On Such Numbered Days

by Zycros

Summary

A man with one eye breaks Kiryu out of prison against his will, and brings him back to a city much colder than he remembers.

Canon-divergence + Alt backstories. Y1 times.
His name is One-Thousand-And-Five.

Yesterday he was someone else; had been given, with the manners of a machine and the politeness of policy, the name, Mr. One-Thousand-And-Six.

Tomorrow he will be someone else again, at the ringing of the perfunctory bell that divorces one day from another: Mr. One-Thousand-And-Four.

In between the going-aways and the coming-tos, he collects names like dust. He goes to the chow hall, and he becomes Wait Your Turn; in going to the yard he becomes Thirty Minutes More. At the shower he gains a uniquely ephemeral identity: Batch-Two-Quickly-Now. He goes in, let the water scald off his skin, be reborn in water burning so hot it strips him red. Coming out shiny like a cooked lobster, he can wear a new identity for the rest of the night: The Dogshit of Dojima.

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In his prison cell he is nothing, his action is waiting.

Waiting is not inaction, this is the second thing you learn in prison.

Before prison you have assumptions, and the assumption is that waiting is just something that happens while the rest of your life is unraveling, becoming, acquainting itself to happenstance; fusing itself, in chemical reaction to coincidence, so that events may soon happen. You are always about to do something while you are waiting: buy groceries, run errands, break someone's neck. Waiting is anticipation, a pre-meditated murder of time.

You were wrong, you know that now. Waiting is action, this is what you learn in prison.

It is an action that must be actively done. You fold yourself as small as possible into diamond-shaped patterns in the privacy of your cell (waiting is not done in public, it is sacred). You may sit cross-legged or seiza, stand on ceremony or leaning coolly, curled up in your bed with an arm tucked behind your head. Sucking your thumb, if you must.

Your exterior does not matter when you're waiting, what matters is your interior, which must be shrunk. You shrink yourself inside, small-small as possible, until you can be turned around and poured out, and out-plop comes your soul and it won't fill even a leaky thimble. You do this by stripping identities out of yourself.

Once upon a time you might have wanted to be great, for example, to follow in the footsteps of Kazama-san, to trace yourself in his shadow.

You take this desire and you erase it, line by line from the top, beginning first from the greatest concept then extending to everything else. You first forget the sentence whole; then you dismiss in inches and angry nights everything else: Kazama-san, the concept of greatness, the idea of footsteps, the desire of wanting, an entity of 'you', the stretching of time, once of the past, until at last you can be left alone with nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Then you wait.
The first thing you learn in prison, is that you have no identity.

You're given an ID the moment you step in, and you think philosophical thoughts: ah, is this what I shall be? You were wrong, of course, because a series of number is an identity, and that identity is more solid than what you'll eventually end up with.

Your identity becomes the days you have left, because 8-1-5-7-6 rankles your ears and bedevils your patience. At roll call, they put existential fear into you: will you be here for eighty thousand days, each by minutes longer than the last? You cannot. You fear. Your soul trembles and weep. You cast it off and take a new name: Mr. Three-thousand-six-hundred, all ten years to be waited tattooed on you; it is a long time but it can be waited. In contrast eighty thousand is forever.

When you take on the others it becomes easier; take them on in the secret corners of the prison where lips can split, skulls can break, nails torn one by one out of grasping flesh. There are many corners where the guards don't see, willfully blind, and here you can be beaten by anyone: your seniors, your juniors, your hitmen, your old friends, your new enemies. Gradually in blood you extract from them new names:

The Dogshit of Dojima, that fucking backstabbing cunt, the lil Tojo shit, why ya staring, asswankcuntsucker, goddamned cocksucker, oi fuck off, are-ya-happy-now-ya-murdering-cunt, and so on.

They're fine names; at least they don't have numbers.

The man with the one eye comes and instantly breaks every rule. He is an earthquake: in his presence you must obey new rules, run for high ground, cower in clear spaces.

He comes, swinging his hips like a new officer, twirling his hands holding an invisible bat, eating with his lips a pop song five years too new for you. He peels back the skin of the cell the moment he arrives. He overturns containers. He looks into the toilet, opens up the flusher, cracks open the sink to examine the deep sadness of the hole in the middle. He takes out his sheets, folds it messily so that he can lay in it like a well fucked boy.

All this you see, his cell is right opposite yours.

"Yo," He says. He puts his legs up in a cross, carefully, making space for the steel tips he must have worn once. He straightens the eyepatch he was allowed (they had tried taking it from him, but realized too late it was too much a part of him, it would have killed him).

"What's yer name?"

You are surprised. It is a terrible question, a faux pas, an abhorrent question never asked in prison. How could he, how dare he?

A name? He wants a name? But you don't have a name, you're a condemned spirit. You've worked hard to get this far. The Japanese dream: work so hard you don't know who you are. Once you had a name, and it'd laid discarded in a laundry pile. You wait for him to understand how rude he's been and go away.
"Oi ya deaf? Ya want me to go over there and beat it out of ya?"

There's three feet of corridor and two sets of bars separating you, and you see that he means it.

You lick your cracked, chapped lips, tried hard to recall...

"My… Name?"

"Just my luck," He swore. "I'm roomed with a fuckin' idiot. Your name! Your name! Are ya daft?"

He needs to be patient. Names are the first thing to go, and the last thing to be replaced. He doesn't know what he's asking, demanding a name. Oh, the weeks to come, wracked in the throes of identity. Does he not know? Does he not care, how much this hurt, to recall a name?

Reluctantly, slowly (time itself is slow here) it is said.

"My name is… Kazuma. Kiryu. Kazuma, Kiryu, Kazuma. Yes, that's my name."

Oh, he says, mouth perfect on an O. The Dragon of Dojima? That Kazuma-fucking-Kiryu? That you? The Dragon of Dojima? The fucking Dragon of Dojima?

"Hell yeah! Always wanted to fight me a dragon! Sit tight in that cell, dragonshit, because I'm comin' for ya Kiryu-chan!"

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Majima Goro was introduced to him in bits of nerve, bones, and tissues.

Kiryu goes as far away from him as he can. Now that he has identity it is not so easy to walk the hallways of the prison; it clings to him like bits of plastic wrap, tight and suffocating, each piece determined to make themselves be remembered. Every nook and cranncy and day and night that once he'd lived as a young man of Kamurocho, clamored to be the one to dice his anonymity to pieces. He will not be forgotten, he cannot forget, not if they have any say about it.

In the manner of Majima's walking and the dance of his fingers on the cutlery he sees the glittering manner of a younger Kamurocho, a visitor, a stranger, here to tell him: time has passed, but not enough time yet so that you can see it firsthand. Time is here to visit. The outside world has been let in, poured angry but fearsome into his cells.

The rattling of Majima's bars replaces his roll call, his silent private mornings.

"Hey," He screams (he is always screaming, he has no other verb). "Hey Kiryu-chan! Wake up, I'm bored!"

At night he rattles them like chains, screaming again: "Tell me a bedtime story, Kiryu-chan! Hey? Ya ignorin' me? I can't sleep, why don't ya stay awake too? We could play imaginary shogi, how 'bout that?"

He is gyoku; the king that has come to sweep all of Kiryu's neat, patiently-allocated time away and replaced it with himself, loud and trying, rolling over all the hallways into the secret corners where he is allowed to beat up Kiryu.

The first time he does this he shatters bone, broke clean through in one piercing fist Kiryu's entire cheekbone, part of his jaw. Lovingly Majima brought him to the sink and tended his wounds; he
tended him five times, smashing Kiryu up-down-up-down onto the metal until it shatters Kiryu's nerves, it was so loud, and the metal had caught him in the ear. Majima left him tended, tender, tenderized, lying in a pool of blood leaving him rapidly for the freedom of the drains. The water, slow and warm now, cascading over him, lights bright and disorienting, the smell of soap mixed with the secrets of prison bathrooms.

He is made to realize he is fuhyo; a low mere degraded pawn. Like a pawn he could only move forwards, could not retreat, could then only be pushed into Majima's arms, holding him in a chokehold over metal plates of curry and rice.

"Ya not such hot shit, Dragon of Dojima," Majima tells him, whispering in his ear. "Ya just plain shit. I'm so disappointed. Ya disappointin' me here, with your lousy ass performance. Kiryu-chan, ya need to shape up. Ya the best entertainment I've got around here and you're so. goddamned. boring."

He cracked his neck and laughed the whole time Kiryu goes down.

Once Kiryu remembers, he would have soared with Majima in his clutches and brought him down like thunder, would have stepped on him and never realized it - ah, might have thought, it's dirtying the soles of my shoe, the little soul of Mad Dog Majima stuck in the rubbery meat he walks on.

"Kiryu-chan!" The hound howls. "Kiryu-Kazuma-chan! Come on, let's play imaginary shogi! Are ya mad I beat ya? Or are ya mad that I beat ya up? Don't be such a princess, Kiryu-chan! Let's play, let's play, let's play!"

The hellhound becomes a puppy at night, frolicking in the lonesome cells; his cell bounded by Kiryu's bounded by others. Only other people don't matter to him; only strangely, Kiryu mattered to him. Kiryu was fun, Kiryu was gokudo, Kiryu had a past. The others Majima couldn't wake up, couldn't ask: who are you? What did you do to end up here? They can't answer him, all of them mute and anonymous, because most of them have worked hard to forget, and unlike Kiryu could not be brought back.

With their sad sunken eyes and closed eyelids they watch Kiryu and Majima play imaginary shogi; kei-ma leapt over kin over gin, pushing aside hisha, storming onto kaku. Who are you, Kiryu whispers one night in bravado. He pressed his head back against the cell bars, sitting with his eyes closed to better remember the shogi board. Hands folded loosely across his lap, moving invisible pieces around.

I am Kei-ma, Majima whispered. Kiryu collects this identity, examine it in the moonlight, thinks fragmented thoughts --

"Are ya an idiot, Kiryu-chan? It just looks like my name - it's a joke! Ya stupid ass thinking it means anything?"

He grinned, laughing so hard he overturns their imaginary board; neither can remember now which pieces were where. "This prison getting to ya, you're a goddamned old fuck now."

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Trapped now in the machine of his identity, Kiryu loses his numbers. He realized this one day when he had to go down to the office, to ask with form in hand exactly how many days he had to wait; the answer came back and surprised him, he is holding less numbers than he thought he had. They had slipped through his fingers and rolled into forgotten corners when he wasn't watching.
He is now Mr. Nine-Hundred-and-Fifty, a whole month having passed him in scorn. Those numbered days he could no longer wear; Majima had forced his identity back onto him and they won't go on now, came on like a loose coat, baggy in the elbows. He can no longer wait, at least wait the way he used to. There is no patience to be had, with Majima strolling bored and callous into his privacy, intruding with answers, leaving with questions.

Why are you here, Majima-san, he asked - desperate to give Majima more form, more identity, to know more so that he can become less to Kiryu.

What crime did you commit? Who did you kill? How did you live?

"Wouldn't ya like to know, Kiryu-chan? I'm bored, bored, so maybe I'll tell ya - but ya have to beat me first."

They dance in the yard. They have exactly six minutes before the officers come with batons and extra days, so they must be quick, trading fists until their faces are bloated with blood and torn epidermis; Kiryu dancing better now but still far from a match to Majima, so that Majima danced with him only because he had no better partners. A fallen dragon made of shit was still better than just plain shit. Majima pivots on the officer, says: it's me, I started this.

An act of generosity. It surprises Kiryu, he doesn't know what to say, Majima taking this sin into the confession of his records.

"I ain't plannin' ta stay here twenty-five years, so what's a few months that I won't be around for?" He bared nasty teeth at Kiryu. "I ain't like ya. I ain't the wallowing sort. I'll be out before six months is up."

Oh, Kiryu said. Glad but sad, sad and glad. He is relieved that Majima in leaving will restore him to his formless mass again; bittersweet that he loses such a strict mold. Kiryu Kazuma Kazama Nishikiyama Dojima. Things he can't forget as long as Majima is around, rooting him, anchoring him without his permission and against his wants.

"Whoooo—"

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The days are slipping away so fast now that he has to seize it with both hands clenched so tight his knuckles go white. Stay, he commanded. Stay. Seizing his miserable days in his hands, he watched Majima prepare for flight. By inches and minutes and lost seconds he withdraws from Kiryu, become more and more likely to disappear during yard time and bath time and free time, to meet with associates strange and shapeless huddling in the other yard.

Lined up against theirs but separated by a fence is the small-timers, the low-hitters, the off-ballers, little people who won't be doing more than six months in the most deprived luxuries, off-site beside them, counting less than one-hundred-eighty-days.

It is these people that Majima meets, forehead-to-forehead like lovers, whispering convoluted plans calculated like algebra. When they hide, when they bother to hide, Majima scratches at the fence with loose-tipped fingers, plucking the fence like a guitar, plucking tunes at his associates until they come: unwilling but bowed by Majima's boys who'd sequestered themselves in the smaller prison.

Where is — He demanded.

What is —
How shall —

How does the flight mechanism work? How does Kiryu find out? He finds out in nerves; Majima sometimes, sidling up to him, having the nerve to ask: I have a question. Where is the control room for —

Kiryu frowning, turning away, saying go, go I don't know, don't trouble me, I've never seen, I couldn't possibly know, I never meant to go, never meant to leave, this prison is for me, nine-hundred-days only left to be. Majima beating him with his fists until he lay shivering and nurturing wounds on the ground, beating his identity into him.

Tell me what you see, Majima demanded.

"Kiryu-chan, don't ya lie to me. I've been watchin' ya watchin' and ya know it. Ya just don't know that you know it. Well, that's what I'm for. I'm going to beat your piece of shit memory into your head." He seized Kiryu by the collar, lift him up so that he could be closer to the sun, shaking him over and over again.

"Tell me! Where is it? You know where it is!"

Come, Kiryu told him, spitting out blood. Led him to the dark places in the prison where things can be seen, push him into corners angled right, take him away from plans angled wrong. You're not doing this right, he told Majima. This control room is patrolled all the time, six-at-a-go, it's a no-go, a no-show, what you want, really want, is this other place. You won't know it unless you've been like me; a man without identity, they don't let anyone see if they've got eyes. The crow-pig comes and pluck out your eye, one on each side, if they see you waiting to watch.

"I get it," Majima said. "Thanks."

More, "Hey, ya wanna come with—"

No, he said, he only had nine hundred more to go, it didn't mean anything to him. All he wants is for Majima to leave, and quickly - so that he can once more be subsumed by anonymity.

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In bits and pieces he watch Majima assembled his plan; in his patience Kiryu had learned to see everything, and in so seeing saw that his plan would work before Majima himself knows it. Majima shrunk and wrapped himself in ignorance until the plan itself is executed. He goes with the flow, himself. Doesn't need to have foresight. He'll work it until it works, even if he fails this time. They waited calm and nerveless in their cells for the escape that will come soon.

"It'll work," Kiryu told him sleepily. Tomorrow, he's thinking. This will be their last game of imaginary shogi, so he slipped: slipped the golden knife in and ate Majima's king whole.

"Damn, ya good, Kiryu-chan. Ya totally wreck me this time."

"Thank you for teaching me how to play."

"Teach ya? Kiryu-chan, ya always knew how to play. Don't ya know? Don't ya remember? You could do anything you wanted - that's why you were the dragon. All I did was make ya remember."

Oh, he doesn't remember anymore; all he'd wanted to was forget. Tomorrow when Majima is gone, he'll go back to forgetting again. Reverse-engineering an onion, putting back layer by layer his thin
skin to cover the sound of the silence inside. Eight-hundred-something more days to be lived. The days had leapt from his hands but he'll have them back under rein again. When Majima is unleashed.

"Good luck, Majima-san," He said.

"Thanks, Kiryu-chan. Couldn't have done this without ya," Majima said.

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He comes awake, frightened by the silence.

Kiryu sat in the dark and listened: there were no sounds. Not just the greater sounds of the outside world: cameras that had stopped working, alarms silenced and napping, doors grinding to a halt in mid-air. There is silence in him everywhere that frightens him - he can no longer hear the sound of forgetfulness, he's forgotten how to forget...

A knife pressed itself tightly to his jugular, nicked him not because it'd miscalculated. Its owner was just sadistic, wanted him to bleed, wanted to see the sheen of a dragon's blood.

"Kiryu-chan." whispered Majima. "Ya coming with me."

"No," He gasped. "No." He wanted to stay, was terrified by the outer world.

"I ain't givin' ya a choice. Ya coming with me, whether ya like it or no. Ya my present to that fucking Nishikiyama cunt."

He pushed his knife in. Hissed orders at Kiryu until reluctantly, Kiryu unfolded himself and groped with seeking hands in the darkness. At length he found the thread of the plan, and began to follow it as it unraveled in the darkness of the prison, its silvery length glowing with hope. They walked down the halls quiet and empty illuminated by the shining spool. Somewhere somehow Majima had secreted all the officers away.

The inmates lined row by row in their rat-holes to watch them, trapped in their cell that wouldn't open. When they realized what had happened, they howled like hell itself - unfair! unfair! unfair! - and hands scratched, brushed, rend at them from all sides. The inmates will drag them down to the pits if they could only reach...

Outside.

Air the same but different; they're on the other side of the fence now. There is a motorcycle waiting, a snakeskin jacket, a small tanto and a helmet. A set of clothes prepared by someone who thought Kiryu was as big as he'd seen Kiryu last. Untrue, he has shrunk now, made skinny by the weak broth of prison.

"Put on the helmet," Majima said. There was only one.

"Don't you—"

"I can't fuckin' see with a black glass on, asshole. Vision strictly 10/20. 'sides," He smiles. "That skull of yours worth ten of mine, isn't it?"

Kiryu knew nothing; there was too much not being said. He climbed onto the motorcycle, clamped loose hands around Majima's middle, and then they flew, across snowy landscapes into the cold and a freedom he never wanted but had received.
They go all the way through the night like a whipping boy, traveling many miles (how many? enough to rattle teeth and seal eyes) on the motorcycle that melted dirty snow under them until it made a shifting river.

Kiryu, holding on tightly, tried to ask: where are we going? Do you have a plan? Are you cold?

The wind is flaying the flesh off his face, frost in the air coming at them in droves. Hidden behind in the safety of Majima's back, he could feel the bone-chilling wind that ate bones. What must it feel, to be in front, without the warmth of a helmet or a body to hide behind. Are you cold? He tries again - if you could only tell me where we're going I can drive, perhaps, with a little bit of practice and falling off a few times.

Majima said nothing, his lips frozen shut a while ago. If they do not leave the storm soon, he will die with his foot on the pedal.

Kiryu tried in his own selfish way to help; he held on tightly, willing the corpse in front of him to warm. It is selfish because he is a trembling thief, hoping to steal a few inches of heat for himself too. It is too cold, too cold... He cannot think of anything else.

Gradually he must have fallen asleep, came awake only when light had broken the horizon in with an angry red-orange eye. Sunrise then, coming early to this parts, meaning that it is now four, maybe four thirty at the latest. Is Majima alive? He tried to ask and received no answer; possibly the man might have died in the middle of the night and kept his foot on, so that they'll travel now in a straight line until they reach the end of the island-and-the-world.

O but a tree! A tree in the way! He rattles the man, and Majima too came awake. The motorcycle swerved narrowly, so close he could smell and peel bark off it if he tried, and they came away a few inches from death. The man is alive then; this is the only indication he gets.

Before the sun is old enough to warm they reached their destination (is it planned? was this a destination, or an accident?). Majima parked the motorcycle by a shack, laid it on its side, and shoveled snow and sleet onto it. Hide, Kiryu thought. He is hiding it; they must hide, we must be hidden. If the prison finds them now they'll be imprisoned forever, their days eighty-thousand and counting. He helped, with cold awful hands to scoop some ice onto the black bike. It is not much help but he tried.

They entered the shack. It'd been unlocked and waiting, had prepared a meal for them to come into. It is a warm meal, vegetables in soup and rice. Someone had left recently in the middle of the night to make way for them, his replacement.

Majima pointed at the food, thought: eat. He had no tongue until it thawed. They ate, but the cold had drawn out their appetite. Soup finished but rice half-eaten, they slept curled back to back against the stove. If Kiryu could have cut himself to pieces and boiled himself in the pot he would have done so; there's no name for the kind of cold that comes from deep winter braved with a thin summer jacket. Majima shivered so hard his bones rattled tat-tat-tat against the stove. He moans something in the middle of the afternoon that Kiryu doesn't catch; something sad.

Evening they found some cigarettes, and smoke it one by one until Kiryu said: "We should stop, we should bring this with us."
He is saying with these words: I am an accomplice now. I am on your side... For now. Majima pockets this advice and the secrets, wrapped himself with a blanket. They took the motorcycle and went on; it will be another night of freezing.

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Majima must have died in his seat. Kiryu came awake and it was the middle of the night, the moon bright, offering no information except a stream of ready-stock silvery light that didn't indicate the time. When? When did they stop? How long has it been?

Majima-san, he tried to say, to find that he'd breathe cold air and his tongue was frozen too. He could only shake Majima, rapping by Morse onto him: Wake up! Wake up!

Kiryu got down from the motorcycle, thrust his feet one-two into deep holes, and stepped Majima-wards to check him. Majima was slumped over the motorcycle, lashes frozen to his cheek. He was breathing but asleep, perhaps had fallen asleep while he'd still been driving, before they'd struck the tree. They were unscathed but covered by a light dusting of snow. They hadn't been here long but might be here forever - if Kiryu does not act.

Wake up, he says, holding the man's face between his hands. You must wake up, Majima-san, only you know where we are going...

He pressed his ear against the man's lip, repeated over and over again like a prayer to a fickle god: where are we going? where are we going? Tell me and I'll get us there - until he got a small pained whisper, a cry made small: the road south, interstate 8, another shack...

He took the reins of the motorcycle and rode down the road, pushed Majima close against the handles (warmth, engine) and wrapped himself as tightly as he could around the man. He is no thief now, holding out his warmth as charity. He got them back on the interstate and kept going. The rivers they left behind grew long. He found the shack, and decanted the dying-dead man into it.

The shack was a twin of the first, with twin cuisines in it. He lifted the pot of soup and brought it to Majima, dribbled down his face and into his lungs, wrapped his hands around the steel - and when they'd scraped the bottom of the bowl (him eating, Majima choking it down unconsciously) he stuck it into Majima's jacket. It was ugly, and looked stupid. But every bit of warmth matters. The rice could wait; later when Kiryu knows if he has to share with a corpse.

Kiryu stripped the man and himself bare, pressed them both together into the blanket and under the small mountain of their clothes; there was warmth but not much, most of it was him and the soup. Majima remained cold as a rock. Somewhere perhaps in glittering Kamurocho this might be sordid; here it is only survival. He held himself to Majima tightly, breathed as closely as possible without melting their faces together. Like Majima's collaborators from months ago, they slept forehead-to-forehead.

Later Majima tells him: we have to share the rice. He won't be a corpse after all. He came awake with his lashes melting, streaking his face like tears.

Where? He asked. Oh. He said. Oh. You got us here then. Was I? I was? I see.

Quietly: Thanks. I guess I would have died, wouldn't I, if it hadn't been for ya?

Kiryu didn't say anything. Didn't understand why things had to be said. He would have done it for anyone. It is Majima who is not used to kindness, not him.
Disoriented and naked the man was beautiful. It's not the first time Kiryu thinks this, but it's one of those thoughts that don't invite attention, came with no plan of action. It was a fact: long and loose-limbed and young, Majima was beautiful. Wet from half-thawed ice, sweating where he could, he climbed nearer to the stove and sunned himself in it while Kiryu watched.

"We can take turns," Kiryu told him.

"Whazzat?"

"On the motorcycle. Hours divided you-and-me. Keeps the cold out."

"Ya think I'll trust yer ass with a spoon?"

"I could have made away with more than just a spoon, last night."

"So-the-fuck-what?"

"So maybe bank in your trust issues, and let me take a shift before we end up skidding to our deaths off a cliff because you damned well fell asleep." He lit a cigarette. "I don't give a shit about you. But I give a shit about living. I won't go back to the cops. Got nothing for me."

"No fucking way. I've got a job to do and I'm doing it."

Yes, he means. He relented. Before all this is over Kiryu will find out again and again that Majima never means anything he says, never says what he means.

They packed up everything in the shack: another blanket, the damned straw mat, the extra packs of cigarettes. Then they got on and drove off again. They are going in circles to keep the hounds off their trail.

Another night of freezing comes.

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"Two tickets for Imabetsu, sweetie," Majima said, smiling sunny at the attendant. A totem pole; turned around scowling at Kiryu. "Oi, ya looking for a way out, gramps?"

Kiryu was looking at the expanse of snow field; Gaussian blurred, white-out. This place is small-town, all around. If you could call it a town. It's a shit stain in the middle of nowhere. They'd parked the bike in the hourly parking and left it to be clamped by better people than they.

"Seems kind of an obvious move."

"Sure. Ain't take long 'fore they find the bike, I reckon."

"Where we going then."

"South, but skips and hops. We're landing around, coming back up, going downtown on a ferry later on. It's all planned out, don't nag."

Majima chased him across the plastic train station chairs, until they sat inches away from each other. Majima will not let him die on the tracks, or buy a soda, or just about anything. He didn't have permission to fart, if Majima had his way. The knife always quick and stealthy, slipping in-and-out of his jacket like a tease. He thought of the shape of their adventures, the contents of the shacks, asked:
"You didn't plan your escape for yourself."

"Hm? Sure. Always been the plan to take ya along."

"Is that why you were in there?"

"What, prison? It weren't the plan, then it was. Ain't matter to me so much, so I said why the hell not? Earns me a couple of favors, figured I could get my leg up. Get myself back into the ring." He took out one of their stashed cigarette, lit it and offered it to Kiryu. Had another for himself.

"I got my own reasons to be in there. Nothin' to do with ya. Or maybe it does? I won't know, til I get back. If the boys are still holdin' the fort that is." A brief chase of worry. "They better, or there'll be hell to pay."

Oh, he said. He took the tickets and the schedule from Majima, then the other tickets that matter. They sat down to wait; the cold train station had nothing on what they'd been through. The snow field was nothing, just a drop in the ocean, the kind of storm they'd seen. Majima might have lost a toe, the mewling weakling, only too stubborn to say so. Could be. Kiryu didn't understand him and probably won't ever.

They had a long wait for the train to come. In angles increasingly acute Majima dozed off, first on his shoulder, then in Kiryu's lap, unaware, unprotected, mumbling again sad things Kiryu had no idea (or interest) about.

You're so weak, he thought, thinking about everything he'd seen. You're too weak for the gokudo, what the fuck are you doing here. You can punch, dice, slice me up like a radish, but you're weak inside. You don't belong. You're only playing mad dog. More accurate to say you're just a sad bitch. You got nothing, nothing on what I'll become.

He smoked his cigarette, hatching himself from the inside.

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On the train they sat with their elbows in each other's way. Kiryu even shrunk, shadow of his former self, was still wide enough to get his shoulders in the way. Get the fuck off, Majima said, shoving him aside whenever he came too near, swayed in by the train's rhythms. Don't worry, Kiryu said, if I wanted anything of mine in your face you'd know it.

"That a threat, Kiryu-chan? Maybe I could kick your ass a coupla times to remind you 'bout when we were in."

Oh, he wasn't inviting an asskicking. He was just rude because he'd seen Majima stumbling; he had no illusions, knew that Majima fully restored was stronger than him in a fight. It's just that (humans, you know) it's hard to fear someone you've seen at their worst - frozen with their balls all shriveled up like little prunes. The enigma is reversed, receded, revealing the little boils of humanity underneath. Now all you gotta do is decide if you wanna lance it.

He waited, he watched. Kiryu's identity sat itself more squarely in his skins. He realized it's his hobby and habit now, to people-watch. It had become so without his assent.

He looked at the phones of strangers, this far out and already newer than anything he's seen, doing incredible things out of science fiction. The subtle changes in the train - now wider, narrower, longer, thinner, faster. There were TVs now, clearer than anything before, nothing on what's to come:
showing photos of him and Majima, over and over again. Kiryu when he'd been leaner and younger, not as gaunt. Majima's very close to how he looked like now.

This man really isn't cut out for this...

He unwound himself from his seat.

"Hey, where the fuck are ya going."

Kiryu pointed subtly at the TV with his thumb, removed his jacket and threw it over Majima.

"Put this over yourself. Pretend you're asleep. I'm going to the shop."

"No—"

He was quiet but firm. "I'm not going to throw myself off something traveling at three hundred miles per hour. Now shut up, and sit down."

Kiryu let the carriages come at him one-on-one until he came upon the last carriage, a small corner peddling merchandise from the train company. Mostly junk straight out of the factories: umbrellas that will break in a few uses, hats with logos you don't want, sunscreen for your destination - and some clothing. He bought with Majima's money: sunglasses, two hoodies, a toiletry kit with a shaver. He took a smaller yellow hoodie for Majima; perhaps he would like it better, the snakeskin jacket had been tailored and it'd been yellow. A little pleasure. He went back to Majima with them.

Oh, Majima said, blinking fake-sleep away. Thanks. Went to the toilet when it was late and no one was watching; shaved and came back both eyes blinded instead of one. He did not look pleased at the yellow. He hadn't noticed. He hadn't notice many things.

"Guess ya got more brains than ya look," Majima said.

"Been around. Rubs off on you."

"Thought you were a real stupid ox when I first saw you."

Kiryu is not surprised. Does not care. He only knows now. Someone somewhere was doing something, moving the skies, blowing the winds. That person clearly wasn't Majima, so he had potential - could be an ally, if Kiryu could read his card right, this wild card. He will need allies where he's going, he's thinking. He could do a lot worse than a beautiful, deadly man with a knife.

He thinks: Let's see if I can respect him.

Wake me up when we get there, he said. He wanted to see every inch of the welcome they receive.

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They flew south as migrating birds, flying in concentric circles so confusing, they had no idea where they were most of the time, couldn't tell you unless they were near a map. They went forwards, then backwards, jumped off trains to slip into the backs of buses. Moved up the aisle into ferries, and then onto bikes that waited for them in alleys, like a familiar whore. Cars spat them out at train stations and drove away, then it was trains again: two, three trains swinging like a pendulum on the map.

Where are we going, Majima-san? Can't you tell me? He asked. But the man is closed off here as he was on the bike. Saving his life didn't matter to him. He wasn't about to bond with Kiryu.

They peeled themselves off grimy (out here all the trains are grimy, nothing like they were in Tokyo) trains and buses, to go into motels through the backdoor. Renting hotels by the hour, rooms smelling sour. Majima had nothing much to say that wasn't a threat.

Good nights, for him: "Ya better not move a fuckin' inch that I can see, Kiryu-chan. I got my eye on you 24/7."

Good mornings, as so: "Where the fuck you been then? Looked like ya move, ain't I said ya don't? Did ya snuck out in the night, did ya try?"

Baseless accusations. He didn't try to run. Why bother? He already knows where they're going. At the end of this convoluted mess, designed more to humiliate him than to save him, they're going to end up in Kamurocho. Once he'd told Nishiki: all the shit in Tokyo flows into Kamurocho. Nishiki had laughed then; it's like you're saying we're trash, Kiryu, don't be so goddamned negative, have a drink or ten...

They slept, the two of them, curled up in dirty beds double-on-one. Majima had a preference, and that preference was cheap. He wanted the cheapest room always, single bed if they had it, and smelly under stairs or construction; didn't matter to him if they could shave a couple of hundred yens off.

"Your head's worth a lot," He told Kiryu. "But I ain't seen it yet and I don't spend money I don't got."

Wise, Kiryu said. Didn't care. He slept on the floors just to get away from the insistent boniness of Majima's frame. He didn't want to wake up with a boner one night and get killed for something he couldn't help; least-way no way Majima would listen if he says: I don't want to fuck you, my body does. Majima didn't seem like the type to care about such fine (but significant) distinctions.

Didn't help - Majima hit him anyway. He hits him for something familiar to Kiryu. For control. The more the situation slipped out of his control, the more he had to hit. He would run aground of ideas at payphones, talking to someone mysterious in short stolen conversations. Instructions that came, meandering and convoluted. He'd come back, vibrating with rage, smoke half a pack of cigarettes, and turn on Kiryu.

For control: he has to show Kiryu exactly who is in charge; smashed him headlong into the bathroom mirror until the reflection showed twelve of them, all of them drip-dripping blood into the sink, where it swirls away in loosening spirals.

"I fucking hate ya," He said. "You and your whole family are cunts."

"Was that Kazama-san?"
"Why the fuck I gotta tell ya anything? Get fucked!"

Well, you can catch a dog better with bones than honey. Kiryu went away one night to look for dreamless shogi, sneaking out on padded feet away from Majima while the man slept, turning round and round in the vice of his nightmares. Kiryu drifted through the 4 a.m night until he came across that staple of every city: a few men littered around a shogi board. The game is one-fourth of their possessions, the other being a tarp-tent and a barrel of flames, illuminating their rapidly degrading lives. Homeless fucks, Nishiki calls 'em. They're like rats, every city's got some.

"What can I do for you," Kiryu asked, "so you will give me that board?"

They looked him up-and-down; "Why don't you take it? You look like you can try."

I'm not that kind of person, he said. If I was I've forgotten how to be, am actively trying to forget how to be. I'll do you a favor. I want the board.

Everyone has people they'd like to see beaten up. The oldest profession in the world: whoring, and clubbing people over the heads with a stick. He comes back to the hotel sticky with blood, fingerprints bloody on the board.

The men had laughed: "You're a funny kind of guy, Kiryu-san. You beat up folks for us to get the board, but won't beat us up to take it. Your principles are ignorant."

Oh yes, but he has principles, that's what important, and gripping onto them tightly he slipped back into the hotel, through the backdoor, up the four flights of narrow stairs that brush him shoulders to shoulder, and into their sour room overlooking other people's laundry. He's too late; Majima had emptied the bed of himself, and filled himself into a chair.

"Yo," He said. "Ya ready to cry?"

The tears exit from wounds on his head instead of his eyes, big fat huge tears crying blue bloody murder. Majima had done him one better on his midnight errand: Majima had gone out to buy a baseball bat, just so he could hit him hard and heavy until he saw stars. Where in the fuck he got it, that's what Kiryu wants to know. Fucking Poppo cunts helping murderers nationwide.

He laid wallowing in the wet carpet. The ceiling is a familiar sight, as was the taste of welling blood in his mouth. Why, he wondered. Why. Are his reasons his own? If they are, why doesn't he know what they are? He laid there until Majima set up the board, then climbed up to join the game. They'd lost two of the pieces in the fight, the kings were nowhere to be found. They had to use a crumpled up memo pad, pastel yellow and pink each. It blows around with the sneaky wind, and they can never be sure if the game they're winning is the same as the one they'd been playing.

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They came into the city while it rained, and to avoid becoming thoroughly wet they slipped into a store advertising - LIQUOR - in modern English neons, the Japanese posters aging and unfashionable all along its windows. They pretended to be connoisseurs, walked down the aisles of whiskies and wines endlessly debating with themselves which vintage was better. Eventually they took too long and the rain showed no signs of stopping, and embarrassed, Majima and he pocketed a random cheap wine with an unpronounceable Spanish name.

A gift, Majima said, to sooth nerves. My boys like this shit. They'll be happy to see me; I've been
gone for a while.

Your boys?

"Safehouse," Majima said. "I'm gon' tie you up 'round a stick there, Kiryu-chan. Or on a chair if that's your style. Got some errands to run, so ya gotta stay put for a sec."

They walk in the diminished rain northwards, almost exiting Kamurocho (the train had spat them out very far just to be on the safe side), and came turning onto a suburb, poor and rundown like those Kiryu used to live in. Apartments and mansions in six packs, each unit sub-divided again by poor renters. The city had aged badly, all its buildings now older than Kiryu by some.

Majima found the door after walking pass it six times (it had neither sign nor number), rapped it hard, waited, rapped it harder, waited - thinking, is no one home? They had almost gone when the rain relented, and they heard the sound of sneaky scuffling feet behind the door.

"Hey! What the fuck? I hear you in there. Tagawa! Tagawa, that you?" Majima kicked the door. "Open the damned door!"

A long embarrassed silence said: "Oyaji?"

"Why don't ya come out here and find out."

"Oyaji..."

"Open the damned door, idiot. Did ya lose your keys again? Open a window then, 'sake, I'm getting soaked out here."

"Oyaji," He said. "I can't."

Majima in disbelief: "Fuck?"

"Oyaji," The man said. "Oyaji. I'm sorry. I can't. We can't. There's been word. It's different now."

"Ya know what's different? What's different is ya used to have balls. Open the door. I'll kick it down, if ya won't."

"I can't. They've said so."

"Who said so." When the answer came unvolunteered, he kicked the door hard enough to step through it. They could see through the hole some dirty jeans. They couldn't see but could imagine many other pairs of them, hiding one behind another silently in the house. With effort Majima could have torn the door down by the hinges; certainly with Kiryu's help he could. Majima knew though, that there were some doors you can't kick down.

"Who said so, Tagawa. Why don't ya be a good boy and tell me?"

"Nishikiyama..."

"Okay." He said, cutting him off. "Alright, okay, sure. Of course it was him. Fucking cunt! I'll be going then. Ya boys watch ya fucking backs. Don't let nobody kill you before I do."

"Oyaji," The man said. "Oyaji? I'm so sorry. We couldn't. We tried. We weren't enough."

Added quiet and resentful: "Maybe it'd have been different if you were here. You know?"
"Not like I wanted to be gone. Well, fuck then." Majima said, casual almost, and took Kiryu away down the wet pavement. The rain had cruelly retreated, so that embarrassed and angry, Majima couldn't hide in it. Kiryu watched him huddle inwards, walking on sullen heels with his arms wrapped around himself, a self-hug, the kind of shit only weak people need. But Majima isn't that weak… Just sad. Morose. It's a bigger betrayal than he's let on. He'd put a lot of emotional eggs in this basket, and found when he came back someone had broken in and made omelettes, not even really because they were hungry, but out of spite, just because they could.

So, Nishiki was strong now, was he? Strong enough to say, and having said, be obeyed? Interesting.

Kiryu followed Majima around, walking like an obedient ox. In the end he saw that Majima had no clue where they were supposed to go. In fact he had not even thought about the question.

"We should find a place to spend the night." He suggested.

Majima looked at him, blinked lost eyes. "So…? Many places, ain't there. Hotels all up and down Kamurocho. Got the whole damned district. What kind ya want? It's my treat, it's on me. Just say it. We could go classy, get the whole damned waterbed. Maybe fucking drown in it. Whatcha want, Kiryu-chan? It's all on me."

"The usual."

"That ain't fun. Aren't we celebratin'?"

"We are?"

"Sure, ya first night back in Kamurocho, Kiryu-chan! Ya gotta round up friends, fuck some booze and drink some girls! What else?"

Thought: I'd rather fuck you, Majima-san. Your ass looks better than anything money could buy; the kind of money we have anyway.

He said instead: "Don't really have friends."

"No? That's depressing. Hey, at least ya got family, even if they're all cunts."

"The usual," He said.

They went and found with no trouble another sleazy flea-mall. In Kamurocho the cheap stuff are the love hotels, so they ended up with a room with green-red lights from the disco era and a mirror on the ceiling, the better with to see their sins.

I'm not really in the mood to see myself all night, Majima grumbled.

"Close your eye then. You got it better than me. Only half the work." Chortling until he choked, Majima drank the whole bottle of wine down in one gulp, shook out the last mouthful and gave the almost-empty bottle to Kiryu.

"It's on me," He said, and slept.

To entertain himself, Kiryu watched TV until he was sleepy, switching channels blue-glow-by-blue-glow until he saw everything that needed to be seen. Then he lit his cigarette (had bought again his favorite brand the moment they were back in the city) and when he was done, methodically stubbed it on Majima's cheek. He made circles of ash one by one, black buds all in a row. They only burn enough to sting, if you don't grind it down.
Majima opened his eye on the seventeenth stab, looked deeply into the dying orange glow. "Ya got weird taste, Kiryu-chan. This your fetish?"

"Just wanted to see how much I could do before you wake." Weakness is his fetish.

"Oh. Well. Doesn't matter anyway." He wiped the streaks of ash off his face, and looking like a warrior, watched the glowing cigarette. They weren't it seemed, talking of tobacco anymore. Kiryu felt around in Majima's loneliness for an opportunity to talk.

"Who gave you that? The eye."

"Mom."

He chuckled, said, no really.

"Shimano."

"You his boy?"

"Ya said that like I get fucked up the ass by him. Well, ya half right. He's the boss."

"How come then? Bungled a job?"

Majima groped around the bedroom in answer, until Kiryu extracted a beer and put it cold and sweating into his hands. He'd gone out earlier to buy some. He figured Majima would need it.

"A long time ago." He said, cracking it. "Other city. Whole other place. Worlds ago, man. He was a fuckwad, that Shimano."

Was?

"Huh? Ya don't know? He's offed ages ago. When you gone in? 1995? Wasn't a year ya were in the slammer before they killed him." Cocked his head, drank his beer, eyed him queer. "Ya slow, Kiryu-chan. Gotta listen more in prison, they musta told everyone with ears the moment it happened."

Maybe. If it was a year in, he was still too angry then to listen. Was blind, deaf, hateful towards everything.

Is this why, he asked, Majima's boys... But Majima had gone to sleep, curled on his side with his head tucked under his own arm. Protection for when the roof falls in, which seems to happen to him a lot.

Kiryu lit another cigarette, continuing his little game: this time he burned rings all up Majima's back before the man growled and flipped around.

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They went from door to door like a salesman, and like a salesman was unwanted, unrequested, unadmitted, so that eventually defeated by the bankruptcy of kindness, they became instead beggars, rattling their tin cans for the alms of a safehouse.

Majima, a lion who's lost his pride (only one kind, never the other), threatened to nip their ears and claw off their faces, but always they had that other answer: sorry oyaji, we're more afraid of him than we are of you. We respect you but not enough. Once perhaps he had ruled by a combination of
might and kindness. It'd have gone better for him if it was all might.

By mid-afternoon they hadn't found a single one of Majima's offices that would let them in. They were always the same formula. One man at the doors, picked by bad luck to tell oyaji no. The rest nestled one within the other like Russian dolls, no guts even to come to the door and say sorry. It's these that I'm gonna kill, Majima promises. When I get back on my feet I'm going to cut all their fucking cocks off.

Well he has a lot of cocks to cut then. By Kiryu's reckoning, more than a hundred, and the day was not done, nor was the week.

"Why don't you just turn me in and call it a day? You call in the favors you get from me, might get you better results."

They sat cross-legged on a bench (those rare surfaces, available only to paying customers) eating lukewarm packaged rice with bits of foreign meat one each; it was grey and lumpy but cheap.

"Eh, Kiryu-chan, ya trying to ditch me too? Not cool! I thought we were buddies - fighting buddies!"

"I don't call people who use me as a punching bag, a buddy."

"That's 'cuz ya weak. If you're more punch and less bag, could be we're different. Well I can't. Instructions to wait. Politics, ya know? Gotta use you as a trump. Or maybe keep ya hush-hush from someone up high?"

"So the person behind this isn't all that high up?"

"Oooh, sneaky, Kiryu-chan!" He waved a finger. "Ya find out, it won't be from me. Now fuck off. Ya ruining my lunch with questions."

Kiryu can wait; he can poach answers bit by bit from Majima's carelessness. Patiently, they unfurled themselves and sailed towards Majima's most reluctant destination.

They went, wading thickly, into the depths of Kamurocho. The rain came in bursts and stops and drizzled all day, but it didn't faze the roaring crowd of people who came pouring out of subway lines and out of shops, into offices and out of malls. They had each their personal universe - phones on the right ear or earphones on both - and in between not talking to each other ads bombarded them on all sides, silently selling, screaming in colors: discounts, sales and more, which Kiryu saw and Majima ignored, as did everyone else.

The crowd walked in the opposite direction to them often, with angry sets to their faces; Kiryu thought at first it was because of him and Majima, standing in the middle of the streets while Majima oriented his terrible sense of direction, but it could be something else, bubbling in the privacy of their interiors. It was a disorienting, loud, garish world that he'd been taken unwillingly back to.

To get where they had to go they needed to cross the city, Kiryu following behind like a golden calf, Majima leading them but lost himself.

How long you haven't been here? Kiryu asked. How long have you been gone, that you lost your men and your direction? Which coat did you leave your respect in?

Majima didn't answer him because he didn't ask the questions.

By and by they came at last to the 56th floor of a tall building, a black skyscraper making good on the threat to gore the skies, and Majima knocked on the door, thickset and heavy, once expensive
and rich still, planted on sinking carpets. They shared neighbours up and down with corporate types, a hundred employees easily in the kind of space they had. Majima's office took up an entire floor, gave no one else space for arguments.

"Yo! Anyone in?" He said, banging loudly. There is a keypad, but no hope that Majima might know (or remember) any code to his own place.

The door, armed with an ecosystem of its own, turned back slowly one lock after another until the peeping hole came through.

"Hullo? Who's there? Eh — oyaji!?!"

"Nishida! Ya in! Good boy! Ey, get the fuckin' thing open!"

Kiryu expected no. They got yes. The locks unlocked themselves one by one until the door swung open. A mousy man stood in the doorway, clenching and unclenching his hands. He's trying not to cry (has the kind of face like it does this often - trying not to cry) but does not know where to put his hands. Does he hug oyaji? Will he be killed if he tries?

Majima solved it: brought his head down with a headbutt, forehead-to-forehead, ruffled the man's hair like a dog. Shoved him around - but joyfully.

"Oi Nishida! What the fuck, Nishida! Can't believe ya in. How long it's been! Oi this place still nice and clean, what the hell. Nishida, ya been cleaning up more mess than asses? Fuckin' A!"

No one can tell if he was happy or pissed; possibly both. The office was in good condition. It had been sumptuously decorated at some point with the most expensive end of modern-furniture catalogs, speakers up to the ceiling, bookshelves crammed full of collector's editions, limited editions, movies a thousand in each. At some point the room had been betrayed too: a line of bullet holes on one side, punched in deeply.

"How's things? How's things?"

They stripped themselves of their weather-eaten clothes, threw their jackets over the couch. Men begin to pour in from the other room, pounding backs, squealing like joyful rats, chanting oyaji oyaji oyaji is back. A locker room scene surrounding a victory: the return of Majima-san. They lifted Majima, crested him on a wave. A hundred hands reaching their own small god.

Kiryu let himself be pushed to the periphery, he had no place in their jubilation. Majima had returned, all will be well now...

Kiryu let himself be carried until he found the doors to the kitchen, and there he sat and watched them, all six stages of grief and celebration. By the time Majima found him again it was late evening and he'd singlehandedly demolished a whole six-pack of beer and someone's turkey dinner. Stealing food, Majima said, stealing food himself, drawing out a leg Kiryu had left him and biting deep into bone.

"Good to be back?"

"Hell yeah! I thought I was gonna have to punch through this door, and with what it cost me ya can be sure I ain't looking forward to that." He chewed, loudly like a boy. A shred of turkey stuck to his chin and nose. "Nishida, whadya know. Good ol' Nishida. Loyal to a fault, is what he is."

"You've got good men."
"The best boys!"

They licked off every juice and tendon of the turkey, then discarded piece by piece all their clothing in front of the shower and washed it all off. Kiryu, just grim. Majima possibly more: fear, anticipation, anxiety, betrayal, each taking fifteen minutes to scrub off, not a minute less.

Majima came out of the shower shiny and wet, towelling himself in those hard to reach places. He watched Kiryu watch him wiping long toes on the mat, went - what?

"Why ya lookin' at me like that?"

"Any reason I shouldn't? Only one view in here. Not keen on floor tiles."

"I ain't askin' ya why ya looking straight, I'm asking ya why — never mind. Hey, been a while! How about we do this?"

How they do this: Majima pulled off the shower curtain, the cold metal of the pole, and in a storm of rubbery subterfuge damned near broke Kiryu's spine before he'd untangled himself from the curtains. Laughing all the while: Come and get it, Kiryu-chan! On sale, special, discounts for ya only! Kiryu surprised him, managed to get in a fist good enough to displace Majima's nose.

Oi what's this, he sneered, the baby dragon punches back! And Kiryu swept, with his feet, knocking him on his ass, climbing onto him; hit him hand over fist again and again until he realized he was sprouting a fucking boner and he needed to stop.

Majima, lying wet and bleeding from the head, laughing so hard he was splitting apart, sexier than the best host you could ask from Starlight.

"Oh my god, that's good! Ya need ta hit me more, Kiryu-chan! Hey? Hey? Don't go showerin' now, we ain't even got to the good part! Ya clean enough!"

He is not clean. He is very far from clean. Kiryu turned on the shower as loud as it would go, and hid in the cover it provided, cowering over his unruly cock. Majima going hey, hey, hey outside his glass door. Kiryu's ears hearing something else, hearing more, more, more. He saw instead of greenish-blue bathroom tiles, Majima with his feet splayed and his ass in an uncoiled towel, groaning over pain (but how easy to imagine something else).

He came out shamefaced and stony. Their bags were already packed. No one knew what they contained; it'd all been Nishida's work. Nishida and Majima huddled in the kitchen, trading news and plans.

"Going somewhere?" Kiryu asked.

"Yeah, empty safehouse we still got."

"How come."

"Ain't safe here for my boys. Not if I was around. Yer boyfriend got a damned hard-on for me, won't stop can't stop til I'm dead. We're camping out elsewhere. Week tops and I turn ya in."

He shrugged on the bags, shouldered all of them. He'd rather keep Majima's hands where they were safe - on his knife. A strange man, Majima, he thought. Why not hide in his stronghold, like a normal person? Simply because his boys would be safer without? Who cares about the fūhyō? If they can't be promoted, they don't mean much, meat shields one and all. Kiryu should know, had had the best education.
He didn't say it. Majima was so damned proud of his brood; these useless chicks of his. It'd only ruffle his feathers. If they weren't trash why would they be losing?

Lead the way then, he said, and followed Majima. A week tops, it was promised.
They camped out in a one-room apartment with no frills. Four walls and a floor, a small kitchen. It had water but no electricity, and their nights became impenetrable darkness spent on a cold tatami floor, ridden with confident roaches and shy rats. There was a stack of bills that told them why: the mailbox had been jammed so full it'd laid bloated with a brick of unpaid invoices.

"Kind of a miserable place," Kiryu said.

"How 'bout you sleep outside then, like the dogshit yer are," Majima shot back, marking his territory with a thin rolled up mattress that smelt moldy and was so.

The cold is intense, bone-biting. Nipped them like their teeth on turkey bone, grazing light, not enough to kill but hurting bad. Has it always been this cold? Or was it that he'd always had it good? He remembered colder days but he had had shelter. Spent the time in Kazama-san's office, camped out beside the radiator. Or else with Nishiki, eating ten hot bowls of ramen each and competing to see who could do it faster. Loneliness is foreign...

Majima exists but is fading rapidly. He has gone into his imaginary future, plotting uncharted waters that didn't matter to Kiryu, because he didn't exist in them.

But it's alright. If Kiryu wants to relieve his loneliness he only has to wait. Park himself silent and quiet in the apartment like a flytrap, until Majima forgets about him. In the middle of the night, Majima will open up, crawling over the few feet of space between them, until sleepily he'd find Kiryu and doze off stuck to him like a patch, drooling on his shoulders. Mumbling again sad things, increasingly incoherent, increasingly irrelevant to Kiryu. Kiryu laid, as still as an object, absorbing the contact and storing it in his cells, mitochondria, like energy.

When he had too much energy he went out to pick fights. Fights were plenty to be had in Kamurocho. You can get them 8-in-a-pack, buy 10 get 10 free, selling fast and hot around street corners where delinquents squat like small predators. They find instead a larger predator (once, an apex), stalking them across the alleys. Not a vigilante, just intensely bored. If they knew fear, if they were smart enough to know fear, they go, slipping off into backstreets to spread rumors: it's not so good to be around that place. Already a few dozen of them down with broken bones.

Sometimes Majima joined him, when he didn't disappear to conference with an anonymous payphone or to run his millions of errands. They made a team. Good team, even. Majima was smart and reckless, always the first in, gave chase, screamed like a banshee, attracted attention, fireworks. By contrast Kiryu was the slow and patient tide, swallowing everyone Majima had left behind, crunching bones, a high calcium intake, one by one all they find.

"Delicious", Majima said, pocketing the change. "Let's go get some food on this bling."

They consume: liters of ramen soup, kilograms of bone-meal sausages, gallons of refillable hot tea, a cow's weight in beef and rice.

"So what's your plan after." Kiryu said.

"Oh, oh? Why'd ya ask? Ya wanna come along for the ride, Kiryu-chan?"

"Doubt your contact's letting me go anywhere."

"Well not in a fucking limo they won't. Ya gettin' the works. Won't come back until ya have a
crown, eh? Prodigal son. Don't go forgetting who kicked your ass in your new britches. Ya need to remember always who fucked ya up good, even on the winning side."

"Doubt I'll forget you."

"Whazzat."

"Don't know many one-eyed guys, is all I'm saying."

"That's sad, Kiryu-chan! That's making me sad! Makes me think all I am to ya is a pretty face. Remember the neck-crack at least. That's my best move."

A pretty face, and an unpredictable maelstrom of hate. Fists, teeth, steel-tipped shoes lashing out in the dark. No reason, just a lot of hate. Majima had a lot of issues, and could only work them out in the inks of violence. Kiryu took it, gave some back, and thought: enjoy this while it lasts. Someday I'll break you like a fucking egg, unless you give me a good reason not to.

Kiryu identity, which he'd cast off and ironed out of himself, came back to him in bits and pieces. The more bones he crushed, the more jaws he break, the more it came back to him, slipping like the wind through a large empty house, howling down its halls… A ghost of a ghost of a person he didn't much like.

The night before the scheduled meeting with his contact, Majima said to him: 'We gotta go. I gotta save some of my boys."

"Who?"

"Tagawa got his nads caught in with a gang. White one. Lots of gangs around here now, white-red-blue like they think they Americana."

"Tagawa." He thought. "The guy who first turned us out."

"Yah. You packed?"

"Don't need much except my fists. I pack light. Why are we saving someone who threw us out?"

"'Cuz he needs saving, and he's one of my boys. Like I keep sayin' but no one listens - only I get to kick their asses. Now let's git."

Principles, that's the thing, huh? What a bitch. Well, he went, he had nothing to look forward to except a cold room. They waded knee-deep into a fight, five of Majima's boys against twenty five punks in white wifebeaters and basketball paraphernalia. They wore their caps backwards, so Kiryu handed them their ass backwards. Methodically dismantled them one by one. Majima off elsewhere being Majima, laughing the house down, cutting three men at one go.

When they were done they didn't stay. Majima looked at his strays, spoke in volumes: I saved you when you would have let me die. On the steps, even. Does it feel good? To be caught with your pants down and lo - ya had no balls.

Nothing else to be said. To be done. Back then, home, to the little shithole.

If Majima had dreams that night, they were kind to him, for once.

—

—
They were to meet Majima's contact (who still anonymous, was about to become less so) at Shangri-la, a top-of-the-line whorehouse that had sprouted while Kiryu was out of the picture. A fancy place, deserving fancy treatment. Majima spun Kiryu's grey suit onto him. Take it and go. Ya won't be coming back here.

"Ready, ready," Majima said, brimming with nervous energy. His knife danced inside his jacket, hand exploratory and patting it, afraid to misplace it. The knife is an organ, but you have to be careful. You never know when you might find your heart in the wrong place.

They went into the whorehouse and it was empty, utterly silent, the only sound a steady drip-drip of an older pipe. Someone else had left their radio on, and the highest note of a jazz hit came through from upstairs. It was afternoon, nothing special, perhaps all the whores were sleeping. Unlikely. Someone had paid, said go, and having said, had seen it be so. Majima brought him to a hall, ground floor and set back, with a small stage for events. There were round tables about a dozen, covered in red tablecloths; at some point there might have been a banquet for a hundred horny men. Might be it hasn't happen, and lies strictly in the future.

They waited, Kiryu on a chair and Majima leaning against a table, playing knife tricks one after another until he'd worked through his repertoire. Majima's nervous. He is a novice at this. Kiryu could have waited forever.

When the man came, announced partially bit by bit by swinging doors, tapping heels, knocking doors, furniture bumping gently, it was someone only one of them expected.

"Kazama-san."

It was him that Kiryu had expected. The years had aged him, bleached him like bone, dyed him white, drawn lines on his face like borders, segmenting cuts of his face. But still, Kazama-san. O Father, father. He who had been more to Kiryu than anyone else, whose shadow he had traced into the orphanage's sand and thought: the man I want to be. Limping on a stick more pronounced now, a briefcase in his other hand. Gloves, as always. No fingerprints, he'd said.

"Kiryu," He said. "Too long."

They went, came together in a fierce hug, Kazama one arm around him and him both arms around the older man (father, father!) squeezing tight enough to break bones. Kazama-san, he thought, and unexpectedly found he could cry.

"You're back, at last. It's been too long."

"It should have been longer."

"Hmm, that may be so, but we need you around here."

"Nishikiyama?"

"Yes. We'll talk later. First." He clapped a strong hand on Kiryu's shoulder, and dismissed him, turning to Majima. Majima sat stony, scowling, the point of his knife held against a gloved fingertip, a small cut.

"Ya ain't who's supposed to show up." Majima said.

"A change of plans. You'll get your reward all the same."

"Huh. Is that right?"
"That table over there, you'll find it under it."

Majima goes, finds hidden in the many legs of table-and-chair a briefcase, filled to the brim with bricks of cash, raw, white-washed. "Seems right," He said, bouncing a brick left-right on both hands, still suspicious. "Though. Ya seemed surprised when ya came in. How come if ya know the deal, ya surprised?"

Kiryu noticed. He never once dropped his contact's name. In this he was careful. An idiot, to be more careful with others than himself. Who does that, walking onto a train with a warrant out for him and no disguise, but clenching secrets tight-tight to his teeth because they're others'? Goddamned idiot.

"I didn't expect... He would hire you. I've told him before I have no great fondness for hounds."

"Didn't seem that way ta me. When you—"

"There's a place and time for hounds."

Ah, Kiryu thought, here comes.

He stepped in front of Kazama before he even heard the click, before he even understood - had thought out - what he was doing. What was he doing? He had no fucking clue. He'll think this out later. First, he stared down the barrel of Kazama's silencer, into the twin holes of the gun.

"Kiryu?"

"Would prefer if you don't." He looked sideways, saw nothing; Majima was behind him and hidden from view. He only had a gun to look at, and Kazama's estrangement, his confusion.

"Explain."

"I'll deal with him myself."

"Deal cleanly." Kazama turned the gun around, gave it to him grip-first. He pushed it away, thought better, and took it.

"How long have you bought this place out?" Kiryu asked.

"Twenty-four hours."

He turned around then, and bore down on Majima who looked at him with sullen eyes, defeated, accepting, knowing he'd been outmaneuvered. He couldn't outfight two men and a gun, if it was only one gun in the game. Kazama wouldn't have left the house without at least two. Majima had been a fool of course: Kiryu could have told him to bring his boys with him, at least two loyal or cowed, to be protection and shields. But he wouldn't have listened, would he? His boys are more important than himself, to him. Well now he has to pay for it.

With practiced rusty hands he shot Majima below the kneecaps, and the man - true to his caliber - keeled over with nothing more than a pained gasp. Later perhaps when he and Kazama are gone, Majima can whine in pain (and peace). For now if he must lose, he won't give them the satisfaction of hearing it from him.

Kiryu took him to the janitor's closet, shoved him in. With that leg he won't be walking a week, and that's with the help of a surgeon.
"Let's go," he told Kazama-san.

"Let's. I've booked your favorite restaurant, just for you. Welcome back, Kiryu."

He lowered his eyes, smiled. "It's good to be back."

—

As a child, Kiryu had known instinctively the measure of the man he would be, had grasp perhaps as young as three or as old as five, that he would grow up one day and wholly subsume the personality of Kazama-san.

The trouble was learning more about the man that he's supposed to be, and also learning if there was any part of himself that he would like to keep, one each in a neatly labeled archival-quality box, to be taken out some days and turned around slowly in nostalgic sunlight, thinking: ah, this was who I am.

Kazama-san is enigmatic. That's what makes it hard to become him. To the children of Sunflower he is as a god-king, who comes to walk among them mere mortals, and having walked dispense gifts and favors, arbitrate injustices, mete out judgement, finance punishments. He came from a foreign, formless land that none of them have ever seen. Upper-Tokyo, the children had said, was a city built by Americans and had no rivers, no subways, and its people drank only beer, for chlorine would poison them, murder them - woe.

Well, that may be so, but there are other things of Kazama-san that you can see, regardless of whether you believe what's said of him. You can see in the well-cut shoes and the fitted coat, the soft dove-like gloves one on each hands, the mysterious drops of inks splattered on his skin (perhaps an office job) that he was someone that mattered. Someone great, someone who'd flown very close to the sun.

As Kiryu grew older, it became easier to guess the kind of person he should be.

Kazama-san goes away sometimes for example, and orders mysterious things into one-use phones at strange people, who sometimes come one-two-three to annoy him while he's visiting, always with that pretext: urgent, sir. There has been an issue that only you, can fix. Only you. It's not so hard to guess then, the kind of person Kazama-san was: yakuza, high up the ladder, with his court of old soldiers and young thugs. A king in other words. Now Kiryu knows he must be king.

But what kind of king is he? This is the question that preoccupies him for most of his younger life, doodled in the margins of his wiry notebooks. Instead of the names of girls (who are irrelevant, he had never had time for anyone who couldn't break his jaw), this strange question: WHICH KING.

King perhaps benevolent as Kazama-san was to them, the little mites at Sunflower, whom he looked upon with pleasure, kindness, but unmistakable boredom? A plain smile rather amused. "Look," Nishiki says, he's waiting to see our pedigree. He's waiting to see which of us breed true. Truly?

"Truly," said Nishiki.

They have fantasies, taken out of badly abridged ideas of Great Expectations. One day they will be the ones that Kazama-san pluck out, hand-picked from his crop, brought somewhere else to be something great, whatever it is. In the meantime they grow the only way they know, to become young thugs - because what is a king but a glorified thug?

Nishiki's idea comes first half-formed and baked crustily, that to be King is to be armored as one: gold, glory, glamour. An incoherent philosophy, but it came down to the fact that to be king you
must dress-act-live as one. Doing whatever it takes to climb far enough that you can live that way, trampling infidels underfoot, dealing under heavy banquet tables. Is this true? Is this what it means? Kiryu reserved his judgment, not out of wisdom, but out of ignorance. Nishiki’s ideas are too complex for him. All he knows is that he wants to hurt people, but only the right kind of people, and Kazama-san can tell him which kinds. The rest if it comes, can cohere later.

Maybe if he’d thought about it more. Too late. Well then. Which king?

Kiryu’s idea comes second. By then he and Nishiki had became young kings-in-waiting. Another girl too, even more ruthless than the two of them (dead now, a bungled job). To be a King, he learned, is to wield an axe as one. To go amongst men and cut them down for being lesser, that they may fear you more than the enemy. Anything (anybody, too) to stay, go further, ever higher, amassing, growing, twisting and turning, in beds ever larger and grander, ostentatious, unable now to escape your castle-prison forever. You can’t learn this kind of thing from the outside, can you?

"Who?" He would ask Kazama-san. Who, and how? Kazama-san gripping him on the shoulder with righteousness: "All of them."

Later a thought: he’d forgotten to look for parts of himself that he’d like to keep. Well, it is too late now.

—

They came out of the mist, Kazama-san and he, clopping out of a warm limousine into the warmer interiors of a ramen store, itself waiting with more mist - the foggy offerings of hot ramen broth. "Ah, ah, smells excellent," Kazama-san said, and took randomly a seat at one of the booths. From 4 a.m the tonkotsu had been boiling for them and no one else.

They ate, Kiryu enjoying non-grey ramen for the first time since his return to Tokyo (really, the food Majima ate, it was a wonder he was alive) and thought: this is more like it. It's sunnier on this side. The soup ladled quickly, no one else to serve, and he ate two bowls for every one of Kazama-san, who looked fondly at him and said: ah, young appetites.

Kiryu's ninth bowl half-finished, he pushed it aside and asked, "So how's things?"

"First let's talk about the important things." Kazama said. "Let's talk about the dog."

Somehow he knew this was coming. "Yes. Of course."

"About why you spare him. Tell me."

"I haven't heard what you've got to tell me yet. Could be he's useful, when I'm done hearing." said Kiryu.

"Is he? His family is in shambles."

"Loyal shambles."

"Not so loyal, that I heard."

"Perhaps, but loyal enough, when they're not terrified. Possibly useful, as I said."

"And if he isn't?"
"Then I go back, and this time I don't miss."

Kazama pondered this, rotated the thought around, said: "Very good. For a moment I thought prison has made you soft."

"Prisons don't usually do that."

"You could be different. You have always been different. Let's talk business then, now that we know you haven't gone soft."

He heard tall tales, of a Nishiki and a Nishikiyama-gumi, grown too high and becoming bothersome, like reedy weeds. Cruel, ruthless, calculating. Such trite words to describe multifaceted evil. Ambitions that encroach on other people's ambitions. But why did Kazama expect differently? He was the one who made them… Well. More. Nishikiyama, wanting with impunity out of turn to be chairman. Methods? Old. Kill everyone in the way.

War, as old as time.

"War, then?" He asked. "You brought me back for this?"

"Yes. I'll have people for you. Soon, but not yet. Your return came earlier than expected, and I haven't had the chance."

"I see."

"Lie low until then."

"I'll be fine. I have people."

Kazama raised a brow. "You do?"

"The dog's."

"You're not serious…? Kiryu, please. You were equals. You will be throwing rocks at his guns. Lie low."

"More like bringing a knife to a gunfight," He smiled. "If it's just one gun and one knife, there are some knives I'll bet on."

"I can't stop you," Kazuma said, pleasantly. "I'll prepare the men for you. You can have them once they're ready, if you're alive."

"I'll try to be."

"My money will be on you."

They were done then, just pleasantries left: turf lines and borders, how they'd shifted since Kiryu was around, the dissolution and establishment of new families, their circumstances, strengths, flaws. The little dinky-chinks in their armor. This is familiar and pleasant, as it'd always been between them, since Kiryu was old enough to hold a gun with one hand and crush heads with the other. It saves you the time of talking about things that don't matter; the royal estate must be tended to.

Time came; said it was over. They rose and shook off the kinks of a body hunched over war plans, hours of it, shook hands and hugged, both fondly, tearfully almost; Kazama handing him the briefcase, said: a welcome back present. Kiryu takes it and knows without seeing that it's a gun, two of them from the weight. "I prefer my fists," He said. Kazama smiled, knowing his preference.
"But times have changed," he said. Many more pieces than they used to be. Kiryu will like it or he can die.

"Thanks, then."

They parted ways on the pavements. Night had fallen, no rain but the pavements wet. The shops showed him plastic goods one by one as he passed. He was in a cheaper and more plentiful world - more guns, more pieces, more mysteries. The heat from the ramen place evaporated, so that the city became once more wet and cold and degrading. Kiryu allowed the city to move him, and it decided to move him willy-nilly into a stairwell, where he could lean against someone's unpaid bills and smoke while he thinks.

"Hey get gone," Someone said, pushing past him - a minute ago emerging from a club on the 6th floor. Outside, more people, framed by the narrow view of the alley. Hmm, hmm. He sees yakuza going by one-two sometimes, in groups of fives like little ducklings. Ugly ones. There were more of them too, but in cheaper suits and bad shoes. Too many vultures and not nearly enough pie. Or did he mean corpses? Speaking of corpses.

He cleared out, went down to the Poppo on the street corner, found that it had moved a few shops up, so that for a moment he sat stupid and blinking at a fast food places promising vegan nuggets, whatever-the-fuck that was. Poppo didn't have everything he needed, and he exited shaking a bag of beers, ten brands, one each. He figured with the kind of day Majima's had he'll like a choice. He'll have very few of these - choices - in the coming days. A pharmacy had what he needed, and a pharmacist with beady eyes thinking hmm, strange, strange indeed. He swept away the rolls of bandages, antiseptic, first aid kit, took an extra bag (the beers were threatening to tear out of their biodegradable prison) and went back to Majima.

Majima cursed up a storm the moment he came in. He'd manage to claw himself out of the closet and halfway across the room, trailing slimy evidence behind.

"Fuckin' cunt! Ya back? Why don't ya come closer, Kiryu-chan, ya bastard, so I can fuck up that damned fucking fucker face of yours —"

"You're incoherent," Kiryu said. "If you gotta swear, at least make sure you make sense."

He peeled leather pants off a putrifying wound, a tender smile when it made Majima scream. He sprayed careless disinfectant over it. "Try not to drop this. You'll need it." He said, stuffing the bag and the briefcase into Majima's hands, clawed from the pain. He makes a good hanger; cannot unwind his hands even if he tries.

"I know a guy," He told Majima, just to distract him. He carried him easy like a bride; the man is surprisingly light, just a bag of bones really, no wonder his punches only hurt so much. "Operating theater near theater street. Try to stay alive until then."

"Ya fucking got my knee asshole. If I was gonna die from a gunshot I'll pick a goddamned cooler one!"

"Keep it down, or I'll shoot you a few more times. Guy's got a deal. Three wounds count as one. You wanna cash in?"

"Fuck you!"

It's like bringing a dying hyena to the vet.
Chapter Summary

"Never write porn again," Said the man, breaking the author's arm in two places.
"It's not porn," Said the dying author. "It's... Bonding!"

Majima came back to his office like a drunken bride, looped loosely around an impatient Kiryu, who had knocked on the door, expected open sesame, and was faced instead with sparkling indecision from Majima's boys - should they or shouldn't they let in the wolf - until he shook their boss at the peephole and said: let me in or I'm riding straight to the roof to throw him down.

They let him in then, Majima (how touching) slurred: "Heyyyyy I ain't 'ppose to be here!"

Kiryu brought him to bedrooms, kicking one door after another down until he found one big and empty enough to look like Majima's and threw him unceremoniously onto the bed. Uncoiling himself from his clothes he slipped under the dusty covers and slept beside an anaesthetized, incoherent Majima.

A few minutes later, tired, presence of mind insistent, he rooted around Majima until he found his tanto, and locked it in the bathroom cabinet. Then and only then he could sleep for good, this fucking paranoid mind of his.

"Security," He said.

—

Somewhere else, someone with a paranoid mind was going through a binder of news.

He had been so busy recently, that the lines were becoming vague and artificial to him. What knowledge had to be known? What whispers are best unknown? What secrets remain to be seen? Which morsel must be kept stored away, to be savored alone?

Sometimes, in the minutes of meetings, he confuses them, and almost said: "Something Secret."

The thread unravels infinitely: Who knows about this? He might ask. Who knows that he knows about this? Who else knows that someone knows about this? The larger the web grows, the harder it is to maintain, all those connections between people and people and information. He has a room somewhere where he'd tried to visualize it with red thread, like a detective, and all he'd gotten for his efforts was a nightmare of a room, blood-red web everywhere.

He went, page by page, across things that didn't interest him and wasn't particularly useful, until he came across it, a small article crumpled then ironed out, cut out from a faraway newspaper. The newspaper had thought it was important. Down here in Tokyo no one cared. A prison break? Happens everyday.

He skirted gently the slim black border that framed Kiryu's face (gaunt, lean, ancient). Thought: Brother. O, brother! Back at last among us mere mortals? Minutes too soon, but good enough.
Somewhere below, relevant still but hateful, the picture of a dog.

Hounding him, and now his dear brother too.

—

Majima sat cross-legged wincing on the bed, said: "I'm gonna kill ya. Tell me how ya wanna die."

"I would like to die, for one, without someone threatening to kill me all the time. You're really irritating, Majima-san, has anyone told you? Try this sometimes. Try killing me without telling me. How about that?"

"Asshole," He said, calmed. "Fucking asshole."

He slept most of the week away, debauched in his boxers, painkillers half a dozen in him at any time. Ate them for breakfast, lunch, dinner, seemed to think it'll make it go easier, heal faster. It's not true; Kiryu could have told him so, except if he'd said something to the effect, Majima would have eaten his own hand and all fifty pills at a go, just to spite Kiryu. A classic nose-cutter, this man.

Kiryu slept beside him. There were bedrooms plenty to be had in the sprawling office complex, but this is his reward. Also his punishment, lying in bed with the TV on, a constant thrum of arousal underneath the surface. He liked-hated the finger on his pulse. Nothing to be done: Majima's only interest in him (if he will ever have more) is the interest of a necrophile. Kill/tear/rip etc.

Oh, he'd always had a problem, Kiryu. Always liking the ones least available, most problematic, half-unhinged, complete nutters if he could find them.

He littered around the bed the fallen heads of cigarettes, thinking, thinking, and having thought, went out to Majima's nervous boys and said, "Have you anyone from Nishikiyama-gumi?"

"Ah, no," Nishida said. "We don't um, engage that much if we can."

"Next time you do, bring one of his men to me. Tell me when it happens, if you need help cracking heads."

"Okay. Is boss - is he alright?"

"Sure," Kiryu said, already half in the room. "Some asshole shot him in the knee."

—

Majima grew better on the week mark, healing rapidly it seemed with willpower, knitting his bones and regrowing tendons out of sheer will. Kiryu knew he was fully healed when he climbed up one day and turned the room upside down looking for his knife. Kiryu handed it to him, thought it irrational to be so sentimental over a knife, when you could get a better one easy-easy from the kitchen. It is a good knife; better can be bought.

"Alright," Kiryu said. "You're healed. Let's talk. I'll go first. You can listen and swear at me."

Said: "You'll join your forces to mine. All of your men, plus you, and I. Only me. I'm not bringing anyone else to the plate."

Majima, flabbergasted. "Wow, that's the shittiest deal I ever heard of, and I once got scammed
buying blank VCRs. Ya nuts?" He folded his arms. "Ya ain't even gonna gimme one fuckin' reason I should do so?"

"I'll do you one better, I'll give you two. One, you're at war with Nishiki. Your men are being slaughtered. You won't win, whatever you do. You're just not as ruthless as he is, but I am. We grew up together. Practically twins. And number two, you can give it to me, or I'll crush you and take your family from you. Your choice."

"I think," Majima said slowly. "Ya got some mercury in yer brains. Last I checked, I was kicking yer ass from here to kansai."

"Then how about we try again?"

"'kay? Ya funeral, Kiryu-chan."

—

In half a week, Kiryu told him, just so he healed completely and Kiryu wasn't beating a cripple. It gave him time to prepare too, which he spent on the watery walkways on Kamurocho. Snow and rain took turns that week, so it was all rainy slushy on the grounds, puddles where the drains couldn't move the merchandise fast enough.

He went looking for trouble, and trouble found him quickly. Quality trouble, that was what he needed. He warmed up with some punks he found on the street, moving on then to the gyms and the dojos, where you can always find young hotheads think-thinking they're hotshots just because they put in five hours at the bench. Then wrestling rings, checking but not seeing anything he liked; found a fighting ring too but weak and slow foes, nothing that could help him prepare against someone like Majima.

In the end he went where Majima had brought him: to his stray boys.

"Hey," He said. "Ex-Majima-gumi?"

"Who's asking?" Frowning, hidden behind doors, scared lil pups.

Consider him the recruitment poster, he said, and tore down the door. Here he found worthy foes, personally trained by Majima, or else had learned fighting watching him, and therefore privy to all his strengths and weaknesses. They were photocopies of photocopies, each by shades worse than the last, nonetheless retaining the image of the original, so that in beating them one by one he could learn and re-learn all the quirks he'd seen: the overconfidence, the overdraws, the undercuts.

Majima, Majima, Majima. Oh, but he was going a little crazy, hurting them too much. It wasn't them, that he wants to hurt. He needs to calm down...

He wrecked those shadows one by one until they bled, cut lips, torn faces. Said, "The Majima-gumi is going up against Nishikiyama soon. You should hurry home. Wouldn't want to be you guys, when it hits. Who do you suppose is more likely to take you in? Nishiki? Or Majima?"

Okay, okay, they'll think about it. "Good enough," He said. "But think quickly."

He dismantled one by one every safehouse he remembered seeing with Majima, only returned when it was too late, him too bruised, too exhausted, collapsing in a pile beside Majima, still unwilling to move out. Majima (strangely) never brought it up, only eyed him with a look, head cocked, asking questions without form.
They chose, as a venue the rooftop of the building that housed Majima's office, a flat helipad that was perfect. Had no obstacles, weapons, nothing except the great strong wind whipping around them in a fury, frenzied itself to watch them tear into each other. Howling: more, yes, more. For precaution, some of Majima's boys near the elevator, but away and aside, without prying eyes. They were just there to keep out strangers.

"Ya ready to do this, Kiryu-chan?" Majima screamed, barely audible above the wind. "Gonna kick yer ass so bad, you'll need a doctor to stitch it back!"

Kiryu smiled. Majima had taunts that made no fucking sense.

Kiryu started on the defensive, on defenses he could do this all day as long as Majima was using his fists. He raised his arms, sat squat in himself, and blocked everything Majima threw at him: fists, one-two, high, low, upper, uppercut, lower, lower still, until he tired and switched to kicks, which were powerful enough to make Kiryu grunt, but not good enough. Low, then high, then rapidly, in roundhouse, strong enough to break through and throw Kiryu four feet back. Then he's back again, blocking. Watching Majima always for a chance; for him to tire.

(The man is a storm)

He moves, like a cold day, whipping furiously into Kiryu. If he didn't watch it he'd come away with bruises cut everywhere; even skimmed and deflected it hurt, could feel where Majima's fist grazed him, he'd managed to torn a slice of him off.

"Ya gonna be on yer shell all day, Kiryu-chan? That's fucking boring! Do something!"

He is doing something, he is tiring Majima out, the man not realizing it but already he was slower - and plus the knee, which he winced on. When he saw that Majima was slow enough now, he slipped through and punched Majima so hard he damned near broke his own knuckles, in the split second before Majima recovered, dragged him by his hair (fistfuls, fistfuls) and broke the back of his head in on concrete.

"That's more like it, Kiryu-chan," He spat. "Gonna get me a stab of a dragon proper this time, eh?"

Not yet. He went back on the defense, but Majima had wised up, unsheathed his tanto. He could block anything except steel.

So then evasion and subterfuge, which did not come easily to him, these were skills that were Majima's and Majima's alone, his little talents, everyone having something. He dodged easily the first few swipes, which Majima used really as a test of the waters, cutting air to see if it'll howl harder, splitting hairs, and then it was in earnest, a flurry of cuts in every direction, branching out, fading in, even one where Majima danced and came in with a low wide arc that threatened to cut him in half.

Oh, he thought. His boys are nothing on him.

Still they helped: the flaws he'd seen in them are real, are replicated in Majima. He leaves himself very open right after multiple cuts, so that Kiryu could go low and hit him hard in the belly, swipe at his legs to trip him, or if he had the space - stomped hard on his knee. He avoided the knee he'd shot; just to be fair. The other weaknesses too: dancing into his enemy's space, so close he's almost breathing on Kiryu, so that unprotected he could be hit all day even by a rank amateur. When he lunges he lunges forward, and you can sidestep him and elbow him hard.
Kiryu ended it with a few half-fists, cracked his jaw hard enough to make him dizzy, then dragged Majima towards the edge of the roof. Holding with sweating, bleeding, slippery hands, Kiryu pushed the man until he hung half-out-in over the side.

"Give it to me," He told Majima.

"Fuck yer off."

"Yield. Or I'll throw you down the roof and call it a day."

Majima looked, saw that he meant it. Still he had to think before he nodded gingerly. The wind is so loud he can't hear his thoughts.

Kiryu considered this: would it be more practical, more strategic, to shove Majima off the roof? He was a wild card, and his boys would be easier to control without him. He was their undisputed head; cut him off and they're useless. But useless! How useless? That's the question, isn't it. He weighed Majima's life in his hands, judged the texture and the compactness of his morality. In the end he decided Majima had much more value alive to him, perhaps easily worth a hundred men, if Kiryu could figure out how to control him.

He relented then, pulled Majima off the edge without letting him stand, so that he knelt in front of Kiryu. A person in his proper place. The wind was quiet now, bored and had left them for other rooftops, with other fights, perhaps more deadly than theirs.

"You'll put yourself in my hands," Kiryu confirmed.

Majima bared his teeth. A grin? A grimace? His gums were bleeding through and looked thoroughly grotesque, a cannibal. "Sure, sure. Ya beat me, didn't ya? Said I would, so I would. Ya have it. Me, my boys. I'll be good. Ow. Kiryu-chan, ya fuckface. That hurt."

Thinking, thinking, added: "Didn't knew what I was dragging outta hell, or I wouldn't have taken ya with me."

"I told you I didn't want to come."

You should have thought harder, longer, before you held a knife to my neck and dragged me out of my pleasant dreams, he thought.

"How's I to know an idiot like ya was this way? Ya look retarded in prison. IQ strictly forty. No one ever told me - just said you were strong." He coughed, spat. "No one told me you're nuts, off the trails, fucking jobber."

"I'm not."

Majima just laughed, it was such a ludicrous statement. "Ya were nicer then though, I liked ya in prison more. More person? Now ya a fuckin' automaton." Shrugged. "I thought all I was takin' out was a piece to use against Nishikiyama."

"I am. And now you're on my side."

Majima chuckled as if saying, am I? Said instead: "Oi, we done? I need a fucking shower."

"Yes," He said. "Just one last thing."

He was about to tell Majima something; get another agreement out, perhaps, he did not know
himself, but when he opened his mouth it was only to shut it again. Kiryu seized the man—who'd bled all over his teeth and was helplessly drooling blood by now, each wiped away again and again to streak his cheeks in lines, stained his neck red - and kissed him. Kissed him until he must have drank a cup full of copper, spit mixed in, then tongue, until they couldn't kiss anymore without making a royal fucking mess, or anyway a bigger one than this.


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He slid into Majima in the showers, both of them slippery and wet, uncanny the way their breaths came together in the exact same rhythm, riding hard on nothing. Well him anyhow; Majima was riding him, screaming with his back roughing up, roughened up by the cold green walls. He's a crier, this one, and a complainer: "Owww, Kiryu-chan, hurts, take it out, some shampoo or something, what the fuck."

Well what was the point if it didn't hurt? What was the fucking point, if fucking didn't hurt? He ignored Majima, rutting on, on, on, relenting only when he saw that Majima's boner was flagging, the pain too much for him to enjoy anything, and went somewhere with searching fingers til he found something slippery, slipped it in. Majima hissed: "Shiiiiiiiiiiit. Burns!" He was already back in, seeking his selfish pleasure.

It's too wet, everything too slippery. Majima with his legs and arms curled around him like a monkey, shuddering oddly (like a cut-dead squid, this guy's weird) doing everything he could to be closer. It was like he was complaining about Kiryu's dick; would have liked it bigger if he could, not because anything, just that he wanted everything bigger and deeper and closer. Wanted them melted together if he could. He wasn't so much being fucked as being absorbed, bit by bit, the thing in his ass just a conduit for him to go away.

Physically impeccable though, full marks, hanging onto nothing, heaving off the walls, and still could match Kiryu stroke for stroke just holding onto him, crying out beside his ear: more more more more. When Kiryu leaves him is the first time he opens his eyes - looking at Kiryu with big wet lashes saying what the fuck? - before Kiryu turned him around, pushed him back against the tiles, and went back to fucking him.

"Lift your leg," Kiryu ordered, and up comes the leg like a ballerina, only when he tire did it flag and he looked really more like a dog, fucked stupid by Kiryu until Kiryu blows.

It's when he tries to finish Majima by hand that he shows his claws, saying, "Ya some kind of idiot, how's that gonna work, ya shafting me?" Majima shoved him away and turned off the shower and made him lay on the wet tiles (just like a long time ago with his head bleeding from Majima's fists).

He took Kiryu's knuckle, made him hold out his fingers, and went to work. Majima thrusting himself up and down four fingers, twisting his own cock so hard it looked like he was trying to unscrew it, face screwed up in pain-pleasure, toes curled hard and all his leg muscles straining from the effort (his inner thighs, sheer work of art, beautifully sculpted forms) and then he was done, letting out a wet keen cry so fucking hot Kiryu would have dragged him out for a second round, if they weren't so goddamned tired.

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Later, Kiryu: "Didn't know you were interested."
"Eh, me. I'll fuck anything that moves. Don't get ya hopes up, ya ain't special. This time next week I'm on another dick."

"Tell me before you do then."

A chuckle. "Oh? Wanna join, Kiryu-chan?"

"Don't share. Only want a notice so I know."

"No fun, Kiryu-chan. No fun at all! Seriously though, anything that moves. Ya know that thing they have at the arcades? The green one at the back? Well, it has these lil knobs—"

Majima came awake and found that he'd become part of the story, which had progressed while he was sleeping, well-fucked and dripping from his ass, evidence that this stranger he'd brought back from somewhere that was going to help him and his boys (for reasons permanently his own) wasn't a figment of his imagination.

He wiped himself clean on Kiryu's discarded shirt, went out, found all his boys lining up in the hallway leading up to the kitchen like it was a mess hall.

"Hey," He said. "What are ya fuckwads doing out here?"

"Oyaji… Look."

He eyed them strangely and traveled down the long line of men, all of them worried and frowning. What was happening? Someone eating dog food as a challenge or something? By the time he was at the kitchens, he'd found men who were closing their eyes, unable to stomach what he was about to see.

Kiryu, of course (all fucked up shit flows back to him), dismantling someone piece by piece on his island counter. He looked at the man's hand, missing four fingers and about to lose more. If he was alive, he must have bitten his tongue off.

"What the fuck?" Majima said.

"Oh, you're awake. Sorry I had to do this here. There isn't a bathroom large enough in your place. We'll do something about it later."

"No! I mean what the fuck! Are ya cuttin' his hands off in my fuckin' kitchen? Ya insane? This ain't how we do shit 'round here!"

"Well." For once, Kiryu with a shadow of uncertainty in his eyes. "It's a message. It has to be sent."

Yowling with frustration, he kicked chairs until he got to the man, and seized Kiryu's face roughly between his hands. "Hey," He said. "I don't fuckin' know who screwed up ya head like this, but this is not how shit is done. I've got fuckin' principles around here. Ya wanna send a message, use a damned phone."

"No," He said, turning away, wrenching himself from Majima's grasp. "This is the kind of thing Nishiki will understand."

Well, what could he say to that? Wasn't like he could stop him; all his men plus him versus one of
Kiryu. Would they win? Probably, but he'd come back to haunt them, this fucking ghoul. Already he saw the future, the kind of raw deal he'd signed with the devil. Kiryu didn't give a shit about his boys. Kiryu had heard that it'd be war (must be that old fuck), and he will throw Majima's boys at it until they're all dead, or he's won, whichever comes first.

"Okay," He said. "Okay, alright, fine."

He'll hang on til the time is right, shank both Kiryu and his brotherly cunt at the same time, these nutjobs that's got his Kamurocho on stage left. Majima can shut his mouth. He can be a good dog. Whatever he has to do, Majima has to make sure he hangs on long enough, bent over backwards, if he must, to keep those who matter alive.

Only he wish he'd known before, before he took this dragon out of its prison, that Kiryu was just as bad as all his kin and twice as strong.

Kashiwagi, what the fuck were you thinking?

"I'll get you a damned tarp, ya gettin' shit all over my tiles."
Upon a deep midnight the first of his boys came back from their long journey, tired and weary, the bags under their eyes the size of their luggage. In their teeth they held words, fumbling and apologetic, rich in content but low in value. This is what they say: sorry, sorry, we're sorry, so sorry oyaji.

Tagawa, the first to return, had led a group of five, which Majima took from him and brought elsewhere, to be returned to the office bruised and battered, deep-fried in his fury.

"Ya better be," He said, then seemed to lose heart and say. "Go on then." Spread out he told them. Take back the safehouses. Even those that aren't ours. Anyone gives you trouble you come to Kiryu, or me. Money now to be had for those in need; medicine could be purchased, peace bartered for, and the services that civilians offered them for double the price - bought again. Kiryu's skull had been just as expensive as promised.


What he did best, despite Kiryu's disbelief, was making it rain.

Majima sent them out to milk their turf, to collect money owed them by the hundreds of thousands; it was dangerous work but it had to be done. How will the civilians know fear if you do not put it in them? How will they know obedience, if you do not drum it into their bellies? His boys straggling like sheep, went out holding lists of grey areas that had changed hands gumi-to-gumi, which Majima was determined would be theirs again.

Then Majima went next, shaking his tin ear around the clubs, saying hey sweetie, hey sweetie, tell me all about the latest trends, whisper into my ear the little tunes, show me the bottom of your tables, every little deal. I've got it all, I'll buy them all, and tomorrow trading news to someone else, turning flowers into gold, gold into shit - he's got a real knack for this, he did. It'd blossom soon, but not yet.

"Money grows on trees. All ya gotta do is water it with piss." He told Kiryu.

Pay your bills, kick some asses. When did it get so complicated? All he'd wanted was a good place to hide, have some fun, kill some fuckers, so he could pass the long stretch of time between now and the day Saejima walks free. Well, now that day was in question; from his end, not Saejima's. Would he even be alive to see it? Already he'd nearly died frozen in a snowstorm if it wasn't for the dipshit. Where's all these foolhardy adventures bringing him?

It's because he keeps making deals with these devils. When will he learn?

He went now to check room to room if his personal demon was up, finding Kiryu gone (prowling perhaps, the man is restless) and unlocked the doors to let in the night. He had people to meet, Kashiwagi to be precise - was done with the subterfuge of slow calls in fast-talking payphones. Majima had no time, no time. He had to figure out what kind of mess he'd inevitably started, the measure of this man Kiryu, and quick-quick no hesitations.

He walked through the night in a snakeskin jacket yellow as the moon, and regretted his decision not to dress warmer, a shirt or ten perhaps. How old was he, seventeen? What kind of idiot goes out this cold in nothing but a jacket? But you have to look the part, or else how will people know what you are? If you don't identify yourself by your clothes, you'll never get your skins to fit. They're the first part, the clothes are, to being someone you're not; strong, fickle, unpredictable, murderous.
He pounded pavement twisting and turning, taking always the darkest corners he could find. The last thing he wanted now was to meet Kiryu. He walked like a rat on garbage, dirtying his shoes in slime and expired food, waiting at intersections for the streets to narrow before he squeezed in, losing himself in crowds, finding himself again, shoulders one back and the other front, keeping himself in a thinner line always, to go somewhere he could not be followed even if others might try.

Eventually he folded himself into a small enough piece that he found Kashiwagi’s office (small enough, in fact, to be able to wait, though he doesn’t know it yet) and camped outside the place. He waited badly, smoking one cigarette after another, darting into the pachinko place opposite for a look-see sometimes, gazing like a ghost out of multicolored windows made so by the colorful fan-shaped attractions outside, advertising: CHANCES FOR ALL.

Well, where were his? His chances came out one by one from Kashiwagi’s office, young punks recruited straight from the streets - straitlaced enough for the old fart - until someone turned off the lights on the third floor. Nothing left? Darkness. So everyone was gone, none of them Kashiwagi. That could work too. He wasn’t picky. He went from the back, up four flights of stairs, realized he’d made a mistake, had count too high, and went down another floor; broke the lock with a clinky-dink pick. He was very good at this. Once he'd had to steal to stay alive, an eternity ago.

Protected from criminality by his hard gloves, he systematically went through each shelf that would open for him. He touched them with magic hands; they sprang apart trembling with secrets they wanted to tell him: invoices! Purchases! Receipts! He waved them away as a bored magistrate might. They didn't tell him anything he wanted to hear. Kashiwagi had the office of a treasurer, only unlike somehow; it held no treasure, only a blow-by-blow archive of what he thought was important, trivial to Majima.

"Hey, someone there?"

A chance, but a young one. You can tell by the tenor of the voice (unlike Kiryu's which sounded like he was fifty, that old-fuck baritone of his). This was a man made nervous by a dark room. Majima sat marinating in darkling ink until the man turned on the lights. The man had not even receive his insignia yet.

"Hi," Majima said, twirling his own badge. "I'm looking for Kashiwagi-san?"

The man took in his knife, the badge, and his missing eye. "Kashiwagi? You just missed the delivery. We've sent him off."

What was that? Where? When?

He took the information and ran on it with wings, slithered as fast as his scaled shoes could take him, disappearing hurriedly into trains, and then when they weren’t quick enough for the taste of his grim mouth, kicked someone out of their car and shoved a fistful of lubricating money into their hand.

"Haaa—! " Someone said as he drove off in their car, seat still warm from someone else's ass. It's okay; if they report it it'll be too late. The car came screeching to a halt by the docks, brakes so badly maintained it almost hurled Majima right into the brackish water. He came out surprised by the cuts of the wind, looked around, and found the ship he wanted.

"KA-SHI-WA-GI!" He screamed. "Get your ass out here!"

Majima was beckoned instead onto the ship, where Kashiwagi sat in an austere cabin tended by two men guarding him; they were seeing to it that he did not leave. They did not care about Majima, an armed strange visitor in the night. The cabin was severe, almost spartan. Four walls and a portcullis,
a bed stolen from a hospital, metal railings and none too soft: a hard bed for a hard man.

"Majima-san," Kashiwagi said. "I was hoping you would come."

Majima looked at the two goons. "Ya want me to remove the ears?"

"No, they'll only grow again." Kashiwagi said.

So they spoke in code then: Morse, Braille, Ciphers and Binaries. But they were getting nowhere, computing in circles; in the end Majima did as Majima does and cut the two ears down, one on each side. Exactly so.

They were alone now. Majima said, "I can't operate the fucking microwave. Ya didn't leave me the manual."

Kashiwagi checked first if the two were out cold, and satisfied, said: "Keep him with you. I'll find some way to come back. This exile. It'll take some time."

"I don't have time. It's my boys he's planning to play war with, and I don't recall this being part of the deal. Ya only said he would off that Nishikiyama cunt."

"He will."

"He better. And I thought it was bad when Shimano was around. Now that he's dead, it's maggots all the way down." Majima rubbed his face, frustrated. "Kashiwagi, what the hell's going on? He's as bad as the other two. Ya fuckin' hate Tojo or something? Ya wanna see it all burn? It ain't enough that between Kazama and Nishikiyama we don't have enough men to make jam?"

Kashiwagi spread his hands. "Think of it as- as separation of power. He's not like them."

"Tell that to the dead guy in my kitchen!"

"Perhaps he changed," Kashiwagi said, quietly. "I'm hoping he didn't. At his core he didn't have the heart for it. I'm hoping he pulls the reins on them."


"Not Kazama. His goals," Kashiwagi said, quicker now, their candle burning close to the wick. "I don't agree with what he's doing, for one. How should I explain— Alright, let's say. Kiryu - what do you think about him?"

"Fucking nutjob."

"Yes, but a very efficient person. A powerful lieutenant. Do you see what the Tojo could be, if there's three of him?"

He could see, but he didn't want to: something greater certainly, something wonderful, a golden age, money up to your tits. Justice to be had, but only his kind of justice, no one else's. Or the justice of whoever was in charge. The measure of Kiryu as a man to Majima was: an automaton, a wonderful axe, but just an axe nonetheless, swinging in the wind. Makes a good wind-chime on good days, not so good when it's pressing on your neck. No way of knowing when it'd come down; axes don't have feelings.
"Good," Kashiwagi said, seeing that he had seen. "What do you think of a Tojo with a few Nishikiyama then?"

Woah-boy-oh-boy. Majima'll be fuckin outta there lickety-spit, and that's even if he was Majima's best friend.

"Now you see? They're both the exact same coin, only different sides, and they both learned it from Kazama. How do we know which way the coin lands? But they're wonderful lieutenants. With the two of them in charge, and Kazama, we could be the strongest clan in kanto, in time."

"And ya want to stop this dreamboat?"

"I disagree with Kazama's methods. He's grooming his two boys to rise as far as they can. He wants a stable golden age, with the three of them at the top. But what kind of golden age is that? If it means growing so large we're greater than the law, if it means the whole Tojo clan under his fist... Well, it might be a benevolent fist, but it's still a fist. Once, the Kazama I knew would have agreed."

Somewhere on the ship an alarm blared; Majima would have to get off soon or swim to the shores. Kashiwagi sighed. "Were you around, in the late 80s?"

"On vacation. Shimano's orders."

"Find someone to tell you of what it was like then. Here's Dojima-gumi of the 80s come again, this time without an idiot at the top. I told Sera we needed Kiryu. Perhaps he can lead the other two out. If nothing else, he might break them."

"Ain't the Kiryu I've seen."

"Maybe. Maybe I miscalculated. I have no choice. In a few years it'll be too late. Even if Kiryu comes back with a heart of gold. Maybe it already is. As for Sera, you know why he's doing this."

Obviously. How does someone become chairman if there's a chairman? Simple self-preservation. "With ya out, it's just Sera. Do I go to him?" Majima asked.

"Never go to him. They mustn't know he's anything but a fattened calf."

"So I watch."

"And wait. Wait and see if the Kiryu we have now is better than they are. See if he can replace them."

"If he ain't?"

"Kill him. That's what you're good for, aren't you?"

"Fine by me." He grinned widely.

O, such pleasures to be had in the coming day.

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He watched the ship shrinking into the distance, tried to rack his brains for questions he didn't ask. There were so many, where did he start? Dammit, Majima, he thought. Next time bring a fucking notepad. Well, Kashiwagi knew best. He'd been Kazama's lieutenant for what, ten years? If he thought it was nasty, this coalescence of agents, this holy trinity of father-son-and-son, who was
Majima to naysay? He was outside looking in but he could imagine. Kazama, Nishikiyama and now Kazuma. Very nice if they're all good guys. Shrivels your balls, just to think what if they're not.

A suspicious coast guard lowered a spotlight on him, and he glared back, feeling interrogated down to his toes.


Think, Majima, think!

There's Kiryu, nutjob but possibly not, according to Kashiwagi. Personality like an empty room. He can figure this out later, see for himself. A Kazama man through and through. Would die, would kill, would go to prison for daddy.

Nishikiyama, on Majima's ass all the time for something. He didn't know why, but he had ideas, could guess. Nominally at peace with Kazama, but sending hounds back and forth to nip at each other's ankles. A disobedient boy, who father is about to punish, a real big spank coming up.

And Kazama, holding all the cards close, including one of Majima's. A double-edged one.

Just off the top of his head Majima knew at least one secret, whispered it into the salty sea, and said:

"The blood never washes out."

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The blood washes out easily, but never the bits under the skin and between the nails, which you have to try hard; scrubbing until you're almost raw, and even after that always the smell: rusted metal, copper, sashimi, fish roe by the fistfuls. The smell can follow you around for days, a sort of representative voice saying: you killed me.

Things they say about killing: once you get the first one over, it gets easier. Smoke one, drink some, and it's all behind you.

Things people don’t tell you: fat yellowy, eyes tallowy, all those fibers, getting up to no good, oh but just think of all that shit leaking out, smelling the worst, you could fall and break your neck, the kind of slippery-slime people have got in them.

Why'd Majima got to use that word, principles? What a cocksucker, to hit you where it hurts.

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"The three hells are: impermanence, suffering, and an absence of self," said a book.

Kiryu had long forgotten everything else: the smell of the book, the color of its skin, even the context and explanation for this vague and unsatisfactory line. Still it came around with him, carried around like a scrap quote from a fortune cookie. Meaninglessly existing, a little like the dragon on his back, which he sat now needle by needle restoring without knowing why.

"As still as water, Kazuma-san." said Utabori.

As still as water, he agreed, lying on his front while the artist was working. Brilliant colors, Utabori had declared. Deeper reds, brighter whites. Kiryu had come more to stalk his memories than to
restore his back. Here, on this bench, he'd once sat nose-to-nose with Nishiki; he on one bench, Nishiki the other, laughing with bravado pretending it didn't hurt. They hadn't been as still as water then, had they? No, they'd shaken so much with laughter - overjoyed by these regal beginnings, these ermine furs — that they'd been thrown out with just the line each and told never to come back.

"Why a koi?" He asked the ghost of Nishiki, and received no answer. He knew why a dragon. Kazama had suggested it, and like all his advice, Kiryu had taken it to heart.

He laid, almost asleep, lulled in by the gentle comforting rhythm of pain. It is like coming home.

Earlier in the day he had gone to do his own bidding, rattling a briefcase with a compartmentalized hand in it, a special delivery for Nishikiyama-gumi. It is not gloved, no gauntlet, but a gauntlet all the same. A challenge. It said with its leathery skins: I will fuck you up real good, Nishikiyama. Doctor's orders. Who exactly will be doing the fucking up is up for debate; he had left only four officers lying in broken teeth and a calling card with Majima's name on it.

Nishiki's smart, he'll figure it out. This is just a courtesy.

Kiryu led from the field. He brought Majima's boys with him, those stragglers that had come in last. "Last in, first out," He told Majima. "Just like a business." Last in: the boys who until a few midnights ago had been lost out there, rallying behind unknown banners, the very ground beneath their feet shifting and reshaping itself. Which turf were they on? Nishikiyama...? The land changed as quickly as their allegiance. Now that they've decided to change no more, they had to pay the ferry-price.

"Do as I will?" Kiryu asked, to which Majima said nothing.

They went from door to door, working six days a week, no longer salesmen now but collectors. Here to collect loose knobs and the splinters of broken doors, the chipped edges of teeth, the keys to Nishikiyama's offices. "Hey," He said, clapping a hand on a shoulder. "You're not doing this right. Let me show you how." At the end of the day's work they drove off the van with Nishiki's men, four-in-a-row in the back, and dropped them one by one like stones into the sea.

"Oyaji said," one of them protested.

"Oyaji said not to kill men. Are these men?"

He gave them Mondays off. Monday blues, he's thinking. He passed them cash by the fistfuls, to help lubricate their conscience. Drink, he told them. Go down to Earth Angel, rise up and Shine, look at your Jewels, bath in Starlight. Go anywhere, buy anything, because tomorrow you'll have to get up and do this again.

His Mondays off he spent sleeping on a bench with a needle in his back, dreaming of a younger identity, accompanied by the spectral Nishiki on the other bed, looking at him with inscrutable greedy eyes. Deeper reds were wound into Kiryu pinch by pinch, brighter whites salted on drop by drop. He was insensate, laid basking in the soft glow of gentle pain (one of his favorite things), and became aware that Nishiki had gone, stretching his legs encased in badly fitted jeans. Someone had come and laid in his place with a strange form and no face. It peered deeply into Kiryu, inviting him to know more.

"Utabori-san," He said. "Have you done a tattoo of a Hannya before?"

"Few."

"What does it mean, the kind of people that choose it?"
Utabori knows; Utabori always does. His rooms were awash in incense for this reason, lit by the almost-neon glow of red candles. It helped him see better the kind of customers he had, the better to tell them the kind of ink they deserved. He had to be careful, not to give their backs greater burdens than they could carry, or else their spines might contort, compress, deform.

Some came in and ask for darkling ink too dark for them: ambitions like gods, soaring like dragons, roaring like tigers. More flowers, they demanded. As many petals as you can fit. Swirls up to here, spears down to there. No, Utabori would say, turning them away. You cannot carry a dragon on your backs. It will break you in half and escape your skins, and I'll not have it dreaming foul dreams in my city.

"Duality," Utabori said. "Sadness and fury. The Hannya shows only half of itself always."

"Can't it be all of itself, and switches from moment to moment?"

"That is what duality can be."

Oh, he thought. How nice not to just have one self, but two. How lucky, to have so much self that you can't hold it fully, and it spills about like dirty water around your ankles, so that you have to have personas and personalities two on each hand just to fit how much self you have. Majima doesn't know how lucky he is.

His tattoo was done, his Monday over, and he peeled himself out of the bench to go into the streets. He had meetings, which took place in inanimate shops with plastic food in the windows, and Majima waiting on a bench. On his third cigarette and lost in thought. Majima sat clustered near the back of the restaurant, amidst beer-cases stacked up higher than him, leaning on walls with old paint that came apart to the touch, stitching itself into the back of his jacket as white powder.

"Took longer than I thought it would." Kiryu said.

"Ain't a thing. I'm good at killin' time." A smile, teasing and boyish, sparkles in his eyes goading.

"And many other things?"

"Eh, lil me?"

Consumed: slices of beef marinated in the sauces of other dead things, pounds of fermenting vegetables, rice white and pearly exposed without their husks. Refillable tea by the gallon, like their insides were on fire. No matter how rich they are, they'll always be cheap.

They traded reports and numbers, the little chinky-chinks of the business of grinding Nishiki to a halt. It is a big business, a big biznez, going up against five thousand men with barely five hundred. "I hope ya have a plan," Majima said. "Somethin' that don't blow up my boys to hell just 'cuz."

Kiryu didn't promise anything; a promise isn't worth the spit it's spoken on. "Here and there," He said.

"I promise ya one thing," Majima said, in a serious tone between flaky smiles. "And I know I say this plenty. If ya use my boys for the sake of usin' I'll kill ya for it. Fighting, breaking heads, they're yours. Ya use them as cannon fodder, and I'll shoot you myself."

"Do you even know which end to hold a gun?"

"Ya showed me good. I learn fast."
They smiled, and just to digest the food faster they went out and beat up some chums; when it got too boring they beat each other up. They were well-matched with their bad knee and scarred arms, and in his newly sprouted wings Kiryu won as many fights as he lost, and found as much pleasure in losing. Because victory? Victory meant no smiles, no cackles, no laughing hyena dancing one-two kicking to the side, screaming with glee: Kiryu-chan ya pathetic, ya a pathetic motherfucker. It is worth it to eat his pride, you can get your belly full on the kind of pride he swallows.

Other things they swallowed on their six-day work weeks. Majima Deconstruction, spreading out like a disease from Majima's office to the Kamurocho around them. Systematically they drew a circle around a map, said let's take it down, everything in here, and went out and took it down. Kiryu had a preference for the North, it made him feel closer to home. Majima had a preference for west, which if he faced long enough he could work himself into an invisible frenzied rage, such bad memories. They came home lit by the signs of 24-hour stores, the only ones up late enough to guide them home, and collapsed on the floor or in the bed, between the sheets or above it, both shoes sticking up, loafers-to-high, pants looped around an ankle. Either they were too tired to take the whole thing off, or else they were fucking.

"Ya good at this," Majima huffed, circling another victory for Kiryu, which quickly outnumbered Majima's and all his boys' added together. The man is a bulldozer, more bull than dozer, three horns on his head, ramming down everything he sets his eye upon. (No wonder Kashiwagi wanted him back). Left as many men dead as alive; by whim.

Kiryu said nothing and smiled. A few more, he promised, and Nishiki will be out soon to nip this in the bud.

"Soonish, yeah? I've got a knife with the fucker's name on it. Five hundred boys of mine he got, he's gettin' as many 'fore I'm done."

Soonish, Kiryu promised, and without Majima's permission or knowledge began to swap his boys around. Last in, first out. He put all the boys who had betrayed Majima in his main office, and swapped out in bits and pieces those that had remained loyal to him, so that cooking under his carpets he had all the bad eggs, who were turncoats and turncoats again, back now that they (might be) winning again.

Oh, Majima, he thought. You did not really think a punch or two was good enough to knock them in line? In line. In line to stab you in the back when you're down? That's the kind of thinking that got you this low.

"Lower," He'd whisper into Majima's ear while he sucked Kiryu's cock, which he does like he's about to bite it off, which he might, this mad dog. "Lower still," he circled further and further south of Majima's turf; they needed big bites to get Nishiki's personal attention, bite it all off if needed. He made Majima go, as much as possible, into fights loud, bold, garish, taunting Nishiki with stab wounds all the way. Kiryu imitated his stabby ways with a knife of his own, to artificially inflate Majima's kill count.

Majima was having the time of his life. Havoc great, then havoc greater, carnage grand and personal. Kiryu was showing him off, his prizewinning dog, leaping high in perfect form, shining brighter than the sun, so that every yakuza in Kamurocho would say, with their teeth kicked in and balls drawn up: The Mad Dog of Shimano is back.
The Mad Dog of Shimano was barking at dead grey skies, somewhere near a misty teal river, when
the first wave of trepidation came to him. He wondered: what is Kiryu planning? Not the kind of
vague, under-the-skin questions that he had, thrumming like a confused pulse, but an actual,
definitive question: What is Kiryu planning? What, if anything, is being planned? Why is he here, the
lower two inches of his leather pants soggy with blood-water-garbage in his cold socks (because you
need socks with these kind of shoes, what the hell), sidestepping unconscious people? In a few hours
his feet will be clammy like the drowned, but still not cold enough to drown out that insistent
question in his veins: What is Kiryu planning?

He became almost depressed, sat heavy on some boxes and tried to think it through. There will be
rain soon, or maybe sun. Kamurocho always keeps you on your toes.

Well, he began. Well. He played with his knife, scraping off layers of dead skin from his knuckles, in
between the hardened pads of his fingers, which grows scaly if you make enough fists and punch
enough things. He cut until he saw the first beginnings of raw flesh and thought: wish I ain't so dumb
at this. It's Shimano's legacy, is what it is. The big dumb cunt's taught us all to be as dumb as he is.

All animal cunning and not a hair worth's more. Sure, Majima could survive. He will always survive.
Hadin't he lived for almost half a decade, pursued on all sides by Kazama plus goons, and with no
shelter? Gotta have some smarts for that. Every other Shimano sub-family had been absorbed by
Nishikiyama or Kazama, and here was Majima still, flagging but still going strong, growing between
the crack like weeds. But he had no stomach for plottin', that's the trouble with him.

What would he do if he was after Nishikiyama's head? Well, he'd drop a truck through the bastard's
office, that's for sure. Don't see why he shouldn't, or how it isn't the best way.

What was Nishikiyama's modus operandi? Shots fired, usually. Point blank, at close range, from afar,
off roof tops, beside you, silenced or loud, six-barreled or a midget derringer. Guns always. Is that
the idea? Is there a red dot cartwheeling in the skies even now, looking for the space between his
eyes?

If that's the case Kiryu would be close by… But is Nishikiyama trying to hurt Majima, or kill him?
Lots of outcome you could have, depending on which question you're asking.

"Hey, Nishida," He said, and the man perked up to attention at once, ready for a massage, hot
towels, buying beers, anything. "Remember what I told ya."

"About Kiryu-san?"

"Yeah. Ya seen anythin'?"

"No," Nishida said, dropping back to his seat, a low rusty railing beside the river. "I haven't seen
anything. He's on the phone a lot, but that's about it. Just that and the shipment I toldya about.
Explosives, guns, and the like."

"The phone, huh." Doesn't tell him much. They went skipping stones pointlessly on the river, killing
time until they were ready for dinner. It'd be hours yet until he was supposed to meet Kiryu, and go
over the kind of places they'd taken and the beatings they'd given. Soonish, Kiryu had promised.
Soonish had come and go though. What's his game? What's his game...

"I gotta go soon," Nishida said at last, when the sun had crossed the earth. "I've been assigned a new
"Oh," He said, wondering with mute resentment, why the hell Nishida's telling him this. But Nishida's a babbler, and on he lists: a new rice cooker since he'd left his old one in a hurry, maybe a couple of blankets, a nice one now that pay's coming in again, hey how bout some beers and meat, even bell peppers? Oyaji could come over for BBQ...


Well, Nishida blinked. It was really just all the old guard, seven of them squished and flat-packed in a small place with two rooms. Tanda's girlfriend was coming over, but that's not really the kind of tits Majima likes, usually. Small like rocks. If Majima wanted tits he'd have to bring his own, except if he did, that meant no more dick, or anyway nothing as nice as Kiryu's one.

"Hell, why not." He said. Better this than the old fuck. He'll ditch Kiryu. "I'll bite. Meat's on me. Let's get the good stuff. Oh, and a watermelon. Off season, innit?"

They went, grocery shopping like brother-with-aunt, Nishida cooing over discounts over the head of an intensely bored Majima, who sat picking his teeth near the trolley and think-thinking, mind-tickling, wondering, wondering; wondering still he went with Nishida to their new place, which was not so much better than the shithole apartment that Kiryu and he had camped out in before he sent Kiryu in to Kazama. It was no place at all to park his old guard, who'd been so fucking loyal to him when he'd gone and ditched them for bars, and Majima said so: "I'll talk with that asshole about this. He's got gall parking y'all here without tellin' me."

They gave each other looks that said, we thought the same, and cheered by his words, told him: "He's got all the new boys up in the grand ol' place."

Did he?

"Didn't seem fair was what I said."

"Ain't fair at all, that those backstabbing cunts living it good while we don't."

"Not telling Kiryu that to his face for ten thousand though."

"Ya mad? You saw how he scowled when..."

Did Kiryu do that now? Why did he do that? Majima hadn't noticed, had been so busy, what with ass to be kicked and turf to be spoiled. Majima lined up the meat slice by slice, end-to-end, all nicely in a row. A little quirk he had, wanting his meat nice and tidy. They bounced with the sparks from the charcoal.

What kinda plan needs Majima's no-good boys sitting like ducklings all in a row?

Majima stared mono-optically at the sizzling meat, watched it cracked, and burned, and grew big lardy boils, and thought: this better not be what I think it is, you fucking cunt.

—

Nishiki came when he was called, descending as if cut wholly from the skins of the sky, dressed in muted greys and deep blacks, sweet as eggshells where he was white. It was no longer the Nishiki that Kiryu knew, once upon a time, who wouldn't wear a shirt if it wasn't yellow, with hues on his jacket; who couldn't leave the house without a splash of color, one each on every part of his golden
skins. Skin too, bleached like bone as Kazama's was. Perhaps he hadn't seen the sun for weeks; there was not much sun to be seen on these anemic days.

"Nishiki," He greeted. Nishiki's shoes clicked perfunctorily on Majima's tiles. Great quality shoes, the finest; his brother had come far.

"Hey Kiryu," Nishiki said, with a practiced ease. "It's been too long, man."

They hugged, seizing each other in a tight grip that conveyed how much they'd seen together, the shit they'd done, if you could only know, longer than the shadows of the sun.

"Too long," Nishiki repeated, coming apart, measuring Kiryu with delight. "Also, not long enough. What's this I hear about you breaking out of prison? You never seemed the type. You could have told me, you know. Then you wouldn't have to crash in a shithole like this."

"Not such a bad place."

"And before I even have the time to call in, you've called me instead. A present? What's this about? It's me who should be giving you one."

But not just one call, Kiryu thought. I've called you more than twenty times. Come out, I said, come and let's talk about this, before I ram your teeth down your fucking throat. But Nishiki wouldn't come, not until Kiryu ate so much of his turf with Majima that he had to sit up, take notice, come and see what's happening in these parts. Still these were bitter words, and he did not call Nishiki out to be bitter. Later, later.

Kiryu shook his head, took him to the vault where he'd locked in all of Majima's boys. He hammered, and it echoed; three dozen voices swearing, weeping, pleading, at least half of them spoken around swollen mouths. "How many?" Nishiki asked. He was happy and it showed.

"Fifty. The rest if you want, you'll have to hunt yourself."

"You've done me a great favor here."

"Nothing to it."

Nishiki guided him away from that hellish nest, an arm around his back, steely and determined. Just like old times, a head on Kiryu's shoulders, leaning on him; conspiratorially said: "Come with me then? I've got places the size of this, and you won't have to share it with a smelly dog and his men."

"No thanks, Nishiki. Don't get me wrong, it's really good to see you," He said, fondly. "But that's not what I'm after."

"What are you after then?" Nishiki's head on his shoulder, so close Kiryu could smell his hair; it'd never changed, this scent of his. Perhaps it never would, he'd smelled just as wonderful when they were boys, and no amount of brawling and childish sweat had masked it out. Perhaps it was putrid after all, and only to Kiryu it was beautiful. These things don't matter; reality or delusions, the important thing is that you hallucinate wholly.

Kiryu nuzzled his head, said. "A fight. To see how things have changed. Before we get into it for earnest."

"I got the hand. I found the dead men. Very pleasant, Kiryu. Subtle as always. Orders, then?"

"Orders then."
"The old man didn't say why?"

"No," Kiryu said. "Can you guess?"

"Oh, I can always guess. Maybe I've come too high up. My view's getting better than his." He shrugged. "Suppose I can't change your mind? Tell you to go easy on me, run off somewhere?"

"It's Kazama-san," Kiryu said simply. "If it was the other way around, you'd have me shot by now."

Nishiki did not deny it, traced the line of Kiryu's jaw with a finger. It was no tease; just to see how lean he had become. "Of course. How could you possibly disobey him?" There was a sneer in there. "What else do you want? That can't be the only thing, to let me capture so many of your pieces for. Don't be coy, yeah?"

He tried: "Will you stop hunting the dog, if I ask?"

"Anything but that," Nishiki returned smoothly, raising his head. "You don't know what you're asking."

"What did he take from you?"

"Yuko." He snarled.

Ah, he thought. Ah. It always comes down to this. "Why?"

Nishiki didn't answer him, he didn't know himself; he only knew enough to hate. His gaze said, virulent under the brown, that he wouldn't rest until he ate Majima bone by bone. Why Majima did it was irrelevant to the action, which having been done, cannot be undone, and so there's only the punishment to be had. Truth is sought only as a bridge, so that upon its shivering planks Nishiki can walk to the next prey, and the next, and the next, emerging one by one from the mist like a clothesline.

Why Majima did it was irrelevant until the time is right. All he had to do right now, right here, was suffer. And for that, the death of fifty men is good progress.

"Alright then," Kiryu said. "Let's do this."

They went up to the roof with their arms around each other, like drunks back from a night out. Lit cigarettes in the cramped space, burned secrets quickly in the soundproofed silence. Do you remember… Did you know… Have you heard…. Their secrets were so well oiled that they could have numbered it (like that old joke) and said, seventy-three, seventy-six, eighty-one and know immediately what happened in that year that was important to them, which golden day they had had, upon which riverbank they had sat, childish feet bare in the wet mud and tall grass. What songs had been sung, in a single day? Everything the crows taught them. Love your enemies, eat thy friends. Little sparrow songs with their childish chirps.

They fought on the roof as two memories boxing each other's ears. Kiryu found that in the half-decade he'd been gone, Nishiki had unfolded himself, so that where Kiryu had shrunk smaller and smaller by tremendous effort, Nishiki had expended even more energy to go the other direction, to expand himself, unfold further and further until like a kite, he could soar and block out the very skies. He hit wider, went lower, left himself more open than he had ever before. He fought with arms spread apart; hit me, it said, hit me if you can. Kiryu couldn't hurt him, because he was beyond hurt. What are fists? Fists cannot touch an interior. It told him in so many words that Nishiki had in the interim that he had been gone, lived as many lives as they'd once shared, each now off limits to him.
When it was over, they laid, holding hands loosely on the cold concrete. Wind, the same wind that had come to witness Majima and him, seeing that there was no blood to be let, left disgruntled in a gale. Kiryu lit a cigarette (what an odd thing, to do before and after everything) and lit another for Nishiki. Someday he'll have to go back to the prison, to get back Nishiki's old lighter.

"Next time we do this, it'll be to the death?"

"That's so damned depressing. Dammit Kiryu, you're really killing me here. Give me five minutes of nice afterglow, alright?"

"Alright," He said, and watched time wound down. When the time was up, he said, "Do you want to know why, if I find out? From the mad dog."

"No." Nishiki said. "Yes. I don't know. I'm afraid of the answer."

"Hmm."

"I thought you called me out today to kill me. For the ten years."

Kiryu had thought so too. The first two years he'd been in the slammer, it had been the madness of his days. To be framed by your old blood brother for a murder. Why had it been done? What good reasons were there? Eventually he realized that there were no reason to be had. It was as much his fault as Nishiki's. Someday soon they'll judge themselves. Everything in its time.

"Don't worry about it."

Nishiki burst out laughing. "Only you, Kiryu! Get framed by someone and say, it isn't a problem. It's cool, man. What will it ever take to faze you?" He brushed off some dirt from his impeccably pressed pants. "I guess that's why you are who you are, and why I am who I am."

"Is that why you did it?"

"Yes."

"Would you do it again?"

His eyes, pools. "Yes. Again and again."

They laid there until the moment was over. Then Nishiki rose, and put on his bleached coat, kissed him on the forehead, and said: "I'm off then. Next time let's do this for serious. Thanks for the present." Then he was gone.

Oh Nishiki, he thought, lying there listening to the rhythm of gunshots, executed six-in-a-row until a clip was worn out. Why do we need presents? Don't we have the whole world? The only riddle is deciding how to divide it. That's always been the trouble with us.

—

Majima came home and found his boys dead, fifty of them lying in the vault where money should be, shit-gone-dead, at least cleanly, a nice big hole in each of their foreheads. Maybe they had been scared, it's hard to know, there's so much blood and fear and upturned eyes, you just kind of have to take it all in and say: woah mama.

He took them one by one, looked them deeply each, to better remember their faces. It's a futile sort of
expression; this time tomorrow he won't even remember it, not even their names, which he'd never known for certain anyway. It's just the principle of the thing. His boys need to be protected, not because individually they mean anything, but because that's the kind of person he is. His boys are an idea, an ideal, and if some of them happens to live because he has it, the better it is for them. So Majima's thinkin', well here some of my ideals lay dead. Someone came in and crushed my principles to dust.

Hey, he said, looking around. Ya boys need to get cleaning, don't cry no more. Pushed Nishida gently around the room saying, we gotta clean up this mess before the police comes around. He gives it 24 hours tops, that's how long the cops will give them before they come barging in, saying they've been hearing 'em gunshots and would they mind a look-see. The cop-pigs don't want to find corpses anymore than they want it found, anymore than Majima wants to find dead people in his precious golden vault.

Y'all clean up here, he told his boys. I got some business to be done. Took his knife, went room by room in the office, sliced up the bed just to let off some steam. He's gotta, his hands are shakin' so bad he's having trouble holdin' on, and he's gotta hold on, at least long enough to show folks what's what. Eventually (already half afraid that Kiryu had run) he remembered Kiryu isn't the running sort, and went rolling down the carpets to the elevator, which he rode to the roof.

There he found Kiryu, lying on his ass, bruises on his face. Majima evaluated these: are these the kind of bruises you buy with fifty lives? He looked around, and found that there's no dead Nishikiyama. No then, it wasn't worth fifty lives.

"Yo," He said. And because he couldn't help himself, added, "Why?"

"Pest control. Only a matter of time before they rot through. Worms from the inside will only hurt us in the long run."

Majima said nothing; if he speaks he will fly apart.

"You agreed to put them in my hands." Kiryu said.

"So's I did. Hey, Kiryu-chan, I got a question I need some answers to," He said.

Majima never did find out the answer, since he'd stabbed Kiryu fifteen times before asking his question, and thirty five more to go, one each for every dead man, one each for every dusted principle, and maybe was still going on way after fifty; certainly by the time Nishida came to drag him from Kiryu he was still going strong, and only when he'd been dragged ten feet away did he find time to scream:

"What I wanna fucking know, is why no one believes me when I say I'll fucking kill them!"

—

—

It's weird that I'm here, Tagawa was thinking. Really weird.

He was here because Kiryu had told him, with a righteous immovable hand on his shoulder, that he had to atone. Atone for the things he'd done, (what had he done, though, really? Been afraid? Was it so wrong to be a coward now?) by doing things that only he can do.

But what exactly the nature of the thing he had done and was about to do, was never made clear to him; only it seemed from the grievances that Kiryu bore him, it was something immeasurably great.
"You really upset him that time, you know," Kiryu said, conversationally. "I figured if anyone has to do this, it should be you. Won't piss him off too bad."

A delivery then? It's not so bad. Strange, this young man, if he thinks a bit of a runner's errand is atonement. Well, what did Tagawa know? He's only glad he got off easy. Could be worse, if it was oyaji on his ass. Oyaji woulda tell him to do a lot more than drive a truck around that's for sure; he'd be lucky if he didn't come out one eye short. A matching set with Majima, just for the laughs of it.

He parked the truck at the spot he was told to, opposite Nishiki Industries, and waited until two security guards came to him.

"Permission?"

"Not yet, gonna get it sent over." Tagawa said.

"Don't come back til you do."

Then he waited. He stood outside the truck, to see better. Stamped his feet to ward off the cold and tucked his hands under his pits, wishing this could be over sooner so he could be back home. If there was one silver lining lately it's been the management. Kiryu knows what's up, putting him and his men up in the swanky place. Who runs from that kind of place? Plush carpets and hot showers? You'd have to run Tagawa out with a gun; that's the kind of place you can fight off rival families in. In comfort, style, the works.

"Oh. Ain't that?" Tagawa said.

A long low limo, longer than any car Tagawa had ever seen, came turning out of the city over the frosted riverbanks. Usually if he sees these kinda rides, it was always with an entourage. How come then, that this one didn't have one? Tagawa looked into the fenced-up factory, and saw the beginnings of activity. Their boss must have been late then.

Tagawa got back into the car, turned on the heat, and sent off the message: he'd seen the target. Give or take this will be over with in five minutes, and he could be off homewards. Well, there was nothing left but to do the deed. He drove ahead to the security checkpoint, where the guards waited with irate eyes.

"Permission?" They asked again.

"Uh," Tagawa said. "Hasn't anyone sent it in?"

"Why the hell would they? It's your job to bring your papers, isn't it?"

Tagawa scratched his head, said: "Guess so. I'll... Be going then?" This wasn't going exactly to plan; the plan was that he'd be in there cozy by now, unload the shipment, and get gone. Behind him the limo driver had his hands on the horn; they had pulled up behind him and was stuck, either he had to get out or they had to move. They'd prefer Tagawa to do the moving. The horn was loud and brash in the manufacturing zone, where not a sound was to be heard on a Saturday night like this.

"Hey, get the hell outta there! The boss is coming through!" The driver yelled.

"Alright, alright," Tagawa said, and got back into the truck. He sent off a quick status update, (going home, he said, ain't working right), then he turned the truck around in a semi-circle, and atoned for his sins in a fiery blaze.
Later a man, with skin recently described as anemic - who'd seen very little of the sun - saw the sun came to him from the back of a truck. It came, touched the car he was in, and the car (shuddering with joy) exploded in strips of metal warmed and astounded, peeling off bit by bit, shrapnel by shrapnel, and reaching him, threw him out so that he went soaring somewhere through the glass. He landed on melting ice that refused to break his fall, and skidded far across the frozen riverbanks. He stopped just when his hair was about to drip tail-end into freezing water.

Ah, he thought, a long moment later, breathing fog. A few calculated inches and some stray metal, and he wouldn't be breathing at all. He was nearly checkmated in a single sweep.

"First move, Kiryu?" Nishiki asked. "And so soon too. You've still got it, man." His voice sounded supernaturally loud in the silence of the world and the ringing of his ears. If he listened closely, he could hear the sound of his teeth rattling still.

He got back up many minutes later, dusted off the luck that had saved him, and started making calls even while he limped away from the scene.

—

Somewhere downriver, a few hours and a murder later, Kiryu had a thought:

Ah, he was thinking. Majima's managed to kill me without telling me first.

He didn't mind so much, it was warm here in the water, warmer than he'd been since he came back to this fucking city. A city of contradictions: in the freezing river they'd dump his corpse into, he felt warmer than he'd ever been. He floated weightlessly in the water, letting it push him to and fro amongst the city's debris. He had time now for thoughts (while he could still think); a moment of calm in an incessantly loud life.

Thought of: the relief of not having go to war against Nishiki. Dying men don't have to fight anyone, kill anyone.

Thought of: Majima, stabbing him with the precision of a surgeon, all fifty wounds coinciding almost perfectly. If things ever go south for him he could be a doctor; he'd look nice in a white coat.

Thought of: apologies, that he never got around to saying. Apologize, for disappointing Kazama-san, for abandoning Nishiki, for betraying Majima. How come he's always doing something he regrets? Other apologies too, many now to faded faces, themselves as dead as he is (about to be).

Thought of: the silence of the prison, where he'd almost known the kind of person he could be. If they'd just left him alone for a few more years, he might have been able to figure it out, what sort of skin he would like to wear. Not just this loose shape he'd taken on, three-quarters a child's hero-worship, and fortuity; scabs really, wounds that had grown over each other like nets, woven together to form his identity.

Boy, he thought. I'm dead now, and still I never knew who I was.

—
Kiryu came back choking on life, clawing at his throat, his throat all afire, fiery down his insides, his eyes burning raw. In them someone was shining white-bright spotlights. The air was thin, cold, freezing, freeze-drying him. From the water someone dragged him out and he came on like a leviathan, spitting dirty trash-water and bellowing exactly so. He thrashed and flopped in their net, a fish unwillingly caught.

*Back to the water,* he said, in words no one can hear. *Put me back to the water where it's quiet!*

"Hey, over here! We found him!"

Who?

He was looking at a row of feet, all of them encased in mismatched shoes. Some of them had lost toes to frostbite. Some of them were in the process of losing toes, but to gangrene; footwraps shared amongst many. One of them squat down low and peered into him, holding the torchlight in the one hand, the other hand turning Kiryu's face left-and-right.

"Is this the one, Nishida-san?" Someone was asking.

"Yeah. Could you?"

"Sure, sure, no worries."

"Alright," Nishida said. He was just another pair of shoes in Kiryu's view, and he couldn't see anything; only the worried tone showed through. "Alright, let's go then."

"Ya sure about this...? If boss finds out..."

Someone stopped. Turned around, him-wards; looked away, perhaps forwards or backwards, and said: "— saved oyaji? It's only right. That's what oyaji's always said. If ah, if it happens. I'll take responsibility."

"—Nishida?"

They came to some kind of invisible agreement, off his viewfinder, and in the middle of adjusting his aperture, someone threw him onto a rickety cart that groaned and loosened itself under his weight. They covered him with foul-smelling newspapers. Wrapped in a blanket of yesterday's news, he passed out.

—

—

"Hey, couldyamove."

Kiryu came to be in the middle of Purgatory, without at once knowing that this was the place; that that was the name, and therefore could not appreciate fully the irony the way he could in the coming days. He came to be in the middle of a circle of tents, spaced apart like broken tombstones, or else a fence. His back on something cool, metallic, greasy. It's a sheet of metal, sawn off a barrel, and existed now as a multi-functioning surface: could be someone's bed, table, bench. As long as you want to be horizontal, it can provide the service
He stayed horizontal for many days, orienting himself west-east, half here and half somewhere else; dreaming he was, of the silence of prisons, and briefly, the serenity of water. Sometimes someone comes and break that serenity; there is a nut around the camp somewhere who's convinced of the end times, who comes with a beer crate as stage, standing either near or far to Kiryu, with a megaphone that does not work but is still used. With it he broadcasts: END TIMES. Reams of incoherent philosophy and indecipherable ideology, which comes in clear and clean the way it wouldn't, had the megaphone been working. END TIMES, he tells everyone who will listen (therefore, no one), and everyone in Purgatory ignores him. Either they were convinced Purgatory was itself the end; or else they were hoping to end up elsewhere.

End times, Kiryu thought. For me, hopefully. A bit of time to think. He hadn't had even a second to think since he'd left the prison. He'd just been swept along: first by Majima, then the necessity of Kazama.

He was burning too from the inside out: fever, infection, wounds knitting itself around strands of a dirty blanket. He will heal, or perhaps he will die.

One day the nut stopped coming. Perhaps end times had come for him. In Purgatory no one is very surprised when someone goes missing; people disappear into the chasms all the time. If you shed tears for everyone you'll end up dehydrated; or else your cheeks grow heavy with all those frozen tears. The nutter was replaced instead by a group of men playing checkers, then shogi, moving pieces around on a board. The little scrip-scrap of wooden armies knocking on a plastic board annoyed Kiryu, who thought: even here, bloodshed. Even here the imaginary tents of a camp; ghostly armies around him, charging forth, sounding retreats, consuming and promoting each other in turns.

"Hey couldyamove," A guy was saying. "This is my spot."

Was it? He tried to ask with cracked dried lips (he'd forgotten things, like drinking).

"Yeah, I don't know where they fish you up man, but this is my spot."

Okay, he said, and went off somewhere deeper into Purgatory.

—

Kiryu began to walk in circles, which to him was a relief. He ended up each day at a spot he'd been to before.

There was one advantage in being loose in his skin; he could step out at a moment's notice to be elsewhere, so that while his feet took him in ever-widening and often-narrowing circles, he could slip out of his thoughts and be elsewhere, relieving himself of the necessity of living in the moment.

Prior to this, he'd never had the choice but to walk in a line, usually on someone else's terms. What was the last decision he'd made? Personally. Not through circumstance. Not fate. Not chance. A conscious decision?

He picked the earliest one he could find, groping around in the corridors of memory. It was of him and Nishiki, joining the gokudo.

That was a decision he (or Nishiki) had come across like shed skin, with the quality of the familiar and undeniable. They had wanted it wholeheartedly. Becoming Kazama in that moment hadn't mattered; what was more important was that they would be together, he and Nishiki, Nishiki with he,
taking on a journey and the world. Recognition, power, ambition, all that shit was peripheral.

Let's tell Kazama-san, said Nishiki (or was it him).

They practiced sales pitches until they were blue in the face. They had it all lined up, a glass cabinet full of awards. Here's the prize, for singlehandedly putting three adults in stretchers. He two; Nishiki one. An unbalanced score (a sign of things to come), but a great one, for two punks who couldn't tell their fists from their ass. These here the prizes for trouble, gilded, shiny.

They overheard Kashiwagi saying there was a troubling collection to be made; off they went, to collect that trouble. Kazama-san had thanked them personally. Did he care? Of course not. It was small-time low-time. To bother oya-san with change scraped from the drains, that was what it was. Here they held a single leaf from the forest.

The subtext was more important: they were two kids who would kill for him, die for him, in awe of him. They were let into the molten heat of belonging, melted, then coined in his image. Be ruthless, he said. Be benevolent. The two aspects are not mutually exclusive in his mind, Be cruel to be kind, that trite thing. He remained as much an enigma no matter how high they rose; all they know now is that he means to make them in his image, to make wonderful, loyal lieutenants out of them, one on each side, like a pair of titans. That was the first skin, which Nishiki took first and he second. They were changing in the dark; ill-fitting clothes to be had.

"Hey, don't leave me behind," Nishiki said, and it's the first time Kiryu comes awake from his sleepwalking. "How come you didn't call me?"

Because you're weak, he thought but didn't say. This isn't his thought, it'd been handed to him. Change from Kazama-san. "Nishiki's more of a planner," Kazama said. "A person we leave behind when we do things. Someone to think, and someone to do. Specialization. It'll make us stronger as a family." But how to tell this to Nishiki? He looked lost, betrayed, disbelieving in his disbelief. In the moments between Kiryu leaving and coming to Serena he saw Nishiki thinking; thoughts that had nothing to do with plans. Could he have stopped it then? Could he, if he'd tried?

"I'm sorry. I'm so damned sorry, Nishiki." said Kiryu. The words fell on holeless ears; there was no wind in Purgatory to hear him.

Perhaps if they only drank more together. Perhaps if Kiryu hadn't been so wrapped up in himself (and his own glories). But where to find the time? There was none to be found in the slits of their dirty couch. In between crushing heads, eschewing morals, and learning the inner workings of smoky guns, dismantled four-five-ten times in a row without stopping, just to be sure he could - how should he find time to ask Nishiki: hey, are you alright? This isn't what it looks like; I'm not better than you. Could be you're better than I, me all brawn and no brains. Kazama-san has something great in mind for you. Your mind he says, is sharp as a card, cutting like words. Sometime soon something great will happen, if only we just believe.

Kiryu didn't have that kind of time. He was busy being great: the greatest enforcer anyone's ever seen in the Tojo clan. He could break heads like eggs, three in each fist. Judge, jury, executioner for the Kazama family; stronger than men his age, fiercer than lieutenants twice his. He soared so high, the only thing he could see was the sun.

In the time that they had together Kiryu found himself becoming unwillingly but unmistakably bored, so that Nishiki need only say, "Hey do you think we'll — ", and his eyes glaze over with a flimsy future. Nishiki didn't see it, then he did, and if he held onto Kiryu tighter for it - in between sheets made wet by summer - Kiryu never knew until it was too late. His skin had come loose, and he was about to slip out into a new one, inch by inch, beginning from his toes. Through the window he'll go
someday, floating out, called to greater things than his present.

"Stop leaving me behind," Nishiki told him. This time colder; the tone of an order. Nishiki used to giving orders now. While Kiryu dismantled guns and people; Nishiki had found a talent for organizing them: the minutes of recruiting, pushing, buying, and shipping.

At the docks he finally found a way to skin himself before his time. In the still, brackish waters under shipping containers, Nishiki found a secret; he dipped cold toes into it, the rest of himself, and swam out into the depths to read his futures in the wet underwater shapes of the concrete; the shifting of the moss.

"If Kazama-san means for you to be greater than I am," Nishiki said.

"He doesn't."

"How come then, that I'm so far behind."

The donkey comes before the cart, Kiryu tried to say. The brute animals always in front. The king in his moving pavilion sits high.

But the thoughts laid strictly in the future, only half formed, and Nishiki never got an answer; from him or oya-san, who liked his enigmas. Kazama was disinterested in the psychology of titans; enough to know that they are loyal.

Well, tomorrow, Kiryu thought. Tomorrow I'll sit Nishiki down and tell him to be patient. Kazama-san's got it figured out, you and I, and one day we'll be equals, two halves of a whole. Just specialization, is all. (If he tries hard he can believe it too)

One night Kiryu realized that he'd run out of time; the conversations that he'd put off will never occur. There was no more time to be had. This surprised him. He had come around the bent of the corridor, sleepwalking, following the trace of silvery thread and found it abruptly cut. Without warning it'd run out of itself. Was there a warning? Were there signs? Was that the sound of thunder, or Nishiki's furies?

Kiryu came in soaking from a young storm, followed the blood where he was told there would be. He walked silent on dark-blue carpets, smelling of feet (at odds with everything else, which felt so unreal), went through low doors and low ceilings, to where Yumi and Dojima laid dead. He almost mourned; then he drew it out of his chest and put it in his front pocket. He will take it out and look at it, later.

"Nishiki," He called out. "I've come."

In reply, the great maw of silence - the kind he'd always given Nishiki. A bored, detached silence. Kiryu had been left behind for greater things. The meeting of two halves of an empire. The rest are just snippets: Yumi killing Dojima, for Kazama. Then Nishiki killing Yumi, for Kiryu, Their deaths were perfunctory; just part of the web they'd all been spinning, cross-stitching alone, each starting from their own corner of the quilt. If they'd only talk to each other more they wouldn't end up with such a bloody tangle. Now that they've made it they can only lie in it, this crazy-quilt.

—

"Suppose I kill ya for it," Majima said. "Would it make the numbers better or worse?"

"Worse," Ito said. "We'd be down a hundred and twenty two men instead."
Fair enough. That's the kind of math that Majima could get behind. He kicked the crate, and the contents rattled around in there, muffled by packing foam. He'd no great desire to look into it again; no one did. It was fucked up, the shit Nishikiyama was sending to him, like atomic high-content hate mail. Severed heads, eyes, noses, even the occasional dick from a real sick sumabitch. What the hell. Did Nishikiyama rent a meat factory somewhere just for this; hang up all Majima's caught boys one-by-one like cows, sliced in half to make detaching their bits easier? It's sick. That's sick. He's making Kiryu look like a social worker. Majima never wants to go up against the guy who made them both.

He's thinking: Man Kashiwagi, your plan sucks balls.

He crumpled the bloody note that'd come with the crate. An extermination notice for pests. Guy's got a sense of humor, he'll give him that.

Okay, he said, sitting depressed for real now on an empty crate. This shit was depressing him. It was depressing all of his boys, and there's never been this kind of morale, so low it's scraping the bottom of the barrel. Well, who the hell wouldn't be depressed? Five thousand men against three hundred now. They'd each have to kill fifteen men just for a fighting chance. Nishikiyama had guns, a factory, his own fucking shipyard, and an iron will to exterminate them for real this time. They got nothing. Nothing.

If they ever had a fighting chance, Majima had gone and dump it in the river with fifty holes in it.

"Get the boys up who wanna go," He told them.

"Oyaji?"

"Anyone who wants to run. Tell them oyaji says it ain't a trick question. I'm shittin' my pants myself and I ain't afraid to admit it. Anyone wanna go, round them up. Take the vans. Take other people's vans, what the hell. Take the two freight trucks we still got. We're getting the hell outta here."

They exchanged glances; Majima is the kind of guy who'll bite your ear off while you're killing him. He'll have his teeth around your balls even with his guts hanging out. If he says they're running —

"Are ya deaf!?" Majima yelled. "Do we look like we got the time to think? Get gone, or else you're highwayin' it outta here on ya own! Get behind me or get fucked!"

THAT they could understand. If they were running from trouble, they'd much rather run in a pack.

—

In the depths of Purgatory, Kiryu was heading into hell.

He had heard that there was a hell in there somewhere. Three kinds of it, and this one is suffering. The absence-of-self he carried with him at all times, that personal hell.

Though he had left his place in Purgatory very early in the morning, to walk around with the vague but informed decision to look for hell, it was nearly noon before he found someone who could answer his questions, who could understand his words. The rotted roof of his mouth hurt his legibility, so that he spoke with a voice low and halting, the moaning of the condemned. Somehow he'd become a little like the crazies he'd derided, when he'd first arrived.

"Where—" He tried.

"Fighting ring?" Someone said, looking him up and down. "Should you be there? They don't just
hand out tickets, you know?” No, he said. He wanted to fight, not watch.

"Then you really shouldn't be there. They'll knock you out in three minutes, and that's just bad spectacle."

In bits and pieces he pieced together the garbled messages from the other souls, and by noon he'd managed to find a door, vibrating on its hinges to unknown music, and fled the warming sun for what he was hoping was the first flagstone on a long road elsewhere. Now he had entered the red (where previously he was gaining, caught in the black), and it felt like hell; had the appropriate color and tonality of a hell. There was a red bridge built above stagnant water, women in cages, calling out to wanderers in the trappings of an office job. Nine-to-five rates and happy hours advertised on repurposed, reprogrammed electronic boards. All this in a defunct train station.

Oh he thought. The right place but the wrong kind. He went further and deeper, branching around going back-and-forth. The music and his own rankness was turning him around. He had become used in these past few weeks to walking in circles, and his feet could not be dissuaded that it was not circles that he wanted. By and by he came at last to heavy metal gates of the coliseum, again in the black, with metal lions and bulbous contraptions on its worn surface; he pushed it apart to find some suffering within.

"Hi, are you here to redeem — "

Redeem himself? That would be correct; but the woman is speaking to someone else, another fighter with points to cash in and money to cash out. Kiryu waited in line for his turn; his turn never came. The reception was a pedestrian from the world above, and had grown hardened scales on her eyes. Eventually, blinking sleepy eyes at him, he came into existence bit by bit beside her and she said:

"Yes, can I help you?"

"No," he said. "But I'll like to join the fighting ring please."

She looks at him, thinks: he doesn't look good but has the right kind of eyes. He's here to kill some time, and himself, if he can. They get this type sometimes.

They consigned him reluctantly to the lowest class. To wile away some time between sufferings, someone asked him: "How'd you end up here?"

"I'm sticking my hand in the sand," he said, conversationally. "Don't want to go back up, don't want to follow orders. Don't know what I want either, or where I should be. I don't know if I should apologize for being right, or wrong. I've said sorry but I don't know what I'm apologizing for, and anyway no one acknowledges it, or if they do I don't understand what I should do with it. I'm hoping if I burn off my hands no one will ever find a use for me again and all this will go away. Do you suppose they can put manacles around you in prison, if you've got no hands?"

Then he realized no one had asked him anything, and sat in silence thinking: Majima is right, something's really wrong with me.

—

Kiryu had gone as far back as he could in the corridors of his memories, and found that there was nothing for him there. All he had was a self built by coincidences. Now that he had time, he had to gestate some kind of ideology; the first sketches in the sand of the sort of person he'd like to be. He was sick of wallowing.
He got far enough to know three things, which he learned in between grinding his opponents into mince in the rings.

One: he liked hurting people. This was one thing that had never changed. His initial passions had never waned: he enjoyed maiming, injuring, incapacitating, wounding people. He is a sadist. It gives him joy to hurt others. Why else does anyone first raise fists? To protect? The only thing he ever had (in all his pathetic life) was Nishiki, and Nishiki could protect himself. Something else then. It's this. When he breaks a bone it gives him warmth, all the way down to his toes, so that he can sleep outdoors on metal sliding even during the coldest days; pain warms his inside so.

To fight then, but not to kill. There his sadism ended. When was the last time he let someone go? Spare them. Not carelessly, but mercy. Besides Majima, that is. That was just a fluke. He'd imprinted himself on the first person he met out of prison, Majima an accident. It must be a long time ago, because the last thing he remembers is someone, faceless and disappointed, saying: "Rat makes two. You let them go and the rat makes two." Murder was what perforated his insides. Crunched glass in his belly. No, not murder exactly (the act itself was fine, was like the picking of teeth, the removal of plaque). But the distance you had to cultivate between persons, in order that one day you may kill them and go: so what's next?

Two: he didn't enjoy hurting people. Their insides, that was. No contradiction. In the interchangeability of his opponents, he saw the lines of Majima's oddling face, etched in pain, his jaw clenched so hard he must have cracked it. Fifty stabs? A hundred wouldn't have been enough. Majima had offered him a tenuous trust, the only kind they had in their world, and Kiryu had spurned it, broke it, threw it in his face. Sorry, he realized he never said. Once he's done here he should go back. Apologize with his liver and his spleen. If Majima cuts it all out, goes cleanly, the apology might be accepted.

He hurt Nishiki with his obedience; Kashiwagi of his expectations. "Use your goddamned brains, Kiryu," Kashiwagi said often. "The lives around you don't end when your mission does. They have to pick up the shit you leave behind." Well, he didn't care; what were they to him? But maybe Kashiwagi was right, and Kiryu should learn to give a damn about the unpersons, if only to see what it felt like. A try-on skin.

Three: he had a lot of filth to learn, filth he hasn't even seen.

He thought of unconditional loyalty, from Majima to his boys to Majima - or at least those he called the old guard - and hundreds of the others who would die, kill, exile themselves for him. Who believed in him, despite Majima never actually winning any battles. Without achievements, no crown, or if there was, only one made of nails. Was that not, in its own way, a mark of royalty? A driftwood crown, still rallied around.

Was that not wondrous? What else remains out there to be known? Something was shaping in the sand, and that was good enough.

Waking him from his inadequate reverie, a voice said: "Hey, champ. Aren't you Kazama's boy? Shouldn't you be out there? It's a damned shitshow you're missing."

The rest it seems he'll have to learn in the world of the living.

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Somewhere north of Purgatory, a line of white unmarked vans were sunning themselves.
Nishida was wandering through the maze of vehicles, amazed by exactly how much inventory he still had to check. There was food (in case they had to hide out in the country), water (in case they're going by the coast), medicine (someone will get hurt, step on a nail), guns (all those that Kiryu-san had left), fuel, and barrels as portable toilets...

"Goddamn it, Nishida. Are we ready or are we not?" Majima snarled. "At this rate? Might as well rent some billboards to advertise."

"Oyaji," Nishida said, wiping sweat off before it could drip on his clipboard. "If I can get three hundred men to appear on time, I'd be in government like my ma said. Taxes, probably."

"Ya would think running for their lives was important enough to be on time for..."

Majima kicked ground around; then caught the scent of something like trouble, and disappeared in a flash. Which was just as well, Nishida had a lot of things he still had to go through. They had enough vehicles to move most of the guys, about ten each in a van. Packed tight but they'll live. Anyway Nishida knows the kind of roads they'll be on, the guys will be glad to have the company. Nothing worse than being hunted, except being hunted alone. He'd already make provisions for the ones who won't show up: either too scared, wounded, turncoats, or had run when oyaji first said so, but on their own terms and in their own way.

Nishida didn't blame them. It wasn't a good strategy, to run in a group when they could go guerrilla, scatter into the grass like roaches. The Nishikiyama-gumi can't get them all, not even if they gun down the whole field. The trouble is sentimentality. That's why they're huddling like this. No one's saying it, but this is mass suicide, all of 'em ducklings in a line behind the boss. Well, what can they do about it? At this point most of them had followed the boss around for a decade, and you don't follow someone around for a decade because you despise him.

There are better places for glory: almost every family since the ascension of Kazama-gumi was a sweeter place to hang out. You can get rich feeding on the shit they throw out. Anyone who wants to leave is long gone; the rest of them, they're just here out of loyalty.

Mass suicide, Nishida thought, and swallowed. No, he'll think about the silver lining. Could be the boss leads them outta this. The boss will think of something when he's flying about on the edge of his seat.

"Hey," Majima said, reappearing beside him. "Gimme the keys for the long-ass truck."

"Which truck?"

"Who cares! Any!"

Nishida handed it over in a grumble. They only had two. And they were the most spacious ones. He hoped the boss won't wreck it driving in circles or something idiotic like that. He'd allocated a comfortable forty men to that. He scurried about with his clipboard to do one last check: found some undocumented supplies of booze that someone had snuck in, and added it to the inventory list.

Sneaking good beer in without sharing? Not on his watch. Uh-uh.

Majima's complaints were valid: they were in a conspicuous spot. Even though it was early on a weekday, and it was a lazy suburb they were in, it was only a matter of not-that-much time before everyone noticed thirty white vans parked on the streets. Can't help it; there's just no place they can gather, unless they meet outta Kamurocho. The idea is to get gone soon, before the city wakes up in earnest.
"Hey Ito," He said. "How's headcount?"

"About two hundred fifty? Not sure if the rest will show up."

Okay, that was fine. Was in fact a bit higher in numbers than Nishida had anticipated. They would be on time. The men had gathered about the vans now, leaning against it, smoking nervous cigarettes five-in-a-row. Someone had brought a battery-powered radio to play tracks on the road, and was fiddling around with it to tune it right. Another group was loading up personal supplies: hair gel, bbq racks, deodorant by the boxes. They'd better hurry; if Majima comes back and sees that shit, he'll load them up in stretchers.

"Nishida," Ito was saying.

"A second. There's bandages somewhere."

"Nishida." Ito said again, urgently enough for Nishida to look up.

He looked, drew in a long breath, said, "Where's the boss?"

"I… I don't know."

They watched, as vans almost identical to theirs but cut from black, began rolling in from the opposite end of the street. Vans loaded to the top, splitting at its seams, filled with Nishikiyama's people. They hadn't marked themselves. Hadn't need to. Only one group on their ass with that kind of manpower.

"We gotta find the boss," Ito was saying.

"Load everyone up," Nishida told him instead. "We gotta — I don't know — but we gotta get out. Everyone of them's got a gun, I wager. Come on then, let's go!" He yelled this to the closest group. They stood in stunned silence for an excruciating half minute, then began to disperse in a flurry of limbs into the vans. The staccato rhythm of cars being started sounded one by one. A general din of panic, swearing, the mass losing of shits.

"But the boss—"

Someone else: "Hey? Where's my stuff?"

"Has anyone seen—?"

"Nishida!"

"Dammit Ito!" He yelled. "You know the boss, he'll turn up! How long have you been doing this shit? Get going! You really wanna be the guy who tells the boss you were standing around with your dick out? He'll turn up, dammit!"

It's bravado; he himself is trembling so hard, his teeth chattering a mile a minute in his foreign-feeling mouth. What were they going to do? He thought but did not dare to say. Can they outrun? They must! What then? Where to? But that's not important; important was to get going, get in there, get started on the road, then the hunt begins. Not so nice to be hunted! He stuffed himself trembling still into the van he'd allocated himself, with Ito and Tanda and the rest of the circle. They were the closest to the Nishikiyama-gumi, had in fact positioned themselves that way. They were supposed to be last, make sure everyone got away...

It's okay, the first of the guys at the exit had already pulled out of the lane; they could make it in time
if they were quick. Well, everyone else anyway. Maybe not so much them? Sorry ma, Nishida was thinking, in between frazzled thoughts of inventories and water storage levels. Sorry ma, sorry ma, sorry ma. Should have gone into civvies like you said, only I'm here because friendship, respect, the whole doggone thirty-miles, and I'm scared but I'm okay… He clutched the weapon he had, a bat and thought: if they come close enough we could still take a couple of swings, maybe.

They watched with sweating eyes and cold feet, the Nishikiyama-gumi's swarm of shiny black vans, crawling slowly across the road on arrogance. They weren't concerned, were they? There's no way to run, this is a one-lane street in the middle of fucking nowhere. Can't get out in numbers or you'll get stuck. Surprise then. It disperses, the swarm parting for a shiny black wasp to come through, alike but unalike the other vehicles, stepping ahead out of the group. It opens, it discloses, and out comes the man that'd hunted them all this while.

So that's the face of a killer, Nishida thought. Not so different from any of us. How come so evil? He's expecting, in his own limited way, horns and scaly feet, metaphorical but showing still, some sign of clearly marked evil, a fallen star sort of face. Nonetheless it's just a man. A well-dressed man, hair slicked back, but a bag of bones like any one of them.

"I'm here for your boss," Nishikiyama told them; they being the last in line only they could hear. "Where is he?"

"He ain't around," Tanda squeaked. "Gone somewhere."

He bore into them a look of immense disinterest. "If you give him up to me, I'll reward you. You'll get to die after him. Might sound like a raw deal to you, but I promise you, it's exactly the kind of thing you're looking for." He tuck a stray hair behind the ear; innocuous, almost maiden-like. "I'll count to ten. Give him up. It'll just be the thing to kill him." He didn't describe the 'or else'; they could see windows slowly winding down across the swamp. Something glinted in there: O wholesome death.

Come on, Nishida was thinking. Boss, come on. The vans are already half gone! You have the truck! Come on!

"Five," Nishikiyama started with. "Seven."

Come on, Nishida thought. — oyaji, you're really going to wait until ten? Is this funny to you!? It was funny to him.

Majima came at ten, cackling so loud he could be heard over the sound of screeching wheels, out of a perpendicular street; had sat waiting like a satisfied cat, the usual creamy look on his face, dreamy up to his toes. The gear as high as it could go without killing it, he rammed the truck forwards through two innocent yards at the very last minute, right between Nishikiyama and his boys, two feet away from flattening the pepperoni supremo, looked right at the asshole and said: "Eat shits on a stick!"

A bullet ricocheted near the top of his head; Nishikiyama hadn't done him the courtesy of repartee, had ducked back into his car in case Majima had a gun, which he didn't, and then the swarm opened fire in earnest, a futile sort of expression, seeing as there was now a truck between them and Majima's boys and not unless guns had been born to pierce six feet of space and much metal was this going to happen. The hunt is de-layed, thankyeverymuch.

The truck's window shattered around a laughing Majima - having the time of his life - who dove with two bullets stuck in his back going ow ow like he'd been stung by wasps, went through the other side
of the truck, the passenger's spot, and bouncing unharmed off the asphalt, ended up in Nishida and co's van.

"Yo boys, soaked any panties?" He said, contorting himself into the backseat.

"Oyaji! That showy shit! You've got to stop doing that!" Nishida screeched, starting the van, aware that he sounded like a banshee and did not care; the car peeled off the road in a mix of dust and debris, and tore down after the rest of the guys. Two of Nishikiyama's vans came after them from the side lanes, but too few, and they brushed right through.

Majima only laughed, raised a middle finger out of the van window that no one could see, shouting things that could be heard: "Hey Nishikiyama! Ya fucking cunt! Ya want me? Ya ain't got the balls to get me! Go fish for your dickwad brother at the wharf or something!"

It did not seem like a good time to correct him, so Nishida did not.

After all, when the dust settles, they'll be hunting-and-hunted, and quickly-soons.

—
In the house of flowers, The Florist was watching little dots shrink and dance on a snowed-out screen. The cameras with their rheumy eyes peered at the stageplay without making sense of it. Rather like Shakespeare, they were thinking, but transliterated. The screen had framed long rows of white-and-black vans chasing each other down a dawn-kissed road. A close-up of a zebra, if you blink. Someone pulls ahead, someone drags them back. People exit stage left and right sometimes. Life writ small.

"Your brother's a bit of a hardass, isn't he?" The Florist said.

Kiryu sat eating a steaming bun on a chair, borrowed from a technician wrinkling his nose at Kiryu. What a chair. Not a comfortable one; there did not seem to be a comfortable seat in the entire place, that did not fold people half and half again who sat in them.

"Keeps you on your toes," The Florist joked. "Comfortable people tend to leave the stage first."

Kiryu knew of The Florist and his network of eyes; had had dealings with him in the past. Many of them indirectly, through the cut-out sides of briefcases and bouquets with plastic flowers. He'd spent a good part of the late eighties in a payphone, punching in numbers one-five-six in a row to call the all-seeing eye. Much more reliable than a god, the Florist - answered prayers the way god won't, as Kazama-san's third eye.

He watched the shitshow on the screen. There were two, three vehicles for every one of Majima's.

Extermination, then. Nishiki was done toying with his puppy. Kiryu's fault - he'd pushed Majima into such blatant existence to draw Nishiki out, and Nishiki had been drawn out, for good. Where before he was content to paw at Majima's boys one by one, he will cut them all down now, preferably in front of Majima.

And Nishiki himself at the front lines, naturally. How will he sleep for the rest of his days, if perchance they kill the dog before he gets his hand around him? It was Nishiki's sister, that Majima had killed. He won't rest until he reduces Majima to nothing.

Kiryu finished the bun, looked at the time stamp.

"How much are my winnings at the ring, in terms of favors?" He asked The Florist. "And how much more, to keep it a secret from oya-san?"

Majima and his boys went west running from the sun, who became displeased by their infidelity and hindered them by hiding itself, so that the days grew shorter for them but longer for their enemies. This is untrue; though it felt that way when they were on the run, driving through wet mud and spike-thin trees spaced evenly apart in forests, forbidding and disapproving of their passage. The sun never seemed to be there when they wanted it to be; if it shone, it shone only to reveal them.

They came apart in designated formation almost immediately after leaving Tokyo, so that before the signs could say five miles they'd already separated, white vans on three roads rolling independently nine-in-a-line, to meet up again in towns circled on strange maps bearing foreign names: Plan A, Plan B, Plan C.
Plan Z was said to be kansai, Sotenbori, Osaka, a zip code most of them didn't like and didn't want to be in, but they kept their mouths shut because Majima hadn't told them anything, and what they heard when they put their ears against telltale mud did not count.

"Where are we going, do you suppose?" They passed this on one-by-one as a Chinese whisper, so that by the time it got to the last guy in the row the message was garbled, jumbled, and said: suppose you do, going where we are?

Suppose we are, going where we do?

Only one van running at the front of the pack knew the truth, though they would prefer not to. Majima's circle sat uncomfortable in this heavy knowledge they didn't ask for, sour tastes in their mouth and traitorous tendencies under their tongues. Tastes bad, they said. Oyaji, are we really doing this?

"Sagawa," Majima talked over them into the phone. "Are ya still kickin'?"

"No," said Sagawa. "I'm dead, Majima-chan. Killed long ago back in '89. Talk to the others. I don't got a mouth no more."

He went through hoops one by one until he got something shaped marginally like a promise, which he didn't believe in but had to; it was something to lead his boys to and better than saying he didn't have a fucking clue where they were about to go, except into solitary wet graves in anonymous stilt.

Never thought it'd come to this, where he'd even consider betraying Tojo. He had no great attachments to the clan; it was betrayal that didn't sit well with him. It went against every fibre of his being, and if Saejima was around to see him... How low he'd fallen, Saejima would say. So damned low, kyoudai. Well, Saejima wasn't here now. Others were.

Nishikiyama's men followed them as a ghoulish army, looking exactly so in their matching suits and their shiny black cars. Like uniforms, what the hell, you can get uniforms for anything now, maybe they even had white standard-issue tighty-whities.

Disheartening most of all was that the Nishikiyama-gumi's vans did not get dirty. Not that being rammed off the road and shot at isn't disheartening, but it's a special kind of upset you feel when your van gets streaked in mud, and theirs remain as pristine as ever by virtue of being too black for dirt.

"Kick ass," Majima told his boys.

"There's too many of them," His boys said. "It never ends."

"Run them into the mud then," He said, giving tacit permission to kill. He felt (too late) that the moral high ground only gave him an elevated standpoint on which to see his boys mowed down one by one. It was no use having rules; too late in the game to have rules, playing against dirty cheaters like the cunt. What a wobbly moral code, that he had.

Majima's family camped separately in places unknown to each other on or under hills, in between the toes of forests or the pits of motels when they felt brave; drove into uncharted roads as spunky explorers to lose their pursuers, went spelunking into villages so isolated that they were still using hand-drawn wells. When they could they misled the Nishikiyama-gumi by driving in circles like madmen. It wasn't a race, it was a humiliation they were after.

By-and-by they became more and more often lost in the boonies. if anyone else existed except them it was hard to know when driving up pristine mountains with winding roads; these shattered paths had seen a car last when they were still American imports. Plan Z had to be told to everyone -
communication had become spotty and unreliable, so that when they spoke they spoke through

"We're about — I think."

"How many left?"

"— quarters of us, I reckon."

One night Majima went to sleep and dreamt reality without knowing it; slipped out of his cold skins
and warm fleshes into an immaculate night sky dotted with stars, and traveled down by osmosis until
he met his other boys, who'd long gone on another path and had been safe so far. He crunched the
leaves gently as he walked towards them, and went to sit beside them where they were huddling tired
and road-weary (almost relieved to be caught at last) against the side of a clapboard inn.

"Where's your boss?" Asked someone in a suit, the kind of asshole who wore sunglasses at night.

"Somewhere else," They replied, not betraying him half because they didn't want to; the other half
because they didn't know how to.

Majima calmly sat (without bringing his flesh he could feel nothing) and watched while they took his
boys one by one and lined them up against the walls, shooting them like targets at a carnival. From
the front, to see better. Nishikiyama's men had had a long road and were bored and it had been many
days since they were last entertained; unlike Majima's boys they hadn't pack with fun in mind, had
not cards or magazines or shogi boards or radios that play soft nostalgic tunes punctuated by
interference while their owners died.

They had their own kind of entertainment, their own kind of crazy cultivated in Nishikiyama's
family. The last of his boys to die were often the worst, because realizing the reels of their film was
about to run out, Nishikiyama's men tend to draw it out. Someone gets told to run, then mowed
down by headlights. Very slasher, very B-grade.

Before he left Majima peered curiously at the half-played game, and found that someone's golden
general had been eaten.

He opened the eyes of his body when he woke up, utterly unsurprised when Nishida stood over him
saying, "Oyaji…"

"Eh, it happens," He said.

Because what else is he supposed to say? Sorry is just damned disheartening. Sorry I got you guys
into this shit? Sorry I wasn't strong enough? Sorry I thought this time it'd be different? Fucking trite!

"Suppose we build a damned time machine," He said.

He'd go back in time to the prison, to before that even, back-back-back to bygone times, find Kiryu,
and say: teach me how to be as fucking cruel as you are. Teach me how to use people like they're
nothing. Teach me how to not give a fuck about my men, so that when they die I won't bleed so
damned much inside.

Then he'd go back to where it matters and change his own mind.

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There was a buzzing of flies and a coming-together of bees, the rare few who had confused all the sticky stuff with pollen and had landed here and thereabouts to see what was going on. Perhaps with a little elbow grease they can develop carnivorous tendencies like their cousins and cultivate a taste for blood.

"Oh," Kiryu said, displeased that he'd manage to stick his shoe in some dead guy's vomit. "Hey, go away." He batted a fly away.

He leaned against his borrowed car and regretted his decision to come out here. His car was boiling hot with smelly leather seats, but nothing on what's out here. How many men? It is too messy; he can't even begin to guess. They were blanketed by a layer of snowfall, which had started last night and never stopped. The conspiratorial white down makes the scene almost pastoral - the easiest way to find the dead is to step in it, like Kiryu did.

The police were swarming around the place, too busy to notice him. When they did he pretended he's from the newspaper, looking studious with a blank notebook and a pair of glasses he'd found in the glove compartment. Kiryu walked around and around until he saw enough skid marks in the sleet to figure out the general direction of the party. Tucking his notebook away, he peered at someone's half-played shogi game and noted that a king was hard fenced in without his golden general.

He got back in the car and smoke one by one half a pack until the smog was enough to drown out the smell of decay. Then he backed out, put on some music, and went back to what he'd done to kill time the whole way down from Kamurocho.

"I shouldn't have done that," He said, trying out the words to see how it sat on his tongue and if they rolled off well. "It wasn't too good, what I did." No it didn't sound right, like the half dozen apologies he'd tried on one by one and found them overly salted.

"Sorry 'bout that." He tried again, but that sounded too casual, that inflection.

I probably shouldn't have… No. Sounded like he was pushing responsibilities away. What else? Hey man, I'm sorry? Wasn't so good, what I did. Sorry about killing people you explicitly told me not to kill. I'm real damned sorry bout it. Sorry about the boys. Sorry about your boys. Sorry I killed your boys. I'm sorry you're sorry I killed your boys. Majima, I apologize. You can hit me if you like, one on each side.

Suppose I'm sorry?

Suppose I'm not sorry?

Well, he thought.

He'll figure it out before he gets there, if he gets there before Nishiki does. If he isn't in time, then there'll be no need for speeches. He put the gear on high, and drove on.

Majima began to feel a knocking in his bones, a suspicion that wanted to be let in.

"Whoooo— " He said.

He was convinced there was someone squishy-squish in the forest, looking at him with ill-intentioned eyes. Who'd trampled over birdsong.
He went walking on stealthy feet away from his boys. They were spread out and comfy in tonight's camp, so close were they today to civilization that someone brave had hopped the border to the land of convenient stores and bought meat by a dozen packs. They'd grilled it with mushrooms and off-season vegetables expensive and rare (no time to be stingy now when tomorrow you might die) and laid now in a loose circle sleepy and fine.

He touched moist bark with gloved hands, and felt the dew. He had worn these gloves for so many years that he could feel texture through them (though perhaps he had forgotten the tactile sensations of many things and just didn't know it).

"Come out," He whispered only to himself, and went oozing forth, walking swaggering with hips swinging, saying: behold here I am. Come ye usurpers if you can.

He brought only his baseball bat; there was only one set of footsteps that he had imagined he had heard, and if he can't fight off one gunner he might as well call it quits, keel over, and fucking die.

Majima must have walked ten-fifteen-twenty minutes before he heard affirmation; someone had turned around on leaves to get a better look at him. Are there red dots cartwheeling in the air? Is there one between his eyes, one behind his ears, anointed sweetly like holy water? There was none that he saw, so he went ahead and pissed in the forest. Whistling a pop tune: step and go, step and go.

Whistling: a bullet through the air, missing, splintering wood above him; another caught him between the shoulders.

Majima hissed, whirled in the direction it came from. In the darkening forest he saw the loose shadowy shape of a man who'd turned and run. He heckled: "Oi, quitter-san! Don't wanna give it another go?"

He dove headfirst into the clearing, running like a maniac swinging his baseball bat side-to-side, so that branches scratched him sometimes but broke off more. Then he touched tree and tree and tree as he passed, brushing them lightly to invite them into his great game; a game of tag, him and the trees - this fucking loser is just caught in the middle of it.

Lithely he saw his chance and leapt, judging his distance in instincts; he kicked and twisted off bark in perfect form and landed on the man's back with a crunch. A single shout and the man was outta the game. Easy-Jammy-Majima-jams.

"Lookee-here," He said, wincing where his muscles pulled around the bullet in his back. Three bullets in two weeks? He needs his lucky underwear, is what he needs.

He pulled the man up by the hair, ignored his pained whine, and checked his kit out. In the dark he couldn't make out what he was holding. The man was dressed in loose black fatigues, almost shapeless if he blinked. One of Nishikiyama's men? No. Didn't have the right look. He sniffed. Didn't smell right either; not nearly enough hair gel. 'Sides. He kicked the man in the gut hard enough to incapacitate him, and picked up the gun he'd dropped.

It didn't look like anything he'd seen Nishikiyama's men used. A silencer on it, for one. Scopes up to the tits. A nice piece. Not the kind you hand out to grunts. And anyway there was no reason for all that stealth if one of Nishikiyama's foot soldiers had found them. They never travel far from each other, those fucking rats, and the logical thing would have been to yell the house down and bring in the other sixty grunts for a sound asskicking.

So, someone else.
"Oi, don't suppose ya can tell me who ya work for?" Majima asked.

The man, curled up doubled-over from a Goro-made stomachache said: "We don't get told anything. I can't tell you even if I want to."

"Sure, sure," Majima said. No need for spite. If the man didn't know, he didn't know. No-need-for-spite-at-all. "But eh? I'll kick ya 'round a couple of times for tryin' to off me, 'kay? No hard feelings."

Man takes it like a champ, not a single peep out of him. Majima took one hand out and smashed it in with his heel just to be sure. A pained groan you can't build a soundbite off. Someone expensive then. Trained, professional, used to this shit. A hitman?

Now who the hell else was on his ass too?

—

Kiryu usually spent his nights sleeping in the car. For one thing, if either Majima or Nishiki's men passed him by, it was easier for him to spot them out there, with his car parked not three feet away from the highway in blatant disregard of the law. For another, rural folks had long memories and a short appetite for strangers, and the less time he spent in inns the harder it'll be for anyone to remember him.

Usually but not always. One night he got fed up of the cold - was sick of curling in contortionist poses every night just to conserve a bit of heat - and decanted himself into an inn and checked himself in as Suzuki Taichi. Those leather seats, boiling in the middle of the day, was no help to him at night and there was no one for him to hurt in miles around so he could be warm and fuzzy inside.

He moped around his heated room checking and cross-checking his map. He hardly had to but he had to kill some time. He knew it by heart and could guess what he didn't know: Majima was going kansai, to Omi's backyard. He must be going there to play traitor with Omi's boys. Trying to figure out which warren he'd disappeared to in the mountains was the trouble.

When the lines began to blur on the map Kiryu started to see someone else's map: Plan A, Plan B, Plan C. He rubbed tired eyes and slumped out of the inn to the one dusty street it neighboured, to look for a bar that had a drink with his name on it. He went into the first one he found, attracted by the car parked outside with kyushu plates.

He nursed seven drinks in the seat nearest to the back. That's the most he can drink before becoming inefficient, and he had to stay efficient.

It was not hard pinpointing the owner of the car. Only Kiryu and three other guys, and two of them know each other, was balling it up over the TV crying foul over play-patterns. One other guy in a workman's skin. It is a good skin. Except someone wearing faded salvage can't afford a car like the one he'd seen, and when the man twisted his wedding ring the skin beneath it was tanned. Now is this a newlywed, or a dangerous stranger?

Eventually he waited long enough that the pair of baseball fans went home, cycling away on bikes. Just the man with the faraway car and Kiryu left.

"Who," Kiryu blew into his cold hands, flexing them while the man walked out. He slipped a thousand yen over the counter for a cheap bottle of whisky, and took it out to meet its new friend - the back of the man's head. The bottle shattered over pleasurtries and smiled jagged happy teeth at the man, so glad was it at the meeting.
"Who are you?" Kiryu asked him. Without letting him answer he hit the man hard enough to knock him out. He figured the man's things can answer for him.

"Professional," Said the gun, a new model Kiryu himself had never seen. He held it, turned it around, flipped it on its back, and scratched its belly. "I'm quiet," The gun said lazily, pleased at the attention. "Sneaky too! Infrared services, how 'bout that? Vision 18/20 in the dark like you won't believe!"

"For the right price, I can be anyone you want me to be. I've got family but not in me." The wallet said, empty of all contents except money. The shoes had the polished shine of ex-military. Nothing else, not even a phone number hastily scrawled on a receipt.

Kiryu took all of this in. Put the things back but carried the information back with him into the inn, where he undressed for the futon. He dozed lazily listening to cicadas outside his window. It was small and barred to keep out critters, a thin film over it for the bugs, and it reminded him of prison and he was all the more comforted for it.

A new player, he thought. No. Incorrect. An old player. Kazama-san's pieces. How come they were this far out? Were they here for Nishiki? Had the old man got bored of waiting for Kiryu to move; had heard perhaps that he had moved but not too well, and decided to take things into his own hands?

Nishiki, he thought, dreaming of curious fishes in the water.

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One night Majima's body goes to sleep and out he comes from his skins.

"No!" He yelled, clinging hard and fast and refusing to see; he didn't want to go because he knew it would be ugly. He didn't sleep that night, thinking that if he didn't sleep then he wouldn't dream and therefore it won't happen. This might work or it might not (it does not); but either way he wasn't sleeping so fuck you.

He sat rattling at the back of the van with eyebags down to his tits, his head burning up a fever from the hitman's bullet. Tanda had extracted it out of him with a pair of tweezers, then pliers, and stamped it with pieces of hot metal they'd heated in the fire. It closed bad and would scar, but Majima probably won't be infected. The operational keyword is probably.

"Trust me," Tanda said. "My old man's a blacksmith."

"Do I look like a fuckin' piece of," He said, descending into incoherence. He'd taken up most of the backseat, and had kicked all his boys to the front so they sat like squeezed apes shoulders-to-ass. Fine by him, he was sick of company. He rattled about like teeth, his eyes infuriated from the lack of sleep; still he refused to close them.

If he won't sleep he won't see! Insomnia! A hard slap when he's sleepy! Who needs sleep! Sleep's for the weak!

They'd gotten to move him around like a wax idol. He sat eyes opened so wide he looked like a Tanuki statue, gripping fiercely onto his baseball bat; immovable like one too, so they had to carry him in and outta the van like a piece of furniture and put him by the side where he could refuse to sleep in peace. When it got bad enough he sat shaking around his bones, and cut corners on himself by knife so he could stay awake.
Too late he realized one night that's not how this works: he began to dream with his eyes open, so that superimposed on images of the camp - his boys preparing to make dinner for the night out of cans - the rest came to be. He saw (Yelling no! No! No!) another group of his boys meeting their grisly end on another path.

This is a memory almost a week old, and it had coiled itself by now into a menacing spiral. It had laid waiting all this while to haunt Majima, lurking in the wet twigs so it could strike his ankles when the moment comes.

Majima tumbled now into a cloudy night and hemorrhaged down the roads until he got to his boys, who stood around a cluster of vans. Twenty of them on one side, about forty or so on the other end. The smaller group was saying: but boss, but boss, but boss said.

"We don't wanna be traitors," The larger group said. "We'll go with him but not that far. We have principles too, you know? We're Tojo, have been Tojo, always gonna be Tojo. We're going back."

"They'll kill you," His other boys said, mutely. "Nishikiyama will kill you before you even get there."

"Better dead than dead traitors," came the reply. They walked off into their share of the vans, took off with most of the supplies. No one protested, since they had the greater number. They pulled out of the group and drove back the way they came, tails tucked between their legs but proud of it, in the direction of kanto. They got maybe as far as forty miles before they bumped into Nishikiyama's men, and faded into a fog that sounded like gunfire and had the color of the sun when it shines through polluted skies. Red? It needs a better name. Red is too blasé, too common. Let's try: crimson.

The rest of the smaller group rode off in the appropriate direction, but they had become disoriented; weakened by low morale, starved of motivation, and before long Nishikiyama's men caught up with them too, and with a tenacity that would (and does) do oyaji proud, they drove off a ridge and hoped they survived. They did not. They went crashing into hell in a mess of tangled metal, but oyaji is proud, oyaji is proud. The boys had rather die than be caught, just like him...

"Boss," Nishida said, waking him up. Worried. Tired. He'd frowned so much recently he had a new wrinkle between his eyes. "I can't seem to get through to the other guys."

"That's cuz there ain't other guys." Majima told him matter of fact. "All we got here is all we got."

Nishida stared at him. He saw that Majima was blinking for the first time in days, a clairvoyant back from his trance; had seen some shit, the kind of shit he saw, burns your eyeballs so hard ya gotta blink for days just to keep it all back. Nishida woke as if from a daydream and looked around him. At the clearing, the mud, the vans all nine, the snow falling thick and heavy, fog across the horizon rolling in. Dotted around it was a handful of fading men.

"This is all...?" He said.

Majima clapped him on the shoulder, went to the van and squeezed himself into the backseat. He can sleep now, now that he's the worst there is to be seen.

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Nishiki had gone fishing by proxy. He came page by page into the story holding a report in his hands, faxed all the way from HQ in Tokyo out here to his office in the boonies. This is as far as the report can go; there are no checkpoints that belong to him beyond here.
The dragon was dead, the report said. Sometime ago someone had seen men from Majima-gumi throwing its body into the rivers. Long enough now that he must have fed fishes aplenty.

"Wrong," He told the report, and slammed it shut. What was the point of paying anyone if they came up with such incorrect, inaccurate, and distinctly counterfactual hypotheses? Should he pay them in visits instead? Pay them in bullets? Kiryu Kazuma stabbed to death and drowned in the river? Nishiki will drown these poor idiots, and by the time they flow out to the fucking Pacific his brother will still be alive.

If it's so easy for Kiryu to be killed, do they think he'd still be in the game? Even the dog had survived this long. How long more a dragon? The prison wasn't a punishment. The prison was a fucking cage. Can't they understand that?

Nishiki put the report aside, placing it carefully on a pile that he meant to revisit someday. When he has the time he'll meet the authors. He slipped out of the car and into his camp, heading for the infirmary tent.

Something was on fire and it smelled; smoke in the air like a signal. The smoke came down from the skies to melt falling snow before disappearing shyly into one of Majima's lil hearses. These two had been brave hearses; they had gone hurtling off a cliff so that Nishiki's men couldn't catch them, and they succeeded - most of them laid now beyond pain of death. His men had pulled bodies from the wreck for half a day, and there was nothing to be had but corpses. Then they struck gold. Four living, but soon dead.

Nishiki stepped into the gloom, letting go of the tent flap; in the darkened tent the smell of fetid wounds was clinging to the corners, groping for freedom.

"Are they alive." He asked.

Sitting steeped in the dark, a medic said: "Can't keep them for long, sir."

"I don't need you to. Just long enough."

Or else, he thought and didn't say. Or else. There's no need to say it all the time. His people (like him) existed comfortably in the knowledge that everything they did had consequences, often deadly, unpredictable, but beneficial in the long run to the system. Rats make two, the old man used to tell him. "You kill your rats and they make two, and before you know it you'll have a fortune in rats." That's how you make an army: you hurt someone at the bottom and the guy above him splits himself by binary fission, so eager to be useful he makes a twin out of himself.

Nishiki weaved himself away, to his makeshift camp where they were knitting war plans for him to peruse. Take this, they said. How about this. Listen to this. Consider this. They are eager to please and to be correct. Nishiki checked the map, saw that it was all going to plan.

"Run them into the valley." He knocked on wood. "Round up all his boys here. I'll lead him away and finish him off myself. Don't bother us when the time comes."

"The bait, sir?"

"Just find me some rope, fasteners, the works. I want a display."

Nishiki had chased the dog around enough over the years to know he ran on two things: emotions and fun. Well, not much fun to be had in the mountains, so there was only the other. Vaguely he wondered where Kiryu was, looking at the map.
Nishiki had two guesses for his brother. Either he would come after Nishiki to join the hunt on the opposite side… Or else Kiryu was waiting for him back in the city, and Nishiki will go home and find his castles stormed upon, gold taken by the fistfuls. Perhaps both? But his money was on Kiryu being somewhere on this map.

It's an educated guess. Just think of that obsessive light in Kiryu's eyes. A possessive shine that said: the dog is mine, my creature, mine. You can ask it questions, with my permission. You may kill it when I say you can. You will step back when I say you shall. Never trouble it, or I will unroll the flesh from your bones and feed them to my dog morsel by morsel, and when I'm done you'll thank me for it. The bitch is my bitch, dog, cum-bucket etc. so on.

He thought: still a thing for nuts, eh, Kiryu? When's the last time you got it up before someone broke your nose in? So soon out of prison, and already he'd replaced Nishiki with a fucking dog. Well. The dog, the old man's orders, his betrayer. Good hunting to be had in these parts. Why wouldn't Kiryu be here?

Poor asshole, that Majima. Nishiki lit a cigarette. An expensive lighter now but never one as good as that old thing.

"You should feel lucky I'm killing you," He told the marker on the map. "The only thing worse than being dead is being his."
The last leg of the hunt began as early as four in the morning, when the first of Majima's boys went out blurry-eyed and sleepy to piss on tree roots. He saw something, thought he saw nothing, and went back to sleep scratching his balls one-two. In fact what he saw was an early crow.

Hey, the crow said, calling to its friends.

Something smells right, the crow said. One by one they came from all across the hills; perched and waited on impatient heels for things to begin. Where are the people, the people? Branches bowed low and swayed, so many were they. They clapped their beaks, eyed the eyes. Good pecking, might be.

Hey, the crow said.

There was good hunting to be had here.

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There was good hunting to be had here.

Nishiki loved the valley. It was a valley shaped like an eye on the map, with tear ducts on both ends. There was only one exit in and one exit out. Pass this valley, and it's Osaka and the backyard of Omi - no more fights to be had that close, no more skirmishing. You can't kill people on Omi land unless you want to water some feuds, and this isn't the right time for it. Someday soon, he'll displace the old man and take the Tojo clan with him to war, eat one by one all of kanto and then come here with his warhorses.

But that day is not today. Today he has a smaller goal - just a rabid dog that had killed his sister.

Are you ready, he wondered, wiping his gun clean. Do you know you are about to die, Majima?

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Am I ready, Majima was thinking. He groped around his self and checked - knife, bat, plus spare taser if things got ugly and he needed to get out quickish. Kiryu's gun that he found in a briefcase, down to its last few shots, shooting Nishikiyama roaches. Still, he wasn't too good with a gun, so it's the knife he'll be relying on.

He peeled off the bandages from his back - went fucking ow - and checked his wound. It's ugly-red-raw but the bandage limited his movements, and he's thinkin' he'll need every inch to swing his arm right. It comes off sticky, gooey bits of ex-Majima skin stuck to it, yellow from iodine or pus.

Anyway, it doesn't matter if it gets infected. Either today they get out of the valley into kansai proper or they die trying. Either Nishikiyama finds them or he doesn't. Majima's thinking they'll be found. Fate has never been on his side, so why start now? No problemo. He has a knife, he'll cut his way out or die trying. Bonus points if he takes the cunt down with him.

No, he thought, thinking of everything they'd already lost. He's taking the cunt down with him; bonus points if he gets out.
He's got less than a hundred men left now, from a grand thousand when this started, years ago. If they die on him he'll be back where he started, utterly alone in this world.

So, isn't that motivation not to fuck this up?

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Did I fuck this up, Kiryu was thinking, driving somewhere off-distant.

They were getting very close to kansai now; the party was either starting or there won't be one. He hoped he was near the right spot. Could be he guessed wrong, and they were somewhere fuck-all on the other side of the mountain, and he'll be here driving alone in circles.

He didn't think so. He'd found the marks of Nishiki's entourage and the mangled heap of Majima's men and their vehicles - he was on the right track but very late. Pedal to the metal, he went as quickly as he could bumping on rough roads into the fray.

Sorry I killed your boys, he was thinking he should say. He said it with a practiced ease now in his head. Had had, in the course of the week, much time to practice; it was just him and the broken record - the litany of apologies in his head.

I'm sorry I sacrificed your boys for a chance to meet my brother-friend-lover. I'm sorry I didn't believe in them the way you did, never gave them the chance to redeem themselves. Maybe they were rotten, but it was still your say. Here's an axe, it'll be more satisfying to cut me with it, and this time - this time I promise to stay dead.

Then he thought of Nishiki and wondered if apologizing to him would work; if they were truly beyond all that, irredeemably broken.

—

"You broke the radio," Nishida was saying. "Boss, that's low even for you."

"Shut the hell up. Can't hear myself fuckin' think with all the shit y'all playing." It was just them and birdsong now; there was silence all across the mountains. They could hear someone farting from a mile away, which wasn't an attractive prospect when you've got some seventy men cramped into the same locale.

Sixty eight, Nishida corrected himself automatically. They'd lost two men last night; they'd gone and left letters saying so. Not a sad thing though - their hometown was near the area, and this was their stop. Only they didn't have the guts to cry through a goodbye with the boss. Had rather foot it than say goodbye.

Must be hard going, out there on foot in winter. They weren't much better off themselves - inches of snow on the ground getting into everything, and more coming every moment. It won't rest won't stop. The damned cold got in no matter what they do, down-deep all the way into the pits of their stomachs. Never thought about it this way, but he'd never spent a winter outside of a town or city. Had never known cold could hurt you so. He sneezed.

He heard the boss calling and went to Majima, who said, "Tell the boys oyaji says - they make fuckin' noise today I'll cut off their ears, Not a peep outta anyone. If someone so much as shits, they better do it upwards."
"Why—"

"Do it!"

So that was that, and now without reason or explanation they were preparing to move out for the day in absolute silence. There's much to be packed every morning. Tents to be rolled, food to be stored, cookingware to be cleaned - and all this had to be done quietly 'cuz the boss said so and only 'cuz.

Nishida oversaw it with his mind elsewhere. It'll be nice to go home, he was thinking. If the Omi thing doesn't work out, maybe he can go home for good. It'll be tough starting over from nothing, but if there was one thing Majima had taught him, it was that you can start from nothing all the time. Doesn't matter, you'll succeed anyhow.

When they were almost done he went to Majima to report, and found the man straining intently towards the powdered hills.

"Something wrong, oyaji?"

"Couldn't count high enough what was wrong," Majima said, then whirled around to go, baseball bat tucked behind him.

Perplexed, Nishida said: "We're ready to go. We can go now."

"'kay then. Nishida? Arm all the boys. Tell them to do it in the vans and not out in the open."

"Why?" Nishida asked, afraid now.

In answer, Majima only said: "Ya come from the country don't ya, Nishida? The Shizuoka boonies?"

"Sure."

"Then ya tell me - what does it mean when the whole hill's silent and not a bird to be heard anywhere?"

Oh, Nishida said. Listening in now, he heard this truth and thought, oh. So it is. He stood thinking for a long inevitable moment, and thought things that he alone knew. Then he rose out of his weak and cowardly skins into something he'd kept for this moment. He went on quickened feet to each man he could reach, and told them to spread the word: the last leg of the hunt! They had to put on their antlers and their dog ears, to make good prey. Put on their little fangs and their declawed feet, and run, run, perchance to wound a hunter once.

Go, he said. Go, go, go. Climb into your mud-streaked vans and take up your wooden spears.

Majima kicked his old guard out of the van they'd always been in, told them to spread themselves out to the other vans and leave him alone. There was plenty of space; the others weren't concerned but Nishida was. Something showy again. Always something showy. Not that he was complaining, since it'd save their bacon many times before, but he was, he was complaining.

Well, Nishida thought. Well. Nothing to it then. Time was pouring out of his hands and he couldn't hold enough of it to fill a thimble. He could seize with white-knuckled hands and still it'll go on. Wasn't strong enough. He slipped out of the van and into someone else's, taking over from the driver. Then as a pack, they moved out westwards, to exit into kansai.
The first thing Nishida saw was fire out of the hills - something blooming like an orange flower — and before he knew his ass from his nose it'd hit them, throwing them up into the air like popcorn and shaking them around exactly so. Nishida hit the roof with himself, then the floor hit him; his world spun crazily on all cylinders and there was metal everywhere, confetti really, and the next thing he knew he was upside down somewhere, and the vehicle was on fire.

Oh, he thought, lying there stunned. Was he dead? Almost but not quite. Then slowly, shoveling coal into himself, he started climbing out, elbows digging front-back like a good soldier. The van was upside down but he was right-side up on the wet mud; he crawled through the melting snow and looked behind. Tried to but didn't; there was something in his neck that stopped it from turning, water (no, blood) in his eyes. Oh, he thought. Oh.

He crawled faster on all fours until he could pull himself out of the metal carcass. Twisting around with his hips as an axle instead he could look back and see that everyone in the van was dead, except someone groaning at the back. He can save that guy but he won't; first of all it was oyaji he must help (if he needed help).

They all needed help. Somewhere ahead he could see the other guys had gotten far away, had sped ahead almost a mile, two miles - and there had skidded to a halt in the mud. There was one van lying on its side bellowing gasoline; hit by the same thing as theirs (an RPG?). The other had bullet holes all over it, shot through like a honeycomb. The guys had died bravely - there were as many Nishikiyama men littered about - one enemy for every dead family member.

Gotta, Nishida thought. He gotta.

He made his way slowly through the ringing of his ears and the insubstance of his world until he found another van, this one unmanned, two guys dead in the back open-mouthed shouting at the roof. He started it and kept going westwards, then realized he'd gone the wrong way and turned back, then realized he'd gone the wrong way and turned back again, to his initial direction. (Fool!)

He wished now he'd mark oyaji's van with a big red X. As he drove he looked for the others. Four so far including his, so there must be three more somewhere; almost thirty guys alive that's a great sign. Was it? It was. He drove down the marks in the mud that he saw, led by them ever westwards, until he saw in the distance two creatures one-black-one-white fighting each other for supremacy.

The black was gaining, ramming the white hard right into trees; someone in there opened fire on the black, and found it to be bulletproof. The black van opened its door, disclosed its contents one by one men who had guns each, and both vans shot at each other and died inside. Nishida drove off course to the left to avoid the whole thing - he had only one of himself and one van, and he had nothing to shoot with except cowardice.

Gotta, he was thinking. If he could get to oyaji they could drive west and even if it's just the two of them it'll be worth it, all this will be worth it, if they'd all died just so the boss can live, then it wouldn't be so damned stupid.

His van bounced off a pit and kept going; the path now almost proper instead of the shattered stones and unmarked road they'd been on. In maybe thirty minutes of hard driving they'll start seeing roads, then roads to osaka, and it'll be all-okay. Two more, he was thinking - unless he'd math wrong, somewhere out there were two more vans of theirs.

He came around a sharp bend where the trees clustered tight and found the second one; it was already dead on his arrival, looked like it'd been blown off course by a grenade or a spike in the wheel, gone and burst, and went screaming around in circles before it struck a thousand-year tree. Some men in there who knows, and then he did: saw Ito's dead grim face and Tanda's dying one and
thought, why the fuck.

One last one - hold on, boss!

Nishida dreaded going on and finding Majima lying dead somewhere but he had to, this is a horrorshow and like all horrorshows it had to be watched first minute to last. Behind him he was aware people were giving chase, were shooting at him - the glass at the back shatters and something hits the back of his seat; it twinges - perhaps he'd already been shot at (is dying too) and did not know it yet. But who cares?

At last! He saw white streaking ahead and saw it was Majima, wound down his window when he got close enough and screamed: "Oyaji!"

Majima looked at him long enough to scowl — "What?"

"Oyaji! Wrong direction! Where you going?"

"After him!" He screamed back. After? After who? Nishida footed the pedal, stretched left and right. He tried to see, then saw, someone ahead in a black van with — oh no — four men tied to the back of it like a grotesque kite, bodies and bellies and beer guts bouncing up and down with the movement of the vehicle. No, Nishida said, motherfucking no.

"It's a trap!" He yelled. "Come on boss, let's just get outta here, it's only us! Left! Only us!"

But Majima didn't hear him; perhaps had heard but did not care, and showed he was a racer born and raced ahead, driving far faster and better weaving in and out of trees the way Nishida couldn't follow, which he saw angrily as Majima receded into a distance he couldn't reach; screamed: "Fucking hell, oyaji! Get back here!"

When Majima didn't care (in fact couldn't hear) he screamed loud enough his voice broke, and scared the two dead men behind him — "What the fuck was all this for then!?"

Then someone rammed into him, and off he went, tumbling in arcs across the air with his arms up to shield him from the impact; it did not work, he landed and he hurt everywhere. He waited, stunned and confused, then crawled out thinking gotta, gotta; he was tenacious if nothing else, alive now but dead soon perhaps.

Above him stood a man from the Nishikiyama-gumi, special service dispatched to clean him up while the rest went ahead to hunt down Majima. Oh, Nishida thought. So this is it? This is how I die? He should be afraid but he doesn't care; he was furious instead, was so angry he was trembling not from fear but from boiling rage.

Oyaji had rather chase dead guys tied to the back of a truck than to get out. To go ahead into the fray when they'd done all this, die this far, went beyond death, just to get him here, get them to this point. Did he think they were doing this so they could live?

Did he not think even for a fucking second, that this was about him - that they had come and rallied with bravado only because he had called? What the fuck was this for then? What the fuck was all this for, if not to get their king out in one fucking piece? What did their lives matter? If they wanted their lives they would have chosen to be roaches in the field!

"The field!" He moaned around a gargle of blood. His killer did not understand him, was only waiting for him to straighten himself out for a clean shot.

Killed like rats, and in the end for nothing, he thought. All of us dead and for nothing. Getting boss
out would have meant something. It would have meant they didn't die in vain. He at least. Who knows what everyone else was thinking. Could be they believed.

Gotta, he was thinking, trying to get back up. Gotta. He could get a few punches in... Nishida got back up, swaying like a leaf, thinking, a few good hard punches, maybe a sound kick, and he could be on the way; he looked, the man stared him down, cocked the gun; in Nishida's wavering view he waved in an out of existence, and Nishida screwed up all his courage to—

The man fell dead.

Did he do that?

No, he thought, surprised but pleased. No he didn't. It wasn't him. It was a ghost who did it, and Nishida was pleased, very pleased.

"Thanks," He garbled at the ghost. "Please help oyaji. Please."

"Where did he go?" Asked the ghost.

"There," He said. "Please help him."

Then he sat back down to rest.

Just a second to catch his breath. He just needed a second to catch his breath.

—

Nishiki backed his truck up, turned in a circle - just like the truck that had brought the sun to him - and rammed Majima's hearse so hard it fell on its side. It gave out a loud bellow of exhaust and exhaustion, turned its wheels furiously to get back up, futilely, roared in pain, and grounded to a halt. The white beast was dead.

Nishiki waited in his seat until he saw Majima crawling slowly out of it. He looked marvelous: bleeding from the head, cuts everywhere, leg twisted all wrong. He was a work of art. Of suffering.

Nishiki keyed his own truck dead, took his shotgun, and went hunting. He fell from his truck one foot ahead of another, poised and ready for this meeting.

"Majima-san," He said. "Been a while since we've met face to face properly."

Majima was already on his feet. Struggling to breathe through punctured lungs, gurgling like a boiler - yet on his feet and ready to fight. Impressive. The man had Kiryu's constitution. He was swaying like a wind-struck branch, and still he eyed Nishiki menacing with a raised knife he could barely hold on to.

"Get fucked, Ya came to crow?"

"No. Though the way things are, there'll be plenty of food for the crows soon."

"Get fucked," Majima said again. Was about to say something else, and lost heart. "Suck on some dick."

"Strange words coming from you."

Majima said nothing. In the glint of his eye Nishiki could see he hadn't given up. If he gave him the
chance, if he got close enough to Majima, the man would rip a new hole in him. A broken leg is nothing to this man. Stepping on his intestines, tap-dancing on it even, and the pain still won't stop him from killing you.

A born killer. Aloud he said: "Do you know why I'm about to kill you, dog?"

"How should I know? I pissed on your steak or somethin'?"

"Think harder," He said, raising the shotgun. He was close enough to shoot Majima dead; had the confidence. He won't shake. He won't miss. He had lived, and breathed, and dreamnt of this.

"No clue."

A shot rang out; the tree beside Majima splintered, punched by a giant, so near it tore part of his ear off and left it bleeding. It went drip-drip-drip drop by drop into the snow beside him, and bloomed beautiful rorschach tests in the white. It's snowing again; in a few hours it'll be like this never existed. It'll be like they never existed.

"I said, think." He repeated. "Anything comes to mind?"

"Ya shootin' me like a duck won't make me smarter. Ask my teachers. Never worked. Couldn't get me pass trig, I can tell ya that much," Majima returned. He was insolent, every inch of him. He circled Nishiki slow and steadily, smiled and swiped lazily when he got close. Slow dancing on one leg, dancing nonetheless.

Without warning Majima lunged at him, narrow arc of the knife nicked him on the shoulder; he reared back, slammed the gun into the man's chin. Majima's head whipped back, forth again like it was nothing, and got another cut in. Nishiki shot him, a wide shot off-mark but enough to push him back.

Majima stood panting, one hand around the ear that had been grazed; blood welled up around his fingers. He hissed, said, "Now why don't ya tell me? Tell me why you got such a hard-on for me ya chased me and my boys for five years and never stopped til we all dead. How come?"

"My sister." He said through gritted teeth, hating that this fucker was drawing him out instead of the other way around; helpless, to conversation. Majima took measured steps forwards, and he, backwards. Why was he retreating? He was the one with a gun! This dog is nothing, nothing!

It said: "Gotta be specific. I killed two women before, which one's yours?"

Too much. "The one in the fucking hospital! The one you cut dead lying in a hospital bed! Ring any bells, you fucking cunt?"

"Oh, that one."

He drew in a long breath, clenched and unclenched his teeth. He won't let the dog get to him. He had waited, oh waited, oh waited! How he'd waited for this fucking moment! All those years! He won't let the dog draw him out, won't lose his patience, won't kill him before his time.

"Glad you remembered," He said as easily as he could.

"Glad I could help out." Majima smiled sunny and bright. "Hold it tight, eh? Wank off it for the rest of yer life. Majima Goro admitting he offed ya sister."

"I will. I'll remember it fondly. " Nishiki cocked the gun, and shot him.
This time Majima gave him a satisfying scream, so loud it's inhuman, terrorizing birds out of trees; blood and bits, juices everywhere, splattering and splotching out-out-in, where Majima's right leg could have been - the leg being now strictly past tense. Nishiki would have liked to go nearer, stepped in it, dance around in that wound, stick his toes in as far as they could go and see if he could reach some heart, but he didn't dare; the mad dog had a knife and was ferocious still, grinning at him even now with red teeth from where he'd bitten half his own lips off from the pain. His one eyed glowed.


"Don't worry. I'll come real close when you're dead. I'll cut you into a thousand pieces and feed you to your fucking boys. They love you so damned much? They're welcome to you."

"Eh? My boys got it good, free meat."

"Irreverence." Nishiki mocked. "Even til the last moment."

"What ya want then? Sorry? Ya ain't getting it from me. No closure for ya, bad boy. If I was sorry I ain't never gonna tell you. How 'bout this? Let's add insult to the injury. Bed, you said? That reminds me, 'cuz I was just about to tell ya what really went on on that b— "

He howled loud enough to drown Majima out and shot — shot — shot — shot the fucker's head off; only when the dust settled it turned out all three in a row had been shot and he'd missed them all, his hands shook so furious it was a wonder he hadn't shot the sky, the trees, himself, everything except the fucking cunt. He'd gotten Majima's shoulder, cold comfort, but at least there now bloomed a magnificent wound, red fucking everywhere, glorious, glorious.

"Woah there boy," Majima said still; teeth gritted where the shots had grazed him and shrapnel stuck to him, hurt and damaged and dying soon, yet not dead. "Try not to come all over my face. Money shots strictly bank-in only."

"You. You're going to die."

"Get fucked!"

Majima grinned at him nastily, looked left surprised — and then it was Nishiki that exited left in a gorey mess, cut down by an axe.

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"Nishiki," Kiryu said.

Nishiki laid collapsed in a heap, his foot tucked badly underneath him, hissing in pain. He's not stoic about pain, Nishiki. Never was very good with it. He took pity on Nishiki, and pulled the axe back out, wincing when it tore the flesh above the scapula out in fresh cuts.

"I'm sorry," He said. "I moved before I thought." In fact the whole way here he'd been thinking, he'll try to be good this time. He'd talk everything through, won't hurt anyone, but here he was again, doing the thing he did best. He knelt down and checked the wound, pinching the cloth of Nishiki's jacket away; it was bad-deep but nothing serious, a bit of bandage and spit and Nishiki'll be as new in no time. His men will have what he needs. He went around to check on Nishiki's front.
The shotgun leveled in his face. "Late, Kiryu. Expected you here sooner."

"I was going to be. Too late though. Too damned late." He looked at the hill, which laid silent and burning in patches all around them, though they could not see it; somewhere the crows were waiting for the live ones to leave. There was good hunting to be had here.

"Choose quickly then. You wanna die first, or your dog?" Nishiki said.

"Neither. Six shots. You're out of ammo."

Nishiki swung the butt of the shotgun at him, caught him full in the face. Hurts. He didn't avoid it, didn't care. He pushed the gun away, got up, dusted himself, and stepped away from Nishiki.

"Stay down," Kiryu told his brother. "You're no match for me right now."

He walked heavy and slow through the short distance Majima-wards, made unwieldy by the thickness of the snow and the wet sludge it made. He hadn't dressed well for the season. It was Nishiki who spoke first, moved first; He struggled up, wincing on his gored back, stood hunched and small looking at Kiryu.

He asked, in words quiet and hoarse from emotion: "You're really going to pick him?"

Kiryu turned around to face him.

"You heard me."

"I did."

"I asked. It's him? You'll pick him over me? Kiryu, is there any fucking thing in this world you won't pick over me?" Nishiki snarled. "A dog? A dog? Even a dog is better than I am? You'd throw me aside for this piece of shit — "

"Can I pick you?" Kiryu interrupted.

"What?"

"I said, can I pick you? Is it even an option?"

"I... What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, can I do that? Will you allow me to? If I said right now that I'm sorry, would you take me back? Suppose I grovel. Suppose I say I'm sorry, and you say it too. Can we go back to the way we were, and pretend everything between us never happened? That the last ten years we didn't hurt each other this bad? " He looked away. "Because if I could, if you'd allowed me to, I'd pick you. I'd kill him myself. I'll say sorry, but I'll do it."

They looked; Nishiki at him, and he at the fog.

"We can do it any way you want. I'll break his neck, his other leg, shoot every part of him if that's what it takes. So." It was a wonder, how hands could be clammy still in deep winter. "Can we, Nishiki?"

Nishiki weighed this. "Would you really."

"You mean more to me than any goddamned thing in this world." He took steps towards Nishiki but stopped an eternity away. Hands loose-clenched-loose, holding onto nothing. "You've always been
it. But you know we can't. If we can forgive, if we knew how to forgive, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Nishiki closed his eyes, furious, angry, face twisted with sheer rage, perhaps even regret, a maelstrom certainly, said: "Perhaps. Maybe? I could. Yes. I could, I could forgive. We can—"

"Stop it." He seized Nishiki by the back of his neck, laid them forehead-to-forehead, and brushed aside his snow-wet locks. "Don't say things you don't mean just to get me to kill him."

"Then." Kiryu waited for him to continue. "Then that's why. This dog. You'd take him in, as what. A replacement?"

Kiryu said: "I don't know, I came to say sorry. Haven't I told you enough? Nothing can replace you. We're everything. We were everything."

"But because."

"Because I can't choose you. There's nothing here left for us to choose. All we could have had, we had." He looked as deeply as he could, willing Nishiki to understand. "He exists. I can say sorry, apologize and grovel to him. I don't know yet if it can be salvaged. Unlike us."

Unlike them, in which between were a thousand cuts too deep.

"Okay," Nishiki said, letting go. "Okay."

Kiryu held him close, closer, breathed him in, willing every form of Nishiki's to belong in him and embed themselves in his very cells. Then he uncurled his fingers, and let go.

He turned away towards Majima, who still sat in dumb disbelief, as one seeing a ghost. He got down on his knees in front of Majima, and checked his wound; the leg was the most serious. Kiryu's jacket came off to become a makeshift tourniquet, to stop the bleeding before they were all swimming in a river of pink snow.

"Alright," He said, satisfied. "We're good to go."

Nishiki watched them rise in tandem, Kiryu leading and Majima hunched over, wincing on his leg. The dog struggled two short steps in Nishiki's direction, knife in hand. It's a mere glint now, his hand shaking so furiously the knife disappears second by second into magic air. Kiryu clamped a hand on him, turned away his kicks. No, he said. Any moment now they'll walk beyond Nishiki, beyond reach and words.

"Wait." He said. "I want answers. I have to have answers. I must." This to the mad dog. "Tell me why. Tell me why it had to be Yuko. Who ordered it? I deserve to know that much."

"Ya deserve to eat my balls. Ya think I'm gonna tell ya shit after all this?"

"You—"

"Fuck you! After all ya done you still expect me to tell ya shit!? If it wasn't for your gorilla cunt here I'll kill you in a heartbeat!"

Nishiki said nothing, turned instead to Kiryu.

"Please," He begged. "Please."

And Kiryu, in turn, to Majima: "Please."
Majima looked the pair one-two to the side, held no pity. Winter now was in earnest, and Majima had most of all a light dusting of snow on all of him. His hair a crown of white, a spot on his nose. They were all cold and shivering soon and had no time for tales; yet tales had to be told. Did Majima want to tell? He must, for there was no other reason for him to do so; no one could force his tongue. If he spoke he spoke only to unburden his own heart.

In the folded pinched corners of him, he must have felt he had to.

He licked his lips, opened wide that wet mouth, and said —
— His name is Idiot.

Yesterday he wasn't someone else; had been given a long time ago, with the manners of a dying pig and the tongue of a disemboweled cow, the name: Idiot.

Tomorrow he will be given, at the perfunctory crowning of one high rat from the nest, the name: oyaji.

In between the putting-away and the bringing-apart of his enemies, he has done his boss a great service at a cost to himself. To repay this debt the boss gives him something he never asked for, a burden he does not want.

He goes into a tea room to pay with lip service and receives it in the hallway, where a row of men stand confused but hopeful, tentatively on tenterhooks but ready for what may come: O bright and beautiful future!

Upon their wet lips they peel his new name like a grape and ate it whole: oyaji —

—

His new throne sits like a crown of nails, digging into his ass and head every day.

Before his ascension he had assumptions, and that assumption was this - that underlings are faceless. His men should be anonymous blobby bag of bones. Baggy blobs of anonymity. These are words that don't capture the essence of things.

Let him try. Imagine for example that you were to put a bag over someone's head, a white plastic bag that stretches infinitely. You put it around their face, tie it tight, and it becomes anonymous; just a white balloon, kinda smock-like.

In the struggle, the first to emerge is the nose - pointy-end first with the upturned tip - and it pushes against the plastic bit-by-bit until it forms a little peak. The creature has form. Mass. Then comes the mouth, wide wet breath perspiring on the plastic; it draws in, pushes out, sucks in, refuse out. Rhythm. Rhythm. You hear the heaving moist sounds of life.

Me, it says - the cry of life. Me!

This here a thing that eats air.

When it is greedy and takes a suckling breath, the plastic goes all the way in like bubblegum; you can see the vague outlines of a mouth with identity, shaped wide or small, big or loose, the imprint of good or bad or crooked teeth. Last of all comes the eyes. Two dark hollows pushing hard against the sheet. There's no identifying feature - you can't see if the eyes are tiny or wide, fearful or furious, dark or light - but they press nonetheless towards you sheathed in white.

Something twists formless in the bright night. Somewhere inside they see you through this plastic womb as a silhouette, a blurry thumbprint. From your perspective you see the birth of identity. Aha, you think - so this is a person!

In this way he watches the men he's given, birth themselves into existence. The jarring play of
anonymity on identity.

Upon the formless plastic he reads their pasts. Watermelons from their hometowns, big and glossy like bowling balls. Care packages with pickles, coming in with notes from their mom. (Be good, dress warm, don't get into trouble son) A sudoku subscription six-books a month, a prized poetry collection. Sometimes gifts: a wooden bear for him by someone with a woodcutting hobby. Artisan coffee, from a man with a crush on a waitress. Someone has an investment account. Wrapping paper with his name misspelled on it, a baseball bat carved twice because they couldn't get it right.

One guy has a telephone club addiction; the other is a champion dancer on Saturdays. One guy is balding and proud; another has haemorrhoids. One guy comes from a big family one-hundred strong. They come and tell him names he never wants to hear. Hey boss, remember me Minami Kobayashi Ito Tanda Nishida Taiichi Shinda? In answer he screwed his ears shut and put two fingers in his mouth, drew out all the vitriol he had and said: fuck off!

The golden chain of camaraderie strangles him. The birth of their first son? Fuck off! Their second marriage hopefully forever? Happy fucking! Mother sister brother father having a birthday or a deathday or a break-your-leg-day? Fuck off then!

Vaguely he wonders if this is asskissing; is this tribute? Tribute! Well, if they want to kiss ass they may have it all. He a generous king. Take everything he has, tear down the tapestry from his walls, unscrew the hinges from his doors. Take the gilded frames and the good silverware, the golden candlesticks and the tallow candles fair; melt them down one-and-all so they burn through their pockets.

What did he care? He only cared to be left alone, in this ivory tower of his. One day Saejima will come home. One day he will redeem himself for 1985. Only that welcome matters. They don't matter. He sees in these men a future where they were just a ring, a shield, between him and the outside world. There to be a wall when he wants silence; there to be a wall to keep people out.

How come then, that a wall gets to have a face? How come a shield talks to you? How come bricks have hopes and dreams, sordid wishes, hometowns and futures?

He sees that he has assumed wrong but will not be corrected.

—
—

He wants to stop the flow.

Their humanity comes to him faster and faster in glances and impressions - it will not be tolerated.

In order to dehumanize them now that they have humanity, he assigns them numbers. Number one is the guy with the mousy face and the panic attacks. Number two the guy who likes beef rumps and wears red lucky underwear. Number three is the one with a girlfriend with rock-like tits - hardest fuckers he's ever seen - whom he swears he'll marry but it's four years and still not enough money.

Collectively they're: Oi.


He goes into corridors and ram them aside when they're in the way; he threatens to cut off their fingers but don't follow through. He beats them black and blue in the crevices of the city, under stairs and over bridges, in clubs. with tables, punching them until they saw the errors of their ways, breaking thighbones until they respect him right.
In blood and calluses he extracts from them the promise to never talk to him, never treat him as a friend, never pretend they are anything but boss-to-pig, and he hands out to them reasons to hate him one by one in a row - brutality, unpredictability, irrationality. Take a number. Any number. The boss will tend to you. If you have a hate however small he will groom it large.

Prize-winning distance, that's what he's after.

If you are brutal to pigs they stay pigs. He works so hard, forgets so furiously, that they go from numbered people to numbered pigs: pig number one, pig number two, streaky bacon three, so that eventually he forgets even the loose skins he'd seen them in, and they reverted from people to pigs and then into faceless creatures once more, lumpy meat-shoes to be worn.

One day Shimano dies.

The relief is beyond torment, the surprise beyond words. His first thought is: bald fuck's finally dead good riddance shit asshole hell itself wouldn't accept.

His second thought is: what the hell do I do now?

He thinks this leaning by a corridor in the hospital, smoking his sixth cigarette for the day. It is two hours past midnight and one hour since the shot. He lights his seventh cigarette, thinking - many more to come. There are five lieutenants besides him, all of them greedier yet stronger, eyeing Shimano's hastily evacuated throne.

Now, he thought. Now what do I do?

The first thing he did was to abandon his crew.

Not much to it, not much spite. It wasn't that he hated them, it's just that he had no use for them. They were just ducklings someone shat out and gave to him cuz they couldn't find good homes for 'em. Got nothing to do with him, won't be done.

He went to stalk ramen parlors and shogi broths, started trouble and fires all down Pink Street, then gamed his way up Nakamichi and kicked the shit out of some gangly punks what's got big ideas in the parks. He goes, dances, trips all over himself cartwheeling around the city. Somewhere else the five lieutenants are warring; it is a warring state. Him? He is a state of joy. No leash! No leash! When the dust settles he'll find some solitary nook in Tojo to hide out, until then it's all fun and games now that the bald fuck's dead.

Hey, hey, he said, knocking someone's teeth into their throat.

Y'a heard the news? I ain't Shimano's Mad Dog no more, there being no Shimano - it's just me the Mad Dog. Nice to nip you!

His wild carousing brings him out of Kamurocho, all the way down and up the hills of beautiful Tokyo, to the glades of Roppongi and the electronic fields of Shibuya; no trouble could be said to be started in those days, unless there was a Majima Goro there, bat ready, batshit insane, glam and blitz to be had.
He dances on elegant toes around unconscious men, counting his beat: one-two-hup! Somewhere else the numbers were counting down instead - five lieutenants became four warring factions became three accusing leaders become two scheming cowards becoming one sole survivor - some shit-on-a-stick and him, and the voluptuous expanding gorging body of the Kazama-gumi. Purge, it says, and spits out an oddball lieutenant, hair slicked back with a face like a monkey, stepping shakily on newborn legs saying: I am Nishikiyama.

Okay, Majima says - got no time for this shit. One day someone will come and bring him a message, tell him what's what under the new management. Until then.

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The message comes one night to him as a knife held by a weakling’s hands in a shithole bar. It cuts him hard-deep in the side. His gut quivers and threatens to pour out his intestines, his body threatens to be disemboweled.

Hey what the fuck he says, and unspools in an ugly shape. They take him out back to an alley and kill him six more times, with glinting edges off a whiskey bottle and fists like a leg of ham. He lies dying-dead seven times over in an alley, between a dumpster and the third-floor guy's trash. The trash bag had burst while they were beating him to death and it discloses now all its insides: fish bones and apple cores and dirty socks, all of them peering at him with the curiosity of the inanimate.

Hey, they said. Fancy dying with you here.

Hey, he said. I didn't mean to die.

No problem, they said. We didn't either.

There is a problem. The problem is he is dying slow and frustrated, thinking: is this my end? How come I came to be here? Saejima still in prison and I promised, and I've gone and done it and I'm dying, without having done a single piece of shit thing I meant to do. How come? What's the problem here? The problem of dying. The dying of problems. He is having a dying problem.

Someone comes seven into the alley, headed by a man with the face of a rat saying - here he is, we're too late. Too bad we're not later, someone else says, sullen and angry and hushed by the rest.

They take him away somewhere that's constantly bright with a surgeon who has nimble alcoholic hands that sew him up wrong then cut him back right only to sew him up wrong again. Ow, he says, but he is no longer having a dying problem and is glad for it. Now he has a people problem: the seven angry mice looking at him from a dirty clinic couch.

Hey boss, they say.

Wow you guys are still around? He laughs. Y'all tougher than you look.

No thanks to him, no thanks to him at all. Where's the rest?

The rest are dead. They had a massive dying problem, a deathly hemorrhage of livingness, had in the process of the warring states become strictly in the past only. Without their boss they'd been grounded piecemeal into bonemeal and then some, made fat into sausage, or into soap. All the boys Shimano had given him - some fifty? - left now seven plus five, hidden around the city. Everyone else laid strictly now in the past.

"Oi," Majima says. "Everyone's dead except you guys?"
Yes, the ratty leader say. "And my name isn't 'oi'. It's Nishida… Sir."

Well, he says, sinking back into the bed. Well. He has to think about this for a bit.

"Lemme be," He says. "I gotta think 'bout this for a sec."

They go one by one away into the unsheltered night all except the ratty leader standing beside the doorway, who thinks, thinks hard, and say: "We respected you, you know."

He does not imply but it is said that the respect lies too, strictly in the past.

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He becomes haunted by pickles.

Haunted by pickles, watermelons, Saturday night dancing, and someone's note: stay warm, stay safe, don't get into trouble now. It is very trite but that's all he can think about, all the birthdays, the kids, the new wives, the ex-wives, the missed alimony payments, the retirement paychecks, the funeral arrangements. Will the cafe girl miss the guy who's stopped coming?

Sudoku; a box divided into nine. Nine boxes might be able to hold all his boys' ashes, do you suppose?

At night he sleeps badly listening to the alcoholic surgeon bingeing and purging in the room next door, the affair with the nurse, the guys who come in with gunshot wounds and the dying problems. He has maybe insomnia or narcolepsy, whichever one causes hallucinations during the day where people come in one by one through the door and look at him with sad eyes that say: you killed me. We were your responsibility; now we're your cross to bear.

Suppose Saejima saw him now, would he be cross as a bear? Saejima won't even acknowledge him - he'd have fallen so low in Saejima's estimation, he'd be a worm in the ground.

He thought, now what do I do?

He thinks: I'll fight! I'll go out there and kill as many guys as I can! Take down lieutenant shitstick and kick as many asses as it takes!

He knows: this is stupid and it won't ever work. He is too late in the game, had sat out round after round while they were killing and purging each other, so that now they'd combined and split numerous times into a cancer he cannot cut out.

He thought, what the hell do I do now? How do I save what's remained?

By his sixth cigarette - two hours past midnight - he'd figured it out.

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For the reward he wants he has to pay a price, and the price is great: they are demanding his soul.

"We have heard you are a killer of women, Majima-san." It was said. "That's a rare quality to be had. Not that many, who'd take on a job like that."

Killer of women, he corrected. Killer of woman. Oh please don't say it again, it hurts, the word hurts. Dehumanize them please. Call them things. Use euphemisms. Flowers, snow, trees, leaves, anything
but that nimble word. He had worked very hard to pretend Osaka did not exist.

"We have a woman that needs killing. You will find her there."

They point and he goes, a pointer dog following his nose. He wants time he will have time, but it will be nestled and squirreled in a flower, which he must prod until it bleeds and withers. Remember: euphemisms only. Metaphors strictly to be used.

In the white central garden for women, he finds trees hundred-years and more, many of them in a long row behind closed doors. The floors of the garden are cold and strange. Although they're all white tiles, they've color-coded it so that you know exactly which section of the garden you're in. There's a long oaken panel by the stairs that says: general, maternity, serious care, emergencies. What strange flowers must bloom within!

The flower he has to find is somewhere on the seventh floor. A Nishikiyama flower, it is said, a fragile and sickly milk-blossom that does not need much sun; it hasn't seen any for years. It only sees daylight when it's shuttled from garden to garden to garden. An exhibition of grace. It won't be hard at all to pluck it, already it might be plucking itself, and all the way up he's thinking: I hope it's wilted. I hope I go in, and it's already dead, withered, fungus-rot in the roots, gangrenous even.

No such luck. He finds it easy-peasy - they've even marked it out with a sign for him. The Nishikiyama flower blooms on a white bed that has seen better days. It is a small cramped garden that smells of fertilizer; a steady peep-peep comes from the birds that sat with the flower.

Hi, the flower says, coming awake when he breathes on it. His presence changes the currents of air within the clearing, brings in the smells of the great outdoors. It comes awake and he wishes it won't, that it'd laid limpid and placid, flaccid around the stem, so that it will be easier when he takes cuttings of her.

Hi, he says.

Do I know you? Asks the flower.

No, he says. I've come to pluck you.

It says: I'm not afraid to die. Tell me it's a good cause, tell me I'll look pretty in a bouquet. Tell me you'll bring me to a centerpiece in someone's home, so that I can greet visitors I've never had. Tell me you'll put me in the lapel of someone's jacket, and I will twirl with them all night long to music I've never heard, in cities faraway I've never seen. Tell me you'll put me on someone's grave, so that I can spend the rest of my days with a lovely grandmother I've never had, and sometimes on clear days the brother I love will visit. Tell me all this, and you can cut me and I shan't cry. I'll be a brave, brave flower...

Fuck off. It says none of this. It dies screaming.

There is blood everywhere when its throat is cut, like a slaughtered pig, the way they did it back home. Fact is pigs probably never squealed this bad; pigs don't call out - Akira, Akira, I'm sorry, help me. They say there's maybe three buckets of blood you can get from draining someone, and that's a fact but not for a killer. For a killer it's rivers, sloshing streams, waterfalls of it. Gets all over the place on all the sheets and under your nails, then into your dreams and nightmares. Smell never washes out.

People who tell you after killing the first one it gets better? Cunts.

Don't believe them. Never gets better.
Anyway it doesn't matter. He gets the time he asked for. They take his hourglass, turns it upside down, and say: here's some time. When the golden sand runs out - someday when avenging Akira descends from the heavens - you'd better be ready. There will be no deals for you then.

And Akira will find out, because blood? Blood always shows.

Perhaps in hindsight that was when he was cursed; when he'd pluck those two flowers and lived for the rest of his days in perfumed hells.

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But he won't rest just yet.

He has to know. What kind of person orders a hit like this? That's what he wants to know. What kind of royal cunt has a hard-on so bad for Nishikiyama he'd go and order something like this done?

This is below the belt, straight-up rude things being done here. He wants to know and he will find out, so like a good pooch he went off and turned his job in and took his time, a whole box full of golden sand. On it they promised: when lieutenant shitstick dies he'll be left alone. They will stop Nishikiyama from killing him for being a Shimano boy. That means time to recover, time to grow his family. Time to bury everyone in a respectful funeral. Arm himself... If he can. Caveat? If Nishikiyama's coming after him for revenge, all bets are off.

Well, fine by him.

He took the box of time and put it away; then he hid himself away in an alley, and folded himself in diamond-shaped patterns until he became half as wide as a (floral-scented) handkerchief. Floating about in the cold night wind, he drifted down, near ankles almost to the ground, only to be buoyed up again by a kindly wind, to seesaw in elegant arcs behind his contact. He danced behind him into alleys, then rode a hearty gust up to a fourth-floor bar. Hanging on the railings, buffeted by the strong wind, he laid limp, draped himself carefully and waited.

By-and-by his patience was rewarded at last, and through the warm-lit window, he saw his contact stood up and bowed deeply.

Said, "It is done, Kazama-san."

Oh, said the dog, tumbling into the wind, letting it bring him high, soaring above even the high roofs of the town.

Not the kinda guy I wanna piss off, said the dog, and flew away to the moon. He landed on it and told the moon: I've bought us some time. I'm sorry. I'll do better. We have maybe a few years. Maybe this time it'll be different? This time we'll win!

Hooray, said the moon. Time! Time to be had! Time to be had by all!

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Kiryu's car was parked too far away for a proper walk, at least the sort of shuffle a person can do with only one good leg. He turns around and offer - a lift? A carry? Piggy or bridal or fireman, take your pick. Majima eyed him with distaste and said nothing, would rather walk on a solid stick of blood until it falls apart and get eaten by worms, than to be touched by this man. Ghost, he said. Fuck off, ya ghost.

So it is. Kiryu in front and he behind they began a slow walk back, tracing swallowed steps eaten some time ago by the snow. Kiryu goes in a misshapen ready-made suit baggy at the elbows, pinching at the hips; he'd lost weight and dressed as if he did it in the dark. He has the kind of five-o-clock shadow of someone who has forgotten to take care of himself, bonier around the wrists too yet still swinging the axe effortlessly - not as a display but only to get it out of the way of skinny branches.

"You okay," He said, turning back every now and then, to see if his companion had melted into the ground and was swimming upstream.

"Ya asked one minute ago, asshole," Majima said.

So he did. They made it back to the car but Majima won't get in. He looked at all the burning hills and said, I wanna go. Not in a car cruising easy but on my feet; this won't mean anything unless he goes on a pilgrimage, visit each site of death one by one and pay his respects. Say sorry to all his boys.

"Don't be an idiot," Kiryu said. "If we hurry now we can still save some. Don't be theatrical. You want to pay your respects you can do that when we know they're dead."

He went into the car. The car threatens not to start, neighs like a horse when they try; a phlegmatic horse convulsing in its reins. The harder Kiryu pushed it to go, the longer its coughs - until it came to life unwillingly. Then and then they retraced the wheeled groves all the way back to where the bulk of the action took place, a mile away but sequestered and far behind the thin trees spaced evenly apart, which didn't take kindly to easy journeys.

They went in silence; the insides of the horse had the steady grumble of old cars. They listened to its organs beat one by one, uninterrupted by any sound out there. No birds chirped. They are respectful peace-loving avians, unlike their cousin crows.

They got to the first white beast and it stood alone in a clearing with two dead guys in the middle. There was twenty feet between them, and one guy had his hand around a gun when he'd died - but the gun had since gone missing - so that they laid looking like children playing quick-draw cowboys and indians; playing pretend-death now, very soon one of them will get back up and laugh - Hey! Let's do it again! Again! One boy is in a suit and another had a ratty face.

Majima came out of the car and began to tremble. The trembling started in the leg that had gone to sleep, in phantom toes he'd left behind with Nishikiyama, buried a mile back in all that bad blood. The ground moved beneath him, he was pitched forward step by step by the rolling earth; he ends up where he needs to be standing as a small tremor above the two men.

"Nishida," He said. "Not you too, you lazy fuck." He kicked the man around the middle, yelled: "Ya got the balls to take a nap in the middle of the fucking day."
Kiryu stopped him. "He's still alive and you're not helping. You want to lose your shit, do it in the car." He shouldered him aside, left Majima standing blinking. Check? He'd never thought to check; had simply assume the worst, the worst being the thing he was most familiar with. It was Kiryu who dragged Nishida's dying-not-dead body into the car and put him ceremoniously into the backseat; the mousy man emitted a wet gurgle of thanks.

He turned the short distance back and took unruly Majima in hand, shoving him back into the passenger's side and buckling his seatbelt on like a child; he stooped low at the door, said, "Stay in here. You want to save them, I'll do it for you." They collected men until the car got full. There were four demi-corpses they'd found that sat in a row at the back, heads lolling back, tongues falling front. There is blood dribbling like a loose tap, enough to fill three pints and then some. Kiryu left it all behind and went ahead alone, swinging emptily in his flapping clothes. He looked ridiculous, like a greying vulture swooping to see if there was good eating to be had.

He came back with a frown, "Majima-san. Can you drive?"

"With a stick maybe. Not enough strength to step the gas on the good leg."

It was expected but disappointing. Kiryu decanted them one by one out of the car into a functioning van he had found, shot through the side like a honeycomb but working still. They'll be conspicuous out there on the roads, but if they keep to the small ones they can make it where they need to be without a stop-and-search; if luck was on their side. Not Majima's but perhaps Kiryu's. He was a man who came back into life; luck seemed likely to be on his side. Lady luck's favorite, eh? Some fuckers have it all.

The van interior smelled of fire and smoke, like someone had a great bbq very near to it and now the seats smell like chicken wings. A box of first-aid (Nishida, that worrying nugget had made sure every van had one of everything, in case they drove off a tangly rainbow, cut off alone), some water, dried food and canned beans at the back. Majima was unbuckled from the car and buckled in, again like a child. He hated co-dependency but was helpless to protest it.

The rest of the men came on like cargo, lying uncomfortably on their sides or back, depending on where they were hurt most, with makeshift tourniquets. There is a spike of metal in Nishida's neck (which Majima had seen but refused to register earlier); Kiryu extracted it bit by bit before strangling him with a choker of bandages tight enough to squeeze him into life, or perhaps death.

"Ya good at this," He said, examining Kiryu's handiwork from the rear-view mirror.

"I'm better at making them for myself." Kiryu said. "A bit different on someone else."

"Don't save too many people usually, do ya?"

"First time for everything."

In the end they collected maybe fifteen, sixteen guys, and they were hard pressed together at the back like sheets of a tabloid. Still it had to be done; no one was well enough to drive and the one guy fairly unharmed (who'd been pissing somewhere when it all went down, and got away with a shot in the coccyx, had fainted more from fright than injury) - well the guy was no use. Sat crying for his mom; Majima thinking: fucking weakling.

Goddammit he hated crybabies.

They listen to the guy nattering on the whole way down the mountains; they exited through one of the tear ducts of the valley westwards, so that the mountains cried them out into rarely-used rural
roads linked to the kansai chain.

True to Nishikiyama's word - which Kiryu believed and Majima hadn't up til now - they left unharassed. There was a long line of suited goons staring at them, clustered around the dead like crow-kin. If Nishikiyama was around they did not see him. Majima guessed the man was still sitting in that clearing, unable to move or comprehend the enormity of daddy-o's betrayal. A real kick in the dick, for a real dick.

The guy in the back is weeping like a widow, and someone else moaned. Gonna kill him, Majima said. Gimme the gun, the axe, hey I have a taser even. Bring him to me and I'll stop the blubbering.

"No," Kiryu said, and drove on.

"Where we goin' then."

"Hospital."

"Oh," Majima said, digging around the glovebox til he found someone's cigarettes, smoking it at the rolled-down window.

"Expected me to say morgue?"


Kiryu managed a smile. "One of your boys. When they're alright I'll tell you which one and you can beat him up."

"Don't gotta tell me. I know which one of my boys would do somethin' like that. Nishida wakes up he better watch out."

There is a long way to go; hours still on a winding road, hours more to keep out of the police's hair. The last thing they want is to be stopped with fifteen dying guys in the back, but they still had to go fast enough to give the boys a fighting chance. That's a convoluted piece of shit; a thinky piece of thing. Majima was tired down to his bones, brain's not doing so good right now. The roads were uneven and the seat dug into his bony ass, every time they hit a bump in the road his foot threatens to come apart, shatter into ligaments.

"Hey, hit me hard," He said. Kiryu spared him a glance; he explained. "I gotta sleep but it hurts. Hit me."

"Keep your eyes on the road," Kiryu said, and when he did so Kiryu elbowed his temple and knocked him out; he went to sleep without so much as a thanks.

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When he came awake they'd driven deep into the night, had peeled back the curtain to civilization and houses came straggling one-two into his view, coming out of the ground between floodplains, growing like weeds between paddies. Most of them are dark and perhaps abandoned; their owners clustered around someone else's hearth with their lips on a glass. The ones that are lit are lit as much by TV as light bulbs, there did not seem to be anything interesting in sixty, seventy miles.

"Do you know where the hell we're going," He said. These parts were stranger to him; when he'd been in Osaka his cage had been small and it wasn't here.
"I asked for directions."

"With this shitshow in the back?"

"I parked and walk. I'm not an idiot," Kiryu returned. There were no cigarettes to be had in the glove compartment; Kiryu had steadily smoked the rest of it to keep himself awake. When he couldn't keep his eyes open a second longer he drove them into the shadow of dark willows and parked them where the inkling ink was the thickest. Without saying anything to Majima or explaining himself or any fucking thing whatsoever he placed his jacket on the steering wheel, leaned his face on it, curled up into a ball and went to sleep.

"Fuck this guy," Majima said. "Can't get a fucking read on him." Stupid loser drove one-third of the country over to save the ass of the guy who murdered him. Is this a guilty conscience? If it was Majima couldn't see it; guy doesn't look like he can tell guilt from a guillotine.

He had slept too much and couldn't sleep anymore, so he struggled out of his seatbelt and faltered in shin-deep snow (which felt great on his leg, iced it, and he was tempted to sit there for hours), went to the back of the vehicle and checked on his boys.

It's a womb in there. Darker than it was outside, and warmer too. There was heat from more than just a heater; a stew of fifteen half-dead men breathing out private hells. In the middle of the night one guy had died. It was the crier. Whatever his wound was it was more than being shot in the ass and he was maligned and had died that way. Majima pulled him out as best he could to the end of van; later he'll have Kiryu bring him out to bury in the woods.

Nishida was looking at him with slitted tired eyes, seemed conscious enough. When he said "Yo, Nishida?" there was no response. Someone else spoke out in the dark instead, asking for a drink of water. That he could do. He went back to the front seat and searched for his bottles; found them empty and went to Kiryu's side instead. He grasped about and found Kiryu's bottle half-filled — and an arm that shot out of the dark to hit him.

"Wh— " He managed. Then the claw loosened. Kiryu blinked blank ox-like eyes at him; did not even seem to know where he was; said, "Shit. Sorry." In the dark his eyes had the filmy texture of dead fish; a rich confusion of presence.

"What the fuck is wrong with ya?"

"Surprised me." He said, rubbing at his tired face. "You need water?"

"Got it." He shook the water bottle, took it back to the guy who wanted it. Came back and finished off the rest; if Kiryu needs more water he can wait for it to goddamn rain or melt some dirty snow, what the fuck, asshole fuck.

"Sorry," Kiryu said again, moved his arm where it'd cramped.

"Ya scared of the dark or something? Need a blankie? I need to know anything 'fore next time you kick me in the face?"

"I'm fine. Doesn't happen much. I was just tired."

Despite himself he was curious. "Ya got caught in an elevator or something?"

Kiryu did not answer him for so long he thought he'd gone to sleep; was about to try to sleep himself when Kiryu said, rasping and husky in dry words: "We practiced a lot in dark places."
His instincts was to make light, ask: ya telling me a wank story here? But Majima was curious and he kept his mouth shut. Said: "Eh?"

"Oya-san started as a hitman. Lots of things someone like that need to know how to do in the dark. Fire, be fired at, build, dismantle. Hide. Fight, too. You do most of those things where it's pitch black, and if you're good and your enemy isn't, then you live and they don't." He rubbed at his eyes like he was about to dig them out, leave staring holes. His words had the texture of a photocopied statement. "I was learning from him. Spent a lot of the time in the dark. Gets to you sometimes."

"Ya practice getting shot at too?"

"Sure," He said. "You have to be able to tell which direction it's coming from. Hear the right sounds. Know it before it happens."

This guy believes this, he really does. "No shit. Did ya learn that bullets hurt too? Part of yer education, was it?" He sounded nasty and did not care; Kiryu heard the nasty but did not seem to understand.

"Being shot at isn't so bad." Kiryu said. "That's just pain."

"Bullshit. I been shot at if ya recall. Hurts like a bitch."

"Walking around waiting for things to happen is worse. Not knowing what, when. Gets you keyed up. Get keyed up long enough it feels a bit crazy. Not just practice, but on the real jobs too."

"Keep ya fuckin' crazy in your pants. Ya whole family is nuts. Your job description is nuts."

A stubborn set to his jaw. "Lots of other guys who did the same. Whole division in the family of hitmen, that get hired out. Lucrative jobs. I wasn't special, just wasn't cut out for it yet."

"Man, you're so cut out, ya just an outline left. What the fuck. Too heavy, I'm out." He ended the conversation, was about to sleep for real, then said, "Kashiwagi was this too?"

"Kashiwagi-san? No, he handles operations. Day-to-day gokudo stuff."

Treasurer. Okay, makes sense; he'd seen the office, the guy was a secretary. A secretary who could slap all your teeth out with the side of his hands, but a secretary type nonetheless. They dozed off for an hour or so listening to tiny orchestras in the forest playing the waltz; Kiryu anyway, Majima couldn't sleep unless he was punched again, his leg throbbing nasty up to his knee and going past soon. He sat gestating thoughts, thinking without knowing he was. Hours later he woke up a grudging Kiryu with questions:

"Yo, pop quiz," He said, waited until Kiryu seemed awake enough to listen. "Suppose ya gotta guess who set me up for a murder, so I'd end up in prison. Who's your best bet?"

Kiryu yawned, grumbled. "I was sleeping."

"Tell me ya best guess and I'll leave ya alone."

"Your contact," Kiryu said, lazily. "Whoever told you to spring me from prison. You killed someone, and it's just the right kind of murder to land you in my prison? Same block too. Someone paid a lot of money for that to happen."

"Oh." He said, and settled down. Fucking Kashiwagi, he's thinking, without real vitriol. He figured that would be the case.
What he didn't figure is that there really isn't a fucking guy in this whole mess who isn't a dirtbag, who won't shank you in your sleep just when you feel safe; ya only got to look at the highest bar to know. Nicest thing anyone done for him so far is to save his frostbitten ass, close second maybe driving him and his fifteen hurt boys off a hill. Same guy who does that is the asshole who killed half a hundred of his guys to meet his penpal.

Gokudo is crazy, he thought. Saejima's right, we ain't cut out for this. Should have taken up the old man's pig business.

There were other thoughts he had to think too (in fact had begun to think) but they are painful thoughts; he slammed a lid on, sat on it, and refused to look. He'll shoot the shit all day long with Kiryu talking about fishin' just so he won't have ta think.

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On the next rose-kissed dawn too ethereal for the kind of shit they were doing, they came off bad roads to go to peace-loving towns for their sordid errand; they found without problem the hospital Kiryu had ask for and received directions to. Kiryu found it, that is — Majima had a fever, one of many in a row, perhaps he'd never really come off a fever that had started with the bullet in his back.

They'd buried the dead guy with the bullet in his ass in the forest before they left, in an unmarked grave. Majima had managed, either with spite or humor, to carve a piece of wood into saying: 'Majima-gumi, 19— to 19 —' as a headstone. He didn't know this man's name even though he had died for him, because of him, etc.

They deposited Majima's boys one by one on the hospital doorsteps like orphans or puppies; not a soul around this early in the morning in a rural hospital like this one, where the most they've seen this past year is an appendicitis, a heart attack, and a bee sting. Later the doctor (a non-alcoholic but less nimble) comes in, takes one look at all the gunshot wounds and his first thought is — were they gored by a boar? He had to look up references and clean out bullets before he could say for sure what had happened to them.

When it came time for Majima to go too, he stamped his good foot, nearly lost his balance and pitched forward into Kiryu, yelling: "No! I ain't going."

"You need to," Kiryu said, exasperated, perplexed, offended by the irrationality. "I can't do anything for a shotgun wound. I'm not a damned surgeon."

"Ain't going." He said, slurred words in a row. "Can't make me."

Yes, he could, but it didn't seem productive to point it out. "You're going to lose your leg."

"Fuck off then, I'll be a pirate! It's my leg, what the fuck is it to ya? It's my leg!" He crawled back into the emptied backseat of the van, sat in the rancid leavings of someone else's wound, and refused to be moved. In the end it was either move on or draw attention to themselves, and Kiryu slammed the van door on the both of them and drove off in frustrated circles until he could call someone who knew someone.

This after he determined what the hell was Majima's problem.

"I ain't wanna stay with the boys," He said. "Can't make me." Fine. If the problem was just his men, Kiryu could find another place; did find one, a clinic off the grid, squat-square like a garage, had only one door that only shoulders could open, and a doctor with expensive habits and cheap
"A week," Kiryu told the doctor. A week to live off the back of the clinic, Majima on an operating table and he on a couch.

"Ten grand," came the demand. That's a high price to pay for a hovel; they were hardly turning away his lucrative multitudes, were they? But Majima needed it — had become over the course of the day increasingly incoherent; his conversations came in bits, pieces, convulsing on his tongue. Kicking at ghosts with missing toes, then at Kiryu, abusing him and mistaking him for one of his dead boys. He will be cared for or he will die.

"Eight," Kiryu said. "And we'll do you the favor of wrecking anyone who comes after us outside."

That was a good deal well-received. They checked in to the place with the van parked around the back. Majima was deposited into the doctor's care, the money in the bank, the food and the clothes where they needed to go,

Kiryu went then and did what he did best: cleaned down the whole back of the van with borrowed cleaning supplies. Scrubbed everything down with bleach, dried it, aired it, did it again with soap and water until it no long smelt like a hearse with its innards open. An embolism, cleaned. The way things were looking he's thinking Majima will need it before long, until they figure out what the hell they were doing next.

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In the back of the van Kiryu laid on his thin mattress with the door open, smoking, listening to nocturnal bugs, watching the distant flickering lights of someone's kitchen — all the way across the boxed patterns of the paddy someone was making soup and it smelt good. He could tease out the scent of miso, though exactly which kind he couldn't know. Reminds him of sunflowers.

The clinic's lights were dimmed; the doctor had gone for the day and it was just Majima left somewhere in there. A week's come and gone, and though his wounds were healing Kiryu was starting to see that it wasn't the physical wounds he had that was festering. Something else in him was growing, gestating, putrifying in the deep-black corners of personhood, and some time soon it'll have to cut; to let the liquidated interiors of Majima ooze out as pus. He didn't know when the right time was, so he waited.

Kiryu flicked off the cigarette, took out a Pocket Circuit mag, and settled down to a long uneventful night. It's not just Majima who had things he actively didn't want to think about. To forget is also an action; like waiting, it is a herculean task. You have to unfold yourself, unfurl yourself, and then reel yourself back in like a mast. If you do it wrong, you snap in half exactly so.

He was on page thirty, maybe forty, when he heard the scratching of an old hardwood door with unoiled hinges. Majima came out shouldering a bag. Kiryu judged its size. All of their things in the clinic; or else Majima had spitefully robbed the doctor. It was a mix: he'd taken everything they owned plus painkillers, disinfectants, and antibiotics the doctor had fed him.

"Serves the fuck right," Majima said, angrily. It could be anyone he was talking about. "Shove off. My spot." He said, and pushed, shoved, rotated Kiryu until all the back of the van was him.

"Where do you wanna go?" Kiryu asked.

"Ya don't got ideas? Don't ya need to go back to town before your brother offs your daddy?"
Kiryu glared. It was personal and he didn't appreciate it, being told what he knows he has to do. That's sometime later; right now he doesn't want to think. And anyway he was still torn if he should go back to Kamurocho or to prison. "Not yet," He settled on.

"Well I got no fucking clue, do I? Ain't this what it's been about? Drive around in circles then, what the hell. We do it long enough, then I go back and meet up with the boys."

"Hoo," Kiryu said, blowing on his cold hands, warming them up for the drive ahead.

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"Who?" asked the radio, who had a lot of questions - who knows what's happened lately? Who can tell us what the weather is? Who's heard about that? Who won a prize, lost a life, took special interest, specialized? It had a 24-hour program for people like Kiryu who played it non-stop, and had a lot of questions to fill the time in with. "Who are you?" the guy asked a caller. "Do you know the answer?"

Can you tell what the song is from a single beat? Do you think you're right?

They listened to this all the way down the coast, which Kiryu chose because it was a change in scenery; Majima had developed an acute allergy to mountains, had to keep an obtuse angle between it and himself at all times. If he opened the van doors and saw mountains, he slammed it shut and went back to sleep, burying himself under a thick layer of blankets that did not keep the cold out enough, so that it nips still his skin without tearing in: let me in, said the wind.

So they went south to the coast, keeping carefully the mountains far off to their left, so it wouldn't break them in the formation of its jagged shadows.

Kiryu drove on roads so close to the ocean that they could hear the waves break on the rocks, come one-and-all to kill themselves on the D-sharp arrangement of the stony bays. There were people fishing along it even now in the thickest depth of winters, old hardened stringy men who attach fishing poles to their hands and waited; sitting so still they could be either statues or dead. Most of the time it was just them though, and the roar of the coast; existing as fragments in the reflections of the cars that pass them by.

Two guys standing on a rock in the middle of winter, a woman says. That's strange. Those strange men. Aren't they cold? Then she forgets about them; is going to the city to buy a trendy identity.

The salted wind dried out their lips; the water smells of seaweed, tastes like salted chips. The sand - when there is sand - grips their toes and won't let go. The water sloshed about their ankles inviting them in for a cold swim.

These are the only times that Majima come out, to look at the sea to see if he likes it, this old thing that he hasn't seen very much of. If seagulls come he goes away, back into his cocoon. "I hate birds," He said, the first time a seagull landed in front of him with a fish that it swallowed whole. In its skinny throat they could see the fish living wildly; twisting and turning under muscular skins.

"Gonna learn how to shoot and kill every bird I ever see."

They are killing time; or is time killing them?

Who-who, said an early owl.

On their fifth, maybe sixth day on the road Kiryu heard a keen began, which at first he thought was a kettle someone had left on in their van. It started low around noon, a purr almost, softly whining and
not much louder than the sound of the engine. Is it broken, he thought. Is something broken? What, if anything, is broken? If it's broken he doesn't know how to fix it.

Then the sound rose in crescendo, volume, pitch, became in the evening a sound like a siren pitched low, wailing about the middle, middling in range; it came as if from nowhere, around him, from behind perhaps, out of the back of his head between his ears somewhere, and it irritated him so that he began to stamp his feet when he didn't need it on a pedal, and felt an itch at the back of his neck that could not be scratched out.

The sound rose, rose, rose ever higher, coming from all around him, sitting beside him and in his seat, scouring his bones, piercing his patience, until it became a full on wail; a lament, dying birdsong (he imagines that this is what the fish wails, dying in a seagull's throat) and in its climax of sharp ascending notes he recognized finally that it was human and that all this while the sound had come from Majima.

"Oh," He said. The dam had burst at last.

He stopped the van in a woods somewhere, came down from it while the engine purred itself to sleep; dying glows. He smoked leaning against the moonlit steel that protected him from the wailing, waffling because he didn't know if he should go or he should go. In the end he made up his mind; so much misery — how could he? Pulled back the door and Majima's covers.

The covers come away an absolute fright, a mess: snot, slime, pus, tears, all the suppuration of misery soaked through in the cotton leaving it heavy as a chain. Kiryu looked at Majima and looked away; was intruding in a shame. Majima looked at him beyond even that - beyond shame - in red eyes and nose and gnawed lips, tormented and suffering every inch, so that between him and the Hannya on his back you won't know which was the more frightening, more anguished.

All those days ago Kiryu had gone looking for suffering, and here it was, so much of it he couldn't hold it with both hands. He conferred a soft touch. It was to comfort himself; Majima was beyond comfort.

"— " Majima said. They are not words; merely garbled pain. He was gulping air in between crying, but the air won't go in; it was disgusted at him.

"Majima," Kiryu said, and tried to say again his rehearsed speech of futile apologies. It'd been said at least twice before - to a dying delirious Majima (he was afraid if he didn't say it, it will never be said) and a choleric and resentful one. It never seemed to go in both times, had tickled his ears and been refused entry. This once it was allowed.

"How come ya sorry?" Majima said - when he could say at all, eating air and laughing. "How come ya sorry, Kiryu-chan, when I killed more of my boys than ya ever did?"

"Majima..."

"How come I get to be mad at ya? Fifty...? Ya gotta kill ten times 's many and stills ya second place, ya fuckin’ loser."

He said nothing. What could he?

"I keep thinkin'," Majima said, eyes cast down redder than tears. "I keep thinkin' over and over if I coulda done something different. Any time. Back then or now. Any point at all where I coulda done smarter, killed faster, be fiercer. Done different. Don't do what I did maybe, or do more of what I did. Every time I think I'm done, something else comes knockin'. Ei, it says. Remember that time ya
fucked up? Remember? Maybe if you weren't such a piece of shit your boys won't all be dead, eh?
Maybe even if I'd died long ago like a good cunt, they'd all be alive now."

"Oh," He said, to make a sound.

"That's trite. Hate trite shit." He drew in shaky breaths but the air said no. He looked at Kiryu perhaps for the first time in weeks, with eyes that saw him and not history.

"I keep thinking, suppose? Suppose I hadn't kept it up back then. Fifty dead and call it a day. Majima-gumi woulda never existed, and all these boys, they wouldn't have joined up and be up there now eaten by cops rotting a mile a minute. Why didn't I die then? Why'd Nishida gotta haul my ass in? This is as much his fault as mine - he shoulda left me for dead and this here today no one would die. Why the fuck did he save me? Why the fuck am I here, when all my men who are fucking better than me aren't? What the fuck kind of justice is that?"

"They would have wanted—"

"Fuck off, asshole! Bullshit! Ya stupid? Everyone wants to live, everyone!"

He drew ragged breaths until he could calm down; at some point he'd ripped apart his own cheeks for some reason, perhaps to let all the tears soak in closer to flesh proper. By and by he managed a mirthless smile.

"Can ya tell me something at least, Kiryu-chan? Tell me what ya think, honest." He said. "If I'd let you had your way back then, did you have a plan? If I'd just let ya take my boys up against him, let ya fight him instead of run, let them die with knives in their hands instead of like this, on their backs. Suppose that. Would they be alive now? Would they have died better? Was it my fault that this happened?"

What could Kiryu say? Nothing. Nothing. Still Majima looked at him with searching eyes, and saw in his face an answer only Majima knew. An answer Majima wanted to see.

Softly, he said: "I see."

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Still there was one last heart that had to be broken before all this could be over.

They went back to the hospital they'd left Nishida and the rest of the boys in. On paper most of them were fine; alive, at least. They either felt lucky to have lived or sorry they weren't dead, but these are all things that lie strictly in the future — to be worked out over the long years left them, their survivor's complex, this cheating of death.

Kiryu went first to check the registry and asked in with the nurse. He didn't think Majima could bear it, if he had to hear from a stranger that all his remaining men were dead too. He didn't know what Majima would do, if he heard that; didn't want to find out in the middle of a hospital where Majima could hurt himself sixty five ways before Sunday.

In the end he drew out a tired-looking Nishida, who'd survived mostly unscathed with a thick crust of bandages around his neck. He'd elected himself without asking the others, to speak to Majima.

"They're too sick," He explained.

Majima met him at a long corridor with cheery murals two to one side: rainbows and blue skies on
one, a line of loose-limbed animals bouncing to a nursery rhyme on the other. They'd been parked in
the children's ward - there weren't enough beds around the hospital for all of them.

"Hi, boss," Nishida said. Majima stared mutely at him. He had wanted this but had nothing to say.

"So um," Nishida mumbled. "Nice to see you're doing okay."

He licked dried lips, said, "'s all good."

Nishida toed the ground, awkward, but he had courage for the important things and always would.

"So... I actually wanted to say. On behalf of everyone." He looked Majima in the eye, looked away.
"I think you should leave. Just... Go."

To Majima's silence he added, "The guys haven't figured out everything yet. They're still in shock.
Maybe they won't, ever, or think different. But I think you should go before they're done. Just... Anywhere. Anywhere except here. We — I can't forgive you. Someday, maybe. When this is all
long gone enough. But not so soon and not now."

Majima licked his dried lips, ask, "For the deaths?"

"No," He shrugged, helpless and angry. "Because of that, actually. That the first thing you thought
of was that I'd be mad at you for all the guys dying."

"What the hell does that mean."

He had an explanation; it rolled off his tongue with a life of its own. Said, "It means you've always
cared about your dead boys more than your living ones. It took me a long time but I finally figured
out what it was. It was like that back then and now too. You don't give a shit about us when we're
alive, you don't give a damn at all, until we're dead." He clenched his hands tight. "Then you come
back, say you're sorry, and we rally because we've got nothing."

"But it's like, it's like to you, we really only matter when we're dead? Like... Ghosts. Ideas. I don't
know how to say it. We don't exist to you except when we're gone or dying, because we give you a
reason to like, go crazy and kill people and be angry. You rather chase corpses than rescue us.
Mourn us instead of help us. You rather kill people for killing your guys than to protect the ones left
behind. Those fifty guys? Did you think about the rest of us — thought even for a second of what's
best for the family, before you did what you did? Did you even know their damned names before
they became history?"

Quietly Nishida added with a clenched jaw, a weary mumble: "I have to know all their names. Every
goddamned one of it."

They sat in the hallway for a long time without anything to say, there being too much unsaid. Eyes,
nose and ears, sang the nursery rhyme on the walls, just to fill in that silence. Eyes, nose and ears.

"I know I'm not being fair, oyaji," Nishida said. "It could be you care. In your own way. Just... Too
mad right now to see it. So... Go, please. We'll see you around. When we're ready."

Majima nodded. "Keep the others alive."

"I will." He wringed his hands. "Are you going back to the city?"

"Dunno. I got nowhere else really."
"I'm going home," Nishida explained. "Most of them too. I'll send it to you later. You can visit, if you'd like. Stay alive til then, please, oyaji."

It was not said but implied — Majima had to stay alive, or it would all have been for nothing. In the process of reducing them to ideas, he had been reduced to an idea too. He had to live the ideal life so their idealized deaths won't be in vain.

He nodded at Nishida and went off, walking slowly deep in thought, to where Kiryu waited for him out by the van; he'd left the keys in for Nishida and the rest of the guys. They'd be getting another one off the garages, another piece of shit van but like the one Kiryu had left in the mountains, boiling leather seats, tanned innards, camel roofs.

"Where we going?" Kiryu asked.

"Just drive," Majima said, tiredly. "Just keep goin' circles, bigger and bigger, and when it gets big enough the circle, we'll end up where we started. Ya game?"

"Sounds good," Kiryu said.

They found their new ride and began their circle under benevolent winter skies; for once it felt they had had enough and gave them a respite. They had a beautiful day - lilac skies as far as skies went - painted hues that shifted with each look, in which they could see clearly birds that were not crows.
A man with wings was being crushed on the rocks between a foamy loud sea and invisible circumstances only he could see. His hand came up to his collarbone, holding a noose perhaps, or else he was choking on seawater with and was trying to ease the pain. He has wings, but he can't fly; possibly they'd been soaked wet by the storm and it'd brought him down, his downfall, and that's why his face is twisted now into surprise— 'O', his lips say. The rest of his expression is smudged out by the grainy quality of the reproduction.

"Icarus?" He guessed.

Majima gave him a look of blank incomprehension and stretched himself out on the flat cushions, taking two to himself. They'd been shaped by countless asses, these cushions. "Ya analyzing paintings now, Kiryu-chan? Restaurant kitsch trash too. Going to college, are ya?"

He lined up the meat one by one in a row, til they were neat and baking well, then stuck them burning hot straight into his mouth. He'd eaten maybe twenty pieces by now; Kiryu none. He took pity on the idiot and passed him a plateful.

"Ain't ya eating?"

"Too tired to be hungry," He said. It was no wonder. They'd been driving aimlessly for more than a week now, and for most of it Kiryu had been driving like an inferno itself was after them. He drove quickly on narrow winding roads and leisurely on safe ones. Started before the sun was up and won't stop until the first of the fireflies amass on the fringes of trees.

Majima saw all of this out of the tiny window of the van, which framed the world as he saw it: always somewhere around the middle, perspective at the leg of mountains, narrowed and rounded by the corners. He saw the world pass him by lying down at the back of the van; most of the time the moon was in frame, when it wasn't away with the fogs.

"Oi, Kiryu-chan. Ya losing weight," He told Kiryu. "Don't fuckin' talk to me at night if ya gonna be this way, ya scaring me. Fucking ghost."

Kiryu gave him a tired smile.

We're a pair, Majima thought. Don't know why we're hanging out. Could be we're just afraid of being alone. It's nice to have someone else to kill yourself with, slowly. We hate being alone more than we hate each other.

They left the restaurant and went out into the rainy night; a rare winter rain, colder than the coldest shower. It was night again and they were in some city whose name they didn't know; they hadn't bothered asking or checking — it'd been a long line of towns, like beads, a string of featureless pearls. Kiryu went ahead of Majima, walking on mindless legs towards the shabby hotel they'd rented for the day. "Gay," thought the receptionist, which Majima could tell but did not correct.

Majima followed always behind. It used to be he did it to look for weaknesses - it's easier to see which flank ya oughta cut when it's waving in front of ya. Now he doesn't know. Could be he's bringing up the rear so he'll be the last to know that he's been left behind. Someday Kiryu will pull ahead, recede into the horizon, and he'll be the last to know it's for good. Could be worse. It'd be a real funk, if you were walking in front and looked behind and suddenly all you've got is yourself. Rest is all tumbleweed.
Ceasefire from the rain, and Majima took the chance to chainsmoke two in a row. Hi-lites of his day, he calls ’em. The pavement is wet and slippery and there is sound of life everywhere but not on the streets; somewhere on the third floor and the stairways people were coming together to kiss or coming apart in arguments. Socks weren’t being placed where they should be; the laundry is growing moldy from the wetness of air. Jazz soaked out from a pub testing its speakers for the day where they’re selling marked up omurice but they’re out of eggs.

"He’s becoming translucent," Majima was thinking. Kiryu, that is. He had gained a sheen to him, a sort of jellyfish-like quality; in some moments where he stood too close to lamps or angled his body just so, Majima fancied he could see the knitted patterns of his large bones, an x-ray floating in a glass of bright water. The skin that had never fitted right was being forgotten even as he wears it. "Fading away," He concluded.

Maybe when they threw him into the river the color had bleached right off. Nishida could save the skin but not stop it from tearing away.

They got back to the hotel and went in through the guest door; four flights of stairs squeezed them tight and brushed their collars, then deposited them into a room with a single bed and a temperamental heater. Without a word Kiryu took off his jacket, folded it into a passable pillow, and went to sleep. Majima sat shrouded in solitude on the bed, took off his winged-tips one by one, wincing where it pinched his wound. Ever since he’d lost his toes it'd never fit right. Pinched where it used to be loose; roomy where it used to be tight.

He has better shoes but refuses to walk in them. It’s not the comfort that matters. How will people know who you are, if you're not molded in the right kind of clothes? What if he wears these comfortable, ergonomic trash, and finds some day when he removes it that he's become unfolded, shapeless and relaxed?

He stepped over Kiryu, drew back the curtains to let in the town lights and the moon; the moon outlasted the town, which one by one flickered shut at eight-thirty. The light where it came in cast a pattern like nets; the wires on the window were shaped that way. He sank lying as a T into the bed, watched it envelop his bony frame and close around him. He could throw a tantrum, he thought. Complain of pain, wince around, storm about. That'd get him the attention he wants. But Kiryu will treat him like a colicky child, and that's not what he wants. He doesn't want to be responsibility. Something else, undefined.

"Do you want the bed," He said. "Can't be good for ya, the floor."

He didn't expect an answer and didn't get one.

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He kept thinking about the winged man in the painting. Was it Icarus, despite the name? That's as far as his knowledge of Ovid went. Was it an Icarus who'd fallen into the seas?

Kiryu had a lot of time to think behind the wheel, which he chose to drive not for a fondness of the road or an extension of the trip, but to get away from Majima, whom he was becoming attached to in an unhealthy way — as an idea, a redefinition of solitude. He'd found one day asleep at the back of the van beside a snoring Majima — who in between breathy puffs was dreaming of sad things again (one of which at least Kiryu knows now) — that he wanted this to last forever; not because he cared particularly about this or Majima, but because the alternative is too monumental and he cared not a whit for it.
He'd taken on this journey at first in order to apologize, but having apologized he found now that it'd only deferred his future to this moment, so that standing with his pockets emptied of sorries he has to decide what he wants to do. He wants to do nothing. He wants to hold onto this, because it would mean his hands will be too full to be seized by a smoking gun.

Between Majima's drowned skin and his own, he realized that they had enough to knit a robe, a web of epidermis large enough to wrap up the both of them together. They can be wrap up in the other. Roomy and cold, but together nonetheless. If he let himself they could find an identity together, based off the other — living for the other's revenge and angers and joys — but it would mean that they can never draw away, or else the skin will rip right down the middle.

Once he'd had the same fleshy smock with Nishiki, and look where that got them. It's a dangerous thing, to put on a skin together. If one of them were to rise too fast — startled perhaps by a doorbell or a cat in the hallway — they'll rip the other apart.

"Oh," Majima said. "How's that? Ya gone and cut it."

Perhaps it was not Icarus' fault that he flew too close to the sun, Kiryu thought, wandering. Perhaps Daedalus made the wings that way. Even in all his glories and machines he needed something more. Maybe he killed his son so he could have a tragic skin, so that he can be remembered forevermore not as an inventor, but as a mournful father. An identity. He took the thought and dropped it like a stone.

He came awake one day in another nameless town. "I'm sleepwalking again," He thought. Now that he didn't know what to do he was sleepwalking again. He found Majima walking ten steps behind him down a street wet with dew. What time was it? In the orange of the sun he guessed it was very early, five, maybe six.

"I've woken you up," He told Majima. "You don't need to follow me out here this early. It's just a walk."

Majima looked at him with the sleepy red eyes of a fellow sleepwalker; he'd merely come half-awake to follow Kiryu around. It didn't mean anything and it wasn't conscious. Well, it did mean something. It meant he was afraid of being left alone; now that he'd traveled for a decade by entourage he was afraid of silence again, had forgotten how to not be afraid. Lying in the hotel alone he will only stew, distill by inches into the bed. Think of his failures. Drops of defeat, one-by-one, out of a pipette. If he doesn't watch out Kiryu might come home and find nothing but a Majima-shaped stain in the fabric.

"Whazzat?" He yawned. No clue what the hell.

"Nothing," Kiryu said, and went on.

Kiryu took pity on the both of them and steered them into a breakfast cafe, selling pancakes interspersed with odd choices on the menu - beer and parfaits. Beer parfaits. It wasn't open but the owner was ready. They paid for it but refused the chair; ate it on the steps of the shop shoveling hot coals into their mouth.

"I hope there's takoyaki where they went," Majima said out of nowhere. "I hope they got it there, where people go."

He knew Majima was moving on grain by grain, and he had to do it too; decide soon where he wants to go with who to do what.

They went back to the hotel where they channel-surfed playback content until the morning news
came on, which they didn't like and traded for children cartoons. To the soundtrack of inane laughter and joy (perhaps in preparation for a lifetime of less, you have to watch cartoons as a child) they spent the featureless morning.

"Gonna nap," Majima said, and went to sleep. Kiryu checked him for a fever the moment he dozed off, placed his hand as if asking for alms on Majima's forehead. He watched the shadows creep slowly across the room (again net-shaped); when it grew bright enough that Majima's long lashes cast shadows on his cheeks, he left the room.

He was thinking of the scars on Majima's cheeks as he went. Left a note of his whereabouts (gone swimming) and went down the tight womb of the hotel and into the streets, where there was a cloudy day unfolding itself everywhere. Soon maybe it will rain or it won't. The weather likes its mysteries, its little jokes. He went northwards out of the town until he found a sign for the coast, demarcating the bluffs and the private shores — which one was safe for the winter and which fatal.

He picked one by random without seeing if it would kill him or not, and found at the end of a long walk a sharp craggy bluff with naked trees protruding five out of infertile rocks. There was a nakedness to it that he liked; there was just the one bluff and the seas, it rose imperceptibly and let the sea rippled all around it. It was just the one. It drew him forward like a challenge; everywhere else he could have gone would be safer.

He slipped out of his clothing and climbed down the steep drops of the cliff into the ocean, which welcomed him impassively; things that were great or important to humans - themselves, a whole skyscraper — to be swallowed here and drowned and no one would know it ever existed. In welcome the waves held him in in a giant's fist and broke him on the sharp stones.

"Ow," He said, voice drowned out by the roar. He swam against the grey current as much as he could, but no matter how hard he struggled he never got very far; always the sea sucked him under, threw him up, dashed him against the rocks. He could kill a man with his hands? The sea doesn't care. He's insignificant and his worries are insignificant and his existence is too small to bear. He liked it, the pain, to be slammed over and over again into the bluffs and be tore bit by bit, flesh off his bones, til he was all cut lips and sore all over.

When he did want to leave an eternity later he found he couldn't; the sea had found him a plaything to its liking, and kept him there, tossing him over and over again into the bluffs and be tore bit by bit, flesh off his bones, til he was all cut lips and sore all over.

In the end he surfaced by blind luck — the seas had tossed him onto a flat outcrop entirely by accident, and it eyed him balefully as he clambered on shaky, punctured legs onto the rocks. He wasn't bleeding only because his wounds were too startled to bleed; had been birthed in seas and had not known air yet. He hadn't gotten anything for his troubles; found neither knowledge or peace.

On the high bluffs above him, surrounded by the five spiked trees, he hallucinated Majima into existence. The Majima of his dreams stood impassive framed by slate-grey skies. Only when he got closer, climbing slowly wet stone by wet stone did he find that it wasn't a hallucination; it was Majima.

Majima watched him put on his clothes, which stuck to his salty gritty skin and won't come on easily.

"I looked for ya on every single shore on the way up here," He said.

"I left a note."
Majima ignored him. "Next time ya wanna kill yourself, let me know so I can get dibs."

"Well," He said, and then Majima kicked him off the cliff and he was drowning again in his wet clothes. In the odd moments when the sea tossed him up — glad for the return of its lost toy — he saw Majima walk away without turning back. The sea would rather crush his lungs than let him call out.

—

"Sorry," He said, coming back into the hotel smelling like seawater.

"'kay? Look what the cat dragged in. Only got ramen for myself, didn't know if ya was gonna live."
This was a lie — there were four uncooked bowls of instant ramen and three six-packs of beer. Either Majima was very optimistic about his appetite, or he was expecting Kiryu to live.

He peeled himself out of wet clothes and baked himself into clean boxers; they ate filthily all the food in between cigarette butts and wet carpets, then turned off the lights and fucked.

—

It wasn't the first time it's happened in all those weeks; it's a good cure for insomnia and they'd started after Majima could bend his knee without screaming the house down and never stopped. It was just not significant — like passing sores — not really something that meant anything to anyone.

They did it always in the dark, as black as they could get it, with the windows sealed tightly and the curtains drawn up; sometimes they even stuck paper under the door to keep out the thin anemic light of the hallways, so it won't intrude upon them, and the darkness can be absolute. In that stifling inky black they couldn't see each other, couldn't know that they're far away and not present at all.

Without light they could move towards each other without knowing the layout of each other's body; often times they knew nothing except flesh rubbing against flesh, easily-identified hand-shaped parts touching and stroking warm anonymous flesh. It could have been themselves they were touching, and the other's presence was superfluous.

What Kiryu hadn't expected was that by doing this over and over again in the dark, he would learn the layout of Majima's body without wanting to, it being taught to him in fluttering skimming touches, in between grips that bruise. He could see in the dark as well with his eyes closed, every line of Majima's bony frame, every beautiful muscle, lean but sculpted, wonderful to the touch. In the darkness (he had hated) he could hear the slide of Majima's sweaty skins against the sheet, knew what he meant, how he'd moved, how he was spread out, what he was about to do; an education, surprisingly.

"Put it in already," Majima hissed. "I don't got fuckin' all day."

But he didn't want to — he knew how that would end, had played that game with Majima over and over again. Majima just wanted a dick in his ass so he could go away easier, didn't want to do anything except lie there and take it — like goddamned tuna — arms and legs curled around Kiryu if he was feeling ambitious, and then he could have pleasure without being here at all. Could close his eye and go away to wherever he went when they were doing this.

"No," Kiryu said, and grasping in the dark, found Majima's cock and moved himself onto it.

"Fuck you doin"" Majima said. "Oi, don't get shit all over me."
He let his ass answered for him; him slipping down almost frictionless, had prepared for this — it
burned but it wasn't going to stop him.

"Whaa— " Majima said, and moaned when Kiryu tightened experimentally on him. He moved his
hips, squeezed the muscles in his ass, and pulled out an involuntary curse from Majima. "What the
fuck are ya doin'" He huffed. "Thought ya didn't do this shit."

For you, Kiryu thought. For you, maybe. It wasn't that he didn't like it; he'd just never done it. Why
fuck anyone if you can't hurt them?

In answer he only raised and lowered himself again, until Majima got the idea, warmed up to it in
raspy breaths and gasps when they pressed close together balls to ass. Then he shoved Kiryu down,
and said, "Naw — ain't like that."

What the hell then.

He shoved Kiryu backwards and leaned over him instead, spread Kiryu's legs as wide as they could
go and shoved rude fingers into him, laughing when Kiryu groaned, his nails scraping Kiryu from
the inside until he finally tore skin. Only that way was it gonna hurt enough, he said. Can't get the
kind of pain ya need with just a dick. People like us don't get off with just a dick.

When Kiryu could be sure he was bleeding from the inside that was when Majima put his cock back
in, slid effortlessly slicked from blood and lube, and huffed out chuckles every time he hit a raw spot
(oh how it burns) and Kiryu gasped.

Now ya know how it feels like, to be fucked good, he said. Nice when it hurts, doesn't it? It was nice
— very nice — Kiryu had no idea it could feel like this, be scraped raw from the inside, every time
Majima's cock hitting a good spot on it there's an explosion of pain and pleasure that starts from his
toes and ends up in his cock; pain egging his pleasure on and pleasure leading the pain. He drew
himself apart and tried to slam down harder onto Majima's cock, but Majima had a grip he couldn't
break out of, hands around his neck, thumb on his Adam's apple, pushing down hard so there was
yet another finger on his pulse.

"Please," He gasped. Please more, harder, faster, hit the spot in him over and over again til it bursts,
he'll do anything for it.

But Majima uses his body like a weapon, moves in when Kiryu didn't want him to, tormented him
by leaving just when he was about to come. He fucked Kiryu with slow small thrusts until he could
feel Kiryu warming up to it, riding upwards with pleasure, then he'd change the rhythm again — big
heavy thrusts where he pulled all the way out and slammed back in, so that Kiryu howled in pain and
got drawn out again.

Over and over again Majima did this to him, hurt him like this; never letting him have enough
pleasure to go anywhere, until the sheets laid twisted around his hands and feet. He was moving
incoherently in any direction, would move anywhere, as long as he could get more cock and more
pain in his ass.

There was only so much time to be tortured; between the cock in his ass and the slow lazy fingers of
Majima's other hand dancing on his cock he was beginning to unravel in earnest, thinking — this is
what it's like, why he likes it — it'd be nice if Majima could, fuck him harder, yes — and abruptly
the fingers around his neck was tightening hard enough to break something, the lack of air made
every muscle of his body spasm and seized, including the right one, his cock spasming in answer,
and he rode the wave of pain over pleasure and screamed and unraveled around Majima, who cursed
fuck-fuck-fuck and himself was done too.
Later lying in the dark and breathing heavy, they could hear someone walk down the hallway but couldn't see the footsteps.

"Ya didn't have to," Majima said, leftover toes twisting lazily in the sheets. "Good though, eh? Don't think the whole world heard ya screaming, 'cept maybe down the lobby? Ya suppose they heard ya at the end of the street?"

"Dammit," Kiryu groaned. If he was blushing, the room hid it.

"Heh," Majima chuckled, added. "Suppose ya tell me what it's about. Ya softening me up for somethin'?"

"Just wanted to try it out." He said.

They dozed lazily on the lie until evening, when they came awake and found out from the window that the nocturnal bars had opened up while they slept.

Majima yawned and dug around the room for his pants. Kiryu couldn't help him with that; he could tell the exact arrangement of Majima's limbs in the dark, but had no radar for clothing. "We gotta hurry or the izakaya will shut on us. I ain't going to bed without yakitori," Majima complained. "Have you seen my underwear? Eh? Fuck it, I'll just go without. Oi, Kiryu-chan! Get dressed or get fucked!"

Kiryu obeyed lazily, unfurling his limbs one by one and hunted out the bare minimum he needed to be publicly decent; it will be cold but he will live, he's too lazy, too relaxed to look up all the coats he need.

Over beer and spicy offal soup and yakitori, the warm light of the bar rivalling his own afterglow, Majima asked him again, "Yo, so about that? Ya didn't tell me whadya want."

"I said it was nothing."

"Ehh, pull the other one." Majima said around a mouthful of soup.

He dawdled until the next dish was in, sucked it down, and could dawdle no more. "If I were to go back to Kamurocho, would you come with me?"

"Ehh?" Majima considered this, cocked his head. "Are ya askin'?"

"I'm asking now."

"Hmm. Depends, ya plannin' to shoot me outta any cannons?"

"Only if you want to."

"Could be a kink," He joked. "Eh... I dunno. Nothin' really goin' on for me, is there? I got nothing left." When Kiryu opened his mouth to spew platitudes, he scowled him down. "Don't gotta lie to me. That's disrespect. Only thing I got on my plate is to go back to the city and shank Nishikiyama some. But that ain't gonna happen with ya around, is it? I'd have to kill ya to get to him. Dunno if I got the heart to."

He considered the red spice on the soup, the sinking jalapenos. "Who ya gon' war with if ya get there? The old man? The asshole?"

"I don't know. I've given up on figuring what I want to do. That's too big a question. I'll just think of
it as what I don't want done, and I don't want them killing each other."

"Big ballsy goal."

"Have to try."

"What ya gon' fight with? Ya don't have men, and all my boys' are dead." He never blinked when he said this; it was the method he used to keep a poker face around it. If he held a poised unblinking face no one can ever tell it bothers him. "They got what, five thousand men each? Ya punch each of them just once and we'll get our retirement cheques before you're done."

"Kazama-san promised me men, back when all this started."

"Could be he wants to keep it to himself, if he sniffs out your brother's onto him."

"I doubt that," He grimaced. "Kazama-san will prefer that I clean up Nishiki. It's good training."

"Training," Majima intoned.

"Training," Kiryu sighed.

They considered this; where they stood in their belief and disbelief. Majima said, "Then after that what? Shitshow over, where ya goin'?"

"I… I'll think about it when the time comes."

Majima shrugged. "Well samey-same then. I'm in. I got nothin' to do, might as well do what I like best. Wreck shit about, start some fights, eh? Ya ain't a weakling, I can do worse. Only if we go against Nishikiyama," He added. "And turns out ya gon' kill him, I get dibs. That's what I want outta this."

"He's my brother."

"He wiped out all my men. I don't care if he's your imaginary friend, I get fuckin' dibs on that cunt. Take it or leave it."

Kiryu considered this, struggled with it. "Fine," He said at last, thinking maybes.

Majima was onto him, narrowed his eyes. "Don't go backin' out on me, Kiryu-chan, or I'll kill ya for real this time. Fuckin' exorcise ya ghostly ass too, see if I don't."

"Hundred stabs?"

"That low? How 'bout death by a thousand cuts?" To show he was serious he stabbed a steak twice. They consumed everything recklessly and poured themselves out into the streets, drunk and relieved inside that they won't have to part, without admitting it to themselves or the other that this was so. They went sloshing about the melting snow, made double stampedes into it; in rare camaraderie Majima allowed himself to be tucked under one of Kiryu's arm, where it was warm.

"Consider Sera too, when ya get back," He said, after thinking long.

"Chairman Sera?"

"Yeah, him and Kashiwagi, they're who sprung you out. Well, and kicked me in the nuts, but everyone's done that, so no grudges, right?"
Kiryu studied him, brush off accumulated snow from his hair. "You sure you meant to let me know that?"

"Eh," Majima shrugged. "I ain't like ya. If I'm in, I'm in. Secrets are like lies, I got trouble keepin' 'em straight. Real fuckin' boring. Anyway, could be handy, or a place to run to if we need it. Who knows, right?"

"Who knows," Kiryu agreed, and spent the rest of walk home dissuading Majima from making snow angels.
They came back to the city under the pallid gloom of a hazy night. From a distance they'd seen one by one the lights of the city come to them, long rows of neons and one-off bulbs and electronic billboards that combined, had the effect of an airport runway. They were either landing or taking off; on this the city was ambiguous. All it wanted was to guide them within.

It was just as cold as when they'd left; the depths of winter not yet pass, not yet over. Soon in a few weeks there'll be hope for something nicer, something more temperate, but for now all the mountains they’d seen (Kiryu anyway, Majima with his allergies) were still snow-capped and ice-toed. Majima had a hobby — pretending he was asleep when they were passing in the shadow of a long mountain. Still it was chilly but not as cold as when they’d left, Majima pointed out.

"It's because you're hurting on the inside," He said. "Either hurting people or being hurt. You get enough of that, you get a belly full of warmth."

So it is, Majima said. So it is. Gotta be extra warm then, he thought, what with him hurting people and being hurt by people. Maybe that's why the fevers he'd had; he was burning up from the inside, an inferno, a molotov cocktail, the passionate flammability of his self. The approach of the city was hurting him, stinging him with flickering burns. His moving-ons were peeling away with every turn of their wheels.

Their first stop was Majima-central, Majima's old office.

"No fuckin' way," Majima said. "Not going in there."

"Stay outside then, I just have some kit left behind." Kiryu went in, found a gun he'd locked up, some weapons and bills, toiletries, and came back out. Good ol' Nishida had left the code as Majima's birthday — in case he had to come back and couldn't remember jackshit. Watching Kiryu punch the numbers in was like being punched six times.

"We're going to have to come back eventually," Kiryu said, tucking the gun away into a grey overcoat. "Once I find out from Kazama-san. I don't think we have any other place that can work as a control central. There's good foundation here, and it makes more sense than renting a whole new warehouse."

This is sense; Majima didn't want sense. He'd started walking as fast as his feet could take him to a hotel somewhere with his name on it, and seven strong drinks. He was going to drink until he saw two of everything — then he can look at Kiryu and see two giant gaping assholes, is what he would see.

"Listen," Kiryu said, catching up to him. "I know—"

"Ya know nothing, fuckwad. Friendless fuck like ya? I'll lock ya up in a room and shoot at you all night long and ya still won't get close. So why don't ya fuck off and stop talking to me!"

In silence they look for a hotel that would take their money in. They had an invisible agreement on something nice, something less like the shitholes they'd been living in up til now. It felt like the kind of times when a person could break if he had to see another shithole-rat-flea cubicle with unremarkable stains on the ground. The found one and went into it; their idea of nice was that it had two beds instead of one and room to swing an arm in.

Majima swung that arm, caught Kiryu right in the jaw hard enough to stagger him. What the hell was
"Face like yours is made for punching, Kiryu-chan, ya never knew?"

They tussled, broke half the furniture, fucked out the rest of their anger, and mellowed out. It was a cycle that Kiryu figured — if they stayed together long enough — would either kill them or get them married. After the six-figure dental work to put all their teeth back in, that is. Majima will probably want golden ones, just to be a luxurious pain in the ass.

For dinner Majima wanted wild carousing, the wildest they could get their hands on — they started at a Korean BBQ place, then hit the batting cages. Kiryu might have been taught to shoot a bullseye at forty paces, but was nothing on the cyclops who utterly decimated him - the baseball bat was just another limb for Majima.

"Oi, ya disappointin' me here, Kiryu-chan. Ya want me to blind my other eye so ya can have a chance?" He complained, and dragged Kiryu off to catch up with bowling, and when that closed on them it was karaoke, 24-hours arcades, all the gambling parlors that had moved about since Kiryu had been in town last, all those years ago, wearing a new coat of paint but the games were still rigged, the bouncers weak.

They didn't make it back to the hotel until morning. Majima tired enough, looped his arms around Kiryu's neck and said, "Drag me I ain't walkin'" Kiryu got them back like an ox with oxcart, threw Majima onto the bed and took himself off to wipe down the gunk a person accrued with interest on the streets. When he got back Majima was asleep, and he put himself to bed.

A few hours too soon he was woken up by Majima again, who — he was learning — had an awful habit of talking to people who were sleeping, but punched anyone who did the same to him.

"Do ya think I should go back with you," He asked. "Even if I don't wanna."

"Your office?"

"Fuck else?"

"Well," Kiryu said slowly, adjusting for inflation. "It's up to you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but I'm askin' what ya think."

Irritated, Kiryu scowled at the ceiling. He wished Majima would write him notes with his feelings on them, then flush it down the toilet. With the kind of help he could provide, the toilet was doing better. "Honestly, I don't give a shit. Stay out, stay in, hang on the rails. You're better on the streets than at a map anyway."

"That's the Kiryu-chan I know, heart of stone!"

"I— Look," Kiryu said, trying his best to mellow out. "It's up to you. I can't tell you what to do. I can tell you what I'll do, if it helps. Like you said once, I'm the wallowing sort. I'll go in there and be upset all the time, stalk ghosts all over the city, into every grave I know. Won't be a corner with bad memories that I won't be at. I don't know what you should do."

"Well, I said I ain't the wallowing sort, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"How come I'm wallowin' then?"
Kiryu didn't have an answer for him; fact is no one had an answer, not even Majima himself. It was a question of whether to open the wound and let it flow, or else keep it stitched up. It was one of those things that was highly personal to the wound, the person, the influenza of the season, the bacterial content of air, the positions of the moons and the stars and whether or not Virgo was ascending in Jupiter's shadow. Tired of scratching at dirt without coming even a little wiser, Majima drowned himself in the forgetful draught of sleeps.

—

"I'm going to meet Kazama-san later," Kiryu told him, and dressed for once looking at the mirror. Must be an important meeting, or an important person, who gets Kiryu to pay attention to his appearance. Normally he wouldn't even care if he'd put his shirt front-to-back, in fact had done so and been told so by Majima, expecting a blush, embarrassment, anything. The rock just takes off his skin and puts it back the other way. Said: there, it's fixed. The subtext is that it's fixed not because it offends himself, but because it offends everyone else.

The kind of person, who makes someone like that. Majima was thinking. Either a very respectable person, who you want with all your heart to be, even if you have to squeeze the lemony bits of yourself into juice. Or else someone who's very good at convincing you to be juiced.

Or had Kazama just found Kiryu fully formed, with the personality of cold pizza crust, and just happened to put a gun into his hand?

"Where ya meetin'?"

"Same place last time."

"That ain't really an answer. If ya recall, last time ya met I was screaming in a closet for ya to die." He said. "Don't think I forgot."

"Well," Kiryu said. "Do you want an explanation?"

"Is it a good one? Does it start with once upon a time? Any fairies?"

Kiryu shrugged, buttoning himself up. "Oya-san's shots are significantly more fatal than mine. You're lucky I was the one who pulled the trigger."

"Lucky," Majima said, hollowly. "Ya know, I'm gettin' tired of sayin' this, but ya got issues. I'm gonna go out. Walk round town. This place is crampin' me."

Kiryu nodded, packed himself up. Just before leaving he added, "Ramen place on Shichifuku." He gave Majima an unreadable look, then disappeared down the hallway where he made far too much noise for a place so narrow.

Majima sat on the bed tossing this information from hand to hand, lied down, got back up, walked around the room. He was about to go out but soon. He was getting a cramp, the beginnings of a cancerous. "Worried," He admitted. He took with him the ball of a feeling, rolled with it into the streets with his bat and his knife to look for trouble, to give trouble what it's worth.

He went searching for trouble and found it soon; there was time to be killed, all day long in fact, and he could beat pulpy punks into pulp fiction for hours. He was going to edit their faces, publish their contents. He let his feet guide him across the town, into seedy public parks where the gang kids were hanging out even this early. In the bright afternoon sunlight they looked like toys: ken-and-ken dolls
in baseball jerseys, Americamura knockoffs, vintage labels bungled by illiteracy. The cramp he was having made him ferocious, merciless, and though they looked too young to legally buy beer he broke their bones one by one across jungle gyms and merry-go-rounds — a suitable end for children. "Go back to fuckin' school," He said, a sort of token acidity.

It was not them that he wants to hurt. This is just making him feel like a bully.

The city had hundreds of corners, and every corner was a memory waiting in the waters, coiled in puddles to strike at his ankles. Here he'd sat and ate and talked and shot the shit with so-and-so. This was where he'd brought his boys to fight... There was no escape; no possibility of escape, so he stopped.

He sat angrily stewing in a concrete pipe someone had left in one of those parks; let the sun baked him in there. It was a rare sunny day and though the wintry heat was not great it felt greater, by virtue of being rare; like ramen broth. "No," He said. Sat listening to the sound of the city coming to him by osmosis, thickened by the insulation of solid concrete. He heard people being late for part-time jobs, bicycles ringing lordly bells to instruct others out of their way.

He could go... Do things. There was still a whole day he could have without Kiryu around. He could go. Hit more baseballs. Hit more people. Bowl. Bowl people over. Eat. Eat more. Gorge. Disgorge. Things like food. Food-like objects. Objects delicious and soft. Soft like ramen. Ramen by the bowls.

"No," He said. He was shaking all over in the inside now and the answer was written in the graffiti inside the concrete pipe. Call this number, it was saying. Happy ending guaranteed. For lonely hearts only. Lonely hearts! Trash word! Lonely? Was he lonely? After all of half an hour being left to his own devices? No one gets lonely that quickly; it was something else — he was afraid of being alone. That's not loneliness, is it? Something that people write at the back of toilet stalls can't possibly capture the kind of shit feeling there is, where you look down-up-around and only tumbleweed.

"Should have gone to school," He said. One of those thick books woulda tell him what he was feeling right now, and he won't be here trying to puzzle out the he was feeling. Attachment, probably, to the only person who will allow him to do so. Withdrawal. He hadn't been left alone, had refused to be left alone, since the mountains. If he wanted anyone else it'll be the Shizuoka boonies, or else Abashiri Prison, and both places had told him no. No, Majima, ya ain't wanted. He had nothing to do, no one to protect, no one to be angry about, no one to kill. Ain't wanted. Alone.

The shit you want the most always taste like ash in your mouth.

He'd worked himself up into an appropriate rage. Angrily he dusted himself out of the pipe, found he'd thicken about with filings, sneezed; let his feet take him where he walked, walked, walked, and without surprise he saw that they'd taken him in the direction of Shichifuku — and he was sure someone else was watching him too. Tingly around his neck. Knocking of suspicions in his bones. Guys like those in the forest, treading on his instincts. So they were still around. It's alright; when he catches them he'll break their backs like rats. For now, Shichifuku.

He wanted to know everything, had to know every fucking thing. If this time Kiryu ditches him again he wasn't going to be the last asshole to find out. No tumbleweed.

He found without trouble the only ramen place on the street; there were only two others that opened late and one had a brothel in the back. Majima sniffed around the shop, examined the texture of it, and found it matched his imaginations. Then he went 'round the back.

"Hey man?" A waiter said. "We're not open today. Are you delivery?"
Was he delivery? He let the waiter take a minute, take in the non-shirt and the leather pants. Then he stuck a thick bill into the guy's fist and patted it.

"I wanna camp out in yer kitchens," He said. Then looked around the place and said, with irony: "Or a janitor's closet. Storage, staff room. I ain't picky. Don't suppose ya got one under your stairs?"

—

When the Kazama-gumi limo came long and sleek-black Kiryu was thinking about shogi. The menu on the walls had the crinkled texture and the necessary square patterns to remind him of so. One Kanji in each square; every kanji in its place. He watched Kazama coming into the restaurant, his well-dressed bulk blocking out the suns of the streets momentarily, and sitting in the temporary dark Kiryu thought — now we have to begin a game again.

"Kazama-san," He greeted.

From 4 a.m the tonkotsu had been boiling for them and no one else. If they come here more often the place can do just as well without a single customer.

"Kiryu, It's good to see you." Kazama returned, slotting into place opposite him. Ramen was ladled and served, but he had no stomach for more than two bowls — and those half-heartedly. He saw that it had been noted but was excluded from its conclusions.

"You've just returned, I heard."

"Yes. Just a few days ago."

"Hunting, with Nishiki?"

"Hunting against Nishiki."

"Not a success, then." Kazama said. Kiryu's hands itched for a smoke, a cigarette to hide behind. "I've heard what he's done to the dog. All the men you were planning to use, run into the ground. Why did you allow that to happen?"

"An accident. I wasn't around."

"You let an accident happen to you?" Looking down at his hands on the table, Kazama added. "Don't let me stop you."

He did just that; lit one, glad for something as a shield, even a wispy one. He was dreading explaining, finagling, haggling for Majima's life, which he knew would come, either now or soon.

"Yes. I'm sorry," He admitted. "He outplayed me there."

"Is that what it is? Kiryu," He said, shaking his head. "You'll have to do better than that. First, let's talk about Nishiki. I don't care about your moves against him. Moves can be redone. I'm interested in the other things I've heard. That Nishiki was hunting the dog, but the same dog reappears in the city a few weeks later, with you. The same dog which, if my information is correct — and it is — was seen sinking a corpse that looked like you at the wharves. Help me out here, I don't know what to conclude from this."

He waited patiently for an explanation to materialize.
"I stopped Nishiki from killing him."

"And then you brought him back, a piece that has no value, who is demonstrably false to you, who now doesn't even have men you can use as an excuse to keep him around. Tell me, Kiryu — is this Nishiki again? Are you keeping a pet?"

"I — "

"I recall telling you Nishikiyama will be the last one you can have."

"He's useful." He resented Nishiki being referred to that way; a whole ton of shit under that rock he didn't want to touch right now.

"A rabid dog?"

"He's — "

"Useless. In the grand scheme of things, extremely useless, even a liability. You have no reason to keep him around, absolutely none. Admit this."

He sighed, gritted his teeth, vacillated, found no way out — "Yes. Quite."

"You will not get rid of him even if I tell you to, will you?"

"There's no reason for me to."

"Except for what I've just told you. Except all of those, and then some." Kazama sighed. "Kiryu, if it isn't for your predilection for fools, you would be perfect."

He said nothing, was grateful when the waiter came with beers and refills, just so he could draw it out as much the silence.

"Very well," Kazama continued. "I see it discomfits you. We can talk about other things. Nishikiyama has been behaving unpredictably since his return. Tell me what you know about this."

"He found out that you put a hit on Yuko." He took a leaf from Majima's book, did not blink even once saying those words. He remembered Yuko, and even though they'd never been close — she was an idea. She was part of Sunflower, of a childhood in hindsight unblemished and uniquely happy. And her death was wretched on Nishiki, who he did care about. Nishiki and his infinite grief.

"Ah. Then I guessed right. I should have had the dog killed years ago."

"Why didn't you? It's not like you not to."

Kazama gave him a brief smile. "He reminded me of you. He has the same eyes." A pause. "It's the nature inside." Kazama clarified. "Had things been different he would have been useful in the family. I offered. He refused. I made a sentimental mistake."

"Sounds like Majima-san."

"Indeed." Tap, tap. "Very well. For Nishiki, now that he knows, I presume he won't rest until I'm dead. You'll have to clean him up yourself, you understand that?"

"I… Yes. Of course."

"And you will do it properly. You will not exile him. You will not maim him. You will kill him.
this understood?"

"I understand."

Kazama examined the texture of his understanding, turned it around and around. "Do you regret it?"
Kiryu looked down at the checkered patterns of the table, said nothing.

"I told you years ago he isn't cut out for this. He has no tolerance for pain, the kind of pain we need
to get far. He's smart, but he crumbles easily. You're the one who wanted to bring him into this. I told
you no, and you insisted. Do you understand why now?"

"He didn't want to be left behind."

"Well, now that he isn't, you'll have to take him out personally. You wanted him an equal, so an
equal he is, and now it's even messier for that." He considered Kiryu. "I can do this myself, if you'd
rather. If it's too much. As a favor. You've done well, for the most part."

"No," He said. "It should be me."

"Good, a responsible boy. You'll have men. Two thousand, use them well. Arrange with
Kashiwagi."

That surprised him. "He's back?"

"Of course. He too, has a mess to clean up. An exile is a vacation, in contrast. He can return to it,
once he's done."

Kazama pulled on his gloves, about to leave.

"Wait," Kiryu said. "About Yuko..."

"The hit?" A nod. "That was unfortunate but inevitable. Nishikiyama removed you, put you in
prison, and cost me precious time. If it wasn't for him you would be ready to take over by now. I
could have put you in Sera's place, the youngest chairman Tojo has, and the best. Actions like that
have consequences. It's hardly the first time I told him — but like you, he never seems to learn."

"Oh," He said. feeling hollow. It didn't seem like a good reason, that Yuko had to die for this; yet he
knew instinctively — if it was instincts — that there was no other way. Punishment had to be meted
out. It was justice, justice. Maybe she even had it good. She'd died cleanly. That was more than a lot
of people had.

"Deal cleanly, Kiryu," Kazama-san said, getting ready to leave. "And for the dog, he is deferred but
not settled. When you've cleaned up Nishikiyama's mess I expect you to remove him too. Someone
like that will always rise up again, like weeds. Stamp him out yourself, unless you want me to do it
for you." He stood, thinking, judging Kiryu. "You will do it?"

"I—"

"Kiryu."

"Yes. I will. I'll do it." The words came fully formed in defeat.

"Good. Let Kashiwagi know if you need anything."

They hugged and parted ways. When Kazama passed through the door, he blocked out the sun
again, though only momentarily. Kiryu wished it was longer, and all the lights were off, so he could
sit in characterless, odourless darkness and unfold himself bit by bit; when he'd papered the whole room with himself he could walk from point to point and consider this, the nature of things, the morality of it.

Oh, who was he fooling. He only had to ask Majima. Get fucked, he'll be told. Keep his crazy in his pants. He wished those were conclusive answers, auguries that could tell him what to do. He'd look into tea leaves, crystal balls, shelved stars, just to have a clue of what the right thing is.

—

He came out into Kamurocho just as the evening crowd was coming out of the woodwork, flushed out of their jobs into a weekend that promised to be great. It wasn't what he wanted, but he'll have to live with it, pressed in by the crowd around him, left-in, right-out, a pressure cooker of swinging arms and elbows raised to hold phones. There were mouths around him everywhere opening and closing. Teeth, teeth.

The millennium tower above him lit itself up for the night, a single tooth towering over the city. He looked at it, looked around him, realized he was lost. Not in geography, but a poverty of intentions. He had to go back to the hotel soon, but he didn't relish the act of repeating word-for-word, play-by-play to Majima. He needed always more time for thought, that was the kind of slow-thinker he was. Though often having thought, his mind couldn't be changed. An avalanche of a mind, Kazama-san had once said. It didn't help him understand himself better.

As he walked, the city began to split itself down the middle, so that with one eye he saw it as it was, and with the other he saw it as it could be. How Majima might see it, with his one eye, the millions of memories soaked in it, which overnight had become impossibly bitter. How must Majima be feeling, he wondered. Not too good, he supposed. Lost. He remembered the soreness of the city pressing down on him when he'd first came back, the confusion of richness, the torn corners where memories bulged and threaten to tear out. It will be a nightmare for Majima. Should he have parked the man outside of Kamurocho (would he allow it?) and come back here himself? But then...

But then he wouldn't have anyone on his side, by his side. And though he wasn't the kind of person who needed a confidante, who could do well enough alone, still. Still. An unhealthy attachment, that was what it was. Without reason or rhyme.

He didn't know Majima well enough for a personal consolation, so he made do with a scattershot one. He went into Maruetsu and came out laden with everything he'd ever seen Majima enjoyed — shoyu ramen, konbini sushi, toxic-tasting Suntory Blacks, packaged rice, a whole bottle of furikake. Then it was the staples of Gindaco and Akaushimaru (the weird shit flavors like tuna-mayo-avocado-roe), enough food that he had to hug the bundle like an old friend. It won't cheer Majima up but it'll knock him out, which was a good alternative.

He scowled down anyone who looked at him wrong; could beat them up but didn't relish redoing his shopping, and showed up at the hotel nearly too wide for the elevator. He shouldered their door apart and slammed it shut with his back. Then he heard the click.

Majima sat stewing in the room on the wrong bed, had left the heater on so high the room was an oven. In the darkling-dark Kiryu couldn't see him, but he knew the click anywhere.

"What are you doing?"

"Thinkin' bout shootin' ya, Kiryu-chan." Majima said, cheerily. "Ain't so good with a gun, me! Help me out here, where do I point this if I need it to hurt real bad?"
"I'm going to put down my shit," He said, to clarified his movements.

"Table's all yours."

He dumped all the shit he'd bought at the tiny kitchen-sink counter, then took off his jacket to hang it up. "Is there a reason? I closed the door wrong or something?"

"How would I know? I'm just fuckin' weed, ain't I?"

Kiryu stood frozen with his jacket in mid-air; unfroze and finished hanging up, then turned around to face the general direction of Majima. "Kitchens?"

"Staff room."

Kiryu scowled. "You ever heard of personal space?"

"Dogs don't do personal space, Kiryu-chan. Might know if ya ever get one that likes ya enough."

"I'm not going to do it," Kiryu said, blowing out a frustrated breath. "I won't kill you. What was I to do? Tell oya-san no way in hell, right after taking his men?"

"I sure as hell woulda done so," Majima said.

"I know." Because he was a fucking idiot, who ran screaming into things, and didn't know how to lie for his own good, and did the first thing that came to mind always. And that was why he'd lost — No, not that. Not to Majima, at least.

Majima said: "That don't mean any fuckin' thing to me, what ya said. How would I know ya on my side? Fact is ya track record ain't so good, Kiryu-chan. How'd I know you meant what you said to me, when ya just told ya old man to his face you'd kill me? Ya can lie to him, ya can lie to me too."

"Alright," Kiryu growled. "What do I do then? What do you want me to say, if saying doesn't mean anything?"

That seemed to stump Majima; he hadn't thought that far. They were at a stalemate, weren't they? Kiryu could only prove he won't kill Majima by not killing Majima, which he was already actively not doing. In the dark Majima began to materialize, where Kiryu's eyes adjusted to the dark. He was holding the gun limp-wristed like it was a toy. Kiryu could have disarmed him, likely, before he wounded them both. But this wasn't a physical conundrum they were fighting out. How do you establish trust before time, before circumstances?

He tried to explain. "I knew Kazama-san wouldn't want you around. If I wanted to obey, I'd have done it outside the city. Better yet, I would have left you for dead. Why would I go to all that trouble, just to drag you back to the city and kill you?"

"Don't mean anything. Could be ya just wanted my help against your brother. He said after."

"I see you're starting to think like us."

"Can't fuckin' help it, can I? Ya swim with sharks long enough ya gotta grow some teeth. I'm 'bout five years too late. Still, hey, ya ain't sayin' anything worth shit."

"Then what the hell do you want me to say?"

They were back where they started. "Suppose I ask ya if you were serious that we're a team on this." Majima hedged.
"My promise, as you pointed out, isn't worth the spit it's roasted on."

"So,"

"So," He said. "Either you trust me or you don't."

Majima said nothing; in the dark his scowl made him look like a squatting, vengeful demon. Kiryu sighed, scrubbed at his face. He really didn't need this — not any of this. It'd be nice for once if they weren't at each other's throat all the time, but that would take exactly that — time. Rapport, trust, credit in the positive.

"If it helps you decide," He said, as one does to a wild animal; whether that animal was Majima or he, he didn't know. "Every thing's that happened is my fault."

"It is?"

"You heard him. This all started because I begged oya-san to let Nishiki in. It was only ever me that he'd wanted, in the gokudo. He'd seen all he wanted to see. Nishiki's a planner, he said. No mettle, no steel, don't have what it takes, for doing the things that need to be done. He was going to put Nishiki at the bottom of the ladder if he joined, and have him stay there. Nishiki didn't — didn't breed true." He added his tempered grievances. "I didn't believe that. I still don't. If Nishiki ever lacked anything, it was Oya-san's trust."

"Ya don't gotta convince me. I'll be the last to call Nishikiyama weak. A lot of other things, maybe."

"He is. Is strong. And anyway. Anyway I didn't want to be alone," He admitted. "He was my best friend. My brother. We'd been together since we were kids. I didn't want to go it alone. I asked oya-san to treat Nishiki as he would me… Only I guess Nishiki saw. No matter what I said, or pretended, he saw. Or I was just too caught up in myself and didn't do enough, I don't know."

He maintained wilfully a thick, expressionless shell. "So today we have the other piece. I put him in the game, and Nishiki put me away so he could win, for which you had to kill his sister as punishment, for which all your boys had to die, and now I'm told to kill him for being too dangerous. You go back far enough, and it's because I'd rather lie to him than fucking grow up. Because I didn't have the courage to say: screw this place that doesn't believe in you, let's get the hell out of here. I couldn't tell him the truth, or part from him. I stuck my head in the sand. Rather watch him be hurt, change, than let him go. And so here we are."

Majima considered this piece of Kiryu he'd been handed, the extent of his belief and disbelief in its sincerity; the irascible lines of Kiryu face, the measured pain.

"Suppose I think ya just feedin' me some soggy lie?" He said. "How'd I know it ain't just some shit story ya made up on the spot?"

"Then get out!" Kiryu snapped. "Get the hell out. I don't need you so bad I have to tell you an inch more shit than I have. I don't need you! I'm perfectly fine on my own."

They let the words sink into the walls, the floorboards, muted through the carpet, soaked into the sheets and ingrained itself into the wooden bed frames. They tasted like sawdust; had the same fineness to it, finality that scared the both of them, for their own reasons. The gun clicked again when Majima tossed it aside. He stretched himself out in measured edges, calculated irreverence, feigned casualness. The air groaned when he came into contact with the evaporating words.

In long drawn out tones he said, "So… What did ya bring home? Anything good? I saw takoyaki. I gotta warn ya, if I don't see tuna in it I really will shoot ya this time, Kiryu-chan."
Kiryu managed, from somewhere within, to draw out a smile. "You'll have to learn how to get the safety off first."

—

They joined the two beds so Majima could have as much leg space as he wanted, infinitely if possible, and have his spine sink right down the middle where the two beds came together to be apart. From this privileged position he considered what he'd eaten, the things that he'd seen, the lies that he'd heard. Six out of eight, he reckoned. The shoyu ramen was the wrong brand, and he liked unagi on his sushi like he liked gonorrhea, but everything else was a Majima Goro kind of meal.

He wasn't an observant person, but it was hard to ignore six out of eight.

Okay, he thought. That was a teambuilding activity. He can consider it so.

"So," He said. "Didja know we just had our first big fight? Ya know what that means?"

"No. Too tired for that shit."

"Come on," He wheedled.

"No," Kiryu said, then realized the innumeracy that had happened. "Our first fight?"

"Eh, give or take a few stabs, who's countin'?"

"I didn't know one came after a hundred. That's new." Kiryu scoffed, a smile folded in his voice.

"Make-up sex," He whined.

"Tomorrow," Kiryu said, and went to sleep the way he did when he was being a grumpy old fuck, curled himself into a prawn-like ball to think his thinky-thoughts, which Majima didn't want anything to do with anyway, even if he did share. When Kiryu was half asleep, Majima crossed the great expanse of the foot-long distance until they touched. Where the contact begin or ended did not matter, only that it happened. He rotated himself until the top of his head pressed against Kiryu's curly spine.

Tomorrow sometime soon, they'll have to go into the nitty-gritty of not-killing or killing, whichever Kiryu had planned, to unravel this big ol' tangle of his. As for what he'd confessed, Majima didn't think it was Kiryu's fault. There were too many players in the game to blame the catalyst. Perhaps Kiryu had never been any such thing, and it was just imaginary guilt. To feel better, important, in control. Guilt by definition means you were responsible for something; something more than blind circumstances had happened to you.

What Majima thought didn't matter, though. He knew guilt, guilt being irrational, irrationality being intractable. Was privy to the emulsifying properties of guilt. You can melt a grown man in it, like a vat of acid, and come away with nothing except a handful of hair, a few crowns.

"I don't think ya should accept it. That guilt," He tried.

Kiryu came out from the shell of his sleep, said — what.

"Nishikiyama being the numbnut he is. Everything that happened since."

Kiryu thought on this, said, "But it is."
"Might be. But if it got wiggle room ya should wiggle. There's plenty of guilt ya can't escape, so ya might as well escape the ones you can." He found the words clumsy, but had no idea how to iron them into smooth waters. "If ya can doubt it, doubt it. It's easier to live that way."

Hesitantly, Kiryu said, "I'll try. I don't know if I can, but I'll try."

"'bout as much anyone can do, eh?"

"You too."

A strong hand from somewhere, squeezing Majima's own, coming apart, going back into its shell. It was as much an answer as Kiryu could give, and Majima took it and folded it away, into little crane-shaped memories, and left them bobbing upon the water.

Thought: Killing, or not-killing.

For six out of eight, he was thinking, he could try. If he had nothing to lose, might as well work for something he could, and keep the thoughts at bay.
'You've got grief like rocks,' Majima was saying.

There were many paper cranes in the translucent glass, each of them bobbing listlessly in the water. They had been folded carelessly by clumsy hands and might sink, but in fact this didn't matter because they hadn't yet come alive. They'd been placed in an aquarium with no fish, lit up by purple lights that were great for the (dead) coral, buoyed only by Majima's enthusiasm. Soon he'll get bored and they'll sink. He'll press them into the water himself.

'Ya got grief like a rock,' He told Kiryu, then thought better. Inaccurate, he's thinking. It's not that his griefs or problems had the texture of a rock — it was that Kiryu himself was a boulder, cut-diamonds, bony about the middle. He could not be cut, could not bleed, could not open himself up to reveal his insides. He had troubles; he had constipation, was what he had. Everything all bore down in there, pressurized, and if he did — if he ever did — let anything out, it's a soft wet gasp: I don't feel so good.

I don't know why, but I don't feel so good.

It's a double-edged shell: no one can hurt him from the outside, but neither can he come out.

He is in short, emotionally constipated.

'Quit giving me grief,' Kiryu said with a scowl, trying to concentrate on a map of Kamurocho and the surroundings of Nishiki Industries. He was trying to fold it into his mind, and Majima sat dangling his legs over a chair, doing absolutely fuck-all.

'I've got grief like 'em tectonic plates,' Majima said, and knew this to be accurate. Tectonic plates, shifting mercurially. Calm one day, a whole continent, rock solid like the history of the world as you know it. Land like you won't believe it, solid under the ground — and then it moves, and the world comes apart, and he sees between the lines what he'd carefully hidden under the jigsaw-puzzle crust.

Then angers, hates, sorrows by the fistfuls folding and unfolding and refolding itself to be tempered into more plates. Every time he rages the plates double, the continent extends, so that one day his whole world is just one ball of thick oceanic crust, and then he'll be safe. All of his grief will be deep-down-under.

In other words: he can be emotionally constipated then.

How wonderful, he was delighted. Kiryu and he will get to trade problems: him and his soft shell, Kiryu and his too-hard one. He pressed the cranes one by one into the water, waited until they soaked themselves. Watched them sink to the bottom of the tank, where they laid compressed by the dozens in front of the fluorescent tubes.

'What time is it?' He asked Kiryu.

'Time to go,' Kiryu said.

'Why don't ya stretch that ass? Come with me,' He said, stretching on the couch.

'That wasn't the plan.'

'Yeah, but if this works? Ya ain't gonna see much of me. Ya sure ya can live with that?"
Whether he could or he could not Kiryu did not say, but he drew his length out of the chair and said, by flesh (the way they did best) yes — let's go.

—

For the meeting they'd chosen somewhere out of Kamurocho, where the all-seeing eye of the Florist was half-blind.

"I can't pay him to close his eyes," Kiryu said. "Well, we can, but not as much as oya-san can."

"By the wharves," Majima suggested.

"By the water?"

Well, why not.

On their way out of Majima's office, they had to pass the Kazama-gumi members clustered about the halls, the rooms, the kitchens. Majima opened his eyes as wide as they could go so he wouldn't see.

Earlier that week the first of the Kazama-gumi men had come ten-by-ten pouring like termites into Majima-central. Majima sat in a couch while they introduced themselves. He used every single ounce of willpower he had to remain still (as water), to not let his face divulge the hate he felt. They were standing and stomping on the memories of his boys; it was enough that he had to be in here, shaking down his insides. He didn't want all these strangers all over his halls.

When they'd first came Majima thought he was seeing ghosts, that his boys had come en masse from beyond the grave to report in to him, say one-by-one their goodbyes and grievances, blame him perhaps, or harangue him. To tell him whether they get takoyaki in the beyond. To tell him if they have blind lost girls there.

That was the first minute; by the second he saw that they were just Kazama-gumi. The enemy, he reminded himself, though they don't know it yet. Only they wore skins that were familiar to him — the textured calluses of rural lives, sun-baked skins, bad coats bought on gambled paychecks, the reddish tinge of boozing problems. If he bothered to look, he'll find that under the skin of his enemies are the anonymous flesh of his boys.

"I don't like 'em," He declared. Kiryu looked at him with curious eyes, and saw that he was scared.

"You don't have to like them. We just have to use them."

"Ya soundin' like an asshole again, Kiryu-chan," He reminded.

"I said you're on my team, I never said they were."

A line which Kiryu apparently took as seriously as nations took borders. Majima watched him push them into a map one-by-one with multicolored pins and thought: am I really on his side? Are we really a team, can I trust him? The last time I was on his side it didn't end so well for me, did it. Is six out of eight enough, for the kind of stakes we're playing with? His fragile ribs all-eight, and the heart it contained. He had many moments of such doubt — it overflowed, poured out, scattered like marbles inside him.

Once Majima would have asked the compass in him if Kiryu was true, and without fail the compass would regurgitate a good answer for him. Whether that answer was valid or false is inconsequential; what mattered was Majima always had an answer for himself.
The true north of his desires was clouded. He couldn't tell what he wanted. Once it'd been simple: he wanted to protect his men, wait for Saejima, have some fun in the middle of it. When did it get so complicated? How come it wasn't easy no more?

Answer: He'd lost everyone, and then... Nishida. Nishida had thrown a magnet into the equation, a garbled message that Majima had spent hours decoding with himself — accompanied by a yellow duck — in a bathtub, soaking in cooling water until he was soggy and wrinkly from thought.

Suppose, was Nishida right?

Had he all this while been passively (even aggressively) standing still while the things that he cared about became ideas, became history? What does it mean? What does it say on the tin? It's hurting his head, hurting his conscience. In the throes of the freezing shower he felt maligned, then guilty, then angry, then maligned all over again. It wasn't true, he told the bubbles of the bath, voice a watery thrum. It wasn't true, he cared — he truly cared.

Maybe, he decided, he was just stupid, an anti-planner, and Nishida interpreted that as wilful spite. He was just an idiot who didn't think things through, and that's what Nishida saw as laziness, as spite, as the deliberate compression of his boys into history, so he could mourn them.

"You're not stupid," Kiryu said. "Well, maybe you are a little," He teased — or did not, Majima couldn't tell. "I don't think you consciously let them die so you can mourn them, at least. You just tend to be sad or angry, before you do anything. Before you think of what's to be done."

"Unlike ya," Majima said nastily, protective of his nastiness. "Ya all doin', can't tell a sack of sad if it hits ya in the face."

"Unlike me," Kiryu said simply. As an afterthought, Kiryu added: "Death has a finality to it, a cleanliness to it. A clean death. I can see why you might like it."

See, that's the thing isn't it?

Dead people don't develop new things, won't betray you, won't start new stories. Maybe he had an attraction to it because when people die they became part of the past; became stagnant, unable to develop foibles or judge his actions. They become thick with history, full of possibilities, by virtue of being dead they become infinitely beautiful — their memory is whatever he makes them to be.

Consider what Saejima might mean in this format: caught forever as the Saejima of 1985. If Majima doesn't meet him, doesn't talk to him, doesn't try to spring him from prison, then he can never change. Their friendship always beautiful, then tragic; he can't be disowned, cannot be abandoned, couldn't be murdered or charged guilty by a Saejima stuck in the past. The life of his men, and Saejima — all his goals — were frozen at a point, where everything is known, and he liked it that way.

"Fuckin' Nishida tryin' ta blame me," He said, sinking into his tub for minutes on end to look at the stopped drain. The water swirled gently around the hole, never able to move on, growing dirty with regrets around him.

"Go out and beat up some people," Kiryu told him. "You'll feel better."

That was the kind of language he spoke, he liked thinking with his fists. Good ol' Kiryu-chan speaks bone too. He massaged other people's temples and found he thought better for it. Looked down at the bits of hair, nose, teeth arranged in prophetic constellations and thought: I didn't want them to die. But it's simpler when they do. It's easier to be alone, even though it's lonely. Nishida is wrong-right. I
am right-wrong.

Nishida had said, at its core, that he preferred chasing dead ghosts and guilt to the living. This was true, this much he admitted. But he'd tried keeping them alive — and if it wasn't his best try it wasn't deliberate, and it wasn't spite. The rest of the blame he refused; balled it up and kicked it away.

"Go out and beat up more people," Kiryu said. "Here's a list. All Nishikiyama men, this should be good."

He said: "Haul ass, Kiryu-chan! No fun if I gotta do this alone!" So they went, like they did not too long before. In time-space it was just a moment ago; in waters traversed they had sailed long. Majima as always led from the front, cackling like an undying hyena, tore half a dozen men at a go with spinning knives, showy kicks, cracking heads against heads against walls. Kiryu was content to wash in from behind, inspect his work, rounded up the unbroken jaws and cheekbones and stomped on them in one go. He searched in the little cracks that Majima overlooked, caught the rats that tried to squirm away, tickled their spines until they broke.

"Ya want them dead ya do it yourself," Majima told him.

"I don't want them dead." Kiryu said, and Majima looked at the neck he'd just broken almost as an afterthought and thought — well long way to go.

For dessert they consumed: a paddy's worth of rice and grilled meat, sushi enough to placate small gods, a whole fish sliced thinly which Kiryu consumed from head to fin with remarkably little pleasure.

"How come ya always behind," Majima complained, balancing chopsticks on his nose. "Ya don't want fresh things to punch sometimes?"

"I prefer watching you fight," Kiryu said.

Majima preened. "Ya tryin' to study my moves? Royalty-free too, Kiryu-chan ya damn thief! Lessons on Wednesdays only. Pay-per-view. Ya gotta pay fees if ya wanna learn." He became suspicious. "Ya not watchin' for weaknesses, are ya? I gotta warn ya, they change every week too!"

Kiryu's answer was an unsatisfactory smile and a shrug, "I like watching you fight."

Well, what does he say to that? Fuckin' weirdo!

When he had slow moments he went into Kiryu's office, which Kiryu had appropriated from Nishida's old room. It had the quality of a battlestation he was looking for; already Nishida had files piled up nearly to the ceiling, pouring out of cabinets, files on files of everything that was remotely relevant from the last few years. The problem with Nishida's files was not their completeness — it was trying to tease out what was relevant out of fifty-six books of receipts on every single group dinners the boys ever had.

Looking at it just hurt (all these evidence that his boys once had mouths; oh Sagawa, you too, shoulda talk to you when ya was still alive, why did I say that, that if I never saw ya it'll be too soon, when it ain't true), so Majima concentrated hard on Kiryu's maps, to make sure he's never caught off guard again. It wasn't that Kiryu didn't explain it to him — it was that he didn't trust his explanations, couldn't be sure they were complete.

"Those yellow pins," Majima said. "Who are they suppose ta be?"

"You," Kiryu said. "Soon anyway. I'm arranging something."
"Whazzat?" He sat on Nishida's desk, kicked a chair about, balancing it from foot to foot on three legs. "Oi, speaks up. Ya plottin' again, asshole?"

"Yes, I'm contacting Sera. I've been thinking — if either Nishiki or Kazama defeats the other completely, he'll be in trouble too. The only reason he's alive is because neither of them can move without the other checking them. He has a stake in this. There's something we can use there."

"So… Ya givin' me away to him?"

"On loan."

In a flash he had his knife out, and though it danced pretty tricks the threat was explicit. "Like a piece? Ya fuckin' turnin' me over like a piece, asshole?"

"I can't hurt Kazama with his own men," Kiryu explained. "So someone has to do it. You're the only one I've got who can do that. We see what Sera's got to say, and if we can convince him to part with a unit and you head it, we can fight on both fronts. Nishiki, and Kazama-san. We can't decimate them, but that's not the point."

"I don't get it, how's whackin' their knees gonna hurt them?"

"The only way to make them talk to each other is to bring them low enough," Kiryu said. "This is the first step."

"If I go," Majima said, looking at the yellow pins, dotted far off Kamurocho. "If I go, it'll be far off. I ain't gonna be 'round here, am I. Away." He didn't give a shit about Kiryu, when it comes down to it, but he liked even less to be alone right now, and surrounded by men he didn't give a damned about. Who reminded. And how the hell was he supposed to keep an eye on the backstabbing bastard like this?

Kiryu considered the transparency of his words. "I have an old apartment of mine in the Ota suburbs. We can meet there, if you'd like."

"Ya sayin' that like I give a shit, Kiryu-chan. Could be I'm just glad I don't gotta see ya mug for-fucking-ever."

Kiryu started writing, waited until Majima said: "Oi, gimme the fuckin' address then!" Then he handed it over. Majima pocketed its significance, and pointed with a thumb. "Que Sera Sera? Let's roll, I'm growin' moldy just being 'round so much paper. Ya don't watch out I'll turn into an accountant. How's that for scary?"

Off they went. Majima hated being in the offices, but now that he was going he felt a fondness for it. The thick door, he was thinking, was something that you could be safe behind. Perhaps before he leaves for good he can extract a promise from Kiryu to hide behind it a lot, be safe, but anyway he knows it won't work. The asshole will just keep rollin', which is just as well, Majima won't have it any other way. Only weaklings hide behind doors, and Majima was no follower of weaklings.

—

They came off the warm seat of a taxi to meet Sera on a ship by the docks, a pleasure boat much less austere than the affair that had brought Kashiwagi away and returned him unpleasantly whole to the city. Kiryu looked at it and saw a ghost from the past, said: "Didn't know they repaired the old thing."
If this thing sailed it wouldn't go far, it was someone's meeting place. To make history without it being recorded, that sort of spot. The chain anchoring it to the pier had half-rusted through, hadn't been moved for as long as three or five years; the interior was the only place that had been maintained. It had the kind of carpets used to secrets too, thick and lush — both of Majima's feet sank unwillingly into it, and he tried to walk at the edge of the halls and the rooms instead of down the middle.

They followed a single masked attendant into the bowels of the ship. The place was deserted except for the three of them — and somewhere inside the labyrinth, Sera — but Majima felt the prickle of many gazes on him, the little hairs of his neck standing up at the attention. He found Kiryu walking like he'd got egg in his pants too, so whatever the guy was saying, he was nervous. Chairman Sera after all. They were punching above their grade. A guy they'd never seen much.

Majima wasn't too keen — the last time he'd met the man, he'd made Majima a promise he couldn't keep. A man who can't even keep a blind girl alive was supposed to help them? What a fucking joke.

"Asshole," Majima breathed out. Kiryu gave him a look that spoke volumes, thick like encyclopedias.

The masked attendant stopped by a grand door to a grand place, held up a finger to his lips (indicating nothing that could be understood) and disappeared off somewhere.

"Those masks are creepy man," Majima said. Old-young baby-gramps faces. Fucking creepy then and really damned creepy now.

"This goes well you'll be looking at those for months yet."

Fuckin' hell.

They went in and found Sera sitting seiza over his courtesies, half-made tea whisked to perfection, a kettle sitting on hot coals somewhere near enough to reach. Majima was sitting on hot coals too; Sera offered them seats and he refused his, stood by the door and glared down Sera and the back of Kiryu's stone-still neck. The tea was not perfect until it was served, after which it rapidly degraded in Kiryu's hands.

"Chairman," He greeted, taking a nominal sip.

"Kazuma-san," Sera returned. "I've received your messages."

Majima closed his eyes and went away. They were boring him to tears already and it'd been two inches of conversation. The room didn't help — it was too official. How the fuck they got tatami in a boat, that's what he wants to know. It looked fit to marry in, take vows in, cut off fingers in. Speaking of fingers. He took out his knife and began to scrap skin again, though he'd already scraped enough off that his knuckles too, were rapidly degrading. Oxidised. It was becoming a tic. He waited until all the courtesies were over, all the will-you-won't-yous, and demanded:

"Oi, Chairman. Cut the shit, are ya or aren't ya gonna give us the men?"

"They can't be traced back to me, you realize this." He addressed this to Majima. "On Kazama I can't be sure, but Nishikiyama has been convinced at great cost that I know nothing of his plans."

"Ya wanna enter the races with an invisible pony? That ain't gonna work. Sooner or later someone's gonna kick one of your boys in the nads and they'll yell your name. Whadya do then? No sorry it ain't mine? Gimme a break. Dunno what Kiryu-chan's here been feeding ya with, but take it from a guy who got kicked hard by those two warhorses — they'll find out. So either ya in or ya out, make
up your damned mind."

Kiryu pursed his lips but said, "Majima-san is right, even if he's tactless about it. I need him to put pressure on Kazama-san, sir, and he can't do it alone."

Sera considered this; he had the strained texture of tea that'd been washed one too many times. Lines on his face like a map, like a subway blueprint. He was getting too old for this before his time; either he'll retire soon or be retired soon. He was no second chairman, that's for sure — that old warhorse folks said coulda keep kicking til he was eighty, just on a diet of vicious hay.

In the end he went for that old kicker, trust, and said: "Kashiwagi spoke highly of the both of you. I suppose if anyone has a shot it'll be you two. I can have it prepared."

"Which family?"

"From the old Nikkyo, actually. They'll be harder to trace at least. Small protection."

"I ain't impressed," Majima complained. "Last I recall I broke in the faces of a hundred of those guys on my own, and I only had one drink in me. Sera, ya shortchangin' me with trash here?"

"They're the best men I can give you."

"How many?"

"Enough."

"Fuckin' trash!"

"If it consoles you — they don't usually lose a hundred to one."

"Yah, but do they lose, them's the question."

"You are seeing things framed by your worldview, Majima-san. From it, I expect most people are brought down low. Compared to you."

Placated, Majima said, "'ppose it's better than nothin'. Personally I'll do it all on my own, but Kiryu-chan here's big on the meat shield diet."

"Majima is big on resurrection," Kiryu returned. "He has a fondness for dying. Can't seem to learn that he can die."

Sera considered them one to the other and said, "That would be unfortunate, if it was so. I'll have it prepare then, and notify you of it." From under the table he slid out a briefcase, and moved it across to Kiryu. "What you requested."

Majima craned his neck about, but stoic-shit Kiryu didn't open it. How come? When Majima handed him things he acted like everything was a bomb; here's a thing that could be a bomb and he doesn't care. Double standards. Majima hopped from foot to foot, angry again that things were being done that he didn't know about, wasn't kept in the loop about. He'll punch Kiryu the moment they get outta here, wreck some ass, see if he don't.

"Thank you," Kiryu said. "You will let me know, if you change my mind?"

Sera gave him a sardonic smile. "I hardly have a choice, do I? Between Kazama, your brother, and you, I don't have room to change it, even if I want to. I only hope you're making the right choice, with this."
Kiryu hoisted the briefcase (seemed light, Majima noted) and stood to leave. "I hope so too. We'll be going then," He said.

Sera nodded. To Majima he added. "Majima-san, about the prison, and the murder charge. I wanted to apologize—"

"Save it! If I punched every guy who wronged me once, I'll break both my wrists. Just get the fuck outta my way, and try not to fuck it up this time."

Then he was out, danced quickish ahead of Kiryu, out of that damp ostentatious hell of prefabricated luxury and into the night air. He stood on the deck and chainsmoked, wanting to sear out the taste of all that moldy courtesy in his lungs. It was a while before Kiryu emerged, briefcase in hand and squint in his eyes, looking around for Majima.

"You have a history with Chairman Sera?" He asked.

"I don't ask ya 'bout boats, ya don't ask me about him, how's that?" Majima glared. "That part about breakin' my wrists, I don't mind so much if it's ya I'm punching."

Kiryu nodded, took up the deck chair closes to Majima. The briefcase clicked and out came papers, shuffling about in bundles, full of mealymouthed words that Majima was too far away to make out; in any case being closer wouldn't make him care more. He was curious though.

"What's that?"

Kiryu checked the documents one by one, then satisfied, slotted them back. The moon was on Majima's side, cowering at his back. Backlit, none of his features could be seen, and he stood swaddled near the boat's railing — enjoying the shadow and the freedom it allowed him to sneer, mock, question.

Kiryu took his own hesitation, stretched it to the furthest it could go, and when it could go no further, said: "Before I tell you, tell me something."

"Kiryu-chan, ya need to go back to school. Ya missed the lesson on how questions work."

"I know," He said. "Tell me anyway."

"'kay?"

"Are you planning to stay in Tojo once this is all over?"


"Have you thought about it?"

"Naw, too thinky."

"Think about it now. You don't have your guys left. If you stay, it'll be as a free agent, or else you'll be absorbed into one of the remaining families. Unless you rebuild yours. Are you rebuilding?"

That he could answer. "Fuck no, I'm done with all that shit. No more."

"Then?"

"Who knows. I haven't thought that far."
"But if you did," Kiryu pressed.

"I dunno."

"Even if it's a half-formed plan."

"Hey! Quit with the fifty questions! I said I dunno — most I ever thought maybe I'd round up all the leftover boys and start a proper business or something. A club. Some physical shit, maybe. I'm good at makin' money. They followed me that long the least they deserve is money. Then... Stuff. Ain't none of ya business what I do."

"So... Out of Tojo then?"

"Huh? Why ya sticking on that point? Ya pissin' me off here!"

Kiryu stood in a defensive stance like he was expecting to be hit, Majima's thinking — what the hell is it now, that he's gone and done.

Then Kiryu said, tapping the briefcase: "Because of this here. I just got papers transferring Chairman Sera's position to his chosen heir. If we use these... Nishiki can be the fourth chairman of the Tojo Clan."

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"No fuckin' way," Majima said, and Kiryu could barely hear him over the bruises on both ears.

"I did tell you, I want to stop them from killing the other. Just listen to me—"

"Suck my dick! Ain't my goal! So far away from my goal it ain't even on the field. Goddamned asshole! Ya got any bad plans ya wanna tell me 'bout before I kill ya?"

Kiryu was in a dumpster — or rather, he was about two feet away from a dumpster, avoiding swipes from a very angry knife. He was out of breath, as well as he should be. They'd danced up and down town; the ghost of a tanto had chased him every step of the way. Majima was getting ready to do the biggest math he'd ever done in his life: count up to a hundred, and bury a knife in flesh for every one-up.

"Majima, listen — can you just trust me for five seconds, and listen to what I have to say? After that you can kill me, if you want. I'll even promise not to come back to life."

He judged this, examined the texture of their relationship, thought of eight-part fractions, and said: "Ya got five fuckin' minutes to convince me this is good news ta me."

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Later. The old place at the Ota suburb was a rat's nest. It was no better or worse than Majima's safehouse, with its brick of unpaid bills. This place won't be habitable for at least a week. It had to be cleaned, scrubbed, paid for — possibly even burned down before it could be habitable again. It was condemned; Majima felt just as condemned, rounding up on it with Kiryu by his side. They didn't need to walk this far together. Addresses exist for a reason. They were just meandering — didn't know how to say goodbye, didn't know if they wanted to, didn't have an idea what they should do otherwise.
"This is the place," Kiryu said. "Won't be useful for a bit. I'll get it cleaned up. I don't expect I'll see you here before I'm done, anyway."

"So's," Majima said. If they keep this up, he won't be able to punch anyone; would have mutilated his fists to fill in all the silence between them.

"You'll be at…"

"The safehouse we agreed on. Sure."

"Okay, and you remember the plan?"

"Kick many asses, what's the big deal? I'll nip as many Kazama men as I can have hands on. Ya the one who shouldn't fuck up your end."

"Alright," Kiryu said. "Alright, I guess this is —"

"Bye then? Guess so," He said sullenly. "Don't backstab anyone while I'm gone."

"Except the ones who matter?"

"Cept the ones that need stabbin'."

Majima turned to leave, hunkered down to face the nippy cold; it's a short walk but windy, to the place he needs to be at. Didn't know why he chose to do this at night; if they'd done it in the morning it'll be cheerier. Don't need the whole street mocking him with the splitting laughter of a 2 a.m gale, streetlights row-on-row lighting his way away, not a single footstep to be heard except his.

He got maybe ten, twenty steps away still thinking what left to be said, some excuse to turn around, when Kiryu beat him to it, said: "Hey, Majima."

He turned around, expected — well, nothing.

"Try not to die." Kiryu said, with the concerned expression of a slab of cold tuna. As if defending his non-concern, he added. "Plan won't work right without you."

He grinned. "You won't work right without me, Kiryu-chan. I'm big big deal, didn't I say? Don't cry into too many pillows while I'm gone. And don't let anybody kill ya before I do!"

Then with a smirk wide enough to hurt his cut lips, Majima was gone — he'd turned down the wrong road, gone the wrong way, but that's fine.

It's the smooth, cool exits that matter in life.

—
Some days later Majima was about to disappear into anonymity, but first he had to shop for a face. The Nikkyo valued their lack of identity; was proud of the fact that each and every one of them could disappear into a mask and be lost forever. In fact, even if they took the mask off they remained quite anonymous (though it might have hurt their feelings if Majima told them so, they had pride). It wasn't the features, it was the little things. You wear a mask long enough you take on tics: a squint through the eyes, a strange splotchy tan, breathing harder to accommodate the tight secret on your face.

He took the Nikkyo boys to theater, went into crowded souvenir stores and dusty costume-jewelry shops. Tall rows of masks up to the ceiling considered them for purchase, but he didn't find what he wanted until the sixth, maybe seventh, could even be the eighth store — and only the tenth had enough stock for all the Nikkyo men.

He peered through the holes of the Hannya mask to look at the guy closest to him; he liked how frightening the visage could be, if you light it just right. It felt heavy, had weight. He tossed it from hand to hand, and chose the best one for himself.

"I'll take many," He said, and went.

Outside. Waiting for the small things to happen (the dinging up of purchases, the chime of a shop's farewell), he considered an apartment block in front of the store, which extended eight or nine floors up, and looked featureless-grey. Somewhere, he thought. In two or three weeks, Kiryu will be in something very like this, putting a bullet in his own old man.

"Bondin', eh?" He said.

—

The first time Kiryu had held a gun in his hand he'd been one of the youngest hitmen in the family. How young he didn't know — he could have as young as seventeen or as old as nineteen, certainly it would have been before the Empty Lot, or else the whole fiasco wouldn't have happened. At that time a gun was just an idea, a smoky glory; only way later would he know that glory itself is smoke-like, ephemeral, smelling like gun oil on your fingers.

The people who say guns and glory are wrong. It's guns or glory. Much more satisfying to look someone in the eye and hit them, hit them 'til they die, if that's your thing. You shoot someone from afar you don't get that kind of feedback; just a kickback on your shoulder, then blam-shazam and someone is dead. It's almost boring. Here ends a life, and you didn't even get a bit of philosophy for your efforts.

If they don't die, it's even worse. Then you have to explain why they're alive.

What else is boring, what else.

Well, waiting is boring. A hit is seven-eighths waiting. Waiting in the opposite window, half-opened for a better view. If you're unlucky you end up on ledges, fire escapes, weather-eaten roofs, contorting yourself into a strange and unnatural position; just like sex, all that fucking work and five minutes of joy. Unlike sex, you can be waiting in that cold corner for days, weeks — longest he'd
ever waited was for a whole month, camped out in some damp parking lot, leaking slowly out of
expensive pipes, waiting for some politician to take his fancy car out for a ride to put a bullet in him.

Every five minutes the elevator goes ding, somewhere. The shakes he could get, if he thought about
sitting in dark places long enough. All that nerve, all that strain. No wonder he chain-smoked: just for
something to do. Well, what's everyone else's excuse? Kiryu did it to stay sane.

Staying sane now. Staying in control. It was just him and an empty room and that barely-open
window. A sniper rifle as usual, his favorite; this time trained on the Kazama-gumi offices. This time
in that toxic mix of boredom and nerves (not cut out for this, why won't anyone listen?) was guilt —
he was about to shoot Kazama-san and never thought it would come to this.

He'd been here for a whole week, and Kazama hadn't even stepped in. If he stayed any longer his
nerves were going to shatter into a million pissy pieces, and he with it.

This is why he liked the enforcing part of the business so much more; he could fight a hundred guys
all day long, crack skulls six ways to Sunday, two in each hand like eggs. The most important part is
that all of it happened in light — even the darkest alleys weren't dark like this, dark inside.
Somewhere in the building someone had turned on a tap, a microwave dinged, a door opened — and
it bit him like a bullet, cracked him across the face, surprised him every time. His body longed to go
belly-up and curl into a ball, like a worm; it is expecting to shoot and be shot at, strafed at. His ears
felt hot.

Best Tojo enforcer? Not looking so best right now.

His fingers itched and crawled phone-wards across the great expanse of the concrete where he was
lying on his front, eye nominally out of the window. He wanted to call Majima, just to hear him
swear:

"Ya think I'm as fuckin' free as you are? I got a job and I'm doin' it!" Majima would hold the phone
close so Kiryu could hear whatever it was he was crunching: ribs perhaps or egos or sugary cereal.
Whatever it was, he'll hear a mouthful of it, then Majima asking, as if time had reversed and he was
picking up the phone for the first time: "Hey Kiryu-chan! Ya kickin' ass? What's happenin'? What's
good?"

It was withdrawal, that's what it was. He had forgotten how to wait; used to be he could fold himself
small-small-across-twice, and become utterly immune to the passage of time. He could have waited
forever, in fact had waited forever before. In and before prison. He was good at waiting, at going
away, at leaving his flesh fibre by fibre behind, so that he could operate like a living person but be
dead inside. It was his special skill; he'd been so proud of it.

Nerves have the nerve to be shot, shot to hell.

Calm the hell down, he told himself. Keep your mind in the gutter, bury it deep-down where it's
quiet. If all goes well this is the last shot he'll ever have to take — give or take about two thousand
skulls left to be cracked — and then he was out of this mess forever. He sat down, forced himself
onto his haunches, and waited.

—

In contrast the last two weeks that had brought him day by day to this point (each day by inches
longer than the last, as he approached what he was reluctant to meet) was enforcing, and enforcing
he liked best.
Two weeks was also a long long time to be missing someone. In this case he was missing Majima — quite literally. The man had gone into the ground and never surfaced again. Kiryu had a guy who had a guy who had a guy (you have to hide the chain of command, for things like this) with an eye on the safehouse, but Majima had disappeared almost as soon as he'd turned that corner, and no one had seen him since.

Okay, Kiryu thought, when he got this piece of news. News to him, but alright. Who did he have to kill now? Who the hell had taken his piece from him — his golden general? He laid very still in front of his arterial map and thought of the holy trinity of Nishiki, Kazama, Sera — who'd squirreled him away? Who dared? Which ventricle of the city was he in, which chamber of its beating heart?

With difficulty he roused himself to push his men out into the streets, pushed them out like little pins, with explicit instruction to be a pain to Nishiki. That was duty done. Then it was just his hobby of chasing ghosts.

He went into bars with a closed fist of money; bought from bartenders eloquent drinks with messages at the bottom. From there it was the back of gambling parlors, for a chance encounter with the right kind of rumor. Still they told him nothing. Said, laughing: man isn't the Mad Dog dead? He'd brought all his pups out of the city and no one's seen hide nor tail of him since. Not good chances, that he's got. He's dead, likely, dead and dusted…

"If you're correct, I'll be back," Kiryu said, and they stopped laughing.

 Turns out, not so. Word surfaced days later that there was some new terror on the streets, swimming out of the sewers with masked droplets to raid Kazama-gumi. Could be Nishikiyama's newly hired goons — all of them wearing costume accessories bought from theater souvenir stores. Hannya masks, in other words. Majima had the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Anyone who'd seen his back would have figured out what the hell was going on. Or was that paranoia speaking?

"You're alive," Kiryu told a phone. "And you didn't call."

"Hey Kiryu-chan! Get off my tits, ya ain't my mom!" Majima screamed from somewhere loud. It could be helicopters or a vent he was hearing in the background. "Ya said not to die, well do I sound dead? Plan's going great, see—"

Click.

Motherfucking click.

The things that he plans to do to Majima when he gets his hands on him, indeed no. He'll wish it's his mother. Majima's mother won't be breaking him into a mattress.

That was his priority; with his priority settled he turned to Nishiki instead. He gathered Kazama's men to him, told them to pick a pin, any pin, off the map.

"And you sir?" Someone asked.

"I'll take many," He said, and went.

- For the Nishikiyama-gumi, the world as they knew it ended differently for different members of the family. Depending on where they were standing when the tide came, their world could have ended on a high or low note, in quickly-shivers or shambles slow. It began, so they said, at the shipping yards, where for many years now it had been ritual and festive for the Nishikiyama-gumi to set out
ships, lit by lonely lanterns, onto the sea; these dark hulking shapes carried with them gun-shaped
deaths to the mainland — it was no wispy secret, it was just business.

The family had ships and shipping containers aplenty; exactly how many no one knew, possibly only
their king and surveyor did. All the members found out at least, that every other odd-numbered yard
was theirs. If they didn't know it before that week they knew it then, when the tide came to it
bringing slow fires, and a heavy knuckle that knocked around mid-day. A man comes then —
dragon-shaped, some say — to knock, always three times with his palm flat on the cold metal, and
said:

"Nishikiyama-gumi?"

The secret is silence; in the silence they can run, and they will have a five minutes head start. The
alternative is wrong, wherein they say: "Yeah? Who's asking?"

The wrong answer brings a dragon and a hundred men, who in their pointy corners and tightly fitted
efficiency were a mirror of Nishikiyama's men — trained after all, in the same methods, spliced by
binary fission. The rats made two, then two hundred.

It is not they who are to be feared — they are just meat. It is the dragon who is like the slow tide,
who washes from room to room into every corner and onto every boiler, to rattle doors and uncover
trapdoors, who soak into the fabric of steel and locked doors, so that you cannot hide — a hand
comes always seeking and grasping in the secret places, to shatter thigh bones and shoulders, ulna
and radius like glaces.

Later, Kiryu considered: should he kill them?

Rounding them up in the middle of a warehouse, beaten and battered, multiple broken-in femurs—
he has to ask this fracturing question: should they be killed? Instinctively (if it is instinct) he knows it
is the right thing to do; it's only justice — for Majima's boys, for Majima, for everything else done
but unknown to him. He had an axe to grind. It is not only right but easy. If he leaves these rats
around they will scurry back to Nishikiyama.

With such a wealth of contraptions around him he didn't have to look far. All he needed was a
shipping container, a hundred men in it in various states of discomfort, with hardly any standing
space. It wouldn't matter, because they won't be standing for long. Then all he has to do is to direct it
into the sea, and by the time anyone finds it, all they'll get for their trouble of fishing it out will be a
hundred bloated corpses, eagerly spewing water but no secrets. It'll be a death most clean, if rather
brackish.

Dealt cleanly, in other words.

So the question comes, in the end — to that thing he'd thought of so long ago in purgatory: the fusion
of his displeasure and pleasures at hurting and not-killing. Still, one has to be practical — should he
murder these rats?

He stood thinking with his fingers curled around a secret. In that heat and turgid silence, something
unaccountable came to be: he let them go.

Thought: This is the wrong move but the right direction.

Thought: He better be happy now, I'm keeping the crazy in my pants.

"Send them back to Nishikiyama," He told his men, who looked at him with a warring of insolence
and fear.
"Sir? He'll only send them back."

"Don't worry about it," He said. "I think he'll do all the killing for me. Take the shipment. Take the ships. Put it all to the sea, and sink it. Then give his men back to him."

He had found a loophole to keep his hands clean. Someday he'll do better, be a good person, save people who don't want to be saved. For now he'll keep that number at one. The skin that he had chosen for himself will take years to graft on him. For now, just saving one person is enough. This is for him, singularity — he had reached a point where he was unrecognizable to himself.

—

A singular action had been done.

They put the men in a circle in the middle of a room; their backs to backs with their hands tied behind them, their lips salted by the sea. Chafed, cracked. Their hands bleeding where they'd been tied too tightly. This is how they'd been found and how they'd been delivered, which Nishikiyama approved of but didn't understand better. What had been done, if anything had been done, was unrecognizable to him.

"This is how you found them." He said. He took one by one their lives and held it in his hands, threw it from palm to palm, juggled it, weighed it. Were they heavier than normal? Were their souls burdened by a deal they made with the Devil? Or was the Devil the one with the burdened soul? Why are they alive? And where, where are his things?

"Where are my things," He said.

On this they were unambiguous — they were eager to please and to be correct. At the bottom of the sea, they said. Thrice-folded in the bottom of shipping containers, shipped now forever to a dirty bedrock down the coast. Irretrievable, or if retrieved, unusable. Utterly useless (them and the guns). The rest had been delivered to the police, bearing unmistakable evidence that they'd come from Nishikiyama-gumi. Soon they'll come running, trailing priggish questions on his carpets, and he'll have to answer them with money and time.

"Fine," He said. "Take them away. They're staining the carpet."

He thought then of the brackish underwater gloom of the docks, where he'd once seen his future floating like jetsam on it; traced the rough surface of a concrete crack, smelled (without knowing it) the smell of mold. It had pressed eagerly into his intrusive fingers and never left since.

He ran fingers through his hair, pushing it back. They had a wet look to it too, as if he'd never really left the water after that night when he lost his weakling bones and knitted himself an ermine skin.

"Who are you?" He asked the fractious, disorderly map. The arteries had been crossed lately; hearts beat where no hearts had beaten before. The chambers were all wrong. Kiryu, he'd expected, would have gathered weapons and killed men. That is what he had prepared for, he'd paid a great deal of money to extend Kiryu's stay in prison, possibly forever this time. At the end of the long walk a single noose.

All those officers paid to be ready for much murder, and no murders.

Why was it the other way around?

"Sir," Someone said.
Who is this person, does he know? He doesn't. No matter how far he's come he'd only ever known one person in his life. Now not even that.

They said: "What do you want us to do with the guys...?"

The rational choice, he knew was to put every man back into his ranks and deploy them against Kiryu and Kazama. But how can he bear it, if he had to live knowing he had been spared? That pity had been done to him, inflicted upon him? What is this, if not pity? Wasn't this what Kiryu was saying? Take your fucking shit back, I'll give you back every one of your piece and still you'll lose.

O, but mercy as sharp as these.

He traced the changing lines of the map and one by one, withdrew pins from it.

—

Perhaps as early as noon or two in the afternoon Kiryu was thinking: no more. He couldn't wait a day longer, not even 'til nightfall. In the brightly shimmering day he was seeing the world through a hazy heat that should not exist in the beginning of Spring. Still he saw the world as if he was an oasis. Not the world, but *him*: a shimmering, vague mirage, the water that disappeared when you blink. He was fading away, into some place that he himself could not reach; he was afraid if he waited any longer he could not leave.

Maybe things would be different if the places he had to hide in were softer, but they were always unilaterally drab — dry sanded walls and cold stone. Old apartments with thin pipes. A shed on a roof (that horror of zinc and onduline!), without even the softest touch of fabric or wood. Wood wasn't soft, but it damped sound better than stone. Sound ricocheted on stone, bounced it about, rattled his nerves. To say nothing about metal.

Yesterday (and the days before) he had sat in the dark for inconceivable hours. When the sun brought down its veil and threw up neons, he'd wanted to go with it. Still it could not be done. Kazama was not going to shoot himself. He had sat in the darkling-dark listening to the scampering feet of rats, the scratchy whiskers of roaches, the sighs of dirt accumulating itself. Is this why they call it deafening silence? At the end of his many days he had trouble telling if it was deafening or silent.

"Get gone," he said, waving a hand, and it only made them fiercer, their thousands of teeth more voracious. When he was tired enough he fell asleep; dreamt of them biting his ears. In the depths of predatory midnight someone broke a glass downstairs, a car backfired, an alarm wailed — and the sound comes to him like hot sand down his back.

When he next heard anything it was the sound of his bones straightening; he hadn't heard himself curl up into a ball. A fist. He was dropping the ball... Imagine the shame if anyone knew. Imagine how he'd live this down.

Not so best now, Kiryu.

When he thought he could wait no more in that bright afternoon, bear the thought of another night — as luck would have it the limo came crawling on its low belly down the road. Just as he was about to dismantle the gun, to bring it in shattered nerves away in a briefcase.

Damn, he thought. If only I'd gone a moment sooner I would have missed it. I've waited long and here my reward at last: patricide. I'm about to shoot down everything I wanted to be and for what? For an identity: I'm not a killer of friends and brothers. Instead I'll shoot the man who brought me up.
More than that it's mostly just relief; he'll be getting out of here soon.

He smoothed down his gun, checked every inch, and then put the reticle to his eye. The world became quartered, sharply demarcated in between a cross. From the middle of his cross he saw Kazama-san emerging moment by moment from the black car. So familiar he could recite it: right foot, then a wince before the left, a slow straightening of his body, fit yet aged. His hand will any moment — now, that is — reach the top of the door, and discretely holding onto it Kazama will lift himself upwards and glide smoothly, as if effortless (in fact in pain).

He squeezed the trigger.

From there, the inevitable trajectory: a whizz in his ear, the evasion and evacuation of air in a straight line, and then Kazama's chest exploding like compressed air. Right between the collarbone and the shoulder, where it will incapacitate him but not kill him. Before Kazama could even shout— and would not, that stoic old man — Kiryu was already dismantling the gun, thinking: I hope that's the last shot I ever take.

"I'm sorry, Kazama-san," He told the empty room.

When he next meets Majima he'll tell him: shooting isn't so bad, it's waiting to shoot that's worse. Just to bait him. Just to watch Majima hose him down with profanity, swearing: ya fucking crazy, goddamned asshole, numbnut wanker. When he realizes he's been gamed, that's when the sun comes out. Majima grinning, cackling — I'm gonna fuckin' kill ya.

He pressed the gun back into its foamy home, turned back to the window; he stood far enough not to be seen. He should go before they figure out the direction, but he was soaking in the moment. Though there were nine floors in this building, Kazama or Kashiwagi will know immediately which range of floors it was shot from.

Thinking, right before he leave: once Kazama was the measure of the man I wanted to be, and here's a bullet in that measure. To say this is regretful is to demean it. Later when I have time I will unpack this and think about it.

Thinking, as he was leaving: I thought I saw someone in yellow.

But no, he must be mistaken. A delusion from the weight of wishing. Without a thought more he drew out bit by bit all the qualms, the misgivings, contrition, and placed it one by one into the case and locked it good, to be inspected later with appropriate momentum; he was very good at delaying thoughts, having been taught so.

His job done, he stepped out to live.

—

In an alley with a dead end and dirty melting snow the Mad Dog (once Shimano, now no-man-no) was running again with an anonymous pack. They numbered exactly one hundred and fifty three, and he knows this now, not because he's developed secretarial tendencies, but because this is how he refers to them.

"Hey, twenty-two," He was saying. "Ya got anythin' good to say to me?"

"We've dismantled the Kazama-gumi in two places we've hit."

"Suppose I kill ya for it," He said. "Will that make the numbers better or worse?"
"Better," Twenty-two said. "The others will work harder."

Good, he said. A different kind of backbone from his old boys, strong as steel. Not as easily intimidated, but then where was the fun? There's no fun to be had, with people you can't scare with a bit of shove-shove. It's the little things, pushing someone's head into a puddle, that builds rapport. But it's a good thing, because even through the anonymity of their new Hannya masks, he could see the Nikkyo guys were different from his own. Their tight-fitting skins and selves, built from long loyalty to Sera... They couldn't be mistaken for his boys even with his one good eye shut.

He was far enough now from Kamurocho too, to consider the question: was it concern? Was it out of concern that Kiryu had sent him all the way out here? Is this why these new boys unlike his old, and explicit instructions not to be near home?

"Go," He said to number thirteen, feeling introspection tickling him. "Don't bother me, get lost. Dismissed. I got my own shit to do."

Well, who was he kidding? If he asks Kiryu he'll only be stonewalled. Strategy, he'd say. 'S just strategy is all.

Majima went slithering on deft feet into the city; this part of it had more brick tiles than asphalt roads, but otherwise it could have been built by an architect with a mirror. Grittier ramen stores on one end, the whores clustered around red neon instead of pink, and then no batting cage. Besides that it was all a mirror, a great mirror. He found a ramen place he liked the look of and went into it, to sit at the back smoking until his noodles came to be left untouched. It was turning soggy in a bowl.

Pathetic, he was thinking. I'm not a mad dog. More accurate to say that I'm a sad bitch. Moping around here thinking thinky thoughts about Kiryu — about not being alone. Wondering: did Nishida and co. got back safe? Were they even now, discussing Spring planting with the family? Or were they like him, caught in ten years of memories, laying on their backs. Them, listening to cicadas; he, listening to catcalls. Both just different sized animals. Was their family sick of them, the way Majima was sick of himself? Or were they glad to have them back? How come then — No, that was too mopey, even for him. Enjoy, enjoy.

He sucked down the noodles. Sat for a moment heavy in soup-fog, where he saw the oblique ghost of a guy bigger than he was, who ate bowl after bowl like it was nothing, his stomach a portal to other dimensions.

Then he went back out to the city, walked around aimlessly, letting his feet take him to the places where feet go. There wasn't enough trouble around here to orient himself. A good neighbourhood bad for him. Used to be he complained a lot about the gang kids, but they helped him figure out where he was: he knew if he was beating up people in red he was somewhere north, blue and he was in the southern cysts. Well, ya make do.

Abscess makes the heart fonder. You get enough pus in your lungs, you'll like anyone.

He folded himself smaller and tucked away into a feast of branching streets. Saw the corners of neon signs where it'd burn out brown, little bulbs desaturated and black in a sea of too-bright lights. Brochures and rats moonlighting by a drain; stairs warm and inviting with arrhythmic music pulsing off the sixth floor. The sound of plastic being scrunched — someone somewhere was opening a pair of chopsticks, a bento, or else tissues — purchases and consumption swiftly happening; things were disappearing rapidly into cavities.

"Hey, get gone," Someone said, pushing past him.
On one street he looked up and found he was lost. Not a poverty of intentions (he had none), but of geography. He genuinely didn't know where the hell he was.

Well, what the hell then.

He picked a storefront that look closed enough for him, leaned against the metal door pulled down for the night possibly forever, and smoked. Warmed it up inside, made things loose and fuzzy the way he liked it. The video store above him was playing pop songs, idols singing about happy things. He found himself humming the chorus, had picked it up wandering the streets like a flu.

The metal beside him cracked and split. When he looked left there was a bullet hole where his head had been not three seconds ago.

"Oh?" He thought, taking one last drag. "Fun, fun."

Direction had found him. From across the street out of almost politeness he saw someone emerged; feet first encased in a grey suit, then the rest of him, just as grey. His hair had gone whiter, bleached out by responsibility since they last saw each other two months ago — Kashiwagi?

"Yo, Kashiwagi!" He said. "This how ya greet friends? Is this my payment, or my change?"

"Your refund," Kashiwagi said. Majima eyed the four new entrants behind him, the shapes of their smoky fists.

"Ya gon' shoot me down after all I did for ya?"

"Nothing personal, kid. You've been a great help." He said. "Just orders to clean up my mess."

Majima knew how this game was played by now, and anyway he made a promise not to be a fucking idiot. This wasn't going to be good for his digestion, was it? He dropped the cigarette. Stretched. Rolled his shoulders.

"I hate customer service," he said, then turned tail and ran.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a thing I drew for the fic.

Enjoy (';
"Suppose ya wanna escape from gunmen," Majima dictated while he was folding himself up someone's pipe. He was garroting the pipe with wires ripped off someone's fence; better than climbing up baredhanded on wet slippery surfaces, gives you purchase.

He'd lost them six times so far and every time they'd come back, hardy like bushes, growing like weeds (who's the weed now, Kazama?) in between the cracks of these unfamiliar streets. He would dash down the cracked pavement of one to emerge into someone's yard, bordering almost the suburbs, and there they would be ready with a gun and a soft word: don't go, stay for the drinks. Well, if he was drinking it would be puddles, no thanks; off he went again, stepping across a high wall, parkouring over roofs, cringing when the tiles cracked beneath his weight, or else smashed by bullets.

"Consider what it means," He said. "When someone's chasing ya with a gun in their hands. Ya be a doll to yerself, do yourself a favor — you go up. Always up. Ya see 'em guns, means they're not so good at climbing 'cuz, no hands, ya see? You can't hold ladders and guns at the same time, eh?"

He leaped clean over from one roof to another, feet drawn up and thinking: bet if Kiryu-chan saw me now he'll shit his pants, what with me being so good at this. He could hear someone in the thick silence panting after him, following his telltale shadows. He found the flat roof of a shop complex he liked and stayed put to wait for his pursuers. If he wasn't going to lose them, he'll beat them up one by one.

Said, "So then they gotta make a choice, don't they? To shoot you or to chase ya. And most people tend to chase ya, which at first they do with a gun in their hands, thinkin' they'll be able to do both at the same time. That's not so — multitaskin' don't work except on paper — so you show 'em."

With all the strength of his left foot he caved one man's face in who'd gotten near enough to emerge from the stairs up to the roof. A knife buried itself one-two in the belly, then Majima threw him off the roof to a tall-fall maybe six storeys long; said: goodbye to ya backbone, friend.

"Pretty soon they realize, not so fun to climb stairs with a gun. Now a knife. A knife is different. People think it's the same thing, just another piece to be held, but that's where they're wrong, false, incorrecto-mundo. Let's observe." Another guy came in through the open stairway, and Majima was ready with a strong pipe that doubled as a baseball bat; he caved in the side of this man's face, sweet across the temples, and with a wet kiss the man was out of the game, rolled down the stairs with a hard kick. He landed crumpled at the bottom of it, to warn off the next guy who came up — say what's what.

Majima nodded at the unconscious man, shifted his weight, and said: "With a knife ya can be fast, agile, quickish-like. Ya can bite down onto it when ya climbing — the way you can't with a gun. Sucking on gun-metal, it stinks like fireworks on your tongue. A knife? You can swing it around, cut down things in your way, twist and turn it when ya need a free hand. Throw it even, if ya like. Me myself I don't part with my knife. But how ya gon' twist a gun? Fact is I only ever saw two guys that good with a gun — and one shot me six times in the face and didn't hit once. Are ya they? Don't think so, friends."

The third guy who came up was easy: Majima grabbed him by the ears, placed his head in the doorway, and closed the door on him four times. He never made it through the door, and folded in a disgraceful heap around Majima's ankles.
"Used to be in the city there ain't so many pieces as these, and people would fight like men with their fists and steel, the proper way. You make a mistake, ya come away with a mouthful of your own teeth. Ya say sorry and you're sincere and you learn and let live. Nowadays, not so. Two royal cunts these days importin' guns like they're eggs. Lotsa omelettes on the streets. Ya gotta be careful, if you don't want egg on your face."

The fourth guy he was almost bored with — kneed him in the face and stomped hard til Majima heard something go crunch, then let him go; won't bother him no more. Now just him and Kashiwagi left who any moment now will probably come around the corner. He wasn't so good at climbin' was he, what with him being older. Very good. Majima wanted to face him last, look him good in the eyes before he boxed him outta the ring. Ya gotta be respectful to your seniors, in this business.

"One thing's never changed though," He dictated. "One thing never changes. Whether ya use your gun or your knives or your fists, it's imperative, important, hella big deal — to kick traitors in the balls. That's the only kind of treatment that traitors deserve. Someone shanks ya in the back, ya shank them back big time. No biggie-low. Once someone betrays you they always gonna betray ya. The only exception is if they come back, say sorry, or save ya ass. Everyone else ya know what we do?"

Kashiwagi emerged from the stairway, stepped out onto the moonlit roof, and the ring.

He said, "Ya knee them in the fuckin' balls."

—

"Majima," Kashiwagi said, face a grimace. His skin was puckered around his long scar, sweat-stained and dirty from the long detour they'd taken through the city. Once this is over Majima will be lost again; he'd run so hard he didn't even know which roof he was on — not that being lost was anything new to him. Losing though, now that's pretty new. Never happens much one-on-one like this. Let's see how good the Kazama-gumi old men are, eh?

"You took down all four?" Kashiwagi asked, stepping over the unconscious flagstone across the doorway.

"I gotta teach ya how to count too? Not the kind of lesson I got in mind."

"I did, I only counted three."

"Other guy took the fast way out the side of the roof. Wanna join him?"

"No thanks," Kashiwagi straightened himself. He threw his gun aside.

Majima eyed the gun skidding, bouncing ten feet away. It made hard sounds where it hit the concrete, like a plastic toy. Strange how hollow these gun-shaped deaths can sound. Said: "What game are you playing now, Kashiwagi?"

"I'm unarmed," Kashiwagi said. To prove it he threw aside his thin jacket too, where it landed on the gun. Now it looked like a magician's trick, about to disappear and reappear elsewhere. He wore only a simple white shirt underneath and an empty shoulder holster; not much cover for a hidden gun. He kept his hands where Majima could see it. "I don't want to fight you. I want to talk to you, but I'm being watched twenty-four-seven."

"Usually people use phones for this sorta thing." He was disappointed. If there was no asskicking to be had, he was disappointed.

"Couldn't contact you."
"Yeah? Couldn't contact Kiryu either?"

"Couldn't contact anyone. I'm being watched. This is maybe the second, third time I'm being left alone since I came back."

"Kazama brought you back to clean me up good."

"And other messes," Kashiwagi nodded. "We don't have much time. I'll start. I've word. There's a traitor someone's planted around Kiryu, in the Kazama-gumi men. A hitman, probably, or else a bomb. I couldn't figure out what the message meant. Either way, something means to take him out. You have to warn him."

"From Nishikiyama?"

"That, I don't know."

"What do you mean ya don't? That makes no fucking sense! He's the only one who'd do such a thing, ain't it? Kazama can't have given Kiryu men, and then a blow-up. What the hell?" Something went bright inside. "How come ya don't tell Kiryu himself? His old man can't be mad at ya for warning his precious princeling he's about to die, right?"

"Because," Kashiwagi said with a tremendous scowl. "The information came from Sera. Majima, have you learned nothing? Even after all these years?"

He adjusted his sleeves, pinching it from one agitated hand to the other. "The information can be false. The information can be true. Maybe someone planted it and told me it was Sera. Kazama might do it, to smoke me out as a traitor."

A sardonic smile. "Then again, maybe it's that piece of shit Nishikiyama who planted the message to out me as a traitor. Maybe it has nothing to do with me at all. Kazama told Sera just to see who Sera will tell. Could be that Sera has a change of heart and wants to cover his tracks. Might even be Kiryu himself who planted it, to out me to Kazama and put me out of the running. What if it's from another family altogether, a player I don't know about yet? What if it's two of these things, and one of them planted it to look like someone else planted it, and I'm just a convenient way to get someone else out of the game? Do you see how this can go on forever? Do you see now?"

He kicked one of the unconscious men, frustrated. "Hell, it might even be that it's true. Kazama wants Kiryu dead — for reasons of his own."

"That's fuckin' crazy. Ya need a shrink and a long lie down."

"Don't tell me what's crazy or not. I've been in this way longer than you have, kid." He scowled down Majima. "And I've seen more consequences and live to tell it. Now take this information, and run to Kiryu. Tell him you heard it on the streets, and act discreetly."

"How come ya tell me then, if ya trust no one?"

"Calculated risk. Because no one will listen to a dog, even if you bark. You're a damned wildcard for now. No one can say for sure what you do or don't know. I can launder information through you, and it might just be believable that you found out on your own. Doesn't mean no risk. Just less risk. I'll take those chances to keep Kiryu alive." Then he rolled up his sleeves, and said. "Now cut me up good. Just don't go for the face. Those bleed like a son of a bitch."

That was new. "Ya want me to cut you up? Ya got a kink I don't needa know about, old man?"
"You think I can go back, say I failed without some scars to prove it?"

Majima considered the jagged groove on Kashiwagi's face. As a child, Majima had torn pincers off giant beetles. Sawn them off carefully at the joint for his collection, detached them with surgical precision just where it was attached to the beetles' heads. He'd collected twenty, maybe twenty-five, before he'd been beaten into a stain on the wall by Saejima for that. Cruel shit, he'd said. The scar looked like those dismantled pincers. A long time ago the scar had been ugly, had been carved in deep by something blunt with the intention to scar more than hurt. Scar and hurt.

"Kazama gave ya that one? That ya have?" He tapped his own face, the vicinity of Kashiwagi's scar.

"Kid," Kashiwagi said. "Actions have consequences. Haven't you heard?" Then he tapped his shoulder. "Now hurt me, and make it look convincing. It's better to fail than to let someone go, around here."

"Yer funeral," Majima said.

He considered then if he should tell Kashiwagi of Kiryu's plans — what he and Majima were doing, the sorta shit that they were about to do. Was on the tip of his tongue to say: ya know the fool plans to make his brother the chairman? Kashiwagi likely had strong opinions on it, maybe even stronger than Majima's; it was no secret that he didn't like Nishikiyama. Though the way Kiryu put it, being openly disliked by Kashiwagi was nothing.

If your enemies tell you they hate you, that's when you can sleep easy. It's when they tell you you're worth a million bucks that ya gotta watch out.

He thought of Kiryu saying: "I said you're on my team, never said they were." Figured it was for the best. If he doesn't learn now, after everything, when is he ever gonna learn? He was sick to hell and back with these assholes telling him he was a fool. Kashiwagi said it himself — there was no one else they should trust. The way things were looking it was just him and Kiryu in their teeming team of two.

"Don't move too much," He said, flipping his knife around. "Ain't my fault if ya come out less pretty."

Then he kneed him in the balls.

It's a lot less satisfying when you do it because you're asked to.

—

"I'm going back to the office at four p.m tomorrow," Majima was telling a payphone. He had one hand in his pocket digging about for change, the phone balanced ear-to-shoulder. There was a hostess outside, judging his contortionist's pose — one hand in his pocket, one foot on the wall, hand rooting around his ass. He mouthed: what.

"What? That's not what we agreed on, at all."

"We don't agree on anything, why start now?" He said, laughing. "Anyway, I'll be back at four, keep the door open or somethin'. Can't remember the door code. Leave a guy home if ya step out."

With a blowsy sigh, Kiryu's voice came through exasperated. "Alright. I'll see—"

The phone clicked dead. It had run out of change.
Majima looked at the coin vending machine with its inane optimism: CHANGE IS POSSIBLE. Thought, nah — they'd said all that needed to be said. Then he popped out of the payphone and headed for Don Quijote, where they had a pair of sunglasses and a beanie with his name on it.

—

Majima came awake sometime after noon, thought: shit, am I late? Crawled like he was under fire in a ditch to his phone. He wasn't but he was a mess — as much a mess as the shithole he'd rented. Not gonna live in nobody's safehouse; he ain't that dumb.

He righted himself in a great shuddering of bones, found himself hungover and naked, and slipped into the cold ass shower to scourge off the dirt and freeze up his balls. His hand had gone numb where he'd slept on it. It came alive bit by bit with him.

"Okay," He said, dripping watery footsteps around the room. "Where's my new skin?"

He overturned half the room to find his disguise: the beanie, the sunglasses, a yellow hoodie with a train’s logo he didn’t remember buying — but must have been either comfy or important, since he’d moved it about. It'd been living at the bottom of his duffle in a crumpled mess for a month, maybe more. He put them all together with a face mask, and didn't recognize himself in the mirror. He looked like a sick tourist. Or paparazzi.

"Yo, I'm Majima Goro," He said, and laughed himself stupid watching the damp fool in the mirror mouthed it back at him. His humours restored, he was ready to roll.

Out he went into the city feeling naked with only his knife. He had to check it thrice just to make sure it was there, nestled in the front pocket of his hoodie. Checked to see if it hadn't walked out on him too. He traced his trajectory through shop windows, who took turns reflecting to him: a loser, civilian, even slightly hunching. The hunch was something that his jacket usually fixed for him, with its padded corners.

So this is what I might look like if I was out, he thought. Then discarded it — there was no way he'd ever wear such lame shit, civilian or not.

His feet brought him into the warm interiors of a taxi, and when he stepped out again he'd emerged as if into a dream of Kamurocho. The shivering lines were all the same, but had shifted slightly in the half month he'd been gone. It'd thawed. There was water everywhere now. The sun working hard to drink them up, but not yet. He let his feet trace him around town, wiggling his toes at his anonymity. Relishing it. No one stopped him or talked to him (but then why would they? Most everyone he knew was dead or gone).

Without a problem, he found the blocks opposite to his office, where a rundown apartment shared walls with shops, crowded out by thin balconies. He'd lived in these when he first came to the city; it was for this view that he'd bought out the office. To see how low he used to be; to see how low he is now. Instinctively his fingers punched in the fourth floor. The hallway was dimmer, darker, smellier, and more urinous than he remembered it being. Just like a dream the unpleasant details had been shuffled into roses and flowers.

He was very early, had an hour to kill. He picked Saejima's old apartment out of a whim, and sat on the steps listening to dying time. In the floor above him a family was fighting. He could hear foreign-sounding words, maybe just an accent, something northern. Then a thud. Someone being hit. Or someone splitting roughly a head of cabbage. He stood and looked over the ledge and everything was exactly the same — the Wild Jackson, the vending machines, the anencephalic gachapon from the defunct toy store. People peopling. Strange how everything stayed still. Except for the skies this
day was exactly like the one he'd came back in, with Kiryu. Would Nishida let him in again, if he knew?

Very close to four he began to look at his phone, thinking, thinking: is it time?

—

It was time. Kiryu scowled at his phone, which anticipated time itself by being ten minutes from the future. It was four-ten. But why was he surprised? Majima can be late to his own funeral. You'll open his coffin and find only his toes in there; the rest still yet to come.

He willed himself into a Kiryu-shaped object on the couch, waited with loose fists for time to walk over him. Then he thought, and thought, and having finished thinking he went to the hallway, found a Kazama-gumi man he'd made his aide, and asked: has anyone walked through that door for the past half hour?

"No, sir. Just a delivery man with a package, but he didn't come through."

"A delivery."

"Yeah. Wrong place. We turned him around."

"No one else?"

"No one, sir."

He went back to his desk and waited. Then four became five became six. It seemed unlikely that Majima was going to be two hours late; had something happened to him? Who did Kiryu have to kill now? Wearily, he hunted down his jacket, and collected his wallet. He was about to leave, to scour the streets for Majima's corpse somewhere close in an alley, when someone called out:

"Hey, anyone in there? I forgot the code!"

Then the doorbell buzzed, and Majima's nice thick door was reduced to fiery wooden splinters.
From across the street, Majima watched his nice plush office kindled — imagined that he could hear all that expensive imported walnut crackling — and wailed as loud as the sirens.

"Son of a bitch!" He shrieked. "Bastards burned down my damned place, those fuckers."

Then he thought — whadya know, I'm thinky now too. Probably would have been me, if I hadn't thought it through. Someone else's yard now.

Then he thought — hope Kiryu-chan wasn't caught in it.

Shaking himself awake he went to the streets, and stood worrying in a conspicuous corner. The fire alarm was wailing the emergency siren, and one by one the denizens of the buildings poured out into the streets; they stood in loose formations of forgotten fire drills. A mass exodus of amnesiacs. "Where—" Someone said, and lapsed into confused silence. "Who?" An answer came. There was a revolving red light down the street, which could be either the cops or an opportunistic ad. Smoke up high. Between everyone and his neighbour was a thin layer of dust. The piercing sound of the siren felt like the only real thing in the scene.

Kiryu's grey shape didn't appear until the very end, behind all the Kazama-gumi men. Majima eyed them, thinking: is this one the traitor? Are there traitors? Do traitors exist, or are we all traitors in some way? Is it this guy, or this identical guy beside him? Every time the crowd shifted he lost sight of a guy he had an eye on, found him again, and couldn't be sure if it was the same person.

He waved at Kiryu (who was the only solid person) until he caught his eye, then cocked a thumb down the road. It was the wrong direction, pointing into the sewers, the manhole, earth itself; as a matter of fact they both had only one place in mind.

Majima mouthed something like, "Wildwater burgers." Then he was off down the road, in the direction of Ota.

—

"Kojiya," said the train, and deposited Kiryu onto crisp air. Into itself it took the burden of noise, the residual wailing of the sirens in his ears, and went away rattling with sound bottled inside. Then it was just him with the quiet night. He headed homewards.

Kiryu had kept his promise to tidy up the Ota place without once stepping into it, so that he walked past it twice before realizing the neat and scrubbed place was his. The aide he'd tasked with cleaning it had done too good a job: it stood out sparkling clean in comparison to his neighbours. Even the cardboard boxes outside — his painstakingly collected childhood — had been removed. He'll have to track the guy down, get everything back.

He overlooked giving Majima his own key, but that fact had not stopped Majima: there was a hole where the window was, and an orange carton in its place. Figures.

"Oi," Majima said, as he stepped through the proper entrance, entranced by the mess Majima had already managed to make. He'd stretched himself like a cat across the tatami, had his shit over all the tables. Three beers drank and already one spilled. On the TV someone was describing the properties of a good octopus. "Ya late. Ya got lost or something?"

"Had to manage the men. Tell them where to go for the day, until we know the extent of the damage.
See the burned guy off. The explosion brought down pigs by the dozens."

"What did you tell them?"

"Someone was cooking by a door. What else? Just kept shrugging and said, I don't know. You know the drill."

Sure, sure — plausible deniability. Whenever denial was plausible, just deny it. That's one-third of how the yakuza dealt with cops, anytime, all the time. Kiryu shrugged out of his jacket and folded it neatly by the table. The table held up with shaky legs all the food Majima had rounded up.

"It ain't six out of eight," Majima said. "I don't know what the fuck ya like. But eat it, or else ya gonna eat it."

Kiryu smiled at his balled up fist, and mutely he began at one corner of the table and ate his way through his half of it. Consumed: a fried crab which he ate whole with its hard shell, tempura battered and assaulted into dry yellow sticks. Something that was once fish, but had lost both its gills and its will to live. A pudding shaped like a tooth.

"Nice," He said. Watched Majima step into the shower, scream from the cold, and come out shivering like a fat duck.

"Fuckin' repair the shower. Why clean it if I can't use it?" He complained. "Left the tub in for you. Go on, get."

He took the towel off Majima (saw that, as always, that he was beautiful underneath), traced Majima's sodden steps into and out of the bathroom. Then sitting across each other while the TV showed them images of a clear-blue sea, they took care of the little nitty-gritty details of meeting: the numbers, the territory, the perfunctory bulleting of the points and people. Majima sat curled up on the blocky TV (said it was warm) and dripped himself onto it; if he doesn't watch out he'll electrocute himself. When they showed just the right program it looked like he was bleeding into the screen.

"So what was that about?" Kiryu asked. "The explosion."

"Just a hunch. I was wondering if someone was listening in, turns out someone is. How come people tap your phone more than they tap you, Kiryu-chan? Is it your personality, do ya think?" He threw the ball Kashiwagi had given him to Kiryu, the information, the suspicions. He ignored Kashiwagi's suggestion to pretend he heard it off the streets; either they were in this together or they ain't. Kiryu processed it.

"Sounds like someone wants to take you out." He said. He placed his own offerings on the table — a box of roe flavored chocolates weird enough to entice Majima. "Pretty specific, to rig a door just when you're about to come in. So we have a question. Is the player who tapped the phone to blow you up, the same player who wants to kill me?"

"Don't really give a shit about that. Do ya think Kashiwagi's got it right, the hit on ya?"

"I give a shit about that. Means someone is specifically targeting you."

"Who cares? Everyone's targeting me, what's new? Gives me an idea. I should open a shooting range and put pictures of myself in there. I'll make millions."

Kiryu ignored him, rode on. "Before Nishiki found out about Yuko, I would have put my money on Kazama sending pieces out to silence you. Now… I suppose it might still be him. He's not keen on you."
"Like I said, that's a non-titty. Let's get back to the important bit — the priority." Majima said. Kiryu tilted his head, considered this choice of words. "Someone after ya ass, ya better keep both eyes up. If ya don't see it coming with two good eyes, I'll gouge them out myself."

They were at an impasse; they couldn't get a conversation going when their priority was completely different — was in fact keeping the other alive, without very much caring if they lived through the process. They had a wild unshakeable belief in their own invincibility. Or not. Well, they had other goals, but this too. Goals within goals within goals, nestled Russian dolls. Their enemies too, each splitting apart to reveal always more.

Kiryu sighed. Gave up. Looked around the room with all its memories. "Why did you disappear? We agreed on the safehouse."

"You agreed on the safehouse. Never said I was gonna do it."

"I took your nod as a yes. Nods changed their meaning since I was away?"

"I learned it from ya. Yes means maybe means no, eh?"

"I looked for you everywhere," Kiryu said, and Majima thought — aww, big lug — for all of five seconds, and then he added. "Could have done a lot with that time."

"Aww, Kiryu-chan, why don't you come out and say ya care? Speakin' asshole like that, getting me all excited. Anyway," He shrugged. "Don't trust no one. Burned bad enough. Ya got that safehouse listed somewhere, don't ya? With so many Kazama rats around ya, one of them is bound to get all college on yer notes. Then what."

"Then we've found a traitor."

"Yah, but also my smokin' ass. No thanks. Not the way I wanna go."

At length, Kiryu dismantled their goals, laid them around, refitted them.

"I've run Kazama-san out of the game, for a few weeks at least," He told Majima. "Tomorrow I'll visit him. Bring some flowers, pretend I'm shocked."

"Ya don't gotta pretend. Ya look like a sheet. Man, ya alright?" He added, in softer tones. "If it gets you all twisty you should sit it out. Send him a card or something. Tell him you got big big deals to do, trading fists with Nishikiyama. No time for a visit."

"That's impossible. I would never do that, if it wasn't me. I must pay my respects or I might as well send an actual card — said I was the one who did it."

Majima knocked the TV with his heels. "Ya think he won't know, lookin' at you now? Pale like buckwheat. Sit out."

"No."

"Ya an idiot."

"Enough about this," Kiryu said, gritting teeth. "What about you? Are you alright?"

"Are ya askin' about me or my jobs?" He dangled a leg over the TV, splitting the image. Half the window to the world was he.

"You?" There was a question in there, asking, what else?
"I'm okay," He said. Admitted: "I miss them. I miss Nishida. Ain't the same. Ain't the same at all." Added, "Are ya really gonna go? Call in sick, for fuck's sake. Ya look a right mess."

"I must."

Okay, Majima said. Okay. Raising his hands, he admitted that Kiryu knew the psychology of a Kiryu best (if he had it, psychology, sometimes it felt like he was all physiology). Majima considered instead the anatomy of the weather. It wasn't raining but he wished it was; if it was raining he'd have an excuse — say stay.

Say, you'll get cried on out there, ain't safe, just park your ass in here.

He tried anyway, said: "Ya got shit to do? Beer on discount. Got a lot."

It wasn't on a fancy card but it did the trick, and Kiryu accepted his invitation before he was done wording it. They took the beer to the tiny slice of a balcony, not large enough for a potted plant, much less two grown men. They talked quietly about nothing. Put the world on hold; all that lying for tomorrow. Let the night meld them together. A nice kind of silence, Kiryu thought.

—

"Tell me a story," said Majima.

"I don't have any stories except of me and him," Kiryu said. I don't have a life that isn't his. A life that's mine.

"Tell me a story anyway."

—

Somewhere else Nishiki opened a report and begins:

"Once upon a time there lived an orphanage, who had in its drafty heart, many little flowers living in the sun. Of these the most important was a boy and his kite."

"The boy and his kite lived many days in the sun, and were for most of it utterly inseparable. Hardly had anyone ever seen friends, nay brothers, as close as these. With childish eyes they would look up at a firmament day-bright and brimming with invisible stars, and imagine in that theatre of unfeeling distance that they were born twins; had, at some point in time been split apart rudely with an axe, so that their limbs sought forever one another, to find comfort in what once they had."

Majima pointed out a constellation. Like those?

"Yes, indeed, stars like these — but not Kamurocho stars. Where they lived the stars are clean and unblemished, shone stone-white on coal-black like an old film. Under this monochromatic light did they grow; they never knew what grey was until later. That people can be grudgingly kind, or else cruelly generous; lies be told in colors other than white — all this late. Not later, but late."

"This then, is a story of how the boy comes to know what grey is."

"Once, the boy and his kite spent kind days flying themselves in the meadows. In the lands behind the orphanage there were hills, which rose evenly like saw-teeth against the clouds. From these they climb to bite at the ankles of skies, got themselves tangled into trees, their threads spinning round and round in circles. If they were lucky and a good wind bore them up, they could unfurl themselves, fly so high they blocked out the very skies."
"Their world was a riotous garden: unkempt ancient trees coming together to make shady orchards. Trees could not rustle but for them, to guide them eastwards, homewards, away. Birds flitted. Songs they learned from the sparrows, who taught it to them reluctantly: they did not like the strange boy and his kite tangled in their nests. Teach them, and they might leave."

"'You don't,' they say, 'belong up here.'"

"One day the boy realized that the kite was better at flying than he was. In a sacred moment on a hill he knew it was so. Oh, said he, and gripped tightly the kite's thread. What's wrong, what's wrong, laughed the kite, and bore the both of them higher for it, brought the boy higher than he'd ever been, so that he could reach out and draw out fistfuls of clouds to eat them. It tasted like a mouthful of feathers."

"When they landed again the boy said: you should fly without me, go further. See what's out there. Then you can come back here and we can have tales, tales as tall as a drink of water."

"'No, no,' the kite laughed, and snarled him in a tangle of thread. 'We'll fly together or we won't fly at all!' Off they went again. In a flurry of fabric-and-boy, this time so far up they tore right through the middle of a cloud for many days (there are no nights in this tale), and came bursting out of it with turbulent feelings. Laughing the boy was, until they got closer to the ground. Then he grew solemn once more."

"The boy said: I wish you would fly without me. I want to see how far you can go. I'm fine really, to see it from the ground. Maybe, perhaps, could be even, that I prefer it so. Won't you go?"

"'No,' said the kite, 'I won't be away from you.'"

"'No,' said the boy. 'What we have won't be diminished by distance; you've got a lot of thread. You can fly very far and still I'll see you. If I ever lose it, lose my grip, I can still see your shadow, and trace it onto the grass.'"

"'No,' said the kite. 'You don't understand. It's not important that you see me. We must fly, and always together.'"

"Alright, the boy said — and holding tightly they flew again. This time they went so far up that they got a star for their efforts, which the orphanage gave to them for their troubles. They'd torn up fistfuls of clouds this time, rendered half the sky so that they left only dotty cirrocumulus clouds behind, shorn shrubbery. Imagine that, a star! Gee, the boy said, holding it in hands. It felt warm, it did. He felt the airy tips. A real star!"

"'Isn't that great?' The kite said. 'This is what it means to fly; this is the sort of things we'll find.'"

"'But it isn't really mine,' said the boy. 'This star that we found, it was yours. Meant to be yours. It was you who brought us that high up, alone I could never have gone.'"

"'Never,' the kite said. 'I have no hands, don't you see? I can't pick stars on my own.'"

"'But you could learn,' the boy said."

"'No, we're flying!'"

"They went, higher and higher than ever before, until they broke through the very skies, and the hills and trees shrunk to accommodate their distance; until they came instead to the distant theatre of the stars and found themselves part of that black stage. They floated boy-and-kite in between the liquid daylight (in this tale there can never be night); this far up the stars were only rocks, craters on their
"Looking down all he saw were the shrunken hills, the curving knolls, the gale-swept trees like ants. Looking up they found a star they liked, and when the boy found he could not hold onto it without alighting his hands, the kite took it — curled its long thread around it and carried it home with the boy like a comet; they reentered in a bright arc of sunlight. Grandeur itself."

"When they landed, the boy pleaded with the somnolent kite. 'Please', he said. 'I don't want to fly. I'm beginning to be afraid; I don't know anymore what the world looks like, unless we're up there in the sky. If you keep bringing me around, what will I do, how will I live, if you ever leave me behind? Suppose now I go, how will I live when I have to walk? What happens when I have to crawl? One day when I eat mud and tear it for worms — I will have to crawl on a bellyful of starlight.'"

"'I will never leave you behind,' said the kite."

"'You can't promise that,' cried the boy."

"'You don't understand,' the kite said. 'I will never leave you behind.'"

"'Already the wind knows; already, I have told them so. Tales of how you and I have flown, tales of the great dying stars we've found. All across the hills every bird has heard, in each nest has rumor been sown — from each fertile imagination stories shall be reaped. They know now you are a flier. You cannot now be anything else; I won't allow it. We will fly, you and I — and the distance from which we view the ground will be all the measure we need.'"

"'I am afraid,' said the boy. 'Of the kind of person I will become. If I dream of eating clouds and drinking stars; if I dare to dream. If one day this is all taken away from me. Walk. Walking. Crawling. Don't tell me if it isn't true. Don't tell tales of me being tall. Don't hurt me with ambition, my ambition is too great. If it won't come true, let me know now and I'll kill it dead.'"

"'You are great,' praised the kite. 'Tall as a willow, willowy as a pine, — without me you can go just as far. Perhaps, perhaps even higher. I've heard the rumors, I know this to be true. The birds come one and all to tell me you'll go far. They tell me you belong.'"

"'Is this true,' said the boy."

"'It is the greatest truth of them all,' said the kite."

"And then the thread comes circling around them, the kite and the boy. The boy gripped tightly onto the kite and knew because he was told — he could fly just as well without it; and the thread spun, faster and faster, so that before they knew it both kite and boy had come together to sleep in a cocoon of truths, truths shining so bright that the stars looked down upon the world and saw: behold a fellow star, about to be raised high."

"But why, they wondered, why was this star grey? Does the boy know this, asleep inside?"

—

Closing the book, Nishiki says, "All things considered."

—

Somewhere else Majima heard a story that was not this. It had two boys and no kite, many suns but no light. A few truths and no lies.
Or was it a few lies with no truths?

It depends, on whether you are the boy or the kite.

He heard a story, either way — and came away knowing Kiryu better but understanding them less.

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What had they talked about in that long night? Kiryu couldn't afterwards remember clearly what he'd said, what Majima had told him, the minutes of their hours of conversation. Sitting by Majima he had felt himself come to life bit by bit, filling out the beginnings of a new skin he'd wanted but had not lived. A flushed, good feeling. Not desire, or maybe desire. But for something else. An insistent warmth in the belly. Certainly he remembered teasing Majima about the ridiculous outfit he'd seen him in:

"You look like a pervert," Kiryu said. "All you need is a camera, and any girl you meet will scream the house down."

"I am a pervert," Majima leered. "I am the biggest pervert of them all." Added, "Enjoy the view, Kiryu-chan, 'cuz I ain't putting it on again. Next time ya see me in a disguise, I'll be wearing a dress."

"Not much of a disguise,"

"Heh, you'll be surprised." Majima chortled, thinking of something else. "Or an officer's uniform, eh? How 'bout that? Officer Majima Goro. Searchin' all yer cavities. Or hmm, a doctor, a nurse? White looks good on me."

"You can be a surgeon," Kiryu suggested, thinking of precision. "You've got the hands for it."

"For real! But depth perception? I don't wanna be the asshole who has to tell a lady I cut out the wrong kidney."

"Only one way to fix that."

"Oh-ho! Knifing tips, Kiryu-chan? Ya sweet-talking me here?"

"Be safe, cut out everything."

"That's me, that's my policy right there, eh," Majima said.

Of all the things that had stayed with him, Kiryu remembered only Majima's voracious look; he wasn't just soaking in Kiryu's stories (What had he told him? Why can't he remember?), Majima was eating his words whole, consuming it, digesting it. He was hungry for more than tales. He was looking for something in it, pushing around the organs of the tale to find a new configuration of it that suited him, suited his needs. Thinking of it now, Kiryu felt for the first time since he'd last dismiss Majima out of contempt in a snow-buried station — perhaps he should be on his toes. Him or someone.

On those toes he embarked on a train. Today he'd chosen to take a train to be surrounded by glorious noise. He wanted to feel the vibration of patterned plates under his feet, shifting and changing with the titanic turns of the train; wanted to hear the train announcing endlessly: Kojiya, Keikyu-Kamata,
Shinagawa. The phlegmatic old people snoring, the crackling electric apologies for emergencies that hadn't happened, and therefore no one could understand. The electronic sign, in between displaying a map and an ad, said: man-made accidents.

"Pretend ya got run over by a car," Majima had said, one last time before he went. "It ain't even outta concern I'm sayin' this shit. One look at yer face right now and he'll know. No poker, Kiryu-chan. Gotta do better."

Kiryu used the window opposite him now to school his features into an impassive, monotonous self. Surely he can't have forgotten how to lie too? The reflections only came through sometimes, depending on the angle of the sun and the color of the bridges walking by, so that his reflection only appeared sporadically. It looked impassive when it appeared; he couldn't be sure if it remained so when the reflection lapsed. Should he be angry? Should he frown? Should he look like nothing? What does nothing look like? Lying is difficult. Chewy and porous.

A whole crowd of people came in at Sengakuji and stood in Kiryu's reflection, about to go to work at normalcy. An aged man in a battered hat too, swaying with his hand one-up, one on the phone. Between the two you couldn't tell which was balancing him. There was a circle around him; he'd been loud from the station and loud here still.

"Now you listen to me," The man said. "Hey, are you listening to me? Am I coming through?" The other passengers on the train looked up furtively, looked away. "Finally. About damned time." He glared angrily at the crowd, as if he'd just been waiting for them to ignore him. "Now we can get back to it. Can we get back to it?"

Kiryu watched him rambled on and on with the movements of the train; when he spoke high-low he moved left-right as if he inflected with his body instead of his tongue. He raised his voice, shouting to be heard over the din of the train, which rattled furiously when other trains came whistling by, so close they were slicing the wind.

"Here's what it is, eh, here's what it boils down to." He said. "I've told you all that's true. Yet I'm the villain," The man paused, let this sink in. Took his palm off the pole, didn't care if it unbalanced him, already unbalanced himself, and thrust it forth.

"Man, you only have yourself to blame. You drew me an imaginary line, and then you crossed it. Crossed the line. Ten years just about right, since you lied to me as long." The train turned a corner, and he leaned Kiryu-wards, almost spitting in his face. "Ten years! Fucking hell! I committed ten years to this shit. Was I your brother or your bag, that you thought you could take me wherever you wanted to go? I said a thousand times — let me know and I'll go. You don't listen. You only speak bone. Now that I've grounded you into dust, will you listen to me?"

Oh, he was listening; had to.

"All this while there was a glass ceiling above me," The man snarled. "And you never told me even once. Maybe even put it there yourself. Fact is you knew it all these years from day one and you never saw fit to tell me. Is this what friends do? Is this what a brother means to you? Anything to keep me around, eh? You'll tell any fucking lie to keep me around. Every step of the way you lied to me. Every step! Now what do I do? Which of me is charity, which of me is pity? Is everyone in on this? Were you all laughing at me all this while, the asshat for the last ten years? Hey! Are you listening to me?"

Swaying left and right, he continued in a reasonable tone, "Just think about that, think about what you've done," He rolled his great shoulders at anyone who would listen. "All those bones, and she had to go too so you'd go away. Did you think I like doing that, putting a sister away? Do you blame
me? Are you blaming me? Are you trying to get me to blame myself? Because I don't own it. Man, you only got yourself to blame. Do you?"

"Zoshiki," The train answered him, coldly insistent — and the man twisted his head aside, woken from a nightmare, turned against a sign, got off, still shaking the phone and spitting at passersby. The crowd quickly enveloped the space he had vacated, palpably relieved, relieved of him. On the floor spittle vibrated with the movements of the train, the sound coming in cycles to drown out everything the man had said, but not soon enough.

Only later when memory replaced reality did Kiryu realize — that wasn't what the man had said at all; it was echoes that he was hearing.

His stop still a while away. When the crowd cleared around his reflection, it was smiling.

"Am I your brother or your bag," He said, chuckling, smothering it, and then laughing for real. Oh, Nishiki. Dammit all to hell. Everything sounded so damned funny without context, didn't it?

—

The train let him out into a boisterous station open and airy, skylights all down its middle to let in the light. He picked a crowd and walked into it.

Near the hospital, Kiryu realized theater was unfolding within earshot; somewhere out on the street actors were acting their part. The little pins that he and Kazama and Nishiki pushed and pulled out of maps had consequences, consequences writ large in alleys and safehouses and rackets. He could hear one of those rackets right now, drifting down a street where Nishiki ran a bar that doubled as a weapons dealer. He heard the stage being set, then the acts being played; in the final curtain call someone shot once into the air, hitting nothing. It could have meant anything. Don't come here. Don't go. Fuck you.

He could hear more than that. Foley and folly. There was a hollow crash when something plastic bounced harmlessly against a body; bottles breaking sharply into weapons, the shrill sound of someone showily taking out a knife. Inaudibly, someone had entered the fray with vitriol. Flesh disfigured soundlessly. Someone yelling bravely, someone yelling in pain. Someone won't be getting a date any time soon, not with that kinda face. Someone swearing and crying — didn't realize up til now that injuries hurt bad. You get those sometimes, usually the young ones. Then distant sirens, which he heard briefly before he rounded the corner into a restaurant.

Majima and he had a simple lunch of conveyor belt sushi. He stacked the blue-red-white plates beside the phone, which crackled when Majima yelled too loud.

"So I've been thinking!" Majima said, munching on something of his own with crinkly paper wraps.

"You think? News to me," Kiryu returned reflexively, then listened to what Majima thought.

They spoke, and what they spoke of didn't matter. In the theater of Kiryu's mind he was elsewhere, composing his anger so it had the appropriate texture and tonality of righteousness.

He would enter a white room, he imagined — a great, important, certainly expensive room. And then he'd say: I can't believe Nishiki would do this, I can't believe that Nishiki would do something like this, it's impossible for me to believe he's fallen so far, dammit to think that Nishiki would do something like this.

How could he, how dare he, how could he possibly think he'll get away with this? Oya-san, how are you, are you alright, does it hurt, is it hurting, did it hit you between the collarbone and the shoulder
exactly three inches to the right? Please rest. You have got to rest. Don't push yourself.

Can you still manage, will Kashiwagi manage, will things be managed? If you want, if I must, if it pleases you — I'll take a thousand men more off your hands and deploy them against Nishikiyama. I'll cut him down where he stands, for this, for that, for doing this.

I know it'll jeopardize your interests, I understand that it's a dangerous strategy, I completely understand why you might be reluctant. But believe me, trust me, know this — I am completely, I will always be, I could only ever be loyal to you. You are the closest thing to a father I have. You have been the closest thing to a father to me. I grew up thinking of you as my father.

"Oi," Majima said. "Are ya listening to me? I'm asking ya some serious shit right here. Melon soda or grape? Ya better think fast — could be we're friends no more if ya don't get this right."

Yes, Kiryu said, shoveling fried fish into his mouth. Melon soda.

"Hmm," Majima said. He did not tell Kiryu if they were still friends.

"Are we friends?" He asked, swallowing hard — a fish bone had become stuck in his throat. Peristalsis, peristalsis.

"Eh? Kiryu-chan, are ya a girl? Ya wanna hold hands and braid my hair? Fuck off! I got shit to do, by—" The phone clicked.

Kiryu waited slowly for the bone to become unstuck. Thinking, he was, of a conversation much later than this. In it he was saying: oya-san, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry it's come to this — but I won't let you hurt him, maim him, exile him, kill him.

He didn't plan the conversation he'd have with Nishiki. He didn't think they'd be having one.
Had Majima been in a long dress (like the one now planted in Kiryu's subconscious) he would have to lift his imaginary skirts an inch or more, just to avoid dragging it in someone's leftovers. He stepped carefully now over unconscious Kazama men, examining the skill with which the Nikkyo men had dismantled his enemies. Sera hadn't shortchanged him in this, at least. They were good fighters, though his pride insisted that they were no better, perhaps even worse than his boys; certainly his boys had wilder revelries. Sometimes that's all that matters. He didn't like this very much, going into fights silent and methodical. That was a Kiryu kind of thing.

He shot Kiryu a text message, said — tell me how it goes. It's shouting into the void. Kiryu hasn't figured out where his inbox is. In the time that it takes him to open messages, Majima could have found papyrus and mailed him a scroll. Could have made papyrus from scratch, if it comes to that.

He made now the Nikkyo men into long lines (the way he liked his meat) told them to stand against a wall and take off one by one their masks, so he can look into the lines of their faces and read the histories that he enjoyed. He went row by row looking. When he reached the end of it he doubled back to somewhere in the middle.

"Ya number thirteen, aren't ya," He said. "What's your name?"

"Sato Daisaku," The man — could not be but young twenties — admitted like a long-held shame. "Sir." He added, after a pause. He had personality, was what Majima liked about him. Small sharp eyes and sharply hair, looked like a punk. Could be wild, if the Nikkyo doesn't beat it out of him.

"Don't like sirs. Boss will do," Majima said. "I don't like yer name. I don't remember names that I don't like. Let's change it. I knew a Minami once who looked like ya. Ya can have that. He won't need it anymore. I got a job for ya, and for now you're a number no more."

Minami nodded, a quick learner.

Majima grinned, patted him on the shoulder. He liked people who are all action. Said, "Ya gonna go to Nishikiyama for me, and ya gonna collect what we're owed."

—

Everyone knows where the seat of power is; the trouble is getting your ass close enough. Nishikiyama's throne was notoriously difficult to approach. You needed tribute, homage, songs to sing, to get into his halls. Nishiki Industries was after all, on paper — an upstanding sprawling factory, almost a city shrunk small. It'd been placed very close to the middle of things, though out of it. A boast. Look at the kind of real estate I can afford, it said. It leered at the neon teeth of Kamurocho with bigger ones of its own. Its red smokestacks breathed heavily on the sky, white breath indistinguishable from passing clouds if you see it from far enough away. It ate land just to show it could. A short building tall in ambitions — the red-white is a splash of color on an otherwise uniformly grey concrete building, cold to the very touch.

Upon the melting snowbank, Minami was kicked out of the car and told to never come back if he failed. Fine by him. He rolled his shoulders, cracked his knuckles; it wasn't a hard job and he didn't plan to fail.

Clad in a thick leather jacket to keep out the cold, he walked alone on white carpets until he reached the security outpost. Near it, he righted the badge on his collar. Through the fog, he said, "I'm here to
see the boss, Nishikiyama."

"Permission?" The guard snapped.

He reached into his jacket. The guards froze, expecting a gun — but he withdrew only a drawstring bag, which clattered like a hundred miniature cymbals. Through the lumpy shape of the fabric they could make out many round objects. Bottlecaps. Minami placed it on the counter, said, "Bring it to your boss."

The guards went with the tribute. It might be important or it might not, but they were taking no chances. In a grand hallway long and wide with manufactured sounds, one of the guards peeked inside and found hundreds of Tojo clan insignias.

Minami was led into the machine. Pristine every inch, immaculate every corner. There was a seamlessness to the interior. Following the guard deeper and ever deeper Minami felt himself to be walking into a keyhole; the labyrinthine insides of a padlock seen closed-up. Perhaps since it was born the factory-machine had never had a stitch added to it. There was sound everywhere being swallowed into a vacuum natural to large buildings. "Whoo—" said a machine, and immediately it evaporated into the upper echelons of the factory floor, lost in cold sunlight, barred from leaving by light-blue skylights.

In the deepest heart of the factory it softened a little, but not by much. There were offices now, carpet underfoot. The AC had been cruelly stuck on winter. Minami was led down the length of a long carpet (which he felt but could not articulate that it had been designed more to humiliate than to decorate) that ended in classical doors. It looked like the old universities down central Tokyo on his way home, an education within but not that kind. When he pushed it apart and went in — there the insignias were again, a pile of silver treasure on the koi’s desk.

Pooling in the filtered light, Nishikiyama held a coin up at him. "They told me these are yours. Are they?"

"Sure they are," Minami said, defiantly. "All of thems are ours."

"And who are you?"

"Nikkyo. Sixth branch."


"Hey now man, no call for that. We came out peaceful, said we were leaving so we are. We're no more traitors than the one who stayed behind ta die."

Nishikiyama seemed to find something hateful in his words — or his slang. Twitched. "You can call yourselves whatever you please. You wanted my attention. I'm giving it to you. I hope you're wasting it now for a reason."

"We wanna get paid," Minami explained. "All these, they're Kazama-gumi. Hit 'em ourselves, you musta heard. Everywhere south of Kamuro-cho. All along central and then some. Worth a lot of fuckin' turf, that we heard you took."

"I never hired you."

"Consider it a demo. A demonstration, a demolition, whatever. We're fuckin' good at kickin' shit in."

"Then you can do it. Be great at it. I'll applaud you, even. Do you want a medal? A star for your
efforts?"

"We wanna get fuckin' paid."

Nishikiyama placed the badge back on the pile. Had a tic, Minami thought. Looked down when he's about to hit; if this was a bar Minami'd probably swing right about now, to get a hit in before he got punched. The guy looked delicate, but had anger issues up to his tits, don't even need a bad karaoke mic to put him in a sour mood. Bad milk.

"I see a threat coming," Nishikiyama said.

"It ain't a threat — just business. If ya won't buy us, someone else will." He paused, considered the boss's words, tried them on his tongue. "We came to ya before the dragon. Heard you're rollin' in it. We'll take less better than nothin', so if it ain't ya we're workin' for, we'll work for him. How's that, then?"

"You know, you have a really annoying way of talking." Nishikiyama commented. "Of barking."

In the pockets of Minami's jacket, fists were clenched. "We're good," He insisted. "Either you hire us or you don't. What's it gonna be?"

"How much?"

"Thirty big ones per head," Minami added, before he could protest: "That's more than the shit ya pay your boys, but we're better at it. Worth your while to use us, and less hassle when someone's dead."

"And you'll hit whoever I tell you to hit?"

"Anyone except the dragon."

"Why? Are you afraid?" Nishikiyama scoffed. "Piss your pants at the thought of it, do you?"

"Man, it ain't that. We got histories. Ya wanna take the dragon out you do it yourself. We'll put pressure on the old man, keep him off you. We got a deal here?" He looked impatiently out of the window, wondering if the boss had driven off. The boss was a cool-ass man, but he had the patience of a grenade. It's a long cold walk back to the city from out here and not what Minami wanted. "Make up your mind, man."

"It's made. You'll get what you want. Arrange with Shindo. And one last thing."

"Eh?"

"Next time your group returns, send someone else. I'd prefer my time to be wasted by someone who doesn't bark like a fucking dog."

Both hands fully clenched to break bone now, face twitching around piercings, Minami nodded tersely, and turned to leave. He brushed angrily pass Nishikiyama's aide, walking on puffed-up ego. He left with relief the big ol' machine, traced his steps, and found Majima in all his rare patience at the back of a warm car. He passed Minami a heavy bottle, already uncapped.

"I know ya said ya don't drink, but that asshole really puts a thirst in ya, don't he?"

Minami took it, made an exception. Majima did not reach for the bottle when he handed it back; there was a glint in his eye that said Minami will need it, that and more, and a bit of headcrackin' down the road too perhaps. He took the badge off his collar, passed the camera to Majima, and
relayed everything that happened. Majima grinned fiercest of all when he came to the last part of his tale.

He held up the glassy lens at the back of the badge. "Oh man, there he goes worryin' his pretty lil asshole for nothin'"

He rapped the back of the front seat. "Drive, man. Get gone. Number thirteen here needs to blow off some steam, and I know just the racket for it. We just got hired, didn't we? Time to earn our fuckin' keep — and work our asses off!"

—

In a hospital's garden with a thousand new men, Kiryu met Kashiwagi, and was beckoned over to a stone bench under anemic trees. Wet leaves stuck to the seat, where they'd been shed slowly since winter began and ended. The staff was stretched thin enough that often the leaves accumulated gradually until it papered the whole bench, and white became brown became moldy black, before they were swept away again. It was nearing the end of this cycle when Kiryu sat down, brushing aside a neat circle for himself.

"Smoke?" Kashiwagi handed him a cigarette, and he took it from bandaged hands. Between Kashiwagi and oya-san you might have difficulty guessing who was shot and who wasn't. At some point someone had taken a knife to him and saw chunks off him. They sat watching lost patients on crutches stretching themselves thinner. It is a sight familiar to Kiryu; reminded him of yard time in prison.

"How's things?" He asked.

"The usual," Kashiwagi said. "Heard you've been doing your job."

"For once."

"You just got home. Takes time."

"Sure," He said, and trailed off.

There were many things Kiryu wanted to say, none of which he could. On the second, fourth, and fifth floor someone was leaning on the railings, looking down at them. Two out of three could be spies, perhaps all three. It had always been this way between them. When he had rare doubts in the service of Kazama-gumi, it was to Kashiwagi that he'd brought them, one in each closed palm. It'd been Kashiwagi who personally broke his knuckles, and taught him not to trust — not Kashiwagi, not the fly on the walls, nothing.

Over cold noodles he'd said, "You get doubts, you put it deep in and put some bricks on it. Don't look at 'em unless there's no one looking over your shoulders. If you think there's no one looking — you're wrong. Look again."

Turn around so much you get a crick in your neck, 'round here.

"I'll be taking another thousand men from oya-san," Kiryu told him. "I'll leave the choice up to you."

"Any preference?"

"The least loyal ones," He said. "Would hate it if we waste the good ones."

"You planning to waste a lot?"
"Apparently no one likes it when I do, so I guess not," He smiled, flicked sparks onto the leaves; too wet for fires.

Kashiwagi eyed him. If he thought anything at all, it was not for Kiryu to know. "You'll have it. Where do you want them?"

"On reserve. I'll send for them."

"Will do. Kiryu?"

He grunted.

"Don't mess this up."

Kiryu didn't answer. Kashiwagi stood, gripped his shoulder, and squeezed it. He either said things or did not; nothing was conveyed. Kiryu watched his retreating back until Kashiwagi disappeared around the corner, then checked his phone. After fifteen minutes of separating science from fiction, he managed to open his inbox. Majima had sent him a photo of a half-eaten sandwich, brinjal, and a fistful of cash.

The was a message from him too. Like all Majima's phone calls it'd been cut in half. "Tell me how — " Kiryu read. With clumsy fingers he punched in, "It goes."

He left the hospital, took the most deafening route he could find back to Majima's office, and found Majima's door had been replaced with a hastily erected steel door. Theoretically strong but a pain to open. Austere and tasteless. Everything else back and fully operational; Kazama's men were well-oiled cogs. He summoned the man he'd made his aide into the office, and pushed papers around until he found the numbers he wanted.

"Take three batches of fireworks down to the pier as soon as you can. Not more than five days." He told his aide — whose name he didn't know, and had no numbers. "Then rent me out the biggest warehouse you can find. Something with a second floor. Somewhere quiet. Then go to the Florist and tell him I want roses with big thorns. To be delivered immediately."

The man balanced a clipboard, adjusted gold-framed glasses. "Who's my contact, for the explosives?"

"Just take it there. Someone will take it off your hands." He said, and left it at that.

—

The first someone was Minami, who a few days later stood with a mask as number thirteen on a shipping container with a gun somewhere close and his fists closer. With a pair of binoculars he was watching Kazama-gumi assholes riding into the yard in five trucks — two of them with guards and three with explosives. Somewhere planted around him were the other Nikkyo guys, who unlike him had mastered invisibility and could not be seen.

"Boss," He said. "They're rollin' in."

"See anyone else?" The walkie talkie crackled.

He said no, then yes. Off east not even five minutes later was a larger group of seven trucks, which even unmarked announced their identity by being shinier and cleaner than anything else on the streets.
"The fishy assholes are in," He said. "Off east."

"'kay? Who woulda guess? Nishikiyama's flies on every wall. Well ya know what ta do. Wreck shit then." Majima said, "We want our shit before the fish nibbles on 'em."

"All 'em?"

"All 'em."

"Even the guys who's bringing us the shit?"

"Minami, ya dense? What part of all ya failin' to get? Ya want schoolin'?"

Alright, alright no need ta shout. He tossed the walkie talkie aside. Don't need it — boss had a pair of lungs that can be heard halfway 'round the docks, and so does Minami. Between the two of them the walkie talkie just a courtesy. They shout just fine.

He cracked his knuckles and grinned, tightened the mask. THIS is the kind of asskickin' he joined up for.

—

Half a hundred times over they've done this and this today no different.

Majima started on the offensive, which came naturally to him as breathing and dancing, and immediately went for the throats of Nishikiyama's men, leaving behind the Kazama assholes for the rest of his crew. There was wind howling outside and inside him, and he whipped them like the winds, who had come to see all the carnage to be done. To the sound of its jeers he tore open the door of the first truck he found, knifed without looking, unplugged the keys, and plugged the driver. Whipping around to find another man he pushed his knife deep-deep into his guts and shoved him backwards to meet his friends; into those friendly embraces he threw himself and his bat, whirling, swishing, hitting like a centrifuge, in slow then fast accelerating cycles hitting everyone close enough to touch. Someone, brave soul, came close enough to eat his steel-tipped boots, now padded and used to his missing toes, which he imagined must taste mighty fine as he rammed them down three more throats and kicked a fourth in the middle into the beckoning ocean.

"Eat dicks!" He screamed, and the winds roared it approval. More, it roared! More!

Someone with big bright ideas started their truck, and he rolled dodged jumped sidewards when the truck tried to hit him and hit nothing skidding to a halt inches away from the sea. He punished the truck's windows and shattered it, grabbing a fistful of glass in his leather gloves and pushed it blindly into the fleshy driver, a spiked fist. Clutching another fistful of glass one each between fingers he turned back to the crowd and hit, made hits, greatest hits, punching high then low to the rhythm of the windy cheers.

Off his periphery he saw Minami doing a good job, great job even, had found within himself a fire to fight with, which burned and jabbed angry fists into the middle of his opponents and crushed ribs and won't be denied; what he lacked from experience and a suitable diet of pain he made up with raw unadulterated passion, a celebration of the musical crunching of heads and the tearing of bones and the breaching of tendons — people dropped around him like flies as much out of passion than skilful bites.

"Good job, kiddo!" Majima yelled into a man's ear, who yelled into the next man's ear, and through a cycle of pain it echoes on and on until it reaches Minami, who grinned under burning moods and
said — "Thanks, boss!"

He will not be outdone! Oh, the things he'll do to these guys, just a preview of what he's got in store for Nishiki, that fucking cunt!

Down then! He wrecked one by one the men in the trucks and then the trucks themselves, took from someone's broken knuckles a gun and shot every tire he could see so no one gets the smart-alec idea of driving away or else driving into him, and when the last of the rubbery wheels burst apart exulting smelly gaseous insides into the wind — who choked and stirred the blowout into someone's eye — he shot three times into the air to signal to the rest of the Nikkyo that this side was done, everyone out of the game and thoroughly checked out.

A heartbeat later from elsewhere in the docks three shots answered in the air: the fireworks too, have been secured.

He went to see, climbed onto a container and leapt nimbly one by one by one thunking his shoes on the metal 'til he saw Minami's binoculars and swept it up. Through them he saw with hawk eye that the Kazama men had been subdued, all except a few running for their lives from his adorable little masked terrors, and he approved, and was glad, and watching gladly still saw one man that looked familiar with an unbroken cowardly back.

"Huh," He said.

"Ain't that," He thought.

Thought nothing further of it, shit to be done first. He landed near the goods and peered into the trucks, knocking on the metal like wood for luck.

"Everything?" He asked.

"Everything sir," Said someone not number-thirteen.

"Boss," Minami said, emerging beside him. "Ya want me to kick down the teeth of those pussies?"

"Naw," He said. "Plan don't need everyone down. All we want is here." He unlocked a truck, peered in at the crates stacked high to the ceiling with fireworks, and whistled. "Attaboy, Kiryu-chan. First-grade tits in here."

To the rest, he ordered — "Move out then. Everyone in a cart. Let's get this show on the road!" Off side to number twenty-two, who had the budding personality of a secretary, he said: "When we get back pull out the row of film we got from Nishikiyama. There's something I'm thinkin' I should see."

The House of Flowers meanwhile had received orders and delivered orders, and the florist sat now with a phone in one hand and notes on the other, saying into it: "That's right."

"Machine guns? And shotguns?"

"The biggest roses we've got, dozens of them."

"I see."

"A big deal, huh?"

"A dirty deal," said the phone. "His dog is teaching him to shit all over the place."
Then it switched off.

Nervously Majima sat in the truck bouncing his ass up and down until he could get home and shake a techie for the appropriate footage, which he played now frame by frame going backwards in time until he saw Minami moonwalking back into Nishikiyama's office, clenching his invisible fists, then moonwalking again calmly backwards into the hall — and right there in the middle of the frame a man with square golden glasses.

Don't get too many four-eyed yakuza.

"Godfuckingdammit," He said, and punched numbers into his cell phone until it broke the seventeenth time Kiryu didn't pick up.
The second time Kiryu's phone was ringing, he was in the middle of dinner, eating from a takeout box and thinking about traitors; in the room a blocky TV with the current news, something on fire and someone being fired. He was looking at the map, trying to figure out Nishiki's next move — now that his men were probably down a good thousand he'll need to figure out exactly who he wants to hit more: Kiryu or Kazama. He's betting that Nishiki will choose to fight Kazama and trick-out Kiryu: use his aborted prison sentence against him. Most likely Nishiki'll turn to Majima more and more, the kind of results he was delivering with Kiryu's help.

The fifth time it buzzed he was out on the roof, examining the roses that'd dropped out of a helicopter, the wind roaring around his ears in joyful bloodlust, peering across his shoulders to get a better look at the green crates carrying with them potential death, neatly stacked ass-to-head-to-ass inside the crates exactly twenty in one.

"Pay him!" He shouted over the sound of the wind to one of his men, who produced briefcases that disappeared swiftly into the dark spartan interior of the helicopter. From the interior came back keys to the crates: all ten keys without which the boxes would never open, not unless they blow it up to high heaven or saw it in half.

The sixth time it was buzzing the helicopter had retreated out into the skyline and was disappearing rapidly into the jaws of neon night, flying against the wind in the direction of Tokyo tower, where for twenty minutes it'll fly round and round in order to mislead people into thinking it was landing where it wasn't. Kiryu was left standing on the roof with six men, checking one by one the crates to see if they fulfilled their promise, and in the middle of all that damping hay — guns, as promised.

"Take them away," He told them. "Three rooms behind my office."

The ninth time it wasn't buzzing he was down in the basement of the building having taken the elevator straight from head to toe; he stepped out into that echo chamber to meet a hundred of Sera's men, from the fifth division this time — steadfast every inch and none of them traitors. Hey he said, shaking the strong grip of the man standing in front, who he assumed and was correct in assuming was the leader. The leader looked very comfortable in his anonymity. Kiryu spoke, and then he, and then he, and then he, and then all that information conveyed they took the elevator back to the 56th floor and Sera's men dispersed some into Kazama-gumi and some out into the night through the fire escape, either way fully consumed now within Kiryu's forces.

"Very good," said the leader to Kiryu, who was already walking away and forgetting him; he was now part of the plan and thus no longer fully human — in the space of fifty six floors he had become a character: a rook.

The thirteenth time it was buzzing Kiryu had summoned his aide into his office in order to question him about things — the most important of which was his belongings that had disappeared from his apartment, but others following swiftly concerning the rental and progress in securing the warehouse, and the exact movements of their men.

"We haven't sustained too many losses. About seven hundred for twice that of Nishikiyama's."

"Pretty good numbers, but not good enough. Loss leader?"
"Nineteenth subsidiary, let themselves be ambushed on a night out."

"Make an example." Kiryu said, then gritted his teeth. "Never mind, I'll do it myself."

Then the rest of it insignificant but still had to be done, them considering together pin after pin after pin on the walls pushing and pulling, both of them standing by the window, until Kiryu looked at those inattentive eyes and said — "Something on your mind?"

"Was just thinking," said his aide. "About those belongings of yours."

"Yeah?"

"The things in those boxes you were asking for." He said.

"What about."

"Was just thinking — that you won't be needing it after all." He said.

The fifteenth to seventeenth calls never went through, seeing as Kiryu — in the process of getting shot and being shocked and having his chest punched through the window by a high caliber bullet — had pitched forwards into his own blood and a knife approximately 9-inches long that buried itself somewhere in his person. The phone had fallen with him into all that blood and landed wrongly, so that its circuits shorted and it laid dead beside its dying owner — who until the end never figured out how to turn on its radio.

—

The good news is that twenty minutes later the dead phone heard in the hallway men screaming, and then the door swung wildly to admit a man shouting: "Fucking hell!"

His owner said nothing in response.

"I told ya only I get to kill ya Kiryu-chan, what the fuck!"

"Boss, where to?"

"Let's get him — fuck is this shit? There ain't nowhere to grab!" The phone was displaced over and over again, skidding across the wet tiles when its owner was pushed around roughly while the two men figured out where on him was a place not punctured.

There wasn't; or else they figured that if they figure any longer its owner would die for good — in the end the first man that'd come in took off his jacket, threw it at his underling, and carried the phone's owner on his back. The last the phone saw they'd dash out into the night.

—

In Shizuoka there was another phone that rang: "Hello?"

"Nishida!"

"Oyaji?" He said, never expecting a call this early and this late — it was almost midnight and his wounds not yet healed.

"Gunshot wounds! Where?!!"

"What?"
"Where the fuck do I take someone with gunshot wounds!?"

"Um, oh—"

"Hurry the fuck up!" Then added. "Minami, stop shaking him! He's fucking leaking!"

"Um. Um! Wait, let me think — Theater street!" Nishida said. "Sixth shop down right from Deborah, the fifth — no, fourth floor! Says it's a dentist! Wait oyaji — who got shot?"

"Who knows!" said the dead phone.

No answer when he called back.

Wearily he sat down, realized he was sitting on the shoe rack. Got up sighing. He gets no peace. He isn't ready to forgive, but what the hell. He went into the living room where his ma was watching the last program of the night.

"Ma," He said. "Have you seen my good shoes?"

Then he began to pack; he figured with his wounds half-healed, been a couple of months now, and oyaji out there fighting properly to keep a person alive for the first time in his life, he might as well go back and see if he could lend a hand. Sometimes water thicker than blood. First train outta here should be at six, he reckoned.

—

Nishida walked into a brown, musty room with carpets smelling of feet the next day, and saw the only two customers there sitting on moth-eaten couches. They made heavy depressions in the sinking cushions.

"Oyaji," He said, and sat beside Majima, opposite the punk kid. One of them curled up like a ball.

A lot of things to be paid for in the room: the desk was overturned, a line of shelves at the back with their doors kicked in. The door Nishida had come through too, won't close right, and on the opposite end a chair sat upturned besides a glass cabinet with no glass. At least the expensive equipment on the shelves were mostly unharmed; there is a silver lining in everything. The door to the surgery was firmly shut.

Nishida considered the amount of blood in the carpets, and figured only one person he knew could lose that much and still need surgery.

"How's Kiryu-san?" He tried. For many heartbeats there was no answer.

"Don't know," Majima said, at last.

"Who shot him?"

"Dunno."

"Nishikiyama?"

"Cunt."

Nishida sighed. "You still fighting him?"

"What hell else I got goin'."
"Doctors said anything?"

"No."

On the opposite couch the punk shifted under his leather jacket, which he'd used as a blanket. Later they will talk, introduce themselves, figure out the pecking order. For now, he asked Majima, "You want anything from the store?"

"Ask 'em got any miracles."

"Um, I'll try. Anything else? You need any food?"

No answer.

"I'll get you some noodles." He said. To the punk he added, "Come on. You too."

Gratefully the kid stretched himself out of the couch, his joints popping from staying still for so long, and they went out into a day less gloomy and came back with beers and instant ramen to feed their vigil. One by one he put the things on the table for Majima, who'd fallen asleep. Later he woke, ate, and in a quiet voice raw from shouting, said: "Thanks for comin' back, Nishida."

"Oyaji," He said, and gently patted Majima's back.

—

Kiryu survives.

Man can probably take a meteor in the head and survive, what the fuck.

Kiryu was gonna live — a fact that they told Majima without convincing him, until he pushed past them and saw through his trust issues that they hadn't been lying to him, and stood there still thinking long and hard before he brushed past them again back into the waiting room.

"Gonna live," He told Nishida, who unlike him, had figured out that a man who could be stabbed fifty times and drowned will likely live through several shots.

"That's good," Nishida said, and took Majima — whose worry was rapidly evaporating into vicious anger — by the elbow. To Minami he said, "Oyaji here probably needs a bit of exercise to feel better. I don't know what's happening around here, but you know anyone he was working his way through?"

"Assholes? Plenty 'round here."

On their way out, Majima said: "I told Kashiwagi it was gonna be him."

—

Ya get a lot a lot of time to think in between beating people up into a pulp, especially when you go out, and you're determined you're not gonna rest until you wreck a hundred men personally.

The fourth guy he kneed in the balls he was thinking: I'm gonna hurt that guy real good. Got no excuse, got no mercy. Don't care what Kiryu thinks, don't care if they make the man a saint, if he kisses babies and gives 'em scholarships. I hate him, and I'm going to hurt him. For my boys, for Kiryu, for everything he'll do someday when he's fucking Fourth Chairman of this cunt-nation. I don't care if he was betrayed, if he was misunderstood, or if has excuses. Kiryu can forgive whoever he wants, love his tragic assholes. Not in my fucking book.
The twenty-fifth guy he shoved into the oceans he was thinking: Kiryu-chan can't tell his ass from his forehead, always actin' like he's goddamned in control but really, just a fucking wreck tied together with nails and a bad paintjob. It's all veneer. So what if he can wreck shit better than me? Who gives a fuck? Kashiwagi only ever got one thing right — his heart ain't in this, just as I ain't cut out for this, just like we ain't gonna be in this — once this is over we're gonna get out of this shit pronto express and blaze outta here for-fucking-ever. Don't know what we're doin' but we gonna be out. If I make it to forty in this, then my mom's the empress.

The sixty-seventh guy punched him hard enough he saw stars, and after he cut out part of the guy's shoulders he had to take a breather in someone's stairwell.

On the eightieth he had a bit of time to think, so he thought: I'm gonna figure out a way to hurt him, yes, yes, none of this thing that Kiryu's planned for him, which is good but more, more, what I gotta figure out is how to hurt him where it really counts.

Hundredth he was thinking: What does Nishikiyama care about the most? What's under that fucking skin?

—

What's under that skin is rage.

"Arase!" He raged. "What the fuck is this?"

"You told me to take him out, so I did."

"Do you understand the fucking difference between prison and a bullet in the chest?"

"You said."

"I said. That's right, I said. Clearly you don't understand. Well. Well! Let me show you the difference then."

On that selfsame skin, blood, and him saying: "Fucking idiots."

—

From a foreign dream of a strange thin balcony Kiryu woke up and slipped inch by inch back into his skin, and found he'd been moved elsewhere in space. His blood pooling had become a portal. A dark dim room. Lit only by a desk light in the corner, too far for him to look, his neck stiff and unbending. The light near a body of water (an aquarium perhaps), casting pool-shadows on the ceiling. All around a lemony glow. Somewhere behind him a machine measured the life left in him, and found he didn't have very much. On his hand someone squeezing more life out of him, sleeping heavy on his hand 'til it was numb and cold and bloodless.

"Hey," He said to Majima — and found he couldn't.

Couldn't do much of anything. Helplessly he floated back into a thin line of consciousness, and there waited patiently until he was able to say, "Majima."

"Asshole," Majima greeted him. "Ya awake, dickbag?"

Unable to say anything else.

Majima continued: 'Fuckin' pussy fart. Asswank-cocksucker. What the actual fuck. I told ya I got
"Dibs. Dibs, dipshit."

"Fuckin' sleep already,' He added. "I got shit to do."

Whatever shit he had to do it didn't take him away long or often enough; every time Kiryu woke up there he was again, wearing an expression of anxious anger — he didn't seem to want to be there, yet he was, didn't want to care, but he did, and he cared callously by gripping Kiryu's forearm hard enough to tear skin; said: "Ya ain't sick right now I'll kick you into a mirror myself. Ya piss me off so bad. First thing I'm gonna do when ya back on the streets again is to knee ya in the face. Ya watch it if I don't."

"Okay," Kiryu said. "You get one knee."

"That a coupon? I look like charity?"

"Six?"

"Ten. And in the fuckin' nose."

"Alright."

"Fuck you." Majima said. "Fuck you."

"Alright, alright," Kiryu said, and whether that soothed him or pissed him off even more, no one knew.

Later he came awake and almost a week later. His turn to be anxious, looking at all that lost time, and wondering how the maps had changed since he'd been there last, at his workstation. Nervelessly wondering how the veins of the city had shifted, if it'd gone cold or warm. What's happening, he kept asking Majima. Is the plan going okay.

"Shut yer workaholic mouth. I don't know. I don't care." Majima said. Nishida came in later with maps and charts and he saw that Majima had been hitting a healthy amount of Kazama men.

"Has Kashiwagi sent in?"

"Yeah," Nishida said. He had inventories for everything. "We've got almost three thousand Kazama men now, well — you anyway. Give or take the several hundred out of commission fighting Nishikiyama."

"Dead?"

"Yeah. Safehouse with almost fifty guys in there and he barred all the entrances and smoked it."

"Dead?"

"All."

He sighed. "Good play, Nishiki."

"Fuck you," Majima said from the other room. Then later, when he calmed down with enough beers in him, asked: "Why isn't he here? Why hasn't the cunt sent more men here to kill ya? Ya down now. Easy peasy ain't it, to blow ya outta this joint? I don't get it!"

Pivoting on Kiryu: "What the fuck is wrong with yer family?"
Kiryu knew the answer and won't say it; he knew Majima was searching, and he won't give it to him — not this.

"Hey, I asked ya a fuckin' question!"

"Don't know," Kiryu stubbornly repeated. "And if you're going to make such a fuss, do it in the other room."

Majima grounded his heels into furniture and Nishida paid for it. At the rate Majima was going the clinic will make more overcharging him for furniture repairs, than Kiryu repairs.

One night on some consecutive day he came in and was surprisingly calm. Either he'd smoke enough joints or else drank enough; either way he came bearing offerings six beers each for them, which he placed without irony on Kiryu's medication.

"Yo," He said. "Doc said ya can't drink."

"And that's why you brought me alcohol?"

"Sure. Bullets don't kill ya why should Suntory?"

He drank before Majima could pour it into his IV drip. Sat wincing on angled pillows. They didn't speak, not having anything to say that didn't involve hitting and hurting, and they had enough hurt inside without wanting to talk about it more. They sat listening to Deborah a few stores down, underground, the music loud enough to come clearly through the walls. Imported eurodance throbbing like a young heart.

When they finally could talk their words stopped and started like an elevator: they weren't getting off at the same floor, didn't seem to be having the same conversation. Majima starting with random things: baseball plays, environmental activism, vintage wines, idols he'd seen on TV. Kiryu continuing with even less sense — racing techniques, bowling angles, upstream fishing, real estate trends. They had fuck all in common; was talking just for some excuse to be in the same room.

Eventually they gave up and just lapsed into silence.

Long time later, Majima broke it, said: "I thought ya was gonna die too."

"Probably would have, if you didn't come."

"I told ya to keep watch." Majima growled. "And still nothin'."

"Too many things to watch."

To that Majima said nothing; knew it was the truth. Said instead: "Ya asked me before what I plan ta do after all this. But ya never really talked about yours."

"I'll think about it if I survive."

"Practical, or else ya chicken. My money's on the nuggets."

"Mine too," A sardonic smile. "Suppose I should talk more. I owe you that much?"

"Damn straight."

"I don't know," He sighed. "I never had a life that wasn't them. First I wanted to be Kazama-san, then I wanted to be with Nishiki. Once this is over I'll have neither."
"That hurts ya?"

"No shit."

"Ya talk to me about hurt once you lose half as much as I did."

"This is a contest now?"

"Eh," Majima said, and relented. "Suppose not." He sighed, thumbed the wrinkled fabric of the bedsheets that had gone grey and brown with old blood. Clinics like these, not known for hygiene. Sitting there with his chin on his hand he looked tousled and boyish. "I didn't come ta pick fights with ya. I came to ask ya."

"No. I won't let you punch me."

Majima grinned. "Who needs permission for that? I'll punch whoever I want. Ain't that."

Absentmindedly he'd taken Kiryu's arm, pressed half-moon sickles into it with his nails. Got to twenty and said: "After this I got stuff to do." His shrug was all nonchalance. "Ya wanna come with, Kiryu-chan? Figured where I'm goin' I could use a pet dragon or two."

Watching those sickles grow in number, Kiryu said, "And you won't tell me what you're doing, I assume."

"Now why I gotta go and ruin the surprise?"

"No hint?"

"Sure, sure. Involves prison."

"Not us in it, I hope."

"Well… Who knows." He smiled. "We might be roomies again, eh? I'll kick yer ass everyday in imaginary shogi. The showers a damned sight better than yours too. No one shootin' at ya. Pretty good deal. I'm startin' to see why ya were so mad I took you out."

Kiryu managed a small smile, thinking of six bars of moonlight. Said, "Alright."

"Just like that?"

"Got nothing better to do," He said. "And like I said once — no friends either."

"And no family after this."

"Now you're really salting it."

"Aight," Majima raised his hands in surrender. "Not gonna poke. Deal then?"

"Deal," He said, having no idea what the hell he was promising, knowing only that whatever Majima had planned it was probably idiotic, crazy, and involved both of them on the fast track to hell. He had nothing better to do anyway, so what the hell.

"If we survive," He clarified.

Majima snorted. "Nothin' ever happens to fools, don'tcha know? Idiots like us, we'll survive just about anythin'" He looked meaningfully at Kiryu's bandaged chest.
He scowled. "You trying to say something?"

"Who, me?"

And so the elevator goes on, its muzak the pulse of eurodance pop.

—

At the end of an uncertain amount of days, Kiryu discharged himself before the doctor did, wincing into the reception before he should, wheeling the IV along. He told them if they won't pull it out of him, he'll pull it out of himself. The surgeon with the alcoholic hands took his bandages apart and put them back together without in any way making them better.

"If you feel like there are pieces in you, come back. I'll give you a discount," said the doctor. Kiryu took that advice and put it into the loose grey suit Nishida had brought from his office; it took him twice as long to put on his own damned shirt. Either his arm won't bend, or it'll bend and can't unbend.

Shuffling along the room gathering his things he happened to see from the corner of his eye, yellow. He went down the stairs slowly on disobedient knees, an old man before his time, and found at the end of it: yellow. Majima was huddling with the punk-ass kid, talking shop, busting imaginary heads. The kid nodded at Kiryu and was gone, rounding around a corner to run an errand.

Without prologue Kiryu said: "There were sunflowers in the trash."

The long line of Majima's back stiffened. "So?"

"Looked like a bouquet."

"Why ya talkin' to me 'bout decor? Receptionist threw away her vase what's it gotta do with me?"

"Looked like a gift."

Majima lit a cigarette and handed it to him, lit one for himself; his tongue around smoke playing tricks.

"Boring me here, Kiryu-chan."

"Was there a card?"

Majima's eyed him serious and deadly when he said: "If there was one I wouldn't give it to ya. Even if it had poetry on it I woulda burn it to ashes and ate it myself just so ya won't have it. Only thing you got from him is a bullet in the chest. Now fuck off. Eyes up ahead. No wallowin'."

"I—"

"No wallowin'." He snarled.

"You're really unreasonable, you know that?" Kiryu said, and relented.

They went into the city as loose flags in the wind, drifting westwards out of Kamurocho without knowing where they were going, looking only for a short shelter somewhere; have a meal, try more conversations. Over a course of hard ramen they had soft conversations, all of which were about work then weather then whether then blabber — each thing they talk about increasingly unrelated to anything; sinking in soup.
Spring now in earnest they could lose themselves easily in the crowd, who had come out to walk in drizzles light and sparse. The advertisements were turning pink: sakura lattes, sakura notebooks, sakura stickers, sakura everything. Not a single cherry blossom tree in the city, but one in every shop around every corner. Plastic branches with straw petals brushed past them. No longer the garish city Kiryu had come back too — or else he'd grown rosy scales on his eyes, and saw everything through it and felt perfectly fine. He no longer found it strange that everyone was always on their phones talking to themselves. Good times, good times.

With sadism Majima put a pink drink in his hands. Majima had one himself that was more cream than liquid. Sipping on it, Kiryu said: "It'll be our last leg, next."

"Ya sure ya up for it, gramps? Yer achy titties and all."

He flexed an arm, tried not to wince. "I'll live."

Their feet had taken them to a park. Somewhere in here there's a lake, a small fair, and a museum — in its yard there was a spherical metallic sculpture that couldn't tell the future. To go into the museum you had to go down a flight of stairs, which they didn't; the ongoing exhibition was impressionism, which they felt was not abstract enough for their needs. Anyway Majima only liked manga. If the sculpture was made out of grilled meat he might consider it. They stood instead by the water, ringed by sleepy trees.

Looking around, Majima said: "Nice place for a fight, innit? Too bad about yer stitches, Kiryu-chan. Been a while since we do this. Could be fun to punch ya into the grass for a change. Stick in the mud like ya, this is perfect."

"I promised you six knees to the face. You wanna cash in?"

"Naw," Majima said. "I'll cash in later. I don't beat up cripples, unless I crippled them myself."

"Kind of you."

He looked now at Majima, who had been in the course of many days (almost three hundred now since he'd come once into the cell opposite his) become less of a stranger, yet still strange, a stranger still — and likely would be for many days hence if they ever have any more than this, days, that is. Without thinking he almost reached out and touched Majima somewhere — on the face perhaps, brushing his cheek, his hair — and stuttered somewhere in mid-air and did not do it. Perhaps one day when they know themselves and each other well enough. If there was snow on Majima's hair he could brush it and pretend it's a favor, but there wasn't.

Only they, Kiryu supposed, could damn near fuck the clinic's mattress in half and kill Kiryu in the process but be unable to say a simple goodbye, have a gentler kiss.

All things lying strictly in the future.

"Don't die." He said around a mouthful of awkward teeth. "It'll be hard to replace you in time."

"That's 'cuz there ain't replacements for me. I'm one of a kind. Anyway ya might kill me yerself when I'm done with your asshole brother."

"Doubt that," He said. Added again, "Don't do anything too stupid."

Majima only grinned fiercely, saying with eyes and bared teeth that he was going to do stupid, the stupidest things men have ever seen, great big bollocks of idiocy, which they will talk about forever into the future, then time travel to the past just to spread history up and down — that's the kind of
stupid he'll be.

To the still water, Kiryu said: "Three kinds of hell there is, and by far the worst is impermanence."

And Majima: "Who cares? Only one kinda hell in my book — the kind we're about to give!"

They bumped shoulders as goodbye instead.

Chapter End Notes

If you notice a remarkable lack of typos, it's thanks to my amazing proofreader (';

Next update will prolly conclude the story, there's just a few more chapters left. Enjoy!
On the day the shitshow was about to go down, the Mad Dog was at the crack of dawn very near a warehouse by a tepid river where a few months ago he had ordered someone drowned; the warehouse he had taken from Kazama for this irony, and upon its anonymous doorstep he was considering now if he should rechristen himself, before they rechristen him. He stood by the warehouse door, unable to persuade his back to remain horizontal on such a fretful morning.

He was the first here; his men weren't even awake yet. Soon someone with the keys will arrive. Likely, it'll be Nishida. In the meantime Majima had time to think — to think about the sort of reputation he'll have.

Will they baptize him before or after the water, he's wondering, in or out of it? Will they call him names? Will they forget him? Will they acknowledge his existence, conceptualize his self, or will he be swallowed whole in the shadow of the Dragon — so that the dog can run a thousand down into the mud and still no one would see him? In the history to come all Majima might be, is a blurry smudge on the paper. Note thumbprint. See whorl. Majima plus Majima-gumi strictly in the negative in a few years; in a decade it'll be like none of his boys existed in the first place.

If they call Majima anything at all, what will they call him? Mad Dog of the Dragon of Dojima? Ain't that a mouthful. Kiryu's toothless one-eyed wonder? Ain't cool at all.

Dog meat, Lee had once said. In Lee's tongue, his name Goro is a homophone for dog meat. Almost fifteen years and maybe it finally fits.

Perhaps names don't matter; only actions do.

Someone comes now to open his doors.

"How's it goin'" He said, and click-clacked into the warehouse. There were crates stacked up high that he'd taken off Kiryu. They took up half the warehouse. The other half used to have identical crates, filled with Nishikiyama's dirty money. Those they'd moved to Kiryu, where Majima supposed he was either buying guns, or else eating sixty-five shark fin soups per minute; with that much cash it could be possible.

Pensively he sat on a crate and began with his knife on his knuckles, cutting and scraping dead skin off it, so it's smooth as a baby's fuckin' bottom when he goes punching. There are faces he wants to caress; feel the undulation of their joys — when he knocks their fucking teeth out.

"Load up that shit," He told his borrowed boys. "Two to a truck, make that twenty five. And put on your best fireproof shirt."

He considered it. From somewhere, Nishida appeared with a clipboard to push the Nikkyo boys into line. Not that they needed pushing; it just made Nishida feel better to be organizing again. Majima watched them load one by one the crates into the trucks; later tonight they'll be loading themselves into it.

Be good, be good, he told them cheerily as they straggled past him one by one.

It's a good thing that everything is happening now. He was getting tired of himself and his long
phone calls with Kiryu: both of them saying nothing, but unwilling to hang up. This is them stuck in a bottleneck. Now to break the bottle so they can both move the fuck on.

He went outside of the warehouse and sat waiting until long after the Nikkyo men were dismissed and gone; they had a long day ahead, and much to prepare for. He sat alone on a box considering the fleshy web under his epidermis. Good skin, he had, that could be torn to pieces over and over again, yet knit out fine. Then he folded himself to practice those skills foreign and rusty to him: thinking and waiting — which now, for once — he intended to practice properly so he won't mess up the joy of his feedings, the rut of his vengeance.

"Hey," He said, long time later about mid-noon when a bird landed opposite him on a street light, and he, almost dizzy from the sun. He couldn't tell if it was a crow or one of those anonymous winged creatures you see pecking on carrion-trash in the city. With his one bad eye he saw it either nearer or further than it was. Didn't stop him from striking up a friendship.

"Hey," He said to the bird. "Call yer fucking friends. There's good nippin' to be had around here. Wouldn't ya like that, ya beaky dickwads?"

Then he sat waiting for Nishida and Minami to come to him, the first of his brand new pack, which he didn't intend to form but found it formed anyway without his consent. Somewhere far away a third member about to wreck havoc on his daddy-o. This is his too-soft shell speaking.

—

Somewhere else on a park bench Kiryu was eating something and thinking things through.

Then he became aware that he was eating cold noodles.

Soon he realized he was sitting in a rented car, not a park bench at all.

The breeze on his face was not fresh. It was the AC. He is nervous.

All that hatchin' and still nothin'. He couldn't break out of his shell. All he did was grow within. Is a dragon with a shell not just a tortoise? They look remarkably similar.

He took out his new phone, exactly like the old, and punched in Majima's number. Then he realized that this wasn't the plan, that that was no longer Majima's number, and anyway he shouldn't be doing this. This is dependency. Every time he feels bad he goes to Majima, so Majima can tell him he has no troubles, that his troubles aren't worth jackshit — and if he stops thinking so much he won't be troubled. Then he feels unhealthily better. This is dependency.

Kiryu had parked by a body of water without thinking anything of it. By the pier, where somewhere off-site they were about to build an amusement park. The first skeletons of a Ferris wheel had gone up, a giant eye in the sky. He sat there wondering if his own mind could be changed. It's not too late to play the game as it was meant to be played. It was not too late to do exactly as oya-san wanted him to do. Walk the line that should be walked. Seize the clan that should have been his, and go from strength to strength; if he only obeyed, everything would turn out right.

Even as he thought it he knew it was an eulogy. An avalanche of a mind, was that what Kazama said? Well, now that it has fallen it can only remain so. Anyway, Kazama will make him kill his pets.

So he got division number five on the line and told the leader to meet him at the warehouse elsewhere in time.

—
About evening they set out, and rolled on all cylinders down the streets enemy-wards. Majima sat sprawling loosely in a truck with number twenty-three. Nishida was off somewhere else. A mask sat on his face tight-tight like the ball in his guts, his fists clenched then unclenched on the dashboard. Out of the window he saw the rest of the trucks driving side-by-side, two each in the narrow city streets; their corrugated metal sides gave no hint of what they were carrying. Could be frozen chicken, could be frozen death. In the side-view mirror he saw himself as Hannya as he'll ever be, snakeskin jacket with no knife in it.

"Keep us ahead," Majima told the driver.

They had not come very far, perhaps a bare half hour from where the warehouse had seen them off, when brightness overtook them and Majima called a halt. Trouble? Predictable trouble — Kazama-gumi men about a dozen trucks, each carrying at least ten men. Bats and bamboo waving like flagpoles missing flags; guns too, probably many each. The first six trucks in Majima's group immediately broke out of formation and jammed up the street; stopped the Kazama-gumi men right there while the rest backed out and slithered away through the back lanes. Majima will buy them time.

The Nikkyo men that had been chosen to either live or die with him went first, out of the trucks and onto the pavements, guns and knives of their own. They fought better away from the sun, and already some were inching away quietly, leaning sideways into the lanes where they were about to run into and fight from, when trouble begins.

Trouble began. Majima stepped confidently out of the truck, swinging his baseball bat.

"Oi," He shouted. "Ya backin' up the traffic here, assholes!"

A Kazama man said: "We want your boss. Rest of you get the fuck out of here."

"I *am* the boss," Majima said, swinging the bat up. "Ya want me? First ya gotta beat the shit outta me. Think ya got enough teeth for what it takes?"

He tightened the mask on his face and walked ahead into the thick of things, proud of how stupid he was being; he struck out in the direction of the setting sun. Evening now and the sun was about to set on a lot of these motherfuckers. The wind today had not come to see, something blind instead — and he raged forward as fiery as the fire in his belly and set upon the Kazama men in the first truck he saw and leapt, bouncing on metal underfoot into the back of it; before they could extend themselves he had stretched his swinging arm, in one arc bashing two heads in and headbutting another one hard enough he saw stars.

Then fury! He tore through the rest of the cunts — knocking heads into heads into ground — until he was left the only one standing up there in the truck, and from there he made it his stronghold, so that they couldn't shoot him down: the walls of the truck was his fort. They had to come at him instead one by one from the back-exit and tried, tried to come in — keyword trying — because no sooner had their claws and paws and hairy backs emerged than he would kick it in and cut them low, and if they chanced to leave a gun in his hands, he shot them on the way down so they won't get up.

He struck enough down that body-on-body they made a pile that formed a fleshy stairs by the truck, which the rest used to get to him quicker. A resistance painting; liberty leading her people. He worked raging and burning still, with music and passion inside; knocked heads until he heard the knocking of knees; rammed them against each other like great bassy cymbals.

"Get fucked!" He screamed into one, and the lyrics were taken down the line one by one when he
put his hiking boots into a man's gut and it reverberated down to marrows.

He was tiring but had enough; could buy enough time. Off the periphery where he could not see, his world framed now only as the back-exit of the truck, he heard the rest of the Nikkyo men with him — the twelve like eggs a dozen — systematically broke under the Kazama-gumi men who outnumbered them ten to one. He clutched tighter his baseball bat; he would make up for lost numbers but probably not that much.

Probably indeed, for the next thing he knew someone had the bright bright idea of ramming the truck he was in aground, and from the corrugated belly of the beast he saw something press loudly like a fist into the metal, and from there he was not the centrifuge but in the centrifuge: his world spinning around and around until he lay many moments later bleeding and hurting in the scrunched up can of a truck, the foot that had rolled it over kicking it still. From the back exit out of smog and dust came Kazama men two or three to seize him. They lifted a weight. They pulled him. Then they pushed him into rough rope, or else a handcuff. He could not feel the music of his hands or hear the sounds of his arrest.

They stuffed him into the trunk of a car, where Majima laid curled up, with the lid opened above him. The scrunched up snakeskin jacket was digging and cutting into him. Boy, the thing was uncomfortable. Can't wait to get out of it. He watched the Kazama-gumi put their shit into order, for an orderly retreat.

When Majima next received attention it was from a lone man walking towards him. A man with a long horizontal scar across his face, slashing right above the nose and bending downwards on his cheek. An exaggerated grimace. Clearly the leader; he had the confidence and the cheap suit. Get far enough up the ladder, you don't have to care about your appearance. He was about to check the goods.

The man paused right in front of him. From Majima's view he could only look up, from which all the world was crushing defeat.

The man seized his mask, ripped it off. Strong enough that the strap broke, snapped around his ears, pinched them. The man held the mask in his hand and weighed it.

Then he said: "Where is he?"

Minami grinned; in the cool air with his secret torn off him, he was relaxed and triumphant. "Wouldn't ya like to know?"

—

Majima's truck pulled up in the parking bay, where his truck was by far the dirtiest. They parked where they were told they should, and came out of it when they were told they could. He landed on asphalt. Righted his mask. All around him was cold concrete.

"Permission?" The guard said. From Minami's thick leather jacket he withdrew scrunched up papers, handed them one by one to the guard. Turns out they were Poppo receipts. Nishida handed them the right ones instead, coming out of the metalwork bowing like a greeter-doll. The other trucks pulled in one by one into place, taking up most of the parking bay. There were some others from Nishiki Industries itself already parked there. They had an obnoxious maroon color and golden serif font, like Nishikiyama was selling a haircut instead of quick cuts. Kind of an odd choice, branding-wise; the rest of the brand is black and white.

Who knows. Who cares. Can't figure out these guys.
"So," He said, going back to Nishida and the guard. "We clear?"

The guard scowled. "You have to declare your goods first. You realize you shouldn't even be
allowed in?"

"Ya want us to drive around the city with guns in our trucks? You really wanna be the guy who tells
your boss that you made us lose two good shipments of the good ol' bam-bams? Naw," He said
around a smile. "I don't think so."

NIshikiyama ruling by might instead of kindness it could only go one way; the man disappeared and
reappeared sour but willing. "You have to declare it later. You're to explain this to the boss yourself."

"I'll meet him later."

"You'll meet him now," The guard insisted.

"Tell him to suck a cock, I got shit to do first. Shipment related," He added with a grin.

Majima gathered the Nikkyo boys to him but did not make war plans; their plans had long been
made and set in stone by now. The tape Minami had brought back had been rewound so many times
it was itself a giant wound; shedding fragments all over the place. Bleeding long lines and snowy
noise in the middle. He gave them a pep talk instead, then scattered the men with excuses. They went
now asking for bathrooms and break rooms. They'll do what they'll do.

He watched them recede into the distance. They did not have to go very far to disappear. It was a
cold foggy night and there were a lot of lights: the red strobe of emergency exits, the white glare of
interrogative spotlights; the dim overhead bulbs, which together with the long dashes of fluorescent
tubes, looked like a dialog of silence. "—."

It said, over and over again. Talking to itself. With all
that light and stone, everything bounced about: reflected, refracted, made fog where there was none
and quickly everything receded and disappeared from him, ate up either by a rude turn around the
corner, or else the magic of mist.

Majima stood leaning one of Nishikiyama's truck, wondering if this was the right time; if they
weren't being too early. Without calling Kiryu he had no idea what was going on over there, only
that perhaps it was going on. Or else they've got to Kiryu, and he laid now dead in some ditch,
rotting his flesh in that ugly suit. Something else was also rotting. He sniffed. There was a bitter smell
in the air, kind of like back home when his ma fermented cabbages, or else that thing she did with
pig's blood, coagulating them into black cubes to be served with tofu soup and pickled veggies.
Nutritious and delicious, if you don't think about exactly what you're putting in your mouth. Right
before they congealed into their jelly-like substance in those leakin' plastic barrels it smelled kinda
like…

Abruptly he took his hand off the truck.

He stood in the middle of a nightmare looking at the purple trucks one by one. It's all shiny chrome
to him. The spokes all glossiness. If they spoke, he didn't want to hear. The light they reflected was
made harsher by the distance of the night and the city's disinterest. Concrete all around him, a chain-
linked fence some distance away either keeping people out or keeping people in.

Keeping people in. Keeping people in, for sure. Electrified fences down the line, prison bars lying on
their side. He walked slowly down the row of Nishikiyama's trucks on numb feet back to Nishida,
and saw, without wanting to see, that someone had placed a bucket by one of the maroon ones. It
was leaking, like a fish truck. Slowly through the gusset. Hollow when it fell. In the bucket
everything looked black, even water; drip dripping drips.
"Oyaji, we're good to go," Nishida said. Looked at him again. "You okay, boss?"

"Sure," He said. "Sure sure sure sure. Ya know what to do."

"I do. Let's go, oyaji."

He nodded. Checked three times to see if his knife was in this foreign jacket, if it'd walked out on him earlier than planned. The jacket was obnoxious and unseemly; someone else's skin. In it he felt more of a fire-breather. Maybe that's a good thing. This tonight a good time for fire breathing. Minami better not wreck his suit, or else there'll be hell to pay. Majima didn't like this one but he'll make do — he always made do. In that borrowed skin he went off to meet Nishikiyama.

When the first of the Kazama-gumi men came it was almost eight at night, and they were miserable and confused about why they had to have a meeting now, on a weekend of all days. Out there could be heard the revelries of a young city about to break into Spring song; clubs were about to begin the special, the event, sunny money, the overpriced front-row-full electrotrash softcore porn shows, and here they were — getting nothin', shivering in their too-thin clothes waiting for this to be over with so they can get their weekend back in order. Even Yakuza wanted weekends.

What didn't look like he ever wanted weekends was their nominal boss, who sat waiting for them on a folding chair at one end of the warehouse. He appeared to be dozing. A spotlight directly above illuminated him; either the highlight of the night, or else the interrogated suspect. Either way it was suspect. They straggled to the corners of the warehouse, filling it up. Most went to the sides to be in the thin of things. A few who were curious moved to the center instead, where they assumed events would unfold clearer; if things were to happen. Things should happen — the night had the electrifying properties of an event unfolding itself.

An hour passed this way; those who came first had the most to resent. They stood in their punctual feet at the front of the room, looking at the seams. The warehouse was nothing special: a big ol' place with doors everywhere. A second floor with a walkway that ringed the lower floor. A foreman's office, unused and dark. Lights too-bright many in a row. There were no goods, no crates, nothing being stacked or stored at all. Guess they were getting a speech.

A speech they got, but late. When the last of the three thousand men showed up — or as close to three thousand as would come, the door which they'd all straggled in from slammed shut clanging metallic like a hollow drum behind them. From outside the final sound of a door being triple-bolted.

"The hell," Someone said. For the first time they peered at the other doors. Were they locked? With the doors sitting in the shadow of the upper floor's extrusion, they couldn't tell. They couldn't tell but they could guess, and they were right — everything was now locked.

No sound to be heard. Then the shrill scream of a folding metal chair pushed back when its body stood.

"Hey," Kiryu said. Chair behind him, a loose circle of men around him. Him dramatically
illuminated by the cone of a single spotlight. In his hand was a shotgun, which he held loosely with its end on the floor, like a walking stick. "I believe you all know who I am." He noted. "So, I won't introduce myself." He waved a hand. "I will introduce them instead."

From above them, on the second floor, came the scratching sound of rat feet. In the shadows still, gun-shaped ends began to creep slowly out of the darkness. Big or small deaths: shotguns, rifles, handguns silenced or not, guns sawn-off or double-barreled, automatic and semi. The heavy shadow at the very end coagulated last, wheeled in on squeaky wheels that sounded like a hundred tiny rats; it belied the weight of the machine-gun it was toting. Every gun was in some way pointed downwards.

"These are Sera's men," Kiryu continued, conversationally. "Fifth Division. They are pleased to meet you. You will be pleased to meet them."

Now, they heard, or perhaps understood for the first time, that there was something familiar in that foreign voice.

"Kazama-san," Someone whispered from the middle of the group.

"Kazama?" From far away, behind.

"No, it's Kazuma."

"Kazama-san?"

"But?"

"Still."

Kiryu waited until they quiet down, and began.

"I would like to tell you a story." He opened with. "Things are usually better when we begin with stories." He added. "This one I've learned from Kazama-san, and perhaps you've already heard this before. It's a favorite. Feel free to not listen. It's not fiction. It's a history lesson."

He grounded his heels into the cement, made his stance more comfortable, and said: "Long time ago in maybe 1934, during the war, there used to be a banana company somewhere in the straits. A big operation thousands of acres wide, bananas everywhere in sight, and the most profitable thing by far. Government funded, and army-backed. Where exactly is not important. What's important was that the workers had ambitions. They wanted to be paid, paid more, live in hygiene, not die of malaria, and so on. You know how it goes. Quite unreasonable for the times, but there it is. They gave their company a cash flow problem very soon thereafter. Striking, underperforming, stealing, assaulting, destroying the company's property. Naturally, all this isn't related to you. You've all been excellent."

His tone was reassuring, calm and measured. If his hand shook on the gun, only two men sharp-eyed in advance of the crowd could see.

"In 1935, after a whole year of unproductivity the company had had enough. With the board's permission they decided to stage talks with the strikers, try to talk with the union to see if they can work something out. Something for everyone. Everyone getting something. They gathered up oh, maybe one or two thousand of the employees. Told everyone to tell everyone else that there'll be a meeting with the company. Try to get everyone on the same page."

"They want to be paid more? Exactly how much do they want to be paid more? The company wants to know. The company wants to find out. The company cares. It's giving up. Word got out and
everyone came," — His tone was bright — "thousands of them in their best Friday suits and demands knocking about their teeth. Brought their kids, brought their drinks, brought their wives. It's a regular carnival alright, and all the fruit they can eat too. A picnic."

"The company rounded them up in the yard, and without fanfare or negotiation or announcement, and with the army's blessings, they put their borrowed guns to work, and mowed down everyone there on the banana saplings. Watered all that soil with five thousand quarts of blood. A real shitshow." He paused. "No one got away. In thirty minutes everyone was either shot dead, or else trampled on by their neighbours. Those ambitious teeth kicked in by their friends. Some even family. Well?" He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Everyone's family after something like that. Turns out, to facilitate such an efficient genocide the banana guys even rented a train — a dozen carriages filled to the brim with bodies. A lovely banana farmer train. All the windows had to be shut, or else it'd look terrible, wouldn't it? A train rumbling on with arms and legs stuck out of it, still clad in their Friday's best. Now."

He punctuated the ground with the butt of the shotgun. "First time I heard the story I always wanted to know if you can really kill a few thousand men before they run out on you. Before they run out of you. I wanted to know if it'll be like killing ants. Do they bite you, the way red ants do? Or do they just… Sort of die and disintegrate and leave that smelly oily shit on your fingers? First time I ever heard it, that's all I wanted to know."

He lifted his head and looked them straight. "Today we can find out, if you want."

"Fucking hell," Someone said. Looked at the constellation of Kiryu and the guns, trying to connect to the dots into any shape except this one. They stargazed. No matter how they looked, there was only the pointy end of Scorpius. Sagittarius with his unwavering arrows.

The front-most guy could see the bandages in Kiryu's open collar, and thought: perhaps? Kiryu cracked his neck.

"I'm offering you a great deal today," He said. "I didn't rent a train but I have a lot of sea. In the water, everyone is family. But I don't want to do that. I'm going to offer you a choice."

Pointed upwards. "These here are Sera's men. You'll join them. Join Sera. Sign over your vows, or else." He put the bananas on the imaginary table, amused by how morbid even a stubby yellow fruit can be.

"Think about that," He suggested. "Some of you are already thinking. Some of you are not thinking the right things. Try again."

"The guns are up there," Someone spat, very close to the front. Kiryu tilted his head. "You're down here," The same guy said.

"I'm where I should be," Kiryu told him. "I intend to keep any one of you who runs exactly where he needs to be — in the crossfire."

"You think you can take all of us?" The incredulity was high. "There's hundreds of us like, right in front of you!"

"I never said I intend to live. I said, I intend to keep you from leaving."

"He's bluffing," Growled another. "I've seen him at work man — he's soft. He ain't fuckin' Kazama. We don't gotta listen to any of his bullshit."

"But—"
"This is exactly how Kazama...

"Sure as hell can't be him, even it sounds like it."

One man said: "Even if we go to Sera, what's gonna keep us there? You ain't gonna be around forever. You think we won't go, when Kazama calls? You think we're stupid enough to follow that weakass cunt?"

"Yeah," Someone else added. "Sera doesn't have the balls to fight off someone like Kazama."

"Because this." Kiryu leveled the shotgun at the guy, aimed, and with one quick squeeze blew off his shoulder. The men nearest to him spattered and speckled, splattered clean through. In the echo chamber, the man's screams turned itself over and over, writhed at windowpanes and metal doors, doubling back to haunt. Kiryu stepped towards the man, the crowd parting before him as seas to prophets, and quite like a revelation he brought down the butt of the shotgun to the man's face once-twice-twenty times, until there was hardly any face left, and most of them teeth.

Looking at that angular mess and speaking to it but intending his words for the crowd, he said: "I promised I'll stop hurting people on my side. So it's in your best interest, your number one fucking priority, to be on my side, understand? Sera calls, and I come. You join, and you don't leave. If I come back, and you're not on my side, you'll wish you never lived. I'm not Kazama-san," He snarled, voice as low as it could be, as dangerous as the crowd he faced; him stepping closer, them backing away, shoe prints red from bravado. "I'm not going to go for your kids, your parents, or your wives. But I will go for you. Your choice. You get to pick. Lucky you."

Then Kiryu retraced his step away from the crowd, and went back to his chair, which when pushed and shoved screeched on the bare floor to admit him. A rickety throne. He breathed heavily. The short walk is much. There were footsteps all around him like a murder. He sat with the gun on his lap, a pet dog with no bite.

He wasn't fool enough to think it'd help him besides adding to the showmanship; what can you do with five bullets, six bullets? With these Nishiki couldn't even kill a single man, how-more three thousand. Those who will fight him won't be more than five hundred — he had the mathematics of traitors 101 down pat. The important thing is to grind them into the dust, make an example of them. For this he held himself very still. The bandages bound him, his chest was on fire. He had to look stronger than he felt.

When Kiryu looked up from the gun he saw his challengers, a hundred or so ringing his chair. In the bright light they looked like mannequins: their eyes deep shadows of their brow ridge, their lips a rude slash. Another few hundred dissidents somewhere in the crowd, waiting for a chance to join the fray. Waiting to see how the waters flow. He stood, and let the tide surge around him.
'Dog meat in Lee's tongue': 狗肉 (Gou.Rou). Literally, dog meat.
Minami laid tied-up on the backseat with his face against the cushion. All his world was leather and the smell of other people's ass. At some point he'd been replaced by guns or roses in the trunk, but he still had to go somewhere — so out-plop he'd been stuffed into the backseat instead.

From his view all he saw was drunken light: the white punches of the streetlights that cast in sometimes depending on the angle of the street and the uncertainty of its height. When they came close enough to the electronic district it was a rainbow: neon blue then pink, the rotating green light of ads (saying go, instead of come), and the dim glow of golden billboards. Bokeh. Or put simply: the shit Minami sees when he's drunk and someone punches him in both eyes. The man with the scar hadn't said a single word to him since he put Minami's mask back on, tighter than Minami liked it. The straps dug into the soft flesh behind his ears.

The car pulled up somewhere. Quiet. Suburbs perhaps, or else a HQ office too important to be located in asscreek Kamurocho. The door opened, and a second man joined them in the passenger's seat. His shadow was wincing and flinching at every tiny movement — each once revealed, quickly suppressed with the force of pride. Now there's the smell of blood in the car.

"You've captured it?" The man asked. Had the smooth undertone of authorities in there.

"Yeah," Scarface said.

"Excellent."

The man didn't check on Minami; either he was trusting or confident. Maybe he wasn't both but just a wanker — had Scarface by the balls somehow and confident he'll toe the line. Know the sort.

Minami tried his best to keep still, still as a lump of coal in the backseat. Last thing he wanted was to attract the attention of this new guy. Somehow Minami didn't think he'll give Minami's mask back to him and pat him on the back. Know the sort.

They drove for many minutes in inky darkness. Streetlights somewhere above him but too far up. No skyscrapers, no office towers. Industrial zone? The walking lights came on slowly, spaced too evenly for the city. Perhaps at the front seat and through the windows there was more to be seen; where Minami was it was just darkness and leather and ass.

At a deserted junction — no sound at all except for the yawning vacuum, Scarface killed the car and said: "About Hana…"

"She's safe," His companion said; a doctor calmly administering molasses. "Happy, even."

"Yeah?"

"You know the measure of my doses by now."

"Of course."

They rolled down the windows, through which Scarface smoked and the other didn't. The waspish incense of cigarettes (which smelled old, ancient, forgotten) came wafting to the backseat, where it pressed itself upon the leather, stained the skins of it. Minami's wrist itched where the cuffs cut into him, but he willed himself to remain still, still, stealing snatches of whispered tales.

"You haven't done enough to merit that. You should know that." Their passenger said.
"I know," Scarface sighed. "But not far, I reckon. We're going there, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Can't talk you out of it?"

"Time for talk is long pass, old friend."

Scarface tapped against his door, flicking sparks and ashes. Through the holes of the mask and the frame of the window Minami could see a slow figure cycling home from the past into the future, ahead of the car, disappearing into, then out of, the passenger's window.

When the figure had gone for good, Scarface said: "Once you would have said, not this. Years ago you told me, yourself. Better that it's fractured. Power concentrated at the top is disease."

"I made a mistake."

"You did."

"So I did. And we've seen it. Remissions again and again, always the same sickness. It's easier to remove it. Replace it with ourselves. Cleaner."

"We could remove ourselves. You've always put too much heart in Tojo. Why won't you listen? If we go, and don't look — "

"No."

An answer without room for arguments.

They parked somewhere waiting for something, or else just waiting for time to overtake them. There was every now and then the sound of slow water, not flowing anywhere, pushing-pulling against unyielding concrete. Lights again somewhere further off, too much for this time at night — construction? Tilting his head upwards Minami could see a giant circle in the sky, lit up around its circumference. A draft of something great. A bright circle, in the dark oval that were his temporary eyes.

"The boys aren't a cure to this, Shintaro," Scarface said, at last. "Even if they were, you can't administer them like this. They're two-part waters. A vaccine. Elixir and poison. Long ago you should have listened to me and either put them both there or not at all."

"He'll do fine."

"But fine's not what you wanted, or else none of this. You wanted greatness. You wanted steel."

"He'll do fine," The man said again. "And if he's not performing so well right now, he'll do just fine when I detach his attachments. Of everyone he's always been the best. Anyway. Anyway, it's too late. I can't reshuffle the deck."

"Maybe the problem is you've never cared about those boys as much as you care about the damned clan."

There was a slight pause. Then the man said: "Pieces no matter how valuable are just pieces." He added, "After everything we've given to the clan it has to remain, no matter what."

"Not this again."
Their passenger said nothing.

Scarface slammed his palms on the steering wheel. "Goddammit to hell, Shin. Why won't you listen? The clan isn't a living thing! It won't remember. Keeping it strong won't change anything, all you're doing is — "

"Cease, Osamu."

A long swallow of silence.

"Old friend," Scarface sighed. "Old friend."

Under the weight of that circle they sat thinking of memories older perhaps than even Minami, who knew nothing about anything — only that he was hungry, and they were fools, these two old farts with more behind than front, living on a diet of the goddamned past.

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"And stay down!" He bellowed.

And so!

Kiryu came back into his abdicated skin on perhaps the hundredth man he punched into the ground, waking himself with those words. Unlike Majima he'd never been wholly present in violence, so that he came back holding onto someone's hair like a scalped prize, bloody victories around his legs: all around him blood pooling and congesting him, clustering into the crevices of his shoes, souls and soles — which he raised now and saw he'd stepped into someone's pissy remains and dear fucking god, how vile!

"Hell," He swore. "Bloody hell." He looked around him for the shotgun, and found his head could only turn a twenty-five degree angle, after which it could no longer turn, was all pain. Kiryu looked down; tried to see in all that mess if there were bits of him. If he was dying and didn't know it. He couldn't tell, too much shit on him. He staggered over the steaming pile of groaning shits, all of them grabbing their knees, arms, weaknesses in both fists, and staggering still Kiryu went wandering around a single-minded sleepwalker 'til he found the gun, which was of no use to him — at some point he'd rammed it into someone's guts one too many times. Realizing then he didn't need it.

He turned back to the crowd of men. He was trying but failing to appear strong: breathing heavy, chest heaving, somewhere in there vomit in between his sternum and his throat, peristalsis working upwards; but not disgust. Weariness worn tight. Kiryu knew they could see. How weak he was. How easy to overrun. No shape. No shape at all, to be doing this. Question is, really, which of them wants to be first.

"Make up your damned minds," He told them, coughing his words. "Or I'll have them shoot."

Kiryu stood straight then — heard his bones screaming in its fleshy container — and put himself on display. To them he said, "You can see that I don't give a shit if I get caught in this. All I care about is that you all die with me. You understand this?"

He paused. Gathered his words. "Either you walk out here Sera's men, or you won't walk at all. My plan works just fine without me in it, and I certainly don't give a shit about yours. Make up your mind. I'll count to ten." He said, then started: "Five."

"Seven," He said.
“Nine,” He growled, and above them in a row, the heavens clicked mechanically into place. An orrery: they saw now it was an orrery. Like clockwork, the moons and the stars spun clockwise and counter-clockwise until they were where they should be. Masked in the shadows still but present always, like the doting skies. Stars coal-black against moss-green ceilings, shone down at them. One of Sera's men lifted a belt of ammo.

Ten hovered above them, an axe grinding to a halt in mid-air; hanging by a thread. Kiryu's tongue pressed upon his teeth to eject that word into their hesitation.

Then someone broke that silence, cried — We'll go!— and from there on it turned, the tide turned, brought with it another song entirely, each voice clamoring to be heard, belting confusion all around, a choir of dramatic self-compassion, echoing over and over until Kiryu had to clap his hands over his ears and walk out of that cesspit of noise.

Later Kiryu went into the water for want of something better to wash himself in (some unknowing janitor had locked the public washroom) and dipped into the dark waters by the pier. He knelt by a low ledge where old men sometimes come fishing on weekends, from which you had to run if there was an earthquake; an escape insisted upon by multiple warning signs. He disobeyed and retreated from high ground to low ground, and lapped at the waters. With it slipping off his palms he wiped down his forehead, his neck, dipped his hands into it and scrubbed out as much as he could from the webby patterns of his skins. It salted and stung wherever it went; him all fleshy wounds.

The water was too black to reflect him, which was just as well. He must look a fright. Something out of a horror flick, either the monster or the victim. Bloody hell, he swore. Everything fucking hurt.

His ablutions done he sat back on his ass. Stone stairs damp beneath him and dirt in the groves with reedy weeds growing out of it, but he didn't care. A plaque beside him explained sonorously the history of this pier. There was a ship out there he could see, a skinny white light signalling: behold I exist. Otherwise full dark, no stars. All the heavens still contained in the warehouse. Kiryu took out his phone for a hit. He deserved a reward for a job well done, didn't he? Called Majima, to hear his voice sassing for voicemail; except there was none. Majima hadn't set it yet. No hit then.

"Fuck it," He said. "Bloody fucking hell."

He sat there by the water listening to Sera's small army eating bone by bone all of Kazama's men, heard it gorge and glut and grew rapidly greater than its seams, perhaps greater than its breeches, and choking on disorganization still it ate more and more — before midnight it had to finish its supper and consume all three thousand whole. What will they call this new chimera? The Nikkyo didn't allow such large groups in their organization. Well, it doesn't matter. They'll think of something, they always do. And anyway, what are names? They're the lowest marker of identity.

From afar if he had no context, it sounded like a great party. Just another one of Kamurocho's weekends, a few thousand men gathered around for beer and big-screen baseball, perhaps renting the hall for their favorite small-time idol. Those loud cheers that were protests, grumbling, insolvency — well, they sounded like cheers. Three times the shine, or a machine-gun kiss. If you squint there's hundreds of men having the time of their lives right now. A great ball.

Kiryu called Sera. No signal.

Quietly he took out his imaginary board and begin to move pieces about, reconfigured it into possible futures, then shattering them and sweeping them aside, placed them one by one patiently again onto the board. He found a configuration he liked and waited patiently by it, his finger on his kin, his
golden general. His pulse.

The fifth division leader appeared by his side like clockwork.

"We've got word," He told Kiryu. "Kazama has mobilized against Sera. What do we do?"

Kiryu untucked himself from his wet stony bed on the stairs, climbed upwards slowly, and thought: on this one night all the stars congregate. Amass. A mess. Said: "I'll take some men. A token force. Not the Kazama ones, obviously."

"We could bring everyone. We'll outnumber them."

"Won't work. We've won them over but we haven't made them ours. I'll be fine." He dug about his pockets, took out his phone, and handed it over to the man. "Someone might call. Has an accent that sounds like he's talking inside a kansai tin can. Tell him where I've gone."

"He won't be of much help," The man said, sceptically.

"I know. That's not the point. He gets upset, anxious, if he's left out of the loop. So keep him in it."

Kiryu drove off then, after arranging a number of men to follow him. The anonymous leader of the fifth division watched them pull away, holding onto an ill wind.

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Majima meanwhile was hungry, nay, voracious for success, for prey. He was dragging a man along with him five steps until he got to the face scanner. Then he flung the man at it like cold fish, pushed his knife up-up close to his eye so it'd open wide, and beep — hello, said the scanner. Welcome back.

Welcome home, he whispered into the hulking insides of a factory floor. Behind him was just Nishida and Twenty-Two, who each nervously shouldered in two duffle bags. When unzipped there were rainbows in there, wiry fireworks in three primary colors, which they could program to explode ten thousand years hence or yesterday, depending on their pleasures.

"That one," Majima said, pointing his knife at a conveyor belt in the middle of the factory floor, which looped loosely and drunkenly around a piston-shaped machine that extruded into the floor and extended tall enough to block out the moonlight. The belts entered and exit along the walls at different points, floors opening into holes opening into floors — an Escher painting of industry. Minami was right: everything was seamless, like the factory had been born this way. Majima went clicking his heels on the clean-cut tiles, each step sounding like a giant's footfall. From the conveyor belt he picked out pieces of plastic lumpy and misshapen. He peered at them, found he didn't know what they were.

"Ya know how to work this tangly rainbow shit?" He asked Nishida. "We only got one shot. If we blow it, we're blown."

Nishida looked pained. He'd taken off his mask to better see what was going on. "I'm okay, maybe? I've read the manual sixteen times, oyaji." Under his breath he added, "The one you got from the internet."

"Not my fault Kiryu-chan sent us bombs but not the manual," He said. The word bomb reverberated around the room like an accusation. The windowpanes brittle and bitter up there, frowned censoriously at them.
He pointed at something that looked vaguely important. "Let's get the party started then. We need some fireworks 'round here or else Kiryu-chan's gonna give us that dissy look again. Say, y'all weak and meek. G'on. Get!"

Majima watched Nishida and twenty two unfolded a briefcase and refolded it into origami, bomb-shaped flowers each thorny as fireflowers; they pushed it into the darkest corners of the machine, wedged it in between belt and metal where hands could not easily reach. Majima meanwhile held back the head of the camera, and with a practiced swish of his knife, cut the muscles of its soft neck. Bzz, it said, and closed its eye.

"This room's done," Nishida said.

"Next then?"

They crept in this way from room to room. As he crept, Majima imagined that he had exchanged for his virtues and good deeds, an eye of a fly: with that kaleidoscopic retina now he saw his many borrowed boys, each in rooms very much like his, holding fireflowers in their hands and planting them viciously into the cracks they could find; planting fists into Nishikiyama men, pecking out an eye — one on each side. They will do this now for some borrowed time.

"Flowers," He thought.

Said, "Sorry, girly. Didn't mean to do it."

Nishida looked at him askance and turned away for his privacy.

On the sixth room they were in, they touched a door and it screamed. Loud cries of alarm from it that reverberated down the walls, all of them screeching now — intruder, intruder — fiercely longing for their disturbed sleep. Down the doors and out into the hallway those cries echoed. Soon the sound bounced and split and danced apart until all of the factory was in alarm, its innards seizing at the thought of an unwanted bug.

From afar, more giants' footfalls; much louder than Majima's had been — and these were steel-clad.

"Are those?" Twenty-Two asked.

"Gates," Majima swore. To Nishida he said, "Fuckin' security gates. This place's gonna lock tight like a jaw. I gotta go. I gotta find him. Nishida, here's on you."

"The plan works just as well if you don't, though," Nishida said, quietly.

Majima paused mid-turn, one foot already stepping on moonlight. "Whazzat?"

"I mean, you can come with us — Kiryu-san's plan don't call for you confronting him at all. It'll work just as well if you don't."

"Ya serious?"

"I'm just — just saying."

Majima turned and faced down Nishida, which he saw sweating and cowering from his sharp gaze. Still he thought: good ol Nishida's probably stronger than many and then some, for when he looked at Majima he had steel in him; maybe not in the face but in the backbone, each lumbar an alloy of will.
"Is that what ya askin' me to do right now, Nishida? No, I ain't mad," He held up a hand. "Just asking. That really what ya want me ta do?"

Nishida swallowed. "It would be safer."

"Safe like grandma pants, sure."

"Safe," He said again.

"Is that what ya askin' me to do here?"

"I… If I do, would you listen?"

Majima hesitated. He looked at his knuckles, naked without the gloves he'd given Minami. Crisscrossed on the back of them were words cut in with a knife, which no one could read, nor he himself understood. Revenge probably, if you took them out and spelled them backwards and played it in reverse on a moonlit night. Either way, hate. Hate cut so deep he'd seen bone.

"Guess so," Majima said, reluctant and soft. "Guess I would. I'll be pissed as all hell, but okay. My life ain't really all my own, innit?" He shifted his weight onto his other foot. "That's what ya askin' me to do, Nishida?"

"No," Nishida admitted with a tremulous smile. "I wanted to know if you understand. Go on then, oyaji. Go give him hell for us. For all of us." He clutched — nothing, but clutched anyway fists and empty air. He dug around his duffle and found a trigger for the bombs. He handed it over on sweaty palms. "Please stay safe." He cautioned.

Majima grinned fiercely. "How come ya don't know 'bout me, Nishida? All those years and still a dumbfuck. Safe's my middle name!"

Then he tore a Majima-sized hole through the air, and exiting from strength to strength he left the room for the hallways where steel doors fell behind him one by one, taking him away from Nishida and Twenty-Two. On their knees they too crept elsewhere, flowers clutched many each by the fistful; these unweary gardeners.

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Majima went charging into the building in earnest, and found his feet wandering about a labyrinth, which in its modern cleanliness was Minos' come again cut into eggshell white. Minos had it good: at least his didn't have gates, or the wails of widowed alarms.

Majima had walked these halls so often in his dreams that they had the knitted quality of a mnemonic tapestry; in the dreams that he conjured with the fabric of Minami's spying eye, he'd weaved a hall very alike yet different. The factory windows sixteen-panes wide were familiar to him, for example, as was the tallness of the ceiling and the shortness of his breath. But where was the rest?

He didn't, couldn't dream, for example, of the sculptures that lined the halls exactly a hundred feet apart. He had seen them but can't know how reflective they are, how cold to the touch, how their spherical weights and odd curves bent light. Light now came from the windows. Sharp diagonal slashes of moonlight on the floor (though in fact this was poetic imagination; it was just a tall lamp in the yard). Every third window of white light there was red, announcing an emergency. As if one didn't know with the shrieking in their ears. The panes are cool to the touch where he brushed his fingers against them; when snapped they sang like flutes of champagne.

In his dreams, this place was unpeopled. Guards did not burst out of doors at him, shatter priceless
vases over him, cut him with knives, tore his cheek in carelessness. They did not hit him hard enough to bruise. They don't come twenty then fifty to one. They don't show up clustered behind one large man, five at the back with rifles aimed at him. So cruel too! Even in Majima's nightmares no one was this cruel — well, maybe Kiryu-chan, who was so cruel by a lake with heavy-lidded eyes promising a kiss yet no kiss.

No one in his dreams shot down their friend from the back just to get to him.

"What the actual fuck," Majima said, and threw his knife and chased it across its silvery glint to end his journey in their face. He knelt on several of them, kneaded them like dough, then kicked them out of the window to bake outside where it was warm. Majima never thought it'd be this cold either. Some cunt had the AC stuck on a blizzard. Small wonder it wasn't snowing, hailing, heil Nishikiyama, that bollocksy ass.

He came across a dozen of Nishikiyama's boys stomping on five of his Nikkyo ones, and he divorced them first from his boys and then from their guts. The sixth one he stabbed he held up by his hair, clenched hard enough his knuckles turned white, and asked: "Where's Nishikiyama?"

"Ain't in—"

"Don't lie ta me, dickwad. I saw his twin 'fore. I wager I could cut out both his eyes and he'll be at his braille desky tomorrow. Where's he?"

"He'll kill me," The man said.

"Lucky you. When I'm done with him, he won't be in any shape to kill ya. Now tell me — or ya'll be needin' braille yerself."

He was told, and he squeezed the information until it cried pearly drops in his fists. Go, he told the Nikkyo boys. Plant the rest of the bombs, and get the fuck out of here. What remains is between him and Nishikiyama; that sweet, sweet boy.

Majima walked until he began to tire; in the labyrinth walking alone was a herculean effort — he felt he'd cross great icy distances, walked past a shelf of ice, every one of it potentially erupting with frozen termites. He was lost and he didn't care: he was always lost so what's one more maze? Amazed, more like, by how the paths splintered and fused and grounded to a halt in the middle of nowhere. Who builds dead ends into their office? More Nikkyo boys whose ass he had to save, then Nikkyo boys who saved his ass. One brave man who took a shot meant for him and died bleeding around a shattered bone embedded wrong. Fucking hell, Majima said, and twisted his knife all the harder for it.

At length by and by he came alone at last, to a hall with rich carpets underfoot, so long and wide and thin and bright that it must have been laid first as a foundation even before this factory came to be. They were on the second floor, yet Majima knew this to be true. This building and this carpet and this room had existed before Nishiki Industries existed, had either been born here or else transplanted brick by brick from elsewhere. The inner sanctum of Nishiki Industries, therefore the heart, the heart of things. This heart beating before it had a body.

He opened a door by random and saw that it had been preserved like a shrine: a drab office that looked like a white-collar shithole, with dark blue carpets. The two couches ringing a table had such a nastiness to it, such poverty to it, that it must have come to be long before this factory.

The second door he opened could not be so; it was locked. He broke the lock with his heels, and saw within that someone had preserved entirely a boy's bedroom — an orphan boy who had bunk beds
by the dozen. Only three was in this room, but it had a look to it, a texture that said: at some point the room was meant to grow, meant to extend, that the carpet sawed in half neatly trampled underfoot was meant to go gently into an orphanage much longer than this. On the top bunk of the second bed, someone had moved all the blanket of the lower one; two boys were about to make blanket-tents and whisper secrets to each other. On the roof, murals of cheery stars and suns. A red kite with a long, long tail.

Was he dreaming...?

"What the fuck," He said, realizing he was not.

Majima knew where he should go. The end of the hallway… The end of the hallway, and those classical pillars, like a university door someone's stolen: an education within, received and returned in kind. But first he couldn't resist, and began to open the doors one by one.

Most of them meant nothing to him. There was a bar, maybe a personal one in the sixth room. It was classy but nothing special, a standard Kamurocho second floor watering hole. Many-easy if you're not too tight about your budget. Floor a tasteful walnut. A jukebox that thinks it's a comedian. Within the bar, ghostly shelves of whiskies bared their wares at him. He stepped out. Doubled back to the fourth and found what looked like a tea-room, the sort you initiate gokudo members in. The seventh room was painful but recognizable: a hospital room identical to the one where Majima had killed (yes, yes, he could say it now), killed Nishikiyama's sister. The soft hiss of a curse followed him out.

The ninth door he opened and immediately slammed it shut.

Majima found himself shaking and seized himself. Looked down at his hands and saw them trembling. But no. He won't be frightened by the crazy.

The ninth room was the Ota place. Kiryu's room. An identical inch by inch recreation of it. Even the orange carton was there. The TV. Every fucking thing.

Majima wagered if he went in now — could stomach going in — he'd find the exact same shower, broken in exactly the right way.

"And they call me the mad one," Majima whispered, keeping his voice low to avoid stirring ghosts. "They call me mad. They ain't seen nothin' yet."

Majima shook his head, shook out those stray thoughts like a wet dog. The rooms had moved him; like Alice going backwards, so that he became uncuriouser and uncuriouser. He will not pry; he knows now not to pry.

He went to the doors at the end of the hallway and stood before it. Knew, by gut and marrow that Nishikiyama was within. He root around himself, brought together his greatest angers — which he knew personally and frequently — piecing them together into his hateful self. Bit by bit he stood in front of Nishikiyama's door shaking first from shock, then anger, and at last with a madness that he imagined rivaled that of Kiryu's family's (but in fact fell widely below the mark).

Five hundred men just this season alone, Majima reminded himself. Five hundred more many years ago, dripping away slowly like Nishikiyama's fishy trucks out there in the yard. Five hundred more maybe, that he doesn't remember, never knew himself, that died like unnamed rats in unmarked alleyways unrecognized even by their boss. All that and more: which only Nishida knew and Majima forgot — and others too, plentiful like sun.

For them, and who else?
For Kiryu, whom Majima could admit — shielded by the hefty silence of the hall — that he was quite fond of.

Kiryu. Unpredictable and bullish, ox-eyed staunch and stubborn. Immovable, implacable, untouchable like the very tide; who retreats at every beckon regardless of time. Trapped inside his constipated shell, huddling all his pointy secrets inside. Loyal only half the time, then loyal to a fault. Does what he's told, then never what he's told. Strong but weak. Stoic but mopey. A real sad sack of shit, in other words; his only strong point his karaoke score, and a voice that shivers Majima's timbers. But still?

Still, still, still.

Still Majima made allowances: this is the same Kiryu who had found from within himself — in spite of the madness of their world — the will to sink, instead of swim. To upend the board when he was winning, to restart a game he'd checked. To sink, when he could have easily outswam them all.

That takes strength, to quit the game when you're ahead. Takes guts, to say no. No, daddy-o. To give away your crown. Majima could respect that. Could be fond of that. Had to have his excuses to be fond of that, or else where will that leave him? A sentimental idiot preternaturally attached to that logheaded lug. So for Kiryu too.

For them, and what else? For himself.

For them all, Majima pushed apart those doors and said: "Oi! Anyone home? I've brought ya a gift, Nishikiyama!"
Kiryu returned to an ancient rusting boat, to find it in the junction of murky waters and a three-way fight.

Kazama's men, of course, and the Nikkyo men retreating deeper and deeper into the ship. What surprised him was that Nishiki had sent his army too: there were almost as many of his men as Kazama's. They were so similar that in the fight, they often became confused as to who was hitting who, and the crowd together began to blend and meld and brew themselves into a viscous beast frothing itself up from the inside. Everywhere stirrers: bats and swords and poles and guns. Kiryu was glad. If Nishiki's men were here they were not with Majima, and Majima would be safe. Safe, safe.

Kiryu waded thickly into the middle of things. Told the Nikkyo men he'd brought to make a circle about him, and in that halo he walked quicker amidst the battle, slipping through its clenched teeth into the space between the bony backs of Kazama-san and Nishiki. He could fight but he didn't want to. It would slow him down, and already his wounds were slowing him down too much. He was walking like molasses...

Kiryu got onto the ship without a problem (slipped and stumbled only at the last step of the stairs) and dispersed his entourage. Fighting with barely two dozen men would be suicide, an inefficient use of resources. Then he went deeper into the ship, to look for Sera, Kazama and without a doubt — Kashiwagi.

Of the many things he would remember from this day later, the one that pained him the most was his inability to tell which one of his memories came from this day, and which one of it was much older. Had he seized upon the railing and shuffled along it with old man's feet on this Spring day, or long ago in the debts of Winter? Were the planks slippery with blood in between the fourth and fifth corridor on this day, or in the receded past? He would remember the indent of his fist on a throat, unable to tell if he'd almost-murdered someone on this day or another; if he'd walked stumbling into a door this night or that.

Certainly Shibusawa's men had less guns. But these too had guns. How to tell...

How did he end up down there, in the ship's kitchen? Was he looking for a bite, or a place to hide? Kiryu was at this point seeing three of everything with a throb in his head indicative of some trauma (indeed, post-trauma), strongly applied to the back of his head between his scalp and his neck. The damp leg of his pants had been the victim of an overturned jug, or else someone's small bladder. Either way, acidic. Stinging. He strode purposefully through the long aluminium back of the kitchen, where once they'd made feasts for hundreds of Tojo guests and more. Today all he was serving was fists, which he ladled out by the spoonfuls to man after man after man, unable now and always to tell the difference between them. One man shook his knife at Kiryu more out of irony than expectation. He passed on.

One of the virtues of a good fight is that it reduces all the hard equations of life into very simple things: seeing, walking, raising a fist and throwing a punch; all things you knew when you were five and never had to relearn again, like riding a bike. Fighting without worries like you're in a sandy pit once more. He walked, and put one leg in front of the other. If he stopped now he might fall over, no thoughts in his head but simple ones. Evade evade lunge strike. Parry parry block strike. This goes on any longer he might fall asleep. Not of arrogance, but weariness. He stopped walking. He'd reached the other end of the long kitchen, then the extravagant dining hall, and exited into a
maintenance hallway.

Down here where it was quiet, the belly of the ship thrum its pleasure at meeting him.

There were boilers behind the steel-plated corridor walls, which vibrated slightly hellos and goodbyes as Kiryu walked down it, unharassed by men for once. His feet were cymbals and hi-hats. The steel stored the ship's heat, and he could feel it through the floors of his feet. He took the opportunity to count one two three four five hurtful holes on himself, which he wondered vaguely if he should plug, but was more concerned if Majima right now had six seven eight nine holes upon him too, and if any of it was fatal. Kiryu had left the phone with the Nikkyo man as much to correct himself as to inform Majima. He stopped walking and sat on an extruded pipe. Waiting just for a short while. A long while. Gathered his fraying nerves from the steam, and breathed in the hot air. He thought: direction.

"Gotta go," He said.

He had direction; now for once, since long ago. He should keep going.

Gradually, he emerged back into a hallway with carpets underfoot one side going up and the other going down. Without being able to tell which direction was prow or stern, he had to lean against the railing and look out: at that infighting crowd of brother-father-motherfuckers, and orient himself northwards to begin a second leg of his journey lower and lower into the bowels of the ship, where the intestines of it intermittently deposited him into small maintenance entrails full of steels and bolts, and then without fanfare or commotion deposited him again into the middle of things: large bronze hallways of the many sculptures and the many vases each in turn wrecked at last by violence.

Thought, he: Yakuza really should stop buying art. All they're doing is a great disservice to culture. The gokudo itself is a disservice to culture. Priceless: without price.

At the end of his many small and narrow journeys he found the right door, and wade through his enemies and stood before it. In the light of things he saw that it was in fact, very similar to the design of Purgatory's coliseum; it had the red steely surface of brushed steel, the faux-ancient ribbing on it. The only difference was that Purgatory's gate was black, and here the gate was red. Where in one you enter from red to black, here you enter from black to red. Always at a loss, never a gain. The knocker was an indeterminate beast, either dragon or demon.

He went in.

—

In Nishikiyama's and Sera's inner sanctum all was calm and in fact looked quite tranquil and ordinary. You'd have to look twice just to see something wrong, and to see it, you have to know how to look exactly right. The desk and the table and the tea and the glass are all where they should be. The moonlight cast equidistant in both rooms, through a sixteen-paned window, and a porthole. Five feet in one; four feet in the other. There was one cold room. There was one warm room. Both were softened by carpets and tatami underfoot, which for reasons of their own, were wet. On the wall there was much art. None of it destroyed yet.

In one room there was a sculpture of a vast iron tree. In another, there was a painting of an open sea; the undulation of its green waves reminiscent of first-flush tea. In the third circle of hell, it is said that sinners who betray their families, are hung upon steel trees formed from knives. In the fourteenth, they boil traitors out of their skin alive.

What does this tell us?
This tells us nothing. It just means hell has got a lot of basements.

—

"Hey asshole," Majima said.

Nishikiyama sat behind his desk counting his treasures and his beans, silvery coins spilling out in a pool on his table. They laid languorous and luxuriating, under his desk light. His hair had fallen around him, pillowing his face, softening the lines, and for once Majima saw what he must have looked like long ago — before the humiliations, before the education — and did not wonder why Kiryu might have loved him.

"Dog," He greeted, and became ugly again.

Majima walked in and studied the room. "Nice place ya got 'round here. Couldn't tell it was built outta blood money."

Nishikiyama placed a coin back on the pile. "Why not? Most of it was your blood. Sorry, I meant — your boys'."

Majima smiled back, easy-easy. Just two old friends shootin' the shit. If he gets his way, he'll be shootin' this lil shit.

All his days since Kiryu had told him he could have this, Majima had dreamt of how it'd be. He had imagined in the throes of his patience that he would come in guns blasting and knife swinging, spitting a mile a minute disrespect left and right, and without celebration or drama he would go straight for the gut no-waste. Disembowel the motherfucker. Put a fork in Nishikiyama's chin and draw out thick slices. As celebration Majima would drink all his wine.

Yet now he was here, he found he wanted to respect this moment — should shroud it with enigma, weight it with elegies.

"Come out from there," Majima said. "And fight me with balls. On your feet."

Nishikiyama obliged him, stepped from behind the desk in his well-cut trousers and his measured skins, a tight-fitted cuff on both wrists. He swept his hair back to keep it out of his eyes; the locks retained their drowned look. He rolled back his sleeves, unbuttoned part of his collar.

"I don't understand what you're doing," Nishikiyama said, tucking away a curl. "Unless you plan to kill me today, you'll achieve absolutely nothing. Most of my men are away."

"You think I won't kill ya?"

Nishikiyama chuckled. "Kiryu won't let you. If he wants me dead, he'll be here himself."

"Funny how you never give him the same courtesy, eh?" He shrugged. "Could be I'm here without permission. Not so good at followin' orders, me."

"God help you then, when he pulls your leash."

"Oh?"

Nishikiyama smiled his superior smile, and said nothing.

"I ain't like ya, I don't just roll over when Kiryu says git." Majima sneered. "Ya keep your limp-dick issues to yourself, how's that?"
Nishikiyama twisted the cricks out of his neck. "Let me congratulate you then. Good job coming this far, man. Joining as the Nikkyo? A good play. Must not be yours, since between you and your men, you couldn't think your way out of a rat maze." He lifted his fists. "Don't miss them too much. You won't kill me? I don't have the same compunctions. Enjoy your reunion in hell."

Majima grinned from ear to ear.

He widened his stance, stretched his knifing arm with his other hand on Nishida's trigger and said: "Let's set the stage then."

—

That day the sun rose slightly before midnight.

Under an enormous moon full to bursting, Nishikiyama saw sunset everywhere.

Nishikiyama looked out of his sixteen-paned windows and saw a kaleidoscope of sixteen oblique suns rising simultaneously; the orange pennant of their flags blazing in a sudden burst of life, waving red and brazen in the wind; through the draft, they traveled towards him. Upon his vast encampment, there began a shout from the distance of unadulterated joy. Far across from miles away, the first organ of his machine burst into flames, and in its eagerness to share its infectious yellow joy, it spread the good-fire to its neighbour so it may celebrate with the next building, and the next, and the next; whereupon reaching some important checkpoint another sun would rise again — round and adorable like a boil — which when lanced, on that exulting cauldron would roll and engulf yet more land; eating steel just to show it could. Tonight yellow is the color of our joy.

Everywhere Nishiki Industries found shades and hues at last: the violet of a dusky sky illuminated after its time, the tangerine of half a half-hundred rising suns. The original white building became smudged with grey, then streaked with black soot. The blue skylights imploded inwards then outwards and became green, ill at the sight of their own exposed bellies. Laughing at all this the tiny red lights coming to life. Exit, it laughed. Exit! In its death throes the factory had become beautiful, a touch of rouge on its delighted cheeks.

"Hoo!" Majima laughed, and could not hear himself laughing.

It could be heard everywhere the jubilant song of Nishikiyama's labyrinth dying. The conveyor belts conveyed the tenor of the breaking walls into the pistons, who fell with a weary mumble into the hollow floor, itself giving way in a great bassy rumble all that laid upon its chest and turned over in its sleep, depositing all the sounds that had been trapped erelong on the factory floor into the land, which received it gladly with a sigh. The ground is sinking. Eventually it will be sunk. Then the dream will end.

All this while the factory was a dream machine. This Majima saw now only after it'd began to die. A machine to make dreams, or else a dream of a machine.

"Hoo," He said to Nishikiyama. "Nice shitshow, eh? Majima Goro special. How'd ya like my rainbow? Ya feelin' warm and fuzzy inside? No need to thank me."

Nishikiyama turned back to him. Against the window he was a dark cloud with a fiery lining.

"I'm going to kill you." He said.

Majima tossed the trigger away, spread his free hand palms out, the better with to measure the distance of koi-to-dog. "Ya can try," He jeered. "Ya sure can try! Let's see if you're half the fighter your brother is, eh?"
Then they fought.

Had there been an audience in that room this night (and there was) the crowd would have said they fought like a fault in the stars. Theirs was an orbit, which they used to circle one another over and over, doubling back, tripling back, once to the front, then around again.

Like suns they could not seem to meet; when they met, knuckles brushed against knuckles and met the metallicity of knives. Out came the silvery spark of a lustrous clash. Majima fought always backwards, Nishikiyama always forwards, grim in action and determination to kill Majima for what he’d done. Majima too, was grim and determined, but he had learned patience, and in his patience he had learned to move into the past so he could traverse to his futures.

Still moving astern Majima lashed out, cut his way across the inky skies between them. He’d learned to nick. Against his nature, he’d learned to nick. He tore small silvers out of Nishikiyama: every time Nishikiyama hit him, the koi drew away his fist with a brand new cut, splitting his knuckles, goosing his flesh, feathering his neck. A hundred times over Majima could have gone for the jugular and he resisted; juggled instead opportunity and time, and sliced Nishikiyama bit by bit to bleed him into the water.


"I learned," Majima said, and tore a great arc in between them.

In one quick lunge Nishikiyama caught Majima by the lapel of his jacket, and brought his face suddenly onto those fists seven times. The sharp end of a shoe landed on Majima's chest and he was kicked, spinning hurtfully onto a desk and landing wrong, a sharp pain in his back. Majima shoved aside hundreds of insignias, each one glinting like silver, and stood. Nice one, he thought. Many more to come.

Much more to come.

He appraised Nishikiyama, and saw the next time he shoved his fists into Majima's chest that there was something familiar in the nature of his strikes. With close scrutiny in between lunging to-and-fro he saw: Nishikiyama fought in the same way Majima once did, by unfurling himself and unfolding himself over and over again, leaving every which way between neck and belly open — without caring if he was hurt; by suppressing hurt with hotter coals of pain inside. In terms of the heavens he was the lowering sun, would crash and burn before he admitted he could die.

Very good, Majima thought — and said: "You remind me of someone."

He did not say — me.

Flames now began to lick their room. Majima had specifically ordered that the main office building wasn't planted with bombs, but orders can only stop so much. The labyrinth could hinder people but not flames, and the fire came now to peer curiously at them, eating its way through the ostentatious carpet outside, to slip beneath the thick door within. The door itself it slowly peeled, squaring around it. A rectangular silhouette of light.

Time, Majima thought, to take Nishikiyama as deadly as his brother, before his carelessness killed him.

Majima launched himself at Nishikiyama then, a collision that caught the bastard off-guard. He leaped into Nishikiyama's personal orbit and from there fought only ever up close, stabbing his knife whichever way velocity allowed, branching and flashing it around, splitting it apart in radial fury. He
saw an opening and tore at Nishikiyama's jaw; for a moment his world was luminous with blood. Water and wine, as he'd promised himself. The blood landed on Majima's face, and he wiped it away. Horizontal lines. A warrior's mark on his cheeks.

"Dog," Nishikiyama hissed, clamping a hand around his neck to stop the flow. "You fucking bitch!"

"Dog," Majima admitted, and dissolved his knife somewhere on Nishikiyama's person. He launched himself forwards and struck the man across the face, fighting prettily no more. "Dog," He said, and hit. Nishikiyama dodged his next attack, strayed backwards, and from there their fortunes reversed and reversed: Majima prowling forwards and him backwards, bedeviled by a demonfire knife, beset at all sides by a hound. "Dog," Majima growled, and snapped at his heels: stomping, kicking, swiping with the sharp steel of his shoes.

"Dog!" Majima snarled, and slammed his knee into Nishikiyama's face.

He shoved Nishikiyama away just to dog the man around the room. Pawed him, mauled, nipped at him. Teeth and claws and hooked nails. Brought him close again and barked taunts at him. With his dogeared knife held in his teeth he collared Nishikiyama at last, dragged him by it, and hit hit hit hit; numb now both his fists. Finish him. Finish this! Majima brought him to the corner of his mongrel's desk and slammed Nishikiyama into the sharp corners of the table once-twice-thrice, until at last Nishikiyama folded and slid softly into a puddle of his own blood and the piddling wetness of his carpets.

"Dog," Majima spat again.

Nishikiyama bared his teeth, gargling blood.

Childish flames by now spread across the edges of Nishikiyama's bookshelf. The rectangle of the door became the rectangle of the room; itself burning bright by the borders. The door had at some point during the fight disappeared steadily into the lower jaws of the flame, its ankles black with soot, then its knees; soon it will be invisible. Now it has disappeared.

Majima stood above Nishikiyama's pliant form and thought: how easy to betray. All he needed was his knife and he could score, score along that jawline, and put his losses to the match. His vengeance was just at the tip of his blade. Kill him. Murder him. Hate him.

But of course he wouldn't. Why would he do that?

"Ya know," He said, watching the nubile young flames. "Ever since I started on this shit, dog is what everyone's been calling me. Dog, dog, dog, dog, dog. That's what anyone can say. Mad dog, wet dog, dead dog, foul dog. Kill that dog, run it down, beat him low. Like a broken tape record. You all need a dictionary. All this fucking art and no culture."

He looked at the back of his mutilated knuckles and its mad verse.

"Motherfucker," Nishikiyama said. "You happy now?"

"Better, but not much. See the thing is," He said, realizing the room was wavering, then realizing it wasn't — it was he who was wavering. "The thing is, no one ever understands that it's a compliment. A dog, ya see." He measured a length with his hands. "A dog is loyal. A dog follows you to hell, burns with you, becomes ash with you, dies a hellhound with you. A dog is fucking loyal. That's more than what I've seen of you. Of any of you. All this time I've never seen a single shred of loyalty on anyone. Every turn I take, I see traitors. Every one of you saying brother mother daddy — and in the end nothing but lies and half-truths. A dog don't do that. Can ya say that?"
"No," Majima concluded. "Ya ain't even that. A dog, ya call me. I'd rather be that than a lil' bitch. That what's you are, right, Akira?" He put his fingers where it hurt. "Akira, said your sister. If only she could see you now."

"Don't you fucking —"

" — cut ya where it hurts? Ya really gonna say that to me? Boy," He said. "You don't know where to fuckin' stop."

Behind him the fire roared to life, gorging itself on a diet of books, flared so loud that Majima was nearly deaf to the click. But even if he'd been deaf he was not blind, and he could see just fine the gun Nishikiyama had whipped out to face him.

Majima had brought only a knife to a gunfight, but he had something even better. He had papers.

—

Kiryu stared down the barrel of the gun.

He stared, but from afar, from the other direction, where he saw only the back of it and its potential exit in Sera's head. Kashiwagi held it expertly.


Kazama placed his teacup back on the table, and nodded at him. "You're late, Kiryu." The chairman and he sat around the table. Kazama with his back to the door, and Sera facing it. In between the both, was Kashiwagi to the side. One hand on a gun, and one hand in a fist. Off near the border of the room, a crumpled man in a snakeskin jacket with a mask on.

"I was held up." Kiryu said.

"Held up, or taken by surprise?"

"Both. I didn't expect you to move this soon."

"Well, never mind. You're just in time. You can watch Kashiwagi clean up his mess." Kazama refilled a delicate porcelain teacup, and pushed it smoothly across the varnished wood to Sera. "Have more tea, Sera."

"Thank you. No good to go on an empty stomach?" Sera asked. A perfect poker, neither fear nor sarcasm.

"Precisely so," Kazama said.

Kiryu removed his shoes, and stepped on quiet socks onto the tatami; too educated even this late to muddy tatami. "Hold," He said, stumbling across the room until he stood a few short paces away. "No point in killing Sera, oya-san. I've already checked you here."

"Have you now."

"I have."

Kazama-san tilted his head. Then he unfolded himself from the ground. Stood and faced Kiryu, leaning on his walking stick. "Explain yourself." He said.

From his pocket Kiryu dug out the paper, crumpled and used and innocuous. It could have been a
receipt, with the care he'd shown it, yet mightier still than any word. He showed them the living will. With a will of its own it unfolded itself, and there along its shaky joints it whispered mightily and said: I will be Nishikiyama Akira.

"Fourth chairman of Tojo clan, Kazama-san." He explained. "It will be no one but Nishiki."

Kazama looked at the paper, his gaze burning holes into it. Then it moved by slow centimeters across air and disappointments to meet Kiryu's own.

"Meaningless." He said.

"Not so."

"Let's see how far you can move then. Demonstrate your play, Kiryu — and we'll see if you've checked me in truth. Begin."

Kiryu nodded, and folded himself into seiza on the floor. He folded himself but did not shrink inside; he diminished only his exterior, but grew bold within.

He slid an invisible piece against the grain of the floor, and said: "My first move. I place Nishiki on the throne as chairman, and solidify it with a living will. You counter then. Swift and brute force. First you kill him yourself, then either you inherit the clan or I." He folded the will and placed it neatly in front of his knees. "I counter this. I remove your men. All three thousand I give to Sera. Now you're too weak to kill Nishiki alone. Not enough force. But what's stopping Nishiki from killing you?" He moved the will, rotated it so that it faced forwards. "So I check Nishiki too. By now another unit will have razed Nishiki Industries to the ground. A grievous injury that won't kill him, but it weakens him terribly. Now he has men but few resources, you have resources but no men. Now you're even. What's your next move, oya-san?"

Kiryu drew by habit an invisible line on the floor. "Your next move, Kazama-san, is this. You kill Sera and reabsorb his men. Your men. Then you're strong once more — strong enough to kill Nishiki and redo your moves."

"Very good," Kazama said. "And what's stopping me?"

He placed another document on the floor, without unfolding it, and said. "A will for death and a will for living. If he dies I inherit all of Sera's men. Then I'm back in the game. Nishiki as chairman, you as dissenter, and I with enough men to stop you both."

He unfolded the document next, spread it and showed his card. "If you move against Nishiki, I'll check you. If you move against me, I'll defeat you. If you don't move, Nishiki will swallow you." He explained. "And in the meantime all the other Tojo sharks in the water, waiting for you and Nishiki to show weakness. Do you think you can wrestle the men from me, oya-san? Do you think you can do that, before the other players kill you both?"

Kazama's hand clenched around the stick. It was the only indication he'd heard.

"I taught you how to play the game. You think you can stop me?"

"I think I can," Kiryu said. "Or else you wouldn't consider putting me on the throne in the first place."

"You believe this."

"I know this."
Kazama considered the texture of his will, the weight and heaviness of his decision. "And you do all this because… Because what? You want to quit the game? Is that correct? Help me out here, Kiryu. You've told me how you'll win, but not what you're playing for."

"I'm playing to lose," Kiryu explained. "I don't want you to kill each other. If I play the game to win, I'll always have to kill either one of you. I've replayed it over and over again. Every scenario involves a death, and I've had enough. I'm sick of it."

Kazama's jaw clenched. "Sick of it? Kiryu, you don't know what sickness means. You barely even know what enough is. You don't understand."

"I understand enough."

"No. No, you don't. You're a child having a tantrum. I told you to kill your brother, and here you are acting out in the worst way. What do you want, Kiryu? Will you be placated if you can keep your pet? Why, keep both, for all I care. You can share the throne with that weak boy if it's what you want, and have your new dog lapping around your ankles. Is that what you want to hear?"

In that moment Kiryu looked instead to Kashiwagi, and saw in those pools of unguarded pity that perhaps Kashiwagi understood better than Kazama ever will.

"It's you who don't understand, oya-san," Kiryu told him. "I want you to acknowledge Nishiki. I want you to raise him, groom him, love him — show him every kindness you've ever shown me. And you will do this, because I will give you no choice. He will be your successor to the clan. It's too late for you to reshuffle the decks. You can't make another successor in time, before you're too old, before you weaken."

"With all I've done you two will have nothing but each other, and you will either learn to swim wrapped around the other… Or else you can drown. And when you do, when you two drown out of spite, I will mourn you but not save you. You have every chance to decide— " He clenched his fists. "I know that deep down, you loved the clan more than you ever loved us. Well, Nishiki will destroy the clan if you don't steer him right, oya-san. You had better make your peace quickly then. For Tojo."

Kazama considered this. In the insulated room outside of which war and wear was happening, they sat swaddled in the thick fabric of thought and played the game a dozen times in a row. Each board cleared then replaced, imaginary shogi outside of prison, imprisoned still, and at last Kazama came to a conclusion. A conclusion he must have saw from the very first piece he laid.

"There is a way out of your game, of course." Kazama lifted from his person a slim handgun, identical in fact, from the piece he'd given Kiryu many months before. Chekhov in full circle.

"If you're dead," He said. "I can kill Sera, reabsorb the men, and destroy Nishikiyama. If I must rule alone, I will do so. A disappointing result, but I can live with that disappointment." He cocked the gun.

Another gun turned to him.

"No." Kashiwagi said, without inflection. "You won't be doing that."

"Osamu?"

"Don't be a fucking fool, Shintaro. You do this, you'll be nothing but regrets."

"I'm starting to have some," Kazama noted dryly. "Bringing you back in was a mistake, I see."
Kashiwagi snorted, his scar crumpling around his nose like a tear. "It is. I've done enough to merit the worst of your consequences."

"I see."

"And you can kill my niece for it later. Here today, you can kill Kiryu first, and me after. Then you kill Sera, and Nishikiyama last. All that killing later you can be the king, and all around you a river of death. Is that what you want?"

"Nothing better."

"You care about the clan. You only care about the clan, Kazama, you fucking bastard. So think for once of it. Which do you think will help it more — working with that asshole, or killing everyone worth a damn in the clan? You're the strategist. Why don't you tell me, you damned fool?" He growled.

"You agree with this?"

"No, I don't agree with Kiryu's play. I think he's fucking insane for putting you two together. It's exactly what I don't want out of this. I brought him out to stop you two, and here he is, putting you two together in a shit chute royale. But I understand why he's doing this. Why are you doing this, Shin? Cut your losses. Use the other boy."

"No," Kazama snapped. "Never that weakling. That fucking fool? He'll crumble like dust."

"Weaklings can become stronger," Kiryu said. "In contrast the dead are forever."

"People don't change."

"Clearly they do," Kashiwagi snarled, and shoved the gun closer, his hand shaking, then steadying itself. "Make up your mind, old friend. What will it be? Your crown of nails, or a plywood throne?"

To which Kazama in answer, seized his cane tight enough his bones show through, white through the bleached knuckles, and folded too.

—

Majima kicked the gun away, stomped on Nishikiyama's hand until it snapped in the other direction, and dropped a copy of the will in front of him.

"Congrats, chairman-san," He said. "Fourth big important asshole of this nation of cocksuckers. How are you feeling? Can we get a quote, mister chairman? How 'bout a sound bite?"

"Fuck you," Nishikiyama swore through gritted teeth.

"That's no good," Majima said. "You're the chairman now. You gotta talk the cock. Take the piss. It should be 'penetration please', eh?"

Then in words greatly different from Kiryu's own he played through the same game for Nishikiyama, showy and with flair, words slow and slurry even as the flames nipped around their ankles.

When he was done, Nishikiyama only glared. "It'll never work," He said. "The old man will sooner kill me than look at me. And for Yuko? For Yuko he's gotta go. He has to die. I'm not done — " He spat red. "I'm not done by far. He has to die. He must be punished."

"You're tellin' that to the wrong guy. Frankly, I hope Kiryu's full of shit and the old man does exactly
that, blow you to high-hell with dynamite. Dynamic shortcut into the skies. But who am I, to tell a
guy how his family should die?” Majima warmed his blade in a neighbourly dose of fire, and pressed
it onto one of his own bad wounds. A blacksmith's boy once told him it'll heal better this way.

"Now. Now that we're done, let's discuss my revenge." Majima said, kneeling down, then sitting
cross-legged in front of Nishikiyama, knees folded and neighbourly, friendly smile on his teeth.

He began with the tip of his knife pointing at Nishikiyama, and said: "See, when Kiryu first told me
about the plan I'm all ballsy for it. It'll hurt you, he says. Hurt ya bad and hurt ya good. Nothing
worse in this world than to rule, but having to share that power with the old man you hate — the old
man that killed yer sister. That's nasty, isn't it? Scares me sometimes, Kiryu-chan does." He pointed
at the flames. "So your punishment, is that you get to rule, but ruling weak and mewling for years
yet. You're king now, but ya still gotta suck cock. Maybe in a few years ya gonna be strong enough
to break out of the truce with the old man, but in the mean time it's a lotta humble pie, eh?"

"This is your first punishment," He said. "But is that enough?" He cocked his head, and tapped the
question with the blunt edge of the knife on his hand. "Is that enough, do ya think? I killed yer sister.
You killed a thousand of my men. Your sister's a nice lady, but is she worth that much? I don't think
so. One person no matter how pretty inside is still one."

He sighed theatrically.

"So I gotta think, don't I? Hurts me, but I gotta. So I think, and I think, and I think, and after all that, I
see — that Kiryu is wrong. He says all you care about is power. That you care only about power.
But that's not true, eh?"

Nishikiyama closed his eyes, a spasm through his face full of hate. Majima pulled him up by his hair,
refused to let him droop.

"What I finally figured out, see, is that what ya fuckin' care about the most, is Kiryu." Majima sliced
the answer into his own palm. "What ya fuckin' care about the most-est in this fucking world is
Kiryu. That's all there is to it."

"This is why ya put him in prison instead of killin' him. This is why ya go for the old man and not
him, when he must be the bigger threat. This is why you shoot him but won't murder him, for the
same reason Kiryu shoots his old man but won't do him in. Ya all love each other so much it makes
me sick. Sunflowers, right?" He smiled. "'I'm sorry. In eighty-six by the tree'," He quoted. "Doesn't
sound like the kind of thing you send to the guy you hate."

"So what do you want?" Nishikiyama asked, opening his eyes. "You want to kill him? Take him
away forever? You think I'll cry over it? You think I care?"

"I ain't ya," Majima said, standing up and dusting his pants. "I only got one eye but I got folks that
help me see better than you." He tapped his eyepatch. "But yeah. I'm gonna take him away from ya,
sure. Got that part right. I'm gonna take him away, away forever from here, and you can sit on your
fuckin' throne forever knowing he's somewhere out there and never yours again. Not yours to see,
not yours to own. Never yours to love. If he loves you, you won't know it. If you forgive him, he'll
sure as hell not hear it. Enjoy your fuckin' memories, because that's all you're getting."

"Man, what a beautiful start to a wholesome relationship." Nishikiyama sneered. "You'll stick to him
at what — the cost of your own time and life, just to make that happen?" He chuckled mirthlessly.
"You'll stick to him like a parasite just so I can't have him? Wow, you are a fucking dog."

To which Majima grinned fiercer than the flames, fiercer than the midnight sun, and said: "But
haven't ya heard, Nishikiyama? Don't ya pay attention in class? Positivity, my little friend — living is the best fuckin' revenge!"

Later Nishida clustered worriedly by a truck on the riverbank. Around him the scattered remnants of the Nikkyo boys, who had suffer losses but not much. Here was Nishida instead, worrying if he'll suffer a loss greater than any of theirs. He stood by the front of the truck, his hands in his pits to ward off of the cold, periodically stamping his feet. "Where's he," He grumbled. "Where's he?"

Around him the men milled. They wanted to go, and soon. They had no great attachments to Majima.

"We have to leave soon," Number Fifty said. "The cops will be down here very quickly, big bonfire like this."

"Just a little longer," Nishida said. "He'll come soon."

Fifty looked at the building engulfed in flames with scepticism, and Nishida protested, "You don't know him like I do. He's survived worse than this. He can survive anything."

He waited and waited and waited and waited until he should no longer wait; the sirens too near and coming closer every second. All the other men got into their trucks and began to drive haltingly away, leaving Nishida alone with the lone truck, him leaning against the metal grille wrapped around himself. Soon, he swore. Soon or else not at all.

His patience was rewarded with a grand sight, which he knew would come; had only hoped he was in time to see it.

Oyaji — because of course oyaji, him with that showy shit — running screeching out of the building, an explosion on his ass, laughing wildly and drunkenly, shaking the half-dead man he was carrying like a bag of sand, laughing, laughing, and cackling still, screamed: "Nishida! Nishida! Look what I found! Get those fists of yours ready!"

To which Nishida broke out in a grin, waved and said: "Oyaji!"

Very much later, Kazama turned his gun instead towards the prostate figure of the man wearing Majima's skin, who Kiryu could tell wasn't him. Majima wouldn't shave his hair like that for a million bucks. Nonetheless with one smooth movement Kiryu unfolded himself and stood between Kazama and Majima's boy.

"Now I can't throw my own tantrums too? Really, Kiryu, you ask too much."

"He's one of Majima's." Kiryu explained.

"But not him? Of course. Such complicity, Kashiwagi."

Kashiwagi shrugged, never letting go even once his own gun. Kazama could agree and renege without breaking for air, and he knew it, and Kiryu knew it, and they all knew it.

"You've grown into a disobedient boy," Kazama said, softly. "I raised you to be better than this. Trading your own life for a worthless piece? Foolish."
"He's not worthless." Kiryu explained. "He's one of Majima's boys."

"And you are willing to be wounded, to die for that."

"I have learned — that some pieces are worth more than many others." He said. "I have learned that there are pieces who are people, and who are important."

"A lesson I imagine, you think I should learn." With a sigh, Kazama pocketed the gun. In this way he said he will not renege.

"I hope so," Kiryu said, wistfully.

"I will try." Kazama said, and smiled for the first time in many a while. He took a slow step forward and wound to wound, clapped a hand on Kiryu's shoulder. "Congratulations, Kiryu. You've won. In some fool way, I'm proud of you."

And Kiryu said, with lashes lowered and a smile of his own: "Thank you, oya-san."
On a windswept hill that promised to be good waiting, Kiryu waited by the car, and was glad that there was no water to be seen for miles to come. From his vantage point he could see the city. It looked unblemished and constant, had swallowed the force of three men and their petty wars and came away without a scar. Hello, said the sign into the city. Goodbye, said its other side. If you walk back and forth along the same stretch of road, you can meet it again and again. Hello-goodbye-howdy-goodbye.

In the sky there were vertical streaks of smoke, one each for every tiny sun that Majima had set off. From somewhere outside the city close enough but not in the middle of things, their boastful flag waved in midair. Out on the pier too, another victory sat tethered with a rusty anchor. In the middle of things meanwhile, a thousand Tojo stars were arranging and rearranging themselves, doing deeds great and important, moving and shuffling into constellations Kiryu won't like — but they don't concern him. Not yet.

One day perhaps he'd come back to this. Upon a deep midnight in some distant future he might again alight, drive into the city on the low belly of another too-hot car, landing on its neon airstrip, to fly into battle once more on winged feet. But if that day had to come it remained some distance in the future, shrouded mistily in possibilities; one of many, though twice as plenty the alternatives, which he hoped fervently would come instead.

He walked ahead of his car. Slowly, slowly, for his wounds were many inside and out. He stood smoking a cigarette leisurely, thinking of a lighter he'll one day retrieve.

A sharp cold object pressed against the back of his neck.

"Guess who?" Someone said.

"Majima, please." He sighed.


He turned around, and saw quickly that all was well. In relief he said, "Hey. I see you're alright."

"That's 'glad to see you're alright', numbnut," Majima corrected. "Ya gonna have to learn how to talk normal. Your words and yer face ain't matchin' right now. Sure glad to see ya, say your eyes. Then you open your mouth and it's all, gee Majima, wish you could die sometimes."

"Glad you survived," He tried again.

"Eh, better but not perfect. You'll learn," Majima said. "Lemme teach ya," He added. "This is how we say hello 'round here."

He grabbed Kiryu roughly by the back of his head, and they kissed, mauling each other, unused to tenderness and therefore failing at it, lips and teeth and tongue clucking and getting in each other's way. They came apart laughing in pleasure still, more from the eagerness of contact than the gentleness of it.

"That doesn't seem any better," Kiryu said, licking a spot on his lips where Majima had bit right through. It bled coppery on his tongue, a rusting proof that he was alive.
"Whazzat? Ya filin' a complaint here?" Majima swished his head left-right, looked around, glanced at the pattern of the knoll, stamped on the grass scratchy and drowsy under his feet. He perked up. "Hey? Hey! Been a while! How 'bout we do this? I got a coupon I'm eager to cash in!" He cried.

How 'bout they do this: Majima punched Kiryu over and over again with great precision, somehow managed to get every time every single inch of him unwounded and unbandaged, so that before it was over Kiryu's existing wounds had split apart and found to their surprise that all around them were new bruises, and said: hello, new friends!

Then hello, old friends. From down the hill two men could be heard huffing and puffing, about to intrude on their privacy. Kiryu laid there with his fingers entwined around Majima's, stealing contact without thinking too much of it, until he couldn't hold on any longer, and Majima stretched away from him towards the two men: one holding two boxes of souvenirs under his arms and the other with a whole basket of it and bruises on his face, as punishment for a crumpled snakeskin jacket.

He laid there listening to them bicker and fight. Then he dusted the grass and dirt off his suit and joined them.

"Hey," He said. "Nice to see you guys are alright."

To which Majima grinned and said: "Ya learnin' good, Kiryu-chan. Ya learnin' to be good."

Then they were off into the light.
On a certain day they'd named with great precision number twenty-five, they drove away in a hurry with dust and dirt spattered on their heels, and sped half a mile away down a small country road narrower than their joys, before they realized the handbrake was down, hence why all the grime in the back. Within that biscuity sienna dust was someone shouting: "Get back here, oyaji! You can't just break a vase and drive off like this! Get back here!" — which they could not hear over the sound of their wild revelries.

Yesterday was number twenty four, and upon that wonderful day they'd watched the first of the summer fireflies sparking into life drowsily out of the crooked knees of trees and the bent elbow of willow branches. Ahead of them some hundred acres of tea, growing in the patterned knoll of the hills, out of the eaves of steppes, on the shoulders of evening's eve; first-shy leaves unfolding themselves in the magenta weave. There was a soft rain later, under which they drowsed. One on the other's lap. The tips of the mountains were still snow-capped and icy-toed.

"Wow," Majima said; eyes on a hill he's never seen. He sneezed from allergies, but not that kind. Somewhere the sound of a TV.

Tomorrow will be number twenty-six, if tomorrow comes. If it does they will spend it chasing down more roads in search of a post office; in it they might mail Nishida an apology and some money, or they might not.

If they do send it the money will get there in a week, travelling slowly and leisurely like a whisper, passing hand over fist over hand over fist; at last it will show up in a palm loose and relaxed many weeks hence. It will be a long time to wait, but they have got a long time to wait with.

When they're done with their harebrained search for a mythical postbox, they will search up and down the sleeves of the country for some snowcones to eat. They won't find any. It is too early in the season for it. Later they will find an inn, or perhaps they will not. If they don't, they will sleep in the car, or perhaps on the car, or perhaps beside the car; under a blue canopy above and grass-root-mud below. Around them will be themselves, getting to know each other, learning to like each other. Between the two of them they'll only be missing a few toes.

On some accurate day perhaps number two hundred or so, they were back in prison again and this time broke, having spent the last of their money to put themselves away. Broke and breaking out; there is a joke here waiting to tell itself. Together but apart they sauntered into a prison cell opposite Saejima's, that master of waiting, and woke him up from his diamond-frosted dreams.

"Who?" He said, looking up from one to the other. "What are you doing here?" He asked, under heavy and drowsy lidded eyes.

"Ghostbustin'" said Majima. "How's that?"

"Who are you?" He asked the other one.

"Promised," The man said, without introducing himself, his nature, or indicating in any way his desire or non-desire for his part in this puzzle. He seemed entirely at ease with prison, folding himself
in neat diamond-shaped patterns into his cell, and there leaning against the bars that night with his arm tucked behind his head, began a long game with Majima of imaginary shogi. With bars as walls Saejima could hear them going on all night: disturbing his rest, waking him with remembrance, fondling him with camaraderie. Through the silvery unspooled light he heard clanking generals leaping over clopping horses, leading pawns by the reins. They played a curiously reckless game: in it everyone could die at any moment, without any reason.

"That's some reckless playin'" He told Majima.

"Aw, it's nothin'" Majima said. "This is good. It's only imaginary, innit?"

"What are you in here for?" Saejima asked.

"Well, whazzat?" Majima pulled out all ten of his fingers and said: "Lessee. I can't rightly remember? I think I'm in here for vehicular manslaughter, second-degree murder, grand theft auto, aggravated robbery, assault and battery, plus public indecency. Am I missin' anything, Kiryu-chan?"

"Public indecency." This man (Kiryu now) said.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"You came in for two counts. You have to say it twice." He said.

"So I do — two counts of public indecency!" Majima crowed.

Saejima was confused, and confused still he was led by inches and minutes and lost seconds later like a sleepwalking tiger, through Kiryu's plentiful obedience, into Majima many plots. One day somehow they opened the doors and woke him and led him through a hall, hell-bent in its grudges. Then outside. Into an air same but different. Above him a cloudless night and anemic mid-winter stars, shining stone-white on coal-black. Under that monochromatic light two motorcycles were waiting for them. On it were many small things: a snakeskin jacket, a grey suit, a tanto; a green parka just right for prison-shrunk him. Properties large and small. On those winged backs and in those loose skins they fled deeply into the night, hid in lonely huts, flying away in concentric circles ever wider in flight.

Majima was incredibly pleased when they got to the shack. There was in there splayed out like a wish: hot food and warm rest. On their journey they walked in the dark. Slept in the light. Noon found Saejima awake, watching dust-drops in the thick air of the shack, snowing in and out. Majima and Kiryu sleeping back to back, skin to skin, then nose-to-nose. It's a familiarity that discomfited him. His kyoudai had always been prickly. In and out. Who was this strange man his brother was wrapped around? What fires had they been burned in, that they have become welded like this?

"Where are we going?" Asked Saejima, whose breath came out as a fog. He rubbed his hands warmer over the stove, which burned steadily down.

"In circles," Majima said, yawning, untangling himself from Kiryu. "In circles each greater than the last, so we'll spiral onwards and never end up where we've passed. Ya game?"

By and by through many frozen nights and the back of iron horses they came at last to the steep steps of Kamurocho, where they stood under a circular pachinko sign advertising: CHANCES FOR ALL. What a bold promise. In the frosted windows their reflections appeared like bokeh, flowering like young hearts. Under its multicolored lights Majima said: "Bye then, Kiryu-chan? Got some shit to do. Best ya clear out now."

Kiryu looked at them but did not see them; his gaze dreamy and lidded, he was looking at the tooth
of Kamurocho's lone tower and thinking of someone else. Majima seized him tightly by the forearm and said, "Ya promised."

"I did, didn't I?" Kiryu said.

"No wallowin', Kiryu-chan. Eyes up ahead." Majima insisted. He nodded.

"Don't die," Kiryu said. "You're irreplaceable." He added, in such a matter-of-fact way that Saejima felt embarrassed to be privy to it, an unwilling voyeur. He turned away and looked into the frosted glass. In it the two appeared as shadowy lovers, a loose idea, and all he could hear was the gentle sounds of their goodbye.

"Call me if you run into real trouble," Kiryu said. To Saejima he handed his number, said: if Majima's being stupid... But Majima had intercepted it; took it away.

"My business, my business," He was defiant. "Ya got no say."

"Exactly when will I ever have a say?"

"Never?"

So they bantered, and said things, and said things, and said things, and eventually Kiryu gave up and said: just don't be too stupid, I don't want to come back and filch you out of a gutter. Saejima looked away again. A long while.

"Eh-heh," Majima chortled — blood on his lips — and made no promises.

Then Saejima and Majima went to a hill, some hill, any hill, and watched a slow buckling rented car drive out of the city; watched it until it was diminished by distance, and in that distance Saejima saw that there was a truism — absence made the heart fonder. If Majima's heart was any fonder it might burst.

"He might come back, kyoudai," Saejima said. "Many roads into the city. Many nights to cover it."

"He won't," Majima said, turning away and walking city-wards. "He promised me."

Catching up to him, Saejima asked, "You believe him?"

"Sure I do." In that voice was conviction a thousand-fold, which Saejima believed that Majima believed, and so let the matter go.

—

In the city the days slipped quickly away on doe legs, skipping unsteadily across the frozen lakes, playing shakily around the wintry rivers with its white-capped snowbanks. In all that snow it carelessly dropped itself day by day in the water, sinking through the melting carpets. The days passed quivering in the cold, unevenly, without rhyme or season — so that they can look up and find an uncertain number of days behind them, without at once knowing how it'd come to pass.

Cease, Majima said, and seized his days. Still they slipped past him between his fingers. To know what day it was he held a phone to his ear and traveled through it to Kiryu, listening to the whispers of accurate time.

Saejima could hear the ticking of a flawless clock every other night, even with his parka pulled up to his ears. From Majima's room came whispered snatches of conversations, replaying the day for a
distant ear. Hi, Majima would say. Lying on his back with his feet crossed on the wall, so that he sat upside down against the coy wishes of gravity.

They lived in a shithole of a place, a rundown apartment they'd borrowed. Saejima wasn't picky about his quarters. Majima was, but he wasn't being picky now, since he was (in his own way) living elsewhere.

"How's things? How's that? How's they?" He'd ask, and some answer would come but not for Saejima; the cockles of Saejima's ears were filled with his own stories. Later Majima would come out of his room, having stopped the conversation in the middle of it, as he was wont to do, for fear of goodbyes. Wistful and sleepy, toeing the ground, he muttered: "He said it's always sunny there."

Sunny where?

"Eh, nowhere?" Majima said. "Somewhere." He shrugged helplessly. "Somewhere I'm gonna be."

"Why do you do that?" Saejima asked. "Numbering your days like that."

They smoked. Majima looked into his storied past and remained silent. When he was done reading it, he said: "'Cuz we fought hard to have even a single one of it. So now we gotta count, right? To know how far we've come. To know how far more we gotta go. How'd you know where ya goin', if you don't keep track of where you've gone?"

He blew out a perfect circle, and watched it disintegrate. "You don't know who you are, until you've been dead. Then your story is complete. Right, kyoudai? Don't gotta tell you."

And so, and so.

They were standing in front of their apartment block, looking up, smoking cigarettes. Opposite them, on the 56th floor, was something that belonged to Majima which he hadn't claimed. He had claimed instead a square plot of land somewhere north, to build a hill over Purgatory so no one can ever be lost there again. So that no one can ever find themselves. There was behind them at the moment footsteps in the snow. In a few moments very soon, someone might step over it from another direction, and they will have gone that way in someone else's shoes. At least it will look like that. Who can tell the truth?

Guess Majima was right. Guess there is some sense to this.

—

In the middle of Saejima's story they walked one day into a bar like a joke and Majima saw that he'd seen it before. Not a deja vu, but in a dream. A second floor bar with many whiskies and a jukebox. Walnut parquet crisscrossing on the floors.

"Hi sweetie," He said to the lady bartender. "Two of the good stuff, yeah?"

"Sure," She said, and stopped them from sitting at the counter, ushering them deeper into the bar where booths sat angled direct to each other. "Sorry about that," She added, placing their coasters and drinks onto them. "There's a regular who comes by every Tuesday, and that's usually his spot. Wouldn't want you all to rub shoulders."

They rub shoulders. In comes Nishikiyama. Majima saw him, measured the span of his coat and the richness of his taste; touched with imaginary fingers the dead animal ringing his neck and the indestructible iron folds of its length. Instinctively Majima knew that this was a coat that could not waver in the wind. It was too solid, too heavy. If Nishikiyama went swimming he would drown, so
weighty this royal cloak of his.


"You should see the other guy," Nishikiyama said, a thin smile thick with arrogance. He hadn't bothered with an eyepatch. An eyepatch wouldn't hide his scar. "Hullo, dog." He said. "Have you brought your master?"

"Away," Majima said.

"Kept away, I suppose."

"Forever away." He promised.

They ignored each other and nursed their drink, then their wounds. Each very near and very far to their hearts. When Nishikiyama drew himself up to leave, he slipped a cold bill across to the lady and approached Majima, hat not in hand.

"How is he," He said.

"Better?" Majima said. "Any-fuck-where without ya is better, I reckon. Under the sea would be better. Under a rock would be better. In the eye of a tiger, still better. How's that, fuckwad?"

"Still a rude little mutt, I see."

"I'm not wine," Majima shot back. "I don't get better with age. Now why don't ya fuck off and never talk to me again?"

Nishikiyama looked at him for a long time, then reared his head back and spoke in tongues. Recited poetry, invented haiku. Sonnets fourteen lines each, and every one sweet as peas. He had messages for Kiryu that Majima would not convey, that he spoke of to lighten the burden of his heart without transporting it elsewhere. Transference. Majima crumbled his words like yellow petals and crammed them into his drink; gulped it down in one go. He watched Nishikiyama leave.

"An eye for an eye," Majima whistled. "And I didn't even have to try."

Then he thought of the hunch of Nishikiyama's shoulders, which the coat could not mask, and took pity. What a burden. What a burdened burden. From the bartender he borrowed a memo pad to write down the message. Out of a developed sense of irony he chose a yellow page.

—

Almost a thousand days later when Saejima's story and his own was almost told, Majima began to hear from afar another story: a rumor of a house.

The story of the house was always in motion. It walked through whispers and promises to him down the telephone lines; through its shivering length he heard a myth about a home.

The house is not large: it is one storey-tall, and two-stories wide. It has six windows on good days, five windows on bad ones; one window has rusted shut, but there are two doors to the side. The house is a thousand square feet if it tries. It houses exactly eight kids just fine. When they forget to close the windows, which they often do, the rain comes to visit and leaves a dewy scent. The wind blows into the house through an open doorway; with it the light-bulbs sway and dance in their conical lampshade-dresses. They illuminate home-cooked meals recovering from a long illness: it is
weak, but getting better. When the season is right, leaves and sleet gather on the drive.

Often there are cats and mice, which both had to be fed so they will play nice. The mice eat bran. The cats eat flowers. In this story of the house, there are only nice things to be had. There is a garden somewhere out back where herbs have been grown and vegetables are growing and flowers are about to grow; last of all there will be trees, which take a decade or more, and won't come to be until the house has aged well into some future light. In the house there is a porch and in that porch there is a car. With effort and compromise everyone might fit with ease, though the windows will have to be wound down, to let in the breeze. If Majima comes he'll have to sit in the trunk.

Majima comes. He'd helped close Saejima's story and had left his own with Nishida. He was done with tales, at least this kind of tales, for a short while.

"Yo, Kiryu-chan," He said, showing up one day. "I brought you a present from that Nishikiyama cunt."

Kiryu took the yellow slip from him; became wistful, for only a moment. He'd grown fonder of other yellows. Majima let himself be hugged, let himself be held. Let himself be touched cheek-to-cheek. forehead-to-forehead. As if they were sharing secrets. As if they still have secrets to share. Isn't it all known now?

Kiryu looked at the paper. It's smudged out and gone blurry. The paper had its own birthday: it was two years old. Asked: "What did Nishiki say?"

"Sorry," Majima said. "Double sorry burgers. Everyone nice and smiling now. All clowns, no frowns. Also, come back and let us fuck yer titties off."

Kiryu raised his eyebrows.

"What? Fine, maybe that last part's embellishment. Just a bit." Then he asked: "Are ya goin'?"

"May I?"

"Ya askin' me?"

He said, "It's your revenge."

Majima dithered, then said. "'kay? I dunno. Guess so. Can be. But ya get a curfew. Stay past midnight, and you're a pumpkin to me. Anyway. Ya goin'?"

Kiryu did not say one way or another if he would go. Instead, he said, "It's been a long time. I'm glad to see you're alright." Tilted Majima's head upwards, and frowned at his chin. "I thought I told you to stop shaving in the dark."

To which Majima said, "Stop yer hen-head. Ya learned good, Kiryu-chan, and now you're too good — a nag!"

Of course that's not all. He also looked around and said: "Hey? Been a long time! How 'bout we do this? Bet ya all soft now!"

And watching them tumble around like boys, like idiots, the house began with its own slowly-growing vocabulary to say: it's true, it's true, truisms are all we have. Without pain there can be no gain, absence makes the heart fonder, and if they weren't dead, they were alive. Watching without understanding, it added: when they were stark naked, there were no shirts on. Lapalissade! Majima at the end of its speech, himself said: "Hey Kiryu-chan, what day are we on again?"
Kiryu doesn't know. They have had too many to count. About two thousand by now, he reckoned. Give or take a hundred artless days. Certainly by the next time Majima asks it had become more. At some point three thousand six hundred and fifty having lived, all ten years of time done; if they're lucky, they will get to half of eighty thousand yet.

A hundred years of such numbered days, well-lived on the run.

Chapter End Notes

Hullo! If you make it to the end of this rollercoaster: welcome, hello, and I'm sorry. Thank you for staying. Let me know what you think, if you could! It's always nice to hear from folks (':

Much thanks to Savannah, for editing this for me! (Except as of writing this, the last few chapters, since I have to get 'em up before I bury myself in work for good. Every mistake is mine alone.)

This piece was written with Balmorhea's Remembrance. I like to think that the voice you can hear, layered at the back, is someone crying out to live. Of the two of them, crying out for life. I'm glad they will be living.

All else is wild. All else is silent.

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