Who I am now

by Nocturnal

Summary

Izaya loses his memory. Shiki takes him under his wing and soon becomes indispensable to amnesic Izaya. Yet the one person that stirs Izaya's memory just so happens to be Shizuo.
Chapter 1

At first Shiki thought that it was another of Izaya's antics. He knew full well that Izaya, as useful as he was, was prone to fits of mischievous behavior. It was just one of those things to keep in mind when dealing with Izaya. Normally Shiki would steer away from such an unpredictable element but Izaya's good points more than outweighed his occasional detours from sanity.

So when Shiki found Izaya blinking uncertainly and walking down a street with a puzzled expression he was sure that something was up.

“What are you doing this side of town?”

Like any yakuza worth his salt Shiki could not help but be territorial by nature. To him the entire city was divided into a grid of power players and areas of influence. Izaya jumped and looked left and right then behind.

“Are you talking to me, sir?”

Shiki narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Sir? Izaya, stop fooling around.”

Normally Izaya was not foolish enough to let his trippy ways affect his business relationship with Shiki but there was something a bit off.

“Izaya...? Could it be that you know me? I can't remember anything- I've been looking through my clothes for a cell phone but-”

He snapped into silence and stood with eyes that were far too wide and a look of frozen panic spelled all over his features. Shiki lighted a cigarette and gave him a good hard stare that he could see intimidated Izaya to no end.

“Come with me. And you better not be up to a prank as usual.”

Izaya hesitated. The goons that shielded Shiki caught his attention.

“Don't worry, we can talk over there.”

Shiki gestured to a café and Izaya relaxed immediately. He joined Shiki across a table and ordered green tea. Shiki was still not completely convinced and decided to test him.

“It's a shame that you should lose your memory just now. I just received intel about a way of awakening your package.”

Izaya tilted his head to the side and sighed.

“I knew it, I'm not an honest and upright citizen. All this talk about 'packages', it sounds shady.”

And Shiki embodied 'shady' to a T. Respectably groomed shady but still.

“You don't know what I'm talking about?”

Izaya shook his head slowly. He held the cup with both hands and looked into the green liquid where a single stem floated upwards.
“All I remember was waking up in an alley, alone. I walked around and was looking through my pockets for a clue as to who I was- and what had happened- when I found a knife- and then I got too scared to ring anyone up on the list. And couldn't go to the police either.”

Izaya's hands began to tremble and the tremor ran up his arms until his entire body was shaking. He took a deep breath and blurted,

“But you seem to know me and not be hostile so I figured I could talk to you. Also I don't think you'd be shocked about switchblades.”

Izaya glanced at Shiki's cuff. Shiki wore well-tailored suits at all times and made it a point of honor to always wear long sleeves but Izaya had caught a glimpse of tattooed skin just flickering underneath the gold watch. By now Shiki was half convinced that Izaya was not faking it.

“I see. So what do you think I do for a living.”

Another hesitation. Izaya lifted his eyes, gulped to steady himself and said.

“Yakuza.”

“Ah.”

Shiki managed the silence that followed. Then produced his cell phone.

“For starters let me show you that I do indeed know you.”

Izaya nearly fell off his seat as his own phone began to ring and he picked it using only the tips of his fingers as if he was afraid it would contaminate him.

“Shiki.”

Izaya picked up the phone just to make sure and sure enough, he could hear the man sitting opposite him both in person and directly into his ear.

“That's me.”

Izaya put aside the phone and looked rather stunned. A television hooked in a conspicuous spot delivered a special report about a teenage girl that had been found dead, police was still trying to identify the body. He pointed to it.

“This city is getting more dangerous by the second.”

Izaya glanced at the screen. The news was on repeat stating again that authorities were still trying to confirm the identity. Izaya was simply wan.

“Yes, Shiki-san, who exactly am I?”

It was then that Shiki knew without a shadow of a doubt that Orihara Izaya had indeed no idea of how to answer this question.

And it gave rise to another question, namely what Shiki was to do with Izaya. Shiki considered what to say.

“You're Orihara Izaya. An informant headquartered in Shinjuku. About the best one in Tokyo, too.”

Izaya's eyes widened considerably, making him look so much like a child that Shiki was momentarily uncomfortable.
“An informant? I sell information to the highest bidder, no doubt. It makes sense that I should know you, then. Unless I owe you money?”

Izaya paled as he asked this. His worry was so naked, extremely off character. Shiki kept seeing that he was dealing with a whole different person.

“You don’t owe me money. We have a work relationship.”

A profound sigh on Izaya’s part. Relief as he smiled half apologetically.

“I was afraid you were about to dump me on Tokyo Bay or something. Can I ask you what organization you work for?”

Izaya leant closer to the table and a distinct flare of curiosity lit up his eyes.

“The Awakusu group.”

“The name doesn’t ring a bell.”

Shiki could see Izaya gathering his concentration to remember something, anything. Izaya tapped a ringed finger against the table and suddenly asked for a piece of paper and a pen that he slid across to Shiki, asking,

“Could you write it for me, please?”

“Let’s get you home first.”

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Shiki could tell how reluctant Izaya was to board the sleek fogged window black car and so they ended up taking a taxi to the Shinjuku address. Izaya gaped slightly at the building and gaped a lot at the vast apartment.

“The key actually fit. So I live here? I must be in rolling in dough!”

Izaya actually dashed to the panoramic window and then back all the way to the lobby again, having kicked off his shoes rapidly so that he could explore this new realm that apparently belonged to him and all. Shiki was amused as he saw Izaya take in the modern overly expensive and minimalistic black leather sofas, the rest of the unobtrusive furniture that lent the living air an air of an office, the checkered board on which random pieces of chess mingled in happy promiscuity with pieces of go, the well-tended plants, the smooth desk dominated by a massive computer monitor placed in front of the glassy surface of the wide window. He paid close attention to the bookshelves running the full length of a wall from floor to ceiling.

“You charge a pretty yen, yes.”

Izaya whistled.

“Oh my, by the looks of it I am a smart fellow.”

Shiki had to smile. He wondered if Izaya was trying to overcompensate for the great void in his memory by sponging as much information as he could. Izaya skipped to the entrance where he spotted a punch-in machine.

“And what is this?”

“I think it’s for your secretary, Yagiri Namie.”
“I have a secretary? Great! So you've been here before?”

“A couple of times.”

Shiki followed Izaya down a passage to the main bedroom. Izaya stood on the threshold for a while, biting his lip as he contemplated the black silk sheets and that were neatly tucked in a big bed that stood right in the middle of the chamber. There was a folded laptop in a corner and Izaya passed it as he opened a closet, rummaging through its contents.

“No girl's clothing so no live in girlfriend. And there is a lot of fur.”

“It's your trademark, I think.”

Izaya guided him back to the living room as if he was sinking into the role of proprietor and settled on a sofa as he gestured Shiki to take the opposite seat.

“Shiki-san, could you tell me how I became acquainted with you?”

The question in itself was neutral enough but the way in which Izaya asked it, loaded with the implication that he wanted to pursue this relationship, told Shiki that Izaya could still be useful. Before Shiki could answer Izaya bounced to his feet.

“Where are my manners, I should offer you something. I'll make some tea. Now where is the kitchen again?”

Izaya smiled ironically as if his lack of knowledge about his own home was rather amusing. Shiki pointed at another passage.

“That way, third door to the right.”

“Thank you. I'll be right back.”

But Izaya took more time than the exactly necessary for boiling water. If need be he could simply state that he had had to look for the tea apparatus. Izaya needed this pause to think for himself.

He made Shiki tell him the directions to the kitchen to see just how well Shiki knew the inner geography of this hyper posh apartment. And apparently Shiki knew it very well. It made Izaya wonder just how much time Shiki had spent in this place and if some of it had been spent in the bedroom. It was very dangerous territory he was treading but somehow he enjoyed the spur of excitement that urged him onwards to learn everything about his own life. And Izaya could not deny the immediate flicker of attraction as he laid eyes on Shiki. But it was a card best not played for the time being.

Izaya returned to sit himself opposite of Shiki and placed a cup in front of him with dutiful solicitude. Shiki found it amusing.

“Where was I, ah yes. How did I become acquainted with you, Shiki-san?”

For once Izaya was curious and overtly so. It was a first for Shiki. That Izaya was a creature driven by curiosity and that he relished it immensely was something that Shiki could not have failed to register but Izaya was as guarded as he was enthralled with a lust for information. Shiki knew full well that Izaya often exhibited an almost childish glee over the strangest of things but that was part of Izaya’s veneer and hardly something to go by. It occurred to Shiki that this was a surprising opportunity for uncovering just who Orihara Izaya was.
“You approached me. Shortly after you graduated from high school, I believe.” Izaya whistled.

“My, how bold of me. Shiki-san, the yakuza is a pyramid-like organization, is it not? And I suspect you stand very close to the apex. So, can I know just why you bothered to listen to who I am sure was a scrawny teen?”

Shiki realized that Izaya was enjoying this. Against all odds. Until Shiki was reminded of the caliber of the man he was dealing with. Gathering data was so engrained in Izaya’s blood, probably sent endorphins into its flow, that he defaulted to it naturally.

“It seems like you remember how the yakuza works but there is one thing I should tell you. More than collecting debts or badgering shop owners into paying protection money the key to it is managing people. And I could tell just by looking at you that you had something to offer. Which I took.”

Izaya’s eyebrows arched at the not too subtle implication. Shiki wondered if he would ask about it.

“I see. And I suppose I have a long list of enemies?”

“Actually, no. Plenty of people hate you but you say yourself that you only have one. But it’s a very bad one.”

Izaya leaned forward.

“And that is?”

“Heiwajima Shizuo.”

Izaya froze on the seat. He remained in perfect stillness long enough to worry Shiki and then just as suddenly jumped to his feet and proceeded to pace up and down rapidly.

“Heiwajima Shizuo, Heiwajima Shizuo, Heiwajima Shizuo-”

“Remember anything?”

Izaya halted and reached for a sheet a paper, pen in hand.

“Not quite. But I’ve heard the name. I am sure of it. Heiwajima Shizuo.”

He wrote it down with slow and almost delicate strokes, his calligraphy almost artistic as if the name was an aesthetic object to be contemplated. Shiki decided to try something.

“How about, ‘Yagiri Namie’?”

Izaya was still studying his own writing.

“Who? Never heard of her.”

A key turning on the locked front door went by unnoticed to him. Shiki got up.

“You’ll hear of her now, I am sure.”

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And indeed Namie was standing in front of them soon enough. Izaya smiled with a hint of
uncertainty.

“I don't suppose I'm lucky enough to have you as my girlfriend, right?”

“I must say you that your humor will forever be beyond my comprehension.”

He sighed.

“Ah, it would be too good to be true, of course.”

Shiki wondered how much Izaya meant this tirade. What interested him the most was that Izaya had clearly no recollection of her name but could write Heiwajima’s perfectly well and without as much as the faintest echo of hesitation. More, Izaya should have remembered her name since he had just read it but clearly some lingering impression of Heiwajima blocked that out from his immediate awareness.

“Shiki-san, we were not expecting you today.”

It was Namie’s way to letting Izaya know that he should leave silly antics for later and attend to the job at hand first, whatever that was. Shiki explained what had happened and was not surprised to hear her say,

“I had nothing to do with it. I do know of procedures for erasing someone's memory but this was not my doing. I can contact some of my people and see if they can help.”

Izaya remained very placid as if someone else was being discussed instead of himself. Shiki could not help wonder if it had crossed Izaya’s mind that maybe this amnesia was deliberate and maybe of Izaya’s own doing.

“I would be very thankful. Now, can you tell me precisely how you came to work for me and what exactly you do?”

Apart from the almost apologetic appraisal of her physical allure Izaya shifted to serious assessing her. Here was a very beautiful woman with a distinctive glint of intelligence in her eyes that hinted to a ruthless attitude. And judging by the way she carried herself in a short skirt and well fitted shirt she was most definitely comfortable in her skin. Izaya suspected that it might be because she simply did not care for her beauty at all.

“I approached you to find my brother who was missing at the time. You found him for me. At the time I was having some issues with the company I was running so you recruited me to do preliminary data analysis, arrange topics by priority level and doing miscellaneous tasks that need be done.”

“That's considerably more than what I'd expect from a secretary.”

Namie smiled for the first time and Izaya found himself wondering if her duties also included bedding him. If so it was just as much on her terms as on his, of that much he was sure.

“A normal secretary wouldn't fit you. Your work methods are rather unorthodox.”

Izaya was very interested in seeing that she took it all in stride. Clearly Yagiri Namie did not get surprised easily and was used to thinking on her feet.

“Ah, that must be the best way of getting information. Speaking of which, I don't suppose you’d know the password to that?”
He gestured in the general direction of the computer that he proceeded to turn on.

“I have no idea. You change password regularly and as far as I know it’s a random combination each time.”

“And here I was hoping that it would be my birthday. Then again, what is my birthday?” He directed the question at her, the password box suddenly ablaze against a dark screen.

“May the 4th.”

Izaya settled on his favorite swivel chair and slowly spun around. Fingers interlaced in one of his contemplative moods.

“This is quite a predicament. It would be for anyone but so much more so for an informant. Without memories I have no ammo and that makes me a very easy target. Right now I’d say that I am the lowest rung in the food chain.”

But Izaya did not at all sound that way. Namie smiled again and Izaya realized how happy he was to have her on his side.

“I can of course brief you on the most important matters and do a who-is-who. But there are things that only you know.”

Izaya turned to Shiki now. The reason why he was having this discussion in his presence was to make it clear that he trusted the yakuza.

“Shiki-san, will you help me?”

“I have an idea.”

“I am all ears.”

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Shiki’s idea struck Izaya as strange at first but he understood its point readily enough.

“You’d employ me as a host for a while to get me used to dealing with people and get my skills back on track. I like it. I believe I'll do just that.”

“You might have to dye your hair to avoid recognition. But I'm sure you'll blend in no time.”

“Am I that charming?”

Only Izaya could be playful about this situation.

“It's best to keep this under wraps, it'd be bad if it became public knowledge. I wonder if we should tell Kida.”

Namie looked at her cell phone in a questioning way.

“And Kida is?”

“He works for you. But he's more of a freelance agent. I cannot tell for sure that he will not leak this to enemy parties.”

Izaya beamed. There was something exciting in having her talk dangerous business in such a matter
of fact tone.

True to her word Namie provided her laptop where after going through a very tight system of passwords she showed him rows of neatly arranged folders. As if anticipating what might be on his mind she said,

“Don't worry, no one but you and I could possibly understand this. I'll tell you the code, think that you can remember it?”

She almost brushed shoulders with him as they both sat side by side on the sofa.

“My ability to retain information has not suffered. I simply can't remember anything about myself.”

Shiki kept to the background but he paid very close attention. She nodded as if this was to be expected but was still reassuring. Namie gave him the code and Izaya almost expected there to be a code to the code.

“Here.”

“I suppose that the information contained in this is crucial and very helpful?”

“Crucial, yes. But I am afraid it will not be too helpful. As you can imagine most of the information is not recorded in any way, this is just a collection of data that can be used mostly for blackmail purposes. It's just raw material, so to speak.”

“Eh? Very clever. And is all of the information here actually true?”

Her smile was cool and piercing.

“No. About 60% of it is dummy info. So that even if you bypass all the security measures you are still likely to fail. Not to mention that the forged intel has its uses as well.”

Izaya whistled again.

“I must say, I am impressed with myself and with you.”

“It was your idea.”

“But it goes to sure that I know how to recruit. Namie, thank you for standing by my side.”

Shiki perked his ears at this. There was a note of genuine gratitude that he found almost disturbing. Perhaps Shiki had become too used to seeing Izaya as the sly bastard that only trusted people as far as he could use them. Namie blinked but gathered herself rapidly.

“I can arrange a meeting with an expert on memory related issues for this afternoon. We will consider what to do next after we hear his opinion.”

Shortly after she left and Izaya was alone with Shiki, the silence widening between them. Then Izaya utterly surprised him by jumping to his feet, his voice almost childish.

“Say, can I see it? Your tattoo, I mean. You have one, don't you? Irezumi, not your average tat. Funny that I should remember the name but yet could not even remember my own.”

Izaya did not skip as he did when he was all bouncy but he approached Shiki with a slow tread, almost predatory. Then seemed to catch himself and retreated to his careful ways, taking a literal step back.
“Sorry, that was too forward of me.”

And Shiki could see that Izaya actually meant it. Otherwise Shiki would not have removed his sleek white jacket and undone the shirt until the impressive display of ink on skin was visible on his well-toned body, smooth strength fully under his control, each movement charged with quiet power. Shiki was very amused as Izaya gasped aloud. At length he found his voice even if it sounded far too awed.

“It's a tiger...must have hurt a lot, getting it done.”

Shiki had to consider if something like imprinting was happening here. After all, Shiki had been the first person to establish any kind of contact with an Izaya who knew nothing. Either way there was an emotional connection that Shiki knew was very new. Izaya retracted his hand almost bashfully, fingertips all too close to brushing Shiki's shoulder blades.

“It won't bite you. You can touch.”

Izaya hesitated and looked very much like a little boy. In an attempt to save face Izaya tried to smile his awkwardness away but his experience was too limited for it to carry him through this strange hurdle. Strange but not completely unexpected. There was a moment in which it was patently obvious that Izaya was considering his options without coming to a viable solution. Izaya merely traced the design, barely touching at all and all too aware of physical contact.

“Does it go on...?”

Izaya regretted asking right away because Shiki removed his pants and stood in naked glory without as much as batting an eyelash. Izaya tried to mimic his unaffected ease but an annoying blush defeated the effort altogether. So he gave up on putting on a façade and granted Shiki a shy smile.

“Sorry, I just got curious. I hope that you won't have to kill me now I've seen it.”

“You're too useful to be disposed of.”

Izaya could not account for the jab of pain of being labeled in such an utilitarian fashion. He did his best to overcome it by rationalizing out loud. Shiki dressed as Izaya expounded.

“Yes, I suppose that you'd need someone like me. An outsider to the system, I mean. Correct me if I am wrong but virtually everyone in the yakuza is entangled in one web of complicity or another. All those chains of loyalty, both vertical and horizontal and the conflicts that I am sure derive when the two collide, not to mention the cutthroat nature of the business itself. You wouldn't want a yakuza informant but someone who is a free agent.”

“You got the gist of it right.”

Izaya smiled as if this was a compliment.

“I expect to remain very useful to you in the future as well.”

Shiki took his time retrieving a pack of cigarettes from a drawer.

“I gather that I keep those around for you? I am sure I'm not a smoker myself.”

And Izaya almost asked if he would find another pack in the bedside drawer and if so what exactly that would entail. Izaya swung over and took Shiki's lighter from him, lighting the cigarette that Shiki...
held between two fingers.

“You'll do great as a host.”

Izaya chuckled.

“Heh, I shall try my very best.”

It was with cool detachment that Shiki saw Izaya consider asking the grand question about what exactly was the relationship between the two of them. As much as this situation inconvenienced Shiki he could not help but be most interested. At intervals Izaya became transparent and the mechanics of his mind shone through. Shiki was too calm a man to let the rush of power get to him but there was something highly appealing in having Izaya depend so much on him. More, to have Izaya truly trust him. It could very well be a first for Orihara Izaya.
Chapter 2

The expert did not want to tell Yagiri Namie that he was at a loss so he worded it very carefully.

“At the moment we cannot give an accurate diagnosis. Amnesia can be caused by all kinds of factors and only with observation can we proceed. For the time being Orihara-san should just surround himself with familiar objects and frequent places that are part of his routine. It is perfectly possible that he will simply recover his memories at any moment. At any rate there were no physical complications nor brain damage.”

Izaya was relieved at this but Namie was less than impressed.

“Keep working at it. This has top priority.”

“Of course we will keep Orihara-san under scrutiny. Weekly check-ups are required.”

They emerged from the office and Izaya giggled.

“‘Under scrutiny’ sounds so naughty. I'm not too sure I like it but I'll play along. Not much of a choice. So, give me the who-is-who. By the looks of it there is no ready-made cure and I won't sit twiddling my thumbs waiting for my fabled memories to come back.”

“I was hoping it would not come to it but fine, I'll do that. But keep in mind I don't know everyone that counts.”

“A shame I was such a secretive fellow.”

The meeting, for it could be called nothing else, took place in Izaya's living room.

“First, your sisters.”

Izaya blinked rapidly.

“Sisters? I have family...?”

It sounded rather absurd.

“You have two younger siblings, twins. Mairu and Kururi.”

Namie handed him a picture and he whistled.

“So that's how he knew for sure. Shrewd, very shrewd. So, these sisters of mine. Do they know what I do for a living?”

“Marginally. You don't hide the fact you're an informant but they are to be kept unawares of any details.”

Izaya studied the two girls very fixedly. One with pigtails and glasses and something of a mischievous smile; the other was very serious looking and wore a gym uniform that was both weird and somehow very fitting. He could tell by the comfortable way they posed in front of the camera - the girl Mairu making a V sign and flinging an arm around the girl Kururi's shoulder - that they were very close. Izaya could see no way of possibly being a part of the tight knit unit of kinship before him.
“Not identical. Do I get along with them?”

Namie hesitated very briefly.

“To some extent. I believe that you don't allow yourself to be much of a brother to them because it would be too dangerous for them.”

“Ah. How laudable of me. And selfish, too.”

Who I am now?

Namie had no comment on this because she agreed.

“At any rate, they won't expect you to be in contact all that frequently so for the time being you need not worry.”

Izaya took a moment to consider that his family life was apparently a complete shambles. He was surprised at himself at how little emotion he had over it. A brief flare of regret. That was all.

“Okay, who is next?”

A lot of people as it turned out. And Namie had detailed information about virtually all of them and Izaya paid close attention, absorbing every detail almost without discrimination. Later he could decide on an hierarchy but for the time being he focused on learning all he could. Namie fixed him Japanese green tea as they took a break.

“By the looks of it I don't have many actual real friends. Just a lot of contacts. Oh well, I suppose that is perfect for an informant.”

But Izaya could not help being a bit depressed. He fixed a somewhat longing gaze on the liquid surface in his cup. Namie timed her next move very carefully.

“And this is Heiwajima Shizuo.”

Izaya jolted violently, the tea spilling as he put down the cup to pick up the picture with shaky fingers. In perfect resolution a large blonde man in a bartender outfit could be seen in profile, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Sunglasses hid the eyes but Izaya still felt as if he could feel an antagonistic personality emanating from the 2D image.

“I know him. I'm sure that I've seen him before.”

Namie lifted an eyebrow. It was interesting how even his sisters caused not even a hint of recognition but Shizuo caused an immediate reaction. Izaya studied the photograph up close, holding it with both hands and then suddenly slapping it down on the table, face down. He turned a tentative smile at her.

“Sorry, it's just that it's a bit too much. I can't explain it but this Shizuo person is someone that I can't handle. Somehow I know that.”

Namie made a mental note to ask the memory expert about this. It might be important.

“You two have something of a history.”

“Apparently he's my enemy number one.”

“Can you remember anything about him at all?”
Izaya stared steadily at the blank side of the picture as if his eyes could see the image by a sheer act of will. Slowly he shook his head, a frown robbing him of his usual smooth attitude.

“No, but I get a feeling about him. That this man is very dangerous to me. But I hardly think he's one to scheme.”

Izaya was a strange mix of fear and speculation.

“Heiwajima is not a mastermind by any stretch of the imagination. No exceptional intellect here but what he does have is superhuman strength.”

“Strength? As in physical strength?”

“Yes.”

She produced the laptop again and played some footage of Shizuo doing his usual damage by rampaging through Ikebukuro, vending machine held above his head and taking aim at Izaya. Namie was curious to see how he would react and was not disappointed. Izaya's eyes widened and he smiled at the end of it. Namie could see that he was shaken by seeing Shizuo in action but Izaya did not seem afraid anymore.

“And I have been dodging attacks of this nature for quite a while, it seems. This Dotachin person, would he know how this feud began in the first place?”

“Either him or the illegal doctor who introduced you to Shizuo.”

“Then again there might be no reason. No reason at all.”

Namie allowed him to sink into thoughtful silence for a while. At length he spoke.

“Any theories as how he became this strong? And surely there are some side effects.”

“I'd have to run some tests and it would hardly be practical. But there are indeed quite a few side effects. From the hospital reports you managed to steal his strength takes a toll on his body particularly when it comes to bone density and articulations.”

Izaya smiled anew, slowly.

“In other words, he's not invincible. Good. And you say I framed him?”

“I don't know the details but it seems so.”

Izaya giggled.

“Monster Boy must know of it, too. Wonderful.”

“What are you going to do about him?”

“For the time being nothing at all. I'm sure there is a slot for him to fill in whatever plan I have been perfecting. I'll trust Orihara Izaya.”

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With perfect timing Shiki knocked at the door as soon as Namie left.

“Hi there, Shiki-san. I do call you that normally, right?”
“You do.”

Izaya nodded as if this was reassuring. Shiki could almost see him piecing whatever he could together in an effort to rebuild his life and bring it back to what it used to be. He allowed for silence to fall between them so that Izaya could set the pace. Many people disliked Izaya's loquacious ways but Shiki knew that Izaya could be silent. Shiki enjoyed these moments of peace, Izaya musing away in his never ceasing schemes and Shiki more often than not studying him. Then Izaya would deliver some pearl of wisdom and not always slyly either. If Izaya was a man that valued information he was also one plagued with questions and there were times when these piled on him like a physical burden that needed be shifted. But questions were also what drove Izaya onwards.

Most enjoyable of all was when Izaya was so deep in thought that he forgot all about putting up a performance.

“I think that I will take you on that offer of yours.”

“The host club deal?”

“Yes. It will keep me from going rusty, at any rate. One way or another I will prove useful to you.”

Shiki lit a cigarette. He wondered just how aware Izaya was to the undertones that kept slipping into his speech patterns. Either way Izaya was at his most serious and earnest. He still took refuge in being flashy and glib but the heart of Izaya's nature seemed more exposed than ever. And that was to always be guarded and striving for control over his environment. Of course this was supposed to come across as a smooth operation that merely amused Izaya but in reality he was as committed and engaged in this pursuit as possible. Shiki quite liked this new overt earnest attitude. It was refreshing. Also, one of the things that made Izaya bothersome to deal with on occasion was precisely this tendency to be too apparently nonchalant. At least this was Shiki's take on it.

He would rather Izaya showed his true colors than sliding along complicated charades of smoke and mirrors to hide where his true passions were. And Shiki might get to see just that. It meant something else, that Izaya trusted him more than ever. Which was intriguing and highly interesting and Shiki could not help wonder if it might also not be just as profitable.

“Alright. I can get you to start this Friday.”

Izaya laced his fingers together and almost sighed.

“I am in something of a predicament. I clearly am very rich indeed but the money in my wallet was not much and currently I cannot actually access any of my accounts since I do not know the codes. I will talk to my bank managers, not surprisingly my money is spread wisely across many a bank, and arrange for new codes but it will take time. Such things must be done in person and I will need to bring documentation along. In other words, until that situation clears I am forced to rely on Namie's financial help. Such a bother.”

Shiki blew a long tendril of smoke.

“You're saying you won't ask me for a loan?”

Izaya chuckled.

“I know better than to do that, yes. I am very much aware of what the interest rates are with people in your line of work and have no desire to be charged a leg and an arm.”

Shiki was pretty sure that the actual matter had nothing to do with interest rates at all. It was Izaya's
way of showing his independence.

“I expect that Yagiri-san will charge you interest too.”

“Heh, indeed. Indeed she will. Do you know much about my personal life?”

Izaya switched gears suddenly.

“Not really. You do talk a lot but more often than not the things that you actually say shed no light on yourself.”

“Yes, that figures...by the look of it I have no friends to speak of- although there is a girl who is very fond of me, it seems- I keep my family at a distance and am dedicated to my job with something akin to uncanny intensity. So I was just wondering...was I a happy person?”

This surprised Shiki a lot.

“I can hardly say.”

“Yes, of course.”

Shiki was puzzled now. Izaya seemed half lost in a reverie.

“But I can tell you that you were bent on being as happy as you possibly could.”

Izaya smiled weakly.

“Thank you. For making it seem like I wasn't something of a failure as a human being.”

The confessional tone was as unexpected as the actual purport of the words. Shiki smoked some more in silence.

“Is that how you see yourself?”

“Right now? Somewhat. I wish-”

But Izaya caught himself. Shiki did not press him. Allowing Izaya to pick up the thread of conversation again.

“If you were in my position, if you lost all of your memories, what would you do? I mean, would you try to recapture your old self or make a brand new start at life?”

“I like who I am so I'd want that back.”

Izaya became very thoughtful, almost dreamy. It was one of those moments when Izaya abandoned the lines of normal reasoning and took a leap into what might be either genius or insanity or perhaps both. Shiki knew that Izaya kept such epiphanies private per rule but Shiki had been elected into a role of confident. And was almost surprised at himself to realize how comfortable he was that way.

“If memories make us what we are, then being a yakuza boss is integral to the being 'Shiki'. Without it identity is threatened. If that is so then who exactly am I now? I- can't say.”

Izaya trembled slightly.

“You can pick another path if you want. Nothing is forcing you to remain an informant.”
“Just like nothing forced me to take this path in the first place? Yes, I suppose. Have you ever heard 'a life without regrets'? I'm not too sure that's a good thing. If you never make mistakes then you will never be able to actually grow. So that if you think your life is without regrets it might very well mean that you haven't lived much and lost many opportunities along the way.”

Shiki finished a cigarette, snubbing it on the ashtray as he contemplated Izaya. It occurred to him that this was precisely what Izaya needed to curb the streak of immaturity that so often crippled Izaya's efforts. There was that tendency not to admit a false step and an almost obsession with flaunting intelligence. Shiki had often thought that Izaya might very well screw himself over by being compelled to blurt out some crucial bit of brilliant reasoning at the worst possible moment for effect. As fond of Izaya was of secrecy, to the point of paranoia, he was still driven to tell things that were perhaps best left untold. Contradiction was part of Izaya's personality, after all.

“Interesting point of view.”

Izaya smiled a bit shyly.

“Sorry, I'm just ranting. I do like the sound of my voice.”

“And you always did as far as I know.”

Izaya sighed deeply. Shiki realized that Izaya was absolutely exhausted.

“That's good. I mean, that I was that was before as well. I don't want to become a brand new person, I don't want to start anew. I am Orihara Izaya and I want to remain that way. To me it is important-maybe even vital- that I remain who I am.”

“You couldn't be happy otherwise.”

Shiki got up.

“Are you leaving?”

“You should go to sleep. You're tired.”

“Wait- do you have to leave- I mean-”

Izaya faltered into choked silence.

“Do you want me to stay?”

“I don't want to be alone. But that's not enough a reason, I'm sure. Besides...”

“Besides?”

Izaya shifted from foot to the other. Took a deep breath. Considered his options. Then,

“Look, I don't want to beat around the bush and I'm sure you know this already- I am attracted to you and can't exactly help it. So when I say I'd like to stay it can be construed...in a way I did not intend but at same time I did intend it. I'm not being very coherent.”

It was obvious how difficult it was for Izaya to say all this. Shiki found himself admiring him.

“It's fine. You can be too coherent for your own good every now and then, in your own way.”

“I'll walk you out as a proper host. Since this is my apartment. And you're welcome here any time.”
Shiki brushed his fingers through Izaya's hair. Hardly touching. Izaya felt lighter as if a pressure had been removed from his heart. It was only when Shiki left that a feeling of deflation filled him. For a horrible moment he understood why there were people who chose to turn their backs to the world and become shut-ins. They were simply too overwhelmed by reality and its demands. Then the mental claustrophobia passed.

He straightened himself and took a deep breath.

“But not me. I'm stronger than that.”

Izaya gathered power from bringing out these words. He studied his apartment anew. By all accounts he was a successful individual but he could not help but feel that true triumph depended on how well he managed this crisis. As the cliche went he could only try his best but to Orihara Izaya that was not enough. He was bent on surpassing himself. As he drifted to the wide panoramic window he thought to himself that the sky itself could be within reach if only he made a go for it.

* 

“Welcome, Michiru-san. You look lovely tonight. As ever.”

Izaya smiled beautifully. Michiru-san just so happened to be an overweight bejewelled woman whose frilly dress barely contained her voluminous body. He already had a lighter ready to apply to her cigarette and produced it with such a fluid turn of the wrist that one barely saw it. With an ambling step he escorted her to a chair and sat in front of her, staring with just enough intent to appear most interested without it being too showy. From the back of the club Shiki studied the scene and his interest was not feigned. As he predicted Izaya was a hit as a host. That clients should flock to him was not surprising but the persona that Izaya had adopted was not exactly what one would expect from him.

Izaya was now nodding, eyebrows lifting in awe at whatever platitude he was hearing and then leaning forward just slightly to make sure he caught the rest.

His host act was not based so much on being smooth but on a perfectly balanced mix of naivety and natural charm. Nothing overly sophisticated. Shiki thought that Izaya would simply up his own personality and perhaps tone it down a bit but Izaya chose to change himself to fit what the client wanted. And that was very telling in many ways. First of all, the fact that so many women liked this routine of semi innocence told that playing on maternal instincts paid off even in such a shady setting. But there was more to it. As fake as it was it did not seem so. Izaya appeared genuine and that was what every single host Shiki had ever met lacked.

Shiki turned to Izaya's clothing now with an appraising eye. A slightly shiny purple shirt, a more flamboyant version of his fur jacket in the same color, the many silver rings strewn on slender fingers. It was a thought out attire and one that only Izaya could pull off as natural. In the end they had decided not to dye his hair but there was no need for adding spurious details to an image that was as tailored as the well fitted pants. Just now the conversation swerved to this very topic.

“My, Psyche. How do you manage to look so dashing always?”

“Ah, the clothes they make me wear in this place. I hardly recognize myself in them. I only hope I do not look too flashy.”

Izaya sealed the apologetic note with a shy smile.

“Nonsense! You look delightful, absolutely delightful.”
Shiki had to agree. And here was an important part of Izaya's winning formula: this dash of half coyness, as if he was not precisely aware of the effect he had on women and needed to be brought to see it. How Izaya managed to combine this with the overall impression of confidence was a mystery even to Shiki.

The night was winding down so Shiki decided to wait it out to have a chat with Izaya. So he could see the rest of the performance. Izaya served many a champagne glass but he barely drank any himself, he merely dipped his lips on occasion. And Izaya did a lot of listening, nodding, head tilted to the side every now and then. Then he broke into a brilliant smile as he received a most generous tip, did a graceful bow and escorted her out with most convincing wishes of seeing her again very soon.

Izaya was about to join closing down when Shiki intercepted him.

“Why 'Psyche’?”

“It sounds erudite and foreign. Women tend to like at least the pretense of intelligence so if one is to opt for an alias I might as well make it vaguely mysterious and smart sounding.”

Izaya handed him the bundle of bills.

“That's yours.”

“Allowing me to work here is already a favor.”

“I wasn't the one smoozing the lady, take the money.”

Izaya laughed.

“Shiki-san, I cannot possibly imagine you smoozing anyone, let alone Michiru-san.”

“You've been doing very well.”

Izaya beamed and blushed to a pretty shade of pink that made him look like a little boy all dressed up in fancy clothes. Shiki thought that it was cute in a way. He led Izaya to a comfortable if sparsely furnished office that looked much larger by being surrounded by walls of glass that gave a panoramic view of the entire club. Izaya guessed that it was one that kind of window that is only transparent on one side and he was right. He identified a frieze of mirror surface running the top of the club as being precisely this. It was his first time in the room and he was rather excited.

“I must thank you for letting me work here.”

“I'm the one who should thank you. You're about the most profitable asset in the entire club.”

Izaya's smile was stellar and without artifice.

“You were very right, this was the perfect occupation given how things are. A host isn't expected to have a past and one can learn so much about people! So many different clients, all of them are unique in their own ways and all of them tell me everything I want to know.”

The smile grew sharper and almost wicked. Shiki liked it. A lot.

“You have a way with them. But are they really all that interesting?”
As far as Shiki could tell, customers were sources of money to be explored, and a good host was he who knew how to best worm his way into fat purses. Shiki knew that to do this one needed some qualifications as far as looks went, and while he did not recruit hosts himself, he had seen enough of them to be something of an expert in male beauty. And Izaya ticked all the boxes in that regard.

Izaya was now giggling.

“Absolutely. One has ideas about the kind of girls that go to these places. Rather lonely women locked in loveless marriages and in need of some entertainment. One may feel sorry for them for they do come across as pathetic. Except it is not quite like that and in some cases not at all. Michiru-san, for example, is the one who picks the stocks in which her husband invests. Oh, she’s not lying about it either. She let it slip almost as an afterthought so she did not mean to boast. And she’s not the only one. Plenty of these women wield a lot of power. Quite a few are attractive, too. Their social progress tells so much about our society. Accents tailored to muffle the original ones are telltale clues and give me much to work with. Rags to riches stories, hidden motives, all served for my pleasure. I love this job.”

Shiki produced a Cuban cigar and wondered at Izaya's glee. Izaya was so unmasked about it that Shiki thought about how he was known to skip about when very happy. Perhaps he was about to do so now. Shiki had never seen it firsthand. In fact, Shiki was realizing just how guarded Izaya usually was around him. And without the memory loss Shiki would never have a chance of seeing Izaya so open. More interesting perhaps, so vulnerable.

“You seem a natural at it.”

“It’s like a confessional, a host club is.”

Shiki cocked an eyebrow and used a rather Medieval looking instrument to cut off the end of his cigar. Izaya watched in fascination and shuddered.

“How so?”

“Do you use that to chop off people’s fingers? Sorry, that was a silly question.”

It amused Shiki greatly.

“You were saying? About confessionals? Can’t say I see the connection.”

Izaya switched from childish curiosity to honed intelligence in motion.

“At first glance, a host club seems the exact opposite of a confessional. After all, host clubs are all about glamor, sex and attraction while confessionals are drab affairs about guilt and mortification with spiritual trappings. But at heart, they are exactly the same. In both cases, people are free to talk, to unburden themselves of their deepest secrets, with no consequences in the real world. The priest and the host do not count as actual human beings, and so they liberate the penitent and the costumers respectively of shame. More, a host club and a confessional by their very nature are disconnected from the real world. They are fantasy places and whatever happens there will stay there.”

Shiki smoked thoughtfully.

“You have a point there.”

Izaya leaned forward and joined the tips of his fingers together.

Shiki noticed that Izaya had failed to light his cigar. Probably too engrossed in speaking out his
thoughts and Shiki remained silent to motivate him to carry on.

“But is it really without consequences at all? The act of sharing information never is. Just by talking these women gain a kind of power that can very well backfire on them. Because while it's true that the hosts themselves will never interact in the same social circles, the club makes sure that does not happen, the women themselves make a connection with the real world by returning to it after each session.”

Shiki wondered if all this talking Izaya was currently doing would not have the exact same effect.

“You're very popular. Won't gain you any friends with the rest of the guys.”

Izaya giggled. It sounded innocent enough if not for the ring of mischief.

“True. I wasn't expecting to. But the guys can be very interesting as well. The greatest problem with a host environment is that I can only tackle the female gender. Dealing with the other hosts is difficult because they are clearly hostile...then again one can find out quite a lot about people when they're full of hate.”

Which may explain why Izaya riled Shizuo at every single opportunity.

“Do you have some sort of secret? The other guys were saying that your act is different and they can't figure out how it works.”

“Secret? Not at all. It is very simple. I listen. I really listen. And remember. That is all. When Michiru-san tells me that her puppy Fluffy is sick and that she has to take it to the vet I keep in mind to ask about poor Fluffy next time she comes by. You'd be amazed how well it goes!”

Childish glee. Izaya nearly bounced.

“Doing that with all your costumers can't be easy.”

“I keep individual files on them all. In my head. As things stand now I know way more Michiru-san and company than I do about myself. Ironic.”

Izaya tried to come across as offhand and nonchalant but in this he did not succeed. It made Shiki want to toy with him.

“They'd probably fall off their seats if they knew that you're a virgin as far as your memories go.”

Something of a gamble, it was possible that Izaya had decided on getting some sexual experience but it was obvious by his reaction that it was not the case. Izaya blushed and nearly stuttered. Having breached the subject of his attraction to Shiki he was set on avoiding any further references to anything even remotely related to it.

“I'm sure they'd be shocked. It might be funny to see.”

But Izaya looked more terrified than amused at the thought.

“I can take care of this second virginity for you.”

Izaya did flail considerably and shifted so much on the couch that he creased his perfectly fitted pants.

“Shiki-san, er, that's a bit...”
Shiki produced a cell phone.

“I can ring up one of our girls. Special treatment, on the house. We keep the standard high when it comes to our professional girls.”

The look of absolute disappointment was priceless. Izaya tried to smile it away but he was all too aware that it showed.

“Oh, no need for that. I mean...”

“It's just a suggestion. I'm sure you can find someone that catches your eye in our catalog.”

This was a crucial moment. Shiki waited out. At length Izaya replied.

“I don't suppose you can find someone with a full back tiger irezumi, a taste for expensive suits and cigars, and a running an entire underground empire?”

Shiki smiled and chuckled. A rare sight.

“That's rather particular of you.”

“Is this the part when I'm sold overseas?”

Very slowly Shiki took a drag. The finest Cubans demanded time to be fully enjoyed.

“There's a market for that. You'd fetch a good price, I'm sure.”

Izaya started despite himself.

“My mind is more useful to you than your body.”

Shiki timed his next move and sat next to Izaya.

“But always.”

It was not something Izaya had an answer to. After an interval of silence, awkward on Izaya's part and smooth on Shiki's, Izaya forced himself to say something and to establish eye contact.

“Shiki-san, I know that we work together...do we also sleep together?”

“What do you think? It might be a good exercise for you to figure that out.”

“I can't be sure. I do know that no one else would know about it so there's no source I can pry for info.”

“Except me.”

Izaya swallowed.

“But you, yes. I should be able to find out something like that.”

But Izaya did not look all that thrilled about that prospect.

“Finding out will be a good opportunity to sharpen your skills.”

Izaya chuckled bitterly.
“Shiki-san, getting into people's head is fun for me. But it is not at all fun having to discover things about myself, things that make me me that I don't know at all- sorry, I am just tired. What time is it, must be pushing on three AM.”

He made as if to get away with all the grace he could muster which was almost none. Shiki grabbed his arm, detaining him easily since Izaya only widened his eyes without making an attempt at resisting. The tension was almost a visible thing emanating from Izaya. Shiki took a deep drag and placed the cigar lightly on Izaya's mouth.

“There you go, an indirect kiss. Young people rave about such things.”

Izaya laughed, decompressing. He studied the cigar with curiosity.

“Shiki-san, saying such things makes you come across as an old man. And this is very expensive, isn't it? Ah, luxury. I should go back home now. I still have some research to do before hitting the sack.”

“Research on Michiru-san?”

“Not exactly. But who knows, this city is filled with endless possibilities. Anyone can remake themselves here. I can feel it in the very air. Maybe Michiru-san will turn out being a huge power player.”

“That would be good for you, wouldn't it?”

“Oh yes. Be friendly with people in high places. Be friendly without actually having any friends to speak of.”

And on this note Izaya returned to his large and very empty apartment.

“Tadaima. Heh...okaeri! Orihara Izaya, party of one.”

He slumped on the sofa, tossing away the fancy jacket and sighing deeply. He wondered if he should take up Shiki's offer and get a professional girl for a night just to flush out the burden of virginity and get it over with. It was not as if he was gay after all. Izaya did not need memories to know that his sexual orientation was fluid. He could probably get a pretty girl without even having to pay but somehow none of these options pleased him.

“Is he just toying with me...I can't tell for sure. Too emotionally involved, I guess. Maybe that is why I never made any friends. If I had bonds with other humans then I'd not be able to manipulate them as I see fit with no regard for them.”

This train of thought led him to Saki. Apparently a girl who was under his tutelage. Izaya shivered despite himself. Namie did not know the details, Kida Masaomi did, but Izaya knew enough to be aware that there was a lot of ugliness on his part in the whole affair. It was one thing to play games by gaining knowledge on people but it was a whole different thing to know himself to be callous enough to cause a world of pain to children. He flopped on his back, eyes fastened on the ceiling that was still unfamiliar. Talking to himself did not even sound all that disturbing since he was addressing a part of his person that was so unavailable to direct scrutiny that in a sense it might as well be a different person.

“I must have rationalized it in some way. Unless I had no sense of conscience whatsoever if that is so then I wouldn't have one now. I must have shifted the blame by simply not interfering too much. At the crucial moment I simply did not act and as such I was not the primary agent. It could have been avoided if others acted in a way not comprised in my scenario as they
Izaya could have done. Except...except I knew they wouldn't, that's what I do I find out how people would react and then allow them to do precisely that in such a way to suit my purposes.”

He laughed. It echoed hollowly.

“I'm a horrible person. But still, it's who I am. It's my nature and I cannot help it. Of course, it's a given...but doesn't that mean that I'm just like all those I've been stringing along? I'm not standing above anyone and I'm very lonely.”

Self-pity was not something he could afford but he could avoid it either. He turned on his laptop and hit the usual chatrooms. He had done this before, of course, and in the dead hours before dawn there was hardly any traffic but he suddenly longed for some sort of feedback.

[What do you think about Orihara Izaya? The informant]

He tossed the question into cyberspace and considered it himself. If he were to meet someone like Orihara Izaya, which is to say if he were not Orihara Izaya, what would he do.

“I'd probably stay away from him. I seem to leave a trail of pain in my wake.”

This led him to Heiwajima Shizuo. It was not someone he at all wanted to consider. In fact, it made him positively ill. He could not help but think that his past conduct toward Shizuo was nothing short of suicidal.

“If I was going to provoke him and make such an enemy out of him I should have found a way of making sure I could kill him. But no. And now I'm stuck.”

Irritation welled up inside him and it was aimed solely at his own folly. Out of sheer frustration he flung himself in the swivel chair and attacked the computer. He tried typing randomly. The password assumed the mental weight of a barrier between himself and information.

“Let's try, 'Orihara Izaya rules/is god/is amazing/is the shit'. Variations of the motif.”

No one had directly told Izaya face to face that his ego was beyond inflated but he had caught the gist of it anyway. It was the word on the street at any rate and Izaya gave it credit in this case. After all, Namie had hinted at it in her cool manner and Shiki had implied it heavily. Then again, Shiki had implied many a thing that Izaya did not feel confident enough to pursue.

The monitor remained black and closed off to his best if albeit sudden efforts.

“Oh well, at least it hasn't self-destructed on me. But I bet there's unlimited tries to this. To drive absolutely insane whoever tried to crack the password. That sounds like something I'd do. I wouldn't do the actual 'driving into insanity', I'd let people do that to themselves. Just a few nudges, here and there...how easy it is to manipulate humans...first I find out what it is that makes them tick, then I undermine them by using their own desires, motivations, emotions against them- and gloat at how smart I am. Or maybe...not just about how smart but how unaffected I am. Yes, unaffected...funny, I don't feel unaffected now.”

Izaya smiled sadly at the irony of it all. It was now that he could not remember these people that he had harmed that he was concerned about them. Or perhaps not in them but in what their suffering meant to his character. It might be an intellectual form of being selfish. Izaya spun on the chair. He felt a bout of disgust at everything he represented and halted so suddenly that his body was nearly propelled out of the still rotating chair. It surprised him that he should feel so critical of the person he had been. After all, Izaya had decided to remain Izaya and not to deviate from the core of his personality.
But a new awareness was opening up his eyes and almost against Izaya's will. He realized with perfect clarity how without guidance he was. Of his own doing, too. Having crafted a pedestal from which he could pull his strings he made it impossible to have someone who could ever reach out a helping hand. This naturally led to Shiki and it was with difficulty that Izaya could suppress a sob at the sheer intensity of feelings that overwhelmed him like a physical mass sweeping him away. Perhaps the reason why he had never connected with anyone before was because he had never had to truly rely on anyone for support.

He remained ambivalent. There was something absolutely delightful (and he could not help but giggle, the adjective reminded him of Michiru-san and her hollow praise) in accepting all that Shiki was doing for him but on its heels the need to reciprocate and make himself useful imposed itself with something akin to duty. And of course Shiki fully counted on it. Izaya was so deep in thought that the doorbell caught him completely by surprise and startled him into blank fear. Images of Shizuo crashing through the door flashed across his mind before he regained enough possession of his faculties to check the cameras.

His visitor was not Heiwajima Shizuo. But in a way it might be as bad. Kida Masaomi stood just outside the front door. Izaya considered pretending that he was not at home but somehow he could not bring himself to do that. So he took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Hello, Kida-kun. What brings you here?”

Izaya sounded as friendly as he could. And he meant it, too. He even used Kida's family name least he came across as too familiar. But of course it was all to no avail. It only lasted a split second but the glare in Kida's eyes could not be mistaken for anything other than unadulterated loathing. It lasted only the briefest of moments. Izaya felt queasy. He was not prepared to face such an intensity of hatred directed at him.

“Namie-san told me to report to her without bothering you but I didn't get the order directly from you. So I figured I'd double check.”

Izaya had only seen pictures of Kida and these always featured a bright kid bouncing away and carrying others along with the silly antics so prone to his age. The reality before him was much too different and painful to Izaya. Kida was furtive, guarded and very obviously suspicious. It was a look far beyond his years and Izaya found it too sad.

“Oh, right. Come on in. Want me to fix some tea or- something.”

Kida stood in pure antagonism mingled with a need to endure what was most definitely an ordeal. And Izaya hardly knew how to handle the disturbing bout of pain that assailed him.

“No need for that.”

Kida's report was short but hit all the important points. Izaya barely heard anything but he paid close attention to the recitation in itself. Dark smudges under the eyes were the only hint to exhaustion that Izaya could guess in this kid standing before him, all wrapped in so much of a mess, and immersed in a private world of hurt. Izaya opened his mouth to tell him the truth, that he had no recollections whatsoever of what had happened but it was not a viable option. Basically because it would not have meant anything to Kida. Instead he said,

“Thanks, I'll put this information to good use.”
“From now on should I report to Namie-san?”

“For the time being.”

Izaya wondered if Kida’s real reason for dropping by concerned assessing the reason behind this change in their work relationship. He decided to explain.

“We are doing a rotation of sorts-”

“I don't care. It's your business anyway.”

“True but we do work together-”

“That's why I asked. Clear instructions are better but I don't want to know too much about what you're planning. I'll be going now.”

“Are you sure you don't want...something to drink.”

The door closed behind Kida. Not with a slam but with enough emphasis. Izaya looked around his vast apartment in something of a daze. Pleasing people was so much better than this. But it had made him used to being liked. A veneer of affection without any real depth but still it was a warming simulacrum of the actual thing. And the petty jealousy of his co-workers at the club could be termed amusing.

Izaya sank into the sofa. In a way this interview had been an anti-climax. He half expected Kida to rail at him, viciously even, some explosion to voice the tension. Izaya anticipated a conflict of sorts, instead he was served deeply ingrained hate that grew all the more for its not being expressed. It disturbed Izaya greatly.

But there was more to it. Perhaps it was Izaya's keen instinct for deciphering all things human for he sensed in a way he could explain that Kida's issues were primarily linked to a profound sense of self-loathing. And Izaya was unsure whether he was relieved or bothered that it was so.

He closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep. It did not work.
“Namie-san, did it ever cross your mind that I was strange?”

She slid a cup of coffee in his direction and seemed to give it some thought.

“I suppose. The thing with the board games and your rants always seemed strange to me. To be honest, at first I had my doubts as to whether I should work for you. Your methods are off whack. But they work and that settled it for me.”

Izaya was in earnest here but Namie was hardly so.

“Is that all that matters? The ends justify the means?”

“Pretty much. It’s one of the things I like about you.”

Izaya nearly asked her if she would think the same if he just so happened to sacrifice her precious brother to his next scheme but held his peace. Instead he relaxed into a brilliant smile.

“What are the other things, may I ask?”

“You are competent for all your eccentricities, your predictions are accurate and you pay well and on time.”

“Ah...thanks. I guess.”

She lifted a single eyebrow.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing.”

Namie had settled at her laptop but she now put it aside and confronted him directly.

“I heard that you’ve met Kida. Is that why you’re like this?”

Izaya smiled weakly.

“I just...have my doubts as to some of the things I’ve done.”

She reached for the phone and was already dialing.

“Your memory loss must have affected you psychologically. I can arrange a professional-”

“I’m taking a break now.”

He meant to catch some air but ended up going for a meandering walk. His past sat ill with him and all the darker for being only half perceived. Part of him wanted to disconnect himself from it but he knew it could never be. His assertion to Shiki, that Orihara Izaya would remain Orihara Izaya, did not crumble. But it made him all too aware that there were amends to be made and of how impossible it was to get about them. More than anything he was troubled by his limitations.

Izaya did not see his current situation as a privileged insight into his identity. Such a perspective required him to not be involved and was by default canceled out. He sat on a bench and pulled his
hood up. To willed himself away from his worries he lost track of his thoughts in the ceaseless tides of people passing to and fro. It was very soothing. 

At length he got up and headed to the nearest library. Izaya stayed until closing hours, sending a message to Namie so that she would not wait for him, and researched all he could on memory loss. That he had failed to do so up to this point surprised even him.

As soon as he delved into the wealth of information he felt uplifted. Cases of personality changes were not uncommon in people who suffered from amnesia. Of course, Izaya wanted to go against the grain as he always did. But it reassured him considerably. Other things alarmed him.

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That night at the club Izaya had to make an effort. It did not show except during breaks. Then he grew listless and downward depressed. Shiki was not even around. Izaya stayed late as usual to close shop. Not out of any need but out of dedication. Same reason why he deposited his tips in Shiki's hand. He was marginally aware that it was quite possible that he clung to Shiki to fill in the gap in emotional warmth.

Izaya was just pulling down the grid when a long black car stopped in front of him. His heartbeat took an unreasonable leap as Shiki rolled down a fogged window.

“Hop in.”

He took a seat so as to keep a polite distance. The car had been silently gliding along the empty night for a while until Izaya asked the obvious.

“Where are we going? My place isn't in this direction.”

“We're going to my place.”

From the confusion of emotions that assaulted Izaya the only one he could properly grasp was anxiety mingled with expectation. He needed to gain a firmer notion of the ground he stood on. After all, it was not the first time in the experience he could remember that he let desires run away with him. And Izaya learned from mistakes.

“I have work early in the morning so I do not think I can stay long.”

“Just stay over, then.”

Izaya swallowed to get rid of a knot forming inside his throat.

“Do I do that usually?”

“Every now and then. And we've arrived.”

Izaya was led into a vast apartment. Sparsely furnished but there were those typically Japanese items one associated with the yakuza. Pretty engravings of elaborate calligraphy, a silver tripped fan and there was even a tiny shrine adorning a wall. Izaya's natural curiosity kicked in as he spun around the room.

“Do you live alone, Shiki-san?”

“Pretty much. So, what happened? And sit down.”

If anyone else gave him such an order Izaya would not feel even remotely inclined to comply but he
had no problems doing so now. Partially because Shiki was commanding in himself but also because Izaya wanted to talk.

“I've just been thinking. About consequences to my actions. How I affected others in horrible ways and what that says about me. If we are what we do...then...”

He trailed off.

“So it's come to that.”

“Yes. I keep telling myself that my amazing plan- whatever that was- will make everything right- but I know it won't. If it works it'll be wonderful for me but that's about it. Everyone else...doesn't really matter much.”

Izaya did not want to bother Shiki with such gloomy reflections but he was rather dispirited at the moment. Shiki let him dwell in forlorn silence for a while.

“By the way, it's well past midnight. So happy birthday.”

Izaya started in such obvious surprise that even Shiki smiled.

“Oh, it's today. It slipped my mind entirely. I mean, I forgot even that and then so many things happened that I forgot again...but I suppose it doesn't matter either way. It's not as if I have anyone I can invite to a party or anything. Odds are no one will remember.”

Trying to sound offhand without entirely succeeding.

“I remembered.”

Shiki was very deliberate. It amused him how Izaya blushed with happiness like a little boy receiving an unexpected present.

“Thank you, Shiki-san. It means a lot-”

Shiki kissed him with unexpected tenderness. It only disarmed Izaya even further. Shiki half expected him to jump off the sofa but instead Izaya remained very still as if afraid to even move.

“Is this my birthday gift?”

“Think of it that way if you want. But it may be settling for too little.”

And here it was, the seductive anticipation that Izaya suited so well. It made itself evident now by certain relaxation of his limbs as if his body readying to entice.

“Are you saying that you have more to offer, Shiki-san.”

“You tell me.”

Izaya giggled nervously and jumped to his feet, stretching.

“That was my very first kiss. As far as I can tell, that is. So it's rather important to me.”

Shiki took his own sweet time on purpose so that Izaya had every opportunity of averting his advances. The next kiss was longer and deep. Izaya was aware of his clothes being expertly removed and of being swept to the bedroom. But all this was happening to him in the same way catastrophes befall one. Except this was very much welcomed by Izaya.
He felt stripped of control entirely as Shiki touched him in just the right way. The bed creaked slightly with their added weight, Shiki pinning him down without even breaking a borderline harsh kiss. Shiki's dominating nature found expression in sex as in everything else. It meant that Izaya was free to float, gasping for breath, on the tide of stimuli that shot through his nerves.

Pain, pleasure, and the world in a swirl.

And afterward Izaya scurried to light the cigarette Shiki was bringing to his lips.

“You may be spending too much time at the club. It's starting to become automatic.”

Izaya's smile was not polished as it befit a host, though. His naked body was slippery with sweat and he was relaxed in a haze of his afterglow. Shiki studied him coolly. Izaya seemed both re-freshened and tired, childish glee tinging his attitude. Hardly the smooth philosophizing that usually followed sex.

“Humans are Pavlovian creatures at heart, Shiki-san. But this isn't work. Apart from work I only do this for you.”

Shiki lifted an eyebrow at this. Izaya was in earnest, his smile a soft pretty shade that Shiki could not quite place. He wondered just when Izaya's eyes had gained this light.

“You can sleep in bed, if you want.”

“And here I was sure you'd kick me to me sofa.”

“Feel free to take the sofa if you'd like.”

Izaya giggled anew and made himself comfortable on the sheets.

“Shiki-san, you're actually an old fashioned kind of guy, aren't you? Smoking after sex, for example. The way your place is decorated. I like it, it's so different...pretty cool, Shiki-san...pretty cool indeed...”

And with this piece of wisdom Izaya drifted to sleep, the smile lingering on and growing dreamy. Shiki watched him for a long time. Then he pulled the blankets so as to cover him. Shiki resumed his vigil and wondered.

*

Izaya woke up to an empty bed and sighed. He would hurt the whole day to come, that much he knew. He could still feel Shiki's scent hanging in the air like more than a phantom presence and he even fancied some of his warmth was still perceptible.

“Happy birthday, Orihara Izaya! Don't you feel so mature now that you turned 24! Oh yay, a shame I can only remember three weeks out of those years! Wheee...okay, that was creepy.”

He was hoping to find Shiki still about the apartment but knew it would not happen. Izaya showered after finding a note that told him he could do so, as well as avail himself to any food he found and not to snoop about. Which immediately sparked Izaya's inborn curiosity. But there was no actual conflict. Izaya could not spy on Shiki any more than he could shake off apprehensions or take to the sky by flapping his arms. This image made him chuckle.
But he felt hollowed out.

Izaya fixed himself some sparse meal since he did not want to impinge even more on Shiki’s generosity. There was no reason for him to check his cell phone, Izaya did it out of professional scruple. As it turned out there was a message. Sent precisely at midnight. Izaya was so surprised that he read it out loud.

“Orihara-san, happy birthday. I hope I was the first to give you my congratulations. May you have a wonderful day. Yours, Saki.”

Izaya stared blankly at the phone. He both wanted to delete it and forget all about it and rush to the hospital where against all reason a girl that should hate him had been kind enough to remember a date most forgot. Acts of good will toward him normally only amused Izaya and did not make him more incline to sympathize with the parties involved. True sympathy was a quality he lacked on an emotional level. But things were very different now that he had no prior references to fall back into. He could not default into nonchalance.

In the end there was no actual choice for he had to other viable option. Izaya slipped into his far too flashy clothes and checking his watch hurried lest he missed visiting hour. As he moved through the preposterously large metropolis, his attire a strange note of nightlife against the sea of suits, it occurred to him if the great riddle of free will was not simpler than was speculated to. Ultimately one's character, background and all that made one oneself made it impossible to pursue certain actions. It placed him in a particularly distinct position for his former experiences had been razed flat.

He jostled amidst the morning rush that was dying out but there were still petering small crowds in which he felt an irrevocable sense of being cut off from the flow of humanity. Not by standing over it in self bolstered superiority but isolated and stranded between two points, unable to reinvent himself completely and equally unable to reconnect seamlessly with his former self. Izaya stopped in a spot that Kida was all too familiar with. He wondered what Saki could possibly gain from his interaction with her.

Izaya also spun on his heels and hurried away but it was not something he could do. He barely noticed the odd looks thrown his way. Izaya read her name by the door twice before knocking. All he had to recognize her by were photographs and as much as he trusted his visual memory he wanted to make sure that he was in the right place. He knocked.

“It's open. Orihara-san, I didn't know you were visiting me today. I'm glad I can tell you happy birthday in person.”

Izaya was taken aback. He half expected and was bracing himself for a scene of hysterics but the girl before him was serene through and through. Her joy was real enough but it too expressed itself through a filter of calm that Izaya did not associate with someone as young. And certainty not with someone with such a dark past. Izaya stood awkwardly enough but realized that he could smile.

“Thank you.”

She produced a small package neatly wrapped in shiny paper and topped with an elaborate bow.

“Happy birthday, Orihara-san.”

Izaya took it from her small hands and turned it over.

“It's almost a shame to rip it open.”

Saki studied him quietly.
“I like your new clothes.”

“Oh, thanks. And thank you for this. Just my style.”

It was a pretty silver ring inside a cushioned mini box as befit jewelry.

Izaya removed one of his old ones to replace it with the new ring and suddenly realized how much he did love it. Something new and unfettered by the past. A small token that belonged to him exclusively.

“I thought so. I ordered it ahead of time but I was afraid it would not get here on time.”

“Wasn't it expensive?”

“It is fine, I saved.”

“I see.”

Izaya could not keep still. Oppressive restlessness was upon him. She watched him pace up and down with the quiet smile that Izaya found so disruptive to his own peace of mind. And then he decided to simply tell her. Saki's eyes widened and she folded her hands anew.

“I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself.”

“I won't tell anyone. It means a lot that you would visit me when you've lost your memory.”

Of course Izaya would never have visited were it otherwise.

“I'm sorry I forgot you.”

Saki shook her head.

“It's fine. It is not your fault, Orihara-san. Even if you seem a bit different you're still the same person.”

Izaya looked around as if to find a place to hide. That she was so sweet troubled him more than anything and he had the distinct sense that there was an inversion of power roles taking place. It crossed his mind briefly that it could be at least half deliberate on her part. But he trusted Namie's assurance that Saki was his one loyal ally that would stand by him regardless of what happened.

“Tell you what, you can go for a stroll now, can't you? I'll wheel you around the block. It's a lovely day outside and it'd be a shame for you not to enjoy it. Besides, fresh air and seeing people will help you recover so much faster. What do you say?”

Izaya was already getting the wheelchair ready. Saki blinked three times in surprise but gathered herself into peaceful happiness right away.

“I would love that.”

Izaya hesitated slightly before propping her on the chair. He could call a nurse to do this but the need to atone plagued him almost like physical pain.

“I'll pick you up, okay?”

“Okay.”
She was very light in his arms and unresisting. Izaya was glad that he could station himself behind the handles and thus not face her directly.

“Hey, have you been eating properly? You're still growing up, you must eat to become strong and healthy.”

They emerged into the sunlight. It was already hot and light shimmered blindingly. Saki laughed, the sound silvery amidst the buzz of the city.

“Orihara-san, you're acting like my father now.”

His hands tightened on the handles.

“T’ll have whatever you'll have.”

Izaya placed the chair in a shady place and bought two vanilla chocolate cones. On his way back he bought a wide straw hat with a pink ribbon.

“Here. It's been a while since you've been out so it's best to wear this.”

Saki adjusted the hat and sampled the icecream.

“Thank you. Orihara-san, you haven't forgotten everything.”

“What do you mean? I don't remember anything about myself, about other people, about my past.”

He kicked himself inwardly. The last thing he wanted was to burden her with his issues.

“But you still know what makes people tick.”

It made Izaya both touched and uncomfortable. She knew him better than he had thought possible.

“Tell you what, let's just focus on letting you enjoy the sights and nevermind the rest.”

She smiled beautifully. Izaya wheeled her around the hospital but then steered into livelier streets. Having informed the hospital personnel beforehand he had some time to spend with Saki. He was thinking on what to do next and keeping track of the return route when the sound of thunder reached him. The ground shook under his feet and he had to steady the chair with all his might.

“Earthquake?”

“Worse. Heiwajima Shizuo. You should run away, Orihara-san.”

But Izaya could do no such thing. For one, there was no time. Shizuo burst into his field of vision, swinging a traffic sign in a hectic arch that swept a small crowd out of his path. Izaya froze, panic giving way into blank horror. He could only think that whatever this Shizuo was he was surely not human. Shizuo’s stampede focused on one point, his eyes flashing with fury.

“I-ZA-YA-KUN!”

And then Shizuo was dashing in his direction. Izaya did not think. If he had given it any thought at all he might have acted otherwise. But at the borders of his tunnel vision he caught Saki's shape. It lasted only for a split second but that very momentary quality made her seem even more fragile as if she too existed only for the shortest of time before being inevitably obliterated.
Izaya stepped in front of Shizuo, kicking the chair with the back of the heel in just the right way to send it off Shizuo's trajectory. Izaya jumped over the sign pole and by the time he landed the switchblade was already in his hand and ready to take aim.

“Your grudge is with me. So leave the girl alone, she never did you any harm. It's me you hate, isn't it Shizu-chan? So come and get me. Right here, right now. Before I slice you open.”

He could not look back and check on Saki but he could hear someone from the gathering crowd wheeling her safely away against her protests. Izaya's legs nearly folded beneath his. The plan was to attract attention to himself so now was the time to make a run for it. From what he had been told Shizuo was bound to give chase. And even as Izaya's mind ran ahead of it over the blueprint of this part of city as to maximize his chances of survival he remained terrified.

Izaya locked his eyes on Shizuo's and prepared to make a dash for it. If it came to close combat he was as good as dead but there was a timing to making his escape. Shizuo seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then he jammed the sign post into the concrete, one end sticking into the air like a pipe jutting from the ground.

“What the hell you doing?”

“Telling you how great of an idiot you are, for one.”

Shizuo frowned.

“You acting all weird. Are you really Izaya? Sure looks like it but those frilly clothes are weird.”

“I just so happen to have a fashion sense. And unlike some people I change my outfit every now and then.”

Shizuo stared at him long and hard. It seemed to last a life time. He pointed the sign at the retreating wheelchair. With so many people jammed together progress was slow.

“Who's the girl?”

Izaya leaped so as to block Saki from any attack from Shizuo's part. By now his mind had processed that he was acting in a most suicidal fashion and that it was absolutely unreasonable to persist. But his new ring glittered in the sun and he knew he could not avoid this. Even as fear nearly unhinged him on the spot.

“Like I said, that is my business alone. You got a problem with me, not her.”

Izaya was not even sure if he was afraid for himself or for Saki. Until the thought occurred to him that if he wanted to hurt someone he would crush a person precious to that him or her. It is part of that knowledge of human beings that Saki alluded to and it puts everything in a new light. Suddenly Izaya saw his own behavior as potentially more dangerous to Saki than anything else. He dared glance behind his shoulder then and like a nightmare in which things happen in slow motion the chair was still in sight.

Izaya shifted his attention to Shizuo who seemed to be waiting for something.

“Wheel that chair out of here now! Hurry up already!”

Izaya's voice sounded near desperation even to himself. He was sure that he has just lost now. If Shizuo were to hurl the pole at Saki there was nothing that Izaya could at all do. And so he prepared to take aim to throw his blade at Shizuo in the hopes of hitting him squarely in the eye. Shizuo had
lost his glasses somewhere along his rampage, making it easier for Izaya to land a hit. Izaya wished he had two knives to seal the deal.

To Izaya's absolute surprise Shizuo moved the pole to herd the crowd away from Saki's exit route. She turned around to grant Izaya a beautiful smile. Izaya lowered his blade.

“When did I say I wanted to hurt the girl? Don't go judging others by your standards.”

Izaya realized that this was exactly what he had done. To his immense relief the human pack obeyed Shizuo's command and soon enough Saki was nowhere to be seen. Izaya tried to shrug his emotion away.

“Who is to know what you'll do when you go all crazy?”

“You're worried about her. Could it be that you wanted to protect her...? Are you really Orihara Izaya?”

Izaya took a step back. With Saki safe Izaya's fear receded and transitioned into something else. He realized that he was actually offended at this. It was ridiculous but there it was.

“Who else could I possibly be? I am Orihara Izaya.”

Shizuo seemed to muse.

“Maybe it's some sort of trick...”

“Ah, that is exactly what it was. A trick and you fell for it.”

But Shizuo was not convinced.

“I don't believe it.”

“Why not, Shizu-chan? It wouldn't be the first time I pulled the wool over your eyes.”

“Yeah but you don't put your ass on the line. Something's weird.”

Izaya was becoming increasingly nervous. As if on cue Tom turned a corner and arrived on site, his step leisurely enough. He was used to following Shizuo's trail of destruction and knew by now that it was best to keep a distance until Shizuo's anger wound up.

“Shizuo, are you done? We have to get back, oh Orihara-san.”

It was the distraction Izaya so desperately needed. In the time it took Shizu to look at Tom, Izaya spun on his heels and sprinted, turned into an alley and disappeared. Even after he was well out of the danger zone he kept running. He felt that his cover had been blown and that disaster was impending. It was by sheer force of will that he brought himself to stop and he had to lean against a wall to catch his breath. Izaya composed himself, emerged from the dimness of the narrow alley into the day.

Izaya was surprised to realize how much he had run. He was in a different part of town and needed to scramble for a sense of direction. Disorientation washed over him but he did not want to use the GPS service lest he ended up too dependent on machines. To a city creature as Izaya geography needed to become part of his inner mapping. He even avoided looking at any signs until he had some idea of where he was.

He walked into a café, splashed cold water on his face in the restroom and drank some juice. His
hands trembled slightly. As he was now he could hardly face Saki at all and for an alarming moment he needed to call Shiki. Izaya waited until it faded into mere wanting. He understood that he had to be alone and think through his tumultuous confusion. There were things that only him could sort out and this was one of these.

Having reached that resolution he remained at a loss. Shizuo's words resounded in his mind and forced Izaya to reflect on his own action. Memory loss or not Izaya knew himself to be very driven to survive and not the kind to risk his life for the sake of others. Yet he had done just that. It did not occur to Izaya that he was becoming a better person but simply that he was becoming a different one. He caught a glimmer from his new ring and turned it over, holding the metal as if it was a delicate treasure. And then realized that it was precisely that.

He turned his thoughts to Shizuo now, reluctantly. His latent memory, or shadow of a memory, was stirred. He did not need to rely on the information he had acquired second hand through Namie and files to know that Shizuo had played an important part in his life as the embodiment of all that opposed him. It was painful that strive as he might to hunt for a glimpse of a memory regarding Shiki he failed but Shizuo had imprinted his presence into Izaya's, somehow.

It made Izaya wonder if Shizuo was not connected with his amnesia. Angles to explore were Izaya's professional saving grace. Even if he was mistaken it would not be a loss of time. For one, it would put his fear into perspective since he would have to tackle it head first. And second, it was better to pursue something than simply wait for his memory to return of its own accord. Investigating Shizuo would take much careful plotting and Izaya was eager to devote himself to it.

To past grievances he knew of and the general feeling of antagonism that he could not escape Izaya added the fact that Shizuo had ruined his birthday and Saki's outing. It was absolutely unforgivable. If wishing someone dead could have an effect then Shizuo would have died. And there was more to it, Izaya blamed Shizuo for forcing him to acknowledge some disturbing changes in himself.

He nearly jumped off his skin as his phone rang. By the ringtone he knew that it was his sisters. Izaya let the phone ring for a long while and almost did not pick it up. He took a deep breath before finally picking it up and was still unsure of what salute to use when a rapid voice on the other side took care of that for him.

"Izaya-nii, today is your birthday. So I thought you might do something useful for a change. Do you know about hobbits?"

Izaya was completely confused. He was dimly aware that he did not even know which of his sisters he was talking to and for a distressing moment he could not even tell them apart in his mind. In his confusion he forgot all about the pictures he had seen and defaulted to 'twins' as 'identical siblings'.

"Hobbits...?"

"Hobbits, hobbits. Like in 'the Lord of the Rings'. In the books hobbits give presents on their birthday so you should too."

"Ah..."

"So, we want new smart phones, I'll text you the technical details and a blu-ray collection of Hanejima-san's movies."

Izaya was suddenly very tired as well as annoyed. He tried to remind himself that this demanding voice was his sibling, his own flesh and blood, but it remained nothing but a demanding voice.
“You want me to give you presents on my birthday?”

“That's the gist of it.”

“Can't you wait for your birthday?”

“Assuming you'd actually remember it. You didn't remember last year, or the year before, or the year before that—”

“I got it, I got it.”

“So you'll get our stuff?”

“Alright. Is that all?”

He felt empty and exhausted beyond belief.

“Wait a sec, Kururi wants a word with you.”

There was some confusion on the other side and a different voice spoke. Much softer.

“Izaya-nii? Happy birthday.”

He had to muffle the phone to keep the sudden bout of sobs to be overheard. It was such a small thing but it meant the world to him. It elevated the kind voice to the status of a real person who had a connection to him.

“Izaya-nii...? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing. Thanks for remembering. And I'm sorry that I forgot- your birthday. It won't happen again.”

“The best thing is, if you remember mine you'll remember Mairu's too.”

Izaya did not think it was all that good but he was not about to contradict her.

“Sure, of course. I'll send your gifts over.”

A slight hesitation before the reply came.

“Oh, okay. I just thought you'd like to meet since it's been a while—”

Garbled noises and then the voice switched again.

“Use express mail so that it gets here faster.”

So much for twins being akin, Izaya thought. Then again all of his data was unanimous in that the sisters were not at all similar. But clearly they stuck together and he was the outsider. That it was so of his own device did was no consolation.

“Will do.”

“You better. We'll be waiting. Kururi says bye.”

And just like that the connection was cut. Izaya was tempted to call again and remind Mairu that the gifts would arrive much faster if he were to deliver them in hand but he knew it would be to no avail. He was much more tempted to give Kururi a call and see if he could work on a connection there. In
the end he did neither.
Instead he waited and sure enough the details arrived via text message soon enough.

Izaya bought the phones and decided to throw in a bonus in the shape of matching straps. He had to
stand on tiptoe to reach the movie collection and was about to ask for assistance when an arm
retrieved it for him.

“Thank you- you!”

Izaya prepared to dash for before him stood none other than Heiwajima Shizuo.

“Not gonna hurt you so chill. Is that for your sisters?”

Izaya was still not convinced.

“None of your business.”

After so much dodging Izaya now opted for a quick retreat without actually making a run for it.

“I can get you an autographed copy.

Izaya was torn. He imagined how great an impression this might cause, perhaps Mairu would even
give him the time of day. Shizuo caught up with him.

“Like I thought, you have changed.”

“Tong a hurry so don't stand in my way.”

“Since when do you buy stuff for your sisters?”

His fear of Shizuo eclipsed on the spot. Izaya hardly knew what he was about to say before the
words rushed out of him.

“Why do they like you so much? It's not fair.”

Shizuo did not miss the undertone of genuine discontent. He was used to Izaya indulging in bemused
complaints that only served to aggravate Shizuo who suspected that to Izaya everything was too
much a joke to even get upset about.

“You want the autograph or what?”

Izaya reached a decision. He produced his wallet out which he extracted a bundle of bills.

“Here, get me the autograph.”

“You're paying me?”

“Got a problem with that? What, you don’t accept dirty money made at the expense of people’s
misery?”

Shizuo blinked, taken completely by surprise and studied him anew in silence. Izaya had a keen
feeling that he was coming across as ridiculous, he bristled all over in a fit of reinforced anger. He
had to take a deep breath to steady himself and regain lost ground. He did so by adopting his
trademark sly smile and dismissive shrug that clearly indicated that Orihara Izaya was above
everyone, too elevated to stoop down to actually get involved.
“My, such silly notions of honor and respectability. It is amazing how they persist even in someone like you who lives in the underbelly of society. There is a name to this phenomenon, what is the word I am looking for, ah yes. Hypocrisy.”

Izaya’s smile gained an edge but Shizuo still stared him down unflinchingly. Much to Izaya’s dismay.

“Let’s go somewhere else. Too crowded here.”

Izaya wanted to walk away in a detached and most elegant manner but he was afraid it might expose his fearful apprehension. And because he could not afford that he found himself sitting on a bench next to Shizuo. Izaya perched on the other side of the seat as distant from Shizuo as possible and he picked a spot next to the park’s exit so that he could jump into the street and let the bustle of the city sweep him away into secure anonymity.

Shizuo pulled an old cell phone and Izaya resisted casting furtive glances in his direction, instead he settled to craft an illusion of blasé ease. He still wanted to bolt and would readily do so if it came to that. But only if it came to that. Because he knew that it would damage his street credit to do otherwise.

Orihara Izaya only fled when the danger was so immanent that he could pull it off with utilitarian grace. If he were not so occupied with keeping tabs on Shizuo he would have begrudged his old self for clinging to potentially deadly habits such as confronting Shizuo in the first place.

It was a particularly ironic case of hypocrisy, all things considered but for once Izaya was unaware of irony.

“Kasuka? It’s me. Can you sign some DVDs for the Orihara sisters? It’s ‘Mairu’ and ‘Kururi’, in that order. ‘Kay, see you later.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“I like the girls so keep your money. Kasuka will drop by my place later to sign the stuff.”

“Do you like Mairu better? Since you insisted on putting her name first.”

“Not really. It’s just that Mairu would like that way and Kururi won’t care either way.”

“Ah, what do you know. Looks like you know them better that I do-”

Betrayed into speaking the truth, too late to retract it but still unable not to bite off further compromising words.

“Dunno about that but I listen to them.”

“How wonderful of you.”

For all Izaya knew Shizuo only bothered being friendly toward the twins out of spite for him. In this Izaya defaulted into suspecting the worst out of his nemesis. At the same time the explanation exonerated Izaya from neglect. It was a twofold consolation and Izaya was shaken enough to believe it for strictly emotional motives.

“What’s up with the gifts? Some occasion?”

Izaya considered an elaborate lie about Mairu and Kururi throwing him a birthday party and how he
decided to thank them with this treat, dropping in a pointed way that Shizuo was obviously not invited, what a shame but it could not helped, it was a family event after all. He abandoned the plan immediately. Shizuo would see through it and either way he would surely talk to the girls and the truth would only make Izaya seem pathetic.

“Hobbits.”

“Hobbits…?”

“As in ‘Lord of the Rings’ hobbits, the kind that give presents on their birthday.”

“So today’s your birthday, huh.”

“If you must know it, yes. Which reminds me, I have things to do.”

Izaya leaped to his feet, he did not want to prolong this any longer.

“What’s going on here? You’re acting weird. Even for you.”

“Whatever do you mean? I am not particularly fond of your company.”

“I’ll send the girls the DVDs-“

“They’re my sisters, not yours.”

Shizuo blinked.

“You dying or something? Is that why you’re having this sudden change of heart? Got some deadly disease or some shit?”

“Wouldn’t you love that. I’m out of here.”

Izaya strutted away, damage control.

“If you want to give them yourself drop by my place.”

“No thanks. I’ll stay away from your den.”

Izaya did not bother turning around.

“Better that way for me but the girls would like to receive stuff directly from you.”

“Tough luck.”

He ducked into a crowd with almost a sigh of relief. Izaya wandered almost aimlessly, his only focus being to drift as far away from the park as he could. Then he decided he needed to visit the hospital again. But first he purchased something. Izaya climbed the wall easily and had no problems working his blade into the window latch so that he could slip into the room.

“Hi there, Saki.”

“Orihara-san!”

He felt his awkwardness keenly. Izaya hurried to produce a wrapped box that he handed to her.

“For me…?”
“Ever heard of hobbits?”

“From the Lord of the Rings? Oh, right. I get it now. They give presents on their birthday.”

Izaya nodded, stress ebbing away under her quiet joy.

“You’re stealing my thunder here. I was supposed to tell you all about the hobbits and their peculiar habits.”

Her brand new hat was placed in a chair close at hand so that she could look at it whenever she wanted.

“It’s the second thing you give me today. Oh! A smart phone!”

A warm feeling filled him.

“I’ll put my number on speed dial, if anything happens, anything at all you can call me. Any time. And if the hospital people give you hell just tell them your guardian says it’s fine.”

She clutched the phone with both hands.

“I already know it by heart.”

“Which is more than I can say, I forgot all about numbers, combinations, the whole lot. And now I better leave before some angry nurse catches me.”

Izaya put the number on speed dial either way and bounced over to the window.

“Thank you very much.”

He was already climbing over the sill.

“Oh, one more thing. When you’re discharged you can move in with me if you want. Give it some thought, no pressure.”

Izaya easily slid down to the street below. His footing was as sure as his resolution. It was the right thing to do and something he would never have done if not for the memory loss. Whether it was a blessing in disguise Izaya did not quite know. He thought about situational ethics, made a few more selective purchases and headed for the club.

Izaya took his part-time very seriously. Always the first to arrive to help tidy up the main room and see that the champagne bottles were chilled and the glasses balanced on intricate glittery pyramids. There were ice buckets to attend to, final touches on the décor and Izaya had even devised a new sleek illumination system with subdued colors that slowly blended one into another to create a cozily surreal experience. Going above and beyond the call of duty.

He let himself in and immediately was on alert. The room was pitch black and made eerie by the mirror. His fear switched to absolute surprise as the lights came alive and a sprinkle of confetti fell on him as two girls he recognized sprang on him.

“Happy birthday, baka-nii!”

“Happy birthday, Izaya-nii.”

“What are you girls doing here…?”
This first encounter with his sisters was so unexpected that Izaya forgot all about his many issues with them.

“I invited them.”

“Shiki-san…?”

They dragged him to a seat and unceremoniously forced him to sit. Mairu even sat on his lap as if he was a seat himself, much to his discomfort.

“Shiki-san invited us over. And since you got nifty autographed copies of Kasuka’s movies I figured I’d forget how an idiot of a big brother you are for once.”

Izaya had no idea how they knew about that but for the time being it did not matter. He was swept into the bustle of the moment.

“It is our first time in a host club. I’m a bit nervous.”

Kururi looked around apprehensively.

“I closed the club for the night so you ladies need not worry.”

Izaya was stunned at Shiki’s gentlemanly ways.

“Listen to the yakuza and let the champagne flow!”

“You’re underage, no bottle for you.”

Izaya took the champagne from Mairu.

“Hey! Not fair!”

“Izaya-nii is right, no drinking.”

“What-ever.”

Mairu rolled her eyes dramatically. Izaya chuckled. He was not sure of what Shiki had told them to account for his being here but Izaya decided to simply trust him. His presence made Izaya considerably less nervous. Izaya could chat with his sisters without being paralyzed by apprehension. To his surprise he found mannerisms in them that he shared. In an attempt to piece back a cohesive sense of identity Izaya had studied his own facial expressions at length as well so he recognized easily on someone else.

The experience was a strange one. Izaya felt displaced as if he was floating in midair and spinning at the same time. He was tempted to down a bottle of champagne but he decided against it. Already he was almost giddy. His sisters were no longer figments of a past that was not his but real girls whose warm bodies were casually pressed to his in innocent familiarity. It was a confirmation of kinship, normally teenage girls would never act so carefree around him. Briefly, he wondered just how Saki felt about it. But now was not the time to consider such matters.

“-so I took her bra and hid it. Served her good!”

Mairu beamed at this bit of wisdom.

“Bullies can be so annoying.”

This was Kururi’s version of events, more subdued. Izaya shifted a bit uncomfortably.
“Do you girls have bullying problems?”

“Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Still, Mairu…keep me informed, okay? I mean it.”

She frowned, surprised.

“Gee, we’ve survived just fine without nii-chan’s protection so far. It’s not like we need you.”

But Izaya believed that the bravado was hollow. He straightened up and looked into their eyes.

“Next time they bother you let me know. I’ll see what I can do.”

Izaya flashed the blade in front of their widening eyes. Shiki wondered at it. At length Mairu whistled.

“You’re suddenly cool, baka-nii! Who are you and what have you done with our good for nothing brother?”

Both sisters stared him down and Izaya’s disorientation climbed a notch. The horrible suspicion that they knew everything mingled with the consciousness of being acting a part of sorts. His smile was watery and a pale shadow of the radiance he so easily cast as a host.

“It’s the new clothes. What do you girls think?”

“Flashy, won’t help you mingle in a crowd, that’s for sure.”

“You look great, Izaya-nii.”

Izaya actually blushed.

“So, I don’t suppose you guys got me anything?”

“You can enjoy your company, be very glad for that and count yourself lucky.”

“We ran out of allowance already.”

“Stingy parents, you know how they are.”

Izaya of course had no idea. He was not looking forward to meeting his parents, their parents to be more precise, and apparently that would not become an issue anything soon if ever. Izaya did not know if he was relieved or disappointed.

The party was a lively one with Izaya finding Mairu’s sarcastic retorts much to his liking (even when addressed at him) and realizing that Kururi was a sweet girl. But something was bothering him.

“By the way…why are you wearing your gym class outfit?”

“It’s comfortable.”

“She always wears it.”

“Ah…I see.”

Mairu rolled her eyes behind the glasses.
“Don’t tell me you just noticed it now?”

“Of course not.”

Mairu leered at him with a mischievous smile.

“Looks like you’re getting mighty friendly with Shiki-san.”

Izaya’s flush returned and deepened. He coughed in an attempt of coming across as too mature to even answer but was all too aware that he failed.

“Izaya is very useful.”

“Oh I bet he is!”

She giggled girlishly, Izaya was at a loss. Kururi came to the rescue.

“It’s okay, Mairu is just being…well, Mairu.”

This provoked Mairu into jumping on her sister and gleefully squeezing her breasts.

“Boob attack!”

Izaya had to laugh. The party was a success of the crazy kind. Later, he stood on the curb as a car of Shiki’s organization drove them away, waving.

“Shiki-san, thank you.”

“Let’s go to the office, I have a job for you.”

Izaya became alert immediately.

“An informant’s job?”

“Yes. It’s what you are, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is.”

Izaya was keenly aware of added responsibility. It sobered and elated him at the same time. Shiki noticed how intent Izaya was throughout the brief. Normally Izaya seemed breezy even on such occasions, so much so that if Shiki did not know better he would have discounted Izaya altogether. But now the façade of smoothness was cast aside completely and Izaya showed his concentration nakedly. Shiki found it charming in a strange way.

“I understand. I will do my best, Shiki-san.”

Izaya’s phone rang and he made as if to turn it off.

“Take the call, it might be important.”

Izaya hesitated.

“It’s Mairu.”

“All the more reason to take it.”

“Thank you, this won’t take long.”
Shiki removed himself to a polite distance. But he was planning on listening to the side of the conversation that was available to him. His curiosity was whetted.

“Mairu, this better be important. Did something happen?”

“That’s what I want to ask. Are you dying or something?”

Izaya blinked. All he knew of Mairu pointed to her being on the insane side of things but he could not make heads of tails of her now.

“Dying? Of course not. Now that was random.”

“You’re acting mighty weird. All of a sudden you’re giving us the time of day. Just wondering if you were about to kick the bucket.”

“Well I’m not, thank you for your concern.”

“You better not go and die on us. I mean it. Not that I would care but it’d make Kururi sad and I won’t have that.”

“Right. Anyway, I am as healthy as it gets. And I’m in a middle of something, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Okay. And you better not be lying.”

“Goodbye.”

Izaya sighed as he ended the call. Then he perked up.

“Shiki-san, do you know about hobbits?”

“Can’t say that I do.”

It was the answer Izaya expected and the one he wanted.

“Hobbits are short stubby folk with flat furry feet. More importantly they are known to give presents on their birthday. It’s an interesting case of self-serving generosity since they only have to give once a year and yet are bound of receive many presents all year around, their social group being on the largish side. Anyway, to keep the hobbit spirit I bought you something.”

Izaya was almost grave as he presented polished cuff links in a velvet case and a sleek tie. Shiki inspected the items.

“I can always use more of these and this is top quality stuff. Thanks.”

“I noticed that you use cuff links, it’s part of my job- or more, part of my nature- to notice details. The little things tell a lot about someone.”

Shiki was amused.

“What do the little things tell you about me, then?”

“Well, that is- that you project an image of discreet elegance that matches the way you are in charge without having to make a show of it.”

“Interesting.”
Izaya positively beamed.

“I’ll start working on the case right now.”

And indeed Izaya seemed ready to rush back home to tackle his many resources.

“It can wait until the morning, get some sleep first.”

“But I can start now.”

“No need for that. I want you well rested before you start. No point in doing it otherwise.”

“I’m not tired, though.”

Shiki considered Izaya’s altered state anew. This eagerness mingled with almost childish stubbornness was completely new.

“It can wait, Izaya. It’s getting late, you can crash at my place.”

That sealed it. Izaya was happy to comply. Later, Shiki stayed up and watched Izaya sleep by his side. Izaya never stayed long enough after sex. Just long enough to deliver a few lines about some abstract topic or another and then out the door after a quick shower. It was a token of their sexual relationship: casual encounters that satisfied both parties without demanding anything.

Shiki was very much aware that Izaya as he was now, happily curled on his side, was entirely faithful. It was a strange feeling. Fidelity was something foreign to Izaya and it would have remained thus if not for this unlikely memory loss. Shiki had always thought Izaya to be interesting but he now knew him to be likable as well.

There used to be a self-sufficiency to Izaya that virtually isolated him from normal human affections. More than once Shiki had thought that Izaya was unable of feeling love even if Izaya fully understood its workings. Perhaps because Izaya was so wired to understand as opposed to actually be affected by emotions. But there was more to it. Izaya was so content in himself that there was no space for anyone else to possibly intrude.

This had most definitely changed.

It placed Shiki in a potentially touchy situation. Particularly if Izaya were to push for Shiki to reply to this fidelity in kind. Shiki wondered if Izaya was about to do such a thing. He thought it highly unlikely. While Izaya was normally too independent to even consider making such a claim he was now too bent on being non-intrusive to ever curtail Shiki’s freedom.

Shiki wondered how it would be like if Izaya were to prove him wrong. Next to him Izaya cuddled closer and mumbled something. Shiki ran fingers through Izaya’s hair. There was something oddly compelling in this.

Shiki was not one to be drawn to protecting the helpless, after all that would hardly do in the yakuza, but Izaya’s naked vulnerability was touching. Probably because Izaya’s new handicap did not turn him into a weak person, instead Izaya fought back. And that was something Shiki admired.

He was turning these musings over when his phone rang.

“Hello, Yagiri-san. Yes, he’s with me. And he’s fine. I understand. If I must say it is odd for you to be so concerned over him. Indeed. If there isn’t any pressing matter I’ll tell him to contact you in the morning.”
As he finished this brief yet telling call Shiki wondered just how other people were reacting to Izaya. Yagiri Namie was clearly worried and Shiki was uncertain whether she was merely afraid for Izaya insofar as he was her boss. But perhaps this was paranoia. If so it raised some issues that Shiki did not want to contemplate at the moment.

Better to just enjoy the moment and watch Izaya happily slumbering. Shiki was not used to having any of his lovers stay over. He could get used to it.

“More sushi…? I couldn’t possibly…maybe just another tiny bit…hmm…sushi…”

In his dreams Izaya was apparently having banquet. Shiki’s thoughts followed another avenue. The job he had just given Izaya was not particularly difficult but somewhat prickly. It required subtlety. And it was very much a test. They both knew it. Shiki was certain that Izaya would not fail but he wondered what would happen if Izaya did fail. After all, it did not matter how much things changed, the fact remained that Izaya had to be useful or else he was to be discarded as superfluous. There were many informants in Tokyo. Izaya without his skill set was ultimately useless. More, he was even a liability. If it came to that Shiki might very well have to terminate him.

Shiki was even less inclined to follow this line of thought. Before he too went to sleep it crossed his mind that his brand new cufflinks and tie were precisely the right color and shape.
Chapter 4

“We have work, Namie-san.”

Izaya spun on his chair, hands laced together.

“Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“Without a doubt.”

Namie regarded him in silence for a while.

“Alright. What do you need?”

“Act as my sounding board if I need it. And prepare me some Japanese green tea, please.”

She appreciated the new polite attitude. Izaya took a deep breath, closed his eyes and then attacked the keyboard. He typed at lightning speed, eyes scanning the monitor. He cast a few comments Namie’s way and sipped tea without as much as glancing at the cup.

Then he leaped off the chair, wincing slightly for in his excitement he had forgotten not to do sudden movements, and bounced to the door.

“I’m going out to do some field work.”

“Can’t the blonde kid do that?”

“No, I’ll handle it myself.”

Izaya both wanted to prove himself and to protect Kida. But even as emotions served the background to his motivation he was cool and collected, thinking ahead on how to proceed next and extract the information he needed. Orihara Izaya did not wait until nightfall, having decided that in daylight there would be a more relaxed network of security. And he was not even about to breach it, only to peer through it.

Orihara Izaya reached the street from a fire exit and immediately blended in. Urban invisibility. He had work to do and he was good at it: the best there was, in fact.

Izaya thought about the human tide that engulfed him. It was easy to disappear in it. The crowds were his material but also his buffer. He took a train, changed to another line and a few stations afterward found himself in a nondescript part of town. From here on it was smooth sailing. He expected his nerves to be on edge but they were steely when it mattered.

Izaya took a few pictures with the smallest of devices as he pretended to rub his right eye and was gone before anyone had registered that he had even been there. For a few blocks he kept his hood up, the fur hiding his face from the cameras that he knew were there.

He transmitted the pictures over to his headquarters and drew a detailed report in his mind that he sent as well.

On his way back he took a detour. He was curious as how his very first assignment had gone. Perhaps Shiki could tell him. And without even realizing where his line of thought was taking him he wondered if he had been in love with Shiki before. He nearly jumped off his seat and startled his fellow passengers.
Until now he had never articulated his feelings as love but after the pressure of work deflated he was without inner barriers. Izaya ran a hand through his hair, it trembled slightly. He exited at the wrong station and wandered aimlessly in a flurry of agitation. Love was a tall order. Izaya calmed down by watching people rushing by. Families, happy, hurried, annoyed or bored; blank faced salarymen with their perennial suitcases and noose like ties; a few girls dolled up in Lolita attires all pastel colors and absurdly pink; some shady old men. A variety of humans parading before him.

He drew useless inferences about those who caught his attention and then let the steady flow clear his mind. Just when he had himself under control someone accosted him.

“Izaya? What are you doing here?”

For a split second he had no idea who the bespectacled fellow was. Panic seized him momentarily then the name and a string of facts rolled into his immediate awareness.

“Hi there, Shinra. Long time no see.”

“Thought you had dropped off the face of the Earth, actually.”

Izaya chuckled in feigned ease.

“Never. You know me, just because you can’t see doesn’t mean I’m not around.”

“Now that sounds creepy.”

Not half as creepy as having a headless girlfriend, Izaya thought.

“It keeps me busy.”

“I bet but you never look busy.”

Izaya was a bit perplexed. All the data he had pertaining to Shinra ran to the effect of their not being exactly on the friendliest of terms. But somehow Shinra now saw fit to have a chat. There must be something to it. If only Izaya knew what had exactly had happened to sour their relationship. Intuition told him that something portentous had taken place in the past but was in the dark how to what it could be. Once more he had to piece incomplete information to draw conclusions. He reflected that gaining knowledge was always like that unless one was God. And presently being God sounded horribly boring.

“Work hard, play hard.”

“In your case play people hard and make a living out of that. How much do you pay for your place, anyway?”

They drifted to a coffee house.

“It’s a somewhat expensive area. Why do you ask, are you by any chance interested in purchasing property in Shinjuku?”

“I have no complaints about my place. But you must make a small fortune.”

“Should I put my bank manager on?”

He dallied his cell phone and smiled.

“Shizuo is right, you are different.”
To Izaya’s credit he did not even flinch and his shrugging was very natural.

“I’m afraid Shizu-chan is very biased when it comes to my person.”

“Maybe but you are different.”

Izaya chose to go all out and risk it.

“Oh? What is different about me? Do enlighten me.”

Shinra adjusted his glasses and peered at him long enough to make Izaya very uncomfortable. It must have shown.

“Nervous?”

“Curious.”

Shinra continued his study of Izaya with unblinking intensity. Then he readjusted his glasses.

“I can’t put my finger on it but I’m pretty sure something’s up.”

This was the right time for Izaya to make a retreat but he did not want to leave it at this.

“I’m a multifaceted individual. There are sides of me you’ve never seen.”

There were sides of Izaya that Izaya had barely glimpsed.

“Seems that way.”

“So I’m the hot topic around town? How wonderful!”

Izaya covered up his apprehension with exuberance.

“You’ve been acting off. No-one seems to see you and your woman is running extra errands.”

Izaya did not like how well informed Shinra was.

“If by my woman you mean Yagiri Namie-san you are mistaken. She is my secretary.”

Shinra took a sip of coffee, slowly and all too in control. It annoyed Izaya more than it should.

“Really? That’s the first time I hear about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You never deny that she’s your woman. You don’t confirm it either.”

This was not something Izaya was aware of. He needed to remind himself that an informant never worked with the full set of facts and this was no exception.

“And how is Celty doing?”

It was almost desperation, Izaya wanted to shift attention away from him. Shinra stared at Izaya with professional interest.

“I’m more worried about you, you don’t look too good.”
Shinra took Izaya’s wrist and immediately Izaya recoiled.

“I’m fine.”

“Just checking your pulse. It’s a bit too fast.”

“I’m just fine.”

“Are you sick or something?”

Shinra seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Mairu. Izaya reacted in a completely different way by overdosing on sarcasm.

“Ah, my secret is out. I only have a week to live, after which the world will of course disintegrate without the great Orihara Izaya.”

Izaya was about to cut his losses and leave. The timing of when to make an exit seemed a vital point that he was still trying to master. It was situational which did not make it any easier. But Shinra took the initiative by getting up.

“I’ve got to go.”

Izaya waved merrily.

“Tell Celty I said hi.”

“Shizuo wants to have a word with you.”

“I’ll pass as I value my life greatly.”

“That he wants to talk to you goes to show that something has changed.”

Shinra left on this note and Izaya could not help thinking that Shinra had won this round. Izaya was musing such things as he resumed his stroll. He nearly missed them but was just in time to spot some dark suits walking into a building. He recognized both the lead man and the site from his files. He was a prominent yakuza and the building the main office of a major rival group. It could either mean a merge or an incoming war. Both would affect Shiki.

And that meant that Izaya had to know which was which. He did not even hesitate, he turned around the block until he was at the backdoor. Sentinels were strategically placed but as soon as Izaya leaped to the fire escape he was outside their field of vision. He crept close to the wall, slowly.

He turned off his cell phone just in case, made sure that he was in a position to dash away if needed. Izaya carried bugging devices and now applied one to the wall, crouched and listened.

*“Shiki-san, I have news. Great news.”

Izaya’s eyes twinkled and he could barely contain himself.

“You’re late.”

“It was worth being late, I assure you.”

Izaya narrated his adventure and the extra information he had stumbled upon. He waited for praise, expectantly. Only to be gravely disappointed.
“Don’t do that again.”

The bout of pain was almost physical. Izaya gasped.

“But I got you some juicy info. You can take over both their territories and expand-”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job.”

“Then don’t tell me how to do mine. I got you top-notch information.”

Izaya could not understand it.

“It’s too dangerous. You’re not your usual self.”

“I can do my job just fine.”

“I don’t want you to die, Izaya.”

“Everyone thinks I’m about to drop dead.”

Izaya sounded peeved. But it did not last for Shiki caressed his cheeks and cast a light kiss on his lips.

“Are you in love with me?”

It disarmed Izaya completely.

“I can’t say, I mean-”

“Then do as I tell you.”

Izaya could say nothing. His heart beat had taken over his entire body and was blasting inside his mind, sending his thoughts into disarray. Shiki drew him into an embrace so that Izaya could hide his face against his chest.

“You’re wearing the tie I gave you.”

Shiki made him face him now, tilting his chin so that Izaya was looking into his eyes.

“You won’t be useful to me dead.”

“Useful…that’s all that I am to you, isn’t it? I’m sorry, I’m getting way out of line but it’s just that I keep trying to be the person I used to be but I can’t- I don’t have the same experiences, or starting point, or motivations.”

Izaya was talking very fast and picking up speed with each word so that his speech became frantic.

“There’s a difference between risks worth taking and risks that aren’t worth it. What you did was very stupid and you’re not stupid, memory loss or not.”

Izaya chuckled bitterly.

“Love makes people stupid, haven’t you heard about it?”

Shiki had to take a step back in order to produce his wallet.

“Here’s compensation for your extra information.”
Izaya felt emotionally deflated. For a split second pain clouded his ability to speak but if Shiki chose to be nonchalant then there was no route that Izaya could follow other than answering in kind. He did so by lifting his hands, palms upwards.

“I only accept payment when the client has asked specifically for the service.”

“That’s a new rule.”

“So it is.”

Izaya was glad to introduce a change in his *modus operandi* as an informant, it made him feel that he not only had the qualifications but the right to act as one and even improve on his methods. It made Izaya feel like an active participant instead of a mere follower of predetermined regulations.

“Any new rules I should know about?”

Izaya hesitated for a while. Then ran his finger along the buckle of Shiki’s belt, before undoing it.

“I’m not sure, maybe.”

Izaya stood on tiptoe to kiss Shiki on the mouth almost tentatively as if tasting him. At the same time Izaya’s fingers trailed anew, unbuttoning Shiki’s pants. Shiki was surprised as Izaya ducked and unzipped the fly with his teeth. Judging by the sly glint on Izaya’s eyes that was the intended reaction.

“This is new too.”

“I thought so.”

Izaya motioned Shiki to take a seat and busied himself sliding down Shiki’s underwear and licking the full length of the budding erection, making it grow inside his mouth. Izaya had done his research on this but he was still a bit nervous. He added some extra stimulation by making a fist around hardening flesh and sliding it up in down in tandem with his tongue washing over the tip.

“Shiki-san, you’re not very vocal are you?”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t like it.”

Izaya beamed. His cheeks were very slightly flushed and his smile compelling, giving him a look of disarming youthfulness. Izaya petted his head, fluffing the hair. Izaya was so bent on pleasuring that Shiki could not help but find it endearing. And Izaya had plenty of tricks, lathering up with saliva, sucking, lapping at the thin thread of pre-cum.

Shiki enjoyed the sight of Izaya’s lips becoming swollen and redder as he applied himself. Izaya fondled Shiki’s testicles and took a deep breath before swallowing him whole. His gag reflex was fully under control making up for his lack of experience.

“If you’re going to stop it should be about now.”

Normally Shiki issued no warnings but he felt for Izaya. But Izaya ignored it altogether and had no problems swallowing Shiki’s load as it shot past his throat.

“Can’t taste it much this way.”

Shiki chuckled and helped him to his feet.

“And that’s a bad thing?”
“Sort of.”

Shiki swept him into a wet kiss. Izaya emerged from it breathless, dazed and surprised at finding himself mostly naked.

“Shiki-san, you sure can be a smooth operator.”

“I’m not done with you yet.”

Izaya trembled with expectation. Then something occurred to him.

“Can I put on your jacket?”

“My jacket? What for?”

“Just indulge me.”

So Izaya was not entirely submissive. Shiki liked it, Izaya was not Izaya without a dose of attitude. Without a word he removed the white jacket and placed it over Izaya’s shoulders. It was far too big, highlighting the impression that Izaya was a kid. Izaya wrapped himself in the jacket and sniffed.

“Smells just like you, Shiki-san.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

Izaya nodded.

“Of course. A very good thing.”

“The women at the club would eat you alive if they saw you now.”

Izaya laughed, the oversized sleeves swinging.

“You may be right about that. It’d earn me extra cuteness points.”

“You’re already cute.”

Izaya blushed as if on cue, much to Shiki’s amusement.

“Oh, thank you.”

“Can’t be news to you.”

“It’s not but hearing you say it is just…”

“Just what?”

“A bit embarrassing.”

“Is that also working on your cuteness points?”

Izaya sighed.

“Shiki-san, don’t make fun of me.”

“You make it very easy, though.”
Shiki knew that this was the time to take over as Izaya expected him to. So he locked the door and immediately Izaya jumped, color disappearing from his face in an almost comic way. Shiki did not laugh.

“Wait, that wasn’t locked…?”

“Not really. We were supposed to be discussing business and nothing else.”

“Then anyone could have walked in…?”

“They’d knock.”

“Still!”

Shiki did chuckle.

“Take heart, no one walked in.”

“I do make it too easy, don’t I?”

“You do.”

Shiki removed the famous tie with deliberate slowness and placed it on the desk. It occurred to him that it made sense how Izaya’s acting defenseless resulted in the women from the club all gushing over him and eager to protect him. But Shiki was seeing the real thing here.

“Shiki-san,”

Shiki picked him up and deposited him on the sofa.

“You can talk through this if you like.”

But Izaya would rather not talk. There was something very exciting in being carried like this and knowing himself to be at Shiki’s mercy.

“Ah, that’d be a cliché.”

Shiki chuckled drily, slipped the jacket from Izaya’s frame and kissed him as he produced a condom from an inner pocket. Izaya’s experience was limited but he readily went with the flow, tossing his boxers and spreading himself open.

“Don’t want to get my jacket dirty.”

Shiki held him down. He knew how easy it was to leave marks on Izaya’s very white and smooth skin. It was always something of a turn on to do it on purpose and enjoy the sight of hickeys in compromising places. Normally Izaya merely laughed it away but Shiki was sure that he would get an entirely different reaction now.

Shiki missed Izaya’s snarky comments but he had to admit that the rather helpless moans were adorable in their own right. He took plenty of time prepping Izaya not just out of concern for him but because it was very fun squirm impatiently. Just as Izaya was beginning to get truly restless Shiki replaced fingers with his erection.

Immediately Izaya clawed for purchase, nails digging into him. It was an instinctive reaction and Shiki was more than willing to put up with some pain to see Izaya at his most primal. Shiki allowed for Izaya to adjust before setting for a series of quick shallow thrusts that rocked Izaya’s body.
Izaya had to remind himself to focus on looking at Shiki. Lust clouded his vision. Izaya always tried to get the most out of every experience and much more so when it came to sex. Even if at the moment he was in no state to analyze the bouts of pleasure coursing through his veins. He had to grasp for air and did not even hear his own raspy moans.

Shiki lifted one of Izaya’s legs for greater access and the change in angle caused Izaya to gasp.

This time Izaya clutched at the sofa and wondered if he would melt as hot bliss filled him. Shiki picked up his pace. There was a raw edge to the way Shiki did this as if channeling his ruthlessness of character. Once things got to this point all niceties disappeared.

And since Izaya was already dripping on the cushions, a thread of pre-cum swaying with the rocking motion, Shiki’s approach was precisely what Izaya craved. Shiki took a few moments to enjoy the sight then grabbed both of Izaya’s hands so that Izaya could not touch himself. Izaya protested but without much conviction. Shiki could tell that Izaya was very close to climax. It was still far too early to expect more from Izaya but Shiki made a mental note to push things a bit further next time.

For now Shiki plunged deeply and fast, his body slamming into Izaya’s with all he had. Izaya tensed up as he lost himself in the euphoria of orgasm that was almost painful in its intensity. The world disappeared in a blur. Izaya sighed softly as Shiki withdrew. Fuzzy warmth flooded his awareness and mingled with afterglow exhaustion.

As he watched Izaya curl up, all dreamily, it crossed Shiki’s mind that it would be interesting to toss a pack of bills at him. The reaction would be priceless and Shiki was not entirely opposed to cruelty. He went as far as to locate his wallet. It was bound to crush Izaya.

“Shiki-san, do you think I can become a good person?”

It took Shi by surprise. The honest questioning was too pure for Izaya and yet it was perfectly natural.

“What do you mean?”

“I know that I was never a nice guy but improving on myself should be something to strive for as a human being. That is one of the reasons that make humans so special, their ability and desire to better themselves.”

“I got the impression you thought far too highly of yourself to feel that way.”

“I’ve noticed that in fiction amnesiacs always become so much nicer after they lose their memory. Even very bad individuals suddenly turn endearing if a tad annoying at times.”

“You’re not too annoying.”

“Shiki-san, I’m serious here...”

Shiki ruffled Izaya’s hair. It was slightly damp with sweat.

“Books and movies make it seem that memory loss turns villains into saints. Bet it doesn’t work that way in real life.”

“It doesn’t. And as much as I want to become a good person I know that if I become too good I’ll be doomed as an informant.”

“Pretty much. I don’t want you getting soft on me.”
Izaya grew very thoughtful and abstracted. It gave Shiki enough time to consider that Izaya’s stamina was slowly but steadily improving, in that area there was definitely an improvement. He kept it to himself lest it trivialized the moment.

“I wonder, it seems to me that it may take a lot more strength to be a good person and do the right thing. It is so difficult.”

This too surprised Shiki.

“It’s up to you to decide that kind of thing for yourself.”

Izaya smiled with more than an hint of apologetic reticence.

“Sorry, Shiki-san. I’m sure you don’t want to be bothered by my personal issues this late at night.”

“What I don’t want is for you take stupid risks.”

“Reading you loud and clear, Shiki-san.”

* 

The following day Izaya took a stroll. The anonymous crowds brushed him and carried him along with them. He kept his hands in the pockets of his jacket and the hood over his head. Camouflaged from prying eyes. He enjoyed these walks in the city, these streets where it did not matter who he was. The gray sky arched above everyone with the same hard glitter.

His mind was a deliberate blank. It took effort to wipe away all thought, focusing on his steps and losing himself in the flow of people helped.

Izaya crossed a major intersection and was passing an alley when a soft sound arrested his attention. Amidst the frantic Ikebukuro din he could barely discern it. He stopped and peered into the narrow opening.

Izaya spotted a bit of fur.

“Hey, come here kitty. Isn’t this a cliché setting? Heh, it’ll start raining next.”

Izaya crouched on the pavement and reached out his hand but he still could not quite catch the cat. Izaya sensed more than felt the shadow that covered him and immediately jumped sideways to make some distance.

“What you doing? Oh, kitty.”

Before Izaya stood Heiwajima Shizuo, cigarette tucked at the corner of his lips despite the many prohibition signs a bit all over the place. At the same time he was sipping from a straw. Izaya was on alert mode right away.

“Just leave me alone.”

“Kitties like milk.”

Shizuo improvised a saucer and poured the carton out of which he was drinking. He placed the saucer close to the alley’s opening and sure enough in no time the tiny cat was lapping at the milk. Shizuo waited a bit and then picked up the kitty and handed him to Izaya.

“What the-”
“Keep the cat, it goes well with your jacket.”

The kitty cuddled into the false fur. Izaya chuckled, it figured that it should be a black cat.

“Isn’t this supposed to bring bad luck? And just how cliché is this, it keeps getting worse.”

“Better start thinking of names.”

Awkwardness followed. On Izaya’s part, Shizuo seemed immune to such things.

“Thanks, odds are it’d take me ages to retrieve mister Cat here.”

“No problem.”

A moment of silence.

“So…you got experience with cats?”

“Kinda. Took care of Kasuka’s cat once.”

“On second thought, you keep it. My furniture is very expensive, don’t want claw parts all over it.”

Izaya tried to disentangle himself from the bundle of fur but no avail.

“Won’t work, he likes you. Cats choose their owners, not the other way around.”

“Oy, oy, I can’t have that. I’m the human here, so obey me.”

Izaya was speaking to the kitten in such a serious tone that Shizuo chuckled.

“He’s asleep now so you’re wasting your breath.”

“I suppose I can push him on my sisters.”

“Nah, that’s your kitten. Not Orihara property but Izaya property. Don’t you live alone, keep the kitty. It’s good company.”

“I probably won’t be living on my own for long.”

Shizuo nearly dropped the cigarette.

“Now that’s…weird.”

Immediately Izaya relapsed to sheer hostility, his eyes drawing into narrow slits. As if by sympathy his new feline friend bristled. Part of Izaya’s anger was directed at himself for having divulged personal information that he had no intentions of sharing. The strange atmosphere between them threw Izaya off in a way he could not quite understand.

“Why, I’m some sort of freak no one would want to be around?”

“I meant it the other way around. More like you’re too great a freak to want to live with others.”

“Is that so? And since when are you an authority on me?”

“Didn’t say I was but I’ve known you for a while now.”

“Good for you.”
Izaya had had enough of this and he turned around to leave all too ostensibly. Nonchalance was hard to strike when he was this uncomfortable.

“Why did you want to pick up the cat?”

“None of your business.”

“You wanted to rescue it, didn’t you? It’s cold today, so-”

“Shut up already! Who died and appointed you Freud?! I don’t care about stupid cats.”

“Put it back in the alley, then.”

“You don’t give me orders, Shizuo.”

Shizuo noticed the missing annoying honorific.

“Doesn’t make much sense to me. What’s your problem admitting that you like kittens?”

It was one of those conversations that Shizuo never expected to have with Izaya. Then again having any kind of conversation with Izaya was a very new experience.

“I watch people fall to their death, don’t write me off as being all mushy.”

“Yeah when was the last time you did that?”

Izaya shrugged. He could not at all remember ever doing such a thing and at this moment he could not conceive of it. Izaya was channeling another Izaya.

“Who knows. I don’t keep tabs.”

Shizuo was silent for a while.

“You sure about that?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve seen you keeping track. You keep a record by writing on the ledge.”

Izaya started. No amount of self-possession could suppress his surprise and for a split second that lasted an eternity he could think of nothing at all to say. Sensing that something was amiss the cat meowed.

“Did you now.”

Izaya’s voice was flat with a trace of threat in it. He was unsure on whether to be antagonistic or to brush it aside as if it was a minor detail that did not at all affect Orihara Izaya. At such times, when he found himself faced with a schism between the present and the unknown past, he thought of ‘Orihara Izaya’ almost as another person. Someone that could be studied as he studied everyone else. It cleared his mind even at the expense of being slightly schizophrenic.

“You better take the kitten home, it’s getting real cold.”

By now Izaya suspected that his unease was painfully visible. With no proper data he could only bluff his way out of this. Shizuo seemed to be offering him a way out but if Izaya took it then he might never know for sure if he was supposed to know that Shizuo had seen him. And it felt
absurdly important. At the same time Izaya did not at all like the idea of coldly writing down figures on the death of unhappy people who simply gave up on life.

“Bye now, Shizu-chan. Go to go, things to do, people to meet and all that.”

In the end Izaya could not ask without compromising himself.

“Don’t forget to get some milk.”

“Milk?”

“For the kitty.”

“Right.”

Shizuo watched Izaya glide away into the crowded distance.

* 

Izaya was so wrapped up in thought that he completely failed to notice that there was someone loitering by his building’s entrance.

“I’ve been calling you on the phone for over an hour now, Orihara-san. Can you do me the favor of actually picking up for a change?”

It was as if Kida suddenly materialized out of thin air. And embodying all the hate in the world directed straight at Izaya. Bad timing all around.

“Sorry, left my cell at home.”

“Isn’t that convenient. What do you think you’re doing?”

“It depends on what you mean.”

Izaya was getting a headache. Kida irradiated anger that was the more virulent for being contained.

“You know perfectly well. What is this talk about Saki moving in with you?”

In all fairness Izaya realized that he should have seen this coming. Izaya was aware of this but presently not at all eager to handle it.

“Let’s talk this over inside, okay?”

“I’m in a hurry.”

Izaya very much doubted it. Clearly Kida had been parked on this spot for quite a while by his own admission. It made no sense to wait for such a long time if there were more pressing matters. Izaya suspected that it was part of Kida’s strategy to act as if there was a lot going on in his life that had nothing to do with Izaya, it minimized the idea of Izaya’s complete control. A feigned freedom. Once again Izaya found himself very sorry for Kida.

Izaya tried to settle on a proper approach as he led Kida to the apartment but to no avail.

“You can take a seat.”

“I’ll stand.”
Izaya took the kitten to the kitchen and poured it a saucer of milk, having bought some on the way home. It occurred to him that as distracted as he had been Shizuo’s advice still affected him. And at the moment he felt that putting the nameless cat out of the way was for the best.

“I’d offer you some tea,”

“I don’t want any.”

Izaya sighed.

“I gather you talked to Saki?”

“What’s the plot now? Haven’t you done enough already? Don’t you have a shred of human decency- oh, forget it.”

Izaya let the silence lengthen for a while.

“Kida-kun, I know that you hate me but there is no plot involved. I just offered Saki a place to live if she wants one. The decision is entirely hers. I don’t want to hurt her.”

Kida’s laughter reminded Izaya of something snapping.

“That you can say that with a straight face says it all.”

“Will it make you happier if you hit me?”

Kida blinked in dismay.

“If I what?”

“You heard me. Venting can be very healthy so go ahead and hit me.”

“I’m not falling for that, Orihara-san. Stop rubbing it in my face! You know I can’t hit you, the moment I’ll try you’ll just screw me over. Same old.”

Izaya did not know what was worse, if the bottled up aggression or this defeatist attitude. Either way Kida Masaomi had given up on escaping from the vicious cycle in which he was entangled. Nothing was more worthy of pity than a victim inflicting damage on themselves out of a sense of guilt.

“As much as you hate me you hate yourself much more.”

Izaya knew precisely when Kida was about to flip. Izaya stayed put even as Kida swung a closed fist at him. Pain exploded on him and nearly knocked him down. It was all very sudden but Izaya saw it coming and could have easily evaded it. Ironically, it was Kida who was too stunned to know how to react.

“Got to say, that hurt.”

“You- you could’ve dodged it. You could totally have dodged it.”

Izaya wiped his lips, a smear of blood on the back of his hand. He winced but managed to smile. Kida remained glued to the floor and looking at Izaya as if a warp in the fabric of time-space had just appeared. The analogy amused Izaya and he was in need of some humor.

“I could, yes. But I told you to hit me so I only have myself to blame, don’t I?”
Kida opened and closed his mouth. He stared with eyes open wide as if he was a child and at the
moment he was just that.

“What the- what’s the point- just who are you?”

Kida could not reconcile the present with what he knew of Orihara Izaya. It was a veritable rift in the
reality he took for granted and shook him more than he thought possible. Izaya shrugged.

“Who knows. I’m me, at any rate. I don’t expect you to care or to at all believe me but I’m sorry for
all I put you through.”

Kida did not seem to have heard.

“Is there a trick? I’m sure I hit you but there’s no way, there’s just no way.”

“No trick. You hit me, alright. And you pack quite a punch.”

Kida blinked as if he had just woken up only to see that the dream was not over.

An unlikely explanation dawned on Kida and even then he knew he was merely grasping for straws.

“Is this some weird way of patronizing me? You let me hit you to show how better than me you
are-”

“As if. Trust me on this, I may be arrogant but no ego trip is worth getting punched in the face.”

Kida took a tentative step as if to inspect the bruise already spreading on Izaya’s cheek. He was still
shell shocked, it made him forget about keeping his guard up. It was as if Izaya by shattering the
rules had plunged Kida into pure chaos and left Kida to dismiss all rules himself. The security
distance that Kida strove to maintain between himself and Izaya suffered from this onslaught on
sanity.

Kida went as far as lightly to touch Izaya as if he fully expected him to dissolve very much like a
phantom. That Izaya remained a solid entity did not seem to reassure Kida as much as disturb him
even further.

“Did I have a heatstroke or something…? Maybe it’s a dream…”

Izaya had to laugh and once he started it was difficult to stop.

“A dream, oh dear! Maybe it’s a dream for you but it sure as hell isn’t one for me. You can’t feel
pain in dreams.”

Kida stepped back rapidly.

“It’s some trick after all.”

Izaya sobered immediately. His fits of hilarity were often unstoppable and almost always
inconvenient but had a quality of coming to a halt abruptly. It rang of psychotic and tended to chill
people.

“I don’t expect you trust a word I say. In your shoes I know that I’d hate me. But I know that if you
let hate dominate your life and guilt paralyze you then you are only making things worse for you and
for everyone that cares for you. The past doesn’t define you, it’s how you react to you that makes
you who are.”
This caught Kida’s attention.

“What did you say?”

“In this world you cannot account for the existence of the future, it may not exist. Only the past is absolutely real beyond questioning and the present stands in relation to the past as being both a consequence and a reaction. Since you have your memories to fall back, since they define you, they become a God of sorts. The past becomes God and God is all about control. You cannot change the past but there is one thing you can change, that you can control and that is how you react to it. That makes you your own God.”

Kida opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“You’ve changed your tune since last time.”

“Many things have changed.”

Kida’s hands turned into fists and he stared at the floor, bleached hair covering his eyes.

“You ruined everything for me. Everything. I don’t just hate you, I despise you.”

“Yes. But if I were to die at your hands you would only be more miserable. Hate finds its way back to you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I’ve wronged you.”

Kida faced Izaya.

“Why now? After all you’ve done, after all this time- why now?”

“I’ve changed too.”

“So what is this? You want us to become best buddies?”

Izaya smiled kindly. It further disarmed Kida.

“No but you do have a best buddy. Give him a call now and then. That’s what friends are for.”

Kida spun on his heels and strode resolutely toward the door. He yanked it open and stopped.

“If you hurt Saki again,”

“You can take your revenge on me.”

Kida looked over his shoulder.

“You’re a strange man, Orihara Izaya.”

And with this Kida slammed the door and was gone.

*  

It was Namie who bandaged Izaya’s wound but she was not at all sympathetic. She did not know the precise details of what happened but she knew enough not to at all approve. Namie made a mental note to have him checked by a psychologist. Or maybe even a psychiatrist. But later developments
might very well make such steps unnecessary.

“Sorry about making you do this, Namie-san.”

His apologetic smile was charming.

“I have good news about your situation.”

“You mean my memory loss?”

“Our experts have a way of restoring your memory. There are no risks involved.”

Izaya paced up and down his long living room. All restlessness.

“Are you sure about that?”

“I’ve looked into the procedure myself. The only negative effect is minimal, you’ll lose your memory from up to the point you originally lost it.”

Izaya froze on his tracks.

“You mean I’ll forget everything that I remember now?”

“Yes, it’s a side effect. But you’ll recover your remaining memories.”

“I...I’ll need some time before I decide.”

“I can schedule it for tomorrow, you have the whole day free.”

Izaya flung himself on one of his very comfortable, very expensive sofas.

“I need to think this through.”

Namie did not see the point of postponing like this and she was about to voice this when she noticed Izaya's listless attitude. There was behind it than his love for causing an effect that occasionally led him to wait for just the right moment to act with a splash. His sense of timing could be far too dramatic for Namie's analytic taste.

“Alright. Contact me when you make up your mind.”

Izaya nodded. He wanted to be alone.

“Thanks for dropping by, Namie-san.”

It was a polite but abstracted dismissal. It made Namie wonder. It was only when her steps had retreated into silence completely that he let out a stifled sob. He felt stranded in confusion, cast off from the orderly workings of humanity. Human identity was comprised in a united front of at least apparently uninterrupted strata—memory flowing in a continuum. Izaya could keenly feel that he had been jolted out of this normal setting.

Wrapping his arms around his knees, he closed his eyes and tried desperately to think. The loneliness he had craved just now was becoming an almost physical obstacle. And then it hit him that while there might no person to face his dilemma in quite the same way there was someone in a similar situation.

“Oh, hi there.”
The newly released kitty was making an attempt at climbing to the sofa but with no success. Izaya picked it up.

“You should listen to what I say, you know. There's an hierarchy here and I'm most definitely at the apex of the pyramid since I am a human being. Why do I think you don't care one bit.”

The only reply was nonchalant meowing.
Chapter 5

[What do you want, Izaya?]

It was the reception he expected but it was still painful. Being judged by his former self's achievements often had this effect. Izaya jumped off the railing and landed gracefully, hands tucked into his jacket pockets so that even gravity seemed to bend to his will. Celty found it unnerving as always.

“Celty-san, I'm sorry I called you out on such a short notice but I needed to talk to you.”

[Talk? About what?]

“I need to ask for your advice.”

[Advice? You? I don't have time for your jokes]

Izaya registered briefly how even without eyes or even a face Celty's body language still conveyed her dislike and impatience. There was an almost nervous twitch in the way she typed away at the PDA.

“It sounds odd, doesn't it? But it's true. Thing is, I've lost my memory.”

Celty stiffened immediately.

[What do you mean? Are you up to your tricks again?]

He smiled sadly.

“Unfortunately not. It is true.”

Only now did Celty look at him properly. Izaya was such a nuisance that she got into the habit of ignoring him as much possible.

[What's with your face?]

“Ah, this? A kid hit me.”

At this point Celty began to think if Izaya had not lost his mind once and for all. She always suspected he was too close to insanity as it was.

“You don't like talking to me so I'll get straight to the point. If you could choose your memories of the present and of the time you've spent with Shinra or those contained in your head, which would you pick? If you could only have one set of memories?”

Izaya's sudden intensity frightened her. She was used to his antics, to some extent, but there was a disturbing intensity here that was too novel to Celty.

[How do you expect me to answer that, and why would I tell you, of all people?]

Izaya stepped forward so fast that she barely even saw him move.

“You have no obligation to tell me anything. But I need some guidance and I cannot ask anyone else. Your answer can help me.”
Celty hesitated.

[I can't answer that, I don't know myself. Did you really lose your memory?]

“You don't know...so even you don't know...”

Izaya half collapsed as he spun on his heels and nearly walked straight into the road in front of an incoming truck. It was Celty who pulled him back by the furry edge of his hood.

[What are you doing?!!]

Izaya got up from the pavement, very slowly. He dusted off his clothes as if all was well.

“I've bothered too much already. Sorry about that.”

[You're not just lying, are you?]

It was with supreme effort that Izaya managed to smile.

“Who can tell. Catch you later.”

[Wait! You can't just dump all this on me and then just waltz away!]

“I suppose you'll tell Shinra about this. I'd rather you didn't but nothing I can do about it.”

For the first time she could sense defeat in him. It disturbed her more than she thought it possible.

[I won't tell him.]

“Ah. So you say.”

And just like this Izaya jumped to a fire stairway and disappeared into a building where she could not follow.

*

Hours of aimless wandering followed. He turned off his cell phone and did not toss it away because it simply did not cross his mind. Deeply ingrained habits sustained him tirelessly even as his steps strayed in wider routes, covering miles of concrete. His concentration was absent from the meandering streets around him. He slid through the city without it touching him.

Eventually he found himself in a bar. Night had descended and the neon lettering cast off a dirty glow in the dark. Izaya sat at the counter without even looking around and ordered the stiffest drink without even asking what it was or stealing as much as a glance at the bartender. He was not at all a drinker which was precisely why he was doing this now. An irrational need to go against how 'Izaya' would normally act possessed him. It was a way of externalizing his predicament.

“You sure about that?”

Surprise jostled him as he recognized the voice.

“I thought you had been fired from your bar tending job.”

Behind the counter Shizuo polished a glass and gave Izaya a long hard stare.

“I'm just helping out for the night, the regular guy got sick.”
“Oh well. Can I have my drink now?”

Izaya took a kind of perverse pleasure in being served by his archenemy. It was something like poetic justice. And because 'Izaya' would probably never allow Shizuo to pour a drink, let alone an alcoholic one, Izaya decided to stay put.

“I don't think you’ll like it but it's your call.”

Something colorless was slid across the counter, Izaya sniffed it, wrinkled and grimaced as he sampled it. Sour and acid. His throat hurt and it was with difficulty that he kept his eyes from watering too much.

Shizuo wandered off to serve other costumers but all soon he was back.

“Do you have to stand right there? You're ruining my drink.”

“How about I get you an orange juice-”

“How about you go to hell?”

Izaya snapped but caught himself immediately. He felt Shizuo's niceness as a personal insult of the most injurious kind.

“How's it going with the kitty?”

It was the last thing Izaya expected. So much so that it cut through his distress and had him swing into conversational mode.

“Pretty well. He's well behaved. I still have to take him to the vet to get his shots.”

“Got a name for him yet?”

“Not yet. I am drawing a blank in that respect. Names are so definitive, I feel that if I give him one I'll be twisting his personality.”

Izaya was aware of how odd he sounded so he settled for toying with the ice cubes crowding his glass. Opening up to Shizuo, of all people, made absolutely no sense but few things did in Izaya's life presently.

“No need to rush it.”

“How about about calling him 'Cat'? The cat called 'Cat'. It's descriptive and straight to the point.”

“Yeah but that's not very much like you. Being straight to the point.”

“I thought you had a theory about my acting 'weird'?”

Izaya was suddenly curious to see how Shizuo perceived him.

“Not a theory, it's just the truth. It's not a bad thing either, I think.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. You don't seem as nasty. Anyone who likes little cats can't really be all that bad.”

“Oh please, that's just silly.”
But Izaya felt himself blush angrily. He took a sip and tried to swallow without letting it show how much he hated it. Somehow he felt slightly better, dealing with Shizuo forced Izaya not to lose face at all cost. The effort made him put aside his troubles for the time being. Almost as if Shizuo forced Izaya into practical awareness and in no position for wasting away in self-pity. At the same time it provided a very needed excuse not to consider the pressing decision yet to be taken.

“It’s true.”

“According to your logic you are an amazing person since you like your little brother's kitty.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“That's quite a high opinion you got of yourself.”

“Don't most people think that they're good?”

Izaya chuckled bitterly.

“True. Whether they are right or not is a whole different story.”

“Do you think you're a good person?”

Silence as Izaya stared vacantly at his very sour drink.

“Hardly.”

And with something bordering on masochism Izaya took a swig of transparent venom that made his eyes water.

“Normally you wouldn't care, you'd be all 'beyond good and evil'."

“So I'm Nietzsche now?”

Shizuo handed him a glass of orange juice.

“On the house.”

“I'm beginning to think you poisoned this, you're so bent on getting me to drink it.”

“Getting drunk won't solve anything,”

“I know that!”

“-but you know that. At times it's still good to hear it from someone else.”

Izaya plunged his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket as a gesture of rejection and childish petulance.

“Thank you very much, Dr. Phil. Do I have pay you extra for your amazing life advice or what?”

Shizuo blinked.

“Your sense of humor remains awful.”

“It is called 'sarcasm'. And don't I get a straw?”

As Izaya sipped from the straw he realized that he could indeed get used to being pampered by
Shizuo. Being a client placed Izaya in a position of power by default for which he was grateful.

“Do you want a pretty paper parasol to go with it?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Better give you full service.”

Izaya found that the seat rotated and immediately saw fit to spin a few times.

“Or else?”

“Or else you might not get what I'm trying to tell you.”

“Oh? And what are you trying to tell me?”

“That I don't hate you. As you are now.”

Of all the things Shizuo could say this was one that shook up Izaya considerably. So much that he nearly went flying off the still spinning seat. It was with some difficulty that he managed to stop facing the counter in such a way as to seem effortless. Shizuo's presence always increased Izaya's stress levels by pushing him to maintain his elegant nonchalance in the teeth of dismay. And against gravity and unwanted momentum.

“You don't hate me? We can't have that, now can we? I have to go back to talking people out of jumping out of rooftops.”

“If you can.”

“Heavily implied that I can't.”

“I don't think you can. And I wonder why. Something happened to you.”

“Yay...be a bit more vague, please. 'Something' can encompass right about any phenomena. 'Something' happens to me every single day.”

“You know what I mean. Better than I do.”

Izaya grabbed the orange juice glass and glanced sideways at Shizuo, assessing him anew. And then reclined back and appeared most at ease.

“Since when did we become best buddies?”

“We didn't. But we've talking for a while, haven't we?”

“So what. I talk a lot, it's what I do. Even you must realize that talking is the best way of extracting information.”

“Not to me, though. You don't talk to me.”

“Can't exactly have a civilized discussion with someone who's trying to mow me down with a vending machine, now can I? Or any kind of discussion, for that matter.”

Shizuo nodded as if conceding the point.

“Yeah, true. Haven't been doing that a while either. I guess that because you changed then I've
changed as well.”

Izaya laughed flippantly.

“Oh my, maybe we are connected at some elemental level and it's fate. How romantic of you, Shizuo.”

“You forgot the '-chan' just now.”

Izaya leaned forward on the counter and dangled the glass, his voice slow and low in its purest threatening tone.

“Get me another one, Shizu-chan.”

Shizuo was unperturbed and obeyed even down to another pretty paper parasol. It annoyed Izaya most unreasonably.

“Fate, huh. There's something to that. If by fate you mean meeting someone and knowing, just knowing without a doubt, that this person will change your life forever. That's how it was for me all those years ago.”

“You make it sound like you fell in love with me at first sight.”

“I hated you at first sight. Because I knew I'd never be the same after you entered my life, I knew you'd mess it up.”

Izaya's silence was that of concentration.

“For the sake of clarity, are you saying that we do have a connection of sorts?”

“That's about it, yeah. And you know it. Or you used to.”

Dealing with incomplete information was something Izaya had to deal with, having all the pieces was an impossibility and it was through induction that he managed to bridge the gaps and reach a breakthrough of knowledge but to grope through the absolute darkness of ignorance was nothing but a frightful leap of faith. It placed Izaya in a perilous situation made worse by the fact that Shizuo possessed whatever information Izaya lacked.

And it occurred to Izaya that even if Shizuo was making it all up and weaving a complicated fabrication Izaya could not properly call the bluff because he did not know that it was so. Izaya fumbled through insecurities.

“Aren't you over-thinking it? We just happen to hate each other.”

But even as Izaya made light of it he could not help but wonder. After all, the one person that he had not completely forgotten was Heiwajima Shizuo. Everyone else had been wiped out from his memory but something lingered of Shizuo, as if hate was a stronger emotion than any other and unable to be eradicated. As if Shizuo was the most important person in Izaya's life, for good and ill.

“We don't 'just happen' to hate each other, we couldn't help it. Because your personality is so different from mine.”

“I guess you have a point there.”

“But that can't be all. Plenty of people are different from me, with you is more that you're like against me just by being who you are.”
“Who I am', he says.”

Izaya mused as he sipped more orange juice, by now he was glad to have opted for a nonalcoholic drink and even disposed to forget that it was due to Shizuo's insistence.

Izaya carried on.

“But aren't you reading too much into it? It's all coincidence, down deep. That we met at all.”

“Maybe. At the time I felt that even if I had gone to a different high school I'd find you there.”

“That sounds way too fatalistic. Take heart, maybe there's an alternate universe in which we never met. And I bet we'd both be happier for that.”

“Doubt it. You have fun putting me through hell.”

“So I'm a sadist now?”

“Or you were.”

“Ahh.”

To this Izaya had absolutely no comment. He hid this by drinking some juice even as he pushed aside the other glass. Shizuo was reminded of Izaya in those not at all dim school days, Izaya slinking to some dark corner, straw in his mouth, hands in his pockets, always self-possessed and traitorous.

It was Izaya who carried out the conversation.

“I don't like the idea of fate. It negates the point of living. And I can tell you that I'd rather I never crossed paths with you.”

Yet even as Izaya said this he was unsure if it was precisely so. Paranoia filled him as he wondered if Shizuo might not just know all about his amnesia, Shizuo might even be behind it in a conspiracy of vast proportions to the effect of rendering Izaya harmless so as to better crush him. Izaya had to force himself to shake off such notions. Instinct told him that it was all far-fetched meanderings of the distraught kind.

“I'm not talking of that kind of fate, just some things that can't be helped.”

Izaya decided to take a gamble. The decision was the result of his being at his most rational.

“Unless you just so happen to forget everything entirely, just like that. Is it still fate then, you think? If you can't even remember 'fateful' encounters?”

Shizuo polished a glass, thoughtfully.

“Forget? Never thought of that.”

“Changes your theory, doesn't it?”

“I'm not sure. Plenty of things have been changing as of late.”

After being so audacious Izaya felt at a loss and more unsure of himself than ever. He did not know whether to settle for a snappy platitude or to opt for a radical change of topic. That he could also pay and leave did not at all occur to him.
“Do you have other juices?”

“How about a tropical fruit cocktail? Without alcohol.”

“Heh, are you saying I'm a light weight?”

“You'd probably like it better anyway.”

A moment of comfortable silence as Shizuo prepared the drink.

“So...how is it like, having had so many jobs?”

“It's a pain in the ass.”

Izaya laughed.

“But think of all the different people you get to meet!”

“Think about paying the rent when you're broke.”

“You make do, somehow.”

“How do you like your job?”

“I love it, wouldn't trade it for the world.”

Izaya found himself thinking about his host side job and smiling sweetly.

“Remembering something good?”

“Something like that.”

“I could never figure out just what it is that you do for a living.”

“I'm afraid it's all terribly complicated and I can't get into details.”

“I bet.”

Shizuo nodded, taciturn once more. Izaya found this most annoying but could not account for his own irritation.

“You're working with Tom-san now, right?”

“Yeah.”

“How's that going for you?”

Shizuo shrugged.

“It's fine, I guess. Here.”

Izaya sampled the tropical mixture through a straw.

“Hey, this is very good. I'm not much into sweet things but this is tasty.”

“It's the special of the house.”
Izaya looked around at the somewhat shabby environs as if to remark on the disparity between these and the quality of the drink but refrained.

“The bartender look seems to suit you.”

“I don't care for that kind of thing.”

Izaya wondered if he sensed some hostility now. It reassured him.

“You'd make a good old school detective in a noir movie.”

“Say what?”

Izaya closed one of his eyes and formed a frame with his thumbs and forefingers, peering through it.

“I can see it now, just add a felt hat, a cigarette, a street corner at night, and a long coat.”

“You got a great imagination.”

“Ah and that's a bad thing?”

“You tell me. It's probably good for you.”

“I'd say I am very connected to reality.”

It was Shizuo's time to smile and Izaya busied himself studying the yellow rosy liquid with great attention. Because for a split second it seemed to him that Shizuo was actually handsome.

“You really like talking about yourself, huh.”

“As long as I am not talking to myself. Then there would be cause for alarm.”

“Wouldn't surprise me if you did that as well.”

Izaya made a very serious face.

“No way. I'm more into spinning around in my swivel chair. In the nude.”

“Is that a joke? I can never tell with you.”

“You lack discernment.”

“More like, your humor is so bad that it's impossible to know when you're supposed to be funny.”

“So I can't make you laugh?”

Shizuo actually seemed to consider it in all seriousness.

“Maybe you can. Say, if you fell in your face or something.”

Izaya chuckled.

“I have too great a sense of balance for that.”

“Yeah. That's true. But it'd be amusing.”

“'A man can dream', something along those lines? Then again, did you ever have dreams? As in,
things you wanted to do in the future, goals you wanted to achieve.”

“Living is already difficult enough without any of that.”

“How depressing.”

Izaya sighed in mock pity.

“Didn't you know this already? We did go to school together.”

“Indeed, indeed. No great opportunities for talking back then, though.”

It occurred to Izaya that it was possible, in a highly unlikely way that at times did happen in real life, that his former self was engaged in some convoluted affair with Shizuo such as only the two of them were aware of. If so, then Izaya had been undermining his position of strength to the point of having none to stand on. A frightful hypothetical question that fortunately did not line up with the data Izaya already had. But it caused him to pause and shiver, he disguised it as a shrug.

“No actual conversations, no. It's not like we were friends.”

Izaya twirled the glass musingly.

“We never went to karaoke together, never shared bento boxes, never saw fireworks in the summer together, never had a sleepover.”

“As far as I know you never did that with anyone else either.”

“Ah. I see. By the looks of it you know quite a lot about me. Ex-classmates or not.”

“Like you'd say, 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer'.”

Izaya thrust the glass in Shizuo's direction as if you drink to his health.

“And here we are, separated only by the counter. Very close enemies, I'd say!”

“Refill?”

“Good idea.”

Neither of them noticed that Tom had entered the bar, despite the fact that a silvery bell jingled on his arrival, until he was next to them. For a while he just stood there blinking in astonishment.

“Orihara-san...?”

“Hi there, Tom-san!”

“Is everything alright...?”

Tom turned from Izaya to Shizuo then back at Izaya.

“Everything is peachy. Isn't that right, Shizuo?”

“Could be worse.”

Tom agreed, at least no tables had been overthrown. Yet.
After some hesitating Tom sat next to Izaya. Shizuo served Tom a beer and then had to drift away to serve newly arrived costumers. Tom was unsure on how to proceed. The present scenario did not add up and he had always been more than a bit suspicious of Izaya as it was. Tom did not share Shizuo’s wrath toward him but he knew very well that Izaya was bad news through and through. On the other hand dismissing Izaya altogether was hardly feasible or wise.

If there was an art to handling Orihara Izaya, Tom had no inkling of it. He struggled for something to say, a way of finding out precisely what was going on without being too obvious. As it turned out Tom did not have to start the conversation.

“Don't worry, I'm not here to cause any trouble.”

“I didn't think that-”

“It's all good, Tom-san. In your shoes I'd be wondering as well.”

“You seem to be getting along with Shizuo...”

Tom could not keep the surprise from showing in his voice. Izaya chuckled and drank some more.

“I suppose. You know how to handle Shizuo, there must be some trick. Care to share it with me?”

Tom was stunned beyond belief. Surely there was some hidden plot to this but Tom had no idea as to what it could be. And never had seen Izaya acting so friendly. Of all the things Izaya could do this was the one to confuse Tom.

“Trick, I don't know about it but Shizuo is a cool guy. As long as you don't make him mad.”

Izaya giggled.

“Which happens by default whenever I'm involved.”

Only now did Tom sip his drink. He was worried as well as curious. Having always heard tall stories about Izaya, Tom's idea of him did not even need be shaded by Shizuo's intense prejudice to always expect the worst from Izaya. Sitting side by side with him like this was very weird.

“Seems that things are going well between you now.”

Izaya nodded.

“Somehow. Maybe Shizuo isn't entirely bad.”

Tom's eyes widened comically behind his glasses but Izaya did not notice it, instead he was toying with the paper parasol.

“Oh, right.”

Izaya lifted the glass with both hands and stared over the rim.

“Ah, it'd be nice if we could be friends...silly me.”

“Orihara-san...?”

Tom had the distinct impression that Izaya was talking to himself and he was not entirely mistaken. Izaya snapped out of his reverie and smiled apologetically as he placed bills on the counter.
“Sorry for the ramble, Tom-san. I got to run, tell Shizuo I said thanks for helping out with the kitty.”

“Right, the kitty.”

Tom was more confused than ever and found himself waving Izaya goodbye as if they were on the friendliest of terms. He realized that for all practical purposed that was how things stood.

Back on the streets Izaya knew where he had to go. There was only one place, the alley where he had woken up as a veritable *tabula rasa*. The panic of that moment returned to him.

Izaya closed his eyes and tried to break the barrier of unrewarding darkness that preceded that one moment. To no avail. Many times before he had tried to recover his memory by sheer will power only to be confronted with failure upon failure. That success was now at hand did not at all soothe him. The irony was a bitter one.

If he took the option of retrieving his lost memories then he would virtually be killing the person born on this unlikely site. It would be a kind of suicide. Sealing the schism within came at a great price.

All the many relationships he had managed to strike in this short time would be forfeited or at least irrevocably crippled. As he was now he cared for many people, perhaps only now did he truly realize what loving humans actually meant but if he backtracked all this would disappear.

Izaya stared at the dirty nondescript alley and thought that only for him did this place hold a meaning. Personal history blended with personal geography. He was very deep in thought and so absorbed that something like tunnel vision kicked in. Apart from his closest surroundings he saw nothing else.

That was why he did not know what was happening only that something sharp punctured him- he could not even quite place where, the pain diffused itself throughout his body confusedly- and he tottered and fell in a sprawling pool of blood that only vaguely could he recognize as his.

As he lied on the concrete, retreated footsteps echoing hollowly in his ears, he thought that this must be shock- but knowing it did nothing to help. Thoughts drifted through his emptying mind, he should staunch the wound before consciousness failed him, and then there was his phone, and he felt very cold, too cold.

The stench of blood invaded him then retreated into nothingness as well as did the pain. This increasing numbness was a dangerous sign but it made it all seem very distant from him. He disconnected from his body as sensations became blunted.

Paralysis was sickening at first but all too soon nausea dimmed with the onslaught of darkness descending on him. Only faintly could he catch a ringing noise repeated at longer intervals, each time fainter until it ceased to bother him altogether: silence won him over, dissolving him into oblivion and he knew nothing more.
Chapter 6

He stood in the boundless dark and looked around in perplexity.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

Izaya recognized the voice, it was his own and upon turning around he found none other than himself. Flickering the switchblade, wicked smile, fur trimmed jacket.

“I'm having a conversation with myself now...I suppose I'll ask you who you are and you'll say, 'Orihara Izaya', and I'll say 'But I'm Orihara Izaya'”.

“More importantly, what are you doing here?”

“What is even 'here' supposed to be? There's nothing here.”

“You were thinking of killing me. By the look of it, you'll get your wish come true.”

“I see. If you die then I die as well because we're the same person.”

“Precisely. And if I am you then you cannot die here, now can you?”

This other Izaya pointed upward to a tiny spot of light.

“I have to follow that? How am I supposed to do that. It's up there.”

“You've got to try. You're me. I am you.”

Izaya sighed.

“Great, cryptic schizophrenia now.”

“Do you want to die?”

“Well, no-”

“Then do something. Before it is too late.”

Izaya's lingering apathy shattered at this. He focused on the single shiny point and willed himself to get there. He felt himself lift, gravity canceled in this place that was not a place but a region of the mind in between reality and the inner self.

The other Izaya waved at him and smiled amicably, the blade catching on the now growing light.

“Bye bee! I'll see you later. We've got to have a long talk.”

“You're me from before, aren't you- you know what happened- can't you tell me? Can't you let me know just what happened, why can't I remember anything? Tell me already!”

“Not now. It's not yet time.”

Izaya struggled to return to the illusive ground because there were many things he wanted to ask, things he needed to know, his thirst for information very personal and demanding. But it was too late, his mirror image was lost in a halo of all-encompassing light into which he was floating. Going upwards, ever upwards.
Izaya blinked and suddenly he was lying on his back in a hospital bed. It took him a few heartbeats to realize where he was but he returned to consciousness with surprising ease. Recent memory returned to him. He checked his surroundings with breathless awe. This was a new lease on life. He knew this instinctively.

“Shiki-san...”

And indeed Shiki sat by his bedside. A bundle of emotions clashed within Izaya.

“You got stabbed. It was a bit hit and go for a while but you're out of danger now.”

“I'm sorry for all the trouble this must have caused you.”

“I just got here. You might want to tell that to the guy who found you and hauled you to the hospital.”

Shiki gestured in the direction of the semi open door through which Izaya caught a glimpse of a bartender uniform and blonde hair.

“Shizuo saved me...?”

“Apparently.”

Shiki got up, his white suit impeccable as always.

“You're already leaving?”

“I dropped by to see how you were doing and you seem to be fine so I'll be going back. It's not as if you'll be on your own.”

“Oh, right. Thank you for dropping by.”

But Izaya could not shake his disappointment. It felt like a small eternity since he had last seen Shiki and he only realized how much he missed him now that he was in his presence. At the threshold Shiki and Shizuo exchanged a curt nod that was not quite a bow.

Izaya wondered at this very stiff greeting but only marginally.

Shizuo walked over to Izaya. For a while neither spoke, Izaya feeling absurdly shy and Shizuo contemplating private thoughts of his own.

“Looks like you'll pull through.”

“Yes, Shiki-san told me already.”

“I'll get your sisters here tomorrow, you still look too white now. Don't want to worry them too much.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Izaya felt remarkably weird. Exchanging platitudes like this did not seem to at all conform to the situation but Izaya had no reference from which to draw. And while Shizuo seemed absorbed by the
air above Izaya he was paying attention, enough to notice Izaya's pallor. It was the kind of act of kindness that threw Izaya completely for a loop.

“Did you see the guy?”

“Guy...?”

“Who did this to you.”

“I didn't see anyone...heard that you found me?”

“My shift ended around the time you left so I went after you. But I lost track of you when you took a turn. So I called you on the phone and followed the ring tone.”

“So that's what that noise was. It makes sense.”

Shizuo looked directly at Izaya now. Izaya's breath caught on his throat.

“It was an amateur job, missed your vital organs.”

“Lucky me. Considering I was stabbed, that is. I heard that you carried me to the hospital?”

“No big deal. You're skinny, after all.”

Izaya studied his hands, aware of the IV drip attached to his arm and unwilling to lift his eyes.

“That's not what I mean, I want to thank you for...for, I suppose 'saving my life' sounds terribly dramatic but that's what it was, I guess. Thank you, Shizuo.”

Izaya did return Shizuo's gaze now. Silence reigned. It was Izaya who broke it before Shizuo had a chance.

“Ah, the kitty! I completely forgot, he must be so scared, in that big dark apartment- not to mention hungry! I'll get to it right now-”

Izaya made as if to disconnect the IV but Shizuo stopped him.

“You're not going anywhere. In case you haven't noticed you nearly died just now.”

There was a moment of panic as Shizuo touched him, if it was only to detain him with surprising gentleness, but it was a mere flash. Gone in an instant. Leaving Izaya increasingly confused.

“Yes, I think I had what they call a near death experience just now.”

“Did you see a white tunnel, light and all that?”

Izaya chuckled.

“I'm afraid not. It was more schizo than that. Just me talking to my other self.”

“And what did this other self say?”

“To live, I guess. Of course, to live. That's me through and through, that's Orihara Izaya- to live.”

“You better find out who's out to get you. Not that he can get to you here, your yakuza must like you a lot. Seeing all the bodyguards he left behind. You can get one of them to feed the kitty.”
It surprised Izaya considerably but he noticed them, black suited men stationed just outside his room.

“Shiki-san did this for me...so many people worried over me, it don't like causing trouble like this but at the same time it makes me a bit happy.”

Izaya's smile was apologetic and oddly endearing. Even Shizuo thought so.

“Your woman is around too.”

“My woman- oh, Yagiri-san. I've told you before, she's not my woman. We just work together.”

“You also work together with the yakuza.”

“Well, that is different- I mean,”

“Yeah, thought so.”

Izaya shivered and Shizuo placed a blanket over him. Suddenly Izaya wanted to scream at him and push him away so that things might return to normal.

“Is this Shinra's hospital?”

Izaya asked more to change the topic and disperse the mood than anything else.

“Yeah, it was close by. And I don't think you want questions asked.”

“Heh, indeed. Where is Shinra, by the way?”

“Dunno. Still working, I guess. Or talking to the woman.”

“Science people are scary, aren't they?”

Izaya glanced at Shiki's man, rather reluctant to ask any favors from them. After all, they were hereon Shiki's orders and their duty was to keep him safe. Sending them on errands to feed pets hardly seemed proper. Shizuo must have picked up on this.

“Want me to feed the kitty for you? I won't touch your stuff.”

“Do you know where I live?”

Shizuo narrowed his eyes briefly.

“I've been there.”

“Oh, right. Of course.”

Izaya kicked himself inwardly. The memories he did have were somewhat murky. He made an effort to grasp them, wrenching them from the realm of aesthetically induced vagueness. It only gave him an headache, he involuntarily touched his left temple.

“Don't think too much, you're still half under as it is. I'm sure you can find who it was when you're better.”

Izaya smiled wanly. For once Shizuo was off. It was somewhat reassuring.

“Ah yes, there's bound to be a list of suspects a mile long. It could have been almost anyone, considering how many people hate me.”
“True.”

Izaya sighed.

“Maybe I had it coming, too. I probably did.”

“Strange of you to say so.”

“I suppose.”

Izaya lied on his side facing away from Shizuo. He wanted to drift back to the security of sleep but also afraid that it might disperse his memory altogether.

“What were you doing there?”

“Where...?”

“In that alley. It was a dead end.”

“I had my reasons.”

“I don’t suppose you were rescuing another kitty?”

“Heh...no, I wasn't. I just needed a place to think, I guess?”

Shizuo seemed to consider something. Either that or he wanted to have a smoke.

“You had blacked out by the time I found you. Did you pass out right away?”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it's just me, I've been seriously injured more than once and at times when it's real serious I'd start thinking 'staying alive is too difficult. Easier to just drift away.' That kind of thing. Something like that happen to you?”

“I don't know, it's all a bit fuzzy.”

“That kind of thing can get you killed. It's giving up. Maybe this other self of yours knew that.”

Izaya found this highly distressing without knowing precisely why.

“Maybe...it was very strange. I was scared, I mean I was scared right away but then it was as if it no longer mattered either way.”

“That's the kind of thing I was talking about.”

“It must be blood loss, the mind shuts down.”

“Yeah. Giving in to it is sure death.”

“I don't suppose you've ever seen another you when that happened?”

“There's only one of me.”

“Heh, good for me or else you'd have hunted me down by now. Two of you would be too much for me.”
Izaya's eyes closed of their own accord. It was Shizuo's cue.

“You better get some sleep.”

Izaya struggled against the weight of lethargy.

“Why did you rescue me...? You could've left me there...”

“I told you already. I don't hate who you are now.”

Izaya felt himself drifting away as if he was being dragged down to soothing darkness.

“Ah...right, that's how it is...you don't hate me...that's good. I wonder...how come I couldn't forget you...?”

Shizuo suppose the meds were still swimming in Izaya's bloodstream and making him groggy.

“You're not supposed to be here.”

The incisive voice surprised him. Namie strode into the room, adjusting the IV automatically.

“I was just leaving. Oh, Izaya wants someone to feed his kitty. Can you get some of your people to do it?”

“Kitty? I have important things to take care of.”

“Sure. But the cat is important to Izaya.”

Namie saw no point to this. Shizuo left without further comment.

* 

In the morning Izaya was surprised to wake up in a hospital bed. His sleep had been profound to the point that he expected the stabbing incident to turn out to be a dream. But he readjusted to reality within a few heartbeats. The strange thing was not that someone had attempted against his life, it was stranger that it had not happened any sooner (assuming it had not, Izaya could not even be entirely sure of this), the truly strange thing was that Shizuo had helped him.

“I don't hate who you are now’, huh. What does that even mean, precisely?”

The thought lingered even though it was hardly a priority. Namie walked in into the room without bothering to knock, thus reminding Izaya anew of his status as a patient at a hospital. He smiled as he imagined her in a sexy nurse outfit and had to force himself to match her serious attitude.

“How are you feeling?”

“A bit weak but fine otherwise.”

“Good. The doctor will be with you shortly. We can discuss things after that.”

“The kitty! In the end I didn't arrange for anyone to feed him,”

“That's been taken care of.”

Izaya blinked.

“It has?”
“Yes. That Shizuo person told me about it and I figured it was for the best to keep the animal fed. Not that I personally understand why anyone would—”

“Thank you, Namie-san!”

To her great surprise and borderline horror Izaya clutched both her hands.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“I was so afraid the kitty was going to starve to death.”

“It didn't. Just focus on getting well yourself.”

“Yes, m'am. Sorry for giving you all this trouble.”

“Talk is cheap. If you really mean that then hurry up and get better as soon as possible.”

He supposed that this was Namie's way of being kind. Abrupt and not particularly graceful but it had a ring of sincerity for being in character.

“You've got a deal.”

“We'll wait until you're completely recovered to get your memory back.”

Izaya was silent for a while.

“About that, I don't have to do that. If it means losing my present memories.”

She started violently.

“What?”

“You can call it cowardice, I guess that's what it is but I don't want to lose who I am now. I don't want to kill who I am now. There are experiences that I need to hold on to - and people I am connected to - and I am Orihara Izaya. I'll live as I am.”

“We'll discuss this later.”

But Izaya had already decided and once he reached a resolution he was not easily shaken. His sisters burst into the room around midday.

“Aha, there he is! Slacking off like a lazy bum.”

“Mairu, I'm not being lazy.”

Kururi approached him timidly.

“Izaya-nii, are you becoming a NEET?”

At this Izaya had to laugh.

*  

He said nothing to Shinra and merely complied with the medical examination in the blankest of ways. The scar looked vaguely surreal. He wanted to leave the hospital immediately but it turned out to be considerably difficult. Getting discharged was not as easy as he had initially thought.
On the second day Kida dropped by. The yakuza barred his way right away.

“Let him in.”

“With all due respect, we have strict orders from Shiki-sama not to let strangers in.”

“Search him, then. And stay in the room if you want. You don’t mind, right?”

Kida shook his head. So far he had not said a word. The bodyguards reached a compromise: they did search Kida and having found nothing placed themselves around him in a protective barrier so that Izaya could hardly see him through black suits.

“I guess you think I did it.”

Not even bothering with a greeting.

“Well, did you?”

“Do you think you’d still be alive if I did?”

“Ah. A very good point.”

“I came here to tell you that it wasn’t me.”

“Word sure flies. And do you know who it was?”

Kida shrugged.

“Could have been half of Tokyo for all I know.”

“True. But it wasn’t half of Tokyo.”

“You are losing qualities.”

“What can I say, there’s decay of angels...maybe devils get that too.”

“I didn’t stab you, that’s all I had to say.”

Kida spun on his heels and was already almost out the door.

“Still, thanks for visiting me.”

“Whatever.”

Izaya sighed and shrugged. He turned to the bodyguard closest to him.

“Kids, what's one to do? So difficult to understand them. Say, what's your name?”

“Sir?”

“You’ve got a name, right? I can’t just call you guys yakuza guy number 1, 3, 4 and so forth, now can I? By the looks of it we’ll be together for quite a while so it’s troublesome not knowing your names. I’m Orihara Izaya, by the way.”

“Shiki-sama has informed us.”

“Of course but introductions must be personal or else they don’t count. You can’t learn anything of
importance indirectly. So, your names gentlemen? Pretty please?”

And somehow they told him. Not so much because Shiki would expect them to as because Izaya had an effortless way of being persuasive without patronizing or commanding them.

“No, Matsumoto-san see if you can get me a notepad and a pen. And worry not, there are no Death Notes lying around nor do I have any piece of one with myself.”

They thought that some amazing plan was in the makes. Instead Izaya did some crazy doodles and portraits of the yakuza men, now not so anonymous.

“So you guys are no longer legion but that's all good. I'll get you the nifty mask and you'll be all set.”

“Sir...?”

“A Guy Fawkes mask! You guys don't go out much, do you? Actually, what do you guys do for fun?”

“We hang out at the office when there's no work and shoot darts or something."

“Ah...okay, that doesn't sound exactly like a great time. What do you do when you're not at the office? Anything...? Come on now, there's got to me something’"

But apparently there was not.

“Alright, gentlemen. That settles it, when I finally get discharged we are all going bowling.”

“Bowling...?”

“Oh me. Or would you prefer karaoke?”

“Bowling is better...I guess?”

Izaya laughed.

“That's a deal! And now what do you say we play a few friendly hands of Uno? A game is not a game without a little gambling involved. Let us play high stakes Uno! And worry not, I am a man of my word. If I lose I won't rat you out to Shiki-sama. I play fair.”

Of course Izaya had no intention of losing. And he did not. In a couple of hands there was already a pile of bills at his side and it was growing exponentially. At this point Shiki arrived.

“Shiki-sama! We're just having a friendly game, it was my idea.”

“The game is over. You lot, cut your losses while you still can and leave us.”

“So soon? That's too bad. I was having so much fun. See you soon, Matsumoto-san, Moritaka-san!”

Izaya waved and smiled brightly. Shiki waited until his underlings were gone.

“What do you think you're doing?”

The terse tone sobered Izaya immediately.

“Just playing some Uno, I figured it'd be more fun if we played for money—”

“Fun? That's their entire wages. I hope you realize that they're broke now. And these guys have
families to feed.”

Izaya started.

“I didn't think of that- if it was that way then why did they accept the terms?”

“Because they're yakuza. They follow a code of honor and binds them to accept a gamble and stick by it.”

“But they must have realized that they'd lose after a few rounds—”

“Izaya, that is beside the point. They're yakuza. They'd keep playing even if it cost them their lives.”

Izaya scooped the money and made as if to jump off the bed.

“That won't do, we can still catch up to them if we hurry- I was planning on giving it back anyway,”

“Izaya.”

He winced slightly. Shiki's voice held him in place.

“I didn't mean to take all of their money...can't we just give it back to them?”

“Don't insult them on top of everything. They will never accept it.”

Izaya sobbed.

“I'm sorry, I really didn't mean it- what are they going to do now?”

“Calm down. They're yakuza, remember? That means they'll make do, somehow. They're used to it.”

“Can't I have a rematch and lose on purpose? They can even make a profit!”

“That's patronizing. They wouldn't like it either.”

“I bet they hate me now. More people that hate me.”

Izaya stared at his folded hands. Shiki had the mental image of a unstrung puppet about to collapse. He sat in bed next to him.

“Not likely. You don't know how they think, you've beaten fair and square so odds are they'd be willing to follow you for the rest of their lives.”

Izaya revived immediately, his eyes full of hope as he turned to Shiki.

“Really?”

“Really. They'd do that already for my sake but they'd do it now for yours. Because they see you as their brother now.”

Izaya might as well be a kid, he was that unguarded. Shiki could very well see how it might trigger people's protective instincts easily. And these were often the strongest in the roughest of characters. Izaya had acquired a new skill that worked all the better for his being unaware of it. Even Shiki who was conscious of precisely what was going on was tempted to comfort him.

“How can you tell...?”
"Years in the business. I could tell just by looking at them that the way they acted around you had changed. You could start your own group if you keep this up."

Shiki only meant it half-jokingly. Such personalities that combined high intelligence with enough vulnerability to make those under them feel needed often solidified stronger empires than the average tough as nails yakuza.

Izaya giggled.

"No way I could do that. It's not just that I work best solo, I can't get people to follow me because no one actually likes me."

Shiki decided to let the delusion stand and change the subject.

"I heard the prime suspect came to visit you. You let him walk free, care to tell me why?"

Shiki wondered if Izaya had developed a reckless death defying attitude.

"Oh, Kida Masaomi-kun? I let him walk free because he didn't do it."

"And you know this because?"

There was of course the uncanny ability of Izaya for seeing through people's lies.

"Human psychology. I know Kida-kun enough to realize that he did not try to kill me."

"How can you be so certain?"

Perhaps now Shiki would catch an inkling into Izaya's method. He was more than a bit curious.

Izaya smiled.

"Because he told me so. Kida-kun wants me dead, I am sure of that and he would take great delight in killing me. And as such he could not have possibly tried to kill me this time around. He hates me far too much to simply stab me in the dark without making sure I knew who killed me. No, Kida-kun would stage it so that I got to see him gloat as he tortured me. Only then would he finally kill me. The MO rules out Kida-kun."

"Fair enough."

"And the worst thing is, it's my fault he's that way. But I won't say all my fault."

"Meaning?"

Izaya had been crumpling the bedsheets mechanically. He now stopped. Shiki took note.

"Meaning that we all hold responsibility for our actions- not for the things that happen to us but the way we react to them. We are humans, not automatons. If something bad happens to you, you do have a choice when it comes to dealing with it. That is my 'fairness', the game is not entirely rigged. I'm not a good person but I allow people the chance of deciding for themselves. I will not push them over the ledge. They take that final step, ultimately, in their conscience."

"I see you've been thinking things through."

Izaya nodded.

"Shiki-san, can I ask you something personal?"
“Ask away. I answer what I want to answer.”

“Heh...of course. I don't want to get out of line here. I just wanted to know if you had a choice in the becoming a yakuza?”

“I'm doing what I want.”

“Yes, that's what matters ultimately...like you said, I've been thinking a lot and now that I have so much free time on my hands thinking is basically all I do. Things like, 'what makes a particular individual who he/she is', 'is there a direct correlation between brain states and identity'...to be honest, I'm not too sure it's a good thing. To be entertaining such thoughts.”

“Why not?”

Shiki was extremely interested now but he did not let it show.

“I'm the kind of person that can get carried away when it comes to thinking. My mind runs away with me. It does not necessarily cloud my intellectual abilities but it may very well impair my perception of reality as it is. If my ego isn't kept in check I can see how I'd think of myself as destined for greatness.”

One of the greatest weaknesses that Shiki had always believed would eventually be Izaya's downfall was apparently being overcome. Shiki had already asked himself in hypothetical terms but for the first time he considered that terminating Izaya might very well be tactic move to make. Shiki saw that Izaya as he now was could tap a wealth of potential that was insofar locked.

If Izaya was more vulnerable he was also more lucid. Shiki had never heard of men becoming gods but he knew of men who gathered enough power to be almost as almighty.

“And are you? Destined for greatness.”

“Hardly. I can't build myself from scratch but 'destiny' is not something I am willing to accept. Even if it might sound good. 'Destiny' is a crippling concept, the moment you believe in it you have limited yourself even if you believe you're destined to be God- because then you cannot not be God.”

Shiki considered this. It cast a new light. Izaya might very well have been haunted by his outlandish ambitions to the point of being consumed by them. Shiki tended to think that Izaya's ideas of aspiring to godhead was a whim on Izaya's part and nothing but than that but in reality they might have been an obsession.

It occurred to Shiki that Izaya as he used to be were to be proven he was not destined to be some godly entity he would not escape unscathed and might collapse entirely. An overinflated ego could not withstand a crisis. Scaled down, Izaya's ego became flexible enough to overcome serious challenges.

“So even a grand destiny is bad?”

“It might be the worst kind...it is easier to accept such a destiny, I think and by that token not to change it. So 'destiny' becomes self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“On the other hand if you have a shoddy destiny you'll fight it.”

“Yes, that's my point.”

As interesting as this philosophical talk was Shiki wanted to steer the conversation back to the situation at hand.
“About Heiwajima, are you considering him as a suspect?”

Izaya jumped at the name but gathered himself almost immediately.

“No, of course not. Since he saved me- ah, I see. There is that possibility. I see two options, Shizuo stabbed me and then under the impression I was already dead brought me to the hospital so as to absolve himself completely; or Shizuo did not mean to kill me then but staged it so as to seem someone was out to get me and that he was committed to my welfare, next time he does plan to kill me and no one will suspect him...when I think like that...”

It became too painful so Izaya trailed out into anxious silence.

“It starts making sense?”

“Well, in a way- if I was killed he'd of course be suspect number one. So he could have conceived a subterfuge of sorts...but I cannot imagine it. He's a straight forward person for all his faults. Such grand scheming is too off character- the psychology doesn't fit.”

“Are you entirely sure about that?”

Izaya's eyes narrowed. Already the mental cogs were turning.

“Not entirely. Not as sure as I am with Kida-kun. It is true that Shizuo was on the site. There is no alibi. And while it's undeniable that he does come across as less than bright at first I do know that that is not the case.”

“Indeed.”

Izaya bit his lower lip, deep in concentration.

“They never retrieved the weapon...and he did ask me if I had seen the attacker.”

“Just something for you to consider.”

“Another thing that I have to consider...”

The mood was becoming grave. Shiki lightened it.

“By the way, your fans at the club have been asking about you.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That you were took a break and are currently on holidays.”

“It's best not to tell them the truth, definitely...”

“They wouldn't be allowed to visit you anyway. Since contact outside the club is strictly forbidden.”

Izaya smiled.

“I know. I was more thinking about not worrying them. Ah, but what a shame! To think I could exploit this for extra sympathy points, I'd be the most popular host ever.”

“You already are. At our club, at least. The number two isn't too happy either. Seems now the women talk about you even more than they used to when you were around.”
“I hope you're not losing too much money because of this...”

“I can afford the losses but as you know you are the most profitable host.”

Izaya had to make an effort not to let the compliment go to his head.

“That's because it's a popularity thing. Shiki-san, you'd make a cool host yourself.”

“Strange idea.”

“No, I can totally see it. The cool, stylish, with a dangerous aura type. The girls would go wild.”

“I have no patience for that.”

“I guess it takes some patience to put up with it...oh do you know what would be amusing? Matsumoto-san as a host. Try picturing it.”

Izaya was the type to laugh at his own jokes and he did so now. Even Shiki cracked a smile at the mental picture.

“That wouldn't go too well.”

“That's the whole point.”

Shiki had been sitting on a chair he now got up. Izaya wanted to straighten Shiki's tie even though there was no need.

“Don't get too attached to those guys. It's not rare of the average yakuza foot soldier to drop dead.”

“Shiki-san, before you leave- am I being kept here because it's an easier place to guard or because you don't trust me enough to be out on the streets?”

Shiki found Izaya's wording a bit odd.

“It's a bit of both.”

“I see. I appreciate the feeling and your honesty but in practical terms I am something of a hostage, am I not? Since I can't exactly leave if I want.”

“See it as it as a holiday.”

Izaya chuckled.

“Like you told the girls at the club?”

“Pretty much.”

Izaya's smile faded and locked eyes with Shiki.

“I don't like this. I really don't like this.”

Shiki considered his options. Ultimately emotions could be extremely useful and Shiki was not without skill when it came to manipulating them. His methods diverged from Izaya radically and his scope was more limited to the strictly practical.
“I want to protect you.”

Izaya remained silent for a while.

“Ahh, I see. That was something of a low blow, Shiki-san. I think we both know it. Could you do me a favor? It’s nothing dangerous, just getting me this particular manga title.”

The tone changed mid-way very suddenly but Izaya smoothed it out by defaulting to the mundane realities of circumstance. Shiki was impressed. To do Izaya justice he adopted the same attitude.

“That shouldn't be a problem.”

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“It's a page turner, isn't it? See what you guys have been missing out on?”

Izaya beamed as one of his new yakuza friends proved him right by turning another page. Izaya had introduced them to Death Note and got them to read during breaks in between shifts. They remained as strict about their duty as ever, the only difference was that those on break now spent it in Izaya's room while their colleagues remained parked just outside.

“It's a good thing these notes don’t exist. Our job would be completely impossible if all it took was writing people's name to kill them.”

Izaya had to laugh.

“That's what caused an impression on you fellows? I suppose you do have a point. It'd make a bodyguard's job null and void.”

“Unless it was Shiki-sama who had one. That would be great.”

“Possibly but there is a theory that the Death Note ends up ruining the user in one way or another.”

“And this is popular?”

“Extremely so. There's the manga and spinoffs and then the anime along with live action movies. There is an arc in the anime with yakuza, I seem to remember. Can't remember if the manga featured it or not. Yakuza tend to be portrayed rather unrealistically in fiction as it is.”

“Orihara-sama, this is fiction, right? Pardon me if I sound out of line but as of late we see so many weird things that belong in fairy tales, stuff like headless riders and who knows what else. It wouldn't surprise me too much if Death Notes actually existed somewhere out there.”

“Heh, I can assure you that there is no such thing as a real Death Note. If there was I would most definitely know about it. Since I'm an informant with an interest in the supernatural.”

It saddened Izaya a bit that as friendly as all this interaction was these men were still akin to prison guards albeit of the very mild kind. Izaya held no illusions, if he attempted to flee they would surely force him to stay in one way or another. Still, they allowed him to receive an unexpected visitor on his own.

Izaya was fully prepared and knew exactly what he wanted to do and say.

“Hi there, Celty. Long time no see.”

[I heard it from Shinra. Are you better?]
“Fine and dandy.”

He smiled at ease. If possible he would rather receive her sitting on a chair instead of propped in bed but he needed to cast the illusion that he was indeed still not fit to be walking about and simply putting in a front of well-being that was to be expected of him. It crossed his mind briefly that there was something uncanny in covering up lies with the truth.

Celty walked into the room somewhat reluctantly. He could almost see the hesitation in her and congratulated himself on having perfected the ability to read others to even cover non-human beings and based solely on body language. Izaya could tell she had reached a decision a split second before she even began typing.

[About your memory, is it back? I didn't tell anyone]

“Oh, that. I suppose fairies can't recognize a joke. Then again my humor is a bit different. Most people don't get. Such a shame.”

Izaya sealed his nonchalance with a shrug. But he could not tell whether she was entirely convinced.

[I just can't understand you. Why would you lie about such a thing?]

Izaya was very aware that in order to properly control the damage done he needed to exploit her insecurities when it came to reading humans in general. It occurred to him not for the first time that exploiting weaknesses was integral to his calling and probably second nature.

“My reasons cannot be sounded. Isn't that how it is with every person?”

[You think so?]

And just like this Izaya shifted the subject from himself in particular to the vast mass of human persons.

“If you stop to think about it, can you really know what motivates people? What makes some of them take the plunge while others don't, what makes some toss some spare change to the beggar on the street corner while others look the other way, what makes some of them hunger for revenge when they perceive they have been wronged while others opt for forgiveness. Ultimately it is impossible to ever discern why people act the way they do. Theirs likes and dislikes remain a mystery.”

Izaya was pleased with this polished bit of rhetoric. Celty seemed to be gathering her thoughts before typing a reply.

[Even if you were just joking, fact remains that you're different]

“How so?”

[The way you've been talking with Shizuo, for example. Something must have happened to you]

Izaya smiled cryptically.

“Perhaps. Does it matter to you? Since you hate me.”

[Normally I hate you, yes. But at the moment- not so much]

“Must be because of my recent misfortune. By the way, have you read Death Note?”
If Celty could have blinked she would have done so now. It was one Izaya's prime tactics of suddenly changing the topic in apparently random ways that were in reality extremely deliberate and timed in just the right way to corner his opponent into reacting so that Izaya was in perfect control of the entire exchange.

It worked remarkably well.

[The manga? I heard about it]

“It's amazing how many people have not been exposed to the wonders of Death Note despite its popularity. Here, I got the first volume here. You'll be hooked on the first panel.”

Celty leafed through it, her cat eared helmet tilted to the side as she inspected the contents and read the blurb at the back.

[A notebook that kills people?]

“Just like the title says. Very descriptive, isn't it? 'Death Note' is just what it states, unlike, say, 'Neon Genesis Evangelion'. Can't grasp what that is at all from the title.”

Celty's body swayed slightly. It took Izaya a while to realize that this was her version of laughter.

[People have such wild imaginations! Look at these shinigami, how bizarre!]

“I don't suppose Ryuk is a cousin of yours?”

[Izaya, don't push your luck. I may not hate you but still]

Izaya held up his hands in a gesture of mock surrender.

“I apologize for my rudeness. I meant kinship in a thematic sense since you are both representatives of death gods. Along with say, Hades and Anubis.”

[You really know your myths]

“Mythology is humanity's first attempt at explaining the world. Call it incipient philosophy, cosmology, natural history, if you will.”

[And you sure like showing off.]

“Guilty as charged.”

[Can I really borrow this?]

“Go right ahead. Death Note is making a comeback with the yakuza so why not widen the fan base to include fairies?”

She turned the volume in her hands, curious.

[So this is the kind of thing you read. Is this your favorite manga?]

“I like it but it's not my absolute favorite.”
Izaya smiled his most innocent smile.

“What's that?”

“I'm just as the title states—which is to say Liar Game. It's just as the title states, too.”

*Liar Game* ticked all of the boxes to reach the position of Izaya's all-time fave. It was increasingly brainy, stocked with characters that covered a wide range of moral tones, loaded with psychological conflict and on top of it all the entire premise was something of an experiment on human motivations and behavior under stress.

A rare case of truth in fiction. Even if the scenarios in themselves were beyond unlikely the reactions were believable and conveyed the paradox of human existence; everyone was utterly unique and yet essentially the same.

Liar Game had another advantage over Death Note in that the hypothetical element was much more appealing to Izaya. Yakuza might crave a real death note but if Izaya possessed one he would have no use for it apart from holding it as a threat. Killing was not Izaya's domain of action, not when his memories were intact and not after they were wiped out. It gave him solace. The moral ambiguities of highly intellectual games thrilled him much more than the possibility of delivering death at will.

Death Note was fun to watch, Liar Game was fun to live.

He mused on such thoughts now as he took a stroll on the surprisingly pleasant and wide hospital rooftop. Izaya wondered if Celty would give Liar Game a go and learn a thing or two about what made people tick.

And this lead him to ponder on what made him, Orihara Izaya, tick. He had an inkling that Shiki was deliberately leading him on by letting a latent affection blossom into something like love. And love was of course a means of conditioning someone into compliance.

That Izaya knew this and yet could not help his feelings was something of a schism: part of him coolly assessed the realities as they presented themselves to disinterested analysis while the other part of him remained entangled in an emotional conundrum from which he could not escape. It highlighted the sensation of being two people that already assaulted him at intervals.

From the corner of his eye he could catch his personal bodyguard squad strategically placed. They had learned to give him some berth and were as discreet as possible. Izaya wondered if they had received instructions from Shiki to this effect. He did not overtly study them but he found himself fascinated by yakuza in general. Not the warped romantic model propagated by movies but the actual thing in the flesh.

Here they were, men ready to die because of loyalty. Dishing out abuse to those beneath them on the overruling power pyramid and yet eager to cower before their superiors. Apparently their sense of pride that bordered on hyper-sensibility squared off such contradictions very easily. To Izaya the yakuza was the most contradictory of institutions.

And the human element drew him toward them.

The view from the roof was somewhat dismal, all that Izaya could see was a jumble of concrete devouring the horizon. But above there was the sky. Izaya found himself staring at a particular cloud formation that reminded him of something that he could not presently place. He realized that it was his pillow except luminous and ethereal in the heights.
“No wonder our ancestors came up with so many gods to explain the things around us.”

“Orihara-sama?”

“Nothing, just talking to myself.”

And longing to talk to others. He suddenly saw his situation as an odious deprivation, a cruel isolation from the life rushing headlong through the riotous streets of the city. It lasted only a split second but left a lingering impression of vague yet pressing discomfort. He decided he would have a word of Shiki.

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What Izaya did not expect was for Shiki to take the first step. And by doing so by inviting him to dine at a high end restaurant. It occurred to Izaya that this was Shiki’s version of an offer that could not be refused: a smooth version that dispensed with threats altogether, needing only to act on Izaya’s emotions to succeed.

“This is a great place, I hadn't heard of it.”

Shiki took his time pouring bright red wine into his glass. Some things could not be left to waiters.

“You used to come here all the time.”

“Oh. Well, I wouldn't know about it.”

Slightly defensive.

“I've heard you're getting bored at the hospital.”

“ Heard from who, Shiki-san?”

“My men, who else.”

Izaya blinked. He had taken his bodyguards as part of the furniture even as he admitted they were interesting as individuals, as people in charge of guarding him he assumed they were blind witnesses.

“I see. So they can notice things like that.”

“Is it all that surprising? They're quite fond of you, too.”

Izaya laughed.

“Why, Shiki-san, next thing you know they'll be ditching you and following me instead.”

Shiki took another sip.

“If that happened I'd have to kill them.”

“I was just kidding...”

“I know. But I'm not kidding.”

Izaya could tell. And it chilled him.

“That's very harsh but I understand that's how it goes.”
“It's not harsh at all. If you live by your loyalties then it follows you should die if you change them.”

“I was thinking along those same lines the other day.”

“Good. As long as she understand each other.”

Izaya nodded absently. Shiki wondered if he was pushing Izaya too far. There was something fascinating in testing Izaya's new limits. Shiki did not shy from testing Izaya but he had to remind himself to hold back. Izaya poked at his food in brooding silence.

“How do you feel about returning to the host club?”

“Can I, Shiki-san?”

“As long as you move in to one of the group's compounds.”

In other words, more surveillance. But Izaya craved freedom and even the thinnest opening in his present captivity had an irresistible allure.

“I can handle that, I think.”

Izaya smiled brilliantly. He wished that things could be simpler and less entangled but he knew that it was the only possible way for him to connect emotionally at a deeper level.

“Shiki-san, have you heard of Liar Game?”

“What is that?”

“It's a manga, there's also a live action version it's not as good. The premise is simple enough: people play a series of games at high stakes, deception being key to winning. The heroine, however, is 'stupidly honest' as she herself says and tends to convince other players to tell the truth and unite against the games' organizers. At times people go along with her. Until someone will say, 'I lied, this is liar game, lying is to be expected'”. It is my favorite manga. You must be wondering why I am rambling like this.”

“I'm sure you have a point.”

“I do. I think that in a way things are the same between us. Not that I deliberately deceive you but there is a premise of 'no actual love' and every now and then you remind me of the very obvious.”

Shiki refilled his glass.

“Does this place look familiar to you?”

Izaya frowned, annoyed.

“It's hopeless, I can't remember anything from my past. Try as I might nothing comes to me.”

“That's a good thing in this case. Because you've never been here before.”

Izaya's eyes widened for a split second as shock hit him. Such a minor detail yet just like that Shiki proved a decisive point. Shiki was curious to see how Izaya would turn things around. Izaya surprised him by laughing.
“I see, I see! I've been had, haven't I? Ah and here I was avoiding alcohol just so I could have a fighting chance. No point in that.”

Izaya asked for a glass wine and took a swig.

“Good vintage this year.”

“I will take your word for it, Shiki-san. Allow me to drink to your health.”

Shiki raised his glass in return. Without a doubt Izaya was increasingly interesting.

“So did you like this 'stupidly honest' character?”

“Not particularly. I preferred the sassy crossdresser myself, nothing like a smart trap to brighten one’s day.”
Chapter 7

Shizuo spotted Izaya without being seen. Izaya came through a door and walked down the corridor with his head down and pretty much oblivious to his surroundings. It was not a sight Shizuo was used to. Izaya looked for all practical purposes aimlessly defeated.

But Izaya's bodyguards were quick on the uptake and moved in unison to form a blockade immediately. Izaya waved them away.

“You can leave.”

“But Orihara-sama,”

“Please?”

They did not of course obey but they did retreat into more discreet distance.

“Is there something you want, Shizuo?”

“Just dropped by to see how you're doing.”

They walked side by side. Izaya's spirits were low.

“I'll be fine, I'm getting discharged tomorrow.”

Shizuo cocked a thumb over a shoulder.

“What were you doing there?”

“Donating blood. Or trying to, they turned me down. Apparently I am still too weak for that.”

Izaya smiled apologetically.

“Why did you want to do that?”

“Well, I had to receive blood so I wanted to give back a little.”

“You're too skinny for that.”

A sense of overall apathy descended upon Izaya. It blunted the edges of his emotions so that he was not even afraid of Shizuo who just had a very unexpected sight into Izaya's state of mind.

“Thanks for reminding me. I really needed to be reminded about how skinny and weak I am.”

“Still unfunny.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Well excuse me for being me.”

“I didn't say you were weak.”

“It was heavily implied. I can take a hint.”

“Nothing wrong with being skinny.”
“Easy for you to say.”

“Want me to donate some blood since you can't?”

Izaya shrugged then poked Shizuo in the chest.

“No can do, I bet you have monster blood anyway. Non compatible with humans.”

“There was this book about that... with monster blood, wasn't there? A book for kids.”

Izaya brightened up.

“You know about that? I'm amazed! It's from R.L Stine's series Goosebumps.”

“Yeah but I got normal blood, it's not green and weird.”

“I am not sure of that myself.”

“Sure you are. You stabbed me, remember?”

Izaya could not account for the fact that he stumbled but stumble he did. Something very akin to guilt troubled him. Izaya regained his balance with instinctive ease, blending his misstep into a strut.

“So I did.”

But he could not recall it. Ironically, his sense of responsibility gained strength by the fact that he could not remember. Yet he could feel a jumble of emotions running just below the surface, connecting him to this man. Izaya could not even tell how much of this was a link to the past or a brand new development. What he did know was that it was becoming increasingly difficult to bring himself to hate Heiwajima Shizuo.

“Can I ask you something? Didn't you think- as you were carrying me to the hospital that you'd be better off if I kicked the bucket?”

“Not really. I don't think ahead much.”

“It's a miracle you survived as long as you have.”

“It wasn't thanks to you.”

“Heh, I bet.”

“I've been wondering, did you fall for that yakuza fellow or something?”

Izaya blinked in incomprehension.

“Say what?”

“Something changed you a lot. Dunno what it is and it's not like you'll tell.”

“Then you're wasting your time asking, aren't you?”

“Oh yeah. I guess you've got a point there.”

Izaya opted for a breezy approach. Hands in his pockets, half-skipping.

“Besides, what is to you? If and I do mean this hypothetically, if I am in love with Shiki-san, it's not
like it's any of your business.”

“I wonder about that as well.”

Izaya came to a sudden halt but improved on the spot as he was wont to do. It often seemed that more than complicated plots and shadowy plans it was the immediate reaction to a crisis that sealed the success of a true mastermind of any kind.

“Ah, you’re as unfunny as I am. What a shame, I thought you were about to teach me the meaning of real humor but I'm afraid you're subpar in that department.”

Shizuo remained silent long enough to make Izaya more than a little nervous. To the point his bodyguard brigade noticed.

“Is this fellow causing you any trouble, Orihara-sama?”

Shizuo remained perfectly at ease. It would take more than a group of yakuza to daunt him.

“Answer the man. Am I causing you any trouble?”

Izaya cleared his throat.

“Not at all.”

They were not convinced.

“Orihara-sama, are you sure?”

“Very much so. We are just having a civil discussion. Aren't we?”

Shizuo shrugged.

“If you want to call it that.”

Just as the tension was beginning to escalate beyond the point of no return Shinra, of all people, burst into the scene.

“What's going on here? Why are you trying to donate blood when you barely made it, do you want to cause me more trouble?”

It was the distraction Izaya needed. He smiled widely.

“Shinra! So very sorry. I repent in ashes and dust.”

“Is that a quote or something? That's all fine and dandy but I'm the one that has to nurse you back to health when you screw up.”

Izaya bowed dramatically.

“My humble self humbly apologizes.”

“Shizuo, you don't have to visit him. Izaya is a jerk, patient of mine or not.”

Izaya pouted.

“Hey, I'm right here...don't act as if I'm not present. It hurts my feelings.”
Shinra had had a long day of tending to groaning yakuza who thought it part of their manly etiquette to bark insults at him when treatment became painful, adding threats and even gun totting on occasion as incentives to his ministrations.

“You don't have feelings, that's why you're Izaya.”

“He's got feelings alright. Not too sure he knows what they are but he's got them.”

Shinra was surprised. He turned to Shizuo to Izaya then back at Shizuo.

“Of course I've got feelings. I'm human, after all.”

Izaya tried to pass it off as merely amused but in reality he was offended. And he hardly knew whether he was offended by Shizuo's insight, Shinra's jab or the combination of the fact that he was expected to be immune to common human feeling and yet unable to come across as such.

He dug his hands into his pockets and sauntered away.

“What was that all about, Shizuo?”

“I'm not sure.”

*

Izaya returned to his host job with added enthusiasm. He went to the extent of getting Okinawa postcards that he sent in such a way as to get them stamped from the island itself. He addressed them to the club in general to be handed to his costumers. To this he added a series of very pretty scenic pictures that he claimed to have taken. When asked why none of the shots featured him he simply played the coy card by saying he was too shy to possibly be photographed.

If he was to fabricate a lie then he might as well excel at it and reinforce it with details. Building up verisimilitude. Ironically, he could not remember ever being in Okinawa yet he knew he had visited it, with Shizuo, even. The school trip included many others and even Shinra but in Izaya's mind he singled out Shizuo as the sole companion of this blank space in his memory. As he chatted to the girls at the club he found himself trying to piece it together.

Tackling his entire previous life was too much of a challenge but recreating incidents of it often held him enthralled. Izaya viewed it as a fun way of exercising his mental abilities and the power of his imagination.

Working at the club meant long nights so by the time he retired to the compound the first hints of dawn were seeping into neon dirtied darkness.

“Hi there, kitty. I'm back! Hey, kitty? Oy, what's wrong?”

The cat made an effort to get up but to no avail. Frail paws moved sluggishly and a weak meow echoed painfully in the still mostly empty apartment. Izaya ran and picked up the tiny furry body.

“Oh, hang it there! Oh god, oy, kitty!”

Blind panic overwhelmed him. He checked the time, still too early to take him to the vet. Izaya's bodyguard squad was stationed around the building's perimeter so he was alone. He wrapped the kitty in a blanket and dashed out the door.

*
Shizuo had yet to sleep, he too had a late night. He was fluffing the futon and anticipating catching some shuteye when the chime exploded with shrill noise followed by banging on the door.

“Shizuo! Are you in, please open the door, my cat's sick!”

“Izaya...?”

Shizuo was more than just surprised. Izaya burst into the room wearing some sleek shiny purple number, eyes very wide with apprehension, hands extended in which the cat nestled. Never had Shizuo seen Izaya look so disarmingly childish.

“The cat, do you know what's wrong? I should've taken him to Shinra but you know about cats-please help him, I'll do anything you want.”

Izaya bowed and held the cat toward Shizuo.

“Hey, no need to do that.”

Shizuo picked up the fuzzy kitty with great care. It was quite a sight, such a big man delicately handling a small and helpless animal. But Izaya failed to see it because he knelt on the floor, head bowed to the floor, his voice breaking.

“It's just a cat but please help him, Shizuo-”

“It's okay. He's not really sick, just having trouble peeing. See?”

Izaya lifted his face. Shizuo rubbed the kitty's underside very gently and sure enough the tiny cat squirmed in relief as a yellow waterfall splashed the floor. Izaya held his breath.

“Is he really okay?”

“Fine and dandy. It's because it's just a young kitty.”

Izaya made a lame attempt a wiping his tears with the sleeves of his too flashy jacket.

“You must think I'm an idiot,”

But Izaya hugged the kitty when Shizuo handed the now happy fellow that immediately licked him on the still tear streaked cheeks.

“Not really. But get up already.”

Izaya nodded and obeyed.

“Oh dear, I forgot to take off my shoes! And I've got to clean this up.”

“I'll do that.”

Izaya dutifully removed his shoes and placed them at the entrance, neatly arranged. Shizuo took a mop and cleaned the puddle.

“Thank you very much. I don't know how to make it up to you.”

“No need for that but you can tell me just what's going on.”

Izaya's cellphone shattered the moment. He rushed to pick it up.
“Ah, Matsumoto-san. Sorry I took off like that, I'm fine- something came up. I can't say- no, no need for that. I'm sure. I can make it back on my own. There's really nothing to worry about. Well then, I'll see you tomorrow.”

Shizuo placed a mug of milk in front of Izaya and a poured some into saucer that he put on the floor.

“Looks like you're under surveillance or something.”

“Or something. Is that for the cat?”

“Yeah, it's probably hungry.”

And indeed the bundle of fur hurried to lap at the milk.

“You sure have a lot of milk around.”

“It's good for you.”

Shizuo produced a cigarette. Izaya smiled and going on automatic brought a flame to it.

“Why bother to drink healthy when you smoke? Doesn't make much sense.”

For a while Shizuo puffed in silence and stared at nothing in particular so that Izaya flinched when he looked at him directly.

“You're not making much sense yourself. So what gives, Izaya?”

“Well, like you saw the cat got sick and I didn't know what to do-”

“I don't mean that. And you know it. For starters, what on earth are you wearing?”

“Ah, do like the style? Purple is my color, I decided. You could say I am something of a trendsetter. Anyway, it's getting late so I should get going. Thank you for helping my cat, I really appreciate it.”

“So you got a curfew now? Is your yakuza going to fetch you away if you disobey?”

“It's...complicated.”

“I bet.”

Izaya sipped the milk and frowned, something he never allowed himself to do at the club.

“I am my own person and can go where I please. Shiki-san is just worried about me since I was attacked.”

“Which is more than can be said about you. You don't seem to worried about yourself.”

Izaya shrugged, absently petting the cat.

“There's no point to acting like everyone is out to get me. So someone has a grudge against me, what else is new? That this person is willing to take the extra step and actually attempt against my life is just a logical conclusion to the way things are. It was bound to happen. I wonder how many people have killed me in their thoughts...that's supposed to be a sin, too.”

“Says who?”
“The Bible.”

“Not too sure you should be reading that, crazy people get even crazier after reading it.”

Izaya burst out laughing.

“That is so true! No wait, did you just heavily imply that I am a crazy? Now that's not nice.”

“You saying you're not crazy?”

“Ah, it is a matter of perspective as are most things.”

“And you're taking into consideration the ‘perspective' of the guy that's out to get you?”

Izaya nodded.

“You could say that.”

“If your yakuza wants to keep you safe then sticking with me is the way to go. Can't get a better bodyguard than me.”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh? Unless you are the one that wants me dead and I would be straight into your trap.”

“You think I-"

“I don't think you did. Either way I've decided to trust you.”

Shizuo nearly dropped the cigarette.

“Trust, huh. Tricky thing, trust.”

“Isn't it? By the way, shouldn't you get going or something?”

“I was about to hit the sack, nothing to do tomorrow- which is today- worked real hard into the night so Tom-san gave me a day off.”

Izaya got up, cat secured in a pocket.

“I see. Then I'll leave you to it, thanks once again,”

“Why don't you stay? You haven't slept yet, have you?”

“I haven't but it'd be a bit...”

“You're not allowed?”

This settled it for Izaya.

“Just let me make a call.”

Shizuo rummaged through a closet under the pretense of getting pillows. In reality he wanted to give Izaya some privacy as he made his decision official via the phone. Shizuo did not quite know what to make of it. But he was curious.

As for Izaya he had acted impulsively as opposed to being ever so calculating. He was now a bit
awed at his own boldness.

“You can have this.”

Shizuo handed him one of his shirts. Izaya held it at arm's length and turned it around, bemused.

“This is like a nightgown on me.”

And it proved indeed to be so. Izaya changed in the bathroom and reappeared wearing the shirt that reached to his knees. Shizuo cracked a smile.

“Here, I got an extra futon.”

Izaya compared it to Shizuo's worn out futon.

“This one is so much nicer than yours, how come?”

“I keep it in case Kasuka drops by. Or Tom-san.”

Izaya grew thoughtful. The futon was brand new.

“It's a shame that your brother is always so busy.”

“Yeah he doesn't drop by much.”

“But take heart. Your brother is busy being a successful actor, my sisters are busy trolling poor people.”

“They take after you in that.”

“Hey, that's totally unfair.”

Izaya wondered if it was possible to sleep in this cardboard apartment with its paper thin walls. Outside the city was up to an early start as always and already a low vibration of noise reached him. Shizuo lowered the shutters. Comfortable semi-darkness descended.

“I still got some cat sand around.”

“Great,”

Izaya yawned, suddenly very tired. Then collapsed on the futon. Shizuo had to smile.

“This is kinda like a sleepover, huh.”

“Kitty thinks so too, say 'thank you' to Shizuo, kitty!”

Izaya held the cat with a flourish and made him bow. The cat purred sleepily.

“Stop playing with the little guy.”

“He needs a name, how come none occurs to me...”

Izaya pulled up the sheets and right away the cat nestled right by his side, curled into a tiny ball of fur. Shizuo stayed awake long enough to see Izaya fall asleep. It puzzled him considerably how Izaya, of all people, could take a chance on trust like this. Izaya had bailed out of offering some very needed explanations but Shizuo too had not explained his unlikely invitation. Shizuo was not one to ponder the reasons behind his actions too much but he now wondered.
One thing he was beginning to realize, something that Shiki had already grasped: Izaya's vulnerability did not seem to weaken him at all, on the contrary, it made him disturbingly unpredictable.

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Shizuo half-expected to find Izaya gone by the time he woke up. It was not so.

“Hi there, good...afternoon, I guess? Strange, huh.”

“It sure ain't morning, that's for sure.”

Izaya beamed. He wore very normal clothes now, a simple red shirt and black pants. Shizuo had a strange feeling of deja vu.

“By the way, have you read this?”

Izaya produced a brand new manga volume from a bag. “I got it at the bookstore across the street- I used your key, I hope that's okay?”

“Sure. And what's it about? Is it one of those, what is it called, Boys Love thing?”

Izaya laughed.

“Heh, no. But at times it sure looks like it! It's Saint Young Men, a gag manga in which Jesus and Buddha are roommates in modern day Tokyo. Hilarity ensues.”

“You're into that kind of thing?”

“It's really funny.”

Izaya had discovered this new favorite recently and took delight in that. Without any idea of whether he would have appreciated it before his memory loss he could fully enjoy it. Basking in harmless humor.

Shizuo leafed through.

“Weird idea.”

“It's an original concept. Here, you can keep it.”

“You're giving this to me?”

“It's just the first volume, the manga is still being published. Give it a go, Shizuo. You won't regret it.”

Shizuo turned the book, curious.

“You always were a bit whacky.”

“I resent that. Anyway, I've got to get going. Thanks for everything.”

Izaya tucked the cat under an arm and waved happily. He gathered his glamor clothes in a bag and opened the front door. Only to halt on his tracks immediately for someone blocked his path.

“Kasuka-san?”
“Hello, Orihara-san.”

Kasuka might very well be the only person in the world to be so unaffected at finding Orihara Izaya at Shizuo's place.

“I’ll leave you brothers alone, nice seeing you.”

“That is a very cute kitty.”

“Isn’t he? I can’t seem to come up with a good name for him.”

Izaya was caught completely by surprise by Heiwajima junior and as such eager to flee the scene but on the other hand he was extremely curious. So if Kasuka chose to chat Izaya was not about to turn him down.

Kasuka took the still nameless kitty and held him easily.

“‘Kali’.”

“That's a good idea, 'Kali' does mean 'the Black One'. Except this is a male kitty, shame.”

Shizuo looked over Izaya's shoulder.

“I wasn't expecting you today.”

“It's a surprise, nii-chan.”

This was Izaya’s cue. He retrieved the cat and made himself scarce. Yet even as he walked away he had to resist the temptation to spy on the siblings' conversation.

It would not be difficult either, Izaya had his ways. But he remembered how upset he would be if someone were to eavesdrop on him and his sisters. So he applied the golden rule.

Feeling reinvigorated he walked down the streets like any other passerby if not for a tendency to skip every third step. In hindsight he had acted very foolishly indeed but at least Kasuka had not dropped by to find him lying next to Shizuo, it would have made for a hilarious misunderstanding. Izaya giggled at the mental image.

Being a very imaginative person he could picture it down to the tiniest detail including Kasuka’s expression that he bet would remain unchanging in its blankness. He was not entirely sure how Shizuo would react but it was a world of fun to imagine.

As he giggled to himself happily it occurred to him that he was indeed a creepy person. It did not bother him. His phone rang with Namie's programed tone just as Izaya was about to reach an intersection. And she was rather cross.

“Tell you what, since I've been such a slacker why don't you take a day off too? I know, meet me at this place,”

Izaya had just had a wonderful idea. He took the kitty home, or what passed for it, had a quick shower, made an appointment and then waited for Namie in the lobby of one of the city's best hairstylists. His yakuza bodyguards followed dutifully.

Izaya was known here. Not only from having his hair done for his host duties but even before that: the address was on his phone from the days before he lost his memories. Izaya viewed it as his
former self directing him in an oblique way. It had been strange to see the all the attention paid to him when he felt it was his first time walking into the very bright hairdressing studio.

He jumped off a plushy sofa as soon as Namie appeared through see-through doors.

“What's the meaning of this?”

Izaya smiled brightly at her curt disapproval. Today he was bent on having fun.

“You've been working so hard for me that I figured you should unwind. You can use the facilities, all on me. There's a great spa out back and why not revamp your image a bit?”

Namie studied the spotless interior of white walls, vast mirrors, sci-fi looking hair apparatuses.

“Are you saying you want me to get a haircut?”

Izaya put up his hands, a placating gesture.

“No, no, of course not, Namie-san! Cutting your hair is a crime, it's so long and shiny and smooth.”

Namie smiled with a hint of mockery.

“You sound like you've been touching it.”

Izaya took half a step back.

“I didn't! But I can tell just by looking at it.”

She was amused by his flailing. Izaya recommended curling Namie's hair into waves and she accepted it. He settled for spinning on the chair to pass time, unfortunately it took quite a while to take care of Namie's hair since it was so long so by the time it was over he was more than a bit dizzy. Izaya stumbled and would have fallen if not for Namie.

“Will you try and behave your age?”

“Gah, head hurts...”

“Well what did you expect?”

They settled on a cozy lounge, a slightly queasy Izaya, Namie in her new hairdo with one of the yakuza underlings standing by. A very unlikely combination all around. Izaya found himself giggling. He kept his eyes closed to become steadier, having yet to take in the makeover. He now blinked a few times and bounced with no regard for his balance.

“Wow, Yagiri-san! You look fabulously hot! As in, more than usual.”

“You're picking up some nasty habits at the club. Quit the flattery.”

Izaya chuckled for he could tell she was not upset. He considered her anew. From what he knew Yagiri Namie had been through quite a rough spot recently. Izaya wanted to make things better for her out of the general impulse toward good will that was such a moving force to his new self and out of a personal sense of gratitude.

He sobered up.

“Yagiri-san, thanks. You've put up with a lot because of me. Working with me cannot have been
easy, I mean I can be a bit weird- maybe even very weird- so I wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your being there for me. You're not just an employee to me, I see you as a friend.”

Namie smiled.

“I'd say 'very weird'.”

“Ah...true, true. But you see, it's all part of my master plan. I hope to soften you with my childish ways, angling for 'maternal instincts'.”

“You're not that stupid.”

“Aha! Heavily implying that I am indeed stupid.”

Izaya nodded with mock seriousness.

“That kind of thing may work at the club but not with me.”

This playful mood made him very happy. Friendly banter was something he greatly appreciated. That his former life had been void of friends did not mean it had to be so now. And he did not only want to broaden his circle of acquaintances but to deepen the one he already had. Truly connecting on an individual level with those he used to know was a challenge he embraced. Izaya wanted to outdo Izaya.

He wanted his change in attitude to bring his people skills into a whole new level. Beyond curious detachment. To be a person amidst people. It was much more than his competitive spirit or his need to improve himself, above all he yearned to build true relationships.

And at the back of his mind he hoped that if he would never be rootless again, even if he were to lose his memories anew. Human bonds would tether him to the world.

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Shizuo waited five minutes then without a warning opened the front door. He found no one and a quick search showed him the landing was indeed empty. Shizuo checked the fire escape.

“He's not spying on us. Not that I can tell, at least.”

Shizuo smiled thoughtfully as he announced this.

“Did you think he was?”

“Who knows. He's Izaya, after all.”

As to what that meant exactly Shizuo was not quite sure. Shizuo had put the water boiling and tea was ready. Kasuka, ever quiet, did not drown him in questions.

“That was a cute kitty.”

“Yeah, real tiny. Cat got kinda sick so I helped out.”

Kasuka nodded as if all this was precisely what he expected and nothing could surprise him.

“Cat lovers can't be bad people.”

The awkwardness that so often plagued Shizuo- directly linked to the sinking feeling of not being a proper big brother- dissolved. Not so much because of Izaya but because he provided a neutral topic
of conversation that was perfect to break the initial ice.

*

Izaya took Namie to a fancy shopping district where he got her a sweet pink dress with matching shoes. He would like to go on a full out shopping spree but he knew that was his idea of fun, not hers.

Izaya caught a glimpse of something across the street, a glint of light that he could not identify. He squinted at it.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, just thought I saw something.”

But if he could readily dismiss it his bodyguards were not. With a curt nod they signaled to one another and were suddenly one except for one who moved in front of Izaya.

“Hey, what’s-”

“This way, Orihara-sama.”

A long black car parked alongside him. More yakuza opened the door but he was not about be herded like this without an explanation.

“What is going on here?”

“Orihara-sama, this way.”

Before he could demand an explanation anew all hell broke loose. Suddenly Namie was shoving him hard and then aiming a high heel kick to a woman that came bursting out of nowhere charging ahead blindly, knife clutched between two hands. The blade went flying out of her grip, clattering loudly on the concrete.

Namie finished a circular kick, sending her crashing down hard. Immediately the bodyguards restrained the attacker. Izaya blinked a few times. He was shoved into the backseat of the car along with Namie. Izaya stared out the back window as the curb receded into the urban distance.

“That woman, I know her from the club. Is she the one out to get me...?”

It was outlandish. But Izaya recognized that it was most likely true.

“This kind of murderous behavior is caused by an excess of estrogen.”

Laughter bubbled up, Izaya could not help it. He felt slightly giddy, hurt and bewildered but above all too amused.

“Ah, my pride as a man is so shot to hell now! I need a woman to save my ass, so sad. But Yagiri-san, that was quite a kick! Move over Sanji!”

“I know basic self-defense.”

“It shows, it shows! You've got to give a name to that trademark kick! How about 'super panty killer shot'? Bad English makes it cooler! Heh, white panties- not that I was peeping, I couldn't help but notice-”

He smiled apologetically. His nerves were out of whack and could not properly emulate being at
ease without sliding into borderline hysteria.

“Calm down, everything is okay now.”

Izaya readied himself to act chirpy and nonchalant then caught his reflection on the window- a pale and shaky Izaya- and gave up altogether. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“I should have guessed but I assumed it was someone from the past. I treated Yamashita-san- that's her name- like I did all costumers, in a way I got to know her so this is a bit difficult to take.”

“Obsessive stalker behavior can lead to violence. Odds are she got even worse when she saw you with me.”

Izaya smiled wanly in an attempt to dispel the gloom threatening to overwhelm him.

“Whatever happened to 'excess of estrogen'?”

“There is always a combination of factors when it comes to borderline cases.”

Her cool scientific approach, the mechanics of human mania clinically dissected, had a soothing effect. Izaya needed his emotions to be kept in check at the moment and Namie was just the person to do that.

“That is very true. I just feel I failed.”

“To defend yourself? You're just not very good at physical confrontation, these days.”

“Not that. But I could not read someone that I dealt with rather closely. How qualified am I to say anything about 'humanity'? Or about anything at all-”

Tears smarted his eyes. Izaya stared blankly at his folded hands. Steadying himself. Namie touched his shoulder very lightly.

“Are you still looking for a name for that cat of yours?”

The unlikely change of topic jolted him out of an impeding episode.

“Yes, still no name for him. Why are you asking?”

“Schrödinger'. I think it's a perfect name.”

Izaya brightened up. As it so often happened with his mood swings he jumped to the opportunity of reliving stress via bubbly outbursts. He now bounced on the seat and clapped.

“Just what I expected from you, Yagiri-san! Schrödinger's cat is alive but not alive at the same time, it's such a delicious paradox. Don't you just love quantum craziness? Oh, do you lean toward the Copenhagen interpretation?”

“It is not my field _per se_ but it is interesting.”

“Isn't it? I wonder, in a thought experiment Orihara Izaya is both alive and dead simultaneous...”

“Let's leave quantum superposition out of it.”

“They do say that no one actually understands quantum physics...”
“That's right, we just make it up as we go along.”
Izaya blinked in dismay.

“Really?”
Her smile was wry.

“It was a joke.”

“I've been had by Yagiri Namie! Always suspected you could be funny. In a sarcastic kind of way, of course.”

“That's usually your department.”

Izaya removed his shoes and very childishly hugged his knees, feet on the seat, rocking back and forth.

“I try.”

“By the way if you peep at my underwear ever again I will stab you myself.”
Izaya put up his hands as if to protect himself.

“So sorry, it won't happen.”

“It better not.”

“What do you suppose will happen to Yamashita-san?”
The driver answered him.

“We'll handle her, don't worry Orihara-sama. You're safe now. Crazy bitches.”

“What do you mean by handle...?”

“Dump the bitch in Tokyo bay.”

Izaya sat upright on his seat, Namie spoke musingly.

“Such a primitive way of disposing of dead bodies.”

“Wait, there's no need to go that far! I mean, she tried to kill me but I do not approve of killing people like that. It's not as if she can do anything now.”

Namie crossed a leg.

“Let her go and she'll try it again. Obsessive types are like that.”

Something that Namie knew all too well.

“Yagiri-san is correct, crazy bitches don't know when to stop.”

Izaya felt very cold all of a sudden.

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“Shiki-san, I cannot accept this.”

Izaya stood in Shiki's office, unwavering. Shiki took a deliberately slow drag of a long cigarette. He knew defiance when he saw it.

“Why?”

“I'm the injured party here and I see no reason to kill Yamashita-san. Just scare her into compliance, I am sure you can do very easily. It's not self-defense to eliminate her like this and she has a family and loved ones that I am sure will-”

“Izaya, who do you think you belong to? I won't let a psycho walk free after endangering what is mine.”

Conflicting emotions accounted for the knot on his throat. Joy at being cherished, upset to be treated as property, an edge of fear keeping him alert. When it came to wielding authority Shiki would not compromise.

“I understand your point of view but I'd rather spare her.”

Shiki managed to move so swiftly that even Izaya's fast reflexes could not keep up with but still came across smooth and effortless as if he transitioned from behind the desk to Izaya's personal space without as much as actually moving at all. Izaya had a moment to think that this approach was so much more chilling than Izaya's own trademark feats of acrobatic lunacy.

Shiki simply lifted Izaya's shirt and traced a finger on skin that was still tender from being slashed. Izaya nearly flinched.

“This is not your decision to make, Orihara.”

The change in denomination was deliberate, calculated to hurt and very successful in that. Izaya took a deep breath.

“Before I am anything in relation to you or anyone else I am myself.”

It was a tangent but a revealing one.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that I can't stand still and just let someone die like this. It goes against my nature.”

“Isn't that what is said about god? That this and that contradicts god's nature. Thought you had dropped the god complex.”

Izaya's smile held no humor.

“I'm sure you think that 'god complex' is just a childish delusion and grandeur and you're right in that regard. That doesn't change the fact that I can't just toss aside core beliefs like this.”

Shiki considered this. Or rather he thought about Izaya's attitude.

“Unfortunately- or not- it is not in my nature to not let this kind of thing go unpunished.”

“I'm not saying to just let her walk scot-free. It's just that an eye for an eye and the world goes blind.”

Izaya felt very exposed just by his belly being uncovered.
“What do you propose?”

Izaya gained confidence from this.

“I want to talk to her first.”

“And that would accomplish what exactly?”

“In a way this is a very personal matter to me, I need to find out why she did it.”

Shiki cracked a smirk and dropped the shirt.

“You sound like she romanced you instead of trying to kill you.”

“It wasn't a hit on my head or anything impersonal like that, that's what I mean. And it had nothing to do with my past so I must own it.”

“I see. And what punishment would suit you?”

Izaya was calmer now. The conversation flowed in a direction that gave him reasons to be optimistic.

“Ship her overseas. She'd have to scramble to get back and realize her priorities. Not as a sex slave, just let her fend for herself for a bit.”

“Won't that be dangerous to her? Middle aged Japanese housewife cast at drift in say Thailand. There are many ways in which it can end in tragedy.”

The idea amused Shiki. Izaya nodded.

“I know. But that can't be helped. Like you said she tried to take a life and that's a serious offense. If there's no risk then it won't be proper punishment. It's the best way to make her learn the lesson.”

“You raise some good points. Unfortunately it's too late.”

Izaya blinked in dismay.

“Too late...?”

“She's been terminated.”

Shiki had led this entire meeting to this disclosure and he was extremely curious regarding Izaya's reaction. He wondered if there would be an outburst. For a while Izaya did nothing at all. Then he took a deep breath.

“It's not me. I am not responsible for this, Shiki-san and I want that to be very clear.”

“Point taken. It is not important to me either way.”

Izaya nodded abstractly.

“But it's very important to me. If you'll excuse me,”

“If it makes you feel any better you should keep in mind that your plan was probably crueler than just killing her and getting it over with.”

“Perhaps so. But it would be fairer. Shiki-san, did you ever watch the movie SAW?”
“I don't keep up with pop culture.”

“Heh...rightly so. In SAW a psycho- to keep up with the psycho theme here- forces people to escape from these very dreadful torture devices in order to survive. To live through the ordeal they have to get seriously injured more often than not and of course it's all taken to silly extremes that become sillier with each sequel but the point is, as crazy the psycho is and as horrible as his death contraptions may be there is always a chance of surviving. The parallel isn't perfect but that's how I feel as well.”

“You liked this woman?”

Izaya's smile was wan.

“I like all of my costumers, I couldn't be so good at being a host otherwise. It's not detached interest but it's not a deep commitment either. You could say that I like people in general and it pains me to see them die.”

“What a strange man you are.”

“I know but my principles are what they are even if they have no authority other than my making them up. Principles are what you stand by even when they only make your life more difficult.”

Shiki ruffled Izaya's hair.

“Running for mayor now?”

“Of course not, how would I aim that low? I'd run for president of all humanity!”

“Good luck with that.”

“Can I count on your vote, Shiki-san? My platform includes sushi for everyone. I'm sure you can't fault it.”

“I'm not sure the world would survive for long if you were calling the shots.”

Izaya gasped.

“Why, how rude. Here I am, trying to make a better planet. No good deed ever goes unpunished.”

“It really doesn't. We all got to deal with it.”

“Thanks, Shiki-san.”
Izaya decided to return to the host club as if nothing had happened. His faith in people in general was not about to be dampened. But he did not overwork and made sure to take strolls. Taking in the sun and mingling with the anonymous crowd buoyed him up.

And not too anonymous for he recognized a face from the thriving human tides.

“Hi there, Kadota!”

“Oh, you’re back?”

Izaya could not be sure if there was actual concern here or not. And he realized that it did not even matter either way.

“Now, I'm about to do something for which you may never forgive me, but I want you to know that I can't help myself. No hard feelings.”

And with this Izaya snatched the beanie and twirled around crazily in a half-dance routine.

“Give that back!”

“You've got hair! Behold, you've got hair, it's a miracle!”

Izaya giggled.

“Izaya! Stop being a troll for once!”

Kadota lounged to catch the beanie but Izaya was much faster and merely twirled some more.

“Now, now, if you want it back that badly...then I guess you'll have to come and get it!”
Izaya dashed away but not at his top speed. Just fast enough to force Kadota to give chase. Having the time of his life Izaya ran down narrow alleyways, his laughter bubbling up each time Kadota cursed or nearly ran into someone. Izaya relished in this opportunity for having pure and unadulterated fun. He had been through too much as of late and was in need of unwinding.

“Will...you...stop already!”

“Hey, no slowing down! Think of the beanie!”

“Izaya!”

“Shizuo is faster and he can scream my name much better, too! 'Izaya-KUN'!”

Kadota did not know how anyone could run so fast while cackling madly at the same time. He suspected that he was being led in erratic circles and so did a double take in order to catch Izaya by surprise. It did not work.

“Thinking on your legs, Kadota! Great but not good enough!”

“Cut it out already!”

“Make me~”

Just when Kadota felt he could not take a step further and that Izaya was long gone the beanie was applied to his head. Kadota spun around and sure enough there was Izaya, smiling widely.

“Orihara Izaya, safe!”

Against himself Kadota found himself smiling as well.
“How old are you again? Stealing my beanie like that.”

Izaya bought a can of juice from a vending machine and handed it to Kadota.

“Here, drink some.”

“Thanks- I see what you're doing here, don't think you can change the subject.”

“I'm amazed you do have hair, you know!”

“Yeah, right.”

“I've been dying to do this since forever!”

“Haha, very funny.”

“You think so too? Oh, sarcasm...it stings! The pain!”

“What was that all about? You can be so childish.”

Izaya landed on a bench with a flourish.

“I am the epitome of maturity, Kadota.”

“At least you're now using people's names.”

Izaya bounced, got himself a can of milk tea and bounced some more.

“I am a good boy.”
Kadota chuckled.

“That sounds so...wrong coming from you.”

“Does not. And why do you wear that thing? You'll end bald for real one of these days, you know.”

It was one of those things that annoyed Kadota to no end, the way Izaya opted for mock solemnity as he did now, nodding like some urban sage of the hipster kind. It had crossed Kadota's mind more than once that Izaya would be right at home in some artsy intellectual movie as the wildly intelligent and frustratingly cryptic character who called all the shots without ever revealing anything of any use to anyone while still looking very good. Izaya would not bend the spoon or point to its nonexistence as much as to turn it into a butterfly and watch it flutter away against a sky in flames as he quoted Shakespeare, Schopenhauer and Sartre in the same breath and probably for the sake of the alliteration alone.

“Because I like it. Why do you wear that jacket all the time?”

Izaya spun around a few times.

“Because it is comfy and stunning on me. Not to mention the fur is so soft, here, feel it.”

“You want me to touch the fur?”

“It won’t hurt you...come on, now...”

Izaya looked genuinely hurt at Kadota's reluctance. Tentatively, Kadota touched the furry brim.

“Fluffy.”

“Isn't it? I love it!”
“Either way you wear the same thing every day so I don't see why you're making a big deal out of my beanie.”

Izaya blinked. Then burst out laughing.

“Oh Kadota, Ka-do-ta! You don't think it's always the same jacket, do you? I have loads of them at home!”

“The same exact kind of jacket?”

“Yes! A closet full of them!”

Izaya was actually brought to tears in one of his weird fits of hilarity.

“You're such a weirdo.”

“Ah, sorry.”

“You may be getting weirder.”

Something Kadota did not believe possible. Izaya's giggles stopped suddenly. He shrugged desultorily.

“So what? Ever met someone worth knowing that was not a bit weird? I'm sure you agree, you hang out with quite a weird crowd yourself and you seem to have a world of fun.”

“They're not dangerous,”

“Don't lie.”

It was Kadota's turn to blink. Not a hint of comedy now.
“I'm not lying, the van gang isn't actually dangerous.”

“Is this when I go 'define "dangerous"'? We both know they're very much dangerous. Nothing necessarily wrong with that either but don’t sit there and try to spin it as evil Orihara Izaya and his plots to take over the world versus the ever so innocent otaku would not hurt a fly.”

“What's gotten into you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing. I'm just tired of being set up as the villain. This city has plenty of villains, even if I'm one of them I'm still one among many. Single me out because you hate me if you want but realize that do so at your own peril.”

Izaya did not precisely have an agenda when it came to Kadota, at least nothing in particular, but interacting with him roused quite a few issues he needed to get out of his chest.

“Okay, okay, I get your point. Don't get so riled.”

“Maybe I should get a van as well. Namie can drive, Shiki-san can sit at the back in a cool pimp chair, and together we'd go around starting fires and mooning folk on the streets of 'bukuro.”

Kadota had to laugh.

“I can imagine that all too well. Minus the mooning part.”

“Oh? I'd do that, it'd part be of my posse's signature move. Once you see the amazing Izaya ass you can die happy for never will you see anything as beautiful again.”

“I can't even tell if that's supposed to be a joke...”

“I'll never tell~”
Kadota suspected that it was mistake to be this at ease but he could not help it.

“So, what gives? Been hearing all sorts of rumors about you.”

“About my gorgeous ass? It’s even better than whatever you ever heard.”

“I’m not interested in your ass.”

“You’re the absolute minority, then.”

“Right..anyway, you disappeared for a while so I was wondering what happened to you.”

“Namie locked me in a dark basement and went all dominatrix on me. Quite a harrowing experience, let me tell you!”

Kadota sighed.

“You never tell me anything.”

“I got stabbed. Pretty severely, actually.”

“There you go again, being the funny guy.”

“It’s what happened. Ew, milk tea is way too sweet.”

Izaya took a sip and grimaced.

“Someone tried to kill you?”

“That’s the gist of it, yes.”
Kadota opened and closed his mouth a few times. Then scratched his head through the beanie.

“Who...? Could it be that Mikado,”

“It could have been. But wasn't. It does not matter anymore as you can see I am very much alive.”

Kadota caught himself. He had been thinking aloud and that would not do.

“It was just a matter of time but still...”

“A matter of time, huh. You may have a point there.”

Izaya bought a can of barley tea from the machine. Overhead the sky was dimming as the city came alive in its many gradients of neon.

“You're taking this very well.”

“It was a while ago, I've had time to mull it over.”

Kadota drank his juice in silence for a while.

“I don't know what to say, this is all so unexpected.”

“I'm just glad to be alive this fine afternoon.”

Izaya smiled genuinely.

“Yes, that's a good thing...I mean, I can't even imagine this city without you.”
It might not be much but it was more than Izaya expected.

“Thanks. I can't imagine this city without me as well.”

“Do you know who did it?”

“All taken care of. By the way, I just thought of a great way of putting your beanie to good use.”

“It's already being put to good use...”

“My kitty could do with a warm new bed.”

Kadota shook his head.

“So you've got a cat now?”

“A poor helpless kitten, formerly a stray, and in dire need of a nice bed if you could find it in your heart to donate your beanie.”

“Not going to happen, Izaya.”

Izaya batted his eyelashes and wrung his hands together.

“Think of the kitty! Here, that's a picture. Cute, isn't he? I am open to suggestions and he is still nameless.”

“You got a pet now?”

“That's what I'm saying. Isn't he adorable?”
Kadota hardly knew what to say. He stared at the small cat on the screen.

“I guess...I'm not much into pets myself.”

“Now is the chance of changing that. Want to have dinner at my place and meet the beast?”

“Are you sure that's okay?”

Izaya pretended to ponder it.

“Hmm...I don't see why not. Unless you see some grave conflict of interest here?”

Kadota did indeed see something to that effect but now that it was out in the open he could hardly mention it.

“Well, no but...”

“You may even get to meet the illusive Yagiri Namie. Oh yes, I know you're interested in her.”

To Kadota's great annoyance he blushed on the spot. Mostly because Izaya was off on purpose, another smokescreen.

“Not like that,”

“I can tell you something about her that you won't find out any other way.”

“What?”

Playing expertly to expectations Izaya leaned forward to whisper into Kadota's ear.
“‘White’."

“White...what?”

“That’s all I’m saying.”

“The line between ‘smart’ and ‘smartass’ may be a thin one but in your case there's no line, is there?”

Izaya giggled happily.

“Ahh, I bet you have an idea of what I mean.”

And it amused Izaya to no end to see how Kadota would react to Namie.

“I don’t think I can make it tonight, dinner at your place I mean.”

“How about I treat you to some ramen? There’s a nice little restaurant just around the corner.”

Kadota could not think up of any reason to turn down the invitation.

“Dig in! Food is on me, Kadota!”

Izaya followed his own advice and attacked a huge bowl of steaming ramen.

“I don’t remember you eating this much...”

“Oh? But it’s tasty. I need to get my strength back, too.”
Izaya's tastes in food had not changed completely, which made him think that it was ultimately a matter of genetics, but there was a certain broadening of his culinary horizons. He remained as much a gourmet as ever but very willing to experiment with less high brow cuisine.

“It's very good.”

Kadota was still amazed that he was here with Izaya without its even being awkward or at all tense. That Izaya could be friendly came as a revelation. Kadota spent as much time watching Izaya and wondering as he did eating. Because he was so focused while trying not to be too furtive or blatant he noticed right away when Izaya winced.

“Something wrong?”

Izaya smiled apologetically very much like a little kid.

“Slight headache.”

“Best be careful, you were just released from the hospital.”

“Aw, Kadota! It's almost like you care. Do you want that egg?”

“What, you want it?”

“Maybe...let's just say that if you were to offer it I would not say no.”

“Okay, here.”

“Ah, I shall surely remember your kindness for the rest of my life.”

“I thought you were paying for this...?”
“Sure am. Still, sharing is sharing. Neh?”

Kadota left the restaurant in a state of puzzlement. Izaya waved goodbye and then hurried to a drugstore. His headache was escalating. Time to knock it down with a few pills and calling it a night.

Once he got home Izaya settled on his favorite swivel chair and caught up on some reading. He had been studying memory related issues and the several pathologies concerned to its loss. His interest was far from merely academic but the more he delved into it the more fascinated he became. Memory seemed such a fugitive thing, stored a bit all over the brain like an actual ghost in the machine: impossible to contain in one precise location.

He was pondering a connection between human memory and its computer counterpart when he looked up from the screen. He could see his reflection on the massive window. And then the world came undone as it spoke to him.

“Hi there. Long time no see.”

Izaya rubbed his eyes as if that would erase what could only be a hallucination.

“What the hell,”

“I told you I'd be back, didn't I? You should pay attention to what I say.”

“You're not real.”

“Now that's just rude.”

“I'm just seeing things.”

Izaya closed his eyes and slowly counted, silently.

“-five, six, seven. What do you know, it's like I'm inside your mind.”
Izaya forced his eyes open because his own disembodied voice was too terrifying. Then again seeing himself smiling slyly chilled him to the core. He was dimly aware that his hands were clammy with cold sweat.

“Well get out, I don't want you here.”

“Hmm...how troublesome.”

“Just what I needed, the cliché scenario again of two versions of myself arguing.”

“I'm rather cross, you know. You nearly got me killed, which was bad, as you're getting all friendly with Shizu-chan, which may be worse.”

“Guy saved my life, you know.”

The reflection shrugged and proceeded to toy with a very sharp switchblade.

“I hope you've been having fun with this 'new and improved' approach of yours or dare I say, 'pathetically at a loss'. Either way it won't last.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Fear gripped him.

“You know what it means perfectly well. I can read your mind and you can read mine. Your time is up. Bye bee! For now.”

Izaya blinked and his reflection was just that. He took a few deep breaths and downed another couple of pills. His headache had just snowballed into a full blown migraine. He swung the chair, back to the window, eyes screwed shut. Breathing in, breathing out.

“Okay, that was crazy. As in, very crazy.”

He shivered. The sound of his voice in the very empty apartment had a ring of hollow hysteria. Izaya could not take it anymore. He dashed out for the solace of crowded streets and their million and one
noises of the nightlife city: a buffer for the stark fear within.

Izaya walked aimlessly. The more miles of concrete he covered the calmer he felt but it was a temporary peace. Izaya was fearful of solitude but he did not want to be around anyone in particular. He found himself shivering in corners and hurrying down narrow alleys.

Before he knew it night had receded and the sky was lifting itself from the darkness in a weak pale of watery light. Izaya climbed a fire escape to the top of a skyscraper and watched dawn break in its tones of gentle yellow mingled with vaguer colors coalescing into the soft blue of early morning. The sight of the sun, almost violently red bursting through cloud, almost stole his breath away. Sounds reached him, the sounds of the day set on its course of activity. The daily grind reasserting itself.

He only returned to ground level when morning had already fully chased away the shadows. But he was still wary of going back home. In the end Izaya returned because his kitty would be hungry. To his immense relief there was no sardonic reflection eerily mocking him.

He nearly hit the door against the cat as he opened it.

“Hey, you were waiting for me? Sorry I left you alone.”

The kitty yawned and tried to climb up Izaya's leg. Izaya scooped him up.

“There, there. What do you say to some milk? How about sushi? I'll order some, could do with some breakfast.”

Izaya ordered a generous portion of tuna sushi and smiled as the cat devoured slab after slab.

“Look at that, you love this. Good taste, kitty. Oh, I know! That's it! I'll call you Sushi! Sushi-chan it is! Yay for Sushi-chan!”

Izaya held the cat up in the air and spun around despite the very angry meowing.

“Heh, sorry. I got a bit carried away.”
His cell phone rang.

“Orihara speaking. Kasuka-san? How odd of you to call. Heh, yes it is very early but I was already up. What can I do for you this fine morning. Alright. I'll stay put, then.”

Kasuka had been characteristically brief. As a result Izaya was left to wonder just how he should treat this appointment. He considered being professional about it since the possibility of being hired as an informant, by Kasuka of all people, filled him with excitement mingled with curiosity. On the other hand he was not entirely sure he could brush off their acquaintance as just that or to take a friendly approach.

He did not have much time to think it over for Kasuka arrived within half an hour and went straight to the point.

“Good morning. I want to take pictures of your cat to put on my blog. Since he's such a pretty cat. Would that be alright with you?”

Izaya could not help being disappointed. And yet he had never heard Kasuka being this talkative.

“Of course. Always like it when people appreciate him, that would be so cool. Kasuka-san, do you write the blog yourself?”

Kasuka produced a nifty digital camera.

“Yes.”

Izaya was afraid of having offended him. Plenty of celebrities hired people just to update blogs and the like but it could be construed as laziness.

“I see. I'm sure it's very popular.”
“I bet you never read it, Orihara-san.”

Izaya laughed.

“I'm afraid you got me there. Then again I'm hardly the intended demographic. Now my sisters, they swear by it—”

“You're not a fan. But do you think I'm cute? Hello, kitty. How are you.”

In all seriousness Kasuka shook Sushi’s paw. Izaya opened and closed his mouth rapidly. The cat settled on Kasuka's lap.

“Like I said, I'm not the intended demographic but I'm not blind either. You're most definitely cute.”

Izaya wondered how Kasuka would react if he knew that at the host club the two of them were compared regularly. Odds are Kasuka would not react at all. That was Kasuka's charm.

“You're cute yourself. Picture time.”

For a second Izaya was not sure just who Kasuka wanted to photograph- him or the kitty- then Kasuka placed Sushi on the sofa and aimed the camera.

“Kitty is no longer nameless. I named him 'Sushi' because he loves the stuff.”

“Good name. Sushi is good, too.”

“Do you think he'll come to recognize the name?”

Kasuka busied himself soothing Sushi.
“Yes. But probably ignore it. That's the way cats are.”

Izaya chuckled.

“I got that impression as well.”

Sushi nestled against Izaya, meowing loudly. It was then that the floor beneath them began to sway very gently. Izaya nearly bolted, the creaky sound that accompanied the motion of the walls sending a rush of panic up his spine.

“Earthquake.”

And a minor one at that. Izaya smiled weakly as the apartment stopped rocking.

“Earthquake, right. That's a first for me.”

“Didn't you feel the big one last year?”

Izaya had no idea. Nor did he know how to evade or answer the question. That Kasuka did not seem particularly interested did not change the fact that Izaya was completely paralyzed for a split second. Pathetically at a loss.

“That was a very big one, wasn't it. Especially with the whole nuclear plant crisis. I don't even want to consider what a disaster a meltdown would be.”

But Izaya wanted to discuss it, in detail if possible. He desperately needed to shift topics away from his personal experience. Apocalyptic visions served the purpose.

“Yes. One of the biggest earthquakes in recorded history. Didn't you feel it?”

Izaya petted the already ever so relaxed cat, his mind spinning for purchase. The more Kasuka kept his poker face the greater the strain to Izaya's nerves. It was not just Kasuka's quiet insistence, it was the looming threat of the other Izaya.
He had no other choice but to seek refuge in audacity.

“I actually slept through it, believe it or not. This place is built to endure very rough quakes. I was sleeping at the time and did not even wake up.”

“And before that? Earthquakes happen all the time.”

Izaya swallowed. He wished Kasuka were dim as idol actors were supposed to be but no such luck.

“I meant it was the first time I've felt this place shake that much. We must be very close to the epicenter.”

It was of course too late to change gears but Izaya could not back down now. It occurred to him that given ample time and planning anyone could be a mastermind but when forced to react in real time everything changed. It came down not only to intelligence but instinct.

“Cats can feel earthquakes ahead of time.”

“Now that you mention it Sushi here reacted right away.”

“Yes. It's a feline sixth sense.”

“Fascinating, cats are really something else. And where are my manners, can I offer you something to drink? Tea?”

“Barley.”

Izaya fixed it and poured himself a cup as well.

“By the way, Kasuka-san. Have you ever had to deal with stalkers?”
Kasuka nodded, took a sip.

“Good tea. My agent handles the stalkers.”

“It must be very stressful.”

“Stalkers are sad people. No life of their own.”

Izaya smiled bemusedly. He had never quite seen it in that light but he supposed Kasuka had a point.

“Unlike cats? They seem pretty happy just being themselves.”

“Very self-reliant.”

“Heh, true.”

“I got you this.”

Kasuka handed him a book.

“All You Need to Know About Cats', thanks a bunch! I never had a pet before so I'm still learning the ropes. Do you suppose Sushi is going to grow?”

Kasuka studied the cat anew and broke into a brilliant smile.

“No, he's a small cat.”

“And with your blog he can now become famous. Sort of like LongCat, Sushi can be SmallCat.”
“Long cat is long.”

Izaya laughed and bounced on the sofa.

“Yes! Kasuka-san, you are the ultimate cat person, figures you even know about LongCat. But who would have guessed that Shizuo has a soft spot for kitties?”

“It's what they call 'gap <i>moe</i>.'”

“Oh, I see. That makes perfect sense, in a way.”

“How do you feel about my brother?”

Again Izaya was on shaky ground. He held the cup with both hands.

“I don't know, actually.”

Kasuka nodded.

“The past is the past, Orihara-san.”

With this borderline Zen pronouncement Kasuka got up.

“Your point being that there is always the future to look forward to?”

“Yes.”

“I don't know about that. Considering all the bad blood between Shizuo and I.”
“True. But if you think about it, that you are getting along now despite everything must mean something.”

“Do tell.”

“You ought to find out yourself. Goodbye, Sushi.”

“Before you go, can I take a picture of you for my sisters?”

“No problem.”

Kasuka struck a sparkly, beautifully radiant smile. Izaya put down his cell phone.

“You're a great actor. But I'd rather capture the real Kasuka-san. Without the camera appeal.”

“Fans aren't interested in that.”

“You can never know. But perhaps it is you who does not want to share your real self with the world?”

Kasuka nodded.

“You're smart.”

“I try.”

“I give the fans what the fans want. And I remain who I am.”

Izaya considered this. Quite a life philosophy and one that he could understand if not
adopt himself. It was part of Izaya's genius to tackle life from other people's perspective. How else can one appreciate humanity in its wide diversity.

“You're a very private person, I see. In a way your choice in career is the perfect way of keeping to yourself since you are not expected to display your true personality. I admit I used to think it was something of a contradiction but it makes perfect sense.”

“Yes.”

Izaya picked up Sushi as he too rose to his feet.

“But I think you shouldn't go as far as say that your fans have no interest in who you really are. That might not be the point here, though. But would you not pose as I take a picture of yours for myself? Since I am not a fan.”

“Interested in people's real self?”

“Of course.”

“But there's more to it?”

Izaya giggled.

“Ah, isn't there always? You see, there are many ways of figuring out human beings. As much a riddle as they appear. The masks that people choose are in themselves telling.”

Kasuka stared at Izaya long enough to make anyone else uncomfortable.

“Take the picture.”
Izaya did so.
“Is something wrong?”

“Sorry, I was spacing out a bit.”

Izaya was in fact staring at the panoramic window, not so much at the spectacle of the nighttime city aglitter as at the pale reflection that stared back with a look of concentration that bordered on solipsism. As of late he felt an almost obsessive need to reclaim his image as his own to the exclusion of anyone else- the other Orihara Izaya included.

“Doesn’t look that way to me.”

He smiled wanly. Namie would not be fooled this easily.

“I’m just a bit tired.”

“Then get some rest. It’s getting late anyway.”

A glance at the computer told Izaya that it was pushing on 1 AM.

“Sorry for keeping you this late.”

“I had a few things to finish anyway.”

Izaya swiveled until he was facing her directly and away from the window.

“No matter how much I pay you, you’re worth every single yen and then some. I didn’t mean to imply- that came out wrong.”

Namie chuckled and poured water into a kettle. From where he sat he could see her front behind, long hair still vaguely curly falling over her very straight back. He found it both incredibly reassuring and strangely off to see her so effortless move through the routines of domesticity in his own home. It made him feel as if he belonged in the vast apartment formerly inhabited by a ghost.

“I got what you meant. And thanks. How about barley?”

“Fine with me. Say, Namie-san... do you remember the very big quake last year?”

She looked at him over a shoulder.

“It’s not something easily forgotten.”

“Ah, now that is debatable. Case in question: I, me, myself, Orihara Izaya.”

“Barring that, of course. Why do you ask?”

Having got to this point Izaya now hesitated. He spun slowly without quite going round.

“Do you remember how I reacted?”

She brought over the tea and poured two cups, making sure she performed this ritual complete with offering him his cup before answering.

“You were rather excited. Something to the effect of ‘People show their truest selves when calamity
strikes” and 'but it can be argued that when something this catastrophic happens humans are unable to emotionally process anything properly and just go on automatic. Which theory is correct? Are both wrong? How exciting to be able to witness all this!.'"

Izaya had yet to pick up his cup so he did not drop it. He did wince and close his eyes briefly.

“That's- a horrible thing to say.”

“Maybe it was a joke, I often can't tell the difference-”

“That doesn't change anything!”

Close to shouting.

“If it changes anything you then donated a lot of money to relief aid funds.”

Izaya blinked.

“I did?”

“You did.”

“Why on Earth would I do that...? I mean, it's obviously the right thing to do but why would I, of all people...”

Izaya was in a daze of confusion. It amused Namie, much more than she would ever let show.

“I thought it odd too. According to you, 'when it's something between humans I must remain impartial out of principle. But if it is man versus nature I side with man all the way. That too is out of principle.'”

Izaya had been leaning forward on his wheeled seat in such a way that Namie wondered how he simply did not fall or have the chair slide from under him. He now leaned back suddenly, sending the chair rolling across the vast apartment.

“I see! That makes sense. Yes, it makes perfect sense. But I must say, this ability of yours for quoting me word for word is very impressive. Bordering on eerie, even.”

“Every now and then you'll say something that catches my attention, that's all. For the most part I feel you're just rambling at length about the most random of obscure topics.”

Izaya clapped and giggled.

“Never one to flatter, Namie-san! I appreciate it. I really do. And how did you respond to my amazing piece of wisdom?”

“Humans are part of nature as well, Orihara.”

She almost flinched, which was extremely rare, as Izaya wheeled himself back to her with such speed that the momentum nearly carried him into her lap.

“Quoting yourself! Now that's a whole new level, isn't it? True, technically speaking humans are very much part of nature as are all animals. But what makes them special.”

“-is when they deviate from the natural order-”
“How did you know- oh, I see. I said the exact same thing back then. That is...”

Quite disturbing. Izaya attempted a weak smile. As if reading the mood Sushi jumped on his lap and proceeded to purr most contently.

“You go on about humanity but it seems you're more popular with felines.”

“Isn't that the truth! But don't let the fluffiness fool you. Sushi is a ferocious beast. Check out these claws!”

“Yes, I am shuddering in fear already.”

Izaya held the cat to best showcase the legendary claws. He now put Sushi down and mused.

“How come you can be funny without even trying? It's the complete lack of emotion with which you deliver your ever so caustic lines!”

Namie had to smile.

“Don't tell me you're jealous.”

Izaya sat cross-legged, causing Sushi to shift.

“I totally am.”

Namie shook her head. Working for Izaya could be very aggravating but she did not mind looking after him. At least not presently.

Cat tucked under his arm, Izaya tiptoed his way toward the park, pausing at the entrance.

“Now Sushi, we must be on our guard. This is the wild and there are plenty of wild animals around but you don't have to worry because I'm here. Now, let's proceed with caution.”

Izaya looked right and left as if intent of detecting deadly predators.

“The wild? It's a park in Tokyo.”

Caught completely by surprise Izaya jumped and spun around almost at the same time.

“Will you not sneak up on people like that!”

Shizuo shrugged.

“Didn't mean to sneak. You were just standing there.”

Izaya had to of course smooth over this mishap of showing such a crack in his image of savvy grace. And there was also the residue of blind fear still present at the fringes of his awareness.

“How can such a big man like you manage to sneak up on people? It boggles the mind.”

“What you doing here?”
It annoyed Izaya to no end to have someone change the topic with complete disregard for his social rhetoric. He walked to the middle bench around a big tree, Shizuo followed.

“I thought I'd let Sushi catch some air. Can't be healthy being cooped up at home all the time.”

“That's not a dog, it's a cat.”

“Which is why I picked this park. What are you doing here?”

Shizuo looked around. There were several cats about, lounging on the benches as if they owned them which for all practical purposes they did, playing with the locals, trying to catch big green beetles, darting across the park with such speed that were but a blur.

“I came to see the cats.”

“Are you for real?”

“Yeah. There's a lot of them there. Thought I might see Hiro-kun today.”

Izaya glanced at Shizuo in a furtive manner that hardly befitted the situation.

“Hiro-kun? And who's that?”

Shizuo pointed.

“That's him.”

A big stocky cat appeared from a bush. Its bushy short tail swished as he emerged from the leafy cover. Izaya lifted an eyebrow.

“That's Hiro-kun?”

“Yeah.”

Izaya cradled Sushi lest he grew afraid of the ponderous cat slowly approaching.

“What, you named him?”

“Not me. Someone else did. Here.”

Shizuo produced a biscuit from his vest and sure enough Hiro gobbled it up. Izaya was about to say something sarcastic as he was wont but something stopped him. Perhaps it was Shizuo's smile. Izaya felt as if he had walked into a scene not meant for him. He had always assumed that all Shizuo's diatribes about peace were nothing but violent hypocrisy at its best but right now Shizuo emanated an aura of undisturbed tranquil joy. It softened him as light would.

“And how did you come to meet Hiro-kun here?”

Izaya was almost sorry for interrupting the silence.

“The cats here are real friendly. I'd heard about that so I decided to visit this place. I sat here and waited. After a while Hiro-kun showed up and joined me. That's pretty much it.”

“So you got into the habit of visiting him?”

Shizuo nodded.
“Yeah. And the other cats. But Hiro-kun is my favorite.”

Izaya studied the cat. Undefinable fur color. Coarse coating. Intelligent eyes glittering with what he could swear was beligerance.

“Not exactly the nicest looking fellow, is he?”

For a while Shizuo did not answer. Abstractedly, he petted Hiro who did not purr.

“Yeah, I guess not. He's not what you'd call 'cute'. So large and not too friendly looking.”

Again Izaya had a witty retort that he aborted at the last moment. And he was glad he did so.

“Actually, that depends on how you look at it.”

“Huh?”

Shizuo had been looking at the cat but he now faced Izaya. Much to Izaya's pleasure.

“There is this idea that 'cute' is all about being small, delicate, sweet and fragile but there's something to be said about being powerful and handsome. I bet Hiro-kun excels at being a strong cat in a tough city. That's a kind of 'cute', too.”

“You think?”

“I do. Besides, Hiro-kun must be a smart cat. I say so because he is a very large fellow and yet has managed to find food to not only stay alive as to thrive. Also, unlike these other cats he isn't too trusty. That goes to show he trusts his God given cat-instincts as he should.”

Izaya nodded and folded his arms in a sage attitude. Shizuo smiled.

“God given cat-instincts? How do you come up with those things?”

“Pure genius, of course. Now, keep Hiro-kun from clawing my poor Sushi to tatters, will you?”

“He's tame. Won't fight other cats unless he has to.”

“Then all's well. For Sushi fights no one.”

“Sushi, huh...what kind of a name is that?”

“Didn't your brother tell you about it? Sushi likes sushi, therefore, Sushi it is.”

Shizuo twirled a cigarette, thoughtfully.

“Haven't talked to him.”

“Thanks to Kasuka-san Sushi is an overnight internet celebrity! See, see! I know Kasuka-san is very popular but I'm sure it's also due to Sushi's charm.”

Izaya showed him Kasuka's blog on his smartphone.

“The blog thing, huh. Haven't read it yet.”

“Do you normally read it?”

“Every now and then. Since it's Kasuka writing.”
“I used to think that Idols wouldn’t exactly be easy to get along with but Kasuka-san proved me wrong.”

“Dunno if most people find him all that easy to get along.”

This surprised Izaya considerably.

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s real honest. Not everyone likes that.”

“Ah. Good point.”

“So you feed sushi to your cat?”

Sounding bemused.

“Hey, not my fault he has good taste. And it makes perfect sense to name him after something he likes. A bit like you. You like peace and quiet, right? Hence your name: Heiwajima Shizuo.”

Shizuo's hand paused on the greyish brown fur.

“I like peace and quiet, yes.”

“But you get precious little of it as it is.”

A bout of guilt nearly choked Izaya.

“Can't complain.”

“Right. This is a very nice place, I must say.”

“Yeah. The locals befriended the cats so they're real tame.”

Izaya glanced at the homeless crowd.

“The locals or the cats?”

“Just 'cuz they live on the street doesn't mean they're bad people, you know.”

Izaya bit his lower lip. He felt scolded and rightly so.

“Sorry. I didn't mean it that way.”

“Yeah.”

Izaya sighed.

“Human society really is unfair, isn't it? You can see the Sunshine from here. And yet at a stone's throw there are people without a roof over their heads. Compassion only goes so far with our species.”

“Yeah. But I bet the guys living here like it.”

“That reminds me of this book, the Box Man. It's about a man who decides to abandon everything so that he can roam the streets of Tokyo wearing a card box over his head.”
“Sounds crazy. Like something you'd see around these parts.”

“Heh, so true.”

A calico cat jumped to one of the middle branches of the tree behind them. Its meows of terror caused Izaya a short but very intense moment of fear.

“It's stuck?”

“That happens every now and then.”

Shizuo was already standing on tiptoe but try as he might he could not quite reach.

“Poor fellow.”

“Give me a hand here, Izaya.”

Izaya hesitated. Then he removed his shoes.

“Stand still now, okay?”

“Sure but hurry, the cat is real scared.”

Izaya climbed on Shizuo's back very much cat-like: cautiously and with great poise. With that said Izaya was less than sure than about this. As he stood on Shizuo's shoulders he could not help imagining a cat all-claws about to tear his eyes out. If Shizuo had not taken for granted that Izaya would offer his help in this rescue mission Izaya would probably not be in this situation now.

Underneath him Shizuo was very much like an unshakable foundation.

“It's not going to attack me, right?”

“Nah. Maybe claw a bit.”

“Now that's not very reassuring.”

“Cover up your hands with your sleeves or something.”

“Okay...here goes nothing.”

As it turned out Izaya managed to extract the frightened cat without much ado. Said cat then sprawled next to him on the bench while Sushi reclaimed his rightful spot on his lap.

“Funny thing, cats can climb to the highest places but every now and then they can't climb down.”

“Maybe funny for you but it's not funny for them, I assure you.”

Izaya was somewhat dampened. He did not mean to come across as sarcastic and it depressed him that his intentions could be so misconstrued. Not so much because Shizuo was biased as Izaya had a natural tendency for the sardonic. He sighed.

“What's that?”

Shizuo was feeding Hiro-kun some pills.

“Medicine. Anti-ticks and stuff like that.”
The calico nudged Izaya's hand.

"You could star in your own TV show, 'the cat whisperer'. There's a cat cafe just around the corner, have you checked it out?"

"I'm not into that kind of thing. Those cats don't look real anyway and they get fed up with all those people petting and picking them up."

Izaya's thoughts wandered. Being on display behind glass windows for the enjoyment of clients was very much like working at the host club. In some ways the parallel was so perfect that it gave him pause.

"They're real cats just like any other cats."

"I guess. But they look fake to me. I like these guys better."

Izaya could not quite read Shizuo's smile.

"Would you like to take Hiro-kun home?"

"Dunno. Not too sure he'd like that. Too used to his freedom."

Shizuo gave the kittens a final pat and made as if to leave.

"Are you going already?"

"Yeah, gotta get back."

"I should be heading back myself."

Izaya secured Sushi under his arm and before he knew it he was walking side by side with Shizuo. He was musing over this and considering distancing himself for Ikebukuro was full of eyes when he nearly bumped into a couple.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

"Izaya!"

He blinked at these unknown people who apparently were not strangers. That his network of acquaintances, victims and enemies was so large (and so entangled that these categories could not fail to overlap) made it nothing short of impossible to keep up with everyone he was supposed to know. Izaya tried a neutral smile.

"I'm not working now but feel free to contact me sometime at night and I'll be glad to look into whatever needs looking into."

"What are you talking about? Is that any way of talking to your parents?"

Izaya opened his mouth to laugh it off and scramble to recover but nothing at all occurred to him. He felt vaguely sick.

Just when he was getting the hang of balancing the here and now with the void left by his empty memory, his fragile construction of security collapsed this easily. Pathetically at a loss.

"-never show up at home,"
“Not that's anything new but still,”

Blurred words in the background. Izaya was too aware that the longer he just stood here in dumb silence the harder it would be fumble for a semblance of normality but the ability to process speech had imploded on him. It was either a corollary of his inability to understand what was being said around him or the other way around, ultimately it did not matter.

A shadow interposed itself between him and the barrage of words.

“Tch, your sense of humor is real bad.”

Izaya jolted. Shizuo's voice cut through the panic about to engulf Izaya.

“Ah, yes, that's me alright- always unfunny.”

It was the best Izaya could accomplish as far as saving face. Yet his parents smiled even as they shook their heads as if they fully expected this.

“Honestly, when will you grow up? No wonder Mairu and Kururi are so wild, with a big brother like that.”

Izaya's very brittle smile was causing him physical pain to keep up. Shizuo blended in with the crowd before the attention shifted to him. Izaya glanced at his watch.

“Look at the time! I'm terribly sorry but I am very busy and must be getting back. Bye bye!”

His tone oscillated between respectful and informal friendliness, suspecting that neither approach quite fit. He made Sushi wave a furry paw in a gesture of goodbye before disappearing around the corner.

Izaya returned to his apartment only to slump on his swivel chair he shivered, pace up and down a bit and then settle on the chair. He only noticed his hands were slightly shaking when he looked down at them.

His feelings were sinking under heavy oppression. Even if he had managed to somewhat react to the fiasco with his parents (with Shizuo's help, even) the jarring knowledge that he had failed to recommit them to memory remained. Izaya had merely glanced at a picture as Namie informed him about the basic facts of the life he had forgotten. Since information management was all about priorities Izaya had barely taken parents into consideration for they clearly were of no importance.

Only now did it become painful: the emptiness of his family life widened about him as the hallmark of all his failures. He felt as if his very his very qualification to live his own life was questioned. And as if to confirm this he felt the echo of laughter somewhere in a hollow place inside his mind.

A soft paw touching him brought him back to the here and now.

“Ah, Sushi must be hungry. Now where did I place the cat food,”

He froze in the act of getting up as he caught his reflection on the window.

“Now that didn't go too well, did it?”

“I told you already to get out.”

“Hmm...there's really no need to mope. It's not as if your parents care much for you one way or another. The problem is of course Shizu-chan. He isn't as stupid as he seems. I bet he knows
something's up. Oh well, you're ever so self-reliant so I am sure you can handle this.”

“You're not real.”

“Then I can't get out, now can I? I'm afraid you lack consistency.”

The reflection sighed as if mildly disappointed.

“Do you know the reason behind my amnesia?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don't. What do you think?”

“You have got to tell me!”

“Why? I thought you had decided to live as you are now. If so, what does it matter to you?”

“Of course it matters!”

“Why does it matter, then?”

Izaya tried to rally his frustration into powerful anger but it knew such emotional outbursts would do nothing but undermine him even further.

“I want to know.”

“Which is ever so laudable. You should work with me on this. It's a win win situation.”

“You don't exist, you're just a psychological phenomenon resulting from stress. You're not an actual person.”

Izaya was too caught up to even notice the front door opening and Namie walking into the apartment.

“Who were you talking to?”

Izaya spun around as if to block the apparition on the glass. As if it was not a personal haunting that only Izaya could see by definition.

“No one, I was just talking to myself.”

And ironically enough it was not a lie either. With anyone else Namie would suspect something was amiss but Izaya voicing his inner dialogue with little regard for others was not particularly odd. She suspected Izaya talked aloud because he was enamored with his own voice.

“You do that a lot.”

“Right, right. That's just me.”

Relief flooded him but it was tainted by disappointment. Voicing his concern was impossible but if Namie could detect it despite of him then Izaya had a chance of telling. He felt a sudden desperate need to tell her everything but that very same despair entrapped him in silence.

Meanwhile Namie went about her routine, stopping to pet Sushi on her way to watering the plants.

“How much do you even know about her? About Yagiri Namie.”

Fortunately Namie could not see him as he stood frozen in horror. He did not expect the ghost of
Orihara Izaya to remain in the presence of someone else. It belonged so much to him in a disturbingly intimate way that reality seemed to shatter when it coexisted with others.

And as ever the reflection had much to say.

"First of all, she doesn't like you at all. And before you go 'but this is the new and improved Izaya! Now full of good will toward everyone and their pets, literally!' let me remind you that if you go ahead and tell her about me she'll lock you away in a padded cell. Try it if you don't believe me. Just go, 'Namie-san, I keep seeing my old self and we talk about this and that. But I'm really not insane, not at all! Let's go roast marshmallows together and later watch some feel good movies like the best friends we are.'"

Izaya took a step back. He knew it would come to this but it still came as a shock- to see the reflection step away from the window and calmly approach until it stood at arms' length.

"Izaya, do you want tea? Green?"

Somehow Izaya managed to reply.

"Green is fine, thanks."

"You've been thinking many things as of late. To what extent are you responsible for what I did, what can you do to make amends, who should you be. It's all very noble and praise worthy. Congratulations on that."

"Namie-san, why don't you take the day off."

"But I just got here."

"You've been working far too much. I'm a bit tired myself, I should have a nap or something."

"Now that you mention it you don't look too good. You do that, some sleep will do you good."

Izaya smiled weakly.

"Sure. Why don't you take Seiji-kun somewhere?"

"That sounds like a good idea."

As soon as she was gone he regretted sending her away. Being all alone with this warped half-shadow sent shivers down his spine.

"Are you sure you want to show her how weak you are? Namie will never stay by the side of someone who can't assure her a safe position for herself."

"Shut up. So what if I don't know everything about her about Shiki-san and the rest- that doesn't mean I can't like them. Besides, no one can never know everything about a person."

The other Izaya burst out laughing.

"But of course you can know! How else can you pull strings on them? Knowledge, knowledge. It's all about knowledge. Rounded knowledge. Disconnected pieces, blind spots, fragmented information- that's what you are now."

Izaya balled his hands into fists. Maybe this was insanity, the slope becoming so slippery that lashing out against an hallucination was the natural reaction.
“Fine. If you know everything then tell me why the hell things turned out this way. Why did I lose my memory?”

“My, my, you're so unfair. You demand me to hand you all you want to know on a platter and offer nothing in return. Don't I need a reason?”

“You don't exist.”

“Far too late for that. If there is something you must never forget- no pun intended- is that not all options are available. Ignoring me is an option you can't realistically afford to indulge in.”

The menace might be obvious but so was the humor underlying it.

“You sure can talk but what more can you do? Other than try and mess up with my mind.”

The other Izaya blinked as if genuinely surprised.

“What more can do? What more could I possibly want to do?”

Before Izaya could think up a reply there was no one to reply to. Izaya became aware of cold sweat trickling down his spine. He took a deep breath and nearly collapsed. With the tension suddenly absent it was all he could do not to let his wobbly legs give way. Izaya sank into one of the plush black sofas.

Some untold time later- it could not have been than half an hour judging by the progress of shadow across the room- Izaya ran a bath. The warm water lolled him with a sense of physical well-being that did not quite reach his mind.

Tendrils of steam floating up, blurring the world. He blew bubbles in the water and let underwater disjointed noises cover up the surface of his thoughts. Izaya closed his eyes shut and pictured up the shape of his body in imperfect darkness.

From his slender limbs, narrow chest, to the delicate balance of his features: Izaya needed to reclaim all of it as his property, as his very own unalienable property. By default his body could only belong to him.

Meowing cut through his concentration. Izaya smiled warmly as Sushi tried to put furry paws on the bathtub.

“Hey, sorry I forgot to feed you. Poor kitty.”

Izaya dried himself rapidly and with nothing but a towel around his waist hurried to the kitchen where he served Sushi a bowl of cat food. The security system beeped and right away a screen came to life.

Izaya had a brief but intense moment of panic. Then he realized it was just someone speaking into the intercom.

“Orihara Izaya-san? You don't know me, but a friend of mine told me you were good at this kind of thing. I need you to find someone.”

Izaya contemplated. Hand on his hip, head tilted to one side, droplets of water still sliding down his bare skin. More than anything Izaya was the image of seduction and yet nothing could be further from him presently. He was in fact bringing his mental acuity to decide what to do.
The man was haggard, middle aged, clearly jumpy. Not someone Izaya normally came across with and here was the crux of the matter. He had yet to cross paths with all sorts of people despite being surrounded by the human tides that was Tokyo. But most of them were nothing but faceless background.

This settled it. Izaya needed to make a stand so that he could be on equal footing next time he encountered his other self, and for that mingling with humanity was of the utmost importance. His decision was only half rational for this was a reasoning colored by gut feeling as much as anything else. But given how big a part instinct played in all this- a kind of intellectual instinct- he was willing to trust it to see him through.

Ultimately he felt that this was his best way of fighting back and fight back he would.

“Orihara Izaya here. Give me a couple of minutes.”

In less than a couple of minutes Izaya had changed into his typical black on black outfit and sat on his equally black sofa in front of the nervous prospective client.

“Now, tell me what I can do for you.”

“It’s my daughter, you see.”

Unshaven and having a hard time keeping still. Izaya would have attributed it to drugs but this seemed too much of a straight shooter for that. Probably just your average Joe whose normal and uneventful life suddenly took a wrong turn and sent him into a downward spiral. Izaya sympathized.

“Let me offer you a cup of tea.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Izaya let him drink it in silence for a while.

“I understand there is some problem with your daughter, then?”

The man shook his head. For a split second Izaya almost burst out laughing as he considered the reaction had he opened the door still mostly in the nude. Then again there might not be much of a reaction considering how absent this fellow seemed. Izaya's interest surpassed his pity.

“She disappeared. I just can’t find her anywhere- that’s why I turned to you. I can pay,”

“Let us discuss fees later. What age bracket are we talking about?”

“Sixteen.”

“That’s quite a tricky age, isn’t it? Particularly for a girl.”

“Can you find her?”

Normally Izaya would have been taken aback by the desperate ring to this plea. But his sharp knack for analysis was taking precedence in how Izaya viewed things. A tingling excitement kept him focused.

“That’s not the question. The question is does she want to be found.”

“What do you mean?”
Izaya crossed a leg over the other.

“This is hardly a missing child's case. It follows that all resources be mobilized when children go missing but teenagers often disappear of their own volition. In other words, they'd rather not be found.”

The man squirmed uncomfortably.

“She wouldn't run away from home...”

“Perhaps not. Then again, who can tell for sure?”

“Will you look for her?”

Izaya did not miss that his question went unanswered and thus proving his point.

“I can find her, in all likelihood. However that is all I can do: provide a location. Whether that will solve your problem is hardly certain.”

“Please find my daughter, Orihara-san.”

Izaya spent the next half hour getting the gist of it. He decided to accept the case pro bono.

“I'll keep in touch.”

His brand new client was on his way out but he stopped on the threshold.

“One more thing, if I could just ask one more thing...?”

“By all means, do ask.”

“Who is the strongest in Ikebukuro? I heard that you knew.”

“Hmm...it depends on what kind of strength you speak of.”

“Kind of strength?”

“Yes. If you say, consider physical strength then I am obviously excluded from the contest by default. But if I was entirely without strength you would not have enlisted my aid. It follows that I possess some strength. You understand it already, don't you? The true strength, the kind that matters, in that respect I excel.”

More haggard than ever the man stumbled out of the apartment.
“-due to the extreme weather schools have been closed. Citizens are warned to keep indoors as much as possible and to-”

Izaya glanced at the television. Night was falling just outside the window and on the other side the very air seemed to grow sharper in the incoming cold. The heating was on so he was comfortable-sitting on his favorite swivel chair, petting Sushi.

Finding the missing teen had been so easy that Izaya felt a bit disappointed. He refrained from exploiting the situation by leaving the reunion between father and daughter to the two of them. Technically he could have justified it to himself that watching the event from the shadows was not that great a breach in privacy, that his being contracted as an informant allowed him such liberties but Izaya was very careful not to overstep moral boundaries.

It was not so much a matter of striving to do the right thing as the almost paranoid need to avoid becoming too much like his other self.

The wind howled against the graying sky. If they were issuing special weather reports then the streets must be in the grip of deadly cold. Izaya shifted on his seat that seemed less comfortable as he stared at the heavy accumulation of leaden clouds. To him they looked about to smash into the city and raze it flat.

Izaya shivered, causing Sushi to jump from his lap. The sudden movement snapped him from his reveries. Izaya wrapped himself in a warm coat, added a scarf and went as far as putting on gloves.

“Hiro-kun? Oy, Hiro-kun? How about to show up?”

Izaya moved about the empty park to keep his legs from growing numb as much as to find the cursed cat. This was a bad idea, he should never have left the cozy haven of his very comfortable apartment instead of being here braving the elements, but now that he was here he could not back down.

“Hiro-kun? Hiro-san! Hiro-sama!”
“Don't cats care for honorifics.”

Izaya nearly lost as he balance as he turned around a bit too suddenly.

“Will you stop doing that! Sneaking up on me, are you trying to kill me?!”

Shizuo looked around.

“Guess they evacuated the local homeless crowd. Most kittens are being sheltered by the folk around here but not Hiro-kun.”

Izaya humphed.

“Well, if you think I came all the way from Shinjuku in this freezing weather to find some lame ass cat I'll have you know that I just happened to have some business around here. As you know I often work in Ikebukuro- what's so funny?”

Shizuo did not bother wiping away the smile.

“Nothing, it's just that I didn't say anything like that.”

“Anyway, I'm here now so let's just get this blasted feline before we both freeze to death.”

Shizuo was already extracting said feline from under a thorny bush.

“There he is. Gonna take him home for the night. Thanks for helping.”

“I'm a helpful person.”

Izaya shifted from foot to foot in an attempt to generate some warmth. Shizuo tucked the cat under his arm.
“Sure looks like it. Well, I'll get Hiro-kun home. See you.”

Before Shizuo could leave Izaya grabbed his sleeve and made as if to drag him in the opposite direction.

“This way, we're taking a taxi.”

“Taxi? I live just around the corner,”

“In an apartment that is bound to be as cold as a fridge. Hiro is staying the night at my place where it's nice and warm and I can't exactly take him without you tagging along as well.”

“You sure?”

Without further ado Izaya marshaled Shizuo into a taxi thus putting an end to the discussion.

“Feel free to make yourself at home but keep Hiro from destroying my furniture too much.”

Which was not likely to happen since Hiro the cat saw fit to make himself comfortable slung on Shizuo's shoulder from which vantage point he surveyed his new surroundings with narrowed eyes full of suspicion.

“He won't. How come it's so warm here?”

Izaya smiled very smugly.

“Central heating system. Pretty cool, isn't it?”
“The floor's warm as well.”

“That only makes it better.”

Izaya arranged an absurdly expensive kotatsu with a warm but light blanket. The homely touch in the very large and extra stylish living room struck Shizuo as odd.

“I got one of those as well but it's kinda shabby. Eats up a lot of electricity, too.”

Izaya nodded.

“This is a new model. Power efficient and all. Get under it.”

Shizuo obeyed after a moment of hesitation. Like a good host Izaya provided tea then made himself scarce, returning with a strawberry milkshake and a bundle of clothes.

“Thanks. What's that?”

“Pajamas for you. One of my neighbors is an American about your size so I borrowed.”

“I normally don't wear pajamas.”

“Keep in mind that the apocalypse is at hand. It's <i>cold</i>. What if you froze to death in my apartment? I'd be in all sorts of trouble. There's no way I'd get away without at least being interrogated by the police.”

Izaya shivered as if to invoke the apocalyptic cold or to express his distress over his unlikely scenario.

“If there's danger of freezing to death we can do that. Share body warmth.”
Izaya had joined Shizuo under the kotatsu and was sipping some tea on which he now choked.

“We'd have to get naked for that. And snuggle and such.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Very funny, Shizuo. You're absolutely hilarious. Anyway, for dinner we'll be having kobe beef.”

“For real?”

“Yes. It's top quality meat.”

“So I've heard. Never tried it myself.”

Shizuo produced a cigarette that Izaya immediately snatched away.

“No smoking.”

“Fair enough, it's your place after all. You know how to cook that?”

Izaya had dropped by the kitchen, he now appeared with a tray containing a fatty piece of meat that he studied with great care then blushed.

“Well, not exactly, I am training, you see. I bought it to cook for Namie-san but then it occurred to me I'd make a mess of it. So I saved this bit for training purposes, when I get it down just right I'll invite her over...it's just that she's helped me a lot,”

Izaya stammered into awkward silence. He had the distinct feeling he had just completely ruined his image but then again Shizuo's being here at all already accomplished that.
“It'll be okay.”

“I suppose this makes you my guinea pig.”

“Yeah? You gonna poison me or something?”

“I could but what's the point? I can't have you die on my apartment. And does poison even work on you?”

To Izaya’s surprise Shizuo grew thoughtful.

“Dunno. Never tried poison.”

Izaya rejoined him under the comfortable kotatsu, leaning on the table in a conspiratorial manner.

“Unless you have and didn't even notice it.”

“I guess it's possible.”

“You've got loads of enemies, right? They might very well have poisoned you somewhere along the line.”

“Yeah but I think poison would at least make me sick. Since I'm human.”

“Good thing I love humans, isn't it? About dinner, I got ice-cream for dessert and I should start filling the tub if you want to take a bath.”

So much for home turf advantage.

“I'm good, already bathed.”
“How about you, Sushi? Wouldn't you like a nice warm bath?”

Sushi meowed in his innocence.

“Bad idea, cats don't like water.”

“That's of course the whole point.”

Hiro climbed down from Shizuo's shoulder to the table where he sat staring at Izaya.

“What color is Hiro-kun supposed to be?”

“Can't tell.”

“Oh, he's the embodiment of Dollars! Colorless cat.”

“You part of that group?”

“Heh, of course not. I'm not part of any group. I'm Orihara Izaya. Neh?”

“Yeah. I guess you are.”

Izaya got on all fours and crawled around Sushi.

“I call this, 'being cat-like'. It's important so as to understand a cat to view things from a cat's perspective. Oh, as in 'I am a Cat'. I see!”

“Don't think the human body is supposed to move like that.”
Ever acrobatic Izaya now planted his hands and feet firmly on the ground as he meandered about, his body arched at a strange angle that would have hurt most people to hold more for more than five minutes. Izaya could even move with great speed, sliding along as if this was his primary means of locomotion. He spoke over a shoulder, the cats looking at him with great curiosity, the fabled kind that was said to have killed many of their kind.

“Like you’re one to say that. Last time I checked the human body wasn’t supposed to be able to lift vending machines, toss trucks around and basically create a storm of destruction equivalent to an earthquake, all by itself.

“I am a cat, I think as a cat. Without words, I can see in the dark. I distrust most humans. I can climb up but have troubles climbing down.’ You know, the day we find out just why your body works the way it does will herald a new age for humanity.”

Izaya climbed up the stairs in pure feline fashion.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. It would mean that science had reached a pinnacle of sorts. And you'd no longer be a mystery.”

“So I'm a mystery?”

Izaya halted mid-stairs, sitting cross-legged on a step.

“Aren't you? What else are you, if not a mystery? You're a mystery to me at any rate.”

“So that's how it is.”

Izaya bounced down the stairs.

“I'll run myself a bath, then. Come on, Sushi. I promise not to dump you in the tub.”
“You better not. Cats got a very good memory, he wouldn't just forget.”

“So I've heard. Felines hold a grudge, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to 'forgive and forget'?"

“Doesn't work that way.”

“Then why didn't you just leave me to die in that alley? Why did you pick me up?”

Shizuo shrugged.

“Like I told you, I don't hate you.”

“'Not hate', you say? What does that mean, exactly? There's plenty of things I don't hate but that doesn't tell you much about how I feel about them.”

Shizuo had been playing with Hiro. He now stopped and faced Izaya directly.

“You're right, it doesn't say much.”

“What, then? 'Not hate' can be 'indifferent',”

“Nah, that will never happen.”

“What do you mean?”
“Being indifferent to you.”

Silence widened between them. It was Shizuo who broke it.

“How do you feel about me? Still hate my guts so much you can't stand it?”

“I'm not talking about that,”

“Yeah. But I'd like to know. You owe me as much.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Izaya started despite himself. A cold sick feeling began coiling inside of him. He did not know how or when but Shizuo now stood too close.

“I'll always hate you. No matter what, come what may, I will always hate you.”

“Why are you saying that now?”

“Those were your words. 'Even if I were to forget everything, I would still hate you,'”

“Stop. Please, just- don't say anything more.”

Izaya was afraid he might start shaking at any moment. He wanted to wrap his arms around himself but his body seemed very distant as if part of the hostile world. His vision grew unfocused and whether Shizuo was still speaking of not Izaya could not tell, the sudden burst of static noise blasted all away any other sounds. It was followed by a sharp jab of pain unlike any headache.

“What did you do to me-”
To his horror he could not hear his own voice. Disconnected images flashed by, sliding out of focus before he could grasp their shape, let alone their import. All was chaos.

“Nothing. I didn't do anything to you.”

Izaya crumbled, legs suddenly collapsing under him. Like it happened in moments when stress overdid one's coping skills, his thoughts strayed in panicky disorder but still registered details- how come he did not feel the warm floor.

The reason was quite simple, Shizuo had caught and now held him. Echoes rebounded in some hollow space where there was no sense of direction. Snippets of words like sharp fragments of memory tearing their way to the surface. He could not hear Sushi meowing in alarm, could not even register Shizuo carrying him to the sofa.

And then the present receded, the apartment rushing rapidly away as if he was being sucked into a dark hole. There was a moment of sickening vertigo that gave way to distinct clarity: the clarity of recovered memory.

A sundown setting. Slanted light sliding from from a red stain stained sky to the concrete streets. Izaya had the strangest impression, that he was sustained in a vacuum where there was no pain, watching a turning point of his past as if in a movie. He could see himself from the outside.

All around traffic signs were strewn like so many bent trees. Shizuo wielded one of these. Izaya, the Izaya within this moment in time, stood at a not too safe distance, smiling as he flicked the blade upon which a sun ray died.

“Ah, this is how it should be, Shizu-chan. You and I, ever clashing. What can I say, could it be fate?”

Shizuo panted and gritted his teeth.

“Izaya! Today's the day I run you to the ground!”

The traffic sign came swinging in his direction, Izaya jumped over it, landed on a crouch, twirled about and rolled away, coming to a halt almost within touching distance of Shizuo.
“Still need to work a bit on your skills, it seems.”

Shizuo ditched the sign and threw a tree instead. Izaya evaded it easily.

“Damn, stand still so I can kill you!”

Izaya giggled.

“I wonder why we hate each other so much? How did things ever come to this?”

“Doesn’t fucking matter,”

“You’ve got a point there. For once I agree with you, who knew Shizu-chan!”

Shizuo literally roared.

“Always yapping, and yapping, shut up for once!”

“I’ll always hate you. No matter what, come what may, I will always hate you.”

“Good.”

“Even if I were to forget everything, I would still hate you. That’s how it should be!”

The world dimmed, dimmed, dimmed, morphed into the present. Izaya opened his eyes and sat up slowly.

“You okay?”
Shizuo held the phone and was ready to dial for an ambulance. Izaya smiled weakly, Sushi licked his hand.

“No need, thanks. Shizuo...I was either very wrong or very right, I'm not sure myself.”

Izaya was very thoughtful, many things weighing on his mind. This was the one memory he had recovered but it gave him pause. He needed time to think.

“About what?”

“About what I said back then.”

“I guess you had to be wrong. Since I'm here now, like this.”

“You have a point there. Why did you remember those lines right now?”

“It stuck to me, this whole 'I'll always hate you' thing. Cuz I agreed with you, that never happened before.”

“I see.”

“Change can be a good thing, you know.”

“Since when were you so deep and wise?”

“Dunno.”

Izaya contemplated his options. He could opt for a confrontation but it was virtually impossible to get Shizuo to reveal any knowledge or even involvement regarding Izayas's amnesia unless Shizuo wanted to. Shizuo was too much of a wild card to be cornered.
“Ah, I think hunger is getting to me. That's it, I'm ditching the bath and attacking the beef directly.”

“Not too sure 'attacking' it is the way best to go about it.”

“Oh? I suppose you know all about kobe beef?”

Izaya was surprised at himself. After such a drastic crisis he never expected to be able to swing back to normality. And what a strange kind of normality it was.

“Nah. But beef is beef, you're not supposed to attack it.”

“It's the Izaya method of cooking. Four Michelin stars.”

“Don't attack it too much.”

“Haven't you heard that the best defense is to be on the offensive?”

“What does that have to do with cooking?”

“Everything. It's a life philosophy, after all.”

“That so? I wonder if that's how it goes in bed as well?”

Izaya leaned forward until he was invading Shizuo's personal space and stared.

“Oy, cut that out, will you?”

“Just thought you'd know.”
“It’s a cheap shot and you know it. So let's not go there, okay?”

Shizuo looked at him in silence long enough to make Izaya rather uncomfortable.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to upset you.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Thought you wouldn't mind talking about it.”

“And why the sudden interest in my sex life, Shizuo?”

Shizuo half shrugged. It was a strange gesture like an arrested intention.

“I've thought about it before.”

Izaya tilted his head to the side.

“Yes, I suppose you have. Just don't go thinking too much about it. It's just...weird.”

They relapsed into awkward silence.

“Yeah, I bet. Haven't seen you with your yakuza lately.”

Izaya sighed a bit too heavily, more for effect than anything else.

“I told you already, Shiki-san isn’t 'my' yakuza.”
“Maybe not in so many words but close enough.”

A flash of anger momentarily blinded Izaya beyond all reason. He was lashing out before he could control himself.

“What will you drop the insinuations already! It’s none of your business who I sleep with anyway!”

Startled by the raised voice Sushi meowed. Shizuo picked him up, the tiny kitty looking even smaller in his very big hands.

“You actually think through things a lot, don’t you?”

Izaya seemed to be merely changing topic but it was his natural curiosity taking over.

“I’ve been thinking about things, yeah. Like, why you changed. Since it’s not a trick.”

“Or! Maybe it is a trick! And I’m playing mind games with you.”

Izaya waved his fingers like a parody of a magician. Shizuo ignored it altogether.

“I guess you won’t tell me what happened, huh.”

“Ah, you don’t know how information seeking works. You won’t get anywhere by flat out asking straightforward questions.”

Izaya shook his head, grieving over such naivety.

“Yeah? How does it go, then?”
“That's a secret.”

“Figures.”

“Everyone has secrets. It's human nature.”

Shizuo gave him another of his silent stares.

“Yeah, that's true.”

“I didn't think you'd agree so readily.”

Shizuo placed Sushi on Izaya's head and petted the kitty.

“Well, it's true. Everyone has things they'd rather others didn't know.”

Izaya smiled very slyly but he could hardly be menacing with a sleek black cat comfortably settled on his head.

“Like the fact that you're so protective of your little brother?”

“Aren't you the same?”

“To some extent. But there's really no need for us to worry, our siblings are more than capable of taking care of themselves. If Mairu went all karate on me I'd be a goner.”

Shizuo chuckled. It showed a mirthful side to him, savvy humor underneath uncouth hostility.

“You'd end up like that Kobe beef there.”
“Ah, I'm afraid so- hey, wait! Give that back!”

It happened in a wink of an eye. Hiro jumped to the counter, snatched the succulent bit of meat and before Izaya could do anything the cat had already disappeared up the stairs.

“There goes your Kobe,“

Izaya was actually about to run after him but he realized that by now Hiro had surely gobbled it already. He burst out laughing.

“The horror, I've been robbed in my own house! Quick, call the cops.”

“Looks like he's into Kobe beef.”

From the upper floor they could see just a glimmer of eyes shining in semi-darkness.

“Oh well, it's equality at work. Sushi gets to eat his favorite treats of fresh fish all the time so why not let Catzilla Hiro have some delicious beef. Who says cats aren’t allowed gourmet food! Not I, not I!”

“So what are we going to eat now?”

“Hmm...I'm not sure.”

Izaya inspected his supplies almost quizzically.

“You got enough stuff here to make hotpot.”

“That sounds great and it sure is cold. Hotpot it is, then.”
“Want my help?”

“But of course. That way if it sucks in the end we can split the guilt fifty/fifty.”

“Or even blame me a hundred per cent, huh.”

Izaya gasped.

“Why, I’d never do such a thing!”

“Sure you would.”

Izaya placed Sushi on the floor then clapped before rolling up his sleeves.

“Right, let's get started!”

“You make it sound like hard work.”

“That's because it is. Hotpot is serious business.”

“Dunno about serious but it's tasty.”

Izaya distributed tasks on a basis on equality, they got to slice about the same amount of ingredients.

“Aha, this is most definitely the wisest option, Shizuo. Having the two of us cook. It wouldn’t do, my cooking for you.”

“I wouldn't mind it myself.”
Izaya tut-tutted.

“It'll never do. Oh, I know! Hotpot is about mixing all sorts of ingredients, isn't it? How about we add sushi to it?”

“You want to eat your cat? Something's wrong with you.”

“Not Sushi, 'sushi'.”

“Not sushi, sushi? What's up with that?”

Izaya was cutting a potato, he stopped halfway and sighed far too heavily.

“Not the cat that goes by the name of Sushi but the food.”

“It's cuz you chose that name. It's kinda confusing.”

“Gee, there is such a thing as context.”

“No context for fresh fish mixed in the hotpot.”

Izaya rolled his eyes very much like kids did in the presence of utter stupidity.

“You add the fish once it's all cooked, of course.”

“I suppose you could cook sushi...”

Izaya spun around, all dismay.
“Never! How can you suggest such a thing, spoiling fresh fish.”

“Ah...you sure take this personally.”

“Indeed I do. But I guess hotpot is hotpot and sushi is sushi.”

“Better that way.”

They gathered around the pot. Izaya was almost nervous. He lifted the lid and bounced happily.

“It smells delicious, it can't taste bad! A client, this late...? And in this weather, too.”

The security system had just alerted him that someone was here to see him. Izaya missed the way in which Shizuo followed him with his eyes. Too surprised at what he saw on the screen.

“Shiki-san! Did something happen? Come on up.”

In his excitement Izaya forgot Shizuo and dashed to the door. He did stop before opening it in order to compose himself.

“Long time no see.”

“It's been ages since you visited. I was just about to have dinner with- Shizuo. Heiwajima Shizuo, that is.”

Only now did Izaya realize he had committed a faux pas. Shiki took it in stride without as much as batting an eyelash at this irregularity.
“I should have called, didn't know you had company. I'll be back some other time.”

“Wait, don't go!”

Izaya went as far as detaining him by the sleeve, a hand clutching at Shiki’s spotlessly white coat. Izaya caught himself almost right away.

“I mean, it’s been so long since you’ve been here and it's far too cold outside. Besides, there is more than enough food. Do stay for dinner.”

Izaya was fully aware that bringing Shizuo and Shiki together was less than wise but there was nothing else he could do. Otherwise he was bound to leave with the worst possible idea. And Izaya could not help feeling a thrill of irritation directed at Shizuo, because of him Shiki could not possibly spend the night over. It was a momentary fit immediately followed by a pang of guilt that lingered.

Shiki stood on the threshold for a small eternity, assessing his next move. Clearly many things had happened in his absence and ultimately Shiki wanted to find out the details. He reserved the right not to share his reasons.

“Alright.”

Izaya's apartment was extremely spacious so that from where Shizuo sat he could not see the door. But he heard enough to figure things out. Still, to make a point he did not budge.

“It's nothing fancy, just hotpot.”

Izaya hesitated slightly as he walked into the living room with Shiki. He knew they were acquainted, Shizuo and Shiki, he believed they had even been introduced but somehow an introduction seemed to fit the situation.

“Shizuo, Shiki-san is joining us for dinner.”

Shizuo nodded curtly. Shiki studied him at length and Izaya shifted rather uncomfortably. At length Shiki sat down and only then did Izaya sit.
“Let's dig in, then.”

The meal proceeded in silence, bordering on gloomy as far as Izaya knew but in reality it was closer to studious. Shiki and Shizuo studying each other without even bothering to hide it and Izaya failed to notice it because he was too intent staring at the rich broth on his plate.

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Sushi meandered into view with majestic indifference.

“Shiki-san, meet Sushi. He's a kitty I picked up, cute isn't he? Then I suppose you don't like pets.”

Izaya congratulated himself on having struck on a very harmless conversation.

“On the contrary. I'm very fond of pets. I even have one myself.”

“Really? I didn't know that! What kind of pet does Shiki-san like?”

“The cute and small kind.”

“Like a cat, then?”

“That too.”

Izaya could tell that there was much more to what was being said that the face value. After all, this was something he excelled at but the precise undertow of meaning escaped him at the moment. He spotted two green glittering points on the floor above.

“Speaking of that, not all cats and cute and small. Take Hiro-kun, for example. He's the cat I'm sheltering for the night since it's so cold, Shizuo and I had the same idea. You can see Hiro-kun from here. Or his eyes, at any rate.”
Shiki seemed to be deep in thought for a moment.

“So Shizuo-kun is something of a cat-sitter, then?”

Before Izaya could jump into damage control Shizuo spoke for the first time since Shiki’s arrival.

“At times. Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. But there is a difference, after all. Between cat-sitters and cat owners.”

“Cats don't have owners. They stay with people because it's comfortable.”

“That they do. But stealing someone's pet is hardly acceptable.”

“Unless it's not stealing.”

Throughout this confrontation, it could not be called anything else, Izaya seemed to sink deeper into himself as if to erase himself. He diminished his presence, the full import of what was transpiring. That Shizuo and Shiki could such a discussion felt like betrayal to Izaya, a double betrayal.

Before Shiki could get around to a snappy comeback that was ever so insinuating Izaya jumped to his feet, hands striking the table as he did so, hard enough to cause the food to slosh in the pot.

Immediately all eyes were on him, even Hiro-kun's. Izaya took a few moments to gather himself enough to speak.

“Shiki-san, Shizuo, you are my guests. As such I hope that you respect the spirit of this meal and not cause unnecessary attrition. This is my house and my table, please keep that in mind. And this is hotpot, it's all about getting along- hotpot is important to me, it's just- important.”

Izaya stammered into silence. He was in something of a bit dazed as if unsure of what he meant exactly but he could not shake the pain of being slighted. Lashing out had taken all he had and a sudden exhaustion collapsed on top of him with the weight of a physical burden.
Izaya's phone rang. He excused himself and stumbled out of the living room. His mood was a mix of indignation and confusion.

“What do you mean, he's missing? I'm not exactly Kida-kun's mother, you know. Odds are he's just fooling around. Gee, tell you what, Mikado. Maybe nasty aliens kidnapped him and they're on their way back to Venus as we speak.”

The moment Izaya disconnected he regretted it. And right away began to worry.

“Something's happened, it seems. I have to go out looking for someone.”

Shiki raised an eyebrow.

“In this cold? Or because of this cold, rather.”

Izaya was already slipping into a fluffy jacket.

“That's right. Shiki-san,”

“I'll get my men on it.”

“I'd rather not. They'd only scare him.”

There was an almost imperceptible pause, all the more meaningful for its brevity. Shiki got up with deliberate slowness.

“I wouldn't want to impose on your hospitality.”

Izaya nodded absently.
“Work emergency, Shiki-san. Shizuo, take care of the cats while I'm out.”

“Will do.”

Izaya and Shiki walked out without exchanging words and even the parting was more than an afterthought. Shiki sat back on the plush seat of the car and waited until Izaya was out of sight until he gave directions.
Chapter 11

Izaya walked away very rapidly. Hands jammed inside pockets, head bent down over the neon stained concrete. The cold barely reached him but he knew it was there nonetheless and that he needed to mind it. He walked soundlessly, the pavement absorbing his light steps.

Izaya ducked into alleys, ever conscious of potential threats or of being followed. He reached his destination.

“If the idea is to freeze to death I dare say you're on the right track.”

Kida shot him a venomous glare then return to sullenly staring at the hospital's façade.

“What are you doing here? Can't you just leave me alone?”

“I'm here because I'm selfish. I would feel bad if you were to die like this and my night has been less than stellar as it is. No need to make it even worse for myself.”

This got Kida's attention. Despite a firm resolution to remain fully uninterested Kida could not help but wonder at the confessional tone.

“It's not that cold.”

Even as he said this Kida realized that his body was rather numb. He shifted from one foot to the other.

“Did you know that every now and then naked bodies were found in the aftermath of blizzards? Dead people, completely naked in the snow. When it gets too cold the body's ability to gauge temperature gets out of whack. People feel as if they are burning up when they are in fact suffering from severe hypothermia. So they take off their clothes and hasten their demise.”
Kida shivered and not because of the cold.

“You really are something of a sadist, aren't you.”

“I'm merely providing readily available information.”

“Awful sense of opportunity.”

“Right back at you, Kida-kun. By the way, next time you want to disappear make sure you actually do. I could find you all too easily.”

Izaya's words were biting but his tone neutral. Which was perhaps to be expected but it made Kida curious. He thought he detected a hint of listlessness.

“What made your night so bad? Got stood up by your date?”

Izaya actually pondered.

“If anything, it's the other way around.”

“Eh? Quite a player, aren't you?”

Izaya giggled then ended with a sigh.

“It seems that way. Apparently.”

Only now did the irony of his situation fully dawned on him.

“Apparently?”
“Apparently.”

“Hmm...I suppose you do have the look for that kind of thing.”

Izaya could hardly believe himself but laughter erupted from him, spontaneously so, unbidden but very welcome. It was as good a vent as any other and less destructive than most.

“Ah, Kida-kun, are you making a pass on me? Trying to frame me for pedophilia? How shrewd of you. Henceforth I must be very careful around you.”

Kida's smile was slow but bemused. He folded his arms for warmth and looked very much like a sullen child.

“This is why I can't win, I'd never think of doing that. And it might work, too.”

Izaya nodded. By mutual accord they walked down the street.

“Very true. I can see it now, 'Mister Policeman, the Bad Mad touched me...'. People would buy it, of course.”

“That's the kind of thing you'd do when you were my age.”

“I wonder.”

“Don't you know?”

“Ever heard of pleading the fifth? It's an an amendment to the American constitution.”

It was Kida's turn to sigh and he did it with relish, rolling his eyes.
“Give me a break, will you? How am I supposed to know what that is.”

“There is a lot to it but 'pleading the fifth' is refusing to answer a question when doing so leads to self-incrimination.”

“So basically it's saying you did something wrong but you're not going to admit it?”

“Basically, yes. It's very useful.”

“I bet it is, to you at least.”

“And to you too.”

Kida gave it some thought.

“Good point.”

“I have my moments.”

“Where are we going, by the way?”

“You're going to stay over at Mikado's place.”

Kida's defenses were almost visible, Izaya fancied he saw them spring up like a physical entity.

“Why? Is that an order?”

“No order, just common sense. His place is bound to be freezing but I'm sure you two will be warmer together.”
Kida had been following Izaya without even realizing it and was somewhat surprised to find himself around the corner from Mikado's borderline derelict apartment. Kida stopped and for a while stared at the concrete ground.

“You’re an odd one, Orihara-san. Try not to freeze to death yourself, I don’t want to find myself out of a job.”

“Young people nowadays are so callous.”

Izaya tossed him a blanket that he had kept hidden under his jacket, neatly folded. He waited until Kida disappeared around the bend and then stood still for a long time. It occurred to him that he had just accomplished a good deed of sorts but he felt distanced from it.

He noticed a long black car sliding alongside but it had the decency to follow him at a distance. Just slow enough to register without actually accosting him. Izaya was at least thankful for that.

His self-respect had suffered too great a blow to allow him to simply go back home but the cold was beginning to infiltrate the buffering effect of his clothes. Nor could he accept a ride from the car clearly tailing him.

What he did do was send Shizuo a short text message to the effect of his staying out and asking the cats to be fed in his absence. As to where he was to spend the night Izaya opted for the most neutral option possible and simply checked in at a capsule hotel.

This was what he needed: an anonymous environment void of questions and oddly conductive of its own kind of privacy. The place was overheated as if in defiance to the crippling chill (and Izaya wondered briefly if such hotels, the term being most loosely applied, had not been ordered to close). Izaya had a sudden urge to just strip naked and prance about to the horror of the few lodgers.

He climbed into his claustrophobic bunk and half-giggled to himself. Odds are this was the first time Orihara Izaya had ever been in such a place and he felt a tingle of pride at that. He was conscious of a compulsion to conquer ground over his former self and out-do his past. Realizing that it was so had taken much soul searching; admitting that it might stem from a need to reassert his right to exist still cost him.
He now rested on his back and studied the bunk. It was like being inside a white tube of sorts but the effect was surprisingly comfy once he got used to it. There was a television set tucked in in a nook and standing out like a statement of sorts or even like a piece in a modern art museum. Something Dadaistic about the whole thing.

Izaya took a reflective turn of thought. Perhaps to escape from his own pressing issues. He considered the stark difference between the vastness of his apartment and this confined space. Both were incarnations of Tokyo's disparate ways of managing that all vital commodity that was space. He imagined the city in a couple of centuries' time as mirroring a sci-fi dream with high rising bridges crossing through layers of cloud as whole massive structure took to the sky. Already he was encapsulated – in a most literal way- in a contraption straight of 2001.

Which reminded him he had not lived the year 2001 or any other prior to it. Or rather, who he was now he had not lived that expanse of time. How well he managed to bypass that lack of personal history was entirely up to him.

Occupied with such musings he turned to the other guests. Only a handful had ventured out on this Siberian night, Izaya suspected they had not so much ventured as found themselves wary of returning to badly heated cubicle apartments that were only slightly less small than their present lodgings.

So far he had only seen two men, both salarymen of the invisible kind. The sort of people that were only noticeable by the sheer strength of numbers when a considerable amount of them were gathered together. There were millions of such men. Non-descript creatures that effaced themselves either intentionally or otherwise.

Yet Izaya knew that scratch the surface and there was a wealth of contradictions and raw emotions. Every person was a sample of the universal human condition. Izaya wondered if his infatuation with humanity did not stem exactly from this, that he was able to see something on a grander scale in every single individual.

From this point of view Tokyo was not the huge hive teeming with faceless entities that it was so often believed to be but a priceless opportunity for gauging the complex interaction between human beings. At the same time losing himself in the maze of streets soothed Izaya's minds as few other things could.

Izaya got on his belly and rolled around as much as possible. It was the equivalent to spinning manically on the swivel chair. Despite the late hour and the very long day that preceded it Izaya did not feel tired. A kind of nervous energy propelled him.
He remembered having read somewhere that guides often encouraged foreigners to stay at capsule hotels when visiting Japan and particularly Tokyo. It was suggested as the cheapest form of accommodation in one of the world's most expensive cities. Izaya amused himself imagining how tourists would handle the challenge of staying in coffin sized compartments. Some of them would hardly fit. Then again, that applied to Shizuo as well.

Izaya turned on his side and closed his eyes. He did not want to think about either Shizuo or Shiki at the moment. Perhaps he should have sought refuge in Namie's house, at least there he would have companionship to distract him from worry. But he knew that it was not a real viable option.

He hummed under his breath then grew more aware. Someone was awake just under his bunk. Izaya lost no time crawling to the entrance and hanging down in such a way that defied gravity.

“Hey there,”

“What the!”

“Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. But it looks like you can't sleep and neither can I. Are you up for a game of UNO or something?”

The man was too befuddled to say no. In a small lounge area there were some games and Izaya's choice of UNO was featured. He played a few rounds and thoroughly enjoyed himself.

“So Honda-san, you've stayed at capsule hotels before? This is my first time. It's kind of neat! I had no idea these places were actually nice.”

“Every now and then.”

“I've heard these places were absolutely ghastly.”

“Some of them are.”
“Then I guess I lucked out. Yay for me.”

Izaya's spirits had lifted considerably. He even deigned to eat the cardboard meal since it was part of the experience. Izaya approached it as an opportunity for expanding his horizons.

As a result he slept precious little but did not feel all that tired. Instead a kind of light headed feeling invaded him. When he stepped outside in the morning the street was filled with snow. The chill in the air gave it an edge that sent a bolt of excitement up his spine. Never had he seen snow.

Izaya forgot all about decorum and happily jumped up and down amidst the still falling flakes. His balance was precarious but that only added to the fun.

“Kadota, oy, Kadota! Isn't this great? Snow!”

Kadota stood blinking in dismay. He had in fact been standing in befuddled surprise for a while, having spotted Izaya doing what seemed to be a strange dance routine in a circle, snow trickling down each time he lifted his feet ever so effortless. It was an odd sight. Surely, it must be difficult to prance around like that in the snow.

“What are you doing? Is it a flash mob thing? But there's only you here,”

“Think fast!”

Izaya scooped a snowball and hurled it at Kadota. It hit and soaked the beanie much to Izaya's delight. Like a kid Izaya jumped once and then burst out laughing, his breath visible against the staggering clarity of the day.

“Bulls eye! Izaya scores!”

Kadota did not speak, he sank to the ground in silence. Immediately Izaya started.

“Hey, are you okay? So sorry, is it about the beanie...? I'm sure you can dry it. Or are you hurt...?”
Izaya approached. Distress stripped his movements of their fancy acrobatics as he shifted into purposeful mode. He was very close when Kadota threw a snowball that hit him point blank and nearly sent him reeling.

“Take that.”

Izaya took a while to recover and by the time he did he was giggling.

“Ah, I've been had. So evil of you, cashing in on my better nature.”

“You started it.”

Izaya threw his hands up.

“Guilty as charged, please don't shoot me!”

“Who's going to shoot you?”

Izaya shrugged. Ever since his brush with death he often took a philosophical approach to threats to his personal safety.

“Who knows? If people are willing to stab me then surely they would not see much of a problem in shooting me. Then again it is difficult to come across guns in this country.”

Kadota wrung his soaked beanie.

“More importantly, you just had to aim for my hat.”

“Someone had to! It's snowing, you should feel the snow falling on your head. Otherwise it's just not the same! And do like this,”
Izaya stuck out his tongue on which snow landed.

“They said it might snow but I didn't think it would actually happen.”

“It's so cool! It's like a whole different city, a whole new Tokyo I don't know!”

Izaya's enthusiasm spiked. Kadota fancied he even saw his eyes shining and took half a step back. There was something a bit intimidating when Izaya was enthralled over the simplest of things.

“Traffic will be hellish. I doubt the van will even get started.”

“Ka-do-ta, don't be a bore! Atchoo, urgh...”

“You'll catch a cold.”

Izaya swayed. The sudden shift from the warm interior to the freezing outside coupled with physical exertion took its toll and the sleepless night and nervous strain did not help. He felt rather weak without a warning.

Kadota was on his side right away. Izaya's eyes did indeed shine but Kadota suspected it was fever than anything else.

“You should better get home, you don't look too hot. I'll take you.”

“But I want to see more of the snow...”

“The only place you're going is to your bed.”

Izaya had to give up and allow himself to be guided to his apartment. Kadota was fumbling with Izaya's key when the door opened and there stood Shizuo on the threshold.
“Shizuo...? What are you doing here?”

Kadota blinked. Atop Shizuo’s head a tiny black cat yawned. What a strange day.

“Cat sitting.”

Izaya was propped against the wall for support but he now made an effort to stand firm on his suddenly weak legs. He should have expected his frail high to come crashing down sooner or later but it took its toll as a completely unforeseen calamity.

“He’s caught a cold or something, I was just dropping him home.”

Kadota rushed to the explanation out of a barely conscious need for justification. He did not know the exact context and could not quite read the atmosphere well enough to catch its undertones but he could very well feel that Shizuo had some sort of claim on Izaya. And Kadota had no desire to stand between the two.

Without a word Shizuo simply picked up Izaya.

“Thanks, I’ll see that he rests.”

“Do you need anything?”

“Stuff to make porridge.”

“I’m on it.”

With that said Kadota could hardly say exactly how he ended up buying the ingredients required and handing them over to Shizuo, the cat having shifted from Shizuo’s head to Izaya’s lap.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”
“Yeah. Thanks. See you later.”

And just like this Kadota was dismissed. In the apartment Shizuo took over the ultra-modern (and barely used) kitchen and made porridge. Izaya nestled in a corner of the sofa and kept a chill silence.

“Here, eat this and get better.”

“I'm still angry at you. Just so you know.”

Shizuo nodded. Izaya made sure to stare at him pointedly, crossing his arms to make it obvious he did not mean to take the spoon.

“Yeah, I thought as much. But we can have this conversation later.”

The scent of comforting food enveloped them, wafting between the two of them.

“We'll have this conversation when I see fit.”

“Fair enough.”

Shizuo knew that there was no point in arguing. If need be Izaya could exhaust himself fully in a grand paroxysm of rage and then finally fall asleep to get his rest. Meanwhile Izaya was gathering his resolve. Words left a hollow echo in their mind even as he spoke. He wanted to close his eyes and just let go of all this conflicting strife but he could not allow himself to succumb to sleep. Not when he was burning in outrage that increased in bitterness with his illness.

“I expect that kind of thing from Shiki-san, after all the yakuza sees people as property by default but it's worse coming from you.”

“I'm glad for that, at least. Means you hold me to a higher standard.”

Izaya cast him a sideways glance.
“That’s not it, it’s just a matter of flaws that come with the territory. Just like informants couldn’t be informants without some insensitivity.”

“I see.”

“And you expected me to just take it lying down while you, ”

“I expected you to get angry. You should, ”

Izaya’s glare had an extra feverish sharpness.

“What’s the deal? Just because I sleep with a guy I’m fair game to all sorts of insinuations? It entitles you to talk trash about me in my home, at my very table? Well fuck you, Shizuo.”

Izaya’s voice grew colder even as his words veered closer to an outburst.

“What I mean is, if it made you mad then that means you can’t shrug me off just like that. Normally you don’t even take insults seriously at all.”

“Normally’? ’Normally’, you say! What part of this looks normal to you?”

Shizuo did not reply immediately. Izaya saw lurid blotches of yellow light seeping across his field of vision, slowly spreading like an oily stain.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that I got jealous.”

Izaya blinked rapidly, both out of surprise and in an attempt to clear his blurry sight.

“Jealous? Huh?”
“I didn't realize just how it was until I saw that guy here like he owned the place. Then it kinda hit me all of a sudden.”

Izaya seemed ready to spring to his feet but his energy faltered. He got as far as getting up only to deflate into the sofa, limbs heavy, brain seething. The precarious gesture upset the kitty from his lap and Sushi landed with an angry meow of pointed discontent.

Izaya passed a hand over his eyes.

“Let's just forget what you said just now. Since I'm running a temperature I'll take it that I'm hallucinating.”

“That's how you want to play it?”

Izaya nodded.

“There's nothing more to add,”

And if there was Izaya could not grasp the words to convey it. The sound of his own voice resounded hollowly like a broken echo.

Shizuo was not about to let it go but he noticed Izaya gesturing aimlessly. The timing was wrong.

“Okay. I'll leave it at that for now.”

Izaya winced at a sudden stab of pain at his temples. Being completely unfamiliar with actually having a fever rendered him almost helpless. It occurred to him that just when he thought he had mastered the art of bypassing the loss of his memory it tripped him in some nasty way.

“Gah, door's that way,”

Izaya gestured but so vaguely but he might as well mean the window.
“Yeah. I know. Looking for a thermometer.”

It was only when he tried to focus on Shizuo's retreating back that Izaya realized just how battered his vision was. He saw sliding lines waving in a slow sick motion with each heartbeat. A sluggish torpor invaded his veins and he did not protest as Shizuo slid the thermometer between his lips.

“Forty one. Not good.

“What do you think you're doing?!”

Sharp panic shot through him as he felt himself lifted all too easily off the sofa.

“Change of plans. I'm taking you to the hospital. You can afford the fancy ones, they won't be full.”

“Just a fever, no need for that,”

Even as the words resounded back to him, in a long drawn echo ringing hollowly like lagging audio, he doubted their veracity. For all he knew he was indeed very ill. All he had to go by was an intellectual assessment of sickness, with no prior experience to match it to he was deprived of a term of comparison. The figure of forty one degrees presented him with an abstract reality that he could not fully grasp: the line between a simple cold and a pneumonia thinned out to a blur.

“Save it to the doctor.”

“The cats,”

“Cats take care of themselves. That's what makes them cats.”

With that said Shizuo had already placed Sushi out of harm's way least Hiro turned vicious.

“I can walk by myself.”
“Sure thing. But it's still a couple of blocks away and there's no point in getting you sicker.”

Izaya allowed Shizuo to bundle him in warm clothes and was equally passive as Shizuo carried him. He closed his eyes to conquer the incoming motion sickness and tried to keep his mind from floating away. His awareness snapped into sharpness as he realized that the black blur was indeed a car. It came to a halt and a few familiar faces swum into warped resolution.

Shiki's men. Asking, which is to say demanding, that Shizuo handed him over. Izaya considered his options and made a decision in a flash.

“Shizuo, put me down. Right now.”

Something in the tone of his voice convinced Shizuo.

“Now, gentlemen. I appreciate the feeling, I truly do, but I am not a commodity.”

By sheer luck a taxi came trudging by, slowed down by the snow. Izaya hailed it and dashed inside only to half-collapse on the seat. As the taxi churned his way Izaya thanked his lucky stars for the wonder of automatic doors.

Izaya zoned out as soon as he gave the name of the hospital so that a very worried taxi driver had to shake him up when they arrived at their destination. This made matters worse as Izaya's already damaged sense of balance suffered a severe shock. He winced and tried to wave the guy away. At this point nurses became aware of the commotion and hurried as a flock of white birds.

Izaya remembered to pay but he never had a chance as he was kindly but very firmly hauled to a stretcher. A timely decision as he slipped the moment he tried to emerge from the car and would surely have fallen.

He tried to wave them all away, all the fuss about him made him rather apprehensive, but his protests
went unheard. Lights rushed overhead, the soft echo of rubber shoes flowing into the vertigo into which he was spinning.

How easy it was for control to simply slip away from him. Izaya knew this already, it was a hard earned lesson that the universe insisted on pounding into him, over and over again, as if he needed constant reminders. Izaya closed his eyes.

The moment it sank into him that he no longer had to struggle his thin grasp on consciousness swum away from him.

He woke up to a sunlit room and an unfamiliar ceiling. Holding up his hand he moved each finger, slowly, dazzled by the dappled effect of shadows intruding on orange light.

“Good morning, Orihara-san.”

“Saki... what are you doing here? Actually, where is 'here' anyway?”

Izaya sat up, trying to place himself in the present time and place. She smiled.

“You're at the hospital. The doctor says you just have a cold.”

“Oh, right. It's coming back to me now. Still, how come you're here?”

Saki folded her hands on her lap. She wore the hat Izaya had bought her.

“I became friends with the hospital personnel. I told the nurses to inform me if your name ever shows up here.”

Izaya looked around the room. He felt very light as if his body had been emptied of painful burdens.

“I guess I ended up giving the name to this place to the cabbie. I appreciate the feeling but isn't that saying you half-expect me to end up at the hospital?”
She removed the hat and played with the ribbon. Thin, delicate hands. Too fragile.

“...You lead a dangerous life, Orihara-san. Surely you've realized that already. But I'm glad. I am no longer worried about you.”

“Hey, don't worry about me now. There's no need for that.”

Saki produced his cell phone.

“Yagiri-san called and is chatting up with the doctors. Kadota-san called to ask about you. Kasukasan called as well. There are people who care about you so I don't have to worry that you'll end up alone.”

Izaya swallowed hard. He was unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed at the lack of contact from Shizuo and Shiki. And he could only guess what Kasuka wanted.

“Right but Namie-san will give me hell, I bet,”

The door slammed open and strode Namie.

“And with good reason.”

Izaya pulled up the sheet as if to hide.

“Hi there, Namie-san,”

Namie needed only to glance at Saki for her to get the point. Saki excused herself and gracefully wheeled out of the wheel. Namie opened the door and made sure she closed it behind her.

“Don't you 'hi there me', Izaya.”
Izaya pouted.

“Hey, I'm sick...”

“And why is that? It's your own fault.”

“Well I guess but,”

Working with Izaya had taught Namie a few things. She now leaned into his personal space to get his full attention.

“I don't know what went through your mind and it's none of my business but cavorting in the snow and getting sick on top of it is hardly acceptable. Don't expect me to be your babysitter.”

“I didn't ask you to come here.”

Namie sighed.

“You need to get a hold of yourself. Your health matters. 'Healthy body, healthy mind'. No one can wing it by sheer will power. Not even you.”

“It's just a cold...no need to make that big a deal out of it.”

Izaya was painfully aware that he was contradicting himself and perhaps even fizzing out into whining but he could not help it.

“You were in a life threatening situation not too long ago and colds often develop into serious complications.”

It was Izaya's turn to sigh. He let the sheet drop in a gesture of giving up.
“You're right, of course. As always.”

Namie stepped back and folded her arms.

“Your private life is none of my concern but if you're under too much stress you should let me know.”

Izaya was silent for a while. He stared off at the furled whiteness of the sheets.

“I'm fine, or I'll be fine with some work- it's just that I don't know just how I'm supposed to feel.”

Izaya nearly jumped off bed as Namie sat on the mattress.

“You're saying that you lack a reference point.”

“Something like that.”

He felt disorientated. Hands folded on his lap.

“Did you know that in the States it's possible for a highly gifted child to be admitted to university?”

The change of topic got Izaya's attention.

“I've heard about it. Why are you asking?”

“These children border on genius. Intellectually they are often overqualified for an undergraduate program. But what do you suppose happens on them? More often than not they crash and burn very badly.”
“Ah, I see your point.”

Izaya let himself fall into the mattress as if by relaxing his body he could gain more leeway and disentangle himself from the mess he was in.

“Your case is different on many ways but my point stands: a human being’s emotional development takes time to progress to the stage at which they can handle life and its many pressures. That development is built through a growing body of memories. Currently you lack that emotional background.”

Izaya smiled wanly and closed his eyes.

“Clever of you to bring 'humans' into it to argue with me.”

“I'm not arguing. Sheer intelligence can get through much, you process information at such speed that you can make up for a lifetime of actual knowledge but you can't apply that to emotions.”

“In that regard I'm like those super clever kids?”

“Close enough.”

“How odd, discussing things like this with you of all people.”

“I may be the perfect person to have this discussion with. As I won't take advantage of anything you say against you.”

Izaya laughed.

“I really must thank my lucky stars you're on my side.”

“Take that feeling to heart and try actually doing what I say.”
“Yes m'am! For I fear for my physical integrity were I to do otherwise.”

“Good. You can start by getting some rest.”

“No need for that, I've slept loads already.”

“You clearly haven't been sleeping properly. There is something to be said about quality of sleep and yours is lacking.”

Izaya blinked.

“You can tell that from my medical chart?”

“Paranoid much?”

Izaya smiled a bemused smile.

“You'll corner me into becoming a shut-in if I don't watch out.”

“You'll be a shut-in for the next couple of weeks.”

“This sounds as if I'm grounded.”

Namie nodded.

“Good. Think of it that way.”

Izaya mumbled but he appreciated the sense of being in an alliance that protected him. Even the scolding resounded with him at a deep level he could not quite explain. He knew nothing of being part of a family, his sporadic interaction with his sisters were just that, but it might very well be like this.
“I'll be dreadfully lonely, all alone in my apartment. I will develop cabin fever, I just know it.”

Izaya meant it as a jest.

“You won't be alone. I'll be staying with you until you recover completely.”

“Wait, what?”

“I need to keep an eye on you otherwise you'll go off scampering on the snow. And you'll need me around to fix you meals and the like. Rest assured I'll charge you for my services.”

Izaya had to laugh.

“Oh, can you make nigiri balls? With tuna!”

“I can try.”

“Then I'm sold. But I'll let you know I may end up calling you onee-san.”
Chapter 12

The extreme weather conditions froze the city into a standstill even as it released many people from the daily grind. This applied to only to the endless multitudes of workers but to the famous and glamorous. Kasuka's scheduled shooting was canceled. It was a rare respite that he fully planned to take advantage of.

He invited Shizuo to come over. The brothers did not speak much to each other and their time together consisted mainly of a quiet kind of companionable silence that made others a bit uncomfortable.

Verbal communication was not essential because Kasuka had an uncanny intuition when it came to his brother. He could tell something was off the moment Shizuo darkened the threshold with his shadow.

Yuigadokusonmaru padded softly as he landed on Shizuo's lap where he immediately became a purring ball of fur. Shizuo petted him.

For a while only the sound to disturb the silence was the content cat.

“It's been very cold.”

Shizuo nodded.

“Yeah.”

“How's Hiro-kun doing?”

“Dropped him at Tom-san's place. Mine's too cold.”

“Did you pick him up at last?”

The siblings bonded through cat care. It was part of their emotional vocabulary. They were not even
remotely fussy or sappy, Shizuo and Kasuka simply went about feeding felines with the implicit knowledge that it was a relaxed way of having fun.

Shizuo had come to associate caring for cats with warmth. It had played a key role in bringing him closer to Izaya.

“Nah. It's just for now 'cuz it's so cold.”

More silence. Shizuo stroked the cat rather abstractedly.

“Orihara-san's cat is very pretty.”

“Yeah. Sushi.”

“You saw him online?”

“Yeah. But it's a kitty with an attitude, it'll bite.”

“Like Orihara-san?”

Shizuo smiled. Trust his brother to see right through him.

As soon as he got home Izaya immediately scooped up Sushi. He would gladly cuddle the small feline some more but Namie called him to his bedroom.

Izaya entered the chamber and blinked. There were machines framing the bed and all sorts of monitors ominously blank.

“Eh, what is this...?”
“Sleep monitoring devices.”

“I see. Actually I don't see, no. Care to explain from the start?”

Namie nodded.

“There is more to proper sleep than simply sleeping hours. The quality of sleep is to be taken into consideration. This device will tell us just how many hours of deep sleep you're having by night and just how brain is behaving during sleep.”

“Hmm...that sounds vaguely intimidating.”

“It's not at all intrusive.”

“Right...”

“It may even tell us something about your memory loss.”

“You could have said that right away, you know.”

“I do know. But I suspect you'd hold it against me if I made recovering your memory my top priority. It can be construed of my being against you.”

“Ah, it's so unfair...Namie-san knows so much about me but I barely anything about you...”

Namie smiled slyly.

“Who said that was a bad thing?”
Izaya laughed.

“Snap! Way to go, Namie-san! Oh, I know! Since you'll be staying over how about we have a
slumber party?”

Namie blinked.

“A slumber party?”

“That's right! I never had one- I bet, considering the person I was- I know it's something I've missed
out on, so why not have a slumber party now!”

“Do boys even have slumber parties?”

“Hmm...probably not but who cares! Oh, don't get me wrong- I'm not planning to hit on you, not
that you're not a beautiful woman,”

Izaya fumbled for words, awkwardly stumbling on disclaimers. It amused Namie to no end how
Izaya could still get this embarrassed.

“I get it. So, what are we doing for this slumber party?”

Izaya nodded and folded his arms as if he was about to impart great wisdom.

“I don't know.”

“This was your suggestion.”

“Indeed! That's why we'll improvise. Just you, me and Sushi.”

“The food?”
“The cat. But we could have a sushi banquet!”

“Not likely. The city is still more or less paralyzed as it is.”

“But there's a little sushi joint down the street. I bet it's open. Let's stock up on sushi goodness and hold the fort.”

“We have enough food as it is.”

“But is it sushi? It must be sushi!”

“Whatever happened to the nigiri balls?”

“No can do. No cooking on slumber party.”

“If you say so.”

Izaya would have gone into a frenzy of preparation for his slumber party project but Namie put a stop to that. Izaya was confined to his swivel chair from which he gave instructions.

She placed two futons on the living room with a very stylish screen placed between them. Namie was surprised to find that the sushi restaurant was indeed open and more could deliver to their place since Izaya was such a good costumer and since it was just around the corner.

Fluffy pillows were arranged as seats to a low table on which Izaya placed a chess board.

But before the game Namie insisted on having dinner. Nutrition came first, entertainment could wait. Izaya waxed enthusiastically about the sushi but grew deadly serious as it came to playing.

Izaya approached the board with great expectation, rubbing his hands as he surveyed the black and white squares that might as well represent the world.
“Did we ever play before, Namie-san?”

“Not really. You always seemed more into playing with yourself. Not to mention you mixed up pieces from all sorts of games.”

“What was up with that?”

“I have no idea. You can take the black pieces.”

“Okay! You know, this is a bit intimidating.”

Izaya arranged the pieces on the board while Namie took her seat.

“Why?”

“No matter how you look at it I am an absolute novice. And in chess experience is important. In other words, I am afraid you’ll mop the floor with me.”

Namie laughed.

“I haven't played much and strategy games are most definitely your area.”

“Hmm...maybe. Winner gets to walk around with the cat on their head!”

“Dare I ask why?”

Izaya gesticulated most enthusiastically.

“It's the prize. Sushi as a hat!”
“Again, why?”

“Because Sushi is fluffy and warm.”

“He also has claws.”

“I’ll make a cat fan out of you yet, Namie-san! In fact, I know the perfect pet for you.”

“Yes?”

Izaya was building up the suspense, caught up in his momentum, the game temporarily forgotten. He produced his cell-phone's screen with a flourish.

“Behold! The sphinx cat.”

Namie stared at a remarkably wrinkly creature.

“It is a feline without fur.”

“Sphinxes do have fur, it's just very short and thin. I suspect you'd object to keeping a cat because of the hair issue. Hence, sphinx cat.”

“I see.”

Izaya did not exactly pout but almost.

“Namie-san, could it be that you don’t see the cuteness?”

“It looks vaguely menacing.”
“Not so! Such a cute cat. They need to be kept in a warm environment but apart from that they're normal cats. Tell you what! I'll give you one. If you don't fall in love with him you can give him back. No strings attached.”

“Whatever happened to your love for humans? Seems like it's been superseded by cat mania.”

Izaya twirled a pawn in a gesture that evoked a Machiavellian prince.

“It's because I love people that I want them to appreciate cats. We have a lot to gain from cats. They teach us how to relax and just be at ease without becoming sloppy.”

Namie expected Izaya to chat as he played. Instead Izaya became so absorbed that he remained in absolute silence, his eyes focused so entirely on the game that she could have stripped without his noticing.

Izaya did not bother to study her across the board for clues. He knew that such an approach would be fruitless against Namie. Pieces traveled on the checkered black-and-white. Every now and then Namie found herself rather surprised at Izaya's moves. It could be a hallmark of his mastermind skills then again it could simply be whacky experimentation. It applied to chess as much as it did to Izaya in general.

“It's a stalemate, I believe.”

Even as he announced this Izaya still stared most intently at the board.

“Not necessarily. I can still make a blunder.”

“Which you won't. I call stalemate.”

“Fair enough.”

Izaya sighed deeply and stretched.
“Not too bad, a tie. I can live with that.”

“You're better at this than me, I told you as much.”

“Maybe. I'd be sure to lose against-”

Izaya trailed off into silence and averted his eyes. He knew all too well that his former self could easily defeat him. It did not matter that chess was just a game, it stood for much more.

“At least you're not burning down the board.”

Izaya blinked, suddenly wrenched from his depressing reverie.

“Why would I do that?”

“I have no idea. How you managed not to trigger the smoke detectors is also a mystery.”

“I'm not some kind of pyromaniac, right...?”

“You're not.”

Namie omitted that she suspected Izaya had been planning to set fire to the city.

“It's horrible how I can't understand half the reason behind most of the things I've done in my life. It's not just not knowing, it's not understanding that bothers me so much.”

Izaya looked visibly shaken.

“So, who gets to wear the cat like a hat now?”
“Oh, good question. Hmm...I think you should. Just so you may see how wonderful it feels.”

“Assuming you can find him.”

Izaya looked around and indeed the cat was nowhere to be seen.

“Oy, Sushi! Where art thou, oh Sushi! He seems to be hiding.”

“Maybe he doesn't want to become a temporary hat.”

“Hmm...you may be right. My point of view was definitely anthropocentric. This reminds me of a video I saw the other day. It's about a blind cat that got injured in the great Tohoku quake. It expresses the cat's feelings of fear and the comfort he derives from his feline family and human friends. But of course the message comes directly from a human being, namely the cat's owner. Ultimately, it's a person using a cat to express how they feel...but at the same time, I wonder if there's not some truth to it. It may very well be that the human is transmitting the cat's experience through our ever so human means of communication: language.” [*here is the video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UyusdRIY0s]*

Izaya did not mention that the video made him shed a tear or two.

“Animals do share a lot of emotions with us.”

Izaya nodded.

“I'm terrified of earthquakes myself.”

“Your place is about the most quake-proofed place in Japan.”

He twirled the black king in silence for a while.
"That won't matter much if the Next Big One turns out to be very big indeed."

Izaya's fear of earthquakes was more than reasonable apprehension. It represented a primeval panic, the sheer horror of humanity rendered helpless in the face of nature's brutality. Merely thinking about it was enough to make him highly uncomfortable.

In his own mind the Next Big One encapsulated the deepest kernel of his fears.

"Let's have a rematch."

Izaya snapped out of it immediately, his attention fully claimed by the distribution of pieces on the checkered board. Namie did not play desultorily but she was more interested in Izaya's attitude of absolute concentration than anything else.

They ended up playing a few more matches, out of which Izaya won half and Namie the other half. He seemed pleased with the result and would have carried on late into the night were it not for Namie's adamant refusal. As much fun as Izaya was having he knew he needed to have some rest.

"Okay, I guess it's running late."

While Namie took a shower Izaya surveyed the makeshift sleeping area. He began to second guess his slumber party plan. Namie emerged from the bathroom in a simple robe and nightgown. She strolled in her usual way, indifferent to the fact that her outfit was somewhat revealing.

Izaya found himself twirling his fingers and smiling sheepishly.

"Eh, you know, it seems I am not always tuned to what is proper or socially acceptable- maybe it's because my memories are limited- but this kind of thing may be a bit wrong- since you're a woman and I'm a man- not to say my intentions are, you know, but,"

Namie calmly ignored the flustered speech and fluffed her pillow.

"Your amnesia has little to do with your disregard for convention in general."
“Still, I can understand if you feel this is just creepy, slumber party, that is. What I’m trying to say is, just because you work for me doesn't me you have to feel like you can't tell me to fuck off.”

She crossed to his side of the screen that separated the futons.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I may work for you but I have no problems putting you in your place if need be.”

Izaya broke into a wide smile.

“You're quite a sharp shooter, Namie-san! I like that. You're not too bored, putting up with me like this?”

“I'm not one of your host club clients. You don't have to entertain me.”

“I'd be terrified if you were my client, I bet no amount of smiling would make much of a difference. Oh no, it would take champagne pyramids all the way to the ceiling! Oh look, it's snowing!”

Izaya hopped over to the panoramic window and stared at the snowy night with perfect fascination.

“You've had enough of snow as it is.”

Izaya flung himself on the floor and proceeded to roll about.

“Central heating is something else! We don't even need the futons.”

Sushi sprang from whatever corner he had been lurking on and promptly curled himself in Izaya’s belly.

“Feel free to sleep there, then.”
Izaya giggled, picked up the cat and flopped on the futon.

“So mean of you. Ah, too lazy to move...”

“I'm not helping you change if that's what you're angling for.”

Izaya sat up and gasped in mock indignation.

“Why I'd never!”

He changed into very comfy flannel pajamas and dived under the blanket with a flourish. For a while he just relished the comfortable snug feeling of fresh sheets in silence.

“Ah, this is the life...so warm and nice.”

“Next time we'll play checkers.”

Izaya rolled so that he was facing the screen.

“Am I good at that?”

“Probably.”

“Go me! How about we give poker a go?”

“I'm keeping my clothes on, if that's what you're angling for.”

Izaya laughed and made himself more comfortable as Sushi curled at his feet.
“You've got a deal!”

“Now go to sleep.”

“Yes, m'am.”

Izaya did as he was told.
Kadota was walking down one of Ikebukuro's main thoroughfares when he spotted a familiar beanie just beyond a window pane. Curious, he peered into the cafe and upon recognizing Izaya he just had to go in.

“Hey, hi there.”

Izaya looked up from the notebook that had occupied him so that he failed to notice Kadota until he was standing next to him.

“Kadota! Just the person I wanted to see, sit, sit.”

Izaya gestured to the seat in front and Kadota found himself taking it.

“What's up with the beanie? I thought you hated that kind of thing.”

Izaya smiled brightly.

“Could it be that I decided that you are a great fashion icon? Not!”

“I didn't think that was it,”

“Since you were so selfish as not to donate your beanie to Sushi I figured I'd wear one for a while, get my scent on it and then use it as the ultimate bed for small felines.”

Kadota had to smile. He ordered a coffee.

“Figures it was something like that. You look busy, am I bothering you?”

“Ah, indeed I am busy but input is most definitely welcome. You know Liar Game?”
“The manga?”

Izaya nodded enthusiastically and nearly leaped across the table.

“Yes, the manga! They're having this contest, you submit a Liar Game spinoff and Kaitani-sensei himself will draw the winner's entry. How cool is that?! It'll appear on Young Jump.”

“It's right up your alley.”

Izaya sat back and folded his arms, all seriousness.

“True. But it's remarkable difficult. Figuring out the loopholes in Liar Game is already thrilling but actually making the games is quite challenging. Akiyama may be a genius but the Office people are probably even smarter.”

“Yeah, you probably have a point. Got any ideas so far?”

Izaya looked around as if he expected spies to overhear him and grew considerably confidential.

“I'm willing to tell you but you must not tell anyone. Particularly the otaku gang. Got it?”

“Sure. I won't tell.”

Izaya looked him up and down, which was quite a feat considering they were both sitting, and reached a decision.

“Alright, it goes like this: we have a labyrinth and two groups that we shall call A and B, are trying to reach the center. They start from opposite sides of the maze, the goal is to be the first team to reach the goal. To do so they must unlock several doors by correctly answering a series of questions. So far so good, now here's the catch: in each group there is a mole that is working for the opposite team and trying to sabotage the whole thing. The teams are told as much.”
“I see. Teams are supposed to work together but that will be difficult when they know there's someone out to sabotage the whole thing. It'll create a lot of fighting.”

Izaya nearly leaped across the table again, so much so that Kadota found himself pulling away slightly.

“Exactly!”

“That's a good idea, I think it'll work.”

Izaya collapsed back on his seat again.

“But it's still not enough. There needs to be some conflict...I need the teams to actively try to find the mole so they can just dismiss their input. But that may be too easy, there must be a reason for the actual members of the team to pretend to be mole so that find the real mole will be so much harder.”

“Not to mention the questions themselves.”

Izaya nodded very heavily and shook his head.

“Ah, indeed. But do you think the overall concept holds water?”

“I think so.”

Izaya burst into one of his sunny smiles.

“I sure hope so! Also, I'm considering having bets along with the questions. You know how Liar Game tends to be about money and how the secondary rules are often what trips the players, the idea here is that you lose your team's money whenever fail a question and you gain money from the opposite team's whenever you answer correctly.”

“And if you win all the money from the other team you win by default?”
“Yes, the other team will then go into debt.”

“It'll come down to those secondary rules, right?”

Kadota was expecting it by now but he was still taken aback when Izaya leaned across the table again.

“Yes! Those little rules that people forget only to be revealed in an amazing moment of epicness.”

“And then there's crazy laughter. I bet you like that.”

“Of course! Speaking of which, I'm working on the characters. I'll be going for a female lead.”

Kadota was surprised.

“Really? I figured you'd just channel yourself into the main character.”

Izaya blinked.

“How come?”

Kadota twirled the spoon on his coffee.

“Aren't you the perfect Liar Game character? I mean, you're brainy, zany, unpredictable and if there's one thing you're good at it is pulling strings on people.”

“I see! You do have a point. But would you read a manga in which I'm the protagonist?”

“Yeah, I'd read it. You're perfect for the part...you even look the part. Cool and sleek.”
Izaya gave this some thought.

“I see what you mean. And the readers would keep guessing, 'is this one of the good guys or...?'”

“That's something I never figured out myself. About you, that is.”

Izaya sipped his drink, at length.

“That makes two of us. Tell you what, I just going to watch the new Liar Game movie at the Sunshine, want to join me?”

Kadota hesitated for a second that felt absurdly long to Izaya.

“Sure,”

As soon as the credits rolled by Izaya literally skipped out of movie theater into the sundown lit street.

“How cool was that, Kadota!”

“Great game, yeah.”

Izaya did a crazy dance and twirled around some. Kadota had to wonder how Izaya managed not to collide with the stream of strolling people.

“Ah, but I don't like the way they portray Fukunaga in the live action movies. Fukunaga is supposed to be a classy trap, instead he's played out like a token campy gay.”
“Maybe they can pick you for the part.”

Izaya blinked. And then blinked again. Kadota had a moment of panic, he had not meant to actually say such a thing. Just when Kadota was fumbling for an apology Izaya burst out laughing.

“Oh dear, Kadota! Are you saying I'd look good crossdressing? I'm not too sure if that's a compliment but I'll take it as one! I'd get to cackle all I wanted, too! Heh, Fukunaga for the win! Speaking of that, there's something I just have got to show you!”

And with this Izaya dragged Kadota to his Shinjuku apartment.

“Tada! Make yourself at home, Kadota. I'll fix you some tea but first, feast your eyes on this!”

Kadota was still looking around at the vast interior of Izaya's place, half expecting Shizuo to somehow pop out. Izaya skipped away and returned shortly carrying an oversized pillow that he propped on a sofa with a flourish.

“What is that...?”

“It's my Liar Game dakimakura! Costume made. There's Akiyama on a side and Fukunaga on the other, look!”

Izaya flipped the pillow and indeed Fukunaga's picture emerged. Wearing a white bikini and smiling most prettily.

“Figured you'd go for Yokoya.”

“No way, too creepy for me. Akiyama and Fukunaga for the win!”

Izaya flipped the pillow again so that Kadota could see Akiyama wearing a suit.
“Do you sleep with this...?”

Kadota had to ask.

“Not really, I just laze about with it every now and then.”

“These dakimakura thingies are real expensive.”

“Cost me a pretty yen, yeah. But it's so worth it! Oh hi there, Sushi.”

The kitten had been keeping out of sight out of feline prudence but now bravely sneaked out into the open to rub himself against Izaya's legs.

“So that's your cat?”

“That's right, it's Sushi the cat! Don't you feel guilty for denying him your beanie?”

Izaya placed his own beanie on the floor. Sushi approached cautiously, pawed it, sniffed it and decided to step inside, curling himself into a ball of fur while he was at it.

“The cat really fits inside!”

“Told you! Mission 'Cat Bed' is accomplished. Rejoice, Kadota!”

Kadota was not entirely sure what he was expected to do but Izaya had enough enthusiasm for the two of them and then some.

“Couldn't you just buy a cat bed?”

“But where's the fun of that? Besides, I can bond with kitty this way! Neh, Sushi?”
Kadota could not quite explain it but there was something to this candor that set Izaya in a whole new light.

“He seems to like you a lot already.”

“One can never quite tell with cats.”

Izaya prepared and served tea. Kadota found himself still looking around as he sipped it. Izaya misread him:

“If you're looking for Namie-san she's has some business to attend to she won't be staying over tonight.”

Kadota blinked.

“Tonight...? You mean she usually stays overnight?”

“She's living here.”

Kadota choked on his tea and only resumed speech after a lot of spluttering.

“You mean- you're living together?”

Izaya chuckled.

“Well, we are. But it's not like that.”

Kadota needed some time to compose himself, it was so unexpected.
“Right, I see.”

“I get a feeling you don't believe me.”

“It's just a bit unusual...”

Izaya tapped his chin with a finger, thoughtfully.

“Hmm...whatever happened to the concept of 'innocent cohabitation'?”

Kadota smiled.

“Can't exactly picture you as innocent...at all.”

As if to confirm this Izaya grew mischievous.

“You know, I can't help thinking you have a thing for Namie-san. I totally support you!”

“I don't,”

“I can fix you a date with her.”

“I am really not interested...”

“Your loss, Kadota. Say, want to stay over for dinner?”

Kadota did not have the heart to say no. And if he were to be honest he did not have to make much of an effort to go along with Izaya.
“Sure, sounds good.”

“Alright! I shall attempt stir fry.”

“Attempt, you say...?”

Izaya nodded.

“That's right. Have some faith in me, Kadota. It will be delicious, most definitely.”

With this Izaya bounced to the kitchen and readily slipped into an apron.

“Anything I can help with?”

“You're the guest, just make yourself comfortable.”

Izaya produced a kitchen knife that he proceeded to wield with great mastery and speed. The blade blurred as Izaya chopped vegetables and sliced meat that he tossed into a wok with a flourish, sprinkling seasonings liberally. Soon enough the scent had Kadota salivating.

Izaya served two plates, holding them up as the world' sassiest waiter. Kadota was afraid the food would end up in the floor as Izaya bounced about but fortunately Izaya had some sense for once.

“Who knew you could cook!”

“Now that's just rude. Ah, if they pick my idea I'll cook a feast and invite everyone!”

“Would you invite Shizuo?”

Izaya's bubbly attitude deflated immediately. He stared at the food on his plate.
“I’m not sure.”

Kadota felt guilty for spoiling the mood. It was a strange feeling. Kadota reached for something that would cheer up Izaya.

“Say, how you play Liar Game? I mean, would you have a strategy going into it?”

Izaya perked up immediately.

“I'd probably keep something of a low profile at first as I figure out the other contestants.”

“That sounds creepy.”

“But of course! And when I win I'd go for a marathon of crazy laughing while I flap my arms around violently.”

The conversation flowed naturally after that. Kadota had more fun than he thought at all possible and Izaya sent him off with a genuine smile and plenty of waving.

Izaya was ready to call it a night. He could feel an impeding headache just at the borders of his consciousness. The intercom's tone made him wince, it was a sudden bout of pain. But Izaya could not just ignore it.

He took a deep breath to compose himself before opening the door to Shiki.

Izaya had rehearsed what he wanted to say. Shiki suspected as much and kept his silence.

“Shiki-san, I want us to understand each other. You follow your own code of conduct, I respect that. However, I am not your possession and I would appreciate it if you kept that in mind.”

Shiki took his own sweet time pulling out and lightning a cigarette.
“Is that what upset you?”

With this simple line Shiki reduced Izaya's emotional upheaval to a mere fit of sorts. Izaya had vowed to himself to remain calm and collected. His headache was advancing toward a migraine and he could not afford to take a pill as any display of weakness would undermine him.

“Yes. I believe I am entitled to feeling that way.”

Of this Shiki was not entirely sure.

“Fair enough. Is that all?”

It was not.

“Viewing people as property may come with the territory for you but assuming I'm too much of an idiot to realize innuendo is insulting and undeserved. I've lost my memory, not my intelligence.”

It was something of a recurring theme.

“How about naivety?”

Izaya blinked despite himself.

“Are you accusing me of being naive?”

Shiki looked around desultorily enough, fetched an ashtray that he proceeded to use. His every movement was groomed to a perfect pitch of smooth ease.

“You brought together two men who are vying for you in roughly the same manner. Competitive behavior is to be expected.”
This gave Izaya pause. Enough to stifle his immediate indignation.

“It's been staring me in the face, you say?”

“Pretty much.”

Izaya gazed off into the window.

“Shiki-san, hindsight is always 20/20. At any rate, we aren't in a relationship so I don't see why you should concern yourself like this.”

Shiki had been contemplating his cigarette for the last couple of minutes. He now turned to Izaya.

“It may sound like a cheap shot but it's human nature. What you do when I'm not around isn't any of my business, usually at least, but it's different when I'm right there.”

Izaya went as far as lifting a hand to his throbbing temples but masked it by gesturing rather aimlessly.

“I see.”

“You need to ask yourself if you can afford to be clueless about those closest to you like this.”

Izaya smiled faintly with more than a touch of irony.

“Indeed, since it seems no-one will bother to actually tell me anything.”

“It's your job to know these things.”
Izaya was silent for a long while. His headache filled the silence with a low ringing noise. Izaya heard his own voice through it.

“In other words, you were teaching me a lesson of sorts.”

“You'll thank me later.”

Izaya chuckled.

“Oh, I'm sure.”

“Are you alright?”

Izaya nearly flinched as Shiki cleared the distance between them and placed a hand on his forehead. Izaya did not feel feverish, just weirdly disconnected as if he was being drawn into a void, but apparently it was taking a toll on his looks. He did not exactly swat Shiki’s hand but he did push it away.

“I'm fine, Shiki-san.”

It was then that Izaya caught sight of his other self-leaning on the sofa and showing right above Shiki's shoulder.

“'I'm fine, Shiki-san', tsk, tsk. Got to hand it you, it takes talent to get involved in a love triangle without even realizing it. Go you!”

It took all that Izaya had to look Shiki in the eye. Knowing that this other Izaya was just a very bizarre mind trick he found it beyond him to completely ignore it. Meanwhile Shiki was studying him closely.

“It's a good thing you got upset. I'm already surrounded by people who wouldn't dare to ever oppose me as it is. What I want from you is considerably different.”
Izaya was surprised. He did not expect Shiki to be this candid at this point.

“And I am only useful as long as I know what's going on.”

“Something like that.”

The other Izaya giggled and produced his infamous blade that he proceeded to dangle the air.

“Shiki-san here sees you a bit like a court jester. You know how it goes, jesters were allowed to tell it like it is even to the face of the king but that's only because they didn't actually count in the grand scheme of things.”

Izaya suspected that there was some truth to it. He knew it would not change anything but he tried blinking in the hopes of dispelling the ever so vivid illusion.

“I see. I'm afraid I am not particularly grateful but now that things are cleared I hope that you never treat the same way again.”

“And if I do?”

The other Izaya bounced, literally so, landing on the sofa on which he sat cross-legged.

“Be very careful now, oh naïve One. You're treading on thin ice here.”

“Then I'll be forced to put an end to our collaboration.”

Izaya made it a point to avoid the word 'relationship.'

Shiki contemplated him at length. It amused him that Izaya should make such a stand, as if it was up to him to decide something that important. As things stood Shiki could easily coerce Izaya into compliance but he reminded himself it was better not to antagonize him too much. After all, Izaya was best utilized when he was happy.
“Understood.”

“See, he understands! Loving yakuza. No, seriously, this is better than sappy drama. I can almost hear the violins harping away in the background.”

The other Izaya giggled, as ever very much amused.

“Shiki-san, have you considered that you may be misreading this situation?”

“In what way?”

“It seems to me I'm almost incidental in all this. You and Shizuo are both forceful personalities, in your very own different ways, you were bound to clash. I was simply the means of bringing you into closer contact.”

Here was a novel idea. Shiki smiled.

“Good to see you can bring something new to the table as ever. But rest assured, this is very much about you. No one could possibly interest both me and him.”

Izaya grew thoughtful, almost abstracted. He was in fact doing his utmost to ignore the other Izaya.

“And I suppose the lesson here is, 'watch yourself around Shizuo'?”

“Ultimately that's your call.”

Izaya's smile grew faintly ironic.

“Ultimately', it's still up to me to decide my own life.”
The other Izaya whistled.

“Oh my. There's still some bite to me, it seems! Here I was afraid you were about to lie down and let Shiki-sama walk all over you.”

“Make up your mind it's either 'you' or 'me'.”

Shiki blinked at this, confused. Izaya had an instant of sheer and blind panic. Not only had he just spoken to this unreal specter as he must have looked his way as well because Shiki now looked in the same direction. For a split second Izaya was sure Shiki would be able to actually see the other Izaya.

“'You' or 'me'?"

It took all Izaya had to make up a context out of thin air. The same air that Shiki was presently seeing, most likely.

“I mean that I can't have two people ruling my life, it's only me.”

Shiki did blink again. He was not entirely sure he followed the reasoning but then again this was Izaya. Meanwhile the other Izaya lifted up his hands in a mock gesture of surrender.

“Okay, okay. I'll go away before you start raving too much.”

And just like that the other Izaya disappeared. It made Izaya sick to his stomach. Somehow, talking to a hallucination did not strike him as demented as seeing it literally pop out of existence. For the time being, Izaya had no doubts it would come back.

“Fair enough. By the way, I have a job for you.”

“Yes?”

Izaya's headache receded to a bearable level.
“It’s a very simple matter, I want you to work as an observer.”

“An observer, Shiki-san?”

“I’m sure you heard that one of heads of the Ichinomiya group died recently. Your job will be to attend the funeral and make your observations.”

“It'll be a big affair, from what I've heard. A major event, even. Is there anything in particular I should be on the lookout for?”

“I leave that entirely up to you.”

“It won't turn into a shootout, will it?”

Shiki actually laughed.

“That only happens in movies.”

“And here I was afraid it'd turn into a Miike Takashi movie.”

“It won't. Most outsiders would find it boring but I bet you'll have a lot of fun.”

“That sounds a bit wrong, having fun at a funeral...”

“The funeral part is more of an excuse than anything else. Whenever major yakuza bosses gather together the police tend to get all too suspicious, you could say the funeral provides a perfect cover.”

“Ah, I hope this Ichinomiya was not offed to make this perfect timing happen.”
“Heart attack.”

“Maybe your men are right after all and the fabled Death Note is actually real.”

“So you're interested?”

Izaya nodded.

“Self-contained human micro-societies are of special interest to me. Will I stand out too much? I don’t suppose there will be a lot of outsiders.”

“The place will be packed, you’ll blend in just fine.”

“Any particular dress code?”

“Black suit and black tie.”

“I’m looking forward to this.”

It seemed oddly fitting to bring this interview to a close on such a business related issue.

When Kadota called the next day Izaya was surprised and rather happy. He could always do with some unwinding. As it turns out things did not quite go the way Izaya expected.

Instead of Kadota alone he found himself dealing with Erika and Walker. For some reason they were both bent on staring at Izaya from such a short range that he found himself rather unnerved. Izaya cast a glance at Kadota who was far too busy playing with Sushi.
“So perfect, just perfect!”

And with this oddball pronouncement Erika proceeded to walk around Izaya, eyes shining. Walker nodded most enthusiastically.

“It couldn't be any better!”

“Er, Erika-san? Could you explain what's going on?”

Erika did not quite ignore his baffled inquiry but she launched on a rant as a way of explaining while Walker finished her sentences.

“When we heard about it, the first we thought was,”

“It has got to be Izaya!”

“Like, no one else would do! But we were a bit afraid because, you know,”

“It's Orihara Izaya we're talking about here, as in, the Orihara Izaya!”

“So it was! But then Dotachin said,”

“Izaya is cool now”

“So we were like, 'No way, for real?!'”

“But you know, this kind of thing happens. Like with Vegeta!”

“Love it when you get oldschool!”
They stopped their chatter to beam at each other for a moment after which they turned their attention to Izaya again. Izaya took advantage of the interval of silence.

“Okay, okay, time out. What are you guys talking about?”

They answered in unison:

“Costplay!”

“...you want me to be your costplay model?”

“That's right!”

“Since Izaya-san is perfect!”

“Here!”

Erika handed him a very glossy picture of an anime character. Izaya did not recognize it, some vaguely Arabic guy with a long, long black braid, exposed midriff, puffy black pants and plenty of absurdly big jewels. The slasher smile and red eyes did look vaguely familiar.

“You want me to dress up like this...?”

By now the otaku duo had worked themselves into a pitch of excitement that could not possibly be contained. Erika literally jumped up and down and went as far as invading Izaya's personal space, forcing him to step back to avoid a collision.

“Yes!”

“Izaya is the perfect Judal!”
Izaya tried to glance at Kadota but all he got in return was a shrug and a bemused smile.

“Let us start from the start, okay? Is this an anime or...?”

A collective gasp. Erika picked up the thread of the conversation first.

“It's Magi!”

“Magi!”

“Can it be that Izaya-san doesn't know about Magi?”

“Such a cool manga!”

“Soon to be turned into anime, too.”

Izaya studied the picture anew.

“Right, I'm not familiar with it. But at any rate, you'll have to pick someone else. I've got a nasty scar, see?”

Izaya lifted his shirt to display said scar. It was barely visible but knowing that otakus tended to be perfectionists when it came to their love for 2D Izaya felt sure he was off the hook.

To his absolute surprise Erika actually proceeded to lift his shirt even more, turning to Walker as she did so.

“Look, look, Yumachi! Quite a sixpack!”

“If I swung the other way Izaya-san would so be my type!”
“Erika-san, will you stop undressing me?!”

Kadota giggled and covered it up by coughing and frowning at nothing in particular. Erika did not let go of the shirt, she produced a pencil that she applied to the length of the scar.

“That tickles! Stop that- actually, what are you even doing...?”

Despite his confusion Izaya was curious.

“Drawing dark ruhk on this. It works so well!”

“Oh, good idea Erika! It's totally Judal's trademark.”

Izaya sighed.

“Guys, guys! Time out. So you want me to dress up like this Judal guy and go to some costplay event. But why me? Don't they usually use fans for these things?”

Erika and Walker exchanged one quick glance. They seemed to sober up on the spot. Again it was up to Erika to resume the conversation.

“Well, Orihara-san is a dead ringer for Judal. And we're sure you can relate to him.”

Izaya noticed the change in denomination right away.

“Let me guess...this guy is the villain, isn't he?”

Walker stepped in.
“Dotachin told us you're more into villains as it is,”

“And Judal is one of those super cool, super sexy villains you can't help loving!”

Izaya sighed.

“Super sexy villain, huh..”

“Here, we brought the outfit!”

And indeed they produced two garment bags and set to displaying the goods.

“Hey, hey, I didn't say I agreed to this.”

Erika actually gasped in dismay.

“But you must! You're so perfect,”

Izaya cut her short.

“Yes, yes, you've said that already. What I want to know is, what's in it for me?”

Again Walker and Erika exchanged a quick glance but it was Kadota who pleaded their case.

“Come on Izaya, you'll have a load of fun. You get to dress up and act like a sexy bastard with a god complex...it's right up your alley.”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow.
“Kadota, don't tell me you think I'm sexy. I'm getting worried about you now.”

Kadota blushed on the spot and mumbled something. Erika immediately jumped to the opportunity.

“No, no, no, that can't be! Izaya-san belongs to Shi—”

Walker knew that Erika was getting too carried away by her love of Shizaya, as she put it, and about to ruin everything so he unceremoniously placed his hand over her mouth and thus neatly shut her up.

“Now, now, let's go back to costplay, costplay. Orihara-san, you'll do it, right? Think about it, think as doing it...for humanity!”

Walker's smile was so absurdly wide that it eclipsed his eyes altogether. He let go of Erika who joined him in staring intently at Izaya as if to hypnotize him into complying.

“Hmm...tell you what, I'll dress up. But only if you guys dress up as well.”

The duo fidgeted a bit.

“Just what kind of dressing up are we talking about...?”

“Why, Erika-san, I'm so glad you're showing interest but that wouldn't be any fun. You guys want me to prance about half naked in weird clothes, in return I want you guys to dress up. You'll find out all about in due time.”

Izaya's smile was vaguely sinister and settled the deal for the otaku: Izaya was just too perfect, they had to go with him. Erika shook hands with him.

“You've got a deal, Orihara-san!”

“Like, totally!”
“Try on the clothes! I'll help!”

And Erika would have stripped him right there if not for Izaya jumping beyond her reach.

“Oy! No undressing me, please. I can do it myself.”

Izaya might be getting the hang of how to handle Erika and Walker but he still did not quite know how to react when she tossed social convention completely to the side. Apparently Erika was unaware that girls should not forcibly separate guys from their clothes.

“Okay! But let me adjust the wig,”

“The wig is the crucial element.”

It soon became all too obvious that it might have been better to let someone help him put on the attire. Izaya felt remarkably awkward as he appeared before them wearing the oddball outfit.

Immediately Erika latched on to him: she attached the wig, clasped the fake jewelry on his neck and arms, and not content with that she did his makeup with plenty of dark shadowing around the eyes.

“It's complete!”

Erika and Walker danced around. Izaya moved his arms and legs, each movement causing a jingly sound.

“This is pretty heavy. Is it actually metal? Couldn't you go with tinsel or something?”

Erika shook her head most emphatically.

“That wouldn't do. If we had real gold we'd use it!”
“Like, we need actual metal to give the impression of weight.”

“Ah, 3D poses so many challenges!”

“That's another reason why we picked you, the crazy parkour moves!”

“Judal has some sick moves himself!”

“Can you stand on your hands?”

Izaya tilted his head slightly, the wig trailed behind him.

“Probably, let's see.”

Izaya jumped back, he needed room for acrobatics. Kadota had seen Izaya running madly many a time and dodging all sorts of very heavy objects that Shizuo hurled at him, Kadota had even chased him very recently but he had never fully appreciated Izaya's agility as he did now.

In one swift movement Izaya seemed to take a plunge forward and landed on just one hand. He had it seem effortless even as gravity pulled at his odd unpractical clothes, metallic fake jewelry and wig.

“Like this?”

“Yes! That's great! Show us some sexy back!”

Izaya giggled as he switched hands very rapidly, the jiggling picking up speed. He then threw himself into a backflip and finished on his feet with a flourishing bow. Erika and Walker clapped. Erika nearly jumped on him.

“Orihara-san! Can you pull cool fighting moves?”
Izaya was actually not sure. He knew that he used to be quite skilled at fighting, at least as far as dodging attacks went, but he had no idea if some bodily memory still remained. Izaya had some run-ins with Shizuo as it was and managed to escape and even lash back, apparently his acrobatic abilities seemed as sharp as ever.

“Hey, Kadota. Try attacking me.”

Kadota shook his head.

“Sorry but I don’t have a death wish.”

“Come on now. I won’t hurt you. Besides, I’m unarmed.”

“You’re more dangerous unarmed than most people are packing lead. Speaking of which just what happened to kawaii-chan?”

Izaya blinked.

“Kawaii-chan? What’s that?”

It was Kadota’s turn to blink.

“Your switchblade.”

“Wait, it has a name?! And kawaii-chan, of all things!”

In his surprise Izaya forgot that he should know this already.

“Yeah, it’s one hell of a weird name.”
“Or as I like to say, 'original'!”

“Yeah, not a lot of switchblades by that name out there, I bet.”

“Indeed. Now, try to hit me! I promise I won't hurt you.”

“Right...”

“Just trust me on this. Neh?”

Izaya’s smile was most reassuring. Kadota hesitated. It occurred to him that he saw Izaya as a friend. He decided to just fake a punch, more to appease Izaya than to please the otaku duo.

“Okay.”

Kadota did aim a fist squarely at Izaya’s jaw but he did so slowly enough so that anyone could dodge, let alone someone as fast as Izaya. As for what happened next Kadota could not tell—suddenly Izaya was nowhere to be seen, there was a bout of sharp pain followed immediately by complete darkness.

Izaya too was dismayed. He had not lied, he fully meant to just play fight for the fun of it. But the moment Kadota assumed a fighting position some switch went on in Izaya’s mind. Before Izaya could even process what had happened he had delivered a chop to the back of Kadota’s neck and knocked him out flat.

To his absolute horror Erika and Walker cheered. Izaya realized how dangerous it could be to mistake fantasy for reality, surely they believed this too was part of the act.

“Oy, Kadota, snap out of it! I didn't mean to, I swear- I didn't mean to,”

Izaya had to make a conscious effort to keep himself from shaking Kadota. He knew that if he started he wouldn't be able to stop.
“That was so cool, go Orihara-san!”

Izaya ignored all the prancing about and immediately called Shinra.

Shinra did not quite know what to make of Izaya's frantic summons. For one, Izaya being frantic was highly unusual and his harming someone accidentally was even stranger.

So Shinra already expected a highly unconventional situation. Still, he found himself blinking in surprise when Izaya banged the door open as soon as the doorbell chime struck.

“Shinra! You're slow, what took so long?!”

Shinra adjusted his glasses, a multipurpose gesture he had picked up. Izaya stood on the threshold, attired liked a gothic genie.

“I don't suppose you'll grant me three wishes if I, er, rub your lamp?”

Shinra smirked. Izaya was sure to catch the sexual innuendo. Except he did not.

“Hurry up, hurry up! Kadota's here,”

Before Shinra could protest Izaya had grabbed him by the wrist, the fake gold tinkling, and was dragging him to a sofa on which Kadota sat with a pack of ice on his neck. Erika and Walker stood by. Kadota made as if to rise but Izaya was having none of that.

“You, don't move a muscle until the doctor here checks you out.”

Shinra pretended to cough.
“I thought Kadota was knocked unconscious?”

“Izaya is overreacting, it was really nothing much.”

Erika had something to say.

“A brilliant chop!”

“Like this, baw! And Dotachin was out of it!”

“Izaya is Suzaku material here! All hail Britannia!”

“Britannia!”

Izaya ignored the craziness and invaded Kadota's personal space by nearly crawling into his lap. Shinra dropped his bag. There was something so highly sensual about half-naked Izaya in such a pose that Shinra could not believe it was unintentional. Surely Izaya was trolling Kadota for good measure.

“How do you feel, Kadota? Sure nothing hurts? How many fingers am I holding?”

“Er, three.”

Izaya bounced back and sat on cross-legged facing Shinra.

“Go on, do your doctor thing.”

Shinra struggled to put on his serious professional face. A simple inspection showed that that there was no damage done.

“You'll be fine, it's a simple concussion. It'll go away in a couple of weeks, just put this gel twice a
Izaya sighed in relief, closed his eyes and united his hand as if praying. It was only then that Shinra realized that Izaya had been genuinely worried.

“Thank god. Kadota, I am really sorry. I don't know what came over me.”

Kadota had not fully recovered, not so much from the chop to the neck, as to Izaya's oddball behavior.

“It's okay.”

“I'll make it up to you, I swear.”

Izaya looked so utterly mortified that Kadota actually felt sorry for him. Erika greatly appreciated this range of emotions and was discreetly taking pictures of Izaya with her phone.

“So you two were play fighting?”

Izaya nodded, dejectedly enough.

“That explains it, then. Your self-defense instinct kicked in and took over much to Kadota's horror.”

“It was a bad idea, I can see that now. I can't express how,”

Izaya's voice broke in a sob. It terrified everyone in the room, even Erika felt highly uncomfortable. Kadota broke the mood by picking up Sushi who was meandering about and placing the tiny feline fur ball on Izaya's lap.

“There, kitty wants you to cheer up.”
Izaya petted Sushi and smiled warmly. Then he jumped to his feet, holding the cat up in the air and spinning around.

“Sushi! If only you had wings!”

Walker and Erika chimed in unison,

“Exceeds for the win!”

Izaya seemed to have regained his bearings.

“Thanks for coming on such a short notice, Shinra. How much do I owe you?”

“No need for that.”

Izaya frowned.

“I know, you get to wear Sushi on your head like a hat! There.”

Sushi meowed and made himself comfortable on Shinra's hair.

“He won't chew on my hair...?”

“Never, Sushi is well behaved. Best cat you will ever meet. Shake paws with him!”

Shinra noticed how gently Izaya lifted the cat again and held him for a paw-shake. It was childish, silly and oddly compelling. That Izaya had a streak of immaturity was nothing new but Shinra likened it to the cruel games children were often fond of. And while Shinra had not been a normal child by any stretch of the imagination Izaya as a child had bordered on sociopath.

“You sure have changed a lot. I wonder what happened to you.”
Izaya was ready to dismiss Shinra's suspicions in his nonchalant way. But he never got around to because Erika interrupted.

“Oh, oh, maybe it's like Viletta. Izaya-san here lost his memory in some accident and became so much nicer as a result.”

Izaya managed to smile but he could feel his stress levels climbing. Fortunately no one tended to take the otakus all that seriously.

“Hmm...that's an interesting idea. Izaya, remember how we first met?”

Izaya was not entirely sure. He had information on how he had met most of the people that currently populated his life but Shinra belonged to a deeper strata, to a past without witnesses. Izaya could only act breezy and hope it would carry him through.

“But of course. How could I forget my schoolmate, tsk on you.”

“Then you remember our field trip to Nara?”

Izaya was too much in a hurry to change the subject and lay it to rest. Everyone's eyes were on him.

“Ah, Nara. It was fun but I can't say I care much for the countryside. How about some tea?”

Izaya hopped away to prepare it.

“You were crazy about the big Buddha statue.”

“It's pretty cool, that statue.”

Shinra waited until Izaya was pouring the delicately fragrant tea into cups to speak again.
“Funny you remember that field trip. Since it never happened.”

In hindsight Izaya saw this coming. But of course it was too late to properly make amends. It occurred to Izaya that the best policy was also to make sure there was no need to make amends.

He opted for a shrug.

“Some other town, then.”

“How about that tea?”

“In hindsight Izaya saw this coming. But of course it was too late to properly make amends. It occurred to Izaya that the best policy was also to make sure there was no need to make amends.”

He opted for a shrug.

“Some other town with a big Buddha statue?”

Izaya waved dismissively, his fake jewelry tinkling in tandem.

“So maybe I'm mixing up things. It's been a while after all.”

Izaya was not precisely cornered but close enough. The silence from the audience, as he now saw Erika, Walker and Kadota, only showed they were not missing a beat. This would be the perfect time for his accursed hallucination to haunt him.

Shinra adjusted his glasses and smiled.

“I believe you'd call this 'trolling'. There's no way you could have fooled everyone if you had lost your memory. Right?”

Izaya mirrored the smile.

“Indeed.”

“How about that tea?”
Izaya handed him a cup. He made sure that his gestures did not betray his inner agitation.

“You guys want tea as well?”

They nodded. Kadota sipped it with a perplexed look on his face.

“You know, it'd explain a lot...”

Izaya knew all too well that once an idea took hold of someone's mind it was best to exhaust it thoroughly if one wanted to get rid of it. Brushing it aside could only do so much. He threw himself on the sofa with grace and crossed a leg.

“Oh yes, I'm sure it would. But think about it, wouldn't someone have realized it by now?”

“Not necessarily. If you had someone to help you out.”

Izaya giggled at this. Shinra was disturbingly close to the truth.

“That would require a whole conspiracy.”

“Makes perfect sense, coming from you. Everything is a conspiracy when you're concerned.”

“Still. My personality should be radically different, shouldn't it?”

“You tell me, Izaya.”

But Izaya was not completely disarmed. The pressure seemed to energize him. He was about to fight his corner when the oatku suddenly up and left, dragging Kadota behind them.

“We'll contact you about the costplay event, Orihara-san. See you later,”
“See you later.”

Izaya blinked in surprise. He did not quite know what to think but he was glad to see them depart. That way he could focus exclusively on Shinra. Without missing a beat he carried on:

“A human being is the result of many elements, so many in fact that they are never combined in exactly the same way in two individuals. How great is the role of memories in this, that is the question here. Imagine yourself: suddenly you forget everything. This means you do not remember Celty. How could you possibly be the same person if that were to happen? All your experience would be wiped clean, just like that.”

Izaya snapped his fingers for emphasis.

“I could say I'd never forget Celty but I know amnesia often affects a person's entire personal life. But one thing I know for sure, I'd fall in love with her all over again, new person or not.”

“Oh? That's wonderful of you but I cannot relate.”

“Funny you brought up Celty as the person that defines me as I am. In your case that person would be Shizuo.”

“Come on now, that's just weird.”

“Yet that's what you told me.”

Izaya started all too visibly agitated.

“You know how it goes, I say a lot of things I don't quite mean.”

“I've noticed. It's what keeps one guessing. But isn't it true? Shizuo defines who you are.”
Izaya secured his cup of tea and slowly sipped. He was aware that he behaving like a sulky child but he not quite know how to properly navigate his emotions. Shinra's claim bothered him greatly.

“It's entirely different. Celty and you are a couple while Shizuo and I...”

“Yes?”

“We have resolved some of our differences. But that's about it,”

“And does Shizuo feel the same way?”

Izaya granted him a thin, cold smile.

“Go ask him, how should I know?”

It was Shinra's turn to shrug. He got up as if to leave.

“Fair enough. I'll on my way now. Try not to knock out people like that, if you can.”

“Like I said, it was an accident.”

“I believe you. Take care. And keep the outfit, it's so you.”

Izaya had to laugh.
Chapter 14

Izaya had assumed the costplay event would take place in Akihabara. To his dismay the otaku gang led him to Ikebukuro, of all places.

“Eh...the event's here?”

Erika nodded enthusiastically.

“That's right! 'bukuro has a good costplay scene too,”

“It's not just Akiba!”

Izaya hesitated before entering the site. He did not mind parading in the highly revealing outfit but it was entirely different when he did so in his very turf. Akihabara offered absolute anonymity, Ikebukuro was a display case where the eyes of the world were upon him.

“I'm not too sure-”

“Let's go, let's go!”

Erika dragged him, quite literally, and before Izaya knew it he was surrounded by all sorts of strangely clad people. In less than five minutes he felt at ease, his clothes actually allowed him to blend in very nicely.

“Hey, this is pretty cool.”

Izaya giggled as he stared at Erika and Walker. True to their word they had obeyed Izaya and now sported a pretty dress and a fur fringed jacket respectively. Izaya had gone as far as ditching Erika's hat and fixing her hair at a hairdresser. He tilted his head to the side, metallic clinking, and smiled.
“You know, Erika-san...you're a pretty girl. How about you guys take this opportunity and turn this into a date?”

They both ignored him. Izaya realized they were scanning the crowd and now found whatever they were looking for.

“There he is!”

“He made it!”

“Happiness!”

Izaya was not even entirely surprised to see Shizuo walking toward them but he was not prepared for Shizuo's getup. It consisted of a full body golden colored armor, wisps of cloth over the shoulder and wrapped around the waist. But what had Izaya gaping the most was the hair dyed red and lower lip piercing.

“Shizuo...Oh my god, what have they done to you! And...is that makeup?”

“You don't look too shabby yourself.”

Erika perched herself on Shizuo's naked arm.

“He's the perfect Masrur! No matter how you look at it, it's got to be Heiwajima-san!”

“Totally!”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“How come he gets to play one of the good guys and I'm the villain?”
He was so caught up in the moment that he did not even feel any animosity.

“They needed a strong guy to play the part. So I guess I was the obvious choice.”

Izaya sighed, arms hanging down and shoulders heaving all too dramatically. It took some skill to keep his balance, considering the long wig.

“But red hair? Kinda pinkish even? What's up with that?”

“Gotta dress up like the character and stuff...that includes the hair.”

“Is that a real piercing?”

“Nah.”

Izaya swirled around on one foot. The wig spun madly and would have surely knocked out in the vicinity had Izaya not leaped into a rare empty spot. It attracted a lot of attention and by the time he had stopped there was a small crowd shooting pictures of him.

As it turned out Izaya had a lot of fun. Unbeknownst to him his sisters were invited and only added to the fun. Izaya enjoyed posing as people milled around him, snapping photos, and somewhere along the line he did not even had to act much, he was just his usual self only with more stress on crazy laughter and arrogance. Shizuo too did not have to act much since his role was the silent type. He did pick up very heavy objects to the glee of the audience that gasped much and proceeded to take pictures.

The otaku duo knew how to type cast. Both Izaya and Shizuo gained prizes, not only because they were dressed to fit the part so perfectly but because they could enact the part. Izaya's acrobatics came up very handy. But he avoided mock fights.

At the end of the event they found themselves alone, sitting side by side at their favorite park. They were still on their outfits but attracted little attention in the nearly deserted park: the sun spread out in a final dash of sinking light as the day came to an end.
There was a deliberate distance between them and for a while silence.

“You know, Shizuo, if your character were to fight mine, mine would mop the floor with yours. Masur may be super strong but Judal is a magi. A magi, mind you!”

Izaya's spirits were high.

“Yeah, I guess. This Judal is more interesting, too.”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh? You think so?”

“Yeah. Like you say he's a magi, and he's also seriously messed up. Makes for an interesting character.”

Izaya sat cross-legged, thoughtfully.

“You know, I didn't take for the type that's into shounen manga.”

Shizuo was not a fan. He had not even heard of Magi until Erika approached him and was only reeled into joining because it was an opportunity for meeting Izaya in a friendly environment. It almost amused him that Erika should know that using Izaya as bait was a good idea.

Shizuo had read the manga out of curiosity more than anything else.

“It's fun. Your character kinda makes the manga, actually.”

“You think so? How about the nakama group and goody-good feelings and whatnot?”

Shizuo smiled around a cigarette.
“You were always pretty cruel to shounen heroes. I remember this essay you wrote, 'The moral pitfalls of shounen'. No one understood a word of it, including the teacher.”

“Aha! But that was the whole point!”

“I bet. I read the whole thing, all ten pages.”

Izaya blinked.

“Really?”

Shizuo took some time puffing smoke into the dimming light.

“Yeah. I wanted to know what it was all about. Can't say I understood it but some parts really stood out for me. Like how in shounen manga offers...'simulacra of personal growth', through the desire to become stronger and of protecting 'everyone and their pets', you said the combination of these cripple the characters as such. Cuz it 'caters to the childish indulgence and immature self-immolation at the same time'."

“Wow, I'm amazed you can quote it! But how cynical of me, shounen manga is supposed to be about having fun with your friends and kicking bad guys' asses.”

“Yeah but you went into that as well...something about the mangaka defines the hero and by default he will be the good guy even when the situations, deeds, etc, imply otherwise. 'The hero gets a free pass and is rewarded for his irresponsibility.'”

Izaya was not so much interested in whatever insight he might have had into popular culture, what had him riveted was Shizuo's unlikely ability to recall all this.

“I don't get it, how on earth can you remember all that?”

“I've read it a few times. I kept the paper.”
“But...why?”

“I didn't mean to but while you were reading it out some sentences stuck. And then you just lost interest and I took it. Doubt you'd care either way.”

“What sentences resounded with you?”

“Very few problems are ever solved by going on a rampage.”

Izaya was silent for a while.

“Well, that's obviously so but shounen manga is escapism at its best. Of course its 'lessons' would never work in the real world. That's the whole point.”

“Yeah, bet you just wrote it to be a smartass but you kinda had a point.”

“What can I say, my intelligence must needs radiate.”

“You're a clever one, right.”

Izaya frowned very slightly. He meant it as a jest and it annoyed him to be taken seriously. But he could reply in kind.

“You really think so?”

“Always knew you were clever. You're probably as clever as it gets. Your problem was never a lack of brains.”

“Oh yeah? What is my problem, then? Care to share?”
“I don't know.”

“Clearly, you have some theory.”

Shizuo seemed to think about it. Izaya hated himself for being on the edge of his seat, quite literally, as if hanging from Shizuo's every word.

“I guess you were born missing something. A sense of human decency? Something like, 'I shouldn't fuck people over.'”

“So I lack empathy. Go ahead and call me a sociopath, why don't you.”

Shizuo shrugged slightly.

“Hey, you asked.”

“Whatever. You have your ideas and I have mine, there's no point in trying to reconcile them.”

“I looked up what 'Judal' means. It's Arabic for 'argument', 'debate', 'controversy'.”

Izaya blinked angrily. Somewhere along the line he had jumped to his feet, laced his hands behind his back and stared out at empty space. He now turned to Shizuo again.

“Point being?”

“It fits you way too well. Debating and stuff. If people can't understand each other than they gotta talk.”

“What happened to the 'controversy' bit?”

“I'm trying to get over that.”
“Oh really.”

“Heard what happened to Kadota-”

“That was an accident!”

Izaya lurched forward as if to actually strike. The metal jingled harshly.

“I know. It sucks to hurt people when you don't mean to.”

“And you'd know all about that.”

Shizuo nodded, doggedly.

“Yeah.”

“So I'm supposed to sympathize with you now?”

“That's up to you but you can understand me a bit better, I guess...or hope.”

“It's actually not 'up to me' as you put it. Whether I sympathize or not is out of my hands, I can't change my feelings at will like that.”

“And that's a good thing. For both of us.”

“Anyway, I have to get going now.”

Shizuo tagged along as Izaya returned to the venue. And found it about to close. Izaya asked around but the otakus were nowhere to be seen nor was any inkling of the Orihara twins.
“We’ve been dumped! I can’t believe it! I don’t have my cell phone, or any money or a change of clothes!”

“Looks like it.”

Izaya looked around some more. He could borrow a passerby’s phone and ask Namie to pick him up but he would rather not as she was sure to disapprove. The last thing he wanted was to let her know he’d been had by a group of 2D enthusiasts.

“Shizuo, let me borrow some money from you. Just enough to cover the subway fare, I’ll refund you tomorrow and with interest.”

“Can’t. Got no money on me either.”

Izaya blinked as he became aware that there was no pocket in Shizuo’s makeshift armor.

“What am I supposed to do? Ah, screw it, I’ll just walk home.”

And indeed Izaya made as if to do just that.

“All the way to Shinjuku?”

“That’s right.”

“In that outfit?”

“I’ll manage.”

With that said it was getting increasingly darker and Izaya was not looking forward to going all the way to Shinjuku on foot.
“Bad idea.”

“It's none of your business.”

“It kinda is,”

“No, it's not.”

“You can take a cab and pay him at the destination. Or borrow money from Simon, it's just around the corner.”

Izaya's eyebrow twitched. These were reasonable suggestions that he had at all failed to consider because he was too angry with Shizuo more than the present situation.

“Fine, Simon it is. I'm getting hungry as it is. Those otaku, I'll get them.”

Izaya visibly gloated at this prospect.

“So Simon's it. Russia Sushi.”

They had meandered in that direction and were already in front of the restaurant. Izaya stopped and clicked with his tongue.

“Can I really eat here without getting dysentery?”

“It's good food.”

Still Izaya hesitated. Nothing bind him to this, he could easily just do as Shizuo suggested and pay the cab at the destination or borrow money from Simon and leave. But he knew none of these options would put him in quite the light he wanted.
“Okay but if I die I’ll come back to haunt you up to the seventh generation.”

“You're getting better, used to be 'up to the tenth generation’”.

Before Izaya could react to this they were passing the threshold and all eyes were on them.

It was the last thing Simon expected. Shizuo and Izaya just strolling in, together, wearing some sort of bizarre fetish wear.

“Orihara-san, Heiwajima-san, good evening. Welcome.”

Izaya fully expected Simon to feed him the finest treats even though he could not presently pay but he was still a bit surprised that Simon should agree to even giving them a private room at Shizuo’s request. Then again Simon would probably rather keep them out of sight.

Izaya looked around at the sparse but easy on the eyes décor. Considering how unorthodox the menu was he half expected psychedelic patterns and maybe a phallic statue or two.

“Not too shabby, this place.”

“Yeah.”

Izaya hurried to remove the wig and sighed in content as he flopped on the floor and landed cross-legged. Shizuo noticed how effortless it all seemed.

“This thing is way too heavy.”

“You should grow your hair and braid it like that.

“Right...so you could easily yank me back next time you chase me around.”
The (in)famous cheese treats arrived in due time. Izaya eyed them suspiciously and went as far as to poke one. He watched with baited breath as Shizuo availed himself.

“Oy, are you really going to eat that?”

“Sure am. It's good for you, too.”

“How exactly is this...thing good for me? Looks like nuclear waste.”

Cheese oozed out as Shizuo bit. Izaya winced.

“Cheese is made out of milk, milk's good for you so cheese sushi is good for you.”

“Next time you try your hand at playing the logician do pick a syllogism that makes sense.”

Shizuo dismissed the sarcasm altogether.

“Never saw nuclear waste, how come you know what it looks like?”

“I don't. It's an informed guess.”

“Dunno what your problem is. There's sushi with cream cheese in America. People eat it here too.”

Izaya jabbed a finger, metallic jingling accompanying his outrage.

“Just because some people cannot see the error of their ways is no reason for one to join the club. I do not care what kind of cheese it is, sushi and cheese do not combine.”

“Yeah?”
Izaya folded his arms and nodded as if he had made an excellent point that was so self-explanatory it needed no further backing. Which did not mean he was about to let the topic drop. Some things could not be overstated.

“Indeed. Shizuo, food is very important and respecting one's culinary heritage is paramount. Tradition has perfected the way of making sushi, it's been sieved through the ages and reached us as a fully accomplished dish. Adding to it is sacrilege.”

“So you care about tradition? Guess that's the only time you give a damn about it.”

“What can I say, I am most passionate about this subject.”

“Does that mean you gonna eat some natto next?”

“Maybe.”

“Eat some of the normal stuff first, you'll die of hunger if you don't have some grub.”

Izaya sampled a tuna nigiri. He chewed at length.

“It's satisfactory.”

“Good.”

For a while they munched in silence. Izaya watched Shizuo very closely and followed his every move.

“Did you really dye your hair red?”

“Yeah. It'll go away with water.”
“Stick to blonde.”

“Will do.”

“You know, considering how much jewelry Judal wears you'd think he'd have a few rings. Some earrings, too.”

“You wanna bling him up?”

“You have to admit it'd look cool.”

“Yeah. If you're the one wearing it.”

“You know, I wonder if you are in cahoots with the otakus.”

“No clue what 'cahoots' is.”

Izaya sighed as if he were surrounded by idiots.

“I mean that for all I know you planned with them to bail out on me like that. You did bring your cigarettes to the park, odds are you knew what they were up to.”

“Paranoia will be the death of you.”

“Ah! Wouldn't you like that!”

Izaya was on a roll of sorts when the door slid open and a very befuddled Tom stood on the threshold.
“Sorry to intrude, I was passing by and heard from Simon that you guys were here so I thought...”

Tom trailed off. He had rushed with the vague intention of putting an end to whatever crisis was about to erupt. Tom could still not quite place Shizuo and Izaya’s shifting relationship and he expected to find Shizuo about to go berserk. Instead he found the two having dinner and wearing the most bizarre clothes known to men.

Izaya jumped to his feet and nearly dragged Tom into the room.

“Tom-san! How great of you to join us, do take a seat. Now, I was just educating Shizuo on the evils of cheese sushi and I would like a third opinion. It's deadly, isn't it? Oh the ignominy!”

Tom blinked and cast a glance at Shizuo as if asking for guidance. Shizuo shook his head.

“Dunno what 'ignominy' means either.”

Tom cleared his throat to gain time. He had to say something but was unsure of what line to adopt.

“Er, you're wearing some strange clothes tonight. Are you going to a party?”

Izaya waved all this away with more metallic clashing.

“Costplay, costplay. But that's not important now, what matters is: cheese and sushi.”

“You better answer or he'll go on about this forever.”

Tom pretended to be studying the food items in question.

“It's not too bad, I guess. I mean, it's tasty.”

Izaya’s sigh redoubled in volume and for emphasis his entire body seemed to collapse on itself.
“Ah, how you wound my heart, Tom-san!”

And Izaya went as far and clutch at his own chest as if his heart was indeed bleeding. Shizuo chuckled.

“You haven't even tried it.”

Izaya recovered and poked the cheesy stuff that dangled from his finger as he drew it away.

“Ew...is it meant to be all gooey like this?”

“Just try it.”

Izaya went as far as licking his finger and immediately grimaced.

“Gah...the horror, the horror!”

Shizuo picked up that particular morsel and proceeded to calmly eat it. Suddenly Izaya jumped to his feet.

“I know! Let's go to the fish market!”

Shizuo seemed to consider this suggestion.

“What for?”

“What do you mean what for? For the fish, the fish! They open really late, or rather very early, if we start now we should get there by the time they're opening. That's when you get the fresh stuff.”
“Is that there great a difference? You got loads of fish here.”

Izaya rolled his eyes and tapped his foot most expressively.

“Of course it makes a difference. You'll see!”

“How about the money?”

“No problem there, Tom-san can help. Neh?”

Tom was in the process of eating, he dropped his food.

“Help, you say, Orihara-san?”

Tom had no idea how Izaya did it but in a blink of an eye Izaya was all too close for comfort.

“Izaya' is fine, no need to be formal. I presently have no money on me so I must ask you to lend me some. Make it the usual 10% interest rate.”

The last thing on Tom's mind was to charge Izaya any interest at all, let alone 10%. Izaya's enthusiasm was not contagious as much as potentially dangerous. At least so Tom believed. Once again he turned to Shizuo for some clue.

“No shoes, how are we supposed to go to this fish market place?”

“They have boots there. We'll buy some.”

“Yeah?”

To Tom's profound relief Izaya stepped back.
“Where there's a will there's a way. Did you know that the Tokyo fish market is the biggest in the world? Just think about it! In the whole world! And here we are missing out on it!”

“It ain't going nowhere.”* [It actually did, having moved location since this part was written]

“You don't know that. An earthquake could wipe it out tomorrow.”

“Good point.”

“So! Let us go!”

Izaya did not quite bounce but his impatience showed in a series of jingling notes as the metal clinked. Shizuo sealed the deal by getting up and making as if to leave, Tom could only follow them in something of a whirl of confusion. Izaya borrowed Tom's phone and informed Namie that he had 'business to attend to', and promptly sailed into the street and even managed to hail a cab, odd outfit notwithstanding. At this late an hour the trains were no longer running and the taxi fare was as hefty as Tom feared.

Izaya carried the very long wig but upon arrival he figured it was too cumbersome and promptly put it on.

The sheer size of the venue dizzied Tom and even Izaya was very impressed. Izaya was aware of being something of an empirical sponge, a living core of aggregated experiences ever expanding in scope and span. From the salty tang in the air to the milling of machines and men carrying the riches of sea, all was very new and highly exciting.

Izaya half-twirled about between the many crates, swaying gracefully like a creature from another world.

Tom was fairly certain they would not be allowed into the inner sanctum of the market but to his surprise people recognized Izaya, oddball clothes or not, and they were immediately escorted to the tuna auction site. Rubber boots were provided and they were even given some of the best seats.

“Wow, look at that! Rows and rows of tuna going on forever. I wonder if it's wise to fish them like
that...one must care for sustainability or risk endangering the continuation of this mighty species.”

Izaya sank into a brown study, slightly hunched and frowning as he contemplated the future of tuna-kind.

“Nothing you can do about that now, just enjoy the ride while we're at it.”

Izaya rebounded immediately.

“You have a point, Shizuo. Let the games begin!”

Izaya was surprised at finding out that he was something a celebrity at the fish market, it made him wonder what other unlikely connections he did not have scattered all over Tokyo. He took it all in stride and gladly accepted the tuna samples that a particularly eager seller now presented him with.

“Thanks! But I don't think I'll be biding tonight.”

“We always welcome your patronage, Orihara-san.”

Izaya bowed back and took a few bites before sharing. Shizuo joined him in chewing thoughtfully. Few times had Tom seen such a bizarre spectacle, Shizuo and Izaya arrayed in fantasy Arabic clothes, sampling bits of fresh tuna while all around people vied for the goods of the sea.

“Tom-san, have some too. It doesn't get much fresher than this!”

Shizuo smiled.

“You'd eat the fish alive if you could. There was that time we went to the aquarium on a school trip. You asked the people there what the fish tasted like. You were this close to jumping into the tanks and taking a bite.”

“Hey, what am I supposed to be...a polar bear or something?”
“Yeah, as far as the fish know.”

Tom was vaguely fascinated and found himself chiming in.

“How about swimming with dolphins? It sounds fun.”

“Swimming with dolphins sounds way too cool!”

“Just don’t go eating them.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Shizuo, dolphins are mammals. Not fish. I wouldn't eat them.”

“You eat beef, cows are mammals too.”

“Just what the hell are you, Linnaeus?”

Izaya followed the auction with great attention. He managed to convince a winner to allow him to take pictures with a particularly big tuna. Tom's phone was employed and Izaya posed happily, standing on one leg, doing a V sign, pretending to be holding the fish.

“Tom-san, send them to my phone! I am so sharing these with everyone.”

Tom could hardly believe that dawn was already breaking. They were making their way through the by now almost fully functional market, Izaya intent on looking at the pictures.

Izaya yawned and stretched, eyes closed.
“About time you go to sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah. All in due time.”

“You'll get sick again if you don't hit the sack.”

“Hey, I'm tougher than I seem.”

With that said Izaya was rubbing his eyes already. So his eyesight was slightly blurred when someone hailed him.

“Oh look, Orihara-san is a fallen magi. I always thought so.”

Izaya blinked away involuntary tears and was immediately on alert.

“Aoba-kun? What on Earth are you doing here, at this time of day even?”

Aoba smirked knowingly.

“I woke up very early. Unlike some people I do not go around traipsing all night long. In weird clothes, even.”

“Oh gee, aren't you a little moralist. No one likes goody good shoes, I'll have you know.”

Aoba laughed.

“Oh, I know. Good morning, Heiwajima-san, Tanaka-san.”

Tom waved, not quite sure who this kid was or how exactly he seemed to know them. He wondered if Izaya and this Aoba were related. They could pass for siblings.
“You still haven't answered, what are you doing here?”

“A man has his secrets.”

Izaya giggled madly for a while, long enough to make anyone else feel uncomfortable but Aoba took it in stride.

“Oh dear, you're a riot. A real man of the world, Aoba-kun!”

“I am looking for the goblin shark. It has been sighted off the shore of Japan and word has it there's a small colony in Tokyo Bay.”

“Eh, goblin shark, huh. What kind of fish is that?”

All of a sudden Izaya seemed interested. Aoba frowned very slightly and produced his cell phone.

“There.”

“Oh wow, this is crazy ugly. Very apt name, it looks like a demon fish. I don't think it's all that tasty.”

Aoba's smile grew even wider. He retrieved his phone and decided to change tactics altogether.

“Judal suits you very well but Heiwajima-san should be Sinbad. That way you could be all over him and claim it's just canon.”

Izaya's immediate reaction was that Aoba either had no sense of self-preservation or that did not at all see Izaya as a threat. But Izaya realized how wrong he was almost immediately. Aoba was simply intelligent and knew that Izaya could not possibly react menacingly without admitting the jab had a point.
Aoba might be treading on shaky ground but he knew very well his way about it. As it was Izaya could only downplay it.

“Oh? So you're a Magi fan?”

“Judal makes it worth reading.”

“Just how popular is this Judal guy? Seriously, he wants to start a war for the fun of it.”

“So do you and you're pretty popular.”

Izaya started despite himself. He could not avoid the immediate recoil of fear.

“You shouldn't believe rumors, you know.”

“Some of them are real. Like, 'Shizuo and Izaya are getting along nowadays'.”

Izaya was not entirely sure whether to outward deny his oddball former plans that he did not even fully understand or know or to play along. Or what do say regarding his strange relationship with Shizuo. Clearly Aoba had his theories and was not to be discounted, kid or not. Izaya was still debating how to tackle it when Shizuo broke into the conversation.

“Friend of yours?”

“How rude of me, ignoring my elders like this. Allow me to introduce myself, I’m Kuroma Aoba. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Again, friend of yours?”

Aoba's permanent smile flickered slightly. Izaya shrugged. He could not account for the strong feeling of dislike that Aoba inspired. It had nothing to do with the visceral quasi-recollection that Shizuo caused nor did it depend much on all he had read about Aoba. It was simply an instinctive reaction.
Izaya had never experienced anything quite like this. There was a deeply seated antagonism barely
hidden under the surface of too much smiling. It occurred to Izaya that there were stages and types of
hate as much as there was to love. Aoba obviously hated him but in a different way that Kida did.
Also, Izaya could never bring himself to hate Kida and yet he sensed he could easily hate Aoba.

But all his keen insight Izaya failed to see that the real reason for this repulsion ran much deeper or
that it might ultimately rest on their being too similar for comfort.

“Not really a friend, no.”

Aoba's smile literally beamed, the budding morning casting its share of light on him.

“Ah, how cruel of you to say that, Orihara-san. You know how much I admire you. Why, I think of
you as an older brother.”

Izaya waved this away.

“That's nice. But it depends on how you feel about older brothers, doesn't it?”

Aoba had gone as far as it was prudent and perhaps even a bit too far. He busied himself with his
cellphone now.

“Anyway, can you pose for a few pictures? You look too much the part for me to let the chance slip
by.”

“You like Judal that much?”

“Of course.”

“I don't mind but if you want some cool pictures Erika and Walker took loads yesterday at the
costplay event. I'll get them to send you the pics if you want.”
Aoba giggled.

“I feel left out. Time and time again I asked you to dress up as Judal and you'd say 'I don't 'do' other people or fictional characters. I am Orihara Izaya after all.”

Izaya was taken aback. He had not imagined that Aoba and himself might have some kind of reluctant complicity going on. Yet he could sense something to that effect. It disturbed him more than it had any right to.

Izaya stood one leg and folded his arms to better show off the bracelets.

“Is that good enough for you?”

“Perfect. Just stay still.”

Aoba took many pictures, in fact he walked around Izaya to capture him from all angles, phone squarely aimed at Izaya. As soon as it was over Izaya stretched some more and then sat on one of the many chairs that had sprung up in front of the opening food stands. He ordered tea for everyone. Izaya pretended to scan the river. It shimmered momentarily, bits of dawn swimming in the water.

“I don't think you'll find your goblin shark here. It's a very rare creature, it's bound to be reclusive. No way it'll be out here so close to the market. If it lives in Tokyo Bay at all it must lurk in the depths, not here with all these people and boats.”

“I must cover all bases if I have any hope of finding it. Thank you for letting me shoot you.”

“All long as it's just pictures you're shooting.”

Aoba seemed thrilled at the insinuation that he rushed to deny.

“Why, I would never shoot you in any other way. You really look so much like Judal, it's uncanny.”

And with this Aoba planted his chin on his hands and stared at Izaya as if at a statue.
“You're a diehard fan, huh.”

Aoba nodded.

“I like Magi but it would be so much better if Judal was the main character.”

“It would hardly even be the same manga.”

“True, it'd be way better.”

“Oy, does anyone actually like the heroes?”

“Plenty of people do. But I don’t. Do you like the heroes?”

It was a harmless topic and yet Izaya knew that there were implications far and wide. Whatever he said would have repercussions.

“I do not dislike them. I suppose they're fine for what they are but,”

“But they bore you to tears and Judal would never be boring.”

It annoyed Izaya considerably that he absolutely agreed. And that Shizuo was very much aware of this added to his annoyance.

“When it comes to fiction heroes often come across as dull.”

“One of the problems is that the heroes always mean what they say and say what they mean. Now Judal, at one point he got all teary eyed and pulled a 'you don't understand me, how can you judge me, I was abandoned as a child and brought up to be this way' and just as Sinbad is starting to feel sorry for him Judal bursts out laughing and goes, 'but who cares!'”
This caught Izaya's attention. He knew enough about Aoba's background to suspect the conversation had very little to do about Judal at all. Izaya managed to look past the refined animosity and catch a glimpse of a lonely boy.

“That's the way to go, hero, villain or whatnot. We are more than just our past and the usual Freudian excuse only goes so far.”

Aoba's perma-smile slipped.

“So you believe in free will.”

“I do, actually. Background and circumstances do circumvent the sphere of actions you can take but in most cases you still have some choice even within a more or less limited set of options.”

“Ah, who would use such complex reasoning with a kid my age? Only Orihara-san.”

“I'm not about to baby you, it'd be insulting to us both.”

Izaya acknowledged Aoba as a peer with all that entailed. It was also a warning.

“I have to interview a 'young adult' for my homework assignment. Could I interview you, Orihara-san?”

“Why me?”

“The idea is to interview a grownup and ask them about their career.”

Izaya tilted his head to the side and considered it.

“How about you interview Shizuo instead? He's had plenty of jobs, it'll make for an interesting interview.”
Aoba held up his hands apologetically.

“Not that I do not respect Heiwajima-san, of course. But I think it'll be extremely interesting to hear from an informant.”

And the smile returned in all its splendor. Izaya wondered whether there was even such an assignment. Either way, Izaya was realizing that he gone too long without factoring in Aoba and this was a problem. Izaya knew that he needed to interact more and Aoba was offering him the perfect opportunity. That Aoba most definitely expected to exploit this to his advantage would only add more to the thrill of turning the tables on him.

Izaya had not come to like Aoba but he could not deny he enjoyed the prospect of a battle of wits with so much on the line but not too much. Izaya could not properly appreciate such a battle with Shiki, not because he was intellectually outmatched but because there was an emotional imbalance of power that made it unfair by default.

With that said, Izaya could not shake the nagging feeling that Aoba represented a kind of danger that had nothing with do with Aoba's plans.

“Alright. But won't you get in troubles if your school were to know you associate with informants?”

“Not at all. After all, you're my senpai and an upstanding member of the community.”

Izaya suspected there was too much tooth to Aoba's grin. Izaya replied in kind.

“Oh yes, on Sundays I volunteer at the local shelter and am known for my upstanding ways. I am so upstanding that just by being around me you'll be spared any time in one of the many hells once you die, why, you'll be on your way to the Pure Land.”

“I thought you were more interested in the Christian tradition, you're into Buddhism these days?”

“If it is a human construction then I needs be acquainted with it. The fact remains that I impart virtue by osmosis.”
Izaya adopted a stance of honesty and ironical self-reference.

“The Pure Land sounds great and all but I’d rather not go there anytime soon, thank you very much. Speaking of that, heard the head of the Ichonimiya group kicked the bucket the other day.”

“You know what they say, ‘In the midst of life we are in death’.”

“Where’s that from?”

Aoba seemed extremely interested.

“Google it.”

“Ah, you’re supposed to be my tutor. The least you could do is let me in on your amazing wisdom.”

This was the first time Izaya heard of this.

“Do your own research, you're a smart boy.”

“I see. Such an honor, for you to be invested in my intellectual development.”

Izaya laughed openly at this.

“Give the boy a shark and he'll feel sorry once it dies, teach the boy how to breed sharks and he'll have a tankful his whole life.”

“How true! Do you suppose the head of the Ichinimiya group is happily lounging in the Pure Land now? I figured one as intimate with the yakuza as yourself would know.”
Izaya smiled very faintly, not having missed Aoba's pointed wording.

“He should still be around, don't forget the 49 days requirement. After that is up to his karmic balance.”

“A shame he didn't get that 'virtue by osmosis' you impart. Other yakuza, however, have more than their share of said virtue. Especially since it's imparted by osmosis.”

Izaya's eyes narrowed very slightly. He was used to speaking through allusion and Aoba excelled in that. So Izaya knew all too well that there was a jab here, what he could not exactly discern was the scope of it: maybe Aoba simply meant to provoke to show he was unafraid but then again it could be Aoba's way of telling Izaya that he knew of Izaya's weakness regarding Shiki.

Izaya saw the subtext but not where it was leading to. Either way, one thing was obvious. If Izaya had lost sight of Aoba, Aoba had never lost sight of him.

Izaya stretched and yawned. He prepared a very pointed retort that he never got around to saying.

“None of that's any of your business, kid.”

Aoba seemed almost startled to see Shizuo butt into the conversation. So engrossed in outsmarting Izaya had he been that for all practical purposes Aoba saw no one else. Also, when it came to mental gymnastics he did not value either Shizuo or Tom as actual threats. As far as Aoba knew he was speaking exclusively to Izaya, the audience only added pressure to Izaya but was not supposed to speak up any more than theater spectators were meant to interact with the actors on stage.

Aoba covered up his dismay as he always did, with a bright grin that he beamed out to anyone in particular.

“I apologize if I am too forward.”

“Oh yeah? Then how about you get lost right about now.”

Izaya blinked in surprise but Aoba for once missed it altogether. Aoba saw in an instant that he was
at an absolute disadvantage if Shizuo were to go berserk. Izaya had a whole routine of running away from Shizuo, it even seemed a ritual to Aoba, but such evasion skills were not Aoba's forte nor was he all that fast. Let Izaya flirt with a beast, Aoba knew that the moment Shizuo showed the faintest sign of anger it was time to bail.

Aoba got up and excused himself with a formal but quick bow.

“I will be on my way, then. Pleasure talking to you, Heiwajima-san, Tanaka-san, Orihara-san.”

And with this Aoba disappeared into the crowd, not even turning around as Izaya called out to him.

“Bye bye, Aoba-kun! Good luck finding that goblin shark!”

Izaya even waved most enthusiastically, metal bracelets catching the morning light and twinkling blindly. A sushi vendor approached Izaya to inform him of a new delivery system that assured prompt delivery of delicious fresh fish on record time all over the Tokyo metropolitan area. Izaya apparently had quite an extensive credit with a lot of sellers.

“That's pretty amazing! Send some tuna over to this address and make sure you hand it over to the guy with the beanie, if you run into some vicious otakus do not hand them the fish for they are unworthy of the wonders of sushi.”

This last injunction did not make any sense to the vendor but the gist of it was that food was to be delivered to Kadota-san's place. Izaya yawned anew and rubbed his eyes.

“I believe it's about time I call it a night. Tom-san, sorry to have dragged you along like this...”

“It was fun.”

Izaya jumped up and down, literally.

“Really? I'm so glad!”
Like Kadota before him Tom found himself surprised at realizing that spending time with Izaya could indeed be enjoyable. Shizuo asked Tom for a cigarette.

“You guys, you really shouldn't smoke. It will kill you.”

Shizuo took his time taking a long drag.

“And you care?”

Slightly miffed Izaya adopted his superbly aloof attitude of looking down on Shizuo. It was quite a feat, with a mere tilting of his chin Izaya literally looking down on a man considerably taller. In his current attire it was slightly ludicrous.

“Not for you, rest assured. But I worry for Tom-san, he seems like a good person.”

“But I can just smoke myself to death, huh.”

“Go right ahead. I won't stop you. Besides, I'm not even sure nicotine has any effect on you.”

Tom noticed Shizuo's faint smile.

“Glad you care.”

“Don't you listen? I'm saying that I don't care.”

“Yeah?”

“Indeed.”

“Can you put that on a scale? Like, on a scale of one to ten how much do you not care about me?”
Izaya cast a furtive glance at Tom. This was not a conversation worth having but having an audience made it worse.

“One cannot quantify one’s indifference.”

“Yeah?”

“Human emotions are not that cut and dry.”

As Izaya said this he cast his gaze at the docks and the river beyond, thoughtfully abstracted. Tom had the distinct impression that Shizuo was about to touch Izaya’s face. There was no accounting for this, Tom could think of none but he had spent enough time with Shizuo to recognize those unlikely moments of tenderness.

Tom considered simply slinking away and leave them to their devices.

“Did you know that shortly after the war Tokyo Bay was the site for most of demilitarization of the Imperial army? It is difficult to even imagine it now.”

Tom found it more difficult to imagine why Izaya saw fit to pick such a topic at this juncture.

Bereft of any recollection of a private past Izaya had recently delved deep into the collective experience of history. It steadied him that his life had a proper context, a background that went beyond him and into a past that often bloody and dreary was still a common link, a reality to fall back on. Izaya could not recall events of his own life any more than he could recall the time before he was born, his first kiss was as remote from his immediate experience as the Meiji Restoration yet both events had indeed happened. By surrounding himself with history books Izaya was not only regaining the past of his country, he was affirming the reality of his own history. Events need not be remembered to be real.

“That's a good thing. That we can't imagine it.”

Izaya seemed to wake up from a daydream. The pattern of light twinkling on minute waves had almost lulled him into a trance.
“You're probably right...we were born and raised in a culture of peace, that we can't even imagine war attests to that fact.”

Shizuo refrained from bringing to Izaya's attention that Izaya could easily envision war if he tried. Which was just as well, already Izaya's imagination was flinging flames over the bay and raining death from fire strewn skies. Izaya shivered. Perhaps Aoba had shaken him more than he was willing to admit.

Izaya winced, turning his head hurt a bit from having carried the heavy collar all this time.

“That looks heavy.”

“It is.”

Izaya tried to undo the clasp but it proved impossible.

“Let me.”

Shizuo did not wait for any complaint. Izaya was almost coy in removing the long wig out of the way and exposing the nape of his neck.

“Tch, careful with your paws.”

“There.”

With surprisingly gentle gestures Shizuo unclasped the metallic adornment. For a split second Tom was sure he saw Shizuo sketch a caress on Izaya's soft nape of the neck. Izaya sighed in relief.

“Thanks. I should just dump this into the river, see how the otakus like that.”

Shizuo inspected the faux gold.
“It's kinda expensive. Not real gold but they worked hard at making it all shiny.”

“And they got this tailored to fit my body, I admit it is impressive but honestly, shouldn't they be using their skills in a more useful way?”

Shizuo shrugged but he followed closely as Izaya spun around, patting his behind to display the otaku duo's tailoring talent in crafting Judal's pants. Tom watched it too and felt vaguely awkward.

“Nah, this is useful plenty. And you admitted yourself that you like dressing up.”

“I suppose. Tom-san, would you give costplay a shot?”

Tom blinked, Izaya and Shizuo had a thing going on that seemed to exclude everyone and him by default so that whenever Izaya spoke to him it was almost like breaking the fourth wall.

“I never thought about that...”

“You're very stylish, maybe you think dressing up in weird outfits will damage your image but it's a world of fun!”

“I don’t mind the fancy clothes but wearing makeup is a bit...”

“Shizuo is super manly and he's wearing makeup! Come to think of that, none of your stylish ways seem to have rubbed off on Shizuo.”

“I convinced him to dye his hair blonde.”

“And what a great idea that was! But really, Tom-san, you're very stylish. One of these days we should go shopping together.”

Shizuo blew some more smoke. Then,
“Am I invited too?”

“No. You only wear bartender suits anyway so why bother going shopping for clothes with you?”

“I'd get to spend some time with you.”

Izaya narrowed his eyes slightly.

“And that's a good thing?”

“Yeah, that's what I'm saying.”

“That's assuming I'd want to spend time with you.”

“That's the idea.”

Suddenly Izaya was jabbing a finger in Shizuo's direction.

“Ha! Very funny, Shizuo. Too hilarious.”

Tom had the distinct impression that Izaya was playing dumb. Every now and then Izaya would fake ignorance for reasons Tom would rather not contemplate but this seemed different. Izaya was deliberately avoiding something, evading the import of Shizuo's words as if to escape from having to face as they presently stood.

Their entire interaction struck Tom as off. Izaya was almost setting himself as a tease but it was entirely possible that by making a show he meant to make Shizuo see just how at ease he was. Tom could not quite tell what Izaya's intentions were so he was left a bit bewildered. Stranger still was Shizuo's not even guarded advances. It was so alien to everything Tom knew about Shizuo that it forced to Tom to reel somewhat.
Tom found himself wondering about how well he knew Shizuo after all. Of the intense feud between Izaya and Shizuo Tom had the vaguest idea, he was aware they hated each other but would be at a loss as to the reason behind such relentless animosity. That they had a whole shared history had never made much of an impression, Tom had always assumed that all their relationship consisted of Izaya being a troll in order to provoke Shizuo into giving chase.

Now that he stopped to think about it, the whole thing was indeed very weird. Of course, since Izaya and Shizuo were hardly average Joes Tom accepted that they acted according to a special set of rules that was not even meant to be understood. But if Tom actually gave it some thought he had to admit that no matter how much of an evil mastermind you might be or how much you got off on enraging your super strong nemesis, it was borderline suicidal of Izaya to have egged Shizuo on all these years. There was an underlying emotion to all this, something complicated and much distorted, a kind of almost compulsion that both drove Izaya to provoke Shizuo's anger and made Shizuo unable to not give chase.

And whatever this something might be it had definitely reached a new stage. One in which Izaya was uncertain while Shizuo appeared firmly grounded. If Tom had to put it in words he would say that the balance of power had been upset and Shizuo had the upper hand. The irony was not lost on Tom and he knew Izaya and Shizuo were just as aware of it.

Through this haze of wondering there was a faint edge of pain. Shizuo had suddenly gained a whole new dimension of unknowns. Or to be more accurate, Shizuo was letting show just how much there was to him, depths that Tom would not dare to sound even had he known of them.

“I'm not kidding.”

Izaya had a moment that bordered on panic and decided there and then to cut his losses short. His instinct for the perfect time for a retreat remained as sharp as ever it was just that lately he had not given it much heed.

“Right, I'll be going home now, how about I give you guys a lift? I'm too tired to contemplate taking the train.”

With that said it was of course Tom who paid for the taxi fare. Izaya made sure to ride on the front seat lest he ended up next to Shizuo.

Izaya's stop came first and he waved goodbye at Tom and Shizuo before dragging himself home. It was fortunate that his building had 24 hour security otherwise he would find it difficult to actually enter his apartment: Namie was already gone and Izaya had no key presently.
Groaning he kicked off the boots and literally crawled on the floor, too tired to do much else.

“Ah, Sushi...your owner is home! And needs to sleep.”

Sushi licked his cheek and would have played with the long wig if Izaya had not removed it along with the fake jewelry and exotic clothes. It took some time to wiggle out of his outfit and he left wig, black pants and fake jewelry scattered on his wake.

Izaya flopped in bed and snuggled under the covers in his underwear. He could not be bothered with sleepwear. He dropped into a deep sleep clinging to his Liar Game dakimakura and did not even notice Sushi curling at his feet.

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In the taxi Shizuo kept his eyes firmly on Izaya until he was out of sight. Tom was so fascinated that he decided to poke Shizuo a bit.

“Looks like you want to join Orihara-san.”

“Yeah. But he wouldn't let me.”

To this Tom had no reply.
“Does this make me look fat?”

Izaya eyed himself on the mirror and turned around almost playfully. He had donned a new black suit, starched white shirt and sleek black tie, all brand new. There were plenty of similar clothes in his extensive wardrobe but Izaya wanted new ones for a new endeavor.

He now looked like an exceptionally well groomed young man of the respectable kind. More, Izaya went as far as to look trustworthy. It occurred to him he had a career as a scam artist if ever decided to a change of pace.

“Bordering on morbidly obese, I believe.”

Izaya swiveled around.

“Ah! Such dry wit, Namie-san. But seriously now, do I look fat...?”

“Not really. You never seem to gain or lose a gram.”

“My metabolism must be that amazing, then! You know, I've been told I have a sexy back. And this coming from people whose one great love in life is 3D is quite an achievement if I can say so myself.”

“I bet. You'll be late if you don't hurry.”

“My way already.”

Izaya took another cursory glance at the mirror and swayed his hips for effect before dashing away. He slipped into newly bought shoes that still held that unmistakable scent of unbroken leather and waved enthusiastically.

“I'm on my way now. See you later, Namie-san! Bye bee Sushi, no scratching the sofas now.”
Izaya boarded the elevator along with his American neighbor.

“Thanks for letting me borrow those pajamas the other night.”

“Oh, no problem. Your wife is a lovely person, Orihara-san.”

Izaya blinked once. Then twice. Then he burst out laughing.

“Ha! You must mean Namie-san. Indeed she is, although ‘lovely’ is an adjective ones does not immediately associate with her, but she is not my wife.”

“Oh, I see- I didn't mean,”

“No problem. No need for 'Orihara-san', 'Izaya' is fine.”

Izaya offered his hand.

“I just moved here, wouldn't want to overstep any boundaries so I keep it very formal.”

“Just moved, you say? So you're new to Tokyo?”

“To Japan, in fact.”

Izaya nearly bounced. Here was someone that had no prior of knowledge of him, immediately Izaya was eager to strike a connection.

“You should have told me sooner! I am so showing you around town, here have my number. I got to hurry now, have a funeral to attend. But I will seeing you later! Bye now!”
With this the elevator reached the ground floor and Izaya sauntered away leaving a very perplexed American gaping.

Izaya was expecting quite a crowd but he was still almost overwhelmed by the endless row of black suits that bowed as people paid their respects. It formed something of a ripple effect. A kind of perfect synchronicity.

Izaya felt excitement like static electricity, a prickly feeling of expectancy that he forced to the foreground with some difficulty. To be so hyper over a funeral struck him as fundamental wrong. Izaya might not be emotionally involved with the deceased but the death of any human being deserved to be respected.

But with so much going on Izaya had to be at sharpest, there was no time or opportunity to let his giddy mood take over. He wanted to make Shiki proud but he was fully engaged for his own sake. Instinctively he sensed a wealth of information waiting to be absorbed and explored, a whole self-contained society into which he could now gain a special insight.

Above all his curiosity would only be satisfied if he was properly focused even if at first all he could discern were disconnected impressions, the many men lined up, piles of white flowers, the scent of incense, delicate gardens of stone and bubbly ponds on which fish flashed all gold and red.

Izaya tried to gauge the size of the compound but he soon gave up. It was surely gigantic and designed so as to disorient outsiders. Security was tight even as courtesy was officially extended to all. As Izaya made his way to the main hall along with the rest of Shiki's committee he wondered about the double nature of the yakuza. Ruthless as these leaders of the underworld were there was a distinct culture of obeisance that they followed as a matter of personal pride. It represented the all ruling hierarchy.

Izaya made sure not to stare too much but he was actively taking notes of everything. No visible guns. He was sure the small army of bodyguards was armed but no holsters were could be seen or anything to that effect. If there were metal detectors they were concealed.

He was a bit surprised at finding himself free to roam about. Shiki soon disappeared to network and his men covered the premises in that watchful way of theirs. Izaya appreciated it, being restricted would ruin the whole experience. He was always at his best when thrown on his own resources.
The tone was somber as befit a funeral but there was a certain alertness that showed there was much more going on. Izaya could tell that the assembled rival groups were assessing one another's strength very much like he was studying them. Except Izaya had a more unbiased perspective and no stake in the rituals of honor. It made him unpredictable and very useful. Any of these powerful groups had something to gain by hiring his services. Izaya was beginning to see just how much it was so. Already he had attracted a few quick glances.

His very presence here placed Izaya in a particular position. Informants were not normally allowed into the inner sanctum of the yakuza like this. It was a privilege that carried its fair share of danger.

Izaya had so much on his mind that he did not immediately attach any significance to bit of blonde hair that towered over virtually everyone. His main goal was to identify all the power player and not to keep track of individual bodyguards. When he did notice it, however, he managed to stifle a cry. Suddenly nothing made sense, then things shifted into focus and rage followed on the wake of clarity.

He paid his respects as if nothing had happened, making sure he burned a stick of incense precisely as regulated but his heart was not on it. Izaya drifted to the general rest area to think and sure enough there the culprit was. Having a smoke break.

“What is this, you're stalking me now? Shizuo.”

Shizuo finished a cigarette.

“Nah. Working as a bodyguard now.”

“I can see as much. And it's just a big coincidence you just happen to be here?”

Izaya was bent on not letting his temper flare up. They could have this conversation since no one dared to sit next to Shizuo, they had the rest area all by themselves but still Izaya was not about to let Shizuo have the satisfaction of seeing him upset.

“Not really. The blue kid was saying something about a yakuza funeral, thought you might attend. So I looked around and they were hiring extra help. Figured I'd give it a shot. Guess I lucked out.”
“I’m amazed they hired you. You’re as likely to destroy the whole place as you are to guard anyone.”

Shizuo smirked.

“Yeah but they were kinda afraid of saying no. Then I really might go crazy.”

“I see. So you are stalking me and making a yen at the same time. How crafty of you, using the yakuza’s ‘protection’ policy against them.”

“Not stalking. Just wanted to see what you were up to.”

“And that is different from stalking how?”

“You look good in a suit.”

“I know.”

Shizuo smiled and tossed the cigarette away.

“Guess you’ll always be cocky.”

“What did you expect that I’d go all demure and ‘kyaa’ on you?”

“Hmm... ‘kyaa’ might be fun.”

“Cut that out. And is Tom-san okay with your being here?”

Shizuo shrugged.
“No problem. What are you doing here, by the way?”

“Observing.”

“And you call me stalker?”

“Your wit disarms me completely, oh my, whatever shall I do. And will you do your tie properly, don't you ever look in the mirror?”

Izaya's nimble fingers fixed Shizuo's tie very quickly but the moment seemed to expand.

“Thanks.”

“You don't really mean to do any actual bodyguarding, do you?”

“Are you wearing a bulletproof vest?”

Izaya's eyes narrowed.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering?”

“Why are you wondering?”

Shizuo looked around.

“Plenty of guns around, I bet. Better be careful.”
“You've been watching way too many movies.”

But even as Izaya said this he could not help but look around half-apprehensively. If there were to be a shootout Izaya was at a distinct disadvantage.

“You got your pet knife?”

Izaya pretended to check the time on a wristwatch he had donned just for the occasion.

“I'm going back, enjoy your poison.”

Izaya did not storm out as he felt like doing but he was thrown off his game. There was something highly upsetting in running into Shizuo like this. Izaya took a deep breath and made a deliberate effort to push aside all thoughts of Shizuo. Fortunately he had not been followed as he almost expected.

Izaya brought his attention to his surroundings. He had gravitated to a lounge that flanked the main hall. It was a long division adorned with a few traditional Japanese motifs in the shape of a golden screen on which a pack of cranes was rendered in their eternally frozen flight. Izaya noticed it first and was then drawn to the group of women in kimonos.

Yakuza wives. Normally they remained secluded and this was a rare opportunity for seeing them up close. Izaya knew he could not just approach them so he settled for courteously bowing from afar. There was security here as well, a few discreet men lined along the walls. He wished he could just loiter about a bit longer and get a better idea about these illusive creatures in their stunning dark kimonos but he could really find no excuse, the screen was very beautiful but he had been admiring it a bit too long.

“Young man, pour us some more tea.”

Izaya could hardly believe his luck, he had not counted on their being as curious about him as he was about them. He recognized the imperative tone from his wealthier costumers at the host club, they too were polite in their demanding ways but it was clear from the very way they spoke that Izaya was not
Izaya bowed again and handled the small graceful tea pot with great care. There were five women in total, ranging from their thirties to veritable yakuza matrons that Izaya immediately associated with the typical 'anego' type.

From serving champagne to host club addicts to pouring tea to yakuza wives there was not that great of a stretch. Izaya kept the smiling in check, though.

“What group are you with?”

Izaya hesitated very briefly. It figured that yakuza women identified people according to their gang affiliation but Izaya did not particularly enjoy this lumping together. His sense of identity was too unique to possibly merge into any organization. Amnesia had only provided a thrust to his sharpening of who he was.

“I came with the Awakusu group but I'm a free agent. Orihara Izaya, at your service.”

Izaya bowed again.

“Oh, the informant from Shinjuku. I've heard of you.”

This was unexpected. Izaya did not know his name was known to them.

“I'm honored.”

Truth be told he was slightly freaked out.

“Shiki-san has high expectations of you.”

“You're much younger than I thought.”
They all looked at him. Izaya did not like being exposed like this. He had the distinct impression that he was an alien element in a tight group that excluded him by default. They had strength in numbers and a common culture of which he knew precious little. All Izaya knew about the yakuza came from his reading and his direct interaction with men, he was at a loss in dealing with the women behind the power.

“But tell us, what exactly do you do for a living?”

Izaya allowed himself to smile. The message was clear, he was to answer their questions and be kept standing at their table as a waiter of sorts.

“I barter information of all kinds. If you ever need my services do let me know.”

Perhaps he was being too flirty. There were liberties he should stay away from and his usual way of dealing one-on-one with women often veered on flirting. A habit he had picked up at the host club proved surprisingly difficult to shake.

To his relief they seemed pleased.

“Information of all kinds, you say? Could you help me find my kitty?”

One of the youngest women produced a picture and handed it to him. Izaya studied a gray cat, very sleek and smooth, the fur nearly shiny.

“I locate people but tracking lost pets is not something I usually dabble in. But I can try. Please give me more details, what is the cat's name, does she answer by it, when was she last seen?”

Izaya swung into professional mode immediately.

“She's Fluffy, at times she answers by the name but normally she doesn't. She's a Russian Blue cat, three years old. She got lost yesterday near the Sunshine building in Ikebukuro.”

Izaya nodded.
“Any distinctive features?”

“A pink collar with a tiny silver bell.”

“I cannot handle your request at the moment but I will get someone on it right away. Cats are highly resourceful animals so hope is not lost. I cannot assure that I will find Fluffy but I will try my very best. If you’ll excuse me I’ll get to it. Who do I have the pleasure to be working for?”

“Ichinomiya Kaori.”

Izaya’s bow had something of a flourish to it. He had managed to ferret a name and quite an impressive one at that, the niece of the deceased had just hired him. Finding cats might seem beneath Tokyo’s most influential informant but the client mattered. Not to mention Izaya liked cats a lot and wanted to find Fluffy for the cat’s sake. It was a win-win situation.

He got a picture of Fluffy to be sent to his phone and resent it to Kida’s whom he called with the request of locating said cat. Kida was puzzled but it could be considerably worse.

“We haven’t discussed your fee yet.”

“There is no need to discuss such matters until Fluffy is secured. If I fail to find her or should she no longer be with us then I expect no payment.”

“Is that how you usually work?”

“It depends, I take a case by case approach.”

“How much of your profit goes to Shiki-san?”

Izaya blinked. Quite an intrusive question but perhaps that was to be expected but the business quality of it surprised him. From what he knew yakuza wives were not familiar with such things as commissions as they did not handle any actual business themselves. Then again he might be
underestimating their actual knowledge.

“None. As I mentioned before I'm a free agent. My profit belongs to me alone and of course part of it goes to the State of Japan via taxation.”

This seemed to get their attention.

“Oh? Taxes will be the death of us all.”

The entire table laughed and so did Izaya. He was having a good time. It occurred to him he was probably overstepping the boundaries of 'observing' by directly interacting but it was too much fun.

“How come I've never seen you around before? From what I've heard you've been 'the informant from Shinjuku' since you were out of your diapers but this is the first time I'm actually seeing you.”

Izaya considered the woman that had just spoken. She was one of the oldest, to her Izaya must be little more than a kid. More, she lorded over the rest as something of a leader and in that quality put him in his place.

They assessed him anew and Izaya could not help being slightly nervous. The group mentality was strong here. But Izaya could use this to his own advantage. He might be excluded from the in-group but he had enough credentials to allow him to at all be where he was. Izaya felt that his whole experience in this strange criminal wonderland of shades of veiled violence was being in between, bleeding past categories. Izaya was above the stony faced men lining the wall and insuring superfluous security but he was not the equivalent of their bosses. There was no clear counterpart and so he was free to chat with yakuza wives. Finding out just how much he could actually ask was a riveting challenge.

“I'm afraid this is my first time at gatherings such as this so I am still learning my way around.”

Izaya made a small bow. The women laughed softly.

“Orihara-kun, you're doing very well. As expected of Shiki-san to pick up such a promising protégé.”
Izaya would rather Shiki was not brought into the discussion. For the present purposes Shiki served as context. He did not care to seen as a subordinate of Shiki's even if technically he might amount to that as far as these women knew.

“We need smart men like you.”

“But maybe not too smart, it's not always wise to be too smart.”

Their laughter had a certain ring to it. Izaya smiled politely and wondered if they might not have too much of a point. Of all the many dangers to which Izaya was subject to the greatest was indeed his acting too smart for his own good.

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Shizuo stared at the pond as he strolled about the garden. No one seemed to expect him to actually do any body guarding, Shizuo included and so he was left with plenty of time on his hands.

“Heiwajima-san, good afternoon.”

Over the neatly pebbled rim of the pond Shizuo could only see a pair of black pants but he recognized the voice right away.

“Is it okay to feed the fish?”

“I doubt the Ichinomiyas would approve.”

A packet of cigarettes was offered. Shizuo finally bothered to look at Shiki.

“Can't smoke here.”

“I'm sure you're a man that can break a few rules.”
“I doubt the Ichinomiyas would approve.”

Shiki smiled.

“Duly noted. Shall we have a seat?”

The stone bench faced the surface of the water, they both contemplated the delicate swirl of colors as the fish went about their lives unconcerned by mere humans. Shiki expected more hostility or at least a greater reaction.

“No one seems to miss the dead guy too much.”

“We are already gathered to pay our last homage to Ichinomiya-san so we might as well take the opportunity for discussing business.”

“Yeah? Sucks being him.”

Shiki smiled.

“I am afraid you are not enjoying the funeral.”

“Didn't know funerals were meant to be enjoyed.”

“I'm sure Izaya is having fun.”

“Well, Izaya is Izaya.”

And just like this they got to the actual point.
“He is a very unique individual, yes.”

“If he gets real hurt because of you I'll kill you.”

Shiki had heard many threats in his day. From punks screaming at the top of their lungs to rivals slurring behind his back just when they knew they were done for so he knew that this kind of calm delivery meant business. More than that, Shiki could tell from Shizuo's whole demeanor that this was no idle threat. Shizuo's very lack of emphasis bespoke of true resolve.

“Fair enough but I might as well say the same to you.”

Shizuo looked straight at Shiki.

“’Cuz he is so useful to you?”

“That too.”

Shizuo did not frown but almost. Despite everything Shizuo was a man that Shiki could respect. There was something of an unwritten code of conduct to Shizuo, a way of resolutely forging ahead through storms that taxed both body and mind. Broken bones and a string of jobs all ending in disastrous firings, constant brawls and the implicit shunning that was a corollary to superhuman strength.

Shiki knew many yakuza who envied Shizuo bitterly. They wished they had such overwhelming street credit and a name that inspired fear. In a society that dealt so much in intimidation like the yakuza someone like Shizuo was something of a fabled idol and a role model. Not that Shizuo at all cared, he worked solo and seemed detached from all and kinds of society. It occurred to Shiki that this might very well be a point of contact between Shizuo and Izaya.

But Shiki did not envy Shizuo for he paid too much attention to ignore the recoil of being 'the strongest man in Ikebukuro'. Izaya matters aside Shiki knew that beyond the glamor of the image people projected on Shizuo there was a gritty reality: too much in the spotlight to properly avoid being turned into an object to goggle at, never quite seen as an actual person.

The notion of 'worthy adversary' resounded deeply with Shiki. He was aware that he was the product of a certain environment, namely the yakuza, and the rules that patterned his life calibrated
the ways of engagement between people who you respected and would still execute if need be. And again even if Izaya was not involved Shiki would take action against Shizuo if ever Shizuo took any kind of action that required it.

After all, Heiwajima Shizuo meant danger through and through.

“I find your concern laudable, Heiwajima-san. I have yet to properly compensate you for rescuing Izaya- my very useful Izaya- when he was in dire need. I hope that you'll accept this as a token of my gratitude.”

Shiki produced a check on which he wrote with an old fashioned yet sleek deep blue fountain pen then handed it to Shizuo. Shizuo took the check and without as much as glancing at it shredded it and let the pieces flutter, some floating petal-like on the pond before sinking.

“You don't want to test me, yakuza-san. I don't want your money.”

Nor did Shiki think Shizuo could be bribed. It was indeed a test.

“I wonder what Izaya would do if he knew you feel this...protective about him. I doubt it would make him like you.”

Shiki let the pause speak for itself. Making the gross euphemism point out to deeper truths.

“Izaya isn't going to like me.”

“So you have nothing to lose?”

Shiki very much doubted this.

“Why isn't Izaya wearing a bulletproof vest?”

The sudden change surprised Shiki considerably.
“You seem to be laboring under a misguided but sadly all too common idea. We do not hold shootouts or go on gun crazy rampages despite what the entertainment industry may lead you to believe.”

“Lots of guys packing lead here.”

“True. It is a public display of power more than anything else. You are sharp enough to spot the guns but they are hidden. We may be armed and we may want everyone to know it but we won't show or use our guns.”

“Unless shit goes down.”

Shiki had to smile.

“That is indeed a possibility, yes. But it is a remote one. I gather Izaya is more likely to get run over by a car than to be gunned down at a funeral such as this.”

“Cars he can dodge, bullets he can't.”

“Aren't you worried you might be gunned down as well?”

“Been shot before. No big deal.”

Now this did come very close to making Shiki afraid. It was a last resort and one Shiki would rather eschew but ultimately, if it came to that, there was always the option of disposing of dangerous elements by having them shot dead. There was no way of properly handling a man to whom bullets were a trifle.

“I see. Can Izaya truly dodge cars, I wonder.”

The mental picture was nagging, it persisted.
“He can dodge a lot of things. Not bullets and not knives, though. You took care of the creepo that knifed him?”

“Ah, that. You need not worry, it's been taken care of.”

“Good. If there's one thing you guys are good at is 'taking care of' people and killing them dead.”

“It is the best way of killing them, you see.”

It was Shizuo's turn to smile.

“Yakuza crack jokes as well, huh.”

“As Izaya would put it, 'humor is an exclusively human response’”.

“Izaya says a lot of things.”

“Am I right in assuming you're not an admirer of Orihara Izaya's many theories about virtually all that exists under the sun and quite a few things that do not?”

Shiki phrased it strangely to let a certain irony shine through.

“It depends.”

“On what, exactly?”

Shiki's own attitude toward Izaya's fanciful mind games almost veered on awe on occasion. Not so much at the brilliant reasoning but on the way it was steeped on such an idiosyncratic perspective that only Izaya could fully understand it. Shiki suspected that it was the mark of a true genius, this having a way of thinking that was so irrevocably unique. And at the same time Izaya had a streak of childish delight at his own achievements and grand visions. That had not changed with amnesia. Izaya was more cautious now but yet more likely to open up and divulge precious information.
This might be the very first time that Shiki ever discussed Izaya's theories with someone else. He was curious to see what Shizuo had to say about them.

“Depends if he really means the stuff he says.”

“You think Izaya lacks sincerity?”

“You're interested in what I think? Dunno why.”

“Well, you know Izaya better than most so it is not without reason to ask.”

Shiki was not entirely sure whether he or Shizuo knew Izaya better. It appealed his ego to believe he had some special access to Izaya's inner being but Shiki knew better than to let that cloud his judgment.

“He's not useful to me.”

This Shiki did not entirely believe. He considered making some oblique allusion to the uses Shizuo could put Izaya to but decided against it. Such verbal maneuvering would just rebound off Shizuo.

“May I ask why the sudden interest in Izaya? I understand you two were not on the best of terms.”

“None of your business.”

“And by the same token my relationship with Izaya is none of your business.”

Lately Shiki had been thinking about Izaya a lot. Since Izaya was ostensibly keeping a distance Shiki found his thoughts returning to him. Shiki was not entirely sure when it had happened but at some point it had become clear to him that much of his future success relied on Izaya. It was not entirely a gut feeling but it was also that. Shiki had taken into consideration Izaya's potential and viewed him from a purely utilitarian point of view to reach the conclusion that Izaya was not merely useful but absolutely crucial.
As information became and more essential the value of someone like Izaya skyrocketed accordingly. Shiki was more aware of this than most of his colleagues. He knew that the difference between being a middle range yakuza boss and at the very top rested on how well Shiki employed Izaya's talents. Which led to the question of what Izaya had in mind for Shiki in the future. Shiki had been trying to properly frame Izaya but none of that would amount to much if Izaya were to pull on his unpredictable moves.

Not for the first time it occurred to Shiki that Izaya was more useful as he was now than he had ever been. As things stood Shiki at least knew that Izaya would not have him eliminated. Shiki suspected that prior to his memory loss Izaya would get rid of him if need be. Shiki might use Izaya but Izaya used him just as well. And in their normal economy of dependence it was Shiki who truly needed Izaya.

“So you saying you like him?”

This was so direct that Shiki blinked in dismay and was at a loss for half a heartbeat.

“I like him plenty.”

“That's not exactly enough.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you're half-assed about the whole thing.”

Shiki was almost alarmed. Men like Shizuo could easily become loose cannons when their emotions were on the line.

“Are you saying you are more in earnest, so to speak?”

“That's right.”
Speaking of sincerity this was much more than Shiki expected out of Shizuo. This period of separation had made Shiki realize that he missed Izaya on a more personal level. Beautiful women and even pretty boys could be easily obtained but it was not quite the same. They lacked Izaya's joyful abandon and proud frailty.

Shiki was surprised at how much he missed the sex. Izaya's lack of experience was more than compensated by his willingness and if Shiki were honest he much preferred having sex with Izaya as he now was than ever before. There had been times in the past when Izaya had got out of his way to impress on Shiki that while sex was a highly pleasurable activity it did not quite monopolize the span of his attention. Or to put it differently, there had been times when Shiki was absolutely sure that Izaya's mind was miles away even as he spread on the sheets. One memorable occasion included Izaya calmly reciting pi during intercourse, Shiki had been genuinely freaked out.

In comparison, sex with Izaya post memory loss was wonderful in ways Shiki was even a bit reluctant to consider.

“Am I correct in assuming you're willing to dedicate yourself to Izaya more fully?”

“That's not up to me.”

This was the perfect opportunity for addressing the topic of Izaya's will, something that arguably was quite beyond both Shiki and Shizuo's control. But Shiki did not want to touch on the subject just yet.

“I'm glad you two are getting along better.”

Shizuo picked up a pebble and reduced it to powder by making a fist. Shiki could tell it was not meant to intimidate him. It just so happened that Shizuo had different standards when it came to physical strength. Nothing short of throwing vending machines even counted as an actual display of power, grinding pebbles was nothing much.

“You sure about that?”

“A cessation in hostilities benefits everyone involved.”

“Everyone involved' includes you?”
“To some extent. Heiwajima-san, do you practice any martial art?”

Shiki tried his hand at changing the topic. It would not do to let Shizuo steer the conversation too much.

“Nah, too violent.”

For a moment Shiki was sure Shizuo was being sarcastic. Then he realized Shizuo was dead serious. Odds were Shizuo's disavowal of violence was not hypocrisy but the true expression of his will. Shizuo hated violence so intensely precisely because he was dragged into it against his better nature. Shiki did not precisely grasp all this but he got the general idea.

“Not necessarily. In fact, martial arts can help you tap into your inner strength by building on your self-control. I practice aikido, it is hardly violent.”

“Aikido? Thought it'd be karate or kendo.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Don't really care.”

“If you will allow me the liberty of making a suggestion I believe you should give aikido a try. Young people need some form of discipline as it is.”

Shizuo chuckled. He sounded truly amused.

“What's this 'young people' talk, you're not all that older.”

“True. As far as years go. But I do feel I belong to another generation.”

“You got one of them fancy phones?”
“Do you mean a smartphone?”

“Yeah, one of those.”

“I own one, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Then you're more 'young people' than me. Never could figure those things out.”

Shiki had to laugh.

“Either way, in your particular case aikido would be of great use. Self-control is the key to a harmonious existence.”

“Ah...you should get stuff like that written.”

“A collection of aphorisms, you mean?”

“Dunno what 'aphorism' is.”

Shiki smiled. He could see how communication between Shizuo and Izaya was bound to break down. It made Shiki feel considerably pleased.

“The goal of aikido is not so much to attack head-on but to redirect your opponent's attacks and thus disarm him.”

“Guess that's what you're doing here, huh.”

“I hope that you and I can be on as affable terms as possible.”
“This is as affable as I get.”

And it might already be pushing it. Shiki suspected that the reason why Shizuo was here sitting with him and having this conversation was out of respect to Izaya more than anything else. Now would be the time to bring Izaya's will into focus. Shiki knew he wanted to shift the conversation into this direction because he had confidence he had the upper hand there. For all his notions of owning people Shiki knew fully well that ultimately it was up to Izaya to decide. No amount of brute strength from Shizuo or suave manipulation from Shiki could make much of a difference if Izaya's emotions were not engaged.

Shiki opted for going about it indirectly.

“Izaya is currently having a very nice chat with some ladies. He is remarkably popular with women.”

Shiki had been informed by his men via the auricular.

“When Izaya wants he can be popular with pretty much everyone.”

“I believe he hadn't...captivated you, if you will, until recently.”

Shiki really wanted to get to the bottom of Shizuo's change of heart. It was too crucial to drop.

“Like I said, 'when’ he wants to.”

“He can be rather unpleasant, I gather.”

Shizuo chuckled.

“Yeah. That's like saying the ocean is kinda wet.”

Shiki agreed. Izaya's potential for mischief tended to amuse Shiki. Partially because Shiki did indeed feel part of an older generation and could see Izaya as the trouble making kid whose pranks went just a little bit too far but also because this particular aspect of Izaya had never been aimed at Shiki.
There was a playfulness to Izaya that made him childish despite his many masterplans. Shiki could afford to be amused by this but there were moments when it overlapped with the sexual element and caused some disturbance. Shiki suspect that at least in part this was deliberate on Izaya's part. It was not played outright but Izaya had his ways of letting it hang in the background like a trump card he did not even have to play as long as Shiki knew he held it.

Izaya's actual age was something of a tricky subject in itself. Shiki had not even contemplated touching Izaya until he was of age but in actuality there was not that great of a difference between grownup Izaya and the kid that had dropped by his office freshly out of high school.

It was not only that Izaya had been mature beyond his years as a teen as he had retained much of the elemental cruelty of children even as he grew. If anything, Izaya was now closer to a fabled idea of purity (Shiki was too savvy to credit notions of purity anyway) then Shiki had ever known him to be.

“It seems you've overcome all of that. Is it a 'forgive and forget' kind of deal?”

“Dunno about that.”

Shiki was not used to being dismissed in such a laconic manner. He found it very irritating. By cutting off discourse Shizuo gained an ascendancy that Shiki was not at all willing to hand over. Shizuo's issues were more than just his uncontrollable wrath, Shiki sensed an undertow of antisocial attitude that went beyond this present confrontation.

“I believe that we can both accommodate Izaya into our lives. In different ways, of course.”

In other words Shizuo was free to play the friend card with Izaya but that was far as he was allowed to go.

“You putting me in my place?”

“That's right, Heiwajima-san. I'm the one who shares his bed.”

Shiki's wording was almost archaic on purpose. On occasion he dipped into formal and even old fashioned language to stress a point. It would be silly coming from most people but in Shiki it was a
classy move that tended to cause quite an impression.

Shiki had to admit to himself that claiming sexual ownership was remarkably enjoyable. Skirting around the issue and hinting at it might be very well but when dealing with such a blunt person like Shizuo it was best to tell it like it is. And Shiki was extremely curious to see how Shizuo would react.

“You trying to piss me off?”

“Not that all. I am simply informing you of your limits. If you want to be on friendly terms with Izaya then by all means. But you are not to go beyond that.”

“Or else you'll send your goons to get me?”

Shiki smiled a very cold smile.

“You misunderstand me, Heiwajima-san. I wouldn't send anyone to handle a personal matter. I'd do it myself.”

“Cuz of the whole honor thing?”

Shizuo expressed himself as if the very notion of honor, or the notion he believed Shiki to hold, was just too bizarre an idea. Something might be lost in translation, they were perhaps bound to speak at cross-purposes. Either way Shiki knew where he stood.

“There are things that a man has to do himself.”

Shiki fully meant it. There was a limit to delegation and he always knew where to draw it.

“Good. Makes it easier to get rid of you.”

Shiki's eyebrows rose in polite shock that he did not at all feel.
“You may find that more problematic than you think, Heiwajima-san.”

Shizuo looked around leisurely enough.

“You got snipers around?”

“Do you have to ask?”

“Thought you guys didn’t go on crazy gun rampages.”

“And we don’t. ’Unless shit goes down’ as you so eloquently put it.”

A moment of silence followed as Shizuo and Shiki contemplated one another at length.

“Shizuo...? Shiki-san...?”

Shinra stood blinking at them in a creased black suit that he obviously was not used to wearing. His eyes looked all too wide behind the glasses. Try as he might Shinra could not at all see why Shizuo and Shiki should be having a chat like this.

But he could tell the tension was thick here. Shinra almost wished he had simply looked the other way. Shizuo took his own time getting up as if to make a point that he did not at all mind being out here in the open as a veritable target.

“It seems that we understand each other, Heiwajima-san.”

“Yeah. Looks like it.”

Shiki granted Shizuo a curt enough nod in lieu of farewell and calmly ignored a rather frantic Shinra who busied himself hurrying Shizuo away. Shinra waited until they were out of earshot.
“What is going on here? You're not seriously picking a fight with Shiki, are you?”

“Kinda am, I guess.”

“You guess...? You already have enough problems as it is, do you really need to make it so much worse for yourself?”

It boggled the mind.

“How come you're here?”

“I treated Ichinomiya-san a few times so they invited me. Actually, how did you even get here yourself?”

“Body guarding.”

Shinra sighed deeply and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Let me take a wild guess, Izaya is involved in this. Somehow.”

“Well, yeah. He's talking to some ladies.”

Shinra blinked.

“What ladies? This is a yakuza funeral after all...”

“Dunno. Yakuza wives would be my bet.”

“How come all hell always breaks loose as soon as I look away? Izaya and yakuza wives! While you
go out of your way to piss off one of the most dangerous men in Japan!"

Shizuo simply shrugged.

“About that, no need for Izaya to know about stuff.”

“Fine, since he was probably the topic of the conversation anyway.”

That much Shinra got.

“Most of it.”

“At least you didn't go berserk back there but I swear it looked like a close call for a sec.”

“Yakuza man got guts.”

“Don't you think it's a bit messed up to go behind Izaya's back like this?”

“Tried talking things through with him around, didn't work out too well.”

“I bet. I think I'm beginning to see what's going on here...and it still doesn't make any sense.”

“You know any place where they do aikido?”

Shinra blinked rapidly. They had wandered off to a shadowy area under a massive tree, the twitter of birds filled the darkly translucent air.

“As a doujo?”
“Yeah, know of any?”

Just when Shinra thought he figured out what was going on.

“I have no idea. Why do you ask? Since when are you into martial arts?”

“Just wondering.”
Chapter 16

The light chatter came to a sudden hush as soon as a newcomer joined the table. Izaya could tell the change immediately. As one the yakuza ladies got up and bowed to a middle aged woman in a black kimono. She made her way slowly, almost majestically, each step calibrated. But what impressed Izaya more than anything were her eyes. Never had he seen true grief in all its ravaging might: he saw it now and it humbled him. He felt a pang of guilt and as he greeted her his bow expressed contrition.

“Orihara-kun? I haven't seen you in a long time. How nice of you to come, I am sure my husband would appreciate.”

So Izaya was acquainted with the Ichinomiyas. It was the first time he heard about it. Whether Shiki knew about this or not was of the utmost importance and something Izaya would have to look into but for the time being all of that was moot. His nature gravitated toward empathy and could not fail to respond to genuine suffering.

“Ichinomiya-san, I am sorry for your loss. If there is anything I can do to help, do not hesitate to let me know.”

Yazuka, crime emporiums, dangers lurking at every corner: none of that mattered to Izaya in this moment. The best of his nature, that which he had been trying to draw from, kicked in without his even realizing that was what it was. Something of his earnest sympathy must have carried through.

“We will be holding an intimate dinner just with the family. I would like you to attend.”

Izaya suspected Shiki was not counting on this development and he might not even approve but none of that even factored in Izaya's decision.

“It will be an honor.”

And this was how Izaya found himself at the noble dinner room, sitting at a long low table covered with delicacies, feeling most definitely out of place. He had been placed right next to the end of the
table on which the widow sat which only made him even more conspicuous.

The entire room was covered in high quality tatamis and the motif was gold. Golden sliding doors set the tone that was then reflected on the ceiling. Izaya found it both very beautiful and oppressive. This was a division conceived to impress and that it did but there was no thought to actual comfort. For one, it was too large for a dining room. It seemed more of a gallery and the flurry of gold powered fans at both ends added to the feeling.

Even the very long table seemed afloat in a lot of golden nothing. As awkward as Izaya felt he was extremely interested. If there was a place in which his role of his as an observer could be pushed to its utmost then this was it. Izaya was the sole outsider. The Ichinimoyia's core members were all present. They had greeted him respectfully but he could tell they were a bit at a loss as to justify his presence in this inner sanctum.

Izaya wondered if this was what passed for 'intimate dinner'. There were far too many people eating in an artificial stony silence. At first Izaya thought that perhaps they were holding back because he was there but it soon became obvious that there were issues running much deeper.

He was relieved at finding his newest client present but she was too far away to even establish eye contact without being too blatant. And as it was no one seemed interested in doing as much look anyone in the eye. They all seemed engrossed in staring at their highly delicious food.

There were no bodyguards around so it was safe to assume that at least they had not reached the cutthroat stage yet. Izaya had done his homework on the yakuza. He knew that no matter how solid and well established a group might be it ultimately depended on its leader (official or otherwise) to properly function. The moment leadership faulted there was a real danger of collapse. Not so much from outright war with other groups but by sectarian infighting.

Izaya scanned the assembly discreetly. He knew who most of them were but it became highly frustrating to see them persisting in acting like mutes. Izaya did not exactly regret accepting the invitation but he did wish Shiki was around as some sort of insurance.

“Orihara-san, what do you think of our family?”

He managed not to start but with an effort. For some reason he had suddenly been promoted to ' -san' and in his experience that usually did not mean anything good. Things clinched for him almost instantly. The widow knew something of Izaya's role as the jester and was using it to out her entire family.
This room was so much like a stage because everyone was acting out an elaborate play. Izaya might very well be the only one who did not know the script. Then it occurred to him that Izaya could rewrite the script. It could be his truest vocation in life.

“I can hardly say, Ichinomiya-sama. Families are very complex entities and I would not presume to speak about the family of others. One's own family is often cryptic enough as it is.”

If she could shift honorifics and add more pressure by thickening the layers of formality then so could he. In fact, Izaya accompanied his disclaimer-like tirade with a very polite bow. Judging by her shrewd smile this was precisely what she expected.

“What's the Awakusu to do with us?”

This came from a burly fellow across the table.

“I am not with the Awakusu group.”

“Yeah, right. Like you're not going to rat us out to Shiki-san. Lapdog that you are.”

Izaya smiled complacently enough. He found it interesting how even when seething with resentment this guy attached an honorific to Shiki's name almost by default.

“I can assure you that I will not divulge whatever happens here to anyone but I fully understand if my word has little or no value here. Also, your animal metaphors are quite varied in scope.”

This last bit provoked a flutter of chuckles.

“Father told me much about you.”

Izaya turned to the new speaker, a serious looking youth that he identified as the third son by the highly redundant name of Saburo. Izaya found it oddly charming that this family insisted on the anachronism of naming male offspring according to their order of birth. Hence 'Saburo' meaning...
'third son'.

“Good things, I hope.”

“I'm not sure. 'Whoever wields Orihara Izaya will rule Tokyo', Father said. So it depends.”

If the Ichinomiyas had any sense they should this fellow was the next leader. That was Izaya's opinion.

“Ah, I cannot be 'wielded', though.”

“Not even by Shiki-sama?”

Izaya made a point of looking him in the eye.

“Not anyone. I am a free agent and it is as a free agent that I operate.”

Perhaps a bit too repetitive but he had a stand to make.

“Does that mean you'll sell your services to us?”

“I take a case-by-case approach but I am more than willing to hear you out.”

“Orihara-san, what would it take for you to work exclusively for us?”

Izaya was not at all expecting this.

“That is not an option.”
“We can double whatever you're currently receiving—”

The burly fellow disrupted things by suddenly slamming his hands on the table.

“How are you acting like you're the new leader?”

“Shut up. Orihara-san, do reconsider our offer.”

For a few tense moments that felt like hours Izaya was sure that the stare down between the brothers would escalate into a famous yakuza brawl complete with cutlery flying as well as insults. Izaya went as far as to glance at the exit.

Surprisingly enough the older sibling, aptly named Ichirou (no one could accuse the family of lacking in consistency) backed down albeit furiously enough. Everyone seemed to let out a collective sigh. Izaya was slightly disappointed. He had almost forgotten he was being addressed and it would have slipped off his mind were not for Saburo turning a very intent stare at him which in turn made everyone else focus on him.

“If I were to work exclusively for anyone my ability to procure information would immediately diminish. My resources would dry up if it were known that I have an agenda that coincides entirely with my exclusive client: people would be more reluctant to tell me what I wish to know and perhaps even worse the scope of my investigation would be limited by default. As a consequence you would end up with an overpaid but mediocre informant. It would not benefit either party.”

Saburo nodded and seemed lost in thought.

“I see, yes, that makes sense. I've wondered why Shiki-sama lets you negotiate with others as he does.”

Izaya straightened up.

“There seems to be a misunderstanding here, Shiki-san does not 'allow' me a certain leeway: the leeway is entirely mine to define. I hope that is perfectly clear. Neh?”
And Izaya granted them his cutest, most innocent and borderline disturbing smile.

“And understood. Will you try this vintage sake?”

“And why, thank you.”

Izaya took a few sips in a perfect blend of decorum and moderation. The mood of the dinner changed course and soon enough there was general conversation a bit all over the long table.

It turned out to be an absolute success for almost everyone involved.

Shiki picked him up when the dinner was over. Izaya settled at the back of the plush limousine with a clear look of satisfaction. Shiki made no comment and let the silence reign: he was betting on Izaya starting a very telling conversation.

“And Shiki-san, do you know about tarot?”

Just when Shiki thought he could predict Izaya he was proven wrong by a dose of apparent randomness. Shiki lifted an eyebrow.

“The cards? Vaguely. Why do ask, are you going into the fortune telling business?”

Izaya giggled. Shiki imagined Izaya spinning off wild tales as he told the whole Ichinomiya clan their fortune. Shiki was extremely curious as to what had happened at the dinner which was the more reason not to ask about it.

“I’m afraid I have no talent at that nor do I put any faith in any form of divination. I believe we make our own destiny and it becomes who we are.”

“Interesting take on it. So why the interest in the tarot?”
Shiki genuinely wanted to know.

“Each card has a series of meanings attached, something of an archetype structure or frame. I've been reading about it and it is indeed a fascinating subject.”

“You're taking a Jungian approach?”

Izaya nodded enthusiastically, almost buzzing.

“Something to that effect. I've been wondering which card fits me best and reached the conclusion that I'd be The Fool.”

“Oh? That is an odd choice.”

“The Fool has a way of seeing through mere rational working and grasp the true shape of the world as it is. His madness is that of inspiration and he is often the main character as a pilgrim going through life, a representative of people in general. As one who goes off to seek out experience.”

Shiki found the self-praise almost charming. Probably because there was no cockiness behind it just a well-reasoned assessment of a character that was trying to find itself.

“I'd say there is plenty of you in that description.”

“Indeed. But perhaps more importantly, the Fool is often not part of the deck at all. In the game proper- tarot was originally a game- The Fool is independent and does not belong to any category.”

So this was Izaya's point. Shiki got it.

“Am I also a card?”

“The Emperor.”
No hesitation.

“Why?”

Izaya smiled with more than a hint of irony.

“It is self-explanatory but I’ll be glad to comment. 'Stability', 'control', 'authority', 'command', 'leadership', 'structure', 'order', 'tradition' are a few notions associated with The Emperor. Arguably you embody all these, Shiki-san.”

Shiki considered this. Quite a partial portrayal that bordered on bias in being so centered on exerting domination but mostly accurate none the less.

“And by 'tradition' you mean 'obsolete'?”

“Shiki-san, do you know the opening verses of the Tale of Heike?”

A bit at a loss as to where this was leading to Shiki recited it smoothly, the rhythm blending in with the comforting hum of the engine.

“‘The sound of the bell of Gionshoja echoes the impermanence of all things. The hue of the flowers of the teak tree declares that they who flourish must be brought low. Yea, the proud ones are but for a moment, like an evening dream in springtime. The mighty are destroyed at the last, they are but as the dust before the wind.’”

“How many people know it by heart and of those how many know how to properly recite it? A precious few. That’s what I mean by 'tradition', this knowing how to incorporate even the very distant past into the present. It is extremely cool.”

Izaya added the last bit in a different tone, going from his eloquent self to his quirky self.

“That’s an original take on it.”
“Tradition is a very present issue, particularly in our country. Tradition is often absolutely atrocious but knowing how to channel it is indeed a talent that someone as yourself has at their command.”

“You knew the entire Tale of Heike by heart. And probably many other works.”

“My ability to retain information seems to be well above average. Ironically enough.”

With that said Izaya did not seem particularly upset over his missing memories. At least not presently.

“I'm sure you're enjoying yourself exploring your vast collection of books.”

“Indeed! My library contains a wealth of classics. I was a bit surprised myself and also thrilled. Speaking of my eclectic book collection, I found an old but very well preserved copy of The Little Prince. An odd choice for me...then again...”

Izaya trailed off as if to alluding to his former self’s widely encompassing erudition could only be described with a vague waving gesture.

“I never heard you mention that particular book.”

“Property of Orihara Izaya, 2nd year elementary school,’ it's written on the back. My calligraphy was very neat for a kid.”

“It would be.”

Shiki pictured little Izaya leafing through his treasured book. It was a charming mental image except little Izaya would probably reach the conclusion that The Little Prince’s deeper meaning related to ushering in the apocalypse.

“It hasn’t changed, my handwriting. Which is a good thing, that way I didn’t have to redo all my legally binding documents or file for a new official signature. Bureaucrats are not known for their flexibility of thought, imagine having to explain that my signature changed because I have amnesia.
Odds are I'd have to spend a few years writing forms to have it changed.”

“Such are the hazards of red tape.”

“Indeed. The bank people are every bit as bad and at heart the same except much better paid. My account managers all reacted with the typical polite concern but you could tell they were more concerned about whether I'd change banks than anything else. They love me for my money.”

“Did you also talk to the one in Switzerland?”

Izaya nodded.

“Oh yes. He stayed up all night just to talk discuss things over the phone.”

Which said a lot about the measure of Izaya's wealth. Or to its measureless quantity.

“We deal with banks a lot so I sympathize with you on this.”

Izaya always had a feeling Shiki meant the majestic 'we'.

“I feel a bit bad using all that money. Considering I did not actually earn it myself. Or I did but I didn't.”

“Who else would it belong to, then?”

“I don't know, the people I swindled it from?”

Shiki took his time producing a silver cigarette box, removing a slender specimen from its inside and on cue Izaya brought a lighter to it.

“I cannot agree. You do not swindle people exactly and you never did. You give people the
information they ask for and you work to obtain it, needless to say you are paid accordingly. If your fees are high and clients still flock to you it is only because you are the best there is.”

Izaya smiled half-shyly.

“Shiki-san, if I didn't know better I'd think you were flattering me with an ulterior motive.”

“Which I might very well do.”

“Ah. Flattery can get you a lot things, I bet.”

There was more than a hint of irony. Shiki enjoyed the unlikely mix of savvy and almost vulnerable.

“I heard you've been making a lot of friends.”

Izaya nodded.

“I realized something recently. I may have very little friends- I could almost be in that anime about people who are friendless- but I do have a potential for being friendly with virtually everyone. Barring people who are already prejudiced against me and those who have serious reasons for hating me, that is.”

“And this quality of yours is very useful?”

“Extremely so. But more importantly it makes me feel a bit happy. In a 'ah, maybe I'm not entirely a hopeless case' kind of way.”

Shiki was more interested in Izaya's ability to make friends in high places more than any indiscriminate friendliness. As it was it might very well make Izaya's life a lot more difficult than his former detachment but Shiki refrained from any disclaimer on the subject. Warnings tended to bounce off Izaya as it was anyway.
“And dressing up in unusual outfits is also part of being friends with others?”

Izaya giggled.

“Shiki-san, do you mean costplaying?”

“Do enlighten me on the subject.”

Some bouncing followed as Izaya gesticulated.

“It's short for 'costume play'. Basically, people dress up as characters from anime, manga and light novels mostly. There are other kinds of costplay but the one I got roped into was manga related. Crazy otakus will do that to one.”

“Sounds like you enjoyed yourself greatly.”

Izaya nodded.

“The outfit was very cumbersome, though. Just look, Shiki-san.”

Izaya showed him a picture of Judal on his phone.

“Any pictures of yourself wearing this...original outfit?”

“Well, yes, but it's a bit embarrassing...”

“Show me.”

Izaya seemed reluctant then made up his mind very suddenly.
“Alright but promise me you won't make fun of me. No laughing at me, Shiki-san! I mean it.”

Izaya produced one of the many pictures, awkwardly enough. Shiki contemplated it at length.

“Most alluring.”

“It's hell to wear. The wig is too heavy, the weird loose pants are way too low.”

“Looks fine to me.”

Shiki was not sure if walking around in such revealing clothes was all that good idea. At least he knew a few neighborhoods in which it would be a recipe for disaster but the case in point here was that Izaya had gone traipsing half-naked with none other than Heiwajima Shizuo. Shiki found it profoundly distasteful.

“It goes to show that 2D apparel does not translate well into daily life 3D. The fake jewelry was way too heavy too.”

Shiki wondered if Izaya was deliberately avoiding the fact more than anything the outfit was extremely sexy or whether he was having one of those clueless moments. Maybe it was too obvious to even bother mentioning but Shiki had more than hinted at it with no response.

“It's not meant to be practical, it's meant to highlight the wearer's body. And that it does beautifully well.”

Silence followed. Izaya's gaze wandered off to the distance beyond the windows. The city slid by, darkness punctuated by jittery slashes of light.

“Shiki-san, are you familiar with the manga in question, Magi?”

Shiki went as far as to blink.

“I'm afraid I am not well acquainted with popular culture.”
Which Izaya knew full well so this must be leading somewhere.

“Magi takes place in this Arabian Nights kind of universe. This Judal is a magi. A fallen magi to be more precise. A very flawed individual with serious issues including a tendency for psychotic outbreaks and a sarcastic sadist at heart.”

Shiki smiled.

“I can see why they would pick you.”

“Ah, that hurts. But I see your point. More important than Judal's peculiar personality is the fact that he is a magi. And a magi is a kingmaker. Do you understand what that means, Shiki-san?”

Shiki did. The clueless moment was his and not Izaya's. Shiki went as far as to almost chuckle. Shiki had been banking on Izaya's sex drive making him pliable but ironically enough Izaya had an important point to make. It was Shiki whose perspective was temporarily warped by libido.

“I believe so.”

Izaya finally looked Shiki straight in the eye.

“A kingmakers chooses the king. It will never work the other way around.”

Shiki was immediately reminded of his recent conversation with Shizuo. In which both had avoided the crucial topic of Izaya's will. No matter how much Shiki trusted in his ability to woo Izaya and regardless of whatever Shizuo had in mind ultimately it was all up to Izaya. Then again that was all part of the game.

“So the Ichinomiyas did not spirit you away or something?”
Shinra posed the question half-jokingly. Izaya had just turned up unexpectedly enough and was now lounging on the sofa as if he owned the place.

“'It seems not. Is Celty-san around?’”

Shinra blinked in unguarded surprise.

“She'll be back any time now. Why do you ask?”

“I'm here to talk to her.”

“About what?”

Izaya clicked with his tongue.

“So controlling, tsk. It's a secret, secret!”

And Izaya added weird waving fingers for effect as he undulated his voice.

“Ever the creepo. Don't upset Celty.”

“Always! Worry not, if she gets too freaked out she'll put me in my place. If anything I'm the one in a vulnerable position here. She can so easily kill me it is not even funny.”

“Which you know she won't. Since you're already here, take your shirt off.”

Izaya fidgeted and put on a coy act.

“But Shinra, my heart isn't ready...this is all so sudden,”
“I want to check out your wound, stop being creepier than usual.”

“Aye, it's healed fine. Barely a scar.”

“I'll see for myself. Shirt off now and no more chatter or I'll tickle you.”

Izaya looked most mortified and obeyed. Shinra went into doctor as he studied the indeed very faint scar tissue on Izaya's stomach and was so focused that he did not even notice the door opening.

“Hi there, Celty-san!”

Shinra was so caught off guard by Izaya's bubbly explosion that tried to wheel around only to collapse on top of Izaya so that Celty walked into quite a spectacle.

“Celty, you're back!”

[What...the...?]

Shinra had already jumped to his feet and a shirtless Izaya did the same, with greater grace it might be added.

“Celty-san, there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this. It is most definitely not what it looks like. Neh?”

Celty's helmet almost swiveled atop her neck.

[Why are you naked?! Actually, why are you here at all? Shinra?!]}

Shinra held out his hands and tried his best smile.
“Just examining him. Izaya is actually here to talk to you.”

[To me?]

Izaya nodded enthusiastically.

“That's right! So let us leave mister doctor here and go somewhere else. But first, 'kyaa, don't look!'”

Izaya went for a typical 'girl caught naked' pose, complete with crossing the arms over his chest to cover his nipples. Celty shook silently in what Izaya assumed was laughter and Shinra giggled.

*

Celty thought she had a pretty good idea of what Izaya wanted with her. She was entirely mistaken.

“I found something I wanted to share with you. Tada! Behold!”

Izaya handed her a flyer. They had drifted into a nearby park away from prying eyes. Celty scanned the paper.

[Sushi course...?]

“That's right! I visited the fish market the other day and it turns out they have these sushi workshops at a very affordable price. They accept beginners, too.”

Celty was speechless for a moment then typed slowly.

[But why are you giving this to me?]

“To me? san, not being able to taste is a great impediment to cooking. But there are ways of overcoming that. You can know if sushi is good or not just by learning what to look for and touch will tell you much not to mention scent. I think it may be the perfect meal for you to master.”
Celty's was speechless for an even longer period of time. The clock ticked a full minute before she began to type again and Izaya did nothing but wait with a smile.

[I don't understand...I mean, you're right- I wouldn't have thought of it myself but sushi seems like a good idea but why do you want to help...?]

“Because I am nice like that.”

Celty seemed about to protest but a fierce shaking of the helmet attested to a change of heart.

[Sorry, I'm being too hard on you. I should be thanking you.]

“It's okay, I'm used to it.”

Somehow Celty found that too sad.

[But won't I stand out too much?]

“Hmm...well, maybe but not if you take someone with you. You'll be amazed at how people relax when they see you have company. Just have your companion explain you can't speak and that you're shy. Once people get into the preparing of deliciously fresh fish people will cease to care much.”

[You may have a point there]

Izaya swung back on the forth on the bench as if he was a kid on a swing.

“No need to get too self-conscious, you know. Besides, this is Tokyo. Short of walking around naked you can avoid people's attention.”

[You may be right about that]
Izaya's ringtone interrupted the conversation.

“Please excuse me. Oh hi there, Kida-kun! That's great! I'll be right there, just stay put. Good job. I'm afraid I've got to go, Celty-san. Fluffy-chan is safe and sound, rejoice!”

[Fluffy-chan...?]

“A wonderful kitty. So, I'll be seeing you, bye bye!”

And with plenty of waving Izaya bounced away before Celty could type anything.

“She looks cute and fluffy but she scratches like a hell beast.”

Kida was rather sullen.

“Now, now, let us be brave and not make a fuss out of a few scratches. It's to be expected from yakuza cats anyway.”

“Yakuza cats...? Do I want to know?”

“I'd tell you. But then I'd have to kill you.”

Kida hesitated.

“I can't even tell if that's supposed to be one of your lame jokes...”
“And I shall never tell. But good job finding her. Here, get yourself a nice meal with friends.”

Izaya handed him some money and took the pet carriage from Kida.

“Is this yakuza cat thing a new meme or something?”

“That would be seriously cool but I’m afraid not...not yet, at least!”

Izaya was received in Kaori’s private chambers, a series of huge rooms all fitted with pink antique furniture that Izaya suspected was originally of other less ostensible coloring. If she had been aiming for soft coziness then it was a complete failure as far as Izaya could tell. All the pastel pink had more of an oppressive effect than anything else.

The room might be bigger than most receptions but fact remained that it was something of a boudoir. Izaya did not particularly care to be admitted into such an intimate environment, just the two of them. He could see it ending very badly if she was in the mood for petty wickedness and Izaya did not put it past her.

Izaya had to sit on a puff while she regally presided on a throne like armchair.

“Please confirm that it is indeed Fluffy.”

With great care he produced the cat from the carrier and placed it on her arms.

“Fluffy! You really found her! I knew I could trust you!”

Yet judging by her joyful surprise she did not trust him to succeed all that much.

“I already took her to the vet and apart from mild dehydration she is perfectly fine. Just a bit shaken up, nothing that a lot of love will not cure.”
Fluffy was already purring contently.

“Thank you very much, Orihara-kun. You're a godsend.”

Kaori flipped open a checkbook and filled a check with a golden pen. Izaya took it with a bow, glanced at the figures and almost frowned.

“Ichinomiya-san, this amount cannot be correct. There are two extra zeros.”

“Really? That's the amount I want to pay you. Is that a problem?”

“I'm afraid so. I am setting the amount.”

Kaori giggled, covering her mouth with a hand in a gesture Izaya was sure had been borrowed from the movies.

“How laudable, to think some people cannot be bought with money. But perhaps you could be bought in other ways?”

This was precisely what Izaya feared. He was all too aware of what she was angling for. It was his cue to leave and he did so with one of his most graceful bows.

“I cannot be bought at all, Ichinomiya-san. Fare thee well.”

Izaya was only too happy to leave. He had recorded everything with a tiny device just in case she decided to tell a different version of what had happened. But he was not yet quite done with the Ichinomiyas today.

The widow had too much self-possession to show how startled she was when Orihara Izaya was announced as a visitor.
“Orihara-kun, I did not expect to see you here. What brings you to my chambers?”

Her part of the mansion was much more tasteful than the strawberry explosion he had just left. Izaya was received in a reception lounge of black lacquered furniture with a few subtle golden highlights in the shape of streamlined waves. It opened to one of the many gardens complete with a rock garden for a genuine touch of what Izaya thought as 'True Japanese Mansion’.

Izaya sampled the exquisite tea he was offered.

“I am sorry if I am intruding on your privacy but I wanted to speak to you.”

She smiled quizzically.

“I heard you helped Saburo-sama in his being chosen as the next leader, for which I am grateful. The decision has yet to be made public but I believe you have the right to know first.”

Izaya bowed slightly.

“I am very glad to hear so but I am not here to discuss power matters. I wanted to speak to you as a private person.”

“In a 'human to human' manner, you mean?”

Izaya nodded.

“Precisely. Ichinomiya-san, do you have any pets?”

“Pets? I don't. Why do you ask?”

Izaya took a moment as if to compose his words very carefully.
“I apologize in advance for being too forward but I can tell you are suffering. I know there is nothing of any importance I can possibly do to ease your pain but what is within is means I would like to attempt.”

For the first time in decades the widow actually gaped in wonder.

“What an extraordinary young man you are! I believe you mean what you say.”

“I do indeed mean it. How do you feel about cats? I have a particular cat in mind. A Siamese cat, not a kitty so it won't be too much of a hassle to take of, in need of a home. Cats take care of themselves and are wonderful company.”

“In this enormous mansion in which I cannot trust most humans there will be a feline ally.”

“If you wish to see it like that.”

“Young man, I'll do as you say and adopt this cat you speak of.”

Izaya's smile was very bright.

“That is wonderful, Ichinomiya-san.”

“Orihara-kun...you're a good kid. Be safe.”

“Will do.”

Izaya wondered if this how it felt to have a nice grandmother. It was a disarming feeling that made him feel absurdly young as if he was about to be given a lollipop and told to behave in front of guests. But he did not dislike it. He did not dislike it at all.
Izaya tiptoed to the edge of the swimming pool and peered into the water with exaggerated care. He had heard that one never forgets how to swim and today he was going to confirm if the truism was indeed true or not. That he used to know how to swim he knew already so it was at least possible that he should still know how. With that said he had his misgivings and was not about to trust some latent swimming skills that may not even exist.

So for a while he merely stared at the very blue water intently and blocked out the noisy kids splashing around even as the sound rebounded in a hollow echo all around. He was not even aware of the thin but persistent scent of chlorine nor of the attention he was garnering as a group of girls that were most definitely checking him out.

Izaya stood out in his black speedo and highly focused expression. His choice of swimwear was not quite accidental but it had nothing to do with a desire for showing off. His first choice had been very normal swimming trunks simply because he wanted to go against his former self's choices, having found a collection of speedos in a closet he decided to go out of his way to avoid wearing them. But it occurred to him that doing so was a bit silly. More than that, swimming trunks covered his scar better and Izaya believed he needed to be comfortable in his skin.

It all led to his now standing here, dripping from the shower, in a swimming pool far away from any of his haunts lest he was spotted by those who knew him. In the end he went with a speedo but he bought a new one.

Izaya tested the water temperature with a toe. It was not quite cold but it was not inviting either. The ladders looked suspiciously dangerous. He approached the stairs on the shallow part and slowly made his way into the water until he was waist deep in it. So far so good.

He half-expected to find out whether he had an affinity with the water or not as soon as he found himself in it but it turned out he still did not know. It was a very strange feeling, half of his body seemed half unreal under the water. Izaya made his way until only his head was above the water and trailed his arms on the surface as he gathered his resolve. He took a deep breath before throwing himself forward, arms extended, in the hopes of at least floating and found himself swimming easily.

It was such a delightful feeling of liberation that Izaya giggled happily which of course made him splutter madly but did not stop him. If asked to explain his movements he would be completely at a loss, all he knew was that his body flowed through the water as if with a will of its own. Sound became a blur and his eyes redder than usual. Izaya lost track of time as he crossed and re-crossed the pool.
He decided to call it a day when he stopped for a rest and realized he was actually exhausted. Izaya was still catching his breath and cursing himself for not wearing goggles when a voice hailed him.

“Hey, hi there.”

Izaya's field of vision was momentarily out of focus and took some blinking to see he was being addressed by a pretty girl.

“Hello.”

“Say, my friends and me have been watching you and you got some cool moves. Want to join us for dinner?”

Izaya was too tired to haul himself up the ladders that still remained a bit treacherous as it was so he floated to the stairs.

“That's very nice of you but I already have plans.”

She pouted in a very artificial way that Izaya bet had been learned by route from some drama.

“That's too bad...say, have my number,”

Izaya waved dismissively but put on his very nice smile.

“Sorry but I am not interested. I'm sort of already taken, you see.”

She frowned.

“Sort of...?”
“It's complicated. But thanks for the invitation anyway. See you.”

Izaya waved and would have skipped away merrily if not for the fact that he might very well slip and fall flat on his face. Not to mention his legs felt slightly wobbly. Swimming was such great fun that he did not realize how much energy he had just exerted.

“Namie-san, guess what! I can swim!”

“Is that supposed to be news?”

Izaya flopped on the sofa, rolled about until he was on his back and right away Sushi jumped on his belly and made himself comfortable.

“I didn't know if I still had it in me so I went to the swimming pool today and lived to tell the tale.”

“Don't go drowning on me. You still haven't paid me this month.”

“Ouch, snap! I've been told.”

Namie tried to hide her smile.

“You seem tired.”

“Ah, I'm beat...sleepy time will early for Iza-chan!”

“Don't '-chan' yourself, it is highly disturbing.”

“So mean.”
“Don't forget to turn on the machinery. I still think supervising your sleep cycles is a good idea.”

Izaya sighed deeply.

“Okay but it looks like a torture device...kinda scary.”

“It's not a torture device.”

“I know that...but aesthetically speaking you must see my point.”

“It may look that way to you but it's perfectly safe.”

“Aye, aye...”

Izaya yawned.

“Time for Iza-chan to sleep.”

“Oh god, 'Iza-chan'? You're killing me here!”

And indeed Izaya nearly choked and would have fallen off the sofa were not for his very quick reflexes.

Just like he expected Izaya fell asleep almost as soon as he hit the sack. But he did not expect to have the strange dream that followed.
Izaya knew that he was dreaming but it was almost as if he was a spectator to a movie more than anything else.

A sudden burst of sunlight as some doors flung open with a metallic bang. A cityscape glimmered into view as Izaya stepped on the rooftop. In the dream Izaya saw through the eyes of his dream-self. Izaya climbed a ladder to the top of a utility house.

“Found a Shizu-chan~”

And indeed Shizuo was before him, flat on his back, cigarette tucked at the corner of his mouth, yellow hair and the lapels of his school uniform fluttering in the air.

“Go to hell.”

“Ah, always so mean. Here, present for you.”

Izaya tossed him a small package wrapped in brilliant red paper that crinkled loudly as Shizuo caught in mid-air.

“What's this?”

“Like I said, present for you.”

Izaya sat and made himself most comfortable.

“Why?”

“What day is it today, Shizu-chan?”

“February the 14th.”
“Namely, Valentine's. I baked you some cookies and filled it with my feelings for you.”

Shizuo stared at the package for a while then smashed it.

“Unfunny shit.”

“Tsk, I spent some much time baking those cookies and injecting them with poison. The least you can do is eat them and foam at the mouth as you writhe at my feet.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“Always!”

A few moments passed in mutual silence. Shizuo sent some puffs of smoke floating above them. Izaya picked up the conversation again.

“I am set on this one man.”

“Good, go annoy him instead.”

“Is that all you've got to say?”

“Feel sorry for the poor bastard, I guess.”

Izaya giggled.

“No need for that. We're talking of someone who can handle me.”

“Good for him.”
“Ah, you're no fun when you're like this.”

“No one's keeping you here.”

Izaya snipped the tip of Shizuo's cigarette.

“Now you've done it,”

“Catch me if you can, Shi-zu-chan!”

Izaya spoke from over his shoulder for he was already dashing away with Shizuo on his heels.

With this the dream ended and Izaya woke up deep in the middle of the night. He remained on his back, eyes closed, breathing in and breathing out for a while. Izaya found it impossible to properly describe his present emotional state. While it was much less disturbing than having a tête-à-tête with a psychotic version of himself it gave him pause in an entirely different way.

Surely it was merely a dream, it could hardly be anything else: it went against everything he knew of his past but at the same time it invoked a sense of reality that mere dreams tended to lack. More than anything else it felt real.

Izaya drank a glass of water then hopped over to a brand new laptop and typed down his dream. It might be a bit silly for anyone past middle school to keep a dream journal but there were particular circumstances involved. Izaya considered them as he slowly spun on his swivel chair.

If he wanted to confirm whether it was a mere dream or a flashback he would have to ask Shizuo. And he was reluctant to do that. Not to mention it might be making himself vulnerable with no tangible result, for all he knew Shizuo might very have forgotten this particular episode.

Izaya turned to analyzing the actions of his dream-self. Through it all he had been a mere spectator, unable to have the faintest inkling as to the inner workings of this dream-self of his. It gave him some insight into how other people viewed him. No wonder Non-Orihara Izaya human beings were often at a loss to comprehend him, he himself was not entirely sure.
Izaya decided to approach Shizuo in the most roundabout manner possible.

As it turned out an opportunity appeared without his doing anything. Rumor reached him that Shizuo had joined a doujo of sorts which surprised Izaya enough to give him an excuse to check it out. Izaya asked no one in particular but merely followed word on the street as only he knew how and in no time found the place in question.

“Aikido? Of all things...Aikido? Why on Earth?”

Izaya was still frowning in front of the building as Shizuo stepped outside.

“Someone told me it'd be good for me.”

Izaya managed to appear most nonplussed and even cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh really? Killed anyone yet?”

“Nah. Aikido is not about killing people, it's about harmony and stuff like that. Good for self-control.”

“Eh, is that so. How laudable, Shizuo. Make sure you thank whoever gave you such useful and friendly advice.”

“Not friendly.”

“Whatever.”

“Come back tomorrow and check it out.”
Izaya blinked.

“Me? You want me to try aikido?”

“Yeah. You'll probably be good at it.”

“Let's aikido', that kind of thing? It's really not my scene, you know.”

“You don't know until you try.”

“I think I'll pass. Nine of the ten scenarios I can envision end with Izaya pancake in a puddle of blood.”

“Creepy way of putting it. Just like you.”

“Well gee, excuse me for being creepy.”

“What about the other one?”

“The other what?”

“The other scenario. Out of the ten you can, what was it...'envision’”.  

“It ends with my escaping being stomped to death by you by a hair's breadth.”

“I told you before, I ain't gonna do that. And aikido really isn't violent.”

Izaya rocked back and forth slightly, keeping a precarious balance on the balls of his feet in the most effortless of ways.
“Harmony and stuff, you say.”

“Want to go for a drink or something? Instead of standing here talking.”

“No thanks. I was on my way as it was.”

Izaya headed for the subway and sure enough Shizuo walked side by side.

“I'm not following you, going to the subway.”

Izaya considered hailing a cab but it would come across too much like running away. Besides, he had yet to even broach the subject that had brought him here.

“So, learned any forbidden techniques?”

“Nah, don't think aikido has any of that.”

“No super special techniques sealed away? Now that's no fun.”

“The otakus are getting to you, they're all about that kind of thing.”

Izaya smiled.

“True. I was hoping for some special technique that is so devastating it kills the user. Such a wonderful way of getting rid of you it would be! But alas it is not to be.”

“Not too sure you'd like that. If it's that powerful it'd probably ruin the whole city along with killing me.”
“Hmm... getting rid of you is not worth Tokyo being wiped out, no.”

“Yeah. No Ikebukuro for you to haunt.”

“I do not 'haunt'.”

“You kinda do.”

“Anyway, are you going on tournaments now? And start rambling about becoming the strongest in the world?”

“No interest in none of that.”

“And do this doujo people know of your proclivity for violence?”

Shizuo looked at Izaya for a while as if studying him closely.

“I've been wondering, you got a tiny head but it's like there's a whole dictionary inside.”

“My head is tiny...?”

“Yeah. Tiny head with a lot of things inside.”

Izaya halted very abruptly.

“Oy, are you implying I am malformed? I'll have you know that my head is perfectly proportioned along with the rest of my body.”

“It's tiny considering all the stuff it's got crammed inside.”
Izaya could no longer put on a serious act and burst out giggling.

“Oh, Shizuo. Only you, honestly!”

Shizuo cracked a smile.

“Yeah, I'm funnier than you'll ever be.”

“Now, now, let us not get so cocky.”

Izaya had the sudden urge, ruffling Shizuo's still damp hair and disheveling it. Trust Shizuo not to bother drying his hair after the shower. But he refrained. They walked down the street when suddenly Shizuo stopped and stood in a brown study gazing at a store display. Izaya followed his gaze.

“A parfait store?”

“Yeah, that one's real good. Never tried it myself.”

Shizuo nodded toward a glossy parfait set as if on a stage. Izaya almost asked Shizuo how he could know whether it was good having never tasted it.

“I suppose it is very expensive?”

“Real expensive, yeah.”

Izaya looked around some more.

“Says there it's 50% off today.”

“Only if you order the special set for two people, they won't serve it to just one person.”
Izaya swung back and forth as he was wont to do.

“Hmm...is that so.”

“Yeah.”

Izaya reached a sudden decision.

“Arithmetic is not your strongest point, is it? Between you and I how people can you count?”

“Huh?”

“One,” Izaya tapped himself in the chest “Two.” Izaya proceeded to tap Shizuo in the chest. “Therefore, 'let's parfait!'”

Shizuo blinked.

“For real?”

“Indeed.”

Izaya was already pushing the door open, a silvery bell going off overhead. By the time he was sitting on a tiny table for two he realized what he should have seen right away, the place was full of couples. The best way of dealing with a handicap was often to seek refuge in audacity. Or so Izaya firmly believed. He granted the rather puzzled waitress a stellar smile and ordered.

“We'll have the special parfait set, please. Ah, to love sweets and yet be simple. What is one to do?”

She left all smiles and Izaya was quite pleased with himself. He gasped as two massive parfaits appeared, oozing chocolate.
“Oh wow, it's like chocolate Tokyo Tower.”

“It's got three layers, different types of chocolate and cream.”

Shizuo was already gleefully putting his spoon to it.

“Shizuo, this kind of thing is fine every now and then but considering how much sweets you eat aren't you afraid of developing diabetes?”

“Nah.”

Izaya sighed.

“Nah'? That's all you've got to say? Just how nonchalant can one be? This is your health we're talking about.”

Shizuo paused with his spoon in midair.

“Non' what?”

“Never mind it. Sweet!”

Izaya had just taken his first bite.

“Yeah, it's as good as it looks.”

“Eh...a bit too sweet, though. I'm getting sugar shock here.”

“Want me to eat yours?”
“No way. 'Let's parfait', remember?”

“I heard of sushi shaped sweets.”

“A blasphemy I say, a blasphemy! One sees sushi, one gets excited, one bites, one Ods on sugar.”

“Is it worse than sushi with cheese?”

“No. No, it isn't. Very few things are worse than that. Why, I could write a whole book on the subject.”

“I bet. Making good parfait is real difficult.”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow. He was in the process of probing the syrupy depths that seemed to be without end.

“Don't tell me you can make parfait yourself.”

“Nah. But there's this Korean movie about this store where they make cakes and parfaits.”

“You're into those kinds of movies? Now that's...unusual.”

To say the least.

“It was right before this drama Kasuka stars in so I ended up watching it. Seems like it's an adaptation of a Japanese manga or novel or something.”

“What's it called?”
“Antique Bakery.”

“So you watched it for the sweet goodness.”

“There’s a lot of gay stuff to it too.”

Izaya choked, quite literally.

“There's what?”

“Dunno how to say it better, some of the bakers are gay and everyone's real cute.”

“And you're a fan of this?”

“Yeah, it's pretty cool.”

“I am speechless.”

“Made me real hungry, seeing all those tasty cakes.”

“Ah, Shizuo, don't forget 'The cake is a lie!’”

“You know, this is kinda like a date.”

Izaya swirled his spoon on the thickly sweet stuff.

“Well, it isn't.”

Now might be the very best time to ask about the content of the dream but precisely because it was
such a perfect timing Izaya could not possibly bring it up. He was in for quite a shock.

“Didn't receive the usual package from you, come to think of it.”

“Usual package...?”

Izaya's sense of foreboding kicked into high gear. In his experience 'packages' tended to be code for very nasty things.

“Yeah. It's cyanide in those cookies, right?”

“What cookies...?”

Izaya knew that flat out asking was opening a huge rift in his defenses but otherwise he might as well be flying blind.

“You know, the cookies you send me every Valentine's.”

Izaya focused on playing with the slushy remains of his parfait in order to gain some time.

“Thought you never tried poison,”

“Never did. But they smelled all almondy so it's probably cyanide.”

“You got evidence right there...that I tried to kill you, why didn't you ever use it?”

“Can't exactly prove it's you who sent it. I know it can be no one else, and you know that I know. That's enough for you.”

“Still...”
“That's why I was kinda surprised when you went on about poison the other day.”

“I see.”

Izaya did not at all see.

“This is gonna sound strange but I bet if I took it to the cops it'd turn out to be normal cookies.”

“Are you saying there's no actual poison...?”

“Not exactly, I know they're poisoned alright but if I did anything about it that particular batch would end up to be clean.”

“How exactly would that work?”

Shizuo shrugged.

“Dunno.”

“Are you implying I have special powers or something to that effect?”

“Wouldn't surprise me much but that's not what I'm saying. It's more like, in some ways there's no point in doing anything against you 'cuz you'll have seen it coming even before I think about it.”

“Now that's defeatist. And fatalistic.”

Shizuo ordered extra whipped cream and poured a liberal dose into Izaya's cup that he proceeded to mix with the remains of chocolate.
“There, you can eat it better now.”

“Eh, thanks...”

Izaya contemplated the gooey mixture with distrust.

“Chocolate is supposed to be all about sexy stuff, I heard.”

Izaya giggled and handed Shizuo a napkin.

“Shizuo, you got chocolate all over your chin. If you're going to go into that kind of talk then at least make sure you clean after yourself, please.”

Shizuo used the napkin and smiled.

“Damn.”

“Shizuo, I believe you meant to say that chocolate is an aphrodisiac.”

“Again with the fancy words.”

“It is commonly accepted that chocolate enhances sexual desire. Is that easy enough to comprehend?”

“Yeah. Don't think it works that way myself.”

“You are probably right.”

“Chocolate don't need any of that to be good.”
Izaya had one of his giggling fits.

“Heh, looks that way. Sorry, it just gets me every time- huge macho man like you having such a sweet tooth!”

“Size got nothing to do with sweets.”

“True. There are times when one can't quite avoid clichés.”

“Dunno about being a macho man either.”

“Ah, Shizuo, you are most definitely the macho type. I can imagine you eating iron instead of pumping iron, it's beyond macho.”

“I don't eat metal.”

“So you say! Have you tried chestnut owl sweets?”

“Chestnut owls?”

“Chestnut pastries in the shape of an owl. They sell them at the Metropolitan hotel in Ikebukuro, owl themed because of the neighborhood.”[They actually do sell these, or they used to, at the above mentioned hotel]

“Sounds cool. Never tried them, bet they're expensive.”

“Somewhat but if you buy a set they become much more affordable. I got Saki some the other day.”

“Chestnut sweets are good but chocolate is better.”

Izaya sighed in his exaggerated manner.
“Shizuo, don't you like more subtle flavors? Like chestnut and sweet bean paste.”

“Hmm... kinda but 'subtle' isn't enough, if you're into sweets then the sweeter the better.”

“How about green tea icecream?”

“Heard of that, never tried it.”

“You'll try it today.”

Izaya ordered it and right away Shizuo gobbled a spoonful. Before he could comment Izaya placed a finger on his lips.

“Shizuo, before you say something like 'it's good but it could be sweeter', you're going to close your eyes and try it again. This time try to actually taste it.”

Izaya removed his finger. The impression lingered on Shizuo's lips despite they're being almost numb from the cold.

“Okay.”

Shizuo made an effort even though he presently had much more on his mind than icecream. When he opened his eyes Izaya was staring intently at him.

“So? How was it?”

“Real good, actually. Tasted better the second time around.”

“See! I am vindicated!”
“You're what?”

“Google it, Shizuo, google knows all!”

“You want some of the icecream?”

“There's no way I can eat anything on top of that parfait.”

“Really? Tiny stomach to go with a tiny head. Except when it comes to sushi.”

Izaya did one of typical abrupt movements, leaning over the table until he was well within Shizuo's personal space.

“That's because there's a different stomach for sushi.”

Having delivered this oracular pronouncement Izaya flopped back just as abruptly, folded his arms and nodded as if appreciating his own wisdom.

“Guess food is also about tasting and not just chugging it.”

“That's right! I've been saying as much for a while now, you cannot appreciate anything if you just gobble it down like a killer whale. Human beings should take their time eating so that they can fully enjoy flavor combinations.”

“Yeah.”

Shizuo carried on eating making sure he did so slowly enough.

“There is much more to food than mere nutrition, human beings have created a rich culture around food. It is part of what makes us human. One should treasure such things.”
“Kinda like, 'food brings us together'?”

“Yes. In general terms, of course. I do not mean you and I.”

Shizuo smiled.

“We're eating together now so,”

“Oh my, look at the time! Got to scramble.”

Izaya paid, left a generous tip despite not being supposed to and was gone before Shizuo's spoon had even hit the bottom of the elaborate icecream bowl.
Shiki went out of his way to purchase all available issues of Magi. He skimmed it rapidly, the artwork was not to his liking even if the plot held his interest in a marginal manner, until the infamous Judal appeared.

He smiled, costplaying might be very foreign to him but he saw the point of choosing Izaya to impersonate this particular character. What a shame that Shiki had not been there to watch Izaya in all this pseudo Arabic quasi-fetish semi-naked glory.

Then again Shiki had his doubts that Izaya would agree to dressing up in such an attire for him. These anime enthusiasts (‘otaku’ was too vague a term to Shiki who associated it carrying bulky curiously themed pillows in the subway much to the annoyance of everyone else) were non-threatening as far as Izaya was concerned.

But Shiki kept coming back to Shizuo's presence in the Tokyo market expedition. Even taking into consideration neutralizing factors, first the otakus and then this Tanaka individual, it all remained extremely risky.

Shiki considered Izaya's character. When faced with danger that hinged on his personal vulnerabilities he was driven to overcome it with such flair so as to appear absolutely unaffected. His reactions were measured to have just that effect. None of that had changed.

It was interesting to dwell on how much Izaya had changed, it was even tempting to see him as entirely a different person but Shiki knew better. That so much of Izaya's core personality had survived the loss of his memory said plenty of how unique an individual he was.

Shiki found it absolutely fascinating. Izaya might have lost track of his grand master-plan but there was nothing stopping him from coming up with a brand new one. Or even to resurrect the original plan without even realizing it, an ironical turn of events that would amuse Shiki.

Either way, Shiki was extremely curious to see what Izaya had planned for the near future. And Shiki would not at all mind if it included dressing in pseudo Arabic quasi-fetish semi-naked glory for Shiki's pleasure. And his pleasure alone.
Kida was walking past the park when he spotted something that caused him to do a double take. For a while he stood very still, rooted to the pavement. Kida made his way past a queue of very shabbily dressed people lining up to a long table behind which stood none other than Orihara Izaya.

The white apron and equally white borderline nurse-like headgear were off but there was denying it as Kida got closer. Izaya was in the process of serving steamy soup with a large ladle. Presently he filled the bowl of a woman in rags who just got to the head of the line.

“Enjoy your meal! Next person, please.”

Izaya smiled one of his stellar smiles. Kida gaped. For a while he could only watch in sheer confusion.

“Orihara-san....?”

“Oh hi there, Kida-kun. Can’t talk to you now, busy. Here, enjoy your meal! Today it’s meaty broth, I peeled the potatoes myself and can assure you it’s yummy.”

An unkempt man took the bowl Izaya had just served and thanked him profusely.

“What are you doing here...?”

“Soup kitchen. Kida-kun, sorry to bother you but could you give this to Kinoshita-san? That’s the lady under the tree there, fitting name isn’t it?”

And so Kida found himself handing a bowl of soup to an old woman who did not look too sane judging by the way she shrieked at the sky every now and then. Kida looked around in the hopes of getting someone else to do this for him but there was no one. With a sigh he placed the bowl by her side and slowly backed away. Fortunately she fell on it right away.[*this shrieking lady actually does exist and at some point was a regular in the above mentioned park. Her name is made up, though]

Kida waited until Izaya’s shift was done. He seriously considered calling an ambulance or at least contacting Namie, surely Izaya had lost his mind.
It seemed to go on forever, an endless procession of homeless people waiting patiently for Izaya to give them a hot meal. By the time it was over the sun was beginning to set and the light had shifted from daylight yellow to a corrosive shade of red.

Izaya helped tidy up and put away the table then stretched like a cat.

“Ooh, you’re still here. What’s up, Kida-kun?”

“That’s my line...what are you doing here?”

“Told you, soup kitchen.”

“But why...?”

Izaya removed the headgear but remained strange in the white apron. The only kind of apron Kida could ever associate with Izaya was a naked apron. Izaya grew thoughtful.

“Because I’m selfish.”

Kida blinked. He had been trying to think up of possible reasons for Izaya to volunteer to help the homeless but nothing came to mind.

“Orihara-san, I don't follow.”

“At times I wonder, what can I do to help those in need? I can make very hefty donations but that does not appease my conscience, there is no emotion payoff in that. But helping up like this, face to face, feels much more real. Of course, donations are much more useful than anything I can actually do myself. I do it to make myself feel better, it is a form of selfishness as any other.”

Kida opened and closed his mouth a few times without actually saying anything.
“I don’t get it...”

“We’re so used not to seeing these people, we have trained ourselves into ignoring them so much that we do not even see them anymore. It takes an effort to actually see them at all. Yet they are every bit as human as you and I and as such deserving of our respect. We all have our circumstances and things can go very wrong at any given time.”

“Orihara-san, do you feel alright?”

“I’m fine, why?”

“Well...that kind of talk is just weird coming from you...it's more something Mikado would say.”

“Ahh, some people have the monopoly on empathy, it would seem.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I bet there’s some plot involved anyway.”

Izaya shrugged.

“Oh yes, it is beyond what a mere mortal could possibly comprehend but it is bound to usher in the end times.”

The biting sarcasm reassured Kida.

“The only kind of apron I ever imagined you in was a naked apron.”

Izaya seriously considered it, tapping his chin.

“That might be a good idea if the mood is right.”

Kida tried to stifle a few giggles but with little success.
“Most people wouldn't admit that, Orihara-san!”

“Most people aren't Orihara Izaya!”

“Good! Or the world would have exploded by now.”

“Are you saying I am a threat to society and even to the continued survival of the planet Earth? Because if so, you may be right.”

Izaya and Kida became aware that a small crowd of delinquents were heading their way at the same time.

“Yo, if it isn't Kida. How come you don't come round anymore?”

“Us guys miss you.”

Kida immediately tensed up. He had been almost about to loosen up even if only slightly and now he was a bundle of tightly wound nerves. Normally Izaya would have avoided hoodlums altogether but he was annoyed. Getting along with Kida was already difficult enough as it was, the last thing Izaya wanted was for random goons to interfere and ruin everything. So he stepped up.

“Gentlemen, is there a problem?”

Kida exchanged a quick and frantic glance from Izaya to the chief of the wannabe gangsters. This could go very wrong very fast.

“Scram, none of your business.”

Izaya smiled. It chilled Kida to the bone and was enough to make a few of the guys retreat a few paces.
“Oh? I beg to differ. You see, this is my city and I'd rather it wasn't polluted by the likes of you. Neh?”

The smile grew wider. How anyone could have possibly failed to see that at this precise moment Izaya was lethal was beyond Kida but the boss clearly lacked a survival instinct.

“Now you've done it,”

Kida almost felt sorry for the poor guy. Almost.

Izaya dodged with fluid ease.

“You're slow, aren't you? Try again!”

Which he did. Izaya dodged once more so that the guy landed a punch on a streetlight. Howls of pain followed, Izaya's smile did not waver.

“Now, now, there is no crying in a gangster's life.”

There was a sudden glimmer of silver as a tall fellow aimed a knife at Izaya who parried it with his own blade without as much as blinking.

“Heh, meet kawaii-chan. Kawaii-chan, meet Mister Gangster.”

Izaya actually giggled. A few of the guys took to their heels. Izaya's crazy giggling suddenly stopped and he tilted his head at a strange angle.

“I'm getting bored now.”

Izaya moved in a circle, spinning madly, blade in hand. For a split second Kida was sure Izaya had just slashed them and wounded them all seriously. Then he saw pants falling and the whole lot dashed away frantically, growling curses as they both tried to pull off their pants and run.
Izaya waved them goodbye and then burst out laughing and kept on laughing. So much so that he actually ended up throwing himself on the ground and rolled around, holding his belly as peals of laughter rocked his whole body.

“Orihara-san...you really can be psychotic.”

Izaya sat up, wiping a tear and still giggling under his breath.

“So what else is new?”

Kida giggled himself.

“That was kinda funny, got to admit.”

“Wasn't it?! Too funny for words!”

“You seem to be enjoying yourself a bit too much.”

“I find joy in the little things in life.”

“Right...”

“Do you get goons like giving you a hard time often?”

Kida shrugged.

“Every now and then.”

“That's not good.”
But of course Izaya could not go on a rant about protecting Kida. It would have been insulting.

“It's the way it is,”

Izaya had to watch himself so as not to pity Kida too much. Patronizing helped no one. His immediate instinct was a painful sense of sympathy, of being too sad for the potential going so much to waste. Izaya knew all too well that Kida was a broken boy in need of affection that Izaya could not possibly supply. There were times when Izaya just wanted to hug him.

“All this feeding people and kick bad guys' asses has made me hungry. Had dinner already?”

“I was about to grab a bite to eat at the convenience store.”

“Have you tried the ramen place across the street? It's quite good. I'm on my way to have dinner there, feel free to tag along.”[this restaurant is real and placed precisely across the street from the park]

It was a direct invitation but phrased in an offhand way in the hopes Kida might take it.

“You paying?”

“That's the idea.”

Kida allowed himself a rueful smile.

“It'd be on you anyway, my money was originally yours.”

“It becomes your property, though. For valuable services rendered.”
Considering Kida's reluctance in joining him for dinner Izaya fully expected him to hardly eat. Instead Kida ordered the most substantial ramen set, a massive bowl filled to the brim and steaming. Kida could not even pick it up, it was that heavy.

“I guess you really are still growing up.”

“Might as well make you burn your money while I'm at it.”

With that said Kida did not seem lacking in appetite. Izaya's own ramen nearly grew cold as he forgot to eat and simply watched Kida. It occurred to Izaya that Kida's meals were probably erratic.

“So...where are you staying on these days?”

It was as good of a topic as any other but Kida was not about to be lulled into an actual conversation.

“Like you need to ask. I'm sure you know.”

“I can't win, can't I. If I let show that I do know you'll complain I'm stalking you and if I deny knowledge you'll accuse me of lying.”

Kida nodded and tried to pick up the bowl, gave up, and picked up his chopsticks as if he was about to pluck out Izaya's eyes with them.

“No point in asking things you already know.”

“It's different my knowing through third parties and your telling me yourself.”

“About that naked apron...”

Kida trailed off, suddenly shy. Izaya found it endearing.
“Kida-kun, that's adult stuff. You're ten years too early to be talking about things like that. Which is why you can't order some vintage alcohol and really make me burn some money.”

Kida seemed to be thinking for a while then he called the waiter and asked for a takeaway order. Then he attacked his meal anew.

“That sure is convenient. When it suits you it's all, 'Kida-kun, you're still a kid so butt out of grownup matters' but when you need me to do stuff for you it's suddenly, 'Kida-kun, you better do this or else'.”

Izaya drew a line across the table with a finger.

“That's because you are a time in your life in which you fluctuate between adulthood and childhood. There is no clear cut transition, you'll meander between the two until you reach a point of stability.”

Izaya zigzagged his finger over the imaginary line. Kida followed it as if expected some major revelation to follow. He seemed to be about to do something decisive.

“So you were 'fluctuating' when you were my age?”

“Probably.”

“'Probably'? What, you don't know?”

“It takes perspective to see some things, being too close can be a hindrance.”

Kida had finished his ramen but for a long time he stared blankly at the bottom of the bowl.

“You know, even when I curse you it's always 'Orihara-san is a bastard' or 'Go to hell, Orihara-san'. One day I started wondering, why is that...then it hit me. As much as I hate you I accept you're above me...you'll always be 'Orihara-san'. Just how pathetic is that?”
Izaya did not expect such candor and was a bit disarmed by it. Kida was about to bolt.

“Wait, don't go just yet.”

To Izaya's surprise Kida halted.

“Is that an order?”

“It's a request.”

“And?”

Izaya realized he did not exactly know what he wanted to say, he simply had a sudden urge to keep Kida here and get through to him.

“You're free to leave but you're equally free to stay.”

Kida blinked in confusion.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means you have a choice. Right now you feel that you simply have to get away from me but you can find a way to stay and still be true to yourself.”

What Izaya really wanted to say was that running away eventually became unsustainable. Kida sat down slowly. Then he lifted his bowl and signaled a waiter.

“Refill, please!”

Izaya laughed.
Izaya decided to visit Ikebukuro's cat cafe. Shizuo had mentioned it rather disparingly but Izaya was curious about what kinds of cats attracted people. Not precisely because of the cats themselves, although that would be fun, but for their human audience.

He made his way through the Tokyuu Hands building, checking out what new gadgets were on sale and bought a sushi shaped USB pen. The cat place was on the top floor right next to an impressive pet shop.[this place is actually real although it is not a café but purely a place to visit and interact with cats]

Izaya had barely stepped inside when a member of the staff all but flew at him.

“About time you show up! You're an hour late on your very first day!”

“There seems to be some misunderstanding.”

She took a step back.

“You're not the new part-timer?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“I am so sorry, we were expecting a new part-timer today as we just received a new batch of cats,”

“Can I help? I'd be glad to fill in for that part-timer. I have some experience with cats, I got one recently. Here he is, Sushi.”

Izaya showed her a picture of himself holding the black cat.
“You're Sushi's owner? I'm a huge fan!”

“Ah, I keep forgetting Sushi is a famous feline.”

“You got the job!”

And so Izaya found himself wearing the uniform include cat ears cap and being introduced to a small crowd of felines. He was given a folder with detailed information including pictures, breeds, names and each cat's particular likes and dislikes. Izaya committed it all to memory very rapidly much to the surprise and happiness of the staff.

“All these cats have impressive pedigrees, don't they?”

“People like easily recognizable breeds.”

“I see. I am fonder of strays myself, more unpredictable all around. They look less standardized. But I see you have a Russian Blue, very smart cats.”

Izaya reached out for the cat in question and gently patted its gray head.

“I think you'll be right at home.”

He toured the premises. A largish series of rooms all painted in bright primary colors had been deftly converted for the convenience of cats. Shelves were built into the bright walls as literal cat walks and there behind glass windows there havens of plush pillows on which the cats could lounge with no human interference. These havens had their own theme, there was a schoolroom with mini-desks, a large toy train outfitted as a long bed and many others.

Izaya found it all very ingenious and would be glad to be posted here but he was sent to the entrance with the sole task of welcoming costumers. His amicable nature and easy going ways made him perfect for front of house as it was. His bright smile came on handy.

He realized fairly soon that said costumers were mostly women and children. It did not cross his mind that the reason was he was readily accepted as a replacement part-timer had anything to do with
his looks but he capitalized on them without even being fully aware.

The uniform had originally been designed for females and while plain enough, loose fitting pants and a red shirt, it had hardly been modified to fit the male body. Izaya thought the waist line was a bit too low but then again that was nothing compared to the fluffy pair of cat ears.

“Welcome! Hope you'll enjoy our lovely cats- oh, it's <i>you</i>.”

Izaya was not even entirely surprised to see Shizuo standing before him.

“Kitty ears. Looks cute on you.”

“What are you doing here? Thought you didn't like cat cafes?”

“Was buying cat food for Hiro-kun when I saw you. New job?”

“Just helping out. Are you buying a ticket or not? You're blocking the entrance.”

“Sure, one ticket.”

Izaya handed him the ticket and smiled beautifully.

“Our cats are tame but do handle them gently. Do not pick them up if they resist or insist on petting them.”

Izaya had been specifically told to greet costumers so he thought he was done with Shizuo for the time being. But it was not to be. His superior overhead the conversation and had Izaya show the brand new cats to the gentleman. Izaya had the distinct impression she was doing it on purpose.

“Oh look, yellow cat.”
“That's Ginger. She likes sunbathing and rolling around.”

“Female yellow, huh. That's kinda rare.”

“The cats here are not your average household feline.”

Shizuo pointed to a fluffy Persian currently grooming very long white fur.

“Lots of hair in that one.”

“Snowflake.”

“Man, what happened to that poor fellow?”

Shizuo meant a hairless cat who was happily climbing his way to a top shelf.

“That's a Sphinx cat, that's the way they are.”

“Yeah? Looks all wrinkly.”

Izaya put out his hands and sure enough the strange cat licked his fingers. Izaya smiled tenderly. Shizuo wished he could take a photograph.

“They are indeed different but have their own peculiar charm. They're surprisingly popular, believe it or not.”

Shizuo was going to say something just to keep the conversation going but a wailing shriek interrupted him before he could even open his mouth. Izaya dashed toward the little kid responsible for the disturbance. He crouched to get on the same level.

“Hey, what happened?”
“Kit-kitty is bad!”

“Did the kitty bite you?”

Some sniffles and a nod.

“Kitty bit me,”

Izaya bounced away and returned with a first aid kit. He smiled reassuringly at the worried mother standing by.

“Let me see. Hmm...it's a tiny cut. You're a big boy so don't cry. Okay?”

“'kay.”

Izaya disinfected and bandaged the small wound.

“Here. You're all set.”

“Thanks,”

“You know, kitty was just afraid of you. To a cat you're a giant. Here, this one is more used to people.”

Izaya caught a meandering Siamese and placed it on the kid’s lap, smiling reassuringly at the mother as he did so.

“See? No need to be scared of kitty. Next time I'll help you with the other kitty, okay?”
And just like this Izaya secured a returning costumer and waved enthusiastically enough at the retreating family. Shizuo had followed the whole episode very closely.

“You're good with kids.”

“Oh, you know, little sisters help with that.”

Izaya had no idea if it was indeed so but it seemed a safe enough bet.

“Do you have a suggestion box around here?”

“If you wish to lodge a formal complaint,”

“Not complaint. I have a suggestion. No cat tails.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The outfit. You got the ears but no tail.”

“Are you suggesting they add a cat tail to the uniform?”

“Yeah. Makes sense.”

Izaya tried to stare him down. It was difficult considering the furry ears hat.

“You do realize this is not Akibahara?”

“Cat tail goes with cat ears.”
“Ah...suggestion box is there.”

Shizuo penned down his suggestion and went on his way. Izaya found himself swamped with felines come feeding time.

“Oy! You guys, calm down. No 'meow', there's enough for everyone.”

By the time Izaya was done appeasing the hungry beasts Shizuo was nowhere to be found.

*

The wall mural depicting Mount Fuji shone dully in the warm air. Everything was subdued even the occasional water splashing and the light rippling out on the surface on the deep, vast tubs.

Izaya looked around curiously. He was immersed in soothingly warm water and would be cozy indeed were he not somewhat perplexed.

“Kasuka-san, thank you for inviting me but why a public bath...?”

It was as oddball a choice as Izaya could think of. But of course Kasuka seemed extremely at ease.

“Perfect place. No fans here.”

“Ah...that's a very good point.”

They did not have the place to themselves but almost. A few regulars were clustered about in other tubs and pretty much keeping to themselves.

“Also, public bath is good for naked bonding.”

Izaya giggled a bit nervously.
“Indeed! Millions of fangirls would kill to be in my shoes right now.”

Izaya was not exactly used to lounging in the nude like this but Kasuka had no qualms with it.

“My new movie premiers in two weeks' time. I'm giving you and nii-chan front row tickets.”

Just when Izaya was beginning to get used to this unlikely experience, Izaya had learned to be wary of Kasuka. Very confident in his ability to read people, Izaya knew he was at a disadvantage with those who could display a faultless font. In utterly different ways both Kasuka and Aoba proved problematic. Kasuka by being ever so sphinx like and Aoba by channeling the Cheshire cat at any given occasion. Izaya was yet to figure out if Kasuka's blankness was a kind of serenity or more a case of elemental indifference. It might very well be a bit of both.

“Congratulations, Kasuka-san. But I am not sure this is all good an idea, inviting me and your brother together.”

Kasuka nodded.

“It's alright.”

“And have you told Shizuo about this?”

“I leave that to you.”

“Shizuo won't like it. I'm sure he'd rather take Tom-san or someone else.”

Kasuka shook his head.

“The tickets are personal invitations. Just for the two of you.”

Izaya watched the scenery for a bit in silence.
“Kasuka-san, seems to be you decided on this all on your own.”

“Yes. It is my movie. And I am the one inviting you.”

“I'll think about it, can't commit to anything just now. What's the movie about, by the way?”

“Romantic sci-fi comedy. In space.”

Izaya laughed.

“Sounds just my thing!”

“With singing?”

“Are you serious?”

“No. just kidding.”

In no time Izaya became something of a mascot. The staff liked him so much that upon learning that the part-timer had come down with the measles Izaya was hired to fill in for an undetermined period of time.

A few days later he was presented a brand new innovation to the outfit. Namely, a fluffy cat tail. To make matters worse he was posted right at the entrance of Tokyuu Hands, right alongside the flow of pedestrians where he was horribly conspicuous. The idea, as had actually been explained to him by the management, was the use 'cat boy' appeal to attract newer costumers.

Izaya was already regretting his decision to take the job when Shizuo walked by.
“Sweet, they took my suggestion. Who knew.”

“I hope you're happy. Just because you wanted to see cat-tailed girls I have to wear a tail as well.”

Shizuo blinked.

“Don't care about the girls.”

Izaya sighed then spun around.

“Just look that, it draws attention to my butt!”

“That's the idea.”

Izaya snapped out of it, he was both being unprofessional and too silly. He was informed via an earpiece that he was needed at the store.

“I'm going back, if you're here for the cats then you can tag along.”

And judging by Izaya's tone he clearly would rather Shizuo did not tag along. Shizuo noticed it and breezily ignored it. He followed Izaya to the store, having a lot of fun watching as people stared at Izaya's cat outfit.

“You got a jacket for the naked cat?”

“He's not naked, he's got very scant fur.”

“Shave a bit of the furry Persian and you'd have a jacket for naked cat.”

“For the last time, he is not naked. He's a sphinx cat. And he doesn't need a jacket, it's nice and warm here.”
Izaya scooped up the cat in question and placed it on Shizuo's arms.

“Up close he's even more wrinkled up.”

“He is aptly named 'Sphinx'.

“If he had babies with the fluffy Persian, they'd be normal kitties?”

“I have no idea.”

“I bet he'd rather have fur.”

“Well, he hasn't. When life gives you lemons you can always make lemonade. In this case, Sphinx's unique look and features make him one of the most sought out cats. Parents in particular like him a lot.”

Shizuo let the Sphinx in question go.

“Orihara-kun, your shift is up.”

Izaya changed into his clothes and sure enough Shizuo was waiting for him.

“So, Shizuo. Like the cat cafe a bit better?”

“I guess. Still like street cats better but naked cat and the like are okay.”

“For the last time, he's not naked.”

“Sure ain't dressed either.”
Izaya sighed.

“Good thing you dropped by, I had to talk to you as it was and it spares me the trouble of actually looking for you.”

“Yeah? What about?”

“I'm having some tea, all those cats have drained me of energy. Need to recharge.”

Izaya picked a nondescript cafe and ordered tea for two. Shizuo waited.

“Shizuo, as I'm sure you know your brother's new movie is coming up soon.”

“Yeah. 'Love in Hyperspace'.”

Izaya blinked.

“That's the title? Oh wow. How would that even work? Would there be low gravity involved? I see potential here!”

“I dunno what you're thinking but it's not that kind of movie.”

“No porn in space? That's too bad...I mean, just think about it! On the other hand, don't.”

“Kinda too late now.”

“Once thought it cannot be unthought! Sorry, it's in poor taste.”

But Izaya was still giggling.
“Is this one of those preview things?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Cool. We're meeting in front of the cinema?”

Izaya blinked.

“What, you expect us to actually go to the movie together?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I was hoping you'd talk your brother into giving a ticket to my sisters instead.”

“Doubt that'd work.”

Izaya sighed deeply.

“This puts me in a tight spot. If I go, my sisters will kill me...if I don't go they'll kill me anyway since they'll see it as a wasted opportunity.”

“How about Kasuka gives them tickets to some other event?”

“Do you think that would work?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. And for that to work, I'll have to do as Kasuka-san wants and go to the movie with you. That settles it, then.”
Odds are it would be extremely easy for Kasuka to squeeze in two extra preview tickets for Izaya's sisters. But Shizuo had reasons for wanting them out of this, reasons that had prompted Kasuka to bring about the invitation in the first place. Izaya was too concerned with his own siblings to notice the not exactly subtle Heiwajima sibling conspiracy.

“Guess I'll have to dress up.”

Izaya lifted one eyebrow.

“Is it a black tie event?”

“Yeah. Kasuka got me a suit for these occasions.”

“Then you should learn how to properly handle a tie.”

“How about dinner?”

“What dinner?”

“These preview thingies usually include dinner.”

Izaya sighed.

“So now I'm supposed to have dinner with you. Wonderful.”

“Won't kill you.”
Izaya was often fashionably late for events but he arrived at the venue way ahead of time. Part of it was his natural curiosity for all human environments but he also wanted to check the waters without Shizuo hampering him. Unfortunately, early as Izaya was, Shizuo still beat him to it.

“Again with the crooked tie, good grief, Shizuo!”

In his annoyance Izaya walked right up to Shizuo and standing on tiptoe adjusted the bowtie.

“A bit tighter and you'll choke me.”

“As if. I'm beginning to think nothing can kill you.”

Shizuo had indeed botched the tie and not due to carelessness either. It was deliberate and quite worth it.

“Bombs will probably do the trick.”

“Ah...I rest my case. Quite a crowd, huh?”

It was a mixed crowd, industry people mingling with a group of stylishly dressed girls.

“Fan club members get preview tickets at times.”

“So we'll be having dinner with these people as well?”

“Dunno.”

The doors opened and Shizuo and Izaya found themselves in a lobby turned reception room. Waiters strolled about offering chalices of champagne and quite a few famous faces clustered about in tiny groups. Izaya looked around, his curiosity tingling.
“Do you go to this kind of event very often?”

“Nah. Feels weird so I just watch the movies when they come out.”

“But you're fine being here with me?”

Shizuo produced a cigarette then remembered the strict non-smoking policy and tucked it away a bit regretfully.

“Yeah. You're kinda like a protective barrier, as long as I stick with you I'll be fine.”

“I'm a protective barrier. Now I've heard everything.”

“You're one of those, what do they call it...oh yeah, hipster. So you can talk the lingo and stuff.”

“That's news to me. And you act like the whole concept of hipster is absolutely foreign to you.”

A canape tray drifted their way, Shizuo picked up and studied it with great care.

“This one got tuna in it.”

“Tuna!”

Izaya availed himself of a canape.

“Only makes you hungrier, tiny bits of food.”

“Rejoice, for it is free tuna.”
Izaya was eager to mingle with the glitzy crowd but he felt reluctant to just abandon Shizuo in such hostile environment.

“You and the tuna.”

“Don’t hate me for my superb taste in edibles.”

Izaya and Shizuo had first row seats to better behold the wonders of Love in Hyperspace. Izaya began giggling within the first five minutes and the rest of the movie was a long and arduous struggle to keep himself from bursting out laughing. He squirmed on his seat and once the dialogue got rolling Izaya clamped both hands over his mouth to muffle his laughter.

Izaya managed quite well but as soon as the credits began to roll he dashed to the lounge where he proceeded to almost roll on the floor.

“Oh my god, 'my love is deeper than the galaxy and wider than the universe!' Too much, it's too much! Your brother is a martyr, how can he say,“

But Izaya never got around to finishing, his mirth once unleashed could not be reeled in at will. Izaya giggled freely and bounced a bit.

“Guess you enjoyed the movie, huh.”

“Enjoy? I loved it! Move over Casablanca, it was too brilliant! 'The stars may come and go but my love for you will never die'. Where would you hear such lines, nowhere else! And those super tight spacesuits! So shiny and pretty.”

Izaya wiped a few tears from his eyes.

“Bet wearing those suits sucks.”

“I'm sure but they make quite an impact!”
Shizuo would very much like to see Izaya in such a suit.

The restaurant turned out to be a very high class Western place with a panoramic view that occupied Izaya for a good while.

“Nothing like the city nightscape.”

“Yeah. How about this food, don't know any of these dishes.”

“So what else is new, Shizuo. I have to wonder why your brother picked this place. Not stingy, Kasuka-san. So, let us see...we're having oysters as a starter. For the main course you're having the duck with red wine reduction, I'll have the veal.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

Izaya was still buzzing from the sheer silliness of the movie.

“So much love talk! In! Hyperspace!”

“Got a little heavy with the love talk, yeah.”

“A little? Good god, it was epically sappy. I have this feeling we're being watched.”

Izaya did not look around to confirm his hunch as most people in his shoes would do. He knew better then to broadcast his suspicions overtly and already he regretted having told Shizuo.

“You really are paranoid.”
“With good reason.”

“Good point but still.”

Izaya shrugged. Let people watch him as long it stopped at just watching.

“Oh well. And behold, the food is here.”

Shizuo regarded the snot-like blobs on their shell with great suspicion.

“It don't look too good.”

Izaya was already working his tiny fork into a shell.

“Never judge a book by its cover, see the gloss? That means it's very fresh.”

Izaya ate one delicious morsel of oyster flesh straight from the shell.

“You just pick it up like that?”

“That's right. Give it a go. You can sprinkle some lemon juice on it but it's not the same.”

Shizuo was not entirely convinced.

“Fancy food, huh.”

“Stop stalling for time and eat up!”

Izaya had been hoping to chat with some of the celebrities but they were nowhere to be seen. But
hardly missed them, he was having more fun than he would willingly admit.

“Okay...”

“And make sure you chew.”

Shizuo did as told, chewing very slowly and even thoughtfully.

“So? How is it?”

“Weird. Real weird.”

“Ah, such a plebeian at heart.”

“You can have the rest.”

“Oh no you don’t. I will teach you to appreciate the fine things in life. I believe it's what your brother would want anyway.”

Kasuka did indeed have a plan but Izaya was way off.

“Like at the fish market?”

“That's right. Speaking of which, it's a shame Tom-san isn't around.”

Shizuo would have to strongly disagree.

“I don't think lemon will make this any better.”
Izaya prodded a morsel loose from the shell and held it as if on display.

“You're too caught up with the way it looks. Close your eyes and give it a go.”

“Okay.”

“There you go. Now chew.”

The whole thing was rather amusing and Shizuo was glad to play along.

“Hey, you're right. Tastes much better.”

Izaya brightened up in all his childish glee.

“I told you so! Let's split it fifty/fifty.”

In all fairness Shizuo would rather skip the oyster experience but it was worth enduring some discomfort to see Izaya beam so carelessly happy.

By the time the mains arrived Izaya seemed to have forgotten his official hostility. Shizuo took note of it as he poked at a slice of duck with a fork.

“It's raw.”

Izaya giggled.

“Guess what, Shizuo. Guess what was actually raw. The oysters! Oh your face!”

Izaya nearly choked on his drink.
“You'll kill yourself from laughing too much.”

“Prophetic words, my friend! But that duck is not raw, it's pink and perfect.”

“You sure?”

“Would I lie to you?”

Izaya batted his eyelashes all innocently.

“Guess it really is raw. Sauce looks like blood and all.”

Izaya rolled his eyes with great emphasis.

“Fine, trade with me. You can have the veal.”

Shizuo considered the cutlery.

“Lots of forks and stuff.”

“Watch and learn, Shizuo.”

Izaya proceeded to slice the veal, a mere flick of the wrist sending the knife precisely through the tender meat.

“You and knives.”

“I have mad skills.”
“Trust me, I know.”

Izaya sampled a bit of duck, he needed to change the topic.

“Delicious. How’s the veal?”

“Real good.”

“There you go.”

“No fancy wine?”

As if on cue a waiter offered them a bottle of red wine that Izaya promptly waved away even after being told it was on the house.

“We'll stick to water.”

“Don't want any wine either. Just thought it went with the posh restaurant.”

Izaya did not stop eating but he was absolutely sure he was being watched. It was quite unnerving.

“There's already wine in the sauce.”

“Looks like blood, the sauce.”

Izaya jabbed a finger in the air.

“No more talk of that.”
“If this was Detective Conan there'd be a murder about now.”

Izaya bounced on his seat.

“I love that show!”

“Yeah. You've been a fan since forever. But watching it with you really sucks. You always guess who the bad guy is and get all smug about it.”

“Hating on me for my deducting prowess. The world is full of haters.”

“Ruins the show for everyone else.”

Izaya was not sure just how and when he had watched Detective Conan, or anything else for the matter, with Shizuo. And of course he could not ask. By choosing to act as if he was in full possession of his memory he was caught in a dilemma of forfeiting much of his past. The few people he could ask had only entered his life relatively recently. There was a whole substrata of personal history to which he had only very indirect access.

Izaya was lost in such musings when the dessert arrived. Shizuo regarded his chocolate galette with obvious interest.

“How come it's so small, thought it'd be bigger.”

“Because it's a delicate confection.”

“Could be bigger. Want to try it?”

Izaya was poised to try a lemon sorbet served in a small see through glass.

“That means less chocolate for you.”
“Well, yeah. But sharing makes food taste better.”

When put like this Izaya could not quite refuse. Shizuo cut the galette in two, impaled one of the bits with a fork and proceeded to offer it to Izaya across the table.

“That looks sickeningly sweet.”

With that said, Izaya did take a bite albeit tentatively.

“It's kinda gooey.”

A syrupy trickle of chocolate dripped on the very soft towel.

“Tsk, you're making a mess. But this is quite tasty.”

“Is that even dessert?”

Shizuo pointed to the sorbet.

“Why, yes. But it is a more subtle flavor.”

“The parfait was better.”

“You know, since you like cakes so much why don't learn how to bake?”

“Like in the Korean movie, Antique Bakery.”

“My point is, instead of moping about cakes you can make your own cake. Revolutionary notion or what?”
Shizuo pretended to give it some thought.

“Never thought of that. Bet it's real hard.”

“You cannot know until you try it, now can you?”

“Guess not. But how do you go about making cake?”

Izaya sighed, rolled his eyes and sighed anew.

“You look up a recipe, of course.”

“That's probably not as fun.”

“As fun as what, adding ingredients and praying it results in a cake?”

“How about aprons, that'd be nice.”

“Earth to Heiwajima Shizuo, hello!”

Shizuo's mind had indeed wandered off a bit.

“How did you learn how to bake?”

Izaya opened his mouth to inform Shizuo that he could not bake but remembered that he had done so in the past. The fabled poisoned Valentine cookies.

“It's not too difficult if you just follow a recipe.”
“One that goes, 'add 2 grams of arsenic to the mix'?”

“I thought it was cyanide.”

“Yeah. Cigarette break.”

Shizuo excused himself and on his way out stopped by a table tucked in a corner and hidden from Izaya's sight. A pretty woman confronted him.

“He can kinda tell you're spying on us.”

Kasuka, for it was none other than him wearing a beautiful but discreet dark blue dress, nodded.

“Good instincts.”

“That's Izaya for you.”

“Date is going well.”

“I'm not too sure myself.”

“Onii-chan, fight-o.”

Trust Kasuka to speak in all seriousness. And he remained just as deadpan as he handed Shizuo a condom.

“I won't be needing this.”

“This too.”
And a tiny bottle of lube followed.

Shizuo was almost perplexed. He knew that Kasuka had his silent way of figuring out much, just like Izaya unraveled people through speech. Kasuka went below the surface without saying a single word, but it was still rather odd how he had not only realized where Shizuo stood in relation to Izaya, arguably better than Izaya himself did, but seemed so invested in promoting their relationship. Shizuo had the strange feeling it had been part of Kasuka’s plans for quite a while.

It was a strange development, more fitting in those works of fiction Erika treasured so much than in reality. Then again, Kasuka’s life was tightly wrapped around fiction and he was genre savvy by default. It could very well be that knowing how to bend fiction into reality what defined a successful realist more than just strict conformity to the norm.

“I gotta go back.”

“Good luck.”

Shizuo half-expected to find that Izaya had figured out Kasuka had been spying on them. When he found Izaya on his feet, Shizuo thought his fears were confirmed.

“Shizuo! Your brother just mailed me, it’s the ultimate job opportunity for you!”

Shizuo was puzzled.

“Ah...what is it?”

Izaya was already bouncing and dragging Shizuo away.

“We’ll pull an all-nighter, this is the chance of a lifetime!”

“Right, but what exactly is it?”

“Thunder From Down Under is touring Japan and looking for a local to feature on their Tokyo
This did not exactly enlighten Shizuo. They reached the elevator.

“Thunder From Down Under being what, exactly?”

“It's an all-male dance troupe from Australia. All buff guys, quirky tear away outfits that they strip to the delight of women all over the world.”

“You and Kasuka want me to strip for a bunch of girls...man, the world is crazy. I don't dance either.”

Kasuka could very well have given in a heads up but then Kasuka's ways were mysterious.

“It's a simple dance routine, I got the video showing the precise steps. With some rehearsal you'll get it down pat. More importantly, the pay is amazing!”

“You for it, then.”

They reached the ground floor and already Izaya was hailing a taxi.

“Oh please, as if my girlish self would ever be picked.”

“Thought you didn't admit you were girlish.”

“Compared to these guys virtually everyone is girlish. This is a show for manly men, in other words, you.”

It seemed Shizuo did not even have a say in the matter.

“Don't wanna prance about naked...that really is more something you'd do.”
“You won't be naked, you'll be wearing boxers.”

“Hmm...”

Shizuo was not precisely looking forward to it but he was already convinced as it meant spending some more time with Izaya. But he was having fun having Izaya work to convince him.

“You can argue with me later, training time is now.”

As soon as Izaya reached his apartment building he was given a package from Kasuka. It contained a change of clothes for Shizuo, pajamas, some tear away clothes for practice and set of toilet items such as a toothbrush. Izaya whistled under his breath.

“Your brother is a wonderful mastermind, I must admit! Looks like Namie-san isn't around tonight.”

Izaya popped the video on his very big television and had Shizuo watch it closely.

“Looks complicated.”

Izaya jumped on his feet and walked to the farthest wall.

“Okay, just imagine this is the runway. It's about the same length. So walk like this, just kind of strolling, then halfway through you tear away the clothes, sort of strut about a bit, then you step to the right, step to the left, turn, repeat the stepping to the sides, walk back. That's it.”

Shizuo studied Izaya's reenactment as if he actually cared for the dance routine.

“Dunno, all this 'strutting' stuff really ain't easy.”
“You do not know until you try it. Give it a go, here's the clothes Kasuka-san so generously provided.”

“How does this work?”

“You put them on like normal clothes then tear away.”

“Ah...the things they come up with.”

“Less dallying, more prancing about.”

Shizuo chuckled. He started to unbuckle his pants but was stopped by Izaya's frantic waving.

“Stop! What do you think you're doing?”

“Putting on weird clothes.”

Izaya sighed.

“You're not supposed to change here. Change in the bathroom.”

“Don't make much sense,”

“It's my place, my rules.”

“Okay, can't argue with that.”

Shizuo did as told, he put on the tear away clothes and did the dance routine under Izaya's scrutiny. It was more nerve inducing than Shizuo thought it would be. There was something highly disarming in Izaya's steady gaze. And it reminded Shizuo anew that whatever Izaya saw in him, he hardly seemed attracted.
Izaya sighed deeply.

“Ah, why so robotic, Shizuo!”

“Told you I can't dance.”

“The dancing is not the problem, your moves are fine. It's the robotic look that's killing me. You need to act sexy.”

“Not gonna work, how do I even do that?”

Izaya bounced around some.

“Simple, just imagine I'm some pretty girl you're trying to flirt with.”

It was almost funny.

“Ah...”

“Again, from the top. Don't forget the steps, get some life in that face of yours.”

Shizuo went through the moves once more.

“Really not gonna work,”

“The night is young and practice makes perfect.”

With that said, a half an hour later there had been no actual progress.
“Okay, time out. Forget about acting sexy, just smile.”

Shizuo tried it again, a rather disturbing grin plastered on his face.

“Don't think that's working.”

“I said 'smile' not 'smile threateningly'. That was borderline scary. Smile normally, not like an ax killer.”

“That's easy to say but being told to smile makes it difficult.”

Izaya seemed to grow very thoughtful.

“Maybe I am going about it the wrong way, the robotic look may be a good thing. It does wonders for your brother.”

“How about you show it again, as in, how you'd do it.”

It was a long shot but Shizuo had nothing to lose. Izaya shrugged.

“Alright. Pay close attention.”

There was no need to tell him, Shizuo watched every move very closely.

“You're not stripping.”

“No tear away clothes for me and no need for that anyway, you're the one training here. One more time.”
Shizuo obeyed.

“Still no good?”

“You know, I have half a mind to call my sisters and get them to help out. I bet they’ll have some useful insight.”

It was about as bad an idea as possible as far as Shizuo could tell.

“Nah. It's kinda late and strippers aren’t suitable for teenage girls.”

“You do have a point there, then again they are hardly your average teens. But you're right, this is my pet project, no need to drag them into it.”

“One more time?”

“Indeed.”

Izaya watched Shizuo stride once more and reached a conclusion.

“I know what's lacking. You're not having fun.”

“Ah...”

“Think of something you really like. Sweet stuff, for example. Anything will work. Just keep that in mind and do your stuff.”

Shizuo nodded. He took a deep breath before taking the first step. By now he was getting tired of tearing away his clothes and doing the same thing over and over but he did as Izaya said and clung to a positive idea as he went through the moves.
Izaya clapped and burst into a fit of enthusiasm.

“That's it, Shizuo! You got it! See, I told you could do it!”

“Yeah. Want to know what I was thinking of?”

“Doesn't matter, whatever it was, it worked. Great job.”

Izaya grabbed Shizuo's hands and gave him one of his radiant smiles. Shizuo was all too aware of the slim distance between them. Shizuo was on the verge of blurting out that something that could not be taken back when Izaya stepped back.

“Tomorrow will be hectic so you should hit the shower. And then it's time to hit the sack, I need you well rested.”

Sushi appeared from wherever he had been lurking and rubbed against Izaya's leg. Izaya promptly picked up the kitty and made as if to hand him to Shizuo.

“You want me to shower Sushi as well?”

“Hilarious, Shizuo.”

“How about you, want to join me at the shower?”

Shizuo tried to make it as offhand as possible. Izaya laughed.

“Oh, I've seen enough of your naked body to last me a lifetime.”

“It's not fair, I got to strip left and right and you keep your clothes on.”

“It's called 'inequality'. Deal with it!”
Shizuo smiled faintly. He was not given to comparing reality to fiction but at the moment he was very much aware that many potentially romantic elements were at play and yet were dismissed so completely that Izaya did not even see them as such. It differed considerably from the overly cute wide open eyed naivety that movies insisted was the perfect setting for further developments.

Yet on the other hand Izaya’s breezy talk about inequality was a very accurate of their current relationship.

“Yeah. You got that right.”

Shizuo took some time to go over things as he showered. With a bit of decent timing Izaya might just burst into the bathroom but obviously he did not. Shizuo was not precisely discouraged, he did not believe in such convenient coincidences abiding his wishes, it was just a minor but highly relevant reminder.

By the time Shizuo emerged from the shower Izaya had already showered in another bathroom and was absorbed in a book, his slim frame almost lost in a fluffy robe, Sushi lounging on his lap. The reading light cast a mellow halo over cat and human in a self-contained domestic scene that made perfect sense.

For a while Shizuo just watched in undisturbed silence.

“What you reading?”

“Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason.”

“Sounds complicated.”

Izaya put the book away and stretched.

“Feel free to read it for yourself.”
Shizuo flipped through the pages.

“Complicated, like I thought.”

“I'll lend it to you so you can read at your leisure.”

“Thanks. There won't be a quiz at the end, right?”

“A quiz? What do you mean?”

“I can kinda imagine you going, 'Well now, Shizuo. What are the most pertinent topics pertaining to this essay?', something like that.”

Izaya laughed for quite a while.

“No quiz, worry not! On second thought, that may be fun.”

“Looks like I am giving you bad ideas.”

“There shall be no quiz, you have my word.”

“Okay.”

“And now it is sleepy time. I'll show you to your room.”

Shizuo would like to suggest their sharing sleeping quarters but could hardly do so. Sushi meandered his way to them.

“Kitty is following you.”
“He likes to sleep curled on my bed.”

Here was an unexpected opportunity.

“Must be cool, having a cat sleep next to you like that. Or on top of you, even. It’d be nice to have that but I don’t expect Sushi to join me.”

Izaya seemed to be considering something.

“How about I get us some futons and put them side by side? I bet Sushi would curl by me as usual.”

Shizuo could hardly believe his luck.

“Sounds good.”

It sounded, in fact, too good. Yet as Izaya fluffed the pillows and set the freshly pressed futons side by side Shizuo could not escape that this willing friendliness excluded any intimacy by default. This seemed all the more obvious as Izaya made himself comfortable under the covers.

“This is like camping out. Behold, Sushi has arrived.”

Indeed the cat had tentatively made his way to the futon and now proceeded to curl himself right next to Izaya’s feet.

“Minus the ‘out’ part.”

“Of course. Sleeping under the stars may be romantic and whatnot but it is rife with inconveniences. Such as bugs and overall discomfort.”

“You’re not exactly the outdoors type.”
Izaya giggled.

“That’s the understatement of the year.”

“You think a park in Ikebukuro is the big outdoors.”

“It is all relative. I gather to a countryside native a village may be a urban center.”

“Countryside native’? The countryside is not a deserted island.”

“A deserted island has no human inhabitants by its very nature.”

“Don't think villagers are ‘natives’.”

Izaya shrugged such semantic distinctions away.

“It's a matter of perspective.”

“I guess.”

“I’d love to chat the night away but I need you to look all fresh for tomorrow. Lights out!”

Shizuo would like to talk as well but clearly Izaya was inflexible. Shizuo waited in silence for Izaya to fall asleep. It did not take long for Shizuo’s eyes to adjust to the darkness and Izaya was so close that he could easily discern his features. This was the perfect opportunity for Shizuo to muse at length and the focus of his reflections was present and literally within reach.

Namely, Orihara Izaya. Ruthless manipulator, source of untold grief, mastermind supreme and fan of kittens, curled on his side like a happy child, smiling softly in quiet innocence. That Izaya was rife with contractions was not precisely new but the nature of these had shifted. Shizuo was now more aware of a polarized vulnerability and even kindness coexisting side by side with a tenacious intellect that might very well usher in the end of the world as we know it.
Shizuo was not one to dismiss Izaya's ambitions, whatever they were, as mere megalomania bound to fail. He knew that Izaya could very succeed and that nothing good would result from it. Yet at same time he could not quite believe Izaya was bent on ruination.

On top of this ambivalence Shizuo could not quite read this new distance between them, something like a barrier of friendliness past which he was not allowed to trespass. At times like this when Shizuo was left to think things through it became borderline frustrating.

And all along Shizuo could tell that some eventful episode had taken place in Izaya's life. Asking about it could only backfire but figuring out what it might be was proving quite a challenge.

Shizuo petted the cat and tried to reconcile himself to sleep.
Chapter 19

“Ah, now I know how a mother feels when her kid is about to act on the school play!”

They were walking side by side, the morning rush flooding the streets all around. Izaya had already messed up Shizuo's hair for effect, even adding some gel, and supervised his outfit most judiciously.

“Yeah, you're the motherly type alright.”

“Now is not the time of bad jokes, Shizuo. Oh wow, look at that, the queue goes around the block!”

A long line of buff men lined up before them.

“Too many people, no point in trying out.”

“I will not have any of that defeatist talk. Is that understood?”

Izaya poked Shizuo in the chest with each word. By now Shizuo was riling him on purpose.

“Okay.”

The wait was long and Izaya was on pins and needles.

“I'm more nervous than you are.”

“Stress ain't good for you.”

Izaya did not even have a retort, Shizuo's turn had come and he was on manager mode.
“Okay, do it just like we practiced last night. Then let the beastly Shizuo factor kick in.”

“Beastly Shizuo factor’...?”

“You know what I mean. Good luck!”

Izaya followed Shizuo's performance very closely. Shizuo went through the motions as drilled, his lack of expression passing off for confidence while his attire had something of urban swag to it.

Izaya could hardly endure the expectation. The waiting as the juries discussed nearly killed him. And when they announced their decision Izaya’s reaction was much more explosive than Shizuo's.

“Yay! I knew you'd get it, go Shizuo, go!”

Izaya proceeded to skip around Shizuo much to the confusion of everyone else. Izaya then proceeded to shake hands with each jury and smile his most affable smile.

“Guess they picked me, huh.”

“What's with the lack of enthusiasm! Rejoice!”

“Gotta play all cool and stuff.”

“Oh, good point. That's part of your persona. Tch, got to take this call.”

Izaya picked up his phone and after a very quick exchange was already dashing away.

“Sorry, got to run. The cats need me! See you soon, Shizuo! And congratulations!”

Before Shizuo could retort Izaya had disappeared as he was wont to do.
A horde of kindergarteners taking over the cat café was the reason why Izaya had been suddenly summoned. The staff needed his help but above all the girls loved seeing Izaya surrounded by little kids.

Presently, Izaya was not too pleased. One of the children was the little boy he already knew, a rather fearless creature who had taken to heart Izaya's lesson in respecting the cats only to be hell bent on pulling Izaya's cat tail.

“Oy, cut that out!”

“Catman!”

The chant was picked up and Izaya flailed a bit. He decided to try something and hissed very loudly at the crowd of young terrorists.

“Catman says, silence now.”

It was a desperate tactic but against all odds it worked and in no time Izaya had herded the children into relative quiet.

Shiki had been watching him long enough to find the scene oddly endearing. It was his first time seeing Izaya in his fluffy cat ears and tail attire, Shiki thought it fitted him quite well. He noticed that the staff seemed to agree.

“Hello, Izaya.”

“Shiki-san! You're about the last person I'd expect to find at such a place.”

Izaya beamed, his bright smile sweeter than it was proper. Or so Shiki thought, not without sympathy.
“Seems like you have your hands full.”

“The kids are killing me.”

Shiki surveyed his surroundings and the many felines in all sorts of attitudes from utterly bored to vaguely predatory in stalking mode.

“That white cat is a Persian, I believe?”

Izaya scooped up the cat in question before she could strut away.

“This is Snowflake. She is indeed a Persian and a very amicable cat.”

Shiki ran long finger over lush fluffy white fur before lifting the cat from Izaya's hands.

“How much for this cat?”

“Oh, our cats are not for sale.”

“Get me the manager.”

Izaya hesitated slightly but as a worker he could not possibly put any obstacles in Shiki's way. The manager was duly brought and within half an hour Shiki walked out of the store with Snowflake neatly tucked in a carrier.

Izaya rushed after him, his workload having alleviated in the meanwhile.

“Shiki-san, are you going to adopt Snowflake?”

“That is the idea.”
Izaya's hesitation was more pronounced this time around. He was uncertain of whether Shiki would prove a good cat keeper and there was no choice but to voice his distress.

“Shiki-san, I do not know whether that is a good idea. Snowflake is very beautiful and a nice cat but she is a cat. She is bound to disrupt your lifestyle at least momentarily, will not answer commands, may destroy property and occasionally even claw or bite if frightened.”

Izaya left it at that. Shiki let some silence elapse before speaking, quite deliberately.

“Are you suggesting I will hurt the cat?”

Izaya squirmed a bit.

“Suppose Snowflake were to wake you up at five am or shred to pieces some expensive scroll, I am afraid you would get rid of her. I take care of these cats, it is my duty to protect them to the best of my ability.”

Shiki was silent again while Izaya's became more and more embarrassed but unrelenting.

“You have my word that I will not harm the feline regardless of what may happen.”

The entire conversation took place where the cat café met the petshop so there was quite an audience. Shiki would not have it any other way. Izaya now relaxed immediately.

“I am glad to hear that, Shiki-san.”

“Will you help me choose the proper accessories?”

Izaya nodded enthusiastically.

“Of course. I know Snowflake's habits rather well.”
Izaya busied himself shopping for a comfortable cat bed (that he checked for softness), a lot of toys, a sturdy scratching pole, a large and well ventilated litter with an assortment of cat sand, a tall cat tree with plenty of platforms, metallic bowls for food and water, a selection of food items including dry and paté-like delicacies, catnip, a hard and a soft brush, cat shampoo and a few more things.

Shiki watched him in this flurry of activity and was quite bemused. It was surprising how exhilarating it was for Izaya to simply trust him at his word so completely. And Shiki had plenty of ulterior motives for picking this fine specimen of a Persian cat apart from his love for felines.

Shiki would not call it devious but it was indeed covert and rather oblique. The goal was not so much gaining an ascendance over Izaya as to lead him to regard Shiki was more of a rounded person. As one with enough emotional resources to spare kindness on an animal.

This marked something of an epoch for Shiki. So far he had always regarded himself as a complete individual, one whose personal history was too steeped in an experience that resulted in success for him to have reasons to swerve off course.

Shiki himself was very much aware of a change in him and knew its causes. Its deeper repercussions, however, he would rather not presently contemplate.

“That is a lot of gear.”

“Snowflake is high maintenance all around.”

Shiki got his men to pick up all the paraphernalia.

“I do not suppose you could help me get the cat settled?”

“Not 'the cat', 'Snowflake'. And I'd be glad to, she is used to me.”

Shiki was sure Izaya would accept the invitation. Once in Shiki’s place Izaya promptly assigned Snowflake to a large unused room with her bedding, blankets and litter box. He then sat across Shiki in the quietly lush living room.
“For now it is best to let Snowflake have that room all to herself without disturbing her too much. She will adapt easily, I think, café cats are very flexible. Now, as I said Persians have their quirks. Their fur must be taken into account: it is beautifully silky but requires a lot of care. Brushing is essential.”

“I understand.”

Shiki was paying close attention, more out of his interest in Izaya than in Snowflake's well-being. Izaya had been on lecturing mode, he now relaxed into one of his pretty smiles into carefree happiness.

“A white Persian is a perfect choice of cat for someone such as Shiki-san.”

“How so?”

“Persians are so classy, regal and smooth. And a white Persian perfectly matches Shiki-san's personal style.”

Shiki smiled.

“I suppose I will be playing the villain, complete with a cat on my lap.”

Izaya giggled as he pictured it.

“I'll go check on Snowflake, see how she is doing. Do join me, Shiki-san.”

Shiki did as told. The cat in question already seemed to have made herself comfortable on her spacious bed. Izaya patted her and she condescended to curl on his lap. Shiki sat next to him and in no time Snowflake had sprawled herself over Shiki's lap. Izaya nodded enthusiastically.

“My role here seems about done, Snowflake approves of Shiki-san.”
Shiki was almost disappointed at the cat’s compliance if it meant Izaya was cutting the visit short.

“Cats choose their owners, as they say?”

Izaya nodded, fully endorsing the wisdom of the saying.

“Most definitely. I hope Snowflake brings Shiki-san plenty of happiness and vice-versa.”

Izaya actually bowed leaving Shiki in the uncomfortable position of matching genuine emotion with rather rarefied notions on the gradients of moral experience. He found himself nodding as a compromise of sorts and decided to change topics.

“You seemed very popular at the cat café.”

“I guess but the girls have absolutely no respect for me. They call me 'Iza-nya'! I heard them talking when they thought I wasn't around. 'Iza-nya', of all things! And I am actually older than most of them.”

Shiki’s smile was greatly amused.

“I gather age has long ceased to be tantamount to respect.”

“I feel like shaking my fist angrily and saying 'kids these days! Why, in my time, add-blissful-description-of-the-past-here'. Then again I do not remember my past so I can hardly say anything...”

As Izaya trailed off into thoughtful reticence Shiki felt a momentary impulse to lift his chin and kiss him fully on the mouth. Shiki was not given to acting impulsively, being quite unused to even dealing with impulses at all. He found it a bit surprising.

“I can assure you that 'kids these days' is a universal cry that each generation picks up to deride the next one.”

Not to mention Shiki viewed Izaya as belonging to this next generation and very much a different
stripe of person altogether. Shiki was very much aware that Izaya's present infatuation was connected to the fuzzy emotional ambiance associated with first love. That just like first love it might prove fleeting had also not escaped Shiki's attention but it had surely escaped Izaya's. Apparently a contradiction it was the obvious outcome: first love must trust itself to be eternal if it is to have any weight.

“So it is. Your timing is perfect as usual, Shiki-san. I was planning on seeing you tomorrow at the latest.”

Shiki raised an eyebrow. This heralded a smoothing of their relationship.

“I am all yours now.”

Izaya slid into business mode immediately.

“I was contacted by an American documentary crew. They're working on a documentary on the yakuza and very much looking forward to interviewing some members of the Awakusu group.”

Shiki could not escape a momentary but very sharp pang of disappointment. He would rather Izaya wanted to meet him in purely personal basis. However, the entire structure of semi-interdependence Shiki was taken such pains to build between and amnesic Izaya and himself forced Shiki to appear unfazed.

“Is the American public interested in Japanese chivalrous organizations?”

Shiki let a certain irony creep into his voice.

“Very much so. Miike is mostly responsible for a new wave of foreigners who are quite enthralled with the yakuza.”

“I gather those movies are extremely unrealistic.”

“That is true but lots of people find the whole code of conduct and whatnot most fascinating. I did some research and found some other documentaries in the same vein, namely a ‘Young Yakuza’
done by a French crew and quite well received.”

Shiki took his time producing a cigarette and bringing his lighter to it.

“Is this advantageous to us?”

“I believe so. For one, this crew must know what they are dealing with if they chose me as a go between, they know better than to just address the group directly. But more importantly, this is wonderful publicity. Needless to say the exact content will be approved by yourself or some else high enough in the hierarchy, I’ve agreed as much. Otherwise we can press charges.”

“That is hardly a documentary, then.”

Izaya's smile was as sly as it had ever been.

“We have our agenda, yes. They have theirs, that of providing interesting footage. I see no reason why the two should not be brought to coincide for the benefit of all parties involved.”

“Be brought to coincide for the benefit of all parties involved’, you should try your hand at playing a politician.”

“Undermining the system from within? Sounds fun! But sadly, it'd end up boring me senseless.”

“I bet.”

Izaya leaned forward, stressing out he had something important to say.

“Shiki-san, I am planning to have you the centerpiece of this documentary. One cannot have enough promotion.”

“Do you mean it will send a message to other groups?”
That too. But I was also thinking of showcasing your talents within the structure of the Awakusu proper.”

Shiki’s smile was slow and very deliberate. It really did not do, to think of Izaya as the adorably innocent boy who looked up to him in all things. Even if it some ways it was almost tempting.

“Is this your ‘standing above others’ and looking at things from a supreme vantage point?”

Izaya blinked, surprised.

“Hardly, I am working on your best interests as I am supposed to.”

“From a politician in the making you are morphing into a lawyer.”

“Shiki-san, I can only advise you to take this opportunity and trust me to ensure that the Awakusu group as a whole and you as an individual come across in the best of lights. You are of course entirely free to reject the offer but if the Awakusu declines some other group will not.”

Shiki knew that Izaya was right. His reluctance resulted from a certain bias.

“Alright. But the decision is not entirely up to me.”

Shiki disliked letting show that his authority had limits yet at the same time he would rather not take ownership for every action taken by the Awakusu. Normally this was hardly an issue since Shiki’s circle of relationships was very well regulated, comprising of individuals all neatly pigeon holed on whom he could cast enough mystification and on whom he could exert enough power so that his control over them extended to their image of Shiki as a leader. There were also the rungs that stood above him but even upwards Shiki could direct just the right amount of influence without being too obstructive.

Izaya was of course an exception. Not simply because he was not assigned a role within the yakuza structure but mostly because he was too entangled with Shiki on a personal level. The more impressionable Izaya was the more aware Shiki became of a particular responsibility that was quite unlike anything he had known.
And perhaps more importantly, Shiki had now much more to lose- and potentially to win- then the extremely valuable services of Tokyo's best informant.

“Do let me know when a decision is reached. It would be a world of fun to interview some of the lower members, how about Matsumoto-san?”

“That's impossible. Matsumoto is currently in jail.”

Izaya gasped almost comically.

“In jail?! Why wasn't I told!”

“I wasn't aware you were on such good terms with him.”

“Of course I am, we got a talk and spend time together so we're friends. What jail is he in?”

Shiki blinked.

“Do you intend to visit him?”

“Obviously! Jail must be so lonely and dreadful. Poor Matsumoto-san! Couldn't the group bail him out, somehow?”

Shiki was silent for a while.

“The group has to sacrifice some of its lesser parts on occasion. Not to mention to men like Matsumoto earning his stripes by doing time in jail is more an ambition then a punishment.”

“Yes, that does make perfect sense, all things considered.”

Izaya was all smiles as he left, having made sure that Snowflake was comfortable but Shiki felt
vaguely dissatisfied. He wanted to detain Izaya but sensed a certain caution on Izaya's part that made any overture troublesome and even impossible.

Shiki considered all this as he thoughtfully ran his fingers through Snowflake's silky white fur. He postponed some business to muse at length, the cat's blue eyes occasionally reflecting bits of icy light.
Chapter 20

“Orihara-sama!”

Matsumoto was so absolutely stunned and borderline horrified as he stood behind the glass partition that Izaya had to stifle a giggle.

“Matsumoto-san, I thought I told you to please drop the '-sama'.”

It took a few moments for Matsumoto to regain his power of speech. Never in a million years would he ever have expected such a visit.

“But- why are you here...?”

“Why, to visit you, what else! I heard from Shiki-san that you've been arrested so I figured I'd drop by to say hi.”

This was more familiar territory.

“Does Shiki-sama know you're here?”

“I told him. At any rate, how are you holding on?”

Izaya was genuinely concerned. Matsumoto was sadly shabby in the grim prison uniform as opposed to the mandatory suit, Izaya wondered if a deflating of his spirits mirrored the downgrading of wardrobe.

“Shiki-sama shouldn't allow Orihara-sama,”

Matsumoto literally bit his tongue. He was on the verge of criticizing Shiki, something akin to breaking a fundamental tenet. If Izaya noticed it brushed it aside most breezily.
“Prison is horrible, I hope you'll be released soon.”

“Oh, it's not too bad. Got a bunch of other guys from the group here, it's really okay.”

“The food must be atrocious. I brought you some onigiris, you can share with your friends. I wanted to get some homemade ones but there's a strict policy of sealed food items only.”

Matsumoto gaped a bit, then looked around suspiciously before leaning forward to speak closely into the grilled vent.

“Orihara-sama, it's dangerous for you to be in a place like this...”

He trailed off. There was no way of he could possibly warn Izaya as he so wanted without telling him that as a cute boy Izaya was fresh meat in jail. It caused Matsumoto great embarrassment to the point he hardly knew what he could say.

“I'm just visiting, inmates aren't allowed in the visiting areas.”

Matsumoto looked around again and whispered very loudly.

“There's the guards, too.”

Izaya blinked. The presiding guard sitting next to Matsumoto frowned but let it go without a comment.

“Heh, Matsumoto-san, I don't think even the guards want me.”

Izaya meant it entirely as a joke but Matsumoto was too straight a player to get humor. In the face of what he deemed to be an actual danger he forgot all about his awkwardness.

“Being too pretty can be bad- and Orihara-sama is very pretty. I can't protect you from here.”
There was some frustration bundled up.

“Don't worry, I'm sure Shiki-san does not expect you to protect me when you're in prison.”

Izaya was a bit puzzled and grew even more so as Matsumoto became very grave.

“It's not about Shiki-sama, I want to protect you,”

Izaya did not answer right away but he did not want a heavy silence to develop lest it became weightier than it was warranted. He understood that to a person such as Matsumoto this was walking a very thin line, in fact probably toeing into a blurred mess, to in any way disavow the leader was a clear deviation but in the present context it was doubly so. Being an outsider allowed Izaya to act as if he had not noticed any breach of conduct. It was one of those advantages that made him function so well as a go-between.

“There's really no need to worry. I have connections with the police, they won't harm me.”

Izaya did not care for this insistence on protection but he knew better than to argue. To Matsumoto it was the only possible way of framing their interaction and no amount of persuasion would convince him that Izaya was perfectly able of fighting back if it came to it.

Matsumoto looked both impressed and relieved.

“That's good.”

Izaya sensed the guard was eager to put an end to the interview so he took the cue.

“I should be going now. See you on the outside soon, Matsumoto-san!”

Izaya waltzed out of the prison without further incident. He was a bit puzzled, not having expected such a strong reaction from Matsumoto. To Izaya it was more than just dealing with someone at the periphery of his interpersonal interactions, his emotional investment in the human phenomenon—something that he had taken up as a decisive character trait when he had to deal with a blank past—meant he had a particular attachment for each and every one he came in contact with.
Overall, he was happy that someone he felt friendly toward reciprocated but he could not help being a bit fearful for Matsumoto's sake. In the highly hierarchical structure of the yakuza being outside the norm could be disastrous, only the truly exceptional could afford it and Matsumoto was not such a person. It occurred to Izaya that this friendship might prove all too costly to Matsumoto.

Izaya invited everyone to attend Shizuo's strip show, going as far as to provide tickets, and then failed to go himself. It did not occur to him that it could be an issue for Shizuo. After all, with so many people rooting for him- Tom, Shinra, Celty, Kadota, Erika, Walker- Shizuo could not possibly miss Izaya.

Shizuo tuned to the crowd, all it took was looking around to know that Izaya was not present. Shizuo had never been able to account for it but he had a knack for sensing Izaya, almost like a sixth sense.

The runway show itself was not half as overwhelming as he feared, Shizuo simply went through the motions and judging by the explosion of cheers he was a great success. Not that Shizuo cared all that much.

He met everyone at the entrance after the show.

“That was quite a show, who knew you had it in you!”

Shinra meant it.

“Where's Izaya?”

Shizuo did not address anyone in particular, he asked because Izaya was on his mind, and no so much because he expected anyone to have an answer.

“I saw him with a group of foreigners on my way here.”

It was Kadota who offered this most unexpected information. Shizuo frowned slightly. He wanted to
know all the details but would rather not say anything on the subject. Or anything at all, actually.

“-quite a, what are they called, 'sexy muffin'.”

Shizuo had retreated into thoughtful silence, zoning out completely. He had no precise idea of what Shinra meant. He missed Erika frantically sketching a draft for a Stripper Shizuo doujin and Celty’s uncharacteristic lack of speech.

Ever since Izaya's anguished confession Celty had thought about him more than she ever thought possible. Izaya could not quite cover his tracks by bluffing his way out of it. Celty was almost sure that Izaya was indeed suffering from amnesia. Once she considered things from that point of view she could explain his drastic changes. That Izaya still managed to work as an informant was stunning but then again Celty knew Izaya was in many ways extraordinary: just not necessarily in a positive way.

She was not quite sworn to secrecy but Izaya had asked her not to tell Shinra and it seemed obvious he would rather she told no one. Yet presently she would like to tell Shizuo. Celty could not possibly realize just how Shizuo stood in relation to Izaya, Shinra had a clearer idea on that respect, but she suspected something and felt that she was in the position of clearing up things between the two former enemies.

If only she could hint at it so that Shizuo would get the message. Celty knew it would be something of a compromise, a way of appeasing her conscience. The problem was a pointy one, all the more so since she could relate to Izaya's memory loss. He had appealed to her because of her personal experience, betraying his confidence would undermine much of her self-worth.

Meanwhile, Erika was ranting away, carried away by her fantasies and oblivious to anything else.

“Shizaya is where it's at! Delicious Shizaya!”

“How does this 'Shizaya' thing work?”

Shizuo seemed to have snapped out of it and faced Erika squarely on. Many would find it intimidating. Not so with Erika.

“It starts with sort-of-rape then develops into a beautiful love story! Still has a lot of fighting, that's
where the hate sex comes in!"

Shizuo smiled, slowly and with a tinge of irony.

"Wouldn't work like that."

"How would it go, then! Let's hear it from the top half of Shizaya!"

Shizuo took his sweet time producing a cigarette and lighting it in clear deviance of the no smoking sign most visibly placed on a nearby wall. All of a sudden everyone had the distinct impression that he was about to say something momentous. Shizuo's entourage focused on them with a tenacity expressed by an unwavering stare.

Whether Shizuo noticed it or not is unclear. It is likely not to matter much to him. They were all holding their breath partially because Shizuo's attitude was one of deep abstraction. Even Erika settled down into expectant silence.

"If I knew I wouldn't be here talking, I'd be with him."

No one knew what to say to this. Erika was too stunned for if it was true she spent an unhealthy amount of time building up fictional scenarios in which Shizuo and Izaya were ever so in love, having these bleed into reality was as much a shock to her to anyone else; perhaps even more so as it jolted the notion of 'reality' and 'fiction' and these stood in relation with each other.

It was Shinra who regained the power of speech first. Smiling widely he grabbed Shizuo's arm.

"My, Shizuo, I almost forgot that I need your help with something. We'll be going now, see you at home, Celty!"

And with this Shinra proceeded to drag Shizuo away, only because Shizuo allowed himself to be escorted. As soon as they were out of sight Shinra spun around, adjusted his glasses and took a deep breath.

"What was that all about? Care to explain?"
“It is what it is.”

“For heaven's sake, I told you this was a bad idea- it goes without saying but still- are you serious about this?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm washing my hands from this whole deal.”

“No one asked for your help.”

Shinra straightened up as if to appear more impressive when facing Shizuo in all his towering height.

“Shizuo, this is Izaya we're talking about. As in, Orihara Izaya. The one and only, the guy who didn't get you killed for lack of trying.”

“I know all that.”

“Then why on earth? Why does it have to be Izaya?!”

Shinra was so befuddled he nearly stammered.

“Dunno.”

“‘Dunno’. That's all you got to say?”

Shizuo shrugged.

“Preety much. Considering how I spend more time talking about Izaya then to Izaya.”
And indeed Shizuo left it at this and calmly walk away, leaving Shinra in a state of great confusion.

For all his keen intuition and occasional perfect insight Izaya was completely unaware that such important discussions regarding his person were taking place. Instead he was fully engaged in a most interesting negotiation with the American documentary crew.

Shiki was absent from this preliminary meeting for a reason. Izaya wanted to build up some expectation before Shiki actually appeared before the crew. Izaya was aiming at maximizing Shiki's impact.

It was agreed that Izaya was to be the appointed interpreter with all and any interaction with the Awakusu. Izaya would rather keep the mystique of the Japanese language intact and on this the crew agreed. In fact, Izaya got along very well with the whole crew and in particular the director.

He ended up taking them all to eat out at one of his favorite restaurants and having a load of fun. Izaya kept it professional but allowed some of his spontaneous flair to shine through.

By the time he got home it was already rather late. Izaya considered calling Shizuo but decided against it lest he woke him up. Instead he simply sent a message asking how the show had gone. Shizuo called back right away.

“Oh hi! I thought you were asleap already.”

“Nah.”

“So, how did it go? Details Shizuo, details!”

“Not too bad. They want to use me on Osaka, there's some tour or something.”

“Oh wow, how cool is that! Way to go, Shizuo!”
It called for some bouncing.

“I'm not going,"

“What! Why not!”

“Feels too weird, traveling with a bunch of guys I don't even know.”

“Oh come on, how lame of an excuse is that? It's a paid trip to Osaka!”

“I guess...want to come along as well, then?”

“Hmm...I'm not sure.”

“They're paying for a double room for me and some guy won't make it so there's an extra train ticket.”

Izaya considered it.

“Won't the organizers complain?”

“Nah. I asked already and it's all cool.”

Izaya took some time to think it over. This prospective trip was something of a defining possibility, full of excitement and new experiences: having no recollection outside of Tokyo Izaya associated any outing beyond the boundaries of the massive city as nothing short of adventurous.

What caused this hesitation, expressed in the form of silence over the telephone, was not so much connected with traveling together with Shizuo as much as it did with his going into unknown territory. Izaya's immediate reaction was to take the offer but he was a bit fearful at the same time.
“When is this taking place?”

“Day after tomorrow, we'll stay in Osaka for three days.”

“Okay. I'll be there.”

“Good.”

What made Izaya accept was his need to gain a greater degree of independence from Shiki and also to assess just how far Shiki's controlling ways went. Izaya was very much aware that Shiki kept him under a more or less relaxed supervision. After all, Izaya had said nothing to Shiki about the cat cafe part-time job. At almost any given time there would be a few men tagging him. If need be Izaya could ditch them but he knew Shiki fully expected him to be aware of their presence.

Izaya was curious to see whether they would follow him all the way to Osaka. A part of him was almost eager to have them trying to detain him as it would Shiki’s direct involvement in him. But Izaya was not about to be escorted back to Tokyo like a good little boy simply because Shiki wanted it. In fact, his wanting Shiki to control him resulting from Izaya's desire to exert some self-assertion by having his own way.

As it happened in some many cases, Izaya's sharp human skills were not always employed to their full potential when it came to his personal case. This was why presently he committed quite an oversight. Deprived of his memory, Izaya had been forced into a kind inward journey, his priority had become finding out how others related to him. It did not occur to him that Shiki might seriously object to Izaya going out of town with Shizuo simply because Izaya viewed Shizuo and Shiki as entities pertaining to Orihara Izaya. He had not yet properly assessed Shizuo and Shiki's interaction.

Ironically enough both Shizuo and Shiki had fostered this partial blindness in Izaya. He had interpreted the disastrous encounter between Shiki and Shizuo as they’re being too controlling of himself, that between the two might exist something stronger than plain dislike seemed too implausible. The irony became stronger in that the strong enmity resulted directly from Izaya himself. Everything being connected, by losing track that he was in fact dealing with two suitors Izaya missed the subtleties in the way Shiki and Shizuo related to himself so that even his grand priority erred on this particular.

Shizuo could hardly be aware of all this but he had noticed too much of Izaya's recent changes to expect him to miss the exact import of what was at stake. Shizuo's invitation was made as if it was no big deal and accepted as such but Shizuo was very much aware that Izaya had just compromised himself at least to some extent. And Shizuo fully expected to take advantage.
Which is not to say he was planning on using this escape for sexual purposes. Kasuka's hopeful efforts in that direction might be well meaning but somewhat amiss. Shizuo knew very well that pushing for sex before there was a relationship to speak of would completely backfire and result in Izaya's possibly enduring hate.

In fact, even if against all odds Izaya himself made any overture into physical intimacy Shizuo was not necessarily sure he would take the opportunity lest it ended up destroying what little they had built already. He based this approach on a particular book that held a deep significance to him.

So it was with a feeling of expectation that Shizuo awaited the trip to Osaka.

“Look at that, it really hovers!”

Izaya busied himself admiring the sleek, streamlined white train.

“Yeah. It's a bullet train and all.”

Izaya was already taking photographs, jumping a bit all over to capture the wonder from many different angles.

“How can you be so nonchalant about it, Shizuo! It's Nozomi, Nozomi! A beautiful achievement of human ingenuity.”

Shizuo smiled. Only Izaya could combine childish glee with an exposition on the aesthetics of technology.

“We're traveling first class, too.”

“Yay for first class! Let's board already!”
Izaya was on pins and needles until he was sitting on the spacious compartment, his nose nearly glued to the window.

“It's moving,”

“Onwards, Nozomi-chan!”

Izaya literally bounced up and down. He watched the sliding spectacle beyond the window with absolute fascination as convoluted miles of concrete gave way to lush green running into a wide blue horizon to which his eyes were drawn: the sense of vertigo, caused by the extreme speed making it impossible to focus on nearby objects.

“It really is fast.”

With this truism Shizuo produced a cigarette.

“You can't smoke here.”

“I'm not smoking. Just holding it.”

“Okay,”

Izaya was not even looking at Shizuo, he kept his gaze locked on the scenery that kept flashing in a continuous rush of light. He only caught a reflection of Shizuo in the glass.

“We'll be there in no time.”

Izaya said nothing for quite a while.

“There really is more to life than Tokyo, huh...the people living in the countryside must lead completely different lives than ours. I wonder how much I'd be able to understand them.”
“Not sure you can ever understand anyone.”

Izaya nodded.

“Yes, you are probably right. Experience is by definition non-transmissible. We approach empathy by approximation, it is something of a compass with no true North. Which is why interacting with others can be challenging.”

“Yeah. But you can go by simple rules like, 'treat others like you'd like to be treated.'”

“Ah, the golden rule. Even that has its flaws, though. It won’t apply to a masochist.”

“Someone like you, then?”

Izaya narrowed his eyes in annoyance.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You said it yourself. 'I'm more M than anything else', something like that.”

Izaya had a moment of shocked silence. Just when he began to feel he was used to navigating his new life and ready to deal with the surprising revelations his past sprang on him, he was forced to realize just how ill prepared he truly was.

It was entirely possible that Izaya had at some point said such a thing as a joke, it could very well be that Shizuo was simply making it up. Then again it might very well be true. Izaya could not possibly know and that disarmed him entirely. For an absurdly long moment Izaya drew an absolute blank, no retort occurred to him, not even a tactful change of subject came to his aid.

A lady wheeling a cart carrying beverages and snacks interrupted the moment much to Izaya's relief.

“Got strawberry flavored chips?”
The lady blinked rapidly.

“I am afraid not, sir. We do have strawberry candy.”

“Guess it'll do.”

Izaya ordered wheat tea, very glad for this distraction. He decided to simply ignore all awkwardness.

“Strawberry chips? Are you serious?”

“Might be good.”

“Right...”

“They got weird flavors all over the place now. Like, flavored condoms.”

Izaya nearly choked on his drink, which was bad, and he suspected Shizuo had timed it on purpose, which was worse.

“I bet.”

“What's up with that?”

Izaya shrugged.

“People seek new thrills all the time.”

“Yeah. But still no strawberry chips.”
“I wouldn't be too surprised if there was already such a thing as strawberry chips. Oh wow, the seats turn!”

Izaya had been fidgeting with the seat's controls and found the button that allowed his very comfy chair to turn around, much to his glee.

“You can't spin on that, though.”

“Still! How cool is this! Hey, how come you're not traveling with the rest of the guys?”

As Izaya turned his seat he spotted the Thunder from Down Under guys further down the carriage.

“Dunno. Marked seats, I guess.”

“That’s too bad…you're kinda stuck with me.”

“It's not too bad.”

It was in fact precisely what Shizuo wanted.

“They're all so nice! I was talking to John and James on the platform and they offered to show me around Sydney if I'm ever in the right hemisphere.”

Shizuo did not know exactly who these people were, he saw the dance troupe as a more or less homogenous mass whose individuals could hardly be told apart. Shizuo smiled, trust Izaya to weave himself people's good graces and extract information with just the most superficial of casual conversations. By the time this Osaka outing was over Izaya would probably have a fairly accurate idea about each of the Australians.

The process of talking with Izaya was not an equal opportunity affair for all parts included. Of this Shizuo was very much aware. Izaya figured out many things about his interlocutors, not just from what they divulged but from a series of unconscious clues he was able to pick up, but these gained
little to no insight into Izaya's true character.

“Can't speak the language.”

“No problem at all! They really are sweethearts, you can get by with gestures alone. It really goes to show you can't judge people on looks. They're manly but kind.”

“Don't think it's connected. Being manly and kind, I mean.”

“Indeed. One tends to think of people as types, certain traits tended to be grouped together. It's our attempt of transposing blueprint of coherence into the manifold experience of human character.”

“Yeah.”

“Like how you're nice to kitties.”

“You're nice to kitties yourself.”

“Why, of course. It is to be expected as I am the epitome of virtue all around.”

Shizuo chuckled.

“You even wear cat ears and tail.”

“And whose fault is it?”

“You can always quit if you hate it that much.”

“And miss out on the chance of playing with all those pussies? I think not!”
Izaya seemed quite pleased with his deliberately ambiguous phrase construction. Shizuo thoughtfully popped a candy into his mouth and chewed it at length.

“Still unfunny.”

“You know, Shizuo, you may have some unresolved emotional issues you might want to look into.”

“You think?”

Shizuo was not expecting this approach.

“I do. While there is not a direct correlation individuals who have something of an oral fixation- and your cigarette/candy obsession seems to be just that- often suffer from emotional handicaps usually incurred in very early childhood.”

“Dunno if that's real deep or just word salad.”

“I'm not making this up, you know. There are plenty of studies to that effect.”

Izaya crossed a leg over the other and nodded very sagely.

“So, what do should I do? To solve those issues or whatnot.”

Izaya shrugged and took a sip of tea.

“I do not know.”

Shizuo was silent for a while.

“Now that sucks. You tell me about this problem I didn't even know I had and then don't offer any help.”
“It's one of those 'Find the answer within' things.”

“Not helpful.”

“Besides, I didn't say you had a problem for sure. I said you may have unresolved emotional issues, meaning, the possibility is most definitely there but it is not at all confirmed.”

“Hmm...I guess. But you think I got these, what you call them, 'issues'.”

“Again, I find it probable but that is as far as I'll go.”

Shizuo seemed to ponder for a while.

“Can't remember anything like that.”

“You wouldn't. I'm talking about pre-conscious memory events either that or repressed memories. Either way you wouldn't remember.”

“Ah...”

“Besides- a cow! Look, it's a cow!”

Izaya glued himself to the window as if to grasp the most fleeting apparition.

“Maybe it's wagyu.”

The mysterious bovine having receded back Izaya returned to his seat and sighed heavily.

“Can you be a little less prosaic?”
“Thought you liked wagyu.”

“That is completely beside the point. I do not see why you must rain on my parade like this.”

Shizuo smirked. Trust Izaya to see everything as relating to himself. Change or no change, that part of Izaya seemed too fundamental to shift.

“Wagyu is raining on your parade? How about Kobe beef, no cats around now.”

“You're doing this on purpose, aren't you. I'd never seen a cow in my whole life and there you are, talking about beef!”

“Never seen a cow before?”

Izaya had a moment of panic.

“Never that close, that is.”

“Makes for easier eating that way.”

“Can we get off the subject of eating cows, please?”

“Fine by me. Wanna go back to telling me what's my, what's it called...childhood trauma thing?”

Shizuo was actually interested.

“Again, I have absolutely no idea. How could I possibly know?”

“Same way you know everything else.”
“I am ever so sorry to disappoint you but I can offer no insight.”

“That's too bad. No guesses?”

“None whatsoever. Unless you were dropped on the head as a baby.”

Shizuo laughed, causing Izaya to jump and nearly spilling the remains of his tea.

“You really can't help it, can you. Being snarky like that.”

“You asked. It's as good a guess as any other.”

Shizuo nodded. Slow, all traces of mirth faded and he grew almost solemn.

“I've thought about it a lot, you know.”

“About what?”

“About how I ended being like this...figured if anyone would know it'd be you.”

“I am not omniscient. Yet.”

“Working on in?”

“Maybe.”

“You'd die of boredom if that happened.”
“So you say.”

“If you knew everything there'd be no point to talking to people and nothing new to find out...yeah, you'd be bored.”

“You may have a point there.”

“Yeah. You had a point too. About my issues and stuff.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Oh gee, so what. You have your issues, I'm irrevocably creepy.”

“That's true, you're really creepy.”

“No need to agree so readily.”

“You said it yourself.”

Izaya huffed haughtily enough.

“If you don't watch out I may crawl out of a television when you least expect it, since I'm so creepy.”

“I think you need long hair for that.”

“That is- Mount Fuji! It's Mount Fuji, look at that!”

Izaya glued himself to the window again. The mountain hovered in a more or less solid distance, refusing to glide into oblivion right away as if protesting the train's forceful speed.
“Isn’t that forest around here? The one with the suicides.”

“Stop being a party pooper, Shizuo and just enjoy the view. It's Mount Fuji!”

Izaya seemed ready to jump off the train and skip all the way to the top of Mount Fuji.

“You think it's going to show up? Rail-tracer?”

“Huh? What's that, from Baccano?”

“Yeah.”

Izaya spoke without even looking at Shizuo, being too enthralled with the scenery.

“Rail-tracer isn't real. Baccano is a fictional work. Why do I have to tell you this, are you turning into Erika?”

“Erika would be all 'Rail-Tracer x Izaya! Squee! Kyaa!'.”

Izaya blinked then burst out laughing, nearly landed on Shizuo's lap, his position by the window being rather precarious, and could only regain balance by flinging himself back into his seat.

“Oh dear, do the voice, do the voice!”

Shizuo cleared his throat and tried to sound high pitched.

“'Kya! Rail-Tracer x Izaya, so sexy!'”

Izaya almost collapsed into the aisle from laughing too much.
“Stop, for the love of god!”

“It's, like, totally hot.”

Izaya wiped a tear and gesticulated wildly, begging for mercy.

“You're killing me here! But why must you slash me with a psycho?”

“Would Ladd be better?”

“Er, no. Psychotic again. But how come you know so much about Baccano?”

“ Heard about it.”

“You sound like quite a fan.”

“Not really. Not into violent stuff.”

“So I've heard.”

Izaya produced a travel guide.

“You're a diehard tourist by the looks of it.”

“I'm considering visiting Kyoto while I'm at it. How fun that would that be!”

And Izaya radiated.

“Yeah. Kyoto sounds fun.”
Izaya narrowed his eyes slightly as if suspicious in one of his sudden changes of mood.

“I don't suppose you can tag along, what with the shows and all that. So I'll be sure to have enough fun for the two of us! I may end up shipping the souvenirs instead of carting over a load of baggage on the way back.”

“I got most of the day free, the shows are at night.”

“Hmm...” Izaya seemed to be making up his mind. “Well, I suppose you could tag along if you like.”

“Thanks. Sounds like you're real excited about that, huh.”

“Shizuo, you're turning to sarcasm now! What next! Soon the world will explode!”

“If the world's gonna explode it'll be your fault, I bet.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Blame Izaya for everything, why don't you. Real original of you.”

“Heard that people who speak in the third person are psychos.”

“Gee, you wouldn't want to visit Kyoto with a psycho, now would you.”

Shizuo was silent for a while then smiled rather slowly like one who had just figured out something.

“You're acting like this so that it looks like I'm the one who doesn't wanna tag along with you.”
“Oh really?”

But Izaya was rather startled as this was precisely what he had in mind.

“Yeah. If you wanna go alone then go alone, no big deal.”

“On second thought, having someone to shoot debris with might be fun. Feel free to tag along if you want.”

Until this very moment Izaya fully intended to see the wonders of Kyoto on his own but he rethought it now. He did suspect Shizuo had been rather shrewd in a way Shizuo was not supposed to be and it bothered him somewhat.

“Sure. You going to the show tonight?”

“Not planning to.”

“I got a ticket. It's the kind of thing you'd like.”

“Are you implying I'm into guys stripping?”

“Nah. Not that it would surprise me but I meant you'd enjoy it cuz it's unusual. You get to observe people, that kind of thing.”

Izaya was actually very curious and extremely happy that he made it seem as if he was doing Shizuo a favor by accepting the invitation.

“I might as well attend, it will be a different experience.”
Izaya's enthusiasm reached something of a boiling point as the train came to a halt and he nearly dashed out the station when the architecture grabbed his attention.

“Oh wow, look at that!”

“Neat place.”

It greatly amused Shizuo how Izaya for all his urban nonchalance could work himself to such a pitch of stunned admiration. But he had to agree, the grandiose metallic structure was graceful in its play of light and air.

Izaya's high spirits were checked as soon as he reached the hotel room.

“Oh...I should have known, double bed...”

“It's real big.”

“Still...”

“Not much different than futons side by side.”

“It's most definitely different. Oh well, I'll take the sofa.”

“Take the bed, I can take the sofa.”

“You don't even fit on the sofa. Besides, we need you to be relaxed and well rested for your performance. And now it's Osaka castle, Osaka castle!”

Izaya had already tossed his bag away and was ready to bounce away.
“Gotta see the venue, I'll see you later.”

“Bye bee, Shizuo!”

“Here's your ticket.”

“Thanks. Got to run now!”

Izaya was on pins and needles to go out and explore the city. In fact, he dashed away before Shizuo could add anything.

Izaya spent some time marveling at the castle gates and moat. His attempt at drawing from a collective past in order to make up for the loss of a personal one had been mostly theoretical thus far. He had most of recorded history literally at the tip of his fingertips and felt no need to confront any actual physical referent. All too used to dealing with symbols he was now confronted with the thing itself and stopped to ponder the schism more than to observe the castle proper.

Izaya stood very still, oblivious of the droves of tourists and after a while even the delicate green roofs rising like a ladder toward the sky left his mind entirely. Between any object and he subject human beings forged mediums, language was the most obvious, but perception itself was not entirely exempt of interpretation. While this could easily be construed as a limitation for it barred one from experiencing the raw data of reality as such Izaya was more inclined to see it as a great advantage.

Thanks to this act of distancing anyone could gain a kind of knowledge without actually being in the presence of any given fact. Human beings were capable of thinking and talking of what they had never seen and could transmit ideas precisely because objects gained a wonderful mobility once converted into information.

Technology sped up communication but it was also responsible for allowing an ever more perfect translation, an almost zero loss procedure, as knowledge became information.

That an ancient castle should make Izaya think about the future was quite characteristic. Izaya saw history as a process, often a painful one, made of fractures and inevitable loss but marching in one
direction almost as if guided from the outset. From that perspective, revolutions, wars, bloodshed and other human events were steps leading to a greater self-awareness of human beings as such.

Izaya reached the top floor of the castle in something of a daze but the panoramic view impressed itself on him. He joined a group of children in their excitement.

“Fish on the roof! I wonder what they'd taste like if they were real!”

A protective mesh ran along the railing, fortunately for Izaya who leaned over to better observe the golden fish sculptures perilously balanced on the roof. If he could Izaya might have jumped on the fish and done a crazy ninja act by jumping from roof to roof. He was sure the view would be so much cooler from the very top.

Before him the grounds of the castle spread in a mix of majesty and frailty, green shingles then giving way to the sprawling grounds while in the distance high rises cut the horizon. Izaya found the contrast most interesting.

On his way down he stopped to try on a medieval armor and get a picture taken. Ancient costplay at its best. The horned helmet was as heavy as it looked and Izaya had some trouble putting it on. But the result was amusing enough to be worth it.[this kind of dressing up is done in Osaka castle and is fairly popular]

Next he took an open top bus and went on a tour around the city. Izaya was so psyched that he saw very little in particular but simply absorbed the overall impression of energy, dynamism, a certain buzz that reached him from the streets.

He was surprised to realize that it was getting late and almost time to head out to Shizuo's show. Izaya called his stroll short, he had been exploring a labyrinth of colorful narrow streets thriving with tiny restaurants, the food scented air fully pulling him in.

Izaya was not late but there was already a queue. A queue of very hyped females, in fact. A lot of men would have felt awkward but Izaya's experience had prepared him for being surrounded by girls. From the host club to the cat cafe, Izaya might be more prepared for handling women than men.

Despite being such an absolute minority his role as an observer was intact. No one was paying him any attention. Izaya blended into the background and listened. The women were excited about seeing
the hot Australians and they had heard there was a blonde Japanese hunk involved as well.

It amused Izaya to no end. By the time he was sitting on the first row seat he was every bit as excited as the women albeit for different reasons. The sleek light show and pumping beats added to his sense of anticipation. He appreciated the dance routine for its coordination but the highlight of the show was of course Shizuo.

And Shizuo floored Izaya.

Shizuo walked the runway like he meant business but at the same time he seemed almost indifferent to the whole affair. Izaya noticed this at the same time he realized that Shizuo was wearing a tearaway bartender outfit.

Izaya was impressed despite himself. He felt that Shizuo had looked him straight in the eye as he tore away his clothes, Izaya attributed it to a performer's instinct of making every single member of the audience feel special. In this Izaya was absolutely wrong.

Mostly naked Shizuo did not seem to be establishing eye contact with Izaya, he was in fact looking at him and at no one else. Knowing the precise location of Izaya's seat, Shizuo could easily spot him. Shizuo could have spotted Izaya in a crowd of millions.

Izaya met Shizuo backstage.

“Bartender-han, that was so cool, ya!”

Shizuo blinked then chuckled.

“I leave you for a couple of hours and you're already talking Kansaiben.”

“I am...?”

“Yeah. The same happened when we went to Okinawa. That was even worse, no one could make heads or tails out of what you were saying.”
Izaya had never heard of this. Nor had he realized that he was talking with an accent until Shizuo pointed it out.

“Mingling for the win, no standing out-hen! And on that note, let's stuff ourselves with delicious food. It's Osaka after all!”

Izaya was about to invite the guys.

“They have to discuss some things about the tour, can't have dinner.”

Izaya's obvious disappointment was a little painful.

“Oh. That's too bad, the more the merrier.”

While it was true that Izaya's amnesia and resulting changes had made him more transparent to Shizuo it had also made him more difficult to understand than ever. Shizuo assumed that Izaya would rather hang out with the Thunder From Down Under guys rather than having dinner with him alone. In fact, Izaya wanted to invite the Australians for Shizuo's sake. Izaya believed that Shizuo would greatly benefit from enlarging his circle of acquaintances but he knew that being too overt about it would backfire.

“By the way, Shizuo...you might want to get dressed. Just an idea.”

Izaya's eyes glittered as a plate of steaming takoyaki sailed his way. His fingers literally twitched.

“I know it's too hot but I can't...help...myself!”

“Takoyaki ain't going nowhere.”

Izaya had picked a restaurant stall and was now perched on a high bench. It allowed him to sway
back and forth in his excitement but he had to curb it lest he end up falling backward.

“And speaking of too hot, that was quite a show! Can't believe you wore a bartender tearaway outfit, it was so perfect!”

“They got a bunch of weird costumes, figured I'd go with what I know.”

“Kasuka-san would have approved, I'm sure.”

Izaya nibbled a piece of octopus most daintily.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Burns!”

“Told you. It's like you got a cat's tongue or something.”

Izaya busied himself blowing on the takoyaki and then nibbled it anew with extra care.

“Delicious!”

Shizuo sampled his own portion.

“Real nice.”

Izaya was already attacking the takoyaki.

“Osaka is all about takoyaki, takoyaki is where it's at! Refill, please!”
“So did you spend the whole day stuffing yourself with takoyaki?”

“Don't be silly. I visited the castle, went on one of those open buses tours and walked around.”

“No lunch?”

Izaya blinked, a fresh batch of takoyaki hovering in the air.

“I completely forgot! No wonder I'm so famished.”

“Don't forget to eat.”

“But there was just so much to see! New city and all!”

“Yeah you can collapse on the streets of Osaka for a change of pace.”

Izaya pointed an empty stick at Shizuo.

“Mock all you want, if you don't watch out I'll take your takoyaki as well.”

And by the looks of it Izaya was ready to do just that. His second batch was currently being made and Izaya was in no mood for waiting.

“You can have some of mine.”

“Tch, that takes the fun out of it.”

“Wanna thumb wrestle for it?”
“Er, no.”

“You’d like the show.”

“Ah, being surrounded by so many girls and not one of them paid me any attention whatsoever!”

Izaya seemed thrilled.

“Yeah. You've been real popular with girls, especially of late.”

Izaya sighed deeply.

“It gets really trying, after a while.”

“Sucks being you.”

Izaya's second batch of takoyaki and he paid that kind of exclusive attention that seemed to zone out
the rest of the world but that he readily transferred to something else with no warning. Shizuo had noticed it quite a while ago.

“It does get in the way, believe it or not. I would rather not be the center of attention unless it serves
my purpose.”

“Gotta lurk in the shadows and spy on people, stuff like that?”

Izaya narrowed his eyes slightly. It looked quite amusing, his being about to bite into a takoyaki
adding much to that.

“I prefer to call it, 'blending in'.”

“Same shit.”
Izaya shrugged as if he could not be bothered to contest this. He tossed the now empty stick with something of a flourish.

“Wonderful octopus! Keep the change, mister! Let's move on!”

A bill followed the empty stick and in the same motion Izaya jumped off the bench.

“Move on?”

Izaya stood on the street, haloed in the streetlight and red neon like a quirky angel up to no good.

“Of course! Like I said, Osaka is all about stuffing yourself! There's still plenty of restaurants to hit.”

Izaya led them to an okonomiyaki restaurant, another counter affair. He took possession of a high seat with the usual effortless grace.

“Don't go falling on the hotplate, now.”

Izaya hardly even heard Shizuo. He watched the hotplate on which all sorts of food sizzled in a confusion of intoxicating scents, the staple pancake mixture serving as the background to a small banquet.

“Wow, these are huge! Give us two with all the toppings!”

Trust Izaya to simply override whatever Shizuo had to say. Two puffy okonomiyaki were prepared in front of them, the spatula work impressing Izaya considerably.

“Never seen okonomiyaki this huge.”

Izaya took a shot of his dish before digging into it.
“Must immortalize the moment!”

The master approached them.

“You boys from Tokyo?”

“That's right! Tokyo, ya!”

“Sounds like you've been in Kansai for a while. Got a bit of Kansaiben going there.”

Izaya was currently chewing a mouthful so it took him a while to reply.

“It's my first time in Osaka, though. It's a great city, isn't it!”

A lively speech on the wonders of Osaka followed with the master adding much to it. By the end Izaya's accent had morphed into a purer form of Kansaiben, complete with 'maido' as he gave thanks for the food and hopped away after tipping very generously.

“Akan! How about dessert?”

Here Shizuo had something to say. They had been randomly wandering about one of the lively streets of the Dotombori district.

“That place.”

They settled for Shizuo's pick, a small cafe tucked in a corner. Shizuo also chose the dessert.

“I'll leave it up to you, you're the dessert expert.”
“Me-oto Zenzai.”

Two delicate bowls of some dark liquid arrived. Izaya immediately took a picture.

“What is it, exactly?”

Izaya was most curious.

“Sweet soy bean soup.”

“Oh...I'm all for!”

“Wanna take a picture of us eating it?”

“Sure.”

Izaya got a waiter to take the picture and wondered at the giggling.

“Real good.”

Izaya had to agree after trying it.

“It looks a bit shady but it is delicious. Local delicacy?”

“Yeah. For couples. Sharing the bowls makes couples happy.”

Izaya spluttered some.

“Eh, how come you know that? And couldn't you pick something else...?”
“I know about sweet stuff. Always wanted to try this one.”

“No wonder the waiter was laughing...I'm beginning to think you're doing this on purpose.”

“You think?”

“No matter! I won't let you ruin my Osaka eating experience.”

True to his word Izaya ate the whole dessert, taking his own time to savor it. Within a few spoonfuls Izaya had dismissed Shizuo's sneaky ways entirely.

“You like it?”

Izaya nodded.

“Can't quite describe it but it's most definitely interesting and flavorsome.”

Shizuo paid for the dessert and once again they were out on the streets. Izaya swayed dramatically.

“Ah, I can't eat anymore.”

“We should be heading back soon.”

“It's a shame but you're right.”

Izaya was suddenly extremely tired. He was only vaguely aware of the trip back to the hotel and flopped on the bed as soon as he hit the bedroom. Excitement had kept him awake most the previous night and all the bouncing about caught up with him.
“Gah...sofa,”

Izaya made a very lame attempt of rolling out of bed.

“Keep the bed, I'll take the sofa.”

Izaya had already curled on his side and was drifting asleep, his eyes closing almost of their own accord.

“Thanks...”

Shizuo watched him closely. Izaya's breathing slowed down in an even, quiet rhythm and did not even budge as Shizuo sat next to him. For a while Shizuo merely contemplated Izaya. Both were completely still.

Shizuo saw his own hand moving gently through Izaya's hair as if belonged to someone else. But the sensory input, soft black silk, shot through Shizuo's fingers like a bolt of electricity. As innocent a gesture as it was, it triggered all the pent-up expectation that Shizuo had been carrying for far too long.

Shizuo bolted to his feet, placed a blanket over Izaya and went for a walk in order to clear his head. Half a cigarette pack later and after pacing back and forth in front of the hotel Shizuo had calmed down enough to actually think. A lifetime of dealing with destructive tendencies had made Shizuo very used to handling instincts but not quite like this.

Shizuo was surprised at his own reaction. It gave him pause. Perhaps there was something symbolic about a double bed after all or maybe there was a limit to this charade and Shizuo was about to reach it. Their newly forged friendship was something Shizuo cherished but it entailed much frustration.

Shizuo was aware of a contradiction in himself. He had been pushing for a development into intimacy only to be forced to retreat almost immediately. As things now stood Shizuo was certain of what he wanted and for that very reason too anxious to compromise it by doing anything harsh. This forced a kind of self-control on Shizuo that did not normally come to him, the kind of self-control that now had him tossing another cigarette down a gutter instead of taking it out on Shiki’s men that he could see lurking right across the street.
Izaya blinked awake and jumped on his feet almost immediately.

“Kyoto! What time is it?! Why didn’t you wake me up!”

“Hi to you too.”

Izaya fumed a bit. The strong sunlight and his somewhat battered inner clock told him it was pushing on noon without his even having to check the time.

“There goes my Kyoto trip!”

“Kyoto’s been around for a while now, don’t think it’s going anywhere soon.”

“If there’s an earthquake and the city is swallowed whole before I get to check it out I will personally hold you responsible, just so you know.”

“It’s okay if the city goes to hell after you check out the sights?”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“I did not mean it like that.”

“Your phone’s been ringing like crazy, Erika going on about something or other.”

“You’re picking up my calls now?”

“Nah. She couldn’t reach you so she called me instead.”

“Why on Earth for?”
“Figured we’d be together, I guess.”

“That’s preposterous.”

Then again, all things considered, perhaps not so preposterous after all. As if on cue Izaya’s phone rang anew.

“Gah, slow down and don’t scream into my ear…no, just woke up. Really?! Are you sure?! Oh wow!”

Izaya discarded the phone and beamed at Shizuo.

“Good news?”

“My draft made it to the prelims!”

“Meaning?”

Izaya bounced.

“The Liar Game spinoff contest! I had almost forgotten about it, turns out they released the prelim selection today!”

And with this Izaya was out, hunting down a copy of Young Jump. Shizuo dutifully followed him into the convenience store. Izaya flipped through the pages then turned the magazine for Shizuo to see:

“Orihara Izaya, ‘Labyrinth’!”

“Manga, huh. Congratulations.”
“Thanks! Odds are it won’t make the next cut but at least they liked the overall concept.”

“You’re good at brainy stuff.”

“Brainy stuff for the win!”

Breakfast time was long gone so Izaya decided they might as well have lunch.

“Don’t go stuffing yourself again or you’ll get sick.”

“Reading you loud and clear. By the way, Shizuo…you didn’t tell Erika we were staying in the same hotel room, right?”

“I might’ve.”

Izaya sighed.

“Why, oh why. She’s already obsessed as it is, no need to feed her crazy fantasies.”

“I guess.”

“Oh well, it’s too late now. Trying to deny things will only make it worse.”

“‘There’s no-one not worth understanding.’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“‘Even you, Shizu-chan.’ Your words.”
Izaya shrugged it off and stabbed the okonomiyaki in front of him.

“Very clever and most accurate of me.”

Izaya was not in the mood for deep discussion so he was rather happy that his phone should ring at this very moment. The Australians were calling to invite them to tour the city. With his Kyoto plans shot down Izaya jumped to the opportunity and soon enough he was enjoying the cityscape of Osaka in merry company.

Shizuo tagged along without sharing Izaya’s enthusiasm. The show went without a hitch and afterwards Izaya and the Thunder From Down Under guys went out for dinner. Once again Shizuo went along but was mostly an observer.

Izaya did not forget Shizuo, though and as engrossed in the conversation as he became he acted as an interpreter in order to get Shizuo involved. Izaya’s commitment to enlarging Shizuo’s social life might be laudable but was very much ill timed. Shizuo got to see Izaya at his best, a friendly side engaged in human interaction but it did more to annoy him than anything else.

At first Shizuo was not even entirely sure why. It was during dinner, as Izaya got to explaining the contents of the food at hand to the curious foreigners, that it hit Shizuo. Izaya’s almost indiscriminate friendly ways cheapened the bond between himself and Shizuo. The problem rested on their being friend zoned, even if Shizuo ignored the expression. It was further compounded by the one sided nature of it all.

More, if it was true that some fundamental change had taken place in Izaya and made it all possible for the present situation to arise it was equally true that Izaya was now more likely to grow closer to others as well. Ironically enough Shizuo felt that he was losing the special status he had always had in Izaya’s estimation. For a while their former hatred was extremely real it was also exclusive: Izaya had singled out Shizuo as his own true opponent, the one enemy to defeat, the ultimate nemesis. As a friend Shizuo was subsumed into a group.

There was also Shiki to take into consideration as much as Shizuo was loath to admit. That Izaya’s involvement with Shiki was more than just professional was nothing new. Shizuo had known it for a long time, Izaya having taken some pains to make sure it was so. But that Izaya should at all be serious about was unheard of.

It was all connected to Izaya’s great change and by now it was all too clear to Shizuo that finding out
just what had happened was absolutely vital. It was just as clear that Izaya would fight him tooth and nail from keeping him from making any headway.

Shizuo did not have much to work on but one thing he had noticed: Izaya’s tendency for avoiding the past altogether. At times Shizuo could sense something like a gap that went beyond letting bygones be bygones. It contained but went beyond their personal history. Even noncontroversial events seemed to aggravate Izaya and led to his changing the topic as soon as possible.

If Izaya was so reluctant to even address the past then it was up to Shizuo to force him to do just that. Shizuo decided it was his best bet.

“Not a bad day after all, Shizuo! No Kyoto but still.”

Shizuo snapped out of his reverie. They were retiring for the night, Izaya still bouncing as he crossed the hotel lobby.

“You can check out Kyoto tomorrow.”

“I’ll do that some other time, Kyoto demands some time to really be enjoyed. And like you said, it’s not going anywhere.”

“Yeah. Old place.”

“I have a bunch of souvenirs to buy tomorrow.”

The souvenir list went from Namie to Izaya’s American neighbor and included everyone in between.

Few things were more conventional than stocking up souvenirs and it amused Shizuo that Izaya, the very definition of unconventional, should take it so seriously.

“You got some tough costumers there.”

Izaya stopped by a vending machine and bought himself an oolong tea can and a strawberry soda
that he tossed Shizuo.

“Ah, don’t I know it…namely your brother, what can I possibly get Kasuka-san that he would like? Not to mention Mairu, no matter what I get I bet she’ll just roll her eyes.”

Shizuo smiled.

“Thanks. You do that rolling the eye thing yourself.”

“That’s because I am a sophisticated young man and rationally cynical. While Mairu is just teenage angst.”

“You rolled your eyes when you were her age too.”

Izaya unlocked the hotel room door and took a swig of tea before replying.

“Call it a Orihara trait, then.”

“Kururi doesn’t do it as far as I know.”

And Shizuo knew better than Izaya.

“I should probably pick the same thing for both of them.”

“They say it’s the thought that counts.”

Izaya giggled.

“Yeah, right.”
“Izaya-nii is real popular.”

All Izaya could do was shrug. Then something occurred to him and he brightened up. Shizuo was making a habit out of watching Izaya very closely, the sudden mood swings were oddly entrancing.

“Oh and there’s Sushi too! Can’t forget to get something for the cat.”

“Cat gets a souvenir as well?”

“Of course.”

“Cute.”

Izaya produced the Young Jump volume and again flipped through the pages until he reached his name.

“They really picked my idea!”

Hugging the magazine close to his chest Izaya proceeded to fling himself on bed and roll around in almost feline fashion.

“Liar Game, huh.”

“That’s right! Sooner or later it comes back to, ‘this is Liar Game so lying is to be expected’. It can lead to some cool paradoxes. Like Epimenides, the Cretan who claimed that all Cretans are liars. Assuming it is so, then he told the truth and contradicted himself by not lying; on the other hand if he lied then what he says is not true and as such the Cretans are not liars.”

“Brainy stuff again. But you gotta know what’s true in order to lie.”

Izaya rolled on his back as he contemplated this.
“You are right. But in real life ‘truth’ and ‘lies’ are not so neatly defined.”

“Like what?”

“So much of human experience depends on point of view…it’s all so subjective.”

“Does that also go for the information you sell?”

“I wonder. Then again, what I sell is just the liquid commodity itself, namely the raw data. What to do with it and how to interpret it is entirely up to the client.”

Shizuo toyed with a cigarette for a while.

“So if you sell some guy a tip about enriched uranium and he goes off makes a bomb and blows up Tokyo it’s not your fault. That kind of thing?”

Izaya put aside the magazine and sat up slowly, a thoughtful gesture as he crossed his legs and folded his hands together.

“Technically, yes. Not that I am saying I would sell that particular piece of information.”

“But if you did it wouldn’t be your fault.”

“Sounds awful, doesn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

“Truth, or at least telling the truth, is not necessarily the right thing. There is that famous example: it’s WWII and the Nazis can banging at your door asking if you’re sheltering Jews. You’re not obviously going to tell them about the Rosenberg family hiding in your basement.”
Shizuo hid a smile with a sip of strawberry soda. Izaya’s example was formulaic enough but naming the hypothetical Jews struck Shizuo was very telling.

“...And would you give shelter to the Rosenbergs?”

“I do not know. I’d be a completely different person had I been born then. I’d love to think that I would at least try to help them out but I cannot say what I’d actually do.”

It troubled Izaya. His ability to invest himself in hypothetical situations allowed him to expand the scope of his experience and had been vital in handling his loss of memory but it also had its disadvantages. Very often it revealed shortcomings that were painful to face.

“...Like you said in your shounen essay, ‘protecting strangers in extreme situations often entails much more than just putting oneself in jeopardy, it means risking the painful demise of one’s loved ones. Seen in such a way, a certain degree of selfishness is perhaps the closest to a moral choice even if it means allowing others to perish.’”

“Just how many times did you read that essay again?”

“Plenty of times.”

Shizuo had reread it very recently, in fact.

“There is more to morality than meets the eye. Let me present a rather famous thought experience to you: imagine you’re walking by a train track that is being repaired; there are five workmen working on a branch and another one working on another branch. Suddenly you see an incoming train and realize the brakes are defective as it is about to run over the five workmen. You have the option of pulling a switch that will change the train’s course toward the second branch where the one workman is. The question is, do you pull the switch to save five men at the expense of one or do you do nothing?”

“I’d kick the train off track.”

Izaya giggled.
“That is not an option, the experiment is meant to apply to normal people who can’t just kick trains.”

“Dunno…guess I pull the switch.”

“Now here is another scenario. You are standing on a bridge over a train track that five workmen are repairing. Suddenly, you realize that the incoming train can’t brake and will soon run over the workmen. Standing next to you is a rather fat man that if you push in front of the train would save the workmen. The question is, do you push and sacrifice him to save the five workmen or do you do nothing?”

“Hmmm…kinda tricky.”

Izaya snapped his fingers.

“That’s just it, both scenarios seem very similar but there is one vital difference: in the first one you’re just pulling a switch, your involvement is indirect; in the second one you are physically pushing a man to his death, your involvement is direct. Which is why most people claim they would pull the switch but hesitate greatly when it comes to committing to pushing the man.”

“Interesting.”

Shizuo meant it, too.

“And this is where it gets even more interesting. They analyzed the testees’ brain patterns as they took the test and found that in scenario one the part of the brain that was activated was connected to arithmetic and basic computation; in scenario two the part of the brain used deals with response conflict.”

“Different parts of the brain, huh…”

“It goes to show just how important the human element is. But there is one option that the thought experience misses out altogether. What if instead of pushing some poor guy to his death you jump yourself?”
“Hadn’t thought of that.”

“I don’t suppose many people would even consider the suicidal option but there is also a minority that might.”

“Real small minority.”

“But that’s just it, human beings have this frightening way of doing the most surprising thing when you least expect it.”

“Yeah. By doing shitty things.”

“As well as rising above themselves for the sake of their fellow humans.”

“Is thus one of those things, ‘taking the good with the bad’?”

“I wonder.”

“Thought you had humanity all figured out.”

Izaya chuckled.

“As if.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Izaya yawned.

“Ah, too sleepy for deep discussion. I’m turning in for the night. Guess I’ll take the sofa this time around.”
“Keep the bed, it’s all the same to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

In no time Izaya was comfortably tucked under the covers and setting on the alarm. Shizuo wished he could blissfully drift asleep that easily.

“Goodnight, Shizuo.”

Shizuo was left in the darkness to stare at the ceiling.

“Izaya?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you suppose we’re friends?”

“Hmm…I’m not sure myself…we’re not enemies anymore, at least.”

“There’s that.”

“So yes, I guess we are friends. To some extent, at least.”

Shizuo had nothing to say to this.
Izaya adhered to his plan and spent most of the morning buying his many souvenirs that he ended up mailing to Tokyo as he would rather travel light. Shizuo spotted something.

“Oh look, geisha stuff.”

Izaya stopped next to him gazing at a window-shop sporting mannequins dressed in lush geisha outfit.

“Geisha workshop…? ‘Take a picture wearing traditional Kyoto maiko apparel’. Eh, now that’s… different.”

“Want to give it a go?”

Izaya shrugged.

“No thanks.”

“Could be worth your while. Like, using the picture to gain favors from Erika.”

Izaya’s eyes grew wider then narrowed, glimmering with mischief.

“I like the way you’re thinking. But I’m a guy, you know. I doubt they’ll just let me doll me up.”

“Only way of finding out.”

Izaya half-expected them to turn him down right away but to his surprise the staff had no issues and before he quite knew what was going on he was already having his face powdered, a wig picked while his opinion about kimono patterns was asked.

“Good grief, how can anyone walk in this,”
Shizuo had been calmly waiting and now lifted his eyes to spot Izaya staggering in a bright red kimono whose long sleeves he flapped about in lieu of wings in attempt to maintain a precarious balance. The make-up transformed Izaya into a flawless albeit worried porcelain doll, the very crimson lips set in an uncertain expression. His eyes were turned downward to the high platform shiny geta shoes so Shizuo could only see the pinkish shadow shading the eyelids. There was a tinkling sound, very silvery, as a sakura colored hairpin tinkled in the massive black wig.

“Can you stand?”

Izaya looked up, long sleeved arms spread out for extra balance. Only then did Shizuo feel the full impact of the outfit. Izaya’s red eyes were brought to a pitch of intensity by the kimono and his seductive allure all the stronger by his being so utterly oblivious.

“Sort of. But honestly, this is insane. It’s not just the shoes, the way this thing binds the legs makes it challenge to even take small steps.”

To exemplify Izaya took a tentative step.

“Looks beautiful on you.”

Izaya blinked then laughed.

“I bet! Where’s a mirror now,”

An employee brought a full length mirror and Izaya gasped at his own reflection.

“Is that really me…?”

Izaya was even more stunned than Shizuo. His fingertips doubled in a delicate gesture as he brushed the glass surface.

“Yeah. It’s you alright.”
Izaya slowly rotated in front of the mirror, studying his strangely engaging image from all angles.

“But I’m a guy,”

A perky employee piped up.

“So is Saotome Taichi.”

Izaya giggled, complete with covering his mouth with a wavy sleeve.

“Point taken. But I hardly recognize myself.”

Shizuo recognized Izaya, what took him aback was precisely how much of Izaya’s inner allure shone through the eccentric outfit. Awash in red and white, Izaya embodied the dangers of seduction. All this was on Shizuo’s mind as Izaya spun, exposing a glimpse of the nape of the neck.

Normally each costumer got a single photograph for a set price but the staff was very excited over Izaya’s makeover. In the end Izaya stayed for a full photograph session, a proper photographer was called, and a series of poses were rehearsed at length. Izaya was handed all sorts of props including a koto, a pretty tea set and tiny sake cups. He had to sit in formal seiza fashion for a small eternity as well as tilt his head many a time.

A highly enthusiastic photographer threw a barrage of commands at Izaya and it was all he could do to arrange his hands properly or stand gracefully, smile coyly, act invitingly. By the time they were done Izaya was exhausted and very eager to change back into his clothes. He flung himself into a chair and sighed.

“Ah, so tired…”

“Let’s get out of here.”

Before Izaya could as much as leave the chair the manager approached him with the proposal of using the photographs for promotion.
“Eh…are you serious…?”

“We are most definitely serious. The kimono manufactory has shown interest, too.”

“You want me to model for you…?”

“We’d just be using the photographs.”

“I am sorry but I really cannot see that happening.”

With great consternation the manager gave Izaya his business card in case he changed his mind. Izaya took it out of reflex more than anything else. He was still shaking his head more than half an hour later having changed into his clothes and sat across Shizuo over a cup of green tea.

“Unbelievable…surely they can find someone else? Namely, an actual woman?”

“Dunno about that.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

Shizuo made sure to establish eye contact and waiting a bit until he answered to make sure he had Izaya’s undivided attention.

“You looked real beautiful, guy or not.”

Izaya gave his typical shrug.

“Gee. Shizuo…you’re making me blush.”
And Izaya could not possibly sound more flippant if he tried.

Shizuo spotted it first and he tensed immediately. Izaya was distracted by the urban scenery so he only noticed the long black limousine once it parked alongside them. A darkly fogged window rolled down and there was Shiki, very polished in his white suit. The black interior of the car formed the perfect setting.

“Shiki-san! What are you doing here?”

“I came to pick you up and give you a ride back to Tokyo.”

Izaya hesitated. It was extremely gratifying that Shiki had bothered to go the trouble but he already had planning on returning with Shizuo by train.

“I still need to pack my things.”

“That’s been taken care of.”

Izaya was not entirely sure he liked that.

“I see.”

Shiki had taken quite a detour to meet Izaya in Osaka and even more telling he had gone of his way to make sure Izaya knew it was so. It would be very easy for Shiki to camouflage this trip under the pretext of business but there was a point to be made here. Not just for Izaya’s sake but for Shizuo’s as well.

Izaya was very much aware that Shiki had some reason for going to all this trouble and try as he might he could not help feeling flattered even if the more rational part of him suspected ulterior motives. Izaya nearly beamed as he turned to Shizuo.

“Looks like I’ll be going back to Tokyo ahead of time. See you soon, Shizuo.”
And just like that Izaya was gone, swept away by the black limousine that glided into invisibility leaving Shizuo to stare after it.

“Shiki-san, this truly is unexpected.”

Izaya launched into talk almost as soon as he closed the limousine door. He had jumped to the opportunity but now that he was in such close quarters with Shiki, Izaya was afflicted by a great awkwardness. Shiki did not seem inclined to conversation and the silence made Izaya doubly uncomfortable.

Shiki was taking stock of the situation at his own leisure. Having Izaya out of town had proved something of an ordeal. While it had not derailed Shiki’s routine it kept resurfacing on his thoughts and always drifted closer to consciousness whenever his mind was disengaged. That Izaya was sharing quarters with Shizuo did nothing to ease Shiki, not to mention it forced Shiki’s hand for clearly something had to be done.

The question was, of course, how to handle the situation. Which was what Shiki was currently contemplating. Making an issue out of things could very well backfire and only reinforce Shizuo’s influence. Shiki had to leave an impression on Izaya, strong enough to wipe out all else and it occurred to him he knew just the perfect way.

Very gently, Shiki fluffed Izaya’s hair.

“Did you enjoy Osaka?”

Izaya jumped at the touch.

“It was great, loved the food and the sights.”

Somehow, Izaya could not muster his usual bubbly enthusiasm. He felt slightly awed.
“Did you pick up some Kansaiben?”

“I did but I lost it already.”

Shiki’s hand slowly moved to the nape of Izaya’s neck, fingers barely brushing but causing a thrill to run down Izaya’s body.

“That’s a shame. I would have liked to hear it.”

“It’d be weird, talking like that in Tokyo.”

Shiki knew that subtlety was of the utmost importance. Rushing would not do and so he took his time in tracing a line along Izaya’s spine, pressing very slightly on key points.

“I’d like to hear it anyway.”

Izaya squirmed. For a split second he was not entirely sure he even knew what Shiki was talking about. He could not account for it but he was becoming increasingly aroused. A diffuse warmth kept spreading through his bloodstream, his breath grew ragged as his heartbeat picked up.

“Shiki-san,”

“Yes?”

There was something wickedly thrilling about this, Shiki had to admit. It veered on manipulation and relied heavily on Izaya being so stripped of defenses. Shiki had a controlling side to him and having Izaya not only at his mercy but so adorably clueless proved to be even more interesting than he had anticipated.

Izaya swallowed with some difficulty. He dared not look down at the erection that he feared was all too visible. All Izaya could do was lean forward in the hopes of hiding it. Dimly, he heard Shiki’s voice saying,
“Should I turn on the air conditioning?”

“Sure,”

If anything it only made things worse. As the outer temperature lowered Izaya felt his skin heating up and beginning to tingle. Judging by the burning sensation on his cheeks he must be blushing furiously. Stealing a glance at the darkened glass only confirmed his suspicions, his reflection showed him a very flustered young man.

Meanwhile Shiki was back to caressing the nape of Izaya’s neck then quietly running ghost fingers down Izaya’s spine. Out of reflex Izaya leaned against the touch. As Shiki expected, Izaya could not tell he was being expertly toyed with. Failing to associate Shiki’s ever so soft ministrations with this overwhelming sensory outbreak, Izaya blamed it on lack of sex and pent-up lust.

And Shiki was counting on this reaction. It was more than just taking advantage of Izaya’s helpless state. Presently, Shiki was not against making Izaya experience some discomfort. Everything about this trip to Osaka rubbed Shiki the wrong way and that a certain measure of punishment should fall on Izaya seemed perfectly acceptable to Shiki. So it was with bemused satisfaction that Shiki noticed Izaya’s hands clenching into fists, clamped lips in an attempt to suppress a strangled moan.

“Izaya?”

Izaya forced himself to focus. It occurred to him that all the puberty he could not remember was hurled at him, compressed into these instants, leaving him no time to adjust.

“Yes…?”

Shiki reconsidered his options anew. He could easy get Izaya to masturbate and it was bound to be fun to watch but Shiki would rather remain the one fully in control. Izaya’s eyes were bent on avoiding Shiki’s. Shiki fixed this by tilted Izaya’s chin, ever so slightly.

“Do you have something to tell me?”

Words failed Izaya and there was a raspy tone to his voice as he struggled to answer.
“I don’t know what’s gotten into me,”

That was as far as he could go. Even to himself he sounded miserable and Shiki took pity on him.

“It’s alright, Izaya.”

Shiki used Izaya’s name very deliberately. He cast a chaste kiss on Izaya’s forehead, tasting something akin to fever. Shiki let Izaya sweat a bit before slowly running a finger down his chest, stopping to flicker the belt buckle before undoing it and unzipping him.

Izaya sighed, half in relief and half in expectation. Shiki lowered Izaya’s underwear, bemused at telltale wet spot on the fabric. Once released, Izaya’s erect penis proved to be oozing at the tip so that it faintly glimmered. Izaya bucked up immediately as soon as he felt as much as a hint of Shiki’s skilled hand on his throbbing erection.

“Sorry,”

Shiki had to smile at such naivety. It gratified his sense of possession but also endeared him toward Izaya in a way Shiki would rather not contemplate.

“Look at me.”

Direct eye contact nearly toppled Izaya over. Shiki regarded him coolly enough, it only added fire to the fuel. Given the balance of power between them, or lack thereof, Izaya was predisposed to be greatly affected by a somewhat aloof attitude on Shiki’s part. It served as a reassurance, mixed signs would only mislead Izaya and lead to a world of pain by creating the illusion that he could possibly cross the line— the same line that unbeknownst to Izaya, Shiki was dangerously close to crossing himself.

Shiki would have liked to drag this on a bit longer but he knew Izaya could not take much more. Within a few pumping motions along the shaft and a swirling thumb along the engorged tip and Izaya was on his way to an explosive climax. Shiki produced a silken handkerchief, pumping Izaya’s spurting seed into it. Whatever tenuous self-control Izaya still had was abruptly shattered by a surge of pleasure short-circuiting any residue of composure. He came in a series of spasms that had nothing of Izaya’s usual graceful movement, light searing his eyes, nerves sizzling aglow.
Izaya flopped back on the seat, all tension easing into a sweet descent into afterglow. Shiki cast a glance at the soaked handkerchief before putting it away. From the thickness and quantity of the semen he could tell that Izaya had not been playing around. It only confirmed what Shiki already knew but there was denying it gratified him.

Still too busy catching his breath to even fumble for speech, Izaya failed to notice Shiki’s intent scrutiny. Perhaps for the first time Shiki was seeing Izaya not as the very useful information broker or the maverick genius of disaster but as his own Izaya, a creature whose claims on Shiki’s heart asserted themselves by some subterranean power.

“So, was that good for you?”

Shiki’s voice and the metallic click of a lighter brought Izaya back to reality. Izaya smiled lazily. Orgasm had dissolved all prior anguish into a languor of contented bliss.

“Almost too good.”

Shiki took a deep drag from a fragrant cigarette, letting the smoke coil around between them. He turned off the air conditioning and rolled down one of the windows.

“Is there such a thing as too good?”

Izaya was on the verge of saying something sappy and ruining everything. He slid back into his clothes and leaned against Shiki’s shoulder, suddenly very tired. Izaya made an effort to reciprocate Shiki’s ministrations but he was too spent to get very far. Nor was Shiki interested in any further sexual involvement at the moment. Gently, Shiki soothed Izaya into resting on the seat, Izaya’s head placed on Shiki’s knee in lieu of a pillow.

“Too sleepy…”

It suited Shiki just fine. He let Izaya drift away to dreamless comfort. Shiki held his elegant cigarette, almost forgotten, in one hand and patted Izaya’s hair with the other. Above everything he thought.

Reeling in Izaya into a greater sense of dependency through sex had been a very deliberate tactic on
Shiki’s part. It worked to Shiki’s advantage all around by providing support to an amnesic young man while at the same time making sure Izaya remained within Shiki’s sphere of influence and did not become the threat he could potentially be. Shiki had counted on all this and acted on this plan with the same understated self-assurance he had in his seduction skills. But it was now all too obvious that Shiki had not taken into consideration is own reaction to Izaya’s changed status. Shiki had caught glimpses of this before but never before did it present itself with such undeniable strength.

Shiki was not willing or perhaps even able of bringing to fruition the new depth of his feelings for Izaya. The line could only be crossed surreptitiously, just like Izaya had worked his way into Shiki’s emotional landscape. And it was up to Shiki to find a way of keeping things that way. A challenge easier to construct than to carry out.

For once proving that ignorance was bliss Izaya slumbered on, happily oblivious.

On the other side of the fogged glass partition, Shiki’s man had his attention as much on the traffic as on what he imagined was going on the back seat. The partition hid everything including sound but he could tell that things were right between his boss and Izaya. As one of the many yakuza Izaya had befriended he had been considerably worried about this Osaka outing. For the simple foot soldier Izaya’s success relied exclusively on his being on good terms with Shiki and all were more than a bit fearful of what could happen if things took a turn for the worse.

Izaya would have been greatly surprised if he knew to what extent this army of usually tough men cared about him. Izaya’s visit to their incarcerated comrade had spread like wildfire and increased his popularity tenfold. Against all odds, Izaya’s human interaction skills gained him a foothold in the lower ranks of the yakuza. By doing what Izaya had always claimed to do but had never quite achieved, namely loving the human element, he achieved a power that had never even considered before.

Thus Orihara Izaya reinvented himself without always even realizing it.
Chapter 22

“Celty-san! Grab that cat!”

Celty had just alighted from her bike in time to hear Izaya screaming at her right as a bundle of yellow fur dashed past her. Out of reflex more than anything else she extended her scythe and safely captured what proved to be a feisty feline before it reached the busy and deadly road.

Izaya had been running in her direction, somehow avoiding the thronging crowd and reached her now.

“Thanks! Naughty cat!”

If Celty could have blinked she would have had. Izaya stood before her, all smiles, adorned in a uniform that included cat ears and cat tail.

[What are you wearing?!]

“Oh, this? Part-time job uniform, cat café. That’s where this little fellow came from, you have to be on the lookout for the crazier cats as they’ll stop on nothing to escape.”

[Cat café…?] 

It kept getting stranger and stranger.

“At Tokyu Hands. It’s a long story. I should be getting back, can I have Ginger back?”

Celty handed him the cat and immediately Izaya lifted him up.

“Now Ginger, you must thank the lady here for saving from becoming road kill. Let us not be ungrateful.”
Izaya made Ginger wave a yellow paw.

[Can I walk you back?]

“Sure! Want to check out the cats? We have some adorable ones.”

Celty had no interest in the cats but she was very curious about Izaya. Being one of his greatest critics she had been so puzzled by Izaya’s radical changes that it made her wonder whether she knew how to judge human beings at all. She was entertaining such thoughts as she wheeled her bike next to Izaya who hummed faintly while cradling the cat.

“So how did the sushi thing go?”

[Oh, great. It surprised me.]

As much as Celty had appreciated the gesture she did not expect that Izaya’s sushi proposal would actually work. It turned out Izaya was right. The workshop was easy and in no time Celty was making fairly acceptable fresh fish bits over which Shinra raved at length.

Izaya beamed.

“I told you! Go me.”

[Can I make a question?]

“Sure, shoot away.”

[How come you’re not afraid of me?]

“Hmm…Celty-san, can you create a nuclear bomb?”

“Izaya held the cat to his chest and smiled beautifully.

“When dealing with you, one is doing just that: dealing with you. But humans are a community, a worldwide one, with destructive knowledge being disseminated and produced at increasingly greater speeds. I too am part of that network. The question isn’t why I am not afraid of you as much as it is how are you not afraid of us. Neh?”

The smile grew even wider. It chilled Celty. She commended Izaya to the better nature she knew he did possess and hoped against hope that his evil genius, that tendency for chaos, would not win him over. Otherwise the world might very well be doomed.

* 

Izaya spun slowly on his swivel chair and mused. A full week had passed since his return from Osaka, enough time for Izaya to analyze everything as well as he could. Looking back, he was less than happy with his behavior with Shiki. Even if Izaya had been aware that Shiki had cleverly manipulated him he would still be a bit deflated, as it was Izaya felt almost angry at himself.

Part of it was connected to Izaya’s awareness of his lack of self-control when push came to shove but the fact that Shiki seemed to be avoiding him added a lot to his uneasiness. He had a nagging and unshakable suspicion that the whole thing had caused Shiki to look down on him as an immature hormone driven brat.
In a rare failure of assessment of human motivations, Izaya believed that Shiki’s had lost interest in him for good precisely when Shiki’s feelings were closer to aligning with him than ever before. It was a twist of irony to which Izaya was blind.

As a result of all this soul searching Shizuo nearly disappeared from Izaya’s mental landscape.

Izaya let the chair’s circular momentum wear itself out. He had just finished going through the draft version of the yakuza documentary and having approved of it, was about to contact the crew when the doorbell rang. To his surprise, there was a package for him that proved to be a futon, of all things.

A note addressed to Shizuo told Izaya that the package had been delivered to the wrong place and he a call to Kasuka confirmed it.

“I see, you meant to give the futon to your brother and send me some promotional stuff for my sisters. Someone got the addresses wrong, more likely than not. I’ll drop by Shizuo’s and check it out.”

Which was precisely what Kasuka had been counting on, the apparent mistake being a very deliberate on his part.

Izaya rang Shizuo’s doorbell and in no time the door opened.

“Were you waiting for someone or something…?”

“Kinda.”

“Well, you’ll have to settle for me, sorry to disappoint. Here, Kasuka-san’s gift.”

Izaya gingerly kicked off his shoes and handed him the fluffy bundle.

“Futon, huh.”
“And it’s right about time you got a new one, yours is ancient. This is quality stuff as is to be expected from Kasuka-san.”

“Yeah. Got some stuff I think it’s for you.”

“Kasuka-san’s promotional stuff, I gather. Great, the evil twins will rejoice.”

Shizuo unrolled the futon and was in the process of musing over it. And noticing it was quite bigger than his old one apart from being softer and overall so much better.

“Real fluffy.”

“You are not going to convert this one into the guest futon and keep on using your old wreck of a futon, right?”

Shizuo cracked a smile.

“It’s like you can read minds.”

Izaya made a stand, complete with firmly planting his feet and folding his arms in a most peremptory way.

“Heiwajima Shizuo, that will never do. Your brother clearly means you to sleep on this delicious futon every night and it flies in the face of reason to keep that bumpy thing that I bet is moldy by now.”

“A futon is kinda like shoes, older is better cuz you get used to the shape and stuff.”

“So you never buy new shoes? Just what kind of logic is that? And no, older is not better. Not to mention the fabric itself, you can see this is a topnotch futon.”
“Have you tried it yourself?”

“What, this futon?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, no but it is plain to see.”

“Wanna try?”

“Fine, if you insist. I’ll prove its amazingness myself.”

And with this Izaya flung himself on the futon and rolled around some as he was wont to do.

“Looks comfy.”

“Like bouncing on a cloud! Think of it as a candy cotton cloud, since you’re a sugar addict.”

“Can’t eat a futon.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“You’re the one saying it’s delicious.”

“It’s a form of speech. Now you try it.”

Izaya bounced off the futon and Shizuo sat on it.

“My old one is better,”
“It isn’t. Think of your health, Namie-san keeps telling me that assuring a good night’s worth is paramount to remaining of sound mind and body. You might not even realize the strain that old mattress is putting on your body but slowly and surely it’s causing damage.”

“Yeah. I guess there’s that.”

“Besides, this one is big enough for two people. When Kasuka-san drops by you can always have him share the same futon. Everyone wins.”

“Or next time you stay over.”

“I guess.”

Izaya did not sound too convinced.

“We’re having this aikido competition, wanna come and see?”

Izaya blinked rapidly.

“You mean you’ll be going all kung-fu on some poor souls?”

“Not kung-fu, it’s aikido.”

“But the part about slaughtering people remains?”

“Nah. Aikido is not very big on competition as it is, it’s more like a meeting than anything else, you get to play roles and stuff.”

“Eh…it’s starting to sound like kinky roleplay.”
“Only sounds that way to you.”

“Now that’s just rude. Count me in, it might be fun. Who else is going?”

“Just you.”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow.

“How come? Might as well invite everyone, the more the merrier.”

“It’s you I’m inviting.”

“Oh well, suit yourself. Just text me the location and date later.”

“You going already?”

Izaya was indeed already on his way but he suddenly halted, a thought having popped into his mind.

“Shizuo, I don’t suppose you’re inviting me alone so that you can go all crazy during this meeting? By, say, burying me under a pile of guys.”

“I won’t.”

“Hmm…I must say, I have some apprehension.”

Shizuo made sure to look him straight in the eye.

“I can only give you my word.”
Izaya’s hands went into his jacket pockets and he proceeded to rock back and forth on the balls of his feet. Shizuo’s unwonted sincerity bothered Izaya without his quite knowing why. Izaya broke into a wide smile.

“Why so serious, Shizuo! Text me the info, don’t forget. I’ll be there if I can.”

“Okay.”

Izaya was making his way very slowly across the aisle, his attention so focused on the rows of books that he was caught aback when he caught his name.

“Orihara-san…?”

“Oh hi there, Ryuugamine-kun. It’s been a while. How have you been?”

Mikado hesitated then hesitated some more. Rumor of Izaya and Shizuo’s newfangled friendship had reached him right away and Mikado half expected to see the giant looming by. At any rate, Mikado had kept an eye on Izaya’s recent doings and could not help but grow increasingly confused. Sooner or later Mikado knew he was bound to run into Izaya but he assumed that Izaya would seek him out long before that. Mikado had been proven wrong.

And then one fine day he received some manju from Osaka, courtesy of Orihara Izaya. Mikado spent some time wondering if there was some hidden message, this after inspecting the package very carefully for drugs or who knew what else. To his surprise it was a mere souvenir.

“I’m fine, thank you. And thanks for the souvenir.”

“Was it tasty? Everyone loves manju!”

Mikado nodded, still a bit in a daze. He had not actually eaten it.

“Very much so. Congratulations on winning the Liar Game award.”
“I haven’t won yet but thanks.”

Mikado tried to look around just to make sure Shizuo was not close by but could not quite pull it off without being too obvious.

“Everyone’s really excited about it.”

Izaya laughed.

“Not half as excited as I am, believe me!”

Mikado glanced at the package Izaya held.

“‘Kanji for Beginners’…?”

“I’m giving my American neighbor a few Japanese language notions. Foreigners swear by these flashcards so I figured I’d give them a go.”

“I see.”

Mikado could not quite imagine Izaya teaching anything to anyone. And to think his first impression of Izaya was that of a cram school instructor of the exceedingly pretty kind.

“It’s a lot of fun, I’ll have him reciting the Tale of Heike in no time.”

“That may be a bit too much.”

“Are you buying material for school?”
Izaya headed for the counter, Mikado followed and nearly bumped into him as Izaya stopped abruptly.

“‘Teach Yourself Korean’, I’m sold! And this one too.”

Izaya grabbed two books, the Korean language one and one on braille.

“You’re learning Korean?”

“I am now! Why not? Might as add another language to my portfolio. And who wouldn’t like to be able to read with their eyes closed.”

Izaya made it sound most flippant but his motives ran much deeper. While up to this point he had never considered tackling a new language or learn braille, he was driven by a need to expand his horizons beyond what his former self had known. Orihara Izaya with his memories intact could not speak Korean, if Orihara Izaya as he was now acquired such a skill he would be ahead. It gave him a sense of self-improvement and of conquest. In a way, Izaya saw it as a most enjoyable and profitable way of fighting against the dreadful hallucination that had so tormented him. Down deep Izaya suspected he was not entirely done with such bits of lunacy and he wanted to build up some defenses as much as possible.

“That’s very much like you, Orihara-san.”

Izaya flipped through the book and slid a glance Mikado’s way.

“Now, whatever do you mean by that?”

“As in, wanting to know things.”

“That much is true.”
Mikado could not even begin to guess just right he was. He almost asked about Shizuo but settled for a less explosive topic instead.

“Did you enjoy Osaka?”

“It was great, loads of delicious octopus all around. But I missed out a chance of visiting Kyoto.”

Mikado was very curious as to what Izaya had in mind in Kyoto.

“Is Osaka very expensive? Compared to Tokyo, I mean.”

Right away Mikado kicked himself inward. It was a dumb question but Mikado was still reeling from the exceedingly pricy Tokyo lifestyle and very sensitive to such matters. Izaya merely shrugged.

“I didn’t notice.”

More than flaunting his wealth, this disinterest reinforced what Mikado already knew: Izaya was a very rich man. Izaya paid for his books and sauntered to the pavement with Mikado on his heels. Mikado needed to detain Izaya here but nothing occurred to him.

“Orihara-san, will you doing anything if you win the Liar Game contest? Like throw a party.”

“Hmm…I hadn’t thought of that.”

Izaya considered it.

“I’m sure it’d be a success.”

Mikado was very aware that he was going out on a limb here. He might as well invite himself to this party so great a liberty was he taking. That Izaya did not seem to mind did not mean anything either.

“It’s an idea but it’s too early to be thinking about it.”
Izaya could imagine it going spectacularly wrong too.

“Right, of course.”

Mikado had reached the end of the rope. He could think of nothing to prolong the conversation. Meanwhile Izaya was giving him some serious consideration. He had yet to tackle Mikado properly and perhaps it was time to fix that.

“Say, Ryuugamine-kun, have you had dinner already?”

“Not yet.”

“Want to go grab something to eat?”

Mikado could hardly believe his luck.

“Yes, of course.”

“How does ramen sound?”

“Great,”

*

Mikado had been thrilled at this opportunity but once he found himself sitting across Izaya on a very tiny table he found himself having second doubts. Having almost forgotten Izaya’s potential for danger, Mikado was realizing all over again that Izaya was not one to be underestimated.

So far Izaya had done nothing even remotely threatening but the mere fact that he was so obviously at ease while Mikado felt himself close to flailing was enough. Izaya ordered for the two of them and rubbed his hands happily as the massive bowls arrived.
“Did you know, Ryuugamine-kun, they say that sharing meals brings people together.”

“I’m sure it does, in a way.”

Izaya smiled through the broth scented steam.

“In the old days there were poor souls whose job was to sample the emperor’s food for poison. I wonder what they thought about the bonding power of eating together.”

Mikado could not help casting a worried glance at his ramen.

“Good thing that doesn’t happen anymore.”

And of course Mikado was now thinking about whether Izaya dealt with poison. Izaya split his chopsticks with a loud crack and stirred the flavorful broth.

“How has Tokyo been treating you?”

It was one of those questions Mikado could not even begin to answer and Izaya was not even particularly interested in hearing it.

“It’s such an amazing city with so much to see and do, I’m still learning my way around.”

“Tokyo is so omnipresent that it is easy to forget how fragile it can be. Just in the last century it was virtually wiped out, first in the great Kanto earthquake of 1923 and then with the bombings during World War II.”

Mikado blinked. Suddenly, the sheer destruction of Tokyo did not seem like bygone events from the past but an all too present possibility. So much so that he had to say something.

“Let’s hope something like that never happens again.”
Izaya tasted his food thoughtfully.

“It might best not to take the city for granted.”

“Do you think the city is in danger?”

“It could hardly be otherwise, considering we live in one of the most earthquake prone places in the whole world. And I gather you’ve seen enough of this city to know there are quite a few who would gladly burn it down for the thrill of it.”

Mikado grew silent and stared at his still untouched bowl. Izaya interrupted the silence.

“It’ll get soggy if you don’t dig in soon.”

Mikado’s appetite was gone but he made an effort to eat some. His chopsticks nearly snapped as he tightened his grip, knuckles growing white.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to this city.”

Izaya took pity. He leaned across the table and flickered Mikado on the bridge of the nose.

“Plenty of time to be gloomy later but first it’s tasty ramen time.”

It took Mikado by surprise and had the desired effect. Mikado snapped out of his worrisome considerations and tried the food.

“This is very tasty!”

Izaya giggled.
“Why so surprised? It figures that I’d pick a good restaurant. One of the great things about Ikebukuro is its bargain price scrumptiousness.”

“I don’t suppose you have to worry about that yourself.”

“True. But I’ve been branching more into street food as of late.”

Mikado had many things he wanted to know about Izaya’s most recent changes but his choice of food was not one of them. But it might serve as an opening.

“Seems like you’ve been trying many new things like food and other languages.”

Izaya caught the drift. It amused him greatly.

“I believe in always trying to improve myself and for that I must break boundaries.”

“Yes, that is important.”

It also resonated with Mikado on a very personal way.

“Do you know what I’d really like to do? See Tokyo from a helicopter.”

Mikado’s eyes widened with excitement at the prospect.

“That would be awesome!”

For the first time since meeting Mikado, Izaya fully engaged with him.

“Wouldn’t it? Just imagine it, the whole of Tokyo unfurled before you like a script.”
Mikado nodded enthusiastically. By the time the meal was over and he bid Izaya goodbye, Mikado was feeling the same confusion Kadota and Celty had already experienced. Mikado knew that he did not understand Izaya, in fact he seemed to understand him less than ever, but he felt disposed to understand him. It was not quite friendship but a sense of good will that made Mikado rather uncomfortable, almost as if he was betraying his better nature. That he had brushed the dark side of the city, perhaps its darkest core, Mikado well knew but the overall sense of effervescence remained just as strong.

Mikado shook his head to banish such thoughts and made his way home resolutely enough. Izaya watched him disappear into the urban bustle that he addressed.

“What a tangled web we weave.”

Izaya entered the arena with growing curiosity. He was way out of his comfort zone and that never failed to excite him. Izaya arrived way ahead of the time set by Shizuo precisely so that he could check out the venue at leisure. In insight it was a good thing that no one else had been invited, this way he could dedicate himself to capturing the environment without being hampered.

Izaya picked a seat on one of the back rows so that he could see everything. He was every bit as interested in the audience as in the martial artists themselves if not more. Already there were a few cheering squads assembled and banners hanging limply from the balconies running along the seating platforms.

He read through a leaflet that introduced the basics of Aikido and found himself approving. The emphasis on harmony was probably exactly what Shizuo needed and in the long run might prove very helpful indeed. There was not much on the competition proper, though, so Izaya was still a bit at a loss as to the rules. He had half a mind to ask as clearly he was surrounded by adepts but decided against it. Izaya was one to thrive on overcoming challenges even on smaller scale. Figuring out the rules for himself was sure to be rewarding.

As soon as the competition started Izaya realized that it was a pointless worry. The crowd’s reaction told him all he needed to know and even with several fights taking place simultaneously he could still get the drift.

For all he had heard Izaya still expected the whole thing to be rather violent but it turned out to be almost like a mixture of dance and mock battle more than anything else. Still, he found himself
At first Izaya had been afraid of missing Shizuo with so much going on but the moment he appeared Izaya spotted him right away. For one, Shizuo stood one by being the only blonde person in sight and second he stood out by being such an imposing presence. Izaya did not exactly know how but the uniform seemed to bring out some understated dignity to Shizuo and even the very yellow hair did not jar but added to the effect. Izaya took a moment to appreciate Shizuo’s calm entrance and then another to pity the opponent.

He cast a glance in the opponent’s direction and his heart skipped a few beats. Already on his feet to cheer for Shizuo, Izaya found himself frozen to the floor and unable to move. He blinked furiously enough but the fact remained, facing Shizuo was none other than Shiki.

Izaya’s surprise was absolute yet at the same time he realized almost immediately that he should have anticipated this. Suddenly things that had been had the edges of his awareness for quite a while shifted into focus and became all too obvious and impossible to overlook.

Izaya’s first emotional reaction once the first shock of dismay had dimmed enough to allow for anything else was anger. Anger at himself for his willful blindness and anger at the two men who had forced him into an impossible position. For try as he might Izaya could not believe that Shizuo and Shiki’s encounter was coincidental or that it did not in any way concern him. Above all, Izaya was angry at the thought of Shiki and Shizuo meeting behind his back for the sole purpose of discussing him.

It took all that Izaya had to sit down and not storm out. He stared intently at the ongoing combat but barely saw anything. Already Izaya was considering his options. He could hardly cause a scene and all things considered he hardly knew what part Shiki played in this. Izaya took a deep breath and unclenched his hands, only now realizing they had closed into fists. He decided to be smooth and show it was not that easy to get a rise out of Orihara Izaya.

With that said, he had to ask the people around him about the outcome of the combat, his attention being too scattered. Izaya took another deep breath and arranged a most cordial smile before waltzing over to Shiki and Shizuo who were leaving the arena.

Izaya’s smile widened as he waved and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“Better luck next time, Shizuo.”
“Heiwajima-san did very well for a beginner.”

Izaya turned to Shiki and bowed elaborately.

“You’re too kind to my friend, Shiki-san.”

Shizuo kept his silence throughout this exchange. No nuance was lost on him.

“Heiwajima-san will be a force to be reckoned with in aikido in the near future if he applies himself.”

In other words, Shiki could afford to compliment Shizuo. Izaya could tell that Shiki did not seem surprised to see him here but then again Shiki was not one to display surprise. Not to mention as soon as Shiki realized who his opponent was Izaya’s presence was bound to become something of a given.

“But I have to say, for all I’ve heard about aikido being non-violent I did not expect it to be so… graceful. It’s wonderful, we wouldn’t want any violence to come between us, now would we? Violence is such barbarous practice. Neh?”

There was something borderline insulting in applying the ‘neh’ approach to these two. Izaya was fully aware of this. Shizuo decided to finally intervene. He did so by ignoring Shiki altogether and looking Izaya straight in the eye.

“Yeah. Violence ain’t good.”

“Indeed.”

Shiki took the opportunity for studying Izaya and Shizuo. He had not expected to face this particular opponent but the moment Shiki saw Shizuo he got a general idea of what was going on. Shiki was not entirely sure how Shizuo had figured out that they would end up fighting each other, perhaps he had simply hoped for the lineup to go that way. What Shiki did know was that Shizuo had counted on this and that Izaya was meant to witness it. As to why, Shiki had no idea and was most definitely curious.
It also amused him that Shizuo had actually taken his advice to practice aikido. In doing so Shizuo had put in practice one of aikido’s most basic concepts of using the adversary’s strength against themselves. And Shiki meant it, Shizuo could very become an aikido powerhouse. There was still plenty of unnecessary movement but behind it there was the beginnings of discipline and moments of clear insight. And above all there was no blind aggression or outbreak of anger. That above all was very telling.

In a battle of pure strength Shiki knew he could not possibly stand a chance. Shizuo could only be defeated within the rules. Aikido levelled them by making Shizuo’s massive power almost moot and then elevated Shiki by giving him the tools to capitalize on a vast experience. On the other hand, Shizuo’s abiding by the established parameters meant he had reached a personal victory.

Shiki was very aware of this. Only Izaya seemed oblivious. Either that or playing oblivious, Shiki did not know which.

“Why don’t you give this aikido thing a go? It’s pretty cool.”

Izaya chuckled.

“I told you already, I’m not interested. I can already defend myself as it is.”

“It’s not about that. It’s about, harmony and stuff.”

“‘Harmony and stuff’, he says. Be a bit vaguer, please.”

Izaya’s breezy façade was cracking under a veneer of sarcasm that did not seem to at all bother Shizuo.

“‘Aikido’, written with the kanji for,”

“I know how it’s written.”

“Yeah, just saying it’s in the name.”
“Names can be deceptive. Just look at yours.”

“Yeah. But it’s something to have as a goal. Kinda like, ‘become worthy of your name’, that kind of thing.”

“Oh great, so now you’re a Zen master. What next, you’ll be asking me about the sound of one hand clapping?”

“Zen, huh…dunno about that. But you know what I mean.”

Izaya shrugged dismissively as if it did not at all matter what Shizuo meant or did not mean.

“What did your face look like before your parents were born?” Any thoughts on that, Izaya?”

Izaya was almost caught aback at Shiki’s voice. He made a conscious effort to appear most nonchalant.

“As expected Shiki-san knows all about Zen koans.”

“Only in their most orthodox forms. I am sure your views are more original and interesting.”

“You flatter me, Shiki-san.”

“I speak the truth.”

Izaya did another elaborate bow. It occurred to Shiki not for the first time that only Izaya could turn a bow into a mockery with such grace.

“For the sake of argument let us ignore all context and consider the koan alone. One had no face
before one’s parents were born as one did not exist. And that is the crux of it, non-existence. We find
it easier to contemplate how it was not to exist before we came to be as opposed to thinking about
how we shall cease to exist once we are no more. If you rephrase the koan as ‘what will your face
look like after you are no more’ you get the same answer, you will have no face as you will not exist,
but a new element is added: fear.

“It is often said that what follows life is just as what preceded it and we need not be afraid of dying
any more than we fear all those eons that preceded our existence. Which is very pretty as far as
consolations go but misses human nature entirely. Conscience cannot even contemplate its demise
without doing some violence to itself. It is not so much not being as ceasing to be that terrifies us so.”

Izaya paused to take stock of his thoughts. He had been thinking out loud and somewhere along the
line the whole Shizuo/Shiki debacle receded in importance until it no longer seemed at all
overwhelming or even all that relevant. Izaya felt a bit detached from his more immediate emotions
as if had transcended them into a higher level of awareness.

“I rest my case, I knew you were bound to have something most original to say.”

Izaya nodded absent mindedly.

“‘Why should I fear death? If I am, then death is not. If Death is, then I am not. Why should I fear
that which can only exist when I do not?’, Epicurus. But that is the whole problem, to not exist. Is it
not?”

Both Shiki and Shizuo followed Izaya’s exposition very closely. Shiki found it oddly compelling, a
mix of very personal anguish and high intellect. Shizuo was reminded of Izaya’s brush with death
and the realization that there was no afterlife. He patted Izaya’s head, almost fluffing the hair.

“Your brain’s gonna explode one of these days. You think too much.”

Izaya shrugged like one struggling to wake up from a reverie.

Shiki had the clear impression that Shizuo had just taken the lead by making the first move, a
situation that sat very ill with him. It was more than just this one occasion. Shiki could not help
feeling that he did not quite know how to soothe Izaya’s subtler preoccupations. It was as if Shizuo’s
straightforward, no frills style was precisely the balance needed to compensate Izaya’s extremely
complex ways.
Shiki decided to take a gamble.

“How about love?”

Izaya blinked, completely caught off guard.

“What about it?”

“Where does love stand in regards to what you were saying?”

Izaya blinked anew. Then giggled.

“I have no idea.”

“Perhaps you can find out.”

Izaya mused over this. It could very well be that he was missing some vital point but he could not quite figure out where Shiki was going with this. And before he could scramble for an answer Shiki and Shizuo were called back to the arena.

Izaya returned to his seat but his mind was miles away. More than anything he was puzzled by his own reaction. The sudden loss of memory had forced him into some very deep soul searching so much so that analyzing his own motives, comparing his present self with what he knew of his former existence and dissecting choices, both potential and actual, had become an obsession. The need to carve an identity made this inward scrutiny all the more pressing.

Without his at all wanting, Izaya had to work through layers of egotism in order to even perceive any relationship. He had been aware of this for quite a while but it gained a sharper relevance now. When he should perhaps be thinking about today’s events as they pertained to Shiki and Shizuo, Izaya found himself fully engrossed in wondering why he had gone off on a tangent about life and death.
There were pitfalls to piecing a notion of self out of others’ impressions, dismissing the past altogether or embracing it wholesale were equally dangerous. This Izaya knew very well. His adopted method of finding some continuity but allowing himself the possibility of change suited him much better and was something of a compromise and as such comforting but it posed all sorts of challenges.

It demanded great flexibility of action and an ever active self-appraisal. Even when Izaya acted impulsively he afterwards reflected at length in an effort to reach a sense of balance.

This balance was a fragile construction built on sheer strength of will, an achievement on which Izaya’s peace of mind rested. Not always consciously, Izaya was constantly engaged in sustaining it. Izaya saw it as his one means of fighting against his past self for he could not shake the feelings that the odd hallucination was simply biding its time.

And Izaya had vowed to be prepared when the time came.
Chapter 23

The sun drifted greenly through tree leaves as Izaya placed a pillow on the bench and helped Saki sit down. She adjusted the hat, the pink ribbon catching a glint of light.

“Nice and comfy?”

“Very. Do be careful, Orihara-san.”

Izaya smiled brightly.

“It should be alright. They say you never forget how to ride a bike, I already put that logic to the test with swimming and it turns out the truism was true in that case.”

Izaya had taken Saki to Ueno park where they were not likely to run into any acquaintance. It was also a wonderful excuse for taking Saki on a much deserved outing. He regarded the bicycle clinically.

“Still, there is no telling until you actually try it.”

“Aye, experience is the mother of all knowledge. Here goes nothing, wish me luck.”

The moment his feet made contact with the pedals Izaya knew that he could indeed still ride. His body went through the motions as if driven by some physical memory.

“Way to go, Orihara-san.”

“Look, no hands! Heh, this is fun!”

Izaya pedaled in a series of loose loops, dashing between soft shadow into warm spots of sun.
“Don’t let go of the handle,”

The note of distress in Saki’s voice had him alight and sit next to her.

“I just had a great idea! Let’s get one of those double seat bicycles and explore the city together once you’re back on your feet. How fun will it be!”

It was Izaya’s way of projecting a normal future for Saki, by making it seem matter of fact. By taking it for granted he made it more real.

“I would like that.”

“And now, it is zoo time! Behold, I got us tickets.”

Izaya produced the tickets and smiled brightly behind them.

“For real?”

“Of course! Let us go, fluffy critters await!”

Izaya helped her to the wheelchair, ever so gently.

“I didn’t know you were into animals, Orihara-san. Aren’t humans your one true love?”

Izaya giggled and wheeled her toward the zoo.

“Technically speaking, human beings are animals as well. To be more specific we are classified as **Homo Sapiens**: kingdom **Animalia**, phylum **Chordate**, class **Mammalia**, order Primates, family **Hominidae**, tribe **Homini**, genus **Homo**, species **Homo Sapiens**.”

“Let us hope they won’t put people into zoos, then.”
“There was a poor pygmy by the name of Ota Benga who was kept in a zoo in the States in the early 20th century.”

Saki turned around on her chair, eyes wide with dismay.

“Really? A person living in a cage?”

“In the monkey house, to be more precise. It goes to show that humans are their worst when they deny their fellow humans’ humanity. It seems to be perquisite to racism and genocide and is probably at the root of all hate crime if one digs deep enough. The holocaust was only possible because certain types of humans were deemed less than human.”

They had made their way into the zoo compound and Izaya made his way through the throng until he stopped next to the flamingos. He had no particular reason to pick this place but had simply wheeled the chair randomly enough. As it so often happened his thoughts occupied him more than his surroundings.

“Orihara-san, I want to see the pandas.”

Izaya was brought back to reality. For Saki to be expressing a preference was a step in the right direction. Izaya was personally committed to encouraging Saki to develop a sharper sense of self, of making it possible for her to be her own person as opposed to being content staying in Izaya’s shadow.

“Pandas it is! I wonder if I’ve been here before.”

Izaya looked around. People milled a bit all over, rowdy families, quiet couples, when Izaya narrowed his eyes they became gradients of light blurred in a mixture of chatter and motion.

“Does anything look familiar?”

“Nothing ever looks familiar.”
He felt a tide of coldness sweeping through this body. It faded almost immediately but left a tingling sensation akin to detachment.

“Orihara-san?”

“Right, pandas.”

He gripped the wheelchair’s handles for leverage and focused on the smooth motion along the concrete, on everything that impinged the very veritable outside world into his awareness. Izaya felt as if the many sights and sounds bounced right off him, tired eyes of animals behind bars and the shrill cry of children mixed with the equally shrill calls of exotic birds. He made a deliberate effort to push off thought.

By the time they reached the panda compound on the other side of the zoo Izaya had regained his bearings.

“Oh look, Orihara-san! There’s a baby!”

Izaya smiled warmly as much at Saki’s enthusiasm as at the stumbling baby panda that now tumbled down a ramp.

“They may seem very gentle and docile but those claws can be deadly!”

“But they’re so cute.”

“That is all part of the panda agenda for taking over the world and forcing humanity into becoming their slaves. Do not be deceived, Saki-chan!”

Saki laughed.

“Is there any animal you’d like to see?”
“Hmm…let me think…oh, I know! Aardvark!”

Saki was puzzled.

“Aar…?”

“Aardvark! Let’s see where they’re at, you’ll love them.”

Izaya checked a nearby map and in no time Saki was staring at a strange creature about the size of a pig covered in brownish fur. Its very long snout hovered over the ground as it sniffed about, two perky ears shot up from a delicate head pushed forward, the tail dragging behind. Strong claws added a bizarre note to this already odd animal, by making it look like an eccentric cross between a demented plush toy and a toy tank.

“I’d never heard about this animal, what was it called again?”

“Aardvark. We’re in luck, they are nocturnal and usually don’t venture out when it’s this bright. They are known as ‘earth pigs’.”

“I’m not sure I’d call them cute but they sure are…different.”

“They’re plenty cute! Just a different kind of cute. Aardvarks can burrow like it’s no one’s business, they can dig a 9 meter long tunnel in five minutes.”

Saki did not quite see the cuteness but it was just like Izaya to find great interest in the unusual. It crossed her mind that part if not all of Izaya’s interest in her had originated in this curiosity over deviation in human beings. Most would find it a depressing prospect but to Saki it was almost endearing. All that mattered was that Izaya saw her as useful and that her use had greatly increased with Izaya’s amnesia. So much so that if she could choose she would prefer Izaya to remain just as he was.

“Aardvarks, digging like a boss’?”

“That’s right!”
Izaya’s glee was interrupted by his phone.

“You should take the call, Orihara-san.”

“But that’d interrupt our outing…”

“It’s alright.”

Izaya sighed.

“Sorry. Hello, yes that’s me. Really? As in, for real? Thank you so much!”

Izaya nearly bounced.

“Did something good happen?”

“They just picked my story for the Liar Game competition! I can’t believe it!”

“Congratulations! I am so happy for you.”

And Saki meant it, too. There was something highly infectious to Izaya’s happiness and it washed all over her like a comforting atmosphere that was precious to her. How easy it was to simply live vicariously through him, in a bout of sudden awareness Saki realized how intensely alive Izaya was. There was so much going on with him that she simply got lost in it.

“Thanks!”

Izaya smiled against the strong sun and as far as Saki knew he eclipsed it by his sheer inner radiance.
Izaya was looking at the city nightscape through one of the massive windows in his apartment. After a while it ceased to look a solid reality and blurred into an abstract pattern of light and darkness. Izaya found it absolutely beautiful and soothing.

Mairu’s ringtone interrupted his peace.

“Hello sister of mine! That’s right, they picked yours truly! School festival…? Next week, you say… I’m not sure- okay, I’ll think about it. Right. Bye.”

He was genuinely touched. As far as he knew this was the first time he had been invited to attend his sisters’ school functions but he still did not intend to go. Visiting his former high school was too great a risk. More than any rational consideration he had a very strong feeling that it would spell disaster. He could always make it up to them by taking them to the Liar Game award ceremony.

A mood of comfortable despondency slowly stole over him. Sushi jumped on his lap and Izaya petted soft fur as he slowly spun on his swivel chair. Namie was due to arrive in precisely three minutes. Izaya keep an eye on his watch and sure enough Namie walked in just on time.

“Punctual as ever, Namie-san.”

Namie walked over to him.

“Are you going to the school festival at Raira?”

“I’m not, no. It’s too dangerous.”

“That never stopped you from doing anything. This is a golden opportunity, you might remember something. Unless you don’t want to?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s more that I am not sure I should…”

“It would mean a lot to your sisters.”
“I’m sure they’ll have fun without me.”

“Or so you’d like to think. There is much more to siblings than you know.”

Izaya smiled weakly.

“I’m sure. But there’s nothing I can do about,”

“You’re wrong about that. You can spend time with them.”

“True but it doesn’t have to be the school festival.”

“Except a school festival is an important event in a teenager’s life. You may regret it.”

Namie’s persistence paid off.

Izaya stood on the overpass that overlooked the whole campus. A small crowd milled about, students in odd costumes promoting events, normal students and guests, all meandering between food stalls, gathering in groups then going their separate ways in a fluid motion. Bigger than life banners announcing the festival covered the façade of the building, huge characters drawn in bright colors.

Izaya watched the scenery very closely. It remained wholly unfamiliar. He had picked this initial approach from a vantage least he was visited by some very unwanted flashbacks but it seemed he need not worry. Three years crucial to shaping his personality had unfolded within these premises and yet Izaya could not invoke a vague sense of déjà vu. It was equal doses of depressing and reassuring.

Even from a distance he could feel the bustle but as soon as he joined the festivities Izaya was swept into the excitement of the moment. The air nearly vibrated with the shouts of vendors, the chatter of relaxed conversation and the occasional announcement from the loudspeakers. Izaya smelled
takoyaki mingled with sweet scents from a nearby pancake stand.

It was thrilling precisely because it was so utterly unalike anything he had ever experienced. Or nothing he remembered experiencing, presently it amounted to the same. Izaya nearly waltzed his way to the school building and by the time he got there he was already munching on a stick of dango.

No recollections came flooding in even as he entered the building but he was familiar with the blueprint, having studying it in detail the night prior. He was very aware that he could not allow himself to commit a blunder here. Izaya made his way to his sisters’ classroom with the skipping step he often went for when happy.

Izaya had not told his sisters that he was coming to the festival as he meant to surprise them but he ended up being the one surprised once he found them.

“Izaya-nii! You came after all!”

“Kururi…what exactly are you wearing…? And why…?”

It was the kind of outfit that Izaya identified as the biker gang delinquent, complete with drop pants, a long coat, and the chest wrapped up in what looked like bandages.

“We’re having a crossdressing café. Izaya-nii, you look so handsome in white and pink.”

Izaya had opted for a radical change of look and donned white pants, matching fur fringe coat and a pink shirt underneath. Not all guys could pull it off but Izaya was a hipster through and through.

“Eh? So you decided to come after all! You don’t look too bad, baka-nii.”

Izaya tried very hard not to laugh but he failed. Mairu meant to make a grand entrance but in her case the biker look was just too funny.

“Heh, I don’t think you even need the bandages in your case…”
Before Mairu could protest a new voice spoke up from behind her, the owner of which seeming even
taller by contrast.

“Don’t be mean to Mairu.”

Izaya blinked. Then blinked again.

“Shizuo! What are you doing here?!”

“Got invited.”

Izaya was suddenly annoyed. That his sisters had invited someone else dampened his spirits. Izaya
knew he was overreacting but he could not help the stab in the heart as if his feelings had been
betrayed. Just when he made an effort to connect to his siblings as such they decided to bring Shizuo
into it.

“I see.”

“Orihara-san, Heiwajima-san. How wonderfully to see you here.”

Aoba floated into view wearing a pretty blue dress.

“Let me guess, cross-dressing café?”

“Indeed. It doesn’t suit me but one does what one must. Neh?”

As ever Aoba’s smile was brilliant and full of menace. Izaya wanted to reply in kind but Mairu had
already latched on to Aoba’s arm.

“Break time! See you later.”
“Do hang around, Orihara-san. I am so looking forward to talking to you. Especially here where you are ever so famous.”

“Bye bee. Don’t let me keep you.”

It was positively painful for Izaya to stand there and wave them goodbye. Shizuo noticed the strain to the usually perfect smile.

“Izaya-nii, will you order something?”

“Right, sure. Thanks.”

He took a menu and found himself sitting at the same table as Shizuo.

“Strawberry crepe for me and Izaya. Strawberry milkshake for two.”

Izaya resurfaced from incoming gloom.

“Oy, don’t order for me! All that sugar will be the death of me.”

“It’s our special, Izaya-nii.”

Izaya took a moment to gather himself. As annoyed and even offended as he was with Mairu, there was no reason to lash out against Kururi. He was aware that he tended to view his siblings as something of a unit. Part of it was their being twins, it was too easy to bundle them together, but part of it resulted from Izaya’s lack of common history with them.

“Then strawberry overdose it is. It’s a bit of a shame you have to wear that outfit, you’d look lovely in a pretty dress.”

Kururi blinked.
“Gym clothes are better. Easier to wear.”

Izaya had a sudden bout of inspiration.

“Say, nii-chan looks nice in pink and white, right?”

“So pretty I want to take you home and pat your head for hours.”

Shizuo chuckled.

“Eh…right. Let us not do that. But how about I get you some matching clothes? Mairu doesn’t have to join. Just you and me.”

She hesitated.

“I’m not sure…”

“No pressure. Just think about it.”

Izaya gave her one of his sunny smiles. It captivated every girl around. Normally, Izaya transmitted something of a dangerous vibe even without trying. It was part of his appeal and might very well be ingrained in his very identity. The pink and white clothes coupled with his apparently innocent affection for a younger sister turned him into a safe and still highly attractive young man. From the bad boy girls would skip school to hang out with, to the sweet boy who would give girls a ride in the pouring rain with no ulterior motive.

But there was much more to Izaya’s present emotional involvement with his sisters. Shizuo caught it right away, perhaps because he was so tuned to siblings’ interaction. He kept his silence on the subject.

“Feels kinda weird, being back to school like this.”
“Bonus points for cross-dressing café. I have a disturbing idea that Mairu was behind that brilliant idea.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

Izaya succumbed to sullen silence until the food arrived. His dejection ran deep and he was too deflated to put up a front for Shizuo’s sake. Slowly but surely he felt pressure tightening on him. He bounced back into a perfect smile as soon as Kururi sailed into view, milkshakes and crepes barely balanced on a tray.

Izaya blinked as his crepe was placed in front of him.

“Er…I think you meant to pipe [兄] [older brother] but this looks more like [呪] [curse]…or is it on purpose…?”

“The piping bag burst, sorry.”

Izaya stabbed the crepe.

“Thanks, it’s personalized and all.”

Kururi nodded.

“Made it just for you. Got to go now.”

“Go get them.”

Izaya waved as she retreated and frowned as soon as she was gone.

“Try it, it’s real tasty.”
Shizuo was already wolfing down his crepe.

“Tell you what, how about you have mine as well.”

“No can do. Your sister made that one for you.”

“Come on now. What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. Just gobble down mine and I’ll smile my way into convincing her I absolutely loved it.”

“That’d be lying.”

“Oh gee, you think?”

Izaya topped his sarcasm by rolling his eyes dramatically.

“Making crepes isn’t all that easy and Kururi doesn’t have a lot of talent. So what you go there on the plate is a lot of hard work for your sake. Might as well eat it.”

Izaya rolled his eyes anew but stabbed the crepe into a oozing mess that he proceeded to sample most daintily.

“So sweet,”

“Down it with the milkshake.”

“That’ll make it worse!”

Izaya’s spluttering morphed into a smile of satisfaction as soon as Kururi dropped by.

“How is it, nii-chan?”
“Absolutely delicious.”

Kururi nodded, her happiness restrained but palpable. She had to saunter away all too soon.

“That was the right thing to say.”

“I thought lying was ever so wrong?”

“It depends. At times it’s alright.”

“And it is up you as the moral guardian to decide on those exceptions?”

Shizuo finished his milkshake.

“Nah. You know that already way better than me.”

Izaya tossed a bill on the table and got up.

“Whatever. I’m out of here.”

To Izaya’s annoyance Shizuo followed suit. A sense of irritation kept recurring. It had little to do with Shizuo, that much Izaya knew, but being unable of pinning it down he rerouted this latent frustration toward Shizuo. He had come here to make a point of sorts to himself and that already been accomplished. Or perhaps he simply chose to think that way as the need to get out school grounds was merging with the increasing pressure.

It took all he had not to run. Unfamiliar corridors rushed past him, a circuit he must have done so many times before but he was so utterly detached from any past experience that he might have been cast away on some uncharted planet.

“They’re doing a play based on The Little Prince.”
“That’s great, Shizuo. You can tell me how that went later, I’ve got things to do now.”

Izaya had memorized the blueprint so he knew precisely how to reach the exit do he took a detour through a less used flight of stairs. It was with a bout of relief that he reached a landing, through a window he could glimpse the world outside.

“‘You don’t remember, do you.’”

Izaya froze. Not just in the sense that he came to a sudden halt, every movement arrested into awkward stillness but in a more literal way. Cold swept his nerves and singed them raw.

“‘What are you talking about,’”

“‘What more can’t you remember?’”

Shizuo walked over so that he could look Izaya in the eye. Against all odds they were alone in the bustling building. And against all odds Izaya was rendered speechless. Shizuo pressed on,

“I knew you’ve been acting weird. Is it cuz you don’t remember things? What happened?”

“What are you talking about?”

Izaya tried a smile but could not bring himself to do it. A trembling crept into his voice.

“The Little Prince. A long time ago you gave me the book. You told me about the Fox and the Little Prince. ‘There are many ways of hurting someone but the one that is most effective is to make someone love you. Once you become attached you become susceptible to pain.’”

Izaya opened and closed his mouth. The cold shattered into so many tiny shards.

“So what,”
“You don’t remember.”

It was too final to be denied. A white hollowness bloomed inside his mind. Izaya stumbled blindly and would have plunged down the stairs if not for Shizuo scooping him into his arms.

Izaya’s body grew limp. He struggled to hold unto consciousness but it slipped away along with his dimming physical strength.

“Let go of me…”

Izaya meant it as a command but it was more of a plea drifting into silence. He barely heard his own words. Darkness closed in on him.

Shizuo waited until all signs of feeble resistance were gone before checking for vitals and picking him up. Shizuo pulled the fluffy hood over Izaya’s head, protecting his privacy in this so vulnerable moment.

“Oh? Is something wrong, Orihara-san. Can I help?”

Aoba’s thin smile was too full of teeth. Even if Shizuo had no reasons for being wary of him already, there was something dangerous and creepy in this apparently concerned attitude. A blue dress would lend a note of absurdity in most cases but Aoba carried it with a degree of disturbing self-confidence.

“Yeah you can help by getting out of our way, for starters.”

“Say, I hope it’s nothing serious. It’d be a shame if something were to happen to Orihara-san.”

Not quite gloating but getting close, Aoba could barely contain himself but he avoided actively antagonizing Shizuo. Aoba knew all too well that none of his intelligence would avail him were Shizuo to go berserk on him. But presently Shizuo was on the periphery of his attention that zeroed in on Izya. Aoba sensed that here could be a chance of a life time.
“Now’s the time you scram, kid.”

Shizuo had no need to actually issue threat. Or perhaps he feared that he would lose it completely if he put it in words. Aoba took the cue and made way for Shizuo who carried Izaya as if he did this every day. Aoba watched them pass and could not resist one final jab at Shizuo’s back.

“Are you sure you don’t want my help, Heiwajima-san?”

Shizuo did not even bother with a reply.

“Put me down,”

Izaya half-floated, half-jostled his way back to consciousness but it was a tenuous hold. The rocking motion of being carried forced him to squeeze his eyes shut as a bout of nausea attacked his senses. All he could tell was that the city was a melting vortex all around him, crude sundown splattered all over a skewed Tokyo.

“Hospital’s right ahead so be quiet now.”

“I’m fine,”

“You’re not.”

Izaya wanted to argue but he could not muster the strength. How he ended up fairly snug in a hospital bed was unclear to him but that Saki should materialize by his bedside was almost to be expected.

“Saki…”

“Good evening, Orihara-san. The doctor says it was just momentary faintness but they’re keeping you overnight for observation.”
“You really can tell when I’m at the hospital.”

“As I told you, as soon as your name appears in the system I am immediately informed.”

“Izaya around…?”

“Just outside the room.”

Izaya sighed deeply and curled in bed as if to slide under the covers and disappear entirely.

“Tell them to get him out to leave.”

“I don’t think that’s possible. Considering this is Heiwajima Shizuo we’re talking about.”

“Ah…don’t I know it.”

“You should rest now.”

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I.”

“None whatsoever. But you won’t be lonely. I convinced the nurses to let me stay over.”

There was just a hint of mischief to Saki’s smile.

“You really have the whole hospital wrapped around your finger. It’s impressive.”

As nothing seemed to be wrong with Izaya, Saki allowed herself to enjoy the chance of having him all to herself in this time of weakness. Physically exhausted and emotionally drained, Izaya drifted away to sleep almost immediately. Saki stayed put and watched. If only the night could stand still
forever.
Chapter 24

Izaya thought he was off the hook as he prepared to dash out of the hospital but luck was not on his side.

“No running for you.”

“The doctor has discharged me, I can go where I want.”

Izaya quickened his pace but Shizuo kept up with him easily.

“Bet the doctor told you to take it easy.”

Shizuo was of course right.

“I can’t exactly relax when you’re following me around like this, now can I?”

The strong midday light was something of an obstacle to a still unsteady Izaya. The doctor had ordered him to go home immediately but that did not seem likely to happen. Shizuo detained him by very lightly holding his arm.

Before Izaya could protest or even properly process what was happening Shizuo had hailed a cab and ushered him in. Shizuo gave his own address.

“Why are we going to you place?”

“You’ll see.”

With this silence descended upon them. Izaya knew that he needed to come up with a strategy but was drawing a blank. There was always the option of shutting out communication altogether and refusing to answer any compromising questions but that was tantamount to confirming Shizuo’s suspicions. He could deny everything but was unsure how well that would work. And there was of course the hopeless option of actually telling the truth.
During the tense taxi ride Izaya juggled his options, minus coming clean, and by the time they arrived he had yet to make up his mind. Shizuo’s apartment was all of a sudden alien territory where Izaya was at a disadvantage.

Izaya found himself standing in the middle of the all too small room, all too aware of how on edge he was. He expected nothing short of an interrogation and braced himself to face it. Instead Shizuo walked past him, reached into a bookshelf and produced a book that he handed to Izaya.

“Here.”

Izaya recognized it right away, he had a similar copy of the Little Prince at home. His hands shook slightly as he took it, a sense of mystification creeping into him. It took an effort of the will to open the book.

Izaya read an inscription in a very familiar handwriting, his voice keyed barely above a whisper.

“To Shizu-chan, from Izaya. Remember the fox. 10 years old’ What is this…?

There was a limit to how much Izaya could bluff. And he had just hit it.

“You gave it to me. When we were kids.”

A ringing noise surged assaulted Izaya’s ears. It passed but had unhinged him a bit further.

“It can’t be. We didn’t know each other back then. We met in high school,”

“You repeating what others told you?”

Only now did Izaya look up from his own beautiful calligraphy and look at Shizuo. What he saw there had Izaya take half a step back.
“That’s how it went- it’s what you said as well, how you met me in high school and how it all went to hell…”

Izaya trailed off. A numbing coldness was slowly claiming his awareness.

“The way things turned out it’s not like I could talk about it.”

Izaya desperately clung for an explanation to make sense of the chaos threatening to collapse on him.

“You’re lying to me…there’s no way, it doesn’t make any sense,“

Izaya’s hands lost purchase and the book fell. A photograph spilled on the floor from the still fluttering pages. Izaya was terrified of looking at it. His child-self smiled back at him along with a glum little boy who could only be Shizuo. Izaya’s legs folded underneath him. At the back of his head he almost hoped he would pass out again but life was not so convenient.

“So you really don’t remember, huh.”

“You lied to me. You lied- you hid this from me,“

“You’re the one hiding stuff from me. How much did you forget?”

Izaya did not even hear Shizuo.

“So what about hating me at first sight?! What is that all about!”

Bordering on hysteria, Izaya jumped to his feet and nearly bristled at Shizuo. His emotional landscape was a convoluted mass of anger, betrayal and a sense of impeding dread.

“That’s the fox, you see.”
Izaya blinked.

“Are you making fun of me…? Is this some kind of sick joke…?”

Izaya turned around in a dawning daze. He half-expected to find that cameras were spying on him for the enjoyment of some unknown crowd watching everything online.

“In the book the Little Prince meets this fox. At first they’re strangers but the fox tells him that if they spend time together, a little at a time, they’ll become friends. And when that happens it’ll be painful when the Little Prince leaves.”

“Have you lost your mind…?”

Shizuo ran his fingers through Izaya’s hair. Izaya felt chills.

“I really don’t mean to confuse you but I wasn’t expecting this. That was how we met. I hated you the moment I saw you but you stuck around. Until I came to like you. I never had a friend before. You gave me the book and smiled. It was happiness to me.”

Nostalgia rang through Shizuo’s voice but Izaya did not notice it. In his panic Izaya was unable of at all reading Shizuo. As a protective device Izaya withdrew into himself. He shook his head as if to externalize his denial.

“It can’t be. It can’t- where did this even happen?!”

Tossed into complete befuddlement Izaya gave up on keeping up a front. His deeper nature took over and sough leverage through filling the terrifying gap between Izaya’s idea of his personal past and the brunt of Shizuo’s revelations.

“I used to go to this park when I was little. One Sunday you were there. Just like that.”

“‘Remember the fox’,”
Izaya’s voice dropped even below a whisper. He was not aware that his hands were twitching convulsively.

“I didn’t take it to heart at the time. Missed your point.”

“My point…?”

“Shizu-chan, do you know how to truly hurt someone? To twist someone up until they become a different person altogether? You spend time with them. Slowly, every day you get a bit closer. Just like the fox, you see. And then, once you have established a bond you can rip them apart through it. So remember the fox, Shizu-chan.”

Izaya brought his hands to his ears as if to muffle the words that resounded in his mind in his own voice. He heard a gargled noise that might have been a choked sob but had no idea where it came from. Izaya squeezed his eyes tightly until it hurt as if the pressure could distract him from the buildup horror blooming within. Izaya swayed.

“Is this revenge? The reason why you saved me on that dark alley- the fox, just letting me die is not enough- first you’ll make me be friends with you and then hurt me until I break…is that how it is, Shizuo?”

There was no confrontation in Izaya. He addressed Shizuo from a place of utter vulnerability.

“I knew something was different in you but I couldn’t guess you’ve lost your memory.”

Izaya’s whole body shook. The import of Shizuo’s words did not even reach him.

“Shiki-san was right, naivety will be the end of me…to think that I believed we could patch up things between us, that you’d get past all the things I’ve done to you…as if that could ever be.”

Shizuo cupped Izaya’s cheek with one of his powerful hands. Izaya closed his eyes.

“Izaya? Look at me.”
A fleeting thought crossed Shizuo’s mind. In a work of fiction a kiss would solve everything. It would convey all that Shizuo was struggling to say, it would assuage Izaya’s fears and make him understand all there was to understand. Pouring himself into one deep kiss Shizuo would form a steady connection through which Izaya would reveal himself.

But reality would not allow it.

Shizuo had to tilt Izaya’s chin in order to see his eyes. What he saw therein did nothing to reassure him. It was a hollow glow against which reasons bounced back and behind it a listless resignation to some cruel fate.

“-Osaka, you asked me if we were friends...”

Shizuo had to bend down in order to catch the faintest rumor of Izaya’s by now extremely low voice. Unsure of what to do Shizuo placed a sweater over Izaya’s shoulders. The irony was not lost to Shizuo. So many times had he wished for Izaya to be at a loss and entirely at his mercy only to have his desire utterly distorted.

“I don’t want revenge, I’m not out to hurt you.”

Izaya’s fingers ghosted over Shizuo’s chest.

“This scar is nothing compared to what I’ve done to you- since we were ten, all this time- I,“

Shizuo was genuinely worried now. He took Izaya’s tentative gesture as an opportunity to fold the small trembling hands in his own. It was like holding ice.

“Oy, you’re freezing. Are you alright? Izaya...?”

Apprehension climbed another notch as a thin tendril of blood dripped from Izaya’s lower lip. It took Shizuo a moment to realize Izaya had bitten his lip.
“All this time, all this time- can’t remember anything but I didn’t forget Heiwajima Shizuo, why, why.”

That Izaya spoke as if Shizuo was not even present was bad, that Izaya seemed unable of even grasping his surroundings was worse. Shizuo remembered anew that Izaya had just been discharged from the hospital and not ready to handle stress.

“How many fingers am I holding?”

Shizuo held two fingers in front of Izaya’s glassed over eyes. For a reply he got a tittering giggle on the verge of madness.

“Justice wins in the end, justice prevails so I’ll be punished…serves you right, Orihara Izaya! Get away from me!”

Izaya’s wild staring past Shizuo’s shoulder had Shizuo following his gaze and half-expecting to see someone else there. Shizuo was still looking at the nothing that stood there when a switchblade came flying through the air and ended up bouncing off a wall. Shizuo almost wished Izaya had aimed it at him.

“Izaya, it’s alright. Everything is alright. So, let’s calm down.”

Shizuo adopted a soft tone that very few would associate with him. He considered slapping Izaya as he had heard should be done to hysterics but it could backfire horribly.

“‘Then you shall judge yourself, ‘the king answered. ‘that is the most difficult thing of all. It is much more difficult to judge oneself than to judge others. If you succeed in judging yourself rightly, then you are indeed a man of true wisdom.’”

The stream of words halted and the hyperventilating began. Shizuo grabbed a paper bag and held it to Izaya’s nose and mouth.

“Just breathe.”
Shizuo blew very softly on Izaya’s forehead. By degrees Izaya’s erratic breathing pattern settled down. Shizuo watched him very closely for a while then removed the bag and held two fingers.

“How many fingers?”

“Two,”

“Good. You’ll be fine.”

“Doubt it.”

Shizuo relaxed if only slightly. Izaya kept his eyes on the floor but at least he was responding to his environment.

“You’re better already.”

A bitter chuckle. Izaya finally established eye contact. Grim resolve stared back at Shizuo.

“I can’t recall anything of my past, my memory starts half a year ago. Since then- since then I’ve been trying to find out just who I was, who I’m supposed to be and do with my life. So I’m not the same person who betrayed you so horribly, not exactly. But I’m also not not the same person. That’s why you’re entirely entitled to resenting me for as long as you live.”

“Wasted too much time doing that already.”

“I thought that I had no actual bonds in the past. But at least for a while you were my friend while I was never yours. Somehow, that makes everything so much worse. Fighting a sworn enemy is one thing, going out of my way to hurt you under the cover of friendship is…monstrous.”

“It bothers you?”

“In more ways than one. And I can’t even tell what my reasons were. Why did I hurt you so badly? For the lols? Pure sadism? Because I could? Was it part of some highly convoluted plan? I can’t
“Odds are you had all sorts of reasons but my guess would be, you did it because it was fun.”

Izaya smiled sadly.

“‘Fun’, huh. Incidentally, I have no idea what ‘The Plan’ is all about. There are no records of it and I can’t even access most of the information I do have access to. In other words, ‘Orihara Izaya’ is mostly a paper tiger at the moment.”

“Why are you telling me all this now?”

Izaya had regained his poise completely but Shizuo was not entirely sure he cared for his attitude.

“You can ruin me by simply leaking this information. There would be some resistance, both Namie-san and Shiki-san would fight it but only to some extent. Once it becomes clear that the damage is irrevocable, which would happen the moment someone like, Aoba-kun gets holds of this, they would cut their losses and switch over to a person more useful than I.”

“Is this your idea of making it up to me?”

Izaya shrugged.

“I’m giving you the tools to destroy all that I’ve built. What you do with them is entirely up to you.”

“I’d like to think you’re doing this because you trust me but I know better.”

“Once my cover is blown I won’t be able to operate so I’ll end up disappearing from this city. It’s not that big a deal, it happens every single day and we do not even notice it.”

“I thought the choice was mine? What’s with this ‘when’ business?”
Izaya walked to where his switchblade was still embedded in the wall, removed it and retracted the blade in one smooth flourish.

“About this, I was aiming at myself. It seems I’ve become mentally unbalanced. At random intervals I’ll see this hallucination. It’s myself before I lost my memory and it speaks to me. So far no one other than you knows about it.”

Shizuo considered him silently for a while.

“Are you telling me to use this against you- oy, Izaya!”

Izaya had knelt, head bowed to the floor.

“Heiwajima Shizuo, I apologize for all the harm I caused you. That I do not recall it does not excuse me nor does it make it away. I cannot atone. This is all I can do as the person I am now, and that is to give you the weapons to make me pay.”

“Lift your head and get up already!”

Shizuo found Izaya’s whole attitude to be more than a bit disturbing. He remembered Izaya had done the same when begging Shizuo to save his cat’s life and that too had been jarring but this so much worse. It was a lucid capitulation on Izaya’s part.

So Shizuo did not mistake Izaya’s now obeying him and getting to his feet as a turn for the meek. Only now was Shizuo beginning to become aware of a wealth of pain lurking just beneath Izaya’s polished surface and how much backbone it must take just to keep himself afloat.

“At any rate I should leave Ikebukuro. It’s your city.”

“‘Make you pay’, huh. Not interested. If you wanna crash and burn then do it yourself. Don’t expect me to do it for you.”

“All this time I’ve been thinking, ‘ah, this can’t last. I should be punished.’ That’s why when I got stabbed I sort of gave up. Down deep I thought that I had it coming anyway.”
“You got amnesia but it’s not as if your memory resets, right?”

“It doesn’t, why?”

Izaya sounded vaguely curious.

“Then you should remember what I told you not too long ago. That I didn’t hate you as you’re now.”

“I remember that, of course but,”

“But aren’t you missing something real important here? I didn’t forget what you did to me, I’ve known it all this time. And I still got along with you. Yeah, odds are I’m too dumb to know better, but that’s the way it is.”

“That’s…something I can’t understand.”

“Good. As for ‘paying’ and whatnot, by the looks of it you’ve more than done that already. So let’s just say we’re even and leave it at that.”

Izaya opened and closed his mouth silently before replying.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m serious alright.”

Something like anger blazed in Izaya’s eyes, cutting through the dull resignation.

“Why! What sense does that even make! Then again…why did you keep it all this time?”
Izaya picked up the photograph and studied it anew.

“Guess I wanted some kind of proof, something I could touch—some kind of proof it all happened.”

“This may be the first time I see myself when I was this age…and you look weird without blonde hair."

Shock and aggression having been if not fully processed at least pushed to the side, Izaya’s natural curiosity kicked it. He was aware that he channeling his thirst for knowledge to divert his emotions.

“But you can still tell it’s me?”

“I can. Somehow, you’re the one thing I did not entirely forget.”

And Izaya did not sound too happy about it.

“Yeah?”

“It has crossed my mind, of course…that I did this to myself. Again, I do not know why. But it is entirely possible I’d make myself forget. If so— if so then I did not simply wander into Shiki-san by mere coincidence.”

“And you can’t get your memories back.”

Izaya granted him a wan smile.

“Actually, I could. At the expense of all I do remember. If I toss aside who I am now, I can regain who I once was.”

“And you turned that down?”
“Ah, I turned it down, yes. I couldn’t do it. Why does ‘that Orihara Izaya’ have more of a right to exist than I do? It’s not as if he was even a decent person! Ah, that’s not entirely honest of me. Even if he had been a saint and a bringer of joy to all, I’d still not forfeit who I now am for his sake. I cannot do that.”

Shizuo abstained from telling Orihara Izaya that such as a stance very much what Orihara Izaya would take.

“Do you want to get your memories back?”

“I do and I don’t. I’m afraid of what it’d do to me. Even now for all I know I’ve become part of the plan and am still working to its eventual fruition without even realizing. Maybe one day I decided that instead of just toying with my paws I’d throw myself on the board myself and see how far that takes me.”

As paranoid as it sounded Shizuo could not even dispel Izaya’s worry as unfounded.

“The plan, huh.”

“There are times when I can almost glimpse the plan, or at least its essence and it never fails to scare me. I am sure it will bring much pain to many. And that’s not something I want to be a part of. That much I do know.”

“Kinda goes without saying but no one can live your life for you.”

Even to Shizuo it sounded trite to make much of an impact and judging by the cursory nod Izaya felt the same way.

“But I have a full proof way of deviating from plan. It’s not something I look forward to but if it comes to that I can sabotage it completely.”

In the hindsight that the next seconds gave Shizuo he realized that he should have seen it coming. There was a silvery flourish and the switchblade materialized, its edge placed on Izaya’s throat.
“Put that down,”

“Even if he predicted this he’s still powerless to stop it.”

There was a kind triumphant insanity to Izaya’s entire stance. Izaya smiled widely, the blade did not waver.

“You’re too blade happy.”

Shizuo considered knocking the switchblade out or simply force him to drop it but it was risky. And unnecessary as Izaya now withdrew it with yet another flourish and returned it to a pocket.

“It’s just a last resort.”

“Bad idea all around.”

Izaya ignored his altogether. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and smiled innocently as he opened them. Izaya held out his hand to be shaken.

“Let me try this again. My name is Orihara Izaya, nice to meet you.”

“Day three, Strong Boy is here again and once more he got beaten to a pulp. Why does it always come to that, Strong Boy?”

Skinny legs, knees, blue shorts, plain white shirt, annoying smile. Shizuo became aware of these in this order. As much as Shizuo wanted to simply stomp curb the ever so aggravating kid he presently had no strength left. Just lying on the warm concrete, the sun ablaze on his eyes as he grasped for air was all he could manage. It had been another lousy afternoon for Heiwajima Shizuo, age 10.

“Thought I told you to get lost already,”
“But I can't. You see, I'm writing a summer diary about you so I have to observe you.”

Shizuo sat with a wince, spat some blood and glared. Darkish hair tumbled over the forehead.

“Go observe someone else.”

“What's your name? I'm Orihara Izaya, by the way.”

Izaya offered his tiny hand that Shizuo pointedly ignored.

“None of your business.”

“I told my name, you could tell me yours...”

“Ain't gonna happen so get lost.”

Shizuo jumped to his feet and proceeded to shake the dust from his clothes.

“You know, no matter how strong you are you'll be in trouble if those cuts get infected.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Izaya produced a handkerchief at which Shizuo did not even glance. Instead he dragged himself and collapse on a nearby bench. Izaya sat on the other end of the bench. For a while neither spoke.

“Strong Boy, human beings will gang up against you out of a herd instinct for self-preservation. You should get used to it because it will probably happen throughout your all life.”

“What do you know.”
There were many things that angered Shizuo, so many he could not even begin to name them but smartasses were very high on the list. Normally at this point his interlocutors had long ago scrambled as they sensed Shizuo’s rage mounting. Izaya merely pulled up his small knees and rested his chin therein.

“I told you already, I've been observing you. I am very good at that.”

“Go observe someone else and leave me alone.”

“I choose to observe you.”

“How about I punch your face in?”

Izaya tilted his head to the side as if giving this serious consideration.

“You can try.”

Shizuo did just that. It went no further than trying because Izaya dodged easily by simply sliding backwards, rolling over and landing on his feet. Shizuo took another swing and Izaya responded by skipping sideways.

“Stay still and let me hit you already!”

Izaya giggled.

“As if. Keep on trying, Strong Boy! You can do it!”

Shizuo growled and dashed almost blindly. Izaya neatly frog leaped him and hauled himself on top of a tree branch.

“Hey! That's cheating! Come down so I can you beat you up!”
“Okay but on one condition. When I knock you down you'll tell me your name.”

Shizuo smiled. It was not friendly.

“Oh yeah, you got a deal alright...”

“Yay!”

Izaya jumped down so as to land right in front of Shizuo who immediately prepared as if to lounge. Before he could do it Izaya tripped him and sure enough Shizuo went crashing down.

“Shit,”

Izaya let him pant for a while and then crouched, offering his hand again.

“Let me introduce myself once more. I'm Orihara Izaya, nice to meet you.”

Shizuo glared viciously at Izaya for a while. At length,

“Heiwajima,”

“Heiwajima? Heiwajima what?”

“Shizuo,”

“Heiwajima Shizuo! Heh, as in, 'peace'? No way, no way!”

Izaya giggled uncontrollably, the laughter ringing almost shrilly. Shizuo got up slowly.
“Got a problem with it?”

“None at all. And ‘Shizuo’? Is that written with the kanji for ‘quiet’? Like this?”

Izaya was already busy scribbling on the dirt with a branch. Shizuo studied the very delicate characters.

“You’re missing one.”

“Hm… [平和島静], ‘Heiwajima Shizu’. If you don’t know the last character I really can’t help you here. Oh, I know! ‘Shizu-chan’ it is, then!”

“The hell, who do you think you’re chan-ing?!”

Izaya placated him with some gesturing.

“It’s okay, Shizu-chan! Here’s how you write my name, [折原臨也].”

Shizuo appeared at the newly dug characters and frowned.

“Like I can read that,”

“I just told you my name…it’s Orihara Izaya. Ori-hara Iza-ya.”

“Good for you”

Still crouched, Izaya proceeded to rock back and forth in a weird display of well-honed balance.

“You shouldn’t underestimate me too much, you know. Let’s be friends, Shizu-chan!”
Shizuo was sure he could at least land a kick now but Izaya easily jumped backwards.

“Stop calling me that!”

“But we don’t know the last character to your name…so I can’t use it. Neh?”

Shizuo fumed for a while then reached into his wallet and flung his train pass at Izaya who grabbed it in mid-air between two fingers.

“There! There’s the bloody character!”

Izaya spun around, his eyes on the pass yet neatly avoiding getting within Shizuo’s reach.

“Heiwajima Shizuo. [平和島静雄]! Heh, how neat! Born January 28th. You know, giving people your personal information like this is hardly wise. One day you’ll run into a bad person and pay for it.”

Izaya’s smile was sweet as he returned the pass to Shizuo who pocked it with a grumble.

“Aren’t you going away or something.”

“How about blood type? Maybe I should just cut you and find out for myself? Just kidding.”

Shizuo was used to kids picking a fight although there was circle of isolation widening around him but they were never this tiny and smiley. Nor did they face him on their own like this.

“You’ve been stalking me for a while, aren’t you afraid of me?”

Izaya titled his head to the side.
“Why should I be? It’s not as if you can actually hit me.”

Shizuo smirked.

“Oh really? You wanna stick around to see how well that goes for you?”

“Sure thing!”

“Don’t come crying to me if you get hurt, Izaya-kun.”

“Why so cold, Shizu-chan! Call me Iza-chan.”

“Like that’s gonna happen.”

Izaya laced his hands behind his back and swung back and forth on the balls of his feet. Shizuo watched in borderline fascination as Izaya cheated gravity ever so effortlessly.

“Neh, Shizu-chan…you need be more careful about your body. At this rate you’ll end up dying.”

“Yeah and you’d cry a river.”

“Of course I’d be sad. I’d be very sad. After all, I’m planning to have lots and lots of fun with you for years to come.”
Chapter 25

Shiki’s shoes neatly placed at the entrance of Izaya’s apartment confronted him as soon as he let himself in. So Izaya was already prepared to finding Shiki calmly installed in the living room. By his very nature Shiki tended to lord over whatever space he happened to be occupying and this was no exception. Izaya took a moment before coming any closer to consider how he felt about Shiki’s proprietary attitude as he sat on Izaya’s sleek black sofa that highlighted the white suit.

“Shiki-san, I see you’ve made yourself at home. Shall I make some tea? Hi there, Sushi.”

The black cat would not be ignored by his owner after what had been an all too long absence in feline time. Shiki watched him busy himself boiling water while petting the cat at the same time and wondered if there was a hint a criticism to Izaya’s tone. After all Shiki had allowed himself in behind Izaya’s back.

“I have a job for you.”

“Is that so? I’m glad.”

Shiki’s men had lost sight of Izaya at school. Shizuo had carried him by an obscure exit and together they had disappeared from the grid altogether. And just as Shiki was beginning to worry he had received an anonymous message informing him to search for Heiwajima Shizuo if he wished to find Izaya. This gave Shiki pause. It was worded with provocation in mind and Shiki had an idea who the sender might be but perhaps more to the point it also happened to be true.

The tea arrived, fragrant as ever but hardly soothing. Izaya served Shiki first then took the seat opposite him.

“Now, what can I do for you, Shiki-san?”

“One of our guns has been misplaced, for lack of a better term. It could easily be traced back to us so it is in our interest to recover it before it causes trouble.”

Izaya nodded, already on his professional mode. Shiki could not explain precisely why but it annoyed him if only slightly.
“I can probably find it. Gun legislation being so tight, people always end up talking whenever a new piece hits the streets. I’ll need the weapon’s specs.”

Shiki provided them. Izaya went through a weapon directory.

“That’s quite a catalogue you got there.”

“Isn’t it? I found it when I was going through my research material.”

“I never did find out what your work method was, exactly.”

Izaya laughed without even looking up from the glossy pages.

“Even Namie-san is mostly clueless about it and she has watched me in action more than most. I suspect I have no actual method nor do I come across amazing leads that no one else knows.”

Shiki had not come here to discuss Izaya’s way of tackling his job nor had he come precisely to give Izaya this job even if he did need the gun located. But he now found himself rather curious.

“You don’t?”

“Not really. What I do is see the connection before anyone else. While everyone is dealing isolated events and trying to come to terms with them all I see how they connect. You could say that’s my ‘standing above’ humanity.”

“Interesting.”

And Shiki meant it. Izaya finished studying the directory and eased back on the sofa.

“That’s why I can remain very useful to you. It is likely that this ability is innate.”
“You were born to stand above us mere humans?”

Izaya giggled.

“That is a way of putting it but that wasn’t my intention. It’s just that the data I work with is there for anyone to analyze so I can access it even now without needing to rely on prior experience.”

“You can’t dodge a bullet, though.”

Izaya blinked.

“True, I’m not in any way godly.”

Shiki drank deeply from the fragrant tea and by the time he put down the cup he knew precisely what he wanted. He bridged the space between them and kissed Izaya fully on the mouth.

The move surprised Izaya more by its import than its suddenness. As fast as Shiki could move Izaya was not one to be ambushed when his attention was focused. Shiki touched Izaya’s lower lip.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

“It’s nothing serious. More importantly, I can’t work like this…”

“Work later, then.”

Izaya was already on his back and Shiki was working on doing Izaya’s zipper with one hand while the other crept underneath Izaya’s shirt.

Izaya sighed weakly in not entirely mock surrender. His pants and underwear were cast on the floor, Izaya felt himself sink into the sofa as Shiki got on top of him. Shiki allowed a few moments to let the expectation build but also so that he could enjoy the sight underneath him.
Shirt undone and nothing else on, already half-erect and slightly panting, a pink tone suffusing the soft skin: Izaya was the very picture of allure made all the stronger by the uncertain smile that veered on awkward.

Shiki traced the delicate yet solid musculature of Izaya’s chest, then made his way down until his fingertips were brushing the faint scar on his belly. Izaya squirmed a bit and then a lot as Shiki kissed it slightly.

That Izaya was different to every other lay Shiki had had was something he had been aware of for quite a while. But only recently had it become apparent that there were reasons as to why Shiki was so willing to invest time in each sexual encounter, reasons that went beyond mere kink. With that said, it took much self-control on Shiki’s part to take it slow.

Some of this must have transpired to Izaya as he made an effort to speak up.

“Shiki-san, let’s,”

“Yes?”

Izaya felt an uncomfortable sense of déjà-vu. It would be ever so easy to simply go with the flow but at this moment in time Izaya wanted something else. Perhaps because taking the passive role was so easy, Izaya felt the need not so much to affirm himself but to go against the default pattern.

“Let’s take this to the bedroom.”

Shiki was not opposed to Izaya calling the shots in bed. He had greatly enjoyed the few times post-amnesic Izaya had done it and looked forward to them, unpredictability being a plus.

“Very well.”

Shiki carried and deposited Izaya in bed with unnecessary care. From there on Izaya took charge. It was Izaya who tossed his shirt aside, divested Shiki of clothes, reached for the lube and condom in the bedside table drawer and who handled all preparation. Shiki watched very closely.
More than desire Izaya’s every move was full of concentration. Shiki had the distinct impression that his own presence was almost secondary, Izaya was all focus. Oddly enough Shiki found it almost entrancing. Such a level of self-absorption now very obvious in the way Izaya carefully lubed up another finger, resulted in an apparently contradictory loss of self-consciousness.

By the time arousal gained the better out of Izaya’s awareness he was breathing heavily above Shiki, skin sheathed in a slight film of sweat, eyes a heavy shade of red. From the angle of Shiki’s vision it was if Izaya filled the entire world in an attitude that bordered on arrogance. Shiki drew this inference not just from the way in which Izaya assumed his own body as from the cocky smile on his slightly parted lips.

Shiki had seen it before, it had been there the very first time he had laid hands on Izaya but this was a first since the memory loss. Somewhere along the line it had occurred to Shiki that while Izaya was fully capable of enjoying sex in many ways, this might very well be the essence of Izaya’s whole being: above his partner in lieu of standing above humanity.

Shiki had only a few moments of clarity to contemplate such things before Izaya was riding him fast and furiously. The sheer abandon alone was enough to nearly tide him over, the momentum of Izaya’s movements did the rest. And still Izaya reached climax first. Back arched, all breathing suspended in one gasp, eyes closed, control swept away in one all-consuming moment.

Even as Shiki followed a few heartbeats later, the warmth of Izaya’s seed toppling him over, it crossed his mind that Izaya was not to be held in his entirety.

Izaya slid off and nearly collapsed on the very expensive black silk sheets. Far too spent to bring a lighter to Shiki’s cigarette. Perhaps far too spent to do anything at all other than try to catch his breath.

“Are you alright?”

Izaya granted him a lazy smile.

“Never better…”

Slowly, Izaya rolled on his side. He would soon drift into sleep. Before that could happen Shiki settled next to him, arms wrapped around his waist. Izaya started as if this kind of contact was
extraordinary.

“I’ll be staying over tonight.”

“Really?”

“Unless you don’t want me to.”

“Ah, of course I want you to…but Shiki-san, you shouldn’t be too nice to me. I might get too greedy. We can’t have that.”

“Is that a rule of yours? Wouldn’t you rather I loved you?”

Here was an unexpected opening. Shiki decided to take it. He relaxed his hold on Izaya’s who rolled on his back.

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest. Actually, I am sure. I’d rather things remained as they are now. I do not want to disturb what we do have. That I am able to love, that I have such an ability in me is already more than enough.”

To this Shiki had no reply. It might very well a most advantageous loophole for him to escape ever having to confront his feelings for Izaya but it did nothing to lift Shiki’s spirits.

“I see.”

“Besides, that’s not exactly something I need to worry about. Let us suppose that Shiki-san did love me, who is to say how long that would last. As it is as long as I prove useful our working relationship will remain, as long as I am attractive our sex life has a future. If it’s a give-take situation in which all parties are satisfied then I see no need to change it.”

This gave Shiki pause. A mixture of utter obliviousness and extremely shrewd analysis that veered on cynical, such was Izaya’s approach. And Shiki could not possibly correct him without exposing himself. The irony was bitter. Shiki did not fool himself into believing that Izaya was merely indulging in consolation. ‘All parties’ were not ‘satisfied’ not because Izaya wanted a greater
involvement on Shiki’s part, it was the other way around.

Izaya yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“It’s okay, go to sleep now.”

“Goodnight, Shiki-san…”

And just like that Izaya dropped asleep. Shiki almost wished he could do otherwise but he had much to mull over. Watching over Izaya’s post coital slumber had become something of a ritual to Shiki. This time around he had a particular thing in mind.

Izaya’s now overt reluctance to accept receiving romantic love, for lack of a better term, did not just apply to Shiki. As much as it repulsed Shiki to consider Heiwajima Shizuo in this context, when Izaya was sleeping next to him, he knew that he could escape such considerations. Shiki had only witnessed a few of Izaya and Shizuo’s interaction but it had been enough to see how Izaya did everything humanly possible to misinterpret Shizuo’s extremely obvious overtures.

It might be expected considering their very tumultuous past but for one such as sharp as Izaya any kind of obfuscation seemed very out of character. So far Shiki had chalked it down to naivety. But he now wondered if there was something deeper at work here.

Like so many things, this too was not something Shiki could possibly ask.

Shiki picked up his phone to call out Izaya’s latest job. It had taken some hesitation but he reached the conclusion that Izaya could be endangered in such an unimportant but potentially deadly assignment. Shiki had chosen him to locate the missing gun more out of a spite than anything else, a rare case of his getting swayed by emotion. Having Izaya disappear only to find by third parties that he had been with Shizuo had taken a greater toll than Shiki expected.

Just as he was about to press the button one of his men informed him that Izaya had just arrived and was requesting an interview.
“Let him through.”

Izaya sauntered into the office with a light step and carrying a bento box neatly wrapped in a purple handkerchief.

“Solid security you’ve got here, Shiki-san.”

“Great timing. I was just about to call you. You don’t have to look for that gun, we’ve found it already.”

Izaya’s expression took a turn for the quizzical. He then chuckled and spoke as he placed the bento box on the secretary and proceeded to undo the handkerchief tied around it.

“Shiki-san, I understand there are times when you must lie to me but this is hardly one of them.”

Izaya removed the top and there it was, the fabled gun.

It was with an effort that Shiki hid his surprise.

“It’s been less than a day.”

“I work fast.”

If Izaya was bothered at being lied to his face he showed no signs of it.

“And you’ve been carrying that in a bento box all across town?”

Izaya smiled brightly.

“That’s right. It’s a perfect container and not one likely to draw suspicion. I even skipped by a couple of police boxes on my way here.”
It was typical Izaya, bold, risky and whimsical.

“I bet.”

Shiki was still a bit stunned.

“The retrieval went smoothly enough. I got the names of the guys who had it, they’ll be easy to find at any given moment but I doubt they’ll be playing with yakuza guns again. Or any guns, for that matter.”

“And you’re sure it’s the right piece?”

Only now did Izaya frown.

“I obviously checked. Incidentally, it hasn’t been fired recently.”

“Right. Thank you for your cooperation.”

It was hardly the right tone and Shiki knew it.

“I wonder if I know how to fire a weapon.”

Izaya tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“Not that I know of. But it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Maybe I should learn. It might be prove useful.”

Shiki could not muffle a sudden grimace. His immediate reaction was as intense as it was irrational.
Shiki simply did not want to see Izaya involved with weapons. He knew that considering the path Izaya had chosen it was indeed a good idea but the mere thought was repulsive.

“There’s no need for that.”

Izaya tilted his head slightly.

“Really? I’ll think about it.”

Shiki reached for a cigarette with deliberate slowness.

“I’ll forward your payment to the usual account.”

“Thanks. And I’ve got to run, I have things to prepare for the big event tomorrow.”

Shiki blinked.

“Big event?”

“The award ceremony for the Liar Game contest. I’m already nervous in anticipation, I’ll be meeting sensei!”

Shiki noticed that Izaya’s hands were actually shaking slightly. Izaya could retrieve a gun from a gang of punks without as much as batting and eyelash only to tremble nervously over meeting a mangaka. Shiki could not possibly comprehend it.

“Congratulations.”

“Everyone is going, too. That makes it more exciting but a bit scary.”

Shiki wished that he could curb the spasm of jealousy. Izaya’s ‘everyone’ did not seem to include
him. And even though he knew that this the time to simply drop the subject altogether he could not help but inquire.

“Everyone?”

“Namie-san, the otaku duo, Kadota and Togusa, Saki-chan, my sisters, Shinra and Celty, Simon and Shizuo.”

Shiki took a deep drag and exhaled the smoke into an already receding coil.

“That’s quite a list you’ve got there.”

“It’s all so exciting I hardly know what to do with myself. So I must run, Shiki-san.”

There were a few options open to Shiki. These went from simply letting Izaya go his way to keep him here by force if need be. Shiki discarded such extremes and settled for something quite different.

“Could I come to this event?”

Izaya blinked twice.

“Of course but I’m sure you’d find it boring. Shiki-san doesn’t strike me as the manga type of person.”

“It might be interesting.”

Izaya lit up. He produced a dark card with stylized lettering in white.

“I actually have an extra invite, here.”

“Unique design, isn’t it?”
“It’s meant to mimic the letters that LGT Office sends to the players.”

“I’ll be there if my schedule allows.”

“That’s great! Hope to see you tomorrow, Shiki-san.”

Shiki waited a while after Izaya was gone then asked one of his men to bring him the first volume of Liar Game. He knew the manga had become surprisingly popular with his men and some copies could surely be found in the one of the staff rooms.

But Shiki did not expect the entire manga collection to promptly arrive in a neat pile. After a slight hesitation Shiki gave orders to only be disturbed in case of an emergency.

“So nervous…what if I throw up?!”

Izaya literally squirmed. He looked very beautiful in a brand new suit but his skin was a few shades too pale so that the dread in his wide reddish eyes seemed even greater. He had been fine until he reached the venue, now waiting to be called on stage Izaya was suddenly gripped by a wave of anxiety.

“Then your only option would be to commit seppuku.”

Izaya sighed heavily.

“So not helping, Namie-san!”

“I can act as your kaishakunin.”

“So you’d cut my head off…?! That’s so mean, Namie-san…”
“But you seem calmer now.”

“Calm and resigned to my fate of a painful demise!”

Izaya delivered this with a bright smile, took a deep breath and smiled anew. Namie adjusted his tie without even asking permission.

“By the way, that new suit makes you a veritable candidate for what they call ‘land whale’.”

Izaya vented all his nerves in a series of not too sane sounding giggles.

“Land Whalezaya! Please do not harpoon.”

“Here, take one.”

Namie produced a pill and a water bottle. Izaya took it.

“I feel better already! And I believe that’s my cue.”

As soon as Izaya stepped onto the brightly lit stage his nerves eclipsed immediately. Excitement buoyed him up as he received the award, bowed very deeply to Kaitani-sensei and asked to shake hands with him. Izaya expected this to be about it but a panel was eager to bombard him with questions while shooting many a picture.

“Orihara-san, could you tell us a bit about the concept of your spin-off?”

“The main idea is ‘labyrinth’, working with others in order to navigate through a maze while at the same time being suspicious of the one person that is out to sabotage you. ‘Who much can you trust anyone? And should you?’ That’s the general theme.”
“Can you tell us how to beat the game?”

“You’ll have to read it and see for yourselves.”

“What’s your favorite LG game?”

“I like them equally. All games are so interesting and complex and perfectly crafted that to have my own chosen by Kaitani-sama is an absolute honor.”

Izaya was so sincere that the whole panel was touched. The fact that Izaya was very easy on the eyes did not make things worse either.

“Do you have a favorite LG character?”

“I really like Akiyama and Fukunaga.”

“Would you be interested in playing Akiyama if there was another live action LG project?”

Izaya blinked.

“Oh, hardly. I am not an actor at all.”

“You’ve got the looks, though.”

A timely blush rendered Izaya most adorable, the blaze of flashes redoubled in intensity.

“I really cannot act but if I could I’d rather play Fukunaga.”

“The cross-dresser?”
“I am confident in my ability to rock a dress.”

At this point Mairu’s voice resounded loudly from the gallery.

“Iza-nii is best girl, always! That’s our big brother down there, hi there Iza-nii!”

Kururi produced a ‘Izaya-nii, fight-o’ banner.

“That’s quite a supporting family you’ve got there, Orihara-san.”

Izaya, who had never thought of his sisters in such terms, had a moment of perplexity that might have seemed off were not for the brilliant smile with which he covered it.

“I am happy for that.”

“Can you tell us what Liar Game means to you?”

Izaya grew almost quiet.

“To me Liar Game is very much like life, a fun, intense and dangerous way of living. The games push people to their limits and thus reveal their true nature. More often than not it is not pretty. Just like in the real world people will lie and will be lied to. But as much as you yourself lie, as much as you go ‘this is liar game, lying is to be expected’, you still get hurt when you are lied to. I am not advocating to always be truthful but to be aware that there is a price to a lying and that you may be called to pay it with the highest of interest.”

Shiki’s seat was at the back. The speech caught his attention. It was probably an illusion that Izaya was looking straight into his eyes but Shiki could not shake the feeling. Either way this was Shiki’s kind of language. Shiki had read the manga with growing relish so he was familiar enough to know that to cushion wide reaching concepts in terms of debt and payment was entirely consistent with Liar Game. But it was as if Izaya was addressing Shiki himself and no one else.
After the award ceremony Izaya and the gang gathered at a nearby park. Shiki watched them from across the street, this ‘everyone’ that excluded him. Standing right under a lamp post and expounding on something or other Izaya was revealed in a circle of light amidst the deepening twilight.

Shiki could simply turn around and let Izaya bask in glory with his oddball choice of companions. But at the same time he could not possibly do such a thing. A mixture of conflicting emotions kept Shiki on the spot for a while but by the time he crossed the street there was no hesitation in him.

Shiki made his approach slow and direct so that Izaya had plenty of time to see him arrive.

“Shiki-san, you made it! I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

Shiki ignored everyone other than Izaya but he was intensely conscious of an audience. It was essential for what he had in mind.

“Congratulations, Izaya.”

Izaya could sense that there was something on Shiki’s mind but had no time for puzzling over it because Shiki kissed full on the mouth. Izaya barely heard the gasps all around him, his entire focus narrowed on trying to understand why Shiki had taken such a step. That it was not spurious Izaya knew, what might mean exactly was something of a mystery.

By the time Shiki’s lips left his Izaya knew enough. Izaya whispered very quietly into Shiki’s ear.

“I cannot be owned, Shiki-san. But thank you.”

Izaya stepped back very gracefully and his voice was light and pleased as he spoke.

“I’m afraid I have to go now, the after-party awaits.”

And with this Izaya waved goodbye to his temporary posse and wheeled Saki away. Erika had gasped wildly and was already running scenarios for Shikizaya, a pairing with a lot of potential, but
she had enough sense, for once, not to let her love for all hot man on man action transpire in Shiki or Shizu’s presence. So she was the first to clear the scene and dragged Kadota and Walker with her, as soon as she hit home she was going to dwell on this new fantasy. The others drifted away almost right away.

Leaving only Shiki and Shizuo.

“Cigarette?”

Shizuo offered one from a full pack.

“It’d be bad manners considering you did not accept my cigarettes.”

“Just thought you’d like a cig right about now.”

“And why is that, Heiwajima-san?”

“Dunno exactly what you had in mind but it didn’t seem to work too well.”

Shiki produced one of his own cigarettes, took his own sweet time bringing a flame to it and slowly inhaled and exhaled a thread of smoke.

“That is yet to be seen. I wish you a good evening.”

With a very curt nod Shiki walked away.

“Izaya’s not your property.”

Shiki replied without turning around.

“Are you implying that he is your property?”
“Nah. That’s missing the point entirely. Izaya is Izaya, he doesn’t belong to anyone.”

“That’s a way of looking at it.”

“That’s the only way of looking at it. Shiki-san.”

The honorific rang sardonic.

“That is yet to be seen. After all, lying is to be expected.”
Namie became aware of a sweet bakery scent as soon as she entered Izaya’s vast apartment. Curious, she made her way to the kitchen where she found a flour covered counter along with the remains of eggshells strewn a bit all over.

“What on Earth happened here?”

Izaya popped from under the counter, smudges of flour on his hair.

“Namie-san! I was making cupcakes, you see. But something went amiss.”

“Have you been rolling around in flour?”

“I am not sure what happened, I followed the recipe.”

Said recipe was produced, Izaya squinting at barely legible instructions under the film of flour.

“I’m amazed you can even read this.”

The oven chimed and immediately Izaya was on it.

“The new batch should be fine! Oh, it looks great!”

Izaya smiled brightly as he put on mittens, removed the tray and placed it on the counter.

“You should consider taking a shower. But why cupcakes?”

“I wanted to make you cupcakes…to thank you for saving me at the award ceremony. What was in that pill? It was magical!”
Namie smiled.

“Water and sugar.”

“No way! Could it be the placebo effect?! It strikes! And works, too!”

Namie took a bite of cupcake and chewed thoughtfully.

“Speaking of sugar, these could do with some.”

“Really? Salty! Oh no, I mistook salt for sugar…!”

The floury hairdo made Izaya’s look of absolute mortification even funnier. Namie could not help laughing.

“Baking is not one of your many talents, it seems.”

“There goes my plan…but I can always try again!”

“Don’t. If you’re so keen on cupcakes then we might as well go to a proper cupcake store.”

“Oh, that sounds fun!”

“But first go wash yourself.”

“I obey in fear and trembling.”

*
Izaya picked up his green cupcake most admiringly.

“Green tea cupcake! I live for this! I already had green tea icecream and this is just as good.”

“Don’t you have to taste it first?”

“But it’s so pretty, I don’t want to ruin it…I know!”

Izaya proceeded to photograph the amazing piece of bakery from several angles. Namie tried her own cupcake.

“It is considerably better than your attempt at baking.”

“I tried my best…how was I supposed to know it was salt instead of sugar?”

“For the record, I do not particularly care for cupcakes either.”

Izaya sighed deeply.

“I was aiming for the ‘I don’t really like cupcakes but I’m so touched since you made me some!’ approach.”

“What are you going to do?”

“About what?”

“About Shiki-san.”

“Do I have to do something?”
Izaya was not precisely flippant but somewhat disingenuous.

“People will talk. In fact, they are already talking.”

“I’m sure. That’s what people do. It’s not much a problem, though. It’s not as if I’ve been hiding my relationship with Shiki-san.”

Namie observed him at length to fully engage his attention. It worked, under Namie’s stare Izaya lifted his eyes from the swirly topping of a delicious cupcake.

“There’s a difference between ‘not hiding’ something and making it very, very public. Announcing it to the world at large is bound to affect you in one way or another.”

“That is very likely. Do you expect it to weaken my position?”

“It might very well do that.”

“Ah, it’s a horrible double standard. What is one to do,”

“Orihara, you will take this seriously.”

The snappy tone brought him to attention yet again.

“Even if you say that I hardly know what to do. Damage control? That’s admitting an amount of damage. There are times when making an admission of damage only makes it so much worse.”

“And this is such a time?”

“I think so.”

Namie folded her arms and considered him anew for a few silent moments that weighted horribly
with Izaya. At length she seemed to reach a conclusion.

“Very well. I’ll take your word for it.”

“Put me down! Gah…”

Upside down and completely helpless, Izaya struggled awkwardly, limbs going in all directions as he dangled in the air.

“Look, Look Yumacchi! The six pack is there!”

Erika proceeded to poke Izaya exposed belly.

“So it is! It’s the, ‘slim bishounen turns out to be strong’ angle! Why, if I swung in that direction Izaya-san would so be my type!”

Izaya failed some more. His outfit of very short jacket, shirt and pants became even more revealing when he was in this compromising position. The shirt ended up covering up his face for added discomfort and thus left his vulnerable to the otakus gushing appreciation of his physique.

“Will you stop saying that! Just take me out of this death trap already!”

“But this is necessary training to handle 3D maneuver gear.”

“Only kind of good 3D!”

“Oh, you’re on a roll there, Yumacchi!”

“You’re making me blush like a tsundere heroine,”
“Help! Someone, anyone,“

Erika pulled up his shirt and crouched in order to establish eye contact.

“Izaya-san, think about it this way: you’re doing this for humanity! For the future of mankind! Now with that kind of feeling, put some effort into it.”

Izaya ceased moving altogether. The harness and straps seemed like fun to wear until he actually found himself restrained in them and tumbling madly like a puppet handled by a madman.

“You guys wait until I get my switchblade. You are all so dead!”

As deadly with a blade as Izaya was known to be it was extremely difficult to find him intimidating in the present condition.

“That’s enough.”

With this laconic remark that amounted to an order Shizuo proceeded to untangle Izaya and place him on a nearby bench where Izaya flopped most ungraciously.

“Thanks…! The blood all rushed to my head,”

“Then be quiet.”

Izaya had no option but to obey. Shizuo’s shadow covered him as he took a next to him. For a while none spoke. The otaku duo had drifted to a corner of the park to discuss the technical details of 3D maneuver gear, their voices reached Izaya through bird chirping and the almost distant hum of traffic. He let himself remain very still, eyes closed so that the leaf filtered sun did not quite reach him as light but as an unseen presence. As the sense of vertigo faded away and Izaya opened his eyes to the intricate pattern of tree branches above him, he became aware of a feeling of nostalgia. Perhaps for moments he did not remember but yet could sense just beyond his perception.
“I found that picture inside my copy of The Little Prince.”

“So you still had it?”

“I must have kept it as well. But how strange that you never told anyone about our remote past. And that I didn’t either.”

“For me it was never an actual option. To tell anyone, I mean. For a long time I didn’t get why but then it hit me. Down deep I’d like to think that the Orihara Izaya back then was not the same person who gave me hell. That way I could treasure my memories of you. Weird, huh.”

“Not at all. It is perfectly understandable. What I find weird is that I didn’t spread it far and wide.”

“Maybe it’d be more fun for you that way.”

“Maybe.”

Still groggy, Izaya struggled to a sitting position.

“You can lean on me.”

“I probably shouldn’t. By the way, do not let them put you on the death trap.”

Shizuo chuckled.

“Yeah I was supposed to try it as well but it’s not a good idea.”

Izaya stretched then bounced back to his feet, fully recovered. He retrieved something from his folded furry jacket before approaching the otaku at his leisure, aiming a thin smile at the pair.

“Now, gentlemen. I believe this setting includes two very sharp long blades, does it not? It just so
happen that I have a great affinity to blades. Let’s try it out. Neh?’”

Erika put her hands up.

“It’s okay, maybe some other time.”

“What she said!”

Izaya tilted his head to the side.

“Really? We can’t have that, now can we. If we’re doing this costplay thing then we have to be thorough about it. Most thorough.”

“That’s okay.”

They both saw a glimmer of silver coming their way but only realized it was Izaya’s switchblade zipping its way between them with surgical precision until they saw it hit a tree.

“See? I have mad skills. Isn’t that great?”

Shizuo was watching this amusing scene when he spotted a dead beetle. A mundane reminder of death.

“Where you are. What’re you looking at?”

Heiwajima Shizuo, age 10, walked over to his friend. All things considered Izaya was a weird one so there was no telling what he was up to. But seen from behind like this, crouching at the feet of a tree, Shizuo did not consider Izaya’s oddities. Instead he thought about what a fragile little boy Izaya was. It crossed Shizuo’s mind that he could easily punch him out of existence if he could actually hit him. Not that he had any intention of doing so. If anything, a slight worry for this creature’s safety crept into Shizuo’s awareness.
“Say, Shizu-chan…what do you think of this?”

Shizuo did not particularly care for the tone and it annoyed him that Izaya remained fully focused on whatever he had been staring at. So Shizuo got closer and followed his line of sight.

“What, a dead beetle? That’s what you’ve been looking at? What for?”

A moment of silence.

“Do you think you’re much better than a mere beetle? Ah, but of course you do. You’re smarter, self-aware, a sentient being. But you see, Shizu-chan…none of that matters one bit. In the end you will die and in death be the same as this dead beetle.”

Shizuo blinked.

“Oy, cut that out. You’re freaking me out.”

Izaya got up slowly. Suddenly Shizuo had the distinct impression that Izaya towered over him.

“Everything you’ve ever thought, felt, hoped for, yearned, hated, none of that will at all matter. ‘Death is the great equalizer’? What is that supposed to mean?! I am expected to take it as my lot? Am I expected to live every day knowing that each breath I take brings me closer to my utter demise? Is that even living?”

Shizuo took a step back. Much of the wording went over his head but he could sense that Izaya was in earnest. There was a dull fiery glow in the depth of Izaya’s eyes that sent a chill down Shizuo’s spine. Shizuo does not understand much of it but Izaya’s distress still gets across.

“Hey, calm down. It’s not like we’re gonna die any time soon,”

“What does that change? Whether I die today, tomorrow, a million years from now, the fact remains that all that I am will be gone forever.”
Shizuo was not equipped for this discussion, he knew as much. But he scrambled for consolation and struck on the first thing that came to him more out of desperation than anything else.

“Well, there’s that. God and stuff.”

Izaya’s chuckle was that of disillusioned old age.

“Shizu-chan, the sky above us is empty of gods.”

Shizuo scrambled anew.

“You get to live in the hearts of those you love;”

Izaya’s laughter rang more than a bit hollow.

“So what! That wouldn’t be me, that’d be a recollection of me. Does your dead goldfish ‘live’ in your memory of it?”

“In a way;”

“I won’t accept it, I refuse to accept it. ‘It’s the fate of every living creature to die’? ‘All people die eventually’? If so then I will not be a person any longer! I’ll go beyond humanity if need be and sacrifice every single thing in this our world in order to live forever. For I am Orihara Izaya.”

Even then Shizuo had known that he was face to face with insanity. It robbed him of words entirely. He had no argument to offer, hope could not be bestowed that easily. Shizuo was reeling but he realized two things within two heartbeats. One, Izaya’s disclosure meant that Shizuo had value to Izaya. And two, all that Shizuo wanted was to find some way of soothing this chasm of pain in his friend.
Chapter 27

Izaya climbed down the winding flight of stairs with mounting apprehension. Concrete walls encased the narrow stairwell and along with a low ceiling reinforced a sense of claustrophobia.

“Matsumoto-san, maybe this isn’t a good idea after all.”

“We’re almost there, Orihara-sama.”

For once Izaya did not notice the unwanted form of address. He only breathed more freely the moment they reached a long room, dimly lit but very large.

“So this is the shooting gallery…to think that such places exist right under the streets of Tokyo!”

Izaya took a moment to marvel at the mysteries of subterranean arcades spanning their secret networks underneath the surface of the city. Once more the city mirrored human existence with this duality of murky depths and smooth façades.

“That’s right. This is where our guys train.”

Matsumoto pushed a switch and bright light flooded the scenery. Izaya’s natural curiosity kicked in despite his misgivings. Several lanes ran across the whole width of the room, one end of which stood a target and at the other a booth-like compartment. The ceiling was crossed by a system of ropes that Izaya supposed served to move the targets.

“Wow, quite impressive.”

The scent of gunpowder hanging like a ghost put a damper to Izaya’s enthusiasm.

“We need this kind of place. This way, Orihara-sama.”

Izaya followed him to another smaller room that Matsumoto unlocked but he waited on the threshold as he returned with a small case.
“On second thought, I’ll just watch. I’m not into shooting anyway.”

Matsumoto faced him with his squarest expression.

“Orihara-sama, it is important that you know how to protect yourself. The world is a dangerous place.”

“That much I concede but it’s not as if I’m likely to ever have to shoot anyone…besides, did Shiki-san even give permission for this? Won’t you get into trouble?”

Never one to do anything out of impulse, Matsumoto had thought it over until he reached the decision of teaching Izaya how to use a gun. He had overheard Shiki expressing his distaste for such a thing but in a rare moment of independent decision he had gone against his boss. Which was not to say that this was an act of rebellion. Part of it was Matsumoto’s heartfelt desire of keeping Izaya safe for Izaya’s sake but the fact that Izaya was Shiki’s elect played a very big role. That Shiki had just made it public how he viewed Izaya only made Matsumoto surer that this was the right thing to do.

“Shiki-sama wants Orihara-sama to be by his side.”

Izaya fidgeted.

“At any rate, it might be best if Shiki-san does not find out about this.”

Matsumoto nodded gravely. He knew that while this might very well save Izaya’s life at some point it was also likely to backfire on Matsumoto himself before it came to that. It was a risk he was more than willing to take.

“Please pay close attention.”

Izaya did as told. He did not like it but he committed to memory the very detailed explanation. Until he actually held the gun Izaya fully expected to fail so tremendously that Matsumoto would give up on him altogether.
But as soon as he took aim a strange stillness came upon him. The headphones muffled the world but still heard the echo of Matsumoto’s warnings about recoil and his advice on the proper grip in his mind but it all slid to the background of his awareness. His perception narrowed down to the human shaped target.

Izaya shot.

“Orihara-sama, have you done this before? That’s a perfect score! As is to be expected from- are you alright?”

Izaya suddenly felt very weak at the knees. Matsumoto deftly removed the gun from him. In his enthusiasm he had forgotten that Izaya still had the headphones on so he now removed them.

Izaya smiled wanly.

“I really don’t like this,”

“It’s enough for today. Let us go back.”

Matsumoto tidied up everything and locked up. Izaya gave a sigh of relief as soon as he felt the sun on his skin.

“I think I need a nice cup of delicious green tea.”

“Should I escort you back home, Orihara-sama?”

“No need for that. I’m fine.”

Matsumoto was not entirely sure. For once he had enough tact to know that praising Izaya’s borderline prodigious shooting talent was not advisable. But it would all be worth in the long run.

Izaya hurried home and dashed to the shower. That bloodshed clung to him was an irrational notion but it lingered nonetheless. He stood under the hot water and closed his eyes.
“So uncool of me…”

Izaya went from the shower to the tub, needing to soak up. The water relaxed some of his tension and after a while lulled him into a sense of tentative well-being. Guns were a part of his professional life but that was far as he was willing to take it. Everything else was off limits.

“Did you people forget me?! Oh, it’s you, Shinra.”

Shinra blinked very rapidly.

“You don’t have to sound that disappointed. And what are you wearing?”

Izaya stood in the threshold of his apartment clad in a very unlikely sky blue kimono with a bright golden obi. He now sighed heavily.

“I thought you were the Kyoto kimono people.”

Shinra noticed a slight lilt in Izaya’s intonation.

“Ah…I can back some other time if you’re busy.”

“No way, do come in.”

Still in a state of mystification Shinra found himself facing Izaya in one of the sleek black sofas.

“So…do you dress up in weird clothes when I drop by or do you do it normally?”

“It’s a long story but some people from Kyoto are dead-set on using me as a model for their female
kimonos. They caught wind of what I said about playing a cross-dresser character and next thing I know their boss descends upon me like a pack of harpies. So they forced me into wearing this, rambled at length and then got some urgent call and up and left!”

Shinra tried not to laugh but it did not work.

“Oh my, that is so strange but entirely believable at the same time. It looks good on you, that kimono.”

Izaya sighed anew.

“Not you too. I’d offer you some tea but it’s not easy when you’re stuck in this.”

“So you need help getting out of that?”

“Probably. I just spent the last half an hour trying to undress with no success. I managed to get rid of the headpiece but that was about it.”

“They must really love you.”

Izaya rolled his eyes as he got up and turned around.

“Right…just help me with the obi, please.”

Shinra got closer and passed his hands through the fabric.

“This is pure silk, must be worth a fortune. How great are these kimono people?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. You can take it with you if you want but first help me out here!”

Shinra fumbled with the bow.
“How does this work, exactly?”

“How does this work, exactly?”

“Izaya looked up from over his shoulder and suddenly Shinra became all too aware of the weirdness of the whole situation. Izaya’s irritation was responsible for a blush-like tinge that almost glowed thanks most likely to makeup.

“Now this is awkward…”

“You’re making it worse!”

The almost surreal spectacle was too distracting so that had Shinra ended up tightening the obi instead of undoing it.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“You’re making it worse!”

“She really is a younger sister, isn’t she?”

“Izaya resumed his former seat from where he glared most viciously. Shinra put up his hands in mock defeat.

“I really am sorry, don’t kill me now.”

“How about you make me some tea?”

“I’m on it.”

Izaya took a kind of slightly twisted pleasure in turning the tables of host and guest like this. By the time Shinra placed a fragrant cup of green tea in front of Izaya the menacing aura had receded. Shinra watched in fascinating as the kimono sleeves shimmering delicately with Izaya’s elegant
gestures.

“Tea makes everything better.”

“Glad you’re feeling better.”

“Barely. So, what brings you to this part of town?”

Shinra took his own time sipping from his cup of tea. He was suddenly unsure of how to proceed.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“As does everyone. What about, though?”

Izaya was a bit disappointed. For all his apparent bristling at Shinra he was happy for this visit and hoped it was a social one. But Shinra’s tentative attitude told him otherwise.

“I saw on the news about the whole thing they’re doing in Shibuya, you know with some rights to same sex couples. So I wanted to hear what you think about it.”

“It’s an historical decision, assuming it actually goes anywhere. At any rate, I’d say it’s a step in the right direction. By the way, when did I become your oracle for social issues? I wasn’t aware you prized my opinion on such matters.”

“I thought it’d interest you,”

“Oh. I see. Shinra, you are laboring under a very false impression. Do refrain from imposing your own values on others, not everyone is interested in marriage.”

Shinra held up his hands in defeat. Izaya’s tone was not entirely biting but was not particularly encouraging either.
“Sorry, I just didn’t know how to get around to it.”

Izaya tilted his head very slightly. A new thought occurred to him, or rather, a change of attitude. From knee-jerk reaction on having his privacy infringed Izaya shifted to a more general approach. This ability to switch between perspectives and to allow his very personal experience to serve as a universal guide was part of Izaya’s particular insight into the very heart of human nature.

“In other words, you are here to discuss my sexual orientation and/or my involvement with Shiki-san. How interesting, how very interesting that you should at all be concerned about such matters.”

Shinra was taken aback by the sudden glow in Izaya’s eyes. It took him a split second to realize that there was no lurking menace here, Izaya was indeed curious and overtly so.

“But of course I care, since I care about you.”

Izaya tapped his index finger on his chin, the swaying sleeve glittering very blue in the subtle motion.

“I see, there is always that. I was about to accuse you to hypocrisy as it’s not exactly any of your business and you’re in no position to criticize me regarding my choice in romantic partners, at least mine is most definitely human- but I won’t. After all, prying into people’s lives is basically all I do so I too have no right to criticize you. So I’ll answer you and won’t even charge you.”

That Izaya’s smile was genuinely affable only made Shinra feel more uncomfortable.

“You’re enjoying yourself way too much. At my expense, too.”

Izaya giggled childishly.

“That’s impossible, there’s no such thing as enjoying oneself too much. Now, to answer your questions. If I were to identify myself I’d say I fall under ‘bisexual’. Regarding my relationship with Shiki-san, it is a cooperative effort that is beneficial to all parties involved.”

“That doesn’t sound very romantic.”
In fact, it sounded quite dreary to Shinra. The main reason why Shinra had gone to such pains to approach this subject with Izaya had to do with Shizuo. So much so that Shinra could be said to said to be on a mission for the sake of one who did not know and would not have approved of it. If gender was not an impediment then Shinra could not help think that Shizuo ought to at least have a chance. The way Izaya characterized his current relationship only sealed Shinra’s conviction.

Meanwhile Izaya was calmly sipping his tea.

“It is not meant to be romantic. And now, Shinra…I have been very candid, have I not? It my turn to wonder now, and to wonder on what you are willing to tell me.”

“Meaning…?”

Shinra had a moment of panic, it was all too likely that Izaya had just seen through him.

“Meaning, ‘information exchange’. Since I have told you what you wanted to know I believe I am entitled to ask for something in return. Neh? Give and take.”

“What happened to not charging me.”

“I won’t charge you a single yen. I have no interest in your money.”

Shinra squirmed.

“You want me to tell you about Celty and I…?”

Shinra felt himself paling. For all his gushing loquacity Shinra held his private life with Celty as sacred thing. Telling Izaya, of all people, struck him as all shades of wrong. As nice as Izaya might become, and even if Shinra was seriously entertaining whether Shizuo was not better off with Izaya, the fact remained that telling Izaya was tantamount to betraying one’s feelings. Shinra could not escape the irrational but very real feeling that Izaya sapped something out of their victims simply by having them confess what lurked in their heart of hearts.
Suddenly Izaya was on his feet and standing far too close.

“You don’t like that, now do you. That’s alright. I’m not interested in that either. But it’s food for thought. You expect me to tell you how I feel but clam up when it comes to talking yourself. Isn’t that an unfair trade? Ah, I’m the losing party.”

Shinra could not tell how Izaya had managed to bridge the gap between them so fast when the kimono constricted his movements. Then it hit him, Izaya on ‘Izaya mode’, as Shinra thought of it, was on a whole different level. A disturbing serenity made him immune to mere humans.

“If anything you’re…standing above us all.”

Izaya tilted his head anew.

“If you wish to see it in that light. What I am saying is that there is such a thing as reciprocity in this world. In other words, if you want to play me then be ready for my playing you.”

All that Shinra could do was shrug.

“I’m outmatched and I know it.”

“Sushi! Where have you been all this time, you’re supposed to protect me. You let the Kyoto people do quite a number on me, I’ve become a Christmas wrap!”

Izaya scooped the tiny cat that proceeded to make himself comfortable on the sleeves.

“Your cat likes the kimono,”

“Sushi is best cat! I know, I’ll get him a cat-kimono!”

And just like this Izaya hopped over to the laptop, nearly falling once, and in no time was going through kimonos for small felines.
“They actually have cat kimonos…”

“It’s a great time to be alive, Shinra! Oh look, one with a sushi pattern! Ordering at the speed of light!”

Shinra adjusted his glasses. He knew that this bout of silliness did not mean that Izaya was harmless after all; it was the other way around. It was a proof of how dangerous Izaya could be that he was able to move on to buying traditional clothes for his cat. And it also put Shinra in his place.
Chapter 28

The call came around midnight while Izaya was musing over and slowly spinning on his favorite swivel chair. The restricted number and very vague wording told Izaya that it was probably some shady deal and that asking questions would only make the caller suspicious.

All that Izaya was told was that ‘another one of those’ had just arrived at a certain place in Tokyo bay. It could be anything other than a legit. And that it was a trap could not be discounted either.

Already in a pensive mood, Izaya spun a few times as he pondered his options. He could always simply ignore the deal, the more reasonable choice. Asking Namie or Shiki whether they knew anything about it was also viable but Izaya discounted it almost right away.

Or he could scout the location himself and see just what it was about. Izaya settled for this.

An hour later found him flitting from shadow to shadow, making a careful and slow approach. There was danger to this but Izaya had already texted Namie his whereabouts and armed with his pet knife and with equipped with infra-red binnacles he felt strangely at ease.

The location was a desolate one as Izaya expected but it was still a strange sensation to move in such darkness when the city was so close in the glittery distance. Water lapped darkly more as a suggestion of a river than physical water.

Barren grounds edged all the way to buildings in several stages of ruin, the occasional gust of wind vibrating eerily on rusty fences caging empty plots of land. Izaya shivered not at the cold but at the grimness of it all. He might as well be walking through the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.

Izaya knew what he was looking for the moment he saw it. The cargo compartment stood out greatly in the remains of what had once been a wharf. Izaya took cover and strained his ears for any sign of life. His binnacles showed none. Izaya waited until the creeping uneasiness reached a certain pitch that could not be ignored. Something told him that he could wait out the whole long night without anyone intruding on his vigil.

Still, his approach to the compartment was stealthy. Izaya was making his way around it when a bang from inside shocked him into a crouch, blade out. Fear for himself did not factor in as he realized almost immediately that this was not an ambush. The loud bang against metal went unregistered by the world. Izaya was a lone witness who dashed into action by banging back.
“Is anyone in there? Can you hear me? Bang twice if you can hear this!”

A single bang followed, weaker now.

“Just wait a bit, I’ll get you out.”

He located the opening and sure enough it was padlocked. But to his great surprise the key was neatly placed nearly on a white hanky. There was no time to consider the implications, Izaya unlocked the padlock and pushed open the doors to reveal hell.

The first thing that struck him was the smell. A mixture of urine and feces, of bottled up terror and long suffering in the dark. There were about thirty people. Most huddled together in bunches, all grimy and tattered, most dead.

Izaya had a moment of nausea that nearly doubled him over. The compartment reeked death at him. Later Izaya did not even remember calling for ambulances and giving a very precise and calm description of this dreadful discovery, he did not recall calling Shinra either. The next thing he did remember was wading through filth and calling out.

“Hey! Is anyone alive? Can anyone hear me! Oy!”

There must be at least one survivor and probably next to the walls but Izaya kept stopping to check for vitals. Dead eyes stared blankly at him. He tripped a few times. The stench intensified as he made his way deeper and Izaya had to retrieve the handkerchief as a makeshift mask.

“Help is already on the way! I’m here, too! Hello!”

Even to himself he sounded pathetic. A very faint noise had him dashing over corpses. A little boy fought for air in the arms of his dead mother. Izaya wiped grime from the tiny face.

“Hyung...”
Pieces clicked in Izaya’s mind. North Korean refugees, most likely. Why they had ended up stranded here Izaya could only guess but right now that did not even matter.

“That’s right, it’s your big brother. You’re going to be alright.”

Never had Izaya been some glad for his Korean lessons. It was with difficulty that he disentangled the child. Izaya carried him outside, the all too light body heaving all the way. Izaya wrapped him in his fury jacket.

“Hyung, mom…”

“Mother is waiting for you in the hospital. She’s fine.”

“Don’t cry…”

Izaya had no idea that he was crying. He wiped his tears and forced a cheerful smile that cost him more than he knew possible.

“Who’s crying? Big brothers don’t cry.”

“Good…sing the Arirang song…please?”

So many words took a lot of gasping and caused a coughing fit. Izaya grabbed a small hand, too many bones, he could see them outlined under the cover of skin. And large wide awake eyes begged him to be someone else.

“Don’t talk, you’ll tire yourself.”

“Ari…”

Izaya took a deep breath. Fortunately he knew the tune and the lyrics by heart. There were variations, Izaya prayed this was the right one.
“Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo...Arirang gogaero neom-eoganda…”

He was still humming it when Shinra arrived. The lurid glow of blue, white and red lights flickered wildly in alarm as the ambulances marched on, wailing. Izaya kept on humming Arirang even after Shinra pulled the hood over the face of the dead little boy.

“Ari-ari-rang, ari-rang,”
Chapter 29

Official procedure occupied Izaya’s next hours as the police asked him a series of questions. He answered lucidly and was very aware that they were sparing him on the account of his being Orihara Izaya. A normal citizen would have been grilled.

So far Izaya had not made use of his contacts in the police force but that was about to change.

“I expect to be informed of any developments in this case.”

With this Izaya walked out of the police station into strong sunshine. He stood in the light in brief isolation. Then the spell broke and the people awaiting him approached.

“Say, how about you stay at our place a while?”

Shinra. Full of worry, ready to slip him a soporific at the first opportunity. Spewing goodwill.

[That’s right, you can stay as long as you want.]

Celty reinforcing the very awkward but genuine care.

“There’s no need for that, I’ll take care of everything.”

Namie stepped up with her usual no nonsense attitude, a strange form of kindness. Izaya’s sharpened analytical sense registered all this.

“Thank you but I’ll be going home now.”

Shinra fidgeted some.

“Will you be okay?”
“I’ll be fine. I know what to do and I can do it.”

Shinra was not entirely sure he liked the sound of that.

[We’ll drop by later, to check up on you]

Warm air scented with exhaust carried the humdrum of traffic far and wide. The world moved on.

“I appreciate that but I’d rather you didn’t. I’ll be very busy in the near future.”

True to his word Izaya lost little time but he knew that rushing things would be his undoing. Above all he needed to stay in control of himself and steel his emotions into fuel to be applied by his ever sharp reason. So Izaya took the time to take a long bath and set his mind to resting for the next couple of hours because he knew that taxing mental effort demanded him to be at his fittest.

Namie was waiting for him with a cup of tea.

“Here. And take this, you have to sleep.”

Izaya smiled wanly, curled on a sofa and held the cup with both hands before taking a sip.

“Thanks, I’ll do that.”

Namie blinked in surprise.

“Really? I expected you to start immediately.”

“I’d accomplish nothing that way.”
“You’re very calm.”

“Am I now. I’m not too sure myself.”

“Should I call Shiki-san?”

Izaya shook his head.

“Don’t. Namie-san, do you know what have I’m planning to do?”

“Find out just who called you to that spot and why, for starters.”

Izaya nodded and sipped some of the fragrant tea.

“That’s right. And then I’ll find out just how those refugees got stranded there and execute whoever was responsible.”

“I thought it’d be something like that. But why ‘execute’?”

“As opposed to ‘kill’? An execution presumes there is justice involved, therefore, that is what I’ll do.”

“And your no killing policy? It no longer applies?”

“It no longer applies.”

Shiki watched the flood of people rush from the arrivals gate. Izaya rolled into view almost immediately. Shiki saw took the rare opportunity for observing him unawares.
It was the second time Shiki saw Izaya in mourning clothes. They fit him very well, perhaps because black was Izaya’s natural preference, but everything else was off. Shiki had been ready for sadness, anger, a combination of both but this weird blankness of expression took him aback.

Black tie fluttering as he strode ahead, Izaya paid no heed to his surroundings even as he flawlessly navigated the living tide. Shiki had taken refuge behind a column in order to remain hidden but he now realized it was an unnecessary precaution. All of Izaya’s resources were rerouted within, Shiki could walk straight up to him without even noticing.

Shiki had a moment to reflect that this lack of expression drew a kind of new beauty to Izaya. It became a matter of purity of line instead of the intense and often baffling personality. But Shiki did not lose sight of the person that was Orihara Izaya, now perhaps more than ever it was crucial that he did not do so.

“Welcome back.”

Izaya smiled through his blankness.

“Shiki-san. There was no need to come all the way to Narita.”

“You’ll need a ride. I expect you’re in a hurry.”

“Yes. Thank you, I’ll take you on that.”

There was even a very polite bow. Shiki felt it put a world of distance between them.

In the car Shiki made sure to roll up the partition between the back seat and the driver. He then pondered on how to break the silence only to have Izaya preempt him.

“I gather you’ve heard about what happened already.”

“Yagiri-san has informed me. You went to Korea for the funeral?”
A nod. Izaya did not avoid eye contact but Shiki found him unreadable.

“Yes. I managed to have them all buried in Korea. The authorities are still trying to find whether there is surviving family in the South but it will take some time.”

“I can imagine. What are your plans?”

“Execution of whoever is responsible.”

No hesitation. This Shiki had predicted even if Namie had been tight-lipped for she too had her own code of loyalty.

“I won’t say you’re wrong in seeking revenge even if it is hardly rational.”

Izaya blinked.

“Revenge? There were thirty four people in that cargo compartment. Thirty four people who left their hell of a country in the hopes of building a better life only to die horribly. To execute whoever did such a thing is not ‘revenge’. It is ‘justice’.”

“That’s a dangerous word.”

“I know.”

Shiki was silent for a while.

“And won’t you rely on me?”

“That is not a viable option, Shiki-san. Illegal immigrants are handled by the yakuza, especially in large numbers. I have narrowed it down to a few groups already and it is only a matter of time until I find which one it was. It is bound to have some connection to the Awakusu. So your involvement is
“out of the question.”

“In other words, you’re going to war and I’m not to follow.”

“That’s right.”

“Have you considered that you may be doing exactly what the person who called you wants you to do?”

“I’m quite sure that’s the case. It is irrelevant, though. Either way I must do what I must do.”

“That’s the kind of language I understand. Won’t you allow me to side with you?”

Izaya was visibly surprised.

“I can’t see why you should, it won’t benefit you and is very likely to upset the stability that your group has just recently conquered. If anything you should be trying to dissuade me.”

Shiki took his time producing a cigarette that he twirled between two fingers, unlighted. Even Izaya’s speech was one of distancing.

“You can’t be dissuaded, that much I can tell. But you know, Izaya, the yakuza isn’t just about shuffling influences and managing alliances. If anything, it’s about loyalty.”

“Loyalty within the structure, I’m sure. I am an outsider, the eternal observer if you will.”

“You’re not an outsider as far as I’m concerned.”

“Shiki-san, I’m not entirely sure I follow.”

“I’m saying that I’m on your side.”
Izaya lapsed into very thoughtful silence. It lasted for the rest of the journey. Shiki bid his time.

Shizuo found about it via Shinra almost right away but getting in touch with Izaya proved impossible. Only now did he manage to find him in the Shinjuku apartment. Izaya was about to leave so he briefed Shizuo in short very pragmatic sentences as he put on a bullet-proof vest and loaded a gun.

“Guess I’ve got good timing. You’ll need help.”

“Are you offering?”

“Yeah. Yakuza man is going with you but you’ll need muscle. That’s what I’m for.”

Izaya frowned at this. It was the first sign of an actual expression Shizuo had seen since Izaya had returned from Korea.

“Don’t say that, human beings are not means to an end. They are ends in themselves. You’re not ‘for’ anything other than doing as you will.”

“Good, what I ‘will’ is going with you.”

Izaya nodded.

“Alright. But there is absolutely nothing forcing you to do this.”

Which was not at all true.

“Can you fire that?”
Shizuo accepted Shiki and his men with a very curt nod. He knew that there was strength in numbers. Shizuo could very well storm into a yakuza compound all by himself but he could not assure Izaya’s safety.

The tense ride in a nondescript van was not very long but enough for Shizuo and Shiki to reassess Izaya’s purpose anew. Izaya had provided the building’s blueprints but the actual strategy had been decided by Shiki.

Which was why Izaya stayed behind in the car while Shiki’s men secured the perimeter. It came as a great relief to Shizuo, he half-expected Izaya to stride into the den all by himself, so much so that Shizuo kept an eye on the doors lest Izaya dashed out. But he soon realized that Izaya was staking his chances on success at all cost.

Shiki joined the vanguard. As his men immobilized the last of the Kumihara, the group unlucky enough to incur in Izaya’s wrath, Shiki reflected on how easy it had been to assemble this task force. Upon hearing that it was for Izaya’s sake the entire lot had volunteered. The eternal outsider had unknowingly seeded borderline fanatical devotion. Shiki did not even need to order them.

Shiki double-checked that there was no resistance nor any reinforcements on their way before calling Izaya. He considered simply killing the boss himself but dismissed the idea almost immediately. This was something for Izaya to handle on Izaya’s terms.

The row of suits formed naturally to allow Izaya’s passage down a long corridor. Izaya walked at a firm pace, confidently, unflattering. Still in mourning clothes. Shizuo followed on his heels and for once Shiki approved.

“Are you the boss of the Kumihara group?”

Said boss had tried to seek refuge under an oversized desk but had been dragged to the middle of the office where he now huddled in obvious distress.

“O-Orihara Izaya,”
A kick was aimed at the man’s back by none other than Matsumoto.

“That’s ‘-sama’!”

Izaya stopped an incoming assault with a mere gesture. Matsumoto backed away immediately.

“Do not make me repeat myself. Are you the boss of the Kumihara group?”

“Yes- that’s me,”

“I will allow you to explain yourself. You arranged to transport a certain cargo compartment. It carried thirty four North Koreans all of which died as a result of either negligence, malice or a combination of both. Care to fill me on the details?”

The man gaped silently a few times.

“That was, that was Orihara-sama’s order- I did as told, why,”

Izaya produced the gun in one swift flicker of the wrist that greatly impressed the yakuza, Shiki included.

“I advise not to lie, I can make your demise very painful.”

The man squirmed greatly.

“I’m not lying! Orihara-sama contacted me last year and gave me instructions and a date, I was to transport refugees from North Korea- lock the compartment and leave it at a certain location- with the key- Orihara-sama, surely you remember!”

Shiki and Shizuo exchanged one glance.
“That can’t be true,”

“It’s true! It was Orihara-sama who gave me instructions! I have proof!”

“Proof…?”

Frantic nodding as the man saw a ray of hope.

“Yes! Orihara-sama gave me a note to deliver should you visit, it’s in the second drawer,”

“I addressed a note to myself…?”

“That’s right! Look for it, it’s right there!”

Matsumoto hesitated but a glance from Shiki sent him searching for said note. Izaya’s voice dropped to a whisper as he read it.

“‘Hello, myself! Tell me, what does guilt feel like?’…”

Izaya swayed. It was Shizuo who acted. With a single chop to the back of Izaya’s neck Shizuo knocked him out, retrieved the gun and scooped Izaya into his arms. Before Izaya could turn the gun on himself as Shizuo feared.

Shiki signaled his men to keep their positions. Already they were ready to fight Shizuo even knowing his prodigious strength. But presently Shiki had more pressing things in mind.

He exchanged another look with Shizuo, a longer one this time. They both knew that Izaya’s tribulations were about to begin.
Chapter 30

Shiki and Shizuo watched the unmoving figure in bed. They had spoken preciously little but had managed to reach something of a non-verbal agreement. Shiki realized that Shizuo had found out about Izaya’s memory loss and what would have been an act of betray turned into one of the few favorable circumstances in a truly acute crisis. For once Shiki and Shizuo had accepted a tacit alliance of sorts that was not even strained for they were both too focused on tackling what was to come once Izaya woke up. That was how they were able to stand side by side in silence for hours on end without a hint of awkwardness or a semblance of hostility.

Izaya had curled up as soon as he was placed in bed and had remained thus. No expression marred his quiet blankness but even in sleep his hands were fists.

Izaya’s eyes snapped open but it was with slow deliberate movements that he got up.

“What do you think led to North Korea becoming as it is?”

Izaya addressed no one in particular. After starting at realizing that he was awake Shiki and Shizuo decided to hold their peace for the question was clearly rhetorical.

“Do we blame the historical geopolitical context that resulted in the peninsula splitting? Or do we factor in more the developments that happened afterwards? Perhaps a balanced approach is better and we ought to take into account all this and more, the Japanese occupation included. We can go back and keep going back or we can go forward and keep going forward and many culprits will appear. It becomes a compounded problem, so great that without the informed opinion of specialists one is almost lost at sea.”

Shizuo was unsure of where this was leading. On one hand that Izaya’s reasoning was so clear was positive on the other hand Shizuo knew that there was a buildup here, the conclusion of which could not be guessed. Shiki got this as well and refrained from asking anything. But he did notice that Izaya did not even bother asking questions about himself, not even to inquire as to his whereabouts.

“Of course, such considerations are not my area of expertise. I deal with people on an individual level. I take into consideration that they hail from a particularly cultural background but that is as far as I go. Because we’re all human at heart.”

A slight pause. Izaya lowered his eyes to his hands that he now folded.
“What happened to those 34 people was a consequence of a very long chain of events most of which have no connection to myself. But that is not relevant. In Aristotelian terms all that is the efficient cause while I was the final cause. In other words, I killed every single one of them.”

Shiki had seen this before, Izaya’s turning to his intellect for solace. It was a process of putting some distance between himself and his experience, a means of drawing meaning from the chaotic world. Presently it amounted to a great effort just to avoid collapse. Shiki could tell from the white knuckles and even from the deflated voice with its lack of intonation in which every word was delivered with the same calibrated tone that let no emotion seep in.

“I understand what I must do now.”

This was the break Shiki had been waiting for. Only now did Izaya establish eye contact with him and thus let Shiki participate in the thus far monologue.

“And what is that?”

“I must recover my memories at any cost. Namie-san can arrange that. And then, Shiki-san, I want you to strap me a chair and torture me until you know what more crimes I might have hatched. After you ascertain that you must kill me.”

Shiki had expected something unusual but this was so incredible that for a whole minute he did not even know what to say.

“Do you realize what you’re asking of me?”

Izaya nodded.

“I am fully aware. It is the only optio-”

“Not gonna happen.”
Shizuo spoke for the first time.

“It’s fine, Shiki-san can handle it,”

“Not gonna happen. Yakuza man isn’t going to hurt you. It’s not gonna happen.”

Shiki was unsure if Shizuo meant that he would pummel Shiki into a pulp if he dared to do such a thing or whether Shizuo’s point was that Shiki was unable of inflicting any violence on Izaya.

“My existence is too danger-”

“It’s not gonna happen.”

“Will you let me finish my sentences?”

“You already gave us quite a lecture so be quiet now and listen.”

Shiki hesitated very briefly. He should perhaps put an end to this as Shizuo’s provocation might backfire at any time but at least Izaya’s budding anger struck him as a healthier reaction than apparently rational insanity. And it pushed Izaya out of his self-commiseration.

“Heiwajima Shizuo, I will not allow you to give me orders.”

“You can’t do this, Izaya. Because of the fox.”

Izaya leaped from the sheets in a sudden bout of movement that took Shiki entirely by surprise.

“Why are you bringing that up now?”

“Remember the fox. Right now you can only see yourself so remember the fox.”
“Why…”

Shiki nearly intervened but a gesture from Shizuo halted him. Whatever this fox business this it had a very strong effect on Izaya and probably much more than anything Shiki could say at this juncture. It was not an easy pill to swallow but Shiki accepted it for the time being.

“Because we’ve spent time together we’ve formed bonds. Not just with me, you’ve talked, laughed and made fun of many people- you’ve formed bonds with them. You’re thinking, ‘I’ll take myself out of existence to avoid bringing more pain to others’ but you’re forgetting that if you die you’ll hurt everyone. You can’t do that.”

“Are you guilt tripping me into remaining alive?”

“Put it that way if you want. But it’s the truth.”

“The truth, you say!”

“What you’re planning won’t even work. Torture will do nothing other than hurt your body, no one would learn a single thing from you even if they tear you limb by limb. And I think you know this.”

“So now you’re a mind reader,”

“I’m not. But I can tell that right now you want to punish your former self at any cost. You told me yourself that suicide was always your final trump card but it’s not worth it.”

Shiki was following the exchange very closely and saw Izaya hesitate very slightly only to relapse into a very thin smile.

“You are not entirely correct. Do I think I should be punished? Yes! But not out of masochism. It’s a matter of justice. I am already a murderer but I cannot abide becoming a hypocrite on top of all else. Shiki-san, please make the arrangements.”
Shiki reached a decision.

“Alright.”

Shizuo did not simply glare, Shiki felt murder shooting from his eyes. Before Shizuo did something stupid Shiki had to take action.

“Thank you.”

“I can leave it all as my final will and it will be carried out.”

Izaya blinked.

“Final will…?”

Shiki produced a gun from a pocket of his sleek white jacket and immediately put the barrel to his head.

“That’s right. I’ll do as you wish and then I’ll pull this trigger. Do you want my death on your conscience, Izaya?”

Izaya gasped loudly, eyes wide in horror.

“Shiki-san, what are you doing?”

“I’m telling you that I’ll kill myself. Don’t you like the idea?”

“Please put the gun away, this isn’t funny,”

“I am very serious.”
To make a point Shiki undid the security, the dry click making Izaya jolt.

“Why are you even doing this?!”

“Does this bother you?”

“I don’t understand, what is the point of this?”

“You don’t like the thought of my dying because you love me?”

“Yes!”

Shiki made sure to look him straight in the eye.

“Then think about how I feel when you order me to torture and kill you.”

Tears brimmed Izaya’s now very wide eyes but he fought them valiantly. It came across as rather pitiful.

“I get it, please put the gun away.”

The security kicked in and the weapon disappeared into the folds of the jacket. Shiki slowly walked over to Izaya and stood close enough to touch.

“Everyone’s a hypocrite at some point or another. So be it.”

Shiki meant to bridge emotional distance by getting physically closer. Izaya placed the world between them by taking a single step back.
“Shiki-san, that was very intelligent of you. More than simply moving others on the boards by manipulating their emotions you’ve thrown yourself on the board and used your own emotions to produce a desired effect.”

This was very Izaya-like language. The game metaphor was odd and not particularly adequate but more than that Shiki was struck by Izaya’s demeanor. There was no trace of tears in the steady gaze that confronted him. Shiki hesitated slightly.

“If you want to see it that way.”

The sound of clapping surprised Shiki so much that for a split second he could not even recognize it.

“Congratulations, Shiki-san. To turn your feelings into a means of wielding power over others is a hallmark of genius and a mark of true leadership. Shall I make you the king of this world?”

The exact implications of Izaya’s speech were unclear. Shiki did not care.

“Fine by me. As long as you live.”

“Because I’m ever so useful?”

“Because I love you.”

“I want you to leave now. Both of you.”

Shiki could not help a bitter smile. The cruel irony of it all reached him as an almost physical spasm of pain. Shiki did not expect Izaya to melt into a puddle of affectionate goo but he at least hoped that a perfectly sincere confession could bind Izaya to life.

“Alright. Just know that I stand by what I said.”

It occurred to Shiki as he exited the room that this was the first time he had truly lost face. He was surprised at how little that seemed to matter. Shizuo watched him leave then followed.
Izaya remained where he stood.

“You got one of them calligraphy people?”

Shiki looked up from the cemetery of half-dead cinders crowding the ashtray. He was almost surprised at finding Shizuo still in the room. The voice did little to stir him from a state of leaden stupor but it forced him to acknowledge another presence.

“What ‘calligraphy people’?”

Shizuo produced one of his cheap cigarettes and it occurred to Shiki that the scent was truly sickening.

“Those guys that can tell who wrote stuff by looking at the calligraphy.”

The sofa creaked slightly as Shiki shifted.

“And what do you want such an expert for?”

Realization hit Shiki before he even finished speaking. It brought him to his feet in one swift movement.

“To see just who wrote that letter.”

Shiki narrowed his eyes for the briefest of moments.

“Surely you’re not implying it wasn’t Izaya? He recognized it himself.”
“Can’t tell for sure if you don’t investigate.”

Shiki blinked.

“The chain of events seems very clear.”

Not that Shiki could possibly even begin to understand Izaya’s motivation for mass murder coupled with extreme self-destruction.

Shizuo shrugged.

“Dunno about that.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Shizuo took some time to discard the cigarette in the already littered ashtray.

“For starters get a calligraphy guy. Then let me interrogate the yakuza guy. Film the whole thing.”

Shiki was silent for a while. Cogs were moving in is mind.

“Very well then.”

Izaya was still standing stock-still when Matsumoto softly made his way into the room after knocking at the door.

“Orihara-sama?”
Izaya reacted in slow motion, turning his eyes from whatever blind point on the wall that seemed to have fully engaged his attention. He granted Matsumoto a tired, weak smile that startled him considerably.

“Hi there.”

“We guys got you some food, figured Orihara-sama would be hungry.”

Izaya nodded by reflex.

“Thanks but you can tell Shiki-san I’m not hungry.”

Matsumoto fidgeted some. He cut a silly figure, such a large and bulky man unsure of what to do with himself.

“This has nothing to do with Shiki-sama, we guys got together and got Orihara-sama his favorite tuna.”

Izaya drifted back to full awareness. He could read worry in this foot soldier bearing food goods as an offering.

“Sorry. Let’s see…wow, this is a whole banquet here! Call the others and let’s dig into the sushi goodness.”

Izaya was already placing the food on the only available table.

“We got the sushi for Orihara-sama,”

“Food tastes better with company. So will you eat with me, please?”

It was almost a plea. Matsumoto hesitated then settled in front of Izaya at the table.
“The rest of the guys are busy.”

“That’s a shame.”

Izaya produced a bottle from the bag.

“Green tea, my favorite brand, too! How did you guys know?”

“Orihara-sama always has green tea.”

“Ha, goes to show that as you are observing someone you are also being observed.”

Izaya threw himself into cheerfulness as a means of gathering self-control. He was profoundly thankful for this intermission. Just when he felt he most needed to be alone he realized that he was in dire need of simple human company. He could tell that it was top quality sushi mostly by the texture and glossy aspect. It tasted flavorless but the mere act of going through the motions of eating—gripping the chopsticks, using them to pick up delicate slabs of fish, chewing, swallowing—went a long way into cementing a method that established normalcy.

As so often happen when something upset his inner balance, Izaya’s mind tackled abstractions as a means of processing. The macroscopic perspective not only offered a kind of solace as it was a keen insight into his own particular case. Izaya was reminded of how meals were thrown after a funeral as a symbol of life triumphing after brushing the death. Food offerings to the dead were another example of denying the final demise of love ones, it extended a sense of continuity between the living and those no longer present. It was a common denominator to much of human culture, too, being present in disparate traditions across the globe.

Izaya watched the rich soy sauce as he poured into a tiny saucer. He too had poured drink on the graves of the North Korean refugees.

“Orihara-sama,”

Matsumoto carefully removed the soy sauce from Izaya’s grasp. The saucer overflowed darkly.
“Sorry, I was daydreaming just now. And can’t I persuade you to drop the ‘-sama’?”

“Can’t do that.”

Izaya sighed as if terribly bothered. It was part of the ritual of reconnecting to business as usual even when he did not believe it would ever come to be. Briefly it crossed his mind that here was tatemaé at its finest, or a warped version of it.

“You guys really splurged on this, you know.”

“Orihara-sama brought me food when I was in jail, too.”

“Store bought nigari can’t compare to this delux meal, though!”

Matsumoto nodded mechanically. He could not tell Izaya that no-one had ever bothered to do such a thing and that it had meant more than all the expensive sushi in the world. For now Matsumoto was not about to do anything but if it proved as he feared and Izaya was being held a prisoner by Shiki then he would have to make a decision.

As he watched Izaya brighten up into a smile that it not reach the strangely red eyes, Matsumoto realized that the decision had been made a long time ago.

Shiki stood at the back of the room. Shizuo sat across from the terrified former leader of the Kumihara group.

“So you know Izaya?”

Much frantic nodding.

“I’ve done business with Orihara-sama before.”
“Like what?”

“I keep him up to speed on smuggled goods and illegal immigrants.”

“From North Korea?”

“That was a first.”

“Right. So Izaya contacted you last year?”

“That’s right, Orihara-sama gave me strict orders to detour a group of North Koreans, bring them to Tokyo and keep them locked.”

“Did you actually see Izaya?”

“Well, no. He contacted me by phone.”

“Did you confirm it with him?”

The man shook his head gravely.

“Well, no, but who else could it possibly be? Besides, that’s how we always communicated.”

Shizuo did not react but Shiki started.

“So you never met him in person before?”

“Well, no. But everyone knows Orihara-sama.”
Shizuo begged to differ but held his peace.

“‘You’re saying that you hadn’t met Izaya until today?’”

“That’s right. I’ve seen him around, of course but that’s about it.”

Shizuo sat up. The interview was over for now.

“The problem, you see, is that induction can always be wrong and deduction adds no knowledge. How do you solve this conundrum, Shizu-chan?”

Shizuo, age ten, scowled.

“Can’t you talk normal?”

“But I am talking normally.”

Izaya was intent on scribbling something on the dirt. Why, Shizuo had no idea. That went to virtually all things concerning his new- and reluctantly accepted- friend.

“Hell you are.”

Shizuo wished Izaya would look at him instead of huddling down like that.

“What I mean is, when you figure something out you can always be wrong. You add knowledge at the risk of making a mistake. But when you work from pure logic and derive a necessary conclusion then you are adding nothing new to what you know even if you know you are right.”
“Ah…”

It did not make things much clearer.

“For example, if I find Shizu-chan holding a bloodied knife and a stabbed body at his feet,”

“What’s with that example!”

Izaya shrugged and finally left his most intriguing scribbling to stand up and face Shizuo. Slowly, Izaya began to walk around him.

“Alright, let me rephrase it. If you find me, Iza-chan, holding a bloodied knife and a stabbed body at my feet you may conclude that I killed said person.”

“Given it’s you we’re talking about, I’d think that even without a knife.”

Izaya pouted in mock annoyance.

“And that’s just mean. But I’ll let it go. Given this scenario it is sensible to conclude that I’m the killer. And go, ‘The culprit is…Iza-chan!’”

Izaya pointed for emphasis.

“Iza-chan…woah, that’s way too much Detective Conan for you.”

Izaya giggled.

“It’d be fun walking into murders every day, I bet! But my point lies elsewhere.”

“Like you got a point.”
“Shizu-chan, I always got a point. Let us hope you realize that before it is too late.”

Shizuo frowned. There were times he found Izaya downward creepy. And being circled around like this made Shizuo feel more nervous than he would ever admit. Izaya walked in and out of strong beams of sun and flighty patches of shadow. Summer still pressed on the city but passed Izaya over, merely casting him in sunlight. Or so it seemed to Shizuo, even now, as he felt that occasional twinge of dread that Izaya could cause.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let us leave it aside for now. As I was saying, you can assume that Iza-chan is the killer but there are many other possibilities. The victim might have killed themselves and Iza-chan simply picked up the knife in a bout of momentary stupidity.”

Shizuo snorted.

“Yeah, right.”

“But it is entirely possible. Your conclusion, as natural as it might be, can be flawed. Thus also with induction.”

“You don’t have a lot of friends, do you.”

Izaya stopped his ongoing circling and blinked.

“I have you. And my cute switchblade, kya~”

“Dropped in the head when you were little, I swear.”

Izaya resumed his slow walk after a giggle.
“So you see the problem. Conclusions can be wrong, that’s also the fun of it! Now, for deduction, keeping strictly to soundness equating validity then you are right by default.”

“And let me guess, that’s plain boring?”

Izaya’s eyes took on a sharp glow and he actually jumped up and down.

“Exactly! Premise A, Shizu-chan is cute when he gets mad, Premise B, Shizu-chan is mad always, therefore, C Shizu-chan is always cute!”

And with this Izaya burst into laughter much to the befuddlement of Shizuo who could only look on disapprovingly, a smile working its way across his lips despite his best efforts to suppress it.

Dropped on the head, no doubt about it.
Chapter 31

Shiki had composed himself thoroughly in order to confront Izaya. It was the result of effort, though, as opposed to his usual flawless if deceiving suavity. So upon unlocking the chamber and finding no Izaya, Shiki’s first reaction was far from rational. Shiki took in the very empty room then slammed one of the still gaping guards against a wall.

“I told you to guard him. It is a very simple request. Can’t you even keep watch over one person?”

Each word was controlled, delivered with great precision but there was a stilted quality to it that betrayed great tension. Shizuo cast Shiki only a cursory glance and simply strode into the room. He had already noticed that it was windowless, which put his greatest fears at bay.

Meanwhile Shiki turned from the wounded guard who flopped on the floor ungraciously to face another foot soldier. A nasty pool of blood began to spread, staining the carpet red.

“Where is Izaya?”

“I don’t know- Shiki-sama, no-one let him out. I’m sure, I’ve been here all the time- Matsumoto brought Orihara-sama some food but that was all, I don’t understand,”

Shiki took a step in the grunt’s direction. The grunt flinched. Shizuo popped his head out of room, putting an end to what was bound to be a bloody outcome.

“Air duct. And he left a note.”

Shiki was vaguely aware of an oversight on his part but it seemed oddly removed from his person, as if his persona as a mafia boss was the buffer absorbing the keen pain that he knew would hit him sooner or later with all its brute force. And then it occurred to him that this was his entire life, a life filtered by rules and self-imposed adhesion to a structure that did much to displace his emotions.

Which was not to say that Shiki did not display timely displays of violence when required but anger was not something he actively engaged in. Presently he felt like tearing this grunt to pieces because Izaya was somehow gone.
Still, it was with a firm hand that he took the note.

“Did he actually write this one?”

“He did.”

Shiki cast his gaze on Izaya’s pretty calligraphy that informed him that he was attending to ‘personal issues’ that had suddenly ‘imposed themselves’ and finished with a request that his guards be ‘unharmed as it is not their fault’. Shiki smiled very bitterly. The grunt shook on his knees, behind him the dim presence of his brethren hovered in uncertainty and fear.

Shizuo was by far the strongest person in the entire building but it was Shiki everyone was cowering from. Part of it was the abeyance to the power pyramid, a deeper part was an instinctive instinct that identified danger.

Shiki cleared his throat before issuing orders.

“Track his cell-phone and search the building, he might still be in the premises. I want Izaya found within an hour. Or else there will be consequences. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir, Shiki-sama,”

“And clear this mess.”

Shiki gestured to the twitching guy without as much as glancing at him. Two grunts shuffled to take him away. Shiki walked into the room and sure enough, close to the ceiling there was a discarded metallic grid giving way into an air duct.

“Izaya won’t be easy to find.”

Shiki nodded absent mindedly.
“I know. Any idea what these ‘personal issues’ might be?”

“Not really. I’ll look into it.”

Shizuo produced his phone, busying himself looking through a list of contacts. It was a simple gesture and even an awkward one as Shizuo was not technology savvy and not used to doing more than just making and receiving calls but in it Shiki saw a deeper meaning. Shiki himself had no such list.

He contemplated the note anew. It was addressed to Shiki, complete with honorifics, the tone very polite and almost unreal. It read as a business transaction.

Shiki imagined Izaya carefully removing the grid and then wiggling his way into the air duct. There was a chair pulled against the wall right underneath but Izaya had surely to stand on tiptoe and push himself up. The jacket was placed as a memento on the chair.

It struck Shiki as an insane act, an absurd extremity but he knew that it made perfect sense from Izaya’s point of view. Whatever the ‘personal issues’ might be, and Shiki suspected they were entirely made up, Izaya was willing to go to great lengths to escape a confinement that Shiki had decreed entirely for Izaya’s safety.

It was then that it hit Shiki that he might be missing the entire import of the disappearance act. If Izaya’s self-loathing had climbed a few notches he could have sought freedom to put an end to his life. Shiki’s eyes widened slightly as he realized that he might be holding a suicide note. And this without even telling Izaya what was so desperately important.

Shizuo’s ringtone shattered the moment and refocused Shiki.

“I was about to call you, it’s about Izaya- Kida, you say? Where? GP what…?”

Shiki snapped the phone from Shizuo’s hand.

“Send the GPS to this address. Right, near the docks. Stay put, I’ll be right there. It’s Shiki talking. Yes, that Shiki.”
Shiki handed the phone back and strode away, already assembling a unit of men.

Izaya was slightly comforted by the sushi. He was humming to himself very quietly when the phone rang. It startled him considerably as Izaya had entirely forgotten all about it. And he half-expected this place, wherever it might, to have no reception.

The voice on the other side was harried and talked very fast. What it said had Izaya jumping to his feet and making a split decision.

“I will be right there. Wait for me.”

Having reached a decision and feeling the urgency of the moment pressing so much upon him that he forgot all about himself, Izaya only had to find the means of leaving. Asking was out of the question. Izaya knew that he was a prisoner. An extremely well treated prisoner but still one who could not dispose of his own liberty. He despised such things in principle yet had been too overwhelmed to do anything about it. At some deeper level he was grateful for the quiet time and for being allowed to gather his thoughts alone. Being forced to stay put gave him the opportunity to center himself.

Izaya had noticed the lack of windows right away and knew it was no accident. The only option was a gridded air duct. Izaya pulled a chair to it and tested the grid. To his surprise it proved wobbly. It did not take much to shake it off and reveal a long, metallic narrow conduct stretching limitlessly.

Izaya was already wiggling his way into the narrow space and fighting off the immediate bout of claustrophobia when it occurred to him that he should leave a note. He did so rapidly, succinctly and above all vaguely.

Izaya took off the jacket in order to better work his way into the duct. It took some balancing. Cold metal closed upon him. Izaya crawled on his belly. As he thought, if he paid attention he could feel air currents swirling at a colder temperature. He followed these for a small eternity until the dim greyness began to grow lighter. With great relief Izaya glimpsed the night city through another metallic grid that he easily kicked.

A three storey climb down a rain-pipe landed Izaya on an alley in a non-descript part of the colossal city that was his. Izaya scampered away rapidly, catching speed with each step until he was running. With no time to waste Izaya snatched a cell-phone from a passerby’s grasp mid-run.
Izaya made two calls as he swerved into recognition into a known thoroughfare. One for speedy transportation. Another for a gun.

Izaya leapt from his ride a couple of blocks away from his destination. Hiring Celty would be the first choice but not a viable one. It was hardly rational of him but this was a situation he needed to solve on his own.

He carefully slipped from shadow to shadow, easily sliding into the darkness of the city. Away from the milling crowds the night took hold of sprawling spaces that bordered the sluggishly black river. In the distance lights shattered the horizon yet hardly touched the many warehouses between each Izaya made his silent way.

Izaya spotted Kadota hiding against a pile of tires. Izaya bridged the distance between them without being detected, sneaking up Kadota with ease. Izaya placed a hand over Kadota’s mouth and whispered into his ear, nearly shocking Kadota out of his senses.

“It’s me, be very quiet.”

Izaya released Kadota and crouched by his side.

“You scared the hell out of me, don’t do that!”

“What’s the situation?”

And just like that Izaya dismissed Kadota who was left to sigh in a whisper. He pointed in the direction of an ill-defined abandoned warehouse.

“They took Kida there. Yellow Scarves by the look of it. All I could do was tail them here on the van.”

Izaya nodded.
“Their numbers?”

“Can’t tell for sure but it’s quite a crowd. Signal is spotty here, I barely managed to reach you on the phone.”

“Thank you for that. You can step back now, I’ll take care of everything.”

Kadota blinked in dismay.

“‘Take care…’? What are you talking about, let’s wait until I can get a hold of,”

“Stay here.”

To Kadota’s stupefaction Izaya slid away, almost immediately disappearing into the prevailing gloom. It was with difficulty that Kadota followed him. For a split second he thought that Izaya was about to simply burst onto the scene, it was with great relief that he saw Izaya climb a pile of crates and surveying the inside through a window. Kadota managed to get a hold of Shizuo on the phone but somehow ended up talking to Shiki instead.

In no time Izaya climbed down and was facing two guards fronting the big closed doors. Kadota did not even see what happened but they fell to the ground without as much as a whimper. And then Izaya shattered the silence of the night by prying the doors open, a rusty whine splitting the air.

Just like that Izaya walked into the spilling light that dirtied the darkness.

Immediately all eyes were on him. Kadota watched from the threshold, half-hidden, but it was almost a redundant precaution. He saw a raised metallic dais on which a familiar face whose name he could not quite place had been trampling on a very beaten Kida. Kadota nearly growled in outrage and in doing so almost missed the thirty so gang members that populated the vast space. Izaya, however, was so coolly collected that Kadota would have shouted at him had he not been too caught up in the moment.

Izaya’s grand and yet very mundane entry (Kadota half-expected Izaya to find a way to burst through the roof, somehow, or at the very least through a window) caused the whole assembly to freeze for a moment. Kadota noticed that the left side of Kida’s face was a blur of blood.
“Now, gentlemen, I believe I told you in no uncertain terms that I have a vested interest in Kida Masaomi.”

The top dog stepped down the dais and spat loudly.

“What does the great Orihara Izaya want with us? Huh?”

Izaya shrugged. Already the gang members were reaching for their bats, some of which were studded with nails.

“At this point I’m expected to put on something of a very cool but essentially useless resistance, I believe, only to be overpowered by sheer numbers. Unfortunately for you all I am not in a mood for that kind of clichéd pattern tonight.”

Kadota gasped as Izaya produced a gun and aimed it squarely at the leader’s head. A second hush of paralysis fell over the scene. The leader looked around nervously. No one had told him that Izaya packed lead but he did know that the informant was one to bluff.

“Why don’t-”

The gunshot exploded so loudly that Kadota flinched at the sudden booming noise. It obliterated the cry of pain that followed almost immediately as the leader collapsed writhing. Only then did Kadota realize that the bullet had torn had the guy’s now profusely bleeding right leg.

“Now, gentlemen. I will ask you to leave. Or do you feel like dying tonight?”

The stampede began almost immediately. With their leader down, they were reminded of the hierarchy of violence. Some considered that if they launched a full out attack they might just neutralize Izaya but there was no telling how many would die in the attempt. But more than that, more than any rational risk assessment, it was the assurance with which Izaya presented himself that sent them bolting.

Gang loyalty was not worth dying for. They had all heard of Izaya, rumor preceded him, and the danger he represented was suddenly made crystal clear and very simple. For them Izaya was not so
much the devious mastermind as the power capable and willing of shooting dead where they stood.

They rushed out of the warehouse in disorderly manner, dropping makeshift weapons on their way out. Izaya let them stream past him, the gun still firmly aimed, just in case.

Only when the place was empty did Izaya make his way toward the dais. Kadota was already running to Kida’s aid but Izaya halted him on his tracks.

“See if you can get a hold of Shinra and make sure he’s unarmed.”

Izaya was already climbing the dais and after the briefest of hesitations Kadota obeyed him. It occurred to Kadota that he had not seen the gun disappear but Izaya no longer held it. Kida squirmed as he sensed more than saw Izaya’s shadow covering him. Izaya knelt by his side and made as if to dab the blood from a nasty cut on Kida’s forehead. Kida slapped the hand away then winced at the spasm of pain that followed.

“Get away from me,”

“Seems like there’s still enough bite to you. I’m glad for that.”

Kida grimaced. He struggled for words for a while, gathering the sizzling residue of anger that had been gathering for far too long.

“Do you expect me to thank you? What the fuck is this, you think you can just waltz here and act like a hero? You’re no hero, Orihara Izaya-san! You’re a bastard- so act like one- act like the bastard you are!”

Izaya endured the glare. A nasty bruise obscured Kida’s left eye but the other one fumed.

“I’m much closer to a villain than a hero.”

“Always, always so cool. Your lines are always so cool. How do you do it? How do you do it?”
Kida sounded genuinely puzzled. For once the sheer bile was gone from his words and only a great perplexity remained.

“That’s probably more your perception than anything else.”

A watery sound bubbled to Kida’s lips, it took Izaya a while to recognize it as a fit of jittery giggles.

“And now you’ve gone and saved my life- how can I live knowing that I owe my life to fucking Orihara Izaya-san!”

Kida accented the honorific like a stab. Izaya remembered how Kida had him that even in his darkest moments, when he seethed in rage at Izaya, in his mind he still added the honorific. As if a cruel underside of respect had been so deeply etched into Kida as a sense of hopeless inferiority.

“I have no idea how you’re supposed to live your life. It’s not my business. As long as you do live.”

Kida’s visible eye widened.

“Again with the cool lines. Smooth, smooth bastard. That’s what you are. Orihara-sama.”

But instead of a grimace an unsteady smile graced Kida’s cracked lips. The hyped honorific echoed some of his typical humor as a jab, more bemused than sharp. Mutely he took the offered handkerchief.

Shiki’s men, that amounted to a small army, arrived almost immediately. Shiki himself headed the unit that invaded the warehouse where Kida was still ruefully coming to terms with something. Shiki barely noticed him. He did notice the groaning gang leader and gestured a grunt to take him away.

But above all he noticed Izaya.

As for Izaya, he produced the gun again as soon he sensed movement but had already lowered it, having recognized the cavalry.
“Shiki-san, I need an ambulance for Masaomi.”

A medic trotted into view and instructed two foot soldiers on how to carry Kida on a stretcher. Kida winced anew and rallied his waning strength to speak as he was being carried away.

“Don’t get so familiar with me,”

Izaya smiled and waved him away.

“Bye byee, Kida Masaomi-kun! Don’t be a stranger now. Neh?”

“…unfunny…”

Shiki let the exchange happen without even acknowledging it. In the background Shizuo answered Kadota’s flurry of questions with a few monosyllables.

Shiki took a hold of Izaya’s hands and studied them in a silence long enough for Izaya to become nervous.

“Shiki-san…? I’m sorry I left but it couldn’t be helped.”

Shiki could still feel traces of heat from the gun in Izaya’s hands. Shiki reassured himself of Izaya’s presence, the solid, physical presence of Izaya’s very body that stood for everything else- for all the many layers between them that could not exist if not for Izaya’s existence. An existence that must be protected.

“I had something very important to tell you.”

Izaya cocked his head to the side.

“What is it?”
Shiki traced a caress on Izaya’s cheek.

“You didn’t do it. You didn’t write the note, two experts say it’s a forgery. A good forgery but a forgery still. The yakuza guy never met you in person. Izaya, you were set up.”

Izaya clenched his hands that Shiki still held into fists. He shook his head.

“So maybe I forged my own signature. Unless-”

Mental cogs clicked into place. Shiki could see it in Izaya’s eyes, a surge of light that had something distressing to it.

“Remembered anything?”

“A crime committed with no direct intervention- I’ve got to go back,”

Had Shiki let him go Izaya would have dashed away.

“Back where?”

“Home. Right now.”

Izaya settled before the computer and flexed his fingers before turning it on. The three people assembled, Shiki, Shizuo and Namie, watched him very closely. As always the mandatory password box popped up. Izaya typed two characters, hit enter. The screen lit up.

Before anyone could react, a black chat box popped up and immediately began to overflow with text at a dizzying speed. White characters nearly screamed against the dark background.
It’s about time you show up! Where have you been, anyway? I’ve been waiting for ages. Just because you lost is no reason to just disappear like this

Izaya thought very fast, so fast that most of it was under the layer of the conscious.

[You could have contacted me, then]

[That’s not the way it works. So you admit defeat?]

Izaya’s expression grew blank as if to match the lack of references that he was wrestling with. He had tuned himself to notice the most minute of reaction, the faintest non-verbal hint in body language, his tools were those of close observation that passed as bemused interaction. Izaya could strip one to their bare soul just by talking but this only because there was a wealth of signs to draw information from. People were living sigils. Deprived of even a voice, Izaya was almost at a loss as how to proceed.

He decided to seek refuse in audacity, to trust a more than hunch that told him he had just found the source, the intuition that was in fact his mind linking everything together before he even became fully aware of it.

[You got me. Information is plastic, responsibility can be wrongly assigned just by manipulating it]

The answer was immediate, characters flowing with eerie ease. Izaya urged himself see behind them, to grasp the person or people from which they came.

[That’s right. I hope you’ve learned your lesson. I told you that I could pin something on you without even having to go outside. ‘Orihara Izaya’ is a label. I can wield it very easily]

Mental cogs slid into place. A great coolness washed over Izaya, leaving him very alert.

[The forged note was a nice touch]

[I’m glad you appreciate the gesture. But I must say, I’m disappointed. You had a whole year to find it out and do something about it.]
Izaya smiled. Everyone in the room was slightly unnerved by it.

[Your point was, ‘Your identity is not yours, I can take it upon myself without even leaving my realm. I can out-Orihara Izaya Orihara Izaya himself,’ something along those lines?]

A slight delay.

[You phrase it oddly but yes. Disembodied information is greater than you’ll ever be.]

[So will you say it? That you killed 34 people?]

Immediate response.

[There is no ‘I’, it’s a mere abstraction to facilitate communication. You killed them. You had ample time to act. In other words, you’ve failed.]

Izaya chuckled.

[I see. Guilt is a fine thing as long as others carry it]

[Will you be retiring now?]

[Retiring? You’re getting the wrong idea here. ‘Orihara Izaya’ is just a label and you can act in my name as you see fit, then you can’t complain when this label finds you, locks you in a cargo compartment and watches you slowly die. Neh?]

[You’d have to find me first. Good luck with that]

[Rest assured I will find you]
Izaya giggled this time around. It crossed Shiki’s mind that whoever was on the other side of the stream of taunts clearly could not see Izaya. Because if they could, they would either put an end to it or make sure to kill Izaya immediately. In all his years of climbing the yakuza corporate ladder, which was a more overtly violent version than its legal counterpart, Shiki had come across many vengeance bent people. From those who were loud about it, to those who were quiet and much more dangerous but he was not sure he had ever seen this exalted despair honed into purposeful determination.

Izaya’s eyes sparkled a cruel red tint that edged on insanity.

[But I’ll be playing the hero this time around]

[Now that’s a first]

[Indeed. You’ll get to see Izaya as a hero in the flesh and it will be the last thing you will ever see]

[I’m scared already]

Izaya’s smile became sweet.

[It’s a good thing you’re not. You’ll have ‘ample time’ to remember how unafraid you were now and to contrast it to when you are afraid. ‘I’ll show you fear in a handful of dust’.]

And with this poetic throwback that left his audience baffled, Izaya closed the window. He then closed his eyes, holding his head with his hands. The silence grew until Izaya interrupted.

“It was all a game. People died needlessly because of a stupid, stupid, crackpot game.”

Before anyone could reply Izaya was suddenly gone, dashing toward the bathroom, holding onto the toilet as he threw up. Eventually he staggered to his feet and returned to the living room where Namie offered him a cup of tea.
For a while Izaya merely watched the stalk floating in the liquid, vaguely aware that he seemed to luck out when it came to these. Namie sat next to him on the plush sofa.

“Did you remember the password?”

Izaya shook his head.

“No, not so much remember as suddenly knowing it…almost as if when the time was right I just knew. ‘jibun’.”

Shiki found it a very apt choice. It could both apply to oneself as to someone else. He decided to speak.

“At least now you know you didn’t do it. Who was that just now?”

“Tsukumoya Shinichi. That’s all I know and all I’ve ever known about him, her, they, whatever.”

Namie nodded.

“We’ve been trying to get a lead on them for a long time but there are no clues.”

Izaya turned the cup on his hands, around and around. The stalk floated, promising a fabled good fortune.

“Why did you investigate it? It seemed so obvious I’d had done it.”

Izaya addressed no-one in particular, Shizuo answered.

“Because I believed in you.”
Izaya turned to Shizuo as if mildly surprised to find him here.

“But why? Why would you- and you, of all people- believe in me?”

“There was a padlock in that cargo compartment, right? That shows you didn’t do it. You’re all about giving people a choice. Nine of ten the people screw themselves either way and that’s fun for you, in a way, but they have to choose for it to be at all interesting. There’s always a chance of getting away with it.”

Izaya opened his mouth, thought better, then spoke again.

“Thank you.”

Shiki frowned imperceptibly. If not for Shizuo he would not have looked further into matters. It felt as a personal fault of sorts and one he did not know how to atone for.

“How you feeling?”

Izaya took a sip.

“Hollow. I wonder if it makes me horrible person, to be relieved like this…it does not bring anyone back to life.”

Izaya seemed hollowed out indeed. The giddy fervor was gone completely. Shiki wanted to gather him in his arms and spirit away to a safe place.

As if waiting for this precise moment to make a grand entrance, Sushi waltzed into the scene, jumped on Izaya’s lap and proceeded to knead furiously. Izaya patted the black fur, smiling vaguely, his mind very far away.
Chapter 32

Izaya slid into the full bathtub and closed his eyes. He was finally alone in the apartment, having firmly told everyone to please leave. Izaya understood very well that each had their reasons for wanting to keep him under a watchful eye, he was even dimly gratified, but his need for solitude had been pressing and not to be argued with.

Izaya let the warmth lull him into a state close to calm. It came as no surprise when he opened his eyes to find himself, the ever so peculiar haunting tailor made to haunt him, casually lounging amidst the drifting steam.

“And today’s lesson is, trust yourself!”

Izaya smiled ruefully and sank a bit deeper, his chin touching the water as he spoke.

“You could have warned me.”

“Except I couldn’t, now could I? I am a product of your mind, I only know what you know.”

“So you’re completely useless.”

“So cruel.”

The other Izaya tapped the surface of the water and Izaya marveled at the rippling effect. His hallucination was nothing if not amazingly consistent.

“I don’t suppose you’ll disappear for good now?”

“Who can tell, the world is a mysterious place~”

The other Izaya granted him a lopsided smile that grew blurred as the steam thickened. By the time it dissipated the other Izaya had joined him in the very large bathtub.
“I suppose I owe something of an apology.”

“What for? For always believing the worst about yourself?”

“You’ve given me plenty of reasons for thinking so.”

“Along with the means for living a very comfortable life. Neh?”

Izaya swallowed.

“Point taken.”

“So what now?”

He thought it through, going through the motions of putting resolution into actual words.

“Now I do as I see fit.”

For all its vagueness, it seemed to suffice. The air blurred anew with steam and the other Izaya was then gone.

It was only when Izaya reached bed that the burden of exhaustion collapsed on him. He crawled under smooth black sheets that parted like liquid, sleep already claiming him. His dream as mercilessly without dreams.

As Shiki watched Izaya approach the terrified boss of the Kumihara group, it occurred to him that all along he had been witnessing a person growing into a decision maker. This was not a revelation, if anything it was long overdue as so much between them tended to be, but Shiki saw it now with crisp clarity. Somewhere along the line Shiki had gone from guiding Izaya to being involved in the web of Izaya’s doing.
What Shiki was realizing was that his policy for allowing Izaya to err within acceptable terms, that is, had been wrong from the very start. It was simply not up to Shiki to allow Izaya anything, he had no power to do so.

These considerations gave way as Izaya addressed the cowed man across a very long table.

“I have decided what to do with you. I won’t kill you.”

The man gasped loudly and comically enough.

“Orihara-sama,”

“I was just following orders’ is probably what you are about to say. But you might as well know that those orders did not come from me.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“That’s irrelevant. Would you obey my orders blindly? If so then you have relinquished your very humanity.”

To this the man nodded, dejected, barely concerned with Izaya’s rhetoric and already anticipating a fate worse than death.

“What will you do, then…?”

Shiki almost felt sorry for the guy. Not quite but the pathetic tone had a hint of hope to it that made it pitiful. Shiki took for a granted that a man who has run his course should simply accept death as nobly as possible. This fellow was a few sobs removed from begging.

“I will ship you to North Korea.”
Whatever he was expecting, this was not it. Even Shiki started slightly.

“North Korea?!”

Izaya nodded.

“That’s right. Incidentally, North Koreans dislike having their nation referred in such a way, make sure to use ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’ from now on.”

“If they find me, they’ll kill me!”

“That is very likely, yes. You have some options. You may make your way to China and hope you are undetected. I do not recommend this, it is very unlikely that you will ever reach the border, let alone cross it. Or you may claim defection and convince the powers that be that you’re a diehard Juche soul, denounce Japan as an evil capitalistic country. This may work.”

The man’s eyes glazed. Then the words sank in and he jumped to his feet.

“Just kill me now and get it over with!”

“Feel free to kill yourself. I won’t stop you.”

Izaya produced a compass, a pocketbook dictionary, another small sized book, a handful of crackers and a wallet. He lined these on the gleaming table.

“What’s this?”

“Young tools to navigate North Korea. That’s a Korean-Japanese, Japanese-Korean dictionary for basic communication. The tiny book there is North Korean propaganda. The food will keep you alive for a while and perhaps serve to bargain. That is your own wallet but be wary of bribery, it can backfire as money works differently north of parallel 38.”

The man stared at the items on display.
“Why bother with all this, I won’t last a day. They’ll find me and torture me to death so you might as well do that here and let me die on Japanese soil.”

Izaya placed a pill on the table.

“That’s what this is for. Cyanide pill, painlessly lethal. Take it if you must.”

The man seemed tempted. Then he broke down crying. “If you come back I will consider your moral debt paid and will not harm you. I speak for myself alone.”

Shiki ignored the sniveling and focused on Izaya alone. In making himself implacable Izaya had turned into cold purpose so that Shiki could not read him or even glimpse at the person behind the machinery of judgment. But he now saw pity in Izaya’s eyes. Not the self-disgust that bordered on pity that Shiki had felt but actual sorrow for another’s pain. It startled Shiki even more than this twisted punishment.

Izaya bridged the space between himself and the broken former yakuza boss and patted his head, thoughtfully.

“The loss of any human being is always a sad thing.”

To Shiki’s dismay, he could tell that Izaya actually meant it. This was not the faux sentimentality that he often saw all across the yakuza, the waxing almost poetically as victims screamed under torture. Izaya was genuinely sad. He had been pushed into enacting justice but took no delight in it because here too was humanity, as much humanity as the nameless boy who had died in Izaya’s arms.

Shiki was unsure whether he was relieved or profoundly disturbed.

“I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Kadota announced this and climbed the ladder into the cozy wooden cubicle. Books lined in neat
curves seemed to beckon and on a deep cushion Izaya held one in a hand, the other turning a page even as Kadota joined him.

“That should have been a clue that I wasn’t eager to meet you.”

“Well, I managed to find you so you should at least give me some credit.”

This gave Izaya some pause. He let go of the book.

“Not that great a feat of the intellect but I concede your point.”

Kadota chuckled.

“Yeah, figured you’d be here, library-hotel really sounds like your thing.”

This novel capsule hotel had just opened in Ikebukuro. Furnished with books of all sorts, it allowed for diehard readers to experience staying over at a library. Izaya had not sought here a refuge from the world, not precisely, but he was very aware of a need to gather his thoughts and feelings. This was the perfect environment, tranquil enough to allow him to focus inward but too quiet as to wall him in emotional isolation. From his contemplation Izaya could feel the rushing activity of other minds all around him. There was something deeply soothing in this silent mental community that floated through words for fuel. Language broken down to its most basic aspect of thought.

“Indeed.”

Izaya seemed about to pick the book again so Kadota found himself blurting instead of speaking.

“Just came from seeing Kida, he’ll be fine. Horada will live, too.”

“And the world keeps on spinning.”

Kadota hesitated.
“I don’t suppose you’ll visit him?”

“I won’t as I do not have that great a death wish.”

Kadota nodded, scratching through his beanie.

“That was pretty spectacular, just where did you learn to shoot like that?”

Despite himself Kadota had been very impressed by Izaya’s surprising heroics. Since Izaya took over so effortlessly Kadota was free to watch unnoticed as Izaya rescued Kida. Kadota’s idea of Izaya had changed yet again, shifting into something different that he was curious to understand better.

“The less you know, the better.”

“Now that’s a strange thing for you to say, of all people. Aren’t you all about knowledge?”

Kadota attempted a conciliatory smile. He sensed a certain distance in Izaya but could not account for it. Surely, there was much going on in Izaya’s life that Kadota had no idea of.

Izaya eased himself against a soft pillow, a hand landing gently on the cover of the book.

“There are a lot of myths that show the danger and potential folly of trying to know. By all means, pursue knowledge if you accept that it carries a burden. What you know can kill who you are.”

To this Kadota had no ready reply and was still fumbling for one when he spotted the cover of book.

“‘The Little Prince’, still a favorite of yours after all these years, I see.”

“I’m rereading it.”
Izaya found it strange to handle his own copy.

“Remember what you said about the Rose? I told you she was too vain and selfish, you said, ‘so would you be if you were alone on a planet’.”

Izaya, of course, did not remember.

“The Rose is not exactly alone, though. She has the Little Prince.”

“That’s what I said but according to you that’s the same as being alone.”

Izaya smiled and seemed to snap out of a reverie.

“How come you can quote me after so long? Even word by word.”

“You’re ‘highly quotable’. That’s one of the reasons why talking to you is so fun.”

“It’s all fun and games until someone loses an eye or two.”

The mood eased into friendliness. There were many things Kadota wanted to ask, particularly about Izaya’s involvement with the yakuza but he knew better.

“This place sure is a neat idea but now that I think about it, you probably have more books at home as it is.”

“You can borrow some if you like.”

“Really?”

“If you want.”
“Thanks, that’s real nice of you.”

Izaya stretched very slightly, the gesture more hinted at than accomplished.

“I’ll be heading out now.”

Kadota followed. They walked side by side down the busy, ever glittery late afternoon of Sunshine Road. Suddenly Izaya took off and promptly glued himself to a crane machine.

“Aardvark plushies! I never thought I’d see the day!”

Kadota blinked at the mountains of weird, vaguely pig-like critters piled behind plastic glass. Izaya was already exchanging a bill for coins and flexing his fingers in anticipation.

“Is that an anime mascot or something?”

“Oh the ignorance. You’d know if you read Gravity’s Rainbow. Listen, Kadota. Aadvarks are natural to Africa and known for their nocturnal habits and great burrowing skills. I happen to be a fan!”

This tirade was delivered without as much as a glance Kadota’s way, Izaya was already testing the controls and fully focused on the prized toys.

“Ah…I see, it’s a real animal.”

“Indeed. Everywhere you look is Alpacasso this, Alpacasso that, but finally I see some genuine cuteness! I am so getting them all!”

“That’s cute…?”

Izaya did not even bother rolling his eyes for he had just grabbed an ever so cute long snouted,
cartoonish aardvark plush. Store attendants busied themselves congratulating him by striking loudly jarring tambourines while Izaya bowed theatrically.

“Aardvark, get-o! Next, one for Saki-chan and another for Namie-san. I’m on a roll here! Want me to win one for you too?”

Kadota chuckled and Izaya’s childish enthusiasm. He could not possibly imagine that Yagiri Namie would care one whit for plush toys of any kind but he supposed it was the thought that counted.

“I’m fine, thanks. How about winning some for your sisters?”

The crane missed its target, a particularly chirpy looking piece of fluff, as Izaya fumbled slightly with the controls.

“I’m sure they don’t care for these things.”

“You think? I bet they’d love to receive a gift from their big brother.”

Izaya’s smile was slow to come as he grabbed a toy and retrieved it. He stared into its beady eyes with an expression that was enough to halt the incoming merriment from the staff.

“Here. Now you’ve got two, one for Kururi, one for Mairu.”

Izaya looked up to find an aardvark plush in Kadota’s hands.

“Woah, turns out you’re skilled at this!”

“Yumasaki and Erika keep pestering me to win them anime goods.”

“Heh, I bet. Thanks.”

Celty spotted Izaya and Kadota from the other side of the street and upon crossing it noticed the
sandy colored toys, the exact identity of which was a mystery to her.

[What are those, pigs? So ugly, just how many did you win?!]

By now Izaya had two plastic bags worth of aardvarks. He held one tightly, the snout poised questioningly.

“There is no accounting for taste. Odds are you’d say that Shinra is ‘cute’, it goes to show your aesthetics cannot be trusted. I have spoken!”

The mock gravity was sealed by Izaya placing the aardvark on his head for reasons unknown. Celty was already typing furiously.

[Shinra is cute, in a way!]

“Right…”

[Just because you’re cute yourself doesn’t give you the right to be so mean to others…!]

Izaya tilted his head while holding the toy in place.

“So I’m cute? Kadota, do you think so as well?”

Kadota jumped, flustered.

“Eh? If you put it like that- then I guess so, I mean, it’s not as if you’re not cute, I mean-”

Izaya doubled up laughing, catching the toy as it fell. Kadota half-expected Shiki’s personal army- which was not even hyperbole given the men under Shiki’s direct command- to burst into the scene.

“Oh god, Kadota, you’re too much! I think you’ve been spending way too much time with
Yumasaki who has assured me that if he swung that way, I’d be ‘totally his type’!

“Just forget I spoke.”

But Izaya was having none of that. In one of the sudden changes of mood that could be so disturbing in him, Izaya’s expression grew sultry, eyes a smoldering shade of red, voice low and inviting.

“Neh, penny for your thoughts, Ka-do-ta~”

Kadota blushed to the roots of his hair that went unseen under the perennial beanie. Celty dropped her PDA. Izaya burst laughing anew.

“So sorry- Kadota, you make it too easy! Don’t worry, you can’t catch the gay.”

Izaya wiped a tear and tried to stifle his giggles.

“I know that…”

Izaya’s giggled some more.

“Sexual orientation doesn’t work like that. Unless, of course, I am so hot that I turn guys gay.”

Izaya meant it entirely as a joke but as he stood there swaying very slightly on the balls of his feet, gracefully cheating gravity, Kadota could not help wondering if there wasn’t some truth to it.

Izaya sensed the sword flashing momentarily before he actually saw its cold glint arching toward him. He reacted with the immediacy of instinct by blocking the blow with his own much smaller blade.

Izaya skipped back, the fuzzy aardvark toys raining around him and falling in random places all over
the alley. Momentum carried Anri past him but she used to swing around and aim another blow that would have sliced Izaya if not for his reflexes.

With minimal movement and ease Izaya evaded Anri’s increasingly fiercer attack. His switchblade was a silver blur of speed. A flurry of giggles joined the clash of metal against metal and to her horror Anri realized that Izaya was actually enjoying himself. For a split second she hesitated. It was all the opening Izaya needed.

Anri barely saw it happening, one moment Izaya was running his blade along hers, the next Saika was knocked out of her grasp and send spinning into trash bags. She made as if to retrieve it but the sharp edge of the switchblade was poised on her throat, almost delicately.

“I guess what they say really is true, size doesn’t matter! Aw, Anri-chan, you can sue me for sexual harassment now but I totally did not mean it that way. Neh?”

The smile was amused and lit up Izaya’s red eyes with an eerie glow. In a stroke of irony Anri found it absolutely chilling. Still, she opened up her mouth to accuse him of having endangered Kida but never got quite to it because the blade was suddenly gone and Izaya had skipped away. “Ah, my poor aardvarks…into the washing machine they’ll go. Here, present.”

Izaya handed her bizarre fuzzy plush toy. It went so against expectation that for a couple of seconds Anri could only stare silently.

“What is this?”

“Aardvark, aardvark! Honestly, what are they teaching you kids at school? That so many people are ignorant to the wonders of the Earth pig grieves me greatly.”

Having no reference to Izaya’s oddball behavior and sensing no aggression in him, her own level of aggression deflated upon her. Anri got to her feet very slowly, the smiley toy held firmly in her hands as if for purchase.

“Aard…vark?”

Izaya had gathered his dear toys back again and now returned holding, of all things, Saika.
“Say, Saika-chan, I heard you love humanity. Guess what, so do I! That makes us the ultimate bffs, doesn’t it! Let’s get together one of these days and talk over tea and cookies. But no cutting, please.”

Izaya ran a finger along the blade’s dull side before handing it over to Anri who took it.

“You should know what Saika is,"

“Just a lonely soul. So what else is new? This city is full of lonely souls, so desperate for affection that they would put their lives on the line. It makes no difference if it’s lonely people or a cursed sword.”

Izaya’s smile was slightly sad. He picked up his many aardvark laden bags, waved goodbye and proceeded to skip away. Anri watched him go, wondering who in his right mind would turn his back on her like this. Either Izaya was insane or he was insanely powerful. As she emerged from the alley, all signs of Izaya long gone for the city was evanescent in its ways, it occurred to her that he might be very be both.

Izaya had a moment to think of how stunningly unlikely it was that he should be attacked by not one but two bespectacled teenage girls in the same night. Yet that was precisely what happened as soon as he set foot in his apartment.

Izaya did not even budge but easily caught Mairu’s leg as it kicked his way. For it was none than other than one of his sisters who now lounged on him without as much as a warning.

“Pink. What a cliché, do try harder next time.”

And with he let go, sending Mairu falling into Kururi’s arms. Trust Kururi to come to the rescue.

“It’s about time you show up! And what’s with spying my panties?”

“If you don’t want others to see them then put on some pants.”
Mairu huffed and busied herself gathering to her feet as nonchalantly as possible. Which was not exactly easy and Kururi’s worried gaze made it even worse. Izaya caught Namie calmly typing away at a laptop and sipping tea.

“You let in the terrorist squad? Why, oh why.”

Namie gave him a wry smile.

“It was either that or their causing a riot at the building’s entrance.”

Izaya would actually have preferred that and was about to say as much when Mairu’s cry interrupted his thoughts.

“Aardvark! Look, it’s a bunch of them!”

“So cute.”

The twin duo had spotted Izaya’s many aardvarks that had once again spilled all over the place. And they were most impressed. Izaya approached carefully as if fearing another kick.

“Do you guys like aardvarks?”

“Like?! Baka-nii, aardvark is where it’s at! They are native from Africa,"

“Mostly nocturnal in nature,”

“Can burrow 9 meter long tunnel in five minutes,”

“Super cute,”
“Known as earth pigs.”

Izaya blinked, for once completely at a loss. Namie chuckled at the oddball family moment. It only took Izaya a heartbeat to get into the fanboy side of it.

“Aardvarks are indeed most definitely cute and I’m glad someone can see as much.”

Mairu bounced, pigtails swaying madly.

“I know, right? Everywhere you look is Alpacasso this,”

“Alpacasso that,” Izaya chimed in.

“Ugly lamas everywhere.”, Kururi said.

“But finally they have aardvark plushies!” Mairu lifted up one of these and spun around.

“I never thought I’d see the day myself!” Izaya joined the spinning.

“Finally, aardvark plushies are here.” Said Kururi in lieu of what she meant, that they were finally a family again. Somehow, she could tell that something momentous was taking place.

Izaya finishing his waltzing around, nodding a few times and produced two aardvarks. As it turned out only a few were dirtied in his scrape in the alley so he had clean plushies to deliver.

“Here, present.”

He then seemed to change his mind and held it high above his head. Mairu jumped.

“Hand it over!”
“I am unsure you girls love aardvarks as much as I. Prove you’re worthy of the aardvark!”

Seeing that Izaya was enjoying himself too much and likely to stretch this for quite a while Namie tiptoed her way toward and simply snatched the aardvarks.

“There. Izaya, stop acting like an idiot, if you will.”

Much cheering followed as Mairu and Kururi took possession of the wonderful furry critters. Izaya went as far as to pout.

“Namie-san, that’s so unfair. I thought you were my side.”

“Well, think again. I’ll be on my way, then.”

She made as if to leave and right away Izaya’s faux moping dropped.

“Leave?! You can’t leave me alone with them!”

So absorbed were his sisters that they failed to even register Izaya’s not too discreet whisper.

“They’re your sisters, not monsters.”

“I’m not too sure myself…”

She looked him straight in the eye.

“Trust me on this.”

Izaya found himself nodding. They all saw Namie to the door with much waving. Izaya glanced at his watch and saw that it was indeed very late.
“It’s about time you go back home, it’s getting late.”

“Not to worry, Iza-nii! We’re staying over.”

Mairu furthered this by rolling a suitcase into view.

“Family slumber party. Yay.”

Izaya nearly panicked.

“Oy, I heard nothing of this!”

Immediately Mairu was on him, her eyes narrowing knowingly behind her glasses.

“I see, Iza-nii doesn’t want us around because he’s having a midnight rendezvous with his boyfriend!”

“Really?”

Izaya sighed and threw himself on a nearby sofa, disturbing Sushi who showed his feline disapproval by nobly exiting the premises without as much as a glance back.

“It’s way past midnight at any rate,”

“So the ‘rendezvous’ part remains?”

To Izaya’s dismay Mairu climbed on the sofa and crawled until she was almost on his lap. Izaya shoved her away softly but decidedly.
“Will you cut that out already?”

Kururi pulled her by the hood.

“Give Iza-nii space to breathe.”

“Tch, no fun!”

Mairu opted for mock indignation as she sat cross legged on the sofa. Kururi brought over the still hot tea and the three siblings gathered around it. Izaya decided it was time to go the offensive.

“And what if I was? Can’t a big brother have a sex life now?”

Mairu gaped in exaggerated dismay and dramatically covered Kururi’s ears with her hands.

“You fiend, corrupting our maiden hearts!”

“Right…”

“Always knew you were an evil perv!”

Izaya shrugged.

“Ah, to think I was about to let you review some hot footage featuring yours truly…but I guess such pure hearted maidens have no interest in such things.”

“Well…if you already have it around, it’d a shame not to watch. Right?”

Izaya burst out laughing and nearly slid down to the floor.
“Showing your true colors at last, Evil! Imouto! Sorry but no sexy gay porn for you. Now go to sleep as it past bedtime for little girls.”

As it turned out the sisters had some peculiar ideas about that. They had brought two tents that now proceeded to pitch amidst much giggling. By the time they had changed into kitty themed pajamas and mourned the fact that so far no aardvark PJ’s were available they were all exhausted, Izaya included.

Izaya ignored the tent assigned to him and stayed in one of the sofas. At some point he must have drifted away because the next thing he knew Mairu was stealthily sitting next to him in the soft darkness. For a while she did not speak.

“That shrine, what is it for?”

Izaya had installed a small shrine with all the names of the North Koreans. The characters glimmered slightly in white against a black background in smooth dots and round shapes, Izaya had hired a professional engraver that specialized in Hangeul. All to do justice to the simple, deliberate beauty of the script.

“For people that I lost.”

He did not know how to word it in any other way.

“And the kid in the picture?”

Izaya was silent for a long time.

“My little brother, for a very short while.”

Mairu made her way to the shrine after picking up something up from the suitcase. In the dimness Izaya could not quite see it. He drew closer and saw that it was a candy bar. Mairu place it as an offering and knelt, hands united.

“That makes him our little brother as well, baka-nii.”
Izaya sensed more than saw Kururi joining them. He cleared his throat and prepared to dismiss this sentimentality. Instead he burst out crying with the same abandon he had earlier burst into laughter. But his tears were silent, bitter, full of heaviness.

For the first time in his life, remembered or otherwise, Orihara Izaya wept before his sisters. They said nothing for the moment demanded no words, what it required was their presence, even if it offered no solace, their being there was in itself a small miracle.

A small miracle in the endless city.
Izaya sat on the other side of Shiki’s massive desk and discussed business. He did so with the typical attention to detail without forgetting the larger picture. Shiki focused on marveling at him but was only vaguely aware of the words being said.

Upon being told that Izaya was requesting an audience Shiki had felt a momentary pang of almost panic followed by dry curiosity. This was the first time they were meeting in private since what Shiki was beginning to see as the world’s worst timed confession and he was very anxious to see what Izaya had to say about it.

Apparently Izaya had nothing to say about it, though. For the last fifteen minutes Izaya had put him up to speed regarding the documentary. Shiki barely remembered it but in hindsight it was about as neutral a theme as possible.

Shiki wanted to interrupt this but having let Izaya start he felt almost passive, as if Izaya’s power of speech robbed him of the right to put an end to it. There was also a sense of security, a temptation in simply taking Izaya’s offer to let things remain unchanged and simply bask in it.

“They would like to show some irezumi but I told them it’s probably not going to happen. I know that you guys are not fond of showing them in public as it is.”

“They can be particular about such things.”

Izaya nodded.

“That could change if Shiki-san asked them.”

“I’m afraid anything I ‘ask’ is immediately taken as an order and obeyed.”

“I see, that’s how it goes.”

Shiki twirled a cigarette between two fingers.
“Why don’t give it a go yourself.”

And with this Shiki summoned Matsumoto who shuffled rather sheepishly into view almost immediately. Shiki had contemplated a very exemplary punishment of this foot soldier. That it had been none other than Matsumoto to teach Izaya how to shoot had been obvious even without the confession that came in due course. For a direct breach in discipline Shiki was entitled to breaking all limbs. But Shiki decided not to go beyond a stern look. For one, Shiki did not want to make a too frequent habit of handicapping the brawn under him. More than that, Shiki had to begrudgingly admit that in the end it had saved Izaya’s life. That was the one consideration that trumped all others and effectively tied Shiki’s hands. The fact that Izaya would surely be very cross if he believed Matsumoto was harmed on his account did not weight much in Shiki’s decision making process. It was fortunate that thus far Izaya had yet to find out about the poor guard who was still on the mend but Shiki was not terribly worried about it.

Izaya’s wrath was something Shiki would handle if need be, Izaya’s death was not to be contemplated.

Meanwhile Izaya had gone over the documentary plans with an increasingly baffled Matsumoto.

“Me, on TV…?”

“Not exactly, the documentary will screen in some select venues and probably create a lot of buzz in the festival circuit but it is still more an Indie thing.”

“Ah…”

Shiki allowed himself a wry smile. For all practical purposes Izaya was presently speaking a foreign language as far as Matsumoto was concerned.

“Tell you what, Matsumoto-san. How about they just film your back? Your face wouldn’t appear at all.”

“Oh, that’d be okay.”
Relief was very obvious.

“Great! If you don’t mind I’ll just take a picture of the irezumi and send it to the documentary people so they’ll know what to expect. It is entirely up to you, Matsumoto-san.”

This was not entirely true, that much Shiki knew, but Izaya firmly believed so. In his often endearing but occasionally extremely frustrating innocence, Izaya thought that he was merely extending a suggestion. In reality the yakuza code of obedience made it absolutely impossible for Matsumoto to refuse. And even without that, odds are there was precious little that this gruff, simple and not particularly clever man would deny Izaya.

“Sure, Orihara-sama.”

Izaya had already produced his cellphone but had to wait while Matsumoto divested himself of suit and shirt. Matsumoto stood bare chested and very awkward in the middle of the room, made very conscious that Shiki was watching everything closely. Izaya bounced around him admiringly.

“Why, that’s Kannon! I’m totally a fan!”

This was entirely new to Shiki. Izaya was extremely well versed in all things spiritual, religious and philosophical but his attitude remained that of cold intellect. Izaya would take a koan and spin it until it meant something obscure, probably menacing and very likely nihilistic.

Shiki did a double take. This playful attachment to Kannon was congruent with Izaya’s uncanny and uncompromising way of dabbing into cultural heritage without adhering to it. In a stroke of irony it was precisely Izaya’s ways of apprehending tradition from the outside that made it so able to fully comprehend and undermine it.

Izaya’s lack of ideological commitment was a hallmark of his generation but in his case it did not stem from disinterest or apathy. Systematical skepticism was in him the result of knowing the very inwards of doctrine, Izaya could sample ideas across the widest of spectrums in a state of fundamental freedom. In this Izaya was much more than the embodiment of the zeitgeist, Shiki knew that Izaya was the future.

“Really?”
Izaya nodded enthusiastically as he examined the detailed Buddhist themed picture spread across the whole of the yakuza’s back.

“Of course! I like other Buddhist figures but Kannon is my all-time favorite. So graceful and pretty.”

“Yeah.”

Shiki nearly rolled his eyes which in a person such as himself was not a mere show of faux annoyance but a display of deep seated displeasure. Matsumoto noted it and flinched but Izaya dismissed it altogether and busied himself capturing the wonders of Kannon with his phone.

“All done, thanks a lot for the cooperation. There’s this Buddhist art exhibition going on, want to go? Next Saturday.”

Shiki spoke without moving from his position but the firm tone made him feel very close.

“Next Saturday Matsumoto will be elsewhere employed.”

“Is that so? Too bad. Thanks a bunch anyway!”

Izaya waved and smiled while Matsumoto put on his clothes and hurried away, having been curtly dismissed by Shiki’s nod.

“I’ll be on my way too, Shiki-san.”

A formal bow followed and it broke Shiki’s paralysis.

“I’d rather talk to you.”

“It’ll have to wait, I’m afraid.”
“Because you’re terribly busy?”

“Yes, I have business to attend to next.”

“Said business being too important to defer to a later date?”

“Precisely.”

This was a standstill. In order to break it Shiki needed to be decisive. Yet he also needed Izaya’s undivided attention and he already could tell this was not to be had presently.

“Next Saturday we’ll talk.”

Izaya replied with another bow.

Shiki believed Izaya to be purely evasive but as it turned out he truly had very important business to attend to. And it would have surprised Shiki immensely to know just how close to home Izaya’s business was.

Upon leaving Shiki’s office Izaya did not head for the exit. He took a few turns and went up a flight of steps that took him to a massive door on which he knocked.

“Come in.”

Izaya obeyed after taking a deep breath. He stepped into the grand office.

“Why, Izaya-kun! We finally meet. Long overdue, wouldn’t you say?”

Izaya was not fooled by the easy jollity with which he was greeted and kept his own attitude very neutral as he studied the man before him. Smooth yet somewhat gritty in what Izaya thought as the
upper echelon yakuza way, a vertical scar across one eye, the other glittering at him. The deliberate swagger as he roused himself from a plush sofa, nifty navy blue suit not showing as much as a wrinkle, was all Izaya needed to know that here was a fighter. If push came to shove Izaya was likely to be outmatched in a physical confrontation. And yet Izaya knew that while there was danger here, very real danger, it would not come to that from angle.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Akabayashi-san.”

Izaya’s bow was not perfunctory. Akabayashi waved it away.

“Don’t be so formal, Izaya-kun. I’ve heard so much about you that by now you’re like part of the family.”

Izaya bowed anew, all reserve. He could respond to this bonhomie in kind but he opted for acting with great care. For all this veneer of friendliness Izaya was very much aware that he was at a direct disadvantage by being deprived of knowledge. Until he found out the reason behind this summons he would be grasping for a strategy. But he could not come out and ask.

“Thank you, I hope to remain of service to the Awakusu.”

“Ah, yes, you are most definitely one of our top information people. The go-to-guy, from what I hear. You information folk are tough nuts to crack, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Izaya smiled.

“It is part of the trade, I’m afraid.”

Akabyashi nodded.

“You sell information, right?”

“For the most part.”
“How does that actually work, though? I mean, information is not something you just exchange for money, you may sell information but you haven’t actually ceased to have it. Why, it’s a ‘eat the cake and keep it’ bargain! Makes me think I’m in the wrong line of job entirely.”

Izaya’s smile did not flinch but inward he upped his level of wariness. Akabayashi was of course right, information was a liquid commodity. While Izaya did not keep a record of every single bit of information he procured for others, he kept a memory of it and an ability to reproduce it in detail if he wanted. Part of his intellect was precisely this ability to accumulate data as memory. This much Akabayashi could not possibly know, or so Izaya desperately hoped, but he had just touched upon one of the most crucial aspects of Izaya’s informant role.

“Akabayashi-san, could it be that you’re considering a change in career? Perhaps you will be my rival in the near future.”

It was something of a risk but by now Izaya knew that being too on his guard would backfire. Akabayashi chuckled good humoredly.

“I leave all this information stuff to you smart younglings. But where are my manners, tea? Do take a seat.”

A generous gesture toward a tea pot sitting gingerly upon a shiny low table. Izaya sat across Akabayashi.

“Thank you.”

“I took the liberty of arranging Japanese green tea. Your favorite, I believe.”

Izaya took a sip.

“I see my tastes have been thoroughly canvassed.”

“Speaking of that, how do you feel about our Shiki-kun?”

Izaya nearly spluttered. For a dismal second he was completely at a loss, which was bad, and unable
to cover it, which was perhaps even worse. Of all the many scenarios he had run through his mind, this was not one of them.

“What,”

“You see, our Shiki-kun has taken quite a shine to you. But as you know, we live in a dog-eat-dog. In the upcoming reshuffling we may have to, how to put it, restructure Shiki-kun. A shame, really.”

Izaya managed to put down the cup without accident. It was not easy.

“And you’re telling me this because?”

Akabayashi slouched forward in a strange mixture of laziness and barely concealed threat.

“Just wanted to let you know. You’d be answering directly to me, Izaya-kun. So think of it as a promotion.”

The smile was winsome. Izaya felt a great coldness creeping into him, a kind of detachment that attended clarity of thought. The moment akin to a satori when doubts peeled out to reveal a kernel of insight. All complication was reduced to a single course of action, the only one he could possibly take.

“Akabayashi-san, were that to happen and I expect it will not, I would be forced to pit my forces against your organization. It would end in blood. Neh?”

Akabayashi blinked. Then burst out laughing and against all odds ruffled Izaya’s hair.

“You’re the real deal, Izaya-kun! Ah, sorry, sorry, that was mean of me to test you like that but I had to see just how much you cared for Shiki-kun. He really is loved.”

Izaya gasped slightly.

“This was a test?”
Akabayashi resumed his seat and beamed.

“Can’t trust information folk, they’re so slippery. No offense, Izaya-kun. But I wasn’t sure I could trust Shiki-kun to you.”

By now Izaya had regained some composure.

“That is a strange way of seeing things.”

“You think? Because you’re younger and cute, it should be the other way around? Izaya-kun, I’ve been around the block a couple times. Enough to know couples aren’t that simple.”

At this Akabayashi seemed to muse at some private matter.

“I see.”

“Oh, I was almost forgetting! Can you sign this?”

Just when Izaya believed he could not be surprised any further, Akabayashi produced a manga volume.

“You’re a Liar Game fan?”

“Oh, you sound so shocked. Of course I am! Why, it’s a great manga. I’ve been following it since the very first chapter. Your spin-off is absolutely brilliant. I’m a fan!”

Izaya had to close his mouth. He took the fountain pen now being offered and signed his name.

“I only wrote the plot.”
“Of course, of course. But Izaya-kun, I am a fan of yours. I mean that. One of these days you’ll do something major. A true game changer.”

The tone swung back to seriousness.

“Assuming I don’t get ‘restructured’ myself before that.”

Akabayashi ignored this altogether. The unnerving one eyed gaze became even more unnerving as it became a two eye gaze.

“When that day comes, keep Shiki-kun in mind. Before you step beyond where he can follow.”

Izaya started violently. This opened prospects he had yet to discern himself, suddenly Izaya saw a whole realm of possibility that terrified him. With some difficulty he swallowed.

“I’ll remember that.”

Akabayashi nodded.

“You do that.”

Tom stretched as he walked out the door into the heavy afternoon. It had been a long day and he felt it on his very bones. He was about to ask Shizuo if he wanted to grab dinner together when Izaya seemed to materialize on the pavement. Tom nearly jumped.

“Jesus, don’t spring on me like that!”

Izaya smiled ruefully enough.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Shizuo, I need to have a word with you.”
Tom hesitated slightly before taking his leave as he knew was expected of him. It was not so much that he was still afraid that this new friendship would spell disaster for Shizuo as the nagging feeling that Izaya could at any point simply appear for Shizuo to drop everything. After many years of unflinching loyalty Tom could not help feeling a bit resentful.

“Okay. See you tomorrow, Tom-san.”

And just like this Tom was dismissed. Tom watched them disappear into the late afternoon city bustle, sighing under his breath.

For a while Izaya and Shizuo walked side by side in silence. Then Izaya emerged from a brown study as he realized Shizuo had led them to a familiar park.

“Here, I saw this on the sale and immediately thought of you.”

Izaya handed Shizuo a pink colored bag of snacks.

“Woah, strawberry shortcake fries! Never thought I’d see the day.”

Izaya took a perch on a bench and smiled faintly.

“I was rather rude to Tom-san just now, I’ll have to apologize.”

“Don’t worry too much about that. You got a lot on your plate as it is. Want one?”

Shizuo had ripped open the bag and was already rummaging through the unlikely flavored fries. Izaya pulled a face.

“I think I’ll pass, thanks.”

“Your loss.”
Shizuo munched on happily, the crispy sound merging with the humdrum sounds of half-stalled traffic just beyond a screen of trees. Izaya took the time to gather himself. The streetlights sprang alive.

“Shizuo, why did you believe in me?”

Shizuo put aside the snacks.

“It’s like if you find Iza-chan holding a bloody knife next to a body, you may think Iza-chan is the killer but you can just as easily be wrong.”

Izaya blinked.

“‘Iza-chan’? What are you talking about?”

“It’s something you said when you were little. Stuff about deduction always being right but not adding new knowledge while through induction learn new things but can be wrong.”

“It’s amazing how you remember things I’ve said so well.”

Shizuo was silent for a bit.

“Good thing, that. Since I have a feeling you weren’t talking to me back then, you were talking to the grown up me.”

“That actually makes some kind of very warped sense.”

“Yeah. Catching up on you is a lost cause but doesn’t mean I’ll stop trying.”

Izaya brought his knees to his chin and made himself smaller. Shizuo recognized the gesture immediately.
“I don’t know exactly how to feel. I’m beyond relieved I didn’t cause the Koreans’ deaths but that does not make them any less dead. It makes me wonder, am I that horrible a human being that I’m more concerned with how I feel than about the fate of all those people.”

But there was more to it, more he could not speak because shaping it into words would give it a greater reality. That all it took was some ingenuity and malice to full Izaya about Izaya was a shock that went beyond his ability to reason. It made his sense of identity something unstable, capable of being easily distorted. Having already a sense of self made very vulnerable by his amnesia Izaya had no ready resources to battle the dreadful feeling that who he was could be warped without his ever knowing.

“It bothers you?”

Izaya nodded then made as if to leave.

“I shouldn’t bother you with all this, you’ve dealt enough with my personal baggage as it is.”

“You always thought too much as it is, now you think too much about your own thoughts. Not saying that’s bad but you’ll go off the deep end unless you have someone you can unwind with. And that’s what I’m for.”

Izaya frowned.

“You’re not ‘for’ anything, you have your own motivations and a whole existence as an individual.”

Shizuo smirked at the pedantic tone yet he understood the meaning behind it.

“Yeah, there’s all that. But I’ve been thinking as well. What kind of role can I have in your life. And this is the one that’ll be best for you for now, I believe.”

“For now’ meaning?”
Shizuo produced a cigarette but merely twirled it between two fingers, unlit.

“For now meaning that I’m in love with you, whether you’re cool with it or not, and can’t just throw my hands up in the air and call it quits.”

Izaya eased back on his seat and whistled almost silently.

“It takes some guts to put it into words like that.”

“Go me. You’re still going to dump me, though.”

Izaya giggled, arms akimbo as his body undulated on the seat with perfect balance then suddenly stopped himself and grew silent grave again.

“I’m terrified of one day realizing I am a sociopath at heart and that nothing I can do will ever change it- or worse, that I’ll slide into sociopathy without even realizing or even caring.”

“You got me to keep that from ever happening.”

Izaya’s hands had twisted into fists as his whole body tensed from emotional strain. They now unfolded and he let out a long, very low sigh as if letting go. When he spoke again his voice was light, deliberately so.

“How about we go catch some dinner?”

“You treat.”

“Alright, sushi is on!”

Shizuo took the bubbly exuberance for what it was: a sheer act of will.
Tom was ruminating on whether it was wise to have a word with Izaya and explain his grievances when he came to a sudden halt, mouth ajar, at the sight of none other than Izaya. In a weird red kimono-like dress that was very short at the front, showing a very generous portion of leg, and adorned with immensely wide sleeves that fluttered as Izaya moved his arms. Tom did another double take and noticed the cat ears, cat tail and platform geta shoes on which Izaya perched most precariously.

Before Tom knew how to react Izaya spotted him and proceeded to run in his direction, miraculously avoiding a fall.

“Tom-san, what a coincidence! I was about to call you and apologize for my behavior last night. I must have ruined your plans with Shizuo, do forgive me.”

The heartfelt apology was followed by a bow that finally toppled Izaya’s balance and would have sent him crashing down if not for Tom catching him.

“Be careful! And what are you even wearing?!”

Izaya regained his balance and smiled bashfully.

“The Cat People joined the Kyoto Cartel. It’s a conspiracy!”

“What…?”

It might be that Izaya had gone completely insane. Tom’s intense awkwardness was relieved by Shinra’s arrival. Shinra looked Izaya up and down, adjusted his glasses then took a picture with his phone.

“Do you walk around in fetish clothes normally or do you do it for my benefit?”

“Hilarious, Shinra. As I was telling Tom-san, the Cat People are plotting with the Kyoto Kimono Cartel. They forced me to wear this…whatever this is, I am not entirely sure. But there is a cat design, see?”
Izaya waved a sleeve and sure enough a series feline figures glimmered in the red fabric.

“So you’re now a Cabaret Cat Kimono Cat Girl!”

“For the record, this is supposed to be a kimono-thing for males.”

Shinra blinked.

“Really?”

Tom was just as surprised.

“Yes. It is marketed that way. So I am most definitely not cross dressing.”

Again Shinra looked him up and down.

“I don’t think that makes much a difference, to be honest.”

Izaya decided to ignore Shinra entirely and turn to Tom who was bound to be a more sympathetic if only a still dazed audience.

“I could handle the, unique, let us put that way, choice of attire but the worst of all is that I can’t play with the kitties with these.”

Izaya waved his arms some more for effect.

“Ah yes, Izaya wants to play with all that pussy.”

Izaya shot Shinra a glare of death that even intimidated Tom. Just then some girls addressed Izaya and right away he broke into a most endearing smile and explained that yes, the kimono pattern was on sale and that if they visited the cat café they could expect a special discount. Secured as
costumers, they were then charged to take a photograph with ‘Cat Boy’. Izaya was smilingly waving when two young guys in what Tom thought as host clothes approach and to Tom’s surprise proceeded to also take a photograph with a most bubbly Izaya.

“So popular, even guys want you.”

Izaya sighed, the effect very exaggerated, sleeves nearly brushing the pavement.

“Word got out and now folk from Ni Chome keep dropping by.”

Tom noticed the not too subtle security that he now realized was here to keep all too eager fans from going overboard.

“Now those guys are not here to play with the pussies!”

Izaya rolled his eyes at Shinra’s witticism.

“You’re so one pattern, honestly.”

“But you know, those guys are either very brave or plain dumb. I’m sure your boyfriend won’t be happy they’re taking photos with you like that.”

Tom noticed the sudden testiness.

“Shiki-san is not my boyfriend, I am not anyone’s property.”

Shinra lifted up his hands in mock defeat and shrugged.

“Okay, okay, forget I spoke.”

Tom watched the exchange with great interest. The change in Izaya’s mood was gone almost
immediately and already he was back to what Tom thought as friendly snark, Izaya pretending to accidentally step on Shinra’s feet with the crazy platform getas. Tom’s experience with the yakuza was not deep but it covered many members and a lot of different groups. He had no knowledge of Shiki in particular but he knew full well that the yakuza were highly possessive. Tom was thinking of this when Izaya turned to him again.

“Tom-san, please accept this free coupon. It’s not much but I hope you’ll enjoy our cute cats.”

Tom gaped and nodded. Before he realized it he had forgotten all about being upset with Izaya.
Chapter 34

Shiki surveyed the long, crystalline counter beyond which glimmered a constellation of jewels cushioned against dark velvet. An eager young woman was standing by, attentively.

“I’m looking for a silver ring. Of the engagement kind.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Shiki inspected the array of delicate silvery rings presented to him. They were all wrong, either too garish, blatantly feminine or boring. Shiki ended up ordering a costume made ring that he designed himself. Something streamlined and unadorned.

Shiki was now looking at the brand new ring. It was understatedly elegant and just as expensive. Shiki took a deep breath as he snapped the dark velvety case shut and dropped it in the pocket of his jacket before heading out.

It started out wrong from the get-go. Just as Shiki was about to ring the bell to Izaya’s apartment the door opened and two willowy young Westerners departed as Izaya waved goodbye. Shiki was very tuned to group solidarity and he could tell immediately that the matching outfits of white shirt and nondescript ties were not a coincidence but more of a uniform.

Izaya stood smiling on the threshold.

“Hello, Shiki-san. I was not expecting you, do come in.”

Ever the good host Izaya busied himself putting away two glasses that Shiki assumed the strangers had drunk and then prepared some tea. Shiki waited until Izaya was presenting him with a fragrant, high caliber matcha cup before speaking. He took note of the altar and its unfamiliar characters but deliberately held his silence. The brand new treadmill overlooking one of the large windows also went into comment.

“Were those fellows friends of yours?”
“Oh, no. They are Mormon missionaries. I ran into them and they were very, very keen to share their religion with me. So I brought them here and we talked about it.”

Shiki lifted an eyebrow.

“Surely you are not about to convert?”

Izaya was about to pick up his own tea but stopped long enough to laugh.

“I’m not, no. But I am all for discussing religion, it can be great fun.”

“I see. What does this Mormon religion say, exactly?”

The term was familiar only in the vaguest of ways and Shiki was not particularly interested either. But it was worth asking if only for the sudden animation that Izaya displayed.

“Mormonism, or the Church of Later Days Saints, is a Christian sect, or perhaps not- it depends on exactly you talk to- that was born in the 19th century in the States. It is very peculiar in many ways with its holy book containing a series of claims involving Ancient Jews colonizing the American continent and engaging in all sorts of very epic and historically incorrect battles. But they are better known for the magical underwear.”

“Do I want to know?”

Izaya giggled.

“I doubt it, Shiki-san. Another odd thing, they won’t smoke, don’t drink alcohol and won’t even touch tea and coffee. Life without tea!”

The horror was great and Izaya expressed it with his typical Izaya exuberance that made Shiki smile.
“How do they ever live.”

“I know! I tried to persuade them to at least take a sip of delicious matcha but they were absolutely adamant.”

“They failed to convert you so I guess it’s a tie.”

“That’s a good point, Shiki-san. Next time we’ll be talking about heaven and maybe I’ll manage to lure them into the matcha side!”

“Next time?”

“It’s a heady subject that can’t be exhausted in a single session. The Mormons have more than one heaven but I’m not sure they’ll divulge that to non-converts.”

“I don’t suppose you informed them of your sexual preference? I suspect that would lower your chances of getting into heaven as far as such folk are concerned.”

A degree of coldness slipped into Shiki’s voice without his even knowing precisely why.

“‘Such folk’, now that’s a quaint way of putting it. And I didn’t, no. I’d rather not get personal but I am very interested in hearing how they stand on the subject. I know the LDS Church is known for its intensely homophobic stance, I’m curious as how they’ll justify it.”

Shiki’s grip on the delicate teacup increased.

“I don’t think you should be meeting these guys alone.”

Izaya refilled his now empty cup and asked for Shiki’s to do the same.

“Why? They are not violent, for all their anti-gay rhetoric.”
Shiki took some time to study the deeply green depths of his freshly poured tea as he considered how to word his next move. It aggravated him greatly that just when he meant to be making a case for the validity of his feelings for Izaya, something Shiki found difficult and that required much mental preparation on top of being an uphill battle, he found himself tangled in this barren discussion about American religious nuts.

“You probably know this better than I do but in my experience guys who have such a strong stance against homosexuality are very repressed and in the closet. That makes them a loose cannon and dangerous.”

Izaya blinked then burst into a brilliant smile that Shiki could not possibly place in context. Either way it reminded Shiki of just how hopelessly attached he was to this oddly charming, absurdly intelligent and all too beautiful young man who could so easily plunge the world into ruin.

“I’m so glad you brought that up as it is a topic that interests me greatly. There does seem to be a connection between being strongly homophobic and a closet case. Ted Haggard’s case immediately springs to mind. I need to look up the research,”

“Izaya. That is all very interesting but it’s beside the point. I’m talking about letting potentially dangerous people into your apartment.”

Izaya nearly spilled his tea as a series of giggles took over.

“Shiki-san, you can’t be serious? Surely you’re not saying those poor Mormons are out to rape me?”

Izaya made it sound so immensely ridiculous that Shiki already regretted bringing it up. He desperately wanted to shift the conversation in another direction.

“I very much doubt it would come to that.”

“If anything, I’m the one with the advantage here. Here they are, spreading their faith, utterly clueless of who they are dealing with.”

The glitter in Izaya’s eyes had more than a hint of mischief. It was also highly attractive.
“And you like that.”

Izaya granted him a slow smile.

“I do, yes. There is something thrilling in being the one with the greatest knowledge in the room and savoring the rush.”

Shiki felt doubly foolish at worrying over Izaya.

“Is this ‘not fluffy’ Izaya?”

Izaya finished his tea and settled the cup on the table with great care before easing back on the sleek black sofa.

“This is the ‘Thinking ahead of you’ Izaya.”

“The kind of Izaya that can royally screw you over, then.”

Izaya nodded, absent-mindedly. Shiki had the distinct impression that Izaya was drifting away. Which was why Shiki got up and walked over to Izaya until sheer physical presence drew Izaya’s attention. It took all that Shiki had to allow the moment, as brief as it was, to hang in expectation.

Slowly, Shiki ran the tips of his fingers down Izaya’s face. Surprise jolted through Izaya and Shiki took the opportunity to steal a long kiss from his lips.

“Say, Shiki-san…what am I to you?”

Izaya tilted his head slightly in thoughtful curiosity. Shiki took a heartbeat to notice how much of an ambiance shift Izaya’s attitude was and another heartbeat to answer. He sensed that any hesitation would escalate into a fatal crisis.

“My one and only lover.”
“First and foremost? Because I’m also a very useful,”

Shiki placed a finger on Izaya’s lips, gently.

“If you retired right now it wouldn’t change a thing.”

“There are other informants out there, that much is true.”

The ring felt very heavy and the height of folly. But Shiki knew there was something he could do.

“Izaya, will you let me make love to you?”

The old fashioned choice of wording was very deliberate, both unexpected and yet almost fitting. Izaya contemplated at length, long enough to heighten Shiki’s anxiety.

“Why, by all means.”

Shiki’s initial reaction was to push Izaya down on the ever so sleek sofa but in the spirit of going past the limitations of their relationship he swept Izaya into his arms and carried him to bed.

It crossed Shiki’s mind that the black sheets were truly keeping up with Izaya at his most hipster. Very likely picked to highlight the white tone of his naked body as it spread on rustling silk. Shiki made it a point of honor to relearn every curve, savoring the heat as it consumed them both.

Now as Izaya slept by his side, his expression softened into a vague smile, Shiki wondered how long it had been since he had seen Izaya looking so at peace with himself. Shiki brushed a slightly damp bit of hair off Izaya’s eyes before tiptoeing away.

A need for thought made him too restless to properly enjoy the afterglow. The apartment being so spacious gave Shiki plenty of room to wander. He found himself in the living room. City lights streamed silently over the hyper modern furniture, rendering the darkness soft but enough to blur Shiki’s sense of orientation. It was perhaps that that had Shiki assess his bearings anew.
Shiki faced the discreet altar. The characters were a jumble of silver lines and spheres, purified of meaning. Shiki could not read them but he knew full well how heavily each and every name burdened Izaya.

The treadmill caught Shiki’s attention. He knew full well that Izaya, for all his litheness, had plenty of muscle. Years of dodging Shizuo had made him very fast on his legs but Shiki had never known Izaya to actually train. But it made sense. In order to keep fit and agile Izaya would need to exercise even if no beast of a man to run him down.

It was no accident that the treadmill was placed fronting the massive window. Izaya would have the impression of running through the sky above his beloved city, an illusion that he was sure Izaya treasured.

Musing such considerations and imagining Izaya leaping from neon-lit cloud to neon-lit cloud as he cackled wildly, Shiki was distracted. He meant to go to the kitchen for a glass of water but must have taken a wrong turn because he found himself in front of a door he could not recognize. Shiki was about to retreat his steps when a ghostly shock of light seeping from the crack caught his attention. Curiosity got the better of him. The door gave way easily, revealing a room cluttered with so many computer screens he hardly knew where to look at. A disturbing hum filled the air along with a scent Shiki thought as a frenzy of electricity.

All the blinking of figures and the bluish glow gave Shiki a case of minor vertigo and had him half stepping out almost as soon as he set foot over the threshold.

“What are you doing, Shiki-san?”

Shiki nearly jumped. He had a keen sense of having trespassed.

“Sorry, your place is so big I got lost.”

Izaya stood in a black kimono, a sweep of dark silk that drew attention to the body underneath in fashionable negligence.

“I see. I did not expect you to stay the night.”
This hurt more than it ought to have but Shiki did not want to pursue it at the moment. He had a weird moment of displacement as he blinked away afterimages of all that pixelated glow.

“What is all this?”

Izaya tilted his head.

“You could call it a war room, I suppose.”

“War room? What are you planning.”

“I’m sure you’ll find out in due time.”

“I see. And you won’t tell me anything about it.”

Izaya scooped up Sushi who now rubbed himself against his legs.

“Call it professional hazard, if you will. It matters greatly just who knows what and when they know it.”

Shiki sighed silently.

“So I’m dancing on your board along with all the other pieces?”

Izaya nodded.

“Yes. Along with all the other pieces, myself included.”
Izaya stepped out of the ladder and onto the flat roof of the skyscraper. Before him the sky ran in all directions, going from murky blue darkness to the first diluted lights of predawn. And underneath him was the city, the ever moving, ever changing, ever renewed city.

This was a scenario he had longed for but had yet to fully embrace. Seen from above the city was still greying toward form, an inchoate mass into which Izaya could read all meanings. A slight chill bit the air as he inhaled deeply.

Being this high up had a dizzying effect that was oddly familiar.

“This plan of yours is insane.”

Izaya smiled as his reflection appeared on the ledge.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Is it worth it? All things considered.”

Izaya took another deep breath. The city was starting to hum its tuneless drone, so much like a prayer to no god.

“It’s worth it. That is my decision.”

“So it is. It wouldn’t be mine but at the same time, I am on pins and needles to see how you fare!”

Izaya chuckled.

“I bet.”

The other Izaya grew somber even as a tentative bit of sunlight highlighted his very solid shape.
“There is such a thing as a fate worse than death.”

“Oh well, let us hope we avoid it, then.”

“‘Us’? My, getting on with the program!”

Izaya had a fit of laughter.

“ Haven’t you heard? I’m you and you’re me! It doesn’t get more ‘us’ than this.”

Izaya closed his eyes, absorbing the light as an unseen sensation. For a while he stayed up, soaking up the dawn as it unfurled around him. By the time Izaya opened his eyes he was truly alone.

Anri was a study in apprehension as she regarded Izaya across the table. She had almost ignored the invitation but it dawned on her that avoiding Izaya’s society would not keep him from causing damage. If anything, it gave Izaya free range to work in the shadows, his natural habitat, from which he spun his web of plots that sooner or later entangled you. Anri did not understand just how Izaya was allowed to be this powerful source of endless corruption when he could so easily be eliminated—

“‘Ah, how come no-one has stabbed Izaya already? It would solve so many problems.’ You’re thinking something along these lines, neh?”

Izaya’s smile was charming. Anri flinched.

“What do you want?”

“Someone has done already, actually. Stabbed me, that is.”

If the memory of this was painful it did not show as Izaya took a thoughtful sip of green tea.
“You’re still alive.”

Izaya giggled.

“How shrewd of you! But to phrase it as I am sure you intended, how come no-one has made sure to actually kill me? If stabbing Orihara Izaya once does not work, you need only stab him a few more times until he stays dead.”

“Something like that.”

Anri’s voice was below a whisper. She pretended to consider her own drink, something foamy she had yet to do as much as sample.

“You see, I am very useful to a lot of people. To you I may be only a very annoying and dangerous person but there are those to whom I am a true godsend. So it is in their interest to keep me around. But I also possess very sensitive information with the potential for ruining quite a few power players. So we are back to, ‘why have I yet to be eliminated.’”

“Why, then?”

Anri was very aware she was following Izaya’s script but she was willing to play along if only to make him get to the point sooner. And a small part of her was interested despite herself.

“The question isn’t whether I am given some amount of free rein despite my being dangerous, I am given leeway precisely because I am dangerous. ‘Keeping Orihara around is a risk but that goes for our opponents as well. As long as we use him well we can get rid of plenty of enemies.’ In other words, the more dangerous the more useful I am.”

Anri took her time to let the rant sink in. She was already wary but simply being on the defensive would not avail her. There was no point to not engaging Izaya after accepting to meet him.

“I can’t see that working in the long run.”

Izaya brightened up.
“Precisely. The balance is precarious and may very well collapse.”

The point was exemplified by Izaya dangling a teaspoon on a finger.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“The long and short of it is, you’re perfectly entitled to wishing me dead. The logic of the world you inhabit demands it, more or less. Feel free to imagine it at length, if you will, with as much detail as you want. But I wish you’d keep in mind that the claiming of a human life, whoever it may be, is a weighty matter.”

Izaya’s tone remained light and conversational. Anri had the clear impression that she was at a great disadvantage when dealing with someone who navigated through speech with such suave facility. Not just speech as such, she corrected herself. It was in the realm of communication that Izaya ruled supreme. She sensed an innate knack for speaking with others in him and all the years of honing it into nothing short of a weapon.

“That’s strange coming from you.”

“Do you think so? That may very well be. As to what I want, it is very simple. I want to have a conversation.”

Heavy shutters kept the room dark. The phantom bluish light emanating from the set of computer screens cast a deeper layer of shadow that sprawled to the entire apartment. A whirling sound of a small crowd of electric fans mingled with the background hum of machinery.

He woke up to the alarm of one of the phones kept around the futon. Sleep receded as he settled on a swivel chair and did a quick check of the three main screens that formed a semi-circle of shifting rows of data.

An afterimage of pixels remained in his field of vision for a while as he went about the morning routine. Except it was pushing on noon. Not that it mattered. His inner clock had long along disconnected from any natural cycle set to ebb and flow of information coursing through electricity.
At times this entailed staying up all night, others it meant long hours of slow moving traffic.

All life supporting activities were a mere necessity and he spared them as little time as humanely possible. This included keeping his meals to a bare minimum with no effort involved, he simply ordered the same kind of pizza every day. Being a thoroughly sedentary creature his nutritional needs were few or so he had convinced himself.

He did not as much as glance twice at the delivery man and he perched on the swivel chair, one slice in hand, the other tracing one of the keyboards. For a while he was too busy running through the latest flow of gossip to even take a bite. A fractured stillness set all over the room, a mixture of the stale air that never grew any fresher despite the frantic work of the fans and of the caged, feverish heat that sprang from the open innards of the multitude of computers.

Temperature regulation was one of his greatest concerns, a basic condition that if not optimized set everything else off course and derailed the well planned circuit of his very existence. He considered this now, very briefly, the though surfacing the back of his mind as a background check anti-virus: active but quiet, ready to spring into an alarm if need be.

He took a bite of the by now cooling pizza, vaguely registering the taste as familiar. Then the slice slipped from his suddenly slack grasp. As his vision dimmed he wondered if the power had gone down, he went as far as to think about getting the generator before it all went black.

“-chi-kun? Shinichi-kun? Annyeonghaseyo!”

Tsukumoya Shinichi struggled awake to the mirthful voice and ready smile of none other than Orihara Izaya. For a few breathless moments he almost hoped this was a horrible nightmare. He went as far as to firmly shut his eyes but the cold floor against his sweat slickened back and Izaya’s dazzlingly sharp smile did not fade away. Instead, they gained resolution as his mind cleared.

“You drugged me,”

“Correct! As to be expected from one of Tokyo’s best informants. From an information broker to another, allow me to praise you.”

Izaya clapped. The sound echoed hollowly around the distant walls. Shinichi tried to gain some
distance but as he suspected, it was more than an aftereffect of being drugged and manhandled that had him unable to even squirm on the floor, his limbs were secured by tape. Panic flickered but he did his best to push it aside.

“How did you find me?”

Even in such a dangerous situation Tsukumoya Shinichi simply had to ask. He had to know.

Izaya had been crouching as he went through this flippant routine. He now dropped Shinichi on a chair and placed himself on a plush swivel chair across it.

“Now, now, that’s not how it works. You of all people should know that information comes at a price. So what can you offer me in return?”

A grim smile twitched Shinichi’s lips.

“Does it matter? It’s not as if you’re going to let me out of here alive anyway. I bet you have your yakuza goons right around the corner.”

Izaya giggled.

“That’s the spirit, Shinichi-kun. ‘It’s not over til it’s over, let me see if I can find out just how much backup he’s brought’. I’ll play. My yakuza goons, as you call them, are not here. In fact, no-one even knows I am here. How do you feel now? Have your chances improved now?”

Shinichi held on to the glimmer of hope. This might work out. Not all was lost. Even if Izaya was lying, it was in Shinichi’s best interest to keep him talking. Izaya crossed a leg and calmly watched him.

“You tell me.”

Shinichi counted his heartbeats, heavy, loud, thumps that he feared Izaya could hear. It took all he had to keep some amount of self-control under Izaya’s keen scrutiny.
“There are reports of a North Korean human experiment. Families were sealed into a room and lethal gas was pumped through a tube. Parents scrambled to keep their children alive, trying to shield them from the gas and doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation for as long as they could.”

Shinichi was chilled by the even tone of Izaya’s voice. His experience with Izaya had been second hand up to this point but a lot of his sources converged on Izaya’s interest in humanity taking a turn for the very dangerous.

“Good thing you’re not there.”

It was the wrong thing to say and Shinichi realized it almost immediately. For the first time he saw anger in Izaya’s disturbingly red eyes.

“When I first found about this I thought, ‘ah, mothers and fathers desperate to save their children even as they all suffocate, and those pumping the gas and taking notes: all these are human beings. This is humanity.’”

Shinichi did a double take. This was not anger, it was excitement. A borderline kind of euphoria had Izaya glowing, his eyes sharper, redder, the true shade of blood. It occurred to Shinichi that convincing Izaya to deliver a swift death was the best possible outcome. Better than agonizing in the lethal gas that he could half-smell already.

Shinichi could think of nothing to say. Instinct told him that if he did have even the slimmest of chances that he needed to negotiate but any kind of exchange might push Izaya into putting into action the horrible plan that Shinichi was sure was in store.

Meanwhile Izaya drifted back from his thoughtful mood and smiled at Shinichi as he addressed him.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, you put me through the paces! At first I was sure there had to be a whole team of you. How else could ‘Tsukumoya Shinichi’ be online 24/7? But then it came to me, what evidence is there that it is indeed a person replying?”

Shinichi started, as much as he could given the skin biting tape.
“You- how did you, how could,"

“How could anyone figure it out? It wasn’t easy. But I started to wonder, surely a genius computer person could create very responsive bots? The problem remained, though, how to test this hypothesis?”

Against his better judgement Shinichi found curiosity winning over.

“How…?”

Izaya smiled amicably.

“I’m so glad you’re in a conversational mood, Shinichi-kun. I couldn’t exactly trace you using my own means. After all I don’t have your computer skills. So I borrowed a little help.”

With a fluid gesture Izaya flipped his hand, palm upwards. Shinichi had a moment to notice how oddly reminiscent of Buddha it was and then his blood froze as Izaya produced a switchblade from his hand. It emerged heel first, sleek blade materializing in one beautiful flicker of light.

“Sai-saika…!”

“Close! A fragment, to be precise. Through it I expanded my consciousness and voilá, I could be online 24/7. In other words…I became Tsukamoto Shinichi.”

“No,”

“This is justice. Don’t worry, I won’t torture or even kill you.”

Shinichi felt very close to throwing up. Izaya twirled the switchblade and hummed quietly.

“You don’t expect me to believe you.”
“This is what I’ll do. I’ll absorb you. From now I’ll control you. A good way of putting it, ‘all your knowledge is belongs to me’. Neh?”

The switchblade barely cut the Shinichi’s cheek. It was almost painless. What followed, however, was too much for his brain to process and it forced a complete shutdown. Izaya’s toneless humming haunted him into oblivion.
Chapter 35

Anri was halfway through a whacky manga Erika had lent her but she could not fix her attention on the vampire bishoujo action. Her gaze drifted off to the window as she turned over her encounter with Orihara Izaya in her mind.

“As to what I want, it is very simple. I want to have a conversation.”, he had said. It did absolutely nothing to assuage Anri’s suspicion. There was no such thing as a mere conversation when Izaya was involved. She reminded herself anew that she need tread very carefully. Fortunately she was not entirely without resources. If Izaya thrived on extracting reactions from his victims then he was about to meet his match.

Anri had not cultivated an almost life-long habit of managing her expressions to the barest minimum of variation for nothing. She knew full well showing nothing was a means of protection, a shield to keep the world from getting to her. It was also the result of being essentially disconnected but for now it would serve her well. As long as Anri did not tell Izaya anything he had no business knowing, she trusted he could not learn much from her expression.

It turned out to be a monologue, as she expected, but so different in tone and content that she could hardly say she had been prepared for it. Izaya prattled on about the most trivial of matters, somehow enlarging them into points of interest with a kind of enthusiasm that would be tiresome in anyone else.

To Anri’s growing surprise- that did not surface her features or appear in the rare occasions she spoke- Izaya proceeded to cover topics ranging from the comparative tastiness of different cuts of tuna, the best swivel chairs and their fluid rotation and the wonders of the many cats at the cat café.

Anri had heard plenty about Izaya’s charm. It was not something she could exactly understand but she was beginning to see how someone less immune might be lured in. Despite being the one doing most of the talking Izaya did not come across as awkward. For all Anri knew, Izaya had one sided conversations with his enemies on a daily basis while enjoying himself thoroughly as he sipped green tea.

Izaya finished the tea, flashed the waitress a dazzling smile then turned a more toned down version to Anri.

“Well, I won’t be taking any more of your time. Thank you for agreeing to this, I’m sure it must have less than pleasant. Probably as awful as having tea with Kyubey? Right along those lines, I think.”
Izaya nodded.

“Kyubey…?”

“Just ask Erika-san. Bye-bee!”

Anri jumped to her feet before Izaya could skip away as he seemed ready to do. Having put up with so much of Izaya’s idle chatter for apparently no good reason, she felt entitled to some answers.

“Why?”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow.

“Why what?”

“Izaya sat back down and seemed to genuinely contemplate her question. Anri half-regretted it already.

“Do you know the story of the frog and the scorpion? The scorpion asked the frog to give him a lift across the river. So the frog asks, ‘why should I? You’ll only sting me halfway through it.’ To which the scorpion replies, ‘But I’d drown if I did that so you can trust me.’ The frog agrees and gives the scorpion a lift across the lift. Halfway through the ride the scorpion stings the frog who befuddled, as he is dying, asks, ‘Why?! Now you’ll drown!’ To which the scorpion replies, as he is sinking, ‘I couldn’t help it. It’s in my nature.’”

Worry crept closer to Shiki’s awareness. At first it was a mere ominous presentiment that he could dismiss. The city seemed to crouch upon itself, simmering in fearful expectation. It was not entirely a new feeling, Shiki had experienced it before, and it always led to Izaya in way or another.
Izaya who had fallen off the grid. That alone was enough to make Shiki more than a bit restless. His mounting concert increased when the door to Izaya’s apartment was opened by Yagiri Namie.

“Where is Izaya?”

“He’s resting. He’ll contact you as soon as possible.”

Before Namie could shut the door on his face Shiki placed a foot on the threshold.

“Resting? It’s four in the afternoon. Can I come in?”

“Is this is about work.”

“It’s not. I need to see Izaya. Right now.”

After a slight hesitation Namie let him in. She led Shiki to the main bedroom, talking as she walked ahead, making Shiki irrationally angry that she saw fit to take ownership of the place.

“Before you ask, I don’t know what happened. He’s not hurt, I can tell as much myself but just to be safe I had a doctor examine it. Whatever he’s been doing these past few days it exhausted him, both physical and mentally, to the point he needs to a lot sleep. But it seems to be sheer fatigue, there is nothing amiss with his body or brain. Apart from Izaya being, well, Izaya.”

Shiki had to bite down a scathing remark at the snarky comment but he forgot all that as he spotted Izaya. Izaya adrift on his superbly comfortable bed, an IV stuck to a thin, pale arm, the infamous sleep monitoring device seeming horribly alive in all its blinking machinery while Izaya was a mere absence.

Shiki had a clear vision of the last time he had seen Izaya asleep and could not help but contrast it with this lifeless Izaya. The tug to Shiki’s chest was painful in a tangible way, the flesh of his body reacting to blinding fear.
“Izaya,”

Namie walked over to adjust the IV.

“This is mostly to keep him hydrated but rest assured, he is just sleeping. Not in a coma or anything along those lines. He will wake up fairly soon but for now he needs complete rest.”

Shiki nodded distractedly.

“I see.”

“I’m staying here to better monitor his condition.”

Namie gestured toward a futon placed alongside the bed. Shiki glanced at it and could not help but frown, a frown that grew more furrowed as Namie wiped a rebel strand of hair from Izaya’s forehead. Vaguely, Shiki noticed that Izaya’s hair had been growing considerably longer.

“There’s no need for that. I’ll stay.”

Namie folded her arms and gave Shiki a long, hard, piercing stare such as he was not used to being subjected to.

“With all due respect, Shiki-san, I am much more qualified to take care of Izaya. You are welcome to stay if you wish but I’m the one the proper background to handle this.”

Shiki nearly smiled. Very few people would be this forward with him but Namie did have a point, as much as Shiki was loath to admit it.

“Alright.”

Shiki forgot all about Namie and her peculiarities as he sat by the bed, gaze unwavering on the still, quiet, all too silent figure.
“Well, good morning. And you better have a good explanation.”

Izaya blinked awake, startled at Namie’s voice even before he became aware of the heaviness to his limbs.

“Namie-san? What are you doing here…ah. That happened.”

“Do be vaguer, please.”

Izaya chuckled. Recollection of recent events returned to him along with a sense of relief as emotions, very human, raw, his very own emotions, floated back to his awareness. Assuring him that he was still himself.

“Sorry. All in due time- Shiki-san?”

Only now did he spot Shiki who had fallen asleep on a chair close to the bed.

“He insisted on staying. By the way, you’ve been asleep for a whole two days. And your phone is here.”

Izaya had to hand it to her, he was looking for his phone even as she produced it. Gesturing her to remain silent, he took a few pictures of Shiki.

“I will treasure these forever. And perhaps use them for blackmail purposes.”

“How would that even work? I’m pretty sure even yakuza middle-range bosses are expected to sleep every now and then.”

Izaya giggled anew.
“You can never have too much information!”

“Aren’t you dating him? Then again, you are the kind to blackmail your boyfriend.”

“Oh, you never know.”

“There’s sushi waiting for you so come to the living room when you’re ready.”

“Delicious fresh fish goodness! That’s my Namie-san!”

Namie checked the ominous machine then removed the IV before retreating. And threw him a glare as he made a show of closing the door behind her. For a while Izaya simply contemplated Shiki. It was more than rare, seeing him so defenseless. For all of their physical intimacy Izaya was not sure he had never witness such a vulnerable side of Shiki.

“Shiki-san? Wakey-wakey.”

Izaya nudged him very lightly but it was enough to startle Shiki awake. Izaya was ready to make light of the whole deal but Shiki’s arms folding him in a tight embrace prevented him.

“Izaya, Izaya- are you alright?”

“Never better. Er, Shiki-san? Can you let go of me, please?”

“Sorry.”

Shiki pulled back and took a moment to compose himself. The usually impeccable white jacket was wrinkled and there was still an edge of something very raw in Shiki’s eyes.

“Shiki-san, are you alright? Because I must say, you don’t look too well. But there’s sushi waiting for us! All hail Namie-san!”
And with this Izaya disappeared into the small bathroom adjacent to the bedroom. It was something of an effort of Shiki to let him go but eventually he wandered to the main bathroom in order to freshen up. The mirror returned him a worn out face that proved Izaya right, Shiki did not look at his best.

Shiki found Izaya in the living room, already enthralled by the sushi bounty before him. But Shiki was not fooled. He noticed the faded pallor, the frayed edge to Izaya’s exuberance as he admired a particularly juicy slab of tuna. The newly donned fur lined jacket only made it more vivid that the skin was a few tones lighter than usual.

“Namie-san, where would I be without you?”

“Probably dead in a ditch by now.”

A mock pout.

“Now that’s mean. Why, I am not the kind to frequent ditches. Dead in some random alley is a greater possibility.”

Namie pretended to consider this as she availed herself of a nigiri.

“True. I won’t dispute that.”

“Heh. Do join us, Shiki-san. Before the fish is all gone.”

Shiki took a seat. He had little to no appetite but once he was faced with enough food to gorge a small army he realized he might as well eat. The biting banter continued, causing some him some mild discomfiture. As one used to very well established hierarchies Shiki could not help but view Namie as an underling whose role was to serve Izaya. The way she chided and flat out mocked him was something of a surprise and despite all he knew of Izaya, he could not help but find the way Izaya took it all in stride to be rather odd.

“You should get a haircut soon.”
“Or! How about I grow my hair long like yours! Then we can go to the hairdresser together and get all sorts of cool hairdos!”

Namie rolled her eyes.

“Just when did you become my girlfriend?”

“It’d be a lot of fun and you know it! We could go to some fancy tea place and show off our brand new ‘dos.”

“Of course. And then we can go buy pretty dresses together with plenty of lace. Maybe a killer kimono or two.”

Izaya shivered.

“Not that, please. No more kimonos. The trauma runs deep.”

Shiki came to a realization. His uneasiness had more to do with something that veered very close to jealousy and not so much with Izaya’s idiosyncratic ideas of work relationships. It forced him to do a double take.

Fortunately Namie took her leave shortly after. Izaya waved her away with Izaya-like aplomb. Then silence dropped. Shiki took a few breaths to focus himself before he broke it.

“So? Are you going to explain what happened?”

Izaya moved to one of the sofas, the cat nestled on his lap.

“I ran into something of an obstacle. So I got around it and obtained what I wanted. There was some risk involved, though.”
“Not everyone is a genius, explain it in a way I can actually understand.”

Izaya’s gaze wandered for a while then settled on Shiki.

“Let us say Tsukumoya Shinichi will never trouble anyone again.”

Shiki started.

“You handled him on your own?”

The slightest of hesitations.

“Not exactly.”

“I could’ve helped you.”

Izaya giggled and eased back on the sleek black sofa. Sushi waltzed off as if greatly offended.

“Now that wouldn’t work, Shiki-san. We both know that ‘Tsukumoya Shinichi’ is an important asset to the Awakusu. I can hardly ask for your help in bringing him down.”

Shiki pressed his hands together. It upset him greatly that he could not possibly contradict Izaya.

“I see. I haven’t heard anything about his demise yet but it should be in the upcoming report.”

This was not what Shiki wanted to be talking about.

“I dismissed him alright but I doubt you’ll be receiving any report on the subject.”
Shiki frowned. There were times when Izaya’s cryptic ways could truly be aggravating.

“Izaya, don’t talk in riddles.”

“Ah, sorry. What I mean to say is, I took over ‘Tsukumoya Shinichi’. With this.”

The blade slid from Izaya’s right hand, emerging soundlessly from the palm. Shiki jumped to his feet, a chill spreading through his veins.

“Saika, why?!”

“There is such a thing as human limitations. Tsukamoto Shinichi, you see, was using a series of very advanced bots to become omnipresent online. There was nothing I could do on my own to trace him. So I used a Saika fragment to possess enough people so that I could expand my awareness to 24/7. I had to stage a fake moving in order to smuggle them into the apartment inside large cardboard boxes as I’m sure someone would notice if they got inside and never left.”

Shiki’s gaze moved from the glimmering tip of the blade to Izaya’s eyes.

“And you possessed him.”

“That’s the gist of it, yes. I can now control him and use his bots. It’s a great ruse but the Awakusu will still receive its information. I expect some of shrewd individuals will figure out something is off but little will come of it.”

Shiki had to refrain from recoiling. Fear nearly choked him.

“Do you know what you’ve done?”

The blade disappeared.

“Do I know that I compromised my humanity? Yes. It wasn’t an easy decision. After all, I have dedicated my whole life to dealing with humans as a human. Something like this is not just a
departure from the usual, it amounts to resetting how I always saw myself.”

“Why do this? For revenge, for a sense of misguided justice?”

Izaya tilted his head as if surprised.

“Shiki-san, I thought you would know all about revenge in your world.”

Now that Shiki had a clearer idea of what he was dealing with, he took a step forward, closing the space between them.

“I know it ruins people. I’ve seen it happen plenty of times.”

Izaya nodded.

“I’m sure. But for all the many reasons I can offer, the one that actually moved me had little to do with any of that.”

“No?”

“I acted for my own sake. To regain who I am.”

Shiki sighed deeply and ran a hand through his hair.

“What a strange, strange man you are.”

“I get that a lot.”

Shiki traced the briefest of caresses on Izaya’s cheek.
“I bet.”

Izaya was still Izaya and that was more than enough as far as Shiki was concerned.
The strangest thing in this very strange ordeal had been seeing his body from the pair of eyes that were not his own, as he occupied a body that did not belong to him. The corporeal being that was Orihara Izaya had slumped on a folding chair, worn out and entirely blank, in a state of suspension, as the entity that was Orihara Izaya typed madly, rolling between screens on another swivel chair.

The silent, eerily still small crowd that simply stood by until he used one of them, had been almost as disturbing. Unsure of the extent of his new abilities Izaya kept the ‘human capital’, as he had come to think of the people he had possessed, as close as possible. Which meant they were all confined to the computer room for far too long.

Izaya felt quite sorry for said ‘human capital’. He wiped out their real memories and replaced them with a bad case of the flu then watched each one individually to see that they readjusted to their normal lives once released. This tampering with memories bothered him considerably, on many levels, and made him all the more eager to prove it had not harmed them in any way.

He was doing just now as he watched one of his ‘human capital’ members, a lanky twenty something year old slacker, sip a coke while trying to romance the not too happy looking girl sitting across him.

Izaya smiled. He was unsure whether it was a universal rule but his Saika seemed to adjust to his personality. Once released he had no power over his former possessed posse. Nor had he even infringed in their integrity as thinking individuals. He had used their brains only as thinking machines, mere tools, all aspects of their personality remained fully untouched. So much so that Izaya knew much more about this boy from observing him than he had from literally inhabiting his body for a while.

As calculated a risk as the entire endeavor was, Izaya had still been terrified of its going horribly amiss. That it had only drained him so that he had to sleep for two days straight was a very small price to pay considering all the many possible disastrous outcomes. What he now felt was more a sense of relief, profound and calming relief, than anything akin to triumph.

The calculation part had been precise and included plenty of research but what fully tilted the scales was his conversation with Sonohara Anri. By now Izaya was almost at ease being hated and dealing with people who would happily give him cement shoes and dump him on Tokyo bay. It was not pleasant but Izaya had managed to turn these encounters into opportunities.

Not so much opportunities of setting wrongs right, he was naïve enough to think that someone like
Kida or Anri would ever grow friendly, but of better understanding these people and by extension, himself.

In this particular instance he had learned that Anri was very much a human. The insecurity was glaring, all the more so for her attempts at hiding it and on a very veritable level, Izaya had enjoyed it. Even as he saw her as an interesting specimen his compassion was active. This dichotomy was becoming a defining trait of what it meant to be Izaya.

He considered this now as he pulled up the fur lined hood and skipped across the road to the cat café.

“Iza-nya! The kids have been asking for you, do dress up- I mean, change.”

Izaya sighed. The staff had given up on treating him as a normal employee and he was officially ‘Iza-nya’. He cringed at what oddball costume they had in mind for him now but it was all part of what passed for routine in his world.

“What is it now…?”

“The usual, cat ears, tail and a sailor fukku outfit.”

“Er, no. I draw the line at sailor fukku.”

“But your friend said you were all for it! It’s your size, too.”

“Let me guess, this ‘friend’ was a crazy female otaku wearing a shapeless black dress?”

“That one! Now put it on,”

“That is so not happening. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Izaya changed into his normal clothes that were already less than functional overalls with the mandatory cat tail and ears attached. He was happy to find out that today the costumers were primarily kids as opposed to the by now regular crowd of rather shady guys.
“Izaya-nii!”

It took Izaya a heartbeat to identify the little girl shyly smiling at him as Awakusu Akane. More importantly, Akabayashi was escorting her.

“Akane-chan, how great of you to come! Did you want to see the kitties? I’ll find you a nice one, neh? Hello, Akabayash-san.”

“Ah, the little lady here insisted on seeing the cats and I couldn’t refuse her.”

“It’s no problem at all, it’s what I’m here for. I’ll be right back.”

As Izaya searched for a particularly tame cat he reviewed what he knew of Akane. She was the daughter of the Awakusu group and from what Namie had told him, they were acquainted and on friendly terms. Not that Izaya believed that Akabayashi was here merely to indulge his young companion. There was probably much more involved but for now Izaya was content to go along with the flow.

“There we go, Sphinx cat.”

Izaya granted them his sweetest smile and placed the cat on a pillow at her feet.

“Kitty is naked.”

“Akane-chan, Sphinx cat is not naked. He does have fur, see?”

Izaya ran his finger along the cat’s back.

“But he looks strange…”

“Give him some time, Sphinx is really nice. Careful petting him, cats are living, breathing creatures
and have their own feelings.”

Akane seemed rather timorous but after a reassuring nod from Akabayashi she lightly touched the cat.

“So soft!”

“See? Sphnix is all wrinkly but he is fluffy!”

Other kids gathered around since the strange looking cat was always very popular and Izaya retreated to some distance, leaving another member of the staff to supervise the children.

“Sorry to trouble you, Orihara-kun.”

“It’s a pleasure, really. Akane-chan seems to be having fun.”

“The young lady doesn’t always get to relax like this.”

“Akane-chan is always welcome at our cat café. No-one will care about her background here.”

Akabayashi smiled wryly.

“That is precisely what Akane-chan needs.” A meaningful pause. “I’ve taken something of an interest in the flow of information.”

“Is that so? Perhaps you really will become my competition.”

“If anything, you seem to be losing competition.”

“My, whatever do you mean?”
It was difficult for Izaya to curb his enthusiasm. He had anticipated that Akabayashi would be the one person to figure out that Tsukumoya Shinichi had been replaced and it was an almost physical thrill had being proven right, tinged with just enough potential for danger.

“My apologies, I’m sure I’m wrong. What does an old man like me know about the players in the information business? Take it as such a hobby of mine, making guesses like this.”

Izaya nodded at the very blatantly faux humility. He returned it with a courteous smile and had no opportunity to say anything because Akane was back and with plenty of things to say about the not-naked-cat.

“We’ll be taking our leave now.”

“Akane-chan, I have a cat of my own. Goes by the name of Sushi. If you want to drop by and say hello to him or have a cookie or two, Namie-san and I would be very happy.”

“Okay!”

Izaya waved them away, watching the deceptively unbalanced limp to Akabayashi’s step. They formed quite an unlikely pair, the rough yet smooth yakuza and the sheltered, sweetly cute little girl. Akabayashi turned around just as they were almost out the colorful entrance. Izaya noticed how fluid the motion was, the cane more of a prop than anything else.

“I was almost forgetting, we’ll be throwing a screening party of that documentary to celebrate the release. You’ll be receiving an official invitation soon but I wanted to be the first to tell you. Make sure you wear something nice. Then again, you make all clothes look great, Orihara-kun.”

Izaya chuckled and thanked him with a polite bow. He could not help wondering how the cat ears and tail would fare at the yakuza screening. It all he could do to keep himself from bursting into a fit of giggles. But this was not the time, there were cats to tend to and kids to supervise.

Shizuo surveyed the recently tidied up apartment. It was as neat as it was ever going to be and that would have to suffice. A glance at his watch informed him that Kasuka should be arriving at any
moment. There was no actual need to go out of his way to make his living arrangements more presentable for Kasuka’s sake but it was something of a matter of principle. He smiled faintly at the watch, an overpriced gift from Kasuka that he made sure to always wear.

Shizuo fluffed the lush futon, also a gift from his brother’s, and in a matter of minutes the chime went off. Kasuka made his way into the apartment quietly as usual, removing the hat, sunglasses and surgical mask that formed his disguise.

Shizuo was about to offer Kasuka some snacks but was preempted him in his clear, cool, collected manner.

“It hasn’t been used.”

Shizuo followed Kasuka’s gaze to the futon.

“Yeah. It’s comfy and all but it’s weird to change futons. You get used to the old one.”

Kazuka kept staring at the flawlessly white, unruffled surface of the high quality futon.

“The yakuza is a very dangerous job. People die there all the time.”

Shizuo blinked, the Segway surprising him as much as the implication. Kasuka was now looking him in the eye but it was impossible to read his expression.

“Heh...I bet.”

Kasuka nodded.

“Accidents happen.”

Shizuo had to chuckle. He nibbled on a strawberry flavored chip that he had been planning on sharing with Kasuka.
“That won’t help me any. Yakuza man can drop dead tomorrow, it’s not as if Izaya would be all over me.”

Entertaining notions that Izaya would return his feelings if only Shiki were removed from the equation bordered too much to wishful thinking. But there were times when he could not help but wonder if things would have gone very differently had he been the one to stumble on amnesic Izaya.

“Start with comforting then break out of the friendzone.”

Shizuo dropped a chip.

“Ah… ‘friendzone’…?”

Shizuo was not even sure if it was a joke. He did not get around to asking as his phone went off and it turned out to be none other than Izaya, asking if Shizuo was at home since he was in the neighborhood and wanted to meet.

It turned out that Izaya was closer than Shizuo thought and in a matter of minutes he was waltzing into the apartment.

“Kasuka-san, how great to see you! This works out perfectly, a wonderful coincidence.” Izaya was already taking a seat, his good mood buoyant in both manner and speech, when a slight cloud overtook it. “Unless I am interrupting a sibling moment?”

“It’s okay. We were just talking about you anyway.”

“Kasuka!”

If Izaya was bothered, it did not show as he merely tilted his head slightly before sitting down.

“Right, the reason why I dropped by is because I have a great job opportunity for you, Shizuo! And since last time I had practically bully you into taking Kasuka-san’s great suggestion of joining
Thunder From Down Under, I am hoping he’ll help talk some sense into you this time around. Behold! The Strongman Competition!”

And with this Izaya produced a flyer with typical Izaya flair.

“‘Strongman Competition’, huh…”

Shizuo picked up the flyer sporting pictures of very burly men picking up heavy objects for reasons that remained most obscure to him. There was text explaining but Shizuo paid it no heed since Izaya was sure to expound on the matter.

“Indeed. Just as the name suggests, it’s a contest in which strong men display feats of their physical strength for the appreciation of a crowd and for a prize. It is perfect for you!”

Shizuo was not even remotely convinced.

“Great idea.”

Izaya turned his brilliant smile to Kasuka.

“Isn’t it? I knew you’d agree, Kasuka-san!”

Shizuo frowned.

“Don’t see the point in this.”

Shizuo regretted his dismissal immediately as Izaya’s joy dimmed on the spot. Izaya nodded, almost somber.

“I understand, I hope I did not offend you. I’m sure you don’t want to make a spectacle of your prodigious strength. After all, it has caused you much grief. But that’s exactly why I proposed this. This could be an opportunity for using your amazing physical powers in a positive environment.”
Something tugged at Shizuo’s heart, lifting it up and then dashing it. That Izaya had given such thought to him was touching in a manner Shizuo was not entirely capable of handling. Shizuo was even vaguely aware of Kasuka staring intently at him.

Shizuo took the flyer.

“I guess I can give it a go.”

Izaya bounced around.

“Really? Yay! The prelims have some standard stuff, lifting giant tires and the like, but there is also a free entry for whatever you want to do. You should juggle vending machines! It will make you can do anything even half as impressive!”

Izaya was clearly on a roll. Shizuo had to smile.

“Ah…juggle vending machines is a bit,”

“You can do it, right?”

Izaya was suddenly too close, nearly invading Shizuo’s personal space.

“Well, yeah,”

“I’ll arrange everything, worry not! I’ll contact you with the details later. But now I got to run, unfortunately. Nice seeing you, Kasuka-san! Always a pleasure. See you later, Shizuo!”

Izaya waved then waltzed away. As soon as he was gone Kasuka clapped quietly.

“A very good chance has arisen.”
Shizuo snorted this away but he could not help but feel a flicker of hope.

Shiki was holding a glass when Izaya walked into the banquet hall and nearly dropped it. Izaya made his way across the crowd, flashing his easy smile at everyone and occasionally bowing ever so slightly, the sleek white jacket lending him an extra layer of smoothness.

Shiki’s reaction must have been more visible than he would have liked because he heard Akabayashi chuckle playfully.

“What do you think, Shiki-kun? I took the liberty of making sure you two matched.”

This disoriented Shiki considerably but before he could quite gain his bearings Izaya had made his way to him.

“Greetings, Shiki-san, Akabayashi-san. I bid you a good evening.”

It was a good thing that Akabyashi took over the conversation as Shiki was still gaping even as he tried to recover. There was something exceedingly attractive in Izaya wearing a very tailor made version of Shiki’s trademark outfit.

“That looks great on you, Izaya-kun.”

Izaya giggled politely in not quite false modesty. Shiki noticed how Izaya’s hair was slightly longer, its deep black silky sheen more pronounced than ever against the white background.

“Such flattery, whatever will I do. If you’ll excuse me, I need to network with the documentary crew.”

With a very proper and elegant bow, Izaya sauntered away and Shiki followed him with his eyes. One of Akabayashi’s trademark chuckles broke the spell.
Ah, quite an effect. Wouldn’t you say so?"

Shiki smiled wanly in return. He had the disturbing feeling of being out of his depth. Fortunately the screening began shortly so Shiki had time to go over his impressions in the quiet of his mind. The documentary turned out to be oddly engaging, with just enough realism to make the glossy atmosphere actually believable. This seemed to be ‘art-house’, a concept that Izaya thought too obvious to elaborate on. Shiki suspected there were filters added to the irezumi shots to bring out the color in vivid detail. He found it somewhat upsetting. It was a detail, ever so minor, but enough to send a prickle of unease down his spine.

Shiki could not quite put his finger on it but as the documentary unfolded and Shiki’s own suave image appeared on screen, he realized what was bothering him. This was Izaya’s vision, or a part of it, overshadowing the world to which Shiki belonged. He felt an irrational fear that if left to his own devices Izaya would bring havoc to the order Shiki could not help but cling to.

He emerged into the banquet hall still in a daze. He barely registered Izaya exchanging pleasantries with everyone as he sampled the many delicacies on display on long tables. Shiki had taken this documentary deal as a mere extravagance but he could see a long of money had been splashed on this event. Akabayashi must surely have been behind it as well the promotion.

“What the hell is the informant doing?”

Aozaki mumbled in the background. If the idea of a documentary struck Shiki as a bit jarring, it was almost anathema to someone such as Aozaki. Shiki frowned at the tone but held his peace. Akabayashi took a bite of a small morsel, Shiki wondered vaguely if Izaya had been in charge of the catering.

“Now, now. Izaya-kun is a great asset so let’s cut him some slack. Can’t be all formal and hardline all the time.”

Aozaki glanced at Shiki, very briefly.

“Yeah, right. Upstart informants can’t be trusted.”

A sentiment Shiki fully endorsed, in principle but that annoyed him intensely at the moment. He distracted himself by focusing his attention on Izaya who was presently talking to Matsumoto. From the distance Shiki could not overhear the conversation but judging from Izaya’s gesturing, he was
trying to convince very simple Matsumoto to try some extravagantly modern tidbit of food.

“Hmm…it’d be great if we could hire Izaya-kun as our PR representative. We could do with some revamping, image-wise. Rebranding, if you will.”

Aozaki spluttered in indignation that set his many scars into jittery lines a bit all over his face.

“What?! Having him flaunt around like that is not bad enough, you’d have him do PR- the hell is PR anyway!”

Akabayashi shook his head in mock dismay.

“You need to get on with the times, you know.”

“The hell I do, like I’m letting that little sissy,”

Shiki’s voice cut through the mounting anger with great precision.

“Shut up.”

Aozaki gasped in such naked confusion that Shiki might be tempted to laugh were he not doing his utmost not to smash a fist into Aozaki’s face. Shiki’s temper was known for its stability, its smoothness almost legendary in an environment where brittle self-control was a badge of honor. But like with so many highly controlled individuals, on the rare instances something threw him too off-kilter, there was little warning to devastating violence.

In this Shiki was considerably more dangerous than Akabayashi or even Shizuo. Akabayashi had a level of well-honed violence so calibrated that he could wield it merely to disable apparently stronger opponents in such a way that the damage was often minimal- not because he lacked fighting prowess but precisely because he had reached an optimal level. As for Shizuo, his fury had a blinding power that often overstepped its targets but for all its potential for sheer destruction, the rampages were so loud that it gave plenty of time for bystanders to get out of Shizuo’s vicinity unless they were, of course, in the thick of it.
On the rare occasions that Shiki did lash out physically, he had none of Akabyashi’s niceties and unlike Shizuo offered no warning. If a confrontation turned physical, it could result in a snapped neck before anyone even realized anything was amiss. The minion still on the mend could very well attest to the ponderous effect of Shiki’s wrath.

For a split second Aozaki almost made an issue of this but he was very aware of Shiki’s personal history when it came to fighting. Ultimately, it was not worth it. Not only that but the documentary had been approved by the higher echelons of the group and that was not something he could possibly go against. And he was not about to forget that at the very top stood none other than Awakusu Dougen.

So with a snort Aozaki put an end to the hit-and-miss confrontation and ambled away.

“Stepping up to the plate, Shiki-kun. Congratulations.”

Shiki’s anger receded but he could not quite return Akabayashi’s playful smile. It came as a belated realization that he did not quite approve of Akabayashi addressing Izaya by his given name. Shiki made an effort to put the implications aside.

“It’s beef tartar, Matsumoto-san.”

Matsumoto stared at the fabled beef that Izaya was presenting to him.

“Ah…we guys ate already.”

“But it wasn’t beef tartar, I’m sure!”

Matsumoto was used to standing to attention as security at fancy events like this one but not being offered the food served there. He tried not to pay too much attention to Izaya’s white attire. This was very unsafe territory to tread all around.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to eat the party food.”
Izaya pouted.

“Now that’s unfair. This is tasty! Delicious beef tartar! Is delicious.”

“Orihara-sama, that’s raw meat…”

Matsumoto would never be able to see the allure of weird, rich people food. Izaya brightened up.

“Think of it as meat sushi.”

That did not make it any better as far as Matsumoto was concerned. But fortunately he did not have to disagree any further because Izaya seemed to give up on this idea, a bit reluctantly. “I don’t want you to get into trouble over this. I’ll send some beef tartar your way one of these days, then.”

Matsumoto was really not looking forward to this but he could not help but smile at Izaya’s generosity.

“Yeah.”

Matsumoto noticed the commotion going on between Shiki and Aozaki and was about to see if he should do something about when it suddenly solved itself. Matsumoto sighed in relief.

“Is there something wrong, Matsumoto-san?”

Izaya had turned Matsumoto’s line of sight but only in time to see Aozaki stalking away. Matsumoto knew it was best keeping Izaya from probing into this.

“All good. Just keeping an eye on things.”

Izaya nodded, almost somberly.
“I shouldn’t be distracting you. Work hard, Matsumoto-san.”

Matsumoto was almost glad when Izaya darted off to mingle some more. He dared glance a way Shiki’s way and saw a storm brewing there. Very attuned to Shiki’s behavior Matsumoto suspected this was more than a mere spat. Matsumoto could only hope it did not evolve into something dangerous.

“Just look at them! All shiny and red. Beautiful!”

Izaya gloated as he presented the three vending machines he had obtained. They glinted brilliantly in the harsh light of a hot day.

“Where did you even find these?”

Izaya waved dismissively.

“I never reveal my sources. It’s part of my personal policy.”

“Ah…right.”

Shizuo should have known that after hyping about the vending machines Izaya would find a way of actually securing them but part of him hoped he had simply forgotten the whole idea altogether. He changed his mind as Izaya rubbed his hands and proceeded to skip around the machines.

“Okay, time to go dazzle them with your mad super strength skills!”

Flashing another bright smile Izaya gestured the staff to take the vending machines to the competition site and took his place on the crew area. It took a forklift truck, also courtesy of Izaya.

Thus far the strength proofs had been humdrum and not particularly difficult. Pulling a truck with a
rope around his waist had been less than interesting but feasible. That went for the rest, including moving absurdly big tyres. But this was unusual enough to get the audience’s immediate attention.

Shizuo had already trained using some older vending machines that Izaya had obviously provided so he got the hang of it. He just hoped he did not drop the shiny new ones and ruin them. Izaya clearly took great pride in them.

Shizuo waited for the introduction when given the heads up, picked up the first vending machine in all its glossy red splendor. Both audience and crew were at quite a distance for security reasons. Which made the entire point of watching it live rather moot as far Shizuo knew but there were large screens to compensate. So Shizuo could not actually see Izaya. Besides, the juggling required his entire attention.

Shizuo went through the motions with apparent ease, though, and had not even broken a sweat when he put them down. The reaction was immediate with plenty of cheering and a small crowd surging his way. Shizuo endured it and even cracked a faint smile as he searched for Izaya’s face. He was sure Izaya would beam most enthusiastically at Shizuo’s thunderous success. It was all the reward Shizuo wanted.

Shizuo frowned. There was a lull as the scores were tallied and still there was no Izaya in sight. Shizuo dismissed the protocol of staying put and waiting. He searched the immediate surroundings with growing concern. Shizuo called Izaya’s phone and stopped on his tracks at the trippy ringtone that sprung up immediately. By now Shizuo had made his way out of the contest grounds and into a deserted area in the park. He followed the sound to a picnic table. Underneath which huddled Izaya. Shizuo dropped to a crouch, worry spiking his heartbeat.

“Oy, Izaya? What’s wrong?”

Shizuo made as if to touch him but Izaya retreated, eyes focusing on him with naked fear. Izaya put up as arms in a gesture of self-defense.

“Don’t hurt me!”

Shizuo pulled back his arm as if scalded. His best guess that Izaya was going through some kind of flashback. Fighting mounting anxiety Shizuo keyed his voice to a gentler tone.

“Izaya, it’s me. No one is going to hurt you. It’s okay.”
Shizuo half-expected the switchblade to be aimed his way but Izaya remained trembling very slightly, wide gaze, his body bundled inward as if to erase his very presence. Shizuo could hear Izaya’s uneven breath on the edge of hyperventilation. Shizuo considered his options. He could scoop Izaya from under the table, knock him out and carry him to a hospital. But that had to be the last resort as Shizuo could tell it would cause great distress on Izaya.

Shizuo played a video of Sushi meowing and meandering about that he had on his phone. For a while there was a no reaction. Then slowly, by degrees, the trembling ceased. Izaya put down his arms and blinked a few times, slightly dazed but unafraid.

A sigh followed. Izaya pulled up his knees and hid his face so that when he spoke his voice was muffled but firm.

“Ah…just made a fool of myself, didn’t I.”

“It’s okay. How are you feeling?”

Izaya granted him a rueful smile and finally crawled out of the picnic table. He settled on a bench where he sat in pensive stillness. Just when Shizuo had given up on a reply Izaya bounced up.

“What happened to the contest? Don’t just stand there, you’ll miss the award ceremony!”

“Never mind that now. I am not going anywhere.”

Izaya seemed about to try his utmost to convince him but he decided otherwise. He called someone that Shizuo presumed was with the contest’s organization and came up with an excuse involving a sudden family problem to excuse Shizuo while assuring that Shizuo was not at all dropping out. Shizuo was impressed despite himself. Only Izaya could improvise on the fly after just snapping out of a breakdown.

With this out of the way, Izaya now hesitated. Shizuo gave him time to pick up his words in the pressing silence. Izaya sat on the bench, linked his hands together as if to gather himself. He took a deep breath and faced Shizuo.
“I’m sorry. This was all my idea, it was supposed to be your day and I went and ruined it.”

Of all the things Shizuo expected, an apology was not one of them.

“No need to be sorry. Can you tell me what happened?”

Another pause.

“I’m not entirely sure…I saw you picking up and lifting a vending machine and all of a sudden I lost control- everything went blank.”

“Was it a flashback?”

“I can’t say. Maybe.”

Shizuo resisted the urge to pat Izaya’s head.

“Want me to call Shinra?”

Izaya smiled ruefully.

“No, I’d rather not.”

“Wait a sec, I’ll be right back.”

Shizuo hurried to a nearby vending machine, keeping an eye on Izaya the whole time as he bought drinks. Izaya was still very quiet when he returned. “Here, green tea.”

Izaya took the bottle with two hands.
“Thanks.”

This fading away into wordless silence bothered Shizuo. Izaya was the type who processed issues through conversation and his saying nothing hinted at a deeper problem. Izaya stared deeply at the tea. Shizuo hesitated slightly before very lightly placing a hand over Izaya’s, removing it almost immediately. It was enough to Izaya’s gaze to meet Shizuo’s.

“You don’t have to try too hard, you know? Acting all perfect and cool. Especially in front of me. You’ve seen me mess up time and time again. So…yeah.”

Izaya smiled ruefully and took a sip of tea.

“On the bright side, you so nailed the vending machine juggling!”

Shizuo was glad that Izaya had lifted himself from his temporary gloom but he knew full well Izaya was bound to push himself into false high feelings rather than worry him. So as much as Shizuo wanted the mood to swing back to carefree, he knew he could not miss the moment.

“This is kinda my fault. Throwing vending machines at you…that wasn’t cool. Shouldn’t have done that. I’m real sorry.”

Izaya spluttered his tea and coughed.

“Oh dear, that’s actually funny! We both know I brought that on myself. Hell, it might have been better if you’d hit me with a vending machine back then.”

Shizuo’s eyes went wide. Izaya’s humor was usually beyond him as it was but it truly was odd what triggered Izaya’s funny bone. Shizuo pushed through his surprise.

“Doesn’t matter. And don’t say that, it’s a good thing you’re still around.”

“Maybe that was the endgame all along. If I couldn’t defeat you, I’d get you to kill me then in a very twisted way I’d still have won.”
Shizuo could tell Izaya was no longer talking to him. He could not hold it against him. There had been too much soul searching for the day, it was time to bring Izaya back.

“You up for some sushi?”

Izaya burst into a wide smile.

“Are you offering?”

“Yeah. Got some money with this Strongman thing.”

“Oh joy!”
“I’ll be away from Tokyo for a week.”

Izaya spoke from a plush sofa in Shiki’s living room. Sitting across him was Shiki himself now in the process of producing a cigarette, his long fingers suddenly arrested in mid-air. Shiki managed to avoid a frown but not the budding worry. He had no reasons to approve of this trip and plenty of reasons to fear many complications. Shiki could not help recalling the Osaka excursion.

“And where will you be going?”

Shiki would rather ask who Izaya was traveling with.

“I’ll be attending a Buddhist retreat.”

Shiki did not know what to expect but this was not it. He went as far as to blink and the cigarette remained unlit. Shiki had not been exposed much to Izaya’s often oddball humor so he was not entirely sure whether Izaya was even serious. He considered briefly if he should bluff his way out of this in such a way as to avoid losing face if turned out to be a joke but in the end opted for simple honesty.

“I’m not too sure I follow.”

Izaya took a sip of fragrant green tea that Shiki had provided. As usual they were arranged in an attitude that hinted at formality without being entirely formal. Shiki was keenly aware that this setting precluded much of what had come to desire from Izaya.

“I want to take a break from Tokyo. I believe you have advised me to do so.”

Shiki finally put away the cigarette.

“I did but I have to admit, a Buddhist retreat was not something I considered. May I ask what brought this up?”
Izaya granted him an amused smile.

“It’s something very different, entirely new. I am willing to try something along those lines.”

It was a remarkably vague explanation.

“I didn’t know you had such an interest in Buddhism apart from its role in the history of ideas.”

Izaya was silent for a while in contemplating the green depths of his tea. At length he lifted his eyes.

“You’re right, Shiki-san. On a personal note I do not have much of an affinity with Buddhism even if I find it very interesting. But I know that I get very caught up in thinking about myself, so much so I end up being too much in my own head. This can be harmful. So a doctrine that has the negation of an individual self as a major tenant may have something of use to offer me. I am not out to accept it wholesale, or even partially. It is simply that an exercise in getting outside of myself may counter my very strong pull to get lost in IzaWorld, if you will.”

This was better and a logical explanation that Shiki could follow. He smiled at ‘IzaWorld’.

“That makes sense, I suppose. I’d rather visit IzaWorld myself, it sounds most riveting.”

Izaya giggled, more at ease.

“For lack of a better term, ‘IzaWorld’ will have to serve. I’m afraid I’ll be unable to be reached as the retreat forbids cell phones. Namie-san has a number where I can be reached in case of an emergency.”

Shiki would very much like to have this number as well but he suspected it was being omitted deliberately.

“Because cell phones are samsara but landlines are not?”
Izaya giggled anew.

“Apparently. I bet very little meditation would be achieved if people were allowed to keep their phones.”

Shiki grew very thoughtful. There was much he wanted to ask, namely where this mysterious retreat was taking place, but if Izaya was bent on non-disclosure then it was a lost cause. Tracking him was a possibility but Izaya was bound to notice. And Shiki could not exactly explain why having Izaya disappear to some unknown place bordered on agony. With so many impediments Shiki was forced to reroute his approach.

“Seems horribly strict.”

“A week shouldn’t kill me.”

“Do they go for the whole purity thing?”

Shiki leaned over to place a hand over Izaya’s.

“They do, yes.”

Shiki moved to cup Izaya’s face, effectively bridging the distance between them.

“Then how about, before you leave,”

Gently, ever so gently, Izaya pushed Shiki away.

“Shiki-san, I appreciate the thought. I truly do. But if I am to take this seriously then I want to get into the proper frame of mind. It won’t do to do this just now.”

Shiki did not quite step back but he did so inwardly. He felt absurdly stung. It took some effort to settle back on his sofa without entirely losing his poise. Shiki tried his hand at a blasé smile, very much frayed.
"I’m afraid you’re taking it too seriously. Are you planning to take vows and become a monk?"

This earned another one of Izaya’s trademark, silvery chuckles.

“Oh, hardly. I am not about to become an ascetic and live off the wind. This will be a challenge that I hope will profit me.”

Shiki was tempted to ask whether this challenge also included the sudden chastity but he knew better. Izaya said his goodbye with a very polite if slight bow, a gesture Shiki was very familiar and that presently filled him with frustration. Shiki wished Izaya would not do it. The bow reestablished them as informant and yakuza boss. Shiki knew that there were couples in which such cultural language registered as respect between lovers but he also knew that such a stance had little to do with the highly modern Izaya. As Shiki stared at the recently vacated seat he considered how he used to think that the bow was for his sake, a concession on Izaya’s part to Shiki’s status. He now wondered if it had not morphed into a means for Izaya to remain very safe within boundaries that did not offend Izya’s independence.

Shiki finally lit the cigarette and let the smoke spiral haphazardly in a scented, earthy shadow.

The moonlight silvered the garden. It cast in a brilliant wash that trembled slightly in the streamlet and hallowed the fronts of the trees into puffs of muted brilliance. Discreet shadows pooled in the empty spaces, softening the foliage. The chiaroscuro blunted the Autumn colors and filled the night with stillness. Izaya stared at all this very intently and suppressed a sigh.

One day into the retreat and he was already worn out. At first it had be fun. The novelty of entering the inwards of the veritable temple alone had Izaya nearly bouncing off the walls, it was all so quaint that he might as well have been spirited away to another world. Changing into nondescript clothing that felt very rough on the skin had added to the experience of otherness as had the scent of incensed that was ingrained in the very wood on which Izaya had to sit. And sit he did, for hours on end, until he was numb.

Izaya had embraced the exercises of ‘mind emptying’ through regulated breathing with gusto. Being very aware of how his thoughts tended to go into overdrive and spiral into very peculiar loopholes that tripped him, he could see the potential of clearing his mental space of disorders. Unfortunately, his good will and zest only got him so far. He managed to avoid taking any interest on the other participants, despite his instinct for assessing them as the human riddles they were, so that he could
focus inward. Izaya even managed to stop thinking about stopping to think, which proved quite a
conundrum, but as soon as he reached a sort of mental negative equilibrium he began to get
increasingly sleepy.

The sleepiness only increased as the day dragged into long hours. The low, monotonous chanting
seemed designed to lull one to sleep, to the point that Izaya could not help wondering if this was a
test of fortitude. It took some extra concentration to banish this stray thought and it eventually led
to the conclusion that if the idea was to empty the mind, allowing him to slip into slumber would do the
trick much better than nodding on and off.

Thus Izaya found himself wondering about contradictions, which kept him afloat but backfired
greatly. By the time he was starting to settle back into non-thinking, the whole situation struck him as
hilarious and in pure Izaya fashion he could not entirely suppress a fit of giggles. He masked this as
coughing and perhaps the powers that be were punishing him because he ended up coughing for
real, which in its turn was too funny.

Awkward did not even begin to describe it. He got a few angry stares, drank some water and tried to
resume breathing in and out, in and out. When the meditation session was finally over his legs hurt
greatly. What followed was a dismaying dinner of rice and vegetables, which was hardly good, with
no talk allowed, which was actually worse. Izaya was revving to talk to his fellow sufferers, he was
dying to know what had led them to the retreat. This ban on interaction sank his spirits even more
than anything else.

And presently Izaya’s spirits had not quite lifted but were fretting about. After battling sleep for so
long, now that he was expected to sleep he found himself unable to. Another example of fine irony
that he could not quite appreciate. He had tiptoed away from the sleeping quarters and into this very
quiet corner. Above all, Izaya was annoyed at himself. He was annoyed at how he kept reaching for
his missing cell phone, annoyed at how the nearly broken silence sat so heavily on him, annoyed at
missing out on something.

“It’s a bit shallow but if you try your best you can probably drown yourself and end this misery.”

Izaya was not even surprised that his pet hallucination should choose now to materialize. It stood, all
smiles, by the stream.

“Thanks but no thanks. Besides, if I die don’t you die as well?”

“Who knows. I may die as well if you empty your brains through your ears. You seem well on your
way to that.”
Izaya sighed. He was not even sure it was less demented that he could talk to his hallucination in his mind as opposed to talking out loud as he used to do.

“See, something good may still arise from all this. I’ll get rid of you.”

The other Izaya chuckled.

“I guess that’s what you’re doing here? ‘Kill the self’?”

Izaya was silent for a long time.

“Not ‘kill’. But ‘disconnect’.”

“Hmm…” The other Izaya peered into the garden. “That tree looks great, go sit beneath it and get all illuminated. Stay away from those mushrooms, though.”

Another attack of giggles threatened.

“Oh dear, I can’t believe it, I really am the type who laughs at his own jokes!”

The other Izaya bounced back to the stream and knelt by it, a few glittery fish flowing just underneath the surface.

“How about making sushi of these?”

Izaya’s henceforth latent hunger surged up anew.

“You’re a real treat, you know? Such a great help.”
The other Izaya jumped to his feet.

“Ha! Beware of sarcasm. Sarcasm is Attachment, Attachment leads to Pain, Pain leads to Fear, Fear leads to,”

“The dark side!”

Izaya had a very hard time stifling his laughter and he envied his hallucination for being free to laugh so freely.

“There you are, back where you belong.”

“Oh get lost.”

But for once Izaya did not mean it. This ongoing hallucination often popped up at the very worst possible moment but Izaya felt so bereft of human contact that he actually welcomed it now.

“Let us hope Tokyo does not explode while you’re gone.”

“I’m sure it won’t.”

It was the other Izaya who sighed now but with plenty of mockery.

“Your Tokyo might, though.”

“‘My’ Tokyo? As in?”

“As in the people who mean something to you. There is no telling what, say, Shiki-san is doing now. Or who.”

Izaya merely shrugged.
“That’s not my concern. Shiki-san is free to act as he sees fit.”

“That’s not my concern. Shiki-san is free to act as he sees fit.”

"Hmm…quite.” Izaya frowned slightly. He was so used to being caught up in his hallucination’s provocations that his lack of concern over this particular one made him think there was something important at stake here. “And in a couple of hours it’ll be dawn and time for more meditation. Keep at it! Maybe you’ll be able to completely destroy the intellect this time around!”

The other Izaya actually sounded encouraging which amused Izaya. He was getting cold and had to regrettably drag himself to the very thin futon in the wide room where all the other male participants were fast asleep. Izaya eventually fell asleep and dreamt of giant lotus flowers raining from the sky while Namie drop-kicked Buddha.

That night Shiki also had a dream. In it Izaya twirled, smiled, then sprouted black butterfly wings and flew away even as Shiki strained to reach him. Shiki woke up with a start, his heartbeat thundering in his ears. Snowflake up and jumped on the bed, majestically taking her place on his lap. Shiki smiled wanly, running his fingers through the warm, white, smooth fur.

Izaya had told Shiki about the wonderful therapeutic effect of petting a cat but Shiki had dismissed it as Izaya’s overenthusiasm. Shiki had since been proven wrong. It turned out to be another bit of Izaya’s wisdom. And as if to keep a theme Shiki was also forced to contemplate something he would normally dismiss out of hand. Namely, the significance of dreams.

Shiki needed no research or a therapist to see what was behind this particular dream. He did wonder at the detail of black butterfly wings. Somehow it was very fitting. Shiki moved to the spacious living room, settling on a particularly comfortable sofa. Sleep was too far gone and he had no desire to recapture it.

Shiki twirled a cigarette between his fingers before lighting it. By then Snowflake had resumed her seat on his lap. It seemed very fitting to sit in the semi-darkness, adrift in smoke, contemplating.

He was, of course, painfully aware that this anxiety was pointless. Very few places were safer than a Buddhist retreat and Izaya would only be gone for a week. And compared to Izaya’s Osaka escapade, with all the dangers it entailed, this particular stunt was almost pathetically innocuous. The worst case scenario had Izaya returning very bored from the retreat, a situation Shiki was sure to exploit. The worst case scenario within the realms of likelihood, that is, Shiki considered the borderline impossible- but nonetheless disturbing- possibility of Izaya taking a turn for the ascetic and
relinquishing sex altogether.

This caused Shiki to vaguely smile. He knew this was not the actual reason behind his concern. What bothered Shiki about this whole affair was that Izaya had not deemed fit to tell him his whereabouts. Only Namie was privy to that information. Which all things considered made perfect sense. Namie worked very closely with Izaya and was much more involved in his professional life than Shiki had ever been. She was much better qualified to handle Izaya’s absence and to no-one else could filter through prospective clients and discern what made for an emergency.

This was all very neat and reasonable but it did not change the fact that Izaya could very well have informed Shiki as well. That Shiki was forced to turn to Namie if he wished to contact Izaya was very disagreeable on many levels. And as apparently harmless this excursion might be, Shiki could tell it meant something for Izaya. For one, unlike the Osaka incident it had not been a whim. And secondly, Izaya had decided to leave Tokyo entirely of his own volition with nothing to force or press him into it. That alone made it very relevant.

Shiki had considered trailing Izaya. With enough effort put into it, if Shiki procured professionals, it might be possible to trace him to the retreat without Izaya ever noticing it. But Shiki knew it was something of a moot point. Finding Izaya’s whereabouts would Shiki on some level but would not fix the problem. It would not change that Izaya had deliberately omitted the information in the first place.

This only felt like a slight because Shiki was irrevocably in love. Any attempt of going behind Izaya’s back on this matter was not merely futile, it was self-defeating. And this applied to their relationship as a whole. Even if Shiki managed to occasionally out-maneuver Izaya he could never force Izaya’s feelings.

Shiki launched to his feet suddenly, startling the disgruntled cat who dashed away, a white blur. There was nothing to be gained by this, Shiki reminded himself, as he ran a hand through his hair. A quick shower and a sharp white jacket did not precisely improve his mood but diverted it somewhat. There was more to Shiki’s trademark choice of wardrobe than just aesthetics. The mixture of suavity and toughness were a means of projecting a sense of security and dominance. Normally, these were qualities that Shiki fully embodied but presently he was shaken. Dressing the part went a long way toward being the part.

Shiki prepared for what he hoped would be a very busy day of work.
Chapter 38

It had been quite a long time since Shinra had invited Shizuo over for dinner. Shizuo appreciated the gesture as he was a bit lonely. Celty sat about the packed table, Shinra had truly splurged, and helped keep the conversation afloat.

“This is real tasty.”

Shinra smiled widely at the compliment.

“Just wait until you see the dessert,”

[We got you chocolate cake]

Shizuo smiled a bit wanly.

“Yeah. Thanks, that’s great.”

Shinra chewed musingly.

“And where is everyone’s favorite informant?”

“Retreat at a temple.”

Celty dropped her PDA. Shinra blinked rapidly behind the lenses of his glasses.

“He’s where?”

“Buddhist retreat. To meditate and stuff, I think.”
Shinra gestured soothingly.

“I’m sure he won’t go that far. Right, Shizuo?”

Shizuo was amused at the note of doubt in Shinra’s voice. He shrugged.

“Dunno. Maybe.”

Celty was already on her feet.

“Let us just wait and see how it goes.”

With that said Shinra still sounded worried.

“He can do it like in that book. But probably not.”

Shinra chuckled, apparently assuaged.

“You don’t sound too surprised. I really cannot picture Izaya-kun in a Buddhist retreat.”

Shinra was not entirely sure when he had started to use Izaya’s given name but it felt very natural.

Shizuo picked a piece of beef and mused. He had been informed of Izaya’s trip with a simple SMS,
which might seem somewhat cold if it were not for the fact that very few people had been informed at all. And unlike Shinra and even Shiki, Shizuo had not been all that surprised. Shizuo even suspected that the timing was not as random as it seemed. Odds are it was connected with Izaya’s recent freak out. Tracing the exact connection was beyond Shizuo but gut feeling told him there was one. As for the temple itself, that did not surprise Shizuo either as he had known Izaya to dabble in religion before.

Shizuo cheered when the chocolate cake was finally produced and let his memory go back to Izaya’s church adventure.

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“Shizu-chan, today we’re going on a field trip!”

Izaya beamed, all childish enthusiasm and shiny eyes. Shizuo was not the most cunning of children but he was very aware that this adorable little boy act was something of an act on the part of his new friend. Yet it was still oddly disarming in how genuine it felt. And his experience as an old brother made Shizuo very predisposed to accommodate and even dote on younger kids. All his knowledge of Izaya’s uncanny ways fizzed to nothing when Izaya smiled, swayed on his tiny feet, and smiled some more.

With all that said, Shizuo knew better than to ever let Izaya realize this weakness so he covered it up by huffing in annoyance.

“Where to, a farm?”

Izaya giggled and swayed again.

“Now that may be fun but no. It’s a secret. Follow me!”

Izaya was already skipping away which left Shizuo no other option but follow.

“Can’t you walk normal?”

“Sure. But that’s no fun.”
Shizuo had a retort but he forgot it. He would be loath to admit but this excursion with Izaya, through what now where unknown streets, made Shizo a bit nervous. There was no telling what Izaya had planned and Shizuo already had enough problems as it was without getting involved into whatever crazy scheme might be just around the corner. He had the nagging suspicion that if things went south it would be Shizuo to catch the flak.

“Oy, where are we going?”

“We’re here!”

Shizuo blinked a few times. They had halted in front a weirdly peaked building topped with a cross.

“Huh? Someone’s getting married??”

Izaya laughed.

“It’s not a wedding chapel, silly Shizu-chan. It’s an actual Catholic church.”

Shizuo remained very deep in the dark.

“I don’t get it…”

“It’s mass time!”

“Ah…wait…aren’t these places kind of dangerous?”

Shizuo’s notions on religion very nebulous but he did recall a lot of talk about little boys faring less than well at the hands of said church. It had only registered with him because he was ever on alert to any possible threats to Kasuka.

Izaya’s smile was luminous.
“That’s why I brought you, Shizu-chan! Now hurry.”

Before Shizuo could protest Izaya and dragged into the building. Shizuo found himself sitting on the back pew of a large twilit chamber with a domed high ceiling, a bunch of creepy statues and surreal colored light drifting through the overall murk via wide stained glass windows. A small crowd was already amassed and apparently waiting.

What followed made absolutely no sense to Shizuo. A guy in strange clothes that bordered on botched costplay stepped on the dais which inaugurated a session of rambling on, getting up, sitting down, getting up again. Songs were sung and Shizuo was not even surprised that Izaya knew the lyrics by heart. Sitting very close to Izaya, as if to protect him from whatever nefarious men were out to snatch him, Shizuo was amazed at how clear and beautiful Izaya’s voice was. The words went right over Shizuo’s head as did the entire ritual but Izaya could any song into a thing of beauty.

In fact, if Shizuo were to believe in angels, he imagined they would look very much like Izaya.

The strangeness kicked up a notch when everyone lined up for reasons unknown to Shizuo. He frowned and put a hand over Izaya’s as if to whisk him away in case the rumors turned out to be true. After a while it became clear there was no reason for alarm so Shizuo relaxed a bit and tried to puzzle out just what was going on. But it was hopeless.

“What’s going on? They’re giving out free food…?”

Izaya covered up his mouth and doubled up to mask the fit of ill-timed giggles.

“It’s communion, the highlight of the whole affair.”

Shizuo brightened up.

“Does that mean it’s almost over?”

Izaya’s humor faded. He leaned over, crossed his arms on the bench in front of him and placed his chin there as he studied the line of believers.
“People have died over this. The blood of many has flowed over the conflict of transubstantiation and opposed to consubstantiation of the host. It was not the only factor but still. Human lives reduced to nothing because of the meaning of a piece of bread.”

Now this was gloomy. Shizuo did not get any of it and suspected an explanation would not help any but he remembered Izaya’s fear of death and his lack of faith on any higher being. At least Izaya was not about to join some dangerous cult, Shizuo thought.

“Sounds pretty dumb to me.”

Izaya turned to Shizuo, a red sparkle to his eyes that Shizuo tried to put down to the bizarre illumination of the place.

“Isn’t it amazing? That human beings can die and kill because of such a thing.”

Izaya was happily swinging his legs that did not quite reach the floor.

“How about we get lost before it gets even creepier?”

Shizuo sighed in relief as soon as they emerged into the healthy light of day and the street with crowds and hum of traffic. Even the smell of exhaust was reassuring after the ghostly atmosphere of the church.

“Shizu-chan, here. As a thank you.”

Izaya had bought a crepe topped withfoamy sweetness and offered it to Shizuo as they settled on their usual perches at the park. Shizuo took it.

“Thanks. Want to split?”

Izaya shook his head.

“That’s too sweet for me.”
For a while Shizuo ate in silence. Then,

“So, what was that all about?”

“Curiosity.”

“Weirdo.”

“So mean.”

Izaya mock pouted and some lingering tension melted from Shizuo’s shoulders.

“Sure you don’t want some of this?”

Shizuo waved the half eaten crepe. Izaya eyed it almost suspiciously then dipped a finger into the cream and brought it to his mouth, grimacing almost immediately.

“Too sweet!”

Something warm spread inside of Shizuo. It radiated from the chest and receded into a knot of anxiety. Shizuo decided to push it aside as it scared him.

“You’re just too weird to know what’s good.”

Izaya cleaned his hand with a handkerchief, all fussy. It crossed Shizuo’s mind that Izaya was probably a rich kid. He did not know much about clothes but Izaya walked around like he had stepped out of one of those children’s clothes commercials in which every kid was pristine. Then there was the liberal way in which Izaya used his money without ever looking at prices. But more than anything concrete it was an aura to him, something Shizuo would be hard pressed to define but that he could recognize. He was about to ask when Izaya spoke up.
“They have this thing called ‘confession’. The idea is to confess and receive absolution for one’s sins. The fun part is, the priest is not supposed to ever reveal to anyone what is said in a confession. No matter what you confess, be it murder or merely being mean to Iza-chan.”

“Are you serious? You can tell some priest you killed someone and he won’t call the cops?”

“That’s right.”

“Woah. No wonder they are out kidnapping little boys. You stay away from those people, you hear?”

Shizuo was on full on big brother mode. Izaya batted his eyelashes.

“Why Shizu-chan, it’s almost as if you care. Neh?”

“The hell is that supposed to mean,”

Shizuo spluttered without even knowing precisely why. He expected Izaya to be all over it but Izaya slid into one of his pensive moods.

“I wish I could have people tell me their darkest, deepest, most disturbing secrets like that. I wonder if it would change me after a while?”

Shizuo knew the question was not aimed at him. It was part of what he suspected was a running inner monologue of Izaya’s and one in which there was much darkness indeed. Which might be why Izaya had this oddball ambition he had just expressed. Unsure of how to react Shizuo settled for something very familiar. He dug into his pockets and produced a bar of chocolate.

“Here. For you. It’s black chocolate, not too sweet. You’ll like it.”

It was Izaya’s time to blink. For the first time Shizuo saw naked surprised in Izaya’s eyes. It lasted but a moment, a mere flicker and then gone. Izaya took the bar with both his hands.
“You’re spoiling me, Shizu-chan.”

On his knees, Izaya grabbed the wet cloth, brought it to the wooden floor and dashed across the wide hall. This notion of cleaning by crawling all over the floor struck him as such an anachronism that he had to take frequent breaks to keep himself from getting winded from too much laughing. Each time he turned his back to the altar on which an imposing golden Buddha statue sat most ponderously he had the distinct feeling he was being watched. When he reached the end, only to re-cross it again, ass up the air and cloth sliding along the already pristine floor, the Buddha seemed to be mocking the futility of it.

But Izaya had decided to take a most philosophical attitude. He supposed that acquainting the good monks to the newfangled invention going by the name of ‘mop’ was missing the point entirely but he was more amused than upset. Perhaps the opportunity for some exercise was just what he needed after countless hours of sitting in frozen meditation.

He decided he was going to donate a Roomba to the temple when he left. The circular design made it a perfect wheel of life even if Izaya suspected no technological improvement would change the routine of making some poor fellow slave away.

Izaya soaked the cloth in a bucket and resumed cleaning.

Dinner took place in a large room where all the retreat participants partook of usually less than tasty morsels comprised of all sorts of vegetables none of which impressed Izaya much. But having settled for an attitude adjustment Izaya now studied his bench companions. At first he had been very disappointed at the imposed silence but had come to realize that instead of a hindrance it could be a challenge. After all, so much of communication between humans was down to non-verbal cues. Being in tune with these was not vital to Izaya but also a world of fun. It was part of his project of trying different approaches and novel means of exploring the world.

Izaya chewed on a piece of what he assumed was cabbage floating in a greyish broth and considered his six companions. Four men and two men, varying ages, going from middle age to early twenties. Izaya was surprised at two of the men. In their thirties, he did not expect them to have enough free time to attend a week long retreat. This probably meant they were rich or at least well off. Since everyone wore the same very drab clothes Izaya could not rely on apparel in his study but his considerations did not play on a vacuum or just circumstance.

For example, he suspected that one of older the men and the older woman were old money. Izaya gathered this by the way they handled the chopsticks, their grip was that of one brought up handling
proper chopsticks as opposed to the flimsy one-use kind. It was with amusement that he recognized
that he too handled the chopsticks in the same manner but he almost immediately redirected his
attention outwards.

He pegged one of the younger women as a university student but this on more general terms. Izaya
noticed a telltale mark on her ring finger, a band of slightly whitened skin resulting from removing a
formerly permanently attached ring. This led him to speculate if she was on this retreat over a
breakup. Perhaps a cliché but fine as a working hypothesis. Judging by the way she shut down her
surroundings and calmly ate, she seemed either very used to this kind of thing or she was a natural at
this renouncing the world.

Izaya considered a young man who sat across him and also very intent on focusing exclusively on
the food. There was a certain slovenly aura to him, something Izaya could not quite pin down as it
seemed more than the cumulative effect of lanky, longish hair and a pudgy face. His personal history
interested Izaya to a degree bordering on the absurd. He wondered if this fellow was keeping a low
profile to escape from loan sharks or other unsavory characters. Offering lodging and food, all free of
charge, it was also a perfect location for anyone forced to go under the radar. The almost complete
confidentiality made it an ideal hiding place.

The other woman, whom Izaya deemed middle/upper class, seemed very out of her element. The
food in particular did not seem to her liking despite her conscientiously cleaning her bowl. Then
again there was nothing else to eat. At this point it crossed Izaya’s mind that this retreat made for a
great diet regime, which may very well be why the woman was attending. Somehow Izaya managed
to avoid a fit of giggles and he did so by clearing his thoughts. This cheered him up greatly, there
was something to this voiding of the mind business.

None of this availed him when he spotted a puny mushroom floating about the broth. This had Izaya
sprinting to the bathroom where he finally burst out laughing.

“Not mushrooms…! Of all things!”

Aoba was biting furiously into a nail but hardly aware of it. He paced back and forth on then forced
himself to halt. And think. Above all, he needed to think.

Aoba sat on his bed. The topic occupying him to distraction was Orihara Izaya. Or to be more
precisely, whatever was going on with Izaya. Aoba could not make any sense of it and it was
infuriating as he felt that whatever it was, it was right in front of him. If only he could put the pieces
together.
In order to do that now, Aoba mentally recapped what he did know. Izaya’s drastic change in behavior had caused quite a splash in the city and Aoba had taken note of it more closely than most. As usual, when dealing with Izaya, Aoba opted for safety first and did not act on the ever growing curiosity that consumed many hours of musing.

Izaya up and becoming friends with none other than Heiwajima Shizuo had thrown Aoba for a spin. In a vague way Aoba planned to use Shizuo in one way or another to take down Izaya. Removing Izaya from the picture was vital, this much Aoba knew just like he was painfully aware that on his own it was impossible.

There was the fact that Izaya was the ultimate power player who stood as a direct threat to Aoba’s ambitions. But it ran much deeper and into places Aobas would rather not admit even existed. The truth was, Izaya made Aoba feel like second best, at most. Izaya was ever a few steps ahead, Izaya was ever out of reach, Izaya could bid his time and then prance happily when Aoba finally made a too disastrous blunder. Izaya whose very existence taunted Aoba by being a kind of genius that Aoba, for all his intelligence, could not predict.

That Aoba’s modus operandi in life was so much like Izaya’s only drew the comparison even more sharply. A dose of reluctant admiration mingled into what Aoba was loath to accept was envy. When he was feeling particularly confident Aoba told himself that his disadvantage could be put down to the age gap. Once Aoba was all grown up, he would surely surpass Izaya. Yet when he considered everything from a lucid point of view Aoba was forced to admit that there was much wishful thinking here. Aoba almost wished he could find out more about Izaya’s illusive childhood, not so much to hit upon a weakness, as to have a level field on which to compare himself with Izaya. But he hesitated in looking into it as he feared it might demolish illusions that Aoba needed in order to get by. Of course Izaya never had to wrangle with an odious older brother- Aoba deliberately shifted his mental stream.

Aoba did not blow up Izaya’s powers into nothing short of omnipresence- that was one of Kida’s many hang-ups- but he did assume that whatever happened of any importance was ultimately Izaya’s doing. That it was impossible to confirm it added to the dread that often wormed its way in Aoba’s stomach. Izaya worked by proxy, using agents who used agents in a long, long sequence that might very well loop at the end. Tracing anything to the source was futile. More, even if Izaya was not behind it, he had surely counted on it and adapted to it. The subtle but most definite change in Tsukumoya Shinich, whoever he/she/they were, fitted in this category.

Aoba nibbled at the nail again, wincing when it snapped. There was an angle he could explore. He had been sure when he happened to luck out on finding Izaya passed out at school. If only Shizuo had not been there. Any weakness on Izaya’s part was giddying and Aoba lost no time dropping a hint to Shiki. Ideally, the yakuza boss would grow jealous at knowing his precious boy toy was with Shizuo then take Izaya out.
But then, to Aoba’s surprise, nothing had happened. Just as Aoba was teetered on the cusp of a checkmate, there was an upset and it all reset. Worse of all, Aoba did not know what had happened or why.

His gaze chanced upon the Liar Game spinoff. Aoba was also a fan and had applied for the contest only to be bested by Izaya. It had nearly sent him over the edge but Aoba had plenty of practice in steeling his emotions when need be. So he had bit down the resentment and even bought the book when it came out. Within a few pages Aoba could not even be cling to the idea that the decision had been unfair. ‘Labyrinth’ was more engaging, pushed the envelope further, while Aoba’s project was simply good. It had occurred to him that this might very well be that genius was. That extra something.

Aoba had even attended the award ceremony, having blackmailed one of the guests into handing over a ticket. At the back of the room, not too far from Shiki, Aoba had observed Izaya charm everyone. But Aoba also paid close attention to Shiki during the speech. It was that which made him tiptoe behind a vending machine and see the scene across the street. In which Shiki kissed Izaya.

It was deeply ironic that Aoba spent so much energy considering Izaya’s sex life. Aoba had no sexual interest in Izaya but he kept tabs on who did have and more importantly on whom Izaya reciprocated. By now Aoba knew that his plan of framing Izaya by alerting Shiki of a faux affair between Izaya and Shizuo had a surprising basis in reality. Even from around the vending machine in a less than optimal angle Aoba had seen Shizuo’s face cloud over.

This suggested a different approach. If Shiki could not be provoked, then perhaps Shizuo could. Aoba did not believe Shizuo was entirely cured of his anger issues. These could probably be tapped into with some prompting. Video of Izaya and Shiki having sex might very well do the deal. An ideal plan that unfortunately was not very feasible.

And then there were other pieces of the puzzle that Aoba could not fit into the pattern. Such as Izaya wiping out a whole yakuza group, or Izaya saving Kida by actually shooting Horada, or Izaya getting a kitty, or Izaya protecting Saki from one of Shizuo’s rampages. Aoba was still baffled over these events. Not for the first time he wished that random lady had actually stabbed Izaya dead, which was the best was of stabbing him. There were times when Aoba took something of a high road and said to himself that the one who deserved to defeat Izaya was him and no-one else. But for the most part Aoba was a very practical boy.

Presently, Izaya seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Aoba sensed that now was the time to make a move. But what to do exactly was still up in the air. Aoba hissed as his teeth scraped and broke skin. Nail biting was a horrible habit. One he should quit. One he would quit. One that Orihara Izaya had told him to quit.
Stubbornly, Aoba chewed another nail.
“Namie-kun! Take a seat, take a seat.”

Namie obeyed, her eyes firmly set on the gas mask. She wondered if prolonged exposure to weirdness had dulled her reaction to it. Shingen veered on the extreme side of bizarre but she could sit with him at a café without being bothered by it.

“What do you want?”

“Woah, what is this? ‘Caramel Brulé Cream Mocha Super’? Why, in my day,”

“Get to the point. If you called me here to rant against coffee names then I’ll be taking my leave now.”

Shingen shook slightly in what Namie assumed was laughter. He abandoned the offensive menu and rested his elbows on the table, placing his chin on his hands as if to bring into relief the mask. Just case someone might have noticed it. An affrighted waitress took their orders, Namie’s green tea and Shingen’s water.

“Namie-kun! I summoned you for no other reason than to offer you a job.”

“Why?”

Suspicion immediately kicked in.

“Why, your talents are wasted working for Orihara-kun. A fun young man, no doubt, but it just isn’t the kind of employment that brings out your skills. With your potential you can aspire to great things!”

Namie smiled wryly.
“I’m not interested.”

Shingen leaned across the table, now most definitely going into creepy territory.

“I see you drive a hard bargain. I’m willing to offer you a most encouraging pay package.”

It occurred to Namie that Shingen’s ultimate goal was more to weaken Izaya than to actually recruit her. But it did not even matter. She took a few sips of tea.

“As I said, I’m not interested.”

Shingen spread his hands in what passed for mock dismay.

“But Namie-kun, this is the perfect opportunity. Young people can be very unpredictable, but still, I don’t see why you’d turn it down…unless, I see! Could it be that you have special feelings for Orihara-kun? I don’t disapprove of that, in fact! I am all for. Orihara-kun has a head attached to his neck which is always quite wonderful. I don’t suppose I could interest you in Shinra, though?”

Namie had to laugh. It was so utterly out of whack and very much in character.

“That’d be ‘no’ to both questions. Actually, make that a ‘no way in hell’ to the second question.”

Shingen lowered his head and sighed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to think it over? Here’s my card, call me if you change your mind. And now, Namie-kun, I need you to guide me to the nearest gas mask filter store.”

She pocketed the card out of reflex and having finished the tea mid-rant was already on her feet, bag hoisted on a shoulder.

“Find it yourself.”
“Namie-kun? Surely you won’t leave me here on my own, on this strange place? Namie-kun!”

But Namie was already gone. She immediately returned to Izaya’s place where she was staying during absence in order to take care of the cat. Said cat dashed as soon as the door opened. Meowing wildly, Sushi grew silent as soon as Namie stepped inside.

Namie had heard about cats growing attached to their owners but she was still surprised. Every time she arrived at the apartment Sushi wound rand madly, hoping it was Izaya, only to be disappointed. Sushi now jumped on the sofa and curled on a furry jacket that Izaya had left out just for that purpose. Never one to read human emotions on animals, Namie could not help thinking that Sushi was very sad.

Fortunately Sushi was still eating and drinking properly. Were he to die on Namie’s watch and she might regret turning down Shingen’s offer. On that subject Namie wondered whether she should inform Izaya or not. She decided not to. If Izaya found about it on his own then it was a proof that his informant skills were as sharp as ever.

She settled to do some work then took a shower. Sushi had not budged by the time she had cooked and eaten her simple and nutritious dinner. Done for the day Namie relaxed on the sofa, making sure to keep a safe distance from the cat. She disapproved of talking to animals but even she was beginning to pity the poor fur ball.

Namie checked her new phone. Izaya had hooked it up so that calls to his cell were redirected to this one. Thus far there had been a few requests but none were at all urgent so Namie had simply taken note of them. Izaya could go through them when he returned. So all was well on the professional side, which should be the only aspect that concerned Namie. Yet was not, of course.

Namie had become quite attached to Izaya. His amnesia had triggered some major personality changes, some of which were most definitely as aggravating as his old self, but others that were actually endearing. It made Shingen’s offer entirely moot as Namie had no desire to bail on Izaya.

As a result, Izaya’s personal life had encroached on Namie’s. This was what being friends meant. She knew that Izaya needed taking care of, that on some level he was very much a kid with a mind too fast and vast for his own coping devices to keep up with. Izaya required someone to keep him stable and this was only one of Namie’s many roles.

The phone and her own showed no contact from Shiki’s part which was mildly surprising. She half-expected him to try to wheedle out Izaya’s whereabouts out of her and she was looking forward to thoroughly putting him on his place. Namie had nothing against Shiki but she would rather he kept in
mind that boyfriend or not, his special status with Izaya only went so far.

Namie had decided long ago not to meddle with Izaya’s complicated romantic entanglement. There was a caveat to this, however. So long as Izaya was functioning properly Namie would not interfere. If, however, it caused him too much pain and a major meltdown then she would do something. And given that Shiki was a strong, domineering personality, it might very well take Namie’s help if Izaya ever wanted to cut loose.

This possibility was one Namie had often pondered. If was not entirely sure Izaya, as he now was, should even be in that kind of relationship. She accepted it as it proved helpful and kept him happy. The moment that changed, Shiki, could count on her efforts to work against him, very overtly, if need be. It was none of her business if this bothered Shiki.

Namie decided that the gloomy black cat was just too much to take so she served him some tuna. Sushi trotted to the plate of food and ate it.

“Make sure you stay healthy or it’s me who won’t hear the end of it.”

And here she was, talking to a cat. Damn Orihara Izaya.

The problem with meditation was that it for all the sitting around very still it still managed to be nothing short of draining. Not during the actual process, though. Once Izaya conquered the knee pain and overall numbness, the physical sensation of discomfort drifted away. His mind being the prodigious machine it was, its deliberate and greatly disciplined hollowing allowed him to completely disconnect from his surroundings.

The stage of intense awareness through breathing technique and focusing on different parts of the body served as the springing board toward a sense of great tranquility. Izaya accomplished this easily by day four.

And then it suddenly happened. It lasted a fraction of a moment but time seemed to slow down. From a place of emptiness Izaya saw an ever expanding network that pulsed like so many veins pulsing vividly, brightly, alive. Izaya, who was now non-Izaya, observed this spread out of connections. The pattern emerged then rerouted into something else and just as non-Izaya was about to grasp it-
He returned to being Izaya. Gasping, Izaya broke the perfect seiza posture. Everything was the same. Motes flowed through thin rays of weak sunlight. The humdrum reciting kept on its steady pace.

Exhaustion overwhelmed him as the stimuli of the world collapsed on top of him. Izaya fancied he could see each individual mote even through the dull pain now assaulting his legs. Fortunately the meditation session was soon over and Izaya could struggle back to his feet and head to the eating hall.

He mulled over this odd experience over more watery broth. The vegetable of the day was broccoli, or something like it. Izaya chewed on it thoughtfully. He needed to recall precisely how he had achieved this state of disconnection. Izaya was very eager to recapture it on his own.

The sense of becoming the perfect observer, one who has erased himself as anything other than the observation itself, was empowering. More than that, it provided well needed balance. For someone who had been pushed into self-reflection to the point of distraction, it felt like an open space in which to breathe freely. But only for a short while. Izaya had no desire to displace the self entirely, not simply because he believe it to be impossible, but because he believe it to be fundamentally wrong. If he could snatch moments of this quiet that was also so motivating then he had an extra resource to see through his ever so complicated and dangerous life.

It was important to Izaya that he had come up this on his own. Izaya knew that no-one could heal the schism inside him. No amount of good will, not even actual love, could possibly solve issues ingrained into the very identity of whoever Orihara Izaya was. Part of it meant coming to terms with the fact some of his nastier impulses would not disappear nor could they be willed away. Izaya’s curiosity that veered on nothing short of cruelty when it settled on seeing human beings pushed to their very limit, would spring on him naturally. It might not be possible to curb but it was entirely up to him to act on it.

Izaya picked up a bundle of wheat noodles that he proceeded to slowly eat. The fear of sociopathy ran very deep in him. His research on the subject had been tentative. For once his desire for absorbing information had given way under the anxiety of finding himself to be a monster. Interestingly enough, this particular worry was shared by many of the most colorful individuals that comprised Izaya’s wider circle of acquaintances. This did nothing to assuage him, though.

Izaya understood that sociopaths and even psychopaths were every bit as human as everyone else but this abstract consideration did not help him any. The distance between himself and everyone else, either built by him or despite him, was very real. After all, someone who had made ‘loving humans’ as a personal motto on which he staked virtually his entire existence, albeit in a truly disturbing fashion, was already implicitly setting himself apart from it.

The best Izaya managed to do was to accurately predict human behavior. This was no mean feat and
had propelled his highly successful career. But it remained a simulacrum for an actual connection. For all the pleasure it still gave him, Izaya knew very well that how genuinely dangerous it could be. Not just for the poor victims who were unlucky enough to stray into his field of action but for Izaya himself.

What he did bore some resemblance to an expert pool player. Place the balls just right, exert the proper amount of force from the correct angle and watch how they went off in apparent chaos but merely following routes that had been planned out for them. That Izaya himself might be bouncing off to this rhythm, even now, bothered him considerably. But even if it were not so, the temptation of letting the clicking pattern shape just as it should could distract him from important, meaningful things.

As amazing as it was to see it all pan out as it should, Izaya sensed that the endgame was quite beyond it. The endgame was likely to be the exact opposite. For all his frequent perplexity over former motives, Izaya knew that the point had never been to be proved right, over and over again. The ultimate point- or an intermediate point- was to actually fail. To meet a situation in which someone broke his predictions and sent it all spiraling into the original chaos from which humanity hid. Civilization itself was desperate attempt to keep it at way, all the nations of the world a mere warding sign against the encroaching darkness that crept within.

Were this to actually happen, though, it would result great damage. Perhaps even death. Already in his own limited experience Izaya had experienced a nearly fatal error when he did not properly account for Tsukumoya Shinichi. That he solved that problem did not change the fact that it had happened. In reality, the actual problem could never be solved.

Surely, Izaya’s former self must have known he was on a path leading to disaster. But Izaya could make sense of it in a tortured way that attested to how twisted Orihara Izaya had always been. It fell into place when he considered that it derived from a compulsion. Izaya’s bursting intelligence made it easier to consider him ultimately a highly rational man. Many others saw him as such and all the talk about his insanity and unpredictability was more the result of a frustration to see ahead as far as Izaya saw. The popular opinion and one that Izaya had encountered in such drastically different individuals as Kida and Aoba, was that Izaya had a masterplan. The masterplan was bound to entail great suffering but that made Izaya a sadist, a very smart sadist, but still someone who had a certain agenda to see through.

Izaya found himself questioning this assumption. Izaya’s manipulations reached levels of absurd complexity but were arranged so as to trigger that unexpected moment. Izaya could not help it any more than his victims could avoid despair once they reached a certain point. To mistake Izaya as a fully functioning, albeit odd, person was a grave error.

Izaya shook his head, almost forcibly. This was precisely the kind of toxic thought pattern he was trying to escape. So Izaya focused on the thinly flavored broth instead.
Erika sighed and dropped her head on the table.

“Ah, it’s so boring without Izaya around! Where is he, anyway!”

Across from her Walker snickered and turned a page of a light novel, his narrow eyes never leaving the pages.

“Maybe he got spirited away? Or someone called Enma Ai on him? Ippen, shinde miru?”

Erika bolted upright, snapping from despondency into wide alertness. Her sleeves slid along the table as she placed her arms therein.

“Don’t jinx it! I have a lot invested in this, he’s my ultimate ship! On his own, even.”

Walker giggled in a less than sane manner.

“Izaya/Izaya? Even I’d ship that!”

Erika nodded. She finally got around to picking up her burger and taking a rather desultory bite out of it.

“I know, right? SemeZaya, ukeZaya, oh the possibilities!”

Her eyes glittered as she contemplated said possibilities.

“But it’s not even shipping if you stick to reality, right? As in, Shikizaya. It is canon!”

At some point or another Walker had become almost as involved in shipping Izaya as Erika was.
Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that, according to Walker himself, Izaya was just his type if only he swung that way. On a deeper level, his diehard otaku soul was fascinated by Shiki and Izaya being an actual couple. To him it was as amazing as seeing a veritable magical girl materialize before his eyes, stumbling on a shiny mecha one fine day or waking up to a full harem of his favorite 2D girls. Had Erika not done so much fantasizing about Izaya as a BL character, Walker would see little so gripping in Izaya and Shiki’s involvement but she had done much to influence him into seeing the entire affair as fiction come alive.

“That’s right. And Shikizaya is fine and all but does it trump Shizaya? That is the question!”

Ironically enough, for once, Erika’s oddball theories actually touched on very real concerns as this particular question still troubled both Shiki and Shizuo.

“How…Shizaya has the whole hate sex thing going for it.”

Erika gave up on the burger again to unite her hands together, eyes sparkling anew.

“The hate sex is a huge draw! It starts as a fight, turns into hot sexing! ‘No, stop’, means ‘Yes!’”

Walker gave this some thought, placing aside the novel. It revealed a gaudy cover featuring a grinning, white haired young man with a psychotic glare and a pattern white and grey shirt.

“That’s the typical pattern but I bet Shiki-san knows all sorts of kinky techniques. Like sexy kinbaku bondage!”

“Oh, I see! Hanging Izaya from the ceiling!”

The mental picture was very vivid and clearly worthy of rapturous admiration. Erika could almost see the red rope, expertly wrapping and suspending Izaya upside down. It was part of her peculiar way of viewing the world that she had no qualms entertaining highly detailed sexual fantasies about Izaya and then meet him in person without as much as batting an eyelash. Erika would even describe these to Izaya if given the chance. This attitude was partially possible thanks to lack of any sexual interest in Izaya. Erika was capable to displace Izaya into a realm in which he was erotic fodder without affecting Erika as anything other than an aesthetic project of sorts. Which was why Erika, like the good fujoshi she was, got a kick out of combining Izaya with several male partners but never with herself.
“For this kind of sophisticated stuff, it takes someone like Shiki-san. Shizuo just doesn’t have what it takes.”

Erika selected a fry from a greasy bundle and chewed on it pensively.

“That’s true. And Izaya works for Shiki-san, so it’d be Boss sex. Lots of potential there.”

“Shikizaya it is, then!”

Walker announced this with relish. Erika grew even more thoughtful.

“Well, yeah…but Shizaya is, Shizaya! It’s a classic, a staple, the got to OTP! There’s a reason why it’s so popular. Clashing personalities, super!smart evil mastermind versus hunky angry blonde. A drama spanning years, years, decades, centuries and millennia!”

As it so often happened Erika was prone to exaggeration.

“Sure, they’ve been at it for ages now. But think about the age gap appeal of Shikizaya. It includes virgin!Izaya and experienced!Shiki.”

Not surprisingly, Walker too had developed a mythology regarding Izaya’s sex life and neatly rearranged it to fit tropes.

“Oh, virgin!Izaya is pure gold.”

“Lewd and innocent!”

And it followed that both Walker and Erika took great liberties with Izaya’s personality. And with Shizuo’s and Shiki’s, for that matter, it simply seemed more obvious in Izaya’s case since he was the focus of their creative interpretation.

“It’s brilliant but how about blundering virgin!Izaya and virgin!Shizuo? Sharing their first time together, in the shower room after PE class, all sweaty and awkward. Now that’s something you
can’t have with Shikizaya.”

“Oh, and does Kadota spy on them and get all hot and bothered?”

“Oh of course!”

Walker was on a roll.

“If we’re adding third parties to it, let’s just make it a threesome!”

“IzaSandwich!”

And with this most brilliant pronouncement Erika took a bite of her own burger sandwich that was unfortunately not half as tasty or juicy.
Izaya closed his eyes, abandoning himself to the gentle swaying motion of the train. He was on his way back to Tokyo from the temple. For once the scenario sliding just outside the window did not capture his attention. Not that Izaya had grown jaded to the wonders of traveling by train, it was simply that he was too tired to focus on the intensely green now smudged by speed.

It came as a surprise that he should be so tired after what amounted to sitting around and doing some cleaning for a week. That his legs should ache from so many hours of uninterrupted seiza was to be expected but he could account for the overall feeling of lassitude stealing into his body and dissolving his thoughts into incoherence.

At the same time he could seem to settle into smooth sleep and instead drifted on and off, fitfully. With an effort Izaya reached for the meditation techniques he had as of late acquired. He began by concentrating on his breathing, slowing it down, letting the air work its way into and through his body.

It helped to clear his mind but he remained profoundly tired and unable to sleep.

A few train transfers after, Izaya finally perked up as he was swallowed by city. He approached it with growing awe. This metropolis to which he belonged beckoned to him now with its chaos of concrete, metal, chaos. Izaya stood on the threshold of the station for a while. He closed his eyes and simply felt the human tides wash about him. This moment was his. This longing for humanity belonged to him and to him alone, to the Orihara Izaya he was at this very instant. He clung to it, proprietarily, a mental clutch on the present that bordered on greediness. Everything flowed together. The gas exhaust so deeply embedded in the very air was the blaring of many horns, was the towering glass structures hurled toward the sky from which night was descending, was the pavement beneath his feet, was the blind tunnels under the pavement, was the rush of many people.

Izaya smiled.

Izaya stepped into his apartment and nearly fell as a black ball of purring fur came hurling at him and proceeded to rub itself most enthusiastically against his leg.

“Sushi! Did you miss me, kitty cat?”

Izaya swept the cat a quasi-hug, holding him close. The warm bundle purred loudly, the vibration oddly soothing as Sushis burrowed into his arms.
“It’s about time you come back. I thought the cat would kill me in my sleep.”

Izaya giggled and sauntered off to meet Namie. A rich scent of food floated about as he approached.

“Sushi is a good cat, he’d never do that? Neh?”

Izaya smiled fondly at the cat and placed him down carefully on a sofa after petting his silky head. Sushi bounded after him.

“Given what they say about cats being like their owners, I had cause to fear.”

Izaya reached the kitchen counter behind which Namie was stirring a big, deep pan. He had a ready quip at his lips but suddenly faltered into silence. The tasty smell resolved itself into made of many foodstuffs together, a slice of domestic peace, a callback to a quiet feeling of belonging that Izaya had never known he missed. And Namie’s trademark snark, ladle in hand as she stirred this pot that had been made for him.

A stinging wetness brimmed his eyes. Izaya gasped at it and daubed at his tears with his wrists, childlike in his dismay. Namie was already moving toward him.

“Izaya? Are you alright?”

He nodded rapidly, wiped the scalding trail of tears and tried a smile.

“Ah, sorry. I’m fine. It’s just that having someone cook for me is…”

Izaya trailed off into uncharacteristic silence and incoherence. He could not process into words what it meant. It was like the fabled nabe party, a blessing granted him for which he was so thankful that it blotted out all proper articulation. Izaya knew that his lack of proper human interaction this last week had much to do with his overwhelming reaction but beneath that he sensed that it was also a result of a fundamental flaw in him. The cumulative outcome of years bereft of being a human amidst humans. Years of which he had no actual recollection but that weighted him down with their shadow presence.
Namie frowned.

“Did they starve you at this Buddhist place?”

Izaya laughed. He took a seat at the counter.

“Heh, almost. It was all vegetarian food.”

“You do seem a bit thinner. Wonderful, just what I needed. Now I’ll have to make sure you don’t waste away.”

Namie poured a generous dose of rich broth into a bowl and placed it in front of Izaya. He held it with both hands, inhaling.

“Thank you, Namie-san.”

His voice did not quite break but was not entirely stable either.

“What’s this all about? I cook for you all the time.”

“Yes. It’s always delicious, too. Which reminds me, I never asked you how you came to cook so well.”

Namie shrugged. She served a bowl for herself but merely stared at it for a while.

“I picked it up growing up.”

Izaya could tell there was much behind this simple statement. A barren childhood in which cooking for Seiji had probably been one of the few outlets for emotion.
“Oh, maybe I should cook for you next time! What do you think?”

Namie smirked.

“How about not. Last time you tried your hand at cooking was quite a disaster.”

Izaya pouted in mock anger.

“That was the first time I ever gave it a go. Practice makes perfection! I’m sure it’ll be delicious.”

“Right…less yapping and more eating.”

“Yes, m’am!”

Namie glanced at her watch.

“It’s getting late, I’d best be off.”

“Please stay. Eat with me?”

Izaya’s smile was slightly sheepish but the plea behind it was very real.

“Allright. I suppose I can stay one more night.”

“Yay! Delicious grub is always better when shared.”

As if to prove it was so Izaya served Namie a bowl of fragrant broth. Namie took it and studied him over the rim.
“So, did you pick anything interesting at this retreat place? I don’t suppose they taught you how to levitate?”

“I’m afraid not. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh well. It just goes to show that it’s all outdated superstition.”

“Snap, Namie-san one, Buddhism zero! Heh but it wasn’t entirely useless, you know.”

“I’m sure. I bet you managed to have fun.”

Izaya nodded, head bobbing up and down in expressive avowal.

“I so did! I had this dream with you- not that kind of dream,”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Which was true but Izaya had not missed the way Namie’s eyebrows arched upwards.

“Just making sure you knew. In this dream you drop-kicked Buddha!”

Namie had to chuckle.

“Dreams are not known for being rational as it is so it’s no wonder yours should be strange. Which reminds me, I suggest you keep track of your dreams. They might clue you in on past memories.”

Izaya went for seconds. Namie was of course spot-on. Dreams remained the one source of clear flashbacks as opposed to the occasional highly upsetting fragmentary glimpses that resulted in his collapsing more often than not. But there was no rhyme or reason to his dreams and no way of summoning them. It occurred to Izaya that the techniques he had acquired at the retreat could change this. Not something Izaya was very eager to explore presently.
A very different topic arrested his attention.

“Namie-san, you know how I own some of the apartments in this building?”

“They’ve been empty as long as I’ve known. Are you thinking of finally letting them?”

“Something like that. I’d like you to move in into one of them. I can arrange a reasonable rent and include an affordable buy option.”

Namie blinked.

“That’s very generous of you. What brought it over, though?”

Izaya took a bite of soft, pliant chicken.

“I’ve thought this over. Having you so close at hand is an advantage for me all around. It also cuts out on your commute and the security here is much better than at your current apartment.”

Namie granted him a wry smile.

“The security? You’re the one who got stabbed by a crazy stalker, let me remind you.”

“And you were the one who saved me. I remember it very well.”

“Good.”

Izaya remembered it perhaps too well and no desire to indulge in that particular memory. It was perhaps a side effect of being deprived of some much of his personal history that the memories he had since made were so clearly engraved in his awareness.

“White panties…! Heh, sorry…it’s not as if you’re a fragile woman in need of protection but you do
work for me. That makes you a target. I don’t know what I’d do if someone were to attack you."

At some point Izaya had started to tremble. Namie placed a hand on his arm, squeezing slightly.

“You really need to eat more and go full ‘Kujizaya’.”

Izaya smiled weakly. Trust Namie to comfort him under the guise of snark.

“Will you consider my suggestion? It’s a very comfortable apartment, not quite as big as this one but it has a guest room complete with its own en-suite. Perfect for Seiji-kun to drop by.”

“You had this all thought out, didn’t you?”

“I am a most thorough individual.”

“That you are. It’s a good idea, I’ll take you up on that.”

“We can go check it out right now, it’s already fully furnished and-”

“The only place you are going to is bed. You’re exhausted and with my luck one of your very eager clients will blame it on me if you pass out tomorrow.”

As if Namie’s words made him aware of that he was indeed tired, Izaya yawned.

He offered no resistance to Namie’s borderline command and in no time was wrapped in a fluffy pyjamas, slightly large for the sake of extra comfort. Izaya slid under the sheets and blanket, Sushi curling into the crook formed by his knees almost immediately. The soft purring was very soothing.

Only now did Izaya realize how much he had missed a decent mattress. A sense of well-being pervaded his whole body. He could feel his Saika almost humming at some background place within him but it was very dim and oddly relaxing.
Izaya had the theory that Saika hosts, the ones who retained their own personalities and the ability to exert control over their monstrous sentient blades, were lacking in a strong sense of self. This vacuum seemed to allow for the accommodation for a distinct entity somehow. It was something of a paradox but it made sense that such people had little for Saika to take over in terms of a self and as such were able to build a whole identity that was centered around Saika without actually being Saika.

What made Izaya the perfect host, as far as he could tell, was his ambivalent attitude toward his sense of self. Izaya was both void of one, in a sense, and imbued with a hyper aware self of sense in another sense. His ability to hold different and even contrasting perspectives about himself was fluid, in constant flux, and more than capable of not just suppressing Saika but of using it only when he wanted.

His thoughts skimmed along these considerations, already sliding toward sleep. Izaya fell asleep with a faint smile on his lips and Sushi curled into a warm curve of cat by his side.
“This pair! Absolutely perfect!”

Izaya took the glossy, baby blue tinted sunglasses from a rack and placed them on Shizuo. He then took a few steps back, studying him closely. “What do you think, Tom-san?”

Tom pretended to join Izaya in this contemplation of Shizuo. When Izaya had first invited Tom to go shopping for trendy clothes Tom had been sure Izaya did not mean it. Tom could hardly say that he knew much Izaya but he had the distinct impression that he had a lot of things on his plate. Tom had also experienced Izaya’s whimsical ways first-hand, the unlikely trip to the fish market had been something else, so he fully expected him to utterly forget all about it.

Clearly, Tom had been wrong.

“It sure is different. Looks good, actually.”

Izaya bounced.

“Precisely! It’s the gap-moe effect.”

Thus far Shizuo had remained silent but Tom could tell by the faint smile that he did not mind this one bit. In fact, Shizuo seemed to be enjoying it quite a lot. Having Izaya fuss so much about him had Shizuo beaming in a quiet manner that Tom could not remember seeing before. Tom remained very skeptical of what struck him as a very odd and potential harmful infatuation. He still found it very strange but could not quite deny that Shizuo blossomed under Izaya’s undivided attention.

It occurred to Tom that having Izaya’s undivided attention for any amount of time was rather nerve wrecking. He felt very much like the third wheel here but Izaya refused to let him float to the background as time and time again Tom’s opinion was required. And the pang he felt at being ignored by Shizuo came as a surprise. Tom hardly knew what to think of it. He was so used to being Shizuo’s most stable emotional support that it felt as if his role was being whittled away, little by little.

“I don’t get a saying in this? ‘Gap’ whatever…”

Izaya sighed and shook his head in mock sadness.

“Shizuo, we’ve been through this before. With this baby that your brother was so kind to provide-Kasuka-san is amazing!- Tom-san and I were entrusted with the mission of picking a stylish look for you. Have some trust in me, neh?”

Izaya produced a credit card, waved it about some, tilted his head playfully as he rambled, then made it disappear with a flourish. Tom was reminded of switchblades and could not entirely suppress a shudder.

“Still don’t know what this ‘gap’ thing.”

“You have a menacing aura to you, being all manly and super strong. Trying to nullify it completely would backfire but if we dress you up in lighter tones that one wouldn’t expect, it creates a nice
Izaya was already paying for the glasses and moving to the next store.

“Ah…if you say so.”

“I have spoken!”

Izaya next picked a pair of shredded blue jeans and had Shizuo try them on. More clinical appraisal followed. “Hmm…I don’t know, it seems a bit too much. What do you think, Tom-san?”

Tom opened his mouth to agree but Shizuo cut him off.

“Pants got holes in them.”

“That’s deliberate.”

“Woah, how come they’re so expensive? What with the holes, it should be cheaper. Less fabric.”

Izaya’s seriousness broke into a smile.

“Flawless logic there. But it won’t do, we need something more…organic. Less hipster.”

Tom wondered if he could have possibly have talked Shizuo putting on shredded jeans. Suddenly, he wanted to show that he had a better sense of Shizuo’s sense of personal style than Izaya had. That this was precisely why Izaya had brought him along did not seem to matter, somehow Tom felt that he could

“How about going for something less extreme? A more basic look that Shizuo can spice up with a flash detail or two.”

Tom was already selecting clothes that he handed to Shizuo. In little time Shizuo reemerged from the changing booth in vivid but otherwise normal blue jeans, a white shirt with blue accents on the collar and cuffs.

Izaya clapped in childish glee.

“It’s perfect! As is to be expected of Tom-san. The sunglasses give it some pizzazz. This blue/white combination works out great.”

Izaya’s smile was grand and Tom found it annoying. “Let’s, ‘shopping spree’!”

“More clothes? Got some already.”

“Oh no you don’t, Shizuo! We’re not stopping until we max this beauty.”

Izaya flashed the credit card again.

“How about you buy something?”

“What, for me?”

“Yeah.”

Izaya frowned slightly.

“You’re not trying to shift attention away from you, are you?”
“Nah. But it’d make sense. You guys pick clothes for me and I get to pick an outfit for you. It’s only fair.”

Izaya did not sound too convinced. He seemed to give it some time as they crept to the cashier queue. By the time he reached it he seemed to have thought it over. “Alright, Shizuo! Why not take the chance!” Izaya’s smile suddenly quirked into something less than thrilled. “Pick female apparel and I will resent you greatly. Just so you know.”

Shizuo laughed and patted Izaya’s hair. The gesture startled Izaya into boyish dismay.

Shizuo took his sweet time wandering about many sections of the department store. He settled for an urban fashion brand and zeroed in on a long white coat lined with pink fur fringe complete with a hood.

Izaya’s eyes went wide with joy.

“Once you go pink you can never go back?”

“Yeah. Might as well go all out, here.”

Shizuo handed Izaya a pair of pink pants. Tom wondered if anyone would notice it if he simply slinked away.

“I’m not sure…pink pants might be a bit too much.”

Shizuo wanted to bring up that Izaya had worn outfits as garish at the host club but decided against it. There were plenty of bad memories associated with that and Izaya.

“You know, it’s what they say. ‘Gap moe’.”

Izaya quirked an eyebrow.

“Oh? Do explain.”

“Well, you can be very scary, what with the all black clothes and whatnot. So you go all bright and pink. People don’t expect it and they relax around you.”

Izaya burst into a fit of giggles.

“Okay, I had that coming. I’ll at least try them on but I’m not making any promises. The jacket is a must have, though.”

The jacket did indeed fit Izaya very well. But as he spun in front of the full length mirror he remained very dubious about the pants. “The waist is very low.”

“Nah. Looks fine to me.”

Izaya briefly touched his belly, the gesture flighty. The slight scar left from the stabbing had disappeared entirely. It must have been a side effect of Saika and one that bothered Izaya. So much so that he drawn it back in a non-permanent tattoo.

“Too low.”

“Here.”
While Izaya was contemplating his reflection Shizuo had picked another soft pink pair of pants but this one with a higher waist.

“You’re deadset on pink, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Izaya found it much more acceptable and ended up buying both pants and jacket.

“Tom-san, you should get something too!”

And just as Tom was beginning to feel redundant again Izaya reeled him in. Tom hardly knew what to do with this abundant enthusiasm. He glanced at Shizuo even as they both followed Izaya’s lead. Tom wondered just how Shizuo managed to handle Izaya’s hyper ways. Tom’s exposure to Izaya being as limited as it was, Tom could not tell whether Izaya was also on bouncy mode, though. What did know was how easy it was to relax and simply let go along with the flow. Had Tom not known about Izaya, he would probably accept him as a quirky but exceedingly nice guy with a knack for keeping everyone around him happy. It was truly chilling that this was precisely what many ended up thinking about Izaya until it was far too late.

Tom’s less than pleasant ruminations were interrupted by more giggling on Izaya’s part. Never had Tom met a grownup who laughed so much like a little boy.

“Oh dear, say that again! It was brilliant!”

Shizuo cracked a smile.

“Like I said, you’re one of those…metrosexuals? So the pink makes sense.”

Izaya laughed some more.

“Ah, you make it sound like- I don’t even, heh…! Where did you even learn that expression?! No, let me guess! Kasuka-san!”

“Woah, it’s like you’re one those, information folk who knows stuff. What was that called again?”

“Oh come on, now you’re pushing it.”

Kadota could not help but feel nervous. Izaya had ambled to the top of the movable ladder that ran along his very impressive personal library and now stood perched most precariously.

“Be careful!”

“Duly noted but worry not, I have mad skills.”

After some hesitating Kadota had finally taken up Izaya on his invitation and visited him with the overt purpose of borrowing a book.

“I believe you but still.”

Izaya hooked his knees over a rung and threw himself backwards, dangling upside down in front of a horrified Kadota.

“Why so scared, Dotachin!”
“You’re having fun, aren’t you.”

“Guilty as charged! So sorry.”

To Kadota’s immense relief Izaya righted himself up and perched anew in a more sensible fashion. This left Kadota free to admire Izaya’s book collection without worrying Izaya would plummet to his death at any moment. Kadota had seen it before but never had the opportunity of paying it the attention it required. Row upon row of neatly arranged books was arranged on a wide, tall, expensive looking grid of shelves.

“Have you read them all?”

Kadota sounded awed despite himself.

“Not all. This row is yet to be read.”

The ladder slid across with dizzying speed to the far right row. Izaya saw fit to hang from the rung with just hand as the other gestured toward the books in question.

“And you remember them?”

Kadota scratched his head through the perennial beanie. Izaya’s smile grew wistful.

“Mostly.”

Izaya had made sure he read them all, letting each and every single word leave a mark on his memory. Namie had encouraged and supervised his progress, methodically assessing how much content he managed to absorb and retain. As Izaya had learned, amnesiacs very often did not just suffer memory loss as their ability to acquire new information was compromised. In Izaya’s case that would be a fatal flaw.

Izaya had read the fatidic The Little Prince without as much as a hint of how crucial a part it had played in his life.

“I don’t know where to start…”

Izaya climbed down.

“Then let us talk books over tea! What will you have, I got a batch of topnotch Darjeeling.”

“Sure, sounds great.”

Izaya hummed under his breath as the water boiled and he kept it up as he poured it into an elegant glass pot. The leaves bloomed in a dark, slightly reddish rush. Izaya watched it eagerly.

“Wait until for the flavor to develop properly. If it’s too bitter for you, you can add sugar. But the pure flavor is where it’s at.”

Izaya settled most comfortably on the black sleek sofa and smiled affably.

“Black tea, did you pick up a taste for it at the Buddhist retreat place?”

Izaya interrupted his appraisal of the tea to look up at Kadota and mock-sigh.

“Ah, there is no privacy to be had in this city. I don’t recall telling you about the retreat.”

Kadota started.
“Wasn’t it supposed to be a secret?”

Izaya shifted into a giggle.

“Not really. And before you ask, no, I did not burn down the temple. But do you know who did?”

“Who…?”

Kadota was not entirely sure he wanted to know. Izaya dashed to the ladder again and returned carrying a book that he promptly placed on the table in front of Kadota.

“‘The Temple of the Golden Pavilion’.”

Kadota read the title almost fearfully.

“That’s my recommendation. For all your temple burning urges, look no further!”

Kadota had to laugh.

“I’ve heard a lot about this one, never got around to it. Thanks.”

“No problem. The tea should be ready now.”

Izaya made a show of serving Kadota first then got himself a cup. Kadota picked up his cup and mused a bit, hesitating. He took a sip of the tea, it had a strong earthy flavor with a bitter edge blended just right

“So, how did you fare at this Buddhist retreat?”

Izaya sampled the tea and seemed satisfied.

“Swimmingly. In fact, I was on the verge of slipping off to Nirvana, just like that, but then there was the mushroom.”

Kadota blinked rapidly. Very often he felt that talking with Izaya was a matter of working his way through a puzzle. There were plenty of layers to unravel that Kadota, against his better judgement, could not help but find fascinating. Kadota was rather used to being mostly lost at sea when it came to the conversation around him. Long exposure to the otaku gang had mostly inured him being discomfited by obscure reference. There was a crucial difference at play, and that was that not having a working understanding of what Izaya meant could have very grave consequences.

And presently Izaya had stepped into exceedingly oblique territory. Was he talking about drugs? Was it a casual threat that Kadota could not follow? Kadota could not even tell if it was a joke, the tone was deadpan.

In fact, Izaya was nodding sagely as if he had just made a very lucid point. Kadota’s befuddlement increased.

“You lost me now…what happened, exactly?”

Izaya tilted his head to the side, slightly surprised.

“Why, a mushroom happened. If not for that, I’d have achieved Buddhahood by now.”

Kadota opened his mouth to confess he was still thoroughly confused when it finally hit him.
“Oh, I see! A mushroom at a Buddhist temple, that’s pretty ironic.”

“Isn’t it?! I think they did it on purpose to sabotage me. So unfair!”

Izaya leaned across the low table and straight into Kadota’s personal space.

“Thought you were doing shrooms for a sec.”

Izaya returned to his seat where he proceeded to laugh.

“Not me! As if I needed narcotics to see trippy things.”

“You’re trippy enough as it is, too.”

Izaya clicked his tongue.

“Now that’s just mean. Sushi!”

The cat had crept from under a sofa and proceeded to jump on Kadota’s head, landing firmly on the beanie.

“Izaya, call him back!”

Kadota’s panicky flailing nearly had Izaya in stitches.

“Unfortunately for you, I cannot command cats. I can only get humans to do my bidding.”

“He’s attacking me!”

Izaya scooped Sushi from Kadota’s head and sure enough the beanie came off, firmly attached to the claws.

“Sushi wasn’t attacking you, he too fears you will go bald if you insist on wearing this fashion disaster. You should thank him, such a brave kitty.”

Kadota’s relief surged into dismay as he saw the infamous beanie tangling from Sushi’s paws.

“My beanie, it’s ruined!”

Izaya sighed and disentangled it from Sushi’s claws.

“It’s fine, look. And for the record, Sushi was simply kneading on your beanie. It’s a cat thing! He must remember his own beanie that serves as a most comfy cat bed.”

Kadota checked the beanie for damage, a certain degree of wariness creeping into him. For all he knew Izaya did indeed order the cat to attack him.

“No wonder he went for the beanie, then.”

“On that subject!”

Izaya bounced back to the towering bookshelves, climbed halfway to the top, picked a book and returned in record time. “Perfect time for rereading ‘I Am a Cat.’”

Kadota smiled at the cover.

“It’s been a while since I read this one, yeah.”
Izaya leaned forward, hands planted on the low table between them and nearly landing on Kadota’s lap.

“If only Sushi could write a book about our present day! I wonder what he’d say about me.”

In an attempt to retreat from Izaya’s sudden, albeit not too surprising, invasion of his personal space, Kadota pushed himself against the back of the sofa. This too was something Kadota was used to via the otakus and in this case as well, it was entirely different when Izaya was involved. With Izaya it came across as threatening at some fundamental level. Kadota was only vaguely aware of a sexual charge that was all the more upsetting for being so unintentional on Izaya’s part. For once, Izaya sensed and was sensible to Kadota’s distress.

Izaya backed off rapidly, his bright smile shuttered shut. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I have no intention of hurting you, I deeply apologize for hitting you.”

Kadota blinked anew. He had not even thought about that particular incident. Kadota’s confusion snowballed some as Izaya bowed to him and all Kadota could do was bow back.

“It’s okay, really. Don’t worry about it. I’ve forgotten about it already.”

Which was actually close to true. Kadota had no idea how Shizuo had managed to be so breezy about all that Izaya had put him through but it now occurred to him that it might be a quality of Izaya’s. After, Izaya had indeed knocked him unconscious with absolutely no provocation and Kadota had not even been angry at him. If anything, Izaya’s extreme reaction had touched Kadota.

Izaya’s mood had deflated entirely. He curled on himself, hands folded on his lap. Kadota noticed how delicate a structure the ringed fingers made when interlaced together like that. Kadota sensed that no amount of reassurance would do any good. His only option was to deflect. He prefaced it with a slight cough, then, “You know, the classics are always great but is there anything contemporary you’d recommend? Something edgy and post-post-post-modern?”

The joke, as lame as Kadota felt it to be, earned a slight smile from Izaya. He perked up considerably as he reached for two books placed neatly on the table.

“Here, ‘Human Acts’*. I’m reading the original in Korean so I’ll let you have the translation.”

Kadota took the book.

“Were you comparing the Japanese version to the original?”

Izaya finally brightened up into a blooming smile.

“That’s right! I figured a book lover would get it. I read the translation alongside the original. It’s extremely interesting.”

“So do you have the original at hand?”

Izaya handed him another book. Kadota leafed through it. “Hangul, right?”

“Yes. Such a fascinating writing system! It was developed to fit the language’s peculiarities and made to be intuitively learned by all. For example, the characters’ very shape is connected to their articulation. See this one, [ㄱ]?”

Izaya settled next to Kadota and pointed to the page. Kadota nodded. “That’s read as [k] and expresses the outline of the root tongue blocking the throat.”
“I see! That’s pretty cool. And this round one, it hints at the throat?”

Izaya bounced in excitement.

“Precisely! [杌], it’s aspired and reads as [h].”

“So it’s phonetic. A bit like kana, then?”

“In a sense, yes. But I have made an effort to avoid comparisons altogether and simply submerge myself in the language in both its spoken and written forms.”

Kadota could well believe it.

“So I guess I’m doing you a favor by taking the translation from your hands? That way you’ll have to rely on the Korean text alone.”

This caused Izaya to nod and renew his smile.

“That’s right! As for the book itself, the subject content is very heavy but that only makes it more relevant. It’s about the brutal murder of a young boy during the student uprising in the 80’s.”

Kadota could sense Izaya’s bubbly ways fizzing away.

“Very heavy stuff all around. I’ll be sure to call Erika and co. when I’m done, I’ll probably need their zany humor to cheer me up.”

Izaya returned to his seat across Kadota and served more tea, again making sure to serve Kadota first.

“They are worth a few hours of cute cat videos when it comes to cheering one up. When they’re not forcing one into a death trap, that is. I’d still be dangling from that thing if not for Shizuo.”

“Heh, you know they don’t mean any harm.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Erika is bad enough with her BL insanity but turns out Fox Eyes is something of fudanshi. How come they don’t go around slashing you with random guys?”

Kadota blinked then burst out laughing.

“Oh, I think they kind of do, on occasion. But it’s just not the same, I guess? Since you’re cute and all that, makes for better slash material. Even I can see that.”

Kadota wondered if he had just made a mistake. This whole topic often set Izaya faux-flirting and that was not something Kadota knew how to handle. Fortunately Izaya did not seem to be in the mood for that kind of trolling. Izaya merely sighed then turned back to the tea.

“How do you like it? Too bitter?”

“Very good but yeah, could do with a bit of sugar.”

“Sugar in tea, pure blasphemy! Tell no-one that I did this.”

Izaya carefully measured half a teaspoon of sugar that he proceeded to had to Kadota’s cup.

“Or you’d lose your tea cred?”
“Precisely! Next thing you know, I’ll be cooking tuna!”

Izaya sounded so outraged at this horrible possibility that Kadota allowed himself to relax. Only then did he realize just how suspicious he had been this whole time. Whether being this comfortable around Izaya was a good thing, Kadota could not say. But it sure was a lot of fun.

Chapter End Notes

Astute readers may be aware that 'Human Acts' was first published in 2014 while this story takes place circa 2012. This is an anachronism but a deliberate one. The novel is too à-propos not to be mentioned.
Chapter 42

Shiki suppressed a sigh. He stepped out of the building where he had been cooped for what felt like half a lifetime and nearly sank his leather patent shoes on a murky, glassy puddle. His fine features scrunched briefly in an expression of distaste. A moment later he was again the stoic yakuza boss.

He hurried across to the car idling on the curb, carefully avoiding puddles and the detritus of dirty, half-melted snow that turned the pavement into an accident waiting to happen. It was with relief that he settled on the smooth seat, the door closing briskly after him.

Thus far Hokkaido had not been impressive. In fact, it had turned to be cold, dismay and quite frankly, a sheer waste of time. Akabayashi had sent him here to deal with one of the many sub-groups affiliated with the Awakusu. Shiki had received the typical welcome, full of sycophant platitudes followed by a very long session in which the boss droned on and on about balance sheets and the like. It would be annoying under any circumstances but the fact that the boss was bent on covering up a slight accent and thus kept stuttering every other word made it nothing short of torture.

Shiki had more to worry about than just his personal distaste for bad weather, simpering underlings and petty kingpins. This entire trip struck Shiki as a demotion or at the very least a sign that his standing had dropped considerably. The Hokkaido yakuza were honored, at least nominally so, to receive the visit of someone so high in the hierarchy but Shiki was all too aware that virtually anyone else could have handled it. Very little of importance was at stake. Some smuggling revenues, a slice of which the Awakusu was entitled as the parent group, were about it. Which was why the boss saw fit to enumerate item after item in aching detail, going through them all in his strange halting manner, stuttering every few words and dragging out sentences in unnecessary flourishes of courtesy.

Shiki had to hand it out to them, these fellows were surprisingly honest to a t. It was almost expected that subordinate groups lined up their pockets and cooked the books in order to keep the tribute they were due. This kind of corruption was a delicate procedure. If done in excess the umbrella group would either drop the under-group and/or exert pressure that often resulted in disbanding it altogether.

Shiki almost wished something like that was the case here. At least that would give him an opportunity for acting, thus giving vent to some of the pent-up frustration. But there was nothing Shiki could do except look imposing, inspire respect by his very bearing and endure the many feasts done in his honor.

And there were three more days of this. This evening Shiki had managed to squirm his way out of a lavish dinner and headed straight to the hotel. He now entered the suite, his men dutifully closing the doors behind him. As he removed his jacket and unbuttoned the top of his shirt, Shiki mused on how his position so often kept him from opening or closing doors himself. There was always someone to
Shiki threw himself on one of the very plush armchairs that fronted the large curved window behind which Sapporo was a thrilling picture of fragile light blinking through the quiet drizzle of snow. Shiki stared listlessly for a while then briskly got up and poured himself a glass of whiskey.

It scalped his mouth and throat but revived him a bit. He would have to drop a hint to one of his men, probably Matsumoto who was almost smart by foot soldier standards, who would then communicate it to lower ranks of the Hokkaido men who would then in turn tell the boss to drop the jarring speech pattern and talk normally. Such a convoluted chain of miscommunication to convey a very simple command but Shiki wanted to strike a balance between keeping a respectful aloofness and throwing his authority around.

He knew that the moment he began to show his displeasure it would escalate very quickly and end with this sub-group alienated and past repair. This trip was a waste of time but it could snowball into a disaster if Shiki lost his temper. And said temper was somewhat brittle and frayed around the edges.

A quick shower did much to lift his mood. Shiki decided to order room-service, taking a kind of twisted pleasure in selecting the most expensive delicacies available. The Awakusu would be footing the bill then Shiki might as well bleed it some. After all, it had seen fit to send him here for no good reason.

Which was not entirely true. There might very well be good reasons, all of which revolved around keeping him away from Tokyo. And it was not the group, in abstract, that had sent him here on this fool’s errand. It had been the group in the person of Akabayashi. Shiki could not help but think this was significant. Perhaps one of recurring power reshufflings were at hand and it was in the interest of some factions to make certain he was not in the thick of it.

Shiki contemplated the elaborate crab dish when it arrived, absent mindedly taking a photograph before sampling the clear, soft white meat that was such a contrast to the hard red shell. The stability of any given yakuza group was something of an illusion. Internal strife and constant fracturing made for sudden promotions and equally sudden demotions and downright purges. The structure retained its integrity not so much despite all this mutability but precisely because of it. Virtually everyone had to be on their toes, always alert to a game of politics that was not even entirely rational. There were times it all seemed like a whimsical game played by chaotic, half-insane yet shrewd players, all of which were entangled in often contradictory alliances.

Throughout his life Shiki had played it very safe. His progress had been steady with a few power moves done at just the right juncture. It was his tenacity and ability to read the game that assured his security. But there was more to it. As a medium grade manager of sorts he was not quite part of the
higher echelons but was far removed from the soldier ranks. His was a position much closer to the core of power than to the lower levels which had very distinct implications in a self-contained society in which hierarchy was so fundamental.

But Shiki’s apparent lack of ambition had a deliberate element to it. He knew all too well that his particular relative position gave him something a wider margin of manoeuver. If the Awakusu were to suffer a major meltdown and split into so many tiny groups, or be swallowed by a bigger fish, or simply disappear altogether, Shiki could- at least in theory- survive. It was a fact of life in the yakuza that the higher one climbed the ladder, the harder the fall if the ladder turned to smoke. The higher echelons, those whose very names bore the group’s name- or vice-versa, depending on how one looked at it- were almost by definition bound to crash and fall if the group collapsed.

So when Izaya brought up talk of making Shiki into a king, Shiki read that as an invitation to disaster. This, of course, was true of virtually everything Izaya ever offered, affection included.

Shiki shook his head. Thinking about Izaya was the last thing he wanted at the moment. Shiki missed Izaya on a visceral level that reasserted itself cruelly here, in a strange city, as a cold absence. Of course, there was nothing stopping Shiki from simply calling Izaya who should be back in Tokyo. Except Shiki was not used to just chatting up on the phone. And Izaya was not likely to call himself since he knew Shiki was away on business and thus not to be distracted. Shiki found himself smiling ruefully. It seemed the issues with communication went deeper than Shiki’s professional ties.

Shiki noticed that the food was almost gone with some surprise. He had barely tasted the crab. The matcha dessert with its subtle sweetness reminded Shiki of Izaya all over again. Shiki found himself smiling ruefully as he took a picture of it. He wondered what Izaya was doing now. Playing with that whacky cat of his? Plotting the downfall of civilization? Spinning on his favorite swivel chair? All of the above?

Impulsively, Shiki decided to send Izaya the dessert photograph. The reply was so quick that Shiki at first mistook it for a confirmation the image had been sent successfully.

[Shiki-san! Looks delicious!]

Shiki considered his next move. He could easily shift this into sex but as fun as long distance sexing might be, Shiki wanted to be there for Izaya’s afterglow. Shiki needed the physical connection of holding Izaya in his arms even if only to have him slip asleep almost immediately. Even that had its own charm, endearingly so.

[I’ll see if I can bring you some back]

[Yay! Matcha is love. Sleepy time now. Goodnight, Shiki-san]
Early hours for Izaya, it seemed. Then Shiki noticed it was actually rather late. It seemed he had lost track of time somewhere along the line.

[Goodnight. Sleep well.]

Shiki wished he knew what more to add but this was not his medium. He would simply have to save his words for when he could lay them before Izaya, face to face, and say whatever need be said. The Awakusu might just have to take the backseat, too. Shiki was too tired presently to be fully aware of what a mental revolution had just taken place in him.

Izaya sauntered around the living room in a wide circle, gesturing toward the windows before spinning around to smile widely at Namie.

“Behold! What do you think, isn’t it great?”

Namie looked around the apartment that was to be her new home. While considerably smaller than Izaya’s, it was extremely spacious by Tokyo’s standards. The living room had an open layout that along with the wall to ceiling windows reinforced the sense of vastness.

“Very impressive.”

Izaya had taken to swinging back and forth slightly as Namie did her inspection. He now swung forward, all bubbly.

“And you haven’t seen the best yet! Follow me!”

He led her to a small platform tucked next to a wall, partially screened by what Namie thought was bamboo fence. Upon getting closer she realized it cradled a tatami covered area upon which sat a portable brazier, its metallic skin black and smooth. On top of it rested a round iron pot.
“Tea ceremony?”

Izaya nodded enthusiastically.

“Turns out the former owner was a huge adept and left his tea stuff behind. This means we can have tea parties!”

“Is this in keeping with the kimonos?”

“So not! But isn’t pretty cool, isn’t it? So archaic.”

“Do you know how to handle that?”

Namie indicated the brazier.

“I have absolutely no idea whatsoever.”

“Figures. Why do I have a feeling these ‘tea parties’ will turn into my making you tea while you roll around on the floor?”

Izaya was mid-pout but he flared into a grin.

“Oh, the floor can be heated so rolling around is a must! But Namie-san, does that mean you know how to work with the brazier?”

“Yes, I know.”

Which was not surprising considering Namie’s upbringing.

“Then you can teach me! That way I’ll make the tea and you can roll around the heated floor!”
Namie blinked. Tea ceremony carried less than pleasant associations. Memories of having to kneel and shimmy about had blended with the humiliation that came afterwards. It was as if it stood for all the disasters that would befall Namie and her family. This idea of Izaya’s, offered in offhanded playfulness, touched her deeply. Never had anyone made her tea in such a fashion.

Namie crossed her arms, snark back in place.

“It’s best I handle that. You’ll end up burning down the entire building.”

Izaya’s pout returned with a vengeance.

“That’s just mean…I’m not a pyromaniac…”

“True. Just accident prone.”

Izaya kicked imaginary pebbles.

“I just wanted to serve you some delicious tea…”

Namie softened her voice. There were times when Izaya needed to be handled with care.

“You can still do that with a kettle and then pretend to use the brazier. You’d be surprised at how many people do that.”

Izaya looked up from the floor where he had been staring at.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Students of Japanese as a second language often do just that for fun. Using the actual brazier can be dangerous so they just go through the motions and then go mere kettle.”
“As in, what matters is the spirit of thing?”

“That’s right. Besides, why do it the normal way? You might as well go full Izaya and make it a IzaTea Party. With extra crazy on the side.”

Izaya sparkled with joy.

“IzaTea Party! IzaTy for short! Oh, do you think I can use my switchblade instead of the whisky thing?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“Oh well. Can’t win them all, I guess! And now, for the rest of the apartment!”

Izaya made of show of displaying a very modern kitchen, a large bedroom and a smaller one with the famous en-suite, a bathroom equipped with a Jacuzzi over which Izaya gushed most enthusiastically.

“You could have a career in real estate.”

Izaya was expected to launch into another bout of sheer gusto but instead he was silent for a while. Namie knew better then to interrupt and simply waited him out.

“Namie-san, I’m very glad you’re considering making this place your home. But I know people are bound to make assumptions, living in the same building and all. If it bothers you,”

“Izaya? If I let rumors stomp me, I would not work for you. I do not care what people say.”

Izaya let out a sigh of relief.

“Then you’ll move in? There are other apartments to pick from, this was just my first choice.”
Namie had already decided to accept. This tour had only firmed her decision.

“It’s a great fit all around. I’ll take it.”

“Yay!”

Izaya did the expected little happy dance. Namie watched with a smile that was superficially dismissive but warm underneath. More than a place to live, Izaya had just helped her take a step towardoverwriteing a crippling past with a present and future rooted on firm connections. She was not about to let Izaya know any this. But she appreciated it at a deep level that was very rarely breached by anything outside of the constricted circle of her emotional attachments. This circle that had previously only contained Seiji had grown by degrees and now encompassed Izaya as well. “And this is the opportunity for getting that Sphinx cat I spoke of! Now, before you say no, you must see one in the flesh! I just so happen to have one at the cat café.”

Namie shook her head. Izaya and his silly cats, silly quirks and silly bouts of shyness. No doubt about it, dead in an alley if not for Namie.
Chapter 43

The scent of sizzling meat permeated the restaurant along with the booming of many voices crammed together, the chattering turned wordless as the sound blurred. Izaya made his way through the crowd, located the private door and politely knocked.

“Come in. Hello, Izaya-kun. How wonderful to see you.”

Izaya returned Akabayashi’s smiling greeting and slid the door closed behind himself. Immediately the noise was muted.

“Thank you for inviting me, Akabayashi-san.”

“My pleasure. Take a seat.”

Izaya did as told. He sat across from Akabayashi, an already sizzling grill encased on a low table between them. Akabayashi smiled playfully as he snapped a pair of thongs that he used to select a few choice slabs of meat. He placed them on the grill along with some vegetables.

“This is quite a feast.”

“I figured you could do with some meat after that Buddhist resort of yours.”

Izaya had already assessed the room but he took stock of it anew. It was a very small affair, perfect for two people to discuss affairs without being overheard. As an exercise in curiosity, Izaya wondered if he could manage to escape an attack were Akabayashi to stage one. The odds of such an event were remarkably low, to the point could round them up at zero, but it was still an interesting hypothesis to consider. Izaya was armed with a trusted blade and he was of course a master at escape but he was fairly certain he did not stand much of a chance. This without accounting for the blade that now was Izaya, that was.

“Ah, it seems everyone has heard about that.”

“It’s what you get for being famous. Make sure to same veggies now.”
Akabayashi served him meat and assorted grilled vegetables. Izaya giggled.

“Yes, sir.”

“Do forgive me, I’m used to seeing younglings as yourself as naughty kids who won’t eat their veggies.”

Izaya very much doubted Akabayashi would underestimate him like this but he was eager to play along. He was exceedingly curious as to why Akabayashi had invited him to have dinner like this. It could, of course, all end very badly for Izaya. Even if an immediate execution was hardly tenable, Akabayashi might have something less than pleasant planned for Izaya. But Izaya could not help being the tingle of excitement coursing through his veins.

Izaya had to blow on the steaming meat before he could take a bite.

“Most scrumptious! Veggies included.”

Izaya meant it, too.

“Anything to drink?”

“Oolong tea, please.”

“How about some of this?”

Ababayashi waved a bottle of sake. Izaya made his refusal very polite.

“I’m afraid alcohol does not agree with me.”

“A wise young man you are, Izaya-kun.”
Akabayashi ordered the tea. He served himself a plateful of juicy meat and added another batch to the grill. Izaya knew better than to make too many questions at this juncture and decided to wait things out. Akabayashi seemed to be enjoying himself as the one in charge of the grilling and now turned to Izaya with more meat on offer. “It’s a shame our Shiki-kun couldn’t make it but I’m afraid he’s tied up in Hokkaido.”

Izaya nodded. He missed Shiki, even terribly so on occasion, but right now he was almost glad he did not have to factor Shiki in. Not that Izaya did not relinquish having verbal debates and feats of the intellect that involved other parties but he wanted to focus on Akabayashi exclusively. And he also suspected that whatever Akabayashi had in store would simply never come up if Shiki was present.

“The Awakusu is a spread a bit all over the country, it seems. Very impressive.”

Akabayashi studied a particularly fat piece of meat on his plate and decided to place it on Izaya’s.

“Speaking of that, we are considering expanding into Korea. We’ll need an interpreter and naturally your name came up.”

Izaya bowed in thanks for the extra meat and chuckled quietly. He suspected his name had not simply come up but that Akabayashi himself had brought it to the attention of the powers that be.

“I am sure the fine Korean gentlemen can provide an interpreter.”

“Let’s just say we’d feel much reassured if we had someone who we can trust doing the translating.”

“Heh. I see. I have no experience interpreting, though.”

“How about you give it a go and we’ll see how it goes. Green pepper?”

“Thank you.”
Said pepper, nicely crispy, landed on Izaya’s plate. It crossed Izaya’s mind that maybe Akabayashi was fattening him to hold a brilliant Izayafeast for all the higher ups. The notion of cannibal yakuza bosses was highly amusing and some of it must be visible in his features because Akabayashi now cracked a rather wide smile that set his one eye a bit too wide.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself. That’s great to see.”

Izaya sobered up immediately. This was no time to be entertaining zany ideas.

“What can I say, I am easily pleased with good food.”

“This is wagyu. I understand your taste in food is rather refined.”

“I suppose you could call it that. Since we all must eat in order to survive, we might as well make the best of it.”

“And that’s your personal policy. As for me, it is a matter of pride to keep you well fed when I’m the one hosting you. That and the fact that our Shiki-kun would have my head on a platter otherwise.”

Izaya giggled. He would never get used to ‘our Shiki-kun’. He was still smiling faintly around his meat when Akabayashi’s own smile shut down entirely and when he next spoke his voice was razor sharp. “Izaya-kun, it just so happens that Shiki-kun is in a bit of a predicament.”

This got Izaya’s attention immediately.

“Tell me everything.”

Izaya flexed his fingers, laced them together and stretched before he sat in front of his barrier of blinking screens. Perched on the edge of one of his favorite swivel chairs, he mused a bit before getting to work.

According to Akabayashi, someone in the Awakusu was leaking vital information to rival groups. On top of this, a small yet steady trickle of money was being siphoned away. Suspicion had fallen on
Shiki and thus Izaya had been recruited to set things right. An internal investigation would prove a very prickly affair given the type of organization in question. Nor could Akabayashi move without alerting the culprit.

Over the hot grill, without neglecting the meat that he kept tossing with great skill, Akabayashi had laid it all out.

“Ah and one more thing. I don’t think our Shiki-kun needs know about any of this at the moment.”

With a nod Izaya had accepted these terms and immediately set out to help Shiki. An expert at reading between the lines, Izaya understood just what was being asked of him. The only way of proving Shiki’s innocence, of which both Izaya and Akabayashi had no doubt, was to find and corner the actual culprit. This might prove less easy than it might seem on the surface.

Izaya was operating from the assumption that certain that whoever was behind this was someone who would gain from Shiki’s removal. However, this only narrowed down the field so far. With such a heavily layered group, staffed by a multitude of contenders vying for a relatively small amount of top positions, the potential pool for suspects was both wide and deep.

“It’s like Detective Conan on steroids!”

Izaya sounded chirpy but he was focused as he began typing.

It was a sign of times that even the yakuza turned to technology in order to gain advancement. In the old days, all it would have taken plenty of browbeating instead of this convoluted strategy. But for a careful player, this was much safer and more effective.

Izaya did not dismiss the possibility of a personal grudge involved. In fact, he hoped for one as that could narrow down the list of suspects considerably. Yet he was full aware that he might be dealing with someone with little or no personal interaction with Shiki. Or a group of conspirers.

The flux of power within the structure was complex enough to allow for ramifications. Some thus obscure player(s) might very well gain, or be counting at least on gaining, from deposing someone as important- yet not quite entirely solidly established- as Shiki.

Which was to say that Shiki could be singled out simply because he was powerful enough to make it
worth it yet not powerful enough to render him inviolable. More, Izaya suspected that the culprit(s) was planning on becoming something of hero by exposing Shiki as a traitor.

From the detached place from which Izaya at least partially saw the world of mind games, Izaya was quite impressed. A smooth, shrewd campaign of seizing power with minimum risk. It was such a crafty plan precisely because it relied so heavily on the yakuza’s fundamental oversights to work. Criminal societies were very adept at using state of the art technology for money laundering and shady financial moves and were no strangers to framing. But given the tendency to mop up any internal strife with brutal force, once anyone’s guilt became too apparent, the powers that be descended with indiscriminate fury.

In other words, the hierarchy was likely to sacrifice a compromised pawn even if it actually knew there was no guilt involved. Saving face became paramount.

Izaya’s phone vibrated. He was surprised to see that Shiki, of all people, had sent him a picture of a delicate matcha dessert. He typed a reply with one hand, the other still tapping away on one of the keyboards.

[Shiki-san! Looks delicious!]
[I’ll see if I can bring you some back]

Izaya would greatly appreciate that. He also wanted to just chat with Shiki but knew he could not afford to.

[Yay! Matcha is love. Sleepy time now. Goodnight, Shiki-san]
[Goodnight. Sleep well.]

Izaya flexed his fingers anew. It was time to get serious. He took a deep breath. Time to put those bots to good use.

Shiki plunged his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and walked against the sharp wind. Snow no longer fell upon the frigid city but it was still clumped in dirty mounts here and there.
He smiled wryly as he spotted his reflection on a shop display. With the long white overcoat and goons reverently walking a few steps behind him, his image was reminiscent of the classic yakuza look. Shiki took the time to produce a cigarette, which immediately activated an underling to bright a light to it. It amused him how well it completed the picture.

There would be more droning over very insipid matters later on. Shiki had already dodged an invitation to one of the local yakuza sponsored strip clubs but he suspected it might be suggested again. For now, though, he was enjoying a stroll around the hotel. There was not much enjoyment to be had when it was cold he needed to be constantly walking in order to feel alive but at least it was of his doing.

Shiki came to a halt a few blocks down. A postcard arrested his attention. It featured a narrow stone flight of stairs, narrow and long, grey and somber amidst the snow. Red lanterns flanked each step and added the only note of vivid color. At the top perched a shrine but the shot was taken in such a way that the skewed perspective made it seem immensely distant.

It appealed to Shiki for its clever symmetry and quiet beauty. He thought it would appeal to Izaya for its Escher vibes. Shiki bought it. In the warmth of the hotel room Shiki pondered just what to write. Some trite like a mere greeting would not do. Giving in person was also an option but Shiki wanted to do something in the here and now to connect him, even if only symbolically, with Izaya.

Shiki’s silver fountainpen twirled on his long fingers. In the end, inspiration drove him to pen down one of the many poems he knew by heart. Nothing overly romantic but suitably hallowed by time. Shiki knew Izaya had a thing for revamping tradition and for cultural re-appropriation. An a physical postcard was already old fashioned enough as it was. Shiki found himself smiling at Izaya’s name in Shiki’s elegant handwriting.

Having handed the postcard to Matsumoto to post, Shiki allowed himself to cheer up even if only marginally so. It was entirely irrational but none the less true for that. Izaya would surely have a field day at dissecting precisely why it was so.
Chapter 44

Izaya spun on his swivel chair, slowly. Eyes closed, he seemed by all accounts the very image of absent mindedness. In fact, he was very deep in thought.

Thus far he had narrowed down his list to a hundred potential suspects. It was a provisory list that could very well be added to. He was currently surveying them all which meant having the bots following their movement across the city via the many cameras; sieving through their financial records for anything unusual and processing all electronic communication. This process was essentially remote. Once certain parameters were met – such as Shiki’s name popping up in a conversation – he would be immediately alerted.

Which was very useful but had its limitations. For all their fine-tuning, the bots could miss nuance altogether. Tone, body language, deliberately evasive or otherwise unnatural language, all these telltale signs could only be properly identified and read by Izaya.

He had a trump card but would only play it if it became absolutely necessary. As if reality were mirroring fiction, his last resort was very much like the forbidden magical technique: it was likely to cause him great, unthinkable damage. Izaya would pursue all other possible avenues first.

“Any progress?”

Izaya opened his eyes and smiled at Namie. He gladly took the tea she offered.

“Thanks. Perhaps. I’m not quite sure. I’m just bouncing a few ideas around.”

Namie settled on a sofa with her own mug. She frowned slightly as Sushi landed on her lap but decided to let it slide.

“Such as?”

“Such as, ‘let’s dismiss Aozaki-san for now’.”

“And why’s that?”
The chair came to a halt with Izaya facing Namie. He smiled as he saw Sushi neatly tucked on top of her skirt.

“Aozaki-san strikes me as too straightforward a person to go to such complicated lengths. He might have Shiki-san shot if he thought it’d be best for the organization but there’s no honor in framing him like this.”

“So you’re not investigating him?”

Izaya giggled.

“Oh, I’m investigating him alright. But I doubt anything will come out of it. Then there are some rather interesting possibilities in this case.”

“Do tell, I’m on pins and needles here.”

The deadpan tone had Izaya giggling anew.

“How about, ‘what if the one behind all this is actually Akabyashi-san himself’?”

Namie blinked.

“Why would he tip you off, then?”

“Who knows. To test my abilities?”

Namie ran the fingers of a hand through the cat’s smooth black fur.

“What are the other possibilities?”
“‘What if Shiki-san is behind it?’”

“Paranoia, thy name is Orihara Izaya.”

“Heh…true. But it may be true.”

“Wouldn’t that mean Shiki-san and Akabayashi-san are conspiring against you?”

“Not necessarily but likely, yes. There’s a chance Akabayashi-san himself is not entirely sure of what is going on.”

Namie took a sip. It was going to be a long night so she had brewed the strongest Assam tea she could find in Izaya’s nearly endless supply of various teas.

“Are you alright with that? Considering how you feel about Shiki-san.”

Izaya spun some more.

“It doesn’t matter how I feel about it. The truth is whatever the truth is and it is and my job to find it at any cost.”

Namie nodded in agreement. She appreciated Izaya’s commitment to reaching the truth. Most thought that Izaya prized power above all else but Namie knew better. This steadfast search for the truth, even when it could only help but be devastating to him, resonated with Namie on a personal level. It reminded her of the principles behind scientific research and made her trust him even though she was very well aware that she would never fully understand Izaya. As far as Namie was concerned, Izaya was like quantum physics: if you thought they understood Orihara Izaya, you didn’t understand Orihara Izaya.

“As long as you’re sure.”

Izaya spun in silence. He let the momentum die out until the chair stopped.
“Is this even about Shiki-san?”

“Meaning?”

“It strikes me that this entire affair is the perfect way of gauging just what I can do.”

Namie considered it. She had realized that in the grand scheme of things Izaya held a kind of potential that Shiki simply could not aspire to. That someone would target Izaya via Shiki seemed entirely likely and she was very pleased that Izaya had the mental flexibility to see as much.

“That changes everything in terms who might be behind it.”

“Indeed. Indeed, it does.”

Namie knew better than to see herself as an expert in Izaya but she knew the glint in his eyes meant he was having fun. More precisely, he was anticipating a world of fun. It was a kind of thrilling sense of expectancy that had Izaya abuzz with excitement - not despite the danger but partially because of it. At times like this Namie was reminded anew that there was a core to Izaya’s self that remained intact.

That Izaya was an inherently malicious person was a widely held opinion. One that Namie did not share. For all the complexities to his character, Izaya was simply a creature driven by a desire for fun. And it just so happened that what passed for ‘fun’ to him often included putting others into critical situations. What most failed to see was that this went as far as to include Izaya himself. On some fundamental room Izaya was driven to place himself in peril.

In fact, if Izaya had erased his own memory - a possibility Namie found entirely possible and perhaps even likely - it was probably on account of this very compulsion. Ultimately, it was self-destructive. Of this Namie had no doubt. And it opened up a very niche skillset in Namie’s repertoire: that of making sure she would be Izaya’s brake.

“So? What’s our next move?”

Izaya was swirling on the chair without quite spinning it around.
“We comb through the list of suspects.”

“And I don’t suppose you’ll be asking Shiki-san if he has any leads?”

Izaya tilted his head slightly.

“I don’t think that’ll do.”

Which was fine with Namie. But it might very well cost Izaya further down the line. It was a thin line to tread, between wanting to provide Izaya with the protection he most definitely needed and allowing him the freedom that he needed every bit as much. When it came to Izaya’s love life Namie had a mostly hands-off approach. If Izaya could not see that keeping crucial information from Shiki would surely cause some serious problems in their relationship then Namie was not about to point it out. Let Izaya figure out for himself and if that ended in tears, then so be it. It might very well be a chance for emotional growth.

After all, if the expert in human interaction had such a blind spot when it came to his own romantic-for lack of a better term-relationship then he might very well need a rude awakening. There were life lessons that need be learned the hard way, after all.

The fact that Izaya was relying on his newly acquired- for lack of a better word- electronic information hoarding abilities did not mean he was placing all of his bets therein. Izaya knew that field work was a method he needed to be on top of. He considered this as he greeted the guards posted around Shiki’s home and made his way inside.

A yakuza residence could not simply be left empty when its occupier had to absent himself. Staff was supplied on a rotation basis in order to keep a 24 hour surveillance. Izaya greatly appreciated it. He was allowed to make his way to the living room where he encountered a familiar face.

“Sakurai-san, long time no see.”

“Orihara-sama! Shiki-san isn’t around, I’m afraid.”
Sakurai was a diehard member of what Shiki thought as the Izaya fanclub. Izaya had won him over when he won a high stakes game of UNO for most of Sakurai’s paycheck. Like so many foot soldiers Sakurai had only the vaguest idea of what it was that Izaya actually did, apart from being Shiki’s pet, and he needed to actually see Izaya’s intelligence at work. Gambling being an exalted art among his peers, Sakurai had been convinced that Izaya was indeed someone to be reckoned with and since then had become quite devoted.

Also, being very proud of the lavish, colorful koi fish he had inked on his back, Sakurai had been absolutely thrilled when Izaya sprang the documentary on him. It was one of Sakurai’s sorrows that his beautiful, intricate irezumi that had taken so much time and literal blood and tears to get was only appreciated by a handful of guys. Having it immortalized on celluloid for all to see had moved him to more tears that he believed to be of the manly kind and thus perfectly acceptable.

Since then Sakurai entertained the notion of showing the wonderful living canvas that was his body to none other than Izaya who would surely see it for the work of art it was, so much so in the flesh, as it were, instead of on a screen. But he knew Shiki would not approve and unless Izaya asked him directly Sakurai could not exactly ask.

“So I’ve heard. But it seems I caught you at a bad time?”

Sakurai held a duster and had been busy cleaning up some.

“Oh, no. Not at all.”

Izaya had been surprised at this obsession with cleanliness that the yakuza held. Annual cleanings were something of a ritual and monthly smaller scale cleanings were not unheard of. But it still put a smile to his face, seeing these tough fellows going about with wet cloths, pristine turban-like cloth over their heads, very busy attacking what little dust there might be.

“I dropped by to say hi to Snowball, haven’t seen her in a while.”

Sakurai grinned widely.

“Snowball-san is sleeping, I believe. She’s bitten me twice already.”

Bandaged fingers were presented. Izaya blinked, both at a cat being saddled with a honorific and
with Sakurai’s happiness over being the target of said cat’s aggression. What Izaya did not know was that while being bitten by cats, in general, was disagreeable, when it was the cat cherished by the boss, it was quite alright. And Sakurai nurtured the idea that Snowball’s true goal was the famous koi on his back.

“She should be used to strangers, how odd.”

“Shiki-sama told me to brush her.”

“Heh, I can see that not ending too well. I apologize on her behalf.”

Izaya activated a small device inside a pocket. It scanned the entire household for bugs and other devices of the kind.

“No problem at all. I’ll fix you some tea.”

“Thanks.”

The tea took some time to arrive since Sakurai could not use Shiki’s kettle or cups. He had to trot all the way to a storage where the lower ranks kept their own utensils. This too had puzzled Izaya considerably, at first, and he still marveled at it. In Shiki’s office there was a kettle for Shiki’s exclusive use along with a series of very pretty cups that he were served to guests. The help was there to polish these but could not make use of them. Instead they had their own lower grade kettle and rough cups.

Normally Izaya was entitled to drink from Shiki’s delicate teacups and had done so on many an occasion but in his absence Sakurai saw fit to stick to what he knew. Izaya was not entirely sure Sakurai had been given clearance to even handle such borderline relics. It was all part of the convoluted protocol that made the yakuza so odd and intriguing.

As he waited Izaya checked the device. No bugs. He sighed quietly in relief. Only now did he pay attention to his surroundings. The very floor on which he sat brought back vivid memories that he would rather not contemplate at the moment. He was distracted from these by none other than Snowball who strode most majestically, fluffy white tail almost vibrant in the air.

“Snowball…-san! Heh.”
“Orihara-sama, your tea is ready. I’m afraid that’s all I can serve you at the moment.”

A quite decent cup was placed in front of Izaya, the tea and intense shade of green.

“…This is fine. I can’t persuade you to have some tea with me? It’s a bit lonely drinking all by myself.”

Izaya tried a frank smile. Sakurai hesitated. But since all the crockery was the staff’s, he could technically use it without infringing any rule. As for actually drinking with Izaya, that was more of a murky area but he remembered Matsumoto had the privilege of having sushi with him. Sakurai saw no reason why he should not be on equal footing with someone of the same rank. Strictly speaking, Shiki might not quite endorse such blurring of lines but Sakurai was sure his boss would not like Izaya to be lonesome. So Sakurai reached something of a compromise by accepting the invitation and then sitting in excruciating seiza across from Izaya, keeping a very respectful distance.

“Thank you, Orihara-sama.”

To add to the surrealism of it all, Sakurai topped it with a bow. Izaya was not precisely sure why Sakurai need thank Izaya for tea that Sakurai himself was providing but now was not the time to delve into the peculiarities of yakuza etiquette.

“You’re keeping an eye on Shiki-san’s place?”

Sakurai nodded.

“Me and some of the guys.”

Izaya sipped his tea after carefully blowing on it.

“Have you seen any suspicious people about?”

Sakurai’s already narrow eyes nearly eclipsed.
“Suspicious people? Rounding Shiki-sama’s place?”

“Yes. That or anything that feels off. Could be anything.”

Sakurai thought it over. He was not the most intellectual of people but a foot soldier could not get very far without picking up a keen sense of alertness.

“I haven’t noticed anything…but I’ll be on the lookout. Should I ask the rest of the guys?”

“Just tell them to be on their toes.”

“Will do.”

“Keep a low profile, though. There is no need to worry your betters.”

Izaya did not care for this kind of language. He was at heart an equalitarian. Assuming that some were superior to others did quite some violence to his beliefs but this was the only way he had of making sure Sakurai did not contact Shiki.

“Okay. Got it.”

“And now, let me show you how to brush Snowflake! I brought her some treats, too.”

The rest of Izaya’s visit was dedicated to exemplifying just how to detect when Snowball was in a mellow mood and how to then brush her long fur. Sakurai watched close and was very thankful for the demonstration. He still fully expected to be bitten, though.

As Izaya excused himself and left, after petting Snowball one final time, he wandered through the streets at a leisurely pace. This conspiracy of keeping Shiki in the dark demanded that he included Sakurai. It was not optimal but could hardly be helped. Izaya did not like it but he had to defer to Akabayashi who had the idea in the first place. Were Shiki to find out he would surely hurry back and make Izaya’s job borderline impossible. All things considered it was the one rational option and Izaya could only hope that for once rationality would win in this subculture so devoted to its own complicated norms.
As much as Izaya enjoyed interacting with the yakuza, it could be a very delicate affair. That was most definitely true in this particular case. Having the tacit approval of Akabayashi was fine but did not precisely mean that Izaya could count on the cooperation across all ranks. The organization was structured in such a typically convoluted manner than the many levels were fractured across so many factions. So much so that the very fact that Izaya had Akabayashi on his side, at least for now, meant that he was antagonizing someone else. Not that Izaya could even wield any leverage overtly, his was to be a stealthy approach full of obfuscation.

Which was how Izaya normally operated so he was not particularly worried over that. And at least he could rely on Shiki’s men. Izaya was very grateful for their devotion to Shiki even if he could not help thinking they should put some thought into it. Their blind faith struck Izaya as inherently fraught with error by its very nature. But of course if they could think along such lines they would not be foot soldiers for a criminal organization.

A thought suddenly took form in his mind. It surprised him into halting. Fortunately this was a backwater street, the kind with little foot traffic that could be found almost all over Tokyo. The city, for all its gargantuan dimension, or perhaps for that very reason, tended to funnel its human tide into a series of main thoroughfares. Almost like a kind of horizontal gravity, the crowds congregated along the same byways while leaving much of the city as so many leagues of urban desert.

Like so many revelations, once it dawned on him it felt obvious and long overdue. More than a new realization it was more of a sense of properly considering something that formed such a background to his emotional life. Izaya suddenly became fully aware that he too had hardly gone through a reasonable process of assessing cost/benefits when it came to Shiki. Izaya might not be an underling and he hardly followed orders blindly yet he was hardly in the position to denounce Shiki’s men.

Then again, this deviation from mere reason was something Izaya clung to. Already Izaya knew all too well that his tendency for sheer irrationality could veer into very dark territory. Love, however, was a check in the opposite direction. It justified Izaya’s better nature.

Izaya noticed that he was swaying gently back and forth. He forced himself to stop then forcibly shook his head. There would be time for deeper introspection later on but more pressing priorities demanded his attention.

Izaya hurried back home. At some deeper recess of his mind, the blooming red pattern of ever so many connections, slithered quietly.
“About time you show up.”

Shizuo huffed as he spotted Izaya make his way through the park. Izaya smiled his sly smile as he sat by Shizuo’s side. Shizuo noticed how Izaya’s feet dangled above the ground, neatly, childishly.

“Could it be that you were waiting for me, Shizu-chan?”

Shizuo blushed in annoyed confusion. At some point, that he could no longer quite precise, he starting going to the park simply to meet Izaya. Which was odd in itself since most of the time Shizuo was somewhat annoyed at his new friend. It did not occur to him that it was quite remarkable how his level of annoyance was a simmering thing that never burst into Shizuo’s unstoppable bursts of anger. In fact, if Shizuo were to be honest, it barely registered and even when it did, it was usually mingled with amusement.

“Who’d do that,”

“Ah, so mean.”

Izaya did not even bother to sound upset. Shizuo blinked as he watched Izaya producing a bunch of things form a satchel, including a small parasol, sunscreen and a weird piece of cloth.

“What on Earth is all that?”

Izaya was busy applying the sunscreen to his arms and legs, then dabbed some delicately on his face.

“The sun is the enemy, Shizu-chan. One must always be prepared.”

To Shizuo’s dismay Izaya proceeded to angle the parasol son as to cover him as he promptly lay on the bench using Shizuo’s knees as a pillow.

“What the?!!”

Izaya placed the weird narrow cloth over his eyes and laced his hands over his chest.
“Nap time.”

“You have got to be kidding! Nap time?! Are you in kindergarten?”

If Shizuo’s scorn bothered him Izaya did not let it show as he replied, very evenly.

“Nap time is very important. It helps children grow healthy and strong. Nighty-night, Shizu-chan.”

“Oy, it’s the middle of the afternoon! Oy, Izaya…? No way…”

Izaya was indeed already fast asleep, somehow. Once again Shizuo was left too baffled to even know how to react. Around them the day was a blaze of pure summer, complete with a droning choir of cicadas. In full bloom the trees above cast a light shade over the slumbering boy as if to reinforce—or render entirely moot—the parasol.

Underneath the milky scent of the sunscreen Shizuo could detect something, a sweet fragrance. Perhaps Izaya’s shampoo, Shizuo wondered as his hand trailed through the silky black hair that was as silky to the touch as it seemed. It stopped short of a caress. Shizuo smiled, bemused.

He wanted to do away with the eye cloth thing as it hid much of Izaya’s expression. From what Shizuo could see, the mouth half-curved in a dreamy smile, Izaya was comfortable as if sleeping on his own bedroom. The only thing missing was a stuffed toy that Shizuo would not at all be surprised was indeed a possession of his. As for the sunscreen, as weird as it was, Shizuo could see the point now that he thought about it.

Shizuo skimmed Izaya’s cheek. The skin was so soft that sunscreen might be a good idea, all things considered. Shizuo brushed his now greasy hand on his shirt, absentmindedly. Porcelain, doll-like skin might look cute but had its downside. Shizuo squirmed slightly, not enough to disturb Izaya. Maybe Izaya should just play indoors when it was hot instead of gallivanting out in the strong sun.

Shizuo shook his head. This was absurd. While it was a hot day it wasn’t any hotter than the last time he had met Izaya- and all the times before- and it had never seemed to bother Izaya any. Still, little kids got sick easily and need be looked after. Again Shizuo shook his head, more forcibly this time. He was only marginally older than Izaya by a few months so Izaya was hardly a little kid. Unless Shizuo was ready to accept he was one himself and that was out of the question.
Maybe Izaya should drink more milk. Shizuo knew that milk was good and supposed to do wonders when it came to growing strong and healthy. Maybe next time he would bring some. He was willing to share some strawberry milk- no, wait, make that plain milk for extra healthiness.

A black cat jumped on the bench and curled at Izaya’s feet. Shizuo smiled anew. Cat and boy went together perfectly, somehow. And maybe that was why Shizuo found himself running fingers through Izaya’s hair. This time the gesture lingered.

Izaya sure was fearless. Shizuo knew of plenty of kids who made a show out of appearing not to fear him but this kind of understated, natural trust was utterly unique. It might very well be folly. Shizuo had seen enough to question Izaya’s sanity, after all. But it still touched him.

“What a weirdo,”

Shizuo mumbled under his breath. This complaining was more of a defense mechanism than anything else. Against what, exactly, he could not quite say. Shizuo simply had the feeling, vague but very deeply lodged, that there was great danger to getting caught up in Izaya’s pace.

Shizuo reminded himself to be careful. He searched his pockets and found a pen. This was the perfect opportunity for doodling on Izaya’s face. Considering how mocking Izaya could be, it would be nothing short of poetic justice.

And Shizuo could not do it. He mumbled to himself, softly. Shizuo stole a glance at Izaya that turned into a gaze. What kind of name was ‘Izaya’ anyway. It was not one Shizuo had ever heard before. The pen, which he now returned to his pocket, made Shizuo think about writing. Izaya had explained how to write his very unlikely name but Shizuo had flat out forgotten it.

And of course Izaya knew how to write Shizuo’s name. Shizuo had figured out almost immediately that Izaya was a brainy kid, the kind with plenty of book smarts. Normally Shizuo found these kids utterly insufferable- despite his having no idea of what the word ‘insufferable’ meant- as they tended to brag. But Izaya went quite beyond the bookish type who made a show of being clever. For Izaya being intelligent was such a natural thing that there was no need to make a great deal out of it. There were times when Shizuo felt absurdly dumb before Izaya but if he were to be honest, he knew that it was not Izaya’s intention. Izaya could probably not help it any more than he could help being cute.

Maybe Shizuo could convince Izaya to teach him to write his name. Not that Shizuo cared. He most definitely did not care. No. Nor was he enjoying this quiet lull. Nap time was absurd after all.
“Well, I guess it's not too bad after all.”

Whispered words, lest he break the spell.
Chapter 45

The whiskey glass left a wet circle on the coaster. Through the malty liquid and ice Shiki could discern the hotel’s logo. Every time he took a sip, as he did now, it became clearer. The bar was a lush affair dotted with small clusters of businessmen talking in soft tones. Shiki very much appreciated it. The constant attention showered on him by the very eager to please sub-group was grating to the nerves.

He kept finding himself almost wishing they would break the wordless code of respect by which the yakuza swore by just so he could reprehend them. Anything was better than being ‘Shiki-sama-d’ to utter oblivion.

Shiki twirled the remaining whiskey on the glass. His nights and even days of chugging down drinks at the insistence of superiors were long gone. Back then Shiki had no actual choice since drinking parties were a social necessity. This was the case in Japanese business culture as a whole and doubly so in its underworld. These days Shiki could usually follow his inclination and not indulge in alcohol even in the mandatory parties.

This time around he had been presented with some regional sake that he had sampled out of politeness. Before the trip was over they would surely give him a few crates of it. Shiki had learned the art of making a drink last and of not overdrinking. Even now when his spirits were quite low, he made sure to add a generous portion of ice to his drink and to limit it to a single glass.

Dinner had been delicious, a sushi restaurant that the sub-group went out of its way to rent in its entirety. But of course for delicacy that came his way Shiki was reminded of Izaya. No-one could possibly be more enthusiastic for fresh sushi than Izaya. And since Shiki was already stuck with thinking about Izaya, he decided to indulge in it a bit. Shiki swirled the whiskey anew. He had never managed to convince Izaya to drink, which was something of a shame. Not that Shiki wanted to load up Izaya with alcohol. Just enough to make him drop some inhibitions. Izaya was not precisely repressed but Shiki could see the appeal of a slightly tipsy Izaya.

It would be well worth in bed but Shiki also wanted to disarm him in conversation. Because as was becoming increasingly clearer, it was through words that Izaya truly connected. Which made the usual lack of post-coital talk something of a gap. On the few times Izaya had not simply blanked asleep immediately after sex, he had revealed what Shiki considered a most strange notion of love. But regardless of how little Shiki understood it, it needs involve him.

Or so Shiki fervently hoped. If Izaya were to stick to some abstract construction of what love stood for then Shiki hardly knew what to do with that. Shiki was not entirely a stranger to relationships in which one party ended up being the only who carried any burden of a strong connection. In fact, that was the common practice in the yakuza when it came to lovers. Shiki had never bothered keeping a
steady lover for any amount of time but he was fully steeped in a culture in which lovers knew they took always took second place to the group.

When Shiki was in a contemplative mood he wondered if this diminishing of importance of romantic entanglements did not end up promoting a quasi-homosexual environment pulsing just underneath the official codes. After all, the group took shape in a series of men, it was the ultimate boys’ club and one where loyalty could easily blur into worship. Shiki suspected something very much like that had occurred in his own men, all of which were infatuated with Izaya in way or another. In most it was a platonic, canine sense of attachment but Shiki suspected that quite a few went beyond that.

At any rate, the very overtly heterosexual bragging about sexual conquests of attractive women was again a sign that these men found it difficult to see women as anything other than objects. They were conditioned to do so. Shiki suspected the only females they did indeed respect were those who were not sexualized in any way. Thus their fondness for little girls and well-groomed deference to the yakuza matrons.

Shiki took another sip and brought back his musings to his own concerns. It was good for mistresses to resign themselves to being disgruntled and betrayed left and center as that came with the territory. It was a completely different case when Izaya adopted an attitude almost akin to them, at least in some respects.

In other words, it bothered Shiki on some fundamental level that Izaya did not even seem to consider that Shiki could be loyal. This letting Shiki go his merry and expecting him to sleep around was all the more hurtful in that it was not entirely without reason. Izaya simply worked with what he knew of Shiki.

Up until recently Shiki believed that an ideal relationship was one with as little demands as possible and the maximum profit. It was a bitter pill to swallow but Shiki had to admit that a deep, meaningful connection could not live off such paltry concerns. Open relationships might be fine for others but not for Shiki. He wanted Izaya to expect things from him, to demand them if need be. Because as long as Izaya did not, Shiki felt loss at sea and unsure. No, to be more precise- he thought as he finished the drink- he felt unclaimed.

Shiki wanted Izaya to be as upset over the idea of cheating as Shiki himself was. It was, of course, all a matter of hypotheticals but Izaya was the king of dealing with ‘what ifs’ and seeing their relevance to reality.

“Bought your souvenirs yet?”
Matsumoto nearly jumped out of his skin at being addressed directly just as he had blended so well with the background as befit his role. More, it seemed the question was of a personal nature.

“Sir?”

“I said, bought your souvenirs yet?”

Some shifting.

“Not yet, sir.”

“Wondering what to bring Izaya?”

Bingo. The startled assent showed Shiki that here was a topic over which the typical blank expressionless mask cracked.

“I hardly know what he’d like, sir.”

Matsumoto’s panic was nearly palpable. Shiki produced a cigarette and finally bothered to look his way. Thus far he had been quietly contemplating the empty glass, then ordering a tonic.

“Just what makes you think you’re entitled to go about buying Izaya anything?”

The panic spiked. Shiki’s voice was very even but there was no missing the threat making each word glimmer darkly.

“I think- that Orihara-sama,”

“You ‘think’, you say. Since then is that is your job, Matsumoto?”

To this there was no possible reply. Shiki spoke into Matsumoto’s hesitation. “Never mind. Pay close
Matsumoto nodded silently. Shiki let a moment pass to let the import carry through. “From now on, think less and act more. Is that understood?”

Not entirely but enough. Matsumoto too must have realized they were pretty much stranded in Hokkaido.

“Sir?”

Shiki sighed. His eyes grew harder as he opened them.

“If something happens to me, you’ll protect him with your own life.”

“Yes, sir. No need to order me, sir.”

Shiki allowed himself a smile. At least his underling had enough sense not to spew lies about nothing could ever possibly befall Shiki.

“Good.”

Shiki turned back to his drink, this time the tonic. Matsumoto knew when he was dismissed.

The translating job Akayabashi had arranged for him was just the perfect opportunity for interacting with the Awakusu without its being suspicious. On top of that, it was bound to be great fun. This was even more exciting than the yakuza funeral.

Namie helped him into a bulletproof vest.

“I think they’ll be offended if they find out I’m wearing this.”
Namie shrugged.

“So? Let them be. Not that they’ll ever find out. Unless you’re planning on doing a striptease act.”

Izaya giggled. He slid into a brightly white shirt and black jacket.

“Namie-san, just how little do you think of my moral mettle?”

“Who knows, does stripteasing even could as ‘immoral’ to you?”

“Good point!”

“Don’t I know it. Are you used to it already?”

Izaya nodded. Namie had suggested the vest and then made him wear it for a whole day in order to get fully used to moving in it without appearing awkward.

“You’d think I was born wearing one!”

Namie ignored the bouncy excitement.

“Are you sure you don’t want to bring your pet knife along?”

Izaya shook his head. He swiveled toward the full-length mirror and proceeded to adjust the very somber tie he had donned just for the occasion.

“No can do. It may cause all sorts of problems.”

“Allow me.”
Namie stepped in and firmly folded the tie into a net knot. Izaya nearly burst into a giggling fit as so ever happened.

“You could so strangle me!”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I repent greatly.”

Which meant Izaya repented nothing, of course.

“I know you’re having fun but keep in mind this isn’t a field trip.”

Izaya sobered up on the spot.

“Aye, reading you loud and clear.”

Namie stared him down for a while in order to make sure Izaya did get it.

“Good. By the way, make sure you avoid the docks because you look like a veritable whale in that. You’d be harpooned or hauled back to sea.”

Izaya gasped in mock horror.

“Is this true?”

“Oh yes. But it could be a wonderful thing. You love sushi so much, I’m sure you’d enjoy becoming sushi.”
“Iza-shi! Served in fat slices. Sushizaya!”

“‘Izaya’ is the other other white meat.”

This struck Izaya as so funny that he doubled down laughing. The tie did not help matters and in no time he was breathless and ruddy faced.

“Can’t breathe,”

“Then shut up for once. Honestly, Orihara. You do this to yourself.”

Izaya wiped tears from his eyes and struggled back to some composure. He knew Namie meant business when he was demoted to ‘Orihara’.

“Aye, I know. It’s a shame you can’t come along… I could use with some help.”

Namie shrugged.

“Not my fault you’re dealing with misogynists still stuck in bloody Confucius.”

“Make that the Stone Age, I think.”

“Pretty much the same.”

“Heh. Oh, I don’t suppose you could cross-dress? The Koreans don’t know you, they’d never see through it!”

“How about ‘no’?”

Izaya pouted.
“It was a good idea…maybe…?”

Namie pretended to consider it.

“Tell you what. I’ll cross-dress if you do it as well. Once all this is over, we’ll hit your hipster places in our gender-flipped outfits.”

Izaya’s eyes grew wide and bright.

“You got yourself a deal! Just no kimonos.”

“Fair enough. Now move along before I start calling you ‘Izako’.”

Izaya might very be afflicted by another bout of ill-timed hilarity but his entourage arrived and put an end to it.

“Sakurai-san! I wasn’t expect you.”

“Good afternoon, Orihara-sama. I’m part of the security detail. M’am.”

Namie merely nodded in acknowledgment to the deep bow.

“Very reassuring. I’ll be on my way, Namie-san.”

Sakurai installed Izaya on the long, lush limousine and took the seat across him. On his most professional mode, he extended an earpiece to Izaya.

“Orihara-sama can contact us guys with this at any time. If you feel we should jump in, the code word is ‘macaron’.”
Izaya turned the small device on his hand. He lifted an eyebrow, quizzically.

“‘Macaron’?”

“I picked it myself, figured it’s not something folk normally talk about.”

It was indeed a very odd choice.

“Is this like a safeword of sorts? Just what exactly will be going at this meeting?”

Izaya’s smile spread to his words but Sakurai took him very seriously.

“It’s a dinner at a fancy place. No shady stuff going on.”

“Always glad to know.”

Sakurai nodded.

“I don’t do Chinese so be on the lookout if they say something hostile.”

“Er, Sakurai-san, your guests are Korean. Most definitely not Chinese.”

Same difference as far as Sakurai was concerned.

“Still can’t understand them.”

Izaya tried his most reassuring smile.

“Just leave all the interpretation to me, Sakurai-san. Just one thing, please do not refer to them as
Chinese in their presence. That’s the kind of thing likely to make it all ‘go South’.”

It was Sakurai’s turn to try his hand at being reassuring and did it with a gesture that he had picked up from yakuza movies, being far too prone to enjoy fictional mobsters than their real counterparts. In far, if Sakurai were honest, he felt that the yakuza as a whole was missing some pizzazz. He kept his hair slicked back in weirdly outdated style as a small contribution to bringing style back to the mafia.

“No need to worry, Orihara-sama. We guys are like furniture when on missions like this. No talking. But we can still shoot them dead if needed.”

“Let us not get into Chekov’s gun territory here, shall we? I am sure no shooting will happen.”

Sakurai tensed on the spot. His eyes went wide.

“Chekov…? Are there Russians involved too? I’ll need more guys,”

“No Russians, I guarantee.”

Sakurai relaxed.

“Oh, good. Because Chine-, Koreans and Russians at the same time would be pretty tough.”

Izaya could not help wondering if Sakurai was not looking forward to a shootout.

“ Aren’t Akabayashi-san’s men handling security matters already?”

“Well, yes. But we’ll be protecting Orihara-sama.”

Sakurai was the unofficial subleader of what the guys, as he put it, had dubbed the Izaya Unit. With Matsumoto absent, it fell on Sakurai’s shoulders to lead it. Sakurai was of the opinion that the Izaya Unit- which was about the only time its members used Izaya’s given name- should be a permanent thing with 24 hour security. There were more than enough members and very capable of self-
organizing. Normally their position relegated them to a very passive role but the habit of receiving orders had made them a well-oiled machine. In terms of logistics it was a very small step from being told to coordinate efforts to getting together and acting themselves. But it represented a feat of personal development.

It was not quite insubordination but spoke of a willingness to go into that territory if need be. If Sakurai were in the position to make a suggestion to Shiki, he might very well ask for the Unit to be given an official status. Yet at the same time he had enough sense to know that its strength relied precisely in being a subterraneous sub-structure within the group.

“And I thank you for that. But tell what, Sakurai-san. How about you keep an eye on the Awakusu members who will be attending? Just let me know afterwards if they act unusual or what your impressions were.”

Sakurai bristled with pride at this.

“Will do, Orihara-sama. You can count on me. Now, may I check if your bulletproof vest is properly placed?”

“Can you tell I’m wearing one?”

“Yagiri-san told me. If you don’t mind.”

Izaya shrugged then smiled sheepishly enough.

“Go right ahead.”

To Sakurai’s credit, he kept all touching to a most non-intrusive minimum. They reached their destination early and Izaya was surprised to see far more personnel than he thought. He was about to remark on it when he noticed a blonde shock of hair amidst the black suits.

“Shizuo…?!?”

“Hi there.”
Izaya’s befuddlement receded into well-contained fury.

“A word in private with you.”

Shizuo allowed himself to be dragging around the corner. Izaya made sure he was out of sight from the small platoon of yakuza footsoldiers before blowing up.

“What are you doing here?!”

“Body-guarding.”

“I thought you hated the yakuza, what’s up with your popping up at every event?”

“Got to go where they pay better, you know. It’s what they call, ‘blue collar’.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Will you cut that out? What is the real reason you’re here?”

“Guarding you.”

Izaya sighed.

“I don’t even, I really don’t. How did you even find out about this?”

“Cane yakuza told me. Then hired me. Kinda nice guy, for a yakuza man.”

Izaya blinked. This was very unexpected.
“Why on Earth would Akabayashi-san do that…?”


“Please tell me you’re not afraid the Not-Chinese-Koreans are out to shoot me?”

“Nah. I bet the Awa folk are the ones in it.”

Izaya could not take it anymore. There was a limit to the absurdity, too much of it shifted his anger into hilarity.

“You were hired by a yakuza group whose name you can’t even recall? It keeps getting stranger and stranger! But you’re right. Whoever is ‘in it’ is likely much closer to home. And since I can’t get you to just leave, I’ll ask you to please not flip any tables or send people flying. I mean it, Shizuo.”

“Yeah. Sure thing.”

“By the way, the code word is ‘macaron’.”

Shizuo brightened up.

“Woah, cool choice. Who knew yakuza folk had it in them, huh.”
Chapter 46

Izaya composed himself before rejoining the group still standing at attention. With so much security he was beginning to feel the paranoia getting to him as well. He had not been informed of just what to expect from this Korean delegation. Izaya had done the proper background checks of the operatives he did expect to attend and had found nothing particularly dangerous but by the looks of it they were quite a menace.

He considered all this as Akabayashi arrived- with a surprising small attaché of black suits- and led them to the restaurant. Like many of Tokyo’s restaurants this one was underground which allowed for the exceedingly big, lake-like multi-tiered tank to sprawl with its plenty of fish. Along this amazing construction that even included elaborate rocks ran a long counter, along which ran a series of benches. At the furthest end stood on platform from which the chef prepared the fish straight from the lake.

The vast room also catered to several semi-private compartments, slightly raised and half-hidden by partitions. Izaya took it all in. Quite an impressive place and yet cozy. The choice of venue told him much of what Akabayashi had planned for this meeting. Izaya had done his research into the restaurant, complete with a detailed blueprint, but being in-situ with this particular company went a long way into setting the mood. He spotted name cards carefully placed on the starkly white table.

Meanwhile everyone was standing to attention as the yakuza was wont to do. It amused Izaya how even a meal could turn into a martial event. He was glad to see that Aozaki was absent but was a bit surprised that Akabayashi had only picked four operatives. As if programmed, the security took its place along the further wall and a bit all around.

Izaya was beginning to wonder if the Koreans were making them wait on purpose, which would be a sign of extreme rudeness, or if they were angling for being fashionably late. Or maybe they had changed their mind altogether. That would be quite a letdown. It was then that they arrived.

The first thing Izaya noticed was that there were only three of them along with a small escort. Izaya recognized them from his research, middle age fellows with dour features and pretty much textbook mobsters. There was the typical ripple of commotion that went with greeting and much bowing.

The second thing Izaya noticed was a fourth man who only became visible after his seniors had duly greeted and been greeted by Akabayashi and the rest. Izaya oversaw this first encounter as he knew it was crucial to form a positive rapport as soon as possible. Then the fourth man stepped up and threw Izaya for a loop. For one, he was far too young to have any place here. In a split second Izaya took note of how the elders parted before him in obvious deference. Then, he was surprisingly beautiful, all delicate lines, large black eyes, fine red lips parted in a smile. And to then he spoke, in clear Japanese only distantly accented.
“How wonderful to see you again, Izaya-kun. It has been far too long, hasn’t it?”

To his credit, Izaya covered his dismay with a beautiful smile of his own.

“So it has. I’ll be acting as the interpreter but it seems I may not be required as such.”

Alarm bells were already blaring through Izaya’s entire body. He was aware of Akabayashi’s slightly bemused look but all of Izaya’s resources were folded inward. It would be wonderful if it proved everyone was as fluent in Japanese as this oddity now thrown his way. Izaya knew that any chance of bailing out of this was long gone and it felt like a personal flaw that he was voicing out loud his very real desire for up and leaving. He could not even properly bluff his way through this by addressing him by name. This guy had not turned out on his limited research and already Izaya was kicking himself for being so lax.

The man smiled anew and waved in the direction of his companions.

“You flatter me, I still have a long way to go. So I’m afraid we’ll be requiring your services as my uncles are less fortunate than I when it comes to languages. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Akabayashi-sama. Hong Kyung, at your service.”

The name was a half-revelation and Izaya’s already budding apprehension spiked. He could not quite place him in the hierarchy proper but judging by the family name he was dealing with someone connected to the family running the entire group. Distantly Izaya marked the hesitation in the speech, that he suspected was entirely faked, and the ill-defined mockery he felt in his words. Already Izaya knew that this Hong Kyung was one who played on Izaya’s terms much more so than on the mafia’s.

Akabayashi guided the whole group to the table. Izaya was profoundly grateful for the smooth, pleasant, down to earth yet still formal flair with which he took control of the situation. But was less pleased to find himself placed right in the middle. Normally it would be a position of honor but in this case it had been picked to facilitate Izaya’s immediate translation. He sat right between the Awakusu and the Koreans. Right between Akabayashi and Kyung.

Izaya considered settling further down the table since it was obvious he need to translate anything. But he knew all too well he would have to play along with Kyung’s ever so artificial humility- is he professed to be deficient in Japanese then there was nothing Izaya could do other than praise him for his skills without actually acknowledging them as useful to the case at hand- and he could not
possibly suggest that Kyung translate to the uncles.

Izaya felt his disadvantage very keenly. He did not even know if ‘uncle’ was an honorific title of sorts, a common enough practice, or if they were indeed kin to Kyung. They shared the surname so it was a safe enough assumption but with so much unclear Izaya knew not to jump to conclusions. And all things considered that was the least of his problems.

There was a short moment of respite as Kyung exchanged pleasantries with Akabayashi. Izaya struggled to place him in his personal history. As it so often happened when he tried to remember anything, to drag as much as a shard of information from unbroken blankness, a faint nausea insinuated itself in his awareness. Izaya abandoned all hope of canvassing out the Awakusu and rerouted his priorities. He had to find out his connection to Kyung and he had to do it fast.

“I am so glad you took my suggestion and picked up Korean, Izaya-kun.”

Izaya jolted at this. He felt himself pale. Kyung delivered this line in Korean this time around and so neatly pushed Izaya to reply in kind.

“I am always on the lookout for new languages to add to my portfolio.”

Was the insistence on Izaya’s given name a provocation, was it anchored in some prior agreement, was it something else entirely. Izaya had no idea. And Kyung’s name was hardly conventional either. Or rather, in itself it was conventional, but was missing another element to turn it into the typical three element pattern that formed Korean names. As if on cue- and furthering chilling Izaya to the bone- Kyung picked up his name card, long fingers barely gripping it and switched to Japanese.

“How lovely, you even got the right hanja. ‘Kyung’, with the hanja for ‘respect’. I believe you read it as…‘kei’?”

“‘Kei’ is the on-reading. ‘Kyou’ is the kun-reading.”

Izaya answered almost automatically. The silent flurry of waiters in traditional attire that now appeared out of nowhere serving very generous portions of all kinds of fresh sushi saved Izaya from carrying on this conversation. He feared no actual business would be handled at this juncture. This was a grand affair of showy good will and nothing more. As if to prove him right, Akabayashi chimed in.
“The world sure is a small place, isn’t it? Who knew Kyung-kun would know our Izaya-kun.”

Normally Izaya would smile at being promoted to ‘our Izaya-kun’ but presently his smile was strained and merely pro-forma. He properly translated to the uncles, nominal or otherwise, and wondered if they were mute. It took some effort to clear his visage of expectation. Akabayashi had just unwittingly helped him. This was the right opportunity for Kyung to expound on how and when they had met.

“Our countries have been sundered for a long, long time. It is my deepest desire that through the Hong group we may do something to bridge this gap. As modest as my contribution may be, I offer it to deepening our mutual understanding.”

Izaya nearly gagged. Of all things, Kyung pivoted to international relations, dovetailed the actual issue altogether and still came off as graceful and ever so agreeable as he politely bowed to Akabayashi. The entire tirade was delivered in such flawless Japanese that it took all Izaya had not to roll his eyes. This fellow looked plucked from a K-drama but had all the delicacy of a diplomat.

Akabayashi blinked, whether impressed or surprised, Izaya could not quite tell. For a while the food occupied them. Izaya did not allow himself to relax one bit and barely tasted the delicious treats. The lull made it possible for him to excuse himself, though. He made his way to the bathroom and was overtaken halfway by Shizuo who commanded two fellows to guard the door before closing it behind him.

Izaya barely took any notice of his. He was already glued to his phone after checking that all stalls were empty.

“Namie-san, I need all you have on a ‘Hong Kyung’. H-o-n-g, K-y-u-n-g. Korean national, belongs to the Hong group. In real time, please.”

Shizuo folded his arms and watched Izaya pace.

“Hong Kyung…got it. He doesn’t just belong to this Hong group, he is the heir apparent. Let me see, his father is the boss but his mother was a Chinese mistress. Fortunately for him, his legitimate siblings all died in a tragic accident. All four of them. Very convenient.”

Izaya halted and ran a hand through his hair. He felt a nervous laugh about to burst out. Sakurai turned out to be right or at least half so.
“Brilliant, so he killed his siblings. Anything else? He’s visited Japan before, right? Find the dates.”

“That’ll take some time.”

“E-mail me everything on him.”

“I’m on it.”

“One more thing, I don’t suppose you know where I’d know him from?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Right. Get on it, then.”

The call over, Izaya splashed cold water on his face and gripped the sink with white knuckled hands that would otherwise shake if not for the tension that ran through them. Shizuo’s voice brought him back.

“So. That bad, huh?”

Izaya turned to face Shizuo and tried a watery smile.

“I don’t suppose this is the time you come to the rescue and reveal something major I can use against this guy?”

“Nah. Sorry. Why you wanna do that, though?”

Izaya sighed.
“Because it’s kill or get killed with that kind. He knows plenty about me while I am mostly clueless about him. It could get much, much worse.”

“So you gotta trust your instincts?”

Izaya folded his arms and glared.

“Contrary to what you might think, I can’t figure out everything about someone by just chatting to them.”

“You kinda can.”

“‘Kinda’ doesn’t cut it. What is he even doing?”

“Lots of things. Including flirting with you.”

Izaya blinked a few times.

“Wait, what? What on Earth brought that up?”

“I got instincts too. It’s pretty easy to see.”

Izaya sighed in discontent.

“Can’t you be productive?” Izaya took a deep breath and shook his head. “I have no time for this, I should- wait. Wait a second.”

By the budding glimmer in Izaya’s eyes Shizuo could tell he was on to something, more so than through his words.

“Figured something out?”
“I think so. Maybe. If I’m right, then…but I can’t be sure now. We better go back before my absence becomes too obvious.”

Izaya resumed with his seat at the table with a greater sense of focus.

“Kyung-kun was just telling us about how they prepare fresh fish in Korea. Very interesting.”

“I’d be honored to if you would allow me to be your personal guide when you visit Korea. I know some fine restaurants and market places.”

“Ah yes, I’m sure Izaya-kun would appreciate it. Wouldn’t you, Izaya-kun?”

Izaya could very well sense an undertow of bemusement in Akabayashi.

“Indeed. I’m sure it’d be delightful.”

“It’s shame I was overseas when you finally did visit Korea...”

For once, Kyung seemed to trail off into genuine sadness. Or perhaps wistfulness, Izaya was not sure. But there might an angle to work with here.

“Oh well, you’re here now so all is well. Neh?”

Izaya stayed on point the rest of the very long meal. At some point the uncles spoke and Izaya dutifully translated but on auto-pilot. He was very glad when it was finally over. The parting took plenty of more bowing, gifts were exchanged, and then the Awakusu sailed away in the trademark limousine.

Kyung waved his uncles and everyone else except on single security guy into his own limousine, thus leaving him in quasi solitude with Izaya and Shizuo who stood by. Shizuo was very curious to see if Izaya was about to throw a zinger, perhaps even begin to dissect this Kyung fellow right where he stood. Before Izaya could speak, though, Kyung took the lead.
“Why, if it isn’t Shizuo-kun. I barely recognized you with the blonde hair. How wonderful to see you again.”

The ground tilted under Izaya’s feet. He snapped around to face Shizuo who was frowning in perplexity, staring intently at the ever so smiling Kyung.

“Kyun-kyun…? You’re Kyun-kyun?”

“Guilty as charged! So glad so someone seems to remember me.”

Izaya forced his mouth shut. A fit of dizziness obscured his vision momentarily. But no memory crept into his awareness. He was left to gape, on the pavement, completely at a loss.

Macaron.
Even as Izaya struggled to wrestle as much as a glimmer of a recollection from the featureless white noise of his past, Shizuo remembered.

“Shizu-chan! I brought a friend today! Kyun-kyun, say hi!”

Shizuo frowned, annoyed. He did not even know exactly why but that Izaya was adding someone else to their time together simply rubbed him the wrong way. Shizuo went as far as to huff when he noticed a small kid glued to Izaya’s back, tentatively peering behind him.

“Huh? Who’s Kyun- what kind of a name is that anyway?”

“You wouldn’t be able to pronounce it properly so I simplified it. Neh, Kyun-kyun?”

With a bright smile Izaya led the strange kid to the bench- their bench, Shizuo thought with seething resentment- and patted his head. Kyun-kyun seemed roughly their age but he was so hunched and scared that he seemed much younger. Shizuo softened immediately as he had a weakness when it came to little kids.

“Where did you meet him?”

“My parents have business connections abroad. Kyun-kyun isn’t from around here.”

“Oh. So he speaks, ur, foreign?”

Izaya sighed, something he would develop into an art form capable of conveying anything from contempt, to boredom, to anger.

“Don’t listen to Shizu-chan, he can be stupid at times.”

“Hey!”
Izaya sat next to Kyun-kyun.

“Shizu-chan once mistook a crayon for a piece of candy. It was so yellow and tasty looking!”

Shizuo bristled up.

“I did not!”

A small sound nearly alarmed him. He then realized it was Kyun-kyun laughing.

“Taste the rainbow~”

“You’re funny!”

Shizuo blinked. Apparently, there was someone who actually appreciated Izaya’s oddball humor. Bizarre. But at least the kid with the weird name was no longer close to crying. Little kids should be happy even if they were making fun of him.

Izaya swung his legs and hummed tonelessly. Shizuo coughed in an attempt at sounding serious and grownup.

“So, er…Kyun-kun? You speak real good and all.”

Kyun-kyun clung to Izaya again.

“Kyun-kyun is better at Japanese than Shizu-chan. Ah, what’s one to do?”

This seemed to reassure Kyun-kyun. He let go of Izaya’s arm, that he had been gripping hard enough to probably be painful- that you’d ever tell, Izaya kept his sardonic smile unaffected- and got up, composed his fancy clothes and went for a low bow.
“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Ah…sure.”

Shizuo looked over the bowed head to Izaya who shrugged.

“Kyun-kyun’s family is a bit strict. It’s okay,”

“They hate me!”

Shizuo flinched and took a step back. In an instant the kid went from creepy formal to bordering on psychotic. No wonder he was Izaya’s friend. Shizuo considered making a joke about it but the expression on the kid’s eyes arrested him. There was much anger there.

Izaya walked over to them, slowly, stood very close and tilted his head.

“What about it?”

Kyun-kyun stumbled for words for a while. Shizuo wanted to intervene before things escalated but he suspected it was absolutely no use.

“My mother didn’t want me- my father won’t even see me- the uncles are- creepos, and,”

“And? What about it?”

This gave the kid pause. He stopped mid-rant.

“What about it…?”
“So your family hates you. It’s unfortunate but there’s nothing you can do about it. So why bother too much about it? After all, you’re already here, in this world!”

Izaya broke into a dazzling smile. It was disturbing. Shizuo glanced at the kid who was still gaping awkwardly.

“Here, in the world?”

Izaya stepped into the kid’s personal space stood all too close for comfort.

“That’s right. You’re you and no-one else can be you. Whether they hate you, whether they don’t, whether they love you, whether they don’t, you exist as yourself. This vast world can be yours!”

“But how…?”

Shizuo shifted from foot to another. This seemed very wrong. But at the same time he could not quite bring himself to say anything. Izaya’s spell held him in thrall as well even if at a distance.

“That’s not for me to tell you, that’s for you to decide for yourself.”

The kid blinked several times.

“But if I try- something, they’ll- take me out.”

Izaya’s smile beamed brighter than ever.

“Not if you take them out first! They’ll never see it coming.”

Izaya cradled the kid’s face, gently. Shizuo stood petrified. The kid shook, his eyes went wide, time spun still under the wide Tokyo sky. Then,
“That’s…”

Sounding dazed, as if some revelation was slowly making its way through thus far fully blocked mental channels, the kid’s voice trailed off into uncertainty. Izaya let got and stood swaying slightly, his smile increasingly bright.

“‘Gekokujou’. Overthrow those above you and rise to the very top. I wonder what you’ll see from that vantage point?”

“‘Gekokujou’,”

Tasting the unfamiliar word around its hard edges.

“The wording does not matter, it’s just a name that means ‘hope’ to you, Kyun-kyun.”

At some point tears had brimmed the kid’s almost penciled eyes. He know wiped them with the back of a hand, sniffed hard and shook his head to clear it. The body language snapped Shizuo from his reverie.

“Oy, kid, don’t listen to Izaya. He’s just making up stuff to sound smart.”

A small platoon of black suits appeared and proceeded to usher the kid away. Izaya stood waving.

“Bye bye, Kyun-kyun!”

Before he disappeared into the fogged windowed car the kid managed to turn around.

“Izaya-nim, I’ll make it to the top and show you- the view from the top,”

“Sure thing!”
Shizuo remained in uncomfortable silence for a while. The kid disappeared along with the shady goons. Izaya resumed his tuneless humming that could be so disturbing. Thus far Shizuo had only seen Izaya in a vacuum of sorts. Perhaps it was because Shizuo knew himself to be immune to the venom that surfaced along Izaya’s words and that lurked at the foundation of what Shizuo knew was a troubled little boy, but Shizuo had never considered just how dangerous Izaya could be to others. Shizuo’s worry was for Izaya himself, that one day it would all catch up and overwhelm him.

Now it dawned on him that Izaya was a menace to the vulnerable. This was the first true intuition Shizuo had into Orihara Izaya in relation to the world at large. It chilled him and left a trail of coldness on its wake even here in the scalding heart of the summer city.

Under normal circumstances, being dragged into a very small room by Izaya and all but pushed against the wall was the stuff of dreams as far as Shizuo was concerned. Then again, that was precisely why it was not ever likely to happen under normal circumstances. Shizuo had a moment to reflect on this as Izaya locked the door behind them and stood within inches from him.

As soon as Kyung gracefully bowed farewell Izaya took off in the opposite direction and before Shizuo quite knew what was going on he was being locked inside a cubicle in a manga café. Izaya now glowered, almost fiendishly, at Shizuo. And as much as Shizuo appreciated Izaya at his most adorable, there was something extremely appealing when he was fumbling for control and bristling. Part of it was the fact that Shizuo knew he could push Izaya into some crisis when things got to this point. The power rush almost bordered on foreplay. But there was more to it, Shizuo knew he was catching a glimpse into an inner layer of Izaya. It was dangerous and full of turmoil, with a kind of fathomless darkness where madness laughed on the edge of genius. Somewhere in there was the Izaya who could giggle wildly as the world burned at his feet.

“Shizuo. Tell me everything you know about this Hong Kyung.”

Shizuo could very well get used to this bossy tone. But he could not afford to daydream at the moment, let alone run the budding fantasy through his mind- in which Izaya ended up very much naked.

“There’s not much to tell.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Tell me everything you know.”
The tension in Izaya’s body seeped into his voice and hinted at a threat. Shizuo almost heard, ‘or else’ at the end.

“I only met him once when were kids. He was your friend.”

Izaya took half a step back. Shizuo was not even sure he was relieved or disappointed.

“That contradicts the data I have on him. Are you sure he was here, in Tokyo?”

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

Shizuo was not entirely sure how he could possibly have made a mistake on this regard but getting a confirmation on this seemed rather important. Izaya glanced through the detailed e-mail Namie had sent him yet again.

“There is nothing about any time spent in Japan. Did he speak Japanese back then?”

“Yeah. Real good, too.”

“I see. That is most interesting.”

“Kyun-kyun was a smart kid, seemed to look up to you a lot.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Can you please not call him that? Who came up with ‘Kyun-kyun’ anyway?”

“You did, as far as I know.”

“Not even surprised, should have seen this coming. Please, start from the beginning.”
And Shizuo did just that. Izaya listened with baited breath and collapsed on a slouching sofa when Shizuo finished.

“So…I advised him to kill his siblings? Now isn’t that wonderful. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.”

“Dunno, it might have been for the best.”

Izaya snapped his sharp gaze back to Shizuo, having drifting off to some dim distance quite beyond the cramped walls.

“Do elaborate.”

Shizuo popped a lollipop into his mouth. He offered Izaya one but a dismissive wave was all the response he got.

“Kyun-kyun is the illegitimate son of a big mobster guy and all that. I bet these siblings of his would get rid of him if he didn’t get them first. Kinda sucks but that’s how it is with mobster families. Real messed up folk.”

Izaya could not help a giggle at ‘folk’.

“Why are you defending this guy?”

Shizuo shrugged.

“Someone’s got to, I guess.”

Izaya sighed and flopped back on the seat that nearly engulfed him.

“Right…seems like you know more about this guy than I do so tell me, what do you think he’s angling for?”
“Some kind of trippy power play with the yakuza, that’s the official reason he’s here and all. But if you ask me, it’s because of you.”

“Do you know if we met more times?”

“Can’t say.”

Izaya opened his mouth to make another question and Shizuo could tell the precise moment when he pivoted to something else that he clearly did not mean to ask.

“You don’t think I’ve slept with him…?”

“No idea. But I bet he’d want to, either way.”

Izaya’s look of absolute dismay was so funny that it took all Shizuo had not to grin.

“If you really want to know you should just ask him.”

Izaya’s expression switched to dismissive.

“Now that’s just brilliant. I’ll just go, ‘oh hi there, I suffer from amnesia so can you just let me know if we slept together, at some point? Thank you so much~’.”

“Beats fretting about it like this.”

Izaya sighed deeply and flopped back, the seat absorbing his slight frame.

“If only I could remember…but I couldn’t even remember people I know for a fact I did sleep with, let alone some random fellow.”
There was a slight pause. It was full of activity on Shizuo’s mind and Izaya missed it entirely.

“Are you sure you ‘know for a fact’ about these ‘people’?”

Izaya blinked.

“Are you implying Shiki-san lied to me?”

“Not really. Just asking if you’d know if he lied.”

Shizuo waited for the indignation that was sure to come and perhaps even end with Izaya storming out. Izaya’s thoughtful attitude did not last that long but it was more than enough to diffuse any kind of knee-jerk reaction.

“Yes, you do have a point there. I cannot be sure of it. It is unlikely but not impossible. After all, there are no witnesses, just the assumption shared by many and Shiki-san’s word.”

This was much more than Shizuo expected. But he could tell just from Izaya’s tone that he was not fully engaged in the conversation.

“Yeah.”

Shizuo felt slightly guilty. This seed of doubt was entirely uncalled for and even bringing it up to Izaya’s attention struck Shizuo as less than fair. But it had been worthy. Shizuo wanted to know if Izaya’s commitment to understanding the truth of his past, in all its magnitude, was strong enough to go beyond any attachments.

“But this is all beside the point. Here, write everything about this meeting.”

“I just told you about it.”

Izaya had already produced paper and pen, being mindful that typing on any device was not Shizuo’s thing.
“I know but it may surprise you, memory gets reinforced when it is recorded.”

Shizuo took the pen and mused. As he tried to put the event into his own words while editing out most of his own reflections that had been what had clinched the event in the first place, it occurred to him that the fact that Izaya could so naturally accept that his lover would lie to him might not be a good thing. It meant that Izaya was in a situation in which trust was a liability. Shizuo found it all too sad.

“Izaya,”

“More writing, less talking. Make it legible if you can.”

Shizuo did as told.
Chapter 48

“Shiki-san, hello!”

Shiki smiled at enthusiastic greeting on the other side of the line.

“How are you doing?”

“Top-notch as ever! But very busy, I’m afraid. Got to go now. See you soon, Shiki-san!”

And just like that, the call ended. Shiki frowned slightly. He knew that Izaya was very much into talking, to the point of excess, so he could not help but feel dismissed. Also, while Shiki knew Izaya was almost always working, in that strange of his, he went about it so strangely that he also seemed to have all the time in the world.

It was not so much suspicious as disheartening.

Izaya finished the lightening call and turned off the phone altogether. He took a deep breath before crossing the road to the hotel lobby. It had taken much inner conflict to finally set on meeting Kyung at the hotel. Summoning to Izaya’s house would give Izaya the home advantage by default but in the end he deemed it too risky. As tempting as it was to see if Kyung was familiar with the place, it set the stage for a wealth of unpredictable blunders. The visit itself could cause Kyung to go on some tirade that Izaya would be unable to at all counter or bluff his way through it.

Painfully aware that he had to play his cards very carefully, Izaya had set an appointment ahead of time. It did away with the element of surprise but at least framed the encounter in a business-like fashion. Not that a hotel room, that turned out to be a roomy, airy suite, was conductive of such discussions but Izaya trusted there would be enough security personnel and useless uncles wandering about to dispel any overload of awkwardness.

A neutral meeting place would be the perfect option but Kyung’s side had suggested the hotel in such a manner as to leave little no room for negotiation. And the last thing Izaya wanted was to come across as uncooperative. In this very delicate situation Izaya could not afford to antagonize Kyung. Not until the time for it was ripe, that is.
As he expected, the entire floor had been taken up by Kyung’s men. Two burly fellows in slightly too small suits guarded the suit’s entrance and let him to an antechamber. A muffled voice reached him through an ajar door.

“Be right there!”

Almost immediately Kyung burst through the door that he had to elbow open as he was still sliding into a shirt. Izaya blinked. He was so used to seeing all mafia personnel either in those universal suits—even Akabayashi did not deviate from the norm, his whimsical ways only came through in the unorthodox color choice—or formal traditional attire that he could hardly react to Kyung’s black jeans and garish shirt that he just finished putting on, thus revealing the print. A stylized Godzilla smashed his way through a graphic rendition of Tokyo, complete with jittery characters above and the city’s name just under the legendary kaiju.

Kyung burst into a dazzling smile. “Sorry for the wait, couldn’t figure out what to wear. What do you think?”

Izaya thought it so strange that he blinked again. He felt absurd in his suit that he had picked just to strike a note of officialdom.

“Well, you are in Tokyo so I guess it makes guess.”

“I know, right? Tokyo is Godzilla, it’s got to be Godzilla.”

Kyung nodded enthusiastically. It was dawning on Izaya that whatever he had expected for this meeting had been built on a false premise. Izaya was prepared for the usual: thinly veiled threats, an endless loop of having to predict his opponent’s train of thought, fishing for any hint of information that could serve as ammunition, straining to read the many meanings to a multilayered conversation. Izaya had even taken Shizuo’s suspicion into account, and ran some possible scenarios in which sexual tension played a part. But nothing had prepared him for this onslaught of geekiness.

And it was about to get worse as Kyung made clear by ushering Izaya out of the hotel, chattering as he went. Very few time had Izaya been out-talked but he might have met his match.

“Where are we going?”
“You know, every day is ‘let’s suit’ day but it looks great on you. But why so formal, Izaya…no fur?”

Kyung’s expression swung between disappointed and thrilled. Izaya was poignantly conscious that his question had gone entirely unanswered. Perhaps Kyung was actually an airhead and Izaya had simply given him too much credit. But he was not about underestimate this still very much unknown quantity.

“If every day if ‘let’s fur’ then it’s longer fun, right? Something like that.”

Kyung nodded.

“I see! Good point. But let’s go! Otome road is just around the corner, how cool!”

Izaya had wondered if Kyung had picked a hotel right in the heart of Ikebukuro as a provocation. Its vicinity to Otome road had not factored in Izaya’s considerations. As Izaya was being half-dragged down the street he spotted a confused policeman in his koban, who would surely tell his pals all about how weird Tokyo was getting, what with hipsters towing each other and being all lively; and a dark blur that Izaya was sure was someone tailing them. Kyung did not even glance in that direction as he spoke, “Don’t worry, it’s just the guys keeping tabs on me. Just ignore them.”

Kyung skipped into the nearest BL haven and looked over his shoulder, barely suppressing a giggle.

“I’m afraid your men will be very out of place here.”

“Heh, don’t I know it!”

As insane as all this was, Izaya was starting to enjoy himself. This kind of top-tier trolling was something he could not help but admire.

“My oh my, if isn’t suit! Izaya! A rare one! Must be a special event. And who might this young man be!”
Erika’s hands twitched as if he was aching to get her phone out and photograph Izaya from all angles, which she could not do given the store’s rules.

“Hong Kyung, at your service.”

“A handsome stranger from overseas! Exotic! How do I ship this now! Kyu-Za? Iza-Kyu! How the possibilities, the possibilities!”

Just what Izaya needed.

“Will you cut that out, Erika?”

He turned to Kyung for support only to find him musing, complete with index finger on the chin and head slightly tilted.

“Both work for me. But wait, let me thicken the accent and mess up the syntax- me for, both work.”

Izaya barely even heard Erika’s squee of joy. He had to pick up his jaw from up the floor.

“It’s here, the reversible couple! It’s extra rare! I was like, doesn’t it go against the rules? Isn’t there a universal rule of the universe that sets the top and bottom roles? But no! Oh, it makes sense, too! Because it’s bishie on bishie! Anything goes! All my Christmas, right there!”

“Okay, enough of,”

“Erika, right? You know your way around this place? Care to show me around?”

Short of offering a front seat to some hot, live BL, this was probably the best thing to say to Erika. She gave Kyung a thumbs up.

“Sure thing, leave it to onee-san!”
True to her word, Erika gave Kyung- and by extension Izaya- a most thorough tour of the wondrous BL treasure cove that was Otome road. They went up and down narrow flights of stairs, each step announcing something, perused long rows of glossy covers until Izaya was bleeding wispy ukes and manly semen. Izaya would gladly take the backseat in what had clearly morphed into pure crack but both Kyung and Erika insisted on asking his opinion on doujin, manga, character goods and absurdly expensive body pillows. It seemed there was no anime too obscure for Kyung. God knew why, Izaya sure as hell had no idea.

They halted in front of a royalty themed doujin that had Erika raving.

“Could it be Kyungu-kun is prince in disguise? And is here against the expressed wishes of his kingdom?”

“I’m afraid not. You guys killed our last queen and that was the end of monarchy.”

This was delivered with a beaming smile. It triggered Izaya’s alarms, reminding him Kyung was no flake.

“That’s not very funny.”

It was Erika’s turn to blink. Here was a line she never expected to hear from Izaya, of all people. Kyung sobered on the spot and even bowed, switching to Korean as he did so.

“I apologize. I did not mean to offend you.”

Izaya took a half-step back. He hoped Kyung was simply trolling him but he only sensed sincerity. It embarrassed him in a way Izaya could not even understand.

“There, there, it’s okay. Orihara-san is just being a big meanie as usual. Let’s hit Mandrake next, Kyungu-kun!”

At the back of his mind Izaya wondered why Erika was on first name basis with Kyung- even though she butchered the name- while he was still ‘Orihara-san’. But he was grateful for the save, less than covert jab at him notwithstanding.
Kyung was having none of it.

“Please forgive me, Izaya-nim.”

For one horrifying moment Izaya was sure Kyung was about to go full dogeza on him. And not to see how Izaya would react but simply out of a genuine desire for his pardon. The highly formal Korean honorific added a layer of surrealism to what was already one of the strangest situations Izaya had ever found himself in. Two guys in an almost exclusively female environment already attracted enough attention as it was without this bizarre display of whatever this was meant to be.

“It’s okay, please lift your head.”

Kyung did so with a sigh of relief and another all too happy smile. The switch was immediate, from contrite to giddy in a snap.

“Thank you! Mandrake next, right?”

It was at this point that it occurred to Izaya that Kyung was indeed insane.

Izaya watched Kyung pretend to puzzle over a menu. He went through the motions of spelling out each item, slowly, in a thickly drawn out accent that forced the waiter to twist himself into a pretzel as he tried to explain the food in broken English that Kyung made sure to only understand intermittently.

Not even the strangest thing that had happened thus far this day, Izaya was too fascinated to even intervene. He let Kyung force the waiter to explain just what went into the ramen bowl, complete with an explanation of what ‘ramen’ was.

“You know they’ll spit on your food, right?”

Kyung went perma smile.
“Do you think so? Living dangerously is where it’s at!”

“Good thing you think so because Erika will probably now stalk you for the rest of your life.”

“I always have someone stalking me. That’s Kim-shi right there, see?”

Kyung pointed to one of the trademark suits, hardly hidden behind a couple.

“You do this on purpose, don’t you.”

“Of course! Ever tried acting like you don’t speak the language around you?”

Izaya shook his head.

“Can’t say I have.”

“You totally should, it’s the kind of thing that goes with your repertoire.”

“Pray, do tell why.”

The ramen arrived and Kyung made a lot of fuss studying it, blowing on it, and studying it again.

“When people think you can’t understand you, they’ll talk about how they really think about you, to your face. You get to find out the truth.”

Izaya felt the mood switch gears. The serious part was about to begin and he was unsure he should be relieved or scared.

“I see! That’s actually a great idea. But I’m afraid I don’t have much of an opportunity for doing that it around here.”
Kyung took a tentative slurp of the ramen, found it amazing and slurped some more with gusto.

“That’s because everyone knows too much about you here. They all know what languages you speak.”

“Yes. Maybe I should go to Seoul and blunder my way pretending not to speak a word of Korean.”

Kyung abandoned the ramen altogether and nearly toppled it as he leaned forward across the narrow table.

“Will you, Izaya? Leave all this and start anew in a different place? Doesn’t have to be Seoul, anywhere would do. How about New York? Ever been there? It’s great! Every city lover must New York some day!”

The tone swings were so abrupt that not even Izaya knew how to keep up with them. He made a joke and got earnestness in return. Normally it would be funny, something to troll a poor guy over, but Izaya knew that would not work with Kyung.

“That wouldn’t work, now would it? I am very much needed here, to undo the mess you’ve done by setting up Shiki-san.”

Kyung sat back and resumed eating. Izaya had dropped this bomb expecting a strong reaction from Kyung but what he got as a dismissive nod, all as per expected.

“I knew you’d figure it out fast. Want my list of contacts in the Awakusu who were helping me out?”

“And you’ll hand it out to me, just like that.”

Kyung blinked, puzzled.

“Of course.”
“And in return you want, what, exactly?”

Izaya knew it could not possibly be this easy. He was still reeling from Kyung being so nonchalant about the whole thing. It only made sense if Kyung had some angle. Once things were back to offer and demand with an optional and highly likely dose of blackmail, Izaya would be on firmer ground.

“Nothing. How could I ask anything of you when I already owe you my life? My life is yours.”

Izaya rolled his eyes.

“Sure. If I told you to kill yourself, I’m sure you’d do it. Since your life is mine.”

In hindsight, Izaya should have seen it coming. He had enough warnings to know Kyung’s mental balance was very skewed. But he still gasped when produced a switchblade with an elegant flicker of the wrist and brought it to his throat.

“Give me the order, Izaya-nim.”

“Put that away, right now.”

The knife evaporated. Given the corner position of their table and how quickly everything happened, the entire episode went entirely unnoticed.

“Thank you for allowing me to exist in this world.”

Izaya took a sip of water with a shaky hand. He had no doubt in his mind that Kyung would have gladly slit his throat if Izaya asked.

“That list- and what exactly you did- do tell.”

“Sure thing! But first, will you let me know how you figured out it was me?”
Izaya tried a brittle smile. It broke on his lips as soon as it formed.

“Sorry, can’t share professional secrets.”

Kyung’s eyes went wide like a child’s would. Which might very well be what Kyung was, at heart.

“Right! This is how it went,”
Aoba tried to swallow past the knot woven tight inside his throat. He was presently trying to manage his fear in an attempt to keep it from overflowing into full blown panic. Sitting on an absurdly comfortable seat of a limousine, outside of which the world- the normal, city life unwinding in precise indifferent- could be seen darkly through fogged windows, Aoba went over everything once again. Over the last long string of hours that his watch insisted on paring down to two, he had tracked down the string of events that had led to his being here, a prisoner of tall foreign mobster-types whose language he could not even place. Somehow, that added a layer of fright to the whole insistence. His situation was close to hopeless as it was but that he could not even understand it, precisely, horrified him at some fundamental level.

It had started with Orihara Izaya, which was absolutely to be expected.

Aoba was walking down the street, actually minding his own business for once- the irony was not lost to him- when commotion on the other side of the road caught his attention. It turned out to be some fellow dragging suited Izaya and gesticulating wildly. Aoba hesitated for a fraction of a second but the fact that the duo had emerged from the hotel clinched the matter for him. The decision to give chase ended up sealing his fate.

Izaya seemed too busy keeping up with the stranger that he was unlikely to notice he was being tailed but Aoba still did his best to be discreet. This too turned out to be a mistake. So intent on blending with his surroundings, it did not occur to Aoba that he was being tailed himself. Another irony that he had had plenty of time to consider, at length.

The duo disappeared into a BL haven, of all places, where they met Erika. Aoba observed this with baited breath. He was sure this could be huge. However this guy was, he could clearly boss Izaya around. And then, a damp cloth drenched in something, sickly chemical- chloroform, it must have been- locked on his mouth and nose. A spike of adrenaline, some flaying, and then the world swum away into darkness.

And now he was held captive. He had woken up from the mush of unconsciousness to find himself trapped inside this limousine. His phone gone. Untied but very much a prisoner.

Aoba rubbed the palms of his hands on his pants. The cold sweat that sheathed his whole body poured out from his hands and Aoba was afraid he would end up dirtying the impeccable seat. He strained his ears again to catch some exchange of words, not that it would have mattered any. Odds are it was organ extraction. Or sex slave harvesting. That did not explain the limousine, though.
Aoba was cursing Izaya anew along with his own carelessness when the door swung open. The blaze of daylight nearly blinded him, leaving him to rub his eyes from blurry spots for a while, so that he could not tell just who had slid into the seat opposite of his. Only a suggestion of movement and the door shutting even told him that someone had indeed joined him. All his careful fear management crumbled.

“Oh hi there! You’re Aoba-kun, right?”

Aoba blinked rapidly, his vision sliding back to normal to reveal the owner of the surprisingly upbeat voice. It turned out to be the guy who had towed Izaya around. A smiley fellow, about Izaya’s age. The pretty kind.

“That’s right, I’m Kuroma Aoba.”

At this stage there was no point in withholding information. It was with an effort that Aoba kept from assaulting the smiler with the barrage of questions in which he had seethed this whole time.

“I researched you, you see! I hope my guys weren’t too rough? They were told to capture anyone they saw lurking out, but I didn’t think they’d hit the jackpot like this. Lucky day!”

Maybe for him, it sure was not a lucky day as far as Aoba was concerned.

“May I ask what you mean to do with me?”

“I want to have a conversation. But where are my manners, I’m Hong Kyung. But you can call me Kyun-kyun.”

Aoba gaped.

“Kyun-kyun…san,”

“Ah, honorifics everywhere you go. Old uncles and their honorifics, old ladies and their honorifics, it’s all so constricting.”
The way Kyung trailed off made Aoba guess that this rant was not even addressed to him but a common theme. He also noticed that unlike his captors this Kyung- it sounded Korean to Aoba, but he was too uncertain to hazard a guess- spoke fluent Japanese. Aoba’s options may very come down to the method of execution but just because he was not getting out of his alive was no reason to just up and give up. “But I digress. Aoba-kun, I’m so glad we get to chat like this.”

Apparently Kyung’s dislike for honorifics was not all that consistent.

“I’m afraid I hadn’t had the pleasure of making your acquaintance before so I do not know precisely why you wish to talk.”

His expression got tangled up in unnecessary formality. He hoped, feverishly so, that he did not come across as sarcastic.

“Well, I have a friend of common!”

“Orihara Izaya-san?”

“Who else!”

Kyung smiled broadly. Thus far this had been the only thing that had gone according to any plan so Aoba was vaguely reassured. So he was going to die because of Izaya, at least that made sense. As opposed to being killed by some random foreigners. It was a slim comfort but still something that his demise would not be entirely a freak of chance. “I always mess up the order of things, here’s my card.”

Kyung produced a card from his tight jeans. Only now did Aoba pay attention to Kyung’s attire. He was dressed like a tourist, if anything, or a hipster gone wrong- Godzilla shirt?- but not as the mobster boss that the card confirmed he was. In minimal style, the card simply stated ‘Hong Kyung’, both in hanja and Roman alphabet. Underneath, in English, the simple inscription ‘Hong group’ and under that, ‘heir apparent’.

“Is ‘heir apparent’ an official title?”

Aoba regretted his words almost immediately.
“Kind of. It’s short for, ‘the old man hasn’t kicked the bucket yet but watch this space’.”

“I see.”

Aoba did not see. At all. Another smile, even brighter than before, caught him further off guard.

“Ah, you’re so lucky…living in the same city as Izaya, going to the same school as Izaya, being tutored by Izaya…I’d trade the whole of Stanford for a single lecture session with Izaya!”

Aoba blinked.

“Stanford…? The university?”

Kyung shrugged.

“Who cares, right? Izaya is better than any and all universities rolled together in one! I hope you appreciate how lucky you are, Aoba-kun. Also, I heard you have a nasty brother?”

The shift from bizarre Izaya worship to Izumii was so random Aoba could only stammer.

“Yes?”

Aoba could not help looking around as if Izumii was about to burst out of the seats or drop from the ceiling. This horrible day kept snowballing.

Kyung crossed a leg over the other and sighed.

“Only one, huh. I had…let me see, one, two, three, four- yes, four, nasty brothers to get rid of. It was quite a chore!”
Kyung counted, long, elegant fingers unfurling one by one. It was a tiny gesture, almost offhand and for that precise reason it chilled Aoba to the bone. He had no doubt this Kyung had killed his siblings, all four of them. Unwilling fascination had Aoba hanging from Kyung’s every word.

“But you didn’t get caught, I gather?”

Despite himself, Aoba was intensely curious.

“It’s what they call, ‘getting away with murder’. But it wasn’t easy. At first I was like, ‘why don’t I make them fight one another?’ Sounds great but it wouldn’t work. Once they get the idea of killing off members of the family, they’d think of me and take me out. But I couldn’t really knock them out one by one either, it’d be too suspicious. So I needed to whack them off in one swift go!”

Kyung slashed the air at an angle, his hand very white and smooth. Aoba noticed manicured nails.

“How did you manage that…? Faked an accident?”

“Bingo! I got creative with a cable car! I know what you’re about to say, ‘but surely an investigation would reveal it had been tampered with’, to which I reply, ‘only if you didn’t heavily bribe the investigators!’”

Aoba swallowed with difficulty.

“Looks like it worked.”

“That it did. The thing is, in a way, you got to make it so people know you killed them but at the same time, you got to make it so people can’t really prove- or even better, don’t want to prove- you had anything to do with it.”

“That’s quite impressive. As is to be expected, only a skilled man would climb as high as you did at such a young age.”

And Aoba meant it, too. A part of him was even slightly awed.
“Oh, I’m being flattered here. Not that I care much but thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Kyung swung back into borderline giddiness.

“The best part was the funeral. I practiced going ‘hyung-nim’ in a pained voice. That and the facial expression. You need to look very sad as it befits a tragic event. Ruined a perfectly acceptable suit by crawling on the funeral mounds, in the rain, tears and all.”

The loss of the suit was obviously the greater tragedy.

“‘Hyung-nim’…?”

“Oh, I keep forgetting things. I’m Korean- I guess, for the sake of argument, let’s go with that- ‘hyung-nim’ is the expression for older brother. Traditionally, graves in Korea consist of small mounds that cover the coffin. A bit like a golf course. But with dead people.”

A nervous giggle escaped from Aoba’s trembling lips. Brilliant. A golf course but with dead people. Dimly, Aoba remembered that Izaya was involved with some Korean gang through the Awakusu.

“And bigger holes,”

“Oh, good point. Note to self: graveyard themed gulf course. They’ll so shoot down it down, though. ‘It’s not proper, young master.’”

Kyung produced a phone and proceeded to actually type down this note to self.

“The Hong group also develops gulf courses?”

To Aoba’s surprise this most innocuous question sent Kyung into a laughing fit, complete with his
doubling in two. It was horribly familiar, like Izaya squared.

“Is the pope Catholic? Of course it does! What kind of half-assed mafia group wouldn’t invest in gulf? Best way to fleece old idiots of their money, it’s even legal! Usually. You do need to get the land and that’s a bit tricky, at times.”

“I’m sure.”

Kyung glanced at his phone anew and pouted.

“It’s getting late, if I don’t hurry back the uncles will keel over. Nice talking to you, Aoba-kun! I feel we have a connection! Just ask Kim-shi for your phone when you leave. They’ll drive you home.”

Kyung was already sliding out of the limousine.

“You mean I’m free to go?”

“Sure thing. It’s not like I’d gain anything from killing you?”

Aoba did not like the way Kyung phrased it as a question.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t.”

“Isn’t that great, all things considered. Killing is a matter of commitment. Like, why go halfway and not actually kill your brother? I meant to ask you, what’s the point in that?”

Kyung sounded puzzled.

“It’s not that easy. I don’t suppose you are offering to help?”

“So not. If you don’t carve your own space in the world, no one else will.”
Aoba bit his lip. He sensed the truth to Kyung’s statement even as he could not help but bristle against it.

“Thanks for the advice. May I ask- if it’s not too presumptuous, what is your relation to Orihara Izaya-san?”

“I love Izaya.”

A sense of vertigo clouded Aoba’s vision and made him sick to his stomach. There were all sorts of reasons that led people to side with Izaya, ranging from degrees of compulsion to simply being hired. These could be reasoned with, to some extent even understood, but Aoba knew that if there was one single variable that upset all computation it was ‘love’. Nor could he detect as much of a hint of a bluff. Kyung was dead serious.

“Hong-san loves Orihara Izaya-san,”

Aoba sank below a whisper, tacking the honorifics as an afterthought. Kyung beamed some more, veritably radiating.

“I’m glad you get it! Instead of being all, ‘say what?’. I love Izaya and since he allows you to go about your merry way, I’ll do the same. Isn’t that good for you, Aoba-kun? Now imagine Izaya were to change his mind! Stay safe!”

In a daze, Kyung saw Kyung slide out of the limousine. In a daze, his phone was returned to him. In a daze, he was driven to his apartment and only as he deflated on his bed, bones suddenly turning watery as the shock wore off, did his mind clear enough for relief to settle in. Relief still tinged with apprehension. It just went to show that when you thought you had everything figured out, you were proven ever so horribly wrong.

Before he could settle for what would prove to be a night full of rioting nightmares, a package was delivered to his apartment. Addressed to him in a spidery, untidy handwriting, it contained a state of the art Samsung smartphone. The screen-saver showed a cable-car sailing through the air against a green, blue background of mountains. Unseen but very much present was the chasm widening underneath the airy carriage.

Aoba read the card out loud:

“Just a little something! Keep safe, Hong Kyung. ^_^”
Unbelievable.

“Great job, Izaya-kun. This will do.”

Akabayashi perused the pen-drive that Izaya had just submitted. It went over the points Izaya had just gone over, establishing a firm case against the cadres responsible for the information leaks and deliberate sabotaging of Shiki’s position.

Izaya squirmed ever so slightly on his seat. By all accounts, he did not seem particularly pleased.

“As long as it clears Shiki-san’s name, I will be satisfied.”

Akabyashi nodded, his steady smile unflinchingly warm. He decided to ignore Izaya’s anxiety altogether.

“It’s more than enough for that. Of course, it’s not entirely complete, this report of yours…but I understand you do not divulge your sources.”

Izaya shook his head so solemnly that it was almost funny.

“I cannot divulge my sources. It’s my policy.”

“Fair enough.”

Izaya had agonized over it. He could simply hand Kyung to Akabayashi and wash his hands of the entire affair. It might very well be that the business opportunity the Hong group represented outweighed any concerns with regards to Shiki but at least Izaya would still have proceeded correctly. Except not. For one, the matter of protecting his sources was not just an empty platitude but a guiding principle. Even if Kyung was hardly the usual source- or usual in any sense- Izaya was not ready to do violence to the few golden rules in his life as an informant. He feared a slippery slope toward he knew not what morass of moral crisis if he were to incur in a precedent.
But more than that, a sense of guilt held his hand. Reading Shizuo’s account had been difficult. The very simple, no frills style, was all the more pitiful for its lack of embellishment. Providing Izaya right, the very act of making a record of the event, of fixing memory on paper and ink, had reinforced the scope of Shizuo’s recollection. Kyung’s tiny nails bitten to the quick, frantically griping Izaya’s arm. That one detail, so small in itself, had impressed Izaya with a grave weight of responsibility.

Izaya could not deliver Kyung to the Awakusu without betraying a little boy whose one solace had been Orihara Izaya. Pity laced with revulsion and a bundle of mixed emotions tied Izaya’s hands.

Fortunately, Kyung was as insane as he was intelligent. His tracks were beautifully covered, allowing Izaya to expose all of Kyung’s contacts in the Awakusu without indicting Kyung himself, which was quite impressive, and without said contacts being able of point in Kyung’s direction, which was even more so. “I hope we can count on your future cooperation as we establish firmer connections with the Hong group.”

Izaya nodded.

“As much I can, I’ll be of help.”

Akabayashi produced a slow cigar. He always enjoyed when Izaya dropped some of the formality and was his zany self but clearly something bothered him presently. And Akabayashi had a pretty good idea he knew what it was.

“Izaya-kun, international networking is a wonderful thing. But let us be careful and not…network excessively, if you will.”

Izaya refrained an instinct to jolt. The result was almost a shrug that disarranged the grace so innate to his body.

“I understand, Akabayashi-san.”

Akabayashi was sure Izaya did.
Chapter 50

Mikado ignored the incoming call. Within seconds, his phone buzzed with a message in which Aoba went on about a 'creepy foreigner' of which Mikado should be wary. Mikado sighed and put the phone away. He would deal with paranoia later. For now, he had to decide what to buy for dinner.

Unfortunately, his choices were quite limited given his tight budget. Mikado walked into the usual convenience store and ambled to the usual aisle where a neat row of cup ramen stretched out, colorfully promising all sorts of delicious delights that Mikado knew would all amount to variations of a watery broth.

At times he wondered if there was a proportional inverse relation between the promising picture on the package and its actual content. He was musing this when he spotted a young man crouching by the lower shelves, lost in deep contemplation. Mikado could not help a blush as his eyes trailed down the slim body, the waistline of shredded jeans riding low.

“Ah, so much to choose from…what do you recommend?”

By now Mikado knew there was enough diversity in Tokyo to account for those who had little to no concern for socially accepted rules of conduct so he was not entirely surprised at being thus addressed, out of nowhere. But the bright smile on very even features, completely with large dark eyes that lit up amicably, had Mikado wondering if he was dealing with some celebrity that he was expected to know.

“I usually buy this one.”

Mikado selected a package from an upper shelf. This prompted the stranger to jump to his feet in one swift, graceful move.

“Beef flavor! With real beef? Probably not!”

“It isn’t too bad.”

Mikado could not refrain a smile. This guy seemed a stranger to the city and Mikado immediately sympathized with him. Tokyo could be a terrifying place, not just due to the supernatural happenings a bit all over or the dangerous mobsters ever eager to add their contribution to the riotous chaos that
burst up at intervals but also on a much more mundane level. Absurdly inflated prices, for one, made much of the Tokyo experience a trick balancing act for the likes of Mikado. It often came down to a decent meal a day, going without heating in the heart of winter and saving up whenever at all possible.

Not one savvy in fashion, Mikado took the shredded nerves and odd shirt with a garish print as bargain buys. Meanwhile, the stranger was turning the package around and around as if expecting some revelation.

“I don’t suppose they have black bean noodles?”

“Black bean noodles? Never heard of it.”

And Mikado thought himself quite an expert when it came to instant ramen. The man sighed heavily. Mikado wondered how old he was. Young by the looks of it, barely out of his teens.

“I knew I should have brought some from overseas…”

Mikado blinked. His curiosity was peaked.

“Overseas? I’m sorry, but are you a foreigner?”

“At times.”

“At times…”?

“You can say I’m Korean, or something to that effect. Hong Kyung, at your service! Call me Kyun-Kyun! Which I bet you won’t.”

Dimly, Mikado remembered Aoba’s warning. But his good manners kicked in before he could even process it, Mikado was already politely bowing.

“I’m Ryuugamine Mikado, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Honge-san.”
To his surprise, Kyung burst out laughing.

“Mikado, now that’s one of those names that doesn’t export too well!”

“Export…?”

It was official, Mikado had stumbled on one of the weird characters that were hardly rare in this city of cities.

“That’s right. Then again, who am I to judge? Very few people ever get my name right around here. What’s in a name, though!”

Mikado hesitated.

“I’m sorry if I didn’t pronounce it correctly. I must say, your Japanese is flawless.”

“‘Kyun-kyun gets complimented twice in two days’. Is it a record!”

Mikado blushed anew.

“I’m sorry, I’m sure you hear that all the time.”

“Say, do you boil this in water, usually?”

“Er, I beg your pardon?”

Kyung shook the package of ramen he still held.

“This. Do you boil it?”
“Of course?”

Maybe there was a miscommunication here.

“I see! I eat it dry as a snack more often than not.”

“Eh? For real?”

For once Mikado’s polite ways deserted him.

“For real. A bit like popcorn. It’s great when stalk-watching.”

Kyung’s smile reached a new extreme, blindly so. Mikado hoped Kyung had slipped in his wording, second language and all. But he had to make sure.

“Did you say stalk…?”

“All your bases are belong to me!”

The reference was lost on Mikado but the randomness was not. Or perhaps it was not entirely random because Kyung now grabbed a basket and proceeded to fill it with cup ramen.

“Are you buying all that?”

“I’ll get one of each type then decide on which to settle. I want to get this right.”

“Get what right?”

Kyung answered without even looking in Mikado’s direction, too busy sweeping packaged from the shelves.
“There’s someone I’m getting this for. He doesn’t go for instant food, at all, so if I can get him to eat it, it’ll be a special moment. I’d feel so happy, if I could only persuade him to eat something he’d normally never touch.”

“Is this person…real?”

It was Kyung’s turn to blink in mild dismay, which was usually as far as Kyung ever went when dismayed. Mikado scrambled. “Sorry for the strange question, it’s just that I’m used to otakus who are all about fictional characters.”

“No problem! But he’s most definitely real, yes. But he’d make one hell of a cool character in, say, a light novel!”

This idea seemed to enchant Kyung. Mikado picked up his own cup ramen.

“I think you would get along with these otakus.”

“Like Erika? Already bff with her! And all set.”

Kyung had finished collecting an absurd amount of instant ramen. Mikado watched with a smile as a rather befuddled cashier processed the purchases. They emerged from the harshly lit interior of the store onto the murky day outside. Before Mikado quite knew how or why, they were walking side by down on the sidewalk. “Here, present!”

Kyung handed Mikado a button.

“Thank you…?”

“When you’re very hungry, chewing on something really helps. It cheats your stomach into thinking it’s full. Chewing activates salivation which in its makes the stomach juices start working. So for a while you feel as if you’ve eaten! Of course, then it is painful afterwards since your body is trying to digest food that just isn’t there. You need to decide, ‘is temporary relief worth suffering in the near future?’ Then again, by the time it gets to that, thinking becomes very difficult.
“That’s,”

Mikado trailed off. There was nothing he could say and apparently nothing he was required to say either as Kyung picked up as if he had not even hitched a lame quasi-sentence merely to cover up embarrassment. The button burned on Mikado’s hand.

“So it’s all a matter of perspective. Instant ramen can be a delicacy when you’re on the brink of starvation. Keep that in mind, maybe?”

It occurred to Mikado that maybe this was an attempt at cheering him up.

“I’ll do that.”

“Then again, same goes for cockroaches. Rats are difficult to catch. Let me tell you- ah, so sorry. Not all sources of protein are equally acceptable to middle class kids. I know, let me buy you dinner to make up for it! Nothing instant or vermin related either!”

Mikado knew he should not accept. His phone buzzed some more but he did not check it. Most definitely, this was an invitation to turn down. Even for one who had dined with none other than Orihara Izaya.

Except Mikado knew, even while he was thinking it over, that he could possibly do so without compromising who he was. Whoever this Kyung was, he stood for much of what Mikado hungered for. The hints of a strange personal history, the chirpy attitude and optimism that put Mikado to shame, were all part of it. But deeper, at some level were intuition was an engine of obscure workings, directing so much of what happened on the surface, Kyung represented a great unknown.

“I’ll take you on that, Honge-san.”

Yagiri Seitarou crinkled up his face into his most amicable expression as the young man walked into the meeting room.
“Hong-kun, we finally meet. Do sit down.”

Kyung smiled back. If there was a type he knew how to handle, it was old uncles, having a slew of them himself and being all too familiar with their ways. Kyung wished he could exchange ideas on this subject with Namie, a person who he was extremely eager to meet, but she was too much a part of Izaya’s inner circle. All in time. At any rate, there was yet another old uncle to deal with presently.

With a bow Kyung slid into a chair.

“The pleasure is all is all mine, Yagiri-san.”

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh. Right. That’s a shame.”

Seitarou was already opening a bottle of vintage whiskey, the arrested gesture rather awkward. Kyung knew this was something of a breach of etiquette, doubly so in that Seitarou went as far as serving the drinks himself. Probably a failed attempt at being friendly and thus secure an atmosphere of comradeship. Uncles always did that, they compensated with expensive things for their complete lack of care. They seemed to think that this stuffy veneer of equality, that was always temporary and only came about when they needed something, was entirely convincing. Sure of their status, the result of a lifetime of sycophants praising them, they even thought that bestowing an audience was a great, magnanimous deed that was sure to endear them to the grateful recipients of such honors.

“As promised, I brought her with me.”

Kyung snapped his fingers and one of his men handed him a long case that was placed on the table reverently. Kyung opened it with a flicker, revealing a massive sword nestled in a dark velvety alcove. Seitarou screwed his monocle and peered greedily.

“What a beauty!”
Uncles were very greedy beings and dropped their guard in the presence of a coveted object.

“She is to be looked at, do refrain from touching.”

“Oh. Quite. I beg your pardon.”

Seitarou had risen to his feet and leaned toward the glittering blade but he now remembered himself and sat back. His eyes were heavy with calculation.

“She was forged during the Imjin war. Rumor has it, she belonged to Yi Sun-sin himself.”

“A cursed sword with historical relevance. How much are you asking for it?”

“She’s not for sale.”

Seitarou started. Uncles lost their cool very easily when things did not go their way but they also expected everyone else to be as obsessed with profit as they were.

“Name your price.”

Kyung tilted his head to the side.

“She is not for sale.”

Seitarou half-rose.

“We had an agreement. You said you’d let me see the sword,”

“That’s right. I said I’d let Yagiri-san see the sword, which you have. I said nothing about selling her.”
Gaping followed.

“You can’t be serious?”

“I can. And am. Besides, I said nothing about any curse. But Yagiri-san is shrewd. There is indeed a curse attached to her. Forged to fight the Japanese, word has it that if anyone of Japanese descent is to ever touch her, she will curse them and consume them with ‘slow, undying fire’. Want to test it?”

Kyung gestured toward the weapon that suddenly seemed less of a relic and more of a threat.

“What value can a sword like that have to me?”

“Ah, that’s not the right question, now is it? You don’t understand her feelings. Yi Sun-sin aside, she was there when Japanese armies marched over villages and towns, sowing destruction and death. Did you know that after a while they stopped collecting heads? Too much of a bother and cumbersome to carry. They took noses as trophies instead. Efficient, wouldn’t you say?”

Seitarou mumbled and huffed some.

“That was centuries ago, I don’t see why you’re bringing that up.”

“It was centuries ago to you. To her, it is her living reality.”

There was a pause charged with tension. Kyung’s smile kept its brilliance, as sharp as the sword.

“So you won’t sell it?”

“I said that from the very start.”

“Is this, a, er…nationalist affair?”
Kyung blinked then burst out laughing.

“Heh, hardly so. She’d be a heirloom indeed and probably a national treasure if Korean authorities were to find out she has surfaced. But I won’t inform them and I gather neither will you.”

“What are you doing here, then?”

“As I said before, I wanted you to see her. Something no amount of money can ever purchase. Something with a soul.”

Seitarou sighed, sagged and after a while curled up his lips in a bitter smile.

“Young people and their ideals. You know where to reach me if you change your mind.”

Kyung giggled and closed the lid.

“If you’ll excuse me, Yagiri-san, I have matters to attend to.” On his way out, Kyung stopped and turned around. “And I’m sure you won’t try to take her by force. That’d be unseemly, for one, and wouldn’t end too well. Besides, who do you think is the anonymous partner that has taken over much of your company? That’s right, the Hong group! Now would have guessed it.”

In a silky, loose robe that fell on him in liquid coppery reflexes, rustling quietly whenever he moved, Kyung adjusted the high definition telescope. Other than that, he wore only a pair of boxers.

The telescope was set against the wide panoramic window, pointing at the city night’s lights very much like a weapon. Kyung reached for some instant ramen that he broke into tiny bits before chewing, his eyes never leaving the eyepiece. A bit of tweaking on the knots and Izaya’s apartment emerged.

Kyung had gone to great pains to secure this place from which he had unimpeded view of Izaya’s living room. It stood out brightly lit, affixed to the emptiness of the sky. Kyung zeroed in on Izaya on the treadmill. Kyung knocked down the noodles and did not even notice. This was better than he expected.
Despite commonly held belief, Kyung did have a sense of morals. It just happened to be extremely personal and so tailored to the quirks of his personality as to be essentially impossible to understand by anyone else. On top of which, it did take liberties that further sealed the notion that Kyung would do absolutely anything with no consideration for others.

As a result, Kyung had no issues with spying on Izaya like this but deemed any kind of bugging or tapping as fundamentally wrong. Seeing absolutely no conflict in this, Kyung had promptly bought a telescope, scouted the proper position and was now enjoying the fruits of his labor.

Izaya’s running form was enough to send chills down Kyung’s spine. He could do with less clothing but running gear was quite revealing, no matter how much it covered. The workout session was short and in no time Izaya padded out of view. Kyung entertained himself checking stocks. For all his apparent flighty ways, Kyung had nothing short of an iron grip on his assets. Virtually everything about his many business enterprises was neatly stored and readily accessible.

That he was underestimated almost by default had gone a long way into staging and successfully carrying out his coup d’etat. But Kyung knew that could only carry him so far. After making such a huge upset by wiping out his brothers in one swift go, he had ascended to a position of power. Standing at the top meant he could no longer hide under the camouflage of giddy zaniness. On the other hand, it also meant Kyung could unleash his real self with a greater sense of freedom. There were still very boring board meeting in which he had to put on the mandatory suit and sit through hours on end as decrepit uncles droned on and on. And when meeting other power players he had to be on his best behavior as Kim-shi, his righthand man, always reminded him.

Instead of simply comforting to typical gangster behavior, however, Kyung sought refuge in sheer audacity. He felt more comfortable that way, which was an advantage, but there was more to it. It exalted him to a legendary status despite- and even because- his young age. There existed a niche in criminal outfits of the maverick leader who could not be predicted and provided results against all odds.

Such had been Kyung’s ascension and his current strategy. Exploring a gap in the market, namely gay clubs and brothels along with houses catering exclusively to a female clientele, Kyung had managed to gain a foothold without alerting nosy relatives or rival groups. Having seen firsthand the well-oiled machine that was the gay sex industry in San Francisco, Kyung adapted the model to Korea, tweaked it where it needed, and cashing on natives and tourists alike, soon became a force to be reckoned with. Riding the Hallyu wave for all it was worth, Kyung turned pretty boys into a source of profit. The fact that the potential competition was too set on its ways to even see the potential allowed him to expand without attracting much attention. Recruiting them himself and taking them under his wing, Kyung offered opportunities that few other employers in this line of work did. Amidst the drifting youth, much of which had hope smashed out of it, Kyung found potential and a chance of climbing from the morass that was the concrete jungle.
The fact that the potential competition was too set on its ways to even see the potential allowed him to expand without attracting much attention. Securing a good relationship with already well-established venues that included providing free protection allowed him to gain a whole network of allies. Making security, on all fronts, a priority, immediately placed his own clubs and those affiliated with him on international gay life guides. Former shambling joints were upgraded to sleek affairs with a select clientele.

That his uncles squirmed, in barely contained horror, was a bonus all around. They mumbled against it but could not argue with the healthy profits. By the time Kyung simply took over the Hong group, the uncles were confronted with this business model that remained a thorn on their side even as it indirectly benefited them. Every now and then he would select the most flamboyantly gay or butch lesbian to serve them at group functions.

He returned to the telescope with gusto as Izaya returned, hair damp from presumably a shower. Izaya flopped on the sofa, staring straight in Kyung’s direction. Kyung shivered slightly, this kind of quasi-proximity had him abuzz with an overflow of emotion. Izaya turned on a laptop, sending Kyung into a frenzy but no augmentation allowed him to see the actual content. A soft glow of pixels washed his expression of concentration. But soon enough Izaya discarded the laptop.

Izaya received a phone call that Kyung was capable of following simply by reading his lips. It gave him much food for thought. Suddenly abandoning the telescope, Kyung paced up and down, the robe fluttering about. After a minute hesitation he decided to call Izaya himself.

Kyung noticed how Izaya flinched the moment he identified the caller. But Izaya did pick up.

“Hello, it’s Hong Kyung. How are you doing?”

“Whatever happened to ‘Kyun-Kyun’?”

Kyung did not even need to spy, he felt the smile on Izaya’s voice.

“I didn’t want to seem too forward.”
“You’re calling me at midnight, I’d say that’s ‘forward’ enough.”

“So sorry…am I bothering you?”

The anguish dripping from Kyung’s words was very real. He made no effort to contain it.

“Not really. Is your call of a professional or personal nature?”

“I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Which was difficult to accomplish across the distance and through thick glass windows.

“Now isn’t that…nice of you. Tell you what, Shizuo is holding an event tomorrow. Technically today, given the time. Do you want to tag along?”

Kyung nearly tripped on his own feet.

“Really? Can I come?”

“By all means. It’s a contest or sorts. Very informal affair but be sure to actually wear something that won’t get you arrested.”

Kyung laughed.

“Hey, it’s not as if I go about naked!”

“I suspect you’re mostly naked now.”

A gasp. Through the telescope Kyung spotted Izaya smiling slyly.
“You really are an amazing informant! However did you know?”

“Mad skills.”

“Don’t I know it…! See you tomorrow, Izaya!”

“Goodnight- Kyun-kyun.”

Bursting with joy, Kyung threw himself on a feather mattress. For a while he simply stayed like that, slung across bed, breathing and out, very still. Eventually he rolled on his back, slipped on a pair of surgical gloves and picked up a postcard.

Kyung reread it. Shiki’s handwriting was elegant and the poem quoted was along with same lines. Kyung turned it around and studied the snowy landscape. All very pretty, very classical, a bit too contained for Kyung’s taste. It told him more about the person that was Shiki than all the research in the world. Intercepting the postcard had been less than easy but most definitely worth it. It also skirted Kyung’s moral limits. Had it been in Izaya’s possession, Kyung would not dare take it. But before it actually reached Izaya, it was fair game. Besides, he would have it delivered, of course. But a few hours would not matter much.

Kyung drifted asleep thinking of cool outfits to wear to the upcoming, not-quite-date outing.
Izaya hit the treadmill with determination. He kept the running session short but intense. It was not enough to lose himself in the coordination of muscle but enough to allow him to unwind some of the pent-up pressure. A quick shower followed during which Izaya was fully focused on the hot water cascading down his body.

Back to the living room, Izaya went through what he had gathered on Kyung thus far. If there was virtually nothing on Kyung’s illusive mother, there was plenty readily available on his father. Izaya had already gone through it but reviewing what information he did have often triggered those connections that emerged with the force of an illumination.

Hong senior looked nothing like Kyung. The murdered progeny had inherited his looks even down to the blocky features. A succinct and official biography informed Izaya that Hong senior inherited the group and gone through the typical steps of a CEO including Seoul university, the very wealthy and produced wife and connections with conservative politicians that appeared in very stilted photographs, at times in traditional Korean attire, smiling in well-practiced yet still awkward smiles.

Izaya did not even need the background he did have on Kyung’s childhood to know Kyung would never be accepted by such a family. Mafia aside and illegitimacy aside, his flamboyant ways alone would have clinched the matter. Which made Izaya wonder if he should pursue his own family’s potential information. From what Shizuo had told him, Izaya had met Kyung through the Orihara family business. It was even possible his parents knew Kyung’s mother.

Izaya could not bring himself to tap this source. The prospect of actually talking to his parents was terrifying in all sorts of ways that Izaya would rather not even contemplate. Whatever he could gain from them was probably not worth the risk. Izaya was stuck dealing with Kyung on his own.

Lost in such contemplations, Izaya was startled when his phone rang. And surprised at the caller.

“Shizuo? Did something happen?”

“Hi. Don’t forget the whole contest for strong guys tomorrow.”

“Thanks for reminding me! It had slipped my mind.”
Izaya could almost see Shizuo nodding on the other side.

“Yeah. Thought so.”

Something occurred to Izaya.

“Say…can I invite Kyung?”

“Sure.”

“There’s too much I can’t ask him myself…maybe you can help me out on this?”

“Yeah. Still think you should tell him but okay. Kyun-kyun is cool.”

“Good thing you think so! Maybe I can transfer his obsession with me over to you!”

“That’s not gonna happen.”

A lull. Then,

“I don’t suppose you have any tips? On how to make him drop this insanity?”

Izaya felt the bitter smile across Shizuo’s reply.

“You mean how he’s so hopelessly in love with you? You’re asking the wrong person here, Izaya. I can’t drop it myself, let alone get anyone else to do so.”

Izaya sighed.
“Sorry…see you tomorrow? Which is already today, actually?”

“Yeah.”

Izaya had barely put the phone down as it rang anew. And sure enough, it was none other than Kyung. Izaya nearly ignored it but this was the perfect opportunity.

“Hello, it’s Hong Kyung. How are you doing?”

“Whatever happened to ‘Kyun-Kyun’?”

Izaya could not contain the smile from creeping into his words.

“I didn’t want to seem too forward.”

“You’re calling me at midnight, I’d say that’s ‘forward’ enough.”

“So sorry…am I bothering you?”

What did bother Izaya was the naked pain in Kyung’s voice.

“Not really. Is your call of a professional or personal nature?”

“I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Izaya already expected this answer but it still sent a shiver down his spine. He did not handle honest expressions of affection applied to himself, regardless of the person in question but having someone he did not remember being so openly emotional was deeply disturbing. Izaya expected anger to come his way as the logical result of so much of his prior- and even current- mode of life but blind adoration was both strange and wrong.
“Now isn’t that…nice of you. Tell you what, Shizuo is holding an event tomorrow. Technically today, given the time. Do you want to tag along?”

Izaya almost wanted Kyung to turn him down.

“Really? Can I come?”

“By all means. It’s a contest or sorts. Very informal affair but be sure to actually wear something that won’t get you arrested.”

Kyung’s laughter rang freely.

“Hey, it’s not as if I go about naked!”

“I suspect you’re mostly naked now.”

The far too dramatic gasp told Izaya that he was indeed right. It crossed his mind that Kyung might even be spying on him, somehow.

“You really are an amazing informant! However did you know?”

“Mad skills.”

“Don’t I know it…! See you tomorrow, Izaya!”

“Goodnight- Kyun-kyun.”

Izaya pulled down the shutters, just to be on the safe side. He pondered on this brief but quite insightful conversation. As disarmed before Kyung as Izaya still felt, humor was a tactic that seemed to work. Kyung could very well be the only person in the entire world who actually appreciated Izaya’s sense of humor so he might as well use it to his advantage.
“Sorry about this, Shizuo.”

Izaya hunched, hands firmly hidden inside the fur bordered pockets. His very visible dejection was oddly endearing.

“No problem. It’s cool you invited Kyun-kyun.”

Izaya sighed and checked his phone.

“He’s late. Maybe he went back to Korea?”

Despite having planned this, Izaya still half-hoped Kyung would ditch at the last moment.

“Yeah…not gonna happen. Oh look, there he is.”

Izaya tensed, momentarily, and was back to his suave self by the time Kyung joined them. From a distance Kyung’s figure was colorful enough and it resolved itself into a rainbow flag shirt.

“Izaya! So glad to be here.”

The beaming smile was turned on and directed solely at Izaya.

“Did you get that in the States?”

Kyung nodded and turned around to reveal more neatly arranged rows of color.

“Yes! I got one for you too. Oh hi there, Heiwajima-san!”

Shizuo was amused, it took Kyung a while to even notice him.
“Can I have one as well?”

“That can totally be arranged!”

Izaya lifted an eyebrow. He had made a conscious decision not to let the barrel of hyperactive enthusiasm get to him. Instead Izaya opted for a quieter approach.

“Do you even know what that means, Shizuo?”

“Yeah. I ain’t that ignorant, you know. It’s a flag for gay folk and others in the same vein.”

“That’s…a way of describing it. Sorry, did not mean to offend you.”

“No offense taken.”

“Just don’t complain when you get hit on if you wander into Shinjuku 2 chome. Then again, that’d happen no matter what, I think.”

Kyun giggled, a tone that Shizuo noticed was lighter than Izaya’s trademark expression of glee.

“I’ll need to hit 2 chome soon myself. For research purposes, though!”

“Because you run a gay sex empire of sorts?”

Kyun’s eyes glittered in a way Izaya found very creepy. Kyung then joined his hands together, lacing the fingers as if he was about to pray.

“Izaya has researched me!”
“Indeed I have. No hooking up in 2 chome, though? Just research?”

Izaya was genuinely curious. All he had managed to dig about Kyung’s personal history had been cobbled through many gaps. No birthplace, a nameless mother whose status was entirely unknown, an educational background that was pure emptiness until Stanford.

Izaya suspected Kyung was running on a few passports and probably had visited Japan illegally at some point or another. Running his name through customs had not struck a hit but that hardly mattered when dealing with someone so deeply enmeshed in underworld tactics, in which he exceeded. Izaya had his bots frantically going through surveillance cameras at airports but he expected it would prove fruitless.

What was readily available and that turned out to impress Izaya, was Kyung’s business strategy and how he had come to dominate the gay scene. Izaya had been caught up in figuring out the tangled mess that was Kyung’s past that he had only recently turned to his recent accomplishments.

“Oh, no. I’m not interested in any of that.”

“Well, it’s about to begin so let’s started, Shizuo!”

Shizuo saw a quasi-pout on Kyung’s part as the conversation shifted. They filed into the hangar. This preliminary session of the Strongman contest took place outside the city and the picked venue added a hint of danger to the whole affair. The crowd was already gathering and growing steadily on mounted stalls running along a chorded off area in the vast hangar. Izaya accompanied Shizuo, exchanged a very words before sending him on his way and taking a seat next to Kyung who was already abuzz.

“Isn’t Kim-shi around?”

Kyung looked left, right and behind.

“Can’t see him but I bet he’s lurking about, somewhere.”

“He could enter the contest.”
“Kim-shi could! But I don’t see how he can win against Heiwajima-san.”

There was no reading meaning behind Kyung’s forms of address. He was on given name terms with Izaya, somehow, but clearly looked up with him with less than sane admiration. Occasionally, though, Izaya received a highly formal Korean honorific which confused the waters even further as Kyung jumped between languages freely and unpredictably. Shizuo got the more typical surname-san treatment but it actually seemed to represent respect.

Izaya had decided to simply dismiss these linguistics quirks altogether and simply go by intonation alone. Kyung was the kind whose scorn simmered underneath the pro-forma niceties.

“Speaking of which, it’s Shizuo’s turn. Go Shizuo! Kill that plane dead!”

The task at hand, and in which several men had been employed, was to tow a fighter plane across the hangar. Shizuo was duly harnessed, found Izaya on the stand and raised a hand in salute before easily pulling all the tons of metal, the plane rolling smoothly to the cheers of the crowd.

“So amazing! Will he shred the plane next?”

“He’d be disqualified.”

“That’s too bad. How cool would that be?”

“I know, it’d be too cool! Shizuo can rip the wings out of that plane like it’s paper, then gut out the engine. And he’d do, too, for peace!”

Izaya scrambled for some composure. He was bent on figuring out just what Kyung’s angle was, not to get caught in his pace.

“Good thing there’s no mandatory military service here.”

“Heh, very good point. You do have it in Korea, though? Did you bribe your way out of it?”
Kyung beamed afresh.

“How well you know me, Izaya! I feel so flattered…”

“And I suspect no-one wanted to teach you how to handle machineguns.”

Izaya simply could not get used to Kyung’s gushing over him and would make whatever he could to point him in other directions.

“That’s very true. I am not a good shot, at all. Kim-shi tried to teach me but no, it’s not going to happen. I’m as likely to shoot myself in the face as anything else.”

Izaya eased back on his seat, thoughtfully.

“Is that a criminal thing? Because one of Shiki-san’s men was very keen on teaching me how to handle guns.”

“Izaya holding a gun…!”

Izaya passed his hand in front of Kyung’s increasingly glazing eyes.

“Earth to Kyun-kyun. Come back.”

“Ah, so sorry. I get distracted.”

Kyung corrected his posture and for a horrifying second Izaya thought he was about to sit full seiza.

“I am sorry, I can’t help it- I’ve missed so much for so long, just being with you is- difficult,”

Izaya was not sure what was worse, the glazed look of absolute devotion or the sheen of incoming tears. Both were too heavy a burden on Izaya. He hesitated before very lightly patting Kyung’s head.
“There’s no need to get so riled up.”

Kyung nodded and almost immediately all sadness burst into a stellar smile that also disturbed Izaya considerably.

“It’s a truck loaded with planes next!”

And sure enough, Shizuo towed the truck and its load of fighter planes without much of an effort. Izaya jumped over with an energy drink and a towel. There were a few more events left but Shizuo’s score already clinched a place for the next stage of the competition.

“Way to go, Shizuo! Next you really will uproot Sky Tree!”

“Can you do that?”

Shizuo toweled his slightly damp hair.

“Nah. Don’t listen to what Izaya says, most of it is, what he calls… ‘hyper…”

“‘Hyperbole’. And no, it’s not hyperbole. I bet you could totally do away with Sky Tree.”

Kyung seemed too delighted at this possibility.

“You’re also just hyper.”

Izaya merely rolled his eyes at this.

Kyung had a limousine prepared to take them to Tokyo and ushered them inside. He settled across from Izaya as the overlong black car started to move. Shizuo sat next to Izaya.
Kyung lost no time fumbling with the sleek inbuilt bar.

“I got drinks. Strawberry milk!”

Shizuo took a carton and sipped it happily. Kyung took another himself, drinking very much like a kid, complete with holding the colorful carton with both hands.

“Great taste.”

Izaya rolled his eyes ostensibly.

“You’re both on your way to diabetes. Well, maybe Shizuo isn’t. No-one can tell precisely how your body works. But Kyun-kyun should watch out...hey, are you alright?”

Kyung’s expression was a mixture of dazed and unsure. Then it switched to a broad smile.

“It’s almost as if you care!”

Izaya glanced at Shizuo as if for help but nothing came from that quarter. Which was just as good. It was becoming increasingly obvious to Izaya that the only way of having a positive impact on Kyung resided with Izaya himself. How to handle it still remained up in the air and Izaya was keenly conscious that any mistake could have grave repercussions. The whole affair forced Izaya to scale down, to dismiss the usual seething cauldron of multiple interconnected plots and narrow it down to a single very fragile individual.

“Well, I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Right! Because I am a human being too!”

Kyung seemed very pleased with this. Somehow.

“Strawberry is good stuff. The sugar makes it better, don’t hate it until you try it.”
Shizuo waved the straw in Izaya’s direction. Kyung immediately took the cue and offered Izaya his own. Izaya took the carton with some reluctance, took a tentative sip followed by an immediate grimace.

“Sugar overdose…I think I just died a little. Oy, Kyun-kyun? Are you alright?”

Kyung’s borderline catatonic glazed expression flitted into a luminescent blush. He gasped almost silently, brought a hand to his mouth and nearly teared up. In his confusion Izaya turned to Shizuo who simply went,

“Indirect kiss.”

It was at this point that Izaya decided to shift gears entirely. He had started by treating Kyung as a power player only to be too confused by his antics. At some point-maybe it was the sob story, or the sickening devotion, probably a combination of all this along with the lack of a moral compass- Izaya had started to coddle Kyung. That clearly was not working.

Izaya eased back on the seat, crossed a leg and tilted his head slightly.

“So, Kyun-san. Do you always spaz out like this? I fear for the future of the Korean mafia.”

Kyung’s luminescent blush did not recede but his eyes refocused.

“Oh, no. It’s only when you’re around.”

Izaya was a bit disappointed that the change in denomination did not seem to register.

“Do you have any decent drinks in this bar of yours or am I expected to beg?”

Right away Kyung was going through the bar and selecting a dark gingery bottle that he handed with undue reverence.
“My manners are lacking. I hope you’ll appreciate this.”

Izaya turned it on his hands.

“Ginseng tea. I’m not too familiar with it.”

“I know your favorite is matcha! And barley. So I wanted to give something of myself to you. So, ginseng,”

It did not make much sense but Izaya let it go. He sipped strong vaguely woody tea with a slightly acerbic kick at the end. Very good, even in this bastardized version.

“Quite good.”

“I got a whole batch of it just for you, Izaya! The real stuff.”

Izaya raised an eyebrow.

“Are we still talking about tea? You’re one step from going ‘it’s uncut’. Just so we’re on the same page, tea is fine, but do keep whatever drugs you peddle to yourself.”

Izaya made it all very off the cuff but he wanted to see just what Hong’s stance toward selling drugs was. Not so much in itself but because it could cause serious problems with the Awakusu connection further down the line.

“We don’t sell drugs.”

“Why not? Is it a moral issue?”

Kyung tilted his head slightly as if the question did not quite mesh. Izaya realized that odds are any notions of morality on this subject had never even occurred to Kyung.
“The routes are already all taken. I suppose it’s possible to force your way into it but it’s very tricky. Great margins but to get any slice of the pie you have to lose a couple of men, at the very least. Takes a lot of launder the money, too. Unless you think I should give it a go?”

“No. No, I don’t think. I very emphatically think you shouldn’t get in that line of business. Keep in mind that Akabayashi-san feels very strongly on the subject.”

“I see! It’s the whole ‘romantic gangster’ thing!”

Shizuo finished his sugary drink, slurped the remains of cloying strawberry goodness.

“Got more of this?”

“Sure thing, Heiwajima-san!”

Kyung returned to the bar and Izaya studied him as he drank the very tasty tea.

“You don’t seem to stock any alcohol.”

Kyung nodded, handed Shizuo another carton.

“You know how it is with business folk, you are expected to drink a lot. So I’d force myself to jug down booze then throw it up as soon as I could so it wouldn’t get to me. It wasn’t nice.”

Izaya did not shiver but inwards he cringed. There was something very saddening in Kyung’s understatement. ‘It wasn’t nice’ stood for making himself throw up, repeatedly, at business gatherings where everyone was older, powerful and out to cross him in one way or another. In just one sentence Kyung conjured up a whole reality that Izaya could imagine all too well. For a second, Izaya was transported to overheated private rooms of restaurants, cigarette smoke stinging the eyes, bundles of rich men talking shop in the shape of aggressive takeovers, land sharking, money held as hostage over the lives of many, while rounds and rounds of liquor were freely consumed. For a split of a second Izaya could taste the acid bitterness that resulted from pushing fingers down his throat in order to expel cheap beer from his system.

“That’s why mobsters just ain’t nice to be around.”
Kyung brightened up.

“Don’t I know it, Heiwajima-san! I’m like, ‘why would anyone want to be around mobster folk aside from doing business with them’? I mean, I see the hypocrisy here…but it’s not as if I’m friends with these people.”

Shizuo nodded at this piece of wisdom.

“Yeah.”

“It’s none of your damn business.”

The biting tone did not surprise Shizuo who was counting on it but Kyung was obviously puzzled. He did not get to expound on it because Izaya laced his words with an extra dose of sardonic spite. “By that token no-one would spend any time with you as last time I checked, you’re the definition of career gangster.”

“True! And when you go high up in the hierarchy, you meet some cool people like Akabayashi-san. But there’s a lot of humdrum, let-me-scream-you-into-submission-you-FAG types.”

“You could get that on a shirt.”

Izaya opened his mouth to defend middle management yakuza members and closed it without saying a word. He knew he was being defensive on account of Shiki and on the verge of making a stand for things Izaya did not even remotely accept or even condone. The flow of the conversation drifted away from him as it occurred to him that in those private rooms he had just pictured, Shiki would have been very much at home.

“-saranghe! Because it sounds alike!”

“Yeah, get that on a shirt too.”
Izaya blinked. He had no idea what they were talking about. Fortunately he did not have to figure it out as Kyung was again all-bouncy.

“Izaya, I have a gift for you! You’ll see it when we get there!”

Izaya was too upset to even pay much attention. But Shizuo watched him very closely. Somewhere along the line it had dawned on him that there were some things that were out of bounds for him to say but that Izaya accepted- reluctantly but still- from Kyung. In fact, Shizuo had never seen anyone come this close to criticizing Shiki to Izaya’s face. Part of it was the lack of guile with which Kyung approached all things. Then there was probably the fact that Kyung’s very intimate knowledge of gangster outfits from the inside gave his opinion weight even down to the self-assumed hypocrisy. On top of which, for all of Kyung’s blatant declarations of love- or maybe because of them- Izaya did not even view him as a pretender in what was shaping up to be a convoluted love square of sorts.

As the limousine entered Tokyo and smoothly made its way to backwater regions within the metropolis, Shizuo sipped more sweet strawberry and wondered if Izaya’s issues with being receptive to ‘love’, however Izaya defined it, gave Kyung a direct line to Izaya’s considerations. By dismissing virtually all affection toward him as misguided, Izaya was already conditioned to disregard Kyung’s extreme love and focus on virtually anything that Kyung threw his way.

Ironically enough, Kyung was not even remotely a rival as far as Izaya was concerned. And yet his entire life experience made any points he made against Shiki resonate with Izaya. Shizuo did not enjoy seeing Izaya going through what was so obviously emotional strain- at least obviously so to Shizuo, in no time Izaya was back to almost flawless banter into which Kyung jumped head first, as he would- but he did not terribly mind the reasons behind it.

In a limousine with two plotters whose styles differed radically yet were as terrifying, in their unique ways, Shizuo was the one more in tune with what precisely what going on. Shizuo kept it to himself. As he would.
“Hon what?”

Akabayashi noticed right away that Shiki was restless. Having decided to pick up at the airport, which was not quite as per usual, they were now traveling on the limousine straight to Tokyo. It was a long enough commute to make for a fairly detailed briefing of the Awakusu’s new Korean connections. Shiki listened in quiet abstraction and only now emerged to make this one question that at least reassured Akabyashi that his protégé had been paying some attention.

“Hong. Hong Kyung. Quite a character.”

Shiki nodded, taking it on board as he filed the name for further reference. But it was going through the motions. Akabayashi was keenly aware that his was a precarious situation. Whatever bundle of complications existed between Izaya and Kyung were none of Akabayashi’s business but it was very likely to affect Shiki in one way or another. As much as Akabayashi wanted to help out Shiki, he knew that it could very well backfire.

Which was why Akabayashi had bothered to go out of his way like this. All he could reasonably do was make Shiki aware of Kyung’s existence and this could be done through a business angle. Unfortunately this also meant that at some point Kyung and Shiki would meet, at which point all bets were off. All it would take was for Kyung to casually refer to Izaya with no honorifics at all, a practice that still felt odd to Akabayashi, or even worse, for Kyung to address Izaya directly.

Issuing Izaya a warning had already been less than orthodox procedure. Akabayashi had enough instinct to know that if things between Izaya and Kyung went awry, the Hong group might very pull out of the whole deal. On the other hand, it would not at all do for Izaya to be on too intimate terms with Kyung for many reasons. Akabayashi half-regretted ever having involved Izaya in the procedure but he knew that even without the interpretation job, Kyung would contact Izaya and by default Izaya’s connection to the Awakusu would land them in essentially the same situation.

In fact, it had crossed Akabyashi’s mind that the Awakusu had been picked almost exclusively based on its relation to Izaya. Kyung had much to win from the deal but he could have picked another group. And Akabyashi was counting on the Hong group’s support to shift the balance of power within the Awakusu toward himself.
All things considered, Akabayashi was greatly relieved when Shiki directed the limousine to stop at Izaya’s place. Let Izaya debrief Shiki on the insanity that was Hong Kyung.

By the time the limousine came to a stop in a quiet street just on the outskirts of a busy area- one of those pockets of quiet in which Tokyo held itself still, almost out of suspicious wariness- Izaya had already refocused on the present.

“Where are we?”

“We have arrived!”

Kyung gesticulated. Before Izaya could quite get a grip on what was happening, the door closest to him swung open and a familiar and most unexpected face appeared.

“Sakurai-san?! Just what is going on?”

Sakurai granted him a toothy grin. For a second it seemed as if he was about to help Izaya out of the limousine.

“Orihara-sama, it’s okay. Us guys have checked. This, Kyu…Kyu-san is okay.”

Izaya stepped out of the limousine and turned to Shizuo who exited behind him as if for an explanation that of course did not happen. Sakurai and Kyung, apparently on the best of terms, guided Izaya and Shizuo to a nondescript two story building. With some flair, Kyung activated a small panel that was cleverly hidden, input a code to open what proved to be a very sturdy metallic door and led them all to a tiny hall. A flight of stairs followed, down a bare basement whose only feature was a massive safe-like door. Izaya whistled despite himself.

“What is this, ford Knox?”

Kyung beamed but kept up the enigmatic silence. Another code was input and the circular door swung open to reveal a brightly lit passage going down in a series of brand new metallic flights of stairs. By now Izaya was curious beyond belief. He already knew there was more to Tokyo than its
surface, that in a very literal sense there was a whole underground city quietly sprawled miles away
from concrete skies. But this was on a whole new level.

Kyung skipped down, followed by Sakurai, then Izaya, Shizuo and then a few of Kyung’s men.
Eventually they reached what seemed to be the bottom level and were confronted with another door
worthy of a vault. Kyung input the code and with a flurry swung it open.

“Behold!”

Izaya stepped inside cautiously but was soon enough staring around with his mouth slightly ajar. It
was a vast apartment with domed roofing and furnished very much like Izaya’s own apartment. The
black sofas were very alike but scaled down a bit and there was all sort of odd equipment Izaya had
not even seen.

“It’s a bunker…?”

Kyung swung his arms above his head for some reason. Or no reason at all, Izaya could not tell.

“Precisely! It can is designed to sustain a nuclear holocaust. There’s more!”

And indeed, there was. The apartment was connected to a series of rooms. A vast pantry (“I know
you’re not into canned stuff but this is survival we’re talking about!), a piece of machinery that
recycled urine into water (“It’s like, great! The science of it!), a small greenhouse (“These here lights,
you see, are like sunlight) along with a sizeable amount of seeds, a surveillance room (“Not working
now!), an exercise room (“Must stay fit!”), generators (“ Entirely off the grid, self-sufficiency is the
way to go”), an internet room (“It works as long as there is an internet. Can be tracked, though),
landline phones (“It’s like, going primitive here!”) and much more, until Izaya’s mind was reeling
from the overload and partially from Kyung’s delivery.

“Okay, I’ve got to ask, how did this even come about?”

They had all retreated to the main room.

“I stumbled on some survivalists in the States and thought to myself, bunkers would so sell in Korea!
You know, with everyone being so paranoid over Joseon and the nukes. So I talked to the right
people and had a few made in Seoul. They already have large one, state-built for the masses. But no
way mister CEO wants to bunk down with mister plumber from down the street.”

“That’s…ingenious. But how do you even manage to build these in cities where the subway is everywhere?”

“That’s the challenge. You do need permits and it’s a matter of picking the right spot.”

“Is it even legal? To build something this big underground?”

“Somewhat. They’re easier to build in rural areas, usually, so I managed to sell two to some of the richer suckers. One for Seoul and another for their hometowns.”

Izaya chuckled.

“And are you trying to sell this one to me?”

Kyung’s look of utter mortification was worth a picture. Before he could reply, Sakurai chimed in.

“It’s a gift, Orihara-sama. Us guys already checked it and it’s solid.”

Izaya had almost forgotten all about Sakurai’s mysterious role in all this.

“And how did you even become involved, Sakurai-san? If I may ask?”

“Kyu-san called us up and trained the boys in some body-guarding moves. Real nice of him. Then told us about this here place and let us check it out in advance. To see if it’s safe.”

Sakurai could hardly contain his pride. When Kyung had first contacted him, Sakurai had been very wary. He agreed to meet more to find out if this non-Chinese fellow was indeed not a danger to Izaya. As it turned out, Kyung wanted to share some tips he had picked up from the presidential security detail in South Korea. Sakurai knew professional security when he saw it and had been extremely impressed. The fact that it employed some borderline suicidal tactics—such as identifying the direction of a shot and jumping to intersect the bullet like moving human shields—only added to
Sakurai’s appreciation. That he had been him, Sakurai, to be privy to such wonderful methods just as the Izaya Unit was coming of age, only bolstered his sense of accomplishment. It was a great thing that Matsumoto had been shipped off to Hokkaido at this crucial time.

“Surely you don’t expect me to just take ownership of this place?”

Sakurai nodded. He had been sad that no koi pond could be made to fit inside the bunker but he supposed some sacrifice was to be expected.

“Sure do. We can’t protect Orihara-sama from bombs, missiles, wars and all that. This is the perfect place.”

“What wars…?”

“The ones you’ll start.”

This was Shizuo’s tease. Izaya had a pointed reply but did not get around to it because Sakurai was on a roll.

“Just wars in general. Like, there was that big war, right? Might be another. Bunker is a good thing to have. And then there’s the crazies in Korea. No offense, Kyu-san.”

“None taken~”

Izaya sighed.

“So if World War III breaks, I’m supposed to take refuge here?”

“Don’t forget the possibility of a zombie apocalypse.”

For once Kyung spoke with perfect seriousness.
“A zombie apocalypse. Just in case zombies become a thing?”

“Totally! In the states, people are really into zombies. But I didn’t pay much attention to it. Then I watched Train to Busan.* Train to Pusan? How do you say it again…”

“‘Busan.’”

“Thanks, Kim-shi! Yes, Train to Busan. Anyway, that movie is all about zombies and it made me think.”

“I’m sure it did.”

Izaya was not entirely sure if Kyung fell somewhere along the gradients of what he thought as the Erika Disconnect From Reality scale. It would not entirely surprise if Kyung had been impressed enough by this movie to speculate about the possibility of zombies being real.

“Oh and these have in-built anti-earthquake technology. Figured that’d be very important in Tokyo bunker.”

“Are you selling others here?”

“This one is unique! And it’ll stay that way.”

“I guess it’s all real estate, in a sense.”

“So it is. Oh, I know! Note to self, ‘post-apocalyptic themed gulf course’.”

Kyung diligently typed down this highly important note on his phone.

“Because only the end of the world as we know it can possibly make gulf even remotely less dull?”
Kyung brimmed with happiness.

“‘Izaya, I’m so glad you understand!’”

Sakurai coughed. As much as he approved of Kyung’s helpful ways, he did not exactly approve of being so disrespectful.

“That’s ‘Orihara-sama’. That’s the proper way of addressing Orihara-sama.”

Izaya gesticulated in a flailing motion that had Shizuo quietly chucking.

“No, it’s not. Please, do not call me that. And you too, Sakurai-san…this ‘-sama’ business is just so stuffy.”

This was obviously a lost battle but the last thing Izaya was more people to join the ‘Orihara-sama’ train. It never failed to be cringe worthy.

For once Kyung ignored Izaya altogether and focused on Sakurai to the exclusion of everyone else.

“I love that kind of respect and devotion! It’s so cool since it comes from the heart!”

“Good thing you know.”

Kyung swung back to Izaya and bowed.

“Ohara-nim!”

Izaya sighed anew. Sakurai frowned.

“Huh? Oh, it’s the Chinese talk,”
There was only so much insanity Izaya could take. He now got up to make a point and walked over to Sakurai, having realized that physical proximity tended to make foot soldiers stand to attention.

“For what I hope is the last time, it’s not Chinese, it’s Korean. And Kyung, drop the highfaluting honorific before I start calling you ‘uncle’.”

Kyung gasped.

“So sorry! But you know, Wang-shi there is Chinese!”

Kyung pointed to one of his men. Sakurai grinned after putting on a dutifully contrite face over Izaya’s scolding.

“I knew there were Chinese folk involved!”

As it came to happen, Izaya had no other choice but to turn to Shizuo for some sanity. Which was precisely the way Shizuo wanted.

“You’re becoming, what they call, a man of the world.”

Izaya rolled his eyes in not entirely genuine annoyance. He ended up cracking into a grin.

“More like Alice in Wonderland. This is how deep the rabbit hole goes!”

It was a private joke that Shizuo did not quite get. But he could laugh with Izaya at it. And that was already precious.
This movie was released in 2016 and thus is another anachronism.
Chapter 53

“I’m afraid Izaya is not here.”

Namie announced with typical noncommittal from the threshold of the apartment. Shiki kept himself from frowning but it took some effort. He should have called ahead of time to make sure Izaya would be home but he wanted to surprise him. There was something very charming to Izaya’s delight and doubly so when it flowed from a genuine place. Catching Izaya unawares often had that effect.

“I see. Any idea when he’ll be back?”

Namie gave him a quasi-shrug.

“This is Izaya we’re talking about. He’ll be back, eventually.”

Shiki considered his options.

“I’ll wait for him, if it’s convenient.”

Odds are it was not but Shiki would take his chances. Namie invited him with the typical polite motions that were very much a surface veneer. Namie was not Izaya’s right hand woman simply for her skills and intelligence. The snarky attitude surely played a part. Usually Shiki did not mind it but today he found it rather grating.

“By all means. But he may take his own sweet time.”

Shiki took his habitual seat on one of the sleek, black sofas and soon enough a cup of fragrant tea appeared in front of him. Namie returned to her desk where she proceeded to fasten her attention to a laptop and type away in a very fast clattering that did much to grate Shiki. What Shiki did not notice was Namie sending Izaya a message to the effect that Shiki had dropped by. To her surprise, the message could not be delivered.

Impatience lengthened each moment. Shiki tried to distract himself with an attentive study of Izaya’s
vast living room. It had impressed him as rather impersonal from the very start, perhaps because it doubled as a working space. But the altar, discreet but solid as a dark presence, the newly installed treadmill reminded Shiki anew of a certain nuance. His gaze met the impressive ceiling to floor wall of books to find the cat leisurely flopped along the top shelf. Shiki wondered if he could pick up a title but it annoyed him acutely that he would have to ask Namie’s permission to do so.

It was a very minor detail but revealing perhaps for its being so deeply enmeshed in daily life. That in Izaya’s absence Shiki had to defer to Namie struck him as a personal grievance. At her desk, mug of tea cozily placed by the laptop, Namie was in her element and very much at home. Shiki felt like the visit.

At least Namie was not into small talk, Shiki was not in mood for it. He half expected her to announce that smoking was off limits when he produced a cigarette but the mandatory ashtray materialized in front of him promptly. Which Shiki appreciated but at the same time found rather disturbing. It meant that Namie was keeping an eye on him even as she pored over the screen.

The act of smoking brought him a degree of tranquility. He could do with a shower, airplanes always left him with a lingering feeling of being unclean. As if the rarefied air brought a film of dirt that adhered to his every gesture, his pristine white jacket turned a murky shade of uneasy filth. It was all in his mind but not even flying business class on a fairly short flight could undo this physical distaste he experienced.

Izaya would have an explanation. Or a few, a series of competing or complimentary hypotheses that he could present with care laced with enthusiasm. For a moment the cigarette hovered tremblingly in the air as a burst of longing shook Shiki to his core.

He could not help himself from staring at the door, willing Izaya to appear.

The first time Shiki had visited Izaya’s apartment had been shortly after Izaya dropped by Shiki’s office in what was either a feat of courage or sheer lunacy. Probably both, Shiki considered, as he took the offered seat on the sofa across from the smiling young man.

“My, Shiki-san. How wonderful to have you here. How can I be of assistance?”

The language was polite but the lilting tone hinting at mockery. Shiki deliberately ignored the question and made a show of looking around.
“That’s quite a nice place you got here.”

And Shiki meant it. He would have someone look into just how Izaya had managed to secure such a topnotch apartment in prime real estate. Izaya granted him a small bow.

“How nice. I like to think of it as ‘Orihara Izaya headquarters’.”

Izaya had brewed the tea himself and served Shiki in a pretty, traditional cup that went with the equally traditional matcha but was not something he expected a hipster to serve in his minimally furnished, spacious den. Perhaps it was something Izaya kept for the sake of his costumers.

“Headquarters of your…information business?”

Izaya gave a highly fake sigh, shoulders slinking in mock sadness.

“Shiki-san, you make it sound so shady. I run a highly respectable if still incipient business.”

Shiki took his time to remove a cigarette from a silver, old fashioned cage and noticed an ashtray placed right in front of him.

“I’m sure you do. And I gather this business of yours can be of use to me?”

Izaya’s smile curled, unseen, around his cup. The scented steam twisted it even further, his expression illusive.

“That is the idea. But I’ll need to have a specific request if I am to see just how useful I can be.”

“And if it turns out you’re not exactly useful enough to bother?”

There was no emphasis to Shiki’s words but the very softness of the question already made it a threat. Izaya put down the cup and lifted up his hands, a gesture of surrender that contradicted
everything else, including the smug glitter to oddly reddish eyes. Shiki noticed smooth palms and long, elegant fingers adorned with slim silver rings.

“Why, if it comes to that you can just cut me off and be done with me altogether. A win-win situation all around. Neh?”

The key turned on the lock was a discreet puncture in the silence. But before it had led to the door opening, the cat snapped awake and dashed from his precarious perch in one smooth bouncing blur of speed. He reached the door as Izaya stepped inside.

“Sushi! To think you care! Kitty cat is love!”

Izaya scooped up the meowing ball of fur, twirled about some, then fastened the cat to his head where he clung like a well behaved hat. Only then went to remove his shoes and noticed a pair he immediately recognized as Shiki’s. He skipped, all smiles. “Shiki-san, so sorry you had to wait.”

Izaya even managed a quasi-bow without dislocating the cat. Shiki was confused but it brought a smile to his lips.

“That’s quite alright. What are you doing, with the cat?”

“At times I wear Sushi as a hat. Do you want to wear him as well?”

Izaya seemed all too eager.

“Some other time, perhaps.”

Izaya was quite not done, though. He now spun around to Namie, the wide amicable grin full of delight.

“Namie-san, how about you? Sushi as a hat!”
Namie tapped a finger on her chin as if considering it.

“Ah yes, a small feline getting entangled in my hair sounds absolutely delightful. Sign me up, Izaya.”

Izaya pouted.

“The snark, it burns! Could it be you’re being tsundere and you really want your own cat as a hat? A cat-hat!”

Halfway through Izaya seemed to forget his faux gloom and went into bubbly mode.

“Ah yes, how can you see through people like that? Truly, your talents know no limit.”

Izaya broke apart giggling which caused Sushi to leap down from his head. Only after a few abortive attempts that resulted in more laughing was Izaya capable of speaking.

“Heh! Make sure you let me know when you’re moving, I’ll help.”

“I appreciate the feeling but that’s what moving companies are for.”

Izaya frowned slightly.

“Hey, I may not be the strong manly kind but I’m sure I can help…”

Namie granted him one her officially cold smile that was actually a form of kindness.

“Worry not. I’ll be sure to find something for you to do for me one of these days.”

And with this Namie left. Throughout this entire exchange Shiki had gone from being amused,
being vaguely irritated- he would never get used to Izaya being spoken to so freely by anyone else-
to downward disturbed.

Izaya resumed his seat across from Shiki, completely unruffled. It took Shiki a while to recover enough to speak.

“Yagiri-san is moving, I hear?”

Izaya nodded.

“Yes, she’s moving downstairs.”

One of Shiki’s eyebrows shot up.

“May I ask why?”

“Saves on the commute and it’s very reassuring to have Namie-san close at hand at all times.”

Shiki most definitely did not like this. It was irrational but the knee-jerk reaction was very real as it shot through Shiki’s nervous system. He was a heartbeat from a sarcastic remark that he managed to rein in at the very last moment. What he found himself saying instead was both unplanned and the product of much rumination.

“How about moving in with me?”

The weightiness of the question caught with Shiki as soon as he spoke but Izaya merely tilted his head slightly in mild perplexity.

“I don’t see why Namie-san would do that,”

“Izaya. Be serious. You know what I meant.”
Izaya jolted slightly at the tone in which his name was delivered. But he regained his composure almost immediately.

“It’s hardly feasible. I mean,”

Whatever Izaya meant remained unknown as the doorbell interrupted him mid-sentence. Shiki had to force himself to keep as Izaya sauntered to answer the door. The immediate reaction on Shiki’s part was to block off Izaya’s path and get him to explain precisely what ‘hardly feasible’ meant. It was irrational as Shiki already knew in advance all of Izaya’s arguments and even understood their point: mixing households was not only too intimate for Izaya, it blurred private and business lives too much. That Shiki was aware it could only damage Izaya’s career and his own, did not change anything. In a subterraneous manner it even underlined the issue by showing just how clear and flawless Izaya’s reasoning was in this regard.

Meanwhile Izaya was ushering in someone Shiki vaguely recognized as a rather high ranking person in the organized crime police division. A rather awkward situation that Izaya breezed through with quick politeness. All this barely registered with Shiki. As he took his leave, he could almost hear another Izaya, in another time, who might as well be the exact same Izaya, saying: “A win-win situation all around. Neh?”
Izaya nearly bounced on his seat. Already he had served his very best tea and did all he could to put his guest at ease and that included grooming himself to keep his excitement at bay. Receiving any member of the police force, in his own quarters, was a first in his repertoire. That it was such a high ranking member opened up all sorts of possibilities that nearly had Izaya rocking back and forth in expectation. Namie had told him that Izaya had not infrequent dealings with the police, which was not that unusual for someone with his job description, but as far as Izaya recalled this was an absolute first. And as far as Namie knew this setting was indeed entirely novel.

“Now, how can I be or service? I gather this has something to do with Hong Kyung-san?”

The slightly guilty shudder that followed fully justified Izaya’s preemptive strike. Kyung was proving to be a gift that kept on giving and presently Izaya was not even annoyed at any oddball behavior. The police chief gathered himself into a quasi-sigh and a nod.

“Thanks for getting straight to the point. Thing is, we could use some help regarding this Hong person.”

Izaya tilted his head slightly. Still within the range of what politeness entailed but veering on disconcerting. He caught the implication, that normally Izaya was not one to get straight to the point. Which was very true. Even now Izaya greatly enjoyed in managing the momentum in a conversation. One of his greatest joys in life was precisely adding expert silences and simulating ignorance at crucial points just so he could drop information at just the right place so that it gained the overwhelming import of a revelation. There was implicit cruelty in such dealings. Izaya knew as much but it was deeply rooted in the core of his being that he could never fully disentangle himself.

Perhaps it was just that as far as Izaya acted as an informant, he needs be humming with the thrill of the chase and all the only vaguely veiled background of ruthlessness it carried.


Said Suzuki squirmed ever so slightly. Izaya got the impression that the decision to consult him was more of an independent move on Suzuki-san’s part than the consensus of the organized crime department. Which explained the choice of venue and perhaps even the lack of an appointment. Suzuki himself might be unsure whether he should meet Izaya, his resolve enough to drop by in the hopes of meeting Izaya not extending to formalizing an appointment ahead of time. Izaya understood the psychology: Suzuki would probably have given up had he not found Izaya at home and even if he did along with the meeting, he could always rationalize it afterwards as its having been nothing of
a spur of the moment deal.

There was a moment of hesitation as Suzuki went through his options. Izaya covered up the silence by quietly sipping his tea. Izaya could tell the inner struggle had hit a bursting point even before Suzuki spoke.

“Look, I won’t mince words here. We’re all unsure what to think of this fellow. He dropped out of nowhere, made an alliance with the Awakusu group and all of a sudden everyone is talking about him.”

“Out of nowhere’ is perhaps too obfuscating? Hong-san hails from Korea, which is hardly ‘out of nowhere’.”

Suzuki sighed at this.

“That’s part of the problem. We already have our hands full figuring out our own criminals, let alone foreign groups…we just don’t know what to expect from this Hong.”

“And you came to me in hopes of getting information.”

A tired smile was already enough of a reply but Suzuki followed it with,

“That’s what we do when we run out of options, Orihara-kun. We turn to you for some guidance.”

Izaya pretended to be mulling this over. He eased back, traditional cup cradled elegantly on the tips of long fingers.

“You can think of the Hong group more as a zaibatsu than anything else. Most of its activities are legit even they need be retconned as such by legislation that is very favorable to such corporate outfits. Once corporations reach critical mass, the law lets them operate more or less freely. More than ‘oh the Korean mafia, what can we do!’, you should approach it as, ‘Korean zaibatsu’.”

Suzuki took some time to digest this. Izaya registered the barest of hesitations as Suzuki struggled to make up his mind. In the end Suzuki produced a sheet of paper from a briefcase and slid it across the
“Perhaps you can place the group and Kyung in relation to this?”

Izaya studied the document before him. He had heard of these before. Teams that handled organized crime made schematics about the convoluted and ever changing relation between the many groups, syndicates and umbrella-groups within the yakuza. The result was close to a genealogy tree with branches splitting off and getting absorbed into new households so that the motion could not quite be predicted. One of the most interesting things about the yakuza, and that kept Izaya so delighted with the possibilities, was precisely how the notion of stability somehow survived borderline constant change.

Syndicates grew up overnight, devouring smaller groups that in turn could find renewed power in the shift of the overall structure. Individuals flowed across division lines and reassigned alliances with the exact same promptitude they had once sworn to rivals. Deadly enemies were often on the same side and lifelong companions were split on different sides.

In a world in which loyalty had a value that was both absolute, in a sense, and almost entirely spurious, in another, relationships were in a state of flux that to Izaya was utterly fascinating.

“And it is but odds are it’ll be outdated in no time.”

Izaya studied the schematics anew. It comprised the main groups, abridging subdivisions for the same of simplicity. He focused on the Awakusu tree line. The entangled lines did little to express the true organic nature of the group but Izaya appreciated the method behind it. Shiki was neatly placed at mid-management level with an upward arrow and an interrogation point penciled over his name. Suzuki’s addition, no doubt. Izaya too had wondered why Shiki was frozen in roughly the same position for so long.
Izaya casually memorized everything before him. It was true that the dynamics of power were shifty but there was an overarching superstructure that remained if not unchanged at least coherent enough. This kind of diagram served to hint at the superstructure and as such had great value to Izaya. Namie had showed him when she first clued him on who was who but it lacked the detail and the point of view.

Izaya found it enthralling how categorizing in itself revealed much as to who did the categorizing. This grid had been conceived around potential points of friction across groups and within groups. It mattered more to the police just who was more likely to commit mass murder than who exactly called the shots. At least when it came to this particular grid, Izaya suspected there were others.

Izaya produced a pen and with a flurry added to the grid.

“Hong Kyung-san stands on par with Awakusu-san, in terms of relative authority within the Hong group. The uncles, officially, should rank around Akabayashi-san’s level. They are presently a united front and can be seen as a bundle. As for Hong-san senior, he is officially the head but his tenure is symbolic at best. Kyung-san’s advisors are mostly not yakuza-like in any way. I’d say his connections are more varied than the Awakusu’s, as is his investment portfolio.”

“That’s most unorthodox, Kyung being so young.”

Izaya nodded.

“If Hong Kyung-san was your typical gangster, odds are you wouldn’t be here. As for the Hong group itself, I suspect it holds more sway in its home ground than the Awakusu does in Korea.”

Suzuki bit his lower lip. Inwardly he bewailed any chance of having any substantial cooperation with the Korean authorities who surely must have plenty of Intel. But he knew all too well that was not an option and that his counterparts overseas faced the exact same problem when the yakuza came creeping into their territory. He leaned forward slightly as he switched to another issue that very pressing:

“What I want to know is, is Hong about to start a war?”

“With the yakuza?”
Sukuzi nodded, his expression grim.

“Yes. Every time someone new comes around, there’s the possibility of our ‘chivalrous’ fellows going all out. We do not want shootouts.”

Izaya smiled at the air quotes that accompanied ‘chivalrous’. That Izaya just so happened to be dating one such fellow did nothing to lessen his appreciation for the irony.

“Hong Kyung-san doesn’t want to start any war. He may cause some merges as the ‘Japan first’ gang feels threatened by ‘foreign folk’ and band together to thwart him but that’s about it. If a war breaks out it’ll be on the yakuza’s part.”

Suzuki relaxed visibly.

“That’s good. Can they thwart him, do you think?”

Izaya considered it.

“Not likely. Kyung-san may be a ‘foreign folk’ but they are missing the fact that he is very savvy about Japan. He speaks the language fluently and has studied his competition carefully. His legal team is topnotch and includes some of Tokyo’s best firms so he is covered on that front. Above all, he has money to spare. ‘Japan first’ is very nice but does not avail much in the face of many wons.”

A bit more squirming, a slight glancing sideways, all preparations to take a kind a gamble.

“I heard you have a personal connection to this Kyung?”

“You could say that.”

Izaya was actually very curious where this was leading but unfortunately Suzuki seemed satisfied with this admission. So much that he got up with a slight bow and effectively put an end to the meeting.
“Thank you for your help, Orihara-kun. Will you let us know if things deteriorate into an actual war?”

“Always glad to help who keep protect us from criminal elements in this our ever so dangerous society.”

This elicited a genuine laugh.

“I’m sure.”

Izaya had risen to his feet as well and stood in what passed for blandness for Izaya, which is to see, a mixture of smugness and amusement.

“Suzuki-san, if your colleagues in the violent crime division happen to come across some particularly…original, or obscure incident, could you be so kind as to let me know?”

“I’ll see what I can do. But why?”

Suzuki was puzzled.

“I have an interest in abhorrent psychology, you see.”

This came as a relief to Suzuki. He fully expected Izaya to exact something in return for the information he had provided. That Izaya was wise enough not bringing money into it did not make it any less perilous. An exchange of what bordered on insider trading of the actual illegal kind might actually prove beneficial to the force. Suzuki harbored no illusions to any rehabilitation on Izaya’s part but his job description entailed dealing with enough informants to know they were not actually blood thirsty by nature. It had long been his belief that someone like Izaya was better equipped to comprehend the perplexing murder cases that occasionally shook the city. The police force, for all its methodology, lacked the insight into the twisted minds capable of taking life with such unabashed relish.

Suzuki was even sure the criminal department would be all too grateful for Izaya’s contribution. With that said, he would rather they handled Izaya themselves. He had had too much of Izaya to last a lifetime.
Namie was amused. The situation unfolding before her had a hint of surrealism that often resulted from being around Izaya but it was also hilarious, unlike Izaya’s warped and never effective sense of humor.

Only with Izaya around could a moving in turn into a remarkable episode that was shaping up into a crisis before her very eyes. True to his word, Izaya had appeared to help with the move. He did so by dismissing the moving men and replacing them with a gang of some of Shiki’s men who were all too merry for yakuza foot soldiers. This contingent of black suited rough guys in shades met another contingent of black suited rough guys in shades, this one led by none other than Kyung.

What looked like a street brawl in the making and had passerby hurrying their tread, even by Tokyo’s standards, into a brisk jog, was in fact a coincidence as Kyung had the same idea as Izaya. The moving proper took place speedily as the two teams blended into one neat, well-oiled mechanism. Namie smiled ruefully at the sight. If there was one thing she appreciated in underlings it was their ability to do as told, to the letter, with no back talk. It was by far the best asset in low ranking yakuza.

Izaya was relegated to hanging around with Kyung as she strictly forbade him from lifting anything. Namie was busy lording over the muscle heads and giving them very precise orders as to where to place furniture and more importantly the delicate chemistry paraphernalia that was both delicate and a rare case of emotional investment on her part.

In this organized chaos of sorts, with burly men communicating in several languages and through gestures as Namie orchestrated them, Shiki arrived. It was at this point that Namie’s amusement solidified into the prospect of a crisis.

For a while Shiki stood in unblinking dismay that he managed to cover only by dint of long practice. Soon enough his men noticed him and immediately stood to attention, except for those currently hauling a pile of cardboard boxes but even these came to a perfect halt. Kyung’s men did not form ranks around him but Namie noticed the biggest and clearly very disciplined one immediately changed gears.

It was Izaya who kept the scene from becoming an awkward living tableau of sorts. He did so by greeting Shiki even as he bounced in his direction.

“Shiki-san! Your guys are doing a wonderful job, we’ll be done in no time.”
Izaya’s dazzling smile turned from Shiki to said guy with the exact same equity of charm and grace.

“I’m glad they can be of use.”

During this exchange Namie focused on Kyung. He was frowning slightly in a deep study, staring so intently at Shiki that it was less than polite. Kyung drew a most amicable smile, complete with a standard bow, as soon as Izaya introduced him as,

“Ah, I don’t believe you’ve met. This is Hong Kyung, Akabayashi-san hired me to work as a liaison between his group and the Awakusu.”

The bow deepened. Kyung produced a business card that he handed to Shiki with both hands, as etiquette required, which surprised Namie and caused Izaya’s smile to turn rueful.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Shiki-san. I am Hong Kyung, your servant.”

It might have even passed mustard as perfectly acceptable behavior if not for Kyung’s choice of wardrobe. Today he sported a glittery number that had already been commented by Izaya as being ‘too fabulous even for you’. Shiki took the card almost mechanically. He pocketed it (wondering at what ‘heir apparent’ was actually supposed to mean) and handed his own in return. Kyung took it referentially.

“I hope our cooperation will be a long and prosperous one.”

All of a sudden, it seemed to Shiki that talk of Hong had been intruding into his awareness, little by little, until it became a recurring theme. So meeting him in the flesh was not just to be expected, it was even a bit overdue. But for all of Akabayashi’s warnings, this was so outside what Shiki thought of as ‘organized crime leader’ that Shiki hardly knew how to react. Too young, too garish and now that Shiki thought about it, too fluent in Japanese.

“I’m afraid I wasn’t expecting to meet you here so I haven’t prepared anything.”

Kyung seemed genuinely upset at this. Izaya saw fit to grant him one of his warmest smiles, his voice keyed at a gentle tone not many got to hear.
“It’s alright, I’m sure Shiki-san doesn’t mind. You can send him some of that great tea! It was so delicious!”

Many things happened at once and Namie suspected only she registered them all. Namie and the ever present Kim-shi, whose attention range was wide. One, the men resumed their work. Two, Shiki’s entire body underwent a slight but very real stiffening. And three, at being addressed by Izaya in such an engaging manner, all the careful conduct Kyung had labored to present to Shiki fell apart completely.

“You like it? Ah, I was so afraid you wouldn’t care for it, I couldn’t sleep! I know it’s huge in Korea- ginseng, that is- but would you enjoy it?”

Kyung was getting so caught up in this hypothetical disaster that Namie nearly chuckled. Shiki stood in pure stupefaction. Which climbed a few notches as Izaya patted Kyung’s head.

“There, there. No need to worry about any that. Neh?”

With all the abruptness of a switch going on, Kyung swung back into his groove and could muster a nod. At this point Kyung must have remembered Shiki anew because he turned back to him with another very well accomplished bow.

“I shall send some ginseng tea your way, Shiki-san. As a token of my appreciation.”

This was very proper. Perhaps even too proper. Having already paid his respects to Akabyashi, complete with the mandatory gift exchange, Kyung did not need to extend this costly courtesy further down the hierarchy line. Shiki was still taken aback to register this, though, and also given Kyung’s surprising youth, he could not quite fully accept that he was the representative of his own highly powerful group. He knew things were changing, when Shiki himself was Kyung’s age- not too long ago as far as chronology went, but a lifetime apart when it came to the way the world worked- only middle age and up could possibly hope to hold an important role. Barring a brutal and hostile takeover in which the ruling generation was wiped out or happened to be wiped out, be it by inner or outer strife, that was. Looking at this weirdly pretty young boy and considering way he let his emotions get the best out of him, Shiki could not see him doing anything violent. In this Shiki missed the mark on Kyung entirely.

Shiki was still murmuring in reply to Kyung’s gratitude when Kyung switched languages and proceeded to talk to Izaya. It took Shiki half a heartbeat to realize they were speaking Korean. What
first impressed him was that Kyung and Izaya understood each other in this foreign idiom, whatever it was, while Shiki himself had no idea what they were saying. It was disconcerting on a level Shiki did not expect.

Throughout this entire exchange Namie had been supervising her temporary labor force with gusto while also keeping an eye on what was going on with Izaya, Shiki and Kyung. She could not help wondering if Kyung was doing it on purpose or simply being his oddball self. Either, Kyung had managed to completely disarm Shiki and neatly display how endeared to Izaya he was. Namie did not exactly understand why Izaya had taken to himself to be so protective of Kyung but the truth of the matter was, Izaya rushed to cheer him whenever he hit one of those unpredictable slumps from which he recovered with such flair it bordered on schizoid.

It was a side of Izaya she was unused to but she realized she had seen something akin to it before. This mixture of friendly with some banter but full endless resources for emotional backing was very much how Izaya interacted with the children at the cat café. She half-expected Izaya to produce band-aids if Kyung were to trip. And she suspected Kyung might trip on purpose just so Izaya could tend to him.

Namie had been surprised at finding in Kyung an agreeable but likable person. She could identify with his disgust at conventions and social constructs from bygone days that still smashed under their weight so many aspirations. The sheer power of inertia in a society that reacted to change with a thousand kinds of cruelty, from brutal dismissal to the long eroding effect of everyday petty humiliation was something Izaya saw as interesting phenomenon but to Namie, whose role in her family had been barred due in great part to her gender, it was a constant enemy. As the product of a family background in which it came down to kill or be killed, in a very literal sense, Kyung’s experience was close enough to Namie’s for her to know where he was coming from.

His angry rants against stuffy uncle might come across as another example of Kyung’s flakey ways but Namie knew all too well how grey old men could plague one’s life. As for the wholesale slaughter of siblings, Namie approved in Kyung’s case. These older brother were only uncles in the making. Getting rid of them in one fell sweep struck Namie was a stroke of genius and the proof positive that Kyung was perfectly capable of drastic measures.

Namie could not help but take up both Shiki and Kyung in her consideration. More than any personal preference on her part, what mattered was how they stood in relation to Izaya. For that reason alone, Namie was inclined to favor Kyung. That his infatuation was highly unhealthy and possibly crippling was, ultimately, none of her business. What Namie knew was that Kyung would never turn on Izaya. No amount of rejection or frustrated longing would hinder Kyung from twisting himself into a pretzel if need be for Izaya’s sake. The lack of any expectation on Kyung’s part made him a perfect ally.

Namie was sure that Shiki might care every bit as much but his personality would never allow him to
take a breakup quietly. If Shiki were to push Izaya into some veritable proof of their attachment, something Namie was fully convinced Izaya was utterly unable of providing, the matter would not be solved without a lot of damage. Assuming it could at all be solved, that was.

She glanced back at the unlikely trio after schooling two particularly burly fellows on the precise place where a sleek desk was to be mounted. Izaya had said something she had missed, whatever it was it had Kyung giggling like a kid high on helium. It went to show it took all kinds: in the wide, wide world, there was at least one single person who genuinely appreciated Izaya’s humor. Go figure.

Shiki’s expression was difficult to decipher. Until it clouded as Izaya patted Kyung’s head.
Chapter 55

The warmth that Namie registered in Izaya’s handling of Kyung was a new development. Izaya’s natural instinct was to recoil from this barrage of twisted ‘love’ with all its one-sided heaviness. It amounted to a monomania and Izaya decided to tackle it as such. This included doing research on the subject of obsessive attachments. Izaya waded through introductory level literature in the hopes of some hints.

The absolute sway he seemed to hold over Kyung terrified Izaya on an elemental level. It might very well allow him to slowly wean Kyung out of his very troubling ways but Izaya was wary of employing it for all sorts of reasons. It could very well backfire and warp an already highly warped emotion landscape. Izaya had learned the hard way that those who swore up and down to follow his orders to the letters were often very capable of completely ignoring his will. Shiki’s men had taught him this very valuable and painful lesson. Izaya vowed to take whatever conclusions he could from all encounters with human beings in their immense diversity.

At a deeper level, Izaya simply did not want to get directly interact with Kyung. That Izaya should help Kyung seemed imperative, it rested heavily on notions of duty to which Izaya was no stranger. It was yet another upshot from past actions that cascaded into the present as a burden. Izaya had impacted Kyung’s life as deeply as he had Kida’s- if not more- and as far as Izaya could tell, the overall effect was every bit as negative.

But it all played in a somewhat theoretical plane. Izaya was very willing to read on how to help Kyung but meeting in person became increasingly painful. Izaya had to push through a measure of disgust to reach out. His compassion remained in abeyance, in a dormant state from which Izaya had to actively rouse it.

As it turned out, the change in outlook took place with none of the very careful groundwork that Izaya was such a master of. Izaya had dropped by the cat café to see how some of the new cats were doing. This of course ended in his being roped into wearing ridiculous clothes for the amusement of man. He was in the process of feeding an overly chubby fellow with special diet food when he spotted Kyung.

Reflexively, Izaya looked around to find Kyung’s ever present escorts but if the infamous Kim was lurking about, he must have amazing powers of camouflage. Izaya had a moment to notice how utterly non-criminal Kyung looked. If not for the barrage of suits that usually surrounded him, Kyung was more likely to be mistaken for a model than anything else. Izaya was smiling despite himself at Kyung’s weirdly open curiosity who seemed quite impressed by the many cats milling about. Izaya nearly ducked into the staff room but in the end he figured he might as well meet Kyung. Otherwise Kyung might keep coming back.
Izaya was making his way slowly, a careful tread he had developed in order to avoid tripping on cats or stepping on tails. By the time he reached Kyung, Izaya was quite alarmed.

Kyung had huddled down and was close to tears. It took Izaya half a second to even realize that the problem seemed to be connected to a particular cat at which Kyung was staring intently.

“Er, Kyun-kyun? Is everything okay?”

Kyung turned his eyes at Izaya who nearly took a step back at the misery therein. It was so much easier to simply view Kyung as a borderline cartoon-like being who bounced back into a ready smile at any and all occasions that even Izaya often found himself favoring this simplified perspective.

“Izaya! The kitty, look at him!”

Blinking, Izaya inspected the cat who was calmly grooming himself and ignoring them both. As par course.

“What about it? He looks fine to me,”

“His legs!”

Izaya got it now and had to smile.

“Please get up, you’re scaring the kids. The cat is perfectly fine, his legs are short. It’s a munchkin cat, they’re bred that way. Nothing at all wrong with him.”

Kyung got up, half reluctantly. Izaya had a weird sense of déjà vu. When it finally clicked and he realized that he had had a disturbingly similar conversation with none other than Akane, a shift took place. It was as if stunted emotional development had taken the shape of this small but ever so telling episode.

“But won’t the other cats get together and shred him to pieces? Since he’s weak and can’t climb out of reach…maybe we should put him out of his misery before they tear him limb from limb,”
Izaya wished he could dismiss this as a joke. But he knew much better. Here was how Kyung saw the world. The pathetic note in his voice was oddly moving. As creepy as it was, Izaya felt relieved that Kyung was capable of pity.

This called for Izaya’s friendliest smile and he put much effort into it.

“It’s okay, Munchkins- no originality in the name, honestly- gets along with everyone else. See that tabby there? That’s his brother and they get along swimmingly. Now let us not talk about killing kitties, okay? Everything is alright, Kyung.”

Izaya did not mean to do it but he ended up patting Kyung’s head.

“But that cat’s legs are long.”

“Munchkin cats are bred for their short legs as people like that kind of thing. But it doesn’t always work so in the same litter you’ll get long legged cats as well. The cats themselves make no distinction and don’t care.”

Kyung took this as a revelation.

“Cats are amazing, then!”

“Would you like to hold Munchkins?”

“Woah, can I?”

“Sure. Just be gentle and let him go if he squirms.”

Izaya had heard of animal therapy. It was usually used with younger children and with the mentally challenged but in this particular case, it might just do the trick. Not that Izaya trusted Kyung to handle a pet without supervision. But in this kind of setting, where Izaya himself was entrusted with the proper authority, it could do a world of good. He saw this vividly as Munchkins huddled on
It was at this point that it occurred to Izaya that he simply needed to expand Kyung’s world, little by little. He held no illusions as to redeeming Kyung altogether nor was he entirely sure that was desirable. Instead of thinking along the lines of ‘improvement’, Izaya settled on ‘development’.

After all, a human being was so much more than the sum of its manifold issues. Like virtually all breakthroughs, it came as overdue understanding but Izaya was thankful to it nonetheless.

Perhaps having Kyung around for a bit longer was not that bad a thing after all.

Shiki followed Izaya and Kyung out of the apartment. Namie had made it clear they were essentially superfluous and that she could oversee the moving procedures herself. So Izaya, after shrugging a bit sheepishly at his uselessness, decided it was time to take a break. Shiki and Kyung were invited by default, an arrangement that seemed quite agreeable to Izaya. As Namie watched them go, she wondered what would happen if she called Heiwajima and add to the upcoming chaos about to burst upon Izaya.

On the landing, that was as spacious as befit the building, Izaya ran into one of his neighbors. The American fellow whose name Shiki had never bothered learning. Izaya went into his enthusiastic mode as he impressed on the vaguely baffled man that if Kyung, a foreigner, had managed to read the Tale of Heike, then so could he.

The logic was clearly lost on the American who stood blinking awkwardly and so at a loss that he even glanced at Shiki for help. Shiki was still brewing in a conflicted state he barely understood himself.

“Oh, oh, the Heike lose!”

Izaya frowned at this.

“Don’t spoil it!”

“Oh, so sorry! It’s been around for a while now but I guess not everyone has read it!”
Izaya turned an expression full of contrition on the American. “Anyway, let’s Tale of Heike! You can do it, John-san!”

Shiki could not help but be amused by the look of borderline horror that this John-san granted Izaya along with a watery smile. Shiki was not exactly experienced in learning languages but he suspected long medieval epic poems were hardly the best way of getting into Japanese. Nor one that was all that useful, with its archaic language and bygone vocabulary. But above all that, Shiki could not help remembering Izaya asking him to recite the first lines of the poem. A rush of associations passed through Shiki’s mind and left him not quite bitter but vaguely discontent.

Izaya tried to rope John into joining him, Shiki and Kyung for snacks that Namie had prepared in his apartment but a work commitment killed in the bud what might have been a disastrously confusing event in this American’s life.

Izaya nodded in acceptance. Then something sprang to his mind.

“John-san, you’re working for a Japanese company, right? Do be careful! They will overwork one to death, literally! Did you know it’s one of the most common causes of death for young adults in this country? Overwork! If you feel they are working you too hard, do let me know!”

Izaya meant it entirely as a warning full of concern but the final bit still veered into threatening territory. Shiki imagined Izaya up and dropping by the bosses of this company and blackmailing them into sparing poor John-san. Kyung saw fit to take this opportunity for sharing that in Korea, ‘folk also drop like flies at work! Oh, here’s my card!’”.

Izaya ushered Shiki and Kyung to his apartment. Like a dutiful host, he welcomed them with genuine warmth and ambled to the kitchen where a neat array of nigiri balls was arranged. They had been placed away from Sushi’s reach, Izaya having learned the hard way what happened when food was within the scope of feline ambition. That Kobe beef would never return.

“It’s not much but these are delicious. Namie-san made them himself!”

Shiki had no idea why Izaya presented this as if it was amazing. He was under the impression that cooking fell under Namie’s job description, the breadth of which Shiki was only beginning to fully realize.
Izaya settled on informal meal, to be served on the sleek, high chrome kitchen table. In a rare case of completely missing vital implications in the present combination of humans, Izaya was quite pleased with having both Kyung and Shiki together like this. Izaya knew very well that inviting Kyung on his own was not an option. There was no telling how much Kyung would read into such an event. Ideally, having Shizuo present might be better but given that Kyung was more or less forced to be civil to Shiki, this was workable as well.

Except it was not, in any way, and had Izaya stopped to assess the situation a more comprehensive perspective, he would have seen it immediately. But Izaya was too concerned on his dedicated mission of managing Kyung.

Kyung held his rice ball with unabashed relish before even taking a bite. He held it with both hands like something precious and fragile.

“Woah, it’s so well done! Can I ask Namie-san how she makes them? I must improve my technique, for sure!”

Izaya swung his legs on his perch by the table.

“What, you’re into cooking?”

“I try! I picked it up at Stanford,”

“Looks like you’ll make a wonderful wife.”

Shiki’s voice cut through the ebullience like freezing water. Heavily tinged with sarcasm, it carried the possibility for actual violence. Izaya frowned, alarm finally flaring up. He would have said something but Kyung preempted him.

“Oh, I see! It’s the ‘Asian machismo’ yet again! Woah, Stanford really spoiled me rotten! It was totally okay for a guy to cook there. That feeling, when being a wife is an actual insult!”

Kyung’s tone was full of bemusement. He turned a dazzling smile to Shiki, causing him to do a double take on the suddenly very uncomfortable stool. Having worked his way up the Awakusu, as opposed to having an entire organization dropped on his lap by right of birth, Shiki had done plenty of cooking back in the day. His promotion up the ladder made cooking unnecessary but Shiki found
it soothing and could in fact make delicious, traditional Japanese dishes that no-one got to see let alone taste. Somehow, Shiki felt that it was unseemly for him to get involved in the kitchen.

Izaya did sense the tension in the air but he had just come upon a point of interest and was unable to leave it unexplored.

“Speaking of Stanford, have you heard about the Stanford prison experiment?”

“It’s familiar but do tell me more!”

Kyung sank his teeth into the rice ball, all expectancy. Shiki did not share the enthusiasm. But as Izaya recounted the infamous experiment, even he grew interested.

“It was a psychological experiment to see the effects on prison on individuals and groups. Volunteers were chosen after being screened for pathologies, drug and substance abuse, and ended up with 24 healthy young men. These were and split between ‘inmates’ and ‘guards’, replicating a prison environment. Soon enough it all snowballed out of control. The ‘guards’ took a turn for the cruel. With no guidelines on how to act, other than doing as they saw fit, they slid into tyranny. Once the ‘prisoners’ rebelled, the ‘guards’ upped the ante. ‘Prisoners’ could only defecate in buckets that were hardly emptied. Mattress privileges were revoked for some ‘prisoners’ who had to sleep on the concrete floor. A number of ‘prisoners’ were forced to be naked as a means of humiliating them into submission. The experiment was discontinued six days into it. It had been planned to last for two weeks.”

“Craziness!”

Kyung sounded very chirpy. Izaya grew thoughtful, munching on a rice ball.

“It’s so interesting how the volunteers internalized their roles. As did the one running the experiment.”

“Oh, if they did ‘The Todai Experiment’ around here, there’d be no rebellion. Just make the ‘guards’ older or higher ranked in some way, and the ‘prisoners’ will go to the gallows like good obedient sensible folk would!”

Izaya was so startled at what Shiki thought was just flippancy, a characteristic that seemed
pathological in this Kyung fellow, that Shiki’s eyebrows arched upward.

“Yes, that’s an important point. The cultural element does play a role. If an experiment like that was done here, I suspect the volunteers would comply very readily to their new identities.”

A shiver ran through Izaya’s graceful frame. Kyung finished a rice ball and gesticulated with some enthusiasm Shiki thought he might pitch from the stool and slam against the floor. Which would have suited Shiki quite well.

“Want me to try? With my guys? We can run, ‘The Hong Experiment’!”

Izaya’s pensive manner switched into alertness immediately. Shiki found it very reassuring as it showed Izaya was not fooled by this silly act on Kyung’s part.

“You will do no such thing. I mean it. I admit I have a…less than healthy fascination with experiments of this type but they shouldn’t be run. There are safe psychological experiments that can be as interesting without endangering human dignity. Do you understand, Kyung?”

Kyung squirmed slightly under Izaya’s deadly serious gaze.

“Yes, Izaya. I’m sorry…I don’t always know, stuff and such,”

Shiki smiled. Kyung descending into incoherence gave him a boost that he felt slightly guilty at feeling.

“Low rank mobsters would feel compelled to get into character by definition. Besides, most of them already know all about being in jail.”

The flare of joy that Shiki experienced as Izaya digested this comment was intense.

“It’d make the entire thing null and void, come to think of it.”

Shiki noticed the slightest of hesitation in Kyung.
“I wrote a paper on tribalism in gangs when I was in Stanford. It wasn’t all that good but it touched upon individual decision making of gang members.”

It was at this point that Shiki’s worry spiked into alarm. Izaya’s solicitude could be very broadly spread out. At its barest essence, it remained almost impersonal since it sprang from a desire to treat others well. But the rapt attention and keen curiosity with which Izaya now regarded Kyung- while something Izaya could also extend to many with no necessary emotional entanglement- was full of admiration.

“That’s right, you studied anthropology, I believe? Tell me about this paper! That sounds so amazing!”

Kyung flushed, turned his nigiri on his hands, and looked thoroughly embarrassed.

“It wasn’t any good… I just picked something I knew about. There’s a lot of better research stuff out there. I’ll get you the bibliography.”

“Can’t you get me the actual paper? I’d love to read it.”

The note of longing in Izaya’s voice was genuine.

“Sure- if you really want- but don’t please do not expect anything great, I couldn’t bear to disappoint you,”

Shiki rolled his eyes. No-one noticed. This was getting utterly absurd.

“You should believe in yourself more, Kyun-Kyun.”

Izaya went on to praise the foreign university but Shiki barely heard it. What on earth was ‘Kyun-Kyun’ supposed to be, currently monopolized his attention. Izaya used to nickname people left and right, Shiki had wondered more than once if he had been nicknamed himself, but ever since his memory loss he kept to people’s actual names.
Shiki opened his mouth to make a rather snappy comment if only to float the conversation back in his direction, even if it annoyed Izaya, but Kyung preempted him completely by suddenly flailing about, grasping for air, his face a most unnatural shade of red, sweat drops blooming all over his skin. He might have flopped off the stool altogether, a development Shiki did not find at all upsetting in itself, were it not for Izaya rushing to his aid.

Izaya was about to ask Shiki for an ambulance as the fit began to subside.

Oy, Kyung?!”

Sickness of not- Shiki suspected this was all a strange act- Shiki did not appreciate the way Izaya held Kyung’s face while peering deeply into his eyes.

“Kyun-Kyun, are you alright?”

A breathy nod and,

“Yes,”

“Have some water. Slowly, easy does it.”

With great care Izaya helped Kyung swallow a bit of water. By degrees Kyung’s face bleached, going from shiny redness to a shade paler than usual.

“Thanks. Sorry about that…”

“I never mind that. What happened?”

Izaya was helping Kyung to the sofa on which Kyung flopped gracelessly, taking a seat right next to him. Legs touching, in fact. Shiki noticed it all too well from his vantage point at the kitchen table where he found himself stranded.
“Ah, I can’t handle spicy things…”

“Was it wasabi inside your nigiri?”

“Probably…”

Izaya tried to repress a giggle. It did not work.

“That must be Namie-san’s sense of humor at work. I’m so sorry. I’ll fix you some tea. I’m going to be cliché now: are you sure you’re Korean if you can’t handle spicy food at all?”

Kyung sighed deeply.

“I pride myself in being a man who can eat anything and everything under the sun. But spicy stuff just kills me.”

Before Izaya could busy himself making tea, Kyung received a call from Kim and regrettably had to retreat. Shiki waited for Kyung to leave to light a cigarette with not too steady hands. With a deliberately slow tread he walked to Izaya, almost looming over him.

“So. Are you sleeping with him?”
Chapter 56

Shiki could feel the tension nearly humming as he waited for Izaya’s reply. Shiki anticipated anger, a sense of defensive knee-jerking. Or maybe even one of Izaya’s horribly timed bursts of jollity. Without even realizing it, Shiki steeled himself for some sort of outburst.

Izaya sighed and deflated on the sofa.

“Of course not. That’s the last thing I’d do, ever.”

Shiki blinked. He was primed for an argument that for a full minute he did not even know what to say. Only he knew Izaya was telling the truth. Fortunately Izaya was too absorbed in his own thoughts to seem to notice the unnatural silence.

“Then how about not being all over the guy? He was practically drooling.”

Shiki did not quite know what to do with Izaya’s very quiet demeanor. He felt cheated of his very justified anger. Izaya nodded vaguely.

“I need to introduce Kyun-Kyun to more people. Widen his horizons so he won’t obsess over me like this.”

Shiki had to take a long drag from his cigarette.

“Izaya? How about you tell me what’s going on here? From the start, if you will.”

Something in Shiki’s tone snapped Izaya from his borderline reverie.

“It’s a very long story. To cut it short, Kyung is a childhood friend. Thanks to my influence he developed this very unhealthy attachment that I’m trying to wean him out of.”

“You had friends as a child?”
There was a hint of bitterness to Izaya’s chuckle.

“Apparently. It threw me for a loop, that’s for sure. And his personality doesn’t exactly help… Kyung is difficult to handle. Very trial and error.”

The gentle smile with which Izaya spoke did not go unnoticed.

“Do you remember him?”

“Oh, no. I’m afraid I don’t remember anything from my past.”

Shiki took some time to steady himself by smoking, slow ribbons of smoke floating about him. He could not quite picture Izaya having had childhood friends but if he gave it some thought, Izaya might very well have been very popular in school. While it was very true that Izaya when he got too excited could come across as downward disturbing, it was every bit as true that he knew how to be agreeable to the point of flawless. Dazzling peers was only a matter of wanting to turn on his very innate charm.

In a sense, it was probably a very good thing that Izaya seemed unwilling or perhaps even unable to keep up a façade of niceness. Were it otherwise, Izaya’s list of victims would have been even longer with virtually everyone not extremely attuned to read threats becoming liable to join said list.

“You do realize he wants to have sex with you, right?”

It was blatant but Shiki knew better than to expect Izaya to turn those amazing human skills of his to actual interpersonal relationships. By now Shiki knew much better. Stressing the issue seemed vitally important.

Izaya merely shrugged. He resumed the interrupted his tea preparation, his back turned to Shiki.

“Yes, I know. But rest assured it couldn’t be more one-sided.”
Shiki killed his half-smoked cigarette in one of Izaya’s delicate silver ashtrays, a new addition Izaya had bought just for Shiki. For a small eternity Shiki contemplated it. Not hyper-modern and stylized as Izaya’s taste but weighty despite a swirly design.

“And how do you expect I feel about this?”

Izaya had poured himself a cup of tea and placed another one on the table for Shiki. Izaya held his own cup with two hands and was blowing on it, having returned to the sofa. The question caused him to tilt his head slightly.

“As Akabayashi-san will tell you, Hong’s involvement with the Awakusu will benefit everyone involved. Kyung’s oddities won’t be an impediment.”

All this time Shiki had yet to take a seat. Nor did he do so now. Instead, Shiki placed himself between the low table, leaning over and effectively trapping Izaya on the sofa. Izaya blinked at this and glanced at Shiki’s arms now firmly placed as bars.

“That doesn’t answer my question. Forget about the Awakusu for a while, if you will. How do you expect me to feel about your running around with a guy who according to yourself is obsessed with you?”

“Kyung’s not dangerous. It’s not as if he’s about to jump on me.”

Shiki was not entirely sure but that was beside the point. What the point actually was became increasingly clear and becoming clearer.

“You are still not answering the question. Did you give any thought as to how I’d feel about all this?”

“I was hired to do a job. How was I to know about Kyung beforehand?”

Shiki was aware that smiling was painful but he did it anyway.

“I thought knowing such things was part of your job description. You’re supposed to know about
“You have to realize that my research was insufficient. I did not cross-reference the information.”

Shiki knew it had brought it to himself but it was still something of a stab to see that Izaya’s professional zeal was so easily triggered as opposed to other matters.

“Izaya? Can you please cut this out and tell me if you thought about me, at all, in all this?”

Shiki’s voice veered on plangent despite his best efforts. One hand let go of the sofa to trace a caress over Izaya’s cheek.

“Of course. The advantages to this alliances should also benefit you…but I’m afraid that’s not what you want to hear right now.”

“It’s not what I want to hear at all.”

A light clicked in place in Izaya’s eyes.

“Is this a matter of how it would affect your reputation? I understand that yakuza managers-

“The hell with my reputation.”

This stunned Izaya into silence. Shiki suddenly walked to the side of the table, the looming pressure over Izaya disappearing.

“What-”

Shiki spun to face Izaya who was just now scrambling out of the sofa. Whatever Izaya saw in Shiki’s
eyes froze him to standstill.

“You understand all about yakuza middle management and all the rest. I’m sure you can tell me precisely what my rung in the hierarchy entails in terms of virtually everything. You know all this, Orihara Izaya. You know so much about people you’ve barely met, about people you do not even remember but do you even bother to stop and think about what I- as a person- actually feel?”

“I try-”

“Do you? Do you, though? I tell you that I love you, but that’s apparently inconvenient to you. I tell you I’d like to live with you but that’s not ‘feasible’. ‘Feasible’! Izaya, do you even know what love is?”

Shiki meant it to bring Izaya to his senses. But he too was working under not entirely sound premises. Shiki was desperate to make a point and a part of him did want to jolt Izaya. But there was something to fighting with a loved one. A moment when getting precisely what one wanted, when one actually managed to deal damage, morphed into nothing but sorrow. The pain inflicted becomes pain received.

Izaya’s stunned expression crumbled into a vacancy that worried Shiki more than anything else in this highly upsetting day.

“You’re right…I don’t know anything about love. There’s something I lack- not just memories, I talk about ‘love’ but it’s just what I cling to in order to make up for everything that is- wrong.”

Shiki took a step in Izaya’s direction. He did not care one bit for the waxy pallor setting Izaya’s features into a blank mask, nor for the hushed defeat in his voice.

“Izaya,”

Out of nowhere, a bundle of black fur puffed up between Izaya and Shiki. It too Shiki a second to realize that it was Izaya’s cat, now all hissing and bared fangs. Shiki was trying to sidestep his way around the far too angry feline when Izaya slowly sank to the floor.

Dimly, Shiki heard the front door open. He glanced its way just in time to see Namie surveying the situation. She strode her way to the now huddled Izaya and knelt by his side. The cat kept the hissing
barrage aimed firmly at Shiki.

Surreal did not even begin to describe it. But somehow, there was still room for the shift into weird territory to deepen. Izaya got up. Namie took her place at his side, silently supportive but knowing very well it was not her place to speak. Sushi settled to a crouch.

“Namie-san, I need to talk to Shiki-san. In private.”

It took Namie only a moment of intense staring to realize Izaya meant it. She retreated, leaving the apartment without further commentary. Izaya took a deep breath. Shiki waited. Izaya petted Sushi’s head, effectively calming the cat who took to circling around Izaya. Only then did Izaya rise to his feet, straighten his spine and address Shiki:

“Haruya-san, I apologize for not noticing how much at fault I am in all this. Will you hear me out?”

Very rarely was Shiki addressed by his given name. It took him entirely by surprise. Hearing it in Izaya’s voice was strange and wonderful at the same time.

“Please do.”

Izaya nodded.

“You’re right, my ability to analyze people is extraordinary. But what do you suppose happens when I apply it? When I focus on any particular individual, or whatever entanglement they are in, I end up dissecting them into motives, purposes, flaws and contradiction. In a sense, I watch them above as so many pawns moving about the board, frantically scrambling about, falling into patterns that are so obvious to me I can almost see them but to which they are entirely blind. This is my ‘standing above others’. And it can be horrifying.”

Izaya gulped, a slight tremor in his frame. It hit Shiki in full that Izaya was absolutely terrified of himself. The darkest side of Izaya, that had the fascination of the unknown, clouded Izaya’s whole existence.

“And?”
Izaya refocused on Shiki.

“And I’d rather not do that those I care for. It’s not a conscious effort but I ended up avoiding thinking about our relationship too much. Otherwise it would have shifted to an object of study.”

“And that applies to me as well?”

Izaya granted Shiki a smile full of sadness.

“For most human beings, keeping in mind how others feel is a sign of empathy. For me, it’s ammunition. Everyone is better off when I don’t fully comprehend them.”

“You mean that you- yourself- are a double edged sword?”

“Yes. In a sense, I am defined by my job description. I chose this occupation because it fits my twisted personality so I am never not working.”

“I love you despite all that. Perhaps even because of all that.”

Izaya shook his head, slowly.

“I don’t know if I can reply in kind to that kind of you, Haruya-san.”

“But you can use my given name, so I guess that’s progress?”

Izaya seemed rather unsure.

“Can you tell me what you want from me?”

Shiki hesitated. He wanted so much that he struggled for words to frame it all. Without quite knowing what he was doing, Shiki reached into his pristine white coat’s inner pocket and produced a
jewelry box that he silently handed to Izaya.

Izaya popped it open to reveal a ring. Shiki’s nerves were on edge.

“‘Was the ring from the prince meant as an engagement ring?’”

The reference confused Shiki. Trust Izaya to slide into unpredictable weirdness. Shiki could feel his jaw clenching as he decided to ignore any strangeness and press on.

“That’s exactly what it is, an engagement ring. And before you ask, what I mean by it is an actual commitment. The ‘let’s live together as a couple’ kind.”

Izaya was still staring at the ring.

“Ah, I could so do with the Shadow Girls proving some cryptic but apt commentary to, ”

“Izaya. Back to reality, please.”

Izaya flinched and finally looked at Shiki.

“Right. Sorry, I got a bit carried away.”

Shiki waited in the incoming silence for Izaya to speak anew. But when finally Izaya made as if to do so, Shiki placed a finger to Izaya’s lips.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you give it some thought? Take your time, if you must.”

Izaya nodded.

“Alright. I’ll do that.”
Izaya made as if to return the ring.

“Keep it. I’d like you to have it.”

A part of Shiki was angry at himself, this felt like too much conceding to Izaya’s abstruse ways. But another and larger part knew that gaining time at this juncture was not just the only fair option- any choice taken under the pressure was very likely to crumble- as it gave Shiki a much better chance of succeeding.

It might be a far cry from the ideal scenario in which Izaya was so delighted he fell into Shiki’s arms but then again it was considerably better than a flat out refusal. Shiki was unsure how he would handle this latter possibility.

Izaya closed the lid and pocketed the tiny box. Shiki traced a caress over his cheek, just brushing the skin. Shiki felt that he needed to undo some of the tension that still threatened to tear apart this very fragile bond between them but he did not quite know how to do it. And Izaya being so uncharacteristically quiet did not help either.

“Allright.”

“And keep using my given name. I like it…a lot.”

There was of course the question as to how Izaya had found out said name. But that was for another time. For now Shiki would rather settle for this sense of something almost right.

“What do you think? Will it do?”

Izaya turned to Saki with an encouraging smile. He helped her to a plush, colorful chair. His care was unnecessary as she could already move properly on her own but deeply appreciated, partially for that very reason.
Saki looked around at the airy, spacious apartment spread out before her. It felt large enough to get lost in and all the more so since the furniture was minimal.

“Are you sure I can live here?”

Izaya grew animated which was always a delight to see.

“Of course! Namie-san is right across the landing and my apartment is on the floor above.”

Izaya beamed at Saki. He had settled on this solution with a feeling of its being very long overdue. As much as he would have liked Saki to move in with him, he had realized it was hardly viable. Not merely because Izaya required privacy and all the more so now that he had his computerized war room but also because Saki needed room to grow. Namie had agreed to help as well which settled the question as far as Izaya was concerned. There were plenty of matters in which Izaya’s input was bound to be less helpful than Namie’s. And while it was true that Namie hardly struck one as the warmest of characters, Izaya knew better.

This setting enabled Izaya to provide all kinds of support while also allowing Saki enough freedom to develop a stronger sense of self and self-reliance. These were issues presently very much at the front of Izaya’s thoughts.

“This is a very big place…”

“If you’d like, I can get you some screens to give it a cozy feeling. You can partition out the apartment as you like.”

Saki looked around once more. She turned the straw hat on her hands. This was quite a grand affair. The apartment was immense, although not half as big as Izaya’s, and Saki was unsure she could grow to see it as home. On the other hand, ‘home’ was no longer a place she could hold on to. If she were to find a new home, this was probably her best shot.

Saki knew that the sense of unease twisting in her belly was merely a fear of the unknown and a dread of change. At a deeper level lurked a greater shadow, that of being unworthy. As if sensing her conflict, Izaya’s smile lost its shine and grew very earnest if slightly wan. “It would put my mind at rest if you accepted.”
Saki was thinking the absurd expense this all entailed. She could never possibly pay Izaya back. But she could tell from Izaya attitude that he meant it. And while Saki was of the opinion that seeking atonement was not something Izaya need bother himself with, there were worse ways of attaining it. Not to mention having a place to call of her own was extra sweet if it came from Izaya.

So she could nod and smile back.

“I’ll give it a try.”

Izaya burst into a brilliant grin.

“Great! I’ll handle everything. Namie-san is helping me select tutors so you can catch up on your schooling. You can make the final selection, of course.”

Saki ran her fingers through the pink ribbon. Letting Izaya’s enthusiasm tide her over might be the best thing she ever did.
Izaya adjusted the focus of his binoculars. There was enough resolution to make out the profile of the shaggy, boney young man in a brand new and clearly barely used cheap suit. But this was all Izaya could see through the small window. It left out a very important component, namely, the person facing the young man.

Izaya found himself muttering his breath.

“Come on, you can do this…keep calm.”

He focused on reading lips. So intent was Izaya on deciphering what was happening and in willing the desired outcome that his fingers grew white as he gripped the binoculars with an increasingly nervous grip. He wished he had bugged the room as he first intended but had ultimately decided against.

As it was he could not see the person facing the young man, the one on which everything rested. Izaya watched with almost painful intensity. The young man eventually smiled widely, got up, bowed most enthusiastically and left. Izaya wasted no time in calling to confirm that everything had gone as planned.

“Yay! I knew he had in him!”

Izaya did a happy dance. He was standing on a deserted rooftop and free to skip about merrily.

“Woah, aren’t you a happy one!”

Izaya nearly tripped as he forced himself into a standstill. He remained entirely alone on the rooftop. He was faced with none other than his recurring hallucination. It was enough to burst his skin into pinpricks all down his spine.

“You have a wonderful sense of timing.”

The hallucination sat idly on the very ledge, kicking up his legs over the sheer drop. Seeing his own
visage in such a perilous position disturbed Izaya on a whole new level.

“I try! Ah, what exactly are you doing, though? Getting the guy a job interview is your way of making up for using him?”

It was precisely what it was but the way other! Izaya put it made everything sound useless and even silly. Izaya had arranged the interview himself and taken great pains to get the Human Capital to find about it. With the many people who owed Izaya favors it was not too difficult to seek out someone willing and capable of hiring someone as per

his request but Izaya had very much let the guy’s nerves infect him as well.

“It’s all I could think of.”

Hallucination Izaya swung backward, staring up Izaya from an upside angle that gave Izaya the absolute creeps.

“Isn’t that nice of you. It’s like you’re trying to cheat karma. Do enough nice things and you’ll balance it out! Or not. You know it won’t help any because it doesn’t change who you are.”

Izaya shivered. There was a limit to having deep- or any, for that matter- discussions with an hallucination. He forced himself to slowly make his way to the emergency stair even when every instinct was screaming at him to race his way down and away from the nagging figure that now took to tunelessly humming. The non-melody followed Izaya down every single rung.

Kida was making his way through the afternoon rush of passerby. The febrile yet orderly tide of people on the move could at times be soothing as it dissolved personal cares in a general feeling and painful as felt excluded on this mighty crowd with its many affairs, none of which coincided with his. Presently he was equidistant from these extremes, being mostly indifferent to his surroundings.

He was caught up in inner musings that it took a while to register Erika’s sonorous greeting. Almost immediately, though, he perked up and hurried to the other side of the street where she was standing with Walker.

“Hi there! You guys out on a hunt?”
Kida could tell by the backpacks and assorted bags emblazoned with anime goods logos from which poked rolled up posters that the duo had been on a shopping spree. They lost no time confirming it, most enthusiastically. Kida found he did not have to fake his smiles. There were days like this, rare, still spaced out unevenly across all the others, when Kida floated above the heavy darkness that had him so deeply encased.

Erika bounced as she asked,

“Oh, have you met Kyun-Kyun? Here he is!”

The otaku slid sideways to reveal a stranger. Kida was unsure how he had missed such a character who apparently had been there the whole time but standing a bit aside and enthralled in staring something in the distance. But he now stepped forward, a sleek figure draped in frantic pink and glittery black.

“Hello, I’m Hong Kyung. Nice to meet you! Call me Kyun-Kyun, if you will!”

With this, Kyun-Kyun, produced a business card with a kind of formality that jarred greatly with his attire. But Kida had the impression that this was a gesture Kyung did routinely, the formality with which he handed the card, holding it with the barest of fingertips of both hands, and the very precise bow speaking of long usage. Kida took the card as if in a daze.

“‘Hong group’…?”

It sounded rather important and also vaguely familiar but Kida could not quite place it. The otakus perched on nearby benches and Kida followed as did Kyung who fell on his seat with a drooping of the whole body that was weirdly dramatically.

“I know, right? So unoriginal! So the family’s name is Hong…why also call the group Hong. I was thinking of renaming it but you know how it is, ‘That’s unseemly, young master’.”

Kida had absolutely no idea but he laughed with genuine humor. There was something oddly endearing about this fellow.
“Oh, I’m Kida Masaomi, by the way. I don’t have a card,”

Kyung gestured to impress there was no need for such a thing. Kida had never felt the need to have a business card but now he wished he had one he could hand to Kyung.

“So you are! I’ve heard so much from you that I feel I’ve known for ages.”

Normally, when hearing that someone knew of him through reputation, Kida became rather wary. Not so now. But he still would rather divert the attention from him. Just in case.

“Were you buying anime stuff with Walker and Erika?”

Said Walker and Erika were too busy discussing a particular development in a favorite light novel of theirs to pay Kida and Kyung much heed. Kyung burst into a beautiful smile as he produced a box from a bag.

“I got a Godzilla figure! Woah, look at that, so true to life! It’s got the spikes down pat!”

All this was delivered in an awed tone as Kyung produced the marvel that was plastic Godzilla. Kida realized that the design on Kyung’s shirt, that he had taken to be a mere graphic, was none other than a profile depiction of Godzilla. He was more impressed by the color and cut of Kyun’s clothes as it was. So much so that he simply had to ask.

“Seems like you’re quite a fan. Did you get that custom made?”

Kyung sprang to his feet and spun around.

“I totally did! Isn’t it cool? That’s hangul, by the way. Reads, ‘Gojira’! It wouldn’t do with the Anglicized name, what with the ‘z’ and all, hangul can be tricky. But I figured it’d be different!”

Thanks to all this prancing Kida could to observe Kyung’s unique outfit in detail. The shirt, in its absolute pinkness, was shirtless and cut in such a way as to seem loose when Kyung lounged about and yet snug enough to be revealing when he moved. Kida wondered how that worked. Upon its front was the kaiju lined in black rhinestones with the cryptic inscription done in the same material.
The back had a tears arranged in the shape of Godzilla so that Kyung’s very white skin peeked through the fabric. When Kyung moved, his shoulder blades highlighted the pattern.

The trousers were black leather that Kida could tell must have cost a fortune as did the shiny pink shoes. Kida was no stranger to bizarre ensembles but for the weirdness of Kyung’s sense of style, he sensed that here was a true fashionista. Kida was perhaps, of all people Kyung had encountered thus far in Tokyo, the one who could better judge Kyung’s taste in clothing. Those who had an inkling for such things included Akabayashi, who would see Kyung’s youthful exuberance as something fun for a kid to wear; Izaya, who was too concerned with Kyung as a person to ponder too much about matters of aesthetics and who only hoped Kyung would dress decently enough not to get arrested; and Aoba, who was far too terrified of Kyung to even notice such things.

Kida was in perfect position to admire the gumption with which Kyung wore his clothes. As someone who took grooming seriously enough to notice it on others, Kida had an idea of what made the hip urbanite precisely that. One of his most unreasonable grips against Izaya was how easily the informant looked the part of the city slicker.

Not that Kida would ever consider wearing anything half as outrageous as Kyung’s outfit. Godzilla fanboying aside, the whole thing was so garish that it looked rather absurd. In fact, Kida knew that if anyone else tried to wear such a look they would indeed fall into sheer absurdity. What fascinated Kida was how Kyung managed to somehow make it all work.

“Who’s your favorite Godzilla kaiju?"

Kyung had returned to perch by Kida’s side.

“I love them all! Maybe Mothra, though! So cute, what with the butterfly wings and all.”

It occurred to Kida that half, or more, of what it took to actually be a hipster through and through was precisely this kind of disinterest for others’ opinion. Kyung might be dressed so as to attract a lot of attention but Kida could tell he dressed as he did purely because it amused him. Kida might obsess for hours on end on how to coordinate an outfit for being morbidly afraid of causing not quite the ravishing impression he craved but Kyung would never bother about any of that.

Of course, Kyung’s elegant frame and pretty face went a long way to rescuing him from looking an absolute fool. Kida was very much aware of this. He realized that he had been staring for a while, scrambling to say something but Kyung preempted him. Giving a contented sigh and sweeping his gaze along the streaming rivulets of humanity, smiling,
“Ah, Tokyo never changes. I’ve missed it!”

“Did you use to live here?”

Kida thought he might trace the faintest of accents in Kyung’s speech but it was barely there. He could not place Kyung’s nationality, though, and thought it impolite to ask.

“For a while when I was little.”

The smile softened, became thoughtful.

“We’re glad to have you here- Kyu, Kyun…”

Kida blushed despite himself as he struggled with the name Kyung giggled joyfully.

“Really, ‘Kyun-Kyun’ is fine. I know the name is very difficult for Japanese speakers. I had problems with a few Japanese names myself. Oh, I’m Korean, after a fashion.”

Kyung added this as an afterthought. Kida smiled back.

“‘After a fashion’?”

“‘This complicated! But let us talk over some food! You never know when the next meal will happen so it’s always best to eat when you can.”

Kida had no idea what this last bit meant but dinner with Kyung was deeply enjoyable. The otaku bailed on them so it was only Kyung, chattering about all and nothing, and Kida nodding and adding to the conversation when he could. There was much Kida could not even begin to comprehend, references to Kyung’s many adventures in the States, his opinion on Korean matters that Kida had never heard about; but that added to the charm.
It had been a long time since Kida met someone entirely new. Meeting new people had a particular attraction and after such a dreary hiatus of being stuck in a rut, meeting Kyung made him feel more in touch with the person he used to be.

By the time they parted ways, with plenty of waving on Kyung’s part, Kida felt better than he had in ages. He had just made a new friend.
Chapter 58

Shizuo watched the almost identical Americans. They sat on Izaya’s hyper-modern yet comfortable sofa, very prim in white shirts, straight ironed ties and neat pants. Shizuo could not tell them apart, not even through their voices that dominated as they expounded to a highly intent and vaguely smiling Izaya.

Out of politeness or in an attempt to come across as more engaging, the duo spoke in quite decent Japanese. The accent had them detach words on occasion for no reason Shizuo could understand but they were both proficient if stilted. At some point or another, they had zeroed in on Izaya as their audience and completely forgot Shizuo and Kyung. It might have something to do with the fact that Kyung laughed himself silly upon realizing the pair would not have any tea. Shizuo had to measure his strength very carefully in order to pat Kyung on the back before Kyung dissolved into his trademark giggling fits. Coming from anyone else, Shizuo would take it as playing it up for effect but he knew enough of Kyung to know it was very honest bewilderment collapsing into ill-timed hilarity. For all Shizuo knew, Kyung had picked up this awkward habit from none other than Izaya.

Shizuo now cast a glance at Kyung who was perched on a puff, slowly rocking back and forth, quite beside himself with happiness. In a sense, Kyung was one to envy. Shizuo could not quite lower his expectations to just being bursting with joy by just basking in Izaya’s presence. This was a skill that Kyung had mastered and even as Shizuo knew it was far from healthy, it must be very comforting.

Meanwhile the presentation came to an end. Shizuo read expectation in these young men’s faces who could spew so much hate in the most friendly of manners. He felt a bit sorry for them. Izaya nodded, took a sip of ginseng tea, then tilted his head as if curious.

“I see. What’s the real reason, though?”

They did not quite squirm which immediately clued in Shizuo. They were indeed a mixture of very self-assured and entirely defenseless. Shizuo wondered if they were the product of the small American towns that he knew through movies. It would explain why they could not read the danger that Izaya represented. Then again, there were many Tokyo born and raised denizens who entirely missed the point behind the affable mask which Izaya greeted so much of the world.

“The real reason…?”

Izaya took another slow sip, managing the silences with effortless grace.
“You’ve told me why your church deems homosexuality to be wrong, all very interesting points. But what’s the real reason, though? Why is it you have a problem with this particular issue to the point of marshaling so many resources into fighting it?”

Izaya put his questions in the least confrontational manner possible. He seemed genuinely interested. The duo exchanged a quick glance.

“Experiencing same-sex attraction is not a sin,”

“Wrong! That’s more ReligionSpeak. What is the real reason?”

Izaya remained ever so agreeable.

“The Church distinguishes between same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior.”

Shizuo could tell Izaya was about to get himself into one of his mischievous moods. When these descended upon Izaya, it was as if he sublimated into a sharper, keener, and considerably crueler version than his normal self. These were the moments that gave Izaya the not entirely undeserved reputation of being a monster bent on dismantling human frailties for the fun of it. Shizuo lacked the detachment to appreciate it and did not suffer from Kyung’s indiscriminate adoration so he could not put his conscience on hold as Izaya shredded some poor fellow. But in this particular case Shizuo could not help thinking the religious nutters had it coming.

“That’s good to know. Because both gentlemen here would gladly have sex with me. It is not going to happen, though, so I gather you make the fine distinction between ‘attraction’ and ‘behavior’ and this in no way at all colors how you see us all.”

Shizuo frowned. Izaya was getting too caught up. A glance at Kyung showed he was as blissful as ever.

“Hey, Izaya. Cut that out, will you? Don’t drag us into this.”

Izaya paid him no heed. In fact, it was his turn to block out Kyung and Shizuo entirely and focus on the rather terrified Americans.
“Now, if I may hazard a guess, the real reason why you are so pro-active on this matter boils down to ‘it’s icky’. Isn’t it interesting how your personal prejudices become a standard for morality if they are reinforced by religious dogma? This applies to same gender relationships as much as it does to tea.”

There was no telling how this might escalate, the Americans were already cowering and under the sway of Izaya’s magnetic predatory ways could not even budge. Shizuo put an effective end to it by getting up.

“I said cut it out, Izaya.”

Shizuo went as far as put a hand on his arm. The glitter in Izaya’s eyes disturbed him greatly. Years of handling Izaya made Shizuo know just when Izaya was about to step over a line. It seemed that was about to happen now so Shizuo dumped a pitcher of water on Izaya’s head. This broke the spell. It gave the Americans the break so they could scurry off, it snapped Izaya out of his spiral of destruction and convinced Kyung to join the exodus.

This left a glowering, entirely soaked Izaya and Shizuo having something of a standoff.

“What the hell, Shizuo!”

“Shut up. That’s my line.”

Izaya wrung his shirt, grimacing.

“What was that all about?”

“Again, that’s my line.”

Izaya’s anger fizzled off. He sighed, slumping in sudden defeat and looking so miserable Shizuo almost pitied him. Almost.

“Sorry…”
“Not enough. I know you get all ego trip, that’s part of who you are. But don’t you dare use my feelings just so you can make some twisted point to some random guys you feel like screwing over.”

Izaya flinched.

“I…sorry, you’re right. That was low, even by my standards.”

“Don’t think you can go around making as if to kiss me just for shits and giggles.”

Izaya flinched even more. For a split second, that had indeed been his intention. It would be the ultimate finishing touch to an already glorious put down and in that moment Izaya’s better nature had capsized entirely under the high of scoring one epic move.

Izaya deflated entirely as he realized Shizuo had noticed his very terrible faux pas. He collapsed on the sofa, still soaked to the bone and curled into a heaving ball. Shizuo’s fury let go when he noticed that Izaya was quietly sobbing. Knowing comfort would backfire, probably in more ways than one, Shizuo brought a bundle of towels from the bathroom that he placed by Izaya. “Here, dry up before you catch a cold and die. Thin as you are, I doubt you’ll survive a cold.”

Izaya uncurled, slowly. Soaked and distraught beyond belief, Izaya looked so pitiful that Shizuo’s heart lurched.

“I really am a horrible person…doesn’t matter how I try.”

Shizuo busied himself toweling Izaya’s head, briskly enough.

“It’s okay, you live and learn.”

Izaya needed to be guided to the bathroom. He did so with his eyes firmly on the floor. Shizuo waited with more patience than he knew he had. Izaya reemerged after a shower, still so upset his pallor was off. Shizuo had fixed a new batch of hot, strong pungent tea, a cup of which he handed to Izaya without a word.
Izaya took it both hands and only brooded for a while.

“I am very sorry. You put up with so much of my stuff, it’s a wonder you don’t just kick me into a wall.”

“Nah. I told you I’d be your brakes, right? When you’re going of the deep end, I’ll be there to reel you in.”

Izaya offered him a watery smile that wavered on his pale lips.

“Like a fish on a hook?”

“Sushizaya?”

“Hey, I’m the one with the dubious humor.”

Shizuo hated to admit it but having Izaya on regret mode like this, while scrambling for normality, had an appeal that he would rather not explore but could not help but enjoy. The price to pay for this kind of warped emotional intimacy was steep. Shizuo was aware that it was built precisely on sacrificing his most profound ambitions. As much as Shizuo would like to spin this entire episode as Izaya giving way to some latent desire for him, Shizuo was too much a realist. The whole problem was precisely Izaya’s penchant for compromising and even ruining relationships for the sake of his trippy plots.

As Shizuo studied Izaya trying his best to make things right, he realized that this crisis was a minor example of the much wider problem. It resulted in awkwardness but on a wider scale, the exact same instinct for chaos, could very seal the end of the entire city and beyond.

Whether there was some reeling in from that was uncertain.

“Ah, I must say, I am afraid I hardly fit in here.”

Kyung announced this with a brilliant smile and an utterly unconcerned attitude. Shiki tried not to let
it annoy him too much. He had invited Kyung to his abode in order to figure him out while keeping the home advantage. It came as a slight surprise when Kyung accepted the invitation promptly and appeared on time, bearing a mountain of highly expensive Korean tea that he had promised to deliver. Wearing an impeccable suit complete with a glossy yet not gaudy tie, Kyung had gone through the preliminary pleasantries, complete with plenty of bowing, and sat in very perfect posture at a low table. He had just turned a wide gaze around Shiki’s impressively adorned spacious living room.

“What do you mean?”

Shiki took some time to produce a cigarette. In a display of respect that was precisely that, a display, there were no foot soldiers present. Kyung had gone through the cleverly camouflaged metal detector and that was all the security Shiki required. Izaya could reassure him time and time again that Kyung was entirely harmless: Shiki begged to differ.

“Well, this place is very…Japonicana, if you will? It makes the Korean citizen in me somewhat wary.”

Kyung did not sound even remotely wary. Shiki was not even sure Kyung had the emotional range for such a thing. Also, ‘Japonicana’ made no sense to Shiki. It was probably more pompous American English nonsense with which youngsters liked to pepper their speech.

“I have nothing against Korea or Koreans.”

And Shiki meant it. The only Korean Shiki had issues with just so happened to be Kyung.

“That’s great to know! I was afraid I was hated.”

Shiki swallowed the very snappy retort that floated to his lips. He was treading on rather thin ice here. As much as Shiki would like to put Kyung firmly in his place, he had to consider Kyung’s insidious influence in the Awakusu. This was something Shiki needed remind himself of, increasingly so, as his patience with Kyung was growing thinner by the creepy smile.

Shiki decided to divert.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, at any rate.”
Part of Shiki’s approach included playing the gracious host. He had arranged delicate Japanese sweets of several shades of delicate color, light and subtle, served with the best macha tea. Kyung was availing himself to these with gusto. He now froze mid-action, the pink sweet unwavering in the air.

“Is this ‘ten years later, Utena-sama’ kind of setting? I am so screwed, then!”

The tirade lost Shiki entirely. He could not make any sense of it and had he known Kyung’s allusion would be very familiar to Izaya, who had alluded to the same franchise himself in Shiki’s presence, Shiki’s mood would have soured greatly. So it was perhaps fortunate that Shiki was merely puzzled.

Meanwhile Kyung took to sniffing the sweet curiously.

“It’s not poisoned, Hon-san.”

Because ‘Kyun-Kyun’ was not going to happen and Shiki was not about to struggle to pronounce a family name and thus give Kyung the advantage, he settled for something suitably respectable on the surface that still made it clear what Shiki really thought. Unlike others Shiki made no effort to hit the pronunciation as accurately as possible and adapted it into the Japanese syllabic structure in the less cumbersome manner.

Kyung nibbled at the pink sweet apparently without a hint of fear. Shiki was unsure what this talk of poison was even about. It seemed a typical was of being confrontational without quite going into a realistic setting, an approach poisoned in rhetorical balance between a banter and what one truly meant via an hypothetical scenario and while outrageous in its incidents- such as poison- was very real in terms of intention- namely, murder. Shiki had become accustomed to such subtleties through Izaya, which was not surprising, but did not give him much of a clue as to how to handle Kyung. If anything, bringing up poison after consuming a considerable portion of foodstuff struck Shiki as rather warped.

It did not occur to Shiki that his experience of talking shop with Izaya did not qualify him to mind games as much as it might otherwise have. After all, Shiki was used to being entertained by Izaya’s clever talk. Only on occasion was Shiki faced with having to actually fight his way through a battle of wits with Izaya.

“My family collaborated with the Japanese during the occupation. In the payrolls, they were addressed as ‘Hon’ family.”
This was rather uncomfortable territory on which Shiki would rather not tread.

“And do you resent me for that?”

Kyung blinked, questioningly.

“You weren’t even alive then, so no? It just goes to show there is no justice in the world. Side with brutal occupiers and get rich on top of it! Ah, karma, where are you! Oh well, such is life. These are great, do you have the recipe?”

And just like that, Kyung went from highly sensitive matters pertaining not only to the collective trauma of a nation but to the question of justice to the riveting question of how to produce confectionary.

“I’m afraid not.”

Shiki’s culinary repertoire did not include sweets but even if he had baked these he would not be able to recall the precise process at the moment. Kyung’s zany transition still had Shiki in a state of perplexity.

“Oh well, picture time.”

Kyung took quite a few of these, holding just the tips of his fingers to frame the remaining sweets. Under the sway of Kyung’s oddball talk, Shiki could not help but consider that Korea had indeed come a long way. While no history buff himself, Shiki had seen his share of footage from the Korean War, all ruin, harried soldiers caked with the dust of so many battles, a countryside gutted. Suddenly, Shiki saw Kyung in a whole new light. Thus urbane young with his sleek Samsung was very much representative of the tremendous metamorphosis Korea had undergone.

There was something very off in considering in Kyung a symbol of a country with which he felt a surprisingly tenuous connection. But it was a novel perspective and one that allowed Shiki to see him through other lenses than those of intense hostility.

Meanwhile, in apparent oblivion, Kyung split the sweet in halves, stared at its innards with great
intensity for a small eternity, sniffed it anew, wiped his fingers daintily enough and then produced his phone. “List of ingredients,”

It took Shiki a split second to realize that Kyung was indeed taking notes. Shiki did not know what to make of it. Perhaps it was Kyung’s way of showing of much of an upper hand he had that he could afford to completely ignore his host. Perhaps Kyung was just that into traditional Japanese sweets. Perhaps it was even a mixture of the two. Either way, it was so odd that Shiki did not take offense as much as feel rather lost at sea.

“Do you suppose you can replicate it?”

“Hmm…maybe! I shall give it a shot, at any rate. ‘Gambarou’ and all that! Woah, come to think of it, Japanese changes so fast in Tokyo, I probably sound so Showa by now.”

Shiki twirled his cigarette.

“Your command of the language is remarkable, though.”

Only now did Kyung leave the sweets entirely and perk up his attention.

“That is so not a compliment! It’s that thing, ‘let me say something nice about you but what I really mean that you’re an upstart greenhorn that should mind his elders’, isn’t it?”

It was, of course, precisely that. Shiki nearly dropped the cigarette. Such frankness was disarming. If fine double entendre and oblique confrontation were called for what they were, they lost plenty of their impact. Kyung seemed quite pleased with himself and granted Shiki a wide smile.

Shiki relaxed. Somehow, open hostilities could be very liberating.

“You’re right. Can’t say I am overly impressed over you.”

Kyung nodded as if this was not only to be expected but close to a natural law. He confirmed it with words shortly,
“I’m used to being disliked. It’s usually more about figuring out the reason behind it…in this case, you don’t hate me because I’m a foreigner. It’s more because I’m a spoilt brat, then? And…”

“And?”

Shiki was genuinely curious now. Would Kyung actually name the elephant in the room.

“And I’m in love with Izaya. So many reasons to hate me, so little time!”

Shiki’s jaw clenched tighter and only then did he realize it had been clenched at all. There was something profoundly annoying in this breezy nonchalance. Kyung’s speech even veered on a lilt as if he would go full-on sing-song at any moment.

“This love of yours doesn’t sound particularly serious to me.”

Shiki noticed the slightest of chances in Kyung. A shadow hovered his features then scattered out leaving him with a dreamy expression that did not bode well.

“‘Serious’, you say…why do you think I bought a whole building in Tokyo? To expand the group’s influence? Heh, as if! Sure, I’ll make a lot of money. Japan is a business opportunity because it’s floundering so bad it desperately needs foreign investment. All this ‘glorious alone’ talk is nice and all but it can so come back to bite you in the ass. As things now stand, your economy is going down the drain while across the sea Korea’s is flourishing. But this only matters to me insofar as it allows me to be closer Izaya.”

The rant started out even voiced enough but it gained animation as Kyung got more into it. Shiki had not even heard about this foray into real estate but he barely registered. He was aware that the cold pressure stealing over him was anger. Shiki flexed and relaxed his fingers, deliberately.

“And I’m an obstacle to your plans, I expect.”

Kyung tilted his head and grew puzzled, an expression Shiki was beginning to loathe.
“Not at all? Why would you be?”

Shiki aimed for barely veiled menace under the guise of sarcasm.

“Are you telling me you ‘love’ Izaya in a most pure and platonic fashion and as such fully accept our relationship?”

Kyung shrugged.

“I have no issue with you. If anything, Shiki-san is a blessing to me! If I help the Awakusu, Izaya will be happy. That’s really all I care for. As long as Izaya loves you, I bear you no ill will whatsoever.”Kyung got up, brushed his fingers over his trousers in order to erase creases that were not even there.

“Really now. You expect me to believe that?”

Another shrug, so dismissive Shiki nearly threw a cup at him.

“I can’t make you believe me but it’s the truth. Anyone who is important to Izaya is safe from me. Now, if Izaya were to change his mind, for whatever reason, I’d gladly make kimbap out of you! Heh, that’s so cliché of me, what with Korean food and whatnot.”

Shiki got up, slowly. He towered Kyung.

“I see. You may be the boss of your gang but there are some things can only be settled between men.”

Kyung’s eyes widened in comic surprise. He tried a step and nearly tripped which did not diffuse the situation but only made Shiki feel slightly ridiculous. Pushing for a borderline duel with a guy whose legs went numb from too much formal sitting. The absurdity of it all hit Shiki anew. It seemed to reach Kyung as well as he now giggled.

“It’s like a 70’s yakuza movie! Meet at sundown, pistols and all? Wait, that’s cowboys.”
“What,”

Shiki did not even know what he was about to ask and Kyung made it moot anyway by suddenly grabbing his hands and yanking them up and down.

“But thanks! I don’t get called a ‘man’ all that often! It’s usually, ‘fag’ or something like that. This is so refreshing, Shiki-san! Thanks for the food and tea, it was great chatting with you! See you soon!”

Kyung finally let go, took a step back, went for a formal full bow like the most polite young man, waved and proceeded to skip away, rather awkwardly as his legs were still a bit numb. Shiki had not yet quite recovered when Kyung stopped in front of the front door before putting on his shoes. “You know, I’m totally the Sayaka kind! But come to think of it, that didn’t end too well, now did it. Annyeonghi kyeseyo.”

As Kyung made his outrageous exit, it crossed Shiki’s mind that it was very fitting that the very last line was as likely to be an innocuous greeting as a death threat. Both would make as little and as much sense.
“Have you thought about getting some highlights done?”

Kida twirled a bang of hair.

“Wouldn’t that be too flashy?”

Kyung was busy slurping his drink through a straw like a kid would. The karaoke catered meal occupied the table entirely in a combination of greasy items, salads, appetizers. Kyung’s invitation had lifted Kida’s spirit more than he was willing to admit even to himself. For some reason- perhaps it was the overall cuteness that Kida associated with K-pop stars- Kida formed the notion that Kyung could sing. As it turned out, it was not so. Kyung’s singing was nothing short atrocious, something he was very willing to gladly concede.

Kida was greatly amused. Just hanging out like this made him realize how starving for close human contact he had been all this time. The relaxed mood, with no torturous implications at every turn seeped right into Kida’s very bones. Usually he preferred to be in a group where attention could easily be diverted from him if need be. Kida had anticipated the whole gang to have been invited and it touched him that Kyung had invited him alone.

As much as Kida enjoyed Kyung’s horrid singing, its mixture of utter lack of talent and sheer enthusiasm had him cackling the whole time, he was glad when Kyung called it quits. There was way too much food but by the looks of it Kyung would polish it off in no time. Never had Kida met such a skinny person consume such absurd amounts of food.

“Want to check out my hairdresser and see what he can do?”

“I’m pretty sure I can’t afford that.”

“No problem! I’ll pay.”

Kyun’s smile was sweet and Kida’s heart sank.
“I can’t let you pay for stuff like that…”

Kida’s gaze wandered to the small banquet on display. Thus far he had managed not to think too much about the cost but it was unavoidable now.

“Hmmm…why not? The way I look at it, I have money now so it’s fine to spend it. But who knows, in the future maybe you’ll have money and I’ll be dirt poor again. I’d hope you’d stand me a burger or two if it came to that!”

Kida found this highly unlikely to ever happen. He was extremely interested in Kyug’s past and these casual references to poverty only whetted his curiosity. But at the same time Kida was one with too many reasons for being wary of having others pry into his past to feel comfortable doing the same thing to someone else. On top of which Kida knew that a confessional tone, once entered upon, demanded a kind of reciprocity he was unwilling to commit to. His loathing for his past and the knee-jerk reluctance to divulge it were a conditioned response by now. Kida applied it to everyone whenever possible. This was all amplified by the very fact that Kida did not want to scare Kyung away. Kida would never forgive himself for jinxing a budding friendship.

“I’ll think about it.”

Kyung availed himself to a handful of fries but nibbled on them one by one. For a second Kida thought he was about to stuff them all inside his mouth.

“I wonder if I should dye my hair as well.”

Kyung puffed as his bangs and relaxed back on the upholstered seat. Kyung had rented a rather big room, Kida had first settled at a respectable distance but after much prancing on Kyung’s part they now sat quite close. As usual, Kyung’s choice of clothing was both unique and questionable. Skinny peach colored jeans and a puffy black sweater sliding to reveal the shoulders.

“Your hair is fine as it is- I think,”

Kida felt rather awkward and picked up a drink to cover it.

“Yeah? Ah, it wouldn’t work anyway. ‘Unseemly, young master’ as usual. And to think I used to have pink hair. Can’t do that these days.”
This seemed to depress Kyung for roughly two seconds. A hotdog seemed to cheer him up in record time.

“Pink? Was that for a costplay event?”

“Every day was costplay day, you could say! I was going for a movie! Utens kind of vibe. I never did turn into a car, though.”

Kida had enough exposure to diehard otaku to be able to be at ease when unknown references came his way like this.

“Natural hair looks fine on you.”

Kida fumbled, unsure of what precisely he wanted to say. He was angling for a casual approach as he so often did but at the same time he truly wished Kyung would not dye his hair or change too much.

“The best kind of hair is all black, glossy, shiny…!”

This seemed rather specific. So much so Kida wondered if Kyung meant a particular person. He was about to ask when Kyung’s phone rang. A quick conversation in a language followed, reminding Kida that Kyung hailed from a foreign land. “Ah, I’ve got to go. Got to meet the ambassador.”

Kyung scrunched his features into an expression of dejection that bordered on the comical. Kida suspected that Kyung hyped things somewhat. It was impossible to hold it against him, Kyung was already so bouncy and over the top that such dishonesty had to be expected, it was almost endearing.

“Oh well, have fun at that.”

Kida was not about to call out Kyung’s delusion. Kida had googled ‘Hong group’ only to find such a massive corporation, the net worth of which had impressed him by the sheer number of zeros alone. He had left it at that, though, and so was convinced Kyung could not possibly be connected to what amounted to an emporium.
Kyung sighed with great emphasis.

“As if…at least the food should be good but I bet it’s another old guy. He probably golfs, too…gah, not golf…! But hey, it’s a prickly job as it is so I guess I can cut him some slack.”

A knock at a door and Kim materialized with a suit bag. To Kida’s utter shock, Kyung lifted his arms and remained perfectly still as the big man proceeded to dress him in a flawless dark blue suit. During this bizarre episode Kim spoke in what Kida assumed was the same unknown language. “Kida-kun, you can keep the food. My guys will deliver it to your place. I really must go before Park-shi takes offense.”

Kida was too stunned to even consider whether it was even possible to bring that amount of food home. Kyung stood before him as a whole different person. Along with the suit came a sharper expression. He dismissed Kida with a polite nod that somehow gave Kida the impressive of unsurmountable distances between them.

Kida followed Kyung out and was not even entirely surprised that Kyung should disappear into the plush interior of a dazzlingly black limousine, the door of which was open by one of the dark suited men that were very obviously at Kyung’s beck and call.

It was in something of a daze that Kida remained on the curb long after the limousine had been assimilated into the entrails of the mutable city.

Namie knew that Izaya’s moods were usually best left to sort themselves out. This did not mean, however, that he could not do with some prompting. When his brooding did not lighten up for a whole day, she ordered him to run some errands. It was times like this, when she overstepped her boundaries as Izaya’s subordinate, that made her so essential to his emotional balance.

Izaya was very much aware of this but very often it was precisely when he was most troubled and thus more in need of her help that he grew blind to it. He felt thankful for the opportunity of leaving the apartment, at any rate.

Once out on the busy street his mental landscape did not lift from the steep depression into which he had been steadily sinking. From Shiki’s highly weighted offer, to Shizuo’s anger at him, Izaya was facing a reckoning of sorts. He felt hopelessly inept. Hood up and hands deep in his pockets, Izaya
took some solace in the early afternoon milling human tide. The sky was stained a wounded shade of pink, edged with darkening clouds and then the city lights in all their glaring glory.

Izaya noticed all external stimuli over on the most superficial of manners. He considered himself, a habit akin to worrying a scab. The horror of lacking some fundamental aspect of what made one human had achieved the status of a phobia with him. It might recede from his contemplation for a while but it recurred at intervals and each relapse left its dent.

He was abruptly snapped from somber reveries by an ever so festive voice hailing him.

“İzaya!”

Izaya forced a smile for Kyung’s sake. Running into people he knew could not be helped, metropolis or not, as long as he ended up drifting to his usual haunts. He blinked in surprise when he realized who stood right next to Kyung. Before Izaya could get as much as a word out, Celty stepped right in front of Kyung as if to shield him from Izaya. A black scythe materialized for a moment, flashing in and out of sight.

[Kyung, do you know him?!]

“Of course I do! Hello, Izaya!”

Kyung waved manically enough. Izaya was bemused. Celty swiveled her helmet from Kyung to Izaya, then back to Kyung. He could almost read her thought emblazoned on the shiny surface of the helmet.

[I don’t know what’s going on, but you better not be putting any of your trippy ideas into Kyun-Kyun’s head!]

This was not a discussion to be having in the middle of the street and so they retreated into one of the many nooks that served as urban oases of quiet.

“So, Celty, how about you tell me how you became acquainted with Kyung here?”
“Am I being demoted here…‘Kyun-Kyun’ is better, I think…but it’s still given name basis, that’s always good…”

“You’re thinking out loud, I think.”

Kyung jolted, eyes wide. He might freak out at this point but Celty was not about to be deterred from having a say.

[Izaya, explain yourself!]

“That’s my line. Where do you even know Kyung from?”

[We met at sushi class.]

The suspended fingers hovering over the PDA spoke of the ambivalence she felt as she remembered it had been Izaya who had recommended sushi class in the first place. Izaya could see it all with great clarity. It occurred to him that there was something profoundly ironical in his being able to so easily pierce through a supernatural entity’s motivations while failing horribly in processing the human relationships that touched him more closely.

Izaya decided he might as well have some fun at Celty’s expense.

“I swear not to corrupt Kyung’s ever so pure heart, worry not.”

As he expected, she misread him.

[You better not! Kyung is a sweet boy, trying his best to make delicious sushi for the girl he loves. He doesn’t need you messing up his head.]

Izaya pretended to be taking all this in. Kyung had taken to humming to himself, perhaps still processing whether he was indeed being demoted or not.

“I see. Has Kyun-Kyun told you this girl’s name, by any chance?”
“Instant promotion!”

It went to show that Kyung could zone out completely while still hearing whatever he deemed of importance to him.

“Why don’t you ask him?”

Celty never got around to that. Kyung grimaced as if in physical pain.

“Ew! Like I’d like a girl…!”

“Celty’s gaydar is off.”

[EH?! You’re gay?! Wait- is this girl- not a girl but- is it Izaya?!

Izaya chuckled. He spoke through his laughter.

“So slow on the uptake, Celty-san!”

It was with some effort that Izaya regained his composure. An idea had just illuminated him and he could not afford it going to waste by the spastic rant he knew Celty was about to unleash on him. “More importantly, you’re a friend of Kyun-Kyun’s?”

[We’re good friends!]

Izaya jumped to comment lest Kyung ruined everything by casually remarking he cared very little for Celty. He wondered how many of these sushi classes Kyung had gone to, there were only so many hours in a day but somehow he managed to squeeze it with all the scheming and corporate maneuvering. Unless there were two- or more- Kyungs, a batch of identical twin brothers all sharing
the same monomanias and posing as the same person. This was too disturbing a notion.

“Great! How about you show him around some? I’m thinking Disneyland here.”

Kyung’s smile was bright with hope.

“Will you tag along as well, Izaya?”

Izaya had not planning to do so. In fact, he came up with this plan precisely to add a degree of separation between himself and Kyung. If he could only get Kyung to develop other human interests, it would benefit everyone involved. And given Izaya’s state of mind, grasping the opportunity for doing good for someone else served as a way of minimizing his crisis. Izaya might be unable to answer Shiki’s demands but he could, and should, lift up someone who was so co-dependent from the murkiness of obsessive attachment.

But Izaya knew that Kyung was much likely to accept this outing if Izaya went and if Izaya were to fully embrace this role as mentor, of sorts, he needed to be there to keep an eye on things.

“Sure. I’ll see if Shizuo wants to come, we can make it a happy outing.”

[Disneyland? If Kyun-Kyun wants, it sounds like fun. Don’t cry!]

Kyung was indeed tearing up. Celty produced a hanky, a move both very weird and fitting, and wiped his tears.

“We’ll settle on a date later. See you.”

Izaya made his timely exit.
Heiwajima Shizuo was having a dream. He knew this to be true because the real Izaya was not this pliant nor would he kiss Shizuo with such relish, or at all, come to think of it. But it looked like Izaya and the white, sweat glistening skin felt hot to the touch. Shizuo had enough awareness to know this was a dream but not quite enough to be terribly bothered.

His cellphone wrenching him out of this vision, however, did more than bother him. Shizuo jolted awake with a raging hardon and enough anger to smash the phone with his bare hands. But the caller’s identity— that Shizuo glimpsed in the gloom as he groped for the phone— put and to this.

“Hi, Shizuo?”

Trust Izaya’s awful sense of timing. Shizuo turned on the light and sighed.

“What is it, Izaya?”

Izaya registered the terse tone even before the words registered.

“Did I catch you at a bad time? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you. I’ll call you later,”

“Wait. Don’t hang up.”

Izaya’s contrite ways had a way of appeasing Shizuo like few things did. His anger deflated on the spot but he remained every bit as aroused. To the point an idea was beginning to take shape in his mind.

“Are you sure?”

Shizuo was very, very sure.

“Yeah. What gives?”
“I was wondering if you could do me a favor?”

Shizuo could think of quite a few favors Izaya could do for him at the moment.

“Like what?”

“I’m going to Disneyland with Celty and Kyung this Saturday. Would you tag along?”

Shizuo had the smile at the naivety. He nearly suggested dropping Celty and Kyung entirely from this project.

“You mean like a babysitter?”

Izaya sighed. It should not have sounded erotic but it had Shizuo touching himself through his boxers.

“You don’t have to put it like that…I’m trying to keep it friendly and I know Kyung likes you.”

Shizuo had the moment to feel sorry for Kyung for being so firmly locked in the friendzone that chaperones were required to make sure he knew his place. Then again this expedition was being arranged for Kyung’s sake, Shizuo and Celty were just buffers.

“Sure, that’s fine with me.”

“Really? Yay! I’ll cover your ticket and give you a ride.”

Shizuo could almost see Izaya bouncing happily at another plan going swimmingly.

“Wanna do me a favor in return?”
“Shoot.”

Shizuo chuckled at the word choice. He knew that if he thought this through he would probably chicken out.

“Tell me what you’re wearing…for starters.”

“Regular pajamas. I was about to head to bed- wait, did I wake you up?”

Izaya tended to keep late hours as it was. The note of genuine concern amused Shizuo. Was not enough to detract from the mental picture of Izaya in his silky, black sleepwear that was not ‘regular’ by any stretch of the imagination.

“Something like that, yeah. But it’s okay, I was dreaming of you anyway.”

“What kind of dream?”

Shizuo could hear the frown across the line. It amused him to no end.

“Curious?”

Playing on Izaya’s curiosity was a proven means for getting his attention. From there to steering him in the direction of a desired outcome could be a short step.

But it could also fail.

“What do you expect from me here? Contrary to common belief, I’m not into dirty talk.”

This was indeed rather unexpected. Yet the majority of Shizuo’s interaction with Izaya was marked by Izaya’s often disarming lack of awareness of sex. But it was all too easy to default to the idea of Izaya as a most kinky creature full of crazy sexy talk. The contrast between dream!Izaya and the real thing was severe but did nothing to dampen Shizuo’s excitement.
“But you can listen…neh?”

Borrowing Izaya’s all-encompassing verbal tick might be taking it too far. The weighty silence meant Izaya was turning it over.

“Alright.”

Having reached this point, Shizuo hesitated. Down deep he did not expect Izaya to agree to this. He was vaguely aware that Izaya’s reasons were probably complex and perhaps not even completely connected to Shizuo but it did not even matter. He closed his eyes in order to better to focus. Deprived of sight, his sense of hearing sharpened. Shizuo thought he could hear Izaya’s even breathing on the other side of the line.

“Disneyland, huh…I’d bend you over one of those spinning cups,“

“That’s an accident waiting to happen.”

“It’s a fantasy, don’t need to worry about that.”

“Indeed. But I got to say, I thought you’d be all about ‘loving staring into each other’s eyes’.”

Shizuo had to laugh. There was something oddly reassuring in Izaya’s mockery of romance.

“Yeah…I’d save that for another time.”

“Another time? Just how many times is this supposed to happen?”

“As many as I want? Cuz it’s in my head. Unless you think it’s creepy?”

“I happen to be a firm believer in cognitive liberty.”
Shizuo picked up speed, keeping a steady tempo on his straining erection. One of the good effects of lust was that it did away with awkwardness once it reached a certain threshold.

“Woah, kinky…”

“I’d go as far as to say it is a fundamental human right. One’s ability to be free in the confines of one’s mind is fundamental to a person’s sense of self.”

The disconnection in Izaya’s commentary did register with Shizuo but in a strange way, it was just perfect. It was better than any dreamed up version of Izaya could ever be and while not at all even comparable to actually having Izaya in the flesh, was so uniquely ‘Izaya’ that it was all Shizuo needed to push him over the edge. He did so with a few grunts.

Shizuo was still catching his breath when Izaya’s voice cut through the afterglow.

“I guess this goes to show you really are attracted to males.”

Shizuo cleaned up, chuckling.

“What, you figured that now? And it’s not ‘males’, it’s ‘you’.”

“I am more interested in sexual orientation.”

“Yeah…I bet.”

Shizuo considered informing Izaya that this was another case of diversion. By framing events from his life and that of others into a larger, abstract context Izaya gained a sense of soothing distance. This was one of those Izaya skills that made for a great mastermind and an interesting person but did much damage to his personal involvement, so much so that the closer he was to someone the greater the harm done.

Shizuo opted to say nothing lest he break the spell.
“How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation, if I may ask?”

Behind the unnecessary politeness Shizuo could almost see Izaya’s curiosity revving up. And while this was not exactly the topic Shizuo wanted to cover, it could be easily steered into a better direction.

“Hmm…dunno. Never thought much about that kind of stuff.”

Izaya’s sigh amused Shizuo to no end.

“Just how little self-reflection do you have, honestly.”

“Well, as far I see it, it’s not so much that you’re a guy that matters and more than it’s you.”

“Have you been borrowing Erika’s BL stuff? Is this ‘if it’s you it’s okay’ in real life?”

“Don’t bitch about the answer when you’re the one who asked.”

A soft thump followed by Izaya’s growing animation told Shizuo that Izaya had taken to pacing.

“Fair enough. I wonder how common this phenomenon is, though? I’m used to thinking of in purely fictional terms but there seems to be evidence to the contrary…it’s very interesting. I suppose this falls under ‘environment’, in terms of determining sexual orientation?”

At this point Izaya was likely to cross the threshold into pure theory in his conversation, which made whoever he happened to be talking to mostly moot. Unless they happened to be experts- and even then- Izaya was bound to spiral into a dense monologue. Which might be fun but at the moment Shizuo had no patience.

“Can’t speak for other people, just me.”
“Oh. Right, of course. What do you think was the determining factor in your case?”

“Meeting you.”

“Do you mean if you hadn’t met me, you’d be straight?”

Izaya sounded genuinely curious. Which, all things considered, was very Izaya. If Shizuo did not watch out Izaya might just hook him to a MRE machine to check his brain states.

“I have no idea. If I hadn’t met you then I would be another person, I guess.”

The long silence that followed worried Shizuo. He was about to interrupt it when Izaya spoke.

“The perfect answer to all this would be my never existing in the first place.”

“Well, Kyung would be dead now if that were the case.”

As much as Shizuo wanted Izaya focused on talking about the two of them, he was all aware that the surest way of capturing Izaya was precisely through an exchange of thoughts, he also knew that when Izaya started to slide down a slope of gloom and doom, it was Shizuo’s priority to pull him out of it.

Shizuo suspected that this side of Izaya was something very few people got access to which all the more reason for him to help him process it.

“You think I had a positive impact on him?”

“Being alive is better than dying, don’t you think?”

Shizuo sensed Izaya gathered himself together.
“I suppose you could look it that way. Thanks, Shizuo.”

“No problem.”

Aoba was worried. Eyes glued to the pavement as he took long, fast strides almost at random. His agitation required movement as a vent. The problem, around which he could find no exit or escape, was Kyung. Over the last couple of days Aoba had brought all his powers of concentration into a sharp focus and applied them exclusively on this human riddle. This inevitably led to Izaya, which terrified Aoba all over again.

The threat was that of a conspiracy against him. Aoba was very much aware that part of the leeway he enjoyed came from the fact that Izaya had bigger fish to fry. In fact, this applied to virtually every other source of danger, to the point Aoba had wisely tuned himself to using this relative obscurity to his advantage.

It also helped that while Aoba did push with Izaya as much as he could without thus far going too far- he did so only when he felt the upper hand. Often this sense of temporary superiority proved to be a wrong assumption on Aoba’s part and thus became one more lesson learnt. So far, so good.

With Kyung, however, Aoba had been at such an absolute disadvantage from the very first that it had shaken his self-confidence. A flash of pain reminded Aoba that he was biting his nails yet again. It jolted him out of his gloomy thoughts. Aoba lifted his gaze and froze.

Right across the street, big blue letters arranged in a logo read ‘HONG’ right above a sparkly entrance. For half a second Aoba merely stared in dumb dismay. He gained his wits and prudently hid in an alley. From a slightly crooked angle that he hoped hid him from any surveillance cameras, he could see the revamped building. Transparent doors displayed a white lounge blazing in light.

Aoba could not recall this building’s former incarnation, the city was too mutable and shifted its façade as a secretive animal renewed its cells, but he was sure it had not been this sleek and bright. He was reminded of a store catering to high tech state of the art technology. Every now and then some very well dressed person floated through the doors.

Aoba’s terror was inordinate. He knew this himself. But it did nothing to assuage him. The combination of stumbling on this building just when his mind was so swamped with dread for
Kyung was enough to make him think of conspiracies. Aoba glued himself to the wall and forced himself to take big, slow breaths. Setting a headquarters in Tokyo made perfect sense from a business perspective. It was not a ploy to terrify Aoba with.

In order to better convince himself- and so as not to appear on any surveillance video- Aoba scurried down the alley. He needed to go to his own headquarters and had already lost enough time loitering about as it was.

It was part of the city’s tissue that it was possible to transverse across long distance by taking just a few shortcuts. The alleys formed their own network of byways and for those who knew how to navigate them it was a veritable city on the underside of the metropolis.

So it took a surprising short time for Aoba to leave the high rise region to the borderline abandoned zone. The sight of the usual dilapidated building eased him considerably. With that said, Aoba’s alarm began to buzz as soon as he reached the stairway without meeting any lookouts. He did not go into full alert mode because he could hear laughter and happy voices coming from the main room.

Nothing could prepare Aoba for what he found when he turned the corner.

His guys were all there. They were gathered around a new table, sitting on plush puffs, and waving flashy cell phones. New lamps were placed a bit all over, giving the place a cozy atmosphere it usually lacked. These did not disguise the black suited men lining the walls. And then, in a crescendo of inevitability, was none other than Kyung.

“Aoba-kun! How great of you to join us! We’ve been waiting for you!”

Kyung’s very presence was bad enough. His bouncy enthusiasm was worse. Worst of all was the easygoing manner in which Aoba’s guys had clearly accepted this entire situation. They turned to him with friendly smiles and welcomed him plenty but it was all skewed and wrong.

Kyung ushered Aoba to two puffs placed at enough of a distance to allow for private conversation.

“Hon-san, to what to I owe your visit?”

Aoba had reached the conclusion that simplifying the name was his best option.
“Just dropped by to say hi! I got to thinking, ‘why isn’t Aoba-kun using his phone?’ and then it hit me!”

This revelation apparently needed more prompting.

“Yes…?”

“I know what you’re thinking and I totally can relate. You were like, ‘what if this here Samsung catches on fire!’.”

This had not, of course, even crossed Aoba’s mind. He feared the phone would be traced or bugged which in hindsight was almost moot. Clearly Kyung could locate his hideout with absurd ease.

“I apologize, I did not want to take advantage of your kindness.”

This was a stretch but it was all that occurred to Aoba.

“I could give you a Samsung gift card so you could pick your own phone but even then, who is to say it won’t suddenly combust! But you know, Aoba-kun, it’s like that.”

“Like what…?”

Aoba was not entirely sure he wanted to know. But he had to ask.

“Why, like human organ traffickers. You know they exist, they are even active in Tokyo, and I’m sure they’d be delighted to get their hands on you- healthy young person and all that- but you don’t think about that when you go out into the city. It’s a matter of odds! Just as it is unlikely you’ll get nabbed, so it is unlikely that your Samsung will burn to a crisp in your pocket!”

A shiver rattled Aoba’s bones. It froze him solid for what felt like a small eternity during which Kyung kept up his very bright smile. Aoba had never seriously considered the threat of human organ trafficking but he knew he would never be entirely free of it from now on.
“Do you know anything about it, Hon-san?”

“Who, me? Nah. It’s not in my area of expertise, so to speak. Besides, that’s the kind of the thing that only works if you have a massive network of contacts, it’d never do to put up such a large scale operation in Japan. Why, these days I consult Legal all the time. Gotta make sure, you see. As a foreigner, there are authorities salivating for the right opportunity of getting rid of me. They’ll be saying I poison wells next!”

Aoba did not what to say to this. Much of it he did not even quite follow, which was becoming a terrifying pattern. In case of doubt, opt for flattery.

“I came across your new building just now. Congratulations, it looked very impressive.”

“Who knew real estate was so cheap in Tokyo! Those taxes, though…still! Why, I got this place for peanuts!”

Aoba’s fake smile froze. He felt it congealing into a painful rictus.

“This place, you say?”

“Did I forget to mention it? I bought this building.”

“You..did what?”

Kyung pouted and turned to one of his men who were still lining the wall like so many statues.

“Ijima-san, is my accent too strong? Can you follow me?”

“Perfectly, young master.”

“Oh, great. I was worried there for a sec. Let me slow them, just in case: I…bought…this…building…behold, the deed!”
And just like that Aoba produced a document from an inside pocket of his pristine jacket. Aoba was shocked into utter numbness. Kyung prattled on, put the deed away, but Aoba registered none of it. By the time he floated back to full awareness Kyung was saying, “-worry. You’re free to use this place as you always have! No need to pay me rent either. And I see your crew is enjoying their Samsung phones.”

Aoba swallowed a few times. It cleared some of the ringing in his ears.

“What do you want in return?”

“I’m floating some ideas with my guys so as to be all grassroots and all. That’s where you come in, Aoba-kun! I’ll contact you with the details later.”

Kyung got up which seemed to be the cue for his army to assemble around him. Only now did Aoba’s guys realize something weighty was going on.

“I come in, you say-”

“Ah, no time to talk now. I have a jet to catch. Seoul beckons!”

If only Kyung were to simply stay in Seoul for good. But at least he was leaving for now.

“Have a safe trip, Hon-san.”

Aoba even managed a decent enough bow.

“Sure thing. Oh, before I forget: do you want some Samsung stock? It’s pretty safe. No bursting into flames here!”

Aoba’s answer was apparently not all that important because Kyung sauntered away before he could come up with one.
“So… we just got stood up. I’m so killing Kyung!”

Izaya rolled his eyes as he flashed his phone to Shizuo who leaned in to read Kyung’s message.

“Woah, is that a dogeza smiley face?”

“Yes. Yes, it is. I can’t believe this, he’s the one who dragged us here.”

Izaya’s annoyance was childish, complete with kicking at imaginary obstacles to vent. All the more so since, strictly speaking, it was not even based on reality. Izaya was the one who had come up with this Disneyland project in the first place. Shinra’s father had descended upon Tokyo with the usual unpredictability and as a result Shinra and Celty had been swept along to some small town inn where the air was much healthier so the Disneyland party had already dwindled before Kyung bailed out at the very last moment.

“Yeah but we’re already here so we might as well have fun?”

This was the crucial moment. Shizuo was very much aware of this. Izaya was one to roll with the punches and this trip to an unknown location might be just the thing to catch his interest, even if he was presently less than pleased. But this relied entirely on Izaya’s not catching up- or not considering too much- the implications of visiting a theme park with Shizuo and no one else.

Izaya now looked around. His expression softened from clearly skeptical to bemused and even enthused. After all there were many people milling about and a fairytale castle looming in the distance, a symbol so full of resonance that Izaya nearly hopped around.

“Oh well, might as well give it a show. I got the tickets and all. But I am still so killing Kyung. Bet he is spying us from afar, too.”

Izaya added this last bit in such a casual manner that it made it all too obvious his expectations of Kyung were very low. Then it hit Shizuo that in Izaya’s world stalking was the norm.

“Nah, he probably got important stuff to do.”

Izaya shrugged, already skipping to the back of the queue.

“Shizuo, how about we borrow a wheelchair and see if we can skip to the front of the line?”

It was exactly the type of suggestion Shizuo expected from Izaya. This reassured Shizuo which in turn surprised him. Ever since losing his memory Izaya had become much more tractable on virtually all aspects but his all-consuming effort to improve as a person often cast a damper on him. As much as Shizuo would like to convince himself that there was nothing at all to like about how Izaya used to be this was not quite so. The mischief and ability to find amusement in the oddest of circumstance were all part of Izaya, a part that Shizuo missed.

“You want to steal from crippled folk?”

“‘Borrow’, I said. Not steal. And ‘crippled folk’ is most definitely rude, shame on you.”

“Yeah. Cuz stealing is, like, wrong. Got to be polite when stealing, too.”

Izaya gave him a slight frown that smoothed out almost immediately.
“And now you’re making fun of me.”

“Nah. That’s entirely your department.”

Izaya tilted his head slightly, considering Shizuo. Then he reached into Shizuo’s breast pocket, grabbed the dark glasses therein and perched them on Shizuo’s nose.

“There! Instant blindness! We only need a cane and we’re all set.”

“Maybe you can steal- I mean, ‘borrow’, a cane from a blind person.”

For a split second Shizuo panicked. It was always there, a limit that Shizuo feared to cross, when poking fun at Izaya hit an actual soft spot. But Izaya, bouncing now that he queue picked up, only giggled.

“Might as well do it properly and buy a cane.”

Upon entering the park proper, Izaya zeroed in on the spinning cups after taking a few pictures of the looming castle whose presence would be oppressive were not so charged with meaning. Before Izaya made it to the cups, he made a show of doing a headstand in order to look at the castle upside down.

“Gotta ask, what are you even doing?”

“Pulling a Utena! I don’t suppose it’s got wheels? Will I turn into a pink car next!”

By now Shizuo was thoroughly lost but it did not seem to matter because Izaya, looking mighty please with himself, had already made it back to an upright position and eying the cups.

“Spinning cups it is, huh?”

“What else! This is looking up, I got to say!”

Shizuo’s bemusement at Izaya’s bubbliness did not last. Because once Izaya got to try the wonders of spinning around in a colorful oversized cup, he took to it so much that as soon as the ride was over, he was all too eager to go at it again. Thus Shizuo found himself going over the ride thrice.

“Oh, let’s go again!”

There being a limit to all things, even indulging Izaya, Shizuo could only wave in a vague gesture while struggling to walk on a straight line to the nearest bench, the location of which was something of a blur.

“How about taking a break…”

Shizuo could quite see Izaya but he felt the flinching into alertness nonetheless.

“Sorry, here.”

With the lightest of touches Izaya guided Shizuo to the elusive bench.

“Thanks.”

“Lay down, I’ll be right back.”

Shizuo was all too glad to do as told. So much so that it took him a while to realize that the softness on which he rested his head was Izaya’s famous fur lined jacket. It had been neatly folded into a
makeshift pillow. For a while Shizuo stayed put, eyes shut in order to fight vertigo. Slowly, the world rocked itself into stillness. Just as he was beginning to worry if Izaya had not just up and left him or that something nasty might have befallen him,

“There are lines for everything here, takes forever to get anything. Here, I got you vanilla and chocolate.”

The sight of Izaya offering him a massive ice-cream cone was more endearing than it ought to be.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. If you're going for diabetes, you might as well go all the way.”

Trust Izaya to be so surprisingly sweet that Shizuo had to smile while remaining true to his snarky self. Izaya settled himself next to Shizuo, a few inches away from lap pillow territory. Shizuo decided that he might as well enjoy it for what it was.

“Heh, yeah.”

For a while there was only silence. Shizuo was about to mention how, at one point, the two of them had been just like this, in those long gone days that, somehow, seemed to become more vivid with each heartbeat but Izaya broke the spell.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t notice you were getting dizzy.”

“It’s okay.”

More than okay, Shizuo could very well endure some discomfort for this very moment but he sensed Izaya was about to go off into self-reprimand. Oddball humor was preferable by far but Shizuo knew better than to divert the conversation. Still, Izaya, ever unpredictable, went off in a direction that took Shizuo by surprise.

“About that phone call…it was unfair of me to carry on like that, I shouldn’t have done that.”

Now this came very close to entirely shattering the precious balance in which Shizuo was basking. It called for Shizuo to sit up, carefully avoiding sitting too close to Izaya.

“What happened to…what was it, ‘cognitive freedom’?”

If Izaya was sarcastic to a fault, Shizuo was not immune to some sarcasm on occasion. Quoting back Izaya’s fanciful terminology was as good a way of bringing that home as any other.

“I firmly stand by that. What one entertains in their mind is entirely up to them and trying to impinge on that goes against all that I am,”

“There’s a ‘but’ on the way.”

Izaya’s gaze had been on the passing crowds but he now turned it to Shizuo. The borderline grim seriousness therein took Shizuo aback. For all of Izaya’s dismissive manner and constant joking, when he was in earnest, he was deadly so. In fact, there were times when it was difficult for Shizuo to fully comprehend and it could all backfire horribly.

“There is, yes. As I said, I have no issues with what you choose to imagine about me- and yes, if you’re going to ask, that includes murder, torture, whatever- but I do not think I should encourage something like that call.”
“Still missing a ‘why’ in all this talk.”

Izaya took a deep breath.

“Because, in the long run, it may hurt you. I don’t want that.”

Shizuo did not expect this. Once he actually heard it, though, it became so painfully obvious that Izaya had been leading to this all along that Shizuo chuckled at his own lack of foresight.

“You’re really something else, Izaya. Don’t bother yourself with that.”

Izaya met this with a frown.

“That’s not option for me, it’s not something within my control.”

“Okay, I get that. Think of it this way, then: I can’t control my thoughts either so…yeah. Not your fault.”

At this point, a cheesy reference to Izaya’s sexy ways being most definitely Izaya’s fault occurred to Shizuo. It was discarded immediately because for good or bad, Izaya was bent on having this particular discussion. More, Shizuo could sense that Izaya had meditated on this. There had been a labor of turning matters over, moving through moral ambiguities, a weird kind of care that was a form of affection. It was also annoying as hell.

“I’m really not good at doing the right thing, it is a work in progress.”

A progress that, quite frankly, Shizuo would rather Izaya gave up on altogether. The strain, torturous going over the same ground, this fabled notion of ‘right’ did not exactly do Izaya much good. All of a sudden, Shizuo had had enough of this. There was a broader context in which Izaya’s efforts were perhaps even noble but none of them mattered at the moment. Let Izaya think himself into a morass, Shizuo would be there to drag him out of it, bodily if required.

In the end, Shizuo knew precisely what he had to do with that clarity that did away with all convoluted mess. The mood was not right, the timing less than ideal. Shizuo tossed all that to the wind.

Before Izaya could embark on exposition Shizuo did always with all further talk with a simple, light, but very real kiss. It was a mere peck, lips locked just long enough to make a point and carry a lingering sweetness of chocolate and vanilla.

“There you go, Izaya. Call that a work in progress.”
Chapter 62

Shizuo hardly knew what to expect next. He was painfully aware that whatever was to happen depended entirely on Izaya. His reaction alone would dictate much, perhaps the entire scope of their future interaction, or even if there such a thing would at all happen.

What Izaya did was slowly unfold his jacket, put it on, pull the hood over his head and hunch forward. This was all accomplished in perfect silence. Izaya might as well taken shelter behind a shield.

“Come on, don’t shut me out like this.”

Just a heartbeat ago Shizuo had been fuming, not in his trademark white fury but very much full of justified anger but only sadness remained. Being unable to establish eye contact made the distance between them mount into an insurmountable obstacle. An obstacle very much of Izaya’s design.

“At times I feel as if everyone is asking things of me that I can’t give them. It can be exhausting.”

Izaya sounded very tired indeed.

“But you’re not mad?”

The hooded head granted him a shake. “So…are we cool?”

Izaya sighed.

“I don’t know, Shizuo. I just…don’t know.”

It was at least an honest answer. Shizuo wondered if he should just it drop, somehow, and hope things would sort themselves up but he knew that was not exactly viable. Some of Izaya’s analytical ways must be rubbing off on it. Shizuo swallowed the rest of the ice-cream in one go, relishing the sudden shock of intense cold.

“Okay, let’s talk about it, then. Is this because you’re…what, pretty much a married man?”

Shizuo could feel the blinking even if he could not see it. Izaya pulled back the hood and turned a genuinely puzzled face to him.

“Wait, what?”

Shizuo crossed his arms and gritted his teeth. By all accounts, this was a conversation he would rather not at all have and he almost wished he had actual ice to chew, the diversion would be welcome.

“Aren’t you pretty much married, by the looks of it?”

Izaya remained so baffled that Shizuo would have laughed if the stakes had been less high.

“Not even remotely, I don’t even get we’re getting this from.”

Shizuo did not know what to do with this, he could either chalk it down to Izaya’s being deliberately obtuse or to one of his occasional blind spots. Unable to tell for sure, Shizuo was left with no other choice but to press forward, as queasy as it made him feel. Shizuo straightened up on his seat, unconsciously priming himself.
“What I’m trying to ask you is, are you upset because you’re in a relationship…and kissing someone else is kinda…wrong.”

For all his preparation, Shizuo could not help but trail off at the end. But Izaya’s quizzical expression brought him back. “Just so you know, I’m not about to apologize- hell, you do enough of that for the two of us and some more- just want to know how you feel about…stuff.”

‘Stuff’ was terribly lame and Shizuo kicked himself as Izaya smiled. But the smile was neutral enough. Shizuo had a long experience of Izaya’s wide range of smiles and knew when they were sharp enough to cut.

“Oh, you mean regarding Shiki-san. Odd you’d bring him up but I suppose it makes sense.”

“You ‘suppose’? What, is it one of those… ‘open’ relationships?”

It was Shizuo’s turn to be considerably at a loss. And all the more so since Izaya seemed to be giving this thought, as if he too was unsure.

“Not quite, I don’t think. But I am my own person and if I did want to pursue someone else, I believe myself to be entirely at liberty to do so.”

At this point, something quite strange happened. A series of revelations, all linked together in a tight bundle of surprises, burst upon Shizuo. He became aware that, in a sense, he probably understood Shiki much better than Izaya did, or possibly ever could. Almost simultaneously, it dawned on Shizuo that Izaya’s sense of a warped morality was not just a matter of Izaya’d overthinking everything. In a very real sense, Izaya did view ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in a radically alien way. This was not entirely new but applied to the present situation gave it an emphasis that gave Shizuo pause.

“So…you’re turning me down but that’s got nothing to do with you dating another guy?”

“That’s a way of putting it, I suppose.”

“You ‘suppose’, again! Damn, that’s kinda even worse, come to think of it…for the record, is this Shiki-san of yours okay with your ideas?”

There was a profound irony here and Shizuo was all too aware of it. Just now he had been lecturing Izaya on how to break through constricting notions of morality only to land in a situation in which Shizuo was very much mired in just that while Izaya remained entirely aloof and unperturbed. Izaya squirmed slightly. He would have given much to be able to believe that Shiki would, indeed, have to issue but he knew better. If Shiki’s most recent remonstrations and avowals had done anything, they had made it very explicit to Izaya.

“Shiki-san does not agree on this with me, no. I find it difficult to properly articulate,”

“Try, Izaya. Use normal words, please.

Izaya tilted his head slightly.

Alright. I’m talking about ‘ifs’ here. In practical terms, my feelings for Shiki-san make it pretty much impossible for anything to happen. But that’s down to how I feel, it has little to do with Shiki-san himself. Hypothetically- as in, in a ‘if’ situation- I wanted to even have sex with someone else, I’d see no reason not to. Sure, Shiki-san would not approve but that’s just the way it is.”

Shizuo, once again, did not know what to make of this. It was intensely selfish yet remarkably loyal at the same time. It also dismissed the elephant the room, namely, that Shiki was not exactly your
average boyfriend but a *yakuza* boss. When it came to possessive and violent, few could ever compare.

Shizuo exhaled very slowly. Against every single odd, he found himself immensely sorry for Shiki. It would not last, this much Shizuo knew, but for now he pitied him.

“Fair enough, I suppose…I’m not about to change how I feel about you.”

Izaya shrugged and granted him a brilliant smile. Not neutral at all but fully radiant and all the more painful for that.

“Oh well, one can always hope.”

For once, it was Shizuo who loaded his answer with a double meaning:

“Indeed.”

One could always hope many things. And Shizuo would go on hoping them. Not entirely without reason: as far as he knew, there was a fatal flaw in this whole affair and sooner or later it would break alone the fault line. Beggars not being able to choose, as the saying went, Shizuo was forced into placing his bets on an emotional meltdown in the making. So be it.

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