

THE PAPER ARCHIVE

X-MEN

Black Roses

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English fan translation

Text-only reading edition

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About this edition

This PDF compiles the current English text from The Paper Archive, including the story, afterword, and backmatter. It is an unofficial fan translation draft of X-Men 1: Black Roses (1994).

Original page references are retained for comparison with the book. PDF pagination differs from the printed edition. Illustration-only pages are omitted from this text-only edition.

Brief passages on original pages 164 and 214-216 remain explicitly marked editorial summaries, as on the website. The surrounding passages are translated directly. This edition does not silently restore or alter those passages.

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Prologue

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“Whoa. This is the first time I’ve seen a real one.”

Five or six boys had gathered beneath a railway overpass along the national highway, just short of Shin-Okubo.

It was past two in the morning. Apart from the boys, no one was passing by. Each held a penlight, illuminating something they stared at intently.

One of the boys prodded it with the tip of his light. It yielded, pushing the penlight back.

With his bleached-blond mohawk and nose piercing, he looked like any other punk. He was almost certainly still in his teens.

“He’s covered in ‘em, right down to his ass. Man, that’s something. Awesome.”

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He seemed endlessly impressed. But they could not linger. The sky would soon begin to lighten.

What lay at the boys’ feet was a human being. They nudged it with their shoes and poked it with sticks, laughing as though they were having a wonderful time.

“Hey, we’d better get out of here soon.”

“Yeah. How about we set him on fire first?”

One of the boys gave it a light kick. The man was dead. His body rolled onto its back, still retaining the warmth of living

flesh. A purple tongue lolled from his half-open mouth. His wide, clouded eyes stared up at the sky.

The corpse they had been admiring so happily belonged to a man with a tightly curled punch perm, the sort of man who looked like a yakuza.

One of the boys had probably done it: his clothes had been slashed to ribbons with a knife, leaving him half naked.

What had caught their attention were the tattoos. A magnificent ascending dragon and a celestial maiden were inked across the dead man's back and stomach, extending down over his buttocks.

Judging by his imposing build and his age, he must have ranked fairly high in the organization.

"Burning him'll stink. Just leave him. Garbage truck'll be here in the morning. It's burnable-trash day—"

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"—anyway. Hey, while we're at it, let's carve our mark into him."

A tall boy with his long hair tied back flicked open the butterfly knife he had used to slash the corpse's clothes. On the stomach exposed when the body rolled over, he began writing something in English.

"Heh heh heh. Look at you now, Mr. Yakuza."

The dead man did, indeed, appear to have been a member of a crime syndicate.

"Hey, you spelled 'power' wrong. That's an O, not an A."

"Oops. My bad. 'NEWEST POWER was here...' There."

The boys showed no trace of remorse.

“He’s dead. Nothing we can do about it. Besides, the old bastard picked the fight. So what if we killed a yakuza? It’s self-defense.”

“Yeah, right. Like you’re gonna go tell the cops.”

“These guys are trash anyway. That’s what they always say in yakuza movies.”

Apparently the man had died as a result of a fight with the boys.

They said whatever they pleased, none of them cowed by the body before them. They looked no older than high-school students, yet seemed numb to death. They belonged to a group called Newest Power, which claimed Shinjuku as its territory.

“Damn right. Okay, let’s go. Gotta report to the boss.”

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After tormenting and mutilating the corpse to their hearts’ content, the boys disappeared into Kabukicho.

Only a man staring into empty space remained.

His body, which would never move again, lay on the filthy pavement.

Every day, young people flocked to Shinjuku. More and more boys could be seen hanging around Kabukicho, drawn by the latest fashions and the promise of a good time. They seemed to move in groups, most of them teenagers: middle-school, high-school, and university students.

They came to Kabukicho looking for companions. Boys with sleek, shoulder-length hair who looked a little like celebrities would, for example, join up with middle-school girls in bodycon dresses. Black-clad girls and boys carrying skateboards would hit it off, talking excitedly about their favorite musicians.

The formation of these groups spread through Kabukicho in no time. Word traveled, reaching boys and girls in other parts of the country, until the phenomenon seemed almost a fashion in itself. For young people from provincial cities, belonging to a group in Shinjuku conferred a certain status.

Now the boys came into Shinjuku every day. Skipping school and cram school alike, they brought their friends to Kabukicho.

A party of two or three became a group of more than ten. Groups repeatedly absorbed one another and merged—

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—sometimes breaking up and disappearing altogether.

The larger the groups became, the bolder the boys grew. They swaggered through Shinjuku as though they owned it, and their mischief escalated. They were not afraid even of the yakuza, whose power was waning. One particularly popular game was to ambush a lone gangster, overwhelming him with sheer numbers.

Furious, the yakuza began hunting desperately for the delinquent boys. But the number of young people coming and going through Kabukicho kept growing, and they could neither identify the culprits nor get a clear picture of the groups themselves.

The number of young people working around the organization had also dwindled before they realized it. The disappearance of these groups at the bottom of the hierarchy meant a direct loss of income. The bosses were getting nervous.

“Little bastards think they can make fools of us! How many major groups are there? Who are their leaders? Listen up. I want every last thing you can find on them. Underestimate them because they’re kids and you’ll regret it.”

The yakuza leadership had mobilized the whole organization to investigate. Even so, they could barely get close to the truth about the boys, and could do little but stamp their feet in frustration.

The boys’ methods were, in fact, ingenious, and their respective leaders kept them remarkably well organized.

There were five major youth groups in all.

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One was Newest Power, whose members were largely over twenty and veterans of street gangs.

Then there was a group calling itself Mississippi, with close ties to motorcycle gangs.

The self-styled band of beautiful girls, Baron Rosa, was also notorious as an organization involved in the prostitution of young girls.

Club Pietro was the intellectual faction, made up chiefly of middle-school students, every one of them with an IQ of at least 160.

And finally there were the Black Roses, led by Masataka Jumonji—known as Kurusu—a boss who enjoyed overwhelming support among the young.

With Shinjuku as their stage, the groups maintained a delicate balance.

* * *

It was a dismal summer.

In Tokyo, day after day of sweltering heat above thirty-five degrees gave way to tropical nights. Even tonight, the wind blowing through the city was hot. Once dawn came, the sun would mercilessly lance the city encased in asphalt roads.

That year, the heart of the Kanto region was gripped by abnormal weather unlike anything in an ordinary year.

Even with the spread of commuter towns around Tokyo, and all the talk of increasing numbers moving out to the provinces, Tokyo's population continued to grow year after year. Throughout its overcrowded central districts, air conditioners and ventilation systems ran flat out from early morning until late at night, without a moment's rest. The heat expelled by their outdoor units only kept accumulating at street level.

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Shinjuku, the new metropolitan center, was no exception.

It was a hot day in late July, with August approaching. Once again, the entertainment districts around Shinjuku Station were overflowing with people.

The din radiated out from the station in every direction.

The area extending from either side of Shinjuku-dori to Yasukuni-dori. The long pedestrianized route south along the road from the south exit toward Yoyogi. Newly built department stores and new branches of famous brands stood in rows, surrounded by a crush of people and cars parked in the streets.

Across Yasukuni-dori, beyond Seibu-Shinjuku Station, Kabukicho spread out as it always had: Shinjuku's other face, a district of nocturnal pleasures.

While the sun was high, foot traffic there was still sparse. As night drew closer, men and women of every age, each with their own purpose, gradually gathered from seemingly nowhere.

The roar of cars overflowing the roads. The murmur of people wandering the crowded streets. Underpinned by these sounds, a muddy noise flowed through all of Shinjuku. A clamor greater even than its teeming population swirled and pooled above the district, echoing throughout the streets.

* * *

Through the window of a sluggishly moving taxi, a man watched the clusters of young people hanging around the crowded streets off Shinjuku-dori. The ash on his cigarette was just about to fall from his fingers.

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"Where in Nishi-Shinjuku, sir? Or is the west exit all right?"

The taxi driver asked his destination in a brusque, gravelly voice. The passenger managed to drop the precarious ash

into the ashtray and answered in a clear tenor, a marked contrast to the driver.

“The Metropolitan Government Building, please.”

The driver offered no particular acknowledgment. Instead, he silently turned up the radio, which had been playing all along.

A familiar DJ’s energetic voice came from the speakers. It was a call-in advice show aimed at middle- and high-school students, one that had recently become popular.

“Hiii, you’re on Teens Hotline! Whatever you want to know, whatever you want to talk about, we’re always taking your calls! Now, first tell us your name and what grade you’re in.”

A click connected the studio to the phone line, followed by a boy’s sleepy-sounding voice.

“Shut up. Who cares about that?”

“Ah-ha-ha! A lively Mr. Anonymous, then. So, is something troubling you? Come on, tell us all about it.”

“It’s not like I’m worried or anything. But they say there’s gonna be a huge earthquake on August thirty-first at one thirty-one—”

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“—is that true? Before summer vacation, everyone at school was talking about it.”

It was a rumor that had been circulating among elementary- and middle-school students since just before the summer

holidays. It had no basis, and no one even knew who had started it.

But many believed it. Women's weekly magazines had picked up the story, reporting panic among children who were genuinely frightened.

"Well, Japan's earthquake country, so a big one could come any time. It's been ages since the Great Kanto Earthquake, and that big Tokyo earthquake never did happen. There's Nostradamus's great prophecy, too, so all we can do is be ready. Anyway, who's next? Hiii, you're on Teens Hotline!"

That breezy enthusiasm was the DJ's selling point. The next caller was a girl with a particularly husky voice.

"I'm Misato. First year of high school. Sixteen years old, gorgeous, and never had a boyfriend!"

"Well, well! A rare find these days!"

Girls these days were having their first sexual experiences at ever younger ages. It was common knowledge, incidentally, that one survey put the nationwide proportion of second-year high-school girls who had had sex with a male partner as high as sixty percent.

"There's this weird girl in our class. I told them to stop, but, I mean, these days, anything goes—"

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"—so everybody was picking on her, and she totally snapped. Now she says she's gonna bring her friends and get back at us over summer vacation. What a pain, right?"

That oddly drawn-out, languid way of speaking was common among girls lately.

“Even pretty girls shouldn’t bully people, you know. I don’t like bullies. To the person being bullied, they’re no different from murderers or the worst criminals.”

It was a rather irresponsible thing to say, but it was true that once you had bullied someone, no one would sympathize with you, however they retaliated.

The days when victims simply endured their bullying were long past. Modern bullying carried risks for everyone involved: perpetrators, victims, and school staff alike. Court judgments could leave people owing enormous sums. There was no end to former bullies who were still struggling with those debts after they grew up.

“And she says she’s got this friend in America who’s a mutant. Says she’s bringing them to Japan over summer vacation. Mutants are, like, scary, aren’t they?”

Even so, bullying did not disappear. It only grew more vicious with each passing year.

“It’s true there’ve been more crimes involving mutants in America lately. But it’s not as if we have mutants in Japan, so there’s probably nothing to worry about. You’re not a bully yourself, right? Then you’re fine, you’re fine. Okay, next—”

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“—caller!”

Cutting the husky-voiced girl off just as she was about to say something, he moved on to the next person on the line.

“Uh, Ossan. Eighth grade. Um, so, is it true there’s a mutant base in Shinjuku?”

“Mutants again? We’ve been getting a lot of that lately. What’s with you kids? Is it some kind of craze? All right, here’s what we’ll do. Starting next time, we’ll have a new mutant-information segment. Send us anything and everything you know about mutants. Keep it coming!”

Outside the window the heat was brutal, but the taxi’s air conditioning was so powerful that the passenger was almost cold.

Still crawling along, the taxi took several minutes to reach Shinjuku’s great railway overpass and turn left. At last it was approaching the west exit of Shinjuku Station.

Perhaps it was because more companies had begun their summer holidays, but the crowds were creating chaos at the scramble crossings and traffic jams all over Tokyo.

“That girl was probably the ringleader herself.”

Tired of watching the tide of humanity flooding Shinjuku’s busy streets, the man had been listening absently to the radio. The remark escaped him—

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—almost to himself. Smoke from the cigarette he had been smoking earlier lingered in the overcooled taxi, drifting through the air.

His name was Nakaaki Takebe. Thirty-two, unmarried. A civil servant.

Despite the summer weather, Takebe was wearing a gray suit that would not have looked out of place in winter, along with a blue shirt. His tie had fine black-and-green diagonal stripes. Behind silver-rimmed glasses, his eyes were narrow;

his thin face and sharp cheekbones gave him a shrewd look. Judging by appearance alone, he might have passed for a young, earnest schoolteacher.

“Oh, are you a teacher? Kids these days, honestly. No shame, you might say. I just don’t understand them.”

Mistaking Takebe for a teacher, the driver abruptly became talkative, a complete change from his earlier manner.

“I’m not a teacher. Just a civil servant.”

Takebe answered plainly, but the driver apparently had not heard him at all. He went on without pausing.

“And what are these mutants supposed to be, anyway? Seems there’s all sorts of them in America, but I don’t know. Can’t say I’d want to meet one.”

Keeping his right hand on the wheel, the driver scratched his thinning scalp with his left.

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The rapid increase in mutant crime in America was occasionally reported in Japan as well. Apparently there was a group of mutants called the X-Men who fought other mutants, though for what reason people did not know.

But that was merely something happening among a particular group of people across a distant ocean. Consequently, little detailed information about mutants reached Japan, nor were they discussed with much interest. This was the general public’s view, and it accorded with the Japanese government’s current basic stance toward dealings with other countries...

Takebe, however, occupied a slightly different position from the general public. At the workplace to which he had only recently been assigned, he had already heard several reports about mutants.

The taxi carrying him turned right around the rotary at Shinjuku Station's west exit and headed toward the skyscraper district. Once past the west exit, traffic was light. The waves of people and the din of a moment before had vanished as though they had never existed. They were only a few hundred meters from the east-exit district, yet none of that charged, stagnant atmosphere seemed to reach this place.

A deep-blue summer sky spread over the buildings. That forest of high-rises, seeming to stretch into the sky itself, ought to have been packed with people no different from the crowds they had just left. And yet, somehow, a stillness enveloped the district.

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"Ah... Damn. I forgot to get a receipt."

Having stepped out in front of the Metropolitan Government Building, Takebe turned to look for the overcooled taxi. But it had already turned left in front of the Hilton Hotel and disappeared from view.

"Mutants... They might already be here in Japan, and nobody wants to think about anything beyond what's right in front of them."

Takebe sighed and reached up to retighten his loosened tie. Evening was approaching. But there was no sign of the

day's heat letting up. He quickened his pace and disappeared into the Metropolitan Government Building.

1 • September 1

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Tokyo Metropolitan Amanogawa High School was a coeducational school with an entrance-exam deviation score of sixty.

There were usually two ways to reach the school in Arakawa Ward. One was a fifteen-minute bus ride from N Station on the Yamanote Line to the school entrance. The other was to get off at M Station on a private railway and walk ten minutes. From K Station on the metropolitan streetcar line, it was a seventeen-minute walk.

Most students changed from JR to the private railway and walked from M Station. A bus caught in the commuter traffic could have disastrous results, while the walk from the streetcar stop was simply too tiring.

The long summer vacation was over.

For the first time in about a month and a half, the road from M Station to Amanogawa High was overflowing with people.

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It was the morning of September 1, the start of the new term.

With 1,033 students, Metropolitan Amanogawa was not a particularly large coed school. Most attended the regular course, which sent seventy percent of its graduates on to further education. The international department, established the previous year, currently had forty-one students in each of two classes, across two year groups.

The international course specialized in English and foreign-language education with the aim of overseas study. It had also been created for an exchange program with St. Florina High School in Kansas, America, which had become its sister school five years earlier.

Several years before, the school had accepted a princess from a certain southern African country as an exchange student, an experience that had delighted the administration. If the new Hawaii-Saipan exchange program the principal was considering for the following term went ahead, the entire school's facilities were expected to expand further.

Girls overwhelmingly outnumbered boys in the international course, eight to two. It was almost a girls' school, but there was little interaction between the international and regular students.

Most regular-course girls disliked the international students, partly out of jealousy; the proud international-course girls made no effort to socialize with them. Yet to the regular-course boys, those girls were glamorous beauties just within reach, objects of admiration. Their entrance scores were naturally a little higher, too.

On the road to Amanogawa after summer vacation, groups of students, similarly tanned and dressed in the same uniforms,

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walked toward school carrying their various summer memories in their hearts.

Among them was Toru Tsunoda.

“Hey! How've you been?”

Toru had barely begun walking from the station when someone tapped his shoulder. He turned to find a familiar smiling face.

Toru had entered Amanogawa that spring and was still a first-year student. The person greeting him was Eiji Minakami, a classmate.

Eiji and Toru set off side by side. Both wore white short-sleeved shirts and gray school trousers. It was a simple outfit, with neither tie nor vest, but it was Amanogawa's boys' uniform.

Both were thin, though Eiji was about seventeen centimeters taller than Toru. Eiji was currently 173 centimeters tall. Still growing, he wore narrow black-rimmed glasses. His face was burned a healthy red. The tan looked so fresh that it almost seemed painful.

“Morning. You've really caught the sun. Did you go somewhere yesterday? I called, but you weren't home.”

Toru had seen Eiji only once during the summer vacation. After that, they'd mostly talked on the phone. The previous

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morning, too, Toru had called Eiji's house.

At the end of July they had gone on a four-day, three-night trip to Hokkaido, planned since before their end-of-term exams. Two boys traveling together wasn't exactly romantic, but it had been fun all the same.

Afterward, both worked hard at their part-time jobs, and they had lost touch until around August 20. Eiji had

suddenly called that night, lamenting that he'd lost every bit of the wages he'd finally earned.

Losing three weeks' pay was truly rotten luck. Toru had therefore decided to treat him to a proper meal on the last day of summer vacation. That was why he had called, only to find Eiji had already gone out somewhere early that morning.

"I was at rock bottom, wasn't I? I deserved a little fun. So yesterday I went to Shonan to pick up girls. And then..."

As they walked and talked, a girl's voice called to them from behind.

"Good morning, Eiji. Toru."

They turned. A girl stood in the summer sunlight.

A black ribbon on her short-sleeved shirt. A gray vest with a fine blue check. A short black pleated skirt and white knee socks. Amanogawa's girls' uniform. She was their class-

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mate, Kyoko Inoue.

"Oh! K-Kyoko! Morning!"

Eiji stammered so badly he almost sounded as though he were joking. Kyoko glanced at Toru beside him and gave a small bow.

Though they were classmates, Toru and Kyoko were not particularly close. They exchanged greetings but had never really sat down and talked. Her casual greeting took Toru a little by surprise. But surely Eiji had been in exactly the

same position. At least, until the end of the first term, he had been.

Kyoko was smiling, her cheeks slightly flushed. Perhaps it was the heat of the rising sun. She looked so dazzlingly cute that Toru could only stare for a moment, unable even to answer.

“Yesterday was fun, wasn't it, Kyoko?”

At Eiji's words, Kyoko nodded a little shyly and hurried toward school. Toru and Eiji could see her greeting people she knew along the way.

Toru tucked his thin schoolbag under one arm and planted his feet. Arms folded, he stared skeptically at Eiji's thoroughly besotted grin.

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“What happened yesterday?”

At Toru's question, Eiji's face relaxed into an even sillier smile.

“Heh heh. Ran into her at Shonan yesterday. I'm telling you, it felt like fate.”

“Seriously? You and Kyoko Inoue? What do you mean, fate? You didn't tell her you liked her, did you?”

Toru had good reason to be surprised. Kyoko was the prettiest girl in the regular course, and her grades were good, too. She was their idol, their Madonna. For the regular-course girls, forever burning with rivalry toward the international department, Kyoko was the most dependable champion in their year.

She was also straightforward, hardworking, and energetic. Plenty of boys admired her. Older students and teachers trusted her, and everyone liked her.

And that Kyoko had “had fun” with Eiji at the beach yesterday! Toru wasn't the only person who couldn't possibly let that pass. It was a situation that demanded attention.

But Eiji's grinning face abruptly changed. The corners of his dreamy eyes drooped farther, and a vertical crease appeared between his brows.

“Except she was there with her family.”

Eiji's shoulders sagged. Toru, on the other hand, brightened like the morning sun.

“Ah ha ha! I thought it'd be something like that. Come on, don't let it

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get to you.”

“This summer gave me my chance. Now we'll get closer, and someday... my lover... I'll tell her how I feel... someday... Hey! Toru! Don't leave me behind!”

Leaving Eiji clenching his fist and making vows to the morning sun, Toru strode off toward school.

The morning road still held the heat of summer.

At last, the new term was beginning.

* * *

The principal's long, long speech finally ended, and with it the school assembly. The students all began returning to their classrooms.

After the first homeroom of the second term, there would only be a major cleanup. Their classmates, whom they hadn't seen for so long, were all deeply tanned.

During the few minutes before homeroom, the room filled with the voices of students catching up. Toru and Eiji were swapping summer stories with their friends Masato Himekawa and Kenji Mizue.

Masato and Kenji were both almost as dark as Eiji. Masato, his skin already peeling for the umpteenth time, was absorbed in survival games and martial arts. All summer he'd gone far afield every day to hone his skills.

"You didn't take Tomomi along, did you? If you leave her on her own too much, somebody's going to steal her

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away."

"She spent the whole summer at my place."

Their classmate Tomomi Sakaki was Masato's girlfriend.

These days Masato even mixed with adult survival-game enthusiasts, and he was hardly ever home on Sundays. His athletic build made him look older than a high-school student, but he was actually a gentle fellow.

Of all their friends, only Masato had a girlfriend already acknowledged by both sets of parents.

Kenji had formed a band with his middle-school friends and spent the summer working to pay for rehearsal studios. Everyone had been surprised that, despite his small build, he was helping with carpentry work.

He hadn't grown any taller, but his slender arms and shoulders now carried muscle that hadn't been there before vacation.

"You went to Hokkaido with Eiji, right, Toru? Where are our souvenirs?"

Masato and Kenji apparently expected presents. Unfortunately, the travelers were two high-school boys who hadn't yet started their summer jobs. Naturally, it had been a shoestring trip.

"No chance. We went before either of us had worked. All the places we stayed were run-down guesthouses. Right, Toru?"

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"I've got souvenirs."

"Way to go, Toru! That's what friends are for. You're usually pretty slow, but when it counts, you come through. Gimme, gimme!"

Before Eiji's incredulous eyes, Toru rummaged in his bag and took something out, handing one each to Masato and Kenji.

"Here you go. Souvenirs from Hokkaido. Pretty good, huh?"

They were cans of soft drink sold in vending machines.

"What's this?"

Eiji answered their puzzled question with an explosion of laughter.

“Ha ha ha ha! That's it! The canned juice he bought in Furano!”

“What? Toru, you bastard!”

The cans Toru had handed them might indeed have been bought in Furano, Hokkaido, but they were available anywhere in Japan.

“What? They're proper Hokkaido souvenirs, aren't they? Why're you so angry?”

Toru grinned foolishly as Masato and Kenji cuffed him around. Apparently the whole thing had been premeditated.

“You lying idiot. If I had a gun here, I'd shoot you!”

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Masato's ominous words seemed to remind Eiji of something.

“Speaking of lies, there wasn't an earthquake yesterday after all.”

He sounded rather disappointed, partly because he'd half believed the rumor.

“Oh, that big earthquake on August 31? Only elementary-school kids and you were getting worked up over that. Too bad.”

Eiji pouted at Kenji's teasing. His expertise in popular tales about ghosts, aliens, and mutants had earned him the title of “information geek” among his friends.

"Yeah, yeah. People keep saying there's going to be a massive earthquake, or mutants are going to show up in Japan. But it always turns out to be rumors. America's so lucky."

Watching Eiji sulk, Toru wondered how many elementary-school children across Japan were wearing the same disappointed expression. The silly thought made him smile.

A familiar, clear girl's voice broke in among the four of them, interrupting his imaginings.

"Oh, I'm sure there must be mutants in Japan, too."

The clear voice he'd heard on the way to school belonged to Kyoko Inoue.

"Kyoko! You believe in mutants, too? We really get

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along, don't we?"

Eiji's face had gone completely lovesick at being addressed by Kyoko. His voice was pathetic. He was utterly smitten.

"There may not be many in Japan, but there are quite a few in America. There's a group of powerful mutant warriors called the X-Men who fight evil criminal organizations. They're so cool."

Kyoko spoke dreamily about mutants.

Apparently her secret interest was American mutants. Unexpectedly, however, Eiji objected.

"But are all the X-Men really that strong? Aren't they just a bunch of mutants who lost their civil rights and don't fit into society, sticking together?"

"Well, even if they're defying the American government, aren't they simply standing up for what they believe is right? I can't forgive a government that tries to ignore people's human rights just because they're mutants."

Kyoko seemed remarkably knowledgeable about mutants. Her knowledge rivaled that of Eiji, the information geek—no, it seemed to exceed it.

"Still... I don't really like the way they get together and use force."

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"The X-Men aren't a biker gang or the yakuza. They're a group of specialists with exceptional abilities. I'm sure of it."

Even while disagreeing about the X-Men, Eiji looked at Kyoko with something like respect. Toru, Masato, and Kenji, who still knew little about mutants at all, looked rather bewildered by the conversation.

"So you've got the same weird hobby as Eiji, Inoue? Really believing in mutants and ghosts—kind of childish, isn't it?"

Toru, the most baby-faced of Eiji's friends, said this to Kyoko.

"Oh? Are you jealous, Toru?"

With an arm around Kyoko's shoulders, Eiji taunted him. Kyoko sharply pinched the back of Eiji's hand on her shoulder.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"I believe in them. I think people with abilities or appearances different from ordinary people's are admirable just for that. Oh, and that rumor the children are spreading, about a mutant base in Shinjuku—it might be true."

Kyoko confidently declared that mutants existed in Japan, too, but Toru, Masato, and Kenji all looked unconvinced.

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Toru knew nothing about what mutants were really like, or even whether they existed. If anything, the idea of unknown beings different from themselves made him uneasy.

Yet Kyoko and Eiji believed that mutants might exist right beside them.

"But doesn't that sound sort of creepy? If there were one nearby, could you catch being a mutant from them?"

Which of them was being childish now? Kenji had blurted out whatever came into his head. Kyoko looked annoyed.

"Honestly, Kenji, are you stupid? If being a mutant were contagious, every American would have turned into one ages ago."

Toru and the others discovered for the first time that Kyoko, whom everyone thought of as the class idol, could be unexpectedly sharp.

Just then, the door opened. Their still-young homeroom teacher, who taught physical education, appeared. He was so much more deeply tanned than any of his students that at first they didn't recognize him. Everyone's eyes were fixed on his dark face.

The room fell silent for an instant, then erupted in cheers.

“All right, all right, quiet down! We're starting homeroom.
Summer vacation is

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over!”

The teacher's unconvincing words sent the whole class into
an uproar.

Soon, that fiercely hot summer would be over, too.

2 • The School for Gifted Youngsters

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In the countryside of New York State, America, stood a private school on an extensive estate.

Within its high enclosing walls stretched rich, green grounds. Known as the School for Gifted Youngsters, the institution had been founded by Dr. Charles Xavier. Xavier himself lived there as well.

It was a training center built for a particular purpose, and also a secret research facility.

Protected by a laser surveillance system that kept out intruders, the school possessed state-of-the-art medical and information equipment, research facilities, and a collection of reference materials and specialist books.

Its living facilities, too, were fully equipped, allowing many people to live there comfortably.

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Amazingly, Xavier paid for all of it himself. No one could imagine how wealthy he must be.

But the people living here were not ordinary human beings.

They had all been born with unusual powers. The examples were endless: flight, heat rays, extraordinary strength. Some had telepathy or the power to destroy matter; others looked like beasts rather than humans.

Their abilities varied, but all possessed unknown powers beyond the reach of ordinary people.

These special abilities began to manifest around the age of thirteen.

They were a new kind of humanity, called “mutants.”

Xavier had established the School for Gifted Youngsters for them.

To the mutants who came here, it was a second home.

The founder himself was, of course, a mutant with powerful telepathic abilities. Being a mutant, Xavier understood deeply the hearts of others born that way. Many looked up to him as a father.

America was a country where mutants had appeared early on.

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But America at that time was a dark place for mutants. Ordinary people simply rejected beings with powers different from their own. Not a soul would acknowledge that mutants were human, too.

Once their existence became known, armed civilians began “mutant hunts” in towns everywhere. This new humanity was pursued like wild animals.

Unjust discrimination and contempt taught those born as mutants to hate ordinary people. The conflict intensified.

Mutants began fighting back against people who aimed guns at them for no other reason than that they were mutants. Their revenge had begun.

As a result, humans came to fear mutants from the bottom of their hearts, and mutants came to hate humans. Crimes involving mutant abilities increased, worsening mutants' position in society still further.

Some mutants began proclaiming that they alone were the “true humans,” destined to rule the world. They appeared in the streets and acted to eliminate ordinary people from it.

Mutants had become outcasts from human society.

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That was why Xavier had founded the school. He had made a home for mutants, a place where they could live in safety—and a base for efforts to put an end to mutant crime.

He had resolved to fight mutants hostile to ordinary humans, and organizations seeking to use mutants for evil, even if that meant mutants fighting one another. He dreamed of peaceful coexistence between ordinary people and mutants.

The mutants who fought for that dream were called the X-Men.

They gathered at the School for Gifted Youngsters. Here, Xavier and the other members scientifically analyzed their powers. Training then developed and strengthened those powers further. At the same time, they worked every day to cultivate their humanity, as well as their mutant abilities.

* * *

Now, the X-Men had assembled in the school's meeting room.

The room was dim. On the huge projection screen at the front, scenes of foreign cities appeared one after another: France, Britain, Italy. Images of different countries flowed past at a dizzying pace.

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To the right of the screen was a narrow platform, where a small man was explaining the images to the X-Men.

The bald man had sharp eyes and wore a black suit. His lower body, difficult to see behind the desk, was enclosed in a black vehicle that floated in the air. Whenever he wished to move, it glided freely through space. It was an antigravity vehicle he had built for himself, using his mutant power to compensate for his disabled legs.

His name was Professor X.

He was the founder of both the X-Men and the School for Gifted Youngsters. His real name was Charles Xavier.

Professor X was presenting a report on mutant affairs around the world, compiled through his intelligence network. The X-Men listened to his commentary and watched the images with interest.

The picture changed again.

Consulting the materials in his hands, Professor X continued.

“So far, my report on recent mutant developments has centered on Europe. Now let us turn to Asia.”

The screen showed a small city crowded with ultramodern high-rise buildings. Beside the forest of towers,

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untamed jungle blazed like green fire. It was an oddly unbalanced scene.

The expressions of the X-Men gathered around the semicircular table varied.

To Professor X's left, the middle-aged Wolverine watched sternly, his thick arms folded. Beside him, Jubilee rested her chin in both hands, elbows on the table. Perhaps the unfamiliar country was a novelty to her; she watched wide-eyed with interest.

A little farther along sat Storm, Jean Grey, and Rogue. All three were distinctive beauties with long, wavy hair and striking figures, but they listened seriously to Professor X's report. Brown-skinned Storm, with her cool, narrow eyes, appeared the calmest. Jean had her chestnut hair tied back. Rogue beside her had an energetic air, perhaps because of her strong-willed features. All three wore close-fitting, stretchy suits.

Next to Rogue, the blue, long-furred Beast had been fussing over his fogged glasses for some time.

Gambit sat farther along. He looked like a delinquent from any angle. Despite being indoors, he wore a heavy, ragged coat, and, like a rebellious schoolboy, noisily chewed

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gum. Every so often he impatiently swung his crossed leg.

Farthest from Professor X sat Cyclops, the X-Men's team leader. Calm and composed, Cyclops never exposed his eyes to the others. Without his visor to block it, his mutant optic blast would destroy whatever he looked at. Though the visor

hid both eyes, he was a tall, well-proportioned, handsome man.

Every X-Man currently living at the School for Gifted Youngsters was gathered in this meeting room.

“Among the Asian countries, Cambodia has recently begun developing rapidly. Following Hong Kong, now an independent democratic state, and Singapore, it has pursued urban development at tremendous speed. Our investigations suggest, however, that while these rapidly developing countries have adopted modern culture, their way of life remains dependent on ancient indigenous traditions.”

Images of newly built modern cities passed across the screen.

“Furthermore, our research finds that these countries share an extremely low level of interest in, or awareness of, the very existence of mutants.”

The X-Men murmured at his report.

“In other words, no mutants have yet been born in these countries.”

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Gambit interrupted Professor X's conclusion, noisily chewing his gum.

“Huh. Asia's full of happy-go-lucky countries, then.”

Rogue shrugged, looking a little incredulous herself.

“You could call them lucky.”

Undeterred by their reactions, Professor X continued.

“Japan, long recognized as an economic power, is also said to be a country without mutants. A senior government official even made a formal declaration to that effect. It caused a stir just recently, as you all know.”

It had happened about a week before.

A young, up-and-coming Japanese legislator visiting America to discuss imports of American cherries had become drunk on wine at a dinner party. He had said something better left unsaid.

“Yeah. ‘We have no intention of getting involved in American mutant crime, but we intend to take a firm line on cherry imports and settle the matter’—something like that. That bushy-browed Japanese fellow said it to a presidential aide. Anyway, that quotation really made the American public

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mad.”

America wanted to increase cherry exports tenfold the following season. Japan feared that this would wipe out every Japanese cherry farmer. The incident occurred amid their maneuvering.

“To the Japanese, mutants must seem like a fire on the far shore. That's why they can say such careless things.”

As Rogue said, Americans had fiercely objected to the Japanese legislator's attitude of staying uninvolved. The next day, after scrambling to retract his statement and apologize, he had returned to Japan as though fleeing.

Storm nodded at Rogue's assessment that it was all somebody else's problem. Only Jubilee was still looking around restlessly.

"But... I'd like to go to Japan, just once..."

She murmured it, but Wolverine's loud voice beside her drowned it out, and nobody heard.

"Japan's got its three non-nuclear principles. Guess they're taking the same approach to mutants: we won't possess 'em, we won't make 'em, and we won't let 'em in."

The X-Men chuckled at Wolverine's joke.

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"Heh heh. Well, jokes aside, there is a rumor circulating among Japanese children lately. It concerns me. We may need to investigate on the spot."

The projected footage had ended, so Professor X switched on the room's lights. Brilliant light filled the room.

"It is a children's rumor, but it says there is a mutant base in Shinjuku, one of the most prosperous and ultramodern parts of Tokyo."

The X-Men stirred again.

A rumor like that, in a country whose rude legislator had just declared there were no mutants? There was a saying about no smoke without fire. Perhaps mutants were being born in some unseen corner of Japan.

"So it means the ones interested in mutants are all children, rather than adults. Children are always the first to notice something new."

Storm analyzed the matter coolly. Then a shrill voice rang out from among them.

“Me! Me! Hey, Professor X, let me do the investigation! I want to go to Japan!”

Jubilee had raised her hand to volunteer for the investigation. Her eyes shone, full of anticipation for the Japan she had never

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seen.

“I don't think you can count on this little lady.”

At Wolverine's remark, Jubilee flew into a huff. She certainly had a short temper, but there was no doubt about her enthusiasm.

“You have been to Japan before, too, Wolverine. Very well. This time, Wolverine and Jubilee will go and investigate. Take care, both of you.”

“What?! Me, with her? Hold on, Charlie. If it's just an investigation, I can handle it alone. This little lady'll only get in the way.”

Wolverine pounded the table in dissatisfaction with Professor X's decision.

“Sorry to be such a burden. But... nice working with you, partner!”

Jubilee forcibly clasped Wolverine's fist against the table. Wrapping her arm around his thick one, she grinned like the Cheshire Cat.

* * *

Two figures stood at the center of a long, narrow space, rather like the bottom of a twenty-five-meter pool with only three lanes. High above them, red lights set into the ceiling about ten meters up cast a faint glow over the pair.

The room was dim. Darkness shrouded both ends, obscuring the view.

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A red flash shot through the air. From pitch-black darkness, a red beam streaked toward them. It threaded its way above, below, and to either side of their bodies.

One of them leaped to the right-hand wall, dodging the beam, and shouted to the other.

“Jubilee! Ahead, on the right! Aim at the source!”

“Aye aye, Rogue!”

The girl called Jubilee shouted clearly back. Rogue had jumped right; Jubilee kicked off the floor as hard as she could and sprang toward the left wall.

Rogue skillfully dodged the beams targeting them, her long, thick curls held back by a green headband. She wore a highly elastic bodysuit with matching gloves and boots.

Jubilee, leaping to the opposite wall, also continued dodging while gathering strength in both arms. She wore her usual hot pants, a high-necked shirt, and a lightweight coat. Her short curls bounced.

Bands of electricity wrapped around Jubilee's arms. Both arms were charged, scattering crackling sparks.

She could feel heat generated inside her body gathering in them.

Electrical light shot toward the direction from which the red beam had come. This was Jubilee's mutant

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ability: plasma bolts.

"Damn it!"

Against her wishes, the bolt veered left. It missed its target by a wide margin, struck the titanium wall, and bounced away.

Several red beams attacked Rogue and Jubilee even more mercilessly. Jubilee's clothes were sliced cleanly where a beam grazed them. They were laser beams.

Dodging them by a hair, Rogue jumped to the ceiling. Her leaping power was extraordinary.

She landed against the ceiling as if clinging to it, beside the dim lights. Feet planted overhead, she hung upside down like a bat, her curls dangling like grapevines far above Jubilee.

"Jubilee! A young lady shouldn't use language like that!"

A laser shot toward Rogue on the ceiling. She kicked off and hurtled toward the target at astonishing speed: the laser's source, hidden in the darkness, which Jubilee had missed.

Just as she thought she'd reached it, the floor beneath her moved. The entire floor began sliding backward at tremendous speed.

Rogue threw both arms up, pumping her legs and running forward as fast as

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she could. She suddenly realized Jubilee was running right behind her. The floor was like a high-speed conveyor belt: stop running, and they would immediately be hurled backward.

“Oh, come on! What's this? I don't need a workout to lose weight!”

Jubilee was running desperately as well. She swayed left and right to dodge the relentless laser fire. Suddenly the floor stopped.

But Jubilee's feet did not. She crashed headfirst into Rogue's back.

“Oh! Sorry, Rogue!”

“Whoa—Jubilee!”

As the pair tumbled over one another, the floor began moving again. This time, forward.

They were about to smash into the wall ahead when both their bodies floated into the air. At the same moment, something sliced through the air, struck an incoming laser beam, and exploded.

The floor stopped moving. Held in someone's arms, both women were lowered to it.

“Are you all right, Jubilee?”

It was Beast, the blue-furred X-Man, who had caught her. Tall, young Gambit held Rogue.

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A playing card thrown by Gambit had blocked the laser. Ahead, the laser emplacement burst into flame under the impact of his energized card and was now smoldering.

Gambit could pour his own internal energy into matter to create weapons. Playing cards were his usual choice. This time, too, he'd made a card into an energy bomb and struck the target perfectly.

"Looks like you could stand to lose a little weight."

Gambit taunted Rogue as he held her. In his long coat, he was tall and handsome. His foul mouth was nothing new, but this time Rogue was especially furious. Her cheeks were flushed and puffed out.

"Shut up! Don't barge in and interrupt our training!"

Holding Rogue in both arms like Romeo cradling Juliet, Gambit received an open-handed slap across the cheek.

"Rogue, a young lady shouldn't use language like that."

Jubilee said it from Beast's blue-furred arms.

The lights came on, revealing the entire room. The brightly illuminated space was the X-Men's Danger Room, their training facility inside the School for Gifted Youngsters. Through a microphone, Storm's

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voice rang out.

"Training complete. Jubilee and Rogue, you will repeat this simulated combat exercise together this afternoon. Understood?"

Storm and Wolverine had been watching from the control room on the mezzanine. Storm, the X-Men's deputy leader, seemed dissatisfied with the results of their training.

Wolverine added his own comment.

"Little lady, at this rate I can't take you to Japan."

"No way! I'll never get in your way, Wolverine. Leave me behind and I'll hold it against you forever!"

At his voice from the control room, Jubilee protested, flailing her arms and legs. As her emotions rose, plasma sparks scattered from her hands and hair.

"Ow, ow! Jubilee, calm down. Do that after you've got down!"

Beast, still holding her, cried out.

"Jubilee, this is your fault for being my partner. Extra training—what a pain. Now I won't have time for my date!"

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After leaving the Danger Room, Rogue wiped her sweat with a towel and poked Jubilee's cheek. Jubilee looked untroubled.

"You're not Cyclops and Jean. You don't even have a date planned."

"What was that?"

When Rogue glared at her, Jubilee immediately ducked behind Gambit, who stood just behind them.

"Rogue's got a date with me. Right, Rogue?"

"Oh, you cheat, Gambit. I was thinking we'd meet Cyclops and Jean in town today and see a movie."

Cyclops and Jean Grey had been out in town since morning. At Professor X's request, the X-Men sometimes took turns checking the neighboring towns. With mutant-related incidents becoming increasingly serious across America, patrols were an important part of their work.

"You shouldn't go getting in their way. Jean and Cyclops are always so busy, they hardly ever get to go on dates."

As Jubilee said, the X-Men's leader Cyclops and Jean Grey were very much in love.

"Hmph. I'm using the Danger Room next."

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Once the conversation turned to the couple, Wolverine went into the Danger Room alone, looking disgruntled.

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped."

Rogue sighed, following him with her eyes.

"What can't?"

Jubilee looked blank. She had not realized that Wolverine liked Jean Grey.

Gambit pressed a hand on top of Jubilee's head and laughed.

"Never mind. Nothing for children to worry about. Anyway, after training this afternoon, let's all go out. Jubilee can come along, can't she, Rogue?"

Rogue nodded in exasperation at Gambit's mischievous smile. But Jubilee hesitated quite a while over whether to go with them. After much thought, she told Rogue her decision.

"Hmm. For now I'm going to watch Wolverine train and learn something. I finally get to go to Japan—I don't want him leaving me behind."

"Whew! Aren't you serious."

Jubilee ran off to the control room where Storm was.

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Gambit whistled. Rogue immediately turned on him.

"Why don't you get a little more serious, too?"

"I'm always serious about you."

Like a knight before his princess, Gambit dropped to one knee in front of Rogue. He took her hand and kissed it through the glove. It was something he could never do to her bare hand: Rogue's mutant power would absorb the energy of anyone she touched.

"I should've taken my gloves off."

Despite her words, Rogue's expression was bright.

* * *

Meanwhile, Wolverine's simulated battle had begun in the Danger Room.

Professor X and Beast had developed the room. It could create different virtual enemies suited to each X-Man's mutant abilities.

"Storm, start it up."

Wolverine called to Storm in the control room and took his stance.

“Okay. Try fighting Sentinels today. Begin training!”

The room darkened, and ten Sentinels appeared before him. They were three-dimensional images.

“Whoa, ten Sentinels at once? Will he be okay?”

Sentinels were robots created by the Mutant Control Center to capture

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mutants. Capable of making their own decisions, they attacked mutants relentlessly. Their numbers, too, made them a constant difficulty for the X-Men.

“Well, now I've got something worth fighting.”

Wolverine clenched both fists. Three long, sharp blades shot from the back of each hand: his formidable weapons.

A Sentinel opened its fist and attacked. A long, thick cable extended from its palm to seize him. Leaping left and right, Wolverine slashed through the cables with his superalloy claws.

He had no ranged weapons like the energy blasts wielded by Jubilee, Gambit, or Cyclops.

His mutant power was his superhuman healing ability. After major surgery, his entire skeleton had also been reinforced with the superalloy adamantium.

The claws that had just burst through the skin of his fists were surgically implanted adamantium as well.

Those powerful superalloy weapons caused him pain every time he used them.

Yet without showing the slightest sign of it, Wolverine sliced the Sentinels apart one after another.

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“Wow! You're as amazing as ever, Wolverine!”

Watching from the control room, Jubilee cheered. In less than ten minutes, Wolverine had defeated all ten Sentinels.

While Jubilee watched in admiration, Storm asked her a question.

“Jubilee, are you ready to leave?”

“Yep. As soon as Professor X gives the go-ahead, I can leave right away.”

Having finished his exercise, Wolverine apparently could hear their conversation.

“I've been contacting friends in Japan. Come on, Storm, give me the next opponent.”

He requested another exercise immediately. Storm and Jubilee exchanged exasperated looks. Wolverine had more stamina than anyone in the X-Men.

“Hey, Wolverine. Can I join you this time?”

“No, no, little lady. Your turn's this afternoon.”

Despite Jubilee's earnest offer, Wolverine refused flatly.

“Aww!”

Jubilee pouted.

3 • Japanese Side

Original page 75

Even in September, the hot days continued in Tokyo.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, amid Shinjuku's skyscrapers, was crowded with visitors again today. Perhaps because September had just begun, more groups were coming from the provinces on school trips. One flag-bearing group swept past like a storm, only to be replaced before anyone could catch a breath. This was also the season when elementary-school children from Tokyo and its surroundings arrived ceaselessly on educational outings.

The toilets off the ground-floor lobby never lacked a queue.

Nakaaki Takebe stood outside the governor's office on the top floor of the building. The entire building was air-

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conditioned, so even the corridor was cool. Yet great beads of nervous sweat were breaking out on Takebe's forehead.

The brown envelope in his hands contained the documents he was about to present to the governor.

Takebe had worked late into the previous night preparing the report. Yet he still wasn't confident that it was satisfactory for the newly established project team.

Apart from Takebe, the team had seven members, all experts in different fields whom he had assembled. Among them were a prominent investigative writer, a university professor, and a man known as a genius surgeon.

Each had a different view of the Shinjuku subcenter according to his own standpoint. In that respect, Takebe's selection of people had not been mistaken.

Unfortunately, the project's assigned subject was too broad.

In a word: Shinjuku.

No matter how much time Takebe devoted to it, how carefully he worked or how thoroughly he wore out his nerves, he could not produce a report he found satisfactory. The members had identified too many problems with Shinjuku.

The project team had been established as a department directly under the governor.

It was called the Tokyo New Urban Development Security Office. Its permanent staff consisted only of Takebe and a young female clerk; its main work was to call together the

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seven outside experts to study countermeasures for various problems.

Takebe made up his mind and knocked on the governor's door.

If he stood here any longer, he'd be late. He knew perfectly well how particular the governor was about time. However often he wiped his forehead, more sweat broke out and slid down his cheeks.

When he opened the office door, the vivid dark brown of the leather visitor sofas caught his eye.

The governor and deputy governor were already seated, along with an older man Takebe had never seen before.

“Hm. Right on time. Listen, Takebe: keeping an appointment means being there and waiting ten minutes beforehand, no matter what happens. Remember that.”

The tall, white-haired man sitting directly opposite was the current governor of Tokyo.

His eyebrows were white as well as his hair. But he was by no means old. He was still in his mid-fifties.

In contrast, the deputy governor was a greasy, stout man with glossy jet-black hair—except that the top of his head was completely bald. Takebe recalled that he had once maintained a comb-over, but at some point it had become a polished expanse of scalp.

The older man beside him had small eyes and a mouselike appearance. His expression was utterly

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unreadable, giving him a somehow sinister air.

“Shall we move to the conference room next door? Your report is ready, Takebe?”

“Y-yes. Yes, it's ready.”

His voice cracked with tension.

The door to the left of the sofas led to the governor's private conference room. Accessible only through the governor's office, it was a completely secure, enclosed room.

“Conference room” hardly described its absurdly luxurious interior.

Four large leather reclining chairs had been arranged around a round marble table with a single black granite slab set into its center. The large ammonite fossil embedded in the granite like a pattern was probably genuine.

The chandelier was magnificent, too, but the large painting on the wall looked familiar. Wasn't that in my middle-school art textbook...? Takebe thought.

He took a deep breath, bowed deeply, and decided to begin his report at once. His sweating seemed unlikely to stop for some time.

"At the governor's request, we formed a new project team and recently held its first meeting, which lasted seven hours. The participants were specialists whom we had previously invited from various fields.

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Please turn to page five of the materials before you."

The booklets handed to the governor and his companions were about two centimeters thick, eighty sheets in all. Takebe had grouped the seven experts' remarks by issue and added the relevant supporting materials.

"First, at the Tokyo New Urban Development Security Office, we have examined the functional problems of the present Shinjuku subcenter from a variety of angles."

Wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, Takebe began his report on Shinjuku.

"Today, the entire Shinjuku subcenter has become so diverse and fragmented that understanding its current condition in every detail is extremely difficult. However long

we continue our investigation, it remains fluid and unstable.”

Understanding Shinjuku's actual condition was precisely the governor's most important objective. Both he and the deputy governor nodded appreciatively at Takebe's explanation.

“Shinjuku is constantly moving. Among its major problems, the first we would identify is... the appearance of mutants. Please see page thirty of the materials for this subject.”

“Mutants? What are those?”

Until then, the governor had been looking down at the documents. He suddenly raised his head. For some reason his face stiffened, and his thick

Original page 80

eyebrows twitched like insect antennae.

“We call a new kind of human being with unusual abilities different from those of ordinary people a ‘mutant.’”

Takebe continued his explanation, leafing through the papers.

“This phenomenon began in America, where many mutants with a wide variety of abilities have already appeared. There have been some reports in Japan of a group called the X-Men repeatedly fighting other mutants in New York and elsewhere. To deal with the situation, America has established a Mutant Control Center and is registering and managing the country's mutants.”

The materials showed detailed annual trends in mutant emergence in America. Photographs illustrated documented cases. On the first sheet, an adorable, ordinary child

appeared on the right; on the left, the same child's face had grown fur and elongated teeth, transforming into something beastlike.

“Those registered with America's Mutant Control Center are sent to detention facilities housing mutants alone, where they are assigned to a facility and spend the rest of their lives.”

Mutants supposedly lived separated from ordinary humans in these facilities set up by the center. This was intended both to prevent organized mutant crime and to study unknown mutant abilities.

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“Currently, a rumor is spreading among young people in Shinjuku, centered on Kabukicho, that mutants are appearing there. The phenomenon arose as young people with no fixed address, occupation, or known identity gathered in Shinjuku for some purpose. More arrive each day after hearing the rumor. Eventually, they may come to occupy Shinjuku.”

It was common knowledge that parts of Shinjuku had become lawless. The investigation had also established that the young arrivals were forming gangs and building their own communities.

Clashes among youth groups, local yakuza, and foreign mafias were now occurring daily without respite.

Regardless of age, sex, or nationality, the district drew people with nowhere else to go, like a gathering place for society's castoffs. Someone was always pausing there, then

moving on. Even those who stayed a while eventually left Shinjuku. It had always been that kind of town.

“Furthermore, most of the experts in this investigation concluded that these young people's mutant rumors will spread throughout Japan in the near future.”

Takebe was so absorbed in his report that he did not notice all three listeners raise their heads and exchange looks.

“However, the facts concerning mutants have not actually been substantiated. Nevertheless, the rumors continue spreading, already reaching young people in neighboring parts of Tokyo, as though they were real

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...”

“Idiot!”

The governor suddenly roared. Takebe jumped at the sound. Rising from his chair, the governor threw the documents at him.

Even the deputy governor joined in berating him.

“Mutants? Don't be ridiculous, Takebe. We didn't appoint you director to investigate baseless rumors!”

“Exactly. We haven't made time in our busy schedules to listen to such nonsense. Besides, all this mutant fuss is confined to America—and only a tiny minority there.”

The older man spoke coldly.

“It's common knowledge that Japan has no mutants. If you have time to worry about things that don't exist, surely your priority should be clarifying the disputed landownership in

the new city center. Your job is to present concrete proposals to prevent young people turning it into a slum. Isn't that right?"

"But the mutants..."

When Takebe still tried to speak about them, the governor silently fixed him with a cold

Original page 83

look and left the conference room without another word.

The older man followed him out.

"Takebe, you mustn't bring up mutants in a place like this. Well, make up for it in your next report."

With an oily little smile, the deputy governor patted Takebe's shoulder.

"I-I was only reporting on Shinjuku's present condition..."

Takebe could not understand why he had been scolded so severely, or why the governor had become so enraged.

One thing, however, was perfectly clear: he would have to spend another entire night preparing a new report.

4 • Black Roses

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In one corner of Kabukicho stood an old love hotel.

Compared with the buildings around it, it was relatively new, but it was now abandoned. Its basement had become a small live music venue called Heaven.

Heaven was a little club where independent bands kept playing for an audience drawn entirely by word of mouth. Its current owner was Masataka Jumonji, a self-styled young businessman who had only just turned twenty.

Jumonji was the boss of the Black Roses. As a result, Heaven had become their gathering place, day and night.

He did not use his real name here. The young people who came to Heaven called him, with respect and—

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—a measure of awe, “Kurusu.”

The independent singer Kurusu had his eye on was a man called Teacher.

Teacher's singing held his listeners spellbound. Kurusu was captivated by that compelling voice. People even said he had opened Heaven to give Teacher's talent a place to blossom.

Heaven was bustling. Several boys were busy adjusting the sound equipment and setting up the stage lights.

Kurusu sat at a table along the bar in one corner, sipping a Tequila Sunrise. Teacher sat beside him, strumming a guitar.

Teacher was a young man two or three years older than Kurusu. The slim, dreadlocked singer's exact age, however, was a secret. Neither of them seemed to earn his living in any conventional way.

They were about the same height, but their appearances could hardly have been more different.

Give Teacher a single guitar and he was content. Simply singing made him happy; he was a narcissist. He liked loose black clothes and had a reggae look. His strongly marked features had something of an Indigenous American cast.

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Kurusu was a calm, stylish man who looked good whatever he did. Even the gesture of brushing back his slicked-back hair had an oddly sensual quality. The young people around him trusted him deeply, and women found him irresistible.

Even now, girls were clinging to him at the bar, making advances without so much as a glance at Teacher. Kurusu brushed them off lightly.

"Ladies, I'm sorry, but we're discussing Teacher's first concert. Could you keep it down a little?"

One girl refused to stop flirting or let go. Kurusu took hold of her and gave her a light kiss on the chin. She was so overcome with joy that her eyes rolled back. Apparently she had fainted. The other girls supported her and dragged her toward the corridor.

“Heh... You're a wicked man, Kurusu.”

Teacher chuckled.

Apparently this happened all the time. Kurusu showed no sign of surprise.

“We don't need women to love right now. Wouldn't you agree?”

He said it without embarrassment. He was not consciously posing, but even Teacher, another man, found him attractive. Several strands of his swept-back hair had fallen across his eyes.

“Until we Black Roses take over Shinjuku—until our kingdom is complete—”

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“—I want no romantic complications. Right, Teacher?”

“Well, I don't have to worry about that. But with your popularity, you'd better watch—”

Before Teacher had finished, a woman approached Kurusu from behind.

She was different from the girls who usually came to Heaven: a dark-haired beauty with a mature, sultry expression. Her long black dress was fitted at the waist. She radiated a feminine allure that drew men's eyes to her. Now her gaze rested imploringly on Kurusu.

“Kurusu... I've left Mississippi... I... I want you to let me join the Black Roses...”

Her soft voice trembled. She lifted the hem of her long dress to show him her legs.

Hidden beneath the black lace, they were red, swollen, and raw with burns. Strips of peeling skin hung down toward her ankles.

She had been tortured. It looked as though someone had taken a blowtorch to her thighs and calves. Blisters and bruises stained her pale legs a vivid red.

“Let me... into the Black Roses...”

That was as far as she got before she collapsed.

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“Kurusu! She's... Mississippi's Onihime!”

The boy behind the bar, known as Zuzu, stopped shaking a cocktail and shouted.

The woman was Mississippi's Madonna, known as Onihime. Mississippi was a rival of the Black Roses. Kurusu and Teacher both knew her by sight.

Mississippi had grown out of a biker gang. They revered Onihime as their Madonna, using her presence to boost morale and hold the group together. Her leaving would be a major incident.

“What's happened, Onihime?”

Kurusu raised her from the floor. With a trembling hand, she stroked his cheek.

“I... I've... fallen in love with you...”

Tears streamed endlessly from Onihime's eyes. Concealed by the folds of her spreading black dress, a pool of blood was growing on the floor.

Onihime had left Mississippi of her own accord. Her misfortune had begun when she secretly fell in love with Kurusu.

If she could have kept those feelings hidden, she would have. But unless she concealed them, she could not retain her position as Mississippi's Madonna. The Madonna's smile was the group's symbol. Mississippi's leader was cunning, cruel, and fiercely possessive.

To confess her feelings to Kurusu, she had no choice but to leave Mississippi. The burns on her lower—

Original page 90

—body were proof of the love for which Onihime had risked her life to leave the gang.

“A f-first-aid kit! Somebody get me a first-aid kit!”

At the call from the boy behind the bar, several of Kurusu's young followers emerged from the small room at the back. Kurusu ordered them to treat Onihime's wounds.

“You gave up being their Madonna to come to the Black Roses? That takes courage. Look after her properly.”

Whatever treatment she received, the scars would remain. Beneath her black dress, her skin was burned in countless places. Only her face had escaped injury.

“Hand that woman over!”

Just as the boys were about to lift Onihime, a sudden commotion broke out near the entrance. Kurusu and Teacher turned to see a familiar face.

It was Gamu, the leader of Mississippi, the former biker gang. Five armed men surrounded him protectively. Army knives, spiked knuckle-dusters, and other weapons gleamed in their hands.

"What an honor—an unexpected visit. What brings you here, Gamu?"

Kurusu gave Gamu and his men an intimidating grin.

"That woman's gone crazy. Give her here."

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It was the first time a rival group had entered the Black Roses' headquarters with so few men. Gamu had come after his Madonna with desperation written on his face.

He wore black leather covered with long, sharp studs. A little taller than Kurusu, he was muscular, with a boyish face that did not match his build. He was still in his teens. His long hair flowed like a lion's mane, but he had no eyebrows.

Kurusu refused him offhandedly, almost as though he wanted to provoke him.

"Go home. She's not your Madonna anymore."

Gamu trembled with rage at the answer. His eyes, touched with madness, were bloodshot.

"W-we let her make a fortune, and that still wasn't enough—we let our members have her, too. She was living in luxury! If she switches sides to the Black Roses now, it'll ruin our name! Hand her over!"

His five men sprang from either side of him at the Black Roses members supporting Onihime. They laid her on the

floor and fought back. Gamu seized his chance and approached her.

As he reached out to grab Onihime, Kurusu slipped behind him. His foot struck Gamu's right arm again and again, too fast to follow. There was a sound like a branch snapping.

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The pointed toe of Kurusu's shoe moved with the force and precision of a honed razor, shattering Gamu's unguarded right arm.

“Aaagh!”

Gamu clutched his arm and screamed. By the time his five men turned at the sound, he was rolling and thrashing on the floor. His fingers, wrist, upper arm, elbow, and shoulder were bent at grotesque angles.

He struggled so violently that the flesh and skin barely holding his arm together strained as though they might tear apart.

Kurusu straightened his slightly disordered clothes and spoke coldly.

“Unlike you, the Black Roses forbid buying and selling women or our own people. Leave quietly. Otherwise I really will kill you.”

“Ghh... D-damn you!”

Still unwilling to give up, Gamu charged at Kurusu while holding his right hand. It was a desperate attack, but Kurusu caught him firmly in both arms.

"You really don't understand, do you? I said the Black Roses will take Onihime in. She won't be any use to you as a woman anymore. There's no reason for Mississippi to make any more trouble."

"Sh-shut up! I decide whether she's any use!"

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Gamu's obsession with Onihime was extraordinary. Restrained by Kurusu, unable to move, his face twisted with pain, he still tried to sink his teeth into Kurusu's arm. Kurusu evaded him and chopped the side of his neck with the edge of his hand.

"Gah—"

There was a dull sound. Gamu's large body swayed and fell to the floor.

"Take him and get out!"

At Kurusu's shout, the five men gathered up their unconscious leader and slunk out of Heaven.

"Zuzu, take Onihime into the back."

The short-limbed boy called Zuzu popped his head out from behind the bar.

"Ooh! She's beautiful!"

After ordering him to take Onihime to the back, Kurusu sat down beside Teacher at the bar. Teacher had remained in his seat throughout, as though nothing had happened.

"See? With your popularity, you have to be careful."

He greeted Kurusu with the same words as before.

"Yeah. This won't be the end of it. Of all the groups around here, Mississippi is the most—"

Original page 94

"—persistent."

The incident had taken place amid increasingly violent conflicts among the groups based in Shinjuku. Yet Kurusu spoke of it as though it were delightful. Teacher, too, had reckoned that the affair with Onihime would be an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the Black Roses' strength.

"You were planning to crush them either way."

Kurusu grinned at Teacher's remark. He took a bottle of Sarah bourbon from the shelf, opened it, and topped up the glass before him.

"Heh... It's all for our dream. Rival gangs, yakuza, mafia—anyone who gets in the way, we'll smash them. It only brings our kingdom closer."

Bourbon filled Kurusu's glass.

"One day Shinjuku will be an independent country, ruled by us—the Black Roses."

"A paradise for outcasts like us... Kurusu, everything you say sounds like a dream."

Teacher drained the Zubrowka left in his glass. Kurusu poured him bourbon.

"I won't let it stay a dream."

Their glasses met with a clink.

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On the night bitter antagonism arose among the groups of boys gathering in Kabukicho, the moon above Shinjuku seemed swollen and redder than ever.

5 • The Amagi Institute of Psychology

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The Amagi Institute of Psychology stood near Ryujin Shrine in Fudomae, Shinagawa Ward.

It was a private psychological clinic specializing in counseling children who refused to attend school or suffered from neurosis.

Its director, Dr. Amagi, had spent years applying for official recognition from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Yet the institute, founded some twenty years earlier, remained a private research facility.

Dr. Amagi was fifty-eight. His full name was Go Amagi.

His wife, Masako, who had served as his research assistant, had died young. He continued his work with a succession of young, part-time apprentices.

His research concerned the unusual latent abilities of children. He wanted to understand those powers.

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They resembled what were sometimes called psychic powers—or qigong in China. Though still in their earliest stages, they were a form of the abilities recently described in America as mutant powers.

More specifically, they amounted to things like having prophetic dreams or making water tremble in a glass.

American mutants were said to manifest their powers at twelve, but that did not hold true for Japanese children. Those attending the institute ranged from elementary-school pupils to high-school students. The strength of their abilities varied considerably, too.

Dr. Amagi's theory was that children with these abilities invariably had some psychological factor behind them: trauma, a powerful complex, or something similar. The children who refused to attend school had all failed to adapt to the little society of school. They harbored obsessive anxieties and fear toward school and society.

Yet as most of them grew into adulthood, their powers faded. As their fear and dread of school and society diminished, so did their abilities.

Dr. Amagi himself had one daughter.

Honoka Amagi was a first-year high-school student. She lived on the institute's second floor. Her father had converted the ground floor of their home into a clinic and devoted himself to his research. The two of them were the entire family.

Honoka was a girl with long hair. Her fair skin and the straight hair she had grown down to her waist were—

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—inherited from her mother. The slight brown tint of her hair was natural, not bleached.

She had well-defined features and a pretty face. Slender rather than plump, she gave a delicate impression.

Honoka had been quiet and reserved since childhood, sensible and bright. She had never troubled her parents with willfulness, stubbornness, or tantrums.

Her mother had died of illness the year Honoka started elementary school. She had been deeply depressed for several weeks, but gradually recovered and began helping around the house. To Dr. Amagi, she was a dear only daughter who never caused any trouble.

Around the time she entered junior high, Honoka began to change a little.

Perhaps because of her mature expression and introspective nature, she became isolated from the other children. She did not make a single close friend.

Sometimes teachers warned her that she was uncooperative, but her grades were always good. That had remained true after she entered high school.

Honoka, who had only started high school that spring, was now in the middle of a home visit from her homeroom teacher, Mr. Inguchi.

This was not one of the routine home visits made during compulsory elementary and junior-high education. A high-school home visit implied some particular reason. The main—

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—reason must have been that Honoka had not attended school since June.

“Sir... My father isn't home right now. Could you come back another time?”

The home visit had been made without any advance notice. Inguchi had turned up at the Amagi Institute of Psychology unannounced.

"I came to talk to you, Amagi."

Inguchi was a young teacher just past thirty, unmarried and handsome. He taught social studies and was in his fourth year as a homeroom teacher.

Still single, he had the looks of a leading man and an excellent reputation among the girls. Every Valentine's Day, he received more chocolate than anyone else at the school.

He was also athletic. He had been known for his tennis since his student days and coached the boys' tennis club. The boys looked up to him as an approachable older brother.

Yet Honoka could not bring herself to like this teacher.

She kept arguing with him, hoping he would leave even now. After a silence, she reluctantly showed him into the reception room. To observe the bare minimum of courtesy, she went to the kitchen to prepare tea.

There were no sweets on hand, so she decided tea alone would have to do. She put an enamel kettle on the stove and lit the gas.

Just then, the telephone rang.

Leaving the kettle where it was, Honoka lifted the receiver hanging on the kitchen wall—

Original page 100

—and answered.

The caller was Mai Misato, the only girl Honoka was close to.

“Oh, Mai? Yes, I'm fine. How about you? Mm-hm. Huh? Today? Sure. Dad's out, but come over if you'd like.”

Mai was two years younger than Honoka, a second-year junior-high-school girl. She was calling from home to say she wanted to visit.

Neither girl attended school. Honoka had stopped going to the prestigious high school she had only just entered that spring and was helping her father instead.

Dr. Amagi had neither panicked nor blamed her for stopping. In his own way, he had concluded that Honoka must have reasons of her own.

Perhaps that was because his work brought him into contact with so many children who refused to go to school.

Since Honoka's mother died, Dr. Amagi had tended to leave his daughter to her own devices.

Even so, he understood that not attending school did not mean Honoka had given up studying. She was very grateful for that.

That was why she had volunteered to help at the Amagi Institute. Mainly, though, it meant reception work and answering the telephone—

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—so she had quite a lot of free time. She could also spend long stretches with Mai.

Mai attended the Amagi Institute because she refused to go to school. She had been bullied. Unable to bear the bullying in junior high, she had not attended school for a year.

She had first begun coming to the institute the previous spring. Her friendship with Honoka dated from then, too.

"My homeroom teacher's here now. But I'll get rid of him soon, so come over. Okay. See you later."

When she hung up, the kettle had just boiled.

She filled the teapot and set it on a tray. As she stepped from the kitchen into the hall to carry it to the reception room, she started. Inguchi was standing there.

"You were taking a while. I was worried. Shall I carry that?"

Was it just a polite offer? The thin smile stuck to Inguchi's face made her feel sick.

"N-no, thank you."

"It's all right. I'm sorry for coming without warning today. What time is your father supposed to be home?"

Inguchi had not behaved this way when they first met in the spring. His familiar tone and ingratiating—

Original page 102

—eyes sent a chill down Honoka's spine.

No—she knew why. She was only pretending not to notice.

Honoka could see what Inguchi was thinking now. Somehow, she could see what he felt toward her.

She had possessed this unusual ability for as long as she could remember. She could somehow read the feelings

people held toward her. As a small child, she had proudly made use of it. But as she grew older, she began to realize how troublesome it was.

Knowing people's hearts was a wretched thing. When she realized that she was constantly watching people's expressions and becoming increasingly calculating, she began avoiding contact with others.

Throughout junior high, school, cram school, even her father had frightened her. Everyone except herself was frightening. Yet her father, absorbed in his own research, seemed to have little interest in his daughter. To Honoka, he was an unsettling presence.

Then came a series of shocks that spring. She discovered that Miyuki, the childhood friend she had thought was her one true friend, resented her.

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"I hope we can go to the same high school."

Miyuki used to say it all the time.

To attend the same school as Miyuki, Honoka had applied to one a rank below the school she might otherwise have chosen. For Miyuki, the entrance examination was right at the limit of her ability.

When they both passed, Honoka had been truly happy.

But within a month, everything had changed. Miyuki could no longer keep up with the lessons. Her attitude grew harder by the day. After that, every day was like sitting on needles.

"I work so hard... but you manage without even trying, Honoka."

Behind her smile, Miyuki slashed at Honoka daily with the blades of jealousy and hatred. Honoka understood it all too painfully well.

Little by little, her feet turned away from school.

Now Honoka could feel those same feet trembling.

A dangerous aura was pouring from Inguchi—every bit as dangerous as Miyuki's had been.

But he must not know that she sensed it. Honoka struggled inwardly to maintain a firm, composed manner.

She set the tray on the reception-room table and served him tea. Then she began to speak—

Original page 104

—before he could.

"Sir, next week I intend to come to school with my father and submit my withdrawal papers."

Inguchi's hand jerked beneath the steaming teacup. A trace of nervousness showed on his face.

"I see, with your father... But what will you do if you leave school?"

The aura seeping from his body changed slightly. This was anxiety.

"So, sir... please leave for today."

An oily sweat was forming on Honoka's forehead. She felt terrible.

"But listen. A girl with grades as good as yours..."

Fragments of the events at school since spring passed through her mind. Inguchi wanted desperately to remain her homeroom teacher. That was why he kept trying so hard to persuade her not to withdraw.

His voice played the part of a devoted teacher.

But what lay behind it was different. Honoka knew what it was.

"B-but I... I can study without going to school. And I can enjoy things... have friends..."

She felt so sick that she could no longer judge what was actually happening. By the time she realized it—

Original page 105

—Inguchi's flushed face was close to hers.

"Then I'll be your friend."

His large hands seized Honoka's thin shoulders.

"—!"

"You're so thin. Lonely, aren't you? I think we could get along."

His thick lips and foul breath were approaching her.

Honoka pushed him away with all her strength and shouted.

"I've never once wanted to go out with you, Mr. Inguchi! Even when you watched me changing in the nurse's office, I wasn't doing anything wrong! It was all a fantasy you made up!"

Inguchi's expression froze. As though time had stopped, every movement in his body ceased. Then all expression vanished from his face.

The blood drained away, leaving him pale. In the next instant his eyebrows rose, twisting his features into a demon's face. Suddenly, with the words of a teacher, he began shouting at Honoka.

"W-wh-what... what are you—! I-I came here as a teacher to visit a problem child who refuses to attend school! Listen to me, Honoka Amagi! Of all the students I've ever had, you're the worst, the most contemptible problem child of the lot!"

Original page 106

"S-sir?"

Spitting as he spoke, Inguchi rose.

"A troublemaker with good grades is completely unmanageable... I happened to see you in the nurse's office! I'll make certain the principal hears about this!"

No sooner had he said it than he left, almost as though he were running away. His face crimson with rage, he departed the Amagi Institute.

Honoka sensed madness in that appalling scene and his sudden change.

"Honestly... I've never seen such a delinquent. The principal—I'll go straight to the principal. Honoka Amagi was making eyes at a teacher in the nurse's office. I know she was trying to seduce a teacher... and I kept quiet about it..."

As he left, he was fabricating a story in his head about how patiently and diligently he had dealt with the greatest troublemaker of the age.

After Inguchi was gone, Honoka sank to the floor where she stood. A silence like the aftermath of a storm filled the house.

Her legs had no strength. Perhaps they had given way entirely.

It had always been this way.

When someone told people exactly what they were thinking, they became angry. Honoka should have known that since she was little—

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—but today she had been unable to restrain herself and had exposed her power. Carelessly, and in front of a man like that.

From the moment Inguchi arrived, Honoka had sensed the lewd aura surrounding him. It was an obscene desire directed at her. She had felt exactly the same thing once before, in the school nurse's office, when she was changing out of a torn uniform.

She had realized he was watching her while she lay trembling beneath the covers of the infirmary bed. Inguchi frightened her as he stared at her, radiating that desire.

He had been violating her with his eyes.

But the Inguchi who had suddenly changed today frightened her to the core, too.

She must never tell anyone about this power. Not her friends. Not even her father.

Honoka felt that conviction strongly.

More than anything, she feared her own ability. And she feared other people learning of it even more. Knowing what other people were thinking made her no different from the mind-reading monster called a satori.

She was afraid. She did not want to trust anyone anymore. Yet she still longed for company, and she cried. Mai would be here soon. That alone sustained her.

Mai always turned to Honoka with admiration and trust that were never false.

Honoka loved Mai, who depended on her to get through life.

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“Mai... Mai, please come soon. Mai...”

Longing for her, Honoka broke down in tears.

* * *

Mai arrived at Honoka's house that night, after nine.

Dr. Amagi had not returned yet. Honoka was only just beginning to recover from the shock Inguchi had caused that afternoon.

Mai was a girl with small eyes, a small nose, and a little face. Her looks were rather plain, and she showed signs of social anxiety. In front of other people, she became so nervous that she stammered. That, too, had contributed to the bullying that led her to stop attending school.

There was another major reason she had stopped going: her extreme tendency to build up an electrical charge.

People prone to static electricity had a hard time in dry winter weather and could not touch metal doorknobs with bare hands. Mai's condition was an extreme version of that. Even indoors in midsummer, she could never take off her gloves.

All year round, Mai had to wear layers of protection. Elementary school and junior high held nothing but painful memories for her.

As a small child, she had hardly been aware of her condition. But during a swimming lesson, when she entered the pool, the students around her—

Original page 109

—received electric shocks, and it became clear. After that she stopped swimming, and she had to keep her distance from other people whenever she interacted with them.

When Honoka first met Mai, Mai's fear of other people had been extreme. Talking to anyone had been painfully difficult for her.

At her worried parents' urging, Mai had begun attending the Amagi Institute of Psychology the previous spring. She and Honoka had gradually become close because Honoka could directly sense Mai's honest feelings.

It also helped that Honoka was unaffected by Mai's electrical charge. Honoka was resistant to static electricity.

Though it was only early autumn, Mai was dressed in her usual heavy layers. Beneath her hat, her forehead was covered in sweat.

In her habitually gloved hands she clutched a flyer. Excitedly, she showed Honoka what was on it.

“Um, um... He really, really was so incredibly cool. The songs he sang for the demonstration were wonderful, too. Next time you absolutely have to come, Honoka.”

Usually quiet and intensely shy, Mai was unusually excited. Her soft-looking, unruly hair bounced, and each movement brought a crackle of static.

Original page 110

“Oh? Teacher, is that his name? Is it a rock band?”

Apparently this was why Mai had been late. Mai lived near S Station on the Seibu Shinjuku Line. To visit Honoka, she had to change to the Yamanote Line at Shinjuku.

The walk from Seibu Shinjuku Station to JR Shinjuku Station took about two minutes. Amateur musicians sometimes played along the street between them. Mai had happened to run into one of those performances.

Teacher was apparently the vocalist's name. They had been giving a street performance to promote an upcoming concert.

“What's come over you? Rock music isn't like you, Mai.”

Honoka spoke with a hint of sarcasm.

“Oh, his voice was amazing. And the man who gave me the flyer was the manager, apparently. He was so handsome and

kind. I think it might be the first time I've ever talked that much with a man."

Mai was positively bubbling over. Her usual timid way of speaking had almost disappeared.

Unaware of how lonely and distressed Honoka had been, Mai had spent all the time since their telephone call absorbed in Teacher's singing. While Honoka was struggling with Inguchi, Mai had been enjoying herself with some handsome manager Honoka had never met—

Original page 112

—and Honoka could sense Mai directing toward a stranger the trust that, until yesterday, had been hers alone.

Mai, who had had only Honoka, was about to make new friends. Thoughts like that flickered through Honoka's mind.

Suddenly she began to feel pathetic. Perhaps jealousy had crept in. And so she lashed out at Mai.

"If you were going to be late, you could at least have called."

Honoka spoke coldly to Mai, who was still chattering in her excitement.

"It's not as if I spend every day thinking about you and looking after you, you know. Being that selfish is a nuisance to other people. That's why you get bullied."

Mai seemed to come to herself. She turned her face away from Honoka. She had realized how carried away she was and felt ashamed. And Honoka's sudden cruelty frightened her terribly.

The girl she had looked up to like an older sister suddenly seemed a complete stranger. Mai could not keep meeting her eyes.

By the time Honoka noticed, the brightness in Mai's heart had gone. A dark, clouded, awkward silence filled the space between them.

Then Dr. Amagi came home. Seeing Mai, he spoke to Honoka.

Original page 113

"It's late. Aren't Mai's parents worried?"

Mai grew even more rigid. Assuming she would stay over, Honoka answered her father.

"Mai's staying here tonight... Dad, could you call her family later?"

But Mai reached for her thin cardigan and began getting ready to leave.

"N-no. I-I'm going home today. M-my mother gave me money for a taxi."

She shook her head and rose, still looking down.

It was past ten.

Honoka saw her to the door, but Mai never once lifted her face.

"W-well... goodbye. S-sorry for intruding."

"...Take care."

They found an empty taxi immediately on the road outside the institute. It drove off with Mai inside.

Honoka bitterly regretted the cruel things she had said. Mai had come to her with the same trusting heart as always. Yet today Honoka had been unable to say “I’m sorry”—

Original page 114

—such a simple phrase, only four characters in Japanese.

From the following day onward, Mai hardly came to the Amagi Institute of Psychology anymore.

6 • Shinjuku, the Masked City

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Chapter Six • Shinjuku, the Masked City

Ever since the new term began, Toru had been feeling unwell for some reason.

He couldn't point to anything definitely wrong, but he couldn't shake the gloom. And although it wasn't particularly loud, sometimes the ringing in his ears simply wouldn't stop.

Mornings were still all right. But day after day, once he reached school and noon approached, he began to feel depressed.

"I reckon you've got the maternity blues."

It was after school. Though it was a weekday, classes had finished after fifth period because the school ceilings were being cleaned and repainted.

Just before leaving, Toru was telling Eiji about how he'd been feeling when the class clown,

Original page 116

Makoto, interrupted them.

"Whose baby is it? Huh? Whose?"

Playing along with Makoto, Eiji slipped an arm around Toru's shoulders.

"Well, Toru's a beauty. Very popular."

"I'm a guy!"

Kyoko and Asami, who were still in the classroom, joined in the laughter at Eiji's joke. Asami was a classmate and a good friend of Kyoko's. Small and slender, she looked like an elementary-school child.

"Toru! Honestly!" Kyoko said, trying not to laugh.

Eiji, naturally, was grinning at her. He was as devoted to Kyoko as ever.

"What are you idiots doing?"

Asami narrowed her already narrow eyes and laughed teasingly at Toru.

"Ooh! So it's true about you two?"

This year's great hope of the gymnastics club, Asami really was as tiny and slight as a little girl. She also had a knack for making outrageous remarks like a mischievous child. She was probably the sort whose mouth would get her into trouble.

Original page 117

"Really? Oh, you two! Toru and Eiji, gay together? You should've told me sooner. That's wonderful!"

Kyoko seemed to have taken it seriously. Eiji hurried to explain himself. They were beginning to sound like a husband-and-wife comedy act.

"It was a joke! Come on, Kyoko! The one I really like is you!"

There was a great deal of truth in Eiji's shout. But Kyoko seemed surprisingly unperturbed.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Eiji was quite serious; Kyoko was smiling as though she thought it was another joke.

"Oh. How boring."

What was that supposed to mean?

"I definitely don't want an ordinary boyfriend. Ordinary people are boring. Burning with forbidden love for a mutant boyfriend would be much more sensational and romantic!"

Eiji, Toru, and Makoto stared at her, wide-eyed. Their reaction was rather like seeing something they couldn't quite believe. Perhaps she'd been serious when she said the other day that she believed in mutants.

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"But thank you, Eiji. I'm glad you told me. I'll keep your confession close to my heart."

"Kyoko?"

That was unexpected.

Perhaps things really were going somewhere. Eyes shining, Eiji waited for her to continue.

"But I'm not ready to go out with just one person yet, and I don't really want a boyfriend. So, if you're okay with it, let's become even better friends."

There was nothing coy about her answer. It was so frank and refreshing that Eiji had to admire her. Listening beside them, Toru and the others felt like applauding too.

“Kyoko!”

She held out her right hand. They shook hands firmly.

“So, anyway, I'm thinking of stopping in Shinjuku on the way home today. Want to come?”

She invited Asami and Makoto as well as Eiji.

“Is something happening in Shinjuku today?”

“Well, there's a place called Heaven there. They're having a gig next week. And there's a rumor that actual mutants might be performing.”

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Kyoko used computer networks to pick up plenty of stories like this. Gathering information online was one of Eiji's specialties too, but Kyoko knew how to access a special information box. This was the first he'd heard of the rumor.

“Real mutants? Seriously?”

“Yes. That's what I want to find out. I thought you'd be interested, since you're our resident expert, Eiji. Isn't it amazing? I wonder what kind of mutants they are. Maybe Japan's finally going to have an organization like the X-Men.”

Her excitement spread to the others. Since she'd guessed his interests exactly, Eiji scratched his head and grinned.

“Yeah, I'll come. Hey, Toru, you're coming too, right?”

"Huh? No, I'll pass. I'd only get in your way. Besides, I'm not particularly keen on mutants."

"Don't be silly. There's no need to think like that. If you're going to talk that way, I won't go with Eiji. You'll have to come with me instead, Toru."

Kyoko linked her arm through his. The touch of her pale skin made him jump.

But frankly, Toru wasn't in the mood for Shinjuku. His ears were still ringing, and he didn't feel well.

Original page 120

"But isn't Shinjuku supposed to be dangerous lately?"

He tried that objection. They'd all heard the news about the recent succession of brawls and gang wars around Shinjuku.

Shinjuku wasn't very far from Amanogawa High, but when they went out after school, they generally chose Shibuya or Shinagawa instead.

"Then isn't that all the more reason to go in a group? Come with us, Toru."

Asami and Makoto declined because they had cram school. They'd only entered high school that spring, with entrance examinations still a long way off, but apparently quite a few students were already attending cram schools.

"Toru, please. Come along."

Eiji sounded so pathetic as he begged that Toru gave in.

"Well... all right, I suppose."

He wasn't very enthusiastic, but this was for Eiji. Reluctantly, he agreed to join them.

* * *

They arrived at Shinjuku Station on the Yamanote Line around half past three.

The sun was still high, and the city seemed wholesome enough. On Studio Alta's enormous screen,

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they saw a refreshing tropical island. Herb products crowded the sales carts. All the boutiques for young people were in the middle of their summer sales, and Kyoko kept getting distracted.

"It seems perfectly safe to me."

Five foreigners dressed as clowns were performing magic tricks and other acts in the station square. A girl nearby who looked like a music student played viola in a superb duet with a man on accordion.

"Maybe it's dangerous at night, when the drunks come out. But it's still daytime. Oh, look at those! Gorgeous!"

Kyoko stopped at a shoe shop squeezed between discount camera stores. All kinds of brightly colored long boots were on sale. She promptly bought a pair.

Their eyes continually caught by one shop after another, Toru, Eiji, and Kyoko set about finding Heaven.

The address was in Kabukicho 2-chome, Shinjuku Ward.

They passed American Boulevard beside PePe, the Seibu-Shinjuku station building, and continued deeper into

the neighborhood. Young call girls stood around here at night, but in the middle of the day there were few pedestrians at all.

“Um... I think it's somewhere around here.”

Yet once they entered a narrow alley, the whole city suddenly seemed dirty and run-down. They felt they'd glimpsed its hidden face.

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“Hey, Eiji. Let's go that way.”

Four or five boys were fighting at the far end of the narrow alley. The three friends decided to take a detour to avoid them. With Kyoko along, Toru and Eiji could never protect her if they got caught in a brawl. Neither boy could fight at all.

They proceeded cautiously, spotting little groups hanging around the back streets. Apparently the stories about Shinjuku becoming dangerous were true.

“Oh! There it is. That's Heaven.”

It was a shabby building that had once been a love hotel. Its walls were badly cracked.

A shutter covered the main entrance, with pieces of wood nailed across it. It looked as though that doorway had been closed for years.

Around the other side of the building, they found a barred gate tangled in dead ivy. It was shut, with a handwritten sign hanging from it. The fresh lettering, CLOSED, suggested this was the entrance currently in use.

Beyond the gate they could see a narrow spiral staircase descending underground. Heaven must be down there.

“What a shame. It's closed.”

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Disappointed, Kyoko put a hand on the gate. She rattled it, but it was locked from inside and wouldn't budge. Perhaps Heaven didn't open on weekdays.

“Well, now we know where it is. Let's come together for next week's gig, Kyoko.”

“Yes. The three of us must come back.”

“What, me too? Again?”

Once again, Toru had been roped in. He couldn't quite work up any desire to return. Even knowing that it wasn't so frightening during the day hadn't made him like Shinjuku very much.

That was when it happened.

They'd been standing at the barred gate. As they took their first two or three steps back toward Shinjuku Station, an unexpected voice spoke behind them in an Osaka accent.

“What, nobody here? That's no good.”

They turned. A boy was standing there. When on earth had he appeared? Elbow propped on the tall gate, he seemed to be peering into Heaven.

He had a remarkable presence, though he looked about their age. He wore a dark purple sleeveless shirt and tattered overalls covered with countless studs, as naturally as if they were nothing unusual.

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His hairstyle was strange: long bangs and just one long lock at the back. An oddly shaped band encircled his head, with earmuffs hanging on either side.

Without so much as a glance at the three of them, as though deliberately ignoring them, he turned on his heel and started away from Shinjuku Station. Then he suddenly looked back, and his eyes met Toru's.

They were fierce eyes.

They held a severity Toru would never have expected in a boy. He couldn't look away.

A little whirlwind rose between them. A moment later the boy left as though nothing had happened.

For some reason, Toru couldn't stop thinking about him. Until Eiji and Kyoko spoke, he stood motionless, staring after the boy's retreating figure.

From that day on, the ringing in Toru's ears grew even worse.

7 • Drug Voice

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Chapter Seven • Drug Voice

Eiji and Kyoko met at Shinjuku Station's New South Exit. Close to the Skyliner and limited-express platforms, and not too crowded, it was an ideal meeting place.

Today was the long-awaited gig at Heaven. Their hearts raced at the prospect of seeing the rumored mutants.

"It's a shame Toru couldn't come."

He had been supposed to join them, but the ringing in his ears was still so bad that he'd decided not to come.

Eiji had stopped by Toru's house. His mother had been urging him to see a doctor. Under the circumstances, dragging him out was impossible.

Original page 127

As far as Eiji was concerned, ending up on a date alone with Kyoko was delightful. In his heart, he felt a little grateful for Toru's ringing ears.

"How about we both go and visit Toru at home after the gig?"

At Kyoko's kind suggestion, Eiji nodded vigorously.

From the New South Exit, the two hurried through the shopping arcade inside Lumine toward Kabukicho and Heaven.

* * *

Kabukicho had an unusual atmosphere that day.

Boys and girls converged on Heaven, one after another. All over the neighborhood, members of Black Roses, Newest Power, and the other gangs stood around in little groups. Some looked as though they were still in middle school. Boys ran between them, presumably carrying messages.

Kabukicho felt completely different from when Toru, Eiji, and Kyoko had visited the other day. A tension absent then hung over the whole district.

Every member of Black Roses seemed to be on guard beside Heaven's ivy-covered gate. Leaning against it and organizing the people waiting to enter was their leader,

Original page 128

Kurusu.

Tall, tough-looking boys stood close to him, as though protecting him. Their faces were tense, apparently expecting an attack. Only Kurusu wore his usual relaxed smile.

Today Black Roses was hosting Teacher's first gig. More than a few people wanted to disrupt the concert Kurusu had arranged. Mississippi, for example, whose member Onihime he had stolen the other day, must be watching for a chance to take him down a peg.

Kurusu had, naturally, posted scouts around Kabukicho and ordered regular reports. His confidence rested on careful preparation.

"Welcome to today's Black Roses gig. Enjoy yourselves right to the end."

Passing him, Eiji and Kyoko descended Heaven's stairs with the other customers.

Kurusu's calm, composed manner reassured the Black Roses members. He was a strange man. Alongside the menace and murderous intensity that terrified even the yakuza, he had an approachable quality.

Every boy who joined Black Roses admired Kurusu. That was also why the leaders of the other gangs

Original page 129

envied and disliked him.

* * *

Mai appeared before Kurusu about five minutes before the gig began.

He remembered her face. She was plainer and less conspicuous than any girl he knew, which had made her all the more memorable.

"Hello. We met in the street the other day. You came. Thank you."

"Oh, um... y-yes."

Summoning her courage, Mai had come to Kabukicho alone. In truth, she was terribly nervous. Shinjuku frightened her, and she'd wanted Honoka to come along. But ever since the way they'd parted last week, she'd found it difficult to talk to her. Unable even to telephone, she'd come by herself.

Still, it had been worth it. Kurusu remembered her.

Perhaps the singer from that day would remember her too. The thought alone made her heart pound. Nothing could have made her happier.

Coming to Heaven had filled her with such joy that she had completely forgotten Honoka.

* * *

Eiji and Kyoko descended the narrow spiral staircase and immediately found themselves in a small live-music venue.

Original page 130

"It's smaller than I expected, Kyoko."

"Aren't clubs usually like this?"

Taking Eiji's arm, she went farther inside. Teacher stood on a raised stage in the center.

It was standing room only. Everyone was on their feet, waiting for the show, and Eiji and Kyoko joined them.

Bare concrete walls surrounded the room. To the left of the narrow entrance was a bar counter with only five stools.

Mezzanines flanked the stage, where staff checked lights and equipment.

There were already about fifty customers, enough to fill Heaven. Zuzu was weaving between them with a tray of drinks.

He passed the tray to the woman preparing drinks behind the counter.

"Onihime, are you feeling okay? You can rest if it's too much."

It was Onihime. Her injuries hadn't healed, but she'd insisted on helping with Teacher's first gig.

"I want to do something for Kurusu too."

Original page 131

She must still have been in pain. She smiled at Zuzu through a strained expression. Her love for Kurusu had nearly cost her life.

Suddenly the room's lights went out. The noisy audience fell silent for a moment, then burst into applause and cheers.

Kyoko had drawn Eiji close to the stage. He watched Teacher intently. Mai was near the bar, also looking toward the stage.

A small spotlight lit the stage, and Teacher began speaking into the microphone.

"Welcome, everyone. I'm Teacher. Until now I've been getting by on word of mouth, but from today I'll be singing with the backing of Black Roses."

His voice filled the room. The microphone also picked up the melody his fingers played on the guitar.

Large lights hanging from the ceiling to either side began to flash.

Teacher stood wrapped in dazzling light.

"Today's the day—my unforgettable first gig. If you want to hear me sing, then come along with Black Roses!"

At that moment, something changed in the audience's eyes. Their expressions changed too.

Original page 132

Cheers rose in answer to Teacher's shout. His voice was powerful. Carried on the melody of his guitar, those few words alone had gripped the hearts of the boys and girls gathered at Heaven.

Even Kurusu was astonished. The audience was changing before his eyes. Once the song began, the effect became even more pronounced.

They couldn't take their eyes off Teacher. Some people's arms and legs twitched; others cried out. Excitement swirled through the room.

A great wave swept the entire venue, overtaking the crowd. Teacher's singing was plainly driving that tension higher and higher.

Kurusu stared in amazement.

Before his eyes, the boys trembled and twisted as though they'd been given a powerful stimulant. Between songs, Teacher shouted again.

"As long as you're singing my songs, Black Roses is your friend. Let's set Shinjuku on fire together!"

Some in the audience, overwhelmed by Teacher's passion, had begun to cry. An abnormal excitement filled the room.

This was different from the response of passionate fans—the response Kurusu had originally intended. It was something unexpected.

Original page 133

The boys were responding to Teacher's voice in their very hearts. Their reactions varied: some wore rapt expressions; others' eyes shone fiercely.

Mai felt heat welling up from deep inside her. Her hair stood on end, electricity discharged more strongly than usual, and sparks scattered before her eyes.

Swaying along near the entrance counter, Zuzu cheered. His feet beat the floor at an astonishing speed. They moved so fast they were almost invisible.

As for Kyoko, for some reason she couldn't stop crying. Eiji tried to steady his own trembling body with both hands while watching her unusual excitement. But there was nothing he could do except stay beside her.

Watching the whole room, Kurusu too became excited by the extraordinary scene.

"What... what's happening?"

Teacher's song seemed to have no effect on Kurusu himself. But he realized that Teacher's voice was causing all this.

"Wonderful... Wonderful, Teacher..."

Suddenly firecrackers went off, followed by the sound of breaking bottles. The noise brought Kurusu

Original page 134

back to his senses.

He saw a group of armed boys pouring into the room. The Black Roses guards near the entrance were being hurled inside one after another.

In the middle of the attacking group, giving orders, was Gamu, leader of Mississippi.

Bloodstained bandages bound the right side of his upper body, presumably because of the injuries Kurusu had inflicted in their fight over Onihime the other day. An iron rod was even strapped to his hand.

“Black Roses? You're nothing! Mississippi's going to crush you! Get ready! Come out here, Onihime!”

This time Gamu hadn't brought just five people. There were more than thirty. Mississippi was attacking with its full strength.

They beat down everyone they encountered, making no distinction between one person and another.

The audience, who had only come to see a concert, fled in panic. Among them were Eiji, Kyoko, and Mai.

“Onihime! Where are you?”

Gamu was searching for her. Spotting her standing stunned at the counter, he forced his way through the crowd toward her.

“Ah! Onihime, run! Get away!”

Original page 136

His little body trembling, Zuzu desperately tried to shield Onihime. She was already panicking at Gamu's deranged appearance.

For a moment Kurusu stood speechless at the sudden turn of events. Of all days—today was Teacher's first gig. They'd

interrupted it. They had spoiled a momentous instant, the discovery of a power unlike anything he'd ever seen.

He couldn't bear the thought. His body moved before he could think. Kurusu's patience snapped.

Laughing like a madman, Mississippi's leader Gamu swung the iron bars strapped to both arms at anyone in reach as he made for Onihime. He must have meant to repay them for the other day. Hatred of her and Kurusu blinded him to everything else.

"Hya-ha-ha! You caught me off guard last time, but not today! I've got a powerful friend helping me now!"

Amid the screams, Kurusu pushed through the crowd, aiming straight for Gamu. As Gamu beat the boys in his path and advanced on Onihime, Kurusu seized the iron bars extending from his shoulders.

Gamu turned in surprise. Kurusu drove a tremendous headbutt into the center of his forehead. It sounded like stone

Original page 137

splitting apart.

It was only one blow, but it was dreadful. Both their foreheads split open, blood bursting from the red wounds. Mississippi and Black Roses members alike froze at the force of it. Eiji, Kyoko, and Mai stood speechless too.

But Kurusu still held the weapons on Gamu's shoulders. He kept hammering his own head into the bloody forehead of the boy who had already lost consciousness.

Every impact sprayed blood. Kurusu's own face was covered with it, terrifying to behold. Something white showed through Gamu's split forehead.

Eyes rolled back, Gamu toppled onto his back. Blood poured down like a waterfall and spread across the floor.

"You bastards interrupted the gig! Anyone who doesn't want to get hurt worse—and anyone who has nothing to do with this—get the hell out!"

As though Kurusu's roar were a signal, the customers rushed to escape Heaven before they got caught up and injured. Eiji pulled Kyoko along into the stream.

The young people fleeing Heaven scattered through the streets of Shinjuku.

Original page 138

Kyoko and Eiji had finally run all the way to Shinjuku Station.

"Whew! That turned into something else!" Eiji told her between breaths. His heart was still pounding.

"What a nightmare. Shinjuku really is just like the rumors."

"Yes... But I'm a little disappointed we didn't meet any mutants. I wonder if there were any there. I couldn't tell at all."

Kyoko looked back, her shoulders heaving. But the uproar in Kabukicho didn't reach this far.

* * *

Mai alone had remained at Heaven's entrance. Fear had frozen her legs and prevented her escape, but even more than that, she couldn't forget Teacher.

Supported by Zuzu, Onihime got up behind the counter. At that moment Gamu, lying at Kurusu's feet, opened his eyes wide.

“!”

He sprang up as though launched by a spring and charged Onihime. Knocking Zuzu aside, he lunged at her.

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“Onihime... Ah, ah, I've missed you!”

He seized Onihime's face and pressed his mouth against hers. Keeping her there, he sucked her tongue up with all his strength. Blood running from his forehead stained her face bright red.

“Mmmnnnnnn...”

Gamu pulled out the tongue he had sucked up. A ribbon of blood flew through the air between their mouths.

“Ngaaaaah—! —! —!!”

With everything inside her mouth sucked away, Onihime rolled across the floor, forcing a sound from deep in her throat that was neither scream nor shout. Her chest gave one great convulsive leap; then she lay utterly still and died.

Gamu chewed up what was in his mouth and swallowed it. The members of Mississippi and Black Roses who had been grappling with one another had already lost the will to fight.

Gamu was laughing. His eyes focused on nothing. He was no longer even looking at Kurusu.

“Onihime, Onihime, Onihime...”

He had gone mad. Only Gamu could see Onihime now.

As Mai stood at Heaven’s entrance, the Mississippi members carrying the deranged Gamu passed beside her—

Original page 140

Inside Heaven, Kurusu and Teacher directed their members to clean up. They also had to decide what to do with Onihime's body. Kurusu's head ached.

“Mississippi's finished now.”

Teacher muttered with a weary expression. Crying, Zuzu wrapped Onihime in black plastic.

“All this over one woman.”

“Gamu was really in love with Onihime. I thought something like this would happen eventually.”

Though he'd never expected it to happen today, Kurusu added.

Someone suddenly broke into their conversation.

“You fellows really are strong.”

An unfamiliar voice rang out in an Osaka accent. Somehow an unfamiliar boy had come to stand behind Kurusu and Teacher.

“Those Mississippi boys haven't got any backbone. Soon as their leader went down, they ran off. There's nobody at their office anymore either.”

Original page 141

He was a tall boy neither had seen before. An oddly shaped band encircled his head.

"Who are you?"

"The powerful friend Gamu was talking about."

At Kurusu's question, the boy smiled without the slightest embarrassment.

"If he can't keep people following him, he's got himself to blame. You're Kurusu, right? Pretty impressive. You fellows seem a lot more interesting."

Somehow it was hard to dislike him. And what he said was right. He had the same easygoing quality as Kurusu.

"What do you say, Kurusu? Want to hire me to help Black Roses? I really can be useful."

To offer his services without even demonstrating what he could do, he must be very sure of himself. Kurusu was interested, but Teacher looked uneasy.

"Heh. I like you. I've always liked interesting people."

"Kurusu..."

Teacher started to say something. Kurusu whispered to him.

"For our dream of building a kingdom."

Teacher still looked dissatisfied. Through the passage behind the counter, he disappeared into the rooms upstairs.

Original page 142

"What's your name?"

“Tempest of the Wind.”

The boy grinned, as though he'd been waiting to be asked.

* * *

Mai, who had been standing at Heaven's entrance for a while, glared up at the sky. With an expression of resolution, she went back inside.

From that day, she became a member of Black Roses and began visiting Shinjuku almost every day.

* * *

That day also shattered the balance of power among the youth gangs of Kabukicho. Overnight, the name of Black Roses—the gang that had destroyed Mississippi—resounded through Kabukicho and all Shinjuku.

Newest Power and the other groups began strengthening their weapons and building up their forces.

The gang war centered on Kabukicho had entered a new phase.

8 • The Moment of Awakening

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Chapter Eight • The Moment of Awakening

Stories of Kurusu, who had reduced Gamu to a broken wreck, spread among Shinjuku's youths.

Captivated by the legend of his invincibility, they came to Heaven day after day, hoping to join Black Roses. Most were boys and girls in middle or high school.

With Gamu crushed and their leader gone, Mississippi's members were at a loss. By the following day, however, they'd chosen either to join other gangs or flee Shinjuku. The gang called Mississippi vanished from the district completely.

Black Roses staged another concert by Teacher a few days later.

With the concert interrupted by the recent disturbance now rescheduled, great numbers of boys and girls gathered around Heaven.

Original page 144

Once again a wave of tension swept the young people of Kabukicho.

Kurusu, Black Roses' leader, meticulously deployed guards around Heaven and throughout the district. Mississippi had interrupted the previous concert; he intended to let no one interfere with this one.

Besides, Mississippi's collapse had increased tensions between Shinjuku's gangs. It couldn't hurt to strengthen their forces. Another group might attack at any time.

Watching the customers stream into the club, Kurusu wore a confident smile.

"If I'm right, Teacher has..."

An idea about Teacher had formed in his mind. It also pointed the way toward his long-held dream of building a kingdom.

The results of tonight's concert should prove whether he was right.

Once the venue was packed with youngsters, the lights went down. Only the spotlight on Teacher blazed brightly.

"Welcome to Heaven. I'm Teacher."

His fingers plucked the strings, and the guitar sounded. The concert began, and Teacher started

Original page 145

to speak. But this was no ordinary speech. It was the finest script Kurusu had ever written.

"Will you follow us—Black Roses?"

As Teacher's voice flowed over the room, the effect began at once. The audience's eyes changed, their faces becoming rapt.

"As long as Black Roses exists, we're one! Let's go!"

The whole room was enveloped in the same indescribable frenzy as the other day.

At the very front of the stage, Mai felt her body growing unbelievably hot. Heat flooded her, and something seemed about to well up from within.

Her knees wouldn't stop trembling. Neither would her neck.

Drawn by Teacher's voice, her body seemed to climb higher and higher. Unable to bear the heat, she squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them wide again, she felt as though she'd burst apart.

Electricity had begun discharging from her body. Responding to Teacher's singing, sparks sprayed from every part of her.

She wasn't alone. The other boys felt as if their bodies were bursting open too.

Seeing the changes in Mai and the others, Kurusu grinned. His confidence in his discovery of Teacher's power was now absolute.

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"I knew it. His voice can awaken latent abilities. I was right. With the right use of that power, taking Shinjuku will be easy."

Kurusu had told Teacher what to say at this concert in advance. Unaware of his intentions, Teacher had cooperated without question in Kurusu's new experiment.

"I see. So that's the kind of power you like."

"Tempest?"

Tempest had somehow come to stand beside him.

He too possessed a mysterious ability. More mysterious still, Teacher's guiding voice seemed to have absolutely no effect on him.

"That's no ordinary thing. What kind of power is it? Look at their eyes."

Precisely. Even now, the audience was responding to Teacher's words and preparing to obey his commands. Yet Tempest, standing beside Kurusu, looked perfectly calm.

"Tempest. Why doesn't it affect you?"

"Same reason as you, isn't it?"

Kurusu himself had been slightly dazed at the last concert, but today he felt fine, as though he'd developed an immunity.

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Looking closely, he noticed a few people scattered through the excited crowd who remained entirely calm and unaffected. In other words, the effects of Teacher's voice varied from person to person.

"How long's Teacher been like that?"

"Only recently. He wasn't like that three months ago. That druglike power... I wonder when..."

Yes. Teacher's voice permeated the audience like a drug. They were intoxicated by it.

"Like a drug? That's exactly it—a Drug Voice."

"Tempest, what the hell are you?"

"Hey, don't get angry. I've just had a strange power since I was born. In America they'd probably call me a mutant."

Tempest raised an index finger and circled it through the air. A wind born at his fingertip sliced away a lock of Kurusu's bangs like an invisible blade.

Kurusu didn't move. He glared at Tempest, his sharp gaze boring into him.

"Heh-heh... I like that cautious side of you too. Building a kingdom, eh? Team up with me,

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and things are sure to get interesting."

Tempest winked at Kurusu's grim face. Taken aback, Kurusu relaxed.

"Heh. So that's it. Both him and you—mutants. Ha-ha! I see. I see."

Tempest answered with a broad smile. The concert was approaching its climax.

"You've got it. I admire you. I'd never do anything to betray you."

Without waiting for Teacher's set to finish, the two disappeared behind the counter.

From the passage at the back, they climbed the stairs into the hotel above Heaven and made for Kurusu's room.

"Well, that's a fine view. Very nice..."

"This is where our dream begins."

Kurusu's room occupied the entire top floor, the eighth. The rooms below had been divided up as sleeping quarters for the young Black Roses members. Teacher, who'd had nowhere to stay, had apparently settled in too.

From the eighth-floor window, they could see Kabukicho spreading like a stain among buildings of middling height.

Original page 149

It was the perfect place to continue discussing their dreams.

* * *

Down in Heaven after the concert, Teacher went on playing his guitar. Mai and several other boys and girls gathered close, looking at him with fervent eyes.

Sparks still crackled from Mai's body, as though the excitement hadn't subsided. The same was happening to the others.

Mai was still in middle school, but today her outfit was strikingly grown-up. Her makeup was heavy, though the bright red lipstick still seemed a little premature. Her glossy red bustier and miniskirt matched her lips. Silver chain accessories jangled around her neck and wrists. Even her thigh-high boots were red.

One thing distinguished her from the Mai of before: she no longer wore protective gloves. Under the influence of Teacher's voice, she had begun learning to control her power.

She had only just joined Black Roses, but she'd worshipped Teacher from the start. Perhaps simply being near him

made her happy. As she talked to him among the other members, she blushed right up to her ears.

Nothing remained of her former air of frailty.

Original page 150

"Can you believe it? It feels unreal that I can talk so easily. Hearing your voice calms me down somehow. Today I could feel an enormous power welling up inside me again."

Mai kept talking excitedly, still caught up in the concert. Teacher listened with a quiet smile.

With his dreadlocks and that smile, he almost resembled Jesus Christ. To Mai he truly was a god. Not only to her: to all the mutants gathered around him, he was a god addressing the people to save the world.

"I'd do anything for you, Teacher. You're the god of Black Roses."

"Kurusu's the leader of Black Roses, not me. I just sing whatever he tells me to."

Teacher sounded a little embarrassed by so much praise.

"No. They just don't understand. You're the real leader, Teacher. Look! You gave me this wonderful power."

Excited, Mai released electricity from all five fingertips. Sparks singed Zuzu's nose beside her. Everyone laughed.

Original page 152

Teacher said no more. Zuzu, who adored Mai, was watching him with earnest eyes.

Mai's feelings were obvious. Teacher simply patted her head gently. Still in middle school, she seemed more like a little sister than a possible girlfriend.

* * *

Kurusu was out. As usual, Teacher sprawled on the sofa upstairs. Cigarette smoke had stained the ceiling.

He and Kurusu went back eight years, to when Teacher was a student singing on the streets. Kurusu had been the first person to understand his music.

Kurusu had always been clever. Even when they first met, he had possessed the ambition to take the world into his own hands.

Teacher had his music; Kurusu had his organization. Their methods were different, but they shared a single dream. Kurusu's influence and ability had built Black Roses into a powerful group.

"Me, the leader? Kurusu's incredible. I couldn't begin to match him..."

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"Heh. Me, the leader? Me...?"

Repeating Mai's words to himself, Teacher laughed inwardly.

They wanted the same thing. Neither stood above the other. That was what he had believed—until Mai said that.

Her words had fallen like a stone into the pool of his mind. At first he had paid no attention to the ripples. Now they kept spreading.

“He and I are in this together. If he has the charisma to draw people to him, then I, too... No, but...”

The ripples only grew.

* * *

He must have dozed off. When he woke, everything was dark. The sky outside looked heavy.

“Brooding doesn't suit me. Thinking's Kurusu's specialty. I'm better off singing.”

“No. You are the man who possesses the power of a god.”

An unfamiliar, low voice spoke out of the darkness.

Original page 154

The neon outside occasionally cast light into the room, but all he could make out was a silhouette.

“Wh—who are you?”

Teacher sat up. The figure did not identify itself.

A deep, ominous voice seemed to rise from the depths of hell and whisper into his ear.

“I will give you real power.”

As he turned, hard hands with a mechanical feel clamped around his head. Enormous pressure bore down on both temples.

“Aaaaaah!”

His skull seemed about to split. Hearing his own scream, he lost consciousness.

* * *

At the School for Gifted Youngsters in New York, Jubilee and Wolverine were preparing to leave.

Actually, Jubilee was the only one frantically packing. Wolverine had finished long ago and was waiting for her.

Original page 155

"Jubilee, will you cut it out? You don't need all that. At this rate we'll never get to Japan."

Surrounded by belongings, Jubilee endlessly debated what to put in her suitcase.

"But I love these clothes, and I want to take this towel, too. Oh, why won't it all fit?"

Bath towels, shoes—so many bulky things. Even her large suitcase could not hold half the pile.

Gambit and Rogue came in.

"Well, well. You've spread yourselves out. Having trouble, you two?" Gambit smiled wryly.

"Oh, Jubilee. Here's a little going-away present. Bring me a souvenir."

It was a set of rose-shaped soaps—certainly something a girl would want on a trip.

"Yay! Soap! Thanks, Gambit!"

"Why do you have to..." Rogue scolded him.

Giving Jubilee another choice would only make Wolverine more irritated.

Original page 156

"Gambit!"

Wolverine sounded almost ready to cry with frustration.

“Heh... Couldn't resist. Wanted to see that look on Wolverine's face.”

“You're awful...” Rogue pinched his arm.

Professor X arrived and looked into the room, where Wolverine and Jubilee were still struggling with the preparations.

“There you are, Wolverine. Since you're going to Japan, I'd like you to stop in Hunan, China, and collect some research materials on qigong.”

“China... You got it!”

“It's a little out of the way, but here are a map and the address. I've already contacted him. He's a respected qigong master, so mind your manners.”

Between that and Jubilee's packing, the two finally left three mornings later.

9 • The Gang War Escalates

Original page 158

Chapter Nine • The Gang War Escalates

At last the hot summer ended, and real signs of autumn reached Tokyo. The struggle among Shinjuku's youth gangs was about to enter another phase.

Black Roses, led by Kurusu, seemed unstoppable. New recruits increased its numbers day by day, and its influence only continued to expand.

Mai was now inside Shinjuku Station with two fellow Black Roses mutants, Eve and Dadaan. They had learned that another gang had a mutant among its members, and had come to hunt the boys down.

If the target was a mutant, their job was to take him to Heaven—even by force. Mai was enjoying herself like a predator stalking its prey.

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“Eve, they ran that way!”

Threading through the crowds that packed the narrow station, Mai and the others relentlessly cornered their quarry.

There were four boys. One had extraordinarily long ears. Apparently he could hear even the faintest sound.

But cornered beside the west-exit ticket gates, he was distracted by the noise outside and failed to notice Eve circling around.

“Okay, Mai!”

Eve was a slender, pretty girl. Moving quickly, she blocked their escape. She tried to produce flames from her fingertips, but failed. They had finally cornered the boys, yet she still couldn't control her mutant powers properly.

Realizing this, the long-eared boy swung at Eve. The other three grabbed her arms to help him—or so they thought. A huge boy was suddenly standing behind her: the Black Roses mutant Dadaan.

The boys flinched at his enormous bulk. Mai seized the opening and sent an electric shock through them.

“Uwaaaaah!”

The four collapsed against the automatic ticket gates. Dadaan hoisted the long-eared boy onto his shoulder. The boy

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had stopped resisting.

“Ahahaha! If you don't like it, come to Black Roses yourselves!”

Leaving that taunt behind, Mai and the others departed.

“D-damn it... If we had a stronger mutant, we wouldn't lose...”

However bitterly the three remaining boys protested, it was too late.

Meanwhile, Kurusu and Tempest spent day after day considering exactly how to use Teacher's Drug Voice.

To expand Black Roses, they needed plenty of capable young people—pawns who would serve as soldiers.

Tempest hurried all over Tokyo, using every means he could to find mutants with unusual abilities like his own and Teacher's. He used every available information network, including the mutant message lines and computer networks that had recently become popular.

Anyone with even the slightest special ability was brought to Heaven, with money if necessary. Teacher's job was to brainwash these new recruits into obedient subordinates and draw out their latent powers.

At the same time, Kurusu formed a strike force from the more hot-blooded recruits whose mutant abilities were relatively weak. They armed themselves and openly

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continued their battles with rival youth groups and yakuza organizations. Anyone who fell into Black Roses' hands was beaten without mercy.

With its growing strength and its fangs bared, Black Roses was formidable. Neither yakuza who knew nothing of mutants nor rival groups familiar with the word could stand against it. Kurusu grew increasingly arrogant.

Shinjuku became more dangerous by the day.

Yet police intervention in Kabukicho was rare. The earlier conflict between foreign mafia groups and local yakuza had diminished both sides, and Shinjuku had only just become

superficially safe again. The police did not concern themselves with its hidden affairs. As long as those affairs did not intrude into respectable society, Shinjuku was a lawless zone.

Of course, Kabukicho had police boxes. Shinjuku had a police station and the metropolitan government offices. The reason Kabukicho could behave as though it were beyond the law was money changing hands behind the scenes. Kurusu had counted on that from the beginning. Some of the money seized in raids on yakuza was used for precisely that purpose.

Besides, the Japanese police were helpless against mutants. They did not involve themselves with them. Japan was a country without mutants—that was the official view, and

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police under political authority were not permitted a view of their own.

This allowed Black Roses to expand its influence throughout Kabukicho. Its opponents gradually weakened. Yet the rival youth gangs also began searching for mutants of their own. They had realized what lay behind Black Roses' rise.

Boys who had previously had nothing to distinguish them acquired power within their groups through mutant abilities and climbed into leadership positions.

Every gang was gaining young mutants like these.

"Hey, hey, hey! This area's under Black Roses. You don't get to swagger around here!"

Mai was picking a fight with two Newest Power members hanging around the entrance to Kabukicho. Eager to test the strength Teacher's Drug Voice had increased still further, she had come out alone.

"What was that, you little bitch?"

The Newest members were taken aback by the sudden challenge.

"D-don't. That's Mai from Black Roses! She uses electricity!"

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"Hmph. My shock waves pack more punch than that little bitch."

The boy fired a shock wave from his left palm. Mai stepped back; it passed her and shattered a building wall.

"Looks like you're getting famous, too."

Tempest, appearing from nowhere as though carried by the wind, murmured in Mai's ear. "I've turned up at an interesting moment."

"Tempest! Perfect timing. I'm going to teach these guys a lesson. Give me a hand!"

A mutant battle between Mai and the shock-wave boy began amid Shinjuku's bustle. They traded attacks at the Yasukuni-dori intersection.

Whenever the light turned green, they darted through the crowds crossing the broad road, chasing each other. When it turned red and cars passed, they raced around the pavement outside the buildings.

Their powers burst through gaps in the passing crowds. They were evenly matched, skillfully avoiding each other's attacks.

But the pedestrians caught between them fell one after another, like bystanders hit by stray bullets.

Still they did not stop fighting. Mai, if anything, was laughing as though she were playing a game.

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...was raging.

"That's enough already. Give it a rest."

Exasperated that the fight showed no sign of ending, Tempest hoisted Mai onto his shoulder. He had decided that continuing to drag ordinary pedestrians into their battle would be bad for both sides.

"Hey! What are you doing? Put me down! I hate being carried like this!"

[Brief editorial summary: Mai is exposed and subjected to humiliating physical treatment as Tempest carries her back to Heaven.]

At Heaven, Teacher captivated the hearts of the young people who gathered day after day with his Drug Voice, giving them a mission as Black Roses warriors.

"Honestly, Tempest! Stop treating me like a baby!"

Tempest set Mai down at Heaven like a piece of luggage, then disappeared again to who knew where.

"Wow... There are so many people here again today."

Back at Heaven, Mai was amazed by the size of the audience. She went into the room behind the counter, changed into fresh clothes, and hurried to Teacher's side.

Anyone who heard Teacher's Drug Voice even once wanted to hear his voice again and again. Dr—

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At first, Kurusu's faction had been astonished by the phenomenon. Once they realized that they themselves might become mutants, they immediately gathered to receive Teacher's Drug Voice.

Without Kurusu or Tempest realizing it, Teacher's power was growing stronger.

Drug Voice turned gifted young people into still more powerful mutants. Their trust in Teacher grew along with their strength.

The mutants whose abilities it enhanced were ecstatic. Intoxicated by their own powers, they swore still greater loyalty to him.

"See? See? I told you. Everyone relies on you more than Kurusu."

Mai smiled innocently. She was right.

With Kurusu increasingly absent from Heaven, command of Black Roses was shifting from him to Teacher.

"I know that. Come on. The show's starting."

Teacher took Mai onto the stage. Lights illuminated it, and the audience began chanting his name.

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Mai, too, gazed at Teacher in a trance. Sparks enveloped her, making her hair stand on end. She loved him and devoted herself to him, even if he saw her only as a little sister.

Mai had not been home for days. Nor had she visited Honoka at the Amagi Institute of Psychology.

She liked Honoka. She had looked up to her as an older sister, yet had always been afraid Honoka would abandon her.

Beautiful, capable Honoka could not understand how it felt to be a girl with nothing to recommend her. Somewhere inside, Mai always despised herself when she was with Honoka.

But now Drug Voice had transformed her tendency to accumulate electricity—once her great defect—into a wonderful ability she wanted to boast about. With this power, nobody would make fun of her anymore.

One of Black Roses' youngest members, Mai no longer feared anything. Her companions looked at her with respect. When she swaggered through Shinjuku, even other gangs and local yakuza treated her and the other mutants with caution.

The power she had gained amplified her natural electrical condition. She could store enough static electricity to discharge it from her body and control it at will.

When she sent electricity coursing through herself and released it in sparks, her target lost consciousness. That power

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put her among the strongest mutants in Black Roses.

Now she wasn't even afraid of Honoka. She could say what she wanted without Honoka's protection. She could fight when she wanted to fight.

No one could tie her down anymore. She could always act for herself. Honoka, about whom she had once worried so much, no longer concerned her at all.

"Teacher's power has made me a new person."

With eyes full of confidence, Mai pledged her loyalty to the man onstage.

* * *

Amanogawa High had just finished its cultural festival.

Called the Hokuto Festival, it ran for three days around October 1 every year. For Toru and the others, who had entered the school that spring, it was their first high-school festival. It was far livelier than anything they had experienced in middle school, and Toru and Eiji threw themselves into it.

Toru's class ran a cosplay karaoke café.

Their classmate Natsuo, whose mother was a cosplay manga artist, had suggested it. With sound advice and reference materials from professionals, it was a huge success. They were so busy with customers that they barely had a chance to visit the other classes during those three days.

Customers challenged the waiters and waitresses, dressed as various characters, to karaoke contests.

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Every victory according to the scoring machine earned a hundred-yen discount on food and drinks. Anyone who beat ten people could take the girl or boy of their choice on a date around the school.

Naturally, Kyoko was much in demand.

Her costume was a little eccentric, though: a tank top, shorts, and red boxing gloves. She called herself Joe Yabuki. Kyoko, with her specialist enthusiasms, was a fan of Dezaki and Sugino.

Most of the other girls dressed as game characters such as Cammy and Sarah, making Kyoko's Joe and Tomomi's Number 18 stand out. Among the girls, Masato's Schwarzenegger was popular too.

Eiji was delighted with his original Tiger Mask costume. Toru, rather against his will, was dressed as a schoolgirl in an old-fashioned sailor uniform. This proved extraordinarily popular with the school's unmarried teachers, who kept dragging him around.

Today was the day after the festival. School was closed for a compensatory holiday.

Toru's tinnitus had returned that morning, leaving him out of sorts. Perhaps he was still tired from the previous day's excitement. But he wasn't ill enough to stay in bed.

About a week before the festival, he had gone to the hospital for a thorough examination. They had found nothing wrong. He was a little thin, the doctor had assured him, but otherwise in excellent health.

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Yet all that morning he could not shake a feeling of unease.

Kyoko and Eiji came to collect him a little after noon.

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

Pouting and doing his Donald Duck impression, Toru prepared drinks for them.

He was alone in the house.

Both his parents worked: his father designed cameras, and his mother worked at a nursery. They were gentle, easygoing people, and their son had inherited much of their temperament. He disliked quarrels and competitions. An only child, he had been carefully looked after. His family wasn't upper-class rich, but he was fairly sheltered.

Eiji's parents were both teachers. He had once told Toru that he would probably become a teacher himself after university.

Kyoko's family was relatively wealthy.

An automobile company founded by her maternal great-grandfather had become established soon after its creation. Later, a minicar developed in-house became a hit, and the business expanded, bringing other relatives into it. Her grandfather was an inventive, adaptable man whose talent for promotion and production turned one new car after another into a success. The company kept growing.

Her father was a technical man who had dreamed of becoming an engineer since childhood. Now he headed technical development at the company, whose president was her uncle. Her father

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had become engaged at university to her mother, a student one year below him from an old family connected with the imperial household. No one had opposed their marriage, and it had been a happy one.

That happiness continued. With a generous father and a sheltered mother, Kyoko had grown up freely, wanting for nothing. Somewhat placid, yet willful and capricious, she was a modern girl who also knew a great deal about old customs. Anything she wanted to know, she had to investigate to the very end. That was Kyoko.

"There was that trouble last time, and the concert got canceled. Today's our perfect chance, Toru."

Eiji and Kyoko had unfortunately been inside during the previous incident, but had escaped unhurt. Neither had told Toru. If he knew, he would certainly insist on staying away.

For Eiji, having Toru along meant Kyoko would feel safe and readily accept an invitation on a day off. He had tried asking her on a date alone, but she had neatly turned him down.

"Come on, Toru. They say all sorts of mutants turn up there these days. If we go today, we're bound to see one. And the singer, Teacher... He was amazing. Just hearing his voice will perk you up!"

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The rumor had also appeared on a public message board on Eiji's computer network: Teacher's singing could make you a different person.

Still, Shinjuku remained a dangerous place. Knowing that, Toru nevertheless gave in to their persuasion.

"If the princess comes to fetch me herself, I suppose I have no choice. I'll go."

"Yes! Then let's leave right now, before you change your mind. Come on!"

Eiji had been sure Toru would come unless he was seriously unwell. But Kyoko's delight at his agreement gave him an odd feeling. There was no reason for jealousy, yet he felt it anyway.

Kyoko looked cute today, too.

She wore a white blouse with a large collar, a long black knitted vest, a black miniskirt, and rather showy stockings patterned with red and black diamonds. A narrow ribbon with a small cross was tied around her neck.

Eiji wore a white shirt covered in safety pins and torn jeans. He had replaced his usual black-framed glasses with round yellow sunglasses.

Toru knew little about fashion. Over his customary jeans cut off below the knee and black hoodie, he put on a white linen jacket.

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Shinjuku was about forty minutes by train from Toru's house.

"Maybe we shouldn't go after all. I've got a bad feeling."

As Eiji and Kyoko had expected, Toru began hesitating on the train. He was indecisive, unable to commit himself.

"What are you talking about, after all this? A premonition? You sound like a mutant who can see the future."

"I don't like mutants."

By the time they reached Shinjuku, it was past three. The concert was supposed to start at four, so they ought to hurry. It was a weekday, and the streets were neither as crowded nor as noisy as usual.

A crowd had gathered outside Heaven. Security around the entrance was unusually tight because of the continuing gang conflict.

"Pretty crowded for a weekday..."

Eiji was surprised too. Their previous visit had been on a Sunday, and the unexpected trouble had kept him from looking closely at the other customers.

Now he noticed many boys and girls about their own age. Some were decidedly strange: animal-like costumes, faces painted bright red. It was hardly unusual to see flamboyantly dressed young people here.

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"They apparently hold concerts almost every day now. That shows how popular he is."

"Is the singer here a mutant?"

Toru pointed at a flyer beside the entrance and asked Kyoko.

"Who are you calling a mutant?"

A girl about to enter Heaven addressed them sharply.

Her small frame was dressed in a flashy, glittering bustier, leaving her shoulders and midriff bare. Toru was unsure where to look. It was Mai.

Helping with the concerts every day, she looked this unfamiliar boy suspiciously up and down. She seemed younger than Toru, but put on remarkably grown-up airs.

"Haven't seen you before. First time? Follow me. I'll show you a good spot."

Apparently she needed no ticket or explanation. She slipped past the queue and went downstairs into Heaven.

After a moment's hesitation, Kyoko, Eiji, and Toru followed the girl, whose name they did not even know.

The basement was already packed. Mai nodded in satisfaction at another prosperous day.

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"Over here. The counter's perfect. You'll be able to hear plenty of Teacher's singing. See you."

Mai smiled and started to go behind the counter alone.

Suddenly the floor shook.

Something exploded in front of the people waiting for Teacher. Toru and his friends involuntarily dropped to their knees. Smoke immediately filled the room.

"Wh-what's this? Kyoko! Toru! Are you okay?"

In moments, the smoke hid everything. Amid the screams, they could hear Eiji shouting.

"Cough, cough... Eiji? Outside! Let's get outside!"

They struggled toward the stairs they had just descended, pushing through the smoke. Though his eyes and throat burned, Toru finally reached the street.

Eiji came up right behind him.

“Ugh... That was awful. You okay, Toru?”

“Y-yes. What about Kyoko?”

“Kyoko? Inoue?”

Toru had assumed she came up with Eiji. But Kyoko was nowhere to be seen. She was probably still downstairs.

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They could not find her among the boys still scrambling up the stairs, either.

“Wh-what do we do?”

“What do you mean, what do we do, Toru?”

“Um... All right. I'll go back down and look.”

At that moment, a second explosion boomed inside Heaven.

“K-Kyoko!”

Eiji pushed past the people coming up and plunged into the smoke-filled basement.

“Wait, Eiji! I'm coming too!”

Toru hurried downstairs after him.

* * *

Smoke still billowed through the basement. The first blast had come from a homemade bomb with a small explosive charge. The second was a smoke screen packed with gunpowder.

Visibility was poor, and it was hard to breathe. Groans sounded somewhere nearby. People must be injured.

The floor was treacherous. Toru could feel chunks of fallen bare concrete beneath his toes. Keeping along the wall, he searched for the counter.

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“Who? Who did this? Damn it. Who's trying to get in Teacher's way?”

Mai was sitting near the counter. Her injured leg kept her from standing, and the smoke that obscured her view was making her furious. Her irritation sent electricity racing through her body. Sparks crackled.

Toru mistook the figure beside the counter for Kyoko and reached out. Mai's discharge burned his hand. A spark ignited the third explosive, placed near the counter.

“Ow!”

BOOM!

The noise was tremendous, enough to seem to burst their eardrums. Its destructive force was slight, but its sound was overwhelming.

Panicking at the explosion right before him, Toru felt his body grow hot and his consciousness recede. A ringing stronger than anything he had ever experienced vibrated from deep within him. His whole body began shaking.

Then white light enveloped him.

Mai was right beside him.

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“Eek!”

She could barely see through the smoke, but she saw the figure nearby blaze pure white. She saw the white light move toward her.

The blast had left her unable to hear. The human-shaped light grew brighter and brighter until she could hardly keep her eyes open.

“N-no! Stay away! Don't touch me! Go away!”

She had never felt such terror in her life.

The white light began to invade her body. Enveloped in it, Mai felt as though she were being torn apart. She lost consciousness.

* * *

The smoke gradually began to clear.

“Ugh... cough, cough...”

Back downstairs to save Kyoko, Eiji choked on smoke and dust from the shattered concrete walls.

He followed the wall, passing young people lying on the floor as he searched.

“Ah! K-Kyoko!”

At last he found her near the stage and rushed to where she lay unconscious.

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“Kyoko! Hang on. Wake up!”

"Mm... Eiji..."

She did not appear badly hurt. Putting her arm around his neck, Eiji started toward the exit.

After a few steps, he looked toward the counter and spotted Toru lying unconscious.

"Hey, Toru! Wake up! Did you come looking for Kyoko too?"

"Uh... Eiji? Inoue?"

"She's all right. Just scratches, I think. Let's get out of here. It's dangerous."

Roused by Eiji's voice, Toru staggered to his feet. The fierce ringing in his ears had vanished as though it had never existed.

Following Eiji toward the exit, they reached the barred entrance door and noticed bright red spray-painted graffiti covering the wall beside it.

"PIETRO, BARBAROSSA, AND NEWEST ALLIED FORCES WERE HERE."

"YOU AREN'T THE ONLY MUTANTS."

"KILL BR."

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There were other threats, too obscene to repeat.

Toru felt sick.

Never again would he come to a place like this. Never again did he want anything to do with mutants, he shouted inwardly.

Outside, the street was crowded with confused young people. Onlookers, noticing the disturbance, were beginning to gather too.

The three slipped into the city crowds, almost hiding their faces.

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Chapter Ten • Kurusu's Downfall

"Damn it! Allied forces, my ass! They think they can make fools of us!"

The smell of explosives still lingered. The bombs planted in Heaven, Black Roses' headquarters, had stripped chunks from its bare concrete walls.

The young Black Roses soldiers gathered there openly raged, pounding their fists against walls where the steel framework showed through.

Other groups, whose headquarters and branches had been attacked by Kurusu's Black Roses strike force, had joined hands to retaliate. They had deliberately targeted headquarters while its leader was away. They had probably known Teacher, Black Roses' number two, was giving a concert. It must have been planned.

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Barbarossa, Newest Power, and Club Pietro, all weakened by Kurusu's raids, had formed a united front.

Newest's leader in particular was a narcissist with an obsessive hatred of Black Roses. They had taken his vital sources of income, his companions... No matter how often he was beaten down, he kept coming back with extraordinary persistence.

The bombing had also been his idea: a demonstration of their new alliance. Infiltrators posing as customers had planted three explosive devices inside.

To make the demonstration more effective, the first produced a blast, the second smoke, and the third a loud report, like aerial fireworks. They were openly exploiting Kurusu's absence.

At the time, Teacher had been meditating before his concert in Kurusu's room on the top floor. The first two blasts and their vibrations were swallowed by the noise of the city and did not reach him there.

He noticed only the third, loudest explosion.

By the time he realized what had happened and descended to Heaven, white smoke was so thick he could not see in front of him. Only the groans of the fallen young people reached his ears.

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It took some time for visibility to begin improving in the basement, but Teacher quickly noticed Mai lying unconscious before the counter. The blast had torn her clothes.

Black Roses members who had fled outside to escape the smoke returned and rushed to their fallen companions. Fortunately, the charges had been small. Some had fainted from the noise and smoke, but no one was seriously injured. Yet anxiety showed on every face.

If another gang took advantage of this moment to attack, they would be finished. Without their leader, they could not properly fight back.

"It's all right. There's nothing to worry about."

Standing in the middle of Heaven, Teacher addressed the members. As his voice seeped deep into their hearts, fear and bewilderment disappeared from their faces.

Drug Voice. In an instant it swept away their anxiety and despair.

"We are invincible. We aren't fools to be thrown off balance by a shabby trick like this. Rest easy. As long as I'm here, you are invincible. Black Roses is invincible."

His voice carried complete conviction. Everyone believed him.

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"That's right! We're invincible!"

"As long as Teacher's here, Black Roses is invincible!"

The young people stood, raising their fists. In their eyes, Teacher was an absolute god, subject to nothing in the world.

One of their companions was patting Mai's cheek, trying to bring her around.

"Uh... mm..."

"Mai! Come on, Mai. Wake up!"

She slowly lifted her heavy eyelids.

"Ah, I... No! Don't come here! Stay away!"

Though awake at last, she was still confused. Clutching her head, she crouched where she was.

"What's wrong, Mai? Pull yourself together!"

Her companion gripped her shoulders and shook her.

"Ah... White light. White light wrapped around me..."

Perhaps because an explosion had occurred so close to her, she seemed unable to hear.

Mai was badly disoriented. It took about half an hour for her to regain her senses and understand what was happening.

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"I... Ugh, my ears are still wrong..."

"The other groups apparently formed an alliance and came to challenge us. Rotten of them to pick a time when our leader wasn't here."

Gripping a companion's arm and trying to stand, Mai finally noticed a change in her body.

"Huh?"

Something was wrong. Something was different.

"What's the matter, Mai? Are you hurt somewhere?"

Zuzu approached anxiously. Mai snapped her fingers, intending to send the usual sparks past his nose.

But none came.

She tried discharging electricity between her hands, as though holding a ball. The ball of electricity she could normally create did not appear.

"Why? Why? Why?"

Mai's mutant power had disappeared.

No one knew why. She reached toward Teacher for support, but her legs would not hold her. Makeup, tears, and dirt smeared her face.

“Teacher! Teacher! What's happened to me?”

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“It's all right, Mai. Just a temporary shock. You'll be back to normal soon... Listen to my song.”

Taking Mai's hand, Teacher activated his Drug Voice. Nothing changed. Her mutant ability had vanished from her body.

“No! My power! My power's gone!”

Holding the girl, who could no longer stand, Teacher could not conceal his bewilderment.

“Why? Who? Who could have done this?”

Someone had erased her power. Whoever had taken it must be a mutant, Teacher instinctively understood.

* * *

By the time Kurusu returned to Heaven, the blast debris had been cleared and the remaining members had recovered their composure. Teacher's report enraged him.

“Allied forces? Bastards. Coming here while I'm away! They've got some nerve.”

“The enemy's been thinking, too.”

Tempest, who had been out searching for mutants, returned just then. Once he went out, he often stayed away for nearly a week. Seeing Kurusu

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again was his first meeting with him in five days.

As Tempest said, this attack was unusually elaborate for mere harassment or intimidation. Clearly the enemy meant to shake Black Roses by striking while its leader was absent.

Yet none of the members seemed shaken. Their unity and discipline remained intact.

Kurusu felt reassured. This was the result of his constant training. It never occurred to him that Teacher's Drug Voice was responsible.

Half of Black Roses' members had sworn loyalty to Kurusu under its influence.

Moreover, Drug Voice had strengthened their mutant abilities. Being given powers stronger than anyone else's must have been an enormous joy to them.

"We can't let this go."

Tempest urged Kurusu to act. Showing even the slightest hesitation would play into the enemy's hands.

They needed a plan. As they struggled to devise one, Teacher proposed a new idea.

"If we're going to act, it would be better to avoid dirtying our own hands. How about this?"

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Kurusu listened, inwardly surprised. He had never thought Teacher possessed the makings of a brilliant strategist. Still, with Teacher at his right hand and Tempest at his left, the emergence of a dependable number two was welcome news for Black Roses.

This would make Black Roses stronger still. Kurusu felt proud.

It never occurred to him that this might herald a threat to his own position at the top.

Nor did he seem to notice Mai's absence, though she was usually pressed close to Teacher's side.

* * *

Among the local yakuza based in Shinjuku, the Takamatsu-kai, affiliated with the Hanawa group and operating a construction company, remained especially powerful.

Although the organizations were weakening, they could maintain their standing because they owned property rights throughout Shinjuku and had stable sources of income. They used both legitimate and criminal faces and never neglected bribes to the police. It was said that no matter how Shinjuku changed, their foundations would never shake.

The challenge arrived at the Takamatsu-kai office, on the first floor of a building in Shinjuku 2-chome, late on Saturday night.

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“What the hell is this? Are these little punks mocking us?”

Three senior members and seven younger men—ten in all—were staying overnight at the office. The challenge had arrived by fax.

“CHALLENGE: SHINJUKU BELONGS TO US NOW.”

It was childish, like a kid's graffiti.

“Time to get started? Well, let's go!”

Having allowed time for the fax to arrive, Tempest commanded the wind and shattered the bulletproof glass along two sides of the office.

The sound of breaking glass rang between the buildings in the dead of night.

That was the signal to attack.

However criminal the organization, its public face was a construction company. Staffing on Saturday night was sparse. Kurusu's strike force and Tempest's faction hit the office together.

Waiting near another entrance, Kurusu and his group kicked the door down and charged in.

Tempest's people took positions beside the broken windows and watched inside.

The surprise attack left the yakuza rattled. Worse, their opponents included people with mutant abilities, something they had never faced at close quarters. Only about ten men were present. They fought back with every gun and Japanese sword they could find, but

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Kurusu's side was overwhelmingly stronger. Repeated battles with youth gangs had thoroughly accustomed his strike force to night raids.

"Take this!"

A balding young man charged at them with a short sword against his chest. As Kurusu's people dodged, a Buddha-faced older man fired a handgun at them.

Pop, pop, pop.

The silenced automatic was Italian.

Tempest whistled.

At once, the bullets fired at Kurusu and his men clattered to the floor. Slug, a new recruit, bent a sword with telekinesis. It buckled with a series of almost comical creaks.

"Eek... These guys are monsters..."

The battle between mutants and yakuza was over in moments.

Eve, whose power could burn through metal, took the property deeds from the safe and handed them to Kurusu.

"As promised, we're taking Shinjuku. Do it!"

One boy pressed his fingers toward the bundle of documents. Smoke rose from his fingertips as though by magic,

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and quickly became flame.

Kurusu had ordered him to burn the deeds with his mutant power. The boys watched them curl and burn, laughing.

"Ugh... You little brats... What do you think you're doing?"

A senior member with a close perm, almost unconscious, struggled up and grabbed Kurusu. With desperate strength, he tried to pin his arms from behind. Kurusu turned without hesitation and gouged his eyes at a speed too fast to follow. In a fight, striking vulnerable points was a basic rule.

The man's flabby belly shook as he rolled across the bloodied floor. His screaming was so noisy that Kurusu drove a hard kick into his anus. He fell silent, twitching.

Tempest took a handkerchief from the man's breast pocket and passed it to Kurusu. Blood and fragments of the ruined eyes stained his hand.

"Get the spray paint."

All the groaning yakuza were stripped and tied up. Children's pranks, as everyone knew, could be vicious.

Before the naked men grinding their teeth in frustration, Tempest left a message on the office wall.

"THE ALLIED FORCES WERE HERE! KILL ALL ADULTS."

Original page 193

"You bastards! You won't get away with this!"

Kurusu and Tempest smiled at the finished message.

"If you want to kill us, come anytime. Though you old men probably can't even find our hideout."

Leaving that cheeky taunt, Kurusu and his group departed. Now they only needed to wait until the younger yakuza learned the locations of Barbarossa and Newest's hideouts from the information secretly leaked to them.

Provoked by Kurusu's graffiti, the Takamatsu-kai attacked a room in the building used as headquarters by Barbarossa, Newest Power, and Club Pietro the following morning.

"Wow. The real thing's impressive."

Watching from a nearby rooftop, Tempest radioed Kurusu and Teacher, who waited at Heaven.

"Teacher, your plan's a perfect hit. Oh, here they come!"

On receiving Tempest's report, a member stationed by a nearby public telephone posed as an ordinary citizen and called the police emergency number, 110.

The arrests that followed were spectacular. It had been a long time since police caught a Kabukicho gang battle in progress.

Professional yakuza, filled with murderous intent, had charged in broad daylight into the headquarters of youth gangs whose members were mostly minors.

Original page 194

There were clear weapons-law violations; attacking minors had also been a mistake. And the police arrived far too quickly.

Both the rival groups hostile to Black Roses and the opposing yakuza organization were rounded up in one sweep.

“Plan complete. Well, I'll go find some more mutants.”

Tempest lightly withdrew. A gust of wind passed, and he was gone. In just one night, Shinjuku had fallen quiet.

* * *

Evening approached.

Alone in his rooms above Heaven, Kurusu watched the sunset over Shinjuku.

The city glowed gold. Once night began, flickering neon would turn Shinjuku into an adult.

“What are you getting sentimental about?”

Teacher was standing in the doorway. Kurusu had not noticed him arrive.

“Our kingdom's almost complete. It struck me that the day our dream comes true has finally arrived.”

Thanks to Tempest and Teacher, they had more mutant warriors. Black Roses was invincible now.

“About that, I've got another proposal to discuss. Sorry, but would you come downstairs? We have a visitor.”

Original page 195

Teacher apparently had something he wanted to discuss.

“Can't we talk here?”

The concert was tomorrow. Down at Heaven, they were probably busy getting the equipment ready.

“We have a visitor waiting.”

Teacher's idea for attacking the yakuza had worked remarkably well. Kurusu had thought the Drug Voice was his only useful talent, but the unexpected results had made him seem all the more dependable.

Naturally, Kurusu was interested in his next proposal.

Following Teacher downstairs, he ducked beneath the counter and entered Heaven.

The lights were off. Only a dim glow from the passage beyond the counter illuminated the basement, where no daylight reached.

"Hey, Teacher. Turn on the lights. And this visitor—"

Suddenly, dazzling light struck him.

The stage lights were aimed straight at Kurusu, flashing at full intensity.

"Ugh! Teacher, that's bright! What's going on? Who's there?"

Original page 196

He could sense several people beyond the lights, but the glare kept him from making them out.

As his eyes adjusted, he began to recognize members of Black Roses.

"Oh, it's you guys. Teacher, the concert isn't until tomorrow. What are you doing here—whoa!"

An invisible force slammed Kurusu against the wall.

Slug was controlling gravity, moving his hands as though manipulating a puppet.

"Guh... What are you... Aah!"

With Kurusu pinned helplessly against the wall, Eve approached. Long, thin flames extended from her fingertips.

A movement of her body sent five blades of fire toward him.

"Heh heh heh..."

The fiery scalpels sliced lengthwise into Kurusu's thigh. They cut like lasers, but there was nothing delicate about their work.

Original page 197

The ragged wound poured blood.

"Aaagh! Stop!"

Zuzu clung to Kurusu and began sewing up the gash with a needle and black thread. His hands moved at tremendous speed, roughly drawing the torn skin together.

"Sewing, sewing! I love it, love it!"

He sewed Kurusu's eyelids shut as well. His skill was extraordinary: he did it without injuring the eyeballs beneath them.

"I'm quite the craftsman, aren't I?"

There was no anesthetic. Kurusu hung against the wall, his pain reaching an unbearable pitch.

"Our kingdom... That's something we'll build for ourselves. Everyone says we don't need a powerless leader like you."

Teacher spoke softly.

Nearly twenty mutants from Black Roses had gathered around them. Now each began shouting at Kurusu.

Original page 198

"We don't recognize you as our leader!"

Dadaan cracked his knuckles and threw an uppercut into the air in front of Kurusu. Flesh was scooped from Kurusu's chest, as though slashed away by an invisible blade.

"You don't have any of our wonderful powers!"

Charm's fangs grew so long that he could no longer close his mouth. Drooling, he panted foul, hot breath into Kurusu's face.

"You're just a human! A filthy, powerless human!"

Their abilities had blossomed under the influence of the Drug Voice.

Kurusu had ordered those powers awakened. Now he was experiencing them with his own body. He had brought all of this about himself.

The mutants' eyes shone with delight as they tormented him.

Kurusu felt as though he were burning in hell.

"Whoopee! We're the chosen ones! Teacher's our leader!"

That was Panky, the boy who controlled water.

The others danced in ecstasy, joining the chorus.

"That's right! Teacher's the one who deserves to lead us!"

"Only Teacher understands how we feel!"

"Teacher's wonderful! Teacher's wonderful! Teacher is our god!"

Original page 199

Surrounded by their cheers, Kurusu wept in agony, close to losing his mind.

"Teacher... Why? Why me? We worked so well together... Our dream was almost..."

Teacher whispered coldly, with a trace of sadness.

Fire and water had burned Kurusu's face. It had been torn, stitched, swollen, and gouged until it was scarcely recognizable.

"Our dream...? You were only using me. You used all their powers for yourself. Mutants stand above humans. Powerless humans are nothing but a burden."

The gentle voice did nothing to ease Kurusu's suffering. Instead, it stirred the flames of his desire for revenge.

"Now it's your turn to be useful to everyone."

"That's right! We're through being used by you!"

The mutants shouted together.

Kurusu was not permitted to lose his mind or even to faint.

"Tomorrow, I'll sing just for you. My last present to you, Kurusu. Enjoy it..."

Original page 200

"...to the fullest."

Leaving Kurusu in hell, Teacher returned to his room upstairs.

11 • The Setting Sun

Original page 201

Chapter Eleven — The Setting Sun

Honoka Amagi was spending her days in a melancholy haze.

As a mutant, she could sense the colors of people's hearts. Because of that ability, she had stopped attending the high school she had worked so hard to enter.

Now she helped out at the institute, passing one tedious day after another.

There was another reason for her low spirits.

Mai, her close friend, no longer came to the institute.

Mai was like a little sister to her. She was her one precious friend.

And Honoka herself had ruined their relationship.

Original page 202

She had needlessly hurt Mai when the girl had left her heart unguarded. Troubled by what she had done, Honoka had called Mai's house several times, but they had never managed to speak.

Then, when the silver grass along the embankment was swaying in the autumn wind, Mai suddenly came to the institute. She said she had come to see Honoka.

Delighted by their reunion after so long, Honoka invited her into the sitting room.

Mai seemed a little more grown-up. No—more than that, she seemed brighter than before.

“I’m thinking of going back to school tomorrow. I wanted to tell you.”

Her unexpected announcement startled Honoka.

“Mai? What do you mean...?”

Mai folded her shawl and hat and placed them on her lap. Honoka noticed the faint pink lipstick on her small lips. The old Mai would never have worn makeup.

“After that... Well, all sorts of things happened. So many things...”

Fidgeting shyly with the edge of her shawl, Mai seemed to be searching for something to say. Her eyes avoided Honoka's.

“...Mai?”

Original page 203

“My illness is cured. That's what I've decided to think, anyway.”

Now that she mentioned it, the gloves Mai always wore were gone.

“So I thought maybe it would be all right to go back to school. Are you going to school, Honoka?”

Those gloves had been the reason Mai refused to attend school.

Honoka did not know what had happened, but the extreme electrical charge that had troubled Mai for years had

apparently vanished in an instant. Mai was delighted to have become an ordinary human being.

Looking into her heart, Honoka was stunned.

Mai no longer felt the same trust and reliance toward her. Instead, the image of a boy wrapped in white flames was burned deeply into her heart.

"You ought to try going back to school too, Honoka."

The image did not reveal his face, but this boy had taken Mai's ability away. He had made her an ordinary girl again.

A storm was rising in Honoka's heart. Hatred and jealousy toward Mai were beginning to eat into it.

"Yes... Yes, I suppose... Someday... Perhaps..."

She barely managed the answer. Her eyes were vacant.

Oblivious to Honoka's feelings, Mai continued...

Original page 204

...telling her about her life.

Having said everything she wanted to say, she must have felt satisfied. Less than an hour later, Mai left Honoka's house.

"Goodbye, Honoka. If you don't mind, I'll come again tomorrow."

She spoke with a bright smile. It was the face of a girl Honoka no longer knew.

"Goodbye... See you tomorrow."

That was all Honoka could manage.

* * *

Kyoko had been agonizing over a decision for a long time.

She had learned that another concert would be held at Heaven that night. Should she go? Should she tell Eiji, or keep it from him? She was taking these questions very seriously.

At the previous concert, she had become caught up in an attack by forces opposed to Black Roses. Once again, she had missed her chance to lose herself in Teacher's singing. Twice she had gone to the concert where mutants were said to appear, and twice something had interrupted it.

She had been looking forward to it so much that the disappointment was unbearable. That singer Teacher's voice would not leave her ears. She was frustrated by her inability to forget it. She wanted to go once more—and this time, hear the concert all the way to the end.

Original page 205

Eiji and Toru had accompanied her to the previous concert. She had fainted, and although they had rescued her, she had come close to being badly injured.

Alone, she surely would not have made it home safely. That thought frightened her too.

If she said she wanted to go again because there was another concert that night, Eiji and Toru would surely be disgusted with her. This time, even Eiji, interested as he was in mutants, would oppose it.

But tonight's concert was an important ceremony for mutants—a special event called a Black Mass, performed by Teacher himself.

Kyoko wanted to go, no matter what.

But if she went alone and got caught up in something like last time... Still, perhaps nothing would happen at all.

“Oh... But that singer Teacher's voice was so wonderful...”

She kept recalling the lingering impression of the little she had heard at the first concert. However often she remembered it, she trembled. Her heart stirred.

She had been in this state of restless indecision for days.

“Just once... If I go alone just once... It'll be all right, won't it?”

After a long struggle with herself, Kyoko went out to Heaven without telling either Eiji or Toru.

Original page 206

The sun had already begun to sink.

The autumn sky was high and clear.

That summer had been insanely hot. Thanks to the heat, farms all over Japan had produced bumper crops. The fruit was plentiful and delicious, and overseas buyers were ordering shipments too. Nothing like it had happened in years.

Even now, large quantities of Japanese fruit were being loaded into containers at Narita Airport for export.

At customs, two travelers arriving from America waited in line: a middle-aged man in his forties and a girl still in her teens.

They made an odd pair. Their ages were too close for father and daughter, too far apart for brother and sister. Surely they could not be lovers.

After passing through customs, they took the escalator up to the first-floor lobby.

The man was apparently very strong. He carried both their suitcases effortlessly. His long, stiff-looking hair flared out on either side at his shoulders. He wore a white T-shirt, a checked shirt over it, and blue jeans.

The short-haired girl walking briskly ahead of him looked delighted. She kept looking...

Original page 207

...around as she walked. Perhaps this was her first visit to Japan.

Her high-necked shirt and shorts gave her an energetic look. Her jacket, the same color as her knee-high boots, appeared to be brand-new. The incongruously large sunglasses suited her remarkably well.

A large television screen stood in the airport's first-floor lobby, continuously showing a commercial station's programs.

At the moment, an aggressively intrusive reporter seemed to be demanding a comment from an important Japanese official.

"So, Assemblyman, you're acknowledging your relationship with Shinjuku's Takamatsu-kai?"

"I don't know anything about it! Nothing!"

The young member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly was under suspicion over political donations and ties to organized crime. Wearing a sour expression, he repeatedly pleaded ignorance into the reporter's microphone.

"Speaking of Takamatsu-kai, their office was attacked by a group of youths recently, wasn't it? Did that have anything to do with you?"

The woman reporter was doggedly trying every tactic she could to get a statement out of him.

Original page 208

"Recently, young people calling themselves mutants have apparently started referring to Tokyo as 'Chaos Tokyo.' What do you have to say about—"

At the words "mutants" and "Chaos Tokyo," the short-haired girl stopped dead. She stared up at the screen.

The picture immediately switched to the studio. This was a new current-affairs program that employed a former entertainer as its confrontational field reporter. A university professor had been invited into the studio as a commentator.

"Certainly, there are rumors among young people that a new type of human called mutants has appeared. But there aren't actually any mutants in Japan."

Another guest, a former commissioner of the National Police Agency, gave a contemptuous smile.

"It's all nothing more than rumor. In short, young people seeking excitement in the city are exploiting the media to glorify their own behavior. A truly deplorable phenomenon."

The girl pouted and spoke to the man. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes were smiling.

"Listen to what they're saying, Wolverine."

"Hmph. Bunch of liars."

Wolverine looked as though he had never expected anything trustworthy from officials in the first place.

Original page 210

"I can tell. This place reeks of mutants."

He sniffed the air. It was a familiar gesture for a man whose sense of smell was far keener than any ordinary person's.

"They say Asia's peaceful because it's behind the times when it comes to mutants. Looks like Japan's different."

"Huh. Well, let's hurry up and get to Tokyo, Wolverine. Dr. Amagi's waiting."

The two X-Men from America left Narita Airport.

They were on their way to visit Professor Xavier's friend, Dr. Amagi.

12 • The Ritual

Original page 211

Chapter Twelve — The Ritual

There was an atmosphere at Heaven's concert that day unlike anything before.

The walls behind the stage and on either side were completely covered with crimson roses. As soon as one descended into the basement, their overpowering fragrance filled the little club.

At the center of the stage stood an object covered with black cloth. It was quite large, and had apparently been prepared for that day's ceremony.

“Wow... Beautiful.”

Kyoko sighed. Never in her life had she been surrounded by so many roses.

Although she had been to Heaven twice before, she had never managed to hear a concert properly, all the way to the end...

Original page 212

...though a tingling afterglow had remained in her heart.

Third time lucky. Surely today she would finally be able to enjoy Teacher's concert to her heart's content.

Once inside Heaven, Kyoko first got a drink at the counter. Perhaps the scent of roses had gone to her head; she was

terribly thirsty. She heard the man beside her speaking to the bartender.

“...Tempest... Nowhere...”

She did not know whom they were talking about, but apparently everyone was looking for someone.

Before long, the lights went out. Cheers rose all around as Teacher appeared on the central stage.

“Welcome, everyone. At today's concert, we shall conduct a ceremony marking a new undertaking for our reborn Black Roses.”

It was that voice.

Merely hearing Teacher speak, Kyoko could feel some great force welling up within her.

“We of Black Roses have already taken Shinjuku into our hands. That is thanks to your efforts, my magnificent fellow mutants.”

However often she heard Teacher's Drug Voice, it made her heart tremble. In an instant, the young people fell under his control.

Kyoko's expression was changing too.

Original page 213

The blood boiled within Kyoko's body.

The overflowing crowd shrieked and pressed toward the stage. Everyone sought to receive Teacher's blessing. Kyoko was among them.

“To make your mutant powers stronger still, we have decided to offer a sacrifice to this Tokyo. Behold the sacrifice!”

Teacher removed the black cloth covering the display at center stage.

Beneath it stood a huge cross. Bound to it was Kurusu, covered in blood.

His eyelids were still sewn shut by Zuzu.

Kyoko was utterly intoxicated by the mingled smell of blood and roses, and by the Drug Voice. Teacher's voice seemed to reach her from right beside her ear.

“This city needs a sacrifice. From this moment forth, let this place—the new world ruled by our Black Roses—be called Chaos Tokyo! Chaos Tokyo!”

“Chaos Tokyo!”

Drawn to the front of the crowd as though by a magnet, Kyoko repeated Teacher's words at the top of her voice.

She had shouted without thinking, but the people around her responded to her voice.

“Chaos Tokyo! Chaos Tokyo!”

Original page 214

Kyoko raised her right arm and shouted.

“Chaos Tokyo! Chaos Tokyo!”

The audience repeated the same motion.

“Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!”

Kyoko's cry had captured Teacher's heart as well.

"Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!"

All around the room, the audience began calling out the names of Chaos Tokyo and Teacher.

Teacher took an interest in Kyoko in the front row. Her voice had captured the hearts of every boy and girl on the floor.

"Come, join me in giving this beautiful sinner the whip of love..."

A cross stood amid the bright-red roses. Fastened to it was Kurusu, covered in blood. He was more beautiful than anyone or anything else.

Teacher struck Kurusu with the thick, long leather whip in his hand. Every time the skin split, Kurusu cried out. The whip traced supple arcs, striking him again and again.

Kurusu gasped in pain.

[Brief editorial summary: The crowd's excitement intensifies. Kyoko remains under Teacher's influence, and he notices her reaction.]

Original page 215

"Now, young lady, it's your turn..."

[Brief editorial summary: At Teacher's invitation, Kyoko comes onto the stage and takes the whip. His touch and influence overwhelm her.]

By now Kyoko seemed to have the audience in her thrall. They, too, were excited, their eyes fixed on her every movement.

Guided by Teacher, Kyoko's whip struck Kurusu mercilessly.

"Gaaaaah!"

Kurusu gasped. Though he was on the verge of passing out, the pain of the whip forced him back to consciousness.

[Brief editorial summary: Kyoko repeatedly whips Kurusu while under Teacher's influence. He holds her from behind; she can no longer stand unaided.]

Original page 216

"You're a mutant too. Look—no one can take their eyes off you. Stand up straight and lead them to heaven."

"...A mutant?!"

At Teacher's words, Kyoko forgot herself in delight. The mutant she had longed to be was herself!

"Wh-what should I do?"

"Command them with that wonderful voice of yours. Tell them to give this man the whip of love."

[Brief editorial summary: Teacher whispers the instruction to Kyoko at close range.]

"...Everyone... Give the sacrifice the whip of love."

Kyoko shouted.

"Give the sacrifice the whip of love!"

The audience meekly obeyed her words.

"Give the sacrifice the whip of love!"

Kyoko, too, felt a new power welling up inside her.

"Give the sacrifice the whip of love!"

She stopped whipping him and threw the whip into the audience.

The mutants who had pushed their way to the front competed to seize it. With the whip in hand—

Original page 217

The young people began striking Kurusu one after another.

Teacher left the stage to watch from the counter. Kyoko remained at his side, held close by one arm.

Those without whips attacked with their mutant abilities, as though showing off their skills.

Flame, water, shock waves, wind. Kurusu's body jerked at every attack, but gradually it stopped moving. He was nearing his limit.

Then it happened.

A gust of wind rose and swept across the stage.

Wind blocked Teacher's view. The countless roses set into the walls scattered in every direction, as though caught in a tornado. Amid the swirling petals stood a man.

Tempest.

Arriving on the wind, Tempest freed Kurusu from the cross and hoisted him onto his shoulder. The watching mutants hurled insults and objects at him.

"Stop! You're a mutant, just like us! That man's a criminal who tried to exploit mutants!"

"We're going to execute the traitor Kurusu!"

Original page 218

The abuse directed at Kurusu showed no sign of stopping.

"I owe this man. And I don't like the way you're doing this."

Tempest glared hatefully at Teacher.

But Teacher, holding Kyoko against his right side, answered with a confident smile.

"I never considered you one of Black Roses in the first place. Take that useless creature and disappear wherever you like."

Tempest stood little chance against so many mutants.

"Tch... Fine. I'll do just that."

He vanished in an instant with the wind. The mutants jeered at him for escaping so easily.

"I have no use for losers. Now, shall we finally begin my concert?"

The ritual was over. It had marked an eternal parting between Teacher and Kurusu, and between Black Roses and Kurusu.

"We mutants alone shall rule Chaos Tokyo! All humans are nothing but sacrifices. Mutants are justice! Mutants are power!"

Teacher shouted to the crowd. His words proclaimed mutant rule over humanity.

Original page 219

"Bravo, Teacher! Beautiful mutants! Long live Chaos Tokyo! Glory to Black Roses!"

The audience praised Teacher in every way they could think of.

The frenzied concert went on and on, like a festival that would never end.

It was midnight before the performance finally finished.

Even afterward, Kyoko clung to Teacher and would not let go. He took her with him to the top floor.

Kyoko disappeared from Amanogawa High School.

Afterword

Original page 221

How did you enjoy the first volume of this Japanese original X-Men story? To all you Dengeki Bunko readers, pleased to meet you. I'm Shinobu Kuwahara.

Marvel Comics sells thirty million copies a month around the world, not just in its home country of America. Since it began publishing in the 1930s, it has created many American heroes familiar to readers in Japan as well, including Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, Captain America, and the Fantastic Four.

Among them, the especially popular X-Men finally arrived in Japan in 1994: on television, in games, and in translated comics. Comics by Japanese artists, special magazine books, and merchandise also began appearing one after another.

This Japanese original story began as one of the more unusual projects among them. Planning started a year and a half ago. It took a long time, but at last we have brought it to publication in this form. Getting this far has involved a great many people...

Original page 222

...along the way.

Now, when we began creating an original story, the first problem was deciding which part of the source material to use. X-Men is a long-running story with more than thirty years of history. Count up all the team members and villains, and you arrive at an astonishing number of characters.

Every one of those X-Men characters was tremendously appealing. The stories were too: full of exciting, enjoyable developments that anyone could relate to, transcending distinctions between Americans and Japanese. The better we knew the original, the harder the decision became.

In the end, although the television series had not yet begun airing in Japan, we decided to use the animated X-Men team as our foundation. We felt that we should make use of the animated series' setting, both for those about to discover X-Men and because its team brought together what was considered the golden-era lineup.

However, I wanted to set the story in Japan and create an X-Men that no one had seen before. It felt almost miraculous that we obtained approval for this from Stan Lee and everyone at Marvel.

There was another question: the difference between American and Japanese perceptions of mutants. In the original, mutants and humans are depicted as distinct groups. But what would happen in Japan?

Original page 223

I think people would probably look away and pretend they hadn't noticed. Even if there were a mutant nearby, they would put on a face of indifference, then gossip behind that person's back: "I hear the child in that family is a mutant." American mutants want to make use of their powers, but Japanese mutants would probably try somehow to discard theirs. One reason I chose Japan as the setting was that I wanted to portray that difference.

The Japanese boy Toru is an ordinary high school student. His everyday life is no different from that of all you young

readers. X-Men as seen through Toru's eyes is probably the Japanese perspective—the general public's perception of mutants.

And so, at last, this Japanese original X-Men novel, written by a Japanese author, came into being. What's more, the novels will take a relay format, so you'll be able to enjoy the writing of various authors besides me.

But this is only the first volume. In volume two, Wolverine and Jubilee are scheduled to run wild through Chaos Tokyo. Writing it will be Yuji Nakasato, winner of the Silver Prize in the first Dengeki Game Novel Award! It's a confident work well worth looking forward to.

Finally, my thanks to MediaWorks president Tsuguhiko Kadokawa; Junzo Takaki and Hiroto Ishikawa of AEON; the artists responsible for the wonderful illustrations and terrific original character designs...

Original page 224

...Hiroyuki Nishimura and Hisashi Hirai; Naoyuki Onda for the pinup; our designer, Asakura; Inguchi at Manga no Mori; Mia Alice and Sho Aikawa; Hashiru Ishida, who helped with the series structure along the way; my editors Yoshihara and Torii; and, lastly, everyone who read all the way to the end. My heartfelt thanks to you all.

October 1994

Shinobu Kuwahara

Publication & backmatter

Backmatter / Other works

Other Works by Shinobu Kuwahara

“Mahoroba no Mon” [The Gate of Mahoroba] — Fujimi
Fantasia Bunko

“Aozora Kaizokudan” [The Blue-Sky Pirates] — Fujimi
Fantasia Bunko

“Datenshi Hakusho” [Fallen Angel White Paper] — Rapport
Comics

“Jugun — JUHGUN” [Beast Horde] — Rapport Comics

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Backmatter / Fan mail

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For Naoyuki Onda

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Backmatter / Dengeki Bunko statement

On the Launch of Dengeki Bunko

Bunko paperbacks have established themselves as “little giants” in the flow of publishing, not only in Japan but throughout the world. By making celebrated works from every era and country available in an inexpensive, accessible form, they have earned a place in people's lives as teachers and as memories of youth, passed down through conversation.

Whether we trace their cultural origins to Germany's Reclam editions or their scale to Britain's Penguin Books, we may say that the importance of paperbacks continues to grow as the reading public becomes more diverse.

The significance of paperback publishing will surely continue to increase, both in our turbulent present and in the future.

Dengeki Bunko will respond to that growing diversity. Alongside works that endure through history, it seeks to be a fresh and powerful eye-opener, breaking through established boundaries as we approach a new century.

Its distinctive character may bewilder readers, just as paperbacks themselves did when they first appeared in the publishing world.

And yet: “Changing Time, Changing Publishing.”

Times change, and publishing changes with them. We launch Dengeki Bunko in the belief that, as time passes, it will earn the lasting appreciation of young people—the bearers of the next culture—as spiritual nourishment and something that holds a place in their hearts.

June 10, 1993

Tsuguhiko Kadokawa

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