

No gambling with Death

Tribute to 地獄少女¹



¹地獄少女– reads as 'Jigoku Shoujo'. Exact translation means 'Hell Girl'

This text in fact is a monologue of Nohatsu Jun, kind of real-time blog. So we tried to interfere into it as less as possible: direct speech can tell a lot of things not only about the story, but also about the character tell it. This is why, even some mistakes that you can find in this text – will tell you more about this strange, but, for us – very interesting and attractive maiden.

Unfortunately, for unprepared reader her style is little bit overloaded with modern Japanese terms, conditions and cultural phenomena (including such phenomena as manga and anime). Although these terms could be understood from context of its usage, and others even not really necessary for understanding the story – but it definitely adds some colour. So we tried to add some footnotes to this text. Actually, these footnotes would not be of any use for anybody knowing Japanese culture even slightly (even for English-speaking manga fans). But anyway – if somebody will be interested – you are welcome.

Episode 1. Preface.

Day zero.

Late evening. Hundred-twenty kilometres per hour on Dubai Bypass road. Time to time, just automatically dropping a quick look into the rear-view mirror. What? In the mirror – half-seen in the darkness black hair, white face, huge red eyes.

Short look to passenger seat. A girl. Black kimono, decorated with bright flowers. Decorated? Flowers slowly mowing, covering one to another, turning around...

– Greetings, Enma Ai...

Quick assessment of situation: I am not angry or worried... And Enma is not wearing school uniform. Thus – there is no point to wait that she would propose a contract with me to send somebody into Hell. Moreover, she is in kimono... fatigue, I would daresay. So...

– Somebody 'ordered' me?

– Yes.

– Then let me at least to stop on the side of the road? If a driver will disappear from car running full speed – others also can be harmed. Or, if you are not in hurry – let's stop at my place. At least I will treat you with some tea...

– Afraid?

Corner of the lip jumps in curved sarcastic smile.

– Of course I do. Even while I know that for some people Hell is looking like Heaven. But this is not the main point.

With some surprise I see some curiosity rising in me: 'To whom I managed to be such a pain that they 'ordered' me? Well, one or two people at work. One or two mates. No, that's not it. It is all small things. Love-to-hate transfer? Possible. But... there could be unpredictable things. Don't want to think of it. Either I will know it in the end, or not. Anyway – I am not an angel. It could be something unintentional.'

– Trying to coax?

– Not without it. But... You know, it was in series (and I believe in that) – you always trying to make sure: does the person, whom you are 'sawing out', understand – for what? Do they confess their sin? You know,

to do bad things – I did not want it never and to anybody. But it happened time to time – with my limpness, with my pride... I have quite a lot of sins...

After turning from the highway, car speeds by the line of tankers.

– ...And I feel sorry for those, to whom I intentionally or unintentionally did something worrying. Even if intentionally, in the end – to wish bad for somebody – is not my nature... But anyway, it happened to cause pain to people. It is worrying, that happened. And even such pain – that they called for your help. So, either way – Hell is my destination. From bottom of my heart I wish that they will be happy in the world without me. But... even with this confession – the contract is already signed. So, no. Not trying to coax.

Few turns, parking.

– Bargaining?!

– Again – not without it. But it is also not a main point. Oh, here we are. Welcome to my (now I should add ‘ex-?’) place.

Clicking lock. Lights switched on. Bubbling water flows to the teapot from canister.

– Main point in another thing. Please, sit on the bed – it is my guests place. And for you the height of the table would be comfortable.

A cup, a metal glass, teapot and a box of oath cookies are appearing on the table. Enma takes a cup and emotionless looks on snacks.

– Try it. Original Russian cookies. Maybe you will like it.

Tea is poured into volumes. Enma thoughtfully gulps from her cup.

– Main point is that you have not an easy job. And even while 地獄少女 should have heart of stone – until now sometimes you feel quite an ugly aftertaste after your work. And it s the job that you’ve got not because of exemplary behaviour. Maybe, it could be said that I pity you... But it is not exactly as is. I just want to do something pleasant for person for whom I feel... sympathy. And for person, who is not really happy. Even just tease her with cup of tea.

Enma bites another cookie, probably she liked it.

– And as for bargaining... At some background I had a logical idea: in modern world people interact not only with people directly. The can hide a lot behind ‘nicknames’, drop here and there in the Internet some small clues. Sometimes simply entrust their feelings to encrypted file in the ‘My documents’ folder. And when you trying to dig out the reasons of client’s hatred – common ‘human’ methods of investigation, even with super-human capabilities – could be not so effective... thus I had a question: do you need an IT specialist in the team?

The girl turns to me and narrowly looks straight into my eyes. My lips without my will curve into somehow sorry, but, as I feel, warm smile.

– Maybe I do, but...

She bends to me and whispers few words into my ear. Idiotic smirk – again without my will – comes to my face.

– Is it possible...?

I am starting to speak without finishing formulating words and ‘freezing’ in the middle of sentence. But Enma understood me:

– Yes.

– Well. It was always interesting to try.

– It is an eternity, not try.

– You should pay even for interest... And it would not even significantly change the restraint – your home is also in Hell.

Enma puts empty cup on the table.

– Thank you for snacks.

– You are welcome... Well, I understand – it is time?

Hell Girl stands up and raises her right hand:

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

A photo in my hands.

– This is it. Last goodbye. Be happy, M...! And I hope – it was not you. I do not wish you to get there, where I am going now. You not deserved it!

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

I am kissing the photo, putting it back. Looking into Enma Ai's eyes.

– 一遍死んで見る？²

‘Of course – not. But everything already decided, isn't it, Mistress?’

Episode 2. 之法 殉³

Day eighth.

– Hone-Onna-san⁴?

– Yes, Jun-chan?

– I would not want to look like being haunting or encumbrance... But I have a plea for you... quite a personal one.

Hone-Onna turns to me. Oh, how gracious is she! More than two hundred years passed, but adopted (or it was hammered in her when she was alive and they were making her a geisha⁵?) manners have not changed. No her face – small gentle glimpse of interest.

– Why not?.. Let's step out then.

She flows by me, not watching puts her pretty foots into dzori⁶ and swoon near to the door. Hastily I stand up and follow her. Yes, in traditional Japanese house dzori are much more useful – I have to spend some time fixing belts on my European T-strap slippers.

²一遍死んで見る？ – reads as «ippen shinde miru?». Means something like: 'want to die at once?'

³Nohatsu (之法) – could be translated in two ways. It is either some kind of prophesy (with respect to the following story) – «the one, who expands laws|restrictions », or some kind of subtle mockery: «the one with expanded (not very strkt) manners». Jun – is a very meaningful name for her: (殉) this kanji means «sacrificing [themselves]» and simply «death»

⁴«-san» (and appearing some time later '-chan' and '-kun') are three most common Japanese postfixes to names, showing relations to subject: '-San' is being used to show respect. '-Kun' – to show equality to male. This postfix could be added to female name only when someone wants to stress on very wrok-related addressing. Even with that most likely she will feel insulted. '-Chan' in opposite nearly monopolized with females. It means something like 'cute little one', and used even with grown-up women. Men call themselves only in early childhood and later will be insulted with such addressing.

⁵Geisha (芸者) is quite usually being mistaken for prostitute in other cultures. In fact, geisha entertains her guests only mentally: talks to them, makes a tea ceremony, daces, plays music, sings. To become a geisha girl should lern for few years. For more 'traditional' prostitutes – there is another word: (遊女) 'jujo' or 'ju-onna'.

⁶Dzori (草履) – one of kinds of the traditional Japanese wooden (or straw) sandals.

We are coming to the field and going towards blue flowers. Besides of everything else – Hone-Onna also very attentive: already spotted, that I prefer blue ones to red ones. By the way, in kimono, on wooden sandals – she do not break a single flower! And there is a new path after me. Even while I am smaller and lighter than her.

At last, when we are in around hundred meters from the house she sits down and gestures: join.

– In fact I also had intention to ask you something.

– Yes. I am listening to you. – bowing my head.

– Jun-chan... You already worked as doll twice. I have no complaints. Once helped us to track down a complicated set of ‘masks’ of our client in the Internet. But later – not going out from the Home. I am happy that there are more of us – number of requests is growing and we have to work as dolls more and more frequently. But...

She stops. It seems, that it is impolite to ask direct question, but she really wants answer. Well, here I am not so clumsy. I am raising my eyes and asking:

– But why Mistress asked me to join?

– Yes.

– From one hand – exactly as you said. Another doll. And Internet.

Hone-Onna is thoughtful. Oh, my, how she manage to hold herself such graciously in any situation?!

– Internet... Well, yes, this is a thing that neither Wanyuudoo, nor Ichimoku Ren, nor I, nor even Little Mistress does not really understand. And you brought around five strange boxes during the first your day...

I am nodding to her within my mind: ‘Looks like that neither Yamawaro, nor Kikuri (who look like children) not even worth to mention in such discussion. And it was exactly five ‘strange boxes’: router, switch, server, external RAID-array and printer’.

– ... and immediately hide these into lockers and cabinets. By the way, Little Mistress quite likely is grateful to you for that: she really accustomed to our furniture and the whole scenery, and even slightest changes disturbing her.

– I knew that. So I was trying to change scenery with my equipment as little as possible. And I am very touched that you also mentioned it, Hone-Onna-san.

– Yes. But some wires are still visible.

– I will fix this negligence!

– Good girl. But what’s it? And for what?

I am smiling; it’s my work and one of my hobbies in the end.

– I have installed a local area computer network within our House. To process information we could get from the Internet.

– Network?

Suddenly, Hone-Onna begins to laugh.

– Nohatsu Jun! How I managed to overlook that? の初の純 No hatsu no jun – Network Maiden, ne⁷?

– Hai!

For some reason I feel slightly uncomfortable. I am really feeling how my cheeks starting to blush. Embarrassed, I am lowering my eyes. In field of view I see gracious figure of Hone-Onna, then her fastidious hands... Well, my own hands now not less fastidious.

⁷‘ne’ is absolutely the same to English ‘isn’t it?’. There is also ‘ni’, the same to ‘don’t it’, but it is used much more rarely.

But about my name – it is manners, manners, I bet. That’s not true. All our names are showing our essence. For example, Wanyuudoo – was being a wheel of coach, but become a demon when coach crushed. And his name translates as ‘a wheel, going on the road’ and in other translation ‘wheel-monster’. So my name is not a Newton’s binomial for her. She just does not want to admit that she never thought about my name. In case I would feel insulted with that. Yeah, to calculate such stuff instantly – not a thing you could learn at once. Even while my name officially being written in quite a different way and has a very different meaning... well I even don’t know should I cry or laugh, or think deeply on this official writing... Anyway – variant she guessed was initial. And Hone-Onna has not seen my kanji.

– But you never worked ‘in field’... Behold, by look – you are 15-17 years old, most of our clients – girls and a little bit of boys of your age. And you can become their friend; can give us information from other side. Even I and Ichimoku Ren are too old for them...

– My plea connected to it.

– Then volunteer yourself? Little Mistress never deny such requests. Why me?

– I... – I am embarrassed even more. – cannot... for now.

– Why?

Surprised Hone-Onna cocks eyebrow.

– Hone-Onna-san. I would like to ask you to teach me... Everything. Manners. Makeup. Dress. I am... not good at being a girl. Even more – Japanese girl.

– Jun-chan... – Hone-Onna definitely shocked, but one can distinguish it only by pause between my new name and continuation of her sentence. – Ren told me, that you are amazingly skilful in computers... And I myself, by your manner to compose phrases already suspected that you are not really good with Japanese language... But you can’t be so...

She is trying to find correct word. Looks like, she fails and changes wording:

– But you weren’t always so carried away with computers! You should understand at least something?!

– ‘Something’ I do really understand. But still, it is only an understanding – no practical experience. And even so – there is not too much even of it, of understanding...

– Oh, Hell the Great! Where do such a you spring from?

– Hone-Onna-san. Maybe I should explain everything for you in stages. But before that I would like to ask you to keep my story between us. At least for some time. Obviously, Little Mistress knows all of this already, in the end it was she who brought me here. But for Kikuri and boys – it is not necessary to know.

– All right, Jun-chan. You intrigued me so much with this story, that I am ready to give you this promise even in advance.

– I spring from a country far, far away, where it is a lot of sand, sun and oil. Where I was quite an ordinary human being. Once upon a time some person who knew me, and who was not less into anime, had a grudge against me and sent a request into ‘Hell Correspondence’. There was no investigation from your side – they were very emotional at the moment and pulled the string nearly immediately – once contractual obligations were sounded.

Hone-Onna nods thoughtfully.

– Yes, I remember that. It was an uncommon call – indeed from far away. We all was surprised, and really have not managed to do anything.

– Little Mistress came to me. – In perplexity I am sorting pleats on my skirt. It is not clear how to tell the story further. How to ‘serve’ it – not for turn myself in most positive light, but not to pop Hone-Onna... – It is possible, that She had some concerns about myself immediately after ‘order’. Probably – She was surprised

by my reaction. Anyway, Little Mistress considered as possible to change somehow the restraint for me and propose me to join the team. With one condition.

I am adjusting collar of my chemisette, and slowly, touching my breasts lowering down my hand – so all attention of my interlocutrix is concentrated on my forms.

– She was looking for somebody between girl and young maiden. Exactly for what you said: friend. And I... I always had a great respect to women. And was somehow in envy to them – they had so much things that I liked! From other hand – never really understood them. Or was not enough trying to make their life better. All in all I agreed. Thus condition turned to be with two sides: as bonus – I've got everything I liked. For own disposal, I would daresay. As penalty – I would not be able to use a lot of things in a way I was used to. And 'filed work' is most expected in much more patriarchal culture than I was born... and where my own attitude to women – is a rare and unique luck⁸.

First time since we begun emotions are so clearly seen on the face of my interlocutrix. Most likely – this is because there are too many of them and she cannot even decide which should prevail.

– Well, yes... Nearly the same level of narcissism as Ichimoku Ren has. Such a foolishman!

Encouraged with her words about narcissism (yes, I liked myself indeed even when I was alive), I am proudly trusting out my chest and correcting her:

– Ano⁹... foolishgirl!¹⁰

For the first moment Hone-Onna looks insulted, taking that into her account, but she realizes the true meaning of my correction and she... well, would not she be the Hone-Onna – I would say she is ROFL.

– Well, yes. Could not argue!.. Oh, Jun-chan, you are a really foolish girl in this case!

– U! U! – I am agreeing in relief. Looks like – main thing is already done.

– And you've been 'ordered' when you was quite not 15 years old, correct?

Laughed out her laughter, Hone-Onna becomes serious.

– Yes, little bit more. So, I am afraid, to reformat mentality is not an option. This is why I am asking: teach me!

Freezing in a bow. At least this part of Japanese culture I know myself. Hone-Onna is keeping silence. Thinking. At last, silence is interrupted.

– All right. Let's go, I will show you how to make up your lips and eyes, for start. Even with your beauty you should not avoid cosmetics, Jun-chan.

Episode 3. This is my rifle, this is my gun...

Day fourteenth.

– ...It was a long time since we studied make-up. Look, Jun-chan, first of all you should take this brush and use more dark colour to accent on your lips edges. Generally speaking – so you can somehow visually extend or lessen your lips size, but for now we would not go for this. And we have no need to.

⁸ This part of Jun's speech could not be translated in full colors: both in Russian and Japanese scripts she randomly jumps from male postfixes to female postfixes (in Russian) and from kun-prononsations to onna-prononsations in Japanese (which is nearly the same).

⁹ «Ano» – a word used to draw attention. Frequently also falls into the same role as european 'a-a-a', a parasitic sound when somebody already started to speak, but does not know what to say. Although in Japanese there is a special word for that occasion: 'Et-to'.

¹⁰ Again, they call Jun just 'fool', but in kun-prononsation and onna-prononsation (or male and female postfixes).

Carefully dipping a brush into dark lipstick and with long, but careful movements encircling my lips. Yes, Hone-Onna is correct. After death we look like us-previous, but, I would daresay, enhanced copies. We've got a same beauty to which we had aptitude being alive, but more perfect. Obviously, I changed much more, but still by some small things can recognize my 'live' face.

– Then, you take this, more light and fill the rest of. Then you should do like this... – she moves her own lips to show me. – To make sure colours accurately transfer one into another... perfect!

I also like the result. But something distracts me and prevents to enjoy it in full scale.

– Sumimasen¹¹.

Not getting up from knees, in two jumps I am reaching my laptop: while Enma Ai is wandering somewhere – it is not a problem to drop 'foreign items' over the floor. Amazing and unscientifically, but emerged during life connection with computers, if I can say so – cybersence, not failing me even now: a big load of data being downloaded to our server. Since I came to the House – all information collected by those working 'on field' is coming here. And, I think only I (when I will be ready for field work) will input it directly from the laptop. All of my colleagues, which are less computer-literate – just dictate their notes to microphones. And making photos, if they'd like. In principle, with our capabilities – it is not necessary... But when I described the system to Little Mistress – she immediately turned on the heat. And even justified it for other. Even while in the bottom of Her soul our Little Mistress is a teenager girl – more than four hundred years of being undead evolved her mind to completely unteenager level... not speaking of experience. Well, cutting that. The justification She gave was quite logical: ability to quickly search for likely details will speed up investigation.

Anyway, we'll have a look on that data later. Returning to my coach.

– It seems that Ichimoku Ren-san had found something essential. Gomenasai¹². I did not intend to say that I do not care about your lessons.

Hone-Onna nods with impenetrable face. I'm just wandering, did she really was insulted, or not? From one hand – the data from Ichimoku Ren – is our job. From another – it was me who asked her for favour and she does not have to spend her time on me... Oh, I was an unmannered gaijin ... I am still unmannered half-gaijin¹³. Anyway, I should be careful thinking about past: if I will say 'boku wa' – it would be a real failure!

– Now, let's switch to eyes. You could do your eyelashes yourself, that's not a big deal. But to enhance the shape eyelid – there is some trick. You should take this brush, mascara... and, look here: close your eye, follow the eyelid, and then – little bit extend the line. Yes, like that.

Wow! I really like this trick. Doing the same manipulation on my second eye. Obviously, lower eyelids are done without any tricks. Both of us are sitting in front of mirror and enjoying the effect.

– Well, Jun-chan, aren't you pretty?

– U!

Hone-Onna bends and whispers:

¹¹«Sumimasen» (済みませせん!) – the one asks for excuse for interrupting and doing|saying something unmannered.

¹²«Gommennasai» (御免なさい!) – the one asks for something unmannered being done. Between close friends could be reduced to 'gome'.

¹³«gaijin» (外国人, full pronunciation as 'gaikoku jin' exact translation is 'foriner', as opposite to, 'nihongono' (日本語)... or, in worst cases 'nihonjin'. Japan is still mono-nation, like you it or not.

– And before... was it bishounen¹⁴, ne?

I am blushing, flashing and downing my eyes.

– Not exactly. But not bakemono¹⁵.

Luckily, unpleasant discussion (one should understand, that I am missing some already lost parameters!) was interrupted by Ichimoku Ren and Enma Ai Herself. However, the Little Mistress is silent as usually and just passing behind the screen where She drops her school uniform and throws on a nagajibana, which She usually put on for bathing. Now everything is understandable – her absence... and our nearest future. Enma Ai always feels in advance, when the client will pull the string on straw doll's neck (it is Wanyuudoo now) thus signing formal covenant with her to 'saw out' the offender. And anticipating that – takes a walk after which, immediately before the final 'show' and ferrying offender's soul to the Hell – bathing in the nearby river.

On Her way to wooden platform She turns and voices out:

– Hone-Onna. Ichimoku Ren. Nohatsu Jun.

Now, this is an order. My heart jumps: first time I will be actively involved. Well, if not in the investigation, bit at least in 'show'. In the corner of my mid – realizing: wise decision. Even if I will make a botch somehow – there will be no living evidence! Meanwhile Ren begins to describe the matter, brassily taking over of my laptop. He is, definitely most hack in this matter (he even worked as physics and chemistry teacher in one school during some 'cascade' investigation), and I am not really worrying for my 'thing', but just little bit insulted. But, it seems to me, I should take it like a woman. LOL, indeed, I feel it is a cultural stuff. And I can figure out several reasons for such brassiness: it is his investigation; speaking of work – he is older staff, than me; laptop is work device – so boyish¹⁶; and in the end – he is a boy, I am a girl.

– Our object. Big militarist, weapons freak and fan of war history. Cool as boiled eggs... sorry ladies.

On the laptop screen – a presentation set of photos. Well, this guy exactly matches the 'bishounen' term. Slender, attractive. A real hawk. And emphasizing it by all means. Here he is in camo, here he is with gun, here he is with another... But, really, even not knowing all details, if feel something wrong with him. Or something does not suit well with him. Frowning, trying to find out – what, but all in vain.

Hone-Onna turns to me and half-viperous, half-kindly smiling says:

– Test passed. You do have a feminine intuition. But not trained one. He is a coward.

Meanwhile Ichimoku Ren continues:

– And while he is incredible cool – he steals girls' hearths in numbers. Now, our client:

On the screen – absolutely regular upperclassmen girl. Cute enough, figuring out from facial mimics – clever enough also. Really – regular good girl.

– One of these girls. We were not able to figure out the reason why she accessed our site, but she was indeed fountaining with emotions. Anyway – two weeks along she was trying to conduct a normal life, continued to date him, and Wanyuudoo was resting mostly in her desk box.

Hone-Onna thoughtfully looks on her freshly manicured nails.

¹⁴«bishounen» (美少年) – naturally 'pretty boy'. There is a pair word (美少女) 'bishoujo'. Generally these words have kind of ironic meaning. Like 'dreamboat' or 'knockout'.

¹⁵ In original scripts Jun is using another untranslatable idiom, which we replaced with 'Bakemono' (kanji will follow later) – monster.

¹⁶ This phenomena will be described later.

– He exactly wins hearts. Wins and bends. Bends with his aggression and defiant cruelty. The girl just realized, she not only loves him, but also frightened by him. Up to panic. And decided to get some power over that man. And protection.

– Quite likely. – Ren agrees, – But now something much more significant happened.

His eyes are sending evil glimpse. Looks like Ren himself dislikes what's happened and can't help waiting until our client will pull a string at last. Disregarding to that – his voice is calm and story – dry from emotions. But maybe it is a kind of defensive reaction.

– The object was seeing the client to home. They've come across a bunch of chaps. Client was invited to join them at arcade to have a few games. The object politely excused himself, said that he hands the care of the client to her good friends and disappeared. The rest of it, ladies, I should not describe, I hope. The client came back to consciousness only now.

Ichimoku Ren loudly grinding his teeth. All in all, but he visibly humanized during his service to Little Mistress. When he was a katana sword he used to frighten maidens, kill them... But now he is worried. Even does not want to spell the 'key' word. To be honest – it is not necessary, clear enough.

Hone-Onna also in rage, this is I am figuring out from my intuition. Actually she is seemingly tranquilly examines nails on second hand. Actually I'm wrong. It could be distinguished from how she speaks: quick, sharp phrases.

I, myself, more like to be shocked. With half of my mind registering what is going on. With another half – worried. I know that such things are happening. But still feeling eerie. Eerie up to pain. Physical.

– To arcade, then. To have a few games. War history.

The rest we are getting without words. And got a plan... immediately and on common agreement.

Crying girl reached a desk box. Took a black straw doll and with doddering fingers tied off the red string from their neck.

– Your grudge shall be released.

The doll disappeared.

Wanyuudoo appears sitting on threshold.

– It is time.

Day fifteenth

– You know, Isishava-kun, they dug a real defence line of 40th years in ***... And made a museum there, What about to drop there?

Ichimoku Ren in camo pants, tall boots and black T-shirt is sitting. In café with the object. The object dressed in the same style.

– Ren-san, that would be really great!

Looks like the object does not feel any remorse. Either he is an idiot, or... I don't know and don't want to know. Ren and the object are in train. The object is 'transcendentally' making some speech, Ren nods conformingly. It seems that they are discussing Nietzsche. Such a thing the object is!

And here is our museum. An old gatekeeper (Wanyuudoo) leads our 'guests' through the exposition. Ren is somehow dumfounded. Seems to me that I overdid... Kso. It was me, who created this museum. Trenches, blindages, all as it should be, with respect to relief and city defence strategies. And, I feel, did all of these

too much adequate. For girl at least. Kso! Kso! It is a test indeed! All that time while Ren was entertaining the object in the train – Wanyuudoo was smoking his pipe, and Hone-Onna, who mentioned the object's attachment to SS uniform – masqueraded herself as a scull on the 'guest from allied Reich' figurine's cockade. And dropped all design to my shoulders. But nothing could be done now. I should continue with our scenario.

– And in this trench, young gentlemen, we arranged a shooting range. Would you like to try? All weapons are authentic...

'Young gentlemen' are definitely and happily agreeing.

– Then, our dear Nohatsu-san will lead you. I am little bit too old to play these toys...

My enter.

I am shaking as in fever. But I have to make myself up. Putting on a sweet smile and emerging from the command blindage. With my back I feel approving look from Hone-Onna-skull. It seems, that she really admire how fast I managed to get into shape.

As nearly any weapons freak, our object has a weak spot about girls in military uniform. Especially when that girl is not really brutal... and even better – young and fey. As someone, named Nohatsu Jun. This is why I am wearing Imperial army lieutenant uniform, adopted for my shape, of course. And straight skirt little bit shorter than knees instead of riding-breeches. A heavy 'Type 11' – Japanese light machinegun is in my hands. I am smiling happily and looking on the device (in my eyes... not appreciation, idolarity):

– We just restored it. All right, let's go.

Looks like, the object is exited. And Hone-Onna – not. She felt that I like machineguns indeed. But... what could be done?

We came to the shooting range.

– Here we've got 'Type 38, 99 and 40' rifles. – I am gesturing towards weapons, lying on the breastwork.
– Or, if you'd like – you can try this device. – With visible effort I am putting the machinegun I brought into shooting cell. In fact I am much stronger, bit role dictates to be weak.

The object immediately runs towards machinegun. Reni differently tries 'Type 40' carbine.

– Well, I think, I would join you. – keeping smiling, I am extracting 'Nambu Type 14' gun from the h

Next two minutes the whole shooting range is rattling so much, that you seemingly can see the noise. At last, after finishing two machinegun clips, the object turns his gaze towards me. And slowly becoming stunned, looking as I am 'putting' bullet after bullet into the middle of target. (By the way, I was not able to get such results when I was alive, so I am enjoying this myself... but we have to return to scenario).

Great. The object fully turned his attention to me. Lazily changing clip in my gun and saying:

– Let's play then, boys. You, - I am pointing to Ren, - will be our soldier. And you – American POW.

An 'American POW' is so entertained, that he feels nothing suspicious and nods. Well, he is an idiot indeed. Or is it situation hypnosis – cowards affected by it more than others. Anyway, that's cool. Dropping the smile, my face now cold and motionless. A gun plated under the object's ear.

– Ano... we are just playing?.. – asks he Ren with doubt. He does not trust me anymore. That's correct. But you can't trust Ren either. 'Type 40' rifle is planted to the object's side.

– Just playing. – Ren answering blankly and pushing him towards commanders bunker. The object does not understand anything, but starting to move... he is moving!

Bunker. We are entering. Ren stays behind the door. Politely smiling he tells:

– I would not interfere, Isihava-kun... and would hand the care of you to your good friend.

The object shruggles. Recognized his own words, scum.

– Well, Isihava-kun, - same blankly asking I. – how did you liked it?

The object keeping silence.

– Answer! - I am shouting and shooting to scratch his ear a little.

– Noooo! – He is screaming. – Ren-san!!!

– Ren-san handed the care of you to your good friends. As you did yourself recently.

The object perceived.

– But... they just wanted to play...

– So we would play also. – Hone-Onna says emerging back from cockade.

Our Hone-Onna is Bone Lady in the end. Forcefully being sold to become geisha, tried to run away and killed during that. And she really can arbitrarily 'lose' flesh. Also, she obviously feels a lot for today's case. So she comes close to the object and showing one of her 'crown tricks' – 'naking' a hand and preaching the object's hip with skeleton fingers. Impressive, by the way...

– But why me?!. – The object continues to scream.

– That's what he said, Mistress. – My reply.

Enma Ai appears in front of us. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– I... – the object blabbing.

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– ... just to play...

– 一遍死んで見る？

The object is not calm even in the boat. Trying to release himself from bone hug of Hone-Onna and continues to babble:

– ...just to play...

– This revenge – Little Mistress is saying the final phrase. – will ferry you to Hell.

Hone-Onna looks at me disapprovingly.

– What's the heck with machinegun? And with pistol?

– Gomenasai! But it is not easy to get rid of attachment to machineguns. And as for pistols... one Russian sci-fi writer mentioned in one of his novels: 'and when a company with a nice big guns coming – they all become stunned...' You have seen how quickly the object was crushed!

Hone-Onna tempera justice with mercy.

– Indeed. But please be careful, Jun-chan...

Ichimoku Ren entering the House.

– Great work, girls! Jun-chan you really rock! By the way, here you have an exemplary nice work when avenge is a festive for soul...



1Wanyuudoo

Episode 4. Paperback serpentarium

Day twentieth

– ... Then you should put on a nagajuban¹⁷. You can hold the lace in your mouth during it. Then you are smoothing out the lapels...

That is me and Hone-Onna, who turned from makeup to traditional Japanese clothes. Actually, nagajuban is nothing. I would never imagine that three letter word would panic me. Hussars, shut up! Well, indeed, I still could not really imagine my erotic relations with man¹⁸ ... But now we are speaking Japanese. And the word is – ‘obi’¹⁹. To tie it aesthetically is mission impossible for me now. Still, while even Little Mistress had mastered this craft – I should also succeed at some point.

There is a smell of good tobacco. Strange. Wanyuudoo expected to be working ‘in field’ – as a cook in cafeteria within some publishing holding. Their chief editor (and main shareholder) kind of obsessed with the idea of closed cycle... and besides from offices and typographies had fit their building... nearly with everything. Well, there are no apartments inside to spend a night within. But there are a number of rooms with good sofas, which could be locked from the inside, and employees are making a lot of use to it. So Wanyuudoo spends days and nights there, naturally. But now he came. Or he needs something from Hone-Onna? At last, dressing of me, the precious, is succeeded. With quite a moderate success, actually. I can

¹⁷Nagajuban – is kind of woman kimono. Light and beautiful, the one of most decorated types. Usually it is decorated with bright flowers or geometrical figures, like balls and triangles.

¹⁸Nohatsu refers to Russian obscene word which means ‘penis’, and to Russian jokes about hussars as extreme-machos with no manners.

¹⁹Obi (帯) – exactly translated as ‘band’ is actually wide and nice looking women waistband.

understand it myself. But the demon, waiting for us sitting on the threshold makes us to stop and ask him at last – can we help?

It turns out that Wanyuudoo have a request not to Hone-Onna, for our surprise. But to me. The client turned to be tough: a junior member of the department, collecting... well, it could be spelled as follows, no doubt. Collecting dossiers. Dossiers for all more or less famous people. Ichimoku Ren, who works now in the same publishing holding... (Oh, he is hiding his talents in the napkin – I read some of his articles... excellent articles! Enough tough, enough acid... Ren is cynical and bunting). Well, initially Ren supposed that the main point in this department head orientation. Problem is that Yusui-san is open gay. But then they have seen the object and this version were dropped: he is not nice looking, and his manners... are not fantastic. So, the idea of one-way love – is not a version.

And then our guys went to the dead end. Relations with the client and the object – are calm and polite. Our client is not a social-climber type. By the way, she also has no boyfriend. As result – we should have a look into their computers. Exactly into their workstations, to be true: Ichimoku Ren made an aquitance with local systems administrators and has found out: both of supervised are using the Internet only for work-related issues. And little-little bit abusing the link with respect to their nature: some traffic to gay sites from the head, some traffic to fashion sites from the girl.

Hone-Onna waves aside:

– Listen, Wanyuudoo, how you can imagine our Jun-chan in the human world? Moreover – with journalists around? You know yourself – she is still pure gaijin. They will immediately corner her and would not let her even step on herself!

I am feeling grateful for her ‘she is still pure gaijin’. She could have used other words²⁰. But did not. This is a good sign. Meanwhile, Wanyuudoo argues:

– They are journalists. So they are more accustomed to meet quite strange persons. In addition to that, Jun-chan will work at night, anyway, when there are not too much people around. And the last but not the least: she will be exactly half-gaijin. Niece to Ichimoku Ren... Grown up, say, in USA.

I am clutching my head... mentally. Visually I am listening to them emotionless. But.. I don’t like America.

– And what Ichimoku Ren’s niece does in the night in their department?

– Waits until he will finish an article for morning newspaper. And uses a free workstation to play with their Internets meanwhile.

Hone-Onna still dissatisfied, but ready to pull back.

– Will you able to manage it, Jun-chanu?

– Hai!²¹ – I am bowing to her. – It would require just making exact copies of their computers contents. This process could be run nearly invisible, in background. And as cower I will open come appropriate website.’ Cheese!’²² for example...Like I am looking for new shoujo-manga...

– OK. Take care. We can impress humans a lot of things, up to being their far relatives. But we can’t erase their minds. Don’t fozzle!

– I will do my best!

²⁰ Again, references to male and female suffixes in Russian and kun- and onna- prononcation in Japanese.

²¹Hai! – is some kind of agreement confirmation. But most close translation will be military ‘Affirmative’ or ‘ay-ay’... though it is being used in civil life normally.

²²Cheese! – is one of oldest and most popular girls magazines, it usually publishing shoujo-manga (as it could be figured aout – manga for girls).

Publishing holding during the night is an interesting place. Not as noisy as during the day, but far much more varied. Hastily clattering with heels I am passing by the cafeteria, where at one table people finishing to celebrate a victory of some baseball team, and around another – to weep the loose of their opponents. Here the guy on duty for incident reports department is half-sleeping in front of radio, which is scanning so-called encrypted police and emergency services frequencies. Meanwhile, I am reaching the destination. Dossier department office is empty indeed: the client works by normal ‘human’ schedule, and the object at this moment is friggig around tables with celebrating and weeping colleagues. Interesting, that he is welcomed on both sides.

All right. Time to begin. I am booting from my own drive and starting to dump the image of section head’s hard disk. By the way Ren checked with help of some systems administrators – that neither object, nor client does not store anything interesting on corporate servers. That’s fishy – two fishes.

How good is that I set up sound notification for process finishing: indeed I carried away with that manga! Removing my disk and going to girl’s workstation. All clear around.

In the middle of my work quite drunk Yusui-san walks in. To be exact – not walks, but rolls in: he has quite a big fat belly and moving only with quick at a trot. Like some unpleasant bun rolls.

– Hurano-chan? – He looks at me surprised.

I am jumping and bowing.

– Sumimasen. I am – Nohatsu Jun. My uncle, Ichimoku Ren-san, said that I can wait for him here as Hurano-san does not work overnight... Sorry for disturbing you, I am leaving immediately.

– Relax. You can wait for hem here indeed... – Yusui-san is benevolent now. But still quickly looks into my monitor. Ha-ha! I am clever girl! There is nothing suspicious on my monitor. Good old ‘Cheese!’ again. And a cable to hard disk to which I am dumping an image is hidden in the mesh of cables on the back of the computer. There is another thing, which worries me: I can sneak the disk itself. But the cable – no. There is a very standard connector on the other end, it used by many devices, not only my disk, but anyway. All I can hope – is that the object will run out for some business... or fall asleep.

I am examining him ‘under a bushel’. He is really unpleasant man. But not so unpleasant to be ‘ordered’. Yusui-san also examines me. Quite openly. And it looks like my ‘legend’ works: judging from his face expression he thinks of me as of regular high school student and blooming fool. ‘That’s great.’ – I think. But not as great as it seemed. After rating my intellect as not something amazing, the object begins... I don’t believe my own ears: he begins to interrogate me about Ichimoku Ren. And again – quite openly.

– Tell me, Jun-chan, – (how differently it feels with different people. When Hone-Onna address to me like this – I am happy. Little Mistress – I feel warm within my heart. And when this man... it is like sticky touch of sweaty palm), – what Ichimoku Ren did do before he become a journalist?

– Sumimasen, I don’t know too much. I returned to Japan not while ago. And we did not communicate too much before that.

– So you do not know him at all?

– Not exactly. I know that he used to work as science teacher in some school. Have seen some photos from these times... But it is like I know only that things, which he wanted to show me, I think.

– So he is so secretive? Nothing to nobody?

– No, Ichimoku-san – is very talkative and joyful man. It is just because... what business he has for a little niece far over seven seas?..

About seven seas – I blurted it luckily. Absolutely gaijin saying,

– So he used to teach chemistry? Organic or?

W-wat the heck with hit interrogation. It is an interrogation indeed! Image dumping has been finished long time ago; disk was safely hidden into my handbag. I would prefer to leave, but I really do not want to leave the cable. Exactly because of this interrogation. Persnickety he is, this Yusui-san. He will definitely find the cable. For my luck, I was wise enough to tell Ren approximate time I'll need to complete this work. And while I am late – he came to save me. Oh, would he know – how close it is to really being saved!

– Uncle Ichimoku! – I am happily squealing. Jumping out from the desk, bumping my hip to it (it is painful!), seemingly losing my balance... and sneak the poor cable from USB-port. Oh! It was indeed...

Day twenty second

I am sitting at Home. Day by day browsing result disk images. Yusui-san is an incredible fish. Even his disk is empty. Well, not empty, of course, there is a lot of stuff in it. But nothing suspicious. Half-mindfully browsing the image cluster by cluster... Oh, Hell the Great! Even empty space is messed. He not only deletes files, but fills their place with random bits. He is either paranoid... Or...

– Ichimoku Ren-san, what do the talk about the object in the publishing house? Besides of orientation?

Ren thoughtfully scratches his head. I am silently envying him: girls are not allowed to scratch a head.

– Well, nothing very special actually. Joking around, but not too much. Either about his overall look, or like this... Oh, no. Somebody told me that he also peaching to the boss.

– Arigato, Ren-san!

Oh, I have a feeling: not only to the boss is he telling tales. Too professionally he cares about his disk. All right, let's have a look at our client.

And our client is an idiot in the end. An Excel file, locked with dictionary word password ('funmatsu' in Latin characters). And there – incomes\expenses list, no doubt. In addition to it – there are no names, only abbreviations. Interesting. And what we can figure out from that?.. By the way something strange could be figured out: all expenses could be divided by the same amount, which amount slightly changes on monthly basis. And all incomes should be divided by the same amount plus fifty per cent. Our client definitely sells something.

– Ano... Ichimoku Ren-san, what can you say about amount of *** yen? – I am telling him this month selling price of unknown goods.

– Hmm... – Ren again scratches his head and begins to recite a long list of goods. Unfortunately, nothing of mentioned does not cost this amount in one piece. Did I miss the point? I am going to ask a next question, but recalling: Hone-Onna stressed many times on that: do not interrupt senior, especially men. Even if you have to. I am closing my mouth and patiently waiting. At last, Ren dried.

– And if it is something illegal?

– Well, I am not a pro in black market, you know... But it seems to me that one dose of cocaine will cost something like that.

Bingo! Funamtsu (粉末) – means powder.

– Congratulations to us. The client is pusher. The object not only nark, but also pro. I bet: he 'revealed' her, but for some reason decided not to pass this to police, but blackmail her.

My words are making sensation between everybody around. Even Hone-Onna stops her manicure. All right, I am explaining the line of my conclusions. Colleagues becoming thoughtful.

– Not the best party. – summarises Ichimoku Ren. – The object is a real sum, as we see. But the client is also not fantastic. What should we do when she'll untie the string?

Hone-Onna shows women solidarity:

– Do not concentrate on her. Let’s think of peaching and blackmailing.

Ren nods.

– So, my darling. – Says Yusui-san with ugly expression. – Either you will let me know where Uncle Ku spends his leisure time; either I will have to hint to somebody regarding your interactions with him.

Hurano Misato reflectively puts her hand into the handbag.

– Well, well, Hurano-chan, don’t be so nervous. Especially while you don’t have a gun or knife in your handbag. You are not of that kind.

Indeed, no knife, no gun. Only yellow straw doll with a red string around the neck – Yamawaro.

– Please, also note that I am not going to hint to this somebody about Uncle Ku’s favourite places. So your words would hurt nobody. And silence could lead to quite worrying results.

Misato frightened. Who knows what this greasy boy-lover will design about Uncle Ku? And Uncle Ku does not like blabbers... But to suffer herself?

– Fuck you! – She suddenly makes up her mind and pulls the string.

– Your grudge shall be released.

Room walls are melting in Yusui-san eyes, becoming grey and rough. His interlocutrix disappears, and on her place appears another woman in strict business suit. A door to the office becomes steel. Ichimoku Ren leans on it.

– What’s it? – Yusui-san shows class. Oh, yes, he is not just some nark. He is real pro – nearly calm even now.

– This is the desk. This is the chair. This is the lady, which would like to have a little chat with you, Yusui-kun. – Ichimoku Ren visibly scoffing. – You see, somebody hinted us about your interactions with some girl...

– I am not into it!

Perfect tactics, by the way! What kind of interactions gay can have with a girl? He clearly understands that all his last discussion with Misato was overheard, but denies creative. Also removing possibility of return blackmailing on the base of his orientation.

– Oh, yes... – Hone-Onna nods. – Interactions mean reciprocity. And in this meaning you never had it with girls. But there are a lot of meanings... Look, you whispered some hint to somebody... and somebody whispered that hint to somebody third. It is also reciprocity.

– And the main point – everything calm, no any screams. Quite a seasonable weather everywhere! – Ichimoku Ren can’t hold it anymore. Obviously, he especially dislikes all kinds of peaching: open battle is another thin. He is katana in the end. Noble weapon. And about ‘seasonable weather’ – this saying he picked from me. I am touched.

– Of course it is calm! Because nothing happens!

– Well, and I will whisper to the boss that not only his ears hearing your peaching whisper?

– Ha! The boss my ass! – The object is already ‘taking water’, but he is right: we still don’t know to whom else he is telling tales. And judging by his professionalism in track hiding – to somebody really serious. It could be even counterintelligence bureau.

– And also – to Uncle Ku... regarding your interest in him. – Hone-Onna makes a next hit.

– But I... j-j-just to make a material! – Now the object is in panic.

– And what? We will whisper. Everything will be nice and calm. And nothing would happen.

– Y-y-you know in the end – who is Uncle Ku!?

– We do. But what’s the matter? You whisper, we whisper. You know something, we know something. It is fair...

– How comes fair? How can I be equalised with that bitch?

– That’s what he said, Mistress.

Enma Ai appears in front of us. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– And what’s that?... – the object bursts. It is even funny – he was collecting dossiers, spying, blackmailing, and have not heard any gossips about us.

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– ... pathetic devildom?...

– 一遍死んで見る？

In the boat this object is also uneasy. Coming back to consciousness, he repeats his last words:

– What that pathetic devildom?

And immediately trying to jump out. In respect to his status we just lock shackles around his arms and legs.

– This revenge – Little Mistress is saying the final phrase. – will ferry you to Hell.

– And this is an example of unpleasant work. – says hone-Onna to me. – The object is a real scoundrel. But clever and crafty scoundrel. And the client, unfortunately...

– What could be done, – I am comforting her. – We are the weapon. And any weapon shoots where it is pointed to. And does not ask – who pointed. But yes, it is still disgusting.

Episode 5. University triangle

Day thirtieth

– When you passing a card directly to the person – you should hold it both hands by lower corners and bow. And finish bow only when card is accepted.

Tried to overcome my incapability to tie an obi aesthetically, Hone-Onna decided to take a break and lectures me on Japanese business ethic. To be honest – I am listening to her not too attentively. And it is not because it is not interesting, but because at the same time I am comparing her lecture to what I’ve seen in anime series when I was alive. For example this moment immediately associated for me with ‘Nana’²³, the episode when Yasu gives his card to my namesake. By the way – I should install a torrent client on our server. It would be funny if our IP will be recognised as located in the Hell. Not the case, actually. External IP of our router is in Japan. Moreover, as I clarified – our House located not inside the Hell, but on its borders. As a part of Little Mistress deal: She does not get into Hell, but gets this job.

²³«Nana» (-ナナ-) – really genius series in ‘josei’ style (女性 – translates as – ‘grown-up woman), i.e. for elder girls and women. Great plot, a; characters indeed like from the real life and incredible music.

And here she is. At this moment Enma Ai wearing saifuku²⁴, so we should not expect an order from her to immediately go and play a final 'act'. Little Mistress looks at us, as always – seemingly without any expression (indeed, in competition on level of emotionlessness she beats even Hone-Onna as a kid), but still we both feel warmth and joy from her look on us. 'We both' – I mean myself and my mentor. Enma Ai comes to her ancient computer (it is an antique now indeed – as far as I remember, she stopped to produce this model around twenty years ago), which – as being waiting for her, immediately turns on the red screen with 'Hell Correspondence' logo in the middle. New request. To be true – I am not surprised. As I think, from our side both reading the request and untying the string by client – is just a formality. Little Mistress fore...feels both request and confirmation.

– Hone-Onna, you will help Wanyuudoo. – says Little Mistress.

Bone Lady bows and disappears.

– Nohatsu Jun.

I am jumping in surprise. Then I realise. Really, everybody is busy. Actually, it is a long time I have not seen Yamawaro. On other hand – long time not seen Kikuri, and it makes me happy. I really don't like her! So – it is my turn again to work as doll. Well, we'll stay alive – then would not die, and if would die – will have a nap. In the doll's role to sleep – is most wise thing. Of the client would not decide to have a chat.

Little Mistress approaches me and takes my hand. I am shocked. She never allowed herself such breadth... but we've never been alone since I've got here. Anyway, to say that I am pleased – is to say nothing. I am in the seventh heaven, really. I don't know how she manage it, but Enma Ai, with all her silent and emotionless appearance – incredibly charming and makes you to fall in love with her in the glimpse of eye. At least I fell in love with her from the first episode of anime. Thus such expression of trust and kindness (and taking into account Japanese culture lessons I've got – I realise, that it is hundred times more significant gesture than if we would been even in Western Europe)... As one of my mates when I was alive used to say: 'Finish! Now I would not wash this hand for a week!' In one word – I am melting.

– Familiarised? – asks Little Mistress meanwhile.

– Hai! – I am nodding. – But there are so many things to learn...

– You knew what you are choosing.

– Hai! I am not complaining. I am... reporting the progress. – I am answering to her and smiling. With absolutely untimely gentle smile.

– Good. – Constotates Enma Ai. – And you have been accepted.

Actually, I've realized it myself. But such a confirmation from her – is really serious thing. Today is some kind of festive. I am even starting to worry. And Little Mistress turns and leads me out.

Everlasting sunset paints the lake into blood-red. We are staying on the beach under a big tree. A boy in front of us. Nothing very special about him, just ordinary one. Maybe little bit nerd, but not extreme.

– I am – Enma Ai. – Little Mistress introduces herself.

– Hell... Girl?! – A boy shocked.

I always was surprised with this thing. It should seem like this: the fact, that our website is accessible only in the midnight, and only when the one trying to access it is having certain feelings (in all our cases it shows a DNS error, like even this domain does not exist) – this fact should prepare the client to something supernatural. But not. Every time they seem to be surprised. From other hand I always been surprised

²⁴Saifuku – abbreviation from 'sailor fuku' (セーラーふく) – a girls school uniform in afterwar Japan. It is a direct 'import' from English. All these unedging anime 'sailor' girls – are girsl in saifuku.

myself how quickly they figure out this 'Hell Girl' from Little Mistress name²⁵. The logic is clear, and even simple enough. But I am, even if I would be a native nihongo-speaker – I doubt that I would be able to figure it out with such speed.

– You have summoned me. – continues Enma Ai. A boy nods.

– Nohatsu Jun! – She turns to me and expectantly drawing her hand.

– Yes, Mistress! – I am bowing and throwing that hard disk cable around my neck, turning into straw doll. A doll drops into Little Mistress palm. By the way I am always forgetting to ask my colleagues – what colour do I have in this hypostasis?

– Take this, – Enma Ai hands me over to the boy. He accepts the doll with surprise. He has good hands: enough gentle, warm, dry and enough strong for his age...

– If you really wish to take revenge – you may pull the red string. If you remove the string you shall officially enter into a contract with me. The one you seek revenge upon shall be taken immediately to Hell.

A boy really freezes. Stays still with spreaded hand.

– However, if I deliver your revenge, I must have you make restitution to me. When one person is cursed, two graves are dug. When you die, your soul shall fall into the pit of Hell. Your soul shall wander forever in pain and suffering, never having known paradise. Well, that's after you die.

Client gets another point in my rating: usually, when they hear this condition – they are panicking and starting to cry out different unreasoned stuff, like 'why me?' Even in the anime series only two or three of them accepted this condition at once and considered it reasonable. I myself think this announcement as excessive. I mean – it could be easily figured out. Murder is a sin. And murder with our help – even more: 'by group of persons, by previous concert'. In one word – a sin with aggravating circumstances. The only difference – that a contract with us could not be covered out with good deeds, or, say, atoned.

Back to the matter: this client does not spell foolish statements. He just nods.

– The rest is – for you to decide. – Little Mistress finalizes the standard entering into the contract formula. We with client appearing back into the human world.

Principally, when being a doll – we are getting funny capabilities. For example – sphere sight. But usually it is not required: the doll rest safely in the desk drawer... or in the briefcase. Not too much to see. Also the doll automatically knows the name of the client and the object. And here I am starting to think. The problem is that the client (Takasake Kyon) 'ordered... a girl (Kitsuki Midori). Interesting, what guided Little Mistress to demonstrate to the client – that the doll is a girl also? Since we've got gender balance in the team she usually tries to give the doll of the same sex as the client. There are some exclusions, of course.

The client is sitting in his room. The room is also nothing special: a desk, a chair, a bed... yes, exactly a bed, client does not sleep on footon²⁶. There are several posters of J-Metal groups, of few anime-series (all of them – 'bulgeonwaging' as 'Bleach')... and two small photos of the object. So ka! It seems to me – here we have an example of unrequited love. Kso! I really don't like such 'hands'. To suicide in such situation – possible. It is not a solution, actually, but, I would daresay, a natural variant. But to kill the object of your love (especially with our help) – a dirty play. Well, definitely the Othello man also could be understood and

²⁵Actually it is a little bit tricky logic. In Japanese language Indian God of Death – Yama – is spelled as 'Enma'. And one of omonymous words, spelled as 'Ai' – is a variant of 'love' (there is 'suki' (好き) – to be fond of, have sympathy, 'ai' (愛) – like Platonism, and 'koi' (恋) – like passion and lust)... So Little Mistress is 'belowed by Yama'.

²⁶Footon (布団)– Traditional japanese mattress, laid on the floor in the night and rolled into the locker or cabinet in the morning.

even pitied. OooK, but I even before all of this was on Desdemona's side... and now even like have to be. Women solidarity, you know...

The client, who does not even realise how much points he have lost in my eyes – demonstrates a sharp mind. If he have seen me in the shape of a regular girl (even in irregular circumstances), then even in the shape of doll I have sense. A logical conclusion. Indeed, a doll can communicate with the client. The problem is that I myself do not want to do it. And the worst of this situation that I don't like this contract by all means. But I can't discourage him! Especially I am! I am starting to feel, that Little Mistress has chosen me – because of myself, not because of the client. Kso! And what to do? Who I will answer to this idiot?

'This idiot' meanwhile asking an incredible difficult for me question:

– Tell me, is it normal – to date several guys at the same time?

Ha-ha! If I knew! And in addition: to tell that it is normal I cannot say because of my job. To tell that it is not – too: I know, that on biological level an ander tries to fertilize as much dams as possible, and dam – tries to draw attention of as much anders as possible... and chose the best of them. All right, let's try to answer as it is. The client is a grown-up boy, maybe he will understand that it means 'yes' and 'no' simultaneously.

– To date, 'make eyes' and flirt by all means – is normal. A girl should attract an attention and decide how much she likes each of the boys. But after making a decision – no. Not normal.

– And how to understand that decision is done? And how to distinguish flirting from...

Oh, you, Little Mistress, you really framed me! Ok, if I don't know the answer without thinking – let's ponder. In case of Japanese (and not only Japanese) traditional culture – the marker of the decision will be intimacy. Well, I am just embarrassed to even think: 'sex', you know. But this fact has lost its meaning even now somehow. And I myself actually, with my quite strange current perception – can have sex here and there without any problems. Because I will concentrate not on the partner, but on myself. Even while in general it is not good. All right. Let's try to spell it as follows:

– It is really very intimate thing for every girl. And could be different. But most likely – it should be moving to his place. Or intimacy indeed.

My only hope (as a worker) – that Midori already had it with somebody. Otherwise it will be like I am discouraging the client. Kso, what a nasty contract! I indeed want to discourage him!

Unluckily for the object – it seems that she really slept with someone and has not make a big secret from that: client's hand reflectory grasps me, as he twitched from pain. And for my own luck – this breaks our conversation. Client sits for some time, silently looking on the doll in his hands, and then locks me in the drawer.

Day thirty first

On the next day he takes me from the drawer, puts into the briefcase, and going into his college (or university?). Well, it is actually for good: I would like to see the object in the real life. Maybe the client is not so wrong?

Still I had to wait for quite a long time. For a few hours I see only glimpse of hands and notebooks, when the client opens his briefcase preparing for next lecture. By the way, he is learning on the faculty that connected with computer science. The lectures I hear while being in the briefcase – initially the introduction into programming, then to network security. I am giggling: if Little Mistress would have sent me tom work 'in field' during this contract – I would be a straight A student. Meanwhile, during one of the breaks I hear a very interesting conversation. Not a conversation, actually. Few phrases:

– Oi, Takasake-kun! Why you are so fixing on Kitsuki and Sudzuki? Jealous?

– Get lost, Fujibayashi!

– Jealous never ends up with any good. You can't do anything. And if you'd can – you'd just ruin the lives. Her and yours.

Oh-oh! The girl with Fujibayashi last name does not know how wrong she is. And how right in the same time: the client can do. Can do a lot. But it will be indeed ruining of life. For both of them.

– That's none of your business, isn't it?

Yes, the client thinks the same: with this answer he reflectory puts his hand into the briefcase and grasps me.

– I just do not want people take sins on their souls. And Jealousy is a sin.

– Maria-san, save me from you Christian preaches. We are in Japan in the end!

So. This Fujibayashi Maria (I always had fun hearing how Japanese stress on the first sound of this name: 'Maria') – is a Christian. And most significant – she could become our problem: shoe knows about relations between our client and the object, and when (or if) the client will 'sign the contract' – she will be able to make certain conclusions. Yes, we are quite a mystic thing. But if she believes in Christian God, especially in Japan – she has a very high predisposition for mystics: it is not a traditional religion here, and to exercise it here, the one should not 'follow the common trend', but believe in it indeed. So this girl can even connect the object's disappearance with the client. This should be reported immediately. Luckily, all dolls have a very close connection with Enma Ai. So I can... let's put it like this: send a telepathem to her.

– You are right. – I hear a whisper of Little Mistress in my ear.

Meanwhile, it looks like Fujibayashi left. And the client picks up the briefcase an also going somewhere. It turns to be – to speak with the object.

– Midori...

– What's up, Takasake-kun?

I don't like the object's voice. I even can't say – why. Frivolousness and friskiness – is kind of norm for her age. But combination is somehow... not good. It seems that I cannot pick up and logically analyze some additional notes in her voice. Supposing, Hone-Onna should say again something about my undeveloped woman intuition.

– I...would like to talk to you.

– Then speak out!

– Maybe while we will be alone?

– Oh, why it should be so complicated?

– Midori... it is serious... you know... I love you!

The client is brave at least in something: such a confession, especially with evidence around – is a very courageous step for Japanese.

– I know!

And the object is fool. Or she is mindfully scoffing the client.

– And if you do – then why you say nothing? Dating me, those other guys?

– Wow, you are jealous! – The object is laughing mockingly. OK, now I am sure: she is really mindfully scoffing him. And the client does not understand that and begins to 'press on compassion' (which is absolutely wrong decision in such circumstances).

– Jealous. Have a look – where you lead me!

Wow! The client opens the briefcase and demonstrates its contents to the object. By the way, I really don't lie to the object. It is not good to say such a things about girls, but slut she is. OK, and I am – vixen. Both are not nice.

– Ha-ha-ha! Kyon-chan got so crazy that begun to play dolls! No, true enough, Takashi-kun is much more mature than you!

Stupid! When she mentioned one of rivals, and moreover – by the first name (a sign of close relations), the client twitches and grabs my string.

– Then – I am a child?

– Ha-ha-ha! Looks like that! And I do not go out with kid. Bye-bye!

Stupid twice and finally. Client mumbles: 'Then you will not be anyone's!' and pulls the string.

– Your grudge shall be released!

I am disappearing.

Midori walks down the street, making eyes to passersby. Gallant Ichimoku Ren trying to make aquitance with her. Now they are in some bar, Ren teases the object with wine.

A classy limo parks nearby. Wanyuudoo emerges from it – now he is looking like some traditionalist boss of huge corporation. He sits to the bar counter near to the object. Midori immediately switches to him OooK, I was correct assessing her.

Ichimoku Ren looks worried:

– Kitsuki-san... how it comes?

The object does not pay any attention to him – she is all attracted with Wanyuudoo.

I am approaching them and saying loudly:

– Sorry Ichimoku-san. Here we have an exemplary example of whoredom.

The object bursts:

– How dare you... such a vixen! It is my business to whom I talk!

That's funny. Another my assessment proved to be true. I was called vixen. But at the moment I don't care.

– That's what she said, Mistress.

By the way – I don't remember such a scandal in the boat. The object really gets hysterical, squealing and screaming, cursing and trying to fight. Only joint efforts of me and Hone-Onna succeed to fix her.

– Unfortunately, this is absolutely adequate description of your behaviour. And there is a payment for that. – I am telling her.

– This revenge will ferry you to Hell. – Enma Ai is saying the traditional final sentences. But she looks on me instead, I can read approval in her eyes... and at last I understand the whole meaning of this all: Little mistress was afraid that I would begin to discourage the client (and she was right –I really balanced on the edge of that) and so she used me in the less influential form possible. But I did not fail, and did everything right. As a girl, and as her subordinate. So she is satisfied with me. This makes me happy indeed... but the contract still was nasty.

Episode 6. Coming out into the stage

Day thirty ninth

– Remember: all housework: cooking, cleaning, washing – are exclusive women tasks. In normal situation a man would not even remove the cup from the table if there is some woman around.

Hone-Onna continues to lecture me about details of Japanese culture. I am sitting in front of her, back to the mirror and quietly proud of myself: mirror reflects a nice bow-knot on my obi. Finally I got this skill!

But as usually – once I manage to do something beautiful over myself – I am not allowed to fully enjoy the result. Now we are interrupted with both our ‘mature boys’. By their faces I can see – the situation is quite messy. And still they are keeping silence for around one minute. Either they are formulating, either... Anyway, we with Hone-Onna are complying with etiquette and patiently waiting. At last, Wanyuudoo announces:

– That college on the East of Kochi²⁷. Computer sciences faculty is being supervised by ‘Kanri Solutions’ company, which deals with all possible computer business little by little. Easy to figure out that a lot of the college students work there part-time. Potential client third day in a row accessing our site, inputs the name of his manager, but does not submit the request. From the first glance the reason is unclear: they have quite smooth relations.

Ichimoku Ren continues:

– Thus, even while you, Hone-Onna, probably think that Jun-chan is not ready for a field work, we still need her. As a student and a girlfriend of the client. And I will infiltrate into ‘Kanri’.

For my surprise, Hone-Onna is keeping silence. My heart stops: is she indeed agreeing that I am ready to field work? Stunned. And grateful, grateful to her indeed! She really taught me a lot!

– Still, let her be an exchange student. Or returned expat. – At last spells she.

My heart drops somewhere down. Hurray! She really thinks that I am ready! Now, by the way, I have a full right to ask a question about the case:

– Who are the potential client and object?

– The object – a network engineer. The client – junior technician ‘waiting in the wings’.

I am thinking. OK, imagine that I made a connection to this boy on the faculty. But it is not likely I would be able to get into the same department in their company in few days. And his manager should be observed on part-time basis. Yes, Ren is correct – we need somebody in ‘Kanri’. But...

–Sumimasen. Ichimoku Ren-san, I am afraid, that this company has really high requirements for computer science. And we require somebody who can really observe our wards. To be close to the, I do not want to insult you... but having some doubts – how much is it possible?..

Ren shrugs:

– Are we have other variants? Who else can work there?

– Second time I am asking for excuse... But of Hone-Onna-san would be so nice to agree to work there at sales department(doenig sales for the department in question)... or a secretary... - I am resting my hands against the floor and bowing before her. Hone-Onna has full authority to be insulted: secretary is far below

²⁷ Kochi is an iseland in south-eastern Japan. Not biggest not smalles, A good place for Jun-chan: when moving to the south, especially when reaching Okinawa specific pronunciation shows up more and more. And her own not-perfect pronunciation would attract some attention in pair with ‘legend’, but much less, if she would a[[eared near to Tokyo at once.

her level. – Because thislike she will be able to contact with them, and requirements for her as pro in different area and... a woman... will be quite different.

For my relief, Hone-Onna is laughing:

– You are a clever girl, Jun-chanu. Nicely calculated. Well, I have no objections to sell computer networking technologies for a while. But beware: in case of any problems – will terror yourself with questions!

– Hai!

Ichimoku Ren and Wanyuudoo looks at each other with irony:

– I think it is a women conspiracy! – Ren is finishing the discussion. – But why not?



2 Hone-Onna

Day fortieth

First day in the college. I am staying in the same lecture hall where I was as a doll, and I am embarrassed incredibly. I am not accustomed to such attention to my person. And the standard procedure requires coming down to the board and introducing myself to the whole course. Definitely, I knew about that for a while. But still not ready mentally. At least I am allowed to take a seat.

Secretly looking on my classmates. Two rows above me – the potential client. Even while I mostly can see only back of his head, but when he turns – I am feeling that he is not fully Japanese. Foreseeing some Malay sub race blood²⁸. Philippine for, say quarter, for example. By the way, I can't spot our previous client. Interesting, is it coincidence, or he transferred? And this nice and attractive girl with moderate bob, as for her voice – is that Fujibayashi Maria. I should pay attention to her as well.

Meanwhile seminar begins. Like we are designing a network for intermediate company. That's a good chance to figure out how good our client in his job. And the boy is really cool: he quickly suggested to install

²⁸Only 'wild gaijin' thinks that all mongoloids are the same face. Even in the same sub-race there are a lot of facial differences. And malai subrace could be distinguished from Chinese subrace easily.

a second domain controller, and argument correctly the use of quite an intellectual firewall like ISA: in the model company they have different enough requirements for the Internet access depending on user's role and position.

Lector agrees with his proposal and suddenly turns to me.

– Nohatsu-san, can you add anything here? – I am not the only one who trying to figure out the level of another's knowledge.

– Yes. I have two ideas. First is simple enough – it would be good idea to use QoS and give a high priority for *** traffic.

Lector bents his brow in surprise. So, you expected less from me? He-he, that's just a beginning!

– Second: Is one of the following is expected in the nearest future: opening branches, joint ventures with another companies, or any 'field works'? If the answer will be 'yes' for at least one of these questions – I would not recommend to use 192.168.1.0/24 and 192.168.0.0/24 subnets – it could pose a lot of problems with routing if the VPN tunnels will be required. By all means, actually, subnets should be planned in advance.

Hm. Looks like I overdid it. Others are shocked. It seems, that nobody expected such a strategic thinking from me. Ah, yes, I am not only first grade, but also a girl... and even more – gaijin (by breeding). Well then, I will be a women prodigy as Chiyo-chan from 'Azumanga'²⁹ in this case. Actually, I am not as small, and not as kawaii, but beautiful (sorry). And in any case I should draw an attention to my person. I am going to make acquaintance with the client in the end. And it would be much better if it would be him who will make this acquaintance. It is also cultural thing, but this rule is quite common in different cultures. From another hand – if I would smile to him right now – there would be nothing reprehensible in such gesture.

Wow! Interesting reaction! Initially I thought the client is very reserved and... well, I just thought that I am over lucky to meet (seemingly) emotionless persons. But now, from my smile – he really bloomed. Quickly ducked back under motionless mask, but I still have seen this momentary glimpse. But what does it mean? I am looking at him from the very morning. And never spotted anything like this. And if I would start from another end? Have I seen any visible emotions from others towards him? It seems, that I haven't. I should ask Hone-Onna tonight: what's going on in their office. In principle, I thought that a 'mirror' – is mostly woman type of personality. But if it is the case? If so – we would have at least some clue.

Actually it is good that the client sitting one desk forward and right from me at the moment. Now I will create a case for him to talk to me. I am setting communicator to play a loud melody one minute before lesson ends and putting it on the desk near to the textbook. Lesson is going on smoothly...

Ha! Just as planned!³⁰ Communicator rings, I am jumping, grabbing it: it is horribly impolite to use mobiles and especially with such loud ringtones during lesson. Naturally, 'because of surprise and embrassement' my motions are not smooth and a textbook drops on the floor near to his desk. Client is a good boy and picks it... the bell rings. Now he can not only return a book to me, but also have a small chat.

²⁹«Azumanga» (あずまんが大大王 – «A great manga drawn by Azuma») – although the plot is about daily life of group of schoolgirls, still this anime is part of shounen genre – i.e. for boys. Very sweet, with quite unpredictable and clever humour.. And also – a real encyclopaedia of Japanese life.

Chiyo-chan – is a wunderkind girl, who even at her age knows a lot and possesses a lot of skills, thus in the very beginning attracting jealousy from classmates. Later she joins their friends circle, because in truth she is really pretty *small girl*.

³⁰Just as planned – a mem that came from the 'Death Note' anime. The point is in political and psychological multi-step manipulation on other people.

– Ano... Nohatsu-san, your textbook...

– Arigato gozaimoshta! – I am jumping and thanking him with full adherence to etiquette rules (another ‘thank you’ to Hone-Onna). – You are very kind, Tenjin-san!

– You remember my name? – Client surprised. Hell the Great, what’s going on here? What’s surprising that I remember the name that was spelled in my presence less than fifteen minutes ago?

– Of course I did!! – I am smiling again (bang! Again he answers with smile for a second... no, this time he smiles even little bit longer). – You answered straight before me. And I really admire your idea regarding ISA – useful indeed.

And even longer. Oh-oh. This guy completely unaccustomed to kind attention. I think, I should ask to monitor this aspect as a priority.

– I am... flattered. – Client is also embarrassed. – And very happy that you noted...

– Am I allowed to do some small tactless thing? – I am deciding to force our familiarity. – I am not really skilled with etiquette and having some discomfort when using such a formal way of speaking. Let’s shift to the first-name terms?

Actually, to switch to first names for Japanese (and between people of different sex) is an extreme way of familiarity. Indeed – *family* level. So at this moment only Hone-Onna and other colleagues address to me as Jun, all others – with second or full name. And here I also suggested actually to drop official postfix ‘-san’... and some other small formal things.

– All right... Nohatsu.

– Tenjin, correct me if I am wrong – but it is a long break and lunch now?

– Yes.

– Then could you please do a favour for me: I was so agitated in the morning that forgot to cook a bento... But I suppose there should be some kind of cafeteria nearby?

– Sure! Come on, I will show you!

During lunchtime I am accurately enforcing these relations. If the client would not submit for contract and immediate signing of it – tomorrow I would be able to ask him questions about work and expect quite ‘intimate’ answers. In worst case we already have a theory: lack of attention. After finishing lunch we are parting (I excused myself with need to sign up into library) – and I am immediately calling to Hone-Onna.

– Hone-Onna-san! Just a quick one: could you please pay special attention to their working atmosphere. I am suspicious, that the object ignores the client. Although it sounds unexpected.

– OK, Jun-chan. Will check that. Surprise, how honey-clover!

Exactly. Absolutely girlish concept. But we don’t have anything else at the moment.

In the evening we are sitting on the Home threshold. Wanyuudoo smokes a pipe, I – a thin lady cigarette. I would prefer something more strong, but nobeless oblige. Actually it is funny. I have died and turned into, I would daresay, a daemoness. But have not dropped smoking. Hone-Onna comes back from work. Can’t help feasting my eyes on her – she is an embodied grace. But I think that geisha outfit suits her better. Or to be correct – she is more accustomed to it, so wears it with a special charm.

Bone Lady sits to us.

– You know, Jun-chan, there is something with your theory. But at least – not exactly as you thought. I watched several times as Miyano-san explains something to Tenjin-kun. Calmly, detailed and mindfully. Gives additional explanations if something was unclear. Still, my intuition tells me that you are close to the truth.

– Hone-Onna-san, can I have a look on Miyano-san myself? Imagine, that with joint intuitions we would figure out something?

– Why not? – She agrees. – But how we would arrange it?

Wanyuudoo grins:

– You don't want to be Jun-chan's relative, ne?

– I would prefer to be girlfriends with her.

I am lowering my eyes and blushing. Her intention to be friends with me – is pleasant on itself. And I especially happy with how she has put it. Because of quite understandable reason. Indeed, it seems that I completely joined the team.

– Then just send her an invitation. 'Kanri' has access to student's files. And always looking for good staff. It is likely that they also did an introductory visit for students in the beginning of the term. And Jun-chan missed it. Here is the cover.

– Hai. – Hone-Onna agrees. – It looks reasonable.

Close to midnight. Little Mistress sits in the living room and plays her glass balls. Boys and Hone-Onna has left to their rooms. I am sitting with laptop and tidying our database: microphone records should be decrypted and indexed, photos – attached...

Enma Ai's antiques computer brings up a red screen.

– Ichimoku Ren. – Says she, and while he is coming down, gives me an explanation: – Tenjin Aruno.

After that she left to propose a contract. I am thoughtful. I can't help feeling that my appearance in the college was the trigger. But why? What I said or did that encouraged the client? Definitely I should have a look on the object... I still wouldn't believe the client will pull the string today.

Day forty first

In the morning the client demonstrates feverish (which is not typical for him, as I understand) agitation. And especially I am worried that this agitation is not noted by anybody. Anybody, but Fujibayashi. Sure, it adds some proof to my theory of lack of attention. But Fujibayashi! And client grasps his briefcase every minute (suppose that Ren is there). Kso! Now instead of interrogating the client I should pay most attention to distracting her!

But, it is much easier to achieve: I can approach female classmate myself. And more – she openly wears a Christian cross, and I even by the legend I used to live surrounded by gaijins for a while – so we have a matter to start a chat.

We introducing each other, and from Christianity switching to pure girls talks. When lunch time comes we are already 'Maria' and 'Jun' (girls are more familiar between themselves in all countries, so we are not acting as, say, sisters, but as girlfriends, indeed). But exactly before lunch something happens... Something, I would say – frightening. As being neat girls, we are going to wash our hands before eating. And at the moment when we both bent by the sinks – in the mirror in front of us Little Mistress appears. And with round Maria's eyes I understand – she *also sees it*. And this is hideous indeed. And the worst thing – we cannot even hope that Fujibayashi connected to Enma Ai because destined to become a Hell Girl herself in

some time, as it was with Yuzuki³¹. Just because Little Mistress pitied Yuzuki and let her go – and for that she lost her right to prepare a shift worker for herself. So this means – Maria is our problem and nothing more.

– Have you seen it? – moaning Fujibayashi.

How should I react? To boldly deny – not an option: My face is also shocked. To pretend it was tiredness from heat? Too risky: hallucinations could not be absolutely the same, and I do not want to lie to her (and to pretend I've seen some very different picture). No. Will use Lighto-kun's method³². Will begin to hunt ourselves.

– Yes... What that was?

– Oh, Jun... I don't know... But this girl breeze with death.

– Probably... you are right... But who is she?

– I don't know...

Actually in this situation there is one positive thing: our current client is safe for some time: Maria would concentrate on Little Mistress' person. It would not take long for her to find out some gossips about us, but we can have a day or two. Though there is a negative thing also: until the end of today studies I am tied to her: I should be shocked and interested not less than she is.

So I spent the rest of the day to leading Maria to wrong directions, and now I am sure: not today, and probably not tomorrow she will understand whom we had seen. Silently proud with myself: I not only lead her aside, but never lied during that. Just recalled another likewise gossips. Well, for example, Crying Myrtle from Harry Potter. And now it is time to have a look on Miyano-san.

I am entering into 'Kanri' office, asking how can I meet with Hone-Onna (obviously, she works under a transformed name: Sone Anna). And five minutes later my colleague and mentor leads me through the company. Hone-Onna is a strategic thinker, by the way. She left her own department to be the last. This would allow us to have some chat and coffee after the excursion. I mean – continue to investigate the object.

And the object worries me. I.e. the fact that this particular man is 'ordered' – worries me. Enough nice, even handsome with some cat's beauty. Same as cat – calm and soft. Extremely clever and by all chances – classy pro. Sorry for such a parallel – but not worst than I am. And I was worth something. And, I would say that I also got some indirect confirmations to my theories: even when Hone-Onna introduced me – he did not smile. And when we were discussing professional things – even if he agrees with me, but just 'constates the fact'. No word of approval. When I am intentionally plant an erroneous statement, although, does not show any displeasure, only keeping detached intonations explains where I was wrong. Apparently, it is not learned emotionless of Hone-Onna or mysterious silence and insularity of Little Mistress. No, he is really calm as... as I don't know what. And looks like he is thinking about something else with half of his mind.

Then we are drinking coffee with Hone-Onna for some time. The client appears in the office. I am greeting him with smile, 'adults' are nodding neutrally. Boys are drowned into work and we are lucky to

³¹Referance to the story in the third season of anime about Little Mistress.

³²Ligth-kun (Yamagami Light) – one of two (five afterwards) main characters in 'Death Note' anime mentioned above. Kind of idealistic killer. The most part of series (or movies – there are movies of same plot) – he pretends to be joint forces with detectives, and at some point even becomes the head of investigation which are aiming to catch... Lighto-kun himself.

behold two tongue-lashings the object does. Indeed, when working him is the same as when speaking with me. A regular person would do a tongue-lashing to subordinate in such cases. Miyano-san just calmly and little bit tediously explains to the client – what he did wrong and how to do it right. Client with that does his best to show that nothing is happening, though I can (after looking at him in different situations yesterday and today) see: something is really hurting him in this.

But I have to leave: I can't fringe around the office endlessly. Formally parting with 'adults', again smiling to the client and exiting from the building.

Hone-Onna had not even have time to change into kimono after work, as Little Mistress went behind the screen. So ka! Then, client made up his mind. Hell the Great, what's the heck is going on? And why I can't stop feeling that it was me again who triggered the situation. I am smoking nervously and listening to my colleagues discussing the matter. Suddenly I've got it. Oh... I triggered everything indeed. The client is terribly longing for emotions aimed to him. Especially care, of course. And a contrast between my smiles and carried-away calm of the object knocked the client out. It is I myself who showed him, that emotions *do exist*. By the way now I am sure he has part of Philippine blood^ as far as I remember these guys (ad I used to work with them a lot when I was alive) – they are really very open and lively people. And the client, poor thing, appeared in the 'icy' Japan.

– ...so that is it. – I am finishing describing my finding. Colleagues are sympathizing me.

– Maybe then you should stay at Home? – asking Hone-Onna.

– No... To some extent – it was me who killed him. So – I have... have to see it.

I am a fool. Responsible. And emotional. Absolutely do not remember the 'act' – all like in fog. Realization of surroundings returns to me in the very last moment.

Enma Ai appears in front of Miyano-san. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– 一遍死んで見る？

Miyano-san comes back to consciousness. He lies in the boat, face to Little Mistress, which stays at the aft with an oar in her hands.

– Then, – he sighing, – there are smiles without cats³³, and I am – a cat without smile. Eh, Tenjin-kun, excuse me... I never had shout on you, but never compliment you. And it turned that you needed it. Sorry. This is how I am... cat without smile.

– This revenge – Little Mistress is saying the final phrase. – will ferry you to Hell.

After coming back Home, I sit for some time in complete stupor. I feel emptiness in soul. I am... totally nothing. Feeling nothing, desiring nothing. At all. Then I am standing up, going to the blue flowers, and falling face-down: do not want to see this red sunset sky.

– A cat without smile. – I am whispering, unseeing gaze pointed to flower in front of me.

³³Reference to 'Alice in the Wonderland' by Lewis Carroll.

Somebody coming and putting their hand on my head.

– He realized the reason too... And he would not suffer too much. – Little Mistress says. – He is very same as you.

Something explodes in me. I am crying. Quietly, but shedding floods of tears. Enma Ai caresses my head.



3Ichimoku Ren

Episode 7. Tribute to Black Lagoon

Day forty second

– ... Thus subroutine – is actually a small program inside the main one, which can get some parameters on entry point. Actually there is no big difference between subroutine and function, but in some programming languages function could be manifested only in one string, and in other...

It is me, sitting on the lecture. Yesterday I cried for half of the night, being comforted by Little Mistress. The she disappeared somewhere. I cried some time more, and then sat in blue flowers until the morning, depleted. In the morning Wanyuudoo had found me. Actually, morning, night and all other parts of the day – here it is a conditional concept: that is the way of this place, that we have unending bloody-red sunset around the Home. So these are just a reference to what is happening in human world. Or to clock arms positions.

The old demon lit cigarette for me and said:

– It would be good for you to stay at Home at least for one day. But the connection between Fujibayashi-chan and Little Mistress – is too dangerous. So you have to return to the college.

I nodded. There is no need to explain such kind of things to me: I am, maybe, careless and light-minded in overall, but if I realize the need for something, then I handle it seriously and responsible.

So, sitting here now. Form corresponds to feelings and feelings are hideous. So hideous that even Fujibayashi, who sits next to me allowed herself to ask – what is happening to me.

– Don't worry, – telling her. – Yesterday I had a huge needle. As result – have not slept at night... And *Moon phase* seems to me, incoming.

I am marvelling inside myself: even with all breakdowns in my heart – automatically I managed again to tell only truth (or nearly truth), but in such way, that Maria can understand my words as she would like. By the way, judging by feelings, *Moon phase* is really incoming. Well... then I will familiarize myself also with this aspect of existence. It will be actually quite natural now. But it is remarkable: I am now a magic being. And somehow even undead. To be honest – I am afraid even to thing – what will I give birth if that will happen? And maybe it is just somatic. And I just imagined a lot of foolish stuff to myself. Anyway, we'll see in next hours. For worst case scenario – I was enough considerate to stock the required things in the morning.

Fujibayashi is somehow settled and returns to lecture. I am sitting and gazing nowhere. To this level I knew programming when I was alive, so I can afford it. To be honest, I do not know: even if I could not afford it – would I be able to listen attentively? Ni, I cried out yesterday indeed. And my current emptiness is not the same as yesterday. Yesterday it was a shock. Now – tiredness. The limit of emotions was used in the night to full extent. Nothing is left for the day.

By the way, Tenjin is not in today. Could be concluded – he is trying to realize what he had done yesterday. Don't know, how to socialize with hem from now on. Luckily, it is not required anymore. To put on a polite smile – Hone-Onna taught me, and close communication is not necessary. Now I have to communicate closely with Maria.

Maria – is a good girl, among other things. It is easy with her (if not the requirement to unnoticeably direct her from our field of action) and pleasant. For me. Actually she is quite strongly marked tsundere³⁴. Lines up everybody, instructs on the right path... It just happened that she turned to me with dere-side and to others – with tsun. Also she skilfully throws a pencil box. Yesterday, when two guys started to romp during the lecture – very neatly threw it to assailant's nape. From four rows distance (she prefers to sit in the far end o the classroom). So she is quite uncommon Christian. More like medieval Spiritual Knights. Grinning inside my mind: 'Fujibayashi Maria, the Knight of the Temple'. Total hodgepodge.

Actually, tsundere is the same 'mirror' type. She sees some strange and suspicious persons – kick them. As far as persons turning to be understandable and good – dango³⁵ to them. Et-to... why exactly dango?.. Because I was so carried away with my thoughts that have not noticed that she passes me a stick with dango.

I am smiling in colour and accepting tease. Concern on her face little bit eased.

– Sorry, Maria. I was thinking deeply. Thank you, it is very tasty!

³⁴«tsundere» (from jap. ツンデレ, from tsun-tsun – ツンツン and dere-dere – デレデレ) – archetypical character in manga. Women tsundere-character correctly should be refered as *tsunderekkō* (jp. ツンデレっ娘), but commonly reffered also as tsundere

The idea of this archetype is in changing of attitude from insolent and blunt (tsun-tsun) to sentimental and loving (dere-dere) in short time frame, few minutes. In some extreme cases tusndere chnges from tsun-tsun to dere-dere and back again several times per second.

³⁵Dango – kind of rice buns. Boiled or baked on the sticks, like kababs and covered with different tasty and sweet souces or glaze afterwards.

If we would continue to think about anime and manga archetypes – then I am the same level marked yandere³⁶. Smiling to everybody. Chewing buns (well, they are very tasty indeed, and in my circumstances to eat something nice and sweet – is a great idea, so I thanked her from the bottom of my heart). But then – bang! The client pulls the string and I am grabbing ‘big and nice guns’. Little Mistress is yandere too, no doubt. And getting crazy sometimes as thousand of hatters. Very rarely, but powerfully. But to classify Hone-Onna is a more difficult task. Still we can assume that our work binds to the same archetype. By the way I should invent something plausible for Maria: what I am thinking about so deeply?

– I am still thinking about yesterday. We are in Japan. So all mystics should be local? And the most close to yesterday ‘show’... oh I forgot the word again... that faceless maiden. And here the opposite – huge eyes! Half-face size! So either it is some really exotic thing... or maybe it is just a technical prank?

– Oh, would I meet that tech!– Fujibayashi getting furious. – But you have a point. We should check mirrors.

Actually – technology for such prank I can design easily. So we have such option. But even to confuse Maria I would not mount such a system. The later she would realize my connection to Little Mistress – the better. And if I will mount this system – with this I will immediately ‘put a signature’ to dirty play accusation. Opposite, I should be as honest, as possible: if (when) she will ‘uncover’ me – we still will have an option to persuade her not to interfere. And for that option – I should become her very good friend during the time we have. However, it will be pleasant for me: Maria is a very nice girl, as I already mentioned.

But this is a bell for a lunch break. Fujibayashi visibly tired into two opposite desires: from one hand she wants immediately go do a total check for mirrors and all surroundings. From other hand – there is a friend around who is getting blues. The friend, who is getting blues with regret looks at the stick from dango. Choice has been made: we are going to cafeteria to feed me with sweets and raise my mood. Funny thing that physiology, to the same token. When I was alive – sometimes I felt for eating a sweet, but was not a sweet tooth in full shape. And now – become.

Suddenly Maria freezes with a spoon full of tiramisu in her hand. Scenery so unexpected, that I am coming out from my thoughts. And first surprise does not allow me to do something... And thanks to that I can assess the situation better. And situation is as follows: it is nice and calm in cafeteria. Still, she looks, not moving eyes and not blinking, on me. First of all – I am eyeing my breast... It’s OK. No deviations. (To be honest, at first thing I thought – maybe Ichimoku Ren opened an eye on my breast... do not understand why he would decide to do so, but who knows? The reason of contact between Little Mistress and Fujibayashi is not clear for us. Could it happen that he found out something and decide to frighten her?) In the end – all OK with me. Then it means that she is looking not on me, but onto something unseen with normal gaze.

Well. It means that we are having developing case of Shibata Tsugumi³⁷: Maria sees some key moments of our work. It is not good, actually. But it is interesting – what exactly she sees now? Also mention with corner of my mind: now I understand where Little Mistress disappeared yesterday – to propose a contract. All this thoughts runs in my head in a second, you can understand. Definitely, I was surprised in the beginning, but I am not a complete slug.

Carefully taking my friend by the hand, removing a spoon. The last thing we need is to spoil her blouse when will get back to reality.

³⁶«yandere» (ヤンデレ) show up as normal and even nice characters, but at some point they are getting mad and their behavior changes radically to cruel and dangerous.

³⁷Reference to the story in the first season of anime about Little Mistress

– Oi³⁸, Maria! Are you OK?

Hesitantly touching her cheek: it is kind of recommended to slap one in such situations... but I do not want to use this method without dare need. To my joy just a touch is enough. Fujibayashi winces (how wise of me to take out a spoon!) and looks on me now enough intelligently.

– I... – she begins hesitantly, but cuts herself: – Tell me, Jun... I've seen – you are smoker. And you dress up nicely, stylish, but... somehow provokingly. Sorry, I do not want to insult you! I just mean that you have different manners and different lifestyle than me...

– Can't argue. – I am smiling expectantly. (Oh, yes... I have radically different lifestyle, that's a fact!)

– So I thought... sorry... even while you came to our city recently – you, maybe you already know how local bars are looking from the inside?

Wow! Little mistress in the bar! I want to see it too. But... it was so, two or three times already. And anyway – what She have not seen in this life?

– Unfortunately, Maria, I am not being of big help here: I nearly do not know the city yet... And have not been in such places. But why are you asking?

To the same token, at Home I also never got drinks, even while my visible age already enough for that... to some extent. But I was not a full member of the team yet. So – everything in future. Plum wine... yum-yum!

– You know, I've seen this fearsome girl again...

Oh, people are different... I would never call Enma Ai 'fearsome'. But Maria assess Her by, we can say, work aura. And I am – by feeling as a 'human' being. As far as I can understand Her heart. Meanwhile my face shows befitting to the occasion interest and light dismay.

– She was in the bar. Was looking on two chatting men. One of them was visibly pressing on another, and firmly held his hand. And that second – was nervous and every second dried his palm to the jacket pocket. The the first released him... and it ended.

– Horror! Well, if you'd like – I can try to find this bar, you are right – I am... well I see nothing reprehensible for myself to visit such places, I am not a super-lady. But what we will get from that? We cannot run to search it immediately. And their discussion was clearly finishing, the will leave very soon...

– If...

– If - what?

– You know, Jun, I can't help feeling that this girl brings death...

– Well, if the second man had a gun or knife in his pocket – then he already used it and we are late anyway. And also – if this girl – brings death... then one of us, as minimum, should be already dead, look how much time passed!

Maria screaming

– Jun, how you can spell such dreadful things! But..

Yes, yes, Maria. There is some logic in my statement. Moreover, this is a right logic: one of us died. And died even not yesterday. And now – walks undead, eats sweets and do a snow-job³⁹ to you with diplomatic sophistic. She grabs my hand. Well, no, not so easy: my hands are warm. And I could not be distinguished from normal human. By the way, interesting: Wanyuudoo turns into fire wheel. Hone-Onna – nakes bones.

³⁸Jaoanese say not 'hey!', but 'oi!'

³⁹ In fact, Jun in such cases uses a direct translation from Russian: 'to powder someone's brains' and we will leave next occurrences as is.

Ichimoku Ren – opens an eye on any surface in some radius from him. Yamawaro – rules wind and leaves. And I am? Feeling computers? Or all amount of magic for me was used to ‘imprint’ Japanese language and hieroglyphs? Anyway, I am fine as I am.

And also, yes. All that happening around pulled me out from depression and I am returning to my normal spiteful, narcissistic and curious worldview. I am firmly, but blandly compress Maria’s arm and winking to her:

– It is warm. So you are not dead.

– Jun, you have a foul mouth! How much you will?!

– Sorry, but I all the way had all these Palestinas, Egypts and other Saudi Arabias around. Have heard a lot of stuff... I should be more careful: here we are in Japan, in the end. Sorry. I had no intention to frighten you.

– Oh... OK. But what to do? Really, we could not leave all this as it is?

– Leave? Maria, until you do not understand what you see...

– Yes. I should understand. Would you help me? You’ve seen it too, you know I am not crazy!

Poor thing. Such a cry, such a plea in her voice, so I cannot decline. Although... maybe she indeed will understand and would not interfere to our business? Interesting – for what logic. I don’t know myself, but for some reason I feel, that it is possible. Somehow. We’ll think. And now I am just saying:

– Hai! And... let’s go back: we have another lesson in schedule.

How great that I am nearly somehow gaijin and can afford abnormal reactions!

Coming back from college. As far I was not invited to go to the library or somewhere – I have to leave Fujibayashi for herself. Still I do not think that next few days I will have to ‘herd’ her and distract 24/7: at the moment she is too shocked to actively mingle into situation. By the way, I should decide something with the Home. If I will get a boyfriend while I am playing student here? (And he will appear, I smell it. I am a girl clever beyond the age, he-he, and not an ugly one. Little bit strange, though). I should find at least some front door without lock in some multi-storey building and transfer Home from there. And best of all – to be hired by ‘Kanri’ and rent some flatlet.

Well... By the way all available members are sitting on the threshold. Even Yamawaro. And Kikuri with screams and shouts ploughing here and there on her bicycle. All members?.. Then the string has been pulled indeed.

– Oi, Jun-chan! – calls Ichimoku Ren. – As I see, you are coming back to yourself.

I did. I really did come back to myself – even reacted normally: blushed and downed eyes. I am really confused and sorry for my mates. She has seen much more worrying things... And I am getting hysterical in front of them.

– do you want finally recover? We’ve got such a nice contract!

Hone-Onna looks with slight inapproval.

– To be true, the client is also not a bright genius.

– Ano... - I am saying. – Sumimasen, may I allow myself to ask to tell everything in order?

Wanyuudoo nods:

– The client is a minor businessman, sub-contracted by the same ‘Kanri’. Was stupid enough to take start-up money from yakuza⁴⁰. Definitely, he got a controller. The client has ordered that controller. As he does not understand – controller will be immediately replaced.

– Wanyuudoo, you are dramatizing. Yakuza are not all the same. Maybe he will get somebody better now. But you know, Jun-chan, – Ren’s eyes are shining with anticipation. – This controller – is really something. Scoundrel - as crooked as a dog's hind leg. And sadistic in addition. He likes it, you can imagine? Cutting out – want to join?

Ren is actually caring for me in his own way. And he is right somehow: after such sad job as yesterday – he offers to help to ‘saw out’ a real scum. To make me feel, that in our work some ‘righteous’ contracts are happening. And I cannot disagree with him.

– Sadistic yakuza, you say? Wow, can we act a ‘Black Lagoon’⁴¹ for him? Oh, I will shoot so... In Fritz Geiger style about ‘bloody KGB’⁴², and about ‘Russian *bratva*’... bagsy I am *Balalaika*⁴³. No. She is blond. Then I will be her aide. Lieutenant.

While I am saying it – Hone-Onna unapprovingly nodding (and I understand her: my current bloodlust – an aftermath for yesterday hysteric). But on last word she can’t hold it and giggles:

– ...Who absolutely loses control *periodically*!

Boys with look at each other puzzled: what’s so funny? I am – laughing with Hone-Onna. And making a mark in my mind: so it happens even with us.

Dressed in military uniform without marks Ichimoku Ren and Wanyuudoo materialize behind walking along a dark pathway object. It happens in a blink of eye – and behold, stunned object with a sac on the head and handcuffs on the vack dragged into the car which was passing by and stopped indeed for a second. Who would doubt (me- not), but seemingly same uniform as boys have – sitting by the steering wheel Hone-Onna wears with deadly elegancy.

Now the object pulled into the room and dropped to knees.

I am sitting in front of him. Due to role – I am dressed in strict skirt business suit; an overcoat with USSR Paratroopers First Lieutenant badges is on my shoulders. A sac is tiered off from the object’s head.

– Thank you, *товарищи*⁴⁴- saying I with bored voice. – Today our guest – a member of one of lesser clans within Inagawa-kai. A real enthusiastic worker: his job is to communicate with those who hold payments to creditors. Although we are not falling into his normal job area, it happened that he fell into ours.

⁴⁰While yakuza is far different from other criminal organizations across the world – by history and by interactions with civil services, still they use all classic criminal ways of making profit.

⁴¹“Black Lagoon” – amazing trash-anime-gunfight series. Authors tried to us all possible cliché from fight movies. The result is breathtaking and funny. Imagine a scene of shooting down a chopper with torpedo from jumping from waterfall torpedo boat. Still series are not so plain and even sad sometimes.

⁴²Reference to ‘Doomed City’ novel of Russian sci-fi A. and B. Strugatskie writers, where a character with Fritz Geiger name suggests his Russian friend to press on persons on remand telling them that he is ex-KGB.

⁴³Балалайка (Balalaika) – is a boss of Russian mafia (consisting exclusively from ex-USSR special forces and paratroopers veterans) in that “Black Lagoon” anime. She is herself an ex-captain of USSR Paras and a sniper (Balalaika is a slang name of SVD sniper rifle in Russian army). By the way – one of the most trustworthy and good persons in series.

⁴⁴Товарищи – rus. ‘tovarisch’ Comrades, formal addressing in USSR Army and Navy.

Wanyuudoo holds the object with indifferent face. Ichimoku Ren, holding him from other side – visibly enjoys my acting. Hone-Onna bends her brow sceptically and looks at our ‘guest’. And guest does not understand anything.

– I would have liked to have a little chat with our guest. I believe, that it also would be useful and interesting for you, *товарищи*. As you remember, communication methods we’ve all was taught in army reconnaissance is normally based on chatting with two captives.

Object sweating.

– When I was studying for second speciality in *Высшей Школе КГБ*⁴⁵ – there I was shown several interesting techniques of communicating with individual client, but...

– But I know nothing! I just truthfully served to oyabun!

Interesting, am I indeed so convincing? In the end, I am really spelling the word ‘товарищ’ with absolutely natural middle-Russian accent, and in the word ‘школа’ articulate sound ‘L’ (nearly impossible for Japanese) nicely, and putting correct suffixes and postfixes... Actually I supposed that he will start to scream little bit later, after demonstrating manicure scissors, for example. But if so – I should cut a little.

– But the real problem is that our guest indeed knows nothing, because works ‘by the love to the art’. And we have no other option, besides to communicate with him on the same level. I mean – purely by the love to the art.

The object is trying to escape.

– And in this case – we can try to use methods of regular *братвы*⁴⁶. As these are not as effective in means of usefulness, but effective as ‘dramatic’. And so – the best choices for us will be a simple soldering and smoothing irons. *Товарищ сержант*⁴⁷, could you please pass these to me.

Hone-Onna, who also has begun to get some pleasure from the ‘act’, passes the iron to me. She also knows me better than anybody else in this room. And understands – if I am blabbing thislike – the in fact I am not going to implement my statements in the real life. It is just psychological pressure and not a real blast of bloodlust.

– For example – I am continuing my speech, – you and me, *товарищ сержант*, in the end are well-mannered girls. And our guest has completely messed up suit. And as exemplary hostesses we cannot let him be so confused. So we should iron his suit.

Objects squeals slurred.

– And what for the soldering-iron? Our guest is not a robot, in the end. – Hone-Onna shows some interest.

I am blushing:

– Sorry, this I can explain to other *товарищам*, but not to you personally, *товарищ сержант*.

Ren has ogt a pint and with last forces holds satisfied horselaugh. Hone-Onna bevels. With my eyes I am showing to her that in fact such filthy things are disgusting for me too.

– So, would you please do a favour to our guest and take care for his suit?

– A-a-a-a-a! No-o-o-o! Why?!!!

– By the love to the art again! – I am shrugging.

– No-o-o!!!

⁴⁵ ‘Vyshaya Shkola KGB’ KGB High School – is actually courses more like university level.

⁴⁶ ‘bratva’ – ‘brothers’ – self-name of Russian bandits of low level.

⁴⁷ Сержант – sergeant. Spells in Russian nearly the same.

– That’s what he said, Mistress.

The team is comparing notes: Wanyuudoo nods surprised. Ren – claps me on the shoulder and announces that I really rock again. And Hone-Onna bends to me and whispers into my ear:

– Jun-chanu, do not put on uniform again. It has a bad influence on you... or you really had lost control?

– Exactly. – I am agreeing with both of them simultaneously and furtively demonstrating the contents of my handbag to Hone-Onna. Indeed, *this* happens even with us.

From other hand I am really feeling for Enma Ai now. To carry in her boat, even if he is tightly fixed, but such a sweaty, stinky and by all other means indeed repugnant brute – is disgusting.

Episode 8. Anime girls.

Day forty fifth

– ... The old saying of gaijin systems administrators ‘for the TCP/IP’ is actually not fully correct, because on the transport level the IP protocol works with two protocols: TCP and UDP. And with the development and extended coverage of high-speed networks UDP is used more and more extensively...

I am again sitting at lecture and fooling around. To be precise – thinking about different work-related problems. I would even get the laptop with me here, and attend to my main work... But it would be an edge of idiocy. Epic casting broadlights on me for Fujibayashi. She still sits next to me. For my relief – carried-away gaze not provoking bursts of templanity in her. After yesterday, when I helped her to write a routing table on seminar – Maria decided that I would better know for myself what to listen, and when to fool around during lecture. But the way, I am also proud with resulting routing table – in different ends of task description there were several subnets, which I elegantly supernetted on two central routers. And it was possible to miss such a chance.

And thinking I am exactly about Fujibayashi problem. I feel uncomfortable to ask Little Mistress – the past she has – is not a pleasant past, no need to return to it. From other hands – after I downloaded all three seasons and showed it to colleagues – everybody had a lot of fun, but agreed in the end: ‘Not typical for writers and journalists, but the nearly did not lie, and only enriched something with colours’. So I can use this anime as a source of information.

So I can figure out quite a strange picture: there are two cases when some girl sees some moments connected with Little Mistress. Either some parts of her past, or some work-related moments. I also can figure out one common point in both cases: Little Mistress needed both of them. The first – helped her to realize and ‘make peace’ with her own past. The second – had a chance to become (and nearly become indeed) her successor. But second option is ‘closed’ forever. (From my egoistic point of view – that is for good: Enma Ai is beautiful, and Yuzuki from the very beginning was quite... neutral for me. From point of view of my love and care for Little Mistress – for bad: I wish she got rid of this work, it is not a great work, totally not! Moreover – for a teenager girl... even if she is more than four hundred years old now.)

Oh, now I am double-carried-away. So. Then. The second option could not be Fujibayashi’s case: it is closed; and from other hand – as far as I was able to ‘dig’ her past – there were no big dramas. So Maria could be a variant of the first case... or be completely new one. Especially degusting is that in both cases it is a dead end. If Little Mistress plots to do something with Maria’s hands – she would not tell it. And would be

absolutely correct – no one uncovers such kind of plans. And I do not want to know them – because of my love to Enma Ai.

And if it is a third case? Here I basically am lacking information. And can wander in guesses. For example we can imagine, that Fujibayashi is Kikuri's provocation aimed to frame Little Mistress somehow and get into her position. You could be laughing, but Kikuri is quite a scoundrel. She really likes Enma Ai... but would never miss a chance to switch with her. It also could be a test from the Master of Hell. But what he wants to test? He already announced his word and with that word Little Mistress was bent to this status for ever⁴⁸.

To the same token, maybe I am too rushing to close the second case? And if Maria is – potentially *second* Hell Girl? Kso, how I hate to see the problem and be not able to spot a smallest hints of its reason!

By the way, my problem found out that lector turned to well-known for her material – requires attention.

– Jun, I've seen he again!

Oh, yes. I was late today and we were not able to chat before studies.

– You had? Really! – With round eyes.

– It is a very sad story. And strange. I've seen how a man dined at home and then went out. And his wife suddenly burst into tears. The she wrote an email to somebody from her mobile and cried again. And suddenly – she stays before her. And passes something to that poor woman.

– Passes what?! – Definitely – I know what. And know to whom. Apparently, there is a really sad story. And disgusting one, for my taste. But so simple that we even did not investigate client or object. Actually, there were two requests yesterday, both in the same store. Maria has seen only half of that. So we are alone now with Hone-Onna: Wanyuudoo and Ichimoku Ren are working as dolls again, Yamawaro and Kikuri again disappeared somewhere. But – in normal circumstances I would not ask anything else.

– Unfortunately, not. I was not able to recognize. But something not big. Little bit more than palm.

– Too big for cauldron with poison. – I am summarizing thoughtfully. Now Maris rounds her eyes.

– Jun!..

– Gome. But if you are so persistent that the Girl brings death – the poison would be most logical solution. Classic women weapon.

Maria reflectively bits a tip of her finger and nods.

– And have you recognized the man, or woman?

– Yes. And I am positive that I've seen the men's face somewhere. But don't remember where.

– Oh, in such case – it is the same thing as you have not seen him. If you were not able to recognize him at once – then it could be anywhere – just bumped each other on the street.

Actually I am breathing out relieved. The man – is a 'Kanri' employee. Another reason why not only me, but also Hone-Onna was left on our positions... and, it seems for quite a while: cascade of employees disappearances undoubtful will bring out a lot of gossips, some people will dig the case and use us themselves... Generally – I am just hoping that this city will not turn into such a rats place as a town in the second season of anime about Little Mistress. But anyway we will have a lot of requests from college and 'Kanri'. Still – at least Maris is quite far away from right guess.

– Jun... there is another thing that disturbs me. Is it only I who think that...

And here I am not surprised. The situation (that part that she had seen) – is trivial. And nothing beyond expectations that Maria guessed the main point. That hound dog plays away.

⁴⁸Again references to second and third seasons of anime about Little Mistress

– U! – I am agreeing darkly.

But at this moment lector turns to 6th level of OSI model and Maria have to cut our discussion.

... And returns to subject only during lunch break, when we are retiring on the roof of one of the college building and eating obento. Actually mine is still having some connection to my tastes when I was alive: third day in a row I am eating baked beef. Well, with rice, slated veggies and all other stuff. I still like it! Moreover, I've lost a lot of blood. So have to eat meat. Fujibayashi on the contrary mostly pays attention to fresh vegetables. As I see she does not have even fish in her box.

– Tell me, Jun... I still can believe or understand: how that possible? You marry somebody, and the go away to another woman?

– It means that his man is just an animal. –I am relying angrily. – Which follows only one instinct: 'to fertilise as much dams as possible'.

Maria stares at me with surprise and little bit frightened: she was not expecting such emotional reaction. Especially from nearly gaijin girl who lived in the country where polygamy was accepted on the governmental level.

– Ano... sumimasen... – are you – feminist?

I am laughing.

– Save... Allah from that. – winking to her. – No. I just believe that a human being does not have a right to be only an animal. And also believe that bargain is bargain. You promised to love her and only her – then do love. Her. Or him.

– But love...

– Yes, love is a tricky thing. And can pass away. Or can come to somebody another. This is why I am saying 'not only animal'. No, is amazing thing, when you are in love – us can such things... and see the world in such colours... honestly it is so horrible that there is no such thing as eternal love!..

I lie back and lean to ventilation tower. In the end I am wearing jeans jacket today so I can afford such gesture. Closing my eyes. Yes... When I was alive – I felt in love several times (and felt quite powerfully, about one case I could even say up to losing myself). And I still adore this great feeling. Yes. Cliché. But I indeed can even write it with all capitals. Because I believe so. This is why there is a dreamy smile on my face. Still, not long before I've met Little Mistress, I finally realized: it is not possible to run only on one feeling. You have to have mind. To preserve, to save this feeling. And I am trying to tell it to Maria. Without references to real things of course.

– It is not possible to just love. Well, possible. For one day. Months. And then everything will break up. You also have to strive. As Kotoko did.

– Kotoko? – Maria wondering. I am opening my eyes and confusedly smiling:

– Gome. I, you see, quite an anime girl. And spent no one thousand hours watching it... There are one very pretty shoujo-series: 'Itazura na Kiss'. About one not very clever, but incredibly persistent girl Kotoko and ingenious, but bored boy Irie-kun.

On the contrary, Fujibayashi answering with bright smile.

– I would not imagine that you are – otaku⁴⁹. But this is really great! And I when I was small always tried to look like a girl with the same last name, Fujibayashi Kyo from 'Clannad'⁵⁰.

⁴⁹«Otaku» (おたく/オタク) – a «fan». Usually – fan of anime.

⁵⁰As it reasonable for her personalyity, Maria mostly watches anime for boys. Although, even while 'Clannad' is a typical 'harem', where more or less good main protagonist helps to several girls in different situations and in the end

– Ha-ha-ha! And even now you've made a haircut like her from final minutes of the 'Kyo chapter'! Actually, you have likewise personalities also. – I am laughing.

– You also have seen that anime?

– Sure! It is so romantic!

– And what kind of series you normally watched?

– Oh, I had a full mesh. Not everything's reachable, but wit quite a big dispersion. 'Lain' obviously...

Maria nods. Naturally, to be anime fan on our faculty and not be a fan o Lain the one could be only in single case: if tomorrow this one will be ruled out from faculty tomorrow – as extreme slowpoke⁵¹. So extreme that managed to miss quite famous IT-related series.

– I adore 'Nana'. 'Sola'. 'Haibane Renmei'. 'Maria-sama ga mitteru'. But from other hand I also watched boys' anime: 'Gundam SEED' for example. Actually these pannikins-on-the-legs were always funny for me. So I also have seen about Lelouch and 'Gurren Lagann'⁵². Or even 'Black Lagoon'. Although I did not liked too much the later in the end. And, just to cut our previous discussion while we started to talk about anime, I would tell you as resume: I pity Kotonoha indeed. But I no way not am despising Sekai⁵³. Moreover, fully support her actions.

Obviously, after such words Maria is ready to return to our previous topic. But I do not need that, and do not want also. I found a twin soul, in the end! Moreover, just as planned, I already have a final sentence:

– Ha-ha! That's funny. Indeed, just few days ago I thought to myself that I am quite a yandere, and you are – very well-marked tsundere. Never would imagine how much I hit the bull's eye! By the way, about 'Clannad'. You've like seen 'Kanon'⁵⁴, aren't you? Which one of them you like better?..

So we chat till the end of the break. Actually, it is a great luck for us. I really watched a lot of anime, and watched with big pleasure. So have quite knowledge about it. And from now on, if I would have to turn the discussion from some dangerous direction – I just have to pick up a reference to somehow likewise series. Moreover, in pike situation, I would be able to say something 'What are you talking about, Maria? What 'Jigoku Shoujo'? Are we ourselves within anime series?'. Funny if it is true and I am a character, and

falls in love with one of them – this particular series are very romantic, clever, gentle and somehow tragic... And the second season is a real dark drama. The 'Clannad' anime plot is based on the computer game where protagonist can end up with other girls – so there are additional anime episodes with alternative plot finals, one which is the above-mentioned 'Kyo Chapter'.

⁵¹ Slowpoke – one of pokemons (pocket monsters) from the same name anime. Is really slow to notice and react. Series is not of anything good, but slowpoke has become a mem.

⁵²Here Jun either starts with legend and then decides to add some truth, or demonstrates really diverse tastes: from quite boyish up to very girlish.

'Sola' is a mystic and romantic love tragedy. Really talented and heart-piercing series.

'Haibane Renmei' – very lovely vidually, kind and tender. And absolutely non-understandable in details.

'Maria-sama ga mitteru' – pure and extreme example of shoujo series: an anime about girls in all-girls school. Very emotional, delicate, absolutely kind... but not without moments of very nice psychology and ethics in relations and competitions. Male auditorium drops these series on 3rd, maximum 6th episode. Of 4 26-episode seasons.

'Gundam SEED' and about Lelouch ('Code Geass') – are 'mecha': anime about wars conducted with help of huge humanoid battle robots. Anime mentioned here, besides of genre-required robotomachia has a very strong political and romantic plots, which actually puts robots far aside.

'Gurren Lagann' ('Tegen Toppa Gurren Lagann') – very clever and talented parody on all 'mecha' genre.

⁵³Kotonoha and Seikin are two main women characters in the «School Days», anime, which tells how 'harems' end up in the real life. A tragedy with 100% unhappy end.

⁵⁴«Kanon» – is a third anime, close by set of authors, creators and seiyuuu with 'Clannad' and 'Sola'. Different from 'Sola' has quite a happy end, different from 'Clannad' – not irritating main protagonist.

somebody writing about me. Ah, let them be. I like myself. And for myself I am anyway absolutely real. Moreover, even if I am a character... it does not differ too much from Maria's Christian ideas. And for Christians both humans and even angels (which are nothing more than tools of God initially) – when was disagreeing with something – managed to turn the history to their liking. That I will also manage. I am – Nohatsu Jun, in the end. Dreadful undead demoness, ha-ha-ha! Well, no, if demoness, so giggles should sound like 'Mwa-ho-ho!', as horrible laughter of arch evil.

And during next seminar I am getting another fruitful idea: also I can spend Maria's time for various anime-related activities. I mean – after college. Ah, what a fortunate discovery!

How good to be at Home without Kikuri! I don't want to say that I am so patalogically fond of quietness... But I prefer to choose loud surrounding sounds by myself. Not at Home. At Home everything decided by Little Mistress, who is indeed quiet and silent being. Well, with rare exclusions, I already mentioned.

We are playing mah-jong. Not really girlish game, but Enma Ai liked it when I introduced it to her. And Hone-Onna, looks like has nothing against this game. Moreover – I insisted to not implement that Japanese rule – 'to play as fast as possible', and now we are easily 'meditating' on each move. By the way – it also feeds you with details of your partners' personalities:

Little Mistress, for example, is a great aesthete. If She says 'Chow' – one could be sure: She is collecting that combination, which would be called 'Street' if we played poker. Generally, even classic mah-jonggs She collects reluctantly, and tends to nice-looking combinations as 'doubles', or 'Heavens'⁵⁵.

Hone-Onna turns to be not a strategic thinker at all. Changes concept hundred times per game. But surprisingly persistent. Can hold a promising pair forever. It seems – for sure, somebody holds this pair for finalizing mah-jong, for example. No. She waits. And usually gets her chance in the end, by the way.

I'm wondering – if anybody of boys would join us at some point? No, I don't think so. Maybe except of Wanyuudoo: for Yamawaro it is too complicated (I don't mean to offend him, actually), and Ichimoku Ren would not accept our ban to this Japanese 'blitzkrieg' rule which makes me really mad. Obviously, on this condition I would insist till the end. To the same token, I suppose, here Little Mistress will side me.

– Invisible Dragon. – announces Enma Ai.

If not Hone-Onna's lessons – my eyes indeed would be popped out. Little mistress calculates combinations conflicts marvellously. She can see that I am in one tile from mah-jong. Exactly that invisible Dragon, as the chance that I am going to finalize mah-jong with pair of 'ignoble' tiles is minimal – it also affect final count. Oh... I wish Hone-Onna would not take umbrage. I calculated myself – she is also not far

⁵⁵While with Windows XP announcement many western people know the visual look of mahjong, in fact it is not a solitaire, but quite intellectual type of gambling (by level of complexity it could be compared to 'Preference'). In Mao Tze Dun' China it was even banned. The aim of gamble – to collect some combination of combinations (mahjong) of tiles, when taking uncovered tile 'from the wall', comparing it to these on hand and throwing out unneeded one. At the moment of throwing out – the tile could be taken by opponent – for their combination. Taken and thrown out tile could be used only for finalizing 'small' combination, which is disclosed to everybody in this case.

'Chow' – most unusable of 'small' combinations: three tiles of same color a row. Not only costs nothing (kind of placeholder), but has negative effect on final score. With exception of case when it is used in one special 'big combination'.

'Dobules' and 'Heavens' mahjongs – another two cases of 'special big combinations'. Due to several reasons – it is much more difficult to collect these, but not too much profitable than a good 'regular'. So it is a choice of aesthete... or rare alignment of tiles.

from finalizing the game. And Little Mistress realized: She has no chance to outrace us.. And decided – who should win. Truly, even little, but Mistress indeed.

Though, even while I am sure for some reason – Enma Ai gave to me victory more basing on some feeling of... kind of sympathy, maybe... But there is a strategic concept also: Hone-Onna was lucky today. And rising my score – She also reducing Her own loss. Ww-ell, as Ichimoku Ren says – Little Mistress *rocks*.

Speaking the devil, by the way. Here he comes. Enma Ai leaves behind the screen to take out saifuku. It is clear – somebody pulled the string. And by the way again – I don't know – whom Little Mistress gave to whom.

– Prurient hound dog! – hisses hone-Onna.

All right. So now an apostate husband goes to Hell. Well, have nothing against that. Meanwhile, it is an office romance. 'Prurient hound dog' – is a sales department employee, which looks after another 'Kanri' business, he used to play away with his colleague. I would even admit, that I was wrong: there was an investigation from our side. We just did not have to do anything for that: all this stuff was happening in front of Hone-Onna. To different point: I should really as her to little bit force company's interest to my person. Soon I will have to invite Fujibayashi to my place... and so I should have one.

And as for plot for the 'final act'... ah, what's the fuss with plot? There are an amount of variants. Unfortunately, there are a lot of apostate husbands in the human world. And thousands of tragic books about such cases are written. So we don't have even to devise anything special. Just have to make choice.

And here I am surprising myself. And in one time with two things. Ah, the first one is really easy to understand: 'apostate husbands in human world'... Am I not counting myself human at all anymore? Listening to myself. So ka! Funny defensive reaction. To abstract myself from 'husbands' with 'humans'. Well, Jun-chan, I knew that you have a lot of bugs in your head. But never thought that these are so big and colourful. Funny indeed.

And the second thing – is my request:

– But can I put a knife into him like Sekai, ne?

Strange point here not in bloodlust. And not in yandere personality (as Seaki is perfect yandere, as myself). Main point here that I do not understand myself: do I want it because scorning men not true to their words... or because pitying cast off girl. Well, Jun-chan, let's make an experiment – to what will undead demoness give birth from human?

– ... Saigo, still let us discuss it... I told, I will have a child from you... – telling me.

– And what to discuss here?

I am sighing.

– All right... Let me make some tea at least...

Leaving to kitchen. The object's mobile rings. Yes, on the other end... by the way, interesting, who to say it correctly? There is no cable. 'On the other end of wave' – sounds crazy. On the other end – Hone-Onna, but her voice for the object sounds now differently. Same as I am looking for him as his own wife.

– Yes, Mikuru-chan... Sure...

I am taking nice and sharp kitchen knife for cutting poultry and creeping upon the object. Gotcha! Right hand grasps hair on the back of the head and pulls it down opening his throat (yes, I am lefthander!) A knife fixed under Adam's apple, leaving a small scar.

– Sa-a-aigo-san... – with menacingly-soft voice.

– No-o-o-o! Mikuru-chan!

– That’s. What. He. Said. Mistress. – Extremely emotionless.

Enma Ai appears in front of us. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

The object not daring even to breathe: I am holding him professionally, and I am much stronger than was when alive. Even with this new body.

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– 一遍死んで見る？

Episode 9. Office square

Day forty seventh

– ... The main advantage of the Active Directory is centralized authentication for both users and computers...

It was a while since I fooled around so much last time. Well, obviously even work of lead systems engineer, who besides of normal technical problems has a dozen of dolts – techs and systems administrators to care – also sometimes have periods of nothing-doing. But not in such industrial scales. All I do in the college – is thinking about work, powdering Maria’s brains and virtually sitting twiddling my thumbs. Though I am getting a big fun from playing student, to be honest. Maybe I am becoming nostalgic?

Speaking of Maria. She is thoughtful today. Would not be surprised if she noted some gossips about missing ‘Kanri’ sales department employee. I could not even monitor all her contacts, and a lot of our classmates work part-time there. Actually, I myself was on the interview yesterday – Hone-Onna rattled that piece of business through. Another reason for deep thoughts.

The thing is that they do want me, and from the very beginning mentioned a perspective of fast career growth... fast even for a full-timer. And it is good – I really made an impression. Also good because I would be able to rent not a flatlet, but quite a normal flat, which would match to my legend – it is supposed, that my parents are still raising ‘a second fluxion’ from Arabian Peninsula oil abundance (i.e. pulling a buck from too quick-wealthy Arabs). The problem lies in different field. And this is an obvious misfortune: if I will accept this offer – I will get Tenjin as the closest colleague. I don’t know what Tenjin would feel, but I am feeling foul even thinking about it. And with career growth perspective... How right again turned to be Little Mistress, when She said that poor Miyano-san is very same as me. Still, I have to accept the offer.

Oh, I was thinking about Maria – and again carried away to some debris. It seems, that now it is my turn to care of her and distract from heavily thoughts. Well, what we’ve got in our sac (obviously, it is impossible to go to college with a normal handbag – textbooks, notebooks... so I have to go with rucksack). Oh. This will do. A pack of sweet buns stuffed with red beans paste.

– Oi, Maria, – I am whispering. Funny, environment affects me: even I am accustomed to spell her name as ‘Maria’, still now I am addressing to her in Japanese way, ‘Maria’. – Where are you?... want some?...

Passing her a box with sweets. Fujibayashi winces and, realized what’s going on, takes the tease. She is looking on me.

– Jun... One friend told me that there is a man missing in ‘Kanri’. By description – very like to be the same as I have seen. And which indeed had and office romance...

– Horrible. – I am trying not to lie to Maria, but now I am saying something opposite to my perception. Though I am formally correct. From point of view of human values, burn them in the next pit to P.C. How good that this idiocy not widespread here in Japan! – You think...

– U. I think, yes. And cannot understand myself. You see, Jun... If it was really he. And she somehow killed him... I understand her. But is it possible to do such things?

– Maria, better eat. I am a very bad adviser for you. I understand. You are a Christian. But I am – not. And I used to live in far less formalized and at the same time – crueller world, then you. Gome, I would put it sharp: not ‘possible’, but ‘a right thing to do’. He is a traitor. And not because he was not true to his word. But because he betrayed the core his function – to protect a woman...

Uh, I am a very bad adviser. It was me, who ‘sawed him off’. And did that with a pleasure, which also puts me into difficulty, but from the very other end. And Maria is thoughtful even more.

– You know, Jun, somehow I think the same...

Not surprised. For ‘knight templar Fujibayashi Maria’ – absolutely right way.

– But... it not only goes in confrontation with my religion. I am afraid of that girl nearby.

– You think – She influenced her?

– No. Something different here. She gave something to her. And if it was something, with help of which she...

Maria speaking haltingly (which is much more my style, than her), and I finally realize, how stunned she is with her conclusions. And also I fully understand what she means, because... well, because I have much better information. Intuition does not betray her – I already said: a contract with Little Mistress could not be covered with good deeds. But I have one point.

– Imagine, that she did shoot him. From gun. Somebody had to sell her this gun? And does the seller guilty that she used against scum-husband-apostate and not against scum-bandit-from-a-street? You see, it is a shaky ethical position, but weapons seller does not responsible for sold weapons usage. In general. And in the end – there are much more homicides in Japan done by simple kitchen knife, than with gun.

Exactly. Exactly with kitchen knife I... tickled him. And I am nearly hundred percent sure – if not Little Mistress – exactly with this thing the object would have ‘meet’ week or two later. Without any help from our side.

– Still... it is somehow... sinful.

That does it for me. And does at very strong for some reason.

– It is sinful to change⁵⁶ – I am shouting.

The lecture hall falls in silence.

– Nohatsu-san, could you please repeat, what did you say? – Teacher looks not less stunned, but, looks like he is ready to make a bloodbath for tinhorn-gaijin. Horsefeathers. I’ve heard a little bit of stuff he was telling.

– It is a very dangerous idea to change the network infrastructure, – I am answering, shooting innocent eyes. – Because in this case we should not only redesign replication policies between servers like domain controllers, but also to reconfigure routers. And this is nearly impossible in a large complicated network: something will be forgotten for sure. Thus it is sinful to change. Extend – possible. Change – not. Easier and better – unmount and begin from scratch.

⁵⁶ Probably, Nohatsu maen another idioma – ‘to change women as gloves’: from one to another.

That is funny. This is my answer not only to teacher, but also to Maria. And Fujibayashi also feels it. Silently I sit down. Enough, I think. Also for both fronts: enough to show off before classmates. And enough to burden Maria: now she thinks in the right direction. What conclusions she'll get – I don't know, but the idea itself is planted in her head.

So he thought until the end of studies. And then we had to part – I went to 'Kanri', to sign a contract. Giggling silently on myself: how much I got into current position and what unambiguous associations I am getting with words 'to sign a contract'. For my great pleasure – for workers like me 'Kanri' is offering 100% piecework payments: project finished – get your money. Not as simple as sounds, you should appear sometimes in the office, interact with colleagues too... but for students (especially – students) rules are not so strict...

And after I dropped the stamp⁵⁷ on three copies of the contract and survived through ten minutes of exercises for liens and facial muscles – left to 'meet the colleagues'. Japanese people would not understand me, but now I am drinking coffee with Hone-Onna being absolutely exited: they don't have such a motion to fool 'the System'. And I am, while looking like righteously meeting with my 'new managing salesperson' doing quite a different thing.

Meanwhile, Hone-Onna tells interesting stuff. Not about the company, of course. Or, about the company, but in another aspects. First of all, she found out that gossips are already spreading. And she even heard once (by the corner of her ear, just passing by) the key words: 'Jigoku Tshuhin'⁵⁸. Well, we are not totally stunned, but I was expecting gossips around one month or two-three contracts later. More experienced in local mentality Hone-Onna – week or contract. It is little bit alerts us, because it means that we had overlooked something. But now I am more turned with the second news.

Which tells that a lover of our previous object is permanently stays in low spirits. Even more, for Hone-Onna's opinion – much lower, than it should be if she would be just worried with the loss of lover. But still – neither pulled the string, nor threw Wanyuudoo out... Well, the last we know indeed, but she stresses on this fact. Draws my attention to this unnatural combination.

Combination is really unnatural: lover disappeared, so there is no need to 'saw off' husband. It would seem – throw Wanyuudoo out and reject with this a contract with Little Mistress. Or avenge him for not letting to enjoy adultery – and 'saw him off'. Anyway – why she hesitates with either decision? And why is she so low? I do not understand either.

– Ano... Sone-san... – Here Tenjin is. – I was told that we will have a new employee in our department... and I came to meet them.

Everything turns in my belly. No, I am commiserating to this boy. On rational level. But I enormously pitying 'a cat without smile', and not depending on how much I understand his killer... Fortunately, I am sitting backwards to him. And by extremely approving face of Hone-Onna – understanding that again I did not fail the exam: looks like that on my own face nothing showed out.

Sanding up. Turning.

– Good afternoon, Tenjin-kun. Will be happy to work with you.

⁵⁷ Each adult Japanese citizen has a stamp to 'sign' official documents. In worst case it is possible to draw kanji by hand, but a stamp is easier and more distinguishable.

⁵⁸ The name of the website through which potential clients can send a request to Enma Ai. Direct translation – 'Hell Correspondence'. (地獄通信)

Hell the Great, let's agree that I am rewarded for my stress. Tenjin's face (especially after I addressed him with postfix '-kun' after last name, which means that now we are only colleagues, and he is no way senior to me; no any postfix signifies much bigger intimacy in relations) .. Well , the face was not even stunned. Flipped over. All right, now I can smile to him quite sincerely. I don't know how to describe it. But I am happy with possibility to outflank him at some moment. To my chances – I am indeed much more professional than him. And to get a killer of somebody whom you respected as junior – is pleasant. It is quite an evil pleasure, but still pleasure. And Little Mistress said that he is same as me... Yes, the contract with us not always solves the problem. Yes, Tenjin-kun, you killed Miyano-san. And as replacement will get Nohatsu-san. And she is – the same. So you have deserved. Be-be-be!⁵⁹

– Sumimasen. But today I would like excuse myself and cannot familiarize with current projects? Can we postpone it for tomorrow? – I am somehow sorry, but something 'dragging' me Home...

As I see – that 'dragging' feeling had some reasons. Nobody at Home, not only 'children' disappeared, but also Ichimoku Ren. And Little Mistress is in uncommon for Her communicative mood. Then I am lucky. I really love Her very much... to talk, just to be aside – I am happy with that. Hope – that for Her the same. Though it is more like to sisters love (I can't make myself to remember that She exists for more than four centuries and still think of Her as of little sister), so actually in this case I did not lost anything when agreed to Her condition. Maybe even gained: now visual distance between us is much less then if I would stay the same I was when alive.

– We. For what?

It is me who understand that Little Mistress is talkative. Her manner to speak more than laconically will stop any person from aside to realize this fact.

– When I was alive, I've read one article, where they said that we are working just for 'More souls for Hell' concept. But I think everything is much more complicated...

Easy to understand that I am now waiting for Her request to elaborate the idea. Or dismissal (heart is shivering). But it is not necessary to spell the request with words? So Enma Ai looks at me expectantly.

– First of all – we are just a weapon. Remember, Mistress, few times You had a chance to propose a contract (even if in not normal time), but decided not to do it? And our potential clients were taking knives. So it comes, that we do not doom clients to Hell: the going there on their own. This or that way, with our help, or without – but exactly to Hell.

– And offenders?

Little Mistress has tact. It is we are, who between us are using technical and expressionless term 'the object'.

– Here it is more complicated. It happens that we are getting orders for practically innocent people, indeed. But for that cease we are helping You: to investigate, to understand the matter, to let them know – why it happened to them? As far as I understood, depending on how much they were innocent, and how much they... et-to, confess, maybe, in the reason of contract – Hell turns to be different for them. Remember that teacher, who tried to drag back to life a hiccomori⁶⁰ girl?

⁵⁹ She is sticking out tongue at Tenjin in her mind.

⁶⁰ (ひきこもり или 引き籠もり) literally "pulling away, being confined", i.e., "acute social withdrawal") is a Japanese term to refer to the phenomenon of reclusive people who have chosen to withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement because of various personal and social factors in their lives. The

– Yes.

Enma Ai again looks into my eyes. Waits, that I would say something else. Ah, indeed. There is third, also quite personified side of our work – we ourselves.

– Also there are we: You, and Your aides. But I can put it cynically (in the end and by all means – I am with you, so my cynics will be aimed on myself also)... You made a deal with the Master of the Hell: You are getting this work, and for that not getting into Hell Yourself. Staying on the border. But what is Hell?

– Don't know.

I am sighing:

– And nobody knows. Only trying to figure out. And we can't look inside someone's Hell of these, who is within our contracts. If You would like – I would tell, what I think myself.

Little Mistress nods.

– For my understanding – there is no Hell. The place, where you are ferrying souls – is not Hell. It is... Land of Dead. Absolutely neutral. Better for ones, worse for another. And Hell – it is inside of us. One can say – the Master deceived You: we all live exactly in Hell. And retributing our sins: revenge, inattentiveness... each – for her own.

– But work...

– Indeed. Work sometimes is pleasant. But sometimes – opposite. Honestly, I always had been surprised and admired – how do You manage so calm, because in reality Your heart is not a stone... And this is even worse: if all contracts would be disgusting – then hearts will turn to stone earlier or later, Yours, Hone-Onna's... and boys always less emotional, they would have become stonehearted the first... And this is why we still able to... feel... during not good contract.

Little Mistress nods and thoughtfully rolls Her favourite glass balls with Her finger.

– Another thing, that mechanics here even while formally looks like to ones of Avraamic religions, – I am not afraid to use such words: I am sure, Enma Ai is too clever and undead for too long to understand them. – But in fact it is working somehow another. You nearly 'paid Your debt' when took the part of that innocent boy. And made another debt (if we could say so) – when released Yuzuki.

I am halting. This moment seemed surprising for me a while ago. But even now, once in a while, I've got a chance to coherently spell out the results of my analysis, and still I can't understand: where is the difference? In both cases Enma Ai acted on same emotion: mercy... But got absolutely opposite results.

– Sorry, but I still unable to figure out the actual rules. Maybe – to understand these will be for us 'a method to retire'. Anyway it will be 'a rise to the next level';

Enma Ai thoughtfully plays with strand. Then takes my hand and gets up, lightly pulling after her. I feel that it is also her answer. We are coming out from Home. Walking down the meadows, covered with red and blue flowers. It is quiet around – not dreadful silence of dead wood, no. Light winds are blowing now and again, making leaves to rustle. Somewhere behind faintly a river murmuring. Butterflies sometimes flying around. But there are no animals or birds... as it seems to me.

– And to be completely honest –our Hell is not so frightening, ne? Still noisome sometimes.

Enma Ai barely compress my palm, agreeing. It happens to be noisome. And how! But still it is beautiful around here. And absolutely beautiful... demons... around us. Starting from Little Mistress Herself. I prefer

term hikikomori refers to both the sociological phenomenon in general as well as to people belonging to this societal group.) – © Wiki.

not to think about Kikuri now. Maybe I do not understand her. And maybe – she is a fly in the ointment. For us – to better appreciate the ointment comparing with a fly.

After that we keep walking silently. I don't know what Enma Ai feels, but I am warm and calm in the whole soul. Just because She walks aside. Walks hand in hand with me. Probably – She is also good with this – because even if She understands my emotions to Her (giggles, I do not understand myself how I am managing to combine the little sitter with the Mistress!) – there is also things like status and etiquette. If She would feel uncomfortable somehow – all She has to do is to release my hand. And I would leave. But Her small and warm palm – still in mine.

Unnoticeably we are near to the Home. Well, unnoticeably for me – Little Mistress leads... moreover, I am not really familiar with Home surroundings, just feel the directions. Interesting, what will happen next?

No. Not Interesting. Then Enma Ai went behind the screen, and on the threshold, with usual pipe in mouth, sits Wanyuudoo. Or still interesting? I think – 'yes' in the end. I still do not understand – neither delay, nor decision. Expectantly looking on the old demon. I am not allowed to ask questions (as junior, I am not offended). But Wanyuudoo is observant and kind gramps.

– Ah, he finally terrorized her to the very end. It turned to be that he knew everything. And when the lover disappeared – started to scoff. 'Never to run'.

Pah! How disgusting! What a men we see nowadays?! From other hand – I would not be worried of this contract. This individual also gets what he deserves.

The 'final act', though, is not so interesting this time. The key idea – 'nowhere to run'. Of course, I would play nearly the same concept 'no escape' basing on the 'Star Wars' materials: 'No escape. For you, the young Jedi, and thy friends – no escape'⁶¹... But we've got different cultural context here. So at first we drive him a little through the maze, regularly bringing him into the centre where his wife portrait hanged. Then we are getting bored with this ad letting him to find a door leading to barren steppe.

In the steppe, anyway, drive continues. Wanyuudoo on Jeep, I am on motorbike – setting directions for him. And eventually he comes back to his wife. It turns to be the right decision. The object was keeping silence in the maze. Or rather was slurred. And after seeing even three... et-to, let's say, 'humans' – in this case out real nature is not principal, – is trying to argue.

– What's it? Why?

Wanyuudoo grins:

– Because now you have nowhere to run!

– Generally, you have to love your wife. Disregarding to what is she actually is. Or do not marry the one you don't love. – I am adding with bored and tired voice (actually I am indeed little bit tired – I hand not such experience to drive enduro bike through rough terrain for quite a while).

– But I... But she...

Wanyuudoo shrugs:

– That's what he said, Mistress.

⁶¹By all odds, Nohatsu Jun is also a fan of the Empire from the 'Star Wars' movie: in actual movie both 'young Jedy' and 'his friends' escaped... and very impactfully... if not to say effectively..

In contradiction to usual fashion Enma Ai does not ‘appears in front of us’, but darts as kite somewhere from zenith. Waving sleeves of furisode⁶², waving hair. Black valcyrrie, indeed. Pity that nobody will understand and appraise it.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– Loved...

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

In the very last moment the object ‘breaks’ and spells, nearly below his breath, maybe the only honest word during the ‘act’:

– ... once...

– 一遍死んで見る？



4Ichimoku Ren, Kikuri, Yamawaro, Hone-Onna

⁶²Furisode (振り袖) – is a kind of women kimono. Ceremonial one, rich decorated, and with a very long sleeves. Worn only by unmarried women.

Here it also seems, that Nohatsu develops her Japanese and begins to distinguish different kinds of kimono: Enma Ai always appears before the object in furisode, but only here she begins to name it like this.

Episode 10. 遊女⁶³

Day forty eighth

– It is advisable to use DNS-forwarders for resolving all other domains if your ISP allows to use their DNS-servers: in such case your own DNS server sends only one request per domain...

Well, yes. But if ISP's DNS servers are getting crazy – you are getting the same crazy stuff. Indeed, root hits are much more reliable, although using them you generate more traffic. Anyway, in most case DNS traffic is negligibly small.

And Fujibayashi – is unnegiligibly great. Obviously, it should have happen sooner or later, but anyway. The fact, that she just wrote four kanji on the corner of her notebook and showed it to me – happened. Four kanji is, obviously, 地獄少女(jigoku shoujo – Hell Girl). So she finally guessed. Using a dirty trick I could try to direct her sideways even now, I doubt she fully confident with her guess. But even using Lighto-kun's methods and hunting myself – I cannot lie to her: it would eliminate a chance to persuade her 'as humans'.

OK, let's play a fool. I am writing: «本当ですか? »('honto desu ka' – 'is it so?', 'yah?'). 'Definitely' – her answer. – 'We'll speak during the break'. Oh-oh-oh, Fujibayashi is so responsible... Hm. And this leads to the idea: if everything will last for quite a while – we could try to hire her. If not to me (when and if I will become a section head), then to Hone-Onna. Responsibility is a character that respected everywhere.

Then it is a break. We retreating to the upper flight: the door to the roof is locked, so nobody will go here: no reason. On other hand – the door is not solid. And my cigarettes' smoke is exhausted through the breaches.

– You know, Jun, – Maria is nearly exited: she is happy to move on in her investigation. It is also good. The wish to solve the problems is also admirable. – You just nailed me with that phrase about inconsistency with traditions.

Kso! So it was me myself, who turned her to right idea? Well, now it is too late... to drink 'Borjomi'. Another idiom that could be understood only by Little Mistress, if somebody... Shock! For a moment Her face appears, formed from the smoke of my cigarette. Fujibayashi sithe startled – no doubt, she also sees it. Well, I am sure now, there are some plans for her by Little Mistress.

– Oh... – have you seen it?

– Yes. And what does it mean? – I am aggravating a game. Funny, thing, but at the moment aggravation is in indifferent intonations.

– That's her! The Hell Girl!

– Maria. We already have seen her. Both of us. If we stepped into the fields of mystics – it is too late to panic. And to see something a second time – is just an indicator of periodicity. Which means: 'it is exists'. But we knew that already?

– U!

– Then let's return to your story. So, you said – jigoku shoujo?

⁶³In modern language these kanji are spelled as 'yu onna', where the first means 'entertainment, pleasure' and second one (as readers probably spotted) also reads as 'jo' in words lik 'Shoujo' So, reading 'yujo' is quite logical. Indeed it is not only logical, but is an actual archaic prononsation. Which is also quite logical in case of Nohatsu Jun, who got her Japanese knowledge 'in a magic' way from half-century years old Little Mistress or even from eterlan Master of the Hel.

– U! U! I... have begun to look for new legends. I do not understand – why. You ‘casted out’ old ones, yes. But I also had a feeling – should look for new ones.

– And? – It is interesting for me: will Maria notice my indifference, or not?

– And suddenly, absolutely accidentally, came up to, you would not believe – anime! It even named: ‘Jigoku Shoujo’... no, indeed... - she seizes by hands, not allowing interrupting her. – And the main character there – to a tee her!

– Amazing! – I am breathing out. Great reaction. Actually – I am scared. How much we are uncovered? Maria, of course, gets it in a different way:

– This is Enma Ai, I am sure! And she kills, indeed!

– O-o-o... – I am catching myself in the very last moment. I want to protect Enma Ai immediately and on the wave of the emotions I was really close to uncover myself, addressing Her as Little Mistress (Ojou-sama⁶⁴).

– But even if it is She. – I revive. – And everything is like in that anime, then – She is a gun, as I told you before... She kills only those who would be murdered even without Her help! Yes, it is bitter... but what could be done?

Maria sparkles her eyes. She understood the problem and made a decision.

– We should try to stop them! Because they sending to Hell also themselves... And it is as sin to kill people, anyway. It was said: ‘Do not kill!’

– That’s true. – I have to agree. Besides of this I am thinking: ‘And how I will pull her back now? She indeed wants to talk our clients out!’ – But are you sure that there is a point here? As I remember this series – then all people are quite motivated there. And only Tsugumi⁶⁵ did not pulled the string...

– Anyway – I should try. I cannot leave this as is. Jun, just understand me! Would you pass by a dying person? I also cannot see passively how people condemning themselves and others to Hell.

Yes. I could not argue with this statement. The point that Hell is little bit different from what Maria thinks of it because of her religion – could not be brought to her at this moment. And actually I can’t help to admire this girl. Because she is intelligent enough to understand – all her efforts will be in vain. But still she would try. And I am groaning absolutely sincerely:

– Oh, Maria, you are so... like a Trojan!

But don’t think I will leave you as is also. Don’t even hope. Even if your efforts will be in vain (and I am pretty sure in fatality of our contracts) – I do not want us to be interfered. And so I have to ask her: what have she seen now.

– Who is it then?

To my surprise, Maria blushes and falters. Well, understood. She has seen our client. And our client now – yujo. A classic story, actually. And very disgusting. The pulled simple-minded villager girl into debts and

⁶⁴The addressing that ‘Hell Correspondence’ ‘employees’ using towards Enma Ai could be translated as Little Mistress, but it is only one of translations for ‘Ojou-sama’ they are saying actually (also could be translated as ‘Princess’ or ‘Mistress’). Actually it is a top-respect addressing to woman, which does not refer to her social status and only indirectly – to her age.

An ‘O-’ prefix – mark of respect’

女 (jo/jou) – woman (as sex, but in modern Japanese it is spelled as ‘jou’ in regards to younger girls and as ‘onna’ for more adult ones).

Postfix ‘-sama’ (様) – a marker of ultimate respect.

«Respected ultimately respected human being of female sex».

⁶⁵Reference to the first season of anime about Little Mistress.

forced to pay back. So she 'ordered' her pimp. Definitely, Hone-Onna 'hoofing' and can't help waiting for confirmation. She has a lo-o-ong bill for such individuals. And client hesitating. I should ask Ren – what she is doing, indeed? By all means we could expect her to pull the string nearly immediately...

Meanwhile, Maria overcame embarrassment and found quite a neutral description:

– A maiden.

– You don't know her, of course? – I am asking an expected question.

– No...

– And how are you going to find her?

It is a great question indeed. Even I in my current state would not risk going to places, where colleagues of our client could be met. Well... would risk, if it would be required, to be honest. But would like not to. What could be said then about much more 'proper', decent and... weak Fujibayashi? But who knows... she has a Mission now, kso. And Maria shows ingenuity:

– I... can imagine where she works. And would try to intercept her before the entrance...

But actually it is not a best idea. Entrances to such places are tightly monitored. How to avoid Maria being beaten? She is an obstacle, indeed... But also – friend!

– Are you sure a person going to their work is has a tendency for long chats? – I also have to use neutral words. Because from one side I should not show I know more about this contract and on another... yes, can't lie.

Fujibayashi thoughtful.

– Yes... Probably it would be better to track her down to her home...

– Giggles! – I am laughing. – Maria Stalker-san!

Maria blushes again.

– But it is really much better. – cheering her up.

Actually I would like to see how she would speak with the client... And what she will think afterwards – I will know for sure. And it is really interesting; in this case I would not even try to prevent Maria from contacting her. Because the case is... typical, f..ck it. And I have no slightest intention to blame or criticize the client. Especially because I myself treating yujo quite good, as far as I remember, even several of my friends when I was alive turned to be them... And pimps, I believe, should be 'sawed out' without mercy.

– Unfortunately, I can't help you here. You know, that I've got a job at 'Kanri Solutions'... So can't accompany on your watch. But if anything – will help you anyway, at least with advice.

Yes. I will help. In that direction which will consider the better for us. Sorry, Maria...

It turns to be that I unwittingly lied to Maris. I have a lot of free time at 'Kanri' today. Hone-Onna brings to me and Tenjin another contract: to install a few servers for a client. The servers are very standard ones... a boring work, in the end. Obviously, shoving it to us – 'senior colleagues' are supposing that we will install OS and configure them manually and one by one. This is quite adequate for first-year students. But I am not a first-year student, actually! So – answer's the lemon!

– Mo!⁶⁶.. – rebelling I am, when Hone-Onna left. – And we should busy ourselves with this rubbish?

– Nohatsu, but it is our job! – Tenjin timidly arguing. – And is this – rubbish? Here we've got DNS, and DHCP, and even WINS...

⁶⁶«Mo» – a shout of displeasure. Mostly girlish. Something like 'Oh, no!'

By the way, he is correct – one of servers is WINS. Long time I've not seen this antique. Well – they need WINS – we will build WINS.

– Imbecility. – I am jangling. – To sit and wait until it ripen to a next question. Answer in one second and wait again.

– And what could be done?...

– Well, we are not imbeciles in the end. We would open such a fashionable tool as setupmgr.exe. – I am explaining while working. – And telling: 'Create a new answer file'. Running through the wizard.

Tenjin looking on it interestedly. As being mean, I am running through the wizard on maximum speed. Firstly, there is nothing complicated there. Secondly – I enjoy myself to look on my hands: indeed there is something fascinating in a picture of delicate hands, flying over the keyboard...

– And then, the resulting file we are opening in not less fashionable tool, named notepad and making necessary changes. This wizard is quite stupid anyway.

Probably, I am a bloody-minded girl. But Tenjin's jaw dropped awfully pleases me. And his question – even more. With the wording itself:

– Nohatsu... -san, how come you know all these things?..

– Well... – I am pulling coquettishly, while pressing Ctrl+S and saving the first answer-file, – Let's put it like this: it was interesting for me. And I always hated trivial rounds.

– But...

Yes. Now he wants to say something like 'but in our age...' Of course, my age is not the one how I am looking. But when alive I had few subordinates (by the way – they were pure-blood Philippines), which knew such things even in our age. So I am interrupting him and putting a period:

– 18 years – is enough time to know quite a lot about stuff you are interested.

Quickly making answer-files for other servers, initiating the process and leaving to next partition – to lounge around drinking tea and coffee with Hone-Onna. Hurray to career jump! By the way – I was honest: I showed and explained my actions to Tenjin. But he anyway would not be able to fully write a good answer-file. And I really enjoyed seeing him jaw-dropped.

And there is another reason, why it is good to 'lounge around drinking tea and coffee with Hone-Onna': even with her age (if I remember correctly, she is twice younger than Little Mistress and now is undead for third century), how wise and experienced is she – still my elder friend is getting weary.

– Mo!.. – With clatter she downs her cup to the saucer. – What she is waiting?..

– A second advent, – I am joking. – And what Ren-san tells?

– Ten tells – a client is busy with a really strange activity. Immediately started to go for work actively. And does a lot of shopping... doing indeed strange purchases.

Interesting. I also do not understand.

– And what she is buying?

– Clothes and jewellery. But clothes not the most fashionable. Jeans and stuff.

Hm. Strange indeed. And then I am struck with idea:

– Hone-Onna-san, and our client – brains!

Elder friend looks at me with interest:

– She figured out, that to replace this.... – yes, me too feeling disgusting even to spell this word, so I am confining myself with meaningful pause. – ...another one will appear in the blink of eye. And she is preparing to 'sling hook'. If she would figure out that it is not the best idea to go home and will try to get lost in some megapolis as Osaka – will be brains twice.

Hone-Onna touches her lip with finger appreciatively.

– Yes, your assumption has logic. – Then she smiles. – All right, in such case we can wait a little longer.

Obviously she wishing best of luck to the client. And I suddenly am realizing another thing: looks like Fujibayashi is not an exact copy of Tsugumi: the later was seeing everything contract-related ‘in real time’. And Maria sees sometimes things that actually happened few days ago. The client got Wanyuudoo three or four days ago. And Maria told me about all of this only today. Well, it is not bad: if she is behind us... the she is behind us!

All right. Time to go home.

And at Home we are met with agitated Ichimoku Ren.

– Jun-chan, – with accusive intonation says he. – Your friend contacted the client!

I am pretending to blush.

– Gomenasai! I was not able to stop her... Ano... It becomes a problem?

– No. – Ren’s displeasure mostly about the fact of contact itself, then its results. – Your friend attacked her with her Christian bullshit. The client firstly tried to give limp excuses...

– And then? – Definitely, Maria will tell me tomorrow everything, but side glance is also interesting thing.

– And then the client took a lower hem of her kimono with the right hand⁶⁷ and with plain words explained – whom she is going to sent to Hell. After that she left your friend stunned and went home.

– Sumimasen... If I would be allowed to say... – I decide to attack. I even think that Hone-Onna probably will side me here.

– Well?

– I don’t think that in this case the contact between Fujibayashi and the client could be an obstacle. The client not pulling the string because preparing to run away. So she is even more motivated, then we supposed. And Fujibayashi will apparently get some stuff to think about. Because the case is... obvious. It is very difficult to criticize the client.

Ren is scratching his head. I am enjoying the flexibility of my own mind: not long time ago I was envy for him in such cases. Now – not. I don’t want to scratch my head anymore. Now I prefer to touch my lips with finger.

– Reasonable, – at last he admits. – Well, let’s see.

– No way. – comes for the threshold. We are turning. Little Mistress and Wanyuudoo stay at the entrance. Actually, the later just silently goes by the screen. Indeed – no way. Either the discussion with Maria triggered the situation, or the client decided that she enough prepared herself... The result is the same: the string is untied...

Hone-Onna’s nostrils widened, eyes shooting lightings. And who was talking about blood lust recently? With viperous grin I am quietly touching her shoulder and passing her a uniform beret for enlisted USSR Marine Corps private – as it should be, with ‘crab’, with jack...

I am getting away with this hooligan act. For second Hone-Onna looks at the beret uncomprehending, then visibly calms down and rumples me. Well, would rumple, if I had a loose hair and not a pony-tail as I do now.

⁶⁷There is another kanji, that reads as ‘yu’ (右) meaning ‘right’. It is not clear from where this words play came from (either yujo decided to mark themselves thislike, or in opposite), but they indeed hold the lower hem of kimono with the right hand. (Gisha, gieko and maiko – only with the left hand).

– Great. And what should we do?

Wanyuudoo looks at us.

– Ichimoku Ren... this case is specific. Delicate affair. A distaff. Let girls to decide how they would like it better.

I am keeping silence maidenly and looking down the floor. In the end, this case mostly affects Hone-Onna. Thus let her be the decision maker – as party mostly concerned. And it turns to be that she already has a decision. Simple and elegant at same time.

– XIXth century. Southern States. We'll catch him and sell. To Americans. Of nonconventional orientation.

Good solution. But Hone-Onna does not stop on that.

– But before – a trip in ship's hold. And you, boys – regular sailors, please. And Jun will be our bombardier and marines commander.

The beret has been put on my head. What a mess we are creating. But that's funny. Well, I will make to slurp a skilly!

Fiery Californian sun dries the ground to stone-hard. Even I, undead one, hot in black uniforms of USSR marine. And that stupid AKMS! No, 'Kalashnikov' – is a fabulous assault rifle. But it is nearly impossible to shoot it from left shoulder. And in overall – I do not understand why Hone-Onna so eagerly plays with anachronisms... But to the object my look instils fear. And this is good. By the way, the object is sitting in shackles dressed only in loincloth. But feels not better than me: skilly does not contribute for good health and flies... the also not stupid. The fly where it smells more... and where they can find more of naked body. So – not to my face, at all.

Buyers appear. Hone-Onna politely smiles to the from under the captains cap. By the way by fashion her cap is typically German. One of submarine crew officers during Second World War. My friend is being naughty today.

The object immediately draws an attention of one of the buyers. He takes the object by jaw, examines.

– Listen, Miss Captain, how much do you want for this sweet Asian boy?

– Oh, this is a very valuable thing, – answers Hone-Onna coquettishly. – A dreamboat... and have look from behind! It will cost a lot, indeed.

– True, – buyer agrees. – A nice ass... So?

The objects can't stand it anymore... I should had kicked him several time during sail, to make him mouth shut. But... in such case how he will get the point?

– Why me?!!!

– And why not? – Grins fangs Hone-Onna. – It is OK to sell girls, and boys – not?

– I have not sold!..

– Yup. – I am agreeing. – Did not sell. Just landed them money and suggested to work out the loan. Then it is just your turn to work out. Simple!

The object bellows in panic.

Enma Ai appears in front of us. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– 一遍死んで見る？

And in the boat we fix him immediately. And plug up his mouth. Tut-tut! Just if Little Mistress has to listen to screams of such a scum.

Episode 11. 125 cubic meters of silence

Day forty ninth

– WPA-authentication with PSK provides enough level of network security, but leads to necessity to manually input pre-shared key on every wireless client. So RADIUS-server would be of a great help in such case...

True. But in the real world – to persuade somebody for RADIUS – it should be a really huge (or mad of security) company. Still, I pay no heed to all of this. I am waiting for the break. When I will catch Fujibayashi at last and ‘interrogate’ her.

At last! The bell rings. I am seizing her sleeve and pulling her with me.

– To smoke!

Actually, she also jumps with the bell. She also wants to share experiences. We are settling ourselves on the stairway.

– And! Have you found her?

Oh, how interesting. Maria brings colours – she recalled yesterdays chat. And understands – now either to tell, but she would not able to get off with general terms. Or to keep silence. But she wants to discuss it! Well, I see. She wants to discuss more than to avoid embarrassment. I can understand her.

– You see, Jun... sometimes it happens, that girls are falling into a bad situation and they have to...

– Would not believe... Is that girl – geisha?? – Not at all, of course. But I am expressing disbelief quite sincerely. Who cares, that from other end?

– Worse. – says Fujibayashi sorrowfully. – Much worse... I even was not prepared...

– Then tell everything in order.

– Well... I planted myself in café – and at last spotted her. I had homework with me – but I was not able to do it, was afraid to miss her...

– Ah, don’t worry about that. I’ve seen today’s eccers. During next break I will tell you the main points, and on the lecture we will put everything in details. Moreover that it will be World Culture lecture... about which both you as Christian, and me – as gaijin, know more than teacher. Thus don’t worry. So, you were sitting in café and waiting.

– Yes. – Maria surrenders to my pressure and starts to tell nearly mechanically. It could be for good, possibly this way it will be easier for her to jump through embarrassing words and turn to the point... and her experiences. – And so she exits. Alone. I am – after her. Caught her near to her place...

– And... Then?

– I am telling her: sorry, I am nobody for you... but are you actually to kill a human? And she replies: ‘Is it a human?’ Jun, I nearly dropped to my knees – just lost all strength from legs. Telling her: ‘But if you kill – you will sin yourself! Why you are doing it for yourself?’

Maria bends her hands. Oh, that wasn’t an easy talk for her...

– And she: ‘You do not understand it?’ And takes a lower hem of kimono with her right hand. Jun, here I really fell down. It is a nightmare!

– Oh, poor girl! – I am sighing. Actually, I don't know myself – to whom this sigh is addressed – to Maria or to previous client. I pity both of them...

– And then continues: 'I am not the first. But let me be the last for him!' Jun, but his place will be taken by others! Yes, he is scoundrel, scum... but why she dooms herself?!

Fujibayashi nearly weeping. I am gently touching her shoulder.

– Maria... All is required for evil – is to make good people sleep. Yes, she has doomed her soul to Hell. But tell me the truth: if you, yourself – be able to destroy such a scoundrel – would you hesitate to do it? Even sacrificing yourself?

Finish. Maria cries aloud.

– But why her?!...

I am sitting, hiding a face into palm. I want to gemb my head, or to bury face into both... But if I will remove my hand from her shoulder – she will feel worse. And I already love her.

– Maria... she made a decision. She sacrificed herself. Even if this sacrifice would not break the System. But one scoundrel less. And she has the whole life before her. Which she can manage to live happily. If she will be able, yes. But – it is we are who should be grateful for her!

– But... – Fujibayashi is nearly slurred. I am holding her, caress her back... And for a first time angry for my own decision: a men's hands required here. Big. Strong. Not my subtle arms.

– Cry. – I am saying out of place. – Cry. This girl did a real act of bravery... you know, when a plane crashes into the battleship – the battleship does not suffer too much. But we did not stop our men 70 years ago. Because – it should be so. Because – the sacrificed themselves – for us. For those, who was born after.

Maria squishing.

– There is a phrase in your religion: 'The God is love'. But those, who sacrifice themselves – are love. Indeed, this yujo, – I, think, that after all Maria's hints I can safely name her profession. – doomed herself to Hell. And did not break the System. But she did it for us. And if another hundred, thousand of people will do the same – even the most dreadful battleship will sink. Even the System will fell down. She made a step to the world without hatred, to world where one should not fear. Can we blame her?

I am startling from own last words: I indeed telling what I believe. But my work – is hatred. Would I disappear...? Hell the Great, but I am the same. I am not afraid for myself. I do not bother what would happen to me in the world where we will be unneeded. But what will happen to Little Mistress? I want her to be happy... Thoughts are jumping from one subject to another. If I will have to fight the Master of the Hell for her happiness – I am ready. Indeed, «Прими, линкор, мою любовь!»⁶⁸

– No. But... Why that way?!

– Maria. If there would be no Enma Ai – she will do it anyway. Tomorrow. Week later. And anyway sacrificed her soul, ne? And in this way – at least humans would not suspect her.

Ups. Probably I was wrong telling this. It is not a fact that Maria knows – string already has been pulled. But I have only emotions in my mind at the moment: all thoughts – about Little Mistress. Oh, no, exactly about 'Mistress and Sister of mine'. Oh, pulled Maria some strings in my soul... Although now she is crying on my shoulder (Hel the Great, and what I will do with my blouse – there is already a big wet spot on it, it is improper!) So, she is not in position to carefully analyze my talks.

⁶⁸ 'Thy battleship, accept my love' (rus). Definitely, Nohatsu Jun likes songs by Sergey Kalugin. At least one of them, «Вперёд и вверх!» ('Forward and up!'), inspired by Japanese movie 'For those whom we love' telling about fates of WWII kamikaze pilots.

– Please, understand, Maria... Enma Ai is not evil. She is... neutral. And yesterday girl – just disposed what she has got. Disposed as ought to.

All right. Final. Here we came. Now the whole day I will have to wrap up into jean jacket and tell everybody like I am shivering. Because I've got now a plenty of Maria's mascara and pomade on my blouse shoulder.

We are late to the next lecture. But, fortunately, there is something written on my face, it seems. Something strange. And unkind. We are not asked of anything. And for Maria the familiar surroundings of college – a balm. Being set to the desk – she picks up notebook quite neatly... and starting to do notes absolutely as if nothing happened.

I myself am sitting all in thoughts. One of them – that this is all a cunning plot by Little Mistress, and everything is aimed to me. Do not want. Do not want to suspect her in such stuff. Even if it will turn to be true – but I want to stay her faithful... executive and sister. Do not want to think that Mistress manipulates me. Even if I would lose something from it. But... I smell it – today we were on the edge of something important.

To the same token, it is interesting – is Maria aware of the next contract? Seemingly – no. And we are suffering. Wanyuudoo just returned – and we had to give out Ichimoku Ren. Though Little Mistress uses him as a doll not too much: his skill is too valuable. So, the string will be pulled if not today, than tomorrow.

And, if Fujibayashi not aware of contract – that's good. I helped her with eccers; put some ideas in her mouth on the seminar... so we can part now.

On the contrary, in 'Kanri' – boredom and yearning. Yesterday's contract is closed, naturally, to bring servers to client and plug them to switch and UPS is not even our job. A new one is only in process. So, killed time here and there: 'sat on the phone'; had reset a password for one client through remote access; told about magic keys Ctrl+z to another... Revelled with coffee in Hone-Onna's cubickue up to square eyes... But was rewarded closer to the evening. I am called 'up'.

They're smiling. Complimenting me. (And I am, you see, staying as izzard, pretending to be a really thankful and well-bred employee)... But the outcome is great!

I have respect for 'Kanri'. After we've 'built' the servers in a day (with expected three days) – on the next day I am receiving a payment... with a nice bonus. Thus – let's switch to housing. I am notifying Hone-Onna on that and immediately stupefied. She likes my idea so much (naturally, it is logical indeed – we both should imitate a normal miss), that she immediately ignited to rent an apartment herself. And, also naturally – in the blink of eye we are coming to the idea of sharing. Oh, I can't hold laughter... it seems that I am really a character in some crazy anime. Now I've got into 'Nana'. But here the question: who of us two is Nana, and who is Hachi⁶⁹? I really love and respect Hone-Onna, but I would not manage to play Hachikou... And in respect to fact that from us – it is me, who can put together a table... it seems, that roles are set. But can't

⁶⁹Nana Osaki (Nana) and Nana Komatsu (Hachi) – two main characters from mentioned before 'Nana' anime. As both girls share the same first name, which sounds as word 'seven' in Japanese – to distinguish addressing to one from another; and also because one quickly becomes a faithful fan of another, like a doggy to mistress – Nana Komatsu gets a nickname 'Hachiu' ('Hachikou') – 'eight'. For some reason, 'Hachokou' is a common dog name in Japan. The rest of Nohatsu Jun's discourses – are references to different moments in that anime.

sing. And play only piano. And Hone-Onna right to a tee was taught to sing, and play... samisen⁷⁰. All right, it is even better, so we are not Osaki and Komatsu, but Hone-Onna and Nohatsu.

And the Internet – is a great thing. While we are not pretentious – all our point is to have apartments with minimal furniture and in more or less respectable district... Cutting to subject – we managed to find two proposals in one hour. I am wondering – does Hone-Onna feel any remorse for using corporate traffic for personal needs? I am – not at all, of course.

Going to have a look in person. First flat somehow does not wit to aesthetical sense of my friend. And the second seems to be good enough. It is, maybe, little bit noisy – one of the bedrooms and living rooms are facing to a big highway... But still – 7th floor, highway is far enough. And we are renting this apartment as cover. To sleep (yes, we still have to sleep, but to get enough of it – need much less time: used to sleep for half a day, now I am fine with four or far hours, and Hone-Onna, seemingly, fine even with two)... Well, we still are going to sleep at our house at the borders of Hell. If we would not have guests. Anyway, we should also think about furnishing.

After deciding to sign a contract tomorrow straight away – letting go to taxi and transferring ourselves home.

By the way, at Home there is a lot of work on the contrary: again to whiz data, plus Ichimoku Ren and Wanyuudoo yesterday was drinking for the whole night for ‘a great contract’... Not the whole, actually, until the midnight – until Little Mistress went to a new client with Ren in the pocket. Anyway – backwash is for women, anyway. And not for Hone-Onna, she is senpai⁷¹ now. So – to me. Yesterday I cleaned that stuff more or less, but did not managed to put a final glance.

Hone-Onna sits on the threshold and admires flowers. Funny, I am not even insulted. It’s a culture. Coals and Newcastle. Or owls and Athens, if you’d like. Moreover – cleaning does not prevent me from chatting. And I have a question on the tip of my tongue.

– Hone-Onna-san, and what kind of contract we’ve got now?

Hone-Onna turns, examines the result of my efforts and nods: enough. And fir me, as gaijin – even makes a ‘discount’: brings out a box of lady cigarettes and pulls one. Indeed enough, come on, have sit and cigarette.

– A contract as contract. – explains she. – No manner of. Not about anything. Actually, I played it for you. ‘What?’ – I am even forgetting to inhale.

– Hard and silent mistress. Hard-working handmaiden, waiting for appraisal.

So ka!! And I thought – it is a culture. Still, a culture too. Hone-Onna just aggravated it a little. In normal situation she would... move sake cups to sink, for example.

– Mo!... I would prefer to see something about love, and here...

I would say last time she is dissatisfied with everything for some time. Why so?.. Answer appears immediately and makes me turn from her. Like not to smoke on her. But actually I am just blushed because of my guess. Though it is not good to smoke on her now anyway.

⁷⁰Shamisen (三味線) – literally "three flavor strings"– s a three-stringed musical instrument, could be described as 3-string banjo. Nohatsu again uses and archaic pronounsation – ‘samisen’.

⁷¹Sanpai (先輩) – «senior». Not a boss or manager, he/she is just more experienced and helps the junior to familiarize... definitely, soldering to juniors the most simple and boring tasks anyway.

All the same, despite of my efforts – all my manoeuvres are unravelled. Hone-Onna’s hand lowers to my nape (again without consequences: today I plaited a spica pigtail). I am turning back. And she shoots eyes left and right and bends to me:

– I also losing control *periodically*. – Whispers.

Straightens again and continues:

– Nothing exiting in the end. Either our maido⁷² will pull a string today, or drop Ren to a bin. Most of people are suffering from lack of communication.

I am letting the smoke rings thoughtfully. Indeed, lack of communication – is the scourge of modern day society. Though I never experienced that. I addition to fact that I was quite all-sufficient even when alive, but also – I am – Nohatsu Jun. Network Girl. Here they are, my friends. Type few words – they will answer.

Stunned. Indeed with jaw out. What kind of skill I possessed then... Pint finger of right hand gets instead of nail (it was a nice nail, cared of and painted, by the way!) – an RJ45 connector. As far as I see – a cross-over one. So I can directly connect to computer.

Second later I inhale: my cute nail is back again. And I did not breathe all this time, it seems.

– *Awakening*, Jun-chanu? – Hone-Onna friendly smiles and gives me another cigarette. – It is time, indeed, but do not get excited. The main point – is to understand, why we are here – can take ages. Maybe only Ichimoku Ren more or less got close to his answer.

Being tactful, we do not mention Little Mistress.

– By the way, Jun-chanu, and what we will do in the evening if...

Well, yes. If she will pull. I am wondering – is my elder friend asks me on purpose, or ‘just if’? If purposely – the she mistaken. I am not the same being as was when alive. I am already... Jun-chan. And feel her emotions nearly as my own. So I am also now – melancholic and uncreative. But... I still have to answer to senpai. At least somehow.

– How quiet... – spill I out.

It is really quiet around. Even wind ceased and smoke of my cigarette (no, I definitely would beg Wanyuudoo for his pipe at some point – I can’t go with these sticks: there is smoke, but no tobacco feeling!) goes vertically up. And no sound of river. Quiet. And sad. Probably, the same for our maido... quiet and sad.

– Pressure chamber? – Hone-Onna lazily cuts a feather with a modern word.

– U!

– Variant... – I can bet: if not manners, she would lay back and look into the sky. But... maybe she too does not want to see this blood-red sunset? I – don’t. Just smoking and looking on my pointed toes.

Enma Ai appears by our side. Looks on us. Indeed there is some kind of women... sisterhood. I feel – She is silent now not because always not talkative. She is keeping silence because She feels our with Hone-Onna anguish. Slightly touches hair with Her hand – just to draw our attention with a movement of strands, and goes behind the screen.

That’s all. A final to ‘no manner of’ contract. I and Hone-Onna are getting up and disappearing to put a silent mistress to pressure camera. All so quiet...

⁷²Direct ‘import’ from English: maido-maid in meaning of handmaid.



5Nohatsu Jun (c) curlyhair

Episode12. Innocent child games

Day fifty seventh.

– ...Da-angO, dango, dango, dango,
Da-ango, dango, dango!..

I am singing like Nagisa from ‘Clannad’⁷³ and with the stick of abovementioned dango – dancing on the meadow near to the Home. I can afford to do it: humans have a weekend today, there also no clients (actually, there is one boy, which accesses our website nearly every day and inputs different names of his mates – but he had not made his mind yet). And Ichimoku Ren said that there is a quite trivial and foolish case there. So we decided not to investigate him as a whole team. There is something interesting for Ichimoku Ren there – so he is investigating. Plus Hone-Onna indirectly: the boy is a son of one ‘Kanri’ employees. He even knew about us overheard her mother exchanging gossips with a friend. And I updated our database, cleaned the Home, tried to bake a dango and now resting. Singing and going to taste the result of my experiment.

My communicator vibrates in the pocket of my jeans. Actually, even we are locate at the border of Hell – all our devices are resolved as being in Japan (and, as far as I understand – depending on who is connecting to us – as being in the same town). But Little Mistress does not like when ‘human’ business mingles into quiet of our Home, so when I am here – I am putting a block on all incoming calls. All, except from Ren, Hone-Onna and Maria (Wanyuudoo and Yamawaro dislike mechanics so does not have mobile phones). So who is that? Maria.

– Konniti-wa⁷⁴, Jun-chan!

– Konniti-wa, Maria-chan!

– How are you?

– Not bad, not bad... Relaxing, eating dango. And you?

– Also good. Listen, Jun-chan I’ve got a fabulous idea. Let’s meet – I will tell you in details!

– Why not? – At free time we can enjoy ourselves as we’d like. As far as I remember, Hone-Onna once upon a time had a romance with movie producer, then became friends with his wife and another miss... and then regularly visited them... to drink. – How about one hour later in the café near to central mall?

– Great! See you there. Bye-bye!

– Okioticskete!⁷⁵..

Today Maria is joyful and energetic. Even if she at some point will get to discuss Enma Ai – still it will happen not very soon. And she again knows nothing about potential client. Which all means – I can look forward to have several hours of joyful and light time. You know, even I long for such sometimes. Technically – I would have been able to suggest meeting 5 minutes later. But I should pay attention to secrecy. So I am returning Home, checking – if everything Ok with me (yes, it was correct idea: I should paint

⁷³Nagisa – one of main characters in abovementioned ‘Clannad’ anime. She was the one for whom main protagonist fell in kanonic plot in first season and married and even had children in second. Nagisa really crazy on the song about dango family, which was popular between Japanese children around the middle of 80th (XX century). Jun sings exactly this song.

⁷⁴Konniti-wa (こんにちは) – standard greeting during the day. Nearly directly translates as ‘good day’..

⁷⁵Okioticskete (most likely – deformed 気付て – okitsuke te) – one of usual variants for parting bid... Direct translation – ‘take care!’

my left eye more accurately... and, I think. I would put pomade on lips...) and transferring myself into our with Hone-Onna apartments.

So we are in café. Sweets in front of us, coffee – too, I am looking on Maria expectantly. She could bang from her great idea so she is shooting:

– Jun, has told me that you are an anime girl?

I am nodding.

– Around month later there will be a festival in Akahibara. With cosplay⁷⁶. Let's go!!!

Indeed a great idea. Besides of that I like it myself. But what perspectives for our business! First of all, for festive week we will remove her from our current main activity zone. Secondly, cosplay. Cosplay means – sewing. And sewing means that even before festival we will spend much more time together, than now. Obviously, if Maria will feel another contract – she will try to stop it. And I would not use trivial hints regarding not finished costume works: Fujibayashi is serious beyond her age girl, and can prioritise things skilfully. But still she will be around. So we will be able to direct her and dispute with her on contract-related matters.

– Sugoi!⁷⁷ – I am gasping absolutely sincerely. – Sugoi-sugoi

Maria smiling.

– And whom would you like to cosplay? – she is asking. I am becoming thoughtful. Actually I have a lot of favorite female characters. But I do not want to get bored with wigs, and these, who has more or less same length of hair as me – mostly just schoolgirls. So it is not interesting to cosplay them: just go to the shop and buy everything. Moreover – you cannot be sure, that others will correctly figure out whom exactly you are cosplaying.

Oh, no, what a snail I am! Of course I have one favorite female character, which had quite easily distinguishable clothes – Sihou Matsuri⁷⁸. But... there is not too much of sewing anyway. And I do not like to lose such a chance.

– Wait a little. – I am telling her. – It is too unexpected. I should think. You know, I would like to do something... exciting. And uncommon!

– U! U! – Maria fully agrees with me and bites from her croissant, giving a time to think for me. And I am starting to think logically:

Uncommon costume – is either 'bulgeonwaging' (don't like and haven't seen any), or historical references (which actually is not so uncommon for Japan and people wear kimono for different occasions quite frequently). Or sci-fi. Oh. And there I have only shounen and seinen. Most of all I would like to do a cosplay for Lunamaria Hawke from Gundam SEED Destiny. But she has haircut shorter than even Maria. And to dress Maria into very revealing skirt⁷⁹ – I'm afraid mission impossible. But I am thinking in right direction.

⁷⁶ cosplay – costume play. To put on costumes of anime characters.

⁷⁷Sugoi! (スゴイ) – a shout means delight. 'Great', 'Fabulous', etc.

⁷⁸Main character in 'Sola' anime. It is absolutely natural that Nohatsu Jun counts her as favorite: firstly, Matsuri is very faithful and loyal, from other hand – joyfull and likes to play the baby; secondly – she is also undead with quite sad past; thirdly she is voiced by the same seyu (Noto Mamiko) as Enma Ai. The seyu voice is a separate object of otaku 'worshipping', and Noto Mamiko indeed has astonishing beautiful tembre.

⁷⁹Because Gundam SEED is a boys anime, there is much attention paid to ephaise women 'beauty', and outside from battle robots girls usually wear a quite revealing clothes. So, uniform (sic!) mini-skirt of space-based (sic!) elite

– Can we try Code Geass?

After short discussion we are coming to resume that Maria can't play anyone else than Karen⁸⁰ (well, still we should try to find more modest clothes). And speaking of me with great regret we had to discard Lady Anya option because of her too loli forms (in the end I have a normal adult young woman proportions... even breasts are, while not huge, which is normal for Japanese women, but still... noticeable. Quite an A, even slightly bigger). So we end up with little bit pretentious (she is too 'though') and dangerous (she is not perfectly human, so am I) variant of C.C.⁸¹ in the black... I do not even know how to name this thing. Let it be 'ex-dress'. As having quite specific status and mentality – I can afford to plough around in quite revealing costumes, on the contrary.

Not to put this idea into pigeonhole – immediately starting to the shops. But having Maria anyway turns my mind to work-related issues. For example – what is the rule behind Little Mistress and Fujibayashi contacts? Since that has begun – I counted five of the, Three times – about contracts. And all of them were quite... morally justified even for an outsider. And missing one seemingly not less morally justified and another quite disgusting, and two – just appearance of Enma Ai, 'neither here, nor there'.

All right. Let's assume first appearance was kind of warning for us: 'There is a connection between them.' Second – a confirmation of guess. From which I can conclude, that somebody (the Master of the Hell, or Little Mistress) indeed plotting some game here, that connection is not accidental. But contracts? Well, actually Fujibayashi sees only 'good' contracts. And the 'good' one that was 'omitted' – was still somehow questionable from moral jurisdiction... and did not showing anything new to the picture of our business for Maria.

Well, this is actually a fruitful idea. Somebody showing our work to her and until now in quite one-sided manner. I don't know, will it be so further, or at some point Maria will begin to see more unpleasant cases, but somehow they trying to form for her... not very negative position towards us. All right, let's go with this theory. Moreover, I am personally would like her to think of us as better, as possible. I mean – do not take us as kind of evil, or like. He-he, because, however you turn – still we are demons.

Loaded with packages, we are tumbling into our flat. Naturally, a question where to do all the sewing was not even raised: I am living with elder (and frequently absent) friend, Maria – with parents... Moreover, I did not try to make sure, but it seems – step-parents. And before we had a chance to sort our stuff – Maria is straddled. So this is how it looks in her case, not the first time I see it – all symptoms are constant. By the way – quite in style with Tsugumi and Yuzuki: stopped eyes, heavy breathing, full stun... And it is good that I am undead. I'm afraid – would I be a normal girl – I would not be able to hold Maria falling down.

But I do not try to get her to consciousness. Maybe it is mean – but Yuzuki always managed to return by herself, so the contact itself is not dangerous for them. I more afraid of the opposite – forceful breaking. Anyway, in both cases it was lasting only for a few seconds. So it is with Maria, as I can see.

– What? – I am asking worried.

ZAFT, to which Lunamaria belongs – is not reaching even middle of hip, and even more – with plications, so quite loose.

⁸⁰One of main female characters of «Code Geass». During series appeared on the screen in different outfits, some of which was quite modest.

⁸¹Lady Anya and C.C. – are also characters of 'Code Geass' anime. Jun and Maria want to cosplay characters from same series to emphasize their friendship to others.

Actually, it is unclear for me too – what's it: client is only potential one. And it is still far before midnight.

– A boy. Not older than high school first class⁸². He was playing with mates at arcade⁸³. Then, as frame change: the same boy sits at computer, opening and closing the 'Bookmarks' menu. And there the first site – Hell Correspondence. That's all. After that I came to myself.

– Do not understand anything! – I am admitting plainly. – He would not, in the end, send to Hell somebody to whom he lost a game? It is far too childish... and he is quite a grown-up, as you say.

Although inside myself I have some doubts. Infantilism is this kind of thing. Not rare nowadays, unfortunately. But maybe there are some additional circumstances there?

– And how he looks, that boy?

– W-well... very regular. – Maria answers thoughtfully. – More – calm and non-confrontational... I don't understand anything...

On the contrary, I am starting to understand. It is Fujibayashi who does not have a clue in boys' psychology. I am, for certain reason, having some data in this area. And this data tells me, that at 13-15 years old (exactly the age of our potential client); 'calm and non-confrontational' boys are very frequently becoming an object of pressure and jeering from their more aggressive and physically developed peers. Thus if he constantly loses the game in that arcade to one after another classmate (or some other mates) – the probability of such jeering is quite high.

– it is strange. – still I have to agree. – But also suspicious. Germans have a saying: 'Quite waters are deep'... and here in Japan: 'Demons live close to temples'. Maybe he is non-confrontational only visibly... and buries all insults in his heart... and then... Boom! But still there should be a really lot of insults.

Meanwhile I am getting another conclusion: whoever plots for Maria – in the end she will see all aspects of our work. Because this contract (let's assume that today he will decide to click 'Submit' at last, otherwise why we've seen him right now?) – is already quite disgusting. I am sure; a boy has a lot of reasons to avenge. But this is exactly that kind of revenge, that not only changes nothing, but also not noble at all. Like... motivated and justified, but useless. This guy should change himself.

Actually, how much people different are – the periodicity stories is still not queasy. I myself was involved in three or four variants of practically conceptually identical contracts. And this one – also practically a copy to one of that was described in the second or third season... It sounds cynical, of course. But I would prefer something more uncommon. From other hand, if religions, for example, allocate only limited number of sins – then there is also not too much of main plots for revenge. Thu, abyss!

And I am getting a beneficial idea.

– OK. It is a truly sad story. And you, obviously, want to talk him out. This is quite right. But – how to search for him?

I am trying to put my words in most vague forms. So she would be able to think that I also want to change client's mind (actually, if I was not been what I am now – I would really want to). And that I am helping her in it. But in fact I designed quite a treacherous move.

– I've seen him in the arcade...

⁸²Japanese school has three sections. High school is last 3 years. Each section has its own numbering, i.e. begins from 1st year..

⁸³Arcade - a very popular between Japanese schoolboys (and even older people) hobby: gambling machines. Not 'one-handed bandits', but with different games like to console ones. In fact – console games usually are ports of arcade ones. Also from these derives a game genre: 'arcade games'. Usually arcade allows to play a match with someone who sits by the next (or opposite) machine.

– Reasonable. If you will try to recall details and tell it to me, then, if we split – we have a chance to find this arcade in one-two evening. We can try to start even today.

And my cunning is in that fact, that even if we by some chance will find this place even today (and I will turn on the regime of maximum tediousness and will pull details from Fujibayashi for qui-i-ite a while, so we will move out not soon at all...) And I will search for the arcade... lazily. Putting a spin on that a girl, cannoning in and bulleting out – is a very suspicious girl. So as minimum we should easily plough through the hall as if we are looking for some game... Well, I would even tell her that.

– And, Maria, even while we could wish to check all arcades as soon as possible – we should not rush. Nobody will allow us to run through halls like electric broom, so we should enter sedately and look around slowly.

All in all, in any case – Maria would not be able to talk to client until tomorrow: until he will wait until the end of classes, and until he will go to arcade again. And I will warn colleagues – maybe even after we will find that place, they will manage to distract her somehow on a hump. Even will organize a passing bus, I don't know.

Indeed, I even enjoyed roaming through arcades. Although I was not a hardcore gamer when alive – still had finished a prehistorical flight simulator for 'Star Wars'. Along with several games of 'MechWarrior'. So somehow knew how to play simulators. So it happened now, I came out quite moderately. But still was looked upon with respect: even such results are unexpected from girl. To avoid puzzling public with abnormal doubts – I also plaid away several thousands of yens on that treacherous 'Crane' machine. By the way – even managed to get one neka-caneka⁸⁴ and hung it on my handbag. Better mannered Fujibayashi gave up for today even earlier than me, called and told that she has to head home. Great. So she would not talk to him even tomorrow. I am returning to our flat – and back, to eternal sunset.

And right in time: exactly at midnight. All right. 'Children' has returned from their weird absence and Little Mistress immediately gives Yamawaro works. Because client requested a contract indeed. And this is logical: Ichimoku Ren is busy, quite officially now. We with Hone-Onna – on continuous mission. And we could not always exploit Wanyuudoo? Moreover – both the client and the object are also boys.

While Enma Ai offers the contract – I am having a quick chat with Ren and Wanyuudoo:

– Fujibayashi have seen the client today. Tomorrow, after college, she will look for his favorite arcade. And I will have to help her a little after work. If we will find it – be prepared: she wants to sit there in ambush. How to put a crimp to her – I don't know, but I told you her plan.

– That's all right, – tells Ren. – That's not a big deal. First of all – the client is not a fool. And he was hesitating exactly because he already aware of *all* our terms and conditions. So he would not wait long – until first insult. And because he is clumsy – jeering happens all the time. Secondly, Fujibayashi cannot plough through the hall as security does. And these few times when she will shift the game or get up for can of juice or whatever – I just will cover him with myself: client is not a big guy.

⁸⁴Neka-caneka (right pronouncation – «neko car neko», 猫力一猫) – a figure, popular in Japan: a big cat carries ('car' is again imported from English) a small kitten on its back or head... or sleeping in such pose. Expresses a touching care for smaller. In respect to fact that Nohatsu is fond of 'Azumanga Daioh!' anime – it is nearly definite, that she was trying to get exactly this toy, thinking of animal loving character Sakaki-san.

– Arigato, Ichimoku Ren-san! – I am bowing. – you will help us a lot!

A-a-a! Friggin why do they all comb my nape? That does it! From now on – no single day without tight hairdo! At least at Home.

Day fifty eighth

But no the next day we are finding out, that all our tricks and tactical designs was not required. Ren was correct – client requested a contract being nearly ready to conclude it. Attack gets to Maria when we are sitting on the lunch break (so, he ordered for a classmate). And now it lasts for quite a while – so even I am starting to worry. But Maria comes back to herself and with tears falls into my embrace.

– Ju-u-un! We fa-a-a-ailed!

I am comforting her as far as I can... caress her head and shoulders. Silently. And what can I say? ‘Next time?’ Hope – not. Or ‘It is difficult to go against Enma Ai?’ – how much of comforting, my ass... even while it is absolutely true.

When she calms down a little, I am asking:

– He pulled the string? What had you seen?

– They were sitting in the classroom, eating lunch, – still sobbing tells Maria. – and that boy was eating udon⁸⁵. And apparently sloshed on the boy across. And all of them begun to jeer him, your hands are clumsy, and you can’t eat normally...

Oh... a regular story. Teenage boys – they are like this... Fujibayashi starts to cry again:

– Ju-u-un! Why they are so? It is so mean!..

– Unfortunately, Maria... – in this age children, especially boys, – are very cruel beings. You studied in all-girls school, so have not seen that... although girls are also no fun to be with...

She nods, sobbing. Girls probably would be even worse. At least they have more cunning mind. Meanwhile, Maria finishes her story:

– And he the whole blushed, and then jumped! Dropped a chair on someone who jeered him... They attacked him even more... and he run away and...

– Understood. A sad story – indeed they got him. – O. I found a good word. – But nothing could be done anymore... Besides of putting you into shape – look, your mascara flooded...

We are leaving to toilet... and there watching in the mirror the final of ‘the act’: a boy in school uniforms stays in front of Little Mistress. For some reason, she had put on a furisode not with flowers, but with geometric pattern – colourful balls and triangles on the whole field.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– Kso! But why me? It is me – clumsy?

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– It is that idiot is clumsy!!! – Wow, the object allows himself to shout on Little Mistress? Can’t envy. To him

– 一遍死んで見る？

⁸⁵Udon (うどん) – wheat noodles. In Japan it is served either with big amount of liquid sauce, or even as soup. Anyway, eating this with chopsticks – it is not difficult to slush oneself and those who around.

By the way, a final is good. It is not fact that Maria would realize: client solved nothing. But she felt disaffection towards the object. For what this all happening? And who plotted it?.. To be honest, I am feeling little bit sorry for Maria. She'd got into our games. And our games – not the most joyful ones.

Episode 13. Life as Hell?

Day sixty second

– Kso! I specially stressed for these clever people, that it's all over, final is unavoidable, I am locking this many times loved feminine folder!..

We are sitting at our flat. I am waving with cigarette and swearing. Really, today's working day unsettled me so much, that in fact in place of words 'clever people', 'final is unavoidable' and so on – I am spilling out Russian foul language in two-three level combinations. Ichimoku Ren looks at me with irony and admiration.

– But no, these God-blessed individuals has made such an indescribably taste mess of access rights, that some of them – still was continuing to throw into their inconceivably creative oeuvre, as nobody said nothing. And when the server has suffocated to angels and is shoot out that old beautiful copy – has started a bum-rap!

– Tell me, Jun... – asks Ren. – I know that you are not native Japanese... What that language was, Russian?

– Obscene. – I am 'deflating' in a blink of eye and blushing.

– Sounds impressive. Impressive disgusting. –mockingly says Hone-Onna from the doorstep.

Oh, kso!⁸⁶ In all gust of feelings I did not noticed, who she returned from kitchen. Definitely, that in her presence I was not going to use such words (even while she does not understand them).

– But I am amazed with another thing. – she continues with much more clam and even, seems to me, kind voice. – You stood for three hours, and even waited until I left to kitchen...

My ears are in colours. One can print photos, easily. Or, well, process films. Of course, if she catch me on that – it would be naïve to try to cover something. Hone-Onna is not Little mistress, but reads people's emotions also whether-either... Especially mine – with whom she used to tinker not for one week. But there is a sound of pride in her voice. Most likely – exactly because I managed to stand. And in that – the desert of her lessons. Absolutely fair.

– And what about that Indian, to the token? – she asks me innocently.

– That... – I am going to burst again... and then realizing that I am being frankly pinned up. Even not covering. – He heard, that the link is awesome – still called me six times in half-minute intervals. I dropped him and e-mail, in Japanese and in English. But still – it is only he who think that he can communicate on these languages.

– Jun, you are dead above the ears! – joyfully announces Ren.

I, definitely, want to feel offended, but logically I realize that I am a fool indeed. Also because taking work-cover to heart. And I want to know – what exactly does he mean.

⁸⁶kso! – a curse on the edge of acceptance in society. 'Damn!' for example. Probably derives from (畜生!) – «chikuso!» – «Curse!», or indeed, 'Damn!'.

– Such a fountain of emotions from out Jun-chan – it’s fantastic! No, you’re not ice-cold, of course, but now you jumped over your won head... You should have been waiting a little longer and place an order for Little Mistress! – he explains.

– Whom? That Indian?..

– All of them! – happily says he.

– We would make you a discount. As for member of staff! – Hone-Onna laughing with him. She also got a grip in her work-cover... really sells the service.

– Yah all of them... – All right. I am quiet. I had been shown my place, praised, made to burn with shame, calmed down, and comforted in one time. I really adore these... beings. Without a trace of irony – love and adore them.

And we’re sitting in our flat for perfectly work reason. I mean – our real work. Thing is that our object and client are showing some strange nightly activity. And we cannot trace their relations during the day. But in other hand – they are running away somewhere during the night. So we are waiting: Ren – when it will be a time for lad to go out, Hone-Onna – for maiden. And I – for possible call from Fujibayashi.

Actually I suspect, that rent humbled into our apartments because of natural curiosity: he was at Home from the middle of the day. And we with Hone-Onna – yes, just came back from ‘Kanri’. And he is confirming my guess:

– And you, girls, are well settled here! – leaning to the wall tells he. – cosily...

– We like it ourselves, – answers Hone-Onna coquettishly and arranges cups: there is not too much time left – soon they will have to go.

Day... sixty third already

It is around 3AM already. I am sitting in empty flat and embroidering my future ‘ex-dress’ to kill a time. Initially I had to work as some kind of hub between elder friends, but now everything is quite. Though it is a strange situation: Hone-Onna at the moment cares of both of them. Our object, Isurugi Ayahi, with black mask ad baseball bite in hands, hides herself in the bushes by the small passage between cottages. The client, Yakagami Makoto – sits with enlightened optics binocular on the tree nearby. Looks like he is searching for her. I am thinking: what kind of boys we’ve got nowadays? To order a girl?.. Unlucky name – Makoto. Either that scoundrel from ‘School Days’ anime, either this one... By the way, speaking of hiding – I don’t know where Hone-Onna hid herself, but we know a lot of tricks.

From other hand, Ichimoku Ren is using this pause to check that girl’s room another time. It is not difficult for him: come close to the building and open an eye anywhere: on the wall, on the ceiling or even inside the desk drawer. I am still not officially engaged into this case – maybe it is not for good, don’t know. But anyway I am apathetical today somehow.

Communicator is tweeting. I am reading the message and transferring myself Home. Both of my elder friends appearing the same time. Ichimoku Ren is thoughtful.

– I don’t know. Girls, in the end – is it a good for me contract and band for you... or vice versa.

We are puzzled. Even Enma Ai, while sitting backwards to us – is interested. I see the reflection of Her eye in the mirror which She used to comb Her hair. An eye pointed to Ren. He sighs.

– All right. Respecting the majority I will tell you women treatment... although they would not switch places from that...

Nothing happened during the night. It seems that what for Ayahi goes out at night not happened either. But in the college I am waited by thoughtful Maria. It seems that with this contract we had switched roles: I am raging and casting lightning, and my friend one by one becoming thoughtful.

– you know, Jun, – says she when we getting into our favorite dead end near by the roof entrance. – I waked up at night. And have seen a strange scene. I don't know why, but it is also connected with Enma Ai...

Well, yes. Scenery is strange indeed for her. Maria does not aware of those facts that Ren uncovered.

– Et-to... – I am perplexed. Again - it is factitious and sincere. What to tell her? – And why do you think that it is linked with Enma Ai?

– You see... The feeling itself was the same as previous times. And the one who sat on the tree – sometimes touched his pocket... nervously. As was checking – is the thing there not disappeared? Jun, I am sure – the doll is there!

– Entertaining. So, somebody with the baseball bat was hunting somebody in bushes. And somebody another either was giving targeting for the first one, or in turn was hunting those with bat.

– Jun, I am nearly sure – it was a girl with the bat.

– All right. 'And someone else was either giving targeting information to her, or in turn was hunting her.' Still not quite distinct scenery.

It's a pity that I can't ask logical and classic question: 'And where it was happening?' The place is quite recognizable. It was mentioned in newspapers and on TV. And about our object – also. The difference is that humans does not know who is behind all of this, and in other details... Somebody constantly stomping on passersby. Seems, like they does not touch girls, but it was around five attacks on young men...

– And what we are going to do? – I am putting out the most neutral reply. – As I understand – the one with doll you did not sight at all...

By the way, it is quite fair. Our Makoto in this case – replaceable. And the object – no.

– Well... then we should try to find a girl. – It is easy to understand Maria's hesitation: the object was sighted by her also quite... unrecognizable. Plus mask. Kso, should I direct her to the place in the end? No, let's try to drag the conversation into psychology area. There also a lot of good hints there, but not so easy spottable.

– Sounds logical. And what a young lady does in the night with mask and baseball bat? Well, I understand – if she is a not super-karateka, then baseball bat is a great thing even for self-defence. But not in the bushes. Is she robbing there?

By the way - not.

– Probably... maybe she has a poor family...

– That's uncommon... usually people do such things on of poverty, but for more disgusting reasons, when they need money for something... also not purely legal. But all right. You think she is robbing. You would suggest a raid through the slum?

– Ano... – this perspective is frightening for Maria.

– No, if you will decide to do so indeed – I am definitely with you. It is safer together. But...

– I will think of it...

Oh, it would be better not to go to apato⁸⁷ districts. We would not find a girl. And I would risk uncovering myself: in case of attack I will cover Fujibayashi. But how much 'humanlike' I will be able to fight to do so? I am not sure... For my relief, Maria does not get any good ideas until the end of classes. Though we've got quite a nice sketch of Isurugi in sports suit, in cap mask and baseball bat. Like identikit picture. Well, if she is going to meditate on this sketch trying to imagine the true look of 'the girl with bat' – I have no objections. No soup, but comforting for Maria: like she is not sitting on her hands.

A work day passes like in fog. Continuation of yesterday scandal, even 'friends' are trying to make a tongue-lashing for me (however for them I copped out fully), then several fortunate small tasks... Well, small for me. So I returned their faith, but still. Dreary.

And again we are sitting in our apartments. Now – everything how it should be: I am making tea, Hone-Onna and Ren discussing something. Well, we even sitting here just for fun: the 'investigation' is closed for us, so my friend and katana demon did not go Home just for their leisure. Suddenly, my communicator rings.

– Jun! I have found! – Maria is so excited with her discovery that actually shouts into phone. Well, that's even better for me: her screams being heard by 'elders'. Ren wrinkles with dissatisfaction. Hone-Onna keeping calm.

– I found that place. It is ***!

– Oh. And what we would do then? – again I am asking this stupid question.

– We will go there! And will track down at least one of them!

It is pointless to decline. What a crazy house we will get there: Isurugi hunts down young men. Yakagami hunts down Isurugi. Fujibayashi hunts down Isurugi and Yakagami. And Ichimoku, Hone-Onna and Nohatsu – hunts down all three abovementioned.

– When?

– Forty minutes later at the bus stop near to the library – can we?

– U! Okiotskete!

– Okiotskete!

I am switching off communicator and looking on friends. 'And what we are going to do?'

– Well, we can as usually... – Ren hesitating

– Ano... Ichimoku-san, it seems to me that we should avoid such things. I have a feeling, that there is a reason, why Fujibayashi sees all this. And if she will get to the hospital – the development would slow down.

Hone-Onna smiles:

– And also you don't want anything bad happen to your friend.

I am looking on the floor. Well, yes, I do not want. There should be some more soft methods!

– Actually you are right. Isurugi attacks only young lads. Without evidence. So if you will be around – most likely she will just retreat for today.

– Mo! – hone-Onna raving. – I feel sorry for that girl, but the fact that she become mad is not a judgement of everlasting contract.

⁸⁷The word «apato» (again imported from English 'apartments') in Japan means the cheapest and poorly constructed housing. Slum indeed. Another mock over gajjins.

– Well, if you want to finish this as soon as possible, – Ren answers with unexpected harshness. – then show her to Fujibayashi.

Like a switch click. Indeed. Then Maria will jump on her, trying to understand why she is doing... what she is doing. She will describe her reasons. Loudly and in unparliamentarily language addressing to XY⁸⁸ chromosome pair bearers. This will be the last drop for the client. Oh, poor Maria. Now we are going to maim her, and then showing her such a story... But to my regret – Hone-Onna agrees.

A night. A dark alley between blank cottage yards walls half-concealed with bushes. I am with Maria, anxiously cling to each other, are walking down the road and carefully looking into dark interlacing branches. Naturally, we would not spot anything, but then Hone-Onna rises behind the object in the 'most naked' form. I.e. just as skeleton.

Maria is screeching. I also, to be honest, letting out some squeak, more because of surprise, of course. And then we spot Isurugi.

No, I am definitely proud with my friend. She pulled herself together, falling on her knees in front of the object, grasps her hands – everything in the blink of eye, in one move, indeed! That's a purpose!

– You!? What are you doing here? Why?! – still she is affected by Hone-Onna appearance: first her questions are quite puzzle-plated.

The object tries to get out from her and hisses quite expected:

– What of your business?!

– For what this bat? Do you understand, that you yourself – in danger? Why do you attacking people?

– People? – The object laughing out loudly. Now her madness is really visible. – You know, what they did to me?! You should have known that! All do know! All despising! Whom? Me! Because all males are vermin!

Bang! She disappears from Fujibayashi's hands. String has been pulled. Fujibayashi's startled looking into the place where a poor mad girl was a second ago.

– What's it?

– Maria. – I am answering as if I am also pulling myself together. – We failed again.

The shock is too big – too much happened and so quickly, so she just nods.

– Let's go to my place.

I am hugging her shoulders and pulling away with me. Somewhere leaves are rustling: the client gets down from the tree.

Day sixty fourth. Astronomically.

To the moment when we are arriving to our flat – Hone-Onna manages to leave 'the tracks of her presence' and 'supposing sleeping in her room'. Judging by the SMS message I've got in the bus, she figured out my intention somehow, 'on hot tracks', to turn this contract in Fujibayashi's perception...Well, at least to no harm to the Little Mistress.

I am feeding Maria with tea and looking how she is pulling herself together. That maiden hardened. There are tears in her eyes, but she is not crying aloud anymore.

– Jun. I understand that something... horrible happened to her. – she gulps. – But why she said: 'All despising'?

⁸⁸Chosomes has an X-shape. But in the last pair of male gametes one of them has 'leg cut' and more liky Y letter. So' XY-pair bearers' – males.

I am feeling extremely uncomfortable. This is a trashy mentality thing that appears nearly everywhere... for some reason people tend to forget, that a woman not always has a choice when to go home. And not always she is a tough karateka.

– And hatred to ‘males’... – Maria continues. Oh, at least I don’t have to explain to her anything: Maria reaching my laptop... and without any efforts finding a first article about criminal cases on that alley.

– ... And then she was taking a revenge of them. For all indiscriminately. – I am saying heavily. – Such a... fool and fruitless revenge. Although – would me or you in her place – who would give warranty?..

Maria, seemingly, got up to going into tears.

– But Enma Ai? – suddenly she asks a question, for which I am waiting for the whole evening. – She is also a girl!..

– Maria. – I cannot say Little Mistress name without gentle smile... but now it would be even useful if Maria will notice it. Bu the way, it is interesting: I can easily tell all these ‘so ka’ and even ‘she’ (although here I am tending for ‘She’ and ‘Her’, in capitals). But when it come to the name – no. Always smiling.

– Maria. Enma Ai does not have a right to punish or mercy. She is – revenge. Revenge of weak and bitter. Noble and cowards. Anybody. A weapon. But... she also was a human being some time ago. And killed poor Isurugi Ayahi quickly. Not torturing her. Unfortunately, she cannot do more.

– So des ka...⁸⁹ – Maria is turned inwards, but keeps listen to me.

– And also – I do not know what the Hell is looking like. But probably for Isurugi the place, where she is being ferried by Enma Ai will be even better: last month she already lived in hell. And there... ‘Your soul would wander in loneliness...’ – maybe, solitude would be better for her?..

– 一遍死んで見る？ – Maria whispers with sadness and pity. I am shrugging. Sometimes Little Mistress spells these words *exactly* like this.

⁸⁹So [des] ka (そうですか – sound «u» in confirming word ‘desu’ usually being reduced) actually could be translated as English ‘OK’: absolutely neutral confirmation of hearing what has been told, or accepting what was seen... Like ‘I’ve got it’, ‘so it is like this in the end’. All emotions here are expressed with intonation.



1Fujibayashi Maria (c) curlyhair

Episode 14. What an employee does not like to ride fast?

Day seventy second

– However surprising it would sound, but with the development of ‘intellectual’ Ethernet port, which normally can determine both speed and duplex, and even pairs distribution – cross-over cables are still actual. For example, when using corporate-level repeaters.

Today’s lecture is extremely boring. Not Likely I will have to crimp cables in full accordance with standards. Anyway, I still remember it: white-orange, orange, white-blue, green... All this is nonsense. Both straight and cross-over cables easier to buy at ship. And to punch down sockets and patch panels. Well then let Tenjin punch it down.

And I am so... Meditating. And drawing a sketch for Maria. We failed to find an interesting Karen in conservative outfit, so we have to stick to wheeze and enlarge her skirt. Ho, that Christian breed-up, my ass! But actually – all is good. Calm, I daresay. I do not know anything about new contracts (on the contrary, by my data, Hone-Onna beg her off from ‘Kanri’ – then something is creeping upon. Something, for which Little mistress decided to engage her). But only ‘creeping upon’, otherwise Maria would also be quite active. But no, she sits still and attentively takes notes.

Actually it happens, not frequently, but happens – when Little Mistress not completely sure in potential client feelings and does not respond immediately even for ‘competently executed query’. Usually it happens when clients are adults. Already skilful in hiding their emotions. And when the link between the client and the object is unclear. Interesting, why Hone-Onna? Her ‘crown’ objects of investigation – old men and young women. Also – girls beforehand, but now it is my ‘diocese’. So it is interesting: who now? Grandpa or, hm, josei?

A bell for lunch break rings. It is nice outside – sun is shining, warm... So we with Maria retiring under the tree in the park next to the college with bento⁹⁰. Actually, with triple load (college, ‘Kanri’, main job) because I sleep so a little – I am managing to have time for everything. Even to cook something in the morning, as exemplary girl should. Today, for example, it is yakinuki bento⁹¹. And when I was alive to get up two hours earlier than required – I would better kill myself, lol. More likely will oversleep, that this.

And Maria today is after shrimps. Also good thing. But why I am about food? Because however we tried to retire – we do not manage to eat at ease. In the beginning I am getting a call from work. Like I have to go to the client. To two clients at same time, well that’s as always. Some times even one Jun is more than enough, sometimes even two of them required. Then Tenjin runs up to us. With the same concept. Well – the let him go to one of them. Moreover there is a job exactly like something about punching down several patch panels. The other one is also seemingly nonsense. But I’ve got too little details. And between these I’ve got – there are CISCO routers. An absolutely fantastic thing, but there could be quite peculiar problems.

And to the end of it – a call from taxophone. Surprise! Who could it be? Ah, Wanyuudoo. Showing that I am sorry with my eyes to Maria and leaving aside.

⁹⁰Bento(弁当) – a traditional Japanese lunchbox. Rice, several types of salted veggies... Actually there could be and infinite number of variants. In restaurants they usually pu each ingredient in a special section in the box. Home-made bento usually is in one-section box, that gives girls an opportunity to make a nice and aesthetical design in arranging all of these.

⁹¹Nohatsu Jun definitely is a predator. Again she has stew geef. Now – in ginger sauce.

– Jun-chan, here is a task for you – quite in your style: there are four buildings. Two houses, two offices. Try to find out where two persons working and living there could see each other. I checked the roads, nothing. And you should try to figure out unexpected routes.

– Hai!

Of course, Wanyuudoo was a wheel. And he knows roads. But mostly – older ones. And evaluates it from the route point of view. Such things as cost of route (which could drop down paradoxically with some ‘hook’ because of minimising the number of tariff zones crossed with additional line change) – is his limit. And if it is a car roads – there are ‘season’ conjunctions! In the morning to one direction, in the evening – to opposite, during the day – in third. And it is already beyond his capabilities. As when alive I was driving to Sharjah during the day by simplest route, but used to get out from there nearly through Ajman. But without traffic problems. And he is still accustomed to lonesome roads, and even if speaking of junctions – anyway. When he was a wheel – they were freeing a way before him: he is carrying a princess! And when working for Little Mistress – all by foot. OK, I will estimate routes with the map during lection and will check traffic statistics from work, to make sure.

I am returning to Maria. She looks at me expectantly.

– That’s nothing. – answering her. – One grandpa whom I know asked for city routes consultation. I would not have leaved you if I knew what he wants now. That grandpa is quite... peculiar. Sometimes ask quite confidential questions.

– And who is he for you?

Giggles. And who is Wanyuudoo for me? I cannot put it out directly: ‘a colleague’. Though we have nearly family relations on our work. Or clan-like. So:

– I can say – a clan patriarch. It is a long and strange story. I will tell you sometime. But not now. Gome.

– it’s OK... That was mostly curiosity...

Wanyuudoo has not been mistaken. While I am waiting for the answer from our purchasing department (oh, I just knew – there would be surprises with CISCO. Now – we supplied it with USB modems, instead of COM ones. Which could not be plugged into AUX ports anyway) – I checked traffic stats. And it looks like if said persons using buses to go for work – probably indeed making a hook. And some part of their routes doing on the same bus. And if at least one of them driving a car – then there are up to five unexpected points, where they could meet. Will see Wanyuudoo tonight – will tell him. Interesting, what’s the heck there? But we have to survive until the evening.

By the way, the ‘Kanri’s client is fantastic. When I was listening the job description – I did not even realize that. And this is a branch office of ‘Shiseido’⁹²! And while I was running and spinning rounds, and even dried a keitai⁹³ battery for their sake – they presented me a lot of nice stuff... Oh, I feel, a half of these beautiful mascaras, shadows and shampoos will be requisitioned by Hone-Onna. I don’t mind if it is for her... But for some reason it is more difficult for me to give out with unexpectedly appeared riches, than with earned during normal work. Though logic is clear: earned once – will earn another tie. And a chance could be only once. Thu! How pragmatic I am!

⁹²Famous Japanese parfume company

⁹³Keitai (携帯) – «mobile phone». Diect translation - ‘Mobility’ and also sounds like English abbreviation: C.T. – cellular telephone.

Still I am exosted. Least of all I like such kinds of 'torren' jobs, when you half time just sitting and waiting. So, accomplished everything could be accomplished in such circumstances I am running back to our apartments.

As expected. I was the last to come. It is even confusing: Hone-Onna sits and entertains my friend. How Maria did not run away: it is not ethical, in the end! Still, I know that Hone-Onna can charm anybody in a blink of eye. In addition to that – Fujibayashi exactly a young maiden, josei. And here I tumbling in. With a bag of cosmetics.

What costumes, what you are speaking about! These two beautiful ladies attacked my bag with screams of hungry eagles! I had, in the end, to share it with both of them... But that was fun. I has been 're-painted' twice (and has been put into different outfit four times), Maria – three times. And Hone-Onna, as most experienced, immediately put her hands on the most fabulous shadows... And I completely stopped to be greedy: she is incredible beauty in the end!

And Maria constantly thinks about Little Mistress on the background. Seemingly an innocent girlish play: dressing up a freshly painted Jun-chan into furisode. Well, you already got it, correct? Fujibayashi gets association immediately.

– Sone-san, could you please tell me, – she approaches form the distance. – Are you interested in urban legends?

'Sone-san' – is a decent fox. Gets the moment. Now we can try to 'work out' Maria a little.

– Of course! Especially with modern ones. But it is mostly interesting to track down the changes in some very old legend. But most of them are sad usually.

– Do you know, why? – I am playing in her hands.

– Jun-chan, use your brains: what for are urban legends in the first instance? To tickle nerves. So these are mostly horrors or something very romantic.

– So you think it is all fantasy? – Maria asking.

– With respect to you, girls, I would say: If there are would bi yakabito⁹⁴ as in Jun-chan's favorite 'Sola' anime – it would be cool... But usually it is a fantasy. However there could be shards of truth.

– Well, and what about 'jigoku Tsushin'?

– A beautiful legend. Exactly horrible... and romantic at the same time.

I am silently enjoying the scenery. Two executives of this very legend are sitting and powdering... Well, naturally, powdering! Because at this moment we are painting Maria at the third time.

– Romantic? – Maria surprised.

– Don't twitch! – answers Hone-Onna rigidly. – Of course it is romantic. Look on Hell Girl's officers: a wheel, that was so faithful to the princess it failed to save from attack, that became a demon because of sore feeling of own weakness. Or katana, which realized that, does not want to kill women anymore...

⁹⁴Yakabito (夜禍) – «curs of the night» – for example, mentioned above Sihou Matsuri – are not disdtinguishable from human beings (all girls). As Western vampires – suffering from daylight and theoretically everlasting, having different capabilities (Matsuri, fo example, can truash everything with her toucj, not immediately, but quickly enough). In all other means – as humans. They coming out from human suffering, if you believe Matsuri's statement. From seriaes it is clear that a girl, died with a very sad death can turn into yakabito... if another yaka was around and decided to extend her being at least somehow.

She tactfully keeps silent of herself. Actually she is little overdoing it: in fact I have not told her, that Fujibayashi at least watched that anime thoroughly. Even while it is quite possible.

– Or an ‘inspector’ from Master of the Hell, who loved the inspected so much, that returned to Her even as wind-up toy... – oh, here she turned to the right direction. Actually I am sure – she initially planned such sequence.

– But Enma Ai... – Maria’s emotions are understandable. From one hand – it is difficult to argue with Hone-Onna’s statements. From other hand – breed-up. ‘Revenge is fruitless, killing is a sin’. – She is a murderer anyway!

– Have you ever thought – how much on free will is she? Don’t you think that to have to eternally see and realize fool human hatred for single burned down village (and not for fun!) – is little bit too much? – I am rushing into attack. – Have you ever wanted to take pity for Enma Ai?

Here Maria finally gets into trap. And I said that not mindfully, on the contrary to my elder friend. And outcome is not bad: from one side Christianity postulate eternal suffering or bliss in retribution to finite in time deeds. From another – pity and mercy. Including for sinners. And Little Mistress, in addition, frankly speaking, does not look like being happy. And She is charming on the contrary... astonishingly.

– And also, as I already told you: She tries to be as much justice and mercy... as She could within Her constraints. Remember Yuzuki, for example! – I am hitting a final blow.

Maria is stunned. No, she is a clever girl indeed. But... how to figure it right... Indoctrinated. Yes. It is very difficult for her to have a look on things looking like obvious from other side. It is not teenage maximalism... But neither Gardner, nor Byron, nor (I am sorry for putting them in a row, but it is indeed an exemplary case of extraordinary treatment of seemingly obvious things) Vasilieva she would not become. At least now. It is us on the contrary: all other team – are native Japanese, saturated with the idea of unity and interpenetration of Good and Evil. And I... who with enthusiasm used to read abovementioned Byron, Bulgakov and Vasilieva.

– Oh... Jun-chan... – Maria is all thoughts. And in the same time looking at me as on some winder from overseas. Indeed, from overseas I am. Don’t know how much of wonder. – You just expanded a full Enma Ai apology for me. Why you always helping me then, if you like her so much?

– Well... I really like Enma Ai. – I am answering without slightest prevarication. – But this is exactly the reason why I am with you. I also like you. And I want you to understand her better. And I also don’t like what Enma Ai... does. And while helping you – I am always thinking: if we could help also to her in the end?

Well, here I balanced on the edge of lie... As minimum, when omitted words ‘some times’ after ‘does’. But said the truth as the whole: I do want her to understand. And the fact the Enma Ai has to do this work – is not a joy for me.

– All right, ladies. That’s enough of discussing urban legends as something existing in reality! – states Hone-Onna. – Even if it actually exists.

That’s right. We ‘burdened’ Maria on full scale for today. And it is already late.

After transferring back Home, we immediately start to exchange data. As we see, I figured out correctly: Wanyuudoo looking after a grandma (who progressive she is! Although she probably heard gossips about ‘Jigoku Tshuin’ when she was young and it was a black space in advertisement section of newspapers⁹⁵, and

⁹⁵Reference to data from the first season of anime about Little Mistress

then, when she needed it – was not able to find it in press and has begun to look through the Internet...) Cutting to the point, that grandma ordered a young woman. A woman is quite successful, but, frankly speaking – not too much to suspect an element of trivial envy to moneybag or pop-star here. She wasn't in newspapers or on TV. And as human being... it is possible to respect her, but to envy – just a little. Just such a purposeful business woman (and self-made woman) on the beginning of her career.

But, as I found out – she actually was able to see each other. And Hone-Onna even exacerbates: it turns out that this girl not only in sense of purpose will give hundred points of stoke. She is also a passionate car enthusiast. Got a license being 18 years old and from now on... well, not driving, indeed. Racing.

– Oh-ho... – sighs Wanyuudoo. – Here could be everything, just not enough slowed down before a puddle and sloshed our client... And then it rolled-rolled...

– Yep. – Hone-Onna agrees. – «What a youngsters we've got...» and all this kind of stuff.

– The grass was wettest, and water greener... – I am blubbing not very clearly. Anyway, my sequence has been tracked: 'we in our time respected the elders, and this bimbo is racing here'. And I am continuing: – But is it indeed for such nonsense?..

– You, Jun-chan, never has been indeed old. – absolutely correctly points Wanyuudoo. Still even he is not very happy with such perspective, it seems. – All right. Let's dig a little more. Maybe there is something more serious. At least now we know where to look...

And we close the meeting.

Day seventy third

And not longer than half-day later, when I am going from college to 'Kanri' – Hone-Onna calls me. And tells:

– You can be in peace, Jun-chan. It is serious indeed. I told them, that we are will go in business meeting. So return back Home.

– Hai.

I am coming out from the bus, turning by the corner and disappearing.

There is another meeting at Home.

– First of all, Kawasumi-san (it is our grandma) got a contract offer from Little Mistress. – Of course, it is Wanyuudoo who opens the meeting. – Because we found out: few years ago Saitou Midori knocked down a child in front of her and fled from the place of accident. By the term of prescription the case is already closed, and Kawasumi-san only a while ago and also accidentally met the name of real culprit. And even managed to find out her name.

Hone-Onna continues:

– Secondly, when Little Mistress finally decided to appear to Kawasumi-san and asked her – why she wants to avenge her so dearly – she answered: 'All of my life I am living not to here, not to there. And now I will die soon. So I will do a right deed at last. And will also know – what to expect beyond the border'. After that she got me and immediately pulled the string.

Both of them are looking at me. I am puzzled. Well, I am grateful for them: I will be able to find some details of this case in 'open sources'. To cast a right light on it for Fujibayashi. We can assume that she have not seen this contract just because it was not proposed. And now everything is finished, so she is not rushing to call me and ask for help, but probably will like to talk the matter with me later. But what do they want from me?..

– Jun... – May I tell Wanyuudoo how you felt that evening after work? – seeing my puzzlement, Hone-Onna tries to direct me. Still I don't understand.

– I was swearing. – I am admitting in embarrassment.

– And how you had sworn? – hints me my elder friend.

– But Wanyuudoo already knows that I am not native Japanese! Indeed, when alive I was kind of soup of Russians, Jews, Germans, Tatars, and... full cosmopolite in the end.

– Had you a driving license? – asking Wanyuudoo.

Hurray! I am changing my name. Now I am not Jun, but Anna. Anna the Giraffe⁹⁶. But I have not expected that my colleagues so familiar with Russian classic literature⁹⁷. I am looking on them with respect and nodding in agreement.

– Can I have «Nissan 370-Z»? Always wanted to understand – what is so attractive in sport cars?..

Interesting, why 'Nissan'? Ah, well, yes. We are in Japan. Would we be in Europe – I would think of some 'Porsche'... or 'Ferrari'.

– Easily, – Wanyuudoo is laughing. – For our Jun-chan – even 'Lamborghini'.

A night. A street. Rare lights merging into continuous belt. As one Russian rock band used to sing: 'Fingers will grasp the grip. Revs up to the full top. And road dotted line will merge into the solid line...' ⁹⁸. The engine roars, and louder than the engine – 'Jigoku Death Metal' in the audio system. How cynical: not only for Russian ear this composition is funny 'hell death metal', nearly 'much of muchness', but also it is a composition for third anime season... about us. But that's kind of fun, actually. It is quite stylish inside, nice dashboard softly glowing... And to race on the nice road – such a pleasant stress. Attention and feel of power. But looks like I still would prefer to drive through the rough terrain. Or just moderately-fast and relaxed drive the highway, enjoying the outside and meditating.

Anyway – here is the object seen on the horizon... And I am nearly failing the whole 'act', automatically turning my car from the accident. But in result – realizing the plot with additional cynics, acting as in famous joke: 'white man is a bad hunter'⁹⁹. Knocking down the object with open door. Screaming tires, making into turn and disappearing.

Saitou lies on the road and swears to my back:

– Where are you going? Are you looking in the end?!

Hone-Onna bends to her.

– And you? Have you looked?

– When that?! – Midori makes a surprised and rebelling face, but we can see – she got the hint.

⁹⁶ A character from USSR 'Cheburashka' cartoon. Jun refers to Russian saying: 'Gets the idea slowly as giraffe'.

⁹⁷ The 'Dead Souls' poem by Russian writer Nikolai Gogol begins with words: 'What a Russian does not like to ride fast?'

⁹⁸ A line from 'Don't fly away' song by 'Voazvrashenie' ('The Returning') band.

⁹⁹ A chukcha comes to a big city to his Russian friend, how drives the Mercedes car.

Chukcha points on the star in front of car and asks him:

- What's it?

- It's an aim.

They drive, and suddenly a pedestrian jumps on the road. Driver to the left – and pedestrian to the left. Driver to the right – and pedestrian to the right. At last they nearly managed to avoid accident... But then chukcha opens the door and knocks the pedestrian down.

- A white man – is bad hunter. If chukcha would not open the door – you would miss!

- That’s what she said, Mistress.
- Enma Ai appears in front of us. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.
- O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...
- ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...
- 一遍死んで見る？

Episode 15. Words that more powerful than deeds

Day seventy fourth

– Sumimasen. We did fetched routers for you in exact packing list as you ordered. The IOS version was not mentioned there. And if your contractor does not want to give us an image of required system – let him install it himself. Give me a binary file – I will install it for you. They are not providing it to us – then they should do it themselves. Gomenasai, but I am not a walking repository of Oses to have all and every version!

Kso! I hate to do such a scandal. But ‘Shiseido’ got me to the edge. They are hiring two contractors, does not allow us to communicate directly, but keep calling every half-hour with next and next problems. I warned them: ‘I am a student! I am at college in the morning!’ No, they calling anyway. So I am sitting on the stairway, skipping a lecture, smoking and arguing with them.

– And in the end, if your contractor from Florida does not like to upload the system through dial-up line, which is quite logical, let them put it on any of their http servers and download to router through the Internet. Yesterday I configured these routers for basic Internet access. And I am actually really puzzled, that this option, which is mentioned even on CISCO site so many times, does not comes to their minds. Gomenasai. I understand your wish to do all of it quickly. And I am ready to help you as much as I can. Give me binaries – I will upload it. Even during class time, if it is so necessary.

Uf-f-f! Looks like that I puzzled them in sequence, at last. Few calm hours for me. Giggles, it would be funny: they are retelling the scandal I made with them to these pindos¹⁰⁰ idiots and they are ordering me. Well, I hope the Little Mistress will decline the order in such case – something likewise happened to Ren at some point¹⁰¹. But the whole idea...

A bell rings. So I indeed skipped the lecture. But there is no rest for me. I am found by Maria. Oh I should be careful not to plump something – I am still stung and don’t have too much control over myself. But Fujibayashi is a tactful girl. She assesses a pile of cigarette thubs in the can next to me and just hands me over a comb. Oh, yes. To comb yourself, to have a look into the mirror – one of the best tranquilizers. I am stating it in full authority, as a professional Nohatsu Jun.

All right. I caressed my head with a nice hair brush, drew my lips (exactly for calming down, all was right there actually), now I can listen to Maria.

– Jun... – Fujibayashi tells hesitantly, as she is not sure about what she is going to say, – How would you get it: ‘And will also know – what to expect beyond the border’. The Hell is to expect. And she is calm, even happy...

– So you’ve seen Enma Ai yesterday again? – I am showing remarkable ingenuity,

¹⁰⁰Slang name of Americans. It is unclear from where it derives, but it is quite popular between Slavic nations.

¹⁰¹Reference to the third season of anime about Little Mistress.

– U! She gave a doll to some elder woman. And the woman with these words immediately pulled the string. How comes?!

– You know... – I am pulling the words thoughtfully. – that gradpa, who called me that other day. Told me once upon a time: ‘You, Jun-chan, never has been indeed old’. Probably to the end of the life people feel very different. The know that not too much left. And trying to reach or accomplish something. And from other side – the do not know – when. And this uncertainty: ‘soon, but unknown’ – could be so ugly obscurity... that any uncertainty becomes disgusting. Maybe that grandma felt that all the same, just to know at last...

Maria nods. My arguments are generally clear for her. But exactly ‘generally’, on rational level. So I am continuing:

– But... you and I are indeed quite a girls still. Can you imagine yourself as grandma? I feel – I will live forever. And there is a lot of time, and a lot of things could be changed, if something will go wrong. And she – hurrying to do at least something more. Something, which she would not regret later.

– How can you say such things! – Maria gasping. – ‘something that she would not regret later’ – of murder?!

– And do you know whom she murdered? Have you seen even in anime a lot of cases when someone pulls the string immediately after receiving a doll? The she was sure she doing a right thing. Maybe there a killer was. For whom there is no chance to bring a justice through police? When a person is only emotion-driven, the announcement of contract ‘price’ is enough to stop. To make them think a little. I think, that Enma Ai announces this condition not only of nicety. And this grandma already decided everything for herself.

Fujibayashi is silent. A strange concept she has been told. A strange, but logical. And it is impossible to check it with feelings. At least – to check it immediately. Though this is what I need: the more Maria thinks – then sooner she would stop to be an obstacle. And maybe even will decide something... for what I hinted yesterday.

Nothing interesting at work today. Well, I’ve got binaries. Threw it into routers. Got another two shampoos and one hair conditioner. Then explained something by phone to another client. And left home. I.e. to our apartments. Because there are few days left before festival, and our costumes... Well not like ‘on ice’, but far from completion.

We are sitting with Maria. She is better in sewing than me, so she using a simpler machine and actually sewing. And I, as technically literate damsel – am programming more advanced one: to embroider our dress. Because my recent experiment of hand-made embroider... I save it for memories, but would not show to anyone. To not to be ashamed.

Hone-Onna and Ichimoku Ren are frigging around, which actually does not help for work atmosphere. But they are elders, and we cannot do in my room – not enough space. Though Hone-Onna sometimes is giving good advises. And Ren is just scoffing. He is looking on monstrous necklines and other cutaways because of which I cannot even call my costume a dress, and offers self-defence lessons. Actually I would happily accept such lessons from him – he was katana in the end. But not when it is offered in such words. Suddenly he cut his scoffs of and went out for some business.

It means for Maria – suddenly. We, with Bone Lady also felt: Little Mistress knows that some will ask for a contract today. And she needs Ren to investigate the matter. What a day today! Just when I am beginning to hope to have some rest – again troubles and affairs are coming. It is good that my friend is not so

sensitive (yet?) and about tomorrow contract she will begin to perch me only tomorrow. Even while I am wondering – what's up now?

But actually I am tired. Everything falls out from my hands. Though I cannot say that I am incapable to do anything. I am just doing everything with such reluctance. When I was alive – that meant 'it is time to go on leave'. But what leave I can get now? Although... that particular festival – also would be kind of leave. If they would not start to 'saw out' each other. But I am not sure. The last season about us was aired around two years ago, and it was not in top charts. So not likely it was remembered by a lot of people... strongly enough to try it in real life.

Maria is kind of 'boiled' too. But it is more understandable in her case. She sees a lot... And we with Hone-Onna burdening her constantly. And all this while she is of exact age how she looks. We should cheer her up somehow.

– Sone-san, – I am asking, – And what about you? Had you been fancy in some handiwork?

Actually it is more like I want to cheer up myself. In a very childish manner. I know what she can do best of all. And extremely fond of it. Hone-Onna not showing that she sees through my small trick (or maybe indeed she not see it). She smiles to both of us and takes already used molds.

Scissors flashing in her hands, then tracing paper being bent, fold... Quickly, gracefully... And now – she puts to her mouth and blows a beautiful paper ball. Sugoi! It is so nice! I am leaving sewing machine aside and taking it into my hands. Light, nearly weightless. And while Hone-Onna probably still associates quite a sad memories with such balls... but they are so fun and joyful! And I hope that my joy will strike out these memories. I am trying to get away, of course. In the first instance I wanted to ask her just because I like these balls myself. So... egoistic.

But my mood indeed gets much better and I am even starting to murmur something when returning to programming. And stopping, realizing a dead silence around. Both Maria and Hone-Onna are stunned.

I am raising my eyes and see: both my friends are looking on with kind of surprise. I am confusing unwittingly and blushing.

– Ano... what's happened?

– Jun-chan, I've never heard you singing. Beautiful. – Hone-Onna's compliment is touching, but I bet: she stunned with something else. She just letting Maria to say her words. Because it is not good to cut off elders.

– U!¹⁰² You speak with a very different voice. – she agrees. – and when you singing – you are like Noto Mamiko.

I am running cold. And, seems to me, starting to guess, what stunned Hone-Onna. Exactly:

– And have you realized, what are you singing?.. – she asking.

Now I am totally embarrassed. I was singing 'Ichinuke' – an ending for the third season. Originally being sang by Noto Mamiko. Who is, in turn – a voice actress for Little mistress. Actually, they hit the bull's eye: the voice of real Enma Ai is very alike to hers. Even little bit more soft, if it is possible.

– Well... I felt somehow for that... After yesterday discussion... – I am offering excuses.

Actually, I am surprised not less than them. And not only because it is a hint for uncovering of ourselves. But with another thing. It is not the first time, indeed, when I am singing something – after I became what I am now. And I can bet the bottom dollar on it: I had not have Noto Mamiko's voice. Which means – for some reason either my own link connection with Little Mistress grew stronger... Or even I am becoming

¹⁰²Japanese analog of common language 'yes' or 'yup'. Simple short U. Sometimes they spell it double: 'U! U!'

more like to her. Well, all this is great: fantastic voice and I love Enma Ai dearly. But, Hell the Great, what all this means?

Hone-Onna is glad with the effect and switches from... sarcasm to mercy:

– Sing more, please. ‘Aizome’, for example... If you are so hooked to it.

I am returning to programming and one minute later starting to sing. There is a small mirror on the sewing machine side – you can turn it and cast some light on required area. But now it should reflect my eye. Instead of that I see Enma Ai’s lips soundlessly singing duet with me. What all of this means?!

At Home Ichimoku Ren meet us.

– Ah, girls be prepared! The story would be fantastic indeed. Will not tell you anything, not to spoil. Just will tell you the name of the client: Suwabe Kyoske.

Interesting indeed. Very rich family – Suwabe. And lately – the whole row of scandals in press. And because a long time ago I used to work in the publishing house myself (although not as journalist), can say for sure: these articles is a pure ‘jeans’, but seemingly indeed based on real facts. Although everybody has some skeletons in wardrobe, and rich families – for sure. And who had most advantage from these articles is also understandable. And so – who paid for these. Old competitors, Kawahara. And whom of them the younger Suwabe ordered? There is something... unusual, if Ichimoku Ren is so obscuring... No, I will rack my brains on this issue. But not too much: if I will guess and spoil the pleasure for myself?

I am leaving to the House. Even grandma’s lights out. Little Mistress sits in shadow, plays Her glass balls. One of them is rolling to me. I am picking it up, coming to Enma Ai. Sitting on the knees in front of Her, and putting the ball aside. Hell Girl looks on it.

– Something is changing. – tell She. The rising Her eyes on me and, out of place: – Your singing is good.

I never seen with my own eyes Her being smiling. And even now her face is the same blank as usual. But I can swear – somewhere there, in the very bottom of Her heart – there is a warm and little bit sad smile.

Day seventy fifth

And from the morning – the regular spin. And Maria, who have seen a new contract offer. Looks wary. Initially I did not got – why?

– Jun-chan. I’ve seen it again. And wanted to discuss. But first of all I have to ask one thing.

– Yes?

– Than young man at your home yesterday – who is he?

Got it. Kso! Her contact with Little Mistress also grows stronger: our ability to put different things in people minds ceasing to work on her. Generally, when we accidentally meet someone whom we’ve met during some investigation – we are not recognized. We all seeming to people what we want to seem. Far relatives, another brunch office employees... And Maria seen in the night how Ichimoku Ren turns into the straw doll. And either she feels that our yesterday guest looks like him (of course!), or even sure that it was him indeed. The later means that someone of us three is under surveillance. Still I am not hesitating with answer:

– Sone-san’s mate. She tells – from other work... - Ah, what a nice word I found: ‘other’. Maria will get it as ‘previous’. In fact – ‘other’ indeed, not in ‘Kanri’ but for Little Mistress.

– I don’t know him too much. But he seems to be quite a nice guy. But why are you asking?

Now we will check confidentiality level between us. If Maria will tell ‘it seems to me’ – then either indeed it seems to her, or the level is not high. But if she would say ‘I’ve seen him’ – then she is sure. And trusts me.

– Enma Ai offered another contract in the night. And a young man turned into doll. It seems to me – he was looking like your yesterday guest...

Check has failed. Hurts.

– Well, I even don't know...

A queue of quite disconnected thoughts, like an instant spark: try to pull out? No need and I don't want to. But I am surprised. Quite sincerely. I should say like this. If she would answer – good, if not – then not.

– Stop! But if it was him, it means...

I am rounding my eyes and covering mouth with palm. Also sincerely, but for different reason, than Maria thinks. And maybe not thinks – something is changing indeed, Little Mistress is right as usual. And Fujibayashi is changing too.

– I am afraid, that indeed. If I was not mistaken, then someone of us is under Enma Ai's survivalence. Either Sone-san, or you, or me. And most likely – you and me.

Uf! First of all – it is good. She trusts me indeed. Secondly – I am a fool. Blooming. We've seen Little Mistress twice. Both of us. Definitely we should be under survivalence. It would be foolish to expect, that we have seen Her, and She – did not! I am pulling myself together.

– Oh-ho-ho... So in his presence – silence! But it actually scares me... that you recognized him.

– Me too...

– So we should get to understand all happening as soon as possible. We should think, Maria. Think hard.

By the way, it is a very positive idea. As more Fujibayashi would think about happening as a whole – the less obstacles for work. And even profit – if she will indeed understand something. Meanwhile she is returning to the contract. Well, that's not a problem. I already know what I would suggest her. And she would not be able to do anything more: rich families is such a thing... unreachable.

– Yes, Jun. We should think. But nevertheless... - she cuts, like it is clear without words.

Yup. Clear. Nodding.

– It was the young Suwabe.

– Wow! Listen, I do not understand – they are moneybags. If he would need to kill somebody – they have enough money for killer!

– But not the younger heir... – reasonably arguing Maria.

– Well... I don't know. But if it is connected with those scandals – they anyway plotting against Kawahara.

– And he does not want a slightest suspicion? Avenging father.

– Agree. It is reasonable. But how to get to him?

– This is what I was going to discuss with you.

Luckily, when alive, I used to have a lot of contacts with bodyguards, 'specialists for security and assault', and all this kind of people. So I successfully defeating to dust all Maria's ideas, suggesting several other, defeating them too... And to the end of last pair the only thing we consider possible is to send this young lad a message in a very weasel words. A regular stranger cannot do more, indeed... I even helped her to select wordings.

Evening. Editorial office. Journalist Ichinose, famous for his implacable war with corruption, speaks over the phone:

– Yes. Sure. From one end this line is safe from overhearing. You are speaking from a taxophone; probability of overhearing is also low. What would you like to tell me? Question? If you please... Yes? Of course not. Nothing personal. If Suwabe would approach me – I would write about Kawahara. Ah, stop it.

Truth is a loose concept. Especially when it is paid. Ethical? Corruption is not ethical, that's it. It is all the same for me! Stop it at last. If you have a deal – let's switch to it... What? What does it mean 'not let you to ruin anybody else'?

Phone falls from his hands. Enma Ai stays in front of him. As always – in black kimono, decorated with slowly moving flowers.

- O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...
- One moment, young lady. What are you doing here?
- ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...
- Assuming that it is correct. But what's of your business?
- 一遍死んで見る？

I am sitting at home and listening Ichimoku Ren's tale.

– And, I have to say, even while this journalist is a scoundrel, but fool. Or professional of top mark. He did not realize even in the end, what's happening. Or was hiding it very nicely. Even in the boat he was calm and tried to unfold some perspectives for Mistress, like if she would need to write something – just let him know, and he is actually a busy man and cannot spend time idly touring with silent mate.

While Enma Ai sits nearby – he tactfully omits a regular within our team intonation 'Little'. Between ourselves we are allowing ourselves such liberty. But in Her presence – no way. Especially because said in face – it could offend Her. And between us – it is a mark of love and care.

– In the end he showed that he realized that it is not a joke only when She said: 'This revenge will ferry your soul to Hell'.

I am applauding. Not for journalist, of course. The journalist, how sad it would not be – does the same work as we are at the same level: somebody orders, he – 'saws out'. Not paying attention to ethical side of the order. But there is a difference: we are sawing out silently. As far as it possible – not hurting the object surrounding. I would say – it is a difference between bombast and sniper. Still not very great. But I knew for what I am subscribing. And not for this work, in my case. Because he indeed works from love to this business. And we... for different reasons. We are not working, but better to say – working off.

I am applauding for young Suwabe. A shout-out between families – is business of elders. And they will settle this deal somehow sooner or later. And such journalists, the very existence of them – is a shame for press and sorrow for people. This lad avenged correctly. To whom it was really required to.



6Hone-Onna, Ichimoku Ren, Enma Ai, Yamawaro, Kikuri

Episode 16. Festival is not only a lot of meetings...

Day seventy seventh

– Oi, Maria, have look! Wow!..

We with Maria riding the ‘Sinkashen’¹⁰³ to Tokyo. I am really overjoyed with scenery I see through the window: here are mountains, here are forests, here are rice fields and farms. That’s funny even for me: I am behaving like a pure provincial. Although from us two – it is I who was in dozens of countries and half-dozen of climates. On the contrary, Maria never left Kochi. Although did not always lived in our city.

Looks like the same idea comes to her mind: Maria giggles.

– Yes, – I am stating proudly. – I am – gaijin. Wi-i-i-ild! But cute.

I am giggling too. Although Maria would not recognize the quote. Well, that’s Ok.

How great! We are going to the festival, beautiful scenery around... And the last contract caused nearly no troubles for me: while Maria did see from the side of client – i.e. a talk from taxophone, but understood everything herself. And seemingly even agreed with the young Suwabe unequivocal decision. Because she is a clever girl – she figured out herself, who was sent to Hell. And later she found an unequivocal confirmation in the newspapers. Unequivocal for those who know, of course. And having agreed – told everything to me, but without any specific horrors and tears. Also I have a feeling, that something in this story hooked her deeply. I mean that she also has some stone in the bosom for journalists. Not surprising in our world. But still interesting: why?

¹⁰³ «Sinkashen» (新幹線) – «New Main Line» – a system of highspeed railroads in Japan.

And I see a trolley passing by. With snacks and other goodies. Oh! Yumeshu¹⁰⁴! Final. Hold me seven people, six ones would not hold! Maria looks with disapproval, but keeping silent. She is right. Even with discount to my current state – to drain one or two hundreds grams of plum wine I can afford without any special consequences. And I want to drain – I like this stuff. Since these times.

While we are approaching Tokyo the train fills with people. They are all different, but here and there I see groups of teenagers and youngsters, which somehow differ from general public. Surely they are going for the same event. Sugoi! Girls are really nya-girls¹⁰⁵! And there are some nice lads also... I am strating to think about perspective to make a quick romance with some bishounen. I should fit to the image, in the end! And it is really interesting for me: how I will feel it myself? Looks like, OK, quite positive. At least it is quite pleasant for me to look onto beautiful boys. And then – a good beginning is half the battle.

Speaking of 'beginning'. We should begin with finding our hotel. Sure thing, not only we will go there. But for the registered non-residents there are several hotels booked. And just simply 'sitting on tail' of some group we are risking to arrive in the wrong one. That's funny. Some stereotypes I had in life are still here. I don't like to ask the way. Better try to find myself, but to speak to somebody – I am confused. Actually, it is even for good now: most of girls are with boyfriends. And to approach first to men... Nope.

Anyway, I am quite good with maps, so we with Maria dumped our stuff to rooms and after a quick shower, are going for the 'first spin' around festival. Today everything is just starting, it is a day of non-residents arrival, so we are strolling 'in civil': the main crazy house will begin tomorrow. Oh, mama mia! If today it is not started – then what awaits for us later?!

This is we came into the firs pavilion. And was immediately deafened, blinded and crushed. After somehow pulling myself together I understand, why. Because Nohatsu plus Fujibayashi equals fool, two items. Half of the space in the first pavilion is designated for merchandising disks, costumes, figurines and other goodies for never dying infinite titles like 'Bleach'¹⁰⁶, and half – to most popular boys' anime series of last year. Definitely, all male population of the festival rushed there immediately on arrival – to catch, to grab...

Somehow we are managing to get out and moving to another pavilion. It is also crowded here and not less bright, but less noisy. And brightness not from lasers and stroboscopes, but from colourful coats, blouses, skirts and all other dresses. That's it. Rooting here. Pavilion of shoujo and josei – that's for me. By the way, Maria is quite neutral to these genres. But I am starting to purposely move from stand to stand: first of all I want a big poster with Nana and Hachi. Secondly – a premium edition of 'Itazura na Kiss'. Thirdly – again premium edition of 'Maria-sama ga mitteru'. And everything else what I will spot interesting.

With that I am also studying otaku girls. Sur thing – there are nearly no singles. Either groups or pairs. It is quite natural for girls. But one of my girl-friends when I was alive used to say, that in certain age it is very

¹⁰⁴Yumeshu (梅酒) – plum wine.

¹⁰⁵Nohatsu Jun several times admitted, that was a fan of anime even before arriving in Japan, so she als knows related slang. Nya-girls is a composite of onomatopoeia 'nya' (cat's meow) and word girls. In Japan the word 'nya' (especially when said by girl or maiden) is really usually means something cute and nice.

¹⁰⁶Bleach (ブリーチ) – is indeed endless series of anime and manga about the same unednig war with conditionally evil conditionally spirits with hitting them with katanas and other cold weapons. To the end of 2009 anime had around 300 episodes and no confidence that it is finished.

usual to like shounen-ai and yaoi, but shoujo-ai and yuri¹⁰⁷ is not popular. Don't know, don't know. I see a lot of yuri-suspicious pairs.

We are continuing to walk around. It is noisy and joyful around. And we also are in very light mood... Bang! We are stunned: Little Mistress looks on us. 'But why here' – I am thinking in astonishment. And then beginning to laugh.

It is a stand devoted to 'Jigoku Shoujo' anime! Maria joins me. By the way – there is a mixed group not far away from the stand. Several guys, several girls. Quite nice people, on the first glance. Then, one of them pays attention to us. I would imagine, our faces are bearing... remarkable emotions. She approaches us and makes an acquaintance easily:

– Hi! I am – Kamiya Akie.

– Good afternoon, – we are answering. We are no more hysterical, but we still out of place, so we are not picking up the talk style.

– I am – Nohatsu Jun.

– I am – Fujibayashi Maria. Pleased to meet you.

– Oh, girls, why so official. It's a festival! – Kamiya smiles. – And this is my friends from 'Kanan'¹⁰⁸ internet forum.

We are bowing with smiles. I am silently stunned inside myself. A cool name for internet forum, I would daresay. Actually a name as name. But given my present – quite a fun opposition. Given my past – even more funny. And her name is a failure. In lights of story in the third season¹⁰⁹.

– And can I ask you, why you were laughing so loudly? – she continues. Well, indeed, most probably our laughter drew her attention.

– Well, you see... – I am answering. – Initially we were frightened (pointing to the poster) and then laughed on ourselves.

– Is she is so frightening? – Kamiya surprised.

Fujibayashi – brains. She understands, that we could not tell our experiences to the first stranger, so he answers evasively:

– Well... So huge eyes! And fearsome. Red... and the whole series... horror.

– O-o! – her respect to us visibly grows. – So you've seen it?

– As another word! – my answer is not linguistically correct, but figurative. – As got used to it.

I am making hard unperinscrutable face. Kamiya smiles intricately to something. To some her thoughts. And tells absolutely different:

– Let's go, I will introduce you with others.

A friend of Akie-chan, named just Rin-chan (I suppose that it is her nickname, but it does not matter) – appears to be a forum moderator. I cure bishounen whom I noticed from the very beginning – has an

¹⁰⁷Genres of gay romance in anime and manga. Shounen-ai (青年愛) – is close relations between boys, «yaoi» – pure gay love; shoujo-ai (少女愛), correspondingly between girls, and «yuri» – pure lesbian love.

¹⁰⁸Why Nohatsu Jun is so stunned we will leave for readers' guess. For those who would like to ask for hint: looks like this word is also imported.

¹⁰⁹Ночью Дзюн ссылается на третий сезон сериалов про Маленькую Госпожу, где у главной протагонистки Юзуки была ближайшая подруга по имени Акиэ... в результате ставшая объектом контракта.

anecdotic for Japanese ear name Keshishiro¹¹⁰. It is more than strange to give to boy a flower name. And also he shares the same last name with me. So, I suspect, it is also a nickname. I don't remember others, but as more I listen, then more I am sure – the only real name was mentioned is Akia-chan's. Does not matter indeed. During my life I was mentioned by passport name only in payment list myself.

Although we are a little confused in the beginning – but it is really more fun in company. And existence of boys around allows us to move in more comfort: as well-mannered maids we are walking a step behind them... allowing boys to show up their masculine capabilities in role of... crowd-breakers. The only disadvantage here is...

– Mo!! Atsuta¹¹¹-kun! Wait a little! The poster with Senjogahara¹¹² would not run from you! And I can't decide here...

This is a disadvantage I meant. Our crowd-breakers break through crowd in that direction and speed that they like. As result – we have every minute ask them to stop or go with us to not very interesting for them stand. From other hand – we are involved in an interesting conversation of four: Maria, Akie-chan, Keshishiro-kun and myself. Obviously we started from 'Jigoku Shoujo', where all of us happened to have opposite opinions.

As it is very well known, Maria believes, that it is all horrible, and if it is impossible to stop Enma Ai, then we should stop clients. Akie-chan puts no arguments, also does not has any moral-ethical position. All her statements are evidence that she is a fan of Little Mistress jus basing on aesthetics, and what She does – she does not care. Keshishiro-kun is actually missing probable intents of Master of the Hell with Enma Ai's and thinks, that all meaning in cynical devise 'More souls for Hell!' – quite a usual concept. I already told – I've seen it even when I was alive... Well, my opinion is also well known, and in this conversation I am stating it quite cautiously. Not only because of Maria, but also – there are people around. Some time later we are moving out from this problematic subject and switching to other anime...

In the end, when, exhausted with travel and walk through pavilions, and also with a load of purchased, dropping down at restaurant in the evening – we are sitting all four. Plus Rin the fifth. And we are very happy that table is round. Because I have a feeling – we would not be able to sit on sympathy principle – one in front of another: during dinner Rin mainly speaks with Maria, Akie-chan also with her (and silently bickering from that between them two), and Maria herself is seemingly like to talk to Keshishiro-kun.

The only good thing here – is Keshishiro-kun himself. Very intelligent and gentleman. While he is studying to be either historian, or linguist – still we found out a lot of common subjects. And it looks like he is also not bored with me. Although I am worrying for Maria: he is so into the conversation with me, that does not react to her timid attempts to get out from 'pressure' of two girls in a time.

And then we founding out that them not only not native Tokyo citizens as we are, but also living in the same hotel. Which immediately leads us to concept: to drop all goods into rooms and to go to continue enjoy ourselves... Ah, yumeshu!..

Everything continues in the bar, but begins to take really frightening forms. We quickly switching to absolutely informal addressing... And as I was able to trace – initiatives was again in the same directions as

¹¹⁰Rin (倫) – japanses pronouncation of Chinese male name Lun; Keshishiro (ケシ白) – a flower of white poppy.

¹¹¹The most strange nickname. (厚板) – «a plate» or «thick board».

¹¹²(戦場ヶ原 ひたぎ– Hitagi Senjogahara)– main character in the «Bakemonogatari» (厚板) anime – «Tales of monsters». Extremely beautiful and extremely tsundere maiden for which they had to invent a new sub-class in tsundere class – 'tsundora' (a word play with words 'tundra' or 'dora' – dragon) – absolutely ice cold tsundere. Still, she 'melted' in the last episode.

during dinner: Akie and Rin actively getting close to Maria, Maria losing herself in admiration for Keshishiro, and he, after finding out that I used to live overseas, completely loses an interest for surrounding... expect our conversation. By the way – I am in turn more and more interested in Akie.

She is so... exemplary girl. I mean not beauty or manners (she actually has both). I am astonished with her manner of perception. Refined-womanlike, I would daresay. 'Everything good that is beautiful'. Actually she does not reciprocate to me, but I am not surprised: besides of that I am not a single 'nymph' here, but also my own manners... still gaijin, despite of all Hone-Onna's lessons. Obviously it was ten times worse before. And not a top-lady language... especially after third glass.

And after fifth glass I am getting a shot of paranoia. I am leaving to 'puff my nose', but instead of that – typing an SMS to Hone-Onna. What's going on at Home? It turns to be – nothing. They are playing mah-jong in three with Wanyuudoo; Ichimoku Ren is hanging about somewhere. Either by Little Mistress order or on his own will. But Enma Ai is perfectly calm. This means that either there are no contracts expected, or expected, but something very trivial. Somehow relaxed, I am returning to the hall.

And it is not good there. Rin and Akie let Maria out and talking to each other. Very nicely by the first glance. But I can see that there are sparkles flying between them. Figural speaking. My Fujibayashi at last managed to draw Keshishiro's attention... But looking at his face I understand, that he answering her more for being polite. Which is actually strange: while Maria is not gaijin as me, but knows of gaijin culture because of her religion quite a lot. But no, he is bored. How interesting! For me.

Although my return works for good. As far as I am starting to actively support my friend... We actually can easily elaborate each other's ideas. Well, excluding one subject. But in the end anyway everybody becomes nearly slurred and from 'interesting nightly experiences' we are saved only with a short distance from the hotel.

Day seventy eighth

First thing in the morning I am knocking to Maria's room. It's nothing for me: I like this stuff when was alive, and now even more – I am undead. And she yesterday drank... indeed the first time in her life. I am being met with languid moans and unhappy eyes.

– Head ache?

– No...

– Green in your eyes?

– No...

In the end we figuring out that she has no hangover. It is quite normal for 'beginners'. But she is still quite drunk... and her body begins to understand this fact. Well, what could we do? I am starting an operation 'Saving private Fujibayashi'. Luckily, I have such kind of experience. And the first thing – I am pulling out a bottle of plum wine taken yesterday from bar, and making a good and noisy gulp. Well. I was expecting exactly this effect: Maria runs out to the next room.

The she returns – all red and in sweat.

– Jun, how can you?!..

– Easily. And you – get to shower for start. A cold shower. You would feel better, trust me.

Maria leaves again, letting me to continue morning boozing. Soon I hear her voice from the bathroom:

– Jun, and what kind of ugly stuff this alcohol?

– Is it rhetoric question? – I am wondering.

– No!

– Tranquiliser – one. In big doses. Exciter and emotions amplifier – in small. Do you think why people initially drink for best and worst cases? On festivals – to get even more joy. In tragic moments – to cry out and doze off. Well, and in the morning... Somebody just does not think of morning. Somebody knows for what they submitting.

– And you?..

– I knew for what I am submitting. Knew that it could be bad later. But considered that it should be done.

Wow, what a wording I designed. More than universal. And for my plea to join Little Mistress' team, and for certain contracts, and for boozing with the new friends could be used. Judging from my friends silence she also thought about something like that. Idiots and genius having the same thoughts. I would prefer to genius. Even more because genie¹¹³ – is also a magic creature.

Closer to midday Maria comes to herself and we are returning to the festival. Today everything is going on full speed, so we are putting on our costumes and changing hair colours. I am happily jumping and spinning in front of mirror. Fujibayashi looks on me with dissatisfaction or with suspect. Indeed, a high-necked 'ex-dress' with detachable sleeves and four cuts on skirt up to waist plus small white shorts – is far too revealing for her opinion. And great for me. I should flash my legs in the end! In addition – there will be so much of freaks, so I would not be so standing out. Maria herself is dressed to Zero¹¹⁴ soldiers uniform, with replacing shorts to simple and stylish skirt up to the middle of the hip. Well, little bit lower – Maria is a girl of strict rules.

In such outfit we are going out. My predictions turned to be true: we are good, out of question, much better than middle level. But people indeed dressed as they could. Still we are attracting some attention... And so I am hearing a tenth time said to our backs: nya-girls. Well, it is not said to our backs now. It is a call: Nya-girls! And in this case I can distinguish it for sure: it is a women voice. Interesting, how much girls will turn now? At least one. Nohatsu 'C.C.' is awesome curious person.

And I turned not in vain. Because that call indeed was for us. And the calling is Rin. Which is dressed in unrecognizable brutal black leather costume and invitingly waves hands to us. By the way I have a feeling that in the morning she was doing the same as me: plum wine. Although no, it seems that she prefers beer.

I am pulling Maria's sleeve: as far as we noticed her, we cannot ignore her. Rin runs down to us and seems to be violently happy:

– Nya-girls, at least you are alive, what a relief. These buggers after yesterday does not want to move and lie dead in their rooms!

It is stranger and stranger. Because at the moment she was telling this – I spotted in the crowd ahead some 'Nana Osaki'... whose shape and hairstyle incredibly resembles our Akie. But... not my headache. Maybe they had an argument. Still teasing her:

– And maybe opposite – run out in the morning?

Meanwhile Rin takes Maria's arm (what insolence... but Maria, it seems, does not react – how much we tried to reanimate her – she is still dizzy a little) and we are moving towards the festival.

¹¹³These words has the same root, 'genius' and 'genie'..

¹¹⁴Zero – Lelouch' nickname in Japanese guerilla organization, which under his management grew up nearly to a regular army and in line with other things got a proper uniforms.

In fact I am grateful to Rin at some point. As she completely occupied Fujibayashi's attention – I can do one important thing that I forgot to do in the morning: to check communicator. And there is, by the way, an email from Hone-Onna. In fact, the contract was offered. To husband-cuckold. A team prepares 'Othello' tragedy. I should transfer Home tonight, at last...

But it also give us a useful conclusion: now I know how to 'cover' Maria from unwanted contact with Little Mistress. If it will smell with disgusting contract – drag Fujibayashi to bar. Oh, I wish we had less such cases. I don't like it myself, and it's a shame to alcoholise a friend as her.

Episode 17. About fidelity

Day seventy eighth continues

– Lunamaria Hawke, gentei ban!¹¹⁵ – an overstrained voice from the right.

Having decided that today a first and most powerful flood of buyers is ended – we are exploring the first pavilion. The one, from which we retreated yesterday. Despite of all our causes – it is more interesting for Maria, neither then me. Because knight-templar indeed our Fujibayashi. So he likes shounen. And I even when was alive knew the Theory of Strength of Materials so good, so I was not able seriously admire all this HHBR¹¹⁶. But the voice from the right boiled my blood and I am bravely plunging into the crowd.

Actually, Japanese people are incredibly greedy of 'constraining' marketing: 'limited edition' (that particular 'gentei ban'), 'only during this week' – finish. Just announce something like this – and you can buy souls in bulk. So surroundings of the seller is overcrowded. But now I am ready to imitate the most daring and hardcore native Japanese otaku and break through to him. What to do? After Sihou Matsuri, Hawk Lunamaria is my favorite anime character. And here we are speaking (as I understand) about a figurine with speakers, which also can say several phrases with Sakomoto Maya's voice (seiyuu¹¹⁷ of Lunamaria, she has not as fascinating timbre, as Noto Mamiko, but I still very fond of it).

For my surprise, I am managing to break through quite easily. And not because I am a girl. Such things as to give a place to women – are not used in Japan. Well, I am saying wrong. The fact that I am a girl – counts. But in conjunction to some other aspects. Here, they joking to my back:

– Oi, people! Skip C.C. ahead! She found a new pupil for her. Now we will get Lunamaria with Geass¹¹⁸!

Guys in front of me turning, examining my purposeful face and letting me to pass. Definitely I have to pay for that with touches to different parts of beautiful me... But in crowd it is always so: somebody press on you, you slip by somebody tightly, so my sensations are not passing over normal crowd repulsion. From other side, on rational level I even enjoying that: how attractive I am!

But way back is not so enjoyable: retrying from the stall I am giving place for others, so they letting me out easily. But feeling me up not less! Kso! Now I am not purposely paying for mu rush to desired figurine,

¹¹⁵ «gentei ban» (限定版) – a translation given by Nohatsu herself little bit later. Here just kanji.

¹¹⁶ It is own Nohatsu abbreviation, meaning Huge Humanoid Battle robots. Actually there is something like this in Russian slang, so this is just a direct translation.

¹¹⁷ This word is already appeared in the story and was described: seiyuu (声優)– is a voice artists, how sounds anime and video games characters. Frequently seiyuu are also singers, or playing in 'classic' cinema, but could be exclusive voice actors.

¹¹⁸ Reference to «Code Geass» anime plot, where C.C., pursuing her own golas, gave a special abilibty, Geass, to Lelouch. After that she tried to be around, not interfering too much to his business, but somehow taking care of him.

but letting them... But they are the same. Stop, Jun-chan, what you said about rational level? So continue to think thislike. Do not spoil your mood. Especially because the figurine is awesome indeed!

Maria and Rin are standing on more or less calm spot and waiting for me. I am happily running to them and bragging with the trophy. It is respected, but somehow weak. I am examining them. Maria is strained for some reason. Rin, seemingly, dissatisfied with something. Oho-ho! Not 'something', but 'somebody'. Shoots and shoots lightnings 'under the table' towards me. What could it mean? Actually I have one guess. But it is far too... peculiar. How can I check it, not hurting Maria too much?

O! Idea. We should try to find Akie. I am pretty sure that it was she in the morning. And to join her into company. With same method: once she will visibly recognize us – she would not be able to get out. And it is even easier to do, than I expected: both my friends lost their interest for festival. Maria is thinking hard about something, Rin – burdening her. But I can't overhear what she is telling her. Just picking up some words. From one side – neutral and even good, pleasant words. 'Beautiful', 'charm', and so on. But if Rin tells them about Maria – then I can understand the later. At least she should be confused with the flood of compliments.

Anyway, they are so busy with themselves, that allowing me to drag our company in any direction. So I am quickly enough 'scanning' pavilions. And finding, at last, Akie at free exchange zone, where she is bargaining to death, trying to exchange several accessories of Nana Osaki cosplay for really beautiful, visibly hand-made obi. I should also mention that this obi raises some suspicions in me.

– Oi, Akie-chan! – I am greeting her with joy. – You also found forces to get up?

Akie looks on me displeased, then turns her eyes to Rin (and gets completely gloomy), but at this moment Maria emerges from our backs. Kamia's facial expression immediately changes: now she is glad... and worried at the same time. Another point for my guess. But Maria indeed is a very nice girl, and it is pretty normal to be worried about her mood.

–Haro-haro!¹¹⁹ – at last she greeting us. – How are you?

While the question directed not to me – I am still answering, It could damage a little our relations with Akie, she will think for sure something like: 'I was not asking you!', but will let Maria to say something, saving her blushes: if she would like to complain somehow – it would not be like we started with complaints. I hope Akie will get this point after some time – I like both of them.

– Have a look, what a Lunamaria I've got! – showing her the figurine. Akie looks on it omdifferently. Waits. Maria keeping silence.

– And Maria with Rin somehow encapsulated themselves. – I am trying to help Maria. Bending to 'Nana' and whispering. – Your Rin is a very talkative lady. Totally chewed poor Fujibayashi's ear off. And she is not yet recovered from yesterday...

Well, at least in one thing I am absolutely sure. Akie looks on Maria with care... And on Rin – with quite unexpected mix of malice and offence. Looks like I watched too much shoujo anime, but I see here a messed up romantic triangle. Or maybe I am not wrong?

Meanwhile Akie comes to Maria and asks her with care:

– Are you not tired?

Fujibayashi looks on her with gratitude and nods.

– Would you like to go to café? Let's have a sit there, eat some croissants, have a rest...

And if I will sharpen situation?

¹¹⁹ Haro – Japanese pronunciation of English 'hello'.

– Oi, Rin-chan, you and me are not so pansy, ne? – let’s check console games meanwhile? And later will join them...

Oh, yes. She does not look inspired with the perspective to leave Maria to Akie. Fancy that she is flashing her eyes on me. But it is really interesting – from where that offence? Still, Rin is not a fool. And understands that she... cannot decline. All right. I’ve got my verification, for that I will have to pay having unsatisfied Rin by my side. That’s OK. I will survive.

But actually I am starting to doubt the sincerity of her resent. She walks quite briskly towards gaming pavilion, with wide boy’s stride, so I have nearly run after her. Well, wide boy’s stride – I also can do it. But how can you imagine C.C. marching? I – can’t. So – nobles oblige. And when getting there we completely switching roles. As I dragged them in search for Akie, the same Rin drags me in search for some games. Looks like she likes it...

... Although I do not respect her taste. I already said – I do not understand all these sword fightings. With all due respect to Ichimoku Ren – he is the only lively, joyful, hot and soundly katana known to me. All others are cold, you know. Another thing – a machinegun! All of them are – hot, soundly and stirring. Although I am also indifferent for shooters¹²⁰. I prefer something closer to reality. Airsoft¹²¹ for example. By the way, speaking of airsoft – I have not even thought about this point. Japan is a motherland of this game. Another lucky aspect of my being! And as for computer games I prefer something more relaxed and intelligent. Tactic games, for example. Preferably – with option to pause it and have a time to think carefully.

Meanwhile Rin gets too ecstatic with some game (looks like – based on the same old ‘Bleach’) and breaks a joystick trying to win. But instead of asking for apology and repaying the damage – making a great scandal, which begins with denunciation of faults of Chinese makers, and ends up with accusing idiotic sellers, who set such a flimsy joysticks to test consoles. While she shouts – I am calling the second seller with my eyes and quietly asking him:

– How much?

– Five and half.

Well, I somehow understand. Rin is surely a mere student. And to shoot out for nothing two hundreds and something dirham (I am still converting money ‘on fly’ to currency I am most accustomed with) – is not a prospect she would relish. From other hand – I am an employed girl, so I do not feel this amount as horrible. Thus I am passing requested sum to him and pulling Ring aside by her sleeve. Being distanced from the object of her emotions she pulls herself back and we are continuing our walk.

At last she seems to be satisfied. We are joining Maria and Akie in café. Then walk around four of us for some time, meeting Keshishiro... Basically the day passes in due course.

And I am starting to feel kind of pressure. Some forefeeling. I am starting to feel for getting Home for a while. More and more. And, I suspect, our client will pull the string soon. So I am having somehow distant look. This actually plays to my hand. Seeing that I am not talkative today – Keshishiro first of all has to pay more attention to Maria... And secondly – he begins to drag us to bar, hoping to dispel my gloom... and

¹²⁰ «Shooter» – computer games genre, where the picture on the screen is representing ‘a looc with eyes of character’ and main character’s business – is shooting enemies with different firearms and fantastic blaster with aim to ‘kill them all’. In most intellectual cases – ‘to break through their lines to...’

¹²¹ Airsoft – a team military game where opponents shooting each other with 6mm BBs from ‘guns’ that are looks and weight as much as possible close to real military firearms. In contrary with paintball, airsoft BBs are not leaving any paint marks, so all game is based on respect and honesty, which in trun completely excludes possibility of turning it into a sport and leaves this game always on the level of ‘game between friends’.

lose my tongue. And it is also great – if the contract confirmation is incoming. So I have to trace Maria's condition and quickly bid a farewell as if I had too much of booze. So I am doing.

My intuition did not fail me. Although was it intuition? Now I can't be sure. Contract was 'signed'. The team successfully performed 'Othello'. But there was some detail, it seems. Because I see Hone-Onna's figure, sitting far away in flowers. Ichimoku Ren even more – disappeared somewhere. As the 'youngsters' did... Little Mistress sits in front of the mirror and combs Her hair. Initially I am quietly standing, to not disturb her. But a minute later I am realizing: She combs non-stop the same ear lock. Automatically.

What's so sad happened there? Shamefacedly I am reaching the network socket and connecting myself to the server. Oh, I was right when decided to booze Maria today. The case of unique disgust. The client is cuckold, indeed. But he was cuckolded... as a last chance to get him back – to make him jealous. He was the one and first who cheat... and very cynically – not covering, not breaking relations with his wife. Thu, what a scum! And we found out this only today morning. Not surprising that Hone-Onna sitting sad in flowers and Little Mistress – in front of the mirror.

And me too, I cannot stay and look on Her. My heart is all in pain and tightening. With compassion, with tenderness. It is not only a disgusting contract. It reminds to Her... Herself. Infantilisation, my ass! Kso. Apostate guys had balls not to contact us in times ago. Poor Little Mistress¹²²...

– Ano...

– Beautiful? – I always admired laconism of Little Mistress.

– Yes... – I am sighing. – And not only...

I am afraid to say what is heating my tongue... but if I will keep silent – it would not disappear, I will always feel it. And I always did feel, think and wanted to tell it. Maybe it is not to the place now. But I am still telling:

– You are beautiful. And smart. And tender, and sensitive. Gomenasai, I cannot perceive you as *girl* – neither now, nor then. But I love you indeed. Not only as Mistress, but also as sister...

– Why cheating?.. – My love confession is not noticed. No, knowing Little Mistress – not like this. It is noticed. Written to memory. But emotional answer will be sometime later. When She will consider required (or possible) to give it. Now She received confirmation of my attachment. devotion and sincerity. And asks me a question that disturbs Her. As to Her confident.

– To be honest – I cannot understand myself. – I am sitting down on knees and going to reach her nape with my hand, but drawing back in the last moment: confidentiality is confidentiality, but etiquette is etiquette. – Maybe I am wrong. And for side observer it looked otherwise. Bu I myself – never was able to understand. You know my passwords.

– Yes. You – faithful¹²³.

¹²²While such situation is not very understandable or hurting for teenager girl (which is Little Mistress formally) on the first glance – her comanions feel for her especially, because they aware of her own story, that was told in the first anime season. Actually, all 'adults' has their own reasons to suffer with this contract.

¹²³It is indeed some kind of confidential issue. We can only suppose that Nohatsu Jun composes her passwords starting from some proper names. Either of people, who she loved and parted, or companies, where she worked and resigned...

It is time to faint. And would I be not Nohatsu Jun, but some cute nice girl – I would faint indeed. This is compliment is not ‘worth a lot’. It is invaluable. One would sell soul for such thing. Well, I already sold mine. Exactly to Enma Ai.

– But you understand better.

I cannot argue. Now I am understanding in person. Understanding boys, understanding girls...

– There are two options. First one – lack of fear. To go with the tide. Do what you want. Fear is a sense of value. If you value something – you fear to lose it.

– You did not value life?

– I did. But not demon with horns, not crone with scythe came to me. But You. Foolish, isn’t it? Though there is another point: if I would meet a gang of yobs with bites – I would try to fool them. To break through them with fighting or opposite – pretend to be knocked out, cover life-sensitive areas and silently disappear. But it is useless to argue with You: You came – means final. All is left is to think about others. Not to hit several lorries with the emptied car. Not to make additional and unnecessary worries to the nice girl in colourful furisode...

– And the second?

– Feeling fear.

Little mistress looks on me eye-to-eye through the mirror.

– Fear of future. ‘And so it will be forever?’... To love the one should not only support another. They have to change something – in themselves. Not sag before another, but not allow the life become a routine. You know – tow most horrible mistakes: men think that their women will be like this forever; women think that they would be able to change their men... And there is also a fear of socium.

– Explain.

– ‘Our problem’ would be able to explain it nicely. Maria, as Christian, should understand the problem of Pontius Pilate. But in general – it is when momentary wish to save something blocks your view and does not allow understanding a wider perspective. When You stood up for Takuma-kun or Yuzuki-chan – you understood that it would not get away. That it will be painful. That even if You will be rewarded, then anyway not now, and not sure if You will be rewarded at all.

– Yes.

– Bu if you would not do it – you will lose something more significant. But momentary – it will be painful. Not everybody can see what will be later, and see only momentary. I would quote F. Herbert, he invented an amazing formula: ‘Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.’ And between us, girls, fear kill not only mind. But also soul. A soul as all that we like: idea of beloved, of honour, of justice, of truth... Makes you betray ideals.

– Fear – treachery?

– Hai.

Little mistress keeping quiet. I, within my mind, finishing the phrase: ‘And traitors were shoot down in all the times’. It seems to me – Enma Ai hear my thought and silently agrees with it. What’s a pity that even we are not able to shoot down all traitors. Or – nobody, especially we are?

So we sitting like this for some time, deep in our sad thoughts. Than something changes. Some elusive C of our common mood. Enma Ai turns to me and touches my palm with Her fingers – like She wants to cover my hand with Hers, but hesitates. And says in Her mind: ‘stay with me, do not leave me!’ Or it is just my imagination?

– Hai. – I am answering...

My head swims. Of all these emotions, of Her plea and trust – Even I indeed going to faint. But if I will – I will leave Her. Even while not for long, even while it is a small weakness. But all begins like this. I am biting my lip to the blood and bowing before Enma Ai.

‘I stay with you’.

Episode 18. Polygon

Day seventy ninth

– Oi, Maria! Are you alive?

It is morning now. I am knocking into my friend’s door. The where boozing till the midnight, while I was at Home. If not longer. Actually ‘Kanan’ people are tough guys in this matter. I can be quite on equals with them, but Maria... I hope she got to her room herself and without accidents.

– Jun?..

Alive. That’s better. Flattering steps behind the door. Lock clicks. Ye-e-ea... Oh, not until midnight. By all means, Maria got to bed around three hours ago,

– Sumimasen. – I am telling her. – If you want to sleep more – then sleep. I just wanted to check out – how are you.

Maria nod gloomily... Then brings a weak smile and answering:

– Arigato, Jun-chan. I... seemingly alive. But indeed I would prefer to sleep a little while...

– Then that’s it! Go back to bed! – I am waving my hands. – No more of me here. Sleep and get back to yourself. Indeed. Do you want me bring you something for lunch? Oranges?

– U!

I am closing her door and going to continue festival. By the way it is interesting: what would I, absolutely and solely, not looking back on Maria, new friends, or whoever else – would like to do on this festival for my own self? It is a perfect time now. And it turns to be that I want quite strange things. Firstly, I would like to sign up for costume contest. Well, it is not difficult. I can do it right now through communicator. And also I want to sit in café in front of first (and most visited) pavilion with cup of coffee... and maybe a small bottle of whiskey – to pour it in coffee sometimes... and just to behold a human maelstrom. Their faces – happy, anticipating, worried – any.

Am I nostalgic for life? Not actually. It is just my own personality. Meditative-analytical-dreamy. I like to look on people from quiet corner and design stories for them. This boy, for example, who just get out and looking confused moving towards shoujo and josei pavilion – has promised a present for his girlfriend... and this mixed-up bishounen strayed away from company and now deciding: either to go search for his friends, either to go for solo voyage, or to wait for them here...

Stop. Bishounen is named Keshishiro. And because he indeed was evaluating an option to go to café – he spotted me. This made his decision. Well, I have nothing against that. There is no Maria around, so I can easily talk with a nice man. Also will ask him, what and how they yesterday was out on the tiles. I am smiling to him. Keshishiro enters.

– Hi, Jun! How are you? – he asking, while seating down next to me.

– Coming back to myself. – I am answering and furtively getting a whiskey bottle out of my dress. – Would you like some Irish koku¹²⁴?

Keshishiro initially shocked with my asocial behaviour: such an act as furtive boozing is not perfectly fits in his mind. Then, it seems, he recalling that by breeding I am practically gaijin and clams a bit. And then he himself feels for small asociality. He is boy in the end. And also my invitation is quite corresponds to his motion. After such a ‘firing’.

He moves closer, orders coffee and waits until I will ‘ennoble’ his drink. Oh well, how strategic of him! When I am getting the bottle – accidentally catching his sight... Keshishiro blushes... well, indeed he even brings some colours on his cheeks. Dreamboat. And strategic, surely strategic... now I understand why he sat on the left from me. Well, then have it for that:

– Little bit more than A, if you are so interested. – I am stating innocently.

Giggles. Now he gave full colours. So – he *is* interested.

– OK. Have you koku. I am not offended. Girls like attention. But actually not so straightforward. Tell me better, how it ended up... as I missed the most part, I feel,

Keshishiro is happy. He definitely waited for much more deadly consequences of his not really ethical curiosity. So he starting to tell me yesterday night story with enthusiasm. Well yes, it was ‘firing’ indeed, I was not mistaken.

– ...And then Rin-chan and Akie-chan suddenly getting up, both, looking so on each other and going out. Well, like you say ‘to puff the nose’. But they were getting up – as if they are going to start throwing with gloves.

Keshishiro is aware of European culture, as I see, But knows not too much of it. Ones does not ‘strating to throw gloves’. A single person throws (or even drops) a single glove. But it is interesting. And I also have quite a feeling from the whole tale, that these two are quarrel because of... Fujibayashi.

– Listen, Keshishiro-kun, – I am adding some intimacy in our conversation. – And Rin-chan and Akie-chan – who are them? What makes them tick? What do they do?

– We-e-ell... – Keshishiro is thoughtful and confused at the same time. – Both of them are quite peculiar girls. Both – posers...

– No, no! – he waves hands. – I did not mean to say anything bad of them. Posers – in positive meaning. Like they like to shock people. Have a little joy over human prejudices. Say, Rin, for example...

He again hesitates confusedly.

– Demonstratively shows her yuri preferences? – I am coming to help. Like if I said it myself, then he has nothing to hide.

– Well, yes... – he nods. – Bu I do not fully understand myself – how much of pose there, and how much of real shoujo-ai preferences. What is primary – pose or?..

– Giggles! Well, if even you don’t know, how comes I would? And what about Akie-chan?

– Actually, as for Akie-chan – you surely should understand her better than I do. – Keshishiro is serious. – She is hundred percent women. I am sorry; Jun-chan, but logic have not ever set foot on that land. Hundred percent of intuitive-aesthetical mind. I completely do not understand her. And you, as girl – probably would be able...

I am grinning.

¹²⁴Nohatsu did a mess up with pronunciations. As she is an experienced English-speaker, the word ‘Irish’ she spells correctly in English, but word ‘coffee’ – in Japanese manner: ‘koku’.

– Yes, the same seemed to me. And possibly yes again. Can understand. And how with posing and shoujo-ai for her – where is balance?

– Who knows! – Keshishiro swinging his arm. – But thank you for conversation. You actually opened my eyes. You know, they were together for quite a while... And now both decide to pay attention to your friend... and was not able to share. To the same hand. May I ask for reciprocal favour? Who is Maria-chan?

I am thoughtful. How and what should I answer?

– Actually, besides of what you already know – that she is Christian and my classmate... I don't know indeed. She is very honest, purposeful and... diligent person. No, indeed – maybe better you will ask questions, and I will try to answer?

– Actually I do not have any specific questions. – Keshishiro shrugging and, leaning to the chair, stretches out his legs. – It just seemed to me yesterday, that she takes that anime... than 'Jigoku Shoujo' too close. Like she is indeed believes in all this stuff... So I was just wandering – why it so hooked her? Wanted to try to understand.

'Oh, Maria-Maria... what did you told them?' – I am sighing in my mind, but saying something very different:

– Well, you are interested in gaijin culture. So you should already know the answer. Maria, as Christian – believes in heaven and hell. And this anime uses these, familiar to her concepts. Plus, she *indeed believes* in Christian God (well, this is information for you from me: she is Christian not only by breeding, but also by belief). So it is easy for her to believe into Enma Ai existence. If there is a God – there is a devil. And his black-haired emissary. That's easy.

– Yeah... Looks like you are right. – thoughtfully says Keshishiro. – But I told you about two. And you – only about one. And I would like to know about two also. And to be honest – much more about the second.

Wow! It is indeed a hidden compliment. I am flattered.

– It will cost you. – I am answering coquettishly. – you will have to add... about yourself. But I can agree on credit.

Keshishiro laughing.

– You are cunning!

– Yes, I am so. And what would you like to know about me?

– Everything, What do you like, what – not. What are you doing, how do you live in overall...

Indeed. Quite an appetite. I am definitely flattered with such attention. But also somehow concerned: in the end I am not fully human... But with such vague questions, actually – nothing difficult. Just keep silent about some aspects.

– You know, I not very nice in telling about myself. But will try. I like anime and manga – you already guessed. From which best of all – shoujo, josei (not surprising for girl, isn't it?), good sci-fi and space operas. But it is desirable that even there should be at least a little about love...

So we continuing our conversation in such manner – initially in café, then we are going to festival a little... And Keshishiro is so gallant, that without objections crawling with me again to girls pavilion and patiently waits while I am choosing several anime to watch later.

In the middle of the day Maria calls. It turns like Akie and Rin made peace (at least – from her words it seems that the stopped to bicker) and inviting her just to have a tour around Tokyo, to look the city. And she wants to join them – from her own interest of provincial (here she giggles, obviously recalling a scene in train), and for case of peace between our new friends. I have no objections.

Then I am retelling our conversation to Keshishiro. He likes the idea. Same as me.

– And let's do it too? Together? – offers he.

– Deito-Deito¹²⁵? – I am joking. – No way!

– Why? – Keshishiro visibly wilted.

– Because if it would be deito – I should have made an obento for you. Or, at least secretively buy it in the morning. An as we decided only now – then I would not be able to do either... Mo! I am joking! Let's go of course!

No, it seems that my feminine intuition works as it should do, despite of all that Hone-Onna says. Or maybe it is just evolving. But Rin and Akie I psyched out absolutely right... and, judging by the fact how Keshishiro beamed – him also. Giggles. I wanted to try it for a while...

Tokyo gives my quite a strange feeling. I think – if I would get there immediately after death – would be astonished. Because it is a very Japanese megapolis. But I used to live in megapolises a lot. Nearly – all of my life. And would be shocked exactly with how Japanese is it. And now – I've got a mighty vaccination of Japanese culture from Hone-Onna, used to work in another Japanese city... So Tokyo for me is just a composition of two already known things. It is interesting, definitely. But... not shocked.

Actually I like to roam around unknown cities. Alone, or together with a good person. And Keshishiro fits enough. Moreover, he is the same here. I mean – likes to roam around. So we are walking, irregularly riding metro and buses, not less irregularly popping in cafes and bars...

Closer to the evening – sinking in one of these. Keshishiro tells me about archaeological findings of Kamakura¹²⁶ era (the way he tells it is nice, by the way), and about the influence Mongols invasions did on Japanese culture... Oh, and on this subject – if a normal girl would be in my place – she would fall asleep a long time ago. Poor guy pays too much attention to culture of conducting hostilities. Better if he would tell about his bellowed scuba gears. Still, Nohatsu Jun is not a normal girl; it is noticeable to a naked eye: what a sane Japanese girl would roam around Tokyo until late in C.C. outfit?!

By the way, along with the story, his hand is creeping to mine... At last – covers it. Keshishiro waits for reaction. Would I jerk it back, or not? Reaction is paradoxal: I am turning to him and winking. He is stunned. I am laughing and kissing his cheek. No, indeed – we has begun in the morning, than continued here and there... And in this bar we are also sitting not for firs hour. So I am in reckless mood... and in drive.

To cut it short, everything ends up where it should be – in love hotel. I am trembling. And not only because of physiological anticipation and even maybe lust, but also of burning curiosity: how it would be? It is very interesting for me – indeed.

It turns like spontaneously developed conception of side-view observation was a notable solution. It does not prevent from receiving positive tactile feelings... Kso, what an office speech? Would be more if I said something like: 'during participation in coitus the amplitude of registered sensations varied...' Actually, I am gust embarrassed, confused and to avoid it – tying to irony over myself. To hide myself behind irony.

¹²⁵ «Deito» – another import. 'Date'. And doubling words is quite normal for Japanese if the sentence is not linguistically complete and when they want to stress on some emotion (for example – joy, or as in this case – irony).

¹²⁶ Japanese delimiting their history to eras by different principles, mainly by ruling families. Kamakura age is 1185 – 1333AD.

Oh, now. Office speech would not be of help, because it is so... powerful! And I have no forces for it anymore... In the very beginning of this story I thought, that I can do it if I would look on it like from outside was absolutely great. It lets me feel... 'here... a-a-a, what a kaif, but gently, please, more gently!' ... and does not contradict with beliefs that I had when was alive: I see everything as... well, as movie. Not 'now *his* gentle hands touching my breasts', but 'now [somebody's quite gentle] hands touching [maybe even my own] *beautiful woman breasts*'. And all happens... indeed fantastically. Ha! I am having a unique experience. And would report you: what girls feel with a good and caring partner – it is something faery. And is comparable, than only very approximately. And Keshishiro happened to be quite *unhurried*, so I had time to feel everything on full scale.

But when everything ends and I, in absolute delight, leaving to shower – something breaking within me. And I am sitting under streams of warm water and crying. I cannot even normally say – why. Probably because after first time getting (completely overwhelming) pleasure from intimacy – as a woman – I finally realized: there is no way back. I am – undead Nohatsu Jun, companion of Enma Ai, the 'killer', who sends souls to Hell. And what I have been – will remain in memories, in habits, in knowledge... But I never would be again... the one I was. Nevermore.

By the way, I am incredibly grateful to Little Mistress for one thing. It turned to be, that I was spared from one not very pleasant aspect of women physiology. And this is good. Even without it was quite traumatic experience of first intimacy that I've got...

But it was right what I've told myself. I am – undead Nohatsu Jun, an Enma Ai's companion. And this sounds proud. So, as they say – one, two! Strain and bristle! I am standing up, exposing face to streams of water. Tears – away! With jerk – casting hair from shoulders. I have sent to Hell not the single person. I am not the first day working 'under the cover'. And was crying like a girl... Well, actually I am also a girl, indeed. That's it. I got the right mood. I am coming out from shower and with soft smile looking on the snuffling Keshishiro. Giggles. How cute they are... when sleeping.

Day eightieth. By clocks

I am walking quietly through the lobby of our hotel. Soft carpets are silencing my steps, but I additionally do not want to make noise. I do not know why. I think – it is kind of stereotype: you should make no noise when coming back from late date. Although whom I would wake up? And whom I am afraid to meet: hotel administration was kind enough to settle boys, girls and couples on different floors...

Wow! And why this door is open, but it is dark inside the room? By the way I even know who this room is. Rin stays here. Then I can look in. Just to check – as a friend, is everything OK with her? Cautiously popping in. In first moment I am cuffing myself in my mind: I forgot to knock, despite of all Hone-Onna's explanations about significance of privacy and private space in Japanese culture. Actually, besides of still blowzy feelings and actual curiosity – I have another excuse: specifics of my work. Which tells: in emergency situation – first of all understand, and then show up, if required.

And in second moment I am stunned. In the very direct meaning. I am standing, holding a jamb, and looking jaw down. Because the scenery is as follows: Rin lies on the bed. Also stunned, but with horror. And with unmoving eyes looking on the one, who stays in front of her. And the one in front – Little Mistress.

– I did not send my aides to you, - she tells. – because wanted to ask myself...

Rin weakly paddling, trying to pull the blanket over her. Her fingers does not obey her. What's going on? Why I know nothing? I checked communicator – no messages about contract and the midnight is passed while ago!

– Don't you think that love – is just a word?

Hold on. One second. If someone, but I know the voice of Little Mistress! And now it sounds somehow wrong. And she never calls us 'aides'. Mostly 'companions'...

– Don't you think that it is possible to play with real feelings as with computer manikins?..

My eyes adapted to darkness. Oh, something wrong here... She is also too tall for Enma Ai. The difference is not so visible here either, but still...

Suspicious person begins to raise the hand in well-known gesture of Little Mistress... but hold on, the finalizing formula 'O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness...' was not announced, it is too early to ask the last question! Rin is screaming. Suspicious person suddenly stops.

– Think of it.

Sharply turns and running out, not noticing me. Well, darkness in the room helps to that. I also was not able to recognize her face. To the strains of unending screams I am rushing after her. In the end of lobby flashed suspiciously familiar obi. With a bang I am leaning to the wall and slowly sliding down. Akie-chan... how fool of you, how fool. How deeply you do not understand, what a dangerous game you ventured!..



7Hone-Onna, Wanyuudoo, Ichimoku Ren

Episode 19. One less angle, two more souls

Day eightieth. Still by clocks

So here I am sitting, leaning to the wall and thinking: 'What to do now?' Actually – should I do something in first place? To try to explain to this poor fool that she not only did something questionable for ethics point of view, but also stepped on very shaky ground? All right, imagine – I said that. And where is my proof? Not only I can provide is just 'hallucinations', I just cannot do it. To close to attempts to stop client. And it is simply would be fool now from my side: right to a tee – Maria believes in all of this (and she is right), and if Akie will blurt something... No. Failure. More to point – where I will look for that Akie now? She

run away down the lobby, in direction, opposite to her room. And where she went by fire stairs or by elevator? So, Jun-chan, follow the wise advice of aunty Scarlett O'Hara and move your body to bed. You will think of it tomorrow. Maybe even consult with Hone-Onna...

And that's true. I am going back to my room and dropping into the bed. Of course, I can transfer Home, but in the hotel the chance that somebody will notice my absence is too high. Trivial case: Maria gets up in the night to have some water – and it is a dead silence in my room. Especially while she is aware, how less of sleep I need...

In the morning I am lying in my room, pecking at laptop keys (nobody cancelled my works), but in fact – head in the clouds. Actually I am lying by the very stupid reason: I should not have sex yesterday with drunken men. It is cool when awhile (though I am sure, that also not always, depending on own mood, at some point it could become displeasing)... But it turns, that loin aches afterwards. And not only loin, as you understand. So – to lie. Or walk. So I am lying.

Knock in the door.

– Come in, – I am shouting.

Maria coming in. Happy and fresh: looks like yesterday she had a nice walk, and had not adventured, as me. Which is not surprising, obviously: from us two it is me a girl of... et-to... let's put it as follows: not very difficult virtue. Easy virtue is something else, anyway. And Fujibayashi on the contrary – a very moral girl.

– So, how was your tour yesterday?

– Oh, Jun-chan, amazing! Seen a lot, was everywhere... And in overall it was great. And fun. I felt like Rin and Akie had a go day before yesterday, but it seems that they made peace. And why to quarrel?

Prelapsarian naivety... Looks like Maria naturally does not understand that the quarrel is because of her... And that it is not too much of peace – I knew it myself only accidentally.

– Because they not wise. – I am answering. I can't, indeed tell her everything. Again, I have no proof, and naturally for what reason I should tell her about all these yuri girls? No, I do not want to 'save her clean'... just because it would be a shock for her to realize that she become a top of yuri-triangle. Enough for her... let her rest a little. I am closing the matter with gulp of yumeshu. Actually I also have a tea on my table. But tea is neutral. And yumeshu is unpleasant for Maria. So she hurrying to change the subject:

– And what you was doing?

– Oh, for me it came out quite funny. – I am gladly switching. – I went in the morning to sink in café in front of the first pavilion. Just for nothing. To stare on Tokyo people in all and otaku in particular. And, can you imagine? Met Keshishiro!

I know that she is interested in him. And my confession would not be pleasant for her either. But here it is a question of sincerity between friends: if she seriously put her eye on him – she should know that Keshishiro is a guy without much of prejudices. I don't think that he indeed has tendency to cheat, but will look on other girls for sure. Too easy it happened yesterday. Although, to be honest, I put quite an effort to that myself: I aimed to have a small romance on the festival? And to try... So I had a romance. And tried... Oh, my... loin.

– ... So, when you called me, – I am continuing. – We were sitting there. And we was so fond of this idea, that we followed your example and went out.

– What?! – Maria's eyes out on stalks. She is indeed a very nice girl. Anybody else would now suspect something not good. And she is worrying for me. – You went just like this, in C.C. costume?

– Well, there was no time to go here and change. – I am shrugging. – It was kind of spontaneous decision. To move! Immediately!

Maria nod with surprise and kind of disapproval.

– Well, Jun-chan, what a thing to do... and how?

– Fantastic, just fantastic. Had a nice tour, not worse than tours. And then... Sorry, Maria, could you please answer me before, but honestly: do you like Keshishiro – as a boy?

– Yes... But why do you asking?

– Gomenasai, Maria. In this case it is a shame on me, but moreover I should confess you: after a walk we...

Wow! And I am embarrassed. And I indeed feel shame and displeasure... at least – to tell it in plain words.

– Well, we came back to the hotel not immediately...

Maria looks puzzled. What suddenly angers me and I am shooting:

– I slept with him!

Immediately calming down and continuing apologetically:

– You have all rights to feel offended. I guessed, but still did that... I was wrong. Well, do you want I will tell him to get lost in front of everybody?..

Hell the Great, I indeed up to tears and wringing hands embarrassed and ashamed. And worried for her. And she is smiling to me (actually, I see suspicious brilliance in her eyes):

– Oh, my God, Jun, but I had nothing with him! Yes, I like him... Yes, I would like to be on your place yesterday. But you did not take him away from me! Because I just never had him!

She is a saint. And I anyway crying of shame and embarrassment. And she even sits aside and comforts me.

So, around one hour later, we, after making peace finally, cried out everything, painted our faces for the second time, hand in hand are going back to festival. Fujibayashi gazing on sides, but I nearly feel her pride. She is an amazing girl. Indeed, how she made me stop crying? Naturally, it is a classic technology: if someone gets hysterical – you should shock him. So she shocked me. But does not realize it herself. Because all my confessions and deeds of disputable ethic level – she turned into values. And told me that she is proud to have such a crazy friend, which can walk in the night megapools in revealing outfit; seduce men in one day and have strength to confess it to her friend. And now it happens that she also subscribed herself into costume contest. Well, actually she is right. I was quite a crazy being even when alive. But I still will talk to Keshishiro.

People turning to us. The costume contest that creeping upon makes everybody to pay more attention to outfits... They trying to guess – is it a competitor for me? Or will we see this on podium? By the way, funny note: in anime all these beauty or costume contests are referred as unliked: main protagonist thinks that it is boring, main girl characters – embarrassing. And in real life, it seems, it is opposite: the list of competitors is really huge, the only salvation – first firs tours are done only by photos; and although I made this decision spontaneously and made a photo with that stupid thing that for unclear reason called ‘camera’ and included into my communicator – I managed to get up to live show. Got to finals, to say it clearer. And interest in the eyes of others promises us quite a crowded with audience hall.

And now we also catching two interesting characters. Actually we even know one of them. It is Rin in her brutal leather. All right, she is a tough girl. Walks as if nothing happened, not showing any signs of yesterday panic. Although the fact that Akie run away (and not disappeared, as real Little Mistress and all of us does) -

likely turned her to right guesses. By the way, where is Akie herself? If Rin uncovered her somehow – then she definitely keeping her out of sight. As they had a magnificent scandal then. And even if not uncovered – she should not show up not to let Rin to compare figure, voice, manners ‘on hot tracks’.

Giggles. And count Dracula (or any other aesthetical vampire, I am weak in this subject, maybe will distinguish only Alucard and Victoria Seras from ‘Hellsing’ and Luchia from ‘Magic Pokaan’ from other anime vampires) – happens to be Keshishiro himself. Honestly, I recognized him not from the first sight... So... should I spoil the day... or wait a little? No, sooner the better. And after greetings I am leaving Maria’s hand (moreover she wants to ask something from Rin), and touching Keshihiro’s shoulder to draw his attention.

– Ano... Keshishiro?

He is surprised. Of course, because I did not added ‘-kun’. Quite mindfully. Nodding to him.

– Exactly. Gome. Yesterday everything happened on drive. And now I regret for that. Because I like you... but as a friend. You are really good... in all means. But do not expect any... evolution. Moreover, that there are girls who like you... exactly as a men. Gomenasai. This is the final decision.

Keshishiro is down. Then he, as we could say, ‘picks his jaw back’, nods and hardly squeezes, also with mixture of surprise, admiration and disapproval:

– What a girl you are!..

I bet he wants to add: ‘naturally gaijin’, but he gets hold of himself. I am shrugging and demonstratively returning to Maria.

– Jun-chan, – both girls asking me nearly in tune. – Don’t you know for any chance – where is Akie-chan?

– No slightest clue. – I am answering absolutely sincerely. – I have not seen her for hundred years. Actually I thought that she would be with you...

Rin emits some undistinguishable sound. Well, it means that Akie is still has her secret. Otherwise we would have now a great opportunity to enjoy another monologue on high tones... as far as I understand Rin’s personality. And also means that after their tour they had a go again. Before this stupid prank. Too neutral and indeed undistinguishable reaction. Anyway. Let’s wait how it turns. I still does not understand how to talk with Akie about this matter.

What finally kills me – is that I am finding Akie in women changing room behind the costume contest scene. And finding her tying obi. And already in long-haired charcoal-black wig. Only Hone-Onna’s lessons saves me. I am pulling out puff-box. Actually I came nearly for that reason – to mascara brows and fix up lips.

– Ano...

– Wow, hello, Jun-chan! – she greeting me as nothing happened. – You too? Great! But do not hope for the first place!

She winks.

– You think... - I am asking her still being in some kind of stun. – that it is a good idea?

Pointing to her costume.

– And what’s the problem? Amazing character, great costume... Epic win! – she shows ‘V’ with two fingers and spins around on one toe and throwing her hands out. Furisode sleeves flowing... nearly the same as for real little Mistress.

Main point there – I really can’t say anything. Because Enma Ai indeed amazing. Would I ‘swear allegiance’ to Her, if she would not be so? Actually, who knows – maybe I would. Whatever she is – but I love her... In the end – I can’t understand my own soul, but still going to teach others?

– Well, still, be careful... - I am saying some puzzling thing. – It is dangerous to gamble with such things.
– Ah, Jun, get lost! You had listened you Christian friend too much!.. Although Maria is – ama-a-azing!
Akie closing her eyes. Actually she amazing herself. But I can't talk to her. I am logic in the end. And she is
– hundred percents of intuition and aesthetics, as Keshishiro correctly mentioned. We are speaking different languages. To have a chat – very interesting. But to explain a serious idea, especially when the idea is quite a mystique... No way. I am sighing and starting to fix up my lips outline.

– And now, number 13, Code Geass, C.C.!

The hall all applauds. I am coming to the scene. Can't see a thing under blinding beams of movie flood lamps. Well, just the mere outline of the 'tongue'¹²⁷. I am raising my head even higher and nearly by feel walking it. No, of course, nobody can see it from outside: I am neatly putting one leg before another, like marching on curb. Spine is tight and straight, shoulder straightened too. Coming to the end and stopping in proud pose. Relaxing for a second and showing to audience another C.C. – that cute and defenceless girl that she was when lost her memories... Straightening spine and shoulders again, briskly turning – so my 'express' flaps. Leaving. Uf-f-f. Time to smoke.

By the way, Akie had also quite suitable number: six. As Lelouch used to call C.C. a 魔女 ('Mahou' – witch), as Enma Ai – Jigoku Shoujo. Actually it is good, that we have costume contest here, not beauty. Otherwise they would begin to ask questions! No, I am not embarrassed as a girl from anime. I just have some stuff to hide.

Akie sitting down aside.

– You know how to do it! Nicely showed out!

– Thank you. – I am indifferent somehow.

– Bu the way, I was watching: all others – nuts. Our Keshishiro was not as bad, but firstly he is in male nomination, secondly – anyway no way equal to us. But do not hope for the first place! – she spells her joke again.

Actually, I think, from what I've seen – the first place will be voted to the very third girl. Which approached contest not aesthetically, as Akie, and not pragmatically (as I am), but purely opportunistically: secure combination – quite revealing potpourri on WWII military uniforms. And claim this as 'So Ra No Wo To'¹²⁸ cosplay.

By the way, I am not bad analyst. The girl in 'uniforms' got to top. And received as the prize a full set of special editions of all anime aired last year. Giggles, how she would drag all this stuff home?.. Actually, Japanese girls are accustomed to carrying heavy cargo. Even with their elegance and fragility. And second place was mine, not Akie's. For the same reason. Well, not exactly. Besides of 'level of costume revealing' – there is another aspect: celebrity. And here C.C. definitely wins. Especially taking in account that for girls – boys are voting. (Well, and vice versa, I just had to skip male contest, having to explain to Tenjin, who

¹²⁷ «tongue» – podium that runs out from scene to the hall during fashion shows.

¹²⁸ Correct name – «Sora no Oto» (ソ・ラ・ノ・ヲ・ト). Aired autumn 2009 to spring 2010. Anime about a group of military girls on some post-apocalyptic war in the society, dropped down to beginning of XX century on technical and aesthetical (so uniforms, wargear and etc. are indeed accurately taken from WWII, for example 'good' girls are wearing Wehrmacht uniforms and driving Kubelwagens) levels and nearly to feudalism on social.

guessed to call me in such a time, that if server sees only one hard drive and it is definitely six are working there – that the server has separate RAID controller).

As result – we are sinking in bar with the whole company and celebrating my second and ‘Enma’s’ third place. Girls from ‘Kanan’ forum greedily bevelling on the best shoujo anime of ten years collection, that I’ve got and Akie’s posters album. I am getting points, with smile ravaging my prise and ladling out disks. What to do, if half of these – are mahou-shoujo, and for me – it is practically a verdict for series. I like shoujo. In overall – anime about girls. But without mahout, without mahout, please! I am a magic being myself; I am not interested in witch-magician-sorceress main female protagonists. And even when I was alive – not felt for them generally. Akie sulking, but holding herself. Unfortunately I cannot quickly improve our relations presenting her something. As far as I know her tastes – I’ve got nothing. All right, when we will come back to the hotel I will give her my poster with Nana and Hachi.

Meanwhile we are sitting, eating, drinking. It is night already, but the celebration is at full blast. Oh, poor Fujibayashi. She again is so ‘beau-u-utiful’ already. But – happy. It seems, that after my strict decline and not very gentle hint – Keshishiro decided to look around... and now talking exactly to her. But actually I am confused with Rin. Definitely, after contest Akie was uncovered and Rin flew in like fury, nearly waving fists. But immediately calmed down when Akie with cute smile (cute indeed) said:

– Rin-chan, but it was just a prank! Gome, I should have come to you in the morning and ask for apology...

– It’s all right, – Rin waves her hand and leaves. I don’t like something in this scenery. Of course, Rin is emotional, and as instantly getting mad, as instantly calms down. Still – don’t like.

Up-ps. There was a reason why morning scene seemed strange for me. As I look on her – Rin plays with her mobile. And before I manage to think about it thoroughly – I see: she disappears for the second. Well, it is good that Fujibayashi is drunk again. I really know what such one-second-long disappearances mean. And now my communicator vibrating. Email from admin@jigokutsuhin.net – one of our changeable domains. Obviously, it is written not by Enma Ai, judging by the telegraphic style – either Ichimoku Ren, either Hone-Onna. ‘Kamiya Akie. The client, the reason are clear for you. Leaving the ‘act’ for you. P.S. Little Mistress is displeased with image profanation’.

Kso. So you came to a head, Akie. No luck for me to give you that poster. Lights are dimming for the moment and then coming back to normal. But it is not a real bar. Those, who would stay alive remembered, that you’ve got a phone call and run out from bar – like to talk in more quiet environment. I would prefer to cover things up better, but our ability is more about shaping pieces of memory into a new mosaic, than for ‘showing live action’. So I have to compose: small distraction – image of girl running out from bar to talk on her mobile – recognition of girl as Akie.

The real Akie sees everybody as they are, but ca not contact them anymore. After string being pulled the object gets into some strange ‘reality’: it could be as much tied with the world of alive, or as much differ for it – as we like. The only sine qua non is this – the object cannot contact living people.

– And still, Akie. – I am telling her, pouring her glass with wine. – don’t you think that the prank turned to be very unethical?

– Why so? – she is bristling. Well, not surprising – abrupt change of tone and subject.

– Judge for yourself: Rin was frightened nearly to infarct...

– I am sorry, Jun, but this is none of your business. And how do you know anyway? Eavesdropping?!

– Who knows, who knows? Maybe even my business. And it does not change the facts: it totally was not fun for Rin.

– You think I had fun – when she pitching a woo with me for half a year, and then abruptly aims for another girl. And moreover – to hat, which I myself is after?

– Oh, Akie-chan, love is – a very fragile thing, I understand it myself. But even more – if you were together, loved each other... Is it possible to so do so mean revenge on beloved person?

– Possible! – Akie states it solid. I am worried. She'd lost half (actually, more than half) of chances to somehow improve her situation.

– And from another side. You said you like Enma Ai?

– Oh, yes! – Akie brings a dreamy smile.

– And? And what are you doing? In first instance you are using her image to meanly and pettily frighten your beloved. Already ugly. Where you have seen 女様 frighten somebody meanly or moreover pettily?

Akie stunned. To analyze words as I do – is not her strong side, but she hears a new and unexpected note: how I named Enma Ai.

– And then you are running away. And not just running, to run – is not a big fault, although She never runs on work. But the fact itself: Mistress came in furisode – means death. And you are bringing it to zero! Is it so how do you like and respect Enma Ai?

– Ojou... -sama? – with flattering voice Akie is asking again.

– What did surprise you? – I am answering coolly. – It is how her employees, or companions, if you'd like Her own definition, address to Her... as far as I remember. But anyway... Imagine that I am sorry for her. And tell me; are you really like her *in such a way*? Not caring for her, say, reputation?

– But it was just a prank!

Oh. All clear. Unfortunately, nothing left for me, but to spell the fatal:

– That's what she said, Mistress.

Enma Ai appears in front of Akie, in nearly the same furisode decorated with flowers. But in Little Mistress case flowers are with slowly moving, turning, covering each other flowers...

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

– What's it, Jun?! – screams Akie.

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– This is – Mistress. And I am – Her companion. – I am explaining the thing, which actually do not require explanation.

– 一遍死んで見る？

Akie sits in the boat. Little Mistress – by the oar, I am sitting by her feet, looking on my ex-friend.

– We really were hurt. – I am saying.

– So ka. – says Akie thoughtfully. – Then everything is – true?

– Yes.

– I did not know... I thought – it is all bogeyman stories... probably this is why I did not take it seriously... But... – she suddenly smiles, raise her head and looks on Little Mistress. – But on the other hand I had seen a real you!

I don't know. Maybe, words said in the boat will count somehow... And the thing that rules Hell – be it a heartless law or Master of Hell... will forgive her at least a little. I would hope to... Fool is she, but still good. And sincere. At least sometimes.

– This revenge will ferry your soul to Hell.

Episode 20. One less angle, one more soul

Day eighty first

– Ohaio, Jun-chan!

This is Maria, who came into my room (I did not locked it) when she did not have any response and wakes me up. Unique situation: usually I am getting up earlier than she. But today there is a special case. I simply was not able to fall asleep after ferrying Akie to Hell, for whom I felt sympathy. So, (no, I did not wet everything with tears, as at that time, but still was not able to sleep) I worked until... something like 4AM... or was it 5AM? Meanwhile drinking 'for the peace of her soul'... Although I know – no peace is in Akie's future is planned. Thus, my natural response sounds as follows:

– Morning could not be good.

Maria stunned with this gaijin wisdom, but laughing.

– I've never seen you so sleepy!

– Well... it happens... – I am sitting in the bed and rubbing eyes, in the same time correcting a slipped off my shoulder strap of my nighty (what a nice reflexes I evolved, I am pleased with myself). – What's time is it?

– It is eight already! And at ten in sixth pavilion the do a fan performance on 'Clannad'!

Yes... 'Clannad', of course, is not 'Kanon', and I am not fond of that anime protagonist... But still a very worthy series. It would be a sin to miss such thing: even if the play will be bad – we will giggle at least. And of good? Nothing to do. Crawling to shower.

Meanwhile Maria is pacing in room, trying to do something with my clothes, lying here and there, and murmuring some song. Which fact overjoys me: it means that she is not yet aware of yesterday doings. But it is also interesting: the first one who will be questioned: 'Where is Akie' – is Rin. What she will answer? And in overall – what does she think about all that happened?..

Some time later we are sitting on the play. It is good, but... moderately. On the other hand – who would wait a great dramaturgy from fans? As result – I am do not regret that went here, and also have a time to look around. Here, by the way, 'Kanan' people. I am furtively waving hand to them. Girls, who got presents from me yesterday – recognizing me and waving in answer. Remarkable – both Rin and Keshishiro are thoughtful and not reacting. Well, it's all right for Keshishiro – he probably ignores me after yesterday talks with me and Maria. And Rin, one should assume, is thinking about how to live further. Well, well.

Actually, I don't know myself, how I would feel in her place. Although it is difficult for me to get into her place: I would not even think about such kind of revenge over the person dear to me. And for not dear... I don't care a brass button for not dear. I am yandere in the end. I am not waiting bad things from people. But if I would get – strike out the offender form list of humans. Desirably also from the list of alive. And what will happen to them next – don't care a damn. But this is all is abstract matters. And actually it is time to stop getting philosophical: the play is ended and we have to go to greet or friends.

So we approaching them. And I understand in a moment – everything is worse, then I thought: Keshishiro does not react not only on me, but also on Maria. And it means – in a really deep thoughts. And, unfortunately – there is no subject for him to think otherwise but Akie disappearance. Rin, on the contrary, shakes up and greets us with big enthusiasm. Although I still see – it is kind of unhealthy one. I would like to understand, what worries her: a perspective of guaranteed falling into Hell, or (hopefully) about friend?

Hell the Great! I do not want to understand anything. If Rin is such an idiot – I am washing my hands. Well, she found nothing better than to put on a blouse with wide loose collar. The Seal¹²⁹ is visible! Even while not all, just a piece of it... But... why am I so agitated? Well – somebody will figure out what she did. Will understand, that she sent somebody to Hell. And what next? They will realize that we do exist and also will submit for a contract? Well, we'll get more jobs. Most of them will be disgusting. But I already got used to it, ne?

Seemingly, it is all correct. But something stops me from calming down on this result and return to my normal business as nothing happened. Oh, kso! Got it... Kso-kso-kso! It is Maria! If she will notice the Seal – here we will get consequences. As minimum – in form of her, hm, hysteric. So – I am coming close to Rin, and, smiling to public – whisper to her with not the most benevolent tone:

– Are you crazy – to show off the Seal?!

– What?

– Blouses and swimsuits – only with high neck for you now. Or do you want them to point fingers on you and call you murderer?

She gets me at last. But if I would wait her to close the collar – I was wrong. Rin sighing, even with some relief:

– It's all the same for me.

At first moment my eyes went out on stalks, but then I understood. I've read about something like this: a criminal when getting caught feels relief that everything ended at last. All right, Rin, point for your case: you still have conscience. And so – let's go to have a little chat.

– Maria, – I am smiling to my friend. – Would you forgive me if we will leave you for some time to Keshishiro's care: Rin-chan promised me to show some game for 'Playstation'...

Definitely Maria would forgive us: Rin is more or less OK for her, but in spite of her numerous compliments Fujibayashi feels confused in her presence. And also – Keshishiro... We are leaving.

Intuition does not fail me again: ex-women change room – is free and unlocked. Rin goes after me reluctantly, but does not resist either. Limply. Dramatic difference from her normal behaviour. I am settling her in the armchair in front of mirror, putting up a chair that was lying on the floor for myself.

– Rin, listen. You've sent a person to Hell. Formally speaking – it is a murder. I can imagine that you are worried for this case. Although we are coming to a question why then you did it, but I would not ask it. It is your very personal and I am for you... just a mate.

Rin looks on me with dull eyes. Although, in the bottom – a small spark of interest: obviously, it is strange that I am so surely talking about her 'crime'. It is a mystique, in the end, and mystique in now days – is kind of fashion. People play it, but do not believe. And, unexpectedly – I am not trying to pull from her – whom, when and for what. I am continuing:

– But de jure – no. So there is no reason to wait that they will arrest and punish you accordingly. Then what you want to achieve with demonstrating your Seal?

– Don't know... – This is her first words since feverish greeting. Well, still it's a progress. – Noisome.

I am grasping my head.

¹²⁹After the contract execution the Seal is appearing on client's chest, as tattoo, which similar to 'Hell Correspondence' logo – a mark that this soul is destined to Hell for quite a certain deed. It is not possible to somehow remove the Seal, so it is maybe the only 'materialistic' proof of murder done by that person.

– Rin, well, can't you understand – if it is noisome – then you should not have done that! And now – you already did. Thislike, or thatlike, but you have to live with this. Well, you can feel so bad that even do not want to live, but then – look, a fully city of skyscrapers. Jump – that's all to do!

Rin shrugs. No, she is not so bad to kick the bucket.

– And if not – you have to live on. You would not help much your soul with remorse – the contract is irreversible, and you should pay anyway. But to live your life so that the Seal would not be your curse at least in life – you can. And for that – the first thing is not to show it.

Rin gives a wry grin:

– And how do you imagine that?

– What? – I do not understand.

– How to live so that the Seal would not be a curse. Here it is – on me. Where I should go from it?

– It is for you to decide. But it also would not go from you – why to fill all your days with it?

Rin shrugs:

– Tomorrow, or fifty years later... what's the difference?

– You don't feel the difference?

– I do. I want everything end ASAP.

– I suggested you an option. You are not ready for that. Think out your own. But in any way...

– Tell me, – Rin suddenly enlivened. – I realized only now. You are not worried about me. You worried with the Seal. Why?

I am smiling innocently.

– Well, for example, I do not want your Seal to provoke a cascade of contracts with Enma Ai? What about such theory?

Rin gives a wry smile again:

– No. Fair to middling theory. It is surprising actually to meet even two quite adult girls believing in this... But you believe differently. It is your Fujibayashi – the one who is kind and wants to save everybody. You are not like that. Cute, somehow funny and little bit of maverick girl with strange manners. But it is kind of devilry... no, you are not seem to be happy with such things... then – cruelty inside your soul.

I am thinking to myself: 'Actually with first word she hit the bull's eye. Devilry. I am a demon indeed. But she is correct. I could be cruel, but devilry – is for Kikuri.' Meanwhile, she suddenly reaches her arm and pulls my own blouse.

– No, Rin. I have no Seal. But somehow you are right: indeed, I do not have such motives. But... If I would say that I am worrying for a friend, exactly for Maria – would you believe me?

– Worrying for a friend?.. – Rin props her chin with the arm and looks somewhere faraway. – And I also worrying for a friend...

I want to say, that her friend maybe – is not so bad... But I cannot allow it. But I want! And then I am again surprising myself. 'More souls for Hell!' – you say? How cynical I am, in the end.

– Then check her.

Rin as looking on me with rounded eyes. Then nods. I don't know what she understand for herself, but at last closed her collar. And got some strength in her movements. Or maybe even purpose. Did she indeed make up her mind for suicide? To be fully honest – I would prefer to avoid taking such a sin on my soul. Even while I am living in Hell anyway. Bu it seems to me – he decided something else for her. Probably some kind of spiritual stuff. And why not? Maybe a real spriritism also exist? As Maria says: 'If there are God – there are devil.' If there are we – could be mediums?

Anyway, I achieved my target. Rin does not showing the Seal and even looks much more lively.

– Well, let's go?

– Yep.

Of course, we have not found our friends on the same place. But is it a problem in our days? I am pulling out communicator, calling to Maria. Which is also wise step: who know where she is? Not a high probability, but she really likes Keshishiro – what if they are alone? No, not alone. Sitting, eating lunch with the whole company. So ka. I did not notice that so much time passed.

And as much Rin got livelier – the same refreshed Keshishiro looks. But if my words gave a purpose for friend, then Maria's company indeed ennobled him. Here – it is that bishounen for whom it is easy to fall. Still some purpose I feel in him also. Interesting, what does it mean?

Although I am failing to clarify it. When we came – all talks about more or less subjects (if there was any of these) – finished for a long time, and there is a normal chatting at the table. Well, normal – for this place and this time. We are still at anime and mange festival. So chatting is about it. Surprisingly – I am totally out of discussion. Nothing to talk about. The o not mention anything that I like. Well then. At least I will be able to eat calmly.

Then the conversation turns to a sad subject: today is the last day of the festival. Giggles, with all my 'convulsions' I nearly forgot about that... Now I understand why Maria tried to put some order within my room: we have to pack and go back with the night train. But, how sad it would be to part, festival closure is a great... festive. And we also deciding to celebrate it. Obviously, Maria states that drinking is harmful, 'And for you, Jun, I would add that women alcoholism is not curable'... Pf-f! Nobody forces her, actually... But despite how strange it would sound – I think I would not be zealous today.

Ha! Said one undead girl. Well, actually on the banquette the forum people organized, I indeed nearly did not drink and was not naughty. As that 'Mary, who can't do it anymore'. Because before that I went to the last round through the pavilions... And was treated numerous times. People recognized me even in 'civil' outfit (though I, unlike to Maria, did not washed a green colour from hair!). Anyway – I've got my piece of fame, photographed with dozen of guys... Well, I have no regret for all of this. But it could be little bit less. For example – there was absolutely no need to climb up the gundam¹³⁰ model and being dragged from there by security.

As result, I spent the evening quietly and more or less calmly. And recovered so much, that not only got into train absolutely by myself (actually up to losing self-support I drunk only once even when alive), but also being quite sober and kind. What makes Maria happy.

A night before day eighty second

So we are riding, looking through the window on the nocturnal Japan, and discussing this coming to its end adventure... When suddenly – I don't even have to look on my watches, it is clear without any hints – at

¹³⁰Mentioned here 'Gundam SEED' anime (as well as oher seriee with the word 'gundam' in the name) is using settled name for certain style HHBRs. In each anime they provide different explanation for this word. For example, in 'Gundam SEED' it is an abbreviation of first letters from full name of robots type (usually absolutely insane, like 'General Unilateral Neuro-link Dispersive Autonomic Maneuve system'). So drunk Nohatsu, presumably, decided to feel herself Lunamaria and climbed into the model of battle robot.

midnight, Maria stunned. Here we came. Request for a contract. Well, we will know soon. Fujibayashi comes back to reality. She is really shocked.

– What? – I am asking.

– Again... – She answers and blinks with eyes.

– Something uncommon? You are not yourself...

– You see, Jun... I nearly got used to see it. I even thought that it is God had a grace for me and made me see how Enma Ai lures to sin...

– Maria, I love you indeed, – I tiredly cutting her. – But we already discussed it and even agreed, that Enma Ai does not lure anybody. Those, who input names on Her site – are *ready to commit* a sin of murder. And, in contrary to regular murder – will be punished for that without exclusions. But... what is happened today?

– Well, now I also have doubts. Because if the God gave me such ability, so I should be able to try to talk them out... You know – I haven't seen the face!

– They were standing backwards to you?

– The main issue that – not. I always seeing it from aside. If I would stay there indeed – then I would be actually nearly by Enma Ai's side. And I see a person in half section.

'Oh, it was not God, who gave you such ability. – I am thinking. – Think yourself, Maria, my darling... aside with whom are you staying? With a man? That's it. How to hint her on this? All right. Later.'

– So now you've seen a blur instead of face?

– Exactly!

– Yeah... Situation... 'Go there, don't know were; bring that, don't know what...' Have you at least heard their conversation?

– There was no conversation. They just nodded and said: 'Yes, I know, thank you'. That's all.

What's a heck? Well, indeed: why to show Maria such things? What the purpose? The only way – it was somebody very well known to us. And in some time she will find all details of this... with normal human methods. So she will do two plus two and will get a new piece of understanding? Well, well, it is some theory. And maybe it is a side effect. But of what? No, there should be some link between client's blurred face and Maria herself. Otherwise it is totally illogical.

– You know... I cannot say to you: 'don't take it too close', obviously. It would be totally unhumanlike. But if it is so strange and ununderstandable situation – you should better sleep for an hour, while we are riding. Hopefully, in the dream your subconscious will hint you something?

– Yes, you are right... The one thing left is to rely on it, – Maria sadly smiles and indeed going to sleep a little. And I nearly hear Hone-Onna's nails clicking on the keyboard. Soon email will arrive and I, on contrary, would know everything.

Yes! This is email. And it's a turn... That was Keshishiro. Who ordered... Rin. And already pulled the string. Attached – his conversation after returning to reality with the doll:

«– You indeed so worried for her?

– Yes... I would like to meet her... We both were idiots. And did a lot of really horrible things. But I still loved her.

– All right. Then...

– Wait! I will get to her anyway. Sooner or later. Why are you doing this?!

– I also loved her. See you later!»

I don't understand a thing. He ordered Rin – just in front of her? «Безумьем полон этот свет, полна безумьем Тьма. Иного объяснения нет. И я схожу с ума»¹³¹. Indeed, a quote of the night. And they are waiting for me. Oh, well, this is clear. I know all circumstances (now – better than anybody of us), and in all... Moreover, Rin not only realized everything, but wants... a right thing. So it is no need to scoff her, even opposite – if the 'conductor' will be somebody well-known – maybe it will even more improve situation. Actually, Hell is quite a 'vast place', as Little Mistress says. But I really wish them to meet. Together it would be... at least not too sad for them.

I am glancing on sleeping Maria and disappearing.

We again are sitting in deserted changing room. Rin is perplexed – too abrupt change of decorations.

– Oh my God! It was a dream? Jun-chan?

– No, Rin. Unfortunately, it wasn't a dream. Or fortunately.

– But why we are here? I remember, after that we talked here – it was a festival closure, we were going home, I came to Keshishiro's place... – she shaking her head, trying to knock off delusion.

– So it was. It just happened, that our conversation is not finished yet. I actually wanted to ask you, but was not able to do it until now: is it right to do so with beloved person?

– So it was? – her question is somehow unclear.

– Yes, it was. Festival closure, and all other things... And Keshishiro sacrificed himself to give you a chance to meet Akie sooner... and get a chance to meet her for himself. Later.

– So it is true. – gasps Rin. – Kso, I never fully believed... But then what are *you* doing here?

– Finalizing our conversation. And keeping company for you while you are waiting for Mistress to appear.

No, definitely, when people love each other – they are becoming similar. So with Rin – she picks up unexpected addressing and with flattering voice asking again:

– Ojou... -sama?

My smile is sad a little:

– Yes. I am – one of Her companions. By the way, that time Akie also asked me again when I called Mistress so...

– Oh, my God! And I was surprising – why do you so seriously taking the Seal and all of this... – Rin exclaims. And then the meaning of the second part of my phrase gets to her. She wringing her hands. – What an idiot I was! No, Nohatsu-san, not right! It is my answer, from now and ever: it is not right to do so!

I am smiling, now with satisfaction and some pride:

– So she said, Mistress.

Enma Ai appears aside to me. It seems, that today her furisode has more flowers than usually, I can't actually take it as black. And I also have a strong feeling, that she... how to say it correctly?.. Sad, same proud and little bit envious.

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

Rin is listening, holding her breath.

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

– 一遍死んで見る？

¹³¹? 'The light is filled with insane, the dark is crazy too. No other explanation. Ans I am getting mad.' - a quote from the song 'Insanity' by Dm. Protasov, known as Timoty Hillsboro, which is well know in Russian-speaking LARPG and historical reanation communities under the name 'Didly-didly'.

– Yes! – at last gasping she.

How much it... straddled her. But – it is love, now I know for sure.

Episode 21. More souls for Hell?

Day eighty seventh

– When using disk imaging tools on system partitions – you should pay an attention to partition placement and letters, assigned to disks...

So this puzzle-pated, hard and strange, but still very pleasant journey has ended. I am again sitting on lecture, listening with corner of my ear (oh, yes, when I was alive I has been there: full chaos with letters and partitions, I've got out then indeed by narrow margin), but still actually doing nothing. To my great joy – all lull for us. Hone-Onna actually noticed a growth in rumours about 'Hell Correspondence' circulation in 'Kanri', but there are no orders. Actually it is a strange tendency: a rumour without makeup should die apparently. And it is opposite – circulates more and more. Should we try to figure out the source of situation escalation?..

Maria is also calmed down somehow. Though she is still trying to find this man without face, but still with little success. And, as it seems to me – trying not too much. No surprise, naturally: she knows that a contract is already executed. And she sees her mission in preventing contracts, not in comforting 'murderers'.

In the end – the only visible activity around my main work – is one policeman, who is under Ichimoku Ren's survivalence. He ordered some second-rate yakuza... Pardon, for our city – practically one of main bosses. It is in Japan-wide scale he is second-rate. Ordered already a week ago. But Little Mistress does not rush to answer. There is no reason to decline. But we also still unsure of potential client's intentions. Indeed: it is natural for modern cop to disgrace yakuza. But to hate to death... for what? And if he was just feeding a momentary burst of anger (which is indirectly confirmed by the fact, that he has not accessed our site since that time) – the why we should sacrifice one of 'executives', to let him (or her, would it be me or Hone-Onna) to collect dust for unknown time somewhere in nightstand?

So we live. Quietly. Ren keeps an eye on the cop, Hone-Onna works at 'Kanri', I am pretending that I am studying... Kikuri goes rounds through city, Yamawaro runs after her, because her wind lasts not for long, and her voice with that does not switches off... So he yelling to wind her back. What Little Mistress does during the day – I don't know, and in the evenings she plays mah-jong with Wanyuudoo, Hone-Onna and myself. By the way, Wanyuudoo pulled a stunt. He now also pretending to study. After that case when he was working as a sport car with me driving – he decided himself to try to drive such a car. And wants to get a driving license. I dream to see, how he would pass a manoeuvres test: in five seconds or in ten?..



8Wanyuudoo, Hone-Onna

Ichimoku Ren calls me during the break.

– Jun-chan, looks like we are hitting a dead end. I can't see any clues. And as I remember – you also failed to find anything in computers?

– No, Ichimoku Ren-san, nothing...

– So we have to make a contact. Hone-Onna agreed to seduce Sahashi-san (it is our yakuza)... I can infiltrate as private in line department – but it is too far from Asakura-san. Can we somehow meet him with you?

– Ren-san, but he is an adult, nearly aged man! No, I have nothing against mature men, don't think so. Bu he... Or you figured out that he is a rorikon¹³²?

Ren grins:

– Trust me, men of all ages like young girls. But some are hiding it. But I was thinking about something that will pull his father's, not man's strings.

– Et-to... I have not thought about such... Interesting idea...

– Jun-chan, you've got a hormonal storm? Then seduce some classmate for yourself!

– Sumimasen, Ren-san, but you are – an uncourtly vulgar person!

Ren laughing out loudly.

– All right, back to the matter. – he says after laughing. – Any ideas?

I am thinking. Both husband and father have similar motives: to support and protect. But husband protects in materialistic matters – with money and fists, and supports – morally. Father does the same from position of wise and experienced. He most likely will help with advice. Or, speaking of materialistic stuff –

¹³² Rorikon – a man interested in young girls. Derives from Nabokov's Lolita: as Japanese language does not have sound 'L' Lolita – Loli – Rori.

with something that a priori unreachable for the man of same age as his daughter. And what wisdom and experience our cop has? Exactly police ones.

– Well, I see two variants: either to write diploma of criminal science and investigations method development in Japan... Or...

Now it is my turn for giggles.

– Sumimasen, Ren-san. Do you have something against somehow unethical methods?

Ren puzzled.

– Depends on how much unethical. And how much disgusting. What came into your twisted mind?

– Ano... Ren-san, you said that young girls are liked by men of all ages? What about three-ages-old tsukumogami¹³³?..

– Jun-chan, I like you indeed... But more like a niece. What are you hinting?

– Could you play a role of stalker?

I nearly see how he scratches his head. But then grins:

– All right. But for that you will... go on deito with me. Later...

Stunned.

– Ren-san... You said yourself – as niece?..

– ... to the shooting range! I never understood these noisy things – so you will explain me a little. And I, all right, will show you several tricks with baton or katana.

Uf-f-f! No, I Really feel for Ren. But it is true – current-I also taking him as elder brother or uncle indeed. And if I would him when I was alive – we would be friends. Also, if one would think of such kind of stuff – it seems to me that they with Hone-Onna have... not simple mutual relations.

Another good aspect in my idea – that it could be moved forward in parallel with all other our business. Stalker formally does not disturbing the flow of life of his prey. Just harassing with pursuit. With gifts, letters, calls... and shadowing.

Day ninetieth, kso!

... And I should tell you – if I did not knew, that it is actually Ichimoku Ren, I would be indeed in panic and rage. Got my goat! Thousands of goats!!! I swear: how great, that stalker phenomenon is nearly not ‘exported’ outside from Japan. European and middle-Asian men are more straightforward and do not hide themselves in shadows. So, in worst case you can tell them in the face to get lost. Or even claw that face. And here –something blurry spins on the horizon... To cut it: after only two days of Ren’s attack I was completely ready to meet our potential client.

We are picking up a moment, when Asakura-san having his dinner in overcrowded restaurant (he is single). I am cannoning into the hall in panic, looking around badgered – and dropping into the chair next to him.

– Sumimasen! – I am whispering through the tears. Tears, buy the way, absolutely real. When sending ‘go ahead’ signal to me – Ren said something... very offensive. And even while I understand, that he offended me exactly to make me cry naturally... It hurts anyway. He would say something at least a little more soft... I know – he is taking revenge over me for that unpleasant role.

– Sumimasen... – I am saying it again. – Can I sit a little bit with you... at least five minutes?..

¹³³tsukumogami (付喪神) – very old human-made object with long history can turn into this type of demon. Ichimoku Ren (ex-katana) is definitely tsukumogami, and Wanyuudoo is also close enough to this type.

– Of course you can. This place is free... – Asakura-san invites me with nod. Then raising his gaze to me. Meanwhile I am, with broken motions, trying to pull out a handkerchief from the handbag – to dry my eyes.

– What’s happened with you, little miss? – now his voice is truly worried. This is why I was talking about unethical methods: he worries about me absolutely sincerely!

– Sumimasen... – I am saying for a third time. – I would be ashamed to involve a stranger into my problems...

So our conversation would have been ended... It was a bad answer from my side. But my physiology comes to help and I am uttering a power- and mourn- ful sob.

– Little miss, I no way do not want to intrude into your feelings. – says Asakura-san. – But from my point of view, your problems are not the ones, which should stay intimate. Trust to my instincts of old police officer...

– You are – police officer? – I am looking on him with hope... hopefully – it looks convincing.

– Yes... So, what scared you so much? Thugs? Or?...

– Or... – I am sniffing and ‘letting it out’. – Goes after me. Calls. Sends letters. As stalker! A pest!

And the later – absolutely sincerely.

– Hoh-ho... – Asakura-san sighing. – And of course, you never told anyone...

Now I can just to sniffle agreeing. All other he will imagine himself. But actually yes. Would it be truth, and I am – *not* Nohatsu Jun – would not tell anyone. It is not European model ‘if you’ve got problems, - then you are fool’. It is Japan. Where, firstly, inferiors can’t have any problems for senior’s attention. As a matter of fact. And where can’t be any ‘stalkers’. He does not do anything reprehensible! So – endure that, woman!

And I figured out correctly: indeed, all my involvement in later conversation is reduced to two sounds: ‘splosh!’ and ‘u!’. Asakura-san sees me home (oh, how we were right when rented this flat!) and leaves his card. Asking to call him if anything.

I am entering apartments with beating heart. If there Ren waits for report?.. No, he is actually brains and bunting. He is not here. Only Hone-Onna which greets me with the message:

– Ichimoku Ren sincerely apologise for what was said and asked to channel the message that he was acting exclusively for our job sake. But while his words was offensive indeed – he apologies and does not want to annoy with his presence to his ‘dear niece’.

After that she is switching from official to friendly tone and asking:

– What he plumped to you, such an idiot?

– Hone-Onna-san. – I am forcing smile – he actually hurt me enough. – If I would tell it to you – you will resent him. And he is actually indeed a very good man.

Ha-ha! Today again I have two ponytails! Why do they so eager to pat my head? But I also did, as far as I remember, going to touch Little Mistress. Kind of stereotype. But actually I am grateful and pleased with Hone-Onna’s caress.

– Chow! – announces Enma Ai

To say that we are stunned – is to say nothing. She already has four in bamboos... and she takes chow in men, and even more – ‘ignoble’ one. I.e. which could not be used for... kso, I am always forgetting how this mah-jong named. The one, which is like ‘street’. So, she would not get ‘single colour’, she would not get doubling for ‘no chows’... Soup-mah-jong, as I call it. What’s happened to our aesthete?

– Four men. – Hone-Onna spells it learnt-passionlessly.

And I am suddenly blushing and telling:

– East.

Because I understood: Little Mistress did this not proper move... for me. Not for game. And to let me understand something bigger. It is Her reproach for unfair play with Asakura-san. And I am answering with only possible move: it is clear for a long while that we clashed with two pairs of East winds. I have pair at my hand, and She has. It is also not bad option – to ‘close’ mah-jong with wind or dragon pair. But after this reproach I am breaking mine. Because all that we do – we are doing for Her. Wanyuudoo looks at me... no, not *at* me. *Through* me, disregarding how trivial it would sound. And, seemingly understood - both move by Little Mistress and my answer. He nods me approvingly.

Day ninety third

– Asakura-san! – I am crying into the phone aloud. To be honest, I am crying because really painfully bumped with shin on the server, which Tenjin left on the way. But I also have a reason to call him: looks like, Ren decided to get crazy with this role on full throttle and to play the one, whom he never bee and would not be ever. Complete pervert, I would daresay. And now I am calling to Asakura-san because I see on my work desk a box from DHL full of ... striped pantsu¹³⁴. Actually it is offending in double: striped pantsu is mark of tsundere, not yandere¹³⁵ at all...

We are meeting again. He listens to my flattering story, calming me down with short replies. In pauses – tells what he did to find my ‘stalker’. And I actually do not know – I am flattering because of role and overall mood (Ren put indeed a great pressure on me)... or because of what he is telling me.

– Nohatsu-san... – tells me our potential client. – Do not take me as if I am hiding incompetency. But the stalker after you... I am afraid – he is not a human. Or a human, having supernatural abilities. Because on rational level...

Kso. And kso again. Ichimoku Ren got absorbed with playing and nearly was discovered. Asakura-san’s arguments are rock solid. So we should finish our play ASAP. But we still have not moved yet from the dead end: why Asakura-san himself?.. I am deciding to play shit-or-burst.

– So – we are powerless? Nobody will help me, even jigoku Shoujo... if she exists?.. I should endure?

Got contact! He floods.

– Impotence. Most horrible thing. Sorry, that I am telling you it... But I tried to help you not just so. One scoundrel dishonoured a daughter of my brother. And I – a police officer – was not able to do anything. Not to save her, not to avenge. Because he has too powerful patrons. You would be laughing, but I am – I had even tried to ask Hell Girl for help. And also got no answer. And then I decided that I will try to save at least others... But even here cannot do anything...

He suddenly jerks with chin. Eyes narrowed with some furious determination.

– Gomenasai, Nohatsu-san. I cannot help you. And have to leave. Please, forget about me.

– Asakura-san! – I am naturally hanging on him. – Wait!

And below my breath, nearly whispering:

– You decided to kill that man yourself. Knowing that he has powerful patrons and you will get revenge upon you?

He looks on me surprised: he did not expect so quick... well, that I would understand his idea so quickly.

– Yes.

¹³⁴Pantsu – again imporded. But in Japan English ‘pants’ are used only for underwear, especially women panties.

¹³⁵If it possible to say, it is a law of shounen genre: if a girl flashed with striped panties – she is nearly for sure – tsunderekkko. Although in ‘K-On!’ this law was broken.

– And if nobody would help you – you will still try to do it?

– Yes.

I am releasing him.

‘That’s what he said, Mistress!’

We are standing under the big tree. Blood-red sunset plays with our faces. I am still at Asakura-san’s side. In front of us – Enma Ai and Hone-Onna. But who is revenge and who is its tool? He avenges? Or she, Hone-Onna? Sunset ties us. And it is correct. The client will pull the string very soon, Little Mistress choice has also logical basis: it would not affect main assignment of my friend. And actually – we are all in sunset. Hone-Onna likes to revenge upon those, who hurts women.

– Hone-Onna. – pronounces Little Mistress.

She bows and throws a string of obi over her neck, turning into red straw doll. The doll drops into Enma Ai’s trusted out hand.

– It happens, – I am telling, – That true intensions of person is unclear. And the Little mistress sends her companions to find out – how strong the wish for revenge...

– Take this, – Enma Ai hands Hone-Onna over to our client. – If you really wish to take revenge – you may pull the red string. If you remove the string you shall officially enter into a contract with me. The one you seek revenge upon shall be taken immediately to Hell.

Asakura-san holds Hone-Onna with two hands. I am sure – he knew, he was ready... But still shocked. Still not believing.

– However, if I deliver your revenge, I must have you make restitution to me. When one person is cursed, two graves are dug. When you die, your soul shall fall into the pit of Hell. Your soul shall wander forever in pain and suffering, never having known paradise. Well, that’s after you die.

We are standing on the street. Hone-Onna in his hands. In barely audible whisper – the last words of introduction to the contract:

– The rest – is for you to decide.

Asakura-san stunned. I am gently taking his hand and pulling them (hand and Hone-Onna) to the pocket of his jacket. Don’t show it, no need. This my action returns him back to reality:

– You’ve seen. – He claiming, not asking. – Then, let’s go. You’ll watch it ‘till the end. Maybe you would feel better knowing that not all stalkers escape unpunished.

We are staying in the passageway, coming to ‘our Sinjuku¹³⁶’ – a part of highway and streets nearby, allocated in our city for casinos, bars... and other facilities. Disregarding to evening time – traffic is quite heavy. And even with openly rude driving and other cars letting them go – three ‘Mercedes’ with left-side steering wheels¹³⁷ plough through it slowly and hardly. Minute passed – and now they are in front of us.

Asakura-san puts his hand into the pocket and changes colour. Little Mistress appearing nearby.

– Contract is cancelled.

– What?! – Asakura-san nearly shouting.

Hone-Onna, who stands aside, again as geisha-maiden (when she appeared?) explains:

– Contract is due to cancelation if the object of contract leaves the world of alive for other reasons.

¹³⁶Sinjuku – amusement district in Tokyo

¹³⁷Modern yakuza like very much European cars with left steering wheel – there is a significant import tax for these, so such car immediately recognized as more expensive, as it’s right-wheeled ‘relatives’.

– But they still moving! What are you!..

In fury Asakura-san gets to his jacket and pulls out a gun. Well, yes, he is – a police officer and should have a service weapon. Hone-Onna stunned. Little Mistress... don't know. Maybe also stunned. She is a girl in the end. And maybe just beholding the development of situation. But I don't like this development. Because I am – not a regular Japanese girl. And because I know: Hone-Onna said truth. There is no object in the world of living. Another woman, mother of another girl pulled the string on Wanyuudoo's neck. And if Asakura-san will begin to shoot now – he would achieve nothing: bulletproof windows will hold several shots. Guards, who not aware about what is happened – honeycomb him. And where is sense?

And reflexes from previous life sometimes coming out in me. Abrupt hit with the sharp of the hand under the wrist joint, right hand covers the gun from top. His finger reflectively relaxed, and bumped to my hand pistol dropping to the ground.

– Stop, you! – I am hissing angrily.

Cortege is stopping in the middle of the highway. Several guys, openly holding automatic guns ('submachineguns, you fool girl!' – hints me I-from-past) jumping out from forward and rear escort cars, ready to take perimeter defence. Different guys, but somehow the same. Clones without soul. One of them opens the door of passenger coupe in the middle 'Mercedes'. It is empty.

– Gomenasai, Asakura-san. We have to leave you. Please, forget us as soon as possible.

Hone-Onna puzzled:

– And why you'd stopped him? Not even it was dangerous, but also senseless – he would change nothing with his shooting!

I feel warmth on my forearm. It is Little Mistress' hand.

– Exactly. Nothing.

Episode 22. Fujibayashi's birthday

Day ninety fifth

– Jun-chan, Oi, Jun-chan! – Maria whispers to me as soon as I am dropping by the desk: some habits I cannot overcome, and even while I am getting up far before required time – still permanently late on first pair. For two-three minutes, but late. And Maria, seems so overwhelmed with some news, which cannot wait until the break.

Actually, I even know what news bursting her. So I am answering to her whisper:

– Happy birthday, Maria!

She just blooming.

– You remembered!

– We are friends in the end, how could I! – I am smiling. – I will give you a present on the break, could you wait a little?

The present is – yukata¹³⁸. Light and very beautiful. It was selected with joint efforts of Hone-Onna and me. And then – demonstrated to Little Mistress. Who even honoured us with approving nod. Well, indeed,

¹³⁸ Yukata – light cotton kimono.

you should present things that you like yourself. So we found such a nice one... With unusual, actually, decorations – like flowers-bindweeds on the whole field.

– I could, of course! But I would tell you right now: I am holding some small party tonight. And because with parents – in traditional style. And you are – invited.

I am happy and confused. I don't have anything suitable. The question of clothes does not bothering us, we can, I would say, create outfit if necessary. As Hone-Onna can from maiden in trousers, shirt and ponytail hair in the blink of eye change into geisha on full parade and corresponding hairdress... So all of us. But I don't know as boys... I am constantly having a problem: I can create outfit. But cannot decide, or design – what to create...

Actually I see here some frightening correlation with Christian beliefs of Maria. Her religion states, that devil cannot independently create, but only moves and mixes. And all we can – is to move and mix. Moving and making a new mosaic of people memories.. And I even can't decide on dress. So it goes.

– Gome, Maria... And when exactly?.. You know... I have no yukata... And I am working in afternoon. Will I be able to buy one after work?

– Of course! – Maria is ready to give a hand. – I can come to 'Kanri Solutions' at 5PM, and we will buy everything together! The will get into your place, change...

Wow! The whole plan she got! Actually, I suspect, it was exactly so: lack of yukata in my wardrobe easily could be figured out from my 'legend'. So Maria indeed could design this plan in advance.

– Arigato gozaimoshta¹³⁹ – I am answering, blushing with full colours.

Well, that's all right. Well spend some part of salary and will buy a real yukata, obi... and geta¹⁴⁰ will buy also. They are funny. With two vertical 'stands'. Very cool sandals.

And in 'Kanri' I have no chance to do any work. Once I am arriving – calling 'on top'. I am in panic. Looking over my sins, but cannot find anything besides of unexpected journey to the festival. And because I am a piece-worker still – it should not be a big problem. Opposite, last days (especially after my return) – I am taking on the world... Et-to... well so I am taking world and what I am doing with this? For example – putting it into handbag.

Stupid ideas coming into my mind. It is because I am panicking. How many times Hone-Onna reprovved me for taking work-cover to close to heart – still I am in awe before bosses. Even while, how Koroviev said: 'I have an honour to be in retinue of the one whose capabilities...' ¹⁴¹ Don't remember. The meaning itself – remember, quote – not.

It turns to be, that I am called to 'the top' for absolutely opposite reason. After recent installation of ISA server to the client, who was suffering from overloaded Internet channel (as it was found out with help of that ISA – some of their employees without doubting for a moment was downloading torrents as from cannon)... To cut it: the client sent a letter of gratitude, where was praising in all means 'Kanri' as a whole, and Nohatsu Jun in particular. And bosses decided that it is a good time to arrange a career jump for me,

¹³⁹Arigato gozaimoshta (ありがとうございました или 有難うございます) – very formal and polite form of gratitude words. 'From the very bottom of my heart I am grateful for your generous care' – something like that..

¹⁴⁰Geta (下駄) – wooden sandals for walking over mud: on two high heels, like a bench. In modern Japan could be weared in any cases with traditional outfit.

¹⁴¹Nohatsu trying to quote form 'The Master and Margareth' by M. Bulgakov. 'The one' mentioned there was Satan himself.

which they were promising after the first interview. It is little bit sad: I have a strong feeling – the whole story is close to its end. I don't think that in day or two, but still. My intuition tells me: I worked here more than half of my term. But anyway now it is the exercise only for Ioin. Because I don't have to pretend to be smiling. My smile is natural. Though besides of being 'happy' – it is also 'malicious'. I still have some time to avenge 'a cat without a smile'.

I am returning to our office with a nice penal, where lies rolled order for my promotion. I am coming to Hone-Onna the first thing. She immediately noticing a malicious grin on my face and whispers happily:

– Well, Jun-chan, show me, what you've got there?

– O! – I am telling her and opening the scroll in front of her.

– O! – answering Hone-Onna. Funny – the only one sound, but how many emotions: I was letting it out as: 'Ha! Have look how cool am I!', and Hone-Onna – with applause and... respect.

– Well, Nohatsu-san, – she is speaking now in full voice. – I a spect of your entering the service of department head you should organize a staff meeting... allocate tasks... probably also organize a party for informal socializing and celebrating your inauguration...

Something dropped behind the screen. I even know what. It is Aruno-kun dropping a screwdriver, with which he was dealing with another one server. Be-be-be! Actually, it is good, that I am promoted at last. Because I am quite regularly have to do some incredibly stupid jobs. And for Aruno-kun (and for few other boys, with whom I have only work-related contact) – opposite, sometimes there are jobs, which I would accomplish quickly, with right little finger, and they are messing about it for hours and calling me over 9000 times with questions. And now I am controlling the flow of jobs and will distribute it more wisely. Giggles. I am feeling ironical gaze from Hone-Onna with my back. Again I am too serious with cover. Well... I am such a geek.

All right. I did a speech. Lads was excited, and Hone-Onna was glaring with reproof: I am not skilled with formal speeches, so took a joking tone from the beginning. And included there a lot of gaijin gunjin¹⁴² jokes. Like 'boots should be polished in the evening to put it on in the morning on fresh head'. Well, this particular was about that we should plan ahead... And we would drink sake on Friday. I am actually even tired of drinking. But here it is unavoidable. Tradition.

And now I left the office and see – Maria is already waiting for me. It is warm on my heart: she is in my yukata. I mean – in the one I've presented her. Looks like nothing, but very touching – that your present is so accepted. And... I was right to involve Hone-Onna. Fujibayashi is absolutely magnificent in this kimono. I can't say anything else – ideally suits for her. No doubts, I would not be able to make such a selection myself.

– Hi, Jun-chan, – she waves hand to me. – So, you've got free? Let's go shopping?

I am nodding happily.

Shopping takes little longer, than I expected. The problem is – Maria is not Hone-Onna. And does not possess a taste polished in two hundred years. So we are choosing yukata for me from three 'passed initial selection' in one shop, then going to another, there checking another four, then coming back to the first one... No I really like it and I am getting a great pleasure from all of that. I am not complaining, I am stating the fact, as they say: it was nice, but took more time than we expected. At last (and, as always – all of

¹⁴² Gunjin (軍人) – 'army people', soldiers.

sudden) – we are coming to absolutely amazing yukata in the very third, which we actually noticed absolutely accidentally, when passing by. It is... Ah, it is just... It is black, and blue and violet flowers like bell-flowers on the whole field. And I was losing my mind with bell-flowers even when was alive. Worshipping!

After selecting yukata we have no problems with obi: it is clear, that we need blue, either without decoration, or with silver or relief flower decoration. Which we managing to find quickly enough. But as result – when we are coming out from my flat – it is already dark. It would not affect Maria – there is plenty of time before party, her parents are late workers, and some other guests – too. So we were planning just to sit at her place before guests' arrival. But lingered. And it is little bit too late now for two young girls in beautiful yukata. And Maria even (oh, responsibility for guests and party anticipation completely switched off her brains!) – pulls me for shortcut from the bus stop to her place through alleyways...

Kso. Once I thought it – hat I was afraid of happens. Four guys are blocking our way.

– Beautiful girls! – begins one of them, clearly leader. – You have a high day today? How great! Maybe you will share some joy with several charming lads?

I don't know, is it hold-up, or something worse. In any case – nothing good for us with Fujibayashi in the sky. I feel void in knees. Judging by Maria's chocking sigh – she is also frightened nearly to death. And this point pulls me out from stun. Kso, in the end – I am... not a regular Japanese girl! Pulling a charming smile over my face... although it is charming only for a first glance: with pulling myself back and feeling my friend's dread – anger rising in me. Generally – I hate jobs!

– By the word 'share' – run! – whispering to her with corner of mouth and approaching top banana. – Indeed, boys... And how can we share our joy?

I hear the footsteps of Maria running away.

– Ouch! It seems that my friend thought something wrong... But...

My jobs initially got alerted, seen Fujibayashi's fast retreat, but I am still here. And my words – quite calm and not dangerous – making them relax. Like I am still in their hands. Fuckheads! But... just as planned. I am coming closer and closer to them... And even putting my right arm on the bell-wether' shoulder. Well, the entire Hell break lose! Now you will know, that there are Nohatsu between girls!

6th category cable shoots out from my left shoulder, I am catching it with right hand and wrapping it over his neck. With that I am moving aside and nearly behind his back – covering with his body from two others. The one behind me gets a nice kick into chest. I just felt, that I have to buy geta, not dzori: judging by sound, 'stands' are breaking several ribs to that job.

Others are beginning to realize that everything went in some discord with their plans. And that their numbers already reduced nearly twice: Mr. Big is still trying to get me with his left hand (and he as most people – right-hander), but I am successfully blocking... and waiting until strangle him. I am not going to kill him, but to 'switch off' – yes.

– Bitch! – shouts one of those, who 'have not yet got my attention' and pulls out a shiv.

Well, you volunteered. I am quite an honest girl. But crazy, yes. I is not decent to wave a knife on me. I have some skills in this myself. Little finger of my free left hand turns into another patch cord, with which I am wrapping his hand with a knife ad jerking it on-aside me. He loses balance... and getting the thing that I like most of all for men, who 'allowing themselves' towards girls: a good punch with sandal between legs.

Kso, and the last one – is not fool. He is rounding croaking Mr. Big from the front and getting ready to caress me with... I have no time to recognize – is it a cut of conduit, or something like this... Anyway – a short and quite impressive looking baton.

Fortunately, I was quite a bearcat even when was alive. And regularly batted (for nearly the same reasons, what is typical) with all these Lebanese and Egyptians. So the decision comes immediately: I am moving farther behind top banana, gaining few more moments. At the same time – reducing length of transformed little finger, pulling crouched guy with knife. Great, he is busy with other stuff, fingers are weak. Removing a knife. Unfortunately, due to understandable reasons, now I can hold my trophy only with ‘pirate’ grip – blade down. Although it is easier to block like this. So one hit of the baton I am taking on the back side of the knife, and another – on the bell-wether.

Great. Fantastic indeed. With this hit he is finally knocked out and no more cumpers me. Let’s dance, my boy?!

Throwing knife into my left hand. And now it is pointed up. It is not a pirate grip, with which you could only cut shoulders. It is serious now. And opponent, seemingly guessed, that I am not only no amateur in fighting, but a lefthander also. And from my blood lusting smile panicking even more. And I am indeed in bloody haze. ‘Do clean job, kill a job!’ Only slightly smouldering spark of pity – I am now – a total advantage: I knew how to brawl; and undead now – what his baton will do for me indeed?.. And simple psychological advantage: they ‘pressurized’ a girl in yukata... and got a crazy bloodthirsty fury. So, he is visibly panicking and trying to finish with me in one hit. Right decision... but dangerous. Straight vertical into head, possibly, would throw me out from reality of living for some time, and would let him to run away (and he does not think about anything anymore). But it is a shit-or-burst hit. When he is doing it – he is all opened. And my reaction and speed – far from human. Multiplied with hatred.

So I am easily avoiding his attempt, clapping by nape – all of him already flying forward, I just have to help a little... And sticking him on the knife of his mate. Hit into right lung – is not deadly. In two minutes his pals will regain consciousness and drag him to ambulance.

All right. And now I have to think. Top banana is strangled and got a hit into head. At least five minutes of backward memory loss guaranteed. But others will remember cables, shooting from me. No, it is not good. I am adding ‘from hip’ to Broken Ribs and Eunuch heads. Now they also got concussion. And I pity the last one. He fought better and suffered more. So I am just mixing his mind and drawing memories about a girl that is totally tough, but without abnormalities.

Uf-f-f... Seems that I’ve sorted things here. And I feel easier on soul. I really hate such guys. Even when was alive – hated. There is a last problem: Fujibayashi. What I will tell her? Oh, leave it!.. Will tell as always, not lying, but not the whole truth. I had street-fighting experience there, where I lived before Japan? And that I have inadequate reactions and instead of panic (which I actually felt at the first moment, fully fitting into my current image) – I am nearly gaijin. That’s all. Do not addle your head, Jun-chan! It’s time to go after Maria.

Which happens much easier to achieve, then I expected. Maria reached the closest well-lit and more-or-less crowded street, dropped on steps to some shop and crying.

– Oi, Maria. – I am saying, lightly touching her shoulder.

She is raising her head and looks on me with joy... and disbelief.

– Jun... You... – she is sobbing.

– Alive and sound, if I can say so. And buoyant than before. And you’ve got mascara flooded. – I am stating.

– But...

– Maria. You forgot, that even while my name is Nohatsu Jun – I am not fully Japanese in fact. – suddenly, I am getting mad again for a second. – I hate such fuckheads. But, If you would feel better from that – I would add: I killed nobody.

Fujibayashi looks on me through tears as on some unreal being. Well, yes, I am not fully fitting with concepts of rational reality indeed. But... I am sitting down in front of her, pulling out from handbag-sac-pouch (well, you know, these on strings, which girls traditionally use with kimono) a handkerchief and fixing her.

– Well, don't cry already. Everything good. You have a birthday today. Soon guests will come and would congratulate you. They love you...

Suddenly Maria buries herself to my shoulder and cries with new strength.

– But you!...

I am getting her instantly.

– Maria... But was I able to decide otherwise?

– No... but you...

I am switching to mocking tone.

– Endeed. Arrived as a preence on the white stag, threw out foes and in overall fixed all falsehood. Maria, understand at last: you are my dear friend. I just cannot do otherwise. And, fortunately, quite can do.

I am also not very understandable, But Maria gets my idea.

– Why? Why you are saving me? You need me so?

And on this place I am slightly flipping. Actually – it is quite a normal and somehow expected question. But I feel something strange here. In her intonations maybe? 'Never before Schtirlitz¹⁴³ was not so close to failure' – quote comes to my mind. But it does not change the answer anyway,

– I need you. You are my beloved friend (do not think about yuri). I... just can't afford myself to lose you. Even with price of trust.

Failure, failure and failure again. Maria is clever, observant and her brains working as they should. Both logic and intuition. If she had seen (or will see in the nearest future) the case with Asakura-san – I am burnt to ashes. I mean – completely failed. And she will realize – what I am actually. What kind of being am I. But... I don't care. Because I was not able to decide otherwise. I had to save her. Because – she is my beloved friend. That's it. And I would not accept any other answers.

Episode 23. Strange alliance

Day ninety ninth

– Hakanaky chi-ita hikari ga...– I am singing most liked song by «High and Mighty Color»¹⁴⁴ band, while working with our server. A song is really nice, and also it was the first not pop-music opening in Gundam SEED and Gundam SEED Destiny anime. Plus it was a lot of my beloved Lunamaria in that opening. So – by all means pleasant song.

¹⁴³ Schtirlitz – a main chracter in popular Russian movie '17 moments of spring'. Russian agent working in Nazi Gremany as SS Schtandartenfurher. So failure here is a failure as secret agent.

¹⁴⁴Quote from song "Pride".

And with the server situation is *unpleasant*: too little space on disk left. Well, some stuff I already archived, but anyway. Moreover, I do not understand – what eats so much space – our database is not so big, I checked it the first thing. So, I just doing a boring thing – calculating sizes of all folders.

Wow, here it is, it seems. Somewhere in user profiles... something huge... roams. Interesting, in whose? Let's have a look... enma.ai – nearly empty. Hone.onna – little bit bigger, than normal, but without fanaticism... Still I'll have a look... Well, a collection of kimono photos. I cannot deprive my friend of such beauty... Moreover, I would ask her to show it to me. Definitely, I can have a look right now, as server administrator. But would not – unethical. Let's go on. Ichimoku.ren – also without fanaticism. Have no feel to look what's there: and if there is some kind of hentai¹⁴⁵? He is a guy in the end. Nohatsu.jun... Mama mia! What's it? What so huge I've got? So it was my profile guilty... OK. Work folders – all normal. And in one service folders, here, here... an incredible file with undescriptive name 'stream.dat'. And what's inside?

Giggles! No more field notes for me. Unnecessary. It turns to be – this stream.dat – is really stream. Stream of my thoughts. Beginning with first power-on of our server, and ending with... I am jumping to the end of file and looking how it updates with words 'I am jumping to the end of file...' Stop! I should get out from recursion. Jumping back to the beginning and thinking – what to do with this? By the way – a good idea: here I will cut a piece until around today to separate file, delete all uninteresting (which is much more than all interesting places) and will keep it as kind of diary. Yes, and not to forget to clean original streamd.dat timely... But it is funny, funny indeed: I never would think that I have so close relations with servers! Unfortunately – I cannot directly put pieces of this file into the database: it turns to be that I am still thinking in Russian. So work-related parts should be translated beforehand.

And who is it staying behind me and impertinently goggling in this entire Cyrillic? I am turning. Of course – Ichimoku Ren. Kso, I completely forgot with all this server! I promised a deito to him on the shooting range. I am jumping:

– Gomenasai, Ichimoku Ren-san. I am ready.

Then a funny idea crawls into my head and my outfit is changed: now I am dressed in women uniform of ZAFT-regular (from the same 'Gundam'). With Kirby pin I am fixing a garrison cap on my head and rearrange two ponytails. Ren looks on me puzzled.

– what's it?

– I, – giggles. – thought that so we will get a funny inversion of one scenery from anime!

– Which one?

I am opening my laptop and showing him a moment, where Aslan is teaching Lunamaria to shoot with pistol. Indeed we will have an inversion: in anime a boy in civil outfit is teaching a girl with elite uniforms to shoot... And for us – a girl in regular uniforms (if not hair colour – I would be quite a copy of Meirin¹⁴⁶) will teach a boy in civil outfit. By the way, Ren liked the joke and copies Aslan's clothes. It suits for him too... Well, Ren by all means a handsome guy.

¹⁴⁵ Hentai – anime- or manga- porn. Actually 'hentai' (変態 or へんたいいい) means 'strange/abnormal' and could be used as characteristic: 'you are – hentai', and not only about a guy who spying naked bathers from the bushes, but also for more innocent reasons.

¹⁴⁶ Meirin serving CIC (combat information controller) on the same battleship[, th which gudam of her sister, Lunamaria, assigned. Alsn (Zara) – a character from both SEED seasons, one of two main protagonists of the anime – clever and tactful guy, typical officer and knight. Boths sisters fell for him, and due to different circumstances (not fully dependant on these three) – in the end Meirin gets him.

We are transferring to our apartments: unfortunately, we cannot appear directly on the shooting range: humans will be shocked! But – while today is holiday – we are getting there quickly enough. In addition, when I got promotion in ‘Kanri’ – they gave me a car to visit clients. And a license I... created. As if I already had it. Because I am too lazy to get it in a normal way. Enough, I already passed driving tests twice: once in Russia, and second time – in UAE. Well, and if Jun is driving – then we are going by rational route on top allowed speed: I don’t like to violate, but to meditatively crawl in the leftmost¹⁴⁷ lane – also not my style. In the sound system – the same ‘Pride’.

Sounds ridiculous, but Ren does naturally the same mistakes, as Lunamaria: bends his hand, abruptly jerking trigger...

– Ren-san, – I am explaining patiently. – Although you could be offended with my statement, but firearms are also weapons. And so – extension of your hand. So – hold the gun straight, point it to target as if you would point the target with your finger!..

Ren hearkens. And succeeds, nearly immediately. In the end he was a weapon himself.

– Great. Now let’s move to less intuitive devices. Here – a ‘Type 89’ assault rifle.

With ‘two-handed’ automatic fire weapons it goes worse. But also progressing. While Ren trying to understand these things, shooting several clips single or in short salvos, I, for my own pleasure, wasting the whole belt to several targets from ‘Type 62’ machinegun. There is no Hone-Onna around, so nobody would reproach me for my love to ‘all-sawing Maschinengewehrs of lead’.

– Ichimoku-san, you are too focused on technique. It is right, of course, but it is still weapon, sorry for saying it again. So – you should feel it. Look at it. It also has its own personality: noisy, agile... Look on my machinegun, see how it happily moves its parts when shooting?

– Hm... Interesting concept...

Well, Ren is Ren, whatever one would say. Beggars can’t be choosers. He looks on his assault rifle for a minute... With nice and relaxed movement puts it to shoulder – and in few seconds depletes his clip. Short salvos of three. One salvo per target. And all bullets – not farther than three millimetres deviation from centre. And all of this – from hundred meters! I am sighing amazed... and taking a petty revenge on him:

– Fantastic! But, Ren-san – save it for ‘internal use’. If you will shoot thislike in front of people – they again will understand that you are not totally human.

– ‘Again’ you said? – he is surprised.

– Yes, I did. Asakura-san did ‘cracked’ you, by the way.

– Kso. – Ren scratches his head.

– Oh, well... do not be offended with me. Here... as long as we have deito today – I have cooked this bento for you. – I am not evil-minded girl. Just pinned him a little and relaxed...

We are retiring into quite place... As it turns – exactly in time: Hone-Onna calling.

– Speaking of Asakura-san, – I am telling after hearing her story. – Looks like we have to remind him of our existence.

Ichimoku Ren looks on me questioningly. But does not to eat... which is flattering: I indeed cooked this bento myself.

¹⁴⁷It is a right-sided traffic in Japan, as in UK. So leftmost lane is slowest.

– do you remember recent influx of orders to international terrorists and criminal bosses? For strange reason coming from ‘Kanri’ employees?

– And? – Ren asking with mouthful of my cooking. – Little Mistress declined. It was not a real orders, there is no feeling there!..

– So. – I am continuing. – Hone-Onna was trying to find – who is constantly feeding rumours about us. And found one man... which turned to be connected with counter-intelligence. And now there is a theory that these nice gentlemen decided to try to fix some of their own problems with hands of others.

Ren bevels. Obviously, he does not admire such methods.

– And how Asakura-san will help us? Our business is out of human jurisdiction!

– It is out, indeed. – I am answering. – But if you’d remember the case with Takumu-kun, then... It seems, that it is still possible to put some base. And here there is even nothing to think about: we have to get this man pressed not for unverifiable murder with our help... But for incitement, provocation. It does not matter here – how he suggests doing it. Matters – what.

– Hm. Interesting idea. And seemingly correct one. But how are you going to do it? For what reason he would believe us? And for what reason he would help?

– He will help us for simple reason. – I am explaining. – Even for two. First: he displayed concern in me, when trying to save at least someone. Here he got a reason to save. Second: he owes me his life for knocked out gun. And while he is a clever pal – should have been already realised it... When calmed down a little.

– The logic is clear.

– And he would believe – again for two reasons: First: he is, on contrary, does not doubt in our existence. So treats dispatching to Hell with our help as a real treat. Second: we will show him that we are is what we are.

– Little Mistress would not do it. – Ichimoku Ren immediately brushing it away. – it is too close to violating her own pact.

– Correct. This is why I am telling all of this to you. – I am jibbing my arms into ground, bowing to him. – Your assistance will be required. It is you and me who should come to him. And tell how we were investigating him. And if you will even *blink your eye* – it will be totally persuasive.

– Little bit risky. – resuming Ichimoku Ren. – but while it can save Little Mistress from unnecessary troubles – I am in.

I am grinning in my mind. ‘What can’t we bear for Her case?’ Actually we can bear anything. We all love Her. Love indeed.

– Komban-wa¹⁴⁸, Asakura-san. It is one Nohatsu Jun disturbing your rest. Gomenasai, we thought, that it would not be correct to continue our aquitance... But some circumstances appeared... Can we meet in a time, suitable for you?

Asakura-san obviously puzzled. As I understand, opposite to Ren, he did not finally uncover me, even while it was me who was giving him explanation for delay between order and contract offer. I think, it is again mentality question. And that father’s motions, on which we played so unethically. Puzzled – means intrigued. So he suggests meeting in one hour. Great, exactly a time to get there by my car... and even more great that I am in ZAFT uniforms: my unusual look will help him to believe. By the way, for better persuasion

¹⁴⁸ Komban-wa (こんばんは или 今晚は!) – standard evening greeting. ‘Good evening’.

I can 'change' in front of him... into yukata, for example. Thu, Jun! Fool girl! You can't change – we are meeting in café, people will be around... Oho-ho, and it means that Ren would open his eye... on my chest. Kso! It is so unpretty!.. But I have to bear it, for the sake of our plan.

It happened, that our vis-à-vis came to the place before us. And place is really well-selected. I have not been in this café... although it is close to restaurant. Indeed a good choice: separate rooms, bells on the doors... Absolutely sure they are aiming for clients who want to have confidential talks. Now I see, why he said initially: when you'll arrive, tell them – Yuuki-san booked a seat for you'. It is his first name – Yuuki.

His eyes are becoming round when I am entering (I was right about my outfit), and with Ichimoku Ren's – just becoming square. Of course, when helping me – he'd seen Ren much more and better than 'pursued by stalker' Jun-chan: stalker does not show up to the object, and interacts normally with other people!

– Kompan-wa! – we greeting him again. Waiting for inviting gesture... but it is not right time to have a seat.

– Asakura-san, – I am starting. Actually, while it is my idea – I should push it forward. Ichimoku Ren wisely opting out: it should be so by ethic, and in worst case – more safe. I can 'write off' my 'undesirable activity' as being novice in Little Mistress' team. And he did nothing!

– ... before we will turn to the subject, we would like to ask you to excuse us. Gomenasai. – I am bowing. By the way, the word 'gomenasai' is not right for situation, as request to excuse us, but used in full meaning: '[we] allowed [ourselves] indelicacy to happen'.

– ... when I told you that in some cases Little Mistress is checking potential client's intentions before offering a contract – I omitted details. It was terribly unethical towards you, but for such check in your case, to understand your motives we had to get close to you.

– ... It was my idea to incorrectly play on your feelings and appear for you as stalker's prey. I am really shamed, gomenasai! And if you would not like to listen to me anymore – I would understand your feelings, although hoping for your indulgence.

– All right... little Miss. – he sounds uncertain. From one hand he used to address to me all the way. From another – now I explicitly told him my actual status... And so it is not clear how much a 'little miss' or 'girl' I am (besides of fact that I am looking as maximum – maiden... but Enma Ai works for fifth century)... And in the end – how much appropriate such addressing for undead demon girl. Appropriate, indeed. Little Mistress is addressed as 'shoujo' in the end!

– ... All in all, it was you who saved me. Although I do not understand – why. So have a seat and tell me your story.

– Arigato gozaimoshta. You are indeed a man whose goodness and understanding could be trusted.

We are sitting down.

– To exclude all reticence – I would state it plain: Ichimoku Ren-san and I – are companions of Enma Ai, who is Mistress for us and known as Hell Girl for you.

– All right... But to exclude all reticence – first of all, I would like to know how to address to you (you already told the name of your partner, but I would like to know yours also). Secondly, it would be to somehow prove your statement.

– Can't argue. My name in nowadays – Nohatsu Jun, the one you actually know. The name I had when was alive – I think is not necessary?

Asakura-san nods. He was asking for my name not for proof, but for ease for communication: he should know how address me!.. as per above, lol.

– As to provide some proof..

By muffling grunt of our collocutor I understand – not required anymore. Ichimoku Ren played his role... By the way – with tact: his eye is not on my chest, but on the shoulder. Oh, Ren-san, arigato. In the end, girl's breasts is... intimate place.

– Well... – Asakura-san pulls himself back. – Persuading.

And now he has a third... quite a natural question. Actually I was hoping – that it will be asked, because from that – it is easier to describe our request:

– But now it is even more surprising, why you knocked out the gun that time? It seems that for you,.. – here he 'stumbles': I understand, he want to say 'killers', but it is impolite! – with respect to your business...

Such a diplomat! I am helping him:

– Unfortunately, people tend to see just soulless bloodthirsty tool in Little Mistress and Her companions. And absolutely not tend to analyze the core of our business. Meanwhile, we also have moral principles, and, as probably you could recall – not happy indeed when work requires going against these. Also, people generally does not realize the main factor, which I already mentioned indirectly: Little Mistress is not a ... 'Death Note'¹⁴⁹. She does not offer a contract if the person calling for her themselves is not ready to kill. She offer a fair play: either a person dispatches their offender into Hell, quite surely would not be punished by earthly powers, but surely will be punished by ... 'heavenly'. Either a person does the same – themselves. And, probably will be punished by both powers... or by some one. Or no one – if they will be enough clever, good and innocent. Her job is just exclusion of uncertainty.

Asakura-san biting his nail as a boy.

– So ka! – at last he is saying. – I never looked to it from such a point. Yes. Basing on what I know... Nohatsu-san, your arguments sound quite convincing. Although on the first glance we cannot exclude the option of outright lie from your side... Sumimasen, but you are indeed a Hell officer, now there could be no doubts in it. And Hell is.. liar.

I am lowering my head. It is a bow and nod at the same. Plea to believe me and a sign: 'I am listening with attention, you did not finish the queue of your conclusions...' And also I can't say anything more: I have no special proof that I am saying truth. Actually I told him the result of my own analysis, I can argument it on logical level and reciting facts. But I have not seen 'a pact' between Little Mistress and the Master of Hell myself!

– ... But your desire to get some kind of help from me (do not decline, there could not be any other motives for our meeting) assures: either this lie is so big, that I would not be able to uncover it before too late, either you are honest. And as police officer – I have to follow the principle of assumption of innocence. So, unless proved otherwise – I believe you. Then what is your request?

– Ano... Jun-chan? – Ichimoku Ren is giving voice. – It sounds kind of... not encouraging... You still sure?

– Hai! Asakura-san trusts us not to the end, and this is natural. But he honestly confessing it and gives all reasons. So on contrary – we can trust him.

– Sumimasen. It would be easier for you to talk with Ichimoku-san, as you understand – he is not so experienced in sophisticated words play, and you would be able to agree quicker. But it is my initiative – and in case... if it will turn out that we exceeded the limits of our authority – I should be the one who bear responsibility. So our request (you figured out right) should be stated also by myself.

¹⁴⁹It was enough to write without erros the name of person, keeping their face in minde to kill with help of the Death Note. No real desire was required. And the number of victims was limited with Note's volume.

Asakura-san is smiling:

– And now you totally convinced me. I am listening to you... – here he grins somehow maliciously and demonstrates some knowledge in Christian culture. – twice rebellious demon-girl Nohatsu.

– Actually, our request is simple enough. A certain person, named Minorikawa Kenji, ‘Kanri Solutions’ company employee and counter-intelligence officer – feeds the rumours about our business between other employees of said company. This is not reprehensible from our point of view, but for you already – not good. The main problem, that along with feeding rumours, he is pushing people to approach us with requests for... honestly saying – not the best representatives of the society. But it is not pleasant for us because it is not corresponding to main principles of our business. And for you, Asakura-san (and all other people) – because it could be qualified as...

– ... incitement to homicide. – Asakura-san is nodding. Indeed, he is very literate person:

– «politics sometimes puts into same bed quite unusual partners» – he is quoting from Sir Winston Churchill. – I think I would not decline to help you with this case...

He is winking:

– would it count for me?

I am shrugging:

– For you – probably yes. I don’t know. I hope – I am right.



9Enma Ai

Episode 24. Final countdown

Day hundred and sixth

– Hello, Jun-chan! How was your day?

Maria is standing in the doors of our apartments and fighting with own sneakers: she is too lazy to unleash it, but failing just to take them off. Actually, she is visiting me without any specific reason. Well, there is a reason, of course. But it lies in the fields of etiquette and personal desires. I invited her just like that, as friend to friend. To relax, have some chat... In the end, I was at her place not long time ago (at her birthday) – now is my turn to be a hostess. So I invited her... Baked an apple pie also.

– Uf-f! – Maria won at last over her shoes and is coming to the living room. – How much times I was here – always marvelling with how eclectic is your flat.

As for eclectic – she is right. Our kitchen is neutrally-modern. The living room (and Hone-Onna’s bedroom, but Maria was not there, so she does not know) – settled in full accordance with traditions and looks like being transferred directly from Edo era¹⁵⁰. And my bedroom – in full accordance with my real name – more like to deckhouse of... Say, Star Destroyer¹⁵¹. Although, not, there design was, for our days – already conservative. To cut it short – chrome, black leather, glass and cables are in quantities at my bedroom. Total futurism.

I am bringing a tray with tea and pie from kitchen. Maria is happily grabbing a piece and telling:

– Oh, that’s yummy! Would you share the recipe with me?.. By the way, about recipes...

Alas. No luck for me to know, what was there ‘by the way’. Fujibayashi’s is suddenly ‘straddled’. As it was a long time ago – I am with care pulling out a pie from her hand and waiting for her return

– N-nohatsu-san...

What?! Why so officially? Hell the Great, what she had seen? I am naturally freezing with jaw out. Fortunately, Maria recollects herself, and, seeing my astonishment, explains. Actually she also does not understand the scenery she seen to the end and wanting to ask me. And the seen scenery is... fatal.

– I’ve seen as Enma Ai gives a doll to aged man. They you and him are staying on the street... He suddenly pulls out a gun, but you knocking it out. And again – you are sitting in some room. You dressed in strange uniforms... you are discussing something. And by your side – that frightening guy. Jun, I am afraid! Why he is near to you?

Congratulations on comrival¹⁵²! By the way – I ‘burnt to ashes’. I have no go-to excuses why I am easily sitting with Ichimoku Ren. It is time for showdown? But.. I still can turn the situation a bit.

– And have you seen – what was discussed?

– Yes, thou... you... was telling about some scoundrel, which provokes people at ‘Kanri’... to access ‘Hell Correspondence’ website and...

Maria merely panicking. First reason (I feel it absolutely surely and respect Fujibayashi for that even more) – she got to know about Minorikawa. Which is not just wants to send somebody to Hell. Which tries to do it with someone other’s hands. For her – he is not a tangled man. As our regular clients. I would (although it sounds too pathetic) say – he is a natural evil for her. Second half – is me. Spotted in strange company... and telling strange things. By the way, here is a, pardon, ‘third half’. Even if (actually – especially if) she had seen only the last part of our talks with Asakura-san, then I am absolutely ununderstandable for her: from one side I am doing the same as she does – sincerely trying to prevent contracts with Little Mistress... But my companion... and some of my words...

– Not the very nice variant? To get a profit from others sorrow. To kill several unreachable... individuals – and push it to others...

– Yes! – sighs Maria. – It is disgusting. But you... You said: ‘Which is not reprehensible from our point of view’... Our? What does it all means?

¹⁵⁰ Edo age (also known as Tokugawa age) – 1603-1868AD.

¹⁵¹ And again reference to Galactic Empire from ‘Star Wars’.

¹⁵² Mixture of ‘coming’ and ‘arrival’. Nearly the same mixture referring to arrival of train and arrival of sheep is widely used in Russian slang.

– All right... final countdown?.. – I am grinning sadly. – Looks like – it is time. Maria... have ever thought – why I know so much and plainly being bored during lectures?

– Et-to... I had... But..

– Indeed. Who knows, what was with me before arriving in Japan. And who knows what computer and fighting skills (I am hinting to recent brawl with yobs) – I acquired in the Rub Al-Khalid desert. Then, another question. The name of my flatmate – doesn't it sound somehow familiar to you?

– Sone... Anna? – Maria is puzzled. And then she gets it. – Hone-Onna?

It seems, that she is ready to cry. I am moving a tea bowl to her. A simple gesture, but well-turned. She recollects herself.

– And you... lied to me all the time?!

– Gome. If I... or Hone-Onna... or Ichimoku Ren lied to you at least once...

Fujibayashi is turning inward. The thing is – that we did not. Not a single word.

– No... But if you...

– Sorry, Maria. But you are keeping forgetting what we discussed not once. And for my pity – you had not seen another part of the discussion with that 'aged man'. Where it was said: 'Little Mistress is not a ... 'Death Note'¹⁵³. She does not offer a contract if the person calling for her themselves is not ready to kill. She offer a fair play: either a person dispatches their offender into Hell, quite surely would not be punished by earthly powers, but surely will be punished by ... 'heavenly'. Either a person does the same – themselves. And, probably will be punished by both powers... or by some one. Or no one – if they will be enough clever, good and innocent.'

– Maria... trust me, please! Recall all that you had seen. All that we lived through together. Enma Ai – is *not* evil. She does nothing, that a person would not do themselves. And assures, that revenge – that one revenge, that you, Christians, treat as horrible sin – would not be left unpunished.

– Yes... probably...

– And you don't see... Or don't want to see... Kso, why *nobody* want to see – that She is also a living being! That She has a soul, that it is simply hurts for Her to do what She has to do!

– Oh, my God! – Fujibayashi is shocked. Something got to her. What?! – You... love her?..

Oho-ho-ho-ho... Definitely yes! But how to explain it to Maria? There is no logical base for love. And actually – is it necessary to explain love?

– Yes. She is my Mistress... – all my insides turning upside-down, a lump in my throat... I am going to cry... How crazy: it is Fujibayashi who should be all in tears now, not me. But I love Enma Ai indeed. Can't think. Just telling all I am feeling. – And... I love Her.

– So you are really... – Maria is sighing with resign.

– Yes. I am – undead Nohatsu Jun. A companion of Hell Girl Enma Ai. Not bad IT pro and jive-ass friend.

– No, you are good! – Maria is grabbing my hand. – We become friends indeed! It was always great for me to be with you... But it hurts even more. Yes, now I am realizing: you indeed never lied to me... Maybe, sometimes avoided something, but still was honest. You saved me not once – on seminars, and... everywhere. On my birthday... maybe you was not risking yourself..

– Well, actually I feel pain as decent people do. – I am making things precise. – And neither knife, nor water pipe cut, nor...

¹⁵³It was enough to write without errors the name of person, keeping their face in mind to kill with help of the Death Note. No real desire was required. And the number of victims was limited with Note's volume.

It is not fair, of course. But it seems that my current status is still little bit strange for myself. So I can't hold myself from untactful beg for a compliment... for untactful reason:

- ... nor 'feet apart' – would not make me happy. The later, of course, if I don't want it myself.
- Then even more! Nohatsu... -san. Why?

Her question is not pretty clear, but somehow I tried to 'calculate' such discussion since a while. S I am answering:

– I would be able to say, that as Enma Ai's companion – was looking after you as for or a person who has unclear link with Her. And it would be also true. But... believe or not, you also become my dear and beloved friend. And I just was not able to do otherwise... even while I understood, that starting a fight with that scum – will give myself away nearly for sure. And this is why... Can I ask you... even if it will turn to be for the last time... I don't know what would happen afterwards, how would we be... But at least while we are talking right now, pleas, do not call me Nohatsu-san... Yes, probably we would not ever be able to go along as we used to. But I really has begun to love you – as a person, as an individual. Not because of work, but from heart. Can we... be friends for a little bit longer at least?

Well, here it is yes. As Russians say: 'An oil paint with cheese on sausage'. Here are two damsels sitting, shedding floods of tears, and trying to comfort themselves. Gome, I've already told: when I am embarrassed – I am hiding behind self-irony.

And Maria is a monster. She again ahead of me and became at least articulative, when I am still muzzily opening wide my mouth and decorating cheeks with black mascara paths.

- Jun... -chan... then more... even more... how? Why?

I can't speak yet, but to do some sensible things – already. So – I am pulling the laptop, opening a web page... Maria gives square eyes. Oh, how fool I am! But this moment of recognition of own mistake brings me round. I am turning a laptop to me and beginning to translate:

- « Late evening. Hundred-twenty kilometres per hour on Dubai Bypass road.....»

...

- You was not scared indeed?

– No... Vexing – it was. And scared, pitted for myself.. maybe fir a second. You know, I will translate another part for you. It is very personal... and actually a conversation with Little Mistress. But.. it is better for you to know. And maybe then you would understand me.

I am opening an edited version of that misfortunate stream.dat file and reading:

- ‘– You did not value life?

- I did. But not demon with horns, not crone with scythe came to me. But You. Foolish, isn't it?...’

...

Maria facepalming.

- Yes. You indeed love her, Jun-chan...

And without transition:

- I want to see that man!

I am pulling out communicator and pushing to her.

- Asakura Yuuki.

I don't know, what associations switched her from Little Mistress and me to Asakura-san. And what she is going to tell him. And moreover – is it food to let them meet? But.. what's the difference? Little Mistress would not suffer from that, if anything – it is me who will be drowned in tea-cup, not Her. And as Fujibayashi's friend a really can't... and don't want to... do otherwise. ' do what seems right - and come

what might'? Probably. I am able for a lot. But not for treachery. I will stay faithful. For my friend. And for my Mistr... sister!

Paradox. But after meeting Asakura-san, Maria is returning to our flat. Now I am feeling her by one order of magnitude greater than usually, and o I know: on the way back she called home and told, that she would live several days at her friend place, as that girl got problems. It looks like quite normal go-to excuse, but something frightening me. We both now – especially now! Feel each other... Well, our intuitions are running over 9000 rpm now. So I've got problems? Ah, screw it all. Neither her, nor Little Mistress would not be affected, I recalculated it again and sure for 'hundredfivehundred' percents. So let it be. 'Thy battleship, accept my love'?

We with Hone-Onna are sitting in her bedroom – in some anxious expectation. After Fujibayashi uncovered us – there is no reason to play in front of her. But she is still human. And have to sleep a normal amount of time. So we have put her to sleep in Hone-Onna's bedroom: Bone Lady herself does not need it. And also she, seemingly, possess powers of Margareta by Bulgakov 'in witch mode': she just touched Fujibayashi's forehead – and Maria fell asleep...

But begins to toss at midnight. We both feel... Hone-Onna nods to me: 'I will take care of her. Go, Jun-chan'.

I am transferring Home. Little Mistress looks at me... as usually – seemingly emotionless, but it is still warm in my heart.

– Nohatsu Jun. – says She, and we are appearing under big tree. The sunset turns water of a crawl into blood. Asakura-san in front of us.

– Nohatsu Jun. – Says Little Mistress again.

I am throwing a router console cable (how it came to my hands) over my neck and turning into straw doll. Falling into waiting hand of Enma Ai.

– Take this, – Enma Ai hands me over to our client. – If you really wish to take revenge – you may pull the red string. If you remove the string you shall officially enter into a contract with me. The one you seek revenge upon shall be taken immediately to Hell.

– you already told me that... - Asakura-san answering while accepting me. – But, I suppose – this is the rule. As in court the evidence swears to tell truth every time...

– However, if I deliver your revenge, I must have you make restitution to me...

Asakura-san listens patiently.

– ...The rest – is for you to decide.

Opposite to usual routine – we are not transferring to the world of alive. Moreover, Asakura-san sits down on his knees in front of Little Mistress.

– I would like to talk to you. Although I know, that you are really silent. But still maybe you would answer... Or your faithful Nohatsu-san... Or maybe even an answer is not required ...

My heart stops: because of his compliment – he said to Little Mistress I am faithful!.. And because of forefeeling. Yes, something is changing.

– Still don't know... And would not know ever: what actually do you feel, when doing your work. You would not tell, I know...

Unexpectedly, Little Mistress is unlocking Her lips:

– Hurt. And grief.

– I... wanted... No, not like this. I hoped. And now I know – it is indeed fair.

– you know, girls. – he addresses to both of us. – That Minorikawa turned to be an interesting person. He believes indeed, that pushing people to apply to you – does a good deed. And so I cannot stop him. If even under pressure from police they will cancel this project – he would not stop by himself.

Enma ai is silent. I also have nothing to say. We are listening.

– But there is some error. When I talked to that girl, Fujibayashi, yes? I really thought: it is not possible to eat cake and have it.

– The thing is that one should be responsible. People, everywhere, people, gaijin – say about that. Look on those who fought last great war... «Пацан сказал – пацан сделал» – this is our neighbours, Russians. Winners. «Ein Mann – ein Wort» – this is German, allies. English and American also have similar sayings. – looks like Asakura-san is really interested in XX century history. – For us this is nearly absolute... Here, Nohatsu-san even took responsibility to contact me... and even helped to meet with Fujibayashi-san. As I understand now – indeed balancing on the edge of allowed... If not crossing it... because of love to you, Enma-san...

I am totally embarrassed. Yes, he indeed discoursing by himself. But... by the flood of praises to me – I am really confused,

– She is – faithful.

I give my word: how fortunately, that I am – undead. Otherwise – heart attack guaranteed. Now it is not a confession between us two. It is a declaration to outsider. To sell the soul? Ha-ha! Don't you want – nine thousands¹⁵⁴ souls? Still, I already said: I already gave out my soul. And I have no souls of other, and don't want them. I am just ionising in panic again.

– Probably, he also loves something. Our country for example. – Asakura-san continues. – But one should pay to reach the goal. Pay themselves. Otherwise... how to put it right? The goal itself becomes corrupted. Spelled backward. Being reached without efforts, without... retribution the goal – is already not the goal that required.

– Your Nohatsu-san risked for you. You paying with pain yourself... It is always retribution. No. *Should* be retribution. So, here is his. And mine.

Asakura-san reaches his fingers and pulls the red string on me-doll's neck.

– I would like to hope that we would be able to talk at least once more, Nohatsu-san and Enma-san.

– Your grievance shall be avenged.

Episode 25. Loving mother

Day one hundred and seventh

– Ohaio, Maria!

My friend, somehow spacy, is coming out from Hone-Onna's bedroom. Not surprising: for her it is not kind of 'there are reasons to be spacy', but more like 'is there anything habitual?' But still she is greeting me with little bit forced – but anyway smile. I think – it is a very good sign. She managed to stay in her mind disregarding to all 'revelations' fell on her. And she is still... Let's put it like this: not hostile towards me. She could turn to be, as now she knows that in some cases we are on different sides of barricades.

¹⁵⁴'Nine thousands' in Japanese language also mean 'as many as possible' or 'eternity'.

– How are you? – I am asking not for being polite, I indeed worrying for her. – Shall we go to college today, or you would prefer to stay here for a bit?

The whole gamma of emotions is on Maria's face. But, if we would continue to use musical terms – it was plaid in such allegretto, that I am not able to understand it: minor is it, or at least a little of major? Fortunately (for me) – she sits down on the bedroom threshold and 'verbalise' it. Not, it is not for me to understand something. She just have to speak out. And understand herself the flood of her thoughts.

– Jun-chan... – 'Arigato!' – I am answering in my mind. Another good sign. – you are still here? So... not fell into error too much?

Maria-Maria... How alvo are you! After all of this – worrying for me!

– Yes... – than I am playing fool a little bit: I would like to talk about her, not me. – Are you all right? Maybe – some water?

– No, thanks. – she is smiling. – I just... after yesterday... was afraid for you. That you confessed...

– Looks like – it was a right decision. But actually I confessed to you because I just was not able to do otherwise. I did not think the situation for even one move ahead. Just did what seemed right. Ano... Maria... Still – you are – how are you? – I am asking again. – Well, you see, I am... et-to...

I don't want to lie to Maria. And can't – especially after yesterday. So I can't use normal human saying 'alive and sound'. I am undead, and not a living being. But Fujibayashi is clever. Looks like she understood it herself. She grins:

– Yes. I see. I worried for you. And I... actually – nohow. I've seen Asakura-san... and you with Enma Ai. And, probably, understood something. You are – yourselves indeed *not* evil. But your existence – still – an evil. And Asakura-san also right. And... mistaken in the same time.

– I cannot blame someone. But there is an error. Somewhere in the deep. A moral one. And I am trying... No, I have to find it.

I am nodding in agreement.

– Christianity – is a religion of love and mercy. And you are a real Christian. Not by breeding – by belief, by mentality. There is no mercy in what we are doing. No hope. But you are not shepherd. You are a knight. The one, who is ready to commit... accept sin for achieving goal...

I am drawing my hand, like licking her mouth – I know what she is going to say.

– There is a difference between you and Minorikawa. Fundamental: you – *accept* sin on your soul. He – did not treat his deeds as sin. And Asakura-san decided the same. He accepted sin. And Little Mistress indeed a tool here. Moreover – far from soulless...

– Oh, sorry. I am again burdening you. Go better to shower, and I will feature some kohu for you. And cheese sandwich, if you'd like?

Maria is nodding weakly and leaves to bathroom. It is not easy for her indeed (what a trivial stuff I am thinking), but indeed: we have to start a new day. And third time indeed – I cannot help her... otherwise than wit care in small things.

Soon she returns, and wrapped in one of Hone-Onna's kimono, which I passed to her through a half-opened bathroom door, weakly biting a sandwich.

– Tell me, Jun-chan... We have become friends. And you helped me... because of that. But why she have sent you actually?

– You can ask a questions. Actually, and 'technically' – it was a one-time assignment, during which your connection with Little Mistress was founded out. But you are asking not about this. And from where... or for

what is this connection – I don't know. And... how much would I love Her – I am not sure does Enma Ai know it Herself. No. Exactly because I love Her – don't want to be sure... to know is She knows.

Maria is sighing. I understand her: my answer only complicates the matter. From other hand – it gives another proof of sincerity of my feelings towards Little Sister (Here! It seems, that I found at last a right word for my 'internal addressing' to Enma Ai: 'imoto-sama'¹⁵⁵ – 'deeply respected little sister'... but still also Mistress).. Well, so – I love Imoto-sama and Maria too. Which... and such recursion – complicates the matter for her.

– Tell me about you all. – she is asking. – With your own words. I've seen Enma Ai in anime and... not only there. But this is a look from outside. Tell me from the inside?

– All right. I really would like to do it. And – I can. Can tell – from my side. As I have seen everything myself. Definitely, I am – not Little Mistress. And how She sees it – cannot tell. And She...

For some reason I feel, that Maria... maybe she does not love Imoto-sama, but worries and cares for her not less than myself. Anyway – she nods and looks on me. Waiting.

– But I am also – inside. And from side of Nohatsu Jun... Listen:

I am taking the laptop again and translating:

‘– Hone-Onna-san?

– Yes, Jun-chan?

– I would not want to look like being haunting or encumbrance... But I have a plea for you... quite a personal one.’

So the day passing. I am telling a story. Maria sometimes thoughtful, sometimes crying, sometimes giggling. Time to time Hone-Onna appearing in the flat (there is no need to work in 'Kanri' anymore: my main object – Maria – anyway nearby; her main theme – rumours feeder – is in Hell). But we both here. Fujibayashi and myself. So she silently brings us more tea – and comes back to Home.

– Jun-chan. – Fujibayashi asking closer to the evening. – But indeed: I cannot treat you as an evil, you actually all are nice in the different ways...

I can bet: she also wants to say: 'And unhappy in different ways', bit holds her mouth.

– But why and from where this connection? I thought – to prevent, but it is not like this, seemingly...

– Oh, Maria... how much easier it would be if I understood myself.

– If we understood. – it happens, that all 'adult' members of our team are sitting behind me. When they arrived, how long do they listen to our conversation – I can't say. Maybe the whole day. And this particular words Wanyuudoo says. And thus it sounds even more with authority: he looks as the elder of us, and actually is... and not talkative... nearly as Imoto-sama. And he is – 'driving a nail home': – And does Little Mistress understand?

I am sighing. That's true. We do not know – who... and what Maria is. Maximum we could suspect – that she is needed for Little Mistress. And even that is only because her abilities is closer to Tsugumi's, not Yuzuki's.

– That's true. – Ichimoku Ren tells. – nobody understood yet. Neither wise Wanyuudoo, nor Hone-Onna with her incredible intuition, nor our logical Jun-chan... nor myself.

¹⁵⁵Kanji: 妹様

If we would distinguish our team by parameters, as it used in computer games, then Ren is our strength... He does not like to be stamina... But jokes aside, but guys are saying correct thing. Fujibayashi is a puzzle for us. Well... and Hone-Onna indeed possess an amazing intuition. She draws her hand with words:

– Maybe it would be clearer from side. If you'd look with eyes of your soul. So – sleep, my girl...

Maria is falling. Asleep. Guys carefully moving her back to Hone-Onna's bedroom.

Not expecting anything, I am still asking:

– Are we waiting for a contract?

Ren shrugs for all of us.

Day hundred and tenth

Well, the situation is as follows. By points. We actually did not expect a contract, formally Ren was right. But it was offered anyway. So hone-Onna's intuition proved to be even greater, then we thought. And, the last, but not least: I am a doll again, and the contract... I would say of peak disgusting level. At least of what I was involved in myself somehow..

You know, there is kind of ugly thing, named 'Oedipus complex' – when son falls for his mother and does not see anything besides her. And 'protects' her, naturally. And here – directly opposite situation. Hypreprotective mother ordered (and, kso, we have no single reason to decline the order) a girlfriend of her son. And really – not because that girl is bad somehow. Because the son is 'moving apart'.

And the more – for our case it is even degusting because of my friend, who is sleeping in the next room. Well, the room that was next while I was in our flat. And degusting thing is that Fujibayashi will see this contract nearly for sure. And the boy is studying in the next grade of our college. And a girl – moreover, sits on the next desk to us... and we even had a lunch together several time on the lunch break.

Basically, using English word forming methods – it is such a kso, one of ksoests. The only (and quite weak) comforting thing is that if we will process this contract – that mommy will fall in Hell sooner or later. Which is a right place for her. But... it is not now still.

So I am lying in her handbag and regularly listening for her attempts to manipulate her son. Incredible disgust. Especially because I understand: she had a reason to apply to us. Psychologist and manipulator from her... as a cook in the Indian restaurant. Absolute zero.

And I cannot even do anything. She does not talk with me. My status is quite forceless. And it is – work. How disgusting it would be (and I am sure – Little Mistress does not feel any excitement about this contract, same as me) – but we indeed have no reasons to decline. And can set neither Asakura-san, nor Fujibayashi on her. Not only for business reasons, but also because of my status.

Maria, actually, have seen everything herself. But the result is zero again. For first approach she was laughed and turned around cynically (do not bother me with these urban legends!), and all later attempts was cancelled with cold ignore.

I don't know – did she tried to contact with the son and the girl... But even if she did – with not bigger success.

So, it is a disgusting dead end. And actually that 'mommy' is constantly lives in 'changed reality' and scandalling with her son even when he is late... for any reason. I pity that guy, by the way, but not too much – he should have his own brains. And should be a man, not a sissy boy... his submissiveness and weak will only... adding fuel to fire.

Even now I am having incredible disputable luck to hear another paranoid scandal. Of course, the boy was late for fifteen minutes because he was kissing with that... when his mommy is cant help waiting for him. But the way a guy was in bus in traffic junction, but who would believe him?

Kso.

Oh. Not 'kso' anymore. Now it is – 'KSOOOOOO!' My string was pulled.

– – Your grievance shall be avenged. – I am saying through the clenched teeth and transferring to the poor girl.

All of us already there and describing to her psychological problems of motherhood (Wanyuudoo) and basic constipation (how strange it could sound, but Ichimoku Ren). Quite naturally – a girl does not understand her guilt... And indeed – what guilt, just a small folly, maximum, and cries:

– But why me?!

Enma Ai appears in front of her. As always – in black furisode, decorated with slowly moving flowers. Flowers are slowly moving, turning, covering each other...

– O pitiful shadow, tied in darkness, looking down upon people and hurting them...

We are actually feeling, how much unwillingly Little Mistress spells the standard formula. But... I don't know. Maybe I am an egoist. I am afraid even to think what will happen to Her, if Imoto-sama will decline to accomplish this contract. As I remember, she fully depleted all credibility. So I am more for fulfilling of this contract. Better a classmate, which is not actually guilty and, hopefully, would not suffer too much in Hell... than Little Mistress.

– ... a soul drowned in sinful karma...

Kso! If I could be in the place of Little Sister! I don't know, how I would decide then, probably indeed would try to decline to fulfil the contract. Even if it will backfire at me. But not at Her! Unfortunately, I am not Jigoku Shoujo, but just Nohatsu Jun.

– 一遍死んで見る？

Episode 26. Three sisters

Still day one hundred and ninth

– ... And such a shit also happens on work. Sometimes. The only thing that comforts me somehow – is guaranteed destination of this 'mommy'... when her time will come. But you, as Christian, cannot comfort yourself even this like... to much of... revenge in this concept.

Why I am telling all of this to Maria – I don't know myself. She already knows me quite thoroughly, and, I suspect, begins to understand the Little Mistress' temper . So – understands herself all that I am telling her. It seems that I am doing because of own melancholy. To break blue silence at least with sound of own voice.

Actually, it did hit me enough. Which fact I am realizing when finding a lit cigarette in my hand. Definitely, we have not to worry about our health, but Hone-Onna does not like too much a smell of tobacco smoke. So we are not smoking in our flat. And here I even don't remember how I pulled it out, how lit...

Speaking the devil. Hone-Onna. She stands in the doorway for some time, then sits down and pushing a saucer to me. She is very nice and understands everything. So – in this case she silently allows me to smoke. And with her gesture... the feeling of gratitude to it – turning my thoughts to another direction. I am not the one who is so flat. There other beings who are through it.

– You know, Maria... – I am telling to her. – Actually I will leave. For some reason I feel, that there is another one... person... is very hurt. And you can sit with Hone-Onna. Or – if you don't want to see anybody: you can use my bedroom... at least until morning. Even if I will come back earlier.

In her dull eyes a tiny sparkle of understanding shines for a second. She is nodding weakly and not asking, but stating indeed:

– Imoto-sama.

Hone-Onna, of course, have not heard my confession. But it is not a Newton's binomial to get about what we are talking. So my elder friend is also nodding: 'Go.' I am transferring Home.

Little Mistress – a perfect copy of Fujibayashi. She is sitting with her glass balls the same empty. I am sitting a side to Her. But not telling Her anything. Enma Ai does not like words. And, it seems, that it enough for her – that I am close. So we are sitting. Keeping silence. At last she is asking:

– It is – love too?

– Yes. Unhealthy, egoistic – but love.

– Feelings – for what?

– To stay humans. To be humans. To be able to think and feel – to be human. Animals does not think. Gods – does not feel.

– And to be humans – for what?

– Indeed. Humans are making mistakes. Doing evil – under affect of emotions and politically. But they also create beautiful things! Yes, we can see very nice, how it is far before whirlwind of hatred will stop. If it will stop at all...

I am stumbling here. Actually I want to say something trivial: that exactly because of our histories and our work – we see everything quite one-sided. And mainly – not the best aspects of not the best representatives of human race. But if I will tell it – it will be like I am reproaching Enma Ai. Either in foolishness, either in actually one-sidedness. The last thing I want to do in my life – is to reproach Her.

Thoughtfully I am touching one of her glass balls with my finger. My grandmother also had such. Lovely, glassy, with tracery of multicolour strings inside. Here, under unending sunset, all strings seem to be red. But still lovely.

– Beauty could be different. There is a beauty of flower. Not humans created it, but only humans can see it. See, that flower is beautiful... and not just bright, full of nectar tool of reproduction. There is a beauty of glass ball. It was designed and created by humans. There is a beauty of another person. But also – only humans can see it. Probably – ability to see the beauty – is the meaning of humanity existence. Maybe it is not a meaning of life for each and every men. But all men, humanity... I think – yes. And also – ability to see the beauty – is ability to love.

– What is beauty?

– This is a question of God. Who lost feelings. Or of animal. Who cannot analyse, compare. And human will answer: beauty is what is beautiful. That it outside of you and inside you at the same time. That makes you worry and happy. That makes you – to do something beautiful yourself. Or at least dream about that. And everyone will say it differently. Somebody would tell – a flower. Somebody – glass ball. Somebody – a little girl in furisode decorated with flowers.

While comforting Little mistress – I am coming back to myself. As much, so even making such a clumsy actually compliment for Her. And actually it is a proof for my words. I've seen beautiful Enma Ai. And has

begun to try to do something good for her. But I would not tell this to Her, definitely. It is too open. And also – will bind Her to me. Not for this I strived!

Enma Ai rolls the same ball as I did a minute ago. She is silent again, but I feel – it is actually another silence. Well, if we would say that in the beginning it was ‘flat’, then now it is ‘thoughtful’.

After few minutes She is asking what we already discussed. Now I feel – as ages ago:

– For what we are?

– I still don’t know. Maybe – to let people stay humans. When doing evil they could comfort themselves: ‘There is a lot of time, I will manage to make it up... and is there Hell in the end?’ We are the proof: it is. And there is no time.

– And maybe... – I am grinning to a strange idea. – We are for ourselves. To do something for each other.

I am recalling again the recent association with computer game. Indeed it is very easy to figure out the dominating personality attribute for each of us. Well, I even thought this thought in quite specific words... Jun-chan – a young intellect of the team, giggles. And I completely came to myself – already can giggle. By the way, Enma Ai, of course, is not a parameter. Definitely – She is out soul.

From other hands – these parameters initially describing a human? Strength – muscles. Wisdom – memory. Intuition and intellect – right and left brain hemispheres. The soul – is heart. Small, gentle, actually – sensitive... and tired heartlet.

We need a weight clocks. Now we would seat, and they would click rhythmically. But we have not. And Enma Ai would not approve. I think, in fact – she does not like any references to time flow. Because She has lasted for a half of age... and has Eternity in front. Maybe it is possible to get out from this ‘path’, but we indeed don’t know – how. Don’t know – at the moment.

Day one hundred eleventh. Also –the first

Meanwhile, midnight comes to the human world. And Little Mistress’ computer brings up ‘Hell Correspondence’ logo. Another request. How much of them we had? And how much – we would?..

Enma Ai is getting up going to transfer to client. But fails. As is remember – such thing never happened before, but the fact is – the client does not waiting us under the tree, but stays in front of the Home.

Fujibayashi with keitai in hand. Maria? Christian Maria, who so much times tried to stop us – or our clients... Placed an order herself? And to whom?! To whom and for what she wishes to bring revenge? I understand nothing. No-thing.

Enma Ai is looking on her.

– So we’ve met. – says my friend. – face to face...

– Why?

– I also became to want to talk to you, Enma Ai.

– Why you did it?

Enma Ai’s question, seemingly specifying, but does not make situation more clear. And Maria is keeping silent.

– Nohatsu Jun. You can read the message. – Little Mistress is feeling my puzzlement and allowing... no, ordering to learn the second half of the contract: the object.

– Hai! – I am bowing my head.

I am opening an email application. And see two rows:

«From: Fujibayashi Maria.

Revenge target: Fujibayashi Maria ».

I am looking at them in horror. But one thing I still can realize. If Maria would wish to suicide – there are easier ways. Although she would not do it at all – she is Christian. Then she has some plan.

– You know... – at last she is answering. And my eyes... well, if they were widened from horror – now completely rounded. Whatever Maria planned – her actions waked up some Powers indeed: a little bit aside from them a big spider getting down from beams. Three dots on its belly looks like eyes... actually these are eyes: on turns to Little Mistress, another – to Fujibayashi... and the third – looks at me. The Master of Hell arrived.

– You know, – Maria is continuing. – It turns out, that all whom I loved... and all whom I respected – either destined to Hell, or already there, or... – she is faltering again. – are working for Hell.

The last – is it about me? For nothing, I am not worth so much. Bu actually, it seems – no. Or not only. Maria is looking on Little Mistress with visible compassion. And She – is asking the next question:

– Want to be with them?

– Yes... – Maria nods. But something hinting to me – not as simple... some aspect she did not uncovered yet.

– The Hell – is quite a vast place. – saying Enma Ai. Not pretty clear... but not for us three: dispatching herself to Hell – Maria gets (quite tiny, although, as I far as understand) chance to meet Asakura-san, Akie, Rin... Keshishiro later...

Definitely she has something in her mind. She came to talk with Little mistress. And looks with compassion exactly on Her. And She is not in Hell, moreover – not allowed there. And I feel dread. Not only for Maria. But also for Little Mistress. She is actually talking Maria out. In front of the Master of Hell! Et-to... in front of everybody: I don't know when it happened, but all our team is behind her back.

Wanyuudoo slightly curves his lips in impenetrable grin. Ichimoku Ren – bites his nails in puzzlement (actually – absolutely not his gesture). Hone-Onna pressed her hands to her chest in some desperate gesture... Although I am not worrying for them – their loyalty to Little Mistress is undoubtful. But there is 'a dark horse' Yamawaro... who seemingly does not understand – what is going on here and glances from one to another. And Kikuri. Who loves Little Mistress in her own way... but always was aiming for her position. And was for a long an 'auditor' from the Master of Hell himself. And who always dictated his will through her. And the worst – her ethics is completely different from ours. We all take something the same, something – differently... But only Kikuri, as I remember, never showed displeasure with the contract. Opposite – she always rejoicing... and rejoicing meanly. In overall – she is the less human in the whole team.

By the way – even now the Master of Hell talks to Maria through her:

– You would not be able to meet all of them. But I will give you a choice: you can pass the border – and meet those, who is there. And you can stay at the border.

Maria is turning her head and defiantly looking on... Yes, she is looking in right direction: on the spider, not on Kikuri.

– If I would stay at the border... – Wow! She even arguing... or going to impose conditions? She'd got balls! A real fighter. Knight templar. – Would not it be too many people?

– You has got a wind. There will be a lot of work. And I need the second one.

A small light 'netbook' is beginning to appear on the table near to Enma Ai's computer. Void in my knees, hearth drops somewhere down and then is jumping back and beats like mad. I am totally petrified with horror, I am afraid to what I have to. But I have to. I must. I would stop to respect myself, I would betray everything I love – if I would not.

I am plodding to the table on rubbery legs. Dropping my laptop on it and making a long arm for Little Mistress computer power button.

– No. – I am speaking with trouble. – you need two – take me. And let Enma Ai go. Or Fujibayashi Maria.

Would I have two souls – I would try to redeem both. But I am only human. And would not be able to help to one of them. And also I am frightened – because I can't choose: whom I want to save. Selection between two evils... a nightmare. Why I don't have two souls? And most horrible, that it seems that I am ready to sacrifice with friend.

– You like a fair play. – Maria telling. – This offer is fair. Enma Ai paid off her deeds. And you know it.

And Little Mistress is also already near to the table. Her gaze towards me is warm and sad (it seems, that first time I see some emotions on her face), and takes my hand out from her computer.

Ichimoku Ren hems behind our backs.

– It is possible – both. Even while I am not a chick.

His mobile is dropping on the table. Yes, Ren was katana. Noble weapon. And after my move – he got it first: now – it is possible at least to try. Possible to try to *protect*. The deed for which he is designed. And the act he committed so rarely 'while was alive'... if had a chance to commit at least once.

– You are so loyal to them?

– I don't really know Fujibayashi. But she is Jun-chan's friend. And I am absolutely loyal to Little Mistress.

Understand it as you like. It could mean: 'I would take Enma Ai's place and Jun, if she'd like – can save Maria'. Or: 'I am supporting Jun's request as she is loyal to Little Mistress as much as I am'.

Hone-Onna is rushing into battle.

– We all are loyal to Enma Ai. And all managed to like Jun-chan. So – enough. You need sacrifices – take me as well. And stop play our feelings. We already delivered a lot of toys for you...

– Ha-a-a. – Wanyuudoo agrees in low voice. Actually the word should sound as 'Hai!', but he always says it like this. Either he has accent, or it is some linguistic thing, still unknown to me... And maybe – it is just his voice gives out into a wheeze.

And the Master of Hell begins to laugh. Uncanny spectacle: little girl laughing with booming man's bass.

– You have learnt something. You stand for each other. But it would not be as you demand. Nobody does impose conditions to me. I – heard your wish. And will deal with it as follows: I am giving Enma Ai's power to all of you. But while I don't need so many executives – you persuaded me. I would grant you a right to decline in contracts. Sometimes. By mutual agreement – while you learnt to be a team.

'Ah! How guile!' – glimpsing in my head. – 'And Kikuri also! Persuade her to decline a contract, of course! But.. still at least some hope.'

– And in the end, all right, I will leave a present for you.

The spider climbs his web and disappears between rafters. 'Released' by him Kikuri is falling on the floor and sitting there stunned. And Enma Ai takes my left hand, Maria's right... looking at her, at me... and pulls us out from Home.

– They are good girls in the end. – saying Hone-Onna quietly, staring after us.

– Now you would not be able argue. – Ren is answering to her. – Now we are indeed like a family.

– Ha-a-a.

Wanyuudoo lit his pipe and staring, how we are standing in flowers hand in hand. So that was the Master of Hell' present!

Three sisters are watching, how bloody-red sun is falling behind the mountains and the first star is twinkling in the darkening sky.

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