



第
八
話 早蕨刃渡(2)

Chapter 8 - Sawarabi Hawatari (2)

Nii-sama.

Nii-sama—I can't understand you.

What is it that goes through your mind, Nii-sama?

Always—as if it were so simple.

Always—observing everything around you.

Always—omitting the most vital points.

Without ever teaching me anything.

Without ever telling me anything.

Sly.

Mean.

Cruel.

Even though—we are siblings.

Even though—we share the same blood.

Us three, and only us three.

Will you not treat me like I'm special?

Will you not hold me dear?

It's hard to believe—that you will.

When all I ever do—is hold you two back.

Whenever we're together, all I do is hinder you—

From afar, I pull the string.

With all my might, I let the arrow go.

I'm tired of this.

I'm tired of not being by your side, Nii-sama.

Why can't I be by your side at all times?

Even though that's all I want.

And yet—you seem fine.

Whether I'm with you or not, you seem the same.

Always silent.

Completely silent.

With your eyes shut.

Without ever caring about me.

Without ever caring about me.

And still—

And still, I love you, Nii-sama.

I love you, Nii-sama.

Your cold eyes.

Your closed lips.

Your slender arms.

Your beautiful body.

I love it all.

And I beg of you—Nii-sama.

With those eyes, scowl at me.

With those lips, touch me.

With those arms, steal me.

With that body, embrace me.

Nii-sama.

I beg of you—Nii-sama.

Please, violate me.

I want to be yours.

I want to be violated by you, Nii-sama.

Even though it's not correct.

There's nothing—I can do.

There's nothing I can do anymore.

There's nothing I can do.

There's nothing I can do.

Nothing could replace it.

No matter how similar—it wouldn't replace it.

It can only be you, Nii-sama

Nothing can replace you, Nii-sama.

You, and only you.

Nii-sama.

Us.

Me, you and him.

Don't say we are as one.

When we can't all be together forever.

I can only endure so much.

For the first time, I experienced it.

A heartache so painful I thought I'd break.

So sorrowful, I thought I'd lose my soul.

And with that, I learned.

I learned that those things exist in this world.

I learned that those things are what this world is made of.

You're strong, Nii-sama.

You're stronger than anyone.

I'm certain of that.

I'll never surpass you, Nii-sama.

And you'll forever be the same.

Which is why—I can't understand you.

Nii-sama.

What are we?

Why are we like this?

How did it come to this?

Nii-sama.

Tell me, Nii-sama.

What does it mean—to kill?

What does it mean—to die?

Nii-sama.

Answer me, Nii-sama.

If I want to run away—can I?

If I want to die—can I?

Nii-sama, I want to die.



".....Tch. So the *barrier* doesn't go away just because I killed the user." Sitting at the base of a tree while checking the wounds on his left arm, he muttered to himself. "It would seem the source of the *spell* is something else altogether. Besides—"

He took his right hand from his left arm to his rib cage. Then, to his left leg, stroking it a couple of times. Resignedly, he let out a sigh.

"Even though these are wounds I suffered inside the illusion—the damage is the same as if it had actually happened. How truly unfortunate."

As long as the brain recognizes it as *pain*, even if there's nothing wrong with the body physically, apparently there's no practical difference. I guess I've always been the type that's easily influenced by things like that. *Manipulation, preconception, bias, hypnosis, brainwashing, mind-control*. In the end, it's all the same. Whew, this is tough.

"Uhuhu."

Then, using the tree's trunk to support himself, only being able to move one of his legs, Zerozaki Soushiki got up. Once he managed to balance himself, he started to plan his next move.

His current situation wasn't exactly favorable.

The damage he took—how long would it take for it to fade away?

"Well.....since I haven't suffered any real injuries, I should start recovering soon. I've wasted too much time already—for now, I'll keep going forward."

At the very least, wounds dealt to the mind ought to heal faster than wounds dealt to the body. That was Zerozaki Soushiki's reasoning. As soon as he forgot about them, his mind should recover. Even if it's the opposite of what common sense dictates, those conclusions, based on his own experience, were something he was confident about.

"Now—where might Iori-chan be? I'll have her give me a big, passionate hug once I find her as compensation for all I've been through. It wouldn't be fair otherwise."

While dragging his left leg, he kept moving towards the forest's interior, without knowing the exact location of his objective. Guided by nothing more than intuition, he proceeded unwaveringly. The scenery didn't change no matter how much he advanced, and yet, he knew one thing for certain: somewhere within this forest, he would find Iori.

"—I know how crazy this sounds."

Knowing such a thing for certain.

Acting like that in modern times. While he did find it funny how out-of-date Naguma's attire seemed, it might just be that, not just the *Sawarabi*, but the *Zerozaki*, the *Tokinomiya*, they were all anachronistic. As though they came from a different world.

It's comical.

No matter how "certain" he felt, there was no way for Soushiki to know whether Iori was alive or not. Even if she were alive, her condition could be so awful she might as well be dead. There was nothing he could do but pray. Under such circumstances—

How could he—be certain?

"—It seems the same logic you'd apply to humans doesn't quite work on you bunch. In that sense, *Hitmen* and *Demonic Killers* might not be so different after all."

—Suddenly.

Suddenly, from behind his back, he could sense bloodlust.

Immediately he attempted to turn his body around, but the wound on his left leg made him falter for a moment. Once he was able to look back, that person stood there still, not attacking him even after taking notice of his injuries, waiting for him to complete the motion.

"—Well, well."

Sawarabi Naguma.

A kimono, a naginata, glasses and long hair. Across his chest ran a wound clearly caused by some sort of blade.

Silently and intently, he glared at Soushiki.

Staring back at him, Soushiki was taken aback for a moment.

This—

This—shouldn't be happening.

Naguma's bloodlust was on a different level in comparison to his previous encounter with Soushiki—or rather, everything about him seemed different compared to the night before.

If one were to ask what had changed—

"Your resolve—it seems different, Sawarabi Naguma-kun."

Hiding his uneasiness and the pain of his injuries, he stated nonchalantly.

"How's it going? To think I'd find you here, of all places. After that pathetic display of cowardness yesterday, you couldn't possibly be thinking of challenging me again, right? When it's so clear who's superior than who. I'd advise against wanting to call that into question."

The authority of a winner.

At the moment, that was Soushiki's only weapon.

With the left side of his body barely functioning, a fight to the death against Sawarabi Naguma was something Soushiki had to avoid. Things would be different if it were clear that defeating Naguma meant Iori would be rescued, but, without that certainty, this wasn't the right place to spend the effort required for a fight. Rather, his best plan was to wait until his strength was at least partially recovered.

However.

"—Your sister....."

Ignoring Soushiki's remarks, he prepared a low stance with his naginata.

"—Iori, you little sister....."

".....What about her?"

"Well, I killed her."

He stated matter-of-factly.

Coldly.

Soushiki's expression didn't change.

It didn't change, but—that was his limit.

He was at a loss for words.

"What.....do you mean?" Muttering those words was the best he could do. "Wasn't Iori-chan—a precious *hostage*, necessary to draw me out?"

"Those were my brother's plans—killing her was something I did out of my own judgment. Out of my own judgment, and because of my own twisted view." He said while slowly approaching Soushiki. "Heh—A Demonic Killer wouldn't be so naive as to call that unfair, right?"

".....Why—"

Soushiki asked with a pale voice.

"Why—did you kill her?"

"Isn't it obvious?—"

With cruel, cold eyes. Without leaving room for doubt, answering everything one could ask, without worry or hesitation—with cruel, cold pupils, Hawatari answered.

"As a Hitman, that's just the way we are. Isn't it obvious—that that's all there is to it? What other reason could possibly exist?"

".....Is that so."

Silently, Soushiki accepted it.

With a melancholic and pained expression, filled with anger—or perhaps resignation.

"That know-it-all attitude. I don't know what it is that you think you understand, but it's unfortunate, truly unfortunate. Even though it looked like you could *pass*. It's truly, incredibly unfortunate."

Suicidal Tendencies

Soushiki readied the *Mind Render*.

"Then, if you so desire—I'll act my part as a Demonic Killer, Sawarabi Naguma-kun."

"Of course."

And so.

Before he finished his sentence, Soushiki had already lunged at him. Not being able to use neither his left leg nor his left arm to their fullest, he'd be at a clear disadvantage if it turned into a drawn-out fight. While not the same as his previous duel, the illusory fight against *her*, he had no option but to end this in a single move, no matter what it would take. Fortunately, his opponent's *determination*—his *resolve* meant there was no need to worry about him fleeing.

A fight to the death in its truest sense.

An instant later, it would be over.

Its outcome would be defined by whether Soushiki could go past the naginata's range. Naguma wouldn't charge at him like in their last encounter—his attacks should be limited to slashes. If Soushiki failed to go past the slashing attacks' range, it'd be his loss. However, the moment he got past it, his victory would be guaranteed.

Suicidal Tendencies

With his target in sight, with a spin, he drew the *Mind Render*.

There was still time until the naginata's slash reached him.

In a single motion, taking advantage of the length of his own legs, Soushiki went past the naginata's range and got close enough to Naguma as to be able to use his scissors. After that—a single blow to his throat would do it. At this distance, there was still the option for

Naguma to attack with the naginata's hilt through bōjutsu and jōjutsu—and Soushiki wouldn't be able to dodge it. But he was aware of that. As long as they weren't from a blade, a couple of hits wouldn't be fatal. He never expected to come out of this fight untouched. For his sister's sake, he could afford to break a rib or two.

"—HAa!"

—Suddenly.

In his stomach—a chilling sensation.

Cold enough to make him shiver.

Mind Render's blade stopped.

".....Huh?"

Something sharp ran through the right side of his stomach.

The blade of a katana.

The naginata's scabbard was nowhere to be seen. *That which had been used as a scabbard*, the *mounting* which hid that cold sword, had been thrown away.

"Capture."

Although they were almost identical in appearance.

Those were not the words—*of Sawarabi Naguma.*

"In the mounting—a *hidden b-blade?*"

Soushiki collapsed to the ground.

From that position, he had a clear view of the wound in his opponent's chest. The wound—however flashy it may have looked, was relatively shallow. And a wound so shallow would never have been caused—by the Mind Render.

"Y-you—"

"My name is Sawarabi Hawatari."

With an extremely cold voice and an extremely cold gaze.

In a cold, silent gesture, he pulled the sword out of Soushiki's stomach.

"Me and Naguma—are identical twins."

Hawatari stepped away from Soushiki, then shook his sword to wipe his blood off. Unable to get up, Soushiki leaned on the tree behind him. He stared at Hawatari, dumbfounded, having yet to process his current situation.

"How I wish my brother could've seen you in such a pathetic state." Hawatari's voice—was undeniably cold. "Knowing that's impossible, at the very least, I'd like to be able to convey your emotions to him. Tell me, Mind Render. Right now, how do you feel?"

".....Uhuhu."

Ignoring Hawatari's question, Soushiki let out a faint laugh.

"*Tricks involving twins switching places*—people will get mad at you for using those nowadays, Hawatari-kun."

It became obvious why his *resolve* seemed different—He and Naguma were different people altogether. Even though their appearance and voice were indistinguishable, it was impossible for their aura and mannerisms to be identical.

"I'm aware of how clichéd those are. For people like you, it's surprisingly effective."

".....So the purpose of that antiquated outfit was to further manipulate my *preconceptions*. Here I was thinking you actually liked those things." He was losing a tremendous amount of blood. After dropping the *Mind Render* [*Suicidal Tendencies*] to his side, Soushiki pressed his wound in order to stop the bleeding. "*Onii-chan*, do you perhaps usually prefer fashion completely opposite to that? While calling it camouflage."

"How sharp."

Hawatari answered unworriedly. After untying his hair, he took a baseball cap marked with a skull from inside his clothing and wore it in a manner that covered most of his hair.

"I guess you could call it a trump card, or an ace up my sleeve. It's a trick I wouldn't have used on anyone other than you."

".....That Tokinomiya granny sure did make for some good foreshadowing." Soushiki smiled wryly. "To think an *identity-swap* would happen twice in a row. Well, well, isn't that impressive. Impressive—but that's all it is.

".....?"

Not convinced by Soushiki's carefree attitude, which seemed unaltered even after he received a fatal wound, suspicious of him, Hawatari knit his brows.

"But say—you don't seem that concerned about reputation, Hawatari, or should I say Sawarabi-san. Puppeteering, taking hostages, employing Cursing Names, and to top it off a surprise attack after concealing your identity. Your ancestors must be turning in their graves."

"You're delusional if you are trying to say that what we did is cowardly or unfair. After all, this is a fight to the death. You can't possibly expect us to abide by some sort of code of conduct."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say I expected that. Didn't I just say I found it impressive?" Soushiki's wry smile had yet to fade. "That hidden blade really caught me off-guard. The idea of concealing a short-ranged weapon in a middle-ranged weapon was pretty good. Above all, your provocations were quite effective—saying you killed Iori-chan and whatnot."

"Unfortunately for you, that part is the truth."

Hawatari stated clearly.

"My brother is probably disposing of her right about now. I tried to stop him, but he didn't listen. I'd surmise it has to do with his confrontation against you. What do you think?"

"I wonder.....did I perhaps say anything that rubbed him up the wrong way?" Disregarding the pain it would cause, forcibly, Soushiki shrugged his shoulders. "By the way—I have something to ask of you, Hawatari-kun."

"—What? Pleading for your life will serve you no purpose."

"As if I'd attempt something like that. It's just that I got a cigarette here in my pocket, and I wanted you to grab it for me and let me have a smoke. My left arm is paralyzed, and if I don't keep pressing this wound with my right hand, I'll bleed out and die, so....."

".....What are you scheming?"

"I'm not scheming anything. It's been a while since I last had one—before I die, I want to have a final smoke. That's all there is to it." Then, as if he'd just remembered it. "Wait, but don't use that opportunity to finish me off! My liver was pierced, see? There's no doubt this wound is fatal. You know how dangerous a wounded animal can be. There's no need to take the risk of approaching me. You can stay there, watching me die. It's your privilege as the winner."

".....I don't understand."

All the more suspicious, Hawatari continued.

"I'll ask you once again. What is it that you're scheming? Fatal or not, those wounds won't kill you instantly. Combat is still a possibility for you. Why have you not attempted to wield those scissors again?"

"I don't try to kill people when there's no point to it."

Soushiki stated.

Looking tired.

Looking desolate.

But also—at ease.

"You won't believe me when I say this, but I don't want to kill people. I'm tired—of killing."

".....I would never have expected to hear those words from a Demonic Killer, all the more so from Mind Render, the Zerozaki Clan's *Twentieth Hell*."

"I've always been eccentric even when compared to the other Zerozakis.....If I were to answer your last question—You know, Hawatari-kun. I'm not feeling—bad at all."

".....!"

"I'm thankful to you, Sawarabi Hawatari-kun, I really am. Using up everything you had at your disposal, paying no mind to your own safety—"

"—Thank you for killing me, Hawatari-kun"

Now, I can finally—be at peace.

Sawarabi Hawatari stared at Soushiki's relieved expression with displeasure, repulsed by that sight. The word "cold" couldn't describe his gaze anymore—his eyes were clearly those of hatred.

To Hawatari, those words made no sense. He was incapable of comprehending the way it seemed like death was something Soushiki desired. They were clearly more than just the ramblings of a dying loser unwilling to admit his defeat, and yet—

"How unsightly—how despicable. I didn't deceive you so I could see you dying so peacefully."

"Uhuhu. So you wanted me to die while filled with regret? How gloomy. Unfortunately for you, that's what separates the *Zerozaki* from the *Niounomiya*."

Interspersed in Soushiki's words were spurts of blood. Still—he continued.

"It's because of your tricks that I can be this calm. After all, a coward like you could never win against *my family*."

"——!"

Soushiki grinned.

"A monster like *her* wouldn't die no matter who she had as an *enemy*, but, against people of your caliber, it's an easy win for any Zerozaki. Hmm—and you say my adorable, adorable *little sister* has been killed by *that* Naguma? That's ridiculous. Delusional. And now you just

confirmed my suspicions. My sister isn't so weak as to be killed by the brother of a coward like you."

"—That's enough."

With those words, Hawatari sat cross-legged across from Soushiki, facing him. Roughly three meters away from each other, neither were within the range of the other's weapons.

"Then—I shall let Naguma finish you off. His grudge against the Zerozaki is deeper than my own. After all, Naguma's affection towards Yumiya was quite considerable. Once he kills you on top of having killed that girl, his resentment should fade a little. Of course—that's if you manage to survive until he gets here."

"If I survive, huh?"

"If you do anything uncalled-for, I'll kill you on the spot."

"If possible, I'd like you to let me die peacefully like this—but well, since the only one getting here is Iori-chan, it should be fine....."

After Soushiki finished speaking, Hawatari fell silent.

He couldn't move his left arm. He couldn't use his right arm.

He couldn't move his left leg. With his right leg, then maybe—

—It's useless.

It was clear that Hawatari was not an opponent who could be handled using only one leg. Even without the tricks and strategies he had prepared, Soushiki, in perfect condition, would still struggle in a fight against Hawatari. They were either evenly matched, or Hawatari was stronger. If that weren't the case, no matter how many strategies he used, with or without a hostage and an advantageous position, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly for him.

Both of them were aware of that.

The only reason Soushiki was able to take his strategies so lightly—

Is that the Zerozaki are a clan.

The Sawarabi can't afford to lose.

If a Zerozaki loses, someone from their family can take over.

That difference.

That gap.

Even if Soushiki dies—there are twenty other people who will take over his will.

That is why—he doesn't fear death.

Even if he dies, it's not over.

It will not be the end.

"—Good grief."

Soushiki whispered.

Thinking about the girl in the knit cap.

Iori-chan.

I still had a lot I wanted to teach you—but this is it for me.

You mustn't—come here.

Run away.

It's okay for you to run.

Since you might still have—a place to run to.

This—is as far as I can go.

There's nothing I can do anymore.

I couldn't find him up to the very end, but it seems my little brother is around here somewhere. Meet up with him, and find a different path. Hitoshiki won't force you to become a Zerozaki. That adorable, stupid little brat might be the reason you got caught up in this in the first place, but he's a good kid.

Iori-chan.

You are—possibility.

You—are hope.

Please.

Don't become a killer.

"—Hah."

Soushiki let out an uncharacteristic self-deprecating smile.

"I sure did want a little sister.....though—"



A shadow ventured into the forest.

"—Haa, haa, haa..."

Gasping for breath—without hesitation, a shadow ventured into the forest. With a clear objective in mind, it made its way through the densely packed trees with everything it had.

"—Ug-Ughh....."

Like that, it collapsed onto the damp ground and tumbled miserably. It was as if the very air of that forest, which had been enclosed by a Tokinomiya's barrier, was stopping the shadow from proceeding.

"—Uhuhu."

It laughed, and then got up.

Was that shadow—Sawarabi Naguma?

Was it the naginata-user, impelled by his desire for revenge, running to his brother's location to deliver the final blow on Zerozaki Soushiki?

—No.

That wasn't it.

The shadow wore a red knit cap.

And a school uniform covered in blood.

Its right arm was severed at the wrist. Despite something like a rubber band being used to stop it from bleeding, *incessantly*, blood dripped from the wound.

Its left hand was nowhere near intact—all five of its nails had been ripped off. And yet, not even quivering from the pain, it gripped a dagger firmly and resolutely.

It was Mutou Iori.

".....Uhu, uhuhu."

She wiped off the mud that got on her skirt and started running again. Without wavering, as though she knew exactly where her goal was located.

Her goal—

Of course, her goal wasn't the exterior of the forest.

That didn't even pass through her mind.

".....Uhu, uhu, uhuhu."

She ran.

She ran.

Not looking back.

Not backing down, not feeling discouraged, not hesitating one bit.

Not averting her eyes, not turning her face away.

Not running away from a single thing.

Forcing her frail, almost broken body to move.

"I'll be right there, Onii-chan—"



Meanwhile, Sawarabi Naguma—

Inside the prefab hut, alone, all alone, in a daze—Sawarabi Naguma stood motionless. Blood gushed from his right shoulder. He would have to stop the bleeding quickly if he didn't want to die from blood loss, as he would lose consciousness very soon.

However, he didn't make even the slightest motion.

Right beside him was a person's severed hand.

It was lori's hand.

Mutou lori's hand, which Naguma himself had severed.

"....."

After her hand was severed, lori screamed and, as if she'd gone insane, rampaged in front of Naguma. Considering she had lost a body part, that behavior wasn't abnormal. And even

after that response, Naguma wasn't satisfied. It wasn't enough for him. It wasn't enough to fulfill him. He felt like he needed to do more. As he got up to sever her other wrist—

A knife fell from the ceiling.

"....."

The dagger which had stuck to one of the ceiling's beams.

The dagger Naguma had handed to Iori, which sprung to the ceiling when he hit it with his naginata.

It was wedged deep into the beam—however, when the hut shook because of Iori, who used her arms and legs to wreck the place as much as she could—apparently, *it fell out*.

And so, that knife pierced Naguma's shoulder.

And tore into his muscles.

"An unbelievable amount of *luck*."

Luck.....despite saying that, Naguma knew it wasn't luck that made it happen. Just like when he managed to *run away* from Mind Render, on that apartment building's rooftop, *that* was something other than luck.

The *qualifications* required to escape from a desperate situation.

The *qualifications* of those who are destined to survive.

Iori had them.

And fate chose Iori instead of Naguma.

She had been chosen.

For reasons beyond herself—she had been chosen.

"—And a *Zerozaki*."

Even that outburst, which seemed to have been born out of the pain of having her nails ripped off and the inability to stand that despairing situation—even that was but a means to fulfill her *bloodlust*.

It's appalling.

Appalling.

More appalling than the *Tokinomiya*.

It was now too much—for Naguma to handle. She was now, certainly, worse than Mind Render. It wasn't because of her nails that she was able to escape from Mind Render when they encountered each other under that bridge.

It was because of her existence.

Her talent.

Nothing could be done to change that.

"Compared to that *talent*—compared to that *existence*—I can see why someone like me would *fail*."

After muttering those words, Naguma started to move.

He couldn't move his right arm anymore—the cut had probably reached his nerves and tendons. It was reasonable to assume his arm would never go back to being the way it used to. But that wasn't a problem. Against a *Demonic Killer*, a *Zerzaki*, surviving was already enough of a blessing.

He picked up the naginata, which had fallen on the floor when he was hit.

I've been using this thing for so many years already. In a sense, it's more of a partner to me than either of my siblings. I can't afford to let go of it now. Even if, with this wound on my arm, I'll have to abandon my occupation as a *Hitman*.

It was weirdly refreshing.

Is it really okay—not to kill anymore?

Right. I'm not the same as the *Zerzaki*.

Not the same as Iori or Sushiki.

If I want to die, I can die.

If I want to kill, I can kill—

If I don't want to kill, I don't need to.

If nothing can be done about it.

It's okay—not to do anything.

It might just be that, if nothing can be done to change something, not doing anything to it, leaving it as is, is good enough. At the very least, it'll keep being what it is, and nothing more than that.

You can just—

—Accept it as it is.

If you judge things based on their origins—you'll only get hurt.

Accept it as it is. If you do that, then again—you should be able to choose.

You should be able to learn.

And one day—you'll understand the answer.

That is all.

That is all there is to it.

"Say, Yumiya-san—Were you also like that?"

As Sawarabi Naguma started to close his eyes—

With a creak, the door to the hut opened.

While attempting to surmise the identity of whoever stood outside, he turned around.

Could it be that Iori had come back?

Or maybe Mind Render had finally arrived.

It wasn't impossible for both of them to be there.

Or rather, wasn't it more likely for it to be Sawarabi Hawatari, having already crushed those two?

".....Yo."

—It wasn't any of them.

A young boy with a strange getup.

He wasn't very tall. His long, dyed hair was tied in a ponytail. On one of his ears were three piercings, and on the other were cell phone straps being used as adornments, among other things. But what drew the most attention was the ominous tattoo imprinted on his face, partially covered by his stylish sunglasses.

"You think you could help me find my way around here, 'cuz I'm a little lost. I'm just asking for directions. You don't need to teach me about life so I can find my way in there too."

"Kahaha", laughed the boy with the face tattoo.

His severed head, his severed left arm, his severed right arm, his severed trunk, his severed left leg, his severed right leg, the severed fingers from his right hand and the severed fingers from his left hand, which still gripped the naginata, bound by the law of inertia, did not stop.

However, his life stopped.

It ceased.

Sawarabi Naguma's body parts fell one after the other in front of the boy with the face tattoo.

"Oops, seems I ended up killing ya, minor character-kun."

The boy stood over the body parts, not making much of the situation.

"These are a masterpiece, don't you think? It's called *String Manipulation*." Multiple extremely thin threads, almost invisible to the naked eye, glimmered around the boy with the face tattoo.

"I can use them in a radius of around three meters—but they say there are people who can do it for ten, twenty meters."

The boy with the face tattoo then realized there was an extra hand amidst the scattered body parts. He picked up all three of them, and once he realized which one belonged to a different person, he threw the remaining two back on the floor.

"Hm..... ? It's the right hand.....of a woman, right?"

The boy with the face tattoo stared at the hand with great interest. His expression was serious, as he seemed to be deep in thought. Soon after, he noticed the hand was missing its fingernails. On the floor he found ten nails, which had likely been ripped off by force.

".....So that's what happened. It must mean the wound on that guy's shoulder was the result of a battle. Some *woman* lost her hand, but still managed to win and run away from here before I arrived, I guess?"

The boy with the face tattoo muttered while tilting his head, then casually slipped the hand into his vest pocket.

"But why did she run away without killing him even after *winning*? Hmm.....I guess I can't be sure that she "ran away" from this guy with the naginata. Maybe her *objective* was something else—maybe there's someone else she *needs to defeat*. Someone else she *must defeat*. Or maybe someone—she *must save*."

The boy sniffed.

"Wherever my brother goes, it always smells like blood. If I don't hurry—since I killed around.....around quite some people yesterday—if I don't shape up, that Demon Killer will catch up to me. I might have even been found already—yeah, I better hurry up."

The boy with the face tattoo followed a trail of blood most likely left by the former owner of that hand. As soon as he left the hut, he turned back like he'd suddenly remembered something, then gazed at the dismembered corpse of the naginata user.

"—By the way."

He tilted his head.

"Since he yelled my name when he tried to attack me, that must mean he knew who I was.....but who the hell was this guy?"

(Sawarabi Naguma—Failed)
(Chapter 8—The End)

第九話
早蕨刃渡(3)



Chapter 9: Sawarabi Hawatari (3)

A natural gift, but not something people are born with—

That's how Sawarabi Naguma described it.

Something inevitable—

That's how Sawarabi Naguma described it.

Mutou Iori pondered over the meaning of those words.

Basically, it was something along the lines of *talent*.

If *talent* doesn't come into bloom, even if it *was there*, it won't ever be manifested. It's easy to come to the conclusion that it would be the same as if it never existed, the same as if it were never there, and something that shouldn't be there in the first place—a vague, unreliable existence. But still, in some form or another, it was something every person possessed.

If you were to ask those people about it, from their point of view, most likely, being a *Zerzaki* is synonymous with having *the talent for killing*. Surely, that's how they saw it. That's how they defined it, and that's how they saw it.

However, Zerzaki Soushiki denied that.

From the outset, he denied it.

Not *talent*, but ^{*disposition*} *nature*.

The difference between talent and nature.

I don't think there's any obvious distinction between the two, but I do at least think that they're closer to each other than "passion [*ai*]" is to "love [*ko*]".

I don't have a dictionary at the moment (and I don't think it'd be of much use anyways), but if I were to decide it myself—I'd say *nature* is a concept that's a level beneath *talent*. It's not by much, but it's because it's something more physical rather than metaphysical. If talent is something relative, then nature is something objective; if talent is something abstract, then nature is something concrete—that's the difference, that's what separates those two concepts. That's what I think.

Therefore.

Therefore, it makes sense that—

It's not that you're born a psychotic killer—a demonic killer.
There's no way one could be born a psychotic killer.

It's a matter of practicality.

It's just that they're more skilled than normal people.

Like being able to run fast.

Like being fast at calculating.

It's just that their base stats are higher than other people's.

It's not like you have to become a runner just because you can run fast, and it's not like you have to become a mathematician just because you're fast at calculating. It's also not like every runner was always able to run fast, and it's also not like every mathematician is fast at doing calculations. There are first-rate professionals unfit for what they do, and third-rate professionals fit for what they do. Without a doubt, those abstractions exist in this world. Or rather, most of the time, in the majority of cases, that's how things are.

Which is why *nature* has nothing to do with a person's future.

It's like the variations in phase transition.

Quantizing directions.

A phase transition point.

Possibility.

Soushiki talked of hope.

Hope an isolated psychotic killer could never hope to be.

But that's also biased, distorted.

Soushiki's theory also has its flaws.

This might seem too forced or too arbitrary of an explanation, but—regardless of Soushiki or lori's *nature*, had they just repressed that predisposition, they wouldn't have turned into demonic killers. Ever since the moment lori embraced her *nature*, I don't think there'd be anything in her that could be described as *possibility* or *hope*. Soushiki asked her something along the lines of "How were you able to endure living without killing people?", but the truth is that those things have nothing to do with each other. Now, the only ones who can truly be referred to as hope, as possibility—

Are the ignorant.

The ones unaware of their own *nature*.
In deep slumber, unaware that they're sleeping.

A natural gift, but not something people are born with.

Hope, possibility, those are formless. You don't see them, you don't perceive them, you don't know of them, you shouldn't see them, you shouldn't perceive them, and you mustn't know of them.

Only then can it be called hope.

Soushiki failed to comprehend that.

And ended up with nothing but some absurd idealism.

That's not what I am—

And that's not something I need.



In that forest, which remained dark even with the sun at its brightest, the two men sat, facing each other.

One of them wore traditional Japanese clothing which seemed out of place even for a martial arts practitioner, and an ill-matched baseball cap marked with a skull in its center. Under his arm, he carried a long sword [tachi]. With coldly detached, coldly silent eyes, eyes which evoked the image of sharp icicles, with a know-it-all expression, he stared at the man in front of him.

It was Sawarabi Hawatari, known as *Blood-Purple Chaos*.

The other had oddly long limbs, with a physique reminiscent of a wireframe model. The man was extremely exhausted, and his face was covered in sweat. On his abdomen ran a deep sword cut, clearly related to his condition. Although he was pressing the wound in an attempt to contain the bleeding, the blood flow showed no signs of stopping, as the wound had pierced his internal organs. His business suit, which didn't fit him at all, was soaked red in blood. Next to his right leg, a large pair of scissors lay on the ground.

Suicidal Tendencies

Those scissors, as well as its user, Zerozaki Soushiki, are known as *Mind Render*.

"*Suicidal Tendencies*—even though I had never once thought of suicide."

Soushiki muttered weakly. Meanwhile, Hawatari showed no reaction to those words. He showed no reaction—however, it appeared as though he were listening. Still, he showed no reaction.

Not caring about that, Soushiki continued. Dialogue or soliloquy, to him, it made no difference.

".....'If you hate living, just die'. When people say that, don't you think that's jumping the gun a little too much? If someone wants to die, it's their choice. But if a person doesn't want to keep living—is death *really* the only option? If 'despair is the conclusion of fools', then disillusionment is the conclusion of the wise. Don't you also wonder who it is that ends up with hope as their conclusion?"

"I assume your consciousness will start to get hazy soon." With an expression that didn't display any particular emotion, Hawatari stated. "Before that happens, to pass time, let me ask you this, Mind Render: to you, to the *Zerozaki*, what meaning is there to *murder*?"

"Meaning? The meaning.....of murder.....?"

"Yumiya—used to ask this quite often. "What does it mean to kill?", and other things along those lines. Truly insignificant questions. Questions for which there's almost certainly no clear answer. However—it came to me that perhaps you, as a member of the Zerozaki Clan, would hold the answer to them."

"Meaning—there is no such thing as a meaning to murder. This—is a disease. A terrible disease for which there is no cure."

"....."

"Since you mentioned your sister, I should also—if only a little, talk about my little brother. The bow user, Sawarabi Yumiya's—murderer. Yeah, in regards to that, it might be that I owe an apology to you people. Naguma-kun's *sense of justice*.....I do respect it, after all."

"Spare me the flattery. But keep talking about your little brother. Information on the Zerozaki Clan is something that fits my interests. And talk fast. After all, even if you're lucky, your life will be over in under thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes—that's almost too much. It annoys me, really. Like life." Said Soushiki with a bitter smile. "—Umm, that little brother of mine. His name is Zerozaki Hitoshiki. No nicknames, unlike me. He's the Zerozaki Clan's prodigy. There's a tattoo on his face and....."

"His exterior does not matter. Talk about his interior."

".....That kid—he's something else when compared to me. Among the *Zerozaki*, it's like he's gifted. How should I put it—I'm not particularly fond of wordplay, but, if I'm the most

different [*itan*] of the Zerozaki, then my brother is the most archetypical [*kyokutan*]. The logical extreme of what it means to be a Zerozaki. He doesn't enjoy, and neither does he loathe, the act of killing. He just—as if it were obvious, as if it were natural, as if it were the norm—'because that's how things are', he just kills."

".....'Because that's how things are.'"

Hawatari repeated Soushiki's words.

"The *meaning*—still isn't clear to me. What you're stating still applies to the *Sawarabi*. Naguma is always saying—that we are all *like that*. That is also how we kill people. A *Killing Name* mustn't bring unnecessary emotions to the act of killing. But the Zerozaki Clan—the *Demonic Killers*, among the *Killing Names*, aren't they the ones who come closer to killing for pleasure?"

"That's a misinterpretation. A misinterpretation which could only originate from a biased point of view. Whenever I hear such things, I'm overcome by sadness. Say, Hawatari-kun. Do you know how to define the feeling of sadness?"

"....."

"Sadness—is sadness. It's simply not something that can be described by words. No matter how many words you put together, you wouldn't be able to explain the way we of the Zerozaki Clan feel.....huh? Oh."

For a second, Soushiki's head slumped down. It seemed as though his consciousness had slipped for a moment. But again, fearless, he stared at Hawatari.

".....Murder..... To a Zerozaki, it's trivial. It's the same as nothing. It's the same as nothing. It's the same as nothing. Feel free to interpret those words however you see fit. And, I'll go ahead and clarify this..... that's not just my personal opinion, but a consensus in the Zerozaki Clan. When my brother killed your sister, his motive was likely just something like that."

"So you're saying that Yumiya's death—was meaningless."

"That's right."

"And that Naguma's grudge—is also meaningless."

"That's right."

"So our actions—were all meaningless."

"That's right."

Zerozaki Soushiki agreed.

"It's not just about there being no meaning..... Honestly, and I say this out of empathy towards *you three*, it'll just backfire. One hundred percent it'll backfire. There might be no point in warning you about this, but—Hawatari-kun, you know what'll happen, right? If you kill me..... you won't survive. Even if you manage to escape from this place, even if your plan succeeds—the moment I die, every *Zerozaki* other than me will move to exterminate the *Sawarabi*. Can you imagine yourself surviving with every member of the Zerozaki Clan against you? And with only your brother as an ally."

".....I have allies other than him, and that's not just counting that Tokinomiya you killed."

"Is that so? Then that's the worst-case scenario, Hawatari-kun. The Niounomiya Troupe and the Zerozaki Clan—it'll become a war between two *Killing Names*.....and yet you, the Sawarabi, don't care if that happens. All for the sake of a single person. All for the sake—of your little sister."

"If that's the worst-case scenario—I couldn't ask for better. Don't misunderstand, Mind Render. I'm not as sentimental as you seem to think", said Hawatari, calmly and coldly. "Yumiya's revenge—that's Naguma's motivation. The *sentimentalism* my siblings share is nonexistent in me. My motive is ambition. For I have no desire for the *Sawarabi* to forever remain as a *Tokinomiya* branch family."

".....I see."

Seeming tired, hanging his head, Soushiki nodded.

".....I wonder how I should go about your grading. That motive—and these methods. There's no doubt I'd usually consider it a *failure*.....but considering the state I'm in, I guess it'd just sound like sours grapes."

"Of course."

Hawatari responded.

"In the first place, a being as loathsome as a *Demonic Killer* having an *exam* for his adversaries is laughable. You take this world too lightly. Did you really think that I—that Sawarabi Naguma wouldn't already have prepared countermeasures for all the things you've just warned me about?"

"Isn't that just that you'll hide my corpse, disguise yourself as me, and then make contact with the Zerozaki Clan? After all, you could borrow the skills of the *Tokinomiya* to disguise yourself convincingly. That's assuming your allies in the *Tokinomiya* aren't limited to just that granny, but that seems likely, even though I'm not aware of any interests the *Sawarabi* and the *Tokinomiya* might have in common."

"How absurd. It's the complete opposite—finding people who bear no grudge against the *Zerozaki* is what's difficult in this world."

"I wonder about that. The Zerozaki Clan has a record of complete annihilation when it comes to dealing with those it opposes—while fear might remain, grudge does not. Cases like yours are an exception. Nothing but a result of my little brother's clumsiness."

"Clumsiness? Of course. How peculiar for the *Zerozaki*."

"Yes.....I agree. I thought I'd taught him better than that, but it was clearly too soon to leave that brat unsupervised.....though I won't be able to take care of him anymore.....gotta make sure someone takes over that role.....by the way, Hawatari-kun. Would it be alright—for me to ask you a favor?"

".....What?"

"If you happen.....and he should be around here, so I think the chances are fairly high—if you happen to encounter my little brother, before you take revenge for Yumiya-san, I want you to tell him something. That to me—To Zerozaki Soushiki, having a little brother like you gave him a fair.....a fair amount.....of happiness. And so.....that he apologizes, but that it seems like he won't be able to pass down his scissors. That he feels bad.....for breaking his promise."

"....."

Hawatari didn't attempt to hide the displeasure he felt while hearing those words.

It had been over ten minutes since he slashed Soushiki's abdomen. He had been sure that the man in front of him would crumble as he approached his death. That he'd plead for his life pathetically, that he'd beg Hawatari for forgiveness—that's all that passed through his mind. It was only once that happened that Hawatari could truly feel relieved, that he could feel like he had won, and that he'd deliver the final blow on Zerozaki Soushiki.

But then why—does he look—

Increasingly—at peace?

He even worries about my future.

Almost like the death—of someone enlightened.

How can this man be considered a demonic killer?

Are my eyes—deceiving me?

".....That's wrong."

He shook his head.

Hawatari had seen for himself the way this man decapitated Kagawa Yasumichi and later six *marionettes*. He'd also seen the wound on his younger brother Naguma's chest, and just

now he'd managed to take a peek at the brutally murdered corpse of the old lady Tokinomiya.

That was a demon—a demon of killing. Zerozaki Soushiki, while appearing unconcerned, while appearing not to feel any guilty, as if “that’s how things were”, he turned humans back into things. As Naguma described it, “like that”—he cut those bodies into pieces.

But then—how could you explain these final moments?

In the final moments, those words.

—To die.

Those words of Yumiya—of my little sister.

What does it mean—to die?

They kept recurring in Hawatari’s head.

Yumiya’s question—

There is no clear answer to it.

Nor is there a need to answer it.

And so, there is no need to ask it either.

And if you don’t ask, you don’t have to think about it.

Neither Yumiya—nor Naguma.

It’s not like they didn’t know.

That in this world—

Some things are inevitable.

How could you ask those questions—when you knew?

Or maybe—

It’s because you knew—that you had to ask?

".....What are you?

"A Zerozaki. You didn’t get that part yet?"

Smugly, he laughed.

Again he laughed.

In his final moments, again he laughed.

Still he laughed.

In the abyss of death, still he laughed.

".....'Tis enough."

Carrying his sword, Hawatari stood up.

How unpleasant.

After leading the Zerozaki's Clan famed Mind Render to his death.....why is it that I can't help but feel this sense—of defeat?

So nonsensical—it's unpleasant.

So absolute—it's unpleasant.

So incredibly contradictory—it's unpleasant.

How truly appalling.

It's not in the darkness that they kill.

They kill in broad daylight.

"You bastards—"

Pure *bloodlust*, and nothing other than that—that's how they had been described to him, and that's what Hawatari believed in. And yet, the more he looked at the man in front of him, the more it seemed like *bloodlust* didn't even exist in the Zerozaki Clan.

If that's how it is—then nothing can be done about it.

That thing.

That Evil.

It's filthy—

"I'm done holding back—"

Hawatari readied his sword.

"—Here and now, I shall bring everything to an end."

Then.

At that moment.

From the bushes behind Sawarabi Naguma, thunderously, a shadow plunged towards him.

It held a dagger in its hand.

Its other hand had been severed off.

With a sailor uniform dyed red in blood and a red knit cap, while letting out a roar at the top of her lungs, the girl thrust that dagger towards Hawatari's back.

Her form was no longer that of a human.

Almost like.

It was almost like.

A demon.

A demon of killing.

"DARAAA!!!"

That figure—was Mutou Iori.

".....!"

He hadn't noticed it at all.

Hawatari's first reaction was shock.

He hadn't felt anyone sneaking up. She must have lunged at Hawatari without even first concealing herself, with no hesitation, as if she had no intentions of it being anything other than a suicide attack. But then, it made no sense for him, who hadn't let down his guard for a second even while exchanging words with Soushiki, not to have heard any sounds, let alone for him not to have felt a presence—that would be true in regards to anyone, to say nothing of a mere highschool girl.

Impossible.

Then, there was the fact that the shadow had revealed itself as Mutou Iori rather than as his brother, Sawarabi Naguma. This girl—her being here meant that Naguma's fate had already been determined. How could his brother have lost to a girl who had been hung from the ceiling with her arms and legs tied up? Besides the incomprehensibility of that situation—faced by the reality that his brother, as related by blood as one could possibly be,

with a genetic composition identical to his, the reality that he had likely met his death—faced by that overwhelming situation—for an instant, Sawarabi Naguma froze.

An instant.

Only a single instant.

And that single instant wasn't enough to close the gap between Sawarabi Hawatari and Mutou Iori.

"—Maybe you're not as Evil as I thought."

He muttered.

And as he turned his body around.

He swung his blade flawlessly.

In a gesture so smooth it seemed he missed his target.

But Sawarabi Hawatari never misses.

Iori's left hand went flying along with her dagger.

"—Ugh!"

But Iori didn't stop even after losing another one of her hands. Still in that same motion, having yet to touch the ground, not breaking her posture, she aimed a kick towards Naguma. However, Naguma effortlessly deflected that leg, using that opportunity to strike Iori's now exposed abdomen with his sword's hilt.

With no way to break her fall, she drove into the ground. She rolled, until her hand, which still whirled in the air, fell in between her legs.

Still gripping the dagger.

"—Tch.....it failed."

Unmoved—Iori grunted, staring at that hand which no longer belonged to her. Her facial expression was warped, in what resembled laughter. It showed no signs of affliction, even though, after having both of her hands cut off, it was impossible for her not to be feeling any pain.

It was irregular.

The only logical explanation was that losing her hands had made her go insane.

There was no trace of the face she made when kidnapped in that apartment building. The face of a teenage girl who failed to take things seriously.

It made sense.

Looking at her, he could understand—how she was capable of escaping from Naguma.

"—lori-chan!"

Zerzaki Soushiki was the only one there unable to keep calm, as a witness to that breakneck clash. He took his hands off of his wound, crawled towards lori and clung to her body, after which he gripped the end of her left arm, which had just been severed by Hawatari, as an attempt to stop it from bleeding.

"Uhu—"

lori faced Soushiki—with a smile.

"It's a pleasure to see you, Onii-sama."

"lori-chan—you shouldn't have come here! Why—didn't you run away!?"

Zerzaki Soushiki's reaction was ordinary.

A normal, commonplace response. A response unlike Soushiki, unlike—a *Zerzaki*. There was no trace of the peaceful attitude he had kept up to that point. That saintly calmness, that nobility exclusive to those who have accepted their own death—was nowhere to be seen.

All there was.....was simple.

Simple, commonplace.

Ordinary, dull.

Concern for one's little sister.

"—Uhu, hu. Uhu."

On the other hand, lori's attitude was nothing short of abnormal. Her face was eerily joyous.....as if she'd gone insane.

"That's not like you~. Why do you think I would need to run away? There are no reasons whatsoever for that."

"Wh-What are you....."

"I mean."

lori continued.

Even if the blood loss from the wound on her left arm was kept down because of Soushiki, considering how much blood she had already lost from her right arm, it wouldn't be surprising if her consciousness was already getting hazy. In fact, just that she hadn't passed out yet was improbable enough to be called a miracle.

"I figured you'd be feeling lonely, Onii-chan."

"....."

Hearing those words.....Soushiki.....

Didn't know what to say.

He just smiled.

"I was fine on my own."

"Really? You should've told me sooner."

Clearly playing dumb, lori replied.

Already, that peaceful aura—had returned to Soushiki.

That calmness—had returned to Soushiki.

Peacefully, calmly.

Zerzaki Soushiki—and Mutou lori.

Almost—like family.

".....You are Evil incarnate!"

As he stomped on the ground as hard as he could—Hawatari yelled.

"Just die already! After losing so much blood, why are you alive!? How much blood do you even have? You've already been killed! Are you telling me that's not enough!? Is killing you not enough!? I can kill you and kill you and it still won't be enough!? Answer me, demons!"

"You just don't stop talking, do you? Keep quiet just a little longer....."

Soushiki replied, annoyed.

The way one would talk to someone who just woke them up from a comfortable nap.

"How about you leave us alone and go check on Naguma-kun? It's not like you haven't figured out the meaning of lori-chan's arrival, right?"

"As if. A weakling's defeat is but the obvious course of things. If a weak person survives, then that is simply a misunderstanding. It's unfortunate that I'll have to rework my strategies for what's to come, but not having to stare at a face that's identical to my own anymore is refreshing. My priority is—"

"Then you *fail*."

lori was the one to interrupt Hawatari.

Facing the person who severed off her left hand, the older brother of the person who severed off her right hand, firmly, not averting her eyes, not cowering before him, not running away, she stood her ground just by fixating her eyes on him.

Confronted by that look—Hawatari flinched.

How—

How could her eyes—be so intense?

Red, as if they were burning.

"If you don't value family, then you *fail*."

"....How absurd. Then I ask, how is your conduct any better than mine?"

While not exactly a bluff, Hawatari's words were, in part, an attempt at putting up a bold front.

"Because of you—Mind Render will die. To stop your arm from bleeding, he's neglecting his own wounds. Don't you know what's about to happen?"

"....."

"First, Mind Render will bleed to death. Then it'll be your turn to do the same. That is all your actions will amount to. Don't you see how meaningless that is? Soushiki is right. All you had to do was to give up and run away. Then you'd at least have *some* hope left."

"'Hope'?"

lori scoffed at Hawatari's words.

"What makes you think I need that?"

"....."

"And I won't feel guilty about having Soushiki-san take care of my wounds instead of his. I'll just hold off until Soushiki-san dies, and then I'll take my time dying as well. It's alright. It's all gonna be alright. After all, it's natural for any brother to want to die while protecting their little sister. Right, Onii-chan?"

The latter half of those words were directed at Soushiki.

Hearing that, "You just say whatever you feel like saying, huh?", Soushiki let out a sarcastic laugh.

There were no hidden intentions.

Nothing wavered.

Soushiki himself must've known that.....if only he let go of lori's arm, it wasn't completely impossible for him to survive. He must've known.....that however slim those chances may be, even though the cut on his abdomen was most likely fatal, if he managed to escape—in his current position, if he used lori as a shield and slipped away, as long as he received proper treatment—there was hope, possibility.

Why—does he reject that?

Does he not want to come out of here alive?

As if there's nothing wrong with dying as long as you're not alone.

As if there's nothing wrong with dying as long as you're not unhappy.

That's too evil to be called trust.

Too ugly to be called love.

It's truly—Evil.

What's wrong with these two?

I can't understand. I can't understand. I can't understand.

I can't understand. I can't understand. I can't understand.

It's impossible to intervene.

I guess—

There's nothing I can do but accept it, now.

"This" is "wrong", you say?

Inevitable—you say?

Nothing can be done about it, you say?

Those things exist in this world, you say?

The demon realm of the *Killing Names*, worse than the most wicked of spirits, incomparable to those, that aberration—is something like what you had described.

An anomaly.

Something that can't—be comprehended.

Like *her*.

Like *him*.

Their values are different.

The world they live in is different.

What they believe in is different.

What they feel is different.

What they desire, what they want to protect, those are all different.

There are no common factors.

There are no common multiples.

An impossible number.

A number that doesn't exist.

However much you cut it, it never seems to dwindle.

A number that can't be divided evenly.

zerozaki
To shred zero.

Zerozaki.

"That's enough!"

He shouted.

Again, he screamed those words at the top of his lungs.

Like he'd already been defeated.

Like a loser.

And so, he swung at the air in front of him.

"I won't allow you to live for even an extra second. I don't care if I lose in the end—as long as you two die, as long as I can kill you, that's enough for me! I'll cut each of you in half!"

"Knock yourself out."

Soushiki didn't even flinch.

Almost as if saying he should just get to it already.

"And I should say this, Hawatari-kun. After you kill us—the next *Zerozaki* you'll have as an opponent will most likely be—like I said before, my little brother. Don't forget.....to pass down that message."

"Your little brother.....to think you'd still be relying on that pipe dream. Do you really think *he* could kill *me*?"

"Yeah. In fact, I know he will.Uhuhu, it might just be that he's already nearby. Like a tokusatsu hero who arrives at the last possible moment."

"Stupid delusions on top of stupid delusions."

Sword in hand, Hawatari stepped forward.

"There's no doubt that you two belong in Hell. Your presence alone makes the air polluted. You shall descend soon. And that younger brother of yours will follow right after. I'm sure you'll get along there just fine."

And so.

In front of that powerless duo.

Sawarabi Hawatari brought his sword above his head.

To bring everything to an end.



"....."

Right nearby.

At a distance of about 5 meters.

A young boy awaited patiently, hidden by the trees.

He wasn't very tall. His long, dyed hair was tied in a ponytail. On one of his ears were three piercings, and on the other were cell phone straps being used as adornments, among other things. But what drew the most attention was the ominous tattoo imprinted on his face, partially covered by his stylish sunglasses.

The boy was able to achieve the feat of concealing his presence from Sawarabi Hawatari, Zerzaki Soushiki and Mutou Iori seemingly without much effort.

As he mulled over his situation, his expression was unusually serious.

Or perhaps troubled was a better way to describe it.

Troubled.

".....Hmm. So that's what's happening. Hmm, I get it, I get it. And, considering that old hag's corpse, then—hmm, it's all clear now. But still—"

He muttered somewhat annoyed.

"That brother of mine is as sharp as ever, huh? What's that guy thinking? After getting called a pipe dream and a delusion and whatnot, doesn't he know how hard it gets to make my entrance?"

(Sawarabi Hawatari—Commencing Exam)

(Chapter 9—The End)

Translator's Notes:

Nature and disposition are a single word in Japanese (seishitsu). Disposition is closer to its meaning, but nature fits some of the sentences way better, which is why, for the most part, that was used instead.

"Demonic Killer" and "psychotic killer" are the same word in Japanese (satsujinki). Whenever it's used, it could mean both things, even though the translation always chooses one of the two.

Hizokko was translated as "prodigy", but a more literal translation is "favorite child", and an even more literal translation is "child kept hidden". It can also mean "favorite student" (i.e. be used in contexts where it has nothing to do with the word "child" as in son/daughter), which is why "prodigy" was thought to be fitting.

Saiaku was translated as "Evil", but it's the same word that's used to describe Saitou Takashi (Worst).

零裂き [Zerozaki/Zerosaki]: the kanji for tear/rip/shred/rend is used instead of "hill", so it's something along the lines of ripping/tearing/shredding/rending the number zero, in two or more parts. Translation ended up as "To shred zero", but perhaps Zero Render would have worked.

第十話
零崎人識



Chapter 10: Zerosaki Hitoshiki

As Sawarabi Naguma and Sawarabi Yumiya confronted the *Man Eater*, as they were led to comprehend—as they were led to perceive an existence beyond what they could manage, something *nothing could be done about*, something *inevitable*, at almost that exact same time—

Sawarabi Hawatari met with this world's Worst.

"I see you're quite perceptive."

Immediately—Hawatari flinched. That style of clothing was the same as what his siblings usually wore, and yet—the pure white of the kimono which clung to that man's thin body, reminiscent of burial clothes, gave him shivers just to look at it. Like a ghost below a willow tree [yanagi onna].

An eerie fox mask covered the ghost's face.

"Wh-Who are you?"

"'Who are you?' Hmph."

The Evil Fox repeated Hawatari's words.

"What a worthless question. It doesn't matter who I am—were I to reveal my name or were I not to reveal my name, it would be the same either way. Sawarabi Hawatari—I've heard the rumors about you."

"....."

"Even at your age, and even though you're only from a branch family, your performance far surpasses even the elite *Niounomiya*—isn't that so?"

"—Overestimation. Those rumors are completely unfounded. Nothing but gossip based on gossip based on gossip."

"'Gossip based on gossip based on gossip'. Hmph." Again, the Evil Fox repeated Hawatari's words and, ignoring them, continued to talk. "Well—things like strength, weakness, superiority, inferiority, those are meaningless as far as I'm concerned. Whether you're strong or whether you're weak, it's the same. It's the exact same thing."

"The exact—same thing?"

"Yes. Be it strong or be it weak, it's all the same. Everything that exists in this world has the same origin. No matter what is done or what isn't done, it's all connected in its roots, and in the end it's all the same. There's nothing in this world which isn't the same. Still.....regardless, even then, there are things which can't be sacrificed. Isn't that right,

Sawarabi Hawatari?"

"....."

Hawatari thought about the sword he wore on his waist.

I can kill him—he thought.

He's making no effort to guard himself.

It should take more effort *not* to kill him.

So why is it—that I can't seem to be able to do it?

I can't imagine myself killing him.

Something tells me—I mustn't kill him.

"Who—are you?"

The Evil Fox sneered at Hawatari's repeated question.

"Sawarabi Hawatari."

And called his name once again.

"I'm assembling—how should I say this.....a group of eccentrics. The exact amount isn't important—at any rate, I'm just trying to gather as many eccentrics as I can. Although.....I guess it can't just be any number of people—" The Evil Fox went quiet for a moment and then, as if he'd just come up with something, "How about.....", he continued. "Thirteen. Yes, that would work out just right. And because it can be interpreted as the sum of the seven *Killing Names* and the six *Cursing Names*, it feels like there's some deeper meaning behind it, which doesn't sound bad—and even if you take it as the Kunagisa's eight plus the Four Gods and a Mirror, that would be fine in its own right—as something along the lines of 'respect'. The name—well, I'll have Rizumu come up with something stylish."

"....."

As Hawatari stayed mute, "Hmph", the Evil Fox paused for an instant, pointed at him, and then continued.

"I've taken a liking to you. Leave the *Sawarabi's* future to your siblings and join me."

"——!"

He shivered.

For no apparent reason, his entire body trembled.

His body went almost—entirely numb.

It was like his legs could give away at any moment.

The feeling of being rejected by the world.

The feeling of rejecting the world.

All because—of those few words.

Hah—

And so.

At that moment, Sawarabi Hawatari understood.

The true significance of the existence which stood in front of him.

So that's—how it is.

So that's why—I don't want to kill him.

So that's why—it's impossible for me to kill him.

To him, to this Evil, living and dying—are probably the same.

Life—is relentless.

Death—is obtuse.

They are both—equivalent.

Everything—looks the same.

Every single thing can be replaced.

To this Evil, there's no need to choose, and there's no need to decide.

He's on a different level.

A different layer.

A different dimension.

And to this Evil, to whom everything is the same—

Sawarabi Hawatari—was somehow different.

And now—

Being invited by that *different thing*.

That reality—

Having been offered a choice.

Having been offered the right to choose.

Possessing—freedom.

Freedom.

"Don't get me wrong—it's not that I want to borrow your strength, your skills as a swordsman or anything like that. As far as brawn goes, the Niounomiya siblings are already sufficient—what I want is for it to be a group with as much brains as possible. By the way, Izumu should be paying your siblings a visit just about now—"

"You mean Izumu.....the *Man Eater*?"

He was very much familiar—with that name.

The Niounomiya Troupe's greatest failed experiment.

"If they can break through Izumu, those siblings of yours.....let me see—Naguma.....and.....Yumiya—that's it, Yumiya. Then, I wouldn't oppose having the two join this group of thirteen—but you're the only one being invited for now, Sawarabi Hawatari."

"....."

"You.....well, it's not by that much—but you are somewhat, you are quite—abnormal. You are qualified to be part of the recurring cast. It'd be hard to find a replacement—or rather, the role you've been given is likely something which can't be replaced. You are eccentric, and therefore—you are interesting."

"....."

"I'm thinking of ending the world as quickly as possible. This world is so, so interesting—that I can't help but want to witness how its end will turn out to be."

"....."

"What I want is to see—the end of the world."

The end—of the world.

Creating an end—to see the end.

That way of thinking—is ended.

It's Evil.

"And you shall be by my side once that time comes. I'll have you be by my side. Your existence has a purpose. The *Sawarabi* name is just something you inherited from someone else. Why should you need to follow it? The only thing people should follow—is *fate*. Your role.....your fate—I'll be the one to determine it."

Truly—arrogant.

Truly—insolent.

Truly—sinful.

Truly—Evil.

"Make your choice, Hawatari."

"If you come with me—it'll feel real good~"

—In the end.

Hawatari rejected that invitation.

Not because—he was scared.

Not because—he was overwhelmed.

Hawatari didn't have such weaknesses.

Truth be told, he wanted to accept it.

He felt like entrusting his fate—to that Evil.

He even thought it'd be okay—to let him take full control over his fate.

Following him somewhere far away.

Letting go of everything—giving up on everything.

Abandoning everything he'd been responsible for.

Throwing away his past self.

He genuinely—desired that.

However, that's not what Hawatari did.

The three *Sawarabi* siblings are meant to be as one. They were constructed to be *like that*. Although there was nothing wrong with Hawatari setting off on his own—he couldn't imagine Naguma and Yumiya being able to carry on the *Sawarabi* name. After all, from the very beginning, ever since they were born—even before they were born, the three were created as a single thing. For them, who'd been raised *like that*, to be divided; for him to be the one to abandon it all—that all seemed.....strange. The three being together was something natural, and it'd be weird to ruin that—those were his thoughts. As far as words can express it, that's how things were.

He wouldn't regret it.

It was probably the first time since he was born that Hawatari chose, that Hawatari made a decision on his own. It stands to reason that that choice—that decision wouldn't be something he'd regret.

But that's not to say that he didn't feel tempted.

As that was likely the last fork in the road he'd encounter in his life, there was no way that he wouldn't—feel tempted. After all, that life-changing decision was made just because of something as vague as it feeling “strange”.

Strange.

A strange feeling.

While up to this day no one has explained to Hawatari that that feeling was something people usually describe as “love for one's family”—

Since then—Sawarabi Hawatari has come to know.

Without choice, he came to know.

The same way Sarawabi Naguma and Sawarabi Yumiya became aware of the existence of something *inevitable*—he came to know that, in this world, there exists an Evil—nothing can be done about.

And that Evil, unconnected to the story, almost as if it existed outside of the story, as if it observed everything from an outer layer—in the worst possible timing, Hawatari came to know of it, and with that—

—Nii-sama.

His sister's—questions.

—What does it mean—to die?

—What does it mean—to kill?

In reality, he was able to answer them.

He became capable of answering them.

Hawatari—knew their answer.

A clear answer.

An answer which was too clear.

Which was why—he didn't want to ask.

Which was why—he didn't answer.

Which was why—he couldn't answer.

If he asked—he'd have to think about it.

And if he thought about it—he'd remember.

That those—are one and the same.



—Suddenly.

Suddenly—he was there.

Before Sawarabi Hawatari's eyes, before Zerozaki Soushiki's eyes, before Mutou Iori's eyes—that boy with a strange getup came into existence. Without warning, without foreshadowing, suddenly, out of nowhere, as if he'd timed it exactly for when the three of them were blinking, with no other reasonable explanation, that boy came into existence.

He wasn't very tall. His long, dyed hair was tied in a ponytail. On one of his ears were three piercings, and on the other were cell phone straps being used as adornments, among other things. But what drew the most attention was the ominous tattoo imprinted on his face, partially covered by his stylish sunglasses.

Having not been seen, having not been heard, having not been felt, as if he'd been there from the very start, that boy arrived on stage. With his sword raised overhead, Sawarabi Hawatari stopped in his tracks. The same happened to Zerozaki Soushiki and Mutou Iori. It became clear to Hawatari that those two's resolve, which managed to stay solid up to that point, had dispersed into something much more vague.

"—I know this might seem out of the blue, but this should be a good time to talk about the difference between me and *him*."

With those words, the boy took out his sunglasses and tucked them into his vest pocket. They weren't meant for Hawatari, they weren't meant for Soushiki, they weren't meant for Iori, they weren't meant for the three of them, and they weren't meant for himself, as some sort of soliloquy. Almost—yes, you could say that they were meant for something like what's usually referred to as God, in the tone of a declaration of war.

"The one and only difference between me and *him*, who's at once the mirror image and the exact opposite of myself, our one, crucial difference—in the end, it comes down to the fact that *he's* hopelessly, unsalvageably *soft*. Because of his softness, *he* was unable to forgive his own *weakness*. And so, it was inevitable that *he* would become alone. His mistake, his foolishness was applying that *softness* to others. When you should've just directed your love towards yourself and yourself only. Of course, it goes without saying that being soft isn't a merit or an advantage—rather, for any living creature, it's a *defect*. It's not only a risk for one's life, but also a hindrance to evolution itself. At that point you're no longer a creature—just an inorganic, machine-like existence. It'd be outrageous to refer to something like that as "life". That's why I call him—*Defective Goods*."

The boy looked at Hawatari.

Faced by the darkness which lay in those eyes, instinctively—Hawatari took a step back. Those endlessly deep eyes which seemed like a mash of all the chaos in this world. Those dark pupils which seemed wrong in contrast to that boy's frivolous smile.

Dark.

Pure darkness.

Enough to engulf those who stared at it.

It only took an instant for Hawatari to understand.

That he—will kill.

It could've been a helpless and innocent infant and it'd make no difference to him. If something shows up in front of him, that's enough of a reason for him to kill it.

"Meanwhile—there's not an ounce of softness in me. That's the type of guy I am. However, I can't seem to be able to forgive that *strength* of mine—the *strength* of being fine even when in solitude. I can't seem to be able to forgive it. Not being kind also means not caring when people aren't kind to you. Why is it that I, who doesn't feel the need for friends, who doesn't feel the need for family, can still be considered human? Living creatures are considered alive because they work as a colony. A being that lives independently inevitably strays away from that definition. It is *disqualified*. It's hilarious, really, how, even though me and *him* are complete opposites, the outcome is still the same. It's the exact same thing. The path is the only thing that's different—the goal and the starting point are the exact same. Such an absurd punchline. I kill the flesh, *he* kills the mind. Forget others, I can't even let myself live. There's nothing in this world I can allow to live. An inhuman obstruction to whom the "living" part of "living creature" doesn't apply. There's not even a point in going through an exam. That's why he calls me—*No Longer Human*."

He laughed, and then continued.

"It's a masterpiece, really."

The boy then proceeded to turn his back to Hawatari and headed towards Iori and Soushiki.

Nonplussed, Hawatari asked:

".....Bastard! Who are you?"

"I'm Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

The boy answered, still with his back turned away.

"For now—that's the only name I can give."

After that, the boy—Zerozaki Hitoshiki looked at Soushiki and, "Kahahah!", let out a laugh filled with malice.

"What's this what's this?—Here I was trying to find you so I could murder you and steal those weird scissors o' yours, just passing some time before leaving the country—but you're already getting killed all by yourself. Pathetic."

".....You haven't changed a bit these past six months—Hitoshiki."

Soushiki's answer to his brother's mocking remarks made it clear some of his earlier calmness had returned to him. His expression mostly displayed shock, but there was also some relief, or perhaps—peacefulness. Hawatari didn't let that pass. Judging from their reactions, it seemed neither Soushiki nor Iori had anticipated the arrival of this new *Zerozaki*—That's not it.

That had nothing to do with it.

His intent was to kill every Zerozaki.

Once he encountered one, it didn't matter what it would take.

Even if it was three versus one, in essence, things were the same as if his opponent were a single person. With his aim set on Hitoshiki's back, Hawatari brought his sword down on—

Hawatari attempted to bring his sword down on Hitoshiki's back, upon which realized he was unable to move it. No matter how much force he put into it, his sword didn't move an inch.

"—Wh-What?"

"That right there is String Manipulation."

[曲絃糸, read as either *kyokugenshi* or *magagenshi*, translated as String Manipulation, could mean multiple things if you don't know how it's written.]

Hitoshiki turned his head over his shoulder and looked at him.

"I won't say it's impossible, but you won't be able to cut through it with that sword.....but don't worry! I'll undo it real quick."

With those words, Hitoshiki raised his hands above his head. At the same time, "shun shun shun shun", the sound of his strings ripping through the air reverberated all throughout that location, at which point the restraints on Hawatari's sword came undone.

"——!?"

At first, Hawatari couldn't comprehend the phenomenon which occurred in front of him. He couldn't comprehend it, but if he were to guess—was that *Zerozaki*.....was Zerozaki Hitoshiki using some sort of projectile weapon.....? Or perhaps it'd be more appropriate to call it—

Flustered, he took a couple of steps back, distancing himself from his opponent. Until he became sure of the identity of Hitoshiki's weapon, it was dangerous to stay this close to him. Still, seemingly unworried about Hawatari's actions, "Kahaha", laughing, the boy brought his hands down.

kyokugenshi
"Limit Arts....."

Soushiki asked Hitoshiki.

"Shitty brat. Where and when did you get taught such a nasty *skill*?"

"Huh?? Why do you think I spent so much time wandering across the country? Even I can change, you know. You gotta learn the truth before distorting it. I even went to see that *hawk*

you're so scared of. Well, I'd say it was more than 50% my win, but I guess it was something like a draw, in the end?"

"....."

"I was never really suited for this *String* thing though. I got a grasp of it some years ago while fighting alongside this weird woman called *Zigzag*, but a long time has passed since then and I still can't get it to work past a three-meter range. What difference does it make then if I'm using that or just a knife? I'm really more of a knife guy myself. It's useful as a surprise attack since it can come from any angle, but I still personally feel like it's unfair, or maybe cowardly—"

"Umm. So, you would be—"

Iori, embraced in Soushiki's arms, attempted to ask something to Hitoshiki. Those words were interrupted, however, by the sound of Hitoshiki violently kicking the ground.

"Don't just go addressing me that casually, Onee-chan." Hitoshiki scowled down at Iori. "The only *Zerozaki* I consider family is my brother over here. I don't really feel any obligation to save you. Wait.....actually....." Hitoshiki scratched his head awkwardly. "Now that I think about it, there's no need for me to save my brother either. Didn't I come here in the first place just so I could kill him?"

"....." "....." "....."

"So why are you still here!?", were the thoughts of everyone there other than Hitoshiki. It's certainly odd that he would have just shown up with no actual goal in mind. *Zerozaki* Hitoshiki's fuzzy attitude made it seem like he just went with the flow and blew with the wind until all of a sudden he realized he was there.

".....Of course."

Setting the other two aside, regardless of Hitoshiki's own beliefs—to Hawatari, the boy who stood in front of him was still someone he had to kill, an *enemy* he had no option but to kill. However, that attack just now—although it was unclear whether it really was some sort of attack—*that* which Soushiki referred to as *Limit Arts*—was something he needed to be careful about. To a specialist in close combat like Hawatari, skills similar to projectiles were his worst enemy. He said its range is only three meters, although I have no way to know if that's true or not—but that's not all. There's still the possibility that Hitoshiki is still hiding any number of other *skills*. Since I know nothing about the enemy, while I myself have no other tricks prepared, should I retreat?—but I'm already at too much of an advantage for that. If, by some chance, even though it's almost impossible, if Soushiki and Iori come out of this alive—all of our efforts will come to nothing.

—Naguma.

My little brother's death—will have been in vain.

—Yumiya.

If my sister were here—things would've been so simple.

What is this.

In the end, that's how it's going to be?

So the Sawarabi—are three as one.

How stupid.

Just some ridiculous sentimentalism.

If you have enough time to be thinking about that, it's better to just—

"—Kahaha."

Suddenly—Hitoshiki laughed out loud.

A pure, merry laugh, with no malice behind it, as if he were laughing simply because he found something to be funny—which made it all the more unpleasant.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess that's how it should be. That's fine, just how people would normally react, that's fine."

".....?"

"I mean—when a *pro* encounters an enemy they know nothing about, they don't normally just thoughtlessly charge at 'em, right?"

".....Isn't that.....obvious?"

Hawatari answered Hitoshiki while still holding his sword. Still, it didn't seem like Hitoshiki was paying too much attention to him. Rather than easefulness, it was more like he already knew everything Hawatari was capable of.

"By the way, just around the corner there was a guy in a hut with that same face you have—and that's exactly what he did. While yelling "Zerozakiiii" or something. What do you think was up with that?"

"....."

So it was this boy and not Iori who killed Naguma. But for that incomparably cautious brother to be taken over by his emotions, regardless of how frivolous he always acted—now that I think about it, this boy's face tattoo—of course, he's Yumiya's murderer.

"That's because y—"

"Exactly, it seemed like that guy already knew who I was. He perceived me as an *enemy* he was already familiar with. Basically, because I wasn't an *unknown enemy*, he felt a sense of security and concluded it made sense to charge directly towards me. But here lies a contradiction, my dear samurai-san."

".....What are you trying to say?"

"If he knew me, there's no way he'd think recklessly lunging at me would be a good idea. Against someone with *Strings*, it's easy to see—or rather, it's easy *not* to see how dangerous that would be. If he *already knew me*."

"....."

"If there's one thing someone who fought to the death against me wouldn't attempt to do, that's to bet it all in a single strike. That'd be suicidal. The only person I could see attempting that is that idiot *Suicidal Tendencies*. And your brother wasn't just a random weakling—he was a pro, right?"

"But.....that would mean....."

However minor it may have seemed, it was a perfectly reasonable suspicion. Even when comparing it to Zerozaki Soushiki's case—although, precisely because it was their *first encounter*, Hawatari's scheme succeeded in deceiving him, it would never work a second time, nor would Hawatari ever attempt to use it again. Few people followed only a single style the way Soushiki did—normally, you have a couple of patterns to choose from depending on the situation. Therefore, if Sawarabi Naguma had already fought against Hitoshiki—there was no way he would fall so easily for the same trick.

It's incoherent.

Contradictory.

"What are you talking about? It's unclear. Are you saying you didn't use that freakish skill when fighting against Naguma for the first time?"

"You are getting something wrong before that. Lemme set this straight—I don't remember having ever seen your face before coming here."

"—What!?"

"This was my first time seeing your brother." Hitoshiki, seemingly annoyed, stated slovenly. "I've only now met him, and your sister—what was it, umm, whatever—your sister wasn't murdered by me. It's all false accusations [*nureginu*, lit. wet clothes]."

One could surmise from the way Zerozaki Hitoshiki spoke as if things were obvious that he was able to get a fairly good grasp on their situation before arriving there. He either found out about it while gathering info in the search for his brother, or he deduced it from the vestiges, from the evidence which had been left in that forest—either way, it seemed he

understood their situation just as well, if not better than Hawatari.

.....However.

He couldn't simply ignore that statement.

"False.....accusations? What do you mean? It's unclear."

"I mean exactly what I mean. False accusations means false accusations and nothing other than false accusations. In the first place—didn't my brother explain to you already that the Zerozaki Clan spares no one? If your brother was still alive until only just now, then that's the best proof you can get that he never ran into me."

"However, my sister—"

"Yeah, of course. If you say so yourself, and considering your brother's fury, it's probably true that your sister was murdered. No one's saying that's a lie. So, she was indeed killed, but it was someone else who did it."

Turning all premises inside out—

Zerozaki Hitoshiki stated plainly.

It goes without saying that those words weren't enough to nonplus Hawatari. They weren't enough, they weren't enough to nonplus him but—he could tell that, if they were true, quite a few things could be explained.

That so-called "clumsiness".

The fact that Naguma came out alive even after opposing—a *Zerozaki*. The fact that Yumiya was the only one who died. It'd be one thing if he had returned after managing to kill his opponent, but not only did he escape, he was never even pursued—

That reality.

What does it tell?

"How.....can you say that? Who are you saying d—"

"No clue. It's not my problem either. How could I know? How could.....but if I were to make some suggestions for the list of suspects—then, how about that granny chopped into pieces over there?"

That granny chopped into pieces over there.

Tokenomiya—Tokei.

The one who prepared over a dozen *marionettes*, who participated directly in combat—an

ally to the *Sawarabi*—

Tokinomiya, one of the six *Cursing Names*.

"T-Tokinomiya—"

"Ah, so that granny was a Tokinomiya? I knew she would end up being a member of a *Cursing Name*. And not just a branch family, but the main household, huh?—I see I see." Hitoshiki seemed convinced by Hawatari's remark. "Then that settles it. If that granny is a *Tokinomiya*, she must've used one of those Thought Manipulation *skills* they're so good at—and completely fooled, completely deceived your two siblings. That's entirely possible, isn't it?"

".....!"

The skill—or rather, the ability that Tokinomiya Tokei possessed and used as a tactic against Zerozaki Soushiki is similar to what's usually called *mimicry*. It's a type of Thought Manipulation which pulls its opponent—or rather, its target into an illusory world in which she is perceived as a different person—usually the transcendental existence known as *Death-Colored Crimson*—at which point it becomes simple to obtain a victory—a method which stands in direct opposition to the *Niounomiya's* usual approach. Soushiki was capable of seeing through it, but—

But.

That Thought Manipulation skill's most notable trait is—

The fact that, if you don't see through it, there's no way to become aware of it.

Normally, you wouldn't even realize that you were caught in an illusion—the only reason Soushiki was able to break through it was that, coincidentally, he knew more about *her* than Tokinomiya Tokei did. If not for that, he would have died without ever knowing that he'd fallen into an *enemy's* trap. Even in death, he'd continue thinking that *she* was the one who killed him.

And it's the same—

If you survive.

And if *she's* not the one being *mimicked*.

It's impossible to catch up to it when the world itself has been replaced. Since there's nothing to compare it to, unless something is directly contradicted—it can't be noticed. That is why the *Cursing Names* are dreadful both as foe and as friend. *Their* skills don't trick only their enemies—they can even deceive their allies. Rather, it's precisely against allies that those *skills* are the most effective.

That can't be it.

That can't be it. That can't be it. That can't be it.

They—the six *Cursing Names* don't discriminate between friend and foe. Those concepts aren't relevant for their sense of morality.

Hence—a curse.

If you cast a curse, dig two graves.

"There was this huge tree next to that granny's corpse with some red piece of cloth nailed down to it—that's a pretty common technique in the field. And this forest is perfect for those sorts of ploys. It was easy to tell from the way that that corpse was butchered that my brother here was the killer, and it was also obviously not an easy fight, considering how rough the job was done. So it wasn't too hard to deduce what type of *skill* had been used—"

Although Hitoshiki kept clarifying his train of thought, Hawatari wasn't in a state where he could process his words anymore.

That's—insane.

There's no way something that insane could possibly be true.

If Hawatari—if the *Sawarabi* were fooled by that crone, then—

"Th-That's just some worthless gibber—"

"Gibberish, huh?"

"Kukuku", Hitoshiki snickered at the word "gibberish" and then leisurely walked away. He had seemed almost like a great detective explaining their deductions. While Hawatari never failed to be mindful of not exposing his own back, completely ignoring that, Hitoshiki kept walking.

"That's wrong—if you had never met each other before, then he couldn't have seen an illusion of you. Even if it's a hallucination, it's impossible to make a person *perceive* something they don't already have stored in their memory."

"It's those *Cursing Names* we're talking about—being impossible means nothing to them. Even a newborn still dreams, right? It's the same thing. And it's not that hard to copy a person's appearance. If you just get a photo or a portrait of a person into the corner of someone's field of vision, that's enough for the brain to register it. It's not good to underestimate the human brain, you know. So, she just needed to imitate my appearance, and then draw out the memories of some time each of your siblings felt *fear*. They had to have at least one of those, living in this world. I don't have any, though, so maybe I wouldn't know."

"B-But—"

He couldn't say anything else.

"I mean, going by that logic, it wouldn't have been possible for my brother to have hallucinated that *Crimson* either. Even though he knew about her, he hasn't ever met her face-to-face, after all. If he had, it's the same as with your brother: there's no way he'd still be alive. Unless you are me, you don't simply survive an encounter with *her*. Thought Manipulation means rearranging information to create images as you see fit—it's what the *Tokinomiya* do."

"S-Still—"

He couldn't say anything else.

He couldn't refute it.

If you assume the *Tokinomiya* showed Naguma and Yumiya an illusion of *Zerazaki Hitoshiki*—then there are no contradictions left. Although, from the moment the *Cursing Names* get involved, complaining about contradictions and absurdities might already be meaningless. While the *Killing Names* are battle groups who at least still follow the laws of physics—the *Cursing Names* are despicable non-battle groups who ignore the world itself.

".....Th-Then—I can't understand why the *Tokinomiya* chose *you*, who's practically completely unknown, instead of *Mind Render*, or *Seamless Bias*—"

"Man you doubt everything. Though it's nothing compared to *him*, who doubts ill and good intentions equally. The answer to your questions is just that, among the *Zerazaki*, I'm the one who's the hardest to communicate with, the one it'd be the hardest to find out had been *mimicked*. It's precisely because I'm unknown that I was chosen. There's no reason to pick someone famous when your objective isn't to defeat your opponent. Right?"

".....I—"

"Besides—first of all, I got one of those "perfect alibi" things. You see, I was busy there in Kyoto murdering people—some thirteen of them, if I remember correctly? No, I failed at killing *him*, so in the end it was only about twelve. In other words, I was too busy to have the time to attack your sister. Unless you mean to say that she was one of the twelve I killed."

"....."

"Ironic, isn't it? Being so caught up in your activities as a killer—that you end up proving you aren't the murderer. Kahaha, it's a masterpiece."

"Th-Then—what was the *Tokinomiya*'s motiv—"

"Isn't the motive obvious already? So obvious, it's almost annoying. The *Sawarabi* are sorta like brothers to the *Niounomiya*, right? It's not hard to imagine the *Tokinomiya* wanting their opposite, the *Niounomiya*, and the *Zerazaki* to start killing each other."

"....."

That thought had passed through Hawatari's mind multiple times. That old lady Tokinomiya claimed to hold a grudge against the *Zerzaki*, but Hawatari never believed that. He knew very well that the reason the *Tokinomiya* were assisting the *Sawarabi* was to increase their odds of mutual destruction—he didn't think for a second it was something like good will. It's just that he didn't care. Hawatari was confident that they could overwhelm any *enemy*, including the Zerzaki Clan. Compared to his ambition, the *Tokinomiya*'s scheme should never have been a huge obstacle.

But if the stage had been set by the *Tokinomiya*—if they were ones who set up the *motive* for our hatred of the Zerzaki Clan—and if they were the ones who provided us the *tools* for our assail—then the situation reverses itself completely.

From the first to the third quadrant.

Unlike Yumiya and Naguma, Hawatari never doubted his own actions. He never let a desire for "revenge" or "retaliation" influence them. If Naguma had been killed, that just meant he was weak. If Yumiya had been killed, that just meant she wasn't strong enough.

Nevertheless—

It's not that he never thought of avenging Yumiya.

It's not that he never understood the way Naguma felt.

Saying that would also be incorrect.

Losing one of three sides—is strange.

It's a strange feeling.

A feeling—of loss.

Why did things have to come to this?

He couldn't simply—stop thinking about it.

"Are you saying that I—Are you saying that we—"

Were tricked.

Were deceived.

Is that why—things came to this?

Even though I followed my own will.

Even though I succeeded in following my own will.

It was in a stage someone else prepared.

In a role someone else gave to me.

A farce carried out just according to script.

And we were the ones being ridiculed—

We were the butt of the joke.

"Are you saying that we were double-crossed—by those filthy, incompetent *Tokinomiya*?"

His voice didn't lose its composure. It shouldn't have a reason to. He wasn't one to be affected by that. He was unmoved. He should've been unmoved. Stay calm. Stay calm. Why should I believe a *Zerzaki*?

Why.

Why. Why. Why. Why. Why.

Why.

"Kahaha—well, none of that matters in the end. You can deceive and be deceived all you want, but that doesn't change our current situation one bit, it's completely unrelated to the world we are now in. Deceiving and being deceived is just how things work in the world anyways."

Then, *Zerzaki Hitoshiki* shoved his hand into his pocket and took out a butterfly knife while spinning it around his finger. To *Hawatari*, it seemed to hold no real strength as a blade, like a cheap toy or worse. However, with all the confidence of someone holding a high-caliber handgun, with eyes that showed no fear, he pointed that knife at *Hawatari*.

"I'm a demonic killer, you're a hitman. It's the same thing—we're both animals in the same way. There's no need for words when we got weapons. Forget holding back, forget respect, forget restraint, forget hesitation, let's kill to live, let's live to kill. I'm one of the weakest in terms of strength among the Demonic Killers, but my ability to kill is as high as any *Niounomiya*'s. I've only failed to kill two people in my life, one of which is a mirror image of myself, and the other of which is Humanity's Strongest. 'Til a couple weeks ago, there wasn't a single one. I came all the way here, might as well participate in this farce you're in. Unlike *him*, I'm not soft at all, you see. I'll just kill you and dismember you, line up and rearrange you then expose you to the world."

His gaze while delivering that opening monologue was undoubtedly that of a *Zerzaki*. *Hawatari* noticed that, at some point while listening to *Hitoshiki*, he had let his sword approach the ground. Hurriedly, he assumed a stance once again.

There was still some distance between them.

His sword would be able to reach Hitoshiki almost immediately if he launched himself at him—but he still hadn't uncovered the truth behind his hidden skill. He couldn't simply launch himself at an *unknown enemy*—it wasn't.....so simple.

"Bring it on! The festival's in full swing. It's the flashy final battle of this worthless story. Let's make it clear who's the good guy and who's the bad guy. Let's do this right, us two, right here, fair and square eh?"

".....Of course."

For now—I'll observe.

It doesn't matter what type of skill it is, he can't pull it off without any prior motion. Some gesture—like how he raised his hands above his head before. It might even be something he can do with his hands inside his pockets. Even then, as long as I don't fail to see it—I can counterattack.

He could counterattack—however.

"....."

However—what would be the point of it? If Hawatari was just a puppet—there'd be no meaning to his victory. Like with Naguma—like with Yumiya.

It'll be meaningless.

It'll be meaningless. It'll be meaningless.

It'll be—meaningless.

"....."

Then.

All of a sudden, "kutsukutsu", Hitoshiki couldn't stop himself from laughing.

He lowered the knife he held forward.

"—What? What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing, nothing—it's just." His lips—along with his tattoo, twisted maliciously. "I was just thinking that it really is effective—I see, it's no wonder *he's* so into it."

".....What are you talking about!?"

"What I'm talking about? Naturally—"

While answering, Hitoshiki let his hair down. As his tattoo got hidden entirely, the faint smile Hitoshiki had kept up to that point faded away completely—and his eyes became dreadfully empty.

"—It's nonsense, moron."

That instant.

Two knives sprouted out of Hawatari's chest.

".....Wha-!?"

He couldn't tell what happened.

He couldn't tell, but there was no need to understand it, as his death was already a certainty. One pierced his chest, the other pierced one of his lungs. Like a dam bursting, blood gushed from those fatal wounds. His flesh was pushed out. I remember—I remember this blade. This is Zerozaki Soushiki's—

Suicidal Tendencies
Mind Render.

"Gah—aaaAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH—"

It hurts—or rather, it burns.

It burns—or rather, it's cold.

Cold.

Extremely cold.

While trying to endure that feeling—

He glanced over his shoulder.

Suicidal Tendencies
The *Mind Render* was being held—in Mutou Iori's mouth, as she clung to Hawatari's back while sinking her teeth into its handle.

"Ah, I see, I guess it really is—"

Said Mutou Iori, after letting go of the scissors' handle.

With a faint, involuntary smile.

"It really is unpleasant, huh?—the feeling of *killing a person*."

"Wha—wha, whawhawhawhaw awhawha"

Was I—careless?

I wasn't careless.

It's just—that I lost my cool.

I was led astray by Zerozaki Hitoshiki's words, and failed to pay enough attention—to my surroundings. I assumed Zerozaki Soushiki and Mutou Iori were already out of action—and subconsciously pushed them out of my thoughts. Even though, until the second they died, I couldn't have ignored the fact that they were still *Zerozaki*. I only worried about keeping Hitoshiki in my field of vision, and didn't stop to consider that I had my back turned to Soushiki and Iori. Now that I think about it, that was probably part of Hitoshiki's strategy.

"S-Still—"

Still, even then, there's Iori's severed hands. It's not just that those wounds are fatal—the moment Soushiki let go of her wrist, as soon as she started moving, she should have passed out from anemia. The amount of blood she lost from having both of hands cut off isn't something that can be brushed off. How could she—

He then noticed.

On Iori's left arm.

On that left arm, which Hawatari himself had severed—was an extremely thin, string-like thing which wound around it tightly, preventing it from bleeding.

A string-like thing—or rather, it was some type of string.

"By the way, you got the kanji all wrong, aniki." Hitoshiki spoke as if it had nothing to do with himself. "It's not 'Limit Arts', it's String Manipulation. You write it 'string of bending chords', not 'skills of the extreme'. I know you'd normally read it as *kyokugenshi*, but it's *magagenshi*. Kahaha."

"Gah, ah—"

So the reason Hitoshiki showed up right in between us three—was to contain Iori's bleeding as soon as he could. He carelessly appeared right in front of Hawatari, he suffered that risk just so that he could get within three meters of Iori—the range of his *strings*. It must've happened when he retrieved the strings entangled in Hawatari's sword—at the same time, he must've also wrapped that *string* around Iori's left wrist.

If her bleeding had been taken care of—as long as she stayed conscious, Iori could move.

At the very least, if she used all of her strength, she was capable of stabbing the *Mind Render* [*Suicidal Tendencies*] into Hawatari's back.

"Y-You bastards—"

Deceived—me?

I—was deceived?

I have to accept it.

I have no other option but to accept it.

I—was tricked.

By Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Then—what about those words of his?

Nonsense—he called it?

If you think about it, none of what Hitoshiki said is conclusive. It's based around a single, subjective view—and quite a few of the propositions are complete uncertainties. The deduction isn't the problem. First of all, his alibi doesn't work as an alibi at all. If he didn't kill Yumiya—how did he even know when she was killed? What's the point of having an alibi before establishing the time of death? And Hitoshiki completely ignored Hawatari's main question—whether he used his String Manipulation skill when fighting against Naguma for the first time. He probably hadn't. That skill means nothing once you know its identity, once you understand its nature. Those *strings* are *hidden weapons*. Weapons meant to stay hidden—whose users are also meant to stay hidden. An *ace up one's sleeve*. Not even his own *brother* knew until now that Hitoshiki possessed such a skill. If he's known it for years, and if he met his brother at least six months ago, then he was clearly keeping it hidden. Then how could he explain everything so confidently?

Then, it was all a lie, and Zerozaki Hitoshiki really is Yumiya's murderer. Unless.....unless, it's just that he embellished the truth in order to keep my attention. If his objective was to distract me, then I can't imagine he wouldn't mix some of the truth with those lies.

What parts of that were the truth?

I can't understand.

It's ambiguous.

Unclear.

Uncertain.

Vague.

Half-baked.

Hazy, sloppy.

Evasive, aimless.

Where do the lies end and the truth begins?

"'N-Nonsense'—?"

"I'm just twisting the truth, like I said before. I warned you twice that I'm not soft.You can't just kill my brother and expect me to fight fair and square."

Unserious, Hitoshiki beckoned at Hawatari.

"Where's the praise, now that every trick has been explained?"

"Y-you coward—"

"Isn't there something else you should be saying?"

From behind came Zerozaki Soushiki's voice.

Paralyzed, Soushiki, slouched against a tree, without even attempting to contain the bleeding in his stomach now that his hands were free, held a cigarette in his mouth.

"Hawatari-kun, isn't there something else you should be saying to him? No? In that case, as it has now been decided that you *fail*, at least in the end of the end of the end of your end, let's have this brawl be 'fair and square'—we are all pros here, after all. Right, *Blood-Purple Chaos-kun*?"

".....!"

Suicidal Tendencies

Since Iori couldn't have used her own hands—the one to grab the *Mind Render* and put it in Iori's mouth was probably Zerozaki Soushiki. Why—why does it seem like everything they do has been meticulously planned, like it's all going according to their schemes? How can their teamwork seem this contrived? The three *Sawarabi* siblings, created as one—Sawarabi Hawatari, the long sword user; Sawarabi Naguma, the naginata user; Sawarabi Yumiya, the bow user—were they really capable of communicating this well?

No—

Of course they weren't.

It's not just that it's impossible.

There's no doubt that Zerozaki Hitoshiki's arrival was unexpected for both Zerozaki Soushiki and Mutou Iori. Regardless, that didn't stop—as if they'd planned their every step, that didn't stop them from acting in complete, absolute synchrony.

So that's—what the *Zerozaki* are capable of.

So that's—the Zerozaki Clan.

Related not by blood, but by bloodshed.

Demonic killers.

Demonic killers. Demonic killers.

Even though they are just Demonic Killers.

Even though they are just Demonic Killers. Even though they are just Demonic Killers.

If that's how it is—then they are almost the same.

They are almost the same—as us.

They are the same as us—

And nothing can be done about it.

"You bastards are all—"

Hawatari collapsed onto the ground.

"—Evil."

Soushiki laughed.

Iori punched the air.

Hitoshiki spread his arms.

With a smile, they answered together:

"No shit!"

(Sawarabi Hawatari—Failed)

(Chapter 10—The End)

Translation notes:

“Saiaku”: both Worst and Evil

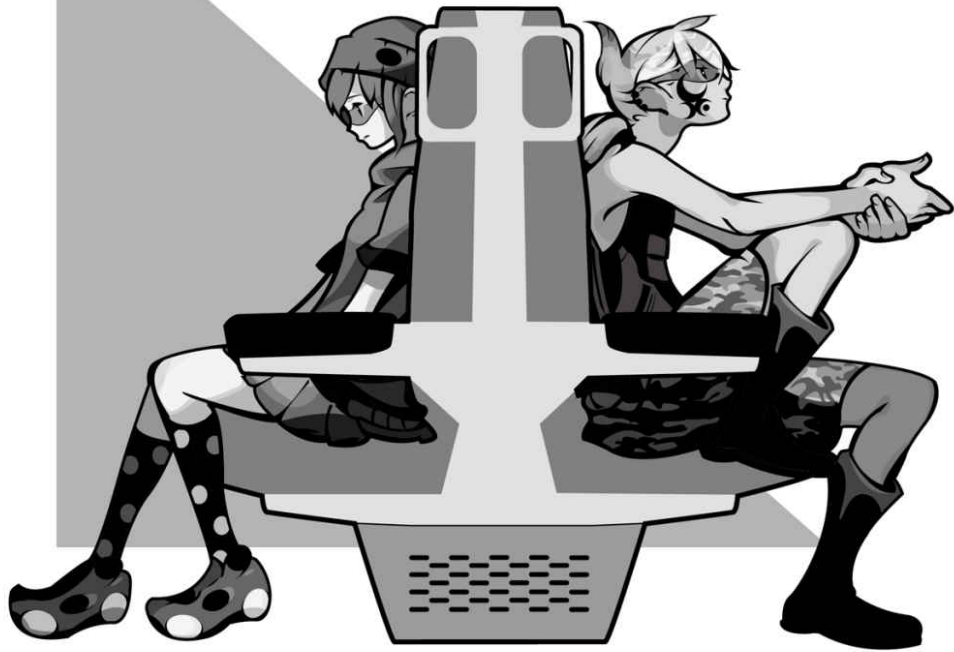
Yasashisa: both softness and kindness

No Longer Human: literally, “disqualified as a human”

Recurring cast: toujou jinbutsu, usu. "cast of characters"

最終話

零崎舞織



Final Chapter: Zerozaki Maiori

"When a person dies, I believe it is inevitable for there to be some kind of *evil*, some existence which can be classified as *evil* at play'—is, well, something my brother used to say a lot."

.....Two humans sat alone in that wagon. That *situation* wasn't particularly unusual for a train already that far away from any major city, all the more so on a weekday. Most of the time, they were about that empty. Two people was not too much, but not too few either.

One of them was a boy with a tattoo on his face. He wore shorts, safety boots, and a tactical vest directly on his skin. Sunglasses with thick frames, three piercings on his right ear, cell phone straps on his left ear. His long hair, with its sides closely cut, was thrown together in a ponytail.

The other was a girl who wore a red knit cap. She was a little taller than the boy who sat beside her, and overall slim, dressed in an oversized red hoodie and a pleated skirt one would expect from a high school uniform. She also had sunglasses on, but these seemed like the cheap ones sold at convenience stores. Perhaps because of some sort of tragic accident, both of her hands had been severed, with recent wounds that likely still hurt. Around the end of her arms were extremely thin strings being used to stop them from bleeding.

In that empty wagon—

The boy and the girl were talking to each other.

"I know this really skilled guy who's a specialist in artificial body parts. You don't gotta worry so much. It'll probably be better than before, even."

".....Is that so."

"After that, I'll introduce you to this other *Zerozaki*. Among the ones I know, he's the one with the least worst personality. Then you should follow him, and then you can keep living your life, you can die, you can deceive, you can be deceived, you can do whatever you feel like. 'Til then, though it's a hassle, I'll look after ya. It's a request from my brother, after all."

".....You can be really cold sometimes, Hitoshiki-kun."

Looking bored, the girl looked at the sky outside the window.

"Now that we're family, we should get more flirty around each other. With a little sister as cute as me—"

"Didn't I tell you already that there's not a single person other than my brother that I've ever considered family? The only reason I joined the Zerozaki Clan was that he was the one who invited me. I don't recommend joining it either. Not that I plan to stop you."

"Hmm. You went through a lot, huh? Hitoshiki-kun."

"Yeah, but I'm not talking about it. I'm being marketed as a boy filled with secrets, after all. It wouldn't do well to my image if my personal matters got exposed."

"So boys are cooler when shrouded in shadows."

"Nah, that's not what I'm sayin' at all. —Well, it's not like I'm ever gonna see you again anyways, so I don't really care about what you make of this. I'm a little fed up with this country, you see. There are already two people I absolutely don't want to run into—so I've decided to go to Texas next."

"How do you plan to get there? You don't have any money, right? And you don't look like you own a passport either."

"There are plenty of ways to get around those things. I already managed to travel through the whole country, you know." The boy stopped talking for an instant. "What were we talkin' about again?—right, my brother. He was always saying some kind of *evil* was necessary for a person to die, but—this time, who do you think was that *evil*?"

"Isn't it pretty obvious that that's us?"

The girl answered the boy.

"Hawatari-san said so as well. I don't know if it's their nature or their essence or what it was, but, in general, those people seemed more 'proper' when compared to you or to Soushiki-san. They say 'you reap what you sow'—I think this time's conclusion was just something like that."

"Still—I don't think this world is so simple that you can just say the bad guys are 'evil', or 'Evil', and call it a day. Dividing things between 'good' and 'evil' is too simplistic, in my opinion. My brother always wanted to be 'normal'—which is why he wore that weird outfit which didn't fit him at all—but what even qualifies as 'normal' is already dubious. If anything in this world is *normal*, then that's a miracle, really."

"A miracle—you say."

"I mean, nothing good could come from being *normal*, right? Wanting to be normal means wanting to blend in with the *crowds* for a sense of security or stability. You have to be a complete idiot to have that as your objective. 'Individuality is defined by what one lacks'—is also one of my brother's mottos, but if you were to take those words seriously, then that means 'having no individuality' is the same as having nothing, don't you think? I used to agree with him on most of these things, but I met this real idiot one of these days, and that forced me into a situation where I had no choice but to change my way of thinking a bit."

"A real idiot?"

"Yeah, some real defective goods. *He* wasn't a *bad* person at all, you see—he's a liar, he

always looks suspicious, he doesn't think of people as people, he doesn't treat people as people, he's a really absurd guy—but *he* was definitely never *evil*. *He* didn't carry any burdens—he didn't have any crosses he had to bear, as far as I could tell. Still, far more than me or my brother ever did, he has *killed* so many people. He has massacred so many people it's impossible for one person to remember all of them. *He* isn't *evil* at all, but his existence alone is enough to kill people."

"He sounds a bit like the *Cursing Names*."

"*He's* probably closer to them than we are. But that's not quite right—if I were to compare *him* to something, I'd say his existence is closer to Humanity's Strongest Crimson. *They* would probably go well together as a couple—but it'd be quite the masterpiece, you know."

"Hmm. I feel like I should meet him one day."

"Terrible idea. Girls with short hair aren't exactly to his taste, apparently. No questions asked.....or rather, *questions asked*, you'll be killed."

"Kahaha", the boy laughed.

"Leaving that aside, that's why I don't think that *evil* is necessary for a person's death. The only things necessary are a blade, and bloodshed."

"....."

They both looked quiet after hearing those words.

A look of pain.

A look of grief.

".....Your brother.....It's unfortunate, Hitoshiki-kun."

The girl was the one to break off the silence.

The boy, partly as a way to look tough, but not in a way that would be apparent to someone observing him, "Hah!", laughed those words away.

"That might not be true. He was the type to want to die more than to live. He said he hated suicide, but you can imagine what dark feelings he hid in his heart considering the name of your weapon, right? He might not have been *evil*, but that's exactly why he couldn't escape from guilt—he was the sort of guy to bear the responsibility for things he was never even responsible for. He was like the calculator of someone who does nothing but read."

".....That so?"

"You.....forget my brother, you being alive is completely abnormal. You know how absurd it is that you survived even after losing that much blood, right? What's up with you? Wanting

everything to go your way even though it's completely unrealistic. Wishing for my brother to have survived on top of everything that already happened is wanting too much."

".....Hitoshiki-kun, to you.....it would have been better for me to have died instead of Soushiki, right? That'd be better as a conclusion."

"Huh?? Nope, not really. You survived because that was your luck, your fate, right? I got nothing to complain about."

".....Luck.....fate, you say. Then, even then, it's still pretty unreasonable. My mom and my dad, my sister, my brother, they were all killed, after all."

"You should be thankful that it ended with that. When it happened to my brother, a whole district got wiped out, or so I'm told. The admiral was always complaining about how hard it was to cover it up."

"How was it with you, Hitoshiki-kun? When you became—a *Zerozaki*."

"I'm a different type from you and my brother—I'm a Demonic Killer *by birth*, as they call it. I don't know how my brother saw it, but, in that sense, I might stray a bit from the definition of *Zerozaki*. Like *him*, I'm not really one to fit into definitions. It's not in our character.....in our *nature*, it seems. It's not really something I wanna talk about too much, though."

Hesitantly, the boy, then, continued.

"—You might be thinking that it was because you *awakened* that you brought my brother into your mess, but he stuck his head into your problems and got killed all by himself. There's no room for sympathy—he was just a fool."

".....Cold as always, Hitoshiki-kun", the girl stated, looking bored. "Wasn't Soushiki-san the one person you considered *family*?"

"My brother hit me all the time."

"....."

"He took me in. He helped me. He raised me. He worried about me. He looked after me. He loved me. I know that very well—way too well."

The boy stated in an awfully direct manner.

"I watched a movie with him this one time. This really boring black-and-white movie which was part of a series I'd never even watched. I read books he recommended to me. Though I never read the manga he recommended. I played catch with him. That scumbag didn't hold back at all even though I was just a kid, so I ended up in the hospital. He gave me a knife. It was cutting myself with that knife that I first learned how much it hurt to get cut. The curry he made tasted terrible. That's what we should really be calling the Worst."

".....Hitoshiki-kun."

"I know him well. It's all things I want to forget, but since I can't, I might as well look back to it, even though it's annoying. So, my brother's not alone. His death will make a difference. He was here. I know that he was here. I know him. I know.....my brother."

"....."

They stayed silent for a bit, until the girl, "Yeah—I also.....know him", not to the boy, said softly.

"Though I thought he was a pervert, at first."

"He is a pervert. And an idiot, to top it off. Stupid enough to love a guy like me. His skills as a Demonic Killer were high, but other than that, there was nothing special about him. Or perhaps.....it's just that he felt cornered."

Feeling cornered.

That's almost too—normal.

"Don't you also think that Soushiki-san—was probably always thinking of himself as a *failure*?"

"Probably, yeah. I completely agree. So far I'd only disagreed with you, but it's good that we finally feel the same way."

"—I wonder how his life was. I mean, I'm not sure if I'm going to say this right—but *yourself* is the one person you have to stay with for your entire life, right? Thinking of yourself as a *failure*—that's way too miserable."

"That doesn't apply just to my brother. Everyone has something they hate about themselves. Weren't you thinking of *escaping* from life until just now?"

"That's.....that's true, but....."

"You shouldn't think of my brother as the protagonist of some tragedy. I get that it's easy to feel pity, but there's no sense in sugarcoating it. He enjoyed life quite a bit in his own way. He had a cute little brother like me, and he even got a simple-minded little sister like you at the very, very end."

".....I wonder."

"There's no mistake. I'm sure of it."

"—Then, what about us?"

The girl asked the boy, stiffly.

"Do you think—we *pass*? Or do we *fail*, as expected?"

"Of course we *fail*—or maybe that's not it." The boy interrupted himself and then proceeded to scratch his head. "It's my brother we're talking about—knowing him, he'd probably say we aren't qualified for it".

"Qualified?"

"Qualified for taking the exam. We aren't. I mean, for sure, this is what he'd say—"You have to be an idiot to want to test your own family."

".....Makes sense."

For the first time, the girl let out a smile fitting her age. A wide, lovely smile which likely matched her usual personality.

".....What are you going to do now, Hitoshiki-kun?"

"I don't know what it is I'll do, but doing something is the only option I have. I know I just said this, but it's just that it's become a bit hard for me to live in this country from now on. Before that red demon hunter catches up to me, I gotta flee."

"Would it not be alright—for me to go with you?"

Sincerely, the girl asked.

"You're sort of my type, Hitoshiki-kun."

"It's a tempting offer. But I'm a lone wolf, and a wanderer, and I can't just wait doing nothing 'til your hands get ready. Besides—you have something else you must do, right? The whole 'getting revenge for my brother' thing."

"....."

"It doesn't look like they were the only ones involved in planning this. They must've had some other collaborators. If you want to become a member of the Zerosaki Clan, then you know you can't just simply let 'em go."

"You aren't doing it, Hitoshiki-kun? *Getting revenge for him.*"

"I'm not fit for a world that brutal. There's also that those *Cursing Names* are quite repulsive, but you can't deny that that's also true about us *Zerosaki*. I don't know if it's when people join factions and lose their individuality, or just anyone who belongs to an organization, but, I don't know, it's scary. Those guys are dangerous, seriously."

".....Won't you feel lonely?"

"Loneliness, huh."

Kukuku, the boy snickered.

"*Loneliness, sadness*—you gotta first discuss whether I'm even qualified to feel those things. Don't you also think it's unfair for a killer to feel lonely?"

"Unfair, you say.....it's not like I don't understand where you're getting at, but....." The girl didn't quite agree, but, for the sake of argument, she acquiesced. "But isn't the fact that they can be there regardless of those things part of what makes those emotions human?"

"There's no use in caring about emotions. Emotions don't really mean much next to reason. There's no such thing as an emotion which can't be suppressed by reason. That is also something *he* taught me. One of his precepts."

"Are there other precepts?"

"'Women will make your body crumble', 'A wise man keeps away from danger', 'The one to steal the good part wins'".

"That's nice. The more you talk about him, the more interesting he seems." Uhuhu, the girl let out a creepy laugh. "If only once, I feel like I should meet him."

"If you're serious about it, then the way to do it is to go to Kyoto. Once you get there, you'll probably gravitate towards *him* naturally. It seems *he* possesses the talent of attracting weirdos and perverts towards himself. That's another one of our differences—I guess."

"Kyoto, then. Alright! I'll be keeping that in mind."

"Though there's no guarantee that he'll stay there forever. He's just like me in the way he doesn't plant roots, and in how he's the type to always stay alone. First of all—", the boy said, sounding ironic. "Nevermind. You're better off giving up on that. *He* may be kind, but *he's* equally merciless. Compared to me, who's just as merciful as unkind, *he's* the exact opposite. In Kyoto, masterpiecefully, his legacy will be felt long after his death."

"Masterpiecefully—Uhuhu. That also doesn't sound—bad at all"

The girl smiled mischievously.

"Before that—first off, for now, it's Soushiki-san's, Onii-chan's revenge."

"Kahaha—Well, do as you want, as long as it's in some place unrelated to me. I'll be hiding there somewhere, just far away enough so you won't be able to find me, rooting for your success."

"Thanks."

—Until.

Suddenly.

A loud screeching noise interrupted their conversation.

With the impact, the train halted abruptly. Following the law of inertia, the boy and the girl fell back into the seats. They had no time to brace themselves. It was like the train crashed into some immovable object which stood right in the middle of its tracks. It had yet to arrive at the next station. From its windows one could see that they had stopped in the middle of a railway bridge. Below them there was only the fierce current of a river. However, still, what force, what *existence* could possibly put a stop to something as heavy as a train—?

“Wai—wha,

“Yeah. Now this—could be a problem.”

Despite the girl’s slight panic, as usual, the boy let out a devilish grin. However, that grin, oddly different from his attitude up to this point, mixed in with some impatience, self-deprecation and resignation, also revealed a certain unease. Failing to grasp the true meaning behind that grin, the girl looked even more disoriented.

But she would soon learn the reason behind the current predicament.

As if an explosion had broken down right outside of the train, one of the doors of the wagon the girl and the boy were in was blown off inwards. Its two parts crashed into the door which stood on its opposite side, after which both doors flew outside of the train.

And then.

From the space that door used to be in—

One more human boarded the wagon.

Imposingly, as if being there was their natural right.

She—*she* had her slender, tall body covered by a blindingly red outfit. *She* was fairly, or rather, incredibly, overpoweringly beautiful, a beauty one couldn’t help but be mesmerized by. Shoulder-length red hair, eyes which could pierce your soul. An air of intimidation emanated from her entire body—even though they stood relatively distant from each other, the boy and the girl—solely because of that presence, felt overwhelmed. There was a

shocking sense of inhumanness, made immediately understood the moment she set foot in that place.

She—

Is known as *Death-Colored Crimson*.

"Here I am—Demonic Killer. Just in time for the ^{obstruction} conclusion."

She let out a sarcastic smile.

"The time has come, Hitoshiki-kun—you don't know how much trouble I went through looking around for ya. Now finally, if you wanna kill me and dismember me, line up and rearrange me then expose me to the world, then I wanna see you try."

Step by step, as if checking her surroundings, step by step, leisurely, *she* approached the boy and the girl. The boy sighed and, "This really is a masterpiece.....", saying that, got up from the seat he'd fallen on. Due to its sudden stop, it appeared as though the wagon had derailed, and, on its now tilted floor, the boy stood up firmly. However, in contrast to that, as if he were obligated to do it, sluggishly, he took out a butterfly knife from his vest pocket and pointed it at *her*.

"—Say."

Collapsed on a seat, the girl asked the boy.

"Is she your enemy, Hitoshiki-kun?"

The boy nodded, silent. Seeming happy, "Uhuhu", the girl laughed in response and, as if kicking the air, sprung up from the train's seat.

"If that's the case."

From the holster hidden inside her pleated skirt came flying a pair of scissors. In fact—calling it a pair of scissors might be a bit of a stretch. Still, relying solely on words to describe it, it was a tool best referred to as that.

If you were to describe it more precisely, then—its handles were shaped like a half-moon with proportions adequate to a person's hand, connected to two double-edged Japanese-styled blades welded out of iron and steel, screwed together in a way that made them relatively mobile. Moreover, the blade attached to the thumb ring was slightly smaller than the one attached to the finger ring. Its appearance was that of scissors, and that was the best way to describe it, but it was impossible to think of it as anything other than a weapon meant for murder.

Those scissors were once given the title—of Mind Render.

And again it would be used under that name.

"Then—she's my enemy as well."

The girl caught the Mind Render in midair with her mouth, and, like the boy, stood up to *her*. Looking at the girl, not knowing how to feel, the boy dropped his shoulders and simply laughed, sarcastically.

"I'll assist ya."

"Thank you."

And so, the two stepped forward to face *her*.

Not hesitating—

Not fearing anyone else—

Not running away from their own selves.

Faced by those two, *she* looked like *she* found that situation to be incredibly, incredibly, incredibly fun, and nothing other than that. As if it weren't her fault that she would feel a sense of joy from the bottom of her heart when two people pointed weapons towards her.

And it was the same—for the girl.

While somewhat shook, aware of the fact that blood was all that awaited her, she faced *her* while grinning from ear to ear. While that smile was the exact opposite of the expression she had on her face up to that point—it was a smile reminiscent of her past self. Not letting that

smile fade away, she thrust the Mind Render's blades towards *her*.

It was the smile—of a Demonic Killer.

"I feel for ya, Defective Goods. Must be one truly unlucky life."

As if he were tired of dealing with those sorts of things, as if he couldn't keep up with it, looking fed up, the boy grumbled to himself.

If you're assisting me, then—

"I'll be starting—the Zerozaki."

Once a Zerozaki starts, it never ends.

(Zerozaki Hitoshiki—Disqualified)

(Zerozaki Maiori—Disqualified)

(End of Exam)

Translator's Notes:

Maiori (舞織): dance (mai) + weave (ori, which can also be read as *shiki*, used in Soushiki and Hitoshiki)

E-book afterword:

Every time I read my past novels I end up thinking: “how would I write this nowadays?”, but the answer is always the same: “nowadays, I wouldn’t write it”. Even if I tried writing the same story, it would likely end up as something completely different. And it’s one thing for the story to end up differently, but having the characters end up as different people is something I absolutely want to avoid. I’m still very fond of them up to this day, but the one who’s best at writing the Zerozaki Clan as they are is the Nisio Isin of the past, not the Nisio Isin of the present. If there’s a work which can be described as something which “could only have been written then”, then the *Ningen Series* is exactly that, or rather, in fact, I’m truly happy that it was then that I wrote it as a series of novels. And I wish for today’s Nisio Isin to keep writing novels that “could only have been written then”. Going forward, so that I can write novels which can only be written going forward, I imagine accumulating those experiences is something important.