

Difference is Fine

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English Version

## Abstract

I often wonder whether humans are truly unique or if our differences are less significant than they seem. For example, it's nearly impossible to find two people who enjoy the exact same music in the exact same way. Even if both love the *Beatles* and "*Let It Be*" one might be drawn to the piano while the other prefers the guitar solo.

If we are all truly different, I wonder if it stems from physical differences — like variations in vision, hearing, or the brain's chemical reactions to the same information. These differences inevitably shape our subjective thoughts. On one hand, this can lead to conflict; after all, if everyone interprets the same thing differently, arguments based on individual feelings are almost unavoidable. On the other hand, these differences might help us to survive, allow us to find meaning, to believe in our own worth, regardless of objective facts.

**Building** on the idea that we humans are all different, I imagine we were created with slight variations in our physical characteristics. Each one of us follows a unique path of development, and together, humanity can gather a complete range of knowledge — whether it's about hiking, designing electrical devices, creating great art, or resolving conflicts. Perhaps the creator — if that is God — designed us this way to collect and learn from the knowledge we accumulate over time.

**Quantum** Mechanics, with its concepts of superposition and entanglement, inspires me to think about human diversity. Imagine that these principles allow humans to be created countless

times with slight variations, ensuring that every possible path and outcome can unfold. This would make each of us truly unique.

**From** this perspective, our purpose as humans could be to collectively develop what I call "great intelligence". This intelligence isn't stored in a single, central repository like a massive database but is distributed among us, with each individual contributing their unique insights and knowledge to the whole.

**Now** God watches as we try to create artificial intelligence, while we still lack a clear understanding of whether machines can ever be fully objective — or how subjective we, as humans, truly are. This uncertainty doesn't concern God, though, as all possibilities resonate with every probability.

just wondering, if we are all unique, then how special is God?

purely Fiction

**Atop** an old, renovated office building, the rooftop has crumbling concrete short walls at the edge and broken tiles scattered around on the ground. This abandoned realm, where hollow souls drift through the ruins of forsaken time, stand as a testament to modern engineering, a lifeless, artificial peak.

He stands at the edge of nothingness, a teenage boy, or perhaps a young man, caught somewhere between his fading moments and shadow memories. He holds his breath, not in anticipation, but as if any further thought is pointless. Don't know since when, deep thinking has become a luxury he can no longer afford. There is some determination on his face, which should be enough to wipe away his hesitation, yet doubt still locks his expression.

A school backpack teeters on the concrete wall, ready to fall. The young man doesn't care, just as he doesn't care about his own life. Just as no one else seems to.

**Some** believe, once a person suicides and jumps off a building, a powerful energy field in the area is created, more people therefore would come and do the same. Others believe that such places already harbour a strange, dark force, constantly pulling people in, one after another, to leap to their death.

those psychics with spiritual sight speak of passing by such places and seeing countless souls falling. All those souls who ended their lives

there, are trapped after death, and doomed to relive the moment of their suicide in an endless loop. The more people jump, the stronger the energy grows, darker, heavier, building into an unnatural force.

> what are you doing?

A security man is expected to be on the ground floor but suddenly appears on the rooftop.

> guess I am sightseeing, this.. city view.

The young man seems a bit surprised that someone else is on the rooftop, but still calmly replies.

> a city view that no one wants to see.

> well, I got different math, I am an one.

> only if you mean it, and you are literally the only one.

> only one, is an interesting description.

> otherwise, you tell me what city view is worth seeing, this is normal, boring city view.

> these concrete towers, supposed to be built as inspiring man-made structures, somehow don't really live up to that. They only end up as emptiness, nothing more than stacks of bricks, piled up by money and labor. For me, those cement objects are made by machines, not by souls.

The security man is relatively young, not as young as the young man, but not quite close to middle age either. His skin still holds a certain smoothness and a healthy glow, showing traces of youth.

> I am confused, since this is a view of emptiness, why do you want to see.

> I am curious how such an emptiness was created.

> I'm not sure what makes you think it's emptiness, but this emptiness is created by humans.

> but by humans with souls?

> well, I can't say all architects lack soul, right? so there must be some architectures that are created by the souls that you are referring to.

How about this, this is what I see. It could be some system in the society, that drains human creativity, turning soulful designs into lifeless shells. Is this better thinking?

The young man exchanges silence with the security man.

> you don't have to go back?

> go back where?

> ground floor, I thought that is the place you work.

> one of the places I work, like rooftop, one of the places I work.

> one of, alright.

Pause.

> so, what are you actually doing here?

> I just said, sightseeing.

> sightseeing emptiness?

> correct.

> compared to natural views on the mountain created by none-souls, you'd rather spend time on emptiness possibly created by souls?

> natural views on the mountain are full of life.

> that's true.

> though it is interesting to say that natural views were created by none-souls.

> also true.

Pause.

> enough, now tell me exactly what you are doing here, don't bullshit me what the soul or the ghost sightseeing nonsense, let's be straightforward.

> you have intention to ask me to drop indirect answers.

> that is an intention, and that is a straightforward question.

> and you want a straightforward answer.

> at least stop indirect answers.

Pause.

> the fact is, once I am straightforward, I might get some classic responses.

> such as?

> such as, some responses that seem to be profound wisdom to alter blind thinking, but actually are just some different versions of "copy from previous" crap with the mindset "I'm just saying and soon I don't care because I don't actually feel you".

> more specific?

> such as, "you are still young, you have a beautiful future, promising life is waiting for you, you should think twice, or more than twice, don't let the moment bring you down".

> frankly speaking, such responses can apply to many situations, do you have more examples?

> how about "it is inevitable that life is not perfect, once you pass it, everything will be great, don't give up". Such as "life never comes without fighting", then follow some examples, then ask you to copy those examples, sounds like you will be fine once you do the same, just don't give up. This type of crap.



> let me confirm, such as, emphasizing that tomorrow must be better than today as long as you move on, but it is simply a way to stop what you are about to do rather than help you.

> you can say that.

> alright, I think I got it, those kinds of classic responses.

> yap, those kinds of lines.

Pause.

> so, are you about to give such classic responses?

> do you think I would still lay out such classic responses after you say that?

> no idea, I am not the person who can make it happen.

> that's true.

> so you have something other than classic responses?

> surprisingly or unfortunately, yes.

> yes?

> especially when you mentioned emptiness, I somehow feel there is a connection between us.

> how?

> can't say how, I can say what though.

> I am listening.

> I guess you intend to do what I've been thinking of all the time.

> so you are going to say what you've been thinking?

Pause.

> alright, I agree now, maybe we don't need to be that straightforward about what we are going to do.

The young man nods.

> so I am going to say it in another way, think we can thus get closer to the answer.

The security man could be assigned to be here by some security company. This is not stable or promising job, the security service can be cut at any time by the office building owner, and the security company can switch the security man at any time.

> alright, I go first.

for me, there is missing proper way to evaluate individuals in the society. A lot of skills require significant time and effort to develop, but often, after putting in that amount of time, people with those skills don't receive fair money. This is because value is decided by supply and demand in the market. When demand changes, such as innovative automation, or when supply increases, such as more people owning the same skill, the value drops, and I am not saying losing a couple of cents in the pocket, it can go below the average. In the end, people who invested time developing their abilities might not even get a basic return.

> sorry for interrupting, since you mention abilities, what ability do you have?

> I am a Class B Machinist.

> I am not sure about what that is, but okay, I assume that is impressive.

> therefore, based on relatively high payment, only particular jobs or abilities are selected. Now there are rich jobs and poor jobs, pushing people who are good at poor jobs to do rich jobs, forcing people to ignore their talents.

society thus wastes talent people and loses the

balance of development. Certain areas are too crowded, while certain areas are lack of people.

> it sounds cynical, but I agree with you.

> if a choice is limited by money, then this is not freedom of choice.

> definitely.

> I must emphasize, it's not simply about who is richer and who is poorer. I do my best on a skill which becomes relatively poor value, I thus cannot afford basic need, and lower than average.

> you have already done what you can do.

> I have already done what I can do.

Pause.

> alright, it's your turn.

> you know I am still a student.

> obviously.

> I see our education is twisted. It is ridiculous to use the exam system and prestigious schools as a measure of individual intelligence. The exam system assumes that every year there will be about the same proportion of people capable of getting into prestigious schools. This assumption seems to suggest that human biology produces the same proportion or number of people with superior brain function each year, and only these people can become the absolute elites. I have no idea where this assumption comes from. My assumption, on the other hand, if we put all the elites from the past ten years into the same year's exam, I am pretty sure that not everyone would make prestigious schools. This clearly demonstrates how ridiculous it is to measure intelligence based on prestigious schools.

> wow, despite the age difference, I think our

thoughts are completely in sync.

> I've never met anyone who shares same view as me.

> same, and I must say, thinking differently comes at a cost, I don't see any benefit, only loneliness.

Pause.

> if I can't prove myself, it's really hard to define myself in the society.

> can't even define the purpose of living.

> some say, live life in your way, I have no idea what that bullshit is. Living comes at a cost, and living on my way costs even more, if I don't have money, what the hell of my way that I can live?

> totally, only those who have money to enjoy life would say "living in the moment".

> tell me about it.

> I have to sacrifice a lot, compromise a lot to get higher income, no time for love or some friendship shit.

> just like that, career success is single priority.

> always saying after proving.

> enjoy school life? What school life is if I am not at top school.

> brotherhood is first rule? No money no brothers, bro.

> some always say friendship is more valuable than interest.

> that is because some have already had money to keep friendship.

> and for those some, it is easy, easy money.

> but for me, I still get no money no matter how much I sacrifice.

> it is modest to use "how much" here.

> you are damn right, it is modest way to say

“despite I have sacrificed all”.

Pause.

> I refuse to live my life being exploited for someone else, while being labelled as secondary.

> I refuse to live just to prove someone else is smarter than me, while diminishing myself.

Both seem to understand each other now, showing less suspicion. Now, it's more about what comes next.

The young man says.

> alright, so you might know what I want to do, and you have been thinking of as well, but I don't know whether you are prepared for today.

> I didn't plan which day.

> I am pretty sure I want to do it today.

> it seems like that.

> so you are about watching me doing?

> no, no, no, I want to join.

> but you just said you didn't plan.

> I don't have exact day, but I do think if somehow I meet someone who wants to do, I will do together.

> together?

> together.

Pause.

> I won't say it's not feasible.

> it's feasible.

> I agree your point in terms of thinking differently comes at a cost, it's funny now we meet.

> wow, this speak sounds like some classic responses.

> I have no problem if this is enough to stop you.

> this can't stop me, don't get me wrong, it is fact that I have no value to the society, and this fact

won't change no matter who I meet.

Pause.

The young starts moving toward the edge of building, then sits on the short wall with school backpack. The security man slowing follows, then takes a glance down at the street over the short wall.

> what now, count to three?

> no, I go first.

> what?

> you heard what I said.

> are you kidding me?

> show your respect to senior people.

Pause.

> don't tell me you are trying to stop me in such a funny way. I agree you go first, then you never go, hence I can never go.

> don't tell me this is enough to stop you, you will do regardless how funny a way can be, am I right? You are determined, I can't stop you.

> of course.

> I absolutely understand. When a person is desperate, the person does not hesitate. When a person wants to dominate, the person does not hesitate.

> nothing can stop me because I am determined.

> you know this too well, there is nothing you couldn't sacrifice.

The views on the rooftop are covered by modern buildings, everything is artificial and fabricated in the city. The young man waves hand, seeing school backpack falls, the expression is as cold as a machine.

> you are right, there is nothing I couldn't sacrifice.

A small sedan is parked by the sidewalk of the street. It is an average car, on the roof of the car rests the school backpack, as if it had just fallen from the rooftop moments ago.

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**There** is no measure to calculate just how special a person truly is. So, no matter how unique, they remain silent their whole life, alone their whole life. One day, when they leave, that specialness fades away, unnoticed and unknown.

**The** life before suicide was as if a dream, the life after suicide is a dream.

**The** person on the other end of phone spoke in a softened tone, gently tried to convey information. Such a sad news, no one can comprehend at the first moment, it was some language that people don't use in daily conversation, so it was natural to assume some misunderstanding, expect there might be some explanation, and deny until the certainty landed the key word, suicide.

That instant didn't feel like a sharp slap in the face, after all, this information needed time to sink in. It sank in, deeper and deeper with each passing day. It slowly seeped through the skin, corroding the veins, and making the heart brittle. The shock stripped away the warmth of family, leaving behind only the weight of silence. The sunlight on the street now is a betrayal, the smiles of strangers seem utterly false, empty of sincerity.

**Perhaps** there's too much to sort through emotionally, leaving his mind blank, or maybe it's that his heart has been hollowed out, making it impossible to organize any coherent thoughts. Yoshiki refused to attend the funeral, distancing himself from any expressions of concern. He allows silence to echo the voices, builds a wall



between himself and family. His mind is devoid of sound, his vision is stripped of color. Every day, he goes through the same pattern, but no sound, no color. Nothing.

**As** a strong business man, father was intimidating and commanding, overseeing each cent, controlling each spent. It was a symbol of success, a textbook of business acumen, until the economic crisis struck, erasing the model and wiping out the guidelines. Bankruptcy shocked father, and the family lost their wealth almost overnight. The phone rang only with calls from debt collectors, and the next meal became a constant worry.

People started gossip, no help, no warm smile, not any more, not like they used to, only criticism behind closed doors. The home, once bustling before the bankruptcy with customers and clients coming and going, now stood empty, filled only with cold and darkness.

**The** relationship between father and son had always been cold and tense, regardless of the family's status. They never shared a smile, not even for a moment. Only being number one in school was acceptable; any hint of independent thinking was strictly forbidden. Words like "second-rate schools" and "social failures" were woven into every threat and reprimand. It was never a pleasant bond, and it certainly can't be improving now.

**Following** the bankruptcy, the business closed, the older brother committed suicide, and the mother ended up in the hospital. Now, Yoshiki is left lost in deafening loneliness.

**Schools** in Taipei are typically enclosed by walls that define their boundaries, and the architectural style is distinctly different from residential buildings or government offices. The walls are often made with at least two contrasting colors of tiles, and rows of medium-sized, semi-transparent windows line the buildings. Corridors, have one side constructed from cement walls, and other side connect the classrooms where marble floors are under rows of wooden desks and chairs, an unmistakably place for students to learn.

**Restory** Middle School is a public junior high school, located in Taipei County, Twin Merging District. The main buildings consist of four connected structures, forming an “M” shape when viewed from above. Aside from one building designated for specialized classes like chemistry, the remaining three house students from each grade level. Each building has five floors, with the restrooms located at one end of the corridor on each floor, meaning students have to pass by several classrooms to reach toilets.

The school uniform is the same for all three grades, as per school policy. Girls wear a preppy style paired with skirts, while the boys' uniforms resemble a suit-like design. The gym uniform, however, is the same design for everyone, with the only difference being the color for each grade, red, green, or purple. As a result, it's easy to tell when students with gym uniform of different grades are mixed together, as the different colors stand out.

**In** the third floor corridor of the school, Yoshiki presses his back against the wall, facing away from the classroom. The corridor is utterly empty,

as silent as a mirror. For a moment, gravity seems to pull down, and his eyes balls are like devices, reflect the ground outside the corridor, as if he's falling from the third floor. Then, everything turns pitch black. The heavy impact shatters his body in multiple places, with countless nerves sending intense electrical signals, forcing his brain to register the pain. Surprisingly, the pain doesn't fade with time. Even as nerves are gradually severed, the brain continues to process the last signals, producing the same degree of agony.

At this moment, there is no longer any sensation of where his body parts are, as though a finely crafted sculpture has shattered to pieces, its soul gone, leaving only a heap of lifeless fragments. However, it's possible that the brain continues to function, processing information and generating regret, denying the reality and wishing that none of this had happened. If this state lingers, perhaps a yearning will emerge, to go back, to do something, anything, to prevent it, to reshape the world, to reshape himself.

> Hey, Zenerate, Fisty-Done is coming.

Back to reality, Zonelimi is tense, moving with an alert tone.

Students move through the corridors and classrooms at ease during the break, enjoy the time before next class. The usual chatter is suddenly broken by a wave of commotion, shattering the relaxed harmony like a siren's wail. Everyone moves like falling dominoes, shifts to the side of corridor, rumbling in confusion, the air thick with unease.

It is Fisty-Done, a gang member in the school, wearing the senior-grade gym uniform, dragging Han toward the restroom with single arm. Two other gang members, Chancist and Tealand, follow closely behind. Such a loud, high-profile move from them is unprecedented, unexpected, and downright shocking. It feels like a readiness of an execution. Fisty-Done's expression says it all, Han is terrified, and the crowd stands frozen, helpless in their shock.

> must have been about last time, Han was stupid, saying what the bullshit that he can win one on one with Fisty-Done. What he was thinking, he thinks DeLight-Street are deaf?

Zenerate replies with silence.

> but it's been quite a while, why DeLight-Street are acting like this now? In school? What the hell, such a loud move, KingHall soon will come. Zenerate, maybe let's talk to Tealand, just kindly reminder that Han is member of KingHall. I don't expect that would change anything, but at least we try.

To Zonelimi, negotiation always begins and ends every conversation. Negotiation requires leverage, and if there is not enough resource to support, then taking the right action at the right time is necessary for leverage.

> they know Han is member of KingHall.

> what do you mean, so we leave it?

Zenerate nods.

> are you sure? Zenerate, if we just watch, Mindhunt would take this as an excuse for trouble.

> stupid, we are not gangster, don't get involve that shit.

> idiot, you are just an idiot Justous, what makes you think you differ from them? You think teachers think you are good student?

> we don't involve what we don't know.

Zenerate cuts the dialogue between Zoneli and Justous, but looks like he is calculating something in his mind.

> for fuck's sack, I still don't get why they make such a lousy scene, usually they would wait until everyone leaves school, it makes me feel like they deliberately picked this moment, Yoshiki, any thinking?

The vision is so vague, the sound is so intruding, Yoshiki struggles to focus, slowly turning his head over the corridor. He sees Has being dragged into the restroom. The crowds gather outside the restroom, squeezing out the air, making it feel as if even the wind is pushed away from the scene.

> what thinking, they are starting.

The crowd immediately erupts with noise when the first punch lands, and it sounds absolutely merciless.

Even though groups within the school don't get along, violent incidents are rare, and such an execution-style demonstration is absolutely unheard of. After all, those are just middle school students, no serious interest conflict, no deep hatred history. Perhaps some occasional quarrels are inevitable, but all groups tend to keep low-profile.

This incident is so seldom that it naturally grabs the attention and curiosity of the students. The crowd has zero experience with this kind of violent confrontation, thus don't know how to react

properly. Some likely assess that they lack the power to intervene, so they simply act as passive onlookers. Others may even assume that the victim could have done something. Fisty-Done isn't just tall and strong, his hands are exceptionally large with an iron grip. Truthfully, it's hard to imagine what being hit by such as fist would feel like. As long as it's not happening to them, many students don't trigger a mental warning to consider how things might escalate.

> people from KingHall are here.

Zonelimi low the tone.

> move! Hey, move out of the way!

Kindaway arrives with a group of people, briefly glances at Zenerate, then confronts DeLight-Street, trying to push his way toward the restroom. Pongen is always energetic, speaking in an aggressive, excited, and often shouting tone.

> Zenerate! Simply cut the bullshit, come to help us!

Pongen shouts at Zenerate, urging him to join KingHall. Zenerate shakes his head and ignores Pongen.

> come, Zenerate, don't be asshole!

> Zenerate, maybe we don't need to do anything, just follow them, should be fine.

Zonelimi and Pongen are acquaintances, used to be classmates. Zonelimi tries to find a peaceful balance, but Zenerate firmly refuses. Pongen, angered, curses under his breath before joining Kindaway.

Both groups are pushing against each other, with neither side showing any sign of weakness.

> yo, yo, yo, I am just standing here, what, I can't stand here?

> just get the fuck out of the way!

> any law says that I can't stand here?

Many of those are classmates from both side, not really gang members. The people from DeLight-Street stand with arrogance, clearly intent on blocking the way. Kindaway feels powerless, so the people from KingHall could only stand there, doing nothing but following along.

> this is KingHall, we support each other, we care about each other.

Perhaps due to his religious beliefs, when the tattooed Eastern religious talisman on Meanhunt's hand is raised above the crowd, a palpable energy can be felt, like standing in a high-radiation zone, wondering the reality of the warmth creeping through. The tattoo starts to sway, mesmerizing the eyes and controlling all attention. Movements cease, arguments are silenced, and then Meanhunt begins to speak, a voice that commands, a voice that incites.

His father was a spirit medium, and their household was deeply rooted in Taoist traditions. Not random people can be a spirit medium, it is selected by god. When the time is right, god would descend and possess the spirit medium to communicate with humans. In other words, Meanhunt's father was one of the chosen.

Since childhood, he has had talisman tattoos on his body and believes strongly in the power of religion and the stories of the gods. This belief is the source of his charismatic influence over people

and serves as the dictionary from which he defines justice. Unlike other members who joined the Eight Generals blindly to follow religious rules and activities, Meanhunt has completely different motivations and a unique sense of authority.

His father had always been a member of a Daoist temple but unfortunately became addicted to drugs, losing his position as a spirit medium and accumulating a significant debt. Later, he borrowed money from loan sharks and, one day, died by jumping from a building. Police concluded it was suicide.

Meanhunt later joined a Daoist temple, KingHall, which differs from the one his father joined. He became the core member of Eight Generals soon after he joined.

> if any of us has trouble, the rest of us offer helps.

Meanhunt shows up among KingHall, the people from DeLight-Street obviously show nervous, maybe even step back without conscious thought.

> I only ask you to let us pass.

> come on, Meanhunt, I just stand here, nothing else.

> you are not just standing here, you are blocking here, blocking us from the way to save our people over there.

> I really just stand here, I don't do anything, how about asking C.T. to come, let him talk to Fisty-Done.

> what C.T.? do you see C.T. now? I don't see him, what you are talking about, our man is inside, right here, right now, we need to pass, you give me what bullshit.

> I don't have position to say anything...



> If you were me, what you would do?

> come on, Meanhunt...

> if God were here, what God would do?

**The** person talking to Meanhunt stands close to the corridor wall. Suddenly, Meanhunt uses his arm to shove the person against the wall, then lifts him up and presses him away from it.

> God, will surely do everything in His power to protect His people.

**The** person is startled by the sudden movement. Though most of his body remains pressed against the wall, he feels like he could be pushed off the edge at any moment and desperately clutches the wall. The members of DeLight-Street quickly back away, creating space between themselves and Meanhunt. The people from KingHall begin shouting in support, pushing the DeLight-Street crowd further back.

**Meanhunt** releases the person while he is still frozen in fear. He briefly locks eyes with Zenerate before turning to join his people.

**The** energy from KingHall now is high, but DeLight-Street is still no pushover. The closer they push forward, the stronger the resistance.

**With** the crowd packed tight, Yoshiki can only hear the shouting but can't see what's really happening. Despite the tension and aggression unfolding before him, Yoshiki still struggles to ground himself in reality. The shouting around him feels like a thick morning fog, visible, tangible, even detectable by scent, yet entirely insignificant. It's as though he's been asleep his whole life, and this moment marks his first time waking up, still lingering in the blurred space where dreams and

reality overlap, not fully transitioned to either side.

**The** situation shifts abruptly. A group of people swiftly passes in front of Yoshiki, including Teacher Tsai. Although the others are in plain clothes, it takes only a moment to realize they're police men. Walking at the rear, possibly a police officer, is another man in plain clothes, but with an entirely different demeanor. His eyes are sharp, and with both hands, he pushes his athletic jacket back, resting them on his hips, commanding the movements of everyone ahead with a subtle authority.

> everyone get out of the way, move! Anyone who blocks will be taken by police!

**Teacher** Tsai pushes the students aside, following police men into the crowd, disrupting the already heated atmosphere and swiftly cutting off the potential escalation of conflict. The police men charge into the restroom, and from the sound inside, it's clear that the chaos has shifted into something entirely different. After a while, gasps ripple through the hallway. Moments later, Han emerges from the crowd, clutching one side of his head with both hands. It takes a second to realize why. Blood is seeping through his fingers.

> you drop your ear!

Despite the ear being drenched in red blood, Han still hears someone shout. He turns back, groping along the ground, eventually picking up his severed ear. He quickly tries to leave, but after only a few steps, he stumbles, and the ear falls to the ground again. Words alone can hardly convey this gruesome scene. Witnessing it firsthand, the

fallen ear is nothing more than a blood-soaked lump of flesh, barely discernible, and even harder to fully grasp the horror of the moment.

Teacher Tsai emerges from the crowd, rushing to assist Han and helping him off the scene. Shortly after, the police men lead Fisty-Done and Chancist out in handcuffs. As they pass Yoshiki, Fisty-Done's menacing aura has completely dissipated.

**The** tension still lingers in the corridor, but with the police gone, a strange, uncertain atmosphere hangs in the air, leaving everyone in a state of quiet unease.

> Tealand, why you are still here, you didn't participate?

**Seeing** Tealand walk out as if nothing happened, Reali playfully asks.

**Reali** is one of the Seven Posh Golds in school, closely connected with the DeLight-Street, while also maintaining good relations with members of KingHall. Despite the tense relationship between the two groups, Reali is confident in her social skills, believing she can easily navigate between local gang members and win their favor. Or perhaps she simply enjoys being around powerful figures, always finding a way to stay connected with influential people.

> I didn't do anything, I am good boy, I was trying to calm them down.

> sure, you are the good good boy.

**It** could very well be true. After all, Tealand had been mediating between Fisty-Done and C.T. regarding Han's reckless remarks.

> if I throw you out of here now, is that gonna impact DeLight-Street?

The corridor remains packed with onlookers, students, DeLight-Street, KingHall and Meanhunt.

> Nah, not at all, just one useless coward who stood there watching when it all went down, won't make a damn difference.

Meanhunt instantly steals the spotlight, silencing the crowd and drawing all eyes to him. Tealand, clearly annoyed, flips the middle finger.

> so what, I didn't do anything.

> exactly, you are responsible for this incident and you didn't do anything.

> I don't know the fuck you are saying.

> you were mediating this, now I only see escalating.

> I was trying to mediate, but it was before, now is now, it is different.

> what the dog shit I am hearing, huh, the same reason to hit Han, it is the same shit, you stupid fuck face telling me different.

> how do I know all the sudden Fisty-Done wants to hit him, how can I stop him?

> That's what mediation is, putting an end to conflict, not letting it escalate. I thought you all agreed to squash it and move on, leave the past in the past, that's it. Now you're telling me Fisty-Done wants to do it today? Did you even try to stop?

> of course.

> so you do know it will happen.

> so what!?

> you can tell us in advanced.

> funny, why should I, what do I have if I told you?

> you stupid fuck, as the mediator, this is on you,

you gotta do whatever it takes to shut this down.

> don't play this to me, don't repeat what the past is, I have said, past is past, now is now, I don't have time taking care every shit, I don't do shit for free.

> I am not playing with you, I think it's you playing with we KingHall.

> come on, Meanhunt, you know I prefer peace, Fisty-Done also doesn't like trouble, but today it is your people having problem, hey, Han keeps saying he can beat the shit up Fisty-Done, ah? fuck, you think we like to hear that? You should manage your people well, just that simple. Your people are messing with us, then Fisty-Done thinks, alright, we have to give you some lesson, send you some message, to shut your people's mouth.

> what do you mean we were messing with you, we were trying to cool down, if you think there is still problem, you come to us, that's call mediation.

> I only know we don't have people provoking C.T.

> alright, so now DeLight-Street are ready to fight with us huh?

> how do I know, I am not leader, you go ask Fisty-Done.

Meanhunt turns to face his people.

> Tealand means from now on, DeLight-Street will "take care" of us one by one.

> fuck you, Meanhunt, you want to steal the attention again? just let C.T. and Fisty-Done talk.

As Tealand throws his hand up to leave, Meanhunt stretches out his foot, tripping him up. Tealand stumbles, managing not to fall, but looking awkward and flustered all the same.

> what the fuck, Meanhunt...

Meanhunt's expression shifts in an instant, and with a swift motion, he grabs Tealand by the throat.

> you think you can really fuck with KingHall ah?

> I really don't give a fuck about you.

With his throat gripped, Tealand struggles to speak, but that doesn't stop him from slowly pulling a knife from his pocket and pointing it at Meanhunt.

> you know I don't like trouble, and I am always kind, you got problem, just let C.T. and Fisty-Done talk.

Meanhunt ignores Tealand, tighten the grip on the throat.

> don't push me, Meanhunt.

Tealand talks in a soft way, but that is actually a warning.

> go back to classrooms, what are you still doing here!?

The police officer suddenly steps out, loudly reprimanding everyone present. His scolding cuts through the tension, turns off the escalating hostility. The focus shifts in an instant, resetting the atmosphere. People are caught off guard, thinking all the cops had left, and were just anticipating another show to unfold.

> what is this, ah, knife!?

The police officer takes off the knife from Tealand and pushes Meanhunt away.

> officer, it is him choking me, see, my neck is hurt.

> it is you taking knife, don't tell me you are innocent, you two, come with me now.

> officer, I didn't do anything, really, it is him hurting me, my throat is in pain.

> what the hell you little are still here, go back to the classrooms now.

The police man grabs the two teenagers, reprimanding everyone to be back to classrooms.

The tension evaporates completely. What had seemed like an inevitable showdown vanishes in the officer's shout. The flash of a knife and the talisman tattoo suddenly seem insignificant in front of his authority. Street thugs might challenge school rules, but once they cross the line, the police are waiting for them.

The police officer's gaze sweeps over the crowd, ensuring everyone leaves in compliance. As Zenerate and the others return to class, surprisingly, Yoshiki remains by the wall, arms propped up, unmoved.

> I am asking you to go back to class, you got problem?

Pause.

> have you heard?

> what?

> the bell sound, that we need to go back to class.

Language is delicate because the differences between people are subtle, and there will always be someone who notices what others overlook. Yoshiki steps away from the wall, facing the officer without hesitation.

> Each class is forty minutes, with a ten-minute break in between. We hear the bell, go to class, and wait for the next bell to get our free time, that's school rule. I haven't heard the bell yet, have you?

The officer, unable to believe what he's hearing,

narrows his eyes in anger, stepping closer to size up the boy in front of him, including the name tag on his uniform.

> your name is what, Yoshiki? You are trouble maker right? Very good, very very good.

> it just makes me wonder, who can be bigger than the rule.

The officer wears a sports jacket, a cheap shirt, and dress pants. Whenever he rests his hands on his hips, he pulls the jacket back, placing his hands just above the cheap belt at his waist.

> listen to me very carefully, my name is Leanruler, my colleagues call me the ruler of the land. I go wherever I'm needed, and I make sure things are in order, which is why they call me that. I've only just moved here, so it makes sense you don't know me yet. But what you don't know is just how much I care about keeping order wherever I am.

The bell rings.

> is this your mother fucking bell sound, ah? Yoshiki, can I kindly ask to go to class?

Leanruler doesn't give much room, forcing Yoshiki to push past him. Unfazed, Yoshiki heads toward the classroom, carefully avoiding the blood on the floor. Just before stepping inside, Yoshiki turns and flips off Leanruler.

Leanruler, with both hands resting above his cheap belt, sizes up Yoshiki briefly before leading Tealand and Meanhunt away, leaving the empty corridor to the sound of the ringing bell.

**The** corridor stands empty, haunted by the lingering trace of the earlier violence.

> wow, there you go again, always crazy talk, have



you heard the bell sound, haha, insane.  
Zenerate sits right in front of Yoshiki, smiling at his friend as he slowly enters the classroom.

**The** desks and chairs are neatly aligned, creating an orderly scene. There's a clear division between the girls' uniforms and the boys'. The blackboard reflects the gazes of everyone in the room, though their thoughts vary. Some are discussing what just happened, some flip open their books as usual, some remain detached, and others focus, ready for class. The one thing they all share, everyone is seated, and the lesson is about to begin.

### - 3 -

In Taiwan, the term Local Taiwanese Gangs refers to criminal organizations led by people who lived in Taiwan before the arrival of the Chiang Kai-shek administration. Their territories were typically well-defined, and they maintained stable power in their regions, inheriting consistent revenue streams and business activities. The management style was flat and straightforward, with one "regional boss" overseeing all members, while senior members gained respect over time.

On the other hand, the term Mainlander Gangs refers to criminal organizations formed by those who arrived with the Nationalist government from China after 1949. Since most of the territory was already controlled by Local Taiwanese Mafias, they had to seek out different, though often limited, business opportunities. Their management style is more corporate, with a centralized leadership structure, various divisions handling different operations, and members advancing through the ranks based on their skills and performance.

In the early days, Local Taiwanese Gangs had the upper hand with their large numbers and established territories, leaving little room for Mainlander Gangs to gain a foothold. However, entering the 1980s, Taiwan launched "Operation Clean Sweep" a government initiative to crack down on all gangs. Many prominent gang leaders were arrested and imprisoned, creating chaos in the underworld. As the political climate shifted and the market economy evolved, Mainlander Gangs gained resources and emerged as dominant

forces. Meanwhile, Local Taiwanese Gangs were slower to adapt to the changing market, losing some opportunities. Despite this, there was no direct conflict or wars between the two groups. The strength of Local Taiwanese Gangs remained mostly intact, while Mainlander Gangs found new opportunities in the evolving market.

**Wanhua** District was once filled with various gangs, mostly dominated by Local Taiwanese Gangs, with Wanfan-House being just one among many. Though it had a good reputation and style, its influence was limited. This changed under the leadership of Wan-Zi. Wanfan-House began securing key revenue streams, eventually rising to become the most powerful gang in Wanhua and standing among the most prominent Local Taiwanese Gangs. At the time, there was even a saying, "If joining a gang is inevitable, join Wanfan-House," illustrating its influence and reputation.

Just before Operation Clean Sweep, a new generation of leaders, Le-Pinguino and TresUno, began to rise within Wanfan-House, creating tension with Tao-Gone, a senior member who had long served alongside Wan-Zi. The conflict between these two generations left Wan-Zi's succession uncertain, casting doubt over Wanfan-House's future. During Operation Clean Sweep, gang members were gradually incarcerated in separate prisons. With Wan-Zi no longer in control, Le-Pinguino seized the opportunity to assert his power, representing Wanfan-House in forming an alliance with other Local Taiwanese Gangs, known as the Vertical

Way Union. By the time he was released from prison, Le-Pinguino had become an undeniable force within the gang. After Wan-Zi passed away, Le-Pinguino took over, while Tao-Gone lost all his influence.

The Vertical Way Union brought together all the Local Taiwanese Gangs, forming a partnership-based alliance. Similar to a law firm, each gang had its own bosses and members, operated independently but worked together as a powerful collective when needed. While decisions were made on a one-member, one-vote basis, with all regional bosses being equal, though a representative was still needed to speak on behalf of the alliance. Le-Pinguino was chosen as the first leader of this alliance.

Many gang members come from poor backgrounds, but Le-Pinguino is different. He was born into a wealthy family, the only son after two daughters, and was exceptionally spoiled. Growing up in such an environment, Le-Pinguino was used to getting whatever he wanted, living without any regard for rules. With his tall, muscular build, he was always the aggressor, never the victim. In his youth, people could tolerate his behavior, but even after entering adulthood, Le-Pinguino continued his lawless ways. One time, he crossed the wrong gang boss and ended up having both his legs broken. From then on, his legs were stiff when he walked, earning him the nickname Le-Pinguino.

Wan-Zi, a strong and respected figure in the underworld, had been able to keep Le-Pinguino's arrogance and ambition in check during his reign.

However, since Operation Clean Sweep, when gang members were scattered across different prisons, Le-Pinguino found himself completely free from any control and eager to assert his influence. He took advice from a highly educated political prisoner, a lawyer, and forged an alliance with other Local Taiwanese Gang bosses, both to improve their lives in prison and to secure better business opportunities upon their release. It's important to note that other gangs were almost as powerful as Wanfan-House. Naturally, Le-Pinguino's role as the alliance leader affected the power dynamics within Wanfan-House, especially with the support of his close sworn brother, TresUno, which further solidified his push for leadership.

While Le-Pinguino wasn't known for his fighting skills, his charisma as a leader attracted many followers. TresUno, on the other hand, was famous for his martial prowess and chivalrous demeanor, which won him widespread support. Together, the two sworn brothers became an unstoppable force within Wanfan-House, making it clear who would ascend to the throne. However, the good times didn't last. Not long after Le-Pinguino took control, rumors spread throughout the underworld that TresUno had poisoned Wan-Zi. In response, Le-Pinguino issued a kill order, plunging the gang into chaos. TresUno vanished, and his loyal supporter CaraLarga was forced to flee and go into hiding. This upheaval shook the foundation of Le-Pinguino's support, but having already consolidated his power, he eventually weathered the storm and stabilized his

leadership.

Now, Le-Pinguino is even running for a seat in the national parliament, extending his influence far beyond underworld, including Twin Merging District, where his nephew Fisty-Done operates.

**With** the powerful backing of Le-Pinguino, the DeLight Street motorcycle crew operates with complete impunity, doing as it pleases. The entire street area is subject to their rule, no parking violations but only temporary stops, noise complaints are unheard of, the local safety standards are defined by the crew, traffic routes follow wherever the crew rides. A few motorcycle shops have banded together, integrating their business revenues and influencing local elections, the DeLight-Street has absolute dominant power. Their bikes are stylish and trendy, everything from custom Vespas to modified DIOs, Kawasaki B-125s, racing bikes, and even bespoke heavy motorcycles. Just by seeing the tire tracks on the ground, anyone could easily learn where is DeLight-Street.

Fisty-Done idolizes his uncle and always strives to make a name for himself. From a young age, he started learning to socialize with adults, building neighbourhood relationships. While the decisions for everything on DeLight-Street are clearly made by an adult, this person has never shown their face publicly.

**The** scale of KingHall is much smaller. It's a local Daoist temple in a township of Taipei County, participating in annual religious festivals while training members of the Eight Generals to perform ritual exorcisms. Nestled in an ordinary residential

area, it quietly fulfills its role. Temples like this are common throughout Taiwan, some were established in response to significant local events, such as homicides, to ward off evil spirits. Smaller temples often engage in simple community services, trying to connect with the neighbourhood, while larger ones, in addition to receiving donations and training youths for traditional rituals, can exert considerable influence, swaying local elections and even indirectly managing substantial public infrastructure projects.

KingHall is led by CaraLarga, a former right-hand man to TresUno. He no longer speaks of his past, focusing solely on community service, trying to live a low-profile life. Yet, the history remains a source of fascination for local youths, which also fuels the tension with DeLight-Street. However, these tensions are mainly based on baseless rumors, the younger generation holds no deep grudges, and there are no real stakes involved. As a result, though the two groups don't get along, they've never clashed openly. Following CaraLarga's decision, C.T. leads the temple's efforts, with Meanhunt as his top choice for successor.

**Zenerate** isn't involved with KingHall, nor is he entangled in any gang activities. However, his brother was once a member of the Eight Generals and a senior to C.T., which linked Zenerate into this web of connections. Zenerate's brother was the first leader of KingHall's Eight Generals and remains one of its key decision-makers even today. His relationship with CaraLarga hasn't diminished, despite their infrequent meetings.

Whenever a new member joins the Eight Generals, his opinion is always sought. Take C.T., for instance, he has a strong sense of right and wrong and believes that sincerity builds friendships, which is why Zenerate's brother recommended him as the current leader of the Eight Generals. That said, Zenerate's brother has been absent for quite some time now.

**The** income source for KingHall remains a mystery. It appears to rely primarily on a small arcade across the street, nicknamed DownTheDark, though it's hard to imagine such a place making much money. However, DownTheDark offers a far larger selection of games compared to most arcades, usually double or more. The most popular game is *The King of Fighters*, where characters like *Kyo Kusanagi*, *Iori Yagami*, and *Mai Shiranui* are household names. The objective is simple: pick a character, defeat the others one by one, and emerge as the final champion, with new challengers able to jump in at any time. Each character has unique abilities to counter their opponents, creating a balanced competitive experience. Before *The King of Fighters*, *Street Fighter* reigned as the most popular game, and while the two games differ, *Street Fighter* still retains its loyal fans. Besides fighting games, *Tetris* remains a favorite, with some players demonstrating remarkable skill in rapidly fitting and clearing blocks.

The only light in the arcade comes from the glow of the game screens, casting a dim, almost eerie atmosphere. The air carries a peculiar scent, which some claim is the smell of amphetamines.



The owner, known as The Limp, had one foot amputated and is often found sitting inside KingHall, chatting and snacking on sunflower seeds with CaraLarga. There was one time Yoshiki saw The Limp looking particularly defeated in the DownTheDark. He suddenly collapsed into a chair, his cane clattering to the floor, and out fell a syringe, rubber tubing, a spoon, and other paraphernalia. For a moment, no one knew how to react.

**Yoshiki** occasionally visits DownTheDark, not to play games, but to catch a glimpse of Soya, who sometimes works at the counter. Though they've never spoken, he just wants to see her. It's a constant dilemma, because DownTheDark is part of KingHall's territory, and the place always carries an underlying sense of pressure. Stepping inside, Yoshiki feels like every movement is being watched, as if he's trespassing on forbidden ground. Even though Meanhunt and the others from KingHall mostly ignore him, the feeling of being dominated lingers. This is DownTheDark, cold in its allure, invisible in its control.

**Each** grade has roughly 27 classes, and Yoshiki and Zenerate are from Class Eleven. No one in Class Eleven is affiliated with KingHall, nor is anyone connected to DeLight-Street. In fact, no one in this class belongs to any group at all, it is an exceptionally unique class.

**There's** a theory that, given limited resources, exams serve to distinguish levels of intelligence. Those deemed more intelligent receive greater resources, allowing them to contribute more to

society and thereby create a cycle of benefit for all. Right or wrong, this approach inevitably breeds dissatisfaction, and when that discontent grows, it risks destabilizing society. In response, the system made a minor adjustment: in middle schools, there's no longer a hierarchy; everyone now has equal access to the same education at this level, raising the general education standard in hopes of easing dissatisfaction. However, exams remain essential at the next level, so some schools conduct assessments and use the results to place students in different classes. By grouping high-achieving students and assigning them top teachers, more students can reach prestigious schools, enhancing the school's reputation. Restory Middle School, for example, administers an IQ test before enrollment and use the results to sort students into different classes.

Class Eleven consist of students who scored high on the IQ test. Even if the test truly measures intelligence, high IQ alone doesn't guarantee academic success. Good grades require more than just raw intellect, they demand a supportive learning environment, focus, and determination. The outcome was disappointing. Class Eleven's academic performance fell far below expectations, and eventually, the school ceased assigning specialized teachers for gifted education.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that each student in Class Eleven is indeed intelligent and capable of independent thought. Each is constantly calculating their future, observing their surroundings, and adapting accordingly. More specifically, everyone in this class is

proactive—proactive in their own lives and in navigating the system. No one passively follows the rules or waits for instructions; each student has a drive, even if it doesn't translate into academic performance. Their backgrounds differ, their upbringings vary, and their views of society are unique. When they receive information, their minds actively process it, responding in distinct ways. Each operates with their own logic, shaped by their individual experiences.

No one in Class Eleven would ever join a gang and passively wait for orders, nor would anyone blindly adhere to the existing education system without question. Each student calculates, adapts, and makes their own decisions, standing out in their own unique ways.

**Teacher** Huang has never liked this class. The way they approach learning frustrates him, he's even suggested that some of the students transfer to another school, warning that staying in this class would only waste their potential. Zenerate doesn't like this math teacher either, he doesn't even bother taking out his textbook, simply tilting his head as he watches the blackboard where the teacher writes out the principles of factorization, only to erase them moments later. Yoshiki has already flipped through the textbook, and after grasping the basic concept, tunes out the rest of the lesson. Some students have already understood the material, waiting for the teacher to introduce something special or challenging. Others aren't planning to exert the mental effort just yet, preoccupied with scribbling their own worries into their notebooks.

The teacher methodically breaks down polynomials, but never explains when or how these formulas might be used. His main concern is drilling the right answers, reducing mathematical principles into models for standardized exams. **Despite** working on the same subject, in the same room, at the same time, everyone's mind is processing the information in their own unique way.

> Zenerate, what is next?

Teacher Huang suddenly asks a question, and the entire class falls silent. Zenerate has no intention of answering and simply lets the moment linger.

> if you don't know, why don't you take out the textbook?

The same situation can lead to vastly different interpretations. To Teacher Huang, Zenerate not taking out his textbook is a challenge. But for Zenerate, it's a form of expression. Teacher Huang's preferences are clear, he's patient with the students he sees as good, but openly despises those he considers unmotivated. The line between good and bad is drawn by what he calls "learning attitude". He would never admit to bias, claiming to treat all students objectively. A poor attitude, he says, naturally leads to different treatment. Not taking out a textbook in class is just bad attitude—objectively speaking. He doesn't bother to analyze why a student might seem disengaged, whether it's from frustration or some deeper issue. There's no time, no capacity, and certainly no obligation to figure it out. Zenerate, on the other hand, feels Teacher Huang has always been biased against him. Not taking out the textbook it's

just his way of proving a point.

Teacher Huang steps forward, openly challenging Zenerate. As the one being challenged, Zenerate could stand up and apologize, though that would mean always bringing out his textbook in the future—a considerable compromise. Or, he could flip the table or throw something, expressing that the teacher has crossed a line by confronting him so publicly. But Zenerate chooses neither. He remains in the same posture, with the same expression, letting silence do the work, allowing time to swallow the challenge. It's not a counterattack, but at least it's not retreat—not an obvious concession. He won't need to bring out his textbook next time.

It works. Teacher Huang turns back to his lesson, and Zenerate continues to ignore the class. The conflict finds a temporary resolution, the tension doesn't escalate. In the classroom, everyone processes the moment differently. Some think the teacher disciplined a troublemaker, others feel Zenerate's attitude is disrespectful. Some are relieved the conflict didn't blow up, while a few, deep down, hoped for an even bigger showdown.

> why don't you take out the textbook?

Justous is imitating Teacher Huang from a moment ago.

> shut the fuck up, Justous.

> fuck, admit you have a problem with us and leave it at that, bitch.

Justous shows frustration to Teacher Huang.

> can that solves problem if he admits?

> ha, right, then we would fuck him up.

> fucking hate math class.

Zonelimi joins the conversation.

> you hate then you leave the class.

> shut your mouth, Justous, you stupid.

> you stupid.

Justous gives Zonelimi a shove, and he shoves back—soon they're play-fighting.

**Usually**, at this time, Zenerate and Yoshiki would head to the small ledge behind the school to smoke. But in light of the bloody drama that just unfolded, they silently decide against it.

**In** the corridor, someone scrubs away traces of blood—after all, it's the spot where someone's ear got sliced off. Students from each class carry buckets and brushes, coming and going in a steady stream. Yoshiki's gaze follows Soya from the neighboring class as she carries a bucket into the classroom to change the water.

Soya is one of the Seven Posh Gold, a close friend of Reali, and like her, occasionally meets with people from DeLight Street and KingHall. Yet she's quiet, exuding an understated charisma laced with mystery. She's like the cloud, like rain, like someone with a revenge story to tell, like a myth that cried itself dry long ago.

> fuck, C.T. is coming.

**The** school enforces a strict dress code for hairstyles: all boys must keep their hair cropped short, and girls are required to follow specific styles. Each month, a hair inspection is held, and any boy who doesn't comply receives a humiliating punishment — a patch shaved off the back of his head. Naturally, for some students, this rule is just

one more thing to defy. C.T. is one of them, ignoring the cropped-hair requirement and letting his hair grow freely, styled however he pleases.

One time, the disciplinary director decided to punish him. After publicly berating C.T., he prepared to shave off his long hair. But C.T. swatted his hand away, standing firm. The director picked up the razor to try again, and C.T. batted him off once more, the two caught in a back-and-forth deadlock until the director finally backed down. Later that day, the director returned home only to be ambushed at his doorstep, a sack thrown over his head as someone beat him thoroughly. After that, C.T. made sure to avoid school on inspection days, slipping out each month. The director, in turn, seemed to look the other way.

C.T. carries a certain aura. Once, a classmate was extorted outside of school and had a prized basketball card taken. C.T. went alone into enemy territory, demanding a one-on-one fight, and won back the card. He has a knack for looking out for his Eight Generals crew, always aware of each member's personality and offering timely support. Yet, as a leader, he struggles with big decisions. When Han was caught badmouthing behind their backs, Meanhunt suggested taking action to set an example within and maintain respect outside with DeLight-Street, but C.T. never made a move, he hesitated until Tealand finally stepped in to mediate.

> hey, Zenerate, quick question — did you tell Tealand that Han's still spreading crap about how it's 'fun' to mess with Fisty-Done, even after we

already worked things out?.

> no.

> someone said you did.

Everyone behind C.T. wears a blank expression, their cold eyes fixed unflinchingly on Zenerate.

> if fact is merely about someone says what, then why do we still need the police, we fuck whoever we want once we say so.

Zenerate replies emotionlessly, C.T. turns and exchanges awkward to Kindaway.

> man, this is fucking crazy, Tealand and Meanhunt are still in the police station, and have you heard? Han has two broken ribs and doctor needs to sew his ear back, insane!

Kindaway is obviously quite, while Pongen also hides his voice.

> anyway, I will handle it, how is your brother?

> don't see him quite a while.

> right, he hasn't come back at all, that worries me, if there is anything he needs, just let me know, I will support him without a second hesitation.

Zenerate slightly nods.

> Zenerate, you know I always welcome you join me, your brother contributes KingHall a lot, I hope I can have more people like him.

C.T. gently pats Zenerate on the shoulder, then heads out with the others, with Kindaway trailing behind, his gaze lingering on Soya.

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**Just** behind the school lies an abandoned field, where egrets and silken birds occasionally pause. A small ledge sits along the wall, and Zenerate



and Yoshiki often lie back on it, gazing over the field. This area only recently fell into disuse; no one seems to know what once grew here. Rumor has it the field is slated for sale as non-agricultural land. Others say farming ceased because crop distribution channels were disrupted. The ledge makes an ideal smoking spot, and they often smoke either Seven Stars or Yellow Long Life. Seven Stars is the popular choice, smoother but pricier, while Yellow Long Life, though budget-friendly, is much harsher to enjoy.

**The** friendship between Yoshiki and Zenerate was nearly instant from the moment they met. On his first day in class, Yoshiki declared he disliked everyone—everyone except Zenerate. Zenerate, in turn, once said, 'A true friend can shape your whole life. You don't need friends, but if you have one, it should be the best.' Whenever someone sees Zenerate, they ask for Yoshiki, and vice versa. Their bond is an unspoken rule, an undeniable truth that no one has ever dared to question.

> I envy you have such a powerful brother, he is really a good one.

> ha, I don't know whether he is good.

**They** briefly touch on the day's incident without going into detail. Yoshiki knows well that Zenerate's brother always urges him to steer clear of trouble, and for now, keeping a safe distance from that scene is all he needs to worry about.

**Yoshiki** always thinks Zenerate's brother is big-time, after all, C.T. was taught by him, no chance he is nobody. Beyond being the leader of the first generation of Eight Generals, he's

practically trained every thief in the area, from breaking into houses to stealing motorcycles, and knows the ins and outs of all types of locks. Even Kindaway learned his skills from him. But eventually, his brother realized that theft is a low-value skill, carrying high risks, and if he were to take risks, he'd be better off aiming for higher returns. Where Zenerate's brother picked up these skills, or what connections he has, no one knows. Even if he only returns to KingHall on rare occasions, CaraLarga's respect for him remains unchanged.

Once, Yoshiki caught a glimpse of a modified Type 90 pistol on the side of Zenerate's bed. Opening a drawer, he saw a row of bullets. Zenerate explained the mechanism, detailing how the bullet fires and the shell separates, spiraling through the barrel. But his brother wants nothing to do with Zenerate joining KingHall, urging him to stay clear of all gang conflicts. And should gang trouble ever come his way, Zenerate's only advice is never to compromise—giving in once would mean a lifetime of concessions. Zenerate's brother wants him to plan for a future in an honest trade. He even defined what he meant by "honest" work, like glass installation or auto repair. One thing is clear, gang life wasn't part of the equation.

> if you are gonna die tomorrow, what you would do today.

> hmmm.

> what?

> you always load questions out of my map.

> always?

> yeah, odd questions.  
> remind me how odd.  
> once you said, People love making themselves the main character in the story, so every myth out there just assumes humans are the big deal. Take people out of the story, and it'd all be boring. The point of all those myths in the end isn't about gods or whatever — it's about people wanting to be in the spotlight.  
> hmmm.  
> then you asked me, can we not take ourselves as main one in the story? What the hell, who can have so many odd questions like this.  
> ha, fuck.  
> another time, you asked, a smile from a dog is cute, while a smile from a retard is pathetic, why.  
> I forgot I asked this, but I think that's a good question, so what did you answer?  
> I didn't, no idea how to answer.  
> ha.  
> didn't cross such a crazy question in my mind, if you give me any more time, I might still don't know what I can say.  
> ha.  
> what makes you think that is good question?  
> no idea, if a dog has six year old human intelligence, we would think that is pretty smart, but if an adult only has six year old human intelligence, we react in negative way.  
> alright.  
> so?  
> what?  
> if you die tomorrow, what you would do today?  
> easy, try not to die tomorrow.

> holly fuck.  
> shouldn't be like this? What the mother fucker you would do.  
> try not to regret tomorrow.  
> shut the fuck up.  
> so try to finish important thing, but I don't know what is the important thing for me at this moment. The sky and fields lie interwoven, yet remain wholly disconnected. Gazing up at the sky, there's no reflection of oneself, no glimpse of the future — only birds passing by, clouds drifting in. Nothing. The earth creates problems, but the sky holds no answers. Perhaps heaven merely shelters all living things from the vastness of the universe, never intending to intervene, lacking even the power to do so.  
> you don't know yours, I know mine.  
> what?  
> try to get back Lixy.  
> again?  
> right, again.

**Once**, during a school festival, the administration invited seven girls to serve as greeters. Dressed in identical outfits, each was thought to represent a unique facet of beauty, earning them the title "The Seven Posh Gold." Among them is Zenerate's girlfriend, Lixy. She and Soya, along with Reali, became close friends after the festival. Lixy, known for her gentle and graceful appearance, speaks with self-assured conviction. She and Zenerate have had an on-and-off relationship for some time now. Despite this, even Zenerate's closest friend, Yoshiki, barely exchanges words with Lixy — two or three words feel like too many between them. If

they pass each other without Zenerate around, they might not even greet each other.

**When** lying back, the two boys let the sky gaze down at them, facing the universe in silence.

Midway through his cigarette, Zenerate flips it around and places the lit end to his mouth. Yoshiki, startled, sits up to watch, unable to shake the impression that Zenerate intends to put it out with his tongue. But no — after a breath, smoke billows from the cigarette's filter, trailing lazily into the air.

> what the hell is this?

> what do you mean what the hell, just smoke, ha

> no shit, how did you do that?

Yoshiki picks up his own cigarette, watching its burning tip before glancing at Zenerate's amused smile.

> don't try at all, don't try, haha

He tries it anyway — flipping the cigarette around so that white smoke streams out from the filter. Finding it oddly entertaining, he does it again, releasing even more wisps of smoke. Soon, the entire scene, sky and field alike, fills with a hazy mist as the two friends disappear into the drifting clouds of smoke.

**The** Operation Clean Sweep crackdown catalyzes the formation of the Vertical Way Union, reshaping relationships and internal management among all Local Taiwanese Gangs. What was once a “mind-your-own-business” approach now shifts to a mix of cooperation and rivalry. The previous “one boss managing all members” system has transformed into a hierarchical organization. Ironically, however, Operation Clean Sweep was aimed at Mainlander Gangs, with a particular focus on a most powerful mafia in Taiwan history, the Peace Society.

**Rumor** has it that Taiwan's intelligence agency trained the Peace Society's boss, General Chen, to eliminate a double agent in the U.S. General Chen brought along Xiaolin, his top assassin in the gang, and the mission was successful. But when they returned, both were arrested by border guards. A murder on American soil is no question big matter, and U.S. law enforcement eventually traced the crime back to Taiwan, demanding extradition of the suspects. Taiwan's response, however, was that it was in the midst of an extensive crackdown under the Operation Clean Sweep, purging all gang activity to ensure public safety. And as it happened, these suspects were on the Operation Clean Sweep list, now serving time and unavailable for visiting.

Since this was a full-scale sweep, the government couldn't just arrest General Chen and Xiaolin alone — they had to round up all gang leaders, incarcerating them without trial. All major gang

heads across Taiwan ended up behind bars, with the Peace Society making up the bulk. That's how, in prison, the Local Taiwanese Gangs united to form an alliance. The cells were packed with Mainlander Gangs members, giving the Local Taiwanese Gangs a reason to band together.

**General** Chen is a sharp man. He knew very well that, until the mission is complete, the government won't just leave him be, they'll protect him. Using this advantage, he strengthens the Peace Society considerably. Upon his return, the whispers started again — the government reportedly plans to silence him and Xiaolin by having them killed in prison. But Chen was prepared. He secretly recorded his mission briefing with the intelligence agency, passing the tape to another Peace Society member, Que Wolf. Chen instructed Que Wolf to leave Taiwan for San Francisco, ready to hand the tape to the FBI if Chen is killed. So Chen survived. After years, he's released, and in the subsequent era of politics mixed with the underworld, the Peace Society rises to unprecedented power.

**The** Peace Society operates through seven key divisions, with the Taipean Division being the wealthiest and a driving force in the Peace Society's influence over black-market politics, securing profits from public infrastructure contracts. The division's leader, Fu Zongli, known as "For Profit", is notably the only division head who isn't from the post-1949 Nationalist migrant background. Early on, For Profit earned a reputation for efficient debt collection under his mentor, Fat Yan. When the Peace Society expanded from five divisions to seven, Fat Yan

promoted his protégé to division leader. After Operation Clean Sweep, as gangsters returned from jail, Yan died under mysterious circumstances, falling from a building. For Profit then led the Taipean Division in a groundbreaking shift, abandoning loan sharking to focus solely on government contracts — a pioneering approach in the underworld. For Profit's reputation skyrockets, and Taipean Division soon becomes one of the most renowned trademark in organized crime.

Le-Pinguino is consistently frustrated and resentful of For Profit's success, seeing him as an imagined rival. While his Wanfan-House has struggled to secure government contracts for years, Le-Pinguino decides to run for office, hoping to use his political position to favor his own business interests.

**For Profit** has twin sons — Qianyou and Qiantang — known around Restory Middle School as the Fortune Brothers. Though they keep a low profile, everyone knows their father is no ordinary man, and so it doesn't take long for them to wield some influence of their own. With Taipean division's wealth and reach, this small-town middle school holds little real interest, so the Fortune Brothers don't claim territory like KingHall or DeLight-Street. Yet, their presence demands respect wherever they go.

For Profit keeps a distant, almost indifferent relationship with his sons. Their exchanges rarely go beyond polite greetings. While the boys harbor a sort of reverence for their father, For Profit never draws close to them, instead associating with a loner by the name of Lieburg.



**Lieburg** is something of an outlier at Restory Middle School— a repeater of uncertain age with poor skin, a soft voice, and limited popularity. Originally, he had no ties to any gang. One day, a student nicknamed Oldhead — feeling smug due to his classmate connection with Tealand — decided to beat up Lieburg with no proper reason. With Tealand watching nearby, Oldhead and his friends held Lieburg down and punched him in the face until he loses a tooth. Smirking, Oldhead told him to pick up his tooth and fit it back in, and Lieburg, trembling, obeyed, only to be pummeled again. As Oldhead warned Lieburg that he will beat him up every time he sees him at school.

For a while, Lieburg heeded the warning, eventually stopping school entirely and finding work with local construction crews. There, he crossed paths with members of Taipei Division, who connected him with none other than For Profit. One year after the incident, Lieburg returned to school and found Oldhead. Again, Tealand watched from the sidelines as Lieburg turned the tables — beating Oldhead until his teeth shatter. Lieburg ordered him to find his teeth, and once Oldhead managed to gather two, Lieburg made him swallow them. Trembling, Oldhead complied, only to be struck again, his teeth broken and swallowed anew.

As the saying goes, "A year is no long wait for revenge." Two boys, two rounds — one doesn't even glance as the other crawls across the ground, desperately searching for broken teeth.

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**Han** lives only with his grandmother alone, who, upon seeing her grandson so badly beaten, can only cry helplessly. C.T. suggested everyone pool some money to help cover his medical expenses, while Meanhunt argued that they should hire a lawyer, draft a lawsuit against Fisty-Done, and leverage it to demand compensation from DeLight-Street. Seeing the others strongly supported Meanhunt's idea, C.T. wavered, and the situation stalled as KingHall deliberates.

Fisty-Done's side finally reached out, offering to negotiate at the DownTheDark but on the condition that the Fortune Brothers act as mediators. C.T. agreed, but every attempt to set a meeting time ends in conflict. Fisty-Done threw reasons to delay, even accusing C.T. of exploiting the territory advantage and picking times that favor KingHall. Meanhunt questioned the intention of DeLight-Street, there is no specific time could ever favor KingHall, also it was DeLight-Street request to meet at DownTheDark. These accusations only signal, he said, a lack of genuine intent to negotiate. With Fisty-Done stalling and C.T. hesitating, the back-and-forth drifts further and further from resolution.

> so this is what Pongen said, then I interpret the actual situation based on his version.

**Four** of good friends step into a building that looks worn with age, as Zonelimi chats casually. The old residential complex has a courtyard untouched by sunlight, likely with half its apartments vacant, giving it an abandoned, ruin-like feel. Tiles peel off in patches, walls are traced with uneven cracks,

and the stairwell is damp, echoing with the steady drip of water from an unknown source.

> then I asked what's next, Pongen said Fisty-Done now requests a last-minute negotiation meeting, in case KingHall play tricky.

A dim light dangles haphazardly over the concrete floor, barely illuminating the shadowed corridor. A few units in the apartment complex have their metal gates shut, but their inner doors are open, letting glimpses of flickering TV screens slip out, filling the corridor with an eerie vibe. Passing by one unit, Yoshiki notices a samurai sword hanging on the wall, with a large blue dragon totem displayed above it.

> if that is last-minute meeting, how Fortune Brothers could join?

> no idea.

> and it is odd that Fortune Brothers want to participate this, they never involve anything like this, especially this is between KingHall and DeLight-Street.

> so KingHall agree?

> Meanhunt openly disagrees, it is not good for KingHall if everything goes as DeLight-Street, but you know C.T., he has no idea what to do.

**Zoneli**mi opens the door of a billiard club.

The door is clear glass, so from the entrance, the polished decor inside is fully visible — a striking contrast in this strange, worn-out building, the only sign of life here. Bright white lights shine down on wood-paneling blended with synthetic materials in black, brown, and green hues. The place is smoke-free and air-conditioned, meticulously clean and orderly. Billiard tables are neatly lined

up, each illuminated by an overhead light. When a table's light is on, it means it's in use and paid for — rates ranging between forty to sixty dollars an hour. Columns dot the hall, each with cue racks for players to grab as needed. Chairs surround every table, creating semi-private spaces where stranger rarely pass by anyone else unless retrieving a cue stick.

> those nasty gangsters, fuck.

> you don't manipulate others, others manipulate you, expand your resources, expand your interests.

**Billiard**, at least around here, carries a strange reputation. Somehow, it's marked as a sport for "bad" students. Maybe it's because people don't see the studious types frequenting places like this, therefore, it's the "troublemakers" who seem to define the scene. This black-and-white categorization is oddly persistent in everyone's minds. Perhaps the good students are too busy studying, or maybe the rowdier crowd keeps them away. Sure, there are some troublemakers here, and occasionally, conflicts erupt, but it's hard to say what any of it has to do with the sport itself. Really, students shouldn't just be good or bad, but for now, there is no clear line distinguishing those in between.

> I go opening the table.

Justous never plays, but always joins, and the only thing he would do, is opening table for his good friends.

> fuck, Chancist is here.

> ah, forget about it, you always worry too much, Zonelimi.

**More** than twelve people are gathered in the area where Chancist is playing. Zonelimi looks a bit concerned, Justous simply shakes his head dismissively, and Zenerate gives a nonchalant shrug. Meanwhile, Yoshiki pulls cue sticks from the rack one by one, inspecting each to check if it's straight enough.

> good students never worry street right? how to be good students?

> study hard, I guess.

> exactly, Zenerate, you see, bad students are not necessary being bad as a person, bad students are bad because of poor future, right? Because we don't study good, we might have trouble to find a good job in the future, no stable job, no stable income, so we are bad. This is why they use academic performance to decide good or bad students.

> maybe.

Zenerate looks toward Chancist, as if calculating something in his mind.

> frankly speaking, I think Delight-Street are deliberately messing with KingHall, no doubt about it. Everyone knows Han has issues, he always says something stupid, but no one ever takes it seriously. He once said Fortune Brothers' family was involved in some corruption case, fucking wide, though I've never seen any reaction from Fortune Brothers.

> so that's why I said, leave it alone.

The overhead light is on, means it starts counting rate.

> fuck, there is no proper stick.

The three of them quickly scan the club and see

only one rack with available cue sticks — unfortunately, it's right where Chancist is. Yoshiki doesn't hesitate and walks toward it.

Chancist's jacket is pinned with a small, delicate silver charm, giving the standard school uniform an unexpectedly stylish flair. He's swapped the usual white shirt for a deep black one, making his look sharp and distinct. As Yoshiki passes, people fall silent, creating a subtle yet distinct atmosphere. Yoshiki picks out two cue sticks; although they're still not perfectly straight, they're better than the last ones, so he's ready to leave.

> yo, the fuck you think you doing.

Chancist suddenly says with a bit warning tone.

> what?

> you take all the sticks, then what about us?

> how about, using the sticks on your hands, that could be a good idea.

> I don't want to just use the stick on my hand, I also want to use the one on your hand, bitch.

> you have been using the one on your hand, since when you also want to use the one on my hand?

> now.

> those are not straight, I don't think you want, I will leave it if you want, and I will see how you are gonna use those bent sticks.

> shut the fuck up, huh, you talk so weird, When I can find a reason to beat you bitch ass.

Chancist warns with calm tone, but it is enough to hold Yoshiki without moving.

> alright I hate to talk to weak, you want to take it, you win first.

Chancist stands up, his people start organizing the

balls on the table, preparing game for him.

> alright, so use the sticks on my hand?

> wow, fuck you, no problem, you bitch ass, I am gonna use it.

Yoshiki can't jump, can't run, he is never good at any sport, basketball or billiard.

> the fuck you are doing here, Zenerate.

Zenerate joins his good friend, doesn't leave him drying here alone.

> just watch how you play, what else I can do.

> what do you mean just watch, join or leave, why I feel this is deja vu, like someone is just watching, haha.

Chancist exchanges laugh with his people, like they are mocking someone else not here.

> no problem, Yoshiki, let me do it.

> hold, we just have agreed, I play with him, alright, it's fine, you are watching.

Chancist asks the stick from Yoshiki.

> yo, this stick is serious bent, bitch, alright, let me open the shit.

Chancist smiles, moves the sticks in a powerful way, two balls fall into baskets.

> sorry, just good luck.

Chancist quick calculates path, aims, moves the stick, another ball goes into basket.

> yo, this stick is the worst, but I still make it, am I too good, haha.

Yoshiki and Zenerate quietly watch Chancist solo show, one ball after another with ease. Finally, he slips up, leaving the cue ball pressed against the rail. Yoshiki takes his turn, carefully lining up the shot — but the ball doesn't go in. The table passes back to Chancist, who smoothly sinks the next

shot without missing again, taking it all the way down to the final nine-ball.

> yo, if I don't miss this one, I will win, is that unfair? Huh? How about this, I let you play now, if you make it, you take the sticks, if no, my turn, I make it, you leave without sticks, I miss, your turn again, cool?

> sure.

The nine-ball sits near one end of the table, almost at the center line, while the cue ball rests against the opposite rail. Yoshiki considers a tricky bank shot to sink the nine. He carefully sets up his cue, aiming for a while before finally making his move. The cue ball strikes, sending the nine-ball rebounding toward the corner pocket. It looks like it's going in — only to stop, hanging frustratingly at the edge.

> holly, wow, you almost make it.

Chancist smiles and sinks the final ball with effortless ease.

> you bet, you take the consequence, didn't I bully you huh?

Zenerate pats Yoshiki on the shoulder, then places sticks back in the rack. They now need to wait for other available sticks.

**Chancist** back to the seat and wraps an arm around a striking girl next to him, smiling with the satisfaction that comes from his own athletic build and supposedly superior genes, mixed with the thrill of a gambling win. The girl, however, is icy and reserved, an aloof beauty whose rare smiles seem carefully measured. The DeLight-Street always has a few of these girls tagging along, often from different schools, which frequently leads



to spats with rival school gangs — a testament to DeLight-Street bold, rough-and-tumble reputation. **Chancist's** demeanor radiates a particular message, one easily registered by onlookers. Victory's sounds reach the brain through the ears, while the visual signals pass through the eyes. For someone who might have felt disappointment from a game loss, these cues blend into a complex mix of emotions — perhaps a flare of frustration, perhaps a moment of reluctant acceptance of Chancist's physical dominance, or even a resignation to the situation without anger or sadness. Yoshiki and Zenerate, each processing this scene through their own minds, remain composed, choosing to walk away calmly without any trace of frustration or repressed feelings.

The billiard hall plays a few dance tracks, things like *All That She Wants*, *Scatman*, or *Coco Jamboo*. Naturally, no one understands the English lyrics, but watching Justous bob his head and hum off-key, Zonelimi starts to imitate him, stirring up a round of laughter from everyone.

> what the hell language you are singing?

> shut you bitch mouth, fuck.

Zonelimi keeps laughing, Justous feels awkward, gives a sudden punch to Zonelimi. This punch is not small, Zonelimi changes expression.

> what is this, you wanna fight?

Zonelimi picks up the cola can on the table.

> let's go out, I am gonna use this can to tear your face, fuck you.

Justous steps forward.

> I can easily dig out your eyes by my bare hand.

> alright, fuck face, let's go out.

Zenerate just shakes head and laugh.

> two idiots.

Just a few moment, Zonelimi and Justous both bust out laughing.

> saying what go out, you are afraid of making a mess here and getting scold by owner right?

> shut the fuck up, see how scare you were.

> fuck you.

> fuck you.

The two start play-fighting.

Yoshiki's gaze drifts over to Chancist's table, where Soya has somehow appeared without him noticing. The original girl is left ignored to the side, while Chancist seems to be inviting Soya to take a seat. She stands there with that mysterious, icy expression, utterly unmoved by his invitation.

> Zenerate, why did you tell Tealand that Han's still spreading crap about Fisty-Done.

Snapping back to attention, Yoshiki notices a crowd gathering around the billiard table, blocking the light from the overhead lamp.

> this is why I always say, Zenerate and his brother are the source of disorder. They intervene KingHall, cause unstable situation, if we don't fix it, no one can feel safe. We kindly ask Zenerate to join, he doesn't want, now he is spreading nonsense out there, what we can do?

Someone sits on the billiard table, another shoves Zonelimi aside. But what grabs everyone's attention is a tattooed hand, inked with symbols and charms, sliding through the crowd and slapping down onto the table.

> as I say, Han's case, we need to reclaim justice

from DeLight-Street, also from Zenerate.

Zenerate might be calculating something in his mind — expressionless, unresponsive, staring straight at Meanhunt. The air feels taut, tense, as if everyone is being tortured here, an invisible fire searing through them all.

> get back what, we don't own you.

Justous confronts Meanhunt. Zoneli steps between two.

> Meanhunt, we didn't say anything, we can have a face to face with Tealand, get this straight.

> Zoneli, this is none of your business, you should shut your mouth, see, the perpetrator is standing there, no word, why, because you don't let him talk.

> get the fuck out of here.

Zenerate shoves people back from the table. Seeing no reaction, Meanhunt picks up the cue ball and lets it drop to the floor with a heavy thud, echoing through the room.

> I didn't touch you, not because I couldn't touch you, instead, I am giving you a chance.

Meanhunt waves his tattooed hand, a signal that sets every KingHall member nodding in agreement. The air feels like it's laced with gasoline, waiting for the smallest spark to ignite the whole scene. Zenerate stands firm, showing no sign of backing down — retreat isn't an option right now. But who knows what calculations run through his mind or whether he's wavering, uncertain of the next move.

> what the fuck you say, huh, what the fuck is this!!

A commotion rises from Chancist's table, drawing everyone's attention. They see Chancist grabbing

Kindaway by the collar, with Soya standing nearby, caught between the two as if in some jealous quarrel. C.T. steps in, trying to pull them apart, his efforts only heightening the tension.

> hey, Chancist, calm down, what the fuck!

> what did you say to her? What did you say?

Kindaway stays silent. He's too gentle, even when faced with Chancist. He holds his composure, though a hint of a tear begins to well up in his eyes.

> Chancist, if you don't calm down, how we are going to talk with Fisty-Done later.

Meanhunt waves his crew toward Chancist.

> Zenerate, I think we should go.

Zonelimi immediately whispers a warning to Zenerate.

> Yoshiki, come on, you need to step in and help your friend. Meanhunt might actually start something, and you're just standing there like it's none of your business—that's really not cool.

Justous's expression is stern, a mix of reproach and warning. Yoshiki swallows, glancing over at Zenerate.

> it's ok, let's go.

Zenerate pats Yoshiki's chest, four of them are ready to move.

> Chancist, again, calm down.

Chancist's side now are crowded with students, gangsters, fighting machines, feeling the light above table is vibrating and shaking.

> calm down your ass, C.T., fuck you!

A sudden shout cuts through the air, its direction unclear, until Fisty-Done bursts in, leading a group wielding bats. Everyone freezes in shock, but

none more so than C.T., whose face registers utter surprise. Chaos erupts across the billiard club as the tension between the two factions ignites in an instant. People swing wildly from every direction, oblivious to hitting their own, driven only by the fear of missing someone else.

Zenerate leads Yoshiki leaving, Meanhunt surprisingly blocks the way.

> where you wanna go?

> are you crazy?

A surge of energy propels Justous forward as he shoves past Meanhunt, while Zenerate pushes Yoshiki off to the exist.

> leave!

Yoshiki catches sight of a door in the corner of his eye and dashes toward it, assuming at least someone would follow. But when he glances back, all three of his friends are still inside. Hesitating for a beat, he opens the door—and finds himself face-to-face not with a stranger, but someone all too familiar. A police officer stands there in a sports jacket over a cheap shirt and slacks. When he plants his hands on his waist, the jacket pulls back to reveal a worn fake leather belt beneath.

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