

Boogiepop at Dawn

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BOOGIEPOP AT DAWN

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1

Kuroda Shinpei. That was the name the composite human Scarecrow used publicly.

His duties were investigative. He was not investigating anyone in particular, however. He had merely been told to look for people who “hold a possibility that does not yet exist.” A possibility no one, least of all the person in question, was aware of.

It was Scarecrow’s job to find it.



“A train is approaching. Please wait behind the yellow line...a train is approaching...”

In the morning, Shinpei boarded a crowded train and headed to the office like a typical human.

He usually wore a long dark gray coat and matching hat, but he removed his hat while on the train. He looked like any ordinary salaryman. His most distinctive feature was the unfastened belt on his coat.

“Ah...” the suit next to him groaned sleepily.

Up all night?

There were lines under the man’s eyes. Shinpei could tell the man suffered from a chronic lack of sleep. He also dosed himself with vitamin drinks before leaving the house every morning. Shinpei could divulge a lot from people’s faces.

He’s got an ulcer. Bowels’re a mess. His only saving grace is that his liver’s still working. But if he keeps living like this it won’t be long before that goes out, too.

He was an ordinary man. Shinpei shifted his attention elsewhere.

He looked at each of the passengers in the same way, careful not to let them notice his scrutiny. One was a thirtysomething office lady who, despite her plain features, appeared to have several different sexual partners. Another was an elderly clerk who was probably embezzling funds or something equally illicit. He looked ready to keel over from the stress.

There were all kinds of people.

Shinpei took a different route to work every day. It took more time than simply taking the shortest route, but he didn’t have to worry about being late.

Two more trains and a bus later, he arrived at the Kuroda Detective Agency. It was located in the corner of a building with extremely cheap rent.

“Oh, Kuroda-san. You’re in the office today?” the building superintendent asked, grinning. This man was ordinary. He did not know who Shinpei really was.

“Yeah, just hoping someone hires me soon,” Shinpei said, shrugging. “This recession’s killing me.”

“But there’s always work for detectives.”

“There are plenty of jobs—but not any that pay.”

They chatted for a moment longer, and at last Shinpei was in his office.

There were two doors, one of which had no lock. It served as the entrance to a waiting room for clients who dropped in while he was out. The second was the door to his private office.

Unlocking this second door, he found a person waiting for him inside.

“Yo, Scarecrow,” she said, waving her hand. She looked like a girl of about seventeen, dressed casually in jeans and a denim jacket.

However, this girl had entered a locked office without leaving any signs of entry, and until he was in the room he had not been able to detect her presence.

She was like Shinpei.

“Hello, Pigeon,” he sighed, taking off his hat and coat.

“I’ve got work for you. They want you to check up on Teratsuki Kyoichiro.”

“Again? This is the fifth time.”

The girl called Pigeon shrugged. “Axis has their eye on him. He’s too successful.”

“Maybe he’s just that good. I can’t see why having a knack for economics should be interpreted as preparation for betrayal.”

As they talked, Shinpei filled the kettle at the sink and placed it on the gas burner. It was much hotter than was strictly legal. The pot was boiling in no time.

“You rig that yourself? That could get you evicted,” the girl said, eying the burner with a grin.

“I hate waiting for it to boil. It’s the aesthetics of it,” he said, quickly setting up some coffee to drip.

“I’ll take a Mandarin.”

“Do I look like I’m running a café, here? No requests,” he said, making her a cup of coffee as well, and taking the two cups over to the reception table.

She joined him there, took a sip of coffee, and hummed appreciatively.

“Always look forward to this when I come here. Scarecrow, you could do this for a living.”

“Everyone knows detectives are picky with their coffee. Part of my camouflage.”

“Ha ha ha, how thorough.”

“So? Details?”

Her expression became serious. “The Towa Organization has raised its observation status of Teratsuki Kyoichiro to Level A.”

“Eliminate at any sign of suspicious activity? That *is* serious,” Shinpei said, gravely.

“For the duration of this duty you can set aside your primary mission. Not like you’ve found any MPLS around here anyway.”

“Doesn’t the Towa Organization prefer it that way?”

“Yeah. Nothing wrong with not having enemies.”

Even so, while he was busy someone else would probably take over his regular duties. Since that person was just another pawn, Shinpei would not be told who'd be covering for him.

"Makes you wonder why they're working so hard to find enemies within," he muttered.

"I don't like it any more than you do, but his company *is* getting much too big."

"I doubt *he* wanted it to expand so much, but the investors *insist* that profits must always be better than they were the year before."

"You're defending him? Go ahead—that's fine with me. But you aren't getting out of the job. No matter what."

Once the Towa Organization made a decision, they never changed their minds.

"I know. I won't let sympathy color my investigation or my reports."

"Look out for yourself, 'kay?" She took another sip of coffee. "It smells so good..."

"The sort of smell that makes you want to keep on living?"

"Exactly. We aren't human, and we couldn't live without the Towa Organization."

"...I know."

"We both have to do what we have to do—and we have to work together on this. Right? As friends."

"A Scarecrow and a Pigeon? Not the best couple," Shinpei chuckled.

"It's crows that can't stand scarecrows, not pigeons," the girl giggled.

The bell on the outer door rang.

"Come in! It's not locked," Shinpei said, standing up to greet his client.

A woman came in. She looked like a housewife in her late thirties, and she was very nervous. *Probably here to find out if her husband's cheating.*

"Uh, um," she stammered.

"Please, sit down," Shinpei said, motioning her to the sofa. There was no need to worry about the room's previous occupant: the girl had already vanished without a trace, along with the cup of coffee she'd been drinking.

They moved among ordinary people, always careful to reveal nothing of their true selves.

That was the world they lived in.

2

The Towa Organization was a group...no, they were too large to be called a group. They were a conglomerate that spanned the globe, monitoring and experimenting.

They performed research on evolution. The Organization was driven to divine the source of human intelligence, to figure out what would come next, and ultimately to control the process that would get mankind there. More accurately, they were focused on keeping as much of humanity as possible in whatever that next step was. They saw it as a fight for survival. For them, it was an ongoing battle to ensure mankind would win the inevitable evolutionary war.

Their primary tools in the struggle consisted of

a great number of composite humans. These soldiers were created by the most advanced genetic research humanity had to offer. The basis of the research was a mystery—top secret even among the members of the Towa Organization. Kuroda Shinpei privately wondered if the source was something that had already out-evolved mankind. Of course, he never voiced his suspicion to anyone. If it was known that he was curious about it, he would have been disposed of immediately.

But—and this was also Shinpei's private theory—if that source was not the future, but simply an individual mutation, a freak, then what the Towa Organization was participating in was a farce of epic proportions.

And that might be perfectly appropriate for us...

Shinpei was walking through town, wearing his hat and dark gray coat, as always. He almost looked like a priest in the outfit. Children would occasionally point at him as he walked by, but for the most part his clothes did not stand out much in a crowd. The look was ideal for lurking undetected in dark places.

He started by taking care of his detective work. It

wasn't hard. He went directly to the cheating husband, and said, "Your wife knows you're cheating. Are you going to stop?"

The man promised to break it off immediately.

Satisfied, Shinpei took several photographs as proof of the man's "innocence," faking the times, and wrote a report claiming he had uncovered no suspicious activity.

Affairs could be smoothed over when they weren't serious. He usually did the same thing if the woman was cheating. Unless, of course, his client had hired him to help win a divorce settlement.

When he'd wrapped up the case, he hung an "on vacation" sign on the door of his office and went to work.

Teratsuki Kyoichiro—even Shinpei did not know the man's real name.

However, he was one of the Towa Organization's terminals, and like Shinpei, he was probably inhuman. Kyoichiro's mission was to create an environment that would allow the Towa Organization to experiment with various methods of economic distribution.

He had been very successful, and his company, MCE, was one of the most powerful in the country.

That, naturally, put the Organization on their guard. He was *too* successful.

Ironic...

Using ordinary investigative techniques, Shinpei made his rounds, checking up on MCE's reputation.

"Eh? Investigation? Ha ha ha, that's a waste of time."

"Poke 'em all you like—you'll get nothing out of it."

"Can't think of a single doubt I might have about them..."

"Well, it's a one-man company. But as long as that *one man* is raking in the cash, who cares?"

"Yeah, any deal you make with them turns into gold. Everywhere else you get paid late, if at all..."

Everywhere he went, he heard nothing but positive comments.

There were no problems of any kind. The first instruction all Towa Organization terminals received was to avoid suspicious activity. Clearly Teratsuki Kyoichiro adhered to the command with diligence.

The closest thing to an issue he could find was that they were a little too high profile. The Towa Organization frowned upon any sort of attention—good or

bad—but having a good name was hardly something to be concerned about. Fame is fleeting. It would only take a little information manipulation for everyone to forget about MCE.

He investigated further, but found nothing particularly notable. Yet Shinpei was beginning to be bothered by just how perfect his results were.

The sheer ingenuity of it was beginning to smell like something he ran across in his work as a detective—alibi construction.

This guy's too good to be true...

He could not shake the feeling that something was amiss.

He reviewed Kyoichiro's cash flow again. His eyes caught on a property investment he'd overlooked the first time.

It was a donation to a prefectural general hospital. Not too uncommon, really. Private enterprises often voluntarily helped out hospitals and medical organizations.

But was this done entirely to incur good will? It wasn't the most efficient way to provide aid to a public services organization. Compared with the flawless performance everywhere else, this seemed...*nice*.

He had no real reason to be suspicious, but even so, Shinpei decided to check the hospital out.

Thus, he was walking through the streets, covered in dark gray, heading for the hospital.

On the way he bought a bouquet of flowers, disguising himself as a visitor. He amused himself by making a whimsical bouquet of peonies, golden lace, and garden bride. Roses were too hard-boiled for him—he preferred to avoid them.

The hospital was large. The building was an octagonal prism, thirteen stories tall. It was a strange shape, but presumably chosen because of space limitations combined with a desire to fill the available volume as effectively as possible.

“Teratsuki-shi certainly has a penchant for strange buildings...” Shinpei muttered as he went in. Due to the large size of the complex, there were a number of security guards monitoring the grounds. However, the main hospital area was open to anyone.

He wandered around briefly, searching for nothing in particular.

The first floor lobby was filled with people waiting for their prescriptions to get filled. Cleaning staff

were scrubbing the tile floor. Children cried for no reason in particular. Upstairs, patients were sleeping, but recovering women were laughing loudly with visitors, heedless of the suffering around them. Nurses rushed back and forth, always on their feet.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Was I overthinking it? Maybe it was just a friendly gesture...

Still holding the flowers, he headed downwards. Glancing at the floor guide near the entrance, he noticed an arrow pointing into the building next to the word "Garden."

".....?"

Curious, he followed the arrow.

The center of the octagonal prism was hollowed out, and there was a garden in the middle. The beautiful patch of green came as a shock here in the heart of the city.

"Wow..." Shinpei said, impressed, as he stepped out into the garden.

He looked up and saw an array of mirrors designed to focus sunlight down into the center of the building.

"Fancy...did Teratsuki-shi do that?" he muttered, and began wandering aimlessly around, admiring the lush vegetation.

"Heh heh," he heard someone chuckle.

He glanced toward the sound and saw a girl of about thirteen sitting on a nearby bench. She was looking at him and laughing. Judging from her pajamas, she was a patient here.

"You're quite the passionate man," she said. Her manner of speech sounded strangely masculine.

"It's very impressive," Shinpei said, with no trace of embarrassment. Something about gardens put people at their ease.

"Let me guess. You came to visit someone, but they weren't here, right?" she said, suddenly.

"Eh?"

"You went upstairs, and then came back down, but you still have your flowers. I saw you up there from here," she explained.

He had been walking next to the windows, he realized. But he had not happened to look down.

"That's a very good observation. Yeah, that's basically what happened," he said.

"Liar," she replied, teeming with confidence.

“You’re just pretending to visit. You’re only here to snoop around.”

“Am I? What makes you think that?”

“Visitors only go to one floor. If you were trying to find a room, you would’ve looked more confused.” She spoke calmly. Having such a conversation with a stranger did not appear unusual for her.

A strange child. For some reason, he felt like she was a little witch.

Yet despite her blunt manner of speaking, Shinpei was not at all put off by her. “I don’t know what else to say—you got me. I’m a detective. Here for work.”

“A detective? You have a card?”

Shinpei sat down next to her, and handed one over. “Here.”

“Hmm, I see. Kuroda-san.”

“What’s your name, little Holmes?”

“I’m Nagi. Kirima Nagi.”

She used a masculine pronoun to refer to herself. It seemed to fit.

“Nagi-chan...strange name.”

“My father was eccentric. He gave me that name so I would remain calm and unflappable no matter what the situation.”

“I think I like that.”

“I don’t. Not when I get teachers at school who can’t read it and call me Kaze.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s fantastic!” Shinpei laughed.

Nagi chuckled too. She looked down at his card again. “Kuroda-san, what exactly are you investigating here?”

“Can’t tell you that. Trade secret.”

“Nothing to do with me?”

“Aren’t you self-important! I run a serious business, you know. I don’t have time to harass junior high school girls.”

“That sounds particularly impressive coming from someone who was just slacking off work to wander around muttering, ‘How pretty’ while staring at plants,” she retorted, grinning.

“You’ve got me there.” They both laughed, shoulders shaking.

For a while they gazed at the flowers in silence.

“It’s easy to relax here,” Nagi said, expansively.

“You sick or something? You don’t look all that...” Halfway through the question, Shinpei trailed off, realizing that she might not want to talk about it.

But Nagi did not appear to mind. “Yeah, well. I’m here for a kind of pain, really. Been here six months already.”

“Six months? Then school...?”

“Leave of absence,” she shrugged.

“Huh...”

“They don’t know what’s causing it. My body just suddenly starts to hurt a lot. The doctors keep telling me the problem’s in my mind, not my body.”

The way she spoke was so straightforward he couldn’t believe she was mentally unstable.

“Doesn’t seem likely...”

“Well, my family background is worse than the symptoms. I wouldn’t be surprised if they tried to blame the problem on *that*.”

“Huh...” was all Shinpei could say. He didn’t know how to react. But there was one thing that bothered him. “Your body hurts? Like...how much?”

“Indescribably,” Nagi said, grinning. She seemed at ease with it, but that just drove home how bad it must be. “I’ve told the doctors, but they just keep comparing it to growing pains. Pain-killers don’t do much.”

“Growing pains...”

“Growing pains,” she explained, “are a kind of nerve pain borne from the rapid changes in a child’s body and activities during growth periods. There’s no treatment for them, but they vanish eventually when the child stops growing.”

This was exactly what Shinpei had imagined she meant, and it rattled him.

Could she be...?

He must have looked grim, because Nagi slapped him on the back. “Don’t look so gloomy!”

“S-sorry,” he said, meaning it.

She broke up laughing. “You’re quite a character, Kuroda-san.”

“Am I?”

“Most grownups would never dream of apologizing to a kid like that.”

“Detectives take everyone seriously. Anyone can be a criminal,” he joked.

“Even kids?”

“That’s a very basic trick.”

Nagi cackled, “Oh yeah? Guess that makes me your number one suspect.”

“Nah. The beautiful mysterious girl is such a cliché no mystery writer would go near you.”

“Beautiful? So you’re flirting with me now?”

“Well...”

At this point their conversation was interrupted by a voice behind them. “Kirima-san, time to go back to your room.” It was the voice of a young woman.

“That’s Dr. Kisugi. Gotta go,” Nagi said, standing up. “See you later, detective.”

“Yeah. Hey, take the flowers?” he suggested, holding out the deranged bouquet of peonies, golden lace, and garden bride.

“No thanks. I never take anything I don’t need...” she grinned, and continued, “is what I’d usually say, but why not?” Nagi took the flowers from him.

“Thanks,” Shinpei said, smiling back.

“Say, detective...if you’ve got time, you should check me out. You might find something interesting,” Nagi suggested.

“Will do,” he said, and a young doctor, presumably Dr. Kisugi, came into sight.

“What are you doing? You aren’t well!”

“I know!” Nagi said, winking at Shinpei. She left the garden with the doctor.

Shinpei waved, watching her go.

3

He ultimately reported that his investigation of Teratsuki Kyoichiro had uncovered nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing his clients would care about, at least. If he had been an ordinary detective the fact that Teratsuki Kyoichiro had a number of mistresses, each of whom had children, would have been noteworthy, but that wasn’t news his clients would care about. Synthetic humans could not produce children, so they were definitely not his. With that in mind, his lovers were nothing but a front to maintain the illusion of his humanity.

And so he headed back to the hospital.

This time he did not wander, but went directly to a room—a private room. He could hear girls’ cheerful voices through the door.

He knocked.

“Coming!” a girl said brightly, and the door opened.

“Hello,” he said, bowing his head.

The girl who had opened the door was wearing what looked like a junior high school uniform, and she frowned at him. “Who are you?”

“The detective Kirima-san summoned,” he said, politely.

Nagi called out from the bed, “It’s okay, Naoko. I know him.”

“Oh? Okay then.” Naoko appeared to be a friend of Nagi’s. She dropped her guard, and waved him in, smiling.

“Detective...you have results?” Nagi asked, grinning.

“You could say that. Never thought you’d be a billionaire,” Shinpei said, shaking his head.

“What? Detective, you were investigating Nagi?” Naoko asked, fascinated.

Innocently, Shinpei said, “She told me to.”



Kirima Nagi.

Nagi was the only daughter of the writer Kirima Seiichi, who had died unexpectedly four years earlier. She inherited the rights to all of his works, which, even after his death, were still selling millions of copies a year. Naturally, those rights came with their share of trouble.

“At first I thought you might be pretending to be sick, and hiding here, but it looks like you really *are* sick. Unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately?”

“There’s no benefit to being sick, is there?”

“Exactly,” Naoko said, earnestly. “No matter how rich she is, she’s still sick. Get better soon! I don’t want to wind up too far ahead of you.”

Her words were said in jest, but there was genuine concern behind them. She was a good girl.

The three of them chatted for a while about nothing in particular. Eventually, it was time for Naoko to go.

“I’d better be off, Nagi.”

“Me too,” Shinpei said, rising from his seat on the bed.

But Nagi stopped him, “Stay a little longer, Detective.”