

48 Hours 41

Chapter 41: Tokyo Drift XI

At 3.00 am somewhere in Tokyo.

The rumble of engines broke the silence of the night.

More than a dozen modified cars in eye-catching colors lay silently in front of a shop that had gone out of business a long time ago. A group of street racers in punk clothing with their provocatively dressed arm candies were rambling away as they waited for someone.

Five minutes later, the person in question appeared.

A blue Subaru Impreza WRX stopped in front of the dumpster. The driver swung the door open and got down off the car, walking towards the group.

The group immediately stopped in their tracks as if they were startled. None of them dared look at him straight in the eye! Half a minute later, someone finally shouted, “The f*ck! Itō Ken! What the hell is with the high-beam?!”

“Sorry! Sorry!” The one called Itō Ken apologized as he turned back to his car and turned off the headlights so that everyone could see the face of this newcomer.

The guy had a head full of unruly green hair and a glacial expression. Out of all the people in front of him, his eyes fixed on only one person. “Kentaro Inoue! Why the hell did you ask me to come at this hour? It’s real late!”

“Oh, nothing urgent, except the title Kosoku Ryusei has a new master,” said the guy in a jacket while lying on the roof of a car with his eyes closed. A girl next to him seductively fed him grapes.

“Whatever! You’re just the guy I defeated.” Itō Ken scoffed.

“Asshole! Who are you to look down at me?! I’m not the same person I used to be!” The jacketed guy opened his eyes like a tiger who had just awakened, angry, confrontational. “This time, I bet on all the dignity of men that I will not lose to you again!”

As if he sensed the sentiment the other guy was imparting, Itō Ken’s coolness thawed a little. He was silent for a little while and then said, “I understand, Inoue-kun. Then let’s talk with our speed.”

At that, both guys entered their cars. The girl who was with Kentaro Inoue walked to the front of the vehicles, and as the crowd cheered and whistled, pulled out her bra and threw it into the air.

When the brassiere touched the ground, both vehicles charged forward simultaneously.

Itō Ken and Kentaro Inoue were old rivals. Both of them were from pretty good families—their fathers had business dealings with each other, with both the boys were best friends who grew up playing together since childhood. As a matter of fact, it was Kentaro Inoue who had pulled Itō Ken into this circle. As Itō Ken’s skills continued to grow, he soon surpassed his close friend, Kentaro Inoue, making him feel as if his reputation was threatened.

To cut the long story short, their friendship did not survive this test, and they gradually drifted apart.

Throughout the years, Kentaro Inoue had challenged Itō Ken but had lost more races than he had won. Itō Ken had never once looked down on his friend as Kentaro Inoue would frequently come up with improvements, whether in racing or technique. This posed a threat to him.

For these reasons, Itō Ken had to stay on edge and give 100% of his effort.

“Come on. Let me see what you have learned this time!”

Itō Ken thought to himself as he stepped on the gas pedal.

Both cars alternatively overtook each other, gaining the lead.

All of a sudden, his eyes widened! Out of nowhere, a mustard van appeared at the crossroad in front like a ghost in the dark!

Shit! Why was there a car at this hour of the morning?!

Itō Ken could feel cold sweat beading on his forehead. It was too close, too fast for him to react! At once, he realized that this was going to end tragically in a fatal crash and that the Kentaro Inoue driving next to him must be just as shocked and devastated.

But what he witnessed next was something that he would remember his entire life. The crappy van did not seem to want to slow down, but charged towards him like an angry bull!

The cars were less than 500 meters apart when the L300 suddenly pulled a strange drift. The van did a sideways slide at the inertia!

Their doors were less than 1 cm from bushing each other!

The hairs on Itō Ken’s entire body raised on its ends. But from the corner of his eyes, he could see the L300 driver piloting the vehicle with only one hand on the steering; the other one busy fumbling for something.

As they passed each other, Itō Ken was able to get a better view of what the driver was holding.

Chewing gum?!

He felt his mind went blank.

“What the hell?!” Itō Ken cried out involuntarily.

How could he be rummaging for a piece of chewing gum at a time like this? But what happened next was more unbelievable, as the L300 accelerated and shot past his WRX! They had almost run out of road, but the run-down van did not look like it was going to turn around!

Instead, the L300 tunneled and disappeared into a narrow valley about the width of the van, leaving the two cars in the dust! The cars slowed down until they finally stopped. Itō Ken and Kentaro Inoue got down from their cars and looked at each other in dismay.

“Do you still want to continue?” Itō Ken asked after a while.

"We can't even beat a delivery van. What's the point of continuing?" said a defeated Kentaro Inoue. "Keep the Kosoku Ryusei 1 title. I'm planning to quit this group, go back, and carry on the family's business."

"... Actually, I was also getting ready to study in Europe after I'm done with this race," Itō Ken confessed.

"Really?" Kentaro Inoue had not seen this coming and immediately felt embarrassed. "Speaking of which, it's been a while since we've talked about things like that."

The boys shared a look before asking each other in unison, "Do you want to go get a drink?"

Unbeknownst to him, Zhang Heng had caused a man to let go of his car racing dreams, nor was he aware that because of him, two friends rekindled their friendship.

To him, it was just a repetition of the daily routine of delivering goods. Tokyo was reputed as the capital of drifting, with the most significant number of car tuning enthusiasts in the world. And like the game's background introduction said, these guys are mostly active at night! Whenever Zhang Heng went out on his rounds, he would often encounter these street racers.

Most of them, like Itō Ken and Kentaro Inoue, were hobbyists always looking for an excuse to participate in some 'manly showdown.' Zhang Heng did not have time to snap at their heels. He only overtook them because he was in a rush.

This was already the ninth month since he started learning to drive. He had only just completed the drifting practice that Takeda Tetsuya had set up a month ago. His driving skills had advanced from level 1 to level 2. Besides that, his car tuning and maintenance skills had progressed to level 1. This car was completely different from when he first drove it. The core configuration inside had been completely revamped. Only the shell of the L300 remained untouched.

Unlike the other drivers who were so afraid that no one would know that their cars had been modified, Zhang Heng did not paint the exterior of his vehicle in bright, glaring colors. For all intents and purposes, it was also because of his limited funds.

To buy accessories alone, he had to take up a second job. Takeda Tetsuya introduced him to a small junkyard owner, where he purchased all the parts he needed for cheap. But even then, it took him four months to get the L300 to what it was now.

The Zhang Heng today was not the same as he was nine months ago. He was now able to deliver all the goods one hour in advance.

He was returning to Kurahara Seafood when he spotted thick tolls of smoke from across the street.

Realizing that something had happened, he stopped the car by the road and called the fire department as he picked up the recurve bow he kept with him for self-defense.

Chapter 42: Tokyo Drift XII

Zhang Heng knew that Takeda Tetsuya was hiding something. Why else would he had given up when he was so close to gaining the Drift King title? Why was he divorced? Why swear that he would never touch another steering wheel? And why contact his daughter again after so many years?

The gambling addiction excuse might have fooled Ameko, his unworldly daughter. Still, having spent so many sleepless nights with the seafood trader, Zhang Heng somehow knew that this seemingly weak-willed man was stronger than anyone else deep inside. Even though he betted on horses, it was purely recreational.

Every time he placed bets, he would always stop, no matter if he won or lost. A real gambling addict would not have been so reasonable.

Indeed, not everyone who left their mark on the world stage lived the rest of their lives aimlessly.

Talent and hard work are indispensable to distinguish yourself from the masses of gifted people. There was no way someone with no self-control would be able to become a top racing driver.

Even so, Zhang Heng never asked Takeda Tetsuya to tell his story, not because he did not care, but because he was worried he might not be influential enough to meddle with this matter.

At that time, his driving skills were just average; he was still absorbing knowledge like a sponge, still unable to complete Takeda Tetsuya's hellish drifting practices. Then, Zhang Heng came up with a simple idea to play the single-player game Formula Drag.

He relied on his exceedingly long time in the game—avoiding from triggering the plot, and then burying himself in practice—finally brushing his driving skills up to level two and complete the modification of the L300.

In fact, he had already made plans to talk to Takeda Tetsuya even if tonight didn't happen. Although they did not identify themselves as master and apprentice, they were, in fact, master and apprentice. The seafood store owner was too proud, always saying one thing but meant another.

Zhang Heng found it suspicious that this guy would have so many orders, not to mention each location always more remote than the one before.

He secretly opened a foam box once and found out that the box labeled 'lobsters' was actually filled with pebbles.

So, it turned out the supposed increase in orders was Takeda Tetsuya's way of increasing pressure in accordance with Zhang Heng's improvement.

... Hopefully, it was not too late.

With the bow slung on his arm, Zhang Heng ran to the front of the shop and spotted Ameko, who was supposed to be asleep at this hour. What was she doing here?

She had taken a taxi here, arriving only minutes before Zhang Heng. Before the car even came to a stop, she had already jumped down the vehicle. Dropping to the ground wearily, she watched the fire devour her father's shop.

Zhang Heng was about to approach her when two tattooed men wearing black gloves and shades jumped down a dark blue Toyota Voxy parked nearby and dragged Ameko from the floor into the car!

The girl screamed and struggled. When the concerned taxi driver saw this, he got down his vehicle to help the poor girl but found a muzzle pointed at his head instead.

The taxi driver's bravery evaporated immediately; he ran back to his car and fled as far and as fast as he could.

The person who had come down the Toyota Voxy did not have to worry about the driver calling the police because he only needed two minutes to take his target away.

Unfortunately, things did not always turn out the way we wanted them to, and in a split second, something pierced the dark skies!

The person holding the gun heard a swishing sound before a sudden stabbing pain shot up his right arm, forcing him to release the weapon!

An arrow that came out of nowhere had pierced his palm.

His staggered partner was about to release Ameko and run for his life, but Zhang Heng, who had taken shelter behind the bus did not give him a chance! Zhang Heng narrowed his eyes and released the taut bowstring! The second arrow hit the guy in the calf.

But their other partner in the Toyota Voxy, who was able to pinpoint Zhang Heng's location from the first two arrows, acted quickly, blocking Zhang Heng with the car.

At that very moment, Zhang Heng knew that he needed to seize the opportunity! He pulled his hoodie over and then jumped out from behind the advertisement board, shooting continuously at the window of the car. To avoid the enemy's shots, he quickly searched for a safe route back to the car.

Doing this, however, put a distance between him and the Toyota Voxy. By the time he was half-turned, the two injured men had already knocked Ameko unconscious and were struggling to drag her up the car.

Zhang Heng's last arrow flew into the car past the driver's seat before finally planting itself on the dashboard. The driver froze for a second, and the door was quickly shut!

The Voxy made a move, racing towards the main road.

Zhang Heng was strangely calm. He moved in this direction to not only get on the other side of the Voxy but to also get near to the L300 he had parked by the road.

When he saw the kidnappers making a run for it, he put his bow and arrows away and jumped into his delivery van! He had left the door unlocked and keys in the ignition in case of unexpected events.

It was this attention to detail that saved him precious time.

Before he fired up the L300, he looked up at the rearview mirror and saw that the Voxy had disappeared.

Most people would have given up a situation like this, but not Zhang Heng. For the past nine months, he had been delivering goods all over the city for the harsh store owner – he now knew the area like the back of his hand. It was as vivid as a 3D map that was right inside his head.

He knew precisely that about 300meters in the direction that the Voxy was headed to was a fork. Two seconds later, he heard the sound of tires screeching through his open window. He knew exactly which direction they were headed to.

So, without wasting any time, he started the van, turned his car around, and in less than 4 seconds, accelerated to 100km/h! He arrived at the intersection in a literal blink of an eye. Without slowing down, he did a lift-off oversteer! The L300's tail drew a stunning arc that completely mismatched its boxy body, changing its direction. Zhang Heng then stepped on the gas all the way to the floor!

The motor transplanted from a racecar let out a low growl.

It took Zhang Heng only 45 seconds to reach the second intersection, but there was still no sign of the Voxy. Zhang Heng changed direction again without a second thought.

This was the most challenging part. Being a minute and a half behind the Voxy, he had to rely on his judgment for the first part of the chase. One wrong turn and he would lose Ameko completely.

But Zhang Heng did not have any other choice. He had to trust himself, trust the old friend chugging beneath him! Ahead of him was a 3 km long, straight road. Unless the Voxy was unbelievably fast, there was no reason he couldn't spot its taillamp. So, Zhang Heng decided to switch directions. He did a second drift; then, from the corner of his eyes, he caught a glance of the Voxy, which was making another turn.

Got you!

This time, Zhang Heng did not continue to pursue the minivan. He took the L300 500 meters forward before abruptly turning towards a closed coffee shop. The quick turn resulted in him breaking through the glass door, toppling over two tables, before charging out the back door and barraging directly into a shopping mall!

Chapter 43: Tokyo Drift XIII

As Christmas was approaching, the stores were already making preparations for the season.

Colorful lights had been hung up with the season's buntings, and elaborately decorated Christmas trees adorned with tiny little presents could be seen in stores.

Suddenly, the faux fir tree shuddered violently, shaking the little ornaments off its branches, sending them flying all over the place!

A mustard minivan hurtled past the escalator. Zhang Heng turned on the wiper, swiping away the two greeting cards that had found their way on to his windshield! The tail of the L300 whipped past a shelf filled with expensive skincare products, the rush of wind causing the Shiseido bottles to totter.

...

The driver of the Toyota Voxy was very sly and abruptly turned at every intersection. After making a big round, he was going to sneak back to the road, but the glass door of the mall to his right suddenly shattered! A yellow minivan with Christmas decorations dangling from it burst through the entrance!

What the hell?! Did Santa come early this year? And since when did he exchange his sleigh for a car?

The startled Voxy driver had been continually monitoring his rearview mirror. He did not see anyone tailing them – so where did this guy come from? And what a dramatic entrance that was!

They were now only 6 to 7 meters apart. That got the Voxy driver's dander up; he stepped down on the gas pedal, trying to shake off the tailing car with his speed.

But to his surprise, the beat-up L300 was actually catching up to the Voxy!

Both drivers stepped on it, drawing closer to each other. Zhang Heng used the front bumper to clip the left rear end of the Voxy. The Toyota began to lose control, and in a panic, its driver tightened his grip around the steering. No matter how fast he drove, though, he could not seem to shake off the tailing van.

Seeing that they were on the verge of turning-turtle, the Voxy was forced to slow down. Then as if choreographed, the L300 behind also decelerated! Zhang Heng could have knocked the other van on its side but decided to go gentle when he remembered that Ameko was inside the vehicle. In the end, both cars stopped by the roadside.

Realizing that he could not escape the other van with his skills, the Voxy driver opened the car door and tossed an unconscious Ameko out! Zhang Heng watched the dark blue Toyota disappear into the night before loosening his grip on the bow and arrow.

He did not continue the pursuit because one, he could not just leave Ameko on the side of the road, and two, the kidnappers had guns. Even if they had refrained from shooting the weapons earlier, who knew what they would do if they were backed into a corner.

Hence, this brief skirmish between the two ended with both sides stepping down.

In a way, the appearance of those kidnappers put Zhang Heng at ease. When he first saw the fire at the shop, his shared Ameko's assumption that Takeda Tetsuya had been murdered and his killer had burned the corpse to get rid of the evidence. But when the emergence of the Voxy told him otherwise – the seafood store owner was still alive!

Otherwise, they would not have tricked Ameko to the ship and kidnapped her. The girl lived a very ordinary life, no different from most Japanese university students. Those goons probably took her intending to blackmail Takeda Tetsuya.

But who the hell were those people in the Voxy? Causing trouble and starting fires. They even had guns! In a country with such strict regulations on weapons, getting their hands on firearms meant that they worked for someone influential.

Zhang Heng shot the tattooed man in the calf intending to keep him for questioning, but their other associate appeared so unexpectedly. Thank goodness they did not manage to get away with Ameko.

Zhang Heng carried his friend into the van and did a quick assessment of her condition. Other than a few scratches on her elbow and calf, the different parts of her body were completely unharmed.

That was a relief.

Shortly after, the loud wailing of firetrucks filled the air. The firefighters renowned for their efficiency came pretty quickly. Judging by the severity of the situation, they responded immediately and only took a couple of minutes to arrive at the scene.

Zhang Heng took off his jacket and placed it on Ameko. She had invited him over to her little rented apartment a few times for hotpot, so he knew where she lived. But it did not seem like a good idea to send her back right now. She was clearly involved in some kind of problem here. If whoever it was could trick her once, they would surely trick her the second time.

It was imperative that he figured out exactly what was happening before coming up with countermeasures.

The Voxy people might have escaped, but Zhang Heng knew that there was one person who could give him the answers.

Everything that had happened tonight was because of Takeda Tetsuya or Yosuke Tsuchiya. It was time for the guy to tell his story.

But before that, Zhang Heng had to find him first.

That was not too difficult a thing to figure out. Zhang Heng drove to Takeda Tetsuya's favorite fūzoku 1, a karaoke cum izakaya, but eventually found him in the abandoned port where they had trained.

The sun was coming up by then. The seafood store owner was wearing a large floppy hat that covered his face, fishing with a group of elderly fishing hobbyists.

When Tetsuya heard the sound of tires squealing, he immediately knew who it was. Getting up, he saw Ameko in the passenger seat and froze!

"Why is she here?"

"That question is for you to answer." Zhang Heng jumped down the van. "I found her at your shop. A bunch of guys were going to kidnap her, but don't worry; she was just knocked unconscious. Nothing big."

"Someone kidnapped her?! What do they look like?" Takeda Tetsuya looked nervous, which was uncommon.

"There were three of them. They were well disguised with sunglasses and masks, though, I don't know why they didn't bother to cover up the tattoos on their necks."

"What are the tattoos like?" Takeda Tetsuya appeared to be only interested in that little detail.

Zhang Heng thought for a minute and then said, "He was too far. I can't be completely sure, but I think it was an eye."

Takeda Tetsuya's pupils contracted, allowing himself to drop to the ground as if he was completely drained of energy, muttering to himself, "So, they've come?"

"Who has come?"

"It's nothing to do with the both of you. They only want my life!" Takeda Tetsuya smiled distressingly. "I thought that changing my name and laying low could help me escape them. I didn't think they would still hold on to me. But never mind, I will go confront them! The both of you won't be in danger anymore."

This was not what Zhang Heng had imagined would happen. The seafood shop owner was not interested in discussing his past.

While Zhang Heng was pummeling his brains on how to make him talk, a voice from behind him said, "So, is this the reason why you divorced mum?"

No one knew when Ameko had woken up and gotten off the car, but she had obviously heard the conversation between Zhang Heng and her father.

Chapter 44: Tokyo Drift XIV

The waitress at the breakfast eatery set the food on the table. There was sumptuous tamagoyaki 1, rice, grilled fish, and miso soup.

But none of them picked up their chopsticks. Takeda Tetsuya heaved a heavy sigh under Ameko's resolute gaze.

He lit a cigarette and said, "What for? You'll be going to China in two months! Why would you involve yourself in all of this?"

"I want to know the truth about what happened back then. A part of you that still loves mum, right?"

"Feelings are not that important anymore at our age," Takeda Tetsuya answered hesitantly while taking a drag. "When I was young, I also thought that I could love a woman forever. But the truth is, after so many years, I've almost completely forgotten what she looks like."

There was a pause before he continued, "But whatever it is. I owe the both of you. How is Nanako? Is she well?"

"Mum is doing great, but she still hasn't forgotten what happened back then. But she told me before that she doesn't hate you anymore. You just... owe us the truth."

Takeda Tetsuya grew quiet. He obviously did not want to revisit his past, but he also knew that he couldn't keep avoiding him forever.

An awkward pause ensued, and just as the cigarette was about to burn his fingers, Takeda Tetsuya finally spoke. "This is all because of a mistake. A mistake that I have regretted, and will regret the rest of my entire life."

He went on to tell the story he had kept a secret for so many years.

In the 70s and 80s, Japan's economy was booming. It was in that period that Yosuke Tsuchiya was born into a happy family. Like most people back then, Yosuke Tsuchiya was full of youthful vigor, proud, and opinionated. When the Plaza Accord was signed, the American dollar depreciated against the Japanese yen, and Japanese spending power reached its peak. However, that was followed by a devastating blow

to the export industry, propagating Japan's 'Lost Decade.' This massive change sent that generation of people down a very different path.

The immense pressure of being in debt overwhelmed Yosuke Tsuchiya's parents. After the bank seized their home, the Yosuke couple, in their desperation, decided to end their own life. They suffocated to death by burning charcoal. Soon after receiving the news of their children's death, Tsuchiya's grandparents too died of illness. However, these life-changing events did not undo Yosuke Tsuchiya; instead, they forged his fearless character, and in the words of the team manager who later discovered him – was born a fighter.

The word 'afraid' was never in his vocabulary.

"Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger."

Yosuke Tsuchiya welcomed his prime in his twenties, reaping repeated success in European competition, winning second place in the FIA GT Grand Prix in New York. He, however, was sent home after a fallout with his racing team. Not long after, he won first place in the Tokyo D1 Grand Prix. He was a legend in Japan's drifting world.

At that time, he was already at the top of his game but was never satisfied, always looking out for new challenges. Eventually, he decided to take on the Drift King title, taking him less than a year to unseat the top street racers from 22 wards. This included all special wards in Tokyo except for one: Nerima.

"Nerima's strongest racer was a guy named Asano Naoto. That guy's crazy! He invented a death-racing format – he would choose a section of a highway, destroy the guardrails and set up the exit and entrance. At the agreed time, the competing racers would drive against the traffic on the other side of the highway lane. Whoever reaches the finishing line first, and alive, is the winner. Sometimes, to make the competition more exciting, he would even involve the police in the game!"

"That... That's basically suicide!" Ameko was utterly gobsmacked.

"Asano Naoto believed that only the bravest racer is worthy of victory, and whoever challenges him must accept all of his rules. Even though it seems stupid now, I was young back then – I was only one race away from winning the Drift King title. I was not about to give it up."

Takeda Tetsuya lit up another cigarette, took in a deep breath, and continued, "We agreed on a time – apart from the two of us, my best friend also joined the competition. He was the best racing driver in Shinjuku – and we chose the course together, 40 kilometers long, three lanes wide. On normal days, there's moderate traffic. No one would have thought that it would suddenly be covered in fog."

"Kobayashi suggested we give up the race and choose another time. I could tell that Asano Naoto was going to agree to it. After all, he was just a ruffian who loved to live on the edge. Despite all that, he didn't really plan to die. Considering the road conditions, the level of danger was way out of his comfort zone. But that asshole didn't want to give up the chance to taunt us. He knew that I would agree too, so he decided to cast the opposing vote by calling us cowards."

"I was a very spirited young man. So, in my anger, I voted against delaying the race too. In the end, it was two against one, which meant the competition would go on as planned. I could see Asano Naoto's

face change, but I took no pleasure in that retaliation because the three of us were already up in the gum tree.”

“Everything that happened after that only confirmed how stupid my decision was. That day, the visibility on the highway was only 4-5 meters. We were forced to drive slower than usual, but even then, we were shrouded by the shadow of death. This was no longer a competition about skills anymore, luck seemed to be of the essence.

“We drove like that for 10 minutes, constantly fearing for our lives. On a normal day, we would have already completed the course by then, but we were only a third of the way. I kept honking all the way! Fortunately, the highway was closed off, and there were not a lot of cars coming towards us. Even then, I had to swerve madly to avoid running into oncoming cars a couple of times, not seeing them till the very last second! It felt like I was rubbing shoulders with the grim reaper!”

When the seafood store owner recalled that dangerous time in his life, it was apparent the lingering terror of those moments still haunted him.

“In situations like this, even the most tenacious mind would not be able to keep going. So, Kobayashi and I took turns leading, giving each other time to rest. Asano Naoto, on the other hand, was already out of the game – the supposedly bravest racer in all of Tokyo’s willpower had been completely destroyed, and he was shivering behind us. But then, suddenly, an accident that no one expected took place!

“As we were approaching the halfway point of the course, I heard the sound of a truck’s horn blaring from the road ahead. I was about to change lanes when Asano Naoto’s GT-R suddenly overtook me, forcing me to stay on the left lane. I tried to increase speed, but he kept staying on my right! I could sort of guess what he was thinking at that time – his performance today was horrible; if he loses this race, all that reputation he had built for himself throughout the years would be destroyed, so he had an evil thought...

Asano Naoto was determined to get me killed. He left me with very little time, and I was devastated! I thought that my time was over. Kobayashi rammed his Lexus hard into Asano Naoto’s GT-R! I didn’t see it coming. The next moment, both their cars lost control, and Asano Naoto’s GT-R went under the truck’s chassis, ramming the truck sideways! It then fell on Kobayashi’s Lexus! It was the most gruesome... I didn’t dare look at it. The top of the Lexus had caved in completely, and there was black smoke billowing out the front of the car.”

Chapter 45: Tokyo Drift XV

“What did you do after that?” Zhang Heng asked.

“I... did nothing.” There was a look of remorse in Takeda Tetsuya’s eyes. “I should not have left him there. I wanted to... get down the car to check on him, but I heard police sirens coming from the opposite. I was scared, so I didn’t stay. I turned the car around and left the highway.”

“What happened to the two of them?” Ameko asked, disturbed.

“I only found out about what happened to them in the news. The reporter said that two juvenile delinquents were racing against the traffic on the highway and hit an oncoming truck. One died, and the

other was injured. The wounded driver was receiving first aid in the emergency room... but he passed away three days later.”

“Was the wounded person Kobayashi or...”

“It was Asano Naoto. Other than being known for being the best racing driver Nerima, he also had another identity—his uncle was the vice president of Tokyo’s largest yakuza clan, Oni Hitomi 1.”

“Oh, no wonder! Is that why you quit the racing world and changed your name?”

“Yes. That was not a public race. No one else other than the three of us knew about it. Even though there were other eye-witnesses on that highway, the visibility was abysmal, and we were driving against traffic. With all that fuzzy testimonies, the police were unable to determine if there was a third vehicle. Afraid that I would be imprisoned and that Oni Hitomi would take revenge, I... chose to keep quiet again.

“There was no joy in my heart to escape punishment. Every day after that day, I have been living in guilt for Kobayashi. If I hadn’t let my emotions affect my decision, and stick to my decision that the race that should never have started in the first place, all these would not have happened! I was the one who had one foot in the grave! But the irony is that the first person to die among the three of us was the only person who voted against having the race... I went to his home secretly after that. His father passed away when he was younger, and he only had his mother and a sister. After what happened, they moved away from Tokyo.”

“You met mum after that, right? If that’s the case, why didn’t you stay?” Ameko asked.

“I was always anxious after that accident; I couldn’t even sleep at all, and I also kept a suicide note by my pillow. But as time passed, when I realized that neither the police nor the Oni Hitomi found me, I thought that it was all over. So, I resumed my healthy life. It was then that I met the woman I loved. We were like every other happy couple—we became a family. A year and a half later, we had you. I swore that I would never drive again and opened a seafood shop.

“After initial struggles, the shop did pretty well. At first, it seemed like I was heading on the right path; it had been 6 years since the incident, enough time to forget many things. I never thought that one day, that year, my nightmare would find me again.”

“What do you mean?” Ameko asked.

“One night, while I was sorting out the orders alone in the shop, a stone suddenly flew in through the window, shattering the glass! I thought it was some prankster, but when I ran out to chase him away, I didn’t see anyone. When I returned to the shop after that, I realized that the stone was wrapped in old newspapers. The front-page article was about the highway accident that year. Next to the headline, there were words written in blood—Did you really think you could escape?”

Takeda Tetsuya flicked off the ashes on his cigarette. “No one else other than the three of us knew what actually happened that day. Kobayashi... died at the scene that day. Asano Naoto was in the ICU for three days. His injuries were severe. The papers said that he was unconscious, but that did not eliminate the possibility that he might have woken up for some time... Anyway, from the moment the newspaper article appeared, my life was over.”

“So, you weren’t actually addicted to gambling—you just wanted to make mum divorce you?”

"I made a mistake 6 years ago, involving Kobayashi in the race. I will not make the same mistake again." Takeda Tetsuya said quietly. "I'm not afraid of death—it's the ending that I deserve! The real Yosuke Tsuchiya died with Kobayashi on that road. The Takeda Tetsuya that lived on was just his guilt and weakness."

"I'm actually more curious about how you were able to escape Oni Hitomi again and again," said Zhang Heng.

"If you were asking about that time many years ago, maybe they were hoping to see me miserable, or perhaps they wanted to prolong my torment. The thing was, they did not come looking for me until nine months ago when I received a mysterious phone call saying that the Oni Hitomi would be coming for me soon. He told me to get ready, also telling me about what happened last night." Takeda Tetsuya paused. "Alright. I've finished telling my story. As I've said, this has nothing to do with any of you! That tragedy happened because of me, so it's only right that I end it myself."

"You don't even believe that," Zhang Heng noted. "Or else, you wouldn't have pretended to be a gambler again and force Ameko to cut off everything with you."

Takeda Tetsuya kept quiet. Then after a moment, he smiled, "I have to, at the very least, try. I can't just do nothing, right?"

The seafood shop owner looked like he had already made up his mind. Ameko began to panic. She opened her mouth to say something but blushed instead.

Zhang Heng got up and picked up the coat next to him. "You were the one who taught me how to drive. No matter what kind of person you were, at least let me send you off."

Takeda Tetsuya thought about it, not refusing the offer. Instead, he looked at Zhang Heng in the eye and said, "Take good care of Ameko for me."

The three left the eatery with Takeda Tetsuya walking in front. He had just opened the door to the minivan when his eyes suddenly rolled to the back of his head, and he collapsed into the carriage.

Zhang Heng retracted the soup bowl he was holding and told the dumbstruck Ameko, "His guilt over what happened in the past is overshadowing his judgment. He's not thinking of managing the situation. He only has a deathwish. I'm sorry. This is the only way to keep him calm for a while."

"Ah? Ah...Oh." It took Ameko a minute to come to her senses. She was puzzled about why Zhang Heng had pinched her hand so flippantly when she was just about to speak. Apparently, she had misunderstood him.

But the strange thing was... Ameko came to the realization that she wasn't repulsed by these things. Not as she initially imagined.

Ameko was still deep in her thoughts when she heard Zhang Heng saying, "This car does not have insurance and has not been inspected. We better leave this place first."

"Mm." She climbed into the van and shut the door.

Zhang Heng started the car, then deliberately took the same route twice to make sure no one was following them. Fifteen minutes later, he parked the L300 in the parking lot of a supermarket. He opened the door and stretched out his right hand.

"There're a few problems with Takeda... your father's story."

Chapter 46: Tokyo Drift XVI

Ameko placed a tattered blanket she found at the back of the van over her sleeping father. She thanked Zhang Heng and jumped down.

"You're saying that he was lying?"

"No. I just think that there are some parts of his story that need deliberating." Zhang Heng locked the car doors and then took the lift up to the supermarket. "The thing I find most curious the Oni Hitomi's attitude towards him. If it's really as he said, and Asano Naoto did wake up in the hospital and told his own uncle about the race, it made no sense that the Oni Hitomi did not go looking for him. The need for revenge is the strongest when there's been a recent death in the family."

"Hmm, maybe they couldn't find him? Didn't he live incognito right after that accident?"

"If that is the case, then how do you explain the stone that was thrown into his window six years later?" Zhang Heng said. "Especially that warning written in blood—forgive me for being frank, but that did not sound like language that a strict organization like the gokudo 1 would use."

Ameko pondered on what her friend was saying. "It does sound like you're right, but I'm sure that the people who burned the shop and kidnapped me were the Oni Hitomi."

Zhang Heng shook his head. "Again, the timing of their appearance is just weird. It's been over 20 years since that accident on the highway. Why would they suddenly choose to take revenge now? And who was that mystery guy who called him? Someone from Oni Hitomi? Why help your father? Your father's not stupid. He should be able to notice these problems, but his brain is refusing to think! That's why we need to investigate this."

"But we don't have any connection with those people from back then," Ameko anxiously said.

"No, right now we're close to a breakthrough. If Asano Naoto woke up from his coma, the attending nurses and doctors who attended would know who visited him. We just need to track down the team that rescued him to find out who he came into contact with during that period." Zhang Heng pushed the shopping cart to the rack displaying tapes. "But before we do that, we need to keep your father quiet."

...

They bought 10 rolls of black tape and 2 bundles of climbing rope. Taking them back to the minivan, they bound Takeda Takashi. Under Ameko's instructions, Zhang Heng drove the L300 to an apartment.

"This is my cousin's place. She's an air stewardess. International flights. She's rarely ever home. She gave me the keys so I could help water her plants on the terrace whenever I'm free. No one would find this place," said Ameko as she pushed the door open.

The apartment was small but well-equipped and furnished, tidy, and well-kept.

Zhang Heng dragged the Takeda Tetsuya, who was wrapped in the blanket onto the bed. The buffer they had since the soup bowl was now over. The man was now half-awake to the apartment, eyes wide open, and gagging through the tape trying to speak.

“Even if you’re really going to seek your death, you need to give us some time. At least don’t just die so dubiously, or else Kobayashi’s sacrifice would have been for nothing.”

Zhang Heng did not care if the seafood store owner heeded his advice or not. As long as he was still wrapped up like a dumpling, there was nothing he could do even if he disagreed.

Ameko apologized to her father and, with Zhang Heng’s help, used the remaining rope to secure Takeda Tetsuya onto the bed so that he would not roll-off. When they were done, they drove to the Tokyo Metropolitan Library, a public library located in Minami-Azabu of Minato City. Constructed in 1973 with a total holding of approximately 1.8 million volumes, it was free and open to the public.

Zhang Heng and Ameko had come to look up newspaper articles about the accident on the highway racing that caused the death of two young men, a brutal incident at any given time.

Practically all major newspapers covered that accident. So, they just needed to find the exact date to locate the corresponding articles.

Ameko was only on the second paper when she found Kurobe Saburo, the doctor in charge of treating Asano Naoto. Asahi Shimbun 1 had conducted an interview with him.

Zhang Heng looked up the name on the internet and found that Dr. Kurobe Saburo had left his position in the public hospital to become the vice president of a private hospital—this was going to be a bit of a problem. People at this level were very busy and vigilant, not exactly approachable.

Ameko looked through another dozen of newspapers with the same date and even found scanned articles in the library’s system. Eventually, she came across a new finding from a local tabloid that had already been discontinued. “Zhang-san, do you think this is useful?”

She stepped aside to let her companion look at the screen. These past nine months, Zhang Heng had not only honed his driving skills but had also worked on his language. Other than attending classes, he also spent every free minute strengthening his vocabulary. His hard work was finally paying off. He could now communicate in Japanese, and as long as the words the newspapers used were not too technical, he was able to understand most of it.

“Hayami Rinko. Is she the nurse?” Zhang Heng was drawn to a stern-looking elderly lady.

“Yes. She has been working in the hospital for 32 years. It said that Asano Naoto was in a critical condition when he was admitted. Since she was the most experienced nurse in the hospital, she was assigned to his case, not sleeping for 2 days and 2 nights. Unfortunately, in the end, they were unable to save him. If we look at her age... She’s probably retired by now.”

“Let’s find Dr. Kurobe Saburo first. If not, we’ll have to find Hayami Rinko.” Zhang Heng decided.

As they had expected, it was not easy getting Kurobe Saburo. As an expert surgeon in Tokyo, his many different numbers were published online, but the person answering the phone was his female assistant.

Even though the person on the other end was polite, she was firm and unyielding about not being able to set up an appointment for them. President Kurobe Saburo's timetable was fully booked until the end of the month. Zhang Heng and Ameko decided to wait for the doctor in front of the hospital building he was working in. After two hours of waiting, they finally spotted him.

Meeting him for only a few minutes, Kurobe Saburo claimed that he did not remember much about what happened that year. After one or two questions, he already appeared irritated. Opening the door to his black Mercedes, he snapped, "If there's anything else, you can look for my assistant. I have an appointment with a few friends from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare."

Zhang Heng did not press the man for more information. Kurobe Saburo was not a small potato, the likes of Takeda Tetsuya. If he were to go missing or be forced into confession, it would draw a lot of attention. Also, this guy might genuinely not recall the incident. A specialist like him sometimes would have to perform more than a dozen operations in a day. After leaving the operating table, he would be so tired that he might even forget his name.

Ameko watched the Mercedes leave and then turned to Zhang Heng. "So, what now?"

"Let's try Hayami Rinko. She worked for the hospital for decades. Someone must surely know where she went after her retirement."

Chapter 47: Tokyo Drift XVII

Even though they had already expected it, Ameko could not help but feel a little disappointed that Kurobe Saburo refused to budge. She and Zhang Heng found a place to have a quick lunch, then hurried to the public hospital that Asano Naoto was sent to.

After making an inquiry at the visitor registration counter, they received confirmation that Hiromi Rinko no longer worked there. But when a passing nurse heard the name, she stopped to tell them, "She used to work here, but she has retired. When I first came here, I was not doing well. She encouraged me and gave me guidance! Why are you looking for her?"

Zhang Heng lifted the fruit basket in his hand and said, "My father was involved in a horrific car accident a long time ago—it was Hiromi Rinko's aunt who helped him recover. We just want to thank her."

This was quite common in hospitals around here. A large number of patients and their family members would continuously return to thank the doctors and nurses. There was no reason for the head nurse to suspect these two young people.

She tore a piece of paper and scribbled an address on it. "Thank goodness we met. Rinko senpai 1 lives here now."

"Taihaku Nursing Home?" Ameko read the address on the paper.

"Yes... Senpai never got married and didn't have any children. Ever since she retired, she volunteered to do charity work there. She wanted to keep making contributions in her sunset years, and also find herself a resting place for the future," the nurse said, brimming with admiration.

Zhang Heng gratefully thanked her and took the subway with Ameko to the nursing home in the suburb. With the help of caretakers there, they were able to quickly locate Hiromi Rinko.

The former nurse was teaching an elderly who had lost most of his hearing how to arrange flowers. When she saw the two young people approaching her, there was a hint of suspicion in her eyes, but she still nodded at them.

Five minutes later, Hiromi Rinko helped the elderly man settle down before walking over to Ameko and Zhang Heng. "Who are you?"

Perhaps it was the nature of her occupation; the Hiromi Rinko in the picture carried a stern appearance, with a military rigidity about her. Zhang Heng was worried that she would not be easy to communicate with, but upon meeting her in person, he realized that she was much more easygoing than he had imagined her to be.

Zhang Heng passed the fruit basket to her as they seated themselves on the sofa.

"We're here to find out about something. Do you still remember that horrible accident 22 years ago? Two young men were racing cars against traffic when one of them ran into a truck. One died instantly, and the other was severely wounded. His name was..."

"Asano Naoto," Hiromi Rinko cut in. "I remember that. But not because it was all over the news, but because that boy was so young. He was battling the Shinigami, and you could see that he really did not want to leave this world! Unfortunately, I couldn't help him."

Zhang Heng and Ameko shared a look between them. "We heard that you were with him the whole time. We... we are his family. We just want to know if anyone visited him or if he asked to see anyone when he was awake.

"No, you're not his family." Hiromi Rinko shook her head. It was as if she could see through them.

Ameko's face grew hot under the old nurse's steely gaze.

Zhang Heng, on the other hand, was calm. "Distant family."

Hiromi Rinko smiled and did not question them anymore about this question. "If you were asking about other people, without their consent or the family's consent, I'm not at liberty to tell you. But he... people other than the media are rarely concerned about him."

"What do you mean?"

"Asano Naoto, that's a very lonely child. In the three days he spent in the hospital, his grandfather only came to see him once. I heard that his parents had already cut off all relations with him by then... oh, and uhh... I think he had an uncle who sent two men to guard the door. He never actually went in."

"So, no one cared at all?" Zhang Heng and Ameko were a little taken aback by the nurse's answer.

Hiromi Rinko sighed. "In our line of work, it's normal to see deaths. But it was a real heartbreak to see such a young boy leave this world in such a lonely way. In the end, he lost all the will to recover. I don't know if you can call that lucky."

Ameko left Taihaku Nursing Home with a blank look on her face. Not a single part of it had been like what she'd imagined. After seeing Hiromi Rinko, everything became even murkier instead of clearing, as if a thick fog had emerged in front of them.

Apparently, Asano Naoto's uncle did not care that much for his nephew. He did not even bother to take time out to visit his dying family—now why would he suddenly think about avenging him after so many years?

If it wasn't Oni Hitomi who set the seafood shop on fire, then who was it? Why would they come after Takeda Tetsuya, who had long since disappeared from the racing scene? Why pretend to be Oni Hitomi?

"No, this does not make sense at all," Zhang Heng said. "From the looks of things, this person is trying to push your father into Oni Hitomi's snare! But if he knew about that, he could have just informed the Oni Hitomi and let them confront your father instead."

They were now at a dead end. At the moment, they did not have any other leads. It was getting late, and the both of them were walking around on an empty stomach, considering they missed lunch. Ameko bought two family buckets from KFC, and then they returned to her cousin's cramped apartment.

Once they got off the elevator, Ameko fumbled for the keys in her bag, but the expression on Zhang Heng's face caused her to look up.

The door was ajar! It was only a small opening, but Zhang Heng remembered very clearly that they made sure to lock the door before leaving. Ameko might have normally been a little absent-minded, but she would never make a mistake like this.

Ameko began to panic a little. She was worried that her father had been snatched into the jaws of Oni Hitomi. While Asano Naoto's uncle may not have been too upset about his nephew's death, but if the murderer did show up, he would never let him off the hook to save his own face as the organization's leader.

Ameko was getting ready to barge into the room when Zhang Heng grabbed her by the arm!

There was a siren going off in his mind. In the condition they left him in, there was no way Takeda Tetsuya could have freed himself from the ropes. He must have had help. Moreover, it was bizarre that the door had been left ajar as if inviting outsiders to come in and take a look.

Before examining the situation in detail, Zhang Heng decided to take Ameko away from this place. The people inside the house, however, had heard their footsteps. In the next moment, someone burst through the door! From his clothes, it was apparent that he was an associate of the guys in the dark blue Voxy back at the seafood store.

Zhang Heng never learned taekwondo before, but had been training in the gym and was much stronger than the average person. By the time the guy reached into his pockets, Zhang Heng was already standing in front of Ameko, throwing a punch at the man's face! The guy staggered and stumbled backward into the house, disoriented.

Ever since he graduated from elementary school, Zhang Heng had never hit anyone. So, he too was stunned by the punch he had just thrown. This, however, was not the time to think about how strong he'd become. It was imperative that he exploited this temporary win and find out if the perpetrator was carrying a gun. He was about to pounce on the man and continued to fight him when suddenly, the cold and unmistakable nozzle of a gun pressed against the back of his head!

Chapter 48: Tokyo Drift XVIII

Someone had tied Zhang Heng to a chair—he had no idea for how long. When someone finally peeled the blindfold off his eyes, he saw that they had brought him to an abandoned factory.

Zhang Heng's head was still a little foggy. After subdued outside the apartment, he was forced into a vehicle and then blindfolded. He could not tell what was happening around him except by the amount of time it took for them to travel in the car, they were still in Tokyo, but probably somewhere in the suburbs.

He was careless, he knew that. In reality, no matter how calm and how watchful he was, this was the first time he was involved in something like this and was bound to make mistakes. The person who took them clearly pulled some dirty tricks to find the apartment.

As if he read Zhang Heng's mind, a guy with a crew cut pulled out a black tracking device the size of a bubble-gum from Ameko's bag.

They probably put that in there when they kidnapped her with the blue Toyota. As Ameko was unconscious then, she would not have known what they did. On top of that, the tracking device was well hidden. Unless she had searched every inch of her bag, it would have been difficult to notice.

Zhang Heng cocked his brows. "Where is Ameko?"

The people who took them split them up at the apartment. They were probably transported in different cars too. Zhang Heng had not seen her since then.

"Think about your own plight first!" The crew cut gut snarled, giving Zhang Heng the stink eye.

Zhang Heng recognized the guy.

It was the guy he punched at the door—no wonder he was showing Zhang Heng the attitude.

"Heh, now we can settle our account!" The crew cut guy put down the tracking device and rolled up his sleeves eagerly.

Just then, a deep, sonorous voice said from behind, "Alright! That's enough for now. Let me talk to him."

"Yes, Boss." The crew cut guy's demeanor quickly changed. He bowed to the man who had just walked in and promptly disappeared.

A short man stepped in front of Zhang Heng, grabbed the nearest stool and plopped himself down. "It was never our organization's idea to involve you and Ms. Ameko in this. I apologize on behalf of our organization."

Zhang Heng simply kept quiet.

"22 years ago, our Executive Vice President, he... and Tsuchiya Yosuke, er, which is also Mr. Takeda Tetsuya, had a little grudge. He sent me here to take care of things. The plan was to throw Tsuchiya Yosuke into the sea and feed him to the sharks, but Mr. Executive vice president had a sudden change of mind and decided to give him a chance. The executive v.p.'s exact words were 'The grievances between racing drivers should be resolved in the ways of a racing driver,'" the squat man said.

"So, I've painstakingly set up a stage for Tsuchiya Yosuke. I'll still need one more person to play the supporting role, though. It was giving a headache because Mr. Tsuchiya Yosuke is not exactly everybody's favorite, and even after so many years, he didn't make any friends at all. I heard that for nearly half a year, you have been delivering goods for him. So? Are you interested in joining the fun?"

"Are there any other options apart from me?" Zhang Heng asked calmly. Even though the guy looked gentler than his associate, Zhang Heng understood that the man did not really want to know his opinion.

"I like talking to smart people—it saves me a lot of time." The man took out a dagger, walked behind Zhang Heng and cut off the rope binding his hands. "The game is simple. Whichever one of you wins this competition, I will let the three of you go. But if you lose... trust me, you don't want to know what happens."

Zhang Heng stretched his arms. He considered attacking the man, grabbing the knife, and make him a hostage, but when he spotted the two towering men guarding the door, he gave up the idea. There was no way out of this situation.

"How many will be racing? Where is it? What are the rules?"

"Don't worry, you'll know when the time comes. First, relax, and choose your car!" The man said, clapping loudly.

The guards at the door walked to the center of the factory to a covered mound. The men removed the covering and revealed the cars underneath. There were 5 in total: a red Nissan 180SX, a silver BMW M5, a gray Mercedes AMG GT, a yellow Dodge Viper, and a blue Ford F-150 Raptor.

"These cars have been modified with some performance enhancements. You can choose to drive the one you like best. If you're not happy with it, you can retune it yourself. We can provide you with the parts. The competition is tonight at midnight. So, do any of these cars catch your eye?" The man asked. He did not leave right after, though, as if curious about what decision Zhang Heng was going to make.

To his surprise, the boy took only one look at the cars and then looked away. "I'm sorry, can I drive my own car?"

"Your own car? What is it? Porsche 911? Aston Martin? Ferrari?"

"A 1982 second-generation Mitsubishi L300," Zhang Heng answered. "It's parked just downstairs of the apartment where your men took me."

"A civilian van?!" The man's eyes widened.

Zhang Heng nodded. After the substantial modification he had done to the L300, the van was completely unrecognizable. Sure its performance had soared, but it was in no way comparable to a racecar. The

man was not only generous—the five cars that he offered Zhang Heng were undoubtedly good. In fact, he was even willing to allow Zhang Heng to tune it up to his liking to prove that he did not sabotage them.

Zhang Heng knew that no matter how good the cars were, the best car for him was the car he was most familiar with.

“That’s a reasonable request that I can fulfill, but are you sure?” The man asked again.

Zhang Heng nodded.

The short man signaled to his men, and a few more walked in to bring the cars away. Then he looked Zhang Heng in the eye and said, “We shall see each other tonight, then.”

This time, Zhang Heng was left alone in the abandoned factory. There was water and food on the table, probably for replenishing his energy. Other than that, there was a gaming console in the corner of the room for him to pass the time. This was too good a treatment for a kidnap victim, and because of that, Zhang Heng was increasingly convinced that this race was not an impromptu, last-minute attempt.

This guy had clearly planned all of this for a very long time now. Those associates of his probably did not have any professional training, but because they came in numbers, it would be an unrealistic proposition even if the seafood store owner and Ameko were to force their way out. Moreover, his phone had been taken away, and he had no way of contacting the world outside.

For now, all he could do now was just eat a little something and wait for the competition to start.

Chapter 49: Tokyo Drift XIX

Zhang Heng finally saw Takeda Tetsuya ten minutes before the race started.

He was standing next to the short man on the side of the highway, looking grim. Zhang Heng also saw Ameko in the blue Toyota Voxy, her wrists and legs bound and her mouth sealed with tape. When she saw him, she began to struggle but the doors were quickly slammed shut!

“Mr. Yosuke, I’ve allowed you to see your daughter as you have requested. We can start now, can we?” The short man asked.

Yosuke Tsuchiya said nothing as he entered the Dodge Viper.

The short man broke into a smile at this. After that, he came up to Zhang Heng and said, “You asked me how many people will be joining the race tonight, where it’s held and what the rules are—I’ll tell you now—tonight, the three of us will be racing here on this highway! Death racing rules! Considering you may be unfamiliar with what happened 22 years ago, I will give you a brief explanation. The three of us will be driving against traffic on this highway. The person who reaches the finishing point first wins. Of course, it would be boring if it was just that, so I’ve decided to add a small restriction. The windshields on all three cars have been frosted, and the windows cannot be wound down.”

The short man took out a wrench and smashed the front of the Nissan 180SX!

“I’ve always thought that the lights on cars are useless. Better just get rid of it!” As soon as he said that, his men broke the lights on the L300 and the Viper as well. Then, the short man opened the car door and grinned at Zhang Heng. “One last thing... if you want to use the toilet, you better go now. The doors will be welded shut, and it’ll only be opened when you reach the destination.”

Zhang Heng had already figured out back in the factory, that something like that was going to happen. Now that it was in front of him, he could not help but think that the man had lost his mind—especially when he sat in the driver’s seat of the L300 and saw the blurry windshield in front of him. He could not even make out a silhouette from 2 meters away.

Outside, people were already working on welding the car doors shut, even on the Nissan 180SX that the short man was driving. His voice spoke from the intercom in front of the passenger seat. “So? Does it bring back happy memories, Mr. Yosuke?”

Yosuke Tsuchiya did not answer. But from the sound of his breathing, Zhang Heng could tell that he was not as calm as he appeared to be. After a while, Takeda Tetsuya spoke, “Follow closely behind me.”

Zhang Heng knew that that was meant for him. In a situation like this, the person driving in front was at the highest risk. On top of that, the set-up now was even scarier than it was 22 years ago. Takeda Tetsuya had not touched the steering wheel for over 20 years—he was not in the best shape.

In fact, at only 3 minutes into the race, Takeda Tetsuya nearly ran into an oncoming Buick! Good thing he had a firm handle on the steering wheel, which kept the Viper from toppling over. Less than half a minute later, however, he nearly hit the divider at a curve!

The short man’s laughter crackled over the intercom. “What is it, Mr. Yosuke? That’s the best you can do? We’re not even a tenth of the way into the race yet!”

Takeda Tetsuya kept quiet. Right now, he could barely even talk. Beads of sweat were dripping down the tip of his nose onto his jeans.

The visibility was abysmal, to say the least. It was in the middle of the night, their cars had no headlights, and the view through the frosted windows was all but a murky blur. Owing to this, they could only use the lights from oncoming cars to determine their position. It was extremely exhausting, and his eyes and mind were already stretched to their limit.

Takeda Tetsuya did not know how much longer he could keep this up. Just as his breathing became more frenzied, the L300 that was behind him suddenly accelerated and overtook him.

Zhang Heng’s voice came from the intercom, “My turn to take the lead! You rest for a little while. We’ll swap places after 4 minutes.”

Takeda Tetsuya wanted to refuse the offer, but he was already overexerting himself, and Zhang Heng’s calm voice sounded particularly trustworthy in this loony race.

The boy was not trying to show off by stepping up. Such a race tested observational skills and the ability to react appropriately. A younger person, undoubtedly, had the edge in this regard.

More importantly, luck should be on his side tonight.

Zhang Heng took out the lucky rabbit’s foot from his pocket and hung it on the rear-view mirror.

He may be the least skilled driver among the three, but with the mechanics of the race today, luck was the decisive factor that actually had the absolute power.

For a whole two minutes, Zhang Heng did not come across a single car.

Then the short man spoke again, “That year during the race—did Mr. Yosuke hide behind his team members like this?”

A look of embarrassment flashed across Takeda Tetsuya’s face. Zhang Heng could see from his rear-view mirror that the yellow Dodge was beginning to sway, which meant that Takeda Tetsuya was getting unnerved.

The seafood store owner smiled sadly. “If you want to avenge Asano Naoto, you should just settle it with me! Why did you have to drag other people into this?!”

The short man sniffed. “Wasn’t your enmity with Asano Naoto embroiled because of someone else?”

Zhang Heng’s eyes widened. His suspicions were finally confirmed!

“You... You’re not taking revenge for Asano Naoto, but Kobayashi?”

There was a heavy silence on the other end of the intercom.

A minute later, the short man said, “Not bad! You were able to guess my intention.”

“You pretended to be Oni Hitomi to kidnap Ameko so you could force him to join this race! It was not just the three people who knew about that competition—Kobayashi told this to his mother? No, that’s impossible! No one would ever tell things like that to their mothers. So... his sister... what’s your relationship with his sister?”

The three modified vehicles sped across the highway~

Precisely 2 minutes and 42 seconds later, Zhang Heng spotted the first oncoming car! He flicked the steering, letting loose the tail of the van with the L300 narrowly drifting past!

Even then, Zhang Heng was unusually composed. He suddenly thought about something completely absurd. “Wait a minute—you’re... Kobayashi’s sister?”

When he first met the man, Zhang Heng had noticed that his movement was a little awkward. Other than the fact that his height and dimensions were closer to a woman’s, he was also the only one who did not reveal his tattoos. This ‘guy’ spent so much effort pretending to be Oni Hitomi. But unlike the other guys, this short man never showed off his tattoo—maybe because he feared people would notice the absence of Adam’s apple.

To disguise his voice, on the other hand, was simple. Every one of them wore masks, so it was only a matter of using a voice changer.

Chapter 50: Tokyo Drift XX

“There were three people in that race, but only you survived. I examined the remains... of my brother’s car. I noticed not only was the roof that was caved in, but there were also marks on the body of the car

from the impact. Its tires were severely damaged. But even until his final moment, he was gripping the steering wheel firmly, trying to steer his car. With his skills, except for external interference, there's no way he could've lost control that way," the short 'man' hissed. "You were his best friend, one of the three people involved in the race! Then you disappeared! How dare you say that day had nothing to do with you at all?"

There was a pained look in Takeda Tetsuya's eyes as he said, "You're right. Your brother died all because of me. It was my fault."

"That being the case, tonight, you'll pay for his life!" The short 'man' announced before cutting off the walkie talkie.

Zhang Heng kept quiet.

He pointed out the 'man's' identity so that both of them could communicate and resolve their dissent. From a third party's view, Takeda Tetsuya did share part of the blame. Kobayashi, however, had also decided to save his friend, which eventually led to his death.

Blaming his death entirely on Takeda Tetsuya was just ludicrous. Even blaming everything on Asano Naoto was not wholly fair either, because the person he was attacking was actually Takeda Tetsuya. Perhaps unpleasant to hear, but the thing that killed Kobayashi was loyalty to his friend.

Zhang Heng did not wish for Takeda Tetsuya to make up some moving touching story—he simply needed to tell the whole truth. At least, that could have removed a portion of misunderstanding between them. Zhang Heng underestimated how much that accident affected the seafood store owner. Kobayashi's death was his greatest regret.

All these years, Tetsuya had been like a prisoner to his past, waiting for this long-overdue judgment day. To add, from the way he saw it, Kobayashi's sister was a punishment by the gods. If it were not for saving his daughter, he would have given up long ago.

Even so, Zhang Heng could sense that Takeda Tetsuya's fighting spirit was steadily declining at a rate visible to the naked eye.

In contrast, the short 'man' at the back who had been following quietly behind them was burning with spite after that last conversation.

The red Nissan 180SX picked up speed and was head to head with the Dodge Viper!—history always had a way of repeating itself.

The short 'man' forced Takeda Tetsuya to the far-right lane on the highway. Even though she had never seen the race that took place 22 years ago, she was making the exact same decision as Asano Naoto.

Coincidentally, a car was also coming towards them, but it was on the third lane, so it merely went past the three cars.

Zhang Heng knew that they could not go on like this. Right now, they were almost a third of the way. Takeda Tetsuya was not getting any luckier, and his mental state was deteriorating. Sooner or later, he was going to make a mistake. So, Zhang Heng switched lanes and deliberately slowed down.

The short 'man' did not pay much attention to the third car's maneuver—Tonight was about settling her grudge against Takeda Tetsuya, and Zhang Heng was only a supporting actor in the grand scheme of things.

But when the supposedly braking L300 suddenly accelerated and occupied the lane on her left, her attention was roused!

In a sense, boxing-out was also a very dangerous move.

Whether it was the Asano Naoto 22 years ago or the short 'man' today, using their cars to block Takeda Tetsuya also put them at risk of running into an oncoming vehicle. Compared to Takeda Tetsuya, who could neither move to the left nor the right, they had at least one vacant side.

If there was any approaching danger, the short 'man' could swerve to the left lane, but since Zhang Heng had gotten involved, the situation was even more chaotic!—the three of them were all stuck on their respective paths.

In other words, it meant that if a car were to approach, one of them would inevitably be involved in the collision.

Zhang Heng had intended to use this strategy to force the short 'man' to give up. As long as she kept decelerating and accelerating, Takeda Tetsuya would not lean in on her. Alas, the short 'man' was even more stubborn than Zhang Heng expected her to be.

Even in a situation like this, she was still determined to drive the Viper into the corner as if to pressure Zhang Heng to give up first.

This move might have worked on other people, but not Zhang Heng with his lucky rabbit's foot. Out of three people, his chances of crashing into another car was very low.

Then as if to prove this point, a bright light flashed from the middle lane! Takeda Tetsuya took this opportunity to slow his car down to giving Nissan 180SX space to dodge the incoming vehicle. However, all this only caused the short 'man' to hesitate for a while.

She had orchestrated all of this to take revenge on Takeda Tetsuya. But instead, if she were to be saved by him, how could she bring justice to what happened 22 years ago?

As she weighed her options, the car coming from the opposite direction was already in front of her! Takeda Tetsuya did not have much time to think. Kobayashi died saving him, so no matter what, he could not let anything happen, his best friend's only sister!

Takeda Tetsuya seemed to have awakened from his languid, enervate state; his eyes shone brightly, and in a fleeting 2 seconds, transformed back into that D1 champion who took over the European racing scene!

The Dodge driver quickly dropped gears, picked up speed, and leaned resolutely towards the Nissan 180SX's tail!

Takeda Tetsuya used just the right amount of force to push the 180SX out of the way so that it missed the oncoming heavy-duty truck by a hair!

The short 'man' proved to be an excellent driver as well. She immediately took control of her car, and while the body of the car grazed the divider creating bright sparks, the vehicle did not flip onto its side, even managing to avoid the heavy-duty truck!

Takeda Tetsuya, on the other hand, was not as lucky. By forcing the Nissan to the side, the Viper took over the middle lane and was heading towards the truck in place of the short 'man'!

The next moment, however, a beat-up L300 appeared suddenly like a ghost, tumbling into the Dodge!

In the minivan, Zhang Heng took a deep breath and pulled the handbrake.

At that split second, it felt as if time was standing still.

With the front of the heavy-duty truck as the center, both the Viper and the L300 sliced a beautiful arc from the inertia! The L300 drifted from the right to the left lane, while Takeda's Dodge Viper went under the heavy-duty truck on its side!

Was this the end?

The short 'man' looked startled! Watching the retribution that she had planned for over 20 years unfolding before her eyes, she neither felt relieved nor gratified.

She was still replaying the scene in her mind when the Viper struck the back of her car.

Suddenly, she understood why her brother had died in that race that never should have taken place. The same guilt that Takeda Tetsuya experienced back then now filled her.

If she could, she would exchange everything she had to go back to the time before everything happened!

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As if in response to her wish, the Dodge Viper miraculously scuttled from under the heavy-duty truck. Except for scratches on the roof, it was mostly unscathed!

"You're welcome!" Zhang Heng's voice sounded over the intercom.

"I didn't plan to thank you!" Takeda Tetsuya snapped! "You got your angles all wrong. If I hadn't corrected the speed, I would have ended up under the wheel!"

The short 'man' opened her mouth to say something but caught herself when Zhang Heng said over the intercom, "No matter how much the both of you have to talk about, let's finish this race first. I really need to pee!"