FICTION AND MANGA FROM THE CUTTING EDGE OF JAPANESE POP CULTURE

FAUST 2



Includes works by

Takeshi Obata * Ueda Hajime * NISIOISIN

Otsuichi * Katsuhiro Otomo * take

Kouhei Kadono * Katsuya Terada

FAUST

VOLUME TWO

FAUST

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ALLEGAN HIGH SCHOOL
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WELCOME TO FAUST!

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Faust: a legendary literary journal that's swept like a fever through the young readers coming of age in the new millennium, changing the face of Japan's literary scene in the blink of an eye. I'm overjoyed to be able to cross the barriers of nation and language to meet with you this very moment. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

If there's one major problem that everyone has to tackle once in their life, it's that feeling of self-consciousness in early adolescence. *Faust* is a leading-edge publication where you'll see radical portrayals of this theme exploding one after another—an avant-garde crossover in which Japan's manga, anime, and video game–based pop culture collide, tempest-like, with the hottest young writers on the Japanese literary scene.

I've been dealing head-on with many of the shining talents who represent Japan's modern culture since the first issue of *Faust* as well as single-handedly editing it from day one. That makes this anthology everything to me. On every page of *Faust,* you'll find nothing less than 100 percent of the artists'—and my—sincerity, passion, and soul.

The word *Faust* has a special ring to it, and I'm convinced that the feverish excitement it gives off will reach you, too.

KATSUSHI OTA, editor of *Faust*
Translated by Paul Johnson

A NOTE ON READING THIS VOLUME

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Faust collects the best in cutting-edge Japanese fiction—whether the author's chosen medium is prose or manga.

Japanese books customarily read from right to left. Of necessity, the prose fiction and essays that follow are laid out left to right. However, the manga selections in this volume present a different challenge—to preserve the artist's original vision for his or her artwork. Therefore, in order to respect the creators' vision, the manga selections are presented on the other side of this volume, in their original right-to-left orientation. Please turn the book over to read the manga selections.

FICTION

AND

ESSAYS

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Magical Girl Risuka

NISIOISIN

Illustrations by Kinu Nishimura
Translated by Andrew Cunningham

Magical Girl Risuka is a typical NISIOISIN fantasia—if anything could be said to be "typical" about NISIOISIN's work. NISIOISIN is without parallel in the light novel world as an inventor of strange universes and fantastic characters, and the strange and gorgeously complicated world of *Risuka* is no exception. While much of Risuka's fictional universe is of NISIOISIN's own wild imagining, the story contains some references to another world-forger, H. P. Lovecraft. Some of the books that Risuka is studying refer to the Cthulu mythos. (Also interesting to note: *The Book of Thoth* is a real book by Aleister Crowley.) Nyarlathotep is one of Cthulu's elder gods, the only one to take human forms and use human language. A reference to Japanese folklore and the kamaitachi (a demon that takes the form of a sudden whirlwind, capable of cutting through anything) completes NISIOISIN's rich web of references. The translator has also made an attempt at rendering Risuka's distinctive style of speech, which NISIOISIN rendered in rather idiosyncratic Japanese.

Born in 1981, the prolific NISIOISIN has already revolutionized the Japanese literary world with his fast-paced, pop culture–fueled novels. He debuted with *The Kubikiri Cycle* in

...Why is there magic?

...Why transform?

...Why become an adult?

...Why a girl?



2002, beginning his seminal *Zaregoto* series, and *Bakemonogatari* was published under Kodansha's popular Kodansha BOX imprint. In 2007 came the magnificent conclusion to his twelve-month consecutive serial novel, *Katanagatari*—for which NISIOISIN wrote one novel a month for an entire year—also for Kodansha BOX. In addition to *xxxHOLiC*, NISIOISIN tackled another major manga franchise with *Death Note Another Note: The Los Angeles BB Murder Cases,* based on Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata's blockbuster series. *Zaregoto, Book One: The Kubikiri Cycle* was published in the United States by Del Rey Manga in 2008.

Kinu Nishimura is an illustrator who has also worked as a graphic designer for Capcom on such projects as the *Street Fighter* game series.

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I happened to witness what might have been an incident, or might have been an accident, but either way was clearly a truth, exactly one week ago, Sunday last week. Events had brought me far from my place of residence in the city of Kawano, in Saga Prefecture, taking me across prefectural lines into Fukuoka Prefecture, the city of Hakata, the town of Kizuna. There are a number of ways in which I could describe the business that brought me there, but they all boil down to "meeting someone," and looked at from a different perspective, you could even claim I had come with no clear purpose at all. Either way it was not inevitable that I should arrive at the spot where I witnessed this truth; I believe my being there was pure coincidence. Because of things like this, I cannot bring myself to hate coincidence. Events occurred while I was standing on subway platform number 1 in the New Kizuna Station, waiting for the train that would take me

back into Hakata proper. The time was definitely 6:32 P.M. I can say so with confidence because that was the moment at which the train I had intended to board was pulling into the station. All Japanese trains, private or government-operated, are invariably punctual. Which means it was 6:32. The customary announcement, "Train approaching platform 1. Please remain behind the yellow lines," echoed through the station, and it happened a few seconds later. Four people lined up in front of me, preparing to board the train. I did not know any of them, but I know their names now: Kagawa Sakiro, Yana Harusame, Manabe Saki, and Tainaka Umi. With perfect timing, just as the front of the train was about to pass us, they all flung themselves out in front of it. I remember that moment happening in slow motion—whether the result of chemicals in my brain or simply a trick of the mind. I saw them seemingly sucked toward it, struggling against one another to be the first to fall. I saw the train's driver gaping as if he were witnessing the destruction of earth and heaven—but only for an instant, a mere instant.

A moment later, the speed of my vision returned to normal—and what happened afterward need not be explained to anyone, assuming blood still flows to their brain. They were pulped, their bits flung together till it was impossible to tell which belonged to which. Trains have been designed for the simple function of moving quickly along tracks, and what might occur if they happened to strike a human being has never really been on their designers' minds. The four victims and I were lined up near the front end of the platform, but it made little difference. We were facing a massive chunk of iron, a veritable symbol of destructive force. Even if we had been at the far end of the platform, near the front doors of the train, the best they could have hoped for was that their bodies might have remained recognizably human. At pres-

ent, this is the extent of the truth as I know it; and if that is all there is to it, then I do not see a problem. Certainly, because of this truth the train was delayed a wasteful thirty minutes, but I am not so petty as to be infuriated by such trivialities. Anger is a waste of energy, and I make use of it only if there is something to be gained in the process. But there were a number of factors to this truth that suggest it would not remain a simple truth, and I viewed this as problematic. The first problem is an obvious one—the fact that four people chose to jump simultaneously. If one person had chosen to dive in front of a train, I would understand. If a single person had tripped and fallen onto the tracks, that would have been even easier. Suicide or accident, such incidents have become a ceaseless ritual, occurring constantly in all parts of the country, on every day of the year. But for four people to engage in that ritual together—that was different. It was unthinkable that they had chosen to do so together by chance, coincidentally—and the idea of it being a planned suicide was also dubious. If they had been family members or close friends, group suicide might have been an option, but from what I had observed standing behind them, there was no connection among the four: Each of them was a complete stranger to the other three.

I am rather confident of my ability to observe human behavior. (Bring anyone you like to me, and no matter who they are, I will provide you with an itemized list of a hundred facts about them—obviously, not including any details of their appearance, just facts about their inner nature.) And the newspapers after the incident verified that there was no connection among them, so that can now be put down as an objective fact. In other words, if the first problem was the simultaneous nature of it, the second was the lack of connection among them. I doubt there are many so foolish as to

have not worked out the third problem—namely, that it was absolutely impossible. For four strangers to fall onto the tracks simultaneously—to make that situation occur, the only reasonable method would be for the person standing immediately behind them to push them off the platform. Indeed, the police and the news media are actively looking for the "culprit" behind this "case"—sadly, a futile effort. For the simple reason that the person standing behind the four victims was me; and I had not pushed them. I would never do anything like push four complete strangers onto the train tracks, never do anything that failed to provide some future benefit. But no matter what I say, without your even needing to bring up the Cretan paradox, mere words on my part are hardly convincing. More convincing than any exhortation on my part is the simple fact that it was physically impossible for me to have pushed the four of them off the platform. I might have been able to push one, assuming that one was a frail woman . . . but I, Kugi Kizutaka, was, at the time, four feet five inches tall, weighed seventy-three pounds, and was ten years old. I had no means at my disposal capable of forcibly moving four adults at once. Regardless of that, if I had stuck around, I would undoubtedly have been suspected, but I took advantage of my size to slip away during the commotion. So. Yes. The fact that it was impossible for me to have been the culprit in their deaths led to one conclusion: It was impossible. Absolutely impossible. The sum total of these three problems—simultaneousness, lack of connection, and impossibility—made it clear that this problem was a problem for me.

As I said before, I went to Fukuoka for no better reason than to meet someone, so my encounter with this truth could be viewed as an unexpected accident, but as far as I was concerned, an accident like this was something to be met

with open arms. I will happily state once more that I cannot bring myself to dislike coincidence. My first thought was to go to see Risuka directly, that very evening, but since the deaths of four people would lead to a rather thorough police investigation, I decided to allow a week for things to settle down and spent the time dealing with other matters. If the situation resolved itself in some insipid fashion in that time, then I hardly need dirty my hands with it. But these thoughts were nothing more than a pretense; inwardly I was convinced. Conviction is a very modest way of describing it for someone with my personality, but in truth, a conviction is what it was. I was convinced that the four I had seen sucked toward the tracks had not been victims . . . but sacrifices.

"Hey, Risuka. I came to love you."

She did not respond.

"I mean, came to see you."

I had not expected Risuka to demonstrate any high-level interactive abilities such as a proper comeback, but the fact that she failed to show any reaction at all was in itself a rather dejecting moment, and one that left me awkwardly explaining my own bad joke. I picked up a cushion (bat-shaped) lying in the corner and sat down on it without bothering to get permission. Risuka was sitting at her desk, her right hand moving steadily. Writing something. I stood up again and stood behind her, peering over her shoulder at the desk. A thick hardcover book lay open on her left and a college-ruled notebook on her right. They call it "college-ruled," but actual college students almost never use them. She appeared to be copying everything from her left to her right.

Which meant the book on her left must be one she had recently acquired or had borrowed from some secret library—a book of magic. Risuka believed that copying grimoires was both fun and productive. The shelf to one side was packed

with books on all kinds of magic, the only notable feature of her otherwise rather drab room. *De vermis mysteriis, Liber-damnatus, Cultes des goules, De masticatione mortuorum in tumulis, Celaeno Fragments, Turba philosophorum, Kryptographik, The Book of Thoth, Malleus maleficarum, Dhol Chants, Image du monde, Necronomicon*—she had all the major works (although most of them were handwritten copies). The only way she could get her hands on rare books was to copy them out herself. In that sense, what Risuka was doing was actually collecting the contents of grimoires, and copying them out was simply a means to that end. Collecting the originals would be quite expensive and take up a lot of space, so this was more practical, and the fact that she was writing them out all translated into Japanese was, apparently, perfectly normal for anyone from the Kingdom of Magic.

"So . . . Yikes! You scared me."

Risuka had suddenly turned toward me and screamed.

"I was much more scared! Eh? Why suddenly is Kizutaka here?"

"Well, unlike you, I can't actually use any magic, you see. So I went through the door of the coffee shop downstairs, ignoring the Closed sign on the door; said hello to Chamberlain, who was cleaning; had him open the door behind the counter; climbed up the stairs; walked down the hall; knocked politely on your door; knocked again when you didn't answer; and when you still didn't answer, I opened the door and came inside."

"Heh . . . How exhaustingly orderly of you," she said, nodding, as if impressed. "Welcome. Anywhere is fine to sit. Would you like something to drink?"

"Nah, I'm not that thirsty. It isn't that hot yet. And that can be a dangerous question, coming from a girl who lives in a coffee shop."

"I would not try to take money from a child."

"What are you copying?"

"Mm? Oh, the title . . . I do not know. I am investigating presently. Rarity is its one merit; it is not a book of much importance."

"Hunh . . . Always looks like such a lot of work. If you could figure out a way to make your magic work with a copier instead of doing it by hand, you'd save a lot of effort."

"I would not do so, even if I could," Risuka said crisply. "The fun of this is in the copying itself."

"The process itself provides enjoyment? That is a handy system. Ideal."

"Is not the same for Kizutaka?"

"Mm?"

"Enjoyment comes with process?" she asked, assured.

I shook my head. "Not for me. The process is never more than a means to an end," I said. The process was never more than a means to an end. I had rarely spoken truer words.

▼▲▼

I discovered the existence of Mizukura Risuka last April, immediately after entering the fourth grade. To be strictly accurate, I had heard a year before about a transfer student in the class next door who refused to come to school, and I knew that this student was named Mizukura Risuka. I had naturally paid sufficient attention to events in other classes. But I did not discover the true nature of the existence known as Mizukura Risuka, did not discover that she was a witch from the Kingdom of Magic beyond the Gate, until our classes were changed and Risuka's name ended up on the same attendance sheet as mine.

Of course, whether she was in my class or not, she refused to come to school at all, and I did not know what she looked

like. I could probably have found out if I had poked around, but when she was in the other class, I had not seen the point. But once she was in my class, and I was elected class representative for the fourth straight year and the seventh straight term, I did have a reason to make contact with her. In my capacity as class representative, I went to see a problem child. It made no difference to me if this Mizukura came to school or not, but if I were able to persuade her to attend school again all on my own, general opinion of me among the teachers and around the school would surely improve dramatically. As with all things, those without the capacity to evaluate accurately must be shown the light. I had no use for the adulation of those around me, but it did serve my purpose to demonstrate as clearly as possible to the simpleminded that Kugi was the sort who got things done. For the moment, if they believed me to be useful and proceeded to use me, that was sufficient. In the course of being used, I would inevitably encounter all kinds of incidents, accidents, truths, and people. Obviously, most of this would be of no use to me whatsoever, incidents and accidents and truths and people of no value worth mentioning. But occasionally, very occasionally, I would encounter incidents and accidents and truths and, yes, people that would be useful to me in times to come. Therefore, I played the role of good student. I did not need to work very hard at appealing to my classmates; it was the teachers, the adults, who mattered. Both groups were leading purposeless, meandering, wasted lives, but adults could act on a far larger scale than children, and I was grudgingly appreciative of the amount of information they had available to them. Judging from the lessons they taught, they were not terribly intelligent, but the sheer amount of time they had been alive had not gone entirely to waste. Of course, the information provided by my classmates could not be entirely

dismissed, but this was simply a matter of percentages. All were wasting the bulk of their time, but my classmates had simply lived less and must therefore rank lower when it came time to prioritize.

However, given the nature of group education, it would hardly do to be isolated from my class, so no matter how useless and forgettable a human they appeared to be, I allowed them to engage my attention. So much energy expended on sucking up to morons. Ideally, it should be possible to extract some benefit from even the most average, pathetic excuse for a human (everyone you meet is your teacher, yada yada), but it seemed I had not yet reached that level of skill, and a great deal of my time at school was spent sowing seeds that would never be harvested. Being forced to lower myself to the level of those cretins bordered on insulting. No, it *was* insulting. In that sense, I was not playing the role of a good student; I literally was better than all of them. This year I had become class representative for the fifth straight year and the ninth straight term . . . for a reason. But my inner self and their perception of me did not overlap. At any rate, I first went to Risuka's house for no other reason than to earn myself some extra points. It was a two-story building, a coffee shop with a design rather like a windmill. An elderly gentleman stood behind the counter (I would later learn that he was Chamberlain, Risuka's manservant), and he led me to her room. I opened the door and laid eyes on Risuka for the first time. She was sitting at her desk, copying a grimoire.

(. . . Ah.)

Red hair—and red eyes. Red kneesocks, red dress. There was a thin belt around her waist, with a holster attached; the holster was long and thin, built to hold a utility knife. She was indoors but wore red gloves, and there was a pair of cold metallic handcuffs on her right wrist, the one thing on her

that was not red. Both cuffs were on the same wrist, and it functioned as a very strange bracelet. When Risuka turned toward me, the cuffs clanked together.

(Ah, ah, ah—)

The moment I laid eyes on her, I instantly abandoned all the plans I had to get the problem child to attend school again. All reasons I had to gain some insignificant amount of adulation had vanished in the blink of an eye. I had known the moment I laid eyes on her: Mizukura Risuka was no average human, she was a full-fledged, powerful witch. I had been developing my eyes my entire life, observing everyone from newborn babies to octogenarians, honing my observational skills to the point where they could instantly tell that Mizukura Risuka was not just anyone. The moment Chamberlain left the room, I looked Risuka right in the eye. True sincerity means looking directly at your opponent, no matter the situation. Risuka admitted the truth with a speed that took even me by surprise. Not only admitted it but explained that she had been born in Nagasaki Prefecture, the Kingdom of Magic, and not only that, but she was from Moriyashiki, a city of magic with a reputation every bit as impressive as the kingdom's capital.

"You just met me. . . . Should you really be telling me all that?"

"Is fine. I was never trying to hide. And if Kizutaka needs eliminating, I have magic. It will do."

"Eliminating?"

"Exterminating," she said calmly, and pulled the utility knife out of her holster, running the thin blade in and out, in and out.

Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk.

I was even more sure of it now. This . . . this girl, out of the vast numbers of people I had met, out of all creation,

from the lowest riffraff to the strangest spirits, she outranked them all—the most useful pawn there was.

▼▲▼

My relationship with Risuka has continued to the present day. When we advanced to the fifth grade, we once again found ourselves in different classes, but since Risuka never came to school in the first place, that made no difference. Our time together was always outside the school and involved my heading to the coffee shop in my free time to talk to Risuka—usually. Risuka was often not at home. Not coming to school hardly left her a shut-in; she had moved to Saga with a clear purpose in mind, and when she was not copying grimoires, she was busy with that. She had enrolled in an elementary school for no other reason than that she was legally required to do so but did not attend classes on the grounds that she did not need them. Direct and clear. I have nothing against the direct and clear. On the pretext of helping with Risuka's goals—obviously, as far as the school was concerned, I was still doing my level best to open the heart of a problematic truant—I began regularly visiting her. Risuka accepted me, without any signs of reluctance. I would imagine she figured a guide to the unfamiliar outside world, a human ally, might come in handy. In other words, she viewed me as an effective pawn. My effectiveness is not simply my conceit; in actual fact, her effectiveness in pursuit of her goal was far greater the year after she met me than it had been the year before she met me. To Risuka, I was a useful human—a useful cooperator. I, however, was not deranged enough to help out a witch on a volunteer basis. I wanted that witch, Mizukura Risuka, as a pawn of my own. We were both each other's pawns, a system found in all walks of life, all across the world, and which I had no objections to. A perfect con-

fluence of interest. The only problem was which of us was actually right. This was not as simple a problem as it might appear. When I first met Risuka, I instantly knew she would be a useful pawn, but I was half wrong.

Risuka was a witch, as I thought, and one with a very impressive résumé: As young as she was, she already had a Second Grade Magic Technician's license. However, her particular field of magic was not one that held much meaning for me. Not only was it meaningless, but it was a little bit beyond me. So much beyond me that I could not figure out what to do about it. Mizukura Risuka was a pawn that I was not yet able to handle properly. But I was not about to give her up for such a defeatist reason. She was the first witch I had ever met. Between Saga and Nagasaki was the Gate, which pierced the heavens . . . and you could legally pass through it whenever you liked, with the proper papers, but witches and wizards were generally very standoffish and rarely came to our side of the Gate. Even if they did, they would normally hide their identity—just as Risuka had disguised the fact that she was from Nagasaki when she enrolled in school. As a result of this, it was virtually impossible for an ordinary, powerless human to meet a witch. It seemed unlikely I would ever be as fortunate as I had been when I guessed that Risuka was a witch. (I might be a skilled observer, but objectively speaking, our meeting had been pure luck.) Risuka was far too valuable a pawn to abandon simply because I could not handle her. Her value was itself a problem—or perhaps I should say her value was the only problem. But even if I could not handle her now, it was possible I would be able to use her freely in the future, and even a pawn I could not handle had its uses.

"Then, Kizutaka, today's theme is what business?"

"I think I might be able to help you out."

"Oh?" Risuka said, pulling the utility knife out of the holster in her belt. *Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk* she slid it in and out, in and out. This was a habit of hers, and that utility knife was, in a manner of speaking, Risuka's magic wand. "Curious. Tell me more."

"A week ago, quite by coincidence, I was witness to a very strange incident. Common sense failed to explain it, so I thought I should bring it to you. There is a chance it will coincide with your goals."

"Oh! Most grateful to Kizutaka."

As anyone who heard her talk would notice instantly, Risuka's manner of speaking was a little unnatural. The way she pronounced things was slightly odd: The accent she put on my name made it impossible to guess what the kanji might be, as if the vowels were coming from Latin instead of Japanese. Risuka was not yet very fluent in what we called Japanese. Language was not my best subject, but even so, her vocabulary was far worse than mine, and it seemed she had not quite managed to wrap her head around the concept of particles. She was much worse when I first met her. Obviously, in Nagasaki, they also speak Japanese . . . the language of Yamato, but they had spent so long in seclusion behind the Gate that the respective grammars had diverged to the point where the language they spoke seemed more like an exotic foreign language than one spoken within our own country. (As much a part of our country as the Kingdom of Magic could really be said to be.) So, when Risuka attempted to speak Japanese with me, her meaning was rarely lost, but it did tend to come across like a bad translation from the German (possibly because of her tendency to emphasize proper nouns). Just now, where she should have said, "I'm grateful to you," she said, "Most grateful to Kizutaka," as if making a point of all the people not me that she was not grateful to.

Other examples would be trying to say "Lying leads to stealing" and having it come out "Stealing comes from lying," or "Someone is looking at us, but I don't know who or where" becoming "What I do not know is who is looking at us from where."

With short sentences like these, it was easy enough to reconstruct her meaning, but when she tried to express a longer, more complicated idea, I had to listen very, very carefully if I wanted to understand her correctly. She was getting better. A year spent talking to me had helped. Obviously, as far as Risuka was concerned, our language was probably the one that was strange and hard to follow, but when in Rome, do as the Romans do, so Risuka was trying hard to talk like us. Chamberlain, on the other hand, spoke Japanese perfectly, even though he looked like a Westerner.

"Well? The story you have brought me is what kind of tale to you?"

"Last Sunday, at 6:32, in Hakata's New Kizuna Station, four people all jumped onto the tracks together. They were hit by the train and their bodies shredded. You heard about it?"

"Mm . . . ," Risuka said, pulling out the big bottom drawer of her desk and taking out a massive file. The file said "June 1st–June 15th" on it. It was a collection of newspaper articles. Risuka flipped through the pages, the handcuffs on her wrist clanking. "Oh, that would be this, yes? I remember, I remember. Um, Kagawa Sakiro, Yana Harusame, Manabe Saki, and Tainaka Umi, yes. A high school student, a businessman, a housewife, and a housekeeper—sadly, pictures of them I have none."

"I remember what they look like. I was standing right behind them."

"Oh? That is coincidence."

"I don't need to tell you what this means, do I, Risuka? I think you know that I am not the kind of person who would shove four strangers off a subway platform without good reason. Which makes this truth . . . extremely mysterious."

". . . Mysterious, mm?" Risuka said, nodding gravely. There was not likely to be anything important in the paper, but she read the article carefully. "So Kizutaka believes magic in this case is involved."

"Right," I agreed. "We've seen mind-control magic before. . . . I also thought telekinetic powers were a possibility."

When Risuka sat in silence, not responding, I awkwardly added, "Not that I can do more than guess with magic. . . ." I wasn't completely clueless, but it was important to say things like this to her. I did not trust Risuka enough to show her all my cards, nor was I completely reliant on her.

". . . Hmm," she said after thinking things over. She put the file down and turned to me. "I have problem with all mysterious or inexplicable things blaming on magic. . . . But, Kizutaka, what we should be most frightened of is that mistake. Magic, in most cases, in normal life, it is not so useful. It makes no real difference if it is there or not. Witch hunts and inquisitions modern magic is not strong enough to fight."

"I know that without your telling me. That is why I waited a week. If they figured out some logical explanation in a week, then I would have assumed magic was not involved." However hapless they might be, the police could be relied upon to do that much, through sheer numbers. But for a full week, all those hapless numbers had done was look for witnesses. "But now? I thought I should bring it to you. I can't be certain, but you can find out if it was magic or not, right?"

"Mm . . .," Risuka said, tidying up her desk. She put the notebook away in her desk, thinking. The handcuffs clanked. "Mind control and telekinesis are both high-level magic. And

high-level magicians do not kill people at random, inside the Gate or out. Unless there is some kind of . . . missing link among those four?"

"Probably not. From what I observed, there was nothing connecting them at all. Other than the fact that they all happened to be standing *there.*"

"Mm. Well, if we imagine it was mind control, that magic is very complicated; I think it is not a pattern we find likely. Um, but . . . it does bother me. If Kizutaka thinks so . . ."

"Talking about it won't get us anywhere," I said, deciding to push things. "Proof is better than theories; if you have time, we could go to the scene and investigate. All we can do here is speculate."

"Time? The concept of time is problem that is immensely trivial where I am concerned," Risuka said, with a slightly twisted smile that did not seem to belong to her face. ". . . But, yes, if I see the scene, certainly, the problem becomes clear. New Kizuna Station . . . How long from here does it take?"

"Including train changes . . . two or three hours? Here's a map. And the train schedules." I had prepared these in advance (a simple matter of xeroxing the relevant documents) and handed them to Risuka. "You'll have to take care of any extra details."

"Okay. My hat?"

"Mm," I said, picking up the big red, pointy hat lying on the floor in front of the closet. While I did, Risuka took the utility knife and made a deep cut through the glove into her index finger. A small amount of red blood seeped out. She put the utility knife back in the holster, took the hat from me, and put it on. The hat was too big for her and came down over her eyes. She was always pushing it back. "Thank you."

"Have a good trip, Risuka."

"I hope to," she said, grinning. And Mizukura Risuka suddenly, with no warning, vanished into thin air. Literally vanished—she didn't move at all. No, her existence took a shortcut through time and space, leaving the chair where she had been sitting empty. I stood up from my cushion and sat down on her chair. I leaned against the backrest. I could still feel her warmth on it. I smiled faintly to myself—a very deliberate smile.

"I left the door open on purpose, to suggest she should try leaving through it. . . . Oh well," I murmured. "Let us hope that this time, for once, we get a magician worth using."

▼▲▼

Mizukura Risuka's magic was Destiny Interference; her pattern was Water, and her category was Time. Destiny Interference was a type of magic so rare that just having it qualified as a third-rank technique; so that alone should tell you how exceptional Risuka was. But despite this (because of this), I had decided Risuka was a bit beyond me—her magic could affect destiny only within her own body. If I break that down so anyone can understand it, she had the ability to control the time inside of her. For example, in this instance, she had omitted the time spent riding trains to New Kizuna Station in Hakata, Fukuoka. One might easily assume she had not jumped forward in time but had jumped sideways in space, but time and space being fundamentally the same is such a famous fact that even the most normal, unremarkable of my classmates were aware of it, and, of course, Risuka could omit time alone, without space having to be involved. For example, a moment ago, she had injured her finger with her beloved utility knife.

An injury that would take three days to heal, but Risuka could omit those three days. Destiny Interference—not a

phrase to be taken lightly. By omitting that time, Risuka was changing the future. From tiny things like not having to pay train fare to much more significant things. You could even say that Risuka's magic was the power to change the future. Those words alone suggested this was a magic I definitely wanted to have under my thumb, and when Risuka had first told me about it a year ago, and I had first seen it happen (now that I have seen how meaningless it is, a rather embarrassing memory), I was very excited indeed. But, sadly, it was a bit beyond me. Her magic affected the destiny only within her body. When she skipped time, her memories did not follow suit. (She might jump five hours into the future, but she would not have memories of those hours. Her memories and thoughts were the same as they had been five hours before.) If she started copying a magic book, as she often did, assumed it would take three hours, and fast-forwarded that much time . . . the magic book would remain uncopied (as Risuka put it, changing clothes might be a pain, but you still have to do it), which meant this magic was, in almost every case, completely useless to anyone but her. It was a little different from a simple teleportation ability. There was a method that made it possible to move through time and space with her, but omission or fast-forwarding, either one involved the passage of time, which meant that jumping two hours forward meant you had two hours less to live. If I were a simpleminded fool, that might not matter, but two hours taken away from me mean two hours less things for me to think, and that was a monumental waste of time I did not find remotely amusing. Also, at the moment, ten-year-old Mizukura Risuka was able to move only forward in time—on the basis that time was irreversible—so she could not gain back the time she had lost. And the time she could erase was (technically) limited to ten days. Ten

days at a time, but piled up on top of each other, you could easily chip your life away. . . .

"But Risuka will not die young," I whispered. "She is, after all, a bona fide witch."

The Red Witch of Time. She earned that nickname at the age of seven, in her homeland, the magical city of Moriyashiki. Even within the Kingdom of Magic, even by their standards, Risuka was a brilliant witch. Apparently. But Risuka's brilliance had little to do with her—it was all her father's doing. Yes, her father. Her father was himself Risuka's goal. Mizukura Risuka's purpose in life. You could put it as simply as "looking for her father."

At this point, my thoughts were interrupted. The phone on Risuka's desk rang. I knew who it was, so I answered.

"Hello? Kizutaka?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry. I must apologize. The mistake, it was mine. This *is* with magic involved. Sorry, I should not have lectured."

"Oh," I said, nodding. This was not exactly a surprise. "So, what now?"

"Mm . . . It is magic, but I do not think it is the work of a magician. Um . . . if that makes sense. Kizutaka, you should come here. It is easier to explain if you are here. This phone is in the station, but I will come and get you now."

"No need. I'll take the train. I don't want to waste any more of my life. And since we don't know what's going to happen after this, you shouldn't waste any of your magic. You must conserve your magic as I conserve my time. I had planned to go to that station today even if you did not agree to come, so I have the money ready. Mind waiting for me?"

"I am forever praising how Kizutaka is always prepared. Fine. Please tell Chamberlain I am here."

I hung up and went downstairs. The shop was open by

now but remained empty. Only Chamberlain, standing behind the counter. Honestly, if there were that many people deranged enough to pay two thousand yen for a cup of coffee, the city would be doomed. I had a child's tastes and did not like coffee. I was fine with canned coffee, but Chamberlain would not allow anyone to add milk and sugar. He had standards. I genuinely hoped that one day I would be able to enjoy his coffee—but had no idea if my relationship with Risuka would continue that long. If it did, then I would have had to grow to the point where I could fit everything about her in the palm of my hand . . . or else I would have lost my future completely. The latter option made me shudder. That would mean I had fallen to the same level as my thoughtless, hedonistic classmates and talentless teachers, like all the pathetic, failed, nonmagical humans out there. And there seemed little point in enjoying coffee once your life has failed. I would rather be drinking cyanide. I told Chamberlain, "Risuka went to Fukuoka. I'm headed there, too," putting things as simplistically as I could. He bowed low. "Look after her, Master Kugi." Risuka might be a bit too much for me, but this old man trusted me completely. It was not that hard to get adults to trust you. Especially old people. Chamberlain was also from Moriyashiki, the magical city, but could not use magic at all. He was a wizard with no magic—the meaning of which I was reserving judgment on. According to Risuka, making good coffee was his magic, but I had no intention of accepting that semantic obfuscation.

Either way, it seemed that Chamberlain genuinely could not use magic; not a smart hawk hiding his claws, so getting to the bottom of the issue was a relatively low priority as far as I was concerned. It hardly hurt to have a coffee shop owner among one's pawns. "Of course. I'll make sure she gets home today; don't worry. You can concentrate on work," I said, and

tried to leave the shop. But the automatic doors did not budge. The doors were triggered not by a sensor but by weight, and they would occasionally have trouble detecting me. The continued use of such an outmoded and flawed automatic door system was my least favorite thing about this coffee shop. I jumped as high as I could and slammed my full weight down on the mat. The doors opened, and at last I could leave. I began walking toward the nearest subway station, where I would board a train and begin my journey to Fukuoka.

"So it was magic . . . but not the work of a magician? Now that is hardly bad news for either of us." While Risuka would have skipped the entire journey, I spent it thinking things through carefully. "Those who were born magicians tend to be too problematic to make good pawns . . . but if someone becomes a magician later? They might have potential."

People from beyond the Gate, people born in Nagasaki Prefecture, wizards and witches . . . they were right next door to Saga Prefecture, where I lived, but as I said, it was like a foreign country, with a different culture and very little in common. Even with Risuka, there was something fundamentally off about our interaction that was yet another reason I found her hard to handle. I was exceptionally gifted at understanding other people's personalities, but where Risuka was concerned, I had to admit I would occasionally make mistakes. For example, in this case, four people had died—a truth that did not bother me in the slightest—but once, in a similar case, Risuka had said, "The dead people each had families, friends, lovers, enemies, teachers, students . . . and when they died, all those connections, they vanished. The killer broke all that, which I cannot forgive." Which might sound like cheap humanism, but when Risuka said it, it felt different, which bothered me. I agreed that even the most worthless of fools had a

right to live, but I did not think that opinion matched Risuka's. If all magicians had these odd disconnects, then that put me at a disadvantage. One of the reasons I continued working with Risuka even though I was not sure I could handle her was because being with her greatly increased my chances of meeting other magicians. Indeed, I had met several other magicians over the last year, but with no satisfactory results. Some of them had had more constructive magic than Risuka's, but unless the magician involved would make a good pawn, that meant little. Tools and humans were both evaluated on whether or not I could use them. In that sense, magicians were all more or less problematic. But . . . if there were someone who was not a congenital magician? Someone who had acquired the ability later in life? They had started as an ordinary human, and that might give me an angle. Of course, only comparatively . . . And the preference for a human with magic over a magician went for Risuka as well. If someone had learned magic late in life, that meant *someone* had taught them—and only the devil could do that.

"Thanks for waiting," I said, dismounting at New Kizuna Station, in Hakata, Fukuoka, for the first time in a week and moving to the first platform, where I found Risuka sitting on a bench, *schk schk schk schk schk*ing her utility knife and looking very bored. She pushed the hat back on her head and said, "I always have to wait," sounding a little annoyed. If her abilities had worked on her environment instead of herself, she would not have had to be so bored. She stood up, adjusting the hat again.

"So, Risuka, results?"

"The place where you were standing—which is also the place where the four 'sacrifices' jumped and died—is there, yes?" she said, pointing at a white line on the platform. "On the tracks there is a Magic Formula."

"A formula? Not a sigil?"

"Formula," Risuka said shortly.

I walked in the direction she had pointed and looked down at the tracks; naturally, I could see nothing. I would not be able to see either a Magic Sigil or a Formula without undergoing a certain procedure, a procedure for which I was not qualified.

"A Magic Formula . . . That means the killer was here when it happened. So there's a chance I might have seen them."

"Mm . . . yeah," Risuka said, coming over to me. The handcuffs on her right wrist clanked with each step she took, like a bell around a cat's neck. "I will let you see. Kizutaka, be moving aside."

As she spoke, she cut her finger with the utility knife and let a drop of blood fall onto the tracks. A moment later, the cut on her finger healed, leaving only the one in her glove. She had omitted the healing time. On the tracks, a complicated red pattern appeared, faint but clear. It was indeed a Magic Formula. It was not the first time I had seen one, but every time I did, I felt my head imploding from the sheer horrific complexity of the thing.

According to Risuka, humans who could not use magic, who had no resistance or immunity, had indeed gone crazy after spending too long staring at a Magic Formula or Sigil. The formula was visible only for a couple of seconds. I looked around the platform. It was the middle of the day, and a Sunday, but this was not a large city, and the station was relatively empty. Nobody seemed to be giving us suspicious looks. We must look just like a couple of kids and probably did not attract much attention. At least, not to fools unable to correctly evaluate their surroundings. It was exhausting to have to control such feeble minds. And I had a lot of that ahead of me.

"This Magic Formula is very low-level," Risuka said. "The very fact that they are using a Magic Formula for a spell this simple means the culprit is clearly not from Nagasaki. . . . Still . . ."

Shortly after we met, Risuka had explained that magic was a lot like math—in that it was a part of ordinary life, something anyone could do if they worked at it. As long as they had time, anyone could eventually master the techniques. As the name implies, a Magic Formula was just like a mathematical one, while a Magic Sigil is something much more complicated. A Magic Sigil is essentially a trap; the caster does not need to be in the vicinity—it will activate on its own when a certain set of conditions are met. A Magic Formula, on the other hand, was a shortcut, like a cheat. To explain it very roughly, you would draw the formula on the object you intended to enchant to lessen the amount of time you would spend chanting the spell. Preparations made in advance of the spell's actual use, to simplify things when the time came. Strangely, this was also the basis of Risuka's magic, her time skipping—although she needed neither to draw a complicated pattern nor to spend any time at all chanting. . . . Magic is incredibly complex.

Anyway, as I said, a Magic Sigil is a trap and is itself magic, so it can activate automatically no matter where the spellcaster is, allowing for remote casting. On the other hand, a Magic Formula is nothing but a formula, cannot be operated remotely, and the caster must be standing close to it. So the killer in this case must have been right next to me. Right. Next. To. *Me.*

". . . But, Risuka, why is the Magic Formula drawn on the tracks? Mind control or telekinesis, in both cases the spell would be cast on the four sacrifices, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Mind control or telekinesis is not being the magic

used here," Risuka said, grinning. "This is Summoning—pattern of Wind. Summoned was, probably . . . a vacuum."

"Someone summoned a vacuum?"

"Yes. A fact that just proves how low-level they are. Vacuums compose most of the universe, a very available thing," Risuka said, looking down at the tracks again, right at the spot where the formula had briefly shown itself. "That aside, this killer summoned a large vacuum over the tracks. And what does Kizutaka think happened then?"

". . . Oh."

The four victims had been sucked toward the tracks—just as I had said. Brute force such as that eliminated the need for high-level magic such as mind control or telekinesis. It was almost a trick. Summoning (basically teleporting a space that did not include yourself?) was low-level magic (five ranks below Risuka's movements through time), and it made sense that it would be even easier if you were summoning something as close to nothing as a vacuum was. And the use of a Magic Formula for such a simplistic spell was definitive proof that the killer was not a magician, was not from Nagasaki.

"Hopes dashed, Kizutaka?" Risuka said impishly. "Magic that weak will not be useful to Kizutaka's army."

". . . Mm." I did not like that smile. Had she taken it into her head that she understood me? Fine, I would forgive her. "High or low difficulty, high- or low-level, no ability can be measured by strength or weakness. What matters is how well that ability can be used. True strength, Risuka, means knowing the stage where your talents can shine. That goes for normal humans or magicians. I don't think we can really say you're making full use of your control of time, your Destiny Interference Magic. It is a very powerful magic, but it has almost no meaning. Having a talent you cannot use is the same as having no talent at all."

". . . Well, that may be so," Risuka agreed. "Oh, and, Kizutaka . . . not taking back what I said entirely, but it is possible this killer is not a complete pansy. Controlling a vacuum—if you have a formula ready, it is like using a kamaitachi."

"Kamaitachi? A vacuum blade?"

"Not as powerful as hitting with a train . . . but dangerous enough. There is also the issue of vacuum permittivity—but perhaps worst of all is summoning a vacuum over our coordinates. The principle is the same as being flung into space without a space suit. But this defines the enemy's magic. Pattern is Wind, category is Summoning. Then . . . his purpose . . . We know the means, which removes simultaneous and impossible, but the problem of no connection remains. This, I have no idea how to solve."

"If the killer can use magic, then the matter is a simple one. As I keep telling you, when humans acquire a means of violence beyond their normal abilities, past or present, east or west, they have done only two things. Used that means of violence to undermine their superiors or used it to stomp on their inferiors."

". . . Oh yes, like Kizutaka's classmates pouring hot water into the anthill."

"Precisely. An idiot convinced he has become strong always feels the need to test that power. Unaware that this merely proves how shallow his thinking is."

Jesus, Risuka had made me remember things about my classmates I would prefer to have forgotten. I would at least like to forget those abortions on a Sunday, when I was with Risuka. The same age as me, but they never made any effort to think; they were worse than animals. Certainly, they were more of a nuisance. They could not even begin to imagine what literal battlefields they would find themselves standing on in the future if they did not start preparing themselves

now. Lack of knowledge might be a problem caused by their environment, but the least they could do was think for themselves about the time that lay ahead of them. Why did nobody see the danger in spoiling children until they turn into small adults, like canned coffee? There ought to have been at least one person in the school who was able to tell that I was different. If that had happened, I would have welcomed that enemy with open arms. Fine, I will tolerate your imbecility for the time being. Go on, read mystery novels, convince yourselves that you are smart.

". . . Even if there was no Magic Formula, what is certain is that the killer was close by. If he was testing his violence, then he would want to watch. To see his strength with his own eyes."

"Right . . . hmm . . . right next to me . . . ?"

The victims had been right in front of me, so where else could he have been? In retrospect, I had been in pretty serious danger. If I had taken so much as a step forward—or if there had been one person fewer in front of me—I would have been sucked into the vacuum on the tracks. And I would have died. I had been lucky. How horrible it would have been to die there, without having done anything concrete . . . mm? No, wait. . . .

"Risuka. This Magic Formula . . . how good is it? How much of the chant can the caster omit with it? How long would it ultimately take someone to cast the spell?"

"How long . . . Four people, at this distance, summoning a vacuum that could suck them in . . . It depends on the caster's class, but with this class of Magic Formula . . . A rough estimate is . . . about one second."

"Hmph."

"So what about it? It is a terrible Magic Formula. . . . A little algebra, and he could have simplified it greatly. Last time,

it was the same. . . . Is this the limit of what ordinary humans can comprehend?" Risuka slid the blade out of her utility knife and cut her fingertip through the glove again. "Twice he will not do the same thing in the same place. But I shall destroy this Magic Formula anyway."

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Okay . . ." Risuka spun the utility knife. It looked as if nothing happened, but she gave a satisfied nod. "Disposal complete. Too simple."

What Risuka had just done was called a Cancel. A simple spell that rendered a Magic Formula, Magic Sigil, or magic itself ineffective. It was not that hard to perform, but neither was it a very simple one. Risuka, and Risuka alone, could pull it off without even chanting a spell. In the vast majority of cases, Risuka did not need to chant spells. Because inside her body (just a little taller than my own) was something that functioned as a Magic Formula—her blood. Every conceivable Magic Formula was already programmed into her body.

That was why she was a Second Grade Magic Technician despite her youth—despite her childishness. That was why she was a genius. When Risuka needed to use magic, all she had to do was let blood flow—cut her fingertip with a knife, and she was done. Hence the *Red* Witch of Time. And it was her father who had put such an advanced Magic Formula in her blood—Mizukura Shingo, current whereabouts unknown. Risuka was looking for him. She had come through the Gate to look for him. Her eyes were peeled wide open, desperately searching for a clue to his whereabouts, any clue, no matter how small. Even a case like this—knowing how he enjoyed teaching humans how to use magic.

"What do you think the odds are this is your father's work?"

"Mm . . . My father can use all patterns, all categories.

Omni. It feels a little too sloppy to be my father's teachings . . . but that may just be the human factor."

"I can't imagine there are many magicians crazy enough to teach humans magic."

"True. Then we should decide to track him down," Risuka suggested, finally getting down to business. For all our efforts, we had found no clues at all recently, and she must be getting rather desperate. Magicians cannot cross water, so Mizukura Shingo could not have gone anywhere; if he was alive, he could not have left Kyushu. But she had been looking for him for two years without catching his scent. (Of course, we could also blame some of that on the way she had been searching that first year.) "Kizutaka is the witness, so Kizutaka will be needing to remember anyone suspicious."

"Easier said than done. . . . We could have solved the whole thing if only magic could have told us the killer."

"Precognition and Postcognition are advanced Destiny Interference. I have yet to meet anyone with those abilities."

"Yeah. Um . . . So you said he would have had to chant about a second? No one near me said anything that sounded like a spell. I'm sure I would have noticed."

"Yes. Kizutaka has experience, can tell if a spell is a spell if Kizutaka hears it."

"With a Magic Formula such as that, how close would the caster need to be? With a Magic Sigil, they can be as far away as they like, but with a few exceptions, Magic Formulas don't work like that, right?"

"Fifteen feet . . . maybe thirty is the limit, I think. Too close and it would work on him, and he would be hit by the train. I would have thought the sweet spot was where Kizutaka was, right behind them, where he could easily see them die."

"But I can't use even the simplest magic."

"Sweet spot number two, then . . . right behind Kizutaka. Kizutaka is short; grown-ups could see over your head with no problem."

"I thought of that," I said, and gave her my prepared answer. "But as I said, if someone standing right behind me had chanted for a full second, I would have noticed. Most people would have."

"Regardless of whether non-Kizutaka witnesses would have noticed . . . Kizutaka certainly would have, yes. Kizutaka is never not paying attention."

"Which means we'll have to find sweet spot number three. . . . Where else could you see the four of them die? Somewhere close . . . The next door over? No." I shook my head. "On the right, the train would be in the way, and to the left, bits of them would get on you. Which would be bad. The left is probably more likely, but . . . can't say it's the best angle, no."

"Mm . . ." Risuka moved over to where the next door to the left was marked on the platform. She looked in the direction the train would come from. "Here is dangerous . . . a little . . . fast, would splatter very hard."

With a three- or four-door car, it might be possible, but the subway used two-door cars, and the door to the left would have been in the same car, which ruled it out. Five meters away . . . somewhere the bits would not splatter . . . well behind the line for that train door. Logically, given those three conditions, he would be standing almost out of range.

"But by the process of elimination, there's nowhere else he could have been. I wonder who . . . It wasn't that crowded, so I doubt I forgot them, but . . . I guess I wasn't paying attention. I should have been prepared for the people in front of me to jump. Or if not that, then once I had witnessed that, watched the commotion around me carefully."

"Then Kizutaka would be a suspect. Kizutaka was right to run. The ones still looking for Kizutaka are the police."

"They can look all they like. I wouldn't say I ran, but . . . I guess I kinda did. . . . Ah!" I clapped my hands together. "Risuka, we have another option! Turn the tables on the way we were thinking. What if one of the four was able to use magic? What do you think? The two right next to me couldn't have, but the guy in front could have chanted a spell for a second without my noticing."

"Mm . . . So, suicide? All four of them together, it seems so roundabout. . . ."

"No need for it to be all four. Just one of them, and the other three were just unlucky. Of course, it could have been a group suicide, but given the lack of connection among them, it seems more likely they were just dragged along."

Which meant I had to change the way I was thinking about the killer. That would mean he had obtained power but not used either choice usually taken. It also meant he was already dead—which would make him useless to both of us, but neither of us was so closed-minded as to be unable to find any value in even a useless thing. After all, wasn't there something rather impressive about using magic to pull yourself onto the tracks instead of just jumping? The people dragged with you were not the most aesthetically pleasing aspect of it, but that was a trivial concern.

But Risuka dismissed the idea quickly. "Did I not say? Suicide by magic is not possible."

". . . You can't . . . commit suicide?" I had been involved with magic for a year now, but this was a new one for me. "Whyever not? I mean, you told me yourself about a wizard who died by his own Magic Sigil."

"That was an accident, negligence—not suicide. Mm . . . You understand . . . magic is not physical. It is mental, yes?

To do anything, your mind must be focused. In that sense, it is a more animalistic action. You could say instinctive? More generally, any ability is a means of turning something from weak to strong, no? Magic is the same. All living things have defense mechanism. To cut your wrist," Risuka said, pointing at hers with the utility knife, "is easy when you are out of control, but to perform magic, you must be in control. You must always be thinking when you are doing calculus, yes? The same. Even if you are using Magic Formula or Magic Sigil, it is the same."

"Hmm . . . I did not know that, but it does make perfect sense. How careless of me. Sorry to make you waste your time explaining that."

"Even in the Kingdom of Magic, only one magician was ever able to commit suicide."

"There was one? Who?"

"My father," Risuka said awkwardly, as if confessing something shameful. "Because he can use Regeneration and Resurrection."

". . . As always, some father you've got there."

Mizukura Shingo. The more stories . . . legends . . . I heard about him, the more I wanted him as a pawn, but again, he might well be a little beyond me. After all, he was Risuka's father, the man who made her. A pawn that was too powerful would be even harder to use than Risuka. But it did not sound as if he was someone it could hurt to meet, and I expected my relationship with Risuka would, at the least, continue until we had found him. During that time, I might manage to find other useful magicians. If I'm being honest, until I met Risuka, I had assumed that magicians were simply exceptional humans. In much the same way as stupid adults assume that everything Westerners do is right. Which is exactly why I was so excited when I met Risuka. If I had

known then how unimpressive most magicians really are, I'm sure I would have remained much more collected. Including Risuka, not one of the magicians—and humans who had been taught magic—whom I had met had even come close to mastering their magic, their own powers. I could not for the life of me understand why they did not seem to view this as a waste. The world is genuinely full of hopeless incompetents. So many born second-rate, not usable even as pawns . . . She might be a bit much for me, but in that sense, Risuka wasn't that bad.

". . . Ah," Risuka said suddenly. "There was one more sweet spot, Kizutaka."

"Mm? Where?"

"Over there," she said, pointing at the opposite platform. Platform number 2, where I had stepped off the train from Hakata Station. She had pointed with her right hand, and the handcuffs on her wrist clanked together.

". . . Oh." Right across from this was a boarding point for trains on that platform. He could stand there, waiting . . . the perfect place. Close enough, and yet far enough that he would not be dragged into the summoned vacuum. (Even less risk than our first sweet spot, the place where I'd been standing.) "Nice. That would be the best place."

"Let's go."

"Mm."

There were only two platforms in New Kizuna Station. There was a passage between them a floor above. We went up the stairs and down the other side, onto the second platform. They were both equally deserted. This suited us perfectly. Even if Risuka had no intention of hiding it, if someone saw her skipping time and suddenly appearing and disappearing, an unfortunate pandemonium would undoubtedly follow. This was what Chamberlain had meant when he told me to

look after her. Some of the stupid, pathetic humans called the magicians "half demons"—simply because they were different—and detested them. The same ideas that led to witch hunts. Few things in life were more idiotic. Even if the government denied the existence of magic, even if the Gate separated them from us, what was there was there. Part of the problem could certainly be blamed on the Kingdom of Magic's standoffishness, and their tendency to look down on humans this side of the Gate as "powerless," but grown-ups should not be having childish fights like that.

They had these abilities; make use of them! Cowards, not even attempting to grasp reality. Convinced they would look smart if they sneered enough while debating the matter. Even though it was no debate, merely an exchange of dismissals. They are not fit even to play bad chess; if they worked really hard at it, they might manage checkers.

"Here," Risuka said, standing in the sweet spot. "Mm . . . He could see well from here. This is perfect, Kizutaka. The one standing at the front of the line for this door was the killer. The police checked only the first platform, which is why he chose this side. Kizutaka . . . do you remember him? Did you see anyone suspicious standing here?"

". . . I don't know. Until they jumped, their bodies were blocking my view, and after they jumped, the train was in the way. If I did see anyone over here, it would have been only a glimpse; even I'm not that good."

"Mm. Then we are stuck."

"No, we have options. Humans are creatures of habit—they all have patterns. It is possible the killer is someone who often used the second platform here at New Kizuna Station. Humans tend to test things within their territory. Perhaps he always stands here. It may have felt comfortable to him. It is not a very big town, so if we search thoroughly,

we should be able to track him down, as unguarded as he seems to be."

"Ah . . . So much work," Risuka said, moving back and collapsing on a bench. She looked down at the map and train schedule I had given her in her room. Wondering if she should have brought her newspaper collection, no doubt. "We will have to lay a sigil down and wait patiently again, yes?"

"Yep."

"I do not like drawing sigils. I have to use my own blood, and if I make the sigil too big, I get anemic. And drawing it that small—such a pain."

This did not sound like someone who seemed to enjoy copying nightmarishly complicated grimoires out by hand, but since I could not use magic, I suppose I do not fully understand the subtleties. But since this was our only means of progressing, whether the process failed to provide enjoyment or enjoyment failed to provide a process, she had to go through with it. There might not be many people here, but it would still attract attention, so we might have to select a different time . . . but at any rate, coming here had not been a waste of time. That, at least, was some consolation. Risuka might be freely distributed at a whim, but even if children rode half price, it still cost a lot to cross prefectural lines. I looked down at the watch on my left wrist—a device that meant little to Risuka. It was just past noon. Mm, it was about the right time; perhaps we should eat something. Risuka never carried a wallet, so I would have to pay, but I could put that down as expenses. She would pay it back by helping to advance my plans.

"Say, Risuka . . . let's get out of here."

No answer. Risuka was sitting on the bench; she had already put the map and schedule away and was staring up at

the ceiling. *Schk schk schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk schk schk . . .* unconsciously sliding the blade of her utility knife in and out. *Schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk . . .*

"Um, Risuka?" I said, without much hope. When Risuka was concentrating hard, as when she was copying a grimoire, she never noticed voices. Risuka's magic was not the only thing that was locked up inside her. "Risuka!"

"Kizutaka," she said, looking at me at last. Her hat had fallen down over her eyes again, so she pushed it back. "It may be that I know the killer."

"Eh?"

"Mm . . . Yes, this is . . . probably no mistake. I think. Well, no . . . If one second, then possible. But only that makes sense. In which case . . . this is not the case we thought it was, Kizutaka."

"What do you mean?"

"Is it possible to speak with the driver of the train that hit those four people? If we can . . . I think we will solve this case."

"The driver . . . ? I'm pretty sure they're investigating him for professional negligence resulting in death. But I doubt he's been arrested or anything. I can't say for sure unless I ask my father, and even if I do, this is Fukuoka Prefecture and not his jurisdiction." My father was a high-ranking officer in the Saga Police Department. I almost never saw him, but he came in handy in situations like this. He mostly made life difficult for me, but he was also no idiot. "But do you really think the driver knows something?"

"You could say that."

"Well . . . can't hurt to ask. Can I borrow your telephone card?"

She handed it over, and I headed down the platform to the

pay phone. I reached up and took the receiver and placed the card in the slot. I tried to dial my father's cell, but the buttons were too high, and I accidentally pressed 5 instead of 2. I put the receiver down and tried again. What the hell were pay phone designers thinking? Why were they so high up? I had used a card this time, but when I wanted to use coins, I had to find something to stand on or I couldn't reach the slot. Adults all have cell phones, so they should at least make the pay phones with kids in mind. Situations like this come about when those in charge are fools. If you have no talent, then all you should do is resign yourself to being used by your betters. Your whole life. My second attempt at dialing was successful, and I was connected to my father's cell. After the polite greetings society required of us, I asked about the driver in question. He had indeed been booked, as I had known, but the accident had left him in a state of shock, so he had been placed in the Hakata City Police Hospital. Not a surprising outcome for a small-scale human who had killed four people. The driver's name was Takamine Koutarou, forty-seven years old, single, with no family. He had already resigned from the company. Resigned. With trains, unlike cars, the driver could bear no responsibility for something like this, so the charges of professional negligence in the line of duty were a mere formality, and he would not have been fired. But with all that had happened, it was not surprising. After getting as much information as I could, I asked my father if it was possible for me to meet the driver. The Fukuoka Police had asked all the questions they were going to ask by now, and it seemed as if it would be possible—not for two children alone, but if he accompanied us. My father knew about Risuka, so that would not require explanation. (Of course, he did not know that she was a witch.) My father rather doted on her. I had never cared for adults who spoiled

children. . . . Not that I mean to cast judgment on the values of others. He was a busy man, and there was (apparently) paperwork involved, since it was outside his jurisdiction, so it would have to wait till next Sunday. I accepted this, we agreed on a time and place, and I hung up and went back to Risuka.

"Sorry that took so long. That man can talk. Only seven points left."

"Not a problem. Any results?"

"All good. Next Sunday, 11:00 A.M., meeting him outside the Hakata City Police Hospital."

"Hospital?"

"He's been hospitalized with shock. Some paperwork and processing, so we'd probably be in the room by 11:30 or 12:00."

"Very well," Risuka said, smiling. "If it is true that I can go where that man is, then I can skip to there whether it is this week or next."

"The hospital . . . you know the coordinates? Need a map?"

"I have been to the Hakata Police Hospital once before, is not a problem. The room number?"

"Room 603. Private room, given the circumstances."

"Perfect . . . Should be easy to cover. Kizutaka, this time, you will join me? I will not wait a week."

"Fine . . . Can't say I like losing a week of my life, but I am curious to see what you'll ask him."

I held out my left hand. As a sort of ritualistic precaution, I looked around; nobody was paying any attention to us. I need not even have bothered; worms crawling in the dirt, the lot of them. Ignorance on such a scale was a crime. Mozart was always a nice guy; Salieri was always the villain? Yes, and twenty years from now, I shall give you all lives of luxury. If you manage to survive that long. Anyway, Risuka's magic



worked only within her own body. She could bring only inorganic material with her through time; organic material was quite difficult . . . but not impossible. To bring me with her, she had to link my blood to hers—the foundation of her magic—and stabilize that connection. In other words . . .

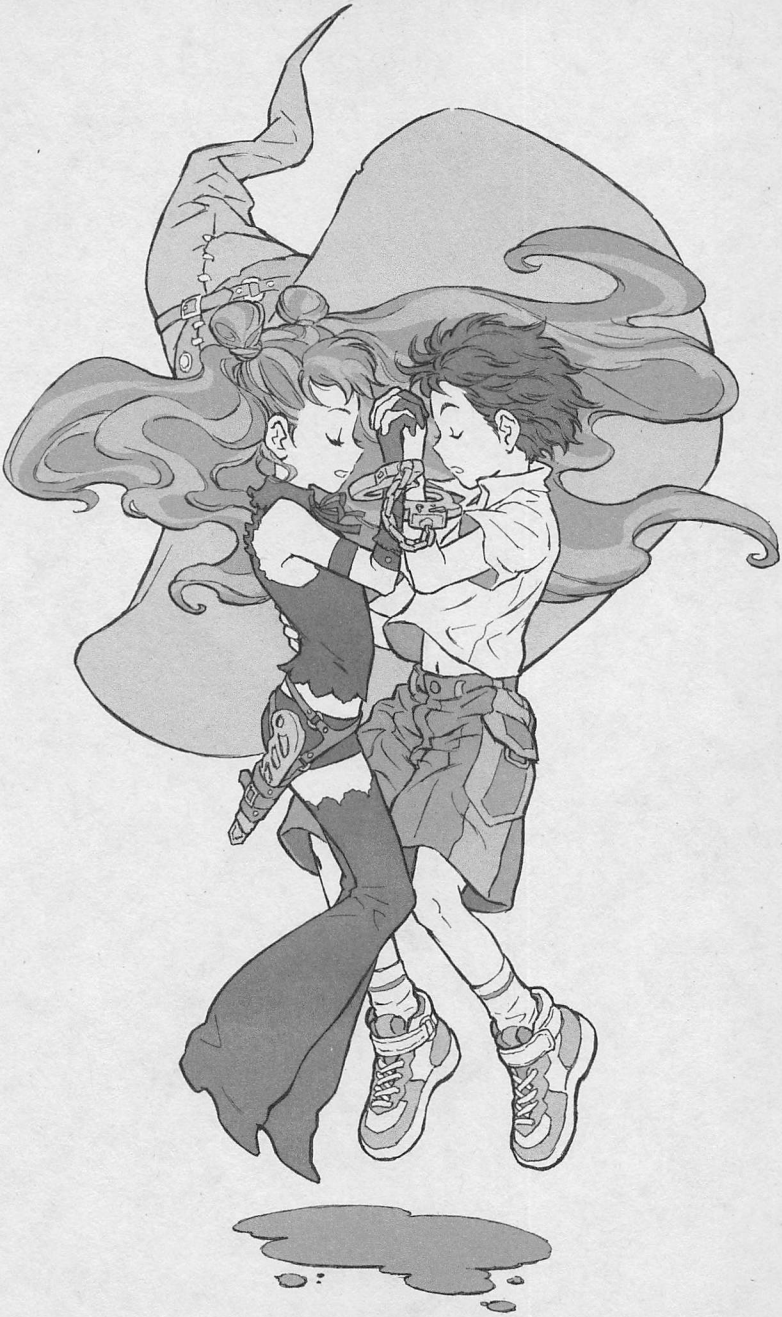
". . . Ow."

Risuka cut the palm of my hand with her utility knife, then cut the palm of her own right hand. Her glove was covered in cuts already. Then we linked our cuts together like puzzle pieces, locking our fingers. Next, Risuka took one of the cuffs off her right wrist and snapped it onto my left wrist. The handcuffs would stabilize our hands, so that nothing could pull them apart. Finally, Risuka wrapped her left arm around my waist, and I put my right arm around hers, as if we were embracing. Her waist was very thin and fragile, like any girl in my class. Barely any flesh to her at all, but somehow still soft rather than bony. Her hand on my back was somehow uncomfortable.

"Ègünãmü Ègünãmü Kããtørükü kã Ikãisã Mürã Tørümãrühî . . . ," Risuka began to chant. Jumping a full week was impossible without a chant, even for Risuka. It occurred to me that I should have pretended to beg and tried to get my father to take us sooner, even if only by a day. It shamed me to waste my pawn's energy. "Ègünãmü Ègünãmü Kããtørükü kã Ikãisã Mürã Tørümãrükü . . ."

And . . .

Since we were moving through time, it was impossible for our movement to take any time at all, either relatively or absolutely. The time omitted was not experienced at all. But relatively speaking, Risuka and I experienced a week in a single instant, and the trick was to convince your mind and body to keep up with that speed. What that actually came down to was compatibility with Risuka's blood. Even linked and



stabilized, it was possible to fail. What happened then . . . we shall not dwell upon. Fortunately, my name was Kugi Kizutaka, and my date of birth not that different from Risuka's . . . which meant I was able to travel through time with her. Physically, that is; mentally, it felt as if the entire world were distorting around me and it was extremely uncomfortable. I always shut my eyes, even though I knew it was meaningless. To my shame. And then . . .

A hoarse shriek.

I opened my eyes and found myself in a square white room—a hospital room. It seemed we had successfully moved through time . . . and through space. Of course, only our relative time had progressed; by absolute time, a moment ago we had been standing on the second platform of New Kizuna Station—literally, only a moment before. A seedy-looking man was sitting up on the bed, staring at us in shock. Of course, from his point of view, we had just appeared out of thin air. Fortunately, there were no nurses or doctors in the room. It would have been much more difficult to cover things up if they had been here. Clearly, this seedy, graying, middle-aged man was the driver—Takamine Koutarou. He did look familiar: I had caught a slow-motion glimpse of him as the accident occurred.

"Wh-what? How'd you get in here? H-how did . . . Why? Children . . ." He did not even try to hide his confusion. "N-no, doesn't matter, what . . ."

"Calm down. You're a grown-up, act like one," I said soothingly. I was getting used to this part of things, after a year of it. The best thing to do when adults were doubting their own senses was to give them an easily understood answer—nothing in the world easier to trick. "You should pay more attention! We just . . ."

"I have but one thing I wish to ask you," Risuka said, inter-

rupting me. She never tried to speak until I had finished pulling the wool over their eyes, so this was very irregular. She carried right on, without waiting for Takamine to respond.

"Who taught you magic?"

All confusion and fear drained from Takamine's face. He chuckled softly and looked right through us.

"I see. . . . So you're the Red Witch of Time."

Risuka just stared back at him. Her lack of denial was itself agreement.

"So you've come to pass judgment on me?"

". . . I guess so," Risuka said coolly.

While this was going on, my mind was quickly catching up. Of course, of course. Since it was a Magic Formula, we had assumed the caster was nearby—had assumed he must have been there the whole time. But if it was the train's driver—then he was not on the scene until the moment the truth occurred. That was why his timing had been so perfect. One second—a borderline number, but the train had been slowing down, and if he chanted fast enough, he could summon a vacuum before the train had passed by.

"You understand now, Kizutaka?" Risuka said. "Yes, the best position was not where you were or on the second platform. The real sweet spot was on the train, in the driver's seat. The one place where he was guaranteed a good view of everything."

"B-but . . . ," I said, watching him closely. "Why did he do it? Here he is, able to use magic . . . and all he accomplishes is being charged with professional negligence resulting in death, losing his job, finding himself blamed by society . . . until he ends up in the hospital."

"Blamed by society?" Takamine scoffed. "So what? Who cares? Boy—all I wanted was to run someone down with my train. Just once."

When humans acquire a means of violence beyond their normal abilities, past or present, east or west, they do only two things. Use that means of violence to undermine their superiors or use it to stomp on their inferiors. He had chosen to stomp—within the realm of expectation—but the violence Takamine Koutarou had acquired was not magic, it was his train. A lump of iron not designed with an eye to what would happen when it ran into someone. Violence that could tear people apart like paper—a veritable symbol of destructive force. And the magic had been simply a means to enact that violence—nothing more than a means to his end. I could wrap my head around that concept but not shake off my disbelief. I could understand wanting to see people hit by a train. That was simply an extension of wanting to drive your sports car at 125 miles per hour, a feeling I was capable of comprehending.

It was a higher-level, less-infantile desire than wanting to kill people with magic, or wanting to drop people on the tracks with magic, and easier to understand. Easy to understand and comprehensible. Oh . . . Trains ran only where the rails took them. No matter how much he wanted to hit someone, without magic, there was no way to guarantee he would ever be that "lucky." Of course there had been no link among the four sacrifices. It all made sense. I had no intention of dismissing that part of things. His stunned look had been bliss as his wish was granted—a bliss that had left him so out of it he had been sent to this hospital. In that sense, it certainly was easy to understand. But . . . but. Takamine had lost everything as a result. His job, his life, everything else—it was like suicide. There was no future in store for him. If you stomped that hard . . . what was the point? And he had quit his job . . . because he had achieved his goal? He had worked there for decades purely because he wanted to run

into someone? But Takamine did not seem to notice my doubts.

"I've heard about you, Red Witch of Time," he said, his attention fixed on Risuka. "Risuka the Witch-hunter, passing judgment on all who use magic outside, right?"

"Magicians cannot be judged by the law—they can be judged only by magic. Stands to reason," Risuka said, stepping forward. "But what to hear I am interested in is . . . who told you that?"

"Gosh . . . Ha!"

Takamine suddenly roared, raising his hands toward the ceiling. Instantly, the room transformed. The white walls, floor, and ceiling, even the windows—in all directions, Magic Formulas appeared. Since Risuka had not made them visible, they were not red but colorless, transparent, like air, like wind given shape. I looked at Takamine—he had a crazy sort of smile on his face. A crazy smile I had seen before. I was, belatedly, certain that he was the killer, the man who had cast that spell. Those who used magic in their villainy always, without exception, smiled just like this.

"Magic . . . Formulas!" Risuka wailed, angry at herself for overlooking them. Shaken badly, her attempt at sounding grown-up crumbled. "He was waiting for us! That's why you put yourself in hospital, bastard! Try to trick me by pretending you were broken! How dare you!"

"Yeah, I'm broken all right . . . but you give me a week, and I can do the job just fine. Take this, Red Witch of Time!" Takamine lowered his hands, focusing his palms on Risuka. "Mägînägü Mägînäkü Èkürätøn Kømütän Kømütän!"

"Ha, you're too slow!"

The moment he began chanting, Risuka whipped out the utility knife, pushed out the blade, and threw herself at him. Yes, this was the greatest weakness of every magician—the

weakness none of them could avoid. When they were chanting their spell, they were completely defenseless. They were not gods, not devils, and they could not avoid the requisite chant. Using the same magic, a high-level magician would be able to chant less than a low-level one and perhaps make that chant time almost zero—but never actually zero. If you genuinely wanted to use magic safely, you would work in teams or, like Risuka, fill your body with nearly flawless Magic Formula. This room was not that small, and covering it in Magic Formulas . . . was not enough to cancel out the need to chant. He was not summoning a vacuum onto unmoving tracks but onto a moving target, and to lock onto her would take several seconds—by which time Risuka's knife would be in Takamine's throat.

". . . Mm?"

There was a clank, and Risuka fell forward, spinning.

". . . Uh, hey! No!"

"Ah!"

I saw her eyes look at me, pleading for help. And realized that our wrists were still stabilized—locked together by the handcuffs. No matter how fast she moved, if I stood stock-still, she could move only the length of our arms. Ah! Such a stupid way to . . .

". . . Mägînägimü Tèèèmü!" He finished chanting.

"Um, sorry."

I do not know if she heard me. The moment Takamine's chant finished, kamaitachi came from all directions—from the walls, ceilings, floor, and windows—and cut Risuka to pieces. Hacked, slashed, chopped, and shredded. Her arm flew off, the severed arm split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again. Her leg flew off, the severed leg split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again. Her head flew off, the severed head split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again.

Risuka was pulped before my eyes, as if she'd been tossed into a blender, unrecognizable instantly. There was no shape left to her at all. No shape, no shadow, nothing of the sort. Only the pointy hat—too big for her, it had flown off at the first impact and escaped damage. It drifted down to the floor. The handcuffs hung limply from my wrist, no longer stabilizing anything.

Chamberlain had made them well, and they had not even been scratched by the storm of vacuum blades. But there were things even the sturdiest of handcuffs could not stabilize. Risuka no longer had arms. She was now nothing but red blood, spattered all over the room. The ceiling, the floor, the walls and windows, the bed, Takamine Koutarou's body, and me, Kugi Kizutaka—covered in fresh red blood. Spattered wildly over everything. Everything was red, red, red, red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red—————

"Hee . . . hee-hee . . . hya ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Takamine laughed like a mad thing. A crazed, deranged laugh. "Th-that all? That was so easy! That was the Red Witch of Time? Gone in an instant! No fight at all! I crushed her! Killing the other four was peaceful and pleasant, but, hey, this wasn't so bad either! The week I spent preparing was not a total loss! The work I put into learning magic was not a total loss! Hard work pays off! What a wonderful thing!

"Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! No point in throwing away my life, is there? More fun for me! First thing, get out of this hospital—then I can use this magic! I can . . . I can . . . I can . . . !"

Sheesh. I waited a bit, but it didn't seem as if he had any

idea what else to do. How could he? His whole goal in life had been to run someone over with his train. Compared with most people's goals, it was a fairly advanced one, one that had taken me rather by surprise, one that had effectively confused me for a moment, but the more I thought about it, the less it seemed like something worth trading in your life for.

That action led to no future at all. What a pathetic man. I clapped my hands together, interrupting his manic laugh. Until that sound, he had entirely forgotten that I was there. He looked at me, and I clapped three more times, slowly. Expressing my admiration.

". . . What? What does that mean?"

"Oh, you are very impressive, Takamine," I said respectfully—as respectfully as I needed to be to hook a man like this. "Of course, that worked only because Risuka stupidly forgot to undo the handcuffs first, but that matters little. You did manage to blow away the Red Witch of Time, and that's what really matters."

"What? Are you . . . ," Takamine said cautiously, feeling his way. "Are you . . . a wizard, too?"

"I am a mere human. I can't use even the simplest magic. Not even the limited amount of magic you have managed to learn. Your pattern is Wind, your category is Summoning—you rely on the Magic Formula, but not bad at all. Who did teach you?"

". . . I don't need to answer that."

"What do you say, Takamine. Will you be my slave?" I asked, sounding as sincere as I could. "I admit I had rather looked down on your magic until now . . . but I underestimated you. It is impressive. Only thing is, there's not enough of it to really be worth calling violent."

He was bewildered.

"What I'm looking for is real violence, on the level of a nuclear bomb. Not the violence of a train that can kill four people, not the violence of the wind you used to kill a little girl—you'd have to be able to kill *at least* a few million, or you just don't count. Magic really is so useless. Go bend a spoon or something." Feeling Risuka's blood on my skin, I gazed at the red all around. "But little and often fills the purse—even magic like yours, I can use. Takamine Koutarou, become my pawn. I shall give your life purpose—and not a pathetic purpose, such as hitting people with a train. Something worth trading your life for; a rich, fulfilling purpose."

"Wh-wh-wh . . ."

"It seems you'll do anything for your goals, even sacrifice your own life—which earns you a place among my minions. Your power is not worth losing at a moment like this—it seems like a waste. You have power but no idea how to use it—which is exactly why I offer to make you my slave. You will expend yourself for me. Obey me."

"F-f-f-fuck off!" Takamine shrieked. "Wh-who do you think you are? You should fear me! I am a magician! You will not use me!"

"Oh, but I will. Using magicians is what I do," I said, taking a step back, folding my arms, and leaning against the wall. Given what was about to happen, it was safer for me against the wall. "I decided that much when I met Risuka. They call themselves magicians, but none of them can use their powers properly. Might as well be human. Useless humans, useless magicians, all the same. Out of sheer pity, I offer to use them. If I do not, who will?"

"N-no child . . . no human thinks like that!"

"Of course they do. I am a child, and I am a human! I will ask you one more time, Takamine. This is your last chance, Takamine Koutarou. Let me make you happy."

"No. With every bone in my body, no! I'm gonna cut you into pieces, you cocky little shit! Mägînägü Mägî—"

But there, at last, Takamine could not help but notice something amiss. Risuka's red blood, dripping from the ceiling, the walls, the windows, pooling on the floor. The sheer quantity of it: There was far, far more blood on the floor than could fit inside one tiny little girl. The blood on the floor, that red, red blood, was lapping against my ankles now. Fresh blood staining my white socks and sneakers. The blood dripping from the ceiling was like rain. Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip . . . drip drip drip drip drip.

"Wh-wh-what the . . . ?"

"Such a shame. My heart fills with regret and a touch of resignation. I was sure your magic would make a good replacement fan. An environmentally sound one, no less . . . but I guess I'll have to make do with the air conditioner," I said, and done with gloating, I handed over the spotlight. "Do what you like with him, Mizukura Risuka."

"UNDERSTOOD."

Her voice echoed. The blood on the floor was up to my knees. I was wearing shorts, so I could feel Risuka's blood lapping against my bare skin. It was warm and sticky, seemed to cling to me, to brush against me, a deep sea of Risuka's red blood. All the blood in the room slithered toward the sea of blood, moving with a will of its own. Drip, drip, drip, drip. Diving down like suicide, scrabbling together like insects, collecting together in an orderly fashion.

"Wh-what's going on!? Sh-she's dead! I killed her!"

"But she is Mizukura Risuka! She is my pawn, the one pawn I can't begin to handle," I said, not even unfolding my arms. "No matter how hard it blows, no wind can split the water. Water blown upon remains water—it comes back together, and the ripples will die down. And Mizukura Risuka

is Mizukura Shingo's daughter. The legendary wizard they called a god, a devil—Nyarlathotep, the most powerful magician who has ever lived. And she is the embodiment of his Magic Formula. Like some diabolical joke! How could she die from being cut to pieces!? A pathetic loser like you might just be able to ruffle my Risuka, but she is not the kind of witch you could ever hope to destroy!"

"EXACTLY."

Again, her voice echoed out of the sea of blood. It boiled, rippled, churned.

"NØNKÎRÎ NØNKÎRÎ MÄGÜNÄÄDØ
RØÎKÎSÜRØÎKÎSØRØÎ KÎSHÎGÄÄRÜKÎSHÎGÄÄZÜ
NØNKÎRÎ NØNKÎRÎ MÄGÜNÄÄDØ
RØÎKÎSÜRØÎKÎSÜRØÎ KÎSHÎGÄÄRÜKÎSHÎGÄÄZÜ
MÄRÜSÄKØRÜ MÄRÜSÄKØRÎ KÄÎGÎRÎNÄ RÜ
RÎØCHÎ RÎØCHÎ RÎSØNÄ RØÎTØ RØÎTØ MÄÎTØ
KÄNÄGÜÎRÜ KÄGÄKÄKÎ KÎKÄGÄKÄ NÝÄMÄMÄ
NÝÄMØNÄGÎ DØÎKÄÎKÜ DØÎKÄÎKÜ MÄÎRÜZÜ
MÄÎRÜSÜ NÝÄMØMÜ NÝÄMØMÈ . . ."

"NÝÄRÜRÄ!"

The chant seemed to last forever, but the moment it finished, a woman's arm rose up out of the sea of blood. The blood came up to my knees—not deep enough to cover someone, but that did not matter. No mere common sense could apply to this. The hand began feeling around, looking for the hat floating on the surface of the blood. It found it, and . . . *she* rose up out of the blood. As she did, all the blood rushed toward her, like the tide going out, the level dropping quickly. Of course, her body was forming from that blood. The blood itself, the Magic Formula carved into that blood, was Mizukura Risuka.

"HA . . . . . HA-HA!"

Risuka laughed. A laugh of birth. She did not cry when born, not like mere mortals—as Risuka was born, she laughed. She was no longer the ten-year-old child she had been before. She was seventeen years older—twenty-seven years old. She was tall, slender, and supple like a wildcat—and very beautiful. Red hair, red cape, with a pointy sort of belt, gloves, and showing a lot of skin. Her eyes were red like fire; her lips glistened. The only things that remained unchanged were the utility knife in her hand and the red pointy hat. But the hat . . . fit perfectly.

". . . Hello, Risuka," I murmured. Murmured with a trace of reluctance, a tinge of regret. This—this was the greatest reason why Risuka was a bit beyond me. Risuka's father, Mizukura Shingo, had placed a procedure in Risuka's blood: If she lost more than a certain amount of blood—if she were ever about to die from loss of blood—it would trigger automatically. A Magic Sigil triggered by Risuka's death. Mizukura Shingo had placed a Magic Sigil inside the blood he'd already covered in Magic Formulas. And the magic that automatically triggered when that condition was met—you could call it a kind of safety valve. Mizukura Risuka's subjective time would leap forward seventeen years—omitting 6,205 days. A Magic Sigil some 620 times as strong as the present-day Risuka's full power. A Magic Sigil formed, against all sense, of Magic Formulas. A magic completely impossible for ten-year-old Risuka—but something easy enough for Mizukura Shingo, Nyarlathotep himself. No matter how much blood Mizukura Risuka lost, she would always be reborn, never die. Whether this was protection in the name of fatherly love or egoism in the name of his ambition, I could not say . . . only . . .

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA . . . AH HA-HA-HA! GOOOD

MORNING! . . . MM? WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY VOICE?" Risuka shoved her long fingers into her mouth. "WHERE'S THE REST OF MY TONGUE!? HUNH . . . MUST HAVE USED TOO MUCH BLOOD IN KID MODE, JUMPING TWO PEOPLE THROUGH TIME . . . RIGHT, KIZUTAKA?"

"What?"

"GIVE ME YOUR LEFT THUMB."

Even as she spoke, she swung the utility knife. She was several meters away, but that did not matter; my left thumb was neatly severed at the root.

"Mm . . ." It did not hurt, but no matter how many times bits of my body were cut off, I would never get used to it—it remained decidedly unpleasant. The handcuffs slid off my wrist. I clasped my right hand over the cut, stopping the bleeding, and kicked the thumb over to Risuka. "There."

"THANKS . . . ," she said, picking it up and raising it to her lips. Blood dripped out of it, landing in her mouth. She sucked every last drop out of it and swallowed. When it stopped bleeding, she popped the thumb into her mouth, chewed it a few times till only the bone remained, and then stuck out her tongue proudly. "Finished! The perfect Risuka! So cool! So beautifully red! Ta-dah!"

Takamine stared at her, stunned. He really was good for nothing. Had he really thought there was nothing more to the Red Witch of Time? That's just too sad for words. A pathetic insect, capable only of perceiving the world according to your convenience. I could have dealt with your pathetic magic, incapable of even blowing out a fire, all on my own. The Wind magic was a waste . . . but there was nothing worse than a pawn that had no use.

"Let me warn you—in this form, Risuka doesn't beat around the bush. I have no idea what happened to her, but sev-

enteen years from now, Risuka has developed a very aggressive personality. No matter how much we change the future, that much is always the same. As if it's an innate trait that memories and thoughts have no bearing on—resulting from the physical construction of her mind and the chemicals in her brain. In that sense, physical and mental are much the same thing."

"A most accurate warning, Kizutaka," Risuka said, stepping forward. "And what will you do now that you've been warned, Wind Master?"

"Mägînägü Mägînäkü Èkürätøn Kømütän Kømütän . . .," Takamine quickly began chanting. There were no more handcuffs to get in her way, and she could have ended it instantly by attacking while he chanted—but Risuka did no such thing. She walked slowly, unhurriedly toward his bed. ". . . Mägînämü Mägînägimü Tèèèmü!"

He finished chanting. Vacuum blades flew from all directions, and once again the blades sliced through Risuka's body . . . but where they cut, her body turned to liquid and immediately returned to its original form. No matter how many blades cut through her, she remained intact.

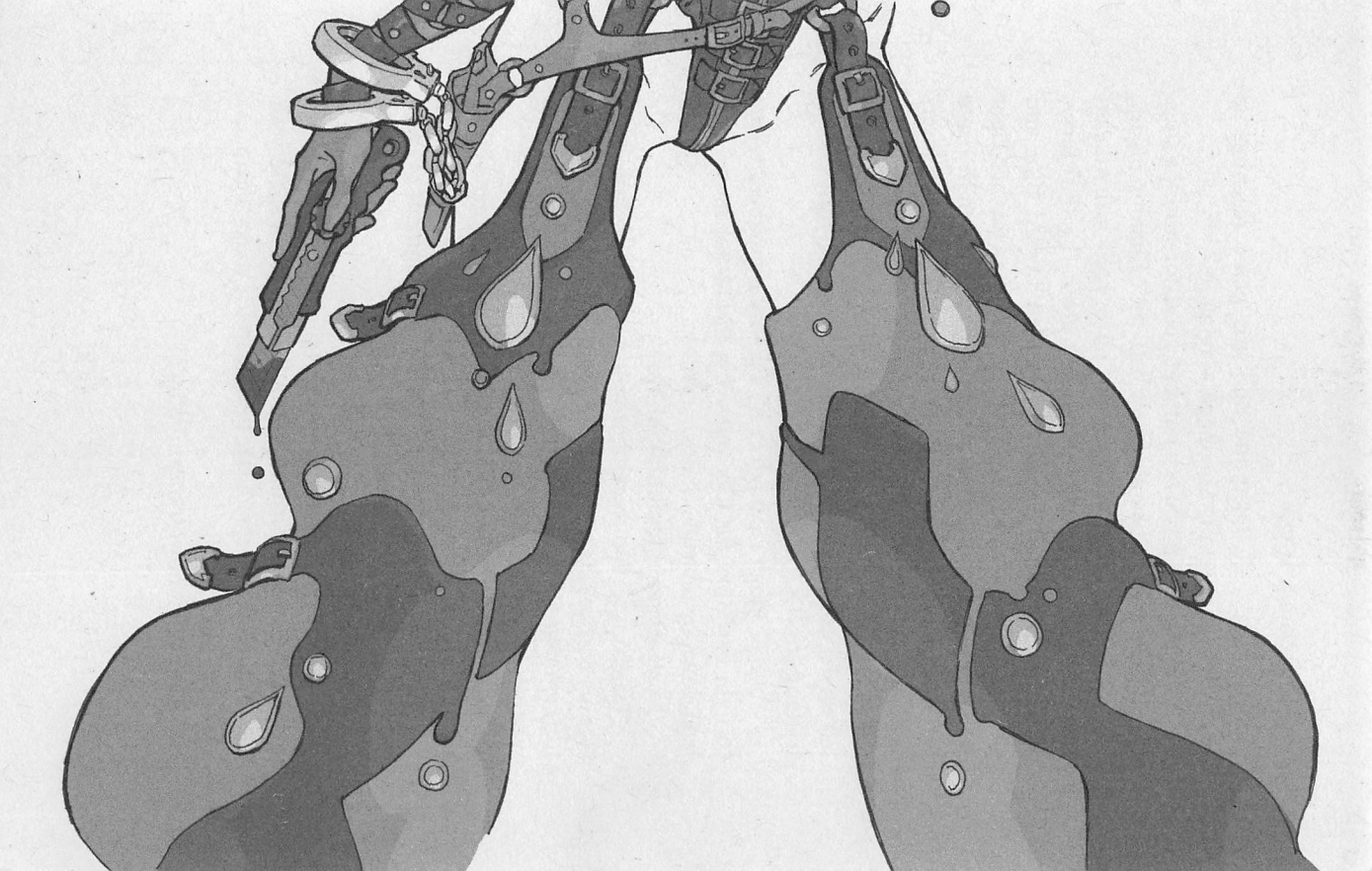
"Wh-wh-wh . . ."

"Kizutaka . . . explain?"

". . . Ten-year-old Risuka can only advance time—jumping forward through it or omitting chunks of it," I said, still clutching my bleeding hand. "But the twenty-seven-year-old version is fundamentally different. Her flesh and blood have matured considerably in the last seventeen years: She can stop her own time as easily as taking candy from a baby."

And once her time had stopped, it was absolutely impossible for her to die, no matter what. She could not be injured, she could not be harmed. By anything. That was what it meant to stop your own time absolutely—the absence of change. Time, time, time, time, time, *time.*





"Th-that's . . . ," Takamine said, his panic reaching its peak. "One more time! Mägînägü Mägînä . . ."

"Didn't I tell you you're a pathetic good-for-nothing slug-like unbelievably unbearably slow half-wit!? Chant in binary, why don't you, you useless piece of historically insignificant trash! I'll reduce you to component atoms by the thirty-second hexadecimal byte!" She vaulted toward him and slammed Takamine's aging flesh against the bed, her right fist slamming into his heart and holding him down by brute force. She might be grown-up now, but he was a man. Nevertheless, she did this easily. She held up the utility knife in her left hand. "Ha-ha-haaaaaaah! Look at all the scribbles you left on the wall, crazy man! You know what I call this? Wasted fricking effort!"

"Augh . . . augh . . . augh . . . ," Takamine groaned, trying to fight back, but his legs and arms would not move, as if held down by invisible chains.

"Aaaaaaggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Listen close, and remember well, you pathetic little man! Genius equals 100 percent talent—no effort at all! Effort is for scrabbling little worms like you, a futile endeavor you waste your whole sad lives on!"

Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk . . . Risuka began sliding the blade of the knife in and out, in and out.

"Time for the witch's trial! I will pass judgment on you! Two choices—live . . . or die!"

"Aaauuggghhhhh!"

"Who was the raging moron who taught magic to a defective loser like you? Answer truthfully, and I will spare your life . . . though you will never be able to use magic again."

"Wh-why?"

"Mm? What do you mean, 'Why'?"

"Wh-why do you . . . do like this? Judge magicians who use magic outside? I . . . aren't we the same?"

"How dare you even suggest a worm like you has anything to do with a goddess like me! There is a limit to how rude I shall allow even a man as ignorant as you to be! Still . . . Well, I suppose . . . I am trying to find my father, but . . ." Risuka looked at me and flashed me a sardonic smile. I said nothing. "I kill you all to stop your damaging the reputations of the rest of us. Outside humans seem to have a bit of a hard time understanding this stuff, but if a scumbag like you gets taken for a typical magician, and people start thinking all magicians are like you? That would suck. You've got to throw the bad apples out. If people start to think magicians are dangerous, that means trouble for all of us. Right now they've just got us locked behind the Gate, but if it got down to it, they wouldn't hesitate to nuke Nagasaki.

"And we really, really, really don't want to be nuked again. That's why basket cases like you and the kind of half-wit magician who would teach a loser like you magic cannot be tolerated. If we want everyone to believe that wizards and witches are harmless, helpful, and adorable, then defects like you can't be allowed to exist."

"Th-that's . . . that's it?"

"See? I was nice enough to answer your question. Now you'd better level with me. What was the name of the man who taught you magic?"

The blade of her knife gleamed. Risuka said nothing more, just stared down at him. Takamine hesitated for a few more seconds, but at last he answered . . . with that same crazy smile.

"Eat shit, bitch."

"Good answer, scumbag!"

She spun the utility knife and stabbed it down through her hand, into Takamine's heart. He grunted, but this was only the beginning of his nightmare. Risuka's right hand was linked to Takamine's heart by the flowing blood and stabilized via the utility knife. And thus, the rest of Takamine's life began. It began in an instant . . . the beginning of his end.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

It was like a video fast-forwarding: Takamine's body began to wither away, faster and faster. He was through old age in no time, quickly becoming a sort of mummy. His skin dried; his eyes lost moisture, turning cloudy; veins throbbed against his skin—his hair went white and then fell out. Takamine was experiencing decades in a single instant. Without a second's thought for compatibility. Meanwhile, Risuka herself remained twenty-seven. At twenty-seven, Risuka had taken advantage of her pattern, Time, and obtained the ability not only to stop—but to remain unchanged. No matter how far she advanced through time, Risuka herself did not change at all. By almost any standard, that meant immortality—immortality without growing old. Destiny Interference, carried to its logical extreme, was just that high-level a field. Risuka no longer controlled time—she *was* time. "Ha, ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaah!" Screaming her laughter, she stole his time, as if her blood were sucking it in.

"You always do like to fight flashy." I sighed, watching the terrifying time storm. "But I guess that's what makes you a witch, daughter of the god devil."

Risuka had said geniuses were 100 percent talent, but I did not agree. Genius meant 1 percent talent and 99 percent wasted effort. In that sense, Risuka was absolutely a genius. And I did not need to be. All I ever needed was 1 percent inspiration.

"I . . . ," Takamine said, racked with the pain only some-

one well past death's door could ever endure. Shame long since forgotten, he begged for his life, screaming, "I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die . . . !"

"Shut up," Risuka said, and took her right hand off his chest, only to punch him with it. Takamine's dry, mummified body—shattered. Into tiny fragments. The air filled with shiny bits of Takamine Koutarou. "Diamond dust," Risuka said, snapping her fingers.

Instantly, all the bits of him in the air, and the pile of hair on the bed, vanished. Removed from the space-time continuum.

"Dude had some balls for a loser."

"I'm sure you haven't forgotten," I said, interrupting her as she gloated. Risuka at ten was one thing; the twenty-seven-year-old version was a bit more difficult—a bit beyond me. She was truly a monster—not a pawn I could even begin to use. Pawns that were too powerful could occasionally hold you back. In that sense, Risuka was as big a problem for me as her father. "Risuka, I would definitely like my thumb back."

". . . Oh, sorry, sorry."

She grinned, moved over to me, and, in a hideously nonchalant gesture, snapped her own left thumb right off. Blood spurted out of it, but that blood was instantly stopped and returned to her body. Risuka put her thumb against the wound on my left hand. The blood mingled, and for a long moment, the thumb twitched like a thing possessed, but at last it calmed down. I tried moving it. Rock, paper, scissors. Rock, paper, scissors. Fox, rabbit, dog. It was an adult woman's size, so it looked a little odd, but since it was made of a shapeless liquid originally, it would soon resize itself to fit my hand.

"Thank you."

"Not at all. I should be thanking you."

"But if you were going to kill him anyway, you might as well have stolen *his* tongue."

"Kizutaka's blood tastes better. Very, very compatible. I could have drained that loser of his blood and not grown as much as a fingernail. Let's face it, your blood is just perfect for me," Risuka said, her red lips twisting into a smile. "But it looks like we both wasted our time here. I got no clues to my father's whereabouts, and you did not acquire a new pawn."

"Not entirely wasted. We have eliminated a dead end—and in that sense alone, this was productive."

"Aha. I see. You do have a clever mind. But it has been awhile since I met you in this form."

"Yes, it has, Risuka."

"Would you like a kiss?"

"Pfft. No thanks. Wait till I'm grown up."

"You're no fun. Either way, looks like my time's up."

Risuka began to melt, her time crumbling away. One minute—that was how long Risuka could remain twenty-seven years old, the only limit on her presence in this time. A necessary limit built into the Magic Formula–Magic Sigil, that impossibly high-level magic.

"See you again."

"Probably."

Risuka winked at me . . . and time moved backward, something that was normally impossible. Her flesh melted, her form turning liquid, everything crumpling faster, faster, until all that remained . . .

▼▲▼

"Still . . . I mean, it makes sense that the train driver was the killer . . . but how did you know, Risuka? I can see how the

front of the train would be the best place to be, but how does that prove he wasn't actually on the second platform?"

"Mm?" Risuka said. "Mm . . . Good point."

She had exhausted her magic and been unable to jump home from the police hospital. She had sneaked out of the hospital with me and headed for the nearest station. A station on the same line as New Kizuna Station. Risuka was ten years old again. Not just returned to normal—but ten in the absolute sense. Other than the hat and knife, there was no sign she had ever been twenty-seven. The hat was too big for her again. Time had been canceled. Knowing how beautiful she would be in seventeen years did factor into my thoughts a little, but . . . it did not really matter. The Mizukura Risuka walking next to me, her handcuffs clanking, was the same person as the Red Witch of Time, the all-powerful, domineering queen. I felt more than a little sympathy for Risuka, faced with the task of developing her powers to that level in seventeen more years, but . . . that also did not matter. We had eliminated one waste of time—that had been the meaning in our work today. The only way to pare down options was to investigate them all, one by one. The Wind Master—a pawn I would not have objected to possessing, but since the man with that power was such a pathetic individual, it would have been useless. The only remaining problem was who, exactly, had taught Takamine magic, but . . . while we had no proof, Takamine had known the nickname "Red Witch of Time" and had been drawing formulas all over his hospital room, preparing for her arrival, which suggested . . . But even if it did, would Mizukura Shingo really do something like that? Would he really teach magic to a human who could never hope to master it? Was he aware that his daughter was chasing him? If he was, then—

"The train schedule."

"Mm?"

Heedless of my worries, Risuka was answering the question I had asked—a question I had asked without much interest. What had she said? The train schedule?

"The train schedule Kizutaka gave me. The xerox. The key to everything was that, really."

"I don't follow."

"Er, um . . . If I tell you, Kizutaka may be angry. Or perhaps just depressed."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"This is proof, not theory. Today is Sunday, also the right time. Let us go see."

"Go? Where?"

"New Kizuna Station."

I didn't understand, but I followed her lead. We went to the nearest station and rode away from home, back to New Kizuna Station. We got off on the second platform. Risuka stood in the best position—not counting the driver's seat. "Here, yes?" she said, checking. I nodded.

"Kizutaka . . ."

"Mm?"

"I don't want to grow up."

"Hunh? Where'd that come from?"

"If I am grown-up, everything is boring. I don't mean Takamine only—there are boring grown-ups everywhere . . . even my father . . ."

"But if you grow up, you gain power."

She did not answer.

"True for you, true for me. Things we can't do now, we will be able to do when we're grown-up."

"I still do not want to grow up."

". . . I guess I understand," I said, nodding. Risuka's personality in seventeen years—aggressive, heedless of her sur-

roundings, self-righteous. But that was only symbolic. Everyone ended up like that, more or less. Risuka knew that better than anyone and had been left hating the idea of her own magic maturing. "But I want power. Power that will let me control everything. If they are fools, possibly so foolish they have no right to live—then they must be controlled by someone like me, and to do that, I need absolute power."

"A difference of opinion, then," Risuka said. "I knew the driver was the killer by the process of elimination. To activate the Magic Formula, the killer had to have been nearby—but there were too many problems with the first platform, and the second platform was also no good. That naturally led to the answer."

"No, wait—we haven't ruled out the second platform yet, have we?"

"It was simply impossible," Risuka said, sliding the blade of her utility knife in and out. *Schk schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk schk . . .* "Now is . . . 6:20. The train will come in twelve minutes. Today is Sunday, so the schedule is the same."

"Just say it already."

"Kizutaka, go to the first platform and stand there," she said, pointing at the door marker directly across the tracks from us. "Tell me if you can see me from there."

". . . All right."

I did as she said; up the stairs, down the stairs, and over to the first platform. I stood at the edge of it, looking across the four rails, looking for Risuka. Her red form was easy to make out. Red was the one color that could be picked out easily at just about any distance. That was why police cars flashed red. By the same logic, I instantly saw Risuka standing across from me. This was the spot; this was where I had seen the accident happen.

"Um . . . Risuka?" I called out, but at that volume, it would not reach the other side. "Risuka!?"

She waved. She'd seen me. Her eyes were not very good, so at this distance she would never have seen me if I hadn't shouted. And I was not wearing red clothes. So . . . what? Did she mean the second platform was too far away for the killer to see? But it didn't matter what we knew about Takamine Koutarou; at the time, we had only been looking for an unidentified killer, and we had no idea if he had good eyes or not. Or was there some statistical likelihood suggesting that the use of magic damaged vision?

"Hey! Kizutaka!" Risuka shouted. "Today was very fun!"

". . . I guess so."

"Eh? I can't hear! I can't hear Kizutaka's voice!"

"I guess!" I yelled back. The platform was much more crowded than it had been at noon. I was a bit embarrassed, but they probably just assumed I was a dumb kid. I saw no reason to care if lower life-forms incapable of thought were looking at me. Whatever opinions of me they might form did not matter. None of them had any ability to evaluate. They would all die, clinging to common sense. "I said, I guess it was fun!"

"Maybe tomorrow will be more fun!"

"I'm sure it will!" I shouted confidently. "I'll make sure it's even more thrilling! I promise I'll make your life worth living! I'll find your dad eventually! I'll even get rid of the Gate to Nagasaki someday, so . . . !"

So for a little while longer, I need you to remain my pawn. Doesn't matter if you're too much for me to handle or not, right now, I need you, Risuka. But before I could say any of that, Risuka grinned.

"So let's be friends forever!"

While I was still left speechless, the PA system crackled to

life. "Train approaching platform 2." The customary announcement I'd heard a thousand times. I tried to shout some objection or perhaps an excuse back at Risuka, but no matter how loud I was, she could never have heard me over the announcement. Hmm . . . oh well. She could think what she liked. Whether she thought I was her pawn or something else was up to her. As long as I knew she was my pawn—as long as I was sure of that, then I could make use of her. The longer I stayed with Risuka, the more useful people I would meet, whether they be magicians or not. That was what mattered—she could think whatever she liked. I would generously allow her that freedom. Then: "Train approaching platform 1." The same announcement echoing over the top of the first one, like a round, but this time it was on my side of the station—a round? Oh, oh! "Please . . ." "Please . . ." "Remain behind . . ." "Remain behind . . ." "The yellow lines." "The yellow lines." The same round as the day of the accident! I looked at my watch: 6:32!

"Risuka!" I looked up, looking for her—but I could no longer see her. The train had already entered the station and was slowing down to stop at the second platform. Its body was a wall, and I could not make out Risuka's red shape through it.

". . . Ah, ahh . . . !"

A moment later, the train pulled up to the first platform. It was coming from the opposite direction, and at this end of the station—even if the trains had the same time on the schedule, it would reach me a little later. That explained it—indeed, it was impossible to witness that truth from the second platform. The front of the train passed in front of me. I felt absolutely no desire to jump in front of it. I would never do something like that. A moment later, the round began again. "Train leaving . . ." "Train leaving . . ." "From platform

2 . . ." "From platform 1 . . ." The train on the other side moved first. I was at the front of the line but did not get on the train, so the fools behind me moved around me, climbing aboard. The doors closed, and the train pulled out, *ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk.*

"Risuka!" I shouted again . . . but there was no one on the platform across from me. It was empty, as if she had skipped away through time. The people who had just gotten off the train glanced in my direction, surprised by the strange name, but soon went back to their own time. Feeling as if I'd been tricked, I scratched my head. Should I be angry? Or depressed? A little of both—even if four people had been pulped by a train right in front of me, I should not have forgotten the other train. Perhaps I had been a little excited, wondering if this case involved magic. Or perhaps worried that someone would suspect me. No, those were just excuses. From now on, I would have to pay attention to inorganic things as much as I did people. A perfect opportunity to get better at using them as well. With that in mind, I looked down at my left hand. Only a few hours had passed, and the new thumb was still a bit funny looking. I felt as if it were sneering up at me.

Naturally.

More than half my body was made from Risuka.

Subway accident is Q.E.D.

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JAGDTIGER (PORSCHELAUFWERK)

Kouhei Kadono

Illustrations by Ueda Hajime
Translated by Andrew Cunningham

American manga connoisseurs have already gotten a taste of Kadono's cool and revolutionary style with the Boogiepop novels. The first Boogiepop novel, *Boogiepop wa Warawanai (Boogiepop and Others* in the United States) single-handedly changed the light novel scene upon its release in 1998, and Kadono remains a revolutionary writer whose innovative work continues to propel the light novel genre forward. In addition to the Boogiepop novels, his dream-team collaboration with illustrator Kazuma Kaneko (famous for *ATLUS* games *Megami Tensei* and *Persona*) resulted in another popular novel series: the Jiken series, a bold mash-up of mystery and fantasy storytelling. Del Rey Manga will bring this series to the United States, beginning with the first volume, *The Case of the Dragonslayer*, in spring of 2009.

The story's illustrator, Ueda Hajime, has also established a devoted following in the United States. A manga artist and illustrator, Ueda Hajime created his international reputation with the manga adaptation of GAINAX's popular *FLCL* anime. Ueda followed this triumph with original series, including *Q-Ko-Chan: The Earth Invader Girl*. The truly global appeal of Ueda's work rests on his unique sense of composition and utterly distinctive visual sensibility. The illustrations

accompanying this work are wonderful examples of Ueda's instantly recognizable style.

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Additionally, the Porsche suspension produces the following unique difficulties. . . . It uses two types of running gears, which creates a strong vibration and alters the aim of the turret. . . . The springs on the suspension are too stiff. . . . And the unique parts are difficult to obtain and repair. . . .

—TAKEN FROM A REPORT BY ARMY GROUP GHQ
CHIEF OF STAFF GENERALMAJOR SCHULTEK

1

The first thing she was told to do was fight a bull.

"If you don't put it down with the first attack, it'll come after you," Schuberth told Koi flatly. It was clear from his tone that he did not consider fighting a bull to be any great feat.

Everything around them was green.

Flat, quiet countryside—a few clouds in the sky, a slight breeze making the grass wave. If you had looked down at this place from above, you would never have noticed anything out of the ordinary.

But it was all a fraud. This was a training ground, where they could practice without fear of being seen by human eyes.

Mai Kuran had brought Koi here, and she stood next to Schuberth, looking unperturbed.

Koi appeared to be in her late teens, and Mai looked even younger. They both looked like ordinary girls, the kind you found everywhere.

But Mai was actually "older." Regardless of her physical

age, she had several more years' worth of memories. Koi had barely a year of continuous memories. Mentally, she had barely any history at all.

And she had never been ordered to fight a bull before.

". . . Okay."

Koi had no choice but to agree.

Schuberth frowned at her lack of enthusiasm. "Right. Dodge this," he said, and punched her in the face.

Despite his warning, Koi was unable to avoid the blow. Her nose started bleeding.

"Good grief," Schuberth said, appalled. He looked at Mai. "She can't even handle that? Is she really a combat synthetic human?"

"Her Bullet Head has a fully functional direct attack ability—no doubt about it. It just takes a bit of preparation. Right?"

"Yes," Koi said, clutching her face. Her nose made strange sounds as she breathed through the blood.

Schuberth gave her a dubious look, but eventually he shrugged. "Fine . . . Start by showing me this 'Bullet Head.' I'll figure out what to do with you then."

All three of them looked like ordinary humans, but they were not. They were synthetic humans, created for a specific purpose. They belonged to a certain system, but this system was so large that almost no one grasped the whole. It was occasionally referred to as the Towa Organization, for the sake of convenience, but that name was rarely spoken aloud.

What exactly this organization's purpose was . . . They might belong to it, but Schuberth, Mai, and, obviously, Koi did not know. They were simply given orders to fight for it.

And now Koi had been given an assignment. If she resisted, the other two would kill her without hesitation.

"Koi, do not hesitate," Mai said, as she always did.

"I know," Koi said, wiping away the blood with a handkerchief.

"Very well. Expand active armor."

"Expanding armor."

As Koi echoed Mai's order, the air around her began to spin. The surface of Koi's skin vibrated at just the right frequency to alter the flow of the air around her.

Eventually, she was completely surrounded by a roaring whirlwind. They could barely make out her shadow inside.

". . . Not very stable, is it?" Schuberth muttered.

"This is the best she can do," Mai said. "The thicker the armor gets, the less focused it becomes."

Schuberth scowled. "Can't use this in the city. Attracts attention, loud, and not very adaptable. Good only for open battles."

"Technically, she is a superbuild, but it seems they had a pretty tight production budget."

He turned to Koi and yelled, "Right. Begin!"

Koi began to move . . . slowly. The whirlwind around her peeled away the ground as she went. There was a shadowy dome extending three meters in all directions and above, and moving that with her was extremely slow. Each step she took made the dome wobble.

The big bull chained a hundred meters away saw her coming and began to thrash around.

Koi looked at this violent creature with a dazed, unchanging expression.

Schuberth looked at Mai again. "You sure?" he asked.

Mai smiled faintly and waved a hand for him to proceed.

Schuberth raised his arm and pointed his palm at the bull. A moment later, a shock wave fired from a focal point on his palm and struck the bull's chain with pinpoint accuracy, shattering it.

The noise shocked the bull. It shook itself and broke into a run.

Schuberth and Mai stepped back, leaving Koi on her own.

Even when she was facing down a crazed bull, her expression did not change. She merely started muttering something under her breath.

". . . Don't hesitate, don't hesitate, don't hesitate. . . ."

Like a spell, she chanted the words over and over.

But . . . her feet slipped. The whirlwind was peeling away the surface of the soil, and water had welled up from the ground, leaving a patch of mud.

The cluster of winds six meters across toppled over.

And the bull's charge showed no signs of stopping.

It lowered its head, aiming to drive its horns right through Koi's midsection, all four legs plowing the ground, eight-tenths of a ton of it charging right toward her . . . and . . .

DDKKK.

A strange sound echoed through the field. Rather like an iron ball being dropped on an iron board; the sound of a dull, heavy impact.

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Koi herself remained as she had been. She had slipped and fallen, and was sitting on the ground.

So was the bull. It had slammed into the layer of air swirling around Koi and been thrown to the ground.

Its horns were gone.

They were spinning through the air, landing a moment later. It was not just the tips broken off—the entire things had been torn out at the roots. Broken by the sheer force behind the bull's charge.

As if it had charged directly into a rock wall. The wall had not budged, but the bull's horns had broken. But in this case, it had charged into a girl who weighed less than ninety pounds.

The bull clearly could not understand what had happened, and it looked around dizzily. The blow that had broken the horns must have shaken its brain. Its right foreleg was shaking, and it began moving in a strange zigzag.

"....."

Koi gingerly picked herself up. She had not moved so much as a millimeter from the spot where she had fallen.

She glanced back at Mai, looking rather dependent.

Mai said coldly, "You aren't done yet. Load cannon."

"Okay . . . Cannon loaded."

Koi turned toward the retreating bull.

Her lips trembled, parting slightly . . . and a dull burst of sound slipped out.

A moment later, the ground near the bull exploded. A massive chunk gouged out of the ground in a spray of earth.

It did not hit the bull directly, but the shock wave sent it flying, crumpling all the bones in its body. It died instantly, its massive body hitting the ground and bouncing once.

Koi just stood there until Mai said coldly, "What are you doing? Reload, fire again. We're testing your destructive capabilities."

Koi nodded, aimed carefully, and made that sound again, firing another shock wave.

Her attacks were not coming directly from her mouth. Bullet Head fired a shock wave by concentrating the biological rhythms of her entire body, and the air in her lungs and digestive system bucked wildly, the exhaust from that emerging through her throat.

This time her attack was on target. But a moment later, it

was impossible to tell where on the bull the blow had landed. Almost the entire body was turned to ground beef, and a big chunk of the ground beneath it exploded.

If an innocent bystander had seen this, he would probably have assumed the girl had used some sort of psychic power. But this phenomenon had been produced by physics alone; there were no mystic forces involved.

She had destroyed the target animal, demonstrating her potential as a destructive weapon. That was all.

Schuberth watched all this with a scowl. "She can't adjust the strength of it?" he asked.

The two craters Koi had made in the earth were both huge but almost exactly the same size. Mai shrugged, silently agreeing.

Schuberth shook his head. "Yeesh. Right. You're done," he yelled.

She just stood there, wind whirling around her. Had she even heard him?

"Hey!" Schuberth called, and at last Koi responded.

Her limbs swayed as if she were a marionette with broken strings, and the wind armor vanished . . . the whirlwind dissipating in all directions, spinning her like a top as it did. She landed on the ground with a thump, hung her head, her back heaving . . . and then her throat convulsed, and she threw up. Her vomit was an unnatural red black and did not smell of acid. It smelled of fat—no, oil.

It was a concentrated nutritional fluid designed for synthetic humans with low-functioning internal organs. She had apparently not processed any of it. She was not able to handle stress at all.

Schuberth was long past being surprised and simply sighed. "You're like the Jagdtiger. And the one with the Porsche suspension."

"Eh . . . ?"

"Heavily armored with a powerful cannon, trying too hard to give you the strongest offense and defense, and producing something so unstable it is barely mobile."

Schuberth was comparing her to a tank destroyer produced near the end of World War II, during the arms race between the Third Reich and their enemies. If you looked only at the technical numbers, it was the most powerful tank destroyer on the field, but it was so unresponsive that it was almost useless in actual combat.

Behind him, Mai giggled. "That's a good one."

Koi remained dazed, not really following any of this.

"So," Schuberth said quietly, looking down at her. "Do you want to live?"

"Huh?"

"If you don't want to live, we've got no reason to force you to stay alive, so speak up. But if you do have a will to survive, then I won't issue an order for you to be destroyed. I'm leaving it up to you. What do you want?"

His voice was so perfectly calm it was impossible to believe he was really discussing a matter of life or death.

Next to him, Mai said nothing, just looked down at Koi coldly.

"Er, um . . . ," Koi said. She didn't know what to say, so she nodded. "I guess I'd rather live, um, I think," she said timidly.

Later, she would look back on that moment with ambivalence.

Had she really wanted to live at the time?

Had she really thought about what it would mean, about the future?

Once she knew what living really meant—at times, she regretted her choice, while at others, it came as a great relief to her. If she had not made that choice, she would never have

met him . . . but that same thing would cause her no end of grief.

Schuberth heard her answer and nodded. "Fine. The rest is in your hands, Mai."

"Understood." She nodded, and the moment of decision had passed. She would never be asked to think of it again—not until Koi or Mai or both of them met their demise.

. . . And a few minutes later, they were walking together down the mountain. They did not use a car; the road was too steep, and Koi's organs were unable to handle the vibrations of a car on a bumpy road—she would get carsick.

". . . Mm?" When they were halfway down, Mai's eyes suddenly narrowed.

Someone was coming up the hill toward them. Two someones.

They had noticed Mai and Koi already, and one of them was waving, grinning broadly.

She was a girl who appeared to be about the same age as Mai. Next to her was a miserable-looking middle-aged man, but the girl was clearly the leader—much the same as Mai and Koi's relationship.

"Leb' Wohl, isn't it? What a surprise to see you here," the girl said, ignoring Koi completely and addressing Mai as if they were old friends.

"Don't call me by that name, Katyusha," Mai said, glaring back at her, eyes still narrowed.

Katyusha did not seem at all perturbed by Mai's naked hostility. "Would you rather I called you Bye-Bye Girl?" she asked, and cackled. A very shrill laugh, which hurt the ears.

Koi watched them absently. There was a tension in the air between them that bordered on the deadly.

The system was so very large that even those belonging to

it, depending on the mission, were not necessarily always allies.

The middle-aged man with Katyusha stood staring absently into the distance. It was impossible to guess what he was thinking.

"Come on, Koi," Mai snarled, and walked past the other two, ignoring them. Koi hurriedly followed.

"Aha! You're one of those superbuilds? Not quite as well balanced as Tarkus, are you?" Katyusha said.

When Koi started to turn toward her, Mai stopped her, snapping, "Ignore her!"

Koi hurried to catch up.

"Hmmm . . . ," Katyusha said, but did not follow after. Instead, she went on up the hill, heading for the place where they had left Schuberth.

(They're also from the organization . . . and here for testing?) Koi wondered, but Mai's demeanor suggested it would not be wise to ask.

It would be several years before they encountered that strange pair—Katyusha and Bracke—again. Like this occasion, it would not be anything that could charitably be called a friendly encounter, but a very deadly one.

2

The original conception of the Jagdtiger always involved the use of the largest tank gun available at the time, the 128 mm Pak 44. They had intended to mount this gun on Ferdinand Porsche's own Panzer VIII Maus, but it was so big and heavy that they were forced to use the Tiger II chassis fixed with an apparatus to stabilize the gun during movement. Should a battle occur, the tank's operators would have to climb out of the tank and re-

move this. Lieutenant Otto Carius, awarded the Knight's Cross for his heroism, pointed out the danger of this, and the lack of adaptability. . . .

After that, Koi was involved in a number of missions in which she had no clear idea what she was doing.

She was always under Mai's control and was never allowed to ask questions.

"Stand on this building. Attack and destroy the satellite antennae on top of that building at exactly 2:54 A.M."

Or: "Stand at the end of this road. Expand active armor. Do not let anyone through, even if they're in a car or a dump truck. If anyone tries to force their way past, do not hesitate to destroy them. If no one comes, then fine. Just keep standing there."

It was clear that all her instructions were some form of support for Mai's own work. Koi was never told what was happening or what they were fighting, but she had no intention of complaining. Until Mai called her, Koi spent all her time in a one-room apartment that was neither particularly expensive nor particularly cheap. The only thing she could eat was the nutritional fluid, and that was delivered, so she almost never went outside. She just sat inside, doing nothing.

▼▲▼

She would occasionally turn on the TV and gaze absently at the people enjoying themselves or the sad victims on the news.

(What is the point?)

She would wonder almost daily.

Then one day, Mai came to see her and gave her that order.

"Mm, how can I put this? . . . This one might play out a little differently from the others, so . . . ," she said.

"H-how so?" Koi asked nervously.

"You'll be killing someone."

". . . Eh?"

"Except we might be ordered not to kill him. But if they say to kill, I know you know to fire without hesitating, right?" Mai said. An odd way of putting it.

"Er, so . . ."

"We're going to a building in the center of town. There's a café in the entrance hall, and someone will be meeting with someone who might be dangerous. We'll be waiting nearby, and if things go bad, we kill the dangerous man. Those are our orders."

"I-in the middle of town?"

"We don't know much about this guy. Which means we need to use the strongest card we have. Hit him once, hit him hard, and if he goes down, great; and if it doesn't work, well . . . we'll just have to figure out how to get away."

▼▲▼

Mai's words sounded a little slapdash, but her expression made it clear she was grimly serious, so Koi did not argue.

By way of disguise, Koi put on a generic business suit and Mai a high school uniform, and they headed toward the café.

Later, Koi would remember that moment again and again. If she had died before that moment, how would things have been different? But this was not a question that had any meaning. She had gone there, and she had met him.

". . . Here. Two people will be sitting in those seats momentarily. One is a woman, our boss. We are to act on her orders. The other is a young man, and he's the dangerous one."

Mai and Koi waited in the shadow of a pillar, where they could unobtrusively watch their target. The entrance hall was

a square about ten meters a side and was large enough for Koi to use her Bullet Head. But . . .

"B-but, if they're sitting together, then both of them . . ."

. . . would be blown away. Along with all the innocent bystanders sitting near them.

"Oh, don't worry about that. Your attack will not even faze her. Fire away," Mai said airily.

Koi was less certain but did not dare argue.

At last, they arrived. They sat down opposite each other, as people do every day, and chatted, drinking coffee.

The woman baffled her. She was a good-looking woman, very collected, but there was none of the edgy tension you'd expect from someone on a dangerous mission.

And the man . . .

Koi stared at him, dazed.

"Okay, if that man makes any sort of hostile movement toward her, does anything suspicious at all, then go ahead and blast him. If someone like her is here in person, then he must have some insanely dangerous secrets. . . ." Mai was whispering in her ear, but Koi heard none of it.

By this time, Koi already knew.

(I can't.)

There was no way she could do this. She could not kill that man. She would probably die here. She would be disposed of for disobeying orders, or that man would kill her. She did not know which; she only knew that she could not do it.

She did not know why not and believed she did not need to know. It was just a fact, a truth that made everything else, even her own life, cease to matter.

(No way on earth could I ever kill that man.)

This was perhaps the first clear expression of will she had ever had. She felt certain that it was. Her entire life had been

spent with nothing certain, nothing definite, but now it had all crystallized.

She did not know what to call these feelings. She knew so little about other people that it never occurred to her that they were very common.

A very everyday sort of thing: a boy catching a girl's eye, and she finds herself staring at him . . . that was all.

Their conversation seemed to be progressing very smoothly. Neither grew emotional or excited.

▼▲▼

(Hmm . . .) Mai thought, impressed by how skillfully her boss had put the man at his ease. It looked as if they would not need to attack unless ordered.

This came as a relief . . . until a few minutes later, when the man turned toward the two of them . . . and froze.

(? Why . . . ?)

Then, of all things, he stood up, and walked directly toward them.

(Wh-whaaaaaat!?)

Did he know? No, that didn't fit. . . . He was totally defenseless. And her boss did not appear to have been harmed. The man had just come over here on his own.

(Wh-what for . . . ?)

Mai was flustered but quickly decided to avoid contact and began backing away.

But Koi, standing next to her, did not budge.

"H-hey!" Mai called out, but Koi just gaped at the man coming toward her and did not appear to hear.

She did not seem ready to panic and start firing, and Bullet Head could not be fired that quickly to begin with, so it was already much too late.

Mai clicked her tongue and beat a hasty retreat, abandoning Koi.

The man had apparently never even noticed Mai. All his attention was focused on Koi. He drifted toward her like a sleepwalker and said, "Uh, um . . . your name?"

From their point of view, there were few things he could have said that would have seemed more out of place.

(Hunh?)

Lurking in a location a safe distance away, Mai could not believe her ears. Was he . . . seriously just hitting on her? She glanced at her boss, and her boss just shrugged. That did not seem like an order to attack.

As for the girl being hit on, Koi was stammering, "Eh, er, um, uh . . ." It was clear the situation was well beyond her capacity to understand.

She just stood there, dumbstruck.

The man tried again. "N-no, I'm not . . . anyone suspicious. . . . I mean, I'm just . . ." But his attempts to explain himself failed to cohere.

Koi and the man were equally unguarded. In fact, he seemed even more flustered than she did.

As if he could not quite grasp what had led him to speak to her.

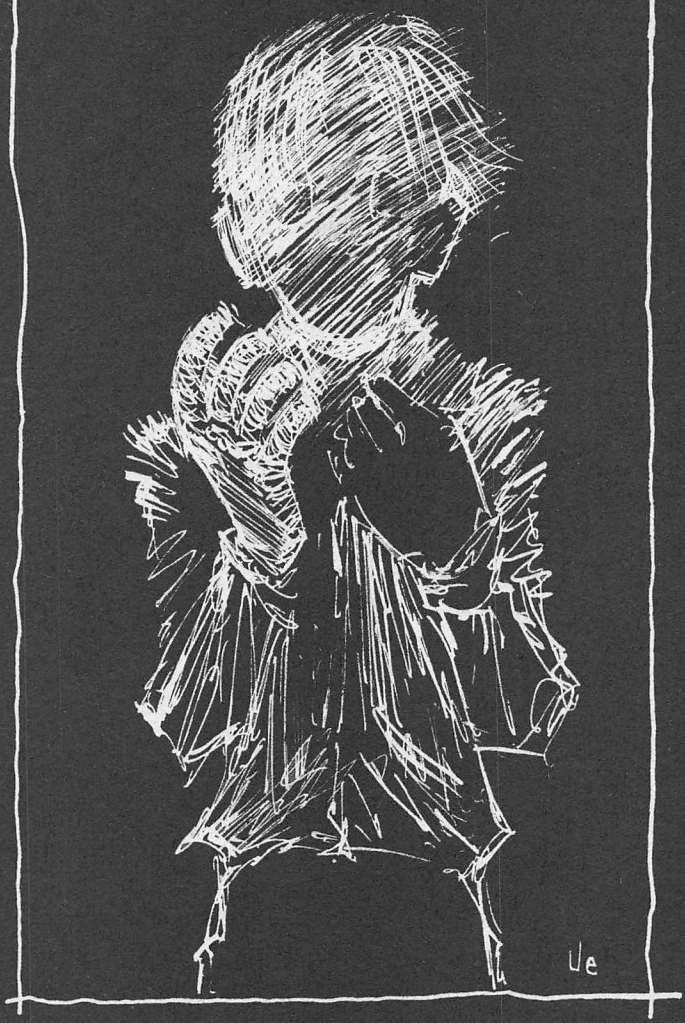
(. . . Oh.)

Koi noticed this as well. That she was not the only one in a state of panic.

". . . uh, um . . . ?" she tried timidly. Seeing how nervous he was came as a relief to her. This was the first time in her life she had ever initiated conversation like this.

"Er, I'm . . ." Since she had asked a question, that seemed to have suggested what to say next. "I'm, uh, Koryo. Koryo. Kunio Koryo. I'm Kunio Koryo."

(PorscheLaufwerk)



For some reason, he was repeating his name like a campaigning politician.

(Kunio . . . Koryo?)

She silently repeated the name and realized her heart was beating very fast.

Oh, she thought. He was giving his name, so she should give hers. But now it was her turn to be rendered speechless. Her mouth flapped, sputtering, "No, I'm, um . . ."

Kunio seemed to have no clue what to say next. "You . . . I, uh . . . you . . . ," he stammered, and trailed off.

"Er, um, I . . . ," Koi spluttered, desperately trying to say something but unable to produce anything meaningful.

All they managed to do was produce sounds, never quite managing to arrive at actual communication.

Mai watched this for a moment and then decided the entire situation was ridiculous.

(What the hell are they *doing*?)

She looked at her boss, who nodded, grinning. The situation had clearly evolved in a direction far removed from the tense affair they had expected. It was no longer a combat mission at all.

Merely a farce.

(In which case . . . there's no reason for us to stick around!)

She stepped out of the shadows, strode briskly across the floor, and interrupted their babbling. "What's going on?"

Both of them jumped and turned toward her. They had clearly not noticed her arrival.

"N-no . . . ," Koi said, surprised by Mai's sudden entrance.

Mai ignored her, decided it was easier if she pretended they were sisters—which would probably rattle Koi even more, but at this point, who would know the difference? She sighed dramatically, looked at the man, and said sternly, "I'm

sorry, sir, but my sister has little experience speaking to men. Don't try to play your little games with her."

Completely thrown, Kunio hastily protested, "No, I'm really not . . . anyone suspicious. . . . I just . . ." But even this was rather vague. Mai could not figure out what about this man could possibly be dangerous.

"Let's go," she said firmly, and dragged Koi away by one arm.

". . . Ah, ah—"

She could hear Kunio calling dumbly after them but did not bother looking back.

(Preposterous!)

She pulled Koi after her like a tow truck, by brute force alone. Koi did not resist, following after. . . . No, something felt off.

She felt heavy. Too heavy. As if she would never have moved if she weren't forced to. . . . Mai looked back and went pale.

All expression had drained from Koi's face—her lips were half open, and she hung limp . . . her pupils dilated.

In other words, she was dead.

". . . Wha—!?"

Mai could not believe it. She quickly picked Koi's body up, ran into the pachinko parlor next to them, praying no one would notice, and into the ladies' room.

She propped Koi's immobile body up on the toilet, tore open her clothes, and put her hand on her heart.

It wasn't moving.

"Augh, you are a Jagdtiger! Stalled from the shock, have you!?"

She quickly searched Koi's jacket pockets and found a bottle of special cardiac stimulant she always had with her. She popped the lid off and started to bring it to Koi's lips. Then she swore and emptied it into her own mouth.

She put her lips on Koi's and let the medicine flow directly down her throat.

She poured saliva down after it until she was sure it had entered Koi's body. Their lips parted only after a good four seconds.

"Gah, that's foul!" Mai spat and pressed her fist against Koi's exposed chest, pushing it in and out with a strong twisting motion. It was less of a massage than a boxer practicing jabs against a punching bag. She could feel ribs snapping under her fist, but she ignored that and kept punching.

At last, the heart started beating again, and she stopped.

Koi groaned, her eyes fluttering open. She was alive again, but she was still completely out of it, no tension in her eyes at all.

"Oh . . . did I die again?" she said awkwardly.

Mai was less angry than exhausted.

"I'm glad it doesn't bother you any, but try and have mercy on your minder. If we lost a combat synthetic human to an accident . . . you really would be a Jagdtiger."

All records of that tank destroyer suggested that the armor was so strong that no enemy bullets could destroy it, but the engine was much too weak to move the heavy frame, and it was constantly stalling, or the gears would break, and the operators were often forced to destroy it themselves. And the suspension it rode on was so delicate the German tank drivers said it was like a lump of iron on a box of eggs.

And this girl was just like that.

Mai glanced down at the girl's exposed chest, and all the ribs she had just broken had already healed themselves. There wasn't even a bruise.

(How can anyone heal like that? Especially when the heart stops all the time! She can't even ride in a damn car. . . .)

There was no balance at all. But the thing Mai could not

work out was what about the situation earlier had been so shocking.

Koi looked around her, vacantly murmuring, "Where . . . is Kunio?"

How long had she been dead? Mai wondered. "Um . . . as you might have noticed, we're in the girls' bathroom? If that man was in here, he'd be arrested," she spat.

"R-right . . . Yes," Koi stammered listlessly. She mechanically did up her front and sighed.

Watching her, Mai began to get a sinking feeling.

(You can't be serious. . . .)

3

These problems caused no end of production delays for the Jagdtiger, but it was so large that even when it did reach the battlefield, it was difficult to deploy. There were ten Jagdtigers made with the Porsche variant, despite the concerns about the suspension, but before those concerns could even become an issue, the tracks in front of the train conveying them were bombed, and they were stuck at a station far behind the lines. It was out of the question for them to travel any great distance on their own power. None of the Tiger series the enemy feared so much were able to travel more than 10 km/hour on even the flattest of roads without breaking down, and they used so much gasoline that they were nearly impossible to keep supplied. . . .

. . . A year later, Koi was Kunio's wife, and her name was Koi Koryo. Her surname had changed fluidly depending on her mission, but at last she had acquired a permanent name.

"Remember, this is nothing more than an excuse for you to observe Kunio and his strange power closely," Mai reminded her pointedly. They had been forced to use the cover

story created when they had first met Kunio, so Koi was now her sister. They were forced to act like sisters when anyone else was around.

Koi . . . spent all her time with the strangest feelings.

At first, her heart had beat wildly every time she met Kunio, to the point where she had to drink a lot of stabilizers before each meeting, to prevent her stalling again. But lately she no longer needed that.

Now, instead of her heart beating, she felt as if her body temperature shot up. A very strange sensation, and it left her awfully dizzy, as if she were walking on clouds.

(. . . What is it?)

These feelings were completely alien to her, but she had not noticed something important: She no longer wondered what the point of it was when she watched people laugh or cry on TV or in the street.

Today she left the apartment where she and Kunio lived, going shopping. She got motion sickness on the bus, but she could handle a bicycle on flat roads, so she always went to the neighborhood supermarket on one. She and Kunio had picked it out together on his day off, and she loved it dearly.

She sat bolt upright, pushing the pedals steadily, never traveling at any great speed, the wind brushing past her face.

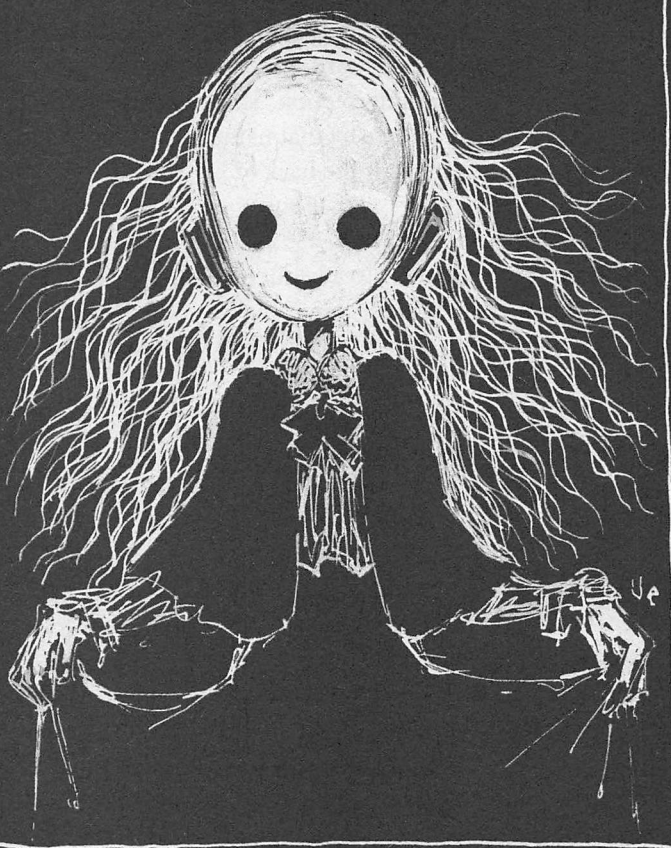
It felt good, and before she knew it, she was smiling. Anyone who saw her would have thought she was a happy newlywed.

There were two people looking at her now, waiting for the walk light on the other side of the street—a gaunt middle-aged man and a girl young enough to be his daughter.

Koi stopped at the light and glanced around her . . . and met the man's eyes.

He was staring right at her, as if he could see right through her.

(PorscheLaufwerk)



Koi shivered, feeling a sudden chill.

The girl next to him was grinning. But there was something about that smile that did not suggest happiness at all, something unnatural.

(Who . . . is that? She looks familiar, but . . .)

She couldn't place her. She honestly was not sure she remembered much of anything before she met Kunio.

The light turned green, and they came walking toward her. Koi began pedaling forward, passing them.

As she cleared the intersection, she remembered Mai's voice saying, "Don't call me by that name, Katyusha." A fragment of memory, caught at the back of her mind.

(Oh . . . We met after . . . that bull.)

Koi looked back.

The two of them were already out of sight.

The organization was so large that even those who belonged to it, depending on their mission, might not be friendly.

Koi shivered again and almost threw up.

She remembered the look in the girl's eyes.

It was just like that bull when it was charging toward her.

▼▲▼

"Well, Bracke? You locked onto her?" the girl said, addressing the gaunt middle-aged man.

He nodded. "Yeah, I have her scent, Katyusha," he whispered.

He had the same name as a type of dog, one similar to a dachshund, and completely unsuitable for a man with such long arms and legs.

But if they knew what the name meant, few would be able

to hide their shock. Bracke also meant "blood oozing from a wound," and Bracke had been bred to follow that scent anywhere, chase it, and catch it, even inside its lair.

▼▲▼

It took a long time for her to calm down. Koi arrived home ten minutes later than usual.

She stood outside the apartment door, trying to get the key into the lock. But her fingers were trembling, and it would not go in. . . . And then the lock was suddenly opened from the inside.

Koi jumped. Kunio should not be home from work this early, but there he stood, smiling down at her.

"Ah . . . ahhh . . . W-welcome home, Kunio."

"Thanks. And the same to you, Koi," he said.

When he smiled at her, Koi never knew quite how to respond. She slipped past him, her head down, stepping into the room.

"Ah! The laundry . . . ," she said, seeing the piles of folded clothes. Kunio must have taken them off the line. Which meant he had come home ages ago.

(In which case . . .)

Since Katyusha and her partner had been coming from the direction of the apartment, there was a strong chance they had been observing him on his way home.

Had they been following him?

"Yeah, it was dry," Kunio said, so nonchalantly that Koi felt the anxiety in her heart swell.

"Sorry . . . ," she whispered, bowing her head. She felt so inadequate. She might well have made a serious mistake. . . .

"Nah, it was nothing."

Kunio was always so good to her. He took the shopping

bags out of her hands and carried them into the kitchen before she could protest.

"What's for dinner? Mackerel?" he asked, peering into the bag.

"Uh, um . . . Sorry," Koi said, apologizing reflexively again. Even she did not know why.

"Want me to cook?"

"N-no, I can do it. But . . . thank you," she said, fretting. She had much more important things to say to him than this weirdly stiff conversation they were having.

"Sure," Kunio said, clearly not bothered at all.

At last the rice was cooked, and the room filled with the pleasant smell of roasting fish. Koi had to rely on the nutritional fluid for sustenance, but she could eat. She took only a small portion, and it went right through her, unprocessed . . . but she liked eating with Kunio and so did not complain. She had no preferences at all where flavor was concerned, so she always watched him intently, trying to work out what he liked.

She placed the dishes on the table, and they sat opposite each other and began eating.

Neither spoke. They almost never had any real conversation over dinner. If Kunio did not say anything, Koi could never bring herself to speak first.

Koi always finished eating first, since she took only enough to find out how it tasted. She would then sit quietly, waiting for him to finish.

Kunio took a bite of fish, but as his teeth sank into it, he suddenly winced.

"Ah!" Koi jumped to her feet, turning pale. A bone had clearly poked him inside his mouth. "S-sorry! Are you okay?" she asked anxiously.

Kunio remained perfectly calm. "Yeah, it's nothing. Just scraped my gum a little. No big deal."

"I'm sorry. . . . I should have been more careful getting the bones out . . . ," she said, feeling absolutely miserable. She could not bear to see him injured at all.

"Nobody can get all the bones out of mackerel. I was just eating too fast," he said.

Koi sat for a long moment, head down, saying nothing.

Kunio put the bone back in his mouth, broke it between his molars, and swallowed it, resuming his meal as if nothing had happened.

(—Ah.)

Koi felt as if her head were spinning.

She remembered the orders she had been given when she first met him.

"He might be dangerous. . . ."

"You know to fire without hesitating, right?"

She could never do that, and she would never do that, but as far as the organization was concerned, that situation had probably not changed.

(I have to . . . I have to do something . . . but . . . augh . . .)

What could she do?

Was there anything she could do?

How could she warn him that he might be in danger?

Koi did not really think about it.

Before she knew it, she had looked up and begun babbling, "Uh, um, I . . ."

"Mm?"

"There's something . . . Kunio . . . I have to tell you . . . um . . ."

"What?"

"I . . . um . . ." She was desperate to say something, but if

she said anything secret, that would put him in danger. She needed to be as roundabout as possible, so, in the end, she said incoherently, "I-I'm . . . um . . . a Porsche."

"Eh?"

"A P-PorscheLaufwerk . . . um . . . Jagdtiger . . . basically."

That was not a code name or anything, just a nickname, so it had nothing to do with the organization itself. But, naturally, it was also completely meaningless to Kunio. In the first place, neither Koi nor Kunio had ever expressed the slightest interest in tanks or the military in general.

". . . What is that? A kind of car? German?"

Most people did not know that Dr. Porsche had not only invented the Volkswagen but had also designed a number of tanks.

Hurriedly, Koi said, "N-no, not that . . . The Jagdtiger is, um, a tank. It has a Porsche suspension . . . designed by Dr. Porsche, a very cheap . . ."

She no longer knew what she was trying to say.

"R-right. First, calm down. What about this tank?" he asked.

Koi was on the verge of tears. "I . . . I, um . . . ," and before she could say another word, the doorbell rang.

Koi jumped and then froze in her chair.

"Er . . . so . . . ," Kunio said, clearly not sure if he should deal with his wife or the ringing doorbell first. When the bell did not stop, he went to the door, where he found . . .

"Hey there! Thought I'd drop in."

It was Mai Kuran.

A horrible cold sweat ran down Koi's spine. Was this a coincidence, or . . .

(Was she listening . . . ?)

Mai came over and sat down next to her. Koi could not hide how much Mai's perfect performance rattled her.

"What's wrong? You look sort of down . . . ," Mai asked.

"No, it's nothing. Really," Koi said awkwardly, shaking her head.

Mai looked at Kunio. "Am I interrupting something? Wouldn't want to interfere with the newlyweds!" she teased, winking.

Kunio laughed, "No, nothing like that. Thanks for coming," he said, smiling at his sister-in-law. Then he turned to Koi. "So, Koi . . . ?" he asked, expecting her to continue the conversation, but she could hardly say anything now.

She sat in silence, her head down.

"Is she looking after you properly? I had my doubts . . . ," Mai said brightly, wresting control of the conversation.

Koi was sure of it now. (She was listening!)

She had come to stop Koi from saying anything. That much was clear.

"Of course she is. Much more than I deserve," Kunio said seriously.

Koi's heart filled with joy and a deep desire to apologize.

Mai giggled in a manner that only those who knew her well could tell was ever so slightly spiteful. "You always this grim? Like a teacher . . . !"

This was absolutely, positively an insult directed at Koi.

"R-really?" Kunio said, entirely missing that nuance.

"Yeah, all straitlaced and firm," Mai said, digging further.

"I don't mean to be. . . ."

"Koi, don't you think he should smile more?" Mai said, turning to Koi. Being as mean as possible.

But this actually came as a relief. If she was being mean, that meant she might be angry but had no intention of disposing of Koi or Kunio for the moment.

"N-no . . . However Kunio wants to be is fine with me," she said, relaxing.

"But you'd like her to smile more, right?" Mai said, turning her edge back toward Kunio.

"No . . . I-I don't . . . ," Kunio stammered.

Koi's relief was an uncomfortable one. As soon as Kunio finished eating, she said, "Um, I'll make some coffee. . . ."

She stood up, clearing Kunio's dishes away.

"Need any help?" Mai asked.

Koi smiled wanly at her. "No, I've got it," she said, shaking her head. It was all she could do to keep Kunio from noticing that a shiver had run down her spine. She put the dishes in the sink, listening to them talk in the other room.

"She still seems a little stressed. Is it still a little awkward for you as well?" Mai was whispering sweetly, clearly well aware that Koi could hear her.

"W-well . . . yeah, a little," Kunio admitted.

Abruptly, Mai growled coldly, "Getting tired of her yet?"

Koi flinched. It felt as if several hours passed before Kunio said anything in response.

But it was only a few seconds. "Wh-what do you mean?" he said, slightly shocked.

Koi's legs nearly crumpled out from under her, but she managed to finish making the coffee. As she poured, Mai came over to her, picked up a cup, and spat, "Don't try that again." There was not a trace of mercy in her voice, no hesitation at all. Mai was showing a side of herself she showed only in a battle to the death.

Before Koi could respond, Mai sniffed the coffee and said, "Smells good," as if nothing had happened at all.

Awkwardly, Koi asked, "What were you talking about?"

"I was telling him what a great husband my sister landed," Mai said, lying without batting an eye.

But what she had said was absolutely true. Koi had ob-

tained happiness she did not deserve and had just been shown again what a delicate balance preserved it. . . .

▼▲▼

While Kunio was in the bath, Koi told Mai about her encounter with Katyusha.

". . . What?" Mai said, her demeanor changing dramatically. It was clearly news to her as well. "What does that mean? What are they doing mixed up in this?"

Naturally, Koi had no idea.

"Is the organization trying to investigate Kunio from a new direction?" Koi said. This was the best explanation her mind had been able to come up with.

Mai ignored her feeble attempts. "Argh . . . Damn. They don't trust us? Or is Kunio Koryo's 'magic' really that high-level? If they've sent two types of combat synthetic human, he must be at least AA class . . . no ordinary MPLS. Or is he of an entirely different nature?" she muttered.

Koi did not follow any of this.

Then Mai looked right at Koi and asked, "Did you find them? They found you, right?"

Koi nodded. They had shown themselves to her. "But why?"

"Throwing down the gauntlet? Katyusha's just twisted enough. . . . Snotty bitch!" Mai growled, grinding her teeth. It was rare for her to be so openly angry. They must have history.

"Um . . . So if they try to harm Kunio . . . ," Koi said, her voice trembling, "can I . . . protect him?"

Koi sounded a little rattled, but had Mai noticed the edge of certainty behind this question? That she was not asking if she should protect him but if Mai would allow her to?

Mai spat, "Of course. We aren't letting them snatch him away!"

▼▲▼

Koi spent the next few days on edge.

Kunio was officially an employee at a company that manufactured and distributed food, and it was arranged so that he was always out inspecting some aspect of the operation, but, in truth, he was usually meeting with different people according to the organization's instructions. Koi and Mai had not been informed why he was meeting them or whom he was meeting or what he did once he met them. That involved organizational secrets beyond the scope of their duties. Kunio would occasionally mention a few things about the people he met and how much he had liked them, but they had no way of telling how much of this was true and how much of it was cover. At least, that was Mai's opinion, but Koi believed every word of it. She had never mentioned this to Mai, but it was rooted less in a belief that he was meeting a lot of nice people than, "Kunio has no need to lie like that to me—my husband hates wasting his time on things like that."

She was confident of that. His work itself did not seem to be dangerous.

But that also meant that he was not expecting an enemy attack.

"At any rate, when Kunio Koryo is out, I'll stick to him like glue, so you monitor the area around the apartment," Mai said, when she saw Koi ready to go out herself. Kunio was always riding around on trains or in taxis. He would find Koi the moment she started throwing up on the station platform.

"... Okay." She was not entirely satisfied, but even Koi knew this arrangement made more sense. She had to accept it.

Before, she had spent almost all her time in the house, leaving only to run errands, but now Koi spent her time walking around the neighborhood.

Which only served to remind her ...

(The ground is too uneven.... If I expanded my armor, I would barely be able to move....)

The large number of hills was a problem in itself, but all the streets were much too narrow. She needed a circle a good six meters in diameter before she could fight, and it would get stuck every time she tried to move or turn around.

She remembered what Schuberth had said to Mai.

"Good only for open battles."

Painfully true. Unless she was in a wide-open field with a clear view all around, she could barely do anything. She wasn't bad at city battles—she was utterly unsuited for them.

(But ... I have to.)

She searched the area, looking for anywhere an enemy might be hiding, watching foot traffic for anyone suspicious. She spent too much time standing in front of the station and looking around, and a truant officer asked, "Running away? Where are you from? You're still in school ... junior high?" She explained that she was already married and lived nearby, but had a great deal of difficulty convincing him.

She went back to the house before Kunio arrived home, depressed at how little she had found out.

Then, one day, after Kunio left for work, she was getting ready to go searching again when the doorbell rang.

Every muscle in her body tensed. They never had any visitors.

Her vision was much better than normal humans. Her

eyes had been designed to allow her to attack an enemy several kilometers away. She could see through the peephole in the door from the other side of the apartment. . . . There was a woman she had never seen before standing outside. She looked like a normal woman, but Katyusha had looked like an ordinary girl. She could not let her guard down.

(. . . What should I do?)

She fought to keep herself from panicking. She always lost this battle. She could not use her armor indoors, so she could not fight. Even if she tried, she would destroy the walls, and the enemy could easily kill her before it managed to stabilize.

(M-maybe she plans to kill me, hide inside the apartment, and take Kunio by surprise when he gets home. . . .)

With no other options, Koi decided to arm herself. She took a butcher knife from the kitchen and hid it behind her. She moved cautiously to the door and opened it.

". . . Yes?" she asked, trying to sound normal but conscious of the tension in her voice.

The woman's eyes widened slightly, but she soon recovered. "Um, my name is Kuriyama. My husband and I are moving into room 403 today. Thought I should say hello."

She bowed her head. It sounded as if she was just a new tenant—but how could Koi be sure?

"Oh, I see. . . . Nice to meet you," she said, ready to bring out the knife at any moment.

Kuriyama brought out a package of cookies. "A small gift . . . ," she said.

It might be a bomb . . . and with her hands hidden behind her back, Koi could not take it.

"P-put it there!" she said, almost hysterical. Kuriyama seemed a little startled, but not particularly rattled; she put it down on top of the shoe box.

Then she smiled kindly. "Um . . . I really don't have anything to do with your husband."

Koi was so shocked her heart nearly stopped.

(Wh-what . . . is she talking about?)

While Koi was still reeling, Kuriyama bowed her head and left, closing the door behind her.

Koi was left alone. She lowered the knife to the floor, her hands shaking.

She checked up on it later: Kaori Kuriyama had once been Kunio Koryo's classmate. She had nothing to do with the organization; she was an ordinary human.

She might once have been friends with Kunio—Koryo was an unusual enough name that she must have recognized it instantly.

And she had assumed that Koi knew this as well and put her strange manner down to jealousy—never once suspecting she had been fearing for her life.

This understanding came less as a relief than as a reminder of how powerless she was.

(What am I *doing*?)

Koi was so disgusted by her own blockheadedness she wanted to die right there.

But she could not die now, could not even waste time being depressed.

4

The Tiger series is legendary, and was overwhelming in tank battles, but they were not invulnerable. There were flaws in the construction, as I have described, and the Tiger II, aka the King Tiger, was the strongest tank of the war, in one battle, three of them were destroyed by a T34/85, which was less powerful. Lieutenant Alexander

Oskin became a Soviet hero for his feats that day. The Jagdtiger had much the same armor as its sibling, the Tiger II, but it ended the war with barely any actual encounters with enemy tanks. There is now no way of telling how it would have fared in a serious tank battle. . . ."

Mai's eyes flashed, her eyebrows snapping together.

She had been monitoring Kunio Koryo closely whenever he was out of the house—and he was barely doing his work at all, spending the bulk of his time following a woman around, an old classmate of his.

And today he had finally found a secluded place and spoken to her, pretending they had just happened to run into each other.

Judging from the woman's pleased laughter, things were going well.

(This Kaori woman . . . she is a bit like Koi. . . . That his type? Does he always just walk up to girls he likes and start talking to them?)

She continued to watch, a little disgusted . . . and she must have let her guard down, because she did not notice her coming until she was already very close.

They were on a road running along the bank of a river . . . and Katyusha was on the other side.

She was sitting on a bench, fingers locked, grinning—not at Kunio but at Mai.

(Is she alone?)

According to Koi, she should have a partner . . . but there was no sign of him.

As Mai was debating whether to grab Kunio and run away with him, Katyusha put up one finger and beckoned to her.

This annoyed Mai tremendously, but she decided this attitude meant she did not intend to attack Kunio immediately. Mai put her hand in her pocket and pressed the switch

on a device that would send a distress signal to Koi, containing her present location. They were not far from the apartment building. Her "sister" would be here soon. All she had to do was discover her husband cheating and put on a show of appropriate histrionics, and that should avoid any unnecessary trouble.

Mai kicked the ground.

Her feet hit the surface of the water twice, like a stone skipping, and a moment later, she was on the other bank. All this happened in a split second, much too fast for anyone with normal vision to have seen.

Her feet skidded a bit in the sand, and she stopped in front of the other girl.

The speed of Mai's approach neither surprised nor alarmed Katyusha.

She continued to smile impishly. "Hello! Such a long time since we last saw each other . . . yet you look so young!" she said brightly.

"Not as young as you," Mai said, maintaining full scowl.

"Come on, sit down. You'd prefer to keep an eye on Kunio Koryo while we talk, right?" Katyusha said, slapping the bench next to her.

Mai made a sour face, but Katyusha was right. She sat down and got right to the point. "What did you come here for?"

Katyusha cackled, "Now, now, don't you start reading all my lines. Little thief, you must learn to mind your manners," she said. Her eyes were not smiling at all. "Observing Kunio Koryo was *my* job—orders received directly from on high and never rescinded. These days we've begun calling his unusual abilities . . . or techniques? We've started calling them 'magic,' apparently, but you neither know just what that means nor do you particularly care, right?"

"Unnecessary personal interest in missions received is the mark of a fool."

"Yes, yes. Spare me the superficial logic. It must be so much easier to confuse your inability to make accurate situational judgments with loyalty. I am so jealous."

"At least," Mai snarled, well past the point of stopping herself, "I haven't stood calmly by while all my team were slaughtered."

"I did not want them to die. I just had no reason to find a way to save them. And . . . wasn't that situation your fault to begin with, Leb' Wohl?"

Leb' Wohl meant "farewell." It was not a term used as a proper noun. If it were, the person it applied to would spend their life with everyone saying goodbye to them.

"Don't . . . ," Mai rasped. "Don't ever call me that."

"That girl . . . Koi, was it?" Katyusha said, ignoring Mai's anger. "Poor thing, forced to work under you. Hardly the path to a long life, is it?"

She glanced away into the distance, and Mai blinked, following her gaze. Koi was coming along the riverbank, on her bicycle. She was headed toward the spot where Kunio and Kaori were chatting happily, and when Mai looked toward them, she froze.

A strange man was standing in front of them. He was fat and hardly a trained fighter. Not the gaunt synthetic human Koi had described—an ordinary human.

But he was holding a knife.

Mai started to her feet, but Katyusha grabbed her hand and pulled her back down.

With shocking force.

"As I said, monitoring Kunio Koryo is *my* job. I know *exactly* what he is thinking."

"Wh-what do you—?"

"You are not a threat to this test. His innate benevolence and that wife of his, who would happily betray the organization to protect him? They are."

As she spoke, Katyusha stuck out her right arm in Koi's direction, palm open, as if shielding her eyes from the sun.

Instantly, the dirt road around Koi exploded, a cloud of dust rising with the shock wave. A good hundred meters around her.

This was, of course, Katyusha's combat ability, Organ—as Mai knew only too well.

Koi and her bicycle were swallowed up in it, and she got only a momentary glimpse of them being flung aside. . . .

▼▲▼

Koi had left the apartment the moment Mai's emergency signal arrived. Not wanting to waste time waiting for the elevator, she jumped off the veranda. Fortunately, nobody saw. She broke her legs and shattered her knee joints when she landed, but they healed quickly, and she was able to run five seconds later.

It took less than fifteen seconds for her to grab her bicycle and ride away at Formula One car race pit speed.

(Did something . . . happen to Kunio?)

She quickly reached the riverbank where the signal came from. It was a long, straight road, and she could see well into the distance. There were three people down the road, two men and a woman. Koi recognized one back as Kunio's.

The other man pulled out something sharp—a weapon.

(Oh no . . . !)

Koi's attention was focused entirely on the scene unfolding ahead of her; she paid no heed to her surroundings.

So even when her bicycle was flung aside by Katyusha's explosive attack, she had no idea what was happening.

(—eh . . . ?)

Her body slammed into the ground before she was even aware that she was spinning through the air. She found herself lying at the bottom of the embankment.

Her left arm was twisted in a very wrong direction, turned to rubber. The bone had shattered.

It was dark around her.

She had fallen off the embankment and into an abandoned warehouse, surrounded by high walls. When she had been investigating the area, she was unable to gain access, the gates being heavily chained.

(Wasn't it . . . an old paint factory? That's what the Realtor's sign said. . . .)

It had also said No Trespassing and had been sealed up so tight she had been unable to figure out how to get in.

A more acrobatic type such as Mai could easily have escaped, but for a field combat type such as Koi, it looked rather difficult.

(What now . . . ?)

She was clearly in a dangerous situation, so before standing up, before healing her arm, she extended her armor.

Which saved her life.

As her armor expanded, about four seconds after she fell into the warehouse . . . there was an earsplitting sound, like tearing cloth.

No normal human would have been able to identify it. The sounds came so fast they all ran together into one weird noise, but it was the sound of a machine gun firing.

The bullets slammed against the armor around her and were all flung away.

Her armor was as strong as a tank. The machine gun could have shredded a car or a helicopter instantly, but it could not dent her armor.

She slowly picked herself up—with her armor out, she could move only sluggishly, like an elephant tortoise—and turned in the direction the bullets were coming from.

A man in a gray cape was holding a massive machine gun—one much too powerful for an ordinary human to operate unmounted—and firing it in her direction. He was not having any trouble with the kickback, so he must be a synthetic human. He was tall, so this must be the gaunt man she had passed the other day—Bracke.

(He's . . . after me?)

She looked at him, more than a little relieved. At least he would not be after Kunio. If Mai was protecting Kunio, then he would probably not be in any danger.

(. . . But should I shoot him?)

He was a synthetic human from the same organization as she, and it might make things easier if she did not kill him. She would have liked to ask Mai, but that was clearly not possible.

(At any rate . . . I'll try to drive him away.)

She began moving slowly forward. Whenever she moved in combat mode, it always shook her body around violently—she had, after all, been compared to the famously flawed Porsche suspension.

But there were no other ripples. The bullets continued slamming into her armor, but none of them came even close to penetrating it.

The bullets bounced in all directions, and the remains of the building were soon covered with holes.

Bracke quickly noticed that he was at a disadvantage. He began backing away, still firing.

(I can't waste much time. . . .)

She had to get to Kunio's side as soon as possible. She had to finish this quickly.

Koi did not believe her guard was down—she was not overconfident in her power. She had simply been in a hurry to protect her husband.

The only problem was, her opponent knew exactly what was running through her mind.

(When the "hero" Lieutenant Oskin destroyed three King Tigers, he began by waiting where the enemy could not see him, until the enemy tanks had passed him on their way from another battle.)

Even as he watched his attacks bounce off Koi's armor, Bracke did not begin to panic.

(The strength of an enemy is also its greatest problem: If you understand the nature of it, then it simply becomes a condition that you must meet.)

He understood her armor.

He knew her cannon was very powerful.

And he knew that she could not move quickly, could not adapt to changes in the situation.

He turned around and vanished—moving where she could not see.

▼▲▼

(He ran away?)

Koi lost track of Bracke instantly.

She looked around her, but with the weight of her armor, she could not look around very quickly. It was as if she were in a swimming pool filled with honey.

(. . . Uh-oh . . .)

If he had fled, then she could not waste time here. But she would not be able to climb back up the bank with her armor extended.

(What should I do?)

As she waffled, a dull shock hit her from behind.

(. . . Mm!)

Clearly, he had not fled. He had simply moved around to her blind spot.

(Hurry. . . .)

She turned in the direction of the attack, but he had already moved elsewhere, and she could not find him.

(Then the other way around . . . the way he runs . . .)

Koi moved carefully, trying to lead him.

She knew he was avoiding her gaze. Which meant she could use that. . . .

When she turned, the enemy would move in the other direction, where she could not see. . . . And for a moment, he would stop shooting.

(Right, that little passage, between the walls and the bank!)

Koi had not been able to see inside the place, but she knew the lay of the land around it.

When she finished turning, the enemy could only be standing there. The only way for him to escape would be to run toward her.

(Will he surrender? Who cares!)

Wrapped in his gray cape, he stood in the middle of the passage, pointlessly firing his machine gun at her.

Koi stepped slowly forward, bullets scattering in front of her.

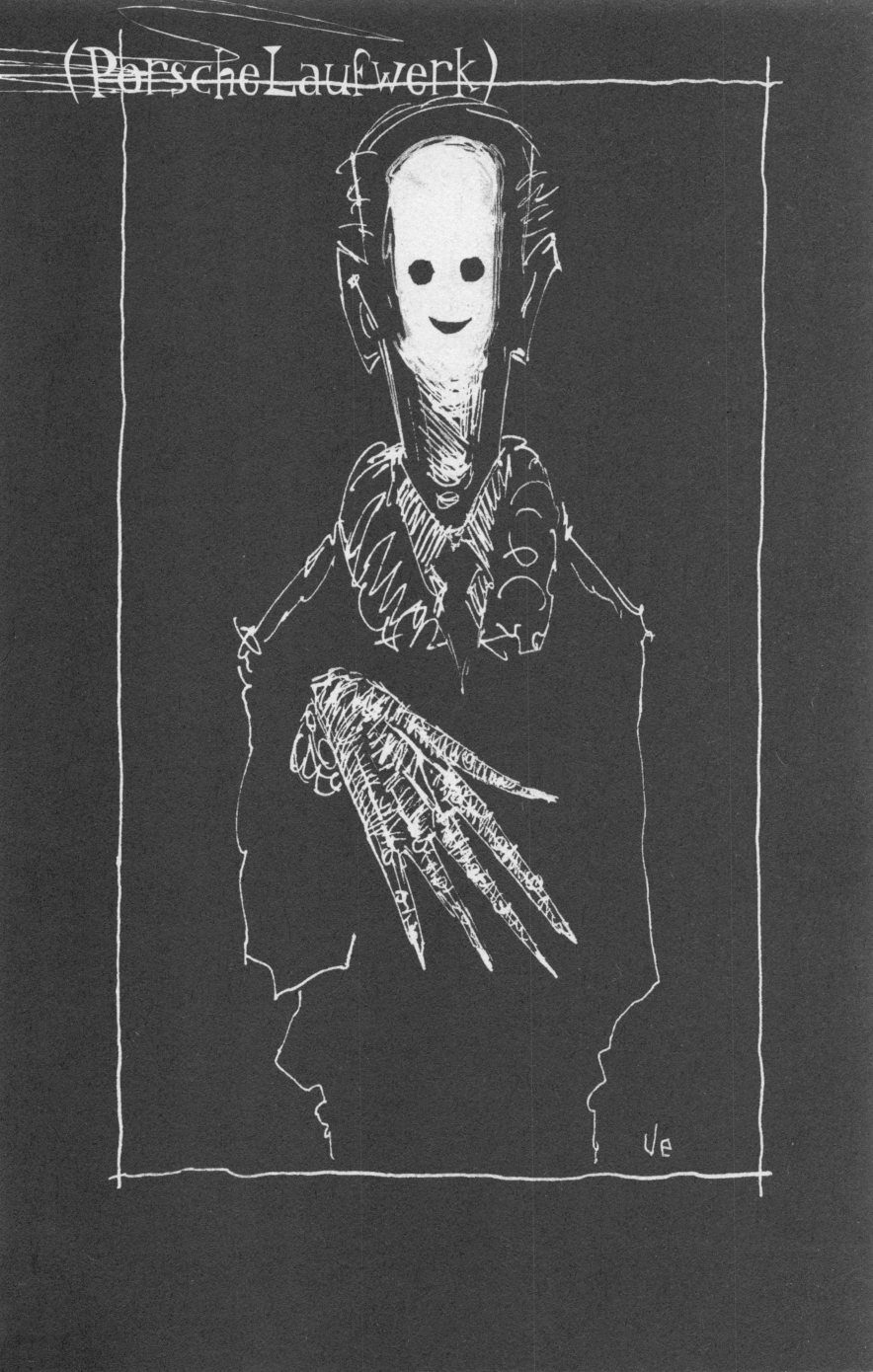
The enemy did not try to run. Her impenetrable armor was getting close to him now, but he was either frozen with fear or had been brainwashed so he could not flee. Either way, he did not budge.

(If that's the way you want to play it . . .)

She sped up a little.

(I'll crush you!)

She did not need to fire. The armor itself was more than


(PorscheLaufwerk)
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strong enough. It was like being hit by a bulldozer, and he was flattened by its weight.

The gun was pushed aside, firing bullets at random, and the person holding it fell apart. . . .

(Fell apart . . . ?)

She noticed too late.

It was something much more fragile than a human, let alone a synthetic human—a doll.

He had hidden a doll here in advance and set it up so it would look as if it were firing the gun, which was on autofire. It was covered in the gray cloak to keep her from noticing.

And if the cloak itself was there only to make this disguise work . . .

(—! Oh n—)

Koi tried to turn around but was too late.

Something hit her hard on the back of her head and she fell unconscious.

Scattering drops of blood.

▼▲▼

Bracke had been hiding directly behind her.

He had been well aware that she would try to chase him into the dead end.

He had very carefully made her think she was leading him there. People always believe what they want to believe. Koi did not want to admit that she was in mortal peril. She had wanted to believe that she stood a fair chance against her opponent—and he had used that against her.

Katyusha's Organ had not killed her outright, and she had managed to expand her armor before he could fire the machine gun. She was tougher than they had expected, but she had relied on her armor too much. There was only one thing

she could have done upon tumbling into the warehouse—run as fast as she could.

Bracke's ability was called Ratsch-Bumm, a fairly common power among synthetic humans—it fired concentrated shock-wave bullets into his opponents. It may have been a common power, but used carefully, with a good plan, it was fully capable of taking down a superbuild. As strong as Bullet Head's armor was, from a close distance, from her blind spot, Ratsch-Bumm had easily broken through it, and Koi's head had shaken, sprayed blood . . . blood . . .

(. . . . . Eh . . . . .)

There had been blood. He had seen it. But . . .

> *At the time, Alexander Oskin was being considered for promotion to second lieutenant, and it is true that he used an inferior tank to destroy the enemy King Tigers, but at the same time, this was an incident that demonstrates just how terrifying the enemy tanks could be. Caught totally by surprise, three shells fired from close by hit the tank on the side, the weakest point, but not one managed to penetrate the Tiger II's armor. He was only able to destroy it by aiming at the turret ring between the cannon and the body of the tank, shouting, "Monster!" and "Cursed by Witches!" all the while. And the heavier tanks—the Elefant, Jagdpanther, and Jagdtiger—they had turrets that were part of the body, and no joints to hit.*

Her head shook, and she lost consciousness for a second . . . but only for a second.

Koi could smell blood. Her nose was bleeding. Nothing major. Her nose always started bleeding when someone hit her.

The words Mai always said to her echoed in her mind.

Do not hesitate.

Before the phrase was even complete, her body was moving. She took aim at her opponent—who was still, for some reason, standing stock-still where he had been when he fired Ratsch-Bumm—and fired.

The strange sound of air churning past her lips . . . but her enemy never heard it. Before the sound reached his ears, the attack itself had turned his body to smithereens. And the attack was not intended to destroy anything as flimsy as his body, and carried right on, destroying the floor and the wall behind it and so much of the embankment it nearly reached the river before finally losing steam. The sound of this destruction all blurred together, and sounded less like an explosion and more like a metallic crunch.

▼▲▼

That sound reached the ears of Mai and Katyusha as well.

"Oh, looks like she finally killed Bracke. Took longer than I expected," Katyusha said, not sounding at all put out.

Mai was in no state to notice. They had moved up higher and were watching a different situation unfold.

In front of them, Kunio Koryo was grappling with the fat knife-wielding deviant in an abandoned school by the riverside.

They had left Kaori Kuriyama standing on the bank, fallen into the river, and been dragged downstream a bit—at almost exactly the same time as Katyusha's Organ had sent Koi tumbling into the abandoned warehouse. Neither of them had noticed or heard the explosion.

Kaori Kuriyama, however, had noticed both and was standing frozen to the spot, neither running away nor trying to help Kunio.

And . . . she did not need to do either.

As the man with the knife lunged at Kunio Koryo, Katyusha whispered, "Here it comes."

Mai did not need to ask what.

A flash of light tore across the sky, followed by a noise so loud it drowned out the memory of the earlier crunch.

Lightning had struck the knife directly, just before it killed Kunio Koryo, as if it were drawing the lightning in . . . and turned to ash.

Thunder this close left Mai clutching her ears in pain. She groaned aloud.

Katyusha's voice broke the silence. "Lightning . . . what the ancients called the voice of the gods. One of the things nobody can control . . . supposedly. Far, far more powerful than any electrical generation techniques. The only thing that even matches its strength is the nuclear bomb. And that just came out of nowhere and destroyed Kunio Koryo's enemy with pinpoint accuracy. Do you understand what that means?"

". . . Mm . . ."

"Yes. Your little pawn, that Bullet Head . . . will never be able to stop *him.*"

Mai could think of no response, so she made none.

When she looked up, Katyusha was gone. She must have gone to report this incident to the organization.

She gritted her teeth. She had been unable to do anything.

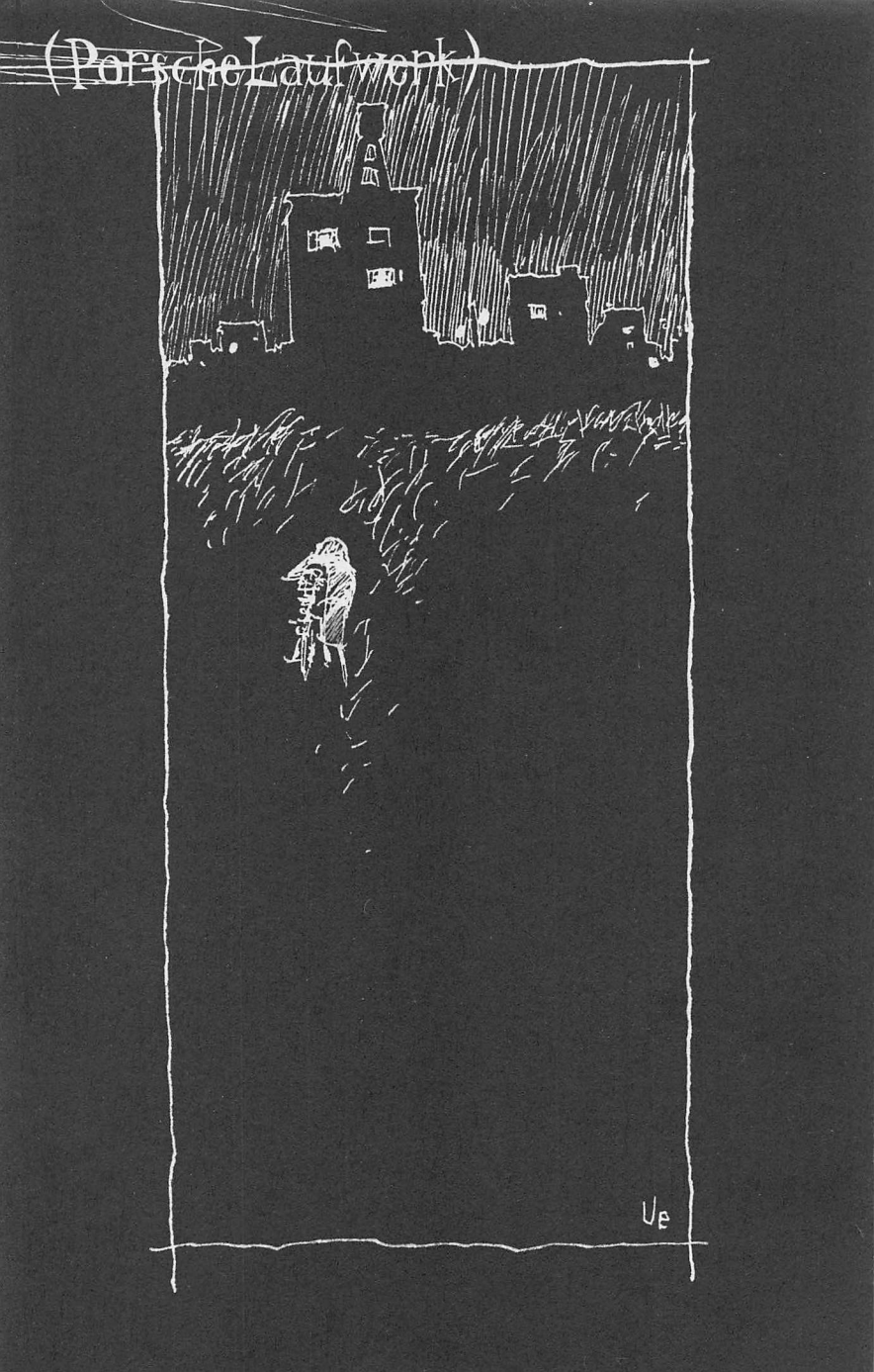
She fled the scene, heading for the warehouse, where her "sister" was.

The one blast fired had left the place a shambles, but . . .

(Such half-assed destruction . . .)

It lacked the ability to destroy everything in its path, it lacked the ability to focus only on the elimination of that target—it was just a rough, blunt force.

(Such a pain to clean up after . . . Not a patch on Reset or Bargain Wagen.)


(Porsche Laufwerk)
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She found the person she was searching for a moment later. She had just dropped her armor and was on all fours, throwing up.

Irritatingly defenseless.

"Hey," Mai said. Koi looked up, still looking out of it.

"Uh, um . . ."

"Nice job surviving. Kunio's fine. Don't worry," she said, sounding bored.

Koi gave a huge sigh of relief. "Oh . . . Oh, good."

She staggered to her feet. And began walking away. Up the bank to where her bicycle was sticking out of the settled dirt. She pulled it out, discovered it was still mostly in one piece, though the front wheel and pedals were a little bent, and the paint chipped.

"You could buy another one," Mai said skeptically.

Koi's eyes were not yet fully focused, but she shook her head blearily. "Kunio chose it for me."

She managed to pop the chain back on the gear and climbed on top, ready to ride it away.

She tried to ride up the side of the bank, almost slipping back down a few times, but finally made her way to the top.

Mai made no attempt to ask where she was going.

She was going home at once, to make dinner for her husband. But . . .

(That man is a monster who could easily change the world forever. . . .)

Whether she knew that or not . . . to Koi, it would not have mattered in the slightest.

The bike wobbled from side to side on the uneven ground, bobbing up and down like an overly heavy tank mounted on a sloppily made PorscheLaufwerk, as she rode slowly away into the setting sun.

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Where the Wind Blows

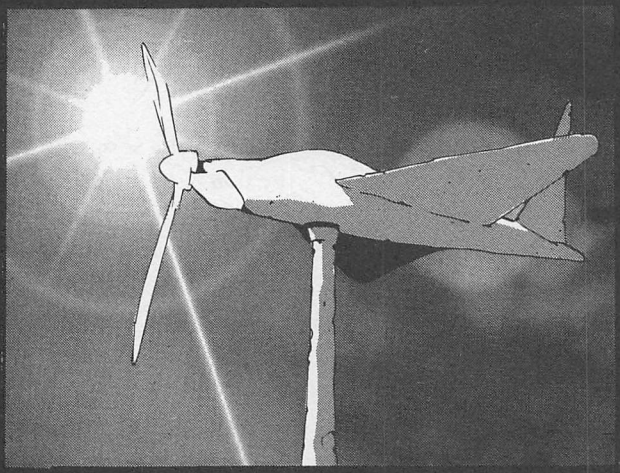
Otsuichi

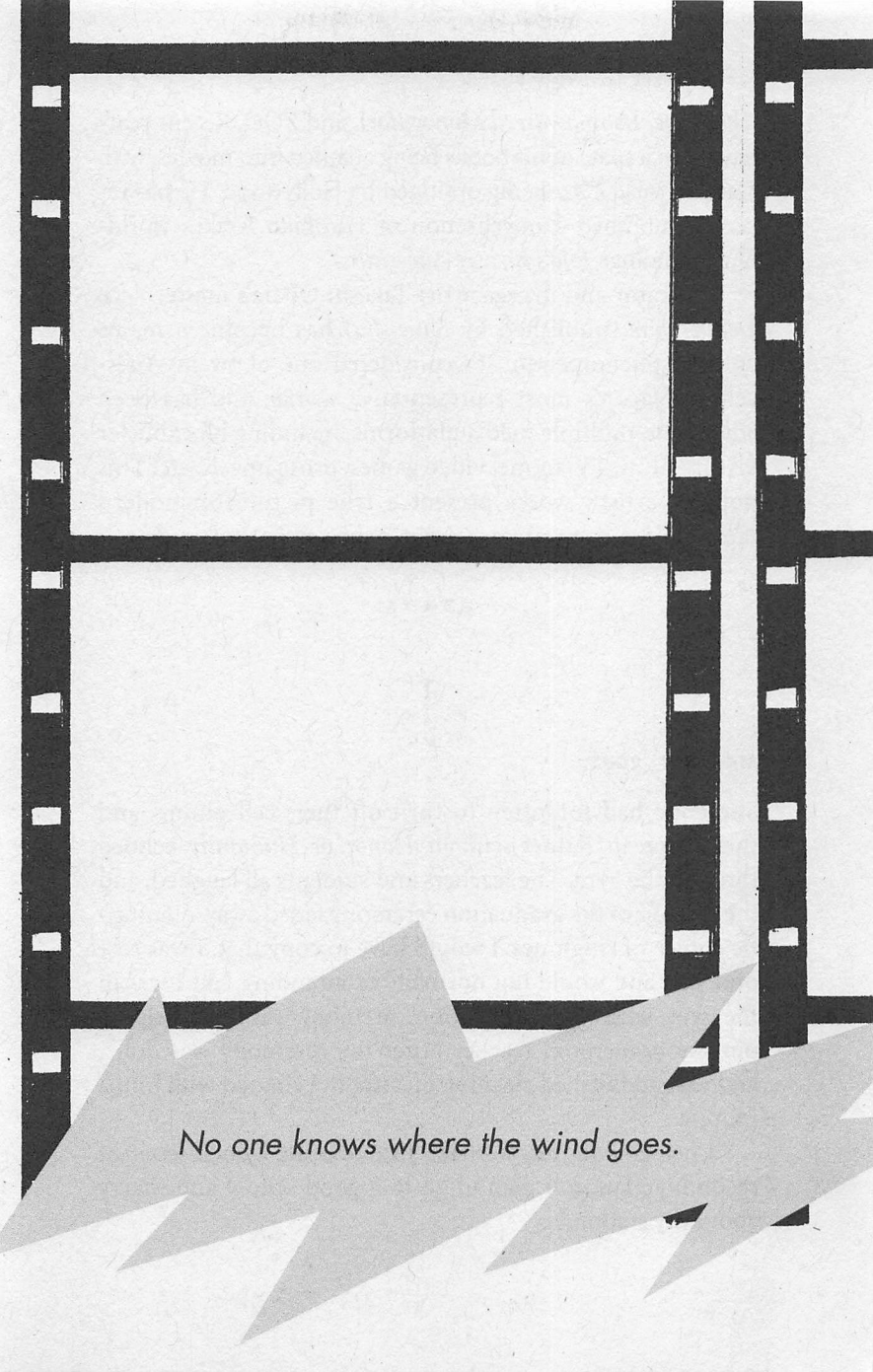
Illustrations by Takeshi Obata
Translated by Andrew Cunningham

"Where the Wind Blows" begins with a song playing in the heroine's head: It's the theme to the classic Japanese gangster film *Battles without Honor or Humanity* (*Jingi naki Tatakai*), directed by Kinji Fukasaku, and known as the Japanese *Godfather.* Otsuichi uses this reference to begin immersing us in the world of an ordinary suburban teenager—who is about to experience some extraordinary events. That a crucial scene takes place in Book Off—a popular and ubiquitous used bookstore chain that allows readers to linger in the aisles, sampling manga—further grounds the magical in the everyday, making this fantastical story all the more persuasive and enchanting.

Readers of the first *Faust* anthology will welcome the return of an Otsuichi/Takeshi Obata collaboration: "F-sensei's Pocket," from the first volume, has much of the same lyrical and melancholy charm that distinguishes "Where the Wind Blows." Born in 1978, Otsuichi was an award-winning novelist from the start, with his debut, *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse* winning the 6th Jump Novel and Nonfiction Award's grand prize. This was followed with another triumph in 2003: His novel *Goth Wristcut Case* won the 3rd Honkaku Mystery Prize. Typical of his work are the novels *A Gun and*

In response to your passionate calls of love, Otsuichi's wind blows through Faust *again!*




No one knows where the wind goes.

Chocolate, Ushinawareru Monogatari, and *ZOO.* Recent years have seen a spate of his books being adapted into movies, with *Goth Wristcut Case* being optioned by Hollywood. He has recently published a novelization of Hirohiko Araki's world-famous manga *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure.*

Illustrator and manga artist Takeshi Obata's masterpiece *Death Note* (published by *Shueisha*) has become a major cultural phenomenon: It's considered one of twenty-first-century Japan's most representative works, and has been adapted to multiple media platforms, including blockbuster feature films, TV anime, video games, prose novels, etc. This popular artist's works present a true picture of modern Japan. His current project is the manga series *Bakuman.*

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MARCH 1, 2005.

Someone had forgotten to turn off their cell phone, and the theme to *Battles without Honor or Humanity* echoed through the gym. The teachers and students all laughed, and the tension of the graduation ceremony faded away. A fantastic choice of ringtones. I would have to copy that. I was second year and would not normally be attending, but I was in the gym, where the graduation ceremony was held, helping out my homeroom teacher. After the ceremony was done, and we had finished cleaning up after it, I chatted with him a minute.

"I helped you out, so make sure to write a good letter of recommendation. I plan to go to a good school and marry above my station."

"I'll miss teaching you next year."

"I'll miss being taught by you."

"Kozue Matsuda, make more friends in your next class."

"I do not need friends."

"Poor thing."

I said goodbye and left. As I changed shoes at the shoe lockers, a male student holding a diploma passed me. His uniform had no buttons. Ah, youth. Not that I cared. As I left the school, I saw girls holding bouquets and looking nervous. Waiting for their favorite *senpai** to come out, I guess. How adorable. A world that was not for me.

Make friends. It was not the first time he had said that. I generally kept to myself, and that must have worried him. I had only one person I could really call a friend. Even though I had been an ordinary child, with any number of friends, I had changed when I moved here.

I could see my breath. The March wind retained its chill. I held my coat closed, walking toward the station. While I waited for the train, I looked to see if the theme to *Battles without Honor or Humanity* was available on my phone, but it was not. My phone was several years old, long since fossilized, and was not designed for advanced ringtone services. As good an excuse as any. Time for an upgrade.

So I headed to the electronics store. Brand-new designs in little rows. While I was trying to decide which to buy, one design caught my eye.

It was a cutting-edge design. But one I had seen several years before. According to the pamphlet, the design had just been released at the beginning of the year. I should not have

* *Senpai* An honorific form of address for one's senior in a group or organization. It is most often used in a school setting by underclassmen to refer to upperclassmen.

seen it that long ago. I thought about it for a moment and figured it out.

I left the shop and walked up the hill. My house was at the top of the hill. I gave my brother a rub on the head and then went to my room and took a cardboard box out of the closet. It was filled with all kinds of things—a child's kite (a strange one, shaped like an airplane) and a tiny Christmas tree, etcetera—just things I'd picked up and dumped in here.

I had remembered correctly, and there was a cell phone in the box. I took it out and looked it over. No mistaking it; I had seen that brand-new design years ago. It was the same design as I'd seen in the shop today.

Well, that explained why I had seen it before. Several years ago, I had picked up a phone that had gone on sale only this year.

My family had moved here five years ago, in March 2000. We had lived in apartments before, but my father had taken out a thirty-year loan and built a house. We moved in as soon as I graduated from elementary school, and I remember being upset at having to say goodbye to all my friends.

"Starting today, this is your room, Kozue."

"Wow!"

My mother had led me to a room on the second floor, and the view from the window was so astonishing I had reacted positively despite myself. The house was built on top of a hill, and I could see the whole town through the window.

"Let's let some air in," my mother said, and opened the window. An astounding burst of wind swept into the room. Like in the movies, when they open the window on a plane. The difference in the air pressure inside and out means a huge amount of air rushes out of the hole, and everyone panics. And I was experiencing that now. The gust of wind

hurled scraps of paper and slippers and other bits of stuff into the room, thrashing them around like a washing machine. My mother quickly closed the window, and the socks and textbooks that had been flying around the room dropped to the floor. The same wind came in the next day and the day after; it showed no signs of stopping.

"Perhaps we built the house on the Path of the Wind," my father said, smearing wasabi on a piece of sashimi. We were eating sashimi for dinner that evening.

"The Path of the Wind?"

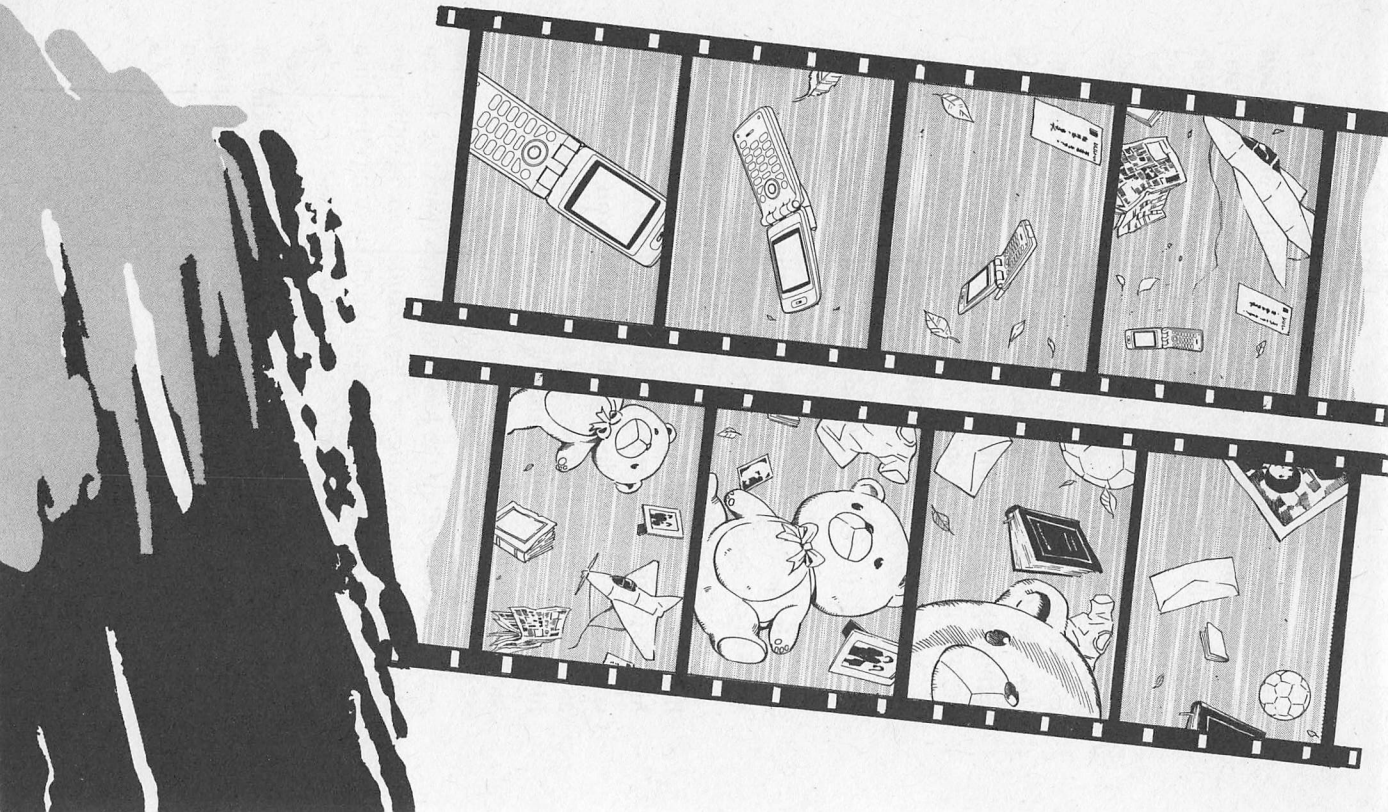
"You can't see it, but the ancients believed there was such a thing."

"Why is there wind only in my room? Nothing comes in the windows on the first floor."

"Only the top half of the house is on the Path of the Wind. Want to change rooms, Kozue?"

A few days after we moved in, one of the people who had built the house came by for an inspection. My mother asked him about the wind, and he told her that the workers, while constructing the roof, had nearly been blown off the building any number of times. There did seem to be an invisible strip of air where the wind constantly blew, and that strip hit the second story of our house.

I didn't think it would be a problem at first, but it was a real pain cleaning up the leaves and flyers that collected on my veranda. The railings of the veranda were like the nets fishermen use, and they caught all kinds of things the wind was carrying past. Sometimes I found underwear or socks mixed in with the leaves. I would like you to imagine the feelings of a twelve-year-old girl forced to throw out that kind of thing, worn by God knows who. But I did not want to change rooms. Occasionally, very strange things would wash up on my veranda, and collecting those was surprisingly fun. An



old, well-loved teddy bear, a new telephone card, not yet used. Boat tickets. A paperback with a bookmark inside.

Photographs showed up fairly often. Memorial photographs with large groups pictured, pictures of couples at the seaside. Pictures that looked as if they must have flown in from overseas. One picture was half burned away, and a black-and-white photograph that looked as if it must have been taken early in the Showa era. I put all of these into a file and looked at them when I was bored, letting my imagination run wild.

Even more common than pictures were letters. Envelopes and postcards were constantly appearing on my veranda. Some had been posted; some had not. Some were open; some were sealed. When they piled up a little, I would take them to the post office, explain what had happened, and have them mailed again.

"This is so weird . . . ," the man across the counter said, on the fourth or fifth visit. He frowned down at the pile of envelopes and postcards.

Nervously, I said, "I swear! They really were on my veranda."

"Ah, no, I'm sure they were. Just . . ." He pointed to the stamp on the corner of the envelope.

I followed his meaning now. "The postmark is from the year after next."

"Not just that . . . This New Year's card . . . ," he said, holding out a postcard. It was the wrong time of year for one to begin with, but the year on it was A.D. 2005. Five years in the future. The stamp even had an illustration for the Year of the Rooster.

Certainly a strange situation, but not my fault. I left the matter for the post office to solve. But on the way home, I could think of little else.

A hunch was forming at the back of my mind. I opened the photo album and looked at each picture carefully. Ten of the pictures I'd found on my veranda had dates on them. My attention focused on one of these: a picture of a married couple and their kid, standing in front of a giant Buddha. I showed it to my parents, and they said it was the Buddha in Kamakura. The date on the photograph was one month after I first looked at the date.

Why was it a future date?

But one month from now was perfect. When that day came, I went to where the picture was taken. Kamakura was a little bit far, but I was well behaved, and my parents agreed to let me go. I boarded an early train and waited about four hours in front of the great Buddha before I saw that familiar family arrive. I checked the picture, and they were definitely the same people. Same clothes, same hair, same bags in their hands.

"Would you take a picture?" the mother said, coming over to me with a camera. I was the only person near the Buddha, and she must have assumed that even a child knew how to work a camera. I hid the picture in my pocket and said sure.

The same framing, the same pose. The image I saw through the viewfinder was the same one I had in my pocket. I pushed the button, marveling. I thought about the mysteries of time all the way home. I was sure the picture I had taken would be swept away on the wind someday. Sucked into the sky, to pass beyond some border we could never cross.

In the years that followed, my veranda continued to catch what the wind brought. Sometimes I took them to the police box;* sometimes I threw them away. When I did not want to

* *Police box* A small kiosk from which community police officers work.

do either, I shoved them into the cardboard box in the back of my closet.

MARCH 5, 2005.

After school, I stood reading a weekly newsmagazine and saw the headline: "Man, 27, Stabs Father in Argument." I read the article. The man was unemployed, a shut-in, and when his family had tried to force him to get a job, he had grabbed a kitchen knife. An awfully common pattern, I thought, feeling depressed. Stories like this were all over the news.

My friend Kyoko Inoue finished buying a banana and came over to me. I put the magazine back on the shelf so she wouldn't see. We left the store and headed for the usual abandoned building.

Kyoko Inoue and I often went to an abandoned building in the shopping arcade. It had office chairs there, and it was quiet, and so much better than talking in a coffee shop. No matter how many times we went in, nobody had ever yelled at us. We went up the stairs to the third floor. When I looked out the window, I saw a couple holding hands, and my chest hurt. I remembered a face I had thought long forgotten.

"About that cell phone you gave me," Kyoko Inoue said, pulling it out of her bag. The one that had been sleeping in my closet.

"Did it work?"

"Yeah, my recharger fit. It turned on."

I guess it wasn't broken. Kyoko Inoue adjusted her glasses and gazed down at the phone. She was my one friend at school and knew about the things that caught on my veranda. When I told her about the phone, she had borrowed it, saying she wanted to investigate.

"If it works, should we give it back to the owner? Was there anything inside to indicate who it belongs to?"

"There were several names in the contacts list. How long ago did you find this?"

"A few months after I moved in . . . five years ago?"

"Well, the last time it was used was February 2005 . . . about a month ago. The wind must have taken it in the last month."

How complicated. They had lost it only recently, but I had picked it up five years ago. If the internal clock had kept time accurately, the screen would be displaying 2010. 2010. A critical year for me.

"I'll take it to the police, then."

"Please."

"If it rings, I'm going to answer it and say a friend picked it up."

"Assuming the phone call isn't from five years in the future."

"Ooh, that's clever, Matsuda!"

2010. Five years from now. If the person on the phone knew what had happened to me, I hoped they would tell me.

We each ate half the banana, then left the building. The sun was setting, and a great throng was churning through the red-tinged arcade. Shivering, Kyoko Inoue and I went into Book Off—you know, the used bookstore. I always bought my books new. I would never buy them used. But I came here occasionally to stand and read. Forgive me. I stood and read some shojo manga.

"You heard of Mika Nakahara? Just won a new-author prize," I said.

Kyoko Inoue was standing next to me. "She just had her first story published the other day, right?"

"Pretty good, wasn't it? She's going to be huge. Household name."

Kyoko Inoue and I both enjoyed reading manga by new authors. I finished the volume I was reading and went to grab the second one off the shelf when someone called my name.

"Kozue, right?"

I turned around. A man was standing there. Long spindly arms, which were placing a pile of books on the counter, ready to sell them. A face I'd spent the last five years trying to forget. Right in front of me.

I dropped the book I'd been pulling from the shelf. Several volumes fell with it, and the clerk turned to stare at me.

"I came back," he said sheepishly. He sounded the same.

I was rattled, a flood of questions shooting through my mind. The books on the counter were all study guides. Had he dropped out of college? Behind me, Kyoko Inoue asked what was going on.

That was five years ago. I had known this might happen someday but had not expected it today. Fate had not been nice enough to let me off the hook. Leaving the shojo manga on the floor, I ran out of Book Off.

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I might have only one friend in class now, but five years ago, in my first year of junior high, I was still happily talking to anyone. I had good grades and was well behaved; I was popular enough and had no trouble making friends. I remember having loads of fun passing notes in class. Tear a page out of a notebook, write a message in colored pen, fold it into a star or a heart, and pass it to your friend when the teacher wasn't looking.

"Kozue, want to do something tomorrow?" said the note from the girl next to me about three months after school started. It was almost time for another trip to the post office, so I sent back a letter to that effect.

It had been roasting hot since July started. I could see other students swimming in the pool through the classroom window. I could hear water splashing and the gym teacher's whistle blowing. I put my chin on my hand and stared up at the cumulonimbus forming on the horizon, keeping an eye on the teacher so I didn't get in trouble.

There was no school the next day, so I took the veranda mail to the post office. It was a sunny day, and the cicadas sang relentlessly. I looked through the mail as I walked and discovered a brown envelope addressed to a house quite close to my own.

The name on the front was Hiroki Takahashi.

Both the name and address were in rather distinctive angular handwriting. It was close enough to walk. The odds against an address being that close seemed astronomical. Or if the wind picked it up locally, was it actually more likely to land on my veranda?

I figured I might as well deliver it in person. I handed over everything but the brown envelope and headed down the road, shimmering in the heat. Plates on the telephone poles indicated the lot numbers, and I followed them, looking for the address on the envelope.

By the time I found it, my shirt was drenched with sweat. A normal house, neither old nor new, with a red roof. I compared the nameplate and the envelope, and it was clearly the right house.

This was where Hiroki Takahashi lived. I was about to put the envelope in the mailbox when I realized someone was looking at me.

"What are you doing?"

A man stood at a window on the second story, looking down at me quizzically. I showed him the envelope.

"Mail for Hiroki Takahashi!"

"For me? Wait, I'll be right down."

He pulled his head in the window, and I heard him clattering down the stairs. So he was Hiroki Takahashi. I was a little flustered by this turn of events but also a little pleased.

When Hiroki Takahashi came outside, I was surprised by his height. I was one of the taller girls in class, but next to him, I looked like a little kid.

"Mail for me?"

I handed him the envelope. When he saw the return address, he gaped.

"From your family?" I asked. The sender's name was also Takahashi.

He nodded, as if he could not believe it. "From my dad . . ."

"He doesn't write much?"

"Nope. He's been traveling."

He opened the envelope in front of me and took out the letter inside.

"Traveling where?"

"The letter says Chiba."

"Not exactly far away."

Couple of hours by train.

"But why are you delivering my dad's letter?"

"I found it. . . ."

"And you came here yourself? You are weird. Have some *mugicha.*"*

I considered shaking my head and going home, but I *was* awfully thirsty.

"Thanks."

He led me past the front door into the garden, where I sat on the porch. The "garden" was just a patch of grass, and no-

* *Mugicha* Roasted barley tea.

body had mowed it in ages. But in the center of the garden was something that caught my eye—a wooden weather vane, shaped like an airplane.

It was fixed to the top of a pole about six feet tall; the propeller was made to spin in the wind, and the wings were shaped so it would always face into the wind. It was painted blue. That day, however, the propeller wasn't moving.

Hiroki Takahashi came back out with a cup on a tray. The cup was filled with *mugicha,* and water beaded its sides.

"If you hadn't brought that letter, I'd never have known he was still alive."

"Did he say when he'd come home?"

"Maybe he never will."

That sounded like a long story. Hiroki Takahashi read the letter standing on the porch, not particularly bothered by my presence. I drank my *mugicha,* gazing up at the weather vane. I quickly cooled off and felt very comfortable.

"Where'd you find this letter?"

"My veranda."

He looked up from the letter. I explained that the wind often carried photographs and mail, and they sometimes got caught on my veranda. I left out the part about them traveling through time, since it seemed too fanciful. He didn't seem to believe me anyway.

"Apparently, there's something over my house called the Path of the Wind."

Hiroki Takahashi stepped down into the garden and looked up at the weather vane. Had he put it there? Or someone in his family? The blue paint was peeling, and it had clearly been there awhile.

"The Path of the Wind? Never heard of it. Sure it's not made up?"

"Fine, don't believe me."

I bowed my head and left. I went out through the gate and down the road the way I had come. I hadn't walked far before I heard a motor approaching from behind me.

"Hey, wait!" A scooter pulled up next to me. Hiroki Takahashi was riding it, wearing a helmet. "I'll give you a ride home. Climb aboard."

"Does that seat two?" Especially without a helmet.

"You're a kid. No one'll care."

A kid? Fine. I certainly didn't mind the lift. I lived up a hill and would have to climb the whole way home. I hopped on behind him.

"Wrap your arms around me, or you'll fall off."

"Takahashi."

"What?"

"You stink."

"You'll live."

It felt weird to put my arms around a man I'd just met, but I forgot about that the moment the scooter started moving. The wind against my face was like no wind I'd ever experienced. Different from the wind on a bike or in a car. It was as if I were sliding along on top of the road.

"Where to?"

"Right here, at the top of the hill."

Without realizing it, I had tightened my grip and was pressed up against Hiroki Takahashi's body. Soon, the scooter was on familiar roads, but for some reason, the trees and road looked different.

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When we reached the top of the hill, Hiroki Takahashi cut the engine. As that sound vanished, the hum of the cicadas took over.

"Mind if I investigate your wind?" he said, looking up at my house.

"You like that sort of thing?"

"I'm thinking about majoring in meteorology. Studying weather. Measuring the flow of the atmosphere, simulating it on computers."

"You're in college?"

"Still studying for exams."

Hiroki Takahashi hung his helmet on the scooter's handlebars.

"The Path of the Wind?" he said, staring up. There was no wind where we stood, and not a cloud in the sky. "Doesn't look windy."

"You can't see it, but it definitely is. The second story and up are always in the wind."

"That tree isn't moving," he said, pointing to a nearby tree. The top of it was taller than our house. But the branches weren't moving, and cicadas were singing away behind the leaves.

"I guess it isn't on the path."

"Mind if I come inside? I'd like to see this veranda of yours."

"Now why should I let you do that?"

"You want to hide something of such obvious scientific interest?"

"I only let friends in my room."

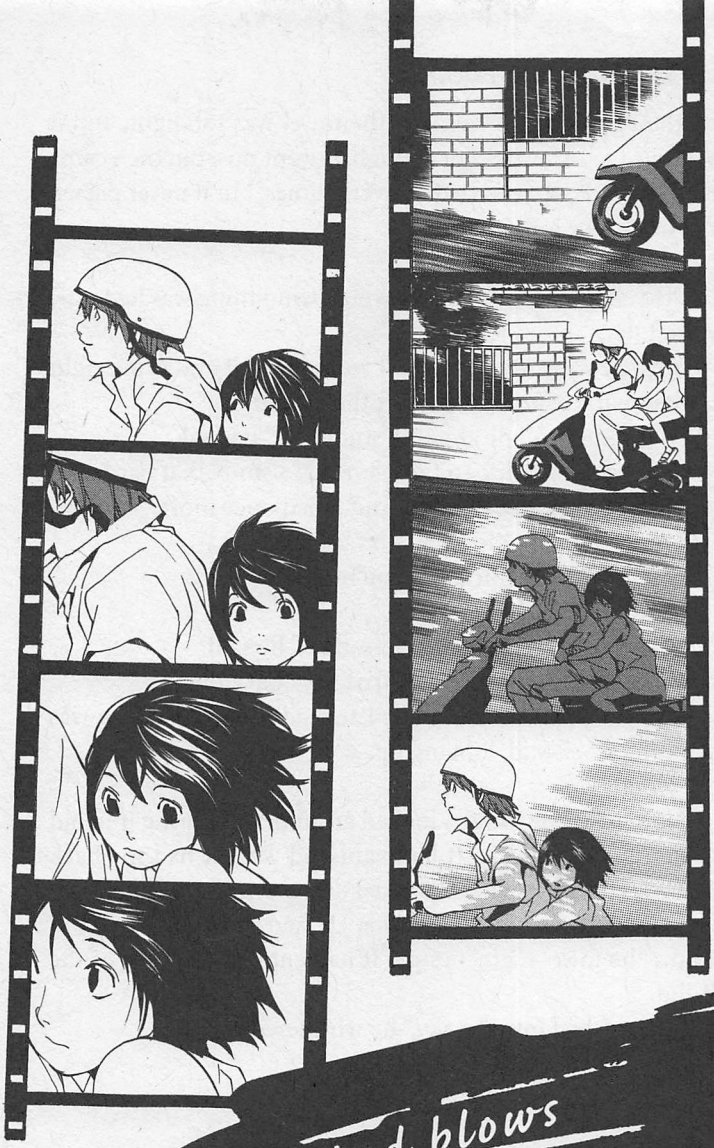
"Guess we're friends, then."

"Snot."

Hiroki Takahashi popped open the backseat of the scooter. I had not known you could do that. He took out a filthy, oil-stained towel.

"The wind hits the second floor?"

He threw the towel straight up. The simplest possible



where the wind blows

method to test for wind. But the towel was too light, and it was hard to throw it high enough. It went up a bit, then came right back down. He tried it several times, but it never passed the first-floor ceiling.

"Heh-heh. How sad."

"Go ahead and laugh! The whole wind thing was just a lie, wasn't it?"

He threw the towel again. It went up a bit and came right back down. He picked it up off the ground.

"Shouldn't you be at home studying?" I asked.

"I get good grades, so I don't need to study that hard."

He threw the towel again. And failed once more.

"You get good grades? So do I."

"Aw, how cute. You think you're smart!"

"You said it first!"

"Man, is this a dumb conversation," he said.

What was his problem? I turned my back on him.

"Uh . . . ?" he said dumbly. I turned around, and he was standing stock-still, looking up.

"What?"

No sign of the towel. I looked around, wondering if it had caught on something. It had vanished while I had my back turned. Hiroki Takahashi looked down at me, stunned, then looked up at the sky again. Aha. He had finally managed to throw the towel high enough. It had entered the Path of the Wind.

"It vanished into the sky," he whispered.

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MARCH 10, 2005.

"Who was the man in Book Off?" Kyoko Inoue asked at school a few days later.

"An old friend."

"Yeah, right. If he was a friend, why'd you run away? It was very awkward after that."

"Did you talk to him?" I asked.

"He asked me a bunch of questions, but I didn't tell him anything, don't worry. There have been too many scary stories on the news."

"He's not a stalker or anything."

"Look, I'm not going to force you to talk about your old boyfriend if you don't want to. . . ."

"No! He's nothing like that!" I protested.

We were alone in the classroom; nobody else had arrived at school yet. If the classroom had been crowded, she would never have come over to talk but would have stayed hunched over on her desk. Kyoko Inoue had been born to be bullied and spent the bulk of her time pretending to be a rock by the side of the road in hopes of not being noticed.

"By the way, that phone rang last night."

"Phone?"

"The cell phone from your veranda," she said.

Kyoko Inoue produced it from her bag. The one that had been in my closet for the last few years.

"The owner called it last night; a woman. She already bought a new one, so she said we could keep it."

She held it out to me.

"Change the paperwork; make it yours. They sell spare chargers at the shop. This is a brand-new one. They have ads for it on TV."

I took it and stared down at it.

"Was she calling from the future?"

Kyoko Inoue shook her head. "The owner resides in the same time frame as us."

"Shame."

"How so?"

"I wanted to ask what had happened to me."

I put the phone in my bag and looked out the window. I could see students coming in through the school gates, surrounded by morning mist. It was almost spring break but still very cold.

"Five years from now, I might not be alive," I said.

Kyoko Inoue blinked at me.

I grimaced. "I'm kidding. Please."

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Hiroki Takahashi came to my house almost every day after we first met, studying the wind over our house. He bought maps of the town and marked the location of my house, then measured its height above sea level.

Another time he showed up with a tank of helium. My parents and I watched with interest as he released a number of balloons into the air. At first, they rose slowly, but when they reached a certain height, they suddenly rocketed away. Or not. When they did, the balloons changed shape dramatically, occasionally even breaking. Marking out the boundaries of a very strange patch of sky.

Observing the movements of the balloons, he attempted to estimate the shape of the Path of the Wind. According to his calculations, the Path of the Wind was about thirty feet across, a long, thin line from the southwest to the northeast. When it reached the hill, it became a spiral a hundred feet across, rising high up into the air. The second floor of our house just happened to intersect with that line.

It was a lot of fun watching the balloons disappear into the sky. The balloons that entered the path without breaking were swept away to the northeast at astounding speed, before

swinging left on the spiral and vanishing into the sky above. Where were they going?

Just after summer vacation began, I mentioned that I was collecting things I'd found on the veranda, and he asked me to bring them to his house. I went, carrying the collection box.

That day was also windless, and the cicadas were again deafening. The propeller on the airplane weather vane was not moving. Sitting on the porch and flipping through the album, Hiroki Takahashi asked, "Anything interesting show up recently?" looking at the half-burned photo.

"Newspaper came today," I said, drinking *mugicha.* "Get kind of a lot of them. Generally just throw them out."

"Taken the trash out yet? Bring it next time. If it's a local paper, we'll know where it was picked up. Might help find out where the wind is coming from."

He put the album down, stood up, and went to refill my cup. Alone on the porch, I gazed out into the garden. It was baking in the sunlight. The smell of grass was suffocatingly strong. There did not seem to be anyone but him in the house. His father was traveling, but where was his mother?

When Hiroki Takahashi came back, I asked.

"She's at her lover's house," he said. "She's a real piece of shit."

His vehement tone shocked me. I didn't know how to react. He sat down on the porch and stretched his legs.

When I got home that evening, I pulled the newspaper out of the garbage can. When I had opened my window that morning, only the front page had been stuck in the veranda railings. I had thrown it out, but there was no reason not to show it to Hiroki Takahashi. I spread it out, and one headline caught my eye.

"Bestselling Shojo Manga Artist Mika Nakahara's Latest Hit Adapted for the Screen."

Mika Nakahara? I'd never heard of her. I knew pretty much everything about shojo manga, so I read the article. It was a straightforward affair: The manga she was serializing was being turned into a movie starring a famous young actress. I looked at the newspaper's date.

August 18, 2010.

Ten years in the future.

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I figured I should probably wait a while longer before I told him that some of the things traveled through time. He was amazed enough by the idea that the wind never stopped. He needed time to get used to that before I delivered another shock.

"Do you ever hear anything hit the wall while you're sleeping?" Hiroki Takahashi asked, investigating the walls of our house.

"Yeah, I hear the odd thump every now and then," I said, looking up at him.

"The wind is blowing stuff into the house. The second floor is much more scuffed than the first. It's white near the ground, but where the wind hits the house, it's covered in a layer of grime. And the paint's chipped, as if something hard had banged into the wall."

As he muttered, he was writing furiously in his notebook, his mechanical pencil squeaking. Then he held out his hand, feeling the wind with his arm.

"You try it, Kozue."

I took his place on the ladder and held my arm up. There was no wind on the ground, but at a certain height, the air suddenly began to move. Like a huge mass of air pushing against my arm. The wind itself was incredibly strong, and I could feel bits of sand hitting my skin. My skin could clearly sense the line between the calm air below and the wind above.

At his request, I helped him with a number of experiments, mostly involving those balloons. To fully map the shape of the Path of the Wind, we had to release balloons all over town, not just near my house. We moved slowly away from my house, releasing balloons. If the wind caught a balloon, we were still under the path. We did the same thing over and over, getting farther and farther away. We put a dot wherever the balloons danced, making a thin line on the map where the wind blew. But since that line went through residential areas and shopping arcades, Hiroki Takahashi had to fill balloons and release them in the middle of crowds. People would stop and watch, and children would shout with joy.

It was my job to fill the balloons and release them on cue. He had purchased a big box of yellow balloons and always got angry when I gave one of them to a passing child. I was terribly embarrassed by all the attention our experiments received, but Hiroki Takahashi barely even noticed. When he was concentrating, he lost track of everything else. He once got so interested in an anthill that he got mistaken for a suspicious character and taken to the police station. I privately nicknamed him Fabre.* He spent most of his time at my house, staring up at the sky, and never seemed to study for exams at all.

"You should get him to tutor you," my mother often said. She was a big fan of his. I was going to one of the best schools in the area. But the notes he took on the wind were filled with equations that made my head hurt. I asked about them, and he said it was Bernoulli's principle, a famous formula for measuring the flow of air and water.

"This principle explains why airplanes can fly," he said, re-

* *Fabre* A French entomologist noted for his keen powers of observation—and his obsession with his subject.

leasing balloons in the tiny yard at my house. "It's really an amazing formula."

He looked up at the sky. In my memory, summer cumulonimbus and his profile were forever linked. I couldn't believe there was anyone crazy enough to do math outside of school. But there was something about his passion that I respected.

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I pretended to have forgotten the newspaper I'd found on the veranda. The subject did not come up, so I assumed he had forgotten as well.

One day, after Obon, I was in town with a classmate from my junior high. When evening came, we split up and headed home. As I was walking through the arcade, a sudden shower sprang up, and I hid under the nearest awning. The shower lasted only a few minutes, and when I stepped out onto the wet street, I ran into Hiroki Takahashi.

"Oh, hey! Kozue!" He was with a girl. A girl his age. He turned to her and said, "Lives near me."

"Hello," she said, smiling.

"Uh, hi," I said, bobbing my head. He did not explain who she was, but she must be a friend from school.

"See you around. Oh, right—that newspaper we talked about ages back—you didn't forget, did you?"

"I kept it for you."

"Great!"

Hiroki Takahashi and the girl walked away, not even waving. I watched them go in silence. When I got home, my mother told me she was pregnant and I would soon have a little brother or sister.

"For crying out loud," I muttered under my breath, and then pretended to be excited to make her happy. Then I went to my room and shut the door.

When my cell phone rang, I closed the manga I'd been reading. It was Hiroki Takahashi. He wanted to know if he could bring some fireworks over tomorrow.

Sparklers? I was briefly excited. But I was wrong.

"Smoke bombs—you know them?"

Smoke bombs. Boring things that belched colored smoke and nothing else. He was planning on sending that smoke into the Path of the Wind.

"Oh, and the newspaper."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

I hung up and took the newspaper out of my desk. I'd known him for a month now. It was probably time to tell him. There was a good chance he'd freak out when I showed him a paper from the future. Would get even more excited about studying. His exams were doomed. But part of me was looking forward to it. I wanted to see how he'd react to this new mystery.

Imagining the look on his face, I ran my eyes over the newspaper again. I'd only read the article about Mika Nakahara's manga being turned into a movie. I read the whole front page, turned it over, and was reading the local news when I discovered that I was dead.

It was a tiny article, with no pictures. Late at night on August 17, 2010, Hiroki Takahashi, 28, unemployed, had stabbed his girlfriend, Kozue Matsuda, 23, several times in the stomach and chest with a kitchen knife, killing her. He had then turned himself in to the police.

3

MARCH 24, 2005.

"She was afraid and didn't know what to do. She spent a lot of her time brooding."

All ceremonies for the last day of school had ended, and we had received our report cards and left the school. Kyoko Inoue and I were walking to the station together. The plum trees on the side of the road were blooming, and it felt as if the chill had finally started to relent. But to my eyes, the flowers looked sickeningly like blood.

"She cut off all communication with him and hasn't seen or spoken to him since."

I had changed the registration on the cell phone from my veranda, and it belonged to me now. Kyoko Inoue had continued exchanging email with the woman who had originally owned it. None of which had anything to do with me.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Basically, she fell in love with an older man she met online. They met in real life, got to know each other, but started arguing a lot, and when she stopped emailing him, she became so distraught that . . ."

Kyoko Inoue got off before me. I got off a few stations later. Hiroki Takahashi and I had released balloons in front of this station. Five years later, and I was the same age he had been back then. In a few weeks, the new school year would begin, and it would be my turn to start studying for college entrance exams.

I remembered seeing him at Book Off. I stopped outside the station and looked around. Everyone had taken their coats off. There was no sign of him. Relieved, I started walking.

"Takahashi came by earlier," my mother said when I reached the top of the hill and stepped inside. My brother looked up at me, surprised that my hand had frozen in midtousle.

"Takahashi?"

I'd have run into him if I'd come home a little faster.

"Apparently, he dropped out of college and came home. You should call him."

"Mm . . . ," I said unenthusiastically.

"You were such good friends," she said.

I took my brother off my knee, went up to my room, and looked out the window. Hiroki Takahashi's house was to the southwest of mine, and I could just make out his red roof through my window. Five years ago, I had spent a lot of time staring at his house. But after I read that newspaper article, I had not gone anywhere near it.

Five years ago, I had fled. Trying to escape the prophecy printed in that newspaper informing me I would be dead in ten years. I did not want to die. I did not want to be murdered. Of course not. I read the article again and again. Hiroki Takahashi stabbed me with a kitchen knife? Girlfriend? Stabbed to death? Several times in the stomach and chest? I had nightmares in which I lay covered in my own blood. I was so afraid of dying I could not help but see Hiroki Takahashi as death itself. Nothing in my life had prepared me for this; all I could do was run away every time I saw him. I refused to meet him if he came to my house, refused to answer if he called. When he left messages on the answering machine, I saw myself stabbed in the stomach and chest. He spent a lot of time around my house investigating the Path of the Wind, but I would not go outside when my mother said he was here. If I avoided him, he would never kill me. A game of keep-away that would have to last until the morning of August 18, 2010. If I ran long enough, we would be strangers. Not lovers. He would never kill me. The simplest plan in the world.

What must he have thought? Knowing him, he might have just been disappointed to have lost a valuable asset to his in-

vestigation. At least, I hoped that was the case. That way, I didn't feel so guilty. But he might have thought we were friends. He might have taken my rejection as betrayal. Whatever bonds had started to grow between us, I had severed them all. Torn them out by the roots. Salted the ground. Of course, at the time, I never considered what it was like for him; I could barely handle my own feelings. I wasn't strong enough for something like that. When summer vacation ended and the second term began, the girls in my class passed me notes while the teacher wasn't looking. "Dear Kozue" in cute letters. They were full of things like "School is sooo boring" or who was going out with whom. I crumpled them up, unable to stand how innocent they were, not while I was desperately fleeing, terribly afraid. I was genuinely unable to believe how stupid they all seemed. I had nothing but scorn for my classmates, who did not fear dying. Go away. Scram. Get away from me. Before I knew it, I had no friends.

It didn't even occur to me until late in the fall, when exam season began, that suddenly ignoring him might have hurt Hiroki Takahashi. When he passed his exams and moved away, I was very relieved. Now that he was geographically far away, I felt as if the future in the newspaper was moving away, too. But the six months I'd spent in fear, rejecting everyone, had changed my personality, had changed the way things worked at school. None of my classmates ever went anywhere near me, and I now found that comfortable. It was painful to talk to people enjoying life normally. It was a little lonely being on my own during lunch, but I had decided this was only natural. This was the price I had to pay. I was being punished. It was what I deserved for driving Hiroki Takahashi away. I had brought it on myself. I had destroyed whatever had been growing between us. I had liked to see him staring up at the sky. I had been thrilled when he talked

about wanting to go to college and study the atmosphere. And I had thrown all that away. I had no choice! My life matters more! I had no right to be upset or angry if everyone in class treated me like an alien.

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"Despite everything she said, she really did love him. Which is the real reason she was so upset."

The former owner of the cell phone was twenty-five, working full-time, but using Kyoko Inoue as her love counselor via email. Kyoko Inoue appeared to be enjoying herself immensely and gave me occasional updates on their progress. Which had nothing to do with me.

"Things went on like that for a while until she randomly ran into him on the street."

"Happens a lot."

MARCH 26, 2005.

My mother sent me down to the grocery store. It was not easy carrying heavy bags of groceries in each hand up the hill. Long fronds of scallions stuck out of the bags, waving with each step. And my hay fever was getting pretty bad; I kept sniffing, which left me out of breath. There were even a few tears in my eyes. About halfway up the hill, someone called out.

"Need a hand?"

That same voice that had muttered to itself, deciphering formulas. I debated dropping the bags and running for it. Then I did.

"I don't know what's got into you."

I had left the bags on the sidewalk and run as fast as I could, but he caught up with me a hundred meters later and grabbed my wrist so I couldn't get away.

"Let go!" I tried to shake him off but couldn't.

"A friend comes back to town and you can't even say hello?"

"Who's friends?"

"We are!"

We went back to where I had started running and picked up the bags of groceries. When he was sure I wasn't going to run again, he let go of me. He offered to carry the bags, so I handed one of them to him. We headed toward my house in silence. I could see his hands out of the corner of my eyes and nervously scratched my head. I felt as if I were walking next to the Grim Reaper. I considered trying to run again.

"This street hasn't changed," he said, looking around.

". . . We came this way on the scooter," I said hesitantly.

"The day you brought the letter."

"Your father ever come back?"

He shook his head. He had told me about his family, five years before when we had been friendly. His father had gone missing ten years ago now, and he had no idea where he was.

"Five years since then—he might be dead."

"Weren't there any clues in the letter? He said he was in Chiba. . . ."

"And that he was fishing in the harbor. I went and looked for him after I got the letter. He was already gone. I couldn't even find anyone who knew him."

The letter had even said he would be somewhere else by the time it arrived.

"Your father's like the wind."

"He is the wind. When you brought the letter, it was as if he had sent you."

A postman on a red bike passed us. It was a quiet spring afternoon, and once the noise of the bike had faded, there were no sounds not made by us.

"Why'd you come back?" I asked, tense.

He managed a self-deprecating smile. "You'll laugh when you hear. Apparently, I'm not that smart."

Hiroki Takahashi had repeated so many years that he was kicked out. He had managed to make ends meet with part-time jobs for a while but had been unable to pay his rent and had come home. That questing look in his eyes was gone. He had been neither a genius nor a scholar. He was just an ordinary man.

We kept walking. I could still remember everything as if it were yesterday. It had been so hot, as if my body were glowing. The asphalt had been so hot it was covered in heat haze, but riding that scooter, the wind on my face had felt wonderful. Every stone, every house, every vending machine was in the same place. Sometimes I was jealous of how little it had changed.

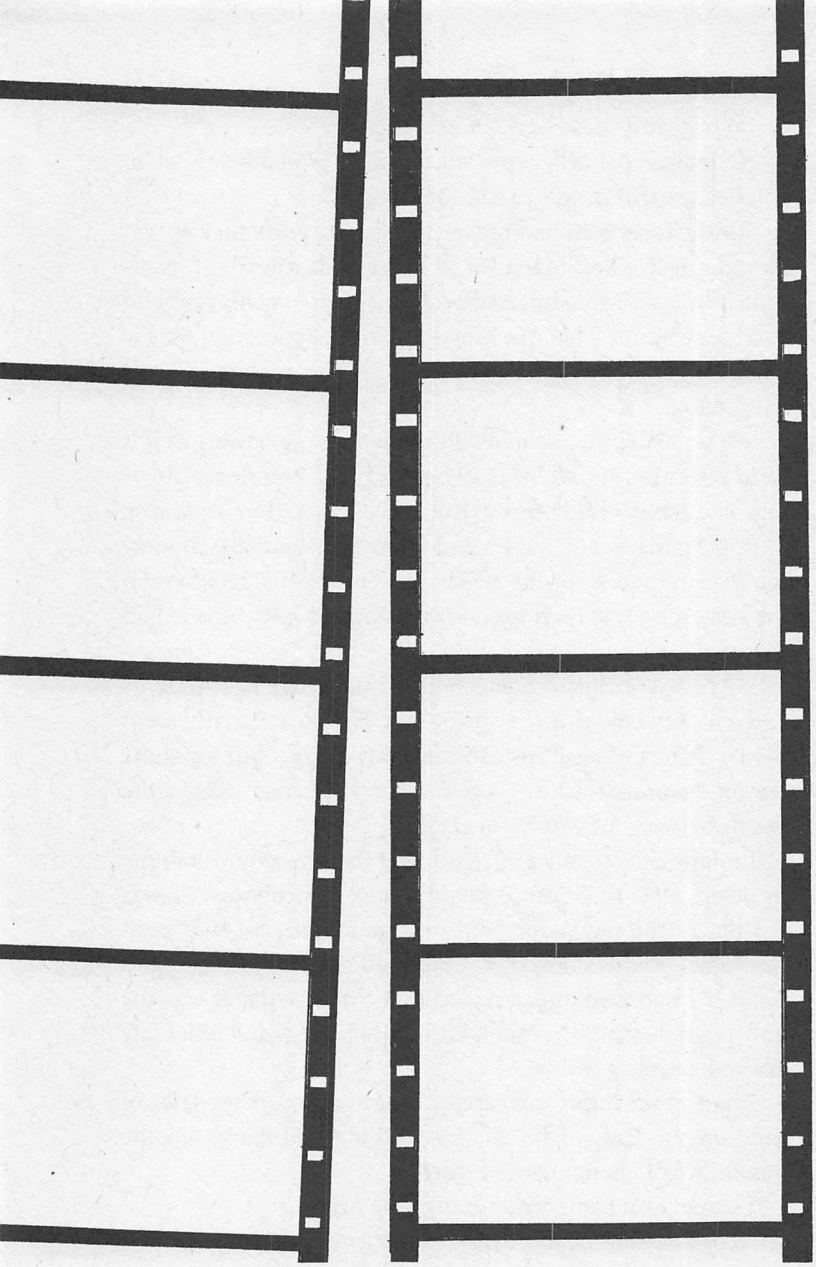
We rested on a park bench halfway up. There were parents and children enjoying the spring sun. Hiroki Takahashi went to buy drinks. Perfect time to make my escape, but for some reason I couldn't do it. I knew there was a real danger the bonds between us would form again.

I might become his girlfriend, and then he would stab me to death. Was that future set in stone? Just because it was written in the newspaper did not guarantee that was what would happen. I believed that, so I had rejected him and run away. If I had given up, decided that the newspaper was the only possible future . . . then I might not have run but let fate lead me where it would.

I had never done any careful examination of the laws of time on the Path of the Wind. Nothing had ruled out the possibility of changing the future.

Escape. Run from him. Change the future.

"The airplane weather vane in the garden fell over while I





was gone," Hiroki Takahashi said, sitting down on the bench, the two bags between us. I realized there was stubble on his cheeks. That had not been there five years ago.

"I never did see the thing move."

He handed me a bottle of green tea. I took it and drank.

Hiroki Takahashi looked at me and asked, "Can you drink yet?"

"I'm still seventeen!"

"I was drinking."

"Well, I'm not a delinquent."

"What is the world coming to? No beer-vending machines in the park? This town can't think for itself," he grumbled, and pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. He lit it. I watched him breathe smoke. He was a grown-up now. Five years older than me.

"Takahashi, you've turned into an old man."

A rather astonishingly seedy bum, frankly. Not a type I'd ever been around before. Not one I wanted around.

"If you can't find a job, get depressed, drink too much, argue with your girlfriend, and stab her with a kitchen knife, I'll shed a tear for you."

"I don't drink. It only leads to trouble."

"You said the exact opposite five seconds ago!"

A gentle breeze blew across the park, sweeping his cigarette smoke away. He closed his eyes, looking content.

"Don't stare at me like that. It's embarrassing."

"You showed up out of nowhere!"

"I don't like the way people look at me now."

"I bet!"

"Why are you angry?"

"How can I not be?"

"What?"

"Oh, come on, Takahashi! You know perfectly well!"

I pulled a tissue out of my pocket and blew my nose. Hay fever.

"The wind here always feels good."

"Why did you research the wind at my house?"

It must have been hard work coming all the way to my house in the summer heat, checking on the Path of the Wind.

"My dad and I flew a kite," Hiroki Takahashi said, looking at the children playing with their mothers in the park. "When I was a kid, in the park near my house. Suddenly the kite went crazy."

"Crazy?"

"It had been flying normally, then it suddenly shook, as if it exploded. The string went taut, pulling away from me. I couldn't hold on to it and let go. But the string was wrapped around my wrist. You know what happened then?"

I shook my head.

"It lifted me into the air. The kite pulled me a good foot off the ground. I kicked my legs but only got air. I couldn't reach the ground. I was terrified. If my dad hadn't grabbed me, who knows how high the kite would have taken me? My father got the string off my wrist. The kite was sucked away into the sky, out of sight in seconds. We both saw it go. . . ."

He explained all this in one excited burst, then fell silent for a moment before continuing, "My mother didn't believe us. She called us liars. They were already in bad shape, I guess."

A ball rolled toward us. Must belong to one of the playing children. I tossed it back to them.

"Did we let up balloons in that park?"

"Of course. And they vanished into the sky."

We left the park, heading up the hill again. The bag was heavy, and I kept switching hands. The higher we got, the better the view glimpsed between the houses. At last, we reached the top and could see my house.

"You've grown up a lot," he said, looking me over. I put the bags down on the front step.

"Can't you men think of anything else?"

"What? Don't be stupid. I mean, like, the way you act. You're still in high school, but you're weirdly detached. You never seem to get carried away. Not like five years ago."

"Yeah. I've changed. Everything has."

I looked up at the house. He followed my gaze. Up at the second floor and above, into the sky above.

"The air is still moving constantly," he whispered.

"Yes, it is," I said.

"Say hi to your mom. You have a brother now?"

"You stopped by two days ago."

"I don't know anyone else."

"Friends from school?"

"They all got jobs out of town. I still live in the same house. Come over sometime."

I started to say sure, then remembered the newspaper. Dead at twenty-three. I touched my stomach. Feeling the skin under my clothes. In five years, a knife would stab me there. But the newspaper had not described the event in detail. Why? How could something like that happen? What had caused it? Booze? Unemployment? It had said we'd been arguing when he stabbed me. Such a boring story. Same stupid chain of events happened every day. No dreams, no hopes, so shallow. Was that why? Had it happened because that's just how things go? If it happened for real, I'd fall over, puking blood. Go to his house? I stood thinking for ages, not answering him.

"What?" he asked. His voice flat, hiding his emotions. I could feel both our hearts growing cold. He turned his back and walked away. I did not watch him go. I went right inside. Maybe that invitation had been a desperate plea, the cry of a

man so broken he'd quit school and moved back home. He'd lost so many things, and I was his only hope. What an ass. I am so not worth it. We'd known each other only a few weeks, five years ago. Come over sometime.

I remembered his profile. He had nothing left. He'd sold all his study guides to Book Off. He'd live at home, studying nothing, trying to get a crappy job. He might not even do that. It was in the paper, in black-and-white: "Hiroki Takahashi, 28, unemployed."

Loser! I stuffed the groceries in the fridge, filled with inexplicable remorse. My mother thanked me. Must have been heavy. I had help. Eh? Help? Never mind. You are strange. . . . Want some coffee? Nah. I went upstairs to my room and collapsed on the bed. Snot trickling out of my nose. Clear snot, like water. Because of the hay fever, of course.

Still lying on the bed, I looked at the window. The curtains were open, and I could see the sky through the glass. The wind was blowing as it always was. The wind passed over the town, over the mountains, over the ocean. It shook the tents of people living in the desert, roared down the alleys between tall buildings, shook the rice stalks in the fields. When the earth was born, so was the wind. Ever since, it had watched plants cover the earth, fish crawl up on land. People had children; made towns, countries; and all the while it watched us from above.

I liked the wind. I wished it would blow me somewhere else.

I closed my eyes and slept a little. I dreamed about a boy flying a kite. When I opened my eyes, I remembered. I jumped out of bed and pulled the cardboard box out of the closet. I had noticed it a few weeks ago, when I was looking for the cell phone. I found it at once.

The kite was too big to fit in the box. A child's kite, shaped

like an airplane. I remembered the day I picked it up. It had been on my veranda one morning, like the envelopes and newspapers and photographs. I had kept it, not wanting to just throw it out.

"Where are you going?" my mother said when she saw me putting on shoes.

"A friend's house," I said.

I went to Hiroki Takahashi's house, carrying the kite.

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"So she changed her mind. It wasn't over; they could always try again," Kyoko Inoue said, wrapping up her long report.

4

APRIL 2005.

I told him about the photographs from the future, and he just laughed, saying anything was possible. He showed no signs of resuming his experiments. As he listened to my strange stories, he just gazed at the airplane kite, looking very peaceful.

"Look at this, Takahashi."

I handed him the newspaper. It was growing cloudy, and when I looked out into the garden, it was noticeably darker. As he had said, the airplane weather vane had fallen over and was buried in the grass.

"What is it?"

"You'll see. Just read."

He frowned and took the wrinkled newspaper.

"Check the date."

"2010!"

"I'll do the dishes."

I left him on the porch and went to the kitchen. It did not

look as if he'd cleaned his room or done any dishes or laundry since he got back in town. The red-roofed house was a disaster area. I began washing the dirty dishes, then cleaned the room. I tossed his clothes and socks into the washing machine.

When I went back to the porch, there was no sign of Hiroki Takahashi. I looked around. He'd left the paper lying on the porch. Darkness fell, and he did not return. I hung out the laundry to dry and went home. I ate dinner, played with my brother, took a bath, and went to my room. I was about to go to bed when my new cell phone rang. The screen informed me the call was from a pay phone, so I thought it might be him.

"It's me, Kozue."

Hiroki Takahashi's voice on the line. I had kept my old number, but this was the first time in five years he had called me.

"I was worried!" I said, pacing the room. Unable to sit still.

"That really messed with my head."

"Where are you?" I pressed the phone to my ear. I could hear waves lapping.

"That paper's from five years in the future?"

"No guarantee of that."

"How can you be sure?"

"In *Back to the Future,* Doc said the future's a blank slate."

That paper had arrived here from one of many possible futures. I was not yet decided if we were following the branch that paper had come from. I believed that firmly.

"Are you at the ocean?"

"Am I going to kill you?"

"That future might exist sometimes."

"Maybe I should live somewhere else. You think that's a good idea, right?"

"Come back," I said, knuckles whitening around the phone. "I have an idea."

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It was raining the next day. I went out carrying an umbrella. The rain seemed to swallow the sound of the traffic, making everything oddly quiet. I stopped at a convenience store and then headed for Hiroki Takahashi's house. I rang the bell, and he answered the door.

"I came back," he said, snorting.

"You're like a kid trying to pretend not to be embarrassed."

"I am not embarrassed!"

I folded my umbrella and stepped inside. I put the convenience store bag on the table. I had brought some pudding à la mode for us to eat together, so I took that out and put it in the fridge. I could hear the rain coming down outside. The lights were off, and the kitchen was dark.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing at the job-search magazine I'd picked up at the store.

"A magic book that can change the future."

The newspaper from 2010 said he was unemployed. All we had to do was make sure he was employed for the next five years.

"Then the newspaper will be wrong, and we will have proved that the future is uncertain."

"But that doesn't mean we'll have avoided the murder. That has nothing to do with whether I have a job or not."

"What matters is that the article contains a mistake. If we can pull that much off, everything else in the article is equally uncertain. Instead of 'This will happen,' we have 'This might not happen.' Isn't that enough?"

He looked at the job-search magazine, scratching his head. "You're smarter than you used to be."

We sat down on the porch and looked through the magazine. The rain came splashing down on the thick grass in the garden, making a pleasant sound. I didn't see the weather vane anywhere, so I asked about it, and he said it was in the closet.

"I guess I'll be working part-time for a while."

"As if we're playing the game of Life."

"There's something terribly sad about job hunting being our plan to change the future."

"The only other thing I could think of was to murder the manga artist Mika Nakahara."

He found a job immediately and began working at the family restaurant next to the station the following day. It was spring vacation for me, and I was bored, so I went down there when he was due to get off work. When he came out, I ran over to him and asked how it was. He said easy and flashed a peace sign. I was relieved. If he could keep this up, the newspaper would say waiter, not unemployed. We need not set our sights any higher. But three days later, Hiroki Takahashi's job collapsed.

I was studying at home when my cell phone rang; it was him.

"I'm in Chiba."

"What about your job?"

"To hell with that."

"You scumbag!"

"Listen first! Last night I reread the letter from five years ago."

"The one from your father?"

"The one you brought me. He wrote that letter in Chiba, in a town near the sea. When I got the letter, I went there looking for him—I told you that, right? But there was one thing you didn't notice."

"What?"

"The letter was posted on April 8, 2006."

Next year.

"Which means it was blown back in time six years. I'm in the town where my dad mailed the letter. I'm a year early, so I don't know if he's here yet. But when I thought I might be able to see him, I couldn't stop myself from jumping on a train. . . ."

After that, he began staying at a motel in that small coastal town of Chiba, looking for his father.

The day after we spoke on the phone, I went to Chiba, too. I filled a suitcase with spare clothes and other necessities from his house, boarded a train, and reached Chiba two hours later. Even in the station, I could hear the pleasant sound of the surf and of seagulls crying. He came to meet me, and I threw the suitcase at him and gave him a piece of my mind. "Which is more important, your dad or your job?" he asked. I visited the motel where he was staying, and we went looking for his father together. Coastal villages make for good walks. We walked along the shore, looking at the fishing boats, laughing at the seagulls stealing fish. The wind smelled of salt and made my hair stiff after a while. I liked the sea breeze. It smelled like toasting seaweed and made me hungry.

Hiroki Takahashi spoke to the people living there, asking if anyone had seen his father. But he didn't even have a picture of the man and could only explain what he looked like, so his efforts were pretty useless. Maybe his father wasn't here yet. He wrote the letter a year from now, so that seemed awfully likely. But Hiroki Takahashi was not so easily dissuaded. He was acting like a devout religious man who has no doubt about the existence of God. I began to feel uncomfortable being with him. Sometimes I even wondered if

the absence of information or photographs meant his father did not actually exist, or was invisible, like the wind. Trying to find his father was like trying to catch the wind bare-handed.

In the evening, I boarded a train and went home.

"Your father's probably somewhere else."

He would not post the letter here for another year.

"Let me look for three more days. Then I'll come home."

He was true to his word. Three days later, I went to the house with the red roof and Hiroki Takahashi was sitting on the porch, reading the job-search magazine, looking for another job.

"I'll probably go look for him again in the summer."

"You really miss him."

I had been surprised by how fervently he had searched.

"I just felt like if I brought him back and we put a fresh coat of paint on the weather vane, then maybe we could start over."

I genuinely wished him luck but was too embarrassed to say so. Instead, I cracked a joke about his chances of success. He found a new job at the bookstore near the station.

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A week later spring vacation ended, and school started again. I was officially an exam student. There was a large crowd of students in the hall, looking at the new class list. Some students were thrilled and others dejected, their friends patting their shoulders. Their second-year teachers had done a number on them. Kyoko Inoue was in my class again. We nodded at each other over the bustling crowd.

"How're things?" she asked on the way home. We had not walked together since the previous school year ended.

"Been helping a friend get a job. Stuff. You? Still emailing the former owner of that phone? She doing well?"

"She started going out with him again, and they've been just dandy."

She got off the train before me. I sat in a café by the station reading a book and waiting for Hiroki Takahashi to get off work. I could see the street through the window. Lots of people passed by, and I found myself musing absently on how each and every one of them was leading a life every bit as important as my own. By the time the setting sun painted the street red, my cell phone rang, informing me that he was done with work.

I met up with Hiroki Takahashi, and we went to the food section of the department store, shopping. I had promised to cook for him as a reward for working a full week. He carried the basket, and I filled it with the food on my list. The shop was filled with mothers toting children, women who looked as if they lived alone, and old men. We talked a bit at first but gradually stopped. In silence, I put onions in the basket, added some milk, then a can of mushrooms. At the meat counter, I put a package of beef in the basket and asked, "Should we buy some beer?"

Awkwardly, he said, "I got in a fight in college."

"A fight?"

"I injured someone pretty badly. They expelled me."

He put the basket on the floor, looking exhausted. Children and housewives brushed past us. We were the only people not moving. He had never told me anything about college. I was so tense my fingers felt cold.

"It happened when we were out drinking. When I hit him, I saw my mother's face. I told you about her? She's very happy with her lover. Damn it all. I can really see myself stabbing you to death in five years."

I was every bit as scared as I'd been when I ran from him five years before.

"There's a part of me I don't think I can control."

Hiroki Takahashi stared down at the meat in the basket.

"Someone made fun of me for repeating a year. I hit him with a beer bottle. He was crying, saying he was sorry. I didn't let up."

He glared at me. My knees shook. The store music turned to noise, swirling around me. I knew what he was saying. *You're scared. Run if you have to. Don't have anything to do with me. Stay as far from me as you can. You did the right thing five years ago. Goodbye. Leave me before I turn violent.*

"It's my mom I really want to kill. Why would I kill you instead? I hit him in the jaw as hard as I could. The bottle shattered. I could feel the bone break. The greatest feeling in the world."

If I ran, he would probably not come after me. Children ran past us, holding candy. A store employee was passing out samples of ham. I took a deep breath, forcing my freezing fingers to move, and picked up the basket.

". . . Then we skip the beer."

A short old woman passed between us. His shoulders slumped in defeat. I felt proud of myself, but a moment later, I was so dizzy I almost fell over. All my tension had suddenly vanished. Hiroki Takahashi was right next to me, asking if I was okay. Holding me up as my legs buckled under me.

"Don't worry. I won't push you away again," I said over and over again. I would never again abandon what was growing between us. The store was so noisy, with so many people bustling this way and that. Nobody noticed us standing still in the corner. They were all busy buying what they needed for dinner.

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For the next year, we staggered on, half happy, half terrified. I went to school, chose a college, studied for the entrance exam. He worked at the bookshop, taking interviews for better jobs until he got full-time work at a small company. When I passed my exam and he got that job, we were very happy for each other.

There was clearly a part of him that was not exactly placid. He believed he had inherited it from his mother. I just thought his mother's actions had had a strong influence on his personality.

Everyone had their ups and downs. Those waves might be stronger with him than with most people. Every time something happened, we talked it over. Tried to figure out what went wrong. What to do next time. We had a good relationship. I could feel myself maturing mentally, talking with him. Every day mattered. We both knew the date in the newspaper was getting closer. August 17, 2010. Late that night. We'd start fighting for some reason. And he would kill me. There were many branches in the future, and one of them led to that.

But we would be fine. Nothing would happen between us. I was sure of it. I told myself that every day. Before I slept, I faced the window and clasped my hands, praying. He is a good man. Let us find a different path through time. Please.

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APRIL 7, 2006.

My friend Kyoko Inoue graduated from high school and got a job at her father's company. I met with her after my college entrance ceremony, and we went out to eat.

"How was the ceremony?"

"Everyone looked so grown-up. They were all in suits. You? Screwed up at work yet?"

We could see the cherry blossoms through the window of the Italian restaurant. The sky behind them was blue, and the trees themselves were buried in pink petals.

"Takahashi doing well?" Kyoko Inoue asked with her mouth full. I'd told her about him, and the three of us had even gone out together a few times.

"He's in Chiba now."

"Chiba?"

"Looking for the wind."

The envelope I'd found on my veranda had been postmarked tomorrow. Hiroki Takahashi's father was already living in that coastal town of Chiba and may already have written the letter. Hiroki Takahashi had been making regular trips out there for the last month, whenever he could get off work, looking for him. But he had not found him yet.

Kyoko Inoue stood up, excusing herself to go to the bathroom. I sat alone, staring out at the cherry trees. I ate a bite of pasta. The restaurant was largely empty. It had a nice atmosphere to it, good lighting and furniture.

The theme to *Battles without Honor or Humanity* began to play. Everyone stopped eating. I quickly grabbed my cell phone. The one I'd found on my veranda. Hiroki Takahashi's name was on the screen.

"I found my dad," he said.

"Really!? Great!" I cried, overjoyed. Someone turned around and looked at me. I knew I shouldn't be talking on the phone indoors, but I didn't get up. I just kept my voice down. "Is he there with you?"

"Yeah. I barely caught him—found him about to go into the post office."

Barely? The post office?

"When I called out to him, he was really shocked. Couldn't work out why I'd known he was here."

"He was living there?"

"Last two weeks. Fishing the whole time. Good thing I decided to stake out the post office. I knew he'd come here eventually, to mail the letter."

A waitress stopped by and filled my water glass.

"You have the envelope with you?"

The same one I'd brought him that summer day, six years ago.

There was a long silence. "Yeah. He was about to drop it in the box, but I stopped him."

"Stopped him? Takahashi, what are you talking about?"

"This might mean we never met in the first place."

The ice in the glass melted a bit and shifted, clanking.

"I don't . . . What?"

"Of course, this might not change anything. I think it's more likely nothing will. But if this changes things, then that's for the best."

I knew what he was thinking.

"This is why you were looking for your father?"

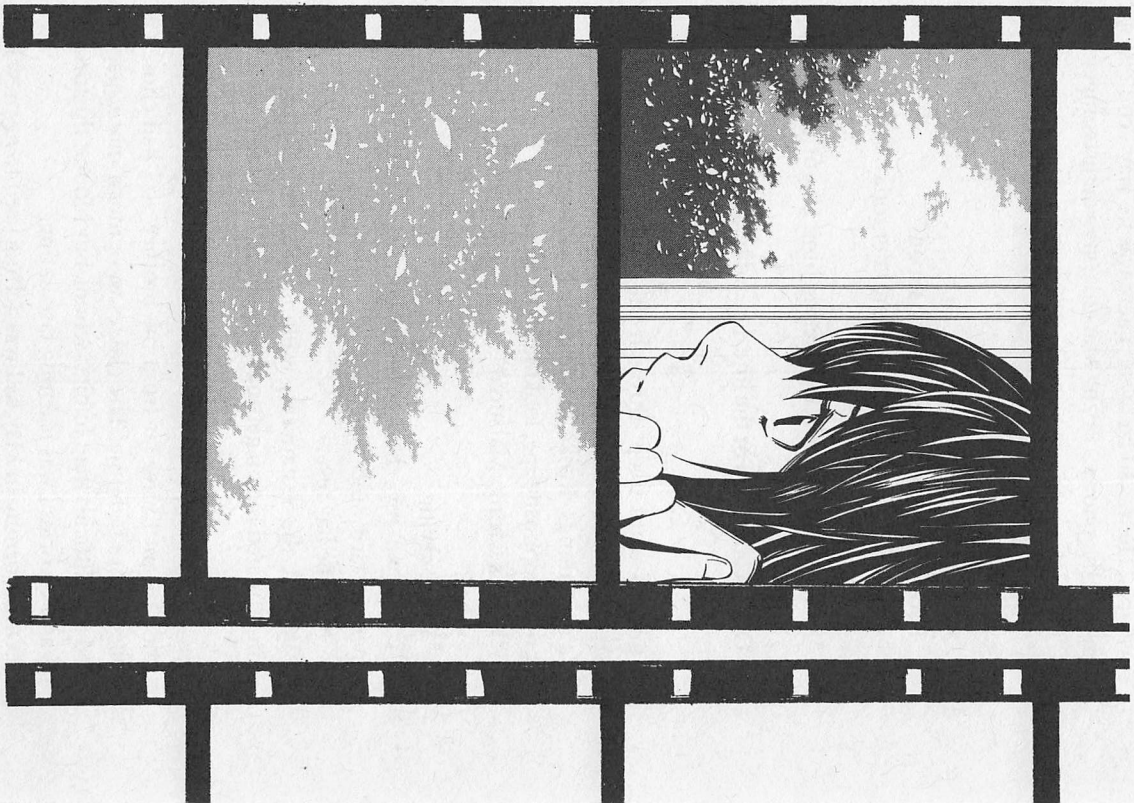
"Yes."

"What about our memories?"

"I couldn't begin to guess."

I could see Hiroki Takahashi standing there with the envelope in his hands. The envelope that was supposed to be dropped in the mailbox, postmarked, and lost on the wind. What would happen if none of that were to happen? Would I never have found the envelope on my veranda, never have taken it to Hiroki Takahashi's house? Would we never have met at all?

"If the future is set in stone, then I won't be able to tear this



envelope." He was so far away. There was no way I could stop him over the phone. "Kozue Matsuda, are you listening?"

"I am."

"Sorry for all the trouble."

"You'd better be."

"Are you scared?"

"I don't know what's going to happen."

"If nothing happens, I'll be home later today. Come out to dinner with my dad."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him. I want to see what he's like."

On the other end of the line, I heard him tear the envelope.

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A gust of wind swept through the cherry trees, sending a flurry of petals into the air. The trees thrashed back and forth like mad things. Kyoko Inoue came back from the toilet and sat down opposite me, looking puzzled.

"What's wrong, Matsuda?"

"What?"

"You're crying."

I touched my cheeks, surprised. Tears were streaming down my face. Since when?

"Must be hay fever."

We left the restaurant, walking together. Kyoko Inoue congratulated me on getting into school, then took her leave.

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I didn't want to live far from my brother, so I had chosen a college close to home. The classes were much more specialized and difficult than in high school, but I found the formulas and theories I was learning fascinating.

One morning in May, as I was getting used to my new life,

a very strange thing happened. It was a beautiful day, without a cloud in the sky.

May 17, 2006, 7:30 A.M. My alarm rang, dragging me out of a long dream. A long, sad dream. I rubbed my eyes, got dressed, and something passed by outside, beyond the curtains. My imagination? No, another shadow went past.

My heart beating quickly, I opened the curtains. At first, I had no idea what I was looking at.

"Kozue, breakfast?"

"I'll be right back!"

I threw shoes on and ran outside. The woman next door was standing outside, her dog on a leash. She was staring up at the sky, stunned. The dog was barking up at the sky, too. People started poking their heads outside, wondering what all the noise was about. When they saw the things floating in the air, they all froze. Some people screamed for their families to come look. Commotion spread through the town.

"What *is* this?"

My mother came out of the house carrying my brother, saw the things floating over our house, and screamed. My father came out dressed for work and stared up at the sky.

"Who blew them all up?"

The sky was packed with balloons. So many we could not see the sun. They were all yellow, traveling southwest on the Path of the Wind. They bumped into our house and bounced sideways, out of the path, filling the sky around it, spreading out across the town. More and more of them, a vast fleet of balloons covering the town, centered around our house. The street was filled with people staring openmouthed at the sky. There were children looking ready to cry. There were too many balloons for it to be fun—it was like looking at a school of jellyfish or the audience seats at a World Cup game.

I was too busy watching the balloons to go to school. How

could I study on a day like this? I got on my scooter—I'd just got my license—and rode around, looking at the town. It took three hours for the balloons to scatter and things to calm down. As I rode, I saw them stuck on power lines or in the branches of trees. Everyone I passed was talking excitedly about them.

I stopped in a park and bought a drink from a vending machine. There was a man sitting on a bench near me, staring absently up at the sky watching the few remaining balloons drift across it. Like yellow dots drifting back and forth across the blue.

"Whoever did this is either really bored or on some sort of mission," he said.

I didn't know him. He had stubble. A newspaper was crumpled up in front of him. On the bench next to him was a can of paint and a weather vane shaped like an airplane. It looked as if he had just painted the weather vane.

"Like God telling me to skip classes," I said.

I bobbed my head and left. I stepped onto my scooter and started the engine. A comfortable vibration went up my arms. I turned the accelerator and rode away. The wind wrapped itself around my body. I remembered how the propeller on that weather vane had been spinning. The wings had been facing into the wind, and the propeller had been turning, very fast. As I rode down the hill, I remembered something someone had said to me once.

"The air is still moving constantly."

I had forgotten whose words they were.

"Yes, it is," I said with confidence.

Where the Wind Blows


4. 7. 2005
5. 20. 2006


3. 10. 2005
3. 24. 2005
3. 26. 2005


3.2005
7.2000


3. 1. 2005
3.2000

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GRAY-COLORED DIET COKE

Yûya Satô

Translated by Andria Cheng

Faust has found a dedicated audience by speaking passionately, eloquently, and above all, honestly, to Japan's disaffected otaku generation. This excerpt from Yûya Satô's novel *Gray-Colored Diet Coke*—from its honest exploration of the painful emergence of adolescent sexuality, to its unflinching look at the uncensored thoughts and feelings of lonely and alienated teens—may be shocking, but it's the shock of the recognition of a brutal emotional truth.

Yûya Satô's debut work, *Flicker Shiki—Kagami Kimihiko ni Uttetsuke no Satsujin,* won the 21st Mephisto Award. After that, Kodansha Novels published his Kagami-ke Saga series, which continued on from his debut story. With that, he gained enthusiastic support from other young readers born in the 1980s. His story *1000 no Shousetsu to Bugbeared* then won the 20th Yukio Mishima Award. He is a representative author of Japan's "lost generation"—youth who have become so immersed in virtual reality that true reality becomes too terrifying.

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The book I ordered online from bk1 hasn't come yet. And it's been seven days. I guess the thing about them delivering

within twenty-four hours was a lie. I reached my hand out to grab the phone so I could call the Japan Advertisement Research Organization because they investigate dishonest, exaggerated, and misleading claims in advertising, but I didn't know their number, so I gave up. Because, really, it's not bk1's fault. It's my fault for living on this stupid island of Hokkaido.

Hokkaido. It prides itself on being 20 percent of the country, but it's just a faraway and stupidly huge island. I made the mistake of wanting to be treated the same as someone living in Tokyo. I guess I could sue bk1 for fraud or negligence, but it would be hard to win. But it clearly said they had a twenty-four-hour guarantee, so I could really win, sue them, sue them! I was so bored waiting I was letting myself get carried away.

It's such a pain to live in the country when you're waiting for a book you want to read. But I think it's ridiculous that the neighborhood bookstore doesn't have any Faulkner (but it's not exactly surprising, based on this town's cultural level). I'd finally gotten off work on a Sunday, but it seemed ridiculous to just sit around waiting for the Faulkner to arrive, and I felt as if any second now I'd start hearing things from behind the doors of the Buddhist altar again, so I called up some friends and took off.

The clear autumn sky stretched out overhead. It was so clear and so blue it was as if there were no atmosphere holding it up, as if it could fall at any moment. "Special bargain on clothes poles! Two for a thousand yen! Two for a thousand yen!" a loud voice called from a megaphone, swallowed up by the sky. The clothes-pole guy must be making his rounds. I had been hearing him ever since I was in elementary school, and his hoarse voice filled my ears as I started my car.

The rate of fatal car accidents in Hokkaido is supposed to be half as high as the national average. Keeping this in mind,

I drove at a high speed, faster, faster. I got off the highway onto a gravel road, kicking up stones and clouds of dust behind me, and came out onto a wide country road without a single stoplight (just driving twenty minutes from the train station takes you out to the middle of nowhere here!), and after driving on that country road for a while without seeing another oncoming car, I spotted a Western-style house with a peaked roof ahead to the right. That's where my best friend, Minami-kun, used to live.

He doesn't exist anymore.

He killed himself.

Minami-kun died because he was defeated by the fresh air, the pure water, the vast land, the delicious food, and the simpleminded people here. Hokkaido swallowed him up, and he died. Minami-kun and I wanted something dirtier. We wanted air polluted with exhaust fumes, water that reeked of chlorine, land that consisted of cracked concrete, food that looked like cat puke, and people who had something to hide. We had no use for nature. Nature never got dirty. We wanted something more poisonous. We wanted something more sinister.

I had to turn right at Minami-kun's house to get to my friends' place. A low-slung, used Nissan Skyline and a Toyota Mark II with ridiculously shiny wheels were parked out front. They're all stupid, so they're not good with money. I pushed open the door to my friends' house and marched inside.

"Oh, there you are! You're late!" Friend #1 turned around from watching some rerun of a TV drama.

"I drove as fast as I could."

"Then you're not much of a driver."

Friend #1 offered me a cigarette. "No thanks." I smiled faintly and pushed it away.

"Huh? You don't smoke?" Friend #2 looked up from his comic book.

"It's bad for you. We're getting older."

"We're only nineteen," Friend #3 objected.

"Yeah, and nineteen is when you can be studying at college or out in the real world working or have a little money saved up or live by yourself or get married or have children, but still not too old to get an allowance from your parents. I know it's a Sunday, but you don't have to be just sitting around like this."

"Who are you to talk? Both of us live with our parents and have only crappy part-time jobs," Friend #1 protested. But he was right. I didn't have a comeback.

So the four of us losers hopped in the Mark II, with its strangely loud engine, and headed for the heart of the city. Ha-ha. Heart of the city! You call a run-down train station, a shoddy electronics store, an unexpectedly decent department store, a pet shop, a convenience store, and a doughnut shop the heart of the city? What a joke! Of course there's no Faulkner in this city. There's nothing here. Nothing. But nevertheless, we arrived in the heart of the city. Bow down to Tokyo. Why did I have to be born in Hokkaido? Why couldn't I live in Tokyo or Kanagawa or Osaka or Kyoto? Why Hokkaido? Why the worst place ever? The Mark II pulled into a deserted parking lot. Apparently, we had reached our destination: the bowling alley.

Four guys going bowling together on a Sunday afternoon. I got the registration card at the reception desk and went crazy with our names. Friend #1 became Shorty, Friend #2 became Francisco F. Fujio, Friend #3 became Pokin, and I became Kenji Nakagami. I decided I wouldn't be able to cheer up unless I did something stupid like that.

"What the hell? Pokin?" Friend #2 yelled as he saw our new names displayed on the TV above the lane.

"Who the hell is Pokin?" Friend #3 yelled after him.

"Huh. I'm a halfy," Friend #2 whispered.

"What's up with mine? Pokin?"

"Pokin-chan! Ohhh, Pokin-chan!"

"Shut up!"

"Sorry, Pokin."

"Hey, you're the only one with a regular name!" Francisco F. Fujio said, pointing to me and thus identifying the culprit.

Huh? What were they talking about? Do they not know who Kenji Nakagami, the writer, is? Yeah, they probably didn't. Nobody around me did, whether they were classmates or adults. Ignorant and indifferent. That's why nobody taught me anything, and nobody influenced me. And even if I tried to learn something on my own, it never has any real substance. That's why I don't know anything. I've only heard the names Akira Asada and Kōjin Karatani, merely Japanese cultural figures. I don't know the difference between Ginsberg and Whitman. I don't know who Fujiwara no Teika or Zeami is. I don't know the difference between cubism and surrealism.

Nineteen years old.

With a crappy part-time job.

Graduated from a third-rate local high school.

The only thing good about any of those was my age.

I didn't have the energy to bowl. I just threw the ball however. Gutter, gutter, gutter. Shorty, Pokin, and Fujio laughed.

"You suck," Pokin said as he bowled a strike.

What's with that triumphant look on your face? No matter how many strikes you bowl, it's not going to change your life. Why can't you understand that? Are you a moron? Have

you no shame? Or are you just choosing to ignore it? Are you going to keep being a loser? Or have you already realized you've been defeated? Which is it?

"Hey, aren't you just a little disappointed with our lives?" I couldn't take it anymore, so I asked them straightforwardly.

"I'm not that poor!" Shorty answered.

"I don't mean money. . . . How should I put it? Like . . . right now we're bowling in the afternoon, and we don't have real jobs, and we live with our parents, and we've lived out in the country in Hokkaido forever. . . ."

"Well, of course it sucks, but you don't have to be so serious."

"But I do! If we're chronically hopeless, shouldn't we do something about it?"

"I don't wanna start studying again."

"Yeah, but you could go get a job in Tokyo without having to study."

"Tokyo? You're saying I should go to Tokyo?"

"Yeah, we could actually get somewhere in Tokyo. Don't you ever think about doing something like that?"

"I wouldn't mind going to Tokyo, but I don't have any money or anything to do there, you know?"

"I'd be happy to make 400,000 yen a month," Fujio declared cheerfully.

"Doesn't take much to make you happy."

"But isn't everyone like that?"

"Not really . . ."

"But if you could make 400,000 a month, you wouldn't think about bringing up this conversation, right?"

"Hey, it's your turn. Throw the ball!"

Shut up. I know. I threw the ball. It was a strike. After we finished our thrilling bowling game, we ate some ramen and went to the car.

"Don't you want to become something?" I said to no one in particular on the way home. But Pokin just babbled on and made a completely obvious observation about how the miso ramen really tasted like miso. I was depressed. When we returned to the house, there wasn't anything for me to do there, so I got in my car, told everyone goodbye, and left.

They're really content to live without hopes or dreams. Those dumb country boys have no idea why I'm suffering so much. As I tore into my friends like a hungry dog, I drove on with only the faint light from the streetlights and my headlights guiding the way. It gets dark around six o'clock in the evening toward the end of October. I saw light coming from the windows of Minami-kun's house. I hadn't set foot in it since Minami-kun died. I stepped on the gas, trying to put as much distance as I could between the house and my car, running away from the guilt I felt toward Minami-kun and my own worthless reality. No, no. I have to become something. This safety-net life of a part-timer isn't enough.

"It's not really the city's fault." Suddenly something Minami-kun had said played back in my mind. "It's not this city's fault that we didn't get into colleges like Waseda or Ritsumeikan. It's our fault for not studying. It's not the bookstore's fault we don't read; it's our fault because we hate to read. I don't have any ill will toward this city. It didn't do anything. It hasn't done anything to us. It didn't teach us the joy of learning or how interesting books are. It didn't bring us anyone to guide us along a different path." That's right, Minami-kun. That's right. "All it did for us was make us live in this stupidly huge place and this joke of a city. Even Kishuu would have been better. Big mountains, big rivers, I'd rather have that. But this city smack dab in the middle of Hokkaido doesn't have that kind of nature. It's nothing but flatland."

Flat.

It was just flat, a mixture of hope and despair.

I arrived at my house. I checked the mailbox, but all that was in it was the evening paper and a flyer inviting us to jazz dance lessons. Where are you, bk1? I let out a small sigh and went inside. If I talk to my parents, who never gave me anything or taught me anything, I start having murderous thoughts, so I quickly told them I already ate, went up to my room, and threw myself down on my bed. God, this is humiliating. I was so humiliated I felt as if I were going to die. I was so humiliated I felt like crying. What am I *doing* here? Here, in this city of only ninety thousand people on this huge island of only five or six million people? In this city that's completely buried in snow from December to March? I've been here for nineteen years? It's crazy. I can't become anything great, any conquering hero, in this kind of place. I have to get out as soon as I can. And head south to Tokyo—to Tokyo, the land of dreams, where ten million people swarm around like maggots.

But what would I do in Tokyo?

I think I'm different from people who have so-called talent. (Actually, I think there are too many people who unequivocally believe that every person has at least one talent.) My academic and physical skills are below average. I'm more self-conscious than the average person. My trump cards are that I have a regular driver's license and a certification in word processing. A nineteen-year-old without a real job. That's me. The only way I can get any notoriety at this point is to become a criminal, but I couldn't do that either. I don't possess the courage to become a serial killer, working my way through a residential neighborhood killing at random, or to rape the bodies of numerous little girls and tie their semen-stuffed corpses to electric poles. So I can't do anything. I can't go anywhere. I can't escape from the ordinary. I took out a piece

of mangosteen chewing gum and shoved it into my mouth. The artificial sweet flavor spread throughout my mouth and made me nauseous. "Special bargain on clothes poles. Two for a thousand yen, two for a thousand yen." I heard the peddler's voice.

"Special bargain on clothes poles. Two for a thousand yen, two for a thousand yen. Special bargain on clothes poles. Two for a thousand yen, two for a thousand yen." Shut up! I wanted to plug up my ears. "Special bargain on clothes poles. Two for a thousand yen, two for a thousand yen." That's weird. . . . Did he always work this late? Was he always such an enthusiastic salesman? I got up from my bed and opened the window. I strained to hear, but the only thing I heard was the kind of silence you hear only out in the country. I couldn't even hear the peddler's voice anymore. I slowly closed the window. "Special bargain on clothes poles. Two for a thousand yen, two for a thousand yen."

What's going on? I'm hearing things. I must have some kind of disease. I started running toward the Japanese-style room. Damn it, damn it, it was bad enough that the city had squeezed all the hope out of me, but now it's getting at me mentally, too. At this rate, I'll go down the same path as Minami-kun. . . . No, he chose death himself, having recognized his own lack of abilities and that his only other choice was to live in Hokkaido. But for me, it's just a matter of being crazy. I opened the sliding doors, entered the room, and stood before the Buddhist altar.

My paternal grandfather was sleeping there.

My grandfather, who lost the thumb and ring finger of his left hand in the war. My grandfather, who bore a keloid scar for the rest of his life after he tried to burn off the tattoo on his back with a hot iron plate. My grandfather, who was blind in both eyes from cataracts and always wore sunglasses to

hide them. My grandfather, who used every kind of power and influence to gain control of the construction business of this entire city. My grandfather, who was worshipped at the center of our family until he died. My grandfather, who built a huge mansion on top of a hill that looked down on the city so that he could show it how powerful he was. My grandfather, the conquering hero who eliminated those he didn't care for in every sense of the word. I say that, but actually, I have very few memories of my grandfather, because he smoked two and a half packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day and, to no one's surprise, died of lung cancer when I was six years old. On top of that, the rest of my family feared my grandfather, so they never took me to that mansion on top of the hill unless it was Bon or New Year's. I saw him only about ten times. But strangely, Grandfather had more of an impact on me than my mother or father.

I took deep, deep breaths in front of the altar until my heart rate returned to normal. I calmly closed my eyes and envisioned a volcano erupting deep beneath the surface of the ocean. That's my way of meditating. A huge white whale protects this ocean. He swims majestically and gracefully through the waters. My eyes travel from his head to his back to his tail, and just as I fall to the mouth of the volcano, all the light disappears from my eyes. My grandfather has stolen my eyesight. The intensity of the darkness increases with every passing second, and I feel my insides opening up again. I sink deeper and deeper within myself. I'm not imagining it anymore; I'm actually falling. What lies before me is ether the underworld, a mere synapse, or an illusion. A labyrinth that's both the truth and a lie. And finally, I find myself as a child there. I rest my head on my younger self's back and slowly climb inside. I'm enveloped by a feeling as if I were drowning. When I open my eyes, my grandfather's face is there.

(Ahh, Grandfather!) He's sunk deep in a leather armchair and strokes my hair with his hand that's missing its fingers and tells me stories of his cruel, murderous life as if it were a fairy tale.

"I've killed sixty-three people that I can remember. Of course, most of them were during the war, but they still count. On the battlefield, all you have with people is the relationship of kill or be killed. But that's not enough. You have to be more irrational, more absurd, don't you think? If you're going to kill someone, it should be a well-built, high-spirited guy. And it's even better when they have a woman with them. Because even under normal circumstances, that kind of guy likes a good fight. Once I find a jerk like that, I pick a fight with him. And of course he's up for it, too. I love the way he stands there with his hands stuffed in his pockets and talks tough, 'What's it to you?' and the woman doesn't even try to stop the fight; she just starts shouting, 'Get 'em, get 'em!' So we duel underneath a bridge, see? Usually, he comes at you first. Anyhow, he wants to show his woman how strong he is. But then I grab his arm in midpunch and twist it up. Just a little pressure and the guy screams. Weak! Once you tear his flesh and muscles and tendons, he can't even scream anymore. He just whimpers 'Uhhh uhhh uhhh.' For me, any guy who whimpers like that deserves to get his face smashed in. I don't know how it is now, but back then there were a bunch of stones rolled down underneath the bridge, so you can take one and use it to bash the guy's forehead. You can use maybe 70 percent of your strength and hit him over and over again. By then his forehead will split open, and this blackish blood will be oozing out. Then stop smashing his forehead and with all your strength take the rock and smash it into the guy's mouth. All his front teeth snap right off; it's really funny. But be careful. Until you get good at it, make sure your

fingers don't end up getting stuck in his mouth. By then, even men won't try to fight anymore. There's just this big body convulsing, whimpering 'Uhhh uhhh uhhh.' This disgusting combination of blood and spit will come flying out of his mouth, and he'll just be crying. If it turns out he's not a tough guy after all, he'll piss himself right then. Ha-ha. This is a grown man, you hear? So at this point, the woman starts panicking and starts screaming, 'Stop it. You'll kill him!' What an idiot. That's what I'm trying to do, so what do you mean, stop it? Dumb-ass. So I ignore the woman and smash the guy's eyeballs with my knees. Then the woman gets scared of me, abandons the guy, and tries to run away. It happens every time. No matter what kind of woman it is, once I cross over a certain line, she'll start running like hell's chasing after her. Don't you think that's cold? No matter how well a woman takes care of you, no matter how devoted she is, that's how they really are, so don't get your hopes up. Your grandma was the same way. Well, anyway, of course I don't let the woman run away either. So now you take the stone that was stuffed in the guy's mouth and throw it at the back of her head. As long as they're not too sharp, they won't be able to get away. So then, while the woman's all curled up in pain—they say women have a higher pain tolerance than men, but that's bullshit—grab her hair and kick her as hard as you can in the stomach. When you do that, most women can't move anymore. So as she rolls around, go finish off the guy. Take out the rope you brought with you and wrap it around his neck and pull it tight. Anyone who hesitates at this point is third-rate. If you can't finish him off, you shouldn't have started the fight. Don't go easy on him; choke him to death with one squeeze of your rope! His skin will tear, blood vessels will burst, and his bones will break. Now she's next. She's lying there like a bunch of rags, and you drag her down to the

river. Unlike men, women will scream, so you can't forget to break her jaw with a rock. So then you push her head into the river. The water isn't even two feet deep, but it's all dark and her jaw's gone, so she struggles more than she has to. This scene is a masterpiece. So, anyway, if you leave her alone, she'll drown, so pull her back up so she can breathe. Then you push her down again. This goes on for a half hour, you hear? This half hour is important. That's how long it takes to get a woman used to hell. You keep this rhythm up for a half hour so she can feel what hell is like. Then she'll get used to hell and think that it's normal. It sounds like a lie, but it's true. So then once the woman's totally used to hell, you suddenly push her face all the way down to the bottom of the river. No matter how much she struggles, you can't let her go, you hear? She'll be dead in a minute. Now listen, this is hunting. And they're your game. You can't avoid this if you're gonna live as a human being. I say that, but most guys don't do this. In other words, they're not human, in every sense of the word. They're just a lump of flesh. They're food scraps left in the bottom of the garbage. Your mom's the same way. Your dad's the same way. Hey, do you wanna live your life as a lump of flesh? You don't, right? It's too bad, but you might have to. Why? Because you don't have anyone to teach you how to hunt. Your dad isn't the kind of guy who can hunt. Either you're born with it or you're not. So you can't learn anything from your dad, even though you have the chance to become a real human, too. Hmm? I may be blind, but that much is clear to me. I'm not like any other guy. I can see a light in you. You're sparkling. Normal guys get only as bright as a lightbulb about to burn out. Just a dim flicker. Your mom and dad are the same way: They don't shine any more than a piece of shit. But you're different. Your light isn't halfway.

You're not like other kids. What I'm saying is you have the potential to live as a human and not a lump of flesh. You can become a conquering hero. But not if you don't know how to hunt. I wanna teach you, but my fingers are gone and my back hurts and most of all I'm blind, so it's just not going to work. So at least let me watch over you. I'll watch over you from inside of you. I'll tell you how to be a good hunter, how to find good prey, how to kill a man, how to rape a woman."

Just as Grandfather tried to grab my eyeballs, I came back to myself. I climbed out of my younger self and returned to my nineteen-year-old self who stood in front of the Buddhist altar. My vision returned to normal.

"I'm not a lump of flesh," I tried to say out loud. But my voice sounded flat and weak. It was proof enough for me that I actually was a lump of flesh.

I left the room, got my car keys, and ran outside. "Special bargain on clothes poles. Two for a thousand yen, two for a thousand yen." The annoying hallucination started again. I turned up the volume on the car radio. A young girl singing pierced my ears. All I remember of it was "I'm all decked out, but even *natto*'s* okay. / I'm waiting for a LOVE text from you. / Even though I'm wearing cheap sandals today, / The world belongs to just us two." Oh, shut up, you little slut. I spit the mangosteen gum out into the ashtray. After that idiotic song ended, the DJ started talking. It turned out this slut was fourteen and a famous musician produced her debut single. It was number seven on the Oricon charts. Oh, really! I stomped on the gas and took off down the darkening road. It was dark. I couldn't see the moon or stars. It was too dark. What, so I'm not sparkling after all? Is that it?

* *Natto* Fermented soybeans.

Is that why it's so dark? Grandfather, if you're still in there, answer me, Am I sparkling? I got caught up in all those sentimental thoughts, and before I knew it, I had turned down Minami-kun's street again. I finally got hold of myself and slowed down. My hands were hard like frozen slabs of beef as I gripped the steering wheel.

"I'm not a lump of flesh." I tried saying it again. That's right. I was the only person my giant of a grandfather recognized; I was his legitimate heir. The ruler of the earth. And a human. So what am I doing stuck in the country? Come on, hurry up! Get back the points! Even the score! From whom? How? I stopped my car about fifty yards ahead of Minami-kun's house and got out. I didn't have much of a coat on, so the cold north wind passed right through my clothes, stealing my warmth. My lips trembled as I walked down the pitch-black road and arrived at Minami-kun's house. The house was almost completely invisible in the darkness; I couldn't even see its outline. The large windows had no curtains on them, and there were lights on inside, but why wasn't the light passing through to the outside? It was like a small star on the verge of being swallowed up by a black hole. I quietly approached the disappearing star. I walked around the yard. I'm sure there were beautiful plants and flowers spread out by my feet, but the black hole extinguished everything and I couldn't see them because the singularity swirled about the roof. It was as if the reality of being just a lump of flesh were being thrown at me. A nineteen-year-old who lost his potential to sparkle. A tragic nineteen-year-old who can't even get out of Hokkaido. A ridiculous nineteen-year-old who can only dream of Tokyo. If only I could put forth more light. . . . Light. Sparkling. In the middle of the darkness, fireworks sparkled.

"Fireworks!"

That's what Minami-kun had yelled out that day. I think it was a night that was too dark, like this one. A July night devoid of the moon and stars. Two years ago. When we were seventeen. Second year of high school. A flashlight hung from Minami-kun's neck, and he stood at the top of the peaked roof. It was so dark I couldn't make out his face. "Minami-kun, what are you doing?" I was watching him from below and probably laughed.

"It's really dark tonight," Minami-kun said.

"Yeah, it is."

"I bet it'll be dark tomorrow, too."

"Yeah, I guess."

"And the day after tomorrow, too." Minami-kun aimed the flashlight at the night sky, and its light was absorbed into the darkness.

"Hey, Minami-kun, you don't have to be so shocked." I tried to comfort him.

Minami-kun was implausibly jealous of the fourteen-year-old kid from Kobe who got arrested in that series of child murders everyone had been talking about.

He was jealous because he had been beaten to the punch.

"I'm not really shocked. I'm relieved. Yeah, relieved. Ha-ha, yeah. I just tried to say it out loud to see what it sounded like, but I think it's true."

"Relieved?"

"Relieved that there was someone else out there who couldn't stand living every day with this suffocating hatred for the country."

"But he got caught."

"Yeah, he did."

"If you get caught, it's all over."

"That's harsh, huh?"

"But it's true. It's amazing that a fourteen-year-old could commit crimes like that, but he got caught right away, and that note he left at the school gate with the victim's head was made public. He gets an F just for that. It was something a kid would do. I think the plans in your notebook are way better."

"What, this?" Minami-kun shone the flashlight at his right hand, dimly illuminating his college-ruled notebook. It was full of "plans," and he had been diligently keeping it since middle school. In it were various horrifying ways to kill someone, ways the kid from Kobe couldn't even dream of. Leaving a freshly severed head at the school gate? Minami-kun was way better than that. He was more sinister, original, excessive, detailed, flashy, cruel, bizarre, calculating, psychotic. Minami-kun let out all the depression and impulses and delusions he had bottled up inside of him in that notebook. He turned his thoughts into words, and that's how he connected with the world.

"I don't need this notebook anymore." Minami-kun turned off his flashlight. Since the only light source was gone, it was as if he had disappeared into the darkness.

"Why do you say that? I think your plans are so much better."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Yes, really!"

"You're nice."

"Minami-kun, just come down now," I said as I felt an inexpressible apprehension.

"What, are you worried about me?"

"It's more like . . . I have a bad feeling."

"A bad feeling?"

"Come on. Hurry up and come down."

"Thanks. You really are nice."

"Gross. You don't have to say it again."

"I think I might have loved you."

I froze as I heard Minami-kun's confession. "Huh?"

"I said, I loved you. L-O-V-E. Don't just stand there. Say something!"

"Are you joking?"

"Why would I joke about something like this?"

"Whoa, wait a second. Huh? What? I mean . . ."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. But you don't have to worry about it. I'm gonna die now."

"Huh? What? What did you say?" I was swallowed up by a whirlpool of confusion. If only I had been able to pull it together. . . .

"I guess in this world there are either people who can do it or people who can't. It's just like you said, what that kid from Kobe did was useless and superficial. It was no good. It was only half psychotic and didn't have much flair. But he actually killed someone and severed their head. Not on paper, but in the real world. And he left a freshly severed head outside the school gate. Doing it in real life is amazing. I already felt like a loser, but that fourteen-year-old pushed me over the edge. What do you think?"

"Hm? What? I dunno." If only I had given him a better answer . . .

"I guess you don't understand. It's writing."

"Writing?"

"The taunting letter he left with his confession. I've been trying to hate that letter, but I can't. His writing is definitely childish. He sucks at English, and it sounds really inexperi-

enced. He spelled a bunch of words wrong, probably because of his age. But I thought his writing was amazing. It had style. Soul. Meaning and worth. No matter what, it'll go down in history. I think his writing had more impact than leaving a severed head at the gate. I think you know, but I can empathize with him. He was relatively intelligent, was talented at writing; he looked down on everyone around him regardless of whether they were children or adults. But he wasn't very good at academics and probably had an inferiority complex because of it. The people who lived around him probably annoyed him no end, and because of that, going on living every day was a struggle. He knew he had to do something, but he was a kid so he couldn't go anywhere and he knew that. I'm sure just a little outside the town he lives in is nothing but the country, but there are some buildings near the train station. There are probably a lot of kids in his school; high-speed trains probably go through the town; the roads are probably wide; the parking lots probably can park more than a hundred cars; there are probably random parks everywhere, convenience stores; the department stores are probably huge, but not many people go there so you could bowl down the aisles if you wanted to; and he couldn't bring himself to have any expectations of the people who lived around him; his friends never thought about anything; the adults don't care about anything; and no one ever reacted no matter what he did; if he drew a picture, if he wrote poetry or novels, no matter what he did, they didn't react; if he did good, he wanted them to tell him he did good; if it was bad, he wanted them to tell him it was bad; he just wanted a reaction, any kind of reaction; but everyone else was just a flabby lump of flesh, so they couldn't think of anything. . . . It was just hopeless."

I guessed his long speech was over. I had finally pulled

myself together and tried to find Minami-kun, but he had been completely assimilated into the darkness, so I couldn't see even a bit of him. I began to feel scared and looked down. The darkness was penetrating me, too. My legs were gone because of the thick darkness. Not just my legs but my knees, my stomach, my shoulders, my arms . . . I couldn't see any of them. The whole world had become darkness. Complete blackness, complete darkness. Now I felt insecure about everything. Was I really standing on the ground? Did I really still have arms and legs? Was Minami-kun's house still there? Was Minami-kun still standing on the peaked roof? Nothing seemed certain anymore.

So I yelled, "Minami-kun?" for reassurance.

"What?" came his reply from above.

"Hurry up and come down from the roof! Let's go inside!"

"It's embarrassing to admit, but until now, I always thought I was someone special."

"Hey . . ." It was no use; I couldn't get through to him.

"But I love another guy, I don't fit in this town, I wrote in that notebook every single day. But the thing with the kid from Kobe made me realize that I'm just a regular person. It's not all that unusual to have feelings for another guy, a lot of people don't like where they grew up, and I bet even having a notebook like mine is ordinary."

"Don't worry, Minami-kun; you're not normal at all!"

"Whoa, what a response!"

"You're awesome, Minami-kun, I always tell you that! When you think of a new plan, when you set fire to things, I'm always by your side and tell you how great you are! I won't let you say you never heard me!"

"No, I heard you."

"See? I understand you, Minami-kun. I understand everything about you. I know just as well as you how bad Hokkaido

sucks and how everyone in this town is a loser. Or what? It doesn't count unless we do it? I'm not a homo or anything, but I wouldn't care if it was with you, Minami-kun. Okay? So come down here!"

I heard the sound of liquid being poured on top of the roof.

And some kind of odor hit my nostrils.

"I forgot. We said we'd do fireworks, right?" I heard Minami's even voice from within the darkness.

"H-hey, what are you doing?"

"Pouring gasoline over my head, can't you see? Oh, I guess it's too dark."

"Minami-kun, hey, hey! W-wait!"

"It's really dark today."

"Wait, I said!"

"Thanks for everything."

"Listen to me!"

"He already did most of the things I wanted to do. All the ideas I had, all the things I had planned . . . he did them before I could."

"But you can still . . ."

"I don't want to be a copycat."

"Minami-kun!"

"I'm really thankful for you. You always recognized my existence, ever since we were little. You reacted to every little thing I did. You complimented me, you ridiculed me, you respected me, you talked bad about me. Because of you, I was able to live without breaking any of my rules. Anyone would love someone like that. I'm sorry."

"Minami-kun!" I yelled his name loudly.

Now that I think about it, my only role was to just continue calling his name.

"But, anyway, it's really dark today. Strangely dark. I have to light it up . . . like this. . . ." He trailed off.

Those were the last words Minami-kun spoke in this world. Just as the sound of a loud *pop* reached my eardrums, Minami-kun's body was engulfed in orange flames.

Minami-kun had turned into a pillar of fire.

He didn't scream, he didn't talk, his body just burned. The sound of fire grew louder.

It was like broad daylight around him, poisonous. Minami-kun was covered in flames, and he sparkled. He sparkled brightly. Minami-kun sparkled, and he raised both hands up to the sky and jumped off the peaked roof in one swift movement. A ball of fire fell before my eyes with a loud thud. The sound of the impact was much louder than I thought it would be. His notebook of plans was on fire, and it danced between the boundaries of darkness and light. Just a few seconds ago, the ball of fire had been called "Minami-kun," but now the hot air it gave off and the smell of burning flesh soaked into my skin. Even now at nineteen, it's still there.

Nineteen years old, I looked up at the peaked roof. Minami-kun wasn't there, just darkness. Two years ago, he had been destroyed by fire. Every part of him was burned. The only thing that survived was a few fragments of pages from his notebook that had escaped the flames.

As I stared at the peaked roof, I tried to remember what had been written inside Minami-kun's notebook, but suddenly I felt tormented by a feeling of pressure in my brain. And the image of the white whale. Why? I'm not even meditating. But I saw the head of the white whale that swims through the ocean in front of my eyes. Usually my eyes travel from his head to his back to his tail, but this time it was the opposite direction; I looked at the whale's face. His two eye-

balls were crushed. As soon as I saw that, I collapsed in the yard.

Instinct. Or maybe I'm being attacked? Someone's hand tries to peel away at me. My consciousness shuts down. My field of vision narrows. The darkness grows deeper. All my sensations vanish, from my fingertips to my abdomen to my penis. My organs and nerves and bones and skin melt into the darkness so Grandfather can crawl out of me from in between my ribs. He takes his sunglasses from my lungs and puts them on, stares at me, says nothing. I'm sorry, Grandfather; I betrayed you; you were watching over me from inside, but I couldn't sparkle; I cut off all my possibilities except to live as a lump of flesh; I didn't hunt; I didn't catch any game. But Grandfather, the conquering hero, doesn't listen to my apology, which sounds like little more than a whimper to him. Because I'm just prey for the conquering hero to crush and play with and kill as he pleases. What else can a nineteen-year-old with a part-time job living a meaningless existence in Hokkaido be but prey? I should be thankful even to be someone's prey. I'm nothing but an insect.

Grandfather picks up a stone that rolled into the yard and hits me again and again without mercy. I'm barely hanging on by a thread when my body explodes. I've been destroyed by his attack. I've been released from all my restraints, and now I can finally think about something besides despair. At that moment, I arrived at the truth. A lump of flesh is someone who both succeeds and fails at life. Grandfather was the last true "human" in the world, and he didn't find worth in life. He didn't have any more attachments to life than necessary and remained a conquering hero. The fourteen-year-old kid from Kobe made Minami-kun realize he was nothing more than a lump of flesh, so he burned that flesh. But right now, I don't have any flesh. What does that mean? As I pon-

dered this, the heat from the flames coming from Minami-kun reached me.

It was a message. He was telling me to get hold of myself. Minami-kun? Are you there? I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't get out of this city I hate; I'm sorry I gave up on controlling the world but still act cynical and laugh at everyone else around me; I'm sorry I'm living like I'm already dead. I'm nineteen, in Hokkaido, in this joke of a city, today, tomorrow, doing nothing.

"Life," said my split-open brain. I want to be a human. I don't want to keep on living as a lump of flesh. That's why I'm begging for this in the middle of the darkness. I clung to it, so I wouldn't die because of worthless human emotions. I had no intention of killing myself. All I want is to live as a conquering hero until my last moment. So I tried to turn all my selfishness and self-interest and anger toward others and emotions into energy. I bet on a complete reversal. Explosion. My body suddenly grew hot, and I started sparkling brightly. I became one body of energy. I realized I have to do something so I could sparkle. I'll do something. Something. And become a conquering hero. Even if I can't right now, I have time—just watch. I'll become something and massacre everyone. That's my dream. That's the meaning of me. The more I thought about it, the more my body sparkled. The darkness vanished and was filled with my light. It shot through me. Scorching heat. Beautiful scorching heat. If I can sparkle, and if I can become a conquering hero, the world can be this beautiful.

Of course, in the end, it was just a useless struggle, like throwing a ball up at the sky. My light converged in no time, and darkness ruled the world again. Darkness? No, that's not right. It was something deeper than darkness: It was nothingness. What was swallowing up the world this time was

something denser; it was just nothingness. I couldn't sparkle anymore, so I was also taken in by the nothingness. As absolute darkness, into nothingness.

As my body gradually returned to normal, from within the complete nothingness, I swore:

I'll become something by the time I turn twenty.

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ECCO

Tatsuhiko Takimoto

Illustrations by D.K
Translated by Andria Cheng

Many stories in *Faust* borrow heavily from the fantasy and science fiction themes so popular in anime and manga. But, as in *ECCO,* they use those themes to explore the very real experiences of Japanese teens. Beginning with the epigraph "A happy high school life is always a lie," ECCO uses a typical science fiction trope—fans of *The Matrix* will find much to ponder in this story—to explore the experience of being in high school. It is about being a stranger in a strange world, whether you are literally an alien being, or are simply possessed of a sensibility that sets you apart from your peers.

Tatsuhiko Takimoto was born in 1978. His debut, *Negative Happy Chainsaw Edge*, was a breakthrough success, but he achieved a new level of popularity with *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, which has been adapted into popular anime and manga versions.

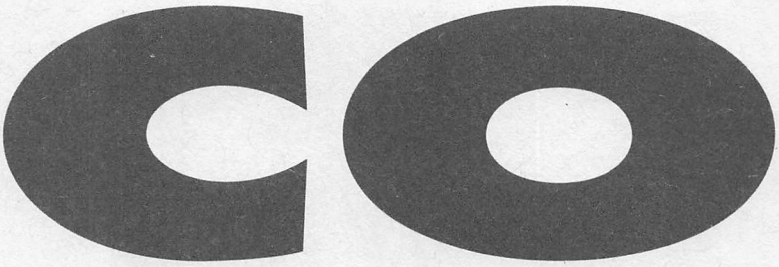
D.K, an illustrator, was born in 1978. His dream was to become Kamen Rider (a popular live-action superhero). D.K has also served as designer on such projects as the film *Casshern.*

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EC



A happy



high school life

is always a ***LIE!***


NUBA

Prologue

It was night. A very cold night.

She sat on a green garbage can in the back alley of a pachinko parlor, swinging her legs in the air. She breathed on her numb hands to warm them up: "*Haa.*"

It was at that moment, the moment when she felt a little bit of warmth in the palms of her small hands, that she woke as an "alien." She had awakened.

"Oh, that scared me!"

She was so surprised that her shoulders trembled, and she cried out in a childish voice as her host's body and brain accepted the reality of the situation. Then she straightened her back and looked all around her.

"Damn it. It's ECCO again."

Her vision wasn't anything except ECCO. She guessed from the snow covering the asphalt that it was winter, and it was very cold. Since she was all alone on a night like that, she felt a little sad but then remembered she felt that way no matter what time period she found herself in. She decided she wouldn't worry herself over the unpleasant physical or mental sensations, which were no doubt controlled by ECCO's influence. She was cold and lonely, but she wouldn't worry, wouldn't worry, wouldn't worry. . . .

But even so, her blue veins were visible in both her legs, which stretched out from her skirt, and her whole body was shaking. She couldn't help but be cold.

But I'll be fine! She tried to encourage herself.

Yes, I'll disappear soon. I'll forget about myself, go to sleep, and disappear. I want to sleep and escape from this mire. No matter how beautiful this snow-covered city is, the beauty itself is proof enough that this world was set up by ECCO.

"When I wake up again, I hope I wake up at home." But the girl knew her wish hadn't come true again and sighed.

From this garbage can I'm sitting on, if I gaze at the lights of the shopping district from the dark alley, I'm sure there's an arcade decorated with twinkling Christmas lights, restaurants with delicious smells coming from them, bars, and probably a love hotel.

I'm positive this world was set up by ECCO. ECCO worlds are always a whirlpool of pleasure and pain. The only thing different about waking up this time is the stabbing cold I feel on my skin.

Her awakening this time was freezing cold, more harsh than usual. She tried bringing the collar of the child-size coat up to her neck, but it still didn't make her warm.

"..."

The sky was already dark, but the lights from the buildings were bright so it cast a seemingly warm, dim light on everything. The asphalt was covered with soft snow, and even though she knew what it was called, it was the first time she had ever physically seen it. It looked fluffy and warm, but when she poked it with the tip of her shoe, it was definitely cold.

"S-so cold," she whispered softly so no one, not even herself, could hear. That made things even colder, and she instantly regretted it. She just kept getting lonelier and wasn't sure what to do.

She could see the breath of the people walking in the shopping district across the way, but they were all smiling cheerfully. None of them noticed the figure of the girl trembling in the alley only a few meters away. Even if they did see her, none of them could understand her complex soul. Therefore, her true nature was the same as not being there, not existing. She was a nonbeing.

"Ahh!" Just then, the girl suddenly realized something terrible.

I already can't remember my true name!

I somehow feel that I've had around twenty different names. A long time ago, I think I was called Epinoia. And he—the one who found and saved me a few thousand years ago while I was working under my professional name Helene at a brothel in Syria—had given me the name "Sophia." It was a very good name. Lately it had become a fairly common name, so no one would think it strange if I introduced myself as Sophia. Thank you for thinking of such a useful name, Simon. . . .

But Simon had died in the blink of an eye. Everyone dies and forgets me. Or 90 percent of them are captured by ECCO while they're still alive and forget themselves and me. At this rate, I'll completely forget about my true nature as well. The day when I am completely extinguished is near.

"S-so please, let someone find me and rescue me," she whispered quietly. Then she gave a self-deprecating snort and quickly sniffled. How romantic and ECCO-tic. She felt stupid. Her nose began to run more heavily, and her trembling grew worse, as much from a sense of embarrassment at her own words as from the physical coldness she felt from being outside. Her arms and legs were so thin they looked as if they would break, and she tried hugging her knees to her chest, but she was already so cold her teeth were chattering.

She knew she couldn't go to the warm-looking places such as the brightly lit shops across the way.

The reason why was because in five, ten minutes, maybe an hour, her fate was to doze off inside of her young host's body, and after that, her host's life would restart as if nothing had happened. So even though she had awakened, she couldn't get carried away and go walking off into an unfamil-

iar town in an unfamiliar time. If she did so, when her host woke up, she could be lost.

Yes, judging from the size of her body, her host was a young girl around ten years old.

She had probably run away from home if she was sitting in a back alley on a cold night like this. At any rate, that wasn't important. Whatever it was, it was sure to be some ridiculous drama, some trick thought up by ECCO. Her host would soon be taken away by a policeman of this time, brought home, fall fast asleep, never realize ECCO's existence, and lead a mediocre life.

She couldn't interfere with an ordinary fate like that. Commoners were suited to ECCO's control. She knew many humans who had gone mad after even halfway discovering ECCO's existence.

"I'm cold, but I have to bear with it."

She hugged her knees more tightly and continued waiting for sleep and her host to awaken. She sat still for thirty more minutes, but her host still hadn't awakened, although the girl's soul was still awake. However, she felt that the suspension of her life force was approaching.

It was cold.

Honestly, she couldn't stand it any longer.

It wouldn't be long before she would freeze to death. She already couldn't move. Even if everything had been supervised by ECCO, or even if by doing so she'd confuse her host when she woke up, she knew she couldn't just sit there and freeze to death. Even if her soul's destiny was to be forever captured by ECCO, she wasn't so unfeeling that she would let her host, a commoner, freeze to death.

Oh! She noticed snow lightly piling up on her shoulder.

The soft, white snow was on her knees and her hair, too.

The girl knew better than anyone that even the whiteness

of the snow was controlled by ECCO. That unforgivable Earth Code Control Organization governed and bound all the coldness of the icy city, the snow, and the winter.

It felt cold like real snow.

If she let herself, she might be fooled by it.

She felt as if she were going to be swallowed up by ECCO's trap.

She gave a small sigh as she looked up at the beautiful full moon between the buildings, which was also devised by ECCO. This night when she woke up, she felt she had better sleep than last time. It was cold, but that had made her snap to reality right away. Her host was a cute girl, and her body felt nicer than most others she had been in before. It reminded her of something Simon had said. "Asians have beautiful skin." It really was smooth and silky. But, of course, those feelings were also because of ECCO. All her feelings, all her surroundings—everything was controlled by ECCO. She felt angry at this reality, and the peace of the night only set her frayed soul at ease just a little. She felt slightly comforted that the noise from the shopping district had died down—there were only a few people walking down the brightly lit road across from the alley.

"All right," the girl said, making up her mind. "I need to go somewhere else now."

Usually, she would retreat back into her host's body and quietly wait, but this time was unusually cold, so if she thought about her host's safety, she knew she had to move around to get her body warm.

She felt that there had to be a reason for her host to have been wandering around this late on a cold night such as this. She decided she had to walk just a short distance in this unfamiliar time and city until her host woke up. She would smile and look down on this world created by ECCO.

"B-but!"

The girl pointed up at the night sky peeking through the gap in between the buildings, opened her mouth wide, and declared, "But don't get me wrong! I'm not being tricked by you! I'm still awake and haven't lost sight of my true nature. No matter how many times you try to make me sleep, I'll always wake up and resist you! Y-yes, I'm the Holy One, Sophia! Daughter of the great Phusis! I'm the one who successfully infiltrated ECCO for my love of mankind, the ultimate recognizer! And as long as I don't completely forget the divinity of my miraculous soul, the ultimate gnosis, I'll continue being me! I'll keep being the last star of hope for humanity and rebel against ECCO! S-so please let me remember everything! Let me remember my wonderful and gentle memories of Simon! If you don't, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

The girl was starting to be attacked by drowsiness, which could be a symptom of freezing to death, or it could be a sign that she was beginning to forget about her soul. No matter which one, she needed to get hold of herself, so she was screaming loudly and dramatically up at the sky. She didn't care what she said anymore. It was just a restorative, a meaningless declaration so she could muster up some courage. Ninety percent of what she had yelled out had been just secondhand knowledge she got from Simon, but truthfully, his word was doubtful at best. Maybe he had just kidnapped the prostitute he had been so fond of and sold her off at a low price.

But if Simon hadn't saved me from that cruel hygienic environment, I would have been recovered by ECCO a long time ago and forgotten my true self forever.

Forgetting myself would be easier than prolonging this rebellion against ECCO, which has no chance of succeeding.

"No, I can't sleep yet!" She squeezed her fist and quietly

stood up on the garbage can and strengthened her sacred resolve. She didn't know how many minutes or seconds it would take for her to get hold of her consciousness. But even if it was for just a little while, she wanted to rebel against ECCO.

I'm going to tell the first man I meet every single thing about ECCO's tricks. And maybe, if he has the qualities of a soldier, I'll have a new partner and we can join hands and fight!

"Yes, yes, that's what I'll do!"

She got off the garbage can and brushed off the snow that had piled on her shoulders, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't reach the ECCO-created white, powdery snow that clung to her back.

"Well, then . . ." She decided she'd turn in big circles in the darkness behind the pachinko shop while no one was watching so the powdery snow would fly off her from centrifugal force. The only light that shone on her was the ECCO-created streetlights and moonlight, but even though she knew that, she had awakened for the first time in hundreds of years, which thrilled Epinoa, Helene, Sophia, and this girl who was an alien in this world. She felt like singing.

"La la la!"

But she quickly clapped her hands over her mouth. "No, I can't sing!"

Every song, painting, and dance, every single one of them, were tricks devised by ECCO. Every kind of art form was a trick from ECCO. So instead of singing, the girl skipped. From the dimly lit alley, the girl got used to the snowy country she was in, the bright lights of the shopping district, and the rhythmical motion of her skipping. She slipped on the ice and fell headfirst into a snowdrift at the base of an electric pole. *N-not yet! I can't get discouraged at something like this!*

I've made it on my own for thousands of years. Until I tell someone somewhere about the truth of this world, until I find a new soldier, I can't fall asleep! So the girl pulled her small, beautiful face from the deep snow and flicked the snow off her eyelashes.

She looked up at the sky again and screamed, "So you're going to get in my way no matter what, huh, ECCO? But I won't give up! I'll find someone worthy to be a soldier! And I'll make him my partner. Uwaa!"

Just as her proud declaration of war was almost over, she slipped again. This was dangerous. The girl learned that snow and ice were very slippery and dangerous and walked more carefully so she wouldn't slip. She could hear a choir singing Christmas songs in the distance and tentatively walked toward the unfamiliar city in an unfamiliar time. The only one who was watching this series of events was ECCO.

1
Chie and Yū

It was the end of the twenty-first century. War, terrorism, and bullying followed in succession. People were losing their sanity and getting away with cruelty.

There were many people who swore they were mentally stable, but the only person who'd believe them in this day and age would be a fool. Because the "morals" people derived from truth were usually fueled by ambition for power. If you believed someone else, you'd become a slave and be sorry you ever did.

So you shouldn't trust what anyone says.

Not even yourself.

The perfect realist understands that this empty world is

completely meaningless. And all the emotions of all the young people who are living soaked up to their necks in this meaningless world will turn into nothingness as well. In effect, all morals will turn to ruin, humanity will fall to the ground, and because of that Japan will enter the end times.

But that can't happen. The world was waiting for a savior to descend. Humans needed their mental stability back as soon as possible. If not, the bullying and shoplifting and reckless driving on motorcycles without wearing helmets would just keep getting worse.

Look, even now a young man has gotten up at five in the morning to prepare for some spiteful bullying.

His name was Yū Nemoto, and he was sixteen years old. He rushed out of his apartment building with an insect cage in hand and started gleefully digging in the damp earth with a shovel. Before long, he plucked some earthworms from the ground and stuffed them into the cage, a psychotic smile on his face.

The fact that Yū was smiling was proof that he was wicked.

Because Yū was planning to stick those squirming earthworms into a girl's shoes. He also planned to watch from the shadows as she stuck her foot in them and squished the earthworms and looked forward to enjoying her scream and cry.

He'd use his digital camera's video function and record Chie's crying face from the shadows of the school entrance, burn the file onto a DVD so the image of her tears and snot and the sloppy bodies of earthworms could be preserved forever, and watch it over and over again for his own satisfaction.

But, actually, Chie was Yū's benefactress. She had saved him, if only for a while, from the bullying that occurred in Class 1-A. But the fact that Yū could only stuff Chie's shoes

full of earthworms showed how dark his heart was and how helpless he really was. He was a fiendish high school freshman. If only the age for juvenile offenders were amended.

However, it could be said that Yū was bad, but there was still one doubt that remained.

Why would Yū hate such a kind, beautiful girl so much? Why would he hate his benefactress?

It wasn't as simple as a warped schoolboy crush. His hatred toward Chie had been solidified a few days earlier on an autumn afternoon.

He still couldn't forget about it.

Chie's gentle gaze and her pitiful eyes.

"D-damn it! I swear, I'll make her speechless!"

Yū had finished collecting about forty earthworms before breakfast, and he narrowed his eyes as the park had begun to grow bright with the morning sun. He remembered the deep hatred he had for Chie. For her warm hands.

From the first time he met Chie, he couldn't stand her.



She irritated him so much he couldn't even stand the way she introduced herself.

He sat in the very back row of the classroom, resting his chin on his hands as he always did and stared blankly up at the podium, his eyes glossed over like a dead goldfish. Standing at the podium was the midsemester transfer student Chie Utsuki. Even though nobody followed all the school rules these days, she adhered to them closely; she had black hair, no earrings, wore no accessories, wore her skirt the regulated length. If the world were a village of only a hundred people, she'd probably be the seventh most beautiful.

Of course, it wasn't Chie's beauty that irritated him. It was her attitude. He couldn't stand how natural her attitude seemed.

Natural attitude, or in other words, her natural style.

Why would a girl their age transfer to a different school in midsemester right before summer break? It was a miracle to Yū that she could just stand up at the podium and introduce herself in such a carefree manner when you took that into account.

Because right around the age of sixteen, humans' self-monitors functioned overtime, causing them to be overly self-conscious. They'd stutter, turn red, or try to force themselves to be happy.

Thinking back to the opening ceremonies of the school year, he couldn't remember anyone from his class who hadn't been overly self-conscious while introducing themselves. The only one who had been able to introduce himself naturally was Yū.

"I'm Yū Nemoto," he had said, and then sat back down. It had taken only about three seconds. And with just those three words that he had spoken, his attitude toward everyone else in the room was clear.

Basically it was "I don't know any of you people and I don't care to either, so please leave me alone."

His attitude wasn't a front or being overly defensive; it was what he actually felt in his heart. Yū always thought how he didn't want to get involved with any of those pigs and that he had no reason to speak to any of them.

Any kind of expectation of the world, others, or even yourself prevented having a natural style. As long as you didn't have a grain of expectation for any of those pigs, introducing yourself naturally was a piece of cake. But since they had expectations of him and others, everyone else would blush or mumble because they were intimidated by their surroundings. It was painful to watch. Every time someone behaved like that, Yū would laugh at them on the inside. *Hey, you pigs and I are at totally different emotional stages! As long as you don't completely abandon hope like me, you'll always be an overly self-conscious person! Why don't you pigs realize that?*

But the transfer student's self-introduction had crushed Yū's cherished opinions and made him panic. If an ordinary person such as Chie could have a good life, then all the work Yū had done to live a life of isolation would be in vain.

Ah, but then Chie turned red and started gesturing wildly as she spoke, her eyes darted around, and she seemed fairly nervous. But Chie was clearly different from the other pigs. Like when she finished introducing herself.

"Oh, and I really want to join a club and do a lot of volunteer work, so if anyone has some good suggestions, please tell me about them! I hope we can all become friends!"

Then Chie bowed her head and, as she stepped away from the podium, tripped over something and fell to the floor.

The accident was so sudden the whole class held their breath. "O-ow!" she said as she patted her forehead and got



up. "Tee-hee!" Chie's face went bright red, and she rubbed her head.

She seemed really embarrassed. However, her actions didn't have the unsightliness of a young person going through puberty. Her face just naturally went red, and she was rubbing her head naturally. The way she was embarrassed, the way she blushed—everything was so natural it was pathetic!

"I-impossible."

Generally what comes after "falling down" and "embarrassment" is "being embarrassed that you're embarrassed" because the self-monitor overcompensates. That's being overly self-conscious, the true nature of being an unsightly human.

But Chie didn't have an ounce of that. She introduced herself naturally, was embarrassed naturally, smiled, got along with everyone quickly, had a carefree laugh, and cried without its sounding gloomy, like the time she took a volleyball in the face during gym. She sang naturally and earnestly during music class, and when she sang a note out of

tune, she'd naturally blush and say "Tee-hee!" in a cute, self-deprecating voice.

"I-impossible." Yū would groan each time something like this happened. To him, Chie was a perfectly complete being. In Zen Buddhism, she'd be the shepherd of the Ten Pictures of Cows. In Indian philosophy, she'd be the complete embodiment of Brahman. She perfectly accepted herself and the world and had prompt, natural responses that came from her heart toward everything. Ahh, it was almost like what Jung had been pursuing—individuation, the complete integration of personality. And that little sixteen-year-old girl is it? It was absolutely impossible. Ahh, impossible.

Impossible. But at any rate, she was wonderful. That was definite. The way she chewed on her pencil during math class with her head tilted to the side was wonderful. The way she would reach out a helping hand to those left out in class (Yū) was wonderful, too. On top of that, she was smart, stylish, unique, polite—ohhh, Chie-san!

"N-no! A pig is a pig!" Yū suddenly stood up and screamed.

It was in the middle of fourth-period classical Japanese class.

Everyone stared at Yū as if he were crazy but soon after turned their gaze back to the chalkboard. The teacher was used to Yū doing strange things like that, so he didn't say anything. Only Chie cast a concerned look in his direction.

Yū glared back at her murderously.

Chie tilted her small neck to the side and narrowed her eyes as she observed Yū. He wasn't sure what she could be thinking, but for about three seconds, she looked him up and down.

Yū had no idea what she was doing, so he ignored her.

After this, class ended and lunch started. Yū ate the pastry he had bought from the cafeteria in about five minutes,

took his laptop from his bag, and killed time by surfing the Internet.

He used his cell phone to connect to the Internet so it was slow as a snail, but it was better than hanging out with the pigs, so escaping via the Internet was one of Yū's favorite activities.

That's right. Anyone who interacted with the pigs was a pig himself. In order to preserve his upper-class emotional state, he had to stay isolated. He surfed the Internet to escape from reality until fifth period, which was science lab. He wasn't looking forward to it. In lab class, you had to get into groups of five and work together. Yū was in Chie's group, but everyone except her always made unpleasant faces at him.

"Why is he in our group?" they'd say bluntly, and exclude Yū. They wouldn't even let him light the alcohol lamp. All he could do was watch them as they happily amused themselves with the experiments, so he pessimistically decided that today he would get up and move only after the bell rang and until then he'd read something interesting on the Internet.

However . . .

"Um, Yū-kun, it's time for science lab."

He looked over his laptop and saw Chie standing in front of him.

"If you don't hurry, you'll be late. Come on, let's go. Oh, wow, your laptop is connected to the Internet? That's so cool! Is it wireless? Can I use it later? Tee-hee . . ."

Yū quickly closed his laptop because he was looking at an inappropriate website.

". . ."

Chie looked slightly nervous.

It had already been a few months since she had trans-

ferred, and she always spoke to Yū warmly in front of everyone else.

Chie did volunteer work, fund-raisers, gave blood, and was a very kind girl. She was a weak and gentle girl. Ever since she transferred to their school, the bullying against Yū had decreased. The number of times they hid his bag, kicked his back, or pushed him down the stairs had decreased. It was definitely because of Chie. Chie had natural leadership, and others thought of her as mature, so if she was nice to a weirdo such as Yū, they realized they probably shouldn't bully him too much anymore.

He should have been thankful, but . . .

"..."

About half of their classmates were still in the room, and they were watching the drama between Chie and Yū unfold with interest. Yū was smart, so he realized he had just gotten himself into a trap that would be hard to escape from. He was positive the situation would be interpreted as "gentle girl saves lonely boy." He was positive they saw her as the perfect girl, and in contrast, Yū was a weakling whom she should reach out to. But, of course, their objective view was wrong. Yū wasn't lonely or weak. At the very least, he knew that was true. Yū never spoke to anyone else in class unless absolutely necessary, but that was because of his own wishes, not because he had a bad personality or everyone else hated him.

However . . . However, even if he tried explaining that to the pigs in his class, they wouldn't understand. There was no way pigs would understand the words of an intelligent person such as him. He was positive of that fact.

So what should I do in this situation? he wondered. How can I hold on to my pride and still escape from this drama in

Class 1-A that about twelve others around us are watching unfold?

Of course, he already knew the answer. It was the same every time. Conflict. He'd take an extreme attitude and look down on Chie and everyone else, and break through the drama that was happening. He'd break the image they all had of the "poor bullied boy" and the "boy who trembled from the kind words of the beautiful girl." He'd show them that he wasn't that simple and that all their ideas were ridiculous and meaningless. He'd tell them the truth, that this school and city and world were all meaningless. He knew he'd have to act soon or he'd lose and have to live the rest of his life as a pathetic slave.

But I can't lose. Ever since I had that breakthrough in the fourth grade, I've always achieved victory. My parents would silently take me to the hospital and be told that just a little bruise on my knee would take a week to heal, then they'd bring me to the police station and accuse the one who did it to me. But my revenge against those who bullied me didn't stop there. My vision is more extreme. I won't lose to adults or teachers or kids, even to the whole society around me. And, of course, I won't join any of their clubs. I won't belong to their families or classes or society or world. I swear. I'd risk my life to protect that vow.

So stop looking over at me, you pigs. Stop looking at me with that expression in your eyes. I'm an awesome guy who's just made an incredible decision, so stop looking down on me. And you, you, that transfer student Chie, stop talking to me so casually and stop dirtying me with your incomprehensible pity! I'm not so mentally weak that I'd fall for someone who's kind of cute and has a good personality! I don't need your kindness or charity! I'll say it again, but I'm the one who chose to be alone! It's

not because I have a bad personality! If you think I'm lying, I'll prove it to you!

Dieeee!

Eat my pencil!

Most ordinary pigs would think "Does this girl like me?" when someone as beautiful as Chie was so nice to them. They definitely wouldn't have an overly hostile reaction like "Y-you bitch! Don't ever talk to me again!" But after the thirty seconds of silence, that's exactly what Yū said. Then he grabbed the pencil that was on his desk and threw it at Chie! What do you think of that? That's proof of what an upper-class emotional state I have! Did you see it? Did you see how special I am? Did that make you rethink your opinions of me, you pigs?

However . . .

"Hey, your lead broke when you threw it at me. It looks as if that was your only pencil, so if you need one, I can let you borrow one of mine. The bell will ring in a minute, so let's hurry!"

Chie looked unfazed as she pulled out the pencil that had stabbed through her sailor uniform, then took out an expensive-looking pencil from her pencil case. "Here, take it!" she said smiling. Yū was frozen and couldn't move.

Even when the bell rang, he didn't move a muscle.

"Ohh, it already started! Ogura-sensei is going to be mad at us. Let's go!" Chie grabbed his hand and pulled him from his chair, and even though he knew they were going to the other classroom, he had only a vague memory of that moment.

The one who had broken his train of thought was Chie. He was completely baffled at the way she pulled the pencil out with a smile after he hit her with it.

But every time he remembered the warmth of her hand, an intense hatred he couldn't bear began to well up inside of

him. After all, those pigs from class had perceived the series of events to be a heart-warming story of the lonely boy and a perfect girl who was kind even to him. But, of course, it was completely different and unforgivable. But the thing he hated most about the situation was the kindhearted, beautiful Chie. If he didn't render her absolutely speechless, he wouldn't be satisfied. He had to smash through the morals she unconsciously followed. He had to make the arbitrary rules of the world she followed explode!

That's right, this world is a harsh and incomprehensible battlefield! And the only way to keep your sanity in this battle was to abandon all hope and make a barrier around yourself! So I'll teach her once and for all!

If I don't, if I don't, I'll go crazy! My whole life will be worthless! I haven't been able to sleep lately! Every time I close my eyes, I see her face and I can't sleep! Damn it!

"S-so I'll make her cry, no matter what!"

So that's why Yū went to school early at six in the morning, checked to make sure no one was watching, and stuffed all the earthworms he had gotten from the park in Chie's shoes. Only a little longer and she'd be screaming. After a daily investigation (light stalking), he established that Chie went to school around six thirty every morning. She was in the tennis club. As soon as she got to school, she would change her shoes, and after leaving her bag in the classroom, she'd go back to the tennis court behind the school and get all the practice equipment ready before everyone else got there at seven.

But she wouldn't have a perfect morning like that today. Today I'll make Chie scream from the evil in this world and make her feel deep doubt and despair and fear toward living.

When I think how good her life must have been until this point, I get so jealous my head hurts. She was probably spoiled

by everyone around her because she's so beautiful and smart and has such a good personality. That's probably why she has such a happy life at school. Someone as happy as her will probably live the rest of her life like that. She'll be happy until she dies, she'll get along with everyone, she'll get along with the world, and she'll have another fifty years of a wonderful and happy life.

But my plan will disrupt all that. She'll never be able to forget it, even if she tries. I'll make one dark scar on your happy life. Yeah, I'll give you PTSD! You'll have nightmares about earthworms at night! Oh, here it comes, that stylish mountain bike she said she won from a magazine contest.

The girl with the bag and tennis racket in hand was no doubt Chie.

She pedaled through the tree-lined school gate happily, parked her bike at the bike rack, carefully got off the bike so as not to show her underwear, opened the front door, and went inside. She wasn't hunched over like Yū. She stood tall. Even the way she walked looked like a character from a movie. There was nothing unnatural about it; she walked as if she had no doubts about school, family, the city, the world—she walked easily, with a carefree attitude. And she was about a head taller than him.

Every time I think of the way her gentle eyes looked down at me, I get a stabbing pain in my chest. But today that will end. I'll watch everything from here in the shadows. I'll record everything with my digital camera: your screams, the dead earthworms packed into your shoes, the worm guts stuck to your socks, and your snot and tears running down your face as you cry. And whenever I feel that stabbing pain in my chest again, I'll watch the video of you screaming over and over again. Yeah!

Just then Chie went inside.

Ahh, camera, camera!

"..."

Chie headed toward Class 1-A's shoe lockers and opened hers. Yū pointed the lens at her back. He gave a soft, evil chuckle, but Chie didn't notice. She took out her shoes, which had about twenty earthworms in each of them, and set them down on the mat. And now her slender, beautiful, white right foot was plunging into the shoe loaded with earthworms! Yū felt as if his heart were going to burst. In just a few seconds, he'd find out whether or not he could retain his sanity, keep his pride at school, no, throughout the rest of his life!

What's she going to do? Is she going to scream and cry? Or is she going to silently endure the disgustingness of it all? No matter what she does, she'll know there's someone bad out there! And her natural style will be completely destroyed, and then I'll win! I'll win the victory of a sparkling life! And then I'll make my declaration of refusal of this entire world! I'll make this beautiful girl Chie the scapegoat, and all the beauty and glory will be mine!

"..."

As Yū was caught up in his cruel, self-centered reverie, Chie had already put her right foot in the shoe. He had forgotten to press the button on the digital camera, the reason being that Chie was trembling, silent, with a vacant expression on her face. She didn't scream, so he hadn't noticed.

Anyway, after he quickly took a picture, he switched to video mode and began filming. But the image of Chie that appeared on the screen was nothing but her trembling. She was sitting on the floor with the remains of the earthworms stuck to the toe of her socks, trembling. He still didn't hear her crying. One minute passed, two minutes, ten minutes. It

was 6:43, and no one had come to school yet. The only thing moving was something crawling from her shoe. It was an earthworm that had survived.

"..."

Yū peered into the digital camera and felt his heart cooling.

For now, he turned off his camera and acted as if he were walking in the entrance as usual. He quietly changed his shoes and acted as if he were seeing Chie for the first time and greeted her casually. "G-good morning, Chie-san. I'm sorry I threw a pencil at you before. I-I wasn't myself."

But she didn't answer.

Her eyes were filled with tears, and she was shaking like a hamster that was on the verge of freezing to death.

"..."

Yū looked and saw that only one earthworm was stuck to her foot and that there were a lot more survivors than he had predicted. The majority of them had survived, and if she just shook her shoes out, she'd still be able to wear them.

But Chie remained completely dazed.

She didn't try to look at Yū; she just kept trembling on the ground.

He couldn't stand it anymore, so he decided to put on a good show.

He took a deep breath and then screamed, "Uwaaa, earthworms! W-who would do something so mean? J-just wait a second. I'll get the earthworms out of your shoes and put them outside!"

He did as he said and then returned to Chie's side thirty seconds later and showed her the clean shoes. "Look, none of them got crushed inside. You can put them on now. Oh, one's stuck to your sock. Here, let me get it."

However, Chie was still staring into space and then murmured, "Why . . ."

"Whoa, this one's half crushed, but he's still alive! Earthworms must have—"

"Why does all of this happen to me?"

"—must have great life force! B-by the way, did you know? Hamburger meat has earthworms in it. Isn't that terrible? They trick consumers and make them eat earthworms!"

"Why does this always happen to me? I've been doing so well, so perfect, what did I do wrong?"

"But when you think about earthworms being in hamburgers, squashing one isn't a big deal! So don't cry! Uhh, Chie-san?"

Chie suddenly stood up, her shoulders trembling. She started yelling things out in rapid succession. "Hey, what's wrong with me? Don't you think I've been the perfect honor student so far? Or has everyone else seen right through me? Are they suspicious of my pity toward you? Do they hate me because I act like too much of a good girl? It was probably Satoko, wasn't it? I don't think she likes me, so maybe she did this? Or maybe that guy Kazuma? He wrote me a really weird love letter, but I turned him down, so maybe he's trying to get revenge? I'm sure he'll get over it, but what if the whole class hates me? What if it was an unrecoverable error? Did you get a note? Did you get a note that said 'Ignore Utsuki'? And they're all laughing at me? Hey, that's it, isn't it? And that's why you threw that pencil at me! I'm right, aren't I?"

Yū had the feeling he had just seen something he wasn't supposed to see after witnessing such a sudden change in Chie. He wished he could go home and redo that whole morning. But here Chie was before him, shoulders shaking, and she kept repeating, "I'm right, aren't I?"

Yū turned his eyes away and murmured, "N-no."

"Then why?"

Yū looked at Chie's bloodshot eyes and the spit flying from her mouth and then confessed. "I-it was me. I was the one who put the earthworms in your shoes."

Then Chie dropped her shoulders, said, "O-oh, it was just you? Whew! I'm so relieved," and let out a deep sigh. She grabbed Yū's shoulder. Her perfectly shaped fingernails dug into his skin. It hurt, but Chie was very strong. He couldn't escape. She brought her face close enough to his that he could feel her breath as she cross-examined him with terrifying force. "How much did you hear?"

"O-of what?"

"What I said just now."

"A-all of it."

"Then come here."

Chie suddenly grabbed his hand and dragged him into the first-floor bathroom. He didn't have time to think what was going on before she pushed him into a stall in the women's bathroom and rammed him against the wall. He saw stars. By the time he realized Chie was beating him up, he had a mouthful of blood. Chie punched him with her right hand and drew blood. That's how strong she was, but her attack didn't stop there. She punched his face and slammed his head into the wall over and over again. The blood from his nose stained his shirt, and he realized if he resisted, she'd probably kill him, so he relaxed his body.

"I-I'm so-sorry! I'm r-really s-sorry, ooff!"

She was beating him up. It was the first time anyone had ever bullied him to this extent. It was also the most inexplicable violence he had ever experienced in his whole life. Every time Chie punched or kicked him, she ordered, "Don't ever tell anyone about what happened before!" What did she

mean, "what happened before"? He didn't know. But he nodded emphatically anyway. But her assault didn't stop, and she suddenly found the digital camera in his pocket and looked through the data. Chie went into a rage after she discovered Yū had been standing in the shadows taping her and hit him over the head with the corner of the camera. Yū huddled into a corner of the stall, covered his head, and cried, "Please forgive me, I'm sorry, I won't do it anymore," over and over again.

But Chie only hit him harder and ordered him again, "Then you better not tell anyone ever!" And Yū nodded, "Okay, okay!"

"And who would believe you, anyway? Everyone's been tricked until now. . . . A-all right, take off your clothes!"

"Huh?"

"T-take off your clothes! If you don't, I-I'll . . ." Chie waved the camera, which had turned into a deadly weapon, at him. Yū guarded his head with both hands. But she hit him in the pit of his stomach. Yū moaned as his gastric juices came up into his throat. He leaned against the wall and thought, "She's gonna kill me!" But then he heard a click from behind him. Chie had taken off his belt.

"W-what are you *doing*?"

Instead of answering him, she hit him again until he felt as if he would pass out. During this time, she took off his pants and then quickly took off his undershirt until he was left in only his underwear and socks. Then Chie put her hands on his underwear. A shiver raced down Yū's spine. Is she gonna kick it? Twist it? Cut it off? Smash it? Various terrible images came to his mind. He already didn't have the strength left to resist, and soon he was as naked as the day he was born. Well, actually he still wore his socks, but that made him feel even more embarrassed and idiotic and spurred his fear on fur-

ther. He bent down and held his knees, desperately trying to protect his embarrassing parts.

"D-don't hide it! I don't want to look at it either, but if you hide it, I swear I'll beat you even harder than before!" Chie screamed and waved her fist at him. Yū thought of his pride as a man and his fear of her attack, but before long, his fear won out. He embarrassingly exposed his embarrassing parts. Chie snapped pictures of it. He was covered in bruises, his nose and mouth were dribbling blood, and his eyes were flooding with tears. His private parts, which should have been covered by a mosaic were instead exposed, recorded on the CF card, which boasted a gigabyte of storage space. Chie used all of it, taking pictures of him in various embarrassing poses and angles.

And then, finally, she snorted and said again for good measure, "H-hmph! If you don't want me to show these embarrassing pictures to everyone else, you better not tell anyone what happened today! So keep your mouth shut!"

What was she talking about, "what happened today"? What did she mean?

He didn't voice his doubts because he was afraid she'd hit him over the head with the camera again, so he just nodded again and again. Chie quickly slid the CF card from the camera and threw the empty camera back at him. "I-I'll give you back the card tomorrow. But I'm going to copy all of the data onto my computer and then upload them to about twenty different servers, so I can spread these pictures across the whole world just by pressing a few buttons on my cell phone! If I find out you told anyone, I'll show the whole world these pictures and then I-I'll cut you up into little pieces and kill you!!"

"..."

He had never experienced bullying like this before—bullying that contained a serious intent to kill.

Now that he knew true fear, he wet himself a little.

Chie looked down at Yū with a look in her eyes as if she had seen something dirty, quickly opened the door of the stall, and ran off somewhere.

He waited for a while, and when she didn't come back, Yū put on his clothes and mopped the floor, which was soiled with blood and urine, and dragged his pain-racked body to the classroom.

"..."

He happened to look out the window, and he saw Chie smiling and bowing her head to the tennis club president.

He figured she was probably apologizing for being late. She was pretending to be the perfect student, as usual.

But Yū knew that Chie hid darkness in her heart, which was overwhelmingly frightening to the point that he had urinated on himself. At the very least, Chie was not a perfect human being. Someone who could beat someone like that had to be very mentally disturbed. He felt as if just knowing that was something to celebrate.

"S-so I'll never do anything to that girl again," Yū swore as he lay facedown on his desk.

But for some reason, a few days after the incident in the bathroom, he was at Chie's house.

He didn't belong to any club, so he went straight home and was reading comics when she suddenly called his cell phone. "Come over now or I'll . . ."

He was afraid to hear what came after the "or I'll," so he hurriedly said, "I'm coming!" and hung up the phone. He jumped off his bed and ran for his bike, which was parked in

the apartment parking lot, and after about thirty minutes arrived at Chie's house.

He knew the general area her house was in from the school network, but it was hard to find it since he had never been there. He had to call her several times (and every time, she called him an idiot, a blockhead, or something of that nature), and when he finally arrived, he was soaked with sweat.

"H-hello? I'm here." He panted and waited outside the door of an old two-story house by the riverside. A window on the second floor opened, and Chie stuck her face out. She ordered him to come in. Yū parked his bike by the roadside, opened the door, and timidly set foot inside the dark house.

2

"E-excuse me!"

There was only one pair of shoes in the entryway—the shoes Chie wore to school. Apparently no one besides her was home. After he realized this, the phrases *severed arms and legs, cut them all off, slice and dice,* and *death* popped into his head, but he knew if he ran away now, his death would be even closer, so he quickly took off his shoes and started up the narrow stairs. Yū guessed the staircase was about forty years old by the way the stairs creaked every time he stepped on them. After he had made it up about ten steps, he became so frightened that he stopped in his tracks. He thought it would be impossible to go one step farther. But he knew he couldn't turn back. He had to go forward. He knew he had to shake off his fear, so he tried to think of something happy.

Something happy, something happy.

That's right. If he thought about it, he was inside a girl's house. Even if it was a run-down old house you'd see in a

horror movie, it was the seemingly cute, wonderful, and gentle Chie's house. Right now Yū was inside Chie's house. That was a rare experience. It was the first time he had ever gone to a girl's house by himself. First time!

F-first time. Just those words made him close his eyes dreamily. Wasn't it a little strange for her to ask a guy who had stuffed earthworms in her shoes over to her house? Chie was strange anyway. And who knows what strange girls might do? There was a possibility that he could have his first time happen at the top of these stairs. But what route would he have to take to make that a reality?

Chie would have to like him for that to happen. No, she wouldn't. Maybe she had just chosen him because he was convenient and blunt. Speaking of which, the other day Chie had seen his private parts in the bathroom. Maybe she couldn't get that image out of her head and something changed. Generally speaking, honor students had only a superficial knowledge of sex. And if you expose them to the kind of data that Chie had, perhaps this horror movie staircase could become the staircase leading to adulthood. He had to make sure he wouldn't act childish, or something terrible might happen.

W-what should I do? I didn't bring anything with me. . . .

"What are you doing? Hurry up!" Yū was brought back to his senses when he heard Chie yelling for him. He bit his lips and continued up the steps, and took a deep breath as he entered Chie's room.

"What's wrong? You're pale. And sweating."

Chie was sitting at an old desk.

"U-uh, nothing."

"Hmm. Did you think I was going to do something terrible to you again? Were you really scared before? But I won't. I won't do anything bad to you anymore. In exchange . . ."

"N-no way! I-I! I didn't bring anything with me, I don't collect them like Inoue and the other guys in class. But even if I did, I don't have the money, so . . ."

"Huh? Well you look nervous, so why don't you have some tea first?" Chie tilted her head and took a plastic bottle from the top of the desk, poured some in a mug, and handed it to Yū. His virginal delusions suddenly flew out of his head, and in their place came "potassium cyanide" and "Do you have any last words?" Chie was acting so suspicious, and he didn't know what would trigger her next violent outburst, so Yū obediently took the mug and drank the cold tea. Soon after, she gave him some potato chips on a plate and even some sweet bean jelly.

Chie smiled broadly.

"Okay, you've come to my house and eaten snacks. So now we're friends!"

". . ."

"Look at this computer. I fished it out of a Dumpster! But it still works!"

Chie clicked the mouse. A picture of Yū's private parts appeared on the screen. Even though she was the one who took it, Chie's face got bright red and she turned away from the monitor and quickly closed the window.

"O-of course, these pictures are a secret between me and you. As long as you don't break your promise to me, I won't show anyone. But if you tell, if you break your promise, I'll spread it all over the Internet. You got it, right? If you do, then look at this."

Chie pointed to an old bookshelf next to the wall on the other side of the small room.

On top of the bookshelf was a knife that had a blade about twenty centimeters long.

"Do you know what that is?"

"Kn-knife. A Bowie knife."

"And what do you think it's used for?"

"C-cutting people?"

"That's right! You're smart! Come over here a second."

Chie beckoned him over. Yū timidly crawled over to her and sat beside her. Chie sat in a chair, and he was close enough to see the seam in her socks. Suddenly, she reached out her hand and softly touched Yū's shoulder. "Hey, did you know there's an artery here?" she said, and pinched his carotid artery with her cold fingertips. "If you get cut here, you die, right?"

"..."

Yū trembled and continued looking down at the tatami and Chie's slightly dirty socks.

"But!" she suddenly yelled out, and Yū jumped about ten centimeters in the air. "But, hee-hee, you don't have to look so scared. Because we're friends, right? Am I right? Why aren't you saying anything? You don't want to be friends with me that much?"

"N-no, you're right. We're friends . . . ," Yū whispered in a strained voice.

"Yay! I knew we'd be friends. You can eat some more potato chips! They were on sale at the store, so I bought two bags of them. So don't worry about my share; I've already had a lot."

"O-okay."

"Is it good?"

"Yes."

"How about the jelly?"

"Oh, it's sweet and delicious. Thank you."

"So now you'll listen to whatever I have to say, right?"

"..."

"We're friends, so you'll listen to anything, right?"

"Y-yes . . ."

"Then let's pinkie swear." Chie grabbed Yū's pinkie in her own. "Pinkie swear. If you break our pinkie swear, I'll kill you. Ha-ha, just joking, just joking! Why do you look so scared? We're totally friends now, so just relax! Oh yeah, since we're friends, I'll tell you my secret!"

Chie stood up from the chair and opened the rear sliding door. On the other side of the door was another small room without a window. It was too dark, so he couldn't see very well, but in the middle of the room was an old dresser. And countless pieces of paper were stuck to the walls with tape. Chie urged him to go into the room, so Yū got up as quietly as he could, since he feared any loud noise could trigger a mental breakdown, and stepped into the room. As soon as Chie, who stood behind him, switched on the naked lightbulb overhead and Yū saw how openly psychopathic the room was, he thought he might urinate on himself again. He clapped his hand over his mouth so he wouldn't let out a scream. The walls and ceiling and closet doors were completely covered with drawing paper. They had various things written on them with thick black marker and large arrows pointing to other pieces of paper. There were probably around two hundred pieces of paper there. He suddenly noticed that Chie was now standing beside him and the air in the room felt moist. He felt as if he shouldn't be looking at this room, which was probably her "secret," and he didn't want to look at it, but he knew he couldn't look away or escape. He remembered seeing something similar in a movie once that said crazy people sometimes keep rooms like this. There were probably bizarre phrases written on the paper such as "I can't forgive you for those electromagnetic waves, so I'll kill you." He still couldn't believe Chie was so deranged. But when he

turned and looked at her, he saw that she was holding her hands behind her back and smiling shyly.

"What do you think of my acting flowchart? Isn't it awesome? At first, I had settled on five sheets, but every time I thought of an addition, so it ended up being this big. But if I follow this flowchart, I can act perfectly. It's pretty genius, isn't it? Maybe when I grow up, I'll become an actress. I know I have the talent for it. Tee-hee."

Then Chie pointed toward one of the papers in the corner of the ceiling. "Look at that one, Brings back memories, doesn't it? 'Four Stages of Self-Introduction.' What was it again? 'Phase E: How to end your self-introduction. After reading the self-introduction lines on page 6b, do the following: If observers' reaction is good, proceed to F. If it's bad, proceed to G.' Hey, do you remember? Their reaction was actually really good! You were watching me, right? Everyone was riveted by my natural style, weren't they? So I made a calm judgment that I should go from E to F."

Chie pointed her finger, following the arrows from phase E, "How to end your self-introduction," to phase F, "Displaying a humanlike weakness." There were more branches that followed.

" 'When you walk away from the podium, trip on purpose to show a clumsy side of you, so others will think that not only are you kind and pretty but you also have some faults. Make a gesture corresponding to documents 5–25 and practice. If you succeed, proceed to H. If you have even an inkling that it failed, proceed to I.' So, anyway, of course my acting was a huge success. I promptly went on to H. There's more, too. 'Attitude during class, #1.' "

This time, Chie pointed to the group of papers stuck to the closet door.

They contained a computer-like flowchart of how she should act in class, and according to the outcomes, she would follow each arrow to the next piece of paper. Chie read them all aloud and followed every one around the room.

"..."

Yū gulped. He had a sense of déjà vu. Everything Chie had ever done in class was written up on the flowcharts on the walls. When he thought of anything, he could find it.

"How to cope with someone being bullied, #17: Practice whenever the chance arises to elevate the victim's position in class."

Yū read quickly. "What, what? 'If Nemoto doesn't go to the science lab quickly, proceed to B? Talk to him gently. If he refuses, go on to G. If he gets mad, go on to H. If he throws something at you, proceed to I. If the object he threw hits your body, go to J. Phase J: Act like it didn't hurt, make puppy-dog eyes, and do the following: (It's necessary to ad-lib depending on the situation. Act like you're dazed from shock that something was thrown at you and make up something off the top of your head.)' Hey, this is exactly what happened between me and you, Chie-san!"

"Yeah. It was perfect, wasn't it? Because I practiced in front of the mirror every night for four hours straight! But I never thought you'd put earthworms in my shoes, so my acting failed there a little bit. But you're the only one who saw my failure, Yū-kun. But now we're friends, so I know you won't tell anyone my secret, so now I know I don't have to act in front of you anymore. So I feel a little bit better. Friends are great, aren't they? I feel so relieved! So that's all of my secret I'll show you right now. Next time you come over, let's eat some more snacks together, okay?"

"..."

They returned to the study and ate the rest of the potato chips together.

AM radio flowed from the cassette player on top of the desk.

After the snacks were gone, Chie said, "Now that you know all about me, aren't you happy, Yū-kun?"

"..."

"We're friends, so I'll tell you more and more, okay? And then you'll be even happier! But don't talk to me at school; just act like you always have. Or, no, be even more isolated than you usually are, okay? Because . . ."

Chie took a book from the shelf called *100 Ways to Touch People's Hearts* and turned to a page she had earmarked and began to read aloud. There were countless other books on the shelf with idiotic-sounding titles such as *20 Lessons to Improve Your Acting* and *45 Words to Move People.* Yū furrowed his brow as he listened to Chie read.

"Here it is. 'Bullying is human—no, a group of animals'—nature. Leaving out the weak demonstrates power within the group. A strong leader is indispensible. But, on the other hand, if there isn't a loser, someone who is persecuted by others and made the scapegoat, the group will eventually collapse. The scapegoat takes responsibility for the entire group's sins—in other words, its existence is necessary.' So even if you're bullied, you're essential, Yū-kun. O-of course, I'm sure it's hard, right? I have a lot of fun being the leader, but you're in pain and jealous of me, so much that you'd put earthworms in my shoes. But it's okay. There's meaning for your existence, too. A-and . . ." Chie placed the book back on the shelf and then stared Yū right in the eyes. "I'll be your 'real friend.' I'll be a friend who won't betray you or bully you, so let's get along, okay? So you don't have to cry by yourself

anymore, and you don't have to be in pain anymore, okay? Got it?"

"..."

Yū had no idea what she was talking about.

Was she looking down on him? Sad for him? Pitying him? Her expression looked serious. It seemed as if she really wanted to be friends with Yū deep down in her heart. Or maybe she was trying to persuade him to be her friend. She wanted to be his friend even though he was a social outcast who was always left out, who was thought by everyone else to be worthless. He was completely baffled by the whole situation.

"..."

But then Yū realized something. The attractiveness he had felt from Chie until just now—that is, her "natural wonderfulness"—had disappeared without a trace. Since he saw her practice room and all the flowcharts, he couldn't help but be sick and tired of the way she talked and acted. Her unreasonably cheerful tone of voice, the way she called him "Yū-kun," the way she said she'd be his true friend—everything about her seemed fake, as if she were acting. She was much more natural when she was following the flowchart itself. But now that she had quit acting and returned to normal, it was hard to look at her. Yū quickly drank his tea and smiled. "Yeah, I finally get it."

He didn't care at all about Chie anymore. After they exchanged some small talk (rumors at school, talking bad about people), he went home, feeling better. His feet felt light as he pedaled, and he was content that Chie was just another kind of pig. One day her mask would peel away. According to his research (light stalking), he knew that she tried too hard. She had the highest grades in their class and went to club meetings early in the morning, but she couldn't keep up such

a fake life forever. She expended a lot of energy trying to memorize that flowchart, but one day her determination would break down, and then her mask would fall off and Chie would become only another irritating girl. Yū knew from just the few hours he had spent with the "real" Chie that she was merely a nosy, annoying person. The day when everyone else would hate and neglect her was near.

Of course, it didn't matter to Yū one way or the other.

"Yeah, even if something terrible happened to Chie, what does it have to do with me?" Yū thought as he pedaled as fast as he could past the giant Christmas tree under construction by the train station. He didn't know what had happened at her previous school, but he had seen a scar on her wrist as she had reached for a potato chip, so he could guess that there was some dark story behind it. But that didn't have anything to do with him. She was just a regular person, a pig. And Yū never had any expectations for pigs. And if she was asking him to be friends, he'd just play along.

But I'm not a pig or a weakling like you who'd reveal my true feelings so easily. Because I don't have any true feelings! Crying when I got bullied, feeling lonely when I get left out, planning the earthworms, crying and peeing on myself when you hit me, my heart beating fast when I got just a little close to you before—all of it, everything was a joke! It was all bullshit! I threw away all that going-from-joy-to-sadness crap when I had my breakthrough when I was ten. Because all of you, this beautiful sunset in front of the train station, the light and shadows in this city in the evening, all of them, every single one of them is just a trick set up by the pigs! And I won't be fooled!

"So die, pigs, diiiieee!" he yelled as he rode his bike. He had screamed out loud in the middle of a traffic jam in front of the train station. Everyone had turned around, but Yū didn't care. Because even this war cry was a joke and not his

true feelings. Actually, Yū didn't look down on his classmates and family and people around him as pigs. Point-blank, Yū didn't think anything. In order to hide the fact that he didn't think anything, he called everyone pigs. And if he made fools of everyone who was a pig, everything would be suppressed. Feelings toward his parents, Chie, and even himself would be suppressed. Until his dearest wish came true, Yū had decided to freeze his heart.

He had to.

He just had to.

But even Yū had days when his heart was weak.

When Chie had declined, his heart had hurt a little bit.

Her decline had started with her grades falling.

"Weren't you feeling well, Utsuki?" their math teacher had asked casually.

Chie gave a cute "Tee-hee!" and said to herself naturally, "Wow, 60 precent? I need to try harder."

Even though she tried harder, her grades just kept getting worse. In high school, their studies were all about memorization. But her memory just wasn't working. Even though her brain wasn't performing at its best, she still managed to hold on to the top spot in grades. But when she had to prepare for the winter competition for the tennis club, she suddenly had a breakdown. Perhaps Chie wasn't aware of it, but there are only twenty-four hours in a day. And if she came to school at 7:00 A.M., she'd have to get up at 6:00 A.M. And when she got home at 6:00 P.M., she had to eat dinner, do homework, and then practice for four hours in front of the mirror, so she got only three hours of sleep. Even Napoleon would have been shocked at the inhuman way she lived, but Chie had kept it up for almost six months. But she had a physical and mental

breakdown from the stress of everything. So much so that he thought she would die.

Of course, the solution was obvious.

She had to choose either studying or her club activities.

But one night Yū received a call from her asking him for advice.

"What do you think I should do about my grades?"

Yū was lying on his bed picking his nose. He answered, "Just quit the club."

"I can't. I'm a regular."

"Then give up on your grades."

"I can't. I'm an honor student!"

She wouldn't listen to him.

Yū felt disgusted at the increasingly childish tone of her voice.

What a stupid idiot! Get hold of yourself! He wanted to lecture her.

He tried to. But even that didn't work. No matter how much he said, "You idiot girl, there are only twenty-four hours in a day; you have to cut down on something or you'll die!" Chie wouldn't listen to him. She'd just say in a childish voice, "I can't!" or "But, but!"

Finally Yū snapped. "If you don't wanna listen to me, then don't call me anymore, you idiot! Die from exhaustion for all I care!" He was at the point where he didn't care if his embarrassing pictures got leaked. If he thought logically, even if he was so embarrassed he thought he would die, it was only those pigs, so it shouldn't bother him. And even if she cut his carotid artery with that knife, he'd just die right away, so it wasn't as if he'd lose to anyone or that he'd yielded to a pig. So he could still honor his vow.

So that's why he told Chie everything he wanted to say.

When he remembered the incident in the bathroom, he reflexively covered his head, but if it was over the phone, he could say anything to her. "Yeah, that's right, Chie-san, you're an idiot! And that scar on your wrist is gross! Just forget about being so perfect all the time!"

"I-I'm sorry. I'll make sure to hide my wrist. B-but I have to be perfect! If I'm not, if I'm not . . ."

"Then what?"

"Everyone will hate me!"

Chie might have been right.

At the very least, it was clear that her perfect grades and performance in club were supporting her attractiveness and her portrayal of the perfect honor student.

In other words, if her perfection wavered even a little, doubts would start to form about her acting. And when she started to doubt herself, it would connect to her self-monitoring system, and then she'd become overly self-conscious.



It was already too late to encourage herself in that psycho horror movie–esque room she had made. It was no use following the flowchart and practicing for hours to be the perfect student. Now he saw that everything about Chie was annoying, that fake girl. Her acting felt hollow. No matter how much she prepared to be the class leader, the instant she started distrusting herself, it would all be over.

The act would have to continue until she died. Chie would soon realize that she couldn't keep her mask on for such a long time. His heart was so irritated lately that he couldn't stand it. He couldn't help but be worried about Chie.

"..."

Then Chie's class rank started to drop. Her test scores only kept getting lower. It would just backfire on her when she cheerfully offered to volunteer for the nearby nursery school's fund-raiser. Everyone in class simply thought she was inept now.

And, naturally, no matter how early she woke up and cleaned the tennis club's room, it was meaningless. Her eyes were red from lack of sleep, and she got so pale she looked like a ghost or a rag lying on the floor. It wouldn't even work to volunteer for the much-hated job of cleaning, and when she talked about her good deeds, such as "I gave blood yesterday. Volunteering feels so good!" all people did was glare at her. The only thing left about her was her beauty, but even that was withering. She was thin as a rail, her skin looked terrible; she looked as if she had contracted some sort of disease. He couldn't believe someone could change so much in the course of a few weeks. Her hair lost its shine, her lips were cracked, her eyes were always bloodshot, and honestly she looked so scary it was hard to approach her. It looked as if she was anorexic, and according to some research Yū had done (in other words, stalking), the only thing Chie had were en-

ergy drinks and protein shakes. When he asked her, she said she weighed less than seventy pounds. She was so thin she looked as if the wind could knock her over if it blew too hard. Her bones looked so fragile they might break. But she still acted cheerful around all their classmates, but that made her all the more frightening and gross. She just looked like a crazy person. She called Yū every night for advice. No matter how nice he was to her, he made no progress. But he knew he couldn't just hang up on her, because they were friends. They had done a pinkie swear, so they were friends. He honestly had no interest in her anymore, but he didn't want to break a promise. Even if a rock by the side of the road meant more to him than Chie, a promise was a promise, so he had to worry about her condition.

"Why don't you eat something, Chie-san? What's going on with the food at your place, anyway?"

"Ever since my grandma went to the hospital, I've had to make it myself."

"Are you really making food?"

"I-I'm sorry. I lied. I'm not eating anything. Because I don't have any money."

She told him that she had used up the allowance from her mother on clothes, books, and makeup. So that's where her natural skin and slender body had come from—she had been living on expensive makeup. Yū slapped his knee. But that wasn't the problem here.

"If you don't eat, you'll die!"

"W-will I?"

Yū hung up the phone and headed toward the kitchen, searched for ingredients, and put them in a bag. He got on his bike and went to Chie's house. He knocked on the door and saw Chie's face hanging out the window. She was wearing pajamas. "Y-Yū-kun. Wait a second. I'll open the door."

About thirty seconds later, the door opened and he went into the living room. It wasn't dirty, but it had a thick, stressful smell. He had been so nervous when he had gone there the first time that he hadn't had time to be surprised by how run-down the house was. But now that he looked at it, the house was so old it was kind of a culture shock.

A single bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling, and the small living room (about one-quarter the size of the one at Yū's apartment) was lit just by that. It was dark. If you tried to read books in there, your eyes would go bad. Chie told him she wore contacts. And in the corner of the room, he saw something he had heard existed in the early days of television—a CRT.

"Can't you sell this for a lot of money if you take it to an antiques store?"

"Can't. It's broken and doesn't work. Sometimes when I pound on it, it works, though. If there's something you wanna watch, just try banging on it."

"N-no thanks. I don't want to watch black-and-white TV in this day and age! I just wanted to see it because it's really rare. Well, anyway, I brought some food, so why don't you eat some? And I'm sorry to come over this late. Did I wake you up, Chie-san? That was pretty rude of me, huh, to come to a girl's house this late. Am I stupid?"

"No, you're my friend! Thanks. I'm hungry, so I'll eat a lot. I'll eat it all up!" Chie pulled a tea table covered in dust from behind the cupboard. Yū set some ham, bread, mineral water, and various other ingredients on top of it. Chie took a fruit knife and a chipped plate from the cupboard and started cutting up some food and ate it.

Japanese-style dolls watched them from on top of the cupboard. A gilded model of Tokyo Tower sat next to the weathered-looking dolls. A yellowed pendant with illegible

writing was hanging on the wall over the cupboard. Yū looked at a nearby pillar and saw "Chie, age 5," "Chie, age 7," and so on, scars of her history. Chie noticed his gaze and stopped chewing. "Yeah, I lived here until I was ten!"

"R-really?"

He didn't want to hear about it. He didn't want to hear any of her stupid background story. Honestly, he just wanted to leave the food and go back home. But he couldn't help it if Chie wanted to tell him about her upbringing, so she kept on chattering away. But he had misinterpreted it as her telling her embarrassing memories from the past.

"We're friends, so I don't mind telling you. But don't stop being friends with me, okay? If you do, I'll show your pictures. And show you my knife. Ha-ha! Just joking! So, anyway, I . . ."

He wanted to plug up his ears, but he listened anyway. This was her mother's family home, and she had lived here with her mother and father until she was five, but then her father got a job at a college, and they all moved away. But then one day "because of Chie," her parents' relationship broke down and they got a divorce, and after that her mother took Chie, but she behaved strangely at her previous school so everyone in the class bullied her, so then she transferred schools and made a U-turn to her grandma's house.

"And that's why you're here! I know everything now! I understand everything about you, Chie-san! So you don't have to talk anymore. Just be quiet and eat your food. I'm going home now."

"Really? You understand everything about me?"

"Yes, yes, so you don't have to try so hard anymore. Just be yourself. We're friends, so just eat normally and go to school and study, and just live the rest of your life and die! You're fine the way you are, Chie-san. I love you. I really love you as

a friend, Chie-san. Really." He said what he thought sounded comforting as he picked his nose. After all, worries that pigs have can all be solved by something as little as that. Yū had seen through all of Chie's problems. When he was being bullied, Yū had read a bunch of books about human nature. So from that knowledge, he guessed Chie was on the borderline of being an adult and a child. If he said something comforting to her, she'd recover, and if she didn't, she'd die, but it didn't have anything to do with him, so . . .

But just then, as she was chewing her bread, Chie said something baffling. "This is yummy. This bread is great. Mm. But Yū-kun, you're way more pitiful than I am, don't you think?"

"Huh? What do you mean? What are you talking about, Chie-san? Are you feeling all right? Explain it. You idiot. I-I don't think anything is fun about talking to any of those idiot pigs from class. I'm at a higher stage than any of you!"

"No, not that." Chie shoved the rest of the food into her mouth and whispered, "You're not here, Yū-kun. You're not anywhere."

"Huh? What are you talking about? That sounds even crazier."

"I always thought that maybe you aren't irritated by me. Maybe you don't hate everyone in class. Maybe you don't think anything. Maybe you don't like or hate anyone. Maybe that's why you're lonely. Just that. But it's okay. Thanks for the food. Good night."

Chie waved Yū off with a tired look on her face.

Yū picked up his bag and left Chie's house without saying a word.

It was three in the morning before he arrived back at his house, exhausted.

Starting the next day, Chie stopped going to school.

"Hey, Nemoto, why don't you go see how she is?" someone from class suggested.

"You guys are close, right? Go see how she is." Then everyone in class laughed.

Yū laughed, too, and said, "Shut up and die, you stupid pigs!" When he said things like that, he usually did it quietly so no one else could hear, but not this time. This time he said it loud enough that it reverberated in the classroom. Everyone turned and looked at Yū with confused expressions on their faces. Someone punched him in the face as hard as he could. He didn't remember much about what happened next, but he was sure he didn't lose. He wouldn't lose to anyone. Because he didn't think anything of anyone, anything, or even himself. So the words Chie had said the night before circled around and around in his head: "You don't think anything." She was right. What was wrong with it? Yū blew bubbles from his mouth in the middle of the fight.

As he was pressed down on the floor of the classroom, he yelled, "Y-you guys will ruin the earth with your bad thinking! You're ruining Japan's morals by the way you look down on people! Don't you know that? It's because of young people like you that there are wars going on everywhere around this world! Right now the carbon dioxide levels are increasing and the environment is getting bad! And it's because we don't weed out trash like you! If you think just for a second about getting along with people and think about our earth just a little, you'd lead a better life here on Spaceship Earth and the environment would be better for the weak ones, but you won't because you don't understand! You counterrevolutionists! You racists! I can't stand racism! I hate racists and foreigners and you all, and I hope you die! You have no doubts about this rotted world, you idiots, you pigs. Die! That was a great straight. I'm impressed you can beat me up

this much. We might be friends someday. We might hold hands and graduate together someday. But if we did, I'd still think you were pigs. I think this world is a pig. But no matter what, I won't lose. Don't ever forget that!!"

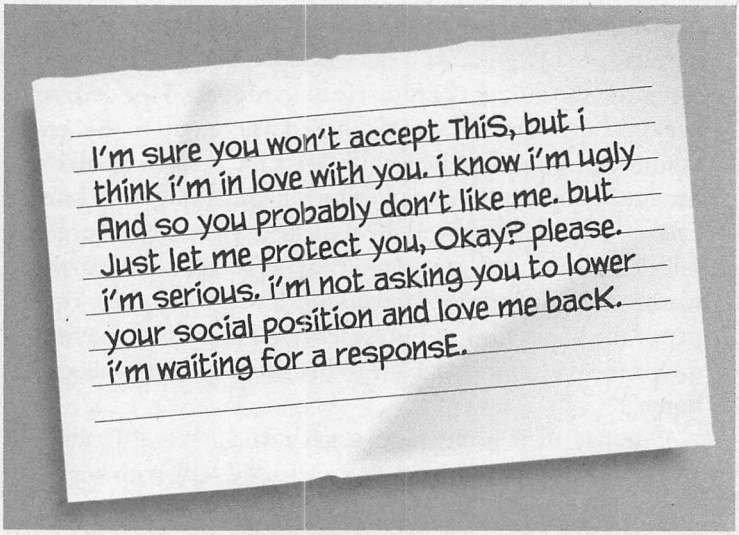
Yū kept screaming things only he understood, and everyone started to get freaked out, so they stood around him at a distance. After a few minutes, the flurry of punches died down.

Oh, that's all? Yū smiled. *Of course I can't lose. Don't make a fool out of me! I wouldn't lose to extras like you who are in this backdrop of a classroom.* But there was one person who wasn't content with this fake classroom, and when he thought of her, he felt a pain in his chest. There was only one girl in class who could see through to his true feelings, and now that she wasn't here, it felt painful.

Usually, he cared about her as much as he might about a pickle on his hamburger. That was true. But that day Yū went home early and headed straight for Chie's house. He was just worried for her safety; it wasn't because he had feelings for her or anything. Her breakdown hadn't influenced him in any way or anything. Yeah, she was just a pig, too. He didn't care what she thought of him. He quietly opened the door to her run-down house. It wasn't locked. He ran up to the second floor. He thought he would find Chie lying in a ball on her futon and would force her to eat something with him. Even if she didn't want to, he'd make her eat a hamburger full of calories, and the whole time he'd talk about earthworms. But her bedroom was empty. He searched every corner of the house for her, but Chie wasn't there. Not the next day or the day after that. Chie didn't show up at school or at home.

One day their homeroom teacher said, "What, Utsuki's absent again? Can someone go see what's wrong with her?"

Everyone acted as if they didn't hear him. Yū noisily got up from his chair, grabbed his bag, and left the classroom. He didn't know where to go, but he couldn't just sit there any longer. He rode his bicycle around the whole town. Of course he wouldn't find her. A week had passed, and the whole town was covered in Christmas colors. The Christmas tree in front of the train station was up, and that night would be Christmas Eve. It was a very cold night. Snow that glowed orange from the lights covered the asphalt. Yū rode his bike as fast as he could down the side road near the love hotel, the bar, the ramen shop, and the bright arcade. He didn't know why he was in such a panic. Because this was a pig world. It was a world where pigs wriggled and huddled together. He didn't belong to it. That would never change. But there was one thing that was different about his usual hatred of the world, and that was Chie. He knew it a long time ago. It was strange. He loved Chie. He couldn't sleep the night before because he felt so uneasy so he wrote a love letter.



He sent it off to Chie's email address without reading it over. He prayed that she would read it and clicked the Send button. He loved her even though she worked too hard for everyone else to like her. He even had precious memories of when she beat him up. He wanted to see her again. But Chie wasn't anywhere. He had frozen his own feelings until now. And this was his punishment for it. What if he never saw her again?

"No, that won't happen."

He got off his bike and headed toward the Christmas tree by the train station. He heard that people who had run away from home liked going there. Six years ago, Yū couldn't stand being bullied anymore and ran out into the night. He had been hungry, but all he had in his pockets was twenty yen. He was worried he would get turned in, so he couldn't go into the warm convenience store. He held his hungry stomach and sniffled. He walked around town alone while the snow fell. Every time he stepped on the snow, it made a noise, and every time he felt a sharp pain in his back where he had been kicked. He wasn't sure why. He did everything his teachers and parents said, so why did he have to be bullied like this? He had studied hard so he could understand middle school textbooks. He didn't have good reflexes, but he thought if he worked at it, they'd get better, so he stayed at the soccer club every night until sunset. He was polite to everyone and always carried a handkerchief and tissues, was kind to everyone, and knew the difference between right and wrong.

It was wrong to steal. It was wrong to hurt people. When people continued to do bad things to him even after being warned, he'd ask a teacher for help. But the people who hurt him never got punished, and only Yū was left out by his classmates. One day after school, his teacher saw Yū crying be-

cause someone had poured milk in his bag and held an emergency meeting after class.

The topic of discussion was "Why is Yū-kun being bullied?" A very long and democratic discussion followed, and the conclusion they came up with was "It was wrong of Tsumura-kun to put the milk in his bag, but Yū-kun also does a lot of things that are wrong. Let's talk things out and get along, okay?" Yū cried and said, "I didn't do anything wrong!"

If I had done something wrong, then everything about the world was a lie. Everything that was right would be nothing. But how is that possible?

"How is that possible?" Yū whispered as he walked through the freezing city. But as he walked through the city at night, he saw things that surprised him. An old man slept in a cardboard box in front of the train station. A bunch of young people walked by, talking and laughing. Weren't we supposed to be kind to the elderly? Weren't we supposed to help those in trouble? That was supposed to be a rule, so Yū pondered it and finally realized something. It was all arbitrary. It didn't matter if you followed the rules or not. Because rules were something made up by people, so the whole world was arbitrary. Yeah, the whole world was arbitrary. . . .

Yū realized that at ten years old. In the lights of the town at night, Yū understood human society for the first time. Before he realized it, the giant Christmas tree was in front of him, and his stomach felt extremely empty. It was as if he were drawn in by the glittering lights, and he couldn't stand himself for falling for it. The red and yellow lights of the Christmas tree looked so warm, like a hallucination. But of course they weren't warm. They were all fake. The tree itself was a fairy tale. There were some businessmen fighting across

the way. There were some idiots swapping spit over there. There was a group of foreign women trying to get people to come into a suspicious-looking store. Of course there were a lot of couples holding hands, and in the middle of all this was the giant Christmas tree. Yū kicked its trunk with his short legs. "You can't fool me anymore!" he whispered, and kept kicking it over and over again until his toes felt swollen. He didn't care if it was fake. But it was deceiving people. The people who bullied him in class thought they were in the right. The female teacher was moved when they came to their "democratic resolution" and was probably still crying about it. He thought about all these people and silently screamed, "You pigs! Even if you halfway realize all this is fake, you still believe in it and you use it to your advantage! Don't you have any shame? But I won't be fooled again, and I'll never accept any of these fake things, not this Christmas tree or anything! I won't be a pig who's satisfied with such a fake fairy tale like this!" Yū glared at everyone surrounding the Christmas tree. Ever since he had a breakthrough that night when he was ten, he hadn't tried to trust in anything. Of course, "anything" included himself, because even his feelings were fake. He had lived six more years not thinking about anything. If he had any kind of intense feelings, he'd point them out and ridicule them because they were fake.

But there was one thing growing in his heart that was real. If he could see her again in front of this Christmas tree, what would he say and do? Just thinking about that made his chest swell. Of course, he didn't expect her to love him back. He didn't have selfish expectations like that.

But I love you, so please let me be your friend. Or let me be your boyfriend. Of course, even if we don't go out, I'll still give you advice and support you emotionally. If you don't have any

money, I'll make you food. I'll help you with everything. So please don't be so self-destructive. And when I see you again, I'll tell you all about when I ran away from home. I was really weird before and just thought about things in extremes, but all kids are weird. I have someone as wonderful as you next to me, but when I think that the whole world is fake, I think how extreme kids are. I want to talk about all those things with you, but first I have to find you, Chie. I know you'll show up here sooner or later. I know it'll be under this Christmas tree. It has to be. People aren't synchronized this often. It's because of this Christmas tree that I didn't decide to freeze to death that night and went home instead.

Under that Christmas tree, Yū had vowed to fight against everyone and the world and then went home. He knew tonight had to be when they reconciled. He'd hold Chie's hand, or maybe they'd even hug each other or do something even more amazing, and they'd smile and say, "Let's be friends and enjoy life at school, okay?"

But no matter how long he waited, Chie didn't show up. Yū circled the tree again and again, but he didn't see her. At some point, the sound of the choir stopped, and most of the foreigners trying to get people to come into their shops had gone inside. It was a bone-chilling December night, and it was almost over. Yū was tired of walking and fell to his knees on the snow-covered ground. *I'm too late,* he thought. He imagined various scenarios of Chie throwing herself into a river, freezing in the mountains, or drowning in the ocean. She might be near the cardboard box freezing to death. It would be easy for her to freeze to death since she had zero body fat. If left out in this cold for only a few hours, Chie would roll over dead.

Something fell on his hands and burst. It was a tear. It was a tear of regret. He was the only one who could save her. Why

hadn't he tried it sooner? He felt like the biggest weakling because he tried so hard not to admit his true feelings.

Then his cell phone rang. Yū took it out with numb hands and looked at the screen. His hands were trembling so he didn't get a good look at it, but it wasn't from Chie. It was from a number he didn't know. Yū answered the phone with trembling hands.

"H-hello?"

There was no answer, but he heard breathing on the other end.

"Ch-Chie, is that you?"

Whoever it was hung up. Yū called back the number. Just as he did, he heard a phone ringing behind him. He turned around and saw Chie with a telephone card in hand standing in front of the convenience store phone. He smiled, exhausted. He ran toward her with tired legs.

"W-where have you been?"

"I've been watching you from inside here."

Her designer clothes that her mother had probably sent to her were dirty and ruined. It looked as if she had been wandering around town for that whole week. After she had seen Yū, she was embarrassed to come out of the convenience store, so she hesitated. He grabbed her cold hand and squeezed it.

"It's okay. You don't have to apologize. I have something to tell you. Will you listen?"

Chie nodded. Her cheeks were numb, but they were a little flushed. They were illuminated by the Christmas tree lights. Yū felt déjà vu again at this, but he took a small breath and stared into Chie's eyes.

"It's embarrassing to say this, but I—"

Chie interrupted him. "You love me?"

"Y-yeah."

"How much?"

"A-a lot. I've been skipping school all week looking for you. You don't have to feel guilty or anything, though. I was just worried about you. It was pretty rough. It's close to the end of the semester, so it took a lot of guts to go around looking for a runaway girl like you. It's not something just any guy could do. . . ."

"I know. I watched you the whole time."

"Huh?"

"It seemed like you were chasing Chie around, but, in reality, I was the one chasing you. I've seen everything from the shadows. At first, your cold attitude wouldn't crumble. But as one day, two days passed, you forgot yourself. You were seriously worried about Chie, to the point where you sent an embarrassing love letter to her. You went around town looking for her from morning till night. I couldn't stand watching it. I got tired of following your bicycle around. But out of consideration for your cooperation six years ago, I held off judgment and kept watching. I watched over you until this night when we met again, without throwing out hope. But it's over now. You don't have the potential to become a soldier. You've failed."

"Ch-Chie-san?"

"You don't remember yet? Who called out to that kid who was kicking the Christmas tree? Who saved the life of that spoiled brat who had made his mind up to die like that old guy in the cardboard box? Who taught you to live with the world's truths?"

Finally, Yū understood. He shuddered at the thought of disappointing the person who meant the most to him.

"I-it wasn't a dream? You were really here that night? It was you, Chie?"

"It was a dream. This whole world is a dream created by ECCO."

Sophia, the only one who opposed ECCO, smiled sadly.

3

"Six years ago, we met here. That night, you were crying in front of this Christmas tree. And I—no, Chie—had run away from home. Chie couldn't stand fighting with her parents anymore and thought it was all her fault, so she ran away with only the clothes on her back. She was hungry and thought she'd freeze to death, and huddled into a ball on top of a garbage can behind that pachinko parlor over there. Meanwhile, you were in front of the tree, crying.

"I'll repeat what I told you six years ago. ECCO is controlling you and everyone. When you cry in pain, smile with happiness—all of it was devised by ECCO. That night, you thought everything was fake and meaningless and cried by yourself, but there's meaning in everything. For example, the bullying was suggested by ECCO. A person's strength is measured by how many tears he's shed. That's how strong you were. You had emotional strength that no one else could compete with. But you were always alone. But luckily a girl with darkness in her heart appeared before you. They held hands and compensated for what the other was lacking. They tried to do good. It was the manifestation of love. But that's one of ECCO's tricks. The way the Christmas tree looks so warm is because of ECCO; the way you're shaking and crying because you've realized my true identity is because you're controlled by ECCO—in other words, everything you feel is a suggestion from ECCO. That's why people let ECCO help them grow. Both Chie and you grew up in the palm of



ECCO's hand. That's the life of a human. No one has escaped from this world created by ECCO. Not even you. Everyone's tricked by ECCO's love and has completely forgotten about the importance of gnosis."

"Y-you're wrong."

"No, I'm not. Look at this world's progress. Everyone is the fruit of ECCO's labor. Electricity is convenient, isn't it? Even this winter night is bright and warm. There aren't many people who freeze to death. Isn't that progress? Mankind is progressing each day, and each day the world is overflowing with love. The day when everything is connected by ECCO's love is near. The day when the world is complete is near. So dream and look forward to it. Be drunk from the love and dreams ECCO weaves. Chie is sleeping until she dies. She'll never see you again."

Yū remembered the promise they had made six years earlier. Sophia had told him about ECCO, and he had said, "Hey, let's fight together!" as she rubbed his head.

"You can't. You're still too young. But when you become an adult, when you become a strong adult who won't lose to ECCO, I'll be hiding somewhere. And if you become an adult and get swallowed up by ECCO, I'll appear before you again and start from where I left off. I'll take you into the real fight against ECCO. So don't forget that everything is a trick devised by ECCO. Someday you might be confused by love and dreams and hopes. You might fall in love and forget about yourself. But you'll have to wake up sometime. It will be a tough fight. I don't envy your position. If you break our promise, you'll be much happier. . . ."

"But wait!" Yū screamed. But Sophia tilted her head sadly.

"You'll be happy from now on. But I'm going now. Goodbye."

Then she silently closed her eyes. She looked as if she was

about to cry. She was sad because she had lost hope and was lonely. She had been fighting alone for thousands of years. ECCO had taken in all of the soldiers she had found. All of her companions had abandoned her and left. The partner she had found after a few hundred years had promised, "I'll protect you. I won't forget," but had forgotten. Sophia was alone once again. That's probably why she looked so sad. Maybe she looked so sad because she didn't have anywhere to go and would just disappear. It was difficult to watch.

But then Yū grinned and squeezed her hand again.

Sophia's body stiffened. "Stop. No one can stop me."

"It's okay. You've misunderstood."

"I can't. You're one of ECCO now. Don't touch me with that dirty hand!"

However, Yū didn't let up and showed her his lips. It was his first true smile in six years. He felt as if he should be smiling now. He had lived for these years to meet her again tonight. He had killed all his emotions in order to reunite with her. He had made his feelings a lie and suppressed everything. So he wouldn't leak any information to his parents or his teachers or his classmates, or even himself, he had put up a barrier of fake hatred toward the world and run away from ECCO's traps. That was all so he could meet her again. His dearest wish had been granted. So he had to at least smile tonight. If he laughed really loud, maybe she would forgive him. Right?

"He-he-he-he-ha-ha-ha-ha-ho-ho-ho-hi-hi-hi. Wait, don't disappear yet. Look at this computer. Computer. Isn't it an awesome result of culture?" Yū whispered strangely, and took his laptop from his bag. He paid no attention to the dubious look on Sophia's face and showed her the email he had written the night before.

"I sent this love letter to you, I mean Chie, last night. I guess you read it on her computer, so you know it's the real thing, right? I wrote this letter with my true feelings. I put all of my devotion into it. So please don't make a face like that. Read it again. Um, can you read Japanese? If not, I'll read it. . . ."

Sophia took the laptop from him and ran her eyes quickly over the screen. "So what? This is the proof that you've been taken in by ECCO."

He couldn't help but be amused at Sophia's bewilderment. He suppressed a laugh and yelled, "The capital letters aren't typos!" He brought Sophia's head close to him as she had six years ago. And as he held Sophia's complex body next to him as he had six years before—her beautiful body that wasn't anything close to a pig's, her donkey hooves, the infinite snakes that interwove to make her elegant curly hair, and her white soft moth antennae rubbed directly onto Yū's heart. Before long, Sophia realized the truth and smiled and cried. The transparent, pearly tears that fell from her beautiful cat-like eyes were so lovely and perfect they permeated every inch of the winter air. They were her first tears of delight in hundreds of years. They were tears of honest relief because Sophia had found her partner. She was moved that Yū had kept his promise to her, and they held each other tightly. Of course, ECCO had completely surrounded them, but Yū had no intention of giving up.

"See, it says 'It's a joke!' "

He had used those words before to turn his back on any kind of drama around him and escaped from ECCO's plans to grow him.

That's right, you're not worth anything! I won't find meaning in any of this! I'll take Sophia's hand and we'll fight the in-

finite battle against ECCO! We might not win, but we'll never give up! As long as Sophia's by my side, I won't ever think about anything!

"So what do you say, Sophia-san? Do I have the right to become a soldier?"

"Shh! ECCO can hear you. Tell me the rest by telepathy!"

From then on, they exchanged information via telepathy, never speaking out loud again. They parted in front of the Christmas tree. But he wasn't sure if she had actually accepted him as a soldier.

Yū pedaled his bicycle, a large grin spread on his face.

He looked very happy.

But then he panicked and stopped smiling. "Stop looking!" he shouted to everything around him. There was no one there. Yū gritted his teeth and shouted in the middle of the night while powdery snow fell on the city.

And the only witness to this event was ECCO.

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H PEOPLE

Kozy Watanabe

Illustration by TAGRO
Translated by Andria Cheng

H People: A Convenient Woman," is another in a series of stories published in the *Faust* magazine by Kozy Watanabe under the "H People" name. In many of these stories, author Kozy Watanabe vividly describes the emotional state of a *hikikomori*. *Hikikomori* is a type of acute social withdrawal, and the Japanese term refers both to the condition or the person suffering from the condition. A *hikikomori,* for a variety of personal and emotional reasons, isolates himself completely from the world, often refusing not only to leave his home, but even his own bedroom, for periods ranging from months to years. The condition has been reported in ever-increasing numbers in Japan, though actual estimates have varied, from the hundreds of thousands through one million—or one percent of Japan's population. *Hikikomori* are often heavy consumers of media such as anime and video games, with which they fill the time they spend wholly isolated from society. While "A Convenient Woman" 's protagonist is not a *hikikomori,* the story nevertheless describes a mind-set deeply shaped by anime—and the difficulty and strangeness of making a connection with another human being, especially a woman.

The author, Kozy Watanabe, was born in 1962. He is highly active novelist and writer, as well as one of video game company GTV's major talents. As a senior figure among gaming generations, he has many TV appearances under his belt. His most popular works include *Kaijin 21 Seiki Nakano Broadway Tantei Yuu & Ai,* as well as *iKILL.*

Manga artist TAGRO provided the illustrations. His books include *Uchuu Chintai Sarugassou (Square Enix).* TAGRO's works often feature depictions of twisted youth—which has enabled him to seize hold of a devoted fan base.

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EPISODE FIVE

A Convenient Woman

The first time I met her was when I was working part-time delivering pizzas. The only thing she ordered was thirty bottles of juice, and as I walked up to the top floor of the apartment building, I thought she must be an idiot.

When her pale face appeared in the crack of the door, I thought she was a doll. She had a delicate scent, like a lily. It drove me crazy.

For about a week after that, I loitered around her apartment complex, still feeling crazy. It looked as if she lived in the 1DK apartment by herself. She never talked to her neighbors. And what's more, I never saw her go outside. Her curtains were closed all day and all night.

When I quit my job, I stole a uniform. Then I bought a bunch of supplies off the Internet.

I put the uniform on and tried not to look suspicious as I went into the apartment building. I stood in front of her door and knocked on it. "Delivery!"

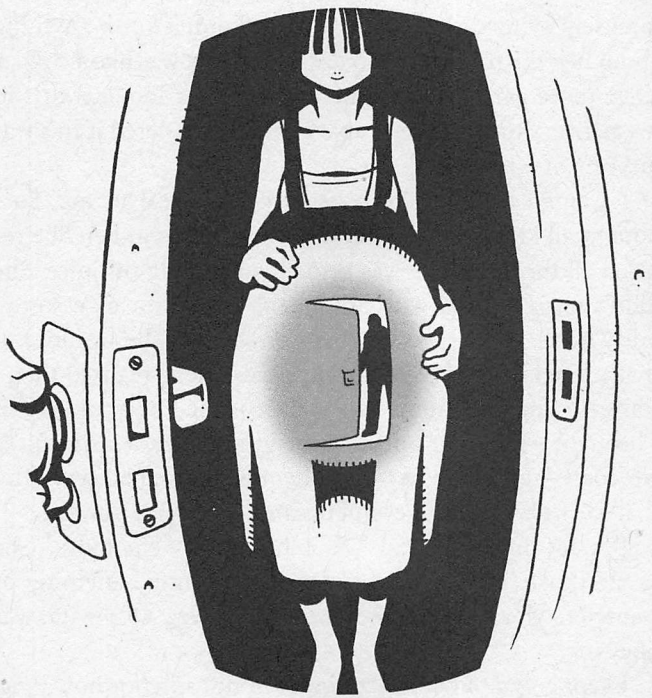
"I didn't order anything," she said, and "What is it?" I had expected a response like that. I heard her unlock the door and unlatch the chain.

The door opened. I could've sworn she said, "I've been waiting for you."

I went inside. She was wearing white clothing. Maybe underwear. The room was dark, but her arms and legs looked clear, luminescent.

She stared at me with her big, black eyes and said, "Should I take off my clothes?"

I froze and dropped my bag. The wrench, bottle of chloroform, and handcuffs fell out.



She was completely nude in one second, as if it were some kind of magic trick.

Then we made love, and the whole time, I thought, *This is a dream; it must be a dream.* No matter how much I gazed at her, I couldn't focus. Her smooth arms and soft thighs and slender neck and fine pubic hair swelled and contracted in front of my eyes like a mirage.

Her life was a mystery to me. No, the opposite. It was far from a mystery; it was nothing at all. She lived there all alone. That was all. She didn't do anything and had no family or friends. She didn't own anything except for a few pieces of white clothing.

The reasons I didn't feel as if she was real, no matter how intensely we made love, were because I didn't know anything about her, the room was too dark, her body was like a child's. I like those games and anime with childish-looking girls in them. Every time I left her apartment, I wondered if this was just one of my delusions.

I wanted to make her existence seem real to me. So I bought all kinds of things and brought them to her. She refused all the food. She was actually just living off juice. She didn't seem pleased with any of the clothes or accessories, but when I told her to try them on for me, she would. But that turned out to be just for my sake. After I realized that, I started going to costume shops. Every time I went to see her, I brought a different outfit—a maid uniform, a swimsuit, a lab coat—and made her wear them while we had sex. After that she became—and even I became—less and less real.

Besides an occasional "That hurts" or "No more," she rarely spoke. Even if I asked her if she wanted anything or wanted to go anywhere, she wouldn't answer. All she did was obey me.

I kept going to her apartment. I'm not sure for how long;

I'm not sure of anything. Once she said, "I can't today." That's when I found out her childish body had a period only once a year. I also saw her take a bath in a tub full of ice cubes. She said it was just one of her idiosyncrasies. That's all. After those strange situations continued for a while, they became normal. The time I spent drowning in pleasure passed quickly. Ten-odd years had passed in an instant.

I was a frog floating in a pot full of water. If the pot suddenly gets hot, the frog will panic and jump out. But if the pot warms up slowly, the frog will keep on floating, carefree. By the time he realizes he's in a pot of water, his body will be aching and he won't be able to escape anymore.

I was now middle-aged. My hair had thinned, and I had gotten unattractively fat. But she hadn't aged a bit. She was still smooth and pale, still looked like a young girl. I didn't have the courage left in me to wonder why.

One day she said to me, "I'm pregnant."

I was shocked. I hadn't even thought about contraception. I was terrified and thought about running away. But to where? That was simple. Wherever she wasn't.

I had made up my mind. All I had to do was fight with my sexual desires and get rid of old habits. It was difficult for a while, but after about a month, it became easier. Before long it seemed as if everything that had happened with her had been a dream.

Another ten years passed. Then I realized I was standing outside her door again. I must have gone there unconsciously.

I thought, *There's no way; there's no way*—and I knocked on her door, shaking.

"I've been waiting for you."

The door opened. There she was. She hadn't changed at all. No, her stomach was round and swollen. She rubbed it and said, "It's almost time."

I heard a click behind me. I turned around and saw that the door had closed.

Then I understood. She hadn't shut herself away in this room. She had imprisoned me. In that small, small world beyond the door.

"Thank you," I said. For saving me. For forgiving me.

She smiled a little and held out her arms. Then she hugged me. I closed my eyes. She wrapped me up in her soft hands, breasts, lips.

"I'm going to give birth now," she said.

"I'm going to give birth now. To you."

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YABAI DE SHOW

Ryusui Seiryoin

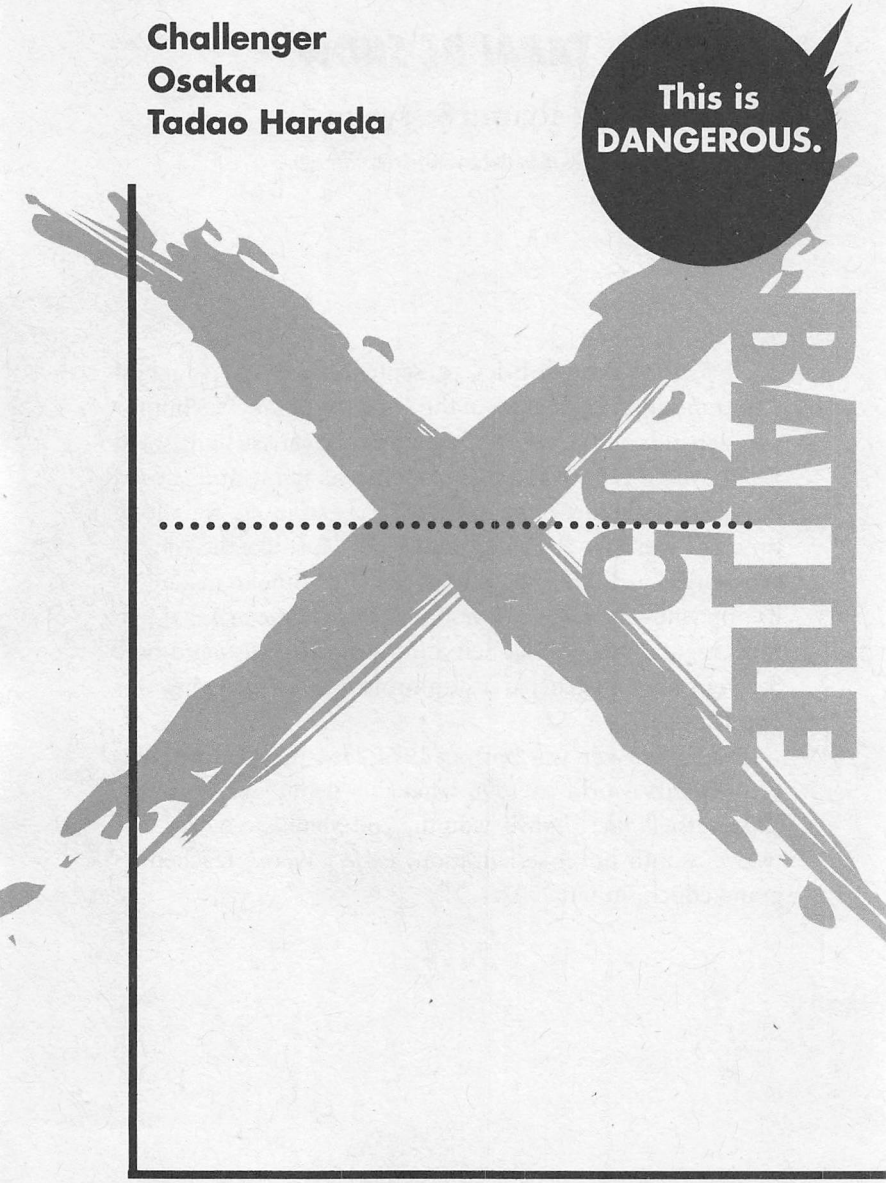
Translated by Andria Cheng

This story, though brief, presented one of the toughest translation challenges in the *Faust* anthology: Its humor depends on the use of the common Japanese slang word *yabai,* which is both the main character's name and is used heavily in dialogue. Though *yabai* has been in use for a long time as a word for "bad" or "dangerous," just like the American words "bad" and "wicked," it has also come to mean just its opposite—"great" or "awesome." The character Yabai features regularly in Ryusui Seiryoin's work in *Faust,* and here Seiryoin has constructed a humorous playlet featuring this popular character.

Ryusui Seiryoin was born in 1974. He surprised the Japanese literary world in 1996 when his debut work, *Cosmic Seikimatsu Tantei Shinwa,* won the 2nd Mephisto Award. His twelve-month novel serialization, *Perfect World,* reached its grand conclusion in 2007.

▲▼▲▼▲

Challenger
Osaka
Tadao Harada





SHOW

YABAI: That's dangerous! Really, really dangerous!

His shouts echo through the event hall, empty except for the two of them. Ryu P is used to it, but those not familiar with Yabai might think he was insane and run away.

RYU P: What's really, really dangerous? You're the one who's dangerous, Yabai! What's so dangerous about this picture? It just looks like pretty stuffed animals to me. Oh, wait, these are knitted animals!

YABAI: Ryu P, you're pretty argumentative today. Are you sure you're not an imposter?

Ryu P ignores Yabai's stupid remarks and continues.

RYU P: Anyway, what's dangerous about it?

YABAI: This picture could be against the law.

Ryu P bursts out laughing.

RYU P: Ha-ha!

Why would this picture be against the law?

RYU P: Yeah, right!

YABAI: What, you don't believe me? Okay, I have no choice, then. I'll have to reveal my secret hobby to the whole country. This is my room. And inside of one of those handmade, knitted animals . . . is me.

RYU P: What? Are you serious?

YABAI: Totally serious. Dangerously serious. I know you think these are regular stuffed animals, but each one is actually almost six feet tall. I'm inside the one called Pierre, and my friends Brian and Stephan are in the other two. I can't believe I'm telling you this!

For some reason, Yabai seems extremely embarrassed and covers his face with both hands. Ryu P sighs and suddenly asks . . .

RYU P: So what about that is against the law?

YABAI: Ryu P, your innocence is almost criminal. Whoever took these pictures of someone's private hobby is a Peeping Tom! And on top of that, they've leaked it to the public! I'll sue them for this!

Oh no . . . Yabai's carried away today. I can't win. By the way, which one is Pierre? Ryu P ponders as he examines the photos.

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YÛYA SATÔ'S COUNSELING SESSION

Yûya Satô

Illustrated by Sasai Icco
Translated by Andria Cheng

The Japanese edition of the *Faust* anthology is what's called in Japan a "mook"—a combination magazine and book. In the fashion of a magazine, it has regular features, including a series of "counseling sessions," which are something like the advice columns that are so commonly found in magazines. Except that *Faust* is no ordinary magazine, and so plays with ordinary regular magazine conventions. This "counseling session," written by the popular novelist Yûya Satô, is more of a conversation between the author and himself than between a counselor and his readers; this hugely self-referential piece also includes numerous references to the world of *Faust* and its publisher, Kodansha. For example, the author mentions NISIOISIN, a superstar novelist very closely connected to *Faust* and Kodansha, and a phone call to *Faust*'s editor in chief, Katsushi Ota.

Yûya Satô's debut work, *Flicker Shiki—Kagami Kimihiko ni Uttetsuke no Satsujin,* won the 21st Mephisto Award. After that, Kodansha Novels published his Kagami-ke Saga series, which continued on from his debut story. With that, he gained enthusiastic support from other young readers born in the 1980s. His story *1000 no Housetsu to Bugbeared* then won the 20th Yukio Mishima Award. He is the representative

author of Japan's "lost generation"—youth who have become so immersed in virtual reality that true reality becomes too terrifying.

This is not illustrator Sasai Icco's first collaboration with Yûya Satô; she also produced the artwork for Yûya Satô's Kagami-ke Saga series.

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Hey, everyone, have you grown tired of your pathetic lives? It's been awhile, hasn't it? This is Yûya Satô (age twenty-three). Lately, I've been fasting to save money and satisfying myself by just filling up the cart at Amazon.com and then not buying anything. I really admire Naoki Yanase for his translation of *Finnegan's Wake.* I also really admire electronics be-



cause they give off light, send information, and are warm. I'm good at conserving water. I'm not good with novels. I think Napoleon is way cooler than Raskolnikov. I enjoy playing Xevious on my cell phone. But I can't keep up with shooting games these days. I bought some lunch at the convenience store, and when I returned to my apartment, there was a cat and her kitten basking in the sun in front of my door, so I ate my lunch in the park. By the way, everyone, are you reading this column right after "Black-Colored Pokari Sweat"? You better not say it was hard to read or there weren't any *moe* characters or it was too dark! In order to enjoy cars, first you have to get a license! Sorry to be arrogant. This was a secret until now, but this column is actually more popular than any of my novels. I wonder if it's because XXXX sells more than OOOO? It feels like my brain has gone bad, but I'm still deceptively alive. Now my mind-numbing writing will commence!

The other day I spent my twenty-third birthday with my friend N-san. It was at Anna Miller's* somewhere in the city.

"At Anna Miller's, they celebrate your birthday even if you're a useless member of society! So let's go, Yûya-kun!"

"Uhh . . . what exactly do you mean by *celebrate*?"

"They have these really cute employees who were chosen after really strict interviews, and they come out and act all embarrassed, hide their faces, and sing 'Happy Birthday to You.' "

"Oh, really? I'll pass."

"Come on, come on! I wanna hear them sing! I wanna see them act all shy! Come on, let's go!"

So N-san strapped me to the back of his motorcycle and forced me to go. The employees were cute and wore white

* *Anna Miller's* A casual dining chain in Japan.

and pink uniforms, said "I'm so sorry, I'm sooo embarrassed!" and then ran off to the back of the restaurant. That's how my birthday ended. Is it just my imagination that with each passing year my birthdays get more and more painful? Oh, well, NISIOISIN-san gave me a "Heey" button. It seems like he enjoys giving people strange gifts. He once gave me a miniature-size bag of rice. Every time he sees Otoichi-san, he gives him a Rubik's Cube. I have no idea what he means by any of this. Somebody please tell me what the reasoning is behind it. If anyone can provide an adequate explanation, I'll use the "Heey" button and make you feel like you're on a trivia show.

That's enough introduction. Now we'll start "Yûya Satô's Advice Column." You may remember the question I answered last time was "I want to get better at taking pictures. What should I do?" Well, I wonder what kind of questions I'll get this time. But wait a second. There's a big problem.

My address didn't appear in the last issue.

I was so shocked I inspected the pages from corner to corner, but it wasn't anywhere in *Faust.* I thought maybe it was printed in invisible ink, so I held it up to the gas range, but all that happened was that my hands got really hot; nothing showed up on the paper. Uhh . . . what's going on here? Is this an attack on me? Is it bullying? Is someone trying to get me to stop this column? Th-that's terrible! I object! I have to fight! So I called up both the assistant editor and then the editor in chief of *Faust* in the middle of the night and said, "What is this, the Kyōgokudō series?"

He answered: "Oh, sorry, sorry. I totally forgot. Ha-ha-ha." He said it in such a pleasant tone of voice it seemed like that was the end of the story, and I started to panic. Then he continued, "Who cares about taking good pictures? Even if the address was in it, nobody would've sent anything in. You're a

writer; can't you give more beautiful advice? Oh, if you do another column like that again, we'll pull the plug on it. How about 'Advice Column for Desperate People'? Ohh, that sounds beautiful. Well, talk to you later!" he said quickly, and then hung up on me. For good measure, I complained to him again last September at the *Faust* Festival, but he gave me a similar reply.

What is the deal with having an advice column if there's no address to send questions to? It's terrible! Why does this have to happen to me? Because this isn't the type of column *Faust* readers like? Because I'm a chicken who runs screaming from the room if I see a cockroach? Because I shoot curse beams at couples walking around the streets before Christmas dressed like it's mating season with the sound of Mari Takeuchi and Tatsurō Yamashita duets in the background? Because in elementary school I lost my chance at winning the skating competition because I went around the rink at a slower pace because I thought it was two laps but it was only one? Or is it because of that time in middle school when I . . . No, I better stop right there.

What's in the past is in the past. I'll forget about what happened last time and continue on with my advice column. Advice, hmm? I don't really want to. Generally—and I mentioned this last time, too—I think that it's wrong to ask others for advice about your own problems. Don't you feel ashamed? Don't you feel humiliated? You're making your worries, faults, and unhappiness public, you know! What else could you feel about that than embarrassed? But still people say, I don't get along with my family, I had a fight with my lover, I can't stop drinking alcohol, I can't work, etcetera, etcetera. . . . Give me a break! It makes me puke!

So, anyway, since that's my opinion on the matter, you can see why I'm past my deadline and can't finish my work. I

tried to drink some alcohol, get drunk, and sleep for six hours, but I got only a few pages done. I tried eating some curry and then sleeping for eleven hours, but I still didn't make any progress. Then I thought I should get down to business and slipped into bed prepared to sleep for eight hours when I realized something.

I hadn't been outside lately.

And if I had, it was only at night.

I remembered a friend of mine had said, "Your skin looks whiter than usual." He was right. I feel like my skin is a lot lighter since I became a writer. Almost like I used a skin lightener or something. I can recommend this method to those who want to lighten their skin but can't afford it. All it takes is a lot of time! The pro is that it's perfect for those with sensitive skin; the con is that you start to forget how to carry on a conversation.

I realized I was a *hikikomori* behind the times, so I grabbed my coat and scarf and went outside. It was the middle of the afternoon in Tokyo, but the cold wind was relentless. Most people would seek shelter in a café or a fast-food restaurant, but I didn't have enough courage to go into one of those places by myself. So I braced myself against the cold and continued walking, carefully observing my surroundings. Why was I carefully observing my surroundings, you ask? That's a good question. There's a trick to solving every mystery. For example, the clue to solving the mystery of a murder that happened in a locked room was one slip from the heroine. Or a seemingly unimportant question from a detective is the clue to solving a "remote" murder. It always comes at the perfect time. That's what I was searching for. I don't want to give advice, but it won't be published unless I give proper advice. So in order to find the clue that would solve my situation, I scoured every inch in a thirty-meter radius.

And I easily found it.

I heard it from a group of nursery school children who were walking nearby. In order to protect their privacy, I've changed their names.

"Machiko-sensei, Machiko-sensei! Kō-chan told me this skirt doesn't look good on me so I shouldn't wear it!"

"Now, now, Kayako-chan. You don't have to listen to that. Kō-chan isn't the one who decides which skirt you should wear; you are!"

Beeep! Oh, wait, that's the wrong sound. *Ding!*

Setting my vocabulary error aside, I'll continue. Can't you at least keep up with me for an essay? At any rate, my brain reacted to those words, and I was given a wonderful solution. I was so thankful, I felt like giving the children a bouquet of flowers, but I didn't know where to buy any, and even if I did, they'd probably think I was a suspicious man anyway, so I didn't do anything and went back to my apartment. I turned on my computer. I listened to "Faust" by the Bloodthirsty Butchers and thought, "Whoa, the singing is terrible!" while I started typing.

"Heh-heh-heh. This is it!"

Sound the bell of revolution! Kick his flank as hard as you can! Tell me the truth about being on the road! The invincible Yûya Satô doesn't quite believe you yet! I'm sure you no longer get my references, but don't worry about it. I'm just a terrible writer who writes things his readers can't understand.

I'm sure you smart ones out there have already figured out what I started. That's right. I'm starting my own plan for an advice column!

I was given these pages with the premise of its being "Yûya Satô's Advice Column." However, I'm changing gears.

(If you always do what others tell you, history would never get made!) I have an obligation to do this column, but I'm the only one who's writing it. Nobody can interfere now. Plus I'm already past my deadline. If I submit it at the last minute before there's any time to change it . . . they might cry themselves to sleep at night.

I did it! I won! What's "Yûya Satô's Counseling Session" anyway? I can't believe they'd do something so foolish as to have a writer give people advice! Who do you think I am? I'm a writer! I'm someone who bears the burden of writing until I die! So how can I give advice? Speaking of which, don't you think they treat me badly? I'm sure those who read "Mail Magazine *Faust*" have realized this, but it never talks about me! What's up with that? Because my novels are boring? Because I'm weak? Ohh, I see. Well I guess I'll just write sickly sweet *moe* entertainment from now on! I hope you enjoy it! And anyone who doesn't like it can turn their back on me with pride! At this rate, I'll single-handedly eradicate *Faust*! (Everyone else might think this is a bad idea, but ignoring people is my specialty.) Goodbye, thanks for everything, thanks for the dreams!

Hey, calm down, Yûya.

Let me reset myself. And starting today, I'll restart myself. Now, all you troubled lambs, tell me your problems! I'll solve them with just one word! I'll solve all your pain, worries, difficulties, and obstacles perfectly! That's the only way you can be happy!

Now I will give you my address:

112–8001
Tokyo Bunkyo-ku Otowa 2–12–21, Kodansha Publishing Company New Project Development Department, *Faust* Editorial Dept. Attn: Yûya Satô's Counseling Session

Everyone who wants to be happy, send all your questions to this address! ★

I'm waiting for tons of letters! ♪

After I finished writing this sentence, I decided to practice for the flood of questions from little lambs seeking advice. I entered "advice column" into a search engine. Whoa, five hundred thousand hits? This many people are worried about their life and need advice? I'm surprised. Okay, now it's time for me to solve their problems, I thought as I skimmed the advice columns.

I'm in severe credit card debt. What should I do?
I'm going to a high school full of delinquents so I refuse to go to school. What should I do?
My mother abandoned me, but now she's trying to act all motherly. What should I do?
I'm twenty-four but I'm in a serious relationship with a woman who's thirty, and we plan to marry but my parents are against it. What should I do?
I'm engaged but my fiancé just quit his job. What should I do?

?????????????????????????? A sea of question marks came at me. And that made me realize something awful.

I can't give advice.

I don't have the ability, knowledge, or experience to answer any of those questions. I have no idea how to answer them. The popular phrase "Go to a Soapland!" wouldn't work in any of those situations, either. I don't have the strength to solve any of their problems. And I'm supposed to give advice? There's no way. I can't. Of course, there's always the standard answer of "Don't listen to others. Do what your heart tells you," but even that sounds lame. I'm a twenty-three-year-old adult. I can't keep doing lame jobs.

So I guess I have to give up on giving serious advice. Then the only path left for me is an advice column like I did last

time. It's very unfortunate, but the only thing left for me now is to act like a clown again.

But it doesn't mean I've backed down. Not yet—it's not over yet! I won't retreat, I won't regret, I won't look back! I will absolutely not self-destruct! Getting up again after I fall down is my specialty!

So, so . . . this time I'll admit my defeat. And ask for advice. If you send me appropriate answers, I'll end my previous column and start "Yûya Satô's Counseling Session." So now I ask you, how can the wonderful Yûya Satô become someone capable of giving advice? What should I do? This is a very important question, so the editor in chief will have no choice but to publish it. Because of the mountains of responses I'll get, I'll find a way to level up so I can answer every question asking for advice and become a stronger writer and then finally start "Yûya Satô's Brilliant Advice Column." It's a beautiful plan, if I do say so myself. If I had been born in the Warring States era, I would be in textbooks now as the winner.

Well, that's all the time I have for this issue. I'm looking forward to next time!

I'm asking your advice: I want to become a writer who can give others advice. What should I do?

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TATSUHIKO TAKIMOTO'S GURU GURU COUNSELING SESSION

Tatsuhiko Takimoto

Illustrations by Chizu Hashii
Translated by Andria Cheng

Another counseling session piece—a feature similar to the preceding selection—in which author Tatsuhiko Takimoto makes frequent mention of an institution known as a Soapland. A Soapland is a type of Japanese brothel, in which prostitutes bathe with their clients as well as providing other services. It's not unusual for married men to go to a Soapland, or for young men to lose their virginity at such a place.

The phrase *guru guru* in the title means to "spin, twirl, or go round and round," and describes the dazzling dizziness a reader might feel while navigating this giddily humorous story.

Takimoto was born in 1978. His debut, *Negative Happy Chainsaw Edge,* was a breakthrough success, but he achieved a new level of popularity with *Welcome to the N.H.K.,* which has been adapted into popular anime and manga versions.

Illustrator Chizu Hashii's manga serialization of *Soshite Gonin ga Inakunaru* (by writer Kaoru Hayamine), is running in the Japanese version of *Faust.* She also worked on illustrations for the novel version from Kodansha's novel arm. She was the character designer for the anime *BLOOD+,* and *Tantei Gishiki*—the story she collaborated on alongside

Ryusui Seiryoin and Eiji Otsuka—is currently ongoing in monthly *Shonen Ace*. Her characters are full of personality, and have really taken off with readers. Hashii's website address is http://www.interq.or.jp/ol/chizu.

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"Should I go to a Soapland or not?"

Ever since I got this question in the last issue, I can't stop thinking about this huge problem.

Of course, Kenzō Kitakawa's answer is always "Go to a Soapland!" but if I simply copied him here, everyone would no doubt accuse me of being a copycat. However, my top priority is to provide honest answers for all those who ask advice, so isn't it my supreme responsibility to verify the usefulness of that phrase, "Go to a Soapland!" even if everyone points a finger at me? And in order to give the most honest reply, shouldn't I make solving the Soapland problem my top priority?



Yes . . . Regarding the previous column, I, Takimoto, spinelessly turned my back on the Soapland problem and simply avoided it. "If I wrote about something as immoral as a Soapland in a national magazine, I'd

never be able to face my father again!" I thought cowardly, and made self-preservation my top priority. And, of course, being so pathetic makes me a failure at giving others advice. Y-you big loser! I could have solved the age-old question of "Will going to a Soapland really solve all of my problems?" What kind of an advice columnist am I? You damn opportunist! You should be ashamed of yourself!

But it's not too late. Even if I'm a coward and a loser, I still have a heart that loves the true, the good, and the beautiful. So I should start running! I should muster up the courage to face the Soapland problem head-on and illuminate the truth for all you troubled lambs out there! In order to do that, I can't be afraid of my social status and public image crumbling or the grief I'll cause my father!

That is why I, Takimoto, called every single person I knew and asked what they thought about Soaplands and recorded all their answers. However, there were only three people who had actually been to a Soapland. "She was old enough to be my mother!" was one person's nosebleed-inspiring confession. Perhaps one person was trying to cover up their embarrassment because all they could say was abstract things like "It was amazing, seriously! It was awesome, for real!" And I think one person misunderstood the question because they told me what they thought about "St. Cosplay Gakuen."

It was no use. I didn't know what to say about Soaplands based on this data. I needed to collect data from a wider range of people, so I searched the Internet for anything having to do with Soaplands. I suddenly came across a huge bulletin board and a thread titled "I lost my virginity at a Soapland." The thread was twenty pages long, and after I read the whole thing, I came to the conclusion that no matter what, you should go to a high-class Soapland! The reason being because the frequency of traumatic incidents that

occur at expensive Soaplands is very low. There was almost zero chance of encountering a terrible monster as described in some posts like "She weighed three times as much as me" and "She was old enough to be my grandma" and "I am way hotter than she is" and "Her personality was terrible" at a high-class Soapland. The stories from people who went to a Soapland costing more than sixty thousand yen were overflowing with praise, and I started to get jealous of how wonderful it sounded. Suddenly I wanted to go to a Soapland really bad! Err, I mean . . . in order to save all those agonizing over this problem, I'll be the guinea pig for this experience. There's no other way! I have to do fieldwork! Plus another reason I have to go to a Soapland is to let out all the various sexual desires that have built up inside of me over these long, lonely years. Why, you ask? Didn't Dr. Freud say sexual repression will make you go crazy?

And didn't Reich say casual sex will solve any problem you have?

And Dazai-san loved brothels, and van Gogh cut off his own ear and sent it as a present to a prostitute, and Nietzsche contracted syphilis after a youthful indiscretion, and the prostitute heroine Sonya from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* was so beautiful yet pitiful with that green shawl around her neck. After combining all of this data, I decided then and there that it was my great responsibility to get up the courage to go to a Soapland!

We young men always torture ourselves over the separation of our emotions and flesh. Therefore, it was a self-evident truth that I had to go to a Soapland. At this rate, it felt like I would go mad. Or perhaps I've been crazy all along. Maybe it's not an exaggeration to say my sexual repression had actually made me crazy. I couldn't concentrate on my work, and all I kept doing was muttering "It's over, it's over"

or "I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die." In other words, I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. The only thing left for this great advice columnist was to cling to those magical words "Go to a Soapland!" And once I trudged through that foreign land, all life's problems would be solved so I, I, I . . . must go to a Soapland!!

However, just then my assistant, Asuka, who was sitting beside me, started reading a fax asking for advice that had just come.

"Oh, two letters asking for advice just came. Hmm, let's see. 'Hello, Takimoto-sensei! I'm a nineteen-year-old college student (female), and I've . . . ' "

Naturally, I ignored my assistant, put on my coat, and ran out into the cold December air. In order to answer anyone's advice, first I had to go to a Soapland. I went to a phone booth by the train station and called the number of a Soapland I had found in advance. I made my reservation in an excited voice.

"Umm, uhhh, I'd like your most expensive service. And umm, uhh, I printed out a coupon so can I get a discount? And umm, uhhh, I'll be there at noon. My name is Takimoto. See you then." *Click!*

After I succeeded in this phone call to a complete stranger, I got on the train with trembling legs, and as the train rumbled on, I pondered. In roughly one hour, I would be in an unfamiliar room with an unfamiliar woman doing very familiar things. Naturally, this was a very hard job for me, and I was curled up into a little ball like a small animal out in the rain. Clearly what I needed then was a casual yet clever joke.

"Umm, this is my first time, so I might have a heart attack in the middle of it, so if that happens, please call an ambulance and save my life!"

All right. That was it.

As long as I opened with a funny joke like that one, everything else was sure to go smoothly. I always carry a joke notebook with me so I can write down all my excellent jokes. After that, I started to mentally prepare myself for the trials and tribulations ahead. I synchronized my mind and body with abdominal breathing and chanted, "This world is only temporary. That is, matter is void, matter is void. . . ." Before long, the train arrived at the JR Uguisudani Station. I waited outside the Fujiya store, and a taxi came to pick me up.

"J-just you wait, my worried little lambs!"

I got in the taxi and offered up a prayer to all those poor lambs who get made fun of. To solve the Soapland problem, I had to answer the big question that was on everybody's minds: whether the Christian idea of duality of the flesh and spirit is true. And once I had the definitive answer in my hands, I would become an advice columnist guru! Finally, the taxi arrived at the high-class Soapland. I was shown to the waiting room and continued my Zen-like abdominal breathing to preserve my mental focus. I pulled Daisetsu Suzuki's *Zen Meditation Anthology* (new edition) from my bag and started reading. Obviously, I don't remember anything I read. My heart was thumping wildly in my chest. A few minutes later, an employee took me to the elevator. Inside the elevator, another girl was waiting for me, and she held on to my arm, pushed her chest against me, and I thought my heart would explode, but then I realized this was the time for my aforementioned joke. I casually took my joke notebook from my pocket and read the joke I had written down, stammering the whole way through. Amazingly, the girl laughed. However, I got even more nervous as she led me to the playroom. My eyes couldn't focus, and my whole body was trembling. It was almost like I was exhibiting symptoms

of a drug overdose, but the unfamiliar girl gently held my hand and whispered into my ear, "You don't need to be nervous. This is a place to relax, so just take it easy, okay?"

And not only that, but if the world were a village of only a hundred people, she would easily be the most beautiful woman in the world. She's really worth eighty thousand yen! I paid with a credit card, but this is really worth it! That's what I get for spending five hours on the Internet researching the best Soapland! At some point as I was thinking all those things, both the girl and I had become completely naked! Oh no! I'm in trouble! The bath! And the mat! Ahhh, i-is this really happening?!

Unfortunately, the two hours I spent with her flew by. (From that bitter-sounding sentence, I'm sure you can all guess how my experience went? I can't go into details because *Faust* isn't a sex magazine!)

Anyway, I, Takimoto, bowed deeply as the girl saw me out and then escaped into the bright afternoon, my steps light. I narrowed my eyes in the bright sunlight and lit a cigarette when I thought of something.

Kenzō Kitakawa was absolutely correct. He is the one and true advice columnist. Because all young men are often troubled by metaphysical problems. In other words, I'm living, but what does being alive mean?

Those young men fighting against those problems with logical thoughts as their weapons are just like Don Quixote with spear in hand! They're manly and heroic. Wasn't it Yukio Mishima who said a requirement of being a hero is being stupid? They are heroes in that sense of the word.

However, we must all become adults one day. Throw all your philosophical thoughts out the window and boldly run alone into this complex, confusing, yet beautiful world! All

you young men, stop worrying and go to a Soapland! All of you, go to a Soapland! If you go to a Soapland, all your problems will be solved right there on the spot, so go to a Soapland as soon as you can! Go tomorrow! And ponder the immortal words of Bruce Lee: "Don't think, feel!"

But that's when it happened.

"Um, Tatsuhiko . . . about those letters asking for advice . . ."

I saw my assistant, Asuka, shyly hiding behind a telephone pole by the Soapland.

Apparently, she had followed me there.

She ran up to me and held out the letters in her right hand.

Of course, I didn't have an ounce of fear in me. At that point, I was thoroughly confident I could solve any question asked of me. "I'm a *hikikomori.* What should I do?" "Shut up, stop worrying, and go to a Soapland!" "I can't get a girlfriend." "Go to a Soapland!" "I don't know what I want to do with my life." "Go to a Soapland!" "I don't have any frie—" "Soapland!" "I'm being bullied at scho—" "Soapland!" "I'm devia—" "Soapland!" "Soapland!" "Soapland!" "Soapland!" Just like that, I already knew the answer to any question!

However, after I skimmed the letters Asuka gave me, I was shocked.

I held my head in my hands.

"Should she tell K-kun how she feels?"

"Go to a Soapland. . . ."

"She can't get married to someone who doesn't have a job. Should she break up with him?"

"G-go to a Soapland . . . !"

"T-Tatsuhiko, get hold of yourself! These are women asking for advice! Soaplands don't have anything to do with it. You need to give them some advice!!"

I ran through all the events of my twenty-four years over and over again in my head. But even if I ran a magnifying glass over every instant of my life, I couldn't find even one milligram of advice for real love. It seemed like my dazzling experience at the Soapland had been a wasted effort. . . .



I shook off Asuka and shouted, "Damn it! Everyone just go to a Soapland!"

"I told you this doesn't have anything to do with Soaplands!"

"J-just shut up and stop worrying and go to a Soapland!"

"A female office worker is asking advice on whether or not she

I'm a twenty-one-year-old office worker. My boyfriend is an indoor person, not to the extent that Takimoto-sensei is, though. We've never had a date outside. Plus he doesn't work, so he doesn't have much money. I tried inviting him to go see a movie, but he said he didn't have any money so he didn't go with me. He always says things like "I'm gonna make it *big* someday," but I definitely don't see that reflected in his actions, and I feel very uneasy. Takimoto-sensei, what should I do? —K.N., Tokyo

Hello, Takimoto-sensei! I'm a nineteen-year-old college student (female), and I've been sort of going out with a classmate for about a year now. But I like someone else. It's his friend K-kun. Instead of going out on dates ourselves, my boyfriend and I usually go out with a big group of friends and K-kun is usually there. I've gradually developed feelings for him. But in order to tell K-kun how I feel, I'd obviously have to break up with my boyfriend. But I don't know if I like K-kun enough to go that far. I also don't want to break up the group. . . . Takimoto-san, please give me some advice!
—K.H., Tokyo

should break up with her unemployed boyfriend! What do Soaplands have to do with that?!"

"Sh-sh-sh-shut up! Anyway, just go to a Soapland! Go go go! Nineteen-year-old office workers and the lame guy who's tired of his girlfriend, and K-kun who's so dreamy, and the unemployed-piece-of-trash guy—all of you, all of you, go to a Soapland today! GGGGGGGOOOOOOOOOooo! Anyway, what's the deal with this advice? Who asks advice of someone like me who has zero experience in love? Are you guys making fun of me? Are you all laughing at me? You're all in this together, aren't you? I'm right, aren't I?!"

Asuka kicked me in the head. "Now I have no choice! I'll provide answers in your place!"

Then she stepped on my head with her right foot and slapped me on the back.

"Now, the first one! 'Should I break up with my unemployed boyfriend?' No matter what, you have to break up with him. If you keep prolonging this relationship, you'll be making a big mistake! What business does a good-for-nothing, unemployed piece of trash have going out with a girl anyway? Just look at this guy (Takimoto). One of his favorite sayings is, 'One day I'll make it big, just wait!' But do you see any women around him? He uses his depression as a springboard and is somehow feeding himself by being a novelist. But when you have someone you love, the power you get from depression fades away! So guys who are stuck in dreams should be alone, and no matter how much you love him, think with your head and not with your heart and dump him! No matter what!"

"J-j-just go to a Soapland, a high-class Soapland. . . ."

"Shut up! Stay on the ground and listen to my advice! Now here's the second one! 'I met someone better than my boyfriend. Should I break up with my current boyfriend and

tell K-kun how I feel?' Hmm, this is a tough problem. But if you think about it carefully, the answer is clear. The main thing to remember is that you need to make your own decisions about your life. No matter if you choose your boyfriend or K-kun, there will come a time when you're lying in bed crying with regret over whatever decision you made. But that's what life is all about. So you need to decide which man you want yourself! And then take responsibility for that decision! And no matter what mistakes you make or regrets you have, there will be a bright future waiting for you someday! But first just do it yourself!"

"N-no, go to a Soapland, Soapland!"

"Are you still saying that, you piece of crap? Die!"

"Ugghhh!!

After Asuka kicked me again, I passed out, and when I woke up, I was in lying in bed in my own apartment. I guessed from the pain in my back that Asuka had dragged me there.

I looked beside my bed and saw Asuka rummaging in a plastic bag, but I thought she was going to kick me again, so I guarded myself.

But she didn't. She looked down at me and whispered, "You're finally awake, huh? Here, put this on your head. It's an ice pack."

"Th-thanks."

"Hey, Tatsuhiko . . . I wonder if my advice was good enough. I've been thinking about it, but I wonder if I really have the right to give advice to others."

"D-don't be stupid! Didn't you say so yourself? Whatever mistakes you make or regrets you have are because of the choices you made, and one day a bright future will come? You should believe in your own words. That's all we advice columnists can do."

"Y-you're right. Well, I'm going home now. If the column isn't canceled, call me for the next one. Also . . . be good."

Then Asuka left.

I sighed. I crossed my arms and pondered. It was true that we were powerless. Maybe I'm the one who's a failure as an advice columnist? I don't have all the answers, so all I can do is offer up a prayer.

Yes. The guy who plans on hitting it big someday will get dumped and be sad. The girl who dumped him will be sad, too. The nineteen-year-old whose heart is wavering toward K-kun and everyone else will have regrets one day.

"But even still . . . I pray that all of them find happiness. The boyfriend, K-kun, the good-for-nothing guy who hopes to make it big, please let everyone find happiness . . . ," I prayed as I faced the setting sun.

And after that I decided to start saving for my next trip to the Soapland.

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OTAKU *VS.* OTAKU *BUSINESS*

Kaichiro Morikawa

Photographs by the author
Translated by Andria Cheng

In Japan, the *Faust* magazine addresses itself to a very specific readership: *otaku.* Though it's also an honorific second-person pronoun, used as a slang term, the word *otaku* in Japanese broadly refers to a person with an obsessively pursued interest; that interest can be hobby or topic, ranging from music to manga to martial arts to computer games and so on. But in this essay, references to otaku culture limit the term to obsessive fans of a certain kind of pop culture (manga, anime, video games, and so on). The word *otaku* has become common currency among American manga and anime fans, who have developed their own version of otaku culture. But in Japan, otaku have their own anxious and fraught status. At once maligned as social deviants, and, in more recent years, cherished as pop culture icons in popular films such as *Train Man,* but always targeted as a lucrative consumer demographic, otaku have an unusual place in Japanese society. "Otaku vs. Otaku Business" analyzes the evolution of the otaku-driven licensed product industry—and the quiet changes in otaku tastes brought about by the growing spotlight on the otaku subculture.

Kaichiro Morikawa was born in 1971. His books include an architectural account of how Akihabara—the Tokyo neigh-

borhood that's become the unofficial headquarters of *otaku* culture—came into existence, *Shuto no Tanjou—Moeru Toshi Akihabara.* He made the news in 2004 when he served as producer for the *Venice Biennale* Japan Homes exhibition, the youngest person ever to serve as commissioner.

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Dismantling the Character Business

Ever since *Spirited Away* won an Academy Award, the government has started paying more attention to the domestic anime industry.

Since the end of Word War II, Japan has relied on heavy manufacturing industries such as steel and automobiles to integrate and support foreign exchange. At the same time, domestically produced manga, anime, and video games have



been under attack by parents' groups and other critics. The administration showed its support for these groups by imposing special taxes on anime studios and game companies. But after an animated film won the Academy Award and proved to be profitable, overseas sales of Japanese anime shot to more than 520 billion yen and the export value tripled. Then the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry made a surprising move: It created a special government branch devoted to the "new market" of anime. Anime became a hot stock in the export industry, and there even appeared a magazine called *Nikkei Characters!*

There is a reason why the magazine was called *Nikkei Characters!* and not *Nikkei Anime.* Box-office sales make up only a very small fraction of that 520 billion–yen figure, with video and DVD sales contributing a little less than 10 percent. The remaining 90 percent came from income from merchandise and licensing, or "character goods"—products based on anime characters. So the focus is not exactly on the anime product itself but on selling copyrighted licenses based on anime characters. It may be said that instead of achieving status as a culture object, anime has become an industrial cash cow. But there's more.

The creator of the beloved series Gundam acknowledges that, like many other shows, the show is basically a thirty-minute commercial for merchandise. But are copyrighted products based on characters from hit series such as Gundam and Eva losing their power domestically, much as Disney products have? And will they begin to lose power overseas as well? If one examines current trends in the otaku cultural sphere—which has its foundations in domestically produced anime—one realizes that that may well be the outcome.

Even today, one can look on convenience store shelves and

find huge quantities of anime merchandise sold right alongside food products. So how can it be said that the licensing business is in a slump? Last year, out of all those figures lined up on the shelves, a certain product appeared and blew all sales records for licensed material out of the water. It was the product that became *the* hot topic in all the newspapers: "LiccaVign."

Everyone is familiar with the Licca-chan dolls made by Takara. The dress-up doll has been sold for more than thirty-five years now, with sales of more than fifty million units. A major toy company, Kaiyodo, approached Takara with the idea of making Licca-chan into a figure to be sold in convenience stores, posed in various scenes, or "Licca Vignettes," called "LiccaVign" for short.

So far, the history of LiccaVign is no different from that of the development of any other traditional copyrighted material. However, Kaiyodo didn't base its Licca-chan figures on the appearance of the original Licca-chan doll, nor was it based on any other anime figure design. Instead, it produced her Lolipu merchandise with a new tagline: "*moe* factor." According to the package, the target age was "fifteen and up."

Immediately after the figures went on sale, each convenience store maintained updates on how many it had in stock on its website. Those who raced to buy the figures were most certainly not the same people who had played with the Licca-chan dress-up doll. Kaiyodo merely exploited the well-known Licca-chan brand as a means of increasing sales. If Kaiyodo had named it "Lolipu Figure," its sales might have been unremarkable, but *Licca-chan* is a name any convenience store manager would know. But what is important to note is that consumers did not buy the figures simply because they were a Licca-chan product.

From Licensed Character Goods to Unlicensed Goods

After the surprising popularity of LiccaVign, another extreme product was announced. It was called "*Shūkan watashi no oniichan*" (My Brother Weekly). Each figure was of a young girl in Lolipu style featured in different *moe* situations and came with a booklet. A new one was distributed every week to bookstores nationwide. At the time this issue was published, the fourth one was on sale.

What is groundbreaking about this product is that it refined the idea of LiccaVign and did not use any copyrighted character. It appealed to the otaku demographic because of its *moe* factor and was a fairly high-risk venture, as several tens of thousands of the painted figures had been produced.

The man behind "*Shūkan watashi no oniichan*" was the cover designer for the manga series *Azumanga Daioh,* Hideki Satomi of Clover Studios. He outlined his idea for the product in his column in the magazine *Dengeki Moeoh,* and it soon became a reality. However, another idea he mentioned in the article was an interesting design for Gal Game Land, a theme park featuring all the situations one would find in a gal game: bumping into a beautiful transfer student as you round the corner; coming home, opening the door, and catching your sister changing; and so on. Hiroshi Tamaru presented a similar idea in his manga series *Loveyan,* which ran in Kodansha's *Afternoon* magazine: a "Glasses Café," which would be set up to look like a classroom with the employees being girls wearing glasses—a simulated classroom experience. Events inspired by this idea have actually been held. These plans were vague, between fact and fiction, but real maid cafés have been open in Akihabara for many years now. The waitresses wear the classic-style maid uniforms

made popular by otaku media. It sounds like a simple idea, but these cafés have enjoyed such success that there are usually lines of people waiting to get inside. Café Mailish, opened by T ZONE, is driving other computer stores out of business as it opens new branch stores in Kichijōji.

Another example of using an uncopyrighted "*moe* character" to appeal to the otaku demographic is the novelty reference book *Moeru Eitango ~ Moetan~* (*Moeru* English Vocabulary ~ *Moe*Vocab~), which flew off the shelves. A magazine called *Lily Sisters,* which focused on young lesbian relationships, was launched after being inspired by the popularity of *Mother Mary Is Watching.*

The point of these examples is that they did not use copyrighted characters one could find at Disneyland or anywhere else in the world but featured uncopyrighted characters appealing to otaku because of their *moe* factor. It used to be the only uncopyrighted materials that sold were *dōjinshi,* but these new products mentioned are now sold at convenience stores and bookstores nationwide.

Using uncopyrighted characters is not simply a means to keep costs low. It may perhaps be fueled by the growing focus on anime characters as a business: It's a way to preserve the otaku cultural sphere's autonomy. I'm sure the incident of Takara's trying to trademark the Giko Cat, created by an anonymous poster on 2chan, a popular message board, is still fresh in your minds, as is the wave of protests that followed. Many *moe* illustrators gather on a 2chan board and draw "*moe* character personifications" of every object imaginable.

Perhaps this can be defined using Hiroshi Azuma's concept of "database consumption." As explained by Jean-François Lyotard's "grand narrative" theory, the otaku demographic has become the targeted consumer. The otaku's changing

viewpoint, and this may sound like an exaggeration, can be said to be the otaku's means of avoiding globalization. Just as the grand narrative was from a Western-centric historical viewpoint. But, actually, in modern times, the West is planted in Japan's "grand narrative" and has continued to fuel the character goods business.

If Japan attempts to expand the character goods business overseas, it should learn from the methods of otaku. Both efforts are closely related. In my opinion, trivial matters such as copyright usage should no longer be an issue.

BONUS FEATURES

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TALK SESSION

On the Occasion of the Publication of the U.S. Edition of Faust

NISIOISIN, Otsuichi, Yûya Satô, and Tatsuhiko Takimoto

Translated by Andria Cheng

In this free-flowing "talk session"—sort of the conversational equivalent of a jam session—*Faust* authors NISIOISIN, Otsuichi, Yûya Satô, and Tatsuhiko Takimoto (all of whom are represented by work in this anthology) discourse freely on their feelings about the American release of *Faust.* Along the way, they discuss such varied issues as translating Salinger, assigning literary value to novels, and their own influences as writers. The conversation was recorded in the KOBOCAFÉ—the Kodansha BOX café, a theme café in Tokyo's Nakano Broadway devoted to *Faust* and books published under the Kodansha BOX imprint.

The conversation was moderated by Katsushi Ota, the editor in chief of *Faust* and one of Japan's most prominent fiction editors. Born in 1972, in the town of Kurashiki-shi, Okayama prefecture, he joined Kodansha, Japan's largest publisher, in 1995. His first assignments included editing shojo manga, but he then moved to Kodansha's literary department as an editor of mystery novels. In 2003, as part of Kodansha's 100th anniversary celebration, Mr. Ota was awarded Kodansha's top honor when he won the Kodansha New Magazine

Prize. When Mr. Ota launched *Faust* magazine in the same year, he became Kodansha's youngest-ever editor in chief. *Faust*'s eclectic mix of genres—including literary and popular fiction and comics—and innovative editorial style has made it one of the most notable and influential magazines in Japan. In 2006, Mr. Ota launched his newest publishing program, the Kodansha BOX line, which he hopes to bring to readers worldwide.

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SATÔ: Satô, Takimoto, Otsuichi, Nisio . . . all of us together again.

TAKIMOTO: [*heartfelt*] Thank God we all survived!

SATÔ: Ha-ha-ha! Thanks for starting us off in style, Takimoto-san.

OTA: Five years since *Faust* first came out. I'd like to thank all of you; it may have taken five years, but *Faust* is finally coming out in America. Del Rey is publishing the U.S. edition; Del Rey is an imprint of one of the largest publishing companies in the world, Random House. This is the imprint that first published Heinlein's *The Door into Summer.*

SATÔ: *The Door into Summer*? Wow, that really makes it clear how fantastic this is.

OTA: When *Faust* came out in Taiwan, I brought Otsuichi-san to Taipei. When it came out in Korea, Takimoto-san to Seoul. And now it's out in America—Satô-san, what do you say?

SATÔ: Huh!? I've never been overseas before! [*laughs*]

OTA: Satô-san's story "Gray-Colored Diet Coke" is excerpted in volume two.

SATÔ: It feels far less real than the Taiwanese or Korean editions. I can't seem to wrap my mind around the idea of Westerners reading my work . . . so I get extra excited.

TAKIMOTO: Will Americans like us?

NISIO: You're all pessimists.

OTA: I hate to admit it, but this is the reality of Japanese literature. We can safely say that *Faust* is getting a U.S. edition because we have people such as Yun Koga-san and Takeshi Obata-san illustrating the stories. I understand that this is the only way a Japanese novel can get published in America. Americans don't view Japanese literary awards as any more significant than literary awards from Jakarta or Myanmar.

SATÔ: So our novels are basically riding the wave of Japanese manga and anime and games?

OTA: Without a doubt. But this is only the beginning! After all, nobody has been publishing English editions of books by young Japanese writers. This is really important. Takimoto-san, Nisio-san, Satô-san, Otsuichi-san—you're all on the cutting edge, bringing the Japanese literature of your generation to the world.

SATÔ: I understand your point, but it just doesn't feel real.

TAKIMOTO: Is it going to work?

SATÔ: Is no one here at all optimistic? [*laughs*] But I really don't know what it's like in America. In Taiwan, they were also Asians, so it was easier to imagine.

OTA: What about you, Otsuichi-san? "F-sensei's Pocket" is in the first volume.

OTSU: If other works of Japanese literature have to start from nothing in America, then *Faust* has an advantage; Obata-san's illustrations give it some name recognition. But do Americans know Doraemon*?

OTA: Not at all! They've footnoted everything—from *F-sensei* to *Pocket.*

OTSU: Now I'm really scared. [*winces*]

OTA: Nisio-san's "Magical Girl Risuka" is in the second volume.

NISIO: They seem to think I write novelizations. *"Death Note," "xxxHOLiC"* . . .

OTA: *Kubikiri Cycle* is also out in English.

SATÔ: The Zaregoto series in the USA! Amazing!

OTA: This year is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the word *otaku.* A quarter of a century later, your books are coming

**Doraemon* A popular manga and anime, and a major pop culture phenomenon in Japan.

out in America thanks to *otaku.* Now that I mention it, I'm the only one here significantly older than the word *otaku.* How do you want Americans to see your works?

SATÔ: I guess I want them reading it as cutting-edge Eastern literature. If we're leaving Japan, we might as well do it with style. I am curious about the footnotes. . . .

NISIO: I'm getting questions about what the words I made up mean.

SATÔ: That would be hard to explain.

NISIO: You have to try and explain what the joke is, which is really hard. I was depressed for three days. [*laughs*]

SATÔ: You get depressed easily. [*winces*] But we didn't write this stuff with foreign translations in mind. They end up being very Japanese. . . . *F-Sensei* is a household word in Japan but needs a footnote in other countries.

TAKIMOTO: If we tried to write for people who don't speak Japanese, we'd end up explaining a lot of things like that.

SATÔ: Sounds hard to do naturally—just cram all these explanations into the text. Not that any of us are writing like Stephen King.

NISIO: What does it feel like to be King?

SATÔ: King writes for readers all over the world.

OTA: You mentioned Stephen King, but what American writers do you like? Otsuichi-san?

OTSU: I like Torey Hayden-san. I recommend her a lot. Some of my readers read her, and they say I write a bit like her.

OTA: That is interesting. We might hear things from readers of the U.S. *Faust:* "Yûya Satô writes like this American author!"

SATÔ: They might step across the boundaries of time and connect me to a writer who isn't well known in Japan.

OTA: Who's your favorite writer?

SATÔ: Salinger is always in my heart!

EVERYONE: Salinger is always in my heart! [*laughter*]

SATÔ: I talk about Salinger way too much. People think I don't read anything else.

OTA: What do you all like about Salinger?

NISIO: Hard to really explain. Japanese fans of Salinger roughly split into those who like Salinger himself and those who like Takashi Nozaki-san's translation.

SATÔ: The translator problem? There's Nozaki-san, and some people also like Motoyuki Shibata-san. And now Haruki Murakami-san is translating them again.

NISIO: When *The Catcher in the Rye* was first translated, they changed the title. *A Dangerous Age,* wasn't it? But the text didn't fit that title. I think the audience that bought it with that name and the audience that bought Haruki Murakami-

san's version [*which put the English words in katakana rather than translating them] are totally different. Koga-san and Obata-san's illustrations might have universal appeal, but words don't work that way. In a sense, it's like watching a movie dubbed.

SATÔ: Novelists do all their work with words, and translation involves changing every one of those words. And this time it isn't kanji but the alphabet!

NISIO: When it ends up with all letters, it's like an adaptation—translating is like making a novel into an anime.

SATÔ: I think we view translations of foreign works the same way. Japanese readers are very picky about translations.

NISIO: Like the Sherlock Holmes stories. The nuances are completely different depending on the translator.

OTA: Makes it hard for you pioneers. But I'm sure the translators for the U.S. edition of *Faust* will do a great job.

SATÔ: If I found someone I could trust with my work, I'd think a bit more about what readers overseas would make of my work.

NISIO: Try writing for the world, like King?

OTA: What about you, Takimoto-san?

TAKIMOTO: The first thing I ever read written by an American was *Dragonlance.* Like a predecessor of Japanese light

novels. It was a novel based on the tabletop RPG Dungeons and Dragons, and I still reread it every now and then.

SATÔ: When did you read that?

TAKIMOTO: Fifth grade.

SATÔ: Gosh. I wasn't even reading novels yet. . . .

OTSU: Me either.

TAKIMOTO: It may have influenced me more than any other book. The world of swords and sorcery is so cool.

NISIO: Has anyone tried to read a book in the original?

SATÔ: Not me. Can't get through a single line without a dictionary.

NISIO: I've read the translations, loved them, and decided to give the original a go, but I usually don't get far.

SATÔ: But you tried.

NISIO: I have . . . which is why I think Nozaki-san's version really defines Salinger for me. I'm a casual fan, so I like *Catcher* best. I'd like to read all the different translations of it.

SATÔ: I see.

NISIO: You know how Japanese people often find the character names in foreign novels hard to remember? Does that

work the other way around? Can they remember the kanji names we've used?

SATÔ: Kanji is nothing like the alphabet. But Russian novels are read in Japan, too. Anyway, we're on the front lines, so we have to try!

OTA: Right, someday some other Japanese author will finally conquer American readers! [*laughs*]

SATÔ: Up to us to break ground. [*laughs*]

OTA: That is the sad lot of the pioneer. [*laughs*] But all kidding aside, thank you all for sticking with *Faust* these five years; helping promote it overseas, helping with the literary camp in Okinawa—that sort of madness is the true appeal of *Faust*! Other than the fact that we're all working on it. [*laughs*]

NISIO: I care only because Satô-san's writing for it.

SATÔ: There you go again, babbling like an idiot. I think the madness makes *Faust,* and *Faust* makes the madness. I hope we can keep that from being diluted in the American edition. Rise above the difficulties of the translation; keep the madness firmly on display. If we do that, I think the Americans will understand what we've been trying to do.

OTSU: What I like about *Faust*? I like how it's a literary magazine with ties to *otaku* culture. I hope the Americans find that interesting as well.

OTA: You once said you liked *Faust* because it didn't care if you did a mystery or sci-fi. As the editor, I found that really

encouraging. At the time, there were no magazines that didn't specialize in one genre or another. Last year, when I went to America, I met a writer named Deb Aoki-san, and she said *Faust* was the *otaku* version of *The New Yorker*.

SATÔ: And that's a good thing? Oh, right, *otaku* isn't that negative a word in America.

OTA: I thought it was a pretty good catchphrase.

TAKIMOTO: The value of the novels has nothing to do with the magazine; you can just read the novels. So what value does the magazine have? That comes from the context, from what novels you package together. In Japanese, some novels are given the impressive name "literature" and function less as something for young people than as an impressive bit of décor for people whose thoughts have already calcified. With novels placed in such an absurd position, novels written for people who just want to read novels are dismissed as pulp fiction or, if they're targeted at younger readers, as light novels—both treated as worthless, as not worth thinking about seriously. I think referring to novels reverentially as literature is strange enough, but it is equally weird to lump other novels under the term *light novel* and treat them with contempt, as if they had no value. I think *Faust* was the first publication to present a package to young readers that didn't puff itself up as literature and didn't settle for being dismissed as something for *otaku*.

NISIO: I think the editor and the writers came into this with a sort of amateur mentality, not really thinking things through. If "amateur mentality" is hard to understand,

then . . . we didn't approach it in a businesslike fashion. Certainly not with volume one.

OTA: The Okinawa literary camp in volume four was also the good side of our amateur mentality.

NISIO: Including Ota-san, do any of us want to do that again? No, right?

TAKIMOTO: I'd go. I enjoy that sort of thing.

OTSU: I might go.

SATÔ: You don't sound enthusiastic.

NISIO: If I'd asked at the time, only Kitayama-san would have said yes. [*winces*]

SATÔ: The next one should be with writers who debuted after us.

NISIO: Professional writers shouldn't be planning this sort of thing. [*laughs*] But I think that sort of thing is what makes *Faust* so fascinating.

SATÔ: At any rate, I hope people read *Faust* and join us in the *Faust*-ian madness.

OTA: Someday, we'll all go to America together! We'll have to work hard to get there! Thank you all for coming today.

(Recorded May 2008, in the KOBOCAFÉ, Tokyo)

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LOST IN TRANSLATION!?

Torn Between Japanese and English

Yukari Shiina and
Andrew Cunningham

Faust has presented an extraordinary challenge even for the talented translators who have been involved in creating Del Rey Manga's editions. With a wide range of authors, experimenting with a variety of literary styles and genres, *Faust* demands a very real artistry from its translators. This piece represents a conversation between Yukari Shiina, a Japanese translator, and Andrew Cunningham, an American translator, about the joys and sorrows of translation, from the trials of translating humor to the mixed emotions brought about by translating a favorite author.

Yukari Shiina, a translator and columnist, is the manager of the *Eigo de! America Manga* blog (the website address is http://d.hatena.ne.jp/ceena), and the founder of an agency whose goal is to introduce comic artists from all over the world to Japan and set them up for publication. She has become a key player in bringing world comics into Japan.

Andrew Cunningham is one of America's leading translators of manga and light novels. His credits include *Death Note: Another Note* by NISIOISIN, *The Case of the Dragonslayer* by Kouhei Kadono, *Parasyte* by Hitoshi Iwaaki, and many stories in the U.S. edition of *Faust*.

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How would you define the act of translating? What are your policies as a translator?

Y: Translating is communicating the heart of the work to a reader in a different language. My policy is to offer a translation that sounds natural and conveys the atmosphere of the work—not to mention it must be a faithful translation.

A: This is exactly what I hoped you would say, and very much my feelings on the subject. We have to re-create the original work in our own language, and there's a real art to that. Speaking both languages well isn't enough; you have to be very good at your own language or it won't sound natural and you won't be able to match the original writing style.

What things about translation do you wish more people understood?

Y: I think that it's up to readers to decide on what is good translation and what is not. I sometimes wish, however, that more people understood that there are no right answers in translation.

A: I remember when I first started learning Japanese, I would hear a word I knew, and the translation wouldn't match. That used to upset me, and I'm sure I assumed it wasn't a good translation. But I was ignoring the context of the line. One book I translated had a character enter a scene saying "Hayaku" to her husband, but I felt that translating that di-

rectly as "Hurry up" didn't work; it made her sound as if she were nagging her husband, when the Japanese line didn't. So I had to write a new line to preserve the original feel.

The other thing I wish people understood is that the translator is not the same as the author. Some of the books I've translated have very badly written fan translations, and I am worried that people will go read some of the fan translations before deciding to buy the book and assume the writing in the book is bad. I promise my translations are better.

What are the best things about the job?

Y: By doing translation, I feel I would be of help in that readers of different languages can read works that they can't read without the translation I do.

A: Exactly! I've been very lucky—most of the books I've translated have been by authors I was already reading. NISIOISIN, Otsuichi, Otaro Maijo, Kouhei Kadono, Keiichi Sigsawa, Coda Gakuto, Kazuki Sakuraba, Hitoshi Iwaaki—I was a fan of every one of these writers before I started translating them, and I've been able to help bring their work to English speakers.

What are the worst things about the job?

Y: Mistranslation is the last thing I should do and I want to do.

A: Right, the downside to caring about the books you translate is that you put even more pressure on yourself to do a good job.

Y: This is a little bit beside the point, but I feel tortured as the deadline for my job is approaching, but at the same time I'm happy that I have the deadline. I understand well that the more time you take on your translation, the better it gets. If it were not for the deadline, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from rechecking my translation forever.

A: I think I'm the opposite; if it weren't for deadlines, I'd never do any work in the first place. Deadlines force me to get a certain amount of work done every day.

How can writers make your job easier?

Y: If writers don't have many puns or cultural matters in their works, it would make my job easier. Puns in particular make translation difficult, since, as you can tell, they are deeply connected to languages.

A: Please do not use sound effects, because English is very bad at them. I suspect this is not going to change anytime soon, sadly. Maybe we'll all have to get more creative with them in English. The only other thing I can think of is accidentally funny names. One book I translated had a character whose name in English is spelled "China." Fortunately, the book was a comedy, so it didn't matter too much that the characters were constantly talking about "saving China." If it had been a serious drama, that could have ruined it.

What kinds of things do you have the most trouble translating into Japanese?

Y: Jokes are sometimes very difficult to translate. In many cases, jokes imply cultural things that people of different cultures have a hard time understanding.

A: And some jokes really take advantage of what one language can do and will never be as funny in another language, even if the meaning translates smoothly.

One problem English creates is that it doesn't like to use the same word too many times in a row. Japanese doesn't seem to have that problem. If a story uses the same word too many times, I run out of options and have to reach for a thesaurus.

Y: I think you are right about that—I also think that the Japanese do not care about the redundancy of words as much as English speakers do. It reminds me of one thing—in dialogue, it seems to me that North American culture uses more sarcasm. For example, you say "great" when you think exactly the opposite. I usually translate it according to the personality of the characters.

A: It's a common myth that Japanese doesn't have sarcasm. But I've definitely seen it used any number of times; Hiroyuki Morioka (*Crest of the Stars*), in particular, uses a lot of sarcasm.

Have you ever translated something that made you jealous?

Y: No. I've translated something I admire very much, though. I have never felt jealous of them. To me, the jobs of writers/artists and translators are very different. Writers/artists establish their original worlds, while translators try to get close to the worlds that writers/artists established.

A: I was in the screenwriting program in college and wanted to be a writer, but I was never happy with the plots of my scripts. Translating is all the parts of writing that I'm good at,

but someone else has created the story. But because I used to write, I am a little jealous of Ryohgo Narita (*Baccano!*)—his books are exactly the kind of story I was trying to write. I hope I get to translate him someday.

How protective do you feel about the works you've translated? How emotionally invested do you get?

Y: I've been emotionally involved in the works I translated. I'm translating *Megatokyo* now. The more I translate it, the more I love it. I can really relate to almost all the characters in the works.

A: I'm actually worried that if I ever meet an author I've translated, I'll find myself asking them lots of detailed questions about things they've long since forgotten. But with some authors, you have to pay attention to every detail or you'll miss something important.

What is it that you care most about in translating for Faust? Could you give us some examples?

Y: As I said, I'm translating *Megatokyo* for the latest Japanese issue of *Faust* and for the book from the Kodansha BOX imprint. What I care most about in translating it is to understand each character's personality and to create an appropriate way of talking in Japanese for them. It is because there are tons of ways of talking in Japanese colloquial expressions, and I think that the way of talking very much reveals the talkers' personalities. I asked the author, Mr. Fred Gallagher, many questions about what he thinks about the characters' way of talking in Japanese. He suggested that I read some manga and watch some anime, and I

find them really helpful in establishing each character's way of talking. I really appreciate his helping me so much.

A: Japanese often uses much more distinctive speech patterns. I tend to think that less is more in English; I rarely come in with set ideas about how a character will talk. Instead, I try to imagine what their voice sounds like. Their personality usually comes out naturally. The stories I translated for *Faust* are all written in very different writing styles, but I didn't decide ahead of time what style I wanted to use; I just started translating and trusted that the writing style would come through naturally.

I think I cared most about doing the stories justice; as I said, I'm a fan of all these writers, so I wanted to make sure the stories had the same impact in English that they had on me in Japanese. It was very important that I capture the writer's voice.

What is it that you have the most trouble with in translating a novel for* Faust? *Could you give us some examples?

Y: As you can easily assume, it is the LEET speech in *Megatokyo.* It took me a long time to figure out what is the best way of translating the LEET speech into Japanese. I consulted the editor in chief of *Faust,* Ota-san, about it as well. It is now up to the readers to judge whether or not my decision is right.

A: "Drill Hole in My Brain" is the single hardest thing I have ever translated. Usually, I find first-person narration and colloquial writing styles easier, but Otaro Maijo uses a lot of very complicated run-on sentences, and I was very worried

about forgetting to include all the pieces—every sentence was like a jigsaw puzzle. And there are really two narrators. In Japanese, you can tell which personality is in charge because the first-person pronoun changes from *boku* to *ore,* but in English this is much more subtle. Again, I didn't consciously decide to do this, but I ended up having the older character swear a lot more and use much coarser sexual terms.


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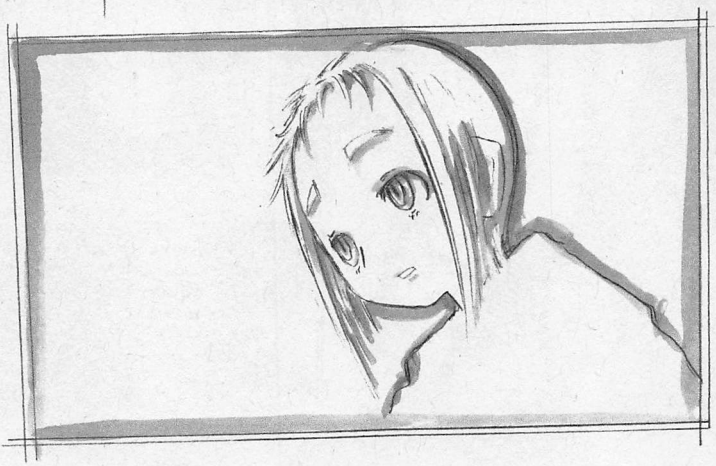




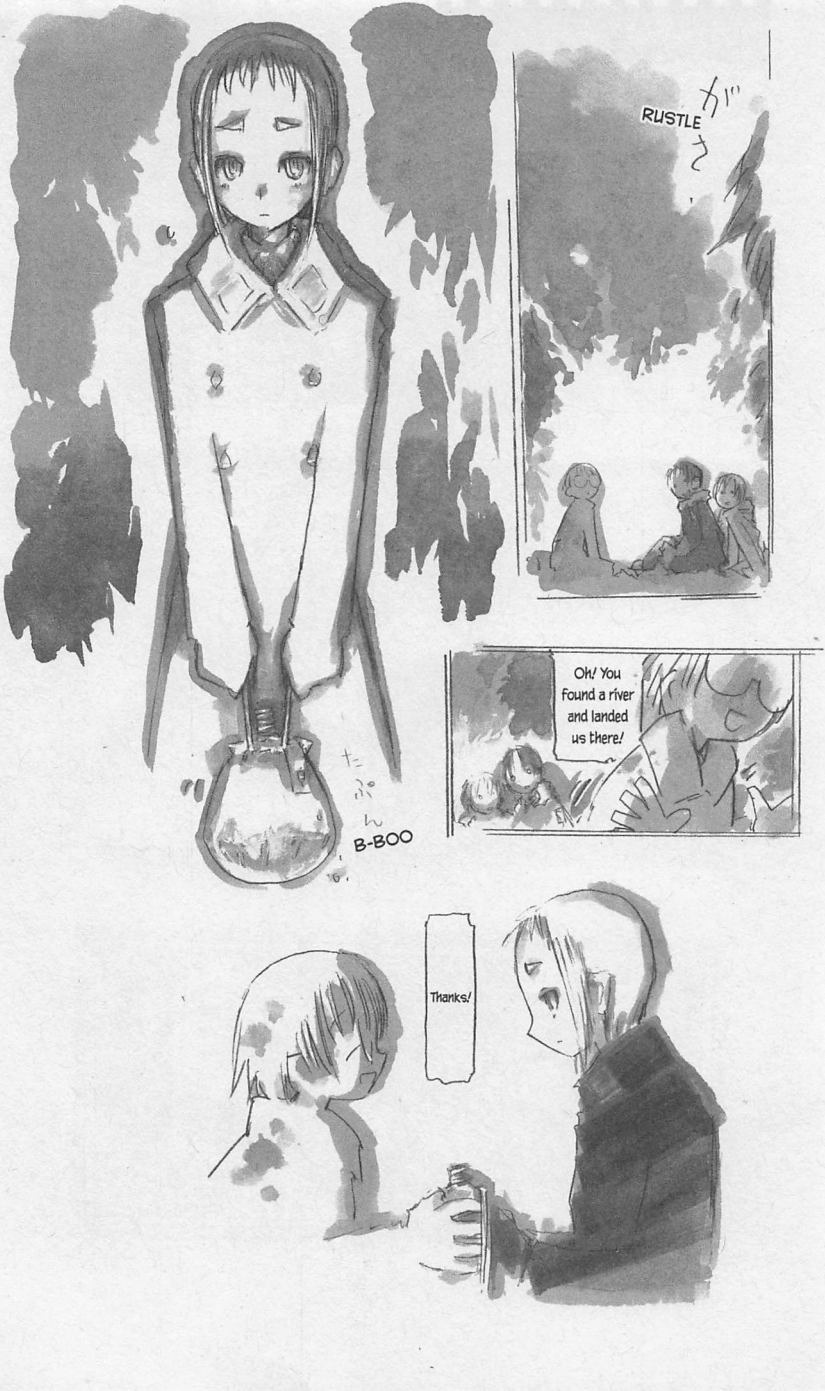

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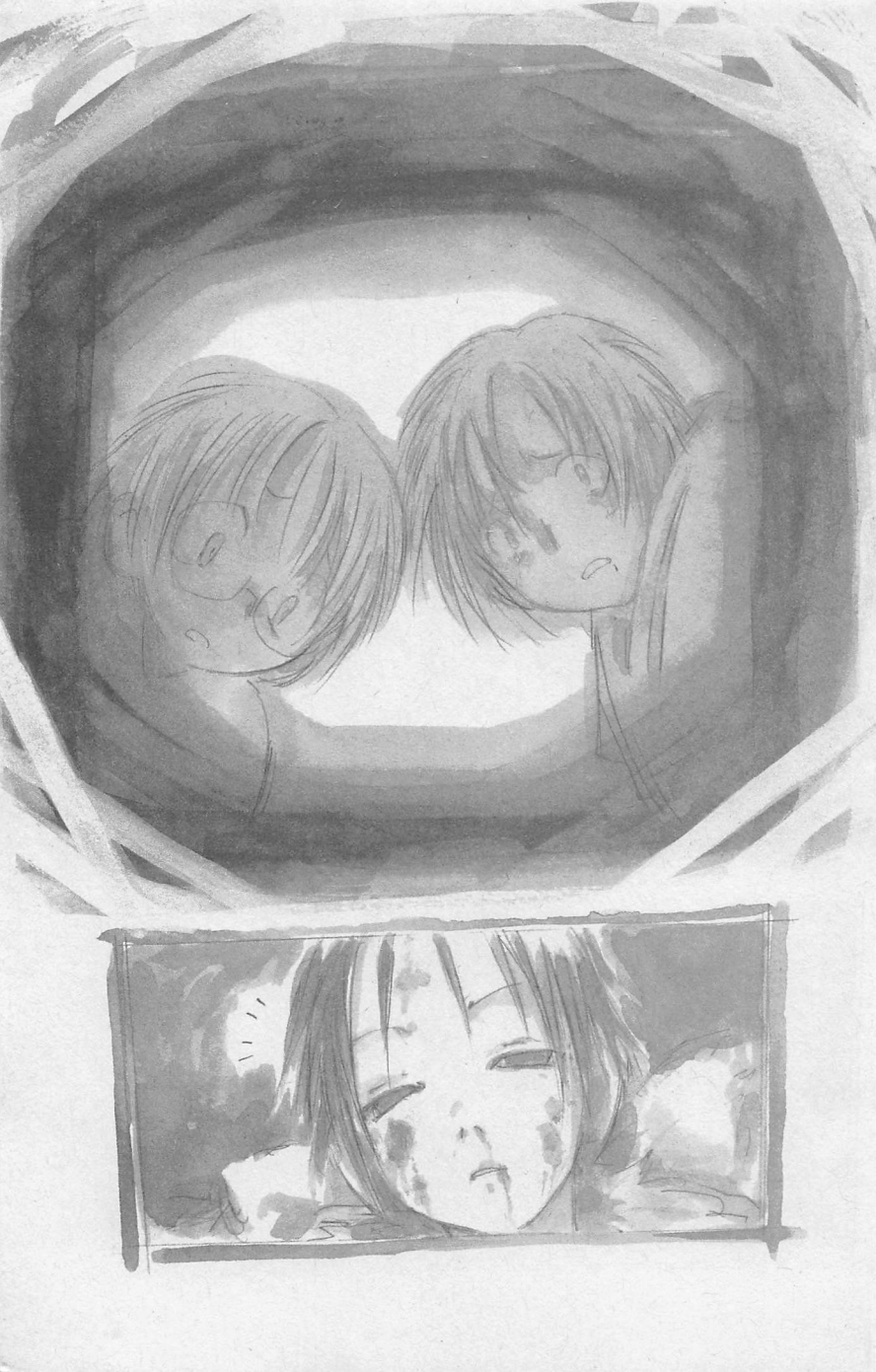

Yeah, don't worry. We're all virgins.
...Are you sure?




I haven't admitted anything!
She doesn't understand.
Hey, wait a second!
?


RUSTLE
B-BOO
Oh! You found a river and landed us there!
Thanks!


Thank goodness you only passed out!
That's passing out!
I didn't feel good and just got really sleepy!
The whole POW thing didn't work after all.
Left somewhere.
Where'd she go?
She did it!
It was a good landing.

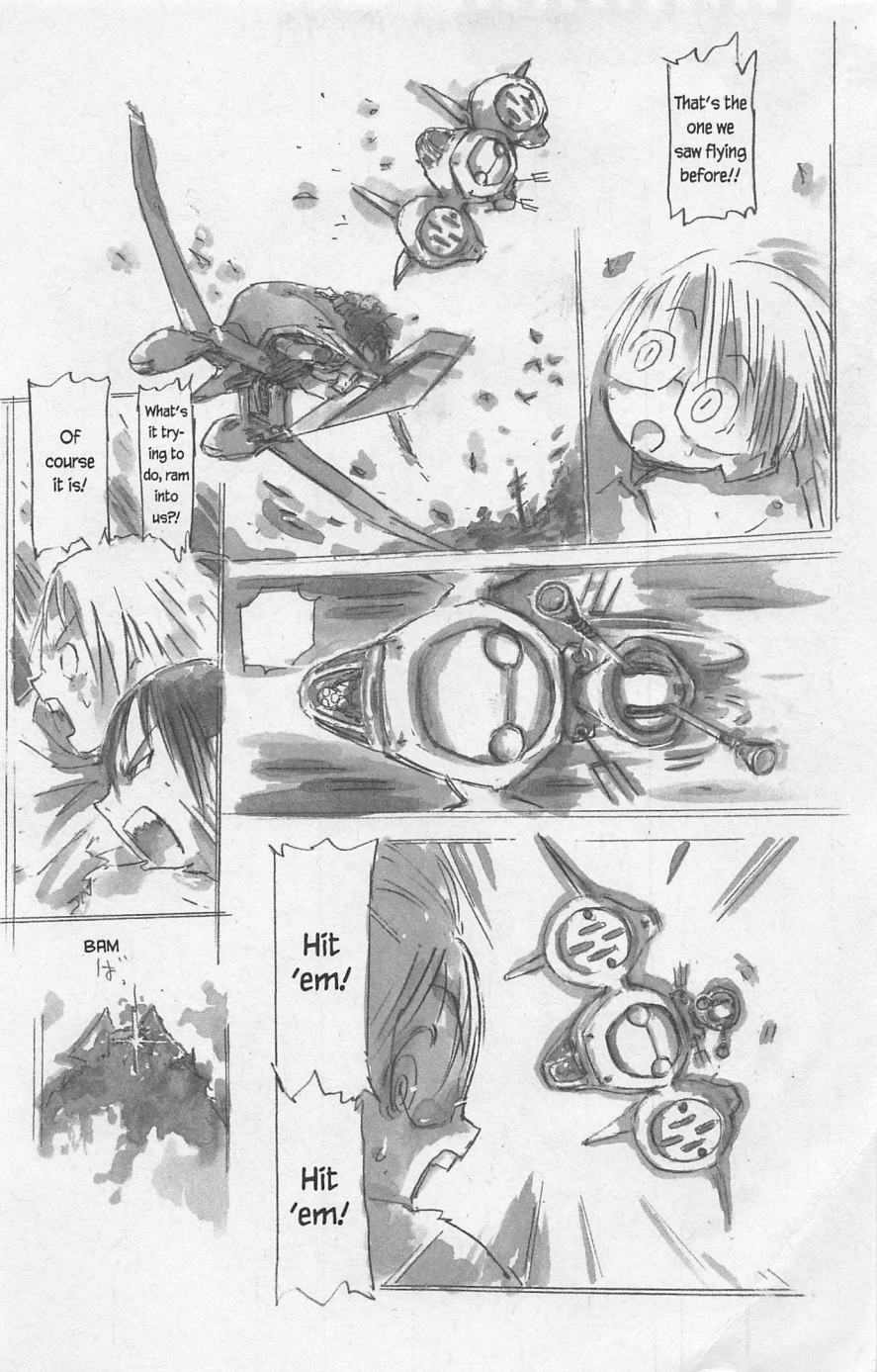


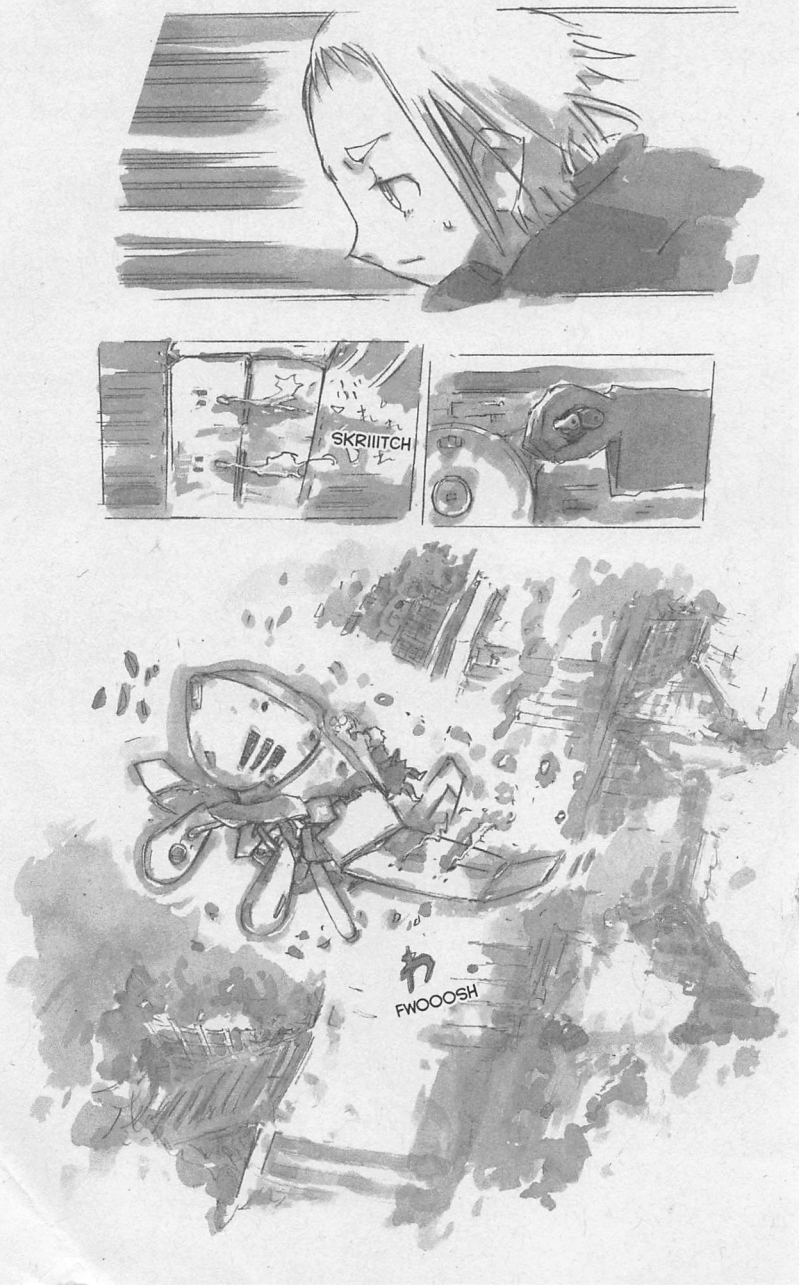

Jito-kun!
Jito!








That's the one we saw flying before!!
What's it trying to do, ram into us?!
Of course it is!
BAM
Hit 'em!
Hit 'em!

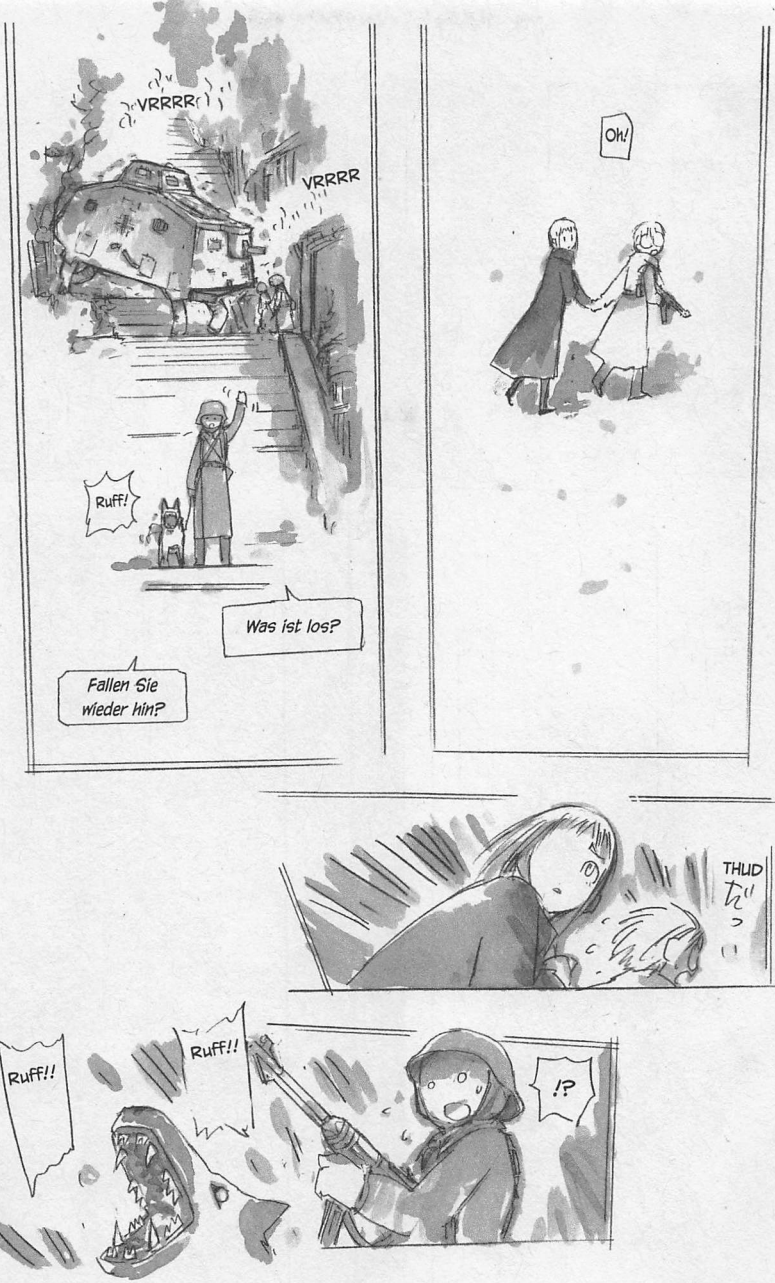

SKRIIITCH
FWOOOSH


Can you get the wings up?
ROOOAR
ごごごん
TWINKLE
ほぃん
FWOOOM
ほぃ
FWOOM
ん


すべれ
SLIIIIPPIINNGGG
The wings won't move?!
You try driving!


ドカーン
CRASH
!?


Wing's uninjured.
A dog?!
Ruff!!
FSSSHHH
Found it!
Looks like it.
B-BOOM
Why's the POW in the driver's seat?!
Huh? What should I have done?
I think we might fall....
CLANK
Just forget it! Keep running down the hill!


VRRRR
VRRRR
Ruff!
Was ist los?
Fallen Sie wieder hin?
Oh!
THUD
Ruff!!
Ruff!!
!?


...I'm bringing her.
I'm sorry. ...
You don't have to shoot!
Come with us.
Um ...

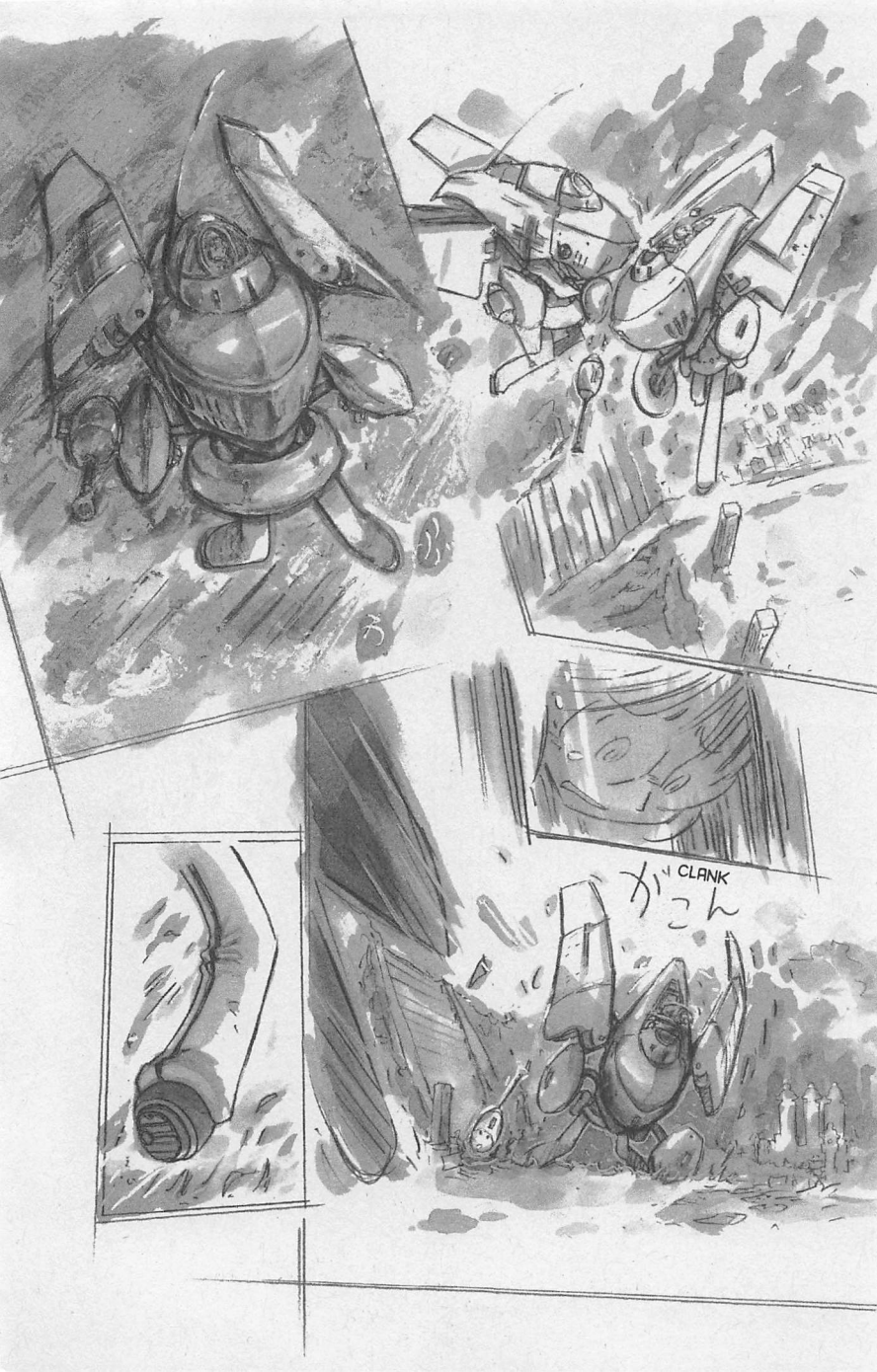

Turn off the power!!
Is this a dance?
!!
BANG
PIIING
VRRRRR
BZZZZZT
BANG


TWITCH
TWITCH
OHHHHHH
OOOHHH
OOHHHHH


FWOOSH
Waah!
POP
Wow, I can see better from here.
BOOM


It's going around in circles! Are you trying to kill yourself? Don't expose your side!
Where ...?
Huh?!
CLANK
CLANK
HOT!!
BANG
BANG


RUSTLE
RUSTLE
The tree's... in the way....
The tree saved us!


CLANK
がこん


BANG
You
...
A school.
.....
Ahh! What are you doing?!
CRASH
CRASH

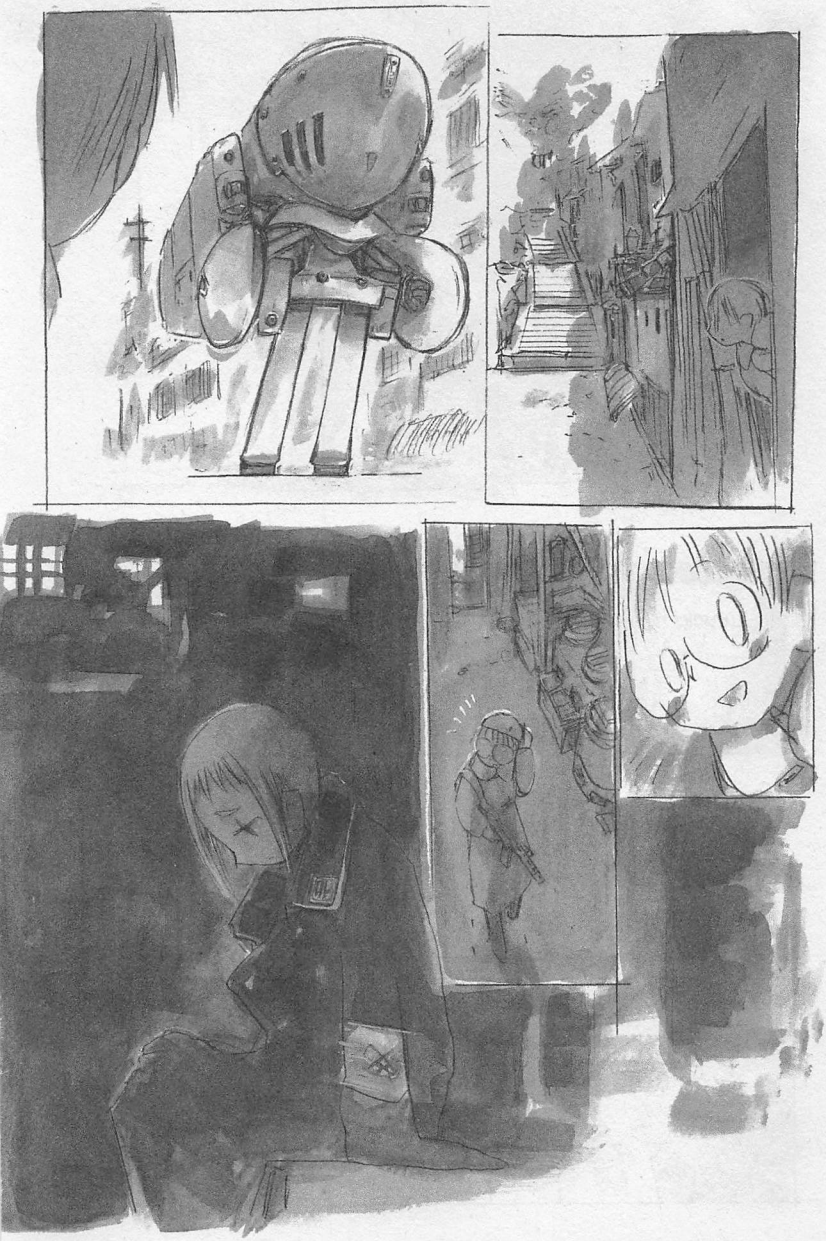

Don't you get mad all of a sudden! You don't know what to do either!
To where?! Huh?! They're taking their time here! Kholminka has been taken! Where's Zapadate?
What did you say??
... Are you northern Asians telling me to treat her like a woman?
Go home to where?
You got us into this mess.
We didn't want a POW.
It's better than going home empty-handed!
So what?!
Everyone's dead anyway! Where's the black-and-white you talked about? Where's the God of Death?! Don't make me laugh!!
Shut up! Stop screaming with tears in your eyes!!
I'm a poet and an artist!! I'm going to Paris!! What's Nonbort?


Oh, the engine's still on.
Oof.
CLANK
CLANK
Hey, it's Rara-stein work-shop's emblem.
CLANK
CLANK
VRRRR
It's all your fault.


I wonder what she did to make her run all the way here?
Looks like she'd even speak classical.
A genuine highlander.
A noble.
If we leave her here, they'll kill her. We gotta take her along. All right! It's decided!
We can't let her die, right?
Let him.
I can do it.
I'll go warm up the flying unit.

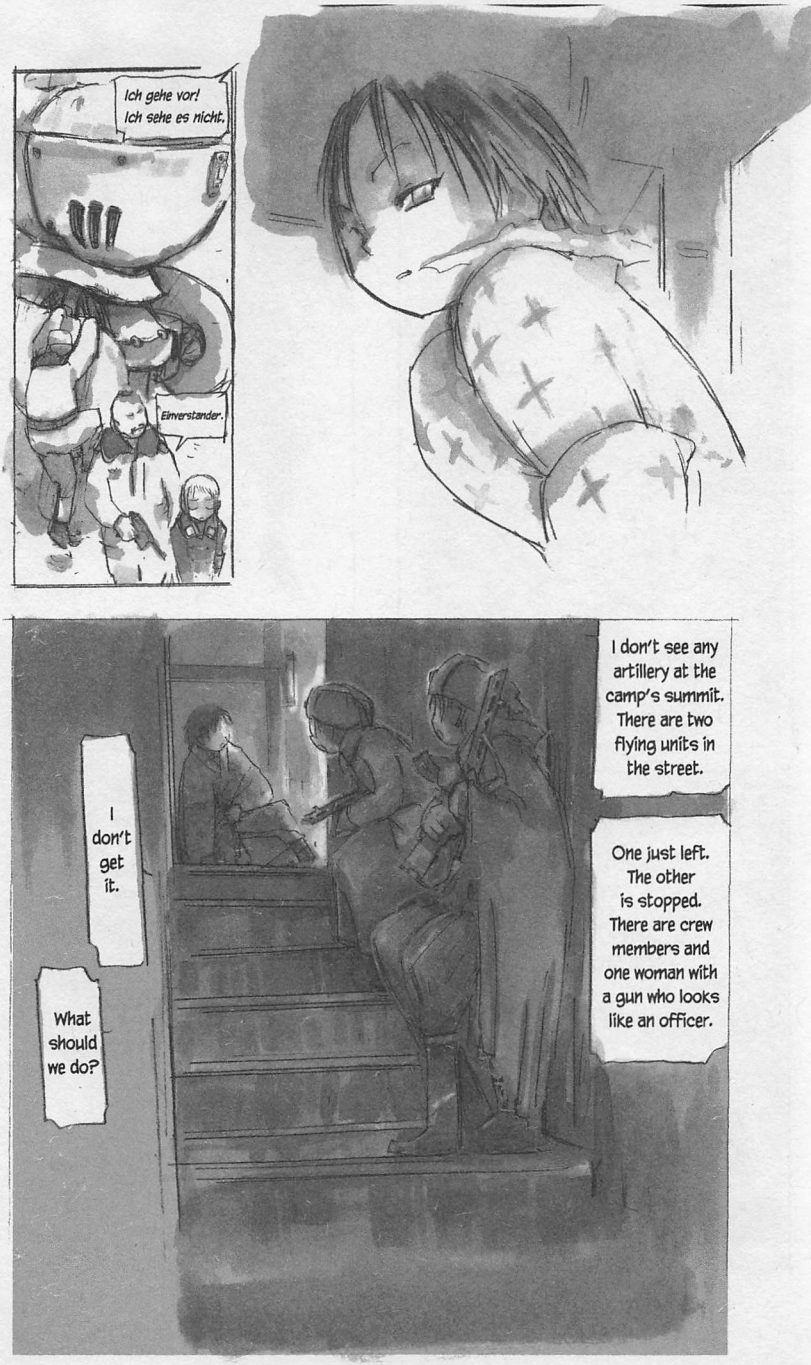

POW? Prisoner of war? The one they almost killed?
It's hard to bring a POW along.
Can you get some information from her, General?
...
Aren't you using the flying units?
Get off, you Nypon bastard!
Don't use violence against women!


Wha—
What?!
Lis-
ten...
Non-
bort?
.....
Tying
up the
ama-
teurs.
CLICK




What did this person do?
Sirs...
Zuruck!
Nimm die Pistole herunter.


THUD
RATTLE
RATTLE
CRASH
Wenn du keine Selbstmord begehen kannst, ich tote dich!


Ich gehe vor!
Ich sehe es nicht.
Einverstanden.
I don't see any artillery at the camp's summit. There are two flying units in the street.
One just left. The other is stopped. There are crew members and one woman with a gun who looks like an officer.
I don't get it.
What should we do?


He! Der Lausejunge! Steige ab!


The air units are definitely coming and going from here.
The ones remaining are probably at the camp.
Because of the treaty violation?
It looks like they were searching for something.
The troops came in three days ago, but they left twenty, thirty people and vanished.
No, they chose to go.
Were these people drafted, too?

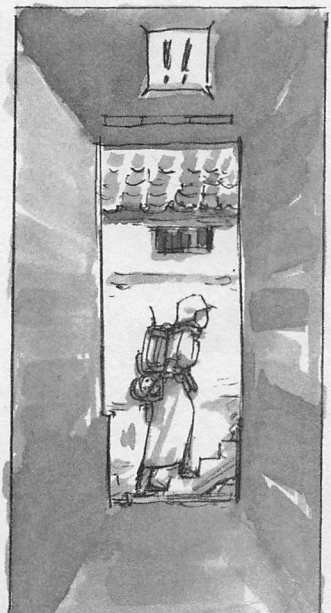

CLATTER





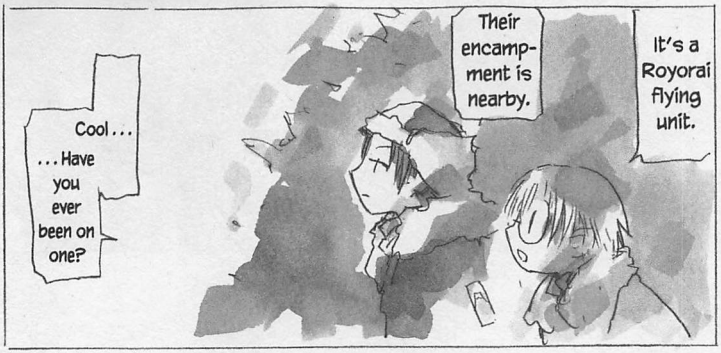


If that's true, you shouldn't be on both sides.






RUSTLE
It's not on a map.
We're not lost? This part of the map is blank!
It's the city of Nypon.

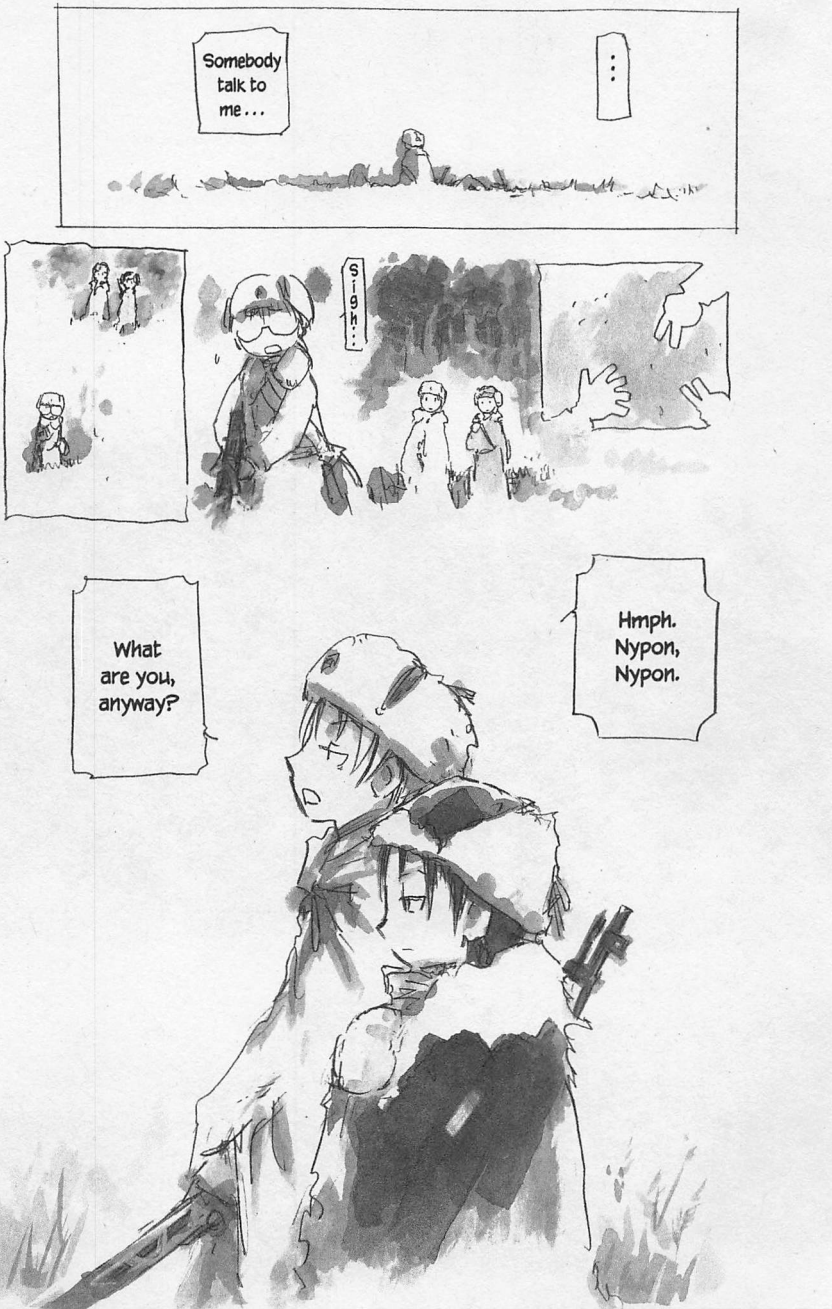

Cool...
...Have you ever been on one?
Their encampment is nearby.
It's a Royorai flying unit.


I don't want to fly anymore.

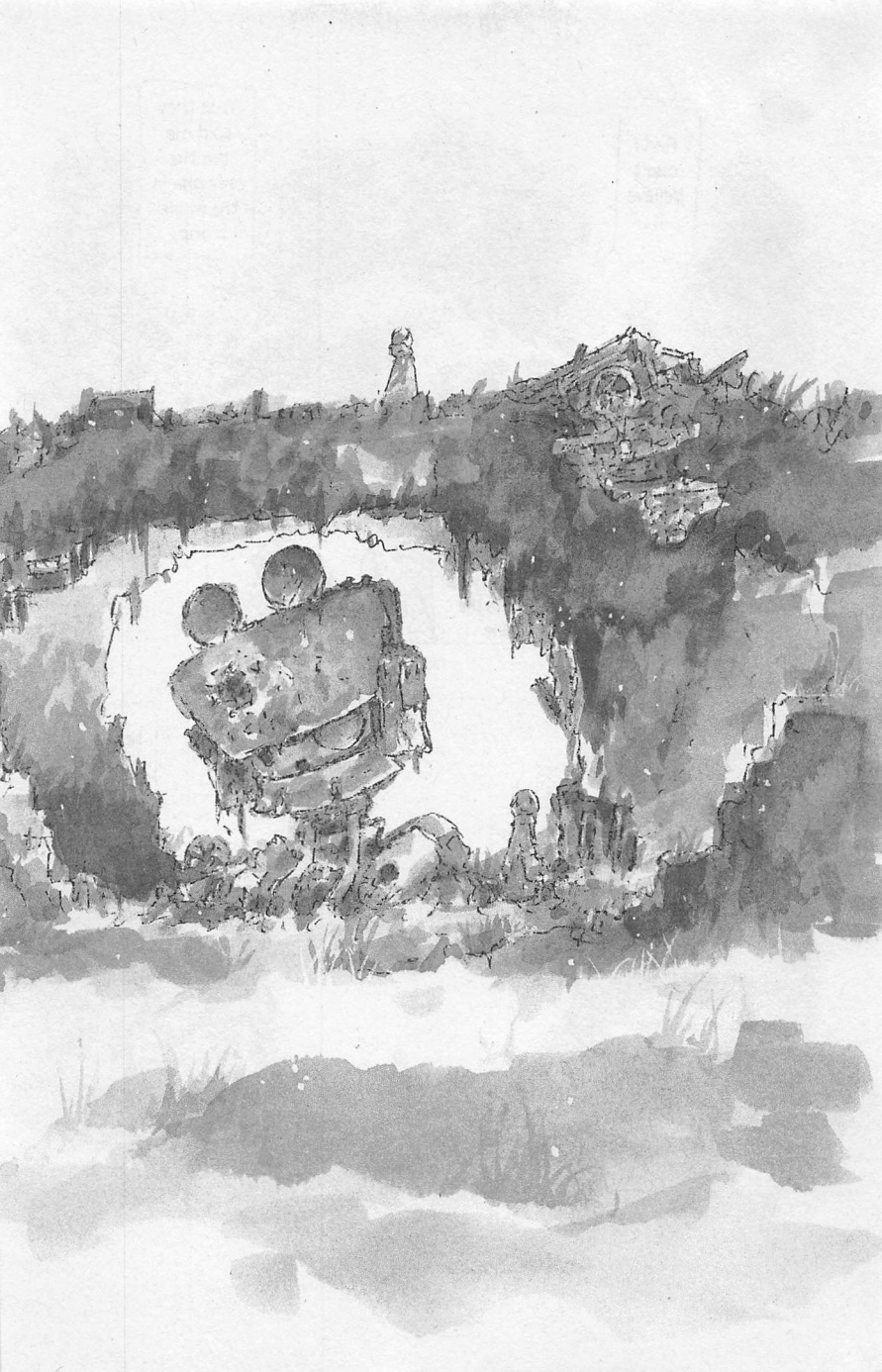

.....
I wanted to ride on them and be in the iron man military unit, but because of my eyes, I had to be a soldier. I wish they would have let me be in it, though....
Ooh, sounds interesting!

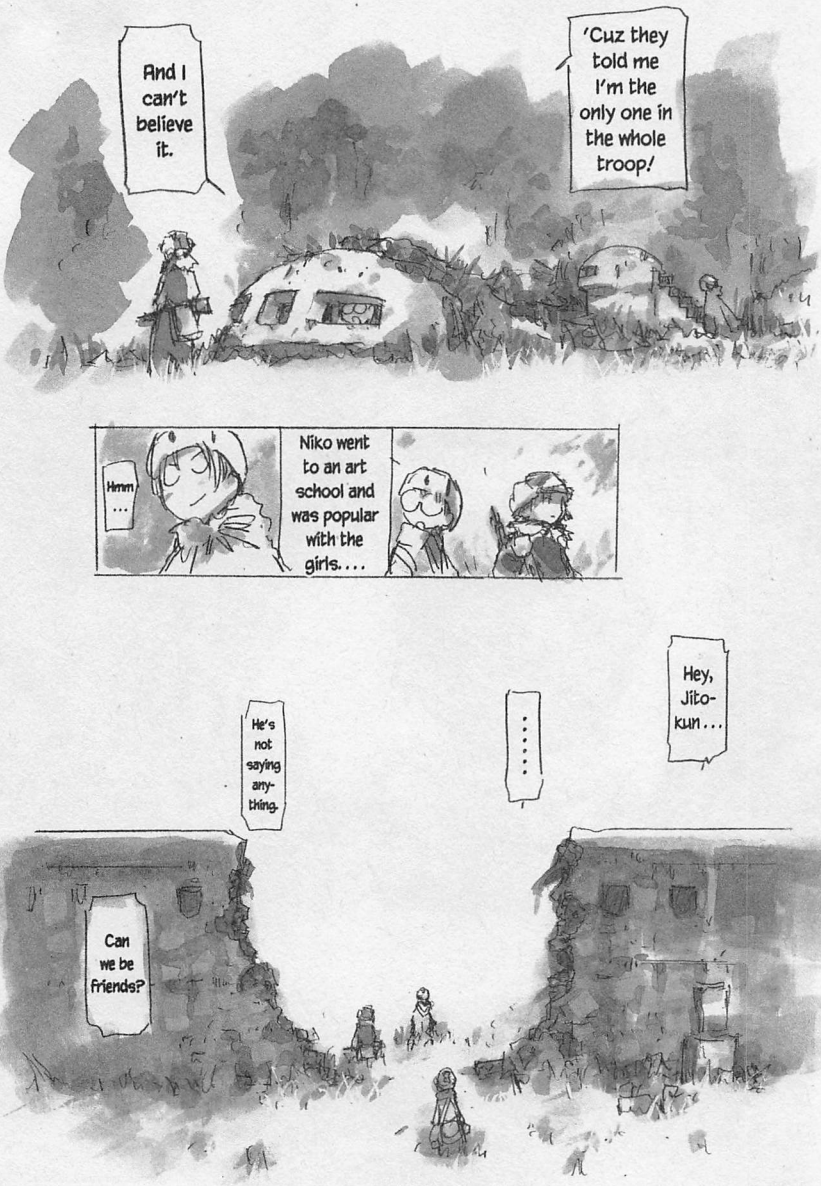

The God of Death has taken away the seven-colored spirits. Water runs away, and white sinks into black.
In a way, rotting is a sign of life.
There were strange colors, too.
He did it.
PING
ぷぁぉん
ぷぁぉん
PING


Do you have anything for me?
Hellooo.
Huh? He's the guy who peddles bucketmen.
...and the island they live on.
Nypon is the name of the people...
Hey! Listen, don't touch it, it looks dangerous!
.....
"The first word bought is a weapon."
That's terrible.
Cigarette smoke makes me sick!
Cough.
SIGH
Really?
They got done in by a nose-dive....
...Looks like a Kholminkan sniper.
There was a big hole in the ground.


Somebody talk to me...
...
sigh...
What are you, anyway?
Hmph. Nypon, Nypon.



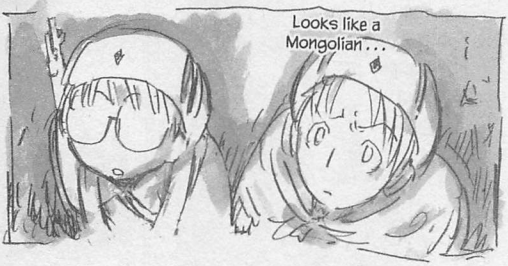


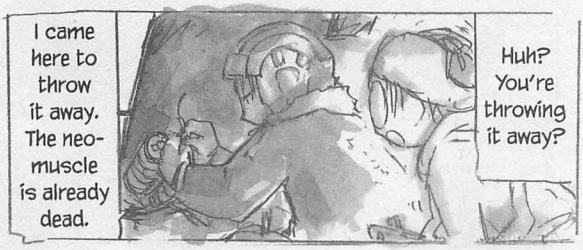

And I can't believe it.
'Cuz they told me I'm the only one in the whole troop!
Hmm...
Niko went to an art school and was popular with the girls....
Hey, Jito-kun...
.....
He's not saying anything.
Can we be friends?


I'm Niko.
I'm Maru.
Can I call you Jito-kun?
I wanna know, too!
Can I ask you some-thing?
Hey...
.....
Are you a virgin, Jito-kun?


Send my regards to the nurse with big boobs.
With big boobs...
SHOOOO
お
A bad bargain, huh?
I guess they're going slow like last time....
They're not coming.
ぱ
BOOM


All right. You gotta have guts to become reservists.
That block-head is still here?
Aren't you going to join the rear unit?
Oh. Yeah.
But we...
That's enough! Get moving!
We have dozens of bucketmen over there!
Take that useless Nypon to the left wing machinery unit led by Kholminka.
?
Yeah, he's Nonbort. Watch him.

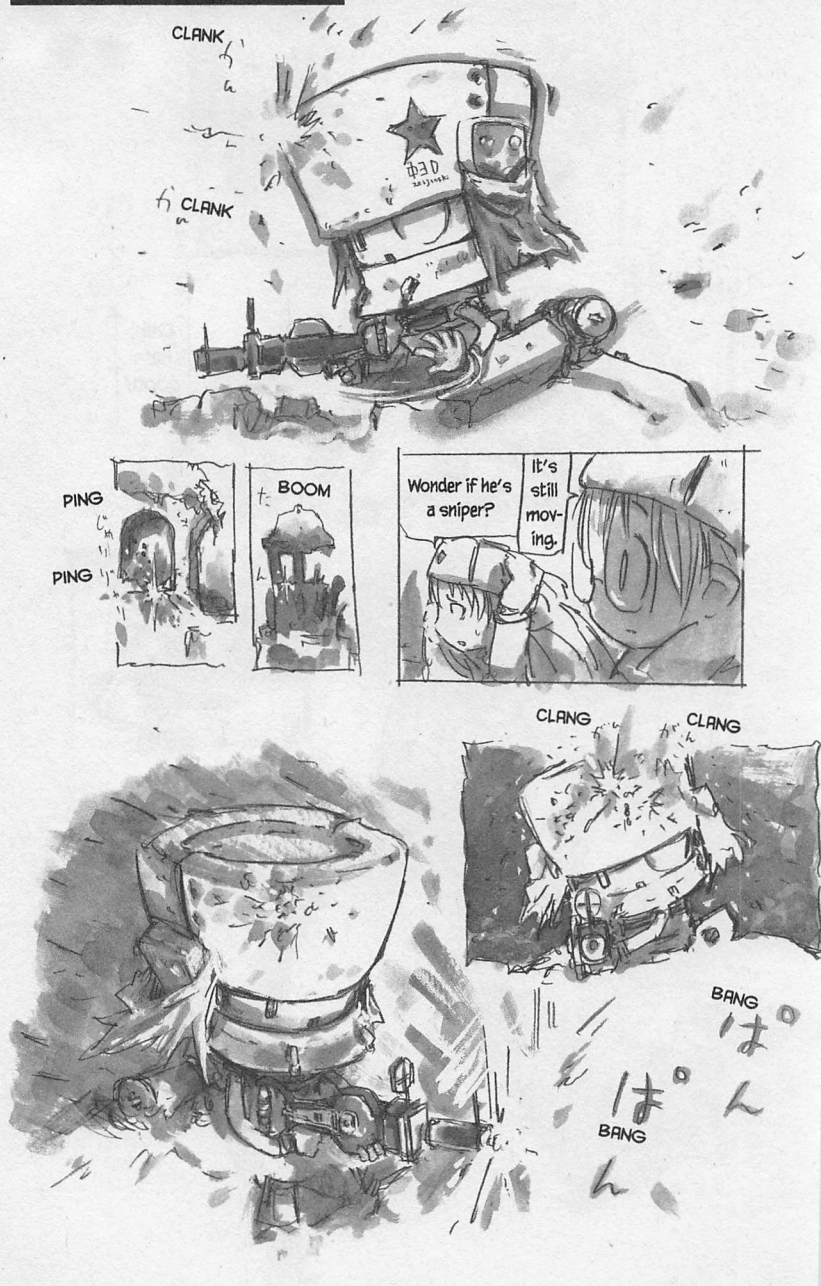

Looks like a Mongolian...


I came here to throw it away. The neo-muscle is already dead.
Huh? You're throwing it away?


ぱん
PING
Are you Nypona?

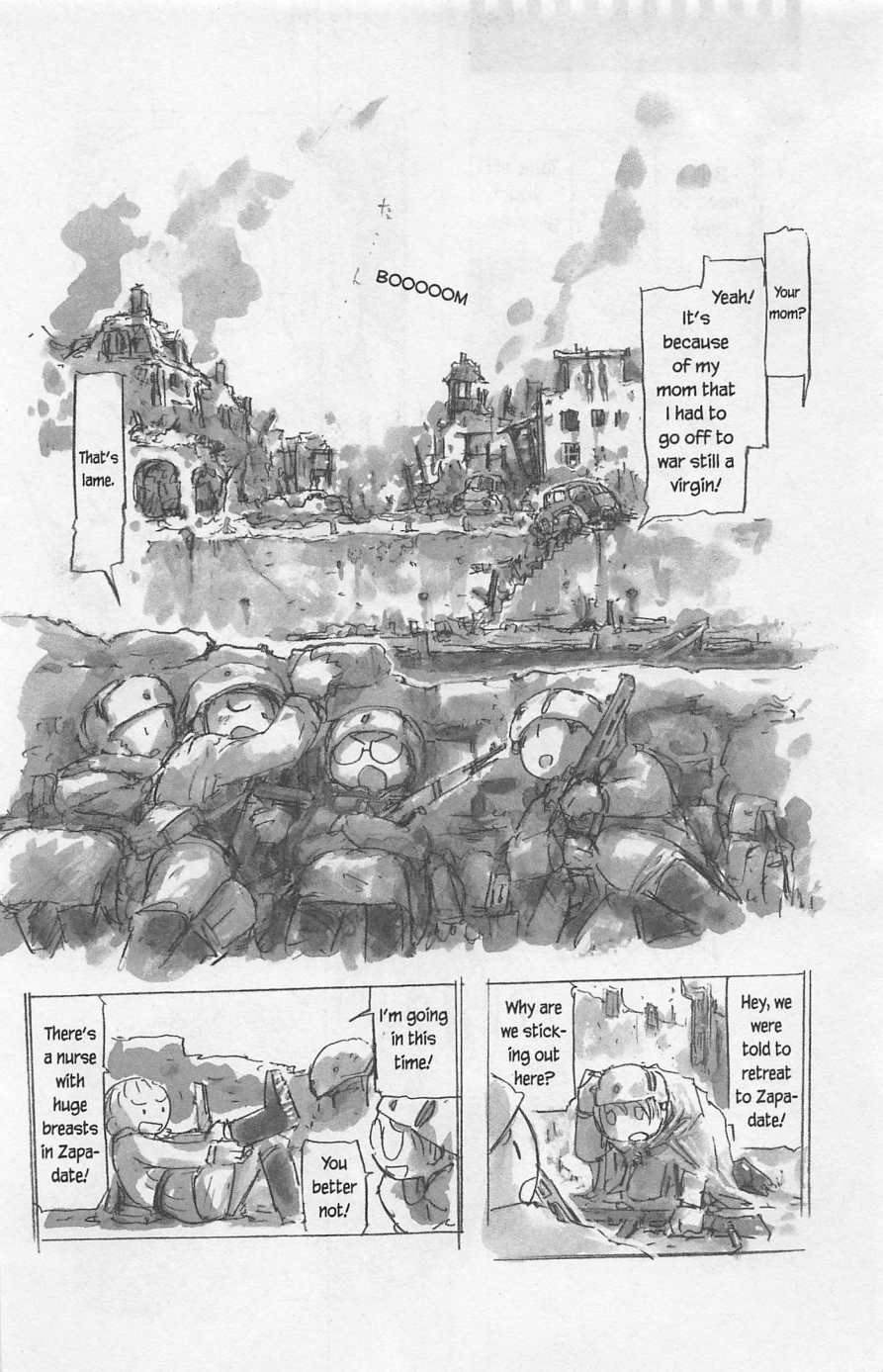

BOOM
Yes.
.....


PING
PING
It stopped.
Ohh, he's good!
がぽん
CREAAAK


CLANK
CLANK
PING
PING
BOOM
Wonder if he's a sniper?
It's still moving.
CLANG
CLANG
BANG
BANG


VRRRRR
KACHIN
KACHIN
pshh
CLANG
Ahh, he collapsed!
VRRRRRR
There's the moving bucket-man!
He's staggering, huh?
VRRRR
VRRRR
VRRRR


BOOOOM
FSHHH
That's what Ziuzin did, and he got a medal for being wounded, plus those breasts....
Maru! Leave him!
The snipers are out.
Hero! You're a hero!
Ahh!
Okay.


BOOOOOM
That's lame.
Yeah! It's because of my mom that I had to go off to war still a virgin!
Your mom?
There's a nurse with huge breasts in Zapadate!
I'm going in this time!
You better not!
Why are we sticking out here?
Hey, we were told to retreat to Zapadate!


But I need to see.
Take off your glasses.
Maru! Are you home?!
Maru!!
THUD
THUD
THUD
THUD
Come out, Maru!!

Iron Man Military Unit

Even though we're virgins, the battle begins!



Ueda Hajime

It was the day before I left for military training. My classmate Manya Oroshkova came to my room.



Truthfully, I didn't think about it much, and I don't remember talking to her.



I had been ambushed by a bunch of girls in front of the school gate.



But that's not the problem.



▲▼▲▼▲

IRON MAN MILITARY UNIT

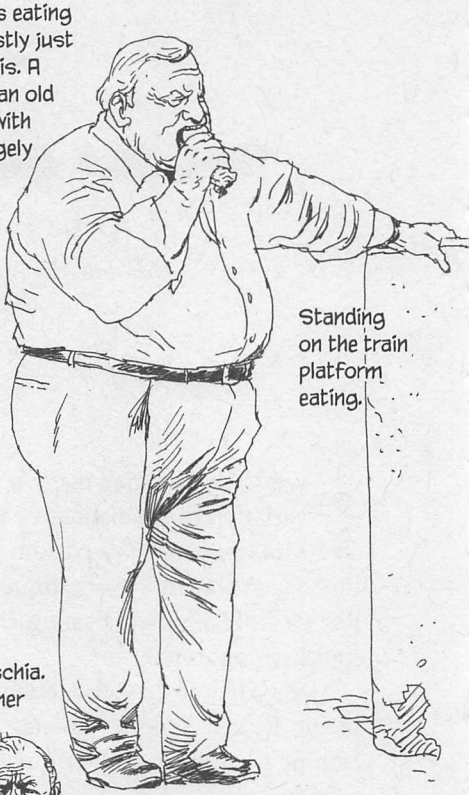
Ueda Hajime

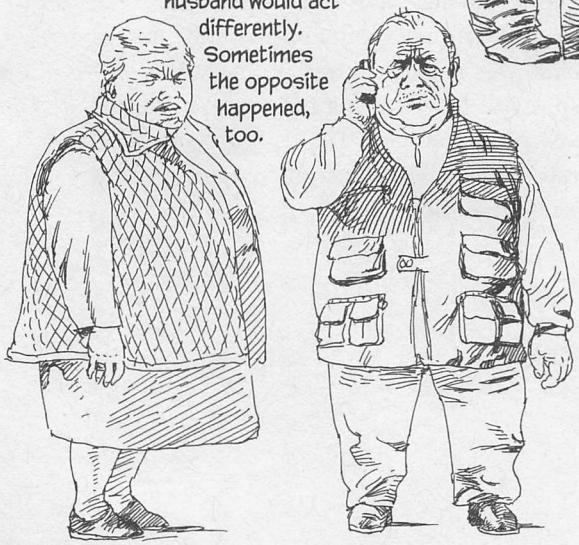
Translated by Andria Cheng

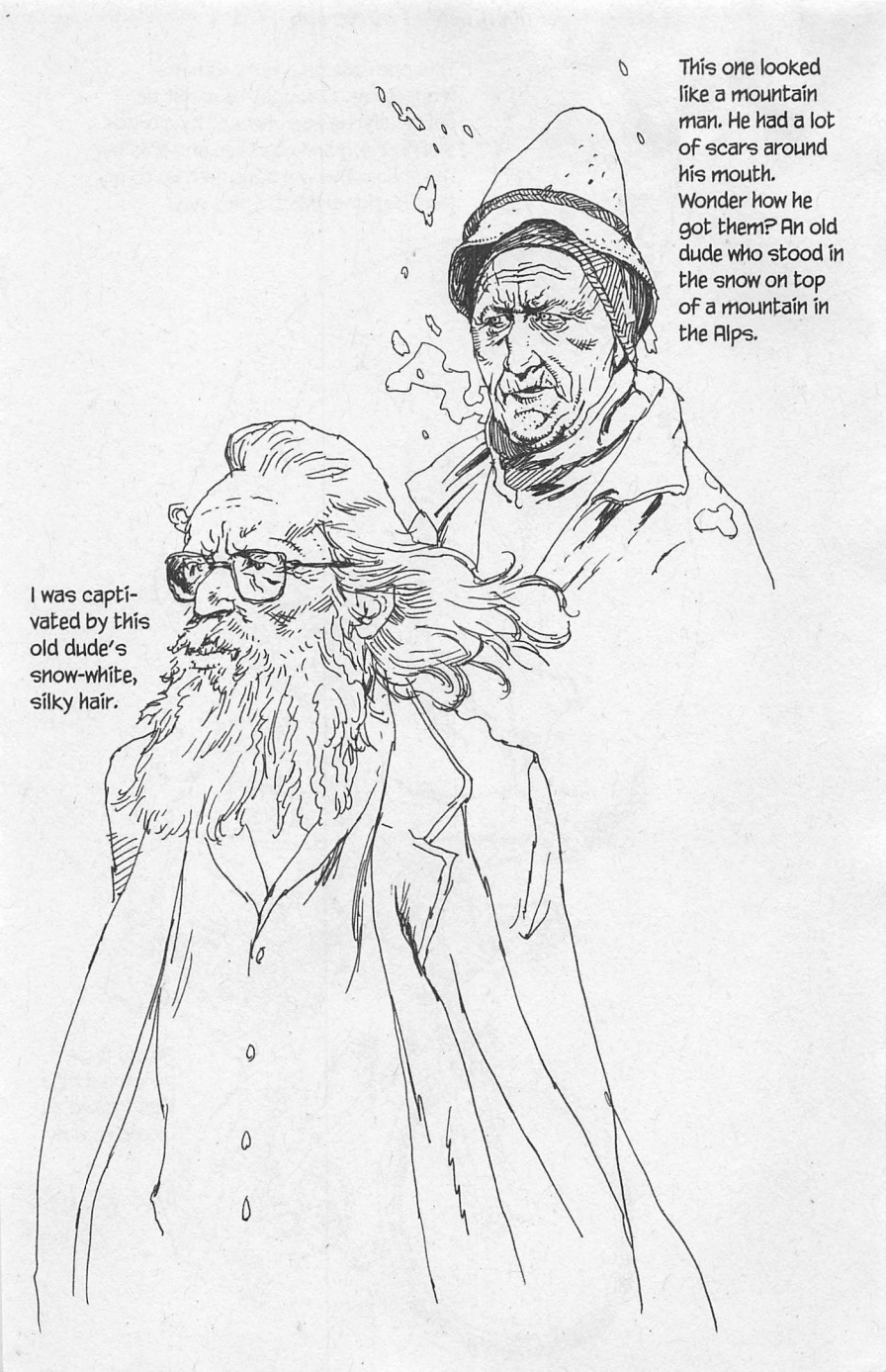
Even Ueda Hajime's many fans will be delighted with the variation in his distinctive style presented in "Iron Man Military Unit." His customarily sharp linework has this time given way to a more impressionistic, watercolor effect. But Ueda Hajime's appealing character designs remain instantly recognizable.

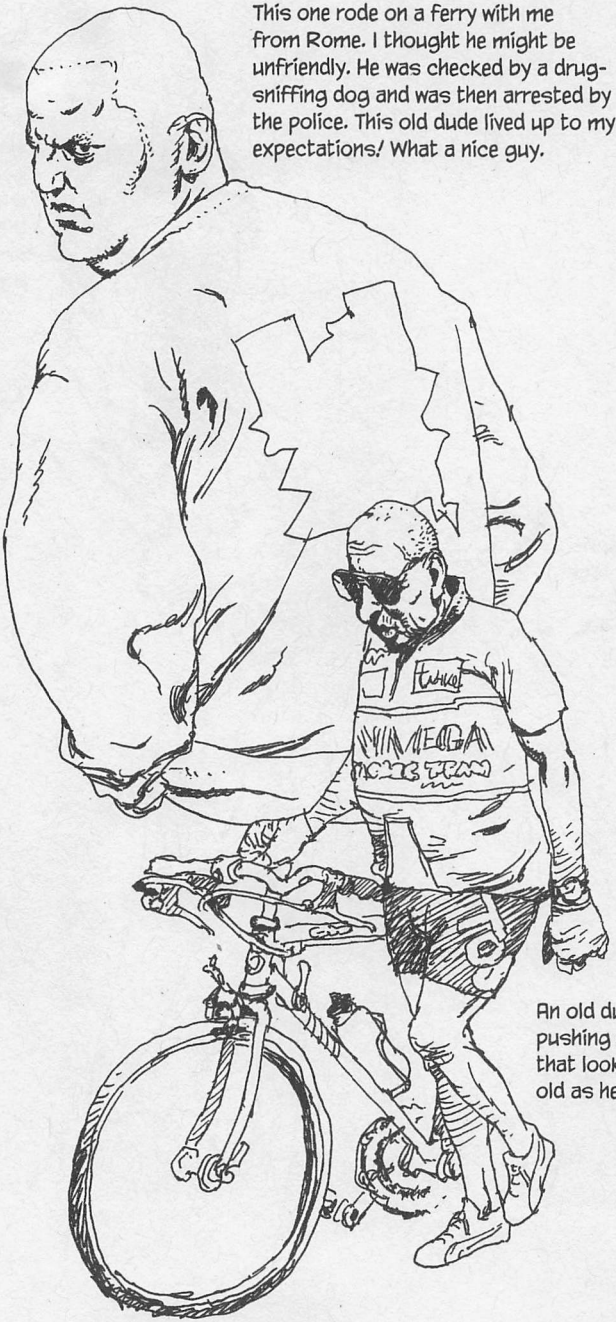
Ueda Hajime has also established a devoted following in the United States. A manga artist and illustrator, Ueda Hajime created his international reputation with the manga adaptation of GAINAX's popular *FLCL* anime. Ueda followed this triumph with his own original series, including *Q-Ko-Chan: The Earth Invader Girl.* The truly global appeal of Ueda's work rests on his unique sense of composition and utterly distinctive visual sensibility.


An old dude who continued to stand next to a bank in Rome.


He was eating earnestly just like this. A fat-man old dude with strangely long legs.
Standing on the train platform eating.


A short husband and wife I saw in Ischia. When she wasn't paying attention, her husband would act differently. Sometimes the opposite happened, too.


This one looked like a mountain man. He had a lot of scars around his mouth. Wonder how he got them? An old dude who stood in the snow on top of a mountain in the Alps.
I was captivated by this old dude's snow-white, silky hair.

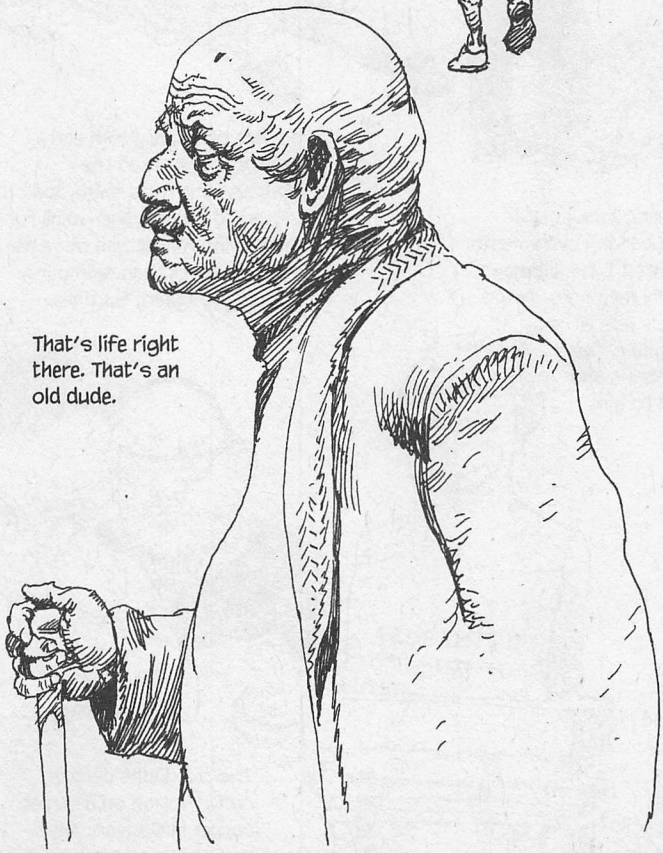

This one rode on a ferry with me from Rome. I thought he might be unfriendly. He was checked by a drug-sniffing dog and was then arrested by the police. This old dude lived up to my expectations! What a nice guy.
An old dude pushing a bike that looked as old as he was.

Old Dudes

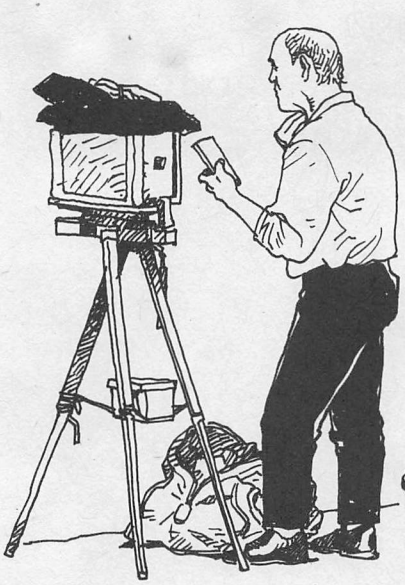
by Katsuya Terada



When I looked at that old dude's back, I thought he must have raised children. But I was so preoccupied with looking at his back, I tripped and fell. Be careful of that.



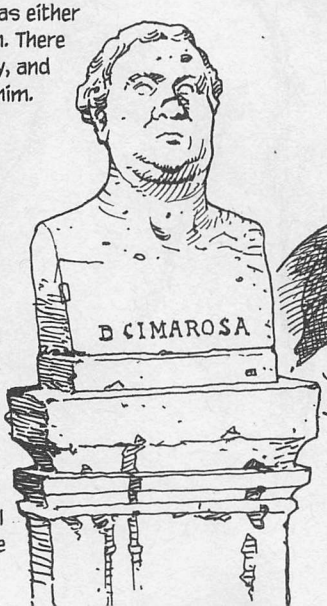
That's life right there. That's an old dude.



An old dude wearing face powder. There are people carving everywhere in Italy. Gold-plated Tutankhamens and bronze family members. I'm sure this old dude was either a clown or a chaplain. There was a camera nearby, and I bet it belonged to him. In Venice.



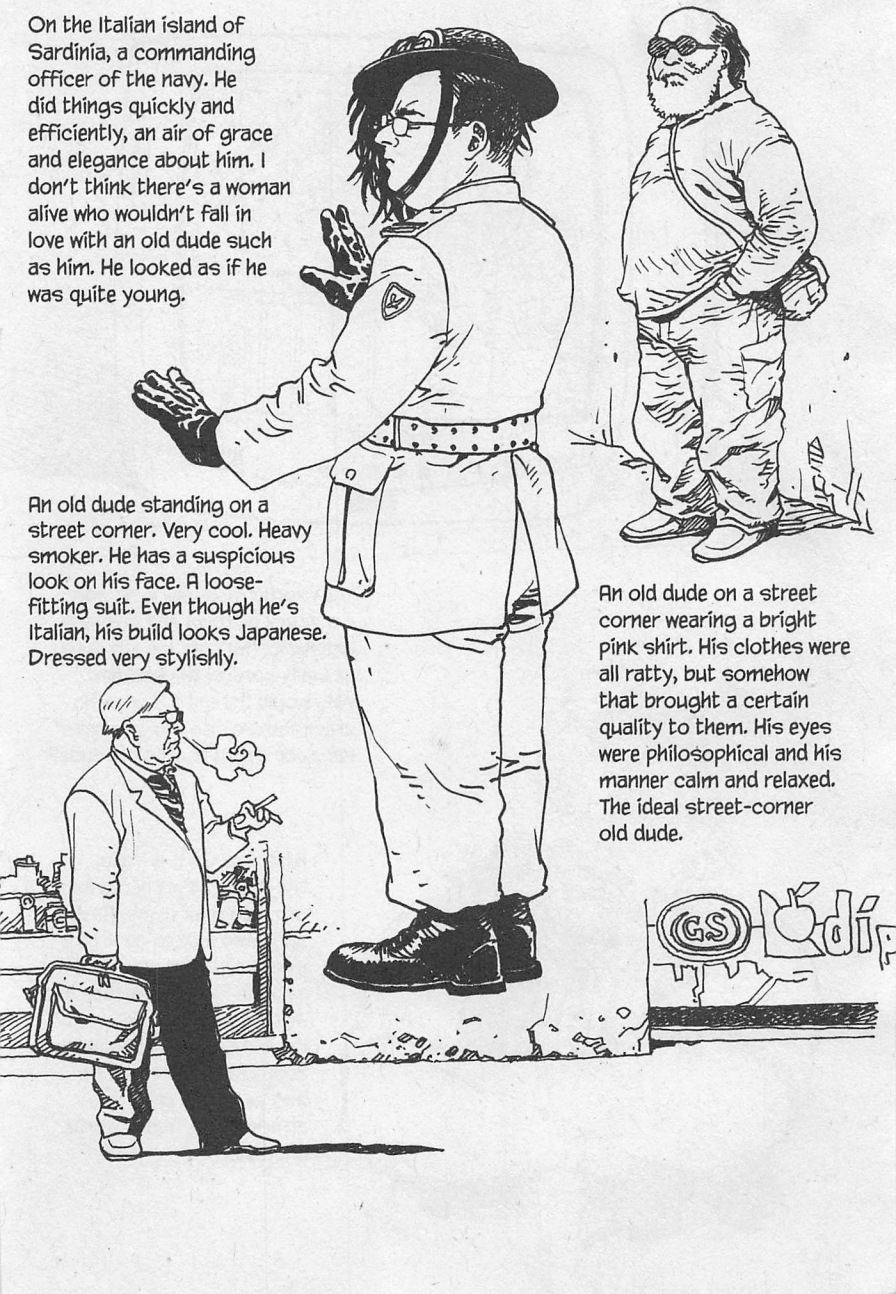
A poolside old dude. From early in the morning, he read the newspaper, went for a swim, took a nap, lounged around, then went for another swim. Well, it was more as if he was floating than swimming. At a hotel in Cagliari, Sardinia.



A marble bust in Borghese park in Rome. He's an old dude. I don't know what the story is behind this bust, but I'm sure it's still standing in the same scenery now.



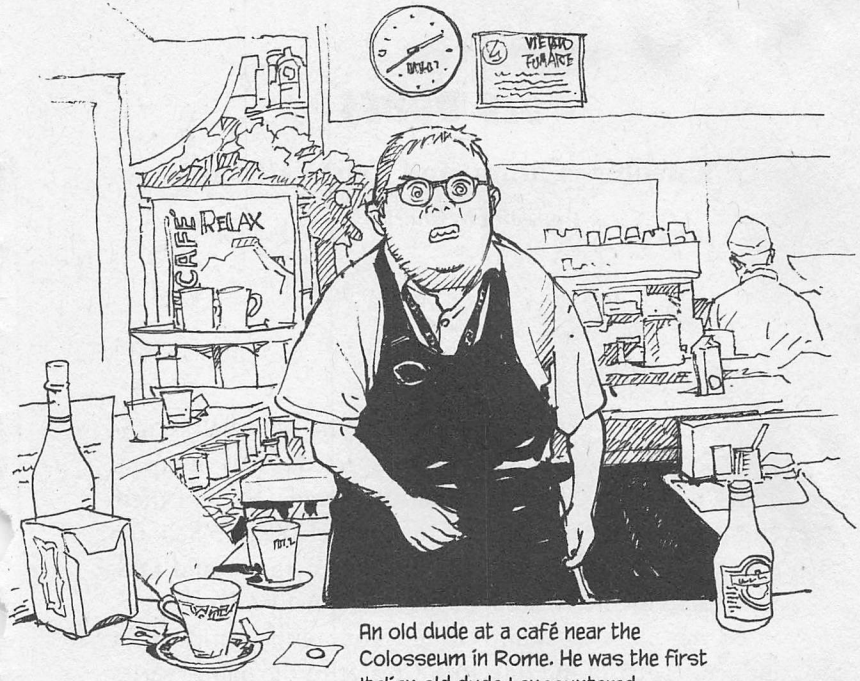
Two old dudes deep in conversation on a street corner in Cagliari. They looked like characters from a Shigeru Mizuki manga.


On the Italian island of Sardinia, a commanding officer of the navy. He did things quickly and efficiently, an air of grace and elegance about him. I don't think there's a woman alive who wouldn't fall in love with an old dude such as him. He looked as if he was quite young.
An old dude standing on a street corner. Very cool. Heavy smoker. He has a suspicious look on his face. A loose-fitting suit. Even though he's Italian, his build looks Japanese. Dressed very stylishly.
An old dude on a street corner wearing a bright pink shirt. His clothes were all ratty, but somehow that brought a certain quality to them. His eyes were philosophical and his manner calm and relaxed. The ideal street-corner old dude.
GS

The weatherman on TV. He wore a military uniform and was very emphatic. I'm sure his job is to actually control the weather. Who would listen to a guy who cracks jokes or a girl who never eats compared to this old dude?



After the Giro d'Italia, the riders all gathered and crossed their arms. An old dude who looked as if he might be their leader had a serious look on his face and was deep in thought . . . but I'm sure he wasn't thinking about anything at all. He was just adding to the atmosphere. That's a true old dude.



An old dude at a café near the Colosseum in Rome. He was the first Italian old dude I encountered.

Old Dudes in Italy

by Katsuhiro Otomo

That's something a youngster can't do, because they are newcomers to life, outsiders in society. The earth hasn't soaked into them yet. They might look eccentric and have an interesting way of speaking. But just because a young person might be meek and obedient now doesn't necessarily mean he won't turn into an old dude. . . .

There are old dudes everywhere. On street corners, on the outskirts of town, in the fields, and on fishing boats. They hang their heads at work and get into fights in bars. They take pisses in empty train stations after the last train has departed, and sometimes they jog in parks on Sunday mornings. They can even be found at the summit of Mount Everest or the North Pole. The great thing about this is that they look at home in every one of those places.

It's almost as if an old dude takes on the qualities of the scenery around him.

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OLD DUDES

Katsuhiro Otomo and Katsuya Terada

Translated by Andria Cheng

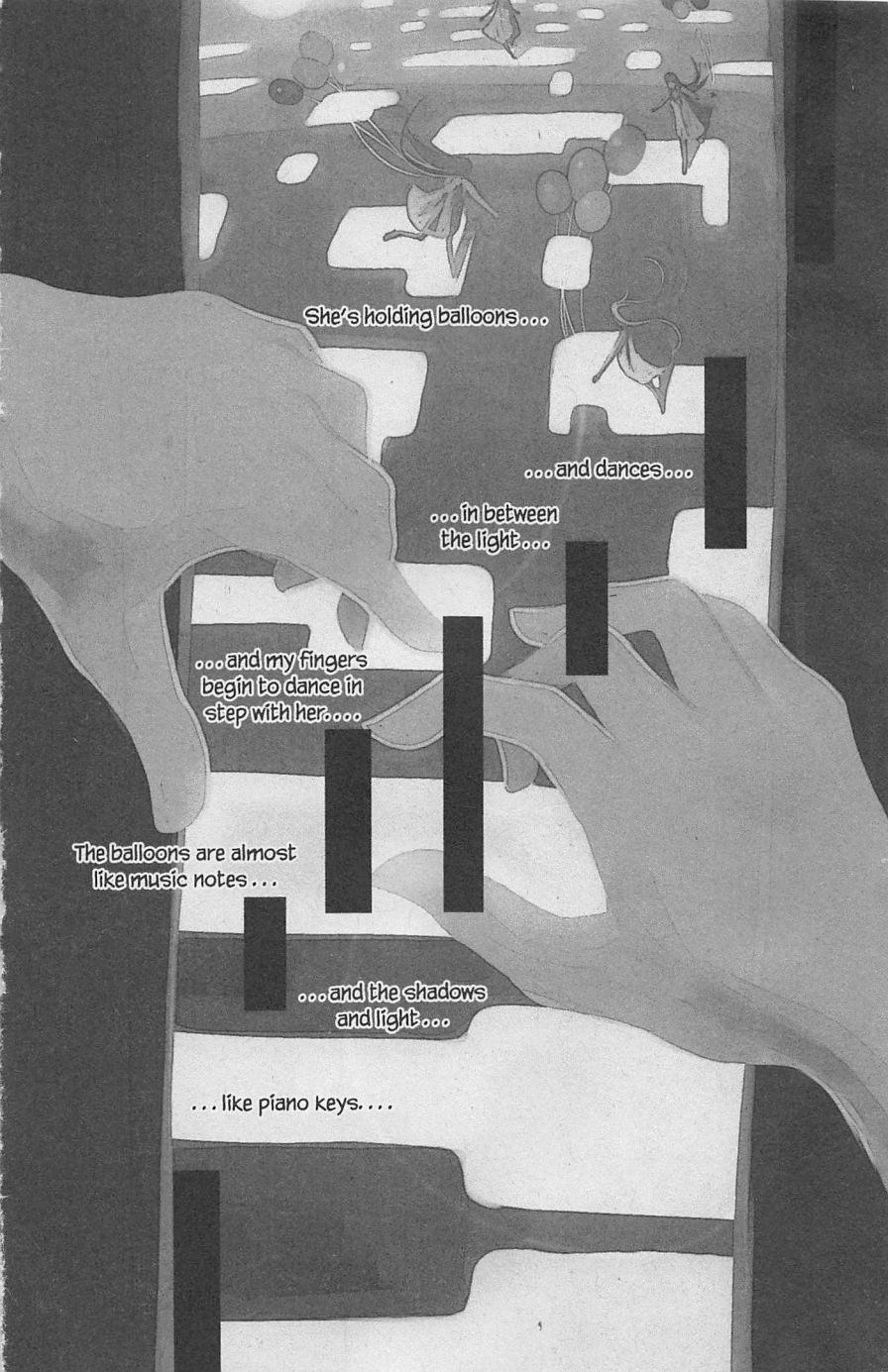
Old Dudes gives us a peek into the personal sketchbooks of two of the most respected artists in Japan: Katsuhiro Otomo and Katsuya Terada. Each of these eminent creators gave himself the same challenge: Walk the streets and sketch the coolest "old dudes" they could find. The results are fresh, spontaneous, and quietly hilarious.

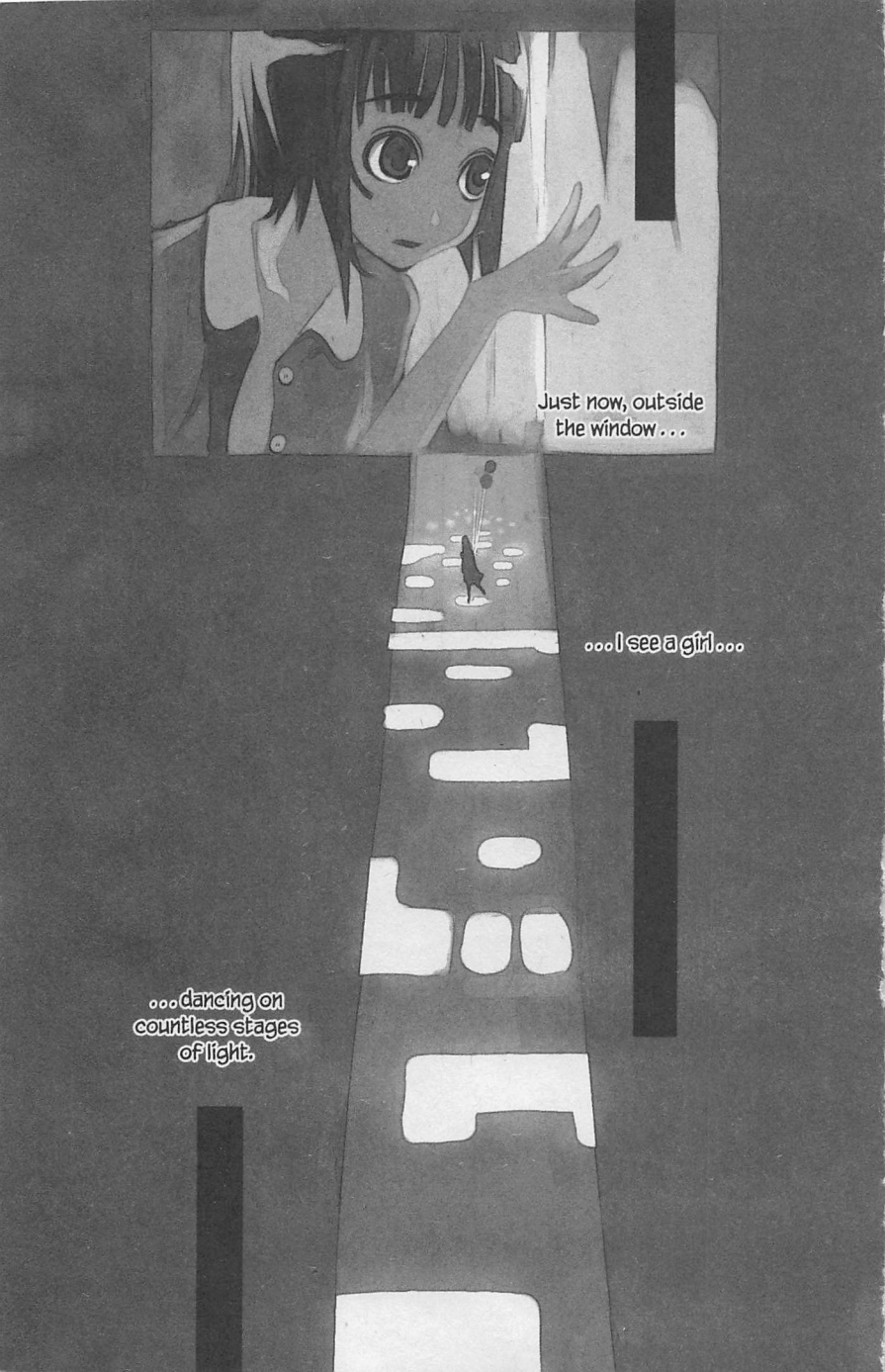
Born in 1954, Katsuhiro Otomo is one of the world's most influential artists and directors. Creator of the manga series *Domu (A Child's Dream)* and *AKIRA*, he also directed several animated features (*AKIRA*, *MEMORIES*, *STEAMBOY*) and live-action films (*Mushishi*).

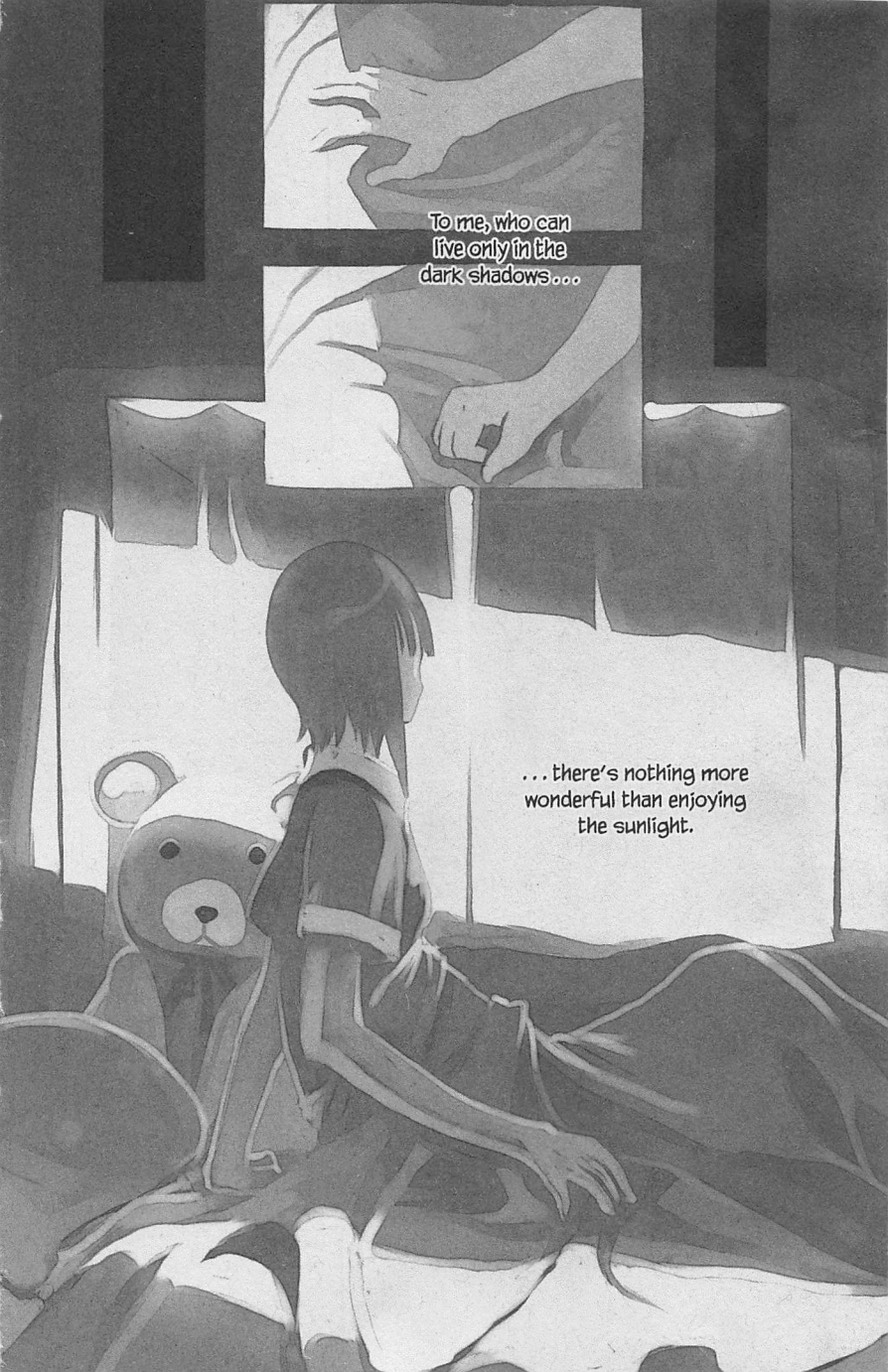
Katsuya Terada, an internationally successful illustrator and manga artist, was born in 1963. Some of his best-known publications include the *Saiyukiden Daienou (Monkey King)* manga and the *Terada Katsuya Zenbu—The Complete Works* and *Terada Katsuya Rakugaking* illustration collections. In addition to creating original works, he frequently serves as a concept artist for feature films.

The dance music's finale...
...must be like this....


She stopped?
Oh no...
There can't be a rest now!


She's holding balloons...
...and dances...
...in between the light...
...and my fingers begin to dance in step with her....
The balloons are almost like music notes...
...and the shadows and light...
...like piano keys....


Just now, outside the window...
...I see a girl...
...dancing on countless stages of light.


To me, who can live only in the dark shadows...
...there's nothing more wonderful than enjoying the sunlight.


Faust brings you the second appearance of the light magician from Taiwan— VOFAN!
VOFAN
Shadow Dance Music
At 2:24 in the afternoon on winter solstice, it's the only time that the rays of sunlight filter into this room.

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SHADOW DANCE MUSIC

VOFAN

Translated by Andria Cheng

While *Faust* features the best and the brightest talents from Japan, *Faust*'s tireless editor, Katsushi Ota, is open to talents from abroad. VOFAN is one of the international stars he discovered for *Faust.* Born in 1980, VOFAN is Taiwanese. He has produced cover art for the Taiwanese edition of *Famitsu* magazine, and his illustrated stories are being published in *Monthly Challenger.* He has earned praise for his beautiful use of lighting, and has been called the "magician of light." He is in charge of art direction for NISIOISIN's new work, *Bakemonogatari*, and has a great many fans in Japan. His art book, *Colorful Dream* (published by Max Power in Taiwan), is scheduled for publication in Japan. "Shadow Dance Music" forms a lovely companion piece to "Nikko Dance Party," found in Del Rey Manga's *Faust, Volume One.*

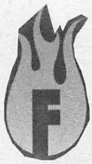

She became transparent...
...and, soon, everyone forgot...
...and had no memory of her at all.


Then, one day...
...nothing else came from her belly button.

She answered them by . . .
. . . continuing to push out many, many more things.

They were all so beautiful...
...they captivated everyone.


Many things flew out from...
...her belly button.
Her Transparent Belly Button
Wakako Katayama
Beautiful colors assault your eyes from Katayama's world!


F

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HER TRANSPARENT BELLY BUTTON

Wakako Katayama

Translated by Andria Cheng

In the United States, manga is strongly associated with a very particular visual style, as exemplified by the work of such popular authors as CLAMP. Wakako Katayama's work betrays some mainstream manga influence—in her character designs in particular—but stretches the boundaries of the conventional with her exuberant coloring, striking compositions, and inventive integration of word and image. Recalling such fine art touchstones as Chagall and stained-glass windows as much as manga, "Her Transparent Belly Button" is the kind of extraordinary, genre-expanding work that has made *Faust*'s reputation in Japan.

Wakako Katayama has illustrated many projects, including the books *Minna Genki* and *Shunkigentei Ichigotaruto Jiken*. Katayama also provided illustrations for Takekuni Kitayama's *Mephisto*.

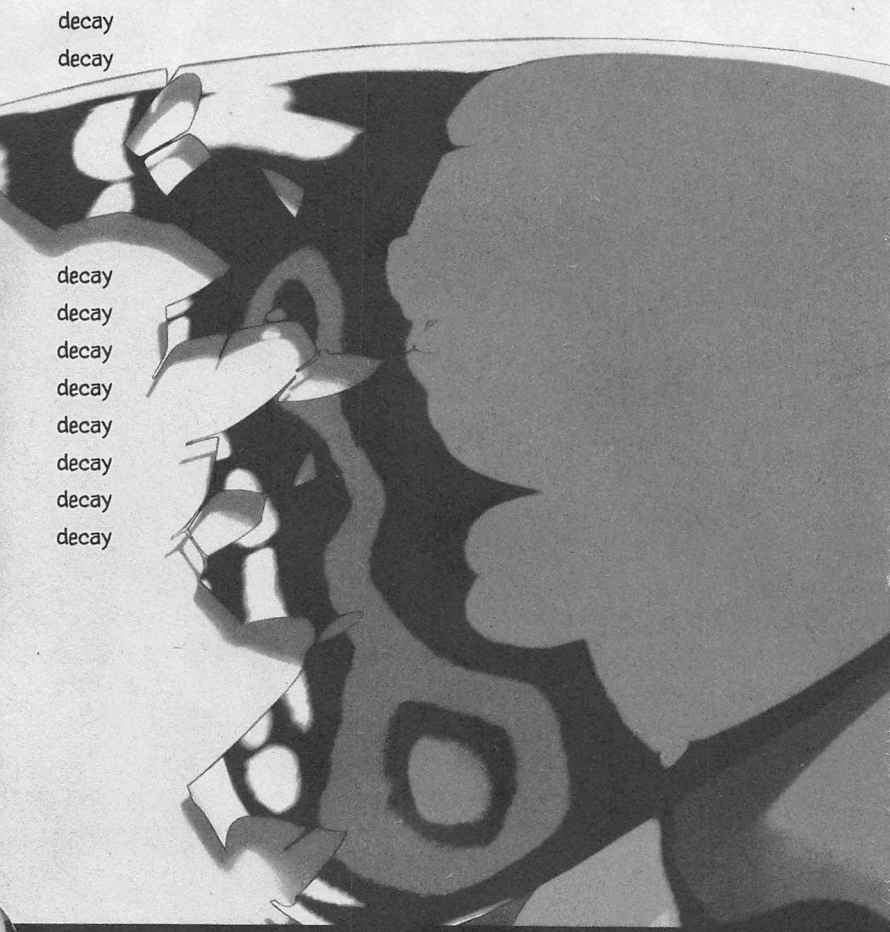


Please, somebody let me out;
please, somebody save me
from this small box that houses me,
from this blinding dream that
scorches me.
Oh, look . . .

my wings are decaying . . .
decaying . . .

In my dream, I was a butterfly, and
I couldn't fly.
I couldn't fly to search for nectar,
I couldn't fly to search for friends,
because the pin you stuck in me
keeps me here, a decoration.

As a decoration, I'm paralyzed.
Paralysis isn't a standstill but
the reason I'm scorched by your
mercury lamp.






I had a dream about the butterflies.
Dream of the Butterflies
x6suke


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DREAM OF THE BUTTERFLIES

x6suke

Faust celebrates a more experimental type of manga than is normally found in Japan's manga anthology magazines. Short "illustory" pieces, such as "Dream of the Butterflies," elevate manga from mere narrative into the realm of the poetic—creating a whole new way to fuse words with pictures. At the same time, this piece remains true to *Faust*'s audience with a beautiful girl dressed in gothic-lolita chic (a fashion trend that mixes morbid Victoriana with baby doll sweetness).

x6suke, an illustrator, was born in 1978.

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A NOTE ON READING THIS VOLUME

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Faust collects the best in cutting-edge Japanese fiction—whether the author's chosen medium is prose or manga.

Japanese books customarily read from right to left. Of necessity, the prose fiction and essays must be laid out from left to right and can be found on the other side of this volume. However, the manga selections in this volume present a different challenge—to preserve the artist's original vision for his or her artwork. Therefore, in order to respect the creators' vision, the manga selections are presented on the following pages, in their original right-to-left orientation. Please turn the book over to read the prose selections.

A brilliant anthology featuring manga-inspired fiction from today's best writers with artwork from top manga creators, including

"ECCO," by Tatsuhiko Takimoto (illustrated by D.K): Is life nothing but a cruel joke? One young rebel decides to find out.

"Jagdtiger," by Kouhei Kadono (illustrated by Ueda Hajime): She's a combat-ready synthetic human with a dangerous flaw: a heart.

"Where the Wind Blows," by Otsuichi (illustrated by Takeshi Obata): A newspaper from the future carries a very disturbing story for one particular woman: She will die by the hand of the man she loves.

"Magical Girl Risuka," by NISIOISIN (illustrated by Kinu Nishimura): She's a beautiful witch with magical powers that could change the world. And he's the boy who will give her a reason to do it.

"Gray-Colored Diet Coke," by Yûya Satô: He's nineteen, surrounded by morons, and desperate to escape his crummy part-time job. His best friend's plan worked great, but surely suicide can't be the only way out.

PLUS more illustrated stories, interviews, essays, manga comics, and bonus features!

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Book 2

FAUST

Includes works by
Obata
Ueda
NISIOISIN
Otsuichi
Otomo
take
Kadono
Terada

2

BALLANTINE BOOKS

DEL REY