INDIFFERENT FOUR-WIND SCATTERING?

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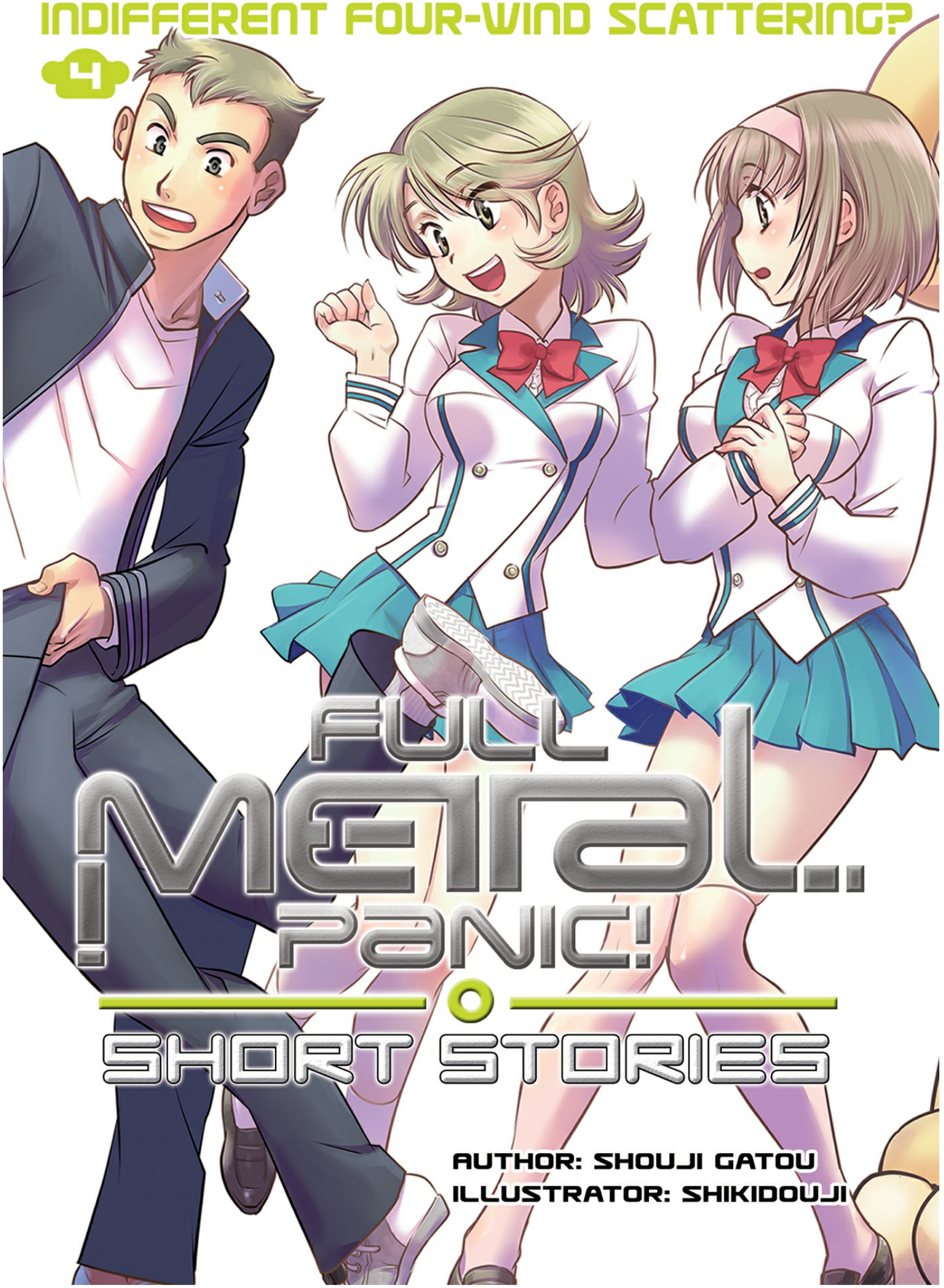
FULL METAL PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

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Who Killed Cock Robin (of the Rocky Shores)?

One day, after class, a mysterious package arrived at the student council room. Sagara Sousuke looked down at it with his usual sullen expression.

The scene that unfolded was common enough: he scrutinized the package, staring at it hard enough to burn holes in it. According to the label, it had been sent from the Daiku Island branch of Maryu Middle School in Kumamoto Prefecture—a school he'd never heard of before. It was made of Styrofoam and about the size of a large shoe box. It was also surprisingly heavy, almost as if there was water inside.

Sousuke was unaware of any such thing having ever been sent to the student council before. He was the only one in the room at the moment, yet he knew it would be dangerous to simply open the box. There was no guarantee that it didn't contain a powerful liquid binary explosive.

What to do with it, then? he wondered.

The path ahead was clear: he should take it out to a safe place on the school grounds, far away from anything important, and test it himself. He could open a small hole with a drill and insert a fiberscope. If it seemed likely that the contents were a bomb, he could detonate it.

But if the person who'd made the bomb was clever, even that small amount of investigation could prove deadly.

Yes. If it were me...

The sender might have pressurized the box. One small hole could then cause the internal pressure to plummet, which would trigger the bomb. Such a thing could be easily rigged with just a carbonated drink, aluminum foil, and common electronic parts and chemicals.

Yes, it's too dangerous to investigate. My only course of action, then...

Having come to his usual conclusion, Sousuke was about to take the package outside, when—

“H... Hold it right there!” A young woman in a suit flew into the student council room.

“Ms. Kagurazaka?!” Sousuke exclaimed.

The woman—Sousuke’s homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri—lurched against the doorframe, gasping for breath. It looked like she’d run all the way there from the first floor. “S-Sagara-kun. What are you about to do with that package?! Don’t tell me you’re going to try to detonate it like you always do...”

“I am, ma’am. It could be dangerous.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“One can never be too careful.”

“In this case, you absolutely can!” she shouted as she snatched the package away from Sousuke. She then cradled it gingerly in her hands, also as if dealing with a dangerous explosive.


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“This is very important material sent by Mr. Koganei, a biologist who used to teach at our school. Last week, he called the teachers’ office and asked us to take care of it,” she explained. “It’s not hazardous in the slightest.”

“Aha.”

“I can’t believe they sent it to the student council room rather than the staff office! That was almost a disaster...” Eri breathed a sigh of relief.

Sousuke watched her carefully.

“Do you continue to have some kind of objection, Sagara-kun?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I would like to ask, just to be certain. Could this Koganei person be... *compromised*?”

Eri stared at him. “What?”

“You haven’t lost contact with him for an extended period of time?” Sousuke persisted. “He hasn’t demonstrated any particular ideological leanings?”

“I don’t think so...”

“He doesn’t have any family members struggling with money, with substance addiction, with suicide... or any other such issues?”

“No,” said Eri. “What in the world are you implying?”

“Well... even if he is a scholar and a former instructor here, every person has their price,” Sousuke told her.

“You...”

“Are you aware that a similar incident happened in Europe recently? Terrorists blackmailed a high government official over his past homosexual affairs and forced him to plant an explosive on the president’s dog. That was—”

“Enough!” said Eri, interrupting Sousuke’s earnest elaboration. “Why are you so suspicious of everything? Can’t you ever give people the benefit of the doubt?”

“I’m afraid not.” Sousuke thrust out his chest proudly. “The enemy will take advantage of any exceptions given.”

“For heaven’s sake...” With a deeply bitter expression, Eri began to open up the package, swiftly untying the cord and opening the lid to show him the contents. “You see? It’s not dangerous. Go on, look!”

Inside the box were ‘gai’—snails. Eight of them, sitting in half-melted ice water. Each was just a little bit smaller than a person’s fist, with several ‘horns’ protruding from its shell.

“Snails?”

“Yes. Snails.”

“They appear to be alive,” said Sousuke.

“Well, I should hope so!” Eri retorted. “These are extremely precious creatures, a species of snail called the Daiku Maryu King-gai.”

“That’s a very long and suspicious name,” Sousuke observed.

“They have a plain but elegant color and only live on Daiku Island in Nishi-Kyushu. They are extremely rare, but Mr. Koganei is an accomplished scholar in the field of malacology, and he’s allowed our principal to take a few on since we promised we’d take good care of them,” said Eri, looking down at the snails. They were a dull, semitranslucent green color—one might even say emerald green—with stripes of charcoal gray, like trailing clouds. They looked less like snails and more like some kind of mineral ore.

“If we take good care of them, they might grow as large as thirty centimeters,” she went on excitedly. “Though it’ll take them quite a while to reach that—”

Just then, a short chime sounded, and a message from the staff office rang through the school. “Ms. Kagurazaka. Ms. Kagurazaka. The aquarium you ordered from Nanbu Goods has arrived. Please come to the front gate at once. The aquarium you ordered from—”

“Oh, the aquarium’s here. I have to go get it,” said Eri, with a glance at Sousuke. She’d apparently gone so far as to buy special equipment in which to raise the snails. “Sagara-kun. Will you help me bring it inside? I don’t think I can carry it all by myself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sousuke responded promptly.

The announcement rang out again, impatiently. “Ms. Kagurazaka. The delivery truck is blocking the road. Please come to the front gate at—”

“Oh, shoot. Better hurry.” The panicking Eri had been trying to close the Styrofoam box filled with snails packed in ice, but it was a fairly involved process, and she wasn’t having much luck. “Oh, forget it,” she exclaimed. “Let’s just leave it here for now.”

Sousuke frowned. “Are you certain of that? Didn’t you say they were valuable?”

“They’ll be fine for a few minutes. The greatest threat to them will be with me, after all. Now, let’s go!” Eri left the student council room, shooing Sousuke out with her. She closed the door tightly, leaving only the strange, precious snails behind in the now-empty room.

Three minutes later, the student council vice president, Chidori Kaname, poked her head in. She was a girl from Sousuke’s class and had long, black hair down to her waist, held in place by a trademark red ribbon. She had a symmetrical, strong-willed face, and very pretty features.

“Hey, folks! Oh, no one’s here...”

The room was empty. Normally, after class, there would be at least one person present, either watching TV or fooling around on the computer.

“Eh?” As Kaname entered the empty room, her eyes fell on the Styrofoam box lying on the large table. She removed the lid without a second thought and saw the snails inside. They appeared to be a gift from some middle school somewhere. “Oh, these are...” Kaname stared at them, entranced. She didn’t recognize the school’s name, but she had to say, they had good taste.

Typically, the gifts that other schools sent them were boring sculptures or paintings—usually something made by some local art teacher entitled “Sculpture of a Young Man,” “A Maiden’s Wish,” or some other cliché title, that they couldn’t sell in their home region. But this...

I can’t believe they sent us escargot! Kaname thought in delight.

Out loud, she exclaimed, “This is magnificent!” These were delicious sazae snails, still alive as far as she could tell. *That means they’re fresh. Fresh from the source. Fresh from their birthplace.* The smell of the rocky shore wafted into her nose. *This is truly, truly—*

Kaname found herself drooling and quickly gulped it back down. Then she tucked the box of snails under her arm, turned around, and flew out of the student council room. She was heading for the Home Ec room, where she would find a gas stove, a grill top, and plenty of soy sauce.

“Hora hora minna no koe ga suru...” she sang to herself, a skip in her step. *Gotta act fast. When working with seafood, freshness is king!*

“Heaven’s sake! Ridiculous!” Eri strode down the hall towards the student council room, fuming. They had finished carrying in the aquarium, and now they were heading to retrieve the snails they’d left behind. “Why don’t you ever think before you act? I warned you so many times!”

Sousuke was trailing behind her, seeming somehow triumphant despite the browbeating he was taking. “But I really am acting in the interests of your safety and that of the student body as a whole,” he told her earnestly. “I believe it’s important to exercise a minimum of safety precautions—”

Eri glared at him. “Is that any reason to hold the poor deliverymen at gunpoint and tickle them all over?!”

“It was a simple body check,” he told her. “I saw the two of them look at me, then share a meaningful glance.”

“They were clearly just surprised at seeing an ordinary high school student pull out a knife that large to open the package!”

“Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s it!”

Still arguing back and forth, they opened the door to the student council room and entered.

And there, they fell silent.

It was immediately clear that the snails—which should have been on the table—were now gone. The box they'd come in was gone as well without a trace.

There were quite a few students hanging around in the room now.

"Okada-kun. Did you see a package around here? It had snails inside," Eri asked a young man, the treasurer.

"No. You seen it?" the treasurer asked the other two with a frown.

"I'm afraid not," said the second-year secretary.

"I haven't seen anything," said the first-year in charge of equipment.

"How in the world..." Eri's face grew visibly paler. Tears filled her eyes, and she began looking around the room in a panic.

"Shall I investigate?" Sousuke asked calmly.

"Yes, please! If anything happens to those snails—oh, I don't even want to think about it! The principal will have my head!"

"We wouldn't want that, I'm sure."

"Yes... oh, please, God. Please... let those snails be okay..." Eri clasped her hands together and entreated the ceiling above.

But her prayers would go unanswered, as the eight snails were already bubbling deliciously on top of the mesh grill over the open flame. The addition of a tiny amount of soy sauce and sake made their aroma even more delicious.

Kaname was in the home economics room, where wine and sake were available for seasoning purposes. The home economics teacher was off today, and there was no one else present—in other words, she had the whole room to herself.

"Hee hee hee..." Gleefully, Kaname stabbed a piece of cooked snail with a toothpick and gave it a taste. It was nice and crisp, and exploded into juice with just the right amount of bitterness in her mouth. "Delicious!" She found herself poking at the shell again and again until she'd cleaned it out. She couldn't help but sense a slight difference in the flavor between these and your typical sazae snails, but surely that was nothing to worry about. They were much better than

the snails she bought at the local fishmonger, after all.

Kaname turned off the burner and left the room to call in the rest of the student council. She considered just bringing the cooked snails with her, but she was worried about the juice spilling out of the shells en route.

As she arrived at the hallway leading from the south school building to the northern one, she passed the treasurer, Okada Hayato. He was short and ruddy, with hair in dreadlocks and a clever air about him. He looked more like he belonged on the streets of Los Angeles than in Japan.

“Oh, Okada-kun. Perfect timing. Are you free?” She was about to ask him to call the others, but he quickly shook his head.

“No, I’m not free. I’m looking for something.”

“Looking for something?” she echoed.

“Yes. Hit up the student council room,” he suggested. “Sagara’s losing his mind.” With no elaboration, Okada Hayato walked away.

Tilting her head curiously, Kaname continued on to the student council room.

There was a sign posted on the door, written in large letters, in magic marker. The eye couldn’t help but be drawn to it.

Daiku Maryu King-gai Task Force HQ

“What the... What nonsense is he up to now?” she muttered to herself as she entered. Inside, she found Sagara Sousuke and her homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, poring over a large diagram of the school and exchanging hushed, serious conversation.

“Chidori,” Sousuke whispered as he cast a glance at her.

“What’s going on here? You both look so serious,” she asked.

Sousuke put a hand to his jaw. “Indeed. We appear to have run into an issue.”

“An issue?”

“Someone has made off with an extremely precious object,” he said. “I told

Mikihara and Sasaki and the others to ask around, but...”

A precious object? “What kind of precious object?” Kaname asked casually.

Eri responded for him. “Snails. Eight of them. They were in a Styrofoam box.”

Kaname froze up for a moment. “I... I see.”

“They’re practically priceless,” Sousuke added in a serious voice. “Mr. Koganei, a leader in his field, sent them especially for our school to raise. They’re an extremely rare species on the brink of extinction.”

“I... I see...”

“We don’t know who could have stolen them, but if anything happens to those snails, the student responsible will be punished severely... What’s the matter, Chidori?” Noticing the greasy sweat rising on her forehead, Sousuke raised an eyebrow. “You look rather ill.”

“Do I? I don’t feel ill... I feel great. Seriously. Totally great,” she croaked out, her jaw as stiff as a marionette’s.

“Really? You seem to be acting strangely, to me.”

“No, no. I’m completely normal. Almost... abnormally normal. Ha ha ha... ha.”

“Hmm...” Sousuke stared at her penetratingly, but at last shook his head, “Very well. The focus of all our attention must be finding the Daiku Maryu King-gai, after all.” He folded his arms and turned his eyes back to the school diagram.

Kaname spoke up, hesitantly, “I... Where’s Hayashimizu-senpai?”

“The president is in the principal’s office. I informed him of the situation, and he went to explain things to her.”

“I... I see.”

“As head of school security and aide to the student council president, I’m devoting my full resources to the investigation,” he told her.

As Kaname said nothing in response, Sousuke turned his eyes away to resume his discussion with Eri. They were pointing at various places on the diagram, formulating a variety of theories. He was pointing out that they could have

been thrown away in some trash can, the bathroom, or a potted plant, and she was wailing about how badly she hoped the snails were safe.

Meanwhile, Kaname leaned her back against the wall, eyes pointed downwards as she tried desperately to catch her breath.

Ahh, ahh... What will I do? she wondered desperately.

She'd had no idea the snails were that important and wondered if it might be better to simply admit to her crime and beg for forgiveness. Surely, they would show mercy on her then? It wasn't as if she'd known. She had assumed they were simply edible sazae snails. There had been no malice behind it.

That's right...

If she just said "I'm sorry! I didn't know!" what would they all—the principal, Eri, Sousuke and Hayashimizu—say? They would ask her, patiently... "So, where are the precious snails that another school sent us to take care of?"

And then... and then she would have to admit that she ate them. That they were delicious.

I can't tell them. I absolutely can't tell them! Kaname shook her head, her face white as a sheet. Her punishment wouldn't stop at a simple scolding and suspension. The incident would become the talk of the entire school. She could almost hear the voices of her classmates:

"Kana-chan, you must have been really hungry, huh?"

"Who just finds something lying around and eats it?"

"I bet you catch and cook neighborhood cats from time to time, too."

They'd say all kinds of things, regardless of veracity, without any attempt at empathy. And she would be made to bear the cross of 'gift-eater' for the rest of her life. After they had already forced on her the title of Jindai High School's 'number one idol that you wouldn't want to date!' They would now combine them into 'gift-eater that you wouldn't want to date,' and she'd sound like a monster.

No... I can't take it! I'm only sixteen years old! I want to wear beautiful dresses and fall in love! ...is exactly the kind of silly overdramatic thing this situation

makes me want to say... This is awful! she lamented to herself, grinding her forehead against the wall.

Just then, the treasurer she'd run into earlier, Okada Hayato, nearly broke the door down as he made a dramatic entrance to the student council room. "Emergency, Chief!"

"What is it, Okada?" Sousuke asked smoothly, as if he were Ishihara Yujiro, the actor famous for playing a police superintendent.

"We found bodies in the home economics room!"

Sousuke gasped. "How many?"

"Eight. All dead. It was a slaughter!" Okada exclaimed.

"I see," Sousuke lamented. "We were too late, then..."

Hearing those words, Eri collapsed onto the desk, unconscious.

"Ma'am. Wake up, ma'am. Someone call a medic!" Sousuke shook his teacher's shoulders.

Meanwhile, Kaname placed her hands over her face, as red as if she'd just gotten out of the bath, and slumped to her knees.

Snap! A flash of light illuminated the bodies on the table—the bodies of the Daiku Maryu King-gai, now rendered into escargot.

In the abandoned Home Ec room, they'd found a gas burner, soy sauce, chopsticks, a kitchen knife, toothpicks, and other objects used in the crime. They'd surrounded them all with chalk outlines and placed small cards next to them, each labeled with a letter of the alphabet. The young equipment manager, wearing an armband that read 'Crime Scene Investigator,' held a camera aloft as he walked around the table, capturing pictures of the carnage from every available angle.

Sousuke stood beside Kaname, scowling down at the escargot. "Estimated time of death, thirty minutes ago. The immediate cause of death was an icepick. The culprit used it to extract the bodies from the shells, chopped them up with a kitchen knife, then returned them to their shells to cook them. Truly cold-

blooded,” said Sousuke, smoothly outlining the method of murder (which was also the recipe for making tsuboyaki-style escargot.)

Kaname watched him, glassy-eyed.


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“The crime was definitely premeditated,” he went on. “The methodological MO suggests intent. But what in the world did the culprit have against snails?”

“Maybe they just really wanted to eat ’em?” the treasurer, Okada Hayato, whispered as he listened from behind.

Sousuke stood there for a while, silently, scrutinizing the cooked snails and the soy sauce bottle sitting beside them. “That is possible.”

“I mean, that’s definitely what it is?” the treasurer prompted him.

“No... That could be a red herring meant to throw us off the trail,” Sousuke decided. “Similar to when a murderer robs the home of a victim in order to draw attention away from more personal motives.”

The treasurer fell silent.

Sousuke, now chief of the task force for the Daiku Maryu King-gai investigation, folded his arms and sighed. “One way or another, these snails were murdered. We must find the culprit and bring them to justice.”

At this, Kaname spoke up again, timidly. “Are you... Are you going to try to find out who did it?”

“Of course we are,” he told her. “We’ll search every nook and cranny, find the one who murdered this precious gift, and make them regret what they’ve done.”

“Regret it... how?”

“A fine question. We will likely parade them around the school, then give them a public flogging, followed by execution.”

Kaname gulped.

“We may also wish to hang their body in front of the school gate for three days as an example to others.” Sousuke sounded completely serious.

Kaname took an unconscious half-step back. “Th-That... seems a little bit harsh. After all, we don’t know for certain that they had malicious intentions. It might be some kind of misunderstanding,” she said faintly.

Sousuke shook his head. “Unacceptable naivety from one of your high office.

The motive is irrelevant—society couldn't function if pleading ignorance was sufficient for acquittal."

"I suppose... I suppose you're right, but..."

"Blood must be answered in blood. This has been the tradition for thousands of years," he said firmly, just before he began to pace around the home economics classroom, inspecting the scene.

"Ah, well... I'm heading out for a minute..." Kaname, dazed and limp, left the room behind.

She walked up to the nearby water fountain, taking a drink to soothe her parched throat. As she wet her lips, she racked her brain over what to do...

"Ka-na-me-chaaan..." The treasurer, Okada Hayato, arrived beside her at the fountain, grinning broadly.

"What is it?"

"You ate those snails, didn't you?"

Kaname flinched. *How did you know?!* she wanted to ask, but she swallowed down the urge and looked away. "What... What in the world are you talking about?"

"Ha ha ha... Don't play dumb with me. You had a toothpick in your mouth when I passed you in the hall. And you were coming from the home economics room."

"Geh..."

"Plus, you're the best cook in the student council. It all just clicked."

"Argh..." She'd just begun to hope it was all over.

But Okada looked at her meaningfully and said, "Relax. I'm willing to not tell Sagara or the others."

"What?"

"But only on one condition." Okada raised his index finger.

"What's... What's the condition?" Kaname looked at him nervously and

gulped.

The short-statured blackmailer smiled a smile that was far toothier than it needed to be. “Heh heh heh... I believe you have a CD autographed by JB. You got it when you lived in New York... It’s a very rare item.”

“Hrk!” said Kaname, her expression tensing up.

“I’d sure love to own it!” Okada declared brightly.

“N-No! That’s... that’s... that’s my life!”

“Is it really?”

“Of course it is!” Kaname exclaimed. “You can’t possibly expect me to...!”

“I understand... Then I’ll have to tell them everything.” Okada turned around, about to head back to the home economics room.

Kaname grabbed his arm. “Wait, Okada-kun.”

“What is it? You said you wouldn’t give it up, right?”

“I-Isn’t there anything else you want? A poster from when he performed in Japan, or—and I admit, this has nothing to do with anything—a Fumo-Fumo Bonta-kun doll? I’ve got lots of good stuff! Well? What about it?!” Kaname begged him.

Okada smiled. “Please,” he said pityingly. “I don’t want any of that crap.”

“C’mon, be flexible. Please! Take something else and spare me this torment!”

“No. Now, let me go.”

“Please don’t tell them. I really didn’t mean any harm!” Her eyes filled with tears, and she unconsciously gave his arm a good wrench... just as Okada slipped on the wet floor of the fountain area.

“What the—” He sailed through the air, did a half-flip, and—*crack!* A dull sound rang out as the back of Okada’s head hit the floor. He laid there, sprawled out and motionless.

“O-Okada-kun?” Kaname’s eyes went wide. She crouched down next to him, shaking him. But he simply lay there, silent except for the occasional groan of pain. There was no one else near the fountain. In other words... no witnesses.

Th-This means... She hadn't meant to silence him. Yet somehow or other, someone who knew about her crime and was threatening to blackmail her was lying on the ground in front of her, motionless. Feeling almost like a murderer, Kaname looked around in a panic. *What do I do?* she fretted. *Drag the body somewhere and bury it... No, no! I need to take him to the nurse's office, explain the situation... No, I can't do that! They'd know what I did!*

Every second, footsteps from the home economics room drew nearer. They were still around the corner, though, and couldn't see her yet.

"Okada-kun, Chidori. We're about to bag the evidence. Could you help? Oh... where have they gone?" It was Sousuke. They'd been gone long enough that he'd come to check on them.

Geh, this isn't good! Ah, what do I do? What do I do?! Confused and terrified by the strange chain of events, Kaname launched into a complete fit of hysteria. First, she tried dragging Okada away by the legs, then ran in Sousuke's direction, then did a brief, spontaneous tap dance, then started removing her uniform, then stopped, then—

Whoosh! In the end, she opted to run off in the other direction. As she flew down the stairway, she could hear Sousuke's voice behind her.

"Okada?! What's wrong? Who got you? Speak to me! Okada—"

Repeating quiet but urgent apologies under her breath, Kaname brushed away her tears and kept running.

The sun was setting on the strange day after class, bathing the school building in its orange glow. On the athletic field, the baseball and soccer clubs finished their practices, and a saxophone from the brass band played a sorrowful melody from the roof.

Inside the student council room, Sousuke and six other student council members gathered around Kagurazaka Eri, who had finally recovered from her shock. Okada, the treasurer, was still sleeping in the nurse's office, and student council president Hayashimizu hadn't yet returned from the principal's office.

Kaname was present as well. She looked terribly uncomfortable, with

slumped shoulders and a permanently plaintive expression, but she'd responded to the call on the intercom and returned to the student council room from wherever she'd been hiding.

"Now, everyone," declared Sousuke, who was wearing his task force chief armband. "Having concluded an investigation of the scene and interrogations, I have ascertained several things about the situation. The investigation itself was not without its own tragedies, but I believe I have finally ascertained the culprit in the murder of the Daiku Maryu King-gai." Sousuke's tone was calm, but at the same time, grave. "Now, as I mentioned before the investigation began, there were many things about the situation that suggested an inside job—in other words, that the culprit is someone inside this room. That is what my judgment and my instinct both tell me."

While everyone else in the room just looked nervous, Kaname began shaking her head in agony.

"Someone in this room? Is that true, Sagara-kun?" Eri asked, just to be sure.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied gravely. "I find it unfortunate, but it is the only conclusion to which I can come."

"So, who is the culprit?"

"Ma'am. The culprit is..."

The entire group leaned forward.

Sousuke waited a few moments, then pointed dramatically. "The culprit is—you, Ms. Kagurazaka!" he declared.

Three seconds passed. Nobody in the group reacted, including Eri herself. At last she said, "Excuse me?" while frowning, her head tilted to the side.

Sousuke nodded gravely, folded his arms, and embarked upon his lengthy explanation. "You very nearly had me fooled, ma'am. I should have realized it when you first told me to leave the snails behind. Why leave such precious snails in a room alone? When I began to really think about it, I realized that there was no good explanation."

"Wait—"

“Yes,” he went on, completely overriding her objection. “In addition to you and I, there was one other person hidden in the student council room. A student with whom you conspired to murder the snails. That person was—”

“You are utterly—”

“—Okada. After all, his sixth period class is English, taught by you. With your permission, he could have easily been the first one into the student council room after school ended. But then you had a problem: I entered the room before you did. Okada quickly hid underneath a table—he must have become quite alarmed when he noticed I’d taken an interest in the package.”

“Wait a minute—”

“You managed to come running just in time, and once you’d cleverly lured me out of the room, Okada stole the snails, killed them, and then returned here, leaving the rest of us none the wiser,” Sousuke continued. “But once the investigation was underway, his conscience began to nag at him. He intended to turn himself in and finger you as the mastermind behind it all. And when you realized that—you mercilessly chose to silence him.”

“Why would you think that?!” she wailed.

“Okada was at the water fountain quenching his thirst when you snuck up behind him, and with a sadistic smile on your face, hit your own student in the back of the head with a blunt instrument—”

“This is absolutely outrageous!” Eri was finally rising from her seat, shouting. “I was asleep in the nurse’s office, remember? And your theory is completely full of holes!”

Sousuke paused. “Full of holes, you say?” Though he remained as expressionless as ever, sweat began to rise on Sousuke’s forehead. He looked at the equipment manager and the secretary as well as the accountant, who all nodded in unison.

“It seems a little forced.”

“I’m afraid it’s quite implausible.”

“She doesn’t even have a motive.”

In the face of their united front, Sousuke put a hand to his chin and hummed to himself thoughtfully.

It was then that Kaname, who had been silently looking at the floor the entire time, leaped to her feet. “For the love of... Enough!”

“Chidori?” Sousuke and the others present looked at her in surprise.

“I said I’ve had enough! What is the point of all this? I’m exhausted,” she sobbed. “I’m just exhausted! I don’t care what happens to me anymore!”

“What is it, Chidori? Where is this coming—”

Kaname mussed up her black hair as tears poured from her eyes. Her voice cracked as she delivered her shocking confession. “I... I’m the one who killed them!”

Her declaration stunned the entire group into silence, their eyes wide.

“What?!”

“Chidori-san? You...?!”

“Yes, it was me! I killed them! All eight of them! Some of them even fought back, yet I stabbed them with an icepick and chopped them up with a knife! I slaughtered them! All of them!” She trailed off into wordless sobbing and wailing, unable to go on.

“Impossible. Why would you do such a thing?” Sousuke, who never would have dreamed that Kaname was the culprit, advanced on her, his face pale.

“Because... Because...!” Kaname trembled as she sobbed.

“Why, Chidori? Why... Why did you kill them?!”

Suddenly, her tears stopped, and she said plainly, “Because they were delicious.”

●

Meanwhile, in the principal’s office, bathed in the same early evening light...

Jindai High’s principal, Tsuboi Takako, and its student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, were sitting around a meeting table across from each other.

“But... Mr. Koganei really does cause a lot of trouble, doesn’t he, ma’am?” Hayashimizu asked as he busily worked his chopsticks.

“Yes, he truly does. He used to be such an intelligent man, too... but he seems to be growing forgetful in his old age,” the principal said, likewise working her chopsticks. “I can’t believe he sends ordinary sazae snails as ‘a newly discovered species’ or ‘a species on the verge of extinction’ every year. We don’t even ask for them!”

“He sent some to the student council room this year as well,” Hayashimizu pointed out. “It appears Ms. Kagurazaka is having a bit of a time about them.”

“Oh, is she? I do believe she was the one who took the phone call from Mr. Koganei last week. It’s fine, though. I hope they enjoy them together.” The principal let out your standard middle-aged woman’s laugh.

Hayashimizu shared her laugh with a pleasant chuckle. “I am quite enjoying them myself already.” He poked at a snail merrily bubbling away on the tabletop burner. Following the naming scheme Mr. Koganei had given them, they called them ‘Daiku Maryu King-gai escargot.’ “Yes, they are truly delicious. I’d love a warm sake with them. Some Kuroushi from Wakayama, perhaps...”

“Rather than objecting to your intemperance, I’d prefer to ask why a high school student has such old man tastes...” the principal whispered to herself without any malice.

〈Who Killed Cock Robin (of the Rocky Shores)? - The End〉

The Innocent of Remembrance (Part 1)

The building was familiar. The hallway was familiar. The scenery outside the window, too, resembled her place of learning... Yet as she walked through the strange school, Chidori Kaname felt extremely unsettled.

She and Sagara Sousuke were walking through Komaoka Academy High School in the next town over on a Friday afternoon. As members of the student council, they were here on business for the Tajiren, the Tama Regional High School Government Conference. The Tajiren was made up of student councils from roughly forty schools in the western Tokyo area, whose representatives met up, discussed things, offered each other aid, and deepened their ties of friendship... or at least, that was the nebulous concept behind it.

The Tajiren was set to hold a two-day training camp next month, which was what they were here to discuss.

“Ah, so nervous,” Kaname whispered to herself as she headed for the local student council room. She was wearing the Jindai High girls’ uniform, a white blazer and blue skirt. The red ribbon that held back her hair provided a charming accent to the classic color scheme.

The Jindai High uniform was quite well known, popular among the local girls, and had even been featured in books and magazines. Ten years ago—the year after the design had been adopted—female applicants to the school had increased by 50%.

Meanwhile, the Komaoka Academy uniform was a boring brown blazer, its dullness unassisted by a maroon necktie. The school itself also had a strict dress code, which forbade them from wearing the navy blue skirt any higher than the knees. Students from other schools called the uninspired design ‘the German cockroach’ in mocking whispers. The students of Komaoka Academy knew about this and, forced to acknowledge the accuracy of the comparison, were mostly resigned about it.

Of course, none of them seemed happy to see the uniform of another school

around their own—especially if the uniform was from Jindai High. Komaoka Academy, one of the top prep schools in the region. Confronted by a student from a school that was not only far less accomplished, but had cuter girls' uniforms? The atmosphere they exuded towards Kaname wasn't exactly hostility, but...

What's she *doing here?*

Hmph. Show-off...

On the prowl for a man, is she?

Such were the thoughts their gazes seemed to convey.

Some of this might have simply been a persecution complex on Kaname's part, but whether that was the case or not, the fact of the matter was that people all along the hallway *were* looking at her. And the natural result was that Kaname felt nervous.

Sousuke was feeling nervous as well. After all, he was in another school's territory. He knew nothing of the building's layout and makeup. If someone were to attack them, he couldn't guarantee a strategically advantageous position or useful escape routes. In addition, he knew nothing of the school's security protocols and political leanings. Could the school have a far right faction with an anti-Jindai bias? He didn't know. Just walking behind Kaname as he accompanied her, he could feel the penetrating gazes of the students in the brown blazers.

What are they *doing here?*

Hmph. Filthy foreigners...

Here to steal our classified secrets, are they?

Such were the thoughts their gazes seemed to convey.

Some of this might have simply been a persecution complex on Sousuke's part, but whether that was the case or not, the fact of the matter was that people all along the hallway *were* looking at them.

"I'm tremendously nervous," Sousuke whispered.

Kaname nodded in response. "Same. For once, we're in agreement."

“You feel the same way? Remain on your guard, then.”

“Uh?”

“If trouble starts, drop your things,” he advised her. “I’ll lead them away, while you run with all your might. Understood?”

“I’m starting to think we’re not as ‘in agreement’ as I thought...”

Throughout that awkward exchange, the two climbed the stairs and arrived at the student council room on the second floor.

“Hello,” said Kaname, “I’m Chidori from Jindai.”

The student council room at Komaoka Academy, unlike the one at Jindai, had a strangely Spartan air to it. There was one desk, two bookshelves, a scattering of folding chairs... and nothing more.

A second-year boy was waiting for them inside. He had short-clipped hair and a haughty air about him. “I am the student council president, Shiohara,” he said quietly.

“A pleasure. Sorry to intrude on your time like this. Where are the others?” Kaname asked.

“Occupied elsewhere. It’s just me today.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Unlike *your* students, one hundred percent of ours will be advancing to university... Thus, they’re all busy studying. They don’t have time for games like you do.” Shiohara’s response suggested a serious degree of annoyance at their presence.

Kaname felt indignant, yet she dutifully pulled out the necessary documents and pamphlets for potential lodging destinations. “Then let’s get this over with,” she suggested politely.

The discussion of the training camp began. They went over adjustments to the schedule and the partitioning of various tasks. Kaname would make a proposal, and Shiohara would simply respond, “Do as you like.” If she asked for confirmation of any details, he’d respond, “You should be able to figure that one out on your own.”

Thirty minutes passed in this fashion. Kaname was annoyed by the man's condescension, but she managed to suck it up to finish the checklist.

"Is that everything?" he asked.

"Yes, it seems so. Have a good day," Kaname said.

Shiohara merely looked away and nodded, then quickly began his preparations to leave. He didn't even say, 'Same to you.' He simply acted as if he had just bought some rolls from a convenience store and she was the clerk who'd said, 'Thank you for coming.'

Kaname flinched. After she'd come all this way to see him, the treatment was infuriating. Did the man even understand the most basic social conventions? "Excuse me..."

"Yes?"

"Isn't there something you're supposed to say?" she asked him, icily.

Shiohara responded, not a hair out of place, "I have no idea what you're talking about. We *are* finished, aren't we?"

"I'm talking about basic manners! Don't you know how to talk to a fellow human being? Where in the world were you raised?!"

Here, Shiohara sighed. "What an utterly proletarian question."

"What?!"

"Do you think I care about remaining in your good graces?" he demanded. "I can think of no reason whatsoever why I should. Therefore, your objection is nonsensical. What right does an outsider like you even have to comment upon my upbringing? Please consider that before you comment further."

His statement was so outrageous that Kaname was forced into silence.

Seeing this, Shiohara showed the first hint of a smile. "Well, as expected from students of Jindai... A certain class of school attracts a certain class of people."

Kaname remained too outraged to speak.

But Shiohara wasn't finished. "That student council president of yours—Hayashimizu-san. He attended Kousei with me. Quite a fall from grace indeed...

but I'm sure he enjoys being a big fish in a small pond."

This was the first Kaname had heard of any of this. By 'Kousei,' of course, he meant Kousei Middle School. It was a private school considered to be one of the best, even at a national level.

"I'm told he began falling in with a bad crowd," Shiohara continued. "He began to make money by taking bets and dealing paint thinner, and the school became quite angry with him. Such a shame."

Is he talking about the same Hayashimizu we know? Kaname felt slightly shaken by this but fixed her eyes on the other man. "Are you trying to pick a fight or something?" she asked.

"I'm simply expressing my condolences. Of course, if I've touched a nerve, I suppose I could apologize. Terribly sorry," he said with utter indifference. Even the bow of his head that accompanied it, though deep, was a mechanical gesture devoid of any true emotion.

Kaname just looked on, flabbergasted.

When Komaoka Academy's student council president looked up again, he said, "Are you satisfied now? I have a private lesson to attend. Therefore—"

Blam! There was a sudden gunshot, and Shiohara reeled back, hitting the floor hard. Sousuke had drawn a shotgun and hit him square in the face with a rubber slug.

"Sousuke?!"

"Sorry, Shiohara or whoever you are... You can't fool me just by invoking the name of our president," said Sousuke. He kept his gun cautiously trained on Shiohara, who was now writhing on the ground and foaming at the mouth.

"You... What in the world are you doing?!" Shiohara gasped.

"Keep back, Chidori. This man is an impostor."

"Uh?"

"To my knowledge, the presidents of student councils are uniformly gentlemanly, wise, and personable. Thus, this man cannot be a student council president," Sousuke explained calmly. "He is exploiting the fact that we have

never seen the real president before to assume his identity, then leak our training camp schedule elsewhere. He's likely already killed the real president."

"That's *so* unlikely!" Kaname scoffed. "Why would anyone even *want* our training camp schedule?!"

Sousuke furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "Don't you realize? The Tajiren discussion camp is an important event, bringing together leaders from various schools. A hundred kilos of TNT planted in the meeting room would kill everyone in attendance. It's a perfect stage for terrorism."

"I'm pretty sure there are better targets out there..."

"Consider the impact if the entire student leadership were eliminated—instant discord among the schools," Sousuke predicted. "A complete bloodbath."

"Do you think the discussion camp is a yakuza meetup or something?"

"One way or another, I must find out who is pulling the strings. I'll interrogate this man, and—"

"You little..." *Slap!* Having pulled out her fan from somewhere or other, Kaname used it to smack Sousuke on the head.

Rubbing his head, Sousuke responded. "I have been wondering for quite some time... where in the world do you hide that weapon?"



“Shut up!” Kaname retorted, refusing to answer his question. “The point is, you’ve got it all wrong! Zero points! This guy’s the real deal!”

“Really? But—”

“I’ve seen him at previous meetings,” she said. “He might be a jerk, but he’s definitely this school’s student council president!”

“Hmm...”

“Now, we’ve got to get him treatment. He’s out cold. Ahh... he’s twitching, too. And talking in his sleep in a really weird way...”

“Hrrrk... It’s bad... It’s bad, Mama... Bonta-kun... Bonta-kun, in Moscow... with Manager Nagashima...”

As Shiohara rambled on incoherently, Sousuke and Kaname did what they could for him, but even after he woke up, he seemed to be so disoriented that he didn’t even realize what had happened to him. After offering brief apologies, Kaname and Sousuke quickly left the school behind.

Despite that rather unpleasant visit, on the way home, Kaname turned to Sousuke, and said, “Well... for once, I actually liked seeing you take a pop at someone like that.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah. But don’t tell anybody I said that,” she said with a cackle.

Several days later, after class, Kaname sat in the Jindai High student council room, silently poring through some documents about the next year’s budget. The rain fell heavily outside, but other than that the school was quiet, with no particular chatter going on in the hallway.

Sousuke and their first-year equipment manager, Sasaki Hiromi, had set up camp in a corner of the table, messing with a plastic model of a robot. Sousuke was inspecting it carefully, letting out murmurs of awe now and then.

“What a surprise,” he hummed. “They even replicated the optical sensors and the automatic wash nozzles...”

“Right? Pretty cool, huh?”

“Indeed. It’s quite similar to the EMDs currently in the testing stages. Even though information on M9s is largely limited, even in the US military...”

“I hear they’ve got connections in Geotron,” Sasaki gushed. “You can’t beat Tamiya for AS kit detail!”

“If only the joints worked, it would be perfect.”

Kaname sighed as she listened to them go on enthusiastically about something or other. Meanwhile, Hayashimizu Atsunobu was sitting in his chair. As there seemed to be no urgent student council business today, he was simply sipping at his tea and leafing through a magazine. Kaname assumed it would be some kind of high-level economics magazine again, but it wasn’t. She caught a glimpse of the title: it was *Weekly Gemstones.* This was a men’s magazine, and not even the classy kind... this was the kind with nude pinups.

“Can I help you, Chidori-kun?” Seeming to realize Kaname was looking at him, Hayashimizu looked up from his reading.

“No, sorry...”

“It’s good timing, though. I have a question to ask you.”

“What is it?”

Hayashimizu nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Let’s say you very much wanted to study language abroad in Australia...”

“Right...”

“But you didn’t have the money to do it.”

“Right...”

“In order to earn the money to study, would you expose your naked form in a magazine with a print circulation of 500,000?”

“What the hell?!” Kaname yelled, turning red to her ears.

Hayashimizu quietly watched her reaction. “You wouldn’t, then?”

“Of course not!”

“I see. That does seem to be the standard reaction.” With what appeared to be a sense of understanding, he turned his eyes back to the magazine and fell silent with a scowl.

Sheesh... What in the world is he even talking about? The way Hayashimizu always acted as if he were above worldly concerns reminded her of Sousuke, to the point that she sometimes thought he was just your average idiot with a particular knack for debate.

But now, Kaname couldn’t stop thinking about the incident from several days earlier.

It wasn’t about their attack at Komaoka Academy. No one had pressed charges there—the school’s student council president, Shiohara, might not have even remembered that Sousuke had shot him. Or perhaps he had remembered but was simply too afraid of Sousuke to file a complaint. One way or another, it hadn’t become an issue.

But what Shiohara had said that day—his talk of Hayashimizu—had lingered in Kaname’s mind. *What is Hayashimizu-senpai doing at our school?* That was what she couldn’t stop thinking about.

Hayashimizu Atsunobu, with his slicked-back hair and wireframe glasses, was tall, slender, and fair—and had the intelligence to match his trim appearance. Not only did he serve in his role as president of their high school’s student council with competence, he was also tactful and strategic, and respected by everybody from the teachers to the delinquents.

His sheer breadth of knowledge, negotiation skills, intelligence, deportment, and willingness to take the good with the bad, made him evocative of a shrewd European politician. Or perhaps he simply had a sort of ‘ruling party’ image about him. Hayashimizu had an innate aura of superiority and almost bizarre levels of interpersonal insight. And he was exceptionally good at arguing others down.

It was this quiet self-confidence and competence, perhaps, that gave him a curious sort of affinity with Sousuke. It would have been easy to dismiss him as simply another weirdo were he not so academically proficient. He regularly placed at the top of the school in terms of grades, as well as on national mock

exams. He was a shoo-in for a prestigious national university.

In other words, although Hayashimizu was definitely eccentric, he seemed almost too good to be a student at their school. He could easily have attended any high-level prep school he wanted. So why hadn't he? That was what Kaname couldn't figure out. It wasn't exactly that she was in favor of a society that ranked people based on standardized test scores and academic performance, but she did accept the reality that how far you could go in life was based largely on your school credentials. Good or bad aside, that was simply how the world worked.

As far as that went, Jindai High School was just on the lower end of the top third. With a little bit of effort, most students could gain admittance. Yet here was Hayashimizu, at Jindai High School. When you really thought about it, it seemed unnatural.

Yes. It's unnatural...

As Kaname quietly thought that over, Hayashimizu picked up his next piece of reading material. This one was a trucker magazine called *Camion.*

Another weird one... He's so inconsistent.

He was probably just an insatiable reader, really... but in a way, it just made him even more inscrutable.

"And that's what I've been thinking about," Kaname said on the train home from school. "Do you think there's some reason for it? Maybe when he was trying out for his preferred high school, he ended up laid up with a fever. Did he ever mention anything like that to you?"

She was speaking to two people on the train with her: Sousuke, who lived close to her house, and the student council secretary, Mikihara Ren.

"No, I haven't heard anything about that." Sousuke shook his head. "Until now, I always assumed that the president was scouted by Jindai High. He surely received a hefty signing bonus from the principal in order to boost the school's standing—"

"You think he's like a first-round draft pick in baseball?" Kaname asked

speculatively.

“I never quite learned how our entrance exam system works,” Sousuke admitted.

“Ah, I see. You really are... Oh, er. What do you think, O-Ren-san?” Kaname asked, turning to the student council secretary.

“Well, I... I’m sure I never asked him about it,” Ren said quietly. She was a second-year—in other words, a peer to Kaname and Sousuke—but for some reason, she spoke in extremely polite language around them. She had a classic sort of beauty about her (hence the nickname Kaname had given her), with striking silky black hair that could have gotten her a spot in a shampoo commercial. “Hayashimizu-senpai rarely speaks of the past. He always appears to be gazing at the future. I find him extremely mysterious... and wonderful.”

Kaname and Sousuke just stared at her.

Realizing she must have said something awkward, Ren suddenly blushed a deep red. “Oh, what’s wrong with me... Is that not what you meant? I’m terribly sorry.”

“Well... no big deal,” said Kaname. “But if none of *us* knows, I can’t imagine anyone else does.” The three people present were the closest of anyone in the student council to Hayashimizu.

“But it certainly is concerning,” Ren went on. “What Shiohara said... at first, I thought it was merely a bluff, but...”

“Yeah. He said that he worked as a bookie and paint thinner dealer,” said Kaname. “It can’t possibly be true, right?”

“The president has many enemies,” Sousuke put in. “It seems entirely possible that someone would intentionally be spreading those illicit rumors.”

“Well, they’re still just rumors.”

As Ren listened in on what they were saying, a sorrow seemed to come over her face. “I do hope you’re right...” she whispered with a sigh.

“What do you mean?”

“Well... I... the truth is...”

They looked at her inquisitively.

Ren paused for a moment. Then, seeming to steel herself, she said, “You must promise that you won’t tell anyone else about this.”

“Sure.”

“Understood.”

“I... I saw it,” she told them.

“Saw what?”

“I saw... Hayashimizu-senpai... engage in illicit dealings with a group of ne’er-do-wells,” Ren clarified.

For a few seconds, neither Kaname nor Sousuke reacted. And then, in a tone that demonstrated little to no surprise... “Illicit dealings?” they both said, in unison.

“Yes, I saw—”

Ren went on to explain what she had seen. Last Saturday, she and Hayashimizu had gone together to Shinjuku. Their goal was to seek out some computer software for the student council, but while there, they had taken in the Egon Schiele exhibit at a department store museum and grabbed a cup of tea together.

“The time I spent with him was quite enjoyable, of course,” Ren said in a deliriously happy voice.

“Frankly, the date surprises me more than the so-called illicit dealings,” Kaname said, peering intently into Ren’s face.

The other girl smiled at this. “It wasn’t a date. It was student council business. And... a mutual taste in art.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kaname hummed. “What happened then?”

“Ah, of course. On the way back—”

Ren explained how they’d left the café and had been on the way to Shinjuku Station when someone had called out to Hayashimizu. According to Ren, these were the ‘ne’er-do-wells,’ complete with shaved heads, tattoos, and facial scars.

There were three of them, and they quickly surrounded Hayashimizu to begin speaking with him in an exceptionally familiar manner.

“Been a while,” one had said.

“Hey, you’re still alive?” said another.

“So you’re preying on this woman next, eh?” said the third.

Hayashimizu had remained as calm as he ever did. After speaking with the three men briefly, he apologized to Ren, asked her to head off without him, and then walked off with the men.

“Wait a minute.” This was when Kaname interrupted. “What in the world did he mean by ‘preying on this woman’?”

“I fear I don’t know,” Ren confessed. “That ne’er-do-well seemed to be under the misapprehension that I was suffering in Senpai’s employ... Perhaps that he works me too hard at the student council?”

“Yeah, I doubt that was it...”

“And that’s when you went home?” Sousuke asked.

Ren shook her head. “No. I’m ashamed to say that I tailed them secretly instead. I was simply too worried about Hayashimizu-senpai.”

“That was a smart decision.”

“Thank you. And so—”

Ren explained that she’d tailed Hayashimizu for a while, cutting through the crowds. They had passed through Kabukicho and entered the basement of a small building close to a seedy-looking adult entertainment district. It was most likely the entrance to some kind of bar or club, but there were even more toughs loitering around outside of it, which kept her from approaching.

“I was forced to wait around a nearby corner for Senpai to emerge. But a man approached me while I was waiting. He invited me out to dinner, and I politely turned him down. Then, after several minutes, another man approached me. This one asked if I was interested in a high-paying part-time job. As curious as I was, I was forced to turn him down as well. I received several more offers of a similar nature in the remaining— What is the matter, Kaname-san?” Ren looked

curiously at Kaname, who was sitting there, mouth flapping, cold sweat forming on her brow.

“Oh, uh, just felt a minor panic attack coming on,” Kaname replied. “You know that a girl like you really shouldn’t go to a place like that by yourself again, okay? I mean it.”

“I see...” Ren stared at her for a moment, then continued. “At any rate, while I was waiting, Hayashimizu-senpai finally emerged from the building unharmed. He left, and although I attempted to follow him, I was stopped by someone fervently asking me if I wanted to act in a movie. Then...”

“You said no, right?! You didn’t give him your phone number, did you?” Kaname interrupted urgently.

“Certainly not.”

Kaname breathed a sigh of relief. “Whew... so? You never found out how they were connected?”

“No, I’m afraid I didn’t. But—”

“But what?”

A grim expression passed briefly over Ren’s face. “When he emerged from the building’s basement, Senpai had given money to one of the delinquents.”

“Money?” Kaname and Sousuke said in unison, then exchanged a glance.

“Yes. Of course, I was too far away to see how much...”

It was then that the train carrying the three of them stopped at Chofu Station.

The next day, after class...

Kaname was swiftly packing away her textbooks and supplies. The weather outside was clear.

It was right after the end of sixth period, and there was still a lot of chatter around them. The students on cleaning duty were pulling out the cleaning supplies. Those preparing to go to club activities were bemoaning their hardships. Those who weren’t in clubs were laughing and exchanging jokes.

“Hey, Kana-chan! Kana-chan!” Her classmates, Tokiwa Kyoko and Kudo Shiori, called while running up to Kaname.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Hey, hey. Shiori-chan won a drawing in the shopping district for a free karaoke session. It’s free for up to eight people!”

“Wow! Talk about a lucky break!”

“We’re about to head over. Ono-D, Kazama-kun, Yuka-chan and Mizuki-chan are also coming. Invite Sagara-kun too!”

“We haven’t cut loose like this in forever! C’mon! Let’s sing the blues away!”

They both seemed to be extremely excited for some reason. Maybe it was because the weather had been bad for the last several days and they’d just finished up their extremely tedious math class.

“Oh, sorry,” Kaname apologized. “I can’t today. “

“Aww! How come?” Kyoko showed her disappointment with a full-body slouch.

“Boo. That stinks!” Shiori did likewise. “I was gonna ask you to do your Nakajima Miyuki...”

“I’ve got a little business to take care of. Sousuke?” Kaname called to Sousuke, who was in his seat by the window. He had also finished packing up for the day and was running his final checks on his automatic pistol.

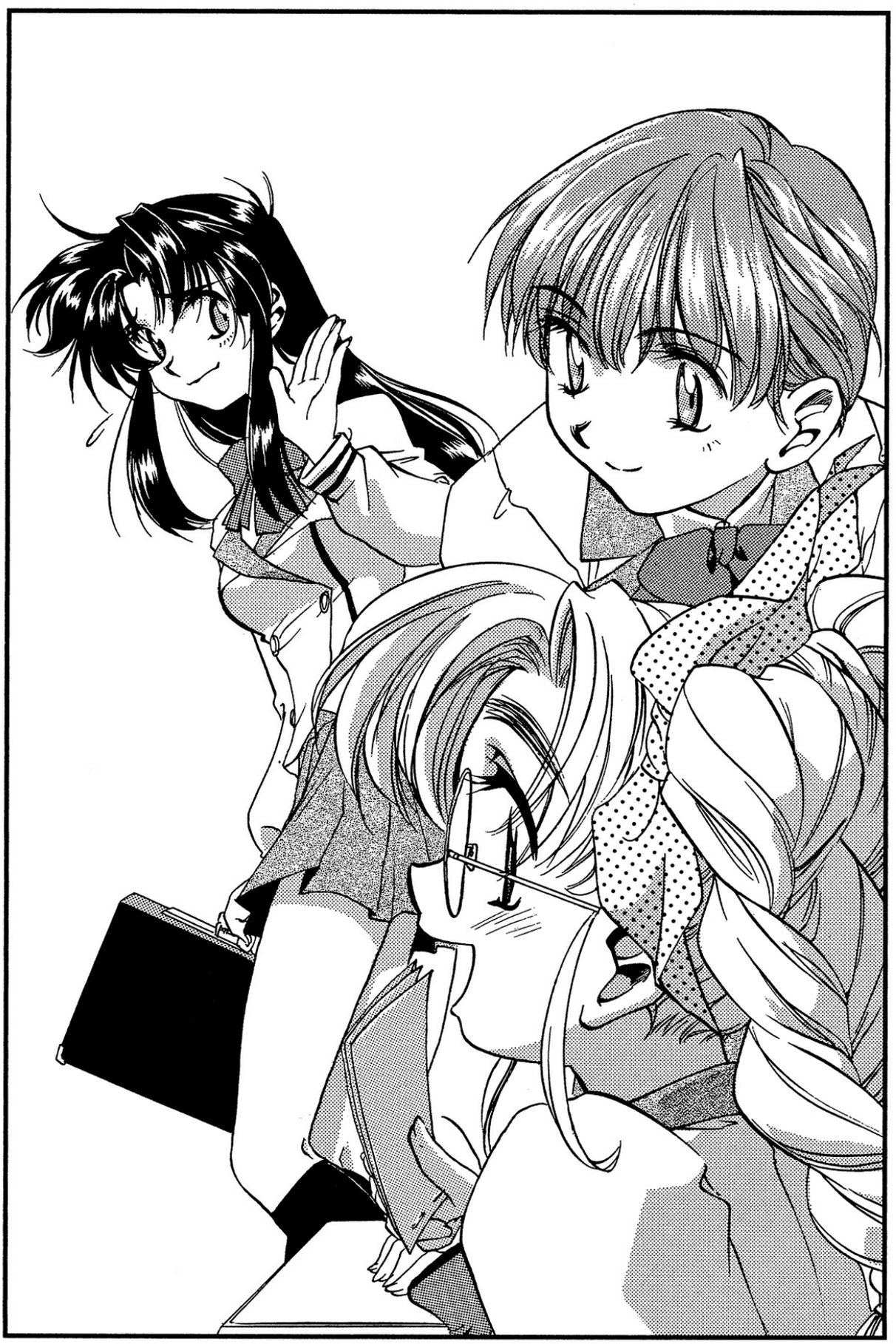
“Are we leaving now?” he asked.

“Yes,” she responded, snapping the top shut on her bag.

“You too, Sagara-kun? Is it student council business?”

“Yes. I’m afraid so,” he told her.

“We really are sorry. We’re totally in next time, though. See you!” Kaname called, waving back to the girls who stared after her emptily as she and Sousuke left the classroom.



Kaname and Sousuke headed to Sengawa Station, the closest one to Jindai High. From there, they took the train in the opposite direction of their usual route—into the city, rather than out of it. They were on the train for twenty minutes before arriving in Shinjuku.

It was, of course, a bustling metropolis. Kaname scowled as she watched Sousuke gawk to an unnecessary degree as they moved through the crowds. “Sheesh, cut that out,” she reprimanded him. “You look like a country bumpkin.”

“Safety first,” he replied. “And I was raised in the country, so it’s not an issue.”

“Uh-huh... You mean the country in Afghanistan?”

“Yes. It was rich with natural beauty, despite the many landmines.”

“I’m not sure I would’ve wanted to grow up in the country there...”

While having that absurd exchange, they began their crossing of Yasukuni-dori. This took them to Asia’s largest adult entertainment district, Kabukicho, where they passed through streets full of X-rated shops until they reached a sparsely populated back alley. It was already growing dark around them.

“Is this it?” Kaname asked.

“That building there,” Sousuke told her.

They’d come to the building that Ren had told them about; the building that Hayashimizu had entered before. They’d come to learn more about Hayashimizu’s past.

Shiohara of the Komaoka Academy student council had talked about Hayashimizu working as a bookie and paint thinner dealer. Mikihara Ren had mentioned an exchange with ‘ne’er-do-wells.’ It all sounded pretty shady.

Kaname had always assumed that Hayashimizu was a truly benevolent person. Sousuke, likewise, admired him as a realist with a conscience. This was why, no matter how many ridiculous tasks he assigned them, they had continued to engage more or less in good faith.

However, recent events had begun to shake their confidence in him. Where

there was smoke, there was fire, after all, and neither Kaname nor Sousuke were naive enough to continue to insist, ‘Senpai’s not that kind of person!’ A certain amount of skepticism was a healthy thing and a requirement for Hayashimizu to have put his trust in them in the first place.

It simply has to be some kind of misunderstanding... Kaname felt sure of that, yet she couldn’t completely shake her doubts. That’s why they had to come here and hopefully find someone who knew the whole story. It was a tacit agreement that Kaname and Sousuke had reached together.

“Hmm, it looks pretty normal to me,” said Kaname.

“It does.”

It was a gray multi-tenant building. The first floor was a pharmacy, the second a Taiwanese video store, and the third a consumer loan office. The fourth floor seemed to host some kind of business, but there was no sign hinting at its nature.

Next to the pharmacy entrance was a stairway to the basement level. The simple sandwich-board sign in front of it bore the writing ‘688 (I).’ That was all; there was no other explanation.

“I see,” said Kaname. “Feels kind of ‘members only’...”

“What kind of store is it?” Sousuke asked.

“I’m guessing it’s some kind of club.”

“What is a club?”

“It’s usually a place where people get together to drink and dance,” Kaname explained. “But I’m not quite sure that’s what this place is. It looks a lot more like a bar.”

“Your knowledge is impressive,” observed Sousuke.

“I’m just guessing. I don’t have that kind of money to mess around with.”

“Let’s enter, then.”

“Right.”

They descended the narrow staircase. The walls on either side were covered

in wallpaper and graffiti. At the bottom, in front of the shop entrance, stood two young men who were jabbering on. They were sitting on cases full of empty beer bottles and smoking cigarettes. They were initially laughing and joking with each other, but when they noticed the arrival of the two outsiders, the smiles left their faces.

"Excuse me," Kaname said to them. The boys simply stared at her suspiciously in response. But she refused to be cowed, pulled a photo of Hayashimizu from her change purse, and asked them, very politely, "I have a question for you. Do you know this man?"

One of them looked at the picture and sneered. "As if. Get lost, loser."

Then the other man, staring hard at her, added, "Hmm. You know, this place is off limits, girly. You preppy kids better get out of here fast or else the two of us might have to **** your ****. Well? You get it? You got it, right?"

Kaname repressed the disgust rising up inside her, and said, "If you don't know, I'm going to have to ask you to step aside."

"We told you to get lost, lady."

"Yeah. If you don't make yourselves scarce, we're definitely gonna have to **** your ****. You don't want that, right? Right?"

The men stood up. Kaname, finding herself intimidated, took a step back.

Here, Sousuke stepped in. "She told you to step aside," he reminded them. "I'm going to ask you not to get in our way. If you refuse... I will have to teach you a lesson."

The two men's expressions suddenly became dangerous. "Hmm... Sounds like a fun proposal, kid. How's about I do this, then?" Suddenly, the man was holding a knife in his right hand, which he immediately used to slice into Sousuke's face.

Kaname gasped... but it only *looked* like he'd sliced into his face. In fact, Sousuke had dodged the blow before it even started and was now twisting the man's wrist.

The man cried out in shock, but before he could react any further, Sousuke

used his open arm to elbow him in the face. The man went flying and landed with a loud crash as the stack of empty beer bottle cases came down around him.

“That was the lesson,” Sousuke said with his usual neutral expression.

The remaining man turned to them furiously. “You son of a...!” He drew a riot baton from behind his back. However...

Crash! The next instant, this man went flying, too, crashing through the door behind him.

This one happened so fast that Kaname hadn’t even seen what had happened. She just watched the man as he hit the floor of the establishment within, then let out a soft hum. “I kinda forgot you were actually pretty good in a fight,” she admitted.

“Yes, I tend to forget it myself these days.” With greasy sweat rising on his forehead, Sousuke stepped inside.

The shop, 688 (I), looked larger on the inside than it had from the outside. The smell of cigarette smoke stung the nose. The lighting was dim. Past the spacious entry hall, they could see low tables and chairs, as well as a bar. The aged walls were plastered with labels for whiskey, gin, and vodka, with loudspeakers mounted close to the ceiling.

There were also about twenty men inside, of the same make and model as the two boys Sousuke had just beaten up, all of whom were looking at them with open hostility. They were out of their seats and ready for a fight.

“What’s all this now?” came a voice from the darkness beyond the seating area.

The man laid flat by Sousuke said, “S-Sorry, Kusakabe-san. Looks like... Hayashimizu’s lackeys...” he croaked out.

“Hayashimizu? Did he send some assholes to pick a fight? Didn’t think he had it in him. Pretty dirty move. Dammit...” It was a haughty, imposing male voice.

Sousuke and Kaname turned towards it.

“Who’s there?” Sousuke asked sharply.

“Who are you exactly?” Kaname asked.

From out of the darkness came a man of average height and build. The dim light revealed a short-cut uniform jacket and crew cut, as well as tanned skin and almond-shaped eyes.

“You know Hayashimizu-senpai?” Kaname asked.

“Oh, listen to you. Right to the questions,” the man spat. “My name’s Kusakabe. A friend of the girl Hayashimizu killed.”

“What?” asked Sousuke.

“Killed? What?” said Kaname.

Neither of them could believe their ears as the twenty men, all with weapons in their hands, moved swiftly to surround them.

〈The Innocent of Remembrance (Part 1) — The End〉

The Innocent of Remembrance (Part 2)

At this moment, it occurred to them how different this shop was from the school environment in which they spent most of their time. It was like being in the depths of the earth, a place in which sunlight could not reach. The smell of degeneracy stung the nose—the smell of lingering stagnancy and discontent. It was the kind of place for which the term ‘den of iniquity’ was invented.

Standing here, Kaname and Sousuke faced a pair of problems. The first was that the man called Kusakabe had them surrounded with twenty of his allies, and none of them seemed happy to see the pair. The second was the history that man had mentioned sharing with Hayashimizu. Had their president really killed someone? How could that possibly be true?

“Hayashimizu-senpai killed someone? It can’t be...” Kaname said, dumbstruck.

“I’m sure it’s more complicated than that,” Sousuke replied, though he seemed similarly cowed.

Kusakabe gave them a sarcastic smile as they paused. “What’s with you two, eh? You forgot whatever business he sent you here on?”

“Well... the truth is, we came here to ask you about Hayashimizu-senpai, not to cause trouble,” Kaname started, casting an awkward glance at the two men Sousuke had laid out. “This was just... an unfortunate series of events.”

“Oh, yeah? Then if an ‘unfortunate series of events’ were to befall you guys, too... well, that’d just be the way of the world, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, I think that’s a different—”

“Like maybe I beat the shit outta you, strip you down naked, let the men have their way with you, then hang you upside-down in front of the Koma Theater,” Kusakabe mused. “That’d be unlucky as hell, right? A real ‘unfortunate series of events’.”

Kaname didn’t know how serious he was being, but one way or another, it seemed unlikely that he was about to let them go. “Well... I...”

There were twenty men, which was too many for even Sousuke to handle. He'd smuggled in his mini-shotgun loaded with its usual stun rounds, but he only had five or six shots at most.

Nevertheless, Sousuke spoke up with great confidence, "Chidori, are you ready?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what we're doing... hoo boy..." Kaname reached into her bag.

That same instant, Kusakabe snapped his fingers. "Get 'em."

The men moved. Most were unarmed, but some carried riot batons, knives, or bike chains. The angry men fell on them, shouting threateningly.

"Time to die, assholes!"

"We'll teach you for pickin' a fight with us!"

"Yeah, it's payback time!"

But Sousuke had already produced a hand grenade. He pulled the pin, threw it onto the floor... and moments later, the grenade was putting out white smoke.

The hooligans started in shock. This wasn't any ordinary smoke: it was teargas, designed for riot control. It invoked a stinging sensation in any exposed mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, and throat, leading to a temporary paralysis of pure agony.

Sousuke had told Kaname in advance about this measure, so by the time the gas reached her face level, she was already wearing the gas mask she'd pulled out of her bag. Sousuke was just a few seconds behind her.

Meanwhile, the rest of the people in the room were left affected by the gas. The ventilation in the basement was poor from the start, so the teargas filled it immediately, transforming the shop into an echo chamber of screams and barks of anger. The men coughed and staggered around the room. Some clung to chairs, pillars, and walls. Some raced for the building's door. Some swung their bats around in desperation.

The fire alarm, triggered by the gas, released its piercing wail... But the

sprinklers didn't activate. The room was host to cigarette smoke all the time, after all; the shop owner, sick of dealing with countless false alarms, must have shut the system off.

Kaname clicked her tongue behind the mask. "Not good. The police are gonna hear this and come running." There would be a number of men collapsed at the top of the stairway after escaping the gas, and they'd be noticed by a local patrolman soon enough.

"We should leave and bring this man, Kusakabe, with us. We'll question him outside."

"Right. He should still be... Oh, there he is."

The smokescreen had lifted to a certain degree, and Kusakabe, the gang's apparent leader, was on the ground on all fours, writhing in pain. "D-Damn you..." he proclaimed between coughs.

Sousuke walked up to Kusakabe and pressed a stun gun to his neck. Eighty thousand volts of electric current knocked the man unconscious on the spot. "Right. Let's go."

"Not to be negative or anything, but we basically just broke in and kidnapped a guy, right?" Kaname observed as they hefted the unconscious Kusakabe onto their shoulders and left the chaotic bar behind.

Sousuke and Kaname proceeded to haul Kusakabe several hundred meters to the nearby Hanazono Shrine. This meant walking through a crowd while dragging an unconscious man along with them, but nobody seemed particularly alarmed by the sight. Despite the relatively early hour, they probably looked like two people hauling a drunk friend off from a mixer.

There weren't very many people in the shrine grounds, and the hustle and bustle of the nearby red light district seemed to fade like the memories of a dream. They sat down on the stairs and nursed Kusakabe back to consciousness. After about ten minutes, he finally seemed to catch his breath.

"You okay?" Kaname asked.

"The hell I'm okay... Sheesh. You people're crazy... Who the hell even are

you?” Kusakabe responded weakly. For some reason, he didn’t seem particularly angry—he must have been used to this sort of kill-or-be-killed lifestyle. If anything, he seemed curious about Sousuke and Kaname.

But Sousuke spoke up in an intimidating tone. “You’re our hostage. We’ll ask the questions here. How cooperative you are will determine how well we treat you.”

“Gotcha.”

“Simply tell us everything you know about President Hayashimizu, and I will guarantee you respectful treatment. We’ll even give you a warm place to sleep.”

“Y’know, the only places to sleep around here are love hotels...” Kusakabe grumbled.

“I don’t know what that means, but I’m sure it won’t be an issue. However, if you refuse to cooperate—” Sousuke slowly pulled out a black combat knife. “—You’ll never see the morning light again. Your dead body will be left to the elements, used to fertilize the grass of the fields. If you want to avoid that fate—”

“Would you knock it off already?” Kaname whapped Sousuke on the back of the head.

“...But the man seems unlikely to simply reveal what he knows.”

“Just leave this to me, okay?” she said. “Kusakabe-san, was it? Are you a third-year?”

“Yeah,” the man replied sulkily.

“Okay... like we said before, we’re Hayashimizu-san’s kohai at school. We came to your shop because we wanna learn more about his past.”

“Yeah, sure. Ain’t nothin’ I wanna talk about more than the old times with that bastard,” Kusakabe said sarcastically.

“He’s not a bastard,” Kaname protested. “He might be... strange, and petty, and underhanded, and thoughtless, and untrustworthy... but...”

“I think most people’d call that a bastard, lady.”

“Hmm, fair enough.”

“Chidori,” Sousuke broke in to ask, “Is that true?”

Unable to mount an argument at that moment, Kaname and Sousuke simply folded their arms at each other.

Kusakabe let out a small laugh in response, inviting a questioning look from the pair. “You guys are crazy or something,” he told them. “Why d’you care about any of this? What are you gonna do with the info?”

“Nothing, really. It’s just that we’ve heard a bunch of weird rumors recently. And I know it’s not good to pry into somebody’s past... but I can’t help wondering,” Kaname responded unsteadily.



Kusakabe narrowed his eyes at her carefully. “You really wanna know?”

“Yeah.”

“You swear you won’t tell nobody?”

“Yes, I swear. Sousuke?”

“I swear. I promise.” Sousuke raised a hand.

Kusakabe let out a snort and slumped over. “Okay. I’ll tell you, then. Here, look at this.” He pulled a picture out of his wallet. It was an old picture, beat-up around the corners, of a group of three people. The first was Kusakabe, who looked younger than he was now—most likely in middle school—and wore his hair in dreadlocks. The second was a young person, taller than him, dressed in a well-kept blazer uniform, but whose face couldn’t be seen, as it had been blacked out with marker. A girl of roughly fourteen or fifteen stood between them, grinning.

“Who’s the girl?” Sousuke asked.

“Niiura Tomoko. She’s dead now,” said Kusakabe, as indifferently as if he were describing yesterday’s weather.

“Dead?” Kaname took another look at the girl in the photo, Niiura Tomoko. She had bushy eyebrows and very short dyed hair, as well as crooked teeth. You couldn’t exactly call her beautiful, but she had a warm and friendly manner. ‘Unassuming’ might be the right word—her cheerful smile suggested a person of unbridled honesty. It was almost unthinkable to Kaname that someone so brimming with life could be dead.

“That’s Hayashimizu next to her,” Kusakabe pointed out, “but I got sick of seein’ his stupid face, so I blacked it out.”

“How did you know each other?” Sousuke asked.

“Good question. It wasn’t exactly your typical friend group. It all started three years ago...” Hesitantly, Kusakabe began to open up about his past. The life he’d led back then wasn’t very different from the life he led now: he hung out with a similar group of guys, and if they ran out of money, they’d shake someone down or pick a fight. Then, one day, he’d met a strange girl. Her name was

Niiura Tomoko.

“I think it was around summer, my third year in middle school,” Kusakabe said, as if reliving a very old memory. “Tomoko was my age, but she didn’t go to school—one of those ‘perpetual truant’ types you hear about. She didn’t spend much time at home, either, just crashed at my place every night. And spent some nights outdoors, too.”

“Outdoors?”

“It was how she was rollin’ when I first met her. I think it was a shrine just like this... I saw her sittin’ alone at night, and I went up to hit on her. It was mostly teasing; I figured she’d get freaked out and run off. But instead, she grabbed my arm and said, ‘Take me home with you. I’ll make it worth your while.’ So...”

Out of curiosity, Kusakabe had let Niiura Tomoko stay with him. His father was dead, and his mother worked nights as a nurse, so there was nobody to object to the arrangement. She continued to crash there from then on.

“Were you together every night?” Kaname asked. “You and this... Niiura girl?”

“Not every night, but most nights. Weirdly enough, nothin’ happened between us. Did you think it did?” Kusakabe laughed.

Upon realizing that he’d seen through her question, Kaname turned her eyes downward with a blush.

“Tomoko didn’t really have what you’d call ‘feminine appeal’... but she was fun. The morning after the first night she stayed over, she wandered off. Then that night, she came back with this boatload of drinks, snacks, instant stuff... Just arms full of it. That’s how she made it ‘worth my while.’ But she didn’t have very much money, so how do you think she got it?”

“Shoplifting?” Kaname asked, hesitantly.

“Yep. But here’s the unbelievable part—she said she stole it all from a single neighborhood convenience store. Just came and went a buncha times. Talk about your spaced-out counter clerks, huh?”

“No way!” Kaname had to laugh. Obviously, there was nothing admirable about shoplifting, but she couldn’t really help herself.

“Right? Pretty funny, huh?”

Kaname laughed. “Yeah, it really is. What a character.”

While Kaname and Kusakabe quietly laughed together, Sousuke simply looked confused.

“She also stole a Colonel Sanders statue, a reach extender from the station platform... all kinds of stuff like that. And I dunno how she did it, but she actually stole a riot shield from a police box.”

“That’s crazy!”

“She really had a knack for the sticky-fingers stuff,” Kusakabe agreed. “Just one thing after another. Meanwhile, I felt like I’d taken in a stray cat. It was nice comin’ home and feelin’ like I wasn’t alone. I introduced her to my gang and we hung out together, just havin’ a nice time.”

Kusakabe and Tomoko’s life, together but with a respectful distance, had lasted for over a month.

“Her real talent was stealin’ mopeds,” he told them. “She could do that all day. She didn’t have money to take the train, so we’d leave my place in Nogata, jack a moped from the station, then ride it to Shinjuku and Nakano to mess around. We’d abandon that one there and steal a new one when it was time to go home. But we didn’t have licenses or helmets, so it’s a miracle we never got caught.”

“Wow. Did you hear that, Sousuke? This Tomoko girl was as crazy as you are.”

“I’ve never engaged in petty theft, myself. But what relationship did she have to President Hayashimizu?” Sousuke asked.

At this, Kusakabe’s expression first became dangerous, then clouded over with grief. “Hayashimizu... Yeah. Tomoko started acting weird after she met him.” His tone became grave, and he continued his story.

It had all started when Kusakabe got in trouble one day after having a scuffle with a yakuza underling. Kusakabe hadn’t hurt the man very badly at all, but several days later, he’d found himself accosted on a street corner, being told to pay 300,000 yen as ‘compensation for damages.’ Tomoko was with him at the

time, and they'd ended up taking her back to their headquarters as collateral.

"Three hundred thousand?!" Kaname's eyes opened wide.

"Didn't they have health insurance?" Sousuke's brow furrowed.

"More like 'pain and suffering' stuff... But lookin' back on it now, I gotta admit they were takin' it easy on me," Kusakabe told them.

"Really?"

"Yeah. The yakuza are serious business. Real serious business. If they offer to let you settle things with cash, you take the deal," Kusakabe whispered.

In that moment, Kaname felt like he looked strangely mature. "So, did you pay?"

"Yeah, right," he scoffed. "Like I had that kind of money. So I asked a friend of mine, Mari, what I should do."

"Mari?"

"Yeah. She's a girl, but she's tough and smart. Mari said she had a childhood friend in the area who was good at dealin' with that kind of thing. And the guy she introduced me to was Hayashimizu."

"I see..."

When Hayashimizu Atsunobu had appeared in front of Kusakabe, he was in his third year at Kousei Middle, the elite private middle school. He was tall and slender, with strikingly intelligent almond eyes, and a cold air about him that was difficult to quantify. He seemed annoyed about the trouble, but agreed to help out after hearing more about the situation.

Kusakabe had an in with an underground gambling ring that played high-stakes poker every night at a particular apartment. Hayashimizu had told him to take him there, and in one night they'd managed to multiply the 30,000 yen they had brought with them tenfold.

"It was like magic," Kusakabe said, breathlessly. "The term 'poker face' was invented for that guy. He said, 'if you do some quick probability calculations, it's not difficult to estimate the opponent's hand'... But a third-year in a middle school cleanin' out veteran hustlers? The guy was wicked." One way or another,

he was then able to give the yakuza their 300,000 yen, so they'd let Tomoko go unharmed.

"Oh? That's good to hear." Kaname, who was listening to the story with bated breath, sighed in relief.

"It's not like I wasn't grateful to the guy, but... I'd never seen Tomoko so happy about anything. She fell for Hayashimizu hard." After that, Kusakabe explained, the three of them began hanging out as a group. An honor student, a delinquent and a runaway... It was a very strange trio indeed.

Tomoko was their leader. She would wait for Hayashimizu in front of his school's gate after classes and practically drag him along with her into the city. She did the same with Kusakabe, and led the two of them around wherever she wanted to go. Shopping districts, aquariums, parks, libraries... Kusakabe and Hayashimizu would both complain, but they always went along. And through her mediation, they gradually became friends. Or at least, so Kusakabe thought at the time... and for a while, that remained the status quo.

"It all started getting weird around October or so," he continued.

"Weird?"

"Yeah. Tomoko suddenly stopped askin' us to hang out. She was still crashin' at my place, but she was hardly ever there. She'd come staggerin' in in the morning, sleep two or three hours, then head back on out. Over and over again."

"Where was she going?" Kaname asked.

"To Hayashimizu," Kusakabe responded, his voice taking on a slightly vicious tone, and Kaname could see the evening shadows of the shrine etched deeply on his face.

Kusakabe would ask Tomoko where she had gone or what she was doing, but she'd never say. She'd just say she was going to see a guy or that she was tired and didn't want to talk about it. "I didn't like it, okay? I talked to my gang and they said she was probably screwing the bastard," he went on. "I thought so, too."

Kaname listened silently.

“I still don’t know what they were doin’ together. Don’t wanna know, either. All I know is she got more and more tired every day I saw her. It hurt to watch.”

“You’re sure there wasn’t some kind of misunderstanding?” asked Kaname. “Like she got a part-time job somewhere?”

“No way, she was as broke as ever. But one thing I know for sure is she was goin’ to Hayashimizu’s house. I tailed her one time to be sure.” Kusakabe pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. Then he released a slow breath of smoke. “I didn’t like Tomoko romantically or nothin’,” he clarified, “but it bugged me. It really bugged me. That bastard... just treatin’ Tomoko like a toy. I was like, what the hell does he think he’s doing?”

“What happened then?”

“Hah... What happened then, huh? That’s how the story ends. It’s a sad and lousy end... but Tomoko died.”

“She... died?” Even though she’d known it was coming, Kaname felt a sting of pain in her chest.

“It was an accident on the road. She was ridin’ one of her stolen mopeds, cruisin’ around... and got hit by a dump truck at an intersection. Clean snap of the neck. Body was in good condition, at least. Silver linings, right?” Kusakabe spoke bluntly, again, as if discussing yesterday’s weather.

“Then, Hayashimizu-senpai...”

“Yeah. I guess it’s a little much to say he killed her. It was Tomoko’s fault for drivin’ recklessly along Kannana without a license or a helmet,” he admitted. “But... it happened on her way back from his place, and she was always exhausted from lack of sleep, so I say he’s at least partly to blame. If he’d cared about her even a little, it never would’ve happened. That’s what I can’t stop tellin’ myself.”

He fell silent a few moments more, and a clump of ash fell from the cigarette in his mouth.

“The only reason I didn’t beat the shit out of him then and there is ’cause I owed him. He’d be dead right now if not for that,” Kusakabe muttered. “I didn’t wanna look at his stupid face, so I just told him over the phone that she was

dead, and that was that. I didn't think I'd ever see him again."

"But last week..."

"Yeah. Last week, a buddy of mine pulled him into the shop. My first time seein' him in three years. And what does the bastard do?" There was rage in his voice as he chomped down on the cigarette and spat the filter onto the ground. "The first time I see him after all that time, all he wants to know is Tomoko's home address. To 'pay his respects' or whatever. Asshole."

"Her home address?" Kaname asked curiously. "Do you know what it is?"

"Yeah. But all that stuff about contacting the family after she died, I left to the police. I never actually met Tomoko's parents."

"Did you tell him what it was?" Sousuke asked, despite having been relatively quiet throughout the recitation of prior events.

Kusakabe shook his head. "Nah, I just threw him out on his ass. Knew I'd lose my temper if I didn't. I even got pissed and broke a chair in front of him... and the bastard actually paid for it! Lookin' down on me, what else is new..."

"Aha. So that's what that was." That explained why Hayashimizu had given the man money, and Kaname was vaguely relieved about it.

Kusakabe glared at her as he noticed her reaction. "What're you so happy about, huh?"

"Er..."

"He's a bastard," he insisted. "Three years without seein' him once, and all he does is ask me Tomoko's home address. Didn't even say he was sorry for what happened. He's cold-blooded to the core. A rotten damn egg."

"But—" Kaname was about to argue.

Kusakabe interrupted, sticking out a finger at her as if it was a gun. "But what? There ain't nothin' you can say. He's garbage. He pretends to be some elite master of all he surveys, but what he's really doin' is just lookin' down at the rest of us. The face, the voice, the way he acts; I don't like none of it." He looked like he'd physically attack Kaname if she tried to argue. It would be enough to intimidate most people, but...

“Kusakabe-san, you’re an idiot,” Kaname said without thinking.

Kusakabe’s glare grew darker. “What was that?”

“It’s been three years and you still haven’t worked out your own feelings,” she pointed out. “You can’t, because you blame everything on Hayashimizu-senpai. Are you sure you’re not lying to yourself about what really matters?”

Murderous anger rose from Kusakabe’s body like an aura, yet Kaname wasn’t cowed.

“Sorry to presume and all, but it’s pretty obvious to me that you were jealous of Senpai,” she insisted. “You really liked—”

“Don’t you dare,” Kusakabe said dangerously, raising his hand as if to slap Kaname.

“—Tomoko, didn’t you?” Kaname finished, before tensing up.

But before he could do it, Sousuke seized his arm tightly, his expression remaining blank.

“Ngh...” Kusakabe stared at his raised hand and, after a few seconds, shook his head as if he’d snapped out of a dream. “Yeah, whatever,” he whispered. Then he relaxed and slowly stood up with a deep sigh, brushing away the pebbles that clung to his seat. “You got it all wrong, okay? I don’t wanna hear crap from some stupid broad who don’t know shit... Who the hell d’you think you are?”

“I’m sorry,” Kaname said genuinely.

“Anyway... that’s the whole story. Nothin’ more to say. Satisfied?”

“Yeah. For now, anyway. Thanks a bunch.”

“Yeah, any time.” Kusakabe looked down at her with a slightly tired expression. “You guys said you were his kohai, right? At what school?”

“Metropolitan Jindai High.”

“Jin... dai?” Upon hearing that, Kusakabe frowned for a moment. He looked up at the night sky as if something was tickling his memory... then he shook his head. “Never heard of it. Well, whatever.” He turned away immediately. “Later.

And tell him this... Next time we meet, I ain't holdin' back."

"You..."

"I'll seriously beat the shit out of him. All debts aside," Kusakabe Kyoya said coldly, then departed from their sight.

Sousuke and Kaname simply remained where they were for a time. Then, realizing there was no reason to remain, they slowly stood up and headed home.

The Keio line train they took home was packed with people returning from work. Kaname and Sousuke stood side by side, pressed together in the crush. Even though she was able to keep her bag between them, knowing that her arms and knees were touching Sousuke's had Kaname feeling extremely alert.

"This is... pretty serious, isn't it?" she said, speaking at last around the time they passed Sasazuka Station. "I always figured Senpai's life was smooth sailing. I can't believe he went through something like that..."

The awful things that the Komaoka Academy student president had said about Hayashimizu had probably originated from the simple fact that he'd kept company with the likes of Kusakabe and Tomoko. It also more or less explained what the secretary, Mikihara Ren, had witnessed.

"But... there's still so much I don't understand," she said plaintively. "What was he doing with her all that time?"

Three years ago, Hayashimizu had been doing something in private with Niiura Tomoko. They hadn't learned what it was, but Kusakabe's description made it seem like there was something unseemly going on between them. On top of that, how did he feel about Tomoko's death? Was he not sad about it? Didn't he feel any responsibility at all?

"Chidori." Sousuke, who had been silent since the shrine, finally spoke up as well.

"Yeah?"

"Let's stop it."

“Stop what? Stop investigating?”

“Yes.”

“Why? We still haven’t—” She looked up and saw that his face was far closer than she expected it to be. It was his usual sullen expression, but there seemed to be a slight change in it: Sousuke was irritated. Kaname fell silent.

“It doesn’t feel good to have your own past investigated,” he continued.

In that instant, Kaname remembered that she barely knew anything about Sousuke’s past. When he talked about growing up in a rural area full of landmines, it sounded a bit comical... but it really wasn’t, was it? He probably had more than his share of painful memories that he didn’t want to talk about, that he didn’t want known. Was he not thinking about anything related to Hayashimizu, but about how unpleasant it would be if his own wounds were dragged into the open?

“You’re right,” she said after a pause. “We’ll stop prying, then.”

“Good.”

Standing aboard the rumbling, packed train, Kaname laid her head against Sousuke’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Well... you haven’t done anything wrong.”

They didn’t say another word after that.

It was the next day, after class. The sky was clear and blue, and the school was lively with student activity. While the classroom was still noisy, Kaname fought with the task she had been working through all during class—a list of equipment needed for the upcoming training camp.

“Let’s see... one amp, two speakers, a projector... extension cords of appropriate length, five, six, seven... ugh, it’s so annoying!” She mussed up her hair angrily. She flipped through the documents further and clicked her tongue quietly. “Hey, Sousuke!”

“Yes?” Sousuke responded while in the middle of loading hand grenades into his bag nearby.

“What’s this metal detector doing on here?” she demanded to know. “And why are there dogs on the list?!”

“Necessary items for security. Three well-trained Dobermans will—”

“No way! You can play guard dog on your own!”

“Hmph.”

Just then, Tokiwa Kyoko ran into the classroom, gasping for breath. “Kana-chan,” she wheezed, “emergency!”

“What is it?”

“There’s a bunch of delinquents from somewhere or other massed around the front gate. They’re really scary-looking, and they’re shouting, ‘bring out Hayashimizu!’”

Kaname and Sousuke shared a glance.

They ran to the gate, only to find it mobbed. They moved through the crowd and came out the other side.

Kusakabe Kyoya stood there, astride a large motorcycle. There were eight other motorcyclists with him. The delinquent gang revved their engines, glaring at the crowd of students who were watching from a safe distance.

Hayashimizu Atsunobu was already there. He didn’t seem the slightest bit afraid as he stood facing the delinquents.

“Pretty confident, eh?”

“Yeah?!”

“You too scared to talk?”

The lackeys were jeering at Hayashimizu, while the rest of the posse cackled with glee.

“This isn’t good,” Kaname said.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Sousuke agreed. They were about to step out, when...

“Sagara-kun. Chidori-kun,” Hayashimizu said with a tone of utmost calm.

“Senpai?”

“I appreciate your concern, but please stay out of this.”

“But—”

“No need to worry.” The sunlight reflecting off of his glasses hid Hayashimizu’s expression. But... at the very least, from a distance, he looked entirely like his usual self.

“Quiet down,” Kusakabe said, and the roaring engine noise immediately died down, leaving a strange silence in its wake. Within the silence, Kusakabe got down off of his bike and swaggered slowly towards Hayashimizu.

“I’m impressed you knew where to find me,” Hayashimizu said.

Kusakabe shot a glance in Kaname and Sousuke’s direction. “No big. Just shows even a worthless piece of shit like you has kohai who care about him.”

“That explains things.” Hayashimizu looked briefly at Kaname and Sousuke, with a quiet smile on his face. “Now, how can I help you?”

“I came here to beat the shit outta you in front of everyone. And I ain’t gonna stop until you choke out a ‘sorry’ while weepin’ like a little baby,” Kusakabe said, in a voice of merciless calm.

Hayashimizu stared straight at him in response, and slightly—very slightly—his expression took on a note of sorrow. “You won’t do that.”

“The hell you say?!”

“You already know that there would be no point in doing so. No point whatsoever. That is your—*our* greatest tragedy.”

“You son of a—” Kusakabe’s eyes widened in anger, and he raised his fist.

Sousuke didn’t interfere, and Kaname and all the other students simply tensed up and closed their eyes. But just as Hayashimizu had predicted, Kusakabe didn’t strike.

“That’s right. I was just jokin’ around.” He slowly lowered his arm and opened his fist to reveal a scrap of notebook paper. “That’s her home address. Go on and light a stick of incense for her... If her family’s even set up an altar in the

house.” Kusakabe spat the words out, then shoved the paper into Hayashimizu’s hand and went to retrieve his motorcycle.

“Kyoya,” Hayashimizu said to his back.

“What now?”

“Thank you.”

Kusakabe stared at him for a moment in non-comprehension. Then he rubbed his temples with his fingertips. “Whatever. Wish you could just act a little scared or somethin’... that’s what really gets under my skin about you. Yeesh...” Then he mounted his bike and drove off.

The rubberneckers that had gathered around the school gate dispersed while Hayashimizu remained where he was, eyes on the paper in his hand. Then, abruptly, he turned to Kaname and Sousuke, who were standing nearby. “Come with me,” he said as casually as could be, then started heading out the school gate without them.

Kaname and Sousuke shared a glance, then followed.

“It appears you heard most of the story from him, correct?” Hayashimizu asked as they walked the road that ran around the school grounds.

“Well, we just... I... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s mostly true—I was once the man he described.”

Kaname fell silent.

“I know it’s pointless to deny it, regardless,” Hayashimizu continued. “Back then, I was seen by my family and teachers as a prodigy with high prospects. And, embarrassingly, that went to my head. Had I remained as I was, I likely would have held even people like you in contempt.”

Kaname found herself thinking back on Shiohara from Komaoka Academy.

“Did he tell you about Niiura Tomoko?” Hayashimizu asked.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“She was a unique person. Truly unique. Society’s rules simply couldn’t hold

her—a person untouched by loneliness and sorrow. At the very least, that's what I thought then. But at first, I held her in contempt. You could even say that I despised her."

"Despised her?"

"She caused me no end of trouble. I lectured her many times, told her to stop stealing, told her to turn over a new leaf, begin studying, advance to high school. I told her that she would never get a decent job otherwise. Quite absurd, coming from me."

"I see..."

"And then one day, suddenly..." Hayashimizu paused briefly. "She declared to me, 'I'm going to get into high school, just like you told me to.'"

"She did?"

"Yes. There was a particular school to which she had aspired to for some time, she told me. She asked me to tutor her; I was a prodigy, after all."

But the school she'd wanted to attend seemed far out of her reach.

"She was a perpetual truant, as you know, and her grades were poor. I told her repeatedly to give up on her choice, but she refused. With no other option, I resigned myself to tutoring her. I gave her long problem sheets and told her to have them completed by the next day."

Impressively, though, she always returned with her assignment complete. In the evening, she would arrive at Hayashimizu's house and hand in her homework. She would stay in his room until late in the evening while he went over what she'd done wrong, then go home. Over and over again.

She had also asked him to keep it secret from Kusakabe at all costs.

"Why?" Kaname asked.

"He would laugh at her, she said, but I don't believe that was the only reason. Kyoya frequently used to say that Tomoko was 'stupider' than he was, and that was the reason he had to look after her. She would laugh when she told me that... but I think perhaps it really did bother her. One way or another, her passion was genuine."

Hard work truly could work miracles, and from an outside viewpoint, her academic ability had skyrocketed in a single month. Hayashimizu began to think she really might get into her desired school as an alternate, and worked even harder to teach her.

“But that was... a mistake,” he said, his voice tinged with pain. He was walking ahead of them, so they couldn’t make out his expression. “That night, she didn’t arrive. The next day, either. Then I received a call from Kusakabe Kyoya, who said she had died in an accident.”

Kaname said nothing.

“He was crying over the phone, but I didn’t cry,” Hayashimizu admitted. “I hung up, returned to my usual lessons, watched the news, and then slept peacefully. I did the same thing the next day, and the day after that. Over and over. My peaceful routine had returned.” He’d continued to get the top grades in his class. There were negative rumors that went around about him, but they didn’t alter his elite lifestyle. Had things continued like that, he would have been able to get into a top-ranked school.

Kaname, Sousuke, and Hayashimizu had turned the corner of the school property and entered a narrow back alley. To the right of them was the school, and to the left were apartments.

What are we doing here? Kaname wondered suspiciously.

It was then that Hayashimizu stopped and turned back. “The school she so desperately wanted to join—do you know what school that was?”

“I don’t know.”

“Metropolitan Jindai High School,” he answered.

Kaname and Sousuke both stared.

“Jindai? But why?” Kaname asked.

“I didn’t know. She refused to tell me—she simply said it was ‘a silly little reason.’” Hayashimizu turned his eyes downward, his expression melancholy. “I then spent two and half years there, and still failed to figure it out.”

“Wait,” said Kaname. “You mean... the reason you came to Jindai was...”

“Correct. Everyone in my life opposed the decision. My parents were furious.” Hayashimizu smiled self-effacingly and sighed. “Now,” he said then, suddenly back to his usual self as he retrieved the piece of paper he’d been given. “By a stroke of good fortune, I have acquired her home address. According to this... she originally lived *here*. I can’t believe it was this close the whole time.” He pointed to an old five-story apartment building across the street from the school. “Heim Sengawa, apartment 403. Will you join me?”

They rang the doorbell of Apartment 403. A woman of just over forty answered, but turned out to be unrelated to Tomoko in any way. Instead, she explained that the Niiura family had moved away two years ago. “The neighbor said that the husband was abusive,” she told them. “He was a layabout, never worked a decent job, just hung around drinking all day...” There was a slight edge to the woman’s voice.

“Do you mind if we come in for a moment?” Hayashimizu asked politely.

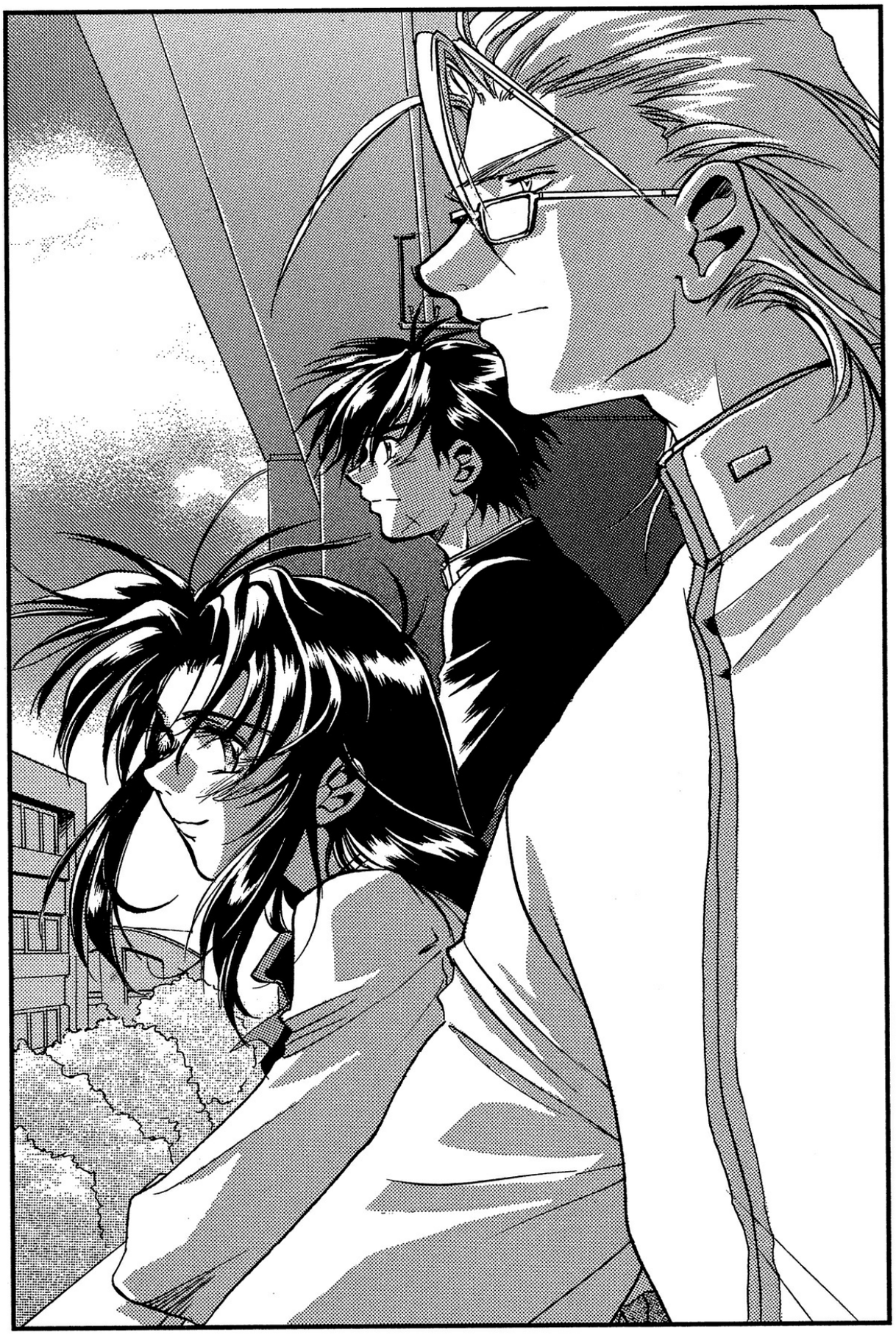
“Eh? Ah... all right. Only for a few minutes, though.”

Kaname and Sousuke followed him inside, briefly passing through the living room to make their way out onto the veranda. From there, they could see the entirety of Jindai High School. The baseball, soccer, and track teams were all practicing vigorously on the athletic fields. In a corner of the courtyard, a group of men in rugger shirts were busily cleaning up. On the tennis courts, a group of female students were hanging out and laughing.

It was easy to see inside the building, too. Boys in the classrooms were playing around. A teacher tripped in the hallway, scattering papers everywhere, and a nearby colleague helped her clean them up. On the roof, there was a couple getting romantic, gazing at the setting sun in the western sky.

It looked like the most peaceful place in the world.

The three of them gazed at it silently for a while. It had most likely looked this exact same way, even when Tomoko was a child.



“It’s a great view, isn’t it?” Kaname whispered.

Sousuke nodded. “Yes. I consider myself a fortunate man.”

“I consider myself one, as well,” Hayashimizu agreed. “It’s only a shame that I can’t thank her... She’s the one who brought me here.”

〈Innocent of Remembrance (Part 2)〉

An Adult Sneaking Mission

Slender bodies and beautiful tits!

Such were the vulgar words that dipped and swayed before Chidori Kaname's eyes as she took her morning train to school. For once, she'd managed to get a seat, but a man was standing in front of her with a tabloid in hand. It was open so that the page of male-oriented sex ads was facing her.

Don't miss – Male Paradise!

Cheating wives made to pay!

Maids to send you to heaven!

Admission free – 800 yen for 1 hour!

Steamy hot asses!

Kana-chan's secret technique!

It wasn't just the words. There were pictures as well. They featured girls not much older than her in various compromising positions... Turning red as a beet, Kaname looked down at her knees. "Sheesh, at least read that stuff in private..." she whispered to herself.

The phrase 'Kana-chan's secret technique' upset her most of all. It featured a picture of a girl in lingerie labeled 'Kana-chan (Junior College, age 19),' plump, with tanned skin and dyed hair. She looked nothing at all like Kaname herself, but that didn't mean she liked seeing it. Incidentally, she couldn't even begin to imagine what sort of killing move this 'secret technique' might consist of.

It's basically sexual harassment, thought Kaname. This was why she hated taking packed trains. There were gropers on them, too. She wished that during rush hours, they would split the trains into men's and women's cars. Wasn't

there something fundamentally flawed about a transportation system that forced her to press her body against the bodies of strange old men?

As she was thinking about that, the train grew suddenly more crowded. As more standing riders forced their way in, the density of passengers grew. The tabloid, with all its ads, pushed closer to her face until it was all that she could see.

You won't believe what this sexy actress does when the cameras are off!

The beautiful captain's full-body breathing technique!

Korean sex industry takes to the front lines!

Her only choice now was to close her eyes. She did so and waited a while until the train finally reached the stop closest to her school, Sengawa Station.

Oh, darn it! To get out of the unpleasant situation as quickly as possible, Kaname shoved the tabloid out of the way and stood up. As she did, a familiar face appeared in front of her.

A sullen expression and tight frown framed by unkempt black hair— It was Sagara Sousuke. In his right hand, he held the tabloid in question. In his left, the pistol he'd been using it to hide, complete with silencer. He clearly hadn't been reading the articles at all.

"Chidori. What a coincidence," Sousuke said lightly.

After a moment's glare, Kaname silently grabbed Sousuke's arm and pulled him through the crush and off the train. As they hit the platform, she snatched the paper from his hands.

"Ahh—"

She rolled it up, raised it high, and... *Whap!* brought it down on Sousuke's head.

Sousuke rubbed his head concernedly. "Might I ask why you did that?"

"Shut *up*!" Kaname yelled, then unrolled the newspaper again and forced it

back into his hands. “You can’t just shove this crap in someone’s face first thing in the morning! I’m not even gonna get into the gun-smuggling thing right now, just have a little self-awareness for once!”

“Is there an issue with this newspaper?” he asked.

“A *huge* issue! Just look at it!”

Sousuke began to leaf through the pages. “Hmm... IWGP heavyweight Tenryu vs. Sasaki for the championship?”

“That’s pro wrestling!”

“T. Komuro enters Hawaii alone for unknown reasons?”

“That’s entertainment!”

Here, Sousuke stopped reading the articles and scowled. “I don’t understand. The articles appear to be without issue. And my primary concern was simply to have an unobtrusive paper behind which I could hide my weapon.”

“Yeah, right!” Kaname said scornfully. “You did it intentionally, didn’t you?!”

“Did *what* intentionally?”

Their fruitless argument on the crowded platform continued, until...

“Excuse me, you two,” someone called to them.

Sousuke and Kaname glared at the other person simultaneously.

“What?”

“What do you want?!”

Their aggressive tone sent a shiver through the person in question. He was a middle-aged man in a suit, on the scrawny side, with thinning hair and a hunched posture that gave him an overall cringing, cowardly appearance. Kaname idly thought he was exactly the type of man who would be groping women on a crowded train.

“I just... are you sure you should be arguing about these sorts of things in public?” he said, timidly.



Kaname just stared at him incredulously, while Sousuke barked, “Identify yourself.”

“What? I... well...”

“We were debating a matter of security as it relates to our school commute,” Sousuke told him reprovingly. “Do not interrupt us.”

“Ah... of course. Goodbye, then...” The man smiled at them weakly before departing.

As she watched him slink away, Kaname suddenly clapped her hands together. “Oh, I just remembered!”

“What is it?”

“That guy’s a teacher at our school,” she said. “Ethics or something... I think his name is Usui.”

“Really?” said Sousuke. “I don’t remember him.”

“Yeah. He really tends to blend into the background.”

And indeed, the unremarkable middle-aged teacher had already vanished into the crowd.

That day, during lunch...

Kaname was in the classroom, discussing the morning’s affair with Tokiwa Kyoko and Inaba Mizuki. The affair in question wasn’t Mr. Usui, of course, but Sousuke’s tabloid.

Kyoko was Kaname’s classmate, a petite girl with coke-bottle glasses who wore her hair in braids. The other girl, Mizuki, was from another class, but lately she’d been coming by to hang out at class 4-2. She had semi-long hair and a perpetually willful expression.

“So, anyway, it was super annoying,” Kaname said irritably before taking a bite of her plain roll and slurping at her can of coffee. “I don’t know what possesses someone to have articles like that on full display first thing in the morning. What was he thinking?”

Kyoko poked at her little packed lunch, smiling with a wince. “Well... it doesn’t seem like he meant any harm, right?”

“I know that, okay? My real issue is those in-your-face articles, and that... that indecent line of work taking place right under our noses! And how fascinated grown men seem to be with it! It’s just pathetic.” She was talking about sex-related occupations, such as pornography. As a 16-year-old girl, Kaname simply couldn’t wrap her mind around what men liked about it so much. She wouldn’t say she found it disgusting, exactly. But she definitely thought it was pathetic.

“Yeah, it is pretty bad,” Kyoko agreed with her breezily. “I have a hard time walking past the magazine rack with all that stuff when I’m in a convenience store. And when I see videos like that in my brother’s room, sometimes I think about throwing them out.”

“I say do it,” Kaname told her. “Don’t tolerate that crap under your roof.”

As Kaname and Kyoko nodded to each other, Mizuki, who had been silent so far, looked at them with an expression close to shock. “You know...” she said with a sigh.

The girls looked over at her, questioningly.

“I figured Kyoko would be like this, but not you, Kaname. It’s kind of a surprise.”

“What do you mean?”

Mizuki sighed again, then launched into a rant. “You guys just don’t know anything about male biology. Men are wolves, okay? Every single one of them. Their heads are full of the most unspeakably pervy stuff you can imagine. If an innocent girl like me shows one single moment’s weakness, they’ll throw themselves at us, exploding with black-hearted, forbidden life force.”

“‘Black-hearted, forbidden life force’?” asked Kaname.

“Yes! Men are wicked, super energy beings created through dark alchemy,” Mizuki declared. “They change into beast mode.”

“R-Really?” Kaname and Kyoko had never had a boyfriend between them in their respective sixteen years, while Mizuki was freshly single, so they had no

choice but to take her words as gospel.

“The purpose of that line of work is to channel that dark power in harmless ways,” Mizuki explained. “It’s not a matter of morality, but of necessity. Your attitude is like saying we should get rid of nuclear waste processing facilities. You know?”

“Yes, ma’am...” Kaname and Kyoko responded, despite feeling unhappy about it.

“Although... I think that high school girls who take part-time work like compensated dating are pretty out there,” Kaname added.

At this, Mizuki laughed haughtily. “Yes, they certainly go above and beyond. I would never do it, myself, but I think that the women who perform a service to benefit society are worthy of our respect.”

“Mizuki-chan... that doesn’t quite seem right...” Kyoko muttered.

It was then that Sousuke entered the room. He marched up to Kaname and said, “Chidori, the president is calling. We have to go to the student council room.”

The three girls remained silent, staring carefully into Sousuke’s face.

A wolf. A wicked energy being. Can such words really apply to Sousuke? they wondered. *Might he really not be an exception in that regard? He certainly seemed to be, but... but... but...*

The three of them were staring at him so intently that he was forced to take a step back. “What is it?” he asked defensively.

“Oh, nothing!” they responded in chorus, voices as indifferent as could be.

“Now, then. Sagara-kun, Chidori-kun. Your mission this time is...” Student council president Hayashimizu Atsunobu addressed them in the student council room. As ever, he was a young man—tall, pale, with a calm and collected air about him.

“Um... why are you calling this stuff ‘missions’ now?” Kaname asked, shoulders slumping.

Hayashimizu opened up a fan with the word ‘Peace’ written on it, smiling elegantly. “I thought it might be motivating. Was I wrong?”

Before Kaname could say ‘very wrong,’ Sousuke spoke up. “Not at all, Mr. President. Chidori and I are grateful for your consideration.”

“Hey,” Kaname objected.

“Excellent. Now, your mission this time is... well, look at this,” Hayashimizu said casually, holding up a flier.

Kaname picked it up curiously and started reading.

Gentleman’s Image Club – ‘C&J’

Grand opening campaign – Give us a try!

▼Admission fee: 30,000 Yen

▼Role-play fee: 8000 yen for one hour

▼Sample fee: 4000 yen for 30 minutes

Although you’re exhausted from work, you possess secret desires.

Yes... every man is born with those desires, and we know you’re no exception. Maybe you have a job, family, and a position in society. Or maybe you’re just too shy to explore them. Either way, you probably see those desires as an impossible dream.

But here’s where we come in – We’ll satisfy those secret desires! With a wide variety of situations, detailed costumes, and high-quality companions available, we’ll give you just what you’ve been longing for! Don’t delay, try today! Our cast is waiting for you!

Join us in a world of dreams!

*Currently recruiting companions. Girls 16 to 20 years old are in particular demand!

After the pitch, it listed the facility's address and phone number beside a map of the location.

Kaname shoved the flier at Sousuke and turned her eyes down, her fists clenched and trembling.

"What's the matter, Chidori-kun?" Hayashimizu asked airily.

"It just... It just seems like it never ends today. I keep on having these disgusting things forced on me, you know?" She glared up at the president.

Hayashimizu returned her gaze, nonplussed. "Hmm. I can't testify as to what's going on in your life today, but... Well, regarding that flier. As you can see in the listed address, it is located in the 1st Maruyama building just outside of the Sengawa shopping district. The same neighborhood as our school," he pointed out.

"So? Can't we just leave this gross club to its own gross devices?" It might be troublesome for the nearby shop owners, but Kaname didn't see how that was their business.

"I'm afraid not." Hayashimizu slowly shook his head. "I've received intelligence that several people associated with our school have been seen coming and going from the establishment—female students. We believe they may be employed there."

"In... that role-play club?" Kaname asked.

"Almost certainly."

"Seriously? Yech, that's the worst..."

"It's not a matter of ethics, but of economy, Chidori-kun. As long as there is demand, the supply will appear. I personally don't believe that we can stop all students from pursuing such employment, but... we can't have it coming to light," Hayashimizu concluded. "If the teachers learn of it, they will act to undermine the independence of the student council in the name of 'public accountability.' We must therefore take measures before that happens."

"I see." Kaname was starting to catch on: Hayashimizu was going to tell them

to persuade the girls in question to quit.

“I understand, Mr. President. We’ll deal with the problem. Don’t worry.” Sousuke said confidently.

Kaname, beside him, frowned. “Hey, Sousuke. Are you *sure* you understand?”

“Of course. I’m not that stupid.”

“You mind if I ask how you plan to ‘deal with it’?” she asked.

It appeared that Sousuke was, indeed, just that stupid. Sniffing haughtily, he said, “Isn’t it clear? The president wants us to kill the students who are damaging the school’s image and make it look like an accident.”

Kaname immediately wrangled him into a sleeper hold. “Why would he want us to kill them?!” she howled.

“Erk... hnngh...”

“Sheesh! Say something to him, Senpai!”

“Hmm?” said Hayashimizu. “That would certainly be a novel way of handling it...”

“Oh, for the love of...” Tossing away Sousuke, who was by now slouched limply in her arms, Kaname collapsed to her knees on the floor.

Hayashimizu patiently waited for the both of them to recover, then said, “In fact, what I am asking for is neither to convince them to quit, nor to assassinate them. I simply want a trump card in the event that these things do come to light.”

“A... A what?”

“It appears that some instructors from our school have also been attending the establishment in question,” he explained. “If you can secure proof of their patronage, I can use it as a bargaining chip against the principal.”

“Oh, boy. Sheesh. Are you kidding me?” Kaname asked.

“That is where you come in,” Hayashimizu told her. “I want you to infiltrate the club in question and find proof of their attendance there. The flier says

they're hiring companions, and Chidori-kun, I believe that your physical appearance will allow you immediate ingress in that regard."

"Uh?"

"And Sagara-kun, I'd like you to accompany her. To pull her out in case something goes wrong. Would you?"

"Yes, sir." Sousuke saluted him.

Kaname just sat there, dumbstruck, until... "Why should I do that?!" she said, finally getting as angry as the situation deserved.

"You don't wish to?"

"I do *not*! I *vehemently* do not!"

"You leave me no choice, then. Mikihara-kun?" Hayashimizu now addressed Mikihara Ren, who was doing secretarial work nearby. She was a classic-style beauty with long, sleek black hair.

"Yes?" Ren tilted her head slightly.

"I have a job for you. As Chidori-kun has refused, I would like you to—"

"Hey!" Kaname furiously interrupted. Allowing poor, naive 'O-Ren-san' into that establishment was like throwing fresh Matsuzaka beef into a lake of hungry piranhas.

"What is it, Chidori-kun?"

"I... I'll do it, okay?!" Kaname shouted desperately.

The shopping district near Sengawa's local station was an unremarkable town on the outskirts of Tokyo. If one was forced to name a particular defining characteristic of the area, it would be a propensity towards eateries aimed at young people, due to the relatively high concentration of high schoolers and attendees to the women's colleges and junior colleges in the vicinity. As far as Kaname knew, it had never been host to a single place like the establishment described in the flier.

They found the place at issue, C&J, a mere five minute walk from the school,

on the uppermost floor of a four-story building just off of the main street there. The sun was down by this point, and it was dark all around.

“I recalled there being a cram school on that floor. I can’t believe it’s now a terrorist training camp,” Sousuke said, looking up at the building.

Kaname glanced at him sidelong. “You weren’t listening to what Senpai said at all, were you?”

“Hmm? The flier seemed to suggest it was a place for men feeling dissatisfied with their place in society to meet up and polish their killing techniques.”

“You have some pretty impressive interpretive abilities— Huh?” Kaname called out in confusion as Sousuke suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her behind a nearby sign. “Wh-What is it?”

“Quiet,” he ordered her. “Look.”

A girl was walking into the building. She wore a Jindai High uniform and had chestnut hair done in a wavy, layered cut. She was on the slender side, but she also had significant curves.

Oh. That’s... Kaname knew her: Saeki Ena. She was in class 2-1, and Kaname was also pretty sure she was the president of the drama club. The girl had sent Sousuke a love letter once, but had dropped her infatuation quickly after learning about his personality.

Saeki Ena hugged her bag to her chest and, after having ensured that nobody around her was watching, swiftly disappeared into the building’s elevator. Then, from what they could make out from the elevator’s display, she had gotten off at the fourth floor—the location of the club in question.

Kaname was stunned. *Of all people...!* “I can’t believe it. What in the world...”

“I always knew she was a terrorist in the making,” Sousuke muttered.

Yeesh, he really can be a creep, Kaname thought. She let out a sigh and, choosing not to comment out loud on that one, went over the plan one more time with Sousuke. “Well, I’m going in. You wait here, okay?”

“Understood.”

“If I press the button on the transmitter, come to save me right away, okay?”

“Understood.”

“And by the same token,” she insisted, “*don’t* come in if I *don’t* press it, okay?”

“Understood. Now, go on. Good luck.” Sousuke gave her a firm salute. He didn’t ask if she was all right or tell her to take care.

“You could at least pretend to be concerned about me...” Kaname grumbled, heading for the fourth floor establishment. Her objective was to find proof of instructors messing around there, but her actual intention was to find Saeki Ena and convince her to ditch this awful job.

The dicey establishment in question—the gentlemen’s image club C&J—looked pretty unremarkable on the inside at first blush. The waiting room was all white, with understated gray sofas and glass tables. On the wall was the famous painting *Liberty Leading the People*—a nude, but a tasteful one. It looked more like the waiting room of a dentist’s or chiropractor’s office than an adult entertainment venue. Kaname had really been steeling herself on the way up, so it kind of felt anticlimactic, in a way.

Still... don’t let appearances fool you, she told herself as she timidly approached the reception desk. “Excuse me.”

“Yes?” The desk was attended by a large man with short hair. He had large ears and thin, monolid eyes. His appearance was a bit funny, but his voice was properly somber.

“I saw your flier,” she told him. “It said you’re recruiting companions.”

“Oh! Wonderful. Welcome, come right this way.” The man nodded firmly and led Kaname inside to a narrow office. “Go on, sit down. This is perfect timing. We really need more girls like you. Would you like some tea? Sweets?”

“N-No... thank you.” Even if they’d had her favorites, Kaname doubted she’d be able to muster an appetite in this setting.

“Oh, I see. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the manager here, Gotou Shouji. A pleasure to meet you, Miss...?”

“Ah... Hidori. Hidori Kana.” Kaname came up with a rather sloppy alias, hoping to preserve her reputation later.

“Hidori-san, then? Right. That’s a Jindai High uniform, isn’t it?”

“Ah... yes.”

“We have quite a few Jindai girls working here. They’re all very good with our guests. They’re pretty and the clients really rave about them. Ha ha ha.” Gotou Shouji pulled out a cigarette and fired it up as he said this.

Kaname cleared her throat uncomfortably.

“Ah, heaven,” he said as he took a deep puff. “Now, Hidori-san, do you know what we do here?”

“Not... exactly,” Kaname hedged.

“Right. Put simply, we do a little role-playing with men exhausted from their professional lives,” Gotou explained. “We take this task very seriously, with numerous uniforms and sets prepared. Of course, this costs quite a lot of money, and it’s difficult to manage it all.”

“I see...”

“Our clientele is primarily made up of workaholics between thirty and fifty years of age. Lots of people with high positions in society: doctors, lawyers, government officials, policemen... and schoolteachers.”

Yeah, guess it really is one of those creepy sex role-play clubs, thought Kaname, wanting to walk right out immediately. *Utterly pathetic. All these men with big, important jobs, dressing up and playing silly games!*

While Kaname was ranting to herself, the reception desk’s bell rang.

“Oh, just a moment. We have a guest,” said Gotou, leaving the office. Soon after, she could hear laughter from him and his customer.

Eh? That voice... Kaname sneaked up to the door and peeked back into the waiting room. *Ah...*

The ‘guest’ was the teacher she’d met on the station platform, Mr. Usui. She recognized him for sure. *That spineless, almost invisible teacher, visiting a place*

like this?! Kaname quickly pulled out the pocket camera the student council had supplied her out of her uniform pocket. She shut off the flash and took one picture, then another.

Wow... this is pretty thrilling! I feel like I'm in Mission: Impossible*!* Kaname was suddenly enjoying the taste of being part of a spy mission.

Gotou picked up the internal phone and made a call, most likely to the employees' green room. "Saeki-san? You have a guest. Yes, room three. Take it away!"

Saeki—he was referring to Saeki Ena. *That girl. Is she about to do... her job?* Kaname wondered. *With Mr. Usui?! Saeki-san, who took second place in last year's Miss Jindai Contest at the culture festival? Who ranked in the top five in every year's final exams? Saeki-san, who devoted herself to the drama club? Oh, God! What has become of this world?!* 'Stunned' didn't even cover the level of shock Kaname felt in that moment. She could hear, tangibly, the sounds of the world she once believed in crumbling all around her.

Gotou was heading back to the office. Kaname, still shaken, quickly returned to her seat and forced herself to assume a neutral expression.

The big man arrived a moment later. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he told her. "We're quite busy at this time of day."

"I... I see."

"Right. I came into some easy money, so I decided to start up this business on a whim. It's been... much more lucrative than I imagined."

"I see..."

"This is my pet theory: Every entry in the species known as man carries these desires inside of them. The knowledge that they can never have them leads to suffering, but our little club gives them the illusion of fulfillment. It's a sign of the sickness that pervades our society." Gotou explained, nodding wisely in agreement with himself. "Now... what were we talking about? That's right, the job. Well, you'll start out as an apprentice, learning what you need to know to please our guests. You'll need a bit of basic talent, and some performance ability. And... you'll need to lose your self-consciousness. This is very

important.”

“My... self-consciousness?” Kaname echoed.

“Yes. Many of the men who come here are very shy. You need to be able to take the lead with them, so that they don’t feel embarrassed,” he explained. “Do you understand?”

“Geh...” Kaname was starting to feel sick.

The expression on her face inspired a suspicious glare from Gotou. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“I... er... Do you mind if I wash my hands?” Kaname asked weakly.

“Not at all. The bathroom is in the back... would you like me to show you?”

“N-No. I can find it... by myself.” Kaname stood up and moved unsteadily towards the back of the shop.

Kaname splashed her face with water from the sink. She had never felt so out of place in her life. The manager, Gotou, was friendly, and the shop didn’t seem particularly seedy. There was no need for her to call for Sousuke’s help just yet. And yet...

I don’t want to stay here any longer than I have to, she told herself. *I have to get out of here! That’s the most important thing.* But one picture of a teacher talking to someone at reception... that was far from the conclusive proof they needed. She had to get something more concrete.

He said they were going to room number three, right? Which meant Saeki Ena and Mr. Usui would be in that room. Could she bust in and take pictures like a member of the paparazzi? Maybe. Kaname left the bathroom, weighing her options.

The shop’s interior was laid out much like a karaoke parlor, narrow passageways lined on either side by doors leading to small rooms. Rooms numbered one, two, three, five, six, seven, eight...

The room in question, room three, was right next to the bathroom Kaname had just come out of. It couldn’t be seen from reception or from the waiting

room. As she was just about to pass it, she stopped. Moving on instinct, she tried the doorknob. Shockingly, it wasn't locked.

Th-This is...

Kaname, feeling her heart beating rapidly, opened the door a silent crack. There was no reaction from the people inside. Quieting her nagging conscience, she crouched down and peeked inside.

The room was set up like the classroom of a cram school, complete with blackboard and row of desks. From the speaker in the wall, sounds she knew well—the sounds of a quiet classroom after-hours—echoed out. Saeki Ena and Mr. Usui were there, standing some distance away from each other. While Usui was staring right at Ena, Ena was looking away. They didn't seem to notice that Kaname was there.

"How long... How long are you going to keep doing this to yourself, Saeki-kun?" Mr. Usui said.

Ena responded indifferently. "That's... That's none of your business. Life is all pointless, anyway. Why don't you stop pretending to care about me, Mr. Usui?"

"I can't do that! You're my student! And when one of my students is taking a step down a wrong path, it's my duty to help, somehow!" he told her in a strangely impassioned voice.

But Ena nevertheless smirked at him. "Hah... You're so stupid. Everything you adults say is a lie. You're really just here for my body, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about? I'm concerned about your—"

"Oh, let it go," Ena told him scornfully. "Let's just... forget who we are, and have a little fun... right, teacher?"



Ena giggled seductively and smiled bewitchingly. Even Kaname, a fellow girl, couldn't help but feel her heart skip a beat at the sight. *Ah... Saeki-san... are you serious about this?* Feeling her stomach churn with bile, Kaname remained rooted to the spot.

"She's been gone a long time," Sousuke observed from where he was hiding behind an electric pole across the street, and glared at his wristwatch. In Sousuke's estimation, Kaname should have put out the call for aid not long after entering the building. But he waited and waited, and said call never came.

It must be... Perhaps she had been captured by a terrorist and was currently being subjected to terrible torture? That had to be the case, he figured. They'd snatched away her transmitter before she could trigger the signal.

Chidori! Sousuke made his decision and sprang into action. He didn't bother waiting for the elevator, but dashed up the stairs like a whirlwind. He arrived at the establishment on the fourth floor, C&J, and stepped in without hesitation.

"Excuse me, can I help—" the large man at the reception desk frowned at him as he approached. Sousuke grabbed the man's arm, twisted it, then pressed the pistol drawn from his back holster to the man's head.

"Wait! What are you doing?" the man protested. "Hey!"

"Where are you hiding Chidori Kaname? Tell me, or I'll kill you!" Sousuke hissed, merciless.

"What? Who is that?"

"Don't play dumb with me!"

"I don't know her, I swear! Please, calm down!"

Sousuke blinked, questioningly.

"Are... Are you talking about Hidori-san, perhaps? She went to the bathroom. She said she wasn't feeling well. But I assume she'll be back any minute now!"

As soon as he heard this, Sousuke cast a glance around the room. The middle-aged men sitting nearby looked at him nervously. They were a largely docile, spineless-looking bunch, who certainly didn't look like the kind of people to be

engaging in terrorist activities.

“Is he right about that?” Sousuke asked.

The other men nodded.

A few moments later, Sousuke removed the gun from the man’s head. “I see,” he observed. “This place certainly doesn’t *look* like a terrorist training camp...”

“Why would it?! Listen, sir, this place is...!” The man stood back up and explained to Sousuke what the establishment was all about.

Sousuke was immediately abashed. “I’m very sorry,” he said genuinely.

“I’m glad to hear that. Now... as long as you’re here, would you like to partake in one of our... scenarios?”

“Scenarios?”

“Yes. You’ll enjoy it, I guarantee.” Gotou grinned.

Kaname continued to watch the forbidden class proceed. In the simulated, empty classroom, Mr. Usui continued to resist Ena’s come-ons. “Don’t... Don’t be ridiculous! I’m your teacher!”

“Oh, you.” She giggled again. “That’s why I said we should forget who we are and enjoy ourselves. Don’t you think so... *teacher*?”

“S-Saeki-kun!”

“Come on, *teacher*... Come right here.” Ena sat down on the desk and beckoned Mr. Usui towards her.

Ah, it begins... Despite her anxiety about what was unfolding, Kaname couldn’t take her eyes off of them. But then...

“You... You idiot!” All of a sudden, Usui pulled out a paper fan and slapped it down hard on Ena’s head.

“Eek!” Ena stumbled.

Kaname’s jaw dropped in confusion.

“Listen to me! You *have* to have more respect for yourself! The future that

lies before you is infinite! Even if you might think there's no purpose in living, someday, you will see the beautiful light of the sun! It will be like a rainbow, and you'll shed tears in your heart! Don't you see that, Saeki-kun? I'll be so sad if you can't!" Usui barked at her, nostrils flaring.

"T-Teacher..."

"Don't say such awful things, like that adults always lie," Usui admonished her. "You can always start over. When I think about all your potential, I... I..." Tears flooded his eyes.

Perhaps in response, Ena, too, started choking up. "Oh, teacher... I've been so wrong!"

"Yes, yes..."

"I... I'm so sorry. I didn't realize how hard this was for you," she apologized. "I've been so selfish. I really..."

"Wonderful!" Usui beamed. "You finally see?"

"Yes!"

"I'm glad. Now, your parents are surely worried for you. Go, race off into the setting sun!" He told her, reciting a line from an emotional scene in an old school drama.

Uh? Kaname was trying to process what she'd just seen, when she realized similar voices were coming from the room next door. She poked her head in, curiously...

Two middle-aged men stood together in room five, which was set up to look like a high-quality lounge. There were no young girls in sight.

"This is ridiculous. What you're doing is against the law!" one of the men said, firmly.

"C'mon, Mr. Policeman. Let it slide, just this once." The darker-skinned man of the pair placed a thick manila envelope on top of the table.

"What is this?"

"Just a little thank-you gift... Go on, take it."

“What?!”

“C’mon, ain’t like it’s blood money,” the darker man urged the other. “Go on. Just one hit won’t hurt you.”

Furious, the other man threw the envelope back in his face. “Stop this nonsense!”

“Wh-What are you...?!”

“Shut up! No matter what else I might be, I’m a servant of the law! Your money and threats won’t work on me!”

“Aargh... Y-You sure about this, pal? I’ve got Rep. Kaneyama in my pocket. You’ll be busted back down to beat cop so fast—”

“Do whatever you want! You can’t buy my pride or self-respect!”

“D-Damn you...”

“My job is to keep this city safe! And your evil deeds are at an end!”

“Wh-Whatever...” The dark skinned man was suddenly panicking.

Completely flabbergasted, Kaname checked the next room down, room number six. This one was made out to be a hospital office.

“M-Mr. Director... You can’t possibly...”

“Now, now, Dr. Sasaki. I really want you *taking care* of Hamamatsu Pharmaceuticals. They always take good care of *us*, after all... heh heh heh.”

“I won’t do it.”

“What?”

“I said I won’t do it! My job is to save patients’ lives,” the man declared righteously. “I didn’t become a doctor to prop up you and some corrupt pharmaceutical company!”

“What?! You think you can stay at *my* hospital with an attitude like that?!”

“Shut up! I’d rather live on the streets than sell out my doctor’s soul!”

“Y-You...!”

It went on and on like that. In the next room, and in the one after that. Each

one featured a timid-looking customer burning with self-righteous fury at an (extremely well performed) actor, each of whom was playing a villain.

“What are you doing, Hidori-san?” The next thing Kaname knew, the owner, Gotou, was staring at her from the door to the office. She’d gotten so wrapped up in watching, she hadn’t even noticed his presence.

“What? Oh... I was just...”

“You can’t look in on other guests. They’ll be humiliated if they see you. Honestly...” Despite his scolding, he didn’t seem especially angry.

“Excuse me, Gotou-san,” she finally said. “What *is* all this?”

“I told you: it’s a place for men, exhausted from work, who want to do a little role-playing.”

“But—”

“I think you might have the wrong idea,” Gotou told her. “Our clientele is weak-willed men whose deepest desire is to give self-righteous speeches to others—incidentally, ‘C&J’ stands for ‘courage and justice.’”

“Wuh?” said Kaname.

“You really don’t know? All men want to be superheroes. They want to be strong, they want to be righteous... These are the secret desires they all hold inside them,” Gotou explained. “But when they enter the adult world, things don’t always work out the way they want them to. They can’t actually challenge their superiors, or they run into situations that aren’t so black and white. The real world is *complicated*. It’s the same whether you are a doctor, a policeman, or a novelist. Yes, yes...” The man nodded to himself, firmly. “Oh, or an editor, a sales rep, a printer, a proofreader, or an illustrator. They all have it equally hard,” Gotou Shouji said with an inexplicable, hasty add-on.

This... This is so stupid. It’s somehow even sadder than a sex club... Kaname found herself flabbergasted by the utter absurdity of it all.

“By the way, your friend is here. He’s in room eight, enjoying a free sample.”

“My friend?” Kaname peeked into the nearby room eight. Gotou didn’t try to stop her.

The interior was dressed up to look like a military headquarters. A forty-year-old actor—a ‘companion’—dressed in a fancy military uniform was laying into Sousuke, who stood at attention before him. “This is unacceptable, Sergeant! I ordered you to slaughter every single person in that village!”

“And I refuse to accept that order, sir!” Sousuke shouted back.

“What was that?!” the actor demanded angrily. “Do as I say or I’ll have you court-martialed! I’ll send you to the firing squad!”

“Do whatever you like!” Sousuke declared. “There were no guerrillas in that village! Your judgment was in error!”

“Y-You...” The faux officer steamed.

“Sousuke?!” As Kaname stepped into the room, the actor and Sousuke both snapped out of character and looked back at her with quizzical expressions.

“Chidori? What is it?”

“Wh-What in the world are you doing? What *is* all this?!”

“This? Oh...” Sousuke put a hand to his jaw and considered. “Well, it’s actually quite interesting. Would you like to join in?”

Kaname felt herself go limp, collapsed to her knees on the floor, and let out a sigh from the depths of her soul.

〈An Adult Sneaking Mission〉

Engage, Six, Seven

The incident occurred during AS drop training.

It wasn't even a particularly difficult exercise. The B-team, led by call sign Uruz-2 (First Lieutenant Tanan Amathart) and consisting of three M6A2 Bushnells, was supposed to descend from an altitude of 12,000 meters and open their parachutes as low as possible to the ground—about 1,200 meters—in what was known as a HALO jump. Descending from the C-17 transport alongside Lieutenant Amathart's M6 were Sergeant Melissa Mao and Corporal Jack Wayne, who held the call signs Uruz-6 and Uruz-7 respectively. All involved had plenty of AS drop experience.

However, immediately after the three machines opened their parachutes—around the 1,000 meter zone—they were hit with buffeting winds. Such gusts were anticipated to some degree, and Lieutenant Amathart (Uruz-2) and Sergeant Mao (Uruz-6) quickly manipulated their parachute toggles to regain their balance. Corporal Wayne (Uruz-7) tried to do the same and failed when a shearing wind struck his M6, sending it out of alignment and into the parachute of the nearby Lieutenant Amathart's M6. Their wires became tangled and both parachutes collapsed as the two ASes plummeted hopelessly towards the ground, intertwined like the double helix of DNA.

Sergeant Mao, left behind in the air, radioed her HQ about the issue and reported the coordinates towards which her comrades were falling. Meanwhile, without even enough time to curse their bad luck, the two men cut free their parachutes and deployed their backups. By the time this happened, though, they were a mere 400 meters from the ground.

The instant the spare parachutes were deployed, their posture-stabilizing rocket motors (which were mounted on the M6's torsos) activated automatically. Powerful flames burst out in a low diagonal on either side of the machines, slowing their descent, but not enough to keep the two M6s from plowing into a heavily jungled mountain slope on Merida Island.

Four minutes later, a rescue helicopter from the base arrived.

●

“I almost can’t believe they survived,” said Gail McAllen, skimming through an accident report at his Merida Island Base office. “I saw a similar accident befall another team when I was in the Australian military. Those two didn’t make it. The drive systems were crushed up, a fuel tank caught fire... Well, I don’t need to tell you it was bad.”

“Sir,” Sergeant Melissa Mao responded weakly. Mao was Chinese-American, with short black hair and large, almond-shaped eyes. She had the air of a graceful cat and a lithe and flexible body. She’d come out of the Marines, but was now a part of the transnational counter-terrorism force known as Mithril. More specifically, she was a member of the SRT, the ground strike team of their operations division’s amphibious battle group known as the Tuatha de Danaan.

Captain McAllen was the SRT’s leader, bearing the call sign of Uruz-1. He was a short Caucasian man of height about equal to Mao’s.

“I guess it helps that Amathart and Wayne are both such good pilots,” Mao added.

“*Were* such good pilots, you mean,” McAllen corrected, rapping his toe in agitation against an empty bucket near his feet. The roof of the island’s underground base frequently leaked during hard rains, and the SRT office was one of the many that had to requisition a bucket at all times. “Amathart was badly injured... his right leg and hip are unlikely to make a full recovery. It won’t interfere with his daily life, but he won’t be able to handle SRT missions anymore. I’m thinking of moving him to intelligence.”

“Really?” Mao whispered, finding it regrettable. Lieutenant Amathart was extremely talented and fair-minded, with a good grasp of human nature and a wealth of experience.

“Corporal Wayne got off with light injuries,” McAllen continued, “but I don’t think he’ll be any good to the SRT after this.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He said he saw the face of God when he hit the ground.” McAllen looked

down, one eyebrow twitching. “A white light appeared before his eyes and proclaimed, ‘Thou art a lost lamb. Cast aside thy sword and take up the shrimp net.’ He says he’s going to pay the contract termination fee, leave the squad, and move to Florida.”

“I’m sure he’ll be a good fisherman,” Mao groaned, eyes glazing over.

McAllen spoke in annoyance. “Damned Wayne. Shrimp, my eye... What a waste of good talent.”

“I’ve never heard of that reaction to a near-death experience before...”

“Glad I found out early, at any rate. If I’d used him in combat without realizing it, it could’ve made real trouble for us.”

“No kidding.”

The two let out a shared sigh.

The man sitting in a dark corner of the office, who had been silently listening to their conversation up to this point, spoke. “It’s not unusual to lose personnel in training accidents.” His voice was deep and quietly sonorous, somehow evocative of a moss-covered rock. Tall, with broad shoulders and deeply carved features—this was Major Andrey Kalinin. He was McAllen’s direct superior, and operations commander of the entire amphibious battle group. “The issue is losing *SRT* personnel. We can swap in Sergeant Mao for Lieutenant Amathart as Uruz-2, but...”

“What?” Mao said unthinkingly.

McAllen explained. “I didn’t mention it? Starting tomorrow, your call sign is Uruz-2.”

Mao was left speechless by his casual declaration. The Uruz-2 call sign legitimately signified the SRT’s ‘number two’—in other words, she’d be second only to McAllen in authority. It was a shockingly sudden promotion.

The Tuatha de Danaan’s Special Response Team (SRT) were an elite force chosen from the best of the best. They conducted the kinds of dangerous and delicate missions that required great flexibility, and were effectively Mithril’s hand-picked top guns. Most SRT members weren’t just exceptional fighters, but

were also top-class technicians in some field or other. In the Tuatha de Danaan's case, that frequently meant AS specialists, and those that weren't had skills in another field. For instance, Uruz-9—the Korean Corporal Yang Junkyu—had very little AS piloting experience, but made up for it with the skills of a professional race car driver behind the wheel.

Mao herself was an AS and electronic warfare specialist, and such things were generally her purview in SRT missions. She knew she had qualifications to match any of her colleagues, but despite all that, she couldn't fully hide her reticence at the thought of taking up the role.

"What's wrong? You seem confused," McAllen said with a grin.

"Well, yeah, I am," she confessed. "You have plenty of others who could do this, after all."

"Untrue. Uruz-3, Castello, leads the PRT, and Uruz-4, Hammer, commands the helicopter squadron. Uruz-5, Sergeant Sandraptor, is good, but he's not cut out for leadership. That leaves it to you, Uruz-6," McAllen explained, listing off the names of the other SRT members. "They're just numbers, of course, but I've been thinking this over for a while. You're still young, but you're even-handed, with a good head for cooperation. And..." McAllen went that far, then trailed off. "Well, there's a lot of reasons."

"Well, thanks." Mao wondered if he was about to say something vaguely irritating, like 'women are more attentive to the needs of those around them.' Though, if that was his reasoning, he might not have been that far off the mark. Whether or not it had to do with her gender, Mao *was* a very attentive person. More so than most people thought.

Mao wasn't one of the 'macho' type women typically seen in male-dominated workplaces. Experience had taught her that you couldn't earn the men's respect by putting that kind of attitude at the forefront. What mattered was flexibility, cooperation, and competence. Even if she got some bullying, she had to let it roll off her back, remember why she was there, put her head down and keep doing her work. It wasn't easy, but it was visible to the people that mattered. And that could pay dividends.

It was shocking how useful that experience had turned out to be in Mithril.

The organization sometimes gave absurd orders without any explanation. Three months ago, in fact, operations HQ had appointed a fifteen-year-old girl to serve as battle group commander. Even Mao was baffled by that one. Said new commander, Colonel Teletha Testarossa, was currently overseeing the finishing touches on their base's new submarine, the TDD-1. As far as Mao had heard, the girl hadn't made any real mistakes as of yet. In fact, she'd heard from several people that she was performing excellently.

"We're promoting you to master sergeant," Kalinin said. "But that still leaves the SRT two numbers short. We'll need two new soldiers with appropriate skills."

"You think we can find them on such short notice?"

"They'll need to have depth. This is an important time for our battle group; we're just about to receive some real fighting power. With the TDD-1's maiden voyage completed successfully, the new ASes will be arriving at Merida Island by the end of the week."

Hearing this, Mao's expression brightened. "Wow! The XM9s?"

"As of two days ago, the official designation is 'M9'," Kalinin told her. "Codename Gernsback."

"Yesss!" Mao did a little dance, like a child anticipating the arrival of a new toy. She'd actually been involved with the new AS's design, and she knew them best out of everyone in the squad. So when the new models came, she'd be the first to get to fiddle with them, play with them, and tool around in them. She'd been planning a shopping trip to Guam that weekend, but could easily cancel those plans. She knew where her priorities lay.

But Kalinin quickly doused her enthusiasm. "Filling in the gaps in our squad is more important than testing out those dubious new models," he said firmly. "You'll be flying to Central America. The training camp in Belize."

"Uh?" said Mao.

"First duty under your new rank," he went on to explain. "Spend a week working with the head of the camp and pick out the two best prospects among the trainees. They'll fill in the Uruz-6 and Uruz-7 roles."

“But what about the XM— I mean, the M9 tests?”

“You can do those later,” Kalinin said flatly.

After Mao slumped her way out of the office, McAllen said to Kalinin, “What if she pulls a pair of duds?”

“She won’t,” Kalinin responded smoothly. “She’s picking her own team, after all.”

“True, that does make a person more discerning...” McAllen rapped his sheaf of documents on the table to get them lined up, then changed the subject. “By the way, the camp’s commander called me last week. He says there’s a strange new recruit there: a boy, fifteen or sixteen, East Asian.”

“Fifteen or sixteen?”

“Yes. Apparently, he’s a mercenary our scouts picked up in Southeast Asia. What were they thinking, bringing in a child like that?”

“Is he Japanese, perchance?” Kalinin asked.

It was a strange question, and McAllen looked at him suspiciously. “I didn’t ask. Why?”

“Oh... perhaps I’m overthinking it. Never mind.” Kalinin shook his head slightly and leaned back in his chair.

●

From Merida Island, Mao passed through Guam, California, and Mexico before arriving in Belize, a city that shared the name of the country it was in. From there, she spent two hours in a ratty old transport helicopter. Their training camp, the Mithril special combatant selection center, was located in the northern Maya Mountains, in the jungles close to the border with Guatemala.

When she finally arrived after a full day’s travel, dressed in her well-worn old olive-colored fatigues with Ray-Ban sunglasses, she found it wasn’t much different than it had been when she’d stayed there. “Has it been a whole year?” she whispered to herself, stepping out of the helicopter onto the damp ground

below.

The training camp fanned out in the middle of the jungle. The sunlight was blaring and the heat was sweltering. Deep greenery and the smell of mud overwhelmed the eye and the nose. Gunshots stung her ears, accompanied by barking voices and the roar of old helicopters.

The camp was located in Belize, a small Central American nation on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The population was a mere 220,000, and it had only gained independence from England twenty years ago. Belize's primary industries were farming and forestry, and most of its population was poor. Most of the land areas were comprised of tropical rainforest. It was September, in the middle of the country's rainy season, meaning that the camp got at least one heavy downpour each day.

The camp's buildings were mostly prefabricated and as bare-bones as could be. Almost all the weapons there were used, older generation things. There were ASes, too, but only four—two M6s and two Rk-92, all extremely well-worn first-generation machines. It was a big difference from the modern high-tech weapons Mao used on a daily basis at Merida Island.

There was a reason why the equipment in this training camp was so shoddy: the soldiers gathered here weren't just training, but also being tested for suitability to their unit. They'd get run through a specific training course, and if they didn't score highly enough, they'd eventually flunk out and be forced to leave the camp with a minor compensation. The dropouts would thus never learn the name of the company they'd been trying to join, nor that it employed high-tech weaponry ten years ahead of the rest of the world. When they returned to their home countries, all they'd be able to tell friends and acquaintances was, 'It was a training camp full of veterans doing really harsh training,' and the secret of Mithril's existence would be preserved.

Immediately after Mao landed, she stopped by the office of Major Estes, the camp's tanned Puerto Rican director who would have looked more like the curator for a museum of odds and ends were it not for the long, fine scars all over his body. Following the initial pleasantries, she handed over Kalinin's documents.

“Now...” Major Estes said, waving around the documents he’d just received to swat at a fly buzzing around his head. “Go ahead and take back whoever you want, but you’re pretty much on your own, all right? I’ve got enough to do.”

For some reason, there was a radial crack in the window behind him. In front of it sat a trophy—apparently some kind of sharpshooting award—split in two.

“We’re host to broke mercenaries and retired military from all over, but only a few of them will do you any good,” he told her. “Not many as brilliant as you out there.”

“Right...” said Mao, trailing off uncertainly.

“Time passes fast,” he observed. “Has it been a year already? Originally I thought you’d drop out in a few days.”

“When people underestimate me like that, sir, I always use it against them.”

“One of your best points,” Estes told her with a happy smile.

Most of the people who came to the camp were veteran soldiers to whom the name ‘trainee’ didn’t seem particularly appropriate... Yet even then, more than half dropped out. The training itself was extremely taxing, with the soldiers forced to work their bodies to the max in a stressful environment. For instance, they’d have to trek alone through a mountainous region that was filled with instructors—who were role-playing the enemy—while running recon. The course itself covered about twenty kilometers, and they had a mere twenty hours to finish with twenty kilograms of equipment on their backs. They had to arrive at their destination on time and without being discovered by an instructor—with every piece of equipment intact, of course. The test was so hardcore that even men confident in their skills frequently dropped out. Some actually got lost in the jungle and had to be saved from the brink of death by others.

For those who managed to make it to the goal within the allotted time, another trial awaited: as they stood there, exhausted and sleep-deprived, the instructor would tell them, “Congratulations on making it, but I’m afraid our plans have changed. You’re going to have to keep hauling that twenty kilograms of equipment to Point Delta another twenty kilometers to the west. And do it within another twenty hours.” This part of the test was psychological in nature:

having overcome so many hardships to reach their goal, with true R&R finally in sight, they'd have to buck up once more and resume their forced march of despair.

It was an extremely difficult thing to ask of someone. Most would give up again before they even made it one kilometer. But those with keen wills would dig down deep and keep walking. And once they'd made it about five kilometers, they'd find an instructor waiting for them, who'd proclaim, "Congratulations! This time, you really passed. There's a jeep nearby. Take it back and have a rest."

That was just one small example of the extremely sadistic trials that Mao had cleared to make it where she was.

Major Estes drew a beat-up cigarette from his pocket and said, "Even men in whom I see real potential will drop out for the strangest reasons. We had a real tough guy who came out of Delta Force..." Delta Force was a US Special Forces team. "...but he got stranded in the mountains one day."

"Stranded, huh?" Mao remarked. "A Delta Force guy?"

"He had a little bad luck. Got pinned to a tree by an unexpected mudslide, and spent three days trapped there," Estes explained. "It's impressive that he managed to hang in there for so long without food or water, and his grades until then had been stellar, so I asked him if he wanted to stick with it... but he said he was quitting."

"Why in the world?"

"He said that while he was stranded, he saw the face of God."

Mao stared at Estes in silence.

"With a grand fanfare, an Elvis Presley clad in white appeared and proclaimed, 'Cast aside thy sword and take up the microphone'," Estes went on. "The day after being saved, he made a pilgrimage to Memphis."

"I'm sure he'll be an excellent singer," Mao said, her eyes glazing over.

Major Estes whispered bitterly. "Damn the man. Elvis, my eye... What a waste of good talent."

“I wonder if there’s something going around...” Mao muttered.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, nothing... I think I’ll go look through the camp now, like you said. Is that all right?”

“Yeah, I’ve assigned you a trainee to act as your guide,” Estes told her. “He’ll be waiting for you outside, so you can ask him if you have any questions.”

“Thanks.” She saluted, then left Estes’s office behind.

As promised, there was indeed a trainee waiting outside in fatigues. He was a young Caucasian man, probably around twenty years old, with a shockingly handsome face that seemed out of place in these tropical hinterlands. He had deep blue eyes and silky blond hair, a perfectly proportioned nose and symmetrical jawline. Despite his quintessential Teutonic beauty, though, there was a strange melancholy in his eyes that seemed reminiscent of the East.

My goodness... Realizing she’d forgotten to breathe, Mao fixed her mouth into a hard line and adjusted her sunglasses. She’d come here to recruit, not to flirt. Still, she couldn’t deny the handsome boy’s appeal...

“Master Sergeant Melissa Mao?” the young man said. His voice was as elegant as she’d imagined.

“That’s me. Who are you?”

“I’m a trainee, Kurz Weber. Major Estes ordered me to show you around. It’s really a true pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Weber,” said Mao, shaking Trainee Weber’s hand. His fingers were soft and lithe, reminiscent of a pianist. *Ah, cut it out...* she told herself, only just managing to keep herself from leering.

“Well, we should get started. Right this way, if you please,” said Weber, who began walking forward with Mao following after him. “The instructor mentioned you graduated from this camp.”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “About a year ago.”

“That’s amazing. It seems like all around me, people are dropping like flies...”

“What about you? Think you can make the grade?”

He gave her a bashful smile. “I’m doing my best, but I’m not sure... They haven’t let us know where we’ll be stationed if we graduate. And I can’t stop thinking everyone here is better than me.”

“No whining, now,” she lectured.

“Yes, ma’am. But I really don’t feel like I have much to offer... I’m especially bad with a rifle,” he confessed.

“Don’t talk like that. I’m a total mess, and even I made it. Have a little self-confidence.”

“Thank you, ma’am. You’ve cheered me up a bit.” Weber smiled again.

A good and honest boy, Mao thought. She honestly wondered how someone so innocent could possibly be making it in this camp, but then... you couldn’t judge a book by its cover. Perhaps, behind his handsome appearance, the boy had a will of iron.

As they walked along, they chatted a bit about memories and current events in the camp. At last, Mao said, “I’d like to know who’s the absolute best among the trainees.”

“I can tell you all about that, certainly. But first, come this way.” With this, Weber guided her to a small warehouse. It was beside a 300-yard shooting range a short distance away from the troop barracks. She could still hear the gunshots periodically going off from here.

“Hmm?” she said questioningly.

“Come on in,” he invited. “Watch your step. It’s dark inside.”

Despite finding his behavior suspicious, Mao entered the warehouse and Weber silently closed the door behind them. Inside was a selection of target boards, lumber, wires, and other miscellany.

“What’s this all about?” she asked.

“I didn’t want the other trainees or instructors to see,” Weber said in the dim light. A few beams of light streamed in through gaps in the walls and the door, but the backlighting made it impossible to make out his expression. “There was

something I was hoping to discuss with you, ma'am."

"What is it?" Mao asked, the strangeness of the situation making it hard for her to do otherwise.

Weber cleared his throat, then spoke up, seriously. "I've been in this camp for four weeks now."

"Yeah?"

"Before then, I lived in the rural middle east, working as a mercenary. A city boy like me, living in the empty backwaters for over three years... then only getting a few days in real civilization before I came here..."

"Sure, that happens," Mao said skeptically.

"Yes... Wiling my youth away fighting pointless battles, surrounded by sweaty, boorish males. Nary a single soft feminine form in sight, my days haunted by loneliness and sorrow... I don't know about the other trainees, but I don't think I can stand this kind of life much longer," he said sorrowfully. "Frankly, I've been thinking of quitting the camp."

"That's a shame," Mao told him, while thinking *Ah, so he's a wimp*. He was feeling homesick, and the minute a sympathetic-seeming superior officer appeared, he took it for a shoulder to cry on. Quite frankly, it was a disappointment. *But why'd he bring me in here to do it?*

"But... but." A little bit of heat entered Weber's voice now. "If you, oh so beautiful and wise and reliable master sergeant... would allow me to bury my face in your ample bust, and cry... I might just graduate this camp with the best grades ever!"

"You—"

"It's not training that I need, but love!" he cried passionately. "Love and warmth! Specifically, the warmth of human contact!"

"W-Wait a minute—" As Weber pressed closer, Mao drew back, arms folded protectively over her chest.

"Master Sergeant, I beg of you! Let me cry into your chest! Preferably naked!"

"You sicko pig!" she bellowed.

“Master Sergeeeeant!” Weber leaped at her, tears streaming from his eyes.

Mao drew back to dodge his charge, but tripped over a piece of wood on the floor and fell onto her backside instead.

Weber promptly threw himself onto her. “Wow, is that a yes? Is it?! You make me so happy!”

“Get off of me!” she told him angrily. “Hey! Ahh—”

“Don’t you worry. I’m very gentle. Yeah, no worries there...”

“S-Stop it...”

“C’mon, Melissa,” he implored her. “Let’s make love. I’ll make you happy, I swear. Yahoo!”



Weber rubbed his cheek needily against Mao's chest. Strangely, she didn't feel completely repulsed by it, but that was all the more reason she had to take this seriously. Returning to her senses, Mao narrowed her eyes dangerously. "That's... enough!" she said, planting a knee into his lower abdomen.

"Erk!" Weber choked. Mao then grabbed him by the collar, lifted up his face, and gave him a swift chop with her open left hand. "Urk... urgh..."

"Was that all an act to get me in here?! You disgusting pervert!" Mao charged at Weber, who'd just gotten unsteadily onto his feet.

"H-Hey. Wait—"

Crash! Mao's jump kick to the face sent Weber flying. Crashing back-first through the door behind him, he tumbled out of the warehouse. After going head-over-heels through the mud a few times, he finally came to a stop, arms and legs flopping motionlessly at his sides.

"Hahh... hahh..." Heaving for breath, Mao made her way back out into the bright sunlight. She stepped on the door as she went, now broken in two, and as she was straightening out her rumpled clothing, Weber slowly sat up.

"Ow, that hurts. Darn it..." said Weber, while wiping his mud-stained face off with a sleeve. It was a haughty voice now, with none of the humble civility he'd had on display when they'd first met. His expression was suddenly that of a sulking child as well. "Are you crazy?" he demanded. "Where'd that come from?"

"That's my line!" she replied. "What were you thinking?!"

"Well, you know... You were being weirdly nice to me, so I thought you might be interested," he said simply.

"The hell I would! Besides, you were tricking me from the start!"

"How so?"

"Putting on that super-polite, 'wouldn't-hurt-a-fly' act!" Mao clarified.

"Hmm? Oh, that... That act really brings 'em in. Especially older women," Weber told her. "I try it from time to time. Ha ha ha ha."

“You...”

It was then that five or six men came running from the nearby shooting range.

“What’s all this?”

“Oh, it’s just Weber. Getting in trouble again?”

“Hey, a hottie.”

The rubberneckers all put in their two cents.

A black sergeant, who appeared to be an instructor, appeared a moment later. “What’s all this noise?! You, there! Woman! Explain this!” he called to her.

“I’ve got nothing to explain! If you want to yell at someone, yell at Major Estes, who stuck me with this idiot!” she shouted back.

The sergeant’s eyes narrowed as he noticed the brand new rank insignia on Mao’s arm. Then he looked at Weber, still crouched upon the ground, and back again at Mao. “Forgive me, ma’am,” he said at last, his tone suddenly extremely polite. “I think I see what happened here. I’m sorry for the trouble my trainee has caused you.” He paused. “Weber!”

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t I order you to scrub the urinals and dig a trench? What are you doing here?!”

“Well, Lagavulin was ordered to show this lady around camp, but he said he suddenly wasn’t feeling well, so I took over for him,” Weber said innocently.

“I get it,” the sergeant said shortly. “In other words, Lagavulin’s insubordinate.”

“Looks like.”

“I’ll have to punish Lagavulin for this. But as he’s not feeling well, I’ll have to punish you in his place. Go clean the two M6s,” the sergeant told him. “You can do it *after* you scrub the urinals and do your digging.”

“Huh? But if it rains they’ll just get dirty again,” Weber protested.

“I don’t care. And no breaks until the work’s all done!”

“Yeah, yeah...” Weber stood up with a shrug, brushing the mud off his bottom as he walked off. But on his way out, he gave Mao a last glance and a grin. “But, Big Sis. I really was lonely. And I only go after the pretty ladies, I swear.”

“Oh, really?” Mao asked. The way he’d winked and said that line offhandedly... for some reason, she didn’t find it pretentious. In fact, she found it rather charming. It must have been some special talent of his.

“Now, get going!” came the shout, and Kurz Weber skedaddled.

After a quick call to Major Estes, the instructor who’d told Weber off was assigned to be Mao’s guide instead. The man in question, Sergeant Zimmer, had been appointed as an instructor here at camp ten months ago. Since Mao had graduated some time before that, this was their first time meeting. He was just under forty and not particularly tall, but had a solidly built, muscular frame. He wore his brimmed hat neatly and had a thick goatee.

“Honestly sorry about the mix-up,” Zimmer apologized again. “Things don’t work like an ordinary camp here. Lots of peculiar types around.”

“I know all about it,” Mao told him. “By the way, that guy... Weber, was he a trainee too?”

“Yeah. And our biggest problem child. He does fine enough in exercises, but it’s like he’s got no respect for the rules at all. He was already in the doghouse for some trouble he caused yesterday, and now he’s skipping out on his punishment to mess with you...”

“What was he in the doghouse for?”

“He shot the major’s trophy,” Zimmer said with a shrug. “There’s a shooting range for urban combat to the north. He fired a .308 caliber from the tower there while the major was out and hit it dead-on. Seems like he’d made a bet with the other trainees... The men all claimed it was just a stray shot, but the major was furious.”

“That tower?” Mao looked northward. Far beyond the jungle that bordered the leisurely sloping hill, just barely within the range of her vision, the tip of a simple steel tower was visible through the trees. She stared at it a moment,

then looked back at Major Estes's office, which was a small prefabricated building on the far south side of the camp cut out of the jungle. There had to be at least a kilometer between them... He'd hit that tiny little trophy from that distance?

"It was complete dumb luck, of course," Zimmer added upon noting Mao's reaction. "Most men couldn't hit the ass-end of an elephant at a distance like that. There's no way he did it on purpose."

"Yeah, probably not..." Mao had heard more than her share of rumors about legendary snipers since she entered the business, but only a handful of people in the world could land a shot like that intentionally. And the sorts that could tended to be stoic and taciturn, with a mysterious air reminiscent of mountain sages. They weren't obnoxious playboys like Weber.

"All right, let's go. I don't know what the major told you, but we've got plenty of good men here to go with the bad. And there are more currently out on exercises who might not be back today... but you can have a look through, at any rate." At this, Zimmer started walking.

Mao spent all day looking at trainees. She scrutinized portfolios, watched the more interesting ones in action, met with them, talked with them, then asked Zimmer a few more questions... and at some point, while she was doing that, the sun had gone down.

A heavy squall hit the base around then, yet the men's training continued. Beyond the endless hiss of the rain, she could hear the barking of the officers and the sounds of gunfire. In the western square of the camp, two ASes with training monomolecular cutters engaged in a mock battle.

Mao, who was understandably tired at this point, told Zimmer she'd see the rest tomorrow and headed back to the quarters they'd temporarily assigned her. The small private room had a simple bed, but no shower of its own, so she waited for a time when the communal shower would be empty, quickly stripped down and washed off the mud and sweat of the day. She returned to her room in only a bath towel, snatched up a beer she'd set to chill in advance, and was feeling human again at last.

“Now...” She lay down in bed to review the files of the trainees she’d met that day. Quite a few men, quite a few characters.

This is pretty fun, actually... There were lots of choices here. Some were handsome. Some had higher education. Some were rich. Some had kids. Some were hairy. Some looked like they had proclivities she didn’t want to know about. Then, just as Zimmer had promised, there were quite a few with unimpeachable records and incredible skills. Of the twenty-some she’d seen so far, she’d picked out three men with portfolios that were ahead of the pack.

First up was Yonatan Harrell, a former Israeli Air Force officer who was truly excellent. He had master’s degrees in economics and engineering, and his skills were as superlative as one might imagine given his career. He had tons of real-world combat experience, and had participated in several top-secret missions in southern Lebanon (though what these consisted of were not mentioned). He had long experience in an AS division and had taken three Syrian Rk-92s during his time there. He’d also received training with the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, and might still have connections there.

Next came Ricardo Prado, who had previously been with Peruvian special forces. He was excellent too, with tons of experience in parachuting, aquatic combat, and recon. He was also an explosives expert. He was licensed for turboprop planes and helicopters, and had logged 2000 flight hours between them. He had no AS piloting experience but was distinguished in all other fields. He’d also fought against the infamous far-left guerrillas, the Sendero Luminoso, multiple times.

Last was Daniele Buriassi, formerly of the counterterrorism unit of the Italian Armed Forces. He’d been hand-picked from the police to join the counterterror squad’s GIS and had significant experience with CQB. Despite his long career in SWAT, he also had a wealth of AS operating experience. During the AS terrorist attack in Rome in 1995, he’d managed to disable the enemy machine without a single civilian casualty. He was a karate master and, based on that hobby, he’d become reasonably conversant in Japanese. For the de Danaan, whose main sphere of activity was East Asia, squad members who could speak Japanese or Chinese were invaluable.

These men had all had incredible careers. She’d also talked to them and

sensed nothing wrong with them, personality-wise. They were gentlemanly, confident, and seemed to view Mao as an equal.

I could probably work with any two of these guys, Mao whispered to herself as she flipped through the documents. But to be honest, she really just wanted to fill the two slots and get back to Merida Island. Those new ASes would be arriving at the base tomorrow around this time.

Still, she couldn't stop waffling. There was nothing triggering her instinct, going "ding ding ding! This is the one!" *Can I see myself going on operations with any of these three men? Would I be willing to take responsibility for their lives? And would they put their trust in* me*? If I get hurt because of one of them, could I forgive them?* In other words, were they worthy of holding her life in their hands?

It felt a little like she was choosing a husband at a matchmaker's service. After all, weren't both situations about roughly the same thing? Choosing a life partner was an extremely important decision in any context.

Hmmm... Mao imagined herself in a wedding dress as she looked through the documents this time, but still nothing leaped out at her. She just couldn't be sure. *Are there no other decent men out there?* she thought, looking back through the other trainees. The documentation for Kurz Weber, the "problem child" was in the bundle, but she'd only given it a cursory glance. She wasn't stupid enough to put someone as shallow and flighty as him on her six.

Eh? While she was rechecking the documents, she realized she'd missed one rather curious entry. He didn't have any particularly noteworthy achievements, and she'd been in such a hurry that day that she hadn't paid it any mind in the documents Zimmer gave her.

"Sousky Seagal," she said out loud.

Sousky Seagal was a strange name. A mercenary from Afghanistan, he'd come out of the guerrilla armies rather than a national military. Nevertheless, he'd somehow acquired AS piloting experience, and had a wealth of experience in recon missions. His birthdate column was blank, so she didn't know his age. His combat experience column, too, simply had 'yes' written in it. The photo clipped to the packet seemed to have been removed at some point, so she

didn’t have a visual.

Sousky Seagal’s accomplishments at camp were on the lower end of middle. He was below average in just about every regard, and looked like he was just barely maintaining passing grades.

But what interested her most was his performance in a mock AS battle. Sousky Seagal had taken down one of her three leading candidates from earlier, the Israeli Harrell, in an M6 while using an older model Rk-92. It wouldn’t seem like a particularly remarkable accomplishment to an amateur, but Mao found it extremely shocking. To take out a higher-spec machine with an experienced operator in a one-on-one fight took significant skill... Or tremendous luck.

Maybe Harrell let his guard down? If that were the case, she’d have to dock him a few points. But what if this Sousky Seagal really was that good? Slightly interested, Mao reached for the beat-up phone in her room. She dialed the number and waited until she got through to Sergeant Zimmer, who was in the instructors’ office doing desk work.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hello. How can I help you, Sergeant?”

“Sorry,” said Mao. “There was something I forgot to ask. This trainee... Sousky Seagal. Do you know him?”

On the other end of the phone, Zimmer let out a slight groan. “Seagal, eh? Yeah, I know him. He’s competent enough, but I can’t recommend him. His heart isn’t in it. At least not to the standard of your squad. More importantly, he’s...”

“He’s...?”

“Ah, no. It wouldn’t be fair to say it. As you know, we need to consider ability divorced from sex, race, and age.”

“I see...”

“Anyway, I can’t recommend Seagal. There’s plenty of better candidates out there. Bye.”

“Thanks.” Mao hung up the phone and folded her arms. “Hmm,” she said to

herself. Zimmer's halting explanation had only made her more curious. What kind of man was this? What issues did he have? Even if she wasn't going to put him on the Tuatha de Danaan's SRT, at the very least, she wanted to know what he looked like. Why not just talk to him, ask him what happened in the AS mock battle, thank him and say goodbye?

Having had that thought, Mao moved swiftly into action. She put her fatigues on and left the room. Apparently Sousky Seagal's team had just come back from training in the aforementioned urban combat grounds, so she asked a passing instructor for the location of the trainees' barracks and made a beeline in that direction.

The barracks were just as spartan as the other buildings in the complex. The provisional structures, which had been sold off by the United States military, could be put up and taken down in just a few hours with the help of ASes. The floor squeaked loudly beneath her feet, and the walls and doors were thin. It wasn't long after sunset, so the room was dark and empty, which suggested that the members of the team were in the mess hall. The rain was still pounding on the roof, but otherwise, it was quiet.

The room was made up mostly of rows of basic bunk beds and lockers. Unlike in a training camp for new recruits, it wasn't perfectly neat and tidy; the trainees' personal belongings and equipment were strewn randomly across the beds. There were lewd pinups and colorful decorations, all things that conjured up images of the personalities of the men who slept there.

That takes me back... Mao had shared quarters with men in this barracks when she was a trainee here. The first thing that came to mind were the curious eyes burning holes in her back when she changed. The Thai man in the bed above her was always very respectful, but the two Americans beside her had made openly snide, vulgar remarks. She'd been resentful about it at the time, but looking back now, it wasn't that big a deal. She smiled as she remembered all the trouble she'd made for that Thai man.

Seeing nobody inside, Mao thought about coming back later, but then she noticed someone near the back of the room. He was sitting on the lower bunk with his back towards her, messing around noisily with something. She looked closer and saw that it was an old rifle.

Frowning, Mao silently moved towards the trainee. He had the lean frame commonly seen in soldiers for whom stamina was needed over brute strength. His movements were curiously precise.

“Can I join you?” she asked.

The trainee looked back at her. Mao was slightly surprised when she saw his face. He was East Asian, and couldn’t have been more than fifteen or sixteen.

The boy furrowed his brow and looked up at her sullenly. He had dark eyes and disheveled black hair. His mouth was set in a tight frown, revealing little in the way of emotions. There was still a childlike quality to his face, but he had none of the shiftless air that usually accompanied boys of his age.

Bringing in a child like this... What are Mithril’s scouts coming to? Mao thought to herself, when...

“How can I help you?” the boy asked in slightly accented English.

She hesitated before replying, “Is your team off eating?”

“Affirmative.” With that word alone, the boy turned away again and went back to his work of dismantling the rifle.

She then noticed five or six more rifles laid out next to him on the bed. There were two types: rifles covered in mud, and shining clean ones.

“You’ve got a lot of those,” she observed. “Are they all your guns?”

“No,” he told her. “They’re my team’s guns.”

“Why are you cleaning them?”

“They asked me to. I saw no particular reason to refuse.” The boy pulled out the rifle’s BCG and began working the blackened metal with a beat-up old toothbrush.

“Shouldn’t they clean their own guns?” Mao wondered.

“They usually would, but the way they maintain them frequently results in misfires and accidental discharges. It’s safer if I perform the maintenance myself.” The boy spoke cleanly and swiftly. There was no hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“I see.” It sounded more to her like the men were foisting their busywork off on him... but Mao didn’t pry any further.



“So, hey. I have a question about a member of your team,” she continued.

“Proceed.”

“You’ve got a trainee who’s an excellent AS operator, right? Do you know him?”

“I have no memory of any such person.”

“Really? That’s strange,” she continued. “His name is Sousky Seagal, I believe.”

The boy paused in his work, but said nothing.

Mao urged him on. “He came up with Afghani guerrillas, and he’s experienced in reconnaissance missions. I don’t know how old he is, but... ringing any bells?”

“More or less,” the boy responded, rubbing at his temples.

Mao leaned forward. “I hear he used an Rk-92 to beat a veteran operating an M6 Bushnell. I know a thing or two about ASes myself, and that’s a pretty impressive achievement. If it wasn’t dumb luck, I’d like to ask this Seagal guy about exactly what went down.”

“I see.”

“Were you there at that mock battle?” she asked.

“More or less.”

“How did he move? Could you see it well?”

The boy paused before saying, “I saw it as clearly as one can, I believe.”

His deliberate choice of words inspired a suspicious squint from Mao. She moved around the bed, peered at his face from the side, and said quietly, “Do you mind if I ask... What’s your name?”

“Sousky Seagal,” he admitted. “Though the correct pronunciation is Sousuke Sagara.”

This boy is Sousky Seagal? Mao couldn’t hide her surprise. When she’d heard he’d come out of the Afghani guerrillas, she’d imagined a swarthy veteran with a thick beard and bulging muscles... but that had been her own prejudice

speaking.

“Y-You are?” she asked.

“Affirmative,” Sousky Seagal—Sousuke Sagara—responded bluntly before he resumed cleaning his guns.

Mao finally realized why Sergeant Zimmer had said he couldn’t recommend him. He had wanted to say he was too young. In addition, his name was actually Sousuke Sagara—a Japanese name. Mao couldn’t read or write the language, but she could speak decent conversational Japanese, so this much was obvious to her.

“So... you beat Harrell’s M6?” she questioned.

“I did.”

“Could you tell me how the mock battle went down?”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“Don’t be like that,” she wheedled. “Just tell me a bit.”

“I got lucky.”

“Liar. You couldn’t do that with luck alone.”

“He made a mistake, then,” said Sagara, whose responses were brief and entirely uncooperative. He seemed unwilling to say more than the bare minimum in response to anything she asked, which made the conversation difficult to continue. He wasn’t argumentative, but neither was he forthcoming.

This isn’t working, Mao decided. The boy almost seemed to have an autistic disorder. At his age, he should be boasting about his accomplishment with shining eyes, yet this Sagara boy showed almost no interest in it at all. In fact, he seemed to reject all attempts at communication, simply continuing to clean his rifle in silence.

Mao found herself losing interest in him. The ASes in this base were cheap and old, after all. Maybe Harrell’s M6 had suffered a slight malfunction of some kind. “I see,” she finally said. “You’re probably right.” She shrugged and was about to leave, when another trainee came running into the barracks.

“Boy, that rain. Darn it... oh?” It was Kurz Weber, soaked from head to toe and carrying a large shovel in his hands. He noticed Mao’s presence and sauntered up to her, shedding water as he went. “Well, if it isn’t Melissa-chan,” he bantered. “What brings you here? Come to raid my panties?”

A disgustingly vulgar man, through and through. She’d never met anyone so polar opposite in his first impression and his true character. She fixed her eyes on him. “That’s Mao. *Master* Sergeant Mao, if you please.”

“Well, well. So sorry, Meli— erk!”

She stomped hard on his toe with the heel of her combat boot before pulling her .45-caliber automatic pistol from its holster and thrusting it against his jaw. “It’s time to start showing the proper respect,” Mao whispered icily. “I forgave your little act of assholery before, but you’d better cut the crap before I shove this down your throat and give you the lead shits. Now, *if* you want your cause of death to be massive rectal bleeding, just go ahead and call me ‘Melissa’ one more time.” Mao had come out of the marines and could trash talk with the best of them.

As mentioned before, Mao didn’t typically play the macho card, but restraint only got her so far. There was a certain breed of man who wouldn’t lay off until threats entered the equation, and Mao wasn’t such a pushover that she’d let someone of lower rank treat her disrespectfully forever.

Weber dropped the shovel and put his hands up. “Wow, scary. I give. Forgive me?”

“You don’t sound very sorry to me. I’m *telling* you to show me some respect,” said Mao, cocking the gun audibly with her thumb.

“I mean it. You win,” Weber said hastily. “How do I get back on your good side?”

“How about you get down on all fours and kiss the dirt? Then I might think about it.”

This suggestion brought a steely light into Weber’s blue eyes for the first time. A corner of his mouth quirked up, and he looked down at Mao in vague amusement. “Oh? And if I refuse?”

“I told you. You’re dead.” In fact, there was no bullet in the first chamber, so even if Mao pulled the trigger, he’d be fine. But at this point, she was half serious. She didn’t need a gun; she could send him to the hospital with her bare fists alone. And planting one into his smug pretty-boy face would feel pretty damn good right now.

Weber likewise seemed to be raring for a fight now. The minute she showed him an opening, he might knock her gun away and try to break her arm. A sense of ‘Then I won’t hold back either’ emanated from his body like an aura. “You might hurt yourself, girl.”

“Just try me, *boy*.”

It was an explosive situation. The stalemate lasted for several seconds, but just as one or the other was about to move...

The stock of a rifle cut suddenly between them.

“That’s enough.” The holder of the rifle was Seagal—or Sagara, as he called himself. He’d stood up and moved to intervene at some point, without sound, without presence. Neither Mao nor Weber had noticed his approach, despite the squeaky barracks floor beneath them.

Mao was openly shocked as Sagara looked at Weber indifferently. “Weber, was it? Stop annoying the NCO. You’ll make trouble for the rest of us.”

“R-Right.” Weber agreed, apparently too surprised to do anything else.

Next, Sagara turned his gaze to Mao. “Sergeant. I understand that he hurt your feelings, but this man serves under Major Estes. Any complaints you have should be made through him.”

“What? Uh, right...” Mao responded sluggishly, caught off her guard.

Then, as if nothing had happened, Sagara returned to his bed, floor squeaking as he walked. He sat down and began to dismantle the rifle he’d been holding.

Mao and Weber both stared at him for a few minutes, and at last turned back to each other.

“Hah!”

“Hmph!”

Then, with a mutual sound of disgust, they turned away again.

There's no point in staying here any longer, Mao thought as she strode out of the barracks and left them behind. She marched through the pouring rain, prickling with irritation. *Kurz Weber is an utterly infuriating man. I can't believe I found him briefly charming. Sousuke Sagara is a complete mystery, too... and creepy to boot. I was a fool to have taken any interest in that total downer.*

"Hmph. Well, whatever," she whispered to herself. At the very least, neither would become Uruz-6 or Uruz-7. She'd never choose them.

And after I leave here, I'll never see either of them again.

Once Melissa Mao was gone, Weber let out a curse and turned his eyes to their youngest trainee. "Hey, you," he said curiously. The East Asian boy was on a different team than his and their beds were far apart, so they'd never really talked before. And Weber couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd mediated just now. Mao had seemed to notice it, too—the boy had nearly superhuman sneaking skills. "I'm Kurz Weber. You?"

"Sousky Seagal."

"You Japanese or something?"

"More or less."

"Then... is your name actually Sousuke Sagara?"

The boy looked at him in surprise. Perhaps he was shocked to hear a white man pronounce a Japanese name properly.

Weber grinned. "Heh heh. I was brought up in Tokyo. I think I'm better at Japanese than German."

"Tokyo," said the boy. "The capital of Japan, yes?"

"Well... yeah, of course," Weber told him. "Where did you live there?"

"Actually, I didn't."

"What?"

"I might have lived there at one time," said the boy, "but if I did, I don't

recall.”

“Hmm...” Kurz was momentarily stunned. It was rare enough to meet a Japanese person out here, and he’d had hopes for a nice chat about his old home. Sagara continued cleaning his rifle, practiced hands going through the motions. Weber whispered as he watched. “Sounds like you’ve been through a lot.”

“Affirmative.”

“Then we’ve got something in common. I’ve been through a lot, too.”

“I see,” the boy said briefly.

When the other boy failed to open up about his past, Weber looked back at the door to the barracks, then changed the subject. “But that master sergeant is one irritating broad. She just flipped her lid over nothing.”

“You’re the one who provoked her.”

“Did not,” Weber protested. “I was just being friendly. Besides... I’ve been in this sausage party way too long. I’ve at least gotta try. You’re a man. You understand, right?”

“No.”

“Okay, fine.” *What a boring kid,* Weber thought. “By the way, what did that girl want with you?”

“She wanted to know about an AS mock battle I participated in.”

“Huh. You can use ASes, too?”

“More or less.”

“How are your skills? Good?”

“No,” the boy told him. “Average.”

In that instant, Weber felt instinctively that the boy was lying—a sort of resonance of purpose, perhaps. *He might be here for the same reason I am,* Kurz thought, and now he asked Sagara a new question. “Hey, Sagara, was it? You’re not hiding anything from the instructors, are you?”

“I’m not. Purely your imagination,” Sagara said indifferently.

“I wonder about that,” Weber said thoughtfully. “Personally, I find the mercenaries that run this camp fishy as hell.”

Sagara fell silent.

Weber had heard that this Melissa Mao woman had come to the camp to find skilled recruits, but where had she come from? Where in the world were they sent after they ‘graduated’? And to do what? Weber had no idea what the larger organization looked like, and didn’t even know its name. What were they after? What was their scale? Their funding source? Why were they putting them through training this harsh? It was a mystery far beyond his comprehension.

Weber had been making his living as a mercenary in a certain Middle Eastern country, and when that had come to an end, the man who’d introduced the camp to him had said, “I can’t tell you all the details, but try it out. It’s amazing. It’ll knock your socks off, in the best way.”

Weber didn’t have another way to make money, so he’d come to Belize on a whim. But he hadn’t found a single thing in this bare-bones camp that would “knock his socks off.” He couldn’t fully give up his suspicion that this was a terrorist training camp sponsored by some country or other, either.

He’d decided it wouldn’t be wise to show his full skill when there were still so many unknowns in play, and Weber got the feeling that Sagara was thinking the exact same thing.

“It is quite opaque,” Sagara said. “But that’s the nature of our job. There’s no point in stewing over it. If things turn dangerous, I can just run away. And...”

“And?”

“You overestimate me. I’m an ordinary man for hire, just barely scraping by with a passing grade.”

Hearing that, Weber laughed. “Yeah, so am I. A regular hoodlum.”

Mao stayed at the camp for two more days, watching the trainees, but didn’t notice any that stood out more than the three elites she’d singled out that first day. There were some who were certainly superlative in a given field, but the SRT wanted an all-rounder. Someone with AS experience, too, if possible.

The cutting-edge M9s had surely arrived already at the Merida Island Base. Thinking about that fact filled her with impatience, but she couldn't afford to cut corners when it came to choosing her new companions. She was still thinking the matter over as the sun began to set on another day. She'd once again washed off the sweat and mud that clung to her in the communal shower and had just made it back to her room when the phone there rang. It was Major Estes, asking her to come by on the double.

For the love of... Mao put on the underwear she'd just washed (which hadn't yet had a chance to dry), put on her muddy fatigues one more time, and headed for Major Estes's office.

Including Estes and Sergeant Zimmer, there were a dozen or so instructors present, enough to make even the relatively large room feel stuffy. They were joined by an older man wearing the uniform of a high-ranking officer. He was lean, with salt-and-pepper hair and silver-rimmed glasses.

"Master Sergeant Mao, this is Colonel Fernandez of the Belize Defense Guard," Estes said of the elderly gent.

An officer from the local army? What could he want with this camp full of punks? Despite her suspicions, Mao hesitantly straightened up and saluted him. "A pleasure."

Colonel Fernandez seemed unsettled as he looked around the room, tapping his foot nervously. He seemed almost jumpy, and was clearly conscious of the time.

"That should be everyone, then." Estes sank deeply into his office chair and pulled a cigar out of the box on his desk. He offered one to Colonel Fernandez, but the other man shook his head rapidly in response. "Let's get right to the subject," Estes then began casually while he lit up his cigar. "The other day, the daughter of the President of Belize was abducted from the capital, Belmopan. She was out shopping with a school friend when a group armed with AK rifles, casting nets, and pantyhose attacked her. They wrapped her bodyguards up in the pantyhose and threw them in the river, and the police who pursued them ended up in a crash... and also fell in the river. It was apparently a big chase scene. Zero dead and thirty lightly injured, but the kidnappers got away."

“Right...” said Mao, and the instructors nodded along with her, dumbstruck.

“The kidnappers are a left-wing guerrilla group hiding on the border with the Republic of Guatemala,” he continued. “They’re calling themselves the ‘Determined Revolutionaries’ and they’re trying to extort money from the government. They’re asking for 5,121,076.25 USD.”

“That’s a weird number,” she observed.

“I guess they’re ‘determined’ primarily in a detail-oriented sense,” said Estes, blowing out some tobacco smoke. “If we don’t pay it off by tomorrow, they say, the president’s daughter gets it. They sent a video tape to show they mean business. Colonel?”

“R-Right.” Colonel Fernandez, who’d said nothing up to that point, gingerly pulled a VHS tape from his attaché case and handed it to Sergeant Zimmer with trembling hands. Zimmer dubiously inserted the tape into the office tape deck and pressed play.

“I-It’s a shocking video. Painful to watch... But please watch it.” Fernandez preceded in a pained voice. He was the highest-ranked officer in the room, but he gave off the air of a timid old man.

The video that played showed a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder, the lower half of his face hidden by a scarf, standing in an unadorned stone room somewhere. “I am the provisional eternal leader of the Determined Revolutionaries, Council President Dijkstra,” the man said in strongly accented English. “In a recent daring blitzkrieg attack, we successfully abducted the daughter of the president of the puppet government. If you want her back, you must pay us the amount of 5,121,076.25 US dollars. This was the number decided upon by our council; not one cent of it is up for debate. If you refuse, the president’s daughter will pay the price. Let us warn you of the cruel fate that awaits her if you attempt to betray us or short us on our ransom. Behold!”

Here, the camera panned. In the center of the empty stone room stood a girl in her late teens, holding yesterday’s newspaper up to the camera. She had curly black hair and generous endowments, a slender waist and a bust close to 90 centimeters. The latter was easy to identify because she was dressed as a bunny girl. Yes, a bunny girl—her outfit consisted of a black bodice, fishnet

stockings, stiletto heels and a bunny ear hairband. She was a bunny girl from head to toe.

An awkward silence fell over the watching instructors.

Clearly embarrassed, the girl on-camera blushed bright red and looked bashfully into the camera. “Papa. Save me,” she whispered.

The camera’s gaze then rushed back to their leader, President Dijkstra. “Well? You can see that we mean business, can’t you?”

One of the instructors had a skeptical comment about what kind of business that might be, but the man on the tape continued.

“If you delay in sending us our ransom, we’ll send you videos of her in different costumes each day. We have many, from coquettish geisha girl to Carnival samba dancer. If these videos were ever to be televised, it would deal a fatal blow to the current government. Be ready!”

Here, the video cut off to gray static... for just a few seconds, until it was abruptly replaced by a cartoon. A red tractor-trailer transformed into a robot. “You’ll pay, Megatron!” it shouted before firing pew-pew beam lasers at an army of enemy robots.

“Who reuses a tape for something like this?” Zimmer muttered.

Beside him, Colonel Fernandez spoke up in a trembling voice. “I... I’m an old friend of the president. I’ve known Miss Maria since she was a young girl. She grew up very beautifully... Oh, but never mind that. We just... we have to save her!” The colonel began weeping with emotion. “Much as I hate to admit it, our military doesn’t have the know-how when it comes to staging a hostage rescue. That’s why we’ve asked Mithril for help. Please... Please, save Miss Maria!”

Estes rubbed out his cigar and let out a sigh. “We’d love to help, Colonel, but this camp is not a Mithril battle group. It’s a facility for training and selecting future combatants. The only official Mithril staff are the people in this room. We’re grateful for your president’s generous offer to let us use this land, but still...”

“Please, can’t you find a way? There’s no time! As we speak, the terrorists may be finding other ways to humiliate her!”

“Well, you heard the man.” Estes looked out over those assembled. “I consulted with HQ, and the South Atlantic Battle Group Neimheadh is currently in West Africa with their hands full. Which means that if we’re going to save her, we’ll have to do it ourselves. All silliness aside, she’s still in a really bad situation. She might seem all right now, but we don’t want to risk an escalation to violence.” The word ‘violence’ caused Colonel Fernandez to faint right out of his chair with a moan, but Estes continued without missing a beat. “What it comes down to is that our landlord’s in trouble, and as tenants, we can’t exactly turn them down. Any volunteers?”

Nobody volunteered right away. None of them looked happy about the prospect in the slightest. But at last, hands began to rise trepidatiously. Mao stuck it out the longest, but as she felt all eyes on her, she finally gave in.

“All right,” Estes said, standing up and walking to a large map pinned to the wall. “Let’s figure out a plan and form teams. We can bulk up our manpower by recruiting volunteers from among the trainees...”

Eight hours later...

They were deep in the jungle, beneath a canopy so dense that not even the moonlight could penetrate it. Mao whispered as she squatted on the mountain path that overlooked the narrow road below. “Why are we doing this again?”

She was dressed in camouflage, with even her face painted black and dark green, and held her M16 rifle close as she squatted on the soaked ground. She could hear the calling of the insects, the leaves and grass rustling in the faint wind, but nothing more. The night was so quiet, she felt like her ears were ringing.

Her team, Team Topaz, was positioned in the mountains about five kilometers east of the Tzacol Ruins on the border with Guatemala. According to the recon performed by the Belize Army, the Determined Revolutionaries were holed up in said ruins, which was also where they were keeping the president’s daughter. After forging their plan, the rescue team (led by Estes) would approach the Tzacol Ruins on foot, mount a surprise raid before dawn, free the girl and lead her quietly to safety.

Mao's team mission was to secure their escape route. Which, for now, meant waiting in an empty plot of jungle, far away from the rescue action. In baseball terms, they were stuck in right field: the ball rarely ended up there, but someone still had to cover the position.

Still, Mao could endure it—even thankless jobs were jobs. The real issue was her teammates. Sergeant Zimmer was fine enough, but the other two were a nightmare: Kurz Weber and Sousuke Sagara. Estes had tried to recruit help from the trainees, and unfortunately they'd been among the volunteers. They both had decent enough grades, but they were young and recalcitrant, and Mao and Zimmer had both objected to their use.

Estes's response, though, had been to shake his head and say, "We're already shorthanded and didn't get many volunteers. I don't like that we had to tell them about that weird kidnapping group, but I'm sure there'll be nothing wrong with letting them handle Topaz's mission. Still, they do need a babysitter—and a highly experienced NCO, not from this camp, is preferable. That means you, Mao." That was how she'd ended up with this team.

The three excellent fighters Mao had been considering recruiting for the Tuatha de Danaan were also taking part in the mission, but all three were on the rescue team proper. She regretted that she wouldn't be able to see them in action directly.

The operation was running on radio silence at the moment, so they didn't know how the rescue team was doing. Timeline-wise, they would have already entered the Tzacol ruins, and should be sneaking the girl out right around now.

Meanwhile, ten-thousand-some kilometers away on Merida Island, McAllen and the others are happily testing the new model ASes, Mao thought grumpily. *The M9 Gernsbacks, the next-generation cutting-edge machines, loaded with the revolutionary invisibility-enabled ECS, a nearly silent palladium reactor, the super-high-performance AI system... And here I am, stuck out here!*

"It's ridiculous," she grumbled, but the silent, untamed jungle gave her no reply.

Instead, she heard an equally unsatisfied mutter from Weber three meters to her right. "Ah, I'm bored. So bored." He spoke quietly, but the whole team

could still hear him. “I got my hopes up because I heard we’d meet a bunny girl. But if I’d known it’d get us sent to a place like this, I’d have bowed out.”

“Shut up. Right now,” Mao hissed.

“Pssh,” he scoffed. “You were the one who started bitching first.”

“Don’t argue with me like a child,” she ordered. “Just shut your smart mouth already.”

“Well, someone’s in a bad mood. You still mad? Nobody likes a girl who holds a grudge.”

“I’m not mad,” said Mao, who was obviously mad. “I just hate shallow playboys like you.” She then cast a glance at Sagara, sitting silently to her left, and added, “I also hate unsociable brats.”

She got a sense of Sagara sagging slightly in the darkness.

“By the way, Sagara. Why did you volunteer?” Weber asked.

“Just in case,” Sagara responded briefly.

His words resonated curiously with Mao. “Just in case... what? In case I suddenly come down with appendicitis? No one asked you. It’s annoying.”

Sagara didn’t respond, but the mood around them was clearly growing more and more frayed.

“Hey, Big Sis,” Weber interjected. “No need to be so mean. You’re supposed to be our team leader, right?”

“Yeah, I sure am! Because you forced yourselves on me!”

“I didn’t force my way anywhere,” Sagara pointed out. “Don’t lump me in with Weber, please.”

“Hey, asshole! I was covering for you!”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Just shut up already!” Mao snarled at the both. “Shut up!”

“Shut up, bitch,” Weber snarked back. “I hate you too, by the way!”

“Please stop arguing,” said Sagara.

“You’re the one who egged him on!” Mao shrieked.

“Wait, is it that day of the month?” Weber asked speculatively. “That always makes women cranky—”

“Piss off!”

“To what does ‘that day of the month’ refer?” Sagara wanted to know.

“Just shut up!”

But there was no stopping them now. The three of them continued their bickering in the darkness.

“That’s enough!” The voice that silenced them came from the previously silent Sergeant Zimmer, who spoke with surprising intensity.

All three fell silent.

The sergeant, who was also the oldest of them, cleared his throat before launching into a lecture. “Sergeant Mao,” he began, “we’re still on a mission here. What if an enemy patrol were to spot us? What is it about these two that brings the worst out in you? I’m disappointed.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mao.

“Weber, Seagal, the same goes for you,” Zimmer continued. “If you’re here to sabotage our operation, go home now. If you don’t, I’ll shoot you where you stand!”

“Fine, sorry...” said Weber.

“I’m extremely sorry,” Sousuke said last.

“Honestly, what a rotten team...” Zimmer sighed before returning to his post.

It was just then that they got a radio message from Estes’s team, which they’d assumed to be in the middle of the rescue. “Team Sapphire here: we’re in trouble. Things have gotten very bad.”

They could hear the voice’s desperation through a rush of static.

“Team Ruby extracted the president’s daughter. No casualties. They’re en route to rendezvous with Team Diamond and Team Emerald at Point Echo, but they can’t shake off enemy pursuit. They have ASes. I repeat—they have ASes!

At least three confirmed!”

Mao couldn’t believe her ears. *Those ridiculous kidnappers have ASes? And three of them, at that?!*

“Can’t outrun them on foot! Bring in the helicopters and ASes on standb— What?!” The static grew stronger, followed by a roar on the other side of the line. She could hear the keening of a gas turbine engine, the *tha-thoom, tha-thoom* of heavy footsteps, the cries of men and shrieks of a girl.

She could hear a member of the team shouting. “Don’t shoot! There’s no point! Split up and head for Point Foxtrot— agh! Dammit! Let me go, you asshole!”

“Resistance is futile! Drop your guns and submit! And return our dear girl!” came a voice that seemed to be filtered through an AS’s external speakers. Perhaps the person reporting in had been caught by an enemy AS.

“What the hell are you talking about, you pervert?! Ow, ow ow... I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“Let that teach you a lesson!” Then the transmission suddenly cut off.

Once communications dropped, a grim silence fell over Team Topaz. Each whispered their thoughts in turn.

“Oh, hell.”

“How awful.”

“Good grief...”

“This is extremely serious.”

Mao didn’t know what specific model the enemy had in their possession, but as humanoid machines standing eight meters tall and capable of moving swiftly across any terrain, ASes were the strongest ground weapon in existence. On top of that, they carried heavy firearms that could even puncture tank armor. They were tough enough opponents even for attack helicopters, let alone regular infantry—surrender was the only way the rescue team could survive.

Still, it would be difficult to say Estes had made a tactical error when he’d decided to leave their own ASes at camp. The current generation of AS was

powered by a noisy gas turbine engine, which could be heard from a kilometer away or more, after all. It was possible to shut down the engine and run off of battery power, but only for a very short time. In other words, they weren't ideal for secret hostage rescue missions.

Besides, no one would have anticipated that the group requesting its five-million-dollar ransom to have ASes of their own; the Belize Defense Guard's intelligence officials hadn't seen any sign of them either, nor had the group that had initially scouted out the ruins. And yet, they had them now. Mao didn't know where they'd gotten them or how they'd kept them hidden, but one way or another, the mission had failed. Estes and their other sixteen allies were almost certainly in enemy custody now. Her team of four were the only ones remaining.

"Let's get back to camp," Zimmer suggested. "There's nothing the four of us can do alone. There are M6s and Rk-92s there. They're old, but if we recruit pilots and come straight back—"

"Not happening. By the time we make it back, the enemy might have regrouped, or more likely, they'll have moved on. And even if they haven't, they'll definitely hear the training camp ASes coming long before they arrive," Mao pointed out. "They'll have plenty of time to use the hostages against us, or even kill them if they want."

"But we only have small anti-personnel weapons. We'll be helpless against three ASes!" The situation was so hopeless that even the normally stoic Zimmer was losing his cool.

But Mao fixed her eyes on the older man. "Then we figure something out. We have to save Estes and the others."

"B-But..."

"Every battle has a flow," she reminded him. "The biggest losses happen when you lose sight of that flow. If we act now, we might yet succeed."

It was true that their current situation seemed hopeless. But at the same time, with the enemy drunk on their victory and overconfident, now might just be the best time to strike. At the very least, it was the best chance they'd get.

“Let’s use our heads and work it out. There’s got to be a way,” Mao said plainly.

Weber and Sagara watched her in surprise. It was dark all around them, so she hadn’t noticed, but these two young mercenaries had rounded their lips in awed appreciation.

“What about you two? Any opinions?” Mao asked the younger men.

“What? Uh, I...”

“Sergeant. I agree with you,” Sagara said, causing Weber to swiftly nod in agreement.

But Mao didn’t bother to hide her irritation. “I don’t need your approval, I need constructive suggestions. What can you guys do in this situation? Name anything you can think of, no matter how trivial it seems. We’re going to make this happen. Go!” She spoke swiftly, stunning the other two into silence.

“Ah...” After a moment’s hesitation, Weber and Sagara began trepidatiously to explain their ideas. They also spoke honestly about the specialties they’d been hiding up until now. And based on these things, they offered up suggestions about what they could do. Their disclosures were shocking, but most people would hear them and decide it still wasn’t enough.

Mao wasn’t most people, though. “You’re a unique little pair,” she said appreciatively. “Very much so.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So here’s what we’ll do. Ready? To start with—” said Mao, who went on to outline her plan to the group. “So? Can you do it?” she asked in conclusion.

“It’ll be hard,” Kurz mused. “But... not impossible.”

“I can’t make any guarantees,” Sagara agreed, “but I think I can do it.”

“You *will* do it,” Mao told them bluntly. “Much as I hate to admit it, I’m counting on you two. So...”

“So?” they both asked.

She folded her arms and grinned at the two of them. “Man up and take

responsibility.”

The Determined Revolutionaries (henceforth ‘Deterevs’ for short) were rejoicing over a victory like none they’d experienced before. Their group, which consisted of only thirty men, had captured every single one of the mercenaries who’d come to save the president’s daughter. It really was an impressive achievement.

“You see that, imperialist dogs?!” shouted the Deterevs’ provisional eternal leader, President Dijkstra.

They were camped out in a stadium in the Tzacol Ruins, at the center of a large, open space. It was light around them, the dawn having just arrived. The disarmed mercenaries had been made to sit in a circle, tied up, while the Deterevs’ guerrillas formed a ring around them and celebrated with song and drink. Beyond their ring stood three Soviet arm slaves, Rk-92 Savages—bulky machines with egg-shaped bodies—their right arms outstretched and waving.

“You cowards tried to steal the bride of our revolution, but you failed! You picked the wrong men to mess with,” Dijkstra crowed. “Wah ha ha ha!”

“When did she become the bride of your revolution?” Estes muttered, bound up in pantyhose with the word ‘IDIOT’ written on his forehead in magic marker.

The president’s daughter, now recaptured, was currently dressed in a cheongsam. Tears streamed down her face as she flitted between the men, bottles of beer in hand. They yelled at her if she didn’t pour it for them, and the experience was clearly very stressful for her.

“You said she was a hostage. Seems like you’re just treating her as a waitress,” Estes grumbled.

“Shut up!” Dijkstra shouted as he kicked Estes, a move that sent him toppling. “Plans have changed. You guys are the hostages now. Unlike Miss Maria, we can make a real show out of killing you people. There’s plenty of you, for one thing, and you’re men.”

“Well, that’s not nice.”

“Now I need to call a council meeting to decide each of your bounties,”

Dijkstra gloated. “It’s a tough job, but it must be done. I think your bounty should be somewhere around 500,000 dollars.”

“One tenth of the girl?” said one of his men. “Seems a little low.”

Here, another guerrilla raised their hand. “Mr. President! I feel 300,000 dollars is more appropriate!”

“No, make it higher! 650,000 dollars!” said another.

“You’re so naive, comrades. A man like him is worth no more than 5,000!” added another.

“Fetch the calculator! We need to average out these values!” Dijkstra insisted.

“Aha...” said Estes, finally realizing why they’d given such an oddly precise number for the original ransom.

“This is bad, Major,” the instructor beside him whispered. “It’s really bad. I don’t think the Belize government or Mithril are going to pay to get us back. We’ve got to find a way to get out of here.”

“Still, they’ve got those things,” said Estes, indicating the three Savages with his chin. They weren’t particularly high-spec ASes, but they seemed well maintained. There was no way to escape machines that could run over 100 kilometers per hour. Estes had thought about stealing one and using it to beat the others, but that was definitely impossible. The Savages were still active, with operators currently inside them. They were also standing up, which would make it impossible for an outsider to climb all the way up to the hatch.

“Prepare the cameras,” Dijkstra shouted. “We’ll tape some public executions! The camera will send the spectacle right into their living rooms!”

This might just be the end... Major Estes was thinking, just when a single bullet landed between him and the president. He heard the gunshot ring out at the same instant he saw the mud splatter from the hit.

The guerrillas froze up for just a second before quickly readying their rifles.

“That’s enough!” came a sharp call. On the western side of the crumbling ruins—high up in what would be the right-field stands in a baseball stadium—stood a woman with a rifle pointed at them. She was East Asian, with the exotic

appeal of a leopard, dressed in camouflage pants and a tank top. Upon seeing her, the Deterevs let out an appreciative cry.

Sergeant Mao? Just her, eh? As Estes was wondering what the hell she intended to do with a single rifle, she went back to shouting at the guerrillas.

"If you don't want to die, drop all your weapons! I'm sure you idiots don't know this, but reinforcements will be here any second. We've got a plan to take you all down in one minute flat!"

"What in the world?" The president scowled at her.

"If you release the hostages and skedaddle, we'll let you off the hook. Guatemala is due west, right? Make it there and you live," Mao said with an easy smile.

"I just need one meter more. The machine to your left. Get it to move a little bit left," Weber whispered over his miniature transceiver.

"Got it. Hang on," Mao whispered back.

Then a new voice came in. "Seagal here. I'm in position. They don't see me."

"Zimmer here. I'm in place. Ready any time."

Weber was currently lying face-down in the deep brush, his beloved rifle at the ready. It was a .308 caliber bolt-action, an old and well-used gun with a stock and frame made of sturdy walnut wood. To a layman it might look cheap, and the trainees around him had probably thought so, but nothing could be further from the truth.

He was currently positioned behind Mao and the guerrillas, in the brush outside the ruins, about 200 meters away. The outer walls of the ball field structure were crumbling from centuries of exposure to the elements, and had large chunks missing here and there. From his current vantage point, some ways away from Mao and the others, he could see almost all of the stadium.

200 meters, he speculated. *Not that far away.* But the target he was aiming for through his scope was just so small.

The Savage standing in the ruins had a heat vent shaped like an inverse

triangle located on its back, just above its hips. He had to put a bullet in a two-centimeter slit right in the center of that. Beyond it lay a crucial part of the Savage's system, the control box that regulated movement in the lower half and relayed signals from there to the central system. If he could sever the main and auxiliary cables connected to that little part, he could paralyze the AS from the waist down. Given the way the thing was balanced, this would probably cause the Savage to instantly pitch backwards. But the vent had so far avoided turning his way.

"Give up? What are you, stupid? There's only one of you!" President Dijkstra laughed merrily. "You're clearly just a straggler. You can't fool me with a bluff!"

"A bluff? Is that what you think this is? By the time you're surrounded by six M6s and fish in a barrel, it'll be too late to turn back. They'll blast apart those beat-up old Savages before you can try anything!" Mao smirked, trying to sound as obnoxious as possible.

Inside, of course, she was sweating bullets. She had the guns of over twenty guerrillas pointed right at her, and she was currently so exposed that if even one of them decided to get cheeky, they could pick her off where she stood.

But this was what she wanted—all eyes on her. It meant that they hadn't noticed Sagara, hiding behind a stone pillar just behind the Savage to her left. *Sheesh, that guy has guts and stealth for days...*

"Especially you! You hunk of junk! You'll get it first!" Mao pointed at the leftmost Savage, which stood right behind the guerrillas.

"Wh-What?!" came a voice through the machine's external speakers.

"I know a lot about ASes, and you'll be the first against the wall when the reckoning comes," Mao announced. "You've just got the face of a hack pilot!"

"The face of a... Hey! How do you know what I look like?"

"Uh... given your body language in that thing, you're obviously hideous!" she taunted. "Well? I'm right, aren't I?"

"How dare you! I'm perfectly good-looking!"

“Are not! I bet you’re woman repellant, as hairy as an ape with stinky BO! Rock bottom of the manhood barrel! I know it! I proclaim it with confidence!”

Even after all her provocations, the Savage refused to move. Most of the people in the ruins were probably starting to get suspicious of her efforts to mock that particular operator.

“What in the world is the point of this?” the president complained to her.

But Mao ignored him and, growing even more desperate, clenched a fist and shouted. “Admit it! You’re hideous! Your father was an alcoholic and your mother was a whore and you yourself are a miserably premature ejaculator!”

The next instant...

“Y-You...Who are you calling a premature ejaculator?!” the pilot shouted angrily, activating his machine and moving forward to the right.

There we are... Weber’s eye against the scope opened wide.

The Savage’s hindquarters were turning towards him, and the angle was now just barely workable. He focused his concentration to its limit, each second feeling like an eternity. He felt sure he could see the control box through the tiny slit on its back as clear as day.

The steel, the air, the sensation of the walnut wood under his fingers... He felt his breath come to an unconscious stop as he merged with his rifle, moved as part of its mechanisms, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet fired. He could feel it flying forward, beyond the cloud of white gunpowder smoke.

And just as he had imagined it, it tore through the air, plunging itself deep into the arm slave’s back.

The Deterevs, Estes’s mercenaries, and the girl in the cheongsam all stopped and stared as the ranting, raving Savage suddenly froze in its tracks.

“What? What?!” exclaimed the pilot. His lower half was totally immobilized, as if his feet were stuck to the floor. He swung his AS’s arms around wildly in an

attempt to regain his balance, but it was all in vain as the machine swayed forward, then back, and...

Crash! With a splatter of mud, it hit the ground, back-first.

Yes! Mao internally cheered, but at the same time, she could barely believe it. Weber had insisted that this bit of high-difficulty sharpshooting was what he could do... yet even so, it had been a magnificent performance.

“Bull’s-eye. The rest is up to you,” said a slightly smug voice over the radio.

Kurz Weber is truly an amazing hand on the sniper rifle, Mao realized. It wasn’t dumb luck that he’d shot through the major’s trophy from a kilometer away. Which meant he was more than just some frivolous jerk. In fact...

No, not now, Mao told herself. *Gotta hurry...* This was no time to be blown away by Weber’s performance; instead, she adjusted her rifle’s aim and called into her transceiver again. “Zimmer!”

“Got it!” Immediately, Sergeant Zimmer leaned out from where he was hiding in the ruins about fifty meters away. He propped a Minimi machine gun up on one of the giant stone blocks and began unloading on full automatic, letting an indiscriminate rain of bullets shower down around the guerrillas and the mercenaries.

“R-Return fire!” The guerrillas, returning to their senses, turned their attention from the fallen Savage to begin firing back with their rifles. Mao, upon hearing chips of stone go flying from the hail of bullets around her, quickly ducked behind a stone pillar.

“Wah... wah, wah!” Major Estes and the others got down on the ground, still tied, and began crawling away like inchworms. Meanwhile, the president’s daughter maintained a surprising degree of cool as she ran back and hid in a depression in the ground.

Like a waterfall, the sound of gunfire roared through the ruins of the old stadium.

“Yeah, that’s the way. Keep up the fire!” Mao stuck just her rifle out from the obstacle behind which she’d hid, firing indiscriminately. There was no need to hit the enemy; she just needed to draw their attention away from the fallen

Savage. She'd told Zimmer this, too, and he was now probably repeating the same pattern of briefly taking cover before wildly returning fire.

Now it's all up to Sagara, Mao thought. If the boy's skills were all he claimed, this would be checkmate. If they weren't... she'd be surrendering, if she wasn't killed first.

Just then, one of the two still-functioning Savages ran at Mao. The other headed for the area of the ruins where Zimmer was hiding.

Well, that's not good, thought Mao. At this rate, she and Zimmer wouldn't last another minute.

Sagara was hidden just beside the fallen Savage, close enough that there was a real chance it might have crushed the pillar he was hiding behind when it fell.

All right, he told himself. Keeping low, he ran out from behind the stone pillar. He was dashing at full tilt for the head of the Savage as it tried in vain to right itself with immobile legs. The way its giant's arms flailed around presented a serious risk to unarmored humans, but this had been Sagara's favorite machine in his Afghani days. He knew exactly what the range this particular model's arms could cover, and knew there was little chance of being hit if he approached directly over the head.

Despite being covered in the mud splashed around by the struggling robot, Sagara successfully made it to the head of the collapsed Savage, climbed over it, and opened a panel about the size of a sheet of B5 paper roughly where a human clavicle would be located. Within the panel was a manual opening lever for the hatch.

The machine continued to flail, threatening to throw him off, but he managed to hold tight to the armor's seam, grab the lever, remove the safety pin and yank it rightwards. The Savage's movements immediately stopped as there was a rush of air pressure. The large frog-like head slid forward, leaving the hatch on the back of the neck open. Inside the cockpit, just large enough to fit a single person snugly, sat the sweat-drenched operator.

He was definitely... hideous.

“What the...” The operator looked up, taken aback.

“Get out,” Sagara told him, sticking his pistol in the man’s face.

“Y-Yes, sir...”

The man slowly began extracting himself from the cockpit, but Sagara was in a hurry, so he grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him out by force. He then planted a heel into the man’s solar plexus and slithered into the Savage’s cockpit himself. He slid his arms through the control cylinders and gripped the sticks at the end of them, manipulating them swiftly.

Close hatch. Reactivate generator. Cut power to lower half. Adjust bilateral angle. Set master mode. These movements, as swift and sure as could be, would have had his training camp instructor weeping and crying, ‘You’re the instructor now’ if he saw him.

The moment the message《Combat maneuvers open》popped up on the black-and-white screen, Sagara got the Savage moving.

One of the other Savages was right in front of Mao now.

She ran around as well as she could, cleverly utilizing the natural maze created by the remains of the ruins, but she was just buying herself a trivial amount of time. The Savage could ignore all obstacles, crushing the stone floor beneath its feet and busting through pillars to make a beeline for her.

“Resistance is useless! If you won’t be taken in quietly, we’ll take you in by force! Then we’ll dress you like a sumo wrestler! How do you feel about that?!” the machine’s operator said through the external speakers.

“I’d really rather not!” Mao declared. She turned back to fire her rifle at the Savage, but the anti-infantry bullets didn’t make a dent in the AS’s thick armor. It would be one thing if she could do pinpoint sniping like Weber, but he was the only one who could perform such miracles.

The other guerrillas were pouring in behind the Savage, and it was all she could do to keep ahead of their merciless gunfire. As she heard rebounds whizzing by her ear, she used her incredible athletic abilities to bound over a fence and continue to fly through the ruins. Any ordinary man would have

already tripped and been filled with lead ten times over... but not even she could last long against an AS.

“Still trying to escape?” the pilot jeered. “Die, then!” The Savage leaped, kicking at the stone tunnel into which Mao had run.

She felt a heavy jolt around her as the blocks were crushed to rubble, the impact throwing Mao herself about three meters. As her body slammed against the hard ground below, the world around her went white for a second. Against her will, Mao cried out as the air was expelled from her lungs, and sharp stings of pain went running through her ribs and her wrists. But she ignored the physical pain and got back to moving immediately. Even as she crawled herself along the decimated ruins’ floor, though, the Savage’s large foot stomped down right in her path.

Mao looked up and saw the egg-shaped body towering over her. “Give up already, woman!”

Ah, I’m done for, she thought regretfully. *I wish I’d gotten to try out the M9 just once before I died...* But just as she had that thought, the Savage in front of her lost its balance. Something had grabbed it from behind.

“What?!” the pilot exclaimed.

It was another Savage—the one which Sagara had stolen. His Savage, dragging its legs behind it, had grabbed tight to the enemy machine’s right leg, almost like a zombie.

“L-Let go... urgh!”

Creeeak... crash! There was a roar of shredding metal as sparks flew and oil sprayed. Sagara’s Savage had broken the enemy’s right knee through arm strength alone. The machine’s leg frame was strong enough against vertical pressure, but surprisingly weak against the lateral. Sagara had used that knowledge to enact an AS version of a submission hold.

Impressive, Mao thought. It was a move one could only accomplish if they knew the machine like the back of their hand. And on top of that, Sagara had done it without the use of his own machine’s legs.

The enemy Savage was forced to its knees. It was then that the third Savage,

which had previously been pursuing Zimmer, came running.

Sagara's machine silently righted itself. With incredible skill, it moved around with arms alone, as fast as it could walk, almost like a gorilla.

Facing it, the enemy machine's engine roared, and it readied its Israeli-made monomolecular cutter as it dashed at Sagara's Savage. The latter, in response, silently positioned itself into a squat and let the enemy's slash miss it by a hair. It then grabbed the enemy machine's wrist with one hand, then used the opponent's momentum against it to throw it off balance. As the opponent tripped and fell forward, Sagara's Savage lifted up its free hand, and...

Crash! The enemy Savage flipped in midair and crashed head-first into the ground. There was a tremendous sound of impact as smoke rose up and pulverized stones went flying. It was basically AS-style jiu-jitsu. To perform a move like that, you needed an unparalleled sense for what a machine could do. And on top of that, it bears repeating, *Sagara's machine couldn't even use its legs*.

Sagara had offered this strategy up as what he could do, and Mao quite frankly hadn't had high hopes. He'd far outstripped her expectations, though. He'd certainly proven his skills vastly superior to those of that Israeli, Harrell. He might even be better than Mao herself...

Truly incredible. Mao wasn't the only one watching on in shock; the guerrillas were too. As they did, Sagara's Savage stole the monomolecular cutter from the collapsed enemy machine and stabbed it into the part of its back that housed its control system, rendering it immobile.

As it did so, the machine whose right leg he had snapped earlier was awkwardly approaching Sagara's machine. Sagara's Savage pulled out the knife in response and, while balancing its weight on its left arm, beckoned the opponent with its right. "Come and try me," he urged him. "I'll teach you how to fight with a damaged machine."

"D-Damn you!" The enemy Savage charged desperately, but the result was already plain to see. A man who was barely a novice didn't stand a chance against a specialist. Sagara caught the enemy's arm cleanly, wrestled it to the ground and, as with the first machine, severed the control system in its back

with the monomolecular cutter.

After defeating the enemy ASes, Sagara's Savage, still moving around using just its hands, turned to the Deterevs and released a burst of its head-mounted machine guns. Some men scattered in panic, while others threw down their guns and had the gall to ask for merciful treatment.

"Feel free to resist all you like," Mao said, leaning back casually against a ruined stone pillar. She was covered in scratches, had a few mild sprains, and was extremely exhausted... but she was still in good spirits. "We can do this as many times as you like. But remember... we've got the best team in the world!" she proclaimed proudly.

Not a single man there was inclined to argue with her.

They untied the mercenaries, got the president's daughter safely into custody, and tied up the Deterevs—the Determined Revolutionaries. Obviously, Mao was the hero—er, heroine—of the day, and Estes and the others showered her with praise.

"But try to make the rescue a little gentler next time, okay?" Estes said with a laugh.

Mao and the others then engaged in a short interrogation of President Dijkstra. When they'd asked him how low-rate hoodlums like the Deterevs had wound up with ASes, he'd said, "Well, my second cousin's friends with Chairman Castro in Cuba. So, we asked, and he sent us a few. Ha ha ha..."

"Liar!" Mao said angrily.

"It's true!" Dijkstra protested. "He said they were old anyway, and asked us to get some use out of them... But it turns out ASes cost a fortune to maintain, so we kidnapped the president's daughter to earn the money we needed..." Then they'd hidden the machines in a temple deep in the ruins, a place the scouting team had failed to check.

But no matter how Mao threatened him, Dijkstra stuck to the Castro story, so they cut the questioning off there. It seemed just strange enough to be true, after all. And at any rate, it would be in the Belize Defense Guard's hands now.

Once that was done, Mao was able to catch up with her subordinates—the members of Team Topaz.

Zimmer had some light injuries, but he was okay. “Boy, really thought I was dead back there,” he told her with a laugh. “What a crazy plan. You guys are a force to be reckoned with.”

“Thanks,” she told him. “I might be counting on you in the future again too.”

“Please don’t. I’m a little too old for this action, I think... Ha ha...”

Then Weber arrived and said, “Whew, thought I was dead back there.”

“Why?” Mao asked, curious.

“There was this huge snake crawling around right next to where I’d staked out my position,” he explained dramatically. “Venomous, I’ll bet. Just glad it didn’t bite me!”

“Oh, really?” Mao responded indifferently, but she was smiling inside. She’d thought that a man like Weber would be bragging about his skills the moment he arrived. *But he didn’t. Maybe he’s a more serious man than I gave him credit for. In fact...*

“Is he actually... self-conscious about it?” she muttered to herself. If so, it was rather charming. Mao felt like she could forgive him for his past idiocy.

“Well, I’m just glad it went well. You’re pretty impressive, too,” Weber said, nodding swiftly as he folded his arms.

Then, finally, Sagara disembarked from his AS. His face pale, he whispered, “I thought I was dead back there.”

“Really?” Mao asked. “Looked to me like you made short work of them.”

“Actually, I meant the stench in the cockpit of that AS. The previous operator’s body odor...” Watching Sousuke look so green around the gills, Mao found herself bursting out into laughter. She’d thought of him as aloof, almost robotic... but it seemed he could be normal now and then, after all. Perhaps he wasn’t completely lacking in charm. “Anyway, Sergeant,” Sagara continued, “you’re an excellent NCO.”

“Really? You think so?” Mao asked.

“I don’t think we’d have gotten them out alive without you. That kind of decisiveness in the clutch isn’t something anyone can learn,” Sagara said with his typically sullen expression. He had a monotone manner of speech that could have come off as sarcasm, but somehow, Mao now knew that he didn’t mean any harm.

“Thanks,” she said sincerely.

“We’ll be going, then. Good luck.”

“Take care, Big Sis Mao. It’s been fun.”

Sagara saluted, and Weber grinned. Then they left, chatting with each other about one thing or another.

Mao felt strangely sad to see them go.

A moment later, Estes, who’d finished giving his withdrawal orders, approached. “Sergeant. You’re set to head back to Merida Island this evening, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I have to take the hostages and Maria to the capital,” he said, “so I probably won’t see you again before you leave.”

“Got it. Take care, then. Thanks for the help,” Mao said.

Major Estes let out a low groan. “Hang on, did you forget? You’re supposed to take back a pair of trainees.”

“Oh. That’s right...” She’d completely forgotten. The previous night had been so chaotic, she’d forgotten the original reason she’d come.

“So, did you pick out the two you’re taking? I’d appreciate it if you could tell me now.”

“Hmm...” Mao folded her arms. She made a big show of thinking it over, hemming and hawing under her breath. But in reality, her mind was made up. “In that case...”

“Hmm?”

“I know you might not be happy about it, but there’s a pair I’d really like to

take my chances with," she told him. "I finally got that gut feeling I've been waiting for. Two people for whom I could be a great team leader... I think I finally found them."

After a long pause, Estes smiled. "So you've fallen in love, eh?"

"Yes, I think I have," she confirmed with a grin.

"Great. So who're the lucky guys?"

"Heh heh... Well..."

And with great aplomb, she said their names.

〈Engage, Six, Seven — The End〉

Afterword

This volume contains the edited and revamped short stories that ran in *Monthly Dragon Magazine* between October 1999 and January through March of 2000, as well as one brand new short (medium?) story. I'm putting off the stories with the new regular character, Tsubaki-kun, and there are only four stories from the magazine here. The reasons why are a bit complicated... but I think we'll be back to normal next volume. I hope you'll be sympathetic. You can also try to figure out the reasons if you want, but you'll probably be wrong.

Anyway, time to do the afterword.

When I reread the afterword for *Into the Blue*, which just came out, I felt awful. "Guh. Why did I write so many strange things? Am I going nuts?!" I really felt like I'd lost my mind. Thanks again to Shinjo-sensei who acted like my psychologist after I'd gone off the deep end. And I'm sorry to people involved in Japanese rap. It's not really icky. I just get annoyed at the amateurish lyrics of the stuff that sometimes plays on the radio. I think you guys know what I mean.

I should probably admit that when I'm really pouring everything I've got into a story, the afterwords get sloppy. I feel neglectful of my fans. Sorry. I'll do my best next time.

Well, goodbye! Oh, I've got a page and a bit left... Let's have a few words on each story, then.

"Who Killed Cock Robin (of the Rocky Shores)?"

I really loved the picture of Kaname drooling that Shiki-sensei did for the magazine edition. The images in the magazine are different from the published ones, so there's quite a few rare pictures there. We have no plans to reprint these at the moment, so make sure you get the magazines too. There's lots of depictions of side characters that don't appear in the novels either, like Akutsu Mari and Shoji Mia and Nishino Kozue (does anyone remember these minor characters?).

By the way, I heard about the sake called Kuroushi from an alcohol specialty shop I go to. It should be in season when this volume goes on sale.

“The Innocent of Remembrance (Parts 1 & 2)”

A rare serious short story. While I was writing this, I was doing a lot of experimenting. Did you like it? I feel like Hayashimizu and Kusakabe represent two aspects of a way I felt a long time ago. I’m sorry if that makes parts of it hard to understand. I sometimes think those relationships and breakups with members of the opposite sex really can shake your sense of values and humanity. So if you’re feeling the same way as you read this volume, Hayashimizu’s final line is my gift to you.

Ah, that was super pretentious. I’m sorry. But seriously.

“An Adult Sneaking Mission”

The previous story was serious, so this one’s light and silly. But as comical as it is, I think men really are like that. Maybe they’re not. Or are they? Maybe they’re like Mizuki said. Or are they? What do you think?

I do think Kaname’s idea about separate men’s and women’s cars is a good one. Women won’t have to be groped, and men won’t be suspected unjustifiably. One time on a packed train car, this office worker lady was squished up against me and glared at me even though I didn’t do anything. It was so traumatic for me, ah, yes...

Also, that stuff Gotou said about writers was a joke, of course. Don’t get the wrong idea, please. Thanks.

“Engage, Six, Seven”

The extra story this time is about the past, a comical look at the circumstances that brought Sousuke, Kurz, and Mao together. I didn’t intend it, but I guess this volume in general is very concerned with the past.

The truth is, there are a lot of stories I could tell about *FMP!* characters’ pasts, but it would get in the way of the storytelling, so I don’t usually depict them.

The years when Sousuke and Kalinin meet and say goodbye, the circumstances behind Mao's discharge from the Marines, why Kurz is in so much debt, how Tessa got involved with the TDD, how the crew came to respect her as a captain, the reason Kalinin sends Sousuke on such hard missions, the dark history of Kaname's time in middle school, Sousuke's dark history as a mercenary... but they're all so serious... I don't really know how to approach them.

By the way, Belize is a real South American country, but it isn't actually full of pervert guerrillas or cowardly colonels. It's mainly that, while writing it up, I thought it would be fun to do a simple fantasy RPG setup in an alternate present setting. But you can't do that in a familiar setting like Japan, so...

Now, for a personal message: I'm grateful to Aki-kun for scolding and encouraging me while I was writing this. Don't fall out of your master's bed too much. Put in earnest effort.

And that should just about do it. Every time I try to write an afterword, I struggle with it... To everyone who writes fan letters, I'm sorry I've been slow to respond. Some of you even included stamps for the return, but right now I'm so swamped I don't have time to write back. I'm really sorry. I do read them all, though.

For you who wrote passionately about how much you like my characters. For you who calmly analyzed my story. I'm grateful. You're the reason I keep doing this.

For you who opened up to me about your struggles with school, work, and friends: I know you can get through this. Just writing a letter is an amazing act of creation. Not everyone can do it. Be careful and cautious, and occasionally bold. Sometimes the best strategy is escape. This is all I can say for you, but I hope you make it through your trials.

Ah. I think this afterword is getting a little dark. Probably because the weather outside is so bad. It's raining. Hoo boy. Dreary skies...

So to cheer us up, a few words from Tessa.

Tessa: XX-san. I'm sad that I didn't have much of a role in this volume, but

let’s both cheer up. We’ll work hard together!

Well, you heard her. You can fill your own name in the XX. Great, huh?

Ow. Hey. No throwing rocks!

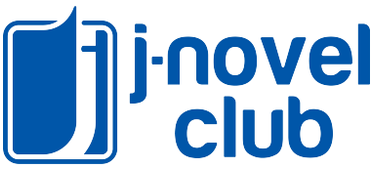
Here at the end, to those people I made trouble for, and to those who contributed their talents, thank you once again.

Until next time, when Kaname’s fan roars once more.


“Have a little self-awareness for once!” Kaname snatched away the tabloid full of lascivious articles and smacked Sousuke over the head with it.
FULL METAL PANIC!
INDIFFERENT FOUR-WIND SCATTERING?


Sousuke lashed out with an elbow strike. The armed man flew back from the force.
“I kinda forgot you were actually pretty good in a fight...”


Seafood. Fresh out of the ocean. Straight from the source. But the alluring smell of rocky shores soon leads to a crime that will shock the student council!



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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 4

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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