



Aria ②

the Scarlet Ammo

Author: Chugaku Akamatsu

Illustrator: Kobaichi



A Digital Manga Guild Publication

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2

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Kobuichi

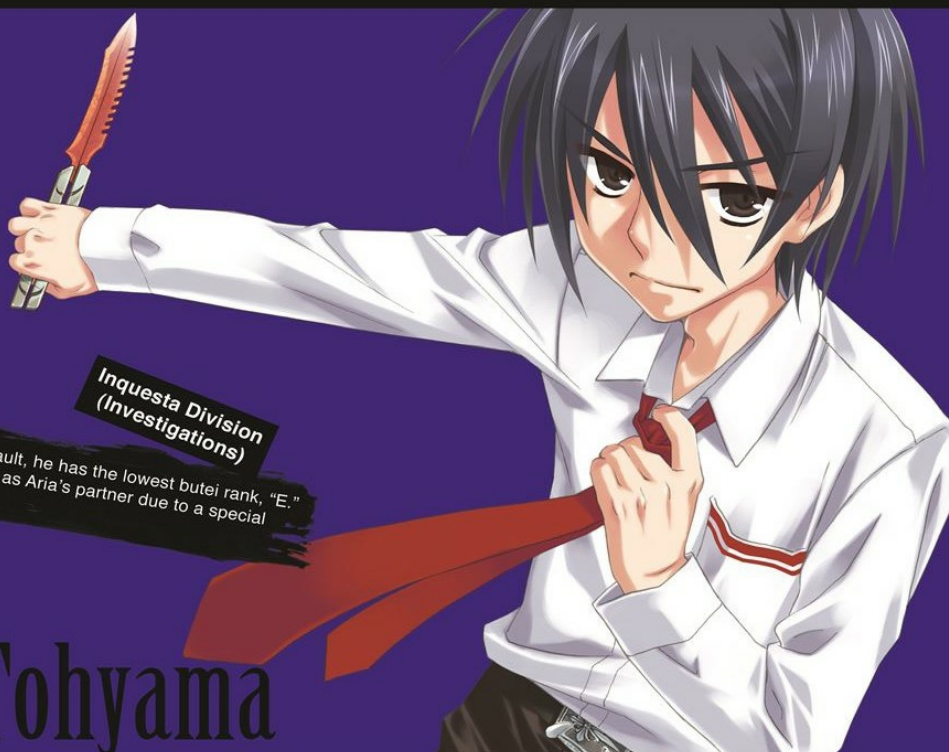


Aria H. Kanzaki



She is a highly skilled Butei who always acts on her own authority and has mastery of dual pistols and combat with two katanas. She has inherited the genes of a renowned detective.

Assault



**Inquesta Division
(Investigations)**

A former member of Assault, he has the lowest butei rank, "E."
However, he was chosen as Aria's partner due to a special
condition he possesses.

Kinji Tohyama

Shirayuki Hotogi



She is the president of the student council at Butei High and Kinji's childhood friend. She comes from an ancient line of shrine maidens who serve at Hotogi Shrine and uses the art of kidou (the path of the demon.)

SSR Division
(Psychic Ability Investigation Research)

Reki



Snipe Division

A gifted S-rank sniper. No one knows her last name; apparently, not even she knows.

“You can’t betray the Hotogis—
not if you understand what betraying them would mean.”





Aria 2 the Scarlet Ammo



Digital Manga Guild presents

Author: Chugaku Akamatsu

Illustrator: Kobiuchi

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Aria the Scarlet Ammo II

Blazing Diamond Dust

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CHUUGAKU AKAMATSU

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First Bullet Armored Priestess

Shirayuki Hotogi is a paragon of the ideal Japanese woman.

She's an exemplary Japanese maiden of the olden days with long, glossy, black hair and a graceful, modest demeanor. Like the ladies of the court in olden day, she is an exemplary maiden of grace and modesty with a lovely visage perfectly framed by her long, glossy dark tresses. A skilled worker in cooking and laundering and a kind soul to everyone, Shirayuki was bound to be a good wife and wise mother. ...Or so they thought...

She isn't the type of girl who would raise a katana over her head with the ferociousness of a demon and scream something along the lines of "I-I-I'm going to kill Aria and then take my own life!"

...Normally, that is.

"Why *me*?! You've got the wrong person!"

It would seem that not even Aria H. Kanzaki, the fourth generation descendent of the great detective, Sir Sherlock Holmes, knew why this priestess had come for her life.

I didn't blame her. I didn't know either, and Shirayuki was my childhood friend. My mind shuffled through the blur of recent events, struggling to find reason and cause for the current madness eschewing in front of me. •Shirayuki, who had returned from training camp, sent forty-nine messages to my cell phone the first of which asked: "Is it true that you're living with a girl?" •Soon afterwards, Shirayuki came storming into my apartment.

•Then, when she saw Aria, this happened.

That's it.

...It's no use. I don't have a clue. I don't have a single clue as to why Shirayuki suddenly flipped her lid!

“Shirayuki! I don’t know what it is you’re misunderstanding, but this *is* a misunder...!”

Before I could finish my sentence, Aria kicked me squarely in the back. I slammed into the wall of the hallway before falling on the floor.

“Kinji, do something about this! It’s your fault this weird girl showed up!”

“I-It’s not *my* fault!”

“That’s right! It’s not Kin-chan’s fault! Kin-chan isn’t to blame! Aria ... it’s your fault! You’re undoubtedly in the wrong here! You should just disappear! So GO AWAY ALREADY!”

T-This isn’t good. Shirayuki’s rage is causing her to forget herself.

To be honest ... I still wasn’t sure of the cause, but ever since we were children, Shirayuki occasionally has these outrageous episodes. From my experience, once things reached this point, no one could calm her down, and it would continue until her victim, usually some girl who had no idea why she was being attacked—was beaten to a pulp.

“This is your divine punishment!!” shrieked Shirayuki as she charged forward, her getas beating across the floor, and swung her katana downwards toward the top of Aria’s head.

Y-You got to be kidding me! She’s seriously trying to kill her!

“Neow!”

Aria gave off a cry like that of some feline-like beast and caught Shirayuki’s katana between her hands.

S-She stopped the blade with her bare hands!

It was the first time I had seen that technique used in actual combat. There was no denying that Aria was a master of baritsu. But this wasn’t the time for me to be impressed by Aria’s expertise.

“You dumb broad!” Aria screamed. With the katana still in Aria’s grip, she jumped up, sending her skirt high into the air. Aria then latched onto Shirayuki’s right arm with both of her legs and proceeded to twist it.

“Vale tudo, is it?!”

Shirayuki, who seemed to have instantly identified Aria’s fighting technique, immediately sounded her getas once more as she took a powerful step backwards and performed a belly-to-back suplex with Aria still wrapped around her arm.

H-Hey, you guys just put a huge dent in the floor!

“Nnnnnnngh, be gone! Be gone, you home wrecker! Disappear from Kin-chan’s sight!” howled Shirayuki, using all of her might to kick Aria with both feet.

“Kyaa?!” Aria cried as she slammed into the living room couch, reducing it to rubble and getting pinned underneath.

“S-Stop! Stop, both of youuuu!”

Blam! Blam!

My deplorations changed to a scream when bullets suddenly whizzed past my face, fired from Aria’s smoking guns that she pulled out while underneath the rubble. Ka-pwing!

Shirayuki matter-of-factly deflected the bullets with her katana.

“That’s it!” Aria cried. “Now I’m pissed! I’m gonna open a hole in you!”

Aria flew out from beneath the couch as if launched from catapult. She ran towards Shirayuki, relentlessly firing her pistols until the magazines became empty . . . but Shirayuki deflected every single bullet. Aria, living up to her alias the Quadra, then crossed her two shorter katanas just in time to intercept a fatal thrust from Shirayuki’s sword. The swords continued to clash again and again until both fighters stood face to face with their katanas locked together, each doing her best to push the other back.

“Kin-chan, stab this girl from behind! If you just do that, I’ll pretend I never saw anything here!”

“Kinji! Back me up! You’re my partner, aren’t you?!”

They both looked to me for assistance ... but I just didn’t know what to make out of the whole situation anymore.

“... Do whatever you want. Fight to your heart’s content.”

Placing my hand on my throbbing forehead, I wearily walked past the two of them, who continued to glare at each other, opened the window, and went out onto the balcony. Why the balcony, you ask? Because there’s a storage locker here—a bulletproof one.

“Kin-chan!”

“Kinji!”

Ignoring their cries, I opened the storage locker and stepped inside.

Shirayuki the Berserker.

Aria the Child of War.

Is a single, ordinary high school student such as myself capable of putting an end to this battle of the beasts? Simply put, the answer is “no.” So I shut the door, sealing my escape from this absurd reality. If you think I’m being rather pathetic, feel free to do so. Nobody wants to die, right?

Hotogi shrine maidens are “armed priestesses.”

At any shrine, the head priest and the shrine maidens more or less protect the objects of worship enshrined there. However, at Shirayuki’s home, the Hotogi Shrine, shrine maidens have always armed themselves while guarding sacred objects of worship for many generations. God only knows why. And as one can see from Shirayuki’s amazon-like prowess, Hotogi Shrine maidens are quite powerful. At this very moment, Shirayuki is effortlessly deflecting all of Aria’s bullets with her katana. Even I have only been able to accomplish that once while in hysteria mode. The source of her strength isn’t something easily understood when explained, nor when witnessed, but apparently ... it’s a type of supernatural ability known as the art of kidou.

...

... Supernatural ability.

It sounds so dubious that no one could believe it, right? I don’t want to believe it either. But evidently these espers do exist. Many researchers have secretly studied and reared them in special facilities in multiple countries across the

globe. At Butei High, SSR is the equivalent of one of those facilities. Shirayuki excels as a student there as well and is currently displaying her superhuman abilities. Additionally, buteis who possess these supernatural powers are referred to as “chouteis,” and though they raise a few eyebrows, they’re gaining more and more attention in the butei business with each passing day.

I let out a deep sigh.

... This is not normal.

Some day, I want to transfer to a regular school, lead a normal student life, and become an ordinary adult ... Even now, I hold that wish in my heart ... However, thanks to Aria, I’m rapidly being dragged off into a world that’s anything but ordinary.

The violent clashes, coming from inside the apartment and resembling the climactic battle scene in a war flick, finally came to an end ... so I stop looking at movie websites (my means of a distraction) on my cell phone, place the phone in my pocket, and quietly step out of the bulletproof locker. I nearly passed out as I saw what had become of my home. There were bullet holes and gashes all over the walls, and pieces of furniture I was particularly fond of, were now fragments scattered about the floor. It was as if an earthquake and a typhoon had merge into one destructive force inside my home. As for Ms. Earthquake and Ms. Typhoon themselves, their hair and clothes were as disheveled as could possibly be, and they were covered with sweat and dust. Their status as the most beautiful women around was crumbling away as they sat there exhausted.

“I can’t ... believe ... what a resilient ... home wrecker ... you are,” wheezed Shirayuki, using her katana as cane to help her stand up.

Would you please not pierce the floor with your sword?

“R-Right back ... at you ... Would you please ... just roll over ... and die?”

Aria was sitting in the floor with her knees upright and supporting her upper body with her arms behind her.

“... So, has everything been settled? From the looks of things, I’d say it’s a tie .
...”

After there are no longer any means of continuing a battle, having a third party

come in and mediate peace talks is probably the way the world works. That's what I figure anyway, so I began urging the two of them to negotiate with each other.

"Kin-chan-sama!"¹

Shirayuki seemed to have just noticed I came out, and tucking her katana away under her arms, she wobbly sat down in proper Japanese fashion. She then moistened her pretty, obsidian-like eyes with tears and covered her face with both hands.

"I-I'll make amends for this with my death. If you're going to cast me aside, I'll kill Aria and c-commit hara-kiri right here and now as atonement!"

She making less and less sense with every word she speaks. And what's with "Kin-chan-sama"? That's two suffixes attached to my name.

"L-Listen to me ... I'm not casting away or picking up anything. What are you talking about?"

"Well, I mean ... I mean ... if you put a male and female hamster in the same cage, they automatically start multiplying!"

"Not only are you not making sense, but you're getting way ahead of yourself."

Hearing the irritation in my voice, Shirayuki flung her tear filled face up towards me.

"A-A-Aria doesn't think anything more of you than a mere plaything! I just know it!"

"S-Stop shaking me by the collar!"

"It's my fault. It's because I didn't have enough courage that you left, and ... I should say you brought a woman *inside* ..."

"If you were to become any more courageous, it would put me in a bind."

She turned towards Aria, who had been making all sorts of wry comments beside me.

"D-Don't let it get to your head just because you're in a relationship with Kin-chan, you she-devil!"

Shirayuki threw me to the floor and flung a chain-sickle, which was hidden in her sleeve, at Aria.

“R-Relationship?!” cried Aria as the chain entwined itself around the jet-black Government and left hand she used to shield herself. The strain in their faces was plain to see as they both tugged on that chain with everything they had.

“D-Don’t be stupid! I-I-I-I couldn’t care less about romance!!” shouted Aria in that anime-like voice of hers. As always, she wasn’t very good at dealing with issues related to love, and her face went bright red. “Romance is ... just a waste of time! I’ve never had anything to do with it before and I never intend to! I-I’ve never even wanted to! I’ve never wanted get involved in a romantic relationship! I’ve never wanted anything like that!”

Why did you repeat yourself three times?

“Then what is Kin-chan to you?! He’s not your lover?!”

“We’re not like that!” Arias voice became unnaturally high. “Kinji is my slave! He’s nothing more!”

“S-S-Slave ...?!”

Upon hearing this, Shirayuki’s face went pale, and she stood there with her mouth agape. I didn’t know what she was imagining, but soon afterwards, her face became red-hot.

This girl’s got a lot going through her mind too.

“T-This can’t be ... You’re even forcing Kin-chan to participate in such immoral games?!”

“W-W-W-What kind of nonsense are you spouting?! You’ve got it all wrong!”

“No, I haven’t! I-I’ve also fantasized about that same situation with the roles reversed, so I know!”

“You’re wrong! You’re wrong! You’re wrong! You’re wrong! You’re wroooooong! Kinji!”

Still continuing her tug-of-war with Shirayuki, Aria glared at me with her camellia-colored eyes.

*W-What does she want from **me**, I wonder?*

“It’s one-hundred percent your fault that this crazy girl showed up! Do something about it! I’m gonna make you regret it if you don’t!”

I’m already in deep regret.

“... Uhhh. Hey ... first off, Shirayuki—”

“Yes?” she answered upon being called, and releasing the chain-sickle, Shirayuki faced me once again, sitting in the proper Japanese fashion. As a result, Aria was sent tumbling backwards with her legs straight up into the air, but I’m going to pretend I didn’t notice for now.

“Listen to me carefully. Aria and I are just fellow buteis who have temporarily formed a party.”

“... Really?”

“Yes, really. You know my nickname, don’t you? Tell me what it is.”

“... The Misogynist.”

“Right?”

“Also, Mr. Useless as a Lamp in Daylight.”

“That’s not relevant right now.”

“R-right.”

Don’t bring up any unnecessary nicknames. It’s only going to make matters more complicated.

“So as you can see, this incomprehensible anger of yours is a product of misunderstanding and your actions just now are completely meaningless. Besides, she’s a runt who looks like an elementary school student. There’s no-”

“Gonna open a hole.”

“way I’m going to enter that kind of relationship with her.”

Aria had made an interjection, but I’ll be ignoring that as well. She was probably out of bullets anyway.

“B-But ... Kin-chan.”

Hm?

It was quite rare for Shirayuki, whose obedience was one of her merits, to make any sort of retort.

“What?”

“That ...” uttered Shirayuki as she pointed to my pants at the pocket with her slender, white finger. Dangling from my pocket was the enigmatic cat-like creature, Leopon, that I won from that crane game a while back. This plushie was somewhat large, and when I put my cell phone in my pocket, Leopon tended to hang outside. But ... what of it?

Shirayuki’s finger rigidly changed direction until it pointed to the skirt pocket of Aria, who had gotten up and made her way to us. From within her pocket as well, Leopon had his head and arm sticking out as if to say “How’s it goin?”

“The two of you are going for a pair look!!” cried Shirayuki, and tears gushed out of her eyes like a water fountain.

“Pair look?”

Apparently Aria isn’t familiar with the obsolete term that brought with it images of the Shouwa era, and she raised a questioning pink eyebrow.

“H-Having a pair look is what people who love each other do! I’ve ... I’ve dreamt of it so many times!”

“I keep telling you! Kinji and I aren't like that! I’m not even in the slightest bit interested in that kind of relationship with this guy!!”

Great ... So much for peaceful negotiations.

“Come on now, Shirayuki.” I turned towards Shirayuki, and gripping her by the shoulders, I looked deep into her eyes. “You don’t believe me?”

I said it with a fairly serious tone, and she began wiping the tears that fell endlessly from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I-It’s not that. I believe you. I do believe you ...”

After repeatedly affirming the fact, Shirayuki finally began to soften up.



Still whimpering and hiccupping, she then looked back and forth between Aria and I.

“Then ... then you and Aria haven’t done anything like ‘that,’ right?” Shirayuki inquired in a slightly calmer tone.

“What do you mean ‘like that’?”

“Like k-kissing ...”

Kissing. Kissing? Kissing, you say?

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Aria and I looked at each other, and the both of us became petrified all at once. Aria became as red as a stoplight and glowered at me speechlessly with a mouth that simply continued to open and close.

*H-Hey, don’t look at **me**.* Well ... if you looked at the facts, the answer would have to be that we have. But that was sort of an emergency measure that was necessary in our battle with Riko. I’m not sure exactly what to call it, but by no means was it a kiss that could be associated with romantic feelings...

“... You ... did ... didn’t ... you ...?” whispered Shirayuki as her eyes became completely dilated. Any form of expression that was once on her face vanished instantly, and an eerie, hollow laugh could be heard coming from deep within her throat.

H-Hold up, Shirayuki! You’ve become something straight out of a R-rated movie!

“W-We ... we did do something like that, but . . . !” For some reason, Miss Aria, who was on the opposite side of Shirayuki, stood up straight and stuck out her “enhanced” chest, which really couldn’t be pushed up or plunged. “B-But i-i-i-it’s okay!”

“It’s okay”?

“I found out yesterday. I’m not ... not ... not ...”

You're not ...?

"I'm not pregnant!!"

Aria's outburst was followed by the type of silence you experience at a funeral. That's the impression it gave me anyway.

... What? ... Pregnant? ... What is she ...?

Aria crossed her arms in front of her and stood firmly with a look on her face that said "What do you think of that?!"

Whoosh.

Something shaped awfully similarly to Shirayuki came flying out of her body.

"... Shirayuki?!" I cried.

It finally got to the point where she just fell over backwards as she sat there.

"A-Aria! What are you thinking?! Why did you bring *that* up?"

"Y-Y-You're such an irresponsible guy! I was worrying by myself the whole time, you know?!"

"Worrying about what?!"

"Well, when I was young, my father told me that kissing leads to pregnancy ..."

I don't even ...! Holmes family! At least educate your daughter about sex properly!

"There's no way you're gonna get pregnant over something like that! Even an elementary student knows that!"

"What are you acting all high and mighty for?! Then how does a person get pregnant?! Tell me!"

"I-I-I can't tell you that, you imbecile!"

"I'll bet you don't even know!"

"I *know*!"

"Then tell me!"

"I'm not telling you anything, you moron!"

We argued back and forth like this until we were both red in the face and glaring at each other so closely that our foreheads nearly touched. It was during this exchange that unbeknownst to us, Shirayuki had regained consciousness and disappeared from the apartment like a cloud of smoke.

Oh, great ... Just how is this going to end up?

Second Bullet Catching a Sword Blade with Bare Hands

The following day, Aria and Shirayuki both started behaving oddly, but their actions were as different as day and night. Aria, whose motto is “investigate and learn everything on your own,” went to the library, and starting with stamens and pistils, she taught herself all about the wonders of life. This is how she came to realize that everything she knew about health and physical education was as wrong as the Ptolemaic theory. Following this, for a brief period, Aria developed a strange habit of turning red and stiffening up every time she saw me, but she seemed to be the type who could change her mindset quickly, and soon enough she returned to being the impish little Aria who abuses me for hardly any reason. I really don’t need this.

On the other hand, Shirayuki had clearly been avoiding us ever since that incident. Until now, she had always insisted on looking after me to the point of being obnoxious, but after her fight with Aria, she started hiding herself like a small, overly cautious animal whenever she saw me.

It was in the midst of all this that one day during lunch...

“Tohyama, mind if I sit here?”

Sitting in that noisy school cafeteria, I was enjoying a Salisbury steak lunch set with Aria, who had brought her favorite peach buns, when a guy, so good-looking you would do a double take, approached me. This guy was Ryou Shiranui. He was a member of Assault, and he gave me that sort of smile that only effeminate guys could. A while back, he was a classmate of mine with whom I would often form a party. His butei rank is “A” and having an “A” rank can mean a lot of things, but Shiranui was a pretty well-rounded person. He could be relied upon for his skills in hand-to-hand combat, with knives, or pistols. His weapon of choice is an MK 23 equipped with a laser sight—also very reliable. When he put his tray with its club sandwich on the table, I slid mine over but he returned it to its original position. He even remembered to nod his head in apology. This guy is

a real straight arrow.

...I might also mention that Shiranui was quite popular with the ladies.

Of course he would be. He's got the looks, and he's a person of character, a combination not often found at Butei High. But the odd thing is ... apparently, he doesn't have a girlfriend. He, Muto, and I (before Aria started following me around all over the place) used to hang out together after school often, and there was never anyone of interest to him.

"I heard all about it Kinji. Let me interrogate you a bit. Try to escape and I'll run you over."

The spiky-haired guy who just sat across from me, pushing my tray back with his, was Goki Muto. He was a skilled member of Logi (Logistics division), and an automobile nut who could drive anything considered a vehicle, from steam locomotives to nuclear submarines. As for his weapon, he likes to use a Colt Python with a revolving cylinder for its ease of maintenance. It didn't hold very many rounds, and it couldn't be outfitted with a suppressor. As a gun suitable for a butei, it was out of the question. Muto, on the other hand, wasn't very popular with the ladies. He wasn't a bad guy, but he was rather rough around the edges.

"What do you mean 'interrogate me'?"

"Kinji, I heard you had a fight with Hotogi."

. . . *That's Butei High for you. Information—or should I say "rumors" spread abnormally fast. More to the point, what are you acting so moody for, Muto?*

"Hotogi was looking really depressed, you know? What happened?"

"Nothing happened between us ... Wait a second. You saw Shirayuki?"

"Shiranui told me that he saw her in the greenhouse trying to divine her future by pulling petals off flowers."

"Trying to divine her future?"

"I'd say it's a pretty popular thing to do," said Shiranui, lifting his eyebrows.

"I wouldn't know. Have you heard of it before, Aria?"

Across from me, Aria shook her head indicating that she hadn't. Her long, pink pigtails flew through the air back and forth like a Japanese pellet drum. Aria, by the way, was currently cramming her mouth with peach buns, so she would be silent for a while.

"I'm sure you know what it is, Tohyama. It's that game where you pluck the petals from a flower one by one and say to yourself 'he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not.'"

Oooh. That. To think that there's somebody who still does that in this era. That girl really is a living natural monument.

"Unfortunately, she caught me watching and then the warning bell for the first period went off, so she didn't finish the divination. But her eyes seemed to be filled with tears. So ... why did you two break up? Did the love grow cold or something?"

I heard Aria gag from the mouthful of the peach bun getting caught in her throat.

Don't mention the word love. It causes children to overreact.

"Are you serious? I have no idea how you came to that conclusion. Shirayuki and I aren't even in that kind of relationship. We're just childhood friends."

"Childhood friends, huh? That's certainly a popular choice of words for dodging the matter. According to rumors, Kanzaki got jealous and opened fire on Hotogi. That's why I'm thinking that you and Kanzaki hit it off, and the two girls duked it out to determine who would have you ... After all, Kanzaki is always talking about you at Assault. She seems to having a lot of fun doing so too."



Aria H. Kanzaki went bright red and with a little difficulty, managed to swallow down her peach bun.

“Y-Y-Y-You pervert!”

“Ngh!”

For some reason, a punch came flying into my face.

What gives? This can't be right. If you're gonna punch anyone, it should be Shiranui.

“I’m going to make myself perfectly clear. The reason I drove off Shirayuki wasn’t because I was j-jealous or anything like that. Kinji and I are partners. There’s no I-love or anything else involved. There’s absolutely, positively, definitely nothing like that going on. Those are my real, honest, true feelings!”

You don't have to deny it so vehemently.

“Oh, is that so? Well then, Tohyama, does that mean you and Hotogi might get back together again?”

“Why do you keep making it sound like we’re a couple? Besides, Shiranui, there’s something funny about your story. When the warning bell rang this morning, I came across Shirayuki in the hallway on school grounds, and she ran into the girl’s restroom without so much as a ‘hello.’ That means whoever you saw, it wasn’t Shirayuki. Furthermore, I don’t recall asking for your personal opinion regarding whether I make up with Shirayuki or not.”

“Now that you mention it, I guess you didn’t. Sorry about that,” Shiranui apologized with the smile of a saint on his face and didn’t press the issue any further. Taking his gaze off me, he turned to Aria and whispered, “Tohyama’s in a bad mood, isn’t he.”

As for Muto ... he had a strange look on his face that suggested he had a question for me but wasn’t going to ask now. Muto’s face is always strange though.

“By the way, Shiranui ...”

I didn't want to be grilled over the subject of Shirayuki anymore, so I decided to change the flow of the conversation.

"What are you going to do about the Adsiard? Weren't you elected to be our school's representative or something?"

The Adsiard is an international tournament in which various butei high schools participate once a year. In terms of sports, it's like an interscholastic athletic meet or the Olympics. But unlike the Olympics, which is an event symbolizing peace, the Adsiard consists of nothing but questionable contests in which members of Assault and Snipe compete.

"I probably won't be participating in any of the events. I'm a substitute."

"So you'll just be helping out with the events then? What are you gonna be doing? You have to help out in some way, right?"

"I haven't decided yet. What to do, what to do?" said Shiranui with a listless sigh that could easily make any girl fall for him in a second.

On the other side of the table, Muto started to stuff his face wildly with a fried noodles sandwich. There was a noodle sticking out from the corner of his mouth.

"Are you gonna take part in the Adsiard, Aria?" I asked.

"I'm not participating in any of the events, either. I was chosen to be the representative for the shooting match but I declined."

"Then you're gonna be helping out too, I guess. Have you decided what you're going to be helping out with?"

"I'll be doing the cheerleading for the opening ceremony."

"Cheerleading ...? Oh, you're talking about Ar-kata."

Ar-kata is a butei term that comes from a combination of the Italian word for weapon, "arma," and the Japanese word for form, "kata." It's a parade in which martial arts, knives, and guns are incorporated into a cheerleading routine. The girls at our school don't think twice about simply calling it "cheerleading." "Kinji, you should help out too. You *are* my partner. You don't care what you help out with anyway, right?"

"I ... guess not ..."

The whole purpose of the show is to improve the image of this profession called “butei,” which isn’t exactly seen in the best light in the eyes of the public. As such, it’s probably wise to make it look as cute as possible, so girls in cheerleader uniforms are the only ones dancing around. Guys have the less ostentatious role of performing band music in the back.

“Music, huh? Well, I’m not particularly good or bad at it. I guess that’ll do.”

“Ah, if Tohyama’s going to be part of the band, then maybe I will too. Muto, why don’t you join the band with us?” suggested Shiranui, directing another smile at Muto and I that felt like a cool breeze.

Man, that’s a perfect set of teeth you got there.

“The band, huh? That could be pretty cool. Alright, I’m in.”

Muto’s coming along for the ride. These two sure do like to act on a whim. I’m not one to talk though.

“... But Kanzaki,” said Shiranui, “it was such a waste for you to turn down the offer of being a representative. It’s a pretty popular story so I’m sure you’ve heard, haven’t you? If you win a medal in the Adsiard, you’ll have a bright future ahead of you. You can get into Butei University solely on recommendation, and it’ll look great on your resume when you’re job hunting. Word is, you can land a job at the Bureau of Butei or even join a top-ranking, privately owned butei firm of your choosing.”

“I’m not concerned about stuff that far ahead in the future. There’s something I have to do at this very moment. I don’t have time to be training for a competition.”

“Something I have to do.” Judging from the determination I could hear in Aria’s voice, I was fairly certain she was referring to helping her mother, Kanae Kanzaki. In order to rescue her mother, who had been incarcerated for crimes she did not commit, Aria was destined to combat and arrest the hordes of criminals. Riko Mine Lupin the Fourth, the “butei killer” whom we fought with previously, is one of the criminals who are truly responsible for charges being held against Kanae. And the same thing applied to me, Aria’s partner. Riko, who barely escaped from us during the hijacking incident, was also responsible for the death of my older brother. At the very least, that case was one I’d have to

see to the end eventually. There was also the fact that ... Riko was speaking as if my brother, who died while on duty, were still alive. I wager it was just a lie she told to rile me up, but to be honest, it was still causing me a little concern.

“The Adsiard can wait,” continued Aria, crossing her arms and leaning her upper body backwards. I think she was trying to create a situation in which she could look down at me since I was so much taller. She *was* only one hundred and forty-two centimeters. “Kinji, I have to whip you into shape first.”

“... W-Whip? You guys better not be into any weird hardcore stuff ...” said Muto, his cheeks twitching as he looked at Aria and me.

“Muto, don’t get started. I’ve already been through this with Shirayuki. And Aria ... at least call it “combat instruction” when others are around.”

“Stop your complaining. You’re my slave, so I can whip you all I want.”

You said “partner” just a little while ago. I’m demoted to a slave when it fits your convenience, am I?

“Now that I think about it, just how exactly do you plan on whipping me into shape?”

“Hmmm... For starters, as of tomorrow, you’re going to be doing morning drills with me every day.”

Ugh.

From the looks of it, Aria had just now come up with this obnoxious plan to do morning drills and was sitting there with a satisfied look on her face as she muttered to herself that it was a good idea.

Damn. My plan backfired. I never should have brought up the Adsiard.

Seven o’clock the next morning.

I woke up early and made my way to the meeting place, just like Aria ordered me to last night—with her pistols stuck into my back of course.

“Guess who.”

Aria had come up from behind and placed her hands over my eyes. When I

turned around, I found myself speechless for a moment.

S-She looks so cute.

“Jeez. How could you let yourself be taken from behind like that? You’ve got a long ways to go.”

Aria, standing up as straight as she possibly could and with her hands on her hips, was in a cheerleader uniform. The cheerleaders of Butei High wore a rather unusual uniform; the primary color is black and the sleeveless top had a small opening above the bust line, providing a view of Aria’s pure white skin. I’m sure that normally, this hole would be in the shape of a heart or a star, but the way it was shaped like a bullet was most befitting of Butei High. Lowering my eyes to the skirt in trepidation, I noticed it was so short that it was permanently gun flashing (gun flash: a glimpse of the pistol hidden under a girl’s skirt. Coined by idiot Muto.)

“W-What’s with that getup?”

“You can’t tell? It’s a cheerleader uniform. Is there no limit to your ignorance?”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from. In any case, what I was asking was ‘*Why* are you dressed like that?’”

“Then say so, you dunce. I’m going to practice my cheer routine while I discipline you. If I do both simultaneously, it’ll save time, right?” said Aria, looking around in satisfaction of our surroundings, which are completely void of any people.

This area, located on the outskirts of the Mega-Float upon where Butei High was located, was known as “Behind the Signboard.” It’s a long, narrow strip of vacant land that lies between the school gym and an enormous signboard that was set up facing Rainbow Bridge. Aria had only transferred to the school recently, but she quickly spotted this area because it’s almost always deserted and decided to make it our training grounds. Apparently, she was also planning on using this area to practice for the Ar-kata as well.

“... So? What am I supposed to be doing?”

“Ahem.” Cheerleader Aria pretended to clear her throat and putting on airs,

drew herself up again.

It's these little gestures of hers that make her look so childish. I'll admit that it's cute, but it's also irritating.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're an S-rank butei."

"Only as far as *you're* concerned, yeah."

"No back talk."

Seeing Aria reach for her pistols, I kept silent for my own safety.

"Being categorized as an S-rank Assault member means having the same combat strength as a Special Forces military unit."

You're crazy.

"That's the kind of potential you have. You can do better if you try. But the problem is you're unable to use your abilities freely. That's why what we need is a "key" to awaken your powers."

Professor Aria, lecturing like an expert. Never would she guess that *she* was that "key."

"So after the hijacking incident I did some research—on multiple personalities, that is."

Multiple personalities? Hehe. Incorrect.

Hysteria mode wasn't a psychogenic acquired characteristic. It was a neurogenic inherited characteristic. In other words, multiple personality disorder is a completely different matter. But ... I decided to act impressed and said a few words to that effect.

"Did you now? I'm impressed you figured it out."

Aria, by all means, continue your misdirected research.

"I studied about it in books and on the Internet. It was pretty interesting. Most likely, a trauma from your childhood days gave rise to split personalities, and the stress from combat caused your other self to manifest."

"I see."

“That’s what happed when your bike and the plane were hijacked, didn't it.”

“Yup.”

“Therefore, the first stage in your training will be to constantly subject you to the stress of combat,” said Aria, suddenly drawing the short katana she even had hidden in back of her cheerleader uniform.

“W-Whoa! Wait a sec!”

“What? I’ll use my pistols afterwards. Don’t worry.”

“That’s not it! If you start waving those things at me, I’m gonna wind up scattered all over this field!”



“Why don’t you try using that teaspoons amount of brains in that head of yours and think a little bit. There’s a rhythm to everything, right?” said Aria in a tone mixed with a sigh that I found particularly irksome. “The purpose of this training is to create a rhythm in which we awaken your powers by subjecting you to stress when you’re in ‘stupid Kinji mode’ and have you counterattack after those powers are awakened.”

“Counterattack ...?”

“You still don't get it? I guess it can't be helped. I'll break it down for you, so go ahead and cry tears of relief and joy, but clean the wax out of your ears so you can hear me.”

I think it would be kind of dangerous to cry joyfully while cleaning out one's ears.

“Number one. You’re standing here in ‘stupid Kinji mode’ right now. Number two. Your powers awake during combat. Number three. You then counterattack. This is the ideal rhythm I’ve come up with.”

That's it? For a person acting like she's doing me a favor that sure is a ridiculously simple plan. If this girl is supposed to be the great-granddaughter of the world famous Sherlock Holmes the Fourth, for the sake of their country's honor, I think the British government should consider having a DNA test done. Seriously.

“So the skill you need to learn is a counterattack technique.”

“Counterattack technique ... What is that?”

“First, you’re going to stop a sword by catching it with your bare hands,” said Aria, raising her katana.

“Wa-”

Before I could say “wait,” I heard the sound of the air being slashed at right next to my right ear. Aria had just swung her sword down towards my shoulder at a speed faster than the eye could follow. I couldn't see it, but she did stop one millimeter away from shoulder though. Riding along the wind created by Aria’s

movements was that faint smell of gardenias.

“Okay. Go over that timing in your head five hundred times. You have ten minutes.”

“Go over the timing ...?”

“That’s right. Imagine yourself catching the katana based on the speed at which it just came at you. If you like, you can actually use your hands as if you were shadow boxing.”

Aria returned the katana to its scabbard on her back in one fluid motion.

“In other words ... you just want me to do image training.”

“We can start mass producing lumps on your head right now if you want.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll do it.”

After breathing a very deep sigh, I reluctantly began imagining myself catching Aria’s katana. Aria nodded in satisfaction.

“That’s the way. You’re very commendable when you follow instructions. Good boy. I hear there’s a master swordsman among the IU members who made my mom a scapegoat. Techniques for countering knife attacks are the basics for any butei. Don’t slack off now,” said Aria in a condescending tone and with a smile on her face.

Get treated like a kid by her and it’s all over.

“Get to it. I’m gonna start counting now. Nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds. Fifty-eight seconds.”

“I’m doing it, I’m doing it.”

“No useless chatter. As a penalty, you just lost thirty seconds!”

What’s up with that “Aria rule”? She’s as tyrannical as a despot. Well . . . I guess I’ll stick it out with her though.

I let out a short sigh. All this talk about the key to my hysteria mode aside, I had already made up my mind about what I’m going to do after that last incident we went through. I’m not going to become some ally of justice. But ... I will continue to be her ally for a little while longer.

I'll help Aria out with what she's trying to do.

But the one thing I wanted to keep telling myself was that it wasn't because she was cute, or I had fallen in love with her or anything like that. It was simply a matter of me seeing through to the end what I had already decided. I was only doing what I should be doing. As for the other things I had decided on—transferring from Butei High to a regular school next year, becoming a normal person who leads a normal life—I didn't intend to change those plans, either.

These were the thoughts swimming through my head as I engaged in image training when Aria pull out her iPod from underneath her skirt and starting fiddling with it. Looking out of the corner of my eye, I saw there was a video being played on the small screen, which also served as a touch panel. It was a video demonstration of the choreography used in Ar-kata. As per Aria's suggestion, I signed up to join the band, and the Adsiard preparatory committee sent me the same video this morning.

"Hmm ... This might be kind of cute," Aria said to herself. Then, slightly distancing herself from me, she turned away and ... suddenly started dancing. She wasn't doing too bad of a job, either.

Well I'll be. She's pretty good.

Having no interest in cheerleading, I'm not too knowledgeable on the subject. But even to my untrained eye, Aria's movements as she began to dance and her twin pigtails flailed about, looked like those of an expert cheerleader. Her movements started out as the normal kind of cheerleading most are used to seeing, and from there, it took on a more gallant atmosphere as she incorporated the martial arts formations. Even so, when adorable, little Aria did all of this in that cheerleader uniform ... it was still very cutesy. Switching from a knife to her pistol, Aria continued to dance, and lifting her leg high into the air, she even performed a back walkover. According to Aria, boy shorts aren't underwear so there's nothing to be embarrassed about. But regardless of her choice in undergarments, I had to admit that she was good. Aria picked up her pom-poms and even had the nerve to show off one of those starry smiles. Normally, she was always in a bad temper and practically scowling, so even though Aria was only acting, the effects of these types of smiles were twice as potent. What kind of effects those were, I didn't know. But despite all of that,

seeing Aria practice her cheer routine like this ... really did make her come across as just an average girl. If this had been a regular high school, no one would assume her to be anything but—just a tad short, self-centered, energetic high-school girl that could be found anywhere.

“Hey ... Kinji.” Aria suddenly stopped dancing and her pink ponytails twirled as she spun around. “Have you been staring at me this whole time? Those are the eyes of a lecher.”

Aria placed her pom-poms against her hips. She then noticed her skirt had inched itself up slightly and used the pom-poms to straighten it out.”

“This isn't a show, you know?”

Though a bit late, I think she must have started to feel embarrassed because her puffed up cheeks had taken a red hue.

“I'd say cheerleading *is* a show—essentially. More to the point, staring at you is the last thing I'd want to do.”

To be sure, I had been fixated on Aria for too long, and feeling a bit awkward, I averted my gaze.

“Why were you watching me then?”

“That's ... that's ... nothing you need to be concerned about.”

“... I'm not *concerned*. It's just ...”

“ ... ”

Ah. This vibe ...

“Anyways, are you doing your image training like you're supposed to be? In five minutes, we're gonna start practicing using the back of the sword.”

“The back of the sword?”

Even if you use the back, it's gonna hurt like hell. In short, you're going to be beating me with a metal rod.

“I'll go slow at first so stop looking so afraid. But I will gradually pick up speed,” said Aria, putting on a truly sinister smile.

“Ow ...”

School had just finished, and I was still rubbing the sensitive lump on my head as I left the Inquesta building.

Dammit. That Aria is a sadistic. She might have been using the back of her sword, but she pummeled me with the thing. I feel like I may have forgotten some English vocabulary or historical dates.

“Kiiinji.”

Aria was running towards me with the sunset at her back. It seems she was lying in wait in front of the Inquesta building again.

“I’ll say this right now; I’m not doing any training after school. I’ve got homework to do for my regular classes.”

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“And I’m not going back to Assault. If you’re telling me to return to that group of death wishers, our partnership is over. I’m going to be living peacefully as a member of Inquesta until I transfer out of here next year.”

“I still haven’t said a word.”

Aria acted completely unconcerned with my harsh tone and began walking towards the bus stop. Then she turned around with a smile as magnificent as a sunflower and said, “But we will continue training tomorrow.”

*... Well, I guess I can do that much. I **am** her partner.*

Besides, this was one those gags where after giving me a false impression twice, the third statement ends with something about “opening a hole in me.”

“Hey, Kinji. At Assault today, we practiced techniques for countering the knives that an enemy throws at you.”

Aria continued to ramble on happily about dangerous things I didn’t care to hear for. She seemed to be in a fairly good mood recently. The reason was obvious. It was probably because I was acting like her partner more or less. Just like the great detective Sherlock Holmes had John H. Watson, the members of Aria’s family—the Holmeses—required a partner that would allow them to display their abilities to the fullest. Aria, who used to be all by herself and an

“aria” in every sense of the word, had been running around looking for that partner. She had literally been searching all over the world. And she finally found one at Tokyo Butei High—me in hysteria mode. I wasn’t able to tap into that power at will, but even so, I was the partner who could be a match for a prodigy like Aria.

“Say, Kinji.”

“What?”

“Hehe. Never mind.”

“God, you’re a pain.”

I get really annoyed by how when we’re walking, Aria occasionally turns around to make sure that I’m there, and then, sending the skirt of her sailor uniform whirling around, she continues on her merry way.

“Aria, you’re not going to look for any other partners aside from me? Wouldn’t it be a good idea to include two or three more people and form a bigger party?

I’d love to have them be the ones to babysit this kid.

“We don’t need any teammates. I don’t work well in groups.”

I’m aware.

“I can fight on my own anyway. I just have to have a partner who can keep up with me. Once your training is complete, there won’t be anything to worry about. You’re the only one I need.”

Ah, crap. That means I gotta be the one to look out for her?

Just contemplating that fact was giving me a headache, and I said as much.

“... My head’s starting to hurt. It’s all because you beat me to a pulp.”

“So take some Aspirin.”

“The only thing I take for headaches or colds is Yamato Pharmaceutical’s ‘Extra Concentrated Kudzu Infusion.’”

“Extra Concentrated ...? What’s that?”

“It means a high concentration of ingredients used in herbal medicine. It’s

made up of various Chinese medicines like kudzu and ephedra.”

“You sound like an old geezer. Go and take that then. I’ll be putting more lumps on your head tomorrow.”

“I just happen to be out at the moment ... And they only sell it at Ameyoko. It’s a real hassle going all the way out there. I get it at a drug store between Ueno and Okachi-machi, and there aren’t any train stations nearby.”

“Kinji.” Aria, who didn’t seem to have been listening to my grumbling, suddenly stopped in front of the educational affairs department. “Look at this.”

“... What?” I asked, looking at the bulletin board to which Aria pointed.

“Attention, Second Year Class B Shirayuki Hotogi of SSR. Come to the educational affairs department.”

Shirayuki had been called to the educational affairs department. That was something you didn’t see every day. She was an honor student with a student deviation value of seventy-five, the student body president, president of the horticulture club and handicraft club, captain of the girls’ volleyball team. Aside from the bizarre incident with Aria a few days ago, she led the life of a model student. I never would have thought Shirayuki would be called to the educational affairs department. “Aria, did you make a complain about Shirayuki assaulting you the other day?”

“I’m a noblewoman,” said Aria, glaring at me with her red eyes, “I wouldn’t do something as cowardly as snitch to a teacher about private matters—even if someone did pick a fight with me. What do you take me for?”

Well, well. That’s very admirable for someone like Aria.

I was a little impressed. Aria placed a small finger on her lips and started musing to herself..

“Kinji, this is the perfect chance to keep that savage girl away from you,” said Aria, taking her own savageness up a few notches and looking up at me intently from beneath my chin.

“We’re going to investigate this matter and find out what her weakness is.”

Didn’t you just say something about noblewomen not being cowardly?

“Her weakness ...? Why? Shirayuki hasn’t come near us since then.”

“Yes, she has!”

Huh?

“Lately, whenever I’m alone, I can feel the presence of someone behind doors. It feels like someone is watching me from the shadows. Telephone lines have been cut apart as if they were bugged.”

...

“Water is dumped on me when I walk through the hallways on school grounds. Blow darts come flying at me out of nowhere. I tumble into pitfalls!”

.... Whoa. Wait a second ...

“I also received letters with the word “home wrecker” written on them. Anyways, that girl is constantly harassing me! How blind can you be to not have noticed?! You’re so incompetent!”

“So that’s what was going on ...”

“And that’s not the end of it.”

It’s not?

“When I opened my locker in the girl’s locker room the other day, there was piano wire strung across inside! She knows that because of ... certain physical limitations, I have to go deep inside my locker to get my clothes, and she set the wire up so it would be level with my neck!”

Now that ... I can’t laugh at.

So basically, as soon as Aria dove into her locker, she would have lost her head. The only people who learned how to set up brutal traps like that were seniors in the Assault division or those in the Lezzad (intelligence) division.

“Kinji, the time Shirayuki is supposed to report to the educational affairs department is posted here. Let’s ...” I was knitting my brows when Aria, seething with anger, gave me the most terrifying order out of all those she’d given me

since I first met her. "... sneak into the educational affairs department while she's there."

There were dangers lurking in every single inch of Butei High, but among them were particularly hazardous areas known as "the three great danger zones." These would be Assault, Junction (underground warehouse), and the educational affairs department. Why is the educational affairs department (a simple, staff room for teachers) such a dangerous place? The answer is simple. Every single teacher at Butei High is a dangerous person. What do you expect? Teachers at a school this abnormal are guaranteed to be abnormal themselves. To put things into perspective, as far as I know, they were all previously soldiers in the special operation forces for various countries, mercenaries, mafia members ... There are even rumors that some of them were hit men. The list goes on. They're a band of people with career histories I wish I had never known. Of course, there are some respectable teachers at the Inquesta and Connect (communications) division, but they're such a minority that it's really quite sad.

"Kinji, my hands won't reach. Lift me up," whispered Lady Aria as she and her slave (me) were infiltrating the lion's den, a.k.a. the educational affairs department.

"Alright, alright."

If I had refused go along with her plan, Aria would have given me a thrashing before opening a hole in me. If that were the case, it would be better to have a teacher kill me instead. They would probably make it quick. That sad logic is what propelled me to go along with Aria's plan of sneaking into the educational affairs department. As I tried to keep my conscience distracted, I helped Aria reach the air duct attached to the ceiling of a hallway. If I had lifted Aria up in my arms, she would have just made comments about me molesting her again, so I put both of my hands on her sides and lifted her up like a little child.

"Ooh, look how tall you are," I said under my breath, not really caring about the consequences.

"Gonna open a hole!" Aria responded as her knee, covered in black knee socks, dug itself ten inches into the pit of my stomach.

"Ngh!"

Paying no attention to my agony, Aria did a pull-up and climbed into the ceiling. Just when I thought the section of Aria's legs between her skirt and her knee socks, or what Muto referred to as "absolute territory, flashed by my eyes, her foot used my head as a steppingstone and she crawled all the way inside. Taking Aria's hand, I climbed up as well, and we noisily crept our way forward. With my master's pigtails dragging along and her skirt right in front of my face, I became aware of the slight risk of going into hysteria mode, but luckily it was dark inside of the air duct. I couldn't even see the "absolute territory," let alone the skirt. After proceeding a bit farther, I noticed Aria was crawling awfully fast. I was barely able to keep up with her as she turned the corner.

"Aria."

"What?"

"Your crawling speed is pretty fast."

"I'm good at it. I'm the fastest girl in Assault."

"I figured as much."

"Why?"

"There's nothing to get in your way, after all."

"Like what?"

"Breasts."

Wham!

From around the corner, Aria's kangaroo kick found its way to the side of my head. Her foot sank in about ten inches.

We found Shirayuki. She was in the office of the teacher that summoned her. The two of us peered inside from the thin openings of an air vent. Given its size, we wound up peeking into the office with our faces practically pressed against each other. If Aria were to show disgust or get upset at the, shall I say, "joining of our bodies," I would start feeling awkward too. So I distanced my face from hers a little and cast her a quick glance. The light seeping in from the vent shone on Aria's face, which I was seeing at point-blank range.

Aah, hell.

She was so cute, I nearly clicked my tongue in resentment. It was infuriating to admit, but Aria really did have an adorable face. It had features as well-formed as that of a doll's, but it was also rich with expressions. Whether it was a look of happiness, sadness, or even one of concentration like she had on now, they all tugged at your heartstrings. She had the power of a Hollywood child actress. It was so unfair.

"Hotogi ..."

The voice that called Shirayuki's name was somewhat low for a woman's. Inside the office was the head teacher for class B of the second year students, Ms. Tsuzuri. Ms. Tsuzuri was a teacher belonging to the Dagula (interrogation) division, and she was sitting in a black, leather chair with her legs crossed, wearing lace-up boots. Shirayuki was sitting in a chair across from Ms. Tsuzuri with her head hanging down.

"Your grades suddenly started dropping recently ..."

Despite being indoors, Ms. Tsuzuri was wearing a dark black coat, and she blew out cigarette smoke in the form of a ring. The manner in which she wore her coat reminded me of how slovenly doctors in manga wear their white coats. I could see the black, leather holster around her waist and the deep-black gun that rested inside it—a Glock 18. Among the teachers at our school, Tsuzuri was at the head of the list for dangerous people. First off, she always had glassy eyes. It was like she was on some sort of drug all year round. I mean, the grass-like smell coming from her cigarette was clearly different from the smell that commercial cigarettes gave off. I had to wonder if it was something a person could legally smoke in Japan. Tsuzuri had thin, black leather gloves over her hands and using one of them, put out the "cigarette" in an ashtray.

"Well, your studies aren't that important though," Tsuzuri said with a yawn.

Hey. A teacher isn't supposed to say things like that. This is why Butei High students' average deviation value doesn't get any higher than fifty.

"What was it? Uhh. Oh, right. Change. Change gets you wondering."

Tsuzuri, with a brain capable of forgetting a simple word like that, and an

expression that read as complete apathy, was definitely someone not to be trifled with. But there was one thing at which she was frighteningly adept at as a butei.

Interrogation.

With regard to her skill in that field, she is one of the five most talented people in Japan. It was unclear what she did to the people she questioned, but when interrogated by Tsuzuri, even the most tight-lipped criminals had confessed everything. Apparently, by the time the interrogation was over, the criminal went insane and called her “Queen” or “Goddess,” but I wasn’t really sure what that was all about. Tsuzuri shook her head, tossing around her jet-black, bobbed hair.

“I’m going to get right to the point. Hotogi ... did that person make contact with you by any chance?”

“You’re referring to Durandal?”

Aria’s eyebrows twitched upon hearing what Shirayuki said.

Durandal.

I’d only seen that name in the notification that was e-mailed to us, but I remembered it as well. If I recall, Durandal was a kidnapper that targeted buteis with supernatural abilities—chouteis.



But Durandal's very existence has been considered to be a rumor for some time now. No one has actually seen Durandal. The majority thinks the chouteis, who were said to be abducted, actually went missing while working on an unrelated case. As things stood, Durandal was just an urban legend that nobody took seriously.

"Nothing of that sort has happened. Quite frankly, even if Durandal does actually exist, I'm sure he would target more powerful chouteis instead of somebody like me."

"Hotogi, have more confidence in yourself. You're the pride of our school, you know?"

"T-That's not true," said Shirayuki, lowering her gaze in embarrassment and hiding behind her perfectly straight bangs.

"Hotogi, I've told you time and time again. Get a bodyguard. A report came from Lezzad mentioned there's a high chance Durandal is targeting you. The same thing was predicted at SSR, right?"

"But ... a bodyguard ..."

"What's the problem," slurred Tsuzuri as she wrapped up some odd grass in what seemed to be a page she ripped out of an English to Japanese dictionary and bound the paper together with a lick of her tongue.

"There's a childhood friend of mine I want to look after ... and if someone were to follow me around everywhere, it would be kind of ..."

"Hotogi, we teachers are worried about you. The Adsiard is taking place soon, so there will be more people on campus than usual. Even if it's only for the duration of the event, have a capable butei act as your bodyguard. This is an order."

"... But Durandal is a criminal that doesn't even exist."

"This is an order. I said it twice because this is important. You will regret it if I have to say it a third time," said Tsuzuri, lighting her cigarette and blowing smoke in Shirayuki's face.

Hey, Tsuzuri. I don't care what happens to you, but what are you gonna do if Shirayuki loses any more brain cells.

"Cough. Y-yes Ma'am. I understand."

Shirayuki squinted her eyes as the smoke came near them and finally nodded her consent.

... Taking the conversation we just overheard into account, it made sense why Shirayuki was called to the educational affairs department. Shirayuki, a choutei, had recently been receiving warnings from teachers that Durandal might be targeting her. That was why the educational affairs department wanted her to get a bodyguard. But Shirayuki had persistently refused. You could say I agreed with her regarding the bodyguard. At Butei High, students were often given warnings just like these, but there were rarely any actual instances of said students being attacked. SSR's predictions couldn't really be trusted to begin with, and Lezzad was famous for generating rumors. Moreover, the enemy this time was Durandal, whose very existence was doubtful. In other words, the educational affairs department was being overprotective. Being the excellent student that she was, Shirayuki had a lot of expectations placed upon her. If there were even a slight possibility of anything happening to her, the educational affairs department would take no chances. That's why they're overreacting to this unconfirmed information and ordering Shirayuki to have a bodyguard. Shirayuki is the one to empathize with here. It must be really bothersome having your life disrupted for the convenience of adults. Just as I was starting to put a wry expression on my face, I was startled by the noise of Aria punching open the air vent.

"Wha-? Hey!"

I grabbed onto the hem of her skirt in an attempt to stop her, but a few kicks in my direction set her free, and she jumped down into the office with her skirt fluttering wildly. Shirayuki, Tsuzuri, and I had a look of shock on our faces. I couldn't see from up here, but I'm pretty sure her skirt turned up a lot farther than what would be deemed appropriate.

"I'll be her bodyguard!"

Taken aback by Aria's words, I couldn't help but lean forward...

“Whoaa?!” I screamed as I fell towards Aria.

“Uaah!”

“Oof!”

Aria was as flat as a pancake for a moment, but she threw me off soon enough.

“K-K-Kinji! Don’t press that idiotic face of yours against me! Especially not there!”

While Aria was yelling at me with a deep red face, Tsuzuri lifted her off the floor by the back of her collar. As I was getting up, I was suddenly lifted up by the front of my collar as well, and Tsuzuri threw both of us against the wall.

I can’t believe how insanely strong she is.

“Hmm? What do we have here?” asked Tsuzuri, squatting down and looking into our faces. “Well I’ll be. It’s the two lovebirds from that hijacking incident the other day.”

Tsuzuri inhaled deeply on her cigarette and audibly cracked her neck twice with a faint smile on her lips as she looked up diagonally into the air. This gesture of hers was a dangerous sign.

And don’t call us lovebirds.

“If it isn’t Aria H. Kanzaki. Dual Government pistols and two short katanas. Alias: Quarda. An S-rank butei who was active in Europe. But it looks like all of your exploits are officially recorded as achievements of the London Bureau of Butei. It’s because you don’t know how to cooperate with others, you dolt.”

Tsuzuri grabbed one of Aria’s pigtails by its base and continued discussing her profile while getting a good look at her face.

“T-That hurts. And I’m not a dolt. Noblewomen don’t boast of their exploits. Even if others claim them for their own, we won’t deny it!” answered Aria, unflinching and bearing her cuspid.

“Is that so? You only wind up losing out with that sort of social status. I’m glad I’m a commoner. There was something else ... Oh, right. You can’t sw-”

“Aaaaah!”

Tsuzuri was about to say something, but Aria flung her arms around and cut her off with a loud shriek. Additionally, she had turned bright red and her mouth was rapidly opening and closing.

Sw? What's that?

"T-T-That's not a weakness of mine! I'm fine if I just put a ring buoy on!"

Oh. Aria, you just gave it away.

Shirayuki, who was still stunned by the sudden commotion, didn't seem to pick up on it, but I understood perfectly.

You can't swim. Haha. I just learned something useful. Good job, Tsuzuri!

"And over here ..." Tsuzuri let go of panicky Aria and looked at me, who was imagining Aria drowning in a kiddie pool, "... we have Kinji Tohyama."

"Um ... I didn't want to come here, but Aria went and ..."

"Unsociable personality. You have a tendency to distance yourself from others."

It would seem that Tsuzuri had data on every student here in that head of hers, which she was using to recall information on me.

"However, there are many students in Assault who regard you quite highly, and it's believed that you possess some type of latent talent. If I'm not mistaken, the cases you've solved are ... searching for a cat in Aomi, the hijacking of ANA flight 600 ... Why is everything you do on such a small or grand scale?"

"Don't ask me."

"Your weapon is a illegally customized Beretta M92F."

Uh-oh.

"It's capable of firing in three-round burst or even full automatic. Why don't we just call it the "Kinji Model"?"

"Uh, the thing is ... it was destroyed during the hijacking incident. Currently, I'm using a cheap model I bought from the U.S. armed forces. It's in conformation with the law of course."

"Oh? I'll bet you've already asked the Armed (Equipment) division to customize

it for you, haven't you?"

Sizzle

"Ow!"

Tsuzuri, showing me the feat of being able to laugh while angry, had just pressed the end of her cigarette into my hand! Unbelievable. It was just for an instant so there was no burn mark, but what teacher would dare give her student a cigarette burn?! In any event, this lady seemed to know everything.

"So? What exactly do you mean by 'I'll be her bodyguard'?"

Aria scrambled to her feet as Tsuzuri turned towards her.

"I meant just what I said. I'll be Shirayuki's bodyguard twenty-four hours a day with no remuneration!"

"Hey, Aria ...!"

Why are you volunteering to be Shirayuki's bodyguard? If anything, you'd be one to assault her.

That's what I communicated with me eyes, but Aria had made up her mind.

"... Hotogi, I'm not sure what's going on, but it looks like an S-rank butei is willing to guard you for free," said Tsuzuri, sending the hem of her coat flapping as she turned towards Shirayuki.

"I ... I refuse! It would be appalling to have Aria next to me all the time!"

The brows under Shirayuki's perfectly straight bangs furrowed with anger, showing me the exact reaction I expected.

"If you don't let me be your bodyguard, I'm going to shoot this guy!" declared Aria, pulling a silver Government out from underneath her dark-red skirt and placing the muzzle against my temple.

H-Hey! Butei Charter, Article Nine! Article Nine! Buteis aren't supposed to kill people, Aria!

"K-Kin-chan!" cried Shirayuki, placing both hands over her mouth.

Aria had an evil smile on her face that seemed to indicate everything was going according to plan.

“Hmmm. I see. So that’s the relationship you all have. Well? What are you going to do Hotogi?”

I don’t know what Tsuzuri found amusing about all of this, but she smiling openly.

That’s not the issue, is it? Do something about this gun in my face!

“O-O-On one condition!” Shirayuki exclaimed with clenched fists beside her thighs and her teary eyes closed tight. “Kin-chan has to act as my bodyguard too! Twenty-four hours a day!

Shirayuki’s tearful voice echoed within the office.

“I’m ... I’m going to live with Kin-chan too!”

Something possessing a shape very similar to myself flew out of my body.

Third Bullet Caged Bird

Being a bodyguard is one of the most popular jobs for a butei. Normally, it involves guarding VIPs such as politicians, celebrities, company directors, or their children, but occasionally there are times when a butei guards another butei whose life is threatened. For the most part, the bodyguard will live with the person he or she is guarding, but in this case, the client—Shirayuki—has conversely expressed a strong desire to live at my place. Well, I had absolutely no intention of living in a girl's dormitory, which is essentially a field of hysteria mode landmines, so this was the better option, but ... I didn't think she'd be moving in the very next day.

"Muto-kun, is really okay for you to do this for free? I should at least pay for gasoline ..." Shirayuki offered.

"Don't sweat it! This is nothing!"

Muto, who for some reason, spoke so formally to Shirayuki despite being in the same grade, got off Logi's mini-truck, which he used to bring Shirayuki here. He then began unloading her things in such a robotic fashion that I found it sickening to watch.

... Was Muto always the type to enjoy physical labor this much?

"Um ... if my memory serves me correctly, this is the third boy's dormitory, isn't it?" asked Muto

"Uh ... yeah," replied Shirayuki.

"Were you planning on using an empty apartment for storage or something? If that's the case, feel free to call me when you move everything back to the girl's dormitory! While we're at it, when we're finished here, how about getting some tea or something to eat ...?"

"Ah, Kin-chan!"

Shirayuki's face lit up as she saw me coming out of the lobby.

Muto, who had started to say something, looked at Shirayuki, then at me, then

at Shirayuki again, and a question mark formed over his spikey hair.

“Kin ... Tohyama?”

“Muto-kun, the thing is, as of today I’m going to be living in Kin-cha ... Tohyama-kun’s apartment.”

“Ki-Kinji’s apartment?”

“Just so you know, it’s part of my job.” I said. “I was chosen to be Shirayuki’s bodyguard. It’s Aria’s fault. Don’t go around telling people.”

Having heard my explanation, Muto could do nothing but gape at me speechless.

What kind of reaction is that?

I was the one who should be speechless. I have to live with two female beasts that could go on a rampage at the drop of a hat. When I returned to my apartment, which still looked like a battlefield, Aria was in the living room tinkering with the window. Taking a closer look, I could see she was setting up an infrared sensor that they sold at the school store.

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell by looking? I’m fortifying this apartment.”

“Don’t!”

“You’re a butei. What are you getting all excited about? We have to make sure we’re alert to any enemies who approach our client. So much stuff around here is broken anyway. It makes things easier.”

“You’re the one who broke everything.”

“Okay. All that’s left is the skylight.”

Aria magnificently ignored my protests and proceeded to install an infrared sensor on the window above the desk. Unfortunately for her, at 142 centimeters, she didn’t reach. She stretched out her hand as far as she could, and a metal washtub fell down directly onto her head.

That’s what you get.

“I-I’m I-letting myself i-in ...” came Shirayuki’s voice from the doorway as she

entered the apartment. She took off her Butei High issued strap shoes, and after neatly placing them by the door, bowed her upper body by ninety degrees, displaying a bright, glossy ring of light that was reflected in her long, black hair.

“S-Starting today, I’ll be in your care. My name is Shirayuki Hotogi.”

I know.

“I-I have my imperfections, but I hope we get along!”

“Shirayuki ... what are you getting all worked up for? It’s not like this is the first time you’ve been here.”

“Ah ... when I think of how I’m going to be living in your apartment, I just get so nervous,” said Shirayuki, smiling bashfully.

Nervous? The other day, you were swinging a katana around in here.

“Um, since I’m moving in, I’ll clean the place while I’m at it. After all, I am the one who made a mess of it in the first place.”

Shirayuki quickly scuttled towards the kitchen where Aria was setting up a surveillance camera and glared at her with sanpaku eyes.

“Hehe. I’ll have to get rid of the large-sized garbage as well.”

She quickly reverted back to her usual smile she always wore and her sweet voice, as melodious as bell.

... No comment.

Or so I thought at first.

“No piano wire, okay?” I warned, remembering the death trap that had been set up in Aria’s locker.

Shirayuki opened her eyes wide, waving her long eyelashes.

“Piano wire? What do you mean?”

... Feigning innocence, huh?

But thinking it over, I decided not to get any further involved in their battle. I was bound to live longer that way.

Much unlike Aria, who never did anything that could fall under the category of a household chore, Shirayuki's skills in doing housework could only be defined as godly. I couldn't even get motivated enough to clean up this landfill that was my apartment, but Shirayuki quickly disposed of all the junk, rigorously vacuumed everywhere, sealed all the holes in the walls and floor with putty, and replaced the carpet. She had the whole apartment cleaned up in less than three hours. To top it all off, she even decorated the place with a flower arrangement of Gypsophila and greenhouse cultivated Large Pink.

"... Wow ..." I whispered to myself as I set down by the wall Shirayuki's paulownia wood chest of drawers, which I had carried up from the lobby. When I tried to help out with something, Shirayuki refused to let me saying, "I can't let you do that!" so this type of heavy labor was the only thing I could do. Just then, seeing Shirayuki go into the kitchen, Aria walked up to me. "Kinji, make sure you also check that chest for any dangerous items."

"Dangerous items? This is one of Shirayuki's personal belongings."

"There's always the chance that someone slipped something inside it on its way here."

"Aria ... that's what's known as fear aroused from suspicion."

"Butei Charter, Article Seven: Always prepare for the worst scenario and take the best action. I'm going to cordon off the balcony so I'll be busy. You be sure to inspect that drawer or else later there's gonna be a hole opening festival."

I've never heard of such a dangerous festival.

"Okay, okay."

"One 'okay' will suffice!"

I watched Aria reproachfully as she stepped out into the balcony with a toolbox in hand and reluctantly inspected the exterior of the chest of drawers. Naturally, there was nothing dangerous to be found. I selected a drawer and opened it to find cosmetics and other various items. I proceed to the next drawer.

"...?"

Inside were many bundles of cloths, the purpose of which I couldn't guess. Each one was folded up very neatly, and they were all packed together in an orderly fashion like candies of assorted colors in a gift box. Some of them had a small ribbon attached to them.

“...?”

Two wooden tags labeled “plain” and “battle” divided the bundles of cloths into two sections. The ones in the “plain” section were all pure white, while the ones in the “battle” section were black.

Battle? So these are some kind of armaments?

I took one of the suspicious bundles into my hands. Judging from the black cloth's sheen, I presumed it to be one-hundred percent silk. It was as thin as a piece of string, and the triangular portion at the bottom was adorned with an elegant torchon lace. I spread apart the semitransparent cloth...

“...!”

Shoving the black cloth back into the drawer, I slammed it shut.

*Dangerous items ... They **were** inside.*

To be more precise, they were items that posed a danger to me. All of the bundles of cloths in this drawer ... they were all underwear! What's more, they were probably risqué pieces of lingerie like G-strings and low-rise panties and the like—just like those my brother had told me about it when he was alive.

That Shirayuki ...

She was always acting like a modest, graceful, ideal Japanese woman ... but behind the scenes, she was wearing that kind of underwear? Now that I think about it, there was that time when I happened to see down her blouse and she was wearing something black that didn't fit the image of an honor student.

T-This is bad. Don't do it, Kinji. If you go into hysteria mode over something like this, that just makes you a pervert!

“Ah, Kin-chan, I'm sorry about that. It's my drawer, but you brought it up for me, didn't you.”

I spun around in surprise at being called from behind. Before I realized it,

Shirayuki had walked up fairly close to me. Shirayuki, who cheerfully took off a pair of cream-colored mittens, must have planned on cooking after she finished cleaning because she was wearing a frilly apron over her uniform.

“Oh, i-it was nothing. Let me help out with the heavy stuff at least.”

“Thank you, Kin-chan ... You really are strong, aren’t you? Such a gentleman.”

Shirayuki was smiling at me happily. Apparently, she didn’t see what I was doing just a moment ago. Seeing Shirayuki in that apron and skirt, my eyes couldn’t help but notice the elegant, female curve of her waist. Unlike Aria’s underdeveloped figure, Shirayuki was somewhat famous for having proportions you wouldn’t normally expect to see on a high-school girl. According to the idiots in my class who spied on the girls during their swimming lessons, Shirayuki in a swimsuit was on par with a bikini model.

This isn’t good. I think I might start to envision Shirayuki in her “battle garbs.” Even if she is a childhood friend, if that image enters my head, it’s all over.

The very thought of it was unnerving.

“... Uhh ... let’s see. I’ll leave the bodyguarding to Aria for a while. I’m gonna step outside for a bit.”

“Huh? Where are you going?”

“J-Just outside. Don’t be so nosey,” I said agitatedly and in a hurry to get out of there.

“Ah ... right. I was prying. I’m sorry,” Shirayuki said, bowing in panic.

It’s times like these that her obedient nature comes in handy.

I didn’t have a particular place in mind so I went to kill time at Roxie, the one and only family restaurant on Academy Island. I was sitting at a table when I heard the tune used during the Ar-kata coming from my cell phone.

“Hey, you!”

A small fist hammered me on the forehead. Removing my earphones, I looked up to see Aria beside the table with her arms crossed.

“What are you slacking off for, Kinji?!”

“There’s a ... reason for this. Why did *you* leave the apartment?

“I came in search of deserters while I was out doing some shopping. I have a legitimate reason to be here,” said Aria, producing two handcuffs from underneath her skirt. Those handcuffs, which were made of pure silver and had Latin runes inscribed on their surface, were anti-esper handcuffs. I had seen them before at the student store and remember staggering when I noticed the high price for which they sold.

“I’m hardly a deserter. More importantly, how could you leave Shirayuki alone?”

“Reki’s watching over her.”

“Reki?”

“I asked for her help. I’m having her guard Shirayuki from a distance,” said Aria, plopping down onto the seat across from me.

Reki.

Her last name is unknown. That alone makes her incredibly suspicious, but in addition to that, she was taciturn, expressionless, and emotionless—three traits that made her a veritable robot. She was also the student in the Snipe division who helped us resolve that bus-jacking incident a while back. In terms of skill, she’s a child prodigy who has been an S-rank butei since her freshman year, but she has a habit of sitting on the school roof with her knees pulled up to her chest all day and was always listening to God knows what with those huge headphones of hers. Understanding Aria is way easier compared Reki. She was harder to figure out than Aria.

... So you got Reki involved, huh?

When Aria said Reki was watching over Shirayuki, I immediately had an image of Reki adjusting her lining of Shirayuki in the sights of her scope. “She’ll only be doing it part-time though. She said she’s going to be participating in the Adsiard as a representative of Japan for the sniping competition, so she’ll be pretty busy. We can only use her for a limited amount of time. Not to mention, snipers aren’t normally suited for bodyguarding. That’s why you and I have to do a good job of

guarding Shirayuki. Hello?! Are you listening to me?!"

"S-Stop pulling my ear! I was just thinking about Reki is all. I'm listening. Besides ... I doubt anybody is targeting Shirayuki anyway. Hire anyone you want."

"Take this seriously, Kinji. This is an official mission."

"Why did you suddenly say you wanted to be Shirayuki's bodyguard anyway? That's what I wanna know."

It was something I wanted to ask since yesterday, and after posing the question in an angry manner, Aria ... started to methodically wink her eyes a number of times.

She was making winking signals. It was a signal but is used when relaying information that shouldn't be heard by the people around them. I deciphered the winks, which were similar to Morse code.

Durandal's ... wiretapping ... danger? What's that supposed to mean?

Aria signed for me to come closer so I leaned over the table and pricked up my ears. She began whispering in my ear so closely that I could feel her breath.

What is with this girl? Even her breath has a nice, bittersweet smell.

"Durandal is one of the people who used my mom as a scapegoat. The master swordsman I mentioned to you during our morning training the other day is probably Durandal. If we can arrest him when he comes for Shirayuki, my mother's sentence will be reduced to six hundred and thirty-five years, and if everything goes well, we might be able to get the case remanded to the High Court."

Oh. I see now. So that's what this is about. No wonder her attitude changed the second she heard Durandal's name at the educational affairs department.

I was getting a firm grasp on the situation when my cell phone rang, making it seem as if our conversation actually was being overheard.

"?"

I tugged on the Leupon strap and looked at my cell phone.

Oh. It's just Shirayuki.

"Hello?"

"Kin-chan, dinner will be ready soon. I tried my hand at Chinese cuisine today."

"Okay. I got it. I'll be back soon."

"Okay. I'll be waiting. But if you're with a friend or anyone, you can come later."

"Sure ..."

If I tell her that I'm with Aria, she's probably going to be in a bad mood again.

"I'm not with anyone. I'll be right there."

"What you mean? I'm here," Aria said.

"K-Kin-chan? I just heard Aria's voice . . ."

Gah! Aria, take a hint!

"Uhh ... Aria just walked by right now."

"What are you talking about? We've been talking together the whole time. Are you stupid?" came Aria's voice again.

"... Kin-chan ..." Along with Shirayuki's voice, which became somewhat frightening, I heard a kitchen knife cleanly slicing through a white radish or something of that nature. "... why are you lying to me?"

W-What's with this voice?! It's like something out of a horror film!

"Ah, yeah, you got it! I'll be there right away!"

Slamming my cell phone shut, I turned towards Aria, the girl who can't read between the lines, and yanked on one of her pigtails. She cried out just like little girl, which made me feel slightly better. A few seconds later, she gave me a high-flying drop kick in retaliation though.

We return to the apartment to find plate after plate of Chinese dishes lined up on the dinner table. It was an assortment of fried rice with crab, stir-fried shrimp in chili sauce, sweet-and-sour pork, gyoza, mini-ramen, and even abalone with

oyster sauce. It was nothing less than a Manchu Han Imperial Feast. And they were all my favorite foods. I sat at the table, and still wearing an apron over her uniform, Shirauki gracefully walked up beside me, carrying a tray with Jasmine tea on it. When I looked up at Shirayuki, she was busily tidying up her bangs. I think it was a habit of hers.

“G-Go ahead and eat. I made it all just for you.”

It looked like she wasn't going to eat until I did, so I helped myself to the sweet-and-sour pork. Indeed, the meat was delectable. It was the unmistakable taste of delicious pork. Its rich, sweet-and-sour taste softly enveloped my tongue. Shirayuki's cooking skills knew no bounds. The difference between Shirayuki and Aria, whose hands became an utter, drippy mess just from attempting to fry an egg and failing to do so in the end, was as large as the difference the land and the sky. No, it was as different as the stratosphere and the Japan Trench.

“Is ... is it good?”

“It's great.”

Hearing my answer, Shirayuki looked as if she couldn't be happier and hid the lower half of her face with the tray. She whispered, “I'm so glad, dear,” under her breath, and I wondered who it was she was fantasizing about. But what was really bothering me was the fact that the food was so tasty, and yet it didn't really feel like I was eating when I was being stared at so intently.

“Shirayuki, you sit down and eat too. Why are you always trying to take care of me?”

“T-That's because ... you're Kin-chan.”

“That's not an answer.”

“... I-I guess not,” replied Shirayuki with a wry smile and taking her place at the table. Aside from Shirayuki, Aria sat with her arms crossed and a bulging vein on her temple.

“So? Why aren't there any plates in front of *me*?”

“This is yours,” said Shirayuki with a voice as icy as the Antarctica and placed a

bowl in front of Aria. In the bowl was a pair of wooden chopsticks standing in a lump of white rice. And the chopsticks hadn't even been split apart.

“Why?!”

“If you have a problem with it, I'll dismiss you from being my bodyguard.”

Shirayuki coldly turned her back on Aria, and Aria, after a few moments of gritting her teeth, gobbled down her rice like a ravenous animal.

I, wanting to watch Sunday Western Movie Theater, and Aria, wanting to watch the two-hour special of Amazing Animals, were gripping each other's faces as we fought over the TV remote when Shirayuki came into the living room with some sort of card game.

“Kin-chan, um ... these are called priestess tarot cards ...”

“Priestess tarot ... fortune-telling?”

“Yeah. I'll read your fortune. You seemed to be worried about the future.”

“Oh? Let's give it a try then.”

Shirayuki's divinations often came true, so I had nothing to lose by listening. Since Aria was biologically female, she seemed to have an interest in that fortune-telling stuff and divinations, so after voicing her interest, she set the HDD recorder to record her animal show and joined us at the table.

*If you don't mind recording it, then stop being so stubborn and let me watch **my** show.*

“Kin-chan, what kind of fortune do you want told? Love? Money? Romance? Health? Love affairs?”

“Hmm ... Let's go with my future. Tell me what I'm going to be doing in a few years.”

Upon hearing my request, Shirayuki clicked her tongue but quickly smiled like an angel and replied, “Sure thing.” She placed the cards face down in the shape of a star and then began turning some of them over.

So am I going to be able to become a respectable human being? Will I be able

to transfer to a regular high school and get a job at an ordinary company or government office?

Even if it were just a divination, I wanted to know at least that much.

“Well?” asked Aria, and I saw a slightly stern expression on Shirayuki’s face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Huh? Ah ... nothing. You’re overall luck is very good. Isn’t that great, Kin-chan?”

“What? Is that it? Can’t you tell me something more concrete?”

“Ah, um, you’re going to marry someone with black hair. Wouldn’t that be something,” Shirayuki said with a smile that looked rather forced.

What was that all about? I wonder what she really saw. It’s really nagging at the back my bind.

“Okay, I’m next!” Aria, unable to restrain herself, nearly climbed onto the table, and from the looks of things, my turn had quickly come to an end. She gathered the cards together and pushed them towards Shirayuki, demanding that she hurry. “I don’t have to tell you my birthday or anything? I’m a Virgo.”

“Really? You don’t seem like one.”

Aria’s expression showed that she was quite peeved by the comment, but she sat in a proper Japanese fashion and waited for the results. With an extremely unwilling look on her face, Shirayuki lined up the cards and turned one over.

“Your overall luck can only be described as horrendous,” Shirayuki said as apathetically as possible and started gathering up the cards.

She obviously didn’t divine anything.

“Hey! Do it right! You’re a shrine maiden, aren't you?!”

“You’re complaining about my divination?! I won’t stand for this!”

“You wanna settle this by more physical means?”

The two of them began glaring at each other fiercely.

T-This is bad.

“If you want to go at it, that’s fine with me. I didn’t use it the last time because the Hotogi family forbids it, but I still have an ace up my sleeve,” said Shirayuki, knitting the brows under her perfectly straight bangs, and to this, Aria responded by standing up.

“I also have a ... two aces up my sleeve!”

“I have three!”

“Then I have four!”

“Five!”

“Tons!”

“For crying out ... would you two pipe down?! Why can’t the two of you just do one little divination peacefully?!”

In the future, it really should be the stance of nations to prevent war before it happens. I used my hands to physically separate them before the situation escalated into something I couldn’t handle.

“Bleeeeah.” Aria pulled down her lower eyelid with her forefinger and stuck out her tongue. Then, sulking, she shut herself up in her room.

Beeep. Gagagaga.

The transceiver I borrowed from Connect the other day to make sure no suspicious radio waves were being transmitted around the apartment started to activate. Scratching the back of my head, I turned towards Shirayuki ... who was looking quite sullen as well.

“... I don’t mean to say bad things about Aria behind her back, but,” said Shirayuki, deftly gathering up the cards, “she’s cute but she’s annoying. And she doesn’t understand you at all. She’s always so rude to you. All the guys say Aria’s cute but ... I don’t like her.”

She said it all in one breath. It was the first time I had ever heard Shirayuki speak ill of another person. She cast a quick upward glance at me. In other words ... she was waiting for me to give *my* opinion of Aria.

“Aria ...?”

To tell the truth, I just made a little discovery about Aria and Shirayuki. I wasn't sure whether or not I should mention it now though and put out some feelers.

"Say, do you really ... dislike Aria?"

"... Huh?"

"I mean ... how should I put this? You're pretty straightforward with Aria, wouldn't you say? When it's me, you always act so suspiciously. Not only that ... well, I might be off the mark here but ... I don't think I've ever seen you express your emotions so openly before."

"..."

"It kind of seems like the way you act towards Aria is more like the real you than the way you act towards me and everyone else ... you know? Don't get me wrong. I'd prefer if you didn't fight with anyone. It's just that, even when you two are fighting, there seems to be something between you guys that just clicks, don't you think?"

As a rule, Shirayuki is the type of person who listens to others. And listening to others is a good thing. That's how the world sees it. That's why everyone regards Shirayuki so highly. Naturally, the teachers, who don't know anything about the Shirayuki that goes into armored priestess mode, are fond of her, and she's relied upon by all the students—both guys and girls. But there's also a problem with this personality that causes her to act so obediently in front of everyone. That's what I think. Shirayuki might be acting obediently, but she isn't expressing her true intentions. However, I get the feeling that when Aria is involved, Shirayuki engages her with her true intentions surging out all over the place. I could be misinterpreting the whole thing, of course.

There was a brief silence.

"... Kin-chan ..." said Shirayuki, tilting her head down slightly and lowering her eyes under those perfectly straight bangs, "you really do know me well, don't you."

"Well, you know. We've been together since we were kids. There *were* long periods of times we spent apart though."

"You probably understand me better than I understand myself."

Shirayuki's voice had become softer than it was previously, and resituating herself, she inconspicuously moved closer to me.

"Aria ... came storming right into our private world—just like a bullet."

Was there such a world?

... is what I was thinking, but I didn't interject so as not to disrupt the flow of the conversation.

"I came at her with everything I had ... and she took it all head on without retreating a single step. It's just like you said. I do dislike her, on the whole. But in a certain aspect ... I do think she's an amazing girl."

Hmm. As I thought, it isn't that she simply dislikes Aria. The feelings she has towards her are more complex than that.

"But that's exactly why ... I don't want her to take you away from me. That girl has a certain charm about her."

"... No one's taking anyone anywhere. I said this before, but Aria and I are fellow buteis. When our job is done, we're just going to say our goodbyes like regular teammates. Aria's not a childhood friend like you are."

"Childhood friend ... That's right," Shirayuki said with her face lighting up. She must have been using some kind of special movement because before I realized it, she had slid up right beside me without changing her posture at all.

Hold up, there. Our shoulders are practically touching. In fact, they are.

"You've known me for so long. That fact makes me so happy. I remember it all—all the way back to those days when I had never even left Hotogi Shrine before ..."

Shirayuki was rapt with memories as she spoke and tilted her head in my direction. Her black hair, glossy as strands of silk, fell against my arm. I could faintly smell the pleasant scent of sandalwood.

"Aah ... now that you mention it, there was a time like that, wasn't there."

When I was about four or five years old, there was a period in which I lived in Aomori because of my brother's job. Hotogi Shrine was located in the city's suburbs, and that's where I first met Shirayuki. At that time, Shirayuki was told

that she mustn't leave the shrine, and she rigidly obeyed. Having an exceptionally shy personality, Shirayuki was afraid of me at first, but she soon opened up and invited me to play with her and the other young Hotogi shrine maidens.

"I remember when the two of us went to watch the fireworks," Shirayuki said, "I was so happy then ..." It finally came to point where Shirayuki rested her head on my shoulder as she started to talk about the past. "You were so excited about the fireworks festival they were having in the city and took me out of the shrine to go see it. It was the first time I had ever left the shrine since as long as I can remember."

"Oh ... that. I'm surprise you remember."

If I recall, when we got back, all the adults got really upset with me, and Shirayuki wasn't allowed outside the storehouse for a while.

"We got in so much trouble, but afterwards, you still came by to play all the time."

"I was there because my brother's job forced us to relocate. Plus, there were no other kids my age in the neighborhood.

*What was it that we played? I wanted to play soccer, but I was outnumbered by young shrine maidens who rejected the idea, so I always wound up having to play house or origami or bird-in-the-cage.*²

Little birdy, little birdy, the bird in the cage is—

I still remember that song. I also remember how my brother would sympathetically call Shirayuki and the others "caged birds."

Sitting in the corner while the Adsiard preparatory committee was having a meeting, I found myself thinking of Aria. Lately, she was hard a worker running all over the place gathering information on Durandal. Aria was being so cautious that the slightest sound in the middle of the night would cause her to jump up with pistols at the ready. But the fact that our enemy couldn't be seen, along with the stress of living with a mother-in-law like Shirayuki, had clearly put her in a bad mood.

“... I think it would be great if Hotogi at least participated in the Ar-kata for the opening ceremony.”

“I agree. There is one opening that needs to be filled.

For what it's worth, Butei High *is* a high school so there's a student council. But due to school regulations, all the members of the student council are girls. This is because previously when the student council consisted of boys, a gunfight broke out over how to allocate the budget for club activities. This school really is the pits. And so, this Adsiard preparatory committee is mostly made up of the members of the student council. As for why I'm present at this boring and dangerous (with girls everywhere) meeting, I'm here acting as Shirayuki's bodyguard. Rather, I'm here because Aria ordered me to be here.

“Hotogi does have the look. I think she'll leave a good impression on the reporters.”

“I think so too. She'll probably improve the image of Butei High—buteis in general, really.”

“After all, Hotogi *is* the one who developed the choreography we're using this year ... Hotogi, you can do the Ar-kata cheer routine, can't you?”

I tilted my eyes in the direction of our student body president to see how she was reacting to all of these opinions.

“Y-Yes. But ... I would really prefer to make my contributions from behind the scenes.”

Shirayuki quickly glanced up at me with pleading eyes, and my response to her, which I kept to myself, was to hurry up and put an end to this meeting. All of the main topics for discussion had already been dealt with, and the meeting was just sloppily dragging along at this point. Those thoughts must have been telepathically transmitted to Shirayuki though.

“Well, it's already gotten this late. I'd like to call an end to the meeting,” Shirayuki declared in a clear and well-projected voice. When Shirayuki got like this, her pronunciation was so clean, and it made her seem very reliable. If Aria were a voice actress, then Shirayuki was a TV announcer. Those were the thoughts vaguely floating in my head as I got out my seat yawning loudly. Not

long after the meeting came to an end, the girls started making a racket.

“Hey, you wanna go to Odaiba after this?”

“Oh, great idea!”

“I’m there! Did you know that Marui was remodeled?”

“I want a summer miniskirt!”

“That reminds me! Estella’s limited edition Sugar Leaf Pies are going on sale today!”

“There she goes! Food over fashion! You’re a shining example of an unpopular female butei!”

“Hahaha, that was hilarious!”

Here we go. Everyone and their charming little smile ... I hate this sort of thing. The reason you girls aren’t popular is because you’re all toting pistols. Get a clue.

“How about you, Hotogi? Wanna get ready for summer and check out their selection?” asked a freshman. Shirayuki looked liked she didn’t understand the meaning of the question.

“Ah, I have to go home and do my SSR assignments and create guide booklets for the Adsiard ...” said Shirayuki, lowering her head.

“That’s Hotogi for you. She’s so diligent ...”

“You never get tired, do you Hotogi?”

“You’re a real superwoman ...”

They weren’t being sarcastic; they were sincerely showing the respect they had for Shirayuki. But ... at the same time, it also felt as if they found Shirayuki to be a little bizzare. That’s the sense I had.

The sun was setting, and I was walking home with Shirayuki at my side. The clubhouse where the committee meeting took place was nearby the boy’s dormitory, so we could get back on foot. Going back home with a girl was the last thing I wanted to do, but being her bodyguard, it couldn’t be helped. If I had

her go back by herself and Aria found out about it later, who knows how many holes she would open in me.

“I-I was pretty nervous today since you were watching. How ... was I?”

Shirayuki was acting bashful as she held her school bag in front of her legs with both hands, but her face showed how happy she was to be leaving school with me.

“It looked like everyone had the utmost faith in you. Pretty good, wouldn’t you say?” I said candidly. Shirayuki lowered her face, which had become as red as a scarlet hakama.

“... K-Kin-chan complimented me ...” Shirayuki said under her breath.

Hey, keep your eyes ahead of you while you walk. Ah. See? Right into a utility pole.

“Oh yeah. You’re not going participate in the Ar-kata? Everyone wanted you to.”

“I-I couldn’t possibly. I can’t participate in the Ar-kata. It’s better to have a ... more cheerful and cuter girl doing cheers. If a boring girl like me were to participate, it would ruin the image of Butei High.”

“Shirayuki ... the way you demean yourself like that is a bad habit of yours. All you have to do is pretend to be really enthusiastic when you’re actually doing the cheer routines. You’d start off pretending, but before you know it, you might genuinely get enthusiastic about it. Then when the time comes for the actual performance and you show off that enthusiasm in front of a crowd of spectators, you’re likely to build some confidence.”

“But ...”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared about the whole Durandal thing the education affairs department is all riled up about. Durandal doesn’t exist. Nobody’s going to be sniping at you or anything.”

“Yeah ... I know. There is no Durandal ... but I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“My family would be upset with me.”

The Hotogis. Shirayuki's relatives at the Hotogi Shrine."

"Why would they get upset with you for something like that?"

In the past, Shirayuki had made similar remarks on more than one occasion, so I had a vague sense of the reason why. The people at Hotogi Shrine put a lot of restrictions on Shirayuki when she left to go to high school in Tokyo. They placed a great deal of importance on formalities and forbade her to do all sorts of things.

"I'm ... not allowed to attract too much attention to myself in front of large groups of people," Shirayuki said obstinately. She didn't explain the reason, but simply gave another negative statement. I guess it's just absolutely out of the question.

"... When the other girls invited you to go to Odaiba, you turned them down too. Was that also because of your family?"

I asked thinking that couldn't possibly be the reason, but...

"Yeah."

"You serious?"

"I ... can't leave the shrine or school without permission."

You are serious. Even among family, forbidding someone to ever go out is a bit harsh, isn't it? It's an infringement of human rights, I dare say.

As if she knew I was going to object, Shirayuki spoke up before I could get a word in.

"Hotogi shrine maidens are guardian shrine maidens. From the day we are born until the day we die, our bodies and our souls are not to leave Hotogi." She seemed to be speaking to herself as she said it. "The truth is ... for generations, we as shrine maidens are supposed to spend our entire lives at Hotogi Shrine. That's just how it is. Of course, we go to other shrines when we have duties to attend at them, and there's compulsory education now as well ... but we have to keep things like that at a minimum. They were very much against the idea of me even coming to Butei High ..."

"But here you are. There's no need for you to uphold those traditions so

blindly. You can't enjoy being a high school student if you're always afraid of someone getting upset with you. What are you acting like a good little girl for?"

"..."

"You don't have worry about making dinner today. Go meet up with those other girls and check out the latest fashions or whatever."

"No, that's okay. Besides ... I'm kind of ... afraid of being outside," said Shirayuki with a depressed look in her lowered eyes.

"Afraid? Of Marui? It's just a clothing department, you know?"

"But all throughout elementary and junior high school, I've never once left the priestess school ..."

Priestess school. It was a type of seminary and basically a boarding school attended by the daughters of wealthy, shrine-owning families.

"I *would* like to go out shopping and buying all sorts of foods once like everyone else does ... but, I'm not confident enough to go out with others or have so many people around me."

"...Confidence?"

"I don't have the same kind of knowledge that everyone else has. Unless we're talking about school, I can't keep up a conversation ... I don't even know what kind of clothes I should wear. Sweets, music, television ... I have no idea what's popular. I can't relate with the others."

"Shirauiki ..."

"But it's okay. I have you. You understand me. You know who I really am and treat me normally, just like the way you always have. That's why I don't mind. I don't need anything else."

Shirayuki ... Shirayuki, that's ... That's no different from how you used to be back then. You're so far away from Hotogi Shirine and yet ... you're still a caged bird.

Night had fallen, and I was wiping myself off after stepping out of the shower.

Putting on my pants, I turned off the light, and checked the clock with my back still bare. It was already ten o'clock.

Aria still hasn't come back.

She had sent me an e-mail about going to Lezzad or something, so she was probably out searching for information on Durandal. Since becoming Shirayuki's bodyguard, we hadn't been able to do our training in the morning, but in exchange for that, Aria declared that she was going to be launching "surprise attacks" on me and does so on a regular basis. Naturally, I haven't mastered the technique of catching a sword with my bare hands yet, so the lumps on my head continued to multiply. These were the thoughts running through my head as I dried my hair with a bath towel when I suddenly heard the sound of someone in slippers dashing down the hall. Judging from the footsteps, it sounded as if the person was in a panic.

"?"

What's going on?

I looked towards the curtain that partitioned off the bathroom.

"Kin-chan?! What's wrong?!"

The curtain flew completely open. It was Shirayuki in her priestess garbs. For some reason, her face was full of anxiety and her cute round eyes were wide open.

"W-Wha?!" I exclaimed, taken completely of guard and taking a step back.

Now that I think about, this situation ... Normally—well, I'm not really sure what's normal in a situation like this, but aren't the gender roles switched here?!

For a quick moment, I was having such a hard time coping with the ordeal that this was the kind of inane analysis I made.

"W-What is it all of a sudden?!"

"Huh? You ... On the phone, you ..."

"... Phone?"

“Y-You said to come right away and hung up suddenly, so ...”

“I didn’t call anyone!”

“But it was your voice! It was an unidentified call, but you said you were in the bathroom!”

That’s not possible. She must have been hearing things.

“How could I make a phone call when I was taking a shower?! That’s insane!”

“B-But the ph-ph-phooo ...!”

It would seem that Shirayuki’s brain had finally finished processing the fact that I was naked from the waist up, and her eyes went from my face to my collarbone, chest, and ultimately my navel. Her face, which seconds ago had been nearly drained of color, became bright red from the bottom of her chin to the top of her forehead, just like some sort of meter. She then took a deep breath—almost as if she were meditating; only her face was nowhere as composed.

“I’m!”

“I’m”?

“I’m so sorry!!”

Shirayuki jumped back diagonally in a more peculiar way than I could have ever imagined. In midair, she bent her knees so that she was sitting in the proper Japanese fashion, and extending her arms in front of her, landed with her forehead touching the floor. It was the perfect dogeza.³

“I-I-I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Shirayuki bundled herself up, and her ears were so red I thought steam would be coming out of them. Shirayuki suddenly lifted her head, and she was so worked up that her eyes were swirling like whirlpools.

“... It’s because you were in the bathroom! It’s because you were naked that I was imagining you taking a shower! It’s true! I-I was practicing kidou techniques but my heart wasn’t really into it! It’s all true!”

“I-I didn’t ask!”

“But then my imagination ... ! It was all *woosh*, and *whoom*! P-Please forgive me! I’m-I’m such a bad person! I’m just pretending to be a good girl, but the truth is I’m a bad girl who thinks of naughty things! I could be a Hollywood actress! I’m such a ... #\$\$%&!”

This is bad.

“H-Hey ...”

At this rate, something was going to snap, and Shirayuki, who was a bit strange to begin with, might just go completely of the deep end. For the meantime, I put one knee on the floor and knelt in front of Shirayuki.

“C-Come on. Relax. Someone probably called the wrong number. It’s not something you need to apologize for,” I said, making my best effort to sound as calm as possible ... but approaching Shirayuki half naked proved to be a mistake. Shirayuki swiftly covered her eyes with both hands. I did have a feeling she was looking at my chest though the cracks between her fingers though ... And then ...

“We’ll call it even!” Shirayuki suddenly screamed incomprehensibly again. She stopped covering her face and it was completely red as if she had a fever. In truth, she really was burning up.

What are you, a stove?

“‘We’ll call it even’? What are you talking about?”

Shirayuki’s dysfunctional thought processor turned out an equally dysfunctional solution. “If you watch me while I change clothes, we’ll be even!”

“Say what?!”

Shirayuki grabbed the collar of her white kimono with her right hand and unraveled the belt of her hakama with the left. She rapidly began taking off her priestess garbs as if they had caught on fire!

“W-Wait! There’s no need to call anything even! That’s not what this is about! Stop undressing!” I pleaded as I grabbed Shirayuki’s clothes, trying to keep them on her.

“I’m undressing! I’ve made up my mind! I’m fine with this! If you’re the one watching, then it’s fine! In fact, it’s fine! So please, don’t worry about it!”

N-No way in hell I'm letting you get undressed!

If the day ever comes when I see those “battle panties” on Shirayuki, I can say without a single doubt in my mind that I’ll be on the fast track to hysteria mode. I was doing everything in my power to keep Shirayuki’s kimono and hakama on her body.

“Kin-chan, stop! Let go!” cried Shirayuki.

“Just do what I say!” I cried in return.

“I’m back,” announced Aria.

... ..

... Aria ...?

Arai, coming back at the worst possible timing, dropped the paper bag she was carrying, and a Matsumotoya peach bun that fell out rolled along floor. It kept going until it rolled up against Shirayuki’s white socks as she continued to struggle with me. With the arrival of a third party, Shirayuki hastily began straightening up her priestess garbs. Her black eyes had tears in them, and her clothes were disheveled. ... And I, half naked, had a firm grip on those clothes. There was also the conversation we just had. *“Kin-chan, stop!” “Just do what I say!”*

“... W-Why ... youuuuuu ...” came Aria’s voice, like the growling of a lion.



She plunged her small hands into the sides of her skirt. “Kinji, you idiot!!”

Blam! Blam!

A jet-black and a silver Government mercilessly fired .45 ACP cartridges in my direction!

“Whoa!” I cried out, noticing the bullet hole that appeared right next to my heel and jumped to my feet.

W-Wait a second! Not only am I not wearing my bulletproof uniform, I’m naked here! “T-T-This is what happens when I leave her to you for just a few minutes?! Y-You sexual deviant! Die!”

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam! Aria shot at my feet with the same rhythm as with she yelled disparaging remarks at me.

“W-Wait! If we just talk about this, I can explain!” I continued to back up farther and farther as bullets imbedded themselves in the floor right in front of my toes.

“You! Are! A! Real! Beast! A maggot! Bacteria!”

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam! Aria stamped her feet loudly as she marched toward me with her pistols firing away, and eventually, I was cornered in the balcony.

D-Dead end!

Looking below me, I could see Tokyo Bay.

“A . . . A-A-After molesting *me*, now you’re going after Shirayuki?! Y-You king of perverts!” It had come to point that Aria was now pointing her two pistols at my actual body.

What are you going to do, Kinji?! If I run inside the bulletproof storage locker, it’s only going to be thrown over the edge of the balcony with me inside it!

“T-That’s not it, Aria!” cried Shirakuyuki, “Stop being such a sore loser!”

Hearing Shirayuki’s somewhat odd statement, Aria spun around and looked at her with furrowed brows.

“H-H-How am I being a sore loser?!” repudiated Aria, bearing her cuspid.

“Kin-chan wasn’t forcing himself on me! We were in mutual consent!”

“Mu-Mutual consent?”

“That’s right! I was trying to undress *myself*! Kin-chan’s not at fault!”

“U-Undress yourself? W-W-W-What in the world were you two trying to do?!”

Aria was obviously flustered, and Shirayuki lunged at her in an attempt to snatch away her pistols. I wasn’t overly thrilled about the statements she was making, but I ungrudgingly routed for Shirayuki.

“Well, e-e-e-even if you *were* in mutual consent ...!!” said Aria, whose face quickly turned bright red as she dove in front of Shirayuki and performed a technique similar to a spring hip throw, sending the priestess backwards onto the floor.

“Aaah!”

“. . . Kinji! F-F-For a bodyguard to do something like that is taboo!” yelled Aria, now bearing her cuspid at *me* as she stepped over Shirayuki.

“I could overlook the two of you being friendly, b-but engaging in t-t-that kind of relationship with the client makes you a failure as a butei! A failure! A colossal failure!!” Aria’s high pitched voiced sounded like it might shatter the window in front of me. “This calls for a hole opening festival!”

Blam! Blam! Blam!

Aria ruthlessly opened fire on me with her pistols.

“Ngh!” I jumped over the side of the balcony and using the wire inside my belt, hung from the railing like Spiderman.

T-That was a close call.

Or so I thought.

“Go cool your head! And I’m not giving you a ring buoy!”

Bang! Snap!

Aria’s scolding was followed by a bullet that severed the wire, and after I

bounded off the safety fence below me, a loud splash echoed in the darkness. When I had gathered my wits, I found myself in the waters of Tokyo Bay.

A bodyguard ... is not to get deeply involved with the client. Sure enough, that was one of the most basic rules of body guarding, and it was clearly written in the Assault textbook. The reason is because when a bodyguard dispenses with the proper formalities, he or she tends to be off guard and isn't be able to be make sound judgments when the situation calls for it. But our mission this time was given to us as a result of the educational affairs department's over-protectiveness, and one could argue that it was more like "playing bodyguard." This whole ordeal came to pass simply because Aria had changed her attitude and became frantic at hearing the name "Durandal," so it was very much a bother when she got angry with me, her partner, for not taking it more seriously. So here we are now. The exhaustion was already taking its toll on me, and after coming out of the shower only to get into a fight with Shirayuki in my birthday suit, I wound up plummeting into Tokyo Bay ...

... and catching a cold.

In the morning, my head was reeling as I held a thermometer in my mouth, and Aria was fairly cross as she told me what a disgrace I was, but she didn't torment me any further like she usually does. Shirayuki vehemently insisted on staying home as well so that she could nurse me to health, but I couldn't allow her to do something like that for me and somehow managed to have her go to school. Therefore, I was now spending the time lying mind-numbingly bored in my bed. My fever was wavering back and forth around a temperature of 100.4 degrees. I didn't always feel too badly, but I was having a rough time at the moment. I was beginning to lose consciousness from the high fever that was most likely the virus army's last resistive efforts. After a while—probably sometime around the lunch hour—somebody came into the apartment. It would seem the person came to check up on me ... which means it had to be Shirayuki. Too lethargic to even call out, I just went back to sleep. I could have sworn that I felt ... somebody tenderly laying a hand upon my aching forehead to check my temperature. It was a very gentle hand.

When I awoke, it was two in the afternoon. According to the thermometer, I still had a temperature of 100.4 degrees, but perhaps I was adjusting to the fever because I was feeling a little better.

“...”

I groggily sat up, sensing that I was the only one in the apartment. I was rather thirsty. It was probably because I had done so much sweating. Desiring a glass of water, I stumbled my way out of the bedroom, and upon closing the door, I felt something on the doorknob. It was a plastic bag.

“?”

I searched inside it to find Yamato Pharmaceutical’s “Extra Concentrated Kudzu Infusion.” It was in an old-fashioned package, and with most medications failing to have very much of an effect on me, it was the single remarkable medicine that I could take for colds.

. . . Shirayuki got this for me? She really does know me well, doesn’t she. But... did I ever tell her about this medicine? Oh, well.

Glory to the power of Extra Concentrated Kudzu Infusion. Thanks to the medicine, when I next woke up, my temperature had returned to normal. It was already evening, and when I went into the living room, I came across Shirayuki who looked as if she had just come back.

“Ah, Kin-chan, how’s your cold?”

“It’s fine. My fever went down and my headache’s gone too.”

“Thank goodness. I’m so glad,” said Shirayuki, but her expressions of relief soon changed to sniveling.

“Didn’t I tell you not to cry so much?”

“I know.” Shirayuki wiped her tears away with her finger and showed me a face beaming with happiness.

“... It’s all because of the ‘Extra Concentrated Kudzu Infusion’ you got me. After taking some and going to bed, I was cured in no time.”

“Huh? I ... was thinking of cooking you Chinese remedial foods since you don’t like medicine, but ...”

“Hm? You got it for me, didn’t you? Sorry for the trouble. They only sell it at the dirty Chinese herbal drug store on that maze-like corner of Ameyoko. It was probably a little scary for a girl to venture in there by herself. Thanks a lot.”

“Wha ... ah.” Shirayuki put a slender white finger to her lip ... and had a look that suggested she was pondering over something ... “... S-Sure,” she said at last, averting her eyes.

I’m currently inside an Assault facility that closely resembles a gymnasium and holding an electric guitar, which doesn’t really suit my image. Today, we’re rehearsing for the Adsiard’s closing ceremony, so having been forced to join the Adsiard band by Aria, I, too, was doing some simple practice with a borrowed Danelectro DC 59.

“Let me show you my gratitude ...”

I wasn’t the vocalist, but I sang in a low voice as I repeatedly went over the song’s intro, which I was in charge of playing. I had practiced the guitar a little when I was taking the masquerading course at Kanagawa’s Butei junior high school, it was only a short two-minute part, and Shiranui, who was the other guitarist and the vocalist, was quite good, so practicing wasn’t too much of a chore ... But this entire scene of an Assault facility being used for peaceful means just felt very odd to me. It’s sad, I do admit. Behind Muto, who was avidly beating his drums in a way that made one think he was trying to impress someone, Aria and the other girls were practicing their cheer dances with pom-poms in hand. The sounds of whistles blaring filled the air as they nimbly danced about, swinging around their short skirts.

Ah, hell. Every single last one of ’em is dressed like that.

Muto was saying something about it being a feast for the eyes that one could only partake in once a year, but to me it was horrific sight.

What am I gonna do if some mistake leads me to activating hysteria mode? I think I’ll just keep my eyes on my own hands.

“Okay everyone, that’s enough for today. Thanks for all your hard work.” Sounding just a teacher, Shirayuki, the supervisor, announced the end of rehearsal, and all the girls voiced their compliance before heading off in every direction. Now at ease, I had more than enough of this space that seemed to reek of girls, so I put away the guitar and decided to climb up the stairs and go out onto the roof. It was a beautiful, clear day in the month of May. The warm sun was inviting on my skin. It was the perfect weather for taking a nap. That being the case, I proceed to lie flat on my back and took a deep breath of the refreshing spring breeze.

Ahhh ... this is nice. The wind in May is worth its weight in gold.

Such were my thoughts as I was enjoying my nap on the rooftop when I noticed the nice, bittersweet fragrance of gardenias blended in the passing wind.

“?”

I opened my eyes halfway and was instantly thrown out of heaven and plunged into hell, which is to say, the soles of a white sneaker came down directly on my face.

“Ngh!”

Subsequently, that small sneaker began delivering a flurry of kicks to my head until I managed to roll out of the way.

“What are you slacking off for?! Guard Shirayuki like you’re supposed to be doing, you useless piece of junk!”

The person stomping her feet next to my ear was Aria in her cheerleader uniform. She had her pom-pom carrying hands on her hips, and was enraged with indignation.

“A-Aria?”

She had followed me even all the way out here. I gave her a rebellious glare as I sat up, and she lifted her leg high into the air—as high as the top of her head—with a motion that was obviously unrelated to a cheer routine. Her foot robbed me of my coveted sun and that’s when I realized ... she was expecting me to catch her guillotine-like kick with my bare hands! Determined to show her up, I proceeded to catch her axe kick...

Clap!

My hands pathetically came together in prayer right above Aria's shin ... and the heel of a twenty-one centimeter miniature foot was planted squarely on the top of my head. I fell right back on my rear end, wishing Aria would just cut me some slack. I was used to getting punched and kicked from participating in Assaults hand-to-hand combat sessions, but the damage of constantly getting hit in the head over and over again was starting to add up. Standing in front of me, Aria stuck out her fake chest.

"Oh, come on! Get it right at least once! This isn't a game, you know?!" Aria roared as she looked down at me with her glaring cuspid.

"L ... Look here ..." I said, clutching my head as I stood up, "if you're my partner, be a little more considerate of the condition I'm in. Let me have a break every now and then. I'm just getting over a cold because of some idiot who threw me off the balcony and into the freezing, dirty waters of Tokyo Bay at night," I said, making a slightly long-winded sarcastic remark.

"W ... Well, I'm sorry, okay? I was thinking that I might have gone a little overboard ..." said Aria, averting her red eyes and partially turning away from me. It was a cute gesture, so I felt like following it up with a nice one of my own.

"Well, I won't hold it against you. My cold's cured now thanks the 'Extra Concentrated Kudzu Infusion' that Shirayuki gave me."

"Huh?" Aria abruptly turned towards me again after hearing what I said. I could easily see the surprise in her wide-open eyes.

What? That wasn't anything to really be surprised about.

"I-I'm the ..."

She started mumbling, so I gave her a look with knitted eyebrows, urging her to speak more clearly, but she just continued muttering to herself and wouldn't tell me anything.

"... What? It's not a name brand medicine, but it works for me. I'm pretty sure I told you about it the other day. Somehow, Shirayuki knew about it and went out and bought it for me." For the time being, I gave Aria an explanation, and looking somewhat displeased, she asked, "... Shirayuki said that?"

I wasn't really sure what the intent of the question was, but I replied, "Hm? Yeah."

"..."

... What? Why are you being so quiet all of a sudden?

"W-Well if you've recovered, that's all that matters. I'm a noblewoman. I'll put up with that sort of thing."

"?"

Was there anything we just discussed that Aria would need to put up with? Doesn't make any sense to me.

"Nobles don't boast about their own exploits. It would be unsightly—even if someone else stole the credit."

"What is it already? If you have something to say, come out and say it. This isn't like you."

"What's *your* problem?! There's nothing wrong with me not saying something I don't want to say!" Aria exclaimed, sticking her small tongue at me. "I'm sure you must be happy to have Shirayuki nurse you to health! Shirayuki! Shirayuki! The one who's always doing you so many favors is Shirayuki! Why don't the two of you just get married?!" Aria drew near me with her cuspid looking more like a fang and her voice about three times as loud as usual.

What's she getting heated up for so suddenly?

Clearly, something I said had to have been the trigger, but I wasn't sure what that something was.

"H-Hold up! Why are you losing it all of a sudden?!"

"You be quiet! I'm not losing it!"

"Yeah, you are!"

"What about you?!"

Aria had gotten so close that our faces were about to touch, and that's the condition in which we started glaring at each other. There was a difference of thirty centimeters in height between us, so Aria was glowering up at me from

below while I scowled down at her from above. I was starting to get more than a little irate at Aria, who was blowing her top for no good reason. Thinking back, she had been doing nothing but aggravate me lately. She turned my apartment into a fortress, she was responsible for Shirayuki living with us, and now there was this whole incident too!

“While we’re at it, I’m gonna make myself clear on this. I was going along with your “sword catching” training because it was your decision as my partner, but no more! That’s a technique for a master fighter! It’s not the sort of thing you just learn to do by practicing!”

“You can’t quit! We’re going to continue! Durandal is rumored to have a sword that even cuts through steel! If that’s the case, you won’t be able to defend yourself with a knife *or* a large duralumin shield! When Shirayuki gets attacked, we’ll awaken your...”

“‘*When* she gets attacked’! We’ve been looking out for her for days now, and there hasn’t been the slightest bit of danger! I’ll say it one more time! There *is* no enemy! There *is* no Durandal!” Aria responded by looking at me with her red eyes wide open. “I know that you’re in a hurry to save Kanae as soon as possible. But your eagerness is causing you to lose your presence of mind right now! As soon as you heard the name of somebody who might be one of your enemies, you thought to yourself that you *wanted* him to exist. And now you’ve deluded yourself in thinking he really does!”

“That’s not true!” Aria insisted as she pointed a pom-pom at me while bearing her cuspid. “Durandal does exist! My intuition is telling me that he’s almost getting closer to us!”

“*That’s* what you call paranoia! Shirayuki’s going to be just fine, so go off somewhere else and occupy yourself with something else! Until the Adsiard is over, I’ll guard Shirayuki by myself!”

“What are you talking about?! Now I’m getting pissed off!” Aria raged from underneath me as she became red in the face. “Oh, sure! I’m a delusional girl who’s nothing but a third wheel, aren’t I! You’re her bodyguard, and the two of you are busy u-u-undressing each other ... You’re detestable!”

“T...That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You’re always getting ahead of

yourself by making decisions based on your own assumptions! Don't be so full of yourself just because you were born into a family of slightly high standing! You might be a genius, but we ordinary people are the ones making this world go round! *You're* a deviation from the norm!" I screamed, losing my cool.

The look on Aria's face seemed to suggest that she was more hurt than I imagined she would be. There was no rebuttal. On the contrary, she took a step away from me. Then a second. And a third. Aria distanced herself in a display of frailty that was unlike her.

"So you're ... like that too. That's how you see me." Aria's anime-like voice was subdued and trembling. From that soft voice, it became apparent to me that conversely she was truly and sincerely angry—much more so than usual. "Nobody understands me. They all say I'm a dogmatic, trigger-happy girl who jumps to conclusions—a reject of the Holmes family. You're ... the same way!" Aria then tilted her face downwards and continued to yell—not necessarily just at me, but as if she were yelling aloud for anyone to hear. It was almost like she was directing her words at every person on the planet. "I can tell! I know that an enemy is approaching Shirayuki! But ... but ... I can't explain it! I'm not like my great-grandfather, the brilliant Sherlock Holmes! I can't explain the situation theoretically so that anyone will be able to understand! That's why no believes me! I'm always an "aria"! But ... but ... I just know intuitively! I keep telling you, so why?! Why won't you believe me?!"

With tears in her eyes, Aria flung her pom-poms on the floor and began bawling like a child. ... It probably would have been a good idea to at least say something kind to her at this point. But I was already much too worked up over my argument with Aria. I was unable to be honest with myself. And as a result...

"... You got that right. I don't understand! How am I supposed to believe an enemy is on the approach when he doesn't even exist?! If you're going to insist on something, then give some proof! That's what a butei does! I'll say it as many times as I have to! There *is* no enemy!" I further attacked Aria, who was already up against the wall.

"... You ... you ... big idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!!" Now she had completely gone berserk over how I wasn't conforming to her will ... and with a flushed red face, pulled out her pistols!

“Wai...!”

Bullets came whizzing at me before I could finish my sentence. The countless projectiles flew past me at a hairs length all around my body. The only thing I could do in response to the surprise attack was hunch down, and at that moment, Aria came running towards me.

“Kinji you idiot! Gold medal idiot! Nobel Prize for idiocy!!” She yelled the words at the exact moment her foot came flying into my face, knocking me over backwards. Then after reloading her pistols, she fired repeatedly at a rather odd angle and ran down the stairs. I was lying sprawled out on the ground very much like I had been before Arai made her appearance. Looking behind me, I had an upside down view of the water tank, which was rapidly losing water. Aria’s last gunshots had riddled the tank with numerous holes, and taking a good look at it, I noticed that they formed straight lines—rather, they formed letters.

IDIOTKINJI

Aw, come on ... How are you gonna fix that? An eraser certainly won't help. I have to give her credit for her accuracy though. She'd win the gold medal for gun idiots at the Adsiard hands down.

After returning to my apartment later that day, I calmed down and decided I would nonchalantly apologize to Aria when she got back, so I waited for her return. But despite how long I waited, she never came home. *I don't suppose she actually went off somewhere else like I told her to.*

Night had fallen and Aria still hadn't come back, so I explained to Shirayuki, what happened.

“So, you're the only one who's going to act as my bodyguard from now on?” If anything, Shirayuki seemed quite pleased.

“Yeah. That's what it sums up to.”

I slunk into the couch I bought anew and started doing some maintenance work on my Beretta M92F by disassembling it like a plastic model. A classmate of mine from Armed just finished customizing it. Aria wasn't here. For some reason, that fact alone made even this pistol look inadequate.

“I’ll be your bodyguard until the Adsiard is over. Guarding you is a plan the educational affairs department and Aria forcibly set into motion, but ... a promise is a promise.”

Shirayuki looked as if she were deeply moved by my use of the word “promise.”

“You did promise to protect me, didn’t you ...” Shirayuki said reminiscently and cast her eyes downward. “Just the thought makes me so happy ...”

“Aren’t ... you concerned at all?” You have an E-rank butei as a bodyguard. I don’t think it’s likely, but in the off chance that Durandal does exist and comes to attack you ...” I reminded Shirayuki, but she simply shook her head.

“I never felt any concern from the very beginning.”

“ ... ”

“After all, I have you with me. The truth is you’re a very strong person. You won’t lose to anyone. I believe in you. Kin-chan, allow me to request your assistance once more. Please protect me.”

“S... Sure.”

Shirayuki was speaking formally half in jest, and I answered almost reflexively. I could tell from Shirayuki’s voice that she wasn’t making jokes, nor was she trying to flatter me. It was the voice of a person who believed in me with all her heart. Indeed, I was the one who took out those punks that were giving Shirayuki a hard time. Ever since the day of that exam, Shirayuki had placed complete and utter confidence in me. But that confidence wasn’t placed in the “regular” me. It was placed in the hysteria mode-me at that time. In the off chance that Durandal did actually exist ... In the one in a million chance that Shirayuki was being targeted just like Lezzad, SSR ... and Aria said ... In the one in a trillion chance that anything should happen ... Would I ... be able to protect Shirayuki? Would I be able to uphold the trust that she places in me without so much as a second thought? ... Probably not. But ... it was nothing to worry about. I’d been keeping an eye on Shirayuki for days now, and there hasn’t been a sign of danger anywhere around her. That’s probably how it will continue to be. I’m sure of it.

Having decided as much, I placed the Beretta that I finished servicing on top of the table.

“K-Kin-chan-sama.” Shirayuki, who apparently had been waiting for me to finish, addressed me in that odd manner again and slowly turned herself in my direction.

“What?”

“So, that interlop ... I mean, Aria won’t be around during Golden Week either?”

“No ... I suppose not. Did you want to go somewhere?”

“N-No. I’ll be taking it easy at home while I study,” said Shirayuki, vigorously waving her open palms at me back and forth.

“... You’re just gonna shut yourself indoors the whole time? You’re always studying. If you don’t let yourself loose every once in a while, you’re going to regret it later. You’ll say to yourself, ‘Ahh, I wish I had more fun when I was younger.’”

“B-But ...”

I saw Shirayuki losing heart and it suddenly hit me.

“Is the Hotogis?”

“ ... ”

She didn’t deny it. Shirayuki was forbidden to leave the shrine and school grounds. She was a caged bird. Already feeling less than stellar because of my fight with Aria, the phrase only served to increase my irritation and I stood up from the couch. From there, I marched over to the computer and audibly flung myself into the chair in front of it. Turning my back on Shirayuki in itself was enough to throw her into a panic.

“K-Kin-chan, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but I ...”

She had no idea why my mood took a turn for the worse, but for time being, she performed her conditional reflex of apologizing. Instead of responding to her, I tapped away at the keyboard and went to the homepage of a community magazine for Tokyo. Shirayuki was momentarily startled when the printer suddenly activated, but she took the paper it produced. She then offered the printout to me, turning it around so it would be easy for me to read.

“Here you are ... Kin-chan. What’s gotten into to you all of a sudden?”

“That’s not for me. It’s for you.”

“?”

Shirayuki looked shocked and turned the paper around for her to read.

“... May fifth, Tokyo Walt Land Fireworks Festival ... Come in your yukata and get an early look at the Star Illusion ...?” she read aloud and gave me puzzled look.

“Go.”

“Huh?!”

“It’s not something to be that surprised about.”

“I-I can’t! So many other people would be there! ... I ...”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to actually enter Walt Land. It’ll be from a bit of distance, but you can watch it from Kasai Seaside Park. Think of it as outdoor training and leave the campus for one little day.”

Needing to travel somewhere for training is an odd concept, but she was an odd girl, so these were the measures that needed to be taken.

“B-But ... I ...”

As I figured, she was still reluctant so I got up and gave her a pat on the shoulder.

“... I’ll come with you ... as your bodyguard.”

“Y...you’ll come with me ...?”

“Yeah. That event *is* taking place before the Adsiard.” I assured Shirayuki, who eyes suddenly began to sparkle. She nodded once, flapping her perfectly straight bangs.

Fourth Bullet Artificial Beach

Aria disappeared after our fight at Assault, but I had a good idea where she might have gone, and I was right. She was temporarily staying at Reki's place. Therefore, I decided I would meet with Reki at a family restaurant to report that I was doing my job of guarding Shirayuki throughout Golden Week, but ... Reki had come with a stylish sniper rifle strapped around her, and as usual, she was taciturn, expressionless, and it was hard to discern whether she was really listening or not. And that's why it took an excess amount of time speaking with her while confirming that she was following along every twenty seconds. After I finished explaining everything for the most part, I looked towards the clock hanging on the wall.

"Ah."

It was almost eight o'clock. Today was the day that I promised to go see the fireworks with Shirayuki. More to the point, we were supposed to have met at seven. *Crap.*

Reki, sitting in her seat like some sort of ornament, noticed my perturbation and gave me a questioning look with her eyes.

"Today, Shira ... um, I've got some plans. I'll be on my way if you don't mind." Not bothering to allow her to object, I got out of my seat, but Reki didn't even follow me with her eyes, let alone make any protest. She just sat there in front of the straight tea she hadn't taken a single sip of and stared at the empty space in front of her like a doll.

"..."

"... I'm. Going. Now. Okay?" I said just to be sure, and Reki nodded her head. Delivered in silence, it was a robotic nod worthy of her nickname. Now that I thought about it, as anyone could tell from looking at her, Reki didn't have any friends, but I heard she had a few fervent fans among the guys. Apparently the eccentric bunch called her "Reki-sama" and revered her as a goddess. Well ... robot *or* goddess, sure enough, she was a girl lacking in *human* attributes. I

turned away to take my leave when all of a sudden...

“Do your plans involve going out?”

... Reki posed a question with her monotone voice.

“What if they do?”

“Please be careful. These past few days, there’s been ... something sinister mixed in the winds.”

What’s that supposed to mean? I’m begging you, great goddess; speak in human tongue.

“Our school itself is what you call sinister,” was my parting remark, and leaving behind Reki, who was readjusting those giant headphones she wore, I paid my bill and left the restaurant. I thought of phoning Shirayuki, but it seemed like it would be faster to just head directly home.

So how should apologize if Shirayuki’s upset with me?

I was considerably late despite being the one who invited her to go, and quietly peeked into the living room ... whereupon my eyes grew large in astonishment at seeing how Shirayuki was dressed. She ... was outfitted in a yukata of which I had no clue where she came into possession. It was made of a trim white cloth with pink nadeshiko⁴ flowers in a snowflake-like pattern. The shape of the pale pink obi and the height at which it was positioned was flawless. Most likely, she had put it on by herself. Her hair, which she was wearing up for a change, was also fastened with a hairpin adorned with wild pinks that complemented the yukata. If one had to describe Aria’s appearance with a single word, it would be “cute.” But in Shirayuki’s case ... it would be “pretty.” I already knew that of course, as did everyone else in Butei High. Shirayuki had the kind of looks that would guarantee her an easy victory if she were to enter that National Beautiful Girl Contest. That was the truth of the matter. But as her childhood friend, at some point, that fact stopped registering in my head. When she completely changed her image on me like this, I was forced to acknowledge her beauty. It did embarrass me, though. Shirayuki, with her impeccable manners, was sitting in the proper Japanese fashion and had her back turned towards me with her cell

phone connected to its charger, placed perfectly on her lap for easy access. She was probably waiting for me to call her. Her figure was being reflected in the window, so I could see her face, but she still didn't seem to notice me.

I kind of feel like toying with her now.

"..."

I took out my cell phone and sent her an e-mail from the hallway.

"Sorry. Gonna be late by thirty more minutes."

When Shirayuki's white cell phone lit up, she grabbed it at a speed too fast for the eye to follow, and holding it in front of her with both hands, she read the message. She then cheerfully typed her reply. I had thought ahead of time to put my phone in manner mode and read the e-mail that came back to me.

"That's okay. I'll be here waiting."

There was even a smiley face at the end of the sentence. It wouldn't be unreasonable for her to get a little angry ... I tried sending another e-mail.

"Actually, it's gonna be three more hours. Wanna just call it off?"

Again, Shirayuki opened the phone she had replaced on the charger and read my message. She looked as if the world was about to come to an end.

Hehehe. I'm right here though.

"Stop looking as if the world is about to come to the end," I e-mailed her. When she read it, she sat there blinking her eyes with a confused look on her face.

This is like a Shirayuki remote control. I could do this all day.

But having taken things this far, I started feeling a little guilty, so I decided to make my presence known.

"Come on. Let's go," I said with a wry smile on my face.

"Hyaaa!" cried Shirayuki, jumping around twenty centimeters into the air, but still maintaining the same sitting position.

How in world did she do that?

“K-K-Kin-chan! You’re horrible! You were watching me from behind and laughing the whole time?!” A rosy-cheeked Shirayuki stood up, and with her glossy bangs swaying back and forth, lightly walked over to me. Rather, she tried to, but must have been fairly nervous because she stumbled on thin air.

“Aah!”

“What are you tripping over for? ...Um, I mean, sorry for being late.”

“No, don’t worry about it! You’re not late at all!” she insisted, smiling and waving her open palm in front of her.

I was undoubtedly late, but ... if that’s what the person who was kept waiting says, I guess it’s not too much of a problem. When our eyes met, Shirayuki hurriedly averted her gaze and fretfully straightened out her yukata.

“K-Kin-chan, what do you think of these clothes? I ordered it on-line, but ... it doesn’t look strange, does it?

“Not really.”

“T-That’s good. ... Ah, what about my hair? I just had it done at a salon on Academy Island ... It’s not weird, is it?

“It’s not weird.”

Upon hearing my answer, Shirayuki looked so relieved, it made me feel embarrassed to just stare at her. Before the situation got more uncomfortable, I said, “Let’s get going” and went back to the door of the apartment. I put on my shoes, and when I turned around, Shirayuki said she was coming and followed after me with quick, mincing steps. She gracefully made her way to the door, where she slipped on what appeared to be newly bought women’s paulownia-wood getas. Her every movement was that of a perfect Japanese woman. *She stands like a Chinese peony, sits like a tree peony, and walks like a lily. I think that’s how the expression goes ... for this sort of thing anyways.*

I’m not at all averse to going out at night. Back when I first transferred from Assault to Inquesta, I felt somewhat empty, and after eating dinner, I would aimlessly prowl around the city at night.

“... It’s cool out, isn’t it?” I asked, turning my head towards Shirayuki who was pitter-pattering slightly behind me to the right. She seemed to have been watching me absent-mindedly from behind.

“Y-Yeah,” she replied, hastily lowering her eyes. It was as if she were trying to say that she hadn’t been looking at me, and our eyes had just met by mere chance.

“I like to go for a walk at night every now and then, but how about you?”

“No. I wouldn’t go walking around at this hour unless you were with me.”

“I see.”

...

...

Somehow, our conversation wasn’t holding up. It shouldn’t be a surprise; I had always avoided talking with a girl alone unless there was a very good reason to do so. It might be because I had developed a habit of dismissing most of whatever Aria said whenever she started droning on about the U.S. army’s flash grenades or Germany’s latest model knives. But in this case, I was having a difficult time chatting. The vending machines on the roadside seemed to be ridiculing us with their flashing fluorescent lights.

“U-Um.”

Thankfully, Shirayuki spoke up.

“Yeah?”

“T-This ... is kind of I-I-like a ... date ... sort of ... in a way ... or not ... but maybe it is ...”

“What?” Her speech was grammatically impaired, and I wasn’t sure what she was saying. “It’s ... like we’re on a date ... isn’t it.”

“A date?”

Just when I thought she finally articulated herself, what she said was rather odd.

I’ve got to be firm in my denial of this.

It would be problematic if she were to have any misunderstandings and did anything that would set off my hysteria mode later.

“This isn’t a date. Your bodyguard is escorting you as you travel about. That’s all there is to it.”

Butei Charter, Article Five: Act with expedition. Buteis should make it a principle to strike first and secure victory.

“Bodyguard ...” Shirayuki said to herself as she somewhat sadly lowered the ends of her eyebrows, “Y-You’re right. You’re here to protect me, aren’t you? Sorry for ... saying something so weird,” she apologized with what was most probably a feigned smile.

Later on—and it was partially my fault for being late—by the time we arrived at Butei High’s monorail station, we could already hear the fireworks that had started off in the distance.

I wonder if we’ll make it in time.

Shirayuki went to buy her monorail ticket, but I sensed she was still hesitant about leaving school grounds.

“I’ll buy both of our tickets then,” was the solution I offered.

“I couldn’t ask you to do that. I’ll buy my own ticket,” said Shirayuki, finally making her purchase.

I asked her about what type of transportation she usually used, and Shirayuki told me she’d only left Butei High by means of the car in which Hotogi’s chauffeur came to pick her up. In fact, she said that as far she could recall, she’d never even ridden a train. ... *Just how sheltered can a person be?*

Well, in any case, I’d succeeded in releasing the bird from its cage. I was still gently cradling it in my hands though.

We took the monorail to Odaiba, and from there went to Ariake using the Yurikamome line. Next, we went to Shinkiba via the Rinkai Line and lastly, transferred to the Keiyou Line. We finally reached Kasai Sea-side Park after repeatedly transferring from one train to the next, and that alone had Shirayuki

looking at me with eyes full of respect. I couldn't say I felt all that great about being respected for navigating through Tokyo's train system. Scratching the back of my head, I began leading Shirayuki from the station to the ocean. We entered Kasai Sea-side Park, which was arranged like a small forest, and there were electric light poles forming a spotted trail to the ocean. Indeed, it had the elegant appearance of a park at nighttime. Being a bodyguard, I did my job of inspecting our surroundings, but even though it was night, there were kiosks open for business and people scattered about here and there. There wasn't likely to be much danger. If there was anything to be concerned about, it would be the delinquents on the prowl for couples to harass, but they weren't dumb enough to attack an armed butei. "... The moon is pretty, isn't it?" said Shirayuki.

"Yeah."

The two of us walked along the path to the ocean amidst the sound of fireworks we couldn't yet see. Once we reached the end of this trail, we came out on an artificial beach that had a splendid view.

"... It really is pretty."

"Yeah."

"Kin-chan ... um ... is this boring for you at all?"

I shook my head in response to her round eyes that looked at me apprehensively.

"It's not boring."

"Um, I ... don't really talk to guys that often, so I don't know what kind of topics they would be interested in talking about. ... Sorry."

"It's nothing to worry about. And stop being so quick to apologize about everything. It's a bad habit of yours."

"S-Sorry."

"That's what I'm talking about."

"Ah ... Sor ..."

Shirayuki's reflexive apologies were so comical, I let out a small laugh. She cast her eyes downward, but finding it funny herself, smiled cheerily. As before, there

was nothing to talk about in particular, but the mood was quite different from what it was when we left the apartment. We continued down the path, and as was her usual habit, Shirayuki tilted her head downward and sounded very happy as she whispered in a small voice.

“It’s like a dream ...”

We made our way out onto to the artificial beach. As I expected, no one was to be seen. It was in every way an artificial beach, but sea bathing, fishing, and even barbequing was prohibited, so there were no people around. I thought that this would be an excellent, little-known place to watch Walt Land’s fireworks, but... “... It looks like it’s over,” I said.

Cloud-like smoke from the fireworks was all that could be seen in the sky above the coast of Tokyo Bay where Walt Land was situated. I brought her all the way out here, and the end result was awkward to say the least.

“... Sorry. It’s my fault for being late.”

“N-No, it’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have been walking so slowly.

Shirayuki was using her own unique logic again, which prevented me from doing any wrong ... but her eyes had a tint of sadness to them.

“And ... while we were walking, I had the chance to reminisce about the past, so I’m satisfied. Just hearing the fireworks was enough. I was able to imagine what they were like.” Shirayuki smiled resolutely as if she were trying to console me.

“About ... the past?”

“You know. The fireworks festival in Aomori.”

“Oh. Right. I took you to see it ... and we got in trouble afterwards.”

I think I must have been five years old. I practically forced her to leave the shrine and come with me. Now that she mentioned it, fireworks brought about the opportunity for us to go somewhere that time as well. Was I subconsciously trying to do the same thing?

“... You ... showed me the world outside Hotogi shrine back then too,” said

Shirayuki, making crunching noises on the sand beneath her feet as she turned towards the ocean.

The sandy beach wasn't easy to walk on, but her posture remained as beautiful as always. Her dressed-up black hair swayed modestly in the night wind.

"I still remember those fireworks. That's good enough for me. To be honest ... I was looking forward to seeing them today as well ... just a little. But it doesn't matter if there were fireworks or not. I would have been happy going to a moonlit ocean or even being at home," said Shirayuki, turning around so that the starry sky was now behind her, "since you would be there with me ..."

Her smile was that of someone who truly cared about me from the bottom of her heart.

Shirayuki ... I ... A guy like me ... can't become a butei. I can't even be a normal high school student. I'm a mediocre good-for-nothing. I'm the kind of guy who after being late, laughed as I played around with you like a remote controlled toy, and in the end, couldn't even show you a single firework. Yet you don't utter a word of complaint. Far from getting angry, you forgive me with the most genuine smile. Why are you so kind? If this is how things are going to be ... I'm the one who won't be able to stop myself from taking action.

"Shirayuki."

"Yes?"

I said her name somewhat as if I were calling for her, and Shirayuki merrily came up to me.

"Are you cold? It's cold, isn't it? You are cold, aren't you? Alright then, put this on and wait here for a second." I took off my jacket and placed it around Shirayuki's shoulders without letting her protest.

"Kin-chan? You're not cold, Kin-chan?"

"I plan on getting warmed up so it's not a problem. I'm gonna make a quick dash. I'll be right back."

Shirayuki wasn't sure what was going on, but I ran off to the station before she could say anything. In truth, it wasn't a good idea for a bodyguard to leave the

person he's guarding all alone in such a wide-open area, but there weren't any enemies around. It would be fine.

As I thought, this was a safe place. Running back to where I left Shirayuki, I found her sitting on a bench a short distance from the beach. She was still wearing my jacket and waiting patiently.

"Shirayuki. Sorry for the wait," I called out to her, but there was no reply. She was clinging onto the sleeves of my jacket, so I tapped her on the shoulder to get her attention.

"Hey."

Shirayuki turned around in surprise. There was a tinge of fear in her onyx-like black eyes.

... What gives?

"What's wrong? Were you scared on your own?"

"N-No. It's nothing. I'm okay. I had this ... so I was fine." Shirayuki held up the sleeve of my jacket as if she were trying to gloss over the issue. "This jacket has your scent ... so it was like you were with me."

I smiled bitterly.

"It's my jacket, so it should. It doesn't reek of gunpowder?"

"No. It had a nice smell."

"Weird one, aren't you. Anyways, here," I said, presenting Shirayuki with the toy fireworks I barely managed to buy before the kiosk closed.

"...?"

"We're gonna enjoy some fireworks. They'll only be about one-thousandth of the usual size though."

Pop. Pop.

Crouching on the beach, the two of us watched the flying sparks given off by miniature fireworks. Given that I was dealing with Shirayuki, I thought this Japanese style of enjoying toy fireworks would be a good idea, but ...

This is a bit too bland, I guess. I can't say I really feel the excitement.

Still, Shiruyuki looked genuinely happy as she stared at the fire that resembled miniature thunderbolts. Shrouded in the semidarkness, I could see the blinking light of the fire being reflected in her slightly drooping, gentle eyes with their long eyelashes. Looking at her like this, I couldn't help but be reminded of what a beautiful girl she is.

"Kin-chan."

"Hm? What is it?"

"The fireworks are pretty, aren't they?"

"... Yeah."

Pop. Pop.

"Kin-chan, do you ... like fire?"

Fire? That's a pretty vague question.

"This sort of thing is alright. Really huge flames are scary though. That's how human instincts work."

"Y ... yeah, that's true. Ah ..."

The tiny ball of fire fell off the firework that Shirayuki was holding. She looked up at me with a wry smile, and when our eyes met, my finger twitched, which was probably why the fireball fell off of mine as well. Nearby, I could hear the waves lapping against the artificial beach.

"... Looks like it's over," said Shirayuki.

"There was one more, wasn't there? You can hold it," I said, pulling out the one-hundred yen lighter that I purchased at the store I bought the fireworks. Shirayuki embraced the bag with the remaining firework to her chest and shook her head from side to side.

"That's okay. I want to keep this one."

"What for?"

"This is something you got for me. I want to take it home. It would be a pity to burn it up."

“What are you gonna do with that thing? Fireworks are meant to be lit on fire.”

“But ...”

“You’re supposed to keep these sort of things eternally stored in your memories.” I came up with something that I thought might sound convincing, and Shirayuki nodded after a brief pause. She then carefully took out the last firework, and I flicked up a small flame to light it.

Pop. Pop.

The light from the toy firework illuminated her skin in way that made it seems as if it were flickering on and off. ... *Hey ... come on now ...*

I just saw it from the opening of her yukata. Shirayuki. I don’t know why, but she was wearing black again. If I recall, it was one of the undergarments grouped into the “battle” section of that drawer. *N ... Now that I think about it, Muto had mentioned something a long time ago about Japanese style clothing being the easiest type of clothing in the world to take off a person. Ah ... stop that, Kinji. Don’t start getting any unnecessary ideas. What are you gonna do if it causes you to go into hysteria mode? Think of something else and calm down. Start counting prime numbers in your head. Two, three, five ...* “Kin-chan ... thank you. Really. I think I’m going to be too happy to even fall asleep tonight,” said Shirayuki, fixated on the firework in her hand.

I lifted my head.

That’s right. Conversation. I was forgetting one of the simplest methods. Why am I sitting here counting prime numbers? I can get my mind off her black lacy bra by concentrating on a conversation.

“You won’t be able to sleep? Come on. You’re exaggerating. All we did was ride a train and walk around a park on a night that’s as black ... uh ...” That poor choice of words caused me to trail off before I could even finish my first statement, and Shirayuki tilted her head in puzzlement.

“Black?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Dark. It’s pretty dark. And then we just lit a few fireworks. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“... But you know ... it was really special to me. It was like a miracle.”

Pop. Pop.



The sparks from the firework had already started to die down.

“You’ve always been a person who delivers me miracles. Even on that day of the entrance examinations, you saved me from those awful people ...”

“That was ... you know ... just me getting into a fight.”

“And when we were kids—and tonight as well—you took me out into the world around me. That’s why I ... wanted to repay the favor here at Butei High.”

“I haven’t done you any favors. And that being the case, there’s no need for you to repay anything,” I said it without giving it that much thought, but Shirayuki showed me that beaming smile of hers again.

“You really are Kin-chan, aren’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The light fell from the last firework. We watched as it fizzled on the sand before disappearing completely. Shirayuki blinked her eyes once for a long period of time, as if to record the image in her heart. She then stood up, moving in such a refined manner that just seeing it was enough to make one release a sigh. I stood up at the same time and was again aware of the sound of waves breaking on the artificial beach.

“The other day, when I divined your fortune using the priestess tarot cards...” Hearing Shirayuki’s sudden remark spoken in a soft voice as she turned towards those waves, it all came back to me. I was pretty sure she told me that my overall luck was good. It did seem like she did a pretty shoddy job though.

“The truth is ... the results said ... you were going away.”

“...Going ... away?”

“You’ll be leaving the place you’re at now—within a few years no less.”

“That ... probably means I’m going to transfer to a regular school. My long-cherished desire is finally going to be fulfilled sometime next year.”

“... I was thinking that ... it might mean Aria was going to take you away somewhere ...”

“Hah,” I responded with a short laugh, but Shirayuki continued to look despondent as if she were seized by some sense of foreboding.

“After all, Aria changed you. Ever since you met her, you’ve had a cheerful ...”

“What? Me?”

“I never saw that coming” is the first thought that came to my mind, but somewhere deep inside me, I suspected that it could really happen. Now *that* was something I never saw coming.

Aria changed me ...?

“... No she hasn’t,” I denied. The words left my mouth in a lower voice than I expected they would.

“... It’s okay ...”

“What is?”

“If it will bring you happiness ... If you like Aria ... It’s okay if you’re going to be with her. Even if it were just from behind the scenes, I wanted to support you ... and repay the kindness you showed me.”

“H-Hold up. What are you—?”

“That’s why I’ve tried to put all my effort into so many things until now. I tried my best with studying, the student council, club activities ... It was all so I could improve myself. But in the end, none of it served any purpose,” Shirayuki said ... cutting me off.

What’s going on with Shirayuki? She’s different than she usually is.

It was like she was urgently trying to convey to me everything she had kept concealed in her heart up till now.

“... You’re saying the most bizarre things. I told you before that Aria and I are just partners, didn’t I? And why have you been talking in the past tense? Are you by any chance ... referring to the ‘butei killer’ incident last month?”

She hadn’t said so specifically, but considering Shirayuki’s personality, she might be concerned about how she didn’t assist me at all with the “butei killer” incident. When things got ugly, the one who was always there with me was Aria,

who quite possibly, is the only person Shirayuki cannot get along well with.

“That’s not it ...” said Shirayuki, suddenly turning around. It was dark and hard to tell, but it looked like there were tears in her eyes. “Kin-chan.”

“H-Hey.”

She had flung herself into my chest. It was instantaneous. This was the Shirayuki that spent minutes closing the distance between us when she sat nearby me the other day.

Seriously. W-What’s happened to her?

“Kin-chan, I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry.”

Shirayuki looked up at me, and I wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for, but faced with those watery eyes, I was powerless to say anything. The light of the moon illuminated her face, and I had been aware of this from the very start, but she truly was pretty. Her slightly out-of-season yukata and her hair that she was wearing up were perfectly suited for this ideal Japanese girl. A childhood friend—I’ve always interacted with her as friend since I was a young boy. It was a relationship as precious to me as water, but one that didn’t allow the intervention of any nonessential elements ... I could tell that at this moment, something like nectar was being blended into that relationship. It was maddeningly sweet and made it nearly impossible to refrain from drinking every last drop.

“Kin-chan ... I’m sorry. I know this is so sudden. ... Until now, I was afraid you would hate me and I couldn’t say it ...but would you listen to just one selfish request of mine? Would you please make just one of my dreams come true ...?” Shirayuki’s lips were trembling, and the expression on her face revealed that she was at her absolute limit. It was at the point where she looked like she might die if she were to continue with what she was going to say next. “Just for this moment ... just for this one moment ... look at me. Look only at me ...”

It was at that instant when a cool night breeze, too early to be making its appearance in the summer, swept by us that Shirayuki closed the gentle, lovely eyes underneath her perfectly straight bangs.

“... Kiss ... me ...”

Could I have misheard her ...? Probably not.

Certainly, she had said it very faintly, but she was standing right in front of me.

Why ...? Why would she suddenly ...?

The surprise had caused my heart to beat loudly, and I immediately checked the flow of blood in my veins. This sensation ... was different, however. The nature in which my blood was flowing wasn't an indication that I was going into hysteria mode. This was a normal reaction—and not quite sexual stimulation ... It was probably due to Shirayuki looking so sad and pained. My ability to speak was starting to abandon me. Before I knew it ... without even making a conscious decision to do so, I had instinctively started reaching out towards Shirayuki. I wasn't even aware if the purpose was to stop her or to comply with her, but I was now on the verge of gently touching the back of her yukata ...

Boom.

The sound of a distant explosion reached our ears.

“...?”

Our most primitive instinct—the instinct to protect each other from danger—took over. Shirayuki, who raised her shoulders in alarm, and I, coming back to my senses, simultaneously looked in the direction from which the sound came...

Two more explosions rang out in the skies above Walt Land. One after another, fireworks were launched into the air where they transformed into large colorful circles. We had jumped to conclusions and assumed the event already ended, but apparently it was just an intermission.

“... Ngh ...”

There's just nothing that can be done about the habits human beings form over their lives.... In the last few seconds, I had placed myself protectively between the source of the explosion and my client, Shirayuki. I also had my hand on the Beretta that I brought with me just in case. I had my days of training at Assault to thank for all this. Here, I was on heightened alert after hearing the

sound of a firework. Having miserably misread the situation when Shirayuki had been agonizing so earnestly, I was unable to look her in the eye as I turned to face her. Just a moment ago, our feet were so close that our toes were practically touching, but because of the movements I made, they were now half a step apart. Those forty centimeters seemed so vast that they would be impossible to recover.

“...Sorry,” Shirayuki apologized. Her voice sounded like she was giving up on something, and she looked up at the fireworks with somewhat hollow eyes that made it seem like she wasn’t entirely there. There was no help for it, so I, too, turned my gaze towards the variously colored fireworks that seemed to magically rise into the air. The summer fireworks added color to the night view of Tokyo, both in the sky and the rippled reflection in the ocean. The two of us simply continued to watch the scenario, standing there as if our souls had left our bodies.

...Never did we think that moment would become our time of parting.

Fifth Bullet Diamond Dust

The string of holidays crammed into this past week came to an end, and the Adsiard had commenced. Since I'm performing the music for the Ar-kata during the closing ceremony, the following few days for me consist of attending shortened classes and helping out with a few things here and there. When Shirayuki and I returned to Acadamey Island yesterday, she said something about forgetting some item or other and went back to the girl's dormitory she had stayed at before. After that, she sent me a single e-mail.

"Kin-chan, I'm really sorry about tonight. You must be angry, I know. I'm too ashamed to face you, so I'm just going to sleep here in my own room."

To be honest, I was pretty fed up this foolishness of constantly preparing for an enemy that didn't even exist. The truth of the matter was that we spent the whole night playing around with our guard down, and nothing ever happened, so I just replied to her e-mail...

*"I'm **not** angry. What happened early is done and over. Don't dwell on this, okay? Also, it would be a problem if the educational affairs department were to give me any bad marks on my record for abandoning a mission, so I'll still continue acting as your bodyguard. Give me a call tomorrow when you finish with your duties for the student council."*

...and went right to bed.

However, for some reason, I had a difficult time falling asleep last night. I thought about the incident at the artificial beach that ended on a sour note, but...I also felt an odd sense of foreboding. It was inexplicable and I couldn't determine what the cause if it was. And as a result, I was suffering from a major lack of sleep today. I had to use every ounce of my willpower to stay awake for my shift. Muto and I were collecting tickets from guests at the entrance to the auditorium, which is where the opening ceremony for the Adsiard is taking place. There were other gateways leading into the auditorium as well, but the structure was situated fairly close to the center of Butei High, so there was no need for any

security. Additionally, this particularly gate we were stationed at only led to an anteroom where the press would be, so I was bored out of my mind. Before the start of the opening ceremony, there were a decent number of cameramen and reporters holding microphones passing through here, but now that it was going on three in the afternoon, no one would be showing up this late.

“...The song we’re performing, ‘Who Shot the Flash,’ is a variation of a copy of a cover version of the original song. When it gets that bad, you just can’t help but laugh, really,” grumbled Muto, sitting in a steel folding chair and having nothing else to do with his free time.

“Why did it get chosen then?” I asked, also having nothing better to do and stirring up a conversation with him.

“There’s a part of the lyrics that goes ‘bangbabangbabang.’ You notice how that line wasn’t changed, right? It’s because that part sounds like gun shots.”

“Oh. ...Well, I guess that certainly is typical of Butei High...” I said, gritting my teeth to stifle a yawn as I looked through the window at the clear, blue skies outside.

“So...is Hotogi not going to take part in the Ar-kata cheer after all?”

“Shirayuki? She said she wouldn’t.”

“Oh,” Muto said, sounding rather disappointed. “By the way...you were acting as Hotogi’s bodyguard, weren’t you, Kinji?”

“Yeah. Me and Aria.”

“I’ll bet guarding Hotogi just kind of felt natural, didn’t it. She *is* the type of girl that makes you want to protect her.”

“I can’t say I felt there was a need to protect her.”

She can fight on par with Aria anyway.

“...So? ... Which is it, Kinji?”

“Which is what?”

“Between Hotogi and Aria, which is more your type?”

“Huh?” I said, bringing my eyebrows together. Before I could say that neither

of them was, Muto turn his chair towards me with a loud thud.

“Aria, right?”

“Why Aria?”

And why am I so shaken up by the assertion?

“Umm ... you know. I have a feeling you get along well with girls who look younger than you.

“I don’t get along with that lion cub. I’m a Homo sapiens.”

“The other day, Aria was in the general education sector talking with the other girls in our class. Everything she talked about was related to you. I’m telling you, the both of you are interested in one another.”

“Not a chance.”

“Well then ... are you by any chance hitting it off with Hotogi?”

“...What gives? Why are *you* also making these dumb assumptions now?” I was becoming sullen after remembering what took place between Shirayuki and I yesterday.

“Uhh ... well, you know. Buteis are a bunch of jack-of-all-trades who always want to know about everything.”

“...Curiosity killed the cat. That’s from a book that was written by a butei,” was all I said as I placed my elbows on the desk and avoided answering the question.

“Answer the question. If you don’t answer I’m gonna run you over with a four-ton truck.

“Bring it on. I’ll take you down with my Kinji Model Beretta.”

I started a very Assault-like exchange with my friend and went into “ignoring Muto mode.” He still refused to give up though. He kept staring at me with a look that said “Say something already.” A minute went by. Then a second minute passed in the same fashion. By the third minute, Muto bent his head downwards, pointing his spikey hair at me.

“...I’m sorry!”

“What is it all of a sudden? You’re being pretty loud too.”

“I almost resorted to underhanded tactics!”

“?”

“By recommending you go out with Aria. I’ll ... I’ll pray that things work out between you and whoever it is you’re interested in,” said Muto, resolutely crossing his arms and looking upwards diagonally.

...Makes no sense. Not a single one of them makes a lick of sense.

I didn’t want to prolong the conversation any further, and Muto seemed willing to drop the subject, so we went back to killing time by talking about music and movies and motorcycles and whatnot. Muto’s shift ended at four, and I was left alone to supervise this gate at which no one ever made an appearance. With nothing to do, I idly dawdled away my time. My eyes began to repeatedly open and close themselves. Sitting on my steel folding chair and in the rays of the sun, both the lethargy that follows a long vacation and my lack of sleep were overwhelming me, and I finally dozed off. I was dreaming of Aria crying as she ran down a hill in pursuit of a runaway peach bun and fell into a manhole. Just then ... “Hey, Kinji!”

Muto grabbed my shoulder, waking me up.

“...?”

Crap. I was completely out of it. The clock has advanced quite a bit. It’s already five.

Muto must have run all the way back here because he was out of breath. *It doesn’t look like he’s mad about me sleeping on the job. What’s going on?*

“What’s up?” I frowned at Muto and he pointed at the cell phone in my pocket.

“Case D7. We’re in the middle of a Case D7.”

The drowsiness I was feeling disappeared instantly. Case D7 is a code word that means some kind of incident had occurred on campus during the Adsiard. But in the event of a Case D7 however, the facts of the incident aren’t made clear right away and only certain people are notified. Additionally, in order to ensure the safety of people who needed to be protected, we were prohibited

from creating a scene unless there was good reason to do so. The Adsiard is to proceed as planned and the situation must be resolved in secret. Taking out my cell phone, I saw that a notification e-mail had indeed arrived while I was asleep.

I blew it.

I hadn't noticed because my phone was in manner mode. There were a few incoming calls from Muto as well. I wondered what could have happened, but before I could read the notification, Muto lower his voice to a whisper told me.

"It looks like Hotogi disappeared. No one's been able to contact her since a little past noon."

"...Disappeared?"

I quickly looked at my phone to check the e-mail Butei High sent to us, and I noticed that a single message had arrived from Shirayuki. The blood in my veins froze upon reading what it said.

"Kin-chan, I'm sorry. Good-bye."

It was odd. Being her childhood friend, I could tell. There was something peculiar about this message. I'm pretty sure she hadn't run away because things got awkward between us yesterday. What happened at the artificial beach was put behind us when I sent her that e-mail yesterday. There was no way for me to know what was actually going on inside her head, but I did know that she was an obedient person. If I said it was over, then she would act like it was over. She wouldn't keep obsessing over the matter. She'd act like it never happened. Not only that, Shirayuki had a strong sense of responsibility. She would undoubtedly finish the duties she had to perform during the Adsiard until the closing ceremony came to an end. That's probably why Butei High issued a Case D7 alert when Shirayuki disappeared without warning. I could tell. This wasn't just a disappearance. Something had happened to her!

At this point, everything was just an excuse. Neither Shirayuki, nor I had felt

any danger whatsoever. Even Aria, who from the very beginning was so cautious of our surroundings, wound up abandoning her mission. Even so ... I was being too careless. I had let my guard down. There was the possibility that someone might have actually been targeting Shirayuki. I brought to mind what I told Aria the other day.

*"You thought to yourself that you **wanted** him to exist. And now you've deluded yourself in thinking he really does!"*

It might have been just the opposite. I was thinking to myself that it would be better if he didn't exist. ... And somewhere along the line, I convinced myself that he really didn't. I had stepped out into the walkways of Butei High, but without any clues, the only thing I could do is roam about and keep my eyes open. *Muto and I agreed to split up and search for Shirayuki, but how in world am I supposed to find her?! I don't even know where to start—not in my current state!*

And I had to keep in mind that the situation was D7. If I went around indiscreetly inquiring people about Shirayuki, there was the chance that contrary to my intentions, I would actually be putting her in danger. None of my calls to Shirayuki were getting through so I tried calling Aria, but for some reason I was unable to reach her as well. In her case there was a ring tone, so she should have responded.

Aria!

If the two of us had been guarding Shirayuki just like the plan originally called for, this might not have happened. But it was my fault that Aria left the picture. I didn't take her warning seriously, and I didn't believe in her intuition. As a result, I pretty much forced her to stay uninvolved.

I ... was being the absolute worst idiot possible! And Shirayuki said she believed in an idiot like me. That night I started guarding Shirayuki on my own, she told me she believed in me. And yet ... I betrayed that trust!

I ran through the streets like an animal on the loose and checked around every alley I came across. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. The time just continued to pointlessly tick away.

Am I... this incompetent? Can I not even protect one single girl the way I am

now? I am just ... so ... helpless! But ... even so, I have to do something! If it's come to this, I've got no choice but to find some sort of lead even if I have to scour every corner of Academy Island to do so. I'll search everywhere. That's all there is to it. That's all I can do. Shirayuki. I'm not the kind of hero you say I am. I'm a worthless low-life who fell asleep when you were in trouble. But even a worthless low-life like me has to live up to the expectations of the person who placed her trust in me! ... If I don't, then I'm even less than worthless!

Short on breath, I was running through the southern area of Butei High when an incoming phone call caught my attention. I snatched up my phone and placed it to my ear.

"Kinji. This is Reki. I have you in my sights."

... Reki!

"It seems we have a D7. I saw the message on my cell phone during the intermission of the sniping contest."

"Y-Yeah."

That's right. I heard Reki would be participating in the Adsiard as a representative of Japan.

I could hear the voices of people yelling angrily in the background, saying things such as "What are you doing, Reki?!" or "You were just about to set a world record!" Reki said something, but her voice was cut short by those around her.

"Reki, where are you right now?! It's so loud over there I couldn't make out what you said!"

"The seventh floor of the Snipe building."

"Snipe ..." I said to myself and turned north.

The Snipe building was composed of an underground facility that was equipped with a long and narrow firing range, and the main building, which rose above the surface in the northern part of Academy Island.

"Sorry about the noise. It's unrelated to your client so calm down."

"What is it?! What going on?!"

“I left the range in the middle of the sniping competition, so I was disqualified. Everyone seems to be displeased about it.”

I heard the sound of a window opening over the phone. Next, I heard a gunshot followed by a large commotion in the background. I was about to ask what happened when the glass sphere of lamppost next to me shattered. I was in a state of panic, but the exploding glass took me by surprise and brought me to a complete standstill.

“Kinji, please calm down. Just losing one’s composure reduces a person’s abilities by half.”

D . . . Did Reki just fire at that? There’s nearly two kilometers from here to the Snipe building ...

“That’s exactly what’s happening to you right now,” she continued.

“R . . . Right.”

I heard a magazine being reloaded into a gun. It was amazing that she could be so accurate while talking on the phone and using that outdated Dragunov rifle, no less.



“I don’t see the client anywhere ... but I can sense something unnatural in ocean currents. It’s around drainpipe number nine.”

There were twenty-eight drainpipes on the fringes of this Mega-Float that was Academy Island. They were holes from which any water that irregularly entered the island via rainfall and the like was pumped into the ocean.

“W-Which way?”

“... I ... am a single bullet ...” was the response that came back to me. It was a sort of incantation she used—one she had a habit of chanting when she concentrated.

Zpp!

The bullet from a sniper rifle marked the asphalt a short distance away from my feet.

Zpp! Zpp! Zpp! Zpp! Zpp!

W ... What the?

Making use of the Dragonuv’s rapid-fire abilities, Reki was etching something in the asphalt. Soon enough I realized what it was.

“In that direction. Please investigate it. I’ll continue to search for the client from here.”

She had drawn an arrow thirty centimeters in length and width. I arrived at the drainpipe it pointed me towards, but I didn’t see anything particularly suspicious about the water coming out of it. There were, however, traces of drainpipe number nine’s grating being removed and forcefully put back in place. *Reki noticed the changes in the ocean surface that came about from something as minimal as this? At that distance?*

Not that it was the time for being impressed by Reki’s superhuman eyesight. I checked my butei handbook to see where this drainpipe led.

“Junction ...” I whispered to myself, sweating. It wasn’t sweat from running around. I had broken into a cold sweat. There was danger to be found in pretty

much every inch of Butei High, but Junction was one of the three great danger zones along with Assault and Masters (the educational affairs department). The term “Junction” was nothing more than a euphemism used to avoid touching upon what the underground warehouse really was—an explosives storehouse.

This is bad. Very bad. I don't mean to imitate Aria, but I've got a bad feeling about this.

Not many were aware of it, but something significant was happening in Butei High. And Shirayuki was caught right in the center of it!

The subterranean floors of Butei High were structured like the decks of a ship, and all floors underneath the first basement were below sea level. I flew down the stairs to the first basement and jumped into the elevator that would take me to the lower levels, which were designated as a restricted area. Once inside, I tapped in emergency password ... but the elevator wouldn't move.

That's weird. It's not working the way it normally does. That much is fact.

I went into the transformer room and removed the thick pin that was securing the emergency ladder in the corner. The manhole-like door installed in the floor also served as partition in the event of flooding and was made of three layers of metal. Using the password, a cardkey, and the contactless IC card chip incorporated in my butei handbook, I opened the door, and putting the ladder in place, I descended to the floor underneath. That brought me to the boiler room where I repeated the same process to access the third, fourth, and fifth basement. The ladder was rusted, and my hands were covered with abrasions from climbing down it so quickly.

... It hurts. Man, does it hurt. But I don't have the time to be concerned with that now! If there's even a one percent chance of Shirayuki being here, I'll climb down as fast I possibly can. If that's what it takes to save her after she believed in me, then so be it!

And at length, I made it to the seventh basement.

Junction.

This was the deepest section of Butei High. Drainpipe number nine was

connected to this floor. Of course, just making it through the drainpipes didn't mean an easy access to the area afterwards ... but I knew it wasn't impossible to do so long as I kept going. The weakness and flaws in Butei High's structures often came up in conversations between students. Since Butei High was designed to be so expansive, it was relatively susceptible to infiltration by outside forces. The reason it isn't that big of a concern is simply because there aren't many people stupid enough to trespass on an island crawling with hundreds of buteis. When I dropped down into a reference room, which was located in the corner of Junction and no longer in use, it dawned on me. *It's dark.*

I carefully opened the door so as not to make any noise and looked down the corridor, but it was pitch-black. The power was out. Only the red emergency lamps remained on. Thinking to call Muto and Reki, I took out my cell phone, but the Inbuilding Mobile Communication System must have been taken out because the words "No Service" displayed on the screen.

Damn.

I was pissed off at myself for being too much of a dolt to anticipate this situation. This wasn't going to be like some video game where a flashlight or transceiver would be conveniently lying around on the ground. Still, I would lose too much time if I were to go all the way back to surface. Right now, what mattered more communications or light was time. I wasn't sure if my judgment was correct, but Shirayuki might be in danger at this very moment—all because I was an idiot. If that were the case, I had to hurry. There was nothing else to it.

I ran through the aisles looking for Shirayuki, doing my best to hide the sound of my footsteps. The corridors were wide and there were shelves of munitions left and right. According to my butei handbook, which I managed to keep lit with a miniature light, the area up ahead of me was a wide-open space. It was called the grand warehouse, and it was where the most dangerous munitions in Junction were stored. It was from there ...

"...!"

...that I felt human presence. The person was having an argument. I couldn't

make out what was being said, someone was definitely there. I reached for my Beretta, and as my hand touched the grip, a frown came to my face. In the darkness, which was ever so slightly illuminated by the red lamps, I noticed warning signs all around me that read “Keep Out” or “Danger.”

This was an explosives warehouse.

If a bullet were to ricochet off of anything it shouldn't and set off an explosion ... Butei High would be sent flying. And by no means was that just a figure of speech. It would be like a battleship taking a direct hit from a torpedo. The sheer amount of explosives being kept here was easily capable of doing just that. And as far as I could see, everything was put away in a very disorganized manner. If one explosion were to cause a chain reaction of other explosions, there would be a large number of casualties among the faculty, students, Adsiard athletes, and the many capable young buteis gathered here in Butei High from countries all over the world. And that wasn't all. The press was here to cover the Adsiard. There would be reports of an unprecedented tragedy in which hundreds of high school students were blown to pieces and sent flying all over the place. ... In any case, I couldn't use my gun. I took out the butterfly knife in my pocket and opened it quietly. The blade glinted with red underneath the emergency lamps. The butterfly knife was a weapon prone to making sounds and not suitable for infiltration missions. I had to keep it steady in my hand and be careful not to wave it around too carelessly. Keeping that in mind, I used the blade a makeshift mirror to furtively peer around the corner ... that's when I saw her. Roughly fifty meters away from me, bathed in the red of the emergency lamps and next to a wall where munitions were stacked into a huge pile, stood Shirayuki in her priestess garbs. She was talking with somebody I couldn't see because that person seemed to be lurking on the other side of a shelf of explosives, which were lined up rather irregularly—or possibly rearranged that way. I had an impulse to go right ahead and jump out onto the scene but somehow managed to restrain myself. First, I had to get a grasp on the situation. After all, that “somebody” might be pointing a gun at Shirayuki. I brought myself as close the corner as I dared and pricked up my ears.

“Why do want *me*, Durandal? My abilities aren't even that spectacular.” Shirayuki's voice was filled with fear.

... Durandal! Durandal actually exists?!

“There is someone who is attempting to outwit us—unaware that the front is the rear of the rear.”

It sounded masculine but it was definitely female voice – and she spoke in slightly old fashioned way. “One who feigns the idea of peace negotiations while making preparations in the shadows. But strife will only serve to further strengthen the one to attempts to outwit us. Our great founder is one who dons the rear side of the shadows; in other words, our founder is one who dons the light and made plans for the shadows.”

“What ... are you talking about ...?”

“The enemy has begun training Stealths (espers) in the shadows. We are going to cultivate stronger Stealths on the rear side. A rare stone of ore such as yourself—well, it is only natural to reach out one’s hand to such a stone. There is nothing to find mysterious about it, Shirayuki. By good fortune you were guarded by a defective butei. ”

“A defective butei . . . ? Who do you mean?” There was a hint of anger mixed in Shirayuki’s voice. The voice of girl opposite from her took on a more mocking tone.

“I thought I might have had a little trouble dealing with Holmes, but just as I planned, Kinji Tohyama took on the role of sending her away. What else could one possibly call him besides a defective butei?”

“Kin-chan . . . Kin-chan is not defective!”

“But given your plight, is it not true that he was unable to protect you?”

“That’s ... that’s not true! Kin-chan wouldn’t lose to you! I didn’t want to cause any trouble for him ... so I just decided against calling him!”

“Hmph!” Durandal laughed. “So you didn’t want to cause any trouble for him? But you know, Shirayuki—you, too, played a role in my scheme.”

“I did?”

“[You remember the phone call, don’t you?]”

My heart nearly stopped when I heard the voice that came out from the

shadows.

*That ... was **my** voice! Did that girl just imitate my voice?!*

“[Shirayuki, come quick! Get over here! I’m in the bathroom!]”

“... Ngh!”

I could tell that Shirayuki had her breath stolen away. The other girl must have found it amusing because she seemed to be enjoying herself as she continued to speak.

“Holmes had set up numerous surveillance cameras, but I was the one surveying *your* apartment. You were by the living room window, the lights went off in the bathroom that was occupied by Tohyama ... and Aria had made her way back at just that moment. I’m not the type to pass up on such opportunities.”

“You posed as Kin-chan to make me take action ... and created a scenario in which Kin-chan and Aria would ... fight amongst themselves?”

“Everything else played out on its own. Before a few days could pass, Aria had left the two of you.”

Durandal. ... She was watching us? She was hiding right next to us—next to Aria and I ... and her target, Shirayuki? And the first thing she did was to get rid of Aria, the keystone in protecting Shirayuki. She then waited for me to let down my guard. And now she was trying to kidnap Shirayuki ...!

“Follow me, Shirayuki. But ... before you become one of us, you should first become disillusioned with Tohyama. A gem such as yourself should offer your body and soul to someone else.”

My mind went completely blank when I heard what she said next.

“I’m going to take you with me now—to IU, that is.”

IU. The ones who framed Aria’s mother, Kanae Kanzaki, leaving her with a prison sentence of eight hundred and sixty-four years and employed the “butei killer,” Riko Mine Lupin the Fourth ... to kill my brother ...! I admired him so much ever since I was a kid—my brother, who was stronger, wiser, and kinder than anyone. And they were the ones responsible for his ...! I could feel the blood

rushing to my head. The butterfly knife, which I kept as a keepsake of my brother, shook audibly in my trembling fist.

“And one more thing.” The girl’s voice became slightly more lucid. “There was just one thing that didn’t go according to my calculations. It seems I misread your personality. I was under the impression that you were the type who kept her promises.”

“... What do you mean ...?”

“‘I’ll turn myself over to you without any resistance. In exchange, don’t involve the students of Butei High—especially Kinji Tohyama.’ You undoubtedly made that promise. I heard it with my own ears. But on the rear side of things ... you were calling him.”

Her voice was being projected in a different direction when she said those last words. She was obviously pointing them in my direction.

She noticed me.

Realizing that, I made my next move.

“Shirayuki, run!” I yelled out as I darted towards them. It wouldn’t be entirely incorrect to assume that I had just lost my patience. But it wasn’t as if I rushed out without any ideas. I had a good sense of where the enemy was, based on the direction from which her voice came. If that were the case, I would bring this to a quick end by throwing myself onto and subduing her. There was also the fact that this is an explosives warehouse. I wouldn’t be able to use my gun, but the same applied to my opponent. There were fifty meters separating me from the enemy. With my speed, it would take seven seconds to close that distance. There was no way seven seconds would be enough time for her to discover what my weapon was, with me running towards her, decide whether to fight or to flee, ready a weapon of her own, *and* position herself for combat. There was no way she could pull it off!

“Kin-chan?!” Shirayuki’s voice echoed in large warehouse. “... Don’t come this way! You’ve got to get out of here! A butei can’t win against a choutei!” Shirayuki cries were akin to screams of terror, and as soon as she finished, something came flying towards my feet at lightning fast speed and embedded itself in the floor.

“Whoa?!” my voice reverberated in the warehouse, and I pitched forward, falling on my stomach. Next to my feet, an elegantly curved silver blade was sticking upright in the floor. I had seen this weapon before in the Assault textbook, so I knew what it was. It was a French bayonet known as a yatagan. They were like short sabers that attached to the end of long, narrow, old-fashioned guns.

“L’anse de la Pucelle. Butei, know the humiliation of one made out to be a criminal and placed in shackles.”

On finishing her statement, something white began to radiate outward from the bayonet. Whatever it was, it made crackling noises as I felt it fix my feet to the floor.

I-I can’t move.

“Urgh?!”

I tried to get up, but the white substance had spread to my knees as well.

What is this?! It’s cold. ... Ice ...?!

The bayonet didn’t look as if it were specially equipped with anything, and underneath my feet was just a regular linoleum floor.

How in the world is she doing this? I can’t get up. ... My body is being sewn down by ice.

“Those of my clan don the light. Our true form is the rear side of the shadows. We outwit the schemers and excel in our own schemes. And the one thing I loathe above all else—is a ‘miscalculation.’”

Our enemy, still concealing herself in the shadows, ended her sentence, and the emergency lamps in the room suddenly went out. We were now surrounded in complete and utter darkness.

“... N-No! Stop! What are you doing?! ... Ngh ...!”

I could hear metallic sounds coming from Shirayuki’s direction. The enemy was on the move.

“... Shirayuki!”

There was no answer from her.

What's going on?! What did she do to her?!

I was starting to go into a panic, but being pinned to the floor with ice as I was now, I couldn't do a thing. No. It wasn't just this particular instance. *Again*, I was powerless to do anything. Far from saving Shirayuki, I had only made matters worse. That was how it had been from the very beginning—ever since I started acting as Shirayuki's bodyguard. I was unable to assess the situation correctly, I idly just let time go by without making any preparations, and when the time did come for me to take action ... in the end, all I did was waltz in here and cause problems for Shirayuki. I was witnessing danger befall upon Shirayuki, yet was helpless to do anything about it. All I could do was watch the situation take a turn for the worse!

I heard a second bayonet traveling through the air. It was pitch dark, but I was fully aware. It was a blade meant to finish me off! At almost that exact same moment, I heard another blade being thrown from behind me

Clang!

For a brief instant, sparks scattered in the air.

I'm . . . still alive. Huh? What happened just now?

"You can hand the baton over to me now."

It was an anime-like voice that cut through the total darkness. A light turned on in the corner of the room. It was followed by more lights, coming on one after the other like a row of falling dominos that encircled this warehouse as expansive as a gymnasium. The jet-black darkness was replaced with pure white light.

"There you are . . . Durandal! I'm placing you under arrest on the suspicion of attempted kidnapping of a minor!" cried a girl dressed in Butei High's sailor uniform, making her appearance after trampling over my back and skull.

"Aria?!" I cried.

"It's you, is it, Holmes?" Again came the voice of the unidentified girl. She had vanished ... along with Shirayuki. She seemed to have been dragged away behind

the shelves of explosives. From an open space in one of those shelves, two bayonets flew out at Aria. Aria spun her katana in a circle like the vanes of a windmill, deflecting both of them.

“Throw as many as you like. This is no different from being in a batting cage,” said Aria, holding her katana as if she were getting ready to take a swing with a baseball bat.

The sound of a door being closed caught our attention, and after a short moment of silence. ...

“She ran for it.” Aria spun around, and after pulling out the bayonet planted next to me, carelessly flung it aside. She then squatted down next to my head. “Well, I guess even as a idiot, you were a little useful.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They say a courageous person can make use of barbarians while a wise person can make use of fools, don’t they? There are ways of using you when you’re in idiot Kinji mode too.”

She showed up only to start talking nonsense again. And don’t squat down right in front of my face.

I turned my neck—the only part of me that I could move freely—to avoid getting a glimpse of the inside of her pleated skirt. Straightening out her knees, Aria ran to go check on Shirayuki, but then made a screeching noise with her sneakers as she came to a halt, sending her long ponytails waving in front of her.

“...?” I looked at Aria with puzzled eyes.

Aria took a step back and stuck her katana out in the air. I heard something I couldn’t see get cut in two.

“... What was that?”

“Piano wire. To be precise, it was probably twisted nano-Kevlar wire. It was set up at the same height as my neck.

Aria looked around and cut another wire.

“This one was set at the height of *your* neck. It was perfectly lined up on a diagonal axis so that if you were to run straight through here, your carotid artery

would have been severed. She probably intended to kill you with this if the knife didn't finish the job."

"S-She's a cautious one! Attempting to kidnap Shirayuki and laying traps all the while. ..."

"But her traps won't work. My eyes can't be fooled," said Aria, full of confidence. She picked up the katana that she threw when she saved me earlier and made her way towards Shirayuki once more. Before very long, she came back and kneeled by my side.

"How's Shirayuki?"

"She's not hurt. But she's tied up. Help me set her free," Aria said with one of her knees placed on top of me as she used her katana to chip away the ice fusing my limbs to the floor.

"Aria ...what have you been doing?! I haven't seen or heard from you since that day."

"Durandal was observing Shirayuki from someplace hidden. And I had a feeling she was rapidly closing the distance between her and Shirayuki. But she never dared to attack when Reki or I was around. That's why I intentionally stopped being her bodyguard."

"When you disappeared after our fight on the roof of Assault ... that was a part of your strategy?"

"Butei Charter, Article Two: Fulfill the contract made with your clients at all costs. I'll never abandon a mission. Well, I *was* seriously mad at you when you were sleeping out on the roof, but I thought it would also be good opportunity," Aria said as she freed my elbow from the floor. "Durandal is one of IU's top strategists. But since you were only moderately guarding Shirayuki, I was finally able to divert her attention away from me. What are you looking so discontented about? You have some kind of complaint?"

I finally regained the ability to move around, but I didn't voice my grievances at repeatedly being called an idiot or Aria's consistently dangerous ways of doing things. Looking at the outcome, she had saved me, after all.

"I don't ... sense the enemy's presence anymore. Did she escape?" I asked

According the floor plan that I check in my student handbook earlier, it should only have been possible to ascend to the higher levels from here.

“In the event that she has to deal with multiple opponents, she’ll first place some distance between us and work on dividing our forces from afar. She’ll then try to dispose of us one after the other, one-on-one. That’s the strategy Durandal uses.”

I see. ... So that’s why Shirayuki and I were separated from each other so skillfully.

“But strategists like that tend to try and erase everything when something unaccounted for disturbs their plans. If that’s the case, there’s a possibility she’ll come back again to kill Shirayuki. So first, we’re going to set her free,” said Aria, pulling on my sleeve as soon as I stood up and leading me to where Shirayuki was.

Shirayuki was next to the wall of the warehouse where she was chained up in a standing position. She was gaged with a cloth and making grunting noises with her throat. When I removed the cloth ...

“Kin-chan, are you okay?! You’re not hurt?!”

... she expressed her concerns for me, disregarding the predicament *she* was in.

“I’m fine. What about you ...?” I asked as I took the chain that was fastened around her upper abdomen into my hands. The chain was wrapped multiple times around a thick pipe that ran along the wall and had the diameter of a hamburger. The huge locks keeping the chain in place were called drum locks. They were about the size of wall clocks, and three of the dreadful things were clamped onto the chain. Aria and I took out the bump key from our butei handbooks and started working on the locks ... but they must have been very intricately made because we couldn’t unlock a single one.

“Kin-chan ... I’m sorry ... I was told to come here in these clothes without informing anyone ... otherwise they would blow up Academy Island and kill you as well”

Upon hearing that, something painful welled up again in my heart. Without my knowing it, I had been used as bargaining chip.

“When did they tell you this?”

“Yesterday. ... It was when you went to go buy the fireworks for me. I received a threatening e-mail. The thought of you get hurt terrified me. ... I had no choice but to do what they said ...” Shirayuki said, beginning to snifle.

“Don’t worry about it now. Stop crying.”

So that’s when it was. No wonder she seemed so strange after I came back from buying the fireworks.

“I have to apologize to you too, Aria. You came to save me even after I did all those horrible things to you”

Aria seemed to be bewildered by Shirayuki’s apology, and her cheeks became slightly red.

“I-I’m ... just doing my job of protecting you since I accepted this mission. My true goal is to capture Durandal. That’s all. So you don’t need to grateful for anything,” said Aria, but at the same time, was pulling on the chain with all her might as she tried to release Shirayuki. Her words and her actions were conflicting with each other, but I wasn’t going to comment on it right now.

That aside ... these chains just won’t come off.

I had a feeling that if we were to use Shirayuki’s superhuman swordsmanship, it just might be possible to do something about this ... but the one tied up was Shirayuki. And from the looks of it, her sword was taken away from her. I began to think it would be better to disconnect the pipe running along the wall, but unless we used some heavy-duty equipment, judging by the thickness, it would be difficult to budge. I started looking for any weak links that might be in the chain when Aria asked Shirayuki a question.

“Did you get a look at Durandal?”

“No ... she kept herself hidden in the shadows of the shelves the entire time. When she ran out of that door as well, all I could see was her shadow,” said Shirayuki, indicating with her eyes the hatch on the ceiling that led to the upper

level. Aria didn't look at all surprised.

"... It can't be helped. Durandal never allows herself to be seen." It would seem all the investigating Aria did on a daily basis had provided her with quite a bit of background information on Durandal. I decided to ask her about something that had been bothering me for a while.

"Aria, that ice back there"

I was referring to the ice that had sewn me to the floor. I thought she might have used liquid nitrogen, but that probably wasn't the case. Back when I was in the Assault division, I had frozen a time bomb with liquid nitrogen before ... but it didn't freeze over like that.

"It's a supernatural ability," Aria replied, nonchalantly giving the answer I was hoping not to hear.

"Yes," said Shirayuki, "in terms of international classification, she's a class three Stealth. Most likely, she's a Matsugi (mage)."

Shirayuki's supplementary explanation brought a frown to my face.

Are you serious . . . ? A magician?

"That can't be. ..."

"It can. These days, first-rate buteis don't find it surprising anymore. Even our school has SSR, doesn't it?"

I knew that of course. The logic made sense in my head, but ...

SSR. This department Shirayuki was affiliated with was most definitely doing earnest research on psychometry and dowsing and other dubious investigative methods. But SSR was a particularly secretive specialized division at Butei High, and aside from those directly involved, very few people knew much about it in detail. That especially applied to me, someone who longed to be an ordinary person, and always avoided having anything to do with that most unordinary world. I never even heard rumors of the existence of these magical powers, well aside from conversations about video games.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Kinji," said Aria. "From my experience, their abilities aren't much different from the sort of thing an illusionist or a street

performer does. They're nothing a lead bullet can't handle."

"But those are superhuman abilities. She might come at us with attacks we didn't account for."

"Oh, stop being such a coward. I hate it when you're like that. But ... you can put your mind at ease. Your training to "awaken" yourself isn't complete ... so you don't have to fight. I'll take care of her by myself."

Suddenly, as if replying to Aria's proclamation, a deep sound rang out in the underground warehouse. Looking around us, we saw water rushing in from the drain on the floor. The amount of water was increasing so rapidly, that in less than a minute it had practically become a fountain and began creeping its way towards our feet.

"This is seawater," Aria said, sniffing with her nose like a small animal.

"Yeah. She destroyed some part of the drainage system," I replied.

From our shoes to our ankles to our shins, the water continued rising.

This is bad.

This place might be as large as a gymnasium, but at this speed, it would probably be completely submerged in around ten minutes. That was plenty of time for Aria and I to climb the ladder and escape from the hatch on the ceiling, but we couldn't possibly leave Shirayuki behind.

A strategist, huh?

"...She certainly does seem to be strategist, Aria. She discovered your weakness."

Aria didn't respond to me. She just stared uneasily at the rising water.

"Discovered . . . ? Discovered what . . . ?" Shirayuki asked, and Aria went red in the face. The look Aria gave me could be easily interpreted as "Don't say it." But these were the circumstances we were in. She would just have to forgive me.

"Aria can't swim. Tsuzuri was saying so the other day."

"T-That's not true. I-If I just have a ring buoy . . . !"

"We don't have a convenient thing like that with us. Aria, you go on up ahead

of us.”

“I ... I can’t do that! I can’t just run away and abandon you two!

“That’s not it. You’re not retreating; you’re going on the offensive. Go up there and get the key from Durandal. Nothing we can do is going to get this chain off. You realize that, don’t you?”

“... B-But ...”

“You have better fighting skills, so you can take her out faster than I can! Go on! We can’t afford to waste even a single second right now!” I strongly urged Aria, remembering the tempo of life back in Assault. Aria continued to stare at Shirayuki with concern, but after seeing the water rise up to her knees, she finally handed her bump key over to me.

“...Alright. But if things start looking hopeless, make sure and call for me, okay?!”

Calling for you wouldn’t help get these chains off.

All three of us were already aware of that thought. Still, I said, “Got it” as Aria turned her back on us with a mortified look on her face.

The water was continuing to increase at a faster rate, and the chains around Shirayuki weren’t budging at all. There was likely to be five more minutes or so before the warehouse was entirely inundated. I had frantically search underneath the water for any sort of tool that could be of use, but came up empty-handed. The water level was now up to my shoulders. Being shorter than I, Shirayuki was already up to her neck in water.

What should I do ...?! What the hell should I do ...?!

“Kin-chan ... go on,” Shirayuki said, looking at the expression on my face, which showed that I was at a complete loss.

“Don’t ... worry about me anymore. I don’t want to put you in danger.” She admirably put on a smile underneath her perfectly straight bangs. Even at a time like this, she was trying to keep me from worrying.

“... Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Hotogi shrine maidens are guardian shrine maidens. It’s our destiny to sacrifice our body and our soul for the sake of another. Kin-chan, go and escape now. Don’t worry about me anymore”

“... There’s no way I’m leaving you here!”

Shirayuki tried to reply, but momentarily winced as the seawater finally made its way up to her mouth, and lifting her head up, she drew in a breath of air.

“It’s okay. I ... Even if I die there won’t be anyone to grieve. The teachers and the other students might have held me in high regard, but there isn’t anyone who truly loves me. *cough* It’s not me ... it’s just the power of a Hotogi shrine maiden that everyone reveres so much ... *cough* ...” said Shirayuki, lifting her head backwards as far as it could go and gasping for breath.

My toes had also left the floor of the warehouse. It had gotten to the point where I had to swim in order to move around.

“Sh ... Shirayuki! Aria’s going to come back with the key any second! Hang in there for as long as you possibly can! Take a deep breath! Clients are obligated to follow the instructions of their bodyguard! I’ll do something about these chai-”

“I’m releasing you ... from your duty as a bodyguard! Kin-chan ...! Get out of here! Keep living ...!”

“Shirayuki ...! Dammit ...! This is all happening ... because of me ...!”

“Kin ... chan ... it’s not your fault ...!”

With those being her last words, Shirayuki shut her eyes tightly ... and disappeared beneath the water’s surface.

“Shirayukiiiiii!!”

Shirayuki’s black hair wavered limply in the water. She stopped looking at me and just looked downwards as if she had already resigned herself to this fate.

“Shirayuki ...!”

Are you trying to just die ... and make it easier for me escape? You released me from my responsibility as a bodyguard ... and defended me to the very end, saying it wasn’t my fault. ...

“The hell it isn’t ...!” I yelled, punching the wall.

I *was* at fault. It was entirely my fault that this was happening. I ignored warnings, didn’t prepare myself to face the enemy, and made the situation worse when I did take action.

Of course, it’s my fault!!

Now that things have come to this ... I finally made up my mind.

*Shirayuki, you always obediently did exactly what I said, didn’t you. Thinking back, most of what I ordered you to do stem from my own selfishness. So now it’s my turn to do everything that **you** asked of me. You told me three things. First off, you just told me to “keep living.” You got it. I’m going to stay alive all right. I’m not dying in a place like this. I’ll keep living with everything I’ve got, and I’ll crush Durandal and any other of Aria’s enemies. And when I’m done, I’m gonna live the most ordinary and carefree life possible. And as for the second thing you told me, I heard you loud and clear on that night when I was to start guarding you on my own. You said, “Protect me.” At that moment, you, too, were unaware of the enemy’s presence. That might be why you were able to say it so easily. But I **did** reply. I said, “Sure.” I’m going to protect you. I have a final trump card to play. Though I’ve kept it a secret and have been running away for it so long. I even hid it from you, a friend of mine ever since we were kids. I have this one card I saved until the very end—power I have locked away inside my body. More than half of what I did during that hijacking incident wasn’t of my own will. I silenced Aria so our enemy wouldn’t find us. That was the priority. If I hadn’t used it, I would have died. That was the situation I was in. But now ... my reason for using this power would have nothing to do with responsibility. Aria said I didn’t have to fight. Shirayuki herself rescinded the order I was given to guard her. That’s why I was no longer responsible. If I wanted to run, I was free to do so. Even if I would wind up regretting it for the rest of my life, I wasn’t obliged to use this power. But for the first time since my brother died, I’m going to use this power willingly. I’m going to use the trump card I have hidden deep within me.*

I'm going to use hysteria mode!

Shirayuki, "I'm releasing you from your duty as a bodyguard," you say?

"To hell with that!!" I screamed with my mouth wide open, and before closing it, took a deep, deep breath. Until I went red in the face. Until my lungs were on the verge of bursting. Until I became even closer to my limit. I sucked in all the air I possibly could ... and dove underwater.

There, Shirayuki stood almost listlessly as I grasped her shoulders, and her large eyes grew even larger as she shook her head from side to side. She blinked her eyes rhythmically, sending me a message in code.

'Don't die Don't make it up to me in that way'

Apparently she thought I was planning on dying with her. It was just like her to entertain such a thought.

That's not it. That's not it, Shirayuki. The third thing you told me. There was one more thing you told me to do, wasn't there? Yesterday, after the fireworks, you said, "Kiss me." I'm sorry it's going to be under these circumstances though. I'll do . . . what you asked of me!

I signaled a single word to Shirayuki with my blinking eyelids.

'Breathe'

As soon as I communicated the message, I embraced Shirayuki ...

" ...!"

...and place my mouth against hers. Shirayuki's lips—and it was a crime to make this comparison, really—were ... softer than Aria's. The breath I held inside was being drawn out of me, and a just a little of Shirayuki's passed my way as well. It had the sweet scent of peaches.

... Ahh. I can feel it. I can feel Shirayuki taking her next breath ...

Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

... as well as my increasing heart rate.

Starting at my lips, boiling blood began circulating throughout my body ... and converged at my very core. I never thought I would have been doing something like this with my childhood friend. That sentiment mingled with furious excitement and lit a fire within me. It was as if all the time I had spent with Shirayuki since we were children had come together and transformed itself into a source of heat that burned the center of my being with enough intensity to be painful ...!

Ahh. ... It's happening. I'm entering ... hysteria mode ...!

From the tips of Shirayuki's lips, bubbles rose to the surface as she exhaled. She was breathing. I kept our lips attached and after letting her take two more breaths ... released my mouth from hers. Reaching out my hand to the drum lock wedged against her upper abdomen, I gathered my concentration and inserted the bump key once again. *When the water rises to the ceiling, we'll lose our means of getting air. The way I see it, that'll happen in three minutes. No, it should already be less than that.* In normal mode, I require an average of twelve minutes to open an anti-break-in CP-C lock via lock bumping. But in my current state, the slightest sensations picked up by my fingertips allowed me to understand the inner structure of the lock as if I could see right through it. Click.

In a mere ten seconds, I opened the first of the locks that even Aria had struggled with. The second lock didn't take any longer, either. I went up for air, and while sharing it with Shirayuki again after coming back down, I took the bump key out the butei handbook she had tucked away between her chest and her priestess garbs.

Click!

The giant drum lock that had restrained Shirayuki made a loud sound as it opened, and the heavy chains also noisily slid down the pipe. Shirayuki and I rose to the surface, and our faces emerged from the water at the same time as we gasped for air.

Great. We made it in time.

Our heads were nearly bumping against the ceiling, but the warehouse wasn't totally submerged yet.

“Kin-chan!” Shirayuki swam over to where I was and embraced me.

“...Shirayuki, you just said that you released me from my duty as a bodyguard, didn’t you?”

Ah. You idiot. I’m an idiot. Don’t talk in that low, cool voice. And stop with the piercing look in your eyes. It’s so annoying.

“Y . . . Yes,” Shirayuki answered.

I gently caressed Shirayuki’s face from ear to cheek with my wet hands while using my thumb to brush aside a tuft of her hair that was clinging to her skin. “Whether I’m your bodyguard or not isn’t relevant. I’m going to protect you. I want to protect you because it *is* you ... no matter what. Shirayuki ... I want you to accept these scorching feelings of mine,” I said in a low yet clear voice resembling a whisper.

There was a bit of surprise mixed in with expression on her face that showed she couldn’t have been more deeply moved, and she nodded once. When she lifted her head, it finally made contact with the ceiling.

Ah. Now isn’t the time to be giving her assurance with my sweet words.

It was a bad habit of mine that emerged during hysteria mode. Right now, we had to move to the floor above us as quickly as possible.

“B-But Kin-chan, our opponent is a Matsugi. I’ll fight too,” Shirayuki said, lowering her nicely shaped eyebrows in determination.

“You’re a brave girl,” I commented with a small, wry smile. I didn’t want to expose Shirayuki to any more danger, but I had to respect the will of a lady. “I’m hoping that won’t be necessary, but ... alright then. If things start looking grim, give us a hand. Aria and I will take the vanguard. Shirayuki, you stay in the rear and set up an ambush.”

Now I had all my cards out in the open. All that remained to do was to meet up with Aria and launch a fierce attack. Then we would arrest Durandal, who had yet to even show herself. Our adversary was a strategist—and an esper at that. She wasn’t the type of opponent who could be beaten by an average butei. But

the buteis assembled here were by no means average. We had Aria the Quadra, myself in hysteria mode, and Shirayuki as support. With these three cards on the table, we can definitely fight on par with Durandal. We should be more than a match for her in fact. Those were the thoughts I was mulling over as I opened the hatch leading to the upper level. The water was now practically touching the ceiling. I opened the three layered door, and to prevent being attacked the second I stuck my head out, I used my knife as a mirror to check the surrounding area above me. When I came to the conclusion that there was no immediate danger, I wondered if there might have been some sort of devise attached to the door because another dull sound echoed throughout Junction.

“... Tsk!” I clicked my tongue. The water level began to rise even faster. It reached the ceiling in no time, and a surge of water threw us out onto the floor above us.

“Aaah!” cried Shirayuki, arriving on the sixth basement floor and subsequently being swept away by a rush of water on the linoleum floor.

“Shirayuki, be careful! Get your sub-edge (support blade) ready!”

“R...Right!”

I wanted very much to go after Shirayuki, who drifted off into the shadows, but right now I had to stop this flow of water. If this floor were to become submerged too, we’d have to go through the same ordeal all over again. Still keeping a firm grip on the hatch built into the floor, I attempted to close it against the extreme water pressure.

“Urrrrrrgh!” I groaned, using all the strength I could muster to push down on the door ... and barely managed to close it.

“Phew.”

Look’s like that put a stop to the water. If I were the normal me, I probably wouldn’t have been able to do anything about this, either.

“... Shirayuki,” I called out, but no reply came back. “...”

It could be ... that she had found our enemy and was keeping quiet so as not to give herself away. Shirayuki was currently supposed to be laying in ambush, after all. I took a look around me and realized that this level, the floor of which was

now waterlogged, had a large number of humungous computers lined up together like walls. This room housed a HPC server—or what's commonly known as a super-computer. There were access lamps blinking all over the place. There weren't, however, any signboards that read "Danger" or "Caution." I pulled out my Beretta and after removing the bullets, blew the water out of the chamber. A little soak in water wouldn't be enough to render modern-day guns useless. It was too bad for the guys in Informa and Connect, but I had no qualms with using my gun on this floor.

This room, with its large-scale computers lined up like portable partitions, was just like a maze. Unlike the shelves of explosives, there was no danger of having projectiles thrown at us from between small open spaces, but there was no way of telling where or who another person could be. Muffling the sound of my footsteps, I ran down a corridor surrounded by walls of integrated circuits and silicon. I held my gun in the position we learned in our indoor-combat class and moved around like a Special Forces commando. I made my turns cautiously when I came to corners of the walls of computers, and at the third one ...

"Kinji."

... I came across Aria. Apparently, she had heard our voices earlier and made her way back here from the elevator towards the back of the room.

"You're okay. That's great"

I made eye contact with her and nodding slightly, adjusted the direction of my gun to exclude Aria from its bullets' trajectory. Aria, who seemed to have felt guilty for leaving the warehouse without us, looked relieved to see me unharmed. But when she came by my side, Aria glared up at me with angry eyes.

"Why didn't you escape from here? I told you that you didn't have to fight, didn't I?" Aria reproved me in a low voice for disobeying her orders.

"I'm afraid I'm not rational enough to leave an adorable person such as yourself here while I make a run for it."

"...Wh-What's that supposed to mean?"

I, also relieved to see Aria bearing her cuspid and returning to her usual self,

whispered back to her.

“When I thought that you were probably longing to see me, I couldn't contain myself and my body just starting acting on its own.”

“W-W-W-What are you talking about at a time like this?”

I put on a smile rivaling that of Shiranui's, and Aria displayed her usual habit of becoming red in the face. The process of going from a fair complexion to bright red took precisely half a second. Congratulations on setting a new record, Aria.

“But more importantly, Aria, where's Durandal?”

“... I haven't found her yet. It doesn't look like that coward plans to fight with me.”

“I see.”

“But she's somewhere in this room for sure. All the locks on the doors leading to the upper level have been destroyed, and the elevator doors have been sealed off with iron plating. It was all done on the side accessible from this floor,” explained Aria, regaining her wits. Sure enough, it didn't look like Aria had entered battle with Durandal yet. “Say, I heard her voice earlier, so you succeeded in rescuing Shirayuki, right? She wasn't hurt or anything?”

It would seem Aria was fairly worried about us after all; she asked with the utmost sincerity.

Such a strong sense of responsibility. What a good little girl.

“No. But I lost sight of her in here. If we're taken out one by one while we're scattered about, it'll be just the way our enemy planned. First, we need to reunite with Shirayuki—”

Just then I heard a faint coughing noise. It was a barely audible sound that my ears only vaguely picked up even in hysteria mode, and Aria, with the sensitive hearing of a wild animal, spun around in its direction.

“It's Shirayuki. She's over there.”

“Let's go. But we don't know where Durandal might strike from. Aria, let me be your shield,” I said as I walked past Aria and started leading the way down the corridor. When I walked past her, I saw Aria's crimson eyes grow ever slightly

larger in my peripheral vision. It would seem that she realized a certain something about me.

We found Shirayuki right away. She was towards the back in the single open area of this HPC server room—the elevator hall. She had wandered into the corridor adjacent to the elevator hall and was slumped down in the shadow of computer nearly three meters high. She might have swallowed some of the seawater that swept her away because she was sitting on the floor in a position of a washed-up mermaid and coughing with both hands over her mouth.

“... cough cough ... D-Did you find Durandal ...?”

“We haven’t seen her. Shirayuki, don’t stray too far from us,” said Aria, bending down to rub her on the back. Shirayuki nodded in compliance.

“Kin-chan” Shirayuki was half in tears as she looked up at me with a gaze that suggested she was completely depending on me. Her wet priestess garbs were adhering to every inch of her body, revealing her sexy bodyline that was uncharacteristic of a high school student. When I was in hysteria mode, I could call to mind everything about the shape, color, quality, and trimmings of a girl’s outfit as if I had a photo right in front of me. However ... Shirayuki currently seemed to be wearing thin body-armor, not that black bra.

“Were your lips okay after that?”

“Yeah, they’re fine.”

I thought I would ask, and Shirayuki nodded her head.

“They were bleeding, weren’t they? Lemme have a look.”

“No need. It wasn’t that big of a deal. I just have a cut on the inside of my mouth.”

...I knew it!

“Aria, get back!” I yelled and opened fire on Shirayuki.

As for Shirayuki ... she seemed to have anticipated my actions.

“!”

In her dripping wet garbs she knocked away my arm, causing the bullet to go astray. The bullet ricocheted off the floor and hit the enormous computer nearby, creating sparks.

“Kinji?!” Aria cried out in surprise, and Shirayuki ran alongside her at blinding speed.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam! I instantly switched to full auto and my Beretta lit up with muzzle flashes. But the bullets it fired only found their way into the hem of Shirayuki’s hakama. She actually made use of the force that knocked back her hakama and scrambled behind Aria. Once there, she took up a katana that was hidden underneath the computer rack. She flung its vermillion-lacquered scabbard into the elevator hall, and the blade she had drawn from it was the katana that Shirayuki always kept with her. I was no longer able to fire at Shirayuki. She was using Aria as a shield. Aria was still unable to comprehend the situation, but she seemed to have sensed the danger with her animal-like instincts.

“...?! ”

She reflexively pulled out her pistols and tried to turn and face Shirayuki.

“Ungh?!”

Shirayuki tightly wrapped her left arm around Aria’s neck from behind. The sharp edge of the katana in her right hand was dangerously angled against the back of Aria’s neck under her ear. It was lined up with her carotid artery—the vital artery that could be reach by cutting inward by just a few centimeters, causing a person to bleed to death in a matter of seconds.

“Shira . . . yuki! What’s going on?! What’s gotten into you?!” Aria hollered.

From over Aria’s shoulder, Shirayuki then blew on the right hand in which Aria was holding her pistol.

“Uagh!” cried Aria, flinching as if she had been scalded by a hot iron. She dropped her prized Government, and when the silver pistol fell on the ground, the area around it became covered in ice.

“Aria! That’s not her!” I screamed. “That’s not Shirayuki!”

Shirayuki proceeded to blow on Aria’s left hand as well.

“Aaah?!”

She flinched again, this time releasing her jet-black Government and bringing both hands in front of her chest. There was ice attached to her hands as if a hard frost had set in. Seeing that unnatural spectacle caused an instinctive sense of fear to run through my spine.

Shirayuki ... did that just now? Using supernatural abilities?

“A mere human,” her voice was no longer Shirayuki’s, “trying to oppose a Stealth? Such foolery.”

I did have a hunch that something wasn’t right. The Shirayuki before me hadn’t done what I told her to do. I told her to take out her sub-edge, but she was lying on the floor coughing and unarmed. That’s why I asked if her lips were okay—to see how she would respond. If she had been the real Shirayuki, who I had kissed when we were under water, there was no way she would have calmly just said something like “they’re fine.” Not only that, but I hadn’t seen her injure her mouth at all. Yet, she answered in a way that suggested she had. This fake Shirayuki was so well disguise that I had to go through such lengths to confirm my suspicions. She was the exact splitting image of Shirayuki. If I hadn’t been in hysteria mode, which increases my senses by many times greater than usual, even I, Shirayuki’s childhood friend, would have been completely fooled and fallen at her hands.

“...Durandal ...!” Aria, finally perceiving the imposter’s true identity, cried out her name while trembling in pain from her frozen hands.

“...Don’t call me by that name. I’m not partial to names people arbitrarily label me as.”

“You ... remember *my* name, don’t you?! I’m Aria Holmes Kanzaki! One hundred and seven years of my mom’s prison sentence come from the crimes that *you* pinned on her! You’re going to have to make amends for what you did!”

“Is that the kind of statement one makes in your situation?” Durandal sneered at the captured Aria. “And regarding your name, it’s laughable for you to be so

proud of a name with only one hundred and fifty years of history. My name is much more ancient than yours. It has a history of six hundred years—a proud history of light.” She narrowed her eyes in amusement using Shirayuki’s face and brought her lips close to Aria’s ear. “I see. So you’re the Quadra. It’s just like Lupin the Fourth said.”

Lupin the Fourth’s name was just mentioned. She was referring to Riko.

*So she **is** allied with the “butei killer,” Riko Mine, Lupin the Fourth.*

I was just thinking that that a disguise this perfect couldn’t have been possible without her skills.

“Aria, you very much resemble my great ancestor, Joan of Arc the First. You have a beautiful and lovely appearance, but you also have a courageous heart ...”

“Joan of Arc ...?!” Aria repeated the name.

Did she just say ...Joan of Arc?!

I knew the name as well. I learned of it in the world history class that was part of our general education. She was a saint of France who led her country to victory in the Hundred Years’ War between England and France in the fifteenth century. Does Durandal mean she’s a descendant of that Joan of Arc? ... But ...

It was impossible for this girl right in front of me to be a descendent of Joan of Arc. The reason being that the woman known as “The Maid of Orléans” met her end by ...

“That’s a lie!” cried Aria, “Joan of Arc was burned at the stake ...before the age of twenty! She has no descendants!”

“That was a double,” Durandal said, snorting with derision. “Our clan is a clan of strategists. We can feign to be saints, while our true identity is that of a sorceress. We have concealed our true identity in the shadows of history while passing on our pride, name, and ingenuity to our heirs for generations. I am the thirtieth in our line—Joan of Arc the Thirtieth,” said Durandal—or if one were to abide by her claim, Joan of Arc.

“It’s just as you say. My ancestor, the first Joan of Arc, was nearly executed by burning. But following that, we have been studying this power for generations.”

Like a poisonous snake, Joan extended her hand to Aria's thighs and Aria wrenched her body in immense pain again.

"Aaah!"

Before my eyes, ice formed over her small kneecap. There was no longer any doubt. This girl had an unbelievable power that was different the abilities of we buteis.

"Follow me, Aria. Lupin the Fourth failed to bring you back with her, but I'll be taking you as well. Or ... would you prefer to die? I've accounted for the possibility of that scenario as well."

"... Aria!"

I switched my Beretta to semi-automatic and threatened Joan by pointing it at her head ... but I couldn't fire. Butei Charter, Article Nine: Under no circumstances shall a butei kill another person while operating as a butei. I only realized it when I fired at her earlier, but the priestess garbs she was wearing were bullet proof. The only other part of her body that was exposed was the hand that held the katana, but if were to shoot at it, I would hit Aria's neck. Joan knew the advantage she would have with Aria as her shield. She had it planned all along.

What do I do?

Joan looked me in the eyes as I stood there with furrowed brows and smiled at me presumptuously with Shirayuki's face.

"Having seen though my disguise, I'm pretty sure you aren't the usual Kinji Tohyama. I unquestionably need to be on my guard ... but in your current state, your weakness is having a girl taken hostage, isn't that right?"

She certainly deserves her title as a strategist. She had done a very thorough investigation.

"Tohyama, if you move Aria will turn to ice. Aria, don't you move either, or I'll freeze any part of you that so much budges."

I cursed in the back of my mind. Just as she said, in hysteria mode, I prioritized the safety of women over all else.

“Kinji ... shoot her!”

Where exactly, do you suggest I shoot her at? I can't just shoot through you. In my current state, I'm utterly incapable of doing that!

“You just spoke, didn't you Aria? You moved your mouth. You don't need that troublesome tongue of yours.”

Using the hand she held the katana with, Joan grab Aria's chin and forced it to the side where she restrained it. She then brought her own lips towards Aria's. *She's going to blow that freezing breath into Aria mouth!*

“Stop!” I shouted, but was powerless to do anything—not with Aria taken hostage.

“Aria!” echoed a voice that didn't belong to me. But the voice didn't have its usual reserved and somewhat frail tone. It had become something more valiant and powerful. From above a three-meter high computer behind Joan, a chain with a weight attached at its end sped towards Aria and wrapped itself around the sword guard of the katana in Joan hand, which she had relaxed her grip on while she restrained Aria's chin. The blade's sharp edge, which had been pressed against the nape of Aria's neck, was being pulled away.

“?!”

Joan looked up with Shirayuki's knitted brows, and on top of the computer ...

“Kin-chan, rescue Aria!”

. . . was the real Shirayuki! She yanked on the chain and pulled the katana out of the hand of her imposter. Atop the computer, Shirayuki then caught the katana that she fished up. Aria saved Shirayuki's life a little while ago, but this time Shirayuki saved Aria's. Butei Charter, Article One: Believe in your comrades and help one another. Normally, the two of them couldn't even do a simple fortune-telling together peacefully, but when situation called for it, they saved each other's lives.

Aria. Shirayuki. You two are remarkable buteis! Excellent job!

The real Shirayuki jump off the computer and swung her katana downwards, aiming to separate Aria from Joan of Arc. Joan responded. She gathered the long

sleeves of her blade-proof priestess garbs and attempted to catch the sword with her kimono. In doing so, she released Aria, who interfered. When Aria got away, she used her remaining functional leg to deliver a kangaroo kick into Joan's knee. Joan almost completely lost her balance and was forced to fall back. My hysteria mode eyes captured the entire process, which happened in little more than a second. Aria came rolling in front of my feet and stood up on one knee. Shirayuki stood in front, guarding her. She held the hilt of her sword vertically with both hands at position diagonal from her shoulder.

"Shirayuki," Joan said, "to think you would forfeit your own life to save Aria. ..."
A cylindrical shaped object dropped out from underneath the hem of the hakama she wore to disguise herself as Shirayuki. It produced a white smoke that quickly spread all around her.

A smoke bomb...! She's trying to blind us!

The sprinklers on the ceiling sensed the smoke and began showering water one by one. Shirayuki backed up little by little, avoiding coming in contact with the smoke Joan used to conceal her whereabouts. "Sorry, Kin-chan. I thought I had her just now ... but I let her escape."

"You did great. I would have expected no less from you. You okay, Aria?"

"S...She had me completely fooled. I never thought there would be two Shirayukis. ..." Aria said, still kneeling and repeatedly opening and closing her hands. Her grip had lost nearly all of its strength. She probably wouldn't be able to participate in the battle any longer, which was likely to be exactly what Joan's planned for. In addition ... I had the slight feeling that it was getting colder inside the room.

"Shirayuki, would you recall to memory a couple of things for me?"

"Sure."

"Do you have any recollection of setting up piano wire inside Aria's locker?"

"Her locker ...? I swear that I haven't done anything like that."

"One more thing. The other day, did Shiranui see you in the greenhouse pulling petals off flowers?"

“Huh? Ah, yeah ...” Shirayuki answered somewhat bashfully, and I clicked my tongue.

“I came across another Shirayuki at that same time. That girl has been lurking in Butei High disguised as Shirayuki, the entire time. That’s how she was able to observe us so closely ... and split us apart. Aria, the one who set up piano wire in your locker was probably Joan as well. You remember the piano wire that was set up in the floor beneath us, don't you? As they say, the best place to hide a tree is in a forest. Joan’s death trap was mixed in among the all the harassment you were subjected to by Shirayuki.”

Aria’s camellia-colored eyes grew wide as I speedily stated my deductions.

“Kinji ... you ... changed into ‘that’ again, didn’t you?!”

I did. I’m currently in hysteria mode—that “awakened” state as you call it. By not saying anything, I answered Aria’s question in the affirmative. Confirming her suspicion must have emboldened Aria because she exposed that fang-like cuspid of hers and started to holler.

“Durandal! You’re Joan of Arc, you say? You’re a coward! You don’t resemble your ancestor in the least!”

Beyond the smoke and a fair distance away, Joan responded to Aria’s taunting voice.

“The same applies to you, doesn’t it, Holmes the Fourth?”

Her voice came from a distance. It originated somewhere by the elevator hall. We turned in that direction ... and it donned on us. It wasn’t just a slight feeling. The temperature in this room was rapidly dropping. On the other side of the smoke, the water that fell from the sprinklers turned into ice crystals and danced around like snow. It was the phenomenon called diamond dust. It was a mystifyingly beautiful scene akin to dancing jewels. But paradoxically, it created an indescribable sense of fear. She was a diamond dust sorceress.

“Kin-chan ... defend Aria. She won’t be able to fight for a while.” Keeping her katana in her right hand, Shirayuki backed up towards us and kneeled down on one knee. She gently took Aria’s right hand into her own left hand. “A sorceress’ ice is similar to poison. The only one who can purify it is a Sister . . . or a

priestess. But this is a strong form of ice ranging from grade six to grade eight. Even if I use my powers to heal her ... I think it will take five minutes before she's back to normal. So you protect her until then. I'll defeat our enemy on my own."

"... What are you saying, Shirayuki? I can't let you fight alone." I step in front of the two, preparing myself in case Joan went on the offensive.

"Kin-chan ... I'm happy you feel that way. But for just right now, leave this to me, a choutei. Aria, I think ... this is going to sting quite a bit. But it's going to help you heal. Please bear with it," said Shiruki, and she started to softly whisper some kind of incantation. She was probably gathering her concentration. Power invisible to the human eye transferred from Shirayuki's hand to Aria's.

"... Agh ...! Ngh!"

Pain seemed to accompany the treatment Shirayuki was performing, but Aria muffled her voice so as not to be discovered by the enemy. Being in hysteria mode, I couldn't keep myself from looking behind me when I heard the pain in Aria's voice.

"Nggh!"

Aria was stifling her voice by biting the sleeve of her uniform, all the while flinching in pain. Her bangs whipped upwards, and I caught a glimpse of the X-shaped scar she hid underneath them. It was from the wound she received when she shielded me with her own body last month—a scar that would remain on the face of a girl for the rest of her life. I felt a pain run deep inside my chest. Beside me, Shirayuki finished administering Aria's treatment and pulled out something resembling wax paper from her kimono. She affixed it to the wall-like computer, and the area around us began to grow warmer. Taking a closer look, I saw that it was a rectangular shaped charm made of Japanese paper, and written on it were red symbols and Chinese characters. My vision became clearer, and I saw Shirayuki spring to her feet. The mixture of ice and smoke surrounding her drifted away like evil spirits being exorcized. I hadn't realized it, but at some point, our clothes had also been dried. *So this is a supernatural ability too, is it?*

"Shirayuki ..." I whispered.

Looking at her, I made up my mind. I didn't want to let her fight alone. I couldn't. However ... I couldn't leave Aria on her own, either.

... I'll leave this battle to Shirayuki for the most part since she's an esper. That's what she desires as well.

Seeing me back up towards Aria, Shirayuki addressed our adversary.

"Joan," Shirayuki said, taking a step forward in the opposite direction towards the enemy and turning her back on Aria and I, "let's ... put a stop to this. I don't want to hurt anyone—not even you."

Shirayuki made herself heard loud and clear, and from beyond the smoke came a short derisive laugh.

"Don't make me laugh. A raw ore such as yourself is incapable of hurting me. I have been thoroughly refined at IU."

"I'll have you know I'm a grade seventeen Stealth."

This time, Shirayuki's words didn't meet with any laughter. I wasn't very clear on the matter, but apparently, what Shirayuki just said was a substantial threat to an esper.

"...You're bluffing. There is only a handful of grade seventeen's in this world."

"You should be able to feel it yourself. It's forbidden by the Hotogis ... but when I released the seal on my garments ..."

"...Even if that *were* the truth ..." This time, there was a bit of tension in Joan's voice. "You can't betray the Hotogis—not if you understand what betraying them would mean."

"Joan ... you're a strategists who's fallen prey to her own strategy." Shirayuki's voice became stronger. "You refer to the person I normally am—the person I've been until now. But at this moment, I have next to me the single being who can bring me to break any of the Hotogi's rules. Your foresight didn't account for the strength of those feelings."

Joan didn't have any reply for the curious statement Shirayuki made. Those who concoct schemes are weak against unexpected developments. And right now, our enemy was being made aware of a miscalculation in her plans—all due to this Shirayuki who was a different person than before. The temperature in the room was already reverting to normal. The smoke from the smoke bomb was

also disappearing, and the sprinkles shut off one after another.

“... Give it your best shot,” said Joan. “I anticipated the possibility of direct combat. The higher their grade, the more quickly chouteis lose their stamina in battle. If I can hold out, then I win.”

It sounded as if Joan had strengthened her resolve, and at long last ... her figure appeared from behind the dissipating smoke. She had cast aside the red hakama and white kimono, and as I suspected, what had lain beneath them was western style armor covering sections of her body.

“The disguise Lupin the Forth provided me with was difficult to move around in, but that’s over now.”

Joan peeled off the thin mask she was wearing on her face, and behind it were long and narrow sapphire eyes as piercing as blades. Her hair, two French braids worn up around the whorl of hair on the back of her head, was a silver color like that of ice. Unlike the descriptions of Joan of Arc mentioned in old-fashioned Japanese textbooks, this Joan of Arc was exactly the kind of beautiful Caucasian that you would expect to see in a western historical film.

“Kin-chan ... don’t look at me from here on,” said Shirayuki in a slightly trembling voice with her back still facing me.

“... Shirayuki?”

“Starting now ... I’m going to use a technique that’s forbidden by the Hotogis. But if you see it ... I’m sure you’ll become afraid of me. You’d think you were seeing the impossible. You may ... come to hate me even,” Shirayuki said as she placed her hand on the white ribbon she always wore in her hair. Her fingers were also trembling to a small degree.

Taking half a step back, I replied, “Shirayuki ... don’t worry. There’s only one thing that’s impossible.” I moved into a position that would protect Aria from the battle that was going to start between two chouteis. “I’ll come to hate you? That, of all things, is impossible.”

Almost as if my low voice had given her a push, with a forced smile, she turned her head halfway towards me as she unraveled the white ribbon that was tied in her hair.

“I’ll be right back.”

Shirayuki repositioned her foot, sounding her geta with its red thong and carrying her sword in a different position. Her stance was different from what it was before. She was grasping the very edge of the pommel of her katana with her right hand and held it sideways above her head so that flat the of the blade could be seen. It was a peculiar stance that was unlikely to exist in any school of kendo.

“Joan, I can no longer allow to you escape.”

“...?”

“It’s because you’re about to witness the forbidden kidou that lies hidden within Hotogi priestesses. Like you, we, too, have inherited the power and name of our ancestors. Aria’s family has done so for one hundred and fifty years. Yours for six hundred. And we have been doing so for a long period of roughly two thousand years.”

Shirayuki strengthen the grip of her hand holding the katana, and a waving, scarlet light shined at its point. The light quickly extended over the entire sword blade. The light, which was illuminating the computer filled room, was the light of flames! At this point, there was no doubting that it wasn’t a trick using benzene or flammable gas. It was unmistakably Shirayuki’s trump card—her supernatural ability.

“‘Shirayuki’ is an alias used to hide my true name. My real name ... is Himiko (scarlet maiden).”

The second she finished her sentence, Shirayuki darted towards Joan, closing in on her like a blazing arrow. Joan, who for a short instant was entranced by Shirayuki’s technique, stooped down low, and pulling out a gorgeous, western style sword that had been hidden behind her back, stopped the powerful attack into which Shirayuki had put her all.



What would have normally been sparks, emerged in the form of jewel-like diamond dust that immediately evaporated as the two swords vied for dominance. Joan skillfully avoided a swing from Shirayuki's katana, and it cut the computer beside her in two without making a sound. Joan dodged backwards from Shirayuki's next attack, placing some distance between the two of them. It was an obvious retreat.

"Fire ..." I said to myself.

Taking a good look, I noticed there was a tinge of fear mixed in with cold sweat running down the face of the beautiful girl. In hysteria mode, I could tell. She was afraid of fire. Joan said that the founding ancestor of her clan began developing that technique after nearly being burnt at the stake. Most likely, it was out of fear. She was afraid of what nearly took her life. For generations, her clan has been studying the secret art of ice manipulation with that fear deeply ingrained in their hearts.

"What you just saw was the first of a series of attacks of Hotogi Souten style, Hinokakabi (Scarlet Shining Man). Next, I'm going to cut through that sword with Hinokaguchi (Scarlet Flame Hammer of Fear)," Shirayuki said, once again raising the blazing scarlet katana over her head.

It's just like a torch. I see now. The purpose of that stance is to keep the surging flames from harming the wielder.

"That will be the end of this. There's nothing this Irokaneayame cannot cut."

"That's my line. The Sacred Sword Durandal can cleave through anything" Joan proclaimed, her voice full of courage.

The large sword Joan wielded was an ancient-looking but a well maintained, magnificent claymore. The blue jewel that decorated its cross-guard sparkled in the light given off by Shirayuki's flames. Shirayuki sprang towards Joan again ... but to my eyes, it seemed as if she were rushing to bring the battle to an end.

Clang! Clang!

Their swords exchanged strikes a number of times, sending the loud sounds of

clashing, fierce metal echoing through the room. It was almost unbelievable to watch as Shirayuki's katana and Joan's sword sliced through everything they came in contact with. The computers along with the cabinets that housed them. The bulletproof elevator door. The linoleum floor and walls. But there was one thing that wasn't being cut apart. It was the metal that formed Shirayuki's Irokaneayame and Joan's magical sword—the Sacred Sword Durandal as she claimed it to be. Those swords, both exalted for being able to cut through anything, were the only things that didn't receive a single scratch no matter how many times they clashed against one another.

“This certainly is ... a battle between top-ranking chouteis!” came Aria's voice from below me, and she finally lifted her head.

“Aria,” I whispered, crouching down next to her, “can you move?”

“I ... seem to be okay now. But my guns are frozen to the floor so even if I recovered them, they won't be of any use. My pistols aren't meant to be used in cold environments. They probably won't be functional unless I completely disassemble and perform maintenance on them,” said Aria, looking at her frozen Governments in frustration.

“Let's come up with a plan.”

Aria, who was always arbitrarily acting on her own authority, looked up at me ... and nodded her head without protest. It would seem she treated me like an actual partner when I was in hysteria mode.

“I'd like to support Shirayuki in some way, but if our timing is off, we'll wind up becoming a hindrance. You have experience arresting espers like this, don't you? Isn't there some way to create a chance for us to take her down?”

“To be honest . . . I've never come up against a Stealth this powerful. But I don't think ... their battle is going to last very long.”

“What do you mean?”

“The greater the power an esper uses, the more that person's stamina is depleted. When fighting a butei, they make it a point to use as little power as possible ... but when the opponent is one of their own kind, they continue to release their full powers just like that. That's why they run out of steam so

quickly. That moment will be our chance.”

“Can you tell when that moment is?”

“As a rule of thumb, probably. Half of it will be based on intuition though. ... Will you trust me?” Aria asked, sounding just a little bit fretful.

I see it left a scar on her heart when I told her I couldn't believe her the other day. This won't do.

If two buteis don't have a relationship of trust, they wouldn't be able to act in unison. Their timing would be off. I straightened out my knees and gently stroked Aria's pink hair.

“I was being an idiot the other day. I want you to forgive me. I swear . . . I'll trust you for the rest of my life.”

“Th-The rest of your life?”

It seemed my formal choice of words wasn't in Aria's Japanese vocabulary.

“Even if no one else in the world believes you, I alone will always be on your side,” I explained, staring deep into her camellia-colored eyes.

Aria, whose natural habit of become red in the face had already made her cheeks quite rosy, became the bright red color of a strawberry. Her face, full of surprise, looked somewhat happy as well, and I asked her if that were the case.

“Feeling happy?”

“... Y-You're an idiot, Kinji! E-Even in super mode, you're an idiot ... you idiot ...!

“Answer me. I want to be certain of your feelings,” I urged her.

“... A-A little ... a little happy. B-But just a little bit, okay?!”

“If you're happy, I'm happy. Now then ... will you trust me as well?”

“... Y-Yes.” Aria nodded and even gazed up at me the way a child does with an adult.

It's like she's at my beck and call when I'm in hysteria mode.

“We both believe in one another,” I delivered the finishing blow, and Aria brought her coupled hands to her chest as if something had rang out deep in her

heart. “That’s why I want you to be confident and tell me how we should time our attacks. We’re going to arrest Durandal.”

While I was rebuilding the bond of trust between Aria and I, the conflict between fire and ice in which Shirayuki looked as if she were dominating at the beginning, now seemed to be an even battle. “...Ngh!” Shirayuki was swinging her sword around with her teeth clenched tightly; it didn’t even look like she was breathing.



She made an attack in which she practically used her entire body to ram into her opponent, and Joan finally fell backwards against the wall in a squatting position. But ...

“Haaa, haaa, haaa!”

... Shirayuki, the person who landed the attack, was the one breathing hard and looking groggy. As if to illustrate her shortness of breath, the flames surrounding Shirayuki’s katana were much smaller than what they previously were.

“Throw down your sword, Joan. You’ve lost.”

“Heh ... heh heh,” Joan laughed unseemly, and with one smooth motion, instantly created a flowing mist of minute ice crystals all around her. Under the cover of that mist, she rolled forward, escaping to Shirayuki’s side. In a panic, Shirayuki swung to the side her katana, which had lost most of its flames.

Clang.

The blade pierced the wall ... and came to a stop. It was all too clear. Shirayuki was losing the power she had been using until now—and it happened in just a few minutes. It was just as Aria said. Chouteis were powerful. They can pride themselves on possessing a strength that was incomprehensible to others. But they were unable to fight for an extended period of time. Video games worked the same way. When a character that uses powerful magic runs out of the means to cast those spells ...

“Haaa, haaa ... haaa.” Still holding the hilt of her Katana, Shirayuki fell on one knee. She looked completely exhausted. It was as if she had just run a full marathon. She pulled her katana out of the wall and resting it on the floor, she fumbled for the vermilion-lacquered scabbard that was lying nearby. And for some reason, she used it to sheath her sword.

“You’re soft.” said Joan. “You’re a woman as soft as ice cream. To think you would aim only for my sword and not my body ... despite the fact that it’s utterly impossible to cut through the Sacred Sword Durandal,” said Joan, repositioning herself and placing Durandal’s edge against Shirayuki’s neck.

Aria ... not yet? It's still not time to give our support?

I saw Shirayuki grit her teeth as she place the sheathed sword behind her, almost as if she were trying to hide it.

Shirayuki!

I nearly jumped out on impulse, but Aria placed an admonishing hand on my arm.

“Not yet, Kinji! Shirayuki’s ... probably leaving herself just enough strength to perform one more attack. ... But she needs time before she can use it. It looks to me like ... she’s charging up some kind of power ...” Aria said in a soft voice, looking as if she were desperately restraining her own self from rushing out into fray.

Diamond dust began to dance around Joan again as she held her sword in her hand. Before my very eyes, it raged throughout the room like a snowstorm. Once again, the cold instantly dropped to sub-zero temperature inside the room!

“Behold the Fleur de la glace d’Orléans (Ice Flower of Orleans)! Turn to silver ice and forfeit your life!”

Beyond the diamond dust, Joan’s Durandal began emitting a bluish-white light that steadily grew brighter. Just then ...!

“Kinji, follow after me in three seconds!” yelled Aria, pulling out the two short katanas from behind her and flying towards Joan like a bullet.

... One second.

Joan, who had been concentrating on her battle with Shirayuki, turned around startled.

... Two seconds.

“A mere butei!” Joan swung her sword sideways towards Aria in a fit of rage, but even faster than that, Aria used the katana in her right hand to pick up the priestess garbs Joan had thrown to the floor and flung them up in front of her, robbing Joan of her sight for just an instant.

“!”

Aria lowered her body and slid with skill of a professional soccer player. Joan's arm continued to swing on the path it traveled. Aria had read her opponents movements and carried herself using aikido-like baritsu movements. Above Aria, a torrent of blue light pushed aside the priestess garbs in midair and rose upwards. The spectacle before me truly was something one would see in a video game. An eddy of shining ice crystals converted into blue cannon fire and reached all the way to the ceiling. It spread on impact like a colossal flower of ice blooming on the ceiling.

... Three seconds!

“Kinji, now! Joan can't use her powers anymore!”

Aria didn't even have to tell me. I raced towards Joan, creating a rift in the diamond dust around me.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

I fired along a vertical line centered on the upper half of Joan's body with my Beretta, which I had set to fire in three-burst rounds. Using Durandal, which she had already brought back in front of her, Joan deflected all three of the bullets. I had anticipated she would. She was a master swordswoman who could fight on even grounds with Shirayuki. That's why I increased my speed and closed in on her. I would engage her in the close-range pistol combat I had learned in Assault. During class, I used something similar to the shields employed by riot police though. When enemies had a means of defending themselves from bullets, the tactic buteis use to defeat them is by showering them with bullets at point-blank range.

“A lowly butei like you dares to challenge me?!” Joan roared, actually coming right for me. Aria swung her two katanas at Joan's feet, and naturally, expecting that as well, Joan jumped into the air, leaping towards me. Using her sword, she blocked the bullets I fired to intercept her. But she didn't just defend herself. After her sword arced back, she brought it down again—aiming for my skull.

“!!”

It was a superhuman feat for someone who had lost her magical abilities. The speed of the incoming sword was greater than that of which I assumed Joan's motor skills were capable. Durandal was on a clear path to my skull, and I was

unable to get out of its way. Just then ... everything appeared to be moving in slow motion to my hysteria mode eyes. There was one technique that would help me to overcome this situation—and it required both of my hands. But I couldn't allow myself to let go of the pistol in my right hand. Speaking in terms of chess, it was a piece I needed in order to achieve checkmate. That's why I used my empty left hand ...

“... Ngh ...!”

...to stop the magic sword, Durandal. It was the method of catching a sword blade with one's bare hands—the single-handed version. I was a bit skeptical as to whether or not I could put it off, but I did it. It was thanks to hysteria mode ... and to the training Aria gave me.

“...!” Holding the hilt of her sword, Joan landed right beside me. “... I can't believe you ...” Joan looked at edge of her prized sword being gripped between my index finger and middle finger, but as I expected, she still didn't seem to have lost her fighting instincts. Keeping her sword in my left hand, I placed the barrel of the gun in my right hand against the back of her neck.

“. . . This is the end of the line, Joan. It would be best for you to behave like a good little girl,” I said, chastising her like a child.

“Butei Charter, Article Nine,” she replied.

I slightly averted my gaze and smiled wryly. She was right. If I were going to uphold the law, I wouldn't be able shoot Joan in the neck.

“Don't tell me you've forgotten. Buteis can't kill people.”

“Ha ha. You certainly are a clever young lady.”

“Y-Young lady?” Joan must have found the designation embarrassing because, her face slightly reddened. “B-But *I'm* not a butei!” she said, straining the arms in which she held her sword.

Come on now. You're already captured, young lady. This battle is over. The reason being ...

The sound of footsteps made by getas with red thongs could be heard racing towards us.

“Don’t you lay a hand on Kin-chan!!” cried Shirayuki as she came running at us with magic sword Durandal in her sights. “... Hihinohotogikami (Scarlet God of Hotogi)!”

Similar to iai style, Shirayuki drew her katana from its scabbard and swung it upwards in one fluid motion. A scarlet flash of light came out along with the katana ... and the upward swung blade sliced through Durandal. It then sent an eddy of flames like those from an incendiary bomb spiraling upwards towards the roof far above. The frozen ceiling and the layer of ice covering it shattered as if it were blown up by a grenade launcher! As debris fell all around her, Joan stood there dumbfounded at the fact that Durandal had been cut in two.

“...!”

At the very end of it all, yet again did something she hadn't accounted for take place. Joan, having a weakness for such things, could do nothing but stand there with her sapphire eyes wide open.

“Durandal!” an anime-like voice called out. Aria took advantage of the opportunity, and the sound of handcuffs being clamped onto Joan’s right wrist could be heard.

“Ah?!” Joan looked at her wrist, and what she saw attached to it were anti-esper handcuffs. It probably shouldn’t even require mentioning, but they were handcuffs that Aria bought on the first day she began acting as Shirayuki’s bodyguard.

“You’re under arrest!!” Aria pounced on Joan like a carnivorous beast and cuffed her left wrist as well.

“That’s why I said ‘It would be best for you to behave like a good little girl.’” Spinning the top half of Durandal’s blade, which had been cut near the hand guard, I grabbed it by its lower end. Meanwhile Aria, clinging fast to Joan, put additional handcuffs on her ankles. I took my watchful gaze off of Aria. Although her actions didn’t suggest it, like Aria, she was, after all, a young lady who came from a very proud lineage. That confidence of hers did prove to be her downfall though.

Joan, till the very end, you made light of Aria and I—of buteis. That was the cause of your defeat. But the buteis gathered here are Holmes the Fourth a. k. a.

Aria the Quadra, and I in hysteria mode working effectively as partners. We aren't "mere buteis".

I let a sigh out of my nose and walked over towards Shirayuki, who had used up all of her strength and was sunk down on the floor surrounded by debris. As soon as our eyes met, she returned her katana, now void of flames, to its scabbard and hid it away.

"K-Kin-chan."

She looked like she was about to say she was sorry, so I made a warning sign with my finger and gave her a look that said "Stop right there."

"...Th...thank you."

"Thank you," huh? I guess that gets a passing mark.

"Shirayuki, you really pulled through. We were able to arrest Durandal thanks to you."

"Y ... you weren't ... scared?"

"Of what?"

"O ... of me just now ... I-I was so ..." said Shirayuki with moisture in her black eyes underneath her perfectly straight bangs. It would appear she was convinced that I was afraid of the supernatural powers she just displayed.

Ha ha. That's what you were worried about?

I could see Shirayuki was afraid that I hated her now so I answered her question with a kind smile.

"There's nothing to be scared of. It was very beautiful and powerful fire. Much, much more so than the fireworks we saw the other day."

"Kin-chan ... ngh ... uuu ..."

Shirayuki let out a wail and started crying as she flung her arms around me, so I gently returned her hugged and stroked her on the back.

I'll do this with you as long as it takes. So quick to cry. Until you calm down . . . I'll just continue to tenderly rub you on the back. Just like I did when we were kids, and you were crying because we got in trouble for going to the fireworks

festival. Indeed. When it came to this sort of thing, Shirayuki hadn't changed at all. But ... she'd become quite strong—strong enough to break out of Hotogi's bird cage, spread her fiery wings, and fight of her own will. Sniveling, Shirayuki looked up at me, and I told her some words to help put her at ease.

“Don't go disappearing on me like that again ... Shirayuki,” I said, showing her another smile.

Final Bullet Who Gave Off that Flash?

I'd like to thank that person . . .

The Ar-kata for the Adsiard's closing ceremony started off with the handsome Shiranui's vocals and the F-minor chords I strummed on my guitar. The other day, I went into hysteria mode again in the underground warehouse—in front of Aria and Shirayuki, no less—and I wasn't overly concerned with the quality of the sounds I was producing.

Man ... that was torture ... What was I thinking? "Don't go disappearing on me like that again ... Shirayuki." Didn't I say something rather outrageous to Aria too? Something about doing this or that for the rest of my life. Just trying to remember makes me want to curl up and die. Though I didn't have any other choice under the circumstances, an even bigger problem was that Aria and Shirayuki witnessed me doing all sort of things like seeing through Joan's disguise, rambling on about strategies that came to mind, and even catching a sword with my bare hand ... It wasn't pretty, but I went and made myself useful. I had provided Aria and Shirayuki with more grounds to overestimate my actual abilities. I really didn't want to remember how the two of them kept raving about me afterwards, saying things like "You can do it if you try" or "Kin-chan you really are amazing." I had a feeling that I would be relied upon to handle all sorts of troublesome things in the near future. It was more than a feeling; I was positive of it. And there would be more troublesome things involving gunfights.

Who gave off that flash . . .

And what's wrong with this school? Stop pinching pennies and hire a real band for crying out loud.

Although it was a bit too late at this point, I started taking out my frustration on Butei High with such thoughts as I played the Danelectro DC 59 on ground number two, the venue for this performance. I was getting rather accustomed to the guitar in spite of myself.

Damn, this is fine weather.

Who gave off that flash that went bangbabangbabang?

At the same time as the tempo started to increase, the girls marched in from the left and right sides of the stage in their cheerleader uniforms with pom-poms in their hands and smiles on their faces. “T-This really is a bit too ...”

Looking towards the voice out of the corner of my eye, I also saw Shirayuki, who was fidgeting on the stage wing.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! What are you talking about after having come all the way out here? Go on! Get out there!” yelled Aria, kicking Shirayuki onto the stage—right into the dead center.

Completely red in the face, Shirayuki raised a pom-pom, and by her side was Aria. As it turned out, Aria, the most athletic out of all the girls, and Shirayuki, who was selected last minute to perform due to Aria’s strong recommendation, were the two main cheerleaders leading the routine. The preparatory committee had secretly hoped Shirayuki would participate in the cheerleading so it didn’t take very long for arrangements to be made. I was a little concerned about how well she would do after making such a sudden appearance on stage, but she proved to be every bit a stellar cheerleader as she is a student. Shirayuki was animatedly demonstrating a perfect cheer routine. She must have been embarrassed appearing in front of everyone in that costume because the expression on her face was still a little strained. But Aria kept a stern eye on her so Shirayuki would just have to chalk it up to bad luck and accept her fate. Aria is like an electromagnet powered by a nuclear reactor; once attached to you, would never let go.

Even if we’re right in froooooont of our enemies, we never run and hide!

For Shirayuki, this was the first time she mustered the courage to appear in front of others ever since that battle ended. Shirayuki had not only left school grounds with me, but she also violated the restrictions placed upon her by using techniques that were forbidden by the Hotogis. However, because Aria convincingly protested against the seriousness of the violations and the insignificance of the specific number of times the violations were committed, the Hotogis eventually gave in and granted Shirayuki permission to participate in the cheerleading. There was also the matter of Shirayuki successfully defeating

Durandal that probably helped persuade them. I conceded to that as well.

Well ... what you're doing is little more than a cheer routine. But I can tell, Shirayuki. You're no longer a "caged bird." You're still all a shudder and haven't ventured out very far, but you're a magnificent bird soaring with your own wings—a ... uh, that's right. A crane. You've become a red-crowned crane.

I was occupying myself with all these thoughts because I didn't want to think about how I went into hysteria mode the other day, but it was also to keep me from paying attention to Shirayuki, whose uniform was tightly hugging on to the shapely curves of her body. Nevertheless, spinning and jumping hither and thither while unable to completely hide her embarrassment, Shirayuki ... was swinging her twin mountains all over the place.

N-Not good. I'm gonna get hysterical.

But what was I to do? There was a giant audience in front of me, and I couldn't very well just hang my head down like I did during practice. This called for emergency evasive maneuvers. I switched my gaze to Aria, who was next to Shirayuki.

... Thank god.

Those mountains were stuck firmly to ground no matter how much she jumped and hopped about. Still, I couldn't let down my guard. The cute little things were so small that there were revealing openings between her skin and her outfit. Be it Shirayuki or Aria, there was no escape from their dangerously active volcanoes. This stage might be more of a threat to me than even Junction. If I were to go into hysteria mode in a place full of girls like this, it would be no laughing matter.

Let's think of something else. Uhhh. Well, quite a significant incident took place underground, but as can be seen, Butei High wasn't blown to smithereens, and the Adsiard is safely coming to an end as the closing ceremony is underway ... uhhh.

Who gave off that flash that went bangbabangbabang?

That's right. Joan. Joan of Arc the Thirtieth. Abiding by the decision made by the Metropolitan Police Department and the Tokyo Bureau of Butei, she was

first being questioned by Ms. Tsuzuri at Dagula. When we handed over Joan, who had her back turned to us and was determined to remain silent, it was really eerie how Tsuzuri smiled and said, "Looks like it'll be worth tormenting this one." It was the first time I had seen her smile like that.

Who was it? Let me give that person a hug.

The girls threw their pom-poms high into the air and the crowd instantly went into a fever. They had all been carrying pistols inside their pom-poms, and just like the lyrics, they fired blank cartridges with their pistols aimed towards the sky. Perhaps it was due to the contagious wild energy from the audience but the girls were firing more than they did during practice.

There they go I really wish our school didn't do unsettling things like this.



The whole purpose of this thing is to improve our image.

I could only pray that the television stations would cut this part out when they did the editing. Finally, with Aria and Shirayuki at the center, the girls all simultaneously struck a gymnastic formation pose, and the aluminum foil confetti that had been set up inside the stage burst upward all around them.

It made a dramatic change in my life!

The Adsiard had come to an end.

Shirayuki, out of breath from the intense Ar-kata cheerleading, was now smiling carefree at the audience. Bits of confetti sparkled as it danced around her. It was like a white snowfall celebrating the start of her new life.

God only knows why, but our celebration party was being held at a family restaurant. It was the same place the guys had their after-party following the Adsiard. I had objected, pointing out that the girls went to Club Estella in Odaiba, so we should at least go there. But as usual, my protests were utterly pointless, and the three of us, Aria, Shirayuki, and I, had our second after-party in a booth at Roxie, the only family restaurant on Academy Island. Having arrested Durandal, things looked positive for Aria's mother, Kanae Kanzaki, who had been framed for Durandal's crimes. Her mother's prison term was announced to be considerably reduced; so in a very good mood, Aria declared that she would treat us. It was a small consolation, but being a noblewoman, I wished she had invited us to a slightly more stylish restaurant. I was about to say as much, but then realized she might reconsider opening a new hole in me, so I just order a steak set, the most expensive thing on the menu, as a small sign of my discontent. All of us placed our order and wiped our hands on the moist hand towel we were provided with when I noticed something odd about Aria and Shirayuki. They were staring at each other, looking as if they wanted to say something but held their tongues.

... What with this atmosphere?

"Y-You know ..."

“Y-You know, Aria ...”

When they spoke up, it was in perfect harmony.

“Y-You can go first, Aria.”

“You go first.”

“... Should I leave?” I asked Shirayuki, who was sitting beside me, but she lowered her face and shook her head.

“U-Um ... I want you to hear this too, Kin-chan. There’s ... something I absolutely have to tell Aria.”

... Something you need to tell Aria that you want me to hear?

“Um ... the other day, when you caught a cold ... I told a lie.”

“A lie?”

“Yeah ... um ... the medicine you took that day . . . I didn’t buy it. That was ... something you left in his room, wasn’t it, Aria.”

Huh? The other day, when I was in a stupor from my fever and stayed home from school ... the one who went through the trouble of buying me “Extra Concentrated Kudzu Infusion” and secretly left it on the doorknob was ...

“It was you, Aria?”

“...”

Shirayuki truly looked apologetic as she watched Aria, who wasn’t saying a word. Aria was looking at Shirayuki as well and gave me a very brief glance with her camellia-colored eyes.

... What kind of reaction is that supposed to be?

“W-What? Is that what you wanted to say?” Aria placed her hands on the back of her head and leaned far over backwards in a contrived manner. She had turned somewhat red and was throwing me brief glances again.

Ah. I remembered what Aria said when we were on Assault’s rooftop.

“Nobles don’t boast about their own exploits. It would be unsightly—even if someone else stole the credit.”

So this ... is what she was talking about?

“What a let-down. You were so serious when you said you had something to tell me that I thought it was going to be a lot more disastrous.”

Judging from how she didn’t deny it, it would seem Aria really was the one who bought the medicine—which meant that the one who very gently checked my temperature back then was also Aria?

“I’m such a horrible girl, I know. But I didn’t want to remain a horrible girl so ... I’m sorry!” apologized Shirayuki, bowing her head at Aria. But Aria placed her hand under Shirayuki’s chin and lifted her head back to its former position.

“It doesn’t particularly bother me, so don’t worry about it. Okay, that’s the end of this conversation. So now it’s my turn.”

“O-Okay.”

From the looks of things, these two had already let one another know that they had something to talk about before coming here.

“Ahem,” Aria cleared her throat and returned her posture back to normal.

“... Shirayuki, you be my slave too!” Aria commanded, pointing her finger at Shirayuki.

Shirayuki, I, and the guys who were sitting in the nearby booth all became stiff as stone.

H-Hey. Stop looking this way.

“Thank you, Shirayuki,” Aria continued.

Hey, Aria. You’ve got a huge non sequitur on your hands.

“You get three-tenths of the credit for arresting Durandal. I get four. Reki gets two.”

... Huh?

“I realized something regarding this incident. In our fight against Durandal—Joan of Arc—if we had been on our own, I’m sure we would have lost. The three of us together barely managed to beat her. I acknowledge that.”

Before that, there's something else I'd like you to acknowledge. I'm included in that "three," aren't I?

"We were able to win because we worked together. Until now ... I always thought that no matter who my enemy was, all I would need is myself and a partner to draw out my full potential. But ... there are opponents out there whom we wouldn't be able to handle with just the two of us. In other words, it would be a good idea to increase the number of allies in my party who have special skills—especially allies like you who have powers that I don't."

Well, well. An ally, huh? I guess it just goes to show that the former "aria" learned a few things at this school.

As for Shirayuki, the one being recruited, she was murmuring things to herself like "s-slave ... that's ... but if I could be Kin-chan's slave ..." and it was difficult to tell whether she was listening or not.

"So our contract may be over, but *you're* going to continue working together with Kinji too! From morning till night, we're going to function as a team and build up our teamwork! Here! This is the key to Kinji's apartment! From now on, you can enter whenever you like!"

"Thank you, Aria! Thank you so much, Kin-chan!"

"Wait a second!" I protested.

Shirayuki put the forged keycard in her shirt pocket with god-like speed, and I fell out of the booth, tumbling onto the floor.

"Out of the question! In the first place, that's a boy's dormitory!"

"You have a problem, slave number one?!"

"You guys! Listen to what I'm say- ... It would make me so happy if you listened to what I'm saying, but would you at least consider it?"

My tone of voice changed mid-sentence because Aria pulled out her two pistols. It was just then that a somewhat perturbed waitress brought us our meal. Mineral water and a steak set. Oolong tea and seasoned rice cooked with meat, fish, and vegetables. Cola and peach buns served over rice.

What in the ...? Whoever created this menu, get yourself another job.

“Okay! Here’s to the birth of slave number two! Cheers!”

“Cheers! ... I’m so happy! I’m just so happy! A spare key ... it’s proof of Kinchan’s love!”

Aria’s eyes reflected her delightful mood, and Shirayuki cried tears of joy as they raised her glass. And I, slave number one, had no way of changing the direction this mess was heading.

For the love of ...

“Fine! Just have it your way!” I bawled, joining the toast with enough force to knock the drinks out of their glasses.

And thus, it turned out that these two nuisances would continue to enter and leave my apartment as they pleased. When we left the family restaurant, the first thing Shirayuki did was go to the girl’s dorm and come back to my place loaded with various personal belonging wrapped up in cloths. Aria was watching the two-hour special of Amazing Animals she recorded the other day, and she was bounced up and down on the couch while saying, “How adorable! Look, look, Kinji! A raft of sea otters!” Her shoes were lying slovenly in front of the door, and her black knee socks were strewn on the floor.

*Miss Aria, aren’t you forgetting that this was originally **my** apartment?*

“Say, Aria. Regarding the calculations you made at the family restaurant earlier ...” I said with a displeased look on my face as I sat down next to Aria, who was fast-forwarding through the commercials.

“What?”

“It’s about the ratio of contributions made in the Durandal incident. You contributed forty percent. Shirayuki contributed thrity. Reki contributed twenty ... so my contribution was ten percent?” I complained

“Well, you only performed a little bit at the very end, didn’t you?!” Aria declared without so much as looking in my direction while she operated the remote control.

“... I’m seriously starting to want to put an end to our partnership.”

“Well ... you were *sort of* impressive at the time.”

Since the raft of otters had gotten Aria rather excited, when she did finally look in my direction ... it was to wink her eye at me.

T-This little ... Don't wink so readily. It should be against the rules. It's just too cute. I think I just felt a miniature arrow come flying into my heart.

“I'm going to put the HDD recorder on pause for you so listen closely, partner. You're just like Shirayuki. There seems to be fluctuations in how well you perform, but you do have abilities that a member of the Holmes family like me requires. I was able to reconfirm that during this latest battle. That's why you, too, are someone who can make up for my shortcomings. You're ...”

Aria turned towards me on the couch, folding her lower legs underneath her thighs and resting her fanny on her heels. Apparently, before she finished her sentence, she wanted to increase her sitting height as much as possible so that her eyes would be level with mine.

“... an important person to me,” concluded Aria, looking at me squarely in the face with her camellia-colored eyes. I was speechless.

H ... how self-centered can this girl be? But, is the reason I can't seem to defy her because the little midget is so damned cute the way she's sitting directly in front of me right now? No. That's not it, Kinji. That has nothing to do with it. It's because of that other thing. It's because of her child-like size. I'm sure of it. I can't say “no” to a kid. That has to be what it is.

“What did you just say?!”

A hysterical, shrill voice could be heard from behind us.

T-This is bad!

I turned around with a pale face, and as I expected, behind the couch was Shirayuki.

“‘Important person’?! What is the meaning of this?!” She was in that berserker mode of hers and stood there with a grave look on her face.

S-Shirayuki, you're scaring me! What's with those dilated eyes that don't seem to be focused on anything?! Or rather, what is it that flips your switch?! For security reasons, just tell me at least that much!

"... I'm going to make myself clear here, Aria!"

"W-What is it?! What are you so upset about?!"

Aria also backed away at seeing the demon-like Shirayuki and slipped off the couch, falling on the floor with one leg still on the cushion.

"Don't think you've won! I-I-I shared a kiss with Kin-chan too, you know!" cried Shirayuki, pulling out her katana from who knows where (I certainly couldn't figure out where it came from), jumped over the couch and slash a strike at Aria with it.

"W-What are you talking about?!"

Shirayuki brought up the matter of Aria and I kissing again, and Aria's face went red as she skillfully rolled to side, evading the katana.

Ahh, there goes my table again ...

"So we're tied! We're tied! As far as Kin-chan goes, we're tied! All I have to do is take the next step ... and I'll be in the lead! That's all there is to it!"

Shirayuki was screaming out incomprehensible logic as she wildly swung around her katana. One after the other, all the various indoor items I had replaced were being destroyed.

"H-Hey! Slave number two! You're just a slave; what do you think you're doing to your master?! Stop this at once!"

Aria dodge backwards from Shirayuki's katana, which came towards her horizontally, and finally pulled out her pistol.

Blam!

Aria fired a warning shot with her jet-black Government, putting a hole in the ceiling.

I apologize to all of you, my neighbors.

"W-Well you're just a mistress who's shamelessly trying to steal what doesn't

belong to you!” Shirayuki wasn’t fazed in the least. She knit her eyebrows underneath her perfectly straight bangs and charged at Aria.

That’s it. There’s no stopping this now.

“Kinji! What’s this about kissing Shirayuki?! Y-You were doing that sort of thing to your client?! You’re a disgrace to buteis! But right now, do something about this!”

Aria, you certainly chose a troublesome person to be slave number two, didn’t you. Either way, before you start getting angry at me, it would be in your best interest to do something about the armed priestess in front of you.

With those thoughts in my mind, I plodded my way across the living room, stepped out onto the balcony, and opened the door—the door to the bulletproof storage locker of course.

“You two be sure to clean up afterwards.”

I’d learned something as well these past few days. Aria the Quarda. Shirayuki the armed priestess. I wound up dealing with all the incidents these two were involved in by going into that loathsome hysteria mode. In fact, it was because I had to constantly avoid going into hysteria mode when working with these two that there had been no end to the amount of danger I’d faced lately. With that being the case ... I can’t really run away from hysteria mode anymore. But I sure did have my homework cut out for me. Hysteria mode was never something to be controlled freely using one’s own will to begin with. My brother was able to do it ... but I don’t think I’m capable of using *his* method. The way I become after going into hysteria mode also presents a problem. If by any chance, the girls take a liking to “Host Club Kinji,” a hostile environment where people use me for hysteria mode would be created, and it would just be a repeat of my days in junior high. The greatest problem is the trigger—sexual stimulation. I would have to make sure no one ever found out about that.

Gaah! There are just so many problems to deal with I don’t even know where to start. Well ... I guess I’ll just try and think of a better way to handle this the next time I go into hysteria mode.

“Kinji! Back me up! If you don’t ...”

For the meantime, what I probably need to do is ...

“... I’ll open a hole in you!”

... ignore Aria’s anime-like voice, shut myself inside the bulletproof locker, and pray—pray that I’m still alive when the sun comes up tomorrow.

Epilogue Go For The Next!!!

Normally, a person's home is place of peace and tranquility, isn't it? But at this moment, with Aria still living in my home and Shirayuki coming in as she saw fit to unabashedly take over the housework, the place reeked of girls, and no semblance of peace or tranquility could be found.

Give me a break here. I'm begging you.

Therefore, far from refusing to go school, I've been refusing to go home these days. Today as a well, I was cooping myself up in the study room after school with the king of all idlers, Muto, and Shiranui, who were always willing to hang out with us. The three of us were studying a game of cards. It was just a little past seven when I was starting to grow weary of Muto's endless winning streak (the guy was always awfully lucky. It made me wonder if he were cheating), and I received a call on my cell phone. If it had been Aria, I was just going to ignore it, but the number started with zero-three. *This isn't from someone's cell phone. Who is this?*

"Hello?"

"Kinji? Where are you right now?"

Ugh. It's Aria.

"What difference does it make? What did you want?"

"Get over here right away. I'm in room number one-zero-one at the girl's dormitory."

"I do *not* want to go to the girl's dormitory."

"Stop your complaining! When I say come right away, come right away! If you don't come, I'm gonna open a hole in you!"

Click.

No room for debate. My master simply hung up on me.

With no other choice (none whatsoever), I made my way to room number one-zero-one of the girl's dormitory ... to find the door was unlocked. Girl's dormitories had more rooms than boy's dormitories, and this place didn't appear to be an exception.

Is this even Aria's apartment?

"Hello? Aria, I'm here."

"Jeez, that took you forever. But I'll let it pass today."

I stepped inside and Aria came trotting out of the bathroom in her sailor uniform. She then suddenly took a firm hold of my hand.

H-Hey. What gives?

"Come on. This way."

She pulled me into the living room, and what I saw there was disconcerting to say the least.

"Ngh ...?"

In this room, which was bathed in the pink light of candle pots, there were so many various outfits scattered about that there was no place one could go without treading on them. The sheer number of them was uncanny. There was a waitress uniform, the type of priestess garbs Shirayuki would wear, a maid uniform, a large smock like the ones worn by kindergarteners, an Alice band with cat ears attached to it, fake tails, an elementary school student's backpack with a recorder sticking out, a pumpkin shaped garment that was most likely underwear—the list goes on.

"Kinji, which would you prefer?"

"'Which would I prefer?' Prefer for what?"

"What am I going to do with you, Kinji? Just because you've lived your life avoiding this sort of thing doesn't mean you have to be *that* dense. I'm asking you which kind of cosplay do you want me to do."

Completely overwhelmed by ambience of the room, I was at a loss for words, and narrowing her slanted eyes, Aria approached me one step at a time. She stepped on my toes with her little foot, around which she wore her black knee

socks, and gave me a shove so that I fell backwards onto the huge bed that was behind me.

“Kinjiii?”

Moving swiftly, Aria straddled my waist like a child would, and without warning, smothered my face with the upper half of her body. My feeling of disgust at going into hysteria mode only lasted for an instant. The sensation of marshmallow-like breasts behind her blouse being pressed against my face. The feel of her soft thighs around my waist. Enveloped by the bittersweet smell of a girl, I made the sudden switch to hysteria mode in just a few seconds.

“!”

At that moment, something flashed across my mind. And at the same time, the blood in my veins turned to ice. I was well aware that it was disrespectful of me to be having such thoughts, but Aria’s chest wasn’t this well endowed. She did misrepresent herself with a push and plunge bra, but having had it pressed against my face once before, I knew all too well what to expect. And this sensation I was feeling presently was being brought about by another girl’s body that I was familiar with from prior experience. It was exactly the same as “that” girl’s.

“... Riko ...” I said in a low, unfriendly tone.

“Bingo! I did it! I did it! Hysteria Kii-kun! You’ve taken a giant step forward!”

The girl was dressed liked Aria, but her voice became Riko’s as she lifted the upper half of her body away from me. Her large breasts jiggled underneath her uniform, and she grabbed the bottom of her chin with her right hand and one of her ponytails with her left. She then tore off the strawberry-blonde pigtails and the thin prosthetic makeup that masked her face. As I suspected, behind the façade was . . .

“It’s Rikorikorin! Hehe! I’m baaack!”

... Riko.

She was the one who killed my brother, planted a bomb on my bicycle and Butei High’s bus, and escaped after fighting with Aria and I during the high jacking incident—Riko Mine Lupin the Fourth, the “butei killer.”

What is she doing here at Butei High?!

One might expect Riko's eyes and their double eyelids to twinkle like stars, and she narrowed them in delight as she let down her long, honey-colored, wavy hair that had been skillfully hidden under a wig. "Kii-kun, help me."

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. In hysteria mode, I wanted to help girls no matter what it took. If it were to help a girl with a problem or a girl in a tight bind, I wanted to assist them in any way they desired. Riko ... was obviously aware of that as she spoke.

"When you think about it, I was enrolled at two schools at once, and it's because of you and Aria that I got expelled from IU in the first place, you know? Phooey patooey!"

Expelled from ... "IU"?

"I have a favor to ask you, Kii-kun. So for the first time, I'm going to use the method my mother taught me to make a guy listen to a girl. Hehe. We're about to start the super sweet event that comes with the patch our customers bought, allowing you to take the Riko route."

Like an excited beast, something hot was introduced into Riko's breath, and she took off my tie. It was clear what she was going to say next in this situation.

What do I do?

Riko brought her adorable baby face close to mine and used her seductive lips as she spoke.

"Kii-kun, let's have a roll in the hay."

What are you gonna do, Kinji?

To Be Continued!!!

Afterword

“Everybody loves girls with long, black hair!”

And there you have it. Sorry for the wait. Shirayuki Hotogi plays a huge role in “Aria the Scarlet Ammo II”! Shirayuki is a tidy, obedient, kind, traditional Japanese woman, but at the same time, she’s also a ... s-slightly problematic girl who goes into demonic armed priestess mode, pointing her glinting katana at any girl who gets close to the protagonist, Kinji Tohyama. (sweat) But this time around, included in the story was the drama surrounding such the comical Shirayuki who was actually being fettered by invisible chains. It was my intention to have you all watch over Shirayuki as she grew in character just a little bit ... but in the end, a lot of you are probably thinking “But she’s still scary!” (Akamatsu in tears) W-Well ... please do Shirayuki the favor by accepting her for who she is—dark Shirayuki mode included. That’s what love is about!

In the story this time, the unlikely duo Kinji and Aria, become Shirayuki’s bodyguard and the three of them start living together. This creates huge problems for Kinji since Aria and Shirayuki are as friendly with each other as cats are with dogs, and they start fighting regardless of where they might be. I hope you enjoy experiencing with Kinji all the comical girl trouble he is faced with.

There are a number of themes that you’ll find throughout the “Aria the Scarlet Ammo” series. One of them is teamwork. This theme is actively researched academically, particularly in Europe and America, where various ethnicities and ideologies are intermingled. Sadly, academics aren’t my strong suit, however ... so I’d like to incorporate the theme into this light novel in a fun way, little by little. As you read through this series, you’ll probably be able to improve the teamwork between you and the friends you have now and the friends you’ll make in the future. I’m sure of it. So recommend “Aria the Scarlet Ammo” to all your friends as well. (smile)

I hope the day will come when all the Kinjis of Japan can meet with other Arias, Shirayukis, Mutos, and Rekis, and form wonderful teams who can accomplish all kinds of dreams.

A lucky day in December 2008

Chuugaku Akamatsu

IT'S VOLUME TWO OF ARIA.

ARIA 2巻 ということぞ。

■ I'M KOBUCHI.

I HAD THE PLEASURE OF DRAWING THE ILLUSTRATIONS. THIS IS THE SECOND VOLUME OF ARIA! IT'S A VERY HAPPY OCCASION. I WAS BOTH EXCITED AND GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO DRAW ARIA AND THE OTHERS AGAIN.

■ THIS TIME, I HAD FUN DRAWING SO MANY EXPRESSIONS FOR SHIRAYUKI. I GOT TO DRAW A CHEERFUL ARIA AND A CHEERFUL-SHIRAYUKI AS WELL.

THE FAN SERVICE IS REALLY SOMETHING, ISN'T IT! AKAMATSU-SENSEI, ARE YOU INTO CHEERLEADERS?

■ THE MAIN STORY DIDN'T PROVIDE ANY OPPORTUNITY TO DRAW THE NEW CHARACTER IN A SCHOOL UNIFORM, SO I MADE AN ILLUSTRATION HERE. SHE GIVES THE IMPRESSION OF A PRETTY DUTIFUL AND DILIGENT GIRL.

I WONDER IF THIS IS GOING TO BE THE ONLY TIME WE'LL SEE HER.

I HOPE SHE MAKES ANOTHER APPEARANCE.



1. sama is an honorific title used to show a person a very high amount of respect.

2. A children's game in which one child squats on the ground with his or her eyes closed while the other children sing a song as they walk in circles around that child. When the song ends, the child in the center guesses who the person behind him or her is, and if guessed correctly, those two children switch places.

3. A dogeza is an extreme form of apologizing in which a person prostrates oneself.

4. *The nadeshiko flower, or "Large Pink" in English, is a delicate frilled carnation used as a metaphor for the ideal Japanese woman, an epitome of pure feminine beauty. The kanji translates to "caress-able child."

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

2

Tokyo Butei High School, the specialized school renowned for training exemplary students to become world class buteis – military combative detectives with skills ranging from marksmanship, bomb detonation, and even supernatural abilities. Super elite S rank and top performing butei – Aria, and her chosen partner Kinji Tohyama, are assigned a new mission: to protect the SSR department's star pupil, and Kinji's dear childhood friend, Shirayuki, from Durandal, the same mysterious swordsman responsible for the imprisonment of Aria's mother. Amongst the high tension of guarding against an invisible enemy, Shirayuki has a mission of her own: to rip apart Aria's relationship with Kinji and steal him back! The thrilling, action packed saga and comedic love story continues in **Aria the Scarlet Ammo Vol. 2.**

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