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18



Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE



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I WILL BE
SEEING TO
ALL YOUR
NEEDS
FROM TODAY
FORWARD,
MASTER.

That day...

I'M
MYUSEL-
MYUSEL
FOURANT.

SORRY, CAN
I ASK YOU
SOMETHING?
CERTAINLY,
ANYTHING
AT ALL.

WHO'S THIS
"MASTER"?
WHO ARE
YOU TALKING
ABOUT?

I'M YOUR...
MASTER?

...my destiny
accelerated.

Prologue

What do you think of when you hear the words *another world*? Floating islands? Rainbow-colored skies? Maybe triple moons?

It's supposed to be a world different from our own. In other words, you expect something that makes it clear that this other world is a different place. Otherwise, you can't be sure that it isn't the world you grew up in. That's what we're used to encountering in fiction: places that are obviously different, with characteristics that mark them out immediately.

However...

"Welcome to the other world," I said with a smile to our U.S. soldiers as they got off the elevator.

The commander saluted. "Emergency Duty Unit Burrows reporting, sir, one hundred and seven men, of the Fourth Marine Regiment, Third Marine Division, Third Marine Expeditionary Force." The hundred-odd soldiers behind him likewise saluted. They were all attempting to maintain neutral expressions—every good soldier knew to keep personal chatter and even emotions to a minimum during an operation—but it was clear how uneasy most of them felt. I knew because we'd felt the same way when we arrived.

It was night now, a curtain of blackness upon the hill where the hyperspace tunnel let out. A few bonfires were burning, but they were far too weak to banish the darkness entirely, and what's more, it was a cloudy night, depriving us of even the light of the moon and stars. The ridges of the mountains were visible as dark shapes in the distance, but that was the only really notable thing in the area. From up on this hill, there was nothing to draw the eye. The grass around our feet wasn't even an unusual color or anything.

Thus, the soldiers' first thought about the other world was presumably: *Is this it?* From the American perspective, someplace like Africa or East Asia, with their distinctive weather and cultural practices, probably seemed more alien than this place.

But it didn't matter. "First, have everyone put these on," I said, handing a case

to a subordinate. “It doesn’t matter which finger. Then we’ll talk.”

The case contained a collection of rings, one for each person. They were made of metal and covered with complicated engravings, but there were no moving parts; to all appearances, they were inert jewelry. But they were magical.

The soldiers hesitated for an instant; they didn’t know anything about these rings. But this was the Marine Corps, and they weren’t known for being intimidated by some accessories. Each silently slid the ring onto a finger.

“You there. Get out of the way. We’re going to close the lid.” Some men appeared from the shadow of the tower from which the elevator was suspended. (To our surprise, the tower on this side was made of wood.) The men were dressed in light armor and carried swords at their hips and spears in their hands. They looked roughly medieval.

The newly arrived Marines caught their collective breath, but it wasn’t because of the men’s outfits. They were surprised because, although these soldiers of the Holy Eldant Empire could clearly be heard to be speaking an unfamiliar language, the words were being translated into English in the men’s minds.

“Sir...” the commander said.

“It’s magic, or so I hear,” I replied. “Something like a universal translator.”

“*Magic*,” the commander mumbled, furrowing his brow. I didn’t blame him. “Are they wizards, then?”

“No. The rings are magical.” I watched the Eldant soldiers as they came closer. They kept an eye on the elevator that connected our world with this one. Something like border guards, you might say, making this roughly equivalent to an immigration checkpoint. It was possible that some among their number could use magic, but they didn’t look any different from the others.

“I see... So we really are in another world,” the commander said, probably voicing what was on the minds of all his men.

Magic. Yes, magic. A technological system that didn’t exist in our own world. Something that could produce an item that fits on your finger which could

automatically translate anything anyone was saying, regardless of the source or target languages. It wasn't flashy, but it got the point across. I couldn't imagine how it worked, but... well, that was what made it magic.

"Get moving. Lid's coming down." The Eldant soldiers sounded a little more emphatic this time. Behind them, a massive cover was suspended from another tower. It was a single, semi-translucent convex panel. I didn't know how they had built it, but I guess that was something else the technology here could do. Or maybe that was magic, too.

"Let's get moving. We don't want to upset them," I said to the regiment.

The Eldant Empire didn't seem to have an especially favorable view of the American military—not of the Marine Corps, and not of me and my bodyguards, who had been admitted as special envoys. Then again, it wasn't that shocking. We were used to this sort of reception when we arrived as peacekeepers.

The commander nodded, and the men began to march away from the hyperspace tunnel, away from the hole in the ground. The Eldant soldiers immediately started operating the crane attached to their tower. It lowered the cover, on chains, onto the hole with an awful racket.

As I watched the cover come down, I nodded discreetly to the commander. He nodded back, and patted one of the Marines beside him on the shoulder. The big man pulled an M9A1 pistol from his leg holster and released the safety all in a single flowing motion. Then he put it back in its holster—and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot echoed across the hilltop, followed by a muffled scream.

"Wh—What the hell?!" The Eldant soldiers turned to us, startled. Several more came running over.

"This man's gun exploded! Somebody help him! We don't have any medical equipment with us!" I shouted, pointing to the Marine, who was holding his leg and writhing on the ground.

The Eldant soldiers looked at each other in confusion for a moment, possibly not understanding what it meant for a gun to explode. As incredible as the magical translation devices were, they faltered if the person you were talking to

didn't have a word in their language for whatever you had said.

They might not have understood the words, but they certainly understood the soldier groaning and bleeding on the ground, and they couldn't just leave him. The Eldant soldiers suspended the work of lowering the cover, several more coming over to us. The remainder headed for the guardhouse, presumably to get first aid supplies.

"Thank god!" I said, smiling at them. It was a real help to us. They were so hospitable.

The Eldant soldiers surrounded the wounded Marine, while the other Marines surrounded them. A human wall, if you will. And because so many of the Marines were quite large, the Eldant guards couldn't see what was on the other side of that wall.

I delicately extricated myself from the circle of Marines and looked over toward the portal. The cover was still about a meter off the ground. And I could see figures slithering through the gap, crawling on the ground like lizards. They wore dark camo to help them blend in with the night, and they hadn't come in via the elevator like the Marines. They had rappelled across the divide using ropes hung between the two worlds. CIA agents. I'd left some cloth pouches on the ground for them, containing magical rings (which I'd obtained, let's say, unofficially) and clothing like the locals wore. The agents silently picked up the bags and just as silently made their way away from the portal. Perfect. The Eldant troops never noticed them.

"The wound is worse than we thought," one of the Eldant soldiers said, coming up to me at length. "We're only equipped for basic treatment here. This man needs to see the doctor in town."

"Right, of course. Thank you, I'll make sure he does." I nodded and smiled. The wounded Marine was able to start walking away leaning on one of his comrades. Nearby, a horse-drawn carriage (well, in this world they were pulled by giant birds) furnished by the Eldant Empire was waiting for us. We just had to load the Marine in and head for the temporary barracks, and tonight's operation would be complete.

The commander and I exchanged another nod. Everything had gone perfectly.

The Eldant soldiers went back to lowering the lid. The two of us had to fight to keep from smiling.

Chapter One: Uninvited Guests

The wind blew gently down city streets bathed in soft sunlight. It wasn't too hot, and it wasn't too cold. The perfect day for a little walk, some shopping, a daytrip... anything, really. Maybe that explained why the town surrounding Holy Eldant Castle in the heart of Marinos, the capital of the Holy Eldant Empire, was bustling today.

Everyone seemed filled with energy and enthusiasm as they went by. Earthquakes had taken their toll on the buildings and furniture not long ago, but that just meant more business for the dwarven craftspeople who specialized in repairs and carpentry. It meant demand for new furnishings to replace what had been broken, so that vendors of furniture and kitchenware were right in the middle of it all, competing to see who could shout the loudest and attract the most customers.

There were other signs of a booming economy as well: not just sales of specific items, but the fact that every place in the capital seemed to be busy. I hardly knew the first thing about economics, but this looked like a boom to me. Everyone in Marinos seemed to be at the top of their game.

"Sigh..." And yet all I could do was sigh as I walked down the street.

It had been quite a while since I'd first come to this other world. As a former home security guard, I used to feel a bit out of place walking these quasi-medieval streets, but these days I felt like I belonged here. As much as I thought back fondly on Japan, I no longer felt like a stranger here in Marinos, and hadn't for some time.

"Shinichi-sama, we should go there next."

"Oh yeah, sure thing."

Despite the hubbub, I reacted quickly when I heard my name. The voice was so familiar, yet I knew I would never get tired of it. It had the endearing quality of the twittering of a small bird, but it was also refreshing, even healing. I knew my ears would always pick it up no matter how much distraction, how much noise there was around us. I was certain that if *she* said my name, I would

always hear her.

Myusel Fourant. The very first person I'd met when I came here—and a maid-san in my own house! Of course, she only wore her maid uniform at home; right now, she was in a going-out dress, but the reserved look of the outfit suited her. It wasn't some gaudy color, and she had kept the accessories to a minimum, but I thought that only highlighted her actual appearance. Her lustrous, flaxen hair; her round eyes the color of purple gems; her smooth skin, pale as ceramic... My point is, she was beautiful, so beautiful that the plain clothes actually highlighted how lovely she looked. Then again, maybe a girl as pretty as her would look good no matter what she wore.

She turned back, and suddenly, my eyes met hers. She smiled happily—really, truly happily.

Hwhoa! Unexpected emotional offensive!

My heart started going a mile a minute (even though it didn't need to). I thought it might burst. If she'd added "Isn't this fun, Shinichi-sama?" then I, whose years without a girlfriend exactly equaled my years of being alive, might have just exploded right on the spot.

"Uh, uhh, so remind me, what else do we need to buy, again?" I asked, desperately trying to slow my pounding heart.

Myusel cocked her head like a little bird; apparently, she kept the entire shopping list in her brain. "We just need some vegetables and... oh, seasonings." Her flaxen twintails bounced slightly. I could just spot the elf ears under her hair. How cunning! How flirtatious! She was threatening to pierce my heart and she didn't even know it! Just, like, *bashoom!*

I hardly knew where I was going! Or... coming, or something!

Come to think of it, I thought, my heart still pounding, I never got a lot of chances to go shopping with Myusel, just the two of us like this.

It was her job as the maid to take care of the shopping, and I usually had school anyway. If she really needed help, she could call on our gardener, the lizardman Brooke, or his wife Cerise, who was also a maid in our house. There was never really a reason for me to go with. That's what made this little

shopping trip so exciting.

No, hold on. Wait. Was this...?

.....

“Wanna have some lunch?”

“Sure. We could eat somewhere. Where would you like to go, Fosse?”

“Oh, anywhere you like, Lew-kun!”

“What I really like best is your home cooking, Fosse!”

“Oh, Lew-kun!

.....

It was almost like we were... you know. It was... *you* know.

Yes—that legendary, much-rumored privilege of the socially fulfilled, a “date”! Yes, a date! That word which, if appended to the title of a light novel, can prevent it from being sold in China (according to my dad)—a date!

Then perhaps I, Kanou Shinichi, am taking my next step into adulthood! Am I still a Cinderella? Oh, surely happiness— Wait, I’m afraid I might get a cease-and-desist if I write any more, so I’ll leave off the rest! (Transmission scrambled.)Uh, okay. Time to calm down.

A man and woman, very obviously a couple, walked by holding hands like total lovebirds. Their sweet conversation had whisked my mind off to far places. But really, I was nothing more than a manservant helping a maid do the shopping. This wasn’t a date or anything. At least, it wasn’t supposed to be. So there was no need for me to get all excited. No need, you hear that, self? You listening? Y’all calm down now, ya hear?

At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

.....

“Sweetheart, that’s our next stop.”

“Sure, I hear you. Wait up.”

“It’s so rare for you to do the shopping with me.”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like to stop for a drink somewhere. Since we’re together. Can we?”

“Sure, of course. Just go easy on me, okay?”

“Hee hee hee...”

.....

A date? Heck, we were practically like young newlyweds going out together. Maybe Myusel and I even looked like a husband and wife to other people walking down the street. Maybe? Just like the completely obviously totally nuts-about-each other couple that had just walked by. Maybe?!

I must have looked a little weird, because Myusel stopped and turned back again. “Um... Shinichi-sama? Is everything okay?”

“Sure, of course. Just go easy on me, okay?”

“Er...?”



My response left her blinking.

“Uh, it’s nothing. Sorry,” I said. I took a deep breath and came up beside her.

But then again, maybe Myusel...

I mean, maybe she really did like me. In a romantic sense. And I sure didn’t hate her. Just the opposite, in fact.

...Meaning, maybe we’ll go out on a real date someday?

To tell the truth, we hadn’t really been planning this. It was just that the school where I usually taught was closed, my work as both a cultural ambassador and General Manager of Amutech was suspended, and I didn’t see any benefit in just hanging around the house, so I decided to come out with Myusel for a breath of fresh air. But if she and I kept spending time together after this, maybe we really would end up going on a date like boyfriend and girlfriend, and then... Well, then I guess we would get married, and spend our time chatting like couples do.

If we were *able* to keep spending time together after this.

“Hey, Myusel...” I looked at the bags she was holding in both hands. “Isn’t that stuff heavy? Are you sure you don’t want me to hold something?”

“Oh, no, sir. This is supposed to be my job,” Myusel said, shaking her head. Incidentally, what she was carrying were the ingredients for tonight’s dinner. Any way you sliced it, a lot of people lived in our house—there had already been seven of us to begin with, but lately Brooke and Cerise’s kids had nearly doubled that. So you needed a lot of food, and a lot of ingredients. It all looked like an awful lot for Myusel to carry all by herself, but the first time I’d offered to help, she’d politely declined just like this time.

To be fair, Myusel did the shopping every day. I was the one who had gotten it into my head that this was some sort of date. Frankly, I was embarrassed for myself.

Then I heard something unusual. Myusel, walking beside me, was... humming. Very quietly; I didn’t even notice until I was right beside her. But she sounded really happy, like she was genuinely enjoying herself.

“Something good happen, Myusel?” I asked.

“Huh?” She looked at me blankly. Only then did she seem to realize what she was doing. “Oh... Well, er, I...” She looked at the ground, her cheeks and ears turning bright red. Not because she was embarrassed to be humming specifically... “Ahem... I’m just so happy... to be here like this with you, Shinichi-sama.”

That struck me dumb.

Yes. Right. That made me feel quite, uh, shy.

The way she looked at the ground, speaking in the quietest possible voice, and with such obvious joy—it was enough to drive my shyness quotient through the roof. If I thought my heart was racing before, it was *flying* now. I practically wanted to run in circles right there and then.

“Myusel... Myusel...” I was brimming with the desire to sweep her up in a hug right here, all these bystanders be damned. In fact, I was close to overflowing...

But then— “When I think... that now I’ll have more memories of you, Shinichi-sama...”

Myusel’s words were like a blunt instrument to the back of my head. My heart spontaneously stopped its furious activity and I felt a chill all the way through my body.

That’s right. I’d been forgetting.

No, that wasn’t true. I hadn’t forgotten. I would’ve loved to, if it were possible, but I couldn’t—that was exactly why I was so desperate for a change of pace, which was why I’d come with Myusel on this shopping trip in the first place.

I couldn’t muster any words. I didn’t know what I should say.

Reality was merciless, and me—I was helpless.

“Oh—” When she saw me go silent, Myusel must have thought I was upset by what she’d said. In the space of an instant, she went from happy to troubled, her eyes darting this way and that. “O—Oh yes, Shinichi-sama, I just remembered, that shop over there—eek!”

In her confusion and panic, Myusel tried to make an abrupt turn from where she had been going, to head for some other shop. I'm sure she just wanted to help disperse the painful feeling that had settled between us. But as she changed direction, she bumped smack into somebody coming the other way.

The bulging shopping bag fell out of her hand. It was so tightly packed that it actually managed not to scatter its contents everywhere, but a few pieces of fruit went rolling away.

"I—I'm so sorry!" Myusel reflexively apologized, then crouched down to pick up the fruit.

To our surprise, a rough hand got to it first. My eyes followed the fingers up the hand, then the arm, until I was looking at a very solid-looking man. He was big and bulky, his muscles obvious even under his clothes. He had short-cropped golden hair and a rugged face. Most noticeably of all, he was wearing a combat uniform with the latest optical-camo pattern. I recognized all this from seeing these things in anime and movies and stuff, but to someone like Myusel, they must have been the strangest-looking clothes around. The M4 carbine hanging around the man's neck would only have heightened the bizarre impression.

In other words, uniform or no uniform, he was the quintessential macho man. You could just picture him stepping out of a movie screen and growling, "Remember when I said I would kill you last? I lied," while dropping someone off a building. He was completely intimidating even just standing there.

At the moment, his amber eyes were fixed on Myusel.

"Er—I'm very sorry!" Before I could think about what I was doing, I put myself between him and her. It seemed like he might just reach out and wrench off Myusel's head. He didn't look like the type who really needed a gun or a knife or whatever to kill someone. His bare hands were enough to ice a couple of obnoxious twerps. I thought it was well within the realm of possibility.

But then...

"Not at all. It was my fault." I was startled to see the man smile and apologize without even a "Come on, Bennett, throw away the chickenshit gun!" He seemed amazingly friendly.

And he was speaking English.

I guess that shouldn't have surprised me—he was one of the U.S. Marines who had shown up in Marinos recently. But it obviously wasn't my exquisite fluency in English that allowed me to understand him—we were both wearing magic interpreter rings.

What a weird feeling, though, to hear English right in the middle of a marketplace in the Eldant Empire. To be fair, I guess in its own way, it seemed more appropriate to this quasi-European fantasy world than Japanese did.

"Everything around here is just so unusual. I wasn't looking where I was going," the sailor said, and then he held out his hand—offering us the fruit he'd picked up.

"Th—Thank you... very much..." Myusel sounded a bit overwrought as she took the fruit.

Just then someone shouted, "Harrison, what are you doing?!" The voice came from a group of guys a short distance away, dressed the same as this sailor—his comrades, I supposed.

"Sorry, Sarge—I was building bridges with the locals!"

"Real admirable, but you're on duty! Don't break formation!"

"Sir, yes sir! Sorry, sir!" Harrison shouted, and then he winked at us—his way of saying "See ya," I guess—and jogged back to his group.

If nothing else, I was glad it turned out he wasn't the violent type. That was great and all, but still...

"The United States... Marines..." I mumbled, taking a quick look around the castle town. Brick houses and shops were everywhere, and instead of cars, carriages pulled by giant birds filled the streets. People's outfits, like the architecture, had a medieval European vibe. Some of those people, though, were fantastical things like elves and lycanthropes. It was a classic fantasy world, like something straight out of a movie or anime.

Maybe that was why they stood out so much, these men walking innocently around town in modern combat fatigues. Or maybe I was the only one paying

them this much attention. They were calm and polite whenever they interacted with the townspeople, and for their part, the people—maybe thanks to having already met the JSDF—didn't seem particularly bothered by the troops. But still...

You know, wasn't the M16A4 retired from service? I thought I read an article saying they were getting new rifles or something...

I thought distantly about the M4 carbine the sailor had been carrying. They'd come armed. Well, so had the JSDF, but they didn't walk around in full kit, to avoid frightening the civilians.

That was it. The Americans were walking around innocently enough, but if they wanted to, they could start a bloodbath at any moment. The people around here didn't know what guns were; they probably wouldn't be able to put up an effective resistance. Imagining the outcome, people drowning helplessly in blood, sent a chill down my spine.

They weren't just foreign bodies here in this fantasy world. They would have looked bizarre in an otherwise ordinary scene like this anywhere. However decent and gentlemanly they might be acting, when you got right down to it, they were fear itself.

"Shinichi-sama?"

I looked at Myusel when she spoke. She was looking at me strangely. Maybe she didn't understand what I was thinking about that could make me frown so hard. In her mind, the sailors had turned out to be nice, and she was relieved. At least, they didn't seem to frighten her.

But that fact frightened *me*. I could just picture a day when the Americans' colors turned, and it was Myusel being shot down helplessly. I could see the blank expression on her face as she bled out from her chest and stomach, not even knowing what had happened to her. Maybe someone else could laugh and say it would never happen, but the image seemed all too real to me.

"Is something the matter, sir?"

"Nah," I said after a moment. "It's nothing."

I had a lot to think about, but for the moment I put it all in its own little

mental compartment and shook my head.



The ten days since the nuclear aircraft carrier *Nimitz* had arrived in this world had passed quickly. It had only made our situation that much more complicated. My friends and I had had to go to Bahairam to prevent an all-out war between the Bahairamanians and the *Nimitz*'s crew, which we somehow managed to do. We communicated that there *was* a way to get home from this world, which (we also told them) was actually the very, very far future of our own. We urged them to leave the *Nimitz* and come to Eldant with us.

Naturally, the crew wasn't eager to abandon the ship. To them, it was the last bastion of familiarity in this strange world they'd been thrown into. If we hadn't been able to guarantee them that they would be able to get back to their original world, I doubt they would have agreed to shut down the ship's nuclear reactors, cutting off its functionality, and leave it behind.

Luckily (I think—there was still some question about that), one of the Super Hornets that had been sent on a recon mission into Eldant territory radioed in with a transmission that backed us up. A special envoy had arrived from the U.S. along with his Marine Corps bodyguards. They had heard about the *Nimitz* from Japan, and had brought in some high-powered radio equipment that allowed them to communicate with the pilot of the Super Hornet and explain what was going on. They instructed him to convey orders from headquarters to abandon the *Nimitz* and relocate to Eldant.

That got the job done pretty effectively. Using the helicopters based on the carrier, along with some dragons Theresa called up for us, we managed to transport all five thousand or so crewmembers into Eldant territory.

Personally, I had been a bit worried about what would happen if the Bahairamanians attacked again while we were trying to get everybody out of there, but to my surprise, their army withdrew while we were talking to the *Nimitz*. I thought maybe one of our acquaintances in the ranks—Elvia's older sister Amatena—had something to do with it, but it turned out I was wrong. Through Elvia, Amatena informed us that the Bahairamanian forces had withdrawn simply because something came up that made them realize they had

other problems. Apparently there had been a massive flood in Bahairam's Second Capital.

The mountainous area around the Second Capital hardly ever saw flooding, until an absolute deluge of rain began right out of the blue. In fact, there was so much water that *rain* almost didn't seem like the right word. It was more like a bucket had been upended over their heads.

What's more, it was saltwater, complete with a bunch of fish. That was when it struck me: this had to do with the hyperspace wormhole. It was a temporary fluctuation in the portal, just like the one that had brought the *Nimitz* over. The wormhole had connected itself to some ocean somewhere and dumped a bunch of the water on the Second Capital.

The Bahairamanian city, normally a very dry environment, obviously wasn't prepared for such extensive water damage. It was as if a tsunami had suddenly deposited itself in the middle of a city. Buildings were crushed, people were washed away, and any interest in dealing with "tertiary matters" evaporated. The army was ordered to rush to the Second Capital to help with flood relief, and so the units engaged with the *Nimitz* withdrew, just happy that the ship itself seemed to have quieted down.

The wormhole fluctuation over Bahairam had been brief enough that the city wasn't simply washed away by a relentless flood of water. But imagine if the fluctuation hadn't been brief. Imagine if it had stayed stuck open, like the portal we used here in Eldant. Just think what would have happened. An endless flood of seawater would have inundated Bahairam, maybe Eldant and the surrounding countries, maybe even this entire world. Meanwhile, the other side of the portal could lose so much seawater that it would have huge environmental effects. It would probably change the temperature of the entire earth. A drop of even ten degrees could trigger a new Ice Age...

We couldn't go on like this. The ocean was bad enough; if that wormhole attached itself to the inside of a nuclear reactor, or a volcano, or even outer space, it could destroy this entire world. I knew we had no choice but to close off the unstable connection between our two worlds. And yet...



We finished the shopping and were on the way home. Our mansion was situated on the edge of Marinos, so walking there could take upwards of half an hour. But it was no farther than Myusel normally walked, and besides, I wanted to cherish the time we had together, so I decided to go by foot.

We'd split the load of purchases. (I'd sort of insisted.) If I didn't get to do *something* to help, I was going to start wondering why I was even there, and with her load lightened, I thought Myusel might be more open to chatting, even if it wasn't about anything in particular. But then...

"Hullo there." We weren't far from the main shopping avenue when we ran into someone I never expected to see around there.

"Matoba-san?" Matoba Jinzaburou-san was standing on a street corner nearby.

He was a Japanese government official, and my boss at Amutech, the half-public, half-private company I worked for here in this other world. He looked harmless at first glance; he didn't have a lot of charisma, and he could act a little out of it. The sort of guy you could see sitting at a desk somewhere, staring out a window as he compiled a company history.

He was smiling his usual slight smile—which meant it was almost impossible to figure out what he was thinking. His face and voice never gave anything away. It was like he was wearing a mask. He wore a classic businessman's suit, and his parted, graying hair was standard Japanese working stiff. Like the American sailors, he looked out of place in this European-ish fantasy world. He didn't seem like he was quite a part of the street he was standing in. Anyway, he stood out.

"Surprised to see you here," I said. "And all by yourself."

It was, indeed, unusual for Matoba-san to visit the castle town. In fact, I wasn't sure I had ever seen him out walking around like this. Without a single bodyguard, either. But whatever you thought about him, he was important to Eldant, and important to Japan.

"My carriage is just up the way," he said, and shrugged. "I saw you walking there, so I thought I might say hello."

“Hmm...”

That wasn't very typical, either. For better or for worse, Matoba-san was relentlessly logical; he wasn't the type to bring his carriage to a halt and jump out just because he'd seen someone he knew walking around. Had he had some change of heart? Or was there more to it?

“Out on a date?” he asked. The question caught me off guard.

“A da— A da— Adgghh...?!” I said. First he showed up where I never expected him, *when* I never expected him, and then he asked a question that made it sound like he could read my mind. My voice failed me. This was embarrassing. Humiliating. And right in front of Myusel...

“N-N-N-No, it's not...! I was just helping Myusel with the shopping!”

I mean, yes, it sort of *felt* like a date. And Myusel seemed to be enjoying herself, kind of like she was on a date. Ugh, but would that be a bad thing? Was this bad, what we were doing? But if I was like, “No! I swear this is not a date!” wouldn't that hurt Myusel?

No! No, that's not what I meant, Myusel! I promise it's not that I don't like you! Wait, is this—tsundere?! No, wait, could it be...?! It's so simple to get moe, but when the moment comes, it's a lot harder, isn't it, you tsundere?! No, not the point! Uh, uhhh... (transmission scrambled) “I was merely joking.”

I was busy getting completely lost in my own head, but it turned out he hadn't really meant it. His face scrunched as he smiled a slight smile.

“I didn't know you ever told jokes, Matoba-san.” Honestly, I was a little surprised.

“Hm? No?”

“I guess,” I said, and sighed. “Really, though, Matoba-san—why are you here?”

Normally, the only places I ever ran into Matoba-san were at Eldant Castle, or else at the mansion. I say he was my boss, but he wasn't exactly stationed in Eldant; instead, he went back and forth to Japan a lot. That made it even less likely that I would just run into him on the street. When I did see him, it usually

meant he wanted something. So it crossed my mind that he had been waiting here because he had some kind of urgent business with me.

“I thought I might see how the town was looking on my way to the mansion,” he told me.

“How the town was looking?”

“Those earthquakes weren’t that long ago, yet it’s already bustling again. Of course, a few places still have a ways to go, but they got back on their feet quite quickly. Magic is a most convenient thing, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh...”

What was he getting at? The rampaging reactor at the Dragon’s Den in Bahairam had caused earthquakes in Eldant, something that otherwise occurred maybe once every hundred years. A lot of people had been hurt or driven out of their homes. Some say you can’t have creation without destruction, though, and the people of Eldant got to work building new buildings and implementing a variety of recovery projects, so that as we had seen, the market was busy again. It was partly thanks to the technology we called magic, sure, but it showed that the inhabitants of this world were made of tough stuff.

Could Matoba-san possibly be here just to have a look at the city?

“I do have a duty to report on a wide range of matters to my superiors,” Matoba-san said, as if answering my unspoken question. Then he gave me a pointed look and slipped the ring off his finger, so I did the same. Usually it was a sign that he wanted to talk Japanese to Japanese. In other words, there was something going on that he didn’t want anyone else to know about. It was sort of pointless with Myusel, because she spoke a fair amount of Japanese, but Matoba-san knew that, so I guess it was up to him.

“Have you noticed there are more American troops on the streets every day?” he asked—in Japanese, of course.

“Huh? What do you mean, more?” I said. I had thought there were plenty of Americans already, but I only knew of the five thousand people from the *Nimitz* and a few dozen Marines sent over from Japan. Was he saying there were going

to be even more of them?

For that matter... hang on. Maybe the reason Matoba-san had taken off his ring wasn't because he didn't want the Eldant people around us to understand us...

"The Japanese government has decided to withdraw from this world. For the sake of argument, let's say for now that you're going along with that."

Matoba-san knew me well enough by now to know how indecisive I was. He was also familiar with the flip side of that part of my personality: that once I'd decided to do something, I tended to go to any length to do it, even if it got kind of crazy. He knew he couldn't simply order me to get out of here the way he could with the JSDF. It wouldn't work. Even though I was sure he would have liked me to just go along with whatever the government decided.

The point was, he wasn't here to argue with me.

"We spelled out our reasoning to the Americans, and provided them with all the materials we had. We thought they would see things our way. After all, one of their carriers got sucked over here. But... well." Matoba-san sighed. For once, he actually looked tired. "They don't seem to have any interest in withdrawing from this world until they've had a good look around and ascertained for themselves that it's the right thing to do. We hid this place for long enough that they don't precisely trust us on the subject."

"Right..." I guess you couldn't really blame them.

"But the end result is that they've been bringing more people in every day for some as-yet unclear objective."

As the JSDF took its troops out, the Americans brought theirs in.

"They've even commandeered the garrison the JSDF abandoned."

"What? But..."

"They claim to be searching for a handful of MIAs."

MIA—that meant missing in action, people who couldn't be found when the dust settled after an operation. The story was that several sailors had disappeared in the rush to evacuate the *Nimitz*. Now the Americans were

bringing in more troops on the pretext of looking for them. But that's all it was—a pretext. The Americans argued that because there had already been skirmishes with Bahairam, they couldn't be certain there might not be further firefights during the search-and-rescue operations. Ergo, they were bringing in plenty of munitions in the name of self-defense. So far they were limited to things the grunts could carry, but combined with the helicopters from the *Nimitz*, they still had a pretty serious force.

Self-defense, right. They could practically storm Eldant Castle and make it their base if they wanted.

“So their real goal...” I said.

The Americans were bringing in men and materiel under false pretenses. Did they want to invade Eldant, or even this entire world? Just like the Japanese government had once planned?

Japan had been hampered by reluctance, as well as a limited ability to bring people and supplies through the hyperspace tunnel. They'd decided a military invasion posed too much of a risk, and had settled on the cultural route instead. But with the *Nimitz*, a massive piece of military hardware, already over here, the Americans had no reason to pussyfoot around like that.

Matoba-san didn't answer me; he just smiled that ambiguous smile of his. He didn't deny anything, though. Coming from him, that was practically confirmation.

“I'm afraid we aren't in a position to negotiate with the American government,” he said. “All we can do is withdraw from this world as initially planned.”

“That's ridiculous!”

“You should be careful as well,” Matoba-san said, cutting me off before I could object further. Then he slipped his magic ring back on, showing that he was done with this conversation. “I'm going to head back to the mansion directly. Would you like a ride?”

He turned without waiting for an answer. He was looking down the way, where a single bird-drawn carriage stood waiting. His carriage, I supposed.

Come to think of it, he normally rode around in a JSDF LAV. Maybe he was in a carriage today because the JSDF had already pulled out everything else. Minori-san was still here as my bodyguard, but as a member of the armed forces, I presumed she would have to obey any orders from her superiors. I didn't know how long she would be here with me.

"No thanks," I said after a moment. "I think I'd rather take the time to walk home with Myusel."

"I see. Suit yourself." Matoba-san didn't look the least bit bothered by my refusal, but neither was he going to push the offer. Instead, he gave me a quick bow and then headed for his carriage.

This time I really did heave a long, long sigh.

"Be careful, he says. How?" I gave Myusel a weary smile, my own interpreter ring back on my finger. Like I said, Myusel was literate in Japanese, and she had probably at least gotten the gist of Matoba-san's and my conversation. Still, the political content seemed to have lost her somewhat, and she didn't say anything to me.

The United States of America. The country that had, practically speaking, the most powerful military in the world where I came from. The entire Japanese government couldn't stop them from doing what they wanted, so what was I personally supposed to do?

"How about we head home?" I tried to smile at Myusel, but I wasn't sure I was doing a good job. I had no idea what was going to happen. Not to this world, and not to us. There were so many things I wasn't sure about—but all I could do was watch things play out.

At least, that's what I thought at the time.



There was no carriage at the mansion by the time we got back. We must have missed Matoba-san.

"All right, I'm going to go make dinner," Myusel said, taking back the bag and heading for the kitchen. Left alone in the vestibule, I let out another sigh.

“Okay... What do I do now?” *I guess I could go back to my room.* “But it seems kind of... I don’t know.”

It almost sounded like I was trying to offer an excuse. To whom, I didn’t know. It wasn’t that I had trouble being by myself. Heck, I’d been a shut-in once upon a time. I knew how to keep myself company, watching anime or reading manga. In fact, I *needed* time to just be alone every once in a while. Normally, I probably would have zipped right to my room without a second thought. I had lots of games piled up and books waiting to be read; the backlog was going to take a while to get through.

But today...

Still feeling indecisive, I headed for the living room. I kind of just didn’t feel like being alone. Maybe it would be refreshing if I could find someone. By myself, all alone in my room, there were some thoughts I wouldn’t be able to avoid anymore. All the things I didn’t want to think about, the things I couldn’t change by thinking about them. They would all come piling in on me.

There would probably be someone in the living room, I thought as I walked along, and lo and behold, I heard chatter from that direction. A bright, cheerful voice. Elvia, probably.

I finally caught a few words: “You looked so cool right then, Hikaru-sama!” The voice sounded really excited. It was definitely Elvia. A werewolf girl, complete with fuzzy ears and tail. She was always energetic, easygoing, and lively, but she was also a skilled artist; in fact, she was Amutech’s artist-in-residence. Or maybe more like *had been*, I guess. For all practical purposes, Amutech was defunct.

“N-No, I’d hardly say that...” I heard another voice, huskier than Elvia’s. That would be Hikaru-san. Sounding a bit cornered, no less. Ayasaki Hikaru had been sent from Japan to fill in for me—in fact, to take over as General Manager of Amutech. It had been a pretty rocky road for a while there, but now he was a trusted ally. You could almost have called him my right hand, although I didn’t think of us too much in terms of superior and subordinate. Incidentally, he always dressed in Gothic-Loli outfits, but he was actually a guy.

“I’m with Elvia. You really showed another side of yourself.”

This third voice was clearly feminine, but it carried an authoritative, borderline gruff tone. If Hikaru-san was a man who sounded a bit like a woman, this was the exact opposite.

The owner of that voice was the one who greeted me as I walked into the living room. “Hey, you’re back.” Waving at me from her spot on the couch was a girl with flaxen twintails. That might make her sound a bit like Myusel, but she came across as very different—the polar opposite, in fact.

This woman looked downright adorable, but she sat on the couch with her legs spread, her arms splayed across the backrest. If you looked in the dictionary under *uncouth*, you might have found her picture. She was acting like some yakuza gangster. The fact that she was wearing little more than a leotard that didn’t leave much to the imagination practically made it embarrassing to look at her.

Her name was Theresa Bigelow, and truth be told, she wasn’t human. At least, not anymore. She used to be a living, breathing human being, a woman in the army, no less, but now she existed as personality data residing in what amounted to a puppet. Somewhere between a cyborg and an android, I guess you could say.

“Hey, welcome back!”

“Yeah, good to see you.”

Elvia and Hikaru-san spoke up from the sofa they were sitting on, across the other side of the table from Theresa.

“Hey, guys,” I said. I observed the half-eaten snacks and half-empty teacups on the table and smiled a little. The snacks were Japanese. Myusel had been out, so I guess Hikaru-san had just grabbed whatever was available. “Boy, you’re a regular, uh, regular these days, Theresa,” I said. They looked like a trio of friends hanging out for some girl talk. I mean, okay, Hikaru-san wasn’t actually a girl (even if he did wear dresses), but he still looked like one. Plus, he had an avatar that was built like one, and he made liberal use of it these days, so maybe he was actually in a girl’s body right now.

Anyway...

“But how long are you going to stay?” I asked Theresa.

“What, you don’t want me around?” She pulled one of her arms off the backrest and braced her hand against her cheek. “After that night of burning passion we spent together, you’re just going to chase me out?”

“Well, it certainly was *burning*, all right... No, that’s not the point,” I said, shaking my head with a tired smile.

It wasn’t that I specifically wanted Theresa to go home. If anything, it was comforting having her around, what with her military background and everything. But Theresa was supposed to be the guardian of the Dragon’s Den in Bahairam, a veritable mountain of hypertechnology. By being here, she was practically leaving the place unattended, and I wondered if that was really safe.

“I told you, didn’t I? The BOUs can handle maintenance and security.” It was like she was reading my mind. Theresa grinned at me. “Not to mention, I’ve still got a direct line to them, even way out here. So what’s the problem?”

“I hope you’re right...”

“Hey, I’m not the only one who should be worrying about whether they can *stay here*.”

“Er?”

“You know...” Theresa squinted at me. “You’ve gotta decide sooner rather than later, right? About whether you’re going back to the past or whatever.”

Her words pinned me in place, and I fell silent. I knew that. In fact, I had come to this room hoping to escape that one overwhelming fact, and here I was having it rubbed in my face.

“Er, uh... Yeah,” I said, avoiding Theresa’s eyes and not really answering. Unfortunately, trying not to look at Theresa left me looking directly at Hikarusan. Come to think of it... what was he planning to do about this? He’d come here significantly later than I had, but I thought he enjoyed life here, in his own way. He seemed particularly close to Elvia. I wondered if he would decide to stay here, or go back to Japan. I didn’t know what he was thinking or what he might choose.

I looked at him questioningly. Hikaru-san glanced away, reaching for his teacup. He looked as calm and collected as ever, but I thought I could see a dark cloud pass over his profile. Maybe I was imagining it.

I guess he was worrying, same as I was.

The cheerful atmosphere vanished, replaced by silence. Hikaru-san and I both sort of looked at the ground, while Theresa just shrugged.

“U—Um, Hikaru-sama? Shinichi-sama?” Only Elvia seemed confused, looking from me to Hikaru-san and back for help. When she twisted her body from one of us to the other, her floppy ears, the color of old leaves, flopped back and forth, and her massive chest, crammed into a tube top—no, no, this was a serious moment! This was no time to be getting all *pant-pant moe-moe*. No dirty jokes!

Wait, who am I talking to?

“A—Ahem, Shinichi-sama?”

This time the voice came from behind me. I turned, surprised, to find Myusel had emerged from the kitchen. “Yeah, Myusel? What’s up?”

“Um... We have a visitor...” She sounded hesitant, and looked almost troubled.

“A visitor?” I blinked. Not many people made their way to our mansion. Myusel would have known most of them by name. If she recognized them, she would have just told me who it was. That meant...

“Hello. Sorry to barge in.”

Before I could even ask who it was, they appeared.

“Huh?”

It was a white guy with short golden hair and blue eyes. He had a square jaw with a perfect cleft in it, and muscles that were abundantly apparent even with his shirt on. He looked a lot like the American I’d met in town—but this was someone else. One big difference? This guy was wearing a dark-navy suit and a necktie. But he gave the exact opposite impression of that other frequent suit-wearer that I knew, Matoba-san. This guy seemed ready to burst into action at

any moment.

As if that wasn't enough, he was accompanied by four other men, all equally ripped. Two of them were obviously white, one was black, and one seemed to be of Asian extraction. I didn't have to look at their combat fatigues or the rifles hanging from their shoulders to know they were American troops. Marines, I suspected...

"Would you be Kanou Shinichi?" the man in the suit asked. He was speaking English, but thanks to the interpreter ring on his finger, I was able to understand everything he said.

"Ahem... Yes...?"

"Mm." The man's blue eyes narrowed, giving me an appraising look. I unconsciously straightened up a little. That searching gaze wasn't pleasant. There was a forcefulness in it that I hadn't felt with anyone from the JSDF; these Americans practically exuded power.

The man looked over at the couch where Theresa, Elvia, and Hikaru-san were sitting. "And these are...?" He did a double take when he saw Elvia, squinting to get a better look at her, but it only lasted a fraction of a second. "Ayasaki Hikaru... and Theresa Bigelow, I'm sure. I see, exactly like the report described."

Report? What was he talking about?

The others sat up a little, like I had, and after the man had taken each of us in, the corners of his mouth turned up in a sneer. I felt a chill run down my spine. He looked less like a smiling person than like a wild animal licking its lips at the sight of its next meal.

"There's something we'd like your help with." His words were innocuous enough, but he definitely didn't sound like he was asking for a favor. In fact, he was practically giving an order. I suspected that this man was used to conversations where the hierarchy was clearly defined—where one person talked and the other person listened and then did what they were told. And he definitely saw me as below him in the hierarchy.

It felt like the anxiety I'd had over the last several days had taken on concrete form and was standing in front of me.



The man in the suit introduced himself as George Grisham. He was here in the Holy Eldant Empire as a special diplomatic envoy from the United States of America. He said that because America had never encountered another country quite like this, and what with the exigencies (his word) of the *Nimitz* situation, he had been appointed head diplomat for alternate-world relations. He showed me some identification, but frankly, I would never have been able to tell if it was real or not. I figured Matoba-san and the Japanese government would know better than I would, and had probably already checked him out.

“Perhaps you could leave us alone for a moment,” Grisham said, taking it upon himself to turn Myusel and Elvia out of the living room. He alleged that the discussion was going to turn complicated, and he didn’t want to waste any of the servants’ time—but to me, it just looked like he didn’t want anyone from Eldant anywhere nearby. As for me, I asked Myusel to go get Minori-san, and Grisham agreed to letting her sit in on the conversation.

Minori-san—namely, Koganuma Minori-san—was a WAC and my bodyguard. Well, emphasis on the *was*, as far as being my bodyguard. What with the Japanese government cutting all ties with the other world and the JSDF pulling out, she really had no reason to protect me anymore.

To my relief, it didn’t take long for Minori-san to show up. Myusel politely cleaned up the snacks Hikaru-san had put out, taking them from the room and returning with Minori-san, as well as enough tea for everyone. Then, just as Grisham had asked, Myusel made herself scarce—leaving us confronting the American envoy and his bodyguards.

Grisham began the conversation with a bombshell: “America is going to assume control of the hyperspace wormhole.”

He was seated by himself on the couch Theresa had occupied until a few minutes earlier, his bodyguards standing behind him, looking threatening. How did Grisham manage to be so much more imposing than Theresa when he was just sitting down? Maybe it was his tone, or the look on his face.

Hikaru-san and I looked at each other. I didn’t know why Grisham had decided

to have this conversation with us of all people, but I knew that a careless answer could have very unpleasant consequences, and I suspected Hikaru-san knew it, too.

Neither of us could muster a response. Instead it was Minori-san, standing behind us with Theresa, who said, “What exactly do you mean?”

Minori-san was an accomplished marksman and hand-to-hand fighter, but you wouldn’t know it to look at her. At first glance, she looked like a sweet, easygoing young woman. From her glasses to her cheerful demeanor to her bulging chest, she looked completely harmless, maybe even restorative. At this moment, though, she wasn’t wearing her usual bright expression. Her face was tense with concern.

“Why, precisely what I said,” Grisham replied, shrugging and making a sort of circle with his hand, a very American gesture. “My understanding is that the facility that created the hyperspace tunnel went on the fritz thanks to the interference of the... what was it? Baha... Bahairaq? Yes, the Bahairaqi army.”

“It’s Bahairam, sir,” Minori-san corrected him.

“Bahairam, yes, I see. Well, the name doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that that facility could annihilate the entire world if it isn’t handled very, very carefully. As I believe you know.”

Yes, we certainly did. You didn’t have to look at the flooding in Bahairam’s Second Capital to imagine that the hyperspace tunnel could conceivably inundate this world, or flood it with radiation, depending on where it opened next.

Grisham went on with assurance: “Such unprecedented danger needs people with sound thinking and an unerring sense of justice to look after it. Just like with nuclear weapons. And the United States is the country to do it. It’s only logical, only *right*, for us to assume oversight of the hyperspace tunnel. It’s the quickest path to peace.” He made it sound like the most obvious thing in the world. But I felt like I could have barfed.

On one level, I was shocked that not only did someone who saw things so simplistically really exist, he was a diplomat for a major nation. This wasn’t about delicacy or etiquette. For better or for worse, this guy Grisham came

across as a patriot. For his beloved America, he would *find* the logic where he needed it, force even the most impossible things to seem right and just.

“From what I’ve seen in the reports I read from Mister Matoba and Miss Koganuma, you’re the only ones to have seen this facility firsthand. And only you, Kanou Shinichi, and Miss Bigelow there have administrative privileges for it.”

Now I remembered Matoba-san mentioning that the government had shared materials with the Americans. So they had some idea of what had happened at the Dragon’s Den, even if only from the vantage point of some paperwork. That was why Grisham was here. Why he had come to this mansion to find me and Theresa.

I knew what was coming next.

“Can we count on your cooperation, Kanou Shinichi? And yours, Theresa Bigelow?” Once again, his request was clearly an order. He never doubted we would help the Americans. He believed with all his heart that Theresa and I would listen to him. He had come all the way out here not to negotiate about whether we would help him, but just to double-check that we would. Talk about unilateral. I felt my eyebrows furrow.

Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and Theresa all seemed to feel the same way. I took in their expressions at a glance, then looked back at Grisham.

“I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here,” I said, paying careful attention to my tone and choosing my words delicately. The magic rings could interpret individual words, but your gestures or the sound of your voice could make them mean something very different than first appeared. For example, a seemingly polite request could become a threat. “But that isn’t something we can decide on our own authority. Perhaps you could come back another time.”

I was trembling inside as I spoke. I wasn’t sure I was doing this right.

Grisham frowned, possibly annoyed that I wasn’t agreeing with him. I tensed up, wondering what I would do if he started yelling or something, but apparently he wasn’t so short-tempered as to fly off the handle right here. Instead he snorted derisively and shook his head as if to say: *I just don’t get it. Have you ever seen such idiots?*

Aloud, though, he only said, “I see. I do urge you to think carefully about it.” Then he stood up. He hadn’t touched the tea Myusel had brought. “We’ll be going for now.” Grisham was about to leave the room, but then stopped as if he had remembered something, and turned back to me. “It seems there’s been quite a lot going on recently. I’m not sure I would feel entirely comfortable with just a single bodyguard. I’ll have some Marines stationed near this mansion. Anything we can do to help.”

And then he finally left, his bodyguards following silently after him. Only when their footsteps were completely gone did I finally feel like I could breathe again. I felt my body go slack, letting out all the tension I’d been holding in throughout the conversation.

“God... I th-thought I was gonna have a heart attack...”

It might have sounded pathetic, but it was the unvarnished truth. Grisham was bad enough by himself, but with his personal squad of muscly macho men behind him, he was even more threatening. It had nothing to do with anything he had said or done; his mere presence was almost enough to break me.

“Peace and justice, my ass. He’s the exact opposite of both those things,” Hikaru-san grumbled from beside me. “He can talk himself up all he wants, but that guy’s an absolute racist. He thinks he can push us around just because we’re Japanese.”

I wasn’t entirely sure about that, to be fair, but in any case, I turned to our WAC and said, “Minori-san... He said he would post some bodyguards. But...”

“Yeah. Human watchdogs.” Minori-san shrugged.

“Argh!” Theresa exclaimed from beside her, tearing at her hair. It was almost unsettling, the way she had stayed completely silent throughout the exchange. I guess she was just playing the game; she wasn’t any happier with Grisham’s pronouncements than the rest of us were.

“As if we needed any more trouble,” Hikaru-san said darkly, and he spoke for all of us.



We were in an audience chamber of Holy Eldant Castle, the political heart of the Holy Eldant Empire. At this moment, the chamber was filled with advisors whom we, Petralka an Eldant III, had summoned by our orders. Not everyone had been able to attend in person due to the sudden nature of the summons, but those who could not be present had sent representatives who lived in the capital, which was perfectly sufficient to convene a council.

“Hmm... so we see.” We frowned at the report from our subjects.

The subject of this meeting was the warriors from another world who had recently come to our empire—the so-called Americans. Normally, when we spoke of “the other world,” we were referring to Ja-pan, but just as the Holy Eldant Empire had neighbors like Zwelberich and Bahairam, Ja-pan was not the only nation in their world. And apparently this “United States of America” was the greatest military power among them.

Quite a number of their military forces had taken up residence in our land recently; indeed, in our very capital. They comported themselves peacefully, but their very presence was a threat.

“The crew of the *Nimitz* we could countenance, but this...”

This had all begun when a massive warship from the other world was dropped into ours, and in Bahairam, at that. From what we had been told, this single ship was capable of annihilating not just an entire country, but perhaps half a world. It was crewed by five thousand people, a staggering number. They had been just on the cusp of an all-out battle with the forces of Bahairam when Shinichi and his friends had intervened and, with the help of an American special envoy who had arrived later via the hyperspace tunnel, convinced the crew to abandon ship, successfully diffusing the situation. And then they had moved here to Marinos.

That was well and good, as far as it went. The problems started after that.

The American envoy and his bodyguards alleged that they had too few personnel, even with the ship’s crew. Apparently, either during the fighting with Bahairam or the move to Eldant, several members of the crew had gone missing. In order to find them, America brought masses of troops into the Holy Eldant Empire, stationing them directly in Marinos.

It was clear for all to see, however, that the “missing sailors” were a pretext at best. It couldn’t conceivably be necessary to bring more than a thousand men and all their equipment to bear on the task of finding a few sailors. We had even offered to have our own army search for the missing people, but we were roundly rebuffed.

Even now, American people and weaponry continued to flood through the hyperspace tunnel. We requested the Japanese government to ask them to stop, but as the Japanese had already decided to leave our land, their response was flaccid and unhelpful.

Even we, with our comparative lack of guile, could see what the Americans were up to. They would continue to bring forces into our country in the name of saving their comrades, until they had for practical purposes established a beachhead here. They brought in “gasoleen”—food for the flying iron boxes they called “helly-copters”—and soon they were making regular trips to the allegedly abandoned *Nimitz*. Presumably they would soon be able to use the ship’s weaponry to effect an invasion of Eldant or Bahairam if they so wished. This stage was merely the preparation.

“But what does America *want*?” our advisors asked, frowning.

The answer came from the man standing beside us, Garius en Cordobal. He was our cousin and first in line for the imperial succession after us, as well as the commander-in-chief of our armies. His appearance was somewhat effeminate, such that people who met him for the first time were given to underestimating him, but he was highly capable and indeed something of a hawk.

“According to what we’ve heard from Shinichi and the others,” he said, “their interest is in the resources they believe they can find in this world, mineral, organic, and whatever else. Supposedly, what we regard only as rocks can command substantial amounts of money back in their world. What’s more, by carefully using ‘microbes’—living creatures so small they can’t be seen—the Americans believe they may gain a great deal of wealth.”

“I can hardly imagine,” one person said.

“Are these microbes something like sprites, then?” asked another.

“Perhaps, but I thought there was no magic on the other side of the tunnel.”

This was only some of the conversation inspired by Garius’s remark. Some of the advisors knew more about the other world than others, and some had some rather distorted ideas about the place. It was proving something of an obstacle to a smooth discussion. That made the entire situation precarious. But the talk wasn’t over.

“Didn’t Ja-pan want the same thing at first?”

“Yes, their Jay Ess Dee Eff arrived just like the Americans’ army.”

“True—but with a hundred people at most.”

“And they never walked around carrying weapons.”

A sigh came from a white-bearded old man standing on our other side, across from Garius. This was the prime minister of our country, and our own tutor, Zahar Lo Hardeen. He was in many ways a contrast to Garius, and ordinarily the picture of a warm elderly man, but at the moment his face was dark, his lips twisted into a rueful smile. A most unusual expression from him.

“I suppose this makes clear,” Zahar said, “just how light a hand the Japanese took.”

“They at least had the decency to try to hide what they were doing.”

Seeing the Americans use bald force like this, it made the delicacy of the Japanese approach seem downright quaint.

“The question is, if the Americans intend to use our nation as a base of operations, when will they begin to implement their *real* objectives?”

“Mm,” Garius grunted. “Knowing nothing of their strategy or tactics, it’s impossible to say...”

For the moment, the American troops had set up tents, chiefly along the fringes of our castle town, and were staying there. For the time being, they had caused no notable trouble. But who knew how long that would last?

“One wishes one could ask Shinichi and his friends for their opinion,” we said.

“I agree completely,” Garius replied.

Shinichi at least came from the same world as the Americans; he would know more about how they thought and behaved than we did. And experience had taught us that the man often had unusual ideas that would not have occurred to us.

“But... we suppose the Americans will be expecting us to consult with him.”

We had reports that American troops had already been stationed around Amutech’s headquarters—Shinichi’s mansion. They were there to keep an eye on him, we had no doubt. They wouldn’t want Shinichi to conspire with us in anything that might be disadvantageous to them. We couldn’t discount the possibility that they might even take him hostage if they felt it was necessary.

The Jay Ess Dee Eff had largely withdrawn to Ja-pan at this point, although Minori still resided with Shinichi and Hikaru as their bodyguard, and the forbidden armor had been stored at the mansion as well, just in case it might be needed. However diehard the American troops might be, however powerful their weapons, that armor would likely allow Shinichi to get out of danger. But it was well and truly a last resort.

“What should we do?” We sighed aloud. But none of our advisors had any ideas that made us feel better.



I peeked outside through a crack in the curtains. “Yep... There they are...”

It was the day after Grisham had asked us to help him. The gorgeous weather today seemed to make it easier than usual to see what was going on around the mansion. And what I saw right now was several American soldiers trying to blend in with the nearby trees. Grisham’s “security” forces. If they’d really wanted to hide, I didn’t think we ever would have seen them; the fact that they were showing themselves to us meant that they were also threatening us. It was like they were telling us, “We’re always watching you.”

I had a feeling they would keep on watching until we gave in to Grisham. In fact, it probably wouldn’t stop then. They didn’t trust us farther than they could throw us. Which I guess was maybe fair in its own way, considering they had probably heard about how I had defied the Japanese government.

But they didn't have to trust us to believe they could use us. In fact, they needed us. They needed a guide to this world—and they needed someone to help them get the hyperspace tunnel to do what they wanted. They intended to keep me and Theresa pinned down as the keys to their objectives. It looked like whether I wanted to go back to Japan or not might be a moot point now.

The question in my mind was, how much did the Americans really know? It sounded like they'd seen all the reports Minori-san had submitted while she was here, but did they know about the things she hadn't written in those papers? For that matter, how much *had* Minori-san written? Exactly what had she described, and in how much detail?

Whatever it was, it had been enough to convince the Japanese government that it was dangerous to continue interfering here, so the Americans should have been equally aware of the potential consequences. But it didn't look like that was going to stop them from messing around in this other world—this future world. Or maybe...

Don't tell me... Do they figure they're going to be fine, just because this is the future? They can't be that simplistic, can they?

Things from the past influenced the future; that was common sense. But the other way around? Maybe the Americans thought that interfering in this world might be dangerous for Eldant or Bahairam, the people on this side of the wormhole, but that Japan and America, safely back in the past, would be fine.

But we still didn't understand what time really was. Everything we said about it was theoretical, speculative—practically fictional. Even the time tech from Theresa's era involved a lot of unknowns, and there had never been any experiments done on temporal interference. That was the whole reason why the situation we were in had blindsided us so completely.

The possibility of a spontaneous time warp causing a massive catastrophe was always there. Theresa and her helpers might be able to figure out how to consciously control the wormhole with enough research and investigation, but we weren't there at the moment. The portal had to be closed, at least for now. As quickly as possible.

"Urgh..." I sighed. I couldn't believe this was happening.

Staring outside was only going to make me feel worse. I was just about to close the curtains when— “Huh?”

I saw two familiar silhouettes approaching the house. A young man with long hair, accompanied by a stout young woman. They almost seemed made to contrast with each other...

I turned to leave the room and bumped right into Myusel.

“Shinichi-sama?” she said.

“Oh, Myusel.”

“I brought tea... er, is anything the matter?”

“Uh, let me get back to you on that,” I said. Then I had a thought. “The tea—uh, put it out in the living room instead. And set a couple more places.”

“Oh, certainly.” She didn’t ask why; she just nodded. I hurried to the front door.

I opened the door and called out to the two figures, who were arguing about something as they walked: “Loek! Romilda!”

“Shinichi-sensei!” They both smiled and came jogging up. It was the elf boy Loek Slayson and the dwarf girl Romilda Guld. Both of them were students at the school where I taught. I’d seen them nearly every day when school was in session—but this was the first time since classes had ended. I’d had so much on my mind and on my plate that I didn’t stop to worry about them. It had really only been a handful of days since we’d seen each other last, yet it felt like forever.

“What brings you here?” I asked.

“We wanted to see you, Sensei!” Romilda replied, as if to say, *What else?* “We haven’t seen you even once since the school closed...”

“Romilda...” I said. They’d come all this way just to see me. It sort of gave me a lump in my throat.

Being a dwarf, Romilda was short, with a round face, so she looked even younger than she was. She couldn’t have been more than five years younger than me, but she was so sweet, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking stuff like, *If*

I had a daughter, maybe she would look like this. I felt like if I was ever invited to Romilda's wedding, I would cry as hard as her dad.

Anyway...

"You came all this way just for that?"

"Well, this pathetic excuse for an elf wouldn't stop getting all weepy about how it was killing him not to see Minori-sensei. So of course I got dragged along."

"N-No one was getting all *weepy*!" Loek said hotly. Well, it was hardly a secret that Loek had a huge (albeit one-sided) crush on Minori-san. I could totally imagine him blubbering into Romilda's shoulder. I smiled a little in spite of myself (sorry, Loek).

Loek, being an elf, was tall and slim, and with his flowing golden hair he could be quite handsome. His eyes and nose had an elegant aspect, and he really looked the part of the son of nobility—at least when he kept his mouth shut. When he started arguing with Romilda, though, he immediately seemed childish. He had a tendency to needle her about every little thing.

As much as the two of them bickered, though, you also hardly ever saw them apart. It warmed the heart to see them together. I guess it's like they say: the more you fight, the closer you are. Hate is just the other side of love and all that. Maybe they even enjoyed arguing. Honestly, I kept expecting them to start dating one of these days.

"I think Minori-san might be in her room. I can probably get her to come join us down here. You came all this way, so why not have a cup of tea?" I said, motioning them to come inside. But they just looked at each other and didn't move.

"Thank you, we appreciate that. But there's something else."

Something else? Another reason they'd come here? I looked at them blankly.

Suddenly someone said, "Put your hands in the air."

I froze. I could feel something hard pressing into my back. "Wha—?"

"Hey there... It's been a long five years," the person behind me growled. Wait

—could it be?! Was one of those titanic creatures—maybe a colossal one —*attacking on* us?! Was there a face peeking out from the wall around our house?! Was this a scarlet bow and arrow?! Or freedom, freedom with wings?!

Heck, even I barely understood what I was thinking. I blinked again. I'd panicked for a second there, but when I realized it was Japanese that I was hearing—well, that made things simple. And I remembered that voice.

“No way...”

Why would *he* be here?

I felt the thing pressed into my back move away, and I turned to see if it could possibly be who I thought it was. “Reito-san?!” I knew from his voice that it had to be him, but I was still shocked. Standing behind me was someone I owed a lot to from my visit back to Japan—Ariga Reito-san. “What are you doing here? And... dressed like that!”

The Reito-san I knew always dressed in dark shirts and pants and wore fingerless gloves, pretty much the picture of an otaku. To be honest, even I thought he took it a little far sometimes. But the guy I was seeing now... he was in a JSDF combat uniform.

I'd known that Reito-san was somehow secretly connected with the government, but at this moment he looked and felt completely different from the way I remembered him. How could he look so cool all of a sudden?! Okay, hold on...

“It's a visitor of yours from Ja-pan!” Romilda said as I stood there, still dumbfounded.

“We ran into him on the way here, and since he didn't know where the mansion was, we showed him!” Loek added proudly. Could it be coincidence? They had to at least have recognized his uniform.

“Here,” Reito-san said and thrust a paper bag at me.

That was when I realized he wasn't wearing ammo pouches or a gun holster or anything else that matched his JSDF uniform, but he was carrying an Akihabara Ga**rs bag. So maybe he didn't look as cool as I'd thought.

“You brought this all this way?” I grinned, indicating the bag.

“It’s part of my souvenir for you.”

I accepted it gratefully and looked inside. Ooh, was that the Kameda-kun figure from *Shin Ga**ra*?! He evolves from an amphibian into a reptile, vomiting blood-colored—er, I mean, crying blood-colored tears as he marches around town. And now he was mine, all mine!

“That’s limited-edition merch from the blu-ray release!” Reito-san exclaimed, his fist clenched. Only now did I notice he was wearing a magic interpreter ring on his finger.

“Reito-san, that’s...”

“Yep. They dropped me over here as a point person. Came along with the U.S. Marines.” Next he pulled something out of a bag he’d been holding in his other hand. “Got something else for you. Two somethings, actually. Here.”

It was a square, transparent case. Inside were some writable media discs. DVD-Rs or BD-Rs, I guessed. (Probably not CD-Rs. I mean, what century was this?) “Wait, are those all the newest anime?!”

“Don’t tell me—the director’s cut of *Shin Ga**ra*?! Sensei, no fair keeping it all to yourself!”

Reito-san grinned at Loek and Romilda’s reaction. “’fraid not,” he said. He and the two kids seemed surprisingly tight. Maybe they’d become friends on the way over here. I’m sure Reito-san was supposed to play nice with the locals as part of his job, but he was also just basically a pretty sociable otaku, so he’d probably hit it off with them right away. “We’re not in the business of making illegal copies, you know!”

“*NO MORE EIGA DOROBOUTOU!*” Loek and Romilda chorused, breaking into a bizarre dance.

Yep, yep. I could see I’d taught them well.

Er, anyway...

“They’re video messages. From your families.”

“Huh?” I had expected a lot of things, but not this.

“I’ve got one for you, and one for a guy named Ayasaki Hikaru. The Japanese government asked me to get them to you.”

For a second, I hesitated to take the discs—but in the end, I accepted them. “Thanks...” I said. “Thanks a lot.”

I thought about my dad. My mom. About Shizuki. About Japan. All the things I’d been trying *not* to think about flashed through my mind. For some reason, the two discs felt a lot heavier than that action figure.



I was sitting at my desk in my room, staring into space, when I heard a somewhat reluctant knock at my door. It was so quiet, in fact, that at first I thought I’d imagined it. Only when the knock came again a second later did I turn toward the door and say, “Come in.”

The door opened just as hesitantly as the knock. I hadn’t asked who it was because I had a pretty good idea. I didn’t have to look at my watch to know that about four hours after dinner, Myusel would come by with a bite to eat.

“Shinichi-sama...” There she was, with a cart loaded with tea and treats. “I brought you an evening snack.”

“Thanks,” I said. Myusel rolled the cart over to me and started setting things out on my desk, just like every night. In fact, I had no idea how many times we’d done this by now. At first, the cup and saucer always used to clatter—I guess Myusel had been nervous. But now the room was almost silent. The only noise was the rustling of her uniform.

Man, was it that time already? I’d stayed shut up in my room ever since dinner and my bath, so I had sort of lost track of time. Now I looked at the clock to discover it was 10:30—no wonder the mansion seemed so quiet.

“Where is everyone? Where’s Reito-san?”

“Theresa-san and Ariga-sama are both resting in the guest bedrooms. Everyone else is in their own room.”

“Huh. So am I the only one still up?”

“No, sir. Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama were still awake when I brought them

their snacks. Minori-sama didn't want hers, though. She said she would be going to bed soon. Hikaru-sama took his, but... I must say, he didn't seem very happy."

"Huh, okay..." I nodded, thinking of Hikaru-san. Nothing ever seemed to faze him, but maybe he just managed to keep up a calm front. Maybe he felt as mixed up inside as I did right now.

"Aren't you going to watch it, sir?"

Myusel's question caught me off guard. I looked up to find she had finished setting out my snack and had folded her hands in front of herself. She was looking at me... No, she was looking at the disc on my desk. "The message from your family. The one Ariga-sama brought."

"Oh... Yeah." I probably should have watched the video Reito-san had delivered as soon as I had a chance, but instead it was sitting on my desk, still unopened. "Was Hikaru-san watching his when you went to his room?"

Reito-san had brought a disc for him, too. Hikaru-san had seemed awfully conflicted when I gave it to him. The look on his face had really stuck with me. Partly because I'd never seen him look like that before, but also because I was sure I looked the same way.

"It didn't seem so, sir..."

"Huh." Maybe Hikaru-san was just as torn as I was about whether to watch the video.

To go back to Japan, or not to go back to Japan. I didn't even know which I really wanted. If I saw videos of my family in this state of mind, the homesickness might decide things for me. For that matter, maybe this was a ploy by the Japanese government to get me to hurry up and come back. They knew I would only fight if they tried to force me—Matoba-san especially knew—so they were trying to manipulate me instead. If I saw my parents and sister weeping and begging me to come home, I had no idea what I might do. I hadn't even watched the video yet, and just imagining seeing that sort of thing was already making my chest tight.

At this point, though, to go back home would mean saying goodbye to

everything in this world forever. Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Brooke and Cerise and their family, Garius and Zahar-san, Loren and Loek and Romilda, students like Eduardo, not to mention Amatena and Clara... All the people I'd met, all the friends I'd made—I would never see any of them again as long as I lived. And that thought made me sad. Crushingly sad. Add it to the list of things that made me hurt just thinking about them.

All this made me respect Minori-san's guts even more. She had to have her own attachments to this world, yet as far as I knew she wasn't agonizing the way I was about leaving. Maybe she'd already made up her mind a long time ago, or maybe she just wasn't letting on about her internal struggle—whichever it was, as a JSDF soldier and a true adult, she had way more mental fortitude than I did.

Maybe it was as simple as this: when her superiors in Japan told her to ship out, then as a member of the JSDF, she had no choice but to obey. Me, I had supposedly come here to work, yet somewhere along the line, life here had ceased to feel like a job.

I met Myusel's eyes. I thought I saw her lip tremble. A very slight movement, like she was about to say something, but then couldn't.

I waited for her to speak, but she just looked back at the ground and didn't say anything.

Argh. I was completely pathetic. I was acting like *she* should solve my problem. Here I was hoping she would say "Please stay here" or something—but what I was really looking for was an excuse to say, "Well, if you say so," a reason to foist responsibility on someone else. I knew that. And that was why I couldn't blame Myusel for not saying anything. She was staying quiet for my sake.

She was so thoughtful. She was denying her own feelings out of consideration for mine.

That only made it hurt worse.

The deep, dark silence of the night hung between us, never broken.



Holy Eldant Castle. The crowning building of the empire also took the empire's own name: it was the residence of Her Majesty the Empress, as well as the political, economic, and cultural heart of the nation. Along with the empress, it was home to a great many important counselors and advisors, and countless priceless treasures. Needless to say, security was tight.

The castle was manned by the royal guard, as well as many simple soldiers like myself, so that there was always someone patrolling, day or night. The lights in the guardhouses never went out, and if some thief or enemy ever tried to sneak in, they would find themselves set upon by more than a hundred people before they could take two steps. And if that wasn't enough, the barracks on the castle grounds contained five thousand troops, ready to leap up and spring into action at a moment's notice, even in the middle of the night.

Add to all that the fact that attempting to infiltrate the castle for any reason was a serious crime. Any soldier in the building could kill an intruder with impunity. Yes, trying to enter Holy Eldant Castle without permission was tantamount to suicide. No one would be crazy or stupid enough to try it.

Or so we had assumed.

"Yawn..." That assumption was what found me letting out an involuntary yawn one night. I stole a quick glance at the man next to me, but he just grinned and nodded sympathetically. I guess he knew how I felt. It was near dawn by now, and our watch would be coming to an end. We expected our relief to show up anytime. The castle was quiet—in fact, the entire town was.

The calm lulled us into a false sense of security. No one had ever tried to break into the castle. We assumed they never would. And so, moments before my watch ended, I found my attention wandering.

I did this same thing every day. Nothing ever happened. It was peaceful, like it always was. I— "Hngh?!"

That's why I didn't notice. Didn't notice the silhouette slipping from shadow to shadow through the night; didn't see it coming up behind me. I didn't even know there was anyone there until they had my arms pinned.

"Wha—!"

My comrade and I both struggled, but our attackers pressed some kind of cloth to our mouths and noses. What was it? I only had a couple seconds to entertain the thought. Something prickled my nose and throat, and then I felt my consciousness growing dim.

“Hrgh...”

The cloth must have had some kind of drug on it. Or maybe this was magic. We both felt ourselves go weak in a matter of moments, until we couldn't even cry out. Our assailants let go of our arms, but we couldn't stand up; we just slumped to the ground.

My consciousness was fading fast. In the instant before it disappeared, I saw several dark, humanoid shapes slipping soundlessly into the castle.

Chapter Two: The Captive Empress

My eyes fluttered open a lot earlier than usual that day. Not on purpose, of course. I just hadn't really slept the night before. I felt sort of like I'd had a really long nap; I didn't feel refreshed. But it would be kind of weird to go back to sleep now.

Maybe I could surprise Myusel by already being up when she came by to wake me. The thought got me out of bed, and I started changing into my day clothes.

Myusel came to wake me up every day. She'd started putting some different spins on it lately, like one day it was "how an old friend might pop by to wake you up," and another it was "how the big sister who suddenly has to move in with you might wake you up." It was a lot of fun. Myusel—well, she had a tsundere streak, or something like it, so she really had to push herself to pull off these little acts. It was adorable; in fact, sometimes when I had already woken up, I pretended I was still asleep just so I could see what she came up with that day.

Just as I got changed, there was a knock on the door. "Hmm." I guess my timing was spot on—that had to be Myusel. Okay, so she was a little bit early (I checked the clock), but some days were like that. I waited expectantly for her to come in.

Incidentally, each of the rooms in this house had a lock on it—they were sort of like the self-locking doors in a hotel. So Myusel, who had to go in and out of our various rooms to clean and make the beds and such, had backup keys, but nobody else could come in on their own. Too eager to wait to spring the surprise, I went over and opened the door.

"Good morning, Myuse—huh?" I choked a little at the end of my sentence. It definitely wasn't who I had been expecting standing outside my door. I was confronted not with an adorable half-elf maid-san, but with a female soldier-san who'd been brought back to life after an extremely long time—Theresa. "Theresa! Uh, good morning."

“Yo. Aww, not who you were hoping to see?”

“Er, no, uh, it’s—I’m fine...”

“Sorry I’m not a half-whatever BOU, eh? Maybe I should wear a maid uniform next time I show up?” She smirked at me.

She wasn’t wearing a maid uniform, but she was wearing her usual skintight white outfit, which made the curves of her body clearly visible. It was sort of like full-body tights, or a wetsuit or something—it was oddly sexy in its own way. And the white color made the heart pound a little—a splash of water and it seemed like it might just turn translucent.

Uh, but anyway...

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

“You know, I thought you might still be asleep when I got here.”

“Just happened to be up today. Hey, why are you here if you thought I would be asleep?”

“Coulda woken you up, or come back later. Got a few minutes?” Theresa jerked her chin toward my room. I guess there was no reason to turn her away. I stepped aside and invited her in. By the time I had closed the door and turned around again, she was standing in the middle of my room—and she got right to the point. “My facility—the place you guys call the Dragon’s Den.”

“Huh? Yeah, what about it?”

It was the military facility in which Theresa had lain dormant. It was both a factory and the site of a wide variety of experiments and experimental equipment—sort of an R&D laboratory for new weapons technology. Theresa was in charge of the place.

“I was playing around with some stuff last night when I realized I had a measure of remote control.”

“Remote control?”

“A person with the right privileges can use the comms lines to give orders *directly* to the facility even from way out here.”

Theresa seemed especially emphatic about the “directly” part.

“Oh yeah? Uh, but couldn’t you do that before?”

She had been able to communicate with the genetically modified soldiers—the demi-humans she called BOUs—and have them handle a wide variety of jobs for her when she needed them to.

“Up to a point. I could do information searches directly, and I could tell the BOUs to do maintenance tasks at the facility. But there’s a lot of equipment the BOUs can’t handle.”

“Oh... You mean like the reactor.”

“That’s one of ’em.” Theresa nodded.

Only those the equipment recognized as humans holding administrative privileges could work the reactor. That was why, when the power source at the Dragon’s Den had gone berserk, my friends and I had had to go stop it.

“Anyway, I tried some stuff out. Reactor’s still a no-go, but I can manipulate the experimental equipment directly, without having to use a BOU. I don’t have very fine control, but I can do emergency stops and simple operations whenever I want.”

Military facilities inevitably meant lots of dangerous stuff around. Of course they would make sure to have plenty of ways to shut things down, even from outside.

“Bottom line, I can work the space-time suppression machine, too. Right from this room,” Theresa said.

“Wait... Does that mean...”

“It means I can work on the hyperspace tunnel. Don’t even have to go to the building to do it. If I wanted to force it shut, I could do that, too. I’ve already analyzed the interference waves that make up the tunnel, so if nothing else, I could use inverse-phase waves to neutralize them and close it up.”

I didn’t say anything, but I heard a squeak come out of my throat.

“So we wouldn’t have to worry about any more of that time paradox-type stuff. Good news, what with how the tunnel’s been unstable since you shut

down the reactor.”

The whole outrageous idea of connecting the past and the future had been possible because of the extreme excess energy from the reactor. When we put the reactor into an effectively dormant state, there was nothing to support the hyperspace tunnel. It became like a bridge that was ready to collapse at any moment.

“What I’m saying is, I can completely sever the past from the future.”

I still didn’t say anything.

In theory, nothing could have been better news. If we could close off the hyperspace tunnel, we could stop worrying about whether interactions between the past and the future would gum up cause and effect. America couldn’t send any more troops over here. The vagaries of the connection were the whole reason Grisham wanted my cooperation in the first place. And from what Theresa was saying, she had the ability to do just that: stop it cold. And, as a registered user of the forbidden armor, I did, too. She had given it to me.

Yes: I could resolve this entire situation by myself.

But of course, that would mean an absolute separation between the past and this future world. It wouldn’t be just a question of going home or not anymore. If I went back to Japan and then closed the tunnel, I wouldn’t be able to come back here for the rest of my life, no matter how much I wanted to. If I were simply forbidden from coming back, I could at least comfort myself with the hope that the ban might be lifted one day—but with the tunnel itself gone, I wouldn’t have even that.

I was still being so naive. Somewhere in my mind, I think I had imagined that as long as the hyperspace tunnel existed, there would be some kind of connection, no matter which world I stayed in. But now...

“What do you want to do?” Theresa asked, cocking her head at me as I stood frozen.

“Wh-What do I...”

This was too much for my brain, still half asleep, to even process. I could hear my own voice trembling, and I felt pathetic. I hadn’t been able to come up with

an answer before, and now I felt like while I had been busy worrying about it, my choices had been constricted even further.

Japan and my family and all that otaku stuff?

Or... here?

Which world should I stay in?

Whichever one I chose, I would regret it. I felt like I should pick the one I would regret *less*. But could I even compare the two?

Theresa watched me agonize with her dispassionate red eyes. I knew she was waiting for me to say something—but no matter how long we stood there, I just couldn't.



I headed to the dining area with Myusel, who had come to wake me up after Theresa's visit. As we came down the hallway, I could hear happy voices around the table. Was that Reito-san? What was he doing, anyway?

"Morning," I said as I came into the room, my mind still somewhere else.

"Heya," Reito-san said. He was sitting on the floor, playing with some tiny plush toys—no, those were Man'ya and the other lizardman kids. Just beside them were their parents: our gardener Brooke Darwin and his wife Cerise. Lizardmen look like walking lizards, so they can be a bit scary at first glance, but seeing them keep an eye on their kids like this, they just looked like... parents. It was enough to bring a smile to your face.

I was even starting to feel like I had learned to read their expressions, and right now Brooke and Cerise both looked happy. Reito-san was letting Man'ya and the others crawl all over him, picking them up and spinning them around, and just generally having a good time with them. A lot of people were reluctant to have much to do with lizardmen because of the way they looked. (I had even heard that some people, when disciplining lizardman servants, wouldn't touch them directly, but used a club.) So it had to be heartening for Brooke and Cerise to see someone like Reito-san playing with their children so unselfconsciously.

"Geez, you've even got lizardmen! This is a real fantasy world!" Reito-san

grinned, spinning Man'ya and her siblings around. The kids burbled with laughter. Reito-san might have been an otaku, but he had the body of the secret agent he was. I sure couldn't have twirled Man'ya and the others as easily as he did. The quick-growing lizardman kids were already pushing fifty kilograms.

"And they're so dang cute! Like they stepped out of an anime!"

I agreed with Reito-san. Brooke and Cerise could be a little imposing, but their kids were still round and plump and overall really cute. They still looked more or less reptilian, sure, but that was part of why it was so touching when they warmed up to you.

"All right, everyone," Cerise said. "The master is here now; it's time to sit down properly." She thanked Reito-san for playing with the kids, then started to collect them and put them in their chairs.

"Reito! Reito! You spin again later, 'kay?"

"Aw yeah, I'll spin you till ya get dizzy, kid!"

"I'm not sure lizardmen get dizzy," I interjected.

"G'morning!" Elvia said. She, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san came into the dining area. We had breakfast at about the same time every day, so it wasn't unusual to run into everyone else while you were going to eat. Everyone said hello to each other and took their seats. Minori-san and Elvia looked like they always did. But Hikaru-san...

"Morning..." Uncharacteristically, Hikaru-san was trying to fight back a yawn.

"Hikaru-sama, didn'tcha sleep well?"

"Huh? Oh, I—I'm fine." He waved away Elvia's question, but that was strange, too. He was usually so careful to do things only in the most refined way, one that suited his Gothic-Loli dresses. Did that mean he really was tired?

Reito-san and I each sat down, and Brooke and Cerise seated themselves beside their children. Myusel emerged from the kitchen with a cart piled with our breakfasts.

"Huh?" I said. "Where's Theresa?"

Myusel had started setting out our meals, which meant she thought everyone was here. So I guess Theresa wasn't joining us this morning. Apparently, as a gynoid, she had no physical need to eat, but she could, so she'd been joining us to enjoy Myusel's cooking. "Beats the hell out of a field ration," she'd said, sounding unusually happy. I knew she wasn't sleeping in, anyway...

"Theresa-san went out somewhere a little bit ago," Myusel said.

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes, sir." She nodded. She seemed troubled—I guess Theresa hadn't been willing to say where she was going. It shouldn't have surprised me; that woman could be as mercurial as a stray cat. Where *had* she gone, though? I couldn't really think of anywhere in Eldant that she might want to visit. But if she was going to head back to the Dragon's Den, I would have expected her to at least say a quick goodbye.

"I guess this is everyone for breakfast, then," I said.

Myusel finished setting out the food and sat down. I glanced around, then brought my hands together in front of my chest. Everyone else imitated me. Reito-san, seeing that he was the only one not making the pose, quickly caught up. It was the "*itadakimaaasu!*" pose the kindergartners and grade-school kids all struck together before each meal.

For everyone, masters and servants and their families alike, to sit down together for a meal was still uncommon in Eldant. I'm sure the members of Bedouna—the assembly of patriots that attacked my school once on the grounds that I was a cultural invader—would have been left speechless to see it. They believed that it was precisely the sharp distinctions between races and classes that allowed the Holy Eldant Empire to flourish.

"All right, then, everyone, let's ea—"

Myusel jumped up from her chair before I could finish. "Oh...!"

"Myusel?"

"Oh, I—I'm sorry."

We all looked at each other, wondering what was going on. "I think

someone's at the door," Myusel said. "I'll go look. You all go ahead and eat." Then she scuttled out of the dining area with a quick, apologetic bow.

Being half elf, Myusel had better ears than the rest of us. She could pick up on small sounds better than I could, for example, and she was always the first to know when we had a visitor.

"Wonder who it could be this time," I said, starting in on my breakfast. The school was closed and most members of the Japanese government were already gone, so I couldn't think of that many people it might be. Then again, I suppose there had never been *that* many people visiting our mansion.

"Maybe it's Matoba-san," I said.

"But he was just here yesterday," Hikaru-san said, taking a bite of salad. "Unless he finally got sick of you stonewalling him, Shinichi-san, and decided to try using force. He's probably here with some burly guys to drag you away."

"Huh? I mean... I guess anything's possible." But in that case, why would he bother sending Reito-san with the video messages? Maybe he was just out to try everything he could. "They're probably here for you too, though, Hikaru-san," I said.

If Hikaru-san had wanted to, he could presumably have gone back with the JSDF. He could have been gone before that American, Grisham, ever showed up.

"Well..." Hikaru-san seemed to be having a hard time summoning a comeback. That wasn't like him. Ah, so he *was* still trying to make up his mind. That actually made me feel a little better, to know that I wasn't the only one who couldn't decide. I know, I know; it's a pretty schadenfreude-esque way of feeling better about myself, but there you have it.

"I can think of one other person..." I said, Grisham's face flashing through my mind. I really didn't like dealing with him. I preferred never to have to do it again, if possible.

Feeling a bit tense, I continued munching away at the breakfast Myusel had made for me. If that was Grisham at the door, it would put an end to my chance to eat.

Everyone else seemed to have their own thoughts on their mind—there was no conversation to speak of, just everyone quietly eating. The quiet scraping of utensils against plates seemed inordinately loud in the morning air. Then...

“Hm...?” I heard footsteps. Several sets, and moving fast. “Myusel?”

I looked over to the entry of the dining room to find Myusel hurrying in with Loek and Romilda, all of them looking upset. The two kids were both red-faced, dripping sweat, and breathing hard. They obviously hadn’t exhausted themselves like that just getting here from the front door. Had they run all the way to the mansion?

“Hey, wh-what’s going on?” I asked. I was so relieved to find out it wasn’t a Japanese government official or American troops showing up at my house—but at the same time, everything about the way Myusel and my two students looked gave me a bad feeling.

The three of them immediately made me even more worried: they ran up to me, faces pale, all talking at once.

“Sh—Shinichi-sama, it’s terrible!”

“Sensei! The castle! It—”

“In the middle of the night! They were completely helpless!”

I heard words like *terrible* and *castle* over and over again, but the three of them were stumbling over themselves so badly that I couldn’t get a coherent story out of them. But something terrible had happened at the castle, I guess? I assumed that meant Holy Eldant Castle...

“I want all three of you to take a deep breath and *calm down*.”

While I was busy staring at them in confusion, Minori-san stopped eating and gently but firmly ordered them to get themselves together. She was normally so sweet and easygoing, but she was still a member of the JSDF, and she could put some authority in her voice when she wanted to. She could even sound downright scary.

Her command was like a bucket of cold water over the heads of the excited trio.

“All right. Now, what’s going on? What happened at the castle?” she asked, her tone softening. Loek, Romilda, and Myusel looked at each other for a moment, then Loek took a step forward to speak on behalf of the group.

“The castle... Holy Eldant Castle... was infiltrated around dawn by Bedouna. They’ve taken it over for their base.”

“Huh?!” I couldn’t believe it. I had just been thinking of them, and now here they were.

Bedouna, who called themselves the Assembly of Patriots, affirmed a society based on race and class distinctions, and absolutely rejected any novel cultural influences. They’d once perpetrated a terrorist act against me, my students, and even Petralka, after which I heard they had been thoroughly suppressed, with many of their members even arrested. So how...?

It wasn’t inconceivable. I’d heard how difficult it was to pull that sort of terrorism up by the roots. You could even kill them all, but locals with strong grievances might agree with the terrorists, and become terrorists themselves in turn.

What really shocked me, though, wasn’t hearing the name Bedouna now of all times. It was that they had taken over Eldant Castle. *That* seemed impossible. I knew how many guards, soldiers, and royal knights were stationed there. Plenty of wizards, too. It was a castle—the whole point was to repel invaders from the outside. It wasn’t like a group of five or ten people could get in. Judging by the pinched looks on Loek’s and Romilda’s faces, though, I could tell they weren’t joking.

There was a tense beat. Then Reito-san said, “Uh... Bey-doo-nah?” He was the only one here who didn’t understand quite what that meant.

“They’re terrorists,” I said. “They’ve attacked us before.”

“Ah... I think I read something about that.” He nodded. He must have seen an after-action report on the encounter with Bedouna.

But Loek wasn’t done. “I heard my mom and dad talking...” he started. Thankfully, his mother and father hadn’t been at the castle, and weren’t among the hostages Bedouna had taken when they occupied the place. There was no

way a small number of people could take over the entirety of Holy Eldant Castle. There was a good chance Bedouna had only occupied the central keep. But that was more than enough.

Loek went on: “They said Her Majesty and the others are among the hostages...”

“And so we can’t do anything ‘*rash*’!” Romilda cried.

She was right. Petralka an Eldant III was Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. If they had their hands on our adorable ruler-sama, it wouldn’t matter how many soldiers there were in the castle. For better or worse, Petralka was absolute monarch here. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that she *was* the Holy Eldant Empire. To control her was to control not just the castle but the entire nation.

“And we thought maybe you and your friends would know what to do, Sensei!” Loek said.

“Huh?”

“You’ve always helped us before!” Romilda added.

“Romilda...”

They were both looking at me with eyes brimming with tears. They honestly, sincerely seemed to think that I might be able to crack this situation. They were so sure of it that they hadn’t even taken the time to get a carriage ready; they’d come running all the way here.

“I’m afraid that’s an awful big *maybe*...” I said.

If Petralka and the others around her were in trouble, then I absolutely wanted to be able to help. Just like Loek and Romilda, I wished I could do something—but what could I do right now? I might be able to take the forbidden armor and punch my way into the castle, but if they had Petralka, the forceful approach wasn’t going to be the way to go.

Hostage situations were considered to be some of the most difficult things even militaries and police forces would ever deal with. I didn’t think a complete amateur like me was going to be able to handle one. Heck, even if I somehow

managed to come up with some brilliant stratagem, a complete amateur like me would never actually be able to pull it off.

But what about someone who wasn't an amateur? Someone like...

"Uh, Minori-sa—"

By the time I turned around, our resident soldier was already on her feet, pulling her 9mm out of her bag.



People are at their most vulnerable when they're asleep. Thus nobles situate their sleeping quarters deep inside their homes, against the possibility of attack. All the more so when that home has a military purpose as well.

Naturally, so it was also with our Holy Eldant Castle. Our bedchamber was on the uppermost floor, far from any stairway. It would take considerable time for any brigand or other enemy to reach us. Security was absolute; about the only people allowed in or out of the room were ourselves and our ladies-in-waiting. Sentries were posted outside the door at all times.

Our bedchamber was large enough that there was usually a kind of tranquility to it. Now, though...

"This must surely be the first time so many people have been crammed into this room," we murmured, looking around using only our eyes. There must have been almost thirty. Our group accounted for ten of them—ourselves, along with Garius and Zahar (in their nightclothes, as we were), and our ladies-in-waiting. Each of us had our hands tied behind us, and we were all tied together so that none of us could move easily.

The remaining twenty or so people surrounded us where we sat on the floor. Each wore heavy outer clothing and hid their faces, so we couldn't tell much about them, but from the size and shapes of their bodies, we guessed that most if not all were men. We suspected they had weapons hidden under their coats. It seemed they now possessed the power of life and death over us.

This was humiliating. Absolutely degrading. This was the first time in our lives we had ever had such an experience...

“.....No.” That was not true. Something similar had happened to us once before, although not at the castle. In fact, it had been only shortly after Shinichi’s arrival here. Some curs causing trouble at the school had captured us along with Shinichi and others.

These ruffians used the same name as those had—Bedouna. They claimed to be “an assembly of patriots.” We had never expected to hear that name again. They had, after all, committed the grave impropriety of laying hands on the empress. We were informed that the army, and in particular our royal guard, had conducted a zealous hunt for Bedouna adherents in a quest to erase the stain from their honor. These “patriots” were supposed to have been wiped out, and we had not heard their name since... until now.

But it seemed this bad grass had deep roots.

As we looked around, our eyes met those of Garius, who was tied up like us. They had confined all the hostages to a corner of the room, so it wasn’t impossible to converse, but...

“Stay still! Don’t talk!”

The moment we attempted to open our mouth, one of those claiming to be Bedouna shouted at us. As if that weren’t enough, he produced something terrible from under his coat. We heard Garius give a soft groan.

The man didn’t reveal the entire object, but Garius and we had both seen such things on many occasions, so we knew what it was. A weapon, called a gun or “pistol.” Minori, we recalled, carried one such that she referred to as a “nine milly-meter,” but this seemed to be of a different type. That much was clear even from the small part of it we could see.

Weapons brought in by the Americans, presumably...

Indeed, there had been a report as the Americans brought in masses of weaponry that some of it had been stolen. We suspected we were looking at some of the stolen weaponry now.

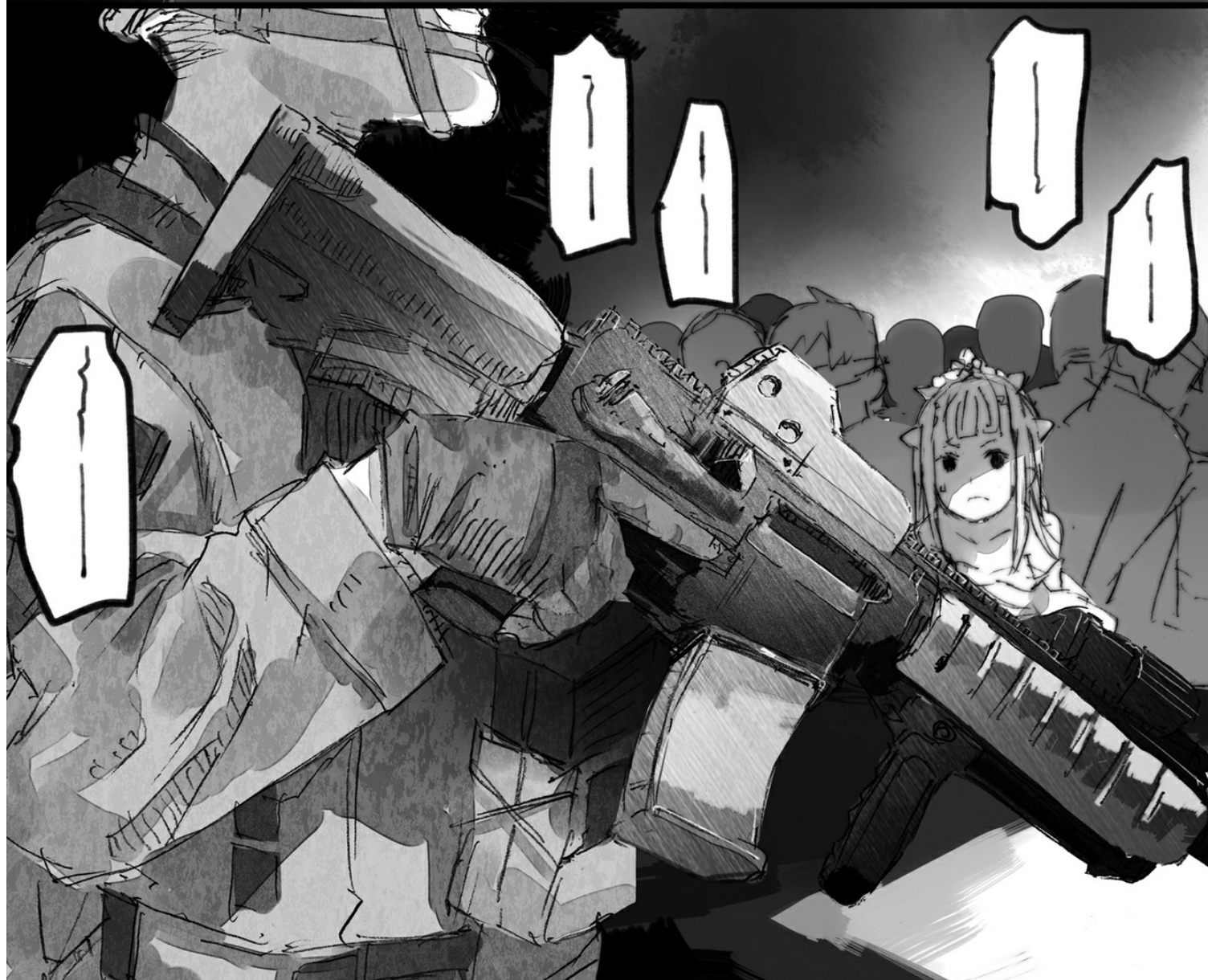
But how did they learn to use it? we wondered. This entire operation was far too skillful...

Holy Eldant Castle was no otaku school. The scale and quality of the security

were far higher. Yet they had reached the innermost sanctum of the castle and taken hostage several important people, including the empress. These were professionals.

We had first been awoken by a huge noise, one we recognized. Like an explosion, but not quite the same as one caused by magic. It sounded like a device Minori and other members of the Jay Ess Dee Eff possessed—a “hand grenayde.”

We had gotten out of bed to see what was the matter when our door was opened from the outside.



Our bedchamber was magically locked, of course. It was normally impossible for anyone to enter without authorization. And yet these people had. Which seemed to imply they had taken the key that only our ladies-in-waiting possessed.

And what of the royal guard who were normally posted outside? We hadn't seen them. All we knew was that we were suddenly surrounded, then dragged over to where Garius and the others—presumably likewise caught unawares—were waiting. Easier to keep an eye on us if we were all in one place, we supposed.

What did these people want with us, though? Bedouna began as an armed resistance against Ja-pan; they feared that the sudden influx of foreign culture would shake our nation's traditional mores, destroy the class system, and rob them of the privileges they possessed. It wasn't surprising, then, that they should oppose us, as we had actively encouraged the importation of Japanese culture. That was what had motivated their attack on the otaku school. But the people who had captured us now didn't seem to have any declarations or demands. What had changed within Bedouna?

For that matter—did these people even truly belong to the Assembly of Patriots?

We quietly removed our magic ring and listened closely. We caught snatches of an unfamiliar language among the conversation. Not just foreign, but a language we didn't know at all. It obviously wasn't Eldant, but it wasn't Japanese, either.

The voices speaking the unfamiliar language—which was translated like any other—faded into the conversation when we had the ring on our finger, so we hadn't noticed before. But without the ring, it was obvious how unusual the language was.

If we had to guess...

American soldiers.

There had been reports that several of the magical rings the country had created for the American troops had been stolen. The reports hadn't garnered

much attention, as the rings are not terribly expensive and the potential for practical harm seemed minimal. But if there were *more* American troops entering the country than we had been informed of, then things would start to make sense.

It had probably gone something like this: the Americans managed to find the members of Bedouna, who had been keeping a low profile within the local population, then provided them with weapons and perhaps strategic advice, enticing them with the promise that these would allow them to take the empress hostage.

If that were so, however, then it would mean Bedouna was just a puppet, and the Americans were the ones we would have to interrogate. And if we the Empress had deduced as much, then no doubt Garius and Zahar were well aware of it already.

Being aware, though, gained us very little. We had been taken while we slept, with neither weapons nor armor to protect us, and even our armed guard appeared to have been dispatched with little fanfare. There was nothing we could do except wait for someone to rescue us from this unexpected turn of events. Perhaps it would be our armed forces, stationed at the training grounds or near the castle. Or perhaps... it would be Shinichi and his friends.

Shinichi...

Part of us hoped that he would come up with a ridiculous but brilliant plan to save us. Maybe it was all we had seen from him so far that allowed us to entertain the hope of something so convenient. Shinichi always seemed to come up with some way of resolving things that hadn't occurred to the rest of us. Was it naive of us to hope that he might do so again?

Shinichi...

We wished we could see him. We wished we could be with him.

If only he would come. If only he would save us.

We clutched our bedclothes and thought desperately of that big dummy.



I jumped into action. Myusel, Minori-san, Elvia, Hikaru-san, and I—along with Reito-san—hopped into a carriage and ordered the driver to book it to Holy Eldant Castle as fast as possible. Brooke offered to come with us, but Man'ya and her siblings were so excited that I was afraid they would just follow along, so I decided to have the Darwin clan stay and watch the house.

Reito-san was with us for two reasons: first, because he was used to being in the middle of chaos on account of his job, and second, because he wanted to come. “Whoa,” he’d said, “it’s like something straight out of a manga! I’m going, I’m so going!” I kind of thought a zombie unit of secret-agent otaku was already like something out of a manga, but whatever.

Trying to keep my raging emotions in check, I desperately wracked my brain to come up with every conceivable plan during the carriage ride—but realizing it was pointless, I finally stopped. First we had to get to the castle and see what the situation really was. Then we could think about what we might be able to do.

When we arrived at the gate of Holy Eldant Castle, I lunged out of the carriage and made a beeline for the building. Normally guards with spears would have stopped me, but today they weren’t there.

I suppose that should have been my first clue that things were amiss. But I was so worried about Petralka that I had sort of lost my head.

A moment later, though, I had no choice but to screech to a stop when several men blocked my path.

“Huh?” I said. They looked big and stubborn, but they also looked distinctly out of place.

“You can’t come in here,” said one of the men from... not Bedouna. His combat gear made it obvious: he was with the Marines.

“Wh-Why not?! Petralka’s in there...!” I cried. I tried to duck around the men blocking my path, but they grabbed my arms so hard I thought they might tear them off. “Oww...”

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel said, rushing up to me. The Marines spared a quick glance at her—and then they shoved me straight into her.

As I stumbled back, Minori-san stepped forward. “Why are the Marines here?” she asked the men.

On closer inspection, I could see the men who had stopped me weren’t the only ones there. The castle grounds were crawling with Marines, more than a hundred of them by my guess. And there were probably more inside.

“The same reason you are,” the Marine who had grabbed me said nonchalantly. “We got word that Her Highness and some of the others had been taken hostage by Bedouna. We’ve commenced urgent operations to rescue the empress of this nation from those despicable terrorists. We have all the experience, knowledge, and equipment anyone could ever need for counterterrorism operations. We’ve got this under control. You can all go home.”

“Wha?”

What it basically boiled down to was: *Stay out of our way, you rookies*. In fact, it didn’t boil down to that; that was what he had actually said. And it was true, as far as it went. But how far was that? Was it just my imagination, or did the Marines have mocking smiles on their faces as they looked at us?

I’d come this far. If there was anything I could do to help, I wanted to do it. “W-We know the inside of the castle better than you do! Let us help...”

But the Marines’ response was predictably cold. “We said, let us handle this.”

Several of them surrounded us. They didn’t actually point their weapons at us, but it was clear there wasn’t going to be any more arguing. We were forcefully escorted away from the castle. Hikaru-san and Elvia flinched like they might be about to try to fight back, but Minori-san placed a firm hand on each of their shoulders and silently shook her head.

Once they had chased us away from the castle, the Marines lined up like a human wall. They were watching us to make sure we didn’t come back. In fact, a good look around showed armed Marines here and there around the whole outside of the castle. They were patrolling in small groups.

“.....Wait.” I felt a chill run down my spine as a particular possibility dawned on me. “Petralka...”

I looked up at Holy Eldant Castle, so large that I could hardly see the entire thing at once. Petralka and the others must be being held in the uppermost reaches. From where I was standing, that seemed impossibly far away.



The school building was eerily quiet. Nothing was moving anywhere; a cold silence enveloped the entire place. Usually it was bustling with students, providing a background noise of kids chattering and playing. To be here without so much as a lamp lit anywhere in the building felt profoundly strange. It was like crawling through the ruins of some unknown civilization.

You know, I remembered an occasion back almost when I had first gotten here, when Myusel, Petralka, and I had all been captured by Bedouna and held hostage in the school. It felt so quaint now. All right, so maybe this wasn't the time to be waxing nostalgic...

"Minori-sama, why're we at the school?" Elvia asked as she came into the classroom. She looked around in curiosity—she didn't get to come here that often, come to think of it. Why had she asked Minori-san specifically and not me or Hikaru-san? Maybe because Minori-san had been the one to tell the carriage driver to come here.

Myusel looked almost as perplexed as Elvia. For better and for worse, they could both be a little naive. I suspected Hikaru-san had some idea why Minori-san had decided to come here, just like I did.

"I thought there was less chance of listening devices here," Minori-san said with a shrug.

"They have listening devices?" Reito-san asked. But he didn't sound surprised. I guess in his line of work, eavesdropping was sort of an assumption.

"I haven't looked, but it seems like a safe bet," Minori-san said.

"Listening... devices?" Myusel and Elvia both looked confused.

"Yeah, for listening to people. Eavesdropping," Hikaru-san explained. "In our world, we have gadgets that can do that easily. Even if the person listening isn't anywhere nearby. Can't you do the same thing with magic?"

The women went from looking confused to downright shocked. Incidentally, I knew there were magical devices—some of which were actually living creatures—for secretly listening to and observing people. I could vouch for it, because Eldant had used them to keep an eye on me at one point.

“They posted soldiers around our house to keep watch on us—I would be more surprised if they *weren’t* listening in on us,” I said. “Besides, I think with laser listening devices, you don’t even have to have them in the room, right? They can use vibrations from window glass to detect the conversations inside.”

Bugging someone’s house these days went way beyond tucking a fingernail-sized microphone into the cracks of the furniture or planting it on the back of a lamp. In the hotels of a certain communist nation that no longer exists, the entire radio in each hotel room was said to be a listening device, and now there were gadgets that could gather sound via the slight vibrations of window glass—in other words, you didn’t have to have anything in the room you wanted to bug; you just had to be able to point your machine at it.

“So you thought about it, too, Shinichi-san?”

“Come on, it’s practically a cliché,” I said with a sigh. Myusel and Elvia, though, looked like they had never considered the possibility they were being listened to; they were looking at each other uneasily. I guess it would be scary to suddenly find out you’d been eavesdropped on. I’d kept it to myself because I hadn’t had any proof and I hadn’t wanted to scare them, but seeing how they looked now, I wished I had spoken up sooner.

Then again, Myusel might cope with it, but I had the feeling that if Elvia knew there was a listening device around, she’d get too self-conscious and accidentally say something she shouldn’t.

“Heh, you guys are regular pros,” Reito-san said with a grin. I guess on some level, we were: aside from all the depictions we’d seen in fiction of the ruthless ways national governments operated, we’d even been on the receiving end a few times. We ought to know by now.

“Uh... Um...” Myusel started out hesitantly. “Can we not just let these, uh... Marines take care of Her Majesty?”

“I doubt it,” Minori-san said. “They aren’t there to help her, believe me.”

“What?”

“B-But why not?” Elvia said. It was like they thought Minori-san was giving up on Petralka. But Hikaru-san and I, and of course Reito-san, weren’t surprised at all.

“Because,” Minori-san said, “it’s probably the Americans who are behind this entire thing to begin with.”

Once again, Myusel and Elvia were astonished, but they were the only ones. The Americans hadn’t exactly been subtle. Maybe they felt they didn’t have the time for delicacy, or maybe they figured it didn’t matter if they gave themselves away. Whichever it was, a kid off the street could have made the connection.

“But... But... But why do you think so?”

“How else would they have known before we did that it was Bedouna that had captured Her Majesty? They could never have reacted so quickly if they didn’t know in advance what was going to happen. Especially not in a completely foreign world like this. The Americans probably orchestrated this entire situation.”

“That’s probably why they were so eager to chase us out of there,” Hikaru-san said.

“It’s not even clear if Bedouna are really the ones who captured the empress,” said Minori-san.

“I suspect they had a hand in the strategy, at least,” Reito-san said with a shrug. “It’s Small Wars 101: pass along some weapons, get a guerrilla movement going. It’s not what I normally expect of the Marines, though. Supporting guerrillas is usually more of an intelligence agency game—classic Cold-War CIA or KGB stuff.”

“So it’s ‘terrorists’ at the top of the castle, Marines supposedly there to fight the terrorists at the bottom, and both of them locked in a standoff with Petralka in the middle. But the reality is, Holy Eldant Castle is now occupied by the Americans,” I said. “That’s where we stand now.”

You could practically see the question marks emanating from Myusel and Elvia.

“But what exactly does America want out of this?” Hikaru-san asked with a frown. “Surely *someone* over there must understand the danger of time paradoxes and stuff, right? We need to be cutting our ties with this place, minimizing interference...”

“I’m sure they understand that,” Minori-san said, putting her hand to her mouth thoughtfully. “But they’ll want the *Nimitz* back. It would give them the perfect platform to make a bid for the hypertechnology in the Dragon’s Den.”

“Oh...” Suddenly it started to make sense. Of course America had to understand the risks of leaving the past and the future connected, but this probably looked like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to them. The hyperspace tunnel would have to be closed eventually, but before that, they would grab up everything they could here.

If this was simply a future Earth, then there wouldn’t be much point in harvesting resources—it would basically be borrowing on margin. What would be the most profitable thing to bring home, then?

Information. Hypertechnology like the annihilation reactor, the BOUs, and the space-time interference-suppression device. Ideally they would want to bring back examples, but failing that, if they could get information, do surveys, make plans, then they could go home with information that might allow America to develop these otherwise unknown technologies. It would be of immeasurable value.

“I don’t think they’re going to be able to bring in scientists to take a good look or analyze anything, and the stuff isn’t exactly easy to get to. But if they want to overpower Bahairam so they can get at the Dragon’s Den, then the *Nimitz* and its weapons are their best chance. But they’ll need a beachhead...”

“For which the Holy Eldant Empire would work perfectly,” Reito-san concluded.

Myusel and Elvia went from perplexed to simply speechless.

“Having Her Majesty and Garius-san as hostages would help keep Eldant under their thumb,” Hikaru-san added. That was to say, the empress and the country’s military leader-cum-heir to the throne. With them captive, the empire wouldn’t be able to resist.

“And Theresa-san.”

“Wait, what?!”

None of us could believe what Hikaru-san was saying. All eyes fixed on him.

“It sounds like they’ve got her, too.”

“I... I know she wasn’t there when I got up this morning, but... but how?”

“Well, uh...” For some reason Hikaru-san started undoing the buttons of his dress. He took it clear off, revealing his pale skin, his neck, his collarbone, and even the soft skin of the valley of his chest... Why was he doing this now?! Argh, no, I couldn’t— *Huh?*

Valley...?!

“Hikaru-san, that’s—!”

“I decided to use this body today, in case anything happened.”

He wasn’t in his actual, male body, but in a female avatar that could house his consciousness. He’d started to use the surrogate body pretty frequently since he had gotten his hands on it. It was definitely stronger and tougher than his human form, so there was some obvious sense in using it at a time like this.

“O-Okay, but why are you stripping?!”

The soft-looking cleft was like a siren call to my eyes, and despite the circumstances, even though Petralka was in trouble, arrrgh, I couldn’t stop my heart from pounding...! *No, Shinichi, that’s a man! Yes, he’s got a chest at the moment, but deep down inside, he’s a dude! Don’t be led astray!*

I struggled internally with something I didn’t understand.

“I thought it might be quickest to show you, but the reaction isn’t very strong at this distance...” Hikaru-san pointed to something near his chest. “The ‘core’ in this body reacted when we were near the castle.”

A core within his body, just under the skin, was pulsing with a faint light. There was a long beat between pulses; it didn’t look very urgent, but it did look important. It was the sort of light that got your attention.

“I got this emergency broadcast, I guess... It told me Theresa-san was at Holy

Eldant Castle but couldn't really move under her own power. That's all I got from it."

"Theresa?" Reito-san asked blankly. Oh, that's right. He didn't know Theresa had been hanging out at our place until just recently. Minori-san probably hadn't had time to submit any reports about the situation.

"But why would Theresa be at the castle?" I asked. The Americans didn't know yet that she could control the Dragon's Den facilities remotely. If they figured it out, things were going to get a lot worse for us.

As if they weren't bad enough already.



The scene was almost unbearable. Several members of Bedouna dragged a young woman into the room where we were being kept and began killing her repeatedly. Five men surrounded her, brandishing guns. The young woman already looked like she had been attacked with guns, and now the Bedouna men attacked her with them several more times. Unlike the men guarding ourselves, moreover, these men had long guns. If the "machine pistol" was akin to a dagger, the weapons these men held were like longswords or lances. From the manga Shinichi had lent us, we knew that these weapons were called "small arms" or "rifles."

The men watched the young woman closely, and if she even attempted to get up, they would use the rifles immediately.

There it was again, another exploding sound from one of the rifles. One of our ladies-in-waiting yelped, and we averted our gaze, feeling as if we might vomit.

Any one of the attacks should have been fatal, but the men continued to administer them at regular intervals. Again and again and again, every time the young woman tried to rise. That implied the young woman wouldn't die, no matter how many times they attacked her.

"Ungh... Agh!" Her body jerked each time they shot her; she writhed on the floor. Time and again she gave what seemed to be a death rattle, trapped in an endless moment of death.

And yet she didn't die, despite the panoply of holes we could see in her body. The reason was simple: the young woman wasn't human. She wasn't even alive, or so we were told. The body was a "prosthesis" or some such. While it made sense that what was not living could not die, it was nonetheless unsettling to watch someone who looked just like us being murdered again and again.

Theresa, that was the young woman's name. Shinichi and the others reported that she was the administrator of the ruins known as the Dragon's Den. She had existed for hundreds, or perhaps thousands, or even tens of thousands of years, and though the form she took now appeared human, her body was not like that of an organic human body. It was more like a puppet she controlled. What's more, minor wounds she sustained would even heal themselves over time.

The men continued to stand with their rifles at the ready, watching her closely. They had to know that Theresa could heal hundreds if not thousands of times faster than an ordinary human being. Which meant that, if a human could be killed with a single fatal wound, Theresa could survive hundreds if not thousands of "fatal" injuries. That was why they insisted on the rifles. That was why they refused to stop attacking her. So that she didn't have time to move.

We reflexively looked in Theresa's direction as we heard her groan. Her pale body was riddled with holes, but they were slowly filling in, silently disappearing as material filled them like melting waxwork.

"Goddamn monster," one of the Bedouna people muttered.

We acknowledged that someone who didn't bleed despite being full of holes, and whose wounds closed up even as one watched, could seem monstrous. But then, to us, these men, willing to shoot relentlessly at what appeared to be only a young woman, were no less terrible.

At length, one of the men in the group around us called to those shooting Theresa with their rifles. "Hey." Perhaps he had some sort of question, for the men retreated to a corner of the room and began a conversation. It sounded as if they were speaking Eldant, but they were doing it quietly, and we couldn't hear what they were saying.

Instead, we shifted where we sat, as if using our behind to dust the floor. Theresa was lying not very far from us. If we could get just a little closer, we

might be able to have a covert conversation.

“Theresa,” we said softly. “Are you all right?” It might seem a strange thing to ask of someone whose body was full of holes, but we were confident that she was still alive, so to speak. Theresa looked at us with her one remaining eye, her left. The right had been destroyed by a rifle burst and still hadn’t regenerated.

Despite fixing us with her gaze, Theresa made no effort to talk. Her lips opened and closed slightly, but produced no voice.

“Is it... your missing ring? Is that why you won’t speak?” we asked. It occurred to us that although we were wearing a magic ring at the moment, Theresa was not. She spoke a different language than we did, and with telepathic communication impossible...

“N... No... I’m f—fine,” Theresa managed, amid a flurry of coughing. “My translation software is already calibrated. I don’t need one of those rings to have a conversation. I do need functioning lungs, though, and they shot those up. Couldn’t really speak until I regenerated them.” Now she sounded perfectly fine.

Her attitude was already back to normal despite her sorry state. We had never been more aware that she was something not human. We suspected she was also capable of turning off any sensation of pain if she so wished.

“Why is it you are here? Shouldn’t you be at Shinichi’s mansion?” we asked. It was the first thing on our mind.

For a moment, we hoped Theresa might have been sent by Shinichi to rescue us, but she said, “I wanted to talk to you... Your Majesty.”

“What?”

Theresa, casting an occasional eye in the direction of our captors, began to speak under her breath: “It’s about that high-per space tunnel. I’ve figured out that I can force it to close from here. I tried asking Shinichi what we should do, but he still can’t make up his damn mind. And now the Americans are here. We don’t have time to wait for that kid to figure out what he wants. So I thought I might just go ahead and close up the portal. Without cluing him in.”

We caught our breath.

The high-per space tunnel. The bridge between our land and Ja-pan. Almost without our realizing it, it had become an ordinary part of our world. We had no more imagined it disappearing than the sky or the clouds or the ground. We had certainly never thought that it might be within our power to get rid of it.

“But I can’t make that call on my own, see? So I wanted to get your go-ahead. Unfortunately, I ran into our American friends on the way, and... well, here we are.”

Theresa’s explanation included one thing we could not overlook.

“Americans?”

“Yeah. Most of those guys are American troops. A few are people from around here, but it’s Americans in charge. Or anyway, they’re speaking English.”

English—that must have been the language of the land of America. “You’re powerful. Can’t you do something?” we asked hopefully, but Theresa only smiled grimly at us.

“Afraid not. They’ve got my number. They know all about this body’s regenerative properties. Hence all the rifles. Good, strong penetrating rounds to keep my systems busy. I’ve got my hands full just trying to regenerate fast enough; comms is out of the question. In this state, I’m less useful than a flesh-and-blood human.”

“Very well...”

So it wasn’t going to be that easy. Perhaps this was a moment to bide our time. The men were finishing their conversation and coming back toward us. We quietly moved back away from Theresa.



We headed back to the mansion feeling somber. Loek and Romilda weren’t there. Brooke and Cerise had told them to go home for the time being, which was a smart move. If there really were listening devices around our house, nothing good would come of the kids being there.

“Welcome home, Kanou Shinichi.”

Loek and Romilda were gone, sure enough, but instead we found Grisham,

sitting on the couch, his legs crossed. He was accompanied by his customary detachment of bodyguards, two men standing to either side of him. Intimidating, as ever.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, stopping in the living-room doorway.

The tough-looking American diplomat made a broad gesture. “I happened to come by a few minutes ago. I decided to wait for you to get back.”

That wasn’t what I had been asking.

“I—I’m sorry, Master.” This came from Cerise, who came up behind me from the hallway. Myusel had been out with me, so Cerise must have been the one who’d had to deal with Grisham when he arrived. She usually kept a low profile compared to Myusel, but she was an excellent maid and did good work. I knew she wouldn’t just let someone wander into the house because they showed up. I suspected Grisham hadn’t given her any choice.

I wasn’t about to blame her, naturally. In fact, I was downright glad that she and Brooke had thought to send Loek and Romilda home. If they’d been here, this whole thing could’ve gotten a lot more complicated very quickly.

“I thought I might see what your answer was,” Grisham said.

“I believe I refused,” I replied, not coming any closer to him. Minori-san, just behind me, was watching Grisham closely; I could practically tell without even turning around. His timing was just too good. He couldn’t have made it more clear that he’d been waiting for this opportunity.

“I’ve got an idea. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, and you can *try again*.” He smiled and stroked the cleft of his chin pointedly. Maybe he was especially proud of it. Hey, this guy was pretty much the epitome of machismo; his creed was probably, you know, “strength is manliness, manliness is righteousness” or something. Anyway, that chin was... well, it was a man’s chin, no question.

I hated the way he acted like he was completely in control of the situation, but he *was* the one sitting there with four armed men backing him up. Turns out I didn’t have the nerve to be like, “Hey, is that your chin, or did your face grow a spare butt?”

Instead I said, “We don’t have the time for—”

“You have family in Japan, I believe, yes?”

“What?” I said, caught off guard.

“Kanou Shizuki. A little sister. The apple of your eye, I’m sure.”

“Huh?” I said, less surprised than I was starting to get annoyed. This was the most transparent attempt at provocation and blackmail I’d ever seen. A villain on a children’s TV show wouldn’t be so ham-fisted these days. Grisham might as well have drawled, “Nice family ya got there. Be a shame if something was to... *happen* to ‘em.” And if he’d gone to this much trouble, there was every chance he’d researched Hikaru-san’s family as well, so he could use them as a bargaining chip, too.

“Y-You leave my family out of this!” Being an otaku, I wanted to tweak the formula a bit, but he’d played it so stereotypically that I couldn’t help responding in kind.

“And your little empress,” he went on. “Don’t you care what happens to her?”

That was when the blood rushed to my head.

I knew it!

“I knew you had to be behind it!”

I was letting my emotions get the better of me, and I was just about to charge Grisham when I felt someone stop me with a hand on my shoulder. I looked back to find Minori-san shaking her head. “Shinichi-kun.”

The way she said my name, calmly and firmly, helped disperse the red mist. *Don’t let your anger make you do something stupid*, her eyes seemed to say.

She was right. I couldn’t go rushing an American diplomat because I was ticked off. It was especially persuasive coming from Minori-san, who knew what it was to speak and act in the grip of a BL-moe frenzy!

...Wait, why was I thinking that?

“Heh, I think you’re laboring under a misunderstanding,” Grisham said. He shrugged slightly and held up his hands, a theatrical and deeply *American* gesture. “I can inform you that at this moment, United States Marines are engaged in an operation to rescue Her Majesty and her associates. That’s what

we're talking about here. Believe me, I'm as mad as you are to see those filthy terrorists lay hands on the empress."

Listen to him run his mouth...

Thankfully, Minori-san was still holding my shoulder, helping me suppress my immediate instinct to punch Grisham in the face. Not that a weakling otaku like me would have lasted a single round in a boxing match with him.

"There is one thing, though." Grisham stood up and approached us, his footsteps clear and distinct as if he was *trying* to make them threatening. The other Marines didn't move, but I reflexively tensed up. *What, you want some?! W-W-Well I've got the ultimate weapon of the fujoshi world right here! Don't make me turn Koganuma Minori-san loose on you, you—* (i.e., desperately hoping someone else will save my sorry butt.) "Kanou Shinichi," Grisham said, placing his hand on my other shoulder, the one Minori-san wasn't holding. I could feel his thick, powerful fingers. "Depending on your answer, our troops might be able to move immediately... or it might take them some time."

I was silent. Grisham took his hand off my shoulder. His blue eyes peered down at me—he was more than a head taller than I was. He didn't have to say anything else. His gaze was enough: *Don't try to fight me. Do what I want.*

Under normal circumstances, I—or anyone, really, any ordinary person—would probably have nodded numbly along, too terrified to do anything else. My sixth sense was telling me this guy was a killer. Maybe he hadn't pulled the trigger or held the blade that did it, but I was sure he could sign off on the deaths of any number of people, probably smiling all the while. Human life was cheap in his mind, just something to be balanced against what it might gain. Hell, he probably felt the same way about peace and justice and whatever else.

I still didn't speak. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I could feel my knees shaking. If nothing else, though, I resisted the urge to nod. That much, at least, I'm proud of.

"I h-have... a lot to think about, so please go home," I said as firmly as I was able.

Grisham narrowed his eyes, but said only, "I'm sure I can expect a favorable answer from you. I'll be waiting." The corners of his lips tugged upward as he

walked by me and out of the living room. But the smile never reached those blue eyes.



After Grisham and his bodyguards left, we all settled in the living room to plan out what we would do next. As for the listening devices, we thought we could use magic to throw them off. Myusel and I used Tifu Murottsu to produce a wind vortex in the middle of the room. Sound is basically vibrations passing through the air, right? So if we could prevent those vibrations from getting to the listening devices, that should do the trick. The wall of wind would scramble the vibrations before the listening devices could do anything with them. There was a good chance it would even confuse laser listening devices focused on the window glass. I guess theoretically, tiny hidden cameras could still be used to read our lips, but if we sat in a circle in the middle of the room to talk, then they would never see what all of us were saying at once.

As one last precaution, I asked Brooke and Cerise to have a good look around the house. I didn't think Marines would resort to just standing there with their ears pressed against the door, but you could never be too sure.

"So, that guy obviously came here to threaten us," I began, looking around the circle at the others. They were trying to use our families back in Japan and our friends here in Eldant against us. It was disgusting. Despicable. Low-down and dirty. But unfortunately... it was also effective.

Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Reito-san all stayed silent. We knew it was true; there would be no point in saying "Yeah, definitely" or whatever.

Myusel spoke up uneasily. "Her Majesty, Theresa-san, and... all of them. I wonder if they're okay..." Her already pale face was completely bloodless. It almost hurt just to look at her. Things had been a little awkward between Petralka and Myusel at first, mostly because of the difference in their social statuses, but now they were as close as sisters. Myusel worried about Petralka because she was the empress's subject, sure, but also simply because she was her friend.

"Myusel..."

It would be so easy to say everything would be fine. Hostages were only useful as *hostages*; I suspected Petralka and the others were too valuable for the Americans to simply kill them. But by the same token, they were valuable simply by virtue of being alive. They didn't have to be safe, well, or in one piece. Think about all the stories in fiction where a kidnapper chops a finger or an ear off their victim and sends it to whoever they want to negotiate with.

It wouldn't be any use saying something fatuous just to make ourselves feel better. That would only put the problem off. So I didn't say anything. Myusel studied me, biting her lip. At last her big, purple eyes started to fill with tears. "Majesty..." she said, covering her face with her hands, which she couldn't stop from shaking.

"Myusel..." Elvia reached out and stroked her back as comfortably as she could.

"I'm just so worried... I'm so scared for Her Majesty," Myusel said weakly. "What if they're... What if they're subjecting her to the sorts of things like in... in Shinichi-sama's 'thin books'? What if they xx her, or—"

"Huh?" I sure hadn't expected to hear a word like *that* from Myusel.

"...and then they end up ●●ing her... and forcing her to ●△■! The very thought is... it's too much!"

"Stop! Myusel, stop! You've got it all wrong!"

That's all stuff from the dirty doujins under my bed! You can't take that stuff at face value!

For that matter, when had Myusel read those things?! I'd gone out of my way to hide them! What was she, some guy's mom who finds his carefully hidden stash of girly magazines and arranges them neatly on his desk?!

"Shinichi-kun?" Minori-san sounded unimpressed. She was looking at me scornfully, and Hikaru-san fixed me with a gaze that said *What a time to be such a complete idiot*.

Noooooooo! It wasn't liiiiike that!

"It's just coincidence!" I howled. "Happenstance! My favorite author's newest

story just, you know, happened to be that sort of thing! I'm not normally into that, I swear!"

Seriously, I'm the happy-ending type! What's worse was that if Myusel ever saw one of those humiliate-a-maid stories, or one of those things where they you-know-what a half-elf, I might be so traumatized I could never face her again. But I don't own any of those. I don't, okay?!

"Aw, man, I've been there. You buy something with this, like, totally innocent cover just to find out it's the filthiest stuff imaginable. That totally happens," Reito-san said, crossing his arms affirmatively. He might have thought he was covering for me, but to me it seemed more like he was pouring oil on the fire!

"But sometimes that's how new doors open," he added.

"I haven't opened any doors!"

At least not yet! For the time being!

"Look, I can't say I don't sympathize," Minori-san said, also crossing her arms. "Like you think, *Aww, what an adorable bottom*, but then you're reading along and it turns out he's actually the top! But then you think to yourself, yeah, that could happen."

Um. Hold on. Was Japan going to be okay with people like her protecting it?

"xx? ◇◇? Whazzat stuff?" Elvia asked, looking from one of us to another, the only one not to follow the conversation.

"Believe me, you don't need to know that," Hikaru-san said flatly—and then he tried to get our derailed conversation back on track. "In any event, setting aside Shinichi-san's lowbrow, frighteningly blasphemous and despicable tastes —"

Hey!

"—at the very least, I don't think Her Majesty is in any immediate danger, so you can relax a little about that, Myusel."

"Y-Yes, sir..."

"I told you, that's not my normal *thing*!"

“Anyway. It’s obvious what the Americans are thinking,” Hikaru-san said, ignoring me completely. “Get someone to pretend to be terrorists, gin up a good, frightening situation, and then swoop in to get rid of the terrorists. Conquer Eldant in the process and use it as a military beachhead...”

The Americans wanted Eldant as a first step to procuring the hypertechnology left over from the golden age of civilization in this world. The question now went way beyond whether we would go home to Japan or not. The danger of interference between the past and the future was going to continue as long as the Americans were here—in fact, it seemed very likely to get worse.

I guessed that only left us one option.

“We’ve got to go rescue her,” I said. Everyone looked at me. I felt the pressure of their gazes, but nonetheless I clenched my fist emphatically. I didn’t think it was very *like* me, but all the same I went on: “We have to rescue Petralka and the others. Theresa, too. If we can get her out of there, then we’ll be able to figure *something* out.”

If we could force the hyperspace tunnel closed, then no matter what America did, we would at least avoid the very worst possible outcome. To do that, though, we would have to rescue Theresa, or I would have to go to the Dragon’s Den myself and work the equipment—but that was no good. I didn’t know what to do. So Theresa was definitely crucial.

“We can’t let America just throw its weight around anymore,” I said, getting up off the couch. “The JSDF’s left, and nobody from Eldant will be able to act with Petralka hostage. We’re the only ones who can help her and Theresa right now.”

Truth be told, it didn’t look good for me. I could say all the brave things I wanted, but I was still just an otaku. I didn’t have weapons or combat training like Minori-san and Reito-san, and I definitely didn’t have an avatar like Hikaru-san. The forbidden armor would let me go toe-to-toe with the Marines, probably—but when you got right down to it, I was still just a civilian, and a former home security guard at that. Maybe it was too much to think that I could take on seasoned warriors, professional killers.

Ugh, I was pathetic. This was an important moment, maybe the most

important moment of my life, but I didn't have it in me to act all cool like the all-powerful protagonist of some light novel or anime. It would be great if I suddenly discovered I had some "cheat" power right about now, but I guess life was never going to be that easy on me.

But as I was busy feeling like the lowest of the low...

"Shinichi-sama..." I felt two hands gently clasp my clenched fist. I looked at the owner of the hands in surprise—it was Myusel, smiling at me. "I'll go with you."

"Huh? But—"

"I want to help Her Majesty. I want to help all of them," she said. "As long as I'm with you, Shinichi-sama, I... I can do anything!"

"Myusel..." I said, deeply moved.

"M-Me, too!" Elvia exclaimed, waving her hands. "I'm not afraid of any Amerlika!"

"Elvia..."

"You're a real piece of work," Hikaru-san said with a sigh. "You've got girls giving you the 'I can do anything for your sake!' line. Dirty bastard. Ever considered going into business as a gigolo? Or a pimp?"

"Uh, hello? Earth to Hikaru-san?"

"No, I get it. I'm coming too," he said with a shrug. "Might not be such a bad thing to have an empress in my debt. My avatar should give me a safety net—better than your flesh body, anyway, Shinichi-san."

"Looks like I've got no choice but to go with, then," Minori-san said with a wry smile. "I am supposed to be your bodyguard, after all. Until we get back to Japan, I'm technically still on duty. Besides, I owe Her Majesty, Minister Cordobal, and Zahar-san, myself."

I had a feeling that we were way outside of normal bodyguard work, but it wouldn't have been polite to rain on her parade. Last of all was...

"I'm coming along, of course. Only natural, right?"

...Reito-san, who normally would have had every right to spectate this one.

“A-Are you sure?” To be perfectly blunt, Reito-san hadn’t even met Petralka or any of the others; he’d really only come here to drop off some video messages for us. Forget spectating—he could have said, “Cool, well, my job’s done, so I’m heading home,” and none of us would have blamed him.

But instead he said, “A red-hot showdown like this? As an otaku, I can’t let this one go, that I can’t!”

“Uh, why’d you suddenly switch to samurai Japanese?”

“I’m trying to cover for myself. I’m embarrassed as heck right now! Argh, why’d you make me say it?” He bumped me in the chest with his fist. Reito-san seemed awfully eager for a covert agent, almost like he thought of himself as a superhero or something. “We’re literally saving the princess!” he said. “Fantasy doesn’t get any fantasy-er than that!”

To be fair, we were actually saving the empress, but why get bogged down with details?

I suddenly discovered my knees had stopped shaking. My friends had volunteered to help me, heedless of the danger, and now I knew that we would face our challenges together.

Man, what was even going on here? This was as hackneyed as crap, right? It was the totally obvious thing, wasn’t it?

But that wasn’t so bad. It meant I knew what had to come next. What had to be waiting for us. Because a scene like this always meant there was a big, fat happy ending in the works.

“Let’s go!” I cried.

Chapter Three: The Rescue

We headed for Holy Eldant Castle as thoroughly equipped as we could be. Namely, Myusel, Elvia, and I wore our forbidden armor, Hikaru-san was using his avatar, and Minori-san and Reito-san had all the weapons they could carry. Reito-san, by the way, had only had his pistol, for self-defense, on him, so Minori-san spotted him a Type 89 and some other stuff she happened to have on hand.

“Shinichi-sensei!” Romilda called from the shadows of the trees, waving to us. Assaulting the castle head-on obviously wasn’t a good idea, so we’d arranged to meet Loek, Romilda, and their parents by one of the many small side entrances. We would stop our carriage, and Romilda’s dad, Rydel-san, would fill us in on the castle’s secret entrances. His ancestors had been among those who built the castle generations earlier, which was why his family had been granted nobility, unusual for demi-humans. Naturally, the Guld family had a set of blueprints for the castle, passed down as a cherished heirloom.

“I must say, I’m impressed you even knew these would be here,” Rydel-san said, running his fingers through his beard.

“Eh, y’know. It’s sort of how these things work. Even in real life.”

Any castle or fortress or whatever was bound to have secret passageways that the family and their servants could use to escape in an emergency. It wasn’t just a cliché—it was common sense. But the flipside was that they could be used to sneak in as well as out. Then again, when I said it was a cliché, I meant in entertainment—which these people hadn’t had much of until recently. Maybe it wasn’t as obvious to them yet as it was to me.

“It’s usually disguised as, like, an unused well or something,” I said.

“No, nothing that obvious,” Rydel-san replied. “Besides, it would fill up with rainwater. Surely you don’t imagine my esteemed ancestors would have created such a facile deception, Shinichi-dono?”

“Huh? But then where...?” I asked.

“Behold the wonders of dwarven skill!” Rydel-san struck the root of a nearby tree with his fist. It went *booong*, and then part of the root recessed inward.

“Wow...”

No way, I thought, but only for a second, because it got even wilder. A dozen nearby trees soundlessly slid aside or tilted half-over, and the ground itself began to give way. I heard dirt tumbling downward, but I could clearly see a metal surface below.

Hang on a second... Was this a secret base?! Was a rescue machine with wings that looked tiny for the size of its fuselage going to pop out?! Why were dwarves so obsessed with this stuff?!

“That’s *so cool!*” Reito-san cried. “I mean, cue the badass background music! Mrrrrmrmrmr bzzzoowww!”

“I think those English do-gooders would be more appropriate here,” I said.

“Yeah, about that,” Reito-san said. “In the opening, they always exclaim ‘*Th*nderbirds are go!*,’ but doesn’t that seem like, grammatically a little weird?”

“Huh? Isn’t it because there’s five of them?”

“I heard *go* is actually an adjective there. They say it’s a pretty common spoken usage,” Minori-san interjected. “But remind me: *why* are we talking about that at a moment like this?”

“Sorry,” Reito-san and I said, and then we prepared to use the dwarven sally port—or escape route or whatever. By the way, it was on a slant so that even a carriage could get in or out. It was a nice touch; I guess you’d expect nobles to flee in a vehicle rather than on their own feet.

“Say, Loek. You can use electricity magic, right?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. But, uh, so can everyone here,” he replied, indicating Romilda and all their parents.

In fantasy novels, lightning always seems to be a subdivision of wind magic, but according to Loek, there weren’t really special “elements” or affinities like wind or earth. I guess when you think about it, metal is the best conductor of electricity, which is really more of a dwarf thing, anyway.

“All right, then...” I pointed to several suitable spots on the castle blueprints Rydel-san had shown us. I told them to get not just the Guld and Slayson families but everyone they could who was capable of using lightning magic, and to start using their spells where I indicated. Everyone looked at me as if to ask why, but I didn’t have time to explain the details.

Finally Rydel-san said, “We beg you to help Her Majesty, Minister Cordobal, and the others. Best of luck!”

“Juuuust leave it to me!” I said, making a rude gesture in imitation of a certain civil servant, and then we headed into the tunnel that would lead us into the castle.

I said it was big enough for a carriage, but that was true only until the spot directly beneath the castle, at which point it became a more ordinary escape tunnel. It was just tall enough for Minori-san to not have to duck, and barely wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side. Reito-san had to lower his head, and those of us in the forbidden armor had to crawl.

So there we were, making our way slowly but surely in a line through the passage. Minori-san was on point, followed by Myusel, then me, Elvia, and Hikaru-san, with Reito-san our rearguard. We’d decided on this arrangement because Myusel and Elvia had wanted me in between them, presumably so that there would be someone to protect me no matter which direction an enemy came from. My manhood felt a little insulted by that, but after their battle in the forbidden armor, they knew how to use it better than I did, and anyway, I didn’t want to waste time arguing, so we went with their idea.

In other words, everything was going basically fine. Except for one little thing.

I swallowed heavily, hoping no one could hear me. But once I was thinking about it, I found myself having to swallow again and again.

Like I said, those of us wearing the forbidden armor had to crawl along. In other words, Myusel’s butt was right in front of me. And while the armor covered the most-vital places, it didn’t leave much else to the imagination. Whether to leave sightlines open or what I don’t know, but for a powered exoskeleton, these things didn’t have much actual armor around the torso. It was dirty. Downright filthy. And it meant that among the mechanical bits of the

forbidden armor, I caught glimpses of Myusel's—of her—her *behind*, swaying side to side, right in front of me, arrgh, and with those thighs hanging right out there, and between them I could almost see—but not quite—but—ahhhhhhhh!

What was this? Was this fan service? This was fan service! It was deliberate! I wished whoever designed this armor was here right now. I would give them a big grin and an even bigger thumbs-up. “Good job!” I’d say!

.....Uhh... I don’t actually mean any of that, okay?

Awful! I am awful! This was serious! Petralka and Theresa were in real trouble, and here I was thinking dirty thoughts! I couldn’t believe myself! (I mean it, okay?!) I was frozen, making excuses to I’m not quite sure who, when Hikaru-san’s voice brought me back to reality. “Shinichi-san, don’t forget our objective, all right?”

“Huh?! Who’s forgetting? What’s forgetting?!”

It didn’t take me long to figure out what he meant, though. He was positioned directly behind Elvia. Which meant he was getting a good look at...

Grrannghhhh!!

There was her butt, of course, and those toned thighs, and that fluffy tail—*whoa!* Was I getting jealous just imagining it? Very jealous.

Huh? But wait. When I thought about it—okay, I didn’t have to think that hard—Elvia was behind me. So was she getting an eyeful of... aaaahhhhh I wish I hadn’t realized that! *Ugh, I’m so embarrassed! Shinichi, you’ll never be able to get married now!! I know, I know, I was just looking at Myusel’s butt the same way, but...!*

“Shinichi-sama, is something the matter?”

“N-Nothing at all, Myusel! Let’s just keep going, dead ahead!” I told the concerned butt—I mean, Myusel!—and tried to smile as encouragingly as I could. It was the only thing I could do.



The passageway eventually led us into an underground room that appeared to be some sort of storage area. We easily pushed aside a cover in the stone

floor, allowing us out of the passageway. Beside the cover, I could see a large, wooden box—it had probably been sitting over the cover to hide it. It looked heavy, but I found I could move it without any trouble. It was probably empty.

“Phew,” I sighed, glad to finally be free of the claustrophobic hallway. I’d been right on the edge down there, and I don’t know how much longer I could have lasted. Of course, the forbidden armor had its own oxygen supply, so I wasn’t actually going to suffocate, but with that butt right in front of me— (Remainder omitted.) Once Reito-san, bringing up the rear, was safely out of the passageway, we all looked at each other. The light in the room was so dim we could only just see each other’s faces. Minori-san pressed her pointer finger to her lips, then motioned to the door leading into the castle.

First things first: we would have to get to the upper levels. While we knew the layout of the castle, though, we didn’t know exactly where Petralka was being kept. We would have to figure it out somehow. Here was my idea: we’d work our way up, then when we got upstairs, we’d have Elvia with her excellent nose try to sniff Petralka out. (It was possible to lower the force field around the forbidden armor to let outside air in, so that wouldn’t be a problem.) We all followed Minori-san into the castle, trying to be ready for anything. We had gone down several hallways and were about to turn another corner when— “Fall back!” Minori-san exclaimed. At almost the same moment, I heard a series of muffled gunshots. The stone floor, walls, and ceiling erupted in showers of sparks. Whoever was shooting at us must have been using a suppressor, because I didn’t hear full-fledged gunshots or see any muzzle flash. But that didn’t make the bullets any less lethal.

“Yeep!” I cried. Minori-san pressed herself against the stone with her pistol at the ready, using the wall for cover as she fired around the corner.

Reito-san, too, jumped out from behind me, letting off a few rounds while being careful to avoid the return fire. But then he let out a “Pfah!” and dropped down toward the ground, his face scrunching. I could see a small cut oozing blood down his cheek—maybe a graze from a bullet, or at least from a bit of flying stone.

“Maybe the people with the armor could get up front?!” Reito-san said.

“Er, right!” I replied. Suddenly it seemed so obvious: ricochet. Even firing blindly around a corner, your bullets would bounce off the stone floors and walls and ceiling, and some of them might hit their intended target. In fact, enough of them probably would that you could deliberately try to use the ricochet to deliver the shot—I remembered reading that in some manga somewhere.

Reito-san let up firing for a moment and Myusel and I hurried forward, hoping to trade places with Minori-san.

Suddenly the firing stopped.

“I knew you would come,” someone said as if they had been waiting for this very moment. The magic ring was interpreting for me, but from what I could hear, it sounded like they were speaking English. Which meant...

“M-Minori-san...”

“Yeah. An ambush.” Minori-san had her back pressed to the wall near me, and I could hear her trying to get her breathing under control.

“We accounted, of course, for the possibility that you would show up here. And so you did. Never knowing that we were waiting for you,” the other person—a Marine—said mockingly. Several other voices started to laugh. Even in the gloom, I could tell we weren’t dealing with just a couple of people. There had to be at least twenty men facing us.

“Uhhh...” *I’d like to see around the corner*, I thought. That got me a reaction from the armor’s onboard AI, which projected an image formed by echolocation in front of my eyes. It was remarkably detailed, much more than I would have expected from a picture formed with sound. I could see not just the Marines’ equipment, but even their faces. If I’d felt like it, I could probably have counted the hairs on their heads.

I had been right—about twenty Marines. They were armed with M4 carbines and MINIMI SAW light machine guns. No snipers. No mortars, either. Well, we were indoors.

Still, that meant there was a hallway packed with fully armed Americans waiting for me. I had never seen anything like this except in movies. Ironically,

that gave the moment a sense of detachment, a feeling of unreality that tripped me up.

“Throw down your weapons and surrender. Do as we say and we’ll let you live.”

There it was: the classic surrender offer. Then again, between the lines there was usually something like, “we won’t kill you, but we’ll make you *wish* you were dead.” So it wouldn’t necessarily pay just to do what they asked.

“Need I remind you that we hold the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire in our grasp? A stupid move on your part could have very unhealthy consequences for her.”

It was so American to take such a roundabout way of saying it—but in any event, the Marines showed no sign of attacking us. They were probably still hoping we would surrender and come out peacefully.

I see, I thought. They don’t know exactly what kinds of weapons we might have, so they’re being careful. They had no idea if we might be armed with magic or magical weapons.

I didn’t say anything out loud, but I looked back at Myusel and Elvia behind me. Our eyes met, and they picked up on what I wanted without me having to say a word. They each nodded, and then I looked at Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Reito-san before raising my arm in front of my face and taking up a fighting posture.

They seemed to get what I had in mind—they all nodded at me and took a deep breath.

It’s all right, Kanou Shinichi. Your forbidden armor withstood a rampaging annihilation reactor—a few 5.56mm bullets aren’t going to hurt you.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

Myusel, Elvia, and I charged around the corner all at once. It seemed to catch the Marines by surprise—but they were still trained soldiers. They didn’t hesitate, but opened fire on us.

I caught my breath as I saw ripples run across my defensive force field, but

they only lasted for a moment. The force field robbed the bullets of their kinetic energy, and they went tumbling to the ground. None of them got through. I'd known they wouldn't, but it was still pretty scary to actually get shot at. I mean *really* scary. I had to force myself not to close my eyes.

But we could do this!

"If they can't hit us, they can't hurt us!" I shouted in imitation of some captain somewhere. I mean, I guess it was sort of a truism, but I shouted it anyway. To be fair, I guess they *were* hitting us. Just in the force field.

"What?!" cried the Marines when they realized their bullets weren't doing anything. They might have expected that if we'd shown up in walking tanks or something, but the forbidden armor looked more like mecha-girl cosplay. You know, the sort of thing that makes you go, "The chest and the head are important—why aren't they covered?!" In other words, they didn't look very smart in defensive terms. It had probably caused the Marines to underestimate us. After all, the force fields were invisible to the naked eye.

I couldn't repress a nasty little smile when I saw how shocked they were. Normally, they could have taken out someone like me with one finger—well, okay, maybe not quite *that* easily, but a good punch from one of them would have laid me out flat. And here they were, practically scared of me! It was an outrageous role reversal.

"Try this on for size! Former Shut-In Otaku Cheat Attack!!" I shouted, making them blanch even further, and then I punched the guy on point.

"Hrgh!" he cried, flying into the air. That's not hyperbole—he literally came up off his feet. I didn't put all my strength into it—I didn't want to kill anybody—but it threw him a good meter or so, slamming him into his comrades behind him.

"Goddammit!" a couple of them shouted as the guy came tumbling into them. Ooh—his arm was at a weird angle. You see that in manga and stuff all the time, but to see it in real life, even without any blood, is pretty grotesque. I knew in theory I didn't have to hold back against people who wanted to shoot me, but like I said, I wasn't out to kill them, so maybe I shouldn't go around punching anybody until I had a better sense of my own strength.

With that in mind, Myusel, Elvia, and I started working our way among the Marines. Even underground, the castle passages were wide enough to allow us to run around in the forbidden armor, but it was a bit too tight for a squadron of Marines to retreat quickly. We slammed into the middle of them, *grab, rip, throw, grab, rip, throw*. Okay, there wasn't actually any ripping, but the point is we tossed them aside easily.

"Tossing" was really one way of attacking. It might not have looked like much at first, but it was remarkably effective. Throws and locks can be better than strikes when you just want to control an opponent. My mom told me that's why police officers usually learn judo instead of karate or kenpo: because they don't want to punch or kick people so much as they want to be able to keep a handle on them once they're on the ground.

My mother had thrown me once, and even on tatami matting it took me a few minutes to get up again. The impact hits your entire body at once, knocking the air out of your lungs. Just imagine landing on something a lot harder than tatami, like asphalt—I wouldn't be surprised if a person went unconscious.

"Wh-What the hell are these people?!"

"St-Stop!"

The Marines could tell when they were outclassed. Their frightened, angry shouting echoed off the stone walls. The guns they were carrying started to work against them, crucially slowing them down as they tried to switch to hand-to-hand fighting or even just withdraw.

In the blink of an eye, we'd cast aside six Marines and were closing in on three more, including one who looked like the commander. They were scrambling backwards, trying to make some space between us and them, but they couldn't run full-out in the half-darkness, so instead they just ended up trying to stare us down—but they were well within reach.

"D—Damn..." The man in the center of the Marine line, the one who appeared to be the commander, held something up. "I told you! You really don't care what happens to the empress?!"

He was holding some kind of communications device. One word from him, he seemed to be suggesting, and the Bedouna terrorists, or the Marines

pretending to be terrorists, or whatever, would kill Petralka.

We stopped as if this were a samurai drama and the communications device the Marine was holding was his *inro* seal case. The Marines saw that, looked at each other, and grinned. They clearly thought they had the upper hand now.

“Excellent, there’s a good boy. Stay still. One false move and the hostage dies. First things first: drop your weapons. And take off those weird suits you’re wearing.” As if to emphasize that he held Petralka’s life in his hands, the commander held the radio to his mouth and said, “This is Charlie Five. We’ve got intruders. Take the hostage and—”

Suddenly, he stopped talking. The radio was silent—or rather, it kept producing useless static.

“What’s the matter? Radio not working?” I said. The Marine glowered at me. Bingo.

“What did you do to it?!” The men to the commander’s left and right leveled their guns at us. The commander tried several more times, with increasing desperation, to raise his comrades on the radio, but there was no response. Just the buzzing white noise of static.

Phew. I couldn’t have been more relieved. It had actually worked.

I’d had no way to be sure it would go the way I’d planned, so I’d been pretty worried—but Loek’s magic was doing exactly what it was supposed to.

When we’d been on our way to the *Nimitz* recently, we’d encountered wireless interference. The cause seemed to be lightning magic being used at the scene of the battle. I didn’t know how large a radius the interference would extend to, so I’d been gambling.

“Oh, and your friends from the other floors won’t be coming, either.”

“What did you do?” the Marines shouted.

Hey, I didn’t have to explain it to them. Sure, cackling madly while I spelled out all the delicious details might have had a certain satisfaction, but you know what happens to people who do that. The tables always turn on them. So I decided to bite my tongue.

To be fair, it wasn't anything that special. Myusel and I were using wind magic to create a barrier of silence around the area. We'd been doing it ever since we got out of the carriage and made our way through the escape tunnel.

"That means you're up, Elvia!"

"Yessir!" She jumped at the Marines, her already exceptional physical abilities further enhanced by the forbidden armor. Regular old humans, even Marines, had no chance. Further hobbled by the despair of knowing that their radio equipment had been rendered useless, Elvia had them on the ground, knocked out, in no time flat.

So much for our would-be ambushers, Charlie Five. The Marines had probably thought they had us trapped—tough luck for them! They were the ones in the trap all along.

"All clear, guys," I called, and Minori-san, Reito-san, and Hikaru-san emerged from around the corner.

"Worked like a charm," Minori-san said. She, of course, was in on the whole lightning-and-wind magic thing.

"You took out an entire Marine platoon in less than three minutes. Pretty impressive," Reito-san said.

"Eh, it's mostly thanks to this armor," I said. Three minutes? I wouldn't have lasted three seconds in that fight without this suit.

"Guns can't hurt you. You have superhuman strength. And you can even use magic," Hikaru-san said, looking irritated. "Shinichi-san, it's like you're the OP cheat protag of some story."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" I replied. "Anyway, you're hardly one to talk, Hikaru-san." I didn't know how battle-capable that avatar was, but Hikaru-san could fight without even being physically present. Talk about cheating. Even if, admittedly, I didn't think his avatar could withstand a hail of bullets.

"We're off to a good start—let's keep it up!" I clenched my fist, and everyone else nodded.



“All right, now...”

After about ten minutes of wandering through the castle, I called for a brief rest. Frankly, those of us in the forbidden armor, and Hikaru-san with his avatar, weren't really tired, but Minori-san and Reito-san had to get around on their own two legs, and five or ten minutes of flat-out running was probably about all they could handle. Even with the sort of training they'd had, flesh-and-blood humans could only exert themselves like that for so long.

At any rate, completely ignoring the lower levels had been the right choice: after rushing up the stairs as fast as we could, we'd arrived at the upper floors. We stopped by a large pillar near the staircase and held a quick strategy meeting.

“The first problem is, we don't know where Petralka and the others are being held,” I whispered, looking around vigilantly as I spoke.

Incidentally, after our encounter with Charlie Five, we'd run into one other group of Marines on the way upstairs—but we'd taken them out quickly, and that was it. I assumed they'd concentrated their fighting strength up here. Or alternatively, maybe the terrorists didn't actually have that much strength. If you think about it, even if they were working with Bedouna, if hundreds of Marines were suddenly to vanish from their posts, people would start asking questions. Which meant that there was a good chance the force committed to taking over Holy Eldant Castle wasn't actually that large. And *that* would mean the group guarding Petralka and the others wasn't that many people, either. They would keep everyone in one place—they didn't have the numbers to do anything else.

“They probably didn't put them anywhere too obvious...”

“But we can't spend forever searching, either,” Hikaru-san said. That was true enough.

“Someone's going to get suspicious when those Americans don't report in after a while,” Reito-san said.

“Yeah, or they'll notice we've been messing with their radios,” Minori-san added. I guess they were speaking as much for Myusel and Elvia's benefit as for mine. In any case, they were right. Jamming communications was all well and

good, but when the other guys didn't hear from their friends, they were going to wonder what was going on. Since we weren't actually out to destroy the "terrorists," the best-case scenario for us would be to run into as few of them as possible.

"I knew this castle was ridiculously big... but I didn't realize *how* ridiculously big," I said. Honestly, even just getting up the stairs had been a challenge. It was like climbing to one of those mountaintop temples where you take a series of steep stone staircases embedded in the side of the hill. Plus, the upper floors were still huge. The walls were too thick to hear any sound from inside the rooms, and I didn't even know how many rooms there were. We couldn't go around shouting Petralka's name; the terrorists would hear us—and because Petralka and the others, you know, lived here, it turned out their scent was everywhere, so Elvia couldn't readily track them with her nose.

The result: we would have to check every likely room one by one.

"It's like trawling through an endless forest or cave in an RPG," I muttered.

"Yeah, but at least if this were a game we could check a strategy guide," Reito-san said with a wry grin.

"Watch out, they're gonna say you have game brain or something."

"Haven't you ever thought life would be easier if it was more like a video game, though?"

"Would it? Imagine if you wound up in one of those Fr*m games. You'd be dead within seconds."

Your character spawns, then you take three steps and die in a river of molten lava. It's over before you even know what's happened. Or you buy it falling from some high place. Too real.

"Could we use magic to find out where she is?" Hikaru-san asked. Expectant gazes turned toward Myusel—but she shook her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry, but I never specialized in magic..."

Myusel had learned her magic while in the military, which she had joined to earn citizenship, but she hadn't exactly joined up because she was itching to

learn some spells and go to war. Naturally, she hadn't learned more than the average.

"What about you, Hikaru-san? You react to Theresa, don't you? Couldn't that give us an idea of her location?"

"I can only work out that she's somewhere in this castle," Hikaru-san said with a disappointed shrug.

"No choice but to go door to door, huh..."

We had a time limit. Worse, if we let down our guard, it would be game over. I guess this was what you would call hard mode...

That didn't mean we could give up, though. As an otaku, I even found the challenge inspiring. If it all went well, I would probably wish I could upload the forbidden armor's recording of everything onto a video sharing site or something.

"We're the only ones who can rescue the damsel in distress," I said. (I meant Petralka.) "We have to try."

"That's right," Minori-san said, looking at me with kind, even comforting, eyes. "You, O brave hero, are the only one who can rescue the monsieur in distress!" (...Did she mean Garius?) "Minori-san?" I asked.

"What?"

"I know who you're thinking of, and it's weird."

"It's not weird. It's not weird at all. Shinichi-kun, you needn't feel embarrassed! I'm rooting for you, on your side, in your corner!"

"No, it's definitely weird, and your brain is even weirder!"

Even as Minori-san and I talked, I got up and started to search.



The alleged members of Bedouna, including the Americans, continued to keep watch on us with guns in hand. They also continued to periodically attack Theresa. Each time they saw her wounds starting to heal, they would injure her again with the guns. Already it seemed divorced from any ordinary sense of

wounding or killing someone; it had simply become another job. Her attackers hid their faces so we couldn't see their expressions, but they didn't seem excited, nor did they shout or act angry or joyful. They showed no sign of feeling any intense emotion.

That was unsettling in its own right, and the ladies-in-waiting who were tied up with us kept their eyes on the ground as if they could hardly bear to see the terrible “work” being done in front of them. Some of our ladies had received military training, but none of them had ever experienced a situation as extreme as this. Garius and Zahar, unable to do anything, were also quiet.

It was the wise choice.

Our captors had powerful weapons and were exceptionally well trained. Garius might have physical strength and hand-to-hand training, but with no weapon and against this many opponents, he had no hope of victory. If he caused trouble, they might decide to torture one of his friends just to keep him in line—or even kill someone.

There was nothing any of us could do. We could only wait. Our captors seemed to know that, and they appeared less vigilant than they had at first. It's draining to be in the same room as your enemies, even if you're in control. Continual alertness takes its toll, and fatigue accumulates many times faster than normal. It's only natural that one would start to pay less attention—one could even say it's the body's way of protecting itself from complete mental exhaustion.

But yes, it was also a weakness we could take advantage of.

“Say,” we said to one of the people nearby. Despite his face covering, we could immediately see his expression tighten. His gun drifted toward us. We sensed surprise and alarm running through Garius and the others.

“We wish to powder our nose,” we informed the soldier, and the men looked at each other. They removed their magic rings and held a hushed conversation, presumably about how to handle this situation.

We had now been captives for quite some time. If anything, it was surprising no one had spoken up about this before. In other words, there was nothing suspicious about our request, we thought. We were only asking to indulge the

same natural processes as anyone.

They could force us to hold it, but it might make things more difficult for them down the line, as they well understood. Given how competent they had appeared as they tied us up, we had to think this wasn't their first time doing this, or at least that they had planned it very carefully. That also made them very different from the last time we had encountered Bedouna.

"All right," one of them said, putting his ring back on and coming up to us. "But don't try anything funny."

"Perish the thought," we replied. In any event, our bonds were undone and we were allowed to stand.

If this were one of the manga Shinichi had lent us, this was the point where we would have swept the man's feet out from under him, but unfortunately we ourselves were not capable of that. Much as we hate to admit it, our body cannot seem to keep up with our age, and isn't very large. Our limbs are short and not terribly powerful. If we were so rash as to try anything right now, we would only end up inviting retaliation.

The man pressed his weapon into our back as if to say *Hurry up*. We felt our heart skip a beat. This was what they called the moment of truth. Fighting to hide our own nervousness and anxiety, we looked up at the man.

"We must have one of our ladies-in-waiting with us."

"What?"

"We do not know how you *lower* classes handle the matter, but when nobles answer nature's call, they always have at least one attendant with them. We might add that we ourselves have never made do with just one."

"Huh, sure. Can't even wipe your own ass. You high-and-mighty types," the man grumbled. "Well, make sure your little friend goes too, while you're at it. I don't want you all going to the bathroom a million times."

"You. Come with us," we said, pointing at one of our ladies-in-waiting. Then, finally, we were free of the bedchamber.



“Tifu murottsu!” Myusel cried, and a blast of wind assaulted the Marine squadron. The men were slammed against the walls and floor and knocked clean unconscious. They didn’t even cry out, which was good for us. They would probably be fearsome enemies in a modern-day-style fight, but instead, they were facing magic and superweapons and amateurs who didn’t know combat common sense from a hole in the ground. If anything, their training tripped them up, as we behaved in ways they never expected.

“Is that everyone?!” I called. I was using wind magic, too, but not to attack, like Myusel was. I was creating a soundproof barrier around us. Myusel and Elvia nodded to me.

Forbidden armor or no, fighting still took it out of you. When you had to fight several battles in a row, it was even worse. We’d had a fairly easy time of it getting to the top floors, but they weren’t going to let us just walk over to Petralka. We were encountering small units of three or four people each. Presumably they were combined groups of Marines and Bedouna, but it was the Marines who were in charge, and that made the effects of attacking with magic and the forbidden armor especially amusing. We were scouring the top levels of the castle, and so far not one of us had so much as been hurt.

While those of us in the forbidden armor had been doing most of the fighting, the flesh-and-blood Minori-san and Reito-san, along with Hikaru-san, had been searching the rooms we encountered. Now Minori-san came running up to me. “Shinichi-kun!”

“Did you find Her Majesty?!” Myusel said, looking panicked. As much as Myusel and Petralka were servant and empress, they were also genuine friends, which only redoubled Myusel’s concern. Of course, I felt the same way—in fact, I was a little annoyed we hadn’t found Petralka yet.

Minori-san said, “She wasn’t on this floor. But we found some attendants, tied up. They told us where she is.” Then Minori-san smiled, and somehow she looked like a wild beast. I didn’t know how exactly she had gotten the information about Petralka’s location, and it sort of worried me, but maybe it would be best not to ask.

“So, where is she?!”

“She’s in her bedchamber.”

“Her bedchamber...”

Now that I thought about it, that seemed like it should have been obvious, but I had never been in Petralka’s bedroom. I’d never even seen it. Loek had said Petralka had been captured near dawn. The Americans must have attacked while everyone was asleep. Did that mean... Petralka was in her pajamas? And what did the empress sleep in in this world? Was it maybe sort of a *négligée*? Or, don’t tell me... did she sleep naked?!

The fantasy machine revved up in my head, spewing out different ideas about how a sleeping Petralka might look. I could see the big, canopied bed, Petralka herself asleep under layers of silk, dressed only in thin bedclothes that revealed not just the curves of her body but even the indent of her bellybutton and her ●●●! And she was hugging a big stuffed animal like a body pillow...

Ooh, my heart races just thinking about it!

“Shinichi-san, get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Huh?! Wh-What gutter? Who’s a gutter?!”

Was Hikaru-san psychic?! Could he read a person’s mind?! Had he spent his entire childhood a misanthrope, until one day one special encounter opened his boyish heart and— “You thought the look on your face wouldn’t give you away?” Hikaru-san’s exasperated voice interrupted my little fantasy of what his life must have been like. *Oh*.

Poor Shinichi, how embarrassing! Completely, entirely unbeknownst to me, I must have had a little smile on my face.

Gazes settled on me that said: *What’s this guy thinking? And why is he thinking it at a moment like this?* Argh, even Reito-san! And Myusel, Myusel looked somehow upset, too! *No, stop, don’t look at me like that!*

“O-Okay, let’s bracket that!” I said in a forceful bid to change the subject. I couldn’t stand their frustrated scrutiny for much longer. Heck, even if I could, it seemed likely to open some very strange doors that I would rather leave closed. “I-If we know where she is, then we’re all set!”

A hostage rescue was a very delicate operation, but with our people and equipment, I figured we could manage somehow. At least, that was what I told everyone, or anyway, myself.

“Her Majesty’s bedroom is on the floor above this one. Let’s hurry,” Minori-san said, and we all nodded.



I, Theresa Bigelow, cannot die. Then again, strictly speaking, I wasn’t alive to begin with, so you might say that’s not a coherent statement—or that it’s a truism. The soldier who became the basis for me died long ago; I’m just a gynoid who happens to carry her personality data. I’m a machine, so I might break, but I won’t die. And if I break, I can be repaired.

My avatar is constructed of nanomachines, and as long as my core is relatively intact, it’ll regenerate itself. I don’t even have to think about it; it’s an automatic process, just like how a human body can repair minor injuries on its own. And in the same way, I normally can’t consciously stop this process any more than a human can.

That might seem awfully convenient, but depending on the situation, sometimes it’s not so great. Regenerating my avatar puts a substantial load on my core, which means I can’t really move while I’m doing it. My nanomachines are programmed to prioritize preservation of the avatar over conscious processes. In other words, if I get hurt bad enough, I’m rendered immobile for a while.

The American Marines understood that, and they perforated me with bullet holes on a regular basis to keep me busy healing up. After they’d taken an anti-materiel rifle and carefully put a bullet in my head, chest, stomach, and each of my shoulders and arms—a regular collection—and were satisfied I couldn’t move, the Americans nodded and went back to chatting with each other. It was just idle banter, but their eyes—and their guns—never left me. I was kind of impressed. These guys were trained.

But then I heard: “Have Charlie and Delta platoons checked in yet?”

“Naw, not yet. They think there might be radio-wave interference. Bravo

Two's going to check on them."

"Don't suppose it's, y'know, some sort of Dellinger-effect thing?"

"Maybe, but..."

The Americans had removed the rings, apparently believing that would prevent anyone from understanding what they were saying. They weren't making any attempt to keep their voices down; in fact, they were talking pretty loud, just in English.

"Your Majesty," I whispered over toward where the empress was sitting patiently tied up. I tried not to let the Americans notice me. It wasn't hard. Even in the twenty-first century, the technology already existed to make a voice audible only in a specific direction and within a specific distance. With my nanomachines, it was a piece of cake. "I think Shinichi and his friends are here to rescue you."

There was a boy, Hikaru, who used a nanomachine-based avatar like mine. I could feel when he was close. The kid didn't strike me as hotheaded—or stupid—enough to burst in here on his own, so if I was sensing him, I assumed Shinichi and his merry band were right there with him.

I also assumed they would be using the PDWSs, or the forbidden armor, as they called it. That would put them on even footing with the Marines and their guns, or maybe even give them the advantage. The whole point of the PDWSs had been to enable complete amateurs to get onto the battlefield and live to talk about it.

If the boys in here with us weren't hearing from their friends, that meant one of a couple of things: either Shinichi and the others were using magic to block communications signals, or they'd completely overpowered all the troops in the castle. In either case, it meant things were going well.

Her Majesty looked shocked to discover Shinichi was here. The other people with Her Majesty, overhearing me, got looks of joy on their faces. They were starting to see a possibility of rescue. I wasn't sure if Shinichi and his buddies would be able to handle all these terrorists, but at least if they came bursting in here, it would give me some time to regenerate.

That was when I heard one of the Americans say, “Charlie Five’s gone completely silent. I think we should take that to mean there are hostiles in the castle.”

I didn’t like that. But it was only natural for them to reach that conclusion—that was the whole point of regular check-ins.

“You think it’s those guys from Amutech or whatever it is?”

“What, the Japs?”

“I think we should assume they’re in here, though we can’t say how close.” One of the Marines produced his gun from under his overgarment and pointed it, but not at me. He was aiming in the direction of the hostages nearby. “Think we better show ’em what a stupid move that was.”

He started to remove the suppressor from his gun. Then the room resounded with a gunshot; without the suppressor, it sounded like a small explosion. The hostages, who were probably hearing that noise for the first time, cowered.

Then we heard a man groan. “Hngh...”

“Zahar!” cried Garius, the empress’s aide-de-camp. I could see an old man, I think someone who advised or took care of Her Majesty, bent double. It looked like he’d been shot in the foot. A red pool of blood was gradually forming on the stones by his feet.

There was general consternation. Everyone knew I was an avatar by now. They were actually starting to get used to the sight of me being shot. The other hostages had gradually stopped flinching every time a bullet penetrated my body. But to see the old man get hit—that upset them all over again. The unmuffled sound of the gun, along with the smell of gunpowder and blood in the air, brought home the reality of the situation to everyone, and freshened the terror.

“Everybody shut up!” one of the Americans shouted. When the ladies-in-waiting saw the gun swing in their direction, they immediately quieted down. Garius glowered at the Marines; the only sound was Zahar’s groaning.

“You think we’re not serious?” the American went on. “You think this is an empty threat?” I assumed he’d taken the suppressor off to make sure the sound

reached Shinichi and the others, to discourage them from coming. I didn't know how close he and his friends might be, and neither did the Marines, but some shooting, some screaming, and a little blood were their way of reminding him: *we have hostages*.

"We can and will kill hostages!" the Marine said. "And if you think killing is the worst thing we can do to you, hoo boy, are you wrong. We'll make you beg for death before we're done. You're all gonna find out what it costs when a bunch of *civilians* try to pull off a hostage rescue!" Then his voice dropped a little and he said, "But their shortsighted dumbassery works out for us. Kanou Shinichi is the only one other than that doll lady there who has access privileges to the hyperspace tunnel. Everything and everyone we want is coming right to us, all on their own. Guess we should be grateful to them."

The American troops laughed. As for the rest of us, no one said anything. We couldn't say anything. But Zahar was still groaning, his blood dribbling onto the floor.



Our objective was right at the very top of the castle. They'd hollowed out a mountain to make this building, but obviously not everything in it was made of rock, and of course, the floors got narrower as you went up.

The uppermost floor was the location of the living quarters of the royal family, and each room was large, but there weren't very many of them. I guess you could say the topmost level was Her Majesty's personal apartments, while the floors below were for business. Even I had never been up in this part of the castle before. Petralka's bedroom was on the south side; it had maybe the best view of any room in the castle.

Minori-san stopped and whispered, "I think that's it." We hid behind some decorations in the hallway—suits of armor holding spears—before peeking out to see what she was pointing at.

A pair of double doors stood at the far end of the hallway. Judging by the doors alone, the room beyond had to be pretty big. If I didn't already know it was someone's personal sleeping quarters, I would never have guessed it was a

room for just one person. I guess that's what it means to be a princess—er, an empress.

“What's the plan?” Reito-san asked.

“Charge the place head-on!” Elvia said immediately. She was raring to go; you could see it on her face. She was a straightforward person, just like her plan. She was probably sick of sneaking around the castle and trying to keep quiet. I couldn't say I didn't sympathize.

Before I could discourage her, though, Hikaru-san said, “We can't do that. We've been able to handle things the way we have so far because we've been getting the drop on our enemies, and they didn't have any hostages. That won't work here. Besides, as if everything else wasn't bad enough, we don't have the key.”

Yeah. That was our first problem. If even our personal rooms at the mansion were magically locked, it was pretty easy to imagine that Petralka's bedchamber would be, too. If the Marines knew about that, and if the lock was active, then we didn't have a leg to stand on. Back at the mansion, Myusel had spare copies of each of our keys, but if the Marines had all the spares in the room with them? That would be bad news.

In fact, we knew just how bad from a particular incident we were involved in called the Seven Days of Rottenness—er, but that's not important right now.

“We'd have to get them to open it from the inside...” I started.

“Or use magic, an explosion, or some other method to break in from below,” Hikaru-san concluded.

“If we're going to try explosives, we'd probably have better luck with a wall,” Reito-san said. “That's basic special-forces stuff, but they use special tube-shaped explosives. Wall, floor, or whatever, I think a standard-issue hand grenade would be a little too risky.”

“Is that true?” I said.

“Yeah. Besides, what if they have the hostages right up against the other side of the wall we pick?”

“Oh yeah...”

If we blew down a wall to rescue the hostages, but blew up the hostages doing it, that would sort of defeat the point. Reito-san said sometimes terrorists even counted on that, specifically placing hostages against walls as an insurance policy...

“A hand grenade bursts into fragments intended to wound an enemy,” he said. “It was never really designed for making holes in walls or floors.”

“True. Even a human body is enough to stop the shrapnel from going very far,” Minori-san added. Come to think of it, that was something I’d seen in manga. Allegedly, they’d done experiments in Nazi Germany and found a lone human body could stop the force of a grenade’s explosion. So when it came to the sturdy walls of Eldant Castle... Well, it was pretty much impossible, I guess.

While we were having this discussion, Myusel spoke up. “U-Um... The lock... I think it’s open.”

“Uh... What?”

“The door is slightly ajar...”

The rest of us took a fresh look at the door. We squinted, trying to make out all the details we could, and discovered that she was right: there was a very slight crack in the door.

“Don’t suppose they just conveniently forgot to close it,” I said.

“The people inside must know we’re coming by now, don’t you think?” Myusel said.

“I’m not sure,” I replied; it was the most I could say. It would be fantastic if we hadn’t been discovered yet, but it had been more than twenty minutes since we’d taken out that first unit we ran into. I didn’t know how often they were supposed to check in, but there was a good chance the terrorists had noticed something was amiss by now. If they’d figured out that the communications disruption wasn’t a natural phenomenon, and wasn’t just an accident—if they realized it had to be deliberate—then they would be on their guard. There was every chance they would be waiting for us when we got in there.

“Maybe we really should charge the place, like Elvia says,” I suggested, glancing back at everyone else. “That door looks like the only way in or out, after all.”

“Looks like it,” Minori-san agreed with a nod. “If we could get some crossfire going, create confusion...”

The ideal when forcing your way into a room like that would be to coordinate the timing of two separate groups so as to catch the people inside in the middle, buying yourself some time while they figured out how to respond. But with just one way into the room, that wasn’t going to happen.

“Even if they are waiting for us, they’ve only got guns,” I said. “The forbidden armor can handle that. We’re the ones who are losing out by taking too much time to talk about it.”

“I’m not used to seeing you so forceful, Shinichi-san,” Hikaru-san said.

“Er, well, I mean, with everything that’s happening...”

“What you mean is you’re sick with worry about Her Majesty, right?”

“Who wouldn’t be?”

What if something happened to Petralka while we were standing here chatting? Deliberately walking right into the enemy’s trap was a real strategy. Sometimes, it could actually create an opportunity. Like maybe they would be so happy the trap worked that they would let down their guard. And what if the thing that walked into their trap was basically a mobile tank?

To this point, the Marines we’d encountered had seemed to underestimate the forbidden armor because so much of the occupant appeared to be out in the open. I hoped the same might hold true for whoever was in that room. The only thing we really knew about them was that they had hostages—but I thought if we could get the drop on them, then maybe we could pull it off somehow.

“Elvia, Myusel, and I will lead the assault. I want the rest of you to back us up, Minori-san and Reito-san with your guns, Hikaru-san with your avatar.”

I was just an amateur, and I’d come up with an amateur plan, but nobody

raised any objections.

We crept nervously toward the door, trying to be as quiet as possible.

First, we positioned ourselves on either side of the door, barely daring to breathe. I listened hard, desperate to catch any hint of what was going on inside—and the forbidden armor, helpfully reading my thoughts, began scanning the interior of the room with ultrasonic waves. This produced an image that allowed me to get a general idea of where the hostages were and how many terrorists we were dealing with.

I assumed the people sitting by the wall were the hostages, and the ones standing around were the terrorists. Wait... Two people lay collapsed on the ground. Don't tell me they'd started killing people already?! This was awful. We didn't have a moment to hesitate. I nodded to everyone...

...and then Myusel, Elvia, and I flung open the door and burst into the room.

"Yipes!" I exclaimed immediately.

Bap bap bap bap bap bap bap bap bap! Muted gunshots (probably thanks to the suppressors on the weapons) came in a flurry, and the marble floor lit up with sparks. They were firing at the ground deliberately, a clear warning to us not to come any closer. Then, from behind the terrorists in the front row emerged a long weapon with what looked like a giant harmonica on the end.

A Barrett M82A3! An anti-materiel rifle! I knew from the unique muzzle brake on the end of the gun. This was a fifty-caliber rifle that could even take down a robot cat from the future—no, wait, I mean a muscle-bound-dad-like future-robot—in a single shot. From what I knew, it wouldn't be effective against a main battle tank, but it could at least take out an LAV. In other words, it deserved its label of an anti-materiel rifle...

So they even had one of those?!

I knew the U.S. Marines used the weapon—in fact, the suffix A3 indicated the Marine variant—so maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. I didn't have any hard numbers on just how powerful the forbidden armor's force field was, and I had no idea if it could survive a direct hit from the Barrett's fifty-cal. I'd been working on the assumption that I could just bull my way through anything the

enemy threw at me, but I was starting to question that premise.

Then there was the guy standing behind the rest of the troops, holding an M4 carbine. He looked like the commander. “Hello there,” he said. The soldiers were wearing heavy outer layers, but the weapons were all U.S. Marine Corps issue. There was no question in my mind: more than half these terrorists were American troops.

“Shinichi?!”

“Petralka!” I exclaimed when I heard her voice. It was just like I had seen from the sonar picture: Petralka, Garius, and their attendants were tied up against a corner of the wall, behind the terrorists. They were all in their bedclothes, probably caught unawares while they were asleep. And just like I had imagined, Petralka was in a *négligée*—but let’s set that aside for now.

My eyes went wide when I saw Theresa lying beside Petralka. She wasn’t moving a muscle. How had they reduced Theresa, of all people, to that? Then I noticed Zahar-san, lying on his side and groaning. Bright red blood flowed from his foot. He and Theresa must have been the two people I had seen crumpled on the ground.

I felt the blood rush to my head. “You bastards!” My anger pushed me a few steps forward. Almost instantly, ten different weapons opened up on me. Most of them were M4s, small-caliber things, but that Barrett got in a shot, too. Everything was aimed at my legs and knees, though. They were far enough away that most of the shots missed.

I could almost hear the smile on the face of the terrorist—or I guess I should say Marine—commander. “Things would have been so much easier for everyone if you’d just done what we said. But I assume you don’t need your legs in order to manipulate the hyperspace... tunnel...”

He trailed off as the smoke cleared—and he discovered that Elvia, Myusel, and I were completely unharmed. The forbidden armor’s force field had successfully repelled not only the small arms fire, but even the fifty-caliber round. Although I admit that when I saw the massive, thumb-sized bullet caught and spinning in the force field and realized it could have gone straight through, it definitely made my blood run cold.

“What?!”

The terrorists were incredulous, and I didn't really blame them. But I also didn't care. The three of us charged forward. Elvia in front, then me, with Myusel bringing up the rear.

As large as the room was, with our legs artificially strengthened by the forbidden armor, we were on the terrorists in a matter of seconds. They didn't get off a second volley of gunfire before we were among them, rendering attacks with firearms basically impossible. The chance of friendly fire was too high, and they knew it. A few of them tried using their guns as clubs instead, but that wasn't enough to scratch the forbidden armor.

“See you in hell!”

One of the Marines manning the Barrett had it pressed right up against Elvia. Bad news. Even the forbidden armor might not survive a fifty-caliber round at point-blank range. Hardly even thinking about what I was doing, I fired the armor's wired claw, hoping to pull her out of the way...

It turned out I hardly needed to help her, though, because before I could pull off my little rescue stunt, Hikaru-san dove in from the side and gave the Barrett a vicious kick. Despite being long and heavy, the rifle barrel swung easily up toward the ceiling, then exploded.

That wasn't all; Hikaru-san and Elvia proceeded to fling the terrorists around every which way. That avatar was really something. It might not be quite as strong as the forbidden armor, but it was a lot more threatening than it looked.

A few desperate soldiers prepared to engage us in hand-to-hand combat, but Reito-san and Minori-san politely opened fire from behind us. Given the effect bullets had on the forbidden armor (that is, none), they didn't have to worry too much about hitting us.

Almost before we knew what we had done, we had taken out more than half the terrorists. We could do this. We just had to keep— “Don't move! Stop right where you are, or the girl gets it!”

Just as I was thinking we only had to finish off the terrorists and get out of here, there was a shout. The rest of us froze, and I saw a Marine—I knew it was

a Marine because he'd taken off his overlayer; I guess he didn't care anymore if we knew who they were. He had Petralka by the arm and was pressing a gun to her head. I felt the blood rush away from my face, pretty much the opposite of what had happened when we broke in here.

"Petralka!"

"Let go! Let us go, we say!"

The Marine wrapped an arm around Petralka's delicate neck, pulling her up off her feet, as if using her as a shield. Her legs kicked helplessly in the air.

"Majesty!" Garius shouted. He almost started to get up, but he stopped when the Marine said, "Freeze! If you want your empress back with her head still attached, sit still!"

"D—Don't listen to him! He must be bluffing!" Petralka shouted, not just to Garius, but to all of us; we had all stopped in place.

She wasn't entirely wrong. She was the Americans' best hostage, so if they killed her, it would give them fewer cards to play later on. From that perspective, it sounded likely to be an empty threat, but...

"Don't listen! Don't worry—"

—*about us*, I think she was about to say, but the American interrupted, "We have a backup. Killing the kiddie queen here won't slow us down." He was looking at Garius, still half-risen from the ground, as he spoke. It was true that Garius was next in line for the succession. If the worst should happen to Petralka, he would immediately become emperor... And maybe that meant they *could* afford to kill Petralka after all.

It looked like we had failed. Maybe we should have gone straight for the terrorists, not worrying about that opening volley of gunfire. It was my fault, too, for letting my anger run away with me when I saw Zahar-san and Theresa shot. I should have focused purely on getting Petralka and Garius out of there.

It was too late for should-haves, though. Wasn't there something, anything I could do? We'd come here to rescue Petralka and the others, but at this rate, we were going to end up as captives ourselves.

“Sh—Shinichi-sama,” Myusel said, turning to me. The way she looked at me with those eyes brimming with tears—I had to think of *something*! I worked my brain as hard as I could. Was there some way to break the stalemate? Arrgh, but if they really were serious about killing Petralka, then my hands were tied. I could hardly think. It felt like all I could do was panic!

That was when I saw something move behind the Marine. “Huh?”

It only took a split second: almost as soon as I had seen the movement, the Marine crumpled. His body, almost two meters tall, hit the ground like a sack of bricks. What the heck had happened to him? I didn’t know exactly, but I soon figured out who had done it to him.

Theresa.

Somewhere along the line, she’d managed to heal her wounds, and had attacked the Marine from behind. Now it was making sense. Her body was an avatar, made of nanomachines. It would take more than a few bullets to kill her, and her body would regenerate automatically. The Marines had been aware of that, but our intrusion had caused them to forget about her for just long enough. She’d used that time to heal up, then launched an ambush as if to say, “Can’t let you guys have all the fun!”

She took advantage of the fresh chaos among the Marines to press her attack. The guy who’d had his gun to Petralka’s head turned it on Theresa—but she immediately grabbed his hand, weapon and all, and gave it a twist, earning a scream from him. Ouch, that looked like a few broken fingers...

Petralka used the moment to slip out of her bonds and came rushing toward me.

“Shinichi!” she cried, spreading her arms wide.

Bang!

Petralka collapsed to the ground, tumbled along, and came to rest at my feet. One of the terrorists stood behind her, holding an M4 carbine. Maybe he was a legitimate member of Bedouna, because he wore ordinary Eldant clothing.

That didn’t matter right now, though.



“Petralka...” I could hardly speak, I was so overwhelmed.

She’d been shot. Petralka had been shot. They’d shot her, and now she was on the ground. Right at my feet.

No, it was okay, it had to be. She’d just tripped, that was all.

See? She would get up in a second, the simplest thing in the world, and berate me for not catching her. I was sure she would...

“Petralka...” I said. My voice shook terribly as I spoke her name. She still wasn’t getting up; she was just lying there. I took her in my arms. The forbidden armor seemed infuriatingly slow and clumsy. The AI must have sensed what I was thinking, because the armor retreated from me, setting me free, and I found myself holding Petralka’s small body in my own arms. She seemed so heavy, though. Limp and cold.

This was ridiculous. Impossible.

“Petralka... Petralka!” I said, but she didn’t respond.

The others, especially Minori-san and Reito-san, Theresa and Hikaru-san, were fighting with the remaining terrorists. But to me it all seemed so far away; I could hear the noise, but it was fuzzy and indistinct. Myusel and Elvia both crouched by me; they seemed to be saying something, but honestly, I couldn’t tell what. I didn’t want to know.

Petralka...

“Why... How could they...”

“We didn’t...” The faintest of voices came from my arms. She was alive! She was alive! But... “We didn’t wish... to get... in your way...”

“You aren’t... I don’t...”

What was she talking about? How could Petralka possibly get in my way? She was always— “Shinichi-sama, give me Her Majesty!” cried Myusel, who had also taken off her armor. “We need magic! We need to heal her...”

“It’s all—it’s all right, Myusel.” Petralka shook her head weakly. “There’s no point...”

“B-But Your Majesty!”

“Tell us, Shinichi... Were we... able to be of help to you?”

I felt my chest constrict. How was that fair? Asking me that question here—now! It was almost like... Like...

I couldn't get any words out; I could only nod.

“Good...” Petralka smiled, genuinely pleased. “That alone... is enough...”

“Stop that!” I said. She was acting like this was her big death scene! “Myusel, quick, take Petralka,” I said. I didn't know if it was really pointless or not, but we had to try. Myusel started chanting immediately.

“We told you, it's no use.”

“We won't know that if we don't try! Petralka, just—”

“Say, Shinichi...” A smile flitted across her face. “Do you remember the day we first met? It feels like only yesterday.”

I caught my breath. My throat hurt, and suddenly my vision was blurry.

This was no time to be crying. If I had time to be getting all weepy, then I had time to be figuring out some crazy plan to save Petralka! Come on, Kanou Shinichi, think of something—anything!

But all I could think of was... nothing.

I hugged Petralka as tightly as I could, clutching her to my chest as if I might be able to keep her from slipping away from me. I got covered in blood, but what did I care? Arrgh, it was all over. I couldn't even feel her heartbeat anymore, and her blood— Wait a second.

“Ah, yes, how could we ever forget your impropriety?”

“.....Huh?”

Her blood... wasn't actually soaking me? She... She wasn't actually bleeding?

“It is our considered opinion that you know nothing about the heart of a woman.”

Whoa, wait, hang on, what?!

She'd been shot through the chest, right? A bullet to the heart should have been fatal, rendering even magic helpless against it. Was I wrong about that? Even if you figured I didn't hear a heartbeat because she'd been shot, wasn't it weird that there was no blood? And did you normally get to talk this long after getting shot in the chest?

"And then all those things you said in the ensuing days, about the flatness of our chest, and on and on. There is insult, and then there is *insult*."

Speaking of chests, I could feel Petralka's through her clothing, and it was downright... hard. I mean, sure, just like she said, she hardly had any chest at all! But what was she, some kind of doll? No human could have a chest so...

.....
doll?

"Are you listening, Shinichi?"

I finally put the pieces together. At some point I had started hearing Petralka's voice, not from my arms, but from just over my shoulder.

"Wha—?!" I looked up in a hurry to discover Petralka standing there, her arms crossed. "Petralka?!"

"What?" Myusel, who had been trying to intone a healing spell between sobs, looked up, too. She froze, utterly astonished.

"Hrm. Took you long enough," Petralka muttered. She was... almost naked. I mean, not in the sense that she had a bunch of skin showing, but she wasn't wearing the royal garments I was used to. Neither was she wearing her bedclothes, though; instead, she was wrapped in a shapeless white sheet of some sort. It was sort of a morning-after look—I mean, if the night before had been really wild—I mean, it sent my mind spinning.

"B... B..."

But how?

I sat there, unable to get out even those two words, when the "Petralka" in my arms suddenly started to move. She calmly extricated herself from my grasp as if she hadn't just been shot through the chest with a rifle, and went to stand

beside the real Petralka. They were perfect twins.

“The doll... The puppet!” I realized someone else I recognized was standing behind the two Petralkas. Someone even shorter than the empress—the dwarf, Lauron Selioz. The young woman who had become a lady-in-waiting at the castle in order to puppeteer the doll that served as Petralka’s body double.

“Wh-What?!” The gears finally started turning in my head.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Excellent work, Lauron,” Petralka said.

“You’re not harmed, Your Majesty?”

“No.”

Lauron didn’t seem bothered by my shouting. She tended not to show much emotion to begin with, so I shouldn’t have expected her to panic now.

“That was a fine performance you gave. That is an impersonation we can count on,” Petralka said.

“You honor me, Your Majesty.”

“Shinichi, Myusel, do you not agree?”

“Oh, yeah. I couldn’t even tell the difference..... Wait, not the time!”

Myusel was still frozen and seemed genuinely unable to speak.

“Lauron,” I choked. “Where did you... I mean, where were you?!”

“Captured, among the hostages.”

“No way! You were?!”

I’d noticed the ladies-in-waiting, but I guess my attention had been drawn by Petralka, Garius, and the two people who had been shot, Theresa and Zahar-san.

Hey, how is Zahar-san doing?!

“Zahar-san?! ” I exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, it missed the artery, and I’ve stopped the bleeding,” Minori-san replied. I looked up to discover that the others had long ago dealt with the rest

of the terrorists and even administered first aid to Zahar-san. Guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Minori-san and Reito-san in particular knew how to act fast.

Elvia, meanwhile, was looking back and forth between the two Petralkas, the only one not to have quite figured out what was going on yet. She had seen the puppet before, but maybe this was the first time she'd witnessed it in action.

"Here, let me fill you in..." Hikaru-san said to her, and started to explain.

As for me, I finally had myself under control enough to ask Petralka—the real one—"How? When were you able to make the switch? Or was that your double all along?"

"Before you arrived, Shinichi, we requested to relieve ourselves, and made the switch at that moment." Petralka looked thoroughly pleased with herself. "We selected Lauron as the lady-in-waiting to accompany us. Then we hid until things quieted down. Lacking proper clothing, we grabbed the nearest curtain."

According to Petralka, Lauron was able to use her magic to get the puppet up and running, which was great, but they were in such a hurry that they couldn't stop to find an outfit for the doll. They obviously couldn't send it back to the terrorists naked, though, so Petralka dressed the puppet in the bedclothes she had been wearing. Their original plan was evidently to find an opportune moment to have the puppet go berserk, giving everyone else a chance to escape.

That was when we had arrived.

Myusel was still staring vacantly at Petralka; finally she managed: "Your Majesty... Thank goodness..." And then, unable to hold back the tears any longer, she started weeping, all that anxiety finally coming out. "I can't tell you... how glad I am..."

"Myusel..." Petralka was almost a little startled by the sight of the sobbing maid. She must have known that they shared a friendship that transcended their social classes, but maybe the depth of it surprised even her. "We must apologize for worrying you so, Myusel."

"No... Your Majesty!"

“And Shinichi,” Petralka added, pivoting to face me. At the distinct possibility that I would catch a glimpse of her tiny body under that bare sheet, I felt my heart skip a beat—no, I don’t mean that, okay?

“Did you panic when you thought we were dying? Hm? Are you crying?” She grinned mischievously at me.

“I—I’m not crying!” I said, reflexively shaking my head. But I was, or I had been. Even though I hated to admit it. Even though it was embarrassing. So embarrassing that I wanted to just writhe on the ground right there. “I swear I’m not crying, okay?!”

“That’s Shinichi-san for you,” Hikaru-san said from a short distance away. “Best tsundere there is. He could pass for a proper heroine.”

“I could not!”

Who was he calling a tsundere?!

Everyone chuckled at the way I was all but howling.

“A tsundere... So that’s it! Shinichi is a tsundere!” Petralka said.

Somehow, she looked happiest of all.

Chapter Four: That Side and This Are Severed

They called it a training field. It didn't look like much, just a wooden fence enclosing a square about a hundred meters on a side, ten thousand square meters altogether. Roughly the size of a baseball field. There wasn't even any equipment set up, just a few small buildings along the edge in the process of being dismantled and abandoned.

We were told this was what the Japan Self-Defense Force had been using as a garrison. They had already left this other world, though, and we were moving in in their place. It was going to be awfully tight for the nearly six thousand troops we had here, including the crew of the *Nimitz*, so we used the garrison mostly for communications equipment and munitions storage, while our people slept either out in the open or in rooms rented in the imperial capital. In a word, this training field in the Holy Eldant capital of Marinos was now a forward operating base of the United States of America, as well as its temporary embassy.

I, George Grisham, was staying in one of the huts the JSDF hadn't managed to tear down. Pretty poor accommodations for the representative of an entire nation, but what the hell. At least it kept me out of the elements. Most of the Marines who had come to this other world with me were camped out in the nearby forest. Partly that was to hide them from prying Eldant eyes. Trying to track the numbers of a group scattered across the forest, living in simple, easily relocated tents, was tricky. If, say, a hundred Marines out of a unit of a thousand were to go missing, it was unlikely to be noticed.

I had to say, I was quite pleased with the current situation. Everything was going just according to plan.

“All right, so the food doesn’t taste like much,” I muttered. The lunch I was eating had been made on-site. I wasn’t exactly a junkfood man myself, but this stuff was making me long for some Burger Ki*g or Jack-in-the-Bo*. Maybe I could requisition some tomato ketchup, at least. That had to be one of the top ten inventions in all of human history. Think how much richer the human table had become because of it!

My thoughts were interrupted when a Marine came rushing in. “Ambassador! Ambassador Grisham!”

“What is it?” I snapped. I might not like the food, but I also didn’t like being interrupted while I was trying to eat. A good meal was essential to give you the energy for a busy day.

“Sorry to interrupt you during your meal, sir. It’s just...”

“Spit it out, Marine.” I dabbed at my lips with a napkin and stood up. The Marine stood in the door of my hut, unable to find the words to say next. That was strange. A lot of the men had foul mouths, but they were almost never at a loss for something to say.

“It’s Troy 1, sir. We’ve lost contact.”

“With one of the squads? Which one?”

Troy 1 was our codename for the operation to take over the Eldant castle and make it our base. It was the CIA’s plan, initially. The CIA operatives we’d secretly helped through the portal had made contact with local dissidents and tried to rile them up, while the Marines were to provide weapons and tactical consultation. But given the tight schedule—we had nothing like enough time to learn the ins and outs of the unique weaponry and tactics available here—we had our doubts about proceeding with the operation using only local forces. Hence a handful of Marines secretly joined the operation. Just a fraction of our total force here, ten percent, but still a good hundred people. They’d been divided into several units for the mission.

We knew from the crew of the *Nimitz* that unpredictable radio outages were a fact of life in this world. We expected to lose touch with one or two of our units during the course of operations.

But the Marine replied, "All of them, sir."

For a second, I was speechless. A hundred fully armed United States Marines, and we couldn't get in touch with any of them? We had nearly three hundred people involved including local rebel forces. Was he telling me communications had failed with all of them?

"When you say all of them, Marine, you mean..." My voice had grown tight.

"Every one, sir."

"Well, what the hell happened? Don't tell me the secret squirrels screwed up their own plan. Or did one of the locals sell us out?"

"No reports saying so, sir." Then the Marine slowed down; he had to force himself to say the rest of the words. "Ahem... The crew of the *Nimitz*... We can't reach them, either. For practical purposes, sir... this embassy is isolated."

"What the hell?!" Was he saying those of us here around the embassy had been cut off from all our other troops? "Are you sure it's not an equipment problem? Is someone jamming us?"

"That was the first thing we thought of, sir."

When we had first arrived here, there had been some issues with the communications equipment preventing contact between units. But it had been hours since the trouble started, and they couldn't find any problems with the comms equipment here at the embassy. Everything was functioning normally. They reported they could reach the capital city, at least. That left just a few possibilities: the comms equipment we were trying to reach was all malfunctioning, had all been destroyed, or the radiomen weren't with their equipment anymore.

I clicked my tongue. We'd dismissed the locals as primitive barbarians. Had that been a mistake?

"Gather the rest of the troops," I said. "Who's the highest-ranking person we have contact with right now?"

"Captain O'Connell, sir."

"Have him form a new unit and investigate, then."

I started getting ready to go to the castle myself, but at that moment, there was some sort of commotion from outside. I could hear the ruckus among the troops.

“Dammit, what now?” I demanded, shoving past the man in the doorway and looking outside. Then I froze.

Three bizarre *things* were walking toward the embassy, pushing my Marines aside like rag dolls. The things looked more or less humanoid, but they had to be more than two meters tall, and they bristled with bits that made them look like heavy machinery. They made me think of a movie I’d gone to see with my girlfriend back in college—Cameron’s *Alien**, I think it was. The power loader. Like heavy equipment a person could wear as a suit.

“What in God’s name—?”

Then I stopped. I recognized one of the people in those suits. Those flat Asian faces all looked the same to me, but I’d studied the briefing materials well enough to recognize this one. This one mattered.

“Kanou Shinichi,” I growled, barely managing to hold back a hiss.



Lights blazed in the audience chamber. Gathered in the room like they were being put on display were the members of Bedouna, brought there from wherever we had found them, all around the castle. They’d all been stripped of their weapons, their hands and legs bound, but it hardly seemed necessary: very few showed any desire to fight anymore.

Bedouna’s *raison d’être* was supposed to be to break the back of the other world’s influence upon this one. It should have been unthinkable to them to rely on that other world for help. After Bedouna’s last escapade, however, they had been hunted down, the organization brought to the brink of extinction. Perhaps that was what drove them to swallow their pride and take the weapons and training of this foreign force. Yet even that had ended in failure.

They were so clearly devastated that even we ourselves felt a little bit bad for them.

Incidentally, the Americans who had helped and encouraged Bedouna were not present. Shinichi and his friends had taken them all away.

“How is Zahar?” we asked, eyeing the broken rebels from our throne. Garius stood beside us. Like us, he had been in bedclothes until only a short time before, but now he was dressed in his usual outfit, as we were.

“The doctor treated him,” he said. “I’m told his life isn’t in danger. But he’s not a young man anymore, and it could take some time for him to heal.”

“Is that so?” We couldn’t suppress a sigh of relief. Zahar had become like a father to us after our parents’ passing. We might not have been able to handle his death. At the very least, we certainly could not have found it within ourselves to look on the Bedouna captives with anything resembling mercy. Even if it had been an American who had shot him, they had been working with this lot.

“Your Majesty. If I may?” Lauron asked from the other side of us, sounding hesitant. At the moment, she wasn’t controlling the puppet that served as our body double, but two of the “clay dolls,” large creatures typically used for engineering work. Their purpose was to stand imposingly over the captives, though again, the remaining Bedouna members didn’t have much will to fight.

“What is she doing?” Lauron asked, indicating with a glance a woman sitting silently, eyes closed, in one corner of the room.

It was Theresa. Truth be told, we didn’t know much about this woman ourselves, only what we had heard from Shinichi. But if it was true that she was the administrator of the Dragon’s Den in the Kingdom of Bahairam, and that it was some kind of malfunction of a machine there that had first created the high-per space tunnel, then she was in some way connected to the start of all this. And it seemed she might be connected to the end as well.

“She told us that she was going to get in touch with the Dragon’s Den,” we replied, but we ourselves only half believed it.

Even now, Theresa was connected by some invisible linkage to the Den, almost like magic. She said it was possible for her to manipulate things all the way over there in Bahairam even though she was here in Eldant.

“This Theresa... Do you really think she can close the tunnel from here?” Garius said, as if reading our mind.

That was the question at the heart of it all. It had all begun with the opening of the high-per space tunnel. That had led to contact, then exchange, with Japan, and ultimately the founding of Amutech. That was what had brought Shinichi here, and led to everything that followed after...

If we could close the high-per space tunnel, the Americans would no longer be able to touch us. It would be the simplest solution to their would-be invasion. But by the same token, it would mean cutting off all contact with Japan. And that would mean...

Theresa’s eyes fluttered open. She looked at each of us, taking us in slowly, and then her lips curved into a smile. “I can do it,” she declared. “I’ve got a little control over the tunnel from here. Just enough.”



The training area where the JSDF had made their home was now the Marines’ base. After taking care of business at the castle—and after a short rest—that was where I went, my posse from the castle assault in tow. We didn’t want to give them any time to come up with any cute little excuses or destroy any evidence.

The Marines at the base turned their weapons on us and ordered us to leave, but with three people in forbidden armor leading the way, we forced our way through. A few pot shots came at us, but they were just warnings; we didn’t even need our force fields. Officially, America was still on good terms with the Holy Eldant Empire, so the Marines probably didn’t want to accidentally hit people they took to be locals. For that matter, I was the exception; Elvia and Myusel actually were “locals.” (Okay, so Elvia wasn’t from Eldant, but let’s set that aside for now.) Finally we found ourselves in front of a small hut, where we discovered the all-too-familiar Mr. Grisham.

“Well, well! What brings you here?” he asked innocently, with a profoundly American gesture of exaggerated surprise. He was smiling, but the smile didn’t reach those blue eyes. He was wary of us. And that was fair enough, I guess.

“I’ve come to give you my answer,” I said in a loud voice, “about cooperating with you.” I could feel the Marines all around watching us. “In English, I think the word is... *No*.”

Grisham’s expression didn’t budge. He’d probably expected this all along. It wouldn’t have been that hard to predict.

“I’ve decided something else, too,” I went on. “We’re going to close the hyperspace tunnel.”

“What?!” That got his attention. I could hear murmuring among the Marines. Perfect. I’d set them back on their heels. I decided to give them another push. “If you don’t want to be stranded in this world, I’d suggest you go home—right now.”

The muttering intensified. Naturally: the Marines might be among the first in when hostilities broke out in a foreign land, but most of them had loved ones back in America. It would have to be unsettling to think they could never go home again, never see their families again.

“Everyone be quiet,” Grisham ordered, almost in a groan, and the Marines immediately fell silent. “You say you’re going to close the portal? How exactly are you going to do that? If you think you can buy time with your little bluff, I’m afraid you’re going to find out you’re wrong.”

“It’s not a bluff. You remember how Theresa and I both have administrative privileges at the Dragon’s Den?”

“I remember. I also remember the Dragon’s Den is an entire country away.”

“Hah! Silly guy. Who was the first to develop the Global Hawk and the Predator?”

I saw Grisham’s face stiffen.

“Remote control is par for the course in weapons these days,” I said.

“You... You can’t be serious.”

“I’ve got plenty of control over the Den from right here. Theresa tells me that if I use the comms network, I can make pretty minute adjustments. Just to give one example, I could open a temporary wormhole anywhere I felt like.”

Granted, I couldn't do it very often or for very long because of the amount of space-time instability it would cause, but Grisham didn't need to know that. I was capable of opening a localized, temporary wormhole like the one that had brought the *Nimitz* over.

With an effort, Grisham regained his composure and snorted dismissively. "Y-You overreach yourself. How could a single private citizen, a Japanese at that, take it upon himself to determine the fate of the entire world?" He stuck out that cleft chin of his and stared down at me. Well, actually, with the forbidden armor on, we were almost eye to eye, but he tried to *look* like he was looking down at me. He was trying to convince himself that he was still in control here.

He raised a hand. "I can see now that you are an enemy bent on obstructing the national interests of the United States! I'm authorized to order an attack on you, and believe me, there won't be any more warning shots!"

"You're not very quick on the uptake, are you?"

"Arrest this man! I want him alive!"

The Marines all brought their guns up at once. Grisham was grinning at me as if to ask, "*What do you think of that?*"

"You're just some dumb Jap kid. I'll show you what it takes to play with the big boys!"

"*You're gonna show me?*" I said, laughing. And then...

Boom!

A huge noise swept over the training field. The Marines were looking around, trying to figure out where it had come from, when several shadows big enough to block out the sun appeared overhead. They all pointed their guns upward, but they knew better than to shoot.

"The hell?!"

"Dragons!"

I could tell how shaken they were, and honestly, I felt a little bad for them. Between the reports the Japanese government had shared and the stories from their comrades on the *Nimitz*, they probably knew there were dragons around

here; they might even have seen photos or video. But for better and for worse, dragons had featured many, many, many times in fiction. Plenty of live-action movies, too. So somehow they didn't feel real—until you found yourself facing one.

Five dragons, called in by Theresa, landed with a thud.

“More where that came from,” I said, and at almost the same moment, ten more shapes came wheeling in overhead. Those were the Faldras. Loek, Romilda, and their parents had gotten Garius's permission to take the dragon-shaped robots (?) on a flyby of the training field. One of them had red stripes on the right shoulder—that must be the one Loek and Romilda were on.

I assumed these Marines had experience dropping in via helicopter to perform an assault. They had to know what kind of situation they were in.

I had administrative privileges over Theresa's dragons, so they would do what I told them. At a word from me, they could incinerate every Marine here. With the dragons on the ground, I could even have them put their electromagnetic fields to defensive purposes. Those force fields would probably be more impenetrable than the armor of a tank.

As if all that weren't enough, the magical soldiers riding on the dragons' backs were ready with their incantations, prepared to use wind magic at any time. A quick whirlwind from them would be more than enough to stop small-arms fire. In other words, the Marines' guns weren't going to do them any good. Hand-to-hand combat was obviously right out, too; a quick sweep from a dragon's tail could bowl over ten people.

“Sorry, Grisham, you were saying?” I smiled as cruelly as I could. “You were going to show me something? What was that? Oh, and just in case you were wondering, we've sent forces to deal with the crew of the *Nimitz* and the Marines you have camped out in the woods, too. That's the plus side of an absolute monarchy—things happen fast when Her Majesty wants them to.”

Grisham finally flinched. The Marines looked equally cornered. They were supposed to be among the most combat-tested of America's forces, but that same experience helped them understand just how futile resistance would be in this situation.

Now, it would be great if they would just throw up their hands and surrender, but reality betrayed my hopes.

“Freaking kid,” Grisham grated. There wasn’t a hint of fear or even uncertainty in his voice. He’d come this far. I guess he was committed now. “You close that portal if you want, but we’re not moving one solitary inch from this spot.”

There was more murmuring among the Marines. Grisham was the special ambassador, but the Marines seemed to be wondering whether they were obligated to play along with his personal vendetta.

Grisham sat down right where he was. “*You’ll have to kill me,*” he seemed to be saying.

“Cool. That’s a big help,” I said. “Just hang out right there. Don’t move.”

“What?”

“You’re all going back home. Whether you like it or not.”

“How? That’s ridiculous! You can’t move six thousand people at a single time! It’s impossible!” Grisham looked at me like I had lost my mind. He was obviously convinced he was right about everything. I found him so silly-looking that I had to laugh.

“What’s so funny?!” he demanded.

“Aw, nothing,” I said, scratching my cheek and looking down at him. “It’s just, every moment of this went exactly the way I planned.”

Behind me I heard Myusel, Elvia, and even Hikaru-san and the others—everyone who had known about the plan in advance—burst out laughing.



Our land, America, is the most powerful country on Earth. If we are to lead the nations of the world into the great, bright, shining future that lies ahead, then we must be the strongest and most powerful at all times and in all ways. Our ways are higher ways, beyond the comprehension of some blathering barbarians. These people *claim* to be civilized, but they’re trapped by stubborn prejudices; they wander around like sleepwalkers, only getting in our way.

And what is necessary to show idiots like them the true way? Strength. Power. The rod of love, brought to bear for their betterment. When a righteous nation wields a righteous power, the result can only be justice.

Thus, our country must continually position itself at the cutting edge of power, through whatever means necessary. If we could get our hands on the far-future technology said to exist in this world—the Annihilation Reactor and the organic-weapon production facility—if we could learn how these things worked, our nation would leave all others ever further behind, gaining ever greater strength.

Instead, here we were, packed into a place they called a training field. Hideous monsters surrounded us, along with the primitive locals, making escape impossible. And leading our captors was the Japanese boy, Kanou Shinichi. The cheeky little bastard had joined forces with the local populace, and now he was insisting he was going to send us back to our own world.

Normally, I would have laughed him off. The hyperspace tunnel was narrow, and I knew it; it was much too tight to send back six thousand Navy and Marine troops at a stroke. Again: normally.

“We’re not moving one solitary inch from this spot!” I repeated, but he ignored me. His friends started drawing some sort of curved line around us with wooden sticks; probably a circle with which to encircle us. But why? So what?

“Kanou Shinichi!” I shouted. “Are you listening to me?” But he hadn’t said anything since he made his threat. I didn’t know if he was lost for words, or if he was busy planning. Whichever it was, it seemed to unsettle my men, for even the battle-tested Marines with me were looking at each other uneasily.

At length, Kanou Shinichi abruptly said, “Cool. Looks like we’re ready.”

“Ready?” I said. Ready for what? I prepared for a fight. Maybe when he’d said he was going to send us back, he’d meant “in body bags.” Of course, that would mean all-out war between our two worlds...

“Okay, have a nice trip,” he said with a cheery wave. Then, without a moment’s warning, the ground disappeared from underneath us.

“Er?” I gaped. Then I said: “Wha—?” But I didn’t have time to get out the

whole word, let alone a whole sentence. Instead I dropped straight down, trailing off:

“Whaaa:

I could hear the Marines around me yelling, too, but obviously I didn’t have time to take a good look at them. What was this? What the hell was going on?! It was too chaotic for me to get a read on the situation. Even while I was trying to understand what was happening, gravity had a firm hold on us and was pulling us downward.

“Huh?!” Suddenly, the world flipped upside down. Up became down, and gravity spontaneously reversed direction. I remembered this. Yes—the same strange feeling as when I’d passed through the wormhole...

“Hngh?!” Half a second later, I found myself flying straight up out of the ground. Gravity might have reversed, but it wasn’t enough to counter the inertia of our falling bodies. “Hrr...gh?” After another second of floating, we were thrown against the ground. The earth scraped our skin. When I opened my eyes, I realized I was lying on grass.

“Where... are we?” I could see the Marines scattered on the ground just like me. Some were sprawled out, others curled up. Among them I spotted the ones who had been camped out near the capital, and the crew of the *Nimitz*, people who had been nowhere near me just moments before.

“Unbelievable,” I muttered. I didn’t exactly have time to take a headcount, but I thought I was looking at about six thousand American troops. Kanou Shinichi, the bastard, couldn’t possibly have transported us all at once, could he? Using the hyperspace tunnel? Had he made it appear directly beneath our feet? So that was why he’d said it would be “a big help” when I had sworn we wouldn’t move!

But that would make this...

“The game is suspended! The game has been interrupted!”

I looked up: the voice from overhead was definitely speaking English. It was also definitely amplified. And this grass we were lying on, it was artificial...

“What in the world are we seeing here?! A mind-boggling number of what

look like soldiers have just appeared out of thin air!”

I immediately forgot the pain of the impact and sprang to my feet. The first thing I saw was the crowd. Faces, faces everywhere, every one of them completely shocked. There must have been more than ten thousand people looking down at us from the bleachers. There wasn’t an empty seat in the house.

Then... behind them, I saw something any red-blooded American would have recognized in an instant: a baseball scoreboard.

“A baseball stadium!” The scoreboard showed that it was the bottom of the ninth, and the score was tied. I recognized the names of the teams, too—anyone would have. They were massively popular clubs. Huge, passionate fan bases.

“Hnngh... Urgh...”

I heard a groan, and looked to the man collapsed beside me. He wasn’t wearing military utilities. In fact, he was in a baseball uniform, on which was written one of the same names as on the scoreboard. He was no Marine: he was one of the players. He must have been in the wrong place when we came flying in. And this had to be...

“The MLB?” No sooner had it dawned on me than something came flying at me. “What?!” It smacked me clean on the head with a *clonk*, although it didn’t hurt. I picked it up. It was a paper cup.

As if on cue, people in the stands started throwing things at us. Paper cups, hotdog wrappers, and score cards, followed by cans, popcorn, and anything else they happened to be holding. Among the barrage were at least one shoe and one ballpoint pen—what were they thinking up there?

“N-No, stop,” I shouted, throwing my arms over my head. “Stop, we’re—” But my voice was lost among the growing chorus of boos and hisses.

“What the hell’s going on?!” someone demanded.

“This is bullshit!”

“Right in the middle of a tie-freakin’-game!”

The thousands of spectators thundered as one, a roar of noise assaulting us. The improvised projectiles kept coming.

I and the other forcibly returned troops tried in confusion to run away, but the crowd's anger wouldn't abate. If anything, the shouting got louder, and despite the announcer pleading with them to calm down, they were on their feet and coming for us.

Then a can of cola collided with the back of my head. My vision went blurry, threatening me with darkness. "How the hell... did this happen..." I mumbled as I slipped into unconsciousness.

That day I, George Grisham, along with one thousand Navy sailors and five thousand U.S. Marines, nixed the climax of the last game of that year's major league World Series.

I would've been mad, too.

Even worse, the game was being broadcast live, meaning everyone watching at home on television saw us, too—and that was before it blew up on the net. The American government had to tie itself in knots trying to explain us. But we wouldn't learn all that until the next day.



"Awesome. I think it worked," I said, surveying the training field, which was already back to being solid ground. It had been a bit dicey connecting six different places on this side to one single place on the other, but it looked like I had managed to transport Grisham and his troops back home. Then I closed the hyperspace tunnel I'd temporarily opened, lest they come tumbling back through the other way.

I wondered where they'd ended up. I hadn't actually specified where the tunnel would go; I'd left those details to Theresa. She'd said she would pick a nice, open space in an American city, so at least I knew Grisham and his friends hadn't drowned or been incinerated the moment they showed up. At least... I was pretty sure.

In addition, we had also temporarily closed the hyperspace tunnel that we—or more accurately, Matoba-san—frequently used. It would defeat the point if

we'd sent the Americans all the way back home just to have them show up again through our usual portal.

The point is, everything had gone well. Really and truly. There was just one little problem. There were limits on the opening and closing of the hyperspace tunnel. Since the Annihilation Reactor in the Dragon's Den was basically in a dormant state, it provided very little energy. At this point, the hyperspace tunnel was effectively being supported by the radiant heat left over from the time the reactor had gone berserk. We probably only had one more good opportunity to control the tunnel. In other words...

"Shinichi-kun!"

I turned at the sound of my name. Running through a crowd of Eldant soldiers, looking almost panicked, was... Matoba-san. Two JSDF bodyguards were right behind him. He rushed up to me, then stopped, doubled over, his shoulders heaving. He wasn't a young man anymore; I guess that's what he got for going so fast.

"Wow. Don't tell me you ran all the way here."

"Hardly. I took a carriage."

As we spoke, I took a look around. I saw Brooke nearby. When our eyes met, he gave me a quick, polite bow. I waved in response.

"Shinichi-kun, what's this all about?" This time the question came from Minori-san. Oh, that's right... I hadn't told her about this part.

"Before I left the house, I asked Brooke to get Matoba-san for me if he was here. I figured if he was anywhere, he would be over by the hyperspace portal—guess I was right."

It would have been pretty unpleasant for everyone if Matoba-san had been inside the tunnel when I closed it.

"I tried the castle, but I didn't find you there—they said you were here," Matoba-san said. "I have to say, I never expected America to try such strongarm tactics..." He dabbed at the sweat on his brow with a handkerchief. Brooke or someone must have given him the gist of what had happened. Maybe it wasn't just physical exertion that had left Matoba-san looking tired. Maybe there was a

psychological component.

“All’s well that ends well,” I said. “We got the Americans safely back to the present, if you know what I mean.”

“But how?”

I waved my hand from right to left, encompassing the entire field. “Opened a temporary tunnel right underneath them. We made sure to get every last U.S. Marine and sailor in this world.” I guess maybe an up-to-down gesture would have been more accurate, but never mind.

“*You* did?”

“Well, it was mostly Theresa.” It wouldn’t have been possible without her ability to finely control the hyperspace tunnel. She *was* at the castle at the moment. “She says that with the annihilation reactor shut down, we can probably make the hyperspace portal work just one more time. It’s possible we’ll figure out how to reactivate the reactor safely, someday, but this is your last sure chance to go back to the other side.”

Matoba-san looked almost confused for a moment. “And that’s why you brought me here?”

“What, were you eager to stay?”

“Fair enough. But Shinichi-kun, you...” He trailed off.

“There you have it,” I said and turned back to look at everyone who had been born “over there.” Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Reito-san. “Anyone who wants to go back, step right up.”

The three of them looked at each other. Reito-san was the first to speak. “Geez, I finally go to a real-life fantasy world and I don’t even get to do a little sightseeing? This is the land of my dreams! I want a chance to make out with a beast-girl or an elf or something!” He scratched his cheek, embarrassed.

“Sorry you had to miss all that,” I said. “And thank you. For everything you’ve done.”

“Thank *you*, man,” he said. “I learned a lot, I had some fun.” He waved to each of us, then stepped inside the circle we had drawn on the ground of the training

field. Then he added, “By the way, when I came over here I took... an elevator? A gondola or something? Anyway, how’s this gonna work?”

“It sounds like gravity should function right to the midpoint of the trip, and then inertia should carry you the rest of the way.”

“What you’re saying is, I *won’t* find myself permanently lost in a space-time rift between worlds.” He crossed his arms and grunted. “Although I could get fired up for that, too. You know, kind of the *Flying Japanese*.”

Seriously, I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“We’ll be going, too,” Matoba-san said softly. He meant himself and his two bodyguards, who no doubt wanted to go home. The three of them stood with Reito-san in the circle—then Matoba-san turned to me. “You won’t be joining us, Shinichi-kun?”

There was a beat. Then I said, “I have to thank you, too, Matoba-san.” I smiled ambiguously.

“Thank you, Shinichi-kun. I knew very little about otaku, and I must admit that otaku products remain a black box to me to this day. But...” For a moment, Matoba-san seemed to be looking for the right words. “Well. Having the opportunity to work with you was... fun.”

For Matoba-san, who was probably the least otaku person there was, invading another world using otaku goods and merchandise probably sounded completely nuts, and confusing to boot. That was exactly why he had wanted me and Hikaru-san. It couldn’t have been easy for him, caught between us otaku on the one hand and the Japanese government on the other. From our perspective, he could almost have been regarded as a traitor. But ultimately, Matoba-san didn’t complain, just did the work he was given as fairly and impartially as possible. It was his presence that had enabled me to conduct cultural exchange the way I saw fit. He had earned some respect.

As for the rest of us...



“Your Majesty.”

We looked up. We were still in the audience chamber, but the members of Bedouna had been led away by our soldiers, and now it was only ourselves, Garius, and a select few others. One of those others was Theresa, sitting in the corner, who was now looking directly at us.

She was a woman from the armed forces who had transferred her mind into a machine and survived across the ages. Now, she jerked her palm in the direction of the training field. “Last portal’s about to open. But it won’t stay that way for long. No idea if we’ll ever be able to open another one. For all practical purposes, there won’t be any more hopping back and forth to Japan after this. You know that, right?”

“Of course, we are well aware.” We could feel Garius studying us, but we ignored him as best we could. Instead, we said firmly, “Why do you bring this up now?”

“I’m just saying, if you’re gonna stop him, now’s your chance. You know he got video messages from his family on the other side, right? No one could blame him for feeling a little homesick.” Theresa shrugged.

“Stop him? To whom do you refer?”

There was a long pause, and finally Theresa shrugged again. “Hey, if that’s the way you want it.” Then she grinned. “Royalty has its drawbacks, eh, Your Majesty?”

We didn’t respond. If it wasn’t one of them, it was another!

Garius placed a hand on our shoulder as we sat in silence. “It *is* possible for you to go to the other side, Majesty.”

“And then you would be Emperor?”

“According to the succession.”

“So if you chase us off to Ja-pan, you gain power without shedding a drop of blood. Huh! We cannot let down our guard around you, we see.”

“I believe I’ll take that as a compliment.” Garius smiled, somewhat bitterly. He wasn’t really trying to maneuver the throne out from under us, of course. If he harbored such ambitions, he could have acted upon them long ago. Instead, he

seemed to be saying: *I'm here to fill in for you if need be, so forget about being ruler and listen to your own heart.*

"We have already said our goodbyes," we said in a whisper. "Now the best thing we can do for him is to keep our distance, lest we undermine his resolve."

"A noble attitude, Your Majesty... Or should I say, Petralka." Garius gave a slight bow, a hint of a smile on his lips.



"Shinichi-sama..."

I turned when Myusel said my name to find her watching me, her violet eyes damp. She was juuust holding it together, but it looked like one little push could send her over the edge into uncontrollable sobbing.

I turned back to the "hole" in front of me. The circle we'd drawn on the ground of the training field, our very last hyperspace tunnel. It was connected to the Shinjuku Gyoen garden in Tokyo, so there wouldn't be any problems when everyone came tumbling through. Reito-san, Matoba-san, and Matoba-san's bodyguards were already gone. Only Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and I were left.

Theresa and I had worked out the timing beforehand, and I knew we only had two minutes before the tunnel closed. I could tell because the forbidden armor showed a countdown timer in front of me, giving the remaining time to the hundredth of a second.

One hundred and ten seconds left. Where had the time gone?

Hikaru-san and Minori-san knew about the time limit as well as I did. Finally, I turned to face Myusel.

"Myusel. Thank you so much for everything you've done."

"Shinichi-sama..."

"You were the one who made it possible for me to achieve everything I did in this world. I can't thank you enough. No, it's... It's more than that. I think you were the first person to say that you needed me. That I was important to you. So I guess, I mean, there'll never be someone else like you in my life."

Geez, I was getting embarrassed. If only I could come up with some dry-cool quip! Despite everything that had happened, it turned out I was still just a useless otaku.

I had to work with what I had, though, so I said, “I mean it, Myusel. Thank you.” I took a step back, toward the hyperspace tunnel. “I love you. I love you so much.” Fifty seconds left. “And...”

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel flung herself at me.

Whoa, yikes! I just managed to catch her, only stumbling back another step. Both of us were wearing our forbidden armor, so there was a clang of metal. It wasn’t exactly a romantic embrace.

“Myusel...”

“Please, take me with you!”

“Look, that’s kind of the point I was trying to build to,” I said, and sighed. “What I wanted to say is, that’s why I’m looking forward to everything we’ll share after this.”

There was a pause. “What?” Myusel tried to blink away the big, fat tears rolling from her eyes.

At that instant, I could feel the hyperspace portal snap shut behind me. I slowly looked back, to discover a flat patch of ground; it was like the hole had never been there. I took a glance around, and naturally, Hikaru-san and Minori-san were there, too. In fact, they were watching me and Myusel as if the whole thing amused them.

“Uh... Um, Shinichi-sama...” Myusel’s face went slack and she gazed at me. “Are you very sure... you shouldn’t have gone home?”

“You thought I would?”

“Yes, sir,” she said slowly, casting her eyes to the ground. Well, I guess I couldn’t blame her. That stuff I’d said *had* sort of sounded like I was leaving forever.

I freed myself from my forbidden armor, and Myusel did the same. Doing so restored the clothing the armor had been storing for us, so that she was

dressed in her usual adorable maid outfit as she stood in front of me. I always knew she looked great like that.

I scratched my cheek to hide my embarrassment, then said, “I got that video message from my family, right?”

“Yes, sir... And I was so sure...”

She’d probably thought it would make me homesick and cause me to go back to Japan. I’m sure that’s what the Japanese government had hoped to achieve by sending Reito-san with that video. If they couldn’t force me to come home, maybe they could twist my arm instead. But I was Kanou Shinichi, a lifelong otaku, and my family was a lifelong otaku’s family—my parents *and* my sister. So guess what they did.

“I admit, I was sure they’d order me to come home,” I said, smiling a little. Apparently, when asking them to record the video, the government had actually told them the truth—all about the other world, and about Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia. My parents had been flabbergasted. My little sister had been ticked.

In the end, their message to me had been: “If you want to come home, then come home. But if you’re a true otaku, then you won’t sit there fretting about trivial details like your family, or society, or even common sense—you’ll go out there and get the bride you’re most moe for!”

“My own parents—how could they, huh?” I said. “That’s normally where you would expect them to be all, ‘Come back right now! This is your home!’ Y’know?”

“Uh... huh...” Myusel blinked. “But it seems... very *like* them, I think...”

“Yeah, maybe.” I grinned. Then I took Myusel’s hands.

“Sh—Shinichi-sama?!” She went red up to her pointy elf ears. We’d held hands before, but she looked as off-kilter as if this were the very first time. Man, this girl sure knew how to be cute!

“So, anyway, uh...” I’d come this far, but I was having trouble getting the next words out. Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m a loser. Nothing I can do. I’m just a useless otaku—that’s life. “Would you be my... my... uh... b— b—”

“Your buh?” Myusel looked at me in confusion. She was bright red, but she was still waiting patiently to hear what I would say.

Say it! Say it, Kanou Shinichi! Now, now, this time you need to come out with it—you need to tell her what’s in your heart! Speak up, speak forth, Shinichi, speak, O extraordinary... no, wait, wrong thing.

Please, Myusel, become my two-dimensional—no, actually, I don’t need that descriptor!—please be my bride! That’s what I was trying to say!

“Arrgh, I can’t stand this anymore!” That exclamation came, obviously not from me or Myusel, but from Hikaru-san, who was standing watching us. He stamped on the ground and then bounded over to me. “What could you possibly be embarrassed about by now, you oaf?! Just hurry up and say it already!”

“G-Geez, speak for yourself, Hikaru-san!”

“Speak for myself *how?*” he asked, but I could see he’d backed off a little. All right, there was my opening! “Aren’t you gonna tell Elvia how you—”

“You just shut your mouth, you loser otaku!”

“Huh? Whazzat about me?”

“Nothing! It’s nothing!”

“Yeah, but I heard my name just now... Uh, Hikaru-sama?”

“Alright, listen, the order of tying up loose ends definitely goes *Shinichi first*. My confession can wait till after that!”

“Confession? Wha?”

With Hikaru-san and Elvia in the fray, things were getting completely out of control. Any possible romance had gone out the window. Although I had to admit, it was a very “us” sort of moment.

“Say, uh, Hikaru-sama, you didn’t want to go home, either?”

“Did you want me to?”

“Huh?! N-No, that’s not what I meant!”

“If I’d been planning to go home, I wouldn’t have shown up in this body.”

That was when we remembered that Hikaru-san was, in fact, using his avatar. The human body of the person named Ayasaki Hikaru was back at our mansion. It obviously wouldn't do much good to send the avatar through the portal.

"And Minori-sama..." Myusel smiled slightly as she looked at Minori-san, who was watching us. That's right: she hadn't left, either. Even though there was no BL here. I couldn't imagine what had inspired such a change of heart. I guess since she didn't have any family or relatives on "the other side," she arguably had fewer hurdles to staying here. Er... but... was she disobeying orders from the JSDF? Maybe she'd requested discharge.

Just then I heard someone wail, "M—M—Minori-zenzeiiii!" I turned and saw the crowd parting again, just as they had for Matoba-san. Then I saw our perfectly matched odd couple, a slim, tall young man and a short, stout young woman. It was Loek and Romilda, of course.

Loek raced up to Minori-san, barely holding back the tears. "You didn't go home?!" he cried. "Are you sure about this?!" Being head over heels in love with Minori-san the way he was, Loek was over the moon—but he also knew exactly what she was into...

It was Romilda, though, who said, "You know there won't be any more BL in this world, right?" The look on her face was confused, conflicted, almost weak. I'm sure that, like Loek, she was thrilled Minori-san had chosen to stay, but something seemed to be holding her back from unmitigated happiness.

Ahh. I saw what was going on here. Romilda must have been thinking that with Minori-san gone, Loek would turn to her. Outside of things with Loek, Romilda adored Minori-san, too, so she *wanted* to be happy that she was staying, but at the same time she might have felt a little guilty or annoyed at herself for resenting Minori-san. No wonder she looked torn.

"Er, yeah, well..." Minori-san looked a little uncertain, herself—but she smiled happily, in a way that made it obvious she didn't have any regrets. "We can just get someone to draw some new BL, right?"

True, this world was fostering its own local talent, from writers like Eduardo to artists like Canal. Even so, I thought it was likely to be a while before the market was mature enough for, you know, the *ultimate* BL.

“Besides,” Minori-san said, pointing at me, “watching over Shinichi-kun and Garius’s future together is my mission!”

“No it isn’t! You don’t have any mission like that!” I interjected, but everyone, including Minori-san, just laughed.

That’s when Loek demanded, “Hey, Romilda. What’s with the look?”

“What’s with *what* look?”

“Minori-sensei just told us she’s staying! Aren’t you happy?!”

“Y-Yeah, sure I am! It’s just...”

“Just? Just what?”

“Just nothing! It’s not like I was thinking that when Minori-sensei went home, you might finally notice me, Loek!”

“Huh?”

“Huh?” We all looked at them in surprise—but Romilda seemed just as taken aback as the rest of us. “D-D-Don’t get the wrong idea! I c-couldn’t care less about this jerk! I swear! It’s not like I, like, *like* him or anything!”

Wow! A textbook tsundere. I was impressed.

Romilda was blushing furiously, but she wasn’t the only one: Loek was red as a beet, too. “G-Geez, uh... Uhh...”

I know I’m not in any position to talk, but after everything you two have been through together, Loek, you didn’t have the slightest inkling of Romilda’s feelings?

Well, I guess it was sort of sweet—or at least bittersweet!

This was turning into one big let-me-tell-you-how-I-feel party. Everyone seemed to be drawing strength from the momentum of my admission to Myusel. It was like one of those scenes, you know, when they’re at graduation and all the underclassmen decide to confess their feelings to their sempai.

It wasn’t just Loek... I wasn’t in a position to talk about any of them! At that moment, though...

“Shinichi-sama...” Myusel edged closer to me, all but whispering my name. As

I felt her hands take mine, I said: “Myusel... would you be my bride?”

There was only the briefest of pauses before she exclaimed, “Yes!”



Even at that moment, we somehow couldn't quite look at each other, watching Loek and Romilda squabble instead. I guess we were still a little shy together.

I was glad I had stayed here, though. I was so, so glad. This was where I was supposed to be. At that moment, I knew in my heart: now, at last, this was really and truly my home.



I, Matoba Jinzaburou, had some time to kill. I looked out the window of my office, where I could see languorous, gentle orange sunlight. I squinted to get a better look at the scenery. There was a gaggle of buildings in the distance, with some green space between them. The familiar vista of Nagata-cho, the patch of downtown Tokyo that was the seat of the Japanese government.

It looked so... normal. It was enough to make everything that had happened in the other world feel like a dream. They'd been busy days, transiting back and forth between the two worlds, mediating among all kinds of government bodies from the Ministry of Defense to the Agency for Cultural Affairs, obtaining and delivering every sort of merchandise. Now, suddenly, I was just filling a desk, whiling away the days until retirement. Maybe that made my previous engagement seem even more dreamlike.

I no longer had the endless arguments wearing on my nerves; I could just sit back and collect a paycheck.

Almost six months had passed since everything had happened. With the closure of the hyperspace tunnel, the increasingly frequent earthquakes had stopped as if they had never begun. Things were tense between Japan and America immediately after the portal closed, but, well, everyone involved was eager to save face. Ultimately, after much wrangling, everyone had simply agreed that the other world had never existed.

And so everything went back to normal. Our world remained a boring, peaceful, lonely place.

Maybe I can't say things went "back" to normal. Most of Japan's citizens had never known about the other world connected to a corner of their country, and

so in their minds, things had never been anything *but* normal. For most of them, the unremarkable days continued unaltered.

There was just one major catch: several Japanese people had vanished from the face of the Earth, at least at this time. Perhaps that outcome had been inevitable. I had chosen people who would have a minimal impact on society if they were to disappear, after all. Japan would continue its era of peace—or perhaps of unrelenting apathy—as if things had always been this way.

“Another world...” I mused.

Maybe all of it—the other world, all those who had stayed there, everything that had happened—was just an illusion, I thought, as I gazed at the unchanging scenery. But I couldn’t help noticing that illusion tugged at my heartstrings awfully hard.

Epilogue: The Power of Moe I ran desperately between the towering buildings, choosing side paths and little detours and racing from shadow to shadow so as not to be seen. But I knew—I knew it was futile.

“Huff... huff... huff...”

There were so many of them after me, and they had so many little gadgets. They might even have had dogs. They were supremely used to hunting prey like me. They knew that “bringing down a criminal” was the perfect pretext to do anything they wanted. They were thoroughly experienced, and that made them dangerous.

“Huff... pant... pant...”

It was no use. I couldn’t run anymore. I dove for the first back alley I saw. It was small, inconspicuous; I hoped my pursuers would run right past it. Even if I knew the odds were ten thousand to one.

“I have to... I have to at least—!” I clutched the bundle I held in my arms. “I have to protect this...”

It was a thin, flimsy book. An offset-printed doujinshi.

“This... at least... must survive...”

My whisper was nearly drowned out by the sound of gunshots.

At a recent Diet meeting, the Agency for Cultural Affairs had approved a statute giving license to execute thought-crime perpetrators on the spot. The Culture Police began openly carrying guns, shooting otaku almost for sport.

How had things gotten like this? It was a lament you often heard from old activists. They still remembered a time when Japan had been peaceful, when everyone could make doujinshi and enjoy whatever works they wanted. When, supposedly, a hundred anime episodes had aired every day, for adults and kids

and everyone in between, and manga had overflowed off the shelves. There had also been books that included pictures like manga, but told prose stories of adventures or romance—they were known as light novels.

A golden age of otakudom.

It had gone on for a long, long time—until it abruptly ended. As relations between Japan and America began to deteriorate, leftist Diet members rose to prominence—and promptly sold our country out to China, which had been expanding its sphere of influence and growing increasingly hegemonic. They had pleasant, logical names for it, like “economic cooperation” or whatever else—but in the space of barely a decade, Japan had virtually become a Chinese territory.

The result had been strict limitations on expression, until just about the only things that were allowed were officially sanctioned works that glorified the government. Meanwhile, the wealth of Japanese anime and manga and novels and games that had existed in the past was confiscated by the police and burned. Protesters compared it to the time in ancient China when the Qin government had burned dissenting philosophical treatises and even buried opposing scholars alive, but every one of the protesters was arrested or killed. Otaku culture in this country was as good as dead.

But there were still a few: a small handful of otaku who secretly held onto copies of these works so that they might be passed down to future generations. In slang terms, they were called “activists,” and they did everything they could to preserve the works that had been made in such quantity until the first half of the twenty-first century—or otherwise to recreate, reclaim, or even make doujinshi of them to help communicate their greatness.

What I held in my hands was just such an item. A precious doujinshi, into which great love and passion for the source material had been poured. Doing offset printing in this day and age was probably harder than getting a gun or drugs. Even so, the spirit of the activists couldn’t be broken enough to keep them from making these things, and sharing them with their compatriots.

Moe is life!

Even a young woman like me, who had never known the golden age of

otakudom, might just happen to see such a doujinshi, or a manga, or an anime, or a novel, or a game, and feel her heart skip a beat. I wanted to see this book. I wanted to read this book. I wished desperately for it.

That was how I found myself part of an underground doujinshi ring. On an almost daily basis, oppressed otaku would gather, declaring without fear or hesitation how much they loved the things they loved, speaking freely of the power of moe in their lives.

That was where I had bought a BL doujinshi based on an old anime. Its author was no longer with us, I'd heard. They'd been arrested on grounds of "encouraging unnatural forms of love and perpetuating value systems detrimental to the good of the state" and were said to have died in jail. A friend and fellow activist of theirs had collected some rough drafts found in this person's house into a book—the one I was holding now.

I began to weep. Moe wouldn't die. Authors might perish, but their ideas and hopes and dreams would live on, just as I had taken up this doujinshi. That's the great, innate desire of all humans, no matter how oppressed.

"Everybody run! It's a raid!"

I remembered the moment one of the Culture Police's Armed Re-education Squads had come bursting into the doujinshi ring, which degenerated immediately into a cacophony of shouts and cries. I don't know how I managed to escape. All I knew was that suddenly I was running, the one BL doujin I'd purchased clutched to my chest.

What had happened to the others? Had the doujinshi they'd created with such love all been confiscated and burned? What about the facsimile body pillows? The character keychains? What about the discs full of cosplay photos? Had they all been... destroyed?

"Argh..." All I could do was hug the book even tighter, trembling, feeling like I might cry.

I was useless. Weak and impotent and useless. I crouched in the shadow of a garbage can, cursing my own pointless existence.

I heard a shout echo among the buildings: "There she is!"

I looked up, feeling empty, to see the armed police squadron running toward me, guns in their hands. This was it. I couldn't run anymore. If I wanted to live, then the only thing to do was to let them see me throw the book away and burn it. Then I would sign a written oath stating that I would never speak such words as *moe* or *top* or *bottom* or *switch* ever again, and that I would lead a pure, moral life from now on. After that, there would only be a few years of forced labor between me and my freedom.

Instead, I bit my lip, curling into a ball. I would protect this doujinshi, if I could do nothing else with my life. I knew it was futile, but I couldn't *not* do it. The shock that radiated up from the deepest depths of my heart allowed me no other choice.

It was over. They were going to kill me. I tried to prepare myself...

But nothing happened. I waited and waited, but the Culture Police didn't lay a hand on me.

"What's... happening?" Terrified, I opened my eyes—to discover the Culture Police on the ground, out cold. "What?"

Several figures stood nearby. They wore something like robes, their faces hidden by hoods, so I couldn't tell what they looked like or even whether they were male or female. All I could tell was that they weren't ordinary people. No one in Japan today would walk around in an outfit that actively concealed their identity. The government had forbidden that sort of thing; they said it interfered with the facial-recognition system they used to monitor the populace.

The figures tossed several small bottles to the ground.

"That should be enough sprites to cover us," one of them said.

"I'd heard the stories, but wow, it's gotten pretty depressing since I was here last. Is this really mid-twenty-first-century Japan?"

"I hate to say it, but I think it is," said a voice that sounded female.

"Restrictions on speech, on *thought*, strict control of creation... Who do they think they are, the Khmer Rouge?"

“Well, at least it shows it was worth a visit home,” said a young man’s voice.

I hardly had any idea what they were talking about. Then the young man said, “Oh, yeah. Myusel, go see how that girl’s doing.”

“Yes, sir.” One of the figures approached me. I could hear an unusual lilt in her Japanese.

I immediately tried to run, but my legs just laughed at me. I could barely stand. “No...” I squeaked.

“Um, please do not worry,” the person said. She was obviously female, and there was that slight accent—was she a foreigner? “We will not hurt you,” she said. “I see that you’re injured.”

She crouched in front of me. I followed her gaze and discovered a pretty serious wound on my left elbow. I must have rammed against something while I was running, and the adrenaline must have hidden the pain from me.

“Please stay still. I’ll heal you,” the woman said, and then she reached out her hand...

“Wha?!” The strangest thing happened. When my elbow fell under the shadow of her hand, the long, vicious cut disappeared. The bleeding stopped and a layer of skin began to form, and in less than ten seconds you couldn’t tell the injury had ever been there. She’d said she would heal it... Could she have really meant it?

“Wh-What’s going on?!” I stared at my arm in amazement.

“Hey.” Another woman spoke, not the one who had just healed me. I looked up to realize I was surrounded by the robed people. “That’s...” She was pointing to the doujinshi, which I had dropped in my astonishment. It was half out of the bag, so you could see the cover. That cover image alone could be enough to get me reported to the police, if I wasn’t careful. Yet the woman simply said:

“...*Zero of the Rebellion*, isn’t it?”

“You... You know it?” The series had begun as an anime in the first half of the twenty-first century. My BL doujinshi was based on—wait, this wasn’t the time.

“Of course I do. That’s basic knowledge.”

“Basic knowledge?”

“I don’t think I remember Zero wearing clothes like *that*, though...”

“Huh? That’s his outfit from the third cour, where—”

“*Third* cour?!” The figure tore back the hood of her robe, shoving her face right up in front of mine. She was a young woman who wore glasses and exuded maturity. She had black hair and dark eyes, along with Japanese facial features—in fact, she was practically the epitome of the *Yamato nadeshiko*, the perfect Japanese woman. There was just one thing: behind her glasses, her eyes glinted like a wild beast’s.

What was with this person?

“What are you talking about?” she demanded. “The second cour ended with the MC dying—but they did a sequel?!”

“Uh, well...”

“Details! I need details!”

I wasn’t sure I could help her. I had never personally seen the third cour, myself.

“She’s having another flare-up,” one of the other robed figures said. He turned to one of his companions and said, “Elvia, can you take care of this?”

“Yessir!” that person replied. Then she grabbed the overexcited bespectacled woman by the collar and dragged her away from me. The woman in the glasses fought and struggled, knocking the hood from this new figure and revealing her face. She was tanned, adorable, and looked lively. All of which was perfectly normal. Until you got to the floppy, dog-like ears that graced either side of her short-cropped hair.

“Wha—Whaaa?!” Was that some kind of cosplay? But...

“Shinichi-san,” said the young man who’d spoken to the one named Elvia. “It’s these hoods. That’s why everyone’s so scared of us.” He lowered his own hood as he spoke, revealing a gorgeous face. This person had long hair, and although his voice sounded masculine, from his looks alone I wouldn’t have been able to tell whether he was male or female.

“You’re right. How’s it look, Myusel?”

“Good, sir. I have just now finished,” said the woman who’d healed me to the figure standing behind her. The woman called Myusel drew back from me, and then, like the others, she removed her hood. She was a cute young girl with twintails—but that wasn’t what got my attention. Like Elvia, Myusel had ears that belonged to no human. They were pointy.

“An elf?” I said in wonderment. Or maybe a devil? Either way, they were both things I had only heard about in my forbidden doujinshi.

Myusel smiled at that. “Yes, ma’am. A half-elf, to be precise.”

“*H-Half?*” I could only stare foolishly at them in amazement. Who *were* these people? They’d appeared out of nowhere, defeated the Culture Police, and rescued me. They had seemingly magical powers, the ability to heal injuries just by waving a hand over them, not to mention animal ears and elf ears...

“Wh-Who are all of you?” I asked.

“Heh!” One of them took a step forward importantly. It was the one who had spoken to Myusel earlier. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties, if I had to guess, and everything about him looked like a perfectly ordinary Japanese person...

“I’m Kanou Shinichi,” he said with a smile. “And the Earth is being targeted.”

That seemed to come out of left field. “U-Uh, targeted by whom?” I asked.

“By me!”

“Er?”

This was making less sense with every passing moment. The young man seemed amused by my confusion, though; he held out a hand to me and said, “We come as invaders. Nice to meet you.”

After these events, the icy atmosphere in the state of Japan would be blown open by a war between the Culture Police and cultural invaders from another world who used smuggled culture as their primary weapon. The entire government system would be turned on its head, and ultimately Japan would be restored to its status as the world’s crowning producer of fine content.

But that's a story for another time.

おしまい

(*Fin*)



Afterword Hullo, Sakaki here. And this is the last volume of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe!*

First off, I want to thank all the readers who have stuck with me so far, as well as my editor W-san (along with apologies for all the trouble I caused), and, if I may use the expression, my trusty partner Yuugen-san for always creating unstintingly excellent illustrations.

It's been quite a while since the anime adaptation, but I'd like to thank the staff and cast of the show once again.

In a world where mountains of light novels are published (to which mountains yours truly has contributed some works), and 90% of them struggle to even generate a single sequel, to have a series that goes for well over ten volumes and also gets a manga version, a drama CD, an anime, figures, and more is an absolute boon.

One reason *Outbreak Company* was so long-lived might have been because it took advantage of the craze for stories where a character goes to another world and uses their knowledge from this one to "cheat." I wasn't actually thinking about that trend when I started writing; it was my good luck that my idea for this story happened to be along the same lines.

I often build up my story ideas logically, considering marketing strategies and making plans to push the franchise, but I don't want to suggest that it's my own cleverness alone that results in long-running series that get turned into anime and that sort of thing. Usually, you need a little something extra, too; a bit of good luck.

Part of that luck in this case was getting the star treatment as one of the launch titles for Kodansha's Lanove Bunko line. So was the fact that the editor-in-chief of that project understood that, although he was a veteran manga editor, he had no experience with light novels, and he brought passion and humility to learning about them. More luck came in the form of Yuugen-san, who was a reader of my novels before they became an illustrator of them,

accepting the assignment to do the illustrations. And I was lucky that Fumisato Araki, with her extensive knowledge of BL, joined me as an assistant.

One more bit of luck? When the series became an anime, the (presumably) high quality of the show boosted sales considerably, and for perhaps the first time in my career, electronic versions of my books were selling as well as or better than the paper versions.

I can only say that I've let everything happen organically.

It's all too easy to look at a novel and think it's all the work of a single author, but in fact a lot of people have to pitch in to create a book, and they're all responsible for its success. (You've probably heard that before.) *Outbreak Company* was a classic example of this, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Now! The following contains spoilers, so if you haven't read the rest of the book yet, consider yourself warned.

An unabashed, full-throttle otaku character like Shinichi is unusual as an MC in my works (although they appear plenty of times as side characters), but I found him immensely easy to write, and really enjoyed tucking little references everywhere.

Myusel, on the other hand—I initially conceived of her as a simple, innocent maid-san, but somewhere along the line she took on a bit of a yandere-ish quality. (Maybe I was influenced by the anime? Who knows.) She wasn't hard to write, and she was a lot of fun, but she surprised me more often than you might think.

Petralka was supposed to be Myusel's opposite number, a tsundere queen (er, empress), but simply by virtue of her position, by the second half of the series she didn't have many opportunities to do stuff with Shinichi. It's sort of a shame. Petralka seems to have a lot of tense, heart-racing scenes. Maybe she was reflecting the author's anxiety!

Elvia turned out about the way I planned. If I may say so, Yuugen-san's character design made her ears floppier than I'd initially envisioned, leading me to emphasize her puppy-like qualities, and that never really changed.

Minori-san—ah, Minori-san. She had the good grace to follow my exact plan

from beginning to end. She was a convenient character, by which I mean she did an excellent job of keeping the story moving. I've got this vague idea that after being discharged from the JSDF, she takes up permanent residence with her BL buddy Garius as his (fake?) wife.

Hikaru has the distinction of not having been a part of my original pitch, and also of being the character about whom my feelings changed the most while I wrote. Having someone start as a headache, only to become, over the course of many plot twists, a redoubtable companion of the MC is a typical arc, but the thing about him and Elvia was an idea that didn't occur to me until I was drafting the forbidden armor story.

On the subject of Garius, I actually came up with a fair amount of backstory for him during the planning stages, but as the volumes went on I got farther and farther away from it, until we ended up with what you've read. Miki Shinichirou voiced Garius in the anime, and really made the character his own. In the script for the drama CD, there was a line where Garius was supposed to whisper, "O most precious treasure..." but Miki-san ad-libbed "Oh, thank you for this untrammelled joy!" instead. That just shows you what a voice actor can do when they truly understand a character.

Brooke and his family: I worried a little about them, but you see how it turned out. By the way, Yuugen-san floated a version of the design for Cerise that was much more of a *bishoujo* (beautiful girl—or would that be beautiful wife?) look, but it just made her look too different from Brooke, so we went with making her a more ordinary lizardman.

I had a kind of vague picture in my head of Man'ya and her siblings, sort of like something out of the anime *S*itch*. I know there are people out there who don't like reptiles, but baby reptiles have those moist-looking eyes... Don't you think they're cute?

Matoba-san was... Matoba-san. He was a sort of wildcard, a very useful character to have around, and as you might expect, he didn't depart much from my original idea. My original concept was for a faux-villain, a guy who wasn't black-hearted, but maybe sort of gray-hearted. Think I pulled it off?

Loek and Romilda weren't in my initial plans, but they were helpful for

fleshing out the Eldant Empire, and especially for highlighting unique features of its demi-humans and the all-around fact that it was another world.

Anyway, I could go on like this forever (what about Zahar, Amatena, Clara, Jijilea, Lauron, Theresa, Falmelle, Shinichi's family, and on and on?). Time goes on for them—their story doesn't end with this book—so as the author, I would be gratified if you imagine what might happen to them.

I considered having the “invaders” who appear in the epilogue be the children of the main characters, but it would have narrowed down the possibilities too much, so I thought better of it. Shinichi and Myusel were obviously already together, so I didn't go further into that, and as for what happens to the rest of the cast, we'll just have to leave that to your imagination.

One more time before I go, I want to thank each and every one of you very much. I hope we'll meet again over another story, sometime, somewhere.

Sakaki Ichiro

5 Jul 2017



HOW
COULD
YOU BE
UNFAITHFUL
AT THE LAST
MOMENT,
SHINICHI!

ガ
GRAB

WHAT?

HUH?

...ABSOLUTELY
ADORE YOU, SHINICHI!
DO YOU NOT
KNOW THAT?!

WE,
TOO...

OH!

WE
SHALL
HAVE A
WEDDING
IMMEDI-
ATELY!

YES,
THAT'S
IT!

IT'S FINE!
WE ARE THE
EMPRESS,
AFTER ALL!

WHAT?

Whaaat?!

HUH?

AFTERWORD

The last volume has arrived. So sad! To Sakaki-sensei, our editor W-shi, everyone at editorial and everyone else involved—and of course all the readers who have stuck with us this long—thank you so much! I can't thank you enough! I'm sure Shinichi, Myusel, and Petralka will go on living their crazy lives. I hope we get to visit with them again one day. See you then! —From Yuugen

Bonus Translator's Notes

Blasts from the Past

The very first volume of Outbreak Company is visible both in Shinichi's hand on the title page and sitting beside the teacup on the Table of Contents. All of the golden text on the color foldout of Myusel is taken from their first conversation together in that volume.

Chapter One: Uninvited Guests

A Date

Shinichi describes this as (according to his dad) “That word which, if appended to the title of a light novel, can prevent it from being sold in China.” This seems to be a reference to *Date A Live*, which was banned in China. It’s unlikely that this was specifically because of the word “date” in the title; thirty-seven other series were banned at the same time, all for allegedly containing material contrary to good public morals.

Am I Still a Cinderella?

These lines constitute a protracted reference to the song “*Omoide ga Ippai*” (Full of Memories) by H2O.

Remember When I Said I Would Kill You Last?

This line, and the description of dropping someone off a building, are a reference to a line spoken by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the movie *Commando*.

It’s Been a Long Five Years This is what Eren says in *Attack on Titan* when the Colossal Titan returns five years after its first attack.

Freedom with Wings

Following the reference above, the entire paragraph is an *Attack on Titan* shtick; these last couple of lines are references to the theme songs from the anime.

Akihabara Ga**rs

That is, Gamers, a well-known chain that sells anime, manga, and related goods. Although they have locations all over Japan, the Akihabara flagship store is naturally among the most recognizable.

NO MORE EIGA DOROBOU!

Meaning “no more movie piracy,” this was the slogan of a series of ad spots that ran on Japanese television and in theaters before a movie started. They featured a truly strange mascot—a man in a suit with a camcorder for a head—doing a hypnotic dance. It’s not hard to find clips of the various iterations of this spot on YouTube by searching for “no more eiga dorobou.” We invite you to do so; this is one of those things that must be seen to be quite believed. *Note from the editor: I’m dropping in to tell you that this changed my life for the better. Go watch. You can thank us later.*

Chapter Two: The Captive Empress

“...Or Did Your Face Grow a Spare Butt?”

The Japanese for this line is “*Damare, ketsuago-yarou!*”, or “Shut up, *ketsuago* guy!” *Ketsuago* literally means “ass-chin,” and is (gotta love this) a slang term for a cleft chin.

I Can’t Let This One Go, That I Can’t

In the Japanese, Reito ends this sentence with *-de gozaru*, which comes from (or at least is seen in the popular imagination as) samurai-era Japanese. In anime, though, it’s most prominently associated with *Rurouni Kenshin*, where it was the main character’s defining speech trait. For that reason, we took our cue for how to translate it from the official subtitles for that series. (Credit to Rika Takahashi, the translator for *RK*.)

Chapter Three: The Rescue

A Rescue Machine

This line is a reference to the appearance of the *Thunderbird 2*, a vehicle from *Thunderbirds* (natch).

Juuuust Leave It To Me

Maaaakasete! (“Leave it to me!”) is the catchphrase of Tosaka-sempai, a character in *Kyuukyoku Choujin R*. It’s usually accompanied by him flipping the bird. After he graduates, Tosaka joins the Tokyo government, hence the reference to a “civil servant.”

Some Captain Somewhere

The character in question is Char Aznable, who speaks Shinichi’s line to one of his subordinates who’s afraid of the Gundam’s powerful beam rifle. Incidentally, the exact translation of Char’s rank is a bit of an open question; military ranks in *Gundam* are consistent in Japanese, but the English translations draw from multiple branches of service and don’t always seem consistent across series.

Inro Seal Case

An *inro* is a small case in which one can keep one’s personal seal (*hanko* or *inkan*). This is a reference to the *jidai-geki* (period-drama) series *Mito Koumon*, in which an important and canny Edo-era official travels around Japan solving mysteries. The episodes always culminate with some disaster about to unfold, but forestalled when Mito holds up his *inro* and everyone discovers who he is.

One of Those Fr*m Games

That is, From Software, producers of the notoriously difficult *Dark Souls* games, among others.

The Monsieur In Distress

There's some visual wordplay in the Japanese here. In Shinichi's line, *toraware no o-hime-sama* ("[the] captured princess") is glossed as *Petralka*. In Minorisan's line, *toraware no o-muko-sama* ("[the] captured hot dude") is glossed as *Garius*.

Seven Days of Rottness

Both a *Nasuiscäa* reference and a callback to a story in Volume 7, the first *Outbreak Company* short-story collection.

A Robot Cat from the Future... A Muscle-Bound Robot Dad The first part of this reference is to Doraemon, who's a robot cat from the future. The second part appears to be a *Terminator* reference, possibly to the 2015 movie *Terminator: Genisys*, which featured a variant of the M82.

Chapter Four: That Side and This Are Severed

Burger Ki*g or Jack-in-the-Bo*

That is, Burger King and Jack-in-the-Box, American burger chains.

Alien*

The reference is to James Cameron's movie *Aliens*. The power loader is a powered exoskeleton that appears at the climax of the film.

Global Hawk... Predator

Both kinds of unmanned drones.

The Flying Japanese

This is a play on the *Flying Dutchman*, the famous ghost ship. Legend holds that the ship sails the oceans forever, unable to make port.

Shinjuku Gyoen Garden

A national garden in Tokyo, the Shinjuku Gyoen originated in the Edo Era as a noble's residence, was later taken over by the Imperial Household Agency as an imperial garden, and finally became a national park under the authority of the Ministry of the Environment.

Speak Up, Speak Forth, Shinichi...

This entire paragraph is an extended reference to "*Kaze Yo Hikari Yo*," the opening theme from the tokusatsu series *Kaiketsu Lion-Maru*, which aired in 1972 and 1973.

Epilogue: The Power of Moe

The Time in Ancient China When...

The Japanese uses the simple expression *funsho kouju* (“burning books and burying scholars”), a proverbial reference to a time about 200 years BCE when the first Emperor of Qin in China was said to have burned many books of philosophical schools with which he disagreed and buried their scholars alive. It’s not clear if this happened as such (the expression originates more than a century after the alleged events), but the first Emperor of Qin did traditionally have an image of being vicious, authoritarian, and willing to take extreme measures against those who questioned him. (Our rendering of the expression in the English version is a lot more than four words, as this story hasn’t become proverbial in English the way it has in Chinese and Japanese.)

Harder Than Getting a Gun or Drugs Although it’s impossible to tell exactly how far into the future the epilogue is supposed to be set, or what cultural and legal standards might prevail at that time, it’s worth noting that guns and drugs are both things that are very difficult to get a hold of in Japan today. Only police officers and a small handful of specially licensed hunters are legally allowed to carry guns, which might also explain why, earlier, the narrator specifically considers it remarkable that “the Culture Police began openly carrying guns.” Meanwhile, Japan is extremely strict about the importation, possession, and distribution of controlled substances; this includes both drugs that are illegal in most places (cocaine, say), as well as drugs that are used as medication (like pseudoephedrine).

The Khmer Rouge

A communist group (particularly associated with the leader Pol Pot) that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. They were notorious for totalitarian policies as well as the murder of political opponents; the Khmer Rouge may have killed as many as two million people during their time in power.

Zero of the Rebellion

A reference to *Code Geass*, of which the subtitle was *Lelouch of the Rebellion*

and one of the characters was known as Zero.

The *Yamato Nadeshiko*

Yamato was the ancient name for Japan, and still occurs in some expressions that hark back to the country's ancient past. Here, the phrase is *Yamato nadeshiko*, which refers to a woman who is delicate and demure, as was considered ideal in the days of the Heian Court. (The *nadeshiko*, which CLAMP aficionados may remember as the name of Sakura's mother from *Cardcaptor Sakura*, refers to a flower known in English as "the little pink.")

The Earth Is Being Targeted This line is from the opening narration to the first episode of the *Ultraman* series *Ultra Seven*.

Invaders

It's probably not coincidence that the episode of *Ultra Seven* mentioned above is titled "The Formless Invader" (*Sugata Naki Shinryakusha*). However, this is also presumably a reference to the *Outbreak Company* series subtitle, *Moeru Shinryakusha*, a complicated pun that means in part "The Moe Invader."

Afterword

Fumisato Araki

Fumisato-san is an author in her own right these days—in fact, just before we were finalizing this volume of *Outbreak Company*, one of her books (*Wake Ari Ryuukishi-dan de Kosodate Hajimemashita*, or "For Certain Reasons, I Started Raising a Kid in a Dragon-Knight Unit") was picked up for publication in Japan.

S*itch

Refers to *Stitch!*, an anime spin-off of Disney's *Lilo & Stitch* franchise. The show appeared in a dubbed and edited form on Disney-affiliated channels outside Japan.







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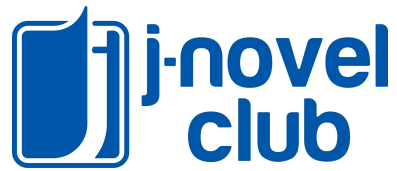
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by Ichiro Sakaki

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