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INFINITE STRATOS

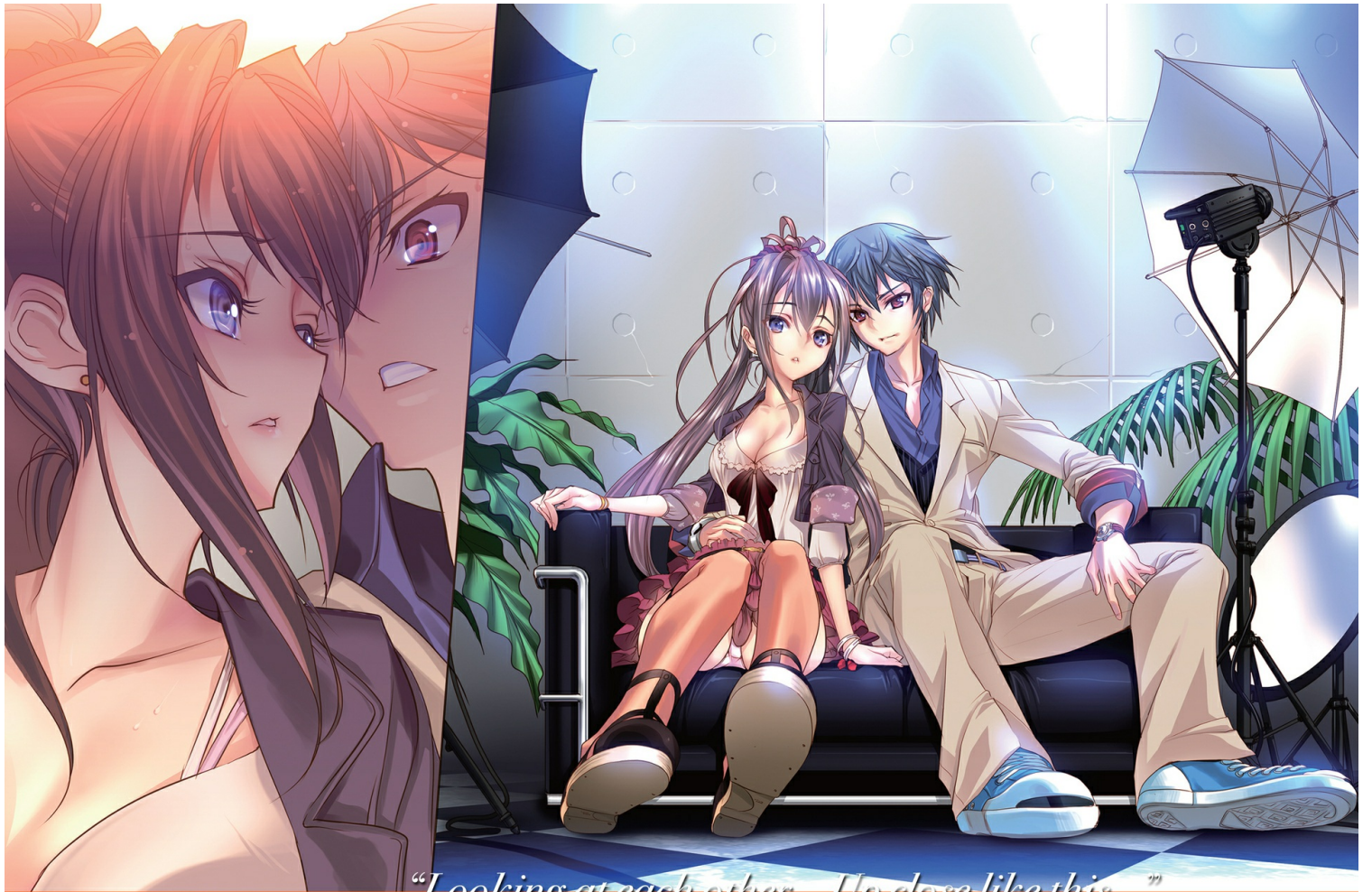
YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO

INFINITE
STRATOS
IS7

YUMIZURU Izuru

Illustration: CHOCO






“Looking at each other... Up close like this...”



"I... I'll fight!

Alongside Uchigane Nishiki!"



A third-generation IS developed by Kuramochi Engineering, who also developed the Byakushiki, as a successor to the Uchigane. Its skirt armor was split into two independent wings to improve mobility, making it a mobile type, rather than defensive. The wing thruster replacing its shoulder-mounted shield incorporates front and back auxiliary jet boosters, giving it a silhouette similar to the Byakushiki. The Uchigane Nishiki mounts six “Yama-arashi” (“Mountain Storm”) eight-tubed guided micro-missile systems for a total launch capability of 48 missiles per volley. Missile control is achieved through a virtual projection keyboard system, which Kanzashi had customized to allow the use of eight keyboards at once—operated with both hands and both feet.

Meaning:
Flintsteel Mk-II
Model: Type 98,
Advanced Armor
Generation: Third
Country: Japan
Classification: Melee-
Range Versatile IS

Equipment: 6x “Yama-arashi” (“Mountain Storm”),
Guided High-Performance 8-tube MLRS
2x “Shunrai” (“Spring Lightning”),
Particle Cannon
“Yumeutsutsu” (“Lucid Dream”),
Anti-Composite-Armor Vibroblade Naginata
Armor: Enhanced Nanoparticle Composite Armor
Features: High-performance Multitasking CPU,
Uchigane Package Compatibility

UCHIGANE NISHIKI

The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos

GOLEM III

An upgraded version of the Golem drone. Unlike the original model, which is more akin to a hulking iron giant, the Golem III is a graceful steel maiden, with its field of vision increased by replacing the visor-like linear camera with a complex visual sensor package that curls forward like a ram's horns. Below its right elbow is a massive blade, making it capable at melee combat; it can also fire superheated particle beams from four barrels mounted on its left palm.



JPN Reporting Name:
N/A
Model: N/A
Generation: N/A
Country: N/A
Classification: N/A

Equipment: Superheated Particle Beams
Massive Blade
Transforming Shield Unit
Armor: N/A
Features: N/A
Additional Information: N/A



Kanzashi SARASHIKI
Right



Left Tatenashi SARASHIKI

Chapter I

Sisters

Chapter II

Girls' Rhythm

Chapter III

Open Your Heart

Chapter IV

What It Takes to Be a Hero

Epilogue

On a Beautiful Moonlit Night



Charlotte Dunois

French national cadet
Personal IS: Rafale
Revive Custom II



Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world
who can pilot an IS.
Personal IS: Byakushiki



Laura Bodewig

German national cadet
Personal IS:
Schwarzer Regen



Shinonono Houki

Ichika's childhood friend—
reunited with him after six
years. Has no personal IS.



Tatenashi Sarashiki

IS Academy Student
Council President
Personal IS:
Mysterious Lady



Cecilia Alcott

British National Cadet.
Personal IS:
“Blue Tears.”



Kanzashi Sarashiki

Japanese national cadet
Personal IS:
Uchigane Nishiki



Huang Lingyin

Chinese national cadet
Personal IS: Shenlong

Chapter I: Sisters

Bang!

“Wha—?!” Gunfire?! C’mon, we’re in Japan! “Ugh!”

The bullet shot toward me. Somehow, I could see it clearly.

“Tch!”

The attacker in front of me—Orimura Madoka—clicked her tongue. In the next instant, the bullet shooting at me stopped in midair. It hung there in stasis. This was... *That must be Laura’s AIC!*

“Ichika! Get down!”

I dove to the ground as a knife flew just over my head. The cans tumbled from my arms and rattled down the pavement.

“I thought you’d try to interfere.” Surprisingly, she chose to block the knife aimed at her right eye with her palm.

“What in the—”

Madoka tightened her grip on the knife piercing her hand.



“You can have this back.”

She flung it back at Laura. However, with Laura’s Wodan-Auge system enhancing her motion tracking and visual acuity, it took almost no effort to stop the knife with her AIC as well. Her golden left eye darted from the knife back to Madoka, but Madoka had already deployed her IS and faded into the shadows.

“Hmph.”

“Wait!”

Dodging the grip of the AIC, she disappeared into the night, gone as suddenly as she had appeared.

“Ugh...”

“Are you okay, Laura?!”

“Who do you think I am? What about you?”

“Yeah. You saved me there. Thanks.”

“Don’t even mention it.” As she spoke, she picked up her knife and resheathed it, then pulled her eyepatch back down. I dusted the dirt off my clothes and began to pick up the scattered cans.

“Ah...”

“Hm? What?”

“Your left eye really is pretty. It looks almost like a jewel.”

“W-What?”

“It wasn’t fun getting attacked, but I guess getting to see that made it all worthwhile.”

“What do you mean ‘worthwhile,’ you idiot!” Laura walked right up to me and deliberately stomped on my foot.

“Oww!”

“Hmph! I’m heading back!”

“Hey! Hey, wait. Can you at least help me carry the cans?”

“That’s not my problem!” shouted Laura as she stalked off angrily.

“You know, now that I think of it, how were you even there to help me when I was attacked?”

“Well...”

“Well?”

“...Do I even have to say it? I thought it would be a good chance for us to be alone together...”

“Huh? What was that, Laura?”

“Nothing! You idiot!”

“Hey, wait! Don’t stomp on my foot, you moron!”

“Who are you calling a moron?!”

Laura, her face red all the way up to the ears, hit me with a haymaker punch.



“**You were attacked?!**” It was Monday night at the dinner table, and Houki and Rin reacted in unison.

“Yeah, yesterday night.”

I ran down the sequence of events, leaving Orimura Madoka’s name out of it. Oh, I hadn’t mentioned it the night before because I didn’t want to put a damper on the festivities.

“Silent Zephyrus’s pilot... I wonder what she’s after. Any ideas, Ichika?”

“Beats me.”

I kept my answer to Charl short and simple, so she wouldn’t realize I wasn’t telling the whole story. I should probably ask Chifuyu about this first. But talking about our family... Rather, talking about our parents had always been pretty taboo between us. Even if I asked her, I probably wouldn’t get very far... Nor did I really want to.

“Oh, Ichika, could you perhaps feed me the omelette next?”

“Got it. Here.”

I was feeding Cecilia, the wounded hero. I felt sorry for her losing the use of her right arm.

“Ahh....”

Nom. She chewed with a hand covering her mouth, blushing at the unwanted attention she'd attracted. *Well, I guess it's pretty embarrassing to be hand-fed at our age...*

“...That's no fair, Cecilia, picking something you eat with chopsticks.”

“You could've had the pasta or something you could eat one-handed...”

Cecilia cleared her throat as if to fend off Rin and Houki's glares. Speaking of which: the menu was salt-grilled salmon rolled in savory omelettes, spinach greens with sesame seeds, miso soup with potatoes, and savory shellfish custard. Every item on the list was a 'chopsticks food.'

“Ichika, she can have the custard with a spoon, right? Think you're up to it, Cecilia?” Charl said while giving a forced smile.

“I, well... I don't believe I'd do that well with my left hand.”

“I see. Then I suppose I'll feed you.”

“Laura?! Wait, at least let it cool— Ah! Hot! Hot, hot, hot!”

Laura crammed the spoon of steaming custard into Laura's mouth. *Come on, it's not nice to tease the injured like that.*

“Well, it certainly looks like you're all having fun this evening.”

“Oh, Ms. Yamada. And—” Chifuyu—Ms. Orimura—was with her. Each of them was carrying a dinner tray.

“Quiet it down, you dunces.”

“I-I'm wounded, so...”

“Alcott. Don't get the wrong impression just because we chose not to enforce your suspension for fighting in the city.”

“Understood...”

I'd gotten raked over the coals all day for going after the Silent Zephyrus, too.

My body and soul both ached after that two-hour lecture.

“Do you all normally eat together like this?”

“Ah, yeah. Pretty much all the time.”

“Really.”

“Oh my. Ms. Orimura, are you worried about your little brother?”

“Ms. Yamada. Care for some melee sparring after dinner?”

“I-I was just joking! Ahaha, haha...”

It seemed like every time Ms. Yamada tried to tease Chifuyu, it backfired. She should learn her lesson...

“Keep it quiet. Well... I guess for teenaged girls that’s going to go in one ear and out the other. At least try to, okay?”

With that, Chifuyu led Ms. Yamada toward a table in the back of the room. With everyone around, there was no way I could ask about Madoka. I’d have to bring it up later. We whiled away the rest of the evening.



“So, uh, why are you all following me?” I asked the clump of girls sticking close on my way back to my dorm room.

“I... Well, it’s not because I’m worried about you or anything!” That was Rin.

“Well, uh, just... It’s nice to have a chat in your room from time to time.” Charl chimed in.

“Yes! It’s important to keep lines of communication open.” Houki nodded, apparently unsatisfied with all the communication we’d done at dinner. Ah well, it’s not like I had a problem with it.

“Um, Ichika? Could you help me change my dressings?”

“Sure.”

Cecilia’s face lit up as I answered. Seeing that made me feel lucky to have been born a man.

“Ichika! You’re going way too soft on her. What kind of national cadet can’t

even care for their own wounds?” came Laura with the snark. “I’ve heard that in this country, they treat wounds using saliva. That sounds good, why don’t you try that.”

“Er... Laura... ‘Licking your wounds’ isn’t supposed to be that literal...” Though it wasn’t really metaphorical, either?

“Really? My saliva contains medical nanomachines.”

Ugh, really? I felt like it was a lot better to just let that one go. *Right, she was a test tube baby born at a Bundeswehr lab. A being given life only to fight...* Well, it was easy to criticize on ethical grounds, but rejecting it meant rejecting Laura herself. And since she didn’t seem to mind too much, it’s not like we can really say much... Plus, I wanted to think that since she’d come to Japan—since she’d made these new friends—there was now something else in her life.

“Are you even listening to me? Sometimes I wonder whether you even deserve to be my bride.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry.” Every time she calls me ‘bride,’ I remember that kiss, but I probably shouldn’t tell her that. Just thinking about it makes my face heat up.

“Mm? What is it?”

“Oh, nothing.” I nonchalantly ducked back from Laura, who had leaned in close, and opened my door. “So, what are we doing for chairs? Should I go borrow a couple?”

“I think the bed’s fine. Right, everyone?” Charl made the suggestion to the other girls. Sometimes I really appreciated her.

“As long as I have somewhere to sit, I’m fine.”

“Yeah. And the dorm beds are pretty good.”

“I’d prefer my own bed, naturally. But it will suffice.”

“I’m fine.”

Rin, Houki, Cecilia, and Laura answered, and we walked in.

“Should I go get some drinks?”

“It’s fine, Charl. Don’t worry about it. Plus, if anyone does, it should be—”

“C’mon! What if you get attacked again?!”

“Ah, right...” Surprised by how insistent she suddenly got, I automatically apologized. When I did, she suddenly snapped back to her usual self, cringing in embarrassment.

“Sorry.”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

“Just... I mean, you’re a guy. Does it bother you being protected by girls?”

“Nah, not really. I mean, it’d be kinda awkward if someone told me to man up or something, but...”

“Really? That’s good...”

“Yeah...”

A few seconds went by in silence as we both awkwardly looked away. I couldn’t really tell if my heart was pounding or not.

“Staaaaaare.”

“Whaa?!” From the doorway, Rin and Houki and Cecilia and Laura—everyone but Charl—was glaring at me.

“Up to your usual tricks, Charlotte?”

“Ichika, you...!”

“That’s cheating, Charlotte!”

“Hmph!”

Ah, crap. Laura was sulking already. Once she got mad, it usually took forever and a day to clear things up.

“Ah, uh... Laura?”

“Why are you only apologizing to Laura?!”

“Is she the only one you care about?!”

“I-Ichika?!”

Welp. I’d really stepped in it now. I could see a lot of apologizing on my knees

in my near future.



“Phew...” Two hours later, I’d finally escaped from the girls and was lying on my bed. “I should take a shower.”

Just as I got up, the door to my room opened.

“Ta-dah! Tatenashi steals the limelight!”

“Please go.”

I slammed my door shut. As soon as I did, I could hear the sound of running water from the other side.

“Whaaa?!”

A blade of water sliced my door in half. On the other side was Tatenashi, her chain sword, Rusty Nail, pulled tight in her grip. “Now, now. Can’t have you ignoring me.”

I give up. I slumped my shoulders.

“May I come in?”

“Go right ahead...”

Tatenashi had already swapped Rusty Nail back to her usual fan. On it was written the words ‘sad plight.’ Could she have been—nah, she *had* to have been punning with ‘limelight.’ And wait, it was her own damn fault it was a sad plight!

“What did you want? Make it quick, I was about to shower.”

“Oh? Then why don’t we talk in the shower? I didn’t bring my swimsuit this time, but that’s okay.”

“Gah, no! Why does it have to be like that?! Just say what it is now!”

“Well, well. You’re all fired up. That’s absolutely adorable.”

“Whatever.” Feeling completely ground down, I made tea for her.

“Ooh, gyokuro. A good choice. But you’ve still got a lot to learn before you take over for the student council.”

Um. I thought my role was vice-president.

“Tatenashi.”

“Ye-es?”

“I’m kicking you out.”

“Aww.”

I let out one final sigh. I couldn’t fight with this. She was going to have me wrapped around her finger permanently, and there was nothing I could do about it. Farewell, sighs.

“So, what did you want?”

“You were attacked, right, Ichika? Shall I assign you some of my bodyguards?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll have to pass.”

My enemy had an IS. I didn’t want to think about it, but a normal person could well end up dead if they got involved.

“I thought you’d say so.”

“I see.” I guess she was right.

“Then, there was one other thing...”

“Yeah?”

For once, Tatenashi was reluctantly grimacing before saying, “...Please!”

Smack! Her hands clapped together as she bowed her head.

“Huh? What?”

“Take care of my sister!”

“Your sister?!”

I had no idea what was going on.



“So, uh. Your little sister? She must be a first year?”

“Yes. Her name is Sarashiki Kanzashi. Here, here’s a picture.” Tatenashi opened up her phone, showing me a photo of a girl who looked a little bit tired

of life.

So this is Tatenashi's little sister. She seems kinda...

"But... Please don't ever tell her I asked you to."

Normally, Tatenashi would never lead in with that kind of thing.

"Your sister looks a bit, uhh..." For some reason, I felt like I had to be cautious with how I phrased it.

"Gloomy, yes."

"I see..."

"She's talented, though. That's why she has her own IS, but..."

"But?"

"She doesn't have it yet."

"Huh?" Does she have it, or doesn't she?

"She's a Japanese National Cadet, so her IS isn't ready yet. That's why she doesn't have it."

"Huh?"

"What do you mean, 'huh?' It's your fault."

"Eh?!" How'd I get involved in this?

"Kanzashi's personal IS was being developed by Kuramochi Engineering, so..."

"Oh... The same lab as Byakushiki?"

"Yes. Byakushiki was an all-hands-on-deck effort, so it's not finished yet."

"I see..."

"So— It's your fault!"

"Sorry, ma'am..." So that's why when they lined us all up with our personal IS, Class D's pilot was always absent. It must be pretty embarrassing to be a national cadet and still not have your own. "So, what did you want me to do for her?"

"Well, after the attack that happened at Cannonball Fast, they're planning an

all-years tag-team tournament to help get pilots with their personal IS up to speed fast.”

“Oh, really?”

“So please! Team up with Kanzashi!” Snapping her fan shut and setting it down beside her, she clasped her hands together again.

“Hey, come on, you know I’d be good for it even if you didn’t beg me.”

“So... So, you will?” she asked again, hesitantly. The difference from her usual attitude made her seem tiny, almost fragile.

What a mess... For some reason, when someone who was normally so carefree suddenly asked so politely, it made me feel like I absolutely had to see it through.

“Then, uh... What was her name? Kanzashi, right? Should I go up to her about it?”

“Yes. But if there’s any way you can avoid it, please don’t tell her I asked you to.”

“Huh? Why?”

“She... Well, she’s kind of always felt that I’ve overshadowed her... So...”

Tatenashi was being evasive. I could tell that there were issues between them.

“So you don’t get along with your sister?”

“Ahh...” Her sigh just confirmed that I was right. Sisters who don’t see eye to eye, with the big sister trying in her own way to patch things up and the little sister rebelling... It made me think of another family I knew.

It almost seems like Houki and Tabane’s relationship... Even with Houki getting an IS from her sister, things had still been a bit tense. We hadn’t seen Tabane again since then, so they probably hadn’t improved any. Anyway, if it was like that, I really had to go through with it.

“I’ll do my best to make it seem like it was all my idea.”

“Thanks. Oh, and try to be careful with how you phrase things. She can be a

bit prickly.”

“Right...” I mentally jotted down what she’d told me about Kanzashi.

“Thanks again. But really, don’t go overboard. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work.”

“This really isn’t like you, Tatenashi. I’d expect you to be more like ‘And if you do it, I’ll wash your back,’ or something.”

“Really? Ahahah... Well, if you really want me to...”

She really wasn’t herself today.

“You sound like you need a back rub.”

“Mm? Ichika?”

“C’mon.”

“Okay...”

I walked around behind Tatenashi, then climbed up on the bed on my knees and began to massage.

“Wow, you’re really tense. Have you been up late working a lot recently?”

“Yeah, a bit... Ow!”

“Your neck muscles are so stiff. You should do some stretching, and then take a nice long bath.”

“I know. Mmm...”

“Should I help out with the work?”

“C’mon, don’t get too full of yourself. You have your work with the clubs to take care of.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Jeez. You can’t just drop everything. I won’t like you anymore if you do that.”

“I know, I know.” I spent another half-hour or so massaging Tatenashi, who was finally back to being herself.

“Mmm! That felt good. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of things with your sister.”

“Yeah. Good luck.” She bowed one last time before leaving, with all the grace you’d expect from a big sister.

“As for this...” I looked down at the two pieces of my door lying on the ground. “I’ll put in a maintenance request for a new door...”



In a dark room, Madoka changed the bandages on her right hand. Repeated use of regenerative nanomachines had already sealed the wound. Empty syringes were scattered around the room.

“I’m coming in, M.” Squall, the leader of Phantom Task, entered without a knock. Her voluminous blonde hair swayed as she walked. “So, Orimura Madoka. Do you have an explanation for your actions yesterday?”

Squall’s smile remained fixed in place. Madoka glanced up before turning back to her bandages without a response.

“You may have enjoyed the theatrics of it all, but unauthorized contact like that could throw off the whole mission. Don’t go off on your own like that again, understood?”

“Understood...”

“Your mission is the capture of IS. If you’re going to use your IS for something else...”

Blam! An explosion rang out, and the first aid kit was blown off the side table. An instant later, Madoka was grabbed by the neck and thrown into the wall.

“Not too shabby.”

Squall floated in midair, her IS deployed, but behind Madoka four of Silent Zephyrus’s bits were aimed and ready to fire.

“.....”

Released, Madoka slumped back down to the bed. Squall dematerialized her own IS, landing next to her. The bed’s springs creaked under the weight of two people.

“Remember, M. You may be Orimura Madoka, but that doesn’t matter to me. I need you to be M. M from Phantom Task.”

“I will be, until I settle things...”

“Settle things... You mean, with Orimura Ichika?”

“Hmph. That little worm? I could kill him anytime I want.”

“So with Orimura Chifuyu, huh...” As Squall spoke, Madoka’s expressionless mouth twisted into a smile. A vicious smile. “Orimura Chifuyu, then. She doesn’t even have an IS right now. Doesn’t seem like she’s that much of a threat.”

The second Squall’s words left her mouth, she caught Madoka’s punch and kicked her back down. Looking at Madoka’s face, her smile had been replaced with blistering rage.

“Don’t you **dare**. You’re not worthy to even breathe the same air as her.”

“Fine, fine. Now put that knife away before you put a hole in the wall.”

“Hmph.” Embarrassed at being provoked so easily, Madoka resheathed her knife.

“Now, I’m going to go get my beauty rest. There’s still a good amount of time before the next mission. Try not to do anything rash. Got it, M?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I like girls who know how to listen. Anyway, until then.” Squall strode out, as indifferent to Madoka’s opinion on the matter as she had been when she entered.

With the door closed, silence and darkness again settled over the room. Madoka took out her knife again, and ran it along her face. Dark red blood welled up from the cut. Slicing into a face which looked so much like Chifuyu’s brought her joy beyond words. Entranced, she gazed at her own reflection in the blade.



“Hey, Orimura, Shinonono.” Mayuzumi Kaoruko had suddenly appeared in Class 1-A during the break after second period.

“What’s up?”

“Well, I wanted to ask a favor of you two.”

“A favor? From me and Ichika?”

“Yeah. My sister works for a publisher, and they wanted to run an exclusive interview with you as students with your own IS. Here’s the magazine it would be in.” Kaoru pulled out a fashion magazine for teens.

“Um... What does this have to do with IS?”

“Hm? Wait, haven’t you two done this kind of thing before?”

“Uhh...” Houki and I both nodded hesitantly, not quite sure of what she was after.

“Well, normally if you have your own IS that means you’re a pilot or at least a national cadet, which kind of makes you a celebrity. Almost like an idol, at least in terms of doing modeling on the side. I think some countries even involve the national theater.”

“Really, Houki?”

“Why are you asking me?! I have no clue!”

We were both pretty out of the pop culture loop for our age. *Now that I think of it, didn’t Cecilia talk about modeling in England?* I remembered her showing me photos once. She definitely looked good in that gown, at least. *I’m a guy, so probably a tux?* I wasn’t really sure about this.

While I was mulling it over, Rin popped up. “Wow, Ichika, you’ve never modeled? I guess I’ll have to show you some of my photos.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“What’s your problem?!” She smacked me on the head. “If I don’t, you’re probably gonna do something that makes you look like a weirdo.”

“What?! Show me! Show me right now!”

Rin pulled out her phone and twisted my face toward it. *Ow, my neck!*

“Oh?”

“Hmm...”

Houki took the opportunity to take a peek too, and she had the same reaction I did. The photo, by the way, was Rin in casual wear.

“Hmm... This looks pretty good.”

“Mhm. Don’t I. This was last summer—”

Ding-dong. The bell rang to mark the start of third period.

“You’re with the kendo club today, right, Orimura? I’ll see you there! Later!”
Kaoru was gone as swiftly as she had arrived. I’d expected Rin to make her exit too, but she was still caught up in showing off her pictures.

“And look here, how I—”

Klonk! She wasn’t expecting to play rock, paper, scissors, and when you throw rock it isn’t normally directly onto the other person’s head, but...

“Oww!” She turned around with an angry squint, only to see Chifuyu.

“Get back to Class B.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

As usual, she slumped out of the room. This was why she hardly ever came to visit Class A, even though it would have been perfectly fine in the afternoon.

“Today we’ll be covering the theoretical foundations of effective evasion and keeping distance in melee combat.”

And so class had begun.



“Here’s your towel.”

“Wow, it’s really Orimura!”

“Ooh! Give me one, too!”

“Can I have a massage?”

“Sorry, that isn’t on the menu.”

“Aww. Laaaaame!”

After school in the school dojo, I was handing towels out to the kendo club members as they finished practice. Like Kaoru had mentioned earlier, today I was with them.

“Here’s one for you, Houki.”

“Ah, yeah. Thanks.” Houki pulled off her mask and headband and wiped her face with the towel.

“.....”

“What are you staring at?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that the hakama look is really you.”

“H-Hmph...” Houki snapped her head to the side. I wondered if she was embarrassed.

“Hey, Orimura Ichika? Been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. Since the school festival, right?”

“Ahaha, yeah? Everyone’s enjoying this, aren’t they? Don’t they all seem like they just won at bingo or something?”

Oh, right. This was the girl who phrased everything as a question for some reason. While I was wondering why, she wove her way between her club members and was gone. *Huh. Beats me.*

“...Hey, Houki.”

“Yeah? What?”

“What do you think about that thing Kaoru mentioned during break?”

“I’m out. Being some display piece isn’t my thing.”

“I figured.” That was how I expected her to answer. Just as I was nodding in agreement, Kaoru appeared.

“Hey! Sorry to keep you waiting! Anyway, about that interview.”

“Houki just said she—”

Kaoru interrupted me before I could finish, “Ta-dah! I’ve got invitations to a dinner at a five-star hotel for you! For both of you, of course.”

She waved a pamphlet at the two of us. It definitely looked pretty fancy. But if Houki wasn't feeling it...

"We'll do it."

Ehh?

"Really? I kind of got the feeling that it wasn't your thing."

"It'll be a learning experience."

Ehh? Ehhhh?

"Oh, I see. It's on, then! You're okay with it too, right, Orimura? See you there at two on Sunday, then!"

"Um..."

"Anyway!" Kaoru left as quickly as she'd arrived. As the door to the dojo closed behind her, I took a good look at Houki.

"Houki."

"What?"

"What happened to 'your thing'?"

"I... I'm flexible! Problem?" She ground into my cheek with her bamboo sword.

"Sigh... I guess. As long as you're okay with it."

"I see. Anyway... This dinner, we're going together, right?" she asked almost nervously.

"Sure. I mean, I'd be mad if I didn't get to come along."

"Oh, I see! Right. Mm-hm, right!" Houki beamed as she gripped the pamphlet. *I hope she doesn't crush that. It'd be a shame if we couldn't make out the address.*

"Oh wow, Shinonono, are you going on a date with Orimura?"

"That sounds so awesome! I wish it was me!"

"Wow, that hotel's world-famous."

Almost in unison, the kendo club members who had been watching from afar closed in.

“It... It’s not a da-da-da-date! It’s nothing like that at all!”

“Oh really.”

Houki’s flustering was met with a circle of knowing grins.

Huh. I guess Houki’s getting along well with the other club members. I let out a sigh of relief. Houki had always had trouble playing nicely with others, so I’d been worried. *Anyway. Sunday.* Between that and Tatenashi’s request, it was going to be a busy weekend.



All right. Fourth period had just ended, and the classroom was buzzing with the excitement of lunch break.

“Let’s go to the cafeteria, Ichika.”

I regretfully waved out of Charl’s usual friendly invitation. “Sorry, Charl. I’ve got something to take care of today.”

“Really? Hmm, what should I do, then...”

“Hey, Doonie! Let’s get lunch!” It was Miss Casual and friends, of all people, who extended the invitation. Her hand was waving from inside her usual way-too-long sleeve.

“Do-Doonie?”

“C’mon, it’ll be fun. Ahahaha.” Ever so slowly, she tried to grab Charl’s hand. As I watched Charl deliberately not evade it, I thought of just what a nice person she was.

“Let’s gooooo!” Tanimoto and a few others were waiting by the classroom door, and as Miss Casual met up with them they quickly pulled Charl into the group.

All right. Time to head over to Class D. If what Tatenashi had told me was right, Kanzashi would just be eating a bun at her desk. *I got a bun for lunch too, so if I’m lucky that’s how I’ll be able to strike up a conversation.* The all-years

tag-team tournament had been explained during homeroom that morning. If I didn't get out of the classroom quickly, someone else might ask me first. I had to hurry.

"I've been waiting for you, Ichika!"

Womp-womp. As soon as I got into the hallway, I ran into Rin.

"Hey, team up with me!"

"Sorry, Rin. I'm already taken."

"Whaaaat? Already taken...? It's Charlotte, isn't it?!"

Eh? Why's she blaming Charl?

"Ugh. Just because you teamed up before, she gets first dibs?"

"Huh? What?"

"Oh, nothing! Anyway! Who is it! I'll get her to back out, just tell me!"

Uh, wow. That's kinda scary.

"Um, well..."

"Well?"

"...Sorry!"

The 36th of the Thirty-Six Stratagems: 'If all else fails, retreat.' I took off running.

"Ah! Hey, wait! Wait, Ichika!"

I darted down the stairs and lost Rin, before returning to the second floor.

"Phew. Finally made it to Class D."

"Oh, wow! It's Orimura!"

"It is! But why?!"

"What do you want at Class D?"

Wow, there were lots of people here. Unfortunately.

"Um, is Sarashiki here?"

“Whaaa?” The girls erupted in unison confusion.

“Sarashiki?”

“You mean, *her?*”

The crowd parted like the Red Sea. Directly ahead of me, furthest in the back by the windows, was a girl. A bun sat untouched on her desk as she stared fixedly at a projection display, her hands flying over a keyboard.

Huh? Tatenashi said she was pretty gloomy, but I wasn't expecting her to be so intense. The other girls whispered to each other as I tried to square up my assumptions with reality.

“Wait, did you want to team up with her for the tag team tournament they talked about in homeroom?”

“Hm? Yeah, that's it.” Murmurs spread out in a ripple around me as the girls processed my answer.

“Really? She doesn't even have her own IS.”

“She's been skipping every event.”

“Are you sure you're not thinking of her sister?”

I didn't really care to hear any more, so I clapped my hands to drown it out, “Well, excuse me! Anyway, I came here to talk to her.”

Passing by the crowd, I made my way to Kanzashi's desk.

“Can I borrow a chair?” I took a chair from a nearby girl and plopped down in front of Kanzashi.

“.....”

Her keyboard clattered as she typed. It was an old school mechanical model, rather than the new projection ones.

“Um...”

I took another look at her. Her hair hung down to her shoulders, but curled inward rather than outward like her sister's. Her eyes were drawn narrow, and a little bit empty inside. On her face was a pair of rectangular-framed glasses that gave off an aloof air.



“Hey. I’m Orimura Ichika.”

Her fingers stopped for a moment. After a short while longer she quietly replied, “I know.”

That’s good. She responded. Just as I was feeling relieved, she stood up. She began to raise her right arm, before sitting back down and resuming typing.

“Um...”

“I... Have every right to give you a good punch... Right now... But it’s not worth the effort... So I won’t.”

Ugh, she must have been angry about her IS. I mean, sure, all the effort that got dumped into Byakushiki was why it wasn’t finished, but it’s not like I could do anything about that.

“...What did you want?”

“Ooh! Right, that. Want to team up with me for the tag team tournament?”

“No...”

Well, that was quick. But I couldn’t give up yet!

“Aww, c’mon.”

“I don’t want to... Plus, you have... Plenty of options...”

“Oh, uh...” I cast about for a good explanation. Something better than ‘Tatenashi told me to.’ “Actually, everyone’s already found a partner—”

“There you are, Ichika!”

Guan Yu?! Nope... Just Rin.

“What are you doing in Class D! If you’re gonna visit anywhere, it should be Class B!”

“Ugh...” The usual tug on my sleeve felt like a vise around my chest. *Could you please not do that? What am I gonna do if you tear my uniform?*

“Come with me, right now!”

“I, uh. See you later, Sarashiki.”

“.....”

Kanzashi took a big bite of her bun in lieu of replying. And that’s how I got dragged off to Class B...

“Here.”

“There? Oh... Is this pepper steak?”

“Yeah. See? I can too make things other than sweet and sour pork.”

“Ah, But I already bought a noodle bun, so...”

Before I could finish my sentence, she snatched it out of my hand. *No, my bun!*

“You’re eating *my* pepper steak. Understood?!”

“I mean, you’re stuck feeding me then. Shouldn’t you be the one who’s iffy on it?”

“An indirect kiss...”

“Eh?”

“N-Nothing! Now come on! Eat up!”

“Okay, okay! Jeez, what’s gotten into you...” I gave one last goodbye to my noodle bun before switching into pepper steak gear. “Ooh? Wow, this is really good!”

“Hmph! Of course it is!”

The sauce was rich and flavorful, without being overpowering, and I began shoveling it into my mouth.

“Well, okay. Your noodle bun is pretty good, too.”

“Huh? You mean the one I just bought?”

“I-I mean the school store has some really good stuff! You got a problem with that?”

Not really, but...

“Anyway, Ichika. So you’re teaming up with me for the tag team tournament?”

“Sorry. I’m already taken.”

“W-W-W-Why?! Who?! Who is it?! I’ll get you out of it, just tell me!”

“Didn’t you already say that?”

“Tell me!”

“No!”

“Grrr...”

If I keep sitting here, she’s gonna keep going. I need to finish up and get back to Class A.

“Ichika!”

“No.”

“I didn’t even say it yet!”

“You probably want to fight her for the spot or something. No way.”

“Ugh! How did you know?!”

“Later, Rin. Thanks for lunch. It was good.”

“Eh?! Er, um...”

I slipped away while she was surprised by the compliment.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Ichika. You’re teaming up with me, of course, right?” Laura stood, her hands on her hips.

“Well, uhh...”

“Here’s the form. Just sign on the line.”

“Sorry, Laura... I already have plans...”

“What...?”

I already knew she was going to try to get me to cough up who it was, so I preemptively got apologetic and replied, “Really, I’m sorry! But I’ve already teamed up with someone!”

“.....” Laura squinted. It was terrifying. “I’ll ask you one more time...”

“Um... Laura... Wait, we can talk this over!”

“Too late!” Laura had already called forth her plasma dagger, slashing it at me at the same time. Gah!

“Knock it off! Barbecue only ever smells good at a rib shack!” Chifuyu appeared from behind to save me, grabbing Laura’s wrist and throwing her toward the window.

“Mein Lehrerin! I don’t recall asking for marital counseling!” Laura’s long hair floated in the air as she effortlessly jumped off the windowpane and landed on her feet. She really was like a cat.

“And I don’t recall asking for a rude sister-in-law.”

“.....!!” The rejection was enough to knock Laura flat.

Huh? Heeey, are you okay?

“She hates me... She hates me...”

This was bad. She was mumbling the same words over and over. And her eyes were as empty as the depths of space.

“Orimura. Put her in her seat. Class is about to start.”

“O-Okay. Hey, Laura, get up.”

“My life... Is over...”

Wow, that must have really hurt her. With no better options, I picked Laura up and began to carry her to her seat.

“Ahhhh! Orimura’s princess carrying Bodewig!”

“I-Ichika? Whatever are you doing?!”

“Ichika, you...!”

“No fair, Laura!”

That was Tanimoto, Cecilia, and Houki, and even Charl was out of her seat and coming in my direction.

“Sit down, you fools.”

Smack! For once, I was thankful to hear the clipboard doing its dirty work.



“Too slow, Ichika! I’m over here!”

It was after school in the third arena, and Ichika and Houki were practicing together again. Up until recently, they’d been on an even footing, but with Kenran Butou figured out, Houki was able to use her unlimited energy to corner Ichika with repeated Ignition Boosts.

“Ugh!”

Byakushiki made a quick about-face with a cross grid turn, firing a particle beam from Setsura as it did. But Akatsubaki’s Karaware blade cut it down with an energy slash.

“HAAAH!”

The variable-sweep armor on its back opening at the same time as it fired off an Ignition Boost, Houki accelerated toward Ichika in a flash.

“Tch!”

A slash across the chest dropped Byakushiki’s energy. As Houki showed off the variable-sweep armor’s ability to laterally accelerate under automatic control, she showered Byakushiki with Amazuki laser fire.

“Got you, Ichika!”

“This isn’t over yet!”

Again, each reached top speed with Ignition Boost. A hail of sparks from clashing blades showered down over the arena.

“Phew...” Houki wiped off her sweat before putting her uniform top back on. “Ahh, that felt good.”

Houki, in a good mood for once, hummed to herself as she adjusted her ponytail.

I beat Ichika today. He’s going to have to recognize my talent now. She chuckled happily. But there was something else making her even happier today.

He’s been saying he already has a partner for the tournament... She tightened her ribbon. Her graceful raven locks swayed beautifully. *It has to be me! Silly Ichika! There’s no way he could mean anyone else!*

It was only as she clanged her locker shut that she realized Cecilia was there too.

“Mm-hm-hmm-hmmm~♪”

Cecilia, too, was in a better mood than usual, as she opened her locker and began to change. *It seems Ichika has already chosen his tag team partner. And who else could it be but me?*

No one knows for sure whether these were the self-serving assumptions we allow maidens in love, or simply the boundless energy of girls blooming into women. *Ahh, finally... Finally, Ichika... Ahh!* It was only as she finished changing and was tying her uniform ribbon that she realized Houki was there too.

“Oh my, Houki.”

“Cecilia, huh. Aren’t you in a good mood today.”

Sparks normally flew between these two, but today, it was all smiles.

“Wonderful weather today, isn’t it.”

“Yeah. It really is.”



Silly Houki. She doesn't even realize Ichika will be teaming up with me.

That Cecilia. I wonder what her face would look like if she realized Ichika was teaming up with me.

Each was smug, completely secure in their perceived advantage.

“See you around, Cecilia.”

“Why of course, Houki. A good evening to you.”

As they passed by each other, a self-satisfied smile rose to each of their faces.

I win!

I've got the upper hand!

It was only two hours later, after dinner, that the tragedy unfolded.



“Sorry! Really, sorry, both of you!” I bowed apologetically to Houki and Cecilia, who had both come to my room after dinner.

“Huh...?”

Each was at a loss for words. Well, this was a mess.

“Listen. I've already picked my tag team partner.”

“And it's me, of course—”

“Who else but me, of course—”

“.....?” I was at a loss for words too. Just what were they driving at? “Anyway, really, I'm sorry!”

“Do you think sorry...”

“...Is going to solve the mess you've gotten yourself into?!”

Houki's katana, Karaware, appeared in her hands, as did Cecilia's Starlight Mk. III sniper rifle.

“Whaaaaaa?! Wait, wait, wait!”

“No excuses! Don't move!”

“If you won’t pair up with me, I’ll finish this right here!”

Fssshh...

What’s that noise?

Smash!

“What in the—” My door was blown off its hinges, and flew into Houki and Cecilia.

“You fools still haven’t learned your lesson about solving all your problems with your IS? Ten laps around the field with your IS on! And I shouldn’t need to tell you, but no PIC, and no power assist! Understood?”

“Ms. Orimura...”

Well, Chifuyu was also the RA for the first year dorms. She must have been on patrol. But still... *How much force did she put into that to blow my door across the room...* Sadly, my door was broken again.

“Chop-chop!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Houki and Cecilia stood ramrod straight while replying, before running off while glaring at each other. Yeah... Ten laps with IS on? That wasn’t gonna be fun. I felt sorry for them.

“And you, Orimura.”

“Y-Yes?”

“You may not be doing anything to cause this, but it’s still always your fault. Better hurry up and narrow down the field, you idiot.”

“O-Okay...”

“...I’ll bring the paperwork for the door over later,” Chifuyu said as she left.

Wait, weren’t you the one who broke it?



Clank, clank, clank.

“Haa! Haa! Haa!”

Clunk, clunk, clunk.

“Wheeze, wheeze.”

Dusk had set over the field, but the heavy clanking of metal on metal still rang out as a red and a blue IS ran laps.

“Cecilia! This is all your fault! Haa, haa!”

“Wheeze. Whatever... Gave you that silly idea... Houki?!”

Clang, clang, clang.

“So-Someday I’ll get you back for this!”

“Why, that should be my line!”

Their pace slowed even as they kept glaring at each other. After all, IS are weighty things.

“Phew. Six more laps...”

“I... Absolutely... Will not... Let you beat me!”

Cecilia and Houki continued their nighttime race, burning all the energy they hadn’t been able to vent at Ichika.

Chapter II: Girls' Rhythm IS Academy's hangars. Structures by the arenas, originally built for the maintenance classes which began in students' second year. Today, though, one was occupied by Tatenashi's little sister, Kanzashi.

"It's still so unresponsive... Why..."

She stared at a projection display while tapping away on her mechanical keyboard. Activating an incomplete IS on her own. It was something Tatenashi was able to do with Mysterious Lady. Kanzashi couldn't stand to live in her sister's shadow all her life. She had to at least measure up this way.

"My core synchronization isn't rising at all... Am I just unsuited to this type?"

The IS, an Uchigane Nishiki, was an all-range fighter which took design cues from the versatile Revive.

"Sigh..."

Not finding an answer, Kanzashi closed the display and put her keyboard away. *Maybe I'll just go home and watch some anime.*

Kanzashi's secret hobby was watching anime. Action shows with a clear-cut hero, of course. The kind where the hero takes down all the villains. She loved that kind of simple, direct plot. Even when she was little, her favorite picture book was Momotaro—Tatenashi's was Urashima Taro.

What should I watch today... She picked up her things to leave the hangar, contemplating the rest of her day.

"Yo." The automatic doors opened, and Ichika stepped in. In his hands were drinks. "Which do you like, tea or juice?"

Ignoring him, Kanzashi left. Ichika hurried after her.

"Hey."

“.....”

“Heeeeeeey.”

“.....”

“Heeeeeeey, Kanzashi.”

A loud footstep rang in the air as she stopped and said, “Don’t call me by my first name.”

“Um, Sarashiki then?”

“Don’t call me by my last name either.”

“Then...”

“Just... Don’t talk to me at all.” Kanzashi walked on, Ichika following a pace or two behind.

“At least take a drink. I don’t need two of ’em. Here, yeah, which would you like?”

“Grape, then...”

“Understood.”

Ichika held out the can, and as she took it their hands touched.

“.....!” Kanzashi suddenly flinched as if struck by lightning. Seemingly annoyed by his questioning look, she grimaced while taking the can.

“What’s up with you?”

Ignoring his question, and drink in hand, Kanzashi turned to leave.

“Um... You there!”

“.....”

“C’mon, I’m talking to you!”

“Are you serious...?”

“You said not to call you by your name.”

“Is that the best alternative you have?”

“Oh. Kans, then.” She glared at him in response. “Okay. Kanzashi...”

Sighing, Kanzashi sped up.

“C’mon, Kanzashi. Team up with me.”

“I don’t want to...”

“C’mon.”

“Why do you even want me as a teammate?”

“Huh? Um...” Ichika’s mind squirmed for an answer that didn’t involve Tatenashi. Then a light bulb blinked on ever his head. “I want to see your IS!”

“.....!”

Smack! The slap echoed through the hall.

“...Huh?”

And with that, Kanzashi silently stalked off.



Back in my room, I rubbed my cheek, still red from the slap. My mind swirled around as I tried to find an answer.

“I wonder what she was so mad about...”

“Oh. That must be it. Her IS isn’t ready yet.”

I clapped my hands together in realization. Now that I thought of it, Tatenashi had mentioned that. *How could I forget...* I pulled the IS Academy syllabus down from the shelf, and began to flip through it.

“Hmm, let’s see.”

IS Academy has an Engineering track beginning second year focusing on IS development, research, and maintenance. During school tournaments, students, especially second and third years, will be assigned crews from students on this track. *Hmm. Maybe Kanzashi can get help from one of those crews.*

Knock, knock.

“Hello? Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

Oh, it's the demon who had sliced my door in half.

"You're thinking something rude, aren't you, Ichika."

"Hahaha. Of course not, Tatenashi."

"Oh really? Ah well. I bought some cream puffs, would you like to share?"

"Oh, sure. Thanks."

I led her in. As we sat down, she noticed the thick syllabus open on my desk.

"Oh, Ichika. Are you thinking of asking one of the crews for help?"

"Nah, not me. I thought maybe they'd be able to help Kanzashi out."

"I see. Well, it might not be that simple," Tatenashi said as she sat down on the bed.

"Huh, why?"

"Kanzashi wants to put together her own IS."

"Eh?"

"I did, so I think she thinks she has to, too. You should just let her do her thing."

"Wait... Did you really put together Mysterious Lady yourself?!"

"Huh? Well, yeah. But it was already around 70% complete when I started."

Wow... She wasn't quite the second coming of Tabane, but still, that was crazy to hear.

"But Kaoruko gave me plenty of advice. And Utsuho was there too."

"Eh? They're on the crews?"

"Yes. The third year top of the class and the second year expert."

Well, that was a surprise. Not Utsuho so much, but I'd thought Kaoruko had her hands full with the newspaper club.

"You should have them take a look at yours, Ichika. It's obvious watching Byakushiki in action that the thrusters are out of sync."

"I see..." Watching her pick up a cream puff, I rushed to get some tea ready.

“Anyway, how was she other than that?”

“She slapped me.”

“Really?” For some reason, Tatenashi seemed surprised. As we spoke, the tea finished brewing. “I know she doesn’t like to waste time on anything that’s not productive, but...”

“Uhh...”

“Did you touch her butt or something?”

“Of course not!”

“Her boobs, then?”

“C’mon! You know I’m not a creep like that!”

“Well, that’s too bad. I was thinking you could double up and get whichever one you missed.”

“Wait! Why are you undressing?! C’mon, you’re pissing me off!”

“Aww, I was just kidding.” Dealing with Tatenashi was exhausting sometimes.

“Here’s your tea. Sorry, I only had bags.”

“As long as you made it, it’s the best tea in the world.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Lie to you, I know.” I was really getting tired of her. “Anyway, though. I think you just might have a chance with her.”

“Really? Even after she slapped me?”

“Girls like a guy who’s not afraid to keep going after what he wants.”

Even I could tell that was a lie. I imagined how it would turn out with the girls I knew. How it would turn out if I didn’t even know them, and after they slapped me I kept coming on to them.

If I did it with Houki...

“What, would you rather I cut you instead?!”

Guh!

If I did it with Rin...

“What, do you like getting hit? Get outta here, you creep!”

Guh!

If I did it with Cecilia...

“I can’t believe the nerve of you uncivilized apes. Get out of my sight.”

Guh!

If I did it with Laura...

“Did you know? People can live for nearly ten minutes after decapitation.”

Guh!

If I did it with Charl...

“.....”

Guh!

That wouldn’t work at all!

“Stop lying to me, Tatenashi!”

“Oh, am I?” Wow, she was already trying a different tact. “Anyway, I’ll figure out a way to hook you up with Kanzashi. Just do me a favor and be sure to help her out with her IS.”

“Is that an order?”

“Oh, do you enjoy being ordered around?”

“...Why?”

“Aww. You don’t have to get angry about it.”

“Hmm. Thanks for the tea. I’ll see you later.” Tatenashi had said what she had to say, most of it lies, and left.

“I guess I should try the cream puffs.”

Chomp. Munch, munch.

“Pffft!”

“Ahahahahaha! I got you good, it has mustard in it rather than cream!” I could see her laughing face through my door, which was still cracked open. A devil. A devil was watching me.

“Ta-te-na-shiiii!”

“Eek!”

The door slammed shut, and she fled. I made good and sure, a good five times, that it was locked and she couldn't get in again.



Kanzashi was back in her room, her blanket pulled over her head to block out her roommate, watching TV on her phone. On the tiny projection display, an invincible hero was foiling the villains' plans yet again. Her face was blank even as she enjoyed the show. Just like usual.

I hit him... Even though she had kept herself under control the first time they met, the second time, she had gotten emotional and gone too far. *Why did I...* It was true that it was Ichika's fault her IS wasn't yet complete, but he didn't mean to do it.

Am I just acting spoiled? Kanzashi was self-conscious about lashing out at people. Growing up in the Sarashiki household, as long as she remembered, she'd always been compared to her sister. All of her anguish about trying to live up to that example was something she'd never been able to tell anyone. All of that, she kept bottled up.

Yet— Yet still—

Orimura... Ichika... His image hung in her heart as if he were still there. She remembered his gentle smile.

Without her knowing quite why, Kanzashi's cheeks turned the pink of a cherry blossom. On the screen, her show had already ended.



“Hey!” I walked faster, trying to catch up. As I did, her pace increased, too, until we were both half-running. “Hold up, Houki!”

“Be quiet! Just leave me alone! I want to do this by myself!”

“C’mon. We were invited to this together, we should do it together. Plus, you’ll probably get lost by yourself.”

“Stop making fun of me! There’s no way that would happen!”

It was Sunday, and we were on our way to meet up with Kaoru’s sister, the magazine editor. Of course, we were in street clothes, not our uniforms. Actually...

“Houki.”

“W-What?!”

“That’s a nice outfit. When did you pick it up?”

“Ah, I... A little while ago, when I went shopping with my friends.”

She was wearing a black miniskirt and a white blouse, under a light parka for autumn. It was the color of dandelions.

“Those, what do you call ’em, frills around your collar. They’re nice.”

“You think so? I mean, I like it too.”

“I always just think of you as that kid in kendo gear, but I guess you can be pretty feminine when you feel like it, eh.”

“Hmph. I don’t need your flattery.” Houki crossed her arms and looked away.

C’mon, I don’t admit it that often, at least you could play along. “Anyway, we don’t have to be there for a while. We can slow down.”

“I guess.”

As we continued to walk I noticed Houki turning slightly toward me, only to turn away again.

“Hm? What’s up, Houki? You keep looking at me.”

“Oh, nothing!”

“Really.”

“You... Your clothes look cool, too...”

“Huh? Didn’t hear you.”

“N-Nothing! I didn’t say anything! Yeah! Ahahaha...”

What had gotten into her today?

“You know, it’s pretty cold out. There’s a coffee shop right there, why don’t we stop?”

“Eh? Well, um... *Mumble, mumble.*”

“Come again?”

“I-If you’re cold, we could j-just hold hands!” Her words were far more forceful than the timid extension of her arm.

“Sounds like a good idea. Let’s do that.” I took Houki’s hand as we walked toward the subway turnstile.

“Ah—” Houki was quiet until we made it to the meeting.

“Hi, I’m Mayuzumi Nagisako, editor for *Infinite Stripes*. Pleased to meet you.”

“Hi. I’m Orimura Ichika.”

“And I’m Shinonono Houki.”

The meeting room was spacious, with three sofas facing each other like chunks of a sliced tomato.

“Why don’t we jump straight into the interview? We can do the photoshoot later.” Nagisako took out a pen-shaped digital recorder and showed us it. She was wearing a checkered suit, with her legs poking out stylishly from a tight skirt.

“So, first question. Orimura, what do you think about going to a girls’ school?”

“Starting with the tough ones, huh?”

“Everyone wants to know! You wouldn’t believe how many people mentioned it in our survey.”

“Well... It’s tough not having many male bathrooms.”

“Pfft! Ahahahaha! My little sister was right! You really are the thirstless harem king!”

Harem king, huh.

“Hey, tell me. What’s it take to get a visa approved?”

“Who are you, Dan?!”

“All right, how about you, Shinonono? Tell me about your sister.”

Houki stomped her feet down as she stood up. It looked like Tabane was still off-limits for her.

“You won’t get the dinner invites if you do that,” Nagisako remarked.

“Ugh!” She sat back down on the sofa.

“Good girl. I like that honesty. Anyway... What do you think of the IS she made for you? Any plans to become a national cadet? Maybe you’re a bit tired of Japan?”

“I’m grateful for Akatsubaki. Currently, while I’ve received a number of requests, I have no plans to become a national cadet. As for Japan, well, it’s where I was born and raised, so I can’t complain too much.”

Houki answered each of Nagisako’s rapid-fire questions. She always took things a little too seriously.

“Okay, okay. Orimura, Shinonono, which one of you is stronger?”

“Me!” Houki immediately answered.

“Really?”

“Well, umm...” Houki had a slightly better win rate in our mock battles.

“Wow, that’s no good! What kind of hero can’t protect the girl?” Nagisako grinned cheekily, and I looked away shyly.

“I’m fine not being a hero. I’m just a soldier.”

“Nice line. That’s the kind of thing you’d hear in a movie.” Nagisako, grinning, mimed a film camera with her hands. She was just as energetic as Kaoruko.

“Sergeant Orimura! What is your mission?!”

“U-Uh, err...” I glanced over at Houki. I didn’t want to say anything too embarrassing, but... “To protect my comrades!”

“That’s it! That’s what I want to hear from a boy!” Seemed like I’d been

demoted.

“Now that I think of it, you’re also on the student council, right? Isn’t Tatenashi wicked awesome?”

‘Wicked awesome?’ She was kinda dating herself there.

“Honestly, it’s a lot of work. Along with IS training and the executive branch, I also take part in a number of other club activities.”

“That’s right, Kaoruko was complaining that you haven’t made it to the newspaper club yet.”

“That’s... Well, they do a drawing to see who gets me.”

“I guess it’s to be expected, then. She always had bad luck. I remember the time when she bought twenty grab bags and every single one had a pack of tissues in it. She almost cried.”

We chatted until the interview was over and it was time for the photoshoot.

“All right, the studio is in the basement. There are dressing rooms attached, you can get changed there. After that, we’ll get you made up and get shooting.”

“Huh? We have to change?”

“Yeah. If I don’t get shots of you in the sponsors’ clothing, my head’s gonna roll,” she said as she made a slicing motion across her neck. Wow, it must be tough being an adult.

“All right, let’s go!”



As Houki entered her dressing room, she clasped her hands in front of her chest and let out a sigh without even looking at the outfit laid out for her.

“Ahh...” A passionate sigh.

‘I’ll protect Houki!’ I can’t believe he actually said that... She banged on the wall, a smile plastered across her face. On the fourth blow, the white panel dented. It may have only been a deliberate mishearing, but once the idea was in her mind, her teenage hormones were impossible to stop.

“That’s it! That’s it! Ahahahahaha!”

It was only after she picked up the clothes she'd be modeling that she realized how daring they were.

"Wow... These are kinda..."

It was an extremely low-cut blouse, a cute frilly miniskirt, and a short denim jacket. *They expect me to wear this? Me? Me of all people?!* As she looked at the kind of outfit she'd never pick for herself, she tensed for a moment. *But... Well... I don't know when I'll get the chance to dress like this again...* She wanted to show Ichika that she could look good like this too. With determination welling up in her, two minutes later she made up her mind.

"All right! I'll do it!" Raising her clenched fists, she began to undo the buttons of her blouse.

Isn't Ichika done yet? I can't calm down when I'm wearing this. Houki felt uneasy as she sat in the studio.

A pro makeup artist had done their best to make her astonishingly beautiful. The assistant cameraman and a few other men had been audibly breathing more heavily when they glanced in her direction. *If he's kind enough to flatter me, I'll ask him if he wants to have dinner on the patio. I'll... I'll ask him out myself. I'll ask him out... I'll ask him out...* As Houki chanted the phrase in her head like it was a magic spell, she heard a voice from the next room.

"Sorry that took so long. Orimura's ready now."

Ba-dum! *Ichika's coming it... Ichika's coming in...* Even more anxious, now, she began to push her bangs back and forth.

"I look pretty weird in this getup, don't I."

Ichika's voice! Her pulse raced even faster.

"No way! It looks great on you. There's nothing quite like a young man in a suit."

A suit?! Unable to hold back her curiosity any longer, Houki turned to look.

"Ah....." It may have just been in Houki's lovestruck eyes, but Ichika, in a casual suit, looked incredibly, fabulously cool. "I-Ichika..."

"Hey. Sorry I took so long, Houki."

“Mhm...” Houki was at a loss for words. She twiddled her fingers, until she finally managed to half-whisper something. “It looks good on you... Um, uh, n-not bad.”

“Sure. Thanks. You look... Cute, too.”

“Cute?!” Houki’s heart suddenly pounded. She squeezed her eyes shut as if her cheeks were actually on fire.

Ichika said I look cute... He said I look cute... Clapping her palms to her face, she could feel the heat rise. Not wanting to let Ichika see her like this, she spun around.

“All right, let’s get started with the shoot. We’re a bit pressed for time, so let’s make this snappy,” Nagisako said as she clapped her hands. The staff sprang to work and the shoot began.



Well, I wasn’t expecting that. In the photography booth, Houki and I went through pose after pose. I tried not to spend too much time looking at her as it dragged on. *I can’t believe how different she looks. The makeup sure does wonders.*

When I first saw her all made up, I wasn’t sure it was really her. And I was really surprised by how much cleavage and how much of her thighs the outfit showed off. *She’d never normally wear that kind of thing.* The unexpectedness, the out-of-the-ordinariness of it was exhilarating. I couldn’t help but think that she was cute. *Hmm. I guess she looks a bit more mature than usual, too? Or something...* I couldn’t quite find the right word.

Anyway, with how hard my heart was already racing, I did my best not to make eye contact with her.

“C’mon, Orimura. Don’t just be in the frame next to Shinonono, you need to be there *with* her,” Nagisako suddenly spoke up.

A bit reluctantly, I scooted closer to Houki on the couch and asked, “Um... Like this?”

“Still not there. Closer! Closer!”

“Really?! But if I get any closer...”

I peeked over at Houki. I had thought she'd be angry, but instead, she was looking up at me, almost entreatingly. *Whaa?!* This definitely wasn't the Houki I was used to. I already knew she was different today, but this was like the opposite of normal. My heart burning up, I shifted over to sit directly next to her.

“Ah...” As I brushed against her arm, she let out an unbelievably cute sigh.

Ba-dum! My heart leapt.

“Hmm, nah, just lining up doesn't quite do it. Orimura, put your arm around her waist.”

“...Huh?”

“Arm. Around. Her. Waist. Hurry it up, we don't have all day.”

“O-Okay!”

Being put on the spot like that, I reflexively said I'd do it, even though I still wasn't sure. *So I have to put my arm...* As I began to panic a little, Houki shifted to make it easier. When we rubbed together, I could suddenly smell the sweet vanilla notes of her perfume. The pounding of my heart echoed in my ears as I pulled her toward me with a wavering arm.

“Ahh...” A quiet sigh escaped Houki's lips. The sound escaping from between those two lines of faint pink gloss was enough to steal my heart.

Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. I gulped down the saliva filling my mouth as I chanted to myself in my head.

“Hmm. Not bad, but I want something with a bit more impact.” Nagisako pulled her face back from the viewfinder and crossed her arms as she stared at the ceiling in thought. “Oh, I know what. Shinonono, maybe wrap your arms around his neck? Yeah, that's it. That'll do it!”

She snapped her fingers.

“All right, go for it!”

Her face was plastered with a wide grin. *Isn't that a bit too...* As I thought, I

looked over at Houki, and her eyes were not even ten centimeters from mine.

“Ah...”

We gazed into each other’s eyes. It was as if time had stopped, as we sat, unmoving. *Houki’s eyes are beautiful...* Within them burned the same fierce determination I’d always known. But today, there was something else there too. I didn’t know what to call it, but it was a face of hers I’d never seen. The mystery of it called out to me.

Snap! The sudden flash brought us both back to reality.

“Ooh, that’s a good one. Honestly, I should’ve gone with that to begin with.”

“Er, um...”

“.....”

We snapped apart in embarrassment, unable to say anything to each other. I don’t know if she knew what was going through our minds as we sat silently, but Nagisako grinned lightheartedly while giving us a thumbs-up and said, “All right! Good job! You can go get changed now. Feel free to keep the clothes.”

“S-Sure...”

“Understood...” We both answered faintly as we tried to look in opposite directions.

“Okay, I’ll email you the dinner invitations later, so be sure to remember to leave your address on the way out. Thanks for coming!” Nagisako, like Kaoruko, was swift on her feet, already looking through the results of the shoot on her phone.

“Anyway, Houki.”

“What?”

“Let’s go get changed.”

“Oh, right.”

Still a little bit nervous, we kept our distance as we headed to our dressing rooms. Of course, we didn’t speak a word on the way there. My face was burning so hot that I needed to fan it with my palm.



He... He liked how I looked... Ichika liked how I looked... He said I looked cute... Houki stood in the dressing room staring into the mirror, stripped down to her underwear, clenching her clothes in her fists. Her heart throbbed, held in by her pure white bra.

And... And... Remembering how her heart skipped a beat when their eyes met, her cheeks flushed pink. *We looked at each other... Up close like that...* It had felt like her chest was going to tear open then, but now, it swelled with exultation. Their eyes meeting like lovers' do... His warmth, the sensation of his breath on her skin, that closeness... The memory of each of these thrilled her. *If... If we had been alone then...* Inside her heart, she imagined kissing Ichika.

"Mmm....." Closing her eyes, she traced a finger along her lips. The blissful sensation mixed with a pang of guilt.

All right... She opened her eyes, her decision made. *I'll ask him out to dinner tonight. Just pick somewhere that looks good and go for it.* As she thought, something tugged at her memory.

I know! There was that one place in the magazine I borrowed from my roommate Shizune. Wasn't it right by the subway station? Thinking of the big 'Top 10 Date Restaurants' on the cover made her face burn even hotter. *I'm on a roll today. I can do this. Just calm down and ask him. Yeah, that's it,* she repeated to herself as she dressed. A shy, but bright, smile spread across her face.

On the way home, Ichika and Houki walked side by side. Each carried a bag with the clothes they'd worn during the photoshoot.

"Well, uh. That sure was something different." Ichika, maybe still thinking of Houki as a woman, stumbled over his words.

"You're right. It was definitely an experience." They made idle chatter to fill the air as they walked down the steps to the subway station.

All right. Say it. Say it! Pressing her hands to her chest like she was trying to hold her heart in, Houki opened her mouth, "I-Ichika... Let's, uh, let's have dinner together tonight."

“Hm? Oh, sure. We’re gonna have to hurry to get back before the dining hall closes, though.”

“N-No! Not the dining hall... I mean... Go out to eat...”

“Oh, dinner out? Well...” Ichika thought for a moment. For Houki, it felt like hours. “Sure, why not.”

“Really?! All right!” Houki’s smile gleamed.

“Okay, where to? The diner by the station?”

“N-No! I know a good place. Let’s go there.”

“Okay.”

Houki basked in the thrill of victory. But—

“Looks packed.”

It being dinnertime on a Sunday, Spruce Forest—the restaurant she remembered from the magazine—was full. Most of the customers being couples only added to her dismay.

“What do you want to do? The sign says it’s a two-hour wait... Should we just go to the dining hall?”

“N-No! Let’s find another restaurant!”

This was her chance at dinner out with Ichika. She didn’t want to let it slip away.

Where do we go, though? The only other places I know are, like, diners, or the mall food court, or ramen shops... None of those were what she wanted.

Houki strained, trying to remember the magazine’s other suggestions. *Two was in the opposite direction... Three’s a long way away... Where was four again...?* As she pondered, Ichika took her hand.

“Hey, I know a place. Let’s go.”

Whaa?! He... Ichika’s holding my hand?! Her heart leapt up her throat.

“It’s a bit of a walk, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, that’s fine... Just... Just lead the way...” Houki was so focused on Ichika’s

hand in hers that she could barely find words to respond.

She was so focused she almost forgot to walk along with him, and finally set off a half-pace behind, still hand-in-hand.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived.

“Here it is.”

“O-Okay?” It wasn’t the romantic getaway she’d been hoping for. In fact, it was a greasy spoon.

“Go... tanda’s?”

“Yeah. Didn’t I tell you about here? My friend’s family owns it.”

“I see...” Houki slumped in dejection. Then again, this was Ichika, wasn’t it? She shouldn’t get her hopes up that much. Letting out a sigh, she followed Ichika inside.

“Oh, hey, Dan.”

“Wow, Ichika? What are you doing here?” The place was around half-full. Dan, in an apron, was waiting tables, earning his allowance while helping out.

“Huh, you brought a girl? Wait, is she your girlfriend?”

“What’s that smug grin for?”

“Whaddaya mean? So... Is she?”

“No way. Remember, I told you about her back in middle school. She’s my childhood friend. My first childhood friend. Didn’t you meet her at my birthday party?”

“Man, you crazy? I spent the whole time getting Utsuho’s number.”

“Wait, what was that about Utsuho?”

“*Cough*. Nothing at all. Anyway, uhh. What was her name? Shinono?” As Dan stood with arms crossed trying to remember, Houki spoke up.

“Shinonono Houki.”

“Oh, right. I’m Gotanda Dan. Pleased to meet you.”

“Yeah.”

Hearing his name, Gotanda Ran came to mind, and she was taken a little aback. *Wait, did he come here just to meet up with her?* The thought ate at her as Dan led them to their table.

“Just get my attention when you’re ready to order,” said Dan as he went back behind the counter.

Houki struck up conversation with Ichika as she looked over the menu, “So, what would you recommend?”

“Hmm, it’s all good, but if I had to pick something it’d be the seafood. The simmered flounder’s really tasty.”

“Thanks. Hmm...”

Even as they talked, the worry that he only came here to see Ran kept running through her head.

“Er, um... Ichika?”

“Yeah?” Ichika replied without looking up from the menu.

“U-Um...”

Say it! Just say it! You can do it! Even as she tried to push herself into it, she couldn’t quite find the words. *Get a hold of yourself, Houki! Where’s all your determination? All right. I’ll say it. I’ll say it!*

“Um— Ichika!”

“Hm? What’s the big deal?”

“Oh, nothing... Sorry...”

She must have been too forceful, as the nearby tables were staring. Embarrassed, she shrunk back into her seat as Ichika gave her a curious look.

“You know, you’ve looked really good at kendo club lately. Your posture and everything. Especially how you keep your back straight.”

“Oh, right. Thanks, I guess...” She took a deep sip from her glass of water as she shrunk back again. *One more time. I can do it!*

“I-Ichika.”

“Yeah”

“Um... Well...” The world swirled around her as she looked up, directly into his eyes. *Just say it!* “Uhh... Lately, I’ve been practicing my cooking. Would you like to try it sometime?”

Argh! What am I saying!

“Oh, really? Your cooking’s great. I’d love to.”

“Oh, I see! I see... Yeah!” As Ichika smiled happily, Houki nodded, her ponytail swaying. Her joy was written all over her face.

“Anyway, I think I’m getting the grilled fish and fish fry combo. How about you?”

“Me? Well, umm...” Houki, who had forgotten all about dinner, looked back down at the menu.

“The Hellfire stir-fry is good too. I mean, it *is* their house special.”

“Oh? I’ll have that, then.” Houki had already forgotten all about Ran, and was enjoying her time together with Ichika.

“Hey, Dan. We’re ready.”

“Alright, what can I get you?”

“I’ll have the grilled fish and fish fry combo. And Houki will have the Hellfire stir-fry.”

“Gotcha. Just a sec.”

A few quick jots on the check, and Dan disappeared into the kitchen. It was then that the chef, Dan’s grandfather Gen, noticed that Ichika was there and spoke up, “Hmm? Isn’t that Ichika!”

“Oh, hi there. I thought I’d drop in.”

“I see. Bring your girlfriend for a date? Gahaha!”

“It’s not like that—”

“Hey! Ran! Heeeeey!” Gen turned and yelled upstairs. A faint ‘what?’ echoed back down. “Get down here! Quick!”

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

It seemed like Ran was inclined to listen to her grandfather, as it only took her two minutes to make it out the back door and back in the front. Like usual, she was in somewhat fashionable, but definitely not dressy, clothes.

“What is it, Grandpa? I’m in the middle of my homewo— Whaaat?! Ichika?!”

“Yo.”

“Gahaha!” Gen, who had been laughing the whole time, was so bemused he’d stopped cooking. As Ran compared her own outfit to Ichika’s, and especially Houki’s, her ears turned a bright red and she ran back out the door.

“Waaaaaah!”

“...Wait, what? Hey, Dan. What’s up with her?”

“Now you’ve done it, Gramps.”

“Oh? And why would that be?”

“I’d be more worried about the cooking...” Dan’s mother and the self-described poster girl of Gotanda’s, Ren, stepped in.

“Oh? Oh, my. Is that your girlfriend there, Ichika?”

“I just said, it’s not like that.”

“Oh, I see. That’s good, at least.” Seeing her smile, a smile rose to Ichika’s face reflexively.

Ten minutes later...

“Welcome, Ichika...” Ran, somewhat inexplicably, was in her best clothes, with an apron over them. The arrival of the true poster girl had excited the male clientele.

“Huh, wait, Ran. Did you get changed?”

“Well... Yeah...”

“Are you going out somewhere? It’s pretty late.”

“Nothing wrong with that! I... I just felt like it!” Ran snuck a quick peek at

Houki, and her heart dropped. *She probably has me beat...* Especially in the chest area. *Ugh...* A loud voice rang out, with no time for her girlish introspection.

“Come on, Ran! Bring them their food!”

“Okay, okay! You don’t have to yell, Grandpa!” Ran picked up the plate and spun away. “Hmph!”

“What...? Hey, Dan. You did something to make Ran mad, didn’t you!”

“It wasn’t me, old man!”

“Don’t lie to me!”

“Gah! Why are you blaming me?! You’re the one who did it!” As the grandfather and grandson bickered, Ren motioned to Ran in encouragement.

“Here you are, Ichika.”

“Thanks.” Having brought Ichika’s meal, she returned to the counter for Houki’s.

“Sorry for the wait. Um... It’s been a while, hasn’t it.”

“Yeah. It has. Thanks.”

With that, Ichika and Houki were both served. But Ran stayed at their table, watching. *Why are they here together? Is it a date? I hope it’s not a date...* As she stood there overthinking, Ichika spoke up.

“What’s up, Ran?”

“W-What?! Oh, nothing, nothing at all!”

“Well, we can’t really eat with someone standing there staring.”

“Oh! Oh, right! That’s right! Ahahaha, sorry about that!” Ran dashed off behind the counter. Ichika and Houki watched in confusion as they split their chopsticks.

“Anyway, let’s eat.”

“Yes, let’s eat.”

Their chopsticks sprang swiftly to their plates.

“Looks like it’s salmon today. Mmm, this is good.”

Meanwhile, Houki let out a surprised ‘ooh’ as she bit into the Hellfire stir-fry.
“This... This is good. It’s got just the right amount of soy sauce.”

“Yeah. It’s great.”

“Would you like some?”

“You sure? Sure thing, then—” Ichika reached out his chopsticks to Houki’s plate, only to be interrupted by a cough.

“I... I’ll feed you...”

“Huh? What?”

“I said, I’ll feed you!”

“O-Okay...” Ichika was a little taken back by how loudly she insisted, but then nodded. Houki picked up a clump of meat and veg and, cradling her hand under it, lifted it to his mouth.

“Say ‘Ahh.’”

“Ah...”

“AHHHHH!” Just as he was about to bite down, a yell even louder than Houki’s echoed through Gotanda’s.

It was Ran...

“See? Ichika’s already got her, you may as well give up.” Dan slapped a hand on Ran’s shoulder, only to squirm as she stomped on his foot.

“Ah— Ahem. I mean...”

“Ah...”

“ARRRGH!” Ran screamed again. The other customers were beginning to gawk at the scene.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s something that couple’s doing, I think.”

“We can’t let anyone make Ran cry!”

“Yeah!”

A group of men started to speak up, only to be met with a ‘quiet it down!’ from Gen.

There was no way that Houki, embarrassed by the sudden attention, could keep feeding Ichika. *Why do things like this always happen when I finally get my chance? I swear, every single time!* Houki’s chopsticks snapped as she clenched her fists.

“Houki.”

“What?!”

“Say ‘Ahh.’”

Chomp. Houki reflexively bit down on the fried shrimp Ichika held out.

“The fried stuff is good, too. I think they do it a bit differently.”

“I... I guess...” Houki answered after swallowing the shrimp. Meanwhile, Ran glared at Ichika from behind the counter with tears in her eyes, but Ichika was too far away to notice.

Ichika just fed me... Ichika just fed me... Houki’s cheeks blushed a bright red as she tried to still her pounding heart.

“Y-You can have some more of my stir-fry.”

Trying not to let him see her snapped chopsticks, Houki fed Ichika another bite.

“Mm. Mmmm.”

“.....”

Even though she hadn’t cooked the stir-fry herself, Houki found herself nervous as she waited for his reaction.

“Yeah, this is great!”

“That’s good!” Relief blossomed in her heart. They returned to their meals, eating until Ran came by their table again.

“Heeeeeeeey, here’s more water.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Ran took the glass with trembling hands, and began to refill it from the pitcher she carried. But with what she had just seen still burned in her eyes, the water poured out wildly.

“Whoa! What’s wrong, Ran? Are you okay?”

“I... I’m fine... Ahahahah...” With shaking hands, she took Houki’s glass to refill it, as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Ran?”

“It... It’s nothing...” Ran wiped her tears away and tried to work up a smile, but she only managed to cry even more.

“What’s wrong?!”

“Uwaaaaah!” Ran’s thudding footsteps echoed through the restaurant as she fled.

“What’s gotten into her? Sorry, Houki. I’m gonna go check on her.” Ichika stood up to follow, only to be blocked by a group of burly men.

“Murakami Shizaburo, age 42, contractor!”

“Juzo Yamada, age 39, carpenter!”

“Yoshioka Shuichi, age 47, delivery driver!”

“Terada Katsumi, age 34, clerk!”

“Chris McKenzie, age 29, self-employed!”

The quintet struck a pose as they introduced themselves. Ichika could almost imagine flames rising up behind them.

“We’re the Ran Fan Club Alliance!”

“Ahh...”

“And you’re about to die!”

The five rushed at Ichika all at once, only to be held back by Gen’s stout arm.

“Gen...”

“Ichika... Let’s take this outside.” A vein swelled up on Gen’s temple. He was furious that someone had made his dear granddaughter cry.

“Ahaha, haha, ahahahaha...”

We interrupt this program to bring you the latest weather update. Some areas will see intense sporadic bloodshed due to an angry grandfather coming in from behind the counter. If you’re going to be out and about, be sure to bring an umbrella.



“Bwahhh....”

Ran sat alone on a swing in a nearby park, depressed. Her cheeks were still red from sobbing. *Wahhhh... Ichika’s going out with Houki...* The quiet creaking of the chains reflected her own dejected mood.

Sighing, she drew out a ticket from her pocket. It was an invitation to the school festival of her fantastically-prestigious school, St. Marianne’s Junior Academy for Girls. *I was going to give this to Ichika, but now...* It was a dream which would never come true. She gripped the ticket to tear it in half.

“Hey, Ran!”

“Wha— I-Ichika?!” As Ran saw Ichika run up, gasping for air, she quickly hid the invitation behind her back.



“H-Here... Here you are... I’ve been looking all over for you...”

“I-Ichika... Why...”

“Why wouldn’t... I be worried... When you ran out like that?” Ichika tilted his head back, trying to catch his breath. She could see the red bruises on his face from where he’d been punched.

“I-Ichika? What happened to you?!”

“Oh, these? I... I just fell, ahahah.”

It was an obvious lie, one which Ran could easily see through. She realized it must have been Gen’s doing.

“Sorry... That was my fault...”

“Huh? What was?”

“Well... I mean...”

Ran’s heart soared as she realized Ichika had left Houki behind, taken a beating from Gen, and searched all over just to find her. The sorrow constricting her chest vanished, replaced with a throbbing pain in its own way. *He’s really such a nice guy...* She clutched her hands in front of herself. *Maybe I can ask him now...* Having made her decision, she looked up and opened her lips.

“Ichika!”

“Yeah?”

“Here! I’d love to see you there!” She handed him the invitation to the St. Marianne’s Junior Academy festival.

“Huh? Oh, is this for the festival at your school?”

“Y-Yes.”

Looking down at the date on the invitation, Ichika realized something. *Huh, that’s the same date as the dinner invitations we got from Mayuzumi.* He paused for a moment to think. *But it’s a school festival, it’ll probably be done by the evening.* Deciding that, he accepted.

“Thanks, I’ll definitely show up for that.”

“Really? Ahhh, when you get there, I’ll be sure to show you around! Just call me when you arrive!”

“Huh? You’re the student council president, right? Aren’t you going to be pretty busy?”

“No! It’s fine! It’ll be fine! I trust everyone else to do their job!” Ran was inordinately proud, at the moment, of not being very relevant.

“Oh, I see. I’ll give you a call then.”

“Yes! Oh, yes!” Seeing Ran’s smile gleam like the sun gave Ichika a bit of relief. He wasn’t quite sure what he had done to make her cry, but he’d been worried about it all evening.

Ran was a girl whose emotions swung wildly, though. Right now, she was overjoyed. *I did it, I did it! I’m going on a school festival date! All right!* Using their one invitation to bring a boyfriend to the school festival was a dream of girls at St. Marianne’s and IS Academy alike, and Ran’s heart soared at its fulfillment.

Of course, her friends would be watching and judging, but she could be sure that Ichika would meet their standards. After all, he was the one boy in the world who could pilot an IS, and now that the Japanese government had relaxed its gag order he was all over magazines and TV. A smug grin rose to her face as she remembered the abject jealousy on a friend’s face as she recounted her shopping trip with him. *And we’ll be walking through the school arm-in-arm as I show him around...* Ran giggled.

“Anyway, let’s head back.”

“Oh, right.”

Ichika returned to Gotanda’s, with a grinning Ran in tow. The sheer glee she felt kept her awake all night.

Chapter III: Open Your Heart

A week had passed since Ichika had met Kanzashi.

“Hey. Team up with me.”

“Not happening...”

Every day it happened, and rumors were flying hot and heavy that Ichika was after her.

“Hey, did you hear?”

“Orimura’s hot for Sarashiki in Class D.”

“No way! Really? Why?!”

“No idea. But it seems like he’s got his heart set on her as his tag team partner.”

“Not any of the others?”

“Well...”

For Cecilia Alcott:

“Ichika... I’ll make you regret not choosing me. Ohohoho!” The Starlight Mk. III and her four bits fired at once. With her new mastery of flexible fire, each scored a direct hit.

“Tremble! I, Cecilia Alcott, will play your requiem with my Blue Tears!”

For Huang Lingyin:

“Give me the package data to replace Shenlong’s right shoulder unit with a scatter impact cannon and left shoulder unit with a piercing impact cannon. After that, I want Souten Gagesu in blade mode, and the arm-mounted impact cannon removed and replaced with a Voltech chain. Can you do it in three days? ...What? You can’t? I know you can! Now get it done!”

After firing off an order to the Chinese supply specialist, she let off a full-power blast from her Longpao cannon. The satisfyingly-large explosion blew a gigantic hole in the ground of the arena.

“Just you wait, Ichika... I’ll have you begging to cry, but I won’t let you!” Rin’s eyes burned with a fighter’s passion as she clenched her fists.

For Charlotte Dunois:

She took a deep breath. Some 200 meters above Central Tower, she looked straight down at the earth. There were 57 targets set up surrounding the tower. Each was a live-fire drone.

“Let’s go, Revive!”

Charlotte suddenly dove. In each of her hands was a .57-caliber Desert Fox heavy machine gun. Alternately slowing, then accelerating, she shot down target after target.

Click. Her ammo spent, she cast away her guns and called forth a pair of assault blades. Maintaining her speed, she swept down toward the earth, slicing through target after target as she dove. **Fwoooosh!**

A moment before hitting the ground, she spun about-face and fired her leg-mounted thrusters. At the same time, she crossed her blades and flung them, scoring a direct hit on the final target.

“You’ve made yourself a powerful enemy, Ichika.”

A smile. The smile of an angel, but chilled to absolute zero.

For Laura Bodewig:

Skrrtch. Skrrrtch. Laura sat planted on the locker room bench, sharpening her knife. Pausing, she lifted it to inspect the edge. It was honed as smooth as a mirror, sharp enough to cut at the slightest brush.

“Phew...”

As she saw her own face in the blade’s reflection, Laura smiled. *Rejected by mein Lehrerin. Rejected by Ichika. What am I doing?* At this rate... A dark flame welled up in her heart. *I’ll show you. I’ll carve true terror into you, Ichika!* The thrown knife pierced a photo of Ichika she’d hung up in the back of her locker.

“I’ll win! I’ll win, and I’ll make Ichika mine and mine alone!” Laura rose, her hands clenched into fists. Her eyes shone with determination. *Just you watch, Ichika!* She glared at the photo in her locker. Wait— The knife had pierced

directly through Ichika's forehead in the photo.

“WAHHHH!”

A photo with only one copy. Laura, who had forgotten that she had bought the negative too, went pale as she cradled it in her hands. *There... There's only one of these in the whole world, and...* She had paid 20,000 yen just for priority bidding in Mayuzumi Kaoruko's photo auction. And she had loved this shot so much she bought it and the negative.

She had really messed up.

But it was too late to change things. She'd burned the negative to prevent it falling into enemy hands, too. So this really was the only copy in the world of a photo she loved more than anything. And now it had a big hole cut in it.

“Tape... If I tape it together, maybe it'll still be okay...” Panicked, Laura searched through her locker, but all she found was MREs and a spare IS suit and knives and knives and knives and more knives.

“Ah...” Yanking her head back out of the locker, she shrieked. “Medic! Medic!!!”

Were there tears welling up in her eyes, or was it only our imagination? Anyway, it was clear that Ichika had attracted some level of hostility recently from the girls with personal IS.

Which brings us to the last leading lady, Shinonono Houki: “Gotcha, Houki!”

“Wha— What are you doing, Sarashiki?!” Houki had been practicing iai at the kendo club after school when Tatenashi suddenly snuck up on her.

“Call me Tatenashi, please.”

“Okay, Tatenashi. What is it? I'm practicing.”

“Wow. Iai with a real sword? You're serious.”

“I suppose. I do come from a family which fought its way through the Sengoku era.”

“Oh, I see. That's good. Team up with me, then!”

“What?!”

“Please! I don’t have anyone else to team up with!”

“Ahh...”

Tatenashi clasped her hands together. Houki wavered, unable to reject such a seemingly-honest plea out of hand.

“Please?”

“Well, uh, I don’t mind, but...”

“Oh? Thanks! You’re such a nice girl.” Tatenashi’s expression instantly changed from worry to glee.

Ugh...Did she just trick me? As Houki began to wonder whether this was some sort of game, Tatenashi took her hand and began to lead her away.

“All right, let’s go! C’mon!”

“Go... Go where?”

“The exam room. I want to see your biometrics.”

“Whaa?”

“They’re important, you know! Your IS may be auto-adjusting, but if it isn’t working off the latest data, well, that’s no good!”

“...I see.” Tatenashi’s explanation sounded reasonable enough, and before Houki knew it, they were at the exam room’s door.

“Open sesame!” Tatenashi joked as she pressed the button to open it. The vacuum-powered door slid to the side with a hiss. “All right, I’ll run everything, you just have to stand in the scanning field.”

“Okay.”

Pulling up a console, Tatenashi prepared the scan. Meanwhile, Houki wiped off her sweat with the towel slung over her neck.

“All right, everything’s set up. Are you ready, Houki?”

“I’m ready.”

“All right, then, let’s get started.” With a quick clatter of typing, the ring scanner at Houki’s feet floated into the air, bathing her in green laser light.

“Hmm. That’s interesting.”

“Is something the matter?”

“You have really big breasts. They might even be a little bit bigger than mine.”

“W-Where are you pointing that thing?!”

“Ahahah. Sorry, sorry.”

“Be serious for once! Jeez...” For once, Tatenashi listened, and around two teasingless minutes later, the exam was complete.

“All right, I’ll send the data over to Akatsubaki. It should handle most of the process itself, but you’ll still have to tweak it a little... Oh, and I’ll give you a few pointers on piloting in the run-up to the tournament, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, sure. Not like I have any reason to turn it down.”

“Fufu~ You’re so cute when you’re cooperative, Houki.”

“Stop teasing me! Anyway, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Oh, of course.”

Houki felt conflicted as she left the exam room. *Why... Why didn’t I really mind her saying things like that?* Normally—with anyone else—she would have reacted. But from Tatenashi, it was acceptable. A bit confused, but not displeased, Houki made her way to the showers in high spirits.



“Hm...”

Tatenashi was left alone in the exam room. Bringing up a second display, the expression on her face turned deadly serious as she compared two sets of data.

I wonder how this happened... On the left display were Houki’s biometrics at her time of admission into IS Academy. Her physical statistics were, even then, at a uniformly high level, but a key indicator—her IS compatibility—was only a C.

Tatenashi turned her eyes to the display on the right. It showed the biometrics which were just measured. And there, her IS compatibility reading was an S.

Compatibility's always been mostly an inborn thing. Sure, some people have been able to bring it up a little bit with a lot of practice, but... But going from C to S in this short a time frame was unheard of. Not just by Tatenashi personally. There wasn't a single case study of such a thing happening, at least not one that had made its way out to the public. *And S-rank compatibility is, like, Brynhildr or Valkyrja-tier...* In compatibility terms, Houki was easily top five in the world. That was impossible. It was impossible... But there it was, right in front of her.

It must be because of... It must have something to do with the once-in-a-generation genius inventor Shinonono Tabane. Hitting on that idea, Tatenashi was convinced that it was the key.

She cast one more silent, intense stare at the display, her eyes shining with a gleam appropriate for the head of the Sarashiki family.



“Let's go get lunch at the dining hall, Kanzashi.”

My sources had tipped me off that the school store was out of buns today, so as soon as the bell rang after fourth period I made a mad dash for classroom 1-D, and earnestly took Kanzashi's hand in mine.

“It'll be my treat.”

“You don't have to...”

Kanzashi shrank back in visible unease, like a nervous little rabbit. But I couldn't push this off any longer. The deadline for entries was today at five. *All right...* I kinda... No, I insistently pulled her along with me.

“Eeeeeek?!”

Sweeping Kanzashi off her feet, I lifted her up into my arms. Almost like a princess carry.

“You're light, Kanzashi.”

“Stop bothering me... Put me down...”

“Anyway, hang on tight!”

“.....?!?!?!?”

Ignoring her objections, I raced off toward the dining hall, paying no attention to the shrieks of dismay rising up from the other girls. Making it down to the first floor and through the lobby, I opened the door to the large dining hall which was the third wing of the school building.

“Made it!”

The slam of the opening door and my shout drew stares from within.

“Let me go...!”

Smack! Smack! Smack! She batted me over the head over and over, and eventually started kicking, getting her legs up high enough to catch me straight in the jaw.

“Hey, c’mon! Cool it!”

“Hmph... Hmph!”

“I can see your panties.”

“.....?!” Realizing what she was doing, Kanzashi slowed down, then stopped. Through her clenched lips she whispered, “I won’t...”

Letting her down, I kept her hand in mine so she couldn’t get away while I approached the counter.

“Today’s special is the fried chicken meal. That sound good?”

“.....”

“How about the jumbo curry cutlet?”

“I don’t like meat...”

Well, at least I got a response out of her. Maybe this was going to work.

“How about the shellfish rice bowl, then?”

“U... Udo...”

“Mm?”

She flitted her eyes over me for a moment as she whispered, “I want udon...”

“Got it! With egg?”

She shook her head from side to side and mumbled, “Maybe... Maybe the tempura...”

“Tempura, huh? Good choice. They make it great here.”

“Mm... It’s tasty...”

“All right! Then let’s pay, pick up the food, and find a table!”

“Um... There... There’s one open... In back...”

“Oh, you’re right... Sharp eyes, huh.”

“I... I’m just normal...”

As I found this unexpected talent of hers, our meals were placed on the counter, and I continued to try and extend our rather surprising conversation, “So, if your vision’s so good, why do you wear glasses?”

“These are a display for my phone...”

“Huh.”

“Projection displays... Are expensive...”

“Oh? Anyway, let’s go sit down.”

Kanzashi silently swallowed nervously, then nodded and followed behind me.

I don’t know if I emphasized it enough before, but the dining hall is pretty damn big. So the back was a long way away. There were a fair number of empty seats on the way, but the weather was nice today, so the ones with a view of the shore were packed.

Huh, great weather we’ve been having lately. Kanzashi and I sat down across from each other at the open table.

“Let’s eat.”

“Let... Let’s eat...”

I had gotten the fried chicken special. The tartar sauce here was amazing, it made it even better. A smile rose to my face.

Meanwhile, Kanzashi pushed the tempura on top of her bowl of udon down into the broth with her chopsticks. She was watching something—the bubbles

which occasionally floated up to the surface—with a pure, almost childlike glee.

“Oh, you like soaking your tempura? Better be careful. If Laura catches you doing that, it’s boss battle time.”

“No... I just dunk it...”

Well, I’d never heard of that one before. Sorry. Anyway, we mostly focused on our lunches.

“You know, this chicken’s great. Fresh out of the fryer. Wanna try some?”

“Eh...?” Surprised, she looked up. As she did, I picked up a piece of chicken and brought it to her mouth.

She stared blankly for a moment, then looked at my face for a fleeting moment before turning away. I wasn’t quite sure, but it almost looked like she was blushing.

“Is... Is that how...”

“Mm?”

“Is that how... How you normally pick up girls?”

“Huh?”

Wait, didn’t I just pick her up a few minutes ago? It’s not complex, you just get one arm under the knees and one supporting the upper back so they don’t slip and fall. Why did she think fried chicken had anything to do with it?

“Not really sure what you mean by that, but c’mon, try it. Or wait, sorry, I forgot you said you don’t like meat.”

“I... I’m fine with poultry...”

“Oh, that’s good. Anyway, say ‘ahh.’”

“A-Ahh...” Gingerly, she bit into the chicken. I guess the piece was a bit large for her, as she left around half of it on my chopsticks. As I watched her chew, I popped the remaining half into my own mouth.

“See? Tasty, isn’t it?”

“.....?!?!?!” Caught off guard just as she swallowed, Kanzashi pounded on her

chest while grasping for her glass of water.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“.....!” Even before she fully caught her breath, Kanzashi was glaring at me. She was angry about something.

“Hey, Kanzashi.”

“.....”

“That tempura looks great. Can I try some?” I saw a piece she’d already taken a bite of and wondered if she’d share a bit of it.

“N-No!” A forceful rejection, as she picked up her bowl and moved it further away from me.

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t know you liked it that much.”

“I... I won’t let you have any.”

C’mon, it was just tempura. What’s up with that?

Suddenly, Kanzashi reached over to the shaker of red pepper flakes on the table and dumped it on my rice.

“Hey, wait! What are you doing?!”

She quickly turned away at a 90-degree angle, as if to say that she wasn’t eating with me anymore.

Slurp, slurp, slurp. Wordlessly, she ate her udon.

“C’mon, what was that for?” Looking at my now-crimson rice, I swallowed nervously. Was this my own Golgotha? Not even kidding. “It’s not inedible... It’s not inedible...”

So... I had to eat it.

“It’s not inedible! It’s not!”

Snatching up my bowl of rice, I lifted a bite to my mouth. The sound of clapping arose from nearby tables at my foolhardy bravery, but—
“SPICYYYYYY!” I could feel my lips literally puffing up like a cartoon. My tongue felt like it was on fire—no, like it was splitting in half, and not my water nor my

miso soup nor the tartar sauce could even begin to dull the pain. “Kanzashi... That wasn’t very ni—”

As I huffed and puffed, she turned her eyes over toward me, and from her pursed lips spoke, “Live by the sword, die by the sword.”

Harsh words, with a chill echo. But for a moment, just a moment, she smiled.



“...Therefore, we can say that melee combat is centered around three concepts: weight, speed, and flow—”

It was fifth period. Kanzashi sat in the back of Class 1-D, listlessly following the lecture. Even though she was more letting the words flow by her than listening, she had no problems absorbing the lesson. When called upon, she could read it back word-for-word, almost like a recording. But that wasn’t what she was focused on. She was focused on what had happened at lunch. In the dining hall, with Ichika.

Her memory flashed back. To when he had fed her, then eaten the part that was left. *He... He didn’t even just feed me... It was an... An indirect kiss, too...* Yet even though she had watched him closely, there’d been no sign that he was thinking anything creepy. Instinctively, she felt that it had to have been, that she had to have missed a tell. But all she could remember written on his face was pure enthusiasm and happiness.

She hid her sudden blush behind her textbook. *But then, after that... He, he wanted something I’d already had a bit of too...* As a feeling not unlike excited humiliation filled her heart, steam nearly rose from her head.

“Arrrgh...”

She didn’t get it.

She didn’t get it...

She didn’t get it.....

She didn’t get Ichika. Didn’t get what he was doing. And didn’t get what was going on in her own heart. *What... What should I even do? What’s wrong with me today?* Kanzashi fidgeted, sinking deeper the more she thought about it.

I... I've never felt like this before... I don't know what to do... Her thoughts wandered to his smile... She gave herself a hard pinch on the thigh as she tried to hold back a sigh.

“If you don't know what to do, why not just give it a try?”

Eh? She could hear Ichika's voice. Without realizing it, she looked up and glanced around.

“Team up with me, Kanzashi.”

I don't want to...

“Why?” *I... I don't know... I don't like situations I'm not familiar with...*

“But if you don't try them, you'll never get familiar with them, right?”

Yeah... But...

“There's nothing to be afraid of. Just leave it to me.”

Ahh... It was like a line from the anime she watched so much of. But somehow, this reassured her.

“See? Team up with me, Kanzashi.”

“O-Okay!”

Suddenly filled with resolve, she took the hand her vision of him was holding out as she stood up. *Huh...?* It was then that she noticed. The orange glow of the late afternoon sun. The empty classroom. And Ichika, who remained even as her imagined world faded.

Huh? Wait, what's going on? As she stood befuddled, Ichika leapt for joy.

“All right! So you will team up with me? Really? That's great! Gotta run over to the faculty room and get that application in, then! Let's gooooo!”

Still gripping her hand, Ichika ran from the room. It was only feeling his pull that Kanzashi realized it was really happening, and her ears turned bright red as she wanted to scream in embarrassment.

I... I must have daydreamed all through fifth period... And then sixth period... And then Orimura showed up, and I thought he was part of the daydream, and I...

She did it without even thinking! By the time she realized, they were already at the door to the faculty room.

“All right, let’s go in.”

“W-Wa—”

She couldn’t even finish the single word before Ichika dragged her inside. Even as she signed the forms, she was so focused on Ichika’s hand around hers that she couldn’t make sense of what was going on.

“All right! Let’s hurry up and get started in the hangars!”

“Er, um...”

“You’re gonna have an IS on, so you should just wear your IS suit full-time. I’ll go get changed too, let’s meet up there.”

“Um...”

He ran off so fast that her words couldn’t catch up with him, then stopped mid-stride, craning his head backward toward her and saying, “Oh, right! Which hangar was it?”

“The... Second arena...!”

“Got it. See you there!”

As Kanzashi watched him leave, she realized her right hand was still held out. *Why...?* As she thought to herself, she embarrassedly pulled it back to her waist.

She quietly thought over the past few minutes. How she couldn’t even finish her ‘wait’ at the door. But did she just not manage to say it? Or did she really not even want to say it? She shook her head from side to side. But she couldn’t answer that question with a ‘no.’

In the hallway, bathed in the soft orange sunlight, Kanzashi’s heart throbbed for the first time in her life.



“All right! Why don’t you show me your IS to start?”

I was in the second hangar with Kanzashi. This was a tournament for students with their own IS, so the competition was gonna be pretty serious. Everyone

else must have realized it too, as the hangars were packed with other students making their own tweaks.

“Hey, can you share those startup analytics from the other day?”

“You’re trying to trim gear weight, aren’t you. Sure you’ll get it done before the tournament?”

“Hey, wait! This hypersensor’s calibration is all wrong! Who was just messing with it?!”

The hangars were a happening place right now, and while most of the girls there were happily trucking along, there were a fair number who were at the end of their rope too. Both groups, though, were hard at work on their IS.

“Huh, this is the first time I’ve ever seen the upperclasswomens’ IS.”

“That’s... Forte Safire in second year... Her IS is the Gold Blood... Past her is Daryl Casey in third year and her Hellhound ver. 2.5...”

I was a bit surprised at how smoothly Kanzashi listed them. How unhesitant and precise she was suddenly being.

“And in the back... It’s...”

“Ugh... Cecilia...”

Cecilia, British National Cadet, pilot of the azure Blue Tears.

“Indeed. I’d like to increase my booster output to increase my turning performance.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad idea... But won’t it make it harder to control? You’re losing stability there too.”

“I simply couldn’t care less. The upcoming matches are too important to worry about such trifling things.”

“You should take it out for a spin before you commit. Remember, you can always tone them back down if it gets too peaky.”

“I suppose.”

A group of older girls, probably from the ground crews, were advising Cecilia on her planned changes. When she noticed I was watching, she turned to look

at me. With a “Hmph!” she spun back around.

After I turned her down as a teammate, she was apparently holding it against me. *Look, I’m sorry, but...* But she didn’t need to get that mad. And Rin kicked me every time we crossed paths. Laura was ignoring me. And Charl... Charl was being more stiff and formal than I’d ever seen her.

Really, they didn’t need to get that mad. It stung.

“...We should get started too...”

“Oh, yeah. You’re right. Let’s do our best.” As I nodded, Kanzashi hesitantly thrust out her right hand. Around her middle finger was a ring set with a crystal.

“Come... Uchigane Nishiki...” She was bathed in light as she floated into the air and armor wrapped around her.

“Wow.”

I’d heard it was an upgraded successor to the Uchigane, but it looked completely different. The skirt armor had been changed to split independent wings for increased mobility, making it more of an agile fighter than the tank that the Uchigane was.

Its arm armor had also been slimmed down for mobility in unarmed combat. The shoulder-mounted shield had been replaced with a wing thruster, and it now mounted small auxiliary jet boosters front and back. From a distance, it definitely looked more like the Byakushiki. All it visibly had in common with its predecessor was its hypersensor design.

“Wait, I thought it wasn’t completed yet?”

Kanzashi knelt her IS, then dematerialized it, shaking her head and replied, “The weapons... Aren’t finished... Plus... Without metrics... It’ll be useless in a real fight...”

“Oh. Anyway, what’s it supposed to be equipped with?”

“High-performance guided missiles with a multi-lock-on system... The particle cannon isn’t complete yet, either...”

“A particle cannon?! You can use data from Byakushiki for that!”

The construction of the cannon was probably different, but at least the output management and control data should be useful. I pulled up Byakushiki's console and began to scan through its data.

"Hmm... This part is for Yukihiro Nigata..."

"....."

"Oh, there it is."

".....!"

As I looked up, I locked eyes with Kanzashi for a second before she turned away.

"C'mon, you can't read over the data looking that way." Taking her hand, I pulled her toward the projection screen. "So? Think that'll help?"

"....."

"Mm?"

"You're... Close... Could you stand back a little?"

"Ah, sorry," I said as I let go of her hand.

She silently rubbed it where we'd touched as she looked at the display again. As she stared intently, she ran a finger along the relevant lines.

"This... The output is too high... It burns a lot of energy..."

"Oh, is it? I kinda figured so, but..."

"You should adjust it... It's wasting too much like this..."

"Sure. Anyway, I'm gonna take a look at Byakushiki. If you have any questions, just ask."

"I think I'll be fine, but..."

"Mm. Thanks again!"

Kanzashi had turned back to her own IS, and her usually-emotionless face showed intent fixation.

"Okay, then..."

“Orimu! Kans!”

I could hear the patter of feet running toward us... And it could only be one person calling us that.

“Honne...”

Miss Casual, Nohotoke Honne. The student council secretary. A classmate of mine, from a family who worked for the Sarashikis. She was usually recognizable by her sleepy expression and slow-as-molasses pace. *Huh. Kanzashi must know her well.*

“I came to help!” Her long sleeves swept around her arms as she waved. A cuff hit a second-year, who fixed her with a glare. But that was Miss Casual. That was just how she was.

“Kans! Let me help with setting up your IS!”

“Stop... Don’t mess with it... Ahh...”

It seemed like Kanzashi didn’t quite know how to deal with her childhood friend of the same age.

“Honne... My sister must have sent you...”

“Whaaat? No way. I’m your maid, so of course I want to help you out.”

“.....”

“Nohotoke Honne, here for you Monday through Thursday!” It sounded like the kind of catchphrase you’d hear in an old TV commercial.

“Wait, what about Friday and Saturday and Sunday?” I asked.

“C’mon. I need a weekend too.”

“Three days is a pretty long weekend.”

Apparently she was always like this. A maid should have a bit more of a work ethic, in my opinion.

“Anyway, what can I do to help? Some system optimization? Or maybe help with your fire control system?”

“I need to do the fire control system myself... Same for the stability control...”

You can...”

“Tweak the shield energy output, right? Got it.”

“Listen... Why don't you check over the armor...”

“All right, got it!”

Defanged by Miss Casual, Kanzashi sighed and slumped her shoulders.

“What are you looking at...”

“Oh, uh, nothing.”

“I don't like it when guys stare...”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

We ended up getting so involved working on our IS that we lost track of time. I spent most of it just looking things up in the manual, but Kanzashi—with the occasional bit of advice—really made leaps and bounds, and ended up reducing her energy consumption by nearly 15% in that session alone. It was amazing.

“Man, this is hard work— Oof!”

General tweaks could be done from the console, but digging down to the bare metal literally needed to be done by opening up the armor and getting my hands dirty. Even taking advantage of robotic arms, it was still a lot of effort.

“Orimu, I know it's something Tabane made, but you're still leaning too much on that. IS need a looooot of fine-tuning.” Ugh. The day had finally come when Miss Casual cut to the point of things. “IS have an amazing capacity to evolve with the pilot... But you can't just rely on that.”

“I know.”

“Anyway... Ah...” Kanzashi fidgeted. Was something wrong? “Er... Um...”

“Hm?”

Her fingers knotted together, and she wavered while her gaze wandered.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“.....!” Kanzashi turned bright red as she looked up at me. **Clang!**

“Oww!”

“Mistress, I’ve punished the rude man.”

C’mon, Miss Casual! That was a wrench! That hurts!

“Orimu, you don’t have a shred of delicacy, do you?”

“Ugh...”

“Even if she does have to go, it’s proper manners not to mention it.” I really, really didn’t want to hear about manners from her of all people. “I’d heard that boys with older sisters don’t really know how to act around other women, but you take it way too far. Weirdo.”

“T-That’s not true!” At least, I thought it wasn’t.

“That’s enough, Honne...”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Stop calling me ‘mistress’...”

“Okay, Kans!”

“I don’t really like that one either...”

“Really?”

Now a bit calmer, Kanzashi looked at me again and asked, “Could... Could you help me with my flight test?”

“Wait, it was just that? Sure.”

“Th... Thanks...” She made a prim, polite bow. I was taken a bit aback, since I didn’t even expect it to be something she thought she’d have to ask for.

“So, uh. Which arena did you want to use?”

“For my flight test... The sixth arena.”

The sixth arena. The place where we’d done the high-speed training for Cannonball Fast. What made it different from the other arenas was its completely open roof, with basically a direct course to Central Tower.

“All right, let’s go for it!”

“Yes...”

“See you! I’ll be running the data scanner in the control room.” Miss Casual waved, her drooping sleeves flapping around her arms. They struck another girl, earning her, again, a glare.



“Thruster output... Check...”

In the pits of the sixth arena, Kanzashi opened up the console of her Uchigane Nishiki and ran over the meters. With Honne’s help today, she’d made a lot of progress. And Honne, just like her sister Utsuho, would likely join the ground crews next year. She had plenty of talent.

And... The data from Ichika’s Byakushiki had also been a great help. Since it was from the same development team as her Uchigane Nishiki, it had ended up being even more useful than she expected.

And maybe, just maybe, Ichika himself had been the most helpful of all. *What... What am I even thinking...* She rubbed her cheeks to hide the blush that was developing. At the same time, she opened a private channel with Ichika.

“So? Feeling up to it?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“All right, I’ll head up first. Meet me at the top of the tower.”

“Okay...”

Kanzashi sat down in the anti-gravity catapult, locking her feet into the footrests. Projected in front of her was the word ‘Ready.’ The instant it changed to ‘Go,’ she accelerated to her limits, rocketing into the skies above the sixth arena.

Avionics... Green... Hypersensor link... Activate... With a staccato series of beeps, the hypersensor locked on to Byakushiki. Zooming in, she could see Ichika’s face, and her heart skipped a beat.

Calm down... Focus... Focus... While keeping the output of the thruster on her back, she accelerated further. *Attitude control thrusters... All green... Deploying shield barrier under acceleration...* Kanzashi opened the Uchigane Nishiki’s console while proceeding on her test run. She didn’t expect deploying the shield

to cause any problems, but as it formed around her, her IS thudded to a halt.

Confused, she opened up an array of displays and scanned over her status readouts.

Mutual interference during deployment... PIC reaction... It seemed like there was a problem in her arm-mounted shield generators, so Kanzashi stopped the deployment for a moment, and tapped away on a pair of projection keyboards while continuing to ascend.

Adjusting deployment point... Moving away from overlap with PIC... Adjusting gravity head six centimeters forward... Also adjusting leg thruster balance... Reignition at negative four...

She wound her way up the twists and turns of IS Academy's Central Tower with short bursts from her thrusters. At the same time, she continued working a keyboard with each hand, and managed to fully activate her flight system by the time she made her way to Ichika.

"Yo." Ichika raised a hand. Unsure whether this was a good or bad reaction, Kanzashi gulped while nodding. "How's your IS holding up?"

"Fine..."

"Oh? That's good, at least."

His smile was so bright that she tried to find somewhere else to look.

"A-Anyway... Let's go back..."

Not knowing what she'd do if she spent much more time up here alone with him, Kanzashi started her dive back to earth before waiting for a response.

"Wow, you're fast. I don't even think Cecilia's Blue Tears can beat that."

"I... I guess... It matches the data I have on her..." Kanzashi answered, her pulse rising.

She sped up, almost running away from Ichika. *Huh?* Ichika, following, noticed something was wrong. Her Uchigane Nishiki's boosters coughed, letting out jets of flame. *That's not right.* At the moment he reopened the voice channel to ask what was wrong, the Uchigane Nishiki's left leg booster exploded.

“.....?!” With a sudden jolt and one booster gone, Kanzashi swung directly for the tower wall.

“Kanzashi!”

The anti-gravity isn't working?! Why?! Her displays read only one word, over and over: [ERROR]. With all avionics down, the Uchigane Nishiki swooped toward the wall.

“.....!!”

Reflexively, she closed her eyes. As she did, the sound of a shout pierced through her, “KANZASHI!”

Firing Ignition Boost, Ichika wedged himself between her and the wall. *Ah...* Cradling Kanzashi in his arms, Ichika made impact.

“Ugh...!”

His IS' life support systems were active, and the collision wasn't fatal, but still, Ichika's face twisted in pain.

“O-Orimura...”

“Eheheheh... Are you okay? That really hurt...” As he spoke, he managed a weak grin—to Kanzashi, the grin of a wounded hero. Ichika was only trying to lighten the mood, but she was starstruck.

“I— Ah— You...”

“Are you okay, Kanzashi?”

“Eh? Ah, yeah...”

“Good. That's good.” Ichika, still cringing in pain, peeled away from the wall with his eyes closed. The crater that their impact had left told the whole story.

Still cradled by Ichika, Kanzashi realized that her heart was pounding so hard it ached. This was the first time she'd been so close to a boy. And she didn't even mind it. It was only then that she wondered whether it was because it was Ichika.

“Y-You there! What just happened?! There's a hole in the tower!” popped in someone via the voice channel.

“Er... Yes. It was, uhh, an IS training accident. I’m Orimura Ichika, Class 1-A.”

“Sarashiki Kanzashi... Class 1-D...”

“What?! Are you okay?! You’re not hurt, are you?!”

The excited speaker was Etoise Franci, a math teacher. Canadian, by the way, and age 25. Single and looking. Her hobby is growing bonsai.

“Seems like we’re okay. We’re headed back to the pits, we’ll report in again when we make it.”

“O-Okay. Be careful out there.”

Closing off the connection, Ichika slowly descended, Kanzashi still in his arms.

“Don’t want you to run into another system error. I’ll carry you down.”

“O-Okay...” With a nervous swallow and a small nod, Kanzashi fell silent. The vivid red light of the setting sun concealed the color of her cheeks.



“Ahh... Do I really have to write this one up? I mean, of course I do, but...”

Back in the pits, after explaining to the teacher what had happened and getting a quick checkup, I was handed ten or so blank pages to fill out a report. “Whew. I’m not even good at this...”

Kanzashi quietly looked on like she had something to say about that.

“What’s up?”

“I... I, um, I’m sorry...”

“C’mon, don’t worry about it. A breakdown isn’t your fault.”

“Mm...” Kanzashi wrung her hands as I spoke.

Well. That must have been a big shock for her, having the IS she tweaked herself break down like that. I was just really glad neither of us got seriously hurt. And learning her limits would really help Kanzashi’s development in the future.

“Hey.”

“W-What?”

“I’m not going to lie. You really should ask the ground crews for help.”

“.....”

“We’ve only got a week left. I know where you’re coming from, but more than anything, I want you to stay safe.”

“I... Mm... I will...”

“Eh?” I was a bit confused by Kanzashi agreeing with that. I’d expected her to silently ignore me, or go ‘I don’t want to...’ or something.

“Well... I’m fine with Miss Casual, so... Maybe I’ll ask Mayuzumi, too.”

“You know her?”

“Yeah, kind of. I’ve run into her a lot at the newspaper club.”

“I... I see...”

Hm? Was I just imagining things, or did she look a bit frustrated for a moment?

“.....”

“.....”

Huh. I didn’t even notice at first that we’d fallen silent. Etoise was gone, her excitement gone with her, and we were left alone in the pits.

“Um...” There was nothing really to say.

“A-A-Ah...” Kanzashi clenched her hands as she stood in front of me. “Th... Thanks!”

“...Huh?”

“Um... Tha... Thanks... For saving me...”

She must have been embarrassed at speaking up so loudly, as she stepped back and turned away. As she held her hands together in front of her chest, she fidgeted her fingers.

“Wait, that’s it? I mean, why wouldn’t I save you?”

“.....”

She stared at me, intently. Why?

“You... You were so cool...”

“Eh?”

“N-Nothing...”

“Mm? Okay.” I snuck a glance outside, and dusk had already fallen. It was pitch-black. I’d dematerialized my IS over ten minutes ago, and I was starting to get cold. “Let’s head back. We may catch a cold if we stay here much longer.”

“Yeah...” Kanzashi nodded, but continued to stay where she stood.

“What is it, Kanzashi?”

“You don’t have to....”

“Huh?”

I thought she was just being shy, but looking closer, she was blushing.

“You don’t have to be so formal...” After quietly murmuring that, she turned and left, almost as if running away. As I watched her disappear through the window in the door, I scratched my head.

Not that formal, huh. So we’re getting a bit closer, at least?



I... I said it... In her own room in the first year dorms, Kanzashi’s heart pounded as she enjoyed a warm shower. Even just being called by her first name was a big thing for a Sarashiki. She ran a finger along her lips. As she did, they parted in a series of sounds.

“I... Chi... Ka...”

Her face bright red and her heart pounding as if it would split apart, her hands moved downward, softly, toward her chest. They didn’t find anything particularly large, but they did find softness, with love beginning to blossom within.

“Honne’s so lucky...”

They were the same age, but Honne was a solid two cup sizes larger. And of

course, her big sister Utsuho was particularly fortunate. Even Kanzashi's own sister— “.....!”

A chill suddenly ran over her as she thought of Tatenashi. No matter how much love uplifted her, her own issues with her family made her shrink back down.

Tatenashi... Someone to look up to. Someone to strive after, even if she could never reach that goal. Sarashiki Kanzashi. A kind sister. A gifted person. A strong person. A charming person. Absolutely perfect, in every way. *I'll never be able to match up to her...* Kanzashi had realized that, how long ago?

A person she'd never catch up to. A person she'd never be able to look in the eye. A person whose name it was painful to share.

The water of the shower washed over her. As she gazed down, the drops dripped down from her face like tears, but then... But then she looked up.

“I'm fine... Tatenashi... I'm fine, as long as...”

As long as she had Ichika. As long as she had Ichika, she wouldn't let it grind her down. She'd found her hero, her man with the gleaming smile.

“Orimura... Ichika...”

Again, she spoke his name. Her heart trembling in a mix of joy and worry, Kanzashi felt a strong will well up in her. Maybe, just maybe. Maybe it was what people called 'courage.'





“Thank you very much!”

After practice, Houki closed with the same words she’d use at kendo club.

“Aww, c’mon. You don’t have to be so formal.”

Houki’s coach and tag team partner Tatenashi languidly wafted to the ground, happily fluttering her hands as usual.

“A swordswoman must maintain her dignity at all times.”

“A swordswoman, huh.” Houki’s tense grimace was met with Tatenashi’s wry grin.

“Anyway. Why don’t we get dinner together tonight? I’ll show you around the second year dorms.”

“Huh? No, I—”

“All right, it’s a date! Let’s go!”

“Hey! Hey, wait! I was going to—”

“Oh, come *on*.”

“Fine...” Houki sighed as Tatenashi winked at her. For some reason, Houki just couldn’t say no to her. The same as when she was asked to team up. Houki had always had Tatenashi pegged as someone who wasn’t afraid to pull the seniority card if she was told ‘no,’ but the more she thought about it the stranger it seemed. *Ah well, it’s not like I really have a problem with it...*

Tatenashi took her hand and led her toward the locker room. Houki didn’t have a problem with that, either. She remembered, a long time ago, having a big sister who would lead her around like that.

Shinonono Tabane... Someone who Houki could never stand up to, no matter how hard she tried. When she was little, she relied on her. Was proud of it. But as she grew up, she felt the gap between them widen. Began to understand that Tabane was not just a different person, but a different kind of person. One with wildly different potential. Still, though, her earlier fondness remained. Until *that* happened.

“Houki.”

“Y-Yes?”

“What’s wrong? Hurry up and get changed.”

“Oh right! Okay!”

“Were you thinking about something? You had a really scary frown on your face.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. C’mon, girls need to smile!” Tatenashi suddenly leapt toward Houki, her hands moving wildly. “Coochie-coochie-coo!”

“Bwah! A-Ahahahah! S-Stop! Hahaha!”

“If you keep frowning like that it’s gonna give you wrinkles! You don’t want to look like an old lady, do you?”

“I— Ahahahaha! I know! So stop it... Hahahaha!” It was only after another two minutes of forced laughing that the tickling ended, and Houki was left gasping for breath. “Ahh... Haa... Haa...”

“You and Laura are so adorable when you’re getting tickled— Anyway...”

“What?” Having finally caught her breath, Houki replied while opening her locker.

“You kind of keep your distance from your sister Tabane, don’t you.”

“.....”

Well, she didn’t hate her. She’d been realizing that lately. Especially since they met again. Since all those memories welled up. Since she was able to let out everything that had been eating at her. And— *I’m the one that hurt her...*

Houki had come to realize that it was her own fault. Not Tabane’s. Hers. What had happened was all because of her own lack of self-control. Not wanting to think about it drove her to keep Tabane at a distance. She hadn’t even wanted to enter IS Academy, but the government had leaned on her until it was inevitable. And the reason was, of course, that she was Tabane’s little sister.

“I don’t dislike her, it’s just...”

“I see. Well, that’s good. You need to be able to rely on family.” Her softly murmured ‘Not like I’m one to talk...’ went unheard by Houki. “Anyway, let’s shower.”

“What? No, I was just going to when I got back to my room.”

“C’mon, the boys won’t like you if you smell like sweat.” Houki blushed, realizing exactly *which* boy this might be. “The showers should be empty by now, anyway. We’ll have them all to ourselves!”

“Y-You don’t need to drag me! I can walk by myself!” Houki protested, but Tatenashi simply smiled back and wrapped her arm around Houki’s.

“Ahh, this feels good.”

Tatenashi let out a sigh of relaxation as the water washed over her. She and Houki were in neighboring stalls under the row of shower heads. The stalls had low partitions, letting the girls using them carry on lively conversations. What partitions there were, stretching from the chest down to the thighs, were made of frosted glass, leaving the silhouette of the occupant clearly visible. This, and the teasing from the other girls about her bust size, was why Houki preferred to shower at home.

“Do you prefer baths, Houki?” Tatenashi asked, breaking the silence.

“Um... About what you were saying before...”

“What? You mean, about your sister?”

Houki swallowed nervously while nodding and said, “I... Don’t dislike her. And I’m grateful to her for giving me my IS.”

“Mm-hm.”

“But... I’m not really sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“How I should feel about her.”

“Well...” Tatenashi stepped out of the stream and leaned against the partition, her breasts bulging against it. “Is it because you’re afraid?”

Houki didn’t reply. Her silence may as well have been the word ‘yes.’

Tatenashi continued, "I'm the same way."

"Eh?"

"And I'm sure Tabane is too."

She didn't understand. And that's why she was afraid. But understanding took courage. Just asking what needed to be asked and saying what needed to be said could hurt yourself, or hurt the other person. Getting over that took courage.

"It'll be okay."

"W-What will?"

"Don't worry. I'm sure you're very important to her, too."

"....."

"So don't be afraid."

Tatenashi offered her kind advice with a peaceful smile.



The next day, in the second hangar.

"Oh, hey, Mayuzumi! Thanks for showing up."

"I told you, I don't come cheap. You owe me an exclusive interv—no, wait, how about a date?"

"What?!"

"A date with Orimura. Now that's something to be proud of."

"C'mon, gimme a break..."

To complete Kanzashi's personal IS, we were going to need to lean on the talents of Kaoruko Mayuzumi, the second year ground crew ace.

"Oooh, oooh, ooh, me! I want a date with Orimu, too."

Miss Casual, Nohotoke Honne. She was still a first year, but her skills were more than enough to be a full member rather than a pledge.

"And, hmm. Let's see what it will take to get Kyouko and Fi involved." As she

spoke, Kaoru pulled out her phone and began gathering her team.

“Sure. I want a photo with Orimura. And a date on school grounds, okay? It’ll be my treat.”

Me, of course. But honestly, I was kind of happy to be that much of a draw.

“Seriously?” I could hear a voice from the other end of the line. It must have been Kyouko.

“I mean, I’ll see what I can do.”

“All right! Yeah! I’ll do it! I’ll definitely do it! But you’d better bring your best camera, Zucchini!”

Zucchini? Must be Kaoru...

“Yes, yes. And Fi?”

“Mmmm-hm. I would like one of ze, how do you say, ‘massage’ I have heard so much about.”

“That work for you, Orimura?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve been giving plenty at clubs, that should be fine.”

“All right! It’s a deal, then! Meet me in the second hangar! Last one here has to buy the drinks!”

With everything settled, Kaoru hung up. Me, Kanzashi, Kaoru, and Miss Casual were already here, so that last bit must have been directed at Kyouko and Fi.

“All right, let’s get this done!” She smiled. Half an hour later, I was already of half a mind to just quit.

“Orimura, can you get me those cables? All of them.”

“When you’re done, could I have the big wrench and the sonic cutter?”

“Mm. We ‘ave not enough of ze projection display. Bring me ze ell-say-day. Of them, eight. And un générateur.”

“O-Okay!”

They were running me ragged. Getting Kanzashi’s Uchigane Nishiki in working order on time was taking the combined effort of an entire second year ground

crew. Hardware-wise, it involved the boosters, thrusters, armor, armament, internal weaponry... Almost everything. The data from all of it needed to be gone over with a fine-toothed comb, with any missing parts modified or custom-built. Kanzashi had to keep the IS deployed the whole time so everything could be tested as it was completed.

And there were a mountain of problems with the software, too. It was a port of the Uchigane's, but we still needed to set up and install the multi-lock-on system, optimize the thrust unit control system, and test the energy bypass operating system in a sandbox; and then there's adjusting and testing the shield barrier control. At the center of it all was the pilot, Kanzashi, who with Miss Casual's help had been running through hardware and software testing, data compilation, and feedback adjustment at an almost inhuman pace.

The most shocking thing was the Uchigane Nishiki's control interface. Of course, it had voice control, vision tracking, and gestures, but along with those there was an array of eight projection keyboards: one upper and one lower for each hand and each foot. They were set up to sandwich around her hands, letting her press down to type on one or raise a finger to type on the other. Honestly, even with the IS holding her up, being able to type with her feet was incredible. Oh, and the keyboards weren't a normal QWERTY layout. They were customized by Kanzashi herself.

That's almost like what Tabane does... She said 'it takes too long to type with a normal layout.' How could she even come up with these things? Really, though.

The image of Kanzashi floating in midair, her hands and feet enveloped in balls of light, was almost like a wizard in a fantasy game.

"It's beautiful..."

".....?"

Kanzashi looked over, as if wondering what I was talking about.

"Oh, nothing." I coughed in embarrassment, only then realizing I'd said it out loud.

"C'mon, Orimura! Quit slacking off and get me that laser arm!"

“I need the data scanner, too! Chop chop!”

“Mm. Ze ultrasonic scope, if you please.”

I dashed off to the equipment room, heavy gear in tow, sweating like a pig from the weight.

“Orimura, fix my hairband.”

“Orimura! Drinks! I need a drink!”

“Yay! Snacks, too!”

Hey, wait... Was I imagining it, or were they starting to ask me for things which had nothing to do with the IS?

“Oh, right, I’m out of shampoo. Can you pick me up some? An herbal scent, please.”

“Orimura, can you bring this book back to the library for me?”

“Ah, could you see what is ze special tonight.”

“GAH! None of this has anything to do with the IS! Not one bit!”

“Oh, you figured it out.”

“You’re a smart one, aren’t you.”

“Oh! It’s a joke!”

This was exhausting. Physically, and now mentally.

“Phew...” I let out a deep, deep sigh. It felt almost like my soul floated away with it.

“Pff...”

As she looked at me, Kanzashi did her best to stifle a laugh. Her face showed only the faintest smile, yet to me, it shone brighter than any diamond.



“All right, I think that’s the last of the basics. Sarashiki, everything feels right, right?”

“I’ll be fine...”

After 9 o'clock, the night before the tag team tournament, the light at the end of the tunnel finally appeared. Kaoruko nodded happily at Kanzashi's reply.

"How's the fire control? Are we punting on the multi-lock-on system?"

"Yes... I'll... I'll use the standard lock-on system..."

Kyouko, who planned to specialize in weapons development after graduation, was especially concerned with this. Uchigane Nishiki was equipped with high-performance guided missiles. Six micro-missile pods, to be specific, each equipped with eight tubes. It was planned to be able to fire all forty-eight at once, but with the multi-lock-on system still incomplete, its accuracy and firepower wouldn't measure up to spec. Still, just getting it to where it was in under a week wouldn't have happened without Kaoruko, Kyouko, Fi, and Miss Casual helping out. And—Kanzashi snuck a glance over at Ichika. He was putting the power tools away now that work was over. He'd spent the whole week doing the heavy lifting by himself. *Orimura...* Her eyes started to light up as she watched him.

"Mm?" As Kaoruko watched, a lightbulb flipped on over her head. "Anyway! Looks like we're done here."

"Huh? C'mon, Kaoru. If we don't bring the tools back they're gonna be mad."

"It's fine. You can take care of it."

"Just me? I mean, I can, but..."

"Why, that's a good boy."

"All right. Do your best, Orimu."

Fi and Honne high-fived.

"Um—" Kanzashi, even though she was unsure what to say, spoke up, trying to thank the others. "Th... Thank you... There... There's no way I could have done this by myself... Thank you so much..."

She bowed deeply. The other five smiled kindly.

"Don't even worry about it. We're all friends, right?"

"You know, it was fun. I don't get to work on Japanese IS often enough."

“Mm-hm. Perhaps something sweet in return.”

“Cake for me!”

The happy voices rising up around her were enough to bring Kanzashi nearly to tears. What had she been struggling all alone for, for so long? Why, when the world was filled with such light?

“All right, let’s head out then!”

“All right!”

“Thanks for finishing the rest, Orimura.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“...Do your best, Sarashiki.” Kaoruko winked at Kanzashi, and whispered something in her ear. Whatever it was made her face turn bright red.

Kanzashi began to sweat in nervousness. *If... If I do this right...* Still looking down, she raised her eyes, watching Ichika. His breath was ragged as he lugged a piece of machinery. *What do I do? Maybe... Maybe I should offer to help...* She lowered her IS and stepped out of its armor.

“Um...”

“Huh? Oh, don’t worry about it. Just get Uchigane Nishiki put away so it’s ready for tomorrow.”

“B-But...”

“It’s okay. When you’re done, just head back. It’s getting pretty late, you wouldn’t want to miss out on the baths, right?”

“W-Wait!” Her voice came out louder than Ichika expected.

“What?”

Kanzashi, being Kanzashi, found herself too embarrassed by her own outburst to say anything more, and instead started work on her IS. Not a word was uttered as the clink and clatter of their final cleanup filled the hangar. In this wide, wide space, she was alone with Ichika.

What do I do? What do I do... At a complete loss, Kanzashi kept working. She disconnected the maintenance apparatus, and returned the Uchigane Nishiki to

standby mode. Of course, she didn't forget to activate its automatic optimization routines first.

She took a quick glance over at Ichika. The tools were heavy, but he was working hard at putting them away—too hard to even notice that he was alone with her.

I... I guess he's used to being around girls... She wasn't in any of the cliques, but she had still heard the rumors. About how friendly he was with each of the first years who had their own IS.

Someone like me can't really... Kanzashi imagined the faces of the others in her mind. Each one of them was overflowing with girlish charm. Dejected, she pressed a hand to her chest to hold back the pain in her heart.

She could feel her heart fall. If she could be... If she could just be a little cuter than she was...

"Kanzashi."

"Wha?!" As she slumped, Ichika clapped a hand on her shoulder. Kanzashi, startled, straightened up. "...W-What?"

"I'm done. How about you?"

"Uhh... I still..."

The sprawl of tools and equipment was gone, now. She must have been lost in thought for some time.

"Let's head back."

"O-Okay..."

Still nervous, she stroked the ring on her right hand that was Uchigane Nishiki as she walked alongside Ichika toward the door. Her pulse was pounding. Echoing in her ears, loud enough to give her a headache.

"Let's get changed. I have to use locker Room B in the third arena. You?"

"I, ah... 2-A..."

"Oh. We can walk part of the way together, then."

"Ye... Yeah..."

Kanzashi and Ichika walked through the halls together. Outside the windows, it was already pitch-black.

“Looks like we just squeaked it in.”

“Yeah... Thanks to all the help we got...”

With nothing left to say about that, they fell silent once more, Kanzashi so nervous she couldn't decide what to say and Ichika assuming she welcomed the respite.

“All right, here I am.”

“Yeah...”

Ichika waved and walked off. For a moment, she watched him leave, then, a moment before he was out of sight, she turned and fled for her locker room like she was trying to escape from something.

I'm such a weirdo... The closer Ichika got, the harder a time she had talking to him. Even though, when they first met, she didn't have any problem saying whatever she wanted.

I... I...

Liked him, just maybe.

Just the thought springing to her mind made her heart leap.

I can't... I can't keep thinking about that... Suddenly finding herself in front of her locker, Kanzashi clasped her hands to her chest to hold back its aching.



“Phew...” I'd just gotten out of the shower, and was laying on my bed, drying my hair with a towel. “I can't believe we pulled that off...”

At first, I'd despaired over whether we had any chance at all, but thanks to Mayuzumi and the others we'd pulled it together. And, of course, thanks to one other person...

Knock, knock.

“Come in.”

I stood up, hearing the knock on my door. It clicked open, and that person made her appearance.

“Ciao!”

“Tatenashi.”

Suddenly having a bad feeling about this, I scanned the hallway behind her. Good. No one saw her come here.

“Can I come in?”

“Uh, yeah...”

“Very well, then.”

She walked with her usual graceful stride to the middle of my room, then dove headfirst into my bed. Man. She was like a little kid sometimes.

“Heyyyy, Ichika!”

“I know, I know.”

“Gimme a massage?”

She kicked up her legs in anticipation. *C’mon, I can see your panties when you do that...*

“Jeez...”

Well, this was Sarashiki Tatenashi. I couldn’t argue with her. If I tried, she’d just want something even worse. *Like a massage in the shower...* Not even joking. Reluctantly, and I mean that in every sense of the word, I placed my hands on Tatenashi.

“By the way, Tatenashi, who are you teaming up with tomorrow?”

While my hands wandered looking for tense muscles, I asked something I’d been wondering for a while.

“Huh? I thought they announced the teams.”

“I’ve been in the hangars all week, so I haven’t had a chance to look. Hey, wait... Your legs are so stiff. Did you run a marathon or something?”

“C’mon, I had some very important things to say during the assembly.

Weren't you paying attention?"

"Ahahaha, it can't possibly be that."

"Ichika, you shouldn't tell lies you're not confident in."

"Ugh..."

"Anyway, then. My partner is Houki."

"Houki, huh... Wait, Houki?!"

That wasn't a name I was expecting. If it'd been me asking, I feel like she would have answered with 'I'd rather enter solo!' but I guess Tatenashi was a different story.

Oh, right. Tatenashi must have been concerned for Houki. And her estrangement from her own big sister. Maybe it reminded Tatenashi of her own relationship with Kanzashi. Even if it didn't, though, she couldn't have wanted Houki to be left out.

"Ichika, you get along well with your sister, don't you."

"Where'd that come from all of a sudden?"

"Well, she's always so strict with you."

"And that's supposed to mean that we get along well?"

"You don't get it, do you? I guess you don't. It's because you're that important to her, because you're that special to her, that she's so strict with you. So that you don't die." Tatenashi said it matter-of-factly, but it struck me from out of nowhere, and it took me a second for it to sink in.

Me? Fight and die? The memories came rushing back. Orimura Madoka. The girl who looked identical to Chifuyu. The one who attacked me. The weapon gripped in her hand. The raw malice she exuded.

My right hand began to shake involuntarily. Softly, so Tatenashi wouldn't notice, I steadied it with my left. Trying to get it to calm down. As if scolding it. As if praying it would stop. I couldn't focus on anything else.

"I mean, if a war starts or anything." Tatenashi's normal grin returned, and she kicked her legs as if swimming. The spell of fear that had entranced me

melted away like mist in the morning sun. “Ichika, massage my butt.”

“C’mon, I told you! Get Utsuho or Miss Casual to do that!”

Her hips, while ample, were beautifully sculpted. As I sunk my palms into their softness, I felt a nosebleed coming on.

“No. You’re better at it.”

“Ah, umm...”

I was a little bit pleased by the praise.

“Don’t even think about it. Just do it.” Tatenashi grinned, happy as a clam. I swallowed nervously. Sometimes, a man has to do what a man has to do.

“Is it finally happening?!”

Silently, I gave myself a ‘dude, it’s not like *that*.’

“Ichika?”

“Yes?”

“Should I take off my panties?”

“ARGH! W-Why?!”

“I wanted to see the expression on your face when I asked that.”

With a Cheshire grin, Tatenashi pounced on me, poking at my cheeks.



Kanzashi had taken over her dorm’s kitchen, and the gas oven was burning red-hot. She sat before it in a chair, nervously waiting for its contents to finish baking. *I wonder if Orimura will try these...* She’d made green tea cupcakes, one of the few recipes she was familiar with.

She looked up at the clock on the wall. It was already after ten. Ichika might already be asleep. That worry dragging her down, she looked over at the oven again, hoping the cupcakes were done. **Beep!**

“Ah...!”

They were finished baking! Her expression suddenly brightened, and putting oven mitts on her hands, she pulled them out. The air was filled with the sweet

smell of baked goods, and with the rich smell of green tea.



Hmm... Looks like they came out good... As she watched the steam rise off the piping-hot cupcakes, her mouth opened in anticipation. She opened a bag she'd had ready and carefully placed them within before tying it with a ribbon.

Now, if I can just get him to try one... He'd be happy. And if he was happy, her heart would leap. *I have to hurry, before they get cold...* Clutching the bag of three cupcakes in her hand, she left the kitchen.

"Ehehe..." As she walked quickly through the halls, a smile rose to her face.

This was fun. Giving something to someone you like was fun. A little bit embarrassing, but also something to be proud of. *I want to be with him...* That was all she could think of, and her pace quickened to a jog as she walked on. Just around the next corner was his room.

"Ahh... Haa..."

She stopped for a moment, to steady her breath. *I should... Walk the rest of the way...* She didn't want him to see her out of breath. Ready, she rounded the corner. **Click.**

"Eh...?"

Ichika's door was open. Quickly, reflexively, she ducked back around the corner.

"Mmm, that was fun."

".....!"

That voice was unmistakable. It was her sister Tatenashi. *Why... Why is she here?* Hidden behind the wall, she watched the interplay at Ichika's door.

"C'mon, gimme a break..."

"But it's fun!"

Tatenashi took Ichika's arm. As Kanzashi watched, her breath stopped. *They... They look so happy together...* Her heart ached like a railroad spike was being driven into it. Unconsciously, she began to squeeze the cupcakes.

"Anyway, how'd it go? Did you manage to finish Kanzashi's IS?"

What?

“Yeah, somehow.”

What was going on here? As she strained her ears to hear their conversation, warning bells went off in Kanzashi’s heart. She shouldn’t hear this. She absolutely shouldn’t hear this.

“So, was the data from my IS useful?”

Huh?! Kanzashi pressed herself against the wall, clamping her hands over her mouth to keep herself from shouting, then slumped to the floor. *The... The data sample Orimura brought... I thought it was from Byakushiki... But it was from my sister’s IS!*

Kanzashi’s world crumbled around her. Ichika may not have meant anything wrong by it. But... But she had her pride. *I... I thought I had finally done it... Finally finished Uchigane Nishiki on my own two feet... But...* Thought that she had maybe finally caught up with her sister.

“Ahh... No....”

It was a lie. It was all a lie. Ichika’s tenderness. The joy of completing Uchigane Nishiki. All of it. It was all just a game her sister was playing.

A vision of Tatenashi welled up in her mind.

“Ahh...!”

Classical beauty. Uncommon genius. Superhuman physique. Bewitching charisma.

“Ahhhhh...”

It was terrifying.

Terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying.

Terrifying. Terrifying.

“N-Nooooo....”

“Kanzashi.”

The vision whispered in her ear. No matter how hard she jammed her hands over her ears and clamped her eyes shut, it wouldn't disappear, wouldn't be quiet.

“You don't have to do anything. I'll take care of it for you.”

Sweet, sweet poison. Kanzashi could feel it spreading through her veins. Dragging her down into the darkness of despair.

“N-No... No...”

“So you can just stay—”

Useless.

“.....!” Her heart couldn't take any more. Her body couldn't take any more. Kanzashi ran. Ran, ran, ran, blindly, until she found herself back in her own room. As she gasped for air, a single crystal-clear tear ran down her cheek and fell to the floor.

“Ahh...” She rubbed her eyes, trying to clear its brethren away. But more and more welled up, and despairing, she crawled into her bed and hid under her blanket.

“I... I can...”

“You can stay nice and useless.”

The cruel words of the vision pierced her chest, and her tears burst forth as if a dam had burst.

“Waaaah...” Crying, sobbing, her heart quaked. *“Waaaaah... Waaaaaaah...”*

Alone, miserable enough to die, Kanzashi sobbed.

Chapter IV: What It Takes to Be a Hero *It's morning...* Rubbing her reddened eyes, Kanzashi got out of bed. She felt terrible. But today was the day of the tag team tournament. She couldn't run away anymore.

I need to get going... Staggering into the bathroom, she washed her face with cold water. Feeling a bit more like herself, she adjusted her glasses. She had to do her best today. She knew that. Even if her heart wasn't in it.

The brackets will be announced at the opening ceremony... Then I'll know who... But if she won, and kept winning, eventually she'd meet Tatenashi.

Twinge. Her chest ached.

Tatenashi, the one who'd been having so much fun with Ichika yesterday. She knew neither of them had been doing it to spite her, but it still hurt. *I'll never be able to match up to her... I have no chance...* Kanzashi gnawed her lower lip, and tears welled up in her eyes.

If only she had a hero. She couldn't drive the thought from her mind. A storybook hero, like in her anime, making a dramatic entrance to save her. Strong. Gallant. Kind. Unflinching. Unwavering. A true hero.

"Ah....."

She shook her head as her image of a hero turned into Ichika.

Gotta hurry up... Kanzashi left her room, almost wishing she could just leave and never come back.



"And now, a few words from student council president Sarashiki Tatenashi." Utsuho stepped back from the microphone. Me and Miss Casual, the other student council members, were lined up behind her.

"Yawn... I'm tired...."

“Ssh! The vice principal’s looking at us!”

“Kay...” Miss Casual gave a nod which would have been almost imperceptible if I wasn’t watching her closely. As she did, she wavered as if she’d just gotten out of bed. And the vice principal was glaring at us again. She was a woman with triangular-framed glasses, hair up in a bun, a prim suit, and dark lipstick. The girls called her ‘the witch,’ but in my opinion, she was a bit cute for that. Now, if you wanted to talk about real demons, there was Chifuyu.

“Good morning, everyone! Today the students with personal IS will be conducting a tag team tournament. You’ll be able to learn a lot from their tactics and technique, so be sure to watch carefully.” Tatenashi’s clear voice and precise enunciation were almost songlike. Her presence wasn’t the only reason she was so popular. “And, aside from that—”

She snapped her fan open. On it was written ‘bookie.’

“The student council has come up with a plan to make this even more fun for everyone! We’re holding a tournament pool, and the prize is meal tickets!” A cheer rose up from the crowd.

“Wait, isn’t that gambling?!”

“Don’t worry, Vice President Orimura.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve already greased the right palms.” Tatenashi grinned. I watched the teachers, but none of them seemed to react. Except Chifuyu... Who suddenly looked like she had a headache. “And besides, it isn’t gambling. It’s just supporting your favorites. That you happen to be doing with your meal tickets. And since we have all those tickets gathered already, what else can we do with them but give them to whoever picked right?”

“Yeah, that’s just gambling!”

‘You didn’t even ask me about it!’ was what I wanted to say, but Miss Casual tugged on the hem of my shirt.

“Orimu, you haven’t even been showing up to student council meetings. We had a vote on it and everything.”

“Ugh... I know I’ve been spending all my time in the hangars, but still...”

What a mess. I couldn’t believe we were just openly placing bets on this. But that was Tatenashi’s charisma for you. She had the student council in the palm of her hand. That still didn’t stop me from feeling blue.

“And now, the official bracket!” Tatenashi opened a large projection display behind herself. On it— “Guh!”

The first match: Orimura Ichika and Sarashiki Kanzashi vs. Shinonono Houki and Sarashiki Tatenashi.

Jeez, we’re taking on the final boss to start off the day? This is gonna be tough... I sighed, remembering my battle with Laura. *Is Kanzashi gonna be okay? I’m worried about how she’ll feel having to go up against Tatenashi without preparation...* I couldn’t see her among the crowd of cheering girls. *Well, we’re working out of the same pit, so I’ll just have to catch up with her then.*



All right! I got Ichika! Houki was overjoyed as the bracket was unveiled. *Today’s the day I’ll show him just what I’m capable of!* Houki’s coaching from Tatenashi over the past week had paid off. *I won’t let this go the way it always used to! And Akatsubaki is stronger now too. This time... This time!* This time she would win, Houki was determined, as she raised a clenched fist.

That’s it. I’ll win. I’ll win... And at the dinner tomorrow that we got for that interview, *I’ll tell him how I— I mean, I’ll, I’ll ask him out! I’m not missing another chance!* Houki’s single-minded wish provided more than enough fuel for her burning fighting spirit.



“Oh, Orimura!” The patter of approaching footsteps was Mayuzumi Kaoruko.

“What is it? I need to get changed into my IS suit and get over to the fourth arena.”

The way over twisted and turned, so it was a pretty far walk. Whoever picked my locker room must have really had it out for me, building a cross-country

course into things before my fights even started.

“Here, look at the odds.”

“Whew...” Looking over the sheet of paper, I noticed that Houki and Tatenashi were at the top. I guess it made sense. Tatenashi was the only national pilot at IS Academy. She was on a whole different level from the national cadets. “And I’m... Ugh, dead last?”

“No one has any info on Kanzashi, so it’s to be expected.”

After a second and third year duo, there were Charl and Laura, then Cecilia and Rin.

“Five teams... So there’s ten of us with our own IS?”

“Yep. And seven are first years. This is a really strange year. One third year, two second years, and then seven of you? And all those third generation IS, too.”

“Pretty impressive, huh.”

“Oh, sure, try to brush it off. We all know it’s your fault!” She pointed at me. Well, I guess that was true. “And Shinonono’s is honestly more of a fourth-generation, if that even exists.”

“Yeah, it sure feels like it.”

“Anyway! Enough about that!” I wanted to remind her that she’s the one who got us on that topic to begin with, but I held myself back. “Give me a comment before the fight! I have to get one from everyone, so I’m super-busy! Give me a pose!”

Snap! The shutter clicked before she finished speaking. She was always such a ball of energy.

“All right, that’s the photo! Now, Ichika, what do you have to say?”

“I, uh... I’ll do my best!”

“I was hoping for something like ‘I’m shooting for the top!’”

“Well, um...”

“Hmm. Oh, right.” She cupped her chin, and her eyes gleamed. “How about ‘If

I lose, I'm going to be a harem slave'?"

"Where did that come from?!"

"My sister came up with it."

What the hell was that interview going to look like by the time it made it to print?! And seriously? Harem slave?

"Ahahah. You're so much fun to tease, Orimura. Tacchan was right."

"C'mon, please."

"Oh, but you are!"

Just as Mayuzumi was gesticulating, **BOOOOOOM!**

"**Huh?!**"

The locker room suddenly swung as if an earthquake was happening.

"EEK!"

"Look out!"

Mayuzumi lost her balance as the room continued to shake. Seeing she was about to fall into the wall, I caught her arm and wrapped myself around her.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah. What just happened, though?"

Fshing! The hallway lighting suddenly changed from white to red, and projection displays reading 'Emergency Alert' popped up from around us.

"All students, evacuate to underground shelters! Repeat, all students, evacuate to— Eeeek!"

The teacher's voice suddenly cut off as the school shook again.

"What the hell is going on?!"



"Ms. Orimura!" Maya, running through the halls, had finally found Chifuyu.

"Situation report, Ms. Yamada! What just happened?!"

"We're under attack! Look at this!" Breathlessly, Maya pulled out her phone.

Displayed was a capture from the arena cameras, seconds before, showing the enemy.

“This is...”

“Yes! It’s more of the drones which appeared before—no, an upgraded version!”

“How many?”

“Five! They suddenly dove in from above the pits and attacked the students preparing their IS!”

As Maya spoke, Chifuyu’s face twisted.

“Dammit... This is too soon... We don’t have *it* yet...”

“Eh?”

Maya was shocked by Chifuyu’s murmur, and Chifuyu, only now realizing that she’d said it out loud, clammed up. She hardly ever saw such nervous frustration from Chifuyu.

“Ms. Orimura! What do we do?” Maya looked up at Chifuyu plaintively.

Chifuyu assumed absolute command of IS Academy in emergency situations. A privilege reserved for the woman crowned as Brynhildr.

“Section status?”

“Same as last time. Under high-level lockdown.”

“Understood. Have the teachers prioritize evacuation of the students. Access the control system, and release the lockdown. Ready combat instructors to deploy, Level III loadouts, in two-woman cells around defensive positions!”

“Roger!”

Maya straightened her spine as she replied, then rushed to the hangar with her own IS. As Chifuyu watched her leave, she punched the wall.

“You’re sure bringing it... But we’ve got plenty to answer with.”

Flames danced in her eyes as she muttered, lowly but firmly.



“Haaah!”

Clang! With a swing of Souten Gagatsu and a forceful kick, Rin sent the attacker—the black IS—flying. She wanted her revenge. She could taste it. But the impassive, mechanical response of her foe only left her aching to feel it.

The black IS maintained its absolute silence. These black drones—these Golem IIIs. Far stronger than the Golem I, and given new form. No longer a hulking iron giant, but a graceful steel maiden. Almost a jet-black mannequin. Close-fit armor darker than night, wrapped around an unmistakably feminine form. The original’s array of lenses and sensors had been replaced with a visor-like linear camera, and a new hypersensor jutted forward like a ram’s horns.

And the biggest change was to its arms. From its right elbow, a powerful, weighty blade extended. Only in its left arm was still the menacing mechanical hulk that was reminiscent of a Golem I. But within its palm were four barrels firing superheated particle beams, dancing with flames like the gates of Hades.

“What the hell does it take to put you down?!”

On Rin’s shoulder units, the covers of her impact cannons swept back. In cramped confines like the IS pits, a full-power blast would be enough to wipe the Golem III from existence. Or rather, should have been— Around the drone, a floating orb of energy formed, absorbing the blast as if it were nothing.

“Dammit! Is this a defensive type?!”

“Ling! Get back!”

Rin dove for cover. In the skies above, Cecilia spun around and stopped midair, firing a burst from her Starlight Mk. III downward.

“Ugh! Such a strong shield! But I’m not finished yet!” The bits floating around her spat forth in unison, streaks of light returning to their home in the rising sun. “I’ve got you now!”

Cecilia’s fingers glided through thin air. With them, the beams curved in flight, seeking the drone from all sides. This was the psychokinetically-controlled Flexible Fire mode of BT weaponry.

Still, the drone sat silent. Almost as if it understood that its transforming

shield couldn't be deployed in time, the Golem III danced in midair.

“Wh—?!”

Its body twisted in ways no human pilot could manage. With impossibly precise bursts from its thrusters, it dodged every shot.

“Th-This is absurd! That strong a defense, and yet so mobile?!” The Golem III thrust its left arm toward Rin and Cecilia. They could see the building energy swirl around the barrels in its palm.

“And plenty of firepower...”

Boom! The explosion shook the pits.



“What the hell are you?!”

The Golem III crashed through the ceiling, bearing down on Laura, and wrapping her head in its left arm. The grasp of its powerful fingers tightened. Her hypervisor creaked under the stress, as alarm after alarm rang. Still caught by surprise, Laura reflexively brought forth her plasma dagger to slash her way out.

I'll slice your arm off! She ripped with her dagger, fast and precise, only to feel it stopped by the Golem III's blade.

“What?!”



Just as she felt terror, the voice of her partner rang out.

“Laura!”

It was Charlotte. Her .69-caliber Gray Scale pile bunker poked forth from the shield on her left arm.

“Damn you!”

Blam! Metal clashing on metal, the Golem III fell back. But as she escaped its grasp, Laura saw the barrels in its palm ignite.

“Charlotte!”

“Get down!” Wedging herself between the Golem III and Laura, Charlotte called forth three shields with Rapid Switch. “Ugh...”

Even the Revive’s thick shields couldn’t stand up to the assault. A beam pierced through, scorching Charlotte’s right arm.

“Ch-Charlotte!”

“I... I’m fine... It just knocked off a bit of shield energy...”

“You bitch! You’ll pay for this!”

Laura cast her eyepatch off. Her Wodan-Auge enhanced hypersensor gleamed golden as she slammed the Golem III with all the force her AIC could muster. The drone sat silent, frozen in place.

“I’ll smash you!” Laura’s revolver cannon roared, the rhythm of its repeated fire and explosions from the drone beating out a waltz’s tempo. “AAARGH!”

“No, Laura! Get away from it!” Charlotte’s voice, so far away, only reached Laura’s ears as the drone suddenly broke free and darted forward.

“Ignition Boost?! And so powerful—”

The Golem III’s blade carved through her body.

“LAURAAAA!”



“What’re we gonna do about this?” Third year Daryl Casey’s voice was flat. Her IS Hellhound ver. 2.5 was deployed, but no weapons were in its hands.

“Whatever it is, you first!” Second year Forte Safire fought to keep the boredom from her voice as she cheered Daryl on. Her IS Cold Blood was ready, but simply sprawled languidly in midair.

“Dammit, Forte. Is that how you talk to an upperclasswoman?”

“C’mon. Aren’t you supposed to be leading by example?”

While they were squabbling, a Golem III began to fire its heat beams.

“Those look pretty toasty. Check ’em for me, will ya?”

“Nah. I think it’s a good chance for you to work on your tan.”

Evade. Defend. Repel. Deflect. Parry. Block. Beneath their banter, a bulletproof defense. Their team’s name was ‘Aegis,’ after all. They fought as one, using their talents to cover for each other, not letting a single attack through.

“Here it comes.”

“Got it.”

Miss. Miss. Miss. Even on a hit, not a scratch of damage.

“Y’know, Forte.”

“Yes, *ma’aaaaam?*”

“If we don’t attack it sometime, we’re just gonna have to keep doing this.”

“I know, right?”

The duo split left and right, around a charging thrust, and their eyes narrowed.

“Let’s do it, then.”

“Time for the counterattack.”

Swoosh! Double tomahawk kicks struck the Golem III.



“Ah... Ahhhhhh...”

Kanzashi was paralyzed with fear by the sudden attack, not even able to

deploy her IS. Her teeth clattered as she cowered. *What... What's going on?* Terror. Abject terror flooded her mind.

“Eek!”

Driven by the sound of footsteps behind her, she ran into a wall.

Quivering, she looked at the wall, then turned and looked up. Silently, a black Golem III drone loomed closer, and seeing her IS in standby mode on her right hand, pursued forth.

Save... Me... Someone save me! Squeezing her eyes shut, she prayed. If there really was a hero, he would be there for her. A hero, his scarf blowing in the wind, slicing through the darkness. But no one came. Reality is no dream, no anime. Step by step, the Golem III approached her.

“Ri... Mu... Ra...”

The left arm of the Golem stretched forth. An instant before it touched her, she screamed.

“ORIMURA!!!”

Crshoom. She felt the wall behind her crumble, then blast away.

“KANZASHI!”

Orimura! He came! Wrapped in a cloud of smoke, Ichika looked every inch the hero. Her own hero.

“RAAH!” Blasting through the wall to the pit, he stretched out his palm. The particle cannon within sparked with energy and fired. At the same time, the Golem III fired its own heat rays. The two beams crashed together in midair, exploding. “Kanzashi! Get in your IS! You’re gonna be caught in an explosion!”

“Y-Yes!”

While Ichika bought time, Kanzashi was enveloped in light, and Uchigane Nishiki formed around her.

“It’s a tough one!” Ichika parried with Yukihiro Nigata as he attacked with Setsura in blade mode, but every blow was in turn turned back by the Golem III’s blade. “I can’t take it alone, Kanzashi!”

“What?!”

“Are you ready?!”

“Y-Yeah!” Kanzashi rushed through her preflight checks. Every package was showing ready. *I... I... I want to fight alongside him!* As the hope, the prayer rang out in her mind, Uchigane Nishiki surged with energy. As if her prayer was answered. “Let’s go! Uchigane Nishiki!”

Clang! Ichika parried a blow and ducked back. Uchigane Nishiki took his place, its Shunrai particle cannon poking out from under Kanzashi’s arms.

“At this range, I can’t miss!” she yelled as she bathed the Golem in a hail of fire— But the shield units floating around it blocked every shot.

“Get back, Kanzashi!”

“What do we do?” Kanzashi questioned as she fell back under Ichika’s cover fire.

“Uchigane Nishiki can’t do its best in close quarters!”

“But the arena is sealed off with a shield... Wait!”

“That’s right. I can cut through the shield with Reiraku Byakuya. Get out into the arena, and fight!”

“Got it...”

“Hold it off for me!”

Ichika prepared Reiraku Byakuya for activation, holding Yukihiro Nigata low. Meanwhile, Kanzashi brandished her close-quarters weapon, the Yumeuttsu anti-composite-armor vibroblade naginata, in both hands.

“Let’s do this!”

“O-Okay!”

Byakushiki and Uchigane Nishiki both spread their wing thrusters, and Ichika and Kanzashi took flight.



“Haaaaa!”

Clang! Houki swung up with her twin blades, sweeping the Golem III's away. For a moment, the drone swung off balance. It quickly righted itself using its PIC, but the opening was one Tatenashi didn't let pass by.

"I've got you now!" Tatenashi's lance, veiled in a spiral of nanomachine-infused water, pierced toward the Golem III, but before it could find its mark, the drone's bulky left hand wrapped around it. "Houki! Activate your back variable-sweep armor! I'll hold it back!"

"Understood!"

The Golem III's hand screeched as Tatenashi's lance drilled away.

"Ugh! What's their armor made out of?!"

"Tatenashi! I'm ready!"

"All right!"

Propelled by Houki's Akatsubaki, Tatenashi slammed the Golem III into the arena's gates. Silence hung in the air, broken only by the roar of three IS' thrusters. Tatenashi and Houki ignored the warning indicators from Mysterious Lady and Akatsubaki that they were about to crash into the arena's shield barrier.

"Eat this!"

Tatenashi gripped her lance as she fired its other weapon, quad-linked gatling guns. The Golem III swept its shield unit forward to block the fire, but crashed into the barrier. Tatenashi's face twisted with pain as she was squeezed between the shock of impact from her front and the constant thrust from behind.

"Tatenashi!"

"I'm fine! Let's crush this thing!"

"But..."

"Just do it!"

Houki was shocked by her insistence, but still increased power to her variable-sweep armor.

“Ugh...!”

Tatenashi could feel her back being crushed, but she kept up the attack. Her water lance and the gatling guns ground away at the Golem III’s armor as sparks flew.

“TATENASHI!”

“Hahaha... I’ve still got one last trick.” Supporting her lance with her left hand, Tatenashi raised her right to the sky. “Take everything Mysterious Lady’s got!”

Tendrils of water swirled forth from her palm, enveloping Mysterious Lady.

“What is this?!”

“I’m focusing all the nanomachines covering my armor into one point, and letting everything fly in one last-ditch attack. I call it—”

Mistilteinn. Formed from a chain explosion of all Tatenashi’s nanomachines, it was an explosion which could pierce through any armor like paper. But it would tear through her own armor as well. Exposing herself to the force of four small fuel-air bombs was definitely a last-ditch attack.

The air in the arena was still. Sensing the energy flow, the Golem III swung its blade down on Tatenashi. Focused on initiating the Mistilteinn reaction, Tatenashi couldn’t dodge, couldn’t parry, could do nothing but take the attack.

“Ahh!” That falling blade sliced through her armor, her life support systems, her skin. Crimson blood welled up, spurting from Tatenashi. But her smile remained.

“Houki.”

“Y-Yes!”

“Shift your variable-sweep armor to defense. You’ll be caught up in this.”

“Wait! What about you?!” she protested.

“I’m immortal,” Tatenashi grinned. The grin she wore after telling a joke, the grin she wore in peaceful times, refused to fade. “Here goes!”

“No! Stop! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!”

Tatenashi didn’t answer. Instead, her grin widened into her smile.

And, Mistilteinn activated.





BOOOOOM!

“W-What just happened?!” Just as Kanzashi and I escaped to the arena, a sudden explosion enveloped the gate separating it from the next. “Was that Houki?”

I tried opening a private channel, but there was no reply. The drones must have been jamming communications.

“Orimura!”

“Whaa?!” Caught by Kanzashi, I tumbled in midair, just as a blast of heat beams shot through where I had been.

“Ugh! They just won’t give up!”

“!...!”

“Kanzashi?! Don’t push yourself too hard!”

“Orimura, check on the other side of the gate...”

“Got it!”

Kanzashi closed in to melee with the drone. Meanwhile, I went full speed for the cloud of smoke enveloping the gate. *Houki! Tatenashi! Be safe!* As I closed in, my hypersensor picked up the signs of an IS.

“Are you okay?!” But what appeared before me was the massive left arm of a drone. “What the—”

It wrapped around my left thigh. I fired my boosters to escape, but instead, it swung me around by my leg, slamming me into a wall.

“Argh!”

I was wracked with pain. This wasn’t right. It shouldn’t be able to break through the life support system so easily. *Wait, is this?!* I opened up a status display.

[UNKNOWN ENERGY EMISSION FROM ENEMY’S ARM. MALFUNCTION WHILE DEPLOYING SHIELD BARRIER.]

What the hell... Are these anti-IS IS?! An IS' armor was reasonably sturdy on its own. But the pilot themselves... Well, it wouldn't take much more than a flick of its wrist to end me.

"Damn you...!"

I brought myself upright by firing the booster on my right leg, and slashed with Yukihiro Nigata, but the drone easily parried my blow with its own blade. Turning to face me, it flung me toward the arena wall.

"GAH!"

The impact knocked the wind out of my lungs. Pain running up and down my body, I coughed up a painful moan and blood all at once. *Dammit! If I get knocked out, I'm done for! Need to get back on my feet and—* Gritting my teeth so hard I thought they'd crack, I scrambled up from the rubble and spread my wing thruster.

"Ah..."

Only to see heat rays bearing down on me.



I can't... Win this alone! Between naginata slashes and particle beam fire, none stopped the Golem III, powerful and swift, from bearing down on Kanzashi.

Ugh...! The private channels were still jammed. She couldn't even tell how Ichika was doing at the gate. With her mind distracted, a rain of heat rays fell toward Kanzashi. Firing her leg boosters, she barely evaded.

".....?!" Falling back, she spotted a familiar aqua blue armor plate in the rubble where she took cover. There was no mistaking it. It was her sister Tatenashi's IS Mysterious Lady. ".....!"

Kanzashi's stomach turned as she switched her hypersensor to scouting mode. *Where? Where is she?* She couldn't stop the waves of anxiety washing over her. Sweat dripped from her brow as her heart pounded.

Wait! Tatenashi was there. Her armor was shredded, most of it blown away. And Tatenashi lay motionless, slumped on the ground, wrapped in what was

left.

N-No... This can't be happening... Kanzashi wanted to scream, but no sound came out. Wanted to shout her sister's name, but couldn't make her mouth form words.

The world twisted around her.

She felt sick.

Sick. Sick.

Feeling as if she was on the verge of throwing up, she fixed her gaze on the Golem III. It stood, silent. The mouthless visor with its line camera. The girlish body. The misplaced bulky left arm. The sleek right arm. Every atom of it. Every single atom of it, she loathed.

"I will destroy you..." she whispered. Near-silent, but full of determination... Of bloodlust.

"GRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Snapping her wing thruster open, she activated Ignition Boost at full power. Becoming her own bullet, she thrust her naginata forth in front of her, aiming for the Golem III.

Clang! The sound of metal snapping echoed out. Her naginata, separated from its blade, spun off into the air. But still... Kanzashi couldn't hold back her rage. Leveling her particle cannon, she fired shot after shot.

"RAAAAH!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! As the Golem III was pushed back under her fire, she pressed in, not letting up for a moment.

"I won't forgive you..."

Fire.

Fire. Fire. Fire.

Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!

"I won't forgive you!"

Not giving it a moment to bring up its shield unit, she emptied shot after shot into the Golem III, until its armor was pierced and its core was exposed.

If I blow that away— **Click.** Just as Kanzashi exulted in her victory, that cruel sound brought her back down to earth. Her particle cannon had exhausted their energy.

“N-No...” She pulled the triggers with all the force she could muster, but nothing fired. Only the cruelly mocking click came forth. She looked up, eye to eye with the Golem III. As she trembled, it slashed at her. “NOOOO!”

Throwing herself to the ground, she pulled up a console. *There has to be something I can use... Something... Anything...* The terrified clattering of her teeth was a macabre tune. Unable to steady herself, she looked over her IS' status. *The Yama-arashi missile pods... But...* With the jamming field the drones had, a standard lock-on system wouldn't be able to control the missiles. High-explosive warheads or not, a shot that didn't hit would mean nothing. *If Orimura was able to hold it still, then maybe...* Just at that moment— **Boom!** An explosion echoed out.

“Eh...?” Ichika was thrown from the neighboring arena. His armor was riddled with cracks, and couldn't take much more. As he lay unconscious, another Golem III reached down and lifted him by his head.

“No... Stop...”

Words squeezed from Kanzashi's lips, as a tear ran down her cheeks. *We're done for... I... I can't do it...* She hated herself for being powerless to avenge her sister. But she couldn't muster the courage to stand up. She was so terrified, she couldn't even raise her eyes.

Orimura... I'm sorry...

Sorry for teaming up with him.

Sorry for not being able to save him.

Sorry for being useless.

Sorry... For being born.

Kanzashi wept. Caught in the depths of anguish, she wished she could

disappear from this world. As she slipped into despair, she realized there were no heroes.

Silently. Slowly. The Golem III approached. Its blade rose—and began to fall. Entranced by its methodical motions, Kanzashi couldn't even squeeze her eyes shut.

“Ahh...”

She was going to die. Nothing mattered anymore. A life without value. A waste of time. Soon enough, it would be over. No relief. No terror, either. Only emptiness. And the whistle of a blade carving through air.

“...Eh?”

But it never reached Kanzashi. A shadow darted toward her, wrapping her in its arms. Tightly. Embracing her so tightly.

“Is that...”

It was Tatenashi. With the last of her strength, she leapt to protect her sister. Blood streamed from her back from the blow she took in Kanzashi's place.

“Tate—” Tatenashi crumpled to the ground. “Tatenashi! Tatenashi!”

Kanzashi lifted Tatenashi, cradling her, the sleeve covering the arm which cradled her dyed bright red.

“No... No... Tatenashi...”

“Haha... How many years has it been since you've called me that?”

“Tate...” Tatenashi smiled. As if overjoyed. As if relieved that at least her sister was safe. “Why... Why?”

“Do I need a reason... To help my sister?”

“But! But... It's all over...”

“It's not over yet.”

“It is! There's no hero coming to save us!”

“And?” Tatenashi's grin was full of kindness.

“But... But!” Kanzashi couldn't stop crying. Tatenashi weakly, in gentle

reproach, stretched a hand up to wipe her tears away.

“...There isn’t...” came a quiet voice.

“Eh...?” It was hard to hear, but when Kanzashi listened closely, she could tell it was Ichika.

“There is no hero...” Dangling from the Golem III’s fist, his limbs hung listlessly. But as he spoke, his voice gained strength. “A real hero... Never cries... Never smiles...”

Painfully, wincingly, he began to move. He was battered, bloodied, pitiful. He looked like he’d been through hell. But... But he shone like the sun. “That’s why! That’s why I—”

Vshoom! Setsura sprang to life in claw mode, slicing the Golem III’s arm apart as it gripped him.

“I’m human. I cry. I smile. Sometimes I fail. But... I won’t give up! Standing and fighting! That’s what it means to be human!”

The Golem III stumbled back.

“HOUKIIIIII!”

“I’M ON IIIIT!” Akatsubaki, finally recovered from the explosion, sliced through the wind. “Tatenashi’s attack has to have finished off its shields!”

Closing the distance at full boost, she dropped into an iai crouch and slashed across its chest. The drone remained silent, for a moment, then. **Schiing!** The Golem III split into two before disappearing in an explosion.

“Ichika! Are you okay?”

“Behind you, Houki!”

“What?!” The remaining Golem III still had energy left, and it smashed into Houki, sending her flying away. “Ugh!”

Smashing into the ground, Houki scrambled back to her feet, and executing a tight midair loop, soared away from the drone under boost. But she was trailed by fire.

“Dammit! Houki’s gonna—”

Spreading his ruined wing thruster, Ichika crouched to take off, but Kanzashi's voice called him back, "W-Wait...!"

"Kanzashi?"

"Wait... Don't go... Your IS can't take any more..."

"I have to. I have to help Houki."

"Why? Aren't you afraid of dying?"

Ichika replied with a bitter grin, "Of course I am."

"So... Why?"

"I'm more afraid of running away."

"Eh..."

"If I run away, I'll never be myself again."

She could hear the determination in his words. Kanzashi had no response... No ideas to answer with.

"Well, here I go." Calling forth Yukihiro Nigata once more, Ichika soared into the sky at full speed.

"Why..."

Staring at Ichika's back as he left, Kanzashi sobbed.

If only she could be strong like that...

If only she had the courage to fight...

If, if, if...

If only, if only, if only...

"I..." Her tears fell on Tatenashi's face. "I'm such a coward..."

Kanzashi was transfixed as she contemplated her faults. Weak. Wretched. Cowardly. Shameful.

"I... I'm useless... Tatenashi..." She sobbed, motionless, loathing herself.

"You're not."

"Eh...?"

Thinking she heard Tatenashi's voice, Kanzashi looked down at her. But Tatenashi was unconscious, limp in her arms.

"It's okay. Even if you're weak. Even if you're wretched. Even if you're cowardly. Even if you're shameful. That's being human."

It was definitely Tatenashi's voice. Was it coming from the vision of her sister she saw so often? No. The voice echoing in her heart was full of compassion.

"So, Kanzashi. Understand your weakness. Understand how you could be better. And use that to stand back up. That's..."

"That's... What makes me human?"

"Yes. And... It's what makes me love you."

She could feel a kind smile behind those words. After a moment of self-reflection, Kanzashi gently set her sister down and rose up.

"I'm going... Tatenashi."

Her tears had dried.



"Houki! Are you okay?!" I yelled out as I slashed at the drone, trying to slide in between it and Houki.

"Ichika?! Have you gone crazy?! You can't fight like that!"

She was right. Byakushiki was a mess. And with the drones' jamming interfering with the life support system, every blow was like I was being torn apart.

"I can't just leave you!"

"W-What?"

"Houki. I'll protect you!"

".....!!"

Yes. I would protect her. Protect Houki. Protect Tatenashi. Protect Kanzashi.

"What's a man good for if he can't protect his comrades!"

Clang! I pushed my blade down as it clashed with the Golem III's, sliding it

along the drone's blade for a slash at its body. *Too close!* I'd failed to land a fatal blow, and it darted in for an attack.

"Ichika! Look out!" Houki tackled the drone away from me, and took a barrage of its heat rays in my place. "Ahhhh!"

"Houki!"

"Hmph... I... I can handle..."

As if to cut down Houki before she could work herself back up, the drone raised its blade.

"I won't let you hurt her!" I dove for the drone from below, letting its blade fall on me. "Ugh..."

It was a fierce slash. I could feel the shock, and my own IS' power assist giving out. *I... I won't let it end here... Not out of nowhere like this...* I grit my teeth. Felt something give way, no longer sure if it was Byakushiki's armor or my own bones. But... But I— "I... Won't... Lose!" I raised my blade. Just as I did, its left palm thrust toward me. "Damn—"

I braced myself. But as I did, an explosion suddenly saved me. A fusillade from the side drove the Golem III back, away from me.

"What just happened?"

"Ichika! Get away from it!" I recognized that voice. But not the strength behind it.

"Kanzashi..."

She must have... She must have been able to get back up. I was happy. Happy, so happy I couldn't help but smile.

"Don't just stand there grinning! Hurry up!"

"Got it!"

Lifting Houki, I made my escape. As I did, a hail of Uchigane Nishiki's missiles poured down on the drone. Ever silent, even though its shield absorbed the missile, the drone was stopped for now. I made my way to Kanzashi with Houki.

"I knew it. That won't be enough."

“So what do we do?”

“Maybe Reiraku Byakuya?”

“I can’t. Not enough energy left.”

Our situation was dire. Dire enough for bitter grins. But determination still shone strong, in my eyes and in Kanzashi’s.

“I can recover it with Kenran Butou...”

“Can you? Akatsubaki’s a wreck.”

“...I can. But it’ll take some time.”

“So... I’ll buy time. And you two...” Kanzashi spoke up.

Just ‘buying time’ sounded simple enough, but it meant she’d have to distract it in the meantime.

“You can’t! That’s too dangerous!” I protested.

“We don’t have time to think it over. It’s our only option.”

She was right. Uchigane Nishiki’s missiles were holding the Golem III back, but that wouldn’t last forever.

So, I have to... Believe. In Kanzashi. In Houki. In myself. In my comrades. All I could do was believe.

“I’ll get them back for what they did to Tatenashi.”

“C’mon... Don’t just leave me for dead...” Tatenashi, heavily wounded, dragged herself to her feet. She wavered unsteadily, and I caught her to keep her from falling.

“Here...”

“Mysterious Lady’s Aqua Crystal?”

“This’ll keep you safe...”

I gripped it in my palm and muttered, “Thanks for the memento.”

“Ichika... When I get better... I’m going to smack you silly...” Her face was pale as she spoke. But she still managed a smile. Softly, but forcefully, she smiled.

“Anyway.”

“Let’s do this.”

“Mm...”

I, Houki, and Kanzashi nodded. Tatenashi held her index finger up and spoke one more time, “Do your best, kids.”

With the student council president’s approval secured, we sprung to action.



If I had the multi-lock-on system... I could create an opening for Ichika to strike... But Kanzashi’s Uchigane Nishiki had none of the code necessary to guide her missiles. So! Closing her eyes, she focused intently. When she snapped them open again, her hands and feet were enveloped in spheres of light.

Ten fingers and ten toes sprang free. She tensed them, experimentally.

“I can do this... Uchigane Nishiki, manual targeting system... Activate. 48-tube fire...”

Kanzashi floated, held up by her PIC like a crucified saint. At her fingers were customized projection keyboards. Two for each limb, above and below. Two keyboards for each set of five fingers and toes formed spheres around her limbs as she began to target the fire of all eight missile pods.

“Windage... Missile performance, time lag... Targeting adjustment for turbulence from explosions, available firepower...”

Dozens of windows sprung open before her eyes. Kanzashi’s mind raced as she worked out manual targeting that would make each and every one of the 48 missiles strike true. She gasped for breath under the mental strain. Clearing her mind, she focused, and— “Can you withstand the mountain storm?”

Six sliding covers on her wing thruster slid open. Within, particle warheads formed in the eight tubes of each launcher, and 48 missiles shot forth.

“Give me your strength, Uchigane Nishiki!”

Skreeeee! The overlaid whine of launching missiles tore through the air.

“Establish direct link! Manual lock, activate!”

The missiles flew as one toward the Golem III, not in a straight line but in a complex swirling cloud. The drone watched quietly. Deploying its shield unit, it began to fire heat rays at the cloud.

But under manual control, the missiles could weave and dodge to match its fire, before changing direction and blowing away its shield. With its defense compromised, the Golem III turned to evade, darting nimbly backward, but a second volley pursued it like a coyote running down its prey. All over the drone, its legs, its arms, its shoulders, its hips, its head, its torso, explosions welled up like a sudden storm.

Still, silently, the Golem III focused its energy to its left arm for one final breakout. With her missile under manual control, Kanzashi was defenseless, and it fired a heat ray directly for her.

“I won’t let that happen!” Houki sprung in front of her, cramming her fists in the way as she unleashed her variable-sweep armor. An energy blaster shield absorbed the fire. Seeing this, the Golem III switched to high-output mode, hoping to pierce through. “Tch! Akatsubaki! Show me what you can do!”

As if responding to her words, Akatsubaki’s shoulders slid open, metal sliding along metal, revealing weapons in the shape of a crossbow loaded with a massive bolt.

“What the hell is...?”

At the same time as the panels slid open, a window popped open in front of her.

[OPERATIONAL EXPERIENCE GOAL REACHED. NEW WEAPON SYNTHESIS COMPLETE. THE VARIABLE-OUTPUT BLASTER RIFLE UGACHI IS A PRECISION RANGED ARMAMENT SPECIALIZING IN LONG-DISTANCE—]

“Ugh! I don’t need an explanation I don’t even understand!”

Snapping the window shut, Houki settled into a crouch with her blaster shield still open. A high-powered ranged weapon... But without her PIC fully devoted to handling the recoil, she wouldn’t be able to land a shot. Realizing this instantly, Houki called forth a targeting scope in front of her right eye.

“I’ve got your left arm!”

BWOOOM!

Short, concentrated beams of the same energy which emanated from the Akatsubaki’s variable-sweep armor sprang forth from its shoulders. Scorching the earth in their wake, they flew toward the Golem III, blowing its left arm off.

Again, always, impassive silence. The Golem III was a drone. It felt no pain. Immediately springing back up from the ground, it rocketed toward Houki with an Ignition Boost.

“Houki... Cover me.”

“Roger!”

Leaping over her head, Ichika activated his own Ignition Boost. The Yukihiro Nigata in his right hand burned bright with the energy of Reiraku Byakuya.

“RAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

The Golem III’s blade swung up, crossing over to its left. In response. Ichika raised his own sword over his head, bringing it down with all his might. **Clang!**

Silent defiance. Ichika’s Yukihiro Nishiki shore through the Golem III’s blade raised to parry.

“This is over!”

A second slash, from side to side. The drone’s armor was torn apart, and the core within was exposed. Inside was a shining golden cube. Ichika punched it with all his might, and the Golem III went flying.

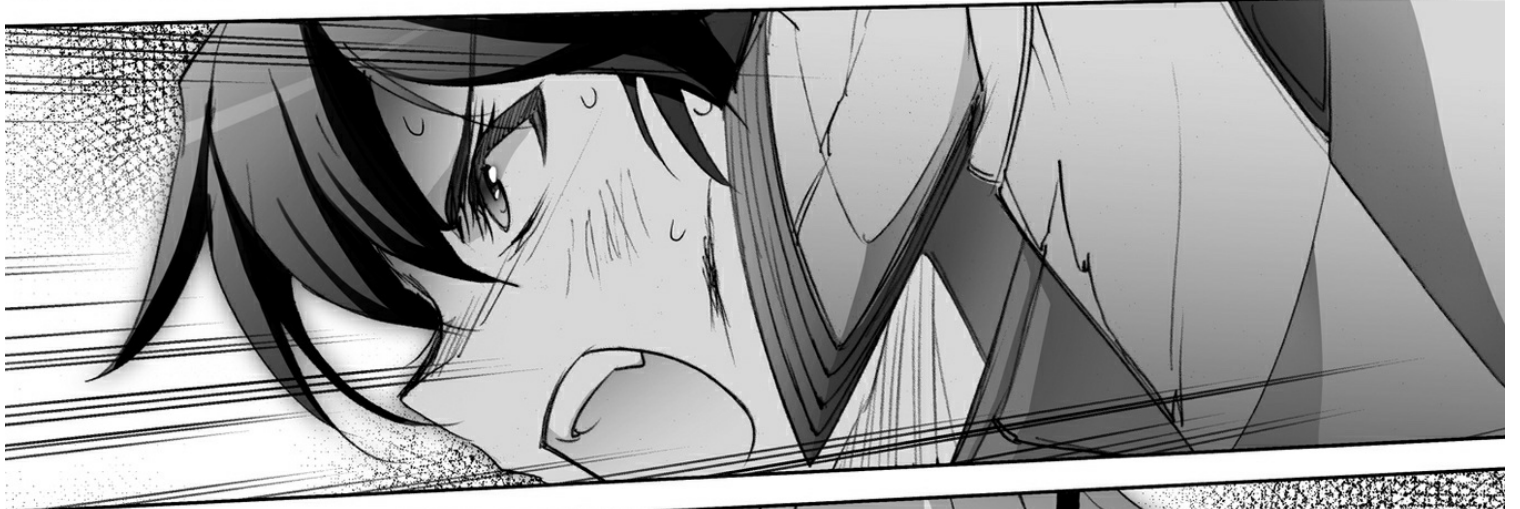
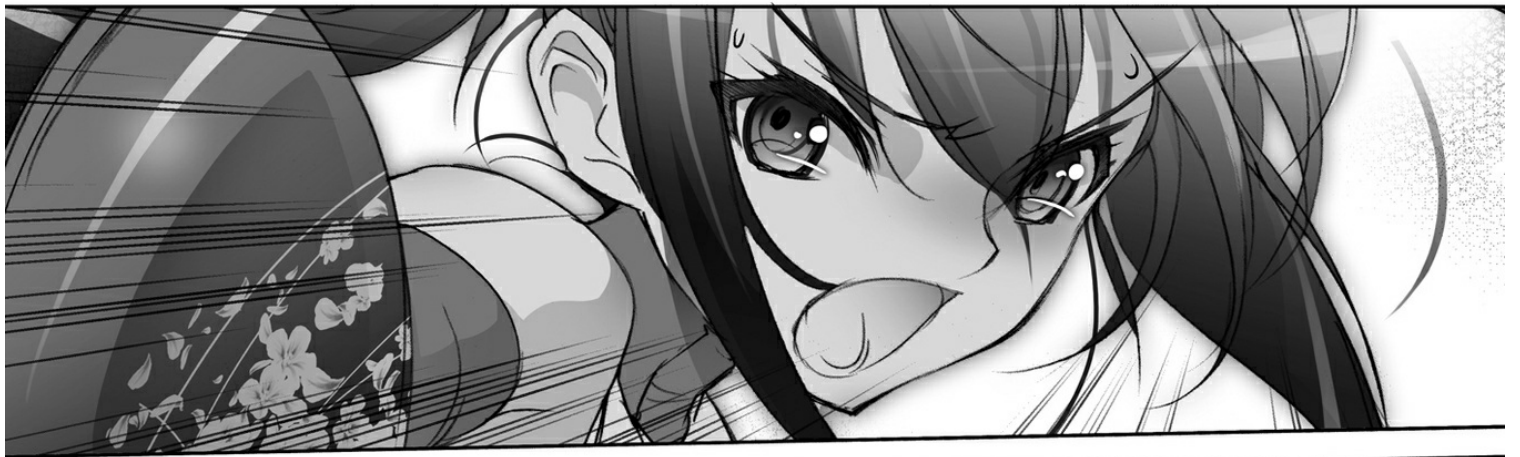
One last moment of silence. An IS’ core was built from a particular rare metal, and not even a power-assist punch would normally be enough to smash it. But — “This’ll keep you safe...”

Wedge between the core and the rest of the drone, a light shone clearly. Its name was the Aqua Crystal. Capable of creating aqua nanomachines. The IS Mysterious Lady’s main armament. And controlling it was — “Phew...”

Sarashiki Tatenashi. Still wavering, half-conscious, from blood loss. But holding her hand in the air as if cradling an invisible detonation switch.

“Click.” Tatenashi flicked her fingertip. A moment later, an explosion enveloped the Golem III from the inside. “Yaaaay...”

With her last ounce of strength, Tatenashi managed a thumbs up. Ichika, Houki, and Kanzashi, dumbfounded, all responded with their own—then broke out in laughter.





“Mmm...”

Half-conscious, Tatenashi slowly blinked once, then twice. The white light of day had turned to the orange rays of sunset.

“Tatenashi...” Hearing her name, she turned her head. There, Kanzashi stood up from the chair in which she had been patiently waiting. “Are you awake now?”

“Yeah... Where am I?” Tatenashi asked slowly, still not fully aware.

“The school hospital.”

“Not even the nurse’s office... Owwww!”

She shook her head, trying to gather her senses. As she did, Kanzashi, worried, steadied her and said, “You shouldn’t move around... You’re stable now, but you’re still badly hurt.”

“Mmhm.”

Time passed silently between them. How many years had it been since they’d talked, sister to sister? Both wondered silently to themselves. The big sister, always concerned for her little sister. The little sister, always afraid of her big sister. But all that floated away like a lie, as they sat in silence.

It’s thanks to Ichika... Tatenashi thought back to when she’d asked Ichika to team up with Kanzashi. The more she thought, the stranger it seemed. *Why did I even ask him?* She hadn’t been sure then, but somehow, she had believed. That everything would turn out right if she left it to him.

I... Her cheeks began to redden. *Was I just flirting with him?* Realizing her blush, she turned away from her sister, toward the window.

“Tatenashi...”

“W-What?”

“What’s wrong? Your face is red...”

Yikes. Looked like she’d been caught red-faced.

“It... It’s just the sunlight in here...”

“I see...”

Silence, again. Ten minutes and many sighs later, Kanzashi suddenly spoke, “Um... Tatenashi...”

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry... About everything...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But...” She’d built her own idea of Tatenashi, built a wall around it, and always been running away. She couldn’t stand the embarrassment at how she’d acted. “I... I’m a terrible little sister...”

“That’s not true at all.” Tatenashi turned, enduring the pain, and embraced Kanzashi, who was about to cry. “You’re my dear, dear little sister. My strong little sister.”

As Tatenashi patted Kanzashi’s head, she couldn’t hold back her tears any longer.

“Tatenashi... My sister...”

“Mm.”

Alone, together, in the hospital. Under the gentle rays of the setting sun. They finally made their peace after long, long years. Finally accepted each other.



“Uhhhh...”

Why on earth did it end up like this?

“My turn, then. Pair of fives.”

“I have a pair of sevens.”

“Gah, I was gonna play that!”

“I pass.”

“I’m next? Pair of aces.”

Houki, Cecilia, Rin, Charl, and Laura were playing President in my room. They'd all showed up at once, insisting in unison that I redeem myself for not teaming up with them by doing one thing they say. When I tried to beg off by telling them I couldn't do it for all five, they decided to compete to see who would get the privilege, and then settled on a game of President as the competition.

"Listen, can we at least put this off until tomorrow? We all have to be pretty worn out after today. And some of us are— Bwuh!"

I was hit by a thrown pillow. It had come from Rin. Likely thrown from her wounded right arm, as she whimpered and scrunched down in her seat. *What's she up to, here?*

"Does that even count as wounded?"

"Indeed! How shameful for a national cadet."

"Hm. I dunno, it seems like a matter of pride."

"Passing yourself off as wounded, really. Not one of the Schwarze Hase flight would lower themselves to that."

"Anyway! I definitely think I'm wounded, so you should be nicer! Get me something to drink! Get me a snack!"

Yep, Rin was back to herself. Everyone was, really. Even myself, though I was pretty beat up.

"I-Ichika, if you've got nothing better to do, you should massage my shoulders."

"Huh? Oh, sure, whatever, Rin." I nodded and stepped behind her. "Your shoulders are okay, right? Like, you're not hurt there or anything? Wow... Your cards suck."

"S-Shut up! I'm going to come from behind to win! Now be quiet and start massaging!"

"Fine, fine."

This girl, sometimes... Just as I started, I heard a piercing yell from Charl, "Ahhhhh! You can't do that yet, Ichika! We don't even have a winner! No fair,

Ling!”

“Yeah! Charlotte’s right! That’s the kind of thing the winner gets to do!”

“Just be quiet! Stop trying to get between me and Ichika!”

“You idiot. Do you want me to slit your throat?”

They kept up a lively conversation as they whittled down their hands. Finally, the game worked its way back around to Charl.

“Okay... Here! Four eights... So—”

“A Revolution! It’s the French Revolution!”

“ICHIKAAAAA!”

Everyone was mad at me, for some reason? The white-hot card battle continued well into the night.



Deep below IS Academy, in a secret area unknown even to most teachers, Maya was examining the wreckage of the drones.

“You look like you need a break.”

“Oh, Ms. Orimura?” Chifuyu, walking into the room, tossed a can of milk tea to her. As she sipped, Maya looked over a screen showing the results of the analysis. “Take a look at this. They have to be improved versions of the drones from before.”

“What about the cores?”

“Unregistered. Again.”

“...How many did we recover?”

“Two. The rest were destroyed in the battle. What should we do with them?”

Chifuyu thought for a moment, then replied brusquely, “Tell the government they were all destroyed.”

“B-But that’s...”

“Think about it. Every country in the world is drooling to get their hands on more cores. If we hand them over, it’s just going to create more conflict.”

Chifuyu was right, of course. But keeping the cores would be risky for the Academy. Sensing Maya's discomfort, she continued in a livelier tone, "C'mon, who do you think I am? I'm Brynhildr."

"Yes, ma'am..."

"I can keep a school or two safe." Chifuyu's lips curled upward, "With my life, if need be."



"Ugh, I'm still exhausted... They never even finished their game last night. The RA ended up kicking them out for being too loud. Oh well."

It was the morning after the attack. I was washing my face at the sink in my room.

"Oww..." Every time I moved my body, it ached. According to the examination I'd received after the battle, I had seventeen bruises, a fractured right clavicle, and two broken ribs. *It hurts, but it's not bad enough to go to the hospital. And besides, I have things I need to do today.* First was the school festival with Ran at St. Marianne's, and then the dinner at the hotel with Houki. *I should double-check where I'm going to need to transfer.*

Knock, knock.

"Mm?" Hearing someone at the door, I called back as I continued washing my face. "Who is it?"

"It's me!"

Oh, Ms. Yamada. It seemed like she was in a good mood today. Must've had a good breakfast. Today's special was the egg with natto over rice, and that was some good stuff. I couldn't really understand why Cecilia poked at it like she couldn't believe it was food.

"Orimura!"

"Yes?"

"It's almost time for your debriefing!"

"...Huh?" Did she just say 'debriefing'?

“It starts in twenty minutes, so come to the counselor’s office.”

“Umm... I really have to go somewhere...”

“What? No, that’s no good. We can’t write up the report if we don’t know what happened, so we’re going to need everyone with their own IS there.”

“Uhh... How long is it going to take?”

“Oh, not long! Only two hours!”

Wait, what. Two whole hours?

“And what happens if I opt out?”

“Confinement.”

“By who?”

“By the secret service.”

Welp.

“And probably some personal lessons from Ms. Orimura after.”

Personal lessons... Like the ‘sparring’ that leaves students knocked out cold? I’d heard about it from someone caught spending the night off-campus, and they’d described it as ‘Hell on Earth.’ I definitely didn’t want the opportunity to find out if that was true.

“So, then. Be sure to be on time.”

“Okay...”

Finished, Ms. Yamada pattered off with short steps. Well, this was a mess. *I guess I should text Ran. She might be angry about it. So I’d better apologize.*

“Haaah...” Just as a sigh left my lips, I heard another knock. “Ms. Yamada?”

“U-Um...”

I opened my door, revealing Kanzashi.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Well... Um...”

“Oh, did you want to go to the debriefing together?”

“Y-Yeah...”

As I watched Kanzashi, wondering what was making her so nervous, she suddenly glared at me. Oh, right, she said she really didn't like it when guys stared.

“Hold on, let me get my blazer.”

“Okay...” Kanzashi swallowed nervously and nodded. She really had changed a lot since we first met. For the better, in my opinion.

“Sorry about that. Let's go.”

“Mmm...”

Leaving my room, we walked side by side. It was just before nine in the morning.

“Yesterday sure was a mess, wasn't it. You feeling okay?”

“Mostly. What about you, I-Ichika?” For some reason, she had a hard time calling me by my first name. I didn't really get it, it's not like it's hard to pronounce or anything.

“Yeah, mostly.” That... Was close enough. I was still ambulatory, at least.

“How about Tatenashi?”

Kanzashi had refused to leave her side at the hospital, so she should know.

“My sister... They're going to keep her under observation for a while.”

Meaning, she's hospitalized. I should remember to bring her something. But what?

“Does she have any hobbies?”

“Hmm... Shogi, I guess.”

“Wow, that's pretty old-school.”

The problem was, it wasn't exactly something she could do alone. And I'd just get in the way if I hung around the room. So I needed to think of something else. While I was brainstorming, Kanzashi spoke up, a bit louder than usual, “A-Are...Are you worried about my sister?”

“Huh? I was just thinking I’d bring her a get-well present.”

“A get-well present?”

“She’s gotta be bored out of her mind lying in that bed, right?”

“Ah... Right, that...” Kanzashi was visibly relieved. *Huh, what’s up with her?*

“Kendama.”

“Eh?”

“A kendama would be good. She always liked playing with those...”

Huh. That wasn’t what I would have expected.

“Okay, that and... Maybe knitting needles?”

“She’s terrible at knitting.”

“Wow, I didn’t think she was bad at *anything*.”

That was the real surprise, though. I could barely even imagine her messing up knitting.

“It’s like you said. There is no hero. No one’s perfect...”

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

People aren’t perfect. They can’t do everything. They’re weak. They’re fragile. But that’s why they want to become stronger. So that they can smile. So that they can make someone else smile.

“I’m going to bring her a book...”

“Oh, I see. Then I’ll go with the kendama. And hey, maybe it’s a good opportunity for her to finally learn to knit.” Honestly, I just wanted to see her face when she was put on the spot like that.

“Ichika...”

“Hm?”

“You meanie...”

“Aww, c’mon. I just wanted to get mine in, for once. Turnabout is fair play.”

“Hahaha...” She smiled, maybe imagining me teasing Tatenashi for once.

Walking together with her, I smiled too. The hallways were nearly empty. It was almost beginning to feel like something from a movie.

“Um...”

“Mm?”

“H-H-Here...” Kanzashi handed me a paper bag she’d been holding since she’d arrived at my room.

“What is it?”

“T-Take a look...”

“Okay.” I unfolded the top and peeked inside. It was a stack of DVDs. Magical girl anime, mecha anime, romance anime, and... Hero anime. “Oh, hey, I think I saw this one.”

“W-Which?”

“This one here— Whoa!” At the same time as I had started pulling it out, Kanzashi had leaned in closer to get a look. Our faces had come almost close enough to touch, and noticing, I nervously pulled away.

“S-Sorry!”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

Looking at her up close made me realize just how much softer, more tender she seemed now. Honestly, she was kinda cute.

“I-If you don’t mind... I’d like you to watch them...”

“Sure. They look interesting, I’ll give them a watch later.” While I evened the stack in the bag up a bit, I asked her something I’d been curious about for a while, “So, that’s what it takes to get your interest?”

“Eh...?” She sounded shocked. I was still looking in the bag, so I couldn’t see her face. “Y-Yeah... It is...”

“Huh.”

“.....”

“Okay, all sorted. Well, I was the one that mixed them up to begin with

anyway.”

“.....”

“Kanzashi? What’s up?” Her face was glowing red, and she was staring at the floor, the folds of her skirt bunched up in her hands.

“Um...”

“Yeah?”

Kanzashi took a deep breath and looked up. Suddenly she shouted, “I... I CAN’T STOP THINKING ABOUT—”

As it echoed through the halls, girls popped their heads out of classrooms. Noticing them, she mumbled a quick “A-Anyway!” and ran off before she could attract any more attention.

“What was that about?”

Left behind, I set off for the counselor’s office myself, still carrying the bag.



I... I said it... Kanzashi ran through the halls, her face red up to the tips of her ears. Ichika, who had changed my life. Ichika, who saved me. Ichika, who made me strong. I can’t stop thinking about him. Not after yesterday.

This was the first time she’d ever been in love, and she didn’t know what to do. Her head was spinning like a top. *I... I’m not a weirdo, right? I didn’t do anything weird, did I?* She ran through her memories.

“.....Ah.”

She thought back to the second time they’d met, when she slapped him hard across the face. Looking back on it, it was a fatal mistake. *I... I need to apologize to him for that...*

When she did, he’d probably just go ‘Oh, no big deal’ or something. But still. Still. She wouldn’t feel right if she didn’t.

But I really don’t want to go right back to him after I just did that... That was a once-in-a-lifetime love confession. She absolutely couldn’t look him in the eye again so soon after. And...

She hadn't actually said she wanted to go out with him. She'd just said what she was thinking. So there was no reason for him to have any reply to it. Plus, all the other girls called him 'the granite blockhead, Orimura Ichika.' *Still... I told him I couldn't stop thinking about him...* The red glow of her face only deepened as her frustration with herself grew.

"Wait..." Something wasn't quite right. She recalled their conversation.

"So, that's what it takes to get your interest?"

"Y-Yeah... It is..."

"Huh."

She stopped dead in her tracks, suddenly realizing something. *Let's look at this one more time, from the start.*

We were talking about anime.



"So, that's what it takes to get your interest?"



"Y-Yeah... It is..."



"Huh."

Waaaaaait. Could he have heard it more as...

"Y-Yeah... These are the kind of shows I'm interested in..."

He could have. He must have. Kanzashi screamed silently. She wanted to crawl in a hole and die. Instead, she took off running again.



"Sigh..."

Meanwhile, in the student council meeting room of St. Marianne's Junior Academy for Girls. Ran, clad in a mostly-black uniform, let out her seventeenth sigh of the day. She was in the president's seat, but rather than sitting tall and imperious, she was slumped forward over the desk.

“What’s wrong, Prez?”

“Why do you look so down? C’mon, today’s the school festival.”

The other members, her friends, were clustered around her in concern, as she rasped out a reply as if her soul had floated away from her body.

“The person I invited...”

“Ooh! Who is it? Who’d you invite? Your boyfriend?!”

“It’s complicated...”

“Anyway, what happened?”

“He’s going to be late...” Ran sighed.

“That’s okay, though. Just means you have to wait a little longer.”

“It’s not like he’s standing you up or anything.”

“Yeah, but...”

“How late, anyway?”

“Two hours...” Meaning, there’s no way he could make the morning session.

“He can just come during the afternoon. It lasts ‘til three, that’s plenty of time.”

“It’s too bad it ends that early. I wish it was longer, and we could go until the evening and have a bonfire and stuff.”

“There’s no way they’d let us do that. The rules are way too strict here.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Ran sighed again. Twenty, now. Already resigned but still somehow hoping, Ran looked back at the text from Ichika.

[Soz. I’m gonna be a little late, school rules. I’ll be there around noon, prob.]

I wanted to show him around all morning... On the other hand, noon had its own appeal. Everyone would be gathered on the terrace for lunch. There was no doubt that she’d be enjoying the meal bathed in envious stares. *And just like that, the rumors will start to go around that he’s my boyfriend...* Just as she was exulting, her phone began to vibrate again.

“A text— Ah!” She barely caught herself before she could yell ‘It’s from

Ichika!’ Ran had kept who she had invited a closely-guarded secret, even from her friends. *I wonder what it is? Will he be here early?* Excitedly, she pressed the button to open it.

[Soz again. The debriefing’s starting back up after lunch. I’m gonna be another two hours or so late.]

“Eh...?”

Ran froze in shock for a moment. *Wh... What’s a debriefing? And... And he’s going to be even later...* The worst part was the ‘two hours.’ If he was planning on noon and now he was going to be two hours later than that, she’d only have an hour to show him around. And it would be the last hour, the one where everyone was more focused on cleaning up than anything else.

Tears began to well up in Ran’s eyes as she looked at her phone. *Ichika, you... You...* She jerked upright and yelled out, “YOU IDIOOOOOOT!”



“Oh... Man...”

I’d sprinted all the way from the station to the gates of St. Marianne’s. It was 2 o’ clock on the dot. Pulling my phone out, I quickly dialed Ran. ***Ring... Ring...***

Huh? She’s not picking up... That was weird. I looked down to make sure I had the right number, and yep, it said Gotanda Ran right there.

Ah. As I made my way through the gate and toward a statue of the saint herself, I saw Ran sitting on a bench under it.

“Hey, Ran! Hey!”

Hearing me, she looked up— —And frowned.

“Huh?” As I made my way toward her, she stood up and walked away. “Wait, c’mon, Ran! What’s wrong?!”

I started after her, but was blocked by a woman in a nun’s habit.

“Do you have an invitation?”

“Of course. Um...” I fished through my pockets. I’d been sprinting all the way from IS Academy, so it had gotten pretty crumpled in my pants pocket.

She glanced back and forth suspiciously between me and the invitation. After two minutes of silent interrogation, she relented, “Very well.”

Taking my invitation back from the nun, I ran off after Ran.

“No running in the school!”

“S-Sorry!” The nun shouted back at me as I sped off. I slowed it down to a power walk that was nearly a jog. “Jeez...”

But St. Marianne’s during its school festival was a sea of girls in black blazers. I’d completely lost sight of Ran. *They’re all staring at me, aren’t they...* Clumps of three or four began to coalesce around me, keeping their distance. *I feel like an animal at the zoo...*

It reminded me of when I’d started at IS Academy. Stares. Stares. A driving rain of stares. *So this is what it means to be in the hot seat...* I sighed. Now what was I supposed to do?

“Hey, check him out!”

“Wow, yeah. I wonder if he’s here alone.”

“He looks familiar for some reason.”

“Ah! It’s him! That’s Orimura Ichika! We saw him on TV!”

“Seriously? No way! What’s he doing here?!”

“Someone must have invited him. But he’s alone now.”

“We should go talk to him.”

“Ahh! He’s coming this way!”

The girls’ whispering was reaching a fever pitch. Nervously, I approached the nearest group of girls and asked, “Um, do you have a second?”

“**Of course! What is it?!**” they answered in unison. What the heck was going on here?

“Um... Do you know Gotanda Ran from the junior school? I think she’s the student council president.”

“Of course! We do!”

“Do you know where I can find her? She isn’t answering her phone.”

“Beats me.”

Well, that was expected. Instead, I asked them to show me to the student council’s meeting room.

“H-How about we show you around instead?”

“Eh?”

I could feel a stare begin to burn a hole through me. *Huh? Is someone looking at me?* It didn’t feel like girlish curiosity. It felt like their eyes were drilling holes in the back of my head. *Could that be...* I had an idea of who it might be, and I spoke up loudly to make sure they could hear.

“Oh, that’s a good idea. I can’t find the person who invited me, so I’m just going to have to spend the afternoon with you instead!”

“Really?!” The smiles of the three girls suddenly brightened. Ugh... I felt like a total dick.

“AHHHHH!” I could hear footsteps from behind as a girl came running. It was Ran. “I-Ichika! Sorry to keep you waiting! C’mon, let’s go! We don’t have much time!”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the trio. Yep, it had definitely been her watching. No, stalking, really. I put my hands together, miming an apology to the other girls.

Ran walked quickly, dragging me away. We were in the school building now, but I was still getting the silent treatment.

“Hey, Ran. Heeeeey.”

“.....”

“Are you mad I was late? I’m sorry.”

“It’s not that, I just...” I’d hoped she was finally opening up, but she just mumbled while scowling.

As for the school festival, well, St. Marianne’s was a girls’ school just like IS Academy, and the students were doing a lot of the same things. *But compared*

to the state-of-the-art IS Academy, this school feels like it has a history. The windows were tall, like those in a church, letting in beams of sunlight. The floor and walls were a calm, stolid beige.

“Wow, Gotanda has her boyfriend with her.”

“That must be nice. I’m jealous.”

“I always thought she was too much of a stick in the mud for that.”

I could hear pieces of conversations as we passed the other girls. They must really like to talk about that kind of thing.

“Oh, there’s a takoyaki stand. Want some, Ran? My treat.”

“...Crêpes.”

“Eh?”

“I’d like a crêpe.”

“Ohh. Let’s find somewhere that has ’em, then.” I might have just been imagining things, but it seemed like Ran’s mood was brightening the more attention she attracted. “By the way, can you let go of my hand now.”

“No!”

“Huh, why?”

“Because you still haven’t shown any contrition for being late!”

“Listen, I had to—”

“Men shouldn’t make excuses!” Ugh, that was pretty harsh. “So this is to make you think about what you did wrong.”

As she spoke, she let go of my hand, only to wrap her arm around mine. Huh? Why did I have to be contrite, anyway? I couldn’t figure it out.

“Anyway, let’s go.”

She was suddenly stiff and formal, kicking her leg up with each step like a tin soldier on the march.

“Ran.”

“Y-Yeps?!”

“Aren’t you overdoing it?”

“I-I am not!”

Really. You sure?

“Oh well. Let’s find some crêpes.”

“Y-Yes!”

She was finally back to herself, and her smile shone like the sun. For the next hour, until the end of the festival, we walked arm-in-arm.



“I’m terribly sorry, sir. But our dress code bans such... Gauche attire.”

“...Eh?” On the top floor of the Teresia, I was turned away by a middle-aged maître d’. “Uh, umm, what should I do then?”

“Ah, yes. You could return wearing a suit or a tuxedo.”

“I don’t even own one of those...”

This was... Bad. Really bad. The ticket wasn’t enough to get me in. I wished the Mayuzumi sisters had actually told me about that.

“Perhaps you could purchase one at the menswear shop on the third floor.”

“Um... What’s the cheapest one they have?”

“I believe... In the range of 100,000 yen.”

Gah. That was definitely out of a high schooler’s budget. I wondered what was going to happen with Houki. Women probably needed to be wearing an evening gown to get in, too.

“What seems to be the problem?”

I heard an unexpected voice from behind me. Turning to see who it was, I found a woman in just such a formal dress.

“Ahh, Miss Meusel.” The waiter turned to her and bowed.

She was quite tall, with flowing blonde hair. A real beauty, with ample breasts, a thin waist, and alluring hips. She wore a violet dress like she was born with it. The very picture of sophisticated charm.

“Is there some kind of problem?”

“I was simply explaining the dress code—and how he fails to meet it—to the young man.”

“Oh, come on. Why don’t you let the poor thing in?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but even at your request...”

“Well, well. I suppose there’s no other choice.” The woman, Meusel, tapped a finger on her chin, and turned to me. “Let’s go, then.”

“Huh? Go where?”

“Shopping. I’ll buy you an outfit.”

“Really?! I can’t impose like that!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I enjoy spoiling younger men.”

That was, uh, definitely an interesting hobby. As I was thinking, she linked arms with me.

“Which floor was the menswear shop, again?”

“The third floor.”

“Thank you.”

Eh? Is this real life?

“Um...”

She giggled. I wanted to say something, but before I could, she started walking. It was like being caught up in a sudden storm.

“Why, it looks perfect on you!”

“Th-Thanks.”

I was nervous trying on a real tuxedo for the first time in a shop full of expensive suits. *Wait. Isn’t this crazy expensive?* I tried to get a peek at the price tag, but Meusel stopped me. I was pretty sure I saw five zeroes, though.

“I... I really can’t accept this, you know.”

“You’re still worried about the price? How adorable.”

“I mean, I’m sure you’re just trying to be nice, but... Why?”

“Oh? Do I need a reason to help someone?”

I melted before her bewitching smile.

“Umm...”

Ugh. My heart was pounding.

“I suppose, if you need a reason. It’s for the satisfaction?”

“Satisfaction?”

“Yes. Satisfaction. If I help a young man who’s down on his luck, he’ll be grateful. That’s satisfying. If nothing else, it flatters my vanity and my ego. You know?” She winked, and I could tell she was joking.

She must have actually just wanted to help me. I couldn’t tell if I was more impressed with her grace or her cleavage, but something about her definitely made me like her. *So this must be what they mean when they call a lady a fox.* The more I thought about it, the more my pulse raced.

“Oh my. Your tie’s all crooked.”

I reached down to fix it, but before I could, she had stretched out her own hand.

“Th-Thanks.”

“Now see? Isn’t that better? Now you just need—”

“Miss Meusel. Your order.”

“Excellent timing.”

Thinking back, I had noticed she was on the phone talking to someone before I went into the dressing room. And now, a florist wearing an apron arrived in the shop. I could tell it was a florist because they had a bouquet of roses in their hands.

“Thank you. Send the bill to the usual place.”

“Of course. We look forward to your next order.” The florist bowed and left. Taking the bouquet, Meusel sniffed it and nodded. “They’re perfect. Here you

go.”

“Eh?”

She handed it to me. It must have been at least 20 roses, and it was heavier than I expected.

“Your date must be waiting for you, right? Be a gentleman. Bring her flowers to apologize.”

“Ahh...”

“Anyway, you should get going. It isn’t right to keep a girl waiting. The world moves twice as fast for women, you know.”

“Uh, can you give me your number or something? So I can pay you back?” For a fifth time, I asked, not wanting to take the tuxedo and the flowers for free. But she simply smiled and waved me away, as if telling me to hurry up. *What should I...* I looked at the clock as I worried. *Oh crap! I’m almost an hour late!*

“S-Sorry! I’ll get going! Thank you so much!”

“I will accept your gratitude, though.”

“Can I at least have your first name?”

She grinned and answered, “Squall. Squall Meusel.”

Squall, huh. I should remember that name.

“Thanks again! Goodbye!”

“Yes. Perhaps we’ll meet again, Orimura Ichika.”

I walked to the elevator as fast as I could without wrinkling my tuxedo. *Wait...*

“Did I tell her my name?”

While I was trying to remember, the elevator’s bell chimed as I reached the top floor. I had to hurry up and find Houki!



Houki sat, nervously, at a window seat with a panoramic view of the night sky. The reason for her anxiety was her clothing.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but our dress code requires an evening gown.”

With that, the maître d' had supplied one. This was the reality of a female-dominated society. Men were simply cleared out of the lobby, told to come back after shopping, but for women, the restaurant would supply something proper.

I wonder if I look right in it... She was wrapped in a pure white gown, elegant and refined. The last time she'd worn something like this was during the production of *Cinderella* at the school festival. Then, she'd been so focused on winning the right to room with Ichika that she didn't have time to worry about how light and flimsy Western eveningwear was.

For me, it's kimono all the way. They were simply the most functional clothing in the world. At least in her mind. While she was lost in thought, a voice came from behind her, "Sorry, Houki. I'm late."

"You sure are, Ichika! What have you been—"

Houki needed to let her frustration out. She stood up, turning to scold him—and the world froze around her.

"Yo." Ichika, clad in a tuxedo, was head to toe in black. He looked fashionable. Suave, even.

He looks amazing... The words she'd chosen to lash out with fell from her mind. Instead, she simply stared as he handed her the bouquet.

"Here. For you."

"R-Roses? Red roses...?"

As she took her first-ever, oh-so-romantic, red flowers from a man, Houki wasn't sure if she was awake or dreaming. *I-Ichika was late, and I was mad and couldn't calm down, but then he suddenly shows up and gives me roses...* She couldn't understand what was going on. She stood, lost in confusion, until a gentlemanly older waiter helped her to her seat.

"Welcome to our dinner table." He bowed, and Houki and Ichika each returned a nod half a beat later. "Tonight, we'll be serving a prix fixe menu. As you're underage, we will not be serving drinks. Instead, you'll be having bottled mineral water."

Nervously, not really understanding what was going on, the two nodded. The waiter continued his explanation, and finally, when it was over, they sighed in relief.

“This... This definitely isn’t our kind of place.”

“Yeah. It’s like we’re not really supposed to be here.”

The surrounding clientele were all adults. Adults, and obviously from the upper crust.

Still... Houki looked at the bouquet resting on the table, and then to Ichika in his tuxedo. He looked so much more mature than usual. He looked... If she had to pick a word for it, ‘fabulous.’ *It’s not fair. Why does he look so good in formal clothing?* He did as a butler during the school festival, too. Somehow, he was just really good at that look. *He must look totally out of my league.* Houki glanced down at her own gown. It looked as out-of-place on her as it felt compared to a kimono. She slumped slightly at the thought.

“Houki.” Anxiously, she looked up. “About your dress—”

“.....!”

She cringed, sure he was about to say it looked weird on her. That it didn’t suit her at all. Her heart pounded as she imagined what he was about to say.

“I like it. It looks good on you.”

“Ah.....”

Ba-dum. Her heart leapt.

“O-Oh. That’s good.” She cleared her throat, trying to act nonchalant. But she could feel her pulse pound, her chest ache, and her face turn red.

I’m lucky the lighting’s so dim... She couldn’t even taste the food which began arriving, course after course. Just looking at Ichika made her heart pound so hard that it was a wonder she could swallow.

“Wow, I knew this place was ritzy, but it lives up to the hype. Everything’s all so good.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right.”

I can't even taste it! It's your fault, Ichika! Houki glared.

"Mm?"

Seeing his worry, Houki blushed beet-red. He was so wonderful, so amazing, she couldn't stand to look him in the face. *Now... I've got to do it now... Got to tell him how I feel!* She had the will, but not the courage. Nervously, she picked up her glass and downed it in a single gulp.

"I-I-Ichika!"

"What?"

"I-I..."

Blood rushed to her head in a burst of exhilaration and tension. Her heart raced like a malfunctioning engine, and no matter how hard she willed it to slow down it wouldn't.



Say it! Say it! She clenched her fists hard enough to be painful, but she didn't notice.

"Ichika, I—" Just as the words 'like you' were about to leave her mouth, the strength drained from her body. "...Hwuh?"

The world spun around her. She wondered why, how, what had happened. The world narrowed, faded around her like the screen of a tube TV that was suddenly unplugged.

"Uh, Houki?" Ichika called out, concerned, as she collapsed into her chair. Unable to put his worries to rest from across the table, he stood up and walked over to Houki. "Houki, you okay? Houki?"

"Bwuh... Isshikuh..."

"Whoa, what's going on? I can smell liquor on your breath."

"Whaa? Tha'ssh abshurd..." she slurred as she batted at Ichika. "I'll, *hic*, I'll show you..."

"Whoa, stop! Stop hitting me!"

"Nyahahahaha...."

Wondering what was happening, the waiter rushed over and immediately inquired, "What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm not really sure, either... She had a drink of water, and then she suddenly got like this."

"Water? Excuse me for a moment." The waiter lifted her empty glass and sniffed. "Who served this table alcohol?!"

"Alcohol?!"

"Booze..."

"It was me, sir!"

"You again! How many times do I have to tell you to make sure you have the right table!" The waiter raged, the *débarrasseur* bowed his head apologetically. Houki wavered drunkenly, and Ichika sighed.



A dream. Alone, I waited in a field of flowers. For something. What, I was unsure, but something important. No, I knew what... My prince.

“_____”

I heard my name, and responded.

“Get on.” The prince held out his arm, and pulled me up, onto his horse. As I wrapped my arms around him, my heart raced. “Let’s go.”

To where? I didn’t ask. Anywhere was fine. Anywhere in the world. As long as it was you. I held tight. His warmth, the feel of his pulse, filled me with joy.

“Houki...”

The wind rushed by us.



“Mmmmm....”

I could feel something tighten around me.

“Guh! Stop squeezing my neck, Houki!”

Houki was drunk, and I was carrying her home to IS Academy on my back. I’d managed to convince the restaurant to let me return the dress tomorrow, but it was still a looooong walk home. *I’m in a tux, and she’s in an evening gown...* It looked almost like we were coming back from a ball. And the smiles that welled up onto her face from time to time were drawing stares from passersby.

“Phew... I’m exhausted. Today was just too much.”

Not really in a bad way, though. *She was beautiful in that dress.* I thought about her, as she snored away on my back. Put her in a different outfit, and my childhood friend shined. Even if I was a bit biased.

“Ichika...”

“Hmm? You awake now?”

“Yesh.”

Ugh. She was still drunk. She probably wasn’t even really aware of what was

going on.

“C’maawwn.”

“I can’t even tell what you’re saying.”

“Mmm...”

“Should I get you some water?”

“Lie... Queue...”

Huh? Was she dreaming about waiting in line or something?

“Houki?”

“Zzzzzz...”

Welp, she was back asleep again. Jeez.

“All right, Takatsuki. The rest is up to you.”

I’d finally made it back to the first year dorms at IS Academy, and handed Houki over to her roommate. I was sure there’d be rumors flying tomorrow morning about me carrying her home— I’d tried not to be spotted, but a few girls had seen us anyway.

I need a shower. As I walked back to my room to take one, I ran into Chifuyu.

“What on earth is that outfit, Orimura?”

“Ah, I simply enjoyed a night at the opera.”

Smack. A karate chop bounced off my head.

“That hurt.”

“You deserve it for lying.”

How could she tell? Wait, there was something I needed to ask her. Luckily, the hall was empty. I stepped closer, and with a serious look on my face, initiated, “Chifuyu.”

“Call me Ms. Orimura.”

“It... It’s about our family.” It was hard to bring myself to say. Since our parents had abandoned us, family was a taboo subject... But I still had to ask.

“Do... Do we have any other family?”

Her expression changed. My question was met with a silent scowl as tenseness washed over her.

“Like maybe, another sister...”

“No.”

“But...”

There was someone who looked just like her.

“You’re the only family I have.”

“Chifu—”

Seeing that I wasn’t going to back off, she spun and strode away. As if her back was telling me the conversation was over. Confused, I stood rooted to the spot until she disappeared from my sight.

Epilogue: On a Beautiful Moonlit Night

A single display shone like a torch inside a room swallowed up by darkness. Under its flickering glow, machinery of unknown use gleamed. It was a scene almost like a witch's coven.

"Hmm... All right, it's finally coming online." The room's owner idly spoke to herself out loud. Her face, floating in the darkness, was that of Shinonono Tabane.

"I wasn't expecting all the Golem IIIs to be destroyed," she hummed to herself as she manipulated an IS core. An unregistered core—that is, one she'd built herself. She was the only one who could.

"I guess it makes sense. Even a piloted IS can't reach its full potential at first, so a drone must be even beneath that."

The manufacture of unmanned IS. This, too, was a technology that Tabane—and only Tabane—had mastered. If it was revealed, it would cause a worldwide panic. What would happen after that was anyone's guess.

"You've gotten stronger, Houki. Almost like what happened then."

Looking over Houki's biometrics during the Golem III fight, Tabane grinned. Yes. It was all for this. The drone attack was just to get that data, and to draw out Akatsubaki's power. All the damage the attack had caused was just for that.

"I'm surprised, though."

She'd expected that committing so many drones would draw out Chifuyu. The first Brynhildr, in Japan's first-generation IS Kurezakura. Officially, it was listed as missing, but Tabane was sure Chifuyu still had it.

"Hmm..." Tabane tilted her head, her chin in her palm, her eyes as deep as oceans with thought. "Wait, could—"

She suddenly realized. It had seemed like nothing, but the more she thought about it, the more it all added up.

"I see. It must be there, then. Hmm."

An impish grin, like that of a child thinking up a new prank, spread across her face. Just as her eyes gleamed, a girl entered the room. She was short, delicate. Seemingly around 12 years of age. What caught the eye the most was her flowing platinum blonde hair, hanging down to her hips in a thick braid.

Why was it braided? Because Tabane had braided it. Tabane meant the whole world to the girl. Even phrases like ‘she owed Tabane her life’ or ‘Tabane had saved her’ didn’t begin to describe it. The day they met, she had sworn in her heart to be by Tabane’s side forever.

“Tabane.”

“Hey, Kuu. What’s up?”

“I baked bread.” The girl timidly held out a tray. More than half of it was burned to a crisp, but Tabane’s eyes still glimmered.

“Mmm-mmm~ It looks great.”

“You’re lying. It’s terrible.”

Honestly, she didn’t want to serve Tabane her failures at cooking. But Tabane had said ‘girls need to learn to cook something,’ and thus the girl tried her hardest every day, even if all she could produce were ash and goo. And Tabane ate it all, without a hint of a frown. Even as she said it was delicious, the girl felt guilt rather than happiness.

“Hey, Kuu.”

She looked up. Her eyes had been closed since she entered the room. But she had no need for vision, with her own unique ability.

“Can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“You’re always so formal. Too formal. Can’t you call me ‘mommy’ or something?”

Tabane had only one sister. So, from the day she took the girl in, she had thought of her as a daughter.

“Anyway, what is the favor?”

“Well. I need you to make a delivery for me.”

“Of course. Where is it going?”

Tabane smiled as she answered, “The secret complex underneath IS Academy.”

Afterword: Your Own Originality

Hi, it's Yumizuru again. This time, I want to talk about originality. Originality really isn't that tough. You just need to be yourself. And how do you be yourself? By being different from other people. That's your own personality.

Here's an example of what I mean by 'different from other people.' Let's assume there's a really popular book. And you want to write something like it. Like, for IS for example, you'd include aspects like 'high-tech weaponry only women can use,' 'only one guy,' 'school setting,' and 'international cast.' If you just write based on those concepts, you'd think you'd end up with basically IS again, but somehow it doesn't turn out that way. Even if the concepts are the same, the result will be different. That's your own personality shining through.

So if you're looking to win one of the talent searches but you don't know what to write or what other people want to read, the first thing you should do is take a look at what else is on the market. Do what everyone else is doing, do it well, and put your own personality into it. That's enough to catch people's eyes while still standing out from the crowd.

Now, you still need the determination to write a second story if the first doesn't work, a tenth story if the second doesn't work, a hundredth story if the tenth doesn't work.

Personality and determination. Why not put them to use, and enter one of the competitions? I'm waiting for new rivals. Let's do our best.

— Izuru Yumizuru

Subject

Celebration of Vol. 7 Release

Date

: It's not too late!
I can still go to the pool!

Time

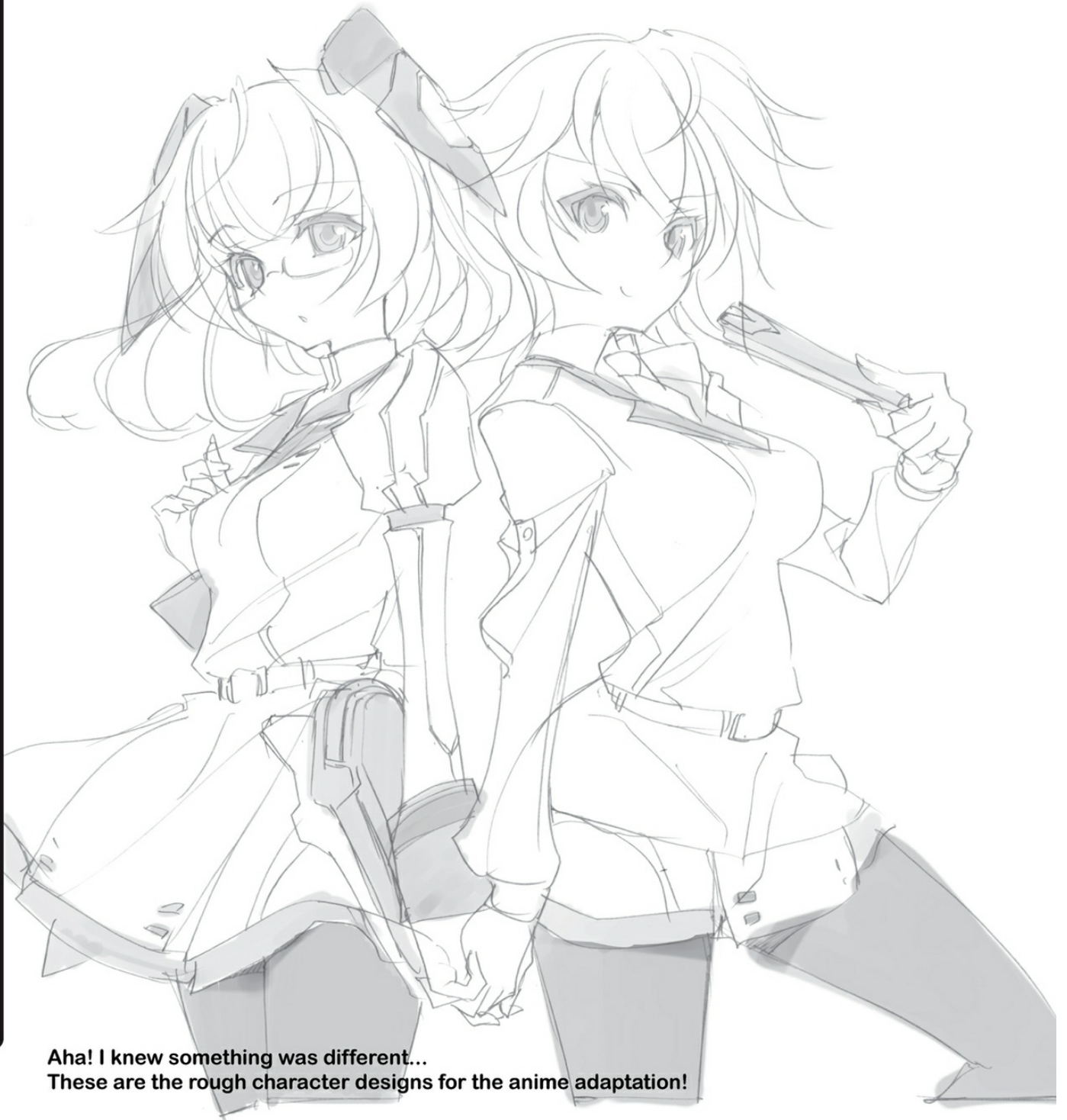
: It's best to do all your
summer homework last minute

Rough Cleanup

Afterword

CHOCO
MUGITANI KOICHI

<http://chocolateshop-float.com>



Aha! I knew something was different...
These are the rough character designs for the anime adaptation!

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Infinite Stratos: Volume 7

by Izuru Yumizuru

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Edited by Meiru

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**INFINITE
STRATOS**

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: **CHOCO**