



CREATED BY
**NAOYA
MATSUMOTO**

NOVEL BY
KEIJI ANDO

KAIJU

NO. 8

**Exclusive
on the
Third Division**

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Exclusive on the Third Division
Story by Naoya Matsumoto and Keiji Ando

TRANSLATION Daniel Huddleston
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KAIJU 8 GO MICCYAKU! DAI 3 BUTAI
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With the highest rate of kaiju emergence in the world, Japan is no stranger to attack by deadly monsters. But that won't prepare Kafka and his compatriots in the Japan Defense Force for their greatest challenge yet—being the subjects of a TV documentary! Will Kafka be able to keep his secrets hidden in front of the camera?



Kafka Hibino



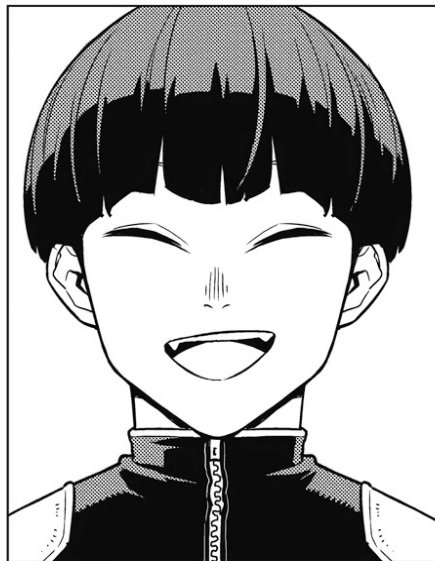
Kaiju No. 8

A cadet in Japan Defense Force Third Division.
Able to transform into a kaiju following contact with a mysterious life-form.



Mina Ashiro

Captain of Japan Defense
Force Third Division.
Kafka's childhood friend.

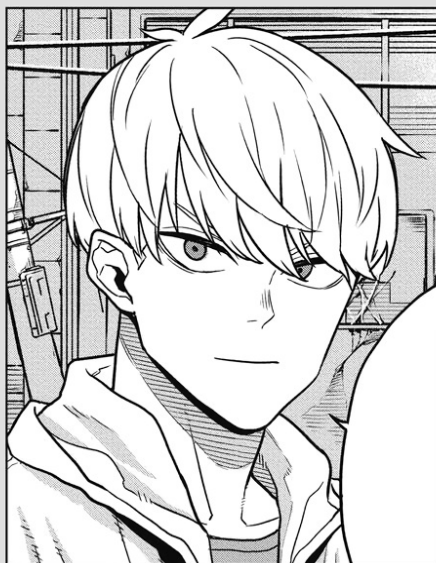


Soshiro Hoshina

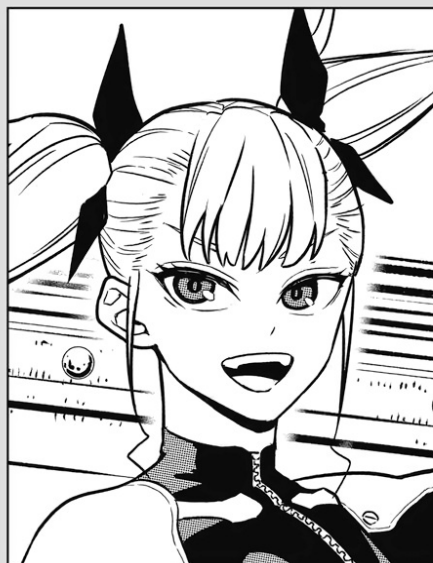
Vice-Captain of Japan Defense
Force Third Division.
Katana specialist.



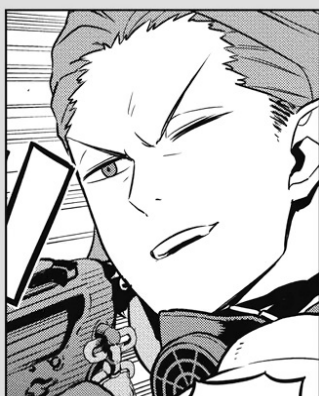
Japan Defense Force Third Division Members



Reno Ichikawa



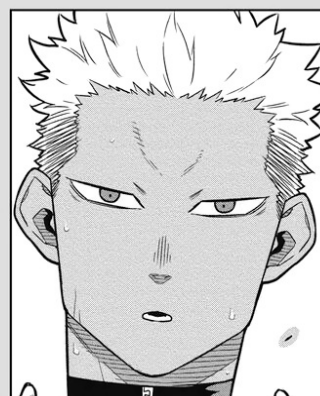
Kikoru Shinomiya



Haruichi Izumo



Iharu Furuhashi



Aoi Kaguragi



Konomi Okonogi



Akari Minase



Hakua Igarashi



KAIJU NO. 8

Exclusive on the
Third Division

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O P E N I N G

OPENING

The time was around 9:00 p.m. Traffic on the main thoroughfare had grown sparse, but a large cluster of young people was walking up the sidewalk. At first glance, they appeared to be a group of college students. A closer look, however, would reveal the densely packed muscle on each of their bodies. These men and women were all in excellent shape.

They were new recruits to the Japan Defense Force's Third Division, which made its headquarters in the city of Tachikawa. Most were still fresh-faced youths in their teens or twenties. One man, however, walking near the very end of the pack, looked for all the world like an instructor taking his students on a field trip. Kafka Hibino, age thirty-two, was this year's oldest successful applicant to the Japan Defense Force, and he was covering his mouth with one hand. His face was pale, and his legs were quivering. "Urp! I think I'm gonna puke."

Reno Ichikawa was the young man that Kafka was leaning on for support. "Didn't I tell you that was too much to drink?" he said.

"The food was great too, though. I just got carried away."

"I'm glad you seem to have enjoyed it," Haruichi Izumo said with a relaxed smile. His father ran the largest domestic producer of anti-kaiju weaponry, but tonight Haruichi had served as organizer of this celebration.

About two weeks ago, a colossal fungal-type kaiju had appeared in

Sagamihara. As their very first mission, Kafka and the other rookies had deployed to neutralize it. Kaiju No. 9 had attacked them, however, and two of the new recruits, Reno and Iharu Furuhashi, had ended up in the hospital. Kafka and the others had waited for their fellow recruits to be released and then taken them out on the town in gratitude for their hard work on their initial mission. Hot sake had flowed, chatter and laughter had reached a fever pitch, and they'd been able to share heartfelt opinions with one another as teammates.

"Uhn. This just might drag into tomorrow." Rubbing his stomach, Kafka gave an agonized moan. Back when he'd worked as a kaiju dismantler, he'd been in the habit of enjoying a nightcap of cheap sake. Part of the problem Kafka was having now was that he'd been laying off the alcohol and tobacco ever since he'd once again set his sights on the Japan Defense Force. Now he couldn't handle nearly as much as he used to.

Kafka's teammates were red-faced, happily conversing, and still caught up in the lingering afterglow of drink. He looked at them, and a blond-haired girl, Kikoru Shinomiya, expelled a "Hmph!" from her nostrils. "Good grief," she said. "Every time the lot of you get together, you end up plastered. Still think you're a bunch of college students?"

Akari Minase, a teammate on good terms with Kikoru, gave her a charming smile. "Oh, come on, Kiko-baby. We haven't had a chance to let loose like this since we first joined the JDF."

"That may be true, Akari, but—"

"You can join in when you hit twenty." Akari smiled at her. Kikoru turned away, looking embarrassed.

"Yeah, listen to Minase!" someone with the twang of a Kansai accent called out from behind them. The man had slitted eyes and a slender build, and his name was Soshiro Hoshina. He was the vice-captain of the Defense Force's Third Division. Konomi Okonogi, a petite operator wearing round glasses, stood beside him. "You only get busier as the years go by," said Hoshina. "Now is really the only time when everyone who started as recruits together can cut loose like this. Enjoy it while you can."

Hoshina lightly poked Kafka in the back. He was still leaning against Reno. “What’s the matter, Kafka? Can’t even give an answer? How about you run a lap around the perimeter of the base?”

“Wait, Vice-Captain Hoshina! Please, let me off the hook just tonight.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. You can run your laps tomorrow,” Hoshina said.

“You’re not serious!” Kafka whined.

“You can handle that much, General Officer Kafka Hibino.”

Kafka looked up in surprise.

He felt a flutter in his chest at hearing the words “general officer” next to his name. During the selection exam, his suit’s unleashed combat power had been 0 percent, and thus far, he’d been treated as a cadet. Kafka’s achievements at Sagamihara had been recognized for the first time tonight, however, and he’d received notice during the drinking party that he was now being promoted to general officer.

“That said, what you heard from me was advance notice,” said Hoshina. “Your official letter of appointment will come from Captain Ashiro.”

“From Mina.”

“From *Captain Ashiro*.” Hoshina nudged Kafka with his elbow. “This goes without saying, but you’ll still be treated as a cadet until then. And until you get your letter, it’s possible to lose your standing.”

“You watch yourself,” said Kikoru. “I couldn’t bear the sight of you if something like that happened.”

“I know. I appreciate your concern,” said Kafka.

“No biggie. If that happened, we’d be the ones looking like fools for celebrating,” Kikoru replied.

Kafka silently clenched his fist. *But I finally got in.* Joining the Defense Force was a dream he’d had since he was a little boy. For a time, he had nearly given up on it, but then he’d met Reno and gone chasing after it once again. Tonight, that dream had finally come true.

Everyone headed back toward the base. It was while they were taking the bridge across the river that a gust of night wind blew in from upstream. It was a humid wind, and a little muggy for bodies flushed from strong drink.

Kafka scowled unconsciously. A questionable and distinct odor was carried on the wind as well—the stench of blood and meat.

“Hey, wouldja look at that!” Walking ahead, Iharu pointed at the riverbank. Kafka and the others stopped and looked in that direction. A barricade had been raised around one section of the riverbank. In its center lay an enormous fish about two meters in length. This was no ordinary fish. Four muscular limbs were growing from its body. A hole had been blown through its gut, and it wasn’t even twitching.

“That’s a fish-type kaiju, isn’t it?” said Reno. “I wouldn’t want to see that for sale at a seafood place.”

“Me neither,” said Kafka in agreement. “From this time of year on, the corpses’ll rot fast. And the fish types’ll spoil even faster.” Kafka had had experience dismantling a number of fish-type kaiju. It was hellish to even think of taking apart those rotting corpses; the stench came right back to him, as if it were being unleashed deep inside his nostrils. Most likely, this kaiju would be dismantled in the morning, and by rush hour not a fin or scale would remain.

“But this wasn’t here when we were on our way to the restaurant, was it?” asked Kafka.

“A civilian reported it a little while ago,” Hoshina said. “Since Ikaruga Platoon was close by on another job, I had them handle it. Since it’s on the low end of the fortitude scale, there won’t have been any casualties.”

“This happened during the drinking party? At what point did such a—” Kafka stopped midsentence as he answered his own question. He and the other rookies had come to the party dressed casually, wearing tracksuits and the like. But Hoshina and Okonogi had remained in their Defense Force uniforms, even during the celebrating.

So, they were ready to mobilize at a moment’s notice, just in case things went south!

Japan was the world's leader in kaiju-emergence rates—giant monsters had already become commonplace. From the ground, from the mountains, from the rivers, from the lakes, and from the sky—kaiju emerged from all manner of places and inflicted enormous damage.

The Defense Force existed to prevent such damage. Now faced with evidence of an actual kaiju emergence in front of them, the new recruits had a dawning realization of their new identities as Defense Force officers.

Kafka, of course, was also one of those new recruits. A kaiju lay dead on the riverbank. Up until now, he'd been cleaning them up in the role of a dismantler, but now things were different.

That's right. My dream hasn't come true yet. All I've done is put my foot on the starting line.

Kafka quietly let out his breath and moved away from Reno, and said, "Sorry, Ichikawa. That's sobered me up."

"Hold on. You're still wobbly, aren't you?" asked Reno.

"Don't worry, I'm fi— Yikes!"

Kafka had tripped as soon as Reno had spoken, and for a moment it looked like he was about to fall backward and smack his head against the road. Somehow, though, he managed to keep his footing.

"Whoa there, old man!" Iharu said loudly. "Way to hang in there. I thought for sure you were going to land flat on your butt."

"Ha ha ha! A layback worthy of Ina Bauer!" Kafka declared, but his attempt at making a joke earned him only blank stares.

"Huh? Who's Ina Bauer?" Iharu asked the group.

"I dunno," said Reno, tilting his head.

"Oh, I know. She's that figure skater, right?" said Akari.

"What? Guys, what's with that reaction?" Kafka exclaimed. Almost everyone in his generation knew who Ina Bauer was. But judging from the reactions around him, there didn't seem to be many who understood the reference.

Hoshina got serious. He crossed his arms and said in a low tone of voice, “Kafka, there are already folks in their teens and early twenties who’ve never heard of her.”

“Seriously?”

Kikoru, having just looked up Ina Bauer on her smartphone, emitted a half-interested hum. “That was pretty far back, wasn’t it? Around when I was born.”

“*Born?*” Kafka gasped. How could that be when he was a young man himself? At times like this, the age difference between himself and his fellow recruits felt brutal. There was nothing but sadness in being reminded of the generation gap.

When they reached the front of the Defense Force’s main office building, Hoshina stood ahead of the others and looked them all over. “Good night, everyone. Starting tomorrow, it’s back to training as usual. Remember, there’s a sharp line between on-duty and off-duty conduct, so keep a firm hand on the switch. Izumo, I’m charging tonight’s bill to the expense account, so bring it to me for approval tomorrow.”

“Thank you very much, sir! Have a good evening!” Kafka and the rest all bowed toward Hoshina.

“Will do,” said Hoshina. “Oh, and take good care of the TV reporters tomorrow, will you? Night, all.” The officers stared back, dumbfounded at the words Hoshina had so casually lobbed their way as he left.

“Uh, p-please wait a minute,” said Kafka. “Did you just say ‘TV’?”

“Hm?” Hoshina tilted his head. “What, you haven’t been informed?”

“It should have been posted, but...” Okonogi said. Standing next to Hoshina, she pushed up her glasses and proceeded to fill them in. “It’s a special feature for public television. A camera crew will be coming on base to do an in-depth report on all of you.”

“They’ll be filming for five days,” Hoshina continued. “During that time, the crew will walk around the base, observe your training, and so on. Anyway, all you folks need to do is come to morning assembly, do your drills, eat your meals, and go to bed as usual. It’s not really anything to get worked up over. At any rate, be aware that this report will be shown to the public. Embarrass us

too badly, and I just might have to assign some *special* training.” Everyone shuddered at the sight of Hoshina’s indomitable smile. Defense Force training was harsh in the extreme, and more of it could be assigned at the drop of a hat.

The group was dismissed, and on the way back to his room, Kafka thought, *Still, though—it’s television!* As a boy, Kafka’s heart had thrilled to the Defense Force’s exploits whenever they appeared on TV. But since becoming a man, he’d harbored a quiet, melancholy feeling and wondered, *Why aren’t I on the other side of the screen?* For someone like Kafka, appearing on TV as a Defense Force officer was truly something to celebrate. “All right, then, I’ll give it all I’ve got!” he said. As he thrust both fists high in the air like a champion, a voice called out from behind.

“Sir, have you got a minute?”

“Oh, Ichikawa. What’s up?” Kafka took a seat on a bench in the hallway, wondering what Reno had been reluctant to bring up in front of everybody. Was it something embarrassing?

“Mr. Hibino, a little while back, you moved away from me and nearly fell over backward, remember?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“You were right on the verge of slipping up and having a partial transformation, weren’t you?” Ichikawa asked.

Kafka’s heart skipped a beat. The not-yet-neutralized Kaiju No. 8 that had society in an uproar was in fact Kafka Hibino. He had been hiding the fact that he could change into a kaiju, and the only ones who knew the truth were Reno and Kikoru. “No, what are you talking about?” Kafka deflected.

“*Right. On. The. Verge.* Weren’t you?” Reno pressed.

Faced with the incisive follow-up, Kafka’s eyes cast about for something else to focus on. He tried to think of a way to gloss over what had happened, but he was unable to lie to Reno’s dead-serious glare. “W-well, just for a minute there. I was a little tipsy. It was a reflex. But nothing really happened, so—”

“Oh? Nothing really happened?” Reno asked demandinglly.

“I-Ichikawa!” Kafka shouted.

“Were you listening to what the vice-captain said just now? You’re gonna be on television, sir. *Television!* Starting tomorrow! Do you realize what’ll happen if you get outed in front of the camera?”

“Hmph! Ichikawa, you’re not giving me enough credit!” Kafka insisted. “I’m training myself to control the transformation. As long as nothing serious happens, there’s no way I’m gonna change this time!”

“I wouldn’t call that reassuring from the guy who nearly transformed just from getting drunk,” Reno said.

“Kafka Hibino, he’s exactly right.” Kikoru had appeared on Kafka’s other side and was staring right at him. “This isn’t like the base or in town. If you change in front of the camera, we can’t cover for you. You won’t just be stripped of your position as a general officer in the force, you’ll be captured and slated for neutralization.”

“I-I know that!” Kafka insisted. “With the training I’ve done recently, I’ve finally learned to control it. It’s not like before, when I’d transform if I so much as sneezed.”

“Kafka,” said Kikoru, “you were transforming if you sneezed!”

“Well, only when I first started transforming.” Kafka scratched the back of his head in embarrassment and gave a weak laugh as Kikoru stood shocked to her core with her eyes wide.

“Reno. Is this idiot really okay?” Kikoru asked.

“I’d like to think so.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ichikawa! Kikoru!” Kafka’s voice cracked a little. “I’m finally set to be recognized as a general Defense Force officer. I am *not* going to screw up something like that!”

Reno and Kikoru looked at one another doubtfully.

For twenty-seven raw recruits and a single cadet, tumultuous days of TV coverage were about to begin.

CHAPTER 1

New Recruit—Reno Ichikawa

1

Morning came early for the defense squad. At 6:00 a.m., the sound of the wake-up bugle rang out through the barracks at Tachikawa Base. Reno sat up in bed the moment he heard it. Soft morning sunlight was shining through a gap in the curtains.

This isn't the hospital. Oh, that's right. I'm back at defense. He had less than five minutes to get ready for work. Reno quickly folded his futon. Each squad would be having their morning assemblies next, so he had to hurry to get dressed.

"Ahriiight! Mornin' already?" Iharu, who'd been asleep in the bed next to Reno, leapt out of his futon. He snored late at night, but he woke up with exceptional ease.

"It's been quiet around here but looks like things're about to get rowdy again." So said a grimacing Haruichi, grooming his hair in front of the sink and mirror. Five minutes not being enough time for the task, he'd apparently gotten up before reveille.

Aoi Kaguragi, a young man with a light-tan complexion, made his bed with the experienced hand one would expect of an ex-JGSDF member. Neat, crisp, and not a wrinkle to be found.

At the sight of these teammates with whom he barracked, Reno, too, felt a swell of eagerness surging up inside. He was ready to get back to work. He'd

spent two weeks slowly recuperating in a hospital room—of course, even there he'd kept up his studies—but there was no question that his fellow recruits had been steadily improving their skills during the same period. Reno knew he had to catch back up to them.

And above all, that race through the obstacle course is waiting for us tomorrow.

Reno had received notice from Hoshina earlier about the obstacle course. It was a form of training where they'd suit up and compete for the best time doing target practice among a throng of abandoned buildings. From what he had heard, new recruits tended to do poorly.

Still, amid these circumstances, there was one individual who had still not gotten out of bed.

"Mr. Hibino, are you doing all right?" Reno looked at Kafka in the next bed over. Although Kafka was sitting up, his futon still wasn't even folded. Kafka's brow was furrowed, and he was holding his head and moaning.

"Unghh, my head's killing me."

"What's the matter, old man? Hangover?" asked Iharu.

"It's 'cause I'd been laying off the sauce since I joined the force." Kafka explained wearily. "Hits hard when it's been a while."

"Please, pull yourself together. The TV coverage is starting today."

"Oh yeah, that's right! All right, then. Time to get serious." Kafka got out of bed and immediately belched, vomited, and went pale.

At this point, Reno was getting a very bad feeling.

Last night, it was probably for the best that I had that ready.

After the squad-level morning assemblies were done, each member had rotating cleaning duties. Reno, together with Haruichi, were in charge of cleaning the men's restrooms.

"Hey, Reno, you've known Kafka since before he joined the Defense Force, right?" asked Haruichi.

“That’s right. I’ve known him since I was a part-time kaiju dismantler.”

“So that’s why you call him ‘mister’ and ‘sir’,” eh? Still, it’s kind of misleading for the rest of us.”

Reno was puzzled. “What?” he asked.

“I mean, the past is what it is, and yes, he is older, but now that you’ve entered the Defense Force together, there’s no seniority for either of you.”

“Well, that’s true, I guess.” Haruichi certainly did have a point. Kafka might be older than him, but he’d joined the force at the same time as the rest, and there were even those like Haruichi who had dropped his honorific. The only one addressing him as a superior now was Reno. From an outsider’s point of view, that *was* misleading, and an open invitation to misunderstandings. For some reason, though, Reno just didn’t feel like dropping the habit of calling him “sir” and “mister.”

2

The division members ate their breakfast in the mess hall, and after that, the morning’s assigned tasks began. Some were carried out at squad level, while all others were tackled by the full division. Today, they had sharpshooting practice on the shooting range.

Each division member was carefully inspecting their weapons when Hoshina, standing in front of them, called out “Attention!” in a loud voice. When they turned their heads, there were people standing there holding cameras and other equipment. Their full force numbered six, and many of them were young, casually dressed in polo shirts and jeans.

“These are the public-broadcasting workers I was telling you about. They’re here to film your training,” Hoshina said.

A friendly-looking man of about fifty came forward and bowed to the division. “I’m the director, Ooka. For the next five days, we’ll be doing in-depth coverage on all of you. We’ll try hard not to get in the way of your training. Also, it’s best for us if you don’t think about the cameras being here at all. Thank you very

much for having us.”

The division members bowed in return and shouted back words of welcome as the cameramen moved to one side and began setting up equipment on the spot. Some of them even had drones like the ones that had been used in the Defense Force selection examination.

Hoshina wasn't done speaking yet. “I've said this in lectures, but providing the citizens with a sense of security is one of our jobs. Be accommodating as much as possible in your interviews,” he said.

“Yes, sir! I'll do my best!” Kafka replied in a loud voice, but Hoshina shook his head.

“No need to push yourself trying to stand out. They're here to shoot scenes of your everyday training. They're also pros, so leave it to them. First and foremost, focus on the drills in front of you—you especially, Kafka.”

“Yessir!”

Standing next to Kafka as he awkwardly replied, Reno's hands tightened on the small firearm he was holding.

That's right. For now, just focus on the training in front of me.

Shooting practice was slated for that morning. They would shoot targets that came out of the abandoned buildings and compete for the best time. It was a simple drill, but it also clearly revealed the differences in people's combat abilities.

As he squeezed the trigger, Reno was remembering the Sagamihara mission. That was when he'd encountered Kaiju No. 9, the identified kaiju that could understand human language. Reno felt that something inside of him had changed a lot since then.

Remember that feeling you had then!

Reno's suit, interwoven with muscle fiber from kaiju, squeezed his body hard, as if in response to his emotions. Using all five senses, he predicted the target's movements.

There!

He took aim at the target through his scope, tightened his abs, steadied his weapon, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet pulverized the target. The feeling Reno had in the instant he fired would tell him whether or not it would hit. Right away, he shifted the sight to the next target.

How was that?

When all the targets were destroyed, Reno's time and the maximum unleashed combat power of his suit would be calculated and delivered to him. It was no surprise that after two weeks his body wasn't moving like he wanted it to, but surprisingly he didn't feel too bad about it.

"Reno Ichikawa. Time: two minutes, nine seconds. Estimated unleashed combat power: 22 percent."

He had finished even faster than he had in the drills before his hospitalization, and his unleashed combat power had gone up as well. For a new recruit, those numbers likely put him in the upper ranks. Even so, Reno wasn't entirely satisfied.

"Hey, Reno, how was your time?"

"Oh, Iharu."

Iharu, who had been shooting beside him, came near. Reno saw the score sheet in his hand: Iharu's time was two minutes and three seconds. His unleashed combat power showed 23 percent. "Ha, how about it? I win again, eh?"

"How was it, Iharu? This was our first drill in a while."

"Huh? Well, I feel like my senses have gotten a little dull."

"Mine too," said Reno. "Nothing at all like *that time*."

According to his operator, Reno's unleashed combat power had briefly exceeded 30 percent during the battle with Kaiju No. 9. Since then, he had never again reached that peak performance, which was why he couldn't feel fully satisfied.

"Next time, I'll do it faster. I'll get that feeling back," said Reno.

"W-what? Well, so will I! I'll finish even faster and win next time!" Iharu

suddenly stuck his face out at Reno. “You listen here, Reno. I’m going to get stronger. And I’m not gonna lose to you!”

“No, Iharu. You don’t compete with me. You compete with the kaiju.”

“Gah! Shut up!” Iharu shouted. “No way am I losing to you!” He strode away carrying his weapon. Watching him go, Reno smiled in spite of himself. Iharu had probably also grasped something in the midst of the battle with No. 9.

“Did you break 20 percent?” Reno turned around to find Hoshina standing there. “Mighty impressive numbers after a two-week blank.”

“It’s not enough,” said Reno. “Everyone else must’ve broken their own records while we were out.”

“That they did,” Hoshina said with a nod. “Shinomiya’s, Izumo’s, and Kaguragi’s growth has been remarkable, but there’s more. It isn’t just you new recruits—your seniors are really giving it their all too. The whole force is coming together really well.”

That was when a distant voice rang out with a powerful battle cry: “Graaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Hoshina heard it and sighed. “Well, there is one fella whose unleashed combat power won’t go up at all.”

There was no need to ask. Reno knew exactly who Hoshina was talking about. When Reno approached the source of that cry, Kafka was speaking in a loud voice to Kikoru. “What’s the matter, sir?”

“Oh, Ichikawa. Great timing. In the drill just now, I felt like I did pretty well, personally. My time was shorter, and my unleashed power should’ve gone up! Kikoru, I want you to see this too! How’s *this*?”

Kafka opened his score sheet to show them. “Kafka Hibino. Time: six minutes, thirty-five seconds. Estimated unleashed combat power: 1 percent.”

“Whaaat?”

“You completely suck, don’t you?” Kikoru stared with astonished eyes at the shock Kafka was getting from his own record.

“But, sir, it’s a better time than before, right?” Reno asked.

“Oh! Yeah! That’s the ticket, Ichikawa. Just wait and see, Kikoru. Someday I’m going to catch up—no, pass you—”

“Sure you are. Here’s my time for this round: one minute, seven seconds. Estimated unleashed combat power: 57 percent.”

Reno was astonished at the record sheet Kikoru presented. In these past two weeks, she had improved her scores even more. She just kept pulling further and further ahead.

“Crap! One more time, just one more time! I’m going to double my unleashed combat power this next time!” Kafka said.

“That’s still only 2 percent,” Kikoru said dryly. “Like Reno says, your time may have improved, but you’ve still got a long way to go.”

“Er, Vice-Captain Hoshina!” An expression of disgust appeared on Kafka’s face.

“No way you’re passing tomorrow’s obstacle course with numbers like those. Depending on how things go,” Hoshina said, opening his eyes halfway, “we might just end up shuffling you off to a more suitable department.”

“Huh? You just told me yesterday I was accepted!” Kafka said in shock.

“Not every job in the Defense Force is on the front line. There are operators, survey teams, dismantling teams. All kinds of work.”

Saying nothing further, Hoshina departed.

“Vice-Captain Hoshina’s pretty strict, isn’t he, sir?” asked Reno. “Just yesterday, he was telling us ‘Welcome to the Defense Force.’”

Kafka had only just been promoted to general officer. Hoshina’s words had to have stung.

“No,” said Kafka, shaking his head. “It’s frustrating, but Vice-Captain Hoshina is right. I’ve only just stepped up to the starting line.” Kafka watched Hoshina walk away, clenching his fists. The look in his eyes was deadly serious. He looked like a totally different person from the one who had been carrying on just moments before.

No, Mr. Hibino is always deadly serious.

Back when they'd taken the selection exam, and again right now, Kafka was always giving his best. That was a side of Kafka that Reno especially liked.

"When it comes to shooting, I think I can give you a little advice too."

"Really, Ichikawa? Please do!"

"In that case, Reno, I've got some advice for you," a familiar voice butted in.

Reno nodded his head toward Kikoru, who was looking his way with a smug expression. "Sure, what is it?"

Kikoru's eyes widened, as if surprised at Reno's direct and open-minded reaction. *I'll do anything if it makes me stronger*—that was the feeling that was starting to blossom inside Reno. *I'll throw away all shame and pride.*

It was then that the television reporting crew approached them. Mr. Ooka, the director, came up in front of them with a gentle smile. "Sorry to bother you in the middle of training. Could I talk to the three of you real quick?"

"Okay, sure," said Reno, and the camera swung around to face Kikoru.

"Thank you very much! Now, Miss Shinomiya, please let us hear your thoughts on a few questions."

"Certainly. Please begin," Kikoru replied with a dignified expression that was the polar opposite of how she'd been talking to Reno and Kafka just moments before.

Kafka and Reno distanced themselves from the interviewer.

"He came to talk to Kikoru?"

"Well, she did get the top score on the selection exam and skip one rank."

Promptly and diplomatically, Kikoru responded to each question asked of her.



"Yes, thank you very much."

When the interview was over, Kikoru turned on her heel and came right over to Kafka and Reno. Her golden hair streamed gently behind her. The look on her face oozed confidence.

“You’re really good at that, Shinomiya,” said Reno.

“No kidding. But Kikoru, you weren’t putting on a well-bred-lady act, were you?” Kafka asked suspiciously.

She answered him with an unapologetic look. “It’s perfectly normal to put on a good face for the public. I got interviewed time and again back in college.”

Even Reno remembered seeing Kikoru interviewed on television before. They’d called her things like “the greatest talent of all time,” and he had come to realize that was no exaggeration.

“Anyway, that’s just how things go when I’m around.” Gloatingly, Kikoru gave a self-assured little laugh. As she was doing so, the news crew closed in on Reno. “Could we have a word with you next?” the director asked.

“Uh, sure.” Reno had never dreamed they would want to interview him, so he immediately felt awkward.

“Can you tell us your name and affiliation?”

“I’m Reno. Reno Ichikawa. Starting this year, I’ve been assigned to Third Division.”

“Oh, so you’re Mr. Ichikawa. I’ve heard you were seriously injured in your first battle but have finally been able to return to your duties. Can you tell us how you feel about your first mission?”

Reno hesitated for just a moment, wondering how to phrase it. “I feel ashamed.” He had decided to cough up exactly what he was feeling. He wasn’t used to putting on a public face like this. “I fought that monster desperately with everything I had. But even so, my attacks didn’t harm it.”

“But I’ve also heard that you’ve put down a number of yoju,” the director added.

“That alone doesn’t help,” Reno said bluntly. There was no way he could be satisfied with any more ability than that. Reno’s goals always lay ahead of him. “I want to get stronger so I can defend those I care about most.”

“I see, that’s a wonderful goal. Thank you for speaking with us.”

The interview ended, and Reno let out a long sigh of relief. Some way off,

Kafka was observing Reno with displeasure.

“What’s the matter, sir?” Reno asked. Had he blurted out something that rubbed Kafka the wrong way?

“Ichikawa, there was nothing for you to be ashamed of. You did a fine job on your first outing.” Kafka said.

“I really didn’t, sir. What I wanted to achieve was—”

His decisive strike having failed to reach Kaiju No. 9, he had been saved by—

“Excuse me, would you mind if we asked you a few questions?” the director said coaxingly.

“Huh? Who, m-me?” Kafka unwittingly pointed a finger at himself.

“Who else but you is left?” said Kikoru mockingly.

“It’s my first time doing a TV interview. I’m pretty nervous.” Kafka cleared his throat repeatedly.

“Well then,” the director continued. “I’d like to talk about the operation at Sagamihara, which was the first battle for the incoming recruits. Speaking as their senior, how did the junior members do?”

“Well, let’s see, speaking as their senior— Wait, what?” After a moment’s awkward silence, Kafka pointed at himself. “By ‘senior,’ do you mean me?”

“Y-yes,” said the director, as if it should have been obvious whom he meant. “How did junior members Shinomiya and Ichikawa appear in the eyes of a seasoned officer? I’d like to hear your opinion on that.”

“Pfft!” Standing off to one side, Kikoru had one hand over her mouth and her whole body was quivering with outrage. “He’s asking you a question, Mr. Senior Officer, sir!”

Kafka could only sputter incoherently.

“Um!” Reno put in without thinking. “When I call him ‘sir,’ it’s not because he’s a senior officer! That’s just how I address him personally. He joined the force the same time that we did.” Reno’s formal mode of address had invited misunderstanding. To avoid any further mistakes, Reno gave a simple

explanation of how he'd come to call Kafka "sir."

The director stared at Kafka's face and said, "I see now! In that case, you must be Mr. Hibino, the eldest of the Defense Force's new recruits?"

"Eldest, huh. I mean, that's right! But that kind of feels like being called an old man."

"I said it before—how are you not an old man?" Kikoru said with a frosty glare.

"Maybe I am old numerically, but I still feel—" Kafka paused to find the right words, and Kikoru swiftly interrupted him.

"There's nothing so unsightly as an old man who can't admit he's an old man."

With a wry smile, the director turned his mic toward Kafka, who had barely yet recovered from Kikoru's harsh words. "Officer Hibino, may I interview you?"

"Uh, yessir!"



"All right, I appreciate it. Sorry to bother you during training," the director said.

"S-same here," Kafka said nervously. "Thank you very much!" Kafka and the director bowed to one another, and Kafka moved away from the camera back to Reno and Kikoru.

"I wonder if what we talked about was all right?" said Kafka. He wasn't at all used to being interviewed and appeared confused and shaken by the ordeal.

"I know, right?" said Kikoru. "You were nervous and said 'um' way too many times. They'll either cut your interview down or not use it."

"I'm not used to this like you are!"

"Actually, I'm kind of relieved," said Reno as he lightly patted his chest. Given Kafka's hangover and nervous state, Reno had been on pins and needles, assuming that a partial transformation was in the cards for today. Kafka seemed pretty much back to his usual self, though, so that had apparently been

needless worry.

Just then, the director bopped his palm with the bottom of his fist. “Oh, that’s right! Could I also get your opinions on Kaiju No. 8, the one the public is so worked up about?”

Kaiju No. 8—at those words, Kafka, Reno, and Kikoru froze up.

“Hey,” whispered Kafka. “He’s asking about No. 8!”

“This is nothing to panic over,” Kikoru whispered.

“Mr. Hibino, Shinomiya. Let me go first,” whispered Reno.

Reno cleared his throat a little too loudly and then began to speak. “Regarding No. 8, from the standpoint of information management, we can’t say anything more than what’s publicly been released. My apologies. Still, as Defense Force officers, locating No. 8 swiftly and securing the citizens’ safety—”

“Ah ... ah ...” Standing next to Reno, Kafka’s mouth suddenly opened wide. “Ah ... aaaaah ... *choo!*”

At the instant Kafka sneezed, it started to happen. A pair of long horns sprouted from his head.

“Ah!” shouted Reno.

“Huh?” said Kikoru, eyes snapping wide.

“Whu?” said the director in confusion.

“Crap!” said Kafka, scrambling to cover his head.

“Raaaaaaah!”

The combat power was released. In the next instant, Reno let loose with a loud yell and gave Kafka a swift kick that sent him flying.

“Umph!”

It was a blow made possible by Reno’s suit. Taking the kick, Kafka was blasted away with incredible force and plunged headlong into a nearby pile of rubble.

The director, unsure of what had just happened, was rubbing his eyes. “M-my eyes must be playing tricks on me. I could’ve sworn Mr. Hibino was growing

horns.”

“You must be seeing things!” Kikoru insisted. She began forcibly dragging Kafka out of the rubble he was now buried under and shoved the dust-caked Kafka in front of the camera. His horns had already vanished.

“See?” Kikoru said. “Any way you look at him, he’s just a dim-witted old-timer!”

“H-hey, there,” said Kafka. “I’m a dim-witted old-timer!”

“Why don’t you know when to quit?” The same Kikoru who had been calmly answering questions in her interview was now sweating profusely. “Come on, you,” she whispered in Kafka’s ear. “What do you think you’re doing? Do you not realize you’ll be neutralized if it gets out that you’re really Kaiju No. 8?”

“S-sorry,” Kafka said. “I was nervous, so when I sneezed, it just—”

“Don’t transform when you sneeze!” Kikoru insisted angrily.

The director frowned and called out to the nearby cameraman. “Hey, were you rolling just now?” The cameraman shook his head no, but the director looked even more suspicious.

“By any chance, is this what you saw just now?” At the sound of Reno’s voice, all eyes fell on him. On Reno’s face was a creepy skull mask—he had transformed into Kaiju No. 8! Before his startled audience, Reno peeled away the paper mask covering his face.

Kikoru said, “Reno, is that—?”

“Yeah, it’s one of the posters the JDF put out to warn the public.”

Kaiju No. 8 was the first monster since the JDF’s founding to have gotten away. Based on witnesses’ testimony, an image of it had been created and circulated on television (naturally), and even on posters that had been put up around town to warn the public.

“I pulled it out right as Mr. Hibino sneezed. Was this what you saw?” Reno asked.

“That? Well, maybe. Hmmm.” With the director’s head still tilted in uncertainty, the crew picked up their things and moved on to their next filming

location.

As Reno breathed out a sigh of relief, Kafka clapped him on the back. “Nice one, Ichikawa! When did you make that?”

“Last night. When I heard they were filming, I got it ready in a hurry just in case. And by the way, that wasn’t a ‘nice one’ at all! If I hadn’t had this thing, how were you gonna talk your way out of that?”

“W-well, I figured somehow my enthusiasm would help?”

“It would just overwhelm him!”

“Kafka Hibino, try to be a little more self-aware,” Kikoru chided. “It would be a massive problem if they found out an identified kaiju had wormed its way into the JDF.”

“I-I’m sorry. It’s all right!” Kafka gave a thumbs-up. “I won’t slip up again. No matter what happens, I won’t transform, so you can set your minds at ease!” Kafka was bursting with confidence. Kikoru and Reno looked at one another.

“You get the feeling there’s some obvious foreshadowing here?”

“I do. I do get that kind of feeling.”

Reno couldn’t help feeling uneasy. Would tomorrow’s obstacle course come off safely or not?

3

Reno awakened suddenly in the middle of the night. Kafka’s bed was the next one over, and it was now empty.

Mr. Hibino’s not here? Maybe he went to the toilet or something, Reno thought, but he had a bad feeling that wasn’t the case. At Sagamihara, Kafka had squared off against Hoshina while transformed into Kaiju No. 8. Hoshina was a pretty sharp guy. If what had happened at midday during the interview were to reach his ears... *Kafka wouldn’t be marched off into custody, but—*

Iharu was snoring away in the next bunk. Reno tiptoed out of the room trying not to wake him. There was a light shining through a crack in the door to the

room at the end of the pitch-black hallway. As Reno recalled, this was the reference room. After sneaking a peek through the gap, he opened the door. “Mr. Hibino, what are you up to?”

“Oh, Ichikawa!” Startled, Kafka turned around. In front of the chair where he sat were several books and a laptop PC. On the screen, a video was playing of an urban district somewhere.

“Lights-out time is already past. Have you been studying?” Reno asked. Many team members studied in their room after their tasks were finished. Kafka was one of them. But Reno hadn’t known that he kept going even after lights-out.

“Yeah. To tell the truth, I’ve been doing it for a while. To become a general officer.”

“You’ve already become one, haven’t you? Tomorrow’s the obstacle course. You’ll want to go to bed early,” Reno insisted.

“Nah, the way things are going, I’d just end up getting left in everybody’s dust. Studying late has gotten to be a habit too,” Kafka said.

“You’re not gonna slip up and partially transform due to sleep deprivation, right?” Reno asked.

“Geh, don’t say that! It makes me weak in the knees! Actually, when you get past thirty, your body really starts to feel it,” Kaka admitted. “These days I can’t even pull all-nighters like I used to.”

“That’s all the more reason for you to go to bed,” Reno insisted.

“Sure. I’d like to sleep, but right now I’m having fun.”

Reno’s eyes went round at the word Kafka had just spoken.

“Fun?”

“Yeah. Back when I was a dismantler, my life was a mess. I’d come home tired and worn out, flick on the TV, and drink a lot of booze. But now that I’m surrounded by all these talented young people, I enjoy this place where I can study. I mean, my body can take this, you know?” Kafka looked at Reno and smiled. “And that’s why I’m grateful to you.”

“I’m grateful”—when he heard those words, a thought bubbled up in Reno’s

mind. “You’re wrong, sir. The one who’s grateful is—”

Just then, a loud noise rang out from the computer. The video was showing an urban district in flames. The resolution was low and the image staticky, so Reno could tell it had been taken quite a long time ago. “Mr. Hibino, is this video —?”

“Yeah, I pulled it off that shelf over there. From 1972.”

“So this is—”

“Yeah, Kaiju No. 2,” Kafka said solemnly.

In 1972, Asia’s first Winter Olympics had been held in Sapporo. It had been a massive success, but that joyful occasion had been eclipsed by a terrible disaster. The giant beast that had later come to be called Kaiju No. 2 had attacked and driven Sapporo to the brink of destruction.

“Since I don’t have much experience with cleaning up big kaiju, I thought I’d study up on it,” Kafka said.

Beyond the flaming buildings, Reno could see a colossal shadow that was likely Kaiju No. 2. The beast roared loudly, and the sound unleashed a shock wave. Glass windows in the buildings all around were shattered, tiles were stripped from roofs, and people were blown into the air. The image on the screen swayed wildly back and forth. Had the person filming this been hit by the blast as well? The image stopped in a sideways position, and there the picture froze.

“What happened to the person shooting this?” asked Reno.

Kafka silently shook his head. “Apparently the camera was all they found later. The images of No. 2 they captured on camera are a valuable record.”

“Nowadays, we could use a drone, but that was impossible at the time.”

At the end of the video, subtitles displayed the date it was taken, the place where the camera was found, and the name of the videographer. Most likely, that information had been put in later by the JDF. Kafka removed the disc and closed the computer.

“Well, I think I’ll go ahead and get some sleep. Sorry to worry you, Reno.”

“No problem. You take care of yourself. And, sir?”

“Hm?”

“Let’s do our best in the obstacle course tomorrow.”

Reno thrust out his fist.

Kafka grinned and gave that fist a little bump.

“You’re on!”

4

There were lectures in the morning, and afternoon tasks began at one o’clock after lunch. Near the entrance to the urban training ground, Kafka joined Reno and the twenty-seven other newly minted Defense Force officers.

Lined up in front of them were Hoshina the vice-captain, Okonogi the operator, and the squad captains. The news crew were also present, over by the wall. Their equipment, including drone-mounted cameras, was ready to go.

“Well then, today we’re doing the obstacle course,” Hoshina said as he surveyed everyone assembled. “It’s been about two months since you all joined the JDF at the start of April. You seem to be settled in and are even getting used to your training. So for all of you, this exercise is a turning point—or maybe I should call it a baptism.”

Hoshina’s narrow eyes opened, and he smiled. Reno had also heard from senior officers that this obstacle course was quite harsh, and there were even officers who couldn’t finish it.

“Maps of the area have been distributed.”

Reno and the others projected their maps in the air using their dedicated terminals. They displayed a course that started at the present position and looped around through a dense array of deserted buildings.

Hoshina continued, “What you’re doing is simple. You’ll break into pairs and run the route that’s marked on your maps. Each pair must destroy ten targets we’ve prepared, complete the course, and get back here within the time limit.

That's the goal. Plus this."

Backpacks were lined up in a row on top of a vinyl sheet. Each one was bulging outward, ready to burst at the seams. "There are relief supplies inside. I'd like you all to go into this wearing one on your back," Hoshina explained.

The size of the baggage caused a stir among the officers as Hoshina continued. "You should've learned this from your lectures, but there have been cases where officers successfully hunted down kaiju while surviving in the mountains even after their supply lines had been cut."

Aoi, who had come over from the Ground Self-Defense Force, was wearing a more severe expression than usual. "This is a lot like ranger training in the JGSDF," Aoi said. "Doing it on this course may be even more punishing."

This was an exercise that could make even Aoi say "punishing"—and prior to joining the Defense Force, he had placed first on the physical fitness test. The tension continued to climb among the officers. Reno swallowed nervously.

The pairs were decided. Reno's partner was Kafka. "Pleased to work with you, sir. How are you feeling?"

Kafka answered with a thumbs-up. "Rarin' to go. I can handle any course they throw at us."

The two were then called to the front, where they were given their weapons and backpacks. "Well now, which team will go first?" said Hoshina, looking around at the assembly.

"If you're asking, I'd say that's us," said Kikoru, raising her hand nonchalantly. Wearing her suit, she easily shouldered her backpack. Her partner Akari had an uneasy look on her face, though.

"What? Kiko-baby! Is that okay?"

"It's fine, Akari. The first team in is bound to have the easiest time of it."

The instant Hoshina gave the signal to start, Kikoru and Akari got moving. Kikoru took the lead. Among the newcomers, she had the greatest unleashed combat power, and she leapt from rooftop to rooftop with effortless movement.

“All righty, launch the drones. I need a camera on each officer,” the director said, and the news crew’s drones set off after them as well. The crew didn’t have enough drones to follow all the teams. It seemed like they were focusing all their attention on Kikoru and Akari.

“We just got passed over while you were loafing around, Haruichi.”

“I was just about to get going, Aoi.”

Next onto the course were Haruichi and Aoi, the officers possessing the second-and third-highest unleashed combat powers, after Kikoru.

“I won’t be able to stand it if we lose to Kikoru,” Kafka said. “All right, Ichikawa, let’s go!”

“Yes, *sir*! But are you okay?” Reno asked.

Kafka’s footsteps were unsteady as he hefted the backpack onto his shoulders. “Yup, 1 percent is still 1 percent. The suit’s supplementing my muscles!” But he had spoken too soon. “Whoa! Almost tipped over!” It was true that Kafka seemed able to move normally even while shouldering heavy baggage. But in his condition, was it really possible for him to get through this course in the time allotted?

Kafka could hear the voices of the receding news crew carried on the wind.

“Okay, let’s follow Hibino,” one of the crew said.

A crew member who was readying drones replied: “That guy? I’d rather chase a different group.”

“At times like this, I get footage of all kinds of subjects. Officers Shinomiya and Izumo are the main focus. Officer Hibino’s team is a secondary concern. ‘He entered the JDF when he was over the age of thirty, but reality was unforgiving.’ We can go for an angle like that.”

Most likely, the television crew bore him no malice. Kafka was getting this attention simply because he was the oldest recruit. Reno got that. Still, it did nothing for his mood to have Kafka made light of behind his back.

“Okay, ready to go! Let’s do this, Ichikawa! We can’t let Kikoru whup us!”

“Yes, sir! Let’s go, Mr. Hibino! We are absolutely gonna beat them!”

“Oh? You’re kinda fired up, ain’tcha?”

At the same time Kafka and Hibino took off running, the TV news crew’s drone came flying after them from behind. Reno shot a silent sidelong glare at its camera lens.

Just you watch!

A crumbled cinder block wall became visible up ahead. They leapt over it, and then cut between a pair of houses. A sound played from the projected map. Ahead of Reno, a target marker appeared.

Following the map’s directions, he found the target standing on the roof of a house. Still running, Reno raised his weapon and looked through the scope. He squeezed the trigger and fired. Even before he saw the result, Reno could tell from the recoil that the bullet would hit. Indeed, it blew a hole right through the middle.

“Nice one, Ichikawa!”

Not yet, it isn’t.

The shots Reno had seen Kikoru fire back during the selection exam had been faster. More precise too. And more powerful. Reno held his weapon close and went on dashing through the ruins.



Fifteen minutes after starting, the fourth target came into Reno’s view. It was standing on an electric pole that had tilted over into a diagonal slant. Reno climbed onto the roof of a wrecked house and peered through his scope.

He took aim and squeezed the trigger. The bullet blew a hole through the center of the target. “Good, let’s get to the next one!”

Kafka had his hands stretched out against a wall. His breath was ragged, wheezing.

“Are you okay, sir?” Reno asked.

“Y-yeah! Energy to spare!” Kafka gave him a thumbs-up, but it was plain to see he was pushing himself too hard. Even Reno, with his 20 percent unleashed

combat power, was starting to feel the weight of the oversize backpack. At 1 percent, Kafka must have felt like he was lugging around a boulder.

“Hey, Reno! Old-timer! Comin’ through!” Iharu let out a loud shout and came bounding over rooftops with his partner. Both were moving at a mind-boggling speed. Pairs that had started their runs later than Reno and Kafka were now passing them by, one after another.

Reno finally destroyed his sixth target. Kafka’s movements were sluggish. It was taking everything he had just to keep walking. The drone hovered high up in the sky, filming the whole thing. “I’m sorry, Ichikawa,” said Kafka.

“You don’t have a thing to apologize for,” Reno replied. “Come on, let’s go.”

“You’re falling to the end of the line too. Even though you ought to finish ahead of them with your unleashed combat power. That’s on me. So I want you to—”

“If you say ‘go on ahead,’ the answer’s no.”

Reno and Kafka each threw an arm around the other’s shoulders, and Reno said, “I’d just as soon drop out here than leave you behind.” Reno had zero intention of doing such a thing to reach the goal. That would be a far cry indeed from his ideal image of a JDF officer.

Kafka, who’d had a bewildered expression on his face, now grinned. “All right, I got it. You’re just that kinda guy. As things stand, we’re falling behind on my account. But seeing as I don’t know when to quit, would you stick with me to the end?”

“Absolutely!” Reno said. “One person could finish this course alone. The fact that they paired us all off means that they want us to help each other.”

“Okay, thanks. Even though I’d turned thirty-two, I still set my sights on the Defense Force. No way this little jog’s gonna break me!”

Kafka set his teeth and tried forcing himself to walk. Slowly but surely, the pair destroyed target after target. But something went wrong at the eighth target, just shy of the goal. “Well, crap. The way’s completely blocked,” said Kafka.

According to the map that had been prepared for them, they were supposed to slip through a narrow passage. What was in fact before their eyes was a large apartment building lying on its side. The path they were supposed to follow was completely buried beneath it.

“This isn’t on the map,” Reno said. “So there must have been an accident. Should I contact the vice-captain and ask if it’s all right to take a detour?”

Kafka stared unmoving at the path before them and gave an unexpected reply: “No, Ichikawa. This might just be exactly what the vice-captain has in mind.”

“Huh?” Reno’s hand paused at Kafka’s unexpected words.

“These are abandoned buildings. That being the case, isn’t it safe to assume the course may deteriorate? That the state of the battlefield can be changed by the pairs that came through before us?”

“Yeah, I could see that happening!”

Kafka had a good point. It had been like that at Sagamihara. In real combat, cities took damage from monsters and changed moment by moment. The information they were given wasn’t necessarily correct. That would mean that in today’s training, the map was only valid for the first pair.

“Shinomiya probably realized this. But what do we do?” Reno asked.

“Ichikawa, you can jump to the top of the building by yourself, can’t you? No way you could do it with the luggage and me, but—”

“I told you before, didn’t I? Sure, I could jump it myself, but I’m not gonna!”

“I’m not planning on giving up either,” Kafka said. “Use this.”

Kafka produced a coil of rope for mountain climbing from his backpack and said, “These rucksacks aren’t just here to weigh us down. Before we set out, I checked what was in it. They’ve got supplies and survival gear inside. Ichikawa, mind carrying this up there for me?” Kafka refused to give up, even faced with all these difficulties. And he was trying to overcome them using his own abilities.

“Yes, sir. I’ll take it up now.” Holding one end of the rope in his hand, Reno

jogged a few paces and then took off running. He took a mighty leap, and then kicked his way up the side of the wall as he made his way to the top of the apartment building.

A throbbing, dull pain ran through Reno's left thigh. It was right where Kaiju No. 9 had gouged his flesh—it still wasn't completely healed. Taking pains not to let it show in his face, Reno secured the rope. "You're all set, Mr. Hibino!"

"All right, here we go!" Grunting beneath the weight of his pack, Kafka started climbing. The rope went taut, and Kafka came climbing up the vertical face of the wall. He clenched his teeth, and a look of desperation appeared on his face. His progress was achingly slow, and he seemed to be making little progress. One step at a time, though, he was steadily drawing nearer. Then, when he was almost to the top, Kafka's foot slipped.

"Whoa!"

"Mr. Hibino!" Reno leaned out over the wall and grabbed hold of his hand. Bracing every muscle in his body, he pulled Kafka up to the top.

"Whew, that was a close one!" Kafka said. "Thank you."

"We're running out of time. Let's get out of here."

After that, they passed through the ninth checkpoint. All that remained was the final target. Under the weight of the backpack, Kafka was breaking down physically, and sweat was coming off him like a waterfall.

"Mr. Hibino, if you're at your limit, I can carry that."

"W-what're you talking about? *This* thing?"

"Your knees are sagging."

Kafka drove his fists into his wobbling knees. "There. They've stopped."

"But—"

"Ichikawa, I bet your leg's aching too."

"You noticed?"

And here he'd thought he'd managed to hide it.

"Sorry," said Kafka. "I'm the one who ought to be helping you out, but I've

been nothing but trouble.”

“No, you are helping me.”

“Huh?”

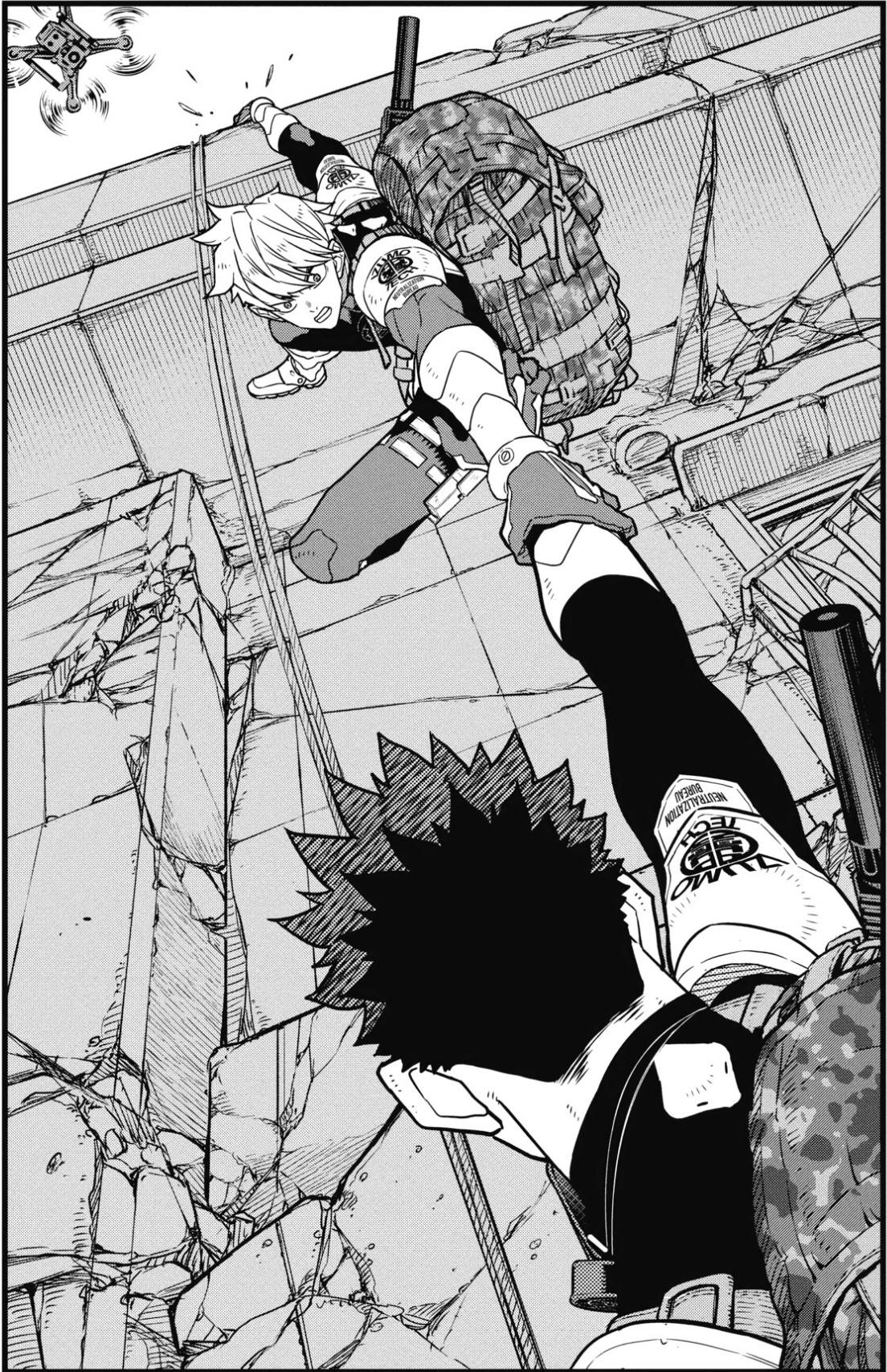
“You didn’t transform, did you?” Reno asked.

“Who’d do a thing like that? And right next to you when you’re trying so hard?”

Though not a year had yet passed since they’d first met, Reno felt that Kafka really was an odd one. Ordinarily, even an exercise like this one should have been easy for him. When Kafka turned into Kaiju No. 8, his physical abilities increased by leaps and bounds. Even with just a partial metamorphosis, he could have blown right through this course with no problem. But he didn’t do that. He was keeping his true nature—and his power—hidden away.

“Even though most times a sneeze will have you on the verge of transforming,” Reno said.

“W-what was that?” Kafka asked.



“Nothing at all, sir.”

Kafka struggled but nevertheless headed straight for the goal, never giving in to the hardship.

Reno wondered how many times this side of Kafka had helped him out. This was exactly why Kafka was still a “sir” and a “mister” to Reno, even if there was no longer seniority between them. There would always be respect.

I can't let this man transform any more than he already has. And to keep it from happening, I've—

Reno put a bullet through the last remaining target as it showed itself up ahead.

—gotta get stronger.

The starting point came into view. There, Hoshina and the other teams that had gone on ahead were waiting. Though Reno and Kafka had set out relatively early, they had ended up in very last place. When they arrived at the goal, Kafka and Reno stood side by side and saluted Hoshina.

“Kafka Hibino, returning, sir!”

“Reno Ichikawa, returning, sir!”

Hoshina looked up from his watch at both of their faces and nodded. “Both of you: your return is acknowledged. This brings the exercise to an end.”

No sooner had these words reached his ears than Kafka collapsed on the ground, arms and legs spread wide. He was likely already way beyond his physical limit. Reno’s leg started aching again, and he crouched down on the ground.

“We originally assumed it would take thirty minutes or less to finish the course,” Hoshina said, gazing at his electronic tablet. “Kaguragi’s pair did it in fifteen.”

“But we did it after the circumstances had changed, and at the highest difficulty!” Kafka insisted.

“Oh yeah, that is true,” said Hoshina. “We didn’t plan on that either.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

In front of the dumbfounded Kafka and Reno, Hoshina rubbed his jaw. “I figured the course might take a bit of a pounding, but wow, that was something else. That rascal Shinomiya ran ahead and had a little too much fun.”

“So are you telling me—are you saying—”

Hoshina nodded at Reno’s question. “If you’d called in at that point, I would’ve guided you to a different course.”

“Gaaah! I can’t believe it!” Kafka cried, holding his head in his hands. “So, in the end, everything I went through was just wasted effort? Ichikawa, I am so sorry I wrapped you up in this too!”

Reno cracked up with laughter. “It’s no problem, sir.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, it was a hard way to go, but it sure wasn’t wasted. I think it was the path we needed to take to get closer to our goal. I believe that.”

Pressing on his bad leg, Reno rose to his feet. City streets turned to crumbling ruins were all around. But when he looked upward, the thought of the grim surroundings was lost in the blue sky spread out above.



The officers headed back from the training ground. Hoshina was also getting ready to go back when he heard footsteps approach from behind. He turned, and standing there was a tall, noble young lady with raven hair pulled back in a single braid. It was Third Division captain Mina Ashiro.

“Captain Ashiro. Finally able to get away from the office?”

“Yes, I came to a good stopping point. How were this year’s officers?”

“Since Sagamihara, every last one of ’em has really caught fire. You can see it in their eyes. I think they’ll get better and better going forward. Reno Ichikawa in particular. Never mind that he just returned to work after recovery—he moved really well. Seems like he figured something out at Sagamihara.”

Ashiro looked down at the tablet Hoshina was holding. “How about the one he was paired with, Kafka Hibino?”

“He’s struggling,” Hoshina said, straight and to the point. “Without Ichikawa backing him up in every way, he would’ve blown it right from the get-go. His unleashed combat power’s still only 1 percent.”

“I see.”

“Still, I can admit he’s got guts.”

Ashiro’s eyes widened slightly at Hoshina’s words of praise for Kafka.

“Seems like at first, the news crew thought he’d drop out,” Hoshina said. “What changed their minds was Ichikawa’s support and Hibino’s own determination. They make a good team.”

“You seem pleased,” Ashiro said.

“That’s ’cause for my part, I don’t much care to see my subordinates being taken lightly. Well, I need to go. Got to go do the postmortem on today’s exercise in the lecture room.”

Hoshina began walking away, following after the officers. When he looked up ahead, Kafka, Kikoru, and Reno were noisily yelling at each other about something.

“Sheesh. Rowdy bunch, aren’t they?”

CHAPTER 2

New Recruit—Kikoru Shinomiya

1

Kikoru had not yet run the obstacle course. It was day one with the television crew, and she was being interviewed at the shooting range. Kafka and Reno had been with her, but both had drifted off to the side.

The director, Mr. Ooka, turned his mic toward Kikoru with a cheerful smile. "It's already been over two months since you assumed your new post in the Third Division," he said. "Please tell us about your first combat mission at Sagamihara."

Kikoru thought for a moment, then responded in a formal manner most unlike her usual speech. "Let me see. First of all, I'd like to express my sympathy for all those who were injured, displaced, or bereaved there, as well as their families. There's a reason they call Japan 'the Land of the Kaiju.' During combat, I realized all over again how enormous kaiju and yoju can be, and how very different they are from what we encounter in our training. I also wonder if I've started to realize what I have to do next."

"Next?" the director said. "I've heard you played a really big role during your first mission."

"The creatures I neutralized were all just yoju," Kikoru explained. "Of course, even yoju are still very dangerous."

"I see. Then you're never satisfied with yourself. You're always aiming high. Hmm," said the director as he nodded. "Are there any officers that you pay

special attention to?”

“Special attention, you say?”

The face that bubbled up in her mind was Kafka Hibino’s.

“Ah-chooo!!”

From behind, Kikoru could hear Kafka’s deafening sneeze, followed by the sound of sniffing. “Ugh, Ichikawa. Got any tissues?” Kafka asked with a hapless expression.

What is he doing over there?

“Ms. Shinomiya?”

“Oh, pardon me.” Kikoru coughed once. “I’d say it has to be Captain Mina Ashiro. In terms of combat power, she’s head and shoulders above the rest of the division. I felt that especially strongly at Sagamihara. With one blow, she opened up a gigantic hole in a colossal kaiju—that’s a trick I still can’t perform. Though I will try harder to accomplish it.”

“I see,” said the director. “Well, if it’s with your present enthusiasm, by all means keep trying to reach your goal moving forward.”

“I think there are many civilians who are uneasy about the emergence of giant kaiju in recent years,” Kikoru said. “But as a member of the Defense Force, I am determined to neutralize kaiju. I won’t let even one of them get away.”

“What a fine, reassuring answer! Thank you very much!”

Kikoru spun around on her heel and solemnly vowed: someday, she was even going to blow away Kaiju No. 9—the hominoid kaiju that had appeared before her on that day.

2

On the second day of filming, the obstacle course and the postmortem had both been held, and the afternoon tasks were complete. From then until lights-out, the JDF members were in principle free, and it was during this time that their dinners and baths were taken. Some went out, some studied in their

rooms, some held bull sessions, some watched television, and some worked out. There were all kinds of ways to pass the time. The base was furnished with a gym, and it had all the latest facilities and equipment. Though the sun was already sinking outside the window, it was packed with officers.

“Whew!” Having finished her workout on the chest press, Kikoru was wiping up drops of sweat with a towel.

I guess that’s enough for today.

At first glance, Kikoru looked like a slender young girl. Her whole body was sheathed in strong, well-developed muscle, however. It was a different body type from that of Aoi, the former Ground Self-Defense Force officer. He was all large, rippling muscles, but she had a graceful, refined form that excluded every hint of excess.

Just as she was about to leave the gym, Kikoru noticed that one corner of it was getting loud.

“Draaaaaaaagh—!” The mighty roar came from Kafka, who was using the bench press.

There at his side, Iharu—dumbbells in his hands—was crying, “Hey, you’ve got it! You’ve got it, old man!”

Reno and Aoi were also nearby, observing the sight with interest.

“Mr. Hibino, I told you it’s best not to strain too much!” said Reno.

“You’re clearly overdoing it. This isn’t efficient,” said Aoi.

“Good grief, what’re you all up to?” said Kikoru. She was the youngest of the new recruits, but there were times when the men seemed so childish to her. Kafka in particular was like a little boy, though he was a whole Chinese zodiac’s worth of years older than her. In the bath, he’d get into arguments and end up dizzy from overheating, he’d compete to eat more than other people, and he’d turn things into contests at the drop of a hat.

Is that how guys are, no matter how old they get?

The reporters were at the end of the gym filming Kafka and the other new recruits working out.

You won't turn into Kaiju No. 8 again, I trust.

She remembered Kafka nearly transforming in front of the camera yesterday. But just like then, Reno was standing nearby. Things were probably going to be all right after all. Probably. Just as Kikoru was thinking of taking a shower and heading back to her room, something cold touched the back of her neck.

“Eek! W-what’s that?” Kikoru jumped away before she could form a thought, spun around, and then breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, Akari and Hakua.”

Standing there were her fellow female newcomers, Akari Minase and Hakua Igarashi. Akari was the type who was good at looking after others, and she always seemed concerned about Kikoru for one reason or another. Hakua was more like a big sister, with a large-boned physique that was the equal of any of the guys. Out of the women she’d entered the force with, Kikoru got on especially well with these two.

Akari was holding a sports drink in her hand. “Worked up a sweat, Kiko-baby? Why not have one?”

“Thanks, don’t mind if I do.”

“Something bothering you? Your brows are all scrunched,” said Hakua.

“It’s really not anything important,” Kikoru said.

From the gym, another cheer rang out from Kafka and the rest.

“Those guys,” Kikoru sighed. “Just look at ’em, at it again.”

“Mr. Hibino & Co.?” Hakua asked.

“Yes. Honestly, that guy was awful yesterday too. Even his interview was a train wreck. If I hadn’t covered for him, it honestly could’ve been a total disaster.”

At Kikoru’s impassioned words, Akari began giggling behind her fingertips.

“Huh? W-what’s so funny?” Kikoru asked.

“I was just thinking, you talk about Mr. Hibino quite a lot these days.”

A moment later, Kikoru realized what Akari was implying—and her face burned with embarrassment.

“H-huh! W-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, you’re right,” Hakua said, nodding from the side. “She seems to enjoy that topic an awful lot.”

“Et tu, Hakua? No, it’s nothing like that.” Though Kikoru tried to argue, she realized she had spoken about Kafka a lot recently. There was yesterday, and lately thoughts of Kafka often crossed her mind. What in the world was she thinking about that blockhead for?

“Oh, there she is.” From behind Kikoru came a voice speaking in Kansai dialect. She turned to find Hoshina standing there.

“Vice-Captain Hoshina, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I got a little something I’d like to talk about. Would you by any chance be proficient in swordplay?”

“Swordplay?” Kikoru cocked her head, unsure exactly what he was getting at. “I think you may know this already, but of the eighteen martial arts, I’ve studied the basics of archery, equestrianism, and swordplay.”

“Well, I just wanted to confirm,” Hoshina said. “Oh yeah, and could I get you to skip tomorrow morning’s drills and come to the control room instead? I’ve got a little job for you.”

“I’ve no objection, sir, but—”

“Oh yeah, do you like crabs, Shinomiya?”

“Huh?” Kikoru tilted her head at the unexpected question. “What’s this, all of a sudden?”

“No allergy problems?” Hoshina asked. “Lots of folks are allergic to crustaceans.”

“Crabs are one of my favorite foods,” Kikoru said. “I’m not allergic to them.”

“Fantastic. In that case, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Telling her nothing further, Hoshina departed.

“Huh? What was with that last question?” Kikoru thought out loud.

“A summons that even gets you out of work,” said Akari. “Do you think you

might be getting a commendation?”

“Maybe he’s gonna treat you to a crab dinner?”

Akari and Hakua were overly optimistic, but Kikoru was feeling cornered. In the mission to Sagamihara, Hoshina had battled against Kaiju No. 8. Given his observant eye and keen intellect, it wouldn’t surprise her one bit if he’d gotten hold of some other information.

Don’t tell me he’s going to ask about Kafka Hibino.

Kikoru realized that once again she was letting her thoughts run wild. She shook her head sharply, trying to clear her mind. Once more, she heard Kafka’s yelling coming from the gym.

Oh, good grief! How can you be carrying on like that at a time like this?

3

The next morning, Kikoru suited up and headed over to the control room. She had prepared several excuses to deflect and mislead in the event she was grilled about Kafka’s true nature.

She knocked on the door and heard Hoshina say “Come in” from inside.

“Kikoru Shinomiya, reporting, sir.”

Hoshina wasn’t alone in the room. Their captain, Mina Ashiro, was present as well. On top of a desk between them and Kikoru was a thick, heavy case. A cable was connected to it, and an operator was performing some kind of data check on it.

“Shinomiya, sorry we couldn’t take care of this yesterday,” Hoshina said.

“Captain Ashiro, Vice-Captain Hoshina. What is th—”

“Oh, relax, please. This is definitely nothing you should worry about.”

Nothing to worry about? Did that mean it had nothing to do with Kaiju No. 8?

The captain, Ashiro, fixed her eyes upon Kikoru and solemnly spoke: “Kikoru Shinomiya, I’m issuing you a custom weapon.”

“A custom weapon?”

As those utterly unexpected words reached her ears, Kikoru’s eyes snapped wide open.

Custom weapons were anti-kaiju neutralization devices issued to those with combat power in the same class as division captains or vice-captains. The term was applicable to both the high-caliber automatic gun used by Ashiro and the katana used by Hoshina. The downside to their power, she’d also heard, was that those without the unleashed combat power of your average Defense Force officer were barely able to use them.

Anyway, at least it’s not about Kaiju No. 8. In that case, all’s well, I guess.

Kikoru breathed a sigh of relief and looked up to face the other two. “Does this mean that I’m captain class?” she asked.

“Normally, it would. This decision was made in light of certain circumstances,” Hoshina said.

Ashiro added that the strength and frequency of that year’s emerging kaiju had also been a factor in the decision.

“Well, don’t worry about that,” Hoshina continued. “This is purely based on consideration of your ability. There’s no reason to think it’s because your parents were the director general of the Defense Force and the captain of Second Division.”

“Is that so?” Kikoru asked. “Um, not that I’d thought that to begin with.” Kikoru was aware that her abilities were outstanding even in the outfit she was a part of. She also knew her abilities were inferior to those of the two people standing in front of her—Captain Ashiro and Vice-Captain Hoshina.

“Let’s begin, shall we? This is a special-order item made with the cooperation of Izumo Tech and our own Science Division. It’s still a prototype, so there’s room for improvement, but this is your custom weapon.” Hoshina put a hand up to the biometric recognition system next to the case. The case opened, and liquid nitrogen rapidly boiled off. When the white fog had cleared, a gigantic weapon revealed itself.

“This is my custom weapon?” Kikoru gasped.

Inside the case was a gigantic greatsword—even longer than Kikoru was tall.

“How about it? You like it?” Hoshina asked.

“At this point in time,” said Ashiro, “there’s no liking it or otherwise. To know a weapon, you have to use it.”

Hoshina nodded at Ashiro’s words. “Well said. Shinomiya, can you head over to the training ground now?”

“Is there going to be an unveiling ceremony?” Kikoru asked. “Of course. That’s what I was hoping.”

Once the weapon case had been closed and arrangements made for its transport, a knock sounded outside the door. When the door opened, the television crew was standing there.

“Reporters?” Kikoru asked. “Why are they here?”

“I called ’em. Said, ‘Officer Shinomiya’s gonna do something cool, so come on down if you like,’” Hoshina explained.

“And you want me to do it on the training ground.” Kikoru zipped her suit up all the way to her neck. “Understood. I’ll try out my custom weapon.”

Everyone went over to the outdoor training ground. The weather was nice, with sunlight streaming down. Okonogi, the operators, and members of the Science Division who’d been involved with the weapon’s development were all gathered there.

“Quite the turnout, isn’t it?” Kikoru asked.

“Well, it’s rare to develop a custom weapon,” explained Okonogi. “Even in Third Division, mine and the captain’s are all we’ve had until now. That makes you the third to get one.”

That’s true, which means they’re counting on me. In that case, I have to meet their expectations.

Kikoru unleashed her suit’s combat power. The interwoven strands of kaiju muscle within the suit began synchronizing with her body. She unlocked the recognition device on the case and stood poised with the huge greatsword resting on one shoulder. Its blade, black as lacquer, reflected the sunlight. She

swung it downward so that it faced her eyes. There was a powerful *whoomph* of sundered wind.

“It’s fairly light, given its size,” Kikoru remarked.

“About that!” Okonogi said, pushing up her round glasses. “It was made from the shell of the reptilian kaiju that emerged in Hamamatsu last year. I heard the thing was a nightmare to process, even for Izumo Tech. But they say that with its lightness and strength, the final product is satisfactory.”

“Is that so?” Kikoru asked. “The crown jewel of the company’s hard work, eh?”

Kikoru walked out to the designated position. She was about to perform a basic training exercise in which she would race against time to destroy a set of targets distributed around the training ground. Ashiro was with Okonogi and the rest beneath a portable awning. Her arms were crossed, and she was watching Kikoru with keen eyes. Combat power total release: 96 percent. The greatest combat power in the Third Division. She left Kikoru behind in the dust.

I knew it at Sagamihara. Right now, I’m still nowhere near the captain or vice-captain.

Okonogi’s voice rang out from the communicator: “All right, Officer Shinomiya. I’ll give you a countdown: ten, nine—”

Kikoru breathed in deep as her suit continued accommodating itself to her body. As her blood circulated, the oxygen spread to her body’s remotest extremities.

“—two, one—zero!”

At the end of the countdown, Kikoru leapt. In front of her and to the right, a target emerged from behind a block wall. Using the force of the jump to swing the giant sword, she sent it flying. Without losing momentum from her leap, she spun around in midair and landed on top of the wall. When the next target appeared, it was on the roof of a house directly in front of her. She kicked off the wall, leaping upward, and swung the sword in a wide horizontal arc, mowing down the target.

“Next!”

Swinging a real sword—even a regular-sized one—required tremendous physical strength. Even more so with a gigantic sword like this one. When wearing her suit, Kikoru could easily pick up an automobile, but it was still uncertain whether she could use an enormous sword to its fullest. That turned out to be a baseless concern, however. The sword felt as light as a feather.

Good heavens, what a weapon!

She obliterated the final target, then headed back toward Okonogi. “How’d I do?” Kikoru asked the operator.

“Your time—was one minute and three seconds. Estimated unleashed combat power: 57 percent!”

A murmur rose up from the onlookers. Her time had shrunk even more since last time, making a new record. It was not a record that newly arrived first-years ever made.

The TV crew looked pleased, feeling they had managed to capture some good footage. But Kikoru herself was not smiling one bit.

“What’s the matter?” Okonogi asked. “Your numbers were fantastic. What’s with the sour face?”

“I think this weapon is easy to use, but to be honest, I don’t feel like I did enough with it. Even after hitting several targets, I still don’t know what this thing can do.”

At scenes of emergencies, Kikoru and the others weren’t met with unmoving bull’s-eyes. There were kaiju, with bodies that were hundreds of times larger than her own. This kind of training probably hadn’t drawn out even a tenth of the performance this sword was capable of.

“Hoshina,” said Ashiro. “You let those kaiju captured at Isehara loose in Training Area Five, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Three yoku and one honju.”

“The behavioral research and analysis of their uniorgans was already finished,” Ashiro continued. “And their fortitude’s too high to use in the screening exam. They’ll make perfect opponents for Shinomiya, though.”

“What are their numbers?” asked Kikoru.

Okonogi manipulated her electronic tablet and said, “The honju was estimated at 6.2 at the time of capture.”

“That’s perfect, isn’t it?”

Though the screening exam had been disrupted by Kaiju No. 9, there had also been a honju that they’d been unable to do anything against. It had had an estimated fortitude of 6.4. She could compare how she’d done that time and figure out how much she’d grown.

“I’ll get approvals from the relevant departments right away, then,” Hoshina said. “Ms. Okonogi, would you help me out with that?”

Hoshina and Okonogi headed off toward the main office building.

“Shinomiya, show us what you’ve got,” said Ashiro.

In answer to her penetrating gaze, Kikoru saluted.

“Yes, ma’am!”

4

Thirty minutes later, the group had come to Training Area Five, located inside the base. It was an urban-style training ground, modeled on the train-station district of a provincial city, with tall, thick defensive walls encircling it. Compared to Training Area Two, where the screening exam had been held, this one was a bit more modest in size.

Ashiro, Hoshina, and a few other officers were with the television crew in the control room, positioned atop a confining wall. Here, they were able to monitor data on the positions of the kaiju inside the ground, as well as open or close the isolating walls. Meanwhile, Kikoru had headed downstairs, where she was getting ready for practice.

“Hoshina,” Ashiro whispered in his ear, softly so the reporters behind them couldn’t hear.

“What is it, Captain?”

“This went through way too easily. You were arranging this practice even before I spoke up about it.”

“Cat’s out of the bag, eh?” Hoshina said with a quiet chuckle. “You know how Shinomiya is. No way was a regular training drill going to be enough for her. And we’ve got TV cameras here, so it’s a perfect chance to impress the public. Those captured kaiju have some pretty cool characteristics too.”

“Okonogi, give me the data on those kaiju,” Ashiro ordered.

“Yes, ma’am. Let’s see. Here it is.” Detailed data was displayed on the screen.

“I caught these live on an out-of-town dispatch,” said Hoshina. “They move kinda slow and aren’t violent tempered. Not all that hard to catch. Although, well, if the job is to kill them, that’s a different story.”

“And you’re putting them up against Shinomiya,” Okonogi said flatly. “You have a marvelous personality.”

“May I take that as a compliment?”

“You may not,” Okonogi replied.

Hoshina smiled and flipped on the communicator switch.

“Well now, Shinomiya, everything in order?”



“I can head out anytime.”

Kikoru was climbing into a transport vehicle, where her weapon was loaded. An officer from the transport squad was serving as driver. Confinement Wall One, which connected to the training ground, opened, and the van began moving forward. Training Area Five had twofold confining walls to prevent kaiju escaping. Once they had entered the training ground, the driver got out and returned to the garage. This left Kikoru alone between the confining walls.

“Here we go—”

Loaded in the van was the enormous greatsword that was Kikoru’s custom weapon, as well as ammo and other weapons. Apparently, she could use whatever weapons she was familiar with. Kikoru was about to pull out the giant

sword when she noticed a silvery case in the back of the van. It was even larger than the case that held the greatsword.

“Vice-Captain Hoshina, what’s that big thing in the back?”

“Oh, that’s another weapon prototype Izumo Tech came up with. It doesn’t meet the standards we asked for, though. So the project’s suspended.”

For just a moment, Kikoru’s interest had been stirred, but the thing in the back of the van was a failure, apparently.

In addition to the sword, Kikoru also grabbed a rifle, and then stepped out of the vehicle. High up in the sky, three drones were on patrol. One belonged to the Defense Force. The other two must have been launched by the news crew from the control room.

“All of the kaiju inside the training ground can be killed,” the vice-captain said. “There’s no need to hold back.”

“Acknowledged, sir.”

Kikoru unsealed the case using her biometric data. She pulled out the sword and rested it on her shoulder. “Now to find out what this baby’s really capable of!” she said. Kikoru tightened every muscle, and the suit harmonized with her body. Before her eyes, Confinement Wall Two slowly opened to the left and right. Hoshina hadn’t given her any details on the monsters. In combat, it was normal to battle kaiju about which little was known. All she could do was figure out their characteristics while fighting them. On top of that, they were challenging foes. This was going to be tricky. But Kikoru’s face was beaming with self-confidence. “Fungal? Reptilian? I’m up for anything you throw at me.”

I’ll slice ‘em clean in two with this sword.

The doors finished opening all the way. Kikoru sprang into the training ground that had opened up in front of her. However —

“Hm?” It was an unexpected letdown. Unfurled before her eyes was a deserted rotary in front of a modest train station, as often found in small towns, including a bronze statue of some old historical samurai. Kikoru couldn’t spot any kaiju anywhere.

They're not here. Does that mean they're hiding somewhere?

Shops lined both sides of a street stretching away straight as an arrow in front of her, and by the road heading off to the right were rows of houses. Kikoru advanced toward the houses, on full alert for any kaiju lurking in the shadows.

Does this mean they aren't aggressive? Okay, fine. I'll find you—

It was in the midst of that thought that it happened. A house on her left suddenly began to shake. In the next instant, a huge, meter-long pincer exploded from its foyer and came racing at her. Kikoru leapt high and landed on the roof of a house. The house across the street was rattling as though struck by an earthquake. It heaved upward, and a great cloud of dust billowed up. Two large pincers were sticking out from underneath the house.

Wait just one minute here! Is this why Hoshina asked if I like crabs?



“Originally, they were discovered by high school students,” said Hoshina.

The incident had taken place in August of the previous year, in the mountains around Isehara in Kanagawa Prefecture. Four high school students had heard a rumor about an abandoned house haunted by a ghost and had gone there as a test of courage. As soon as they'd set foot on the property, the house had shuddered and started to move. And then a single pincer had broken through a window.

“One of the students was attacked at the scene. He sustained a serious injury that severed his right foot.”

At Hoshina's words, the television crew gasped as they stared at the screen. “That shape—is that a crab-type kaiju?”

The kaiju lifted up the house, revealing its full form: two giant pincers, and on either side, three slender legs and one short one, for a total of eight limbs. Its entire body was covered in a hard-looking carapace.

“Good eye. It burrows underground, gnaws into the foundation, and infiltrates the house. When prey approaches, it attacks with its two pincer claws.” Hoshina made a peace sign next to his face, then moved his fingers in a

snip-snip motion. “The explosive rounds the general officers carry couldn’t even break through the shell. Anyway, let’s see what you do, Shinomiya.”



Kikoru shouldered her rifle. She let loose a horizontal spread of burst rounds at the kaiju’s claws. Bright flashes of light and heat and the roars of explosions rang out. For someone with Kikoru’s high unleashed combat power, that should have been enough to finish off an ordinary yoju. The smoke from the explosions began clearing off. The kaiju was sitting there looking unperturbed, wearing the house on its back. That didn’t mean it was unharmed, though. Its carapace had taken some damage, but—

The shell’s just too hard.

It looked like this would take time even for Kikoru if she relied on head-on attacks with the gun. She set the gun down on the rooftop and firmly gripped the greatsword’s handle with both hands.

Okay, here I come!

The kaiju raised its legs up high. It stretched out its claws and came after her. Kikoru jumped from the roof. She swung the greatsword down, straight at the kaiju below. A heavy *ka-chunk* split the air, followed by the loud *splurch* of something being crushed. With just one swing, the kaiju’s claw had been severed. A pair of black eyes were sticking out from the kaiju’s head. They looked dazed, as if the creature couldn’t comprehend what had just happened.

Again!

She struck the kaiju head-on with the greatsword, using all her momentum to drive the blade into its head. Kikoru crushed its rigid carapace as though it were a fruit. Clear, yellowish fluid splattered all around.

One down.

Next, Kikoru made use of her suit’s power to race up the side of a building and took a great skyward leap. She looked down on the entire town. Something moved at the right edge of her field of vision. A partially destroyed wooden house was swaying back and forth.

There!

Jumping from rooftop to rooftop, Kikoru rushed toward the target. The moment she landed in front of the wooden house, the house was heaved upward, and out sprang a claw. Kikoru swung the greatsword down on it, breaking it into pieces. Beneath the house, the kaiju raised an earsplitting scream. Kikoru thrust the sword forward, piercing the kaiju right through the face. The moment she pulled the sword out, the creature's body slumped to the ground.

"That's two." No sooner had the words left her mouth than the sound of something slicing through the air came at Kikoru from behind. She turned and saw a giant claw right before her eyes, racing toward her. She raised her sword vertically and blocked the claw with its blade. The third yoju had been hiding close by, and it was carrying part of a collapsed apartment building on its back.

Again, the claw came rushing at Kikoru. She swept the greatsword sideways and sent it flying from its joint. She was expecting the kaiju to follow up with another attack, but instead it turned around and fled.

Oh no, you don't!

Kikoru got a running start, leapt up into the air, and swung the greatsword down at the kaiju's back, penetrating the concrete there all the way down to its carapace. There the sword's momentum ran out, however.

It can't cut it in half?

Kikoru lifted the sword again. The kaiju turned tail and concentrated all its efforts on escaping the attack. Kikoru immediately went after it and drove her sword into the same place as before. The greatsword intersected with the exposed carapace, and just like that, the kaiju's body was cleaved in two.

Number three!

Chunks of concrete the kaiju had been carrying lay scattered nearby. When Kikoru drew near to examine them, she discovered pieces of a yellow-brown substance stuck to them, resembling chunks of amber.

Hoshina called her communicator. "Well done. This class of yoju doesn't stand a chance, do they?"

“Vice-Captain Hoshina. When you asked if I liked crabs yesterday—”

“Yeh heh, it was a relief to hear you’re not allergic.”

“Sir, I didn’t come to eat them. I was the one who stood to be eaten!”

“Never would’ve happened. I figured the likes of those’d be a cinch for you.”

“I understand that, but—”

“What is it? Something bothering you?”

There was a little something that concerned her. Kikoru lowered her gaze to the kaiju’s back. “The concrete the kaiju was carrying—it’s covered in a dark, yellow-orange substance that seems to be an adhesive. Pieces of rubble are strongly bound together with it. Does this come from its uniorgan?”

Uniorgans—these were special organs that kaiju possessed, having a variety of properties depending on the kaiju. They were sometimes used as weapons in the Defense Force’s equipment.



“That’s right,” Hoshina affirmed. “The uniorgans in their backs produce a sticky fluid. When the fluid is sprayed, contact with air makes it quickly dry out and harden, turning it into a strong armor—along with the building it’s in.”

“Armor. That makes sense, then,” Kikoru said. Even though she had split the beast in half, the fact that she hadn’t been able to one-shot the thing bothered her. The greatsword she was holding felt fantastic to use. That was likely due to it being so light. Still, she felt all the more dissatisfied because it didn’t seem to work like she wanted it to.

“You’ve still got a honju remaining,” the vice-captain said. “Good hunting.”

Even yoju were strong enough to carry houses on their backs. It was possible the honju was carrying around an even bigger piece of architecture—an entire building, maybe. Kikoru looked around, taking in the larger structures inside the training ground. Japanese-style homes, row houses, multitenant buildings, and so on. However—

Isn’t it in here?

Inside the training ground, all was still and quiet. There weren’t any noises coming from anywhere. Lonely, empty buildings spread away into the distance.

Come to think of it, I first learned the truth about him on the training ground.

Kaiju No. 9 had struck during the screening exam. A defeated kaiju had regenerated. Although it had been wounded, Kikoru had been helpless to stand against it. It had been Kaiju No. 8—Kafka Hibino—who had saved the day.

Thinking back on it now, you must have been out of your mind, transforming and charging in there under Defense Force surveillance. What on earth were you thinking?

Kikoru was on her way back to the road when she noticed a run-down family restaurant. It reminded her of the time that she, Kafka, and Reno had gone out to eat after joining the Defense Force.

Right around the time they’d all joined up, Kafka and Reno had asked Kikoru to meet them at a family restaurant in town. The reason had been to explain to her about Kafka’s monstrous metamorphosis on the training ground. She’d

been wondering what kind of incredible top secret intel would be revealed to her, but—

“Huh? You ate a kaiju and turned into one?” she had found herself saying. What they had told her—that Kafka had become able to change into a kaiju after eating it—had been too hard to believe right away. But Kafka and Reno hadn’t appeared to be joking. Both of them looked stone-cold serious. If Kikoru spoke to the Defense Force about it, Kafka might end up as a component in some weapon.

“Fine. You did save me, so I’ll keep this a secret for the time being. But know this—if it turns out you’re just another kaiju out to harm humanity, then *I will kill you.*”

That was what Kikoru said to Kafka—to Kaiju No. 8—as he sat in front of her at the restaurant. She didn’t mean it as a threat. Kikoru had spoken those words from the bottom of her heart. If Kafka ever so much as bared his fangs at a civilian in the future, she intended to put him down without a second thought. It might be unsettling for Kafka to hear, but that was where she stood. After all, up until just a little while before, the man before her had been screaming so pathetically she could hardly believe he was twice her age.

Unexpectedly, though, Kafka smiled back. “Sure thing. If it comes to that, I’ll expect nothing less.” He smiled then, as if it was only natural that he’d accepted his destiny.

Kikoru, on the other hand, was completely dumbfounded.

“Well, now that that’s out of the way, are you guys ready to head back? Sorry for dragging you into this, Ichikawa.”

She saw Kafka getting up with the receipt in hand, and—“Hold it right there,” she said angrily. Kafka was surprised by the white-hot fury in her voice. “W-what is it? Is there still something left to talk about?” he asked.

“We’ve come all this way into town,” Kikoru said. “Come with me for a bit.”

“Come with you? Where to?”

Kikoru pointed a finger at her cup on the tabletop.

“It’s teatime on my day off, and I’m supposed to settle for free refills at the soda fountain? You have got to be kidding me.”

Kikoru dragged Kafka and Reno to an English-style tea shop in a spot they had to change trains twice just to get to. The first floor had a store selling British teas, and the second floor was a café. Kikoru had been coming there occasionally prior to going to America. At the window seats they were shown to, soft sunlight streamed in through a semicircular window. The room had a chic, relaxed atmosphere.

Sitting across from Kikoru, Kafka tensed up and started looking all around suspiciously. When he got a look at the menu, he whispered in Reno’s ear. “Psst! Ichikawa, help me out here. What is this? It’s just strings of letters I’ve never seen before. These are teas, aren’t they?”

“This is incredible. To think there are this many kinds of Darjeeling,” said Reno in amazement.

“What’s ‘Namring King Upper’?” Kafka asked, now intrigued. “That is totally a finishing move.”

“Look over here, Mr. Hibino. These prices.”

“Whoa! For a cup of that, I could eat two lunches and have change left over! What the heck?”

“I’d appreciate it if you two could cut back on the lowbrow chatter,” said Kikoru. “Also, it isn’t for just one cup. They serve it by the teapot.”

If the three of them carried on much longer, they’d have likely begun to stand out in a bad way. Kikoru picked out an assortment of teas and sweets for everyone, then placed their order. A waiter brought them cups and teapots, and also poured their first round. A refreshing, fragrant bouquet spread out around the table.

“This is Castleton First Flush,” said Kikoru. “It tastes great served plain.”

Looking rather cautious, Kafka picked up his cup and raised it to his mouth. “Oh. Ohhh! This is really good. Kinda fancy and upper crust, and kinda tastes great.”

“I had no idea. To think becoming a kaiju limits one’s vocabulary,” Kikoru said.

“Now it’s plain!” Kafka continued trying to describe the new taste. “No, hold on. Maybe I should change that to ‘missing flavor.’”

Next to Kafka, Reno tried a sip, and his eyes snapped open wide. “Wow. The sweetness and the aroma fade away after just a moment, like they were passing you by.”

Kafka was impressed. “L-listen to you, Ichikawa! That’s one heck of a review!”

“I don’t think it was all that impressive—”

“Dang, this stuff is great, but I just can’t put the flavor into words very well.”

Seeing agitation on Kafka’s face, Kikoru grinned.

“Hmph. Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed of,” she said. “You’ve never had it before, right? So it’s no wonder your tongue can’t keep up.”

Kafka stumbled over a few more words, then with a frustrated expression, pointed his finger straight at Kikoru. “Get down offa that high horse, young lady! There’s something I’ve drunk before that I bet you’re totally clueless about.”

“Something you’ve drunk that I never have?” Kikoru put a hand to her mouth as she considered. “Muddy water?”

“I’ve never had that either, all right? Heh. It’s a shame, really. You don’t even know the flavor!”

“Surely you’re not talking about beer or something. I am a minor,” Kikoru reminded him.

Kafka opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He’d frozen up the instant she’d spoken.

“Mr. Hibino. Don’t you think that was a little immature?”

“Ha, ha ha ha. What’re you yappin’ about, Ichikawa? Of course it ain’t. Hey, wait! I got it! Yeah, that’s the ticket!”

Kafka’s face lit up, and he stuck his finger on the tip of Kikoru’s nose.

“Ramune!” he said.

He had the look of someone struck with a brilliant idea at the moment that all hope had seemed lost.

However—

“Ramune?” Kikoru said. “I know about it. It’s that fizzy drink they sell at festivals, right?”

“Oh, you knew?” Kafka said. “Ah, but have you tried it? Can you get the marble out of the way?”

“Marble? We’re talking about drinks. What are you bringing up marbles for?”

When Kafka heard those words, he opened his mouth and burst out laughing. He crossed his arms, puffed out his chest, and said, “Yesss! I win! Even the great Kikoru is a total noob when it comes to ramune!”

“Please, Mr. Hibino,” Kikoru said. “Don’t gloat over something so trivial.” As she observed Kafka’s behavior, Kikoru was unaware of her pouting expression. “Well,” she said, “if you’re gonna build it up like that, I guess I’ll make sure to try some the next chance I get. But it better be fantastic, or this won’t end well for you.”



What an imbecilic conversation.

Kikoru had been idly reminiscing while walking down the street. Suddenly, she realized she was thinking of Kafka yet again. She shook her head to drive the thoughts out.

What was that all about? It’s almost exactly what Akari said I was doing.

A twofold beep in her ear announced an incoming transmission from Okonogi. “Miss Shinomiya, are you all right?”

“All right about what?” Kikoru asked.

“There’s an abnormality in your vitals,” Okonogi said. “Your heart rate seems to be climbing.”

“Nothing’s amiss, okay?”

“Sheesh, no need to snap—”

“I repeat: it’s nothing, Miss O-kay-nogi. Just frustration. Because I can’t find the kaiju.”

Afterward, Kikoru advanced all the way to the confining wall at the far end of the ground, but ultimately she did not engage the honju.

“Hmm,” said Hoshina through the communicator. “Can’t seem to find it, huh, Shinomiya? Come back over to the entrance.”

“Yes, sir. Heading back now,” Kikoru said.

The kaiju was apparently hiding somewhere and not coming out. Kikoru walked on the long, straight road for a while, and up ahead, the entrance—the rotary in front of the station—came into view. There was a massive crack in the road.

Just as she was stepping in front of the station, there came a rumbling sound, and the earth shuddered.

Right next to Kikoru, the asphalt burst apart, and a massive claw emerged from the ground. She took a big leap backward.

A massive crab-type kaiju several times the size of a yoju appeared from beneath the street. Huge amounts of dirt and asphalt were packed tightly against its body.

“It came back over to the entrance,” Kikoru said under her breath. “He knew good and well it was over here! That dirty-dealing—”

“I can hear that, Shinomiya,” Hoshina said. “You up for some push-ups later?”

“Yes, sir. Well, whatever.” Kikoru said indifferently. “This saves me the trouble of looking for it.” Kikoru raised the greatsword above her head, preparing to strike.

Combat power, full release!

All around her, the air crackled and shook. In a single motion, Kikoru sprang forward. The kaiju was caught on some rubble, and she swung the greatsword at its head. The blow that Kikoru unleashed easily split the kaiju’s head in half—at least, that’s what she thought would happen.

The sword made a loud noise and bounced off the tightly packed asphalt on

the kaiju's back. She'd done some damage and sheared off some of it, but she hadn't reached its carapace. She clenched her teeth tightly. "Have another!"

Kikoru swung her sword at the kaiju's giant claw, which was coated in large amounts of entangled dirt and rock. Once again, her sword bounced off. "It pushed me back!"

Although the kaiju had taken two attacks now, it was still essentially unharmed. It stared intently at Kikoru with eyes like obsidian. Then, as if in challenge, it stuck its enormous claws out at her.

"You pest!" Kikoru yelled.



In the control room, the kaiju's position within the training ground was being monitored in real time. When Kikoru had returned to the entrance, it had been assumed she would engage the kaiju in battle.

"So not even Shinomiya can hack through a honju with one swing, eh?"

At Hoshina's murmur, Okonogi nodded while she looked at the data. "The honju's carapace is a few times thicker than the yoju's. Its uniorgan secretes a lot more fluid too. Breaking through the shell when it's covered in asphalt might be tricky even for a division captain."

Hearing that, the television director raised a question. "Mr. Hoshina. If that's the case, what methods can you think of for dealing with it?"

"It has its vulnerabilities," said Hoshina. "The first thing I'd suggest is to aim for its joints. Actually, that's what I had my officers do when we captured it."

"I see. So that's the method you would —"

"Nah, I think I'd just kill it the usual way."

"What?" said the director, drawing back a bit.

"Using this," Hoshina said, and patted his custom weapon—a daggerlike ninja sword—that he wore on his hip.

"Hoshina," said Ashiro, "your method wouldn't be any help."

"Oh? Then what would you do, Captain?"

“Blow a hole through the carapace with artillery.”

“I don’t think that helps us much either.” Hoshina said.

With a grimace, Okonogi answered the director, who was now overwhelmed by a conversation far beyond his experience. “You can’t rely too much on the standards of these two, so—”

“Ha ha ha. Seems that way, huh?” the director agreed.

As Ashiro watched Kikoru in battle, she murmured, “Is this the turn of events you were aiming for, Hoshina?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hoshina said, cocking his head.

“If all this was just to showcase her custom weapon, there would have been no need to bring a truck loaded with weapons into the training ground. You must have predicted that that greatsword wouldn’t work on the honju.”

“Nothing gets by you, does it, Captain?”

“I can guess right away what you’re likely to think of,” Ashiro replied.

Listening from the side, Okonogi wasn’t sure what the point of this was. “Vice-Captain Hoshina,” she asked, “why would you do such a thing?”

“Ms. Okonogi, there are situations where relying on your custom weapon alone can actually trip you up,” Hoshina explained. “That’s especially true for Shinomiya, given that she’s still light on field experience. To deal with that kaiju, she ought to judiciously incorporate standard weapons into her attacks. There are freezing bombs in that van. Using those, she could inhibit the kaiju’s movements. The best way is to do that first, and then hammer it with her custom weapon.”

“I see.”

“At this rate she’s going to gradually run out of options. What’s your next move, Shinomiya?” Hoshina wondered.



As Hoshina had predicted, Kikoru was struggling.

This thing!

She could break the armor that the kaiju was wearing. But one slice wasn't enough to reach her real target, its carapace. Even now, the kaiju was continuing to spew out that sticky fluid. The sand and asphalt scattered on the ground were getting stuck in it and creating new armor as quickly as Kikoru could destroy it.

She realized that her breathing was labored. She'd been pushing the suit's capabilities too far for too long. Kikoru had also realized what Hoshina intended for her. On the other side of the kaiju, she could see the delivery van in front of the station. He wanted her to get back over there and use the other weapons.

But even though she understood, Kikoru didn't feel like following through.

If I did that, it'd be like I'd turned tail and run!

"You doing okay, Shinomiya?" asked Hoshina. "Not losing your cool?"

"What makes you think I'm losing my cool?!" Kikoru yelled.

"That's what someone who's losing her cool would say."

Once again, Kikoru came at the kaiju head-on and swung her sword. A giant claw was waiting for it, though, and the two weapons clashed. Kikoru's greatsword was caught firmly in the pincer. The kaiju swiped at Kikoru with its other enormous claw, flinging her aside. With the greatsword still gripped by the kaiju, Kikoru went flying toward the front of the station and slammed into the delivery vehicle. The transport was knocked on its side by the impact, and the weapons it carried were thrown out.

Since Kikoru had just raised her shield, her vitals showed no abnormalities. She had no injuries to speak of either. Combat itself was still doable, but she'd lost the weapon that gave her any hope of winning. Sword still pinched in its claw, the kaiju was gazing in her direction, as if sizing up the situation.

Gritting her teeth, Kikoru got to her feet. Something she'd been vaguely worried about during this training had become a reality. Her custom weapon was light and easy to handle, but it lacked crucial destructive power.

This isn't my ideal weapon.

To attack head-on and subdue with overwhelming fighting power—that was

what she wanted in a weapon now. That didn't mean strategy wasn't important, but the hope of a one-shot kill suited her temperament best.

If only I had something heavier, more massive!

A pile of cargo from the overturned transport van lost its balance, and a very large trunk case came tumbling out. It was that weapon that Hoshina had said wasn't up to standard. It fell to the ground with a heavy thunk.

Huh? What was that noise? How heavy is that thing?

The case must not have been sealed very well, because the shock of its fall had opened it. When she saw what was inside, Kikoru's eyes widened.

This is a failure?

It made sense once she saw it. The weapon was far too large and rugged. It was an obsidian-black axe with a blade longer than half Kikoru's height. The polished blade reflected dark-gray light. Before she'd even thought about it, Kikoru was reaching out for the weapon, as if it were pulling her in. She gripped its handle and raised it up with both hands. A shock ran through her core. The greatsword had been lighter than it appeared, but this axe was far heavier than its appearance suggested. She couldn't imagine how many kilos it must weigh.

If I use this—!

"Stop it, Shinomiya," Hoshina demanded. "It's totally reckless to handle that."

"My attacks bounced off because they had too little force. A heavy weapon increases the force, right?" Kikoru asked.

"You'll understand when you raise it up. That weapon had to be made heavy because of a gimmick. You can't swing it at your level of unleashed combat power. Now hurry up and put it down!"

"I can't swing it at my present power?"

"That's right. Now—"

Kikoru's eyes shone with a fierce glare.

"All the more reason to do it! Now I really want to swing it!"

"Wait!" Hoshina insisted.

Kikoru's personality was aggressive and assertive, and there was one other thing about her that was consistently true: she was self-confident and absolutely hated to lose.

With the axe against her shoulder, Kikoru took off running. Each time one of her boots hit the ground, a deep footprint was etched into the surface. She attempted to raise the axe up at the kaiju, but—

Crap!

The blade's center of gravity was off somehow, and it threw off her aim. The blade came down far in front of the kaiju. The shock of the impact rebounded into her hands, and Kikoru was flung toward the ground. As she looked ahead while taking a rolling fall to avoid injury, she saw the axe stuck deep in the asphalt.

The force is incredible. With this, I can break through its shell!

Yet, as Hoshina had pointed out, Kikoru couldn't quite handle this axe in her present condition.

In that case, what should she do? Put her tail between her legs and run away the next time a powerful kaiju emerged? Or, as in the entrance exam, wait for Kaiju No. 8—for Kafka—to come and save her?

I won't allow it.

She didn't want that to happen.

No way will I let that happen anymore!

Kikoru placed both hands on the handle of the axe that had sunk deep into the asphalt. She strained her muscles, trying to pull it loose. Her suit squeezed her body tightly, and she realized it was attuning itself to her even more deeply. The air all around her vibrated with electricity.

The honju let loose a loud, piercing shriek. Almost as if it were frightened of Kikoru standing before it.



"That dimwit. She really did lose her cool," Hoshina said. "I'm going in there."

The vice-captain started to head downstairs. Just like at the entrance exam, when he'd been ready for Kaiju No. 9's attack, Hoshina was equipped with a weapon and ready to do battle at a moment's notice.

While waiting in front of the elevator, he heard Okonogi's panicked voice ring out. "Vice-Captain Hoshina! Shinomiya's unleashed combat power is rising!"

"What?"

Hoshina came back and gazed at the screen along with Ashiro. Kikoru's greatest unleashed combat power to date was 57 percent. The number displayed, however, was steadily rising: 58 percent, 59 percent—

"Estimated unleashed combat power: 60 percent!"



Kikoru pulled the axe from the ground and sprang.

As if in answer, the kaiju roared. Gouts of sudsy foam came spewing from its mouth. It tossed away the sword it had in its pincer and swung its claw straight at Kikoru. The claw and the axe collided in midair. There was a sound like something bursting open. The giant claw that the greatsword could only scrape at had finally cracked open. Armor and all, the claw had gone flying, exposing white strands of muscle fiber.

The kaiju's decision came swiftly. Perhaps it had realized instinctively that the petite young girl before its eyes was immensely more powerful than itself. It turned its armored back on her and attempted to flee the scene.

Kikoru poised to unleash another strike into the asphalt-encrusted carapace. That was when it happened. From under Kikoru, a transmission arrived from Hoshina.

"Shinomiya—that axe has a gimmick to it."

"A gimmick?"

"Yeah. There should be a trigger right there on the handle," Hoshina said. "Pull it."

"Yes, sir!"

Kikoru held the axe far back and leapt. She positioned herself directly above the fleeing kaiju and pulled the trigger. Radiating out from the head of the axe, a ferocious shock wave burst forth. It nearly caused her to lose her balance, but she managed to maintain her footing by sending power throughout her entire body. The axe unleashed the shock wave, and it explosively accelerated directly downward.

I like the taste of crab, but there's one thing I don't like.

Her golden hair blew wildly. What looked like a torrent of lightning bolts sent from heaven poured down on the kaiju. Roars of explosions rang out all around, and dust billowed high into the sky. The white haze was too thick for even the drones to confirm what had happened, but at last it began to dissipate. There was the honju, split perfectly in two right down the middle, and there was Kikoru, calmly resting the axe on her shoulder.

“You guys’re a pain to eat, aren’t you?” she said.

From the kaiju, a veritable fountain of bodily fluids sprayed out and began drenching the entire area.



“The honju’s vital responses are gone! Officer Shinomiya has now completed the elimination of all kaiju—three yoju, one honju—within the training ground!”

As he received Okonogi’s report, Hoshina scratched a sweaty cheek.

“Who would’ve thought she could handle that thing? I sure didn’t expect it.”

“Looks like it’s decided. Shinomiya’s custom weapon, I mean.”

Hoshina nodded at Ashiro’s words and looked at the news crew with a smile on his face. “How was it? Got some pretty impressive footage?”

Pointing his camera straight down, the director simply murmured, “Images like these can’t be aired without blurring them.”

Even more bodily fluids were now spurting from the split kaiju’s body. As if to moisten her dry lips, Kikoru, axe at the ready, licked the area around her mouth.

Training was finished, and Ashiro, Hoshina, Kikoru, and the others had returned to the control room. The greatsword and the axe were lying side by side on a desk.

“About this axe,” said Hoshina. “Its primary material is a uniorgan from the honju neutralized the year before last in Shinagawa. By generating a powerful bioelectric potential, it was able to contract its muscle fibers extremely quickly. That would expel the air it had taken in with explosive force, causing a shock wave. That kaiju inflicted a lot of damage on civilians and city alike. This axe uses that as its gimmick.”

“And that was what happened on my last swing, right?” asked Kikoru.

“Right. When the trigger turns on the power, it generates the shock wave. What you employed this time was an acceleration caused by rearward expulsion, but you can get the maximum force out of it by sending the shock wave forward. As you can tell from this characteristic, lots of strength is also required of the weapon itself. Loading it caused it to become incredibly heavy. It’s undergone processing to make the blade narrower, but even so, it was decided that your unleashed combat power wasn’t enough to handle it. However—”

“You showed you can handle it well,” Ashiro said, picking up where Hoshina had left off. “Officer Shinomiya, I’m reissuing your custom weapon. Any objections?”

Kikoru’s hand crept toward the axe. She remembered the feel of it from just a little while ago. The overwhelming force that had slain the kaiju. Training would still be needed in order to handle it correctly, but this was without a doubt an ideal weapon.

“It works well enough. That goes without saying. But if I had one complaint about it—”

“If you did, what would it be?” Hoshina asked.

“I guess it would be that the design is too rugged and doesn’t really look good with me.”

“Oh no, I think it suits you perfectly,” Hoshina said with a wry smile. “That’s right, Shinomiya. There’s a name for the technique you displayed at the end there.”

“A name?” Kikoru asked.

“Squadron-Style Axe Technique may not have a lot of practitioners, but it’s definitely a thing. For the purposes of slaying kaiju, it’s been studied since way back. That midair downswing you exhibited—in Squadron-Style Axe Technique, that’s called ‘Falling Thunder.’ It’s the first form.”

“Falling Thunder.” Kikoru made a mental note of the name.

“As you might expect, axe wielding is also included in the eighteen martial arts,” Hoshina said. “I’ve studied the basics of it myself. You never know when the next enormous kaiju’s gonna emerge. Tomorrow or the day after, I’m gonna drill those fundamentals into you, so get ready.”

A flame flared up in Kikoru’s heart. She was going to learn everything there was to learn. She answered Ashiro and Hoshina with a salute. “Custom weapon humbly accepted!”

6

At lunchtime, Kikoru headed to the mess hall. It was bustling with many JDF officers whose drills were already finished, and a delicious aroma was in the air, whetting appetites.

“Hey, Kikoru.” Kafka, carrying a tray loaded with food, had noticed her. “You didn’t come to morning drills. What’s up?”

“I had a little errand with Captain Ashiro and some people.”

“With Mina? What in the world did she want?” Kafka asked.

“Please stop using her first name. Well, I’ll show you soon.” Kikoru blew a privileged-sounding “Hmph!” from her nose. That was when she realized that Kafka was in high spirits about something.

“What’s with you? Did something good happen?” she asked.

“You bet! Get a load of this! Ta-da! How about it?”

What Kafka confidently produced was a record sheet from the morning drills.

“Check this out! I’m down a few more seconds since yesterday.”

“Hmmmm. Here, look at this.”

Kikoru handed her sheet to Kafka, and his eyes went wide.

“O-one minute, three seconds! Did you— Is this?”

Staring intently at Kafka, she cocked her head once more. Although he had put on some muscle lately, his appearance was that of a man in his thirties—a so-called old-timer. It was hard to believe he was in fact Kaiju No. 8 and had saved Kikoru.

With that in mind, Kikoru arrived at an answer she could accept.

Ahhh, is that why?

Why was it she was always so concerned with Kafka Hibino? It had to be because she hadn’t paid him back yet. On that fateful day, Kaiju No. 8 had saved Kikoru’s life, so she still owed Kafka a debt. And she didn’t much care for staying in debt.

That’s it. That’s gotta be it. Just you wait, Kafka Hibino.

If that was the case, next time would be the opposite, she thought. If he ever got in a tight spot, she would come running with her new weapon in hand. And then she would absolutely—

I’ll make you sorry again.

Kikoru began to giggle innocently.

CHAPTER 3

Vice-Captain—Soshiro Hoshina

1

“All right. Guess that about does it.” Hoshina thumped a finger on the report resting on top of his desk and let out a sigh. The report was an evaluation of Kikoru’s training exercise from the day before, written from the perspective of Hoshina, her vice-captain. “That took longer than expected.” Hoshina swallowed the last of his lukewarm coffee and stepped out of the room. Office hours had already ended, but he had another appointment coming up.

He walked down a corridor of the main office building and saw the television crew approach from the other end. “Mr. Director,” said Hoshina. “How was your day? Are the interviews going all right?”

The director gave a slight nod. “It really helps that everyone’s so cooperative,” he said. “Mr. Hoshina, I’d like to ask — Would it be okay if we heard a bit from you?”

“From me? I’m too old to call a newcomer, but—”

The director laughed gently. “No, I’d like to ask you about the newcomers. Everyone this year seems top-notch. I was really surprised at Shinomiya’s exercise yesterday too.”

“Well, the most recent entrance exam in western Tokyo was pretty harsh. Maybe the most competitive one we’ve ever had. It’s ‘cause there’s so many talented people. I’d be glad to get just one of their kind every year.”

“Interesting,” said the director. “Actually, that makes me wonder even more

about something.”

“What would that be?”

“Officer Kafka Hibino. Compared to the others, he just seems weaker in terms of basic physical ability. What exactly did you have in mind when you chose him for the job?”

It was no wonder the director was harboring such a question. For the past few days, Hibino hadn’t managed to do anything impressive in front of the news crew. He’d come in dead last in shooting practice as well as in the obstacle run.

“Well, it should go without saying that we don’t simply hire based on combat ability,” Hoshina said. “There’ve also been various changes of attitude in the upper echelon. Because of that, one of the reasons we hired Officer Hibino is—”

The director couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “One of the reasons?” he asked.

The corner of Hoshina’s mouth turned upward as he smirked. “I guess you could say he ticks the comedy checkbox.”

“Th-the comedy checkbox?” Startled, the director blinked his eyes, looking like he’d never expected such a thing.

“The life of the party, as it were,” Hoshina explained. “Even watching from the sidelines, he’s pretty funny, isn’t he? All those reckless, dim-witted things he does? Honestly, what a klutz! Up until now, I’d never seen an unleashed combat power of 0 percent, and while his fighting spirit would do any officer proud, he lacks the physical strength to back it up. At Sagamihara, he didn’t even know what he could do and just ran around the emergence site from start to finish.”

“Th-that’s a pretty severe evaluation, isn’t it?”

“Well, I just have a soft spot for that kind of moron,” Hoshina admitted.

“Let me ask you again,” the director pressed. “Why did you hire him?”

Hoshina scratched his cheek. “A long time ago, I saw someone like him doing the same things. People around him were always telling him to give up being a Defense Force officer, but he kept frantically running around trying to make it work. He was a moron too.”

“I see. So there was someone like him before. What is that officer doing now?” the director asked.

“No idea. But I like to think he’s off working as an officer somewhere.” Hoshina laughed softly and started walking. “Come to think of it, there’s a training session I’m running in the dojo that’s about to start. Newcomers will be participating too, so if you don’t mind, I’d like you to drop by and report on it.”



“Seyaa!”

Shouts of officers were resounding in the wood-floored dojo. The JDF base had indoor training facilities, which included a gymnasium. Even after dinner was over, many people were still focused on their training.

“Look at this.” the director murmured, impressed. “Even though this is their free time, there’s quite a turnout, eh?”

Hoshina looked around the dojo and remarked, “This year’s new hires are especially proactive.”

Near the entrance, two officers in protective gear were jabbing the tips of their swords at one another. One charged forward to strike at an opening and drove his bamboo sword into the mask of the other.

The officer who’d scored the hit pulled off his mask. It was Haruichi Izumo. “You’re pretty good at this, Reno. Did you do kendo before?” he said.

Reno, who had been Izumo’s opponent, took off his mask and exhaled. “Just a little, in a class I had in junior high. I couldn’t see that last charge of yours at all, Haruichi.”

“No, no. I was in a tight spot too.”

A relaxed, easygoing smile was on Haruichi’s face.

Nearby, another pair with decidedly different physiques were facing off against one another. One was a veteran male officer experienced at kendo, and yet he was being put on the defensive. His opponent, a tall, muscular officer, was swinging the sword downward from overhead in a blisteringly powerful strike.

“That officer’s intensity is something else, isn’t it? Is he a new hire too?”

Hoshina shook his head at the director’s question. “I know you can’t see their face because of the mask, but it’s not a ‘he’ but a ‘she.’ It’s new recruit Hakua Igarashi.”

“Igarashi— Oh yeah, the younger sister of Officer Jura from Second Division!”

Hakua Igarashi got along well with Kikoru and was herself another of the promising newly minted officers.

While Hoshina was letting his gaze wander around the dojo, a lone male officer walked up to him. He was a young man with light tan skin, a piercing gaze, and a shredded body. It was Aoi Kaguragi, formerly of the Ground Self-Defense Force. “Sir! May I request a sparring match with you?” he asked.

“All right,” Hoshina agreed. “A single-bout match.”

Once he’d donned his protective gear, Hoshina faced off with Aoi, standing on his toes with his knees apart, his hips low, and his upper body straight. The officer who was refereeing the match gave the signal to start. The air was charged with tension. Other officers dropped what they were doing and started watching the match between these two intently.

They approached one another until they were close enough for the tips of their swords to make contact. Aoi was the first to make a move.

“Ueiyaah!”

Letting loose with a rip-roaring shout, Aoi charged forward. Instantly, he narrowed the distance and went in hard, striking faster at Hoshina than the untrained eye could follow. Hoshina caught the blow with the blade of his bamboo sword, though, and deftly parried. Aoi’s attack failed to score, and the two swords’ handguards ground against one another as each tried to push the other back. Both Aoi and Hoshina stepped back, once more putting some space between themselves.

This time it was Hoshina who closed the distance. In response, Aoi swung his bamboo sword over Hoshina’s in an attempt to go on the offensive. Hoshina didn’t miss the opening. By sweeping Aoi’s blade upward from below, he made him vulnerable. The clear sound of bamboo smacking plastic rang across the

dojo. Aoi had been hit on his mask.

“Point!” the referee’s voice called out. The two bowed to each other, and the match came to an end. Aoi removed his mask. He had large drops of sweat on his face. Hoshina, on the other hand, wore an indifferent expression.

With the same severe expression on his face, Aoi bowed low and said, “Thank you very much, sir. I’ll keep working on it.”

“No, that was really something. No wonder you got where you are.” Hoshina was honest in praising Aoi. Even in the JGSDF, he’d been one who was expected to go places, and his skill at kendo was considerable as well. He was likely in the top class of the Third Division’s officers.

This year’s new recruits really are an exceptional bunch, Hoshina mused.

A round of applause rose up, lauding the match between the high-level pair.

Meanwhile, a match that was its polar opposite was going on in the front of the dojo.

“Do-ryaaaaaa!”

With an awkward and hasty charge, a man swung his bamboo sword wildly. His preparatory motions were large, however, making his attack easy to avoid. The officer who had been under attack went on offense. He raised his bamboo sword high above his head and swung it down hard.

“Gwah!”

The shinai struck so hard that it seemed as if his mask would surely split in half. The man dropped to one knee.

“Killing Strike: Iharu Blade! Whaddaya think of my downward swing? Pretty strong, eh, old-timer?”

“C-come on, man! At least cut me a little slack!”

As Kafka was getting to his feet, he pulled off his mask. Iharu, who had charged him, cocked his head sideways. “A love tap like that *is* cutting you slack. Even so, old-timer, any way you look at it, you’re too much of an amateur.”

“I’ve never practiced kendo before,” Kafka explained. “Everyone around me,

Ichikawa included, has experience, right? I wonder if everyone who shoots for the Defense Force is doing martial arts.”

Reno came over and spoke to Kafka. “You say you don’t have experience, but didn’t you take judo as an elective?”

“Huh? No, I’ve never done judo either.”

“Oh? What about your required course?” Reno asked.

“What’re you talking about?” Kafka said.

“I mean, weren’t either judo or kendo a required class? In junior high.”

“Whuh? What do you mean?”

Holding his mask under one arm, Hoshina came over to where Kafka and the others were. “Due to revisions to the National Guidelines for the Course of Study, one martial art is a required course *now*. That’s why, well, practically all of this year’s new recruits have experience, except Kafka.”

“Hey, is that true? S-so even here there’s a generation gap?” Kafka rose to his feet and clenched his fists. “Crap, if that’s the case, it’s all the more reason I gotta practice. Sir, can I ask you to teach me too? Please, sir, let me have one match!”

Reno chimed in, “Vice-Captain, can I have a match too?”

“Whoa, Reno! You tryin’ to get ahead of me? Me too, sir! Me too!”

“Iharu, I didn’t really mean it like that.”

Seeing the newcomers with their hands raised, Hoshina nodded.

“All right. I’ll take you on, so line up in order.”

A loud thwack rang out.

“Gah!”

A loud thwack rang out.

“Gwah!”

A loud thwack rang out.

“Ugh!”



“All right, good work, everyone. For now, what you need are basic drills.”

Kafka, Reno, and Iharu lay on the dojo floor like a pile of corpses. Their levels were so far below Hoshina’s that it hardly seemed like they’d fought him.

The director, who’d been watching from a corner of the dojo, approached Hoshina. “Ahhh, you use the sword better than anyone else! Just what you’d expect of someone from the leading kaiju-neutralization force, here or even in the Kansai region. Come to think of it, you didn’t join the force here, but over in Kansai, right?”

“Yes, I was scouted by Captain Ashiro and transferred here,” Hoshina said.

“I see! So your reputation was spreading far and wide from the time you joined up, eh?”

Hoshina gave a pained smile and replied, “It wasn’t anything like that.”

The director cocked his head, unsure of what to make of Hoshina’s response.

“Vice-Captain Hoshina?”

When Hoshina turned toward the voice from behind, Kikoru was standing there in protective gear. A sharp glare could be glimpsed from between the bars of her mask.

“May I go next, sir?” Kikoru asked.

“Uh, sure.” Hoshina agreed.

Kikoru balanced on her toes, lowered her hips, straightened her back, and raised her shinai. The phrase “right at home” suited her demeanor well. As with Aoi, you could tell just by looking that she possessed extraordinary ability.

Proficient in the use of swords as well as guns, eh? Outstanding. Absolutely nothing like me.

As Hoshina watched the newcomers approach, a certain memory flitted across his mind. He started to recall the time before he was assigned to the Third Division.

Hoshina was normally working over near Kansai, but that day he had been in Tokyo on a business trip. He had a meeting to attend for the interdepartmental kendo tournament that was coming up the following month with the Third Division. The sword-slay instructor for the Third Division had been an acquaintance since early childhood—one reason being that Hoshina's father was on friendly terms with him.

Hoshina greeted the instructor. "It's good to see you're doing well, sir."

"Oh no, these days not even my body does what I want it to. Recently, I've been thinking about resigning as an instructor. What do you say, Soshiro? It'd be a big help if you'd come work over here."

Hoshina smiled and dodged the offer. "Ha ha ha, well, I'll give it some thought."

"Why don't you become an instructor?"—they were words Hoshina had heard many times before. "Swordplay skills, roundly acknowledged, but not cut out for combat." That was the usual appraisal of Soshiro Hoshina within the Defense Force. He'd been urged to take an instructor position by both his father and his supervisor. And that would mean withdrawing from the field.

Hoshina wished to remain on the front line, however.

It's not that I disagree with them. I know I'm stubborn and hardheaded.

The meeting finished up, but just as Hoshina was about to head back, he was stopped in the General Affairs Division. Apparently, there had been a message from the Third Division's captain. She wanted him to drop by her office.

A message? From the captain to me?

Hoshina had no idea what it could be about, but since he'd been summoned, he had to show up. Feeling a bit on edge, he knocked on the door to the captain's office.

"Come in," a crisp, dignified voice said.

When Hoshina opened the door, a woman was facing her work desk. Mina Ashiro—the new arrival who, at quite a young age, had taken up the position of

Third Division captain. She seemed roughly the same age as Hoshina. He had seen her before during joint training exercises, but this was his first time speaking with her face-to-face. Hoshina straightened his posture and saluted. "Pardon me for coming in while you're busy. I'm Soshiro Hoshina."

"I'm Third Division's captain, Mina Ashiro. I'm sorry for calling you here."

"Not at all. I've got nothing else to do, after all. Was just thinking of doing a little Tokyo sightseeing before heading home. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

Ashiro turned away from Hoshina and gazed at the thinly clouded expanse of sky outside her window. "I saw you before at the joint training exercises. I only saw it from a distance, but that was superb swordplay," she said.

"That's much appreciated."

What's this all of a sudden? Hoshina thought suspiciously.

"Soshiro Hoshina, you're a katana specialist, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

Hoshina had a feeling he knew what Ashiro was about to say. A silent sigh escaped him.

Oh, it's going to be that again. Please give it up, already—

Third Division needed a new instructor for sword-slay techniques. She was probably going to tell him to give up on fieldwork and transfer over here.

Ashiro slowly turned toward him, and then said her piece. "We need your help. Would you be willing to join my division, Hoshina?"

There was a break in the clouds, and sunlight came streaming into the room. The thinly clouded sky cleared. Ashiro's crystal clear eyes were locked on Hoshina.

"Uh?" His thoughts had frozen at her unexpected words.

"Going forward, we can't discount the possibility that powerful enemies may appear with small bodies," Ashiro explained. "And unlike you, I'm utterly useless with bladed weapons. I don't even like holding a kitchen knife."

I get the feeling the kitchen knife's a different issue, though.

“When I need to shoot a threat, can I trust that you’ll clear a path for me?” Ashiro asked.

Hoshina realized his heart was deeply moved. No one, not even his father, had ever said those words to him. If it were under this woman’s command—yes, he would end up embracing her fighting spirit.

No.

Hoshina took in a silent breath and then released it. His agitated mind was already peacefully settling down.

Don’t take what she said at face value—it’s only lip service. I’d make a fool of myself if I said yes on the spot. Answer lip service with lip service. That was what decorum was all about.

Hoshina began to speak, “I’m happy to hear you say that, but—”

And then it happened. A shrill alarm rang out from the hallway. The door swung open forcefully, and a male officer with a shaved head burst into the room. “Captain, I beg your pardon!” he said. “Kaiju emergence reported in Oume. It’s a small one, but a large number of yoju have also been confirmed. As many as a dozen casualties at the emergence point already. Details on the scale of the damage are as—”

Ashiro listened to the officer’s report, and then nodded. “Understood. Ebina, call up all officers, including those off duty.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The man called Ebina saluted. “Still, they’ve got the drop on us, don’t they? This is coming right when we’re full of greenhorns.”

“These are kaiju we’re up against. They don’t take our convenience into account,” Ashiro coolly replied.

She picked up the phone on her desk and quickly began firing off orders. But Ashiro had just recently assumed the office of captain, and her chain of command didn’t seem to be performing optimally quite yet. If they were going into battle against kaiju, they probably needed all the help they could get. Which was exactly why the suggestion came naturally to Hoshina’s lips.

“Captain Ashiro. If it’s all right with you, how about I go to the scene as well?”

Ebina's expression twisted as if he were saying "Huh?" at Hoshina's words. "You're here on a business trip, aren't you? And you're from a different unit," Ebina said.

"I brought my suit and my weapons here with me," Hoshina replied. "I figure I can make myself useful for dealing with yoju, at least."

"But still —"

Before Ebina could speak any further, Ashiro broke in. "Hoshina, as Third Division captain, I would definitely appreciate it. I'll make arrangements with your division captain as well."

"Captain, is this really okay?" Ebina shouted. "Going off their estimated fortitude, this is going to be a dangerous operation."

"He's a close-combat expert. I'm sure he'll be a great help. Isn't that right, Hoshina?"

In answer to Ashiro's question, Hoshina gave a simple nod and said, "Yes. When it comes to killing small kaiju, I'm second to none."

3

And so it was that on Ashiro's order, Hoshina was placed in Ebina Platoon. They boarded the transport together and headed for the northwest part of Oume, where the emergence had occurred.

Hoshina was reading a book in the transport when Ebina said "Hey" to him. Ebina had a large scar on his face, and his stern, forbidding features made him look like some kind of criminal.

"You seem to think this'll be a walk in the park," he said to Hoshina.

"If it bothers you, I'll put the book away. This is a little routine I have."

Hoshina had been an avid reader since childhood. Reading while en route to missions had helped calm his mind in the past. In his hand this time was *The Rubaiyat*, a collection of four-line poems by the Persian-born scholar Omar Khayyam.

Ebina rose to his feet. “A routine?” he shouted.

What’re you getting mad at me for? Hoshina thought, but Ebina sat back down.

“You’re— That’s important, isn’t it? So do it right!” Ebina said unexpectedly.

“Y-yessir. I will,” Hoshina replied sheepishly.

Hoshina resumed reading and noticed that Ebina kept glancing at him. Did he have something more he wanted to say? Unable to concentrate, Hoshina closed the book. “Is something the matter, sir?” he asked Ebina.

“You said your name is Hoshina. That’s a name even I’ve heard of. A family whose ancestral business is kaiju slaying. Even my instructor couldn’t open his mouth without singing the praises of your swordplay.”

“I appreciate that,” Hoshina replied.

“But times have changed,” Ebina said. “Surely you realize that. I appreciate the backup, but I want you to stick to logistical support only.”

“I have no intention of putting my nose where it doesn’t belong,” Hoshina said. “I intend to do what I’m able to do.”

What he was able to do—was slay monsters.

That alone is who I am, and why I’m here.



The field headquarters had been set up in the parking lot near the train station. As soon as Hoshina got out of the transport, he heard sounds of explosions, gunfire, and roaring kaiju. When he looked in the direction of the noise, the plume of a huge eruption was billowing up into the sky.

Looks like it’s already started over there.

The point of kaiju emergence was at the narrow end of an alluvial fan through which the Tama River flowed. The kaiju had appeared in the mountain forests and were headed downstream, smashing civilian homes along the way. Presently, they were advancing toward an urban area. All eleven members of Ebina Platoon, including Hoshina, were deployed within Neutralization Zone L.

“I’ll relay the operation,” Ebina said, addressing the officers. “Our targets this time are reptilian kaiju. One honju and a large number of yoju. The yoju are emerging in the mountains. Their numbers are presently unclear. They are also reported to have insatiable appetites, so watch yourselves. Our role is to stop any yoju that the vanguard platoon may have missed here in Zone L. Don’t let even one of ’em get away!”

“Yes, sir!” the surrounding officers answered with vigor. Everyone was holding a rifle, except for Hoshina.

So, I’m the only one with swords? Every year, I feel more like I’ve gone to a wedding in my swimming trunks.

The Defense Force’s drones were flying off toward the mountains. They would locate victims who hadn’t gotten out in time, monitor kaiju, and so on. The information they gathered would be relayed to the officers via their operators. As they were also highly useful as go-betweens when platoons were coordinating with one another, drones were now indispensable on kaiju hunts. The drones had formed a neat line formation, but one of them was lagging behind.

Ebina didn’t like the look of that. He suddenly started yelling with a very unprofessional expression on his face. “Hey, you! Who are you, and where’d you come from!” He pointed his rifle at the lagging drone.

“Hold on, sir, what are you doing?” Hoshina asked.

Ebina indicated the drone with his rifle. “Look there, at that drone. That ain’t one of ours,” he said.

“Oh, you’re right.”

Looking at it carefully, Hoshina could see that there were no Defense Force logos on it. Many JDF drones were flying back and forth all over the scene, but in an orderly fashion. The number that could be in flight was even limited so as not to provoke kaiju.

“It’s either some news outlet or a rubbernecker,” said Ebina. “Honestly, I’ve heard of cases where civilians deliberately baited kaiju with drones and caused massive accidents.”

Ebina continued to wave his rifle at the wayward drone and shouted, “Hey! Knock it off before I knock you off!”

Listen to him go. Maybe he did run a shady business after all?

“Good grief. Captain, please calm down.” The general officers were trying to cool Ebina off. Going by the practiced ease with which they did it, they seemed to view his outbursts as commonplace occurrences.

Just then, a transmission for Ebina Platoon arrived from an operator. “Zone L, yoju emergence confirmed south of you.”

“Got it. Let’s go, everybody!” Ebina ordered. “Time to rain on those kaiju’s parade.”

Their instructions were to move within the train tracks of the Oume Line. Hoshina and the others leapt over the fence and onto the tracks.

“Distance to targets, four hundred meters. There are four of them.”

There came a rumbling in the ground, like the sound of an approaching stampede. Far away down the tracks, a cloud of dust began to appear. Four kaiju were climbing over and shoving past one another, vying to be in the lead as they approached. Each was about five meters in length. Their bodies were black, their eyes were opened wide, and large amounts of drool dripped from their mouths. On their heads, there were organs that looked somewhat like scarves.

Their movements are pretty fast.

Hoshina placed a hand on the sword that was slung from his waist.

“Target acquired! Set your sights on the head.”

At Ebina’s call, the officers formed a single row and aimed their weapons.

“Fire!”

Buddabuddabudda! Burst rounds were fired simultaneously in a horizontal row. The go-to opening move against a kaiju opponent was to aim for its limbs and head, but this kaiju was moving fast. Ebina judged it too difficult to aim at its four legs and narrowed the target to just the head. This strategy seemed to be working perfectly. The officers’ lateral hail of burst rounds struck it in the

head, burning the kaiju's eyes. The beast let loose a screeching roar and came to a halt.

"Keep shooting!" Ebina shouted.

The gunfire continued even harder against the writhing kaiju. The kaiju's bodies were crackling with the impact of burst rounds. The lead kaiju collapsed to the ground. The two behind it leapt over its corpse and came charging.

But the last of the pack, hidden from view by the others, suddenly changed direction. It easily pushed over the fence next to the railroad tracks and went charging toward a house. Going right through it, it began advancing toward the foot of the mountain.

On Ebina's orders, some of the officers fired at the kaiju, but it was already out of range. "Crap! It got away!" Ebina said angrily.

Before the officers' eyes, the remaining pair of kaiju were advancing ever nearer. With everyone fighting together, the platoon was somehow managing to hold them at bay, but if officers were to split off and go after the escapee, the other kaiju might well break through.

"This is Ebina Platoon! One kaiju has escaped. Matsuura Platoon, request—"

"I'll go."

"Huh? Hey!" Ebina said, surprised.

Hoshina leapt from the train tracks. Jumping from rooftop to rooftop, he caught up with the kaiju that was destroying houses as it advanced, detoured around it, and came to stand in the middle of the street.

A house was blown apart, and from the swirl of airborne dust the kaiju revealed itself. It emitted a screech like fingernails on a chalkboard. There was not a single tooth inside its gaping maw.

You don't need a dentist at least. I'm jealous.

The kaiju came charging straight at him. Hoshina crouched, keeping his head low, and jumped forward as if he were crawling on the ground. He delved into the narrow gap between the kaiju and the ground. In this way, he emerged from between its rear legs and passed the kaiju's body. The katana that was

slung from his waist was already drawn from its sheath.

Got him. I felt it in the handle.

When Hoshina looked back, the kaiju's head was just coming loose from its body. The creature collapsed with a loud noise. Hoshina shook his blood-drenched blade clean with a little swish.

"Platoon Leader Ebina, this is Hoshina. About that yoju. I neutralized it."

"W-well done! We've also neutralized all of ours. Return to the platoon."

"Yes, sir."

As Hoshina passed by the kaiju he had just neutralized, he reflected on the encounter.

So— my Hoshina katana still works after all.

Just as the other officers and his father had pointed out, it was difficult to tangle with giant kaiju using swords. But when it came to small kaiju like these ones, in urban combat with plenty of obstructions, Hoshina had the edge.

Thoom! A loud noise could be heard somewhere off in the distance.

That's artillery fire!

Hoshina looked, and in the river's upstream direction, he saw the figure of a gargantuan kaiju that looked like it was wearing a giant scarf. It was standing on its hind legs, rising to a likely height of thirty meters.

Is that the honju that Ashiro's handling?

After all, Hoshina and his sword were no match for something that big.

Just as he was heading back to rendezvous with his platoon, a communiqué arrived from an operator.

"One yoju entering Zone L! Please exercise caution!"

At eleven o'clock, Hoshina saw a kaiju running down the sloped street in his direction. Compared to the one he'd just neutralized, this one was somewhat larger. Probably had a full length of ten meters.

"I'm close by. I'll head toward it." After Hoshina transmitted his response, he

took off running toward the kaiju.

All right, come at me, will you?

Twenty meters to contact. Hoshina pulled slightly on the sword on his hip to loosen the blade from the scabbard.

That was when the kaiju suddenly stopped running down the slope. It rose up on its back legs, supporting itself with its tail. As if wary of Hoshina, the kaiju was keeping its distance. The scarf-like organ on its head swelled outward.

What's that?

The next instant, the kaiju opened its mouth and forcefully stuck its neck out forward. As if from a fire hose, a huge amount of yellowish fluid shot out from its mouth.

What the—!

Sensing the danger, Hoshina retreated instantly. The decision had been a correct one. A fluid-drenched roadside tree in front of him began to sizzle as burn marks appeared on it.

A solvent?

Hoshina discovered something on the ground near the roadside tree. It had come flying out of the kaiju's mouth along with the liquid—the skull of a deer.

"Listen!" Ebina transmitted. "I've heard that mature individuals with scarf-like organs that are sufficiently developed can spit out highly acidic saliva. Apparently, they store saliva inside the scarf, breaking down their food into sludge and digesting it. Their range is between twenty and forty meters!"

Unlike a sniper, Hoshina had no choice but to get in close to a kaiju to neutralize it. The news that it had a ranged weapon wasn't good.

There's still a way!

Hoshina leapt into the shadow of a house. Rebounding from wall to wall, he made a surprise attack from the kaiju's blind spot. He drew his katana. Noticing Hoshina, the kaiju turned its eyes on him, glaring, but—

You're too late! I've got the distance.

Hoshina swung his katana from the side.

Technique Number One—Air Slicer.

When Hoshina looked back in midair, fresh blood was spraying from the kaiju's head. He'd killed it—or so he thought, but its head didn't come rolling off. It was still attached to its body. The kaiju was still hanging on to life.

It still isn't finished? Was the fat around its neck too thick?

The scarf inflated, and the kaiju pursed its lips.

Then the acidic fluid came. In midair, there was no move Hoshina could make.

Uh-oh, at this rate—

Ra-ta-ta-ta! He heard a volley of gunfire.

The kaiju's movements instantly ceased. Its epidermis had gone rigid, as if frozen.

"Fire!"

From nearby, Ebina's order rang out. Immediately, a large explosion went off by the kaiju's head.

"The core is inside its pharynx! Concentrate your fire!"

Countless flash rounds struck the kaiju's throat. Although the scarf inflated once more, another huge explosion occurred. The kaiju let loose a massive roar toward the sky, and then fell over onto its back.

Passing alongside the fallen kaiju, Ebina approached with his gun at the ready. "Hoshina, run to check if there are any civilian stragglers. There was a report from a shelter about a child who got separated from his parents. There's even a possibility that he might still be somewhere in the city."

"Sir, I can still fi—"

"I know what you can do," Ebina said, interrupting Hoshina. "It's amazing. But it isn't a good fit for tangling with these kaiju."

That made sense to Hoshina, although he still didn't like the sound of it.

"You pick the right tool for the right job," Ebina continued. "Word from above

is, dull their movements with freeze rounds, and then pump 'em full of burst rounds. That'll work. Inform us if you run into any yoju."

"Yes, sir," Hoshina said.

The boom of a large artillery strike resounded from far away. Upstream, a large column of smoke was swirling upward. Was Mina Ashiro's bombardment of the honju still ongoing?

I've always lived alongside my katana.

"*This is no longer the age of the katana.*" These words, once spoken to Hoshina by his father, reverberated inside his head.

If you rob me of my katana, what on earth will be left—?

4

The sun had sunk partly behind the ridgeline of the mountains, and a shadow was falling across the city. Things were moving steadily toward resolution. Mina Ashiro had destroyed the honju. All that remained now was to mop up the yoju in each zone that were running around trying to escape.

"There were way more of them than I expected," Ebina said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "We were in danger when even the freeze rounds ran out."

It had been an especially long operation, and exhaustion was showing on the platoon members' faces. There had even been officers wounded by the kaiju's solvent liquid who had headed to the first aid station. Still, they hadn't suffered any serious injuries.

Third Division. Impressive.

Hoshina silently exhaled. It wasn't just the platoon. The whole unit had functioned like a well-oiled machine, dealing with the kaiju efficiently. Hoshina had offered to back them up, but that might have been arrogance on his part.

"Captain Ashiro is impeccable too—"

Hoshina's soft murmur reached Ebina's ear. He nodded and said, "Yeah, she is. If only it weren't for *that*."

“That’?” Hoshina asked.

Taking a closer look, he saw that Ebina and his officers had dark expressions. It looked like something was really bothering them. Ashiro had a graceful beauty, and her character seemed sterling as well. There was no fault in her that Hoshina could see.

“Is there something about Captain Ashiro you’re concerned about?” he asked.

“There is. That woman, that woman, that woman—”

Ebina look grim. Hoshina didn’t notice himself swallowing.

At last, in a voice that seemed wrung from his very soul, Ebina said, “That woman is unbelievably terrible at cooking!”

“Huh?” Hoshina couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Officers all around were nodding their heads in agreement.

“Her *cooking*? That’s what the grave faces are for?”

“Because it’s a grave situation!” Ebina shouted. “We had wilderness training in the mountains. The officers made curry and rice, but the squad she was in had a truly horrible time of it. She tries to throw whole vegetables into the pot without even slicing them up!”

“People who do that actually exist?” Hoshina asked.

“She did!” Ebina continued. “And she isn’t slow. She says herself she can’t use a kitchen knife, so it can’t be helped. Actually, we tried making her hold one, and that’s when things really went off the rails. I wondered if we’d have fatalities.”

“What kind of emergence scenes did she handle?” Hoshina asked.

“We told her, ‘If you can’t use a kitchen knife, at least use a peeler to get the skins off.’ Then she said with a serious face, ‘I can’t use any kind of knife.’”

“Do peelers count as knives?” Hoshina asked.

“Honestly, that woman is really—”

Following Ebina, other officers began chiming in with their own complaints, one after another.

From what Hoshina had been told, he gathered that Ashiro's cooking skills were truly horrible. It was shocking that she couldn't even hold a kitchen knife.

They still like her, though.

Ashiro was young for a captain, but her officers all seemed to think of her favorably.

"All right," Ebina said. "This area seems to be all right. I'm going back to field HQ."

"You're right," Hoshina agreed. "There don't seem to be any yoju left—"

There came a noise from behind. Hand on his katana, Hoshina swiftly looked back. Near the veranda of a lone house facing the road that stretched away toward the mountains, there was a young boy. In his arms he was holding a dachshund.

Hoshina wondered aloud, "Was he still hiding?"

"That's the kid who has a search request out on him from the emergency shelter," Ebina said. "The characteristics of his appearance and clothing all match."

"Looks like he was chasing his dog that got away," Hoshina said. "Doesn't appear to be injured."

The boy was looking timidly in their direction.

"It's okay now! You did fine. Come over here."

The boy nodded at Hoshina's words. He began walking toward them, but suddenly the dog he was holding began barking loudly, as if it was frightened of something.

Then it happened. A transmission came from an operator for Hoshina and the others. "Ebina Platoon!" The voice sounded very strained. "Exercise caution! In Neutralization Zone L—"

Before the message was finished, a large black shadow suddenly ran past right before their eyes. It was a kaiju, over ten meters in length.

The boy let go of the dog. Before anyone could even take a breath, the yoju

opened its enormous mouth and swallowed the boy whole.

Hoshina was about to spring into action when the yoju turned toward him and sprayed out a large amount of saliva. The acidic liquid landed on houses and trees, which erupted with steam. And just like that, the kaiju was running for all it was worth toward the mountains.

“Shoot it! Shoot it!” Orders flew from Ebina, and his officers opened fire at the kaiju’s back. But the kaiju’s silhouette was already dwindling to the size of a tiny speck. It was out of range.

“Neutralization Zone L—yoju emergence confirmed! Be alert to your surroundings!”

The evening glow bathed a town from which all signs of human life had disappeared. There, only the whimpering of a little dog that had lost its master and the transmission from the operator reverberated meaninglessly.

“I’m going after it!” Hoshina declared.

If he started now and ran as hard as he could, he could catch up with the kaiju. Having made his decision, Hoshina was just about to take off after it when his shoulder was gripped by a strong hand from behind. Ebina was looking at him with a grim expression.

“Let it go, Hoshina.”

“Please don’t stop me.”

“We’re out of freeze rounds,” Ebina said. “The odds wouldn’t be in our favor against that thing. We’ll wait for another platoon to get here.”

“And what’s going to happen to that boy who got eaten in the time it takes reinforcements to get here?” Hoshina asked.

The yoju was mature enough. It had plenty of saliva saved up in its mouth too. A small child would take precious little time to digest.

“We have to go after it right here and now,” Hoshina insisted.

“Forget it. I won’t allow it,” Ebina said sternly.

“Why not?”

“Because you can’t beat it alone. That thing was pretty big even as yoju go. It’s too much for you. And I won’t send an officer entrusted to me into a fight he has no chance of winning.”

“And you’re fine with that, even if a child dies?” Hoshina asked.

“No way am I fine with it!” Ebina shouted. His body was trembling, and blood was running down from where he’d just bitten his lip. Ebina continued, “No way am I fine with it, but still the answer’s no. I can’t let you go.”

A civilian had been attacked right before their eyes. It was most certainly infuriating to Ebina. Maybe he was thinking that under normal circumstances, he’d want to take off after it himself as well. But Ebina’s job was to lead the platoon. He was setting aside his feelings, calmly analyzing the situation, and making a judgment call about the best way to proceed.

I see now. This is why his officers look up to him.

Hoshina looked straight at Ebina and said, “I understand your orders very well, sir. But still I ask—please let me go.”

“Why, you, what are you saying—”

Suddenly, a transmission broke in. “Soshiro Hoshina.”

“That voice—is this Captain Ashiro?” asked Hoshina.

“Yes, it is. I’m headed your way as soon as I’ve finished mopping up the yoju here. Can he last until then?”

“Probably not. Every second counts.”

“Hoshina—can you beat that yoju?” Ashiro asked.

“If I go, that kid will be saved.”

Hoshina cut the transmission and said, “I’m sorry, Platoon Leader Ebina.”

“Hey, Hoshina! Wait a minute!”

Shrugging off Ebina’s calls to stop, Hoshina took off running. He leapt up onto a rooftop and began to pursue the kaiju that had already receded to a little black speck in the distance, at maximum speed.



“I wanna be a strong officer like you, Daddy.”

Whenever Hoshina had said that as a child, his father had laughed and tousled his hair. Hoshina’s father was an officer in the Defense Force, had slaughtered countless kaiju with his exquisite swordplay, and had risen to the rank of platoon leader. After taking part in one particular neutralization operation, however, he had withdrawn from the front lines and became an instructor of sword-slay techniques. This was in spite of having never received a serious injury.

One day, Hoshina had been practicing his swordplay in the yard by the veranda. As his father looked on, Hoshina had told him that he wanted to be a Defense Force officer. He had been expecting him to tousle his hair, like always.

His father called Hoshina to come to the drawing room, and there, with a forlorn look on his face, he said, “Give up on that idea, Soshiro. In this day and age, a katana alone can’t protect what needs protecting.”

Hoshina hadn’t been able to ask what had happened during that last operation. Yet he felt his father’s words and expression were telling him everything he needed to know.

The firearm was the main tool of the present-day Defense Force. Burst rounds, freeze rounds, lightning rounds—by using different ammunition for different effects, it was possible to deal with many kinds of kaiju. Since soldiers could attack them from a safe distance, the number of casualties during operations was fewer than in the days when close-combat weapons were standard for officers.

Hoshina placed a hand on the katana at his waist.

I know better than anyone else that the age of the katana is finished.

On modern kaiju hunts, such weapons couldn’t be the primary means of attack.

Even so, this is what I was put on this earth for.

Even on rainy days, snowy days, birthdays, and New Year’s—ever since

childhood, every day, Hoshina had lived to swing his katana. If by his katana, by the sword-slay techniques he had cultivated, by this slender iron demon, even a few of those who could be saved were spared—

—then I must swing the katana.

The kaiju's backside came into view. Already, it was closing on the foot of the mountain. If it went any farther, neutralizing it would become extremely difficult.

I'm definitely going to kill it here.

Hoshina pulled the pin and threw a stun grenade. In midair, it let loose a resounding wail and an intense flash of light. The kaiju turned toward Hoshina, and its enormous eyeballs fixed themselves on him.

All around the kaiju's neck, the scarf-like organ was inflating. A large quantity of solvent was stored in there. At this very moment, the child trapped inside must be burning from the acidic fluid.

Hoshina leapt at the kaiju. He dodged the saliva the kaiju spat at him and closed in.

Good boy! Keep right on spitting! The more you spit, the longer it'll take to dissolve that kid you ate!

Based on his experience earlier in the day, Hoshina knew he couldn't cut a kaiju of this size down in a single stroke. So, he would aim for the core in its pharynx instead.

Hoshina kicked off the ground and sprung into the air. Closing in on the kaiju's throat, he drew his katana.

"Technique Number One—Air Slicer!"

Hoshina looked back in passing. A single line ran along the kaiju's neck, and blood came gushing out. The position of the cut was a little off from the core. Worse still, his blade had been impeded by thick subcutaneous fat, so the wound wouldn't be fatal.

Did he twist away and dodge it? This one's different from the yoju up till now! Given that it was also lurking out of sight, it seems like it's learned a thing or

two!

The kaiju's tail swung around sideways and smacked into Hoshina's airborne body. He was flung away at great speed and slammed into the ground.

The impact knocked the wind out of Hoshina. When he tried to stand up, his body didn't want to move. Because he'd been unleashing combat power for so long, his suit was on the verge of overheating.

In this condition, I can't pour on the speed anymore!

Thoom! There was a rumble in the ground that reverberated all the way to the pit of Hoshina's stomach. The kaiju was approaching. Spittle overflowed from its mouth and fell to the ground, where it made a sizzling sound. Somehow, Hoshina squeezed out the last of his strength and tried to move, but —

"Sheesh, will you stop, already?" Hoshina asked aloud. It seemed hopeless. Hoshina decided to give up on fleeing. He looked up at the kaiju closing in on him. He lowered his katana and showed it not the slightest sign of resistance.

The kaiju opened its enormous mouth. A sour stench from its mouth hung in the air. Hoshina, as though throwing away his own life, allowed himself to be swallowed whole on the spot. He found himself in a dark place where almost no light penetrated. He was inside the kaiju's oral cavity. There was a sizzling sound, and burning pain ran through Hoshina's bare skin. Saliva was eating into his body.

From out of the gloom, Hoshina could hear a child moaning, "Uhhh. It huuurts. It hurts—"

The boy was still alive. Hoshina stretched out his hands toward the sound. The child and Hoshina's hands met one another. Oh, how it must have hurt to have been inside the kaiju for so long.

That's why.

"Leave the rest to me," Hoshina said to the child.

Blocked by the subcutaneous fat, his attack from outside had failed to reach the core.

In that case, how about attacking from inside, where there are countless capillaries jam-packed together?

Hoshina unleashed his suit's combat power. With all the power at his disposal, he swung his katana.

"Technique Number Four—Wild Slicer!"

The air shook with the kaiju's earsplitting scream, and the evening light streamed inside. The bag of its cheek split apart, and Hoshina leapt outside. Cradling the child's body, he readied his katana. The kaiju's throat was right before his eyes.

There's no way to dodge at this distance! But I can reach the core!

Hoshina's sword techniques had been refined again and again since childhood. The stroke that boasted unparalleled power in a close quarters fight was Technique Number Six, named "Eightfold Slasher." The power of this technique was such that Technique Number One did not even bear comparison to it. Even a yoju of this size would be cut to pieces. Hoshina rose to the occasion and didn't miss his mark. Cuts shaped like flower petals spread out across the kaiju's epidermis.

Surely, he'd killed it. So Hoshina thought, but the kaiju didn't fall. Even though he was slashing through its epidermis, he was still falling just short of the inner core. The reason for that was plain to see. The katana in Hoshina's hand was being corroded as it cut. The kaiju's saliva had dulled the katana's edge.

Crap!

Holding on tightly to the child, Hoshina fell to the ground. Full release unlock—the suit was at its limit. That strike just now had taken all the power he could wring out of it. His body wouldn't so much as twitch anymore.

The kaiju glared intensely at Hoshina, and dripping blood flowed from its ruined cheek. Hatred seemed to burn in those eyes for the creature that had harmed it.

What a sneak I am.

"Hoshina—can you beat that yoju?" Ashiro had asked Hoshina a short while

ago.

He had replied, “If I go, that kid will be saved.” But deep down in his subconscious mind, maybe he had known there was no way he could ever defeat a kaiju this big.

The kaiju swung its immense foreleg down at Hoshina. Without the power of his suit to aid him, Hoshina was now just a flesh and blood human. If the kaiju trampled him, he would be crushed like an eggshell.

Is this it? At least let this kid—!

Hoshina tried to push the child clear as best he could.

And then it happened. The air shook.

The kaiju was closing in, and then—the upper half of its body was completely blown away.

“Huh?”

A few seconds later, the roaring of the gun arrived. The velocity of the rounds had exceeded the speed of sound. Spurting fountains of bright blood, the lower half of the kaiju’s body tilted and then fell over onto the ground.

Not understanding what had happened right before his eyes, Hoshina could only stare blankly.

“Hoshina, I appreciate the help.” With a buzz, the transmission arrived. The channel had been forced open, apparently. “Since you got the kid out of there, I was able to shoot a hole through the kaiju’s core.” Ashiro’s graceful and strong voice was reaching his ears.

“Captain Ashiro—”

Hoshina spotted Ashiro standing on the roof of an apartment building in the distance, holding a gun. White smoke was rising from the high-caliber barrel.

Her timing was amazing. Don’t tell me she believed in me?

“If I go, that kid will be saved.”

Mina Ashiro had sincerely kept believing in Hoshina’s words—words that not even Hoshina, who’d said them, had been able to truly believe in. But Mina had

believed him, and that was why she had waited on the rooftop and fired as soon as he had rescued the child.

“Hoshina! You alive?”

He looked toward the source of the voice. Ebina and the others were running toward him. They had arrived too quickly for them to have started out after the kaiju was shot. As soon as Hoshina had taken off after the kaiju, they had come running after their comrade.

Every last one of you guys. What a division—

Hoshina was hurting all over. He closed his eyes and gradually fell into the depths of sleep.

5

Two days later, Hoshina was at a hospital under Defense Force jurisdiction. His head and feet were wrapped in bandages, but his injuries were minor, and soon he was going to be able to leave the hospital.

In his hospital bed, Hoshina opened up a newspaper. One page featured an article about the recent neutralization operation. There was a photo of Ashiro leading her division. According to the article, the Defense Force Third Division had neutralized the yoju under Mina Ashiro’s command. The damage had been kept to a minimum, and rebuilding efforts were underway.

There was a knock at the door of his room.

“Come in.”

Hoshina was expecting a nurse, but the ones who entered turned out to be Ashiro and Ebina.

“Captain Ashiro! And Platoon Leader Ebina!”

Ashiro cracked a smile when Hoshina saluted them.

“No need for formality,” she said. “I had business in the area, so I’m just dropping by.” Ashiro seated herself in a chair near the bed and set a basket containing an assortment of fruits on the desk.

“Thank you so much. You didn’t have to come all the way over just to see me,” Hoshina said.

“This is about more than that,” Ashiro said solemnly. “Officer Soshiro Hoshina, as captain of Third Division, I want to thank you again for your help in the Oume neutralization operation.” Ashiro lowered her head deeply.

“Stop it, please!” Hoshina insisted. “I just did what I could as a Defense Force officer. Why thank me? I couldn’t even make much of a contribution during the operation.”

Ebina, standing perfectly straight behind Ashiro, chimed in. “The child you rescued had no serious injuries. He’s apparently headed toward recovery.”

“That’s good news,” Hoshina said, relieved.

“I understand you were a katana specialist,” Ashiro said, staring straight at him. “You were unquestionably the one who saved the life of that child. So, I still haven’t heard your answer yet.”

“My answer?”

Ashiro stretched out her hand in front of Hoshina. “Will you come over to my division, Hoshina?”

At Ashiro’s words, his heart was once again stirred.

When she’d asked the same thing in her office before, Hoshina thought it a sort of social convention and that she didn’t really mean it. But Mina Ashiro wasn’t flattering Hoshina. She really did consider his swordplay a necessity.

Even so, Hoshina couldn’t just nod his head and agree obediently. “I appreciate the offer, but honestly, I’m conflicted,” he said. “The katana is the only thing I’m skilled at. In this last operation, though, not even that katana turned out to be much use, so—”

“Hoshina, will your katana skill evolve no further than what you displayed today?” Ashiro asked.

“Huh? No, of course not.”

Hoshina didn’t believe an ending existed on the path of the warrior. *Be stronger tomorrow than you were yesterday.* That’s what he would think while

swinging his sword day after day.

“In that case, Hoshina, you should refine your swordplay skills even further. Come over to my division and do so. Take your abilities as far as you can.”

Hoshina had never heard such encouragement. Ashiro knew that his present skill was not enough, but even so, she had invited him to join her division.

Of course, his father and his supervisor also had a point with what they had said. No matter the degree to which Hoshina mastered the katana, his low unleashed combat power with firearms was a strike against him. Fighting large kaiju by himself would be difficult. But now Hoshina had a certain belief to hold on to.

I don't have to be the one who makes the kill.

Hoshina and the other officers could hold back a giant kaiju while the captain came running. If they could coordinate with Mina Ashiro, she'd be sure to finish the kaiju off.

Hoshina realized such a future was now possible. He let out a laugh and said, “Up until now, I've been treated like a boil on the neck of my own division. If you're saying you can use somebody like me—then please, allow me to transfer to Third Division.”

Hoshina gripped Ashiro's extended hand and said, “It's settled, then.”



“Well then, I’ll be going now. I still have to run this by your division captain as well,” Ashiro said.

“Most likely it’ll sail right through,” Hoshina said in a friendly tone of voice. “His lips have gotten puckered from all the times he’s told me to get off the front line.”

Despite the joke, Ashiro remained serious. “Hoshina, there’s one other thing I’d like to mention. During the last mission, you ignored the orders of your platoon leader, Ebina, and ran off to take action on your own recognizance, correct? Obviously, I can’t let that go unanswered.”

Hoshina was at a loss for words and could only say, “Uhhh.”

“When you’re released from here and inducted into my division, I’m going to whip you into shape good,” Ashiro said.

“And don’t expect me to go easy on you either,” added Ebina.

That night, in his bed, Hoshina put a hand on his stomach and grimaced. “Ha ha. Honestly, this division looks like it’s gonna be a fun one.”

6

“Haaaaa!”

Oh, impressive, Hoshina thought as he parried the fearsome strike that Kikoru launched while stepping toward him.

Each and every one of her blows was swift and well aimed. Kikoru didn’t have the raw power that Aoi did, but her footwork was graceful as she closed to an appropriate distance. She was aggressive, but she also had technique.

Even so, she’s still just a diamond in the rough.

The two came apart, and this time Hoshina closed the distance. Kikoru didn’t fail to see it coming. She stepped forward to meet his sword with her own, then went after Hoshina’s protective glove. Against any ordinary opponent, she would have surely scored a hit.

Kikoru’s sword only sliced the air, however. Hoshina had stepped backward,

dodging the attack on his glove while raising his shinai up over his head. With Kikoru wide open from her thrust at his glove, he brought his shinai down on the top of her mask.

A glove-pull, mask-tap combo—the point was his.

“Great work, as always,” Hoshina told Kikoru. “Still, your movements are a little too pronounced when you’re getting into position. It creates all kinds of openings.”

“Thank you very much!”

Though Kikoru lowered her head and said the proper words, her voice sounded sullen.

She really can't stand to lose. She'll get better and better going forward.

A coarse and loud voice resounded across the dojo. “Hey, what’s the matter, newbies? Come at me harder!”

It was Platoon Leader Ebina dueling with his new recruits. Ebina was now a veteran officer. Hoshina smiled at that ferocious expression and tone of voice. Ebina hadn’t changed a bit since he’d first met him.

When Hoshina looked at the clock on the wall, it was already after 9:00 p.m. He clapped his hands twice for attention and said, “We seem to have run a little over tonight. Let’s clean up and withdraw, shall we?”

Even so, I just remembered something that really took me back.

He’d traveled back to a time in the spring of his life, when he’d had yet to fully believe in his sword. Yet Ashiro had believed in his potential for growth, and she had needed him during the operation. And so Hoshina had chosen to transfer to the Third Division.

Well, a lot's happened since then. It's fair to say that was the point when things started to get really tough.

How Hoshina had come to join the Third Division was just one memory among many. There’d been other storms to weather before Hoshina and Ashiro had performed missions together and developed absolute trust in one another—but that is a tale for another time.

Suddenly, Hoshina noticed someone standing near the door to the dojo. He walked over to speak with her.

“Hey there, Captain! What brings you here?”

Ashiro, clad in her Defense Force suit, shook her head with an indifferent expression. “There’s something I’d like to talk with you about, but it can wait till tomorrow.”

“Not at all. It’s fine. We’d just finished up here.”

Without a word, Ashiro raised her arm and pointed at something behind Hoshina.

Hmn?

He turned around to find Kafka staring at him. Despite the humiliating defeat he’d just experienced, his eyes were blazing with fighting spirit.

“Pardon me, Vice-Captain Hoshina,” Kafka said. “I know we’re wrapping up, but may I ask for one more match?”

Standing behind him, Reno spoke up.

“I’d like one too!”

“Ah, the day’s already over!”—is what Hoshina felt like saying. But looking into the eyes of those two officers, his resistance faded away. He put his hands on his hips and sighed.

“Welp, I guess I have to, then. But just one more for both of you.”

“Thank you very much, sir!” Kafka said, then positioned his shinai.

Compared to Kikoru, it was plain to see Kafka was an amateur, with openings all over the place. He wasn’t even starting from the basics. They could probably fight dozens of rounds without him taking even one point off Hoshina.

What’s excellent is his fighting spirit and his—well, that’s about it.

I’m going to stand beside Mina Ashiro—Kafka clung to this foolhardy hope.

Reality, though, thought Hoshina, tends to be cruel. No matter how strong your will, no matter how many times you redoubled your efforts, it was no guarantee that your dream would be attained.

The odds of the oldest recruit and his 1 percent unleashed combat power ever measuring up to Ashiro were inarguably zero. It was not something that would somehow work out through will alone.

The world's worn me down too much to look him in the eyes and say, "Never give up, and your wishes will come true."

There was only one thing he could say for sure: *"There's no future for a guy who's given up. As long as you keep going, you can get closer to your goal step-by-step, even if the odds of reaching it are zero. Even if your pace is like a snail's crawl."* That was something Hoshina knew all about.

Hoshina poised his shinai, gave a wry smile, and said, "Now come and get me, little duckling."

How these hatchlings would one day mature was something not even Hoshina yet knew.

CHAPTER 4

Cadet—Kafka Hibino

1

It was the first day of reporting at the shooting range. Kikoru's and Reno's interviews were already concluded when the director pointed his microphone at Kafka. "Officer Hibino, would you mind if we interviewed you?" he asked.

Maybe it was nerves, but Kafka's mouth felt awfully dry as he said, "Uh, sure!"

The director started his line of questioning by asking, "Officer Hibino, you joined the Defense Force at the age of thirty-two. How is the life of an officer treating you?"

"Let me see." Kafka began warily. "Uh, to be honest, there's a lot of tough parts about it, and there's also the problem of physical strength. After all, the officers around me are all young people. Still, I wanna grit my teeth and hang in there!"

"What kind of work did you do before you joined the Defense Force?"

"Ah, I worked as a kaiju dismantler. Um, it was for a company called Monster Sweeper," Kafka said nervously.

"I see, so your previous job was also in a kaiju-related profession. Did you decide to build up experience there and then put your own abilities to good use in the Defense Force?"

"Well, um, not quite," Kafka explained. "You're right, of course, about wanting to make the most of my experience from my last job, but the real reason I joined the Defense Force, um, is because that's been my goal since

elementary school. I've taken the entrance exam many times in the past, but I've always flun—I mean, failed it!"

Kafka was sweating a little and fumbling his way through his answers. The director put a strained smile on his face, trying to ease the air of nervous tension. *This is no good. I really ain't used to being interviewed like this! Hurry up and end it already, will ya?*

No sooner had those words crossed his mind than the director asked Kafka another question.

"Your goal since elementary school? In that case, was there some kind of incident that led you to make joining the Defense Force your goal?"

Kafka's answers thus far had all come out haltingly, but this time the words flowed from his mouth. "Back then, the area I lived in was damaged by a kaiju. A good friend of mine even had her house destroyed. That was why we made a promise together: someday, we'd become Defense Force officers and kick kaiju butt together."

The trees that had lined the sidewalks, the roads, the houses, the park, the school—the town where Kafka and Mina had lived had been destroyed piece by piece by the overwhelming force of the kaiju. Kafka could remember those scenes clearly even now. But when faced with such scenes of despair, his and Mina's will had remained unbroken, and they had sworn to become Defense Force officers. Reality had been cruel to Kafka, however. He kept failing the entrance examination. There was also an age limit to enlisting, and he had given up—until he met Reno and set his sights on the Defense Force once more.

"All right, that'll do it," the director said. "Thank you. Sorry for interrupting your training."

"Th-thank you too," Kafka replied. "I really appreciate it!"

When Kafka asked Kikoru how he'd done, her response was frank.

"Let's see. You were nervous and said 'um' way too many times. They'll either cut your interview down or not use it."

Kafka blurted out, "Well, excuse me for not being an old hand at this like you!"

He silently clenched his fists. It seemed so far away, but even so, Kafka vowed in his heart, *Someday, I'll stand by Ashiro's—by Mina's—side.*

2

The television special was covering five days, and the last day of shooting had arrived. The schedule had proceeded without incident, and so far no major problems had been observed.

“Well, Captain, what was it you wanted to talk about?” Hoshina asked. He had come to the captain’s office first thing that morning. This was because last night in the dojo, Ashiro had been about to bring up some matter she wanted to talk about. Now she was sitting at her desk, reading through a document. The sky seen through the window behind her was dark, as if it might start to rain at any moment.

“About next week,” Ashiro began. “It’s been decided that I’m going on a business trip to Ariake Seaside Base, way down south in Kyushu.”

“The timing of this—Is it about those two identifieds?” Hoshina asked.

“Yes,” Ashiro replied, nodding. “It seems the higher-ups also have a dour view of the situation. Ordinarily, I’d have you attend as well, but things are what they are. You’ll be in charge of the base while I’m away.”

“Roger that,” Hoshina said. “After all, the load’s too heavy for Ikaruga and Shinomiya.”

Kaiju No. 8 and Kaiju No. 9 had both been sighted in northern Tokyo. It would be dangerous in the extreme for both of the Third Division’s strongest fighters to leave the base while those two were still unneutralized.

“Please take care during your trip. I’ll show myself out,” Hoshina said. He was just about to leave the office when Ashiro called after him.

“How’s the reporting going?”

“It’s going fine. After all, with Shinomiya and Izumo, Kaguragi and Furuhashi, and Ichikawa too, we’ve got a fine crop of newcomers this year. I think the crew can feel that they’ve got a story worth filming. They’re in pretty high spirits.”

“Really?” Ashiro said.

“Oh, and Hibino’s also getting his share of attention.”

Ashiro looked surprised to hear that.

“He’s the oldest newcomer, and he’s easy to handle for television,” Hoshina said. “With his promotion to general officer decided, he’s also trying hard. Though he does spin his wheels a lot, hm?”

Ashiro had no comment to offer. She was silently reading her document. To Hoshina, however, it looked like the line of her mouth had softened slightly. “You’ve told him that until I write his letter of appointment, he isn’t a general officer, haven’t you?” she asked.

“Y-yes. You were going to do that next week, weren’t you?”

Just then, the phone on Ashiro’s desk rang. She took it on the first ring. Her face wore the same calm, collected expression as always.

Huh? Was that a smile, or were my eyes playing tricks on me?

“Ashiro here. Okonogi? Understood.”

From her tone of voice, Hoshina instantly picked up on the situation. “Are we up, Captain?” he asked.

“Yes. Get everyone together ASAP,” Ashiro ordered.

A light sprinkle of raindrops was falling against the window.



Kafka, having his breakfast in the mess hall, looked outside and sluggishly murmured, “Rain, huh. And we’ve got sharpshooting practice this morning. I hate rainy days. You slip on the ground, your gun’s handle gets cold, and—”

Reno, sitting across the table from him, stirred his natto while he answered. “What did you expect? It’s not going to be good weather every time we go hunt kaiju in the field.”

“No kidding,” Kafka agreed. “It was tough in the Monster Sweeper days too.”

“Those days when there was deep snow were the worst.”

“Still, you’re right, Ichikawa. After all, the kaiju couldn’t care less about our situation.”

Looking at the seat across from him, Kafka could see the TV crew filming them having breakfast. “The filming ends today, right? It feels like it’s taken a long time—and also, like it was over before we knew it.”

Ultimately, Kafka hadn’t gotten his chance to show off in front of the camera. He’d sputtered his way through his interview on the first day and finished last on the second day’s obstacle course. Even during the previous night’s kendo training, he hadn’t managed to score a single point off Hoshina. “I’d like to at least show off a little on the last day.” Kafka said out loud.

“What are you talking about? If you push yourself too hard, nothing good will come of it—again.” It was Kikoru, speaking to Kafka from behind as she passed by with an empty tray. Akari and Hakua were with her.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Kikoru?” Kafka asked.

“Knowing you, you’ll end up running in circles. Just do your training without overextending yourself.”

Then, so that those around her wouldn’t hear, she whispered in Kafka’s ear, “Got it? This is the last day of filming, so be a good boy and don’t start wagging that *tail* of yours.”

“Oh yeah, right,” said Kafka. “I don’t have a tail though—just horns.”

“I’m not talking about your physical characteristics!”

Kikoru had spoken more loudly than she’d realized and was starting to draw stares.

“Kiko-baby, what’s the matter?” Akari asked from behind her.

Kikoru’s cheeks flushed and she cleared her throat, trying to pretend she hadn’t said anything. “Anyway, watch yourself, okay?” she said to Kafka.

“I told you, keep it down! Sheesh!” he said, getting flustered.

“Kafka Hibino. At the rate you’re going, you’re probably going to tell some hopeless dad jokes soon and put the whole room into an Arctic deep freeze,” Kikoru said.

“Ha, ha ha. No way would I do that.”

Back in elementary school, Kafka had had a homeroom teacher who told dad jokes at a rapid-fire pace. Kafka remembered vowing back then that no such puns or gags would ever cross his own lips in the future.

Kafka took a bit of rice and called out to Reno, who was on the other side of the table. “Hey, hey, Ichikawa. My joke just now wasn’t ‘Arctic,’ was it?”

“Eh, it was so-so,” Reno said unenthusiastically. “I’d put it around ‘winter on the Sea of Japan coast.’”

“That’s freezing cold!” Kafka exclaimed.

“Still, sir,” Reno continued, “you really ought to be careful, like Shinomiya says. You know—about kaiju-fication.”

Kikoru and Reno alike had been showing more concern for Kafka than usual these days. So much so in Reno’s case that even now he was still walking around with that paper mask of Kaiju No. 8 just in case he needed it again in an emergency.

“Ah, I’m fine,” Kafka said. “After all, I’m not gonna slip up like I did on the first day of filming.”

Just then, a loud alarm blared out in the mess hall.

It was just like the Sagamihara neutralization mission a scant three weeks ago.

“Kaiju emergence, kaiju emergence. Officers, prepare immediately for mobilization.”

No sooner had the operator’s voice rung out than the officers in the mess hall headed outside. Reno and Kafka looked at one another, got up, and ran outside, leaving their half-eaten breakfasts behind.

Hoshina came walking up through the pouring rain, clad in a parka and hood. “Third Division, this is an all-hands mobilization. Get started on your preparations immediately.”

“Yes, sir!” Kafka and the others replied, saluting him.

A column of large-scale transport vehicles was making its way up a mountain road. Weapons, rescue supplies, and Third Division officers were packed tightly inside. As the vehicle swayed this way and that, Kafka was moaning with a hand on his stomach. “Uhhh,” he groaned.

Hoshina noticed and said, sounding a little shocked, “What’s the matter, Kafka? You go too heavy on the rice again?”

“N-no, sir! It’s more like I was midway through breakfast, so now I’m hungry.”

The sound of Kafka’s growling stomach resounded throughout the vehicle.

“Overeating one day and undereating the next. You’re a man of extremes.” Hoshina said.

The swaying and vibrations from the mountain road were taking a physical toll on Kafka.

Not good! I’m starting to feel a little sick.

Kafka realized he’d broken out in a bit of a sweat underneath his suit. As the vehicles got closer to the emergence site, his heart was beating hard and fast.

Just then, he was clapped on the shoulder from the side. Reno, sitting next to him, was holding out a chocolate bar.

“Here. Eat this, sir,” Reno said.

“Is it really okay? That belongs to you.”

“I’ll be fine. Anyway, sir, wasn’t it you who told me we’ve gotta eat when we’re able, or things’ll be hard later on?” Those were the words Kafka had said to Reno on his first day as a part-time worker.

“Wow, you remembered a silly thing like that?” Kafka asked.

“I did. Now eat this.”

“Thanks, Ichikawa.” Kafka took the candy bar from Reno, then began munching on it hungrily.

It’s settled down a little. And I have a weapon of my own too. I’ll do what I’m

able to at the scene.

Though Kafka still hadn't received his letter of appointment, he had gone out on the front line at Sagamihara and swiftly identified the kaiju's weakness, and for that he'd been recognized as a general officer. He'd gained a bit of confidence from that.

"Vice-Captain Hoshina! On the site this time, I plan on identifying the kaiju's cores and supplying information!"

Hoshina nodded at Kafka's powerful declaration. "That's the spirit," he said. "Except this time, we don't need you to. We've already figured out where their cores are."

Kafka nearly fell over. "Whaa—?" he said in shock.

Hoshina explained, "We just got a communiqué from the analysis unit. Look at these images of the kaiju at the scene. These kaiju are from the same family tree as the ones Ikaruga Platoon neutralized a week ago."

This was good news, Kafka told himself. If they knew where the cores were located this early, that alone would make it much easier to deal with the kaiju. This was the fruit of the data collected by the Defense Force analysis unit.

"Still, you can do something besides that, can't you?" Hoshina asked.

"Yes, sir!" Kafka answered in a powerful voice. His job wasn't limited to analysis only. There were lots of things he could do, like neutralizing damaged yoju and providing support for other officers.

With no inkling of how many times he'd done so already, Kafka performed a painstaking check of his rifle and suit. That's when he realized that Kikoru, who was sitting in front of him, had been silent for a while now. Her head was resting on one hand, and she wore a sullen expression on her face.

"What's the matter, Kikoru?" Kafka asked.

"What do you mean, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just had a feeling you were in a bad mood."

"It isn't anything like that," she said dismissively.

Kafka kept questioning her. “Did you not get to finish your breakfast?”

“Don’t lump me in with you,” Kikoru growled.

“Hey! Eating a good breakfast is important, right?”

Kafka wouldn’t stop talking, and Kikoru let out a long sigh in response.



Kikoru’s bad mood was due to something Hoshina had told her just prior to heading out.

“What? I can’t use my custom weapon this time?”

Kikoru’s voice was loud, but Hoshina remained calm and nodded. “It’s a pity,” he said. “But we just sent that axe back to Izumo Tech. Apparently, some fine-tuning is necessary. Can you deal with the kaiju using firearms this time?”

“And I studied Squadron-Style Axe Technique for this!” Kikoru said in exasperation. “Okay, what about the greatsword—”

“That’s also been sent back,” Hoshina said flatly.

The familiar sensation of the axe and greatsword in her hands offered new tactics and possibilities in battle that were simply unimaginable with firearms. They could improve Kikoru’s combat ability by leaps and bounds. The thought of going into battle without her custom weapons was deeply frustrating.

“With your unleashed combat power, a gun should be plenty powerful. Save the custom weapons for your next battle,” Hoshina said.

Kikoru could only nod reluctantly and say, “Understood, sir.”



“It’s fine. No big deal. I should be able to fight just fine with a gun.”

“What’d you say, Kikoru?”

“Like I said, it’s nothing.”

Kikoru spun her head away from Kafka.

Kafka cocked his head, unable to fully understand the tense mood she was in.

Two hours after leaving the base, the transports finally came to a halt. Hoshina got up, looked around at the faces inside the vehicle, and said, “Well, let’s get to it, people—time to neutralize some kaiju. Let’s put some spirit into it.”

The door opened and an icy wind blew in, cutting like a knife. Kafka gulped as he saw the scene outside. Dozens of transport vehicles were lined up on a vast plot of land. Before their eyes, the sacred Mount Fuji rose up high beneath a leaden sky. Minami-Tsuru, Yamanashi Prefecture—this was the Ground Self-Defense Force’s North Fuji garrison.

Kafka slapped both of his cheeks, stepped outside, and yelled, “All right! Let’s do this, Ichikawa! Kikoru!”

“Why are you giving orders? Good grief,” Kikoru said in disgust.

The Third Division’s kaiju-neutralization operation was about to begin.

4

The severity of the cold was taking an unexpected toll on Kafka’s body. The temperature was low, and the rain falling from the low-hanging clouds was chilling his body all the more.

“Ah-choo! Ugh, so cold,” Kafka said while trudging along the road with the others.

Reno pulled the hood of his JDF-issued rain parka over his head and said, “The altitude is high too. Even at this time of year, it’s six degrees Celsius colder than Tokyo. It’s probably a great spot for a summer resort, but—”

“It’s just like you, jumping into this with high spirits and then getting sidetracked,” said Kikoru, looking around the area. “Though this really is a nice place. Would be even nicer if it wasn’t raining.”

Kafka and his fellow officers were standing in the middle of a road that stretched off arrow straight into the distance. If they continued down that road, they would come to a wide lakeside, beyond which towered Mount Fuji. They were now at Lake Kawaguchi, which boasted the longest circumference of the

five lakes of Mount Fuji. Many hotels were located near the lake, but right now it was a ghost town without the slightest hint of human presence. This was because the JSDF had completed the evacuation immediately after the kaiju were discovered.

It wouldn't surprise me one bit if a kaiju came outta there.

Kafka's hands tightened on the rifle he was carrying. He reminded the others, "Reporters'll be watching too, so we'd better not let 'em see us screwing up anything."

"If you mean that news crew, they aren't here," Kikoru inserted.

"Huh? How come?" Kafka asked. "They're scheduled through today, aren't they?"

"It was fine to film us training. But they'd need to file a formal request with admin to follow us into the field, and it's next to impossible for regular civilians to get one approved."

"Ah, is that so?" Kafka asked. He recalled how during his days as a disassembly worker, he'd head straight to the scene as soon as they received notification.

"Sir," Reno said, concerned, "please don't tell me you were acting all gung ho just now because you thought the news crew was here."

"Uh, no! I mean, well, maybe just a tiny bit," Kafka admitted.

"New recruits, can you hear me?"

It was a transmission from Hoshina. There was a lot of noise in the signal, possibly due to the rainy weather. "All platoons, proceed to your positions. I'm going to go over the operation one more time. The kaiju targeted for neutralization emerged inside Lake Kawaguchi. The honju's in the lake now, and yoju are coming ashore on the southern side of the lake, which has an urban area. Captain Ashiro, myself, and the veteran officers will eliminate the honju, as well as the yoju wandering around in the town. New recruits, it's your job to wipe out the yoju that came ashore on the western side of the lake. There are big ones and clever ones, so don't let your guard down. And although we'll be dealing with the honju, there's still the possibility of one of the big ones moving

toward you. If that happens, it'll be up to you to stop it."

"Yes, sir!" Kafka shouted, trying to whip up his own spirits.

"Now I'll hand it over to Captain Ashiro. Listen carefully, and remember what she says."

The voice that rang out next was graceful, strong, and tense.

"Can you hear me, everyone?"

Mina!

"As was stated in the notification, the estimated fortitude of this honju is 7.1. Many yoju have also been confirmed. Make one mistake, and your lives will be in danger."

"Your lives will be in danger"—Defense Force duty regularly went hand in hand with death. This was something Kafka knew was true, but hearing it from Ashiro's mouth made his heart beat faster.

"I want to express my utmost respect for those of you who do not flee from your duties, but embrace them willingly. The time is 10:15—from this moment, the Lake Kawaguchi neutralization operation commences."

With those words, the sound of gunfire rang out in the distance. Neutralization had begun.

Right away, a transmission came in from an operator. "Three yoju sighted coming ashore! Shinomiya Squad, can you handle them?"

"Certainly!" Ashiro said. "Let's do it, Reno! And Kafka Hibino!"

"Let's go!" Reno shouted.

"Yeah!" Kafka said, giving a vigorous answer to Kikoru's and Reno's words.

With Kikoru in the lead, the trio headed for the point displayed on their map.

As they ran down the rain-slicked road, several kaiju came into view. They were four-limbed ichthyoid kaiju. Ichthyoid kaiju lived in water during their juvenile stage, but once they matured, they were able to live on land. Their hides had a silver gleam and a pattern of three horizontal stripes on their bellies. All three creatures were running straight down the road toward the

squad.

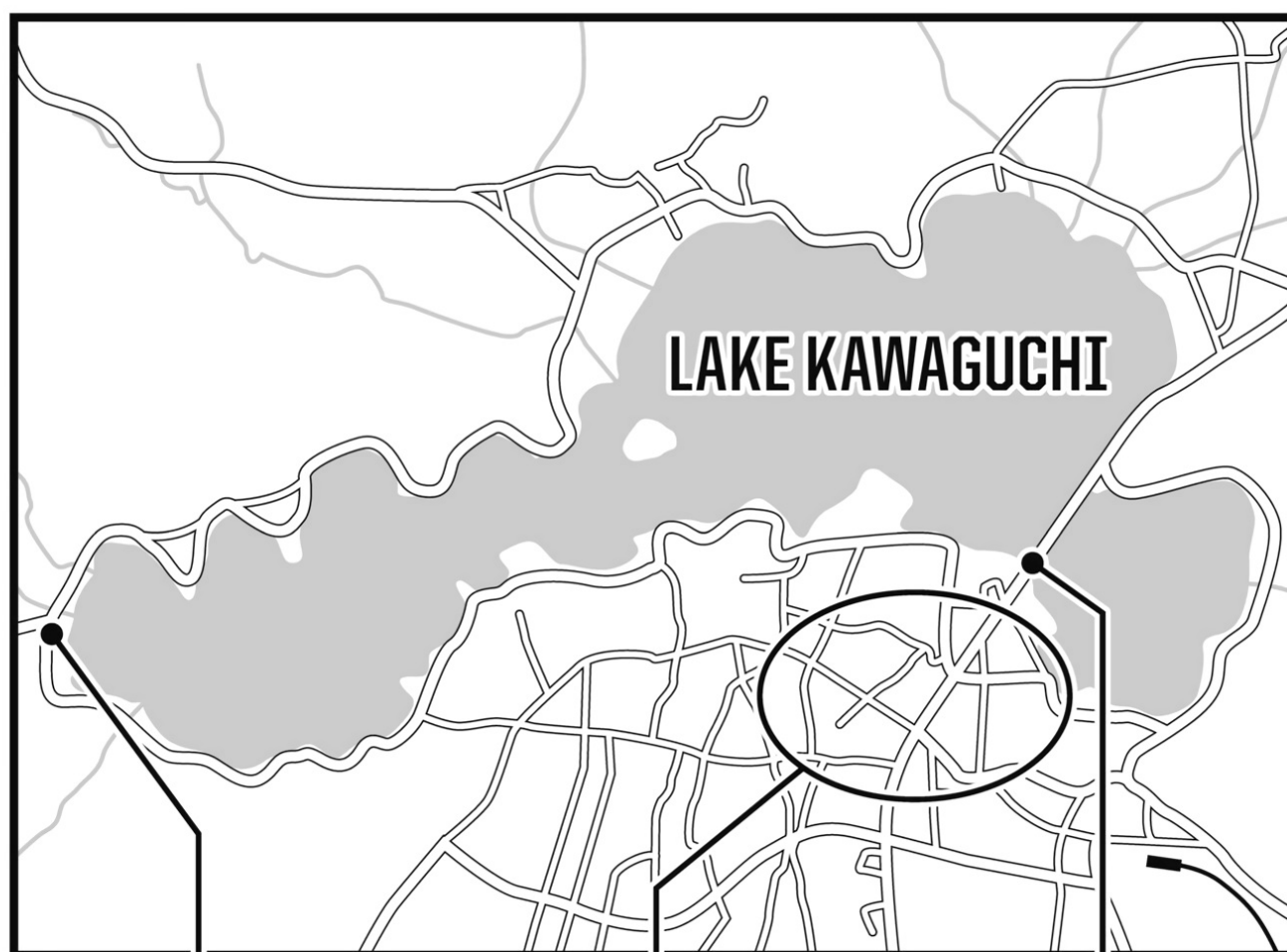
Kikoru went to deal with the largest individual. The midsize one was Reno's, and the one Kafka would be taking on was the smallest individual. Their length was only two to three meters, about the size of a compact car.

The kaiju opened their mouths wide. The insides bristled with countless teeth.

Kafka came to a halt and raised his rifle.

Combat power, full release—!

Kafka had put in a lot of training since Sagamihara. His times on the shooting range had shortened as well. This wouldn't be like Sagamihara, when he had been swatted aside by a yoju.



KAFKA AND OTHERS

**AREA WHERE
KAIJU FREQUENTLY
APPEAR**

MINA, HOSHINA



“Uooooooooo!” Kafka raised his voice in a battle cry, took aim at the kaiju, and squeezed the trigger. The shot he unleashed with all his might struck the kaiju’s head, piercing through a thin layer of epidermis before ricocheting harmlessly away.

“Huh?” Kafka said, stunned by the lack of damage his shot had done.

The kaiju came barreling toward him at tremendous speed, and then with a sound like a racket smacking a tennis ball, Kafka was swatted aside.

“Ugh—!”

Kafka tumbled in midair, then slammed headlong into a thicket by the side of the road. His field of vision was enveloped in darkness. His head was stuck firmly in the bushes, and he couldn’t pull it out.

“Ng, grgrgl!”

“What the heck are you doing over there?” Kikoru’s scolding voice was followed by the roar of a powerful gunshot.

“Ngggg! I can’t pull my head out!”

As Kafka writhed in darkness, somebody grabbed his ankle and yanked him out like a turnip. It was Kikoru, and she was looking at him with an appalled expression.

“P-pwah! Where’s the kaiju?” Kafka asked.

“Already dealt with.” The kaiju lay fallen where Kikoru pointed. A large hole had been blown through its body.

“Oh, wow. Way to go, Kikoru!”

“Are you still at 1 percent unleashed combat power?” she asked. “There’s no way you could have handled that thing!” Kikoru stuck up her finger in front of Kafka’s nose. “Listen, we can’t have you transforming with officers all around. Stick to doing what you’re capable of.”

Kafka nodded obediently and said, “R-right.”

What Kikoru had said was absolutely correct. He might have put in a lot of hours training, but with his present unleashed combat power, he still didn’t

hold a candle to the other general officers.

“Where’s Ichikawa?” Kafka wondered aloud.

His rifle had inflicted practically zero damage on the kaiju. But the kaiju Reno was dealing with was much, much bigger. Kafka was just wondering if Reno was all right when—

A heavy thump shook the ground. When Kafka looked toward the sound, he saw a kaiju lying on the road. There was a gaping hole in its stomach. Reno was standing next to it with his rifle poised, as he wiped the sweat from under his hood.

“Whoa! Nice one, Ichikawa! You did good!”

“Sir, the information from the analysis unit was correct,” Reno said. “When I shot it through the core, I was able to beat it. I also get the feeling I can see their movements more easily than before.”

Kafka looked at the yoju carefully. Its eyeballs were about the size of a human head, and the inside of its mouth was bristling with countless teeth. Just like the kaiju he had seen on the bank of the Tama River, it had three horizontal stripes on its stomach.

Fish-type kaiju came in all shapes and sizes, but you could ID their type based on limb count and pattern. This time as well, the analysis unit had determined their type and shared out the position of their cores.

“Still, seeing a fish type up close,” Kafka said, “it feels like it’s staring at me on *purpose*.”

“You mean, ‘on por-pose’?” Kikoru said doubtfully.

“Yeah. Look at how big its eyes are—like it’s staring into my soul on *purpose*.”

“Sir,” said Reno, “you didn’t go through all that now just to say ‘on porpoise,’ did you?”

Standing before the dumbstruck Kafka, Kikoru wore a stern expression. “And there it is. We have our dad joke,” she said.

“No, that’s not it! That wasn’t a joke just now. You just heard me say ‘purpose’ wrong! I didn’t say ‘porpoise’!” Kafka insisted.

“Reno, let’s get over to the lake. Other kaiju may still come ashore,” Kikoru said.

“Roger that. Let’s go, Shinomiya.”

Leaving Kafka behind, the two of them ran off toward the lakeside.

“Hey! Wait up, you two!” Kafka yelled. “I didn’t mean it like that! Don’t leave me—!”

Kafka was just about to take off after them when, from behind, there came a sound as of something being dragged.

“Hm? What’s— What!”

Kafka was struck speechless when he turned around to look back. The yoju that Reno had supposedly killed was getting up again. Blood and entrails spilled from the hole in its stomach, and its bloodshot eyes were trained on Kafka.

But Ichikawa shot a hole through it!

The kaiju opened its gaping maw and leapt straight at Kafka. Tumbling sideways, he tried to dodge it and just barely managed to avoid its attack. The enormous body passed by his side with a loud whoosh.

“Sir!”

A single shot rang out. A burst round fired by Reno struck inside the creature’s mouth. The kaiju’s head sizzled loudly, and it collapsed on the pavement, this time for good.

Kikoru and Reno hurried back over to where Kafka was standing.

“You need to follow through, Reno. Like Vice-Captain Hoshina said, don’t let your guard down.”

“Sorry, Shinomiya. Sir, I’m sorry,” Reno said. “Maybe I didn’t shoot through the core.”

“No,” said Kafka, shaking his head. “That was without a doubt the spot the analysis unit told us to aim for.”

“That can’t be, sir. They can’t survive if they lose their cores.”

“You’re right,” Kafka said. “Maybe this one was some kind of subspecies.”

The bodily characteristics of subspecies differed only slightly, so examples had been reported of cores with differing positions.

The words Kikoru had only just said to Kafka reverberated in his head.

“Stick to doing what you’re capable of.”

Kafka said, “All right. I’ll examine the body and confirm the core’s location.” He pulled out a knife from the sheath on his belt and jumped up on the kaiju. He had plenty of experience disassembling ichthyoids. This one had a hide covered in hard scales, however, and he was having trouble cutting through with his blade.

“Crap. What I wouldn’t give for a heat chain saw right now.”

Kafka changed tactics and inserted his knife in the hole Reno had made. The kaiju’s organs were still warm, giving off their distinctive odor. Kafka proceeded alone with the ichthyoid’s disassembly in the driving rain.

Watching him from the side, Kikoru murmured, as if impressed, “Wow. You’re pretty good at that. To think you were really that good with your hands.”

“He’d charge right into intestine duty when everybody else tried to get out of it,” Reno said.

Kafka paid no attention to the chatter around him. His eyes were locked on the kaiju in front of him. He sliced through the peritoneum and pulled out the intestines. Behind them was a large translucent organ whose surface was covered with a web of blood vessels. The inside was filled with liquid.

What the heck is that?

When Kafka picked the organ up, it immediately burst open. Instantly, a foul stench spread outward and assaulted his nostrils even through his mask. “Ugh, that was its bladder!” Kafka screamed, realizing the seriousness of the situation he found himself in. “This liquid is pee! Ichikawa, Kikoru! Help me out here! This stinks to high heaven!”

Ichikawa, perhaps flashing back to some trauma from his time as a disassembly worker, was getting nauseous. “Gross!” he said. “Don’t come near me with that stuff on you!”

“Good grief! If you’re just going to play around, then I’m going on ahead!” Kikoru said.

“No, I’m serious. Wait. Hm?” Looking at the disassembled kaiju, Kafka realized something. “I’ve got it, Ichikawa, Kikoru! I know why this thing got back up!”



A large bridge connects the northern and southern shores of Lake Kawaguchi. Hoshina was in the town on the southern side of the lake, not far from the bridge’s foot. A large number of yoju were coming onto land from the shore near the town. Even now, a huge number of them were rampaging through the area, and the seasoned officers, Hoshina included, were busy dealing with them.

“Vice-Captain Hoshina, this is Izumo, in Neutralization Zone Delta. I’d like to report—”

Hoshina listened to Haruichi’s report from the western side of the lake, and then responded. “So, they can’t be neutralized even by shooting through their core, eh? I’ve confirmed examples of that over here too. I was just about to get in touch with the analysis unit.”

Similar reports had been pouring in from numerous officers. Hoshina had seen it happen himself with a kaiju he had battled. He opened a channel to his operator. “Miss Okonogi? It’s me. There’s a surefire way to neutralize these yoju, so would you be kind enough to tell everyone? The method is as follows —”

Suddenly, there was a noise like that of something enormous beginning to stir. Two yoju that had been concealed in the shadows of buildings had leapt into the air and come at Hoshina from behind while he was talking on his transmitter.

Ting! A brief metallic sound rang out. The pair of yoju that had been closing in on him instantly froze up. The next moment, a powerful ice-cold wind blew, and their heads rolled off their bodies.

Hoshina shook blood from the blade of the katana in his hand. “Take off the heads and the cores don’t matter,” he said. “It’s just like making grilled fish

heads.”

“But, Vice-Captain Hoshina,” Okonogi said, “The only one who can do that easily is you!”

“Really?” Hoshina said. “Well, maybe things won’t go so easily then.”

When Hoshina looked at Lake Kawaguchi, there were large ripples on the water’s surface. The head of an enormous fish appeared above the water. Its eyeballs alone exceeded the size of a human being, and it had an enormous mouth that looked able to swallow a whale in one gulp.

To think that a honju could grow this big.

In the past, a large-scale survey had been conducted of the five lakes of Mount Fuji. At the time, no kaiju had been confirmed to be living there. These fish-type kaiju had four limbs and were able to move about on land. As juveniles, they spent all their time in the water, but when they matured, they came onto land and expanded their habitat. Which was why—

With a loud *bloop* of waters rushing back together, the honju dove down into the lake.

We can’t let a thing like that escape into another lake.

Hoshina looked at the bridge nearby. It was five hundred meters in length, and Mina Ashiro was standing in the center. She had her gun barrel pointed at Lake Kawaguchi, whose waters appeared murky from reflecting the overcast sky.

Looks like the captain’s finally ready.

Suddenly, a transmission for Hoshina came through. At first, he thought it was the analysis unit, but the sender turned out to be Kafka. “Vice-Captain Hoshina, have you got a second? I have something to report.”

He could sense urgency in Kafka’s voice. “Make it quick. What’s up?”

“I dismantled a kaiju’s corpse, and the core is not where our preliminary intel said it would be.”

“Way to go. I’ll share this info with everyone. Can you go ahead and tell me the location?” said Hoshina.

“Yes, sir. It’s a bit higher than the reported position, above the plates protecting its gills.”

“That’s quite a ways off,” Hoshina said. “Is it a subspecies?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so,” Kafka replied. “Which means this kaiju is most likely still a juvenile.”

“Wait. Did you say ‘juvenile’?”

Hoshina put a hand on his chin and listened carefully to Kafka’s next transmission.

“Yes, sir. Adults and juveniles of this kind have their cores in slightly different positions. As they grow, their lungs develop, and that puts pressure on the nearby core and causes it to move into the lower body. The core position that the analysis unit sent us was from a mature individual. But in the one I dismantled, at least, the lungs were not yet completely developed. It’s a juvenile. And since the core was still in its upper body, it didn’t die when it was shot through the lower body.”

“That’s a bit hard to swallow,” Hoshina said. “Like I explained in the briefing, this kind of ichthyoid kaiju doesn’t go on the move until *after* it matures. If your hypothesis is on the money, that would mean they’re coming ashore as juveniles now. And if they come ashore at a stage where their lungs are still underdeveloped, they should have a hard time breathing.”

“I have some corroborating evidence,” Kafka said excitedly. “It isn’t just the lungs. The reproductive organs are also immature. At any rate, the ones coming ashore are mostly juveniles. Please correct the core location info!”

Hoshina had to agree. “All right. It seems they’re confirmed to be juveniles.”

From off toward the lake, Hoshina heard the sound of something being smashed apart. Looking toward the source, he saw a house standing near the shore being batted aside. An ichthyoid kaiju was approaching, one so large that the yoju they’d encountered thus far did not even compare.

“Speak of the devil. Is that a mature one, then?” Hoshina asked.

Even though officers near the kaiju were shooting it, their rounds were doing

practically no damage to its armor-like scales. Paying no heed to the officers, the kaiju advanced toward the urban center, obliterating houses as it went.

“Hold your fire!” At Hoshina’s order, the officers stopped shooting. Hoshina leapt straight at the adult kaiju. That was when another, smaller individual showed itself from behind the shadow of a building. Going by its size, it was probably a juvenile.

Acting on Kafka’s intel, Hoshina pierced it with his katana through the upper half of its gills. “Out of my way!” he shouted.

The yoju fell to the ground with a massive thud.

Without losing momentum, Hoshina closed on the adult, but unlike with the juvenile, his sword flashed across the lower half of the gills this time. Bloody foam spurted from the creature’s mouth as it collapsed onto the ground, truly dead.

Juveniles had their cores in the upper half, and adults had theirs in the lower half. That much seemed certain.

“Miss Okonogi,” Hoshina said. “Kafka has located their cores.”



Okonogi communicated the core intel to the other officers.

“Kafka, good job!”

Kafka said “Thank you very much!” and pumped his fist triumphantly as he ran.

I did it! It was all I could do, but I was able to help the others again!

“Great job, Mr. Hibino!” said Reno, who was running beside him with one hand pinching his nose.

“Do I still stink?” Kafka asked warily.

“I’m sorry. You do,” Reno replied.

“And don’t you dare get close to me!” yelled Kikoru, who was running ahead of Kafka, keeping her distance from him.

The trio was headed toward Neutralization Zone Delta. Two other new recruits, Haruichi and Aoi, were stationed there. Even now, many yoju were still coming ashore. Up ahead, a single yoju appeared from behind a building. It didn't appear to have noticed them just yet.

"I'll take this one," said Reno. He aimed his rifle and squeezed the trigger. The round his weapon unleashed penetrated the core with great precision. Spurting blood, the kaiju tilted over and fell to the ground.

He one-shotted the thing!

Kafka was amazed at the precision, as well as the power, of Reno's marksmanship.

It's incredible, Ichikawa. You keep getting better and better.

But Reno, not conceited about his skill in the slightest, just looked at Kafka and smiled. "Mr. Hibino," he said. "It's thanks to you I could shoot through the core and safely eliminate it."

"Me?" Kafka asked. "No way, it was your skill at shooting that did that." The real problem for Kafka was that even if he knew the core's location, he still lacked the skill to shoot it.

"I've still got a long way to go," Reno said humbly. "Still, who'd've thought we'd get faulty data from the analysis unit?"

Kafka remembered some old data he'd come across in the reference room. "It wouldn't be the first time," he said. "They made judgment calls based on photographic evidence, and the intel they gave was faulty. In this case, there was also the fact that the juveniles had never been come onto land before."

The members of the analysis unit were pros when it came to judging the characteristics of kaiju. They had a lot of data, and their knowledge of kaiju might well have exceeded Kafka's. But Kafka, with his many years handling kaiju corpses, surpassed them in terms of field experience, and today something had just felt a little off to him. That hunch seemed to have paid off this time.

My strength is that I can actually go into the field and reinforce our intel.

Kafka, Reno, and Kikoru reached their destination point. The other new

recruits were already engaged in fierce combat there. Countless yoju carcasses lay sprawled on the ground, and the sound of gunfire continued unbroken.

“Sorry we’re late!” Kikoru said, and started shooting. The kaiju that had been closing in on the officers were blown away one after another.

With his gun at the ready, Haruichi looked over at them, grinned, and said, “Looks like the cavalry just showed up!”

“Don’t let your guard down just because some of our guys have shown up,” warned Aoi.

“I know that, Aoi.” Firing his gun, Haruichi shouted, “Reno! Cover me!”

“Roger!” Reno leapt forward and took cover.

Incredible.

Kafka was watching from a distance. A kaiju could bounce the rounds he fired right back at him without even breaking a sweat. If he were to jump into the fight, he’d only get in the way.

Never mind, it’s only strangers who are watching.

Kafka looked at the ground near his feet. A kaiju with a hole in its belly was trying to get up. There were way too many yoju, and some of them hadn’t been hit precisely in their cores. They could still pose a threat if they were to attack the officers from a blind spot.

If there’s an open wound, even I can manage this!

Kafka stepped back a bit, took aim, and fired his gun into the hole in the creature’s body. The wound widened even more, and this time the kaiju crumbled to the ground.

Kafka shouted at the top of his lungs toward the officers engaged in combat, “I’ll make sure the fallen kaiju stay down!” Again, he raised his heavy weapon, trained it on a half-dead kaiju that was trying to start moving, and fired.

I-I’m gonna do what I’m capable of!

Just then was when it happened. The air was shaken by the boom of an explosion.

“Whaaa—?”

Kafka, as well as Reno and the other officers in combat, instantly turned their heads toward the source of the massive sound. A splash of water several dozen meters in height was rising from the middle of the lake. From the shock wave, it looked as though there had been a meteorite impact. In the center of a great column of water was a honju of enormous size. For a moment, Kafka wondered if it had jumped up out of the lake, but that wasn't what had happened. He could tell because one of the honju's log-like limbs had been completely blown off. The officers who beheld this sight all understood the situation.

Once again, Kafka clenched his fist and instinctively shouted, “Mina!”

“Mr. Hibino,” Reno shouted back, “if you use the captain's first name, you'll have to do push-ups again.”

“It's fine. My transmitter's turned—”

“You came through loud and clear, Kafka!”

Kafka felt his blood curdle at the familiar sound of Kansai dialect in his ear. “Huh? Did I, uh, by any chance forget to turn it off?” he said.

“I hear that one loop around Lake Kawaguchi is twenty kilometers. Shall I have you run it once this is over?” Hoshina asked dryly. “It'll do double duty as a patrol operation.”

“Y-yes, sir!”



Far away from Kafka and the others was the large bridge spanning Lake Kawaguchi. Mina Ashiro boldly stood in the middle, pointing the barrel of her gun. At her side was her white tiger, Bakko.

Supposing the honju emerged from the water, severe damage could be dealt to urban areas. And taking the length of Lake Kawaguchi's perimeter into account, it would take time for officers to arrive on the scene once the creature came ashore. Given that, it would be preferable to put down the kaiju while it was still in the lake, but the honju was hardly ever showing itself on the water's surface.

Ashiro and her group had come up with something of a crazy plan. First, they would get a rough idea of the honju's location, and then they would blow it up along with the lake itself. It was a power play made possible only by the massive firepower that Ashiro possessed.

Many drones were flying high above the lake. From the ripples on the water's surface, they deduced a rough idea of the kaiju's whereabouts and relayed the data to Ashiro via operator. The angle of fire, the force, and so on were calculated, but Ashiro did the fine aiming adjustments with her own hands—and opened fire.

The recoil was so powerful that a shooter of ordinary unleashed combat power would have been blasted backward into the air. Large cracks appeared in the road leading up to the bridge where Ashiro had braced herself. A mighty rumble shook the air as a massive pillar of water was blasted upward, carrying the kaiju along with it. One of the kaiju's limbs was blown off in the process.

"Round two, loaded!" Ashiro shouted. Still swept up in midair, the kaiju turned its ferocious visage on her. It sprayed a torrent of water from its mouth. Ashiro reacted instantly by jumping to the side. A linear stream containing tens of thousands of liters of water spread out toward her, utterly obliterating the spot where she'd been standing only seconds before. A part of the bridge crumbled and was blown backward by the force of the water. But during it all, Ashiro remained calm and focused on the kaiju.

"Bakko."

As Ashiro fired the second round, her tiger moved in to support her body. The round raced straight toward the kaiju just as it was splashing down. Again, a massive gout of water erupted. Water that had been vaporized by the round's impact enveloped the area in a thick fog. For just an instant, the kaiju's form was concealed in the mist.

Even so, drones patrolling the area had a good view of the water's surface. The honju was swimming toward the south end of the bridge as if to put distance between itself and Ashiro.

"Honju still active!" the operator said. "Swimming toward opposing shore—I'll recalculate its position."

“Round three, loaded!”

“Roger! Prepare to fire!”

Even having lost one of its limbs, the kaiju’s swimming speed was still incredible. It placed one limb on shore and attempted to climb up onto land from the foot of the bridge.

“Oh no, you don’t!”

Hoshina was waiting for it there. With a flash of his katana, the kaiju’s foreleg went flying. Having lost its anchor, the kaiju fell tailfirst into the lake. “There you go, thank you for playing!” Hoshina said. He immediately withdrew from the spot, knowing he was in Ashiro’s line of fire.

“Good job, Hoshina,” Ashiro said, and she immediately unleashed round three.

A huge hole appeared in the kaiju’s backside, and a massive spray of water and chunks of meat were scattered across the area. The kaiju roared out a shrill death scream. Soon its dead body bobbed in the lake.

“Honju vital responses, lost!”

Even with notice from her operator, Ashiro didn’t let up. She stared at the kaiju, shouted “Round four, loaded!” and braced herself to fire the round. There had been cases where supposedly neutralized kaiju had suddenly come back to life. They had to be thoroughly destroyed to the point where any hope of revival was impossible.

Once the finishing shot had been delivered, Ashiro pulled off her goggles and let out a breath. Hoshina came walking toward her from the foot of the bridge.

“Captain, good work neutralizing the honju. Though once again, you really didn’t do things halfway. Isn’t this why people complain about Third Division being a nightmare to clean up after?”

“It’s not like that’s anything new,” Ashiro replied.

“That’s certainly true,” Hoshina said with a loud, jovial laugh.

“How goes the yoju neutralization?” she asked.

“They’re in the process of being eliminated. It seems the newcomers on the shore over there are putting in a hard day’s work for us. Once those are mopped up, we’re probably 90 percent done here. Only—”

Ashiro picked up Hoshina’s sentence. “Only something feels off?”

“You think so too, Captain? What bothers me is Kaf—Officer Hibino’s hypothesis.”

“Yes, I heard it,” Ashiro confirmed. “According to his analysis, the ones coming ashore are juveniles, right? Going by the maturity of their reproductive organs, that’s probably factual. Still, if it’s true, it raises another problem, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hoshina agreed. “The question of why kaiju are coming ashore as juveniles, eh?”

“Do you think they ran out of food in the lake?” Ashiro asked.

“I don’t think that’s plausible,” Hoshina said. “According to the analysis unit, these fellas have been known to engage in cannibalism in the past. With this many yoju present, food is plentiful. I think there must be another reason.”

“If so—”

Just then, a transmission came through for both of them, from Okonogi at the field headquarters. “Captain Ashiro, Vice-Captain Hoshina! I have an emergency report!”

“What’s the matter?” Hoshina asked. “You sound panicked.”

“It’s the estimated fortitude of the honju Captain Ashiro just killed. It’s 6.5!”

Hoshina and Ashiro looked at one another in surprise.

“As I recall, the estimate in the initial report was 7.1, wasn’t it?”

When it came to fortitude, the initial report put out numbers early, so they sometimes differed from precise measurements. In this case, however, the difference was too great to be an error.

That’s when Hoshina’s eyes snapped wide open. “Miss Okonogi, get drones covering the entire area inside the lake!” he ordered. “Confirm whether or not

there are any peculiar ripples somewhere. Then check to see if there are any faint tremors.”

“The lake’s whole interior, sir? Please wait a moment. Th-there it is. There’s definitely one point where faint vibrations are being detected. It’s on the shore opposite from your present position.”

Hoshina examined the data that Okonogi sent to his map, then nodded. “Captain, this couldn’t be—”

“Yes, I doubt it myself.” Ashiro opened a channel. “Ikaruga Platoon, can you hear me? Move immediately to the sector I’m about to designate.”

5

In no time at all, word that Ashiro had succeeded in neutralizing the honju was getting around to the officers.

“Mina did it!”

Kafka, who was finishing off yoju, as well as the other officers, who were still in combat, were boiling over with excitement.

“This is the last one!” Kikoru said as her bullet pierced the core of the last remaining yoju. With that, the neutralization of yoju in the surrounding area was complete. A sense of relief spread out among the new officers.

But as if to wipe away that afterglow, there came a loud *thoom* that shook the ground.

“Huh? What’s that?” Kafka wondered. Unable to keep his footing amid the shock, he stumbled and braced himself with both hands on the ground. He had a feeling that this shock wave was somehow different from the kind that occurred when a kaiju was walking. It was more of a deep vibration that he felt in his stomach. The ground cracked at his feet and began to bulge upward. Kafka could hear the rumble coming from right beneath himself and his teammates.

“What is this? What’s happening?” Kafka asked unsteadily.

Not even Kikoru had a firm handle on what was happening.

Oh no!

That was when it dawned on Kafka. “Everybody! Get away from here!” he shouted.

And then it happened—right after the officers had reacted to Kafka’s warning and taken off running. With a massive *thoom*, the ground danced skyward. A heavy rain of dust covered the area, and it became next to impossible to see anything.

“All officers: high alert! High-energy breakout in the northeast quadrant of Zone D.”

When Kafka heard the operator’s communiqué, everything clicked into place. Why had ichthyoid kaiju been coming ashore as juveniles? Because they felt their lives were in danger, and they were trying to get out of the lake as fast as possible. Most likely, another enormous kaiju had already been lurking in the lake for decades or more when the honju first arrived.

“Estimated fortitude: 7.1!”

At last, the dust cleared, and the creature revealed itself. At its tallest point, it rose to a height of around fifty meters. Its body was grayish brown, long and slender like a serpent’s, although it had a thick barrel chest. On its trunk were limbs resembling suction cups, which supported its body. On its head were many blue eyes that sparkled like strange jewels. Using its suction cups, the kaiju began to move. Trees at its feet were trampled and crushed as it made for the city area.

“Mr. Hibino, is that —?”

Kafka answered Reno’s question before he’d finished it. “Probably a species of ichthyoid kaiju.”

“Ichthyoid? *That?*”

“There’s a behavior called estivation,” Kafka explained. “On rare occasions when they dig into the ground for road construction, ichthyoid kaiju will emerge from nearby places without any water!”

Estivation occurred in a number of fish species, such as the lungfish. They would wrap their bodies up in a membrane that served to protect them from dehydration.

“In the past,” Kafka continued, “kaiju that came to this land went into estivation and were too deep in the ground to be discovered. Then, more recently, the four-legged ones came and settled here. The ichthyoid kaiju who reproduced woke up the sleeping kaiju. The juveniles were terrified of them and scrambled over each other trying to get out of this lake.”

“A kaiju has come ashore in the Nagahama District of Kawaguchi Town, Fuji City! It’s advancing in the direction of Lake Sai!”

Unease spread over the faces of the newly minted officers. Evacuation wasn’t entirely completed in the direction of the advance. If they couldn’t hold the line, many casualties would occur among the residents there. But could they really hold out against that thing until the officers who were across the lake from them got there? It didn’t seem likely.

A single shot rang out, blowing away all doubts and concerns. Kikoru had her gun poised. “If that’s the case, all the more reason we’ve got to stop that thing!” she said, unleashing fire.

Haruichi and Aoi also began shooting. Among the incoming officers, they, along with Kikoru, were top class when it came to unleashed combat power. As they continued their fusillade, explosions erupted on the surface of the kaiju’s body.

“Sir! I’m going too!” Reno shouted at Kafka.

The sight of the best officers in battle inspired Reno, along with the other newcomers, to open fire as well.

The kaiju’s advance didn’t stop, however. Perhaps it only considered the attack something along the lines of a mosquito bite.

Watching the battle from behind, Kafka clenched his teeth and thought, *Crap, at that rate, it’s gonna break through!* There was no one here who had the power to stop the kaiju’s advance. There was only one way.

If I transform into a kaiju—!

At that moment, a huge and devastating explosion occurred on the kaiju's stomach. Soon, it stopped moving forward. The one who had fired the shot was in a spot even farther back than Kafka. When he turned to look, his fellow rookie Iharu was the one standing there.

"Iharu!" shouted Reno.

"Sorry I'm late! I'm not gonna let you guys be the only ones showing off!"

The reinforcing barrage unleashed by Iharu and his group struck home, and the surface of the kaiju's body was blown away.

"Honestly, this is no time for that kind of talk!" Reno said, although a smile was brimming on his face.

It wasn't only Iharu who had arrived. Other veteran officers were assembled behind him, with Platoon Leader Ikaruga in the lead. This platoon was supposed to be stationed in an urban area in the opposite direction, so what were they doing there?

Why are they here? From that distance, it should've taken them longer to get over here—

As if in answer to Kafka's unspoken question, a transmission from Hoshina came through. "All hands, can you hear me? I just sent Ikaruga Platoon your way. I'm sending along Agatsuma Platoon and then Takao Platoon as well. Hang in there somehow, and keep that thing where it is!"

Kafka thought, *Vice-Captain Hoshina already knew about this kaiju?*

Boom! Another explosion went off, this time near the head of the kaiju before them. Nakanoshima Platoon, Itakura Platoon, and Ebina Platoon all came running. The Third Division's powerhouses were gradually coming together.

The kaiju had completely ceased its forward march. Facing skyward, its body squirmed.

"It's working! Concentrate fire on the lower leg!" At Platoon Leader Ikaruga's order, the barrage was concentrated on a single point near the suction cup at the bottom of its leg.

Kafka had a bad feeling about that. The kaiju's body was covered in a thick

layer of subcutaneous fat, and the bullets were not penetrating deep. So why had this thing stopped moving forward?

Kafka realized that the kaiju's eyes, which were turned toward the sky, were giving off a blue light.

The operator's message came through. "High-energy reaction detected in the target's head! All officers, shields on!"

Kafka instantly obeyed her words and raised his shield to maximum.

Kiiin! A shrill, metallic-sounding noise rang out.

The buildings, the ground, the lake jumped upward. The high energy emitted by the kaiju's head uniorgan struck the officers. Kafka, no longer an exception, was blown far into the distance.

"Gah!"

His body rolled across the ground. While monsoon rains mixed with dirt and sand poured down from overhead, Kafka somehow managed to get back on his feet. The sound of gunfire that had continued without cease had now fallen completely silent. In a haze of dust, the kaiju's colossal silhouette towered above him.

Just look at the size of that thing!

Kaiju and human—Kafka once again felt the overwhelming difference in strength between the two.

"Ugh."

A groan sounded not far from Kafka. One of the officers was down. Most likely, he'd been fighting on the front line. His arm seemed to be injured.

Kafka immediately set about helping him. The officer's arm was hurt, but he was conscious and lucid, and had no other noticeable injuries. His life didn't appear to be in danger.

A hiss came from Kafka's comms. He could barely make out Hoshina's voice. Maybe the shock wave just now had broken his communicator. Either way, the static was awful, and he could hardly make out any words.

Again, Kafka saw a blue light overhead. The towering kaiju's eyes were glowing again.

With another crackle of static came a faint transmission, this time from an operator. "Targ ... again ... high energy reac ... ! It's gonna fire that ... again—!"

Even with his shield raised, Kafka had been blasted through the air like a rag doll. If the kaiju kept on firing like that, what would become of the injured officer who couldn't move? Even worse, destruction of the area seemed all but assured.

Kafka clenched his fists and made up his mind.

Sorry, Ichikawa, Kikoru. You tried to stop me, but I—!

The surrounding atmosphere snapped, crackled, and popped, as if being purged of moisture by flame. The instant before he attempted to transform—Kafka saw it.

A single ripple came running across the surface of Lake Kawaguchi, which spread out behind the kaiju. He thought it was a surviving ichthyoid kaiju, but that wasn't what it was. A motorboat was racing across the lake. A human form shouldering an enormous case made a tremendous leap. Emerging from the volcanic fumes and leaping toward them was none other than Hoshina.



Hoshina bounded up onto the kaiju's body and quickly climbed all the way to the head.

That's unexpected, he thought. *Who would've guessed one this big would be hiding here?*

The light emitting from the kaiju's eyeballs gave the whole area a weird blue glow.

"Oh no, you don't. Hoshina-Style Sword-Slay Technique Number Six!"

Hoshina, having climbed far up, leapt into the air right above the kaiju. He swung his katana at its eyeballs. "Eightfold Slasher!" The kaiju's head split, and blood poured like a fountain from it.

A scream rang out that made the very air vibrate. Upon receiving Hoshina's attack, the kaiju's shock wave was fired off into the air.

"And I hit it hard enough to send its head flying! That's a giant kaiju for you," Hoshina said in celebration. Next, he landed on the ground and picked out Kikoru's form amid the volcanic fumes. Even faced with the kaiju's attack, she had reflexively raised her shield and continued fighting on the front line.

"You were right where we needed you, Shinomiya."

"Vice-Captain Hoshina! What's that on your back—?"

Kikoru had her gun poised for shooting, but her eyes opened wide.

"This just arrived from Izumo Tech. Sheesh, this thing is heavy!" Hoshina said. "You can't really call this an unveiling since folks can't see their hands in front of their faces in all this dust, but still, go have a little fun."

Kikoru took the case from Hoshina and opened it. Concealed within was her custom weapon: the pitch-black axe, Axe-0112.

"All hands, get back into formation," Hoshina commanded. "Make sure you're far enough back, take aim at the kaiju's head, and open fire. Stay alert for its high-energy attacks, and lure Mr. Wormyface here over to the park on the east side of Zone D! Shinomiya and I will create a pitfall by its feet."

"Yes, sir!" cried the officers.

Hoshina and Kikoru leapt into the air simultaneously. Kikoru poised the axe and squeezed the trigger. An enormous shock wave erupted from the weapon and cut into the kaiju.

She's mastered that thing in no time. Okay, guess it's my turn, Hoshina thought. He unsheathed his katana and began cutting into the kaiju's suction cups. With its footing now destroyed, the kaiju's movements were clearly getting dull.

Next, explosions went off on the kaiju's head. The other officers had already gotten back into formation.

Instructions from Hoshina arrived in Kafka's ears.

We're luring the kaiju to the park!

Visibility was exceedingly bad due to all the dust in the air, and Kafka couldn't see all the way to the destination point. By checking his map, though, he could see that he was almost four hundred meters away from the point they were leading the kaiju to. The creature's body squirmed, as if writhing in torment. Affected by the cut to its head from Hoshina, it seemed to have lost all sense of direction.

How are we supposed to make it move four hundred meters in these conditions? Kafka wondered. *No, hold on a sec. I once dismantled an ichthyoid kaiju in Bunkyo Ward that had been estivating. Let's see, that time was with Iida Dismantling! That's right!*

Kafka took out one of the stun grenades he was outfitted with. He released his combat power and threw the grenade with all his strength. It was a scant 1 percent of the suit's potential, but 1 percent was still better than nothing. The stun grenade soared high into the air and unleashed a flash of light and a roaring sound. The kaiju's blue eyes turned toward it.

I thought so!

Kafka hurriedly connected to his operator. "This is Hibino! I once disposed of a kaiju from the same family as this one. That kaiju exhibited positive phototaxis. Most likely this one has the same characteristic!"

Positive phototaxis meant that the creature would move in the direction of bright lights. The ichthyoid kaiju that Kafka had processed in the past had first emerged in Bunkyo Ward in the middle of the night. It had been attracted to the lights at an amusement park.

"I've confirmed a prior example. As you suggest, kaiju of this family do exhibit positive phototaxis! I'll relay this to all personnel. It's possible it can be guided using stun grenades!"

"Roger!" Kafka shouted.

One after another, stun grenades were thrown in the direction of the park. The kaiju responded to the intense light and sound. Although its head started glowing several times along the way, its shock wave attacks did not go off.

When the kaiju had moved all of four hundred meters, Hoshina's order rang

out.

“It’s time now. Everyone, get clear!”

The officers put distance between themselves and the kaiju. Kafka spotted Reno among them. Kikoru also came leaping from where the kaiju’s feet were.

“Sir! Are you all right?” Reno asked Kafka.

“Ichikawa! You’re okay too, are you?”

“I heard the transmission,” said Reno. “About the stun grenades. I guess you get the credit for that one.”

“Kikoru? What’s that huge case on your back?” Kafka asked.

“This? Well, I suppose we’ll have an unveiling ceremony later,” Kikoru replied in a voice that sounded both dissatisfied and pleased at the same time. “The design didn’t suit me all that well, you know.”

“Ichikawa, what’s going on right now?” asked Kafka. “I’m not picking up transmissions very well, and I need to hear what Vice-Captain Hoshina’s plan is. Why did we lead the kaiju to the park?”

“He said if we can get him there, the captain will take care of the rest.”

“The captain?” Kafka said in a panicky voice. “Mina will? It can’t be—”

A transmission from Hoshina rang out. “Good work, everyone. Be careful of stray bullets.”

Moments later, one section of the kaiju’s body was completely obliterated. Chunks of airborne flesh went flying as far as the mountains behind them.

Kafka looked toward the middle of Lake Kawaguchi, where the shot had come from. Located there was a tiny uninhabited island known as Unoshima. A long rift appeared in the leaden rain clouds that covered the sky, and a single ray of light was illuminating Unoshima. Ashiro was standing there, on that island. The enormous barrel of her cannon reflected that light, glinting in the sun.

Kafka wanted to cry out, “*Mina!*”

When extended, the line of fire connecting Unoshima and the park went straight to the mountains, so even if Ashiro’s killing shot had missed, there

would have been little damage to the town. Even if the chunks of kaiju flesh scattered, the damage to civilian homes would be minimal. After carefully considering everything, she had instructed them to bring the kaiju here.

That's the kaiju-neutralization pros for you, Kafka thought proudly. Japan Defense Force Third Division!

Ashiro fired a second shot. It blew a hole right through the kaiju's thick body, and the shell made it all the way to the mountains in the distance. The power of the attack was even greater than what she'd unleashed a little while ago against the ichthyoid kaiju in the lake. Kafka belatedly realized that Ashiro had been holding her full power in reserve.

She's so far away—

Once upon a time, Kafka and Mina had made a vow to fight side by side. She had joined the Defense Force and risen to the rank of division captain. Kafka, on the other hand, had only just recently gotten his promotion to general officer.

But still, even so—

Kafka clenched his fist. Ashiro loaded a third round and fired.

I am catching up. Just wait and see, Mina.

Without straying from the target, the shell scored a direct hit on the kaiju's head, blowing it completely off.

"Honju's vital responses, vanished!"

Having lost its head, the strength ebbed out of the kaiju's body. It was about to fall over in the direction of the park. Everything had gone according to plan.

Among the officers, expressions of relief at last began spreading from face to face. But then, in stark contrast, the operator cried out in a grave tone of voice, "V-vital response detected! Very faint. It's not from any of the officers! It's a civilian! There's a civilian who didn't get out in time!"

"What's that?" Hoshina said, sounding surprised. "How is that possible? Evac for this sector was finished! This is bad. At this rate, we won't be able to reach them in time!"

The kaiju slowly slumped over toward the ground. Amid the dust, a tiny

human figure was clearly perceptible. By the time he realized it, Kafka was already running.

“Ah! Mr. Hibino! Sir!”

Heedless of Reno trying to stop him, Kafka went straight into the middle of the volcanic smoke.

6

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The enormous kaiju, big enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with high-rise buildings, came tumbling down. The helpless man below it was certain of his impending death. No matter what he did, there was no escape. His body would be crushed to pulp, to the point where no one would be able to identify it.

Mr. Ooka—the director of the TV news special—saw fond memories of his life flash before his eyes like images in a zoetrope. His father had been a journalist. He’d captured images of kaiju with his camera, and had been a famous man within the industry. In 1972, however, he had lost his life in Sapporo while photographing the beast that would later come to be called Kaiju No. 2.

The boy had looked up to his father and had now become a director who had photographed many kaiju himself. But shooting kaiju up close—especially giant kaiju—was strictly forbidden.

The director had put in a request to cover the Third Division precisely because he’d always wanted to shoot a kaiju up close. He’d been thinking that it would be quite the twofer if he got to go with JDF officers to the scene of an emergence. Ultimately, it had been impossible to get into an emergence area, but he was not going to let a chance like this get away. The director and his crew had been hiding on the opposite side of the emergence point, flying the news drones, but—never had they dreamed that the point would move toward them.

The kaiju was closing in. The director closed his eyes tightly and thought, *I’m gonna die. Am I gonna die in a place like this? Somebody, help me.*



A partial transformation of the legs later, Kafka ran swiftly through the middle of the volcanic smoke. When he came out of it, he was able to see the shape of a human up ahead. Sunk down on the ground was the director of the TV crew that had been covering the Third Division.

What's that guy doing here? No, never mind that. It doesn't matter!

The kaiju was closing in from directly above the director's head. Kafka kicked off the ground and lunged. He transformed, changing all the way into Kaiju No. 8. He clenched his fist and went into a windup with his arm. A brilliant light was beginning to shine from his body.



Drones were in the air above, but this was no time to hold back on their account.

“Uoooooooooooooooooooo—!”

Swinging his fist around sideways, Kafka struck the kaiju with all his strength. An incredible shock wave ran through the surrounding area. Powerful winds were blowing everywhere.

One blow.

With one blow, the dead kaiju’s collapsing body was utterly blown apart. Splatter from it went flying off toward Lake Kawaguchi. Meaty chunks pulverized by the punch came falling down from above as it rained blood on the whole area. Kafka, carrying the director, headed off in the direction opposite of the spot where they’d lured the kaiju, where there didn’t seem to be any officers.

Kafka laid the director down against the wall of a civilian home. The man seemed to have merely fainted.

Whew! But as Kafka let out his breath, he heard a sound behind him. The memory of battling Hoshina after the events at Sagamihara flitted through the back of his mind.

Not good! Kafka thought, trying to find something to hide behind—but he calmed down once he saw who it was. Both Reno and Kikoru were headed his way as fast as they could run.

Ichikawa! And Kikoru—

Thinking they were coming to greet him, Kafka waved his hand at the pair.

And then—

“What’re you doing?” said Reno.

“What are you doing?” said Kikoru.

“Uge—!”

The instant they met, Reno and Kikoru both slammed their fists into Kafka’s face. Hands on his cheeks, Kafka fell backward and landed hard on the ground.

When he looked up at them, both Reno and Kikoru glared at him in rage. They were expressions of fury like Kafka had never seen before.

“Y-yikes!” Kafka said, surprised. “W-what’s the matter, you two? Hitting me all of a sudden like that!”

“Will you hurry up and turn off that kaiju form already?” Kikoru shouted.

“S-sure. Sorry, I’m sorry,” Kafka said. “Look here, back to normal.”

Kikoru wasn’t satisfied and said, “Don’t you give me ‘sorry’! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“It’s all right, though, isn’t it? Nobody saw him but us, right?” Reno asked, hoping that Kikoru would calm down.

“Yeah, there was nobody else around,” Kafka said. “Well, there was that one drone, but—”

Reno’s and Kikoru’s eyes opened wide as saucers. They both shouted “Drone?” in unison.

“Yeah, this guy was probably the one flying it. But it’s fine, I tell ya! It got swept up in the shock wave from that punch just now. I don’t think any images survived.”

Kafka gave them a hopeful thumbs-up sign, but Reno and Kikoru were talking to each other with somber expressions.

“This just got messy, didn’t it?” said Reno.

Kikoru agreed. “Yeah, we’ve got to do something.”

“Hm? Why is that?” Kafka asked. “The drone was destroyed, so what’s the problem? It’s gotta be smashed beyond recovery. I didn’t let anybody see what I—”

“Mr. Hibino, today’s cameras send their data to computers,” Reno explained.

“Huh?” Kafka was still perplexed.

“The drone must have been doing that in real time. Recording should have stopped when the drone was broken, but the video up until that moment is likely saved securely on the cloud.”

Kafka still didn't fully understand, but he knew the color was draining from his face as he said, "I-in other words, um?"

"Kafka Hibino. Your transformation scene is without a doubt perfectly preserved on video!" Kikoru shouted.

"What?" Finally, Kafka grasped the dire circumstance he now found himself in. "Whaaaaaaaat! What do I do? What's gonna happen to me? What's going on?"

"Those are our lines, aren't they?" said Reno.

"The only solution is to delete the data somehow," said Kikoru.

"Uhhh, uhhhhhhng—"

Lying against the wall where Kafka had set him down, the director suddenly came to. He saw Kafka and the rest in front of him, blinked his eyes several times, and said, "Where am I? A-am I alive after all? Did you rescue me?"

Without a doubt, it had been Kafka who had gotten him out of there, but he had done so in the form of Kaiju No. 8.

"Ah, no, um, that's—"

As Kafka descended into gibbering incoherence, Kikoru pushed him aside and said, "All right, the important thing is that you aren't injured. That being said, I'm sure that as a worker in public broadcasting, you're well aware that this area is off-limits to civilians at this time, so I trust you won't mind if we confiscate any images or videos you've taken here?"

Kikoru's words were strong, forceful, and impossible to resist. Watching from the side, Kafka was impressed at her delivery. Still, the director had been shooting that footage at the risk of death or severe bodily injury. Kafka doubted the man would just hand it over without any pushback, but—

The director let out his breath and said, "Okay, fine. I'll give you the video files."

Kafka was surprised and thankful at how cooperative the man was being.

"Video I shot with these methods certainly can't be broadcast. If it's of use to the Defense Force, then by all means, take it."

Kafka's face brightened, and when they had all turned to go, he whispered to Reno and Kikoru: "W-wow! You did it, Reno! Kikoru! I don't really get it, but things worked out fine in the end!"

"Don't you 'I don't really get it' me!" said Kikoru. "Next time, please be more careful with your little problem. But you won't, will you? No matter what I say?"



The director was watching the three departing figures from behind as they whispered to one another.

Officer Kafka Hibino, eh?

If he were being honest, Kafka had seemed like a pretty unremarkable man when he'd covered him. Hoshina had coyly referred to him as the comic relief, he came in last in everything during drills, and the director couldn't rightly see how or why the man had been hired in the first place. To think it was a guy like that who had ended up saving his life—but life itself was strange, and stuff like that happened sometimes.

There was only one reason he'd so obediently handed Kafka and the others those images he'd risked life and limb to record: it was because he'd already gotten what he'd come there for.

I wanted to film a kaiju. But that wasn't all.

His father had lost his life at the scene of an emergence. If Defense Force officers had run to him then, maybe his father could have been saved. What the director had been looking for was a dramatic rescue of that sort.

I wanted to film Defense Force officers saving somebody.

That was the real reason the director had put in the request to cover the Defense Force, and why he had snuck into the emergence scene. As a result, he'd gotten himself into a terrible situation and would likely receive due punishment for it, but—

Ah well. As long as I've got this one, I guess it'll be enough.

The director took a pen from his shirt pocket. At a glance, it was nothing more than an instrument for writing, but it had a tiny video camera attached to its tip.

He pointed it at the departing trio as they continued talking and pressed the record button.



Reno was carrying the laptop computer they had confiscated from the director. When he looked back, he saw Kafka was walking along behind because he was helping to support the director on his still-wobbly legs.

“I checked the recordings, and Mr. Hibino wasn’t in them,” Reno told Kikoru. “He was just barely out of frame. I think we’ll be fine turning it in to HQ as is.”

“We were lucky,” Kikoru said solemnly. “It was pure chance this time. Sheesh, Reno. You tell him too—tell him till you’re blue in the face—not to ever, ever transform in front of people again. This time, he even transformed while a bunch of officers were around. It’s a miracle he didn’t blow his cover.”

“I’ve already warned him, dozens of times,” Reno said.

“Aah, that guy just—” Kikoru sighed.

“And you already know, Shinomiya. Mr. Hibino just isn’t the type you can get anywhere with just by telling him. If there’s a need to, he’s going to transform. Every single time.”

“You’re right. Like on the training ground.”

“And at Sagamihara.”

The two of them sighed at the same time. Both already knew very well what kind of person Kafka Hibino was. Before asking what would become of himself and what the consequences might be, that man was sure to transform, without hesitation.

That’s just how he is, thought Reno. So it’s up to me to make sure he doesn’t need to transform.

It’s unclear why Kafka Hibino turns into a kaiju or what the governing principles are, Kikoru mused. There’s even the possibility that his consciousness has somehow become part of the kaiju. Even so, I—that guy—

Although neither could fully put their thoughts into words, both Reno and

Kikoru silently affirmed their intentions.

Because in all of the Defense Force—in all of Japan, even—they were the only ones who knew the truth about Kafka and Kaiju No. 8.

And it was in this way that the Lake Kawaguchi neutralization operation finally concluded.

CLOSING
CREDITS

“Oh, hello. Are you with the Defense Force?” An elderly lady walking her Shiba Inu gave a polite bow. Kafka and Reno, walking together, lowered their heads in response.

“Hello there,” said Kafka cheerfully. “We’re on patrol right now, but—whoa!” It was a gentle-looking dog, but the moment it noticed Kafka, it started barking loudly. It bared its canines and acted as though it might bite him at any moment.

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry!” the old lady apologized. “She’s usually such a sweet dog.”

Even some time after the officers had moved on, the dog was still barking. “Lately, I get the feeling that small animals are avoiding me.” Kafka said.

“Maybe animals instinctively know about you,” Reno mused.

“Does this mean I’m gonna be setting dogs and cats on edge for the rest of my life?”

Reno and Kafka were both wearing their suits, doing patrol duty along the Tama River. The fish-type kaiju that had appeared in Lake Kawaguchi had been neutralized along with all its known yoju, but their numbers had exceeded expectations. It was possible that some had escaped and made their way to other areas via the river. In particular, Tachikawa had been seeing a lot of fish types lately, meaning a second investigation of the area was now in order.

“Finished for the day, Shinomiya?” asked Reno, seeing Kikoru up ahead. “How’d it go?”

“None over this way either,” replied Kikoru. “This area’s clear, so the next place to patrol is—”

“Hey, before that,” Kafka interrupted, “why don’t we all go cool off somewhere? It’s gotten pretty hot.”

“I still feel all right,” said Reno.

“I’m okay too,” said Kikoru.

But when they both looked at Kafka’s face, they changed their minds. Great beads of sweat were running down his cheeks. The low, dark clouds that had

recently hung overhead had vanished at last, and the sky over Tachikawa was now as clear as glass. Rising like mountain peaks above the distant sea were towering cumulonimbus clouds. When had it started to feel like summer?

“Would you like to rest for a bit, Mr. Hibino?” asked Reno.

“I guess we’d better,” said Kikoru reluctantly. “It’ll be a hassle to deal with if him if he gets heat exhaustion.”

The trio came to an old-fashioned sweets shop by the riverside and seated themselves on a bench near the entrance. Kafka went in and bought drinks and handed one each to Reno and Kikoru outside.

“Check this out, Kikoru,” said Kafka.

“What’s with this bottle?” she asked. “Hey! Is this ramune?”

“You said before that you wanted to try it.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to—you said you’d treat me to some. Anyway, thanks. I’ll take it. Hold on, what is this? Is that a marble jammed in the neck?”

“How about it, Kikoru? Can you get it open? You can’t get to the ramune inside if you can’t!” Kafka teased.

“Of course I can do it. This is nothing,” Kikoru said confidently. Then she added, “Hey! What’s with this green lid?”

Kafka erupted with laughter. “Bwa ha ha ha! You’re having a little trouble, I see!”

“No, I am not! You do this, then push here, and there you go! I did it, see?”

The marble fell, making a clinking sound, and then came the hiss of fizzing soda pop.

“Ooh! You did it! Way to go!” Kafka said.

“It’s an easy win for me.” Laughing, Kikoru tried a sip of the ramune. “Too sweet. But, hmm, I do like the flavor.”

Kafka also opened up his ramune and took a swig. The soda water and refreshing sweetness passed along his throat, replenishing his body moisture. How long had it been since he’d last had ramune? The flavor took him all the

way back to his boyhood and festivals at local shrines and temples.

“By the way, sir,” Reno said as he drank his ramune, “did you hear they took disciplinary action against the director who came to report on us?”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. Unauthorized entry into a neutralization zone. After all, he really did put lives in danger. However, the Lake Kawaguchi neutralization op got too much media coverage, and that story got buried by all the rest.”

“Well.” Kafka said. “I guess things turned out all right. He’s still alive, after all.”

“I think ‘Thank goodness we’re still alive’ is our line,” Kikoru said, with a sharp glance at Kafka. “If you had turned up in that video, we’d have had a huge mess on our hands.”

“Uh, I said I was sorry about that,” Kafka said meekly.

“So get your act together,” Kikoru snapped. “You’re a general officer now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

It had happened that very morning. Kafka had been summoned to the captain’s office, where he’d been given his letter of appointment by Third Division captain Mina Ashiro and had been made a general officer.

“Kafka Hibino, on this date and time, I hereby revoke your status of cadet and officially designate you a general officer of the Defense Force.”

Those words had been spoken to him directly by Mina, the childhood friend whom he had promised to fight alongside, and Kafka was in high spirits now. He was putting even more spirit than usual into his duties too.

“All right! Let’s get back to patrolling!” he said merrily.

“Who was it who wanted this break in the first place?” Kikoru asked under her breath. “Make up your mind, already.”



Hoshina, standing in front of the captain’s office, knocked on the door. Suddenly, he had a feeling of déjà vu. Back when Ashiro had just been installed

as Third Division captain, he had knocked on this door in just the same way. The circumstances were completely different from back then, however. Now, he was also this division's vice-captain.

"Excuse me. Soshiro Hoshina, reporting."

Behind her work desk, Ashiro was standing with her back turned toward him. Light streaming in through the windowpanes accentuated her silhouette. "Sorry to call you here so suddenly," she said.

"What's the matter?" Hoshina asked. "Do I have something stuck to my face?"

"Uh, no, no. Not at all," she replied.

Back then, youthful softness had still been present in Ashiro's face, and her hair only came down as far down as her shoulders. Now, she gave a completely different impression. Lustrous raven hair spilled down her back, she had a brave, heroic countenance, and a hardness could also be seen in her expressions. There were probably many people who thought Ashiro had changed a lot over time.

Hoshina knew better, however. Her eyes when she looked at him were just like that other time, clear and direct.

"What was it you wanted to talk about, Captain Ashiro?" Hoshina said. "Isn't it about time for your business trip?"

"Yes, as soon as we're done here, I'm heading straight over to the main office building. This is about the recent matter at Lake Kawaguchi."

"Some kind of follow-up?" Hoshina asked.

The Lake Kawaguchi neutralization operation—the emergence of fish-type kaiju in the vicinity of Lake Kawaguchi. There had been a mass emergence of joju there as well, but all those that had been confirmed had been neutralized. With the cooperation of nearby JGSDF troops, the harm to civilians had been kept to a minimum. Some time would be needed to restore the city to what it had been, however.

"This is the data that arrived from the analysis unit. The fortitudes that were

calculated that day near Lake Kawaguchi.” Ashiro held out a report, and Hoshina took it from her. On it was printed waveform graphs showing the changes over time. The little waves were yojū, most likely. In the latter half, two waveforms rose up high above the others. One was the fish-type honjū, and the other was the kaiju that had been estivating. The important thing was what came next. It was a wave that vastly exceeded 7.1.

“Estimated fortitude: 9.8—” Hoshina said in disbelief.

Ashiro continued, “At the moment it was measured, the kaiju I had shot was just about to fall. As you can see from the graph, it was only there for an instant. They suspected a malfunction or error in measurement, because the kaiju was on the brink of death, but—”

“It’s Kaiju No. 8, isn’t it?” Hoshina replied right away. He didn’t hesitate to utter those words, even for an instant.

“You think so?” Ashiro asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t think there’s any doubt that Kaiju No. 8 was present. It delivered a single blow to the kaiju that you had just finished off, then withdrew from the battlefield. I don’t know what it’s thinking, but—”

“As if No. 9 wasn’t a threat enough already,” Ashiro said regretfully. “This matter will be on the agenda when I go talk with HQ. The base is in your hands while I’m gone.”

“I’ll take care of things for you.”

Hoshina bowed toward Ashiro, turned, and was about to leave the room when Ashiro added, “Oh, I forgot to tell you. I gave Kafka Hibino his official letter of appointment this morning.”

“Oh, so he’s now a general officer like us, is he?” Hoshina said. “Hard to believe he didn’t get thrown off the team instead.”

“You were the one who recommended him,” Ashiro pointed out.

“Ha ha. Oh yeah, that *was* me, wasn’t it?” Hoshina laughed jovially.

“I also got an email from the TV station expressing their gratitude. They said Ichikawa, Shinomiya, and Hibino were all a great help.”

Kafka too?

Hoshina had read Reno's report about their rescue activities at Lake Kawaguchi. According to what he'd read, Ichikawa and Shinomiya had rescued the director together. So why had the TV station mentioned Hibino in the thank-you note?

Are they hiding the fact that Hibino was with them? But why would they do such a thing?

Kafka and Kaiju No. 8—for just a moment, something almost drew a line connecting the two in Hoshina's mind. But an image surfaced of Kafka as he was in his daily life. Not once had he defeated a yoju in the line of duty, and even his drills were nothing but a succession of failures.

No way that could ever be, is there?

The feeling that Hoshina had for just a moment dissipated immediately, like an early-morning fog.



That night, many officers were gathered in the recreation room. Even Aoi, who tended to spend his off-hours on additional training, put in an unexpected appearance. Everyone's eyes were glued to the television screen.

Notice had been given that barring any emergency bulletins, their segment would be broadcast tonight. Kafka was in the back of the room, staring intently at the TV screen. Next to him was Reno, who was having trouble keeping still.

"You think they'll really show much of me, Ichikawa?"

"They interviewed you, so it's definitely possible."

"Kafka Hibino," Kikoru said in a low voice beside him. "That isn't what you need to be worried about. If by some chance they have footage of you transforming, the resulting scandal will be huge."

"Not a problem," Kafka said confidently. "I wouldn't screw up like that. At least, I *shouldn't* have."

"Not losing our confidence now, are we?" Kikoru slyly asked.

Her words made Kafka uneasy. What if his partial transformation had by some slim chance been caught on camera? His stomach started tying itself in knots at the thought of it.

“Oh! This is it!” shouted Iharu, who had taken up a spot in front of the television.

Behind the newscaster, an image was displayed of Captain Ashiro. “Next up, we have a special report. Japan Defense Force Third Division, led by Captain Mina Ashiro, this year admitted twenty-seven new officers into its ranks. We followed these newly minted officers for an in-depth look at the lives of harsh training they lead.”

With a chorus of *oooohs*, a stir spread through the crowd.

“Twenty-seven members— Did they leave me out?” Kafka asked.

“Well, sir,” said Reno, “you hadn’t gotten your official letter at that point yet.”

The first thing the program showed was shooting practice. It began with a shot of officers holding weapons, and then Kikoru appeared, blasting holes through her targets one after another.

“Ah, it’s Kikoru!” Akari squealed happily.

For a time, clips played of Kikoru’s impressive training efforts.

“You are really, *really* standing out,” Kafka murmured unconsciously.

Looking immensely pleased with herself, Kikoru squared her shoulders, held her head high, and said, “Of course I am. I’ve also got the top scores, and most importantly, I am radiantly photogenic.”

“Hold on a minute. I was there shooting right next to you, so I might show up too—” said Kafka, his heart pounding with expectation.

The newscast continued: “Last year’s selection exam was the hardest they’ve ever held. The twenty-seven who were chosen are performing so well that it’s hard to believe they only just joined up.”

“Ah,” said Reno, “looks like they’re done showing shooting drills.”

“Ichikawa, is it just me, or did they blatantly leave out only me?” Kafka asked

worriedly.

“If they did show you,” Kikoru said, “no one would believe the part about this being the hardest selection exam ever.”

Urk. Kikoru’s words stabbed like daggers, to the point that Kafka unwittingly clutched his chest.

Next, they moved on to newcomer interviews. First to appear on the screen was Reno, in close-up.

“Oh! It’s Ichikawa!” Kafka shouted.

“Ah,” Reno said, “this is from the first day, right after shooting practice.”

On the screen, speaking into the mic pointed at him, Reno replied to a question with a gallant look on his face: “I want to get stronger,” he said. “So I can defend those I care about most.” Seeing that, Iharu started roaring with laughter from his seat in the front, and said, “Wha ha ha, Reno! Putting on a hero act for the camera!”

“I-I was not!”

Reno’s interview ended, and the scene changed. Now it was Iharu answering the questions, with sweat trickling down his forehead.

“It—it’s me!”

On the screen, Iharu answered the same question that Reno had: “It’s still not enough,” he said. “I’m going to get stronger. I’m—”

“Iharu,” said Reno, “aren’t you saying exactly the same thing I did?”

“Sh—shut up!” Iharu replied angrily.

Next, the screen switched to the obstacle course. The duo of Aoi and Haruichi were shown running between vacant buildings. Aoi unslung his rifle and blew a hole through a target that emerged from the shadows. Haruichi, resting his head on his hand, saw this and murmured, “Aoi, your moves really are too stiff. If it was me in this scene, I’d have done it two seconds faster.”

Arms crossed, Aoi replied, “Haruichi, what you need to do is go back to the fundamentals again. First, master the basics, then put them into practice.”

“No, Aoi, even at Lake Kawaguchi, you were—”

“No, it was *you*—

The two began arguing, with no regard for the TV or the others watching it.

Scenes followed one upon another, showing the inside of the base. There was Hakua wolfing down her dinner in the mess hall, Akari listening intently to a lecture, officers training hard in the dojo. Cheers went up every time people recognized themselves.

And then, an alarm rang out inside the base, and officers were shown on-screen getting ready for mobilization.

The special report had been going for over fifteen minutes by this point, and the end time of the program was rapidly approaching.

Hey, now! What's this? Kafka wondered. He had a sinking feeling he knew what would come next.

The screen showed Ashiro, facing her work desk in the captain's office. “Defense Force officers have a harsh duty,” she said, “where they could die at any time. I want to fight with them on the front lines and be both their shield and their spearhead.”

The recorded footage of the Defense Force ended there. The program cut back to the studio and newscasters.

Kafka looked at Reno sitting next to him and shouted in a loud voice, “Hey, Ichikawa— Did they really not show me even once?”

“N-no, they showed you.”

“Huh? Where? Did I miss it?”

For just a moment, Reno didn't know how to answer. Then he muttered, “You were in it for just a second. It was the scene in the dojo. You'd lost to Vice-Captain Hoshina and were lying on the floor.”

“I'd rather they cut that!” Kafka said, outraged.

“More importantly,” said Kikoru, “I'm just glad that nothing *unusual* was shown.”

“Yeah, well, that was a good thing, but— Urgh, just you wait! Next time a TV crew comes here, I’ll see to it the show is *all* about me!” Kafka said.

And I’ll be standing right next to Mina. That was his goal, after all.

Seeing this special report on their training from an outside perspective, the officers had noticed new things about one another, and not all of them were good or agreeable. Arguments were steadily heating up. Somewhere along the line, the recreation room had descended into a clamorous uproar.

That was why no one noticed the person lurking in the doorway.

What the—? Looks like I don’t have anything to contribute here.

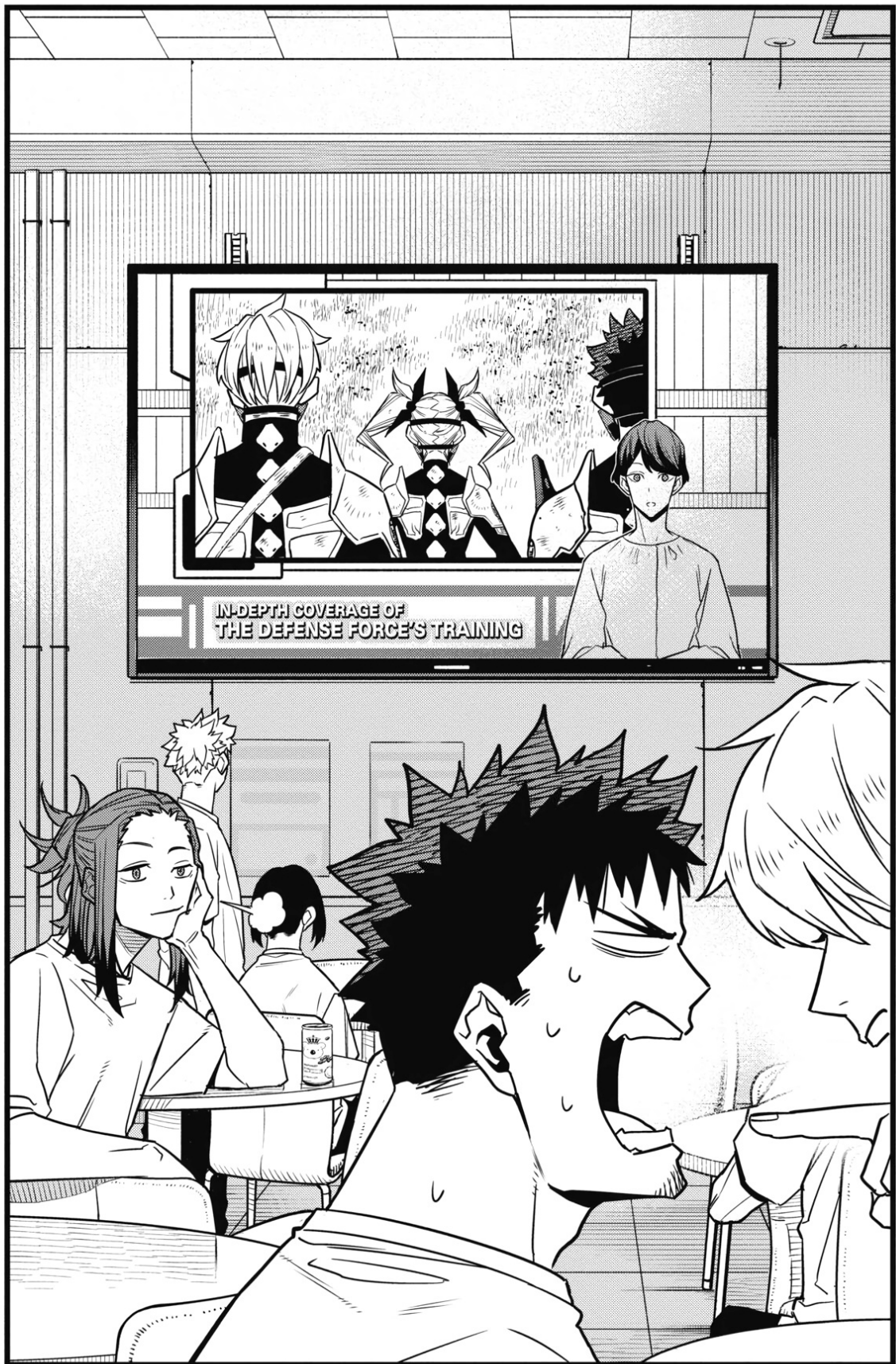
Quietly, Hoshina gave a wry smile, turned on his heel, and walked off alone down the darkened hallway.

Behind the newscaster, the TV was running footage from the Lake Kawaguchi neutralization operation. It showed Reno, Kikoru, and Kafka from behind. It was the clip that the director had secretly shot at the very end. He’d done it to honor the three who had rescued him, and he’d fought hard to squeeze it in before his work suspension took effect.

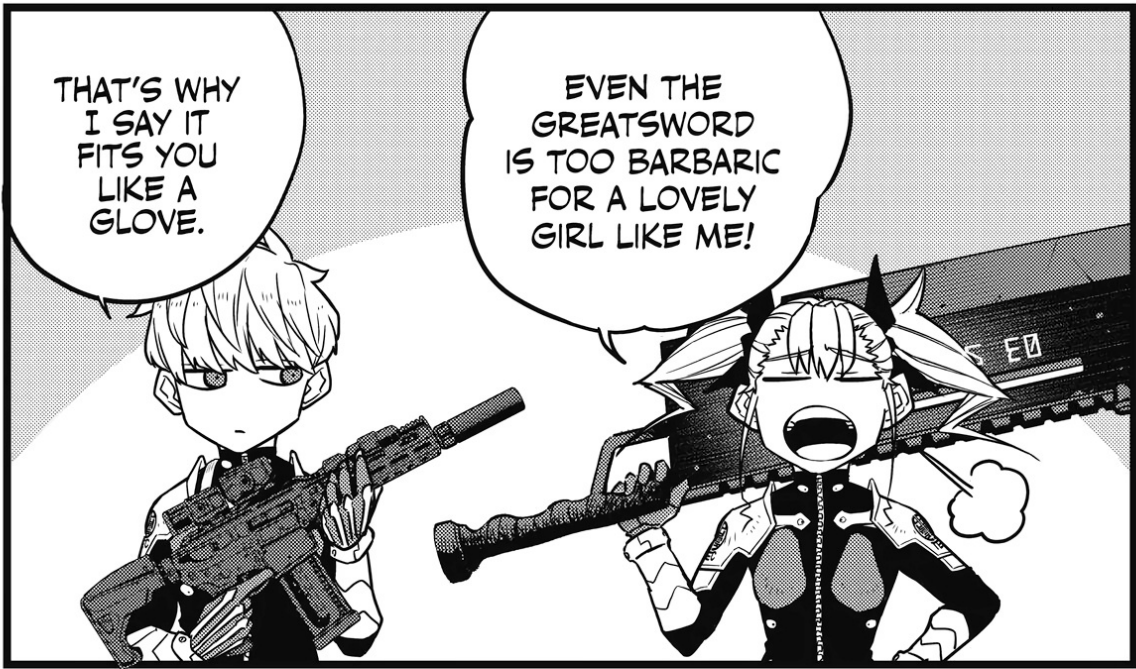
Kafka was in the middle of an argument, however, and didn’t notice himself on the screen at all. The commentator wrapped things up with the following words: “Due to its extremely high frequency of kaiju emergencies, Japan is called ‘the Great Land of Kaiju.’ We mustn’t forget that the reason we’re able to go about our daily lives as we do in this environment is thanks to the officers of the Defense Force.”

The uproar in the rec room carried on, with no end in sight.

It was going to be another late night for the newly minted officers at Tachikawa Base—all twenty-eight of them.



Kikoru's Complaint



THANK YOU VERY MUCH 🐾





NADYA MATSUMOTO

It's been my good fortune to have
a novel written for *Kaiju No. 8*.

Reading it, I was thinking...

—“So this character has this kind of side to them?!”

—“So that weapon had that kind of backstory...!”

...and ended up having a good time with it myself.

Here's hoping you will, too!



KEIJI ANDO

The world of *Kaiju No. 8* is vast, and I was given the opportunity to write just a small piece of it in the form of this novel.