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THE  
OF HARUHI SUZUMIYA  
THEATER

N A G A R U   T A N I G A W A





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Suzumiya Haruhi no Gekijo

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# CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[\*\*ACT 1\*\*](#) [Fantasy](#)

[\*\*ACT 2\*\*](#) [Galaxy](#)

[\*\*ACT 3\*\*](#) [World Tour](#)

[\*\*FINAL ACT\*\*](#) [Escape](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)





To my utter horror, I suddenly found myself in a situation that defied comprehension. Anyone capable of rational thought would likely have sympathized with my current predicament (and lack of motivation). I'm sure they would join me in saying the following: "What the hell?"

Next to me, Haruhi wore a smile totally inappropriate for the occasion. An almost malevolent glee—the sort of grin she wore when she brushed common sense aside and went full-tilt bonkers. The moment this grin appeared on her lips, we were doomed to follow her into uncharted waters, no matter what fate that led us to. I could only pray this runaway freight train wouldn't land us in the student discipline office, or a year toiling in cram schools hoping to pass college entrance exams on our *second* try.

But this did not seem like the right time to pray.

"You say something?"

"I didn't say anything and don't plan to for the foreseeable."

No further comment.

"Fine, then zip it. Leave this to me—you're a sidekick here. You were never good at negotiations."

I'd prefer she not decide what I could do or where my life would take me, but I settled for keeping my mouth shut. I'll admit I had no clue what to say and would very much rather avoid putting my foot in my mouth and making the situation worse. Anyone who suddenly found themselves in this predicament would probably think the same.

Mostly because I've somehow wound up in what seemed to be a palace, standing before a portly old man sitting on what appeared to be a throne. That would make him the king, presumably.

"Haruhi the Hero!" he intoned, looking very much like the King of Diamonds. "Born to save our world, sole living descendent of the ancient hero of yore! Pray, heed my plea! The dire demon lord seeks to seize control of this beautiful world through fear and calamity! You must defeat him!"

"Look, Grandpa," Haruhi said, unfazed by the fact that the elderly minster

standing by the throne had *clearly* called him *Your Majesty* just moments ago.

I gathered this was some sort of medieval monarchy, but did they *not* execute people for lèse-majesté here? By this point, the guards really should have stepped in and escorted Haruhi off to the dungeon.

Please—put her in solitary. Don't leave me in the same cell.

I doubted Nagato, Asahina, or Koizumi wanted to join her, either. We might all be standing here next to her, but imprisonment by association was hardly fair.

“You want me to save the world? Sure, I could do that. I'm exactly the person you want to be asking. You've got a good eye. Me and my people can handle any situation in the blink of an eye. And we've got the results to prove it.”

She was spewing the kind of BS that made you want to immediately delete her last paragraph.

To my left, Haruhi straightened up and then extended her arm, pointing a finger at the man on the throne.

“But good work doesn't come for free! You want us to take down this demon lord wannabe, but what's in it for us? I get the impression that no matter who's controlling these lands, the only real difference will be who we pay taxes to.”

She was certainly mouthing off. I tore my eyes away from her gleeful grin and nonchalantly inspected her garb.

The king had called her a hero. Ordinarily, if someone did that, I'd try to hide my look of pity while frantically calling for an ambulance or just quickly walk in the opposite direction, but neither was an option at the moment. For the simple reason that the outfit Haruhi wore *did* inarguably make her look like a hero.

Use your imaginations, please. It doesn't matter which medieval fantasy RPG comes to mind first, really—just conjure up the clothes that hero wears. Whatever you're picturing is basically what Haruhi has on.

“Ah, Haruhi the Hero!” the king said, seemingly inclined to play along with someone he really should have thrown out on the double. “When you defeat



the vile demon lord and restore peace to this world, they will sing songs about your deeds in every land! Will that honor and glory not suffice?"

"Hell no, it won't 'suffice.'"

She wagged a finger before her nose.

"No matter how you slice it, you can't eat glory! If you pin a medal to my chest, best I can do is auction it off somewhere."

"In that case, Haruhi the Hero, I shall welcome you to the palace! Marry my daughter, the princess—"

"Why would I want a princess?"

"—Correction, marry the prince, and you will gain authority and influence. Sadly, my children, prince and princess alike, have been captured by this dastardly villain! They're currently imprisoned in the demon lord's castle, so you will have to rescue them first."

"What the hell would I do with your kids?!" She was starting to sound pissed. "You think I'd be delighted by a marriage to some total stranger? Let me be very clear, you're way outta line! How outta line? It's like you took your answer sheet and filled every row one bubble off and then turned it in like that. And not in a mock exam either, no, this was the real deal!"

When this furious diatribe died down, Haruhi leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Kyon, what say we rise up and start a revolution? I feel like this dude would abdicate the throne in a second if we pointed a sword at him. I could make you the new king."

You're on your own for that one. I have no interest in rebellion, revolutions, or ruling. All I want is a quiet life in an unremarkable town. Pretty sure everyone but Haruhi is thinking something along those lines.

On that note, I looked past Haruhi. Standing next to her was the magnificent visage of Asahina, looking taken aback. I could put up with agonizing pain for a full week as long as I had her face to comfort me.

"Um," she said, catching my gaze. Her confusion gave way to a smile, and she

bashfully gestured to herself—not an invitation for a hug. More...

“Does this look good on me?”

Of course it did. If anything failed to look good on Asahina, then the clothes were to blame. And those rags might as well be consigned to the fireplace of a mountain shack on a chilly night.

“You’re the spitting image of a mage, no doubt about it.”

Lately I’d been feeling like compliments were best when they’re succinct, so I let that one line do the heavy lifting. Judging from her smile, it worked.

“You look good, too, Kyon.”

Well, well. I managed something like a smile but was deeply unsure I should actually feel good about that. I wasn’t especially into cosplaying and took no pleasure from how well my outfit matched me. While I attempted to muster the appropriate attitude, the King of Diamonds seemed to grow tired of arguing with Haruhi.

“Kyon the Warrior!”

Now he was talking to me.

“What do you say? Save the world, take my daughter as your bride, and I could name you next in line for the throne!”

—Warrior. Apparently, that was my role. I was wearing armor and had a longsword at my side, so I’d figured as much. At least I was dressed like one. My expertise with a sword was limited to some time with a wooden kendo sword in junior high gym class. Would that be of any use?

“She’s quite beautiful, if I do say so myself!” The king was now being a doting dad. “She was dazzling as the grand prize winner in last year’s World’s Hundred Most Beautiful Women guide. Had the demon lord not spirited her away, no doubt she would have defended the title!”

“Uh-huh,” I said. A noncommittal response. Perhaps it would be worth seeing just how hot this princess was. But all I could say at this point was that I was completely sure this unseen princess would not be cuter than Asahina, more proactive than Haruhi, or more extraordinarily resourceful than Nagato. It

would take a lot of doing to get my heart racing.

More importantly, if I nodded here, I'd just end up defeated by the hero before we even got to the demon lord. I saw that future waft by like a soap bubble and then burst a few centimeters from my face.

"This king doesn't know when to quit," Haruhi grumbled. Then she declared, "This is hardly enough to cover our travel expenses. Quit trying to skimp on the reward and open up your coffers. Like 99,999 gold!"

It would be one thing if they'd invented paper money, but if that was going to be all coins, I imagined it would be extremely heavy. Who would be forced to haul all that treasure around? It seemed silly to argue. Might as well take the king's crown and hock it somewhere.

Haruhi fired off a bunch of questions about currency exchange rates and the gold standard system, then demanded an army of ten thousand cavalry and fifty thousand infantry to guard us, and none of this accomplished anything besides drawing confounded looks from the minster and king.

This would probably take a while. So to pass the time I'd better give you a brief rundown on what the others were wearing.

Nagato was a thief, and Koizumi a lute-carrying bard. The end. Nothing else to explain. They looked the part.

Nagato's unmoving gaze was fixed on the stone wall directly in front of her, and Koizumi was simply observing Haruhi with that phony, easygoing smile. I was relieved I didn't have to wear what he had on. It looked irritatingly good on him, though.

We were a party of five—a lineup of the usual suspects. But at the moment, Haruhi wasn't the "chief" but the "hero." I was a warrior, Asahina a mage, Nagato a thief, and Koizumi was a bard. All of us were badly miscast, like our character profiles had been swapped with some other story at the planning stage.

It didn't seem like I could do anything to stop it.

Haruhi was still busy with her stupid King of Diamonds Q&A, but at least we knew what was going on here. An ultimate evil—the demon lord—had popped



up out of nowhere. He was evil incarnate—at least to the ruling class—and a kidnapper to boot, so they wanted us to go on a grand ol’ adventure culminating in the demon lord’s defeat. Standard RPG fare. And not a very inspired one.

“Hokay,” I muttered, hefting the sword on my hip. No clue when the fighting would start, but I’d rather not have the opportunity to use this. I’m not into bloody grimdark stuff.

The loooong negotiations eventually wound down and ended exactly the way I thought they would. Me, Nagato, and Koizumi ended up shouldering chests absolutely stuffed with gold coins. I was worried we looked less like the hero’s party and more like a couple of particularly brazen burglars—but the chests were so heavy I stopped caring. I was used to being Haruhi’s pack mule, but a wooden chest brimming with gold was far heavier than anything I’d been asked to carry lately. Heavier than Haruhi herself. If weight decided value, the chest easily won.

“An acceptable start. Let’s keep this up the whole way!”

Haruhi strode off ahead, and we panted as we followed in her wake. Technically, only I was out of breath; Nagato and Koizumi seemed to have no trouble with their cargo. Nagato was one thing, but I really didn’t appreciate Koizumi having that much hidden strength. Was he lifting in secret? Thanks for the invite, jerk.

It went without saying that nobody attempted to give Asahina any undue burden. She was carrying a gnarled wooden staff, allegedly a bit of magical equipment. The truth remained unclear. What spells could this Asahina cast? Less a question than a mystery. Though I doubted her magic revolved around the secret to brewing new types of tea.

“And we can’t march on an empty stomach! Order whatever you like! We’ve got plenty of cash, so let’s go all out!”

Haruhi had stopped outside a two-story wooden building with a sign out front calling itself a pub of some sort. There were several horses tied to posts outside giving us exhausted looks. This was clearly not a one-horse town.

“Man, it’s hard to pin down what time period we’re supposed to be in,” I said.

My armor clanked as I looked around.

The town beyond the castle walls seemed to me like Europe around the time of the Hundred Years' War, but it wasn't like I had exacting anthropological knowledge of the era, so that was just my best guess. The people milling about on the streets were wearing clothes I'd only ever seen in fantasy RPGs, so it was probably safe to assume this was a bog-standard sword and sorcery kinda deal.

If you just imagine that and fill in the blanks, you'll save me a lot of time on exposition.

While I was busy flexing my powers of description, Haruhi threw open the door of the pub and called, "Hellooooo!" causing every single patron to turn and look at her. This establishment didn't seem to attract a high caliber of clientele. Seeing a bunch of blue-collar men day drinking like proper working lads certainly gave us some insight into the kingdom's labor conditions. The way their eyes locked onto the chest in my arms was unsettling, and I seriously considered hiding behind Nagato.

And yet...

"It's your lucky day, people! I'm paying for all your food and drink! Everything's on me! Don't worry, it's on the king's dime anyway!"

Haruhi immediately put my worries to rest. A roar went up, shaking the shabby wooden rafters, and the pub was engulfed by a party atmosphere.

"Who owns the place? Bring us one of everything on your menu! No, five of everything!"

Haruhi stalked over to the counter at the back, bellowing at the mustachioed proprietor.

"Stop dragging your feet, Kyon! Come on, everybody, sit down! It's time for the pre-party! We're celebrating early!"

It was a total mystery to me what we were celebrating, but no one seemed to have any answers, and my questions were quickly lost in the revelry.

"....."

When I failed to move, thief Nagato held on to her chest in silence and walked

past me.

“Wow... Something smells good!” Asahina said, sniffing the air.

She tried to step forward.

“Eep!”

And promptly stepped on her robes.

“Suzumiya certainly is a generous soul. Then again, this money comes from the kingdom’s treasury, so perhaps returning it to the people like this is for the best.”

Koizumi helped Asahina up and flashed me a smile. He was always unflappable. Nagato’s lack of expression and Asahina’s clumsiness were also the same no matter where we were, clubroom or otherwise. Meanwhile, Haruhi was inexplicably getting worked up even more than usual. I was starting to feel a little left out; everyone else was clearly taking this situation in stride.

“Ooh, I like this! What kind of meat is it? Mammoth? Never had anything like it! Give me the recipe later.”

Haruhi was already sampling the parade of dishes that had started coming out of the kitchen.

“What about this is supposed to be heroic?” I muttered, setting my chest down.

We get hired to take down the demon lord, and she hits up the first pub she spots outside the castle, blowing a bunch of our funds on literally anything but gear and supplies. Not exactly hero material.

“Kyon, get your butt over here! This bubbly’s boozy in a good way! Grab some before it’s all gone!”

Haruhi was waving a tankard around, yelling my name. Fine, you talked me into it. She’s the hero we got. There was no menu option to mutiny, so this lowly warrior can’t exactly ditch the party. Dunno where I’d even go on my own.

I headed for the hero’s table.



How long had we been there? With no clocks in sight it was hard to tell, but the party was still going strong.



Haruhi had really taken to that booze. Each time she drained her tankard, she'd get even faster as she sang off-key, shoulders locked with a dude from the next table over.

Next to them, Nagato was silently, placidly working her way through the endless stream of unnamed dishes. This pub seemed to have an infinite supply of food, but the capacity of Nagato's stomach might be even more infinite. Where was she even putting it all?

I heard someone pluck a string. Koizumi had moved his chair to the wall, and was running his fingers across his lute, surrounded by girls from all around town. They stared at him like the purest maidens watching Apollo descend from the heavens, and I didn't love that.

Fine. Whatever. I have Asahina—I tried to console myself with that, but she wasn't exactly sticking close by. Where was she?

"Thanks for waiting! Was this what you ordered? Oh, certainly, I'll ask."

Somehow, she'd gotten roped into working as a waitress, and was hurrying from table to table. It had been a mistake to let her try that mug Haruhi had foisted on her. Her cheeks were slightly flushed as she enthusiastically ran between the kitchen and the tables.

"Hey, Koizumi."

I could only eat in silence for so long. I was way past full and decided it was time to call over the ad hoc bard who was still playing his wandering musician act.

The town girls' longing looks followed him as he came over and asked, "What ails you, Warrior Kyon? Are you concerned about our current state of affairs?"

Damn straight I am. Are you not?

"I'll concede that point. The demon lord does need to be defeated as soon as possible. Still, a delay of a day or two shouldn't be too serious."

That's not what I meant. My issue comes way before that.

"Where are we, even?" I asked. "What's with the RPG aesthetic? How'd we get here? Who brought us here?"



Koizumi flashed a smile so white it almost looked bleached.

“I have no clue. I imagine, much like yourself, I simply found myself in the palace. My memories leading up to that point are rather fuzzy—are yours in any better shape?”

They aren’t, which is why I’m worried. What was I even doing before I found myself in a royal audience?

“Perhaps I’m imagining things,” Koizumi admitted, lute in one hand. “But it feels rather like we’re playing a game. Though I couldn’t say if it’s tabletop or online.”

I made a face. He had a point there. None of this felt real. Like we’d been playing a game and then got sucked into it—not that *that* was any more believable.

“Asahina,” I said, calling over the caped waitress.

“Coming!” She tucked the tray under her arm and trotted over. “What’ll it be?”

I wasn’t trying to place an order. Are you a mage or a maid? What role are you even supposed to be playing here? I considered asking, but...

“What’s going on here?” I said, picking up my sword. “Haruhi’s a hero? And we gotta take down a demon lord? How’d we even get here?”

“Huh?” Asahina blinked adorably. “Isn’t this a theme park attraction?”

First I’d heard of it.

“Um. I feel like we all went to an amusement park together and went inside a building there... We were supposed to go on an adventure where we’d become someone else!”

I turned to Koizumi for advice, but he was just tilting his head, hand on his chin.

“This is a bit real for that. Hard to believe the castle and this pub are fake, and the patrons are just extras. And I have no such memories.”

Neither did I. Neither playing a game nor visiting an amusement park.

“Really?” Asahina raised a dainty hand to her chin. “Another part of me feels like I was always a mage. Hmm. That’s odd. The SOS Brigade...Suzumiya’s a hero, Kyon’s a warrior...wait...”

I sighed. Any world so desperate they had to make Haruhi their hero was clearly sorely lacking in human resources. They could hit up any temp work agency and easily find more qualified candidates.

“Do you have any spells, Asahina?” I asked, curious.

“I do!” she said with confidence. “Should I demonstrate? This is a spell to make your ears bigger!”

She demonstrated.

“And this spell lets me pass a cigarette through a hundred-yen coin! Like! So!”

I was starting to mist up. Asahina, please. These aren’t spells! I mean, this *is* called magic. Words are hard.

“Huh, this one’s not working. I could do it when I was practicing, though! Let me try again.”

Please, no more. I’ve had my fill.

As I clutched my temples, another table called for her, and Asahina abandoned her attempt at sleight of hand to go take their order. She tripped on her robes again.

“Eep!”

It was clearly time to summon the ultimate weapon.

“Nagato.”

Our diminutive thief had been soundlessly stuffing her cheeks, and at my summons she rose to her feet and came over.

Before I could say anything...

“Simulation,” she said, eyes on the half-eaten food in front of me.

Really? This was clearly more an RPG than anything else.

“.....”

Nagato appeared to be searching for the right wording, and eventually intoned, “The specifics also elude me. The most likely explanation: This is a simulated space.”

“You mean,” Koizumi interjected, “We’ve been plucked from reality, by unknown means and unknown actors, and flung into a subspace cut off from the real world?”

Nagato nodded, but her eyes never left my plate. I pulled a chair over and had her sit, then pushed the plate her way.

“So we don’t know who or how. Does anyone?”

“Unclear.”

Her reply made it sound like that didn’t really matter, and she was already going to town on my leftovers. Only after she’d cleaned the plate did she speak up again.

“I sense there are end conditions.”

Looked like she was throwing me a bone. She also gave it another moment of thought and added, “There should be a trigger to restore our original parameters.”

I didn’t have to ask what. We had our roles, and a mission to carry out. Namely...

“Defeat the demon lord,” Koizumi said, speaking for me.

He followed this with an elegant strum of his lute strings.

So I guess we’ve gotta take out this demon lord. That was one problem down. We at least had a clear goal. Time to focus on the how.

“That’s all well and good, but...”

I turned a baleful gaze in Haruhi’s direction. Therein lay our biggest problem. I hardly need to elaborate—basically, *all* our problems came from the SOS Brigade’s troublemaking chief.

“We’re running outta food! Three rounds for the new arrivals, on the double!”



This soiree was now on its third day. All we'd done in the meantime was move from the inn to the pub and back again. We hadn't fought any monsters to grind levels, hadn't hunted down any useful items, and had no idea where the demon lord's castle actually was.

Instead of playing the hero, Haruhi was trying her best to become a partying high roller. Asahina had reverted to full-time maid like it was her destiny. Koizumi was steadily getting better at playing the lute and bringing his gallery of fair maidens to tears. And Nagato seemed to be training for an eating contest.

I was starting to wonder if maybe we weren't actually the hero's party but the party of an imposter. There was a decent chance somewhere out there was a righteous group that genuinely cared about the state of the world, and we were just a bunch of scoundrels claiming to be them. I started worrying that the king would realize his error and a bunch of guards would kick in the doors to arrest us. I flinched every time someone new came in. That must be why my stomach hurt (I wasn't overeating!) The creak of the door (the source of my ulcers!) came again. Once more, I was relieved by the lack of guards.

Instead, it was a man—he was old, but I wasn't quite sure how old. He had white hair, and equally white eyebrows, topping a face covered in wrinkles—reminding me of a hermit or a mystic. This guy looked like he was about to teach us about the Force. And for some reason, his piercing gaze was locked on me.

“.....You're still *here*?” he asked, appalled.

Not like I can do anything about it.

The old man let out a desiccated wheeze, and headed to the back, where Haruhi reigned.

“Haruhi the Hero!”

“What do you want?”

She'd been presiding over a drunken arm-wrestling tournament and gave him a dubious look. “The entry fee's one gold, winner takes all. Just write your name down over there.”

“You fool!”

The old man was absolutely right.

“I thought you’d be halfway to the demon lord’s castle by now, but you haven’t even left town?! What is the meaning of this?! Haruhi the Hero, destruction stands upon our very doorstep! It is your duty to defeat the demon lord before we are all doomed!”

“Who’s this geezer? He’s a real blowhard.”

“I,” the man began, fully straightening his back despite his apparent age, “am the sage of the forest. It is my role to provide you with vital information and ensure you follow the correct path.”

The din had died away, and his gravelly voice echoed in the silence.

“Ordinarily, I would wait for you to come to me, but since you haven’t budged, I was forced to come to you. Mark my words, Haruhi the Hero—”

“Fine.”

I wasn’t sure what was supposed to be fine, but Haruhi stood up, a smile on her lips.

“I figured someone was bound to show up. We were almost out of money anyway. Time for a change of scenery!”

So this was a premeditated crime. But what kind of heroic party blows their entire budget on entertainment?

“Unbelievable,” the forest sage said. “Then let us leave this place! Haruhi the Hero and her comrades! I must guide you to the first trial!”

Finally. Shaking my head, I got to my feet. Koizumi was shaking the hands of the heartbroken town girls, and Asahina was accepting a purse from the owner. Apparently she *was* being paid for her work. And Nagato was already waiting for us outside.

“Come on, Kyon.”

Haruhi grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door.

“Awwwright, time to go kick this demon lord’s ass!” she said, turning back. “I’ll loot his treasure room and come back for some more partying!”

The roar of the crowd swept us out the door.

Outside the town walls everything was green. The darker bits were forests, and the lighter bits were grasslands. Extremely basic terrain, like the developers had been stingy with the graphics budget.

“Listen,” said the forest sage, leading the way. “First you must find a cave at the heart of yonder forest. It is not a deep cave; you will not lose your way. There is a single treasure chest within, containing a key to the gates of the demon lord’s castle.”

So it’s a fetch quest.

“Roger that,” Haruhi said, nodding. “Come on, let’s get this over with. Move out!”

She ran off, forcing us to give chase. We couldn’t exactly let the hero charge in alone.

I think I heard the sage yelling, “Wait!” and “I’m not done yet!” behind us, but trying to keep up with Haruhi meant we had to leave him in the dust.

We spent a few minutes charging down the one path in the forest and found the cave at the end of it. This was immediately suspicious. Clearly, this was the sort of place where hideous monsters guarded treasure. Anyone would think twice about entering—but not Haruhi. We all charged right on into the cave, but then we were forced to pull up short not five steps inside.

“Yikes.”

The passage was pretty large, and the walls were faintly glowing. In other words, it wasn’t particularly dark, which allowed us to see what we’d much rather not.

“It’s so big!” Asahina gasped.

“True.” Koizumi nodded. “How do we defeat this?”

“.....”

Nagato was merely peering up at it. So was I—the massive bulk before us defied words.

“Um,” Haruhi said, scratching her head. “Is this the first monster? That doesn’t seem right.”

Haruhi might have a screw loose, but her question was right on the money.

Before us stood a dragon. It was ridiculously huge and glaring at us something fierce. Clearly, the boss of this cave and the guardian of the aforementioned treasure chest.

While we stood there, frozen in shock, the dragon’s mouth yawned open—We didn’t stand a chance. The dragon’s breath wiped us out.

“I tried to warn you!” the forest sage said, scowling. “You should really listen when people speak! Your levels are not high enough to challenge the guardian dragon! You must reach the key without engaging it!”

We were back at the forest entrance. As for why we were still alive after getting defeated—do I really need to explain what save points are? What other explanation could there possibly be?

“I know,” Haruhi grumbled, cutting him off yet again. “We just need to get the key, right? We’ll do better this time.”

“I’m trying to tell you how—”

“That’s quite enough out of you,” Haruhi said, eyes gleaming. She was hell-bent on getting revenge on this dragon. “I just let my guard down. We were caught by surprise! If we’re ready for it, something like that won’t take us down. We’re gonna kick its ass this time!”

And with that, she ran off once more. We didn’t have much choice besides running after her just like we had before. Personally, I’d rather go the other way, but that wasn’t an option. Really wish someone would fix that.

We burst back into the cave, found ourselves face-to-face with the dragon, which diligently breathed fire at us again, and we wiped a second time.

“I told you to listen...” The forest sage sounded weary, but I was wearier. Asahina had actually collapsed on the ground, nodding in agreement. Even Koizumi’s smile lacked its usual crispness. The only person who wasn’t visibly worn out was Nagato.

“This is infuriating!” Haruhi said, angrily biting her nails. She wasn’t wrong, though.

We’d been wiped out five times. All because Haruhi kept charging in without a plan. Enter the cave, face the dragon, breath attack—same sequence five times in a row, same results every time. If we tried again, we would definitely wipe a sixth time, and I was getting fed up.

“Haruhi, maybe you should actually listen to the old man’s advice. Otherwise we’ll be doing this forever.”

She snorted, but plopped herself down, legs crossed.

Relieved, the sage began, “Then allow me to explain. You need to put the dragon to sleep. That will allow you to slip past it to find the key. To put it to sleep—”

He pulled a crystal ball from his pocket.

“Use this Orb of Sloth! But I cannot just give it to you. At my age, I suffer from the most awful joint pains. The best treatment for that is an herb growing on the western plains called the Gout Gagger! Fetch that for me, and I shall bestow this orb—”

The forest sage broke off because Haruhi leaped to her feet, drew her sword, and pointed it at his throat.

“Let’s skip the preamble,” she said, smiling like a mean mugger. “We can fetch your herb later. Give us the orb now, okay? We’re not your errand boys. We’re the hero and her brave compatriots. Our mission is to save the world, and don’t have time to be picky about how we do it.”

The old man’s jaw was hanging open, so Haruhi dropped her voice to a growl.

“One wrong move and things are going to get *messy*. I do believe in respecting the elderly—so don’t make me do something I’ll regret.”

The sage’s lips kept flapping. He probably didn’t think the world should be saved by a hero who was willing to steal a quest item.

“C’mon, Yuki. Snatch it from him.”

She *was* our thief. But you didn’t exactly need class skills to take an orb from



an old man at knifepoint.

“.....”

Nagato walked over to him—not in any rush—and simply took it from his hand. She returned to her original position and resumed her silent statue routine.

“Between the end of the world and your rheumatism, I’m afraid my priorities are crystal clear. No hard feelings, yeah?” Haruhi sheathed her sword with a beautiful smile. “I mean, if the world ends, you can’t even grumble about back pain! You’re nothing without your life! Don’t worry, I won’t forget the herbs and stuff.”

She threw a hand up to the sky, as if commanding heaven and earth.

“Let’s do this, Kyon! Time to knock this dragon out then beat the tar out of it, gang!”

Was *that* the goal?

No matter how we attacked it, the dragon was entirely unfazed, but we also didn’t accidentally wake it up or anything, so let’s call it a win.

After successfully obtaining the Demon Castle gate key, we went back out and found the forest sage still there, having learned nothing from his last encounter with our party. His brow was notably more furrowed.

“This is what we needed, right? So where’s this dude who wants to rule the world for no good reason? Spill the beans!”

“Ehrm...,” the sage said, licking his lips uncomfortably. “The key alone will not get you to the demon lord. At the depths of his castle, beyond a labyrinth, stands the Door of Delusions...”

“And where’s *that* key?” Haruhi said.

Growing steadily grimmer, the sage admitted, “In a dungeon beneath an abandoned town to the north of here. An underground temple wherein the demon lord’s loyal minion, the vile wizard, worships the god of darkness. He bears the Key of Delusions. But that land is under the sway of the god of darkness, and one does not simply walk in. To reach the dungeon, you need to

bathe in the light of the Orb of Consecration.”

“Huh,” Haruhi said as her smile grew steadily wider.

“.....I have the Orb of Consecration with me, but...well, you know I’m getting on in years... My eyes have been bothering me quite a lot. My condition can be cured by an herb found in the lands to the far west...” He let out a dreary sigh. “.....the Eyestrain Eliminator. I would be happy to exchange the orb for some, if you’re willing.....?”

He was clearly prepared to be mugged again, but Haruhi’s hand left the hilt of her blade.

“Are you really working for the good guys?” she asked, looking him over. “This seems pretty fishy. I’ve met old men before, but none of them worked up this phony-sounding rasp you’ve got! I’m not buying the act. Are you sure you aren’t the last boss in disguise?”

“Wh-whatever do you mean?!” the sage blustered.

“I bet the real sage is long since dead,” Haruhi said, twisting her lips. “You’re acting all nice and telling us about keys and orbs and whatnot, but you’re actually the demon lord, aren’t you? And this is how you plan to free the real boss you’ve been working for all along! Just as we think we’ve defeated the demon lord and are free to go home, a voice from nowhere will be all like, ‘I must thank thee, heroes! You have freed me from the shackles that once bound me! Well done!’ and then the real boss will appear with a crack of thunder!”

The sage looked to us for help. All we could do was shrug. If Haruhi’s idea was remotely accurate, this script *sucked*.

“That is not the case, I assure you...” The old man’s argument was rather feeble. “Hmm, it shouldn’t be. Perhaps it *was*, but...no, no, it is no longer. I’m sure of it. The demon lord is the only challenge, nothing beyond that. I am merely a kindly forest sage.”

Eager to prove his innocence, he pulled a crystal ball out of his pocket.

“I can endure my eyestrain. It is but a trifle compared to the fate of the world. Here, the Orb of Consecration. Help yourself to it, Haruhi the Hero. And...”

He pulled out yet another orb.

“This is the Orb of Banishment. It will momentarily halt the demon lord’s actions. I no longer care about the legendary Pan-Affliction Preventative that grows down south. For the sake of the world, I shall swallow my complaints.”

“Thanks,” Haruhi said, nodding but making no attempt to take the orbs. “But we don’t need your balls. Or these pain-in-the-ass keys. I only need to know one thing.”

The sage was gaping at her, but her eyes were gleaming.

“Where’s the demon lord’s castle? Give us the location, and we’ll work out the rest ourselves. I’m done wasting time. We just need to take him out, right? We’ll make it happen, so just point us in the right direction. Come on, spit it out.”

“But...,” he stammered, flabbergasted. “How? Even if you reach the castle, without—”

“Whatever,” Haruhi said before she flashed an impish smile at us. She looked from me to Koizumi, to Nagato, and finally Asahina. “I’ve got this incredible party. Why would I need to resort to all these cheap tricks? We’ll save the world as many times as you like. I bet we’ll make it look easy.”

She let out a laugh that was as bright as it was brainless.

“Why? Because I believe in us.”

So there you have it.

Here we were. Skipping a lot of places we should have gone, obtaining no necessary supplies, doing no grinding in the beginner area. We were making a beeline for the final stage.

The demon lord’s castle loomed over us, framed by storm clouds. Very intimidating. The whole place reeked of evil. Just the sight of it was mentally straining, sending ripples of fear running through me. I instinctively wanted to stay away. Not another step closer.

“What now, Haruhi?” I asked.

Our hero was looking up at it like a tourist at the foot of Mount Fuji.

“We skipped all the other fighting, so this’ll play out just like the dragon. A guaranteed wipeout. That isn’t going to change no matter how many runs we take at it.”

“I’m afraid I must agree,” Koizumi said, taking my side for once. Cradling his lute despite it having been no use since we left the pub. “This isn’t a foe we can challenge with a frontal assault. After all...he is the demon lord. The castle itself will be full of fearsome monsters and traps. Would we even make it to the throne room?”

“Unlikely,” Haruhi said, her smile proving she wasn’t the least bit concerned.

“.....”

Nagato said nothing. She just stood there unobtrusively, siding with neither the yeas nor the nays, like a winter flower blooming in our brigade.

“No worries!” Haruhi said, confidentially pulling our caped and shivering upperclassman closer. “Mikuru will handle it!”

“I will?!” Asahina yelped, bending backward.

Haruhi got an arm round her shoulder, enunciating like she was teaching a parakeet to speak.

“Listen, you’re a *mage*. And you’re in the hero’s party, so you’ve gotta have stronger spells than anyone else in the world. I know for a fact you can do this. Your untapped potential should be top-tier. We only need to awaken it! Come, Mikuru, unleash the power hidden within you! Blast this dingy castle with something super-duper powerful.”

“B-but...”

Asahina dithered, clutching her robes, looking from the castle to Haruhi and back again.

“I don’t really know many spells...the best I can do is make your ears bigger!”

“Have faith in yourself.”

At the right time and place, that was a very encouraging phrase, but Haruhi had never once considered either of those things. It was arguably her most defining feature.

“You can do it, Mikuru. I chose you, so it has to be true. You have everything. You’re adorable, you’re nice, you’re a little clumsy—the perfect mage.” She pointed at the castle dramatically. “And now is the time to demonstrate the ultimate Mikuru magic! Are you ready?! Go, Mikuru! Cast a spell, any spell.”

“O-okay.....!”

Asahina screwed her eyes shut and began muttering an incantation. Haruhi watched over her like a shepherd minding a newborn goat. I watched Asahina like I always do. I didn’t look at Koizumi, so I couldn’t be sure how he was taking this, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Nagato’s impassive stare break—her eyes widening.

Before I could ask why—

Asahina unleashed a super-duper powerful spell.

“Meteor Buster and Devil Quake. Both spells activated simultaneously,” Koizumi elaborated. “We heard rumors about both at the pub—legendary spells from myths. To obtain either requires long-lost ancient knowledge and god-class magic points, but Asahina seems to have effortlessly cleared both hurdles.”





Talk about deus ex machina. Forget game balance. Was it really necessary to one-shot everything?

“Why not?” Haruhi said, looking thoroughly pleased. She was already celebrating our victory. “That’s our Mikuru! I knew you could do... Well, I’ll admit you surpassed my expectations, but in a good way!”

This lavish praise did seem to help; Asahina looked ready to swoon at the sight of her handiwork.

“Aughhh...eeeeek...”

We were on the top of a hill. The spot where we were standing was no more, since everything within a twenty-mile radius, including the demon lord’s castle, no longer existed. There was only a massive yawning crater where it had been.

Asahina’s secret spell was legitimately terrifying. It would have reduced us to our component atoms, but Nagato had bailed us out. Just before several thousand meteors and localized earthquakes struck the castle, she moved like lightning, gathering us up in her slender arms and running off at near warp speed, and deposited us all on this hilltop. Good thing thieves are great at escaping. Probably not the most vital thought right now.

“.....”

Nagato wasn’t even out of breath. She just watched the smoke and flames belching from the rectangular pit with no discernible emotion.

And so, the demon lord was eliminated along with his castle. All’s well that end’s well... Wait, aren’t we forgetting something?

“Time we head home!” Haruhi declared, thoroughly satisfied, and not inclined to bask in the afterglow. “Shame about the treasure, but no use crying over obliterated milk. Defeating the demon lord saved the world; I’m sure the king will be overjoyed. That means a triumphant return for us! Let’s start planning the victory party.”

That generally wasn’t something the hero planned herself. More like something that would normally be waiting for you, and in the castle instead of the pub— Hang on; that’s not where “home” was. We defeated the demon lord

—shouldn't the game be over? If this was a genuine RPG, the credits would be rolling by now. In our case, we should've been sent back to our own world.

"Mission incomplete," Nagato whispered, looking at me. When I blinked at her in confusion, she added, "We appear to have been penalized."

That made even less sense. I stood there like a plank of wood—and the scenery around us began to transform. The forests and mountains collapsed, and the night sky expanded alarmingly. The night sky? Could it even be called that anymore? Though none of them twinkled at us, stars surrounded us in every direction, 360 degrees.

"....."

Nagato and Koizumi and Asahina and I were all dead silent.

I was forced to say it again—the same thing I'd said when I figured out I was in a fantasy world.

"What the hell?"

We had suddenly found ourselves—this phrase was becoming *real* tired, *real* fast, but there wasn't a better way to describe what was happening—in outer space. I found myself holding some sort of flight stick, which prompted me to examine my surroundings. I was in the cockpit of a spaceship, retro futuristic instruments all around me. My eyes settled on Haruhi, Nagato, and Asahina, all bedecked in costumes I found rather hard to describe. They sure showed a lot of skin. And they were striking rather audacious poses to boot.

"Oh my," Koizumi said, a suggestive smile on his lips. He'd gone from bard to spaceship pilot. "It appears we're now assigned to a space patrol unit. I suppose this is Stage Two?"

Don't ask me. Was this the penalty for not completing the mission? What were we supposed to do this time?

"Do you copy, Ranging Galactic Observation Patrol, Haruhi Squad?"

A stern male voice emitted from the console before us. It sounded a lot like that king, and I couldn't see this ending well.

"This is the emperor of the Fifth Galactic Separatist Empire. Nefarious space

pirates have kidnapped our prince and princess. They seek the destruction of the universe! Please, put a stop to their vile schemes and rescue my children!”

“You got it,” Haruhi said immediately. “Trounce some space pirates? We’ll do that for free! Patrolling space is our job! Your kids don’t need to worry about a thing. We’ll make sure to save them this time!”

Oh, *that’s* what we forgot. That’s why there was a round two. When I hung my head, Haruhi slapped my shoulders. Her smile brighter than any star around us.

“Come, Kyon! Let’s chase these no-good pirates to the end of the universe!”

Fair enough. Whether our course took us to the ends of the universe or a ring world, there was no disobeying the captain’s orders. Frankly, it didn’t seem like this would ever end unless we rescued these abduction-prone royal children.

The rule of three wouldn’t apply here, right? We weren’t gonna wind up in a gunslinging western or whatever later, right? Please say we won’t.

“Engines, full power!” Haruhi bellowed.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed the flight stick all the way forward.

I prayed the next sudden scene shift would leave me back in the clubroom with a cup of tea.







I'll be honest: I had no idea what was going on.

First the SOS Brigade suddenly found itself in a medieval European world, and some people might think this would count as an *isekai*, but it felt more like a budget RPG. Haruhi the Hero wasn't one to follow designated paths, so she dragged us (her party) around at level one, skipping all the fetch quests that were meant to progress the story, and finally blew away the prince and princess we'd been hired to rescue along with the demon lord and his entire castle. As a result, our mission was deemed an abject failure, and as punishment we were flung into a new world—this one set in outer space. The change in setting was so dramatic it made my head spin.

And like always, I found myself wondering...

What was the point of all this?

What even *was* this world? Where were we, exactly?

Koizumi, always speculating, thought it might be some sort of game. Nagato, a fount of knowledge, suggested, "This is most likely a simulated space." Asahina unsurprisingly didn't seem particularly bothered by it and had convinced herself this was "a theme park attraction." To my mind, Nagato's idea felt the most on the money.

If *someone* had thrown us in to a half-assed world just to run through some simulation, then I was ready to nail them with an uppercut after getting a good a running start. At least clearing this mission might finally rectify things and send us back to normal life. Frankly, that was the only thing we could rely on at the moment.

Much like the RPG, this new world had mission parameters set in stone—and they again involved rescuing a kidnapped prince and princess. In other words, the only thing that had changed was the set dressing, exchanging medieval Europe for outer space, and the demon lord for space pirates. Likewise, we'd gone from being the legendary hero, warrior, bard, etc., to something more futuristic. Now we were members of the Ranging Galactic Observation Patrol, Haruhi Squad, an innately dubious title, but in accordance with our newfound jobs, we were crewing a spaceship.

I was sitting in the pilot's seat with a rod in front of me that I could only assume was a flight stick.

The screen I was looking at was filled with stars that didn't twinkle, making it crystal clear that I was very much in outer space. I'd dreamed about space odysseys as a little kid, but I never realized how easily dreams could come true.

Being sent to space with zero prep felt like an insult to the would-be astronauts who poured their blood, sweat, and tears into training.

That said, I had no clue if this was really outer space, and odds were high it was a dream by a different definition of the word, so I didn't exactly gaze out at the stars with a sparkle in my eye. It wasn't like I'd lost touch with my inner child or anything. I had simply accepted my fate, which made it hard to get overly excited.

"Kyon," Haruhi said, smiling like a summer sun that banished the shadows. She slapped me on the back. "Let's wipe out these space pirates and swipe their hostages! Full speed ahead! Mach speed!"

Looking back, it was impossible to avoid seeing the spaceship's bridge (or CIC?) This wasn't especially large by spaceship standards; the control room itself was barely bigger than our clubroom. Haruhi was seated at the back, a level higher than I was, and there was a plate on the seat proclaiming her the captain.

She seemed to be having the time of her life, and her outfit was extremely colorful—with a shocking amount of skin on display. Let your eyes wander for even a second and you'd get a full reminder of what a good figure she had. Did she really not give that getup a second thought?

It was sort of a throwback to old-school sci-fi from overseas.

"Make a beeline to the space pirate den," Haruhi said. "The rest'll be easy! Just gotta kick in the boss's door—"

She pulled a ray gun from the holster at her hip. It looked more like a toy than anything.

"—and pop off a few rounds with these bad boys. Then we grab all the loot they've got stashed and return it to the original owners! I bet they'll be

chuffed.”

Waving that ray gun around was fine and dandy as long as she didn’t accidentally pull the trigger. I don’t have the reflexes to dodge beams traveling at light speed.

“Don’t worry, I only shoot pirates.”

She jammed the gun back in her holster.

“Point is, Kyon, we’ve gotta find this lair! Is this ship even moving? The view hasn’t changed.”

Well, if the inexplicably analog speedometer was to be believed, we were traveling at maximum velocity. The unchanging view drives home how big space really is.

“That aside,” I said, shaking my head, “which way am I even supposed to be going? Where is this pirates’ lair?”

“Beats me!” Haruhi said. “Yuki, do you know?”

Suddenly in the line of fire, Nagato wordlessly tilted her head. She was seated to one side of the bridge, apparently in charge of the radar.

“.....”

Wearing a costume identical to Haruhi’s, Nagato began poking buttons on her console, choosing her words carefully.

“Beginning omnidirectional scan for hostiles. Gathering intel.”

“Make it snappy, please. I wanna wrap this job up and do some planet-side sightseeing!” Haruhi leaned back in the captain’s seat, then turned to face the opposite side of the craft. “Mikuru, can I get some tea?”

“Oh, of course.”

Asahina—wearing the same absurd getup—hopped to her feet and vanished through the automated doors to the rear, only to come back almost immediately with a tray bearing enough cups for all of us. I’d sort of expected it to come in tubes, but perhaps because this ship had artificial gravity, it was just normal teacups. I’d sure like to know how *that* worked.

“Here’s your tea. Um, the pack said it was green tea from the planet Dongara. Heh-heh... I took a sip, and it’s such an interesting flavor!”

She was delightedly passing out the cups, but Asahina was supposed to be our comms officer. Then again, tea officer seemed like a better fit and I found it comforting, so I let it be.

“Tea is always a delight,” Koizumi said, interrupting our moment of elegance. “But before we head to our destination, we should ascertain our current location. Outer space is rather vast.”

He was seated right next to me, but I preferred not to look his way. For the simple reason that he was wearing the same pilot suit I was, and seeing him in it raised grave concerns about why I was letting myself be seen in the outfit.





Setting down his mug—identical to the one in the Brigade clubroom—Koizumi gestured to the copilot's console.

“I messed around with the knobs and discovered a star map. According to it, we are in the outer reaches of an interstellar nation known as the Fifth Galactic Separatist Empire.”

The emperor with a suspiciously familiar voice had dropped that name as well.

“Huh,” Haruhi said, noisily sipping tea. “And the pirates’ den?”

“That, I don’t know,” Koizumi said, tapping a screen with one hand, and putting a number of windows up on the main monitor. “There are so many space nations, and very little uncharted territory. I narrowed it down to regions capable of sustaining systemic piracy—the Sargasso Space, for instance—but so far, I’ve yet to discover anything.”

He seemed to be enjoying himself. I dunno how he was managing that, but it was hardly the time to be elegantly sipping tea. When was this waking dream/simulated game gonna end?

“Naturally, it will draw to a close once we finish the task at hand,” Koizumi said, turning his smile my way. “First, let us study the history of this galaxy. The emperor of this Fifth Galactic Separatist Empire requested our aid. As the number implies, there are other space empires out there.”

Koizumi swiped with his fingers, and the star map on-screen shifted, highlighting regions in different colors.

“Originally, a single empire controlled all this territory. After several breakups and independence movements, it settled into what we have now. Data indicates the Fifth Galactic Separatist Empire was established relatively recently. We have the First Galactic Conquest Empire, the Rightful Galactic Empire Government in Exile, the Galactic Imperial Alliance, the Holy Galactic Empire, the True Galactic Empire, the True Galactic Empire Frontier, the Galactic Empire Independent Union, and—”

“Enough,” I interrupted. “I get that there are galactic empires everywhere. We need the pirates.”

“That’s the thing. Based on the files on this ship’s computer, they may not be pirates at all.”

“Huh,” Haruhi said, not the least bit interested. “How’s that work?”

“Well, many of these nations insist they are the one true and proper galactic empire, and are constantly engaged in border disputes. The computer suggests these so-called pirates could actually be the agents of foreign militaries carrying out clandestine missions.”

“Hmm,” Haruhi said. It was unclear if she followed this explanation, but she put her empty cup down. “So these other nations have the pirates’ backs. And this idiot prince and princess got themselves captured by another country, not actual pirates?”

“It is a possibility. In which case, no amount of caution is too much.”

Koizumi spread his hands.

“After all, we’re merely the Galactic Patrol. We’re in no position to comment on matters of international diplomacy. Rounding up pirates is part of our job, but territorial conflicts fall well outside our jurisdiction.”

Those regulations made sense.

I sighed.

“So what *should* we be doing? Just drifting through space?”

“Obviously, we fight the pirates! That’s the job we’ve been hired to do!” Haruhi beamed. “Who cares if they’re actually military ships in disguise? If they’re acting like pirates, they might as well be pirates! Let’s just board their ship and get out quick. If we get the prince and princess back safe and sound, that king won’t bug us.”

An empire with a king? Not an emperor?

“That’s all well and good,” I said, “But that brings us back to the question of where we’re going. We still have no leads on where the pirates even are.”

“True...”

Haruhi considered this momentarily. Then a light bulb went on. She drew her

ray gun, turned the knob on the side of it, and took aim at the screen.

“Here,” she said.

Using her ray gun like a laser pointer, she indicated a section of the star map.

“A hunch is good enough!” she said, circling the area. “I feel like this galaxy isn’t as big as it looks. If we just keep flying, we’ll probably run into them. Nab any suspicious ships we see, give them the third degree, and make ’em cough up whatever information they have.”

Would it be that easy?

“It may very well be,” Koizumi said, punching Haruhi’s coordinates into his console. He offered me a smile. “I doubt this scenario is intended to be that difficult. We’re expected to clear it, after all. Odds are, if we do nothing, they’ll come to us eventually. As they did last time.”

“True.” I nodded reluctantly and put my hands back on the flight stick.

After doing nothing but living it up in the fantasy world, the man we were supposed to track down came to us. We’d skipped right past a bunch of stuff we were meant to do, and ultimately, all we did was blow up the demon lord’s castle. The end credits basically started rolling right after the opening finished. Circumventing the final boss battle had been a mistake—and one we’d better not repeat. We’d have to be careful and make sure we ended up face-to-face with the boss himself at the very least.

“Kyon, warp speed! *Schismatrix*, engines at max!”

Haruhi appeared to have given the spaceship a name. For now, I obeyed her orders.

After all, Haruhi’s hunches were prophetically accurate and, like it or not, if we headed where she pointed, we’d likely bump into something. She’d proven this power so many times I’d remember it even in the next life.

So I moved the flight stick, prepping for warp speed. Somehow I knew the procedures already. Kind of like how you can figure out how to play a lot of games without reading the manual, I guess?

“*Schismatrix*, warp speed,” I echoed begrudgingly, and the ship with a

needlessly cyberpunk name broke the light speed barrier.

Oof. The view on-screen was giving me motion sickness. It was a whole spiral of spinning lights, like that freakish logo on the SOS Brigade site. I guess it *was* a warp. I was actually impressed by how much it looked like the anime I'd seen as a kid.

"More tea?" Asahina asked, carrying a pot around with a smile.

She was acting so normal it made the futuristic spaceship going warp speed seem like it was something that happened every day, but that couldn't be true. Then again, having her act just like she did in the clubroom made me feel a lot better, so I happily let her fill my cup.

What did this journey have in store for us?

Haruhi seemed eager for a ray-gun fight, Nagato was silently sitting there radiating radar beams from her body, Koizumi was clearly treating this like a big game, and Asahina seemed blissfully unaware of what was going on. And I—or the SOS crew—was bound for the final frontier, where we'd likely find the pirates' den.

About an hour later...

I didn't really think we'd stumble across the pirate lair *that* easily.

Yanking the flight stick around, I said, "So now what?"

"The situation speaks for itself." Koizumi shrugged. "We've been captured by some sort of tractor beam. There is no escape."

In accordance with Captain Haruhi's orders, the good ship *Schismatrix* had warped itself right across the galaxy.

And the moment it emerged, the screen filled with stars—and the massive fleet hidden in this star sector.

I couldn't even begin to count the number of ships. Pointy spaceships, big and small, all mixed together in row after row.

Running into them right after returning to normal space caught me by surprise. But the mystery fleet must have been equally shocked. A bunch of ships got jammed up like a pileup on the freeway, and there was a brief

moment of chaos, but they quickly recovered. The bow of one of the ships pointed toward us and shot an oddly colored beam at our ship. The moment they did, *Schismatrix* was trapped and the consoles started emitting warning sounds. They still were.

“Turn those off,” Haruhi said, chomping on some chocolate bar-style space rations. “The noise is driving me nuts. And call up the man in charge of the other fleet! Who are these people? They don’t really seem piratey.”

If these were our pirates, that was bad news. One dinky patrol vessel against ten thousand warships. How were we supposed to win? Would Asahina’s insane spell work in a vacuum?

As the alarms that sounded like electronic music kept beeping, our comms officer stopped doubling as a tea server, sat down at her console, and started tapping the touch panel.

“Um. What do I do?” Asahina stammered.

Right, I guess she wasn’t a mage anymore.

“This alarm indicates they have a lock on us,” Koizumi drawled. “I expect they’ll hail us soon—they seemed rather bewildered by our arrival.”

Nagato finally stopped the warning message that sounded like a gas leak alarm. All she actually did was brush the screen in front of her, but she must have reached an understanding with our spaceship; the machines obediently went quiet.

At roughly the same time, a suspiciously familiar-looking old man appeared on the main monitor. We could only see his upper half, but that was enough to tell he was in military uniform.

“We must protest!” he said, scowling at us. “That could nearly have been a serious collision! If your warp-out point had overlapped with one of our ships, the explosion would have been colossal!”

No wonder he looked familiar—he was the spitting image of the fishy old-timer who’d called himself the forest sage.

“What business does a Ranging Galactic Observation vessel have here? There

are no viable planets in this region of space!”

Mm. He seems weirdly flustered. Clearly, we weren’t welcome here, but he also seemed like he was up to no good.

Haruhi hadn’t said anything because her mouth was full of what looked like chocolate. Once she swallowed, she said, “Identify yourself. Giving your name before asking a question is basic manners!”

Her open-mouthed grin was distinctive.

“You already know we’re patrolling for the Ranging whatsit. Who are you?”

“We are the New Orthodox Galactic Empire Third Mobile Space Fleet, and I am the fleet commander—”

She didn’t bother letting him finish.

“It’s our turn to ask the questions. What are you doing here? With all these ships.”

Seemingly unnerved by her questions, the fleet commander got very shift.

“.....Military exercises. Now if you’re satisfied, be on your way.”

If I picked up on it, Haruhi definitely did. And just like I expected...

“Very fishy,” she said. “If this is a mock battle, why not do it in the open? This guy’s acting funny. Koizumi, where are we?”

Koizumi looked up from his instruments.

“Near the border between the Fifth Galactic Separatist Empire and the New Orthodox Galactic Empire. Currently in the latter’s territory. This is off the standard shipping routes, which *is* ideal for exercises, but...”

No one doubled as a narrator better than this pretty boy.

“The scale is far too large. Judging from their trajectory, they’re covertly heading toward the holdings of our client, the Fifth Separatist Empire. I cross-checked the data on the ship computer but was unable to verify any military exercises scheduled during this time period. At the very least, the Ranging Galactic Observers are unaware of any.”

“Aha!” Haruhi said, her unparalleled intuition getting her to the explanation.



“They’re not practicing for war; they’re getting ready for the real thing! It’s a sneak attack!”

The elderly commander quivered guiltily.

“What a bald accusation! Even if that were the case, the Ranging Galactic Observation Patrol has no right to interfere in a civil war!”

“Maybe not,” Haruhi said. “But we’ve seen what we’ve seen. It wouldn’t be strange if we *accidentally* let your targets know you’re about to launch an offensive. My lips are feeling very loose right now.”

“O-oh dear... No, wait, wait...”

The fleet commander was in a bit of tizzy.

Clearly, we’d warped right into the middle of a fleet staging for a sneak attack. That just seemed like a headache for everyone involved.

“Fine,” Haruhi said, grinning like a cat. It wasn’t clear *what* was fine. “We’re only here for the space pirates, and while I do think everyone would be better off *without* these silly wars, I’ll let it go this time.”

The elderly commander looked profoundly relieved. But...

“On one condition.”

Haruhi leaned forward in the captain’s chair.

“Will you tell us where the pirates’ lair is? The ones we’re after.”

“Pirates, you say? Hmm, very well. We’ll happily share our intel.”

He was very friendly now. Extremely happy to be rid of us.

“Still, there’s all manner of pirates out there! Did they attack a merchant vessel? The biggest power in these parts would be Captain Beyond’s High Ground Pirates.”

“Um...more like kidnapping? Koizumi, what was it again?”

“Their identities are unknown,” he said, giving the commander a look of amusement. “But the pirates kidnapped the Fifth Separatist Empire’s prince and princess.”

“Oh, right!” Haruhi said, then pointed at the screen. “Those pirates. Any clue where we can find them?”

“Urk.....”

The commander had visibly flinched. He was incredibly bad at hiding his emotions for someone of his rank.

“First I’ve heard of it! I wouldn’t know.”

“That’s a lie if I ever heard one.”

If he couldn’t even convince me, he’d never convince Haruhi.

“It’s written all over your face! Why did you even bother playing dumb?”

Her smile *seemed* innocent, but I could tell it was a sham. Let me reiterate that her intuition was keen enough to put most katanas to shame.

“Aha, I see what’s going on!” she said with triumphant certainty. “*You’re* the kidnappers! You disguised a military vessel as a pirate ship! Why would you kidnap the royalty of another country? Oh, I get it. To justify your war! You’re gonna use them as *casus belli* to attack the Fifth Whatchamacallit Empire. You’ll claim they defected to you, rebelling against their parents!”

Her eyes latched onto this poor old man, refusing to let him go.

“When I heard how many *Galactic Empires* there were, I started wondering. ‘Space pirates’ is such a vague term.”

“Hngh...”

The commander was really sweating now. Guess we had him dead to rights.

“What a coincidence! The fleet we just happened to bump into was our target all along!”

She was acting like this was a stroke of luck, but if it actually was pure chance, *that* would be genuinely stupefying.

“Saved us a lot of trouble,” Haruhi said, clearly not finding it particularly noteworthy. “Anyway, that makes things easy. Hand over the prince and princess. We’ve gotta bring them back to their parents!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

This whole time, the old fleet commander looked like a toad sweating bullets, but now he stood with his back straight.

“If you’ve figured this much out, you leave us with no choice. We cannot let you go, much less free the royal children. We’ll need you to sit quietly until our operation is complete!”

With that criminal admission, the commander faded from our screen.

Uh-oh. He wasn’t planning on blowing up our ship to silence us, was he? Haruhi, maybe you should reconsider blurting out every little thing that crosses your mind. This might have been one of those *pretend you haven’t worked it out* moments. While I was worrying about our future prospects...

“Erp?”

The *Schismatrix* began to move. Not under my control, either. All on its own. Why?

“The tractor beam. They’re pulling us into the warship. Presumably to capture us,” Koizumi drawled.

He was right; our ship was being pulled toward the massive warship. A hatch was opening in the side of it.

“That’s the flagship,” he elaborated. “I imagine they’ll keep us locked up until the war is over.”

*Managed to work that one out myself, thanks.* Anything we can do about it?

“I’d say this is an opportunity,” Koizumi offered, rubbing his lips with one finger. “Our mission is to recover the kidnapped children. They’re likely held somewhere in this fleet, and this may give us a chance to reach them. Only one problem—”

Here, he turned to Nagato.

“Which ship are the prince and princess on? I imagine a little prodding will tell us that.”

“.....”

Nagato’s lips stayed sealed, her eyes on the console before her. She was

currently our ship's radar expert, but Nagato herself was likely more efficient than the ship's instruments. She may have been a thief in the fantasy world, but space was her element. It was worth getting our hopes up.

Unable to suppress her own baseless expectations, Haruhi began practicing her ray-gun draw.

"I figured we'd have to flit from star system to star system gathering intel, but this was real quick! Ideal, really. Mm, my plan's perfect!"

Even I could tell what the plan was. Haruhi was raring for a shoot-out, and if she threw herself into one, that automatically forced me into it as well.

Maybe we should have obediently done all the busywork quests designed to raise our levels until we really were ready to tackle the demon lord's castle.

Leaning back in my seat, I sighed up at the imposing bulk of the flagship.

"I feel like Pinocchio."

And thus, the *Schismatrix* got pulled inside the enemy vessel. The epitome of flying by the seat of our pants. All the worse because we'd got it in one. I bet there was lots of foreshadowing we were supposed to have found here and there around the galaxy, but Haruhi was never one for patience and had once again skipped ahead. Better than fighting the final boss at level one, at least.

Now then, I imagine you already know, but this is the gist of Haruhi's plan.

"We've successfully infiltrated the enemy ship! The rest is easy. We just gotta rush the bridge and seize it! We tie up that geezer and demand he free the prince and princess. They can still have their war without the hostages, and we get to have a shoot-out."

If everything actually worked out that way, it would be *too* easy.

I took a peek outside the window of our ship, docked in the enemy hold. This appeared to be some sort of launchpad for smaller vessels. Shuttles and ferries everywhere. It almost looked like valet parking.

The main difference between those ships and ours was that we were surrounded by guards with (presumably) laser rifles (suspiciously similar to what clone troopers carried in a super-famous sci-fi series.) "Uh, Haruhi," I said

as she rose to her feet brandishing the ray gun. “If you run straight out there, they’ll fill you full of holes. You’ll be burned to a crisp before you make it to the old man.”

“That won’t be a problem as long as you put your back into it.”

Let me reiterate that I am not capable of dodging beams of light.

“R-r-right!” Asahina said, breaking her silence. Her voice was shaking. “Th-this is very dangerous! We should sit and have some tea.”

“Nope!” Haruhi immediately said, dismissing Asahina’s welcome suggestion. “That’s no fun for me! Listen, we are members of the Galactic Patrol. We’re the good guys! It’s our job to mow down the baddies. Kidnappers think they can hold us captive? Unacceptable!”



Yet she seemed delighted. Her expression didn't match her lines. She was dying to go on a rampage.

"That may be so, but give us a little time." Koizumi now stood next to Nagato. "Nagato's looking into the matter—she'll soon know where the royal children are being kept."

I glanced over, and Nagato was slowly running her fingers over the console's panels. I had no idea how that thing worked, but there was a ton of code running across the display. Eventually...

"There," she whispered. Her fingers—and the scrolling text—paused.

"Found something?" Haruhi asked.

"The crew list," Koizumi answered. "I asked Nagato to hack this ship's central computer. Nagato, you made it look easy."

He sounded impressed, yet that smile was a bit strained.

"This makes it clear most people listed are military—only two individuals on board who don't match that description. I suspected the odds were good they are aboard this very ship, and indeed, it turns out they are."

Koizumi swung around, facing me and Haruhi.

"The prince and princess are imprisoned on this vessel. In VIP suites—likely because they *are* royalty. It would hardly do to place them in a cell."

Was this all a happy coincidence? Or was that decrepit commander just an idiot? You'd think he'd have the sense to keep his prisoners on different ships.

While I shook my head, Nagato must have done something—the main monitor now showed the ship's layout. A retro wire frame schematic. One section of it was flashing.

"The prince and princess are in this room," Koizumi said.

Another section started flashing.

"And this is our present location. The lower hold. The royal suite is much closer than the bridge, but what say you?"

"Hmm." Haruhi considered this. "Should we snatch them and bail, or take



over the ship?”

I didn't really feel like one was substantially easier than the other. You may be forgetting that we're not quite as statistically anomalous as you are, Haruhi.

Even if we managed to shake off the troops milling around the *Schismatrix* and somehow made it to the royal children, we'd still have to make it back in one piece. If we tried to wrest control of the ship, we'd need to force a quick surrender with only the five of us. Neither seemed realistic.

“Then a third way,” Koizumi said craftily. “Since we've got the ship's computers hacked, let's take advantage of that.”

Good thing Nagato could do anything. Though this ship's network security also seemed conveniently flimsy—wasn't this supposed to be the distant future? Why was the word *computer* still in use? What language were we speaking, anyway? Maybe best left unprobed.

With a guilt-free smile, Koizumi added, “This is a stealth ship intended to launch a surprise attack on their enemy. They'll have done a lot of work to ensure their targets do not see them coming. Including the masking of all outgoing communication and electromagnetic signals. We need merely ensure they *are* detected.”

Koizumi pointed a finger at the star map above his own seat.

“Fortunately, we're rather close to the Fifth Separatist Empire—their target. If we cause a commotion, they'll soon discover us. Stealth units that have been revealed tend to be rather flimsy. Every ship in the invasion fleet will be in turmoil. If we take advantage of that, recovering the royals should be a simple matter.”

“Then make it so!” Haruhi said, like a figurehead general leaving all planning to her scheming aide. “Yuki, do your thing.”

Nagato nodded and began doing something—I couldn't tell what, of course—at her console.

A moment later, she muttered, “All ships, ECM active.”

Ten thousand ships broadcasting electronic warfare signals with no

interference was stupendously effective.

There was low vibration in the distance that made the entire cockpit shake.

“They’re definitely panicking,” I muttered, gazing around the hold.

Scattered revolving lights were painting the small ship’s hold a deep red, and an alarm echoed loudly, ordering soldiers to their combat stations.

The ship shook again. A direct hit.

The New Orthodox Empire fleet, with the *Schismatrix* in the belly of their flagship, was currently engaging interceptors that had been hastily scrambled by the Fifth Separatist Empire in response to Nagato’s signal.

She had hacked into the ship’s systems, scooping up intel.

“Reinforcements inbound. Forces evenly matched,” Nagato said, eyes on the deluge of text streaming down her screen.

“Perfect,” Haruhi said, pretending to roll up her sleeves. “This is our chance! We’re gonna move hard and fast under the cover of all this chaos! Looks like the guards all vanished, too.”

Indeed, the soldiers stationed round the *Schismatrix* had run off somewhere, and there were only scattered security patrols milling about the hold. If we missed this chance, we probably wouldn’t get another. Had we managed to lock into the correct path for beating the game?

“Make sure you remember the route to the royals’ room!” Haruhi said. Feet planted firmly, she stared at the wire frame for a few solid seconds, then brandished her ray gun. “Move out!”



I would've loved to stay behind on the ship, but clearly that wasn't an option. We all drew our ray guns (can we not have a better name for these? Blasters, maybe?) and Haruhi led the way through the airlock and into the hold.

"Eep!" Asahina nearly toppled over on the landing, but Koizumi caught her. As adorable as she was sexy. She'd lost her blaster (definitely sounds cooler, so I'm going with it) while she was airborne, and it skidded toward Haruhi, who then picked it up.

"Everyone, set your weapons to stun. That'd be the S on this dial. They may be kidnappers, but they're not pirates, and we won't be able to sleep at night if we hurt them."

When had she figured these guns out? Also, that totally ruined the whole *blaster* thing. Now I'd have to start calling them stun guns.

Haruhi handed Asahina her S-Gun and yelled, "Follow me!"

When she was certain we'd heard her, she bolted off. Hair streaming behind her, full of energy, she broke into the kind of run that made you forget we were in space. Was this *really* a spaceship? I was starting to feel like this was an elaborate set, like humanity had yet to even land on the moon. Well, we had our mission. The rest didn't matter. No choice but to follow it where it takes us. Especially if Haruhi was into it.

We charged toward the hold's big exit door. Haruhi saw the remaining guards aiming laser rifles at us and took them down with her S-Gun. The paralysis beams left them writhing, and we stepped right over them, charging forward. Toward where the prince and princess were being held...

We arrived.

Mostly thanks to Nagato's memory rather than anything Haruhi did, but despite taking the shortest route through the spaceship's interior, we managed to have shoot-outs on every staircase, elevator, and corner on the way here, downing countless guards. I no longer had any clue where we were, but we were outside the door to a room.





“Get back!” Haruhi yelled.

She switched her ray gun to heat ray mode and fired it at the metallic door, slicing through it like butter. The door fell in, revealing two figures beyond the threshold.

Given the situation, stunned looks were expected, but their expressions were so vacant they barely seemed human.

Haruhi marched right in.

“You’re the prince and princess of the Galactic Thingamabob Empire? Don’t worry, we’re here to rescue you.”

They were supposed to be royalty but didn’t exactly look the part. They just seemed like your standard issue young people. Their clothes were futuristic but also clearly everyday wear.

And since they were just gaping at us, they had no dignity whatsoever, and I was starting to wonder if we had the right pair.

But heedless of my concerns, Haruhi grabbed their arms.

“Retreat! Evacuate! Head back to the *Schismatrix*, blow the hatch open, and let’s get on home! Nothing else for us here.”

She was clearly in no mood for arguments and dragged the royal siblings into the hall. Naturally, we followed. What else could we do?

The ship might be in combat mode, but that didn’t mean everyone was at their battle stations. Cannon fodder troopers stuck their faces out every now and then only to be met with Nagato’s unerring aim. We left them quivering in our wake.

We ran back the way we’d come and soon found ourselves back at our patrol vessel. I need hardly point out that Asahina had spent this whole time getting dragged around. She’d never been one for combat, and the role she’d been cast in seemed entirely wrong for her. Maybe they should have made her the ship medic.

“Kyon, launch!”



Inside the ship, Haruhi had the royal siblings stand at either side of her while she sprawled back in her captain's chair.

"Prime all cannons! Target: the middle of that wall!"

"Understood."

Koizumi, appearing to have graduated from copilot to gunner, took aim.

Haruhi bellowed, "Fire!" and he pulled the trigger.

Particle cannons, and what looked like photon torpedoes, shot out of the *Schismatrix's* bow and blew a hole in the side of the ship. Impressive fireworks. All the air was sucked out, revealing the depths of space through the gash. The stars twinkling in the distance weren't stars at all, but ships exploding. I'd only seen the like in movies, but I was in the pilot's seat, and couldn't stop to take it all in, much less gawk. As Haruhi ordered, I lifted off and then escaped the flagship's interior.

The *Schismatrix* flitted through the disarrayed formations of the two opposing fleets like a tiny fish. Both sides were firing colorful beams in all directions, and I was sweating it. It didn't feel remotely real. Flying the ship on sheer instinct and reflexes, I aimed for an arbitrary section of space.

"Mikuru, open the comms. Hail our allies."

Haruhi was being all captainy, and Asahina somehow muddled through it. Just as I inexplicably knew how to pilot a ship, she seemed to know how the comms worked. That was decidedly odd, but arguably also made perfect sense. This place followed its own rules.

"Can you hear me, Ranging Galactic Observation Patrol, Haruhi Squad?"

A familiar old man's voice echoed from the speakers. I couldn't help but picture the King of Diamonds.

"This is the Fifth Separatist Empire's emperor."

"We've rescued your children," Haruhi said smugly. "Satisfied?"

"I am grateful. Name your reward—but we're in combat at the moment, and I'm busy commanding. Take shelter in a safe place, and we shall come to collect the prince and princess soon."

The comms cut out. That was quick. I mean, I didn't want him sobbing out a thank-you or anything, but...

"That's it, then," I said. I was looking at Koizumi, but halfway through realized he wouldn't know, and turned to Nagato.

"....."

She'd been sitting by the radar equipment, but abruptly got to her feet and moved over to the royals lurking behind the captain's chair. What? They didn't react at all.

She studied the duo for a moment with her deep-sea creature stare, then she reached out, poking each in turn.

"Um," I ventured.

The moment she made contact, both crumpled to their knees and toppled over.

"Robots," Nagato whispered.

They looked for all the world like action figures with busted joints.

"Oh dear," Koizumi said, shrugging. "They foisted fakes off on us. They must have assumed someone would try to rescue them and prepared dummies. Perhaps the real ones were never there, and they were always robots—but certainly a blunder on our part. We should have been suspicious the moment they were on the same ship as us. That did seem a bit inadvisable on their part."

"Then where're the real ones?" Haruhi asked.

Koizumi turned to the screen.

"Assuming they were captured by this fleet and weren't on the flagship—then they must be on some other ship. Impossible to tell which."

Another plume of fire lit up the sea of crisscrossing beams. The battle was getting more furious by the second, and both sides were sustaining considerable losses. Not great.

All we could do was watch helplessly as ship after ship blew up.

"So?" I said glumly, to no one in particular. "Is our employer unwittingly going

ham on the enemy because they think we've safely rescued the prince and princess?"

"Most likely," Koizumi said, nodding. "Perhaps we should inform them we rescued fakes."

"Better do that now, before it's too late."

"No, something tells me it already is."

Same. I bet we all felt that way.

I mean—

The view before us was fading out. The wide-screen monitor was gone, and the view of space—like black construction paper with pinholes in it—fell away, as if it was being rolled up.

I couldn't even bother saying "What the hell" this time.

"Mission incomplete," Nagato said.

I'd heard that before and didn't have to ask why.

"Augh..."

We blew it again. The ship with the real prince and princess had been annihilated by their own side, and those poor souls were space dust now. RIP.

"Penalty," Nagato added.

I sighed.

This was the second time seeing the world transform, and it no longer impressed me. The swath of darkness grew steadily brighter, and the word *panorama* floated through my mind.

".....," I said at the same time as Nagato, Koizumi, and Asahina.

First a fantasy world, then a space opera, and for our third trick— Dry wind on our cheeks, dust swirling around our boots. Boots? Sure looked like boots. My feet could feel bare earth beneath the soles.

I looked up and found buildings of yesteryear beneath a sky so blue it made my eyes throb.

“.....”

No one said a word.

We had ten-gallon hats and, uh, I dunno how to describe our outfits. Westerny. We were standing on an unpaved carriage road.

“Now we’ve done it,” was I all managed to mutter.

The ray gun in my holster was now a single-action revolver. Koizumi and I had old-timey shirts on, suspenders on our trousers, and sheriff badges gleaming on our chests. Haruhi and Asahina were wearing cowgirl outfits with rather a lot of skin showing, and Nagato was inarguably a wandering gunslinger.

Which meant we were...

“All right, crew.” Haruhi grinned. “Move out! We’ve gotta rescue the rancher’s son and his bride from these roustabouts and claim the bounties on their heads! Brave sheriffs and their helpers won’t let these wanted hoodlums get away with this!”

I guess that’s the plot.

We were in a western, and the play—if that’s the word for it—was just getting underway.

I wasn’t sure who to ask, but let me ask anyway.

“How many of these are there?”

“I assume they’ll continue until we complete the mission,” Koizumi said, curiously examining his ancient-looking Peacemaker. “Or until whoever invited us here grows bored.”

He spun the gun, then holstered it, and shot Nagato a smile.

“I doubt this will go on indefinitely. Best to just enjoy the role-playing experience. It’s not every day we see the like.”

Asahina was gaping at everything, and Haruhi put an arm through hers, beaming at all of us.

“First, we’ll need horses! You can’t impress anyone walking across the frontier. Let’s find a saloon—”

A staged North America in the nineteenth century. The town around us looked like a standing set.

The SOS Brigade set out—across a vast and wild land.



The dusty, unpaved road continued for as far as the eye could see.

It was the main street of this town, flanked by wooden shops and saloons lined like row houses.

Tracks from wagon wheels and horseshoes were imprinted in the dirt.

Two figures were facing each other down, ten odd meters apart, beneath the glaring light of the sun.

Sparks flew—like an unseen lightning bolt charging up, ready to unleash death.

Heads were peering through every window, like chickens in a henhouse—this was not a duel to be missed. An errant gust of wind made the dust swirl, and a giant tangled thing rolled by—what were those called again?

“Tumbleweeds,” Nagato said, behind me.

I didn’t turn to look, getting right back to setting the scene.

Two figures staring each other down on main street. I need hardly tell you one of them was the chief of the SOS Brigade herself—Haruhi Suzumiya.

She wore a ten-gallon hat, a denim jacket over a white tube top, and a pair of daisy dukes with frills on. It might sound like a quirky western cosplay, but she was meant to be a legit cowgirl.

And not just *any* cowgirl. Haruhi had a gun belt around her hips, and in the holster, a Colt Single Action Army—a gun that had been on everyone’s hips during the pioneer days of the American West and the famous Peacemaker.

Haruhi was a famed gunslinger, head of the SOS Brigade—a trio of mysterious female bounty hunters. For the first time ever, we were someplace where the term *brigade* felt normal.

I looked around and sighed—everything the eye could see was right out of a western B movie broadcast on late-night TV.

If I had to put a title to it, *Showdown at High Noon? The Wild SOS Brigade?*

Either way, two groups were in conflict, and now our leaders were settling things with a duel.



Facing Haruhi was, um... I remembered him giving a name at some point, but it hadn't stuck on account of him being such a classic villain, and his lines all played into those clichés. A black-clad gunman with a list of vile crimes and a bounty on his head, a wandering gunman hired by the other side to handle their fighting. Whatever that description makes you picture is likely getting you most of the way there.

The rules for the duel were as follows:

Stand approximately ten meters apart.

Prepare to draw your weapon.

The mayor would flick a dime into the air.

And the duel would start when it hit the dirt.

Winner was the one left standing.

Your basic quick-draw duel. The mayor bearing witness to this was a familiar looking old-timer with a white beard, and the third-string henchmen in the other group were all grinning like they were up to something, being so obvious that it was actively discouraging, but technically this was meant to be a tense moment.

The road Haruhi and her bounty occupied was cordoned off, wagons and shoppers stopped at the ends. There shouldn't be any danger of getting hit by stray bullets.

Naturally, we were lined up on the sidewalks—which were just planks of wood. The villains were similarly lined up on the far side of the street, whispering to each other, making a show of pointlessly holstering and unholstering their guns.

I glanced back, and my eyes first lit upon Asahina. That white cotton shirt and extra-small pair of shorts failed to hide her spectacular figure, and the well-maintained leather cowboy boots and colorful kerchief at her neck really pulled the whole look together. She might be small, but she had a full year on the rest of us—and she currently had her hands pressed together, watching Haruhi with breathless concern.

Meanwhile, Nagato was looking straight ahead—as always, her eyes betrayed no emotion. She was more Mexican style, with a broad-brimmed hat in muted colors, and a cape-like poncho on her shoulders. Your classic badass bounty hunter who always worked alone. It was safe to assume her aim was the truest in the entire universe.

Rubbing his chin next to her was Koizumi, dressed exactly like I was.

Picture the sheriff in any western movie—or even a manga or anime. That's what we were. That isn't just me getting lazy with explanations, either. Koizumi and I were technically deputies.

We were working with Haruhi's group, but this time the SOS Brigade was *just* the three lady bounty hunters; Koizumi and I had merely been headed in the same direction and found ourselves swept up in Haruhi's business. Your classic western movie adventure plot.

The mayor cleared his throat. "Shall we get started?"

He seemed to be addressing me, so I nodded back and glanced at Haruhi, who fluttered a hand.

"Anytime," she said, so airily it was hard to believe this was a life-or-death moment.

Her opponent grunted as well, and the mayor backed away and out of the line of fire. Once he was safely on the wooden sidewalk, he raised a hand.

His fist was held sideways, and the dull gleam of a dime rested on his thumbnail. The old man took a breath and intoned, "Here we go."

There was a tiny *dink*, and the coin flew toward the sky.

It felt like everything went slo-mo. Haruhi and the hired gun went for their grips. The crowd's eyes gleamed with anticipation, curiosity, and trepidation. The wind blew a tumbleweed through. Time was moving so slow I could make out the head and tail of the coin.

I feel like I need to explain how we got here, so I'm gonna do that. It won't take long. Should wrap up before the coin hits the ground.

One minute we were cavorting around the galaxy, and the next we were in

North America in the late nineteenth century, the Wild West. For lack of better options, we headed for the nearest town.

There, we hit up the sheriff's office and received a telegram from someone. This expedited things—and the contents overlapped with what Haruhi's brain waves had picked up on. Namely: *In a town half a day's ride from you, there's been a long-standing feud between the ranchers and the farmers. Bullets regularly fly there. Like the Warring States period or a post-apocalypse, the Wild West is a lawless land. We request your aid restoring order. Hostages have been taken, putting the ranchers at a disadvantage.*

That made it clear which side we were meant to take. They really ought to hire a flavor text writer who was familiar with the concept of an anachronism; the telegram text gave me a headache, but just then, a second telegram arrived.

*Deputies Kyon and Itsuki Koizumi cooperate with the three bounty hunter girls of the SOS Brigade and put an end to this conflict.*

Why it felt the need to specify they were girls was beyond me, but despite the fact that I'd never ridden a horse in my life, we now had to procure some. While Koizumi and I were fretting about that, the girls vanished on us.

"Borrowing these!" Haruhi said, snatching the sheaf of wanted posters from the office desk.

And a few minutes later we heard gunshots somewhere in town.

The two deputies (me and Koizumi) ran nervously toward the sounds and found a massive gunfight going on in the saloon.

Apparently, a gang of train robbers from the wanted list had been busy day drinking. They were all granite-faced grown men, but age and gender never mattered when Haruhi was in the room. They were nothing but targets for the .45 rounds her Colt SAA spat out.

Gunshots and gun smoke filled the scene that looked like it came straight out of a western—it was just that fake-looking. Koizumi and I shrugged at each other and let it play out.

It definitely seemed like every bullet Haruhi fired struck someone's vitals as all

the bounties went down.

“Don’t worry, I used the blunt side of my blade,” she said. Apparently, she neither killed nor injured anyone—just robbed them of their will to fight back.

Meanwhile, Nagato was flawlessly sniping the trigger mechanisms off the enemy’s pistols. And the moment Asahina’s gun left her holster, she started juggling it like a hot potato and then it somehow exploded in midair. The resulting shrapnel coincidentally hit several bandits in the head, knocking them out. The upshot was that nobody died, and the train robbers were left unconscious on the floor that stank of cigarettes.



Flanked by Nagato and Asahina, Haruhi advanced on the bartender (who was cowering behind the bar) and ordered three glasses of milk. She plunked the sheaf of wanted posters on the counter and plopped herself down on a barstool.

The money they'd earned from these bounties alone would pay for the ranch, let alone this milk, but that didn't matter much to Koizumi and me. We diligently made sure the robbers were properly tied up. This shoot-out was clearly a side quest at best. We should probably do what the telegram said and make haste toward the location of the feud. *Tombstone*, was it?

Once we stuffed the trussed-up wanted men into a wagon bound for jail, we accepted a bag full of the cash bounty. Then Koizumi came back with five horses he'd found somewhere.

"They were tied up behind the saloon. Probably belonged to the train robbers."

Suspiciously in our favor, but now our preparations were complete.

"Let's get going."

I pushed through the swinging doors and found Haruhi busy eating what appeared to be chili con carne.

"Can you wait till we're done? Oh, Kyon, pay the tab."

I took a wad of bills out of the bag and handed it over to the proprietor, figuring the extra would make up for riddling his establishment full of holes.

"Keep the change."

I'd always wanted to say that.

It wasn't my money, so I could be as generous as I liked.

The girls took their time eating, then we finally mounted up and headed for the town in question. We'd never learned how to ride, but it proved as easy as any bicycle—a fact I no longer bothered questioning.

We hadn't really asked how long it would take to reach the next town on horseback. Would we get there before nightfall? The horizon was visible in all

directions, and we hadn't even seen a map. What time *was* it? I looked up and found the sun orange and definitely on the decline. Evening was coming fast, and I had enough experience with these things to know it would not be light out for long.

But after a solid half hour, the sun remained where it was, showing no signs of setting. Like it was waiting for something. But what? I suppose I already knew.

Also, the view streaming past us appeared to be speeding up. Our horses were just plodding along, but it felt more like the last lap of the Mile Championship.

My internal sensors were all out of whack, but we spotted the next town maybe an hour after leaving the first.

The elderly mayor met at us at the entrance. He seemed to have been waiting for a while.

The sun appeared to agree with that sentiment, and it plunged abruptly to the horizon the moment we reached town like it was on fast-forward. We cast long shadows in the orange light as we dismounted and turned to the mayor.

He had on a black jacket over a flannel shirt, and a bowler hat on his head. We'd seen his face several times before; it was that same white-bearded old-timer.

Once a forest sage, then a galactic empire fleet commander—no surprise his wrinkled face was extra unwelcoming.

"Took you long enough! I was forced to stand here the whole time. Have a heart!"

Save your complaints for the scriptwriter.

"You seem to be ad-libbing every second of this?"

That's what happens when Haruhi's the star. Blame whoever cast her.

"Very well, let's move on."

An instant later, we were seated around a dining table.



Apparently we'd cut around the transition and picked up back here. Snappy.

"This is my home," the mayor said. "We're short on time, so I'll fill you in over dinner.

The main dish was steak—red meat, but I couldn't tell what from. It didn't taste like anything I'd ever had before, so maybe it was bison. There were also pancakes doused in syrup, cornbread, and a stew filled with things I could not identify. There was also a dessert that was likely apple pie. Nagato silently worked her way through all of it, and I spent the bulk of my time watching Asahina's eyes gleam with every bite, tilting her head or thoughtfully inspecting the ceiling. Meanwhile, the mayor droned on.

"Once, this was a remote area good for little besides grazing. Nothing to do but look after the herds. Cattle and other livestock put this town on the map."

Going all the way back, huh? Weren't we short on time?

"Kyon has a point," Haruhi said, waving a knife stuck through a chunk of medium rare, probably bison, steak. "What do you want us to do? I heard something about a kidnapping? We just gotta rescue them, right?"

The mayor glared at me, then gave Haruhi a long stare, then studied Koizumi and Nagato elegantly enjoying their meals, smiled briefly at how Asahina was expressing delight with every bite, and finally put his fork and knife down, folding his hands on the tabletop.

"I'd like one of you to take my place in a duel," he intoned.

According to him, a few years back, a tycoon had set his sights on this pastoral ranchland. He owned farms here and there across the states, but was a scoundrel known for employing underhanded tactics to get his way. The pushiest kind of nouveau riche, earning massive wealth by any means necessary.

This tycoon laid claim to the land around the town and brought in a lot of men to cultivate the land. When they were content to coexist with the ranchers, everything was fine—but the farmers kept expanding their fields, and this began to encroach on the rancher's territory. Soon, they were fighting over new territory.

The ranchers insisted they had the rights to these lands, and demanded the farmers cease their expansion, but the farmers pulled out deeds of unknown origins, insisting they had legally acquired them and could do whatever they liked with their property. They soon began plowing the grasslands despite the ranchers' protests.

Discussions became arguments, arguments screaming matches, and the yelling was shortly followed by violence; in short, things escalated quickly.

Thus, the town was split between the existing ranch hands and the newly arrived farmers. The pastoral peace of yesteryear was a thing of the past, and conflicts brewed round every corner.

The farmers were the first to bring in hired guns. The Somethington brothers and their gang—a bunch of lowlifes—started parading around, and sensing a threat, the ranchers hired groups of cowboys who knew their way around a gun. This only added fuel to the fire. The town now had two groups of toughs as liable to shoot as they were to breathe, and the upshot was that constant gunfire could be heard inside town and out.

Since the farmers had bribed the town's sheriff, the law wasn't stepping in; the mayor's authority was but a wax ax before a flamethrower. If this had merely filled the medic's beds with convalescent gunshot-wound victims, that'd be one thing, but it wasn't long before lots of people were turning up dead. The mortician ran short on coffins, and the priest had to started prepping the next funeral before he even learned the name of the deceased.

The stalemate continued, with nothing but bodies to show for it. The ranchers were the next to act. They hired Hyatt Harp and his brothers—well-known bounty hunters—but the firepower advantage didn't last long. One of the oldest and most powerful ranchers discovered his son (and that son's wife) had been kidnapped.

They received a threatening letter demanding Hyatt and company to leave town if they wanted the young couple back alive. The ranchers gnashed their teeth, and the town sided with them—no matter the day and the age, trying to win through despicable tactics did no one any favors. The saloon, butchers, grocers, doctor, and bank all turned on the farmers. When they angrily

brandished guns, this only cratered their reputations further—but the ranchers' hands were tied.

This second stalemate led the mayor to finally flexing his political muscles.

“Staring each other down will get us nowhere. If shooting starts again, it'll continue until only one side is left standing. I cannot stand idly by as the countdown to destruction commences. I propose that we settle the matter with a duel; may the fastest hands win.”

Both groups begrudgingly accepted these terms. Neither side could bear any more losses.

“If the farmers win, they'll be allowed to construct a massive agricultural belt. If the ranchers win, the farmers will be forbidden from expanding any farther. Additionally, they'll have to surrender the fields they plowed without consent to be turned into grazing land. No matter who wins, the hostages will be released.”

But since they did have hostages, the farmers' side added a condition. The ranchers were not to put their hired gunmen—the Harp brothers—in the duel. If they tried, the rancher's children would be killed, and the feud would continue until one side was wiped out. The more time this took, the bigger the advantage the farmers' wealth would give them; the ranchers accepted those terms and turned to the mayor for a proxy gunman.

“And you turned to us,” Haruhi said, putting her fork down. She seemed very pleased with this. “We'll take care of this! I'm great at contests. I can't remember ever losing one. I'll make them regret going with me instead of those Whyahat brothers.”

She'd skipped the bit where we decided who to put in the duel, but never mind. Letting Nagato handle it would mean a totally foregone conclusion—but even when dreaming while napping in class, I couldn't picture Haruhi *not* stealing the limelight at a moment like this.

Smiling confidently, Haruhi reached for her coffee cup.

“So when is this duel? And is it in a field? The pastures?”

“Noon tomorrow. On main street, in front of the town's only saloon.”

Haruhi nodded and knocked back the coffee.

“Is there an inn? Preferably one with a bath.”

“I imagine we’re short on tubs, but I’ll arrange one with a shower. There is but one inn.”

“Does it have hot water?”

“Um...I imagine so?” The mayor clearly didn’t remember that granular a detail. “Let’s say yes. Yes. Hot water it is. As of right now. I’ll even throw in a tub.”

He seemed to have received a broadcast, and a decisive one.

In the seat next to me I heard Koizumi make a noise like he was stifling a laugh. I looked over and found him wiping his face with a napkin, hiding the smirk behind it. I fully agreed.

“This world sure is malleable,” I said, turning back to the mayor.

He made a show of having a coughing fit.

“Well, now you’re fully briefed! Best of luck tomorrow!” he cried, rising to his feet.

And the scene immediately shifted again. We were now in the lobby of an old-timey, two-story wooden hotel.

“Whaaa...huh?” Asahina said, with an adorable head tilt. She still had her hands up like she was holding a knife and fork and was staring at her empty hands in confusion.

We received keys at the front desk and retired to our rooms. Single rooms for all of us. After a long day, we all wanted to get right in the bath to wash off the dust of travel, and prepare for the events of the next day.

The bathroom had a tub with a shower next to it. Very Japanese. This place sure was accommodating.

We spent the night there and regrouped the next morning. The mayor arranged a meet and greet with the ranchers, and the SOS girls, plus two new deputies, headed out to face the ne’er-do-wells.

And that's it for summaries. Let's get back to the original scene, still in progress.

That coin was still spinning. Nice of it to wait until I was done recapping.

The progression of time remained very slow. The spinning dime reached its apex and began to fall. Like in movies, where everything gets super quiet before a burst of action, my senses were all heightened.

The dime was spinning fast, gleaming in the dazzling sunlight, like a mirror ball in free fall.

The gunman opposite Haruhi—one of the Somethington brothers—didn't even look up. His eyes were on her alone. The sound of the coin landing would be the signal.

But then...

"....."

Nagato had been even more taciturn than usual since we arrived in the West, but now her face made a smooth diagonal turn like one of Tanaka Hisashige's mechanical puppets. Her unblinking catlike eyes fixed on a single point. I followed her gaze.

"Mm?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement. Just a subtle positional shift, but clearly human.

I squinted and saw someone lurking in the second-story window of the saloon across from us. A shadowy figure stood behind the half-open frame.

A man peering down at the street below, a long object in his hands that could not be mistaken for anything but a rifle. Given the times, likely a Winchester M73, an undisputed USA bestseller.

And the business end of his rifle was pointed at Haruhi's face.

"A sniper?"

Aha. Unsure how the duel would play out, these dastardly villains had decided to cheat. Brazenly laying on such thick stereotypes was weirdly novel.

On reflex, my hand reached for my holster. I felt pretty sure I could put all six of these slugs in his head without a pang of conscience, but should I? Or should I let Nagato handle it?

“.....”

Nagato’s silence felt like a suggestion to remain on standby. True, the idea of Haruhi dying from a sniper in her blind spot felt every bit as unlikely as Godzilla getting taken out by an army tank. Especially in this extremely phony western setting.

But she didn’t have much time. The falling dime was about to touch down.

All eyes were on the duelists.

Which meant we were all equally shocked.

“!”

No one expected Haruhi to move *before* the dime landed.

Much less hop sideways into a forward somersault, vanishing into the gap between the saloon and the shop next door.

An instant later, the dime hit the ground with the faintest of *dinks*. Officially ending slo-mo time.

Haruhi had fled in the face of battle.

Anyone unawares would have assumed as much, but the look of panic on her opponent’s face proved he knew about the sniper waiting upstairs.

I assumed Haruhi must have somehow detected the mystery sniper and made a beeline for the second story to put a bullet in him—but she betrayed my expectations in every possible way.

“Here goes!” Haruhi cried, and there was a *thnk*, like something not terribly thick getting kicked.

And then the entire saloon toppled toward the street.

“Wha.....?!”

The gunman was so shocked he froze up—and the giant mural with a saloon painted on it fell directly toward his head. At the last second, he leaped back,

and the saloon turned cutout hit the main street with a *fwoomp*, kicking up all kinds of dust.

Between the cutout and the dirt, a man grunted once, followed by the unpleasant sound of something squishing. I didn't have to squint—between the wood and the dirt, there was just enough space for a man. This unexpected man sandwich was clearly the sniper with the Winchester rifle.

He must have been flung out the window the second the 3D saloon became a 2D stage flat.

"I thought so!" Haruhi said.

She still had one foot in the air from kicking the saloon over.

"I had a hunch. It all seemed very fishy!"

She flashed a triumphant grin.

I looked around, registering our surroundings in a very different light.

What I'd perceived as normal buildings and shops lining the street now lost all depth. They were just boards with pictures painted on them.

"Seriously?"

The shocking truth left us reeling, but the crew of bad guys was even more bewildered. Even the mayor's jaw was hanging open. Couldn't blame him. The world's parameters had just been rewritten. Forcefully, in the blink of an eye.

Even the inn we'd slept in last night was now a standing signboard.

Truly something else.

This had never been the late-nineteenth-century American Wild West. Merely a stage built in a field suggesting that frontier. And one working with a very small budget, so all the buildings had just been matte paintings.

Haruhi came stalking across the collapsed saloon.

"Oh, wasn't this a quick-draw competition?"

She drew her Colt SAA and, before her opponent could recover from the surprise, aimed the barrel at his chest and pulled the trigger.



There was a bang. But nothing more than that.

If our surroundings were all an outdoor set, then the duel itself wasn't real; merely a performance, and the guns obviously didn't have real bullets in them.

We were in a western movie. At least, we were *now*.

What did the rest of our crew think of this? Koizumi was wearing that patented smile of his, Asahina was adorably flabbergasted, Nagato was unaffected.

Haruhi was just playing with her gun, so I asked, "You knew about the sniper upstairs?"

"I saw him reflected in my opponent's eyes."

You've got eyes like a hawk.

"How'd you realize the buildings were painted on?"

"Just went with my gut."

Best not to probe that one further.

The famer's hired guns were all clumped up, rubbing shoulders, and Haruhi swung around to face them.

"I shot first, which means I win. Return the hostages and disband your posse."

She had her finger hooked through the trigger guard, spinning the Peacemaker around it. Her glare allowed the Somethington brothers (and the others hired by the farmers) to momentarily forget the alterations to the state of the world.

They were shouting "Hell no!" and "Listen to yourself!" and "That wasn't a fair fight!" and I could hardly blame them. They all piled into the street.

They had guns in their hands, but how long did we have to play along with this farce?

"....."

Nagato reacted first.

Her poncho swirling, both hands blurred. A Colt held by her right hip, the left

hand working the hammer. This was fanning—a technique that let you fire as fast as you could pull the trigger. Inquiring minds want to know why Nagato’s gun alone still held real bullets.

Six rapid-fire bullets—but not aimed at the inbound bounties.

She fired them all into the sky.

Aimed at what? The answer soon fell toward us.

Several light fixtures plummeted directly toward the thugs’ heads.

They croaked like toads as the lights came crashing down and squished them flat.

It wasn’t even an outdoor set. We were on a soundstage!

The moment I perceived that, the sun shining above became a prop suspended from the rafters.

At this point, someone really ought to yell, “Cut!” and snap a clapper, but even when I looked for one, I could see a crew. Guess we’d have to help ourselves to *The End*.

The mayor was clutching his head, so clearly none of this was going according to plan. It wasn’t really clear how much power and sway this dude had.

“So?” Haruhi asked. “Where the hostages at?”

Two heads peered around the boards with a bank painted on. Seeing all the villains laid out, they nervously emerged. A young man in work clothes—in this case, a flannel shirt and suspenders—and a woman in a long dress, like an old-timey maid. They must be the couple we were meant to save.

They’d been prince and princess in the RPG, and I forget what in the space opera—for the first time, we actually laid eyes on them. Was I the only one who thought they looked exhausted and resigned?

“Thank you.”

“From the bottoms of our hearts.”

The powerful rancher’s son and his wife bowed their heads. Thoroughly average-looking people. No matter how long I studied their faces, I’d forget

them thirty seconds after looking away. They could be anywhere from their late teens to their early thirties—completely devoid of any memorable details. Stick figures were more distinctive.

But if we saved the hostages, it should be mission complete.

“Yo, old-timer,” I said.

Hands on his head, he looked my way. “What?”

“What else? We may be a bit off script, but we did what you asked. Getting sent off to the next world won’t—”

Before I could even finish, a car crashed through the wall of the studio.

“Augh! What the—?!”

A black automobile with a cloth roof, so classic it was basically a fossil on wheels. The kind of car you’d see driving down the coast at the start of the twentieth century. It pulled up next to the rancher’s kids. Black suited arms reached out and dragged them in, and the car sped away, crashing through the far wall.

“Hey!” Haruhi yelled. “We *just* rescued them! Let us enjoy the moment! I wanted to play a cowboy leaving the ranch behind as all the farmhands wept!”

She stamped her foot, and another car shot through the hole the first had made. This looked familiar. It was an open-top Model T Ford touring car.

It pulled to a silent stop like a taxi. No one was in the driver’s seat.

“Are we supposed to give chase?” Koizumi wondered, stroking his chin. “Is anyone capable of driving a car like this?”

I shook my head, and so did Haruhi and Asahina. Before I could say, “You’re up, Nagato!”

“—I’ll drive,” the mayor said, stepping into the driver’s seat. “Just a little freebie. Aftercare, if you will.”

We glanced at each other momentarily, then piled in. Haruhi claimed shotgun.

“Off we go, gramps! I’ll tip you later. Let’s catch these clowns and finish that

shoot-out! With a car chase! Go, go, go!”

The Ford took off like a pinball. Not exactly what I’d call an ending, but that was all she wrote for the western arc.

Outside the soundstage, it was the middle of the night.

Rows of skyscrapers standing against the backdrop of midnight awaited us. Also the world was black-and-white now. The colorful neon signs on the shops all looked equally white.

Haruhi’s headband, Asahina’s eyes, and Nagato’s hair were all shades of gray.

Our clothes had been changed on us, too. Dark suits, white shirts, and black neckties. No need for colors here. Were we on the way home from a funeral?

The mayor had also done a quick change to a black suit. Hands on the steering wheel, he said, “Prohibition era Chicago. Or maybe New York.”

Pick one.

“Doesn’t matter which—that’s beside the point.”

Fair enough.

“I’m no longer the mayor. I’m an ordinary hired driver. Slash guide.”

And the kidnapped duo?

“They’ll be in the gangster’s hideout. You’re on your way to talk things over with the mob boss.”

“Is he gonna be inclined to listen?” Haruhi asked.

“Unlikely. Which means you’ll have to get the better of them somehow. Win and the hostages go free! If you’re lucky, there’ll be no car chase required.”

It didn’t seem like we’d be that lucky.

I let myself sink in the—rather uncomfortable—back seat, looking up at the sky. The twinkling stars were just gray dots, far less impressive than what we’d seen in space.

I hadn’t heard anyone say “Mission incomplete” this time. As I wondered why not, we sped up, and inertia pushed me deeper into the back of the seat.

We pulled to a stop not long after. The corner of a street full of tall buildings. Haruhi leaped out first, and we all followed.

“The basement of that building is an illegal speakeasy. See those stairs right in front of you? Go down that way, knock three times on the door, wait three seconds, and knock three more times. They’ll open for you.”

There was a hole in front of the gray building just wide enough for two to pass. It was connected to a staircase that led into darkness. Very sinister.

“Don’t worry, it’s all been arranged. Worse comes to worst, you can slip out in the commotion.”

He flashed us a wrinkly grin.

“Best of luck. May we meet again, children.”

With that, the classic car drove off, belching exhaust. Regardless of what waited below us, I remained unsure how helpful that old-timer actually was. He sure made it sound like this wasn’t our last meeting, which meant any hopes we had of successfully rescuing these hostages were likely unfounded.

“Might as well head in! It’ll probably be fine.”

Haruhi was always optimistic, but for me to find that comforting? What a day.

Our chief led the way down the stairs and we followed. Mere seconds later, we encountered a heavy wooden door blocking our way. Haruhi knocked three times, waited three seconds, and knocked three more times.



We waited; then the knob turned with a squeak, and the door cracked open.

A blast of cigarette smoke; the roar of a crowd. Uncouth sounding voices shouting and cheering in the background, and peering through the cracked doorframe was a bouncer, nearly two meters tall, glaring impassively down at us.

This lasted barely a moment.

“Head on in,” the bouncer grunted. He stepped aside, and Haruhi led us through the door.

When she tried to go farther, he stopped her.

“Wait. Hand over your weapons.”

He was the bouncer *and* the security guard.

Did we *have* weapons? I guess we’d been carrying Colt Peacemakers earlier, but I no longer had a gun belt on. I patted myself down and realized there was a shoulder holster under my suit.

I stuck my hand in and found the heft of a Colt Government. Same company, but it had gone from a revolver to a semiauto.

Haruhi went, “Huh.” Looking it over. Asahina juggled hers again. Nagato handed hers over with smooth movements, and Koizumi with a shrug.

The bouncer held all five guns with ease, then jerked his chin once and stalked away.

Pushing through so much smoke it felt like walking through clouds, we reached a giant round table at the center. There sat a heavysset man holding a rocks glass filled with ice in one hand. At our approach, he shot us a snakelike smile.

A well-tailored dark suit, black tie—dressed almost exactly like us, but he wore it way better. Definitely had the bearing of a man who’d quickly climbed the ladder.

I took in our surroundings.

This was certainly a speakeasy. There was a bar at the back, and a stone-faced



bartender polishing glasses. A fairly large interior crammed full of round tables, from which sprang forests of half-finished bottles. The stench of booze was enough to make me woozy, but the smoke still overpowered it—nearly everyone here was smoking either a cigarette or a cigar.

They *all* wore dark suits, too. The mob had this speakeasy rented out. Perhaps there were investors and business affiliates among them—these folks were just as unsavory. The old man had said this was the Prohibition era—so everything happening here was guaranteed to be illegal.

“Boss,” the bouncer said. He leaned in to whisper in the snake’s ear, then went back to his post. He dumped the pile of Colt Governments on a table along the way. Didn’t really want to use those, so I had no complaints about being unarmed.

The snakelike boss said, “So you’re the upstart SOS Family?”

Even his voice sounded like a reptile trying to talk.

I was wondering if *family* was any better than *brigade*, really, when Haruhi thumped her chest.

“That’ll work,” she said. “We’re certainly as close as any family.”

The snake’s eyes narrowed.

“Resorting to using kids like you—they must be getting real desperate. Am I right, boys?!”

He waved to the crowd, and a sneering laugh went up. He let that continue a solid ten seconds, then dropped his hand.

The laughter stopped immediately.

“Have a seat.”

He waved to a single chair, and Haruhi didn’t hesitate to claim that as her own.

“I won’t need a drink,” she said with a charming smile. “Looks like you only serve booze, so I’m good. I just remembered swearing a vow to myself to never again get so drunk I lose any memories. Also, if you don’t mind me saying, Prohibition was definitely a terrible piece of legislation, but rather than

breaking the law, you should really go through the proper political channels to advocate for their repeal.”

Mm? Something about that tugged at my mind.

I felt like something she’d said was too important to miss. But I wasn’t sure what. Terrible legislation? Not that. Breaking the law? Not that either. Political channels? Definitely not it. Her memories...no, not that either. Then what? What was nagging at me?

Despite my doubts, Haruhi and the boss continued their conversation.

“I hear we’re set for a wager,” Haruhi said. “We just betting the couple you kidnapped?”

“Naturally, not *just* them.”

The man knocked back his drink. One of his minions tipped a bottle, refilling it. In black-and-white, it was hard to tell, but I imagine the drink was amber-colored.

“If we win, your employer’s turf will belong to our family. Every last acre of it. The illegal casino, the moonshine factory, the café speakeasy—all their territory. Whether we win or lose, the hostages go free. We only extended them our hospitality to bring your side to the table. We just want peaceful negotiations. Won’t find a more honest guy than me. Am I right, boys?!”

Another round of phony laughter that stopped the moment he put his hand up. Was this a skit?

Haruhi looked like someone with a front-row seat to the world’s worst comedy act.

“I think I’m starting to catch the drift,” she said. “So what are we betting on?”

“Poker.”

He pulled a pack of cards from his suit pocket and dropped the deck on the table.

“Rules are short and sweet. Five cards dealt, one chance to trade ’em. Whoever has the better hand wins. No jokers, no bluffs, no chips. Capisce?”

Haruhi looked at the cards.

“Sure, that’ll work. If anything, I’m surprised that’ll satisfy you.”

“Care to inspect the cards, little lady? Don’t want you accusing us of cheating later.”

Haruhi responded with a smile like a midsummer sunflower.

“Just tell me this. What’s the strongest hand in poker?”

“You don’t even know that?! That’d be a royal straight flush, of course! Not that you’ll ever get one. Am I right, boys?!”

Another ten-second guffaw, stopping on a dime.

By this point, I’d entirely lost track of what had been bothering me. It had wriggled out of my hands like an eel, leaving me gaping on the riverbank. Every second the evidence grew fainter.

Damn, I can’t remember.

.....Remember what? What did I even need to remember?

That question, too, evaporated in mere seconds. What was going on here? It felt like someone was manipulating my thoughts. Was I losing it? Fantasy, sci-fi, western—this was hardly a normal world. Why were we here? Where was here? When was here? Who was doing wha—?

“We’ll need a dealer. I know—*bartender*! You handle it.”

The stone-faced bartender obeyed his boss’s command. He moved to the table, picked up the deck, and executed a flawless Hindu shuffle for at least ten seconds. At this point, he mixed in a riffle, laid the cards out in several piles reassembled at random, then cut the deck. Only then did he deal five cards to the boss, then five to Haruhi.

Smooth moves. Too smooth. You could go to the ends of the earth and still not find anyone alive who’d believe this bartender was a neutral party and not one of the boss’s underlings. His own man shuffling the deck, not even letting us cut it. It’d be more shocking if they weren’t cheating.

Haruhi ought to know that.

No surprise, her hand was a pair of threes, clubs and diamonds. Its only redeeming quality was that it was better than no hand at all.

“Hmph,” Haruhi snorted, fanning out her hand.

Meanwhile, the boss held up his hand for the room to see.

“Feast your eyes on this, boys! I guess today’s my lucky day. My guardian angel always steps up when I need it! Am I right, boys?!”

*HA-HA-HA-HA!* This time, the laughter lasted longer than ten seconds—because he didn’t signal them to stop. He just left that forced guffaw go on as background music, fixing us with a smug grin.

“I’ll keep this hand. You can trade as many cards as you like—but only the once. Make your choice.”

Haruhi glanced at her cards, then the backs of the boss’s, and tossed her hand face down on the table.

“I’m good with what I got. The bet’s on.”

The laughter died.

Every face registered shock.

Haruhi’s face was radiating that much confidence. On top of which, she offered some advice.

“I think *you* oughtta trade a few cards at least. I won’t accept take backs later.”

“Don’t be daft.” Those snake eyes narrowed. “My luck is real, and you can’t compete. You play it that way, we gonna have words.”

He put his hand face down on the table.

“Fine, we’ll play with the cards we’re dealt.”

He must have a good hand—we all knew exactly what.

“Works for me,” Haruhi said, eyeing the backs of his cards.

I knew full well what that look meant. That’s the look she got when her cunning plan was going so well she couldn’t keep the grin off her face.

“Our cards are locked,” she said, inexplicably getting to her feet. “But I won’t be making the bet. *She* will.”

She moved over to stand behind Nagato like she was dancing the waltz, gracefully (and so quickly I didn’t have time to admire her poise) escorting the tiny literature club member to the seat Haruhi had been warming.

“.....”

Nagato merely blinked a few times, but that alone told me this twist had come as a surprise to her.

In the blink of an eye, Nagato had replaced Haruhi as our gambler.

But what did that mean? Even Yuki Nagato couldn’t exactly beat what I assumed was the best hand in the game with a pair of threes, especially since this was a straight show of hands with no bluffing or raising. Not unless she straight-up cheated.

Haruhi leaned in, whispering, “Yuki, remember—you’re a wizard. Yuki the Wizard, capable of making the impossible possible. Who cares if they’re cheating? Show them some real magic.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than she pulled out a pointy black hat, and put it on Nagato’s head.

“.....”

I felt like the view before me warped. Like something unexpected had happened, and the world itself was scrambled— Nagato didn’t react, but I got some massive déjà vu.

I’d seen Nagato like this before somewhere. Back then, she’d had more than just a witch’s hat. She’d had the full cape...

I squinted again, and Nagato was dressed just like I remembered her. Pointy hat, black cape.

“.....”

Nagato’s eyes were on Haruhi’s cards, face down on the table.

It felt like she was considering how to win at poker, but Haruhi waved her

arm.

“Here,” she said, handing Nagato a silver stick with a five-pointed star on the end.

“Star Ring Inferno.”

A whisper escaped my lips. Koizumi and Asahina both jumped, looking at me. Clearly, I wasn’t the only one who remembered the wand’s name. But I wasn’t sure *how* I knew it. I imagine they didn’t either. All we had was a strange sort of certainty.

Despite my misgivings, the Prohibition poker battle continued. Whether that title remained accurate was beside the point. Why the wand, why the witch costume, where Haruhi had gotten either—we were past the point of poking at those plot holes. Best not to go against the flow of the story. I didn’t think I could even if I wanted to.

“.....”

Nagato was staring fixedly at the wand in her hand.

Like she was trying to remember where and when she’d seen the thing.

A tiny, unmoving, black-robed figure. Haruhi had her hands on Nagato’s shoulders, her lips almost touching one ear, whispering away.

Instructions of some kind? Nagato raised the wand in her hand. Every gangster’s eyes locked on it. She slowly waved the tip.

“.....”

The star at the tip of the wand tapped each of the five face-down cards in turn.

And that was all.

After a solid thirty seconds of silence, the boss said, “What was the point of all that?”

Exactly my question. Haruhi had tossed her hand on the table, then handed a wand to Nagato—all *she’d* actually done was tap the cards with it.

If this was a magic trick, or they were cheating at cards, there’d have to be

more to it. But with all these eyes on them, even the deftest hand would be caught in the act.

What had Haruhi whispered, and what had Nagato done?

“Just to be clear,” Haruhi said, smiling brightly. “If my cards here are a stronger hand than yours, you have to do whatever we say?”

She was clearly winding him up, and the snake-eyed boss took his time answering.

Eventually he said, “Yeah,” his eyes falling to his own face-down hand. Like he had only just started to doubt his decision to put the cards down.

He then glanced at the dealer, but found only empty space. The bartender was back behind the counter, silently polishing a glass.

The boss’s face twisted diabolically. He’d realized something unexpected was going on.

“Ain’t no way I’ll lose,” he snarled. “My hand’s unbeatable. And there’s no sign of you cheating—you’re just bluffing! But it won’t do you any good.”

Yeah, since this would be decided purely on the strength of the hand dealt, the bluffs and mind games of competitive poker really didn’t apply.

The boss was certain he’d win—but also sensed something unfathomable was going on.

Haruhi and Nagato. When those two worked together, the worst-case scenario could well happen. But in this scenario, that would be the worst case for this deeply insecure mob boss and his lackeys. Pulling the rug out from under them was hardly gonna make me feel a pang of guilt.

“Then cards on the table?” Haruhi grinned. “What say we show hands on three?”

Haruhi’s hand reached out from her black sleeve, picking the cards up.

The boss followed suit.

“One, two...three!”

Both hands were exposed to the light of day.



Or the lights in the room.

Five cards times two.

One hand—a pair of threes.

The other—a royal straight flush of spades. The best possible hand, shocking no one.

What did shock people—was whose hand it was.

A frozen silence filled the speakeasy.

“.....”

I couldn't begin to take the measure of Nagato's surprise. I couldn't even tell if this magic trick had been carried out by her or Haruhi.

But to the mob boss and his henchmen, that difference was trivial.

“Ain't no way!” he bellowed.

I fully sympathized. What had happened was clearly impossible.

Their eyes looked ready to pop out of their skulls.

“How...?!”

Five cards laid out in front of the boss, clearly showing a pair of threes. The same hand Haruhi had been dealt a few minutes before.

In front of Nagato were the ten of spades, then the jack, queen, king, and ace of that suit. Gleaming dully in the lamplight.

During the brief time both hands had been face down—the hands had switched places. And without Nagato ever touching her opponent's hand. All she'd done was tap the backs of her cards with a wand.

“You cheated!” the boss growled.

“Not at all. Like I said—this was *magic*. Yuki's a mage. A bit of a naughty one. But up against scoundrels like you, you're allowed to be bad.”

It wasn't that long since Asahina was our resident mage.

“I didn't think Mikuru could handle a card game.”

And dropping a meteor would not help here.

“.....”

As though her role was done, Nagato got to her feet. She was back in the original black suit. The witch’s hat and cape nowhere to be seen.

“What’d Haruhi say?” I whispered.

“Use a spell to switch the hands.”

So you did that?

“I didn’t do a thing.”

So it *was* Haruhi. Her power of self-persuasion had instantaneously swapped the hands. Physically transporting them. Apport and asport at the same time... Let’s not think about this further.

“Table-side magicians often pull this trick,” Koizumi explained. “They swap the cards too fast for the eye to see by taking advantage of the way human eyes work.”

Even as he spoke, he must have realized this world had no rules and there was no use trying to justify magic or advanced alien technology. His smile was deeply uncertain.

Haruhi beamed at all the gangsters.

“We win! And we played by your rules. Time to hold up your end of the bargain.”

Her eyes swept the crowd.

“Where are these hostages?”

The gangsters froze up. A very unnatural pause. At last, the boss spoke.

“What are you talking about?”

Like he was playing dumb—but he was clearly panicking. Like an announcer forced against their will to read lines not in the script.

Perhaps we’d been meant to lose this poker game? And since there was no way to win it, there was never any intention for the hostages to appear, so they

weren't even here? We'd probably thrown a huge wrench into things.

Haruhi put her hands on her hips.

"You said you'd return them, win or lose. Who were they again? A young man and woman. I dunno their names."

"Shut your mouth, cheater!"

The boss pulled a gun from his shoulder holster, and the rest of the mob followed suit. Our guns were still on the table yonder.

We were seconds from being riddled with bullets. Now what?

Just then—a familiar voice started yelling outside the speakeasy door.

"Chicago PD! It's a raid!"

The hefty wooden door caved in, the lock shattering. Men rushed in with helmets, body armor, and transparent shields.

"Nobody move! Weapons on the floor!"

The cop in front was brandishing a glock (I think) but the only people who obeyed him were the SOS Brigade. I was somewhat shocked Haruhi actually hit the floor, but the gangsters were even more surprised.

"The coppers?!"

They weren't criminals for nothing. The whole outfit was already kicking tables over, erecting makeshift barricades, turning their guns on the new arrivals—and away from us. That was a relief.

But these officers weren't dressed right. They looked like they had come straight out of an early twenty-first century TV show—all modern equipment. Wasn't it supposed to be the 1920s? It felt like two different settings were overlapping.

Accordingly, the gangsters were acting like they were watching the last episode of a samurai drama when all of a sudden aliens invaded Sekigahara and started fighting the Tokugawa Army. Everyone was shocked by the sheer audacity of the historical revisionism. The cops were keeping their guns raised, but seemed equally baffled—only their professionalism kept them focused on

the task at hand.

“You’re under arrest for illegal gambling! Drop your weapons!”

That line also generated a flurry of questions, but at the least it seemed safe to assume they weren’t here about the alcohol. Then I remembered what the old man said when he dropped us off here. Was this the commotion he’d promised? How were we supposed to slip away while surrounded by two heavily armed groups?

The raiding police and black-clad gangsters were in a standoff, going nowhere fast. Fingers on triggers, eyes peeled, tensions mounting...

Haruhi was the first to break it.

She’d been lying face down next to me, but she slowly raised her hands. Like she was leading a cheer or in a robbery, but with the palms facing inward. Like she was facing the collection box at a shrine.

*Bam!*

Then she started clapping her hands in prayer. Well, just one clap.

This signal got the shoot-out started.

Bullets whizzed overhead from both directions. A complete nightmare.

“Eeek!” Asahina wailed, clutching her noggin. Nagato was down like a new hire collapsed in bed after an all-nighter. But I could tell her eyes were open, so she hadn’t actually passed out. Koizumi used his elbows to crawl over to me, yelling over the gunfire.

“Let’s find somewhere to hide!”

Like where? The cops have the entrance occupied.

“Behind the bar! I saw the bartender vanish behind it! And that should hopefully block the bullets!”

Not seeing any other options, I poked Haruhi, then pointed at the bar. She nodded and started crawling. I put my left arm around Asahina and dragged myself across the speakeasy floor with my right arm alone. I probably looked like a wounded soldier on his way back to the trench.

By the time we reached the back of the bar, our suits were covered in dust. The stone-faced bartender was sitting there...silently polishing a glass. He barely glanced at us, just kept polishing. Less like a man of few words than an NPC that had never been given a voice file.

The gunfire was still going strong, and by the time the gun smoke was starting to rival the tobacco smoke, I heard a bell ring.

It pierced my ears like an alarm clock. The source of the sound was on the bar above. The bartender reached up for it and pulled the whole phone down. Very old-fashioned-looking, downright antique. He lifted the receiver and held it to his ear, then silently passed it to me.

I could only think of one person who'd call us here.

"Hello? That you, old-timer?"

"That it is! There's a hidden door in the shelves behind the bar. You can slip out and come to the back alley. I've got a car waiting."

He hung up.

I handed the phone back to the bartender and pointed at the cupboard doors. I assumed that was the way to the pantry. He caught my drift and opened the doors, without ever speaking.

Just enough space for someone to crawl through.

I'd have liked to thank him but had nothing on me. I simply raised a hand and flung myself into the secret exit. I made sure Haruhi, Nagato, Asahina, and Koizumi made it through, then proceeded down the hall beyond. There was a staircase and a heavy door at the top. We managed to shove it open and found ourselves in the black-and-white business district.

The car waiting was a different model from the one that brought us here. This was a Ford Thunderbird convertible.

That same old man was sitting in the driver's seat, cosplaying a Chicago cop.

Another freebie?

"Hurry up. They're on your heels!"

I could hear several sirens closing in. A bit of overkill for an underground casino.

Haruhi claimed shotgun, and the four of us squeezed into the back seat somehow. The Thunderbird pulled out, merging with traffic on the main thoroughfare.

A moment later, I blinked. I'd thought something was odd—color had come back. I assumed we'd moved forward in time, but that may have been premature.

The buildings outside the windows were slowly petering out, as if the SOS Brigade were being driven out of town to an unpaved path through the woods.

"Where next?" Haruhi asked.

I'd like to add, "When next?"

"Well," the man said, hands on the wheel. "I'm as much at the mercy of this as you are. I may well be in a worse position! I have come from nowhere and have nowhere to go. An eternal servant at the mercy of this world."

How much do you know, old-timer?

"Not a thing. They won't let me. I'm not even sure if that's a bad thing."

His voice seemed to be fading out. The view blurred, growing hazy. When it came back in focus—yup, we had new duds on.

Koizumi and I had gone from funeral suits to suits you'd wear to a wedding. So not that different, really. But the girls were all in old-fashioned, frilly party gowns. Colorful jewelry, hair all done up. Talk about preferential treatment.

Also, my butt hurt, so I looked down, and the car seat had been replaced with wood. I pried open the window and looked out—this was a horse-drawn carriage.

Two chestnut horses were trotting along. The old man was holding the reins, wearing a silk hat.

What task awaited us once this carriage stopped? I couldn't begin to guess, but if I was certain of anything—this would hardly be our last adventure. What did they even want from us?

We were in a place that sort of resembled seventeenth-century England, tasked with preventing the assassination of the king. A faction of parliament with ties to an old religious order planned to blow up the palace with the royals in it during a masked ball. A nobleman in favor of the current monarchy ordered us to infiltrate the ball, prevent the explosive plot, and capture those responsible. The king and queen were rather young—shocking no one, they were our old prince and princess. Somehow we managed to stop the attack, and blow up the crooks instead, but got caught in the explosion ourselves and woke up in another world.

The next one was set in Europe during the Second World War. English intelligence suckered us into doing a *Mission Impossible*, “Be a chap and pop over to Germany and fetch one of those Enigma machines!” and Haruhi was totally up for it, so we went from Dover through occupied France to Berlin. Stuff happened, and we did manage to steal the code machine. Then we snuck onto an American submarine under cover of night in Calais, but a German destroyer spotted us, and the rest was every submarine movie ever. By the end, we were rowing away in a rubber dinghy as the sub sank and the destroyer went up in flames. That was when we passed out.

The next was a police drama, where a serial bomber kept leaving us riddles, and we had to use those to disarm the ticking bombs—why are these all about bombs now?

Next we were Heian-era nobles locked in a nasty courtroom power struggle, and the only worthwhile bit was seeing the girls in their twelve-layer kimono.

Then we were vampire hunters invading a vampire’s lair.

Then we were cleaning berserk robots out of a post-apocalyptic ruin.

Then we were in an Arabian Nights setting, stealing a lamp, then an Edo-era zombie story, then another submarine for a nerve-racking deal involving nuclear missiles, then on a failed mission to turn Jupiter into a sun, an escape from a labyrinthian death game, time traveling back to fight dinosaurs, etc., etc., on and on...

And now we were way out at sea.

On the deck of a half-wrecked boat, likely to wither away here. Nothing but

empty ocean in every direction, no masts or smokestacks in the distance coming to our rescue.

Worse, there were no clouds in the sky. The sun was beating down, bouncing off the waters of the Caribbean, doing its best to thoroughly bake our skin.

“Too hot,” I said, glaring at the heavens.

From Stuart England to zombie Edo to Cold War submarines to WWII Germany, we’d been forced to trot the globe. This time we’d wound up on a shore in America somewhere.

The beach looked pleasant enough but before we could even hope for a vacation, we were hired to go shark hunting. Apparently these waters were being terrorized by a man-eating shark, and only we could stop it. Like always, this was framed as a job, but was more of an order. Also like always, Haruhi was instantly on board, and the SOS Brigade followed her lead. One of us procured a high-speed cabin cruiser, and we all climbed in, setting out to slap that shark silly.

This was a major undertaking. There were actually *two* man-eating sharks, each well over five meters long. Our battle with the Jaws brothers was furious. We ended up sticking dynamite in their big ol’ maws and blowing their heads off, but it took us literally an entire day. And one of them gnawed the cruiser’s engine off. With no power of its own, the cruiser got swept up in the current, drifting from sea to sea. No help came, nor were we sent to the next world; with nothing better to do we took shifts sleeping, fishing off the side to keep ourselves fed. The sun rose, and was now high in the sky.

Fortunately, the cabin cruiser had a healthy supply of bottled water, so we weren’t in immediate danger of desiccation, but it was very boring. We’d gotten used to being kicked over to another world at this stage of the proceedings—why weren’t we? We’d accomplished this setting’s goals, right?

“Perhaps,” Koizumi ventured, dangling a fishing line beside me. “It no longer matters whether we complete our mission.”

The girls were decked out in swimsuits, lounging in deck chairs on the ship’s deck, sunning themselves.



The moment we started looking, we found swimsuits, sunglasses, suntan lotion, and tropical drinks. It went beyond well stocked and into overly prepared.

My fishing line refused to budge.

“So what do we do? What are we doing here? How do we escape this endless cycle of crappy games and Z-tier movie worlds?”

“There is one thing I’ve been considering.”

A way to escape this world?

“No, on that front I remain clueless. But I do have a hypothesis about our current predicament. What this world is, and why we are here.”

Koizumi’s face and tone made it clear this would not be good news.

As I dithered about whether I even wanted to know something obviously depressing, the sunlight suddenly dimmed.

“What the—?”

I looked up and found a fog had sprung up around the cruiser. White steam rose from the surface of the ocean. A mystery mist had appeared without warning, growing visibly denser until we couldn’t see at all.

Haruhi took off her sunglasses, sitting up and pointing to port.

“Incoming!”

Good eyes and instincts; our chief was never wrong. A massive shadow loomed out of the pea souper. Had we gone from two sharks to a white whale?

As I remembered just how things had gone for Captain Ahab, something entirely different emerged from the fog. A massive wooden sailing ship. An old galleon, like you see in pirate movies.

Way too ancient to be dispatched on a rescue mission for a stranded pleasure boat.

This galleon pulled up alongside us. For a long moment, it seemed to be taking stock of us—then there was some rummaging about, and a rope ladder fell over the side.

With no engines, we couldn't exactly sunbathe forever. Let's roll with it. I reached for the ladder—and my fingers brushed Haruhi's shoulder.

"I'm going first. Kyon, you bring up the rear. Make sure Mikuru doesn't fall off."

Haruhi scrambled up the ropes like a monkey in a colorful bikini. Nagato followed without making a sound, and Koizumi followed her with a nod to me. Asahina looked quite nervous about it and missed her footing with a squeal, rewarding me with several kicks to the face. Eventually, we all made it up.

Burly arms helped me over the rail onto the deck.

The face attached was red with sunburn, his hair disheveled. When he saw my feet firmly on the ground, he grinned once, then went back to his companions.

The whole crew was assembled on the galleon's deck.

They were all dressed like theme park pirates, their shirts and trousers the worse for wear. Ruddy faces made them seem liable to start passing the rum around at any moment. The physical vibe suggested they were far more suited to violence than intellectual pursuits. Several of them had black patches over one eye, as if advertising their occupations.

A real racial melting pot, so varied I wasn't inclined to try to conduct a census. What mattered was that this was a pirate ship, and they were pirates.

I peeled my eyes, checking to see if that one old man was somewhere in the mix, but we hadn't seen him in a while; maybe his part was done.

Haruhi took a step forward, her gaze sweeping the crew.

"Appreciate the pickup," she said, beaming.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," the crew chorused. They led us inside.

Haruhi waved a hand appreciatively.

"Does this ship have a shower? It does? Then let's hit that up and get changed."

Several pirates (I assume they were mates of some sort) were all bowing and scraping their heads, leading her to the poop deck. We followed in silence. I

realized the mist had thoroughly dissipated. Once more, the sun was blasting us with beams of nuclear fusion, but as dry as the air was, it wasn't *that* hot.

Clearly, we'd shifted worlds again. It was such a seamless transition I hadn't even noticed.

Haruhi was led to the captain's quarters, and I was way past marveling at that. The idea of Haruhi taking any other role on a pirate ship was less likely than the reversal of the Earth's rotation.

The captain's cabin was pretty big for a ship like this. It served as parlor, bedroom, and war room. There was even a shower. A primitive one, with what looked like a watering can at the top, water warmed by sunlight falling straight down. Gave the impression they'd only just thrown it together.

I assumed we'd take turns washing off our sweat and the scent of the brine, then change out of our swimsuits, but the next thing I knew, we already had, and I was fully dressed.

"Huh?" Asahina squeaked, blinking like she'd been tricked by a fox. She was gaping at herself.

I looked down, too.

An open-necked shirt and vest, corsair pants with a leather belt, boots on my feet, and a garish bandana tied pirate-style around my head. Definitely looked like I'd stepped out of the seventeenth century Caribbean, prepared to assault European merchant ships. Everyone's stereotype of a rank-and-file pirate.

Haruhi alone was a step above, sporting a heavily embroidered coat, and a pirate hat with a skull on it. She was sitting at the head of the table.

"Huh?!" Asahina said again, and I knew why. We'd been fast-forwarded a second time and were now seated around this table. One of the crew was serving tea and biscuits. The biscuits were hard as roofing tiles, and the tea had a distinctive flavor, but it wasn't half bad.

"So? Haruhi asked, addressing an eye-patched pirate who seemed important. He was standing a few steps from the table. "What are we doing here?"

Then she karate chopped her biscuit in half, muttering, "These are horrible."

The pirate took out a rolled-up parchment and offered it to her.

Haruhi spread it out on the table, frowning down at it.

“What’s it say? The writing’s too fancy to read. Yuki, interpret.”

Nagato had been nibbling her biscuit like a chipmunk with a walnut.

“.....”

She took the parchment and stared at it.

““In the name of the queen, we require you to fulfill your duties. Sail to the new continent and annihilate the ships of our great enemy, the Spaniards. If you or your companions are captured or killed, our country will disavow all knowledge of you. This message will self-destruct.””

The moment her flat voice finished reading it, the parchment caught fire. No clue how.

That felt like a collage of a bunch of familiar directives, but I couldn’t be bothered to point that out.

“.....”

Nagato dropped the burning document on the table. By the time it landed, it was mostly ash. Call it magic.

“Curious,” Haruhi said, grinding on the biscuit with her back teeth. “We’re privateers, then. I’m not exactly motivated to do anything *for* England, but it seems fun enough. Definitely a tougher challenge than those sharks.”

She flicked her pirate hat, then winked with such flourish you could almost hear the sound effect. This wink was seemingly aimed at someone not seated at the table.

We spent a while attacking every ship in sight and emptying whatever treasure chests they had on board, making the most of the pirate life.

Haruhi set up camp in the crow’s nest, using her hawklike eyes to spot ships on the horizon.

“Enemy ahoy! Full speed ahead!” she’d bellow.

We flew a flag with *SOS* spelled out in skulls, the crew’s roars were like

loudspeakers, and our good ship, the *Golden Fleece* (Haruhi named it) never let any prey escape.

Haruhi had argued in favor of ramming them, but fortunately the galleon possessed no ram, and the best we could do was crash into them sideways. The crew would then throw ropes with grappling hooks to secure the ships together, then pour over the rail with a raucous cry, brandishing sabers and muskets.

Some of the ships we attacked were clearly flying English flags, not Spanish ones, but we didn't care. As if our motto was "Deceive your allies to deceive the enemy," we hit everyone and helped ourselves to all the loot in their hold. The sheer weight of our cargo almost sunk the *Golden Fleece* several times.

We hauled all that coin and the gems back to the nameless island where we made our port. It was getting to be quite a pile. At this rate, we might have to name this place Treasure Island.

Haruhi showed no interest in anything but moolah and sparklies. Even if the ship was laden with spices, she'd just go, "Waste of space." Then generously spare the lives of the crews, and leave enough water and provisions to complete their voyage. If the ship itself was no longer seaworthy, she even gave them a tow to the nearest harbor. But the upshot of this was that no vessels from any nation were venturing near these waters anymore. Our infamy preceded us.

At the moment, Haruhi was glaring at the horizon through a telescope up on our main mast. Not the captain's job, but I wasn't about to complain.

Asahina was (obviously) unsuited for combat, so she mostly kept to the kitchen or the mess hall, happily (if clumsily) toiling away. Nagato was seated with her back to the main mast, reading an extremely old and hefty book.

Finally, Koizumi and I were once again fishing off the port side (for lack of anything better to do). The wind had died away to a calm, and we were immobilized on the glittering blue.

As directionless as the five of us.

The sun was directly overhead, but the air was dry, so it didn't feel too bad.

An improbably comfortable temperature, like we had the AC on. I was starting to wonder just what time of year it was, but finding out wouldn't really change anything, so I simply locked my eyes on my bite-free line.

We weren't exactly engaging in a game of chicken to see who'd break the silence first, but for the record, Koizumi lost.

"They're not biting."

Nope. I didn't feel like they ever would.

"Perhaps the fish won't bite because you think they won't."

Maybe not. No clue what you'd even catch in this day and age in these waters.

"Did you bait your line at all? I can't seem to recall doing that."

It wasn't clear if there were hooks on these lines, let alone bait. I had no memory of casting.

"We could pull them up and find out."

We could. But for some reason, I didn't feel like it.

"True. Arguably, speculating on the possibilities is a better way to pass the time than actually confirming things. What lies on the ends of these two lines, if anything? A metaphysical quandary."

Isn't it about time?

"Yes?"

"What are we doing? How long are these slapdash plays going to continue?"

Koizumi looked at me like it was his first time hearing a myna bird speak.

That bothered me, but my lips kept moving.

"And when did we even find ourselves together here?"

"Well," Koizumi said, wagging his rod like he was testing a catch. "We've long since come unstuck in time. Ever since we got here."

I reflectively echoed that phrase, sensing a question bubbling to the surface.

"Where *is* here? Does here mean this sea?"

“No, I meant from the very start. That medieval fantasy world, the countless galactic empires, the sham western town, and all the rest that followed.”





Koizumi seemed to be gauging my reaction. He had apparently made up his own mind about something, nodding to himself.

“Perhaps it is time. I think I’ll be allowed to speak without interruption.”

I considered what that meant and worked it out.

“Ah...yeah, I’ve had my doubts about this world any number of times, but every time it felt like a switch flipped inside my head.”

“Like your thoughts were forced into a different lane?”

Like a forced stop on my train of thought.

“And our very memories are unreliable.”

I feel like I should be remembering something but can’t. Trying makes my mind go fuzzy.

“When exactly were we thrown into this world?”

In spring of my first year of high school, I met Haruhi Suzumiya, we formed the SOS Brigade, and what happened after that I mostly didn’t *want* to remember...

But when I tried, I got stuck, like the memories were flattened under a giant boulder in my brain. Which was obviously messed up. I felt like things had gone down over the summer, and something else had happened after the seasons changed, but couldn’t remember what.

But the wand and hat Nagato briefly wore *had* looked familiar.

“In the Prohibition speakeasy, yes. The phrase ‘Star Ring Inferno’ rang a bell. It did seem rather like a name Suzumiya would come up with.”

It was pretty dumb, yeah. Haruhi tended to come up with dumb names.

“As for where we are...”

Koizumi’s smiles were *always* zero yen.

“First, let us establish a major premise.”

Should I start?

“This world isn’t real,” I said.

Koizumi's faint smile grew less faint. Perhaps it was a fifty-yen smile now.

"Almost certainly. This a virtual space. A virtual reality, in the parlance of the times."

The way things worked and felt seems more like a simulated space than a physical transportation to an alternate universe. For all the world like we were in an exceptionally real 3D action RPG, with all the background and props made with computer graphics. I had no such praise for the story. Talk about incoherent. One minute it was a fantasy, the next a space opera. We'd get flung into a western, then shortly after, forced to play poker with the mob. I had to assume the scriptwriter was drunk.

"Which means," Koizumi continued, "the five of us aside, everyone here are NPCs prepared by the game master."

I pictured the crew in the mess hall.

The kitchen was entirely run by a muscle-bound bald guy and Asahina, and the rest of the crew members were gathered around the table, yukking it up, drinking, and chowing down.

Asahina was learning to cook, and doubling as a waitress, but as she approached the crew, they'd sit bolt upright, going very quiet—and start making a racket again once she moved away. Total background noise. Just extras there to set the scene.

And they all had bog-standard NPC faces. So generic you'd forget them the second you looked away.

"I once attempted to determine how capable their thought processes are."

The Turing test?

"I merely asked a simple question. Ever heard of a city called Tokyo? They said they hadn't heard of it. Do you have any brothers? They said they didn't. Same answer for all of them. None of them ever said anything like 'What's a Tokyo? Why are you asking?' Just the same responses every time, verbatim."

Sloppy work. That old-timer who kept showing up—and maybe the mob boss—must have been exceptions.

“When I pressed the point and kept asking, they eventually began ignoring me.”

How many times did that take?

“Around fifty.”

Even an NPC would get annoyed. I felt sorry for both parties in that dreary Q&A.

“For that reason, I’ve concluded that this world is not real, but a VR space.”

No arguments here. The problem is how we wound up here. I couldn’t remember the beginning.

Koizumi held up two fingers.

“Two possibilities. First, we have donned a brain-dive-type interface, sending our minds alone into this world. Our real bodies are unconscious or asleep.”

No memory of that, and if a machine that fantastic actually existed, you’d think it would have made the news.

“Secondly, we are merely copies of our actual minds.”

A shadow crossed the self-proclaimed psychic’s face.

“Cut off from our bodies, nothing more than a clone of our minds. In which case, the real ones are going about their lives in the real world. We would be mere copies, cognitive twins.”

So someone scanned our brains, made a backup of that, supplied physical data, and reconstructed us in a virtual space.

Even if you could copy a human mind, that would be a ridiculous amount of data. Where would they keep it?

“On the server of a quantum computer. Or perhaps...”

No use thinking about it?

“Then who’s behind it?”

Just making sure—what if this was Haruhi’s power gone berserk?

“I am becoming quite an expert on Suzumiya’s powers and mental state. And

I'm quite certain it isn't."

He rarely sounded that firm.

"It goes without saying that the agency is incapable of doing anything like this. I do not believe it to be the work of any human. Perhaps in the future things will change—but in that case, Asahina is far more duplicitous than we'd imagined."

It was possible she'd just not been informed, but I had to agree this wasn't the work of any human. It was too fundamentally weird to have been developed by anyone from our world.

"So," I said. "What do we do? Do we just keep up the shitty role-playing as the stage keeps getting swapped in and out?"

"If we are cognitive clones in a VR space, then this will continue indefinitely. At least until the administrators tire of it and hit the delete button, or power down the server."

If we died in here...I guess we did that already in the fantasy world.

"If they shut it down, our minds will vanish, but that's all. Our real selves will keep on living normal—or abnormal—lives."

"However," he added, tapping a finger on his temple, "if our minds are still connected to our bodies, brainjacked into this world, then our flesh is likely on a bed, couch, or gaming chair, unable to wake up. In that case, if we're removed from this world...will our bodies simply wake up, go on sleeping never to wake again, or some even worse outcome? I cannot begin to tell."

I highly doubt that.

"On what grounds?"

Haruhi and I are one thing, but if you, Nagato, and Asahina aren't waking up from a coma, do you think the forces behind you are just gonna twiddle their thumbs? They aren't being psychics, aliens, and time travelers for their health.

"That's a good point."

Koizumi flicked his bangs with his fingertips.

"But that does leave us in a bit of a pickle. If we're cognitive copies, then

there's nothing we can do. Just as an NPC in an online game has no capacity to change the world."

I'm less sure. I mean, imagine an exact copy of Haruhi. Clone or doppelgänger, she's still *Haruhi*.

"You have a lot of faith in Suzumiya."

Don't make it creepy. Don't give me that look. It's a simple statement of fact.

"Getting back on track," I said, since at least one of us had to try to advance this plot. "How would we determine which of these hypotheses is accurate?"

"There's no way to tell. For the simple reason that we don't remember how we got here. Are we the originals or merely copies? In our current state, we have no way to determine that."

Got it. Raising the white flag. I turned around and held up a hand.

"Nagato, hate to interrupt your reading, but can we borrow you?"

I figured she'd have worked stuff out by now.

She'd been reading in the shadow of the main mast, out of the direct sunlight. Her head slowly came up.

"....."

Her gaze rested on me a full second before she closed the book and quietly got to her feet. She walked toward us on silent footsteps, her tiny frame clad in pirate sailor garb.

"....."

She stopped behind us, staring down with eyes like the sea at night.

I'd called her here, but that didn't make it easier to say the next bit.

Honestly, I was afraid to ask. The answer could spell our doom...and if you can laugh at me for hesitating, laugh away.

"I know how you feel," Koizumi said. "I myself have been putting it off, hoping against hope we might spontaneously return to reality."

I let this small comfort go in one ear and out the other, getting to the point.

“Did you hear us talking?”

Nagato’s emotionless face moved slightly, nodding.

I took a deep breath.

“Is the Data Overmind behind this?”

“I cannot rule out the possibility,” Nagato said flatly, her expression never budging. “But the odds of it are not high.”

Really?

“I cannot detect any traces of the Overmind’s involvement. The faint noises I detect in this space are similar, yet distinct from the Overmind I know. An unknown sensation I cannot properly verbalize.”

Koizumi leaned in. “Essentially, it doesn’t feel like the way the Overmind does things?”

Nagato neither nodded nor shook her head. Perhaps this was a concept human words could not explain.

“Are you in contact with the Overmind?”

“I cannot detect the Data Overmind at all. The link is severed.”

That should be a big deal, but she seemed unconcerned. I sighed dramatically.

If Nagato’s boss was behind this, there’d been a chance we could persuade it, but that hope had just been crushed.

“Nagato,” Koizumi said, uncharacteristically eager. “Of the two hypotheses I mentioned—either one—which do you see as the more likely explanation?”

“.....”

Nagato’s head tilted wordlessly to one side.

It felt like a long time since I’d seen her use body language to communicate anything but a yes or a no.

A response rare enough that Koizumi’s eyes actually widened.

“Then...assuming it is true that this isn’t reality, am I wrong to declare this a binary choice between our bodies in a brain-dive device or our minds copied

over?”

Nagato nodded. “Not confirmed. Speculation,” she said, her voice almost a sigh. “Listen accordingly.”

Her eyes locked directly on me.

“We are not on a computer server. We are not data in any sort of mechanical memory conduit. We are quantum information in a data space.”

“.....”

This ellipsis was all mine. I didn’t fully grasp what Nagato was saying, but was that just me?

“We’re quantized?” Koizumi said immediately. “This whole state of affairs?”

His hand leaped to his chin, considering that.

“By refuting the server concept, you mean to suggest the apparatus generating this virtual space is incorporeal?”

“Quanta are a form of corporeal,” Nagato replied.

“Oh, I see.”

What did he see? I saw nothing.

“Pardon me,” Koizumi told me. “Nagato, you mean we are neither the original’s mind alone nor virtual creations cloned from our minds, but have ourselves been quantized?”

He did not seem relieved to discover we weren’t copies.

I got why. Koizumi and I were one thing. Asahina and Nagato were just barely tolerable.

But it felt deeply dangerous for the real-ass Haruhi to be stuck in here.

Dropping Haruhi and her unknowable, unfathomable, mystery power in this maddening mystery space could not possibly end well. If Haruhi caught on that this wasn’t real, what would she wish for, and where would her unconscious thoughts take us?

But Nagato had cocked her head again.

“Our physical forms remain in the real world. The versions of us in this space are superimposed over our corporeal bodies via the principles of quantum mechanics.”

“...Quantum superposition?” Koizumi parroted, looking stunned. It sounded like that was all the response he could manage.

Head still at an angle, Nagato’s whisper voice droned on.

“Strictly speaking, inaccurate. This is beyond Earth’s current understanding of quantum physics on a multidimensional and higher dimensional sense.”

“So the principles at work are noticeably different from the quantum mechanics we know?”

These questions spoke volumes about Koizumi’s current state of mind.

“That conclusion is substantially accurate.”

“So quantum theory is merely the best tool available to explain our current state.”

“Not the best, merely better.”

“Taken to heart. Let us call it a quantum-like.”

His lips managed to recover his default faint smile.

“Still, superposition? The five of us are simply one set of an ever-expanding sea of possibilities? Unevenly distributed in all directions?”

“Not that many. Likely two. Entanglement.”

“Quantum entanglement? Between what and...oh, our current selves and our real selves?”

“Not entirely accurate. But I estimate the situation is functionally similar. Unverified. Many unknown factors demand the suspension of definitive conclusions.”

There are few things as discouraging as listening to a discussion you even can’t begin to understand.

Quantum mechanics? Quantum theory? Entanglement? Have some pity on my brain.



“So what does this mean?” I interjected, trying to boil it down. “Are we copies or the originals?”

“According to Nagato’s suggestion,” Koizumi said, eyes rather distant, “both the versions of ourselves in the real world and the versions of us here are real. If I oversimplify it, there’s some form of dissociation at play; our real selves remain in the real world, but we’ve also been converted to quantum data and are trapped in this virtual space. Am I accurate so far?”

He glanced at Nagato, who nodded.

I think I sort of got it? We were here but also simultaneously in standard reality, and both versions of us were ‘real.’ I found that hard to believe, but truth was stranger than fiction.

What kind of logic was this? What did quantized mean?

Koizumi and Nagato exchanged glances, and she averted her eyes.

“.....”

“Oh dear. Quantum theory—I’m afraid I can’t exactly explain that off the top of my head. Give me some time to marshal my thoughts. I’ll fill you in later.”

If it was bad enough for Nagato to pass the buck, this must be a real headache.

So be it. I could learn about quanta some other time. Before that, I had something to ask Nagato.

“As far as our current predicament goes, is there nothing your data manipulation powers can do about it?”

Eyes like freshly harvested black pearls turned my way.

“My cognitive functions are restricted here. Conjecture, but something’s occupying my processing power.”

So someone’s holding Nagato’s F5 button down and blocking her special skills?

“Not that aggressive. More like interference.”

Nagato’s tone was always calm, but this response did not fully alleviate my

concerns. Fundamentally, she was our best hope in situations like this. A futureless visitor from the future, a psychic with powers he couldn't use, and a thoroughly typical high school boy did us no good here.

Realizing her explanation was inadequate, Nagato elaborated.

"It feels more like a probe than an active attack."

A probe? Like a scan? What does being scanned feel like?

"....."

Nagato abruptly stood and raised both hands. Sketching a large rectangle with them, she crouched down, then moved her hands as if peeling an invisible rectangle from the space in front of her. My brain was filling in the gaps, assuming she'd opened an invisible portal.

Nagato stood back up, took a step toward the rectangle she'd drawn, then turned toward me.

"....."

Staring at me with cloudless eyes.

"Were you using pantomime to explain what being scanned feels like?"

"Not pantomime," she corrected. "It always feels like that."

What that was supposed to be honestly escaped me, but since Nagato had gone to the trouble of physically demonstrating it, I chose to go with gratitude instead.

I shot her a thumbs-up. "I kinda get it! So that's what it's like. I see!"

I could feel Koizumi stifling a laugh. I stifled a sigh.

"But you could have told us sooner."

"I'm waiting for the right moment."

Odd tense choice. Not "*was waiting*," but she still is? For what moment?

"Escape."

Koizumi and I looked at each other. When had we least heard anything that proactive from Nagato? With our spotty memories, maybe that wasn't the most

useful question.

“Don’t suppose we can ask you to elaborate—”

Not like I can read every minute shift in her expression, but her vibe definitely changed.

“—guess not.”

Whoever had flung us into this world was likely listening in. Offering spoilers here would be a sin.

“Nagato, if you’ll allow me to indulge in a moment of pure curiosity,” Koizumi said, eyes gleaming like a grade school student whose eyes have just been opened to the wonders of science during a classroom experiment. “I’m convinced this world is a quantum data space, but to make such an expansive virtual environment feasible, what sort of interface would that require?”

“Interface unknown.”

“An example will suffice. What manner of thing would make it possible?”

“A quantum calculation processing system the size of a dwarf planet made entirely of photons.”

“That sounds like it would require a tremendous amount of energy. A Dyson sphere?”

“Given human technological capabilities, yes.”

“This world isn’t inside one, is it?”

“Unclear.”

“Is this more like the holographic principle?”

“Unclear.”

The Made-in-Cosmos synthetic android and the deeply fishy psychic boy’s academic debate was sailing right over my head, so I broke in. I had a question of my own that had been on my mind.

“Do you know when this is? If you’ve got memories from right before our arrival, I’d like to hear them.”

“They’re vague.”

Even Nagato wasn’t clear on this point. That spoke volumes about how nasty this place was.

“In the Prohibition speakeasy, Haruhi pulled that hat out of nowhere. Did that or the wand with a star help?”

Nagato responded with a three-second unblinking silence.

“.....The movie,” she said, with a voice like squeezing all the juice out of a ripe fruit. “We filmed one.”

We made our own movie? What for? Oh...I guess Haruhi *would*.

“.....I think.”

Nagato’s expression never shifted, but I could tell her brain was in overdrive. The light was fading from her eyes. I could no longer see my reflection in them.

Not good. I realized my error instinctively before my logic caught up.

“Enough, Nagato. No need to remember more.”

I waved my hand before her eyes.

“.....”

Too late. Nagato was unresponsive. It was like all her functions had locked up, her screen frozen. Something was attacking Nagato, interfering. She’d retreated deep inside, battling it, trying to recover the manipulated memories.

“Shit...!”

Digging into the blocked memories had been a trap. They were inaccessible, or set up to be. That’s why Koizumi (and likely Haruhi and Asahina) had unconsciously avoided prodding them.

Nagato had likely sensed something similar. But my careless question had made her step right into the trap she’d been carefully avoiding.

I’d assumed I’d remember eventually and tried not to force it.

But that sort of *que será, será* thinking didn’t apply to Nagato. If she had a record that made it possible to recover the memories, she’d try to access it—

and get stuck in the spiral.

A fatal peril waiting for the unsuspecting. If this was the intent of whoever had created this space, we'd fallen right into their trap.

Damn, I'd let this harmless vibe pull the rug right out from under me.

"Nagato?" Koizumi said, unusually grim.

We couldn't lose her here.

I put my hands on those slim sailor-suited shoulders. I tried shaking her, but to no avail.

Please, come back to us.

"Nagato!"

Panic rising, like my ice-cold organs were trying to escape through my throat.

Then—

"Ship! Spanish flags!"

Haruhi's cry resounded from the heavens.

She plunged down a rope from the crow's nest, landing—or falling—nearby.

"Ten o'clock! Three-ship convoy! No escorts!"

A moment later, her pirate hat caught up. She caught it and put it back on.

"Kyon, Yuki, snap out of it!"

Haruhi yelled right in our ears, loud enough for the whole ship to hear.

"Battle stations!"

She ran off toward the stern. Likely to fetch her weapon.

.....No, that was for the best. Recovering, I turned back to Nagato.

"....."

She was her usual expressionless self.

I removed my hands from her shoulders.

She blinked once, confirmed her position, and nodded slowly.

“Sorry, Nagato.”

“It’s fine.”

Her short hair shook with her head, then she considered things.

“That was careless,” she said. An accurate assessment.

Haruhi’s deafening voice had really bailed us out. Thank god those Spanish ships showed up in time. Koizumi smiled, looking equally relieved.

“Interrupted, for better or for worse. Was this uncanny timing intentional, or an accident?”

Dunno, but guess we’ll have to continue until this job’s done, at least.

“Our memories might get meddled with during the commotion,” I said, glancing at Nagato. “If possible, I hope you’ll manage to retain this conversation. But don’t force yourself. Be careful.”

“Understood,” she nodded. “I’ll put the highest-level alerts in place and constantly cross-check before engaging in thought.”

We almost never saw her so demonstrably determined.

Koizumi and I dropped our fishing rods over the railing. Now what lay at the end of the lines would remain an eternal mystery. Appropriate, since I’d never given a damn about the answer.

The three of us ran off to our stations, mingling with the crew.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nagato opening her book, as if checking something, but this was no time to ask why.

For now, I’d have to go back to dancing in the palm of someone’s hand. Role-playing a privateer attacking galleons laden with loot, I ran off to fight.

The battle was easily won.

With us as the losers.

The *Golden Fleece* sailed in alone, and the Spanish flotilla simply waited for us. By the time we realized what that meant, it was too late.

Somehow, the entire outer hulls of the galleons blew up, revealing armored

frigates bristling with cannons. They'd disguised themselves as merchants.

And we'd sailed right into their trap.

We were soon under fire, and Haruhi decided retreat was impossible, so she ordered us to close in on the enemy flagship. The NPC sailors' flawless seamanship made that happen.

Once we were that close, the enemy ships couldn't exactly keep firing.

Haruhi ordered the crew to board, and they leaped aboard the enemy ship with a roar. She tried to follow them, but Koizumi and I managed to restrain her, sticking to musket fire.

At first, our side had momentum, but the battle slowly turned against us.

The other two enemy ships moved in, pinning the *Golden Fleece* down—and then they rammed us. Spanish marines boarded us, sabers in hand.

We fought back hard and managed to half scupper one ship, so arguably we did well. But our valiant resistance proved futile, and NPCs we'd dined and berthed with were flung into the waters, or fell victim to the enemies' blades and bullets. That stung. I hoped they'd find themselves playing bit parts in a more peaceful setting next time.

The enemy cannons downed the *Golden Fleece's* mizzenmast, and that decided the battle. Flight was no longer an option.

But here Nagato sprang into action, raising her bow, and shooting fire arrows at the enemy sails. Didn't matter when she'd acquired that thing; we managed to peel ourselves away from the Spaniards as they tried to douse the flames.

A miraculous gust of wind caught us, and our half-wrecked ship rode that gust like a speed skater racing toward the horizon.

That was a while ago.

Now we were adrift on the waters.

Including the shark hunt, this was our second time stranded at sea.

The really fatal blow from that fight was the damage to our rudder. Only the wind knew where we were bound, and said wind had died completely the

moment we were out of harm's way. Now we were just rocking on the waves.

The NPC sailors had vanished like so much smoke, and all the hustle and bustle of the mess hall was nowhere to be seen. Almost like a ghost ship.

Haruhi decided to take a nap on the poop deck. I didn't see Asahina or Nagato around, but they were likely making tea or reading old books down in the mess.

That left Koizumi and me with the deck to ourselves. We decided to lie down, staring up at the sky.

After a while, I started to feel like I was forgetting something.

"What was it?"

I was pretty sure we'd been having a serious conversation before the battle with the fake Spanish merchants.

"I also sensed that," Koizumi said. "I'm convinced we discussed something vital between boarding this ship and that last battle. I'm certain this is no trick of the mind, but cannot for the life of me remember what it involved."

The mind does play these tricks on you. People's names or words you know that you know just get stuck on the tip of your tongue. Foreign words you've definitely seen before—but you can't seem to remember what they mean. The right word generally pops up later, when you least expect it.

"Whatever, we'll remember it eventually."

Putting it out of my mind, I rolled over—and found something stuffed in my pants pocket. I sat up and fished it out. A wadded-up piece of paper.

"What the...?"

I straightened it out. Writing, in English.

Koizumi sat up, leaning in.

"A page from the book Nagato was reading. Oh, it's the Bible...If that's King James, it hardly fits our current temporal location, but I believe that's a passage from the Book of Job."

It looked rather hastily torn out. Some Nagato-style sleight of hand had somehow placed this in my pocket. Looking closely, some of the letters were



underlined. Perfectly straight lines, like she'd used a ruler—the only new ink on the page.

### **remember me**

Even I could read that much. But what could it mean...?

“There's little room for interpretation. Is she trying to remind us of something...?”

Not like we'd ever forget Nagato.

Koizumi's head snapped up.

“No, hold that thought. I remember Nagato reading this book. Open on her knees beneath the mast.”

He tapped his brow with one finger.

“We were close by, fishing—”

I heard a whirring noise, like a video tape rewinding, then someone pressed the invisible stop button and playback resumed. White flag. Called Nagato. She'd closed her book and walked over toward us—this was in slo-mo.

“I remember now.”

My fist clenched the page of calligraphy.

“We were talking about what this world is and what's happening to us. Only to be interrupted by the Spanish ships.”

Koizumi sighed.

“Yes, we've been quantized. It's all coming back to me. We have to assume they *are* manipulating our memories, then.”

But they weren't that good at it. I wasn't sure if that was by design, but our minds were still our own.

If my mind was this clear, Nagato's must be even more so. Haruhi and Asahina appeared to be fully absorbed by their roles and just having fun with it; the latter was one thing, but I was extremely reluctant to take these facts to Haruhi right now. Whoever was behind this might be hoping we'd do just that.

Best to keep an eye on things and continue the talk with Nagato and Koizumi.

“So where is Nagato?”

As we rose to our feet, we found the *Golden Fleece* about to plunge into a wall of fog. More of a smoke screen, really; like a white summer cloud on the surface of the ocean. Koizumi was right next to me, but I couldn't even make out his face.

This again. It was just like a very obvious transition between the shark hunt and the arrival of this ship.

We were between worlds. What stage awaited us next? I tightened my grip on the scrap of paper, swearing not to forget myself again.

From the poop deck, I heard a door open and close.

Three figures appeared in the mist, a faint glow around them.

They pierced the white fog. Haruhi, with Asahina and Nagato on either side.

Their clothes alone proved we were switching worlds.

“Heads up, we're almost at our destination,” Haruhi said, the moment we could make out her face. Her smile somehow even smugger than usual.

Was that a chiton? Those white tunics they're always wearing in anything based on ancient Greece. The fabric was draped elegantly over them like a long dress. Didn't seem like any of them were supposed to be your average village girls.

Not just Haruhi, either—Nagato and Asahina were also backlit, highlighted by a visible glow that picked out their silhouettes.

If they had wings and a halos, they'd unmistakably be angels, but it didn't seem like we were going there. Which meant, uh. Only one thing.

These were goddesses. Not metaphorically. Literally.

Haruhi was sizing me up, Asahina was gaping at her own dated fashion and making little noises, Nagato was standing bolt upright and immobile—and I was seized with a wild impulse to genuflect.

I knew better, but my mind was forced to perceive them as goddesses

descended from the heavens, their divinity so awesome it made me want to prostrate myself.

“Oh my,” Koizumi said, shaking his head. He was likely fighting the same impulse.

Asahina was particularly hard to look at. It felt like staring too long at her would make my eyes fall out. I shook off the reverential compulsion and turned to Nagato.

“.....”

Our eyes met. The diminutive goddess nodded once. Her eyes retained their usual calm.

*Remember me.* I chanted those words internally, like a mantra. I couldn't let this freakish world's machinations consume me. I still had a page of the Bible in one hand. I had my doubts about the claims of monotheism, but it did provide some measure of solace.

The mist clinging to our bodies was swept away by a gentle breeze, and our vision cleared.

The sky was too blue. The ocean spread out below. Tufts of clouds drifted by.

A bit of inertia. The ship was accelerating.

I looked up, and the masts and sails were no longer galleon style. From the ship's sides, I heard the sound of long poles smacking the water.

Looking over the rail, I spotted so many oars I was disinclined to count. They were rowing us forward with well-trained movements.

“A trireme,” Koizumi stated.

So this was ancient Greece? Or Rome?

“*Our* clothes are more Roman.”

His own duds had given way to white cloth, like a toga. Like he'd stepped out of the crowd of former senators in the painting, *The Death of Caesar*. I was wearing much the same.

The *Golden Fleece* had been beautifully restored from a shattered galleon to a

brand-new trireme and was moving full speed ahead toward land now visible on the horizon.

That hazy shadow was growing steadily distinct, and by the time we reached shore, we beheld the massive stone walls of a fortress town.

“Troy,” Nagato muttered.

Aha. Now we knew where we were, at least. And what the girls’ roles were. Still, that didn’t tell us what we had to do. Battling off a primal fear, I lent an ear to my unconscious. I heard no voice telling me I was Paris. That was a relief.

The original plotline had long since veered so far off track there was no correcting it. What happened to saving a kidnapped couple? Had that mission been retracted?

The beach didn’t seem to have any sort of wharfs on it.

The trireme simply rode up on the sand, then listed sideways.

Her arm aglow, Haruhi held it out to me.

I watched close, wondering where this was going.

“Don’t just stand there,” she said, clearly amused. “Escort me.”

I reflexively took her hand, and the port side transformed into some parquetry, forming a staircase to the beach below. I felt a bead of cold sweat run down my back. I didn’t think ancient ships that plied the Aegean Sea came with transformative functions, but arguably that was proof of divine providence in this world.

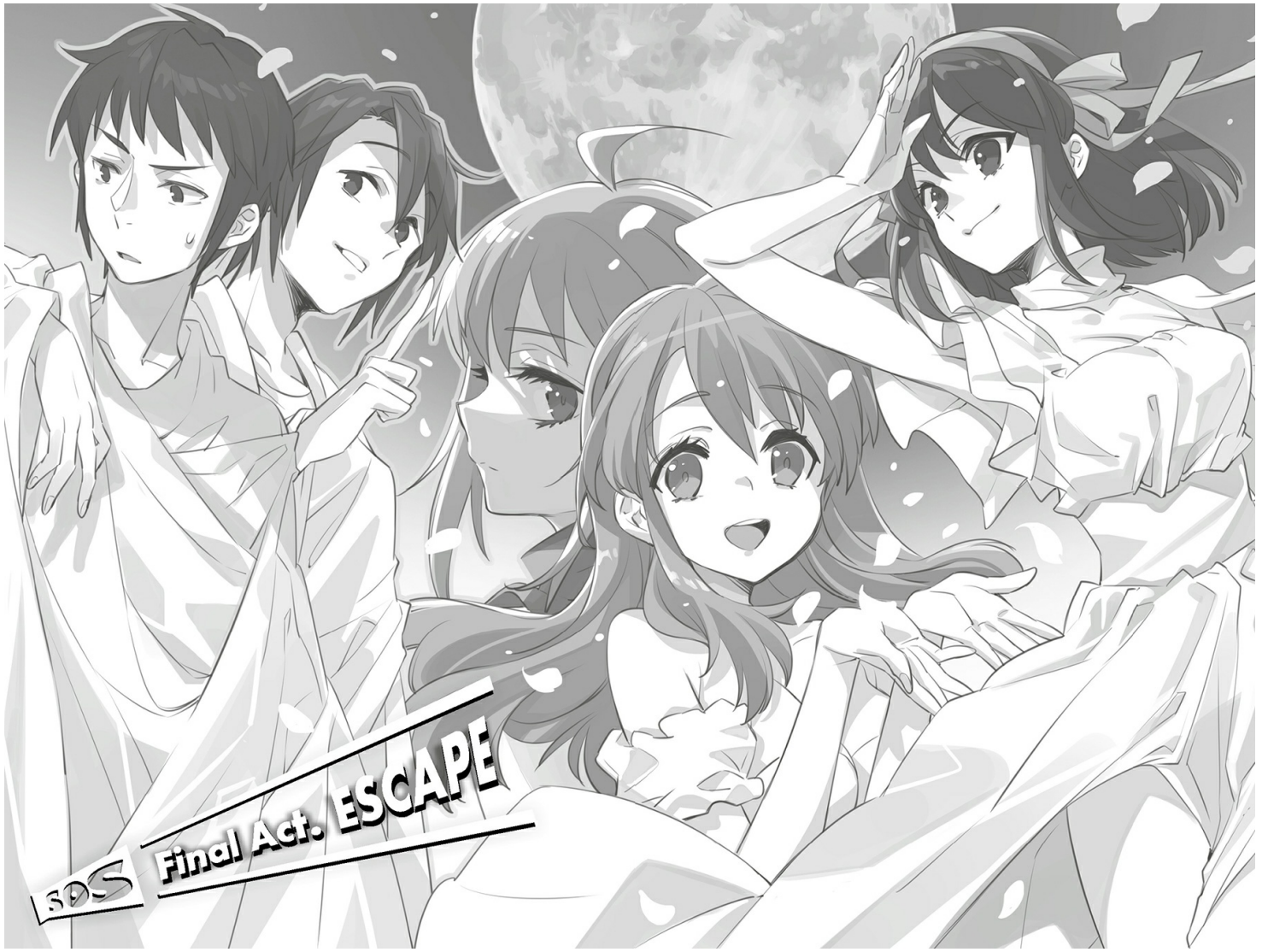
“Come on.”

I acted the part of a humble servant, leading Haruhi down the stairs, her hand on mine. Koizumi did the same for Asahina, and Nagato just stomped down the steps on her own. Our feet hit the white sands, but we were given no time to savor the feel of dry land.

Burly men in armor stood before us in two rows bristling with spears. Several hundred ancient warriors had formed an aisle for us to walk down.

Which side were they on? The Trojans? The Grecian alliance landing party?

In perfect sync, they raised their spears, crossing them above the aisle. The tips caught the sunlight, gleaming, and we marched through the shimmering air across the burning sands toward the fortress beyond.



I've no idea when I learned this, but somehow, I knew a fair amount about the Trojan War. It probably doesn't need an introduction, but I should do a quick rundown anyway.

Troy was said to lie east of the Aegean Sea, on the coast of Asia Minor. Most famously, it was the subject of an attack by the Greeks in the *Iliad*, a famous story crafted by the Greek poet Homer approximately eight centuries before the birth of Christ. For a long while, there was doubt as to whether the legendary city actually existed, but ruins were eventually found in a famously dramatic manner.

The Trojan War itself took place during Mycenaean era Greece, approximately 1300 BCE. The fighting went on for a whole decade and only ended with the destruction of the city.

The mythological war began with the Judgment of Paris and ended with the Trojan Horse, the ultimate ancient jack-in-the-box. This latter was so famous it even got a computer virus named after it, but Homer's *Iliad* actually doesn't mention *either*. It seems they were both common knowledge among all Greeks at the time, and he didn't need to cover those bits.

The war was hardly started for the best of reasons.

Eris, goddess of strife and discord, was incensed about not being invited to a wedding on Olympus and devised a scheme to pay them back. She furiously swiped a golden apple made by Hephaestus, wrote, *To the fairest one* on it, then tossed it onto a table at the wedding banquet. As she'd hoped, several goddesses in attendance insisted it belonged to them, kicking off an epic catfight.

Lord knows how the bride and groom must have felt. Peleus (the groom) must have found the sight especially horrifying. He was busy marrying the goddess Thetis, and their union would result in the birth of Achilles.

The apple argument eventually boiled down to Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena. But no resolution proved forthcoming. Sensing that this could well go on forever, they turned to the king of gods, Zeus, hoping he would decide who deserved the apple.

Hera was Zeus's wife, Aphrodite the goddess of love and beauty, and Athena the goddess of wisdom, an eternal virgin.

No matter who Zeus picked, it would cause problems, so he passed the buck to a young prince of Troy—Paris.

Really, bro, you gotta give to Hera, truth be damned.

Paris was probably stuck going, "Why me, tho?" but if the king of gods asks you to do a thing, you do it. While he wrestled with the decision, all the goddesses tried to bribe him, each offering a reward if he chose them. Hera offered to make him super rich and the king of Asia, Athena offered technological knowledge and the power to win any battle, and Aphrodite promised to hand him the world's most beautiful woman.

Perhaps knowing his limits, Paris ultimately went with Aphrodite, and the goddess of beauty did her thing, giving the prince the hottest lady of the day—Helen.

If that had been the end of it, this would have been another cute story about how the gods are just like us—but there was one big problem. Helen was already married. And her husband was Menelaus, little brother to Agamemnon, the king of Sparta. Even if a goddess said so, having your girl NTRed by some foreign prince and hauled off to Troy must have been pretty dang infuriating. His bro got hopping mad, too.

Agamemnon demanded all of Greece team up to go after Paris and take Helen back, and all the other kings and heroes were on board. This was basically a collection of dudes who had tried to woo Helen themselves and got brushed aside.

Anywho they marshaled forces, put a fleet together, and sailed across the Aegean to Troy where the fighting began.

For this one woman, two armies were locked in a long tug-of-war, a chaotic mess going nowhere fast. Plus, for totally selfish reasons, their gods were taking sides and making things a whole lot worse. The stalemate left both sides sick of the constant fighting, but nine long years went by. Finally— That's what got them to the end of the Trojan War. It's all legendary, so the truth may be pretty different, but you get the gist. *The Odyssey* is actually about the fifty days that



happened after the conclusion of all that.

Naturally, the above is all simply the account passed down to us, and nobody knows what the real history was, or even if there was a war at all.

And here we stood, in a place of half myth, half history—but I'm afraid we had no time to revel in that.

This was a virtual space where someone had hocked up a slapdash version of the myth. A hollow replica.

Apparently, we'd been met by the Trojans.

Ripped ancient soldiers led us into the fortified city.

Inside the sturdy walls, and along stone-paved streets. To my surprise, our final destination was outdoors.



I'd assumed we were going to the palace to see King Priam. But apparently we weren't here to join the battle—the structure they took us to made that obvious.

It was an amphitheater made of white stone.

A semicircle of descending seats looked down on the stage at the bottom. The stage itself was a long rectangle with a wall behind it; you see a lot of these in Greek and Roman ruins.

Here, we changed guides, the armored Trojan soldiers replaced with some unnervingly beautiful women, each dressed much like our party's girls.

A lady smiling like the marble bust in the art room escorted Haruhi to the VIP seats. Asahina and Nagato received guides of their own, each attended by women who looked like they'd stepped out of a Mucha painting.

The VIP seats were at the top of the amphitheater; three lavishly decorated thrones. The ladies gestured, and Haruhi planted herself on the center throne, gazing down at the stage like she was granting an audience.

Asahina sat to her right, and Nagato to her left.

The relief carvings on their seats each bore a distinct style. Haruhi's throne must have been a custom job—it was all covered in gold, framed in lilies, and depicted the twelve labors of Hercules. Asahina's seat had white winged doves and anemones, while Nagato's had olive trees and owls. Clearly significant.

The upshot was that I now had a fair idea which goddess each of them was playing. The roles fit them flawlessly—I was actually amazed they'd managed to find good matches for each of them within Greek mythology.

While Koizumi and I were entranced by the sight of our three goddesses—well, gazing at them with purely academic curiosity—the leader of the beautiful servants turned, gracefully beckoning to us. She then pointed at a low table next to Nagato's seat.

We were men, not gods, and did not need thrones.





No use arguing the point; we obediently sat down together, eyes on the stage. A man in a toga stepped out from the wings, stopped in the center, and bowed to the thrones with a flourish. A tenor voice was soon raised in song.

“I believe that’s Latin,” Koizumi whispered, inexplicably fascinated.

I couldn’t have told you the language; it was all Greek to me. Yet somehow I could understand it.

It was like watching a movie with the original audio and no subtitles, but it felt like I had an invisible subtitle track being beamed into my head. This was not surprising. We’d had no trouble communicating in any country we’d visited, even fantasy or far future settings. Auto-translating Latin in our heads was no big deal at this point. Though if we could make this work in the real world, I’d have much better grades in English.

The man’s song basically said the following: “Today we are honored by the presence of the divine goddesses. The people are overcome with joy and can barely remain standing. We have no way of expressing our pleasure and awe in words, so we shall do so with the arts. Please enjoy our profound and boundless adoration and respect. Oh, queen of the goddesses, love born of foam, and the eternal virgin, may you bring everlasting prosperity! The pyres of glory to Acacia! Eternal light illuminate the world of the divine. All hail ye!”

Dramatic but empty. All I really got was that they were about to do a play.

Would this Trojan theater show us comedy or tragedy? As I watched, actors streamed in from both wings, hitting their marks.

It seemed our tale began with a wedding. Somehow I got that much despite the lack of narration.

The groom, Peleus, and the bride, Thetis. Chiron the centaur kicked off a procession of divine arrivals. These famous gods and goddesses were all wearing those ancient Greek clothes that looked like over-embroidered curtains. Zeus and Hera, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Aphrodite, Poseidon...even Prometheus and Ganymedes. Quite the guest list.





Your basic prologue to the Trojan War.

Naturally, these weren't real gods onstage, just humans playing them; but I knew right away who each was meant to be, like there was invisible text being projected over their heads and I was unconsciously reading that. Not just their names; a brief overview of the characters' histories was flowing into my mind.

Handy dandy. Maybe all movies will work like this in the future.

"Witnessing a play about the Trojan War in Troy during said war...", Koizumi murmured, sounding touched. "What a layered construct. Two—no, three layers deep."

That line of thought sounded hella gnarly, so I opted to let him tackle it solo.

More importantly—my eyes were on the performers.

From what I could see, the actress playing Hera resembled Haruhi; their Aphrodite was kinda like Asahina, and their Athena was not dissimilar to Nagato.

All three had been stretched out vertically, aged up, and generally smudged around a bit; I didn't have to look close to know they were entirely different people. It was more of a faint resemblance. Like they'd hastily gone looking for doubles and not had time to find anyone better, so been forced to compromise with this. That sort of vague resemblance, a near miss that actually bugged me more. Was this how I'd feel if we found ourselves face-to-face with a fake SOS Brigade?

And just because our girls had become goddesses, did they have to make the actors resemble them?

"Perhaps to ensure we know who the girls are playing."

I was watching the play like I would a museum exhibit when Koizumi started talking.

"They may have decided the symbols on their seats would not convey the intent. That said, I agree it's in poor taste. At least I don't have a fake—if that's any solace."

Don't care. One other actor had my attention.

“That’s...not the same old man.”

At first, I thought our old buddy was playing Zeus, but on closer inspection it was someone else. Zeus and Hera were seated at the head of the table in center stage, and the others were all genuflecting to them—not the actual bride and groom. The arrogance was certainly capturing Haruhi perfectly.

The actors playing gods spent a while acting out a raucous wedding party, but in due time, events unfolded as previously described.

The Apple of Discord incident.

An actress with long black hair—playing Eris—threw a golden apple into the party, and it was instantly a battle scene, quickly descending into pure chaos.

In time, someone asked Zeus to pass judgment—and the stage went black.

With no lighting fixtures, how’d they managed that? You might well wonder. I certainly did. But there was no other phrase to describe it; when light returned, the stage now held a pastoral landscape.

Wind blew across a grassy plain, like pure magic—a young man was aimlessly following a flock of sheep. The young prince of Troy, only recently informed that he was of royal blood. Here, Hermes descended from the heavens, serving as Zeus’s messenger, and accompanied by Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite.

Hermes demanded that Paris choose which of the three goddesses was most beautiful, and the goddesses each did their best to win him over. Aphrodite’s presentation may have ignored what the prize—Helen—felt about the whole mess, but she won Paris over, and the rest is as I’ve already explained.

Thus, having earned the enmity of the other two goddesses, Paris began to prepare for his sea voyage. Bound—of course—for Sparta, where Helen resided. Paris was actually already married, and his sister Cassandra, fearing for Troy’s future, begged him to reconsider. Her words reached him but failed to change his mind. Perhaps overwritten by the sweet whispers of the goddess of beauty.

Another blackout, and Paris was on a ship bound for Greece.

The fleet had several ships in it, waves cresting off the prows as they raced



across the Aegean Sea. Paris's cheeks flushed with love for the as-yet-unseen Helen, that heat undeterred by the chill of the wind upon them. With Paris was his relative, Aeneas, hero of Troy, here to back up the prince's reckless plans to do crime and abduct Helen.

"First grasslands, now the sea and a fleet of ships? How's this theater work? What stagecraft allows all this?"

Only one person capable of responding to my grumbles.

"It's doing nothing to alleviate my suspicions that they've rather confused ancient Greek and Roman cultures. All the dialogue is in Latin. The girls are dressed like Greeks, but we're wearing Roman clothing."

Koizumi was also wearing his everyday smile.

"A play based on the Trojan War that took place in ancient Grecian times. Performed by Roman actors in a theater styled after imperial Rome. Yet the contents resemble modern Hollywood effects—if that make sense."

"Hence the three layers?"

Our real selves and the movie we were watching; the movie showed a play based on legends; and the legends in that play ultimately derive from a heavily embellished oral tradition that made it difficult to differentiate fact from fiction. What percent of the truth remained?

"There's a fourth layer with us in this virtual space, and we may have to account for the versions of ourselves still in the real world."

Koizumi glanced around the amphitheater.

"Odds are high whoever constructed this world cannot distinguish between fiction and documentary. They've likely modeled this world after on-screen depictions."

The fantasy and space opera arcs were especially indicative of that. The western bit was pretty bad—and the Prohibition storyline mixed elements of a C-tier TV show into a bad movie.

But if they couldn't tell the difference between images based on historical fact and live-action stories someone just made up, what did that say about their

minds?

“Denizens of other planets completely unfamiliar with Earth history may require explanations to clarify these distinctions.”

In which case, this definitely wasn’t the Data Overmind. Nagato’s boss probably had a decent handle on that distinction.

When I glanced back at the stage, Paris had skipped the rest of the journey and arrived on the Peloponnese peninsula. Joining a group of Trojan emissaries, he was now inside the Spartan castle.

At this point, they brought food and drinks to our table.

Ladies (likely in-waiting) lined up silver dishes heaped with colorful mystery cuisine.

I assume that seafood soup was pitch-black because of squid ink, but the only other dishes I could identify were the platter of fruit and one that clearly involved meat. What sort of animal or fish, seasoned how? Couldn’t even begin to guess.

If this was a computer server, there was no chance of us getting food poisoning...

“Computer server?”

Mm? Oh, I remembered easily enough. Managed to not forget this time.

“We’re not actually in one, if I recall correctly,” Koizumi said, clearly keeping up with me.

Silver cup in hand, his smile seemed confident. The cup they’d given me contained some syrupy juice; sort of like peach, but with a hint of citric acidity.

“Is this the infamous nectar?”

Unsure. At the very least, it wasn’t spiked.

I glanced over at the girls, and they’d all been given food and mystery drinks, too. No tables for them, so kneeling servants were merely holding up the dishes.

Haruhi kept her eyes glued to the stage, stabbing a fork into the food and

carrying it to her mouth. Asahina was gingerly sipping her cup and letting out appreciative noises.

And Nagato was looking right at me.

I grabbed a berry from the fruit platter, tossed it in my mouth, and shot her a hand signal.

I'd just made it up on the spot, but the SOS Brigade's brightest mind would surely know what it meant.

"....."

Nagato rose soundlessly, slowly but steadily advancing to our table, where she sat down next to me. Her figure still glowing; seen up close, her divine aura dazzled the eyes. That's my best attempt, but it's a hard sensation to describe.

The moment she sat down, a serving NPC offered her a silver cup. Nagato took it, glanced at her once—and the NPC backed away from the table.

The other ladies kept their distance or were otherwise occupied, bringing food to Haruhi and Asahina; the SOS Brigade's incident resolution squad were free to consult in private.

Koizumi leaned in. "Nagato, if you've seen any chance at escape, by all means share it with us."

She blinked once. "First, quantized."

"You wish me to explain?" he said, frowning.

Unemotionally, she said, "Advanced comprehension will smooth future decision-making."

"So it is necessary." He sighed and threw up his hands. "Then let us review our current active hypothesis. According to Nagato, this world is an intangible virtual space, and we are data humans composed of quantized information."

Something like that.

"For some reason, the five members of the SOS Brigade inside this world have become dissociated from our selves in the real world...for lack of a better description."

What Nagato said was more reliable than the evidence of my own senses.

“Those two facts are likely vital, so bear them in mind. Now, I’m hardly an expert on the matter, but for lack anyone better suited to expositing, I aim to try. But there is one thing I want to make clear beforehand.”

Koizumi turned his gaze to Nagato.

“From your standpoint, there are minor differences from humanity’s current quantum theory and known principles of quantum mechanics. Perhaps we should dub them the super quantum theory, and expanded quantum mechanics, but since these are beyond my understanding, I’m going to parse them via standard quantum theory and convey things accordingly. Is that acceptable?”

Nagato nodded easily.

Koizumi took a sip of the syrupy juice.

“I’ll also warn you that my understanding of quantum theory in general is imperfect. I’d go so far as to categorize it as something I do *not* actually understand. The field itself has multiple interpretations and contradicting claims, which makes it all the harder. So feel free to take what I do say with a grain of salt.”

A fairly lengthy disclaimer.

“I’ll also add that attempting to make quantum theory easy to understand is virtually impossible.”

Still more disclaimers, accompanied by a pleasant smile.

“With the potential for misunderstanding or incomprehension at the forefront of my mind, I shall do my best. Please avoid phrases like, ‘How is that possible?’ ‘Why does it work that way?’ or even ‘I find that hard to believe.’”

Nagato would hardly say any of those things so it was clearly me he was preempting. I’d better ask any questions I had before he handed me a mask with an X drawn on it.

“Are quantum theory and quantum mechanics different?”

“If I boil it way down, quantum theory is dealing with the broad strokes of

quanta, while quantum mechanics is more specialized. Functionally speaking, you can consider them one and the same. For the simple reason that I think they are.”

Cool, got it. Or I don’t, but I’ll roll with it. Please proceed.

“Then let me give a basic rundown,” Koizumi said, straightening up. “Quanta are things that have the properties of waves, yet can be counted like particles. This is referred to as the wave-particle duality.”

That much I vaguely recalled hearing before.

“Closest to hand are things like light and electricity. The double-slit experiment can easily show that these are waves.”

And waves are...?

“In this case, waves are like magnetic waves or frequencies. As I’m sure you’re aware, waves themselves are intangible. As you can see with ocean waves or other bodies of water, or with sound waves or those produced by earthquakes, waves produce oscillation or undulation in some other medium.”

Aha.

“Meanwhile, particles may be incredibly small, but *do* have corporeal form. The carbon and oxygen that make up human bodies are composed of atoms, but the photos and neutrons within that atom’s nucleus are particles. Quarks are even smaller, but they’re clearly labeled as elementary particles.”

Still with you.

“In other words, from a conceptual level, waves and particles are inherently different. And yet light and electricity are, somehow, said to be both waves and particles.”

Mm-hmm.

“If you attempt to observe them as a wave, they behave like waves, but if you attempt to observe them as particles they manifest as such. Behavior that feels inherently wrong, but is a verified fact, and confirmed with empirical observations.”

I had to stop myself asking why.

Koizumi smiled faintly.

“That’s just how they work. Put your questions in a vacuum pouch and throw that in the freezer. We must begin with the belief, ‘I don’t get it, but okay.’ It’s not like I have a truly better understanding of it. One quantum theory authority said that overthinking quantum mechanics is akin to the Buddhist principle ‘form is emptiness’ and may lead to enlightenment.”

Welp, that’s pretty out there.

“Reading any primer on quantum physics may leave you thinking, ‘Can’t they make this easier to parse?’ but now that I have to explain it myself, I must say that quantum mechanics are the polar opposite of something that can be easily broken down.”

Here, he looked at Nagato. Perhaps he was hoping she’d take over, but the organic android harboring the divinity of Athena within her tiny frame continued mechanically moving grapes from the fruit platter to her mouth with a small silver skewer.

He sighed.

“Next, I should explain the concept of superposition. According to Nagato, those of us here are in a state of quantum superposition over our flesh-and-blood bodies in the real world, but what does that mean?”

Koizumi paused, looking upward pensively.

“Let me try to explain using electrons. The direction of an electron’s spin is fifty percent one direction or the other; the orientation is only set once it is observed.”

What do we mean by spin?

“The angular momentum. All you really need to know is that particles are rotating in a variety of directions. For simplicity’s sake, we classify those as up or down, right or left, positive or negative.”

Sounds like I was right not to take physics as an elective.

“Let us assume that as a result of observation, an electron’s spin is ‘up.’ Herein lies the problem. Our experience-based instincts tell us that the

electron's spin was always up or down, and the act of observation merely verified that. But in the quantum world, this is not the case."

Let's hear why not.

"Before the electron is observed, the electron is in a state in which its spin could be either up or down. At the moment of observation, there is a fifty percent chance of its spin becoming one or the other. It transitions from an uncertain state—half up, half down—to a state when its spin is determined—in one or the other direction."

Who determined that?

"No one. It is determined by pure statistical odds."

Koizumi plucked an olive from a silver tray and spun it on the table.

"Imagine a die getting shaken. While it is spinning, you put a lid over it and wait for it to stop. In this example, even before you remove the lid, the die will have stopped on either even or odd. But in quantum mechanics, the die will continue spinning until the moment that lid is removed—perpetually until the moment of observation."

I caught my objection and ground it between my back molars.

"This example involved momentum, but we could say much the same thing for the position. Imagine an electron inside a box, unseeable from the outside. We add a partition to the box, dividing it into left and right sides. Since electrons are waves, it has not been put in one or the other side; it exists simultaneously in both. When we open the lid to observe it, only then is the electron particle discovered to be on the left or the right. Until that moment it could have been on either."

I could see why he'd forbid me from saying *I find that hard to believe*.

"This is the state of quantum superposition. Building on this, let us examine the concept of quantum entanglement. This is the main point you need to follow."

I feel like I've got an itch on the inside of my head.

"As demonstrated in Einstein's famous equation,  $E=mc^2$ , since energy and

matter are equivalent, it is possible for energy to create matter with mass. Take the elementary particle known as the quark; this was likely born from energy via some impetus. The quark created in that moment was not alone; it was generated in a pair with equal but opposite qualities.”

Let’s pretend I followed that.

“Referencing that, and putting aside the *how*, we generate two electrons from a single quantum. According to the law of conservation of angular momentum, the spin of these two electrons must be in opposite directions.”

Okay, I’ll take your word for it.

“One will always be observed to rotate up, and the other down.”

Apparently.

“Let us call these Electron A and Electron B.”

No argument there.

“Not to repeat myself, but either Electron A or B spins up, and the other spins down. They cannot both have the same spin. If A is up, B is down; if A is down, B must be up.”

That much I can follow.

“Let’s imagine we haven’t observed these two electrons. We keep Electron A with us, then send Electron B to the other side of the world—somewhere in Brazil. Then we observe the electron we kept, Electron A. Fifty percent chance of being up or down; now we know which. Let’s say this observation determines that Electron A’s spin is *up*. That automatically means that Electron B, in Brazil, has a down spin.”

O...kay. Right.

“As I mentioned beforehand, the direction of the spin was not preordained, but determined entirely by probabilities at the moment of observation. In other words, it was equally likely that Electron A would be observed to have a downward spin. In that case, Electron B would automatically have an upward spin. However...”

However?



“That begs the question—how did the electron in Brazil know that Electron A had been observed? Like I said at the start, a single electron always has a fifty percent chance of spinning up or down. It’s as if Electron B thought, ‘*A’s been observed spinning up, so I’d better spin down,*’ and determined its own spin accordingly.”

I’d like to voice a doubt but can’t quite put it in words.

“The same thing would be true if Electron B was not in Brazil, but on the far side of the galaxy. No matter how far apart the two elections are, they remain a set, as if they are bound together, and that link cannot be severed. That’s what we call quantum entanglement.”

Nagato had mentioned that on the ship.

“And we have to assume that information transfer between these two electrons occurs faster than the speed of light. If one is observed, then no matter how great the distance between them, the other’s state is determined in that same instant. This contradicts the theory of relativity, and Dr. Einstein’s displeasure at the concept is a famous event in physics history.”

Now that I think about it, it’s not like I really understand the theory of relativity, either.

“Let us call the entangled electrons an EPR pair. Those letters are from the initials of three scientists who raised objections to quantum theory at the time—E being Einstein.”

Was this name chosen out of spite?

“So, have you managed to follow all of this? Superposition and entanglement are vital concepts, so I really need to force this point.”

We can’t do a more basic comparison?

“I suppose...when someone is just tossing ideas around inside their head, that’s one thing, but once two people pit their ideas against each other, then relations get entangled.”

“That metaphor is inapplicable,” Nagato interjected, speaking for the first time.

Koizumi hung his head.

“Well, that’s the best primer I can give. I could get into the uncertainty principle, or time symmetrization, or that famous cat, or quote Feynman, but those aren’t strictly relevant to our current predicament, so I must leave them out.”

So this whole lecture is somehow related to understanding the mess we’re in?

“It is. Right, Nagato?”

“Substantially.”

“So, using what we’ve learned as a baseline, let us consider what we actually are. Applied theory.”

Professor Koizumi’s lecture in the Nagato seminar seemed far from over.

My eyes wandered to the stage below and found a ballroom in the Spartan palace, with Menelaus and his wife, Helen, warmly receiving Paris and the Trojan contingent.

Dude was about to experience the tragedy of NTR, and Helen was supposed to be a world-class beauty, so I scoped them out and was mildly surprised—but convinced.

“Well, then.”

Once, they were the prince and princess kidnapped by a demon lord, another time they were from some galactic empire, kidnapped by pirates, and still another time, they’d been ranchers held hostage by outlaws in the American West—that same man and woman who were constantly getting themselves captured.

Neither was distinctive enough to leave anything more than a vague impression, but this play expected me to believe they were a handsome hunk and the world’s greatest beauty.

Menelaus was just sort of standing there, while the handsome Paris and Helen—who fell for him at first sight thanks to the goddess’s meddling—were staring into each other’s eyes. Dramatic music was trying real hard to sell the hand of fate at work. Keeping one ear tuned to the unseen orchestra, I glanced

at the thrones beside me, and found Haruhi and Asahina savoring the endless stream of dishes, elegantly enjoying the play.

Sensing someone else looking, I turned.

“.....”

Nagato was also staring at them. No—just at Haruhi.

I felt like I detected a hint of urgency in her inert expression, but perhaps she caught me looking—she broke off her stare.

Why would Nagato be staring at Haruhi here?

“Now, then,” Koizumi said, like an old-timey detective who’d just assembled all the suspects at the scene of a crime. “We are here—but what *are* we? What is this world? What are we doing here? Let us turn our minds to these and other questions.”

Sounds like he had all the answers.

Koizumi stole a glance at Nagato and did not seem especially disappointed when she refused to meet it.

“On the pirate ship, Nagato suggested that this is a virtual space, and we’re a quantized portion of our actual selves. I’ve been considering this ever since.”

Come to think of it, when *did* you first realize this wasn’t real, but VR? Amazed you didn’t find yourself forgetting that.

“Yes, well—that initial fantasy world was far too unreal. I’ve had my doubts all along. I found if I focused my mind on a single topic, that was enough for me to avoid the amnesia effect. Still, it did repeatedly slip from my mind, only to come back after the fact.”

Acting like an MC, he waved dramatically.

“Can we get a word from Nagato here?”

Nagato intoned, “At an unknown point in the real world, we seem to have collided with virtual particles in a quantum state.”

.....Koizumi, interpret.

He plucked an apple from the fruit tray, a silver knife in his free hand.

“I assume a dual-aspect virtual particle collided with the five members of our SOS Brigade. We and this particle interacted, causing a dissociation—and quantizing us.”

He sliced the apple in two.

“Our real-world selves and the versions of us here are both in a state of superposition and EPR paired—is what Nagato is trying to say.”

Nagato’s head shifted. I took that as a nod.

“Okaaay,” I groaned. “And to do something that nuts...”

“If not the Data Overmind, then something else from outer space. Space is vast, after all.”

Still, I didn’t want to picture the galaxy stuffed full of godlike entities we could not even perceive. I needed *less* headaches in my life.

“So,” I said, “what are these dual aspects?”

Koizumi’s gaze turned up, then all around.

“Remember the situations we’ve found ourselves in. The fantasy RPG, the space patrol, the Western, the gangster film, battling man-eating sharks, piracy on the high seas—and now a page from mythology, the Trojan War.”

Certainly all familiar motifs. Right out of our TV screens or the pages of our comic books.

“There’s your answer,” he said, toying with the apple halves. “They are in a word: fiction. We are inside of a *story*.”

That made sense, or—if aliens made a world based on human fiction, it stood to reason they’d get details wrong, or off-balance. I sighed and spoke from the heart.

“I would’ve rather lived inside my favorite manga.”

Koizumi picked up one half of the apple.

“This allows us to deduce the nature of the two aspects we’re interacting with. One part of us remains in the real world; while we find ourselves here in this fictional construct. The virtual particles are Reality : Fiction, equally likely to

be one or the other.”

But both reality and fiction are mere concepts. How would one physically collide with that?

“Conceptual quantization,” Nagato muttered. “Concept quanta are not impossible.”

“And so those of us interacting with the Reality side remain in the real world, while we interacted with the Fiction side, becoming fiction versions of ourselves, and winding up here.”

Koizumi put the two halves of the apple together and put it back on the platter. Just eat it, dude.

“Our real-world selves are in a state of quantum superposition with those of us in this fictional world. In other words, we are not yet completely cut off from reality. In fact, we’re closely connected.”

His faint smile grew slightly stronger.

“And I imagine therein lies our chance to escape.”

Assuming you’re right, then what? Putting aside the question of who did this, they went to all the trouble of making this world just to trap our fictionalized selves.

“That does seem to be the case.”

“Still,” I said, gazing at the back of my hand. Looking it over. “I can’t tell this body’s fiction just by looking at it.”

“It is not *merely* fiction. It is a fiction given corporeal form. Simply put, the atoms composing our bodies are themselves quanta, so it is hardly inaccurate to say we were *always* made from quanta.”

Surely that’s an exaggeration.

“Speaking purely in statistical terms, if we were in real space until yesterday, then the odds of us remaining in real space today are extremely high. But if there is the slightest chance of us existing in virtual space, then the odds of the phenomenon occurring cannot be zero.”

Oh, come on, that sounds like complete bullshit.

“Odds that are next to zero are *not* actually zero, so there remains a remote chance of them happening. Though the odds of this occurring naturally are almost certainly one in a ten billion.”

Odds that close to zero should be treated as zero. Else you’d never get anywhere. Where in the world would that virtual space even be? You’d need the equivalent of an ultra-high-tech super-quantum computer server...

Which I guess we’re on.

“Interface unknown,” Nagato said again.

Fine, I have other questions.

“They couldn’t just copy our personalities and put them in a virtual space? That feels like it’d be easier.”

“Perhaps there’s no point in copying our minds alone,” Koizumi said, now using that knife to peel the apple. “Perhaps human consciousness cannot be separated from our physical forms. It may well be that our minds depend on something other than our brains alone.”

He glanced at Nagato, but our tiny literature club girl was nibbling at an olive like a squirrel.

“If mere cognitive copies are insufficient to re-create our minds in a virtual space, and our physical data is also necessary...”

Is that really the reason?

“Our presence here arguably answers that.”

Following Nagato’s lead, I popped an olive in my mouth and instantly regretted it. Extremely vinegary.

“Currently, we are in a virtual space with our physical bodies. That may sound contradictory, but if our flesh was also quantized, I believe it’s possible. This is not our standard definition of a virtual space—an electronic or computer environment—but all we can really say is that it is something *else*.”

Trying to banish the bad taste, I took a slice of peeled apple from Koizumi and

bit into it. Extremely sweet.

“The being behind this possesses quantum technology far beyond humanity’s level and can presumably exercise a degree of control over the quanta themselves.”

He began chewing on a dried date.

“This dissociation is rather arbitrary. We can only read quanta in probabilistic terms, while they have the technology to do all *this* with them.”

Well, I guess I get the how.

“So whoever they are, why have they trapped us here, and why are they making us act out these third-rate plays?”

“No clue. Part of me thinks it might be some sort of experiment. Place the SOS Brigade in an array of situations and see how each of us responds... What do you think, Nagato?”

“Motive unknown,” she said clearly, soundlessly sipping from her cup. “We’re being observed. That alone I can perceive.”

How do you know that?

“It is what I always do. This feels the same.”

I looked around for an invisible camera.

“Perhaps the goal is to erase our original minds, completely immersing us in these roles we’re playing. The situational variety may be a shotgun attempt to discover what setting will captivate us best.”

So they’ll leave us here until we become someone else, forever stuck playing out one of these stories?

While playing a role, you become that person. Perhaps as the worlds shuffled, we’d eventually find the perfect role for our minds.

And that would leave us unable to return to reality. Guess we can’t just sit here. I wasn’t about to play along with a game master who had no plan to wrap things up.

“Let’s do something, then. Where do we start? Nagato? Koizumi?”

This made Nagato set her cup down, and Koizumi flashed his teeth at me.

“Let’s organize our thoughts. These are the known facts: • The five members of the SOS Brigade are interacting with two concepts: Reality and Fiction.

- SOS Brigade x Reality and SOS Brigade x Fiction both exist.
- These two are in a state of quantum entanglement /superposition.
- $\text{SOS Brigade} \times (\text{Reality} + \text{Fiction}) = \text{SOS Brigade}(\text{Reality}) + \text{SOS Brigade}(\text{Fiction})$  “If Nagato’s explanation is correct, there *is* something linking our real selves to those of us here.”

This is the Reality : Fiction concept quantum?

“Repeating ‘Reality’ and ‘Fiction’ is getting redundant, so let’s take the initials and call them r and f.”

Koizumi pushed some food out of his way.

“I could use something to write with. Let us turn to the goddess of wisdom. Nagato, don’t you want something to read?”

“I do,” she said.

“Then ask for it.”

There was a silly-sounding *plop*, and an A3-size clay tablet landed on her lap. Covered in odd writing.

“Is that...Linear B?”

“A,” Nagato said flatly.

“Gosh, the undeciphered one? Can you read it?”

“Analysis required.”

“How long would that take?”

Nagato considered that, but I shook my head.

Didn’t matter right now.

“True. The moment I let my guard down, my thoughts are pulled elsewhere.”

Koizumi took the tablet from Nagato’s lap and turned it over. There was



nothing inscribed on the back.

“I suppose paper wouldn’t fit with the times.”

He plucked a silver skewer from an olive and began scratching away.

$$\text{SOS}(r, f) = \text{SOS}(r) + \text{SOS}(f)$$

Do the SOS(r) versions of us know what’s going on?

“Possibly Nagato...but, myself included, the rest of us are likely just going about their daily lives.”

The SOS Brigade dissociated, existing both in the real and a virtual world. Sure sent a chill down my spine.

“Let’s ignore the hard bits and assume, for simplicity’s sake, that the following is true.”

$$\text{SOS}(r) + \text{SOS}(f) = 1.$$

A formula even a little kid could manage.

“However, I have no clue what process we must follow to achieve this result.”

So those of us in the real world are just completely unaffected by the collision with these mysterious space particles?

“We’re unsure to what extent the r and f variables affect the real world, but I’d like to believe nothing terribly odd is happening there. Your take, Nagato?”

“Our real selves will be preserved in the original state for comparison.”

So just like we always were.

“Meaning (r = 1) or very close to it. A whole string of nines.”

So the real-world version was pure us, 99.999999999 percent. That was fine—or maybe not. The remainder bothered me, and I didn’t like it—gimme back my change.

“The ‘change’ in this equation would be our current selves,” Koizumi said, rolling the silver skewer across the tablet. “If we were simple personality clones, one could argue we had no choice but to go on living like this. But if our real-world selves are at the mercy of some unidentified science, I’m disinclined to

leave well enough alone.”

Here, he chuckled.

“Role-playing with the SOS Brigade is hardly a bad thing. I’d been pretty sure we were just copies, after all.”

But our real selves and virtual selves are branches.

“Yes, and the two versions of ourselves are super positioned. Both real.”

Which wasn’t all good.

“This dissociation between real and virtual worlds is hardly a natural state. What will it lead to? I have no idea. Perhaps our real selves are beginning to notice something is amiss. What would happen if this situation begins to affect Suzumiya? Either one of them?”

We can’t just passively kick back and enjoy this theater. We’ve gotta do something proactive. If we ever want to get back...

No, hang on.

“One question.”

I looked Koizumi right in the eyes.

“Assume we do manage to escape this place. What will happen to us? We’re not gonna end up with two SOS Brigades, are we?”

“I don’t even want to consider that.”

“Then will we fuse with our real selves and be one again?”

“That would be the ideal.”

“You sound dubious. What else? Where might we go? Level with me.”

Nagato’s voice cut in.

“If  $SOS(r) + SOS(f) = 1$  is achieved, the entanglement and superposition will be resolved.”

Her voice was as flat as her words were calm.

“In accordance with the probability theory convergence of wave functions, our current consciousnesses will dissipate with our existences. Leaving our real-

world selves as the sole existing versions.”

So basically a death sentence.

“Resolving the duality of existence probabilities inherently involves the elimination of the other. Just as observation renders light either a wave or a particle,” Koizumi elaborated, sounding a mite choked up. “But, Nagato, by resolving this situation, are we certain we won’t end up with two of each of us in the real world?”

“Fermion.”

“.....Well, by applying the exclusion principle, our (r) selves and (f) selves cannot simultaneously exist, and the quantum state will be resolved one way or the other. Since the elementary particles within our bodies are basically all fermions...is that the logic?”

Nagato opened her mouth and closed it again. Perhaps she realized that words were insufficient. Koizumi shrugged, giving up.

“Whatever the process, there’s no use considering which set of us should be eliminated. We can’t well return to the real world with our memories of time spent here intact, can we?”

I closed my eyes, considering that.

Our existence here *was* unnatural. Obeying some other being’s will, forcibly transferred from world to world. Perhaps this would continue forever. But if asked if I’d rather be eliminated—well, I sure wasn’t at the point where I could say yes right away.

Koizumi’s voice rang in my ears.

“If we look at the discrepancies, us having two conflicting sets of memories is one thing. The real issues would be some accident leading to two versions of us manifesting. No telling what would happen then.”

That would be like suddenly getting a twin. That was one thing for most of us, but the idea of two Haruhis made me want to run for the hills.

If it was just memories, then Koizumi, Nagato, and I would be fine. Asahina would probably work out somehow. But what about Haruhi? What would

happen if she went back to reality remembering all these crazy adventures?

“What a nightmare.”

“There may be a fraction of a percent chance that we will be the true ones, and those of us in the real world are eliminated, but since they’re 99.999999999 percent pure, the odds of us being chosen are almost zero.”

“Likely even less,” Nagato said.

How do you represent the difference between almost zero and zero?

“But we know a woman who ignores the odds and effortlessly makes the impossible happen.”

Koizumi sounded downright sad about this.

“Hopefully, I’m fretting over nothing.”

If Haruhi got back to the real world with memories of this one, what ideas would that give her? If it was just ideas, that’d be one thing, but if it started affecting and influencing the real world...Well, I didn’t want to imagine the outcome. I’d rather go to the south pole and try to sell the penguins syrup-free shaved ice than bet on Haruhi alone getting amnesia. No way that would end well.

Seeing me lost in idle thought, Nagato said, “We’re merely going back to the original (1).”

I think that was supposed to sound like good news.

“That is not necessarily equivalent to death.”

Time to steel my nerves.

“Okay, fine. Let’s forget about our current selves.”

Perhaps some well-timed miracle would conveniently net us a flawless ending, but before we even got to that— “Bringing these memories to the real world won’t do us a lick of good.”

That bugged me.

“Or is that what our enemy—whoever’s doing this—is actually after?”

“It is a possibility. One day, we suddenly gain memories of impossible adventures. A shock to us all—but to Suzumiya, these memories could well alter the world in unknowable ways.”

One could only hope she’d assume she’d been daydreaming a very long time.

I glanced her way, and Haruhi was sprawled back in her chair, nibbling on nuts from a bowl a serving lady proffered. Totally in *watching a movie at home* mode. Asahina had her fists balled up, eyes locked on the play.

Onstage, nothing-burger-face Menelaus was off to Crete for his granddad’s funeral, and Helen—just habitually abducted at this point—took her kidnapper’s hand and slipped out of the castle. Tense music blared as the Trojan contingent raced for their ships in the Spartan harbor.

Once aboard, the whole fleet took off, racing across the ocean back to Troy. Back at the palace, they discovered Helen’s elopement and ran around like they were being chased by bees. Helen had left a young daughter—Hermione—and the plaintive cries of this abandoned child brought tears to Asahina’s eyes.

“So, what’s the next move?” I asked.

Koizumi looked at Nagato, then looked faintly surprised.

Only then did I realize she was looking at Haruhi. I recognized that look. She’d been staring at her with equal intensity not long before. What about Haruhi’s couch potato act had her so concerned?

Picking up on my doubt, she looked at me.

“We should hurry.”

A rare voluntary opinion—and her next words made me gulp.

“The analysis-defying energy Haruhi Suzumiya radiates is increasing.”

I shot another look her way but saw nothing but our chief, playing the world’s most slovenly goddess. Perhaps looking didn’t do much. It wasn’t like I could detect the energy.

“Oh,” Koizumi said, leaning in. “She’s attempting to activate her reality alteration powers?”

“The outcome of this energy buildup is unclear,” Nagato said. “This is not reality.”

“Oh-ho.”

Koizumi scratched his head.

“But Suzumiya likely perceives it to be real... But even if she perceives it as such, it is fundamentally not real...”

He groaned a bit, then looked at me.

“What do *you* think?”

Dunno. But there’s one thing bugging me.

“Why is Haruhi only starting to emit that energy now?”

“Unclear.” Nagato wasn’t helpful, but her eyes were like black diamonds. “Perhaps you can tell.”

Not like I’m her press secretary. Nor am I a mind reader; if the chief ain’t said it, how am I supposed to know?

Nagato’s eyes bore through me.

“Each time we shifted worlds in this virtual space, her energy radiation increased incrementally. That curve rose sharply recently.”

“How recently?”

“Since our arrival in Troy.”

So really recently. That would make for an alarming graph.

“And that’s why we should hurry?”

Nagato returned a slight nod.

“Estimated time till that reaches the limit is in flux, but given the exponential speed of growth, odds are high she’ll use her power for something before we reach the next world.”

We could gamble on her powers turning things around?

“.....If that’s what you want.”

Sorry, forget I said anything.

“Still,” I said, trying to act like I *was* thinking. “Haruhi’s been stockpiling mystery power all this time? She didn’t seem like she had any questions about the world-hopping.”

“They might fool her conscious mind, but it’s hardly surprising that her unconscious mind detected something amiss,” Koizumi said, making so much sense it was rather dull to sit through. “That said, we can conjecture about the source of Suzumiya’s energy later. Nagato, on that privateer vessel, you said you were waiting for the right moment to escape. Can we assume that moment has arrived?”

She gave a silent nod measurable in millimeters.

“Then this situation is what you were waiting for?”

“It was a necessary condition.”

“And that condition is?”

“Power beyond human understanding.”

Athena, one of the goddesses from the Judgment of Paris.

“I am a goddess now.”

Her petite frame glowing, for a brief second I saw a statue of Athena overlapping her.

“In this setting, with these abilities, I can use unrealistic, supernatural powers without it seeming contradictory.”

Her quiet voice was oddly convincing. A divine proclamation.

Koizumi narrowed his eyes, looking Nagato Athena over.

“To do what, specifically? Does the divine power within you allow you to force  $SOS(r) + SOS(f) = 1$ ?”

“Not on my own.”

Nagato glanced at Haruhi and Asahina. Hera and Aphrodite, down from heaven to watch Greece and Troy go at it—I could almost see that.

“I’ll borrow theirs, too.”

Could you just ask and receive?

“Emergency mode. No request required. Forcibly requisitioned.”

I guess you couldn’t just walk up to Haruhi and go, ‘You’re about to unleash your unconscious power and maybe destroy the world so lend the power of the goddess you’re inhabiting to Nagato.’ Asahina... Well, she’d get it if we explained later. Not that we’d remember any of this by then.

“Still, I guess even Nagato voices proactive opinions sometimes,” I said, impressed.

Her brow furrowed slightly.

“I cannot fulfill my role when out of contact with the Data Overmind.”

Her role being observing Haruhi? Aren’t you doing just that here?

“Observation data transmission.”

Oh, right. Just watching doesn’t mean much.

“It means nothing,” she said.

She looked genuinely upset by it, which was a shocking development. Maybe syncing with Athena left her more emotional.

At this point, the orchestra started playing an especially powerful piece.

Onstage, Menelaus had discovered his wife’s infidelity. He and his brother Agamemnon had sent word to all of Greece and were mustering an army to conquer Troy. A ton of actors were onstage, and somehow, in my mind’s eye, I could totally see thousands of ships on the water. They’d skipped Odysseus’s scheming, but that supplementary information came flooding into my brain like it was tagged on. At long last, the world-renowned hero Achilles appeared; he and a troop of heavily armored soldiers boarded a ship, and the stage went dark. When the lights came back on, the Greek fleet was already anchored off the coast of Troy. There was like a decade of relationship drama truncated here in an attempt to get this war underway.

Koizumi raised a hand.



“I do hate to keep asking, Nagato. I understand that you three received divine powers with fortuitous timing, and you plan to concentrate that power within yourself. But will that alone truly allow us to escape?”

If Nagato said it would, leave it to her.

“It won’t,” she said. “Within this fictional world, the divine power will merely be a starter / booster. What I actually need is the unanalyzable energy Haruhi Suzumiya radiates and the alignment Mikuru Asahina possesses.”

Haruhi I get, but Asahina’s alignment? Klutzy moe maid?

“Time traveler.”

.....Oh, right. That should have been my first thought; you win. Moe maid was just dumb.

Koizumi crooked his head.

“I assumed you needed something reversible to turn time back to the moment when  $SOS(r) + SOS(f) = 1$  was possible. Is that how?”

“Mikuru Asahina’s intrinsic concept.”

“I see, travel from the future to the past—you extract the concept of time travel and use it as a variable. A concept quantum?”

“Yes.”

“And you can also control Suzumiya’s desire actualization powers?”

“Yes. Here and now, only.”

“If that’s actually feasible... No, I’ll leave that unsaid. In this place, anything goes.”

Koizumi smiled like he’d had a breakthrough. He threw up his hands in resignation—but to my mind, the fact that he could actually follow Nagato’s train of thought was legitimately impressive.

“But, Nagato, rather than do something with the concept of time travel, wouldn’t it be faster to simply ask Asahina to borrow her time machine?”

“The time machine is installed inside Mikuru Asahina’s body.”

That wasn't a statement I could let pass without comment. You weren't about to tell me Asahina was an android, too, right?

"She is human. Flesh and blood. But a type of DNA computer is built into her brain. This is the software that carries out the time travel process and the switch to do so; most of the time it's left in sleep mode."

My main takeaway from that was she likely didn't have the ability to use it now. The older version of her floated into my mind—would I ever encounter her again?

Koizumi tapped the side of his head, as if trying to ensure he did not forget this discussion.

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Wait."

We both completely stopped moving. Nagato blinked.

"First, I must construct the logic. That requires calculations. And time."

I had no clue how many weird virtual settings were out there, but even I could handle a task like waiting.

"How are you calculating? Will you need a scientific calculator?"

"No," Nagato said. A whole heap of clay tablets hit the table.

Her slender hand reached for a silver skewer.

"Commencing calculations."

She flipped them over and began scribbling equations. The skewer scratched into the dry surface.

"Normally, they use soft clay, not yet hardened... But I supposed that doesn't matter here."

She must be writing after considerable thought. Her hands were anything but fast. The bulk of the symbols and digits written were nothing I'd ever seen.

"Heisenberg...no, the Schrödinger equation in bra-ket notation?"

Koizumi squinted like he was trying to memorize it, but as more mystery

writings—I could not believe they came from Earth—appeared, he shrugged. Clearly too soon for humanity.

“There are theories and formula only known to higher beings, as yet unknown to humankind.”

“.....”

Nagato didn’t look up.

“Theorems discovered by aliens, as yet unknown to Earth scientists.”

“.....”

“I imagine Nagato’s head is filled with laws and equations that humanity has yet to obtain.”

“Meaningless if you don’t find them yourselves,” Nagato said firmly.

She reached for a second tablet. The sound of her scratching unknown equations was oddly comforting.

“.....”

The organic android was absorbed in her calculations, her expression unaltered, but her head was undoubtedly running at full speed. My body felt warmer, like I was sitting next to a space heater.

I felt like the divine glow around Nagato was growing more colorful.

With nothing better to do while I waited, I looked back down at the stage.

The Greek army was marching onto the beaches near Troy, and the Trojans weren’t exactly standing around waiting. Paris’s brother and Troy’s greatest hero, Hector, led a fearsome attack against the invading host. Arrows and stones rained down, and Greeks toppled over or went flying. But Achilles was nigh invulnerable—save his notorious weakness—and he charged into the enemy formations. He wrought devastation befitting a demigod, tossing the Trojan soldiers around like so many scarecrows.

Sensing panic in his armies, Hector ordered a swift retreat, moving them all inside the fortress walls. The Greeks established a camp on land and pulled their troops back to it; both sides had lost many in this initial clash, and the

prologue to the long Trojan war drew to a close.

At this point, I sensed a familiar presence behind me and turned even as his voice echoed in my ears.

“You there!”

That same white-bearded old man, dressed like a Greek philosopher, a gnarled walking stick in hand.

I was wondering when we’d see you again. You’re the main NPC in charge of making sure we avoid dead-ending the storylines, right? Been a while, old-timer. What message did you bring us this time?

“So cavalier! I am Zeus, you know? Show some respect.”

He plonked himself down across from me. I guess he did have the same glow the girls did, like his edges were bleary.

“Bleary, my foot! A voice is whispering in my ear that I would have infinite time before my faculties are in any way diminished!”

I topped up his cup from a decanter filled with a wine-like beverage.

“You’re not here to chat?”

“The girlie in charge of you lot, the hellion currently one and the same as my wife, Hera—she’s up to no good! Any way of stopping her?”

He knocked back the wine, and I made eye contact with Koizumi.

“Old-timer,” I said, speaking for us both. “What do you know about Haruhi’s power? How are you seeing it?”

“I know nothing and see nothing. But that power is having a negative effect on this world. Likely a destructive one! It was weak enough at first, but since she got *here* it’s going out of control. It won’t end well—you’ve got to do something!”

He pushed the empty cup across the table, demanding a refill.

“.....is what whoever sent me here is whispering in my head,” he added.

Considering they’ve trapped us here, they’ve got a lot of nerve. Who is this whisperer, anyway?

“Hmm, from all the expressions I have available to me, the best I can manage is the creator—or the maker.”

The one who made this world, then. Effectively the god of all who dwelled in this fictional space.

“I could use more of a hint,” Koizumi said, pushing a platter of meat toward the old man. “We’re assuming this being is extraterrestrial in origin. A data life-form, life from another planet, an inhabitant of space—do any of those phrases ring a bell?”

The old-timer tossed a bit of mystery meat in his mouth, chewing this over.

“Hmm, as Zeus, I am all-knowing, but even with that knowledge, I have only the vaguest impression of this being. Just a hazy sort of notion.”

He emptied his second cup.

“Unseen, yet in heaven. Blanketing the world. We are in their realm. Not that I’m in a position to tell, but I sense no evil. It feels protective.”

If he’s your god, it would feel that way.

“You’re under its protection, too.”

It may not be evil, but anything that put us here without consent for whatever experience, observations, or even trials this was supposed to be—well, it could hardly be considered benevolent.

“You’re like an AI, right? How much do you know about us?”

“Perhaps because I am Zeus right now, I feel like I know a lot more than before. Especially about Hera, Aphrodite, and your Athena here.”

Free associating from that to “heavens” got me to Uranus.

“That name’s too far-removed. This is something closer. Covering...the sky? Space? No, a canopy?”

Like on a canopy bed?

“Clearly bigger than that! In the air...spread all over the world.”

That sure sounded like my image of the Data Overmind.

“Nagato, is this suggesting anything?”

“No applicable data found with my access permits.”

Nagato never stopped writing or took her eyes off the tablet.

I poured the man a third cup.

“I’m grateful to it,” he said. “Which means I cannot ignore its whispers. Couldn’t even if I wanted to—but I’m not about to stand by and let this world be destroyed.”

How does this whisperer describe Haruhi’s power?

The man listened a moment.

“Parameters unquantifiable. Disorder, uncontrollable—emissions—growing with each transfer—limit close at hand—destruction—”

All ominous words.

“If having Haruhi here’s such a problem, tell it to kick her out. And us along with her.”

He looked up for a few seconds.

“The voice is gone. Can’t hear anything else. This is merely my perception of things, but it felt like it planned to take no action no matter what becomes of the world. Perhaps because—like you say—this is a virtual, fictional world.”

How much of our plan did you hear?

“All of it. You’re planning an escape?”

Are you here to stop us?

“No. I have been given no such orders. This is merely my personal request.”

The NPC old-timer quietly put his earthen cup down on the table.

“Any way you can take me along with you to this real world?”

The surprising request left me dumbfounded. Koizumi froze up for a second, so I assume it hit him the same way.

“If we return to the real world, we believe our (f) selves will be eliminated in accordance with the convergence of wave functions. But how would the change

of worlds affect residents originally of this world? You are likely a being of pure data. Would it even be possible to export you with a physical form?"

Only Nagato could begin to answer that, but she was studiously doing math.

"You've no attachment to this world?"

"I've grown curious about the other one—after all, it made creatures as amusing as yourselves. I don't think badly of this world, but I'm sure you've got your reasons for wanting to leave it. And I'd like to know more."

We've simply worked out that a world with no rules ain't all that. Having some limitations makes things fun. Our world was pretty well-made.

Koizumi leaned in.

"But what was it like to have always lived in this world? Care to share your views, Zeus?"

"Well, I've only ever known this place. None of it feels odd to me. But hearing you talk about a reality governed by laws and principles makes me want to see what that's like."

"If you make it to the real world, you might never come back."

"That's fine with me. I feel like I've spent an eternity here already. And—"

He lowered his voice, one eye on the stage.

"If you leave here, this world may serve no further purpose. What independent consciousness I have is growing steadily concerned about that."

This was a giant playground built for the five of us. A virtual space required vast quantities of energy to sustain. Seems like a waste to just chuck it out.

Koizumi suppressed a smirk.

"I'm unclear if data life-forms even *have* a concept of 'waste.' It would boil down to the intent of the creator here. If this was simply an experiment, perhaps it would be reused for some other purpose later. Given the cost of upkeep, there is a chance it'll be shut down, but I find it hard to believe a galactic being able to control quanta at will would be worried about energy constraints."

“My word. Sounds like you know more about my boss than I do!”

“I feel like the concerns would stem from places other than the cost.”

Koizumi’s eyes turned to the stage.

Ten years had passed since the Greek forces landed, and still Troy had not fallen.

The gods themselves had built these walls; their defenses were sound and resisted everything the Greek alliance threw at them. The Trojan army was never merely on the defensive; they frequently emerged to try to drive the invaders off—but the Greek host was a force to be reckoned with. Neither side could gain a clear advantage; evenly matched, the fighting raged on. On the Greek side, Agamemnon and Achilles had a falling out over a beautiful woman; while on the Trojan side, Hector was dismayed by his brother Paris’s ineptitude. The gods themselves often interfered in the battle. Furious with Paris, Hera dropped lightening upon the Trojan forces; while Apollo took their side, raining arrows upon the Greeks, spreading pestilence, and generally being a serious asshole for a sun god.

“Oh,” I said, realizing. “I’ve seen a lot of these faces.”

Most of the actors—playing roles made famous in the *Iliad*—had played parts in roles we’d previously visited.

Potato face Menelaus and Helen were just the start—Somethington and Hyatt Harp, their brothers, the gangster boss, his minions, the stone-faced bartender, even the crew of the *Golden Fleece*—all of them were out there waving swords around.

If they had to reuse this many NPCs, maybe this world was smaller than I thought. Or the canopy was just lazy.

“I’d say less lazy than simply not quite understanding things. I imagine it has the computational capabilities to give all the characters full-fledged lives, and could if it tried, but doesn’t really get how to go about doing that.”

I got what Koizumi meant. The oddness of the worlds we’d visited proved this creator’s sensibilities were far removed from humankind’s.



I couldn't begin to predict what plans they had for this world. I didn't exactly have any real affection for the NPC extras, but we'd spent a fair amount of time with them. Even if this had been a video game, and they'd only repeated the same lines each time we spoke, we were prone to seeing humanity in that.

"An option bound to delight all writers out there," Koizumi teased.

In other words, if they were doomed to vanish along with the world, I felt a little guilty about that. Thus, we both rather hoped the world would carry on without us.

In that sense, perhaps this creator was not an enemy. I couldn't be sure we were protected by it the way the old man suggested, but I sure didn't feel like this world was designed to harm us.

Even that first JRPG world had a comfortable warmth to it. Like we were sitting back in a nice hot bath. Under other circumstances, we might even have come to enjoy the constant shifting of worlds.

But I'd chosen another path. The SOS Brigade was never simplistic enough to settle for a manufactured paradise some other being prepared for us. Even if you erased all this from my mind right now, I'd pick the naturalistic open world over the birdcage utopia. I'm exaggerating—I've never been such a high-minded individual. Simply put, it got on my nerves. This thing stuck us in here, watching us like lab rats. I didn't want to play by their rules.

"....."

An eloquent silence pulled me out of my reverie.

The sound of tablet scratching had ceased.

Nagato was looking over her calculations, double-checking them, but soon she let out a long, thin sigh. Perhaps she'd overheated.

"Theoretical construction complete," she said.

Most of the tablet was covered in enigmatic symbols, but even I could read the final two marks.

= 1

"The escape plan will use myself as the source. However...," Nagato added,

face slightly flushed. “My calculations show we’re short on the energy required for the starter. We won’t be able to trigger it.”

Not even with Hera’s and Aphrodite’s powers combined with Athena’s?

“I require it internally.”

So the self-starter didn’t have enough force to get the engine running?

All three of us looked at one man.

He managed a wrinkly smile.

“Then allow me to help. I shall lend you the power of one more god.”

Didn’t think you could.

“I am the god of gods, the omnipotent Zeus. This is nothing.”

He waved a scepter, and a spotlight from heaven shone down upon him.

A very stagelike effect—and apparently it was meant to be, since the Greek and Roman soldiers battling onstage all prostrated themselves before him.

A narration echoed from somewhere. *“Zeus demanded a duel between each army’s best warriors.”*

The invaders appointed Ajax, and the defenders Hector. Both men strode to the center of the stage.

One eye on that, the old man held his scepter over Nagato’s head.

“Thou who trod on blades of green, racing ’cross plains like the wind itself. Guardian of nature’s breath, dance, and the hunter’s arts. Your divine power like a shout echoing o’er arid lands, like a bowstring drawn taunt. With everlasting dignity and the light of the moon, descend!”

The glow around Nagato grew brighter.

“.....”

She sat there mute, and two lights overlapped with hers.

One a goddess of war, in valiant armor. The other a chaste goddess, wielding a bow with a tender smile.

Something wriggled at the edge of my vision, and I turned to see a new relief

spreading across the throne where Nagato had been seated. White marguerite flowers, and a symbol impossible to misread—the moon.

In addition to Athena's power, Nagato now embodied Artemis. This made her so divine it took considerable nerve to even look directly at her.

"Figured it was worth a shot," the old man muttered. "Is that enough?"

He seemed proud of himself. Nagato opened and closed her glowing palms, staring at them.



“Thank you,” she said.

“Not to put a price on it, but would you take me with you? I mean, assuming that is even possible. I’m aware it’s a tall order.”

“I’ll do the math.”

A spotlight appeared above Nagato’s head. Onstage, the actress playing Athena was giving her blessing to the Greek representative, Ajax. An effective presentation.

Athena Yuki Artemis Nagato considered things for approximately one second.

“It is feasible in terms of data energy quantity. I propose you assume a messenger role. You’ll be given a command code, which will be executed mechanically. It’s unclear where your consciousness will be preserved once the transfer is complete.”

Rare to see her either this proactive or this verbose. Koizumi and I were both gaping at her.

Oblivious to this, the old-timer nodded. “Fair enough. I’ll follow your lead on this. Just say the word.”

Koizumi recovered faster than I did, muttering, “You couldn’t call Apollo down on me?”

The old man shot him a look so barbed it made a sound effect.

“You do have some of his vibes, but I’d say your character has more in common with Hermes.”

“That would suit me fine, Father Zeus,” Koizumi replied, theatrically.

“No need,” Nagato said, dismissing the idea.

Onstage, the duel ended in a draw, but as the stalemate seemed set to resume, the Trojan army led a furious counterattack. With Hector in the lead, their momentum was stupendous, and the Greeks were forced back off the beach and onto their ships. On the defensive, even their leader, Agamemnon, was wounded—and then the ships caught fire. Even in these dire straits, the rift between Agamemnon and Achilles was so great the latter refused to lift a

finger. Achilles' bestest friend, Patroclus, went out in his stead and, at the climax of a furious battle, was slain by Hector. In his lamentations, Achilles tore through the enemy, recovered his friend's body, and finally made his peace with Agamemnon. As the demigod hero stood before the Trojans as their greatest enemy—Nagato stood up, too.

The tiny, short-haired goddess moved behind us, putting her hands on Koizumi's and my shoulders. Her flat voice whispered in our ears.

"Temporarily hijacking your vision. This is the world as I see it."

The thin fingers on my shoulder tightened their grip, and my eyes filled with light. I closed them on reflex, but the glow was undiminished. What my optic nerves detected was not light, but the visual information Nagato's eyes perceived.

Koizumi let out a groan.

"This is truly something."

A dazzling aura flowing out of Haruhi, growing even brighter around Asahina, swirling at stupendous speeds. Like the aurora crossed with a typhoon.

Nagato extended a hand, and the flowing aura traced a spiral, gathering round Athena's / Artemis's hand, forming a vortex centered on Nagato herself.

Haruhi's power, Hera's strength, Asahina's concept, Aphrodite's essence, Nagato's cosmic force, and the divinity of both Artemis and Athena, all made visible. It was so overwhelming it sent a chill down my spine. Uh-oh. I was seriously starting to get why the ancients were so scared of their gods. Faced with a tremendous entity of a fundamentally different nature, the instinctive awe shook us to our genetic cores, making my very soul break out in a cold sweat.

And then the light was gone.

The songbird-like weight on my shoulder vanished. Nagato had let go and was seated at the table once more.

I was relieved yet still sweating. I heard Koizumi sigh.

"My word, that was a sight for the ages. Extremely educational. I would quite

like to remember it, but perhaps I should not hope for the impossible.”

“Itsuki Koizumi.”

Had Nagato ever used his full name before? My memories were hardly reliable to begin with, so no use searching through them. Koizumi scratched his head, looking bashful for some reason.

“I shall eliminate your concern.”

Nagato sounded unprecedentedly sure of herself. Perhaps a side effect of the double goddess system.

“I can’t help but worry about Suzumiya’s presence.” Koizumi nodded. “We’re embarking on a battle with an advantage far greater than ninety-nine to one. Ordinarily, we could feel secure about the outcome; but Suzumiya’s powers are unaffected by mere statistics. What measures are you taking?”

“Setting an objective observer.”

Her answer made him raise a brow.

“By which you mean someone who’s role is to decide which of us is real, those of us in the real world or those of us dressed for this scene?”

“Yes.”

Koizumi looked at Nagato’s clothes and his own toga.

“If we return to the real world like this, then Suzumiya would descend upon the world as a mythological goddess. Asahina and Nagato as well.”

The ultimate nightmare.

“So who are you appointing as this observer?”

“Not telling,” Nagato said, looking at me. “There is potential for prior knowledge of the observation process to diminish the objectivity of it. Ignorance is vital.”

“So you plan to have a genuine third party observe the (r) version of ourselves, converging the quantized state via that perception. I won’t ask who, but I’m assuming they’re someone with some proximity to us, but not too close—and someone who possesses a realistic sensibility.”

“An accurate understanding.”

So someone would compare our real-world selves to us wearing Greek and Roman robes, and decide which of us was more real. Anyone remotely normal would decide those of us dressed funny were clearly mad.

“But how?” Koizumi asked.

“It’s possible to affect the real world from here for a very short time.”

Here she turned to Zeus, who’d been listening with evident curiosity.

“I can’t take you in that form.”

“Ho,” he said, stroking his beard. “What form should I take?”

Nagato extended an arm in his direction. The white-haired, white-bearded, elderly god was wreathed in a soft glow. That light scattered like tiny particles, the outline of the man collapsing into a shifting mist of light—which then began taking on a new shape in Nagato’s palm.

It flapped its wings a few times, testing them, then landed on her shoulder.

“Ho,” the owl said, retaining the same glow it had as Zeus.

Gods were prone to taking animal forms, but seeing it with my own eyes sure hit different. Koizumi sounded downright amused.

“Minerva’s owl’s spreading its wings at dusk... So this owl is your messenger?”

“Yes.”

Nagato tore a strip off the sleeve of her gown, dipped a silver skewer in the squid ink soup, and wrote something on the cloth.

“Convey this to the individual at these coordinates.”

She held the cloth before the owl’s beak, and it swallowed it up. Then it hooted twice to prove it understood.

Meanwhile, the loss of his friend had driven Achilles mad with grief, and to the Trojans, he was a one-man disaster. The way he made a beeline for Hector, hell-bent on revenge—you could put that in the dictionary under *slaughter*. Trojan soldiers unlucky enough to get in his way were torn apart by a single sweep of his spear, geysers of blood rising as the demigod warrior demolished



another enemy formation. The man was so terrifyingly OP, the Trojans stampeded back behind their walls—but Hector alone stood at the gates, waiting for Achilles.

Achilles swung with fury, but Hector parried the blow. Their exchange was fast and furious, but in time—Achilles' spear ran his foe's neck through.

With Troy's greatest hero dispatched to the underworld, the fortress filled with cries and lamentations. The skies above swirled with dark clouds, as if foretelling the future of Troy itself.

"There was an anticipated two-microsecond delay between escape to reality and the dissolution of the quantized state. In that moment, it is possible to affect the real world."

Nagato's customary dispassionate tone had given way to a hint of resolution—was this simply the goddess effect in action?

"I'll make things consistent."

I'll let Koizumi handle that one.

"Consistent? Beyond sending a message to the observer?"

"It's possible our (r) selves have detected the anomaly."

Ah, so maybe weird stuff is happening over there, too.

"Changes to the real world should be minimal. All those nines."

"But I am also in the real world."

She sounded sure of that.

"My (r) self will be aware of what's occurring. I anticipate she is merely observing."

The owl on her shoulder crooked its head.

"If she hasn't noticed, I'll explain. And request assistance."

In two microseconds. So short it was downright rude to call it an instant—could she explain things in time?

"If nothing blocks communication. Obstruction unlikely. Time enough for

minor world alterations.”

Almost missed that one, but I leaned in.

“Alterations? You?”

“Utilizing Haruhi Suzumiya’s powers. Currently I can make some use of them.”

Her eyes were like a pitch-black sea reflecting the moon.

A shade that was very Nagato—quiet, certain.

“Alterations will be minimal. No more is possible. Two microseconds.”

It would certainly be bad if this matter confused our real-world selves, so some alterations might be necessary to prevent that, but are we sure? I mean, I’m not doubting Nagato.

She didn’t take offense.

“Alterations will be limited to the message transmission and the process of making  $(r)$  and  $(f) = 1$ . No changes to the core data of the real world. No need for them.”

Cool, I’m putting my faith in you. Less likely to go wrong than me trying anything, that’s for sure.

The owl looked at me and hooted twice.

The play was reaching its climax. There’d been a lot of wrangling over Hector’s funeral, but it finally happened, and the war resumed. Troy had lost their general but still had strong soldiers—and had received timely reinforcements that left them evenly matched once more. With the death of the Greek leader Antilochus, they even had the upper hand in places. In which case, the situation called for Achilles’ might and brawn.

A totally broken unit who could turn the tables on any front, he brutalized enemy formations, sending scores of Trojans to the afterlife, his slaughter so drenched in blood it appalled even the gods above.

Deeming it impossible for any human to stop his advance, Apollo stepped in. The sun god had been on Troy’s side all along, and now he possessed Paris, firing an arrow that pierced Achilles’ one weakness—his heel. This proved a

fatal wound, and the heroic demigod fell in a foreign land. But his fame would go down in legend and endure throughout history.

I felt like the play version of the Trojan war was speeding things up a bit. Like the world was urging them on. Curious to see what we were up to? Or just wanting to be rid of us?

Koizumi softly clapped.

“One final query...or perhaps a suggestion.”

Nagato and the owl both looked at him, in perfect sync.

“You said Zeus in his new owl form will be converted to data to be sent to the real world. In which case, can we not do the same thing with our current memories?”

If we can have a character from this world send a message, then presumably they could take more.

“The elimination of our memories is preferable. Especially anything in Suzumiya’s head. But it is also true that our memories here are valuable.”

No one wanted to lose experience they’d gained. But if that wasn’t an option, I’d sure go with the real-world versions of us.

“What if only Nagato and you remembered?”

“The five of us consist of a single quantum construct. Correcting one could well influence us all.”

Yet Nagato—for once—dithered for a moment.

“The energy value coalescing on me is higher than anticipated. I could use the excess energy to purge memories from our consciousness.”

She had Koizumi’s, the owl’s, and my rapt attention.

“But we must seal all memories from SOS (f), my own included.”

Better than completely erasing them.

“Cut the memories from our minds, compress as a data package. Send the sealed memory data to our real selves as an archive and, once received, freeze them.”

Take out the memories, put them in a box, and lock it. But we'd forget receiving those memories. Memories you couldn't remember were as good as forgotten.

"Information lost and information unretrievable are fundamentally different."

"This is proof our current selves lived. Perhaps there will be a time when they can be thawed."

Koizumi smiled brightly.

"I believe this is the ideal solution."

Nagato, you're one hell of a dame. I've thought as much before, but lemme do it again.

She waved a hand dismissively.

"I'm currently a god. Also..."

She pulled out a pointy hat.

"An alien witch."

A goddess witch alien could handle just about anything. Say no more.

If we get outta here, I'm building a Nagato shrine and ensuring all my descendants worship you.

"No, thanks."

News of Achilles' death sent ripples through the Greek camp. Agamemnon was white as a sheet, while faceless Menelaus just sort of stood there. The Greeks were in such shock they held a tournament alongside the funeral, insisting it was in his memory. But it wasn't like the Trojans were doing great, either. The one-man hurricane Achilles had simply done that much damage. Skirmishes continued for a while, and losses mounted on both sides, but the only remarkable death belonged to Paris.

Arguably the cause of the whole war, the handsome youth was struck by a poisoned arrow, never recovered, and expired. A sad sort of death for a leading character. And his death changed almost nothing. Even Helen didn't seem to care. Her fake love for him had long since cooled.

With no end in sight, the war found one in a surprising manner—yet one you all know.

And since we knew it, the SOS Brigade had no real reason to continue letting them inflict this ancient Greek play on us.

I had things to do. I hadn't talked to Nagato or Koizumi about it, but even my thoroughly average brain could work this much out.

As I got up, I saw a golden apple rolling around the table. Not sure if this was a hint to take over Paris's role, but I didn't care and wasn't about to play along. This wasn't about giving that away. Who cared about an inedible apple? None of them would want it, not Haruhi, not Asahina, and not Nagato. And so...

"Take that."

I grabbed the apple and threw it over my shoulder. Then I left my seat and headed for Haruhi's throne.

The relief on her seat showed Hercules wrestling a lion, moving like Claymation. One seat over, Asahina was wringing out her handkerchief, eyes locked on the Trojan War play below.

Sick of the impregnable walls, the Greek army had taken desperate measures. They made a giant hollow wooden horse, hid a few dozen Greek soldiers inside, and left it in the field. The rest of the army boarded their ships and sailed away. The Trojans assumed this was a capitulation and dragged the wooden horse inside the walls as spoils of war. Menelaus—who desired Helen's return more than anyone else—was naturally among the soldiers inside.

Our chief was demonstrating catlike flexibility, sprawled against the lavishly decorated throne, but when my shadow fell on her, she looked my way.

"What's up, Kyon?" Her fingers reached for the tray the servant girl was holding, plucked a walnut from it, and tossed it in her mouth. "Done with your nefarious scheming?"

"Yeah, thanks."

We'd been able to wrap things up precisely because she and Asahina had been focused on the play.

Haruhi grinned like a Cheshire cat, peering up at me.

I remembered that fantastical aura Nagato had briefly shown me. The flow of mysterious power so great it had made the old man become Zeus and come here to try to stop it. The chief was still cosplaying as Hera, body and mind—was that immense power still rolling off her?

It had been rising steadily as we toured this world. Energy radiated off her. Nagato had been right; I did have a hunch what caused it.

With Haruhi, it was her thoughts and feelings that produced that mysterious energy.

And I was on the exact same page she was. I wasn't sure why I was so certain of that—but I was. And Haruhi had a stubborn streak. She didn't wanna be the one to admit it. Perhaps she hadn't even consciously realized how she felt.

So I said it for her.

“Say, Haruhi.”

“What?”

“Think it's time we went home. This isn't where we belong.”

I—

“I wanna go home.”

No matter how many amusement parks, theme parks, and resorts you hit up in a row, they couldn't match the place where we'd had the most fun. Compared to the everyday spectacle of the North High literature clubroom, fantasies, space patrols, westerns, and the golden age of piracy were just virtual attractions. Those weren't our real lives.

I heard cloth swishing and looked down at myself—and I was back in the familiar North High blazer uniform. Yeah, that was what I felt most comfortable wearing.

Haruhi glanced around, then down at her Greek goddess clothes. For a moment, she looked surprised—but she soon worked it out and nodded.

“Yeah, we've had our fun. About time we got going,” she said, all smiles.

“Mikuru, Yuki, let’s go home!”

“Huh?” Asahina said, like her soul had only just returned from the play onstage. “But we’re at such a good part! I wanna know what happens...,” she murmured.

But after looking from Haruhi to me and back again, she worked it out.

“Oh, okay,” she said.

Haruhi flipped her arm, looking at her wristwatch.

“Look at the time! It’s almost sunset.”

Wristwatch? When’d she get one of those?

Haruhi looked me over from head to toe.

“Look at you, already dressed. Eager much?”

Then turned to Nagato.

“Oh, nice,” she said, eying up the pointy hat. “That does look good on you,” she added. “Is that owl your familiar? Not the worst, but better swap that out for a cat.”

“Ho! Ho!”

The former old man shook a wing at her in protest, but nobody cared.

“Asahina.”

Perhaps this was the primary reason I was already in uniform.

Aphrodite still seemed cut up about the play.

“The drinks here aren’t to my taste. Doesn’t seem like they’ve got tea here.”

“Oh,” she said, blinking.

“The tea you make in our clubroom is four thousand times as good as this heavenly concoction.”

Our lovely, ditzy upperclassman looked momentarily taken aback but then smiled like a blooming rose.

“Okay!” She nodded. Then, for the first time, she appeared to notice she was

glowing. “Huh? Huh? Wh-what? Why am I all warm?”

The glow of four goddesses (net total) was steadily increasing.

“What’s this mean?” Haruhi said, squinting. “I feel like I can do anything right now. I could probably jump across the Pacific to America.”

Right, Haruhi was literally a goddess right now. So were Asahina and Nagato. If Asahina amplified Haruhi’s disorderly power and Nagato kept it under control, nothing was impossible. I dunno who was responsible for it, but casting the SOS Brigade’s ladies as goddesses was a huge mistake.

“.....”

Nagato was staring down at the glow on her palms. Her head slowly came up.

“A new power is attempting to join in.”

I squinted. I could see a different shade in there, not matching any of the goddesses.

This light was trying to take shape, writhing like an amorphous being.

Halos appeared above their heads; wings on their backs. As if seeping out of space, overlapping their goddess forms. They were goddesses *and* angels. *Superpositioned?*

“Perhaps a transition to the next story,” Koizumi said grimly. “We’d better act fast.”

Three angels might mean a biblical setting. The sight of monotheistic angels melded with Greek goddesses was likely so blasphemous it’d give fundamentalists a heart attack.

“This world’s creator is likely far less particular than the one described in the Bible.”

It simply doesn’t care. No consideration for humankind.

Onstage, night had fallen on the center of Troy. The whole town was fast asleep. Greek soldiers began filing out of the giant wooden horse brought in as spoils of war. Certain of their victory, the Trojans had partied hard, worn themselves out, and were now sound asleep. Successfully inside the walls, the



suicide squad acted swiftly. One climbed a tower, waving a torch at the ships waiting offshore. Another got the gates open, while others started fires or slaughtered soldiers in their sleep. Menelaus went straight for Helen.

I peeled my eyes off the impending tragedy and looked at Nagato. She looked at me.

That eye contact was everything; I knew what I had to do.

“Haruhi, Asahina, take Nagato’s hands.”

“We calling a UFO?” Haruhi joked, but her right hand took Asahina’s hand, and her left took Nagato’s. I took Nagato’s free hand, then put my left on Koizumi’s. He and Asahina joined hands, and we formed a circle. I couldn’t exactly sense the flow of energy Nagato had shown us earlier, but I bet there was a massive swirl of it all around us.

I could almost feel it crackling behind my head. Perhaps the best a layperson could manage.

“Close your eyes,” Nagato whispered. “Impossible to predict what we’ll see during an emergency escape. Unknown what effects this will have on the optic nerves or related brain cells. Some risk of madness.”

Ominous words. Before obeying, I took one last look at the stage.

The Trojan horse. A Trojan virus. That was basically our effect upon this world. Was this world’s creator satisfied?

As the fortress city of Troy went down in flames, Menelaus and Helen were tearfully reunited. They ran over to each other—and then things got awkward. Neither looked exactly at ease. It sort of felt like actors who’d received a last-minute script change. Perhaps they weren’t originally meant to get back together.

I called out, “Sorry, but we’re outta here. Do what you please! You ought to be free now.”

They looked at each other, then turned to us—smiling and hesitantly waving. As if the last shred of doubt was gone, they stepped closer and threw their arms around each other.

It was like the last panel of a happy ending. As long as you didn't mind the slaughter and raging inferno behind them.

Nagato's thin fingers squeezed my hand like plucking a tuft of cotton candy, and I closed my eyes. (My other hand was coated in Koizumi's clammy palm sweat.) She was that close to me—but her voice felt so far away, like it was echoing through time everlasting.

“Commencing SOS (r) + SOS (f) = 1 actualization process.”

As she spoke, we became simultaneously anyone and no one. We no longer existed at all. And yet, we were everywhere all at once. We tapped into all-world knowledge and forgot it instantly. We were rising and falling. Spinning while staying still. Eternity and fleeting existence were of equal value. The darkness behind my eyelids was replaced with blinding light. The light and darkness mingled, swirling, becoming one. It converged into a single point, becoming both infinite and infinitesimal.

As everything blacked out, the voice of no one in particular intoned: “—— Mission Complete——”

One step outside the exit gate, I stopped in my tracks.

“.....Hmm?”

I'd felt momentarily disoriented but soon snapped out of it.

The fall breeze brought a pleasant evening chill. The sky above was turning orange, the light already dimming; I could tell the sun was about to set.

Behind me, I could hear them playing an arrangement of “Auld Lang Syne,” and even farther, screams rising from the roller coaster going for one last spin.

Haruhi and Asahina were walking together up ahead, but she turned back.

“What, you forget something?”

“Nah.”

I started moving but glanced over my shoulder. A building like a castle, rides, attractions galore.

This—

A local fun center, not well-known outside our area. Half amusement park, half theme park. We'd just left. Small enough we could hit every ride before the day was out, but the quality of each one had been pretty solid—and we'd stuck around till almost closing time.

But...why were we here in the first place?

Having steamrolled us all through a grueling movie shoot and then a culture festival that really made Haruhi the center of attention, she'd somehow decided to reward our efforts.

"Let's all go have fun together to celebrate! Forget about finding weird things; let's turn our brains off and throw ourselves into tawdry entertainment! Fun for everyone."

That film shoot had certainly ruffled some feathers. Perhaps this was her way of making up for that. If she possessed that kind of consideration, then I wished she'd let it show in class.

"Where we going?" I'd asked.

"An amusement park! Next Sunday, gather at the usual spot."

So much for consideration—she settled all the plans on her own, and we'd spent the day getting hauled around in her wake, trying every ride in the place, and joining in on every attraction the theme park offered.

I will begrudgingly admit to enjoying myself. Asahina had been adorable, Nagato impassive, Koizumi prone to exhaustive commentary, and Haruhi a constant source of uproar. We'd battled a demon lord, fought space pirates, visited a western town, hunted sharks, assaulted Spanish fleets, flung ourselves into Greek myths—in hindsight, these attractions had sure had verisimilitude. Some of them had made it feel like we were really there. Amusement park tech not to be trifled with.

"Been a while since I played that hard!" Haruhi said, stretching. "I feel like I got a decade's worth of fun. Maybe it's just been that long since I hit up an amusement park."

"I'd like to go again!" Asahina said. Dressed in street clothes and walking shoulder to shoulder with Haruhi, they looked like sisters—and I hardly need

say which one looked older.

Koizumi was matching pace on my right.

“I thought we’d be worn out, yet my feet feel light. Like we’ve achieved something. Perhaps I got in touch with my inner child.”

Hearing that misty note in his voice, I glanced back once again.

“.....”

Nagato was right behind me, staring down at her palm for some reason.

Like there was something resting on it—but I couldn’t see it. Only her pale fingers.

Before I could ask what, her head drifted up, and our eyes met.

“.....”

Her eyes seemed to say, *“I feel like I’m forgetting something. Any idea what?”*

I couldn’t begin to tell you why I’d read into it like that, but if Nagato didn’t remember something, there was no way I would. I felt like there was something else I needed to ask her, but before I could put it in words, the doubt vanished like the last puff of smoke from a burned-out candle.

Something else tugged at my mind.

Something soft in my hand. I was holding hands with someone. I looked down...

And found my sister. Her right hand in mine, her left holding on to a balloon. A mascot character had been handing them out at the gate. There were some anime characters printed on the side.

She looked up at me and grinned.

My sister...? Had she been with us? No, wait, right, I remember now.

As I was putting my shoes on that morning, she’d thrown her arms around my legs, wailing, “I’m coming, too!” Somehow she’d found out we were going to the amusement park. I’d asked how.

“Yuki told me!” she claimed. But when I asked when and where, she’d

thought to herself for a moment and simply said, “A birdie came!” which made me want to take her temperature. After that, she just insisted she didn’t remember and seemed to be telling the truth. Maybe the bird thing had been in a dream.

I left that mystery for later and attempted to pry myself away, but a fifth grader hell-bent on going to the amusement park has a grip like a freight crane on a shipping container, and I wound up showing up late with a sister in tow.

I knew Haruhi and Asahina would welcome her, but when I asked Nagato if she’d told her about our plans, she simply crooked her head, her face not shifting at all.

Fair enough. Nagato secretly sharing SOS Brigade plans with my sister had neither rhyme nor reason.

Walking slowly to match her gait, she said, “Kyon, piggyback!”

“Sure, sure.”

Even I’m not sure why I went along with this demand so easily.

It had been quite a while since I carried her like this, and for some reason, I found myself deciding I’d better splurge a bit on her next birthday.

We headed toward the nearest station. On the way, I heard something rustle in my pocket, and I pulled it out, finding a bit of paper with English written on it.

“What the—?”

Was this a key item from the escape room? The paper had a weird feel to it.

Koizumi leaned in.

“A passage from the Bible. The Book of Job?”

Bits of it were underlined.

“Remember me?” I muttered...but had no recollection where I’d obtained this. Well, we’d been in and out of a lot of places; I might have absently taken it in passing. I shoved it back in my pocket to throw out later.

I could hear someone snoring next to my ear and glanced over to find my sister conked out.

Not sure how you could fall asleep on someone's back. As I was marveling at her feat, out of the corner of my eye, I saw wings flutter and looked up—only to not spot any bird...

“What is it?” Koizumi asked. From the look on his face, it must have been my imagination. I guess I hadn't heard flapping wings.

Yet my eyes turned up to the sky...and saw a balloon rising.

It had slipped from my sister's fingers in her sleep, escaped the clutches of gravity, and was now free to fly where it pleased.

The cartoony anime characters on the side were a man and a woman.

I felt like I'd seen them somewhere before, but their names and identities didn't come to mind.

My sister's lost balloon drifted on, higher and higher.

Perhaps a trick of the angle, but to me, the couple's smiles looked relieved.

## AFTERWORD

Even as a kid, I could never fall asleep properly. I have almost no memories of ever just pulling the covers on, closing my eyes, and drifting off. Most nights, I'd wouldn't sleep a wink, just toss and turn until the wee hours of the night, finally passing out after hours of this. I was meant to be nocturnal. For that reason, late-night radio was my boyhood best friend. Fortunately, I lived in an area with lots of channels and never got bored. But I was chronically sleep-deprived and getting up was horrible. Unsure if that's why I tended to vividly recall my dreams.

As a student, I made a habit of jotting down every idea and phrase that came to mind. I've got notebooks full of them, but somewhere in that pile of slop, I found a sad little line that said, *Dreams have the best cost performance of all entertainment*. At the time, I often had dreams with solid stories, and I woke up going, "*I wanted to see a little more of that one!*" Which may have prompted that note.

Sadly, as I grew up, I stopped remembering my dreams. Even if I do have one, they're the type you're relieved to wake up from. My inability to fall asleep alone continued and only recently corrected itself. I mentioned this in the last afterword, but it's easier to drift off while throwing together plots in your mind. My recent go-to started with a man walking endlessly through the ruins of the Earth, three thousand years in the future. A black-hooded coat wrapped around him, not another soul in sight, just walking on and on. Who is he? Where'd he come from? Where is he going? Where is everyone else? I start pondering that...and before I know it, I'm asleep. I recommend this to any insomniacs out there.

Acts one and two of *The Theater of Haruhi Suzumiya* originally appeared in *The Sneaker*, as "Haruhi Theater." I started out with a trio of concepts, and I

believe the plan was to have Noizi Ito draw some art for them and write a short story based on those illustrations, but somehow it ended up more of a novel. Also, the three goddesses motif in the final act took a lot of inspiration from pinup illustrations done for *The Sneaker LEGEND*. The art is always fantastic, and I can never be grateful enough, but this volume legitimately requires an extra special thank-you to the one and only Noizi Ito. The last concept sure got reworked a lot, but somehow it worked out in the end. Thank you so much.

I'd also like to take this space to express my gratitude to all the Haruhi Suzumiya series fans who've sent me wonderful gifts. Thank you very much.

And of course, to anyone who helped edit, proof, market, and sell this novel; and to anyone who picked it up, I send waves of gratitude in your direction. May we meet again!



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# PUBLICATION HISTORY

Act One: Fantasy.....*The Sneaker*, August 2004

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Act Three: World Tour...All New

Final Act: Escape.....All New

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# Table of Contents

- 1. [Cover](#)
- 2. [Insert](#)
- 3. [Title Page](#)
- 4. [Copyright](#)
- 5. [ACT 1 Fantasy](#)
- 6. [ACT 2 Galaxy](#)
- 7. [ACT 3 World Tour](#)
- 8. [FINAL ACT Escape](#)
- 9. [Afterword](#)
- 10. [Yen Newsletter](#)