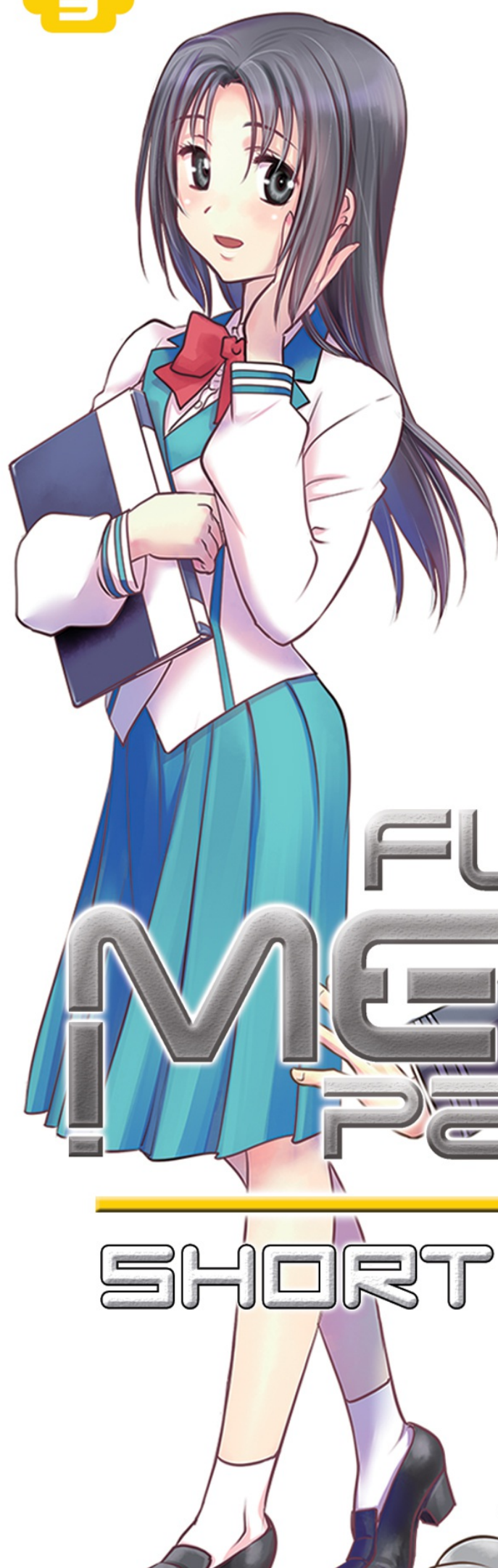


UNPOLISHED THREE-RING CIRCUS?



FULL Metal.. PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

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A Hostility Born of One-Sided Rivalry

Chidori Kaname stared at her watch. It was 12:28 p.m., and the second hand inched slowly yet steadily across the dial. They were almost at lunch break, but the class showed no signs of ending. For some reason, their modern lit teacher was just rattling on about the folk religions of Haiti.

“I mean, Voodoo is its own legitimate lifestyle, featuring wisdom passed down through generations. Zombies are purely an invention of movies...”

Three minutes ago he was telling us about the life of Natsume Soseki, thought Chidori. *How’d we get to zombies, exactly?* “Ngh,” she muttered to herself. “If you don’t have anything worthwhile to talk about, just let class end already...” She glared death at the teacher, but he didn’t seem to notice.

She could hear footsteps and chatter in the halls; another class must have let out early. She could even hear the sounds of running...

Geh, this isn’t good... Desperation began to contort Kaname’s typically attractive face.

Jindai High didn’t serve student lunches, but a local bakery—Hanamaru Pan, from the shopping street near the station—set up a kiosk there during the noon break. They served pretty good stuff there. Pizza rolls, croquette rolls, yakisoba rolls... they all tasted great. Everything, that is, except the plain rolls, which they always had a ton of left over at the end of the day.

You wanna talk zombies, that’s where you’ll find ’em... Kaname thought. When lunch break hit, students who didn’t bring their own lunch typically swarmed the kiosk and fought over its inventory. Anyone late to the party was resigned to a cruel fate: the leftover plain rolls. She didn’t even want to think about that. No butter, no jam, just plain and boring... bread.

A poor lunchtime indeed. Just the thought of it filled her eyes with tears. *Ahh... I want a custard roll,* she thought wistfully. *Sweet but not too sweet; tender, with custard that melts on the tongue...* An extravagant lunchtime

indeed. Just the thought of it filled her mouth with drool.

But... this stupid teacher! she thought angrily.

“—and then Sam Raimi made those utterly ridiculous movies. Of course, I love *The Quick and the Dead* and the like with their comically over-the-top killing scenes reminiscent of the *Hissatsu!* series, but—”

Just then, the chime signaling the end of fourth period rang out. The modern lit teacher stopped mid-rant and looked up at the ceiling.

Kaname’s fingers rapped loudly on her desktop. A few other students in the classroom began to rise from their seats, edging their toes in the direction of the door.

Hurry...

“Let’s see, is there anything else...”

Come on, hurry!

“Hmm...”

Can’t you hear me telling you to hurry?!

“Okay, class dismissed.”

The instant the teacher spoke, Kaname shouted, “Rise! Bow!” Then she, the one leading the end-of-class formalities, raced out of the classroom and dashed full-speed down the hall. Overtaking a few other students, she approached the steps and... “Geh.”

The stairwell area was crowded with students who had just finished gym. She’d lose at least fifteen seconds wading through them. She had to find a shortcut!

Kaname threw open a nearby window and leaped without hesitation. “Hah!” She landed on the roof of the bicycle parking stand and ran, the sheet metal banging below her with every step. Her positioning meant that any boys standing below could look up her skirt, but she didn’t care. She’d put on her gym shorts in advance, having anticipated just this course of events.

Reaching the end of the roof, she alighted to the ground below, her

momentum uncompromised as she raced for the school's front entrance. She almost hit a first-year girl coming around the corner but managed to avoid her with a dazzling display of footwork.

There! The Hanamaru Pan kiosk stood to one side of the entrance. It was already surrounded by hungry students, whose numbers were only growing.

"One wiener roll and one Pikachu roll, ma'am!"

"Curry bread and an Anpanman!"

"French toast and a deep-fried roll!"

They shoved and shouted over each other, looking like brokers during a stock market crash.

Kaname gripped her 500 yen coin and charged into the fray. The crowd jostled her, but she didn't flinch. She proceeded through their sweaty ranks and shouted at the top of her lungs, "Croquette roll and custard roll, please!"

It was intensity that mattered here—even the slightest timidity would get you ignored by the bread-seller lady. *Please reach her, voice of my soul!*

Then, after a moment that felt like eternity...

"Right, 390 yen," the lady responded, sliding a croquette roll and custard roll into a bag.

I did it! At last! Kaname sighed in relief, handed over her 500 yen coin, and took her change and rolls. With a pleased smile on her face, she exited the crowd the same way she had come.

"Mwa ha... ha ha ha... I did it," she muttered in satisfaction, just as she noticed Sagara Sousuke standing nearby. He was wearing his usual sullen expression and tight frown, scowling thoughtfully into the crowd around the kiosk.



“What’s up, Sousuke? You here for baked goods too?” Kaname asked.

He folded his arms in response. “Affirmative. I’ve run out of dried meat and vegetables. But I don’t think I’ll be able to buy anything in this state...”

Kaname couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of the battlefield-raised boy looking so timid. “Oh, come on, that isn’t like you. They really will sell out if you don’t hurry, though.”

“I wouldn’t want that.”

“So bust in there! Go on!” Kaname gave Sousuke a shove.

“Hmm...”

“The old lady will ignore you if you don’t shout out your order. It’s all about intensity!”

“I see. Intensity...” He nodded, then walked to the edge of the crowd. He straightened up, took in a deep breath, then shouted, “Hand over the plain rolls!!!”

“...”

“I demand a plain roll!”

“Um, dude. If that’s all you want—” But just as Kaname was about to clap a hand over his mouth, Sousuke drew his handgun from the holster on his back!

“Hand over the plain rolls, now! Do it, or I’ll kill everyone here!”

“Hey!” she protested.

Blam! Sousuke fired a warning shot into the sky. The students, stunned by the sound of the shot, immediately moved. All the pushing caused someone to trip, and they fell into a few others, causing those students to lose their balance—and one by one, the dominos fell.

“Ah...”

Rustle! Skreeeee... crash! The table lined with baked goods, and the woman behind it, were both crushed under the surge of student bodies.

That day, after class, in the student council room...

“Two weeks to recover, apparently,” said the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu. He was a young man with a clever appearance, wearing a white high-collared uniform with wire-rimmed glasses and slicked-back hair.

Sousuke and Kaname sat in folding chairs, facing him from across his desk. They both looked exhausted. Following the... *incident*, Kaname had given Sousuke a thorough scolding.

“Two weeks, eh?”

“Yes. The nurse who performed first aid said the woman’s injuries weren’t severe, but that the baked goods kiosk would likely be on hold for a while. I think she intended to imply some criticism with the statement.”

“Hrmgh...” Sousuke and Kaname both groaned and folded their arms.

“This would be a serious issue vis-a-vis class provisions,” said Hayashimizu, who stood and turned away from them to gaze out the window. He was looking down on the athletic field where the baseball and track clubs were having practice. “Reliable polling suggests that approximately 88% of our students bring their own lunch to school,” he continued. “This includes those who buy lunches from convenience stores on the way. That leaves 120 students, all of whom rely on baked goods, going hungry. The results of starvation are easy to predict: violence, looting, moral depravity... school security will be severely compromised.”

Sousuke nodded in agreement, his face ashen.

Kaname slumped beside him. “Um...” she mumbled, “Jindai High’s not exactly some developing nation...”

“The principle is the same regardless,” said Hayashimizu. “Polite society survives only as long as the food stores are packed. We can’t expect reasonable behavior from bloodthirsty students suffering from starvation.”

“I don’t think anyone’s gonna be that upset about a little lunch...”

A light shone in the student council president’s eyes. “Don’t you? Today, I saw a girl running over the roof of the bicycle rack in order to reach the bread kiosk

faster.”

“Geh...” Kaname was stunned into silence.

Ignoring her, Hayashimizu reached for the drawer of his desk to pull out a sheaf of papers and a notepad. “I have talked things over with our principal, and we’ve decided to have the student council procure and distribute our own baked goods for the time being,” he told them. “The funding will come from the treasury, and one of our own will be appointed to manage it.”

“Not me,” Kaname said instantly.

Sousuke’s brow furrowed. “Chidori. That seems rather irresponsible. Looking back on how the incident unfolded, I believe we owe this to the people,” he said knowingly.

Kaname’s chair clattered as she launched to her feet, her arm immediately in a sleeper hold around Sousuke’s neck. “*You* owe it! You, *singular!*”

“Egh...”

Hayashimizu gazed calmly at the merciless throttling. “But Chidori-kun,” he said, “I’ve received reports from witnesses that you ‘egged Sagara on.’ Now, if you are willing to testify that you bear no responsibility whatsoever for the incident, I can let you off the hook... But can you?”

“Geh...” When he put it that way, Kaname couldn’t claim that she was completely innocent. She did feel responsible for her failure to stop Sousuke, whose limp body she now released. After glancing evasively around the room for a while, she said, “Okay, fine! I’ll do it, okay?”

“Excellent,” Hayashimizu agreed, and offered her a brown manila folder. “The documents are here. There’s a list of things to buy as well. Take care of it.”

After finishing their discussion with Hayashimizu, Sousuke and Kaname left the student council room. “Boy, what a pain in the ass...” Kaname grumbled.

“It’s nothing to worry about. I’ll handle the work. You don’t have to do anything,” Sousuke said confidently.

Kaname side-eyed him. “No way. Nothing good comes of leaving things to

you.”

“That’s not true,” he protested.

“You’re planning to buy some weird dried meat or gross army rations, right? Because they’re cheap?”

“How did you know?” he asked after a pause.

“It was super obvious!” Kaname said scornfully. “Sheesh...”

Sousuke folded his arms with a frown. “But you’re wrong about field rations not tasting good,” he insisted. “The US Army’s MREs are particularly edible. You’ve tried them, haven’t you?”

Kaname had once tried a bite of a US Army field ration kit that Sousuke had brought during lunch. The taste was... pretty rough. “That mushy tuna with noodles? That’s not fit for human consumption. It smelled like plastic and the texture was weird. No wonder soldiers go to war; I’d be cranky too if that’s what I ate all the time.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works, exactly...”

“Anyway,” she said, “I’ll handle all the procurement and selling, so you just sit back and watch.”

“Hmph.”

And while they were talking...

“Madame Principal! I simply don’t accept this!” They heard a deep male voice from around the corner. A large-framed teacher was stalking after a middle-aged woman—the principal—who was walking swiftly away from him.

The man was around thirty, wore his hair in a crew cut, and was dressed in a tracksuit. It was the gym teacher, Kogure Ichiro. He was also the school’s guidance counselor, and the students generally disliked him.

“Leaving everything up to the students goes far beyond encouraging independence! It’s just irresponsible! It’s *anarchy*!” Kogure insisted.

The principal responded with a scowl. “Stop worrying! It’s just a few weeks of lunch!”

“Wrong!” he retorted. “Have you forgotten it was the students who caused the accident in the first place? Yet after all that, you want to put them in charge of food and drink... it’s unacceptable!”

“Just think of it as an extension of the school festival,” she told him placatingly. “You don’t have a problem with that, do you?”

“But—”

“There’s nothing else to discuss!” The principal waved as if to declare the conversation over, then disappeared into her office. Mr. Kogure stopped in front of the door, cursed under his breath... and then, for the first time, noticed the presence of Sousuke and Kaname.

“He’s looking at us. I think he’s mad,” Kaname whispered.

Sousuke’s expression didn’t change. “Really?” he asked indifferently.

Just then, Kogure strode up to him. “Well, well, if it isn’t Sagara. You’re looking well. Hard to believe you just got finished sending someone to the *hospital*,” Kogure said, sarcasm on full blast.

“I’m honored, sir.”

“That wasn’t a compliment!”

“Yes, sir!” Sousuke said, snapping to attention.

Kogure just glared at him in response. “Well, it’s perfect timing. Let me use this moment to make one thing clear...” The gym teacher stabbed at Sousuke’s chest with his finger. “Listen up, Sagara! I won’t tolerate students like you and Hayashimizu throwing your weight around any longer. You people are worse than the delinquents. You act like you’re so prim and proper, but I can tell you’ve got contempt for the teachers. I can’t openly defy the principal and the PTA, but I’ll put pressure on you in my own way!”

“Yes, sir!” Sousuke responded, his back still ramrod straight.

The response seemed to have gotten on Kogure’s nerves, because his shoulders began to tremble. “Y-You’re mocking me again! Just you wait!”

“Yes, sir. I am waiting!”

“Y-You...!” A vein bulged on Kogure’s forehead and his mouth flapped in impotent rage. In the end, unable to find the right words to chew Sousuke out with, he turned around and left.

Kaname just watched from behind. “Sheesh. Has he got a calcium deficiency or something? You’d think a gym teacher would be better about taking care of his health...”

“I believe Mr. Kogure is merely playing the role of drill instructor. That rage is the true sign of a professional,” Sousuke said with utter sincerity.

Kaname just looked at him in disbelief. “Are you just really bad at picking up on hostility from others?” she asked.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Oh, never mind... But, boy, old man Kogure has it out for you now, Sousuke. This is bad news,” said Kaname, folding her arms with a thoughtful scowl.

“Do you think so?”

“Yeah. You should really be careful. He’s a pretty crafty guy. If he doesn’t like a student, he’ll find an excuse to yell at them in gym and force the entire class to do laps. It sucks.”

Hearing that, Sousuke’s brow furrowed. “What’s wrong with that?” he wanted to know. “It’s standard practice for the entire company to take responsibility for the failings of one soldier.”

“...”

“The class must function as a single organism, and it’s Mr. Kogure’s responsibility to prepare us for missions,” he insisted. “I think it’s a fine practice.”

“Maybe you ought to tell him you think that... It might make him pretty happy,” Kaname said with a sigh.

Mr. Kogure returned to the gym teachers’ office and sat down in his chair. “I just don’t like it,” he mumbled.

Kogure Ichiro had first come to Jindai High two years ago, yet he still hadn’t

adjusted to the school's laid-back atmosphere. There were several things that earned his ire in particular—drinking, smoking, lapses in dress code, and destruction of property—and the mood around this school was that such things were generally permissible. He had briefly attempted to spearhead morning inspections, but the other teachers didn't share his enthusiasm, and at some point, the practice had died out.

Still, it wasn't like the school was a hotbed of immorality. Perhaps because its academic ranking was on the higher end, the students who got in were relatively well-behaved. There were a few who smoked, but there was no serious drug usage. They were smart enough to understand that such things were dangerous, and none of them had the kind of home troubles that would lead them down that road. When someone did cause trouble, the others' response was largely the same: *"Him again?" "Yeah, typical." "Oh well."* Both the teachers and the students simply accepted it. It was a truly strange school.

There was no place for a teacher like Kogure Ichiro at such a school, and Sagara Sousuke was the embodiment of everything he despised. Why did the other faculty members simply tolerate him despite the trouble he caused? Kogure himself would never tolerate it, and found it bizarre that they could. And thus, over time, Kogure Ichiro had developed a strong dislike of Sousuke.

He was nursing a can of coffee with a scowl when one of his fellow teachers called to him. "Did you hear, Mr. Kogure?"

"Hear what?"

"That Sagara kid is going to run the bakery kiosk tomorrow," said the other teacher. "Of course, Chidori-kun will be with him. I just hope they don't cause any more trouble..."

"Oh?" said Kogure. This was the first he'd heard about it. He was already against the idea of students selling baked goods at lunch, and now Sagara Sousuke was going to be in charge of doing so? That was even more intolerable! He had to find a way to disrupt it! He couldn't stop them openly, but he could arrange a bit of sabotage. Something that wouldn't lead the principal back to him...

Kogure thought quietly for a few moments, then clapped his hands in

realization and let out a nasty chuckle.

The next day...

During a long break in between second and third periods, a kei-truck had stopped in front of the school. It was filled with orange cases. Sousuke and the driver from the bakery handled the grunt work, while Kaname stood nearby with a clipboard. It was her job to quickly count the rolls in each case and check the inventory against their invoice.

Once the unloading was complete, Kaname scowled as she questioned the young man from the bakery. "You're twelve yakisoba rolls short and twelve gratin rolls over."

The young man scratched his head. "Ah... Looks like there was a small mistake. They're the same price, though. Can you make do for today?"

"Hmm... Well, if you insist. We did impose on you pretty suddenly, after all," Kaname admitted. "Just make sure you get the order right starting tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure, thanks." The young man from the bakery smiled ingratiatingly, then took his kei-truck and left the school behind.

"There are no plain rolls," Sousuke said, as he looked over the cases.

"I didn't order any," she told him. "I asked for as few of the other unpopular baked goods as I could, too. We can't afford to have any left over, you know?"

"Oh, really?"

Kaname, noticing Sousuke's vague expression of disappointment, said, "Wait, are you telling me that you *wanted* to eat the plain rolls?"

"Oh, no..." Sousuke turned away innocently. Then he pulled out the waterproof tarp he'd brought from the student council room. He arranged it to cover the stack of cases (which stood about the height of a washing machine) before adding weights to the corners to hold the tarp in place.

"That should do it," said Kaname, clapping her hands together decisively. "Now we just have to wait until noon to start selling."

“Will we be doing the selling all by ourselves?” Sousuke inquired.

“No way,” Kaname told him. “I asked a few people for help. When we said that they would get first choice on purchases, they agreed to help immediately.” Then she tucked her clipboard under her arm and strode swiftly back to the classroom.

It occurred to Sousuke in that moment just how well organized she was. Kaname was quick-witted and exacting; perhaps there was a reason she had been appointed both Student Council Vice President and Class Representative.

At the same time, that meant there was nothing for Sousuke to do. He felt perfectly extraneous.

Actually... Staring at the tarp-covered stack of cases, he reconsidered.

“We’ll be doing passing practice in groups of three! Ten minutes of that, then we’ll do a scrimmage!” Mr. Kogure said to his students after the warm-up exercises were completed. The boys, dressed in tracksuits, began kicking around the randomly scattered soccer balls. It was fourth period. “I have some business to take care of,” he then said to a nearby student. “I’ll be back soon.”

Then Kogure left the athletic field behind, stopping by his office to remove a small plastic bag from a drawer in his desk.

“Mr. Kogure, are you looking for something?” asked one of his colleagues, who had that period off.

“No, nothing,” he said, avoiding his colleague’s gaze as he shoved the bag into a pocket of his tracksuit, swiftly heading for the school’s entrance. Classes were in session, so the area was more or less deserted.

To one side of the door sat a stack of cases, covered by a waterproof tarp. These were the baked goods that Sousuke and Kaname had bought.

Kogure smiled. How irresponsible of them to simply leave it lying out here... “Maybe I need to teach them a lesson.” He let out an evil chuckle as he checked the contents of his plastic bag one more time.

Insect legs—about thirty of them. They were actually grasshopper legs, sold

as bird feed, that he'd bought from a local pet shop. But they looked exactly like cockroach legs. It would be a disgusting sight for anyone who got one in their roll. Sousuke and Kaname would be blamed, their impromptu business would fail, and the student council's budget would take a huge hit. It would be the end for not only Sousuke, but for that insufferable oaf, Hayashimizu, as well.

"Heh heh heh..." Kogure felt sorry for the students who would be buying the rolls, as well as for the bakery... but that was just their bad luck. They should just be grateful he didn't mix in arsenic or cyanide.

Truly, it was the thinking of a terrorist.

"Now I'll show you, Sagara, you bastard..." Kogure Ichiro took in a deep breath, then tore off the waterproof tarp that Sousuke had placed on top of the cases.

Five minutes before the end of fourth period, Sousuke and Kaname received permission from their teacher to leave class early.

"Okay, the hard part's coming up. We're going to have to deal with over a hundred students shoving their way in," Kaname said, apron in hand.

"What should I do?"

"Nothing. You don't even know the names of the rolls, do you?"

"Hmm..." Sousuke grunted in frustration.

As they came out to the entrance, they saw a group of female students already gathered around the baked goods cases. These were the salesgirls that Kaname had asked for help: students from athletic clubs that Kaname had done favors for, as well as younger students from the student council—they looked colorful and charming in the aprons they'd brought.

The waterproof tarp was already gone when they arrived. One of the salesgirls was just about to reach into the baked goods case, when...

"Don't touch that!" Sousuke barked.

The girl stopped, startled. "Wh-What?!"

"What's wrong, Sousuke?"

“Well... it occurred to me that someone might try to steal the rolls. So, I rigged the case with a trap.”

Sousuke reached for the car battery he’d attached behind the case and removed the cables attached to it with clips. Then he poked at a small transformer beside it, probably prepared in the physics room. “This emits a high voltage current designed to knock out whoever touches it. The amperage is high, so the consequences will be severe. Even after they regain consciousness, they’ll deal with aftereffects such as headaches, vomiting, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, lethargy, and more.”

“Youuu...” Kaname pulled her fan from somewhere-or-other, and was about to smack Sousuke over the head with it, when...

“Hang in there, Mr. Kogure!”

“The taxi’s on the way now. We have to get him to a hospital—”

A group of adults moved past them. A pair of gym teachers were supporting Mr. Kogure, who was looking pale and limp.

“Are you all right, sir?” Sousuke asked.

Kogure looked at him with hollow eyes. “You... You...” That was all he could manage before his head drooped back down and his colleagues carted him away to the school gate.

Kaname and Sousuke watched him go. “Vertigo, you think?” Kaname asked. “It’s really got to be some kind of vitamin deficiency...”

“He does have a taxing job that requires frequent outbursts of anger. It’s most likely overwork,” Sousuke speculated wisely. “I pity him.”

They chatted back and forth as they set up the kiosk. They lined up the cases on top of long tables, which had been borrowed from the student council room. Then they laid out the change, plastic bags, and other details.

“I forgot to mention it before,” said Kaname, “but don’t set something like that up tomorrow.”

“You mean the electric trap? But—”

“I said no!”

“Very well...” Sousuke sulked.

Then the bell rang, and the students began to crowd around. The baked goods sold out at a rapid pace, and everyone commented positively on their quality.

The next day...

Kogure, still not completely recovered from the high-voltage current, arrived at school on uneasy legs and somehow managed to make it through to third period. He then slumped over his desk in the gym teachers’ office and let out a long groan.

He hadn’t been expecting a nasty trap like that. What a coward that boy was! All he’d wanted to do was mix in some bug legs with the rolls...

When the bell to signal the start of fourth period—Kogure’s break period today—rang, his fellow teachers left the office, leaving him behind there. He waited about twenty minutes for things to quiet down and hauled himself to his feet. He picked up the paper bag he’d prepared and headed for the front door.

Once again, the baked goods cases that had been brought in after second period lay beneath a waterproof tarp.

“Damn you, Sagara...” Mr. Kogure whispered. “I’ll get you this time.” With that, he pulled a pair of rubber gloves from his bag and slipped them on. Insulation was the key to foiling an electric trap. Now he could sabotage the baked goods.

He examined the contents of the small bottle he’d pulled out of his pocket, which contained a white powder made from crushed laxative tablets. He’d prepared it after deciding the insect legs alone just wouldn’t do the trick.

One dose of this would give any students who ate the baked goods upset stomachs, causing a disruption similar to a food poisoning panic. The principal’s trust in the student council would plummet, and Sousuke and Kaname would be held responsible.

“Heh heh... Get ready for this one...” Kogure let out a nasty laugh, then stripped the waterproof tarp off of the case.

Five minutes before 4th period ended, Sousuke and Kaname were once again given leave by their teachers and left their classroom early. Their math teacher didn't look happy about the situation, but did agree to let them go. Apparently, the principal had given her approval at some kind of staff meeting beforehand.

"Now, let's keep up the big sales today!" Kaname declared confidently. She'd been pretty annoyed about having the job forced on her originally, but now she was really raring to go.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Sousuke observed.

"Oh? Maybe I am. I think I might be cut out for this kind of work!"

As they reached the entrance hall, they saw that nobody else had arrived yet. Sousuke and Kaname were the first ones there.

"Hm..." Sousuke frowned, noticing that the waterproof tarp, which was supposed to be over the cases, had been stripped off.

Kaname, not seeming to notice, said, "What's wrong? Oh... The tarp. You think the wind blew it off?"

"I don't know. Nothing seems to be missing." As he said that, Sousuke reached for the topmost case to remove a small, dark green gas cylinder.

"What's that?"

"You forbade me from using high-voltage electricity," he reminded her, "so I prepared a different trap."

"..."

"I rigged it so that anyone who strips off the waterproof tarp will get a face full of tear gas—more specifically, a riot control agent known as Adamsite or DM. It causes a burning sensation in the eyes, nose, and throat, as well as difficulty breathing, headaches, nausea, and other symptoms—"

"Youuu..." Kaname pulled her fan from somewhere-or-other, and was about to smack Sousuke over the head with it, when...

"Hang in there, Mr. Kogure!"

“The taxi is on the way now. We have to get him to a hospital—”

Mr. Kogure passed by, dragged along by two of his colleagues. His eyes and nose were red and swollen, and his face was soggy from tears and snot. He seemed limp again today.

“Sir? What’s wrong?”

At the sound of Sousuke’s voice, Kogure looked up in anguish. “D-Damn you...” But that was all he could manage before he slumped over and was dragged away to the front gate.

Sousuke and Kaname watched him go, and each expressed their own opinion.

“Hay fever, you think? Some people get it pretty bad...”

“A kind of nasal inflammation due to allergies, yes. It’s impressive that he came here despite his chronic illness.”

After recovering from their surprise, they began working at setting up the shop. Then their helper students arrived and began tending to their various duties.

Kaname, now wearing her apron, said, “Oh, right. No more of that Adam-stuff starting tomorrow, okay? No more electric or gas traps of any kind.”

A furrow appeared on Sousuke’s brow. “But what about my anti-theft measures?”

“I said, *no traps of any kind!*”

“...Very well.” If she insisted, he had no choice. Sousuke decided he wouldn’t set any more traps.

The lunch period arrived soon after, and the hungry students began to crowd around. Once again, the baked goods sold quickly, and there were no complaints of any kind.

The next day arrived. Mr. Kogure had spent the entire night laid up with a headache and a cough, and arrived at school that day looking exhausted.

Blasted Sagara! he thought. First electricity, now tear gas... It was all so

cowardly. Had anyone ever met such a nasty little student? Hadn't he ever considered his victim's feelings?! All he was trying to do was sabotage the students' baked goods!

You'll pay this time! You will absolutely pay! Kogure Ichiro burned with one-sided thoughts of revenge.

When fourth period began, he barked at the students in his class, "Twenty laps around the athletic field! And another ten laps for every person who slacks off!" He ended in a near scream before turning away and leaving the athletic field behind. He stopped by the gym teachers' office, picked up his bag, and headed for the entrance where the baked goods kiosk sat.

He put on his insulated rubber gloves as well as a gas mask. He'd forced himself out of bed the night before to buy them from a military surplus shop.

"And...!"

On top of that, he'd added the bulletproof vest and helmet he'd bought in anticipation of further traps, plus the anti-flash sunglasses he'd prepared just in case. He should now be safe from anything short of a bomb.

"Ha ha... It's perfect!" Having fortified himself with all imaginable defensive measures, Kogure pulled out a bag of blasting powder from his bag, as well as twenty sewing needles. After everything that had happened to him, he wouldn't settle for anything less. He also retrieved the laxative and insect legs he'd failed to use the past two days.

"I'll give you everything I've got!" Whispering in a voice that brimmed with madness, he stripped off the waterproof tarp.

No traps... he realized.

He removed the lid of the topmost case.

No traps here, either.

The custard rolls lay exposed, defenseless.

"Eh...?" Slightly taken aback by the anticlimax, Kogure picked up one of the sewing needles. Then, with a hard swallow, he stuck it into a custard roll.

No issues. It was a success.

Lofty accomplishment brimmed in his chest. His heart blazed with a wicked excitement.

Well, Sagara?! Now you're finished! He'd completely lost his mind. With a mad cackle, he inserted another needle, then another. "Bwa ha ha... Take this!"

"Hello?"

"Take that! And that! Well?!"

"Excuse me?"

"Learned your lesson yet? Take— eh?" He quickly looked up and realized that a middle-aged woman in a suit was standing over him.

It was the principal. Her face was pale and her eyes were wide as she stared straight at Kogure. "Mr. Kogure," she said, "what in the world are you doing?!"

"Eh? Ah... well..." He racked his brain for ideas—anything, anything that could explain what he was doing. However...

He was wearing rubber gloves, a gas mask, a bulletproof vest, and a helmet, while inserting needles into the students' baked goods with a mad glint in his eye. There could be no good explanation for that.

Ten days after Kaname's kiosk business began, Hanamaru Pan returned.

The students had made a healthy profit off the baked goods they'd sold in the meantime. Beginning on day four, Sousuke had learned how the business worked, which lifted some of the burden from Kaname.

"I mean, sheesh!" It was lunchtime, the day the standard sales resumed. Kaname sounded like she was in high spirits. "I can't believe we made it through safe and sound. At the start, I was really worried you'd blow up the kiosk or something. But what a great ending!"

"I agree," said Sousuke, nodding firmly. "I'm pleased that we were able to pull it off safely as well."

Just then, one of their classmates, Tokiwa Kyoko, came running. "Hey, guys! Big news!"

“What is it?”

“Remember how Mr. Kogure’s been off since last week? They say he’s been suspended!”

Kaname and Sousuke looked at each other in shock.

“You think he really is sick?” she asked.

“Most likely,” Sousuke said. “His health seemed extremely poor last week.”

“That’s scary.”

“It’s a shame. He really was an excellent teacher...” Sousuke whispered with rare introspection, chewing on his plain roll.

〈A Hostility Born of One-Sided Rivalry — The End〉

A Suicide of Inconvenience

Classes were over for the day, and students had gathered on the school's athletic field.

Sagara Sousuke stood in the batter's box, wearing his usual sullen expression, complete with tight frown. He had removed his high-collared uniform and was dressed in just his undershirt. For some reason, he didn't hold a bat, nor was there a catcher behind him; yet his stern gaze was pointed at the pitcher's mound, where his classmate, Onodera Kotaro, was standing.

Kotaro was a big guy with a crew cut who, for some reason, wasn't wearing a mitt either. He instead had his hands full with as many baseballs as they could hold. "Okay," he said. "Here we go, Sagara!"

"Ready any time," Sousuke responded.

Onodera took in a deep breath, then threw the baseballs high into the air.

In that instant, Sousuke drew a black pistol from the holster on his back and fired it over Onodera's head. His target? The six balls just reaching the height of their arc.

Blam! Blamblamblam! Blamblam! All the balls in the air were sent flying, pierced by bullets, as shredded rubber drifted to the ground. The other eight boys watching let out a cheer.

"Damn, awesome!"

"He got 'em all!"

"I win. That'll be 300 yen."

"Damn... at least miss one of 'em!"

Amid the chatter, Onodera walked off the mound, gave Sousuke a firm nod, then looked at his gun. "Boy, that's a hell of a lot of power," he observed.

"How'd you modify it?"

"I installed a laser sight, but I didn't use it just now. Otherwise, I simply

replace the parts as they wear out,” Sousuke responded casually before holstering his weapon.

The gun was an Austrian-made 9mm semi-automatic, known as a Glock 19. It was a shorter version of the Glock 17, the famous pioneer of plastic-frame pistols. Its short length made it convenient to carry around, but it was neither particularly powerful nor especially precise. And this was just an ordinary mass-production model, without much customization at all. He had installed an off-the-shelf mini laser sight (easy to acquire even in Japan) in it, but he never actually used it when shooting. It was there for other reasons.

“Wish I had one,” Onodera said wistfully. “How much was it again?”

“Roughly 100,000 yen.”

“Wow, that’s a lot! Almost like the real thing. Guess I’ll pass on that one.”

It was widely known among the students at this point that Sousuke had grown up in war-torn regions overseas and knew little about everyday life in Japan. However, even now, most of them still believed that Sousuke’s gun was some kind of modified replica.

“C’mon, guys. Let’s stop playing around and start practicing,” said Kazama Shinji, a short and mild-mannered boy, with a sigh. “We went to all this trouble to reserve the athletic field, and there’s only two days left until the inter-class tournament.”

The inter-class tournament was one of Jindai High School’s customs, set to be held two days from now. For practice purposes, the sports clubs had been yielding the athletic field and the gym to regular students for the past few days. Some classes were extremely excited for the event, while some seemed entirely indifferent. Sousuke, Onodera, Kazama, and the others from class 2-4 were registered in the boys’ baseball division, but none of them were taking it seriously at all.

“But...”

His classmates voiced their objections in turn.

“Practice sucks, y’know?”

“Yeah. Let’s wash out in the first round and go play Uno on the roof.”

“Besides, Kazama, you’re the lousiest of all of us.”

Shinji floundered a little bit, looking to Onodera for aid, but the other boy just shrugged his shoulders. “What do you expect?” he said. “We’re up against class 7 in the first round. They’ve got a ton of guys in the baseball club. Not sure how far practicing is gonna get us.”

“Well, I guess...”

“At least the girls are better off. Right, Sagara?”

“It does appear so,” Sousuke responded, turning his eyes to the gym across the athletic field. “Chidori has been quite engaged.”

And inside that very gym...

Chidori Kaname was dressed in her gym uniform, running her classmates through a hard practice session. Her long black hair, held in place by a ribbon, was disheveled, and she was barking at those around her. “Okay! Make it look like you’re doing a back change, then break out the sumo slaps. Drop the ball behind you and let it roll!”

Five girls, including Kaname herself, were dancing around the basketball court, their motions intense. But at the same time, something was off: one ran through over-the-top fancy footwork; another mimed pulling down an invisible opponent’s shorts; one plunged a ball under her shirt, making her look pregnant. An outside observer might not think they were practicing seriously at all.

“Yes, good! If you pass to me, I’ll land a crossover dribble that’s totally pointless but will look super cool, and then—” As Kaname explained, she passed the ball between her legs several times, showing off a wild dribbling style.

Thumpa thumpa thumpa! The echoing of bouncing balls resonated throughout the gym. “I’ll show off my technique to the spectators and our opponents... watch carefully for when they start to get bored with it, okay? That’s when Kyoko will bring in a spare ball...” One of the members of the team, Tokiwa Kyoko, picked up a ball lying outside the court and approached Kaname. “Then

she'll whap me with it from behind!"

"Hi-yah!" Just as requested, Kyoko threw the ball at Kaname's butt. The ball hit her, then rolled listlessly to the ground.

Then, as the other girl just stood there, Kaname stopped dribbling, and mussed up her hair. She looked like a frustrated auteur film director. "Not like that! You're supposed to ye!!! Hit me harder, with more anger! And I want you to show more... you know, bubbleheaded (obsolete term) reactions!"

"Like what?"

"Say, 'Oopsie, I missed!' or 'Like, sorry, tee-hee!' or something like that!"

"Wow. That's a little too cheesy for me," said Kyoko, looking distinctly opposed to the suggestion.

"Your character in this performance is 'Valley Girl' (obscure ancient language)!" Kaname told her exasperatedly. "It's a statement to the audience! You're telling them to look at themselves in the mirror!"

Despite Kaname's absolutely outrageous demands, Kyoko didn't look angry at all, but just tugged at her braids and adjusted her cute coke-bottle glasses. "Geh... I think I get what you're going for, but... Is this really worth it just for an inter-class tournament? We could probably win if we just played normally."

Kaname was obviously excellent at sports, but the rest of the girls on the team were as well (except Kyoko, who was just average). Their team was already one of the favorites to win.

Kyoko's complaint turned Kaname red with frustration, steam rising out of her ears. "Well, when we picked our teams, everyone said they just wanted to have fun!"

"Sure, we did say that..."

"If we want to put on a crowd-pleasing performance, we need to put our blood, sweat, and tears into rehearsal! Do you realize how long comedy novel writers spend just sitting and staring at their word processors?!" Kaname demanded.

"That's a really random example, Kana-chan..."

Kaname always got weirdly obsessive about these events. It was as if they made her blind to everything around her as she focused only on rushing forward as fast as she could.

“But... it’s against the rules to mess up on purpose,” said one of her teammates.

The rest had their own complaints to voice, too.

“Isn’t showing off like this kind of counter to rules of sportsmanship?”

“It does seem kind of messed up.”

““Messed up?!”” Kaname shouted at the four of them. “Don’t you know anything about the seventy-year history of the Harlem Globetrotters?! They’re the best show basketball players in America! They use their incredible techniques to make the audience laugh! And even then, they always win easily. They’re way more inspiring to kids than the stupid Bulls. And that’s what we should be aiming for! *Entertainment!*” It was a truly heartfelt speech. However, that particular team’s abilities were a million times greater than those of these girls.

As Kyoko cradled her face in her hands, Kaname looked longingly up at the ceiling. “I went to see a Globetrotters show a long time ago,” she said. “I got a handshake and an autograph from Mannie Jackson. It was just the best... hee hee hee.”

“There she goes again...”

“She’s such a sports geek...”

Just then, they heard a girl’s angry shouting from the neighboring court. “How many times do I have to tell you?! A lame pass like that is just *giving* the opponent the ball!”

“...?”

They looked over to see Class 2-2 practicing on the neighboring court. The person shouting was a tall girl who appeared to be their leader, and the one she was yelling at was a short girl who was sluggishly retrieving a ball.

“Oh, Mizuki...” Kaname said, referring to the short girl. She had semi-long hair

and a face that was childish yet proud. She was only a little bit taller than Kyoko, but significantly more curvaceous.

The girl, whose name was Inaba Mizuki, glared at the other girl with tear-filled eyes.

“What are you looking at? I’m just trying to make you better so you stop messing up the team,” the leader girl insisted.

“...”

“Oh, okay. Whatever, then. Go do chest passes against the wall. By yourself,” she added coldly, turning away from Mizuki. Her teammates followed her lead.

Mizuki left the court without a word, then sat down facing the wall and practiced her passing all alone. She threw the ball. It bounced back, and she caught it. She did this over and over again.

“What are you looking at?” Mizuki asked sullenly as she noticed Kaname was looking at her.

Kaname walked swiftly up to her and crouched down at her side. “Wanna practice passes with me?”

Kaname’s request, predictably, enraged Mizuki. “Oh, please! I don’t want your pity—”

“I was kidding,” Kaname said without even a smile.

This only made Mizuki even more infuriated... for half a second, but then she just sagged. She gave Kaname a listless side-glance, then threw the ball at the wall. “Sheesh... I wonder why talking to you always seems to tick me off.”

“It’s just because you’re so stubborn,” Kaname suggested. She was, of course, correct. Mizuki was a proud girl with a somewhat perverse personality, and had a tendency towards underhanded behavior, so she didn’t have many friends. Kaname was about the only person in the school who would interact with her this openly.

“I hate the stupid tournament. Playing these barbaric games to see who wins and loses is such a pointless exercise,” Mizuki kept muttering as she practiced her passes.

“Hmm. Well, if you’re not good at it, can’t you just focus on having fun?” said Kaname.

“How am I supposed to have fun?” Mizuki demanded. “I’d rather just leave it to the people who want to do it.”

“That’s how I feel about the marathon, yeah...”

“I want them all dead. I wish I could set fire to the school or the gym.”

“Hey, now...”

Just then, the leader girl from earlier pointed at Kaname and shouted, “Excuse me! Kaname-san, wasn’t it? Could you please stop interrupting our practice?”

“Hmm?” Kaname recognized the girl. She was the vice president of the girls’ basketball club, Shoji Mia. She was even taller than Kaname and had a lively short haircut.

She and Mia had faced off at last year’s tournament (which had also been basketball), and Kaname’s team had won. Mia’s team was focused too much on polished play, while Kaname’s team saw it as ‘just a school tournament,’ and so were willing to go for rough and dirty tactics (Kaname had also prepared pro-wrestling style ‘poison fog’ and corkscrews, but didn’t have a chance to use them.)

The loss had apparently been a big blow to Mia’s pride, because ever since, Shoji Mia had always flinched whenever she looked at Kaname. It was the face someone wore when they suddenly ran into their ex, with whom they’d had a messy breakup. And in a way, this was a similar situation.

“Yeah, yeah, beg your freaking pardon,” Kaname muttered. “See you later, Mizuki.”

Kaname moved to leave, but Mia shouted after her, “I know it’s just an inter-class tournament, but watching your ridiculous practice makes me sick to my stomach.”

“Grr...”

“Aren’t you ashamed of looking foolish in front of everyone?”

Kaname wouldn’t take that lying down. She stopped in her tracks. “Heh. Talk

about us all you want, but you're the ones who're going to lose," she taunted. "And miserably, at that."

"What was that?" Mia shouted back.

Kaname simply smiled like an evil terrorist. The battle had already begun. This was what was known as psychological warfare: you made the other person as angry as possible, which actually ended up making them afraid. It was like a press conference between two heavyweight boxers before a match: *This guy ain't shit. I'm gonna pound his face in!*

"Prepare to be humiliated twice as hard as last year," Kaname told her. "I'm gonna expose you for the loser you are and make your life a living hell. You'll be the sad clowns we step on along our way to certain victory. Heh heh heh..."

Mia looked shaken for a moment, but rebutted with, "F-Fine, bring it on! Don't cry too hard when you lose!"

"Hah... ha ha ha!" Kaname refused to dignify her with another response, instead striding back to her own court.

The next day—the day before the tournament—arrived. During lunch break, Kaname and Sousuke were called to the student council room via schoolwide announcement.

Kaname was the student council vice president, while Sousuke held the rather dubious title of 'Head of School Security and Aide to the Student Council President.'

"Darn it, I wanted to practice basketball," Kaname muttered as she headed for their destination. She cast a glance over at Sousuke, who was silently accompanying her. "That's right, Sousuke. You're on a baseball team, right? What position are you playing?"

"You mean on defense?"

"Of course."

"Vanguard," he responded. "Kazama says it's the most important position to play to stop the enemy advance."

Kaname fell silent for about three seconds. “Are you talking about first base?”

“It may be called that as well.”

“Are you sure about this?” she asked suspiciously. “You’re not allowed to shoot or hit the runners, okay?”

Sousuke looked at her as if he was hurt. “I’m not that foolish,” he protested. “It’s against the rules to engage in violence directly against the enemy.”

“Hey, you really do get it!”

“Yes. That’s why I planted mines along the enemy’s route of advance—along the first base line, in other words. It’s the route they’ll have to take.”

Kaname fell silent again. The vague image of a batter hitting the ball, taking off into a run, and being blown to smithereens in front of the spectators floated through her mind.

“The only issue we might face is if the enemy employs the human wave tactics of the Iranian army,” Sousuke continued. “The enemy team has nine players in all, but if they were all to swarm first base at once, the mines would fail to keep them at bay. I wish there was a more effective way.” He seemed to consider this, while Kaname stared at him in disbelief. “Hmm? What’s wrong?” he asked as he noticed.

“Um... it’s not technically written in the rules,” she told him. “But landmines are also off limits, okay?”

Sousuke was briefly silent. “I’m using reduced amounts of gunpowder to limit their lethality. Are they still—”

“Yes, they are!”

“Hmm...”

Soon, they arrived at the student council room. They opened the door and went inside, where they found Hayashimizu, the student council president, sitting there alone.

“Oh? Is it just you, Senpai?” asked Kaname.

“Indeed. I have an important matter to discuss with you,” Hayashimizu

responded. He was a young man with a cool and calculating demeanor, slicked-back hair and wireframe glasses. “As vice president and my aide, this is something I thought you both should know. Please, sit down.”

They each took a random seat, and the student council president began talking. “Tomorrow’s inter-class tournament has been canceled. It was the principal’s decision, and it will be announced today in homeroom.”

“Right, right... Wait, what?” It took Kaname a moment to fully process what he was talking about.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Hayashimizu asked. “The tournament is canceled.”

The tournament... canceled. The tournament she’d been looking forward to for so long... “The heck you say?! Canceled?! Why? Tell me why!” Kaname leaped to her feet and slammed her hands down on the table in front of her.

Hayashimizu was unmoved by her aggressive display and simply held out a printed piece of paper. “Read this,” he said. “It’s a fax that was sent to the student council room, the principal’s office, and the teachers’ office yesterday.”

“Let me see!” Kaname took it, and Sousuke peered at it from the side.

To everyone involved in the tournament. I’m a second-year girl. I’ve been bad at sports since I was little, and my classmates always mocked me for it. At sports festivals and marathons—every time one of these events rolls around—I’m tormented by headaches and stomachaches. I want to stay home that day, but it will make everyone on my team mad, and my parents would never let me. I want to die.

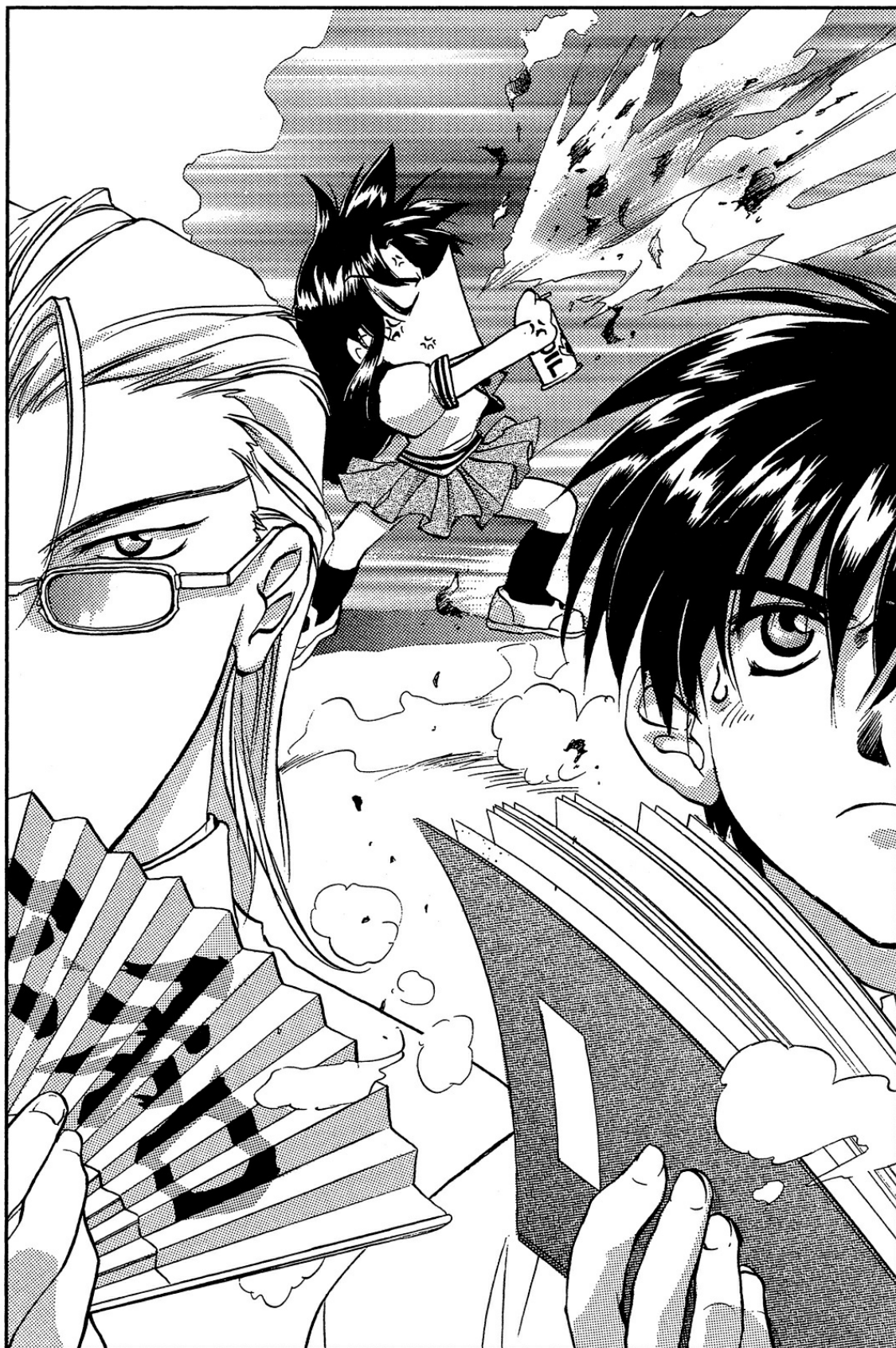
Please cancel the tournament. If you don’t, I might die. I’m sorry to be so selfish, but please. I really will die.

The instant she finished reading it, Kaname crumpled the paper up in her hands, threw it onto the floor, and stamped on it repeatedly. Then she kicked it up in the air and sliced it into shreds, the chops from her hand coming sixteen times a second. Then, still unsatisfied, she picked up a lighter and some oil spray (supplied to the student council room), used it to create an impromptu flamethrower, and let the fragments of the paper fall on the floor, burning with

the fires of her rage.

“I’ll kill her myself!!!” Kaname howled. Towering over the burning shreds of paper, she was in an absolute fury.

Meanwhile, Sousuke and Hayashimizu simply stood there calmly, each opening a nearby window or door. Then they used a few folders to wave the smoke out of the room.



“That was perhaps a bit rash,” Hayashimizu said, while he continued fanning calmly. “I understand your frustration. It does feel a bit like a terrorist holding their own life hostage. But the principal has decided to comply with the demand, just in case.”

There was a vein throbbing in Kaname’s forehead. “But if you give in to a threat like this,” she replied, “where does it end?!”

“I fully understand your perspective,” Hayashimizu said again. “But what if this person really is driven to the psychological breaking point? And what if, as a result of our ignoring it, her body is discovered dead tomorrow? Who is responsible for her death, then?”

“Erk... W-Well...”

“The principal?” he continued ruthlessly. “Me? Her parents? Her classmates? Or all of society? Who bears the responsibility?”

Kaname hesitated to answer. Hayashimizu looked at Sousuke, asking him the same question with his eyes.

“The girl,” Sousuke responded simply.

“Exactly. It should go without saying. But we frequently forget that, Chidori-kun, as you did just now.”

“Geh...” It seemed that when it came to problems like these, Sousuke had more common sense than she did. Kaname felt slightly abashed as she realized it.

“Sagara-kun,” said Hayashimizu. “Obviously, it is up to the individual to look after their own life, but the illusion that this is not true has expanded to unhealthy levels here. It is understandable that the principal acceded to her demands.”

It was a rather abstract sentiment. Hayashimizu was always dealing in such complicated philosophical concepts, but for some reason, even though he was comporting himself as calmly as ever, he seemed somehow angry... It was probably her imagination.

“Still, I’m unable to accept that,” Sousuke said firmly. “No matter what form it

takes, a threat is a threat. If you compromise with terrorists once, they'll continue to push you forever. We should find the girl and take her out with a sniper's bullet."

Smash! The fan, which had appeared at some point in Kaname's hand, hit Sousuke over the head.

"That really hurts," he said.

"You shut up!" she told him. "You're missing the whole point!"

"Hmm..." Sousuke folded his arms thoughtfully.

Leaving Sousuke to his thoughts, Kaname looked pleadingly at Hayashimizu. "Isn't there anything we can do? To just cancel it like this..."

"Well, it isn't set in stone yet," he admitted. "If we could find the student in question and relieve the threat of suicide, we could overturn the cancellation. I have the principal's word on this."

"I'll find her!" Kaname responded instantly. "She'll be an unathletic second-year girl, right? That narrows it down a lot already!"

"Assuming the letter is truthful, of course," Hayashimizu pointed out. "And you may offend those with whom you interact."

"I don't care. I'll do it. I won't let the tournament be canceled for such a stupid reason! Okay!" Kaname flew out of the student council room instantly, leaving Sousuke and Hayashimizu alone in the room together.

"But Mr. President, what if the perpetrator is just doing this for fun? Then no matter how Chidori sniffs around, she won't find them," Sousuke said, looking unsatisfied.

"I'm aware of that possibility. Hackneyed though it may be, I created this." Hayashimizu spoke self-reproachingly, and held out a new sheet of paper. It was made up of short sentences and printed from a similar word processor.

To those involved in the inter-class tournament. After thinking it over, I've realized I was being stupid. I'm sorry for causing trouble. I won't kill myself, so please don't call off the tournament. I really am sorry.

“I see,” Sousuke observed. “A fake letter.”

“Yes, we’ll use the enemy’s anonymity against them,” Hayashimizu affirmed. “In the worst-case scenario, I’ll send it to the principal and the teachers’ office. It will be deceiving them... but of course, when dealing with people willing to concede to threats, I see no need to hold back.”

If Kaname were still present, she’d probably mutter something about them being villains.

“I’ll accompany Chidori.” Sousuke stood up.

“Will you? I doubt there’s anything you can do to help.”

“Actually, I’m worried that if Chidori locates the blackmailer, she might be killed to ensure her silence,” Sousuke told him. “Caution comes first.”

“The possibility of that seems astronomically low to me, but... do as you wish.”

“Sir. In that case...” The boy took his leave.

Unaware that Hayashimizu had a Plan B in mind, Kaname raced through the school building, shoulders heaving in rage. She started with the closest room, Class 2-8, and tried all the likely students in order. She spoke to her friends and acquaintances in each class to pick out girls who were less than athletically inclined, and then ask those girls a few leading questions. “What sport are you playing tomorrow?” “Got anything weighing on you?” “There’s a fax going around with your number on it...” It was an unpleasant and awkward job, but it was the only way to go about it.

There were quite a few people who weren’t in class because it was lunchtime, and these she had to run all over school to locate. It was really time-consuming work, and most of the answers more or less came down to: ‘What in the world are you talking about?’ It was an inevitable response to being interrogated out of nowhere by a girl from another class to whom they’d never spoken before.

“Whew...” Kaname let out a sigh. She’d managed to work through the majority of the second-year student body, from Class 8 to Class 3. They were already nearing the end of the lunch period. “But... But I can’t give up!” she told

herself. She wouldn't let the tournament be canceled by some shifty, anonymous threat. She just couldn't accept it, and she slapped her cheeks with both hands to psych herself up.

"Looks like you're having a hard time," said Sousuke, who had been tagging along for a while.

"It's not over yet!" Kaname told him. "I still have the most likely suspect to visit."

"To whom are you referring?"

"A previous offender. Just yesterday, she said... Well, never mind," she responded as they arrived at the entrance to the gym.

Numerous students were practicing hard on the basketball court. Kaname strode towards a corner of the room, dragging Sousuke along. Inaba Mizuki was standing in the same place as yesterday, alone, doing passes against the wall.

"What do you want?" Mizuki gave Kaname a glance before throwing the ball against the wall. She seemed to have noticed Sousuke standing beside her, but immediately averted her eyes.

"Mizuki. I need to speak with you."

"Just make it fast. Miss Annoying herself is right over there." She stole a glance at Shoji Mia, who was yelling at their teammates back on the court.

Kaname put her hands on her hips and got to it. "Listen, I really don't think you're a bad person."

"Oh? Gee, thanks."

"When I think back on some of the things you've done to me, I actually think they're pretty funny," Kaname continued.

"Look... I'm sorry about that," Mizuki said grudgingly, throwing her ball against the wall again. It bounced off with a sharp sound.

"So, listen. If you're upset—" Kaname got that far, and then stopped.

What she was about to say was, '—and you've done something stupid again, just tell me, okay? I won't hold it against you.' But before she could say that,

she noticed that Mizuki's throws against the wall were sharper and more precise than yesterday. The girl had been diligently applying herself to improving her practice passes. There was sweat on her face that she didn't even bother wiping off. She had silently kept up her practice, and she was seeing results for it. Why would someone who'd sent a threatening letter trying to cancel the tournament be working that hard?

"What is it, Chidori?"

"Er..."

Sousuke was looking at her in suspicion. Mizuki seemed a little bit annoyed as well. "Well? What did you want with me again?" she demanded.

"Ah... Well, actually..." She felt a cold chill run up her spine. *What am I doing? Just because they seem a little bit suspicious, I'm accosting my own friends and treating them like criminals? Maybe my anger is making me crazy. This isn't who I usually am!* Suddenly flooded with embarrassment and self-loathing, Kaname lowered her face and turned red. "Ha... ha ha... looks like you're practicing hard, huh?"

"That's right. I really hate feeling like I'm holding others back," Mizuki responded with a scowl. Just then, Kaname suddenly threw her arms around her. "What the... What?!"

"I'm sorry, Mizuki! I've been a huge jerk! I suspected you for no reason, based on an awful, arrogant, selfish assumption! You really are a team player sometimes, aren't you?!" She held Mizuki tight, tears spilling from her eyes.

"Ugh... Wh-What's with you?"

"I just..." she sobbed. "I've really hurt you and made you suffer! Forgive me. Please."

"You're hurting me. You're making me suffer. Mm... hrrk..." Mizuki choked, her fingers spasming as she struggled for dear life.

"Chidori... she can't breathe," Sousuke told her. "You're killing her. Stop it."



“Hey, you! How many times do I have to tell you?! Don’t get in the way of our practice!” The shout came from Shoji Mia.

“Oh?” Kaname lay the unconscious Mizuki on the ground (Sousuke tending to her), and turned to face the other girl.

Mia walked up to her, glaring. “Honestly! Do you have to try to sabotage us just because you know you can’t beat us? These are some seriously dirty tactics!”

Kaname scowled. “Ugh... I knew you’d say that. Don’t you know I’ve been running around the school all day trying to make sure the tournament happens?”

“What?”

“An anonymous student asked the school to cancel, under the totally illogical threat that she’d kill herself if they didn’t. On behalf of the student council, we’re trying to find that student now.” When Sousuke explained, Mia’s hostility subsided.

“I see. That sounds... hard,” she admitted.

“You’re damn right it is. It’s *really* hard.” Kaname puffed up her chest proudly—though in fact, she’d already decided to give up her ugly search for the culprit and seek another resolution.

“Well? Have you found any leads as to who it might be?” Mia asked.

Kaname was about to say, ‘No, not at all,’ but she reconsidered and instead said, “Yeah. I know exactly who it is.”

It was a lie, of course. She didn’t like Shoji Mia, and didn’t want to admit to her failure. Sousuke tried to interject, but she stomped on his toes to keep him quiet.

“So, who made the threat?”

Kaname felt internally flustered. *Ugh, I should have known she’d ask... Better try to brush her off with a joke.*

With an assumed air of great importance, she pointed straight at Mia. “Hah. It

was *you*, Shoji-san!”

A few seconds passed. The other girl was expressionless. Neither her eyebrows nor her mouth moved, and she just stared at Kaname.

Ah... She's mad. Kaname's mind went into damage control mode as it strained to figure out a follow-up like, 'just kidding. That's actually classified info. Ha ha ha ha ha...' She was about to open her mouth to try that one out, when suddenly...

“How did you know?” Mia asked, all of the blood draining from her face.

Kaname stared at her. “Wha...?”

“How did you know? I've been practicing really hard... I didn't think anyone would notice. How did you know it was me?”

It was such an unexpected reaction that both Kaname and Sousuke were left dumbstruck.

“Y-You—”

“It's... It's all over!” Mia's voice broke, and she took off running for the door of the gym. The other two could only stare blankly after her.

“I'm surprised, Chidori. How did you know?” Sousuke asked her, with an expression of great admiration.

“Huh?” Kaname said blankly. “Um... just a shot in the dark, actually.”

“No need to be humble. I'm impressed. What deduction method did you—”

“Seriously, it was dumb luck! Anyway, we have to go after her. I have... a really bad feeling about this.”

“What about Inaba?” Sousuke cast a glance to Mizuki, who was still on the floor.

“Ah... Take her to the nurse's office. Please? Thanks!” Leaving Mizuki and Sousuke behind, Kaname ran after Mia.

She continued to run after Mia, asking students on the way through the halls and stairs where she'd gone. She ran into a first-year on the 4th floor and asked if she'd seen her.

“Yeah, she went to the roof,” the girl said in response.

Kaname thanked her, then ran off again, up the stairs to the roof. She couldn’t stop her heart from pounding as she thought, *I really hope this isn’t what I think it is...*

But indeed, it was. She came out onto the roof and saw Shoji Mia there, already over the railing and fence. She was one step away from a plunge to the ground below.

A cool wind blew by, stirring Mia’s hair. She looked as if she already had one foot in the grave.

“Don’t do anything stupid! Get back here right now!” Kaname took a step forward.

“Stay back!” Mia shrieked, one hand gripping the fence. “If you come one step closer, I’ll kill myself! I’ll be expelled for this anyway! What’s the point of living on?!”

“I mean, I think being expelled is better than being dead...”

“Wah! So I really *will* be expelled?! I’d rather die! I *will* die!” Mia sank to her knees, crying. She really could fall off the roof at any time.

Kaname was standing face to face with a suicidal person. There was no one else around. *Ah, what do I do? What do I do?* While Kaname wracked her brain, she started asking questions, hoping to calm the other girl down. “Sho... Shoji-san? Um... before you do that, could you tell me something?”

“What?!”

“Why did you send that fax? You’re really good at sports. Shouldn’t the inter-class tournament be a place for you to shine?”

“Yes! It should be!”

“Then, why—”

“It’s your fault, Chidori Kaname!!!” Mia yelled, her face contorted in the setting sun’s light.

“What?” Kaname asked in surprise.

“Yes, I know I can’t possibly beat you! It would be just the way you said! You’d make me look like a loser and leave me in the dust,” Mia wailed, “even though I’m on the real basketball team! I’d be humiliated in front of everyone! I can’t stand it!”

This time, it was Kaname who turned pale. *Am I the cause of it all*, she wondered? She’d always thought that Shoji Mia was tougher than this... The thought that she had driven someone else to the psychological breaking point was almost unbelievable to her.

“I... Er... W-Well then, why didn’t you just take the day off? You could—”

“Don’t be stupid! I know how mean you can be,” Mia scoffed. “If I was the only one who’d taken the day off, you’d just tell everyone I ran away!”

Kaname suddenly purpled. “D-Don’t be stupid! I’d never do something like that!”

“Shut up! You have all the talent, but you never put in any work and just mess around all day... Why should I believe anything you say?!”

“Geh...” Those words cut deeply, because Mia was right. Kaname was a real ‘jack of all trades, master of none’ type; she was better than most people at anything she tried, but there was nothing she really applied herself to. Cooking was about the closest thing she had, but even that she approached more like a hobby.

She couldn’t beat somebody who was both talented and seriously applied themselves to a skill—Sousuke and Hayashimizu, for instance—but she could usually beat your average hard-working type, like Mia or Mizuki, without much effort at all. From the perspective of someone like Mia, then, she probably seemed horrendously petty. *Chidori Kaname, the cheater. The mean girl. She’s the one person I can’t afford to lose to. But I will, no matter how hard I work...*

“It’s all my fault...” Kaname whispered to herself.

Mia was right, wasn’t she? Kaname’s selfish behavior had harmed this girl. She’d been stubborn, acted in poor faith, and driven her to the brink of suicide. Or maybe that way of thinking was the true arrogance... But either way, what should she do?

As Kaname just stood there, cowed into silence, Mia glared at her. Her expression was a complicated one—half proud, half self-pitying—and her face a mess of tears. “You see now, Chidori-san? It’s all your fault! And you’ll regret it all your life!”

“S-Stop it!”

“Hah! If you want me to stop, you’d better grovel before me! Maybe if you strip yourself naked, I’ll consider it!” Mia was saying awful things in her desperation. But just as Kaname was genuinely thinking of stripping down and groveling...

“A curious logic.” Sousuke arrived on the roof and spoke from behind her.

“Sousuke?”

“I left Inaba in the nurse’s office, Chidori. But why is this girl standing on the edge of the roof, giving you orders?” A furrow appeared on his brow, and he sounded very confused.

“A-Are you serious? She’s trying to kill herself,” Kaname told him incredulously. “We have to stop her!”

“I just have to stop her from killing herself?” Sousuke checked.

“Yes. But—”

“Understood. That’s easily done.”

“Hey... are you okay? Hey... ah!”

“Just watch. This is negotiation.” Sousuke stepped forward, without any further explanation. He picked up a volleyball that had fallen on the roof—some student had swiped it from the gym storehouse, no doubt—and strode for the fence.

“D-Don’t come any closer! I really will jump! Hey! Are you listening?!” Mia shouted at him.

But Sousuke ignored her and, with the ball tucked under his arm, dexterously vaulted the fence. Mia was standing on the edge of the roof just five meters away.

“I-If you come any closer, I really will do it!”

“I won’t come any closer. I promise,” he told her. “But, look at this...” As he said it, he threw the volleyball he was carrying off the roof. A moment later, so swiftly that it left an afterimage, Sousuke drew the black automatic pistol from its holster. He pointed it at the falling volleyball, and then...

Blam! Blam! Blamblam!

The gunshots rang out. The ball was torn to shreds in midair, which slowly drifted to the ground.

Mia said nothing. She just watched it, stunned, eyes wide.

“Now, remain where you are.” Sousuke next pointed his gun at Mia. He held it firmly in both hands, activated the laser sight, and pointed it straight at her chest. Mia looked down at the red point on her shirt, her face twisted with the fear of the unknown.

“Hey, Sousuke! What do you think you’re doing?!” Kaname shouted.

But Sousuke steadily maintained his aim. “Shoji Mia, was it? Vice President Chidori has ordered me to prevent you from killing yourself. I will do whatever it takes to stop that from happening.”

“Um... what?” Mia began to panic, unable to process what was happening.

Meanwhile, Sousuke said in a calm and clear voice, “That ball represents your future. If you jump now, I will shoot at least four special rounds into your head. Yes, before you hit the ground.”

“Um... what?” Mia floundered. “Why would you—”

“You don’t see?” he asked calmly. “That is how I will prevent you from killing yourself.”

Kaname’s mouth dropped open in shock as she finally realized what he was talking about. He was saying that he would kill her before she killed herself.

“Y-You’re going to shoot me? B-But I said I wanted to die!”

“That is your right, but I won’t let you have it the way that you want—which is by your own hand,” Sousuke told her firmly.

“This is ridiculous!”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost.” Sousuke chuckled, with a hint of triumph. “If you survive this day, you’ll have plenty of chances to kill yourself later. Will you live to see them, or will you give up and die now? This is your choice.”

“Wait, what are you... What? Ahhh!” Mia let out a wail of confusion.

Meanwhile, Kaname’s art turned horrifically off-model as she dropped limply to her knees. “Sousuke... You are... You are just... What in the world...” she whispered to herself, but couldn’t find any more words after that.

Sousuke shifted the gun to his right hand, while his left hand slowly beckoned, like the grim reaper itself. “All right, Shoji. You have three seconds. Death or humiliation—choose one.”

“Hey—”

“Three...”

“Wait—”

“Two...”

“Stop!”

“One...!”

And in the end... Shoji Mia chose humiliation.



The next day, the inter-class tournament went through as planned.

Hayashimizu heard what happened, but chose not to report Mia’s actions to the principal. He sent in the fake letter he’d printed, and the incident was easily resolved.

Shoji Mia was so shaken by the events of the previous day that she didn’t attend the tournament. As a result, the Class 2-2 team lost in the second round. Still, Inaba Mizuki was able to land a couple of pass assists, which somewhat increased her popularity with the class.

Kaname’s team played the normal way in the end, rocketed through the rounds, and won, as expected. But even in her moment of triumph, Kaname

didn't look anywhere near as happy as the others.

Incidentally, Sousuke's baseball team lost, with the mercy rule having to be invoked. Following their elimination, they went up to the roof to mess around.

Over the course of that day, Sousuke completely mastered the rules of Uno and card-based mahjong.

〈A Suicide of Inconvenience — The End〉

A Hard-Sell Fetish

“You want to know how to use the copier?” asked Chidori Kaname, looking up suspiciously. It was lunchtime in her classroom, and she was in the middle of eating a melonpan roll.

“Yes. Could you teach me?” The one asking was her classmate, Sagara Sousuke. He had a sullen expression and tight frown, and he stared at her keenly, his brow furrowed.

She suddenly felt self-conscious about the big bite of bread she was chewing on, and hid her mouth behind her right hand. “Hmm... okay, but what are you printing?”

“A schoolwide flier,” he told her. “There’s been a sexual molester on the prowl around the city lately. The flier contains a warning, as well as measures that students can take.”

Kaname was genuinely impressed by this. “Oh? You’re actually doing something that will help people for once?”

“Of course I am,” he said virtuously. “That’s my job.” Sousuke’s title in the student council was the rather odd, ‘Head of School Security and Aide to the Student Council President.’ In practice, he was mainly tasked with busywork, but he always engaged in it with utmost seriousness.

“So, what’s this about a molester? What exactly are they doing?” Kaname asked out of curiosity.

“It’s written right here,” said Sousuke, proffering the document in question. It was the rough draft of a printout he wanted to post.

Student Council Notice

Classified (Burn after reading)

120410-ZULU

From: Aide to Student Council President (Head of School

Security)

To: All Students

1: Commencing one week prior, multiple reports of attempted assaults in vicinity of school. Nine reports currently confirmed from eight other schools.

2: Seven of nine assaults reported 'sexual' in nature. High likelihood of shared culprit. Reports mention word: 'poni.' Meaning unknown. Equipment unknown.

3: Recommended actions upon encounter:

a.) Engage and eliminate.

b.) If a.) proves difficult, gather information before withdrawal.

4: No air or artillery support will be provided.

Message ends.

Kaname stared at it for a full minute before whispering, "Is this a top-secret message from some command HQ somewhere?"

"No, it's an ordinary student council dispatch," Sousuke said with complete earnestness. He was a transfer student who had grown up in war-torn regions overseas, and completely lacked understanding of how life worked in more peaceful parts of the world.

"Listen, Sousuke. If you make it this dry, no one is going to understand what you're talking about."

"I'm sure you're incorrect. I can't think of a clearer or more precise way to write it."

"You're kidding me, right? Besides, it's not exactly classified if you're sending it to the entire student body. Why don't you—" Before Kaname could finish speaking, her classmate Tokiwa Kyoko popped up, peeking at the printout from behind.

"What's up, you two?" Kyoko asked curiously. "What's this? 'Commencing

one week prior'... Wow, a molester? Freaky..." she said, quickly grasping the message's meaning. Then, as she noticed the awkwardness this fueled between Sousuke and Kaname, she blinked questioningly behind her large coke-bottle glasses.

"She appears to understand it," he pointed out.

"L-Look, just try to make the language a little more accessible next time!" Kaname said defensively. "Got it?!"

"Understood. But will you teach me how to use the copier now?"

Kaname waved him off in annoyance. "Fine, fine. Just give me a minute to finish lunch."

"Understood. I'll wait." Sousuke fell silent, but remained standing exactly where he was.

Kaname opened her mouth wide and was about to take another bite of her roll, when she suddenly felt Sousuke's eyes on her and turned red. "W-Well don't stare at me, okay? Darn it..." She started poking at him mercilessly.

Sousuke, in response, just looked at her in confusion.

Kyoko watched and giggled from the sidelines.

That night, Kyoko walked alone along a dark and lonely road. It was 10:30 at night, and she was just heading home from the station now. After school, she'd stopped by Kaname's apartment for dinner and to watch the Yokohama-Giants game. It had kept her out pretty late, and now it was dark all around.

The road seemed entirely devoid of life. To her right were scraggly trees; to her left were old apartments. A dying streetlamp flickered, and a faint breeze caused the trees to rustle.

On a corner of the road sat a sign created by the local PTA. 《Watch out for molesters!》 it declared in hastily-scrawled paint. Beneath the writing was an absolutely awful picture of a girl (or at least a figure that looked like a girl) in an elementary-school backpack, being stalked by a grinning, demonic shadow. It was the kind of picture that seemed like it would be better off as an

advertisement about dental hygiene.

Who even draws these signs? she mused vaguely as she passed it by. She thought back on the talk she'd had with Sousuke and Kaname this afternoon. The image of a middle-aged man, naked under a trench coat, appeared in her mind, and a slight chill went up her spine. "Geh..."

And just as those vague anxieties were beginning to run through her, a figure stepped out from behind the electric pole ahead.

Kyoko stopped in her tracks. A shudder went up her spine.

In the dim light, the figure took a step forward. He was tall and thin, dressed in a black coat.

"Um... E-Excuse me?"

The molester... Is it the molester after all? But there was something about his appearance that made her think somehow the word 'molester' didn't quite cover it: he wore a large headpiece, a fluffy equine face made out of felt, with marble-like eyes that stared straight at her—a horse mask. On top of that, he was holding piano wire and a red ribbon... And, for some reason, a hair brush.

"What... What's going on?" asked Kyoko, feeling disoriented and afraid. She couldn't begin to imagine what he could possibly want from her. At least if it were a buck-naked old man, she'd know what was coming. But with this one... just looking at him didn't tell her anything about what he wanted or why he was here.

"Ah... er..." Kyoko just stood there, frozen to the ground.

And then, the horseman whispered... "Poni."

Kyoko blinked, then finally said, "Huh?"

"Poni."

It wasn't a Japanese word, as far as Kyoko knew. The strange utterance just increased her state of bewilderedness.

"Poni. Poni..."

The man drew closer. Kyoko stepped back. The man stepped forward again...

I'm going to die, she thought. *He's going to kill me. He's going to **** me, and then bury me somewhere!* With her fight-or-flight instincts on full blast, Kyoko, tears in her eyes, turned to run away.

"Poni...!"

"Eek!"

But just as she began to run, the horseman grabbed her from behind. Kyoko struggled to free herself from his grip, but the man refused to let go.

"Poni... Poni!"

"N-No! Someone! Someone help!" She screamed for her life, but no one seemed to hear her.

The next morning...

As Kaname arrived at Sengawa Station en route to school, she found Sousuke waiting for her at the ticket gate. Normally, Kyoko would be waiting for her there, but she was nowhere to be seen today.

"Oh, Sousuke. Morning..." Kaname called in her usual lazy voice. She was not a morning person.

Sousuke merely stared back at her, a grave expression in his eyes.

"What?" she asked, made suspicious by Sousuke's behavior. She'd never seen him looking so serious, and he seemed to be trying to choose his words carefully.

"Chidori. I have... bad news. I only just learned about it. It's about that molester case. The one you helped me with yesterday, with the copies."

"Hmm? What about it?"

"Last night," he said gravely, "Tokiwa was attacked."

"What..." All the blood drained from Kaname's face. "No way... Kyoko? What... What happened? Is she okay?!" She seized Sousuke's shoulders as a feeling akin to terror began to run through her.

But he turned his face down to avoid meeting her eyes, voice ashen. "I'm

sorry. I don't know how to tell you this..."

"No..." Kaname began to tremble.

"She was apparently on her way back from Kokuryo Station, when she encountered a strangely-dressed man. She couldn't fight him. He caught her..."

Kaname was shocked into silence.

"He wrestled her to the ground, and despite her attempts to fight back..."

"A-Ah..."

"He carefully brushed her hair, and then..."

"That's awful..."

"...he put it in a ponytail," Sousuke finished.

"That's horrible! He... wait, what?" Kaname frowned in confusion.

It was just then that Kyoko appeared from behind Sousuke. "Oh, it's Kana-chan," she said. "Good morning." She was dressed in her usual uniform, with her usual coke-bottle glasses. There was just one thing different about her: she wore a ponytail, tied with a red ribbon, in place of her usual braids. Her carefully brushed hair ran in waves down her back.

"Okay, what the hell is this?" Kaname asked, limply.

"Isn't it clear?" Sousuke replied grimly.

"It's a ponytail," said Kyoko, touching her hair. "It's awful... He used wires and glue to force it into place. It's been a whole day, and it's still not back to normal... It's really gonna ruin my hair," she wailed, then sighed.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it. Though it was really scary at the time." Kyoko's expression was surprisingly nonchalant.

Kaname's shoulders slumped, and then she glared at Sousuke. "You..."

"It's truly bizarre, isn't it? It's hard to know how to tell someone about it," Sousuke said dispassionately.

Slam! Kaname's bag hit him on top of the head.

“That hurt quite a lot,” he observed next.

“Shut up!” she screamed back at him, tears in her eyes. “I was seriously... seriously scared! Why’d you have to scare me like that?!”

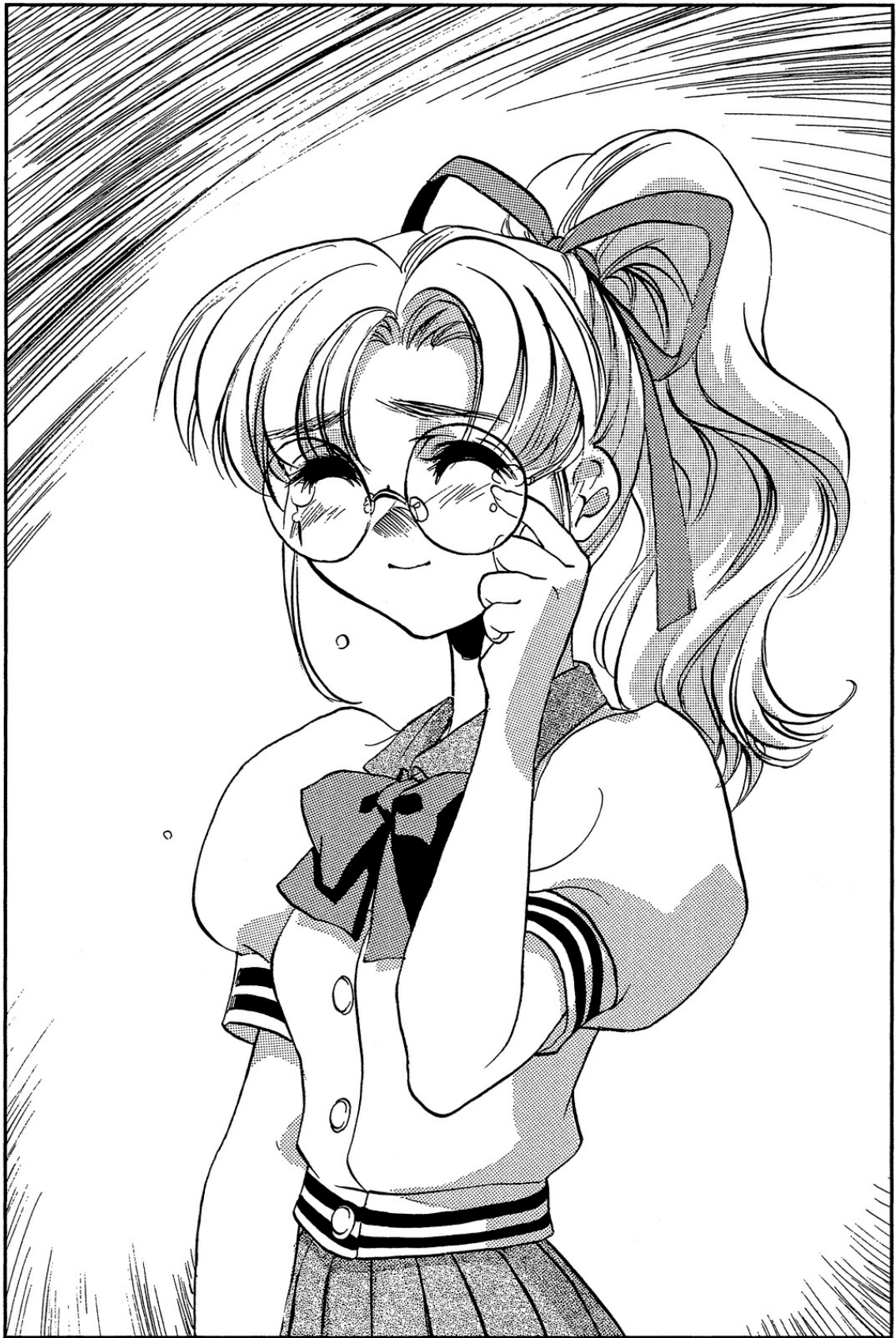
The reactions from classmates to Kyoko’s new hairstyle were generally positive. Onodera clenched his fists in awe and insensitively insisted, “It’s great! It’s awesome! It looks way better than those old kiddie braids!”

The result was Kaname having to smack a boy other than Sousuke for the first time in a while.

Kyoko didn’t seem particularly upset about it, but she did confide in Kaname later that day. “I don’t know what to do,” she whispered weakly. “I liked the braids.”

“D-Don’t worry about what the stupid boys say. You’re cute no matter what your hairstyle is,” Kaname told her.

Kyoko smiled brightly at this. “Yeah, you’re right. Thanks, Kana-chan,” she responded guilelessly.



Nevertheless, Kyoko had headed home the minute class was over, much earlier than she usually did.

Kaname had had no choice but to let her go. Doting on someone when they were having a rough time could come off as smothering; she knew this from past experience. And whenever Kaname was seriously depressed about something, Kyoko always left her alone. She'd just say, "I'm here for you, Kana-chan," and nothing more.

Yeah. Kyoko's a really nice person. And so...! she thought to herself. *That 'poni-man'... He might just be a petty little weirdo, but he's going to feel my wrath...* She'd begun to dwell on fantasies of what she'd do if she were ever to run into him personally.

"One of the students at our school has been harmed. There's no way we can let this stand," Sousuke said to Kaname on their way to the station from school. It was just after six o'clock, when their student council business was done.

"Yeah," she agreed, "I'd like to do something too..."

"Other schools are suffering from this as well," he continued. "We need to capture the culprit and torture him until he reveals his true intentions."

"Back to that old standby, huh?"

"He may seem innocuous now, but in time, he could begin doing real harm. It's dangerous to leave him at large."

"Are we talking about him or you?"

"Eh?"

"Sousuke," Kaname said firmly. "There's nothing that the student council can do about this. Don't you get it? It didn't happen on school grounds."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep. So, we're asking *them*." As they walked through the shopping street near the station, Kaname suddenly stopped. Across the street from them stood a neatly kept police box.

"The police?" he asked.

“Yeah. We’ll tell them a friend of ours was attacked by a pervert, give up the description, and ask them to do something,” she explained. “I got the go-ahead from Kyoko on the phone earlier. Then we’re just going to wait and see what happens. Got it?”

“Hmm...”

“Anyway, Sousuke, you wait outside. I’m pretty sure you’ll just make things more annoying if you come along.”

As Kaname entered the police box, she was met by a young officer in a uniform. She explained the situation, gave the details on what had happened, and provided Kyoko’s address as well as her own.

The young officer frowned as he filled out the form. “Hmm... I’m not sure this is enough...”

“Um... is there some kind of issue?” Kaname asked.

“We really need the victim to come and see us herself. And, I don’t quite know how to put this... but you probably shouldn’t get your hopes up.” The officer’s tone gradually took on an arrogant cast.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m not going to say she got what was coming to her, but she really shouldn’t have been so careless,” the officer opined. “Walking alone at night? She should consider herself lucky that that’s the worst that happened to her. Is this... Tokiwa-san, was it? Is she a ‘good girl’? Because from what you’re saying here —”

“You... piece of shit pig,” Kaname hissed.

The officer stopped mid-sentence. “What?”

“How dare you! My friend was *attacked*, and you think you can act like—” But just as Kaname was reaching for the officer’s collar...

“Hang on a second!” came a new voice from the back of the box.

She saw a female officer striding towards them from the door to the break room. She had sharp features and long, shaggy hair. Her uniform was rumpled, and there were bags under her eyes. She was the picture of exhaustion.

“W-Wakana-san... How’s your research coming?” the first officer said, trying to smooth things over.

The officer, apparently named Wakana, seemed to ignore her colleague as she charged up to Kaname. “Hey, you. I heard what you said. A pervert with a mask on? Where’d you see him?” The woman pressed her with great intensity.

“Oh... Well, as I just told the officer here...” Kaname gave the address that Kyoko had given her.

At this, the female officer looked up at the ceiling, then at the city map on the wall, and let out a cry of joy. “Yes!!! Just as I deduced! Now... now... whew.” She suddenly caught herself on the table, looking unsteady.

Taken aback by her intensity, Kaname spoke up, timidly. “Um... deduced? You know something about this?”

The woman gradually raised her haggard face. “I... I’ll tell you. But not here. Come with me, girl!”

“Huh? Wait, hang on—”

The woman flew out of her seat and ran out of the box, dragging Kaname along with her. Sousuke, who was supposed to be waiting out in front, was nowhere to be seen.

“Um, hang on! Where are you taking me?” Kaname asked. “That kind of hurts... Hang on, let me go!”

“Stop complaining and follow me!” the woman cried back, as she dragged Kaname along the shopping street.

The policewoman’s name was Wakana Yoko. She’d previously been part of the Sengawa Traffic Department’s mini-patrol car division, but had since been relieved of her post.

“I’ve been stuck on desk duty lately. But I’ve been ditching it to investigate this pervert,” Wakana Yoko explained as they entered the coffee shop near the police box.

“Wow...”

“I’ve been skipping sleep to read the daily reports and ask around on my own time.”

“Really?” asked Kaname, feeling impressed. “Sounds like hard work.”

“It is,” Yoko agreed modestly. “But I’ve figured out that there’s a pattern to where the culprit appears. Have a look at this,” she said, opening the map with a flourish. “I’ve heard eight similar assault reports, all from middle or high school girls on the way back from school. The locations... see? Always about a twenty-minute walk from the city station, alternating between north and south sides...” Yoko pointed at the map as she rattled off the info. She drew a circle with a compass, which really showed how limited the culprit’s range was. “You see? Based on this pattern, yesterday he should have come out... here.” Yoko marked the point on the map with a red pen.

“Oh, that’s—”

“Exactly! The place where your friend was attacked! So tonight, I expect he’ll show up about... here.”

Kaname was blown away by the cogency of Yoko’s deductions. “Ahh... That’s really impressive.”

“Hah, that’s nothing!” said Yoko, folding up the map. “So... I want you to play the decoy for a little trap I’ve cooked up. Tonight!”

“I... see,” said Kaname, finally realizing why the woman had taken her out of the police box and into a cafe to explain.

“The pervert will come out after you, and the moment he does anything to violate public decency laws, I’ll show up and catch him in the act. No need for annoying process or paperwork. I’ll just say I happened to be passing by. Great plan, huh?” Yoko’s voice was a strange mix of exhaustion and exhilaration.

“Um... but what about me?” Kaname asked.

“How can you be thinking about that?” Yoko demanded. “Your friend was killed, wasn’t she? Don’t you want revenge?”

“Well, she’s not actually dead...”

“Haven’t you ever heard the saying, ‘a woman’s hair is her life’? It’s still a

murder, metaphorically speaking.”

“Well, I guess I see what you’re saying... But why are you so desperate to catch this guy yourself?” Kaname asked hesitantly.

“I always wanted to be a detective,” Yoko said eagerly. “I used to watch *Miami Vice* as a kid. I’ll never forget Don Johnson saying ‘Go ahead, Mosca. Make my day.’ I felt like my whole body was on fire. I passed out. I even wanted a white Ferrari Testarossa like the one Don-sama drove, and used the money I made as a swimsuit model to buy one, see? I was obsessed!”

Kaname had never heard of that particularly awesome crime drama, so she was left to wonder dubiously about the existence of a show called *Miami Spice*. The fact that the car in question happened to share the name of a foreign friend of hers made it even more confusing. “Uh-huh...” she said simply in response.

“And yet, they stuck me on traffic duty! And now, because my chief’s mad at me, I’m even stuck on desk work. I’m hoping that collaring this weirdo will get me out of limbo.”

“Why’s your chief mad at you?” Kaname asked.

Yoko sighed and gazed into the distance, slurping at her ice coffee. “The stupidest reason. I saw a teenage boy and a girl riding two to a bike, and chased them in my mini-car. It was a real wild goose chase... And after they gave me the slip, I crashed into a house.”

Splurt! Kaname spat out the coffee she was drinking. She was all too aware of who the policewoman was talking about—it had been her and Sousuke. So, this was the female cop who had pursued them that time! Kaname turned pale, and a cold sweat began to rise on her face. “Th-That’s... awful.”

“The car was wrecked,” Yoko went on. “I was unharmed, thankfully, but my partner in the passenger seat is out of action for a month... Hey, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Oh, uh... It’s just...”

“It’s so frustrating!” Yoko exclaimed, “I remember the face of the boy, at least. If I ever see him, I’ll punish him for his poor upbringing. Heh heh heh...” Her eyes, blurry from lack of sleep, began to take on a sinister glow. And in the

seat behind her...

Kaname silently exclaimed as she saw Sousuke—in other words, the boy that Yoko was talking about—sitting right there. Fortunately, Yoko hadn't noticed him yet.

With his usual sullen expression, Sousuke wrote something down on a paper napkin, and held it up over the policewoman's shoulder. 《Not an issue. Continue,》 it read.

Kaname's mouth flapped uselessly, and she could see him writing something else.

《Don't worry,》 came another napkin message. 《If she realizes it's us, I'll silence her.》

"Don't do that!" Kaname found herself shouting.

Yoko looked at her in confusion. "Well... maybe 'punish' is too strong a word?"

"N-No... It's fine, in moderation."

"Yes, it's best to keep things in moderation. Anyway, Chidori-san... I'm so grateful that you agreed to play decoy."

"Uh, I think you skipped something there!" Kaname exclaimed.

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"The fact that I never actually agreed to it, maybe?!" Kaname said angrily.

From behind Yoko, Sousuke flashed a note. 《We know what she knows now. She's outlived her usefulness.》

"You shut up, too!"

《...》

Yoko looked behind her, and Sousuke ducked down in time—but just *barely*. "What's with you?" she asked.

"Oh... nothing," Kaname told her hastily. "I get these psychic flashes now and then... Voices in my head. It's a chronic condition."

“Ah... that’s rough.”

Kaname suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her. She wanted to be out of this situation ASAP. In the interest of expediency, she whispered, “Ah... fine. I’ll do it. But just this once, okay?”

“That’s all I need. Thank you... heh.” Yoko smiled the vague smile unique to people who’ve been up all night. It was the kind of expression born purely of unconscious mental processes, unconnected to the person’s actual feelings. Standing up, she said, “Then I’ll pick you up at your house later.”

“Where are you going?” Kaname asked. “It’s almost night time.”

“I’m going to drop by the station to pick something up.” Yoko left a 1000 yen bill on the table, then listed out of the coffee shop.

Sousuke sat up, impatiently. “She’s gone?”

“Sheesh, that was a close call...” Kaname grumbled. “And how long have you been there?”

“From the start,” he told her. “I recognized the policewoman and tailed her in secret.”

“Ah... good choice. Nice work.”

“It was easily done.” Sousuke let out a modest chuckle, then pulled the cinnamon stick from his coffee and stuck it into his mouth like a cigarette. “But Chidori, are you really going to play decoy for her?”

“Well... look,” said Kaname, rubbing her temples. “The normal police clearly aren’t going to do anything to avenge Kyoko. And it’s kind of our fault that this policewoman’s in the situation she’s in, so...”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” he told her seriously. “It’s dangerous.”

“Thanks for the concern, but I’m fine. It’s nothing compared to the people we’ve fought from your *real* line of work.” Kaname smiled.

Sousuke watched her penetratingly for a while, then nodded a few times. “I see... very well. I’ll cover you, then, in the interest of caution. If you’re truly in danger, I’ll step in.”

“No way,” Kaname told him flatly. “That lady cop saw your face, remember? If she sees you now, it’ll be a huge mess. You could get us both arrested.”

Sousuke thought for a while about this. “Then I just have to make sure she can’t see my face?”

“Well... even if you cover your face,” said Kaname, “she might recognize your build.”

“You have a point. I’ll use my new equipment, then.”

“New equipment?”

“Yes. There’s an item I acquired—rather, that was left to me—which I’ve modified in several ways. It should disguise my build as well as my face,” Sousuke explained. “I’ve mounted it with various sensors, a digital transmitter... as well as a bulletproof material that can even stop a rifle shot.”

“Aha...”

“It’s rather like a power suit,” he continued. “If successful, it could revolutionize modern warfare. I was just getting to the point of needing a field test anyway. It’s in my apartment. I’ll go get it now.” Sousuke stood up, left a 500 yen coin on his table, and proceeded to leave the coffee shop behind.

Several hours later, on a corner of a residential street shortly after sundown...

“Well, here we are,” said Wakana Yoko, now dressed in civilian clothing and jeans. “I just want you to wander around this area for a while. Keep to the most isolated places you can find.”

“What will you do, Wakana-san?” Kaname asked. She was in her uniform, just like last night.

They were on a deserted road. There were desolate farm fields and an old temple nearby, but no sign of anyone coming or going.

“I’ll be patrolling the area in the interest of caution,” Yoko told her, sounding exhausted from sleep deprivation, as always. “When the enemy appears, let out a big scream. I’ll come to arrest the pervert.”

“Arrest him? How?”

“With these,” said Yoko, pulling two guns from her satchel. They weren’t genuine firearms—one had electrodes on the tip, while the other was loaded with rubber balls the size of fists. “I sneaked them out of the station. It’s a taser and a rubber bullet gun, used for riot control. I’ll use these to put him down.”

Sousuke used similar weapons all the time, so Kaname was unfazed by the sight. “Just don’t hit me alongside the culprit, okay?” she cautioned.

“Heh heh. All right, let’s go!”

“Don’t laugh. Say you won’t!”

Yoko just held up her hands reassuringly.

Kaname let out a sigh. *Even so...* She thought, turning her eyes to the farmland and the forest beyond. *Is Sousuke really here? He said something about picking up new equipment, but...* Then she put him out of her mind and began trudging down the dark night road.

About fifty meters away from Kaname, in the underbrush...

The vague outline of a curious animal could be seen in the streaming moonlight—more precisely, a person in a plush animal costume. The head was somewhat doglike, yet also somewhat mouselike. It was two heads tall, short and squat, with a bow tie and two large, round eyes.

The costume’s name was Bonta-kun, which was the mascot of a particular amusement park. His head was covered in camouflage netting, and he held a shotgun at the ready. He blended in with the darkness like a predator waiting for prey, or a cruel and dangerous insectivorous plant. At least, that was the air he hoped he gave off.

She’s on the move... Sousuke whispered to himself from inside the costume. He’d ended up stealing the Bonta-kun costume during an earlier conflict in an amusement park. Now, in his hands, that costume had been reborn. It was now the Bonta-kun Mk. II.

Bonta-kun’s night vision sensors picked up Kaname’s and the policewoman’s silhouettes, and displayed them on his HMD. The highly directional microphones he’d installed in its ears could even pick up Kaname’s breathing. If

he'd wanted, he could use its internally mounted digital transmitter to intercept police radio signals. His silhouette was not recognizably human, making it difficult to identify him at a distance.

Incidentally, he had also disabled the bizarre voice changer function.

"Now, let's follow." Sousuke finally began to come out of the brush. He moved carefully and silently, maintaining a distance from Kaname.

Kaname continued walking listlessly. Bonta-kun followed her. He hadn't been able to see the policewoman since she'd disappeared around the corner.



The pervert didn't appear.

Thirty minutes passed uneventfully, with Kaname walking the same road back and forth several times.

Maybe he's lying low tonight? Sousuke thought, sneaking past a rusted old pickup truck left in the bushes. But as he rounded the corner...

"Eek!" He ended up face to face with the policewoman, Wakana Yoko. She must have realized it would be the perfect place for the pervert to hide, and come to investigate.

She just stood there for a minute, then began shaking her head rapidly as she readied her taser. "The witness testimony I heard said it was a horse costume... but it's a Bonta-kun. Prepare to die, pervert!"

"Wait, I—"

"No excuses!" Yoko's taser sparked. High voltage current surged through the Bonta-kun costume. The costume's fabric was thick, so Sousuke himself wasn't shocked, but...

Crackla-pop! Vwssh! The electricity shorted out most of the costume's electronic equipment. The night vision sensor feed went blank, and the only sound through his headphones now was head-splitting static.

Hissing in pain, the Bonta-kun costume reeled back through the brush, staggered, and caught itself. Sousuke tried to shout "stop!" but it came out as "Fumoffu!" The electrical short seemed to have reactivated the voice changer, changing all of his words to "Bonta-kun-ese."

"S-Still moving, eh?" Yoko asked menacingly. "You're a stubborn one!"

"Fumo... (Erk...)" Left with no other choice, Sousuke fought back. Bonta-kun firmly stuck out his shotgun and fired at Yoko. The rubber slugs he was using were nonlethal, but they still packed the punch of a heavyweight boxer. But because he couldn't see, he missed her by a wide margin. The rubber stun rounds shattered against the trunk of a nearby tree instead.

"Ngh... resisting arrest, eh?! You degenerate! I won't lose to you!" Yoko fired a rubber ball of her own, right at the muzzle of Bonta-kun's gun! This one also

had the power of a punch from a heavyweight boxer.

Bonta-kun squatted down and just barely dodged the blast. *Damn*, thought Sousuke. *If this keeps up...* he rolled along the ground while struggling against the roar of static in his ears, and fired two more shots from his shotgun.

“Y-Yow! That hurts!” Yoko shouted as one of the rubber rounds grazed her arm, causing her to take shelter behind the truck.

“Fumo, fumoffu! (Ugh, my aim is off!)”

“Now you’ve done it! You’ll pay for this! For the sake of my redemption... you must die!” Yoko declared, reloading her rubber bullet gun as she screamed and fired again.

As Bonta-kun staggered to his feet, one of the bullets hit him right in the head. “Fumo! (Wagh!)” Bonta-kun screamed, tumbling onto the ground. But he managed to swiftly right himself, and took off in an idiosyncratic run away from Yoko.

“You won’t escape!” Yoko howled in pursuit. “Tormenter of women!”

In the middle of the brush at night, a woman carrying strange guns in both hands was chasing a rotund little mascot around, each occasionally firing at each other. It was truly a sight to behold.

While he ran, Sousuke felt a deep sense of regret. *Even after all those modifications I made*, he thought mournfully, *this costume is still useless on the battlefield*. He couldn’t see behind him at all. Even turning back was difficult. In reality, it was just heavy and exhausting to wear...

Although he did quite like how it looked.

Kaname heard the sounds of a gun battle raging in the nearby brush, and cradled her head in her hands. “There it goes,” she sighed. “Must be Sousuke.” *Is he in a shootout with somebody?* she wondered. *Actually, I can’t see Wakana-san, either... And what am I even doing, wandering around this dark road? Trying to lure out the pervert who attacked Kyoko, right?*

“But will he even show up?” Kaname asked herself. It was all starting to feel

pointless. *My priority now should be to stop Sousuke, she decided. If it's Wakana-san he's fighting, someone might really get hurt.* "I've got to hurry," she said out loud, before whipping around and running along the road in the direction from which she'd heard the gunshots.

Just then, a figure appeared in front of her. He wore a black coat, carried piano wire and a hairbrush, and wore a horse mask on his head. The vacant gaze and eerie motions... There was no question. This was the deviant who had attacked Kyoko: the Poni-man.

"Poni..." said the figure.

"Geh..." Kaname stopped and began to draw back. She'd heard his appearance described, but actually seeing it up close was worse. "P-Pervert..." she said weakly.

"Poni?"

"Help! Pervert! Extremely specialized pervert! Someone help!" Kaname shouted as she ran.

The horseman raised his hands and pursued, standing upright, at top speed. If there were fast zombies in this world, they would probably look a lot like this.

Kaname's terror was indescribable. She was so frightened that she'd forgotten that even if he did catch her, all he'd do was change her hairstyle. "Noooo!" she wailed.

"Poni, poni..."

Kaname ran. The pervert chased her. A pursuit down a night road, with gunfire in the forest. In some part of her brain—the part that still had common sense—she couldn't help but lament what a ridiculous situation she'd found herself in.

Meanwhile, the forest battle raged on. Bonta-kun had restored a number of his sensors, and Wakana Yoko was still high on adrenaline as they continued to trade fire.

Wakana Yoko cackled as she ran through the trees, her self-awareness

scattered to the four winds. “This is fun! This is fun, Bonta-kun! Give me even more fun!”

“Fumoffu!” Bonta-kun fired his shotgun, as if in reply. The shot missed her by a hair, but tore a hydrangea to pieces.

“It’s no use! It’s no use!” Yoko gloated, pulling the stun baton (a police weapon that used a high voltage shock to knock out whoever it hit) from her hip and charging straight at him.

But Bonta-kun ran boldly at her with his own stun baton! Both of them turned their batons’ voltage on. The currents raced through them, and...

“Graaah!”

“Fumooo!”

Crash! The stun batons collided. Sparks flew as they struggled against each other, as if they were beam sabers. Illuminated by the pale blue light, the night air around them grew hot.

“You’re so stubborn!” Yoko howled. “Go down already!”

“Fumoffu! Fumoffu!”

“You’ve got a big mouth for a little mascot!”

“Fumo?!”

Yoko continued to press the sparking stun baton against his, reliant purely on force. “Grrrr!”

“Fumoooffu!” Bonta-kun, too, showed no mercy. He leaned all his weight forward, pushing back against Wakana Yoko.

Yoko was finally forced to yield to his weight, her back slowly arching. “Grkk... kkh...!” Skillfully, she deflected Bonta-kun’s baton and dealt a hard knee to his side.

“Fumo!” Bonta-kun lost his balance and went flying. He crashed through the underbrush, flew out of the forest, and then rolled across the road beyond until he hit the guardrail. Yoko came through the forest after him, rubber bullet gun outstretched.

Wakana Yoko and Bonta-kun faced each other down from opposite sides of the road. “This is the end!” she told him. “Prepare to die!”

“Fumoffu!”

They locked eyes and weapons. And then, right into their firing line, ran...

“It’s the goddamn pervert! Somebody help me, dammit!”

...Kaname, pursued by the horseman.

Yoko and Sousuke were so engaged in their battle that they didn’t even notice. They pulled the triggers on their guns just a split-second after Kaname passed, and...

Wham! As a result, the rubber bullets ended up flying straight into the horseman pervert, who had entered their firing line in his pursuit of Kaname.

The force of a punch from a heavyweight boxer slammed into his face and his side, simultaneously.

One minute later, a man in a black coat lay limply on the road. Kaname, Yoko, and Bonta-kun were looking down on him.

“So, this is the real pervert? Who’s this, then?” Yoko asked Kaname, shoulders heaving, as she finally regained her calm.

“He’s my friend,” said Kaname. “Right, Bonta-kun?”

“Fumoffu.”

“I see... You have a powerful friend,” Yoko whispered, with the expression of someone in the grips of a terrible nightmare. Bonta-kun’s violation of the Swords and Firearms Possession Control Law didn’t even enter her mind.

Kaname let out a sigh. *Some new weapon*, she thought. The costume had at least prevented Yoko from identifying him, but...

Silently, Bonta-kun squatted down and shook the horseman’s shoulder.

The masked pervert stirred and regained consciousness, then whispered, “Poni...?”

“Fumoffu.”

“Poni? Poni?”

“Fumoffu. Fumoffu.”

“Poni...”

Bonta-kun patted the horseman’s shoulder with a gentle, “Fumo.”

Kaname whapped him on the back of the head. “Don’t reach an understanding in a language we can’t understand!”

“Fumoffu...” Bonta-kun drew back, rubbing his head with his stubby arms.

Then Yoko snapped back to reality and said, “One way or another, it was my actions that caught the culprit. Thank goodness.”

“Wakana-san,” said Kaname, “you were totally out of control back there...”

But Yoko didn’t respond as she squatted down and removed the horseman’s mask. The face that appeared from within was that of an unremarkable young man. “Geh... gehh...” The man let out his first recognizably human sounds.

Yoko flashed her police badge with aplomb. “Excuse me, Mr. Pervert, but you’re under arrest. You don’t have the right to remain silent, or the right to an attorney, so you’d better tell me everything right here and now!”

Kaname eyed the woman silently. The main thought that ran through her mind in that moment was, *Thank goodness she didn’t catch on to Sousuke’s identity.*

“Oh... really? I’ll talk, then,” the young man murmured, still in a daze.

“Tell me why you’re doing this,” Yoko ordered.

“Because... ponytails are awesome. The sexy nape of the neck of short hair. The flowing femininity of long hair. These two contradictory factors come together to make perfection, don’t you think?” the young man explained with melancholy. “But nowadays, when I ride the train, I don’t see any girls with ponytails at all. It just made me so sad...”

“And that’s why you committed these bizarre assaults?”

“Yes... But Officer, I’m satisfied,” the young man declared. “I lived my life in a way that was true to myself. Do with me what you will.”

“I see,” said Yoko. “But watch yourself in prison. It’s gonna be a long stay.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry for the trouble.”

Greasy sweat arose on Kaname’s forehead as she listened to the conversation. *There is something... seriously wrong here...*

But while she fretted, Sousuke simply nodded firmly, arms folded in satisfaction.

〈A Hard-Sell Fetish — The End〉

An Eloquent Portrait

Mizuhoshi Iori, a teacher at Jindai High School, had long, disheveled hair and unkempt stubble. He looked more like a musician than a teacher, and the brush in his hand moved with an almost explosive passion.

He stood before a linen canvas stained in various colors: there were cloud-like whites and pale blues, tranquil moonlight indigos... Though the painting was comprised primarily of cool colors, it had a curious warmth and radiance.

It was a painting of a woman, and it was very striking, but...

"It's no use," Mizuhoshi muttered. "No use at all. Worthless, worthless, worthless, worthless..." he went on and on, "...worthless, worthless, worthless, worthless, worthless... worthlessssss!" And with this last scream, he cast his brush and pallet onto the nearby glass table. The glass broke, spilling linseed oil. "Ahh... Why?!" he wailed dramatically. "Why can't I get it right?! This... This miserable painting! My spinal cord has been severed! My soul is vomiting! It's like a ladder soaked in sewage that should be cast aside!"

Crash! Mizuhoshi Iori slammed his canvas against the wall and pushed over a nearby plaster model, which tumbled around the art room. The easel fell to the ground with a crash. Masks, which were used as teaching materials, fell from the shelves and broke.

"Ah... Whyyy?! Why can I not capture the smallest fragment of her beauty, and in doing so grant it eternal protection from the ravages of the world..." Here, he embarked on a bitter rant which ended with, "...so easily?! Why am I so incompetent? Am I a meaningless decoration, a mere empty globe? In other words... it has to be more... like... ah, but she's more like this!!!" He continued to ramble as his madness raged on.

Incidentally, this incident was taking place during school hours, so Mizuhoshi was neglecting his waiting students to hole up in the supply room like this. It was a reflection of his desperation to finish the picture. The picture of that woman... So dear, so heartbreaking. He would die if he didn't finish it! It was

the only way to complete his soul, to quell the raging passion inside him. Who would have thought such a thing could prove so difficult?! It was in this manner that he kept muttering strange, complicated things as he continued his destructive rampage around the small and dimly lit room.

Smash! One of the boys from the art room next door crashed in, apparently having heard the commotion. “Sir, where is the enemy?!” he cried out, a pistol in one hand. It was Sagara Sousuke from Class 2-4. He had a sullen face in a tight frown, and perhaps because he was on high alert, the furrow on his brow was especially deep.

Mizuhoshi fixed his bloodshot eyes on Sousuke. “E-Enemy?!”

“Yes,” Sousuke replied tersely. “Where is the enemy?!”

“Enemy... Yes, the enemy is... Right here! This room itself is my enemy!” Mizuhoshi threw his arms to the sides.

Sousuke began turning his gun in all directions. “Where, exactly?”

“Don’t you see? Here!”

“But where?”

“Here! Right here!” Mizuhoshi was barking at the ceiling now.

“Above us?!” Reacting to his body language, Sousuke pointed his gun at the ceiling. *Blam! Blamblamblamblam!* He fired off five rounds directly above. As the small bullets tore into the ceiling, there was some kind of metallic sound. For a moment, the two of them fell silent and stood there, smoke trailing from the muzzle of the gun. While Mizuhoshi stared, Sousuke continued to glare at the holes in the ceiling. And then...

“Sousuke!” Chidori Kaname, a female student, came running into the room to land a hard jump-kick against Sousuke’s back. She had long black hair, rolled-up sleeves, and a fine-point brush gripped in one hand.

Sousuke, who had toppled forward in the wake of her kick, placed his hands on the floor and looked back up at her. “What are you doing, Chidori?” he asked.

“Shut up!” she bellowed. “And stop shooting at everything all the time!”

But instead, he ignored Kaname's admonishments and peered up at her earnestly. "Stay back," he implored. "There's a chance that the assassins targeting Mr. Mizuhoshi are hiding in the ceiling—"

"Assassins? In the ceiling? What in the world are you... Ah, yeek!" Kaname wiped off the cold droplet that had just fallen on the back of her neck, and then looked up at the ceiling. "Wait, what?"

Sousuke and Mizuhoshi did the same thing.

Water was leaking in through the bullet holes in the ceiling, as well as from gaps in the plasterboard. There was a brief, confused pause... and then the next second, a ceiling panel collapsed with a bang, showering water down on them. The word 'downpour' didn't even cover it—it was practically a waterfall. Sousuke's bullets had pierced a water pipe.

"Bwuf!" cried Sousuke as a falling piece of ceiling plaster hit him in the head, knocking him out. Kaname also screamed and threw herself to the floor. The two of them, clinging to each other, were swept to the side of the room like a piece of waste dragged down in a flushed toilet.



“Ahh...” Meanwhile, Mizuhoshi just stood there, battered by the torrent. “That’s right... Wash it all away. Wash away the dark clouds that conceal her from my heart... Wash it all away...” he whispered, his eyes deep with their madness, but neither Sousuke nor Kaname were in a position to hear him.

Twenty minutes later, after class, inside the otherwise empty girls’ changing room...

“Achoo! Ugh, dammit...” Kaname let out a sneeze curiously reminiscent of an old man as she stripped off the blouse that was clinging to her skin. She hung it on her locker door, along with the rest of her soaked clothing.

Her legs were shining wet from the water, and her skin was visible through her white panties. It was the kind of scene that would knock any man out cold on the spot. Fortunately, the only ones here at the moment were Kaname and her teacher, Kagurazaka Eri.

“Here, use this to wipe off,” said Eri, handing Kaname a bath towel.

“Oh, thanks,” Kaname responded, using it to start wiping down her hair.

Eri gazed blankly at her as she did. “Sorry about all this, Chidori-san,” she said. “Making you watch over him all the time...”

“It’s okay. I’m pretty used to it by now.”

“Really? As long as you’re happy...”

“I mean, I’m not exactly happy...” said Kaname, trailing off awkwardly.

“Hah...” Eri sighed, clearly not even listening.

Kagurazaka Eri was an English teacher, and the homeroom teacher for Kaname’s class. She was in her mid-twenties, wore her hair in a short bob cut, and was dressed in a beige suit. She had an attractive face and an overly serious look about her.

In truth, Eri took her job very seriously. Any time Sousuke raised trouble, she’d join Kaname in scolding him and crying to the heavens, *O Lord, was placing him in my class a trial you want me to face?! I will do my best to endure it! Actually, if possible, couldn’t you give me a slightly different trial? This one’s a*

little much for me. Surely, it's important to practice moderation in all things!
and that sort of thing.

And yet, she'd seemed strangely listless lately. She seemed to spend most of the day in a daze, spacing out even during English class. For instance, yesterday, she'd written some extremely violent rap lyrics on the blackboard and asked Chidori to translate them.

Um... I'm a genuine thug. Kill the police. Kill all white people. My so-and-so is awesome, yeah... The moment Kaname had translated it faithfully, Ms. Kagurazaka had turned deathly pale and asked her what she'd just said.

At any rate, she was acting strangely.

Kaname, growing curious, inquired as she put on a fresh tracksuit. "Ma'am. Are you worried about something?"

"Er?"

"You've seemed pretty distracted lately. You can talk to me about it if you want," she added casually.

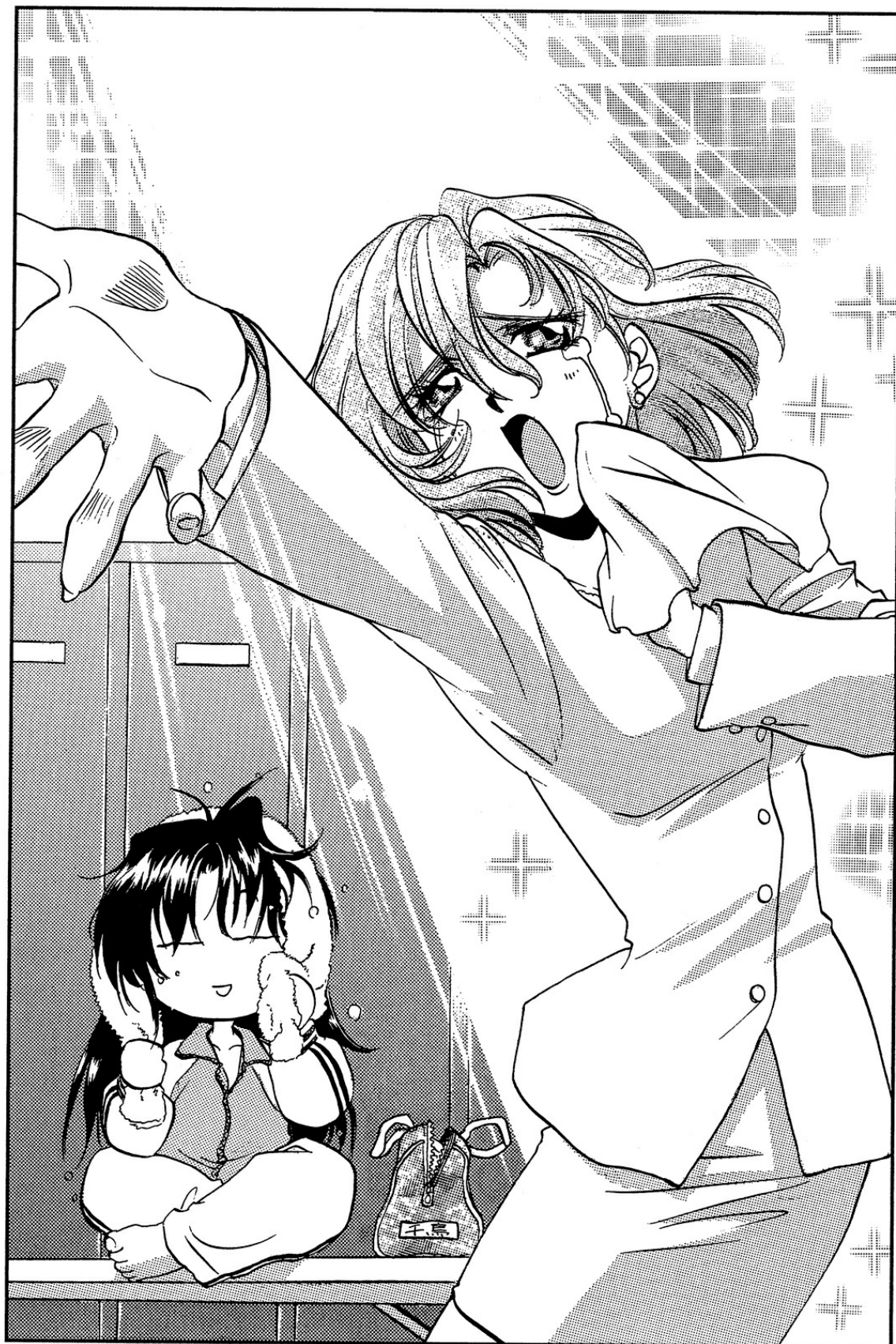
Eri went silent for a while. Then, suddenly, her eyes filled with tears.

"Ma'am?"

"I... I'm sorry... You're my student. You shouldn't have to be worrying about me... although it makes me very happy to know that you do..."

"Huh?"

"But I really can't. This is something I have to fix on my own. I wouldn't be much of a professional if I asked a student for help in solving my problems. But... but, oh! No, I just can't tell you!"



Eri was clearly tormented, making exaggerated gestures like a Takarazuka actress.

Kaname finished changing, and after staring at her blankly for a moment, finally snapped back to her senses. “Oh, really? I’ll be going, then.”

She was about to leave the locker room when Eri seized her sleeve. “Wait, Chidori-san.”

“What is it? You said you can’t talk about it, right?”

“I can’t, but... but I just... I really...”

“Tell me fast, then,” said Kaname. “I need to get to the convenience store to buy underwear.”

“Ah... please don’t say that,” begged Eri, tormented by her guilt. “Here, you can use mine...”

“Um, I’d rather not!” Kaname turned bright red as she saw Eri hesitantly reaching for the hem of her skirt. “Are you crazy?! Of all the grossest, stupidest... where is this coming from?!”

“P-Please don’t yell at me...” said Eri, who was completely panicking.

Kaname had never seen her so upset. It was hard to tell who was the student and who was the teacher at this point. “What in the world is going on?” she asked. “I’m starting to think this doesn’t have anything to do with Sousuke at all... Please, just tell me.”

“Ah... Well, it’s an... interpersonal... work issue,” Eri hedged.

“Interpersonal, huh?”

“Well... it’s about Mr. Mizuhoshi, the art teacher.” Hesitantly, she explained the situation: Kagurazaka Eri and Mizuhoshi Iori were colleagues and nothing more. They taught different subjects and managed homeroom for different grades. They only saw each other once or twice a day.

But then, last month, they’d been put in charge of arranging a farewell party for the retiring earth science teacher. Mizuhoshi hadn’t done that kind of thing before, but Eri had looked after him and the farewell party went smoothly. The

experience had brought them much closer than ever before.

And then, last Sunday, Mizuhoshi had invited her to dinner and a movie to thank her for her help. Eri had accepted happily.

“It had been so long since I last thought about what to wear like that. It was wonderful...” For a moment, Eri’s voice became lilting and joyful.

Kaname couldn’t hide her surprise as she looked on. To think that the half-mad Mr. Mizuhoshi and the extremely earnest Kagurazaka Eri could go on a real date! “Ahh... I guess even teachers are human, huh?”

“What?” gulped Eri.

“Well, you like him, right?” asked Kaname.

“W-Well... I wouldn’t go that far. But it’s sort of, well... I do think he’s a very fine man...” Eri was dissembling now, and had none of the air of a teacher about her.

“That’s okay. So... what exactly is the problem?” asked Kaname.

Eri’s face clouded over slightly. “That day was... wonderful. But since then, Mr. Mizuhoshi has been extremely distant with me.”

“Ahh.”

“He’ll say hello when we see each other, but then he’ll leave immediately. It’s like... It’s like he’s avoiding me.” Eri was completely downcast.

Kaname remembered how Mr. Mizuhoshi had spent most of their class holed up in the art supply room. It didn’t seem like it could be related, but... “Did you do something to freak him out? Did you try to push international Jewish conspiracy theories or admit to dancing at Juliana’s Tokyo?”

“Of course not!” Eri declared hotly. “I’m not a complete freak! But... dozing off during the movie, and eating four servings of sirloin steak... was probably a mistake...”

“Yeah, that would make someone mad,” Kaname agreed, and slumped over.

Eri looked once again like she was going to cry. “Ah... I knew it.”

“Yeah,” said Kaname, “I’d have stopped at three servings.”

“You’re right. That would be standard...”

“Yes, that would be standard.”

They both nodded in firm agreement.

“So... he’s probably completely disillusioned with me,” Eri concluded, growing even more despondent. “He thinks I’m a selfish, gluttonous woman. It’s all over...”

Kaname, unable to bear it, tried to cheer her up. “Really, I don’t think it’s that bad. It’s possible he’s not even really avoiding you!”

“Really? I hope you’re right...”

“I’ll try to do a little digging,” Kaname suggested nervously. “Surreptitiously. About Mr. Mizuhoshi.”

Her teacher’s eyes went wide. “What... really?”

“Sure. Not like I have anything better to do,” Kaname told her with a smile.

Sousuke and Mizuhoshi were silently but diligently mopping up the water in the art storage room. Listlessly, they soaked up their rags, wrung them into buckets, then repeated the process, over and over again.

“Sousuke,” Mr. Mizuhoshi said at last, around the time the floor was just starting to look clean.

“What is it?” Sousuke responded as he kept wiping. He had changed into his combat uniform.

“What do you think of that painting?” he asked, pointing to an oil painting on the wall.

It wasn’t the one he’d been working on during class. This painting was older; a landscape of a quiet forest morning, bathed in faint mist, with a beautiful balance of grays and misty greens. It was the kind of painting that really drew a viewer into the scene.

“This one?” Sousuke walked up to the oil painting and inspected it carefully. He poked at the wooden frame and peered at its reverse side. “I don’t think it

would provide much of a shield in an emergency,” he concluded. “Mere cloth can’t block even a .22-caliber bullet.”

Here, Mr. Mizuhoshi was speechless.

“Have you considered weaving the backside with super aramid fibers and ceramic plates?” Sousuke suggested. “That would let you stop up to 5.56mm rounds.”

“Actually, I meant... What do you think of the painting itself?”

At this, Sousuke examined the picture itself, as if only just realizing it was there. He gazed at the landscape for about thirty seconds. “It’s a forest,” he observed.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“It looks like a very safe forest,” Sousuke went on. “No dangerous animals, like venomous snakes or leeches. No sign of landmines or any other traps. But the underbrush in the back is concerning.” Sousuke pointed at a spot on the picture, which he viewed as a perfect position to place a skilled sniper.

Sousuke’s interpretation caused Mizuhoshi to sag. “I see... Concerning in its incompetence, I’m sure,” he said, completely misinterpreting his student. “What a shame.”

“Don’t be despondent, sir,” Sousuke advised him. “It would be a difficult thing for any amateur to notice.”

Any time the two of them got together, they always seemed to talk past each other.

“I painted this when I was a student. I was rather proud of it. But if that’s all you have to say about it... I think it’s a sign that I really have no talent. There’s no way I can finish the painting I’m working on now...” Mizuhoshi sighed.

Sousuke then turned his attention to the painting in question, which was sitting on the easel. It was covered in a dust-proof sheet, so he couldn’t see what it depicted. “What kind of painting is it?” he asked, even as he made to remove the cover.

“No! Please don’t look,” Mizuhoshi begged him.

“Why not?”

Mizuhoshi seemed flustered for some reason. He said, “B-Because it’s unfinished, and I don’t like to show people unfinished work. I just... well, maybe I’ll get right to the point. This painting... it’s provided a temporary reinvigoration of the radical form that exists within me. Yes, it’s like the master-slave relationship between myself and nature has vanished, and I am instead at all times subject to the magnanimity of a small god... Those are the words of Soseki, but that’s what this work means to me. Do you understand?”

“I do not,” Sousuke responded immediately, feeling greasy sweat rise on his temples.

“Hmm... yet as I explain this to you, I feel the drive to create grow within me once more. Yes, like the first faint light in the eastern sky...” Mizuhoshi’s eyes narrowed as he gazed off into the distance.

“That sounds pleasant,” Sousuke observed.

“It is. All right, I think I’m going to give it another try...”

“Will you allow me to help you? I do bear responsibility for interrupting your work,” Sousuke said earnestly.

Mizuhoshi waved him off with a smile. “If you want to help, let me be alone. I wish to concentrate.”

“Understood. I shall endeavor to make sure you remain alone. Goodbye.” Sousuke saluted, then left the room.

As she walked down the hall towards the art supply room, Kaname began to feel a bit of regret. She had offered to investigate on a whim, but now that she thought through the implications...

“Guh,” she mumbled. “I’m so not great at dealing with Mr. Mizuhoshi...”

Talking to Mr. Mizuhoshi was exhausting for her. He was always rattling off complicated art and literature terms, and he used so many roundabout expressions that it was impossible to tell what he was ever talking about. “Still, Ms. Kagurazaka does mean a lot to me. I’ll just have to suck it up,” she told

herself.

Kagurazaka Eri was clumsy and careless and inflexible, but Kaname and the other students had their reasons for trusting her, like the actions she'd taken during their canceled field trip. Eri's insistence that she cared about her students was more than mere lip service.

As Kaname reached the art supply room, she found Sousuke standing in front of the door, arms folded. He was in his combat uniform, shoulders back like a soldier.

"Sousuke," she said politely. "Is the room all cleaned up?"

Sousuke nodded in response. "Affirmative. Mr. Mizuhoshi wishes to focus on his painting once more. Thus, he wants to be alone to concentrate."

"Oh, okay," said Kaname. "I'll just be a minute." Then she tried to enter the supply room, but Sousuke stopped her. "What now?" she asked.

"The teacher is busy," he told her seriously. "I can't let you enter."

"I have to talk to him right now. Could you please let me through?"

"Regrettably, I cannot."

"C'mon, I just want to ask him a question! Let me through!" Kaname insisted, puffing out her cheeks.

After a moment's thought, Sousuke said, "In that case, tell me your business. I'll convey it to Mr Mizuhoshi myself."

"Huh? Sheesh..." But in that moment, Kaname remembered that Sousuke was relatively friendly with Mr. Mizuhoshi—certainly compared to her, at least. It might be easier to get the truth out of him if Sousuke spoke to him personally. With that thought in mind, Kaname nodded firmly. "Okay... could you ask him this for me?"

"Very well. What is it?"

Kaname laid out the general situation, making sure to leave Eri's name out of it.

"Hmm," said Sousuke.

“What would he think about someone who, on a first date, ate a little more than usual?” Kaname concluded. “I think he’ll probably say he wouldn’t mind, or that he appreciates a good appetite, but try to ask him surreptitiously.”

“Understood. Wait here.” Sousuke nodded and disappeared into the supply room.

As Sousuke entered the room, he saw that Mizuhoshi was engaged in his painting.

“Sir,” he said.

“Yes?” the teacher responded as he mussed up his long, disheveled hair.

“What are your feelings regarding gluttonous women?”

“Excuse me?”

“Gluttonous women. Imagine you’re watching a woman eat two pounds of rare steak. What would your opinion of her be?” Sousuke’s tone was surreptitious as he picked up a carving and surreptitiously regarded it—truly unparalleled surreptitiousness.

“I don’t understand... That’s rather vulgar,” Mizuhoshi responded quietly.

“Vulgar?” Sousuke questioned.

“Yes. I believe a class hierarchy exists, even in our animal instincts. To assume that the common sense of the apex and the civilized can always apply to that is...” he went on and on, “...but...” he went on and on, “...you see. Because even the mating of flies...” he went on and on, “...and it’s all part of the beauty and structure of nature. What really matters is the nobility inherent to its existence.”

“I see. Thank you for your help.” Sousuke returned to the hall.

“Ah... That was fast,” said Kaname, who had been waiting in the hall. Then, without any particular show of enthusiasm, she asked, “Well? What did he say?”

“Ah,” Sousuke replied. “He said it was vulgar.”

“Oh...”

“He said a great deal more than that, but that word sums it up. Something about flies... Something about the mating of flies being more beautiful than such a woman?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Sousuke frowned as he saw Kaname standing there, her arms folded and her expression serious. “Is there an issue?”

“Well... No, I guess it’s fine. Thanks anyway.” And with that, Kaname turned to leave.

How am I going to explain this to her? Kaname wondered, racking her brain as she stood outside the teachers’ office.

Suddenly she heard a voice from behind her. “Chidori-san?”

“Eek!” She leaped into the air and spun around, only to find Eri, who was holding some printouts for class, standing there.

“What’s got you so spooked?” Eri asked. “Are you all right?”

“No, I’m fine. I...”

As Kaname struggled to think of what to say, Eri looked at her with upturned eyes. “How... How did it go?”

“Ah... How did it go? Well...” Kaname hesitated for a moment, then decided she should probably just be honest. “I’m not sure how to put this. It sounds like... Mr. Mizuhoshi prefers women with small appetites. I’m afraid you didn’t really make... a high-class impression.”

Eri didn’t react at first. Then, about five seconds later, she suddenly dropped the printouts in a mess, swayed on her feet and slumped against the wall.

“M-Ma’am?!” cried Kaname.

“I... I’m fine. I’m fine, Chidori-san,” Eri said reassuringly. “Just a moment of vertigo... For a moment, up was down, I could no longer recognize my place in space and time, and I felt like all my blood was replaced with industrial waste...”

you know the feeling?”

“That sounds pretty serious, ma’am.”

“I’m fine. I’m just fine. Absolutely fine...” But despite her protestations, Eri had begun to hiccup and sob. She was pretty clearly in a bad way.

Kaname struggled with what to say next. “Um, but... I didn’t actually mention your name, so maybe he was speaking generally?” she hazarded. “It might not be so bad.”

“Ah, but... eh... really?” Eri looked up.

“Really. After all, they say that love is blind! No matter how careless and gluttonous and relatively flat-chested you might be... maybe Mr. Mizuhoshi doesn’t care about that!” Kaname said brightly. “He might be okay with anything as long as it’s from you.”

“Y-You think?” Eri’s cheeks turned pink, forgetting how bad she’d felt originally.

“I do! I’m going to ask him directly how he feels about you,” Kaname promised.

“W-Well... I don’t know if I want that.”

“But you won’t be satisfied until I do, right?” she insisted. “Let’s get the whole thing cleared up so you can sleep soundly tonight. If it’s bad, you can drink yourself to sleep. I think it’s really the best choice.”

“Ah... but...”

Kaname put a finger to her chin. “In that case... okay. I’ll make an excuse. I’ll say we’re making plans for a student council bulletin. We did star charts to see how teachers paired up, and it said you and Mr. Mizuhoshi were a perfect couple. I’ll tell him that and see how he feels. That wouldn’t be too suspicious, right? Right?!”

Eri let out a small breath and nodded firmly. “I see. In that case... all right.”

“Okay, sure thing! See ya!” Kaname headed for the art supply room once more.

As she arrived, she could see Sousuke still standing guard in front of the door.

“I guess I still can’t go in?”

“Correct. I’m sorry, but the room will be off limits for some time,” Sousuke responded, back straightened in an at-rest posture.

“Okay... would you ask for me one more time? This time...” Kaname explained the situation.

“Understood. You want me to ask him how he feels about Ms. Kagurazaka?”

“Yes. Please do.”

“Wait here.” Sousuke disappeared behind the door.

Inside, Mizuhoshi was still desperately engaged with the unfinished painting. Sousuke spoke up, feeling a bit awkward. “Sir.”

“Oh... what is it?”

“I have a minor question for you. What do you think of Ms. Kagurazaka?”

“What?” Mizuhoshi’s hand stopped on the easel, and he peered over the canvas at Sousuke. “Wh-Why would you ask me that?”

“The student council used a highly reliable method of astrological charting and received an intriguing result. It said the two of you were perfect for each other. I wish to request your comment.”

“Wh-What did Ms. Kagurazaka say?”

“We haven’t asked her yet.”

Mizuhoshi frowned for a minute, then finally, sluggishly, opened his mouth. “That fortune... can’t be true. We’re not a good match at all.”

“Not a good match?” Sousuke echoed.

“Yes. I... Whenever I look at her, I feel like needles are stabbing me in the heart. It’s not mere admiration of her beauty. It’s something else... something far stronger, more deathly terrifying. Monstrous. Primitive. Yes, I find her primitive. The struggle between Eros and Thanatos she inspires within me...” he went on and on, “...beyond the neurotic paradox that, to borrow the words of

Sigmund Freud..." and on and on he went.

Sousuke listened, trying to work out if Mizuhoshi even liked her or hated her. It was completely beyond him, but he used the best of his reason and sensitivity to commit Mr. Mizuhoshi's words to memory.

"...And that's more or less how I feel," Mizuhoshi concluded. "Is that acceptable?"

It wasn't, really. It was rare for Sousuke to feel completely taken aback by anything, but he spoke up weakly with his fingertips pressed to his temples, "Yes, that is... acceptable, I believe. Thank you."

The sight of Sousuke, grimacing and trailing sweat as he exited the room, had Kaname immediately nervous. "What did he say?"

"Hmm. I'm not certain how to explain." Sousuke folded his arms, gave a slight groan, then shook his head rapidly as if to clear it. "It appears that when Mr. Mizuhoshi looks at Ms. Kagurazaka's face, it inspires thoughts of death."

"Huh?"

"He appears to see her as a monster," Sousuke clarified. "Extremely primitive... eros... something like that. Erotic? Like a prostitute. He sees her as a person tormented by neurosis... and a poor match for him? I think it was... something like that." His voice shrank at the very end.

"Does that mean he hates her?"

"It certainly didn't sound... positive."

"Geh... I guess you're right," Kaname agreed reluctantly.

"I didn't understand everything he said, but Mr. Mizuhoshi said that Ms. Kagurazaka is monstrous, primitive, erotic, neurotic, and that looking at her makes him sick," said Sousuke, still trying to make sense of it all.

"I feel like that can't be quite right, but..." Just then, Kaname heard a small sob behind her. She whipped around. "M-Ma'am?!"

Kagurazaka Eri was standing right there. Her expression was that of a lost child, and her eyes were swollen and red.

“H-How long have you been there?” Kaname asked.

“Since you said he hated me.”

“Geh...”

“I reconsidered what we discussed, so I came down to stop you,” Eri whispered, her tone almost dire.

“Um... look, I’m not exactly sure that’s what he said...”

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it? I’m always speaking so high-mindedly in front of you students, but I suppose I was just a foolish, pathetic woman all along. Completely ignorant of the world, a glutton, and still a virgin too. I just... I just...”

As Eri entered a spiral of self-destruction, Kaname tried desperately to reassure her. “That’s not true. Don’t torture yourself, ma’am.”

“She’s right, ma’am. And for primitive peoples, it was important to eat as much as they could when they could,” said Sousuke. “Don’t chastise yourself.”

“You shut up!” Kaname screamed, and Sousuke ducked his head, cowed. Eri began to back away unsteadily.

It was just then that the door to the art supply room flew open, and Mizuhoshi charged out. “What’s all this noise?! I am trying to concentrate—Eh?” Mizuhoshi stopped in the middle of his scolding. He’d just noticed that Eri was there. He saw that she was crying and fell silent. “M-Ms. Kagurazaka. What’s the matter?” Confused, he looked at Sousuke and Kaname.

They looked at each other, then looked away. Kaname began whistling, and Sousuke began disassembling his gun for maintenance.

“Mr. Mizuhoshi... I really must apologize,” Eri said in a pained voice, turning her back to him.

“What?”

“I should have been tactful and refused, but I accepted your invitation to dinner... It was far too presumptuous of me,” she said.

“Wh-What are you talking about? I don’t—”

“Don’t bother! It’s all fine. I know I’m a plain and boring woman. But... But...” After that preface, Eri turned around, probably glaring at Mizuhoshi with tear-stained eyes. “Primitive, neurotic, like a prostitute?!” she blurted out. “It’s all too hurtful! I never thought you were the kind of man to say such cruel things! I’ve completely lost respect for you!”

“Wait—” In that moment, Sousuke and Kaname were sure they saw the word *Shock!* appear over Mr. Mizuhoshi’s head.

“Never talk to me again! Now, if you’ll excuse me...” Eri wiped away her tears and strode away.

Mizuhoshi was left behind, staring emptily at the ceiling.

“Um... Sir?”

There was no response. After a moment, he turned slowly to Sousuke, and said, “Do... you have a lighter?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Could I borrow it?” Mizuhoshi took Sousuke’s Zippo and wandered listlessly back into the art supply room. He walked further inside and held the lighter up to the painting he’d been working on just then.

“What?!” Kaname turned pale and ran in to stop him.

“Don’t try to stop me, Chidori-kun!” Mizuhoshi cried out.

“What are you doing?! You’re going to start a fire!”

“Yes, let it all burn! This filthy painting... this filthy world! It’s all... it’s all... gaaah!” Mizuhoshi let out a primal scream, tears streaming from his eyes.

Sousuke wrenched his arm behind his back as Kaname snatched the lighter.

“What’s the matter with you?! You don’t even like Ms. Kaguraza—” Kaname started to say, and then suddenly stopped. She had seen Mizuhoshi’s painting for the first time. “I-Is this...”

“I see.” At the sight of the picture, even the normally dimwitted Sousuke understood everything.

Eri was lying in a bed in the nurse's office, crying.

"Um, Senpai. Are you all right?" the nurse, Nishino Kozue, asked in concern. The two of them had known each other since high school, where they were one year apart in the brass band club—in this very school, in fact.

Eri sniffled. "I don't think I am," she said. "I'm just so pathetic..."

"I don't know what's going on... but ever since high school, you've been quick to make assumptions," said the nurse.

"Just leave me alone," Eri mumbled. "You've always had plenty of guys. You'd never understand my pain. *Sob...*"

Just then...

"Excuse us..."

"Is Ms. Kagurazaka here?" Kaname and Sousuke asked as they opened the door to the empty nurse's office.

Nishino Kozue turned to Eri, her gaze inquisitive.

"Tell them I'm not here," she insisted.

"Yes, she's here," Kozue called, turning back to the door.

"Hey!"

Kozue smiled and disappeared behind the curtain. Kaname and Sousuke entered in her place.

"Hey. Are you sulking again?" Kaname asked.

With her face buried in the pillow and covered in a sheet, Eri really did look like a sulking child. "I'm... I'm fine. I just want to stew in my misery. Please go."

"I can't do that. We bear some of the responsibility for what's happened." With that, Sousuke produced a painting from behind his back, and the smell of not-quite-dried oil paint stung her nose.

"Ah..." said Eri. The painting was an incomplete portrait. Standing in front of a building somewhere in town—probably a meetup spot—was a young woman, looking at her watch as she anxiously waited for someone. It was clearly meant to be her.

The woman in the painting looked worried, yet excited. The gaze of the onlooker—the painter himself—seemed full of warm affection, despite the painting being mainly made up of blues, greens, and grays. It was truly a mysterious painting.

“Mr. Mizuhoshi has been working on this painting in a furor the last few days,” Sousuke told her.

“He said the reason he’s been short with you is because he’s been trying to hang on to this image of you from your date,” Kaname added.

Eri said nothing. She just gazed at the painting, a flush entering her cheeks. It had all been a misunderstanding. She didn’t need an explanation. The moment she saw it, everything became clear.

“I think I was too hard on Mr. Mizuhoshi. He’s actually just really bad at expressing himself,” Kaname said with a smile.

“Yes...” Eri said, her face turning red to the ears. “That’s why I love him.”

〈An Eloquent Portrait — The End〉

The Patients of Darkness

It was an exceptionally hot summer's night. A lone candle's flame flickered atop a dining table in a dark apartment, its weak orange light casting eerie shadows on the walls.

A mixed group of four—three girls and one boy—sat around the table. Their expressions were uniformly serious, and sweat beaded on their foreheads. The air around them was thick and heavy. Only the voice of a girl, who was reciting a story, broke the silence.

A scary story...

"And then," Chidori Kaname hissed out, "disbelieving, she opened the box of shumai dumplings again and again. Each time she did, one more of the dumplings had vanished. In the end, all twelve of them were gone..." The candle flickered, making her otherwise beautiful face appear strange and distorted.

The scent of creeping tension and fear permeated the room as one member of the group, Inaba Mizuki, swallowed hard. "What happened then?" she asked.

Kaname allowed for a long pause, her face pale. "Yes... In the end, she realized—the vanished dumplings... were all stuck to the underside of the lid!"

The *cra-pash* of the old *Mito Komon* eyecatch echoed through the room (or at least, it would have been appropriate if it had).

"No!"

"No... no, no!" Mizuki and the other girl, Tokiwa Kyoko, let out a collective shriek of despair, clinging to each other in fear.

"Shh! It's not over yet! For you see, there's more to this story..." Kaname said, pressing a finger to her lips.

Mizuki and Kyoko quickly stifled their screams. "More? How can there be more?!" Kyoko asked.

Kaname spoke again, with all the gravity she could muster. “Let us have a change of scene. Once, there was an old man who loved shumai dumplings. He ate them almost every day. One day, he choked on one... and died.”

“Oh...”

“They held a grand funeral service for him, and all the offerings were shumai dumplings...”

The girls listened in horrified silence.

“Before they were to bury the coffin, the attendants came to the front of the funeral parlor to pay their respects one last time... their final goodbye. And there, they opened the coffin’s lid. Slowly... ever so slowly, it creaked. And when at last it was open...”

“When at last it was open...?”

As the rest of the group held their breath, Kaname reached the conclusion of her tale. “The old man’s body was gone.”

Mizuki and Kyoko both turned pale.

“Oh no,” said Mizuki. “Don’t tell me... don’t tell me...”

“He was stuck to the lid?!” Kyoko gasped.

Cra-pash! That same strange sound seemed to echo out of nowhere once again (or at least, it would have been appropriate if it had).

“Oh, God!”

“No! Noooooo!!!”

Mizuki and Kyoko became half-crazed in their fear, weeping and screaming.

Kaname, Kyoko, and Mizuki... The three of them had decided to have a slumber party here on this midsummer night. Since Kaname lived alone, her apartment tended to be the stage for such things. Incidentally, Mizuki and Kyoko never used to hang out before but had been doing so lately thanks to their mutual association with Kaname.

In contrast, the lone boy who was with them—Sagara Sousuke—merely sat there in silence, invisible question marks hovering over his head. His presence in

Kaname's apartment was easily explained: he lived just a minute's walk away, so they had invited him in the spirit of mischief.

"What do you think of the story, Sousuke?" The three girls looked at him, brimming with curiosity, waiting to see what he made of it.

He merely looked at them, his gaze impassive, his mouth still downturned. "I don't really understand..." he said in confusion.

The three girls released out a mutual sigh and slumped over in disappointment.

"Ugh... That story won't do it either, huh?"

"Does he have the sensitivity of a reptile or something?"

"Well, the story about shumai dumplings *might* be a little too surreal to qualify as a scary story..."

All three had tried to tell Sousuke scary stories about different things, but none of them had invoked the desired reaction.

This was entirely understandable. He'd been raised in war-torn regions overseas, after all, and had probably lived his life in closer proximity to death than most people ever did. It was natural that creaky old ideas about paranormal phenomena simply wouldn't register with him.

"Sagara-kun, you really aren't scared?"

"I don't think I understand these 'scary stories.' The stories you told about the slit-mouthed woman playing the harmonica, or the fast-moving Giant Baba, all seemed like nonsense to me. If you want to hear a more dangerous and mysterious story, I know several myself."

"Oh? Tell us, then. Go on," Kaname said with a challenging air.

Sousuke let out a confident snort. "Very well," he replied. "Prepare yourselves."

"*Gulp...*" The three girls let out a nervous noise.

"Yes... it all started when I was on a scouting mission in Cambodia," he began. "I had been separated from my comrades, left to wander the jungle alone."

There, I happened to encounter a passing platoon of a hundred guerrillas. I was almost out of ammunition, and my transceiver was broken. If they caught me, I was dead. That's when I—"

"Arrrrgh!" Kaname and Mizuki shouted angrily.

"Nobody asked for your old war stories!"

"What is the *matter* with you?!"

The criticism caused Sousuke's shoulders to slump. "But it was dangerous..."

"There's definitely *something* dangerous here..."

"And it was mysterious as well," he argued defensively. "Why was a gang supposedly being armed by Eastern powers in possession of American-made Stinger missiles, as well as the latest anti-AS mines—"

"Nobody cares!" Kaname interrupted. "That's not the kind of scary story we're talking about, okay? It's more like... Oh, damn it. Fine, I'll bring out the one I've been saving. It's gonna scare the pants off of you. I call it, 'French kiss between the faceless man and the slit-mouthed woman'..."

"That seems physically impossible," Kyoko whispered.

Meanwhile, Mizuki waved her hand in annoyance. "Forget it, Kaname. It's totally pointless. The guy's just got no imagination. I'll bet he doesn't understand fiction at all."

"Ugh..."

"I agree," said Kyoko. "Maybe he'd be scared if we could show him a more concrete ghost."

"Now... there's an idea," Kaname said thoughtfully, folding her arms. She really wanted to see the stone-faced man actually express fear of something, for once. Was there anything at hand she could use? The thought brought a faint memory back to her. "Now that you mention it..."

"What?"

"There's an old abandoned hospital the next town over," she suggested. "It's all rundown and desolate..."

The building in question was a roughly fifteen-minute bike ride from Kaname's apartment. It had once been a perfectly functional hospital, but there'd been a deadly fire there about ten years prior, apparently due to the hospital director's decision to skimp on preventative measures for tax purposes. The resulting lawsuits, when combined with the economic downturn caused by the bubble's collapse, meant they hadn't bothered to rebuild. The hospital had lain abandoned ever since.

"Hmm... Sounds fun," Mizuki whispered.

But Kyoko looked a little bit nervous. "Don't tell me, Kana-chan..."

"Yeah. How about we take Sousuke to that hospital? Give him a taste of a *real* ghost story." Kaname grinned, and cast a glance at Sousuke.

He, in turn, looked skeptical. "An abandoned hospital?"

"Wanna go see?" she proposed.

"I don't object. But what do you expect to find there?"

"Heh heh heh... Terror, of course!" Kaname grinned wickedly.

But Kyoko began tugging on her sleeve. "Hey, Kana-chan... could we not? I've heard scary things about that hospital." She sounded completely serious, with none of her usual laid-back manner. "They say the hospital director committed suicide and people have seen him standing in front of the hospital... Middle school students who have gone in to mess around were never seen again..."

"People always say that stuff about spooky abandoned buildings," Kaname told her scornfully. "We'll be fine!"

"But what if there really is a ghost?!"

"Then that's what we want, isn't it? We'll finally scare Sousuke." With that, Kaname stood up with a smile and prepared to set out.

Kyoko, though, remained seated. "I don't want to go," she said.

"What, seriously?" Kaname and Mizuki were both shocked by this.

"Yeah. I'll hold down the fort, so you guys go on without me." It was rare to see Kyoko so steadfast about anything.

“Oh... okay, then,” Kaname said uncertainly. “How about you, Mizuki? Sounds fun, right?”

“Sure thing. I’m in.” While Mizuki was putting on her cardigan, Sousuke checked the bullets in his handgun.

Taking two bicycles, the trio soon ended up in front of the hospital in question. There was an old, broken-down fence and a ‘Do Not Enter’ sign, beyond which a rundown hospital building made of reinforced concrete towered, still covered in soot from the fire.

A humid wind blew past, feeling like a sudden chill in the otherwise sweltering air.

“It looks like the site of a bombing,” Sousuke observed, looking up at the four-story building.

All of the windows were broken, and the walls closest to the ground were covered in graffiti. They read things like ‘Ready to Rumble!’ and ‘Musha Gundam Suicide Squad’ and ‘Bonta-kun Was Here,’ all spelled out in unnecessarily intricate kanji characters. The work of some delinquents, most likely.

“I always wondered... how do your stereotypical uneducated punks know how to write such complicated phrases?” Kaname mused.

“Maybe they always have a kanji dictionary on hand,” said Mizuki.

The graffiti also included a traditional Buddhist temple manji mark, the symbol egregiously misappropriated by Nazi Germany for their iron cross. Yet there was no sign of life around the hospital, outside or in. Although it wouldn’t have been unusual for other young people to be doing the same thing right now, given the season and time of day...

“Anyway, let’s go in,” Kaname said excitedly, slipping through a hole in the fence. Sousuke followed after her with a hand on the holster on his back.

Mizuki, though, remained outside, a nervous sweat forming on her brow.

“What’s wrong, Mizuki?” Kaname asked.

“O-Over there...” Mizuki pointed to the fourth floor of the hospital, the second room from the right. “I thought I just saw... a strange old woman, in that window... looking down at us...”

“Huh?” Kaname followed her gaze to the window in question, but didn’t see any trace of an old woman. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“I saw her! I just saw her! She was looking at us and smiling!” Mizuki shouted, sounding utterly crazed.



“You know what? Nice job,” said Kaname. “You’re setting the mood perfectly. This is gonna be great!”

“Wh-What? What are you talking about?! This place is really dangerous. I mean it. There’s someone there... I s-saw them!” said Mizuki, stammering in fear.

“Huh? Hey, come on, it’s fine. It was just your imagination,” said Kaname, laughing with a dismissive wave.

But Mizuki spun on her heel. “I’m leaving!”

“Huh?”

“You’d have to be crazy to go in there!” she shrielled. “I won’t do it!”

“Wait—” Kaname tried to say, but there was no time to stop her before Mizuki got on her bike and swiftly rode back in the direction she’d come from.

“Sheesh, what a bunch of weenies...” Kaname muttered as she began walking through the narrow yard, which had long since gone to seed. “Are they cowards, or just that superstitious? You’re supposed to at least go inside before you start acting like that. Bunch of wet blankets...”

“I don’t understand, though.” Sousuke said from behind her. “Why was Inaba so afraid?”

“You got me there,” Kaname told him.

“All the old woman was doing was standing there,” he pointed out. “It would be another matter if she’d been holding a sniper rifle or a rocket launcher.”

There was a brief moment of silence—a necessary one, for Kaname to process Sousuke’s words. “What did you say?” she asked at last.

“I said that the old woman in the window was unarmed.”

Kaname gulped. “You... You saw her too?”

“Yes,” he replied. “It would have been impossible for Inaba to see her if I couldn’t have done so as well.”

He seemed completely unfazed. If he’d been anyone else, she’d have

assumed he was joking. But Sousuke definitely wasn't the joking type. Which meant... there really had been an old woman in the window. Not even Kaname could keep the chill from running up her spine.

"What's the matter, Chidori? You're looking ill," Sousuke said in surprise.

"A-Aren't you scared?"

"Scared of what?"

"You know! A place like this, at a time like this?" she hissed back. "Don't you think it's weird there'd be an old person there?!"

"Perhaps a local senior with dementia went for a walk and got lost," Sousuke suggested. "We should find her and take her to the local police."

"I... I guess that'd be the most reasonable explanation..."

There was no sign of fear in Sousuke's face at all. His sheer level of calm was utterly infuriating. "You don't want to go in, then?"

"What?"

As Kaname hesitated on the hospital threshold, Sousuke said, "I don't understand why you'd be afraid, but if you are, you can go. You shouldn't subject yourself to unnecessary mental stress."

"Geh... ugh..."

"You look extremely frightened to me," he continued. "You're lacking in your usual energy."

"Mmgh..." Kaname knew he didn't mean any harm by it, but his choice of words still pissed her off. It was things like this that really got her stubbornness going. After all, she'd brought Sousuke to this hospital to scare *him*. If she got scared and asked to turn back now, she'd never live it down... Which meant they'd have to wander all around the hospital until Sousuke was too scared to remain. Or if not scared, exactly, she at least wanted to get him looking nervous...

So in the end, Kaname steeled her nerve and said, "I-I'm totally fine! Let's go on in!"

“What are you so angry about?” Sousuke asked in confusion.

“I’m not angry... Now, come on!” said Kaname, stepping onto the rubble around the entrance and going into the empty lobby. The light from the street lamps outside was able to permeate nearer to the entrance, but deeper inside it was pitch black.

Kaname stopped in her tracks. “Hang on,” she said.

“What is it?”

“M-Maybe you should go first,” she said, and quickly got behind him.

They’d decided to head for the patient’s room on the fourth floor, the room where he’d seen the mysterious old woman. But since the front stairway was in disrepair, they aimed for one further down a long hall, lined with dark portals, its depths completely draped in black. They couldn’t see anything... And yet, something was present.

A faint breeze brushed across Kaname’s cheek, then traveled down her hair and the back of her neck.

Meanwhile Sousuke, holding his Maglite in a reverse grip, continued down the hall. In his right hand, he held his black pistol. His posture was extremely guarded.

“Why’d you draw your gun?” she asked.

“Safety purposes,” said Sousuke, his voice calm.

A foul smell permeated the first-floor hallway, and the light of the Maglite flickered in the darkness. A broken wheelchair lay on the floor, close to a scattering of abandoned syringes and a porcelain doll with no legs. It was a truly desolate atmosphere, and pretty damned...

“S-Scary, right?” Kaname asked.

“What is?” Sousuke responded, more confused than anything. He seemed to be completely unaffected by the eerie atmosphere.

“Ugh. Guess he’ll need more than entry-level spookiness,” Kaname fretted to herself.

Just then, Sousuke turned his light to a bend in the hallway about ten meters ahead and let out a questioning noise.

A boy wrapped in bandages had poked his head out from around the corner. His head hovered there, close to the ceiling. His eyes didn't narrow in response to the light, but simply looked down at them impassively. One side of his face was swollen with what looked like a concussive wound.

Kaname stood there in silence, staring.

Then suddenly, there was a crash behind them. They turned and saw fragments of a glass bottle littering the middle of the corridor. Had it fallen through a hole in the ceiling? Or had it been thrown in through the window? There was no sign of anyone nearby, and when they looked back at the bend, the child's head was... gone. Simply gone. Neither hide nor hair of him was visible.

The ruins were now back to their previous silence.

Sousuke drew Kaname closer to him, and spoke first. "Strange," he said, in a casual tone that suggested he might have just as easily been talking about a news story about bonsai trees becoming trendy with female high school students.

"'Strange'? Did you just say 'strange'?!" By contrast, Kaname's voice was hysterical. Honestly, the fact that she hadn't immediately run off screaming was laudable in itself. "Is that it?" she continued. "You don't think anything other than that? There was just... a child! And then the glass!"

"As I said, strange."

"It's terrifying, isn't it? It's super weird! Aren't you scared?!" Kaname insisted, forcing back the urge to beg him to take her home.

But Sousuke merely tilted his head in confusion. "I'm afraid not," he told her. "It's just a child, while I'm a fully armed man. I don't see how he's a threat to me."

"Argh!" Kaname kicked the nearby wall. "There is... something wrong with you! After seeing something like that... how can you... how can you... How can you be the usual idiot you always are?!"

This gave Sousuke pause. “I don’t entirely understand, but that manner of speaking was very offensive...” Greasy sweat rose on his temples, and he waited for Kaname to calm herself down through sheer force of will. “So, what now?” he asked then.

“Huh?”

“I’m still concerned about the old woman on the fourth floor,” he reminded her. “If you’ve lost your nerve and can’t move on, you’re free to leave without me.”

His choice of words irritated her deeply. “Grr...” Kaname glared at Sousuke, and after mussing up her hair, she said—partly to give herself courage—“D-Don’t be silly! I’m totally not afraid! I was just a little startled!”

“I see. Let’s proceed, then.” And with that, Sousuke continued walking unconcernedly.

They peered around the corner, but found just an empty hallway. There was no sign of anything the child could have been standing on, either.

For some reason, the stairway to the second floor was littered with mannequins. They all had the word “grudge” written on their chests in red paint, which really added to the creepiness. As Kaname and Sousuke tried advancing further to the third floor, they found it blocked by piles of old beds and lockers.

“The way is blocked,” Kaname observed.

“We’ll have to find another,” said Sousuke.

They turned back and came out into the second floor hallway. Having to take the long way to the fourth floor meant it would take even longer to get back in the end; they wouldn’t be able to simply run back outside if something bad went down. She felt like they were being drawn further and further into a dungeon.

After a bit of walking, they found the hallway blocked by beds, desks, and medicine cabinets, just like the stairs had been.

“L-Looks like a dead end,” Kaname said nervously. “Maybe we really should —”

Sousuke tried pushing in a nearby door, which creaked open in response. “We can get around through this room. There’s a door on the other side,” he said, peeking into the room. “Let’s go.”

Kaname said nothing.

The room within must have originally been some kind of an office. There were soot-covered desks and chairs scattered all around, mountains of smelly old papers, a beat-up sofa... A fluorescent light swayed back and forth, dangling from the ceiling.

“S-Seeing something like this still doesn’t scare you?” she asked incredulously.

“As long as I’m careful, I’ll be able to notice the presence of any land mines or explosive tripwires,” he responded.

“Seriously, that’s not what I—” Just then, a tremendous sound shook the room. There was an old phone lying on top of the nearby desk... which had suddenly begun to ring.

“Wah...”

“Stand back,” Sousuke ordered. Kaname was bolted to the spot, but he pushed past her to approach the phone. He carefully inspected it as it continued to ring. Then he took a few steps back and threw a nearby coffee cup at it. The cup hit it, knocking the receiver out of its cradle. Then... silence.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Kaname asked.

“For caution’s sake. One might pick up the phone out of curiosity and set off a bomb rigged beneath it,” he told her. “I’ve seen traps like this before. One took out a comrade of mine in a similar abandoned building in Lebanon.”

Kaname fell silent.

“But this one doesn’t seem to be trapped,” Sousuke continued.

“Of course it’s not...” she grumbled.

Ignoring Kaname’s words, Sousuke picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

He listened, silently. His reaction was as impassive, as if he were calling in for the time or the weather report. Then he said, slowly, "I'm sorry, but this hospital has been closed for several years. If you need emergency care, you should dial 119. An ambulance will come and assist you... Hello?" he tilted his head. "I don't think they're listening."

"I-Is there someone on the line?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you want to talk to them?" He held out the telephone receiver, which Kaname trepidatiously put to her ear. Masked by a sound like radio static, she heard a person's voice.

"Can't breathe... so hot... help me... hurts... hurts... hurts..." it was a child's voice, agonized. Behind it, distant screams rang out.

"Eek!" Kaname turned pale and threw the receiver away. "Wh-What the hell was that?!"

"An emergency patient, I expect," said Sousuke. "They were calling a hospital about their breathing difficulties, after all. I suppose they didn't realize it had closed down—"

"That is *not* what's going on!" Kaname exploded. "Don't... Don't you think it's weird?!" The old person in the window, the child in the hallway, and now, the phone call... It was all obvious paranormal phenomena. They'd experienced a lifetime's worth of ghostly happenings in one night. And yet...

"It is quite strange, yes," Sousuke agreed neutrally.

"Then why don't you look scared?! These are *ghosts*! We're meeting *ghosts* in this *hospital*!" Kaname screeched, flexing her hands for emphasis.

"Really?"

"Yes, really! It's a damned ghost parade!" she declared, her shoulders heaving.

Sousuke just peered at her calmly. "Are you sure you don't want to leave? I think you may be tired," he said softly. His gaze seemed concerned, almost pitying.

"Oh, dammit," she snarled. "That look in your eyes makes me so pissed off!"

He tilted his head in confusion. “I’m just worried about—”

“Shut up! And spare me your concern!” Kaname yelled. “Fine, let’s keep going! And no more talk about leaving! Dammit...” She was starting to feel unreasonably angry about the paranormal phenomena they were encountering. *Why do I have to be the only one getting scared?!* she was thinking. *These little parlor ghosts aren’t going to scare Sousuke! Why can’t you take a different tactic, a more powerful one, and really scare the pants off of him?!* He’s not going to understand any of this! Just think about it a little more! she wanted to shout.

“It just isn’t fair!” Kaname muttered as she strode along, while Sousuke kept looking at her in confusion.

They proceeded from the second floor to the third. The stairway to the fourth floor was once again blocked, so they walked down the third-floor hallway instead.

Suddenly, Kaname saw something pass outside the window. She’d only seen it in her peripheral vision, so all she perceived was some kind of white ball. “Did you see that?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Sousuke. “It appeared to be a human head. A flying one, at that.”

“A *head*?” she asked incredulously. A flying head... But instead of feeling scared, Kaname just felt annoyed. *Talk about cheap!* she thought to herself. *Do they really think a stupid flying head will be enough to scare Sousuke?!* She glared out the now-empty window and said aloud, “Well, how do you feel? Were you scared?”

“No,” Sousuke responded. “I’m just relieved it wasn’t a grenade.”

Kaname glared up at the ceiling and shouted, “See? This crap’s not working on him?! Go on, try again!”

“Who are you talking to?” he asked curiously.

“Shut up! Let’s keep going!” Kaname clenched her fists and took the lead down the hall once more.

They found the stairway to the fourth floor and had just started to climb it when mysterious laughter rang out. *Heh heh... heh heh heh heh...* The voice echoed around them, its origin impossible to pinpoint. *Heh heh... ha ha ha... he he...* It seemed strangely mixed with static, but it was certainly a creepy laughing voice.

At the same time, though, a new idea entered her mind: *Is this really paranormal phenomena?* Aloud she asked, “What about now? Scared yet?”

“I can’t understand why I would be. It’s just laughter,” Sousuke said apologetically.

Kaname clicked her tongue, let out a sigh, then cried out again, “Another miss, guys! C’mon, get it together! Are you even trying?!” At this, inexplicably, the laughter disappeared. “Hmph,” she grumbled. “Cowards!”

“Really,” said Sousuke, “who are you talking to?”

“Oh, shut up! Next!” *Ghost, specter, whatever you are! Would one of you please just scare this guy?!* Kaname thought, even as she strode forward.

The fourth floor was in bad shape when they reached it. The concrete in the wall had crumbled, creating holes. The floor was in tatters, with scrap boards laid down here and there in a pathetic attempt at reinforcement.

They proceeded forward until they came to a large hospital room, where a girl about ten years old stood in the doorway across from them. She was dressed in pajamas and her face was pale. Her arms hung limply at her sides, and she held a bloodstained hammer in one hand. Her sunken, empty eyes stared at Kaname as she stood there, silent and gruesome.

Then, her small mouth moved. *Get out... die... get out... die...* The whispering voice echoed through the room.

Neither of them moved.

“W-Well? What about now?!” Kaname asked, sounding extremely annoyed.

Sousuke put his hand to his chin and thought for a moment. “It’s more difficult... But a hammer still isn’t much of a threat,” he decided. “If she had

some incendiary grenades, perhaps...”

“Oh, come *on!*” Ignoring the ghost girl, Kaname began stamping on the floorboards. “It’s not about the weapons! There is a little girl covered in blood, right there! It’s freaky! Most people would be creeped out by it!”

“Hmm.” Sousuke frowned.

Kaname groaned, and pointed at the girl who was standing in their way. “And you! Quit grumbling and figure out a new trick! Blow out some poison gas, or do a weird dance! You’ve got options, remember?!” she shouted.

The girl’s mouth curled upwards at this. It definitely was a bone-chilling smile, but...

“Ugh... Come on, that’s just stupid!” It just made Kaname angrier. She strode up to the girl, cracking her knuckles.

“What are you doing?” Sousuke asked as he watched her go.

“I’m gonna grab her by the scruff of the neck and give her a talking to! I’m sick of being the only one scared!” Kaname didn’t even think about whether it was actually possible to grab a spirit by the scruff of the neck; she was acting purely on momentum. When a person reached the point of no return with their fear, there were generally two emotions they could reach: resignation or anger. Kaname was currently experiencing the latter.

“It’s not safe, Chidori. You shouldn’t—”

“Shut up!” As Kaname advanced, the girl whipped around and disappeared through the door. “Wait up, you!” she shouted and started to run. Then...

Suddenly, her body sank.

“Huh...?”

The ground below her feet—weak flooring not even covered by tile or linoleum—gave way. She was sent falling to the floor below, accompanied by broken boards and building material.

“Ah—”

Slam! Suddenly, Kaname hit the ground, knocking the air out of her lungs. She

couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. She knew she was back on the third floor, but her consciousness was hazy. "H-Huh?" Her fingertips were numb, and she was coughing. She felt something wet spreading from the back of her head to her neck. It was red. Probably blood. And it was spreading.

There's so much blood, it could be a horror movie. And it's flowing from my head. It must've been a bad fall...

"A-Am I going to die?" she wondered hazily.

"Ch-Chidori?!" someone was shouting. "Chidori! Wake up! Say something... No, don't talk! Don't move! I'm coming!" The voice was obviously gripped by fear.

Who's that? she wondered as she looked around, and saw a pale face coming towards her in the dark.

"Chidori!" Someone lifted her up. His eyes were wide open, sweat pouring from his brow, his lip trembling slightly.

Why's he so scared? After all those ghosts... didn't even faze him... she wondered idly as she said the man's name aloud. "Sousuke? What happened?" This time, her voice came out properly.

Then the man—Sousuke—spoke up, relieved, "Chidori. Were you injured? Are you all right?"

"Oh? Think I'm fine... just hit my back... ow, ow..." she responded, then looked around. She was lying in a hospital room on the lower floor, surrounded by a mess of painting supplies, cardboard, tools, timber, and extension cords. A prop head on the end of a fishing pole—the same child's head model they had seen on the first floor—also lay nearby, accompanied by an old telephone, a CD player, an amp, a car battery, and more. The clutter must have acted to cushion her fall. She had a few cuts and bruises, but was otherwise uninjured.

"And what's... this?" Kaname pawed at the liquid on her neck. It was indeed red, but it wasn't blood. It was fake blood, the kind used in special effects makeup.

"Hey... are you okay?" came a voice from the hole in the ceiling. It was the ghost girl from before, but her expression was no longer hauntingly creepy. She

just looked worried.

Then another boy, elementary school aged, stuck his head out too. “Aw, the green room is ruined!” he lamented. “C’mon— Wait. That you, Sagara-san?” With intelligent eyes and a checkered bandanna, this was a face which Kaname and Sousuke recognized.

“Yoshiki?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” the boy admitted quickly.

And from next to him came a seedy-looking middle-aged man. “Hello? Are you all right?” he asked.

The man wore black-rimmed glasses, had shaggy hair and a beard, and was dressed in ragged clothing. He gestured at some nearby chairs. “Go on, sit down,” he urged.

Sousuke and Kaname dusted off the seats, then hesitantly did as they were told. A small group of elementary school students all sat down behind them.

They were next to the fourth-floor hospital room from before. This was another room with more stable flooring, the home of the homeless man who had made a dwelling for himself in the old hospital. He had a collection of cooking utensils and instant food, as well as piles of books, a bed, and a table. It was a pretty comfortable space, really.

“I’ve got plum wine. Want some?” he offered. “It’s clean.”

“No, thank you...” Kaname and Sousuke said together, politely turning him down.

“So you’re saying, Yoshiki... You and your friends put on this act to help this old man?” Kaname asked, and the boy—who seemed to be their leader—nodded.

The boy’s name was Akutsu Yoshiki, and he’d ended up meeting Kaname and Sousuke completely by chance during a separate incident. “That’s right,” he said. “Neighborhood couples and delinquents come by here all the time. They bully Gen-san and mess up his room.” Gen-san must have been the name of the

bespectacled homeless man with the reggae style. “We thought if we spread a rumor that there really were ghosts here, they’d stop coming, so we rigged some stuff up.”

“Aha,” said Kaname.

“I was against it, but the kids were really into the idea, so I ended up helping. And I guess it must’ve worked, because people don’t come here so much anymore. I really appreciate it.” The homeless man had a curiously intellectual air about him.

“Most people run away by the time they get to the phone call on the second floor. But you broke through everything we threw at you. We didn’t know what to do. But now that I know it’s you two, I guess it makes sense,” Yoshiki said with a laugh.

“Hmm... psychological warfare, then?” said Sousuke. “Like Hanoi Hannah and Baghdad Betty. I think I finally understand.”

“What are those?”

“A kind of psychological warfare; broadcasts designed to degrade enemy morale. A woman’s voice whispers, ‘you’re all going to die’ or ‘the squad next to yours has been wiped out.’ Every military does something similar. It’s a true battlefield tradition...” Sousuke said, his gaze distant.

“Sounds like a pretty creepy tradition... But Yoshiki-kun, what are you kids doing out here so late? What does your family have to say about this?” Kaname asked.

Akutsu Yoshiki puffed out his chest. “Well, I just don’t tell them! I go to bed and then slip out the window. It’s pretty easy! This place is like our secret fort with Gen-san. Pretty cool, huh?”

“I see,” she replied. “I guess you’re right... that stuff really did freak me out at first. The old woman in the window was enough to scare Mizuki off!”

“Huh?”

“Well, you know,” Kaname continued. “You put that old woman up in the window, right? What’d you use, a mannequin?”

Yoshiki and the other kids shared a glance. “We didn’t do anything with an old woman...”

“But you saw it, right, Sousuke?”

“Yes,” he affirmed, “I was certain of it.”

A sudden quiet tension appeared among the children now.

“Oh, that,” Gen-san said languidly. “Probably the woman who died in the fire ten years ago. She comes out from time to time.”

Now it was the kids’ turn to go pale.

Gen-san looked out the window to watch the children scramble away from the hospital at top speed. He could also see Sousuke, with the passed-out Kaname on his shoulder, briskly exiting the hospital grounds.

Some time later, a door in the back of the room opened and an old woman appeared. “The children are gone now?”

“Yes, Mother. They’re gone,” Gen-san responded. He hadn’t told the children that his mother—the wife of the hospital director who’d killed himself—lived there with him. They’d never come this far into the hospital, either. “That should stop the children from coming around here as well.”

“That would be nice,” she said agreeably.

“Indeed.” The man nodded and poured some plum wine into a cracked teacup. “At last, we’ll have a little peace and quiet...”



When Kaname woke up, she realized she was riding on someone’s shoulder. It was Sousuke, carrying her over his left shoulder while his right hand pushed the bicycle. They were already several blocks from the abandoned hospital, seemingly on the way back to her apartment.

“Geh...”

“You’re awake?” Sousuke asked, his voice not terribly concerned.

“Yeah... I can walk now,” she said groggily. “Let me down.”

“I would advise against walking so soon,” he argued. “The fact that you passed out from that old drifter’s words is a sign that you haven’t yet recovered from the shock of the fall.”

“Seriously, set me down,” insisted Kaname. Being carried around like a sack of potatoes just felt pathetic, yet she still felt a little unsteady as her feet touched the ground. Sousuke helped her sit down on the back seat of the bicycle.

“Hold on,” he said, then mounted the bicycle and started pedaling with her riding pillion behind him.

“Hey, Sousuke...”

“Yes?”

“Were you scared?” she asked.

“Of what?”

“When I fell. And got covered in blood.”

Sousuke didn’t respond. She couldn’t see his face, so she wondered if he was mad... and found herself slightly disappointed at the thought. Maybe he’d seemed frightened just because he was so surprised? Still, she had never seen him so flustered...

Silence hung between them for a while. They were passing a convenience store, and around the time they’d gotten far enough away that the teenagers loitering in the parking lot could no longer hear them, Sousuke said, quietly, “I was.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” he said shortly.

Silence reigned again. Kaname stared into space for some time, and at last took on a slightly pleased, slightly teasing expression. “Hey... I didn’t really hear that.”

“It’s nothing,” he insisted. “Forget I said anything.”

“Aw, c’mon! Seriously, what’d you say? Tell me!” she begged him teasingly, wrapping her arms around his neck and tugging.

“Don’t struggle, Chidori,” Sousuke told her. “You’ll fall. I really didn’t say—”

“Just tell me!” she demanded. “Tell me, or I’ll give you a second dose of fear for the night! Come on! Tell me!”

“Stop it!” he bellowed back, the bicycle carrying the two of them swerving left and right as it sped down the night road.

〈The Patients of Darkness — The End〉

Cat and Kitten R&R

Tessa's day had been very busy.

As a colonel with the top-secret, high-tech mercenary team known as Mithril and commander of an amphibious fighting force, Teletha Testarossa had roughly several hundred people under her command. She always had a million things to do, naturally, but her work that day had been particularly trying. Specifically...

In the morning, she'd had to supervise maintenance on the Tuatha de Danaan (an amphibious assault submarine). Then she'd processed requests and reports from the crew. She'd been irritated to learn that the fire prevention systems in the hangar weren't working as well as expected, disappointed that the variable torque screws were wearing out faster faster than they had been designed for, and angry about requests from the galley to mess with the switchboard so that they could get two more burners on the electric stove.

In the afternoon, she had a satellite meeting with Admiral Borda, head of Mithril's operations division, to consult on various matters. He conferred to her grave news of suspicious movements in the East China Sea, rebuked her for losing too many arm slaves, and harried her yet again to return to his command (a proposal which she yet again declined).

In the evening, she paid visits to various officers to discuss high-level amphibious tactics. When all of the weapons mounted on the Tuatha de Danaan were mobilized, she was informed, they could only really use their full capabilities up to a hundred meters inland. Any further than that could lead to high-risk situations, but the deployment range of the ASes they relied on as their primary battle force would be limited... et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

None of these conversations were particularly enjoyable.

Her busywork continued even after the sun set on Mithril's West Pacific Base, located on Merida Island in the south seas. Meeting with subordinates, discussing, arguing, scrutinizing sea charts and blueprints... then poring over

intelligence division reports, followed by the civilian news, trade journals and her email. She read through quite a few essays, as well. With a lonely air about her, Tessa often meditated on the fact that she was probably the only sixteen-year-old girl in the world immersing herself in topics such as *Fluid Dynamics of Supersonic Aquatic Projectiles: Their Technical Potential*.

And then, after much wrangling, she finally finished up most of her work... around eleven o'clock at night.

This was more or less how Tessa's life usually went. For dinner, she had a sandwich. She could eat quite a lot despite her small size—perhaps due to stress—and only slept four or five hours on average. When she slept, she slept fitfully. It wasn't good for her health, or for her appearance. Fortunately, such treatment had yet to affect her delicate beauty or slender frame, but this was only due to her youth.

The women in her squad frequently teased her, wicked smiles on their faces:

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Colonel. Hee hee hee...”

“It all starts around the waistline. Hee hee hee...”

“Italian women like you, as they age, get it especially bad. Hee hee hee...”

Tessa would argue, on that last point, that middle-aged Italian women generally put on weight due to their participation in high-calorie food cultures. Besides, there was more Swiss-Austrian blood in her family line anyway... Her gray eyes and ash blonde hair were proof of that.

And yet, when she thought of the full-figured frame of her grandmother, who had died when she was little, Tessa couldn't help but perceive their teasing as an apocalyptic prophecy.

But all that aside...

Tessa was understandably exhausted. She walked listlessly down the darkened underground corridor, bought a shiruko drink at one of the vending machines, then got a ride in a base security jeep to the officers' living quarters.

Her own residence was a dainty little two-bedroom apartment with its own kitchen, a high ceiling, and a lot of space to stretch out in. It even got plenty of

natural light during the day, thanks to windows that reached the surface. It was one of the best rooms in the base.

When Tessa had first arrived at the Merida Island base, she'd insisted that she wouldn't do anything here but sleep, and that she'd be fine with more basic amenities. But her second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas—and the rest of the top brass—forced her to take it anyway, claiming that it was a matter of appearances. Nevertheless, she didn't like the residence much. It made her especially uncomfortable when she thought about how the barracks for the enlisted men still leaked every time it rained, no matter how many times they tried to fix it.

Tessa sighed, loosened her necktie and entered the living room. She was surprised to find the TV already on, playing the CBS documentary program, *48 Hours*. She looked around curiously, and only then did she see the woman in combat dress lying on the sofa. She was lazing about, a can of Budweiser in her hand.

This was Master Sergeant Melissa Mao of the ground team.

As a woman with an active and sporty image, Mao was almost the polar opposite of Tessa. She was Chinese-American and in her mid-twenties, with very short black hair and large, slightly almond-shaped eyes. She was part of the battle group's elite forces—the Special Response Team—and one of their top AS operators.

Tessa looked down at her and said, "You're here?"

"Hey," Mao replied casually. "Welcome home."

They weren't roommates, of course, but Mao's presence in Tessa's residence was hardly unusual. Mao had a spare key and frequently let herself in to take advantage of Tessa's apartment amenities. It was also true that despite being almost ten years apart in age, Mao was Tessa's friend, and they frequently got together to discuss their troubles.

"Thanks," said Tessa. "I thought it smelled like cigarettes in here..."

"Huh? The fan's running," Mao responded carelessly, without even a glance back.

When others were watching, they maintained the formality of their ranks. But in private, this was how they typically interacted. They shared an implicit sense of trust, as well as a mutual distaste for the insensitivity of the men in the battle group. They liked to discuss matters of romance together, or pore excitedly over a mail order catalog; more or less, the behavior of close friends.

But today, Tessa was especially tired. As she sat down heavily on the sofa across from her with a scowl, she yanked at the tab on her shiruko drink. "Even so, I wish you would consider the fact that Auntie Gloria might notice and talk."

"Who's Auntie Gloria?" Mao asked.

"The cook's wife. She comes around to clean once a week, remember?"

"Oh, that old gossip."

"Yes. Auntie Gloria, the rumormonger, will tell everybody that she came to clean my room and found it filled with empty beer cans and menthol cigarette butts," Tessa said tartly. "What do you think will happen then, Melissa?"

"How should I know?" the other woman responded lazily.

Tessa looked down, a vein on her forehead throbbing. "They'll spread rumors that I've cracked from the pressure and turned to underage drinking and smoking! Silent yet deep, the rumors will spread! Yesterday, when Colonel Mardukas came to my office, he all but told me to 'drop my unhealthy habits'!"

"Aha."

"I'll admit, I *do* have a bit of a caffeine dependency, but that's all," Tessa insisted. "I can't stand the idea of everyone thinking I'm drinking and smoking like some common *prostitute*!" It was, of course, simply a turn of phrase... but perhaps her day's frustration was catching up with her, because she'd said it more pointedly than she'd meant to.

"Excuse me? Are you talking about me?" A wrinkle appeared on Mao's forehead as she favored Tessa with a glance for the first time.

"Who else could I be talking about?"

"Huh... Well, well. I guess to the great Lady Testarossa, any girl who drinks and smokes is a *whore*?" Mao sneered.

The sudden use of profanity caused the blood to rise to Tessa's head. But her voice itself was icy when she spoke at last. "Could you please refrain from the use of such language? You sound like a hoodlum in a gang movie."

"Are you kidding me? You're the one who's basically a gang leader."

This turn of phrase also struck a nerve with Tessa. She slammed her shiruko drink down on the table. "How dare you," she hissed. "I work hard every day so that people *don't* think that about us. And having grunts like you acting *this* way puts all my hard work to waste!"

"Grunts. Grunts?! Okay, that one I won't take!" Mao was getting visibly angry too, now. She tossed her beer can aside and snapped up from her supine position on the sofa.

Tessa glared back at her. "Well, isn't that what you are? It's an appropriate word for someone as irresponsible as you! Just accept it!"

"Pull your head out of your ass!" Mao volleyed back. "You're just a little girl playing officer!"

"How dare you! You don't know *anything* about the work I do!"

"I think I can sum it up! You sit at the bottom of the sea, dishing out orders from your hidey-hole!"

"What an utterly ignorant thing to say!" Tessa spluttered. "But it's understandable—a musclehead marine like you could *never* comprehend the responsibilities my position entails!"

The conversation had devolved into a competition of increasingly cheap shots. It didn't even matter who had started it; at this point, they were both squarely focused on hitting below the belt as hard as they could. And since they were the only two people in the room, there was no third party available to step in and turn down the temperature.

As the mutual abuse reached its fever pitch, both women stood up.

"Disgusting!" scoffed Tessa. "Can't you say anything that *isn't* vulgar?!"

"Oh, shut up!" Mao retorted. "Why don't you put yourself in the line of fire for once?!"

“Sheltered by the cutting-edge specs of the M9, you think you’re some brave hero?! I think *you’re* the one under a grave misapprehension!”

“You’ve never even piloted an AS before, so how would you know?!”

“I could if I wanted to! I simply haven’t done it yet!”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes! And I’m sure I could do it much better than a gut-reliant barbarian like you!” Tessa exclaimed. “Frankly, I doubt you’re even using the M9 to its fullest! I can’t tell you how many times I’ve watched you in action, irritated by your incompetence!”

“You... little brat...” With a vein throbbing in her forehead, Mao looked like she might jump on Tessa at any moment. “Prove it, then,” she hissed.

Tessa froze up. “P-Prove what?”

“Your skill with an AS. You talk pretty big, so you must be better than me, right? Why don’t we have a little skirmish on the practice grounds? If I lose, you can say anything you want about me. And I’ll do anything you tell me. You can say ‘kill yourself,’ and I will. You can tell me to grovel, and I will.”

“You...”

“But if you lose... I’m gonna make you do a lap around the whole base, naked! How’s that? Nah, I’m not a monster... I’ll let you keep your underwear on! Since you’re gonna lose anyway. Heh heh.” With that, Mao grinned brightly. It was a triumphant smile, the smile of ‘checkmate.’ Her expression radiated complete and total confidence that her request would force Tessa to back off.

What now, girl? Have you found a way out? That’ll teach you to tread on someone else’s territory. Stick your neck out too far and it gets slapped back in. Get it? Mao didn’t say the words out loud, but they must have gotten through nevertheless... because Tessa answered reflexively.

“Very well,” she said crisply. “I accept your terms.”

“...Wuh?”

“I’ll partake in your AS battle and feed you a dose of well-deserved humble pie,” Tessa clarified. “But if you lose, *you’ll* be the one doing a naked lap around

the base!”

“Are you stupid?” Mao asked incredulously. “You can’t actually—”

“I’ll prove that you’re nothing special and make you the base laughingstock! Wait and see!”

“You...”

“The match will be in three days’ time! I’ll send the details soon! Now, remove yourself!” said Tessa, pointing to the door.

Mao just stood there silently for a moment, then she snorted and strode out. Tessa heard the door slam closed, and then the room fell quiet after. Then, suddenly, she realized that Mao had left something next to the sofa: Lancôme foundation.

I completely forgot... a week ago, I asked Mao to teach me how to use it. She must have come here tonight to show me... even though she was likely also exhausted from working overtime...

Tessa shook her head.

No... it doesn’t matter what she came here for. She’s made it very clear that she has no respect for my position. She’s self-righteous, egotistical, and condescending. And she clearly thinks I’m stupid—just some naive, spoiled little girl! She’s insensitive and cruel!

“I hate you, Melissa!” Tessa hissed, still fuming. It wasn’t until much later that she remembered that the terms of her challenge—the ability to control an arm slave—was far from being a trivial task.

“It’s your fault,” Sagara Sousuke and Kurz Weber said in unison as they pointed at Mao.

It was morning in the base’s mess hall. Mao sat across from her two colleagues, poking at her bacon and eggs. “H-Hey, don’t gang up on me,” she said, her fork pausing midair when faced with their mutual accusation. Kurz had noticed that something was wrong and refused to stop asking about it. In the end, she’d hesitantly revealed what had happened with Tessa the night before

—and this, in turn, was their response.

Sousuke cut off a slice of a bright red tomato with his combat knife. “If an officer says something, you should agree with them. That’s the duty of the NCO.”

“Geh...”

Meanwhile, Kurz was shoveling ground soybean natto onto his piping hot rice. “Ignore this blockhead. Point is, you’re older, and that matters. Quit acting like a dumb kid,” Kurz said dismissively, then began wolfing down his meal. He was a handsome man with blonde hair and blue eyes, but when he ate like this, he looked like some foreign actor on a Japanese variety show. “C’mon, y’know... mm, isshogood... Tessa’s busy... homgh nomgh... She was probably just tired, right? Poor girl... omfgh mfgh...”

“I was tired, too,” Mao pointed out. “I was up all night writing reports.”

“Ha ha ha. You only end up working overtime like that because you suck at writing reports,” Kurz said with a smug expression on his face.

Mao suddenly leaped to her feet, leaned over the table, and put her hands around his neck.

“Geck!” he choked out.

“I have to work overtime because *you’re* always destroying things, failing to correctly calculate the ammo you’ve used, and writing crappy reports about it!” Mao bellowed. “Hear me?!”

“C-Can’t breathe... Stop...” Kurz begged, eyes bugging out as she throttled him.

Beside him, Sousuke quietly chewed on his tomato. “Well, Mao? Are you going to go through with the fight?”

“Huh? Um, well...” Mao, shoulders heaving, finally removed her hands from Kurz’s neck. “She sent me an email this morning... Here’s what it says.” Mao pulled a handheld notebook-style portable terminal from her breast pocket, turned it on and showed it to Sousuke. The LCD screen displayed a message from Tessa.

Dear Melissa Mao:

Pursuant to our discussion last night, please come to 'Twin Rock' in sector B5 on the 1st practice grounds at 1800 hours on the 21st. You may bring an M9 (E-006) with any of the following:

▼GDC-B Assault Rifle

▼Boxer Shotcannon

▼ASG96-b Smoothbore

The funds for the above, paint rounds, a training ATD, and a training cutter have already been allotted.

Teletha Testarossa.

PS: Don't chicken out.

It wasn't an official order. It was just a personal message. She'd probably paid for the rounds out of her own pocket, too. But that extremely precise manner of writing, followed by that biting post-script...

"Yikes, she's all-in on this. Scary," Kurz said, having recovered enough to peer at the terminal.

"The colonel, acting that way..." Even Sousuke couldn't help feeling a chill as he read the email. It was that same little chill that Chidori Kaname gave him, the chill of the opposite sex. A woman didn't need shouting or violence to make a man tremble. He handed back the terminal, feeling cold sweat rise on his temples. "Are you going to accept?"

"Of course I am. She's not gonna get away with this. Heh... heh heh... heh..." said Mao, her face contorting awkwardly. She was clearly going for a cocky smile, but the rising fury inside her was making that difficult to accomplish... although the resulting expression was terrifying enough in its own right.

"My understanding was that the colonel had no AS piloting experience," Sousuke pointed out.

"Yeah. She doesn't," Mao said.

“Mithril’s M9s are designed for specialists. It may be disrespectful to say so, but I don’t believe an ordinary person could use one easily.”

“Yeah. And she’s clumsy at the best of times, to boot.”

“It sounds like it won’t even be a contest, then.”

“That’s right,” Mao agreed. “It won’t even be a contest.”

Sousuke was right. Even if Tessa did manage to get the AS moving, Mao’s advantage was undeniable; she would outstrip Tessa by an order of magnitude, at least. Even your average military AS pilot would struggle against her.

This was a matter of more than just animal instinct and talent. Mao knew most machines’ attributes, their strengths and weaknesses. She held a master’s degree in engineering and knew AS systems and tactics like the back of her hand. She even had the know-how to participate in AS design and development projects—Mithril’s new cutting-edge M9s had actually incorporated a number of Mao’s ideas. With all that plus a wealth of battlefield experience, she was the kind of resource any manufacturer would love to have on staff.

Tessa was quite knowledgeable about ASes as well, but actually piloting one was a different story. Frankly, there was zero chance of Tessa beating Mao.

“Cut it out,” said Kurz. “The poor girl...”

“He’s right,” Sousuke agreed. “It’s a waste of time.”

“I can’t do that,” Mao told them. “I’m gonna make her regret this. I’m gonna push her around until she’s weeping and begging for forgiveness. Mwa ha ha...” A sadistic sort of joy radiated from Mao as she imagined the scene. Some truly unenlightened thoughts seemed to be running wild in her mind.

Sousuke and Kurz both grimaced.

“You appear to be enjoying this...”

“Total sadist. Seriously, you’re acting like a kid.”

“Yeah, well, so is she. She’s a child, after all,” Mao boasted breezily.

Just then...

“Who are you calling a child?” asked a quiet voice.

The three turned to see Tessa standing there. She was dressed in her usual khaki-colored uniform, with a laptop and file case tucked under her arm. She looked like her usual put-together self, but there were large bags under her eyes. She must not have been getting much sleep lately.

“Well, well. If it isn’t the colonel,” Mao said blankly.

Kurz and Sousuke were both frozen for a moment, but eventually waved to and saluted Tessa respectively, then turned awkwardly back to their breakfasts.

“You gotta go with that California-grown natto,” Kurz said to Sousuke.

“I wonder what makes tomatoes red?” Sousuke mused in reply.

Meanwhile, Mao and Tessa just glared at each other. Seeming to catch on to the frosty air around them, the other men in the mess hall had gone quiet. The only remaining sound was that of crackling sparks between them.

It was Tessa who broke the silence first. “I’m sure you’re thinking you’ll beat me easily.”

“Well, yeah. I probably will.”

“You will *not*. But get your hopes up all you want.”

“Hmph. A bigger question is that naked lap around the base... Are you really gonna go through with it?” Mao taunted.

“I certainly would. I fully expect *you* to do it, after all.”

“Grr...”

Tessa cut the conversation short and turned her eyes to Sousuke. “Sergeant Sagara?”

“Ma’am?” Sousuke snapped to his feet, his back going ramrod straight. His face was pale, and he wondered if he’d done something to upset her.

“I need to speak with you. Come along a moment.” With that, Tessa marched out of the mess hall.

Once they’d reached an empty corridor some distance away, Sousuke spoke up, timidly. “Colonel. How can I help you?”

She was trembling slightly. *Is she angry?* he wondered. *That would be understandable, but I really didn't have anything to do with—*

"I have a favor to ask you," Tessa said, her back to him.

"Oh? A... favor?"

"Yes. It's something only you can do. I know it's mixing personal and squad business, but... please don't hold it against me."

"I won't," he promised. "I'll do anything I can."

Tessa turned back around and met Sousuke's gaze. Her tired gray eyes trembled behind tears. "Do you mean it?"

"Affirmative. Ask me anything."

"Thank you. That makes me... very happy."

"I'm sure... anyone would do the same," Sousuke said, but he did feel strangely tense. He thought, *It must be something extremely serious...*

What should he do if Tessa asked him to kill Mao, or at least cripple her for life? Should he refuse? Should he claim he'd killed her while secretly smuggling her to South America? If so, he'd have to find a corpse that matched Mao's frame sufficiently. He could stage an explosion, swap the body with hers, then prepare escape routes and forge plane tickets...

It's going to be a big job, Sousuke realized. He'd had plans to fly back this afternoon and watch a movie with Kaname, Kyoko, and their friends. But he wouldn't have any time for that now!

"Sagara-san?" Tessa scowled at him.

Sousuke was wearing his usual sullen expression, but he was now white as a sheet, sweat dripping down his face. "Er?"

"What's the matter? You're looking rather ill..."

"No... I, er... You want me to kill her?"

"Where in the world did that come from?" asked Tessa, slumping over and letting out a deep sigh.

Sousuke felt relieved, yet slightly flustered. "What is it, then?"

“Well... I was hoping you could train me.”

“What?” Sousuke echoed.

Tessa clenched her fists. “Teach me how to control an AS. You’re just as skilled as she is, aren’t you? I want you to make me strong enough to beat her!”

Sousuke just stood there, stunned. *A big job, indeed...*

That afternoon, Major Andrey Kalinin, ground commander for the Tuatha de Danaan, stopped by Tessa’s office with his usual stack of documents.

“Excuse me, Major,” said Tessa’s secretary, Second Lieutenant Jacqueline Villain. She was a tall woman with short blonde hair and a tan. “I let everyone with appointments know, but Colonel Testarossa won’t be taking afternoon appointments for the next three days, until the twenty-first. So, she’s not in right now.”

Kalinin frowned slightly. “Just afternoon appointments? Why is that?”

“She didn’t tell me, but she did seem rather tired.”

“Hmm...” Kalinin wondered if Tessa was using some of her built-up leave time. In truth, she really was working too hard. There were far too many things in this squadron that only she could decide. She was the kind of indispensable resource for whom the term ‘excellent’ barely scratched the surface, and he frequently thought that the squad really had to start taking better care of her. Especially since repairs and maintenance on the de Danaan would be finished a week from now and they’d be heading out into the ocean for some time...

“That’s fine,” he said. “Does Colonel Mardukas know about this?”

“He should, but...”

“Glad to hear it.” Kalinin walked out, heading for Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas’s office, which was just a little ways away. First, there were the rumors of her taking up drinking recently, and now this strange request for leave... There were a few things he would have to confirm.

“Hmm... ah, I’m sorry. Yes. An urgent... No, it’s not particularly dangerous. But

please, go on with Tokiwa and Onodera. Tomorrow? No, I won't be back for a while... The situation is still unfolding. Yes, please do. Goodbye." Sousuke hung up the satellite phone and let out a big sigh.

He was standing on the sandy beach on Merida Island's east side. Towering palm trees, an infinite horizon, an endlessly blue sky, and the pleasant crashing of the waves... It was a scene right out of a travel agency's pamphlet.

There was an arm slave sitting nearby on the beach. It was an M9 Gernsback, a cutting-edge humanoid weapon in Mithril's arsenal. Its body was gray and possessed a slender, agile silhouette made up of a combination of complex curves. Its head looked like a fighter pilot wearing a helmet.

Sousuke was standing next to the M9, hands on his hips and eyes downcast. Then, as if to snap himself out of it, he nodded several times. "Shall we begin?" he asked, looking back grudgingly to where Tessa was doing warm-up exercises on the sand.

She was dressed in activewear: a baggy T-shirt and black hot pants, with never-before-worn Nike sneakers and ash blonde hair tied up neatly. She looked less like she was about to pilot an AS and more like she was about to play basketball... but as there were no operator's uniforms in her size, this would have to do.

"Yes. I await your instruction, Coach!" Tessa said in a surprisingly forceful tone. She'd seemed in far better spirits since leaving the base with Sousuke. It was as if all of the exhaustion of the office had blown away.

"Er, Colonel," said Sousuke, "I'm not sure about the title of 'Coach'..."

"But you are my coach," she pointed out. "I could call you Sagara-san if you prefer."

"I would appreciate that," he said hesitantly.

"All right. Sagara-san!" said Tessa with a grin.

Sousuke felt nervous in a way he found hard to describe. What if something went wrong and she got hurt somehow? And he'd had to cancel his plans with Kaname...

“Yeah, whatever. Work is work, right? Ha ha ha. Mega-ha,” she’d said... but he couldn’t help but feel that Kaname had been offended.

What have I done? Sousuke wondered. It was his usual thought whenever Tessa dragged him into something ridiculous. He didn’t dislike her by any means. In fact, he cared about her a great deal—in a different way than he did for Kaname—and he was honored that Tessa had come to him for help. It was just that she always acted so uninhibited around Sousuke, and he never quite knew how to feel about that...

No, don’t think about it, he told himself. Get to training.

Shaking off his concerns, Sousuke cleared his throat. “First, how to board.” Sousuke slapped the M9’s armor. “As I’m sure you know, the M9’s cockpit hatch is where it is in most ASes: at the top of the chest, behind the head. It’s designed that way so that the pilot can easily escape if they fall over and become immobilized. It’s a significant distance to the ground, so be careful when boarding. Even in storage posture, the head is four meters up—the height of a building’s second story. So please be—”

“Yes, I’m aware of all that. I hear that the US Armed Forces have thirty falling accidents a year. Fortunately, no casualties yet,” Tessa added with an almost smug air about her.

Sousuke found himself a bit intimidated by her knowledge. He had never heard any of that.

The M9 was currently in a rather silly posture, seated on its knees with its arms drooping limply at its sides, but this was the posture in which the AS was generally stored while in a hangar: They were too unstable when standing, and lying down, they took up too much space. Seeing ASes lined up in this posture in the hangar, they looked like judo students receiving a lecture from their teacher. It really was a bit pathetic.

“There’s a lever for the lift device on the ankle,” he instructed. “Give it a pull.”

“Right.” Tessa did as she was told. There was a thick lever hidden underneath the armor, around the place a cuff would be on a human pant leg. She removed the safety and pulled the lever, then heard a release of pressurized air from above as a rope ladder made from black polymer resin rolled down the AS’s

back.

“A veteran can climb without the rope, but I wouldn’t recommend that for you,” Sousuke said. “Go on. Climb up.”

“Right.” Tessa slowly began to mount the ladder dangling from the machine’s back. “Here we... go. Th-This is really... quite difficult, isn’t it?” The rope ladder swayed back and forth with her weight. With great effort, Tessa climbed it rung by rung until she reached roughly the machine’s waist level. “Eek...” Then she put one foot wrong and fell, tumbling head-over-heels.

Whump! Sousuke caught her, but her momentum sent him tumbling to the ground. Doing this training on the sandy beach had been the right call. “Were you injured, Colonel?” he asked gallantly, even as he was crushed beneath her weight.

“I... I’m fine, of course,” she said. “I’m sorry.” They lay on the sand in a tangle, alone on that beach, wrapped in each other’s arms. It seemed to take Tessa a moment to realize this, and when she did, her cheeks turned slightly pink. “In fact... I feel like I’m a little better off for it,” she said rapturously, and didn’t try to move away.

Sousuke could feel the soft sensation of her body, its faint warmth, and the mild smell of sweat. *Oh, no*, he thought. *This is... This is very bad...* Sousuke was filled with an indescribable sensation and a surging sense of guilt. He froze up like a rock, uncertain what to do.



Tessa's training continued to be a headache for Sousuke. Tessa just couldn't seem to make it to the hatch and, worried that she might really hurt herself eventually, Sousuke was forced to board the M9 himself and move it into a fully face-down posture. From that position, she could reach the hatch without the rope ladder.

Once she was inside, the booting up of the generator, vetronics, and sensors all went smoothly. This part, she seemed to be an expert on. It was truly impressive.

But it was then that the real challenge began.

After Tessa got the M9 standing through an automatic process, they began to practice the most basic of maneuvers: walking. It sounded like a simple act, but it was in fact fairly tricky.

For a bit of technical background... the word 'arm slave' was short for 'Armored Mobile Master/Slave System.' As the name suggested, the machine employed the master/slave system popular in robotics, in which the slave (the machine) mirrored the movements of its master (the operator). But since an environment that would let the operator move their arms freely would require more space than an efficiently scaled weapon could afford, the AS actually used an altered version of the system known as 'semi-master/slave.'

The cockpit was cramped, with just enough room to hold a single person. The operator sat snugly in that space, performing just the slightest movement that they wanted their machine to imitate. If they wanted its elbow to bend ninety degrees, for instance, the operator would bend theirs twenty to thirty; the machine would mirror the operator's movements in exaggerated form. The internal computer did a degree of interpretation and averaging out in order to keep the movement smooth, and in fact, the computer's ability to manage this 'smoothing out' was a huge factor in judging a machine's overall capabilities.

In other words, the smallest movement from the operator could result in huge, dramatic movements from the machine. What would that mean with a clumsy and awkward girl at the controls?

"Now... try taking your first step," Sousuke said over his small FM transceiver.

“Right. Here I come.” Tessa, now on board, spoke through the external speakers as she did as she was told. She’d probably intended to just take a tiny step, but perhaps she’d gotten carried away... One way or another, she ended up trying to take a normal step. This motion, in turn, was replicated loyally—with greatly exaggerated power—by the cutting-edge M9. Its highly flexible leg tore upwards, planting a hard knee-strike into its own chest.

“Eek?!”

In a series of moves impossible for a human to replicate, the M9 completely lost its balance, spun through the air and landed on its back. Its massive body kicked up huge piles of sand on impact.

“Colonel?!” Sousuke cried in concern.

“Geh... ack, hkk!” Tessa coughed and choked from the impact of the collapse—but these movements, too, were enhanced by the M9. Each tiny flex of her back caused it to shoot several meters into the air, which in turn confused Tessa even more, causing her to flail with her arms and legs... movements which the M9, once again, enhanced significantly.

Tessa panicked, and the M9 panicked worse; it was a vicious cycle. Like a fish thrown onto land, the gray machine flopped about, looking utterly absurd. It rolled around on the beach, knocking over palm trees, stirring up a sandstorm, and splashing into the ocean... but even this didn’t stop it from continuing to thrash around, kicking up sea spray.

It was far too dangerous for him to approach. Sousuke could only shout over the radio. “Colonel! Stop moving! Colonel!”

“H-Help me!” Tessa wailed.

“Lie still! Don’t move!”

“I can’t! It won’t stop!”

“Colonel!”

And that more or less covered their first day of training.

In the base’s one and only pub, Darza, at the SRT’s assigned seats—in other

words, the counter—sat Mao, who was nursing her beer. She was already on her fifth pint. She really could have switched to something else by now, but she'd just kept drinking beer.

She had a superstition that bad things happened when she tried drinking something else. When she'd gotten the news that the aunt who'd cared for her while growing up had been in an accident, she'd been drinking wine. When her Japanese-American marine boyfriend had broken up with her, she'd been drinking bourbon. When she'd been drinking a frozen daiquiri, a drunkard had thrown a Bloody Mary on her and ruined her favorite evening dress. And there was more where that came from. Several things she didn't want to remember, too. Beer alone was safe. Yes, beer alone...

And yet, even that line of defense was beginning to break down. She'd definitely been drinking beer in Tessa's room the other night. *What can I drink from now on?* she wondered. But as wondering wouldn't solve the problem, she simply ordered her sixth pint.

"Again? Order something else already," the bartender rasped at her sourly.

"S'okay. Old man. Pour s'more."

"Fool," scoffed the bartender. "Don't call me old man; I'm still young. I could even give a young filly like you a night to—"

"F'gettaboutit. Just givvit up, sweet old man. Burp."

"Hah. Pity's sake..." The bartender slammed a foamy tankard on the bar. His body language was that of a surly cat's owner, plopping down its dinner for the night.

Undeterred, Mao started in on her sixth beer, just as Kurz arrived and sat down next to her. "Wow, someone's been drinking," he remarked. "I can smell it from here. Nice one, Big Sis."

"What'shyer problem?" Mao asked, her large almond-shaped eyes glazed over with drunkenness.

Kurz ordered his usual from the bartender before leaning in to speak to Mao. "Looks like she's practicing hard."

“Who is? At what?”

“Tessa,” he specified, “at AS stuff.”

“She’s stupid. Poor Sousuke,” Mao whispered indifferently.

Kurz winced in reply. “You’re the stupid one here. You know you forced Tessa into this, right?”

“How come?”

“She’s basically lived her whole life having to prove she can do things when someone tells her she can’t,” he pointed out. “Then you up and tell her she can’t pilot an AS? You’re the stupid one, Big Sis.”

Mao was incensed by his smug expression. “Look, I know a lot about that girl. I know her favorite snack, her most hated bug, and her bra size,” she boasted. “But in all I know about her, the one thing I never liked is how she gets way too stubborn about things for her own damn good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. She’s got this stupid martyr complex. She’s convinced she alone can change the world! And that includes me... She wants to control me. Like I said, she’s a child.”

“How did you act when you were her age?” Kurz inquired.

Here, Mao sank into thought. She’d had a wild side growing up in New York, but she’d thought of herself as being a ‘good’ delinquent: didn’t touch drugs, loyal to her friends, protected the weak—all that good stuff. Was she convinced, back then, that she could change the world? Did she care about anything as much as that girl did? To the first question, the answer was yes. To the second... it was no.

“Actually, I think I was probably way stupider than her,” she admitted honestly.

For some reason, Kurz cackled.

“What?”

“Wow,” he said. “Is that how you really feel?”

Mao didn't get angry, but just slumped over the counter instead. "Yeah. Guess so. I just can't help but feel like she's better than me."

It was the second day of training. Tessa had just gotten the M9 to the point where she could walk it around successfully. She'd switched her control mode to semi-automatic, then set the bilateral angle—the degree to which the machine amplified the pilot's movements—to its most generous setting.

There were countless footprints on the white sandy beach. The M9 tottered along like an old man who'd lost his walking stick, following its predetermined course back and forth, back and forth. At times it wobbled, but caught itself firmly. Given the disaster of the first day, it was impressive progress.

"Let's take a short break," Sousuke said in the tone of an instructor, glancing at his watch.

"Yes, sir. Here we... go..." The M9 got down on its knees with some effort, then placed its hands on the ground and lay down awkwardly. The chest and head slid together, revealing the cockpit hatch.

"Whew..." Sousuke offered his hand to Tessa, who slid out of the cockpit, covered in sweat. She was unsteady on her feet and on the verge of falling, but he supported her.

"Thanks," she said. "It feels almost strange to walk on my own legs again..."

"It will feel that way for a while."

"My reading told me that most falling accidents happen after boarding, rather than before. I think I understand why, now..." Tessa giggled to herself. She looked extremely tired and vaguely nauseated, but also rather satisfied with the progress she'd made.

But... There was still no way that Tessa could beat Mao. Walking alone wasn't enough. At this rate, he could probably get her good enough to run... but what was the point? Aiming, jumping, evasive maneuvers, effective usage of obstacles... There were so many things about combat that she had yet to learn. After coming this far with Tessa, Sousuke wanted to do everything he could to help her win. But the reality was all too clear.

Tessa spoke, as if reading his mind. “You’re thinking I can’t win too, aren’t you?”

“What? I—”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to pretend.” Despite her words, Tessa didn’t sound particularly upset. “But I’m not stupid, either, and I know the basics of combat. I’m not challenging her with a spirit of noble self-sacrifice.”

“You intend to win, then?” Sousuke asked.

“Yes,” Tessa said easily. “I’ve been thinking up plans for these past two days. Part of why I asked you to be my coach was to get your opinion.”

With that, Tessa walked up to the bag she’d set nearby, pulled a piece of paper from it and opened it on the sand. It was a detailed map of Merida Island. There were marks here and there written in red pen, mainly in the first practice grounds and the B5 area.

“You see?” she said. “The wilderness is very thick here, with poor visibility. And the ground is very soft...” Tessa explained her thinking to Sousuke, point by point. She indicated places on the map as she talked, showed him pictures from the site, and fluently laid out her plan.

Sousuke was genuinely shocked. It wasn’t a particularly novel plan; a fairly standard bait-and-ambush, in fact. It was about the best plan a novice like Tessa could hope for. But the fact remained that Sousuke’s own ideas about Tessa’s best shot were a perfect match for what Tessa was saying now... and Sousuke was a professional AS combatant. The fact that she could match him that easily...

She really is something, he thought. There was a reason she was the battle commander of the Tuatha de Danaan. “It’s a fine idea,” he said.

“Do you think so? That’s good. It was worth all the hard work I put into it, then.”

“If that’s your plan, I would recommend plotting your route this way,” he advised her. “Given the time of day, it will give you backlighting.”

“I see...”

“But one way or another, you’ll only get one chance.”

“I’m happy just to have the one chance,” she admitted, her shoulders slumping. “If I try it and fail, I’ll give up.” Tessa seemed refreshed now, like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. During these two days of training, her anger and resentment towards Mao seemed to have vanished. She’d brought Mao’s name up several times over the course of their strategy discussions, but she no longer spoke the name with venom. If anything, she spoke it with fondness. “I’m going to give Melissa a real shock,” she said, folding up the map.

“A shock?”

“Yes. As long as I can do that, I can easily handle a naked lap around the base. I mean it.” Her pretty face lit up with a smile.

A low, rocky mountain stood painted in the colors of twilight; at its summit was a strangely shaped rock. The rock was large and top-heavy, about half as tall as an AS, and supported by a slightly smaller rock. The two rocks stood at the open tip of the mountain, and they were frequently used as a landmark for those utilizing the training grounds. They called it ‘Twin Rock’ for reference.

An M9 was crouched in front of Twin Rock: this was Mao’s machine. It carried a 40mm rifle loaded with paint rounds and nothing else. Not even a spare magazine. This was all she’d felt she needed. Mao herself leaned silently against the rock, dressed in her black operator’s uniform, arms folded. She glanced at her watch: 1831 hours. It was over thirty minutes past their agreed-upon meeting time.

“She’s late,” she whispered in annoyance.

Kurz, sitting beside her with his chin in his hands, let out a small sigh. He knew it was none of his business, but he’d come to watch in the spirit of curiosity. “Y’know...”

“What?”

“You ever read about Miyamoto Musashi, Big Sis?”

“What’s that? A battleship?”

“Ah... Never mind. Don’t worry about it,” Kurz said with a chuckle.

Not long after, a new AS appeared. It couldn’t be seen through the thick brush, but its footsteps could certainly be heard. The revving of a drive system echoed out, and the faint growl of a gas turbine engine approached.

Mao blinked in confusion. *A gas turbine engine? Doesn’t the M9 use a nearly silent palladium reactor? Can it be...*

An AS appeared out of the tall underbrush. It had a slightly squat body, like a man in a life jacket, with thick, sturdy biceps and thighs. The head was long and narrow, giving an insectoid impression. Tessa was standing on its arm, suggesting that it must be Sousuke in the pilot’s seat.

“Huh. An M6?” Kurz whispered.

The AS that had arrived was an M6 Bushnell, a machine from the previous generation to the M9. The model was still used in front-line combat for any number of militaries, but its agility, stealth, and power were all inferior to the M9’s.

Regardless, Mao nodded. “I see... Well, that makes sense.”

The M6 was the M9’s inferior in most respects, but it had a few things going for it. One was that it was easier to pilot than the M9. If Tessa couldn’t make use of the M9’s superior specs anyway, she might as well swap over to this ‘best seller’ machine... and had likely done so on Sousuke’s recommendation.

The M6 stopped and went down on one knee. Tessa, in her activewear, hopped down.

“You’re late,” Mao said.

Tessa smiled slightly. “I’m sorry. I was hungry, so I had a light lunch.”

Mao said nothing. It was obvious to her that Tessa was trying to provoke her, yet she couldn’t quite staunch her irritation nonetheless. It was a nasty thing to do while acting so innocent. *Or, she thought, maybe it was Sousuke’s idea?*

Tessa seemed very calm. There was none of the anger, irritation or impatience she’d displayed at the start of their fight, just a strong determination of some sort in her eyes. They certainly weren’t the eyes of

someone about to ask to call the match off.

Does she actually think she can beat me? Mao wondered suspiciously.

“All right, let’s begin. How about we get 800 yards away, then say, ‘ready, start’? Sagara-san will be the judge.”

“Fine by me,” Mao agreed. Sousuke would probably be impartial; Kurz, much less so.

“Very well,” said Tessa. “Do you agree to that, Sagara-san?”

Sousuke disembarked from the M6 and then nodded.

“Then let’s get ready,” Tessa said, turning to her M6. Then she stopped a moment. “Melissa?”

“What?”

“No mercy, all right?”

“That’s the plan.” In fact, Mao intended to end this ASAP and then book it back to base. She had no intention of letting Tessa win, but wasn’t particularly enthused about the fight, either. *It’s all so stupid*, she thought. *Fighting a newcomer in a damned M6... What’s there to get excited about? How’d we end up in this lousy situation?*

Sousuke pointed a revolver in the air and fired. The gunshot echoed through the practice grounds, serving as a declaration of open hostilities.

“All right...” said Mao, her M9 taking immediate action.

Tessa’s machine, a bit less than a kilometer away, was no longer in sight, blocked from Mao’s view by the rocky mountain. But Mao jumped her machine two or three times, taking her through the thick jungle trees fast enough that she could soon see the stumbling M6 in the darkness.

《11 o’clock, distance 6. Target sighted. One AS. Designate target Alpha-1.》
The M9’s AI gave a simple report. Mao didn’t exactly need the info under these circumstances, but in a real battle—particularly when things got chaotic—such voice messages could prove surprisingly useful. The M6 didn’t even have this function; sophisticated talking AI systems were only available on Mithril’s M9s

and combat helicopters.

She was 620 meters away, more than close enough for a 40mm rifle to hit. Mao manipulated her machine skillfully, kneeling it down on the summit of the rocky mountain and pointing its rifle at Tessa. The stumbling M6 was a sitting duck. “All right,” Mao decided, “one should do it.” She let out one shot on her semi-automatic setting.

The paintball flew at the M6... and broke apart on a tree separating them. Red drops of paint splattered the shoulder of Tessa’s machine. But...

“That’s a miss,” said Sousuke’s voice over the radio. He was standing on top of Twin Rock, watching Tessa’s machine through his binoculars.

“Huh?” Mao asked incredulously. “How come?”

“It wasn’t a direct hit,” he reminded her. “You hit the tree in front of her.”

“What in the world? If that had been a live round, it would’ve blown through the tree and hit her dead-on!”

“But it wasn’t a live round. It was a paint round.”

Mao couldn’t exactly argue with that. The logic of ‘pretend it’s a real battle’ wouldn’t hold water when Tessa was already in an M6. The situation was as far from reality as anyone could get.

“Ah... dammit!” Clicking her tongue in annoyance, Mao fired three more paintballs at Tessa’s machine. But the jungle around the M6 was thick, and it was hard to land a direct hit with paintballs through all the branches and leaves. Tessa’s M6, seemingly herded by the mist of red paint exploding around it, continued swiftly westward.

“All misses,” Sousuke reported. “Not one direct hit.”

“This is ridiculous!” *She’s totally covered in my paint!* Mao thought in frustration. *How in the world—*

Blam! The M6 fired a shot back from the forest. A paintball exploded close to Mao’s machine, creating a blue fog around her.

“Whoops...” Snapping back to attention, Mao hid behind a rock. *Guess she’s gotten good enough at aiming and firing, at least...*

“That’s a miss, too. You’re lucky, Mao; if those had been live rounds, shrapnel might have taken out your sensors.”

It was a truly irritating comment.

Kurz butted in then. “That’s right. Nice job, Tessa! Keep at it!”

“Y-You people...!” Mao screamed. It seemed that making Sousuke the judge had been a mistake. But... “Whatever. I just need to land a direct hit, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then watch this.” Mao’s M9 sprang into action. She ran it down a rocky slope with good visibility, charging her machine after Tessa’s. Her movements were more violent now, like a cat transformed into a tiger, as she gained more and more ground on Tessa’s M6. *Get ready, baby...* she thought. Her plan was to seize the opponent by the head and land a rifle shot at point-blank range. Then Sousuke couldn’t give her any more excuses.

She’s finally after me, thought Tessa, her face tensed with fear as she looked at the screen.

Her breathing was heavy, and her face was covered in sweat. Just walking on the uneven terrain was bone-breaking work, but she knew she had to be faster. *No, I have to run! Just keep your opponent’s position in mind as you follow the course you laid out in advance. Navigate the obstacles, and...* If she tripped, it would be game over. It would take her close to a minute to stand up again. *Don’t fall over. You can’t afford to. If you trip, you lose...*

“Hahh... hahh...” Tessa’s nerves were frayed from all the stimuli around her. She felt like her head was going to explode. The cockpit was stuffy, hot, nauseating. Her machine jerked back and forth with every step, threatening to tear her eyeballs out of her skull. She hadn’t known AS combat could be this intense. She wondered, *How do the operators do this time and time again?*

The same alarm she’d heard several times already rang out again, with a sharp *pop!* as another paintball exploded at close range. It was a paintball from Mao, and was immediately followed by another.

None of the shots were direct hits, but Tessa could feel them driving her to

her wits' end. She froze up in shock for just a moment, then felt her machine begin to tilt—but she grabbed a nearby tree and steadied herself just before disaster struck. A shock wave shot through the cockpit, hard enough to jerk her body around. Her neck hurt. So did her knees, her elbows, her butt...

“Hahh... ahh...”

What if these were live rounds? I'd be dead several times over, wouldn't I? Yet she's always in places like this... No, much worse places... She's amazing. She's a woman like me... But she's on a whole other level... I can't beat her, Tessa realized. I just... can't beat her!

“Colonel, you're slowing down. You must remain calm and keep moving,” Sousuke said over the radio, almost like an impromptu AI.

“I... I know. But...”

“It's all right. You can do this,” he promised her. “I guarantee it.”

“Right!” she gritted her teeth and took off running again. When Tessa would look back on this day later, she would realize the inexpressible degree to which those words had empowered her. She was almost at her goal. Almost...

Meanwhile, Mao was feeling slightly impressed. “She's faster than I expected.”

Tessa's M6 had toddled along at first, but was gradually starting to pick up speed. Mao had genuinely tried to hit her once... and it was still a big miss. A big part of that was luck, of course, but she was nevertheless doing very well. Still, the match was almost over. Mao's machine was a mere two hundred meters from Tessa's. If she could get just a little closer, Tessa wouldn't be able to use the trees as shields any longer.

“Okay. Time to end this,” she whispered.

And then, something strange happened. Tessa's machine, running desperately towards the sun setting in the west, vanished.

“Eh?” Mao asked.

《Alpha-1 lost,》 her AI reported.

The backlighting had certainly made Tessa's machine difficult to make out. But to disappear that abruptly? Mao couldn't spot any trees in the area thick enough for it to hide behind. No other sufficient natural features, either...

"What kind of trick is she pulling?" Mao asked herself. *Doesn't seem like ECS... The M6 doesn't have an invisibility mode, anyway.* Mao stopped her machine and carefully activated her counter-sensor, the ECCS. Short-distance wide-band impulse radar waves combed the area from which Tessa had disappeared, searching for signs of electromagnetic camouflage.

Nothing.

She activated her high-sensitivity microphone.

Nothing. No sound of the generator, even. Tessa must have shut down the engine.

And because she was facing the sun, her own infrared sensor was useless. *What in the world?* Mao wondered. *Guess she's set a trap of some kind... But of course, Tessa's smart. She wouldn't call me out here without some kind of plan...*

Mao proceeded cautiously with her M9, hearing the all-too-loud crackle of breaking branches as she went along. *The hunter is at a disadvantage in a situation like this,* she thought. *Time to really get serious. "Let your guard down and you'll lose..." That's what my nose is telling me.*

She was on her utmost guard. All her focus was in play. In other words, Mao had gotten serious. *Was this Sousuke's idea, too?* she thought suspiciously. *Either way, it's impressive. You did well. You really did. But...*

Mao pointed her rifle's barrel at the ground a bit ahead of her; she'd found Tessa. There was a hole just ahead, designed to be difficult to make out from her position, but it was there, dug in advance, and large enough to fit an entire AS. Tessa's M6 was hiding inside. She'd likely dug it out the night before.

Lure me out here, bunker down, then snipe me when I get close... That's her plan. Simple, but clever, to use the dense forest and backlighting against me... If I'd been a little more careless, I might've fallen for it, Mao realized. *I only just barely noticed it because of the unnatural layout of the forest vegetation...*

Smart camouflage. Still, it wasn't enough to fool a veteran like Mao. Tessa's tenacity was admirable, but the game was over now. *Though I do feel bad for her...*

Mao made her M9 leap to the hole. In her screen's reticle, she could see Tessa's machine, rifle pointed back at her. "It's no use..." But just as Mao attempted to pull the trigger, a powerful light appeared under the M9.

Mao drew back in shock. Her machine had been caught up in one of the base's extremely powerful strobe lights, now installed inside the hole. Powerful enough to blind someone who looked directly into it, the light rendered all the M9's sensors blank for a split second.

Mao was left unable to keep her balance, let alone fire. Her machine toppled to the left and hit the ground as a powerful impact ran through her.

"Ngh!" She quickly adjusted her sensors' light sensitivity to restore her vision. But finding it too slow to wait out, she tried to sit her machine up. And as she looked...

On the screen just ahead, leaning out of the hole overflowing with light, was Tessa's M6, holding its rifle.

She was a mere twenty meters away.

I've got her. It worked! Tessa told herself. She hadn't been positive her two-stage plan would be enough to take Mao down, but it seemed that God had been on her side.

Tessa, in a frenzy, turned her rifle towards Mao's M9, which was struggling to stand. As the enemy machine entered her sight, she heard an alarm ring out in her cockpit. *Target locked. Fire!* it seemed to say.

"Hit!" she commanded it internally, pulling the trigger in response. It was set to fully automatic fire, and a blue mist quickly exploded in front of her. Tessa's breath heaved, eyes locked straight forward. She pulled the trigger again and again, until it finally registered that she was out of ammo.

The mist faded, and... she could see the gray M9, now stained in blue, hit directly by fourteen paintballs.



“I lost. I admit it. I’m not gonna whine about it,” Mao said, slumping as she got down from her M9. “I’m not gonna complain that setting a trap in advance is cheating, or that the referee was biased, or that using a strobe light from the base is pretty damn dicey. I’m not gonna complain that you were all on Tessa’s side, while I was off on my own. And I’m not gonna insist that if this were a real battle, I definitely would’ve won.”

“Sounds a little like whining to me,” Kurz said with a frown.

“Let this be a lesson: overconfidence is a killer,” Sousuke declared with unearned wisdom.

“Yeah. Overconfidence is a killer. Heh. Yeah. Sheesh... What in the world am I doing? Boy oh boy... good grief. Whew...” Mao slumped down onto the ground, looking as defeated as Sousuke had ever seen her.

The M6 finally arrived back at Twin Rock. Tessa timidly climbed down, soaked from head to toe with sweat. “Melissa...” she said, tottering up to Mao’s side, no air of triumph about her. Her eyes were glassy, and it didn’t even seem like she’d realized she’d won.

Tessa and Mao regarded each other silently, and Sousuke remained tense in anticipation of restored hostilities.

At last, Mao opened her mouth. She spoke haltingly. “I’m sorry... for the nasty stuff I said.”

Tessa said nothing.

“You worked really hard. Hats off to you.”

Then, five seconds later... tears began to spill from Tessa’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I... I...” Tessa grabbed Mao tightly, her voice cracking. “I’m the one who’s been awful! I just got so angry... I just wanted you to acknowledge me. And I got stubborn and did this stupid thing... I’m so sorry.” Tessa sniffled and sobbed and buried her face in Mao’s chest.

Mao patted her head in a motherly fashion. “No, I’m glad I lost. This is the way it should be, I think. But let this be the end of it, okay?”

“Yes... I’ve had more than enough of ASes...” Tessa sniffled.

Mao sniffled, too. “You really are adorable.”

“Please, don’t say that...”

They seemed to have made up.

“Um, so what about the naked lap around the base?” Kurz asked hesitantly, eyes shining.

Noticing him at last, Mao and Tessa spoke with eerie synchronicity. “Creep,” they whispered.



Then the two girls began doting on each other like nobody was watching, as Sousuke and Kurz just stared.

“How... strange,” Sousuke observed.

“Yeah,” Kurz agreed. “Feels like they could’ve just done this from the start, right?”

Sousuke and Kurz looked up at the two ASes, covered in paint and mud. Both machines looked a bit slumped, as if embarrassed about the situation they found themselves in.

“If I ever end up in a fight with a superior, maybe I’ll try the same thing...”

“What do you mean?”

Kurz suddenly grabbed Sousuke’s arm and began to speak in an eerily coaxing voice. “I’m sorry! I... I...”

Sousuke stared at him in silence.

“I just wanted you to acknowledge me, Sousuke! And I got stubborn and... What?” Kurz’s voice abruptly returned to normal as he slid away from Sousuke. “You were planning to shoot me just now, weren’t you?”

“I’m impressed you could tell,” Sousuke said with ice-cold calm.

About six kilometers from Twin Rock, in the base’s communications center...

“It appears to have all been resolved,” said Major Kalinin. The small monitor he’d been watching displayed a real-time video and sound feed from Mao’s M9. He’d ordered Kurz Weber to fiddle around with the machine’s electronics to let him do it, but they were the only ones who knew.

“She constantly surprises me,” said Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas, who had watched the whole thing live with Kalinin. “I didn’t expect her to win through sheer skill. She has a certain inevitable *something* that mere luck cannot fully account for, don’t you think?”

“It’s difficult to say for sure,” Major Kalinin said thoughtfully. “This was simply a game, after all. Different qualities come out when one’s life is on the line.”

“Perhaps,” Mardukas said gravely after a small, thoughtful hum. “But really... what will we do with the colonel? I can look the other way when it comes to her using machines for personal use, but she shows too little respect for her health. Wasting the time she should have spent resting on playing these violent games... I’ll have to speak with her tomorrow.”

“No need for that,” Kalinin said lightly.

“Why not?”

“Look at her face.”

Mardukas turned his eyes to the monitor, frowning. In the middle of the screen was Tessa’s beaming smile. Her face was aglow with sweat and dried tears, pleasant exhaustion and satisfied accomplishment. She always hid it behind an air of sophistication, but she really was a girl overflowing with vitality.

“I see,” Mardukas said, his dour expression unchanging. “She really has been restored. My gratitude to your subordinates.”

Afterword

This book is comprised of the *Full Metal Panic!* short stories serialized in *Monthly Dragon Magazine* from May through September 1999, with edits, plus one extra story.

So... um... in the afterword for *Two-Out Inning*, I wrote that the next novel would be out in fall... but in order to maintain quality, I'm having to take a little longer. It's all because of how pathetic I am. I think Novel 3 will be out soon, so please be patient. I really am sorry. Ugh.

Anyway, comments on each story.

"A Hostility Born of One-Sided Rivalry"

My favorite rolls are the croquette rolls they sell at the convenience store, but recently I read the book *Katte wa Ikenai*. It said that rolls from convenience stores are dangerous, so, simple man that I am, I immediately stopped buying them. Yes. It's the artificial colors that are bad for you. I try to take care of my health... and yet, I find myself smoking cigarettes every day.

"A Suicide of Inconvenience"

I bet everyone here has been in some situation in life that made you say, "I wish I was dead." I have, too. Yes, there was that one winter's night I'll never forget... I think I'd eaten some bad seafood at an izakaya the night before, because I spent all night puking my guts out. Curled up in a freezing bathroom, moaning wildly, covered in sweat and suffering for five hours... I genuinely started to wish someone would just kill me. But then it was over. Life is a wonderful thing.

"A Hard-Sell Fetish"

Wakana Yoko has a real-life basis, but she's not a loose cannon cop like the

character. She's a normal policewoman who's very serious about her job. How serious? Serious enough to give my friend a ticket for parking violations.

I have my friend Inoue Yoshihisa to thank for the Poni-man's speech tic being 'Poni.' I hope you get picked up for publishing! (←Purely private message.)

And Bonta-kun is so cute when Shiki-san draws him. I wonder if I can get someone to make a plushie. Fumoffu!

“An Eloquent Portrait”

I've never been in a situation where workplace romance has even been a possibility. I work alone, after all; the company I used to work for, Yuentai, was all guys, and before that, I was a student. I talked to my editor, S-san, while we were out drinking one time, and she said, “I don't have any experience with that either. Nobody ever talks to me. Ha ha ha...” very ruefully. Of course, in her case, just like I wrote in the afterword for *Rampaging*, I think she has to do something about that attitude. This is a chance for all the bachelors in the Fujimi Publishing Department! If you want to ask her out, I'll play mediator! Just like Sousuke, I'm sure I'll make everything worse!

“The Patients of Darkness”

Like Sousuke, I don't have much of a sixth sense for ghosts and such. A friend of mine has a much stronger one, and once we were drinking and messing around at a construction site that said friend claimed was definitely haunted. I was walking around in a dark room by myself when I suddenly saw a flickering light, like a red will o' the wisp, beyond a distant girder.

“Crud! A security guard?!” I thought. I hid, and the red light just sort of drifted around for ten minutes or so without making a sound. Then it started coming towards me, but without warning, it went out without a trace. I wish there was more to it, but it is a true story. It was all pretty mysterious.

“Cat and Kitten R&R”

As I announced in advance, it's a Tessa story. This one's about her friendship


with Mao, which I didn't have much of a chance to expand on in the novels.

This might just be my personal view, but to a man, the fights between two women are always strangely anxiety-inducing. I wonder why. In a story, if you make it too real, it's not fun, so I decided to keep it in moderation.

By the way, the R&R is meant to be read as 'Rock & Roll' but can also refer to the military jargon 'Rest and Relaxation.'

Now, I should offer up my thanks once again. For all the people who helped me with this, I'm sorry for the trouble, and also thank you.

Next time, once again, Kaname's fan will roar.



**A chase on a
night road.
A shootout in
the woods.
The lovers'
battle in the
middle of
the night has
Kaname's
mind about
to burst!**

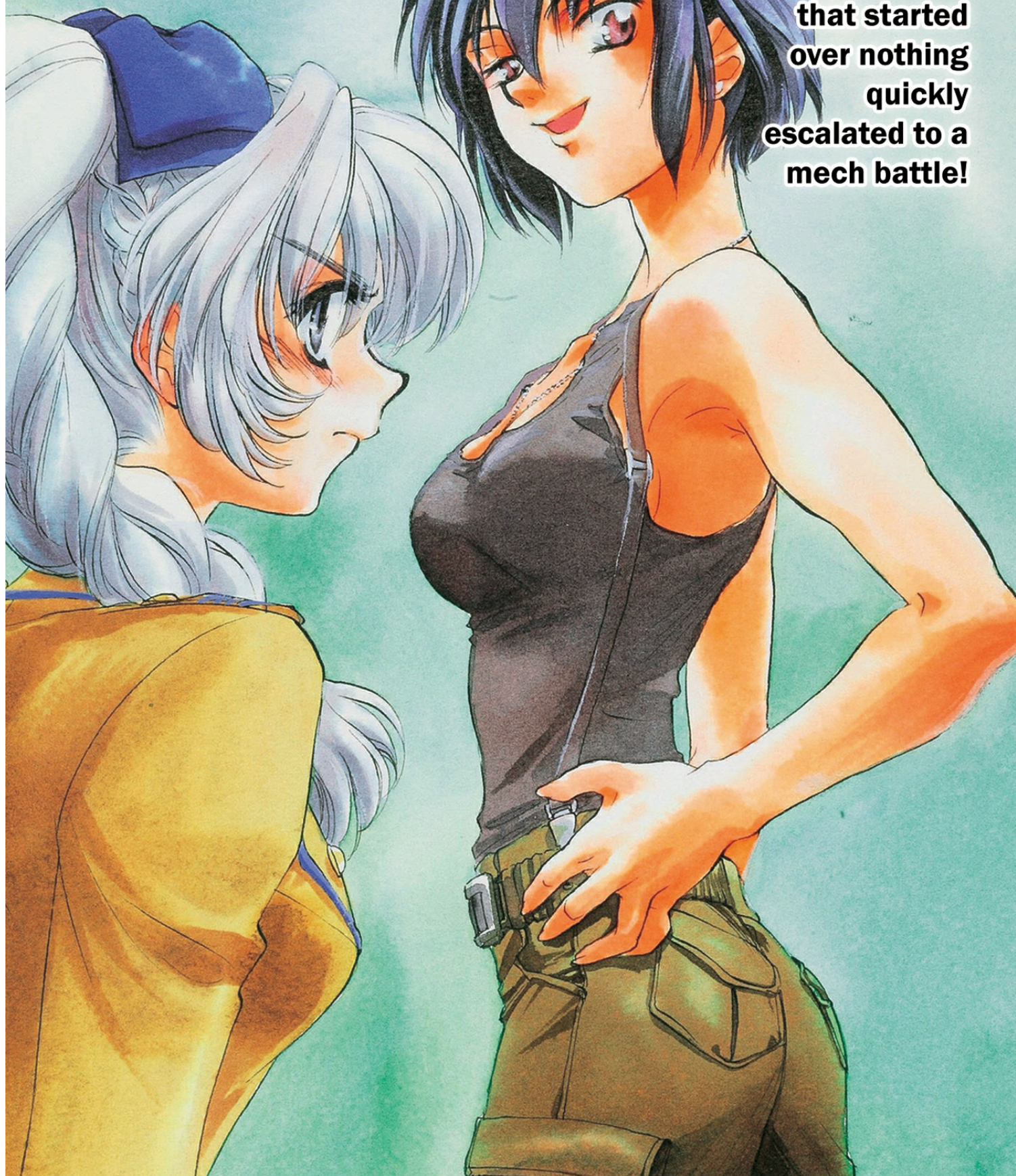
**FULL METAL PANIC!
UNPOLISHED THREE-RING CIRCUS?**

The red fluid slowly spread out on the floor. Was it blood? Sousuke took the dazed Kaname in his arms and spoke her name.



**“If you lose the AS
match, you’ll have
to do a naked lap
around the base!”**

**The argument
that started
over nothing
quickly
escalated to a
mech battle!**





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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 3

by Shouji Gatou

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