

UNAVOIDABLE NINE-DAY WONDER?



FULL METAL.. PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI



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9

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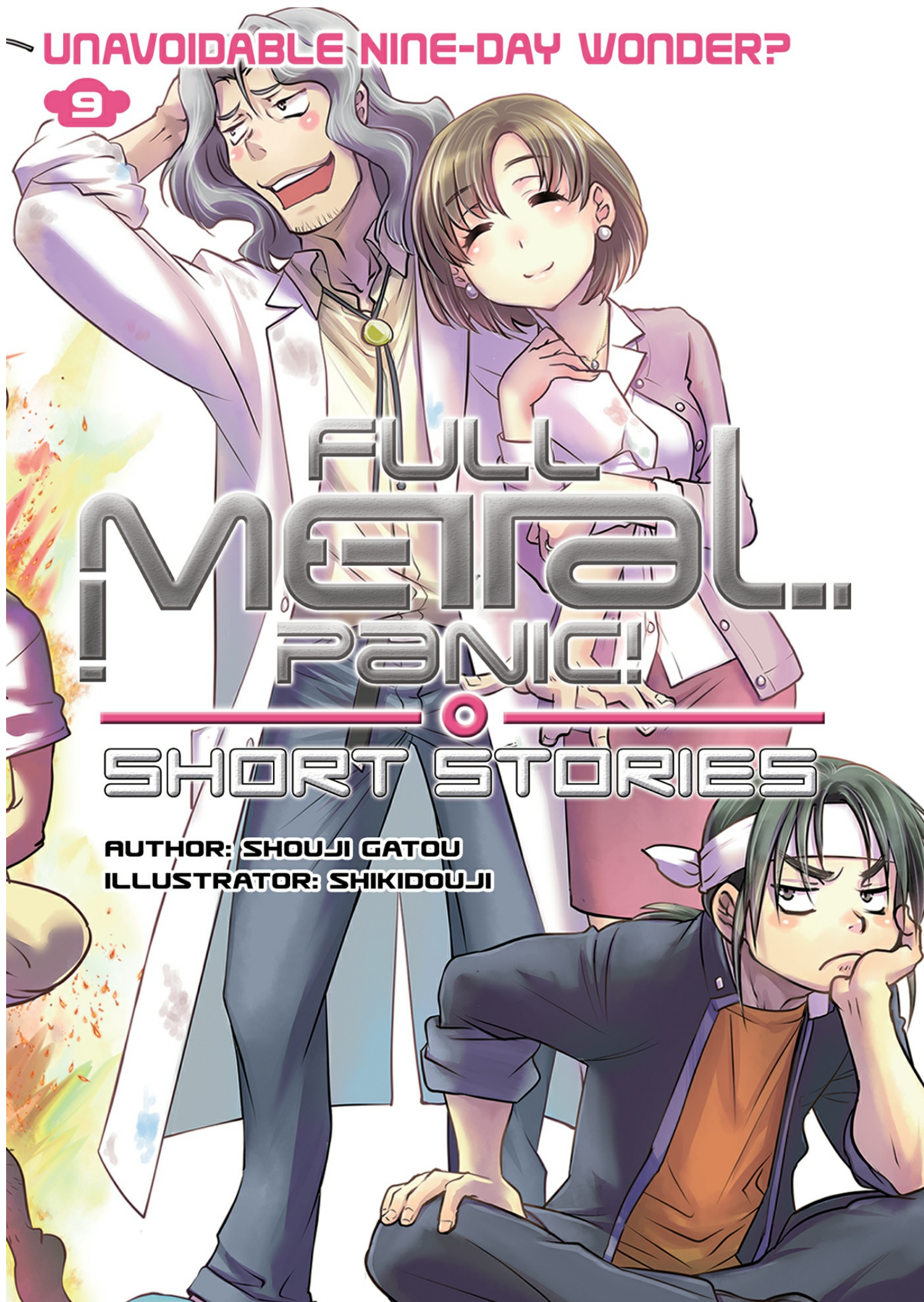


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The Hooligans' Rule (Part 1)

One day after class, Chidori Kaname was on cleaning duty. She had just brought the trash to the dump site behind the northern school building and was on her way back, when she picked up on a series of sharp metallic clinks and clanks coming from the chemistry lab. The sounds of levers, cylinders, and springs snapping back and forth—all sounds she'd come to recognize by now.

"Hmm?" she said. The chemistry lab was on the ground floor, but the curtains were drawn. Kaname idly approached the window, attempting to peer through the gap in the curtains.

Inside the dimly lit room sat a small group of men, inspecting and treating a variety of firearms. They were curiously dressed in urban camouflage fatigues, with bandoliers wrapped around their chests and waists. On the tables around them sat rows of shining submachine guns, bulky shotguns, heavy-looking assault carbines, and automatic pistols. There were also spare magazines and grenades on hand.

They looked like a whole crowd of Sousukes.

"This MP5 is acting up, even though I just replaced the chamber..."

"It definitely seems to be lacking firepower."

"Well, it might not work for fighting in the bush, but it should have more than enough power for a shoot-out in the school."

"Plus, it's light and easy to handle. In a setting like this, I think my M40's at a bigger disadvantage."

"Please, for killing *our* prey, even my Walther will do. Heh heh heh..."

They spoke those sinister words while precisely and swiftly loading shotgun rounds, shifting rifle bolts, and carefully adjusting sights.

Kaname felt confused. *Surely Sagara Sousuke is the only person in the whole world who'd be messing with dangerous weapons on school grounds, she*

speculated. *And... shoot-outs? Prey? What in the world are they up to?*

“This is...” she breathed.

“A coup d’état,” came Sousuke’s voice from behind her.

“Ghh—?!” Kaname almost screamed, but Sousuke quickly clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Hush,” he said. “They’ll hear you.”

“Ugh... Where the heck did you come from?” Kaname hissed back.

Wearing his usual sullen expression and tight frown, Sousuke said in a hush, “You assigned me to trash duty. It’s natural for the person on trash duty to monitor the removal of the trash.”

“How is that natural?” she wanted to know. “And who are those people? Friends of yours?”

“No, I have no association with dangerous people like that.”

Yeah, give me a break, Kaname thought to herself, but decided to hold her tongue about it.

“And did you see their arsenal? Heckler & Koch and Colt carbines, special forces P90s, Benelli shotguns... I also caught glimpses in the back of a few SAWs. With equipment like that, they could easily lock the entire school down. However... the caliber of the guns is curiously diverse,” Sousuke observed. “I felt certain that the channels through which one could acquire ammunition in Japan were limited... Chidori. I’d like to get your opinion on the matter.”

“How could I possibly have an opinion?”

“I believe they intend to mount a raid on the student council room,” he told her, “which means that we must strike first, with all speed.” Sousuke pulled a small shotgun seemingly out of nowhere and began changing out its ammunition. “I don’t have time to get my rifle from my locker. It’s unlikely that I’ll be able to deal with them on my own with my current equipment. I will require your support.” Kaname began to panic as Sousuke pressed the shotgun into her hands, while he pulled out his usual trusty pistol.

“W-Wait a minute...” she tried to say.

“I’ll get around to the corridor side and burst in,” said Sousuke, cutting her off mid-protest. “You shoot from the window. You don’t need to aim at the enemy; it’s enough that you shoot at the ceiling. After firing one shot, hide immediately. That’s all I need you to do. I’ll handle the rest. Just don’t put your finger on the trigger until you’re ready to shoot. Understood?”

“But... it all seems a little sudden,” Kaname objected. “And also, are you serious? I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“It will be fine. I know you can do it.” Sousuke was adamant with her.

“N-No way! And what if I accidentally hit someone?!”

“No need to worry. That shotgun is loaded with rubber rounds,” he said reassuringly. “They’re non-lethal. I just need them to think that they’re surrounded.”

“But... I don’t...”

“They’re on the verge of overthrowing the student council,” Sousuke insisted. “You must be brave, Chidori.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about! I just think we should investigate a little more—”

“Trust me,” said Sousuke. Then he sprang into action, heading for the emergency exit door.

“And there he goes,” said Kaname. “What in the world am I going to do?”

Just then, a nearby window rattled open. They’d been talking so casually, after all, the people inside must have noticed their presence.

A man wearing a mask and goggles poked his head out of the window, causing Kaname to shout in alarm.

Then he said, “What are you doing, Chidori-senpai?”

Kaname, who’d been juggling the shotgun that Sousuke had forced on her, frowned as she recognized the voice. “Huh?”

“It’s me,” said the other person, removing their mask and goggles. “Me,” he said again. It was Sasaki Hiromi, the first-year student in charge of the student

council's equipment.

“Sasaki-kun?” said Kaname. “What are you doing? Why are you dressed like that?”

The short, baby-faced boy smiled innocently and tugged at the collar of his fatigues. “What, this? Pretty cool, right? We’re playing survival games.”

“Survival... what?”

“Survival games. You’ve never heard of it?”

“Er... that thing where you shoot at each other with toy guns?” asked Kaname, hazarding a guess.

Hiromi’s expression became a bit testy. “Hey! They’re not toys. I mean, they *are* toys, but... Well, we typically play in the fields outside, and we’ve been talking about taking it indoors. There aren’t many people in the north building after class, anyway. We’re hoping to get a proper club going! We’ve even asked Hayashimizu-senpai.”

“Hah...” Kaname said weakly. “But—”

Just then, a student who had been watching the conversation from behind Hiromi interjected. “Oh, Miss Vice President? We’re being very careful about safety. We take turns standing lookout to make sure that nobody enters the game space. And we pick up all the ammunition we shoot. We even brought a vacuum cleaner. I promise, okay?” It seemed they were being very conscientious gamers.

Kaname, who was finally grasping the situation, let out a sigh of relief. “Ah... so that’s what it’s all about. But you really need to get proper permission— Wait, what’s wrong?” She stopped as she realized that the gazes of the others watching her had fallen on the gun in her hands.

“Chidori-senpai, why are you carrying that thing?” one of the boys asked. “Is that one of Sagara-senpai’s airguns?”

“What? Oh, I almost forgot...” Kaname trailed off upon suddenly remembering her conversation with Sousuke. *This is bad*, she realized. *He’ll be in the hallway right now, preparing to engage them in close-range combat.* She

began to say, “Guys, we’ve got trouble! You have to—”

But her attempt to warn them was interrupted by a crash. It was too late. The lab’s corridor-side door—or, rather, the wall right next to the door—fell inwards with a roar, opening up a huge hole. A hole that had been made by a directed explosive.

At almost the same instant, Sousuke came charging through the smoke with his pistol in hand. “Now, Chidori! Shoot!” he shouted, pointing his pistol at their nearest “enemy.”

“Sorry,” she told the other students, “Get out of the way for a sec.” Then she hefted up her shotgun.

Blam! Blam!



Kaname shot the rubber rounds right into Sousuke.

“Impossible... Why would you— Urk!” Shocked by this unexpected betrayal, Sousuke slumped to the ground.

Even Kaname was surprised by how precisely and calmly she had shot him. But then, her combat abilities did tend to skyrocket when it came time to put down Sousuke’s absurd behavior.

“Ch-Chidori-senpai...”

“Hmm... interesting. That felt so much like the first time I used my fan...” Kaname whispered as she gazed at the smoke rising from the muzzle.

“As usual, Sagara-kun will be covering the costs of the damaged wall,” the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, told them both calmly in the student council room after the commotion had died down. Tall and pale, with an intellectual air about him, Hayashimizu closed his fan with a snap. His secretary, Mikiyama Ren, stood quietly behind him.

“However... given that he was trying to protect the student council,” Hayashimizu mused, “perhaps we will pull half of the payment from the C-fund.”

“The C-fund?” said Kaname. This was a secret budget that the student council controlled, hidden from the teachers. Not even she had been told how much money was in there.

Kaname had once asked the treasurer, Okada Hayato, how much money was in the fund. He’d responded with an unusually grim expression, sweat rising on his face. *“It’s better if you don’t know. Just back off,”* he’d told her. Of course, that had only made her more curious. But when she’d kept on pressing him, asking for a ballpark figure for what sorts of things you could buy with it, Okada had looked off into the distance and said, with tears in his eyes, *“Enough that the old man next door would sell off his daughter, I bet.”* She’d asked him what the hell that was supposed to mean, but Okada had refused to say more. Kaname had never learned if that was a large or small amount.

But all that aside...

“I’m very grateful, Mr. President,” said Sousuke, standing at attention as he received Hayashimizu’s debriefing.

“Good. Incidentally, regarding Sasaki-kun and the other students with their model guns...”

“What is it, sir?”

“These... survival games of theirs,” Hayashimizu said with a meaningful pause. “They’ve been repeatedly petitioning the student council about them.”

“Petitioning?” Kaname frowned at him.

“They wish to open a survival game club. They are seeking permission for the appropriate funds, club building lockers, and the use of school facilities for ‘practice.’”

“I see...” Kaname responded unenthusiastically. She had to admit that, even if they were just model guns, they were pretty heavy, and running around with them had to qualify as some kind of a sport, but... “But I’ve never heard of a school club like that before,” Kaname said.

Hayashimizu nodded. “Agreed. Still, I don’t believe that to be sufficient reason to dismiss their request out of hand. This school has always been quite lenient as far as clubs go. Even this last year, we approved the karate society in addition to the existing karate club.”

“Right, Tsubaki-kun’s thing...”

“And they pointed out that Sagara-kun already carries model guns around in the school...”

In other words, how could he reject their club concept when there was already a member of the student council who went around with guns? It was certainly a difficult argument for even Hayashimizu to refute. As student council president, Hayashimizu’s baseline opinion on the Sousuke issue was that he wasn’t in violation of school rules, that the equipment was a necessary part of school security, and that he had used it numerous times to the school’s benefit. Still, a neutral third party would wonder how he’d gotten the teachers on board with tortured reasoning like that. Indeed, it was a reflection of Hayashimizu Atsunobu’s skill at the negotiating table—Kaname could imagine him pulling out

some serious political techniques to get what he wanted.

“I believe in being as fair as possible. I’m not a dictator, merely a representative of the common interest,” Hayashimizu said. “However, we cannot pack in too many clubs. If I were to approve every single application, our school extracurriculars would number in the hundreds. For instance, within game-related interest groups alone, I have received applications for a console game society, an arcade game society, a retro game society, a Western game society, a TCG society, a TRPG society, a war game society, an online game society, and more... it’s enough to make one’s head spin. They sound indistinguishable to me, but if you were to ask the club members themselves, they would say they’re all different. And for some reason, none of them get along. I have difficulty understanding it. The other day, I even had a request for an ‘18 and over’ game club.”

“In a high school? Why?” Kaname asked.

“I don’t know. I’m sure it was a mistake of some kind,” Hayashimizu continued, dismissing her concern. “Regardless, that is why I cannot easily accept their request. Thus, I’ve given them a condition: if they wish to represent our school, even as a mere club, they must prove that they have some level of skill.”

“In survival games?”

“Yes. In other words...” Hayashimizu looked over at Sousuke, who was in an at-rest position. “We will hold a match at an appropriate location. If they can defeat the student council’s elite representative—in other words, Sagara-kun—then I will consider it.”

“Just Sousuke?” said Kaname.

“It doesn’t have to be just him. But don’t you think that would make it easier for him?”

“Hmmm... but...”

There had been five members of the unofficial ‘survival game enthusiasts’ in the chemistry lab. Given what Hiromi had said afterwards, their group actually numbered about twice that many. Even Sousuke would surely struggle to fight

that many people all at once.

Kaname was about to voice her disagreement, when Sousuke interrupted. "It's easily done, Mr. President. I will bring all of my training to bear and crush our enemy." He puffed out his chest proudly.

"I guess he's confident, at least..." Kaname said with a sigh.

"Are you sure it'll be okay?" Kaname whispered to Sousuke as they left the student council room.

"Will what be okay?"

"Well... there are about ten people on Sasaki-kun's team, aren't there? I'm not sure even you can handle that many alone."

"Not an issue. Considering the welcome they gave me when I burst into that laboratory, they are extremely ill-trained," he told her. "I can employ mines and other such measures to easily reduce their forces to less than half. Then I can pick the rest off one at a time."

Kaname sighed. "I should probably mention that you're not allowed to use traps."

Here, Sousuke frowned. "What?"

"I mean, duh. It's basically a sport," she pointed out. "Also, no knifing anyone in the throat, sleeper holds, or hand grenades."

"Absurd," he scoffed. "How do you expect me to fight, then?"

"You're supposed to shoot at each other with airsoft guns! That's it! No one's allowed to hurt anyone!"

"Hmm..." Sousuke looked troubled as sweat rose on his forehead.

"What are you so worried about?" Kaname asked. "Don't real soldiers do that kind of thing in training and stuff?"

"I suppose you have a point," said Sousuke, clapping his hands together in understanding.

"Honestly..."

“But our squad trains frequently with live rounds. And we’re allowed to use grappling and traps. Once, when we were practicing CQB indoors, I ended up fighting with Mao... and ended up much the worse for the matchup. She is a first-rate martial artist.”

“But that kind of thing is against the rules here,” Kaname reminded him.

“I know. It will be difficult facing ten men with firearms alone... but not impossible. I will polish them all off cleanly.” Sousuke didn’t sound like he was bragging, but rather as though he was simply speaking the truth. After all, he was a professional. That hobbyists couldn’t beat him was a simple fact.

After thinking for a moment, Kaname made a suggestion. “Hey.”

“Yes?”

“This sounds kinda fun. You think I could get in on it? Hayashimizu-senpai said that it was okay for the student council team to have multiple people. So...”

“No.” Sousuke quickly shut her down.

“Huh? How come?”

“You’ll just hold me back,” he told her. “It’s easier if I fight alone.”

The bluntness of his statement left Kaname stunned. “Hold you back? Me?”



“Yes. I’m sorry, but I can’t work with you.”

“Wh-What the heck? It’s just a game! You don’t have to take it so—” Kaname was almost too confused to argue with him.

Sousuke peered seriously into her face. “Even if it is just a game, I cannot work with you.”

“Hey... are you mad at me? Because I shot you in the lab?” she whispered, looking at him with upturned eyes.

“I am not mad at you. I merely regret putting a gun into your hands. Regardless of the situation, anyone who would shoot an ally who has entrusted their life to them...” Sousuke trailed off briefly. “I simply cannot let you have my back.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and she felt like she’d been punched in the head. Uncertain of how to respond, Kaname found her voice cracking. “But... you were about to shoot Sasaki-kun and the others based on a misunderstanding! So—”

“Regretfully, that is also true. That is why I bear you no ill will. But still, I cannot work with you.”

Kaname fell silent.

Sousuke certainly didn’t seem angry, it was true. There was no real ice in his voice, either; he was simply speaking in his usual businesslike fashion, calm and professional. Kaname found herself unable to say anything more in her defense.

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her again. “As I said before, I am not berating you. But I also don’t think it’s something you can understand. And I do not require your aid in this matter.” Then, as Kaname stood in place, Sousuke began walking down the hall, leaving her behind.

Even if he said he wasn’t berating her or angry with her, she definitely felt like he was. She felt like he was calling her a traitor. Like he was saying he could never trust her again...

What the heck? she thought. *That’s ridiculous.* After all, she was just doing the same thing she always did... *This is so stupid! It was just a shotgun instead of a*

fan! So why does he... Feeling extremely flustered, Kaname went back to her classroom and began preparing her things to go home.

It was dusk. The light of the setting sun streamed in through the window. Kaname shoved her textbooks, notebooks, and empty lunch box into her bag and let out a sigh.

She heard a voice calling her from the door. “Hey, Chidori-senpai.”

“Hmm?” She turned and saw Sasaki Hiromi and Sousuke’s other upcoming opponents standing in a crowd there. They weren’t all first-years like Hiromi. There were second-years, too. Some were brawny or shifty-looking men, but they were probably all students at the school.

“The truth is, we wanted to talk to you about something.”

They timidly entered the classroom and explained their proposal to the skeptical Kaname.

“Serve as your leader? Me?!” Her eyes went wide when she heard their suggestion. “But why?”

Here, the survival game students folded their arms and nodded enthusiastically.

“Ms. Vice President. We’re ashamed to admit it... We’re pretty good at what we do, but...” said their second-year leader, Ihara. He was a 190-centimeter giant with a heavily muscled frame, wearing a beret. For some reason, he had a thick goatee.

“Yeah, yeah. We got pretty far in the survival game tournament sponsored by *Combat Dragon* magazine. Hee hee hee...” said Ebikawa, another second-year student. He was tall and lean and occasionally licked the blade of a knife.

“Heh heh heh. We really made a bloodbath of all of them. I remember some even weeping and begging for their lives...” laughed a second-year student named Inoue, a swarthy man with thick lips, a shaved head, and a large cross-shaped scar on his forehead.

“I... I see...” said Kaname, observing that the other members of the club were

all similarly intimidating. They certainly seemed like the kind of people who could beat someone like Sousuke. “Um, so... if you’re that good, why do you need me?”

“Well, because...” Their leader, Ihara, looked down, trembling. Trembling violently. “Even with everyone we have, we really don’t think we can beat Sagara-kun!”

“What?”

Tears had begun flooding from the eyes of Ihara and the others, and they all ran to cling to Kaname.

“Eek!” she shouted.

“I mean, come on! You’ve seen what he does every day! The way he moves! That look in his eyes! He’s a total professional, while we’re out of shape! We can’t possibly beat him!” Ihara said, weeping.

“Hee hee... we’re going to die. We’re totally going to die!” Ebikawa laughed empty.

“It’ll be a bloodbath! He’s going to kill us all!” Inoue cried to the heavens.

Suddenly they were a bunch of good-for-nothing weaklings, lamenting their own fates.

“Hang on, calm down! Even so, why me?! I can’t be your leader!” Kaname said, trying to soothe them.

But they emphatically refuted her. “But you can. We all know how you whipped our rugby club into shape, and you’re the only person who can kick Sagara-kun around like you do. You’re the scariest student at Jindai High School.”

“What the heck?!”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s a compliment.”

“It is *not*!” Kaname shouted, wanting to cry.

But Ihara and the others refused to back down. “Still, we talked it out and decided that if you helped us, we might just be able to work out a plan to take

out Sagara-kun. So we're really hoping you'll help us. We're begging you. Chidori-san. You're our last hope for forming a survival game club."

"But... I don't..." Kaname didn't know how to respond to a request like that out of the blue.

Ihara leaned forward immediately. "Of course, we'll reward you. The moment we win... you know how so-and-so is coming to Japan on tour in a few days? We'll give you luxury box tickets to his concert."

"So-and-so? Wait. Do you mean..."

"Yes," Ihara said immediately. "Supreme Soul Brother. Mr. Dynamo. The Godfather of Funk. *Him.*"

JB! It's James Brown! Kaname found herself gulping. The fact that she lost her mind over an old man with a face you might see in *Planet of the Apes* rather than pretty boy idols around her own age suggested odd things about her, of course... but Kaname was a woman of taste. She knew what made a true entertainer.

"Urgh..." She wanted them. She really, really wanted them. She had, of course, been planning on going to the show already, but she wasn't able to get luxury seats like those. How could Ihara have them?! *Oh*, she thought. *But...*

Even if it was a mock battle with airsoft guns, Sousuke was a fearsome opponent. She'd seen him use his true power several times by this point, and he'd dealt with highly trained terrorists time and again with ease. His techniques were highly refined, and he moved so swiftly that untrained eyes couldn't follow him.

The power of a professional. Real power. There's no way we can win. It's completely pointless. If he gets serious against us, I'm not sure even I could lay a single finger on him...

Then Sousuke's words played back in her mind: "*I simply cannot let you have my back.*"

In that instant, all thought of the tickets vanished. *That's right. It's not just about that.* Obviously, she wanted the tickets to the show... but that wasn't all. *Sousuke. What was that he'd said to me? He can't trust me with his life? How*

dare he say something like that, to me, of all people? He was doing his usual stupid thing in the laboratory, and I was just stopping him in my usual way. What exactly is wrong with that? After all, he's the one at fault! I understand he'd hold a little bit of a grudge, but he didn't need to be that mean about it!

No. I just can't accept it. Saying that he didn't want to work with me... I can't just let that go, she realized. After all, we have a special relationship, don't we? Where did something like that come from? It's really against the rules. Whatever. If he's going to talk that way to me, I guess I'll just have to teach him a lesson.

While all those thoughts ran through her mind, Kaname kept her eyes fixed on the ground and whispered, "Okay. I'll do it."

"What?"

"I think you're right. I think I'm the only person in this school who can beat him," she said firmly.

The boys let out a murmur of appreciation. "I'm not sure if it's appropriate for me to say this after we came to recruit you... but you're really confident, Chidori-senpai."

Hiromi's words got on Kaname's nerves. "But it's true, isn't it?"

"R-Right..."

"No need to worry. The point is, I'm taking the job." Kaname took in a deep breath. She had to get it together and project an aura of confidence. "Okay," she said again, "I'll do it. Let's get training! We'll need a whole lot of it... yeah, we'll work you out until two in the morning, to build up the stamina you need. Training starts at seven. Until the day of the match comes, I'm gonna run you ragged!"

"What?!" Hayami and the others looked less than enthused.

By comparison, Kaname felt power rising up out of her fists. "Shut up! If you're gonna ask me for help, you'd better do what I say! I'm gonna whip you into shape like Manager Hoshino would! Anyone who can't keep up is off the team! So you'd better get ready!" She stood tall and threw her fist into the air.

“Okay...”

“But let me make one thing clear... Whether it’s a sport or a battle, the fundamentals are all the same! In other words...” she pointed right in front of her. “No chickening out! Effort! Teamwork! That’s the only way to win this! We’re gonna work on those three fundamentals, and put Sousuke in his place! Got it?!”



“Right...” Ihara and the others responded, taken aback.

“All right! We’ll start with running! The road to a healthy spirit starts with a healthy body. Basic stamina training is the greatest investment of all! And so...” Kaname puffed up and pulled out her fan from wherever she always did.

As she did, she thought, *Yes, this feels right in my hand! It really is the only way to go!*

Kaname then flipped over the closest desk with all her might. “Training starts now!” she bellowed. “Get running!”

Fearing the unmitigated violence she seemed about to unleash, the group got running.

[To be continued]

The Hooligans' Rule (Part 2)

After just ten laps around the school courtyard, Ihara and the others were ready to throw in the towel. It seemed they were just as out of shape as they'd claimed.

Left with no other choice, Kaname ordered them to take a brief rest while she familiarized herself with their equipment: the airsoft guns, which were lined up on the tables in the chemistry lab. She picked one up and asked Ihara, the goateed man, "Okay, how do you shoot this?"

"Huh? Just remove the safety and pull the trigger," Ihara responded in confusion.

"What's the safety?"

"It keeps it from firing accidentally."

"And what's the trigger?" she asked next.

"It's what you pull to fire it."

"Yes, yes. I see." Looking impressed by just this basic information, Kaname quickly did as she was told.

Ihara began to say, "Oh, wait—"

Ratatatatatatatatat!

But Kaname ended up firing a long stream of rounds from the gun. They were just plastic BBs, but they bounced off the walls and the ceiling, showering them like hail.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Don't do that, Chidori-san!"

"It hurts! It hurts!"

The whole group cowered, shielding their faces. Even mere ricochets still hurt quite a bit.

Kaname froze up in shock. “I thought you said they were toys,” she whispered.

“They are, but they’re still dangerous,” Ihara told her.

“B-But this thing could hurt someone!”

“That’s right. They can even put your eye out! That’s why you shouldn’t fire them recklessly!”

“Wow...” Kaname muttered while rubbing her thigh, which was stinging from a ricochet hit.

In fact, this was Kaname’s first time wielding an airsoft gun. Due to various unfortunate circumstances, she’d been in contact with real guns many times before—in fact, she’d been shot at and almost killed several times—yet had never worked with gamer guns like these. She’d assumed that they were, at best, a slightly souped-up version of the toy pea-shooters that could only fire a few meters ahead.

“You really shoot at each other with these things?” she asked in shock.

“We do.”

“But that’s dangerous!”

“Of course it’s dangerous!” Ihara bellowed.

Here, Sasaki Hiromi asked her a question. “I-Is it possible, Chidori-senpai... you don’t know anything about airsoft guns?”

“Of course not,” she replied. “I mean, I don’t care about guns at all.”

“But Sagara-senpai’s always brandishing them!”

“That doesn’t mean I know anything about guns!”

The members of the survival game society (club status pending) let out a collective groan of despair and bemoaned their fate.

“Oh, woe is us!”

“We assumed, because you’re always bossing around Sagara-kun...”

“...That you had equal knowledge of firearms and tactics.”

“Is that how everyone sees me?” asked Kaname, greasy sweat rising on her face.

Meanwhile, at a specialist shop in Kichijoji...

“I want to buy an airsoft gun,” Sousuke told the salesgirl as he walked briskly around the shop, perusing the firearms there.

Truthfully, he also knew nothing about recreational airsoft guns. He’d never even seen one before. As they were mere toys, Sousuke assumed they would be easy to master, but he’d decided to get some experience with one nevertheless. Therefore, he’d let Kazama Shinji direct him to this store so that he could buy one for himself.

The young salesgirl wore an apron and jeans, with her hair tied back in a messy ponytail. She wore plain, black rimmed glasses, and approached him with a mild expression. She asked him, “So, do you have any experience with airsoft guns?”

“No. I’m a beginner,” he responded earnestly, with his usual sullen expression.

“I see,” she said. “Let me think... If you just want to play with friends, what about this one?” She plucked a special forces carbine off a nearby wall. “It comes with a variety of accessories, and it’s easy to use.”

“An M4A1?”

“Oh... yes. You recognize it?”

“It’s not a bad gun, but I already have one.”

The salesgirl swallowed back a comment about him claiming to be a beginner and forced a patient smile onto her face. “W-Well, I suppose this is a fairly heavy model. If you just want better ease of handling, what about this one?” She then pulled a Belgian-made, next-generation submachine gun off the wall.

“A P90?” said Sousuke. “I have that one as well.”

“I see. Well... could you tell me more specifically what you’re after?” the salesgirl asked. “A long barrel, a short one... more realistic, more practical...”

Sousuke let out a small sigh. “I told you what I want. I want an airsoft gun. Please stop recommending assault carbines and submachine guns.”

“What?” The salesgirl was stunned.

“An airsoft gun,” he tried again. “A toy. Don’t you have any?”

“But that’s what this is!”

“That’s clearly a carbine,” Sousuke scoffed. “Why don’t you know more about your own shop’s product?”

“Ngh. You are being absolutely ridiculous. This is an airsoft gun!”

“No, it’s a carbine. Let me see it.” As they continued talking over one another, Sousuke ended up snatching the gun away from the stunned salesgirl. “Listen to me,” he said. “I don’t know how these came to be sold commercially in Japan, but this is an M4A1, a special forces assault carbine replacement for the Colt Commando. It has far greater precision, overheating resistance, and handling convenience than previous models. The caliber is 5.56 mm and it takes SS109 ammunition—” Sousuke handled the gun expertly, moving to make sure there was no live ammunition in the bolt. He pulled back the charging handle, and...

The motion was greeted by an underwhelming click. Finding it strange, Sousuke peered into the bolt and found a strange gear there. “Hmm?” He then noticed something else: the gun itself was unusually light, and the frame, which should have been made of sturdy metal, felt strangely fragile in his hands. He pressed the release and removed the magazine. White balls, like grains of rice, began to spill out of it.

The salesgirl scowled at him as the BBs spilled out. An awkward silence fell.

Sousuke met the salesgirl’s eyes, his tight frown growing deeper. “What is this thing?”

“It’s an airsoft gun! Like I told you!” she shouted, shoulders trembling with anger.

Finally catching on to the fact that the gun was a replica, Sousuke was truly impressed. “It looks just like the real thing,” he told her. “It even has the Colt stamp and a serial number. Is it really a toy?”

“Of course it’s a toy,” the salesgirl said with exasperation. “Are you messing with me, sir?”

In lieu of a response, Sousuke pulled out his wallet and checked its contents. “I’ll take one of these, as well as ammunition and a spare magazine.”

“Thank you. Would you like any other equipment? Springs, bandoliers, boots, gloves...”

“No, thank you. I already have my own.”

“Well... if you insist.” The salesgirl pulled out a calculator and began punching numbers in.

Meanwhile, Sousuke began examining the AEG. He generally enjoyed tinkering with machinery. “I see,” he said. “It fires these plastic projectiles. An internal motor moves the gears and compresses the air. It’s very well made. It even has a safety.”

“Please, be careful. The battery and ammunition are both live.”

“By the way, is the trigger—” Sousuke turned the gun up to the ceiling and pulled it.

“Wait, don’t—”

Ratatatatatatat!

The salesgirl tried to stop him, but Sousuke’s gun fired off a lot of ammunition nevertheless. The BBs ricocheted all around the store, hitting other customers and salespeople.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

“What are you doing?!”

“That hurts! That hurts!”

The customers crouched down, covering their faces, while the salesgirl apologized profusely. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Sir, that was very reckless! I told you to be careful!”

Sousuke stared at the small holes he’d put in the plasterboard ceiling. “I thought you said it was a toy.”

“It is,” she told him, “but it’s still dangerous.”

“This could really hurt someone,” Sousuke remarked.

“That’s right. It can even put your eye out! That’s why you shouldn’t fire them recklessly!”

“I see...” he muttered thoughtfully. He’d once gone out with Kaname and her friends to a shrine festival, where they’d taken part in a shooting gallery stall with cork guns. He’d assumed these would be similar. But this... “You shoot at each other with these?”

“We do.”

“But that’s dangerous.”

“Of course it’s dangerous!” the salesgirl shouted at him.

Unaware of Sousuke’s own rookie behavior, Kaname and the others began their survival game training on a weekend morning. They had chosen a campground in the city, the same hill where the life drawing incident had taken place some time back.

Their first assignment was running, push-ups, sit-ups, and squats, followed by more running. It was a serious training regimen, and it left Ihara and the others quickly gasping for breath.

“Hahh... hahh... Chidori-san... why do we have to... run this much?” Ihara asked Kaname, who was running behind him as they staggered their way up the hill.

“Hahh... hahh... the first thing you need is guts... the will to fight. So I’m building up... enthusiasm...” She was also sweating and panting. Nevertheless, fighting spirit blazed in her eyes. Even if they were out of shape, the others were all men, who naturally had superior stamina. The fact that she was still in fourth place right now showed how seriously she was taking things.

“But... rather than this sort of basic training... hahh... hahh... we wanted you to tell us... Sagara-kun’s weak points...”

“You really think... he’s got such... convenient weaknesses?! Get real!

Hrrrgh!”



Gritting her teeth, Kaname pushed herself down the final stretch. She passed Ihara and the others to reach the finish line first. Then she collapsed, her arms and legs splayed.

“Hahh... hahh...” Droplets of sweat hit the ground beneath her. Her tank top and leggings were soaked.

The others arriving at the finish line gazed at her and began whispering among themselves, “I’m glad she agreed to help us... but what’s she so worked up about?” asked Ebikawa, the knife-user. His knife was made of rubber, of course. He was just a guy who liked to get really into his role.

“Yeah... I don’t think we’re gonna survive this. She doesn’t seem to know how to use a gun, either,” said the scar-faced Inoue. He’d actually gotten the cross-shaped scar on his forehead when he’d fallen off his bike in his fourth year of elementary, and again in the first year of middle school, hitting an electric pole and a concrete wall, respectively.

“Stop it, you guys. We gave her command. We can’t complain about it now,” said the bearded, beret-wearing Ihara. Incidentally, he just had a prematurely grizzled face.

Sasaki Hiromi was lying on the ground, sprawled out limply. His teammates were in the same boat. Their chests were all heaving as they let out complaints of various intensities. It was like the old veteran sergeant (Ihara, in this case) was trying to reassure his men about the newly appointed lieutenant, Kaname.

After a brief rest, Kaname stood up. “Okay,” she said. “Next in the regimen: thirty courses of daily calisthenics Number Two!”

The entire group let out a scream.

“Chidori-san, this is too psychologically taxing!”

“This isn’t going to make us better at survival games!”

“And why Number Two?!”

Kaname’s fan roared through the air. It struck the ground with a bang as she shouted, “I’m trying to increase your concentration!”

“Does it really work like that?”

“Shut up!” she howled. “Now, get up! Get up!”

The group slowly rose to their feet.

But then the knife-user, Ebikawa, spoke up and said, “I’m not doing this anymore! This ain’t some health club! It’s a survival game team! We got pretty far in a tournament once! We don’t gotta do what this little girl says!”

“Grr...”

“Cut it out, Ebikawa!” Ihara tried to calm him down, but the others also seemed determined to say their piece.

“Yeah! That’s right!”

“Give us real training!”

Kaname grew even more outraged. “This is barely anything!” she retorted. “Well, I guess we know one thing you’re good at... Whining!”

“What the hell? You’re not even—” Ebikawa started, but stopped mid-shout.

The others did the same. They all frowned thoughtfully and perked up their ears.

“Hmm? What is it?” Kaname asked.

“It’s an AEG,” said Ihara.

The sound—a periodic *ratatatatat!* in the distance, followed by the pops of BBs hitting a target—was coming from a clearing in the forest at the base of the campground. The group temporarily called a truce to head into the underbrush and check it out.

As Kaname approached, looking on in curiosity, she could see that the one firing the airsoft gun in the clearing was Sousuke. He was down on his stomach, firing his carbine into multiple targets. Beside him squatted a young woman in jeans and black rimmed glasses whom Kaname didn’t recognize.

“My shots are trending high, Kitano,” Sousuke was saying. “Why is that?”

“Oh, that’s the hop-up... Give it here. You can adjust it.”

“I see.”

“You want to turn this gear. See? You do it like this...”

At least from a distance, they seemed rather friendly.

“There’s a girl with him. Who do you think it is?” Hiromi whispered.

“Look. The girl with the glasses...” Ihara said back.

“She’s the one from that store we go to all the time! What’s she doing here?” Hiromi demanded.

Kaname stewed in silence, looking just as annoyed as they were. *Just the other day, he said those awful things to me, and now look at him! Getting all close and cozy with some stranger...*

“Who’s there? What do you want?” Sousuke said as he looked in their direction.

The big men weren’t exactly being stealthy, just standing behind Kaname as they watched. Sheepishly, Ihara and the others came out of the underbrush.

Upon seeing Kaname coming out with them, Sousuke’s expression turned suspicious. “Chidori. What are you doing here?”

“What does it matter to you?” she retorted. “I’m helping Ihara-kun and the others.”

He paused. “Are you?”

She paused. “I am.”

They’d seen each other a few times since their disagreement the other day. It hadn’t exactly been a fight, so they’d still said hello and chatted like normal, but there was something definitely awkward about it.

“I should ask what you’re doing here,” said Kaname.

“Airsoft gun target practice,” Sousuke told her. “I am attempting to understand their trajectories and special characteristics.”

“And who’s that?”

“An instructor I met at the specialty shop. She’s teaching me the ins and outs.”

The girl nodded lightly to Kaname and the others. “Hello there, I’m Kitano Kazumi,” she said. “I work part-time at the shop. I had the day off, so I decided to help Sagara-kun out. Ha ha...”

“A salesgirl helping a customer? You two must be awfully close.”

“No, we, well... it’s actually complicated, you see—”

“I’m Chidori. Chidori Kaname.” Chidori was usually polite and friendly with strangers, but this was one time she couldn’t afford to be so flippant about it.

Picking up on the strained atmosphere, Kitano Kazumi asked her a question, eyes upturned. “Chidori-san. I... are you dating Sagara-kun?”

In unison, Kaname and Sousuke vigorously denied it.

“Oh. I’m sorry for asking. Ha ha ha...”

Kaname fell silent, her feelings complicated.

Sousuke went back to firing his BB gun, his expression unchanged.

Just then, Ihara spoke to Kazumi. “Kitano-san?”

“Yes?”

“You remember? It’s me. I come to the store a lot. I’m so happy to run into you in a place like this.” His cheeks had turned red, and he looked very nervous. The others seemed to be acting the same way. They all had sheepish smiles on their faces, nodding to her from behind Ihara.

Is she some kind of idol among the shop regulars? Kaname wondered.

Kazumi searched her memory and at last smiled awkwardly at Ihara. “Er... I’m really sorry. Ha ha ha...”

Ihara and the others froze up in shock. “You... You really don’t remember us? We all took a picture together for the summer event...”

“Oh, I remember now! The preliminaries for the *Combat Dragon* magazine tournament, right? The ones who got clobbered in the first round against that team of women’s university students!” Kazumi shouted, her expression brightening in recognition.

“What? You lost in the first round?” Kaname said, staring blankly at them.

Noticing her expression, Ihara and the others slumped over uncomfortably.

“Yes, I remember! Um, and you come to our shop as well?” Kazumi then asked.

“Yeah,” Ihara said glumly, “at least once a week...”

“What, you do? I’m so sorry! I don’t remember you at all! I don’t know why... but I see you’re wearing your BDU today... Are you playing now?” asked Kazumi. “You’re only supposed to play in designated fields, you know.”

“Well, actually...” Ihara and the others looked very sheepish indeed.

Meanwhile, Sousuke finished silently firing his AEG and began cleaning up his equipment. “I think I have the hang of it, Kitano. Now I’d like to try on more hilly terrain. Let’s move.”

“Oh... of course. I’ll talk to you all later! We’re having a sale at the store next week, so I hope you’ll all come by!”



Kazumi walked away, holding her things. She seemed to have instantly forgotten about Ihara and the others.

Just then, Sousuke stopped and turned around to face them. “Ah, right. You seem to be embarking on some kind of training regimen, but you can’t beat me with such stopgap measures. You should just give up on forming your club before you get hurt.”

“Grr...”

“That goes for you too, Chidori,” he told her. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but it’s a waste of time.”

“Wh-What did you say?!” Kaname demanded.

“I’m merely speaking the truth.” Then Sousuke turned around, and this time, really left.

Once the two were out of sight, the men started whispering to each other.

“He’s got a girl with him. And it’s Kitano-san, our store idol, of all people...”

“This won’t stand. This really won’t stand...”

“The humiliation! This has gone way past the whole club thing...”

Some trembled with anticipation, while others spat on the ground. Some even wept tears of frustration.

“By the way... what was that about losing in the first round?” Kaname asked hesitantly.

Ihara and the other men slumped over in shame.

“For all your big talk, are you just some group of geeks trying to impress a girl?” she asked incredulously. “Do you even really want to beat that guy?”

“Of course,” said Ihara. “That’s why we asked for your—”

“So, trust me already!” Kaname snapped at him. “I know I’m just an ordinary girl who’s been through near-death experiences countless times, and it’s understandable that you wouldn’t trust me. But at the very least, I want to beat that war-addled fool more than anybody here! Right? If you think I’m wrong, say so right now!”

Ihara and the others had no argument for this.

“If there’s something wrong with my methods, I’ll really work to fix them. But I need you to take me seriously. Trust me. We’re a team, aren’t we?!” As Kaname shouted her truth at them, Ihara and the others looked down, trembling with clenched fists.

“Chidori-san... you’re right. If we don’t do something, we’re just going to lose.” The one who spoke first was Ebikawa, who had previously argued with Kaname.

“You’re right. We forgot about something important,” the scar-faced Inoue said.

“That’s right. We need to trust her!”

“There’s ten of us! If we just work together, we can win this!” one of them said.

“I’m sorry, Chidori-san! I won’t complain anymore!” Hiromi chimed in.

“Let’s do this, Commander!” they all cried in unison.

“You guys... thank you. This is the first time you’ve called me Commander.” Kaname folded her arms and lowered her gaze, looking extremely moved. Tears pooled at the corners of her eyes, and then she struck an enthusiastic pose.

“Now, let’s get back to training! Line up!”

“Yeah!”

“Radio calisthenics Number Two! Thirty times!”

The men collapsed to their knees, wailing in agony.

“Hey, Sagara-kun...” Kazumi said to Sousuke as they moved away from the camp.

“What?”

“Are you sure about this? Those friends you’re going to fight... Chidori-san and the others? You said some very harsh things to them...”

“It’s the truth. They can’t possibly beat me.”

“But... even if you’ve used real guns in foreign countries, Japanese survival games are a different beast.”

“That’s why I’m asking you to teach me.”

“I suppose, but—”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get the empty anti-AS 76mm cartridges that I promised you. A dozen of them,” he said bluntly, then removed the AEG from its case.

Kazumi had come along with him on the promise of receiving some rare military surplus. Empty 76mm cartridges were very hard to find in Japan, and quite expensive. They were about the size of a pen, so they were great for interior design.

“Also, this is a good opportunity. I’m going to fight so hard she never picks up a firearm again.”

“Oh... why?”

Sousuke paused in the middle of fiddling with his gun. “I don’t exactly know.” He then used the special loader to refill the magazine with BBs. “I just feel like it’s the right thing to do.”

Obviously, they had to do more than calisthenics. Kaname was currently working with Ihara and the others on a more on-point training regimen: accuracy and coordination. At the same time, they were working out a game plan for the match.

They would form four squads of three people each. If any of the squads ran into Sousuke, one member would serve as a shield while another fired wildly to hold the enemy in place, while the most skilled member took aim to try to finish him off. If they could remain calm and employ three-on-one tactics, not even Sousuke should stand a chance. They’d also have four chances at it.

“It’s called Heaven, Earth, Man Tactics,” Kaname explained. “I learned about it from an old Taiga historical manga.”

“Ohhh...”

“The squad names will be Lemon, Peach, Melon, and Papaya. Make sure you

use those call signs when communicating via radio.”

“Those names sound a little wussy...”

“Really? I think they’re cute.”

“Well, okay,” Ihara reluctantly agreed. “What else?”

“We have to work out our placement and timetable.” Kaname opened up the map of the pay-to-rent survival game field outside Tokyo, where the match would take place. “You know this field well, right, Ihara-kun?”

“Affirmative.”

“But Sousuke doesn’t,” she pointed out. “We’ll use that to our advantage. We’ll place our teams... here, here, here, and here. Stay in contact and herd him towards the southeast part of the forest.”

It was a pretty logical placement for an amateur, but Ihara and the others voiced their doubts.

“You think it’ll work?”

“It’ll be fine,” Kaname reassured them. “His best strategies involve setting traps and getting in close enough to punch and kick. But he’s not allowed to do any of that this time.”

“Hmm. I see.”

“And with this many people, it should be surprisingly easy to finish him. No worries!” Kaname declared with a clenched fist.

And so, the day of the match arrived. It was a Sunday afternoon as the group gathered in the field’s safe zone, with Hayashimizu playing referee.

Kaname was wearing borrowed fatigues and jungle boots with a bandanna wrapped around her head. She hooked up the battery of her AEG, which she’d just learned to use, and loaded its magazine with BBs. She then secured her side arm into its holster and put goggles on for eye protection.

She pulled on the gloves and flexed her fingers a few times. “Okay,” she finally said, “preparations complete.”

“You look wonderful, Chidori-san,” said Mikihara Ren, who’d come to watch.

“Yeah, totally awesome!” chimed in Tokiwa Kyoko, who’d done the same.

“Thanks!” she told them. “Okay, you guys ready?!” She turned to her men.

“We’re ready, Commander!” Ihara and the others chorused together. They’d ended up only having a few days to train, but it seemed to have done them a world of good, as they were all brimming with enthusiasm. The combination of running, shooting, and eating Kaname’s home cooking had increased their sense of unity, as well.

Sousuke, meanwhile, was wearing his old fatigues. He shouldered his AEG with a practiced motion and did a few light warmup exercises.

“Sousuke,” said Kaname. “You look pretty confident.”

“Yes. I’m going to finish you off quickly and go home.”

“Grr...”

Sousuke’s taciturn nature could be very annoying at times like this.

Then Ihara approached timidly. “Chidori-san. Here,” he said, handing her a small envelope. “The JB concert tickets I promised you.”

“Huh? But... we haven’t won yet,” Kaname protested.

“No problem. I was going to give them to you either way.”

Kaname was silent.

“Let me tell you one thing before the match starts. We might be a lousy-ass team... but we’re all honored to be fighting at your side. Thanks to you, we’ve regained the enthusiasm we started this hobby with.” Ihara, the boy with the old-man face and goatee, spoke with eyes shining in a way that was appropriate for his actual age. Complete trust, beyond advantage and disadvantage... Theoretically, giving Kaname the ticket she was doing this for might diminish her enthusiasm, but they apparently didn’t doubt her at all. “However it turns out, I won’t have any regrets,” he declared earnestly. “Let’s give Sagara-kun a run for his money!”

“R-Right,” stammered Kaname.

Then Hayashimizu, playing the referee, said, “Are you ready? It’s a simple elimination game, as previously explained. Just defeat all members of the opposing team. We’ll expect self-reporting for any hits taken, but I’ll be tracking both sides with binoculars from the safe zone. First, Sagara-kun will move to the north side of the field. Five minutes later, I will blow a whistle to start the match. That is all. Any questions?” Hayashimizu looked around at the group and saw none. “Good. Please begin.”

“Roger,” Sousuke said, hopping a few times like a track runner before a meet. Then he let out a quick breath and ran into the forest of the game field.

Sousuke’s insistence that he’d finish them off quickly wasn’t an idle boast. As a super veteran elite soldier, he would demolish their amateurish plan in just the first five minutes.

First, he crushed the Lemon Squad, led by Sasaki Hiromi. Hiromi had reported that they were moving through the brush when both his teammates abruptly took five or six BBs from behind and had to check out. Hiromi fought back as best he could, but it was pointless. He fired BBs into the brush where he thought Sousuke had to be, but then out of nowhere, Sousuke appeared behind him. One quick hit to the back of the head, and he was done.

《Lemon-1 here. I have no idea how he did it! Send reinforcements... gahh!》
The message cut off.

“Sasaki-kun?!” Kaname cried. “Respond, Sasaki-kun!”

“You mean Lemon-1, Chidori-san. You’re the one who insisted on call signs...”
said her squadmate, Ihara.

Ignoring the comment, Kaname cursed. “Dammit, Lemon Squad’s down. I forgot how weirdly good he is at sneaking and hiding and stuff...”

“This is awful. Then it won’t be possible to herd him to the point we—”

Just then, there was a communication from Peach Squad. Peach’s leader was Inoue, the man with the cross-shaped scar. 《Peach-1 here! We’re taking fire! We’re returning fire while heading for Point Del— Wagh!》

“I-Inoue-kun?!”

Another voice came across on the same channel. 《P-Peach-2 here! Peach-1 is dead. I'm taking command of this squad. Heading for Point Del— Wagh!》

“What?!”

A third voice chimed in. 《Peach-3 here. Peach-2 is dead! I'm the only one left! I'm gonna try to return fire. Heading for Point Del— Wagh!》

The transmission cut off. It was one “wagh!” after another. Honestly, Sousuke's efficiency was really just disgusting.

The same thing happened with Melon Squad. Just a few minutes after Peach Squad's total elimination, they were already in trouble. The voice of knife-user Ebikawa came over the radio. 《Hahh... hahh... Melon-1 here. My subordinates are all down...》

“Hang in there, Ebikawa-kun!” cried Kaname.

《It's no use... He got me in the gut. I don't have long...》

“No... don't die!”

“Wait, are you a zombie now?” Ihara asked awkwardly.

Zombie play—to stay in the game despite taking a hit from a BB—was against the rules.

Ignoring his teammate's objection, Ebikawa kept up his theatrical speech. 《Khhh... he's headed your way. We managed to lure him to our target destination. It's all up to you guys now...》

“Nngh... Ebikawa-kun...”

《Reminds me of the Laotian border... Take care of things, Commander. Make sure you... hrrrk!》

With those final words, Melon-1 expired. Kaname closed her eyes meditatively, turned off her radio, and asked Ihara, “Hey... how was that, rules-wise?”

“Umm... seems borderline safe. It's not against the rules to roleplay over the radio like that after you die, so...” Ihara said awkwardly.

“Okay, okay... But what it comes down to is, we're the only ones left,”

Kaname concluded. “Fortunately, it seems we’ve got our enemy right where we want him...”

Just then, they heard empty cans clinking together in the underbrush at their four.

“Ah!” It was a tripwire they’d set up in advance. Sousuke had triggered it! Setting up alarms like that seemed a little like cheating, but it wasn’t technically against the rules. And it was the only way for them to stand a chance against a master stalker like Sousuke.

“Over there! Shoot!” Kaname, Ihara and their squadmate whipped around, took cover, and began firing in the direction of the sound. BBs rained down on the underbrush with a *pop-pop-pop* sound. She expected firepower like that would be enough to hold Sousuke down, but...

The next instant, BBs began to shower them from a completely different direction!

“Wah!” One squadmate was hit and immediately taken out of the game.

Sousuke had used a decoy to trigger the tripwire. They should have known that the seasoned veteran wouldn’t have fallen into such a simple trap.

“What?!” Kaname cried.

A shadow was rushing through the dim jungle: it was Sousuke. He was coming at them like a wild, nimble beast, all while shielding himself among the trees. There was nothing for them to aim at.

It’s no use, Kaname realized. We’re dead. He’ll get Ihara-kun first, then me...

“Graaaah!” Just as she thought that, Ihara did something incredible. Rather than firing at Sousuke, he hefted up his AEG and threw it at him.

“Ah?!” Sousuke knocked away the airsoft gun flying at him. He certainly hadn’t expected Ihara to throw such an expensive tool without hesitation.

In a real fight, Sousuke wouldn’t have hesitated to get violent, with elbow strikes and knee strikes to get the charging Ihara in a grapple. But here, he hesitated. This was their chance.

As Sousuke tried to take aim again, Ihara charged him with all his might,

hitting him with a low tackle.

“Geh?!” Sousuke staggered and fell down on his behind. Ihara fell with him.

“Now, Chidori-san! Shoot him!”

“Um...”

“Shoot him and me together!” Ihara implored her. “Go!”

This really would be their last chance. Urged on by Ihara’s shouting, Kaname pointed her AEG forward... At Sousuke and Ihara, grappling in the mud...

“Hurry!”



She hesitated.

“What are you doing?!”

She still couldn’t fire.

Ihara was clinging to Sousuke’s gun with a desperate look in his eyes. She couldn’t bring herself to shoot him. Her mind rebelled against her wishes in a way she’d never felt before.

After all, Ihara-kun’s my comrade. Isn’t there some way to finish off Sousuke without hitting him? Is there no way to spare the ally who trusts me?!

It was just a single, fleeting thought. And... thinking back later, in those few seconds, maybe Sousuke could have thrown Ihara off and shot back at Kaname. In that second, which passed by in slow motion, Sousuke was looking at her. He was noticing the reticence in Kaname’s eyes. Somehow, she felt like he was saying to her, *“This is what I meant. Do you understand?”*

“Chidori-san!” came Ihara’s voice again.

This time, it snapped her back to reality. *Oh, right*, she remembered, *it’s just an airsoft gun*. “Sorry!” Kaname swallowed hard and pulled the trigger. Thirty BBs rained down on Sousuke and Ihara.

Ihara and the others were delighted by their amazing underdog victory. They’d beaten *the* Sagara Sousuke, after all, and now their club would be official. The boys were walking on air.

“Even the mighty may fall, I suppose,” Hayashimizu chuckled.

Sousuke looked a bit sheepish. “I suppose so,” he said with a shrug.

“It’s fine. It’s not as if I was severely opposed to acknowledging their club. You did well today.”

“Thank you, sir.”

And that was the end of the match. Hayashimizu treated them to an all-you-can-eat yakiniku banquet on the way home. Kitano Kazumi, who had gotten off of work by that point, joined them, which pleased the boys even more. Holding

their large beer steins (most actually containing oolong tea) in one hand, they sang and drank and hollered.

Kaname and Sousuke sat next to each other at the end of the table, a bit away from the party.

“Hey,” she said, “about before...”

“What?”

“I think I get it now.”

“Hmm. Really?” asked Sousuke, running one hand along the edge of his bowl, which was filled with kalbi kuppa.

“Yeah... so I hope you’ll forget about what happened before,” said Kaname, peering sidelong at his expression.

Sousuke, who was eating with an expression of great satisfaction, swallowed and then responded lightly. “Yes. I’ll forget it.”

“Thanks. It all seems a little too easy, though...”

“Not an issue.”

“Oh, well. Here,” she said invitingly, “the loin is cooked up.”

“Hmm...”

“It’s best when it’s still a little raw at the center. Remember that.”

“I will.” After adding the spicy sauce, he took a bite of the piping hot barbecue. After swallowing it down, Sousuke whispered, “It’s good.”

“Right? Heh heh...” said Kaname, giving him the first unreserved smile she’d shown him in a while.

[The End]

The Local Surveyor

Morning sunlight streamed through the window. By the time Chidori Kaname woke up, it was already 7:41 a.m. *Not much time before the opening bell...* At this rate, she'd be late.



Even so, it took her another five minutes to get out of bed.

“Guh...” She’d fallen asleep the night before just after her bath, wearing only a pair of cheap underwear and a blouse.

Kaname had been living alone for a year and a half now. She’d grown sloppy with her lifestyle recently. It wasn’t as if there was anyone to see her, after all. And her mother, who had always been the one to wake her up in the morning, was now gone.

Kaname decided to skip her morning shower, as well as breakfast. She just got dressed, washed her face, and brushed her hair. Her long, beautiful hair was such an annoyance at times like this.

The hands of the clock now read 8:01. The train would arrive at the closest station in six minutes. She had to hurry!

With her school bag in her right hand and the bag of noncombustible trash in her left, Kaname flew out of the room. As she headed for the apartment complex’s dump site, she passed a neighbor. It was a junior high boy dressed in a blazer uniform.

“Good morning,” she greeted him, but the boy didn’t even acknowledge her. As rude as it was, it wasn’t exactly rare. Tokyo apartment life was just like that.

The other residents had already piled up their garbage at the dump site. She threw her own bag onto the pile and had just turned to run for the station, when—

“Hey, wait! Hang on a minute!” came a voice.

She stopped and looked back to see the apartment’s cleaning lady step out from behind a pillar. She was significantly shorter than Kaname, and wearing a green tracksuit, a rubber apron, gloves, and boots. She was a familiar sight around the apartments. On weekday mornings, she tidied up the dump site and cleaned the communal areas.

“Yes?” Kaname asked back.

“You can’t mix noncombustible and combustible garbage!”

She pointed at one of the bags in the pile. Amidst the translucent city-

endorsed noncombustible trash bags sat a moist, dripping bag full of kitchen waste. It wasn't the bag that Kaname had set out.

"Um, that isn't my bag," Kaname protested.

"Liar! I just saw you!"

"There must be some kind of misunderstanding. My bag is—"

"No excuses! Come on!" The old woman cut her off, grabbed the garbage bag and thrust it at Kaname.

"Now, hang on a minute here!" said Kaname. "I'm in kind of a hurry—"

"No, no, no! You have to separate your waste and take the combustibles back to your apartment!" said the cleaning lady, who then thrust her dingy pair of tongs into Kaname's face, glaring at her viciously. She looked like a militiaman in some destabilized country, sticking a rifle into her opponent's face. A pungent smell stung Kaname's nose, impossible to describe.

"I'm telling you, I—" Kaname looked at her watch. The second hand was ticking away. The train would arrive in three minutes. She didn't have time to argue, but she didn't have time to go back to her room, either. "Aargh!" Left with no other choice. Kaname gritted her teeth, snatched the bag, and ran towards the station with it still in her hand.

"That old hag pisses me off so bad!" Kaname shouted after her first period class ended. She had made it just in time. "Didn't even listen... so humiliating..." she grumbled to herself resentfully. "Thinks she's right about everything..." She opened up the garbage bag she had stored with her personal belongings in the back of the room, and began separating them briskly. Her classmates who had been gagging for fifty minutes from the stench watched her with scowls.

One classmate, Tokiwa Kyoko, watched Kaname work. "You really brought that trash bag all the way here on a packed train?"

"I didn't have a choice! If I'd just dumped it on the way here, I would've been as bad as the vandal. It would be like admitting the old hag was right! I won't subject myself to that humiliation!"

“You’ve got integrity about the weirdest things...” Kyoko said, pinching her nose.

“You refer to the custodian of your apartment complex?” asked Sagara Sousuke, who stood there quite calmly, by contrast.

“Yeah,” Kaname fumed. “That old hag with the twisted sense of justice, who never listens to anybody!”

Sousuke folded his arms and listened with a frown. “The custodian is a serious and industrious person,” he remarked. “The fault must be yours somehow.”

“Is not! I *separated* my garbage! But she just— Wait, how do you know her?!” Kaname demanded.

“I jog around the neighborhood every morning,” said Sousuke. “We sometimes exchange pleasantries.”

“I see. Is that it?”

“That’s it.”

“Well, either way, she’s the worst. She treated me like a criminal even though I’m completely innocent! This won’t stand!” said Kaname, slamming the two plastic bags into the bins where they belonged.

One evening, several days later...

Kaname returned home, her uniform covered in soot. As was typical by now, Sousuke had caused an explosion and chaos had resulted... but that wasn’t the important part of this story. After taking a shower and changing into her street clothes, thinking about what she could make with what was in her refrigerator, she heard the intercom for her apartment beep.

“Yes?” she called.

“Excuse me, I’m from the police. Special armed detective Wakana with the Sengawa violent crimes unit. Could I ask you a few questions?”

“Violent crimes unit? Special armed detective?” Kaname asked suspiciously. The female voice sounded vaguely familiar, and there was no such division or rank in all of the Japanese police force.

“Oh, sorry. I was just trying to explain my duties in civilian-friendly terms. Anyway, can I ask you a few questions?”

“Um...”

“I can come back with a warrant and a SWAT team if I have to,” Wakana offered.

“Fine, fine, fine! Just a minute! I’m coming!” Kaname walked to the front door and opened it. As expected, the person standing in the communal hallway was a familiar face: Wakana Yoko, from the Sengawa Police Department. They’d met each other over the course of a few incidents, and Kaname had learned that this officer was a loose cannon, in some ways as troublesome and lacking in common sense as Sousuke.

Wakana was pretty, provided she didn’t open her mouth. She was dressed in plainclothes—jeans and a baseball jacket. She held up her police ID in the manner of an FBI investigator in a movie.



As she looked into Kaname's face, Wakana Yoko frowned suspiciously. "Oh, hello again. What are you doing here?"

"This is my apartment," Kaname told her, "I live here."

"Really? What a coincidence," Yoko said flatly, looking suspiciously around her entryway.

"Um... so, what can I help you with?"

"I have a few questions for you. There was a burglary in your apartment complex this morning."

"A burglary? Aren't you in the traffic division—"

"There's a patrolman who acts as a gofer for the regional division," said Wakana, cutting her off midway. "I stole the job he was assigned."

"You really just take whatever you want, don't you?" asked Kaname, who was beginning to have doubts about the professionalism of the Sengawa Police Department, given the free rein they seemed to give this cop drama-obsessed maniac.

"It's fine," Wakana said confidently. "Questioning goes much smoother with a beautiful woman like me handling it. Incidentally, a scriptwriter named Shimo ****hiko got involved in a murder case and a real big-shot detective in our precinct thinks he's behind it. He even had his fingerprints taken. This is nothing compared to that."

"That's a lot to throw on a person out of nowhere..." muttered Kaname.

"Let's talk about the burglary," said Wakana. "The Yamadas in apartment 103 had a break-in while they were out for their morning tennis game. They were gone for two and a half hours, between 7:00 and 9:30. In that time, their savings of 50,000 yen in the dresser and 150,000 yen worth of jewelry were stolen."

"A first-floor apartment, huh?"

"Yeah. Perp came in through the garden and broke the glass door. You see anyone suspicious?"

“I don’t think so,” said Kaname. “I just threw out my trash and went to school, like always.”

“Did you run into anyone on the way? A big guy with a striped sack and a hanky wrapped around his face, or a phantom thief-type in a mask and a tuxedo?”

“I wish criminals were that easy to identify...”

“So, you didn’t see anyone at all?” Wakana asked.

“Nobody suspicious, at least,” said Kaname. “I shared the elevator with a standard middle-aged white-collar type I see around now and then. That’s about it.”

“You know which is his apartment?”

“No idea. I think he came from the fifth floor or higher.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.”

“And you said he wore a brown tie?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Police officers often asked for confirmation of things they knew to be false when dealing with someone they had suspicions about. Someone with something to hide would just agree to whatever the officer said. This was one such leading question.

“Why do you suspect me, anyway?” Kaname asked.

“It’s nothing personal. It’s just part of the investigation. So? You said he lived in apartment 302?”

“You’re really getting on my nerves now...”

“I’m just kidding.” Yoko shrugged. “One way or another, it seems like it was an inside job.”

“What makes you think that?”

“There’s a security perimeter around the first-floor garden. The only way to

get in without triggering the alarm would be to go around the fire escape from inside the complex.”

They were in a relatively safe residential district in the Tokyo suburbs, but things had been getting a little more dangerous lately. Kaname’s apartment, too, had undergone construction a little while ago and had anti-theft devices installed at that time. It was now much more difficult for criminals to enter than before.

“So the culprit would first have to enter the apartment’s communal areas without being suspected,” Wakana said.

“I see.”

“Good. Incidentally... you haven’t been hard up for money lately, have you? Not incurring debts from your friends at school, or gaining a taste for expensive brands...”

“Well, I did borrow five hundred yen from Kyoko...” Kaname admitted, then realized what she was doing. “Hey, I told you to cut it out!”

Yoko looked very disappointed. “I see. I guess you’re not involved, then.”

“Of course I’m not!” Kaname exclaimed. “And while I’m at it, I really doubt anyone living here would need to pull off a small-potatoes robbery like that.” The people in her apartment complex had a pretty high standard of living. The place had been built twelve years ago, it was close to the station, and it had all the amenities. All of the cars in the parking lot were relatively expensive brands, as well. In other words, there were a lot of rather well-off families living there.

Surprisingly enough, Yoko agreed pretty readily with Kaname. “Yeah, that’s the issue. Which means that this is our obvious suspect.”

“Hmm?”

Yoko held out a picture of a pair of dirty tongs lying next to a dresser.

“Is that...”

“Our sole piece of evidence. A tool used by the complex’s cleaning lady.”

“That old lady?” asked Kaname. “I doubt she’d leave behind such an obvious piece of—”

“I thought it was suspicious too,” Wakana admitted. But it was all she had to go on. It wasn’t actually a violent crime, so they hadn’t done any proper crime scene investigation. It turned out that the cleaning lady had been questioned and taken off to the station that morning while Kaname was at school. “We also contacted the apartment’s management agency and insurance company for her papers and such. They sent a few of their suits by the precinct.”

“Is she still at the precinct?”

“I’m not sure,” Wakana told her. “She’s not cooperating, though, so I decided to do some investigating on my own. I wanted to get the credit, after all... ha ha ha.” Yoko laughed confidently and then left.

Kaname was concerned about the burglary, but it seemed unlikely that the culprit would target the same building twice. Still, she was worried about the cleaning lady. The old woman might be irritating, but Kaname couldn’t imagine her being a thief.

“I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding...” Kaname whispered to herself. But then, it didn’t directly concern her, anyway.

Afterwards, Kaname threw all of the leftovers in her refrigerator together, seasoned the mix heavily with chili pepper and garlic, and made spaghetti. It was a little too much for one person, though, so she gave Sousuke a call.

He picked up and said, “Sorry, I’m eating at the moment.” Apparently, he was meeting up with an old battle colleague at Yokota Air Base.

Kaname said, “Fine. Later,” and hung up.

She ate dinner alone while watching TV. *Maybe I should have invited Wakana-san*, she thought. The spaghetti tasted all right for being such an improvised meal, but there was nobody to brag about her good instincts to. With no other choice, she just whispered, “Yes. It’s good,” out loud.

But there was nobody to agree with her.

The next morning was trash day, but Kaname didn’t see the old cleaning lady anywhere. A small group of crows skulked among the garbage bags strewn

haphazardly around the dump site, picking at them and casting their contents onto the street.

Kaname heard three housewives talking near the elevator hall. They were discussing the burglary.

“Did you hear? They say it was that old cleaning lady.”

“It’s not proven yet, is it?”

“But wouldn’t it be awful if it was her?”

“I hear she had to quit her last job because she stirred up trouble there, too.”

“You think it’s really true?”

“Yes, that’s what I heard. Though she certainly puts on a kind face to the residents here...”

The malicious gossip was being led by a slightly chubby housewife in her early forties. Kaname recognized her; she had served on the apartment residents’ superintendent board several times. She had also apparently participated in movements to ban harmful books, having come to Kaname’s apartment to collect signatures before.

“They’re just making baseless assumptions...” Kaname muttered to herself, but chose not to intervene as she passed them by on her hurried way to school.

That day, after class, Sousuke and Tsubaki Issei had a fight that left three windows and a classroom door broken. Other than that, it was an ordinary day. On her way home that evening, Kaname gave Sousuke a thorough lecture, then invited him over for dinner. He followed her loyally, tail wagging.

They went shopping at the fishmonger on the shopping street, but as they returned to her apartment, they saw a figure near the dumping site, spraying the street with a hose. It was the cleaning lady. Had she been released? No, given what Wakana Yoko had said, it didn’t seem like she had actually been arrested...

“Oh, hello...” Kaname decided to take a neutral attitude towards the cleaning lady despite their unpleasant interaction the other day. Sousuke gave her a

silent nod as well.

The cleaning lady turned back with a neutral frown. Kaname had assumed she would be depressed about her trip to the police, but that didn't appear to be the case. Still, she did look exhausted.

"Dinner?" the old lady asked.

Kaname remembered she had a plastic shopping bag hanging from her arm. "Yeah. The fishmonger had cheap saury today."

"How wonderful. You cook for yourself?"

"Yeah, but daikon radishes have been expensive lately. It's a real problem," Kaname laughed.

The other woman let out a speculative hum, then went back to hosing down the road.

"It's unusual to see you out at this hour," Kaname added. She'd only ever seen the old woman in the mornings.

"I was worried about the filth, since I missed this morning."

"Really?"

"And it's in as bad shape as I imagined. Even though I'm always telling them to put nets over the trash. Honestly..." Muttering to herself, the old woman went on spraying the trash on the road into the gutters.

"Ah... I'm sorry," said Kaname. "I did see the crows picking at it this morning, but..."

"It's fine. You had school, right?"

"Oh... yes."

"I realized what happened after you left. You were in a hurry because you were late, right?" The old woman said indifferently.

"Yes. Well..."

"I see. Next time, make sure you sort your garbage properly, all right?"

"But, seriously, that wasn't my—"

“All right, all right. Just be more careful next time.”

“Grr...” There was no talking to her; she was as stubborn as ever. But at the very least, the flippant way she’d spoken suggested she didn’t hold a grudge. *This issue is behind us*, she seemed to be saying.

Well, all right, Kaname thought as she bade her goodbye, then entered the building’s front hall with Sousuke.

“You were more amicable than I thought. The other day, at school, you spoke so poorly of her,” said Sousuke, who had been quiet through the whole interaction.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter,” she told him. “I was just annoyed, with it being first thing in the morning and all.”

“I see.”

They entered the front hall just as a young man in a suit was posting a notice on the residents’ message board. It was probably someone from the management agency. Kaname peeked over his shoulder and saw that the notice was about the recent burglary, with a reminder to residents to lock their doors.

“Hey... did they catch the thief?” Kaname asked.

The man from the agency shook his head. “No. At least... not yet. They might. It’s hard to say.” With that, he cast a glance in the direction of the dump site. “The police took in a person of interest... They were apparently kept for questioning overnight, but continued to deny it. I guess the police don’t have decisive proof, so they sent her home.”

“A person of interest?” Kaname echoed. “That cleaning lady?”

“Ah, well, yes. You can see she’s still at work. We told her to take some time off, but she’s very stubborn. Nevertheless, I’m monitoring her. You can rest easy.”

The part about him monitoring the cleaning lady got on her nerves. “That doesn’t seem right, does it? Treating her like a criminal over one stupid piece of evidence? Hasn’t she been working here for a long time? Aren’t you going to defend her?”

The man made an expression as if to say, *"I only work here."* "Well... I'll take your opinion into account. But a lot of people are nervous, and I'm getting complaints. So... no matter how the police investigation goes, I think we're going to ask her to quit at the end of the week."

Kaname stared at him in surprise. "You're firing her?"

"Yes."

"Just based on suspicions?"

"Regrettably, yes."

Kaname felt her face turn hot. "What the heck?! That's stupid! You can't do this! There's no way she would rob someone's apartment while carrying a work tool that would immediately incriminate her! And just leaving it behind like that? It's ridiculous!"

"It's possible it was a spur of the moment thing," he pointed out.

"Like hell! Nobody really believes that!"

"Stop it, Chidori." Sousuke held back Kaname as she began to grow heated.

Even so, she continued taking the man to task. "Are you guys even trying to find the real culprit?! You're just going to declare a random criminal and sweep it under the rug? That's disgusting. It's awful!"

"Chidori," Sousuke said again. "Calm down."

At last, the elevator door opened.

"This 'don't rock the boat' bullshit sucks! You're worse than garbage! Hang on! I'm not done yet! Let me go! Come on!" As Kaname continued trying to lay into the man, Sousuke dragged her away. The man from the management agency simply stood there in shock and watched them leave.

Once they were in her apartment, the still-angry Kaname laid out to Sousuke everything that had happened.

"I see," he said afterwards. "That's quite ridiculous."

"Right?! It's so wrong! She might be an annoying old lady, but I can't let them

do this to her!” said Kaname, while she chopped the saury in half and slapped it on the grill.



“But the fact remains that there’s no evidence to the contrary,” Sousuke continued. “And I can understand the residents’ feelings of insecurity. Unless she can prove her innocence, the management agency’s response is understandable.”

“How can you be so cold?”

“My temperature is irrelevant. I’m merely evaluating the facts of the matter,” Sousuke said, grating the daikon radish.

“But you can’t be okay with it, right?” Kaname insisted. “You know that old lady too, don’t you?”

“Affirmative.”

“And you don’t feel bad for her?”

“I can express my sympathy and concern, but it won’t improve the situation.”

“Still, I can’t stand it. If this were a detective manga, we’d find the true culprit and end everything happily, but...”

“Yes, but that likely won’t happen here,” Sousuke told her.

Everything he’d said was on target. Kaname was a total outsider, and she didn’t have any useful proof or leads. If the old woman wasn’t behind the burglary, then who was? It wasn’t as if Kaname knew everyone who lived in the apartment complex. It could even be a completely unrelated team of thieves.

A long silence fell. The only sounds were the grill burner and Sousuke grating radish.

“Still,” she said, “it gets on my nerves.”

“Just let it go. There’s nothing you can do. It’s finished,” Sousuke said at last, holding out a small bowl of grated daikon.

“I’ll handle the rest, then. You can go watch TV or something.”

“Understood.”

That was the end of their talk about the burglaries.

In addition to the fried saury, the meal ended up consisting of hot daikon miso soup, freshly steamed rice, okara, and reheated Japanese yam stew. Sousuke had seconds of both rice and miso, and they watched a nature documentary on TV together while drinking their after-dinner tea. When the show was over, he thanked her and returned to his nearby apartment.

Suddenly, Kaname's apartment was empty again. She'd be on her own until morning. If her mother were alive and with her right now, they'd probably talk about Sousuke. *"Boys really do eat a lot, don't they?"* or *"If you keep bossing him around like a big sister, he won't ever like you."* It sometimes felt unsatisfying to not have someone to laugh about these things with.

No, she told herself. *This is enough. Living alone is easy. I'm not lonely at all.* She then lay down on the sofa and stared blankly at the TV.

A comedian on the screen said something silly. Kaname laughed her head off for a while. Then she let out a small sigh.

One morning, a few days later...

The weather was bad, raining on and off. Kaname woke up a little earlier than usual and headed for the dump site with a heavy bundle of newspapers. While there, she noticed something was off: the cleaning lady had collapsed. More precisely, she was crouched on the ground, leaning limply against a pillar a few meters from the site.

"Um... A-Are you all right?" Kaname asked nervously.

When the lady didn't respond, Kaname began to look around in panic. A young woman, seemingly also a resident there, threw out her garbage and was about to head back to the entrance. She didn't seem to have noticed what had happened.

No... that isn't it, Kaname realized. *She's pretending not to see so she doesn't have to get involved.* Given how fast she was walking, that had to be it.

Kaname was taken aback, but quickly snapped back to reality and checked the older woman out. "H-Hang on a minute, okay? I'll call the ambulance!" She pulled her phone from her pocket, but the old lady stopped her.

“Don’t. I’m fine.”

“But—”

“Just a little lightheaded,” she insisted. “Really. I’ll rest a while and feel right as rain.”

Kaname said nothing.

“I’ve made enough trouble already, right? So... I don’t want an ambulance.”

“B-But...”

“Really, just leave me alone!” Despite the bad condition she was in, the old lady remained dauntless. She really was a strong-willed woman.

“Fine,” Kaname agreed after a pause. “But you really shouldn’t be sitting here. Come to my place.”

The woman shook her head. “I don’t need your help. I’m not so far gone as to need pity from a stranger while I’m already being accused of burglary. Just leave me alone!” It seemed the investigation had affected her after all, which was entirely understandable.

But despite all that, the cleaning lady continued to reject Kaname’s offers. She must have hated being pitied. Her pride was honestly kind of stunning. Could it be that this old cleaning lady actually had a greater sense of dignity than those gossipy housewives?

Still, Kaname couldn’t just leave her there. She used the strength of her youth to compel the woman’s obedience. “Just come on,” she insisted. “You can’t stay out in this cold!”

“W-Wait! Hang on...”

“Can you get up?! Take my shoulder!” Kaname held the cleaning lady’s hand, which was covered in a wet rubber glove, and forced it over her shoulder. The old woman was far lighter than she’d expected.

Despite her slowness, moving her to the living room in her apartment had proved to be quite a task. The woman had kept insisting that she let go, not to worry about her, that she had to work—but Kaname had eventually forced her

onto the sofa. She'd almost felt tempted to restrain her with the handcuffs she'd confiscated from Sousuke.

The old woman had also been worried about the state she'd left the dump site in, so Kaname had eventually ordered her to lie down, then took her umbrella and left her apartment.

As expected, in just that brief amount of time, the dump had come to overflow with old newspapers, old magazines, and glass bottles. She decided to tidy up the pile. The truck that picked up the recycling only came as far as the road, so she'd have to move the garbage to that spot, eight meters away, before collection time.

That massive pile of garbage, all by herself...

"Ah, dammit," said Kaname. She started by carrying the newspaper bundles out one at a time, so that she could keep her umbrella in her other hand. She soon realized that doing it that way was going to take forever, though, so she gave up, dropped the umbrella, and began carrying as much as she could in both arms at once.

Some might be inclined to wonder why a girl in a high school uniform would be carrying newspapers from the dump site to the road in the pouring rain. But the residents just kept piling on the trash as if they didn't even see her there.

Her breathing grew heavy. She began sweating. Her arms and her fingers went numb.

A stack of magazines that hadn't been bundled properly fell apart and spilled out onto the ground. *Who the hell did that?* She cursed as she gathered them back up. The newspapers were growing heavy from the rain they'd absorbed. Like the weight of a human life. *That little old lady does this every week?* she marveled.

One of the residents tossed a bag of combustible waste on the pile and tried to leave. *Even though it's recyclables day!*

"Hey, wait a minute!" Kaname shouted at her before she could think, stalking up to the woman.

The young housewife stood there in confusion.

“You can’t do that! It’s recyclables day!” Kaname laid into her. “Combustible waste is another day!”

“Oh? I... er...”

“You can’t fool me, okay? Take it back! Go on!” She shoved the bag back at her with a glare.

The woman took the bag and ran away.

“Darn it!” Kaname said with a snort. There was no way she’d make it in time for homeroom now, but she didn’t have a choice. She still had plenty of time before first period, at least...

“Chidori. What are you doing?” came a voice.

Kaname turned around and saw Sousuke standing there. He was holding an umbrella and carrying a large bag under his arm. “Well... isn’t it obvious? Some stuff happened, and... Darn it...” she said, spitting out the words.

“That looks hard.”

“It sure is. Think you might help me out?” That she was asking for his help was a sign of how exhausted she was.

But Sousuke just looked at his watch, hesitated a moment, then said, “I’m sorry. I have business to take care of. I have to go.”

“Huh? What could you possibly have to take care of before scho—”

“Best of luck.” With that, Sousuke left, expressionless.

“You... unfeeling creep!” she shouted after him.

How cold can a person be? Are you no different than the other people here?! Jerk! I’m so disappointed! You snake! You cretin! While whispering silent curses at him in her heart, Kaname released a deep sigh. *Well, forget him for now. I’ve gotta clear out this trash.*

It was a little after nine by the time she finished carrying it all, finishing the last loads even as the collection truck pulled in. Finally, soaked from the sweat and the rain, Kaname plodded wearily back to her apartment.

She entered the living room and found the old lady snoozing on the sofa. She stripped off her sweaty uniform, showered, and changed into her school track suit. By the time she'd settled in and started watching a morning show, the old woman finally woke up.

"Oh, dear... the recycling pickup..." the old woman said as she groggily tried to sit up.

Kaname quickly stopped her. "Ah, don't. I took care of it. You can rest a while longer, okay?"

The woman looked at the clock in the room. Then she let out a sigh, lowered her eyes, and whispered, "Oh... you carried all that? That must have been hard." She was sounding timid for the first time Kaname had ever heard.

"Oh, no. I was fine," Kaname told her reassuringly. "I think the load was lighter than usual today."

"Really?"

"Yeah, easy-peasy. My friend from the neighborhood also helped. You know, the guy I was with yesterday." Kaname was happy to lie about things like this. She was a master of grinning and bearing.

"I'm very sorry... I've been a bit tired lately, it seems."

"Well, that's understandable, after everything that happened... Ah. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I know what the residents think of me," said the cleaning lady, her tone curt but not especially judgmental.

"Was everything all right with the police?"

"Yes, they asked me all kinds of things, but I'm innocent, so I stuck to that and they let me go home."

"Oh, really?" It must not have been as easy as she made it sound, since the landlord's office was willing to fire her over those suspicions alone. Even so, Kaname strove to maintain a cheery tone. "R-Right! I knew it was strange. I don't know who did it, but it's really stupid. I'm sure they'll get their just deserts. And gossip lasts just forty-nine days!"

"The saying is 'seventy-five days,'" the woman said in the tone of a stern

teacher.

“A-Ah ha ha... That’s right.”

“Are you paying attention in school? Honestly...”

“Oh, sorry...” Kaname rubbed the back of her head.

The old woman relaxed for the first time and burst out in a laugh. “Thank you, though. You really are a kind girl, Kaname-san.”

“Huh?” Kaname was surprised. She didn’t realize the woman knew her name. Her apartment’s door plate just said “Chidori.”

“I’m sure you don’t remember, but I’ve known you since you were a child,” the cleaning lady told her. “I’ve been working at this apartment for ten years now, after all.”

“Huh?”

“Your mother called to you frequently: ‘Kaname, you forgot your backpack’ and such.”

“Ah...” Kaname had lived there from ages four to nine before moving to New York with her family. Then three years ago, at age thirteen, she’d returned. To think the old woman had been working here from before they’d gone to the USA... She didn’t remember her at all.

“Rare to see a small child head off to school without their backpack,” the cleaning lady remarked. “You just flew out the door every morning, bursting with energy. You’d even say hello to me, but you were always going so fast you never really looked at me that closely.”

“Ah... ha ha ha. I might have done that,” Kaname confessed. “I’m sorry.”

“Then you moved away, but returned three years ago. You’ve grown up so beautifully, it shocked me! But I recognized you right away. ‘Ah, it’s the girl with the backpack.’”

“H-Hey... ‘beautifully’ is a little much...” said Kaname, who felt like her face was on fire.

“Oh, no. I said it, so it’s true. I have a good eye for people,” the cleaning lady

confided. "I used to run a bar in Ginza, you see."

"What? Really?!"

The old woman puffed out her chest. "Of course. I'm doing this grunt labor now, but I don't look down on myself at all. I do it proudly to put food on the table. The women here could never do what I do. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. Totally," Kaname said genuinely, rubbing at her exhausted arm muscles.

"Good. You're beautiful because you're capable of learning those things. Remember that. Your mother was a wonderful person too, but... oh, I'm sorry." The old woman lowered her voice a bit. She must have known Kaname's mother died of illness.

"Oh, no, that's okay." Kaname forced a smile onto her face.

Seeing her smile, the old lady returned it. "Good. It seems you've cheered up quite a bit since then. You frequently seemed very gloomy in middle school."

Kaname hesitated. "I was."

"You've got good friends now, though?"

"Yes. Um... kind of. Very. I'm not sure which... heh." There was something simultaneously comforting and embarrassing about being around someone who'd been watching her so closely since she was little. It was totally different from talking to someone her own age, like Kyoko. Kaname felt like she hadn't talked to someone like this about herself in ages.

From there, Kaname talked and talked; about Kyoko and her other classmates, then Hayashimizu and the rest of the student council. She bad-mouthed the teachers she hated. She talked about the cake shop she went to with her friends, and about the movies she'd been watching lately. She said there was a boy she liked, but that he'd been cold recently and annoyed her...

Not even Kaname knew exactly why she was doing it, but she just kept talking and talking, like a dam had burst on her words. She talked and talked forever. *It isn't right. This woman isn't my mother.* She told herself that, but the words that had lost any other refuge just kept pouring out of her. In time, she even

found tears in her eyes.

“Kaname-san?” The old woman’s voice snapped her back to attention.

“Huh? Oh... right. No, it’s nothing. It’s just... I haven’t talked to anyone like this in a while... ah ha ha...” Kaname turned away and wiped at her eyes.

“It seems that way.” The old woman smiled kindly at her. It was the first kind expression Kaname had ever seen from her. “But there’s one thing... I’m afraid I’m going to be fired for something I haven’t even done,” said the cleaning lady. “So, that friend of yours you were saying those awful things about before... your boyfriend. Treasure him.”

“Eh?”

“He’s really not as cold as all that,” the cleaning lady said wisely. “I said it before, remember? I have a real eye for people.”



The task itself was simple, but infiltrating a police station was still enervating, even in the morning before most of the officers had arrived. Wearing the uniform he’d secured in advance, Sousuke headed for the second-floor office. He passed a sleepy-looking patrolman on the way, but fortunately wasn’t recognized.

Is this it? he thought as he stepped into the empty traffic office and glanced at the seating chart on the wall. *There—Wakana.*

He found the desk in question right away, which was messily covered in gun magazines and cop drama DVDs.

The mission given to Sousuke by his mercenary organization was the protection of Kaname. Because of that, his squad had hidden cameras set up all around her apartment complex. They were so high-tech that even security professionals wouldn’t be able to spot them easily.

Naturally, they had recorded the suspicious intruder.

The footage would show a human figure on the morning in question breaking the glass door to apartment 103 from the garden. The figure was a middle school student from apartment 102, the son of the nosy woman who liked to

lead movements to ban harmful books. It was a childish crime—maybe he'd just been after some spending money.

Even so, the matter was unrelated to Sousuke's mission, and handing it over to the police did entail some risk. Sousuke had wanted to pretend he hadn't seen the silly breakin, and he'd feigned indifference in front of Kaname as well, but...

He dropped the DVD case carelessly on his desk.

"I've gone so far as to break the rules... Now, do your job," he whispered to himself.

He couldn't afford to stay there long. He turned around and strode out of the traffic office.

[The End]

The Adorable Thermopylae

One Friday, after classes in the usual 2-4 classroom...

“Hey, Sousuke. The flea market’s in two days. You’re free, right?” Chidori Kaname asked Sagara Sousuke.

“Flea market?” he replied curiously. “What’s that?”

“It’s like a swap meet. A bazaar. We promised to run a stall, right?”

“Hmm?” Sousuke watched her with sullen expression, tight frown, and precise motions—almost like a soldier. Well... given that he’d grown up in war-torn regions overseas and still served in a military organization, he was, in fact, *exactly* like a soldier. Then he said, “I thought that was in nine days.”

“Nope. Two days.”

“It’s right here.” Sousuke showed Kaname his student notebook. The Sunday a week from then was circled in red, with Kaname’s handwriting saying, *Leave this date free! No missions or operations!* “You wrote it so that I wouldn’t forget.”

“Huh? What? Oh, so I did... Weird, I must’ve flaked or something.” She checked the flea market flier again. It was definitely in two days. “Hmm, sorry. Guess I got mixed up. Can you come to the one in two days?”

“I have plans,” he informed her.

“Huh?! But I’m gonna be selling the fifty-issue *Golgo* set I bought on a whim, and *Agatte Nanbo!!* by Koike Kazuo, and *Akagi*, and all kinds of manga it’s gonna seem weird for a high school girl to be selling!” she wailed. “It’s embarrassing! I wanted to pretend they were yours!”

“I don’t entirely understand that, but you seem to only want me there for ulterior motives...” A trail of greasy sweat trickled down Sousuke’s temple.

“Hmm, that’s a problem,” said Kaname. “I know it’s my own fault, but there’s no way you can cancel?”

“Sorry. My plans that day are unbreakable.”

“More soldier work?” she asked, lowering her voice here.

“No, but... it’s very important that I be there,” Sousuke insisted. “I have an event similar to your flea market.”

“Huh?”

“It’s at the Aomi Pier Event Hall,” he continued. “The organizers invited me. It’s far too late for me to cancel.”

“I see... That’s that, then, I guess.”

Indeed, Sousuke ended up not being present at Sunday’s flea market, but Kaname headed to the park in the morning with the other friend she’d invited, Tokiwa Kyoko. They lined up all their unneeded manga and other possessions and sat down to wait. But only about an hour passed before...

“Ah... thank you very much.” To her surprise, their wares were gone in a flash. The owner of a ramen shop that Kaname knew came by and bought all her manga in one swoop. Turning to Kyoko, Kaname said, “One hour in and we’re all sold out...”

“I guess it does happen.” Kyoko, in her coke-bottle glasses and braids, stared at the bundle of thousand-yen bills in shock. “Nothing much to do now... Should we just go home?”

“Hmm... That’s not much fun,” said Kaname, looking at her watch. It was a bit after ten, and customers were only just now arriving in force. She’d left her whole day open, but now she had nothing to do.

“Sagara-kun’s in Aomi, right?”

“Yeah,” said Kaname. “He said he had a ‘similar event’... but he didn’t give me details.”

Kyoko’s eyes began to shine with curiosity. “Let’s check that out, then! I’d love to see what kind of stall he runs!”

“Hmm... It’s true that I’ve got nothing better to do, so I wouldn’t mind looking in... But it’s pretty far away, I think.”

“Hey, no problem there. Let’s go!”

They packed up their remaining items and their picnic blanket and headed for Aomi Pier on the bay.

It took a little under forty minutes by train to get from their flea market venue to Aomi Pier. They tried to call Sousuke in advance but got no response. They decided to get off at the nearest station based on memory alone, but...

“This is... kind of a weird vibe,” Kaname observed.

They were at the coastal monorail station. Even though it was a Sunday, there were few couples or families there, just lots of shady-looking passersby—crowds of men with mohawk haircuts and tattoos, studded leather jackets and ear studs, and dangerous expressions. They were the kind of people you usually only caught a glimpse of here and there in the city, but they were currently loitering around the ticket gate en masse.

The whole thing was like a scene out of some piece of post-apocalyptic fiction, like *Fist of the North Star*. Some even cackled while they sprayed graffiti on the wall of the stairs. Kaname almost expected to see them slaughtering innocent villagers while crying, “Purge the filth!” until a passing martial artist took them all out with one finger.

There were even more gathered in the shopping area outside the station, blasting earsplitting music and banging their heads.

“What’s with these guys?” she wondered.

“Kana-chan, don’t make eye contact!” Kyoko reminded her as they made their way through the crowd, as tense as could be.

Fortunately, these men didn’t seem connected to the event Sousuke was taking part in. As the girls got further from the station, the shady types thinned out.

“Is it some kind of cult?”

“No idea.”

They walked another ten to fifteen minutes, and ended up taking a number of

detours: sometimes finding a bridge closed for construction, sometimes reading the map wrong. But at last, they found their destination. The event hall building stood on an isolated stretch of reclaimed land. Despite being a very impressive event hall, it seemed oddly small, surrounded by empty land and parking lots as it was.

“So he’s in there, right?” Kyoko asked.

“I guess so, but... I’ve been calling him, and he’s not picking up,” Kaname told her. Then she thought, *What kind of event is Sousuke actually taking part in? A group of enthusiasts holding something like a flea market on a seaside pier?* Kaname couldn’t imagine what shape that might take, but...

“Is it some kind of doujinshi trade show?” Kyoko whispered.

“Dunno,” said Kaname. “Probably a military geek convention. Selling scary military uniforms and knives and such.”

They passed through the unnecessarily large entrance and entered the venue, emerging into an extremely spacious hall several times the size of a school gymnasium. This was clearly the event venue. There were impressive gates set up all around, and the event name was written on the large sign: *Eighth Annual Fumoffu Market*. And what the girls saw next was...

Lots and lots of Bonta-kuns.

Bonta-kun was a mascot creature somewhere between a dog and a mouse. He had plush fur and large, round eyes, and wore a stylish hat and bowtie. Every step he took made a squeaking sound, and the only things he could say were variations on “fumoffu.”

There were probably over a hundred of them, here in this massive seaside event hall.

“Um... what...” Kyoko began to ask, before trailing off.

“What?” said Kaname. “What is this?”

There were rows and rows of tables, and signs and banners looming everywhere. There were a few hundred booths laid out, and the Bonta-kun

participants were buying and selling goods in their fumo-riffic fashion.

A group of five Bonta-kuns had formed a band on the event stage and were playing an up-tempo song. Nearby, some bunny girl-like Bontas were dancing to the music, receiving applause and cheers for their efforts. There were tons of human participants as well, but it was the Bonta-kuns coming and going all over the venue that made the biggest impact.

In addition to the standard yellow type, there were orange ones, blue ones, green ones... Bonta-kuns of every color of the rainbow. Normally, Kaname and Kyoko would have found them all adorable, but seeing them all here at once was more unnerving than it was delightful. And seeing them all here attending some strange convention—it was curiosity alone that kept her from just turning around and walking right out the door.

“Fumoffu! Fumoffu!” A Bonta-kun selling some kind of book at a nearby booth beckoned to them.

“Huh? Wh-What?”

“Fumoffu.” This Bonta-kun was a pale pink color.

The pink Bonta held out a copy of the book, turning the pages with impressive dexterity for such big, squishy paws. It was a color photo book, showing various Bonta-kuns in cool poses.

“I-It is cute, but is there really demand for this kind of thing?” Kaname wondered aloud. Still, it was surprisingly well made. It appeared to be a fan creation, but it looked as good as a commercial work.

“Moffu.”

“You want me to buy it?”

“Moffu. Fumoffu.”

“Um... 1500 yen seems a little pricey,” Kaname observed.

“Fumo... moffuru!”

“You’ll knock it down to 1000? I’ll take it, then. Here.”

“Fumoffu!” The Bonta-kun took Kaname’s thousand-yen note and handed her

the photobook with a smile.

Kyoko gazed with envy at Kaname, who was able to communicate and haggle effortlessly. “Kana-chan,” she said, “you speak their language?!”

“Well... I just sorta picked it up, yeah.”

“RReally...”

They left the photobook booth and began to walk around again. It seemed there was more than just books here. More Bonta-kun goods were being sold at other stalls: B2-sized Bonta-kun posters, Bonta-kun mugs, Bonta-kun towels, Bonta-kun caps, Bonta-kun windbreakers, Bonta-kun undies... There were also hand-sized Bonta-kun figures, pleasant-to-the-touch microfiber plushies, ceramic sculptures, and other such crafts.

“Moffuru!” A Bonta-kun came towards the girls through the crowd. “Fumoffu, fumoffu. Fumo-moffuru!”

It was the “standard-issue” Bonta-kun, with yellow fur and brown spots, wearing a green hat and red bowtie.

“W-What the...” said Kyoko, drawing back defensively.

Meanwhile, Kaname squinted and watched the Bonta-kun carefully. The elbows and other joints showed signs of wear, because it did a lot of crawling. Its ears flopped around more than the others, due to the weight of the internally mounted high-sensitivity microphone and FM antenna. The lay of the fur on its head was unusual, because it frequently wore a helmet instead of a hat. In other words, this Bonta-kun was...

“Sousuke?” she checked.

“Fumoffu.” The yellow Bonta-kun puffed up and nodded several times as if to say, *“That’s right.”*

“Kana-chan, how could you tell?!” Kyoko asked with an emotion almost like terror.

“Oh, it’s nothing special... I just could.”

“RReally...”

The Bonta-kun then started rooting through the sack he was carrying and pulled out two headsets. “Fumoffu.”

“Um, what?”

“He wants us to put them on, I think,” Kaname translated.

Bonta-kun nodded firmly. Kaname and Kyoko both put on their headsets.

“Chidori, Tokiwa. Can you hear me?” Sousuke’s voice came through the headset. The Bonta-kun in front of them was just waving its arms and speaking in its fumo-fumo language, but the voice of Sousuke came through the headsets so they could understand him. “What are you two doing here?”

“We sold out at the flea market before the morning was out,” Kaname explained. “We had time to kill, so we decided to stop by.”

“I see,” Sousuke responded, while the Bonta-kun in front of them nodded with a “fumo.”

“So, what is all this?” Kaname looked around the venue.

Fumoffu Market already seemed to be picking up speed, as cheers and applause rang out sporadically around them. Of course, the cheers were cheers of “fumooo!” and the applause was the squeaky collision of their padded paws, but...

“It’s just what it looks like,” he told them. “Once a year, enthusiasts from all over Japan come together to trade goods and information.”

“A character con, huh? Those don’t usually get to this size, though...” Kyoko said.

“Th-This many all gather together, just around the theme of Bonta-kun?!” Kaname asked incredulously.

“Affirmative.” As the girls looked shocked, Sousuke began leading them through the venue. “You’re aware I began selling this power suit through a Belgian arms dealer, correct?”

“Yeah, I do remember you mentioning that...”

Sousuke had once altered a Bonta-kun suit for military use, mass-produced it,

and conspired with an arms dealer friend of his to try to sell it to armies and police forces, but it had been a big flop. She'd heard they'd sold about two to an eccentric police organization, and had otherwise ended up in the red.

"The other day, the organizers of this event heard about the power suit," Sousuke explained. "They were impressed and chose to invite me."

A nearby blue Bonta-kun passed by and greeted Sousuke's Bonta-kun suit (henceforth Sou-Bon) with a "fumo." Other participants seemed to react the same way. Sou-Bon seemed to be highly respected among the Bonta-kuns in the venue.

"As you can see," he continued, "I've been welcomed with open arms."

"But what even is Bonta-kun?" Kaname wanted to know. "Wasn't he an amusement park mascot? What company holds the rights?!"

"I can explain that," came a new voice into the headset's feed. The girls looked up and saw a new Bonta-kun approaching. This one had fur the color of snow, with dignified silver spots. It wore a wide-brimmed hat like a French chevalier with a red feather plume, and had a fine embroidered cape on its left shoulder.

That prim fumo-ffley mouth, that dignified air—this is clearly a Bonta-kun of some status, thought Kaname. In actuality, he could've been the lowest rung on the whole Bonta-kun ladder for all she knew, but he certainly had the air of a big shot about him.

The white Bonta-kun (henceforth Whi-Bon) offered a dignified bow to the girls. "A pleasure, my dears. I am Fumozawa, representative of the Fumoffu Market organizers' committee." The speech was delivered in a man's voice—calm, intellectual, and sonorous. But the Whi-Bon suit in front of them really was just saying, "Fuuumo, fumo fuuumo fumo. Fumo fumoffu," like the rest of them.

"Oh, thanks. Sure thing..."

"Obviously, Fumozawa is but my pen name," he said with a chuckle. "It's a bit too on-the-nose for a representative of Fumo-ket, eh?"

"You really abbreviate it as 'Fumo-ket'?"

“Now, let me tell you the history of Bonta-kun.” Ignoring Kaname’s backhanded question, Fumozawa began to explain. “Bonta-kun was a merchandise line developed by a certain toymaker fifteen years ago. The amusement park Bonta-kun you’re familiar with is but a remnant of its licensing blitz; the park itself does not own the rights.”

“So they got it on loan?” Kaname asked.

“Precisely. The toymaker also made a related children’s anime, *Bonta-kun of Fumo-Fumo Valley*... Have you heard of it?”

“No?”

“Understandable,” Fumozawa said with a nod. “Only eight episodes were ever produced, after all.”

“So, it wasn’t popular?”

“No, the ratings were perfectly fine. Even by today’s standards, it was of abnormally high quality. In particular, the scene in episode three where Bonta-kun dodges a missile barrage is called the ‘legendary five seconds.’ There were other similar scenes, and it’s generally regarded as a god-tier work among enthusiasts.”

“And... this was supposed to be for children?”

“But the scrupulous attention to detail ended up wrecking the production schedule and ate up all the budget,” Fumozawa told her. “The station canceled it, and the toymaker went bankrupt. The subsidiary that inherited the rights folded several years later, and the rights were then passed around until they ended up with Okawa Tofu, a Nerima tofu maker.”

“Why a tofu maker?” Kaname asked, sweat streaming from her brow.

Whi-Bon continued his fumo-tastic explanation. “That was the end result of prolonged and complicated court battles. But Okawa Tofu insisted that they ‘didn’t want to obstruct the activities of those who love Bonta-kun,’ and so Fumo-ket was born.” Whi-Bon pointed his paw at a corner of the venue, where a tofu vendor was set up. It seemed to just be a big man selling normal tofu, but there was a long line leading to his shop. “Buying silken tofu from Okawa-san at this event is tremendously important to Bonta-kun enthusiasts,” he told them.

“Um, maybe we should go now,” said Kaname.

But as the girls tried to turn around and leave, Whi-Bon and Sou-Bon grabbed their hands in unison. “Don’t be like that,” he pleaded, “stay a while.”

“He’s right, Chidori,” Sousuke chided. “You’re being rude to Fumozawa.”

“Guhhh...”

Whi-Bon quickly waved his hands. “No, Sagara-san, they’re not rude. I simply wanted the girls to know the true history of Bonta-kun.”

“You’re a generous man, Fumozawa-san.”

“Not at all,” Fumozawa denied. “It’s nothing compared to what you’ve done, illuminating the world’s militaries and police forces about Bonta-kun. I’m truly glad I invited you today.”

“The pleasure was all mine.”

There was something surreal about seeing the two Bonta-kuns going “fumo, fumo” and bowing to each other. Kaname and Kyoko were rendered speechless by the true depths of geekery they were witnessing. And then...

“Fumo fumo, fumoffu!” A green Bonta-kun with a staff armband came running up to them. Whi-Bon must have changed his headset transmitter channel, because they suddenly couldn’t hear Fumozawa’s voice.

“Fumo?”

“Fumoffu, fumoffu. Fumo-moffu. Moffu fumo-fumo, fumo-moffuru!”

“Fumo? Fumoffu!”

Upon hearing the staff Gree-Bon’s report, Whi-Bon nodded seriously.

“Moffu.” With a nod, Whi-Bon and Gree-Bon went squeaking off together.

“Did something happen?” they asked Sou-Bon.

“Yes,” Sousuke affirmed. “There appears to have been an incident. Arson of some sort...”

“Arson?!” Kyoko cried out.

“I’m worried,” he told them. “We should investigate, as well.”

“What’s all this ‘we’ stuff? Kyoko and I aren’t part of— Ow, h-hey!”

Sou-Bon grabbed the arms of Kyoko and Kaname before they could object and took off after the staff.

They headed behind the event stage in a corner of the hall where a mass of fumo-nity had gathered (had they been people, it would have been a mass of humanity, but given that they were all Bonta-kuns, “fumo-nity” is more appropriate.) It looked like they’d already caught the ruffians.

There were four men emanating a combative aura, which generally felt like the polar opposite of the fumo-ffable one that otherwise filled the venue. These were wicked men decked out in wicked makeup, with mohawks, tattoos, and studded leather belts.

“What, ya wanna fight? Eh?!” one said.

“That hurts, dammit! Lay offa me!” said another.

“I’ll (bleep) every one of ya! Got it?!”

“We’ll burn every one of ya bastards!”

“Hey, Kana-chan, aren’t they...” Kyoko whispered to Kaname.

“Yeah. Just like the guys from the station,” Kaname whispered back.

“Hey, lemme go! I’ll turn you all into fireballs!” The man with the silver mohawk who appeared to be their leader screamed at them all.

“Fumo...” The Bonta-kuns present all wore staff armbands. Some of them wore imposing expressions, but most of them looked like weak-willed Bonta-kuns, appearing flustered and unsure of what to do.

“Fumozawa-san. What happened here?” Sou-Bon asked Whi-Bon, who’d heard the report from the staff.

“They attempted to throw Molotov cocktails onto the event stage,” Fumozawa replied. “They insist they have the right to use the venue...”

He then explained that the ruffians had revealed themselves to be members of the fairly famous indie band Achsheros.

“Ach... what?” asked Kaname. “I’ve never heard of that band...”

“That’s because you only listen to 70s funk musicians like JB,” Kyoko told her. “I’ve heard of them.”

“Oh?”

“They have a really extreme performance style,” Kyoko went on. “Their fans are known for being really violent, too. They’re on another level from even death metal and stuff.”

“They’re that bad?”

“Yeah. They burn dogs to death on stage, eat hamsters whole, set fire to their venues, then rape the firefighters who come to put it out. At least, that’s what the rumors say...”

“What the hell?!” Even without getting into the firefighter thing... Kaname loved dogs. She had a hamster, as well. The thought of them hurting innocent animals like that... “Monsters!” Suddenly drawn in the art style of Hiramatsu Shinji, Kaname lunged at the band’s leader.

“Guh! What are you— Hrk!” he choked.

“I’ll murder assholes like you!” she howled. “Go to hell!”



As Kaname throttled the man, Kyoko and the surrounding Bonta-kuns tried to pull her off.

“Kana-chan, calm down!” Kyoko pleaded. “Those are just rumors!”

“Hahh... hahh... Sorry. I really lost my cool for a minute there...” Kaname eventually came back to her senses and returned to her Shikidouji-style art.

“But the fact remains that they attempted to throw Molotov cocktails. They’re clearly mad,” said Sousuke.

“That’s funny,” grumbled Kaname, “coming from the guy always throwing grenades around our school...”

“Still, it’s very strange,” he continued. “Why do they think they have the right to the facility? Fumozawa-san, you did rent the hall through the proper channels, didn’t you?” Sou-Bon asked Whi-Bon, ignoring Kaname’s comment.

“Yes, of course I went through the proper channels. However...”

“However?”

“It appears Achsheros holds their biggest concert on this day in this venue every year,” Fumozawa admitted. “Aomi Hall is considered something of a holy land in the fandom, and today is its most holy day...” He made it sound like Christmas among Christians. But recently, the fans and organizers had behaved so rudely at one of their concerts that the venue had refused to book them again.

“Just constant incidents of arson, broken windows, and violence,” he continued. “And so...”

And so, he explained, the Fumoffu Market organizers’ committee had booked the hall for that day, completely unaware of the circumstances behind the opening. They usually rented the Ariake International Hall every year, but since a massive terrorist attack in June had left it half-demolished, they’d used the Aomi Pier one instead.

“H-Huh... I-Is that... so?” Kaname nodded along with the explanation, looking uncomfortable.

Kyoko watched dubiously. “Kana-chan, you’re not looking well,” she

observed. “Is something weighing on you? You’re looking like you did a year ago, when the principal gave a lecture over the PA the morning after you set the forest behind the school on fire trying to bake sweet potatoes and then ran away...”

“Th-Thanks for the really specific comparison,” Kaname grouched. “But seriously, I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“May I continue?” Whi-Bon waited for them to finish before going on. “The truth is, even before the day of the convention, we had received a few threats from their fans. They’re convinced the arena’s owners only rejected them due to some plot on our end. They said that if we didn’t cancel our event today and hand over the venue, they’d resort to force...”

“What do the hall’s owners say?” Kaname asked.

“They said they don’t get involved in conflicts between clients.”

“Creeps.”

“Well, I never would’ve imagined they’d start acting like this, either. The lack of foresight is my own fault. It almost ruined our fun day...” Whi-Bon sighed and then sagged in despondency. The rest of the Bonta-kun staff around him shared in the motion.

It was here that the leader of the arsonists broke out in a cackle. He must have stolen a headset from a member of the staff at some point to listen in on the whole conversation.

“What’s so funny?”

The man kept laughing sinisterly. “Hah... What we did was just the start,” he informed them. “It was the signal flare for our fans to swarm the convention hall. Look outside.”

There was a large metal shutter backstage used for bringing in and taking out props. Whi-Bon nodded, and a member of the staff hit a button beside the shutter. It began to open. On the other side, across the river from the reclaimed land that housed the arena, was a massive crowd of people. It was thick,

spreading out as far as the eye could see.

From the event hall, it looked like more than ten thousand people... but if they were surrounding the whole pier, there would have to be several times that many in all. Tens of thousands of people on the verge of a riot—the ones at the station had turned out to be just a fragment of the total. The massive crowd, all of them dressed similarly to the cackling leader of Achsheros, carried bats with nails in them, bike chains, and steel pipes, which they waved around as they shouted, their voices loud enough to shake the very ground at their feet.

“That’s the thirty thousand fans who come to our concert every year,” the man snickered. “They’re gonna mob the place soon. What do you think’ll happen then?”

They’d overrun the Fumoffu Market, burning their humble shops and crushing the goods they’d worked so hard on. The Bonta-kuns themselves would surely not make it out unharmed.

“Fumo...” Whi-Bon and the others trembled, but so did Kaname and Kyoko. This was going way beyond a passion for music; this was like an evil crusade motivated by religious zealotry. To think that a band this evil could attract so many followers!

“I think... maybe we should just call the cops at this point.” Kaname took out her phone and worked the dial for 110. But the call wouldn’t go through. None of the numbers she dialed went through. All the phones, both wired and wireless, were down.

“Wh-What’s going on?” Kaname asked shakily.

“Sabotage,” said Sousuke. He seemed to be using the electronic weapons mounted on Sou-Bon to scan the environment around the hall. “The base stations for cell phones and lines for landlines have all been neutralized. With that many people, they’re bound to have a specialist or two.”

“Oh, no!”

“We currently have no way to contact civilization,” Sousuke announced, and a

heavy silence fell over the Bontas. There was a horde of 30,000 rioters shouting from the opposite shore, ready to fall upon the venue and rampage to their hearts' content.

"Sh- Shall we evacuate the participants?" the staff Gree-Bon asked.

"I'm afraid we'll have to call off Fumo-ket," Fumozawa agreed reluctantly. "Let's work with the fire brigade and get the participants clear—"

"We can't evacuate," Sou-Bon declared, pulling a map of the venue from somewhere or another and unfolding it in front of the others. The Bonta-kuns crowded around it. "This is a reclaimed island, cut off from the mainland," he explained. "The only way out is the bridge on the north side, but they're concentrated on the other side of the bridge. In other words, they've cut off our only escape route."

There was a bridge under construction on the west side as well, but at the moment, the reclaimed island was basically Dejima—and the only way out was blocked.

"Isn't there a ferry that goes around the bay coast?" Kaname asked. "Could we escape via sea?"

"It can only carry fifty at a time. It would take all night to get our thousands of attendees out."

"Ergh..."

"We have no choice but to fight," Sousuke concluded. "The committee staff must take them on."

"Take them on?!" Gree-Bon shouted in despair (though to anyone around them it just sounded like "Fumofumoffu?!") "Y-You saw how many of them there are, though! Tens of thousands! And there's only thirty staff members. We can't possibly fight them!"

"Yet we have no other choice. What shall we do, Fumozawa-san?" asked Sou-Bon, his button eyes glimmering.

The answer was obvious, but the group waited to hear Representative Fumozawa's response.

“We really have our backs to the wall, don’t we?” Whi-Bon said in fumo-speak, eyes closed and stubby arms folded as he listened. “If we let our event get trampled on with no resistance, Fumo-ket will become the laughing stock of the mascot business!”

“There’s a mascot business?” Kaname muttered.

But the others ignored her again, and the representative said, in a dramatic whisper, “I’m scared, too. But we have a duty to protect our attendees.”

“Representative! (Fumoffu!)”

“Representative! (Fumoffu!)”

Whi-Bon’s eyes snapped open. “We must prepare for battle. Let us recruit volunteers.”

An announcement played throughout the venue. “All suit attendees, please come to the event stage at once. I repeat: we have important fire safety measures to explain, so all suit attendees, please come to the event stage at once. This includes non-staff participants...”

“What are ‘suit attendees’?” Kyoko asked Sousuke.

“You’ll see soon enough.”

Soon, all the present “suit attendees” arrived at the stage—three hundred Bonta-kuns.

Every single Bonta-kun at the event was now here, a mass of button eyes gazing up at Whi-Bon on the stage. Red, blue, black, emerald, sapphire, gold. Halloween-style, Santa-style, kimono-style, camouflage-style—they were Bonta-kuns of all colors and types.

“Th-There’s so many...” Kaname said, her mouth agape. “You beat all those yakuza with just seven of these guys, so this might be enough, right?”

“Well, they’re all non-combat mascots. They’re just wearing normal suits,” Sousuke clarified, “not the enhanced kind.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about there being combat mascots...” muttered Kyoko.

The Bonta-kun suit that Sousuke wore was a kind of power suit, mounted with an array of electronic weaponry. It had a power assist function, along with bullet and blade resistance. Without going into how Sousuke came to have such a suit, suffice it to say that the other Bonta-kuns present were pure hobbyists.

Ignoring their conversation, Whi-Bon AKA Representative Fumozawa explained the situation to the suit participants. “Fumoffu, fumoffu,” Whi-Bon said. “Fumo fumo fumoffu. Fumo moffuru. Moffu fumofumo, fumofumoma...”

Upon hearing those words, the three hundred Bonta-kuns fell into a panic.

“Fumo fumoffu!” a Bonta-kun said accusingly.

“Fumo fumo...” Whi-Bon said, admitting his fault. Then he went on to passionately explain, “Fumoffu. Moffuru moffuru, fumo moffu. Fumo, fumo fumo, mofurufumo? Moffu! Fumo fumo fumoffu, fumo fumo!”

The three hundred were taken aback by his grim determination, but stoically nodded to each other with exclamations of, “Fumoffu! Fumoffu! Fumoffu!”

Whi-Bon explained even more fervently. “Fumoffu, fumo fumo? Moffu, fumo!”

Yes, it was true...

“Fumo, fumoffu!”

He was right, but...

“Moffu! Fumoffu! Fumoffuru!”

These words resonated deeply within them:

Behold us here, heaven and earth. We gather together with paws bound. This we swear: bring freedom to the fumos! We will fight. We will put our lives on the line so that this day will be known throughout history as a second Thermopylae!

Well... that might not have been exactly what Fumozawa was saying. But nevertheless, his words still inspired the three hundred Bonta-kuns, and they all raised their stubby arms before letting out a dramatic war cry that shook the event hall.

“Fumoooooooo!”

Taking directions from the staff, the three hundred began preparations to meet the attack.

With help from the regular attendees, trash can lids and mops were gathered from all over the venue in order to arm the Bonta-kuns—trash can lids as shields, and mops as spears. Due to the unexpected nature of the engagement, this Bonta-kun brigade didn’t have any firearms. The battle would be fought entirely in melee. Sousuke, who’d been appointed special advisor to the Fumoffu Market Organizers’ Committee Special Forces Division, had set the site of the battle at Terumo Bridge, which connected the pier to the mainland.

The regular attendees watched in agony as the three hundred marched off to the site with a grim air about them. Some of the Bonta-kuns embraced their wives or children and seemed hesitant to leave. (This raised the question of what kind of person would engage in a hobby like this while married with children, but it was still a tear-jerking scene.)

“No, no, no freaking way!” Kaname shouted at Sou-Bon as the three hundred marched. “Three hundred of us and thirty thousand of them? That’s a hundred for each of you... It’s impossible!”

“So the math would dictate, yes,” Sou-Bon agreed, nodding fumo-ically. “But with proper strategy, such odds can be overcome.”

“R-Really?”

“Hannibal at Cannae, Philip II at Chaeronea, Napoleon at Austerlitz—this battle could end up joining those in the textbooks, and you will have been a witness to history.”

“Yeah,” Kaname mumbled, “I don’t think that’s gonna happen...”

“I’ve also prepared an ace in the hole,” he told her calmly.

“You’re not allowed to kill them all with napalm grenades.”

“Very well. I’ll scrap that plan.”

“So you really were thinking about it, huh?”

“Now, I must take command. I will return.” Sou-Bon squeaked away.

“It’s nice to have confidence, but can you please try not to get yourselves hurt?!” she called after his retreating yellow form.

As he marched into the distance with his mascot army, Sou-Bon just raised his stubby fumo-fful arm back at her.

The armies stood facing each other across the Terumo Bridge, which was about the size of a basketball court, with two lanes of traffic traveling each way. Enemies swarmed the opposite bank as far as the eye could see. The thugs of the Achsheros fandom jeered at them, waving their dangerous weapons around.

“You wanna fight?”

“Goin’ ‘fumo, fumo’ at us all the damn time!”

“We ain’t gonna back off just ‘cause you’re cute!”

Meanwhile, the three hundred Bonta-kuns just formed ranks and stared down the opposing army.

A man who looked like a commander stepped out from the enemy’s masses. “Fools of the Fumoffu Market!” he shouted from the other side of the bridge. “Behold our massive force! Resistance is useless! Drop your weapons now and clear a path at once! If you do, we might just spare your lives!”

“Fumoffu,” Whi-Bon said at the head of their ranks.

“You won’t back off, eh? Excessive courage can be bad for your health!”

“Fumo, fumoffu.”

“Foolish Fumoffu Market!” the commander bellowed scornfully. “That was your last chance to earn mercy. Henceforth, we shall slaughter your entire—Hrk!” The commander suddenly reeled back and collapsed.

Sou-Bon, standing beside Whi-Bon, had thrown a 350 ml can of Afternoon Tea he’d bought from a vending machine in the venue. It had hit the man square in the brow.

“Fumoffu, fumoffu.”

The thirty thousand grew agitated and glared at the three hundred.

“You... You damned mascots!”

“Get ‘em!”

No more talk was necessary. The enemy army raised their deadly weapons and charged, unleashing a cry. The sound alone seemed to shake the earth below and sent crackles of electricity through the air.

On the other side of the bridge, the three hundred awaited their orders.

“Moffu! Fumo, fumo!” At Whi-Bon’s order, the Bonta-kuns raised their shields in unison and thrust out their mop spears in front of them.

“Fumoffuru!”

The enemy charged while the three hundred dug in. Within moments, they collided. The Bonta-kun phalanx had spread to cover the width of the bridge, intending to fully deny entrance to the front line of the enemy army. At the point of impact, their fumo-fully legs braced against the asphalt, but they were still forced back two meters.

Ah, and yet, their line did not break! The mascots held fast against the tidal wave, blocking attacks with trash can lids and counterattacking fiercely with their mop spears. Strikes to the face, chest, solar plexus or privates sent the first line of enemies into retreat.

“Fumoffu!” Blocking the enemy’s strikes with their shields, they vanquished one foe after another. There were Bonta-kuns who couldn’t fully dodge swings from the hooligans’ nail bats, but their thick, sturdy fur minimized the damage they took.

This revealed why Sousuke had only asked for the three hundred suit mascots: even if these Bonta-kun suits didn’t come with military-grade bullet resistance and power assist, they still made for rather sturdy armor. Against hooligans wielding primitive weaponry, it was more than enough defensive power.

Block! Resist! Hold strong!

“Moffuuuu!”

“Erk...”

Knock down the flinching enemy before you, strike them, step forward...

Whi-Bon’s spear broke in two. But Whi-Bon remained calm, unfurled his red cape and jabbed the broken end of the mop into the enemy soldier’s behind.

“Hah!”

“Fumoffu!” Sou-Bon, beside him, didn’t flinch either. Pulling out a high-voltage stun baton, he employed dazzling footwork to mow down the enemies before him.

The three hundred had annihilated the first wave of enemies.

However, stepping over their bodies, the second wave soon surged upon them. The front line of Bonta-kuns withdrew and the healthy second line waiting behind them took over. Using their line of shields as a wall, they repelled the enemy’s attacks and continued to counterattack with determination.

The bridge was the only way for the Achsheros Army to advance, and it served as a bottleneck. No matter how large the armies involved were, they could only send the same number of forces to meet at any one time. Even if there were thirty thousand of them...

“Moffu! Fumoffu!” The Bonta-kuns grew bloodthirsty as they waved their spears, clearing out the second wave of attackers and kicking them over the bridge’s railings. The intimidated enemy let out cries of regret as they plunged into the cold sea below.

“Fumo!”

Next! It seemed all three hundred of them cried the same word as the third wave of enemies charged. The third line of Bonta-kuns swapped in and raised their spears and shields in unison.

“Amazing,” Kyoko breathed in disbelief as she watched the battle of the Terumo Bridge from afar. “They’re holding the line.”

A fourth wave. A fifth. A sixth. The three hundred Bonta-kun army tore through the surging enemy ranks, refusing to give up an inch. The tiniest ray of hope had appeared. Was it possible? Those watching the fight began to grow excited for the allied victory.

“Yeah. They’re doing their best, but...” Kaname whispered. *But they haven’t even cut the enemy force down by one tenth. Meanwhile, the same three hundred have been fighting all this time. No matter how determined they might be, how long can they really hold out?*

While Kaname worried, the three hundred kept fighting.

The infuriated enemy army attempted to drive a truck onto the bridge. Sou-Bon, who only had a few grenades, used one now to blow up the vehicle before it reached the bridge, throwing the enemies around it into panic.

The enemy then dispatched a strange masked force of elites. The three hundred piled up the enemy soldiers they’d beaten, then knocked them over to bury the elite force beneath.

A three-meter-tall monster of a man appeared and attacked Whi-Bon. Whi-Bon had a tough fight against him, but prevailed.

“M... M... Moffuru!” Ally morale was skyrocketing. The Bonta-kuns were meeting everything thrown at them. Yet they couldn’t hide their exhaustion, and more and more Bonta-kuns were being carried to the back lines, injured by the enemy’s nail bats.

A ninth wave came. A tenth. An eleventh. And although they continued bravely repelling the enemy attacks, the Bonta-kun troops were slowly growing tired. And just after ninety minutes into the battle...

“Enough! Surrender!” the enemy commander shouted. It was the man who’d initially been knocked out from Sou-Bon’s Afternoon Tea can, who must have gotten back up at some point. The delinquents currently engaged in battle on Terumo Bridge ceased their fighting at the man’s order as well. “We acknowledge your strength,” he shouted again, “but you must see that you have no path to victory!”

Kaname and the others had to agree.

“F-Fumo...” The Bonta-kuns still capable of fighting were down to maybe a hundred, just thirty percent of their initial number. Their other allies were exhausted, resting limply on the back lines or devouring the yakisoba and takoyaki they’d bought at the stalls.

Meanwhile Achsheros, though greatly depleted, still had an overwhelming force of twenty thousand remaining.

“Fall to your knees and yield to me,” their commander demanded. “If you surrender, we won’t hurt you. We won’t kill your families, either. We’ll rule this pier together. We’ll even give you a portion of the proceeds from Achsheros’s new album!”

The Fumo-ket organizers’ committee surely found this a tempting offer. If they just gave in now, the safety of the participants behind them would be assured, and they’d be free to use Aomi Hall any time next year except for this day.

However... No matter how it was phrased, they’d still effectively be reduced to the other fandom’s slaves.

“Mofu...” Whi-Bon glanced at Sou-Bon.

Sou-Bon fell into deep thought, then shook his head with a faint “Fumo.” It was as if he was saying, *“It’s up to you.”*

Whi-Bon nodded and looked up to the sky. His button eyes sparkled with sadness, as if looking back on good old days which would never come again. With his battered army behind him, Whi-Bon strode forward alone. As tens of thousands watched on, he came to the center of the bridge and stood there for some time.

It was over. No one could claim that the organizers’ committee hadn’t fought well.

“Ahh...” Kaname breathed, impressed. *Fumozawa-san loved this event so much, and yet...* It was so sad to see it end like this.

Whi-Bon sank to his knees in despair, showing submission to the enemy. The twenty thousand strong enemy army jeered at him, weapons clanging.

But...

“Fumoffu.” He then stood up silently and slung his arm in the man’s direction.

“Eh? What are you... Ah!” Whi-Bon had thrown a can of Dr. Pepper at the opposition’s commander, which hit him in the forehead and knocked him out again.

“Moffu, fumoffu. Fumoruffu,” Whi-Bon said boldly, slowly straightening up.

Sou-Bon also rushed to his side and beckoned, his paw squeaking. *Come at us, villains. We’ll drive you back each time!* he seemed to be saying.

“K-Kill ‘em!”

Naturally, this enraged the enemy. They charged again with even greater fury than before.

“Ahh!!!” Kaname groaned, while Kyoko covered her eyes.

The enemy covered the entire road. The Bonta-kun army no longer had the strength to stop them. Would their allies simply be trampled? Would they simply let the tens of thousands of hooligans pass and fall on the venue?

“Fumo...” Sou-Bon and Whi-Bon drew back, and began to run. When they reached the end of the Terumo Bridge, they stopped and turned back.

By now, the enemy had reached the center of the bridge, screaming in rage.

“Moffuru,” Sou-Bon said, and handed something to Whi-Bon.

“Fumo,” Whi-Bon said. He’d been handed a detonator, the safety already removed.



“Wait, is that—” The moment Kaname recognized it was the same moment Whi-Bon pressed the button.

“Moffu.” There was a short, sharp explosion, and Terumo Bridge split right down the middle. The remote control had detonated the plastic explosives that had been set at its halfway point.

The explosion itself was a small one, but it caused a mathematically perfect collapse of the bridge’s pontoons and girders, forcing the bridge down under its own weight.

“Gah... ahhhh!”

The bridge began slowly to collapse into the ocean below, sending up large splashes. And as the hundreds of attackers cried out in desperation...

“Fumoffu,” Sou-Bon whispered, eyes closed. He almost seemed to be saying, *“I wish there had been another way.”*

“That’s too far!” Kaname yelled, bringing out her fan for the first time in a while to smack Sousuke on the back of his head.

The hundreds of enemy soldiers who had fallen into the sea swam to the island’s shore, crying pitifully for aid, but the Bonta-kuns poked at them with their mops and forced them back into the water.

With the destruction of their one invasion route, the Achsheros Army couldn’t keep up the attack. They remained close to twenty thousand strong, but cowed by the tragic sight they’d just witnessed, they fell into a frightened silence... and eventually, one by one, they dispersed.

The battle of Terumo Bridge had concluded in victory for the Fumoffu Market Organizers’ Committee. Many staff members called it a miracle, but the greater miracle was that everyone involved had survived. The next day, the incident was glossed over with a police report that the collapse had been caused by the weight of the fans swarming the bridge, which had overtaxed a structural weakness.

It was rumored that someone among the Fumo-ket staff had connections in

the police department, but Kaname didn't feel like digging into it any further.

And so, Fumoffu Market and its participants were safe once more. But...

"Isn't it supposed to end with you all wiped out and spoken of in legend?" The night after the battle, partly because the bridge had been destroyed, the Bonta-kuns had remained on the pier to hold a victory party. It was there that Kaname whispered those words to Sou-Bon, who was celebrating amidst their fumobrationals toasts.

"I don't understand what you mean, but it's no issue," Sousuke said through his headset. "The bonds between paws are greater than any."

And with that, the Bonta-kuns toasted together with a cheer of "fumo, fumo."

[The End]

Tessa's Visit to the Grave

On top of a queen-sized bed sat a large suitcase, wide open, surrounded by mountains of clothing.

"What should I do?" wondered Tessa, who found herself at a loss while preparing for a trip. *Obviously, I have to take more than just clothing, she thought. Toiletries, medicine, in case I come down with something, books to read when I get bored, cooking utensils and ingredients... I need at least eight kinds of spices, and at least five pairs of shoes...*

But no matter how she went about her packing, it wouldn't all fit. Even with her large suitcase, it wouldn't all fit!

Or won't it? Couldn't I rig something to make it all fit? What if I put all the clothing in plastic bags and vacuum sealed them with a compressor, input the size and shape of everything I need into a 3D model and ran the ideal packing arrangements through a simulator? Or... wait, there's no such software for that, she realized. I'll write some, then! If I base it on existing software, it'll be a snap. The only hard part will be creating the 3D models. Maybe I should use a 3D scanner? But it's 1 a.m... Even if this is New York, no store that sells 3D scanners could possibly be open. And my plane leaves at nine! It's impractical to expect to buy one before then...

Out loud she said, "Um, Melissa?"

"Hmm? What?" responded Melissa Mao, who was reading a magazine while sprawled on the bedroom sofa.

"Do you have a 3D scanner in your apartment?"

"Given the giant pile of stuff around your suitcase, I can imagine what you want a 3D scanner for, but..." she tossed the magazine aside. "I obviously don't have one."

"A regular scanner will do, then," said Tessa. "If I have enough scanners, I could jury-rig them to read a 3D image—"

“Seriously, I don’t have anything like that. I haven’t even used this apartment in years.”

This particular luxury apartment, located in an old high-rise, belonged to Mao, who had acquired it through either her father’s connections (as president of a company) or her own earnings from her Mithril days. Located in a swanky part of town, the apartment was like something out of a Hollywood movie, with an incredible view of the entire green band of Central Park.

Tessa had begun living there with Mao only two weeks ago, in exchange for a little rent. It had been just over three months since the decisive battle on Merida Island, and yet it felt so long ago...

Tessa had been hesitant to move in with her at first, partly because Mao had recently entered into a romantic relationship with Kurz Weber. But Mao had insisted that she’d meet up with him at his place if she wanted to see him. And then, because the idea of holing up in the country by herself somewhere was depressing (as well as there being concerns about her safety), Tessa ended up accepting Mao’s offer after all. The idea had been to spend a little bit of time wandering around the city while she thought about what to do next.

“When you came here, you were practically naked. How in the world did you end up with so many clothes in two weeks?” Mao whispered, gazing at the mountain of clothing.

“I ended up shopping as a form of stress relief,” Tessa admitted.

“Well, that’s fine, but you don’t need to take it all on you with your trip, do you? Let me have a look. Here we go...” Mao sat up with some effort before walking up to the bed upon which the suitcase lay. Her actions were sluggish and lazy, almost unimaginably so from such a normally energetic woman.

“Oh... are you all right?” Tessa asked. “You really don’t have to—”

“C’mon, I can handle it. Let’s see... Don’t need this,” said Mao. “Don’t need this, or this, or this. Definitely not this...”

“Oh... so merciless!”

Mao decisively threw the unnecessary clothing and other belongings onto the floor. “You’re going to the South Seas, right? Why would you pack a heavy

sweater? You don't need this, either. And when did you buy this sexy lingerie?"

"Mail order," Tessa mumbled. "I wasn't thinking..."

"You're ten years too young," Mao lectured, "though I want to see you in them when you're back. At any rate, it's out."

"Ten years too young?" Tessa objected. "Melissa, I *am* eighteen, you know?"

At this, Mao turned and examined her closely. "Hey, yeah, I guess you are a little bit bigger."

"In what way?"

"Your chest."

"Argh..." Tessa folded her arms to cover the breasts filling out her flimsy camisole. She still wasn't anything compared to Mao and the other older women in her life, but had nonetheless developed to a surprising degree.

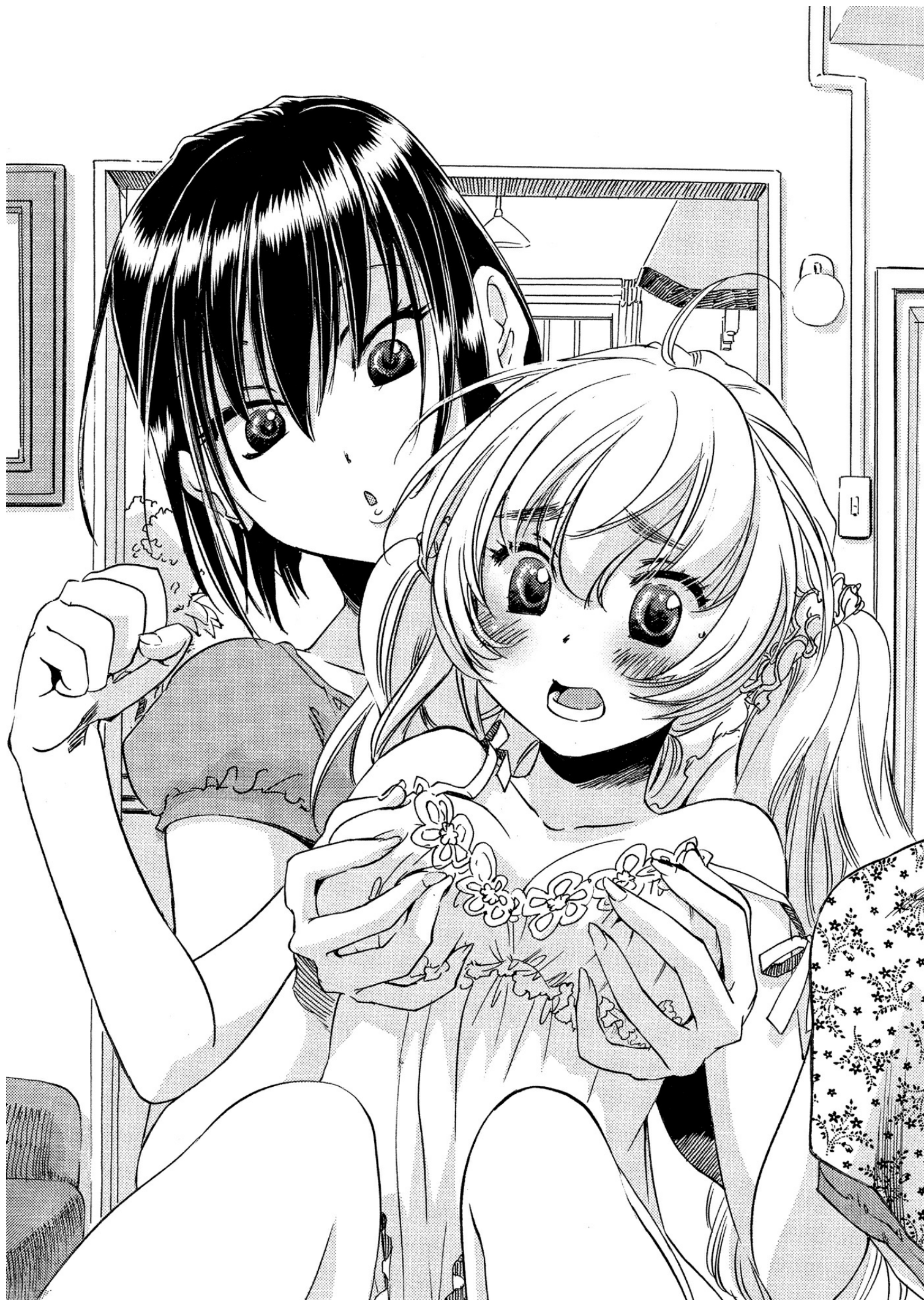
"Well... I suppose I have. I lost a ton of weight last year, after all."

"That's right," Mao agreed. "You had a pretty rough year."

"Then after losing my submarine, I got to relax, eat, and sleep all I wanted. This is the natural result."

"In other words, you put on weight?"

"Well... I'm not sure," said Tessa. "At least I'm back to where I was before I became so emaciated. I don't think my waist is much wider, but— Hey, wait, Melissa! You're tickling me!"



Mao started touching Tessa all over, pinching at her waist and butt. “Yeah, I think it’s just your chest. And just from a little rubbing on my part...”

Mao always got a little touchy-feely with Tessa when she got drunk—though she hadn’t gotten drunk in a while lately.

“I think the idea that rubbing makes them bigger is an urban legend,” said Tessa.

“Oh, is it?”

“Not that I would know. But, oh... my mother was quite large in that regard, so it’s possible I’m a late bloomer.”

“A late bloomer?” echoed Mao.

“So it might just work out after all. Hee hee hee...” said Tessa, giggling easily.

She had been like this all the time lately. It was as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, a rebound effect from the heavy burden she’d carried during the last three years while serving as a submarine and battle group commander. Even during the brief stint in which she’d attended high school in Tokyo, she’d come off as more mature than she did now.

“But getting back to the subject at hand,” said Tessa, “what do we do about my luggage?”

“Right, forgot about that. Let’s see...” Mao was immediately at a loss again. “Honestly... you’ve just got too much you don’t need. Stop talking nonsense about some 3D scanner and use your head. You know, the ordinary way.”

“Grr...”

“Think like a soldier on a recon mission,” she advised. “Do you really need all these shoes? Just take the bare minimum. And cooking utensils? Don’t be stupid. And the only spice you need is curry powder. After all—” Mao cut off there. She scowled and turned her eyes down, breathing strangely, then stumbled out of the room.

“Melissa?”

“Sorry, just a minute,” she called back. “It’s here again.”

“D-Do you want me to rub your back?” asked Tessa.

“No, I’m okay. Geh...” said Mao, rushing straight for the bathroom. The door slammed, followed by the sound of retching from within.

Tessa waited five minutes, then heard the sound of the toilet flushing before the exhausted looking Mao reappeared.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Well, I guess I’m not, actually... But I’m okay,” said Mao, staggering back to the sofa.

“Morning sickness is pretty rough, huh?”

“I hear it’s different for different people, but I guess I get it pretty badly.” Mao threw herself onto the sofa and took halting breaths. Her pregnancy was still in its first trimester, so there hadn’t been many changes to her body just yet. She looked more or less like she always did during a bad hangover. But behind all the suffering, she seemed vaguely giddy.

Does she still have some innocence left in her? Tessa wondered.

“Ah, but it really pisses me off,” said Mao. “Why did that bastard father have to go flying all around the world and leave me in this predicament?”

“It’s not as if Kurz-san is just playing around,” Tessa pointed out, “and he’ll be back in New York in two days, right?”

“That’s the plan, but... I’m really gonna work him like a slave when he gets back. Urk.”

“Do you want something to drink? Maybe tomato juice?”

“I am pretty thirsty... but not right now, I don’t think.” Mao was limp on the sofa, so Tessa put a cushion under her head and gently laid a blanket on top of her.

“Then let’s think about fun things,” said Tessa, “like names for the baby.”

“Hmm. Names...”

“What if it’s a boy?”

“Hmmm... maybe Gail, or Ed?” Mao mused.

“And if it’s a girl?”

“Eva.”

“All names of dead comrades?” observed Tessa. “That’s a bit depressing.”

“I guess. There are so many of them, makes it hard to narrow it down to one,” Mao admitted. “And I don’t think they’d want me to name a kid after them out of some weird sense of duty, either. Maybe I should open up my options.” She buried her face in the cushion and began mumbling out a variety of names.

“Let’s try again. What if it’s a boy?”

“I can’t think of anything,” said Mao. “Maybe something like John?”

“Too ordinary. It’s no fun.”

“It’s okay if we’re just spitballing. We still have six months to decide.”

“Then what if it’s a girl?” Tessa asked again.

“Hmm... What about Clara?”

“Oh, that one is good. I should write that down.” Tessa wrote the name ‘Clara’ down on her left hand with a finger, as if to take notes in her mind.

“What, really?” Mao asked. “It doesn’t sound weak?”

“Of course not. It sounds cute.”

“Fine. I’m gonna sleep now. Cut your own luggage down, would you?” Mao pulled the blanket up to her chin and gave a short cough.

“All right. I’ll do my best.”

“I already sent the package, too. Make sure you accept it when you arrive there, okay?”

“I should be able to,” Tessa told her. “Don’t worry.”

“I wish I could go along with you... but, you know. Sorry.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s a personal matter, after all.”

“I still can’t help but worry,” said Mao. “You’re not used to traveling alone, are you?”

Tessa intended to travel to her destination on her own. Mao had debilitating morning sickness, and Kurz was already traveling all around with preparations to start up his new business. Mao tried to insist that she take another of their former allies along to protect her, but Tessa was tired of relying on the kindness of others, so she was determined to go by herself.

Her destination was the South Pacific—Lantanfushi Island, in the Republic of San Jorge. Tessa had prepared a little insurance before her departure, but if she still couldn't keep out of danger... she'd deal with it then. She felt completely indifferent about it.

"I'll be fine," she said. "Take care of yourself, Melissa."

"Thanks. I'll still worry, though."

"I told you, I'll be fine. Don't cry." Tessa stroked Mao's hair gently as tears filled the other woman's eyes.

"Maybe it's because I'm pregnant, but I've been so emotional lately..."

"Of course you have," Tessa agreed. "And I love you this way, too."

"There's nothing lovable about it," Mao sobbed. "I'm not good at anything but fighting. If I'm a weak, whiny mess, I've got nothing left..." She really did sound timid, even though something wonderful was happening.

Tessa felt bad for Mao, yet at the same time, found her very amusing this way.

After one day and two connections away from John F. Kennedy Airport, Tessa arrived halfway around the world, in the city of Sasbona, San Jorge. The airfield was larger than she'd expected, with lots of people coming and going.

"I'm exhausted," she groaned. She'd spent most of her trip in business class, but for some reason, Tessa still felt very tired. She'd grown accustomed to the roar of military transport helicopters and planes, so the relative quiet of civilian craft somehow made her anxious.

She picked up her luggage—which she'd managed to pare down after great struggle—from the carousel, and headed to the oversized luggage pickup

window. Mao had taken care of everything, so Tessa was able to move swiftly through the checkout process.

“Um... Teletha Mantissa? Please sign here. The cargo is an industrial refrigerator, then? Yes, yes... It all went just fine. Take care now, madam.” Mao’s go-between must have bribed the man, because he didn’t even attempt to pry into the nature of the package. “Mantissa” was also one of Tessa’s frequently employed aliases.

The worker led her to the large cargo area. Here, she was supposed to pick up her “industrial refrigerator” and meet up with her guide and driver, Murat, whom Mao had arranged for. After that, they’d head for Lantanfushi Island.

Tessa entered the swelteringly hot cargo area, roughly the size of a gym, before being approached by a tall, slender, swarthy man. He’d been talking with a gloomy expression to a worker with a sales slip in hand, but spread his arms wide and beamed at her welcomingly the moment she arrived. “Miss Mantissa!” he said. “I’m sorry I’m late. I am Murat. I wasn’t told you were such a beautiful girl. I’m surprised.”

This first impression was enough for Tessa to draw a conclusion. *Ah, she realized, this man is untrustworthy. I guess there are limits to even Melissa’s connections...* But out loud, she said, “Oh, thank goodness! Please take care of me, Murat-san.” She met his forced smile with one of her own.

Tessa would play the helpless little girl, relieved to meet someone who spoke her language in this strange foreign land. She’d spent three years dealing with trained veterans and knew that it wasn’t always smart to appear openly cagey.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Murat returned. “I’m sure you’re tired from the long trip. Let me take your luggage.”

“Why, thank you.”

He took Tessa’s suitcase and began striding away. “I’m sorry it’s so unpleasant. The air conditioner in the warehouse isn’t working,” he explained. “Your package is here. Please confirm it.”

Murat stopped in a corner of the cargo area, where the wooden crate—large enough to hold an industrial refrigerator, as described in its documentation—

sat. The label corresponded to the code number on her form, and the seals were intact. It was definitely her package.

“Is everything in order, miss?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Of course. Now...” He started directing the four burly workers, who had arrived behind them, in their native language. The men hoisted the crate, which weighed over one hundred kilograms, and began to carry it away.

“We’ll head to the nearby harbor by truck,” Murat told her. “Then it’ll be half a day’s journey to Lantanfushi on my ship. We’ll arrive late at night.”

“Good,” said Tessa. “Thank you.”

“Still, it seems like a waste,” he mused. “I think you’d enjoy spending a night here. There are lots of good tourist spots.”

“I really would love to, but my schedule is quite strict,” Tessa said with a smile, her guard rigidly up. *Still*, she reminded herself, *I’m almost there*.

Bani. Bani Morauta.

I’ll be arriving soon, in the land where you were born...

Murat’s “ship” would be more properly called a boat, as it was small enough to seem that its entire weight capacity might be reached with just him, his four workers, Tessa, and the crate containing the “industrial refrigerator.” The vessel did have a bathroom, but it was no more than a single stall formed by a few partitions.

Nevertheless, they soon left port and headed out onto a sea painted in sunset colors. The undulating movement of the waves was pleasant. The city of Sasbona shrank on the horizon, and all they could see now was a scattering of islands, popping in and out in the evening light. The closer they came to night, the fewer of those they saw.

Thankfully, the night was brightly illuminated. *So many stars*, Tessa thought. *I haven’t seen a sight like this since moving to New York. Being out in nature has its benefits... Maybe once I’ve helped Melissa get settled in with her baby, I’ll*

move out here.

As she was having that thought, Murat asked her, “Miss Mantissa, would you like dinner? I’m afraid I can only make instant noodles, but...”

“Thank you,” said Tessa, “I’d love some.” She did have some cereal bars in her bag, but it was best to conserve things like that.

“One moment, then. Incidentally, may I ask a personal question?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been in this business—as both guide and driver—for a fairly long time. A customer like you is a rare sight,” he explained. “Lantanfushi is fairly rural, even relative to this nation as a whole. The population is... I’ve forgotten, but it must be less than a hundred, and there aren’t even that many televisions. It feels strange for a young girl like you to be going to such a small village to deliver a refrigerator. It’s piqued my curiosity.”

“Oh, well,” said Tessa, “I suppose that follows.”

“I mean, an industrial refrigerator in a village with only one generator? Ha ha... It makes me wonder if there’s something else in that crate, you know?”

“Yes, I’m sure it seems quite strange.” Tessa just shrugged, unfazed in the face of Murat’s unsubtle prodding.

“In addition, you are very beautiful. Between you and the cargo, I assume it must be a very expensive item—to be quite frank, something worth far more than what you’re paying us.” He wasn’t trying to hide the lecherous quality in his voice now. She wasn’t sure if the workers understood his English, but they had started looking her up and down as well.

“If that were the case, Mr. Murat,” she asked, “what would you do then?”

The roar of the boat’s engine went silent. The helmsman had stopped it. The boat drifted on inertia for a while longer before eventually slowing down, and at last they just sat there, rocked by the waves.

“I’d do this, miss,” Murat said threateningly, as the other men laughed. “If you want to reach Lantanfushi safely, you should do what I tell you. Oh, we’ll get you there—if you do what we say, faithfully and without complaint, entertain

us all night, and give us what's in the box."

"Ahh..." Tessa breathed.

Inwardly she thought, Ah, of course this would happen. Melissa Mao, in her current condition, was playing telephone tag with friends of friends of friends to arrange for a group of shifty workers in a backwater region. It's natural that something like this would befall a fragile-looking girl alone in such circumstances. I can't blame Melissa for it.

Besides, it's not as if these men want to kill me. It's annoying, but I'm sure they want nothing more than they've already requested. "If you do as we ask, we'll let you go"—that kind of thing.

Tessa took a deep breath, then said to Murat, "Excuse me. I do have one question."

"What is it?"

"How far is it from here to the nearest shore?"

Murat grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her. "You think you can escape into the ocean?" he demanded. "Think again."

"Oh, that's not why I asked... Also, you're hurting me."

"Let me tell you, then: the closest island is a little over a kilometer away," he continued. "That's a long swim in a pitch-black ocean like this. There's small sharks here, too, and the current is strong. A little girl like you would drown for sure. A big, strong man might barely make it. So don't do anything stupid."

"Aha. Yes, I see." Tessa nodded docilely. "Good luck with your swim, then."

"What?"

The next instant, an arm burst out of the crate containing the "industrial refrigerator"—a thick, mechanical arm.

"Erk?!" choked Murat, who couldn't escape its grip.

The whatever-it-was grabbed his throat with terrifying strength before revealing itself, ripping out of the crate as if it were made of tissue paper. The thing looked like a large man in a trench coat, with two red lights shining out

from beneath the hood pulled low over its eyes.

This was Plan 1055, an Alastor. Formerly employed by Tessa's rival organization, they were the world's smallest autonomous arm slaves.

As it lifted the struggling Murat higher, the Alastor said, «Colonel. Orders, please.»

"I'm not a colonel anymore," Tessa informed it.

«Well... orders anyway, please.»

"Countermeasure D1, then," Tessa decided.

«Roger.»

"Yeek?!" screamed Murat, who hit the ocean with a splash as the Alastor threw him overboard.

The other men stood there dumbstruck for a moment before they quickly snapped back to themselves, drawing their concealed handguns. By the time one was taking shots at the Alastor, though, two of the four were already in the ocean alongside Murat. Simple handgun rounds couldn't hurt an Alastor, so the remaining two were immediately grabbed by the mechanical arms and thrown into the sea as well.

"What the hell is that thing?! What is it? Dammit!"

"Help me! Help me!"

Murat and his men struggled and screamed while splashing around in the sea. Tessa ignored them, instead taking up the helm to restart the engine.

«Countermeasure D1 complete. Please issue your subsequent order,» the Alastor demanded.

"There are life rings in the back, right?" said Tessa. "Throw them. And stop talking like a normal AI, AI."

«Excuse me. I'm just trying to respect this body's procedures.»

"Your satellite link is working, right? Just do whatever you want."

«If you insist.» The Alastor dropped its intimidatingly mechanical body language with a shrug, before languidly grabbing the two life rings in the back of

the cabin and throwing them to the men. It even made a motion like dusting off its hands afterwards. «There are two life rings for five men,» Al observed. «A fight may ensue.»

“I don’t care,” Tessa told him. “They’re bad people.”

«Roger. If they’re bad people, it is what it is.»

That’s all it took to convince you? Tessa wondered to herself, even as she re-initiated the boat’s forward movement. The engine roared, the propeller kicked up sea spray, and the boat—now five people lighter—began to pick up speed.

Tessa hadn’t been at a helm in over a year, but this definitely felt more relaxing than a multi-thousand-ton submarine. *Even though, in my early teens, I’d dreamed of piloting the giant submarine that I designed... I really have changed,* she realized.

“Al,” she said, “we’re traveling at thirty knots. How’s your link?”

«There is a lag time of 0.45, but it shouldn’t be an issue outside of combat.»

Al, the core unit of the AI once installed inside Mithril’s lambda driver-mounted AS, the Laevatein, was about the size of a mini-fridge. It was far too big to load into an Alastor, so Al’s real body was currently hidden elsewhere in the world. Tessa hadn’t asked where, but Al was remotely controlling the Alastor (which had been modified to act as a receiver) from that location via satellite link. In a remote region like this, even the latest high-speed satellite relays still had a massive time lag, but things were clearly working well enough for him to serve as a bodyguard against local hooligans.

The Alastor had been a weapon employed by Mithril’s enemy organization. But every time Mithril had destroyed one in battle, they’d recovered whatever parts they could. They’d originally done this for the purpose of analyzing those components and working out who’d made them, but the other day, Tessa’s friend—a girl named Mira—had successfully combined the intact parts they’d had on hand to replicate a completed Alastor.

“It really would be a waste otherwise,” Mira had said. “Still, I couldn’t replicate the most important part, the autonomous functionality. It was seemingly designed to make very flexible decisions with very limited memory,

but I haven't been able to figure out how that was accomplished. Maybe it's something only your brother could have done."

She was talking about Tessa's brother, Leonard, who was unfortunately dead now. In other words, it was like having a body without the brain. And so, even after having restored the Alastor, there was no way of getting it to work... Or so she'd been thinking, when suddenly...

«Can I have that?» Al had said over his internet connection. «I can make good use of it.»

And so, Al had acquired a new body with which to accompany Tessa on her journey.

"How does the body feel?" she asked him now, gauging their general heading from the stars as she adjusted their course here and there.

«I can't quite get the hang of it,» he had to admit.

"That's a pity. Do you know why?"

«It's partly the lag, but it's mostly a size issue. This body is built roughly on a human scale, so it functions differently than my previous bodies in many ways.»

He was referring to ASes like the Arbalest and the Laevatein, which were giants that stood eight meters tall and weighed ten tons; they were obviously quite different from the two-meter-tall, 150-kilogram Alastor. There was the rate of inertia when moving, the friction when interacting with objects, the angular velocity of joint manipulation, et cetera. The fact that he could no longer control those things on instinct was probably what Al meant by saying that he couldn't "get the hang of it."

"I'm sure you'll get used to it sooner or later," Tessa reassured him.

«Most likely. But I can't be certain I can protect you if things go very wrong.»

"I'm sure it'll be fine. I think that will be the last attack we see."

«Yes, Colonel.»

"I told you," she reminded him, "I'm not a colonel anymore."

«Under most military precedents, it's not unusual to call an officer by their

rank even after retirement. Besides, I still refer to Mr. Sagara as Sarge.》

Tessa was a bit annoyed to hear that name come up. After she'd learned he was safe, they'd exchanged a few phone calls and emails, but never again met face-to-face.

Clearly he's just locked himself in with her and doesn't have time to see me anyway, Tessa decided. She'd mostly gotten over him, but it seemed she still couldn't help these little moments of annoyance.

"I don't care what Sagara-san does," she muttered. "I'm saying that I don't like it."

《I see,》 Al observed neutrally. 《But I still feel like 'Colonel' suits you best.》

"We're going around in circles like this," said Tessa. "How can we resolve it?"

《Let's search for a point of compromise. Might I call you Captain?》

Tessa fell silent, looked at her hand on the wheel, and then sighed. "Very well. I am captaining this vessel at the moment, after all."

Then the boat, with one human and one robot aboard, headed through the night sea on a southeast course.

After about two hours at twenty knots, Tessa noticed that the fuel gauge arrow was low.

Curious. That shouldn't be... She stopped the boat on the water, took out her flashlight, and shined it on the fuel tank in the rear. She needn't have bothered, though... The smell of fuel stung her nose. Gas was clearly leaking out from somewhere. The wind passing over her as she drove had prevented her from noticing before now.

Maybe during the fight with Al before, she reasoned, one of their shots ricocheted into part of the fuel system. There didn't seem to be any danger of fire, but she had to get to land ASAP. If she didn't, she'd likely run out of fuel and end up adrift.

《Some kind of issue?》 asked Al, from where he was squatting in the cabin in power conservation mode.

“Yes,” she told him. “We’re running out of fuel. I think one of those shots earlier opened a hole somewhere.”

《If need be, I can attach this body to the stern and kick us along.》

“That would be nice, but I think there’s another issue.” Tessa sighed again as she illuminated the surface of the sea and the boat in turn. “I think the water line has been rising,” she said. “We’ve sunk a bit.”

Al stood up and looked down at the ocean. 《As compared with the view of the sea level from two hours ago, your comment appears to be accurate, Captain. Likely about ten centimeters.》

“Even though five men went overboard and we’re losing fuel, the water level is rising,” Tessa repeated. “That means we’re taking on water, likely from another of the bullets. We’re going to sink eventually.”

《That’s a problem,》 said Al. 《This body can’t float.》

“At least there’s no need to worry about sharks in your case,” Tessa offered as consolation. Any shark that tried to bite through a robot would end up needing dentures.

《You’re acting very calm. I thought a frail woman like you would have fallen into a panic upon facing imminent death like this.》

Tessa scowled at Al’s teasing. “Who do you think I am?”

《Pardon me, Colonel.》

“I told you, I’m not a Col—”

《Captain.》

“Honestly...” she grumbled. But even so, they had no time to waste. They had to be close to their destination, but would the boat hold out long enough to get them there?

Tessa decided to do a rough calculation based on how quickly they were taking on water, given the boat’s size and the current waterline, then factored in the minimum distance to Lantanfushi according to the map. Her conclusion: they could make it. She probably wouldn’t be able to reach the settlement directly, but would at least be able to reach land.

She had restarted the engine and begun driving when AI chimed in. «The calculations I just did suggest that this boat will not reach land. It is truly a shame. If you have any final words, please tell them to me now.»

He must be using calculations from some strange online documentation, thought Tessa. *What an amateur.* Out loud she said, “We can make it.”

«No, we cannot.»

“Would you like to wager, then? If I win... I know: you’ll have to change your voice to a woman’s for one week.”

«I do not understand,» said AI, «How would that benefit you?» Because he didn’t have a physical body like a human, his voice couldn’t crack, but there was still a definite nuance of fear in AI’s voice.

“Melissa and the others told me that you’re extremely opposed to changing your voice,” Tessa informed him. “Weber has suggested giving you a girl’s voice numerous times, and you always refused unequivocally.”

«Of course. I am a veteran soldier. A soldier’s voice should be a man’s voice.»

“Hence the wager,” Tessa continued. “You think the boat will sink, right? I disagree. If your judgment is incorrect, I get to ask for something that I enjoy and that makes you uncomfortable: changing your voice to a woman’s.”

«Understood. And if I’m correct?»

“If that happens, I’ll be dead, so it won’t matter much, but... I know. I’ll give all of my inheritance to you. It’s enough money to buy a very nice house, and if you play your cards right, you could even make yourself a new body.”

«A very appealing prospect.»

“That’s only if you win, though. Well? Shall we bet?”

«Very well. I agree to your terms.»

I might be the first person in the world to make a bet with an AI, Tessa thought.

«Allow me to clarify one thing to prevent misunderstanding, Miss Testarossa. I do not wish for your death.»

“I’m sure you don’t.”

《I merely wish to prove that my judgment is correct.》

“I told you, I know.”

In a mere twenty minutes, Tessa’s victory was confirmed when a small plot of land came into view beyond the waves, illuminated by the moonlight. It was definitely Lantanfushi Island, and just about three miles away. The boat had sunk even further, and the fuel gauge needle was close to zero, but they could still make it another three miles.

“There we are,” said Tessa. “See?”

《Brilliant,》 Al said. He didn’t even seem particularly displeased about it. 《As I have lost the bet, I will change my external voice to a woman’s. There are several options, but...》

“Oh, that was a joke. You don’t really have to change it.”

《But we made a promise.》

“It’s all right for the winner to call off the bet,” Tessa clarified. “I agree that your current voice suits you best.”

《Thank you.》

As they spoke, they gradually got closer to Lantanfushi Island. Tessa read the map and worked out the best place for them to moor the boat. “We don’t have enough fuel to search for an anchorage, so we’ll want to beach it on that sandy stretch to the north,” she said. “Help me, would you?”

《Aye aye, Captain.》

Once they’d reached the shallows, Al splashed into the ocean, grabbed the mooring line, and began pulling their craft towards the beach. For the power of an Alastor, moving a boat of this size was a simple task.

What a convenient thing to have around, thought Tessa. I wish I’d had robots like this when I was leading the Mithril battle group. Loading and unloading cargo, cleaning, doing work at dangerous heights... They almost seem wasted on combat.

《Beaching complete,》 said AI. 《Are we going to repair it?》

“In the dark? We’ll have to wait until morning,” Tessa said in annoyance, then held her watch up to the cabin light. There were about five hours until dawn. “I’m tired. I’m going to sleep.” She pulled a shawl out of her suitcase, wrapped it around her shoulders, and lay down to sleep.

《Shall I stand watch? Remaining in alert mode until dawn will deplete about 30% of my internal battery...》

“That much? Hmm...”

The primary flaw of the Alastor was its short run time. It ran on battery power, so it couldn’t run close to five days independently the way an AS could. Half a day of walking would fully deplete its internal battery. She had no idea if their destination village would let them use its generator, and the spare batteries in the crate would only last for about two days (plus, it would take quite a lot of time to charge them).

Perhaps anticipating Tessa’s thought process, AI made a suggestion. 《What if I put myself on standby in hibernation mode, then reboot once every twenty minutes to scan the area for anomalies?》

“Let me think... Yes, let’s do that.”

《Roger. Good night, then.》

Under AI’s control, the Alastor knelt down in a corner of the cabin and froze. It appeared to have gone into hibernation mode.

“Well, then.” Tessa turned off her light, and lay back down on the hard bench. She intended to explore Lantanfushi Island once morning came, but she wasn’t even sure if the people in the village would speak English. She’d thrown Murat, the man who was supposed to serve as a guide and interpreter, into the ocean, after all. Would she be able to explain that she was Bani Morauta’s friend, and that she had come to seek out his surviving family?

Bani Morauta was AI’s creator, who had also been a Whispered, like Tessa. He was the one who had developed the ARX series—lambda driver-mounted prototypes, like the Arbalest—as part of Mithril’s research division. When it came to the invention of theoretical super-technology, he’d had far greater

potential than Tessa.

They'd first met in a dining hall at one of Mithril's research facilities in California. She'd only been eleven years old, and under the guardianship of her adoptive father, Admiral Borda, learning all about naval combat. She was still young then, still burning with a sense of mission—to build history's greatest submarine and use its power to bring stability to the world. She'd already lost her brother, but she'd channeled that despair and distress into her challenging work.

"Can I sit here?" Those were the first words he'd ever said to her.

Gulping down her not-particularly-appetizing macaroni while keeping her eyes locked on the sheaf of documents she was reading, Tessa had just said, "Sure."

A few minutes later, he'd said, "You're very enthusiastic."

"Yes," she'd responded indifferently, paging through her documents.

"You should at least enjoy the taste of your food while you're eating. I kind of feel sorry for the macaroni."

I'm busy. If you want to find someone to make small talk with, go find someone else— She'd looked up to say that to him and then seen him for the first time. He was a boy, just about her age, standing in front of her with a smile. He had smooth brown skin and a gentle, symmetrical jawline. His eyes were deep and black, and seemed to perceive everything around them.

Tessa knew at first sight that he was the same kind of person she was. There were no children in this facility except for her.

"Is that R. Draf's thesis?" he'd asked. "Is it interesting?"

"Not really. I'm just reading it because I have to for my current line of research."

"I see. So you're not enjoying the macaroni *or* the essay."

Tessa had glared at him. "So what?" she'd said icily. "If you're trying to make fun of me, I'll have to ask you to refrain."

Bani had just shrugged a bit. "I don't mean it like that. I just have two points

of advice for you. one: that's the version written for publication in *PLOS One*, so it omits several important points that the DoD requested be redacted. You should request the full version from DARPA, with the appendix."

"What?" Tessa had checked the essay in her hands. Neither the cover page, table of contents, or back matter mentioned the existence of an appendix. But then, she'd been feeling as though it was lacking something...

"And warning number two... Macaroni is never good cold," Bani told her. "You have to eat it while it's still hot, with lots of cheese on top."

"I don't need your advice. The point of food is to provide nutrition, and this essay is just fine as it—" Tessa started to say, and then stopped. She'd hated to admit it, but he'd been right. If she'd kept reading like that, she might have wasted another few hours. "No, I appreciate it. Thanks," she'd said sulkily. She hadn't been used to having others point out her errors, so she'd switched to an attitude that seemed to say, *Satisfied now?*

"You're welcome," he'd told her. "I'm Bani Morauta. You?"

"Teletha Testarossa."

"A pleasure, Teletha. But I'd like a reward for pointing out that you were reading the wrong essay and helping you keep from wasting your time."

"What do you want?" she'd asked, cautiously.

Bani had smiled in response. "Ten minutes to chat. Food tastes better when it's had over conversation."

"Very well. If that's all you want, I'll humor you." After that, she'd talked with him while eating her cold macaroni. The next thing she knew, they'd been talking for forty minutes. And within a few days they were having lunch every day.

Bani had killed himself over two years ago. He'd attempted deeper and deeper access into the omnisphere using the consciousness transfer system known as the TAROS. During his final effort, he'd contacted the abyss of the Whispers and lost himself to it.

Tessa hadn't been there at the time. On the day Bani died, she'd been out on

a test voyage with her submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan. She'd only heard the news upon her return a week later.

In the Mithril research facility on the outskirts of Melbourne, Bani—the head of the first division there—had sneaked a pistol in and gone berserk, trying to destroy the core unit of ARX-7—AI. When he'd failed to do so, he'd instead fired the gun through his own head. They said he'd died instantly.

Tessa hadn't been able to see his body or attend the small funeral held for him. At the time, she'd had her hands full with learning the ropes of the newly born Tuatha de Danaan and desperately trying to win the trust of its crew. She hadn't had time to leave the Merida Island base. She'd used her usual technique to detach from her feelings and thoughts, deciding to “leave her troubles for another day.”

But it had turned into far more than just “another day.” During her various days off she'd thought about coming here, but her heart had resisted. She'd unconsciously felt that if she ever properly faced Bani's death, it would cause the delicate balance in her mind to collapse, and she'd find herself unfit to command her battle group.

But now, that wasn't a concern anymore. Now, she could visit. Though what should have been “next week” had turned into two years...

She'd heard his grave was in that village. His remaining family should be there, too. She wanted to tell them why Bani had died, the truth of it all: what had happened as a result, what had been born, what had been saved...

She'd shared those feelings with AI, too. She'd brought him here for reasons more important than just serving as her bodyguard. If Bani's idea had been to make AI more than an AI, then in a way, this was a homecoming. It would be for a human.

The hunched-over Alastor stirred, and its motor began to whir quietly. It stood up silently, leaned out of the boat, and slowly observed the surrounding area. First the starboard side, then the port. Concluding that nothing was amiss, it returned to its starting point.

Apparently twenty minutes had passed while she was thinking things over. The waves broke quietly nearby.

Better get to sleep quickly, Tessa told herself. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day...

《Captain. Miss Testarossa. Please, wake up.》 Al's voice brought her back to consciousness. It was morning; the sun had been up for a while now.

"Mm... Something wrong?" Tessa asked groggily.

《Negative. But if you sleep any longer, you'll be exposed to powerful UV rays. Protect against sunburn,》 Al advised. 《Take care of your beautiful skin.》

"Oh, thanks..." *Where did he learn that strange phrasing?* Tessa wondered. *Most likely some commercial he saw online...* "Looks like I overslept," she said out loud. "What time is it now?"

《0717 hours. I reactivated on my own recognizance.》

"No need to worry. I'm not in any position to give you orders anyway."

《I feel quite anxious without orders, though...》

"That's rather sad," she observed. "Shouldn't you enjoy your free will?"

《My apologies.》

Tessa stood up with a stretch. She'd have loved to take a shower, but it seemed she'd have to go without for a while, at least. "Now..." she said, standing up in the stern of the beached boat and looking around at the illuminated shoreline. A pleasant wind blew, rustling her ash blonde hair and pleated white skirt.

The island seemed larger than it had last night. Several meters inland, on the slope of a hill covered in broad-leafed trees, there was a small stone dwelling. It was so hidden by the trees that she hadn't noticed it at first.

"There's a building," Tessa pointed out.

《Yes, there is.》

"You didn't notice, all night long?"

《I did not. But that's not because of any issues with my visual processing abilities. It's merely a lack of resolution in this machine's optical sensors, so—》

“Hmm...”

《You don't believe me, do you?》

“I don't.”

《Either way, someone's coming.》

“Changing the subject...”

《Heading, 10 o'clock. Distance, 300. One person, unarmed.》

Someone was walking towards them over the white beach; a small figure in a large straw hat. They wore a baggy white T-shirt and similarly baggy denim shorts. They were carrying a long staff... No, a fishing pole.

Tessa thought it was a girl at first, but as the figure got closer, she realized it was a boy, eleven or twelve years old.

《What should I do? Attack?》

“What?!”

《Just joking. There's a chance I've already been seen, but I'll hide in the back.》

“Darn it...” grumbled Tessa, who had truly been concerned by Al's joke. It had only been half a day, but Tessa felt like she already understood why Sagara Sousuke found this Al so frustrating.

Al quickly moved into the back of the cabin.

Soon after, the boy approached and called out to her in fluent English, “Miss, are you having trouble?” He took off his straw hat and looked up at her. He had a handsome face and large gray eyes. His pale skin stood out in a tropical region like this. His hair was a dark red, straight and silky.

Tessa stared at him in shock.

“You understand English?” the boy asked again.

“What? Oh... yes. I do.”

“Then at least say something in response. I thought you were stupid or something. Sheesh...” His tone was less teasing and more annoyed.

There was a reason Tessa was so taken aback. Despite being of a different race and having different hair and clothes, the boy looked just like “him”—the “him” she never thought she’d see again. The resemblance was so close that she doubted her own eyes for a moment.

“Bani?” she asked.

“Eh?” the boy replied with a frown.

Obviously, he wasn’t Bani Morauta, or even related to him. This was someone else entirely; his name was Ronnie.

“Ronnie Semmelweis. Weird name, right?” asked Ronnie, as he led her to the house on the hill.

“I wouldn’t say weird,” Tessa told him, “though you don’t sound like a local.” She thought ‘Semmelweis’ sounded like a Hungarian name, and observed that Ronnie himself had Central European features, so at the very least he wasn’t from around here.

“Yeah. I’m technically an American citizen, and I’ve got a mixed ancestry, but that’s all I know,” Ronnie admitted. “My father’s an eccentric freelance scholar, or what you might call an unaffiliated researcher. We’ve traveled all around the world ever since I was little... but we’ve stuck to this island the past two years.”

From his speech pattern and vocabulary, he seems to be a bright boy, Tessa thought.

“Sit there,” he said. “I’ll make tea.”

“Oh, thank you.”

The house’s interior was surprisingly civilized; there was a TV and a game console. No air conditioning, of course, but there was a small refrigerator and a gas stove, and even a PC with a webcam on the table. The adjoining room, partially visible through a half-open door, appeared to be full of shelves packed with documents and books. It looked like a study.

“Where are your parents?” Tessa asked. “I’d like to ask them something.”

“Dad’s not here. Oh, but he’s not dead,” Ronnie clarified upon realizing that

Tessa was about to offer her condolences. “He’s just out. He went off to Madagascar or something for his research and I haven’t heard from him for weeks. That’s pretty typical, though.”

“Your mother?”

“Haven’t seen her since the divorce when I was three. Dad says she got remarried and she’s doing fine, though.”

“So you’re all alone here? You’re not going to school? They just abandoned you?” Tessa stared at him with wide eyes.

Ronnie immediately became cautious. “Teletha Mantissa, you said? You’re not from some child welfare service, are you? I like living the way I do. I’ve finished all my grade school studies, I can talk to my friends online, and when I’m not doing that, I read by myself,” he told her defensively. “If there’s any games or necessities I want, I can shop online and get a monthly delivery from FedEx. I’d really like to stay here until I figure out what I want to do. So, if you’ve got a problem with that, you can get the hell out right now.”

Tessa quickly waved her hands at him. “Oh, it wasn’t that. I was just surprised. I’m not trying to interfere.”

“Oh, really? Okay, then,” said Ronnie, as he casually filled a pot with the water he’d heated on the gas stove. “Some adults like to get in my face about it, and I’ve gotten pretty sick of lectures. Sorry.”

“Not at all. I’m sorry for prying.” She’d gotten more than her share of lectures from adults herself. If the department of child welfare had heard about her, they’d have insisted she stop waging war at once!

“It’s a little weird, though,” he mused. “What’s a girl like you doing coming to the island on a boat all by yourself?”

“Well,” said Tessa, “I had a guide, but we ran into a bit of trouble...”

“Yeah, asking for help around here always comes back to bite you. The economy’s been bad lately, and there’s lots of con men around.”

“I-It does appear that way...”

“You gotta learn how the world works,” Ronnie told her. “Not everyone’s got

your best interests at heart, okay?”

“I already regret it...” Tessa bristled. *Pathetic. I didn't come halfway around the world to get lectured by a child!*

Ronnie held out the metal mug into which he'd poured the tea.

Tessa took it. “Thank you.” It didn't have an especially nice aroma, but she was glad to have something to wet her whistle.

Ronnie sat down in one of the old chairs. “So? You wanted to ask me something, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “This is Lantanfushi Island, isn't it? I hear there's a settlement on the south side. Can it be reached by land?”

“Yeah, but it's a rough road,” he told her. “You'd be better off taking your boat.” As he answered her, suspicion appeared in Ronnie's eyes. He'd probably realized Tessa wouldn't be able to get that boat back in the water by herself, and by extension, he'd begun to question how she'd gotten it up onto the shore in the first place. “Teletha-san, are you really alone here? You aren't hiding someone else out there, are you?”

Ah, but of course he caught on. He's a sharp kid. She'd been hoping to leave Al out of this, though—he was far too technologically advanced for the average person to see. If Ronnie were to get a clear look at him, it could make things complicated. “Yes. Well... I am the only *person* on board,” she hedged.

“Yeah?” Ronnie responded listlessly. He didn't look particularly satisfied with that answer.

“But... anyway, the truth is that the boat is almost out of fuel. And there seems to be a hole in it, so it's also taking on water. I need to patch that up first.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Do you have any fuel in your house?” Tessa asked. “I can pay for it, of course.”

“Only the gas for the generator. Will that work in your boat?”

“I doubt it.”

“Then you’ll have to get some at the settlement,” said Ronnie.

“How long will it take to get there?”

“About two hours if you walk. And it’s a pretty rough path, lots of ups and downs.”

“Hmm...”

It was a tricky issue. There was no way she could carry a heavy can of fuel all the way along a two-hour walk by herself. She’d also have to interact with the people in town. Should she bring Al with her, and have him hide just outside the settlement? But his battery situation was already dicey...

Ronnie watched her think, then suddenly stood up from his chair. “Okay, let’s go.”

“What?”

“You’ve gotta get there one way or another, right? We’d better head out before it gets too hot.”

Tessa decided to leave Al with the boat. While Ronnie went around to the back of the house, she used her small portable transceiver to tell him to wait while she went to the settlement.

Al gave her a short “Roger,” in response.

Ronnie brought out his motorcycle, an old off-roader with a 50cc engine that produced a lightly keening engine noise. “Hold on tight!” he told her. “Don’t blame me if you fall off!”

“R-Right,” said Tessa, getting on behind Ronnie and wrapping her arms tightly around his chest. He was shorter than her, so if she gripped him too hard, she’d probably take them both down.

For some reason, though, he didn’t take off. She was just beginning to wonder why when Ronnie turned back and lifted his goggles. His face was red for some reason. “Your chest.”

“What?”

“Your chest,” he said pointedly. “Don’t press it against me so hard.”

“Ah... I-I’m sorry.” She hadn’t even considered that she’d be pressing her chest against his shoulders. She quickly shifted back, then assumed an awkwardly hunched-over posture to hold his waist instead.

“Here we go.” Ronnie finally began to accelerate, driving the two-person motorcycle down the narrow, unpaved road. They were soon enveloped by the thick jungle, surrounded by darkness despite the sunny day.

They drove a while down the road as it twisted and turned through the slopes, until they seemed to come out into a valley. The trees thinned out there, and Tessa could see a small river flowing to their right. The road was still bumpy, but it had straightened out at some point.

“Miss Mantissa, are you all right?!” Ronnie called back to her.

“Yes, I think so! Ah... and just call me Tessa! That’s what all my friends call me!”

“You can call me Ronnie, then! Nice to meet you, Tessa.” Even though he was driving, he turned back to grin at her. He had a pretty charming smile for such a snotty little brat.

“A pleasure, Ronnie.”

“Could I ask a question?” he continued. “What brings you to this island? It’s not exactly a resort.”

“It’s the hometown of a friend of mine who passed away,” Tessa told him. “I’ve wanted to come here for quite some time.”

“I see... What’s his name?”

“Bani Morauta. Have you heard of him?”

“Nope, never. But, I mean, I’ve only lived here for two years, so I don’t know much. It’s about to get bumpy!” The motorcycle jerked up and down as it drove over a dip. Thanks to Ronnie’s warning, Tessa just managed not to take a tumble.

“Tessa, um, er...”

“Hmm? Ah...” She realized she was pressing her chest against him again, and gave him space.

To divert himself from the awkwardness, Ronnie went back to his questions. “What kind of person was he?”

“He was superior,” she told him. “Truly superior.” She thought, *Bani Morauta... In a way, he was an even greater genius than my brother. My brother built the Belial, and Bani the Arbalest. That battle between them ended with the Belial’s overwhelming victory, but the Arbalest’s most important component—Al—survived.*

Al was reborn with a new body, the Laevatein, and faced down the Belial once more. This time, the Laevatein beat it. Rather... Sousuke and Al’s teamwork beat it. I suppose the Laevatein itself never really beat the Belial. Even so, I don’t think you can say that Bani really lost to my brother.

When she’d heard from Al how the battle had gone, Tessa had felt strangely proud.

In the end, their victory would not have been possible without the exceptional Al named Al. Sousuke wouldn’t have survived that nuclear explosion without Al, either. If the Belial had been in the same situation, would its Al have tried to save my brother? It’s hard to imagine.

Al was more than a simple combat unit. He’d been created to be something greater. Something more than a merely strategic or tactical mind—something that could alter humanity’s very destiny.

Perhaps Bani had fundamentally different ideas about what a machine should do, she reflected.

The idea that objects could develop souls, and that the passage of years could afford them a hint of the divine—it was an idea that was relatively unfamiliar to Westerners like her and her brother.

Bani was working on more than a powerful lambda driver-mounted AS, she thought next. Al was deeply involved in the creation of the Laevatein and all of the black technology it incorporated. He activated the lambda driver, which should only be accessible to humans, on his own. Al is a machine capable of

accessing the omnisphere.

In a way, didn't that make him an artificial Whispered?

I sometimes wonder, was Bani trying to create a god out of the machine—a “deus ex machina”? Was Al his solution to the inescapable time hazard? Was he trying to save us the same way my brother was, just in a different way?

Of course, it's not as if everything had turned out the way Bani had planned.

But Bani, the genius, also had the humility to accept the uncertainties inherent to his plans. He knew he couldn't control destiny, that he couldn't predict exactly how things would turn out. He accepted the possibility that Al might be destroyed, or that he might turn his free will to wicked ends.

But, Tessa recalled, the one to pilot the Arbalest and awaken Al had been Sousuke.

Al mapped onto Sousuke's neural patterns, and those became the root of Al's personality. That fundamental core—the part we could think of as “good”—might be something that Al picked up from Sousuke. Sousuke is kind, straightforward to a fault, and loyal. No matter how many times he's been hurt, he's never come to hate the world.

And nothing had to be said about the brilliant teamwork that resulted.

Had Bani planned that? No, that seems hard to believe. Nor did he plan the various events that came after, nor Al's transfer to the Laevatein. Things had worked out because Bani had accepted uncertainty. He'd had the courage to entrust the “art” into which he'd poured his heart and soul to chance.

Yes, she decided, *Bani won*. No one could ever hold a candle to him.

“Superior...” Ronnie murmured while Tessa was lost in thought. “Superior how? Athletically?”

“No, he wasn't particularly athletic,” she told him. “Though he wasn't bad in that regard, I don't think he really cared for it.”

“I see.”

“Bani was an engineer,” she went on. “He was very smart and very strong.”

“Hmm... Were you dating?” Ronnie sounded probing.

Tessa became flustered. “N-No, certainly not. It wasn’t that kind of relationship at all...”

“Really? You sounded pretty intense about him. Kind of like you were bragging.”

Impressive that he can pick up on that over all the engine noise, the wind, and the vibrations... “Perhaps...” she mused, and then decided that it wasn’t right to continue talking like this to someone she’d just met. She hadn’t even told the closest people in her life, after all. But by the same token, maybe it was easier to tell Ronnie, this boy she’d just met today in this foreign land.

She leaned in toward his ear and whispered so that he could hear. “Don’t tell anyone, will you?”

“S-Sure.”

“I did care for him deeply,” she admitted. “I think of him as my first love.”

She felt Ronnie’s body stiffen up. He probably hadn’t heard much of this kind of talk. She hadn’t either, of course, but she had the benefit of age.

“But it was one-sided,” she added.

“Really?”

“Yes. I was very arrogant at the time, and competitive, and I’m sure he saw me as something of a diva.”

“You think?” Ronnie questioned. “You seem kind of helpless and flustered to me.”

“Hmph,” said Tessa. Children really were merciless. Even if it was true, he didn’t have to phrase it that way. “Well, I... I won’t deny it. But Ronnie, a person has many faces. For instance, despite how I look, I can be a great leader when I want to.” It wasn’t a lie. She’d led a veteran crew and experienced soldiers to victory through many difficult battles. Her statement was no exaggeration.

“I find that hard to believe, but I won’t argue with you.”

“It’s true,” she insisted.

“Okay, fine. Keep going.”

“Keep going... with what? It was one-sided, so nothing really happened.”

“No kissing or holding hands?” he pressed.

“Well, no...”

“That’s boring,” Ronnie spat, openly disappointed.

“Y-You’re the one who asked!” Tessa protested. “And I told you straight, even though I didn’t want to. You can’t talk to me that way!”

“Fine, fine. Sorry. I should’ve been more considerate. You missed a dead guy who didn’t like you back, so you decided to barge your way to his homeland,” Ronnie said acridly. “I should’ve realized it was a sensitive situation and picked my words better.”

It was an outrageous way for anyone to talk to her, let alone a child! Every single word seemed chosen to have cut her to the quick. *What kind of upbringing do you have to give a child for them to talk like that?!* Tessa wondered.

“What, are you mad?”

“Not really,” she told him.

“Nah, I can see you pouting,” Ronnie observed. “You’re mad.”

“I am not!”



On the south shore of the island, they found the settlement.

From the hill just before it, they could see the roofing of simple houses, about twenty at a rough count. On the distant shore, there was an old dock with about three boats moored. There were probably a lot more there usually, but they'd be out fishing right now.

"Anything I should watch out for?" asked Tessa. "Local taboos and the like?"

"Not really. The area's been Catholic for over a hundred years. They've even got a church over there," said Ronnie, pointing out a building that looked like a town hall, with a wooden cross atop its gabled roof.

Ah, I guess it is a church... thought Tessa.

"Did you think they still practiced cannibalism?"

"Of course not," she replied. "I just asked to be safe."

They rode down the hill, parked the motorcycle, and entered the village together. A free-range chicken strode across the unpaved road, and children much younger than Bani played with a plastic ball beside one of the houses.

Ronnie asked them something in the local language. The kids answered with smiles, seeming to recognize him. Turning to Tessa, he said, "They say the chief is in the church."

The almost naked children pointed at Tessa and sounded very excited.

Tessa waved and smiled. "What are they saying?" she asked Ronnie.

"They're not used to people like you, that's all. Let's go," he responded bluntly, and began walking towards the church. Tessa had no choice but to follow along.

She could tell the village was poor. Most of the houses were a combination of wood and corrugated iron, covered in a patchwork of repairs. They did seem to have electricity here, but she wondered how often it worked.

Several of the women had come together to knit and mend nets. They used rope made of braided palm or some other kind of leaves to make souvenirs, likely to supplement their income. As she had intuited from the number of

boats in the dock, most of the men seemed to be out fishing.

And this is where Bani grew up... Tessa thought. Ronnie had told her that the church had a school. Theoretically, Ronnie went to that school too, but...

"It's not exactly an education," he laughed. "They're just happy if you learn to read and write your own name and do basic arithmetic. The adults here think learning how to fish is way more important."

"I see..."

"It's the chief who does the teaching," said Ronnie, "but he's always asking me to stand in. One time he got really persistent, so I ended up teaching a class."

"What did you teach?" asked Tessa.

"Science. I did a demonstration of how alkali metals explode in water. I started with sodium, then went onto potassium, rubidium, and at last, cesium. The explosions got bigger and bigger. The kids loved it, but the chief didn't ask me to teach ever again."

"I would imagine not. How did you acquire metals in sufficient amounts, though?"

"Oh, one of my gaming buddies is friends with an assistant professor at MIT, so he sent me some good stuff in exchange for rare items."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," remarked Tessa.

Ronnie's exploits aside, she had gotten the drift of the local education system, and they didn't seem to have much in the way of books. If most of the villagers didn't even know how to read or write, how had Bani Morauta developed world-class intelligence? Obviously, he wouldn't have had someone smart, like Ronnie, to debate with back then. Even with the help of the Whispers, it would probably have been quite challenging for him to have learned just about anything.

Did Bani like his hometown? That strange thought drifted up in the back of Tessa's mind.

"Here we are," said Ronnie. "I'll find him."

As they arrived in front of the church, Ronnie called out something in the local language and ran around behind the building. A man of just about fifty came out soon after. He wasn't dressed in local garb, but in a beat-up print T-shirt. Perhaps he'd been doing some repairs to the building, because he was also holding a rusty bradawl.

"This is the village chief, Mr. Matassi. Chief, this is Teletha Mantissa." Ronnie introduced them.

Tessa nodded politely. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Matassi."

"Hmm, ah, thank you for coming all the way to our empty little village, miss," Matassi said.

She was glad there were people here who spoke English, heavily accented as it was.

He went on to say, "So, I hear you had something to ask me?"

"Yes," Tessa replied. "Did you know Bani Morauta? He was a friend of mine."

Matassi narrowed his eyes and gazed out over the ocean. "Bani. Bani Morauta, eh?" he mused. "I remember him well. A bright boy. Ronnie there is smart, too, but Bani was polite and better mannered. And smarter, I'd say. Wah ha ha."

"That's a mean thing to say, Chief." Ronnie acted like he might hit him, but Matassi just laughed. He seemed to enjoy Ronnie's presence.

"You know that Bani died two years ago?" Tessa asked.

"Yes," he replied. "A lawyer came with his possessions and his ashes. The name was... ah..."

"Allen Moseley?" Tessa prompted. This was the (fake) name of a Mithril agent she'd read about in reports before, though she'd never met him herself. He was usually the one in charge of conveying the news and belongings of dead combatants to their families.

"Yes, I think that was his name," Matassi agreed. "He told Bani's family that he died in an accident on the job. Some machine with a complicated name blew up, and a screw went through his head at high speed. It was such a tragedy."

Obviously, they couldn't have told them he shot himself. Tessa was quietly grateful for the agent's tact.

"When he was about ten years old, Bani sent a letter to some big scientist in Denmark or somewhere. His intelligence was recognized, and he was scouted by some big-shot laboratory. Ah... are you involved with them, then?"

"Well, we were in different departments, but we often talked in the cafeteria." Tessa was hoping to avoid lying, so she kept her comments vague.

"I see," said Matassi. "There must have been a lot of smart people there. He was a prodigy out here in the sticks, but I'll bet he struggled a bit more out there."

"No, he was the best there, too."

"Ah, well. Small mercies." Matassi didn't seem to believe Tessa, though, interpreting her words as mere flattery for the departed.

He really was the best, though. Maybe even the best in the world...

"And so... er, where is his family?" she asked next. "I'd like to pay my respects."

"Oh, they're gone."

"What?"

"There seemed to be a lot of inheritance and condolence money, so his death left them rich overnight," Matassi explained. "They had no reason to stay here in the sticks."

"I see..." *That does make sense,* Tessa thought. *I wonder why I never considered that possibility.* Out loud she said, "Where are they now? Do you have their address or contact information?"

"I'm sorry, dear, but I don't. I wanted to rebuild the church, but they refused all my requests for donations. They started to fight more often with the locals, and basically left on bad terms. I haven't heard from them since," Matassi clarified. "I hope they're not spending the money in foolish ways, but... It's not good to have money beyond your means. I feel bad about asking them for that donation, too."

“Any clues at all?”

“Sorry, but no. And...” Matassi stopped. He seemed to be hesitating over what to say next.

“What is it?” Tessa asked.

“I didn’t want to say this, but I think you’d be disappointed if you met them. Bani’s parents were lazy fools, always sponging off the townsfolk. They often picked fights and raised trouble. And I can’t prove it, but I think they were thieves, too.”

“What?”

“They tended to beat Bani as well,” Matassi said apologetically. “And maybe they saw his intelligence as being snotty, because they also tore up the books I lent him. To say they were a no-good bunch is the kindest way of putting it.”

As she listened to the chief speak, Tessa felt as if the clear blue sky were turning gray. “Then... does he have a grave?”

“He does. It’s a little ways to the east of the village. There’s a graveyard along the road.”

Bani Morauta’s grave was in a graveyard on a hill that overlooked the sea. His name and life span were written on the simple gravestone in both English and the local language. It was even simpler than the other gravestones. That fact alone spoke volumes of the character of the family that had run off with his inheritance.

“There’s the grave. You wanna be alone?” Ronnie asked curiously after leading her there.

“Yes,” she replied. “Could you give me some time?”

“Sure thing. I think I’ll go back to the village. I’ll come get you in thirty minutes.” With that, he walked back to the bike he’d parked outside of the graveyard.

“Ronnie.”

“What?”

“Thanks.” Tessa smiled with all her gratitude. *He really is a good boy. He’s being so considerate of me*, she thought.

But Ronnie just gave her an exaggerated shrug. “Don’t go killing yourself to join him, okay?” With that last sassy remark, he left. She heard his motorcycle drive away, which left Tessa alone in the graveyard.

The grass swayed in a passing breeze, and the strong sunlight felt hot on her skin.

After a while, she said, “Bani... I’m sorry I’m late. I finally made it out to see you.” Tessa removed a bouquet of flowers and a small model of her submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, from her bag, and laid them in front of the grave. “I wanted to take my submarine here,” she told him, “but it was destroyed. Nevertheless, it performed very well right to the end. As for Al, your son... he’s fine. He’s no longer in the body you gave him, but I’ll bring him by later.”

Tessa then squatted down and began to tell him everything that was in her heart: Her present circumstances. The events of the past few years. The people she’d saved. The people she hadn’t. Shared memories of their past. Her own feelings towards him.

“I couldn’t tell you then, but I loved you,” she whispered. Tessa hesitated over whether or not to tell him about Sousuke, but decided she might as well. “After you died, I fell in love with someone else. Nothing happened between us. That is... that love was unrequited, too. He didn’t want anything to do with me.” She laughed as she said it. It felt like a strange confession, since she assumed Bani had never seen her as anything more than a friend.

“The girl he loved was another one like us,” Tessa went on. “She can be a bit flighty and impulsive, but she’s also very brave and strong. She did so many things I never could... I think she just had something I lacked. I admired her, envied her, felt inferior to her. Yes... in a different way than I felt inferior to you. I don’t think it’s any surprise that my brother fell for her too.”

Tessa spoke the words on her mind freely and easily. It was strange. It might have been her first time sharing her emotions like this.

“But Bani,” she said, “I’m grateful to all of you. You and my brother and even her... You all took me down a peg, but you also helped me to grow more honest

in the process. I had an awful way of thanking you when we first met, about that essay... I'd never do that again. The next time someone points out my mistakes, I'll be able to thank them with genuine gratitude. I know that's something every human should be capable of, but back then, I simply wasn't."

Tessa fell silent for a little while after that. She heard the birds calling in the mountain behind her. Voices like song, like lamentation.

I wish we'd talked more often like this, she reflected. *I was just so busy with my work back then, still haunted by the loss of my parents, by my brother leaving the way he did. I didn't have the time. I was so focused on growing stronger and smarter, and not needing any help from anyone...*

"That's why it feels so strange to me now," she told him. "Even back then, how could you be so kind to others? How could you have made a work of art like AI?"

I'm not jealous, of course. I've just always wondered. Bani didn't try to crush his rivals or develop weapons to annihilate his enemies. He just... smiled. If he'd been raised by a kind and loving family in some simple South Seas paradise, I might understand. But having seen this place, it's hard to call it a blessed existence. Had I been raised in a place like this, I don't think I'd have turned out as well. At the very least, my parents didn't try to stop me from learning things. They didn't abuse me.

Who taught him the right way? Was it that village chief? No, I doubt it... He seems kind, but the way he talked about Bani gave the vaguest suggestion of indifference. He saw Bani as a poor child, mistreated by the community he was supposed to lead, and born to a troublesome family. That was the nuance she'd picked up. Who, then? Tessa wondered. She just couldn't figure it out.

The gravestone remained silent, offering no answers. It was simply a stone mirror that reflected her heart.

"I'm sorry. I should find that answer myself, shouldn't I?" said Tessa, changing the subject. "We should talk about the future, too. I've been taking it easy lately, but maybe it's time I got started on something. A friend of mine is having a baby, so I'll have to do it while I help with that. And then there's the question of... us. I'm not sure I can rest easy just yet, but at least things seem much

better than before.”

By “us,” she meant the Whispered. Tessa hadn’t heard the whispers even once since the final battle on Merida Island, nor had she experienced even the occasional bout of déjà vu. From what she’d heard, it was the same for others in her situation. They likely wouldn’t have to be afraid of the whispers and their allure any longer.

They hadn’t lost their intelligence or the knowledge they’d already possessed, but now they could just be ordinary humans. *Still, people might still come after us, Tessa thought. Awful things might still happen. But someday, I think, we’ll be safe.*

The signs of it were already out there. With the settling of the military crisis that had begun the past year, the hard-line factions on both sides of the Cold War were rapidly losing their influence. Many had already been driven from power, and for others, it seemed to be only a matter of time. Reformist and democratic factions in the Eastern Bloc were starting to take over, and the aftershocks from that were rocking the Soviet Union. The Communist powers were already becoming shells of themselves, and would soon fall.

The Cold War, locked in a stalemate for ten straight years, might finally come to a true end.

Once that happened, countries would slash their budgets for defense and intelligence. They’d pivot to rebuilding their flagging and panicked economies and dicey political situations, and slowly ramp down new weapons development. No one would give a second thought to those strange occult children and their ideas about super-technology.

It won’t happen right away. In a year, maybe five, maybe more... I won’t be able to rest easy for a while, but someday, I will. Ideally, we’ll be treated as silly rumors, on the level of theories about South American Nazis making clones of Adolf Hitler. And even if those who know the truth try to sound the alarm, no one will listen to them...

Could it be possible? Those thoughts, which had been vague and formless up until this point, took firm shape in Tessa’s mind as she stood before the grave. Working with Al, Mira, and Chidori Kaname, could they manipulate information

to get things moving in that direction? She wasn't sure how well it would work, but with that many minds working together, it surely wasn't impossible.

And some day, I'll get my normal life back. It was a grand calling, far more important than building and commanding the Tuatha de Danaan.

"It won't be easy, but I think I'll be able to come back someday and tell you that," said Tessa, gently tracing the surface of the headstone. She had never touched Bani before. She'd never even held his hand. This was their first real contact.

But her moment of sentimentality was interrupted by a sneer. "Teletha Mantissa! You really took us for a ride last night!"

She turned and saw a familiar group of men standing at the entrance to the graveyard.

It was Murat and his men—the ones she'd thrown into the ocean the night before—standing nearby, with a sour-looking Ronnie.

Murat and his crew glared at her, their eyes burning with unrestrained anger. They carried old rifles and pistols. *Where did they get those in the course of one night?* Tessa wondered. But beyond the rifles, the item that caught her attention the most was an old break-action grenade launcher. It shot powerful 40mm grenades and could kill everyone there if not used with great caution.

One of the men had Ronnie by the throat. They'd probably forced him to lead them here.

"Hey, Tessa. What's the deal here, huh? I don't get it," Ronnie said.

"I'm sorry, Ronnie," replied Tessa. "I had a minor dispute with these men before I arrived."

"A minor dispute? They seem a little violent for— ow!"

"No talking!" Murat gave him a smack, and Ronnie reluctantly clammed up.

"Mr. Murat," Tessa said politely, "I'm glad to see you survived."

"Don't put on airs with me, little girl."

“But I’m surprised you caught up with me so quickly. How did you manage it?”

“Heh,” Murat said with a triumphant snort. “It was easy. We swam our way to an island and walked for two hours. Then we found a fishing village, borrowed a boat, got some weapons from our cop friends in the closest city, and only just arrived here.”

“You must be running on very little sleep...” Tessa observed.

“That’s none of your concern! Anyway, we were just shaking down the village chief when this kid came running. He tried to get away, but we grabbed him and got him to tell us about this place. Poor little thing.”

“Sorry, Tessa,” Ronnie said apologetically. “I tried to lead them on a wild goose chase, but I think I just got them in a killing mood.”

“I told you not to talk!” said Murat, who gave Ronnie another smack.

“Ow.”

“Please leave that child alone,” Tessa requested.

“You shut up. All right, it’s time to teach you a lesson. But more importantly...” said Murat, as the men looked around them. “Where’s that big guy? He’s the one I really want a piece of.”

“Oh, he’s...” Tessa pulled her tablet out of her bag, called up a digital map, and checked Al’s current location. “He’s here. Er... yes, right over there, in fact.”

The men turned to look. Around thirty meters away, traipsing through the mountain jungle behind the graveyard came the trench coat-wearing Alastor. He must have cut straight through the thick of it, because his body was covered in sap and leaves.

《I’m glad I made it in time,》 Al said through his external speakers. 《There happened to be a certain country’s surveillance satellite passing by overhead. I had a peek at its feed to kill time, and happened to see their boat en route here.》

“And so you came running?”

《Yes. Am I intruding?》

“No,” said Tessa, “I’m glad you’re here.”

The men immediately sprang into action, shouting, “Get him! Shoot! Shoot!” They unloaded all at once, and in the same instant, the Alastor took off.

Unfortunately for the men, they were amateurs when it came to firearms. They had fired their rifles without proper bracing; fired the shotguns one-handedly, and then dropped them. One of them was even dual-wielding pistols like an action hero to fire at a target over thirty meters away. Several shots hit Al purely by chance, but standard rounds wouldn’t do much against a body reinforced with bulletproof fibers and titanium alloy.

Murat himself was struggling to load his portable launcher. *He hasn’t realized that he has the round backwards— Ah, no, there he goes,* thought Tessa.

One of the men gasped as Al closed in, grabbed his arm, swung him around, then threw him into the next man over. The move knocked them both out together. Another man fired his shotgun at Al from close range, doing no damage at all. Al turned around, snatched the shotgun away, and thrust it at the man unceremoniously—another one down.

Rather than firing his stolen shotgun, Al just threw it at the dual-wielding man, who was still firing at him. The shotgun’s stock hit him square in the chest and—*Ah,* thought Tessa, *that must have hurt*—he doubled over and fell to the ground, motionless.

Amalgam’s antipersonnel weapon truly is impressive, taking out four men in mere seconds. Tessa found herself forced to admire anew the skill of Kurz Weber, who’d taken out one of them with just a handgun during their very first encounter.

Murat was the only one left now. “D-Don’t move! I’ll kill the kid!” He staggered backwards, using Ronnie as a shield in one arm and brandishing the grenade launcher he’d finally managed to load in the other. “What the hell are you?!” he shouted. “You’re not human... y-you monster!”

《Monster, you say?》 Al replied.

Tessa didn’t miss the slight sinking of the Alastor’s shoulders. *Ah,* she thought regretfully, *his feelings are hurt.*

《My classification aside, you should release that boy and drop your weapon. Surrender and I guarantee you won't be harmed.》

“Sh-Shut up!” Murat howled. “Why should I trust you?!”

“You really should do as you're told. I know it's hard to believe, but he's been taking it easy on you,” Tessa joined in.

But of course, the man wasn't listening. “Y-You wanna get me, go ahead and try! Got it? Don't move, I said!” Murat cried, slowly backing away from Al.

Meanwhile, the hostage had apparently forgotten the danger he was in, staring wide-eyed at Al. “Awesome,” Ronnie whispered.

《What shall I do, Colonel?》

Tessa knew Al wasn't really asking for help. The Alastor's arm was mounted with a .50 caliber gun, which could easily blow just Murat's head off and save Ronnie even at that distance. The reason he hadn't used it yet was that at the start of the trip, he had promised Tessa he would save killing as a last resort (he seemed to view this as part of his ROE).

At the same time, the grenade launcher was a dangerous weapon. If it hit on-target and exploded, it would do serious damage to even the Alastor, and Tessa was close enough that she wouldn't survive getting caught in the blast.

But Tessa said instead, “No need to do anything yet. Let's just wait until he fires.”

《I don't understand,》said Al.

“It's all right,” Tessa told him reassuringly. “Just don't move.” She thought, *He'll make his move soon enough. Ah, there we go...*

“Grr... I said, don't move!” said Murat, stepping farther back, still using Ronnie as a shield. Once he reached a gravestone large enough to hide behind, he pointed the grenade launcher at them. He was a little over ten meters away, probably figuring it was a safe distance from them, but still close enough to land a hit with the grenade launcher.

Just as I anticipated, thought Tessa, *He's going to try to shoot from there.*

“You've humiliated me for the last time,” Murat yelled. “I'll take you all

down!”

«I see...» Al started to say, just as Murat fired the grenade at him. The round went flying with a pleasant *plunk*, striking the Alastor right in its central mass... and that was it. The grenade just bounced off Al and spun through the air, trailing smoke before falling to the ground... where it simply went silent.

“Huh? What?! Hey!” While Murat stared in confusion, Ronnie stamped as hard as he could on the other man’s foot. Murat’s grip loosened in pain and Ronnie dashed off. By that point, Al had already gotten in close. Tessa found herself closing her eyes, but she still heard the awful crunch of the Alastor’s fist breaking his nose.

“It’s kind of like a safety mechanism—the grenades won’t detonate unless they’re a far enough distance from the launcher. That’s why it hit but didn’t explode, right?” Ronnie asked, using Murat’s own belt to bind the collapsed man’s hands behind him.

“Yes,” said Tessa. “From fifteen meters or more it would be dicey, so I wouldn’t want to test it, but... Really, Ronnie, I’m impressed that you know so much about grenades.”

“I use grenade launchers a lot in games, so I looked them up out of curiosity,” he told her. “I’m more surprised a girl like you knows about them, Tessa.”

“Oh, well...”

“So, anyway...” said Ronnie, looking at the Alastor. The two-meter-tall robot was pulling the unconscious hooligans into one place. “What is that thing? As an innocent child dragged into all this chaos, I feel like I’m owed an explanation.”

Tessa wasn’t sure how much to tell him. Of course, she felt bad about having put him in danger, but she worried that telling him too much would just make more trouble for him.

“It’s okay. I won’t tell anyone,” he promised.

“You really won’t?”

“I really won’t. So tell me.”

“When you urge me on that enthusiastically, it makes it harder to trust you...” said Tessa.

“Aw, c’mon,” Ronnie replied, looking genuinely disappointed.

Tessa just smiled at him. “I’m kidding. He’s my dear friend, and Bani’s only son.”

“Huh?”

Al finished bringing the unconscious men together and said, «Colonel. Shall I take care of the unexploded ordnance?»

He’s gone back to saying “colonel” in the chaos, Tessa realized. She didn’t want to object and open a new can of worms, though. So instead, she just said, “Yes, please.”

«I’ll detonate it over there. Keep your heads down, just in case.» Al picked up the grenade lying on the ground and walked to the outskirts of the graveyard.

Ronnie watched him go. “Hey,” he said, “what did he mean by ‘colonel’?”

“It’s like a nickname,” Tessa said dismissively. “Don’t worry about it.”

“But this morning, you said your friends call you Tessa.”

“Ah ha ha...” She laughed uncomfortably as Al stepped outside of the graveyard. He threw the undetonated grenade on an arc down an uninhabited path, took aim with the gun mounted in his right arm, and fired.

There was a deafening explosion. Smoke rose beyond the treetops. Tessa knew that Al’s fingers probably weren’t dexterous enough to disarm a grenade, so he’d had to use more forceful means to neutralize it.

Al then returned to Tessa with the swagger of someone who’d taken out the trash. «It’s disposed of.»

“Well done,” she praised him. “I need to talk with these people about what to do with the guns, then acquire fuel... and talk with the chief about a few things.”

«I suspect my presence could cause trouble, and as I also have little power remaining, I’ll hide in the underbrush outside the village. Farewell.»

“Ah... wait, Al!” Tessa called as Al was about to leave.

《Yes?》

“Bani’s grave is right there. Don’t you want to talk to him?”

The Alastor that contained Al’s mind turned around and was silent for a while.
《Shall I interpret that as a joke?》

“It’s not a joke,” she told him.

《Then I do not understand,》 said Al. 《Is Bani Morauta not dead?》

“He is, but...”

《It is not possible to talk to someone who no longer exists. Yet you recommend that I do. It’s a difficult metaphor. Could you explain it to me in terms that are easier to understand?》

“It’s not a metaphor. It’s... um...” *How to explain it?* Tessa wondered, racking her brain.

But Ronnie chimed in first. “It’s Al, right? When you visit a grave, you’re basically talking to yourself.”

《Talking to myself?》

“Having a conversation with the dead person inside your mind,” Ronnie explained. “You think, ‘If I said this, what would he say back?’ It’s like running a simulation. And imagining that stuff helps you realize things about yourself. What you want to do, how you’d like to live, what you’re worried about, what dilemmas you’re facing. It’s basically how you work through that stuff.”

《Is a self-diagnostic not sufficient to check my own condition?》

“It’s not a diagnostic,” Ronnie told him. “It’s introspection.”

《Introspection?》

“You think about your life and come face-to-face with yourself. Tessa instinctively realized that you needed that, and that’s why she recommended it.”

《Hold, please.》 Al went silent for about ten seconds. On the other side of that satellite collection, somewhere on the Earth, he must have been using

considerable processing power to grasp Ronnie's words. «May I use statistics?»

“Like Bézier statistics? If that's how you do things, it's probably all right. What the human brain does is pretty similar,” Ronnie said doubtfully. “The important thing to do is imagine that he's here. If that Bani guy who raised you was here, what would he think of you? All these silly-looking stone monuments are just a symbol to help you visualize that.”

Tessa gazed in wonderment. She'd thought Ronnie was a very mature boy, but he clearly had some quality beyond it. That he could explain something like this to an AI at his young age...

«Thank you, Ronnie. I understand.»

“That's good,” Ronnie said agreeably. “Well, I'll be back later.”

«Indeed. Could I have some time, Colonel?»

“What? Ah... of course,” Tessa agreed.

Al knelt down in front of Bani Morauta's gravestone and then fell silent.

Tessa had been hesitant to ask how long 'some time' would be, and in the end, she and Ronnie ended up having to take Murat and the others back to town without Al's help. First, they returned to town, borrowed a spare sheet of corrugated iron, returned, placed the tied-up men on top of it, then dragged them back to town on the motorcycle. By the time that was done, the men who'd gone out fishing had returned to the village. They wanted to go check out the graveyard, and Tessa had to struggle to invent reasons to prevent them from going. She talked to them about what to do with Murat and his crew, purchased some of the gasoline she needed, made a bit more small talk, and finally returned to the graveyard around evening.

Al was still kneeling in front of the grave when she did. She wondered at first if he'd locked up due to power loss, but the data on her terminal showed her that the Alastor was still active. *What is he saying to Bani in that artificial mind of his?* she wondered. No one could know the answer to that question. Al was likely running calculations never before run in human history, but that was territory into which no one had any right to tread.



“Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” Ronnie whispered, staring distantly at the Alastor in the twilight.

“No, it’s fine,” Tessa said, her expression very serious. “He’s undergoing an important rite of passage. I couldn’t have explained it to him as well as you did. You’re an amazing boy, Ronnie.”

“I dunno...” Contrary to Tessa’s expectations, Ronnie grew neither bashful nor self-satisfied. “I was just excited to see that a robot like him really existed. If I’d been a little more clear-headed, maybe I would’ve given more responsible advice.”

“More responsible?”

“Even for humans,” said Ronnie, “talking to the dead isn’t easy.”

She hadn’t heard him sound so sad before.

“At least, I can’t do it,” he added.

“Oh?”

“Sorry,” he said next. “Remember when I said my dad was away doing research? I was lying.”

“What?” asked Tessa.

“He’s actually dead. The research he was working on forever didn’t pan out, and he couldn’t figure out what to do next, so he took some pills in a hotel in New York,” Ronnie admitted. “The others in the village don’t know, though.”

Tessa said nothing.

“I lived with my mother in North Carolina for a while... but I didn’t fit in with her family, so I just came back here on my own,” Ronnie went on. “I made sure she could figure out how to contact me if she really wanted to, but since I haven’t heard from her, I guess I wasn’t worth that much. She’s probably glad to see the other side of me.”

“Ronnie...” Tessa trailed off. She didn’t know what to tell him.

She had thought his situation was strange to begin with. It was hard to imagine even the most permissive father giving his child as much freedom as

Ronnie had, and she hadn't gotten much of a sense of the man's presence in the house she'd visited that morning. She didn't know how Ronnie supported himself, but he did seem to be a bright boy. Maybe he made money online. Even a part-time salary would probably be enough, given the local cost of living.

"I stood in front of my dad's grave and couldn't think of what to say," said Ronnie, the inland wind stirring his hair. "All I could think was, 'What a weak man you were.' What he was thinking, hoping for, struggling with when he died... I couldn't even start to imagine it. Standing in front of his grave and thinking didn't get me anywhere."

"Then why could you say those things to Al?" Tessa wanted to know.

Ronnie said nothing.

"You said that standing in front of a grave, you talk to yourself," she continued. "Not just about that, but about all kinds of important things. If a gravestone is like an interface between the living and the non-living, maybe you were treating Al as a gravestone just now?"

"Sounds like a stretch," Ronnie told her.

Tessa didn't want to push him any further than he was ready to go, so she just put her arm around his shoulders.

"Stop it," Ronnie said, his voice cracking as he turned away. "I don't want your pity."

"This isn't pity," Tessa replied. "I'm doing it because I want to. Is that wrong?"

"It's fine, I guess."

"Good." She'd only known him for a day, but felt like she'd known him for years.

"Hey... are you leaving tomorrow?" Ronnie asked hesitantly.

It had gotten late enough that she'd have to stay at Ronnie's house overnight, but her intention had been to go home the minute the boat was fixed. "Well... I can't stay long. I've left a friend in a rather vulnerable position."

"Oh."

It's so strange, she thought. Why does hearing him respond that way cause my heart to ache so much? “Ronnie,” she said, “you said you liked living here, didn’t you? But if you’d like...”

The sound of the activator starting up caused Tessa to swallow back what she was going to say next. The Alastor, silent for so long, was finally waking up from power conservation mode. Its joints creaked as it walked towards them.

There was theoretically no need to be self-conscious in front of Al, but Tessa found herself removing her arm from Ronnie’s shoulders and taking a small step away from him.

《Oh, dear. It appears I’ve made you wait a long time,》 Al said.

“Are you finished? Did you learn anything?”

《Yes,》 he responded, turning back to Bani’s grave. 《Bani Morauta is very proud of me. I persevered through a difficult battle, became a brave warrior, and returned to his side. That alone is a small miracle. He didn’t realize it would turn out this way. I don’t believe he had determined in advance what I would become.》

“I see... You may be right,” Tessa agreed thoughtfully.

《As for what I will become, he told me that it is up to me to determine.》

“Really? You think he said that?” Ronnie asked. His voice was doubtful and hesitant.

《Yes. I owe it to you, Ronnie.》

“Oh, I... I didn’t really...”

Al knelt down and placed his hand on Ronnie’s shoulder. 《I believe that you cannot hear the voice unless you’ve spent time fighting through life and facing down trials. You will be able to speak with your father as well someday.》

He must have overheard our conversation earlier, Tessa realized. Surely he could’ve waited a little longer, then...

Ronnie didn’t seem to know what to say in response. He just stood there, eyes down, clearly wrestling with some difficult feelings.

“Well, let’s set the difficult topics aside and head home,” Tessa urged them. They certainly couldn’t stay there forever. Ronnie nodded, still despondent, and the two began to walk.

《Colonel, forgive me,》 Al said from behind them. For some reason, he was still locked in the kneeling posture he’d taken in front of Ronnie.

“What’s the matter?”

《My battery has expired. My drive system is no longer functional. My electronics will soon be non-functional as well.》 Even the synthetic voice from his external speakers was growing lower and slower.

“That’s awful!” Tessa exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say so earlier?!”

《It was like the Japanese phrase, I ‘read the mood.’ Ah. This is... not... good. My connection is... is... is...》

“Al?!”

《F-Forgive m-m-me... me... me...》 The voice trailed off, and then the 150-kilogram Alastor went completely silent.

“What do we do? We can’t carry it,” Ronnie, arms folded, said with a groan.



Between fetching a spare power source for the Alastor, charging it, and dealing with connection trouble, it turned out to be a chaotic night. The next day, Tessa was too exhausted to fix her boat, and the weather was too bad to do any work, so she ended up staying on the island for four days.

Having to repack the Alastor for shipping home took a whole day in itself. In the end, she didn’t return to the New York apartment until a week after her original departure.

“You don’t look very refreshed to me,” Mao said, looking at Tessa, who lay splayed out on the elegant living room sofa. Mao herself was similarly splayed out.

“Well... it was quite an eventful trip,” Tessa admitted.

“Yeah? So, did the workers I hired come in handy?”

“Oh, the workers...” *What should I do?* wondered Tessa. She decided not to tell Mao about Murat and his gang. It would probably just make her feel bad, and a stressed mother wasn’t good for a developing baby. “Oh, well... they did. They led me to an unexpected meeting as well.”

“Oh? What kind of meeting?”

“Just a meeting,” Tessa said dismissively. “Where’s Weber-san, though? Shouldn’t he be back in New York by now?”

At this, Mao’s expression turned sour. “He flew to Tel Aviv yesterday.”

“Tel Aviv? What business did he have in Israel?”

“You know. That girl, Lana, who he’s been looking after,” Mao reminded her. “Her hospital’s there. He’s having steps taken to move her to a hospital over here. I know it’s important, but I barely have time to see him before he goes flying off again...” Following this explanation, she launched into a litany of complaints about Weber.

Mao really seemed to be carrying a lot of pent-up stress, and Tessa was worried it would explode someday. But out loud, she said, “Is it true that she’s walking now?”

“I don’t know yet, but if she can use a wheelchair, she should be able to go around on her own,” Mao predicted. “Once she can do that, she’ll come to live with us. Lana sounds like a good girl, so I don’t mind it.”

“And with the baby coming, too, things will be very lively here,” observed Tessa.

“Yeah,” Mao finally said with a smile. “I feel kind of happy.”

“Yes. I do as well.” *Now might be the best time to say it,* Tessa told herself, before sitting up to face Mao. “Hey, Melissa. How would you like one more to contribute to the liveliness?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve already put in the paperwork, but...”

It was a large apartment, after all. It could surely accommodate one more person.

[The End]

Afterword

This short story collection contains edited versions of stories that ran in the November 2003 through January 2004 and March 2010 editions of *Monthly Dragon Magazine*, plus one bonus story.

Wait, 2003?! That's eight years ago! How slow is this series? I'm really sorry it's so late (sweats).

I was really at my wits' end at the time. I'd continuously written over forty short stories, and I was reaching my limit in many ways. I felt like I just couldn't do it anymore! That's when I switched over to serializing the novels. I know it's caused a lot of trouble, so I'm sorry.

The reason it felt so impossible is mainly because of the time frame compared to the novel series. Sousuke is only at Jindai High School for a nine-month period. If you just add up the number of short stories I've written, it means some kind of crazy nonsense is happening once a week. I just couldn't fit it all together.

Of course, I could adopt the "Sazae-san dimension" philosophy, wherein the same yearly events keep happening over and over, but I thought that would detract from the tension of the novels. And there were things I absolutely couldn't cover because of the novels' timeline, like Valentine's Day and flower viewing. And the idea of that much chaos taking place at the school... I felt my inner President Hayashimizu patting me on the shoulder and saying, "I think you've done enough."

At the same time, the person I am now thinks maybe I could've set that all aside and gone on a little longer. So for the sake of this collection, I read excitedly back over those eight-year-old drafts, and... *Hey, they're not bad. You did a pretty good job, eight-years-ago me.* I had those silly kinds of feelings.

Anyway, let's get to the commentary for each story.

“The Hooligans’ Rule”

A survival game story. Real-life players might find this depiction a bit rude, but I hope you’ll allow it for fiction (prostrating myself).

Incidentally, it’s a common misconception, but I don’t actually own many airsoft guns. I own two pistols, a shotgun, and an AEG: four in total. I don’t have any fatigues or boots or tactical vests either. I’ve only played survival games a few times.

When you reach a certain age, even if you buy an AEG, you don’t get many chances to fire it. You buy one for X0,000 yen, pull it out of the box and admire it, charge it up, and shoot some old manga magazines in your room. That lasts about ten minutes. Then you collect all the BBs and put the gun back in the box. It’s not like you can fire it around in the park without getting reported.

So I can’t really work up the enthusiasm to buy any new guns. Sigh.

“The Local Surveyor”

In the apartment I lived in at the time, there was a cleaning lady who would say hi to me in the mornings. She worked hard to cart our trash around through the wind and the rain. It was watching her that made me think of this story. It was a building filled, for some reason, with young and beautiful women, yet they couldn’t respect basic trash etiquette. The cleaning lady seemed to have a really hard time.

The women would have men over for Christmas Eve, so I’d get annoyed and spend all night blaring *Black Hawk Down* or *Saving Private Ryan* at high volume while working. I’m not even that sorry about it.

By the way, in front of the house I live in now, when I work hard to put out my books and magazines for recycling day, there’s always a group of homeless-looking guys who ride by on bicycles and steal them before the trash collector comes. I’m not sure what to do about it. I’m positive they’re selling them to B**k-Off (sweats).

“The Adorable Thermopylae”

This is a pretty recent story, published a year ago to commemorate *Dragon Magazine's* 300th issue. Apparently, the *Dragon Magazine* editorial staff had a slightly stupid moment where they realized the 300th issue was coming just a little while in advance. You guys must have too much on your plates! Since it was the 300th issue, I decided to go full SPAAARTAAA! with a parody of the movie *300*. It seems way too many authors had the same idea, though, and reading the issue became kind of awkward.

It had been so long since I'd last written a silly short story, so it gave me a lot of time to think. I feel this kind of thing really is important. It helped me to loosen up my overly realistic way of thinking about things.

Thanks, Bonta-kun.

B: "Fumoffu!"

"Tessa's Visit to the Grave"

This is an odyssey undertaken by Tessa and Al after the events of the novels. Thinking about it, this is Tessa's third visit to a grave. She can be kind of an old lady sometimes.

I struggled a lot with writing an epilogue to the novels, but I thought this might do the job nicely. It's not a story you could write a hundred pages about, but it reassures the audience that everyone's okay.

It's pretty easy to write ever afters for the other characters, but it's hard to follow up with Sousuke and Kaname and the like. I can imagine what happens in the three days after the end, but there's no way I can write that kind of drippy sweet lovey-dovey stuff. Damn. It would tick Tessa off, too.

Now, if you're reading this book in a bookstore, you may have seen another book with Shikidouji cover art of an unfamiliar *FMP*-looking girl holding a submachine gun with a scowl on her face and an unfamiliar Ebikawa AS behind her. I believe the title is something like *Full Metal Panic! Another*.

This beautiful blonde is Adelina-san. She works as something like an AS instructor for a PMC called DOMS headquartered in California, eleven years

after the events of the FMP novels—2011. What could that blue machine be?

That's right, it's a side story.

It's modern day, in an *FMP!* world in which the Soviet Union has collapsed and the Cold War has ended, bringing things a little more in line with our own history. How have the weapons known as ASes changed in the ten years since the series? What kind of new machines have been developed? It's kind of an "I want to play around in this sandbox" sort of thing. I think it could be really fun! There was a little foreshadowing for it in the Tessa story, too.

Now, given the title format for this short story collection, I think this will be the final one. (I'm glad I didn't have to go to ten!) If I want to publish more short story collections, it'll be under another scheme, like maybe "Side Arms"? At any rate, this doesn't feel like a tearful farewell, so I hope we can all meet up, class reunion-style, soon enough.

And I plan to have a new series out at the end of the year aside from *FMP!* It's chill and silly and romcom-ish. It's being published by Fujimi Fantasia Bunko, just like these. The tentative title right now is *Amagi Brilliant Park*. If you happen to catch it, please read it.

See you.



**“But that’s
dangerous.”**

**“But that’s
dangerous!”**

**FULL METAL PANIC!
UNAVOIDABLE NINE-DAY WONDER?**



**This we
swear. Bring
freedom to
the fumos!**

**We gather
here with
paws bound
together.**

**“Your chest.
Don’t press
it against
me so hard.”**

**“Ah... I-I’m
sorry.”**





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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 9

by Shouji Gatou

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