

INEVITABLE SIX FEET UNDER?



FULL METAL PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

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6



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Uncooperative Bluebird

It was lunch break on a clear day. Sagara Sousuke was sitting in a corner, looking through a magazine. The articles within were peppered with words incomprehensible to the average person. They read:

Secretary of Defense Powell testified before a Senate special committee about the progress of the joint M9 Gernsback project, a collaboration between the US Army, Navy, and Geotron Electronics. The M9's EMD phase is expected to reach completion by December, as initially planned. Twenty-six LRIP machines will be commissioned, with first assault soldier squads reaching initial operating capability. Additionally, Special Operations Command has high hopes for several of these FSDs to be equipped through DARPA with currently experimental next-generation electromagnetic camouflage systems.

Civilian reporting suggests that the People's Liberation Committee government in Beijing (North China) has received at least thirty-three Rk-96Ms from Soviet right-wing forces. The Rk-96M is primarily an upgrade to the Rk-92 Savage's scanning and fire control systems. The Yugoslav and Syrian governments have also shown interest in this improved technology.

The German Army has begun use of its first eight assault soldiers, known as the Drache G (König Drache). The Drache G contains replacements for the electronic weaponry and drive system of the current model (Drache D), and is the first machine to fully integrate the superior anti-ballistic capabilities of Einhorn Elektrotechnik's MMP-112 muscle packages.

British intelligence believes that Soviet Zeya OKB's new experimental assault soldiers have realized a fully electric drive system based on an Aegis System palladium nuclear fusion battery, similar to the M9 Gernsback. This machine, likely falling into the category of third-generation assault soldier, has been designated the Zy-98 Shadow by NATO.

US Raytheon Missile Systems has accepted a 38-million-dollar order from the British Armed Forces for 300 K1 Javelin kinetic energy missiles. The K1 Javelin interface, originally designed for the M6, has since been converted for use in the newly developed British Cyclone.

A settlement has been reached between France's GTTO (Giat TTO) and Stingray Freight over the loss of twelve Mistral-2 assault soldiers which disappeared during shipment in the Indian Ocean in June. Stingray has agreed to pay a penalty fee of 61.2 million USD.

The Norwegian Army has announced their acquisition of Oerlikon Contrave's GEC-B 40mm machine guns for use as portable ammunition for their currently requisitioned M6 Bushnells.

"Hmm..." Sousuke let out various noises of interest (which would sound like disinterest to most).

Just then, Tokiwa Kyoko entered the classroom. "Oh, there you are!" she called. "Sagara-kun!"

"Yes?" he responded, hastily closing the issue of *Jane's Defense Weekly*, the military specialist magazine he got his arm slave-related news from.

"Could you come here a minute? I've got a favor to ask," she asked somewhat apologetically.

"Understood," he said affably.

They left the classroom and headed for the storage room in the southern school building. Quite a few students were standing in the hall there, looking nervous. They were all members of the women's softball club, of which Kyoko was also a part.

"Is there some kind of issue?" Sousuke wanted to know.

"Yeah. I think... it's locked from the inside and we can't get it open," Kyoko told him nervously, pointing to the door of the storage room. "We hear sounds and voices in there... and it's creepy. They asked me to bring you in to investigate."

"A wise decision," Sousuke commended her. "You should continue to do so in the future." He stood next to the door and listened.

There was definitely someone inside of the storage room; likely three men. They were having a hushed conversation.

"Is it ready yet? Hurry up!"

"I'm trying... Okay, ready."

"Whew... This is nuts."

Their voices sounded excited, even awestruck.

"What a great feeling. Nothing beats flirting with danger."

"We can't keep it all to ourselves. We oughta sell some to the others on the sly."

"No way. We'd get in trouble."

Sousuke frowned. What were they doing in a locked room, away from prying eyes? *Could it be... narcotics? Yes, it must be,* he decided. *And getting high inside the school...*

As head of school security and aide to the student council president, this was behavior he couldn't let slide. He pulled out a mini-shotgun and told the girls, "Stand back."

"What?" said Tokiwa. "Er, Sagara-kun. What are you—"

Blam! Blam blam! Without responding, Sousuke blew the doorknob and

hinges off, kicked the door in, and threw a stun grenade into the room.

“Ahh—”

Whoom! Inside the storage room, a flash exploded with tremendous noise. Sousuke dashed in behind it. “That’s enough!” he bellowed. “Come along quietly, and don’t—”

Three students lay half-conscious within, amidst red light and rising smoke. There was a photo enlarger and an overturned developing tray sitting on a makeshift table. Film and plastic containers were strewn across the floor. The stench of developer fluid stung his nose. There was no sign of drugs whatsoever.

“Geh...” One of the collapsed students sat up with great effort. It was Kazama Shinji, a member of both Sousuke’s class and the photography club. “S-Sagara-kun? What in the world are you—ah!” Shinji panicked and flew at the negatives and photographic paper strewn about the ground. “Oh... what have you done?! They’re all ruined!”

“Geh... What’d you say?” Another one stood up and wailed.

“He’s... He’s right!” cried the third as he sat up and caught sight of the film.

“Kazama,” said Sousuke. “What were you doing?”

“Developing film, of course!” the three shouted in unison.

“After we worked so hard to get those pictures...”

“Ngh... Shots of girls reclining against the railing on the roof, innocent as you please, taken from a super-low angle on the first-floor courtyard with a telescopic lens...”

“This is just cruel, Sagara-kun. What did we ever do to you?!” asked Shinji, who usually never got this mad at Sousuke.

“I didn’t realize this was what you were doing,” said Sousuke.

“No matter what we were doing, a stun grade couldn’t have been the appropriate response!” Shinji yelled back.

“I had to be certain the room’s residents were pacified,” Sousuke told him.

“But why were you developing your film here? You were making trouble for the girls.”

Kyoko and the other girls, holding their noses, nodded along firmly from the light streaming in the now-open door.

“Oh.” Shinji and the others slumped over dejectedly. “Well... we are sorry about that. But the photography club doesn’t have its own club room.”

Chidori Kaname, the student council vice president, was dealing with similar trouble after school. The light music club had taken over the geology room to play Van Halen. It sounded less like music and more like a cacophony, and after receiving a litany of complaints, Kaname had to come running to put a stop to it.

“Aw, but—”

“No buts!” she insisted. “At least unplug the amps!” Grumbling, the students began to put away their instruments.

Kaname, feeling relieved, returned to the student council room in time for another student to arrive with a complaint. “Chidori-san...” It was a girl from the cooking club, and she was in tears.

“What?”

“The biology club people are using the home ec room,” she wailed. “They’re experimenting on cockroaches while we’re making lasagna. Tell them to go away!”

Kaname rushed to the home ec room and screamed at the biology club kids. “Don’t you have your own room?!”

Their blank-faced biology club president snickered and said, “Yeah, but the karate society guys are using it.”

Kaname cursed and headed to the biology room. “Tsubaki-kun!” she shouted as she opened the door, just as the karate society president, Tsubaki Issei, was jumping off a table. He was about to execute a jump kick on another of the club members, a burly man with a shaved head, when...

“Chido—” Issei noticed Kaname and lost all balance in midair. *Crash!* He dove shoulders-first into a shelf against the wall. Jars fell to the floor and broke, spilling their contents everywhere.

“Guh...” Issei got up unsteadily as the foul smell of formaldehyde filled the room. He was a short but attractive and masculine young man with thick eyebrows and almond-shaped eyes. “W-Well... if it isn’t Chidori,” he said. “How can I help you?”

“What were you thinking, messing around in a place like this?!” Kaname demanded, pinching her nose as she opened the window to clear the air.

Issei was flustered as he responded, “W-We weren’t messing around! We were studying ways to fight in an unpredictable environment...”

“Well, stop it! You’re messing everyone up! Find somewhere else to—”

“How dare you, woman!” the three club members shouted in unison.

“Aren’t you the one who drove us from our own dojo?!”

“We’re the victims here! We’re pitiful lost lambs!”

“Indeed! We’re the underdogs!” the big men said one after another.

But Issei smacked them all down at the speed of light.

“What are you doing, Tsubaki-kun?” they all asked in unison again.

“Shut up! Don’t say something so pathetic so proudly!” Issei shouted. The club members all hung their heads in unison.

Kaname sighed as she watched. “Anyway... Whatever you do, you can’t do it here. Though I am sorry.”

“Hm... fine. Sorry, Chidori.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you get it. You’re a really nice guy.” She smiled brightly.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah. Well, see you later!” Kaname left the biology room. She could hear Issei’s underlings ribbing him about his goofy smile, but didn’t dwell on it.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. It’s one thing after another today!” Kaname muttered to herself after returning to the student council room. She cast a glance at Sousuke, who was lost in his reading. “Sousuke,” she said, “Kyoko told me you went on another rampage during lunch break.”

“It wasn’t a rampage,” he protested. “I was acting with all due caution, and it turned out not to be a threat after all.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kaname eyed him, but she must have been too tired to dig any further.

“Still, the photography club is struggling,” he informed her. “They don’t have their own room, so they were using a storage room instead.”

“More club room issues, huh?” Club room issues—a problem common to every school. Jindai High had its own two-story club building, but it was currently all booked up, which forced clubs to share rooms—sometimes just two clubs at a time, but up to four in the most painful of cases.

“And that’s before they all start vying for budgets next month,” she said. “This stuff seriously makes my head hurt.”

“Why don’t we construct a new club building on the roof? I can buy a used temporary structure from the US military for practically nothing,” Sousuke offered. “Though the lack of windows and poor ventilation will likely make it a sauna in summer...”

“No, thank you.”

It was just then that the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, entered the room. He was tall and pale with intellectual features. The council secretary, Mikiyara Ren, stood attentively behind him, which made him look like some kind of company CEO.

“Fine work today, Chidori-kun,” Hayashimizu commented. It looked like he’d heard about the day’s chaos.

“Thanks,” said Kaname. “Where have you been?”

“In talks,” he told her.

“Oh, really? While I’ve been run ragged sorting out club room chaos?”

“That’s what the talks were in regard to,” he informed her. “A room in the club building is opening up—the social research club, which had only two members, has agreed to vacate it.”

“Oh? That’s good to hear.”

“But we must decide to which club the vacated room will go,” he reminded her. “Roomless clubs will likely flood us with applications. I personally believed a simple lottery would suffice... but the social research club’s agreement to leave came with a curious condition as to how the replacement is to be chosen.”

“Which is...?”

“The club that wins a competition dictated by the social research club gets the room.”

“So what’s the competition?”

“A competition to see who can pick up more members of the opposite sex in town. Whoever gets the most girls wins.”

Kaname was silent for a few moments.

“Um... Are you suggesting...”

“Yes,” he said. “In other words, pick-up artistry.”

Upon realizing that Hayashimizu was serious, Kaname’s mouth hung open limply.

The next Sunday, the weather was clear, the skies were blue, and a group of thirty or so Jindai High School students gathered in a corner of Inokashira Park, close to the entertainment district of Hachijoji. They were all in street clothes, and rather fashionable ones at that. Some of them looked openly upset about the thought of participating in the competition but, knowing it was the only way to get a club room, they weren’t about to sit it out.

The president of the social research club, Nanba Shiro, addressed the group with a megaphone. “All right, everyone. Good morning!”

“Yeah...” the club members responded listlessly.

Nanba was a third-year boy on the portly side, with large eyes that seemed to constantly dart back and forth. “It’s great pick-up weather, isn’t it?” he commented. “Some say that clear weather increases the success rate of pick-ups. I want you all to put in a good show and go for that club room!”

“Yeah...” The club members let out another listless reply.

“I’ll go over the rules one more time,” he continued. “Three members from each club will execute the pick-ups. You’ll speak to members of the opposite sex on the street, and compete to see who lands the most. Any girls who are here at 5 pm will count. You can bring them yourself or just invite them under any pretense you like.”

“So, anything goes?” a member of the light music club asked.

“Yes. You can even tell them the nature of the competition and ask for their help. Or you can go the opposite route and lie your ass off. The point is, they have to be *strangers*—no calling friends and family in to buff up your numbers,” Nanba clarified. “If you’re caught cheating in that regard, you’ll be disqualified. I want to be very firm on that point. Additionally...” He went on to explain the finer points of the rules, then concluded, “So, after registering over there, you can hit up the town. Good luck.”

“Yeah...” The participants in the pick-up contest gathered around the other social research club member, who was holding a clipboard.

Ahh. It really is starting... Kaname thought in vague disgust as she watched the registration process begin. She’d been sent as an observer on behalf of the student council, and though she didn’t have much to do, she’d committed to spending the whole day here.

Participants included Kazama Shinji of the photography club and Tsubaki Issei of the karate society. Issei, in particular, looked unhappy about the situation. He didn’t seem to like the premise of the event one bit.

Sousuke was present as well. He wasn’t there on behalf of the student council and wasn’t a member of any of the small clubs vying for the spare room. He’d apparently just shown up.

Is he interested in the pick-up aspect, then? Kaname thought suspiciously as she watched Sousuke line up with the registrants for some reason.

“Sousuke? Why are you lining up?” she asked, and the others all looked at him.

“Because it’s the registration line,” he answered, confused.

“But you aren’t in a club,” she pointed out.

“Incorrect,” he told her. “I’m enrolled in the photography club as of yesterday. I’ve already handed in the appropriate documentation.”

“What?”

“It’s true, Chidori-san,” said Kazama Shinji, who was standing beside him. “We asked Sagara-kun to help us out. He’s a good-looking guy and he’s brave... and he wanted to make up for the whole film incident. Right?”

“Affirmative.”

Issei, standing at the head of the line, smacked his fist into his palm in frustration. “A ringer. Damn... I hadn’t thought of that!”

Sousuke glanced at Issei, letting out a snort. Then he proudly proclaimed, “It’s too late now, Tsubaki. The moment I threw my hat into the ring, your hopes were dashed. That club room will belong to the photography club.”

“What was that?! Sagara, how many times will you interfere with my—er, what?” Issei suddenly stopped and sagged as he noticed Sousuke’s mode of dress: Beat-up urban camouflage fatigues, faded boots, hand grenades pinned to his chest... “What kind of outfit is that for a pick-up competition?”

“Hmm?” Sousuke questioned.

“Well, give it your best shot...” Issei said pityingly, then turned away from Sousuke.

The other participants around them cackled at the exchange.

“Why are you laughing?” Sousuke asked in confusion.

The members of the light music club shared a meaningful glance with each other. “Well... you know?” one said.

“You think any woman would go out with a guy dressed like that? You look like a pathetic military geek,” said another.

“I’m prioritizing functionality,” Sousuke told them. “Personally, I feel your outfits are the laughable ones in this situation.”

“Oh?” At Sousuke’s words, the light music club members bristled a little and shared a glance. “Well, why don’t we add a little wager on top, then? If you manage to bring in a single girl, we’ll treat you to lunch for two straight weeks.”

“Hmm.”

“And if you don’t even get *one* girl... I know. You’ll have to swim in that lake over there, stark naked. How about it?”

“I accept,” Sousuke said nonchalantly.

The crowd erupted into hollers around them.



“Nice one, light music club!”

“Now it’s even more exciting!”

“We all heard it! He said stark naked!”

Sousuke remained completely calm amid the guffawing around him.

Kaname, who’d been silent up until now, was getting too uncomfortable not to ask, “Hey... Hey, Sousuke! Are you sure you want to agree to that?”

“It’s not an issue,” he told her calmly.

“Do you even understand what a pick-up competition is?”

“Yes, Kazama told me. It’s a girl hunt; easily accomplished,” Sousuke responded with tremendous confidence.

“Easily... accomplished?”

“Yes,” he affirmed, “I can knock any woman out flat on the first try.”

Kaname said nothing, but she felt quietly suspicious of his phrasing.

And so, the competition began. The participants left the park to go about the city.

“This is a social research activity, you see,” Nanba explained to Kaname.

“The pick-up competition?”

“Right. What kind of person do girls trust most—those who tell the truth or those who lie? Do looks play into it? Aggressiveness? Is there some other principle at play? We thought this would provide an interesting sample,” he explained.

“Aha...”

“The clubs that want the club room offer a lot of demographic diversity,” he went on, “and since we had a bargaining chip to put on the table, we figured we’d try them out.”

“I see...” said Kaname. It made a strange kind of sense to her. They then arrived in front of a famous department store at the south entrance of Hachijoji

Station. “Wow, look at them go,” she said as she caught sight of the model-building enthusiasts making passes at women near the store’s entrance.

Sasaki Hiromi, the student in charge of equipment for the student council (but participating outside of his capacity as such), was among them. Hiromi had managed to get the attention of two rather ditzy-looking girls and was stumbling over his words shyly. “Um... e-excuse me...”

“Huh? Whaddya want?” one of the girls asked. Her tone communicated an understandable disrespect.

Hiromi’s manner immediately became more passive and awkward. “Um, um... would you like to... grab a drink with us?”

“Is this a cult thing? Or a pickup?” the girl asked suspiciously, which was a natural reaction. “Or do you just think we’re stupid?”

Nevertheless, he mustered up all the courage (or whatever you’d call it) he could find and continued. “W-Well, maybe karaoke... er...”

“What’s with these freaks? Karaoke? Anisong, right?”

“Yeah, I bet!” The two girls laughed uproariously.

It was painful to watch. Kaname scowled, while Nanba pulled out a memo pad and pen and whispered, “Model-building enthusiasts struggling, as expected.”

“What the heck? Quit lookin’ at me like that,” said one of the girls. “It’s creepy.”

“We’re... We’re sorry.”

“Turn around three times and bark,” she demanded, “then *maybe* I’ll let you treat me to lunch. Go on.”

“You... You don’t have to be cruel.”

“Wow, you got him!” her friend said admiringly. “Look, he’s crying!”

“I... I’m not crying...”

But despite the way the boys bravely continued their attempts to talk to them, the girls wouldn’t let up.

Hiromi finally exploded and grabbed at the woman’s collar, “You bitch!”

“Erk!” she squealed.

“Just lay off, okay?!” he shouted on the verge of tears. “I’m not talking to you because I wanted to! I just... I just... I just want a room where I can build my models! Every night, the unfinished kits whisper to me, ‘Make me complete, make me complete!’ What would you hideous 1:1 Perfect Grade flesh dolls know about anything?! Not even Katoki Hajime could make you look good! Maybe start by replacing that hideous makeup of yours with Sentinel blue and adding some EFSF and Vms-AWrS markings! How about it?!”

His fellow club members quickly moved to stop him.

“Stop it! Stop it, Sasaki!”

“We get how you feel!”

“Let me go, Senpai! I’ll correct her disgusting attitude! You’ll pay, you whore!” Hiromi kept shouting as the two girls ran away, completely put off by his behavior.

Wow... zero points for that. Kaname thought. You couldn’t exactly pick up a woman while calling her a whore.

“Well, not much hope there... Let’s move along, Chidori-kun,” Nanba said calmly, and they moved on.

They made a circuit around the station, where every team they saw seemed to be struggling equally with their pick-up techniques. After all, students who cared this much about their club activities tended to focus on those over skirt-chasing day-to-day.

The members of the light music club seemed to be putting up the best fight of the lot. Just after noon, when Kaname stopped in, she saw them chatting up a small group of girls. They weren’t particularly experienced in picking up women either, and it was probably less an issue of looks and speech as it was the confidence they’d picked up from playing onstage.

Oho... impressive. Eighty points, perhaps? thought Kaname, interested in their success.

Nanba commented, though, while still taking notes, “They don’t know what they’re doing, either. Picking up women is a numbers game.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Any man, if he cleans himself up and talks to ten girls, will get at least one to give him the time of day. And one out of ten who give him the time of day will probably hear him out to the end. I mean, despite what I look like,” said Nanba, slapping at his beer belly and double chin. “I still have a roughly 1% success rate with pickups. If I walk around for one full day, I’ll end up with at least one real phone number. In other words, persistence is the key. The persistence to talk to one hundred people.”

“Aha...”

“Particularly, look for married women on weekday mornings,” he went on. “Women who want a little fun when their husband’s away. You can’t go after young women. Their expectations and demands are too high.”

“I... I see...” Kaname responded vaguely, resisting the urge to ask how much experience he personally had with this.

“Well, I’ll go check in on the others,” he said next. “What will you do, Chidori-san?”

“Oh... I think I’ll wander around a bit longer.”

“All right. See you later.”

Kaname parted ways with Nanba, then wandered around the open market area in front of the station for a little while. Eventually she noticed two big men—members of the karate society—moving through the crowd. They were immediately recognizable from their size and were dressed in riveted leather jackets with spiked collars and mohawk wigs. They looked like background extras from *Fist of the North Star*.

C-Costumes? she wondered weakly.

They were advancing on three middle-school-aged girls, fingers flexing menacingly. They were too far away for Kaname to hear, but given how scared the girls looked—huddling together and slowly stepping back—they must have

been saying some pretty nasty things.

Sheesh, now it's just kidnapping, Kaname thought. She was about to try and stop them, when...

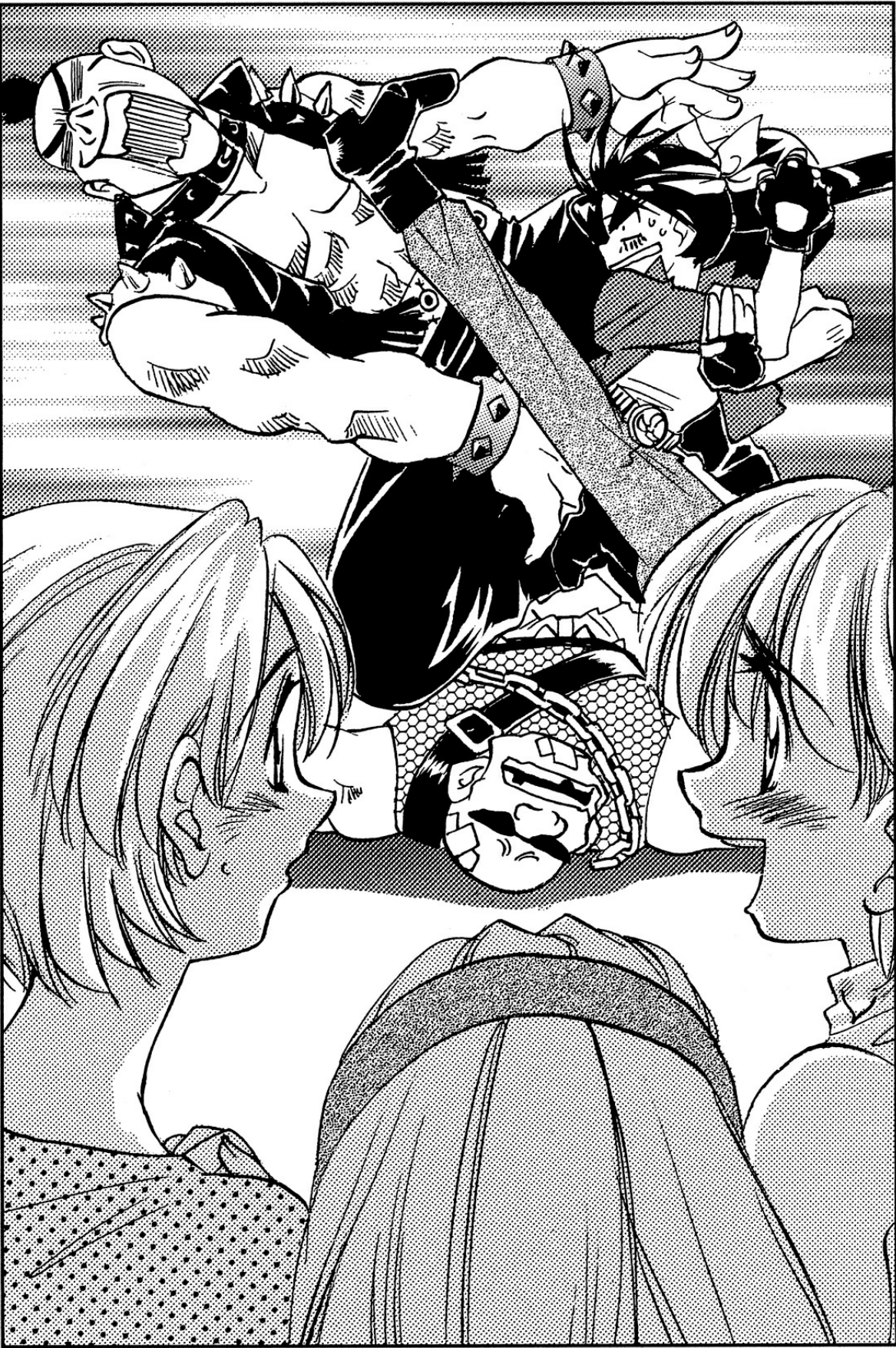
"Hold it!" Issei suddenly appeared behind the two men. They turned back and, for some reason, got into fighting postures. "The... The girls don't like it. L-Let... Let go of them." Issei turned a bit pink in the cheeks as he spoke in a monotone.

Meanwhile, the big men seemed very enthusiastic. "Eh? And who d'you think you are?"

"Little shrimp. I'll tear your arm off!" they shouted, pulling out a spiked bat and a big axe before charging at Issei.

"Heh..." Now came Issei's moment to shine. Like a member of a Sentai team putting on a show at an amusement park, he moved with springy jumps and whip-like strikes. Weaving together big and small movements, he eventually sent both of the big men flying (in a way that definitely required the men's cooperation).

"This isn't over!" they shouted back at him (unconvincingly) as they ran off.



“Aha... not bad.” Kaname understood now. Issei was taking the age-old “guardian” tactic.

Issei, keenly feeling the eyes of the crowd on him, blushed an even deeper red. “D-Did they hurt you?” he asked the girls.

“W-We’re okay. Thank... Thank you,” the three dazed girls managed to answer.

“I see. Now... if you’d really like to thank me, I would like to ask you a favor.”

“What?”

“This evening at five o’clock, come to the stage at Inokashira Park,” he told them. “All together.”

“Wh-Why?”

“I... I’ll explain then. Just come, please. It’s very important. Goodbye!”

“Oh. Er...!”

Apparently unable to stand the attention any longer, Issei disappeared into the crowd.

Hmm... I’ll give him 60 points for that one, Kaname decided thoughtfully from where she was watching. Having the bigger club members play the bad guys to get attention was a good idea, but Issei hadn’t stuck the landing. He should’ve made sure to get a firmer commitment from them. *Since he’s such a good-looking guy,* she thought.

That said, it had been a good showing from Issei. It was impressive to see a fighter like him make such an effort to play the role of actor. He must have really wanted that room. It went past being funny, in fact, and became a little sad.

She’d managed to see most of the clubs competing for the room at this point. All that was left was Sousuke’s photography club. That was actually the one Kaname was most curious about. *How will that war-addled idiot handle picking up girls?* she wondered.

Kaname headed north along the shopping street and finally saw Kazama Shinji

trying to get the attention of a passing girl. He was alone for some reason—Sousuke wasn't with him. The type of woman he was going for was an even worse match than the ones the modeling guys had tried for, with bleached hair, outrageous makeup, gaudy accessories... Like a cryptid, perhaps. Or part of a headhunter tribe.

Wow, thought Kaname. Kazama-kun's aiming high too.

Shinji was groveling before the woman, and while Kaname was too far away to hear the conversation, the woman really seemed to be giving him a piece of her mind. Nevertheless, Shinji continued pleading with her.

Is he going for a pity strategy? Kaname wondered until Shinji pulled, of all things, three 10,000-yen bills out of his pocket and handed them to her. *Wait, a bribe?!*

In response, the woman laughed and started walking, shoving Shinji along with her. The two then disappeared into a nearby alley.

As Kazama Shinji entered the alley with the girl, restraining his feelings of shame all the while, he pulled an FM transceiver out of his pocket and called into it, "Gedor to Ashkelos. Long live Jerusalem. Over."

"Ashkelos, copy. Proceed with caution," came Sousuke's voice through the radio.

Seeing that, the girl—whose name he didn't know—gave Shinji one more shove. "What're you mumblin' about?" she complained. "It's creepin' me out."

"Hah... sorry," he told her. "Just got a call from my friend."

"What kind of friend? Some foreigner or somethin'?"

"S-Something like that. Anyway... how about here?" As they made it to the T-intersection at the end of the alley, Shinji stopped, pulling a reflex camera out of his bag.

"Anywhere's fine," the girl said dismissively. "Just take your pictures, perv. I got friends waiting, so—"

"S-Sure. Let's just..." Shinji whispered into his radio.

“Gedor here. The pig’s in the pen. Go!”

“Ashkelos, copy.”

She really is a mean person, Shinji thought. And she’s stuck up, at that. She thinks I’d really pay 30,000 yen for a lousy picture of her panties?

The woman, ignorant of Shinji’s thoughts, kept hurrying him along. “I said hurry, okay? Make me wait too long and I’ll charge extra. Thirty thousand’s not enough for this garbage—”

Pew! Suddenly, there was a bright flash above her head. “Eek!” A tremor ran through the woman’s body. She let out a shrill scream and collapsed.

“Ashkelos, mission complete.” Shinji looked up and saw Sousuke on the third floor landing of a nearby fire escape, holding an already-fired taser. Using a rope to drop down into the alley, he then took the money back from the woman’s prone form.

“That makes six,” Sousuke commented. “Quite a catch indeed.” Then he hefted the girl over his shoulder. His expression was as sullen as ever, yet he seemed ambiguously pleased with himself.

“Sagara-kun, I feel like... maybe this isn’t right,” Shinji said uneasily.

“The competition rules did say ‘any means necessary.’ To bait a trap and then spring it is the most reliable method,” Sousuke pointed out.

“I know I said I want the club room, but this seems a little...”

“You’re the one who told me that it was a girl hunt.”

“I didn’t mean a *literal* hunt...”

Ignoring Shinji’s complaints, Sousuke turned his eyes to the distance. “I used to hunt, back in the old days. Once I caught a two-meter-long crocodile in the swamps of South America. Even a wild boar is far more formidable prey than this.”

Binding the unconscious woman’s hands and feet with sturdy wire, he proceeded to throw her into a hand cart concealed deeper in the alley. Five similar women were already lying in the bed, occasionally letting out a grunt or a curse. Every single one of them had been lured in by Shinji’s offer of 30,000

yen to take pictures of their panties.

Shinji tried again. "Look... I know we're in pretty deep already, but this feels kind of illegal, you know?"

"But we'll free them this evening," Sousuke pointed out. "It's catch and release. There's no issue."

"There so *is* an issue!" came a new voice.

They turned to look at the speaker and saw Kaname standing there dauntlessly.

"Ch-Chidori-san?!"

"Chidori. How can I help you?" Sousuke replied unconcernedly.

Kaname strode up to him. "You are... without a doubt..."

"Hmm? What are you—"

Thump! Whump! Wham! She struck a fist into his solar plexus, followed by a hook to his temple and a final throat strike that left him collapsed on the ground. Once he was down, Kaname stepped over him. Pointing at the hand cart and glaring at Shinji, she demanded, "Let them go! *Now!*"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Shinji, completely terrified, tearily untied the women.

"Now hurry, let's go!" Kaname told them urgently. "The police will be here soon, okay?!"

After freeing the women, the trio quickly fled the scene of the crime. Having escaped to a nearby multi-purpose building, shoulders heaving, Kaname kicked Sousuke to the ground one more time.

"That hurt," he said simply.

"Oh, shut up!" she snarled. "Don't you even realize when you're doing something bizarre?!"

"I don't think I understand what a pick-up is..." Sousuke lamented as he sat up, looking confused.

"Fine! Listen. Here's what a pick-up is..." Kaname explained very carefully the

definition of the term. After going over the general principles of the act, she then went on to explain her experience of having been on the receiving end of it.

As he listened, Sousuke's expression became more and more grave... and soon, his face was covered in sweat. "Is that what it is?"

"Yes, that's what it is!"

"But I can't do that."

"Don't give me the puppy-dog eyes!"

There was now a faintly awkward cast to Sousuke's permanently blank expression. He looked like he'd shot someone he'd thought was a terrorist but turned out to be an innocent civilian.

Kaname slumped over and sighed. "You really didn't know? You truly are hopeless!"

"This is bad. Very bad. I didn't anticipate this at all," Sousuke said, his expression grave as he hung his head.

Meanwhile, Shinji, perhaps the most at fault among them, finally began to panic a little. "Wh-What are we gonna do, Sagara-kun? You made that promise to the light music club guys. If we don't bring in at least one girl, you'll be humiliated! You'll have to swim in that freezing water naked... Hey, Chidori-san. What if we take in just *one* using our earlier method..."

"What?! No way!" Kaname turned him down flat.

"But... this isn't about the club anymore," Shinji pleaded. "Sagara-kun's in real trouble!"

Kaname was at a loss for words for a moment. "W-Well... that isn't my problem! I can't fix all his problems every time."

"Chidori-san?!"

"It's a learning opportunity! Let... Let him learn his lesson! All the things he does... causing so much trouble... And that thing before could've been a huge problem, right?" she pointed out defensively. "Not just for him, but for the whole school!" That was how Kaname genuinely felt. Sousuke was always

causing trouble, and she was always cleaning up after him. She was genuinely sick of it.

Eventually, Sousuke whispered, weakly, “I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ll figure it out myself.”

“Sagara-kun?” said Shinji.

“I don’t have a choice. I’ll try it the right way. I’ll speak to women normally. It’s possible there are women out there with unexpected interest in missiles and sniper rifles,” Sousuke said, but he already sounded defeated.

It did indeed seem like Sousuke was trying to do things the right way, walking all around the station area and calling out to any girl he saw.

Excuse me. I just learned some interesting information about the new Javelin missiles...

Would you like to know the names of North Chinese Army spies infiltrating the Department of Defense?

Would you like to learn reliable and accurate ways of killing someone from a distance?

It was all that kind of thing. On top of that, Sousuke spoke to them with excessive intensity, plus he was dressed in fatigues. Although he was reasonably handsome, it wasn’t enough to compensate for his intimidating aura.

The girls he spoke to uniformly looked at him with suspicion before quickly running off. Nanba of the social research club had told Kaname that if you talked to one hundred people, you’d always pick up one, but Sousuke’s ratio was likely to be less than one in ten thousand.

Ahh... it’s hopeless after all, Kaname thought with a sigh, watching from a distance. There was still time before the 5 pm deadline, but it was clearly pointless.

Nevertheless, she’d made up her mind not to interfere. It was better that way—maybe having that bad experience would help Sousuke to reflect on his behavior and speed up his struggle to adjust to life in Japan. She’d lost any urge

she once had to advise him on how to do better. But nevertheless, there was something about seeing Sousuke—who was always such an inflexible hard-liner—acting so desperately that was very hard to watch.

Sousuke applied himself diligently to every task, and it was genuinely painful to see him like this. She watched for a while until one ‘member of the opposite sex’ did indeed stop to listen to him. It was an old, hunch-backed woman dressed in a kimono.

“I have new information on the encryption used by the Soviet military’s Far East Fleet,” he told her earnestly. “If you’d be willing to help me, I can tell you what it is.”

“Yes, yes. This is my eighty-eighth year, you know,” she told him. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Would you like to know the fatal flaws in the Self-Defense Force’s anti-ship missiles? Selling that information could earn you significant spending money,” said Sousuke.

“Yes, yes. The other day, my daughter and her husband took me to the hot spring in Kusatsu,” the old woman replied. “The water was heavenly. Yes.”

“It’s true, I promise. If you want to know my source—”

“I’m here shopping for my grandson’s birthday today. You’re about his size.”

“I see.”

“Yes, yes. He really is a kind, considerate boy.”

“I’m glad to hear that...” In the end, Sousuke listened to the woman talk about herself for about thirty minutes, joined her in helping her buy a birthday present for her grandson, then saw her politely to the station.

What in the world is he doing? He’s barely got any time left. “But still...” Kaname let out a sigh. He was silly and stupid and always made trouble... yet when an old woman had needed his help, he’d given it. That was who Sousuke was. As she watched him from afar, she felt a curious sense of amusement combined with pity... a strange feeling indeed.

Kaname pulled her PHS out of her pocket, punched in a certain phone

number, and waited a while. “Ah, hello? Nanba-san?” she said at last. “Um... I’m not feeling well. Yeah. I’m gonna go home and lie down. I’m okay... I think. Yeah. Yeah... Sorry. Later.” Kaname then hung up and went back to staring at Sousuke, who was still wandering around the station area. “See you. Good luck,” she whispered, then bought a train ticket for home and began to walk.

As five o’clock came, darkness was just beginning to veil Inokashira Park. There were about a dozen women they had brought there in addition to the thirty Jindai students who’d gathered there that morning. There were some thinking they were arriving for a date, upset to learn that it was a school event. There were some who still didn’t know what was going on and were looking around suspiciously. And some who’d been told the situation from the start and were just waiting around patiently.

Nanba Shiro at last addressed the group. “Attention, all! Excellent work today.”

“Uh-huh...” Having been running around all day, the club members who wanted the room looked extremely tired.

“The tallying is now complete. Well, okay, so there weren’t really enough to need a tally, but... let me announce the results! In third place, with three points, are the fishing enthusiasts!” This earned scattered, perfunctory applause. It was understandable—there was no actual prize for third place.

Nanba continued on nevertheless. “In second place, with five points, the light music club! It’s a shame. I think you could’ve gone the distance...” There was more perfunctory applause as the light music club members let out depressed sighs. The girls they’d reeled in looked genuinely unhappy about the situation.

“And first place, incredibly, the karate society, with an amazing eleven points!”

“Yes!” The three big men of the karate society wept with joy and leaped into the air before the shocked audience. Meanwhile, Issei, standing among the group of shouting girls, was looking very shrunken and uncomfortable indeed.

The eleven girls who’d come to see Issei began to mutter around him.

“I came because I thought you were cute... What’s with all these other girls?”

“Tsubaki-san, um... were these the ‘circumstances’ you mentioned?”

“Hey, hey. Is there gonna be a follow-up to that show this afternoon?”

As Issei became extremely apologetic to the girls huddled around him, his fellow students began to mutter.

“I didn’t think he’d bring in this many...”

“Are girls just super attracted to Tsubaki? Is it a pheromone thing?”

“No, no. This generation just has a preference for fighter types...”

There were a great many sighs heaved between them.

“Which means the club room now belongs to the karate society! You’re all witnesses. Now, take care!” Nanba declared before dismissing them. But the group didn’t disperse immediately. Instead, the members of the light music club turned their eyes to Sousuke with great interest.

“Sagara-kun? How’d the photography club do?” asked a grinning student who sang vocals.

Sousuke paused. “Zero points,” he responded, slumped over.

“Zero, huh? That means you didn’t pick up a single girl, *right?*”

“Affirmative,” he added hesitantly.

“Hah. A promise is a promise, then,” the light music members said gleefully. “Time for a little dip in the lake. Ready?” They were all grinning at him enthusiastically.

Shinji was panicking while Issei whispered in disgust, “I warned you.”

Sousuke remained silent for a while, then let out a small sigh. “Very well. A promise is a promise...”

“Take it off! Take it off!” the group chanted as Sousuke removed his camouflage jacket.

The girls around them shrieked, excited about this new development. Sousuke finished removing his shirt and reached for the hem of his tank top.

But just then...

“Ah... excuse me?”

A woman in voluminous Japanese-style clothing appeared. She looked to be in her midtwenties, with dewy, almond-shaped eyes. Her appearance was immaculate, her bearing extremely elegant. She had a certain quiet grace about her that made her seem inappropriate to the scene. She wore a deep violet kimono with intricate embroidery and her elegantly tied-up hair shone lustrously. The white nape of her neck was bewitching, and her skin lacked a single blemish.

As the peanut gallery watched in curiosity and suspicion, the woman shuffled up to Sousuke and spoke in a mature, husky voice, “I’m terribly sorry I’m late, Sagara-san.”

“What?!” Everyone around them, including the light music club, cried out in surprise. Sousuke, too, could only gape, confused by the unfamiliar woman’s appearance.

“Who are—” He was about to say more, but she pressed her finger to his lips.

“Say no more, now,” she told him. “You’re the one who begged me to come out with you this afternoon, remember? And it was so difficult slipping out without my husband seeing...”

Husband?! She’s a married woman?! the students of Jindai seemed to think, united in their shocked reactions.

The woman tilted her head with a shy smile. “You did promise, didn’t you? That you’d join me for dinner...”

“R-Right...” Sousuke could do nothing but stand there, flustered.

Meanwhile, the woman pressed herself up against his chest and drew little circles on it with her finger. “I simply... couldn’t wait. Shall we, then?”

“Er? Um...”

She quietly took his arm and began to walk with elegant steps. Sousuke was so taken aback that he couldn’t do anything but walk sluggishly after her. “Best wishes, all.” The woman paid her elegant respects to the shocked gaggle of

Jindai students, then led Sousuke away into a corner of the business district.

As Sousuke followed in silence, he could hear shouts from behind him:

“We lost!”

“A married woman?!”

“He got us!”

But the woman kept him moving. *Who is she?* he wondered. Even as they left the park, Sousuke couldn’t begin to imagine. As dense as he was around women, even he couldn’t help but feel agitated as he walked alongside her. He’d never spent time with a woman like this before.

“Just in the nick of time, hmm, Sagara-san?” she whispered to him.

“Yes. Er... and who are you, exactly?” Sousuke asked, nervously.

“Gracious... You don’t remember?” she asked mischievously. “But we see each other every day.”

“I... I’m very sorry. But... I’m afraid I simply don’t.”

“You *really* don’t recognize me?”

“No. I’m... very sorry.”

Suddenly, the Japanese-style beauty snorted in laughter, “Snrk... Yeah, I can’t keep it up. Pfft... bwa ha ha ha ha! I did it! I’m incredible! Awesome! It worked like a charm!”

Sousuke stared at her in shock. The moment her voice lost its elegant masking, he realized who it was. “Ch-Chidori?!”

“Yep! You didn’t catch on, huh? Not even for a minute? How awesome am I? Perfect score!” She threw her fists into the air and launched into singing her own praises. Despite how mature her makeup made her look, when she acted like this, she was unmistakably Kaname.

Sousuke, nervous and trembling, still didn’t seem to understand exactly what had happened.

After thoroughly enjoying his reactions, Kaname spoke up. “Heh heh... Be grateful, okay? I went all the way home and, with O-Ren-san’s help, got into my

mother's kimono."

"I see..." He had to admit defeat. She'd not only saved him, but completely fooled him, too. "Honestly... you never cease to amaze me."

"Right? And there's one more thing I'd like to hear you say, if you don't mind..." Kaname peered into his face, eyes shining with expectation.

Hear me say? What could it be? Sousuke spoke uncertainly, "Um... thank you?"

"Nope."

"I'm sorry?"

"Stupid." Kaname's expression was gradually growing more and more unsatisfied.

He considered, and after much wracking of the brain, he spoke up timidly, "You look... beautiful?"

"Heh. That's the first time you've said so." Kaname grinned at him broadly, and it truly was a beautiful smile.

〈Uncooperative Bluebird — The End〉

Off-Target Emotion

It was a gloomy day after class. The sky was cloudy and the air was dry.

Tsubaki Issei, president of the karate society, strode with determination along a tree-lined lane on a corner of the school grounds. He was young, short, and pale, but also a skilled warrior. His striking almond-shaped eyes held an indomitable warrior's spirit that seemed to burn at all times, but his mouth was drawn in stubborn science.

He was en route to a duel.

That afternoon, incorrigibly, he had issued a letter of challenge to Sagara Sousuke. He simply couldn't restrain his desire to fight him.

He'd been born with numerous handicaps—his height, his weight, his vision—but had overcome them all through careful dedication to refining his skills. His inferiority complex had propelled him into a single-minded pursuit of strength regardless of his deficiencies. Issei felt it was crucial to defeat Sousuke, the one who had defeated him, in order to reach even greater heights.

Yes... Ever since that day he caught me off guard, Issei thought, I've been unable to move on. But that ends today. At last, I will... His eyes snapped open. *I will defeat Sagara!* As if inspired by his sudden spike of fighting spirit, a wind blew up around him, stirring the dust and the dead leaves.

Soon, he arrived at the appointed site of the duel: the remains of a recently torn-down judo dojo. There was nobody else there just yet. He must have arrived a bit before the agreed-upon hour.

But then, Issei noticed something strange about a nearby zelkova; a piece of white paper had been stuck to its trunk with an army knife, at about chest height. There was some kind of long message written on it.

Issei squinted at it, but he was too nearsighted to make out the message from where he stood. He walked up to the trunk, leaned in, and found that the paper said this:

Tsubaki Issei, I have received your declaration of hostilities. Unfortunately, the student council has issued me an important mission today, and so I have no time to spare for you. Instead, your opponent will be the item below you.

“Below me?” Issei muttered, shifting his weight, and...

Click. A dull metallic sound came from the ground beneath his feet. Foreboding welled up within Issei as he kept reading and discovered what the sound signified:

If you heard a metallic sound already, it would be best not to lift your foot. I’ve buried an anti-personnel mine in that location. If you remove your weight, it will explode.

“What?!” Issei looked down, flabbergasted, then carefully moved into a squat. Still trembling, he dug a little ways into the soil beneath his beat-up sneaker from the side, revealing the first hint of a CD-sized mine right below his foot.

Shaking harder now, he went back to reading the message.

Use the army knife and try to dismantle the mine without removing your foot. If you manage to disarm it and survive, you win. That is all. Good luck.

Sagara Sousuke.

Issei threw his arms around the trunk and wailed, “Sagara... n-not again!”

Around that time, a sullen-looking Sagara Sousuke was himself working on

carefully stapling a packet of paper. There was a mountain of similarly printed packets sitting on top of the student council table. This was the “important mission” to which he had referred: putting together this month’s student council newsletter, the Jindai News.

Several other students were there with Sousuke, all silently focused on their work. Perhaps because of the gloomy weather, nobody had much to say. But around the time they’d stapled their 200th packet, an explosion rang out. It echoed like thunder, causing the windows to rattle briefly in their frames before silence fell again. The students glanced over, frowning in curiosity.

Meanwhile, Sousuke merely closed his eyes meditatively. “He failed, then?”

Chidori Kaname narrowed her eyes at him. “What do you mean by that? What was that sound?”

“A man who came to fight lost his life in a far-away land. That’s all,” he responded gravely, then went back to methodically clicking the stapler.

“Uh-huh. You’re weird,” Kaname said before silently resuming her own work.

Not long after, one of the girls helping make the packets, Inaba Mizuki, let out a whine. “How did I let you drag me into this?” she complained. “I’m not even part of the student council!” Mizuki was a short girl who wore her hair in a mid-length bob and had a stubbornly intimidating air despite her rather childish appearance. Kaname had roped her into helping on her way out the door, as most members of the student council were busy with part-time jobs, clubs, or family business today.

“Give it a rest,” Kaname said. “Like you don’t owe me a million favors? Besides, it’s not like you had anything better to do.”

“Well, excuse me,” Mizuki harrumphed. “I was just gonna go home and waste my youth rewatching *Shadow Warriors: Bakumatsu Chapter*. You know, like the boyfriend-less, club-less loser I am.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kaname said disinterestedly.

“I hate it so much! Manami, Madoka, and Shoko all got boyfriends and they won’t shut up about it lately.”

“Your friends from middle school?”

“Yeah. We got together for the first time in forever and they basically spent three hours at Mos going on and on about them,” Mizuki sulked. “Like they don’t even know what I’ve been through! It makes me wanna call up their boyfriends and air out all their dirty laundry.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know,” Kaname said in exhaustion.

It was then that the door to the student council banged open, and Kaname and the others looked up questioningly. “Sagara!” shouted Tsubaki Issei, who was clinging to the doorway for support, looking like he’d been through the wringer. His entire body was covered in soot and scrapes, his uniform had scorch marks on it, and his hair was still smoking.

“Oh, hey there, Tsubaki-kun,” said Kaname.

But Issei didn’t even spare her a glance. He adjusted the cracked glasses on his nose and, after confirming which of the people in the room was Sousuke, he shouted, “I’ll kill you!” and charged straight at him.

Sousuke had by then gotten up out of his chair and dodged the sudden straight punch by a hair’s breadth. The force of the punch caused his pile of packets to collapse, which sent paper flying through the air. “You survived that?” he asked in surprise. “You have impressive endurance.”

“Shut up!” snarled Issei. “I’m gonna make you pay, once and for all!”

“If you detonated the mine, it means you lost the duel,” Sousuke pointed out.

“That’s not up to you!”

“Then let’s try again tomorrow,” he suggested. “I have to finish these packets —”

“I don’t give a damn!” Issei bellowed, continually striking at Sousuke, who likewise continued to dodge lithely around the room. In a typical barehanded fight, the two would be roughly equal, but Issei was so enraged now that his attacks were extremely telegraphed.

“Here they go again,” said Kaname, scratching at the back of her head. Their rivalry had been a thorn in her side for a while now.

“Who’s the geek with the short fuse? What a freak,” Mizuki said with a sneer.

“Oh, just a guy we met recently with a grudge against Sousuke.”

“Do they squabble like this all the time?” Mizuki sighed.

“Yeah, though it gets pretty extreme for a ‘squabble.’ But I guess now’s not really the time for gossip... Hey, you two, cut it out!” Kaname told them.

But Issei continued his pugilistic pursuit of Sousuke.

“Okay, come on, would you just... *Stop it, Tsubaki-kun!*” she finally shouted at the top of her lungs.

At this, Issei seemed to notice Kaname’s presence for the first time. “Ch-Chidori?” he asked, stopping in mid-swing and flushing bright crimson. He seemed extremely embarrassed about losing his cool in front of her.

Sousuke, of course, didn’t miss his chance. He dove in with a sharp kick at his opponent’s stomach.

“Grrk!” Issei crossed his arms and just managed to block Sousuke’s strike in time, but the force of it still knocked him into the corner by the window to which the girls had retreated. Kaname dodged Issei’s incoming body... only for him to slam right into Mizuki instead, which triggered a horrible chain of events.

“Eek!” shrieked Mizuki. The impact caused her to lose her balance and stumble towards the open window of the student council clubroom, which was four stories up. She had only a split-second of realization before her little body was falling out the window, tumbling head-over-heels towards the asphalt a dozen meters below.

“Hrk!” Issei choked out, lurching out of the window himself in order to catch Mizuki just before her plunge began in earnest. Holding her ankle with a two-handed grip as she hung upside-down, he just barely kept her aloft. It had been a truly close call.

“Ah... aaaaaaaaaaah!” Mizuki began to scream as she realized her situation. At first flailing wildly, her priority quickly turned to holding down her upturned skirt as she writhed. “Yeek! Ahhh! Heeeelp!”

“Q-Quit struggling!” Issei told her.

“Let me go, let me go, let me go! ...I mean, don’t let me go, don’t let me go, don’t let me go!”

“I wasn’t going to! Just calm down! Stop struggling!” Issei’s face strained in desperation as he attempted to grab Mizuki’s other leg. He also managed to turn his gaze back, hoping for help from the others.

Sousuke strode slowly up to him.

“S-Sagara?”

“You’re trapped now, Tsubaki,” he pointed out.

“What?!”

“If you let go, Mizuki will die. In other words, you can no longer dodge my attacks. Checkmate.”

“D-Damn you...” said Issei.

“Admit your defeat like a man. Or else—”

Slam! A hard punch from Kaname hit him in the side, causing Sousuke to double over. She then pointed at Issei by the window, as white as a sheet. “Help save her already!”

“Understood,” said Sousuke, quickly righting himself to move in and help. With Kaname pitching in as well, they managed to carefully pull Mizuki back up, and disaster was avoided.

“Hmm... that was quite a close call,” Sousuke noted.

“You villain!” Once the moment of relief had passed, Kaname laid Sousuke out with another punch.

“That really hurts.”

“Shut up! Mizuki almost died, and you decided to take that moment to threaten Tsubaki-kun?” she lectured him. “Are you crazy?! How petty can you get? You really have a short circuit somewhere in your moral fiber, don’t you?!”

“Do I?”

“Yes!” Kaname exploded. “You should get yourself checked at the electrician by the station on the way home! You hopeless, idiotic, dunderheaded, crazy—”

While they engaged in their usual fight—Kaname chewing him out, Sousuke trying to argue—Mizuki remained flat and motionless on the floor, overwhelmed by her near-death experience.

“Hey... are you all right?” Issei, who’d finally regained his calm, knelt down next to her and waved a hand in front of her eyes.

She looked back up at him in a daze, and then her eyes widened in shock. “Ah...” Issei’s glasses had been lost in the commotion, and Mizuki’s manner did a complete 180 at the sight of his pale, symmetrical features. The usually shrewd aspect to her gaze turned dewy and covetous, and a sigh escaped her lips.

“I’m sorry about that. I hope you weren’t hurt,” Issei continued.

“I... I... I think I’m... fine,” Mizuki managed to respond. Her voice was so timid that one might not even recognize her.

“I see. I’m glad to hear that.” Issei stood up and turned towards Sousuke, who was still mid-scolding. “Sagara, I’m too tired to continue, so I’ll let you off this time. But the next time we meet... no mercy.”

“Right.”

“Be ready.” With those final words and an expression of exhaustion, he made to leave the student council room behind.

But Kaname called after him. “Wait, Tsubaki-kun!”

“Y-Yes, Chidori?”

“Be careful from now on, okay?” she cautioned him. “We’ve already got one walking hazard to deal with.”

“Y-Yes... I’m sorry. Goodbye, then.” Issei nodded slightly, then left the room with an awkward expression. For some reason, he was always strangely docile when it came to his interactions with Kaname.

“Sheesh... Hey, Mizuki, you okay?” Kaname asked.

“Yeah... I’m okay,” Mizuki said, distractedly.

“Really? You seem kinda weird.”

“Yeah. I feel kinda weird...”

“Huh?”

“His name was... Tsubaki-kun? That’s a wonderful name. He’s so handsome. And...” she trailed off for a moment, before briefly switching to English slang, “groovy, soulful, cute, and kitsch... strong, yet vulnerable. I’m in love...” Mizuki clasped her hands together as if wishing on a star.

Kaname found herself drawing back. “Th-This is...”

Mizuki had switched completely to head-over-heels mode.

The next morning, Issei was walking glumly along his usual route from the station to the school. He’d run into students from his class already, but they’d merely exchanged casual greetings. When he wasn’t getting worked up around Sousuke, he was typically a quiet boy with an icy air around him. His classmates saw him as being cold, aloof, and unapproachable (though his recent interactions with Sousuke had begun to change that). And as he was turning the corner, thinking over the question of how best to challenge Sagara...

“Watch where you’re going!” said a girl coming around the corner as she slammed right into him.



“Gwuh?!” Having been caught unawares, the full body hit laid him out flat on the street. Upon coming back to his senses, he glared at the one who’d done it and asked, “Wh-What do you think you’re... doing?” It was the second-year girl he’d saved from falling yesterday. He couldn’t quite recall her name... *Mizuki, wasn’t it?*

She was sitting on her backside, rubbing at her own ankle in a way that looked rehearsed, “Ow, ow, ow... it hurts. I think I sprained my ankle... or maybe broke it?” she said, looking at Issei. “Oh. You’re that boy from yesterday...”

“R-Right...”

“Fancy bumping into you again...”

Issei said nothing. He couldn’t figure out why she was doing this or how to respond.

Undaunted by his awkward silence, Mizuki boldly held out her hands.

Issei blinked at her in confusion.

“Carry me,” she prodded him.

“Wh-What?”

“I can’t walk like this,” she said impatiently. “Carry me.”

Issei stared at her for three full seconds, agape, before saying, “D-Don’t be ridiculous. Why should I... carry... some woman I barely even—”

“Owww! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!” Mizuki suddenly began rubbing her ankle again, shouting at the top of her lungs. People were beginning to stop and stare.

“H-Hey!” he objected.

“My leg hurts! Tsubaki Issei-kun of Jindai High School Class 2-8 crashed into me and now I can’t walk! I can’t even move! First period is Fujisaki’s classic lit course and I’m gonna be late, and he’s gonna mark me absent and flunk me, and I’ll have to repeat the whole yeeear !” she wailed loudly.

“S-Stop shouting! I get it already!” Issei said, even though he could have run away.

She immediately stopped shouting and looked up at him needfully. “Really?”

“Er? Ah... well...”

“Carry me, then.” She held out her hands with a grin.

It was around lunch that day when Kaname heard the rumor from her classmate, Tokiwa Kyoko.

“Tsubaki Issei came to school with a girl from Class 2. He was carrying her. For real! They seemed really friendly, too!” she was saying, going into full gossipy housewife mode. “Tsubaki-kun was giving her a piggy-back ride, and Mizuki-chan had her chest pressed up against him, and Tsubaki-kun got so happy he danced a passionate flamenco with her on the spot... at least, that’s what they say. Of course, it’s all just rumors...”

“Wow, she moves fast. Lightning speed,” muttered Kaname, shocked by Mizuki’s decisiveness. The determination, the follow-through... such were the things that defined Inaba Mizuki. Kaname felt strangely outclassed by her, at least in certain regards.

Sousuke, listening to the story from a nearby seat, put a thoughtful hand to his jaw. “Tsubaki’s been in contact with Inaba? A curious combination,” he noted. “It smells like a conspiracy.”

“It’s not a conspiracy!” Kaname insisted. “Still, it’s hard to believe that that muscle-headed Tsubaki-kun went for it so easily...”

Kyoko stared at Kaname scrutinizingly. “Yeah,” she agreed. “I always figured Tsubaki-kun was in love with *you*, Kana-chan.”

Kaname laughed dismissively. “Yeah, right. Anyway, I’m fine with it! It’s a pretty fun pairing. I’m more than happy to wish them both well.”

“Huh. I thought you’d make more drama about it.”

“Really? How come?”

Just then, Tsubaki Issei himself strode into their classroom. The desperation in his eyes suggested he was anything but “well.” The girls looked up at him questioningly, but he didn’t spare them a single glance as he moved to hide

behind the door.

Shortly after, Mizuki came running down the hall. “Issei-kun? Where did you go?” she called.

As her footsteps then retreated into the distance, Issei sighed in relief and relaxed.

“What are you doing, Tsubaki-kun?” Kyoko asked.

He startled in response, seeming to notice their presence for the first time. “O-Oh... Nothing.”

“We heard you’re dating Mizuki now? That’s nice,” Kaname said.

But Issei shook his head fervently. “I’m not! It’s not true!”

“Really? But everyone’s saying it.”

“They’re wrong! She just started hanging off me. Chidori... hearing you say that makes me... makes me...” he heaved, seeming more stressed than the situation seemed to warrant.

Kaname laughed. “C’mon, don’t be shy.”

“Chidori!” Issei’s face was consumed by despair.

“There you are!” chirped Mizuki, who’d doubled back at some point to find him in the doorway.

“Oh, drat.”

“Issei-kun, you silly! What are you doing dawdling around here? You promised to grab lunch with me!”

“When did I promise that?!” Issei shrieked back.

But Mizuki ignored him, blushing and wriggling coquettishly. “Oh, you’re bashful! It’s adorable!”

“Listen to the words I’m saying!!!”

Ignoring this, too, she sidled up to Issei and thrust out a boxed lunch. “I got up early today and made this lunch just for you, Issei-kun!”

“We only interacted for the first time today!!!” he howled.

“So what? Stop nitpicking everything! Go on, eat up!” she said, opening the box and seizing a mini-hot dog, cut to look like an octopus, in her chopsticks.

“Wow, Mizuki. I didn’t know you could cook,” Kaname muttered.

“A hot dog... shaped like an octopus. What could it taste like?” Sousuke mused at her side.

“Say ahh!” Mizuki held out the little hot dog sweetly.

But Issei swiped her hand away. “That’s enough!”

“Ah...” The little octopus sausage flew through the air and splatted onto the ground.

“Leave me alone already! You’re a nuisance! You’re making people spread rumors about me!”

Mizuki fell silent.

“All right? I make it a policy not to strike a woman, but... if you don’t stop bothering me, I can’t be held responsible for my actions!” Issei burst out.

In reaction to that statement, the room around them sank into awkward silence. Mizuki was hanging her head wordlessly, while Kaname and Kyoko were both flustered. Sousuke was gazing seriously at the mini-hot dog on the floor.



And then...

Mizuki's eyes filled up with tears. "Fine, whatever. It's not like you didn't almost kill me, after all."

"Wh-What?"

"Falling out of that window was traumatizing. I'll never recover. It's called PTSD. I'll be scarred for life!" Mizuki said, weeping.

Issei seemed at a loss for how to react. "Well... I'm sorry about that, but it's not really my—"

"And you saw my underwear," she said accusingly.

"Geh..."

"My *underwear*," she emphasized again. "I know you saw it. Don't try to play dumb."

"W-Well... I'd actually lost my glasses, so I actually just saw... a blur... so no, I'm innocent!" Issei declared, clearly panicking.

All the students in the classroom, Kaname included, began gossiping to each other now in whispers (except for Sousuke, who seemed to be wrestling with some deeper internal question as he stared at the dropped hot dog octopus).

"You knock a girl out of a window, get a full look at her panties, then play dumb? It's cruel," Mizuki cried pitifully. "Men are so cruel!"

"I-I apologize," Issei stammered. "I'm really sorry."

"Really?"

"Y-Yes," he responded without thinking.

Immediately, Mizuki turned sweet again. "Then, say ah!" This time she grabbed a tamagoyaki roll with her chopsticks and held it out at him.

"Why is this happening to me?" Issei wondered as, holding back tears and under the watchful eyes of all around him, he ate it.

After class that day, Issei came right to Sousuke's classroom just as he was

preparing to leave for the day. He was alone, apparently having shaken off Mizuki somehow. “Could I have a moment?” he asked.

Another attempt at a duel? Stubborn fool, thought Sousuke, but followed him nevertheless.

As they made it to the roof of the northern school building, Issei turned back to Sousuke and came right to the point. “Sagara. Are you the one behind this?”

“Behind what?”

“That Inaba woman. Did you hire her to torment me?!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sousuke responded.

Issei squinted at him suspiciously. “Really?”

“I can’t think of any reason why I’d lie.”

At this, Issei let out a rare sigh. “It’s true... these aren’t the tactics you’d employ. In that case... damn. She’s serious, then,” he muttered to himself and pounded his fist into his palm.

Sousuke tilted his head. “Is that an issue?”

“A big one!”

“Is receiving food at lunch that troubling? I’ll admit the hot dog octopus had a disappointing flavor, but...”

You ate that?! was a comment that, sadly, nobody was around to make.

“Idiot. I’ve got a woman I barely know acting like she’s my wife,” Issei had to explain. “It’s awful. People are spreading rumors about my lecherous nature, and Chidori’s jumping to all sorts of conclusions... It’s awful,” he finished in a limp whisper. He seemed completely exhausted after just one day of having made Mizuki’s acquaintance.

But Sousuke responded indifferently, “I see. That’s a shame. If you have nothing more to say, I’m going to leave now.”

But Issei grabbed his arm as he turned away. “Wait.”

“What?”

“You’re the reason I’m going through this,” he said accusingly. “You can’t just leave me like this!”

“Me? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t play dumb! You’re the reason I knocked her out the window!”

“Ah...”

“You’re still going to pretend like you aren’t a part of this?!” Issei reached for Sousuke’s collar, enraged. But perhaps his exhaustion was even greater than imagined, because when Sousuke dodged, he lost his balance and ended up clinging to his shoulder.

Just then, the door to the roof opened. The person who poked their face out was Kyoko, holding a box of Pocky and a pair of binoculars. “Eh?” Kyoko’s large eyes blinked behind her glasses, shocked by the sight of Issei clinging needfully to Sousuke’s shoulder.

Both men looked up at her questioningly.

“S-Sorry... I think I’ve interrupted something,” she said, forcing a smile before withdrawing back behind the door.

“What was that?” Issei wondered.

“I don’t know,” said Sousuke, “but let go of me already.”

“Hmm? Right.” Issei recovered his senses and stepped away from Sousuke. “The point is,” he continued, “that woman’s got me under her thumb because of *you*. You need to help me. Can we call a truce until then?”

It was rather presumptuous reasoning, but Sousuke didn’t argue. He had no particular reason to refuse, after all. “At first you just wanted a moment,” he pointed out. “Now you want my help?”

“Stop nitpicking. I’m desperate here.” Issei’s expression did indeed resemble that of a drowning man. The fact that he was willing to ask even his mortal enemy for help suggested how much of a bind he was in.

“So, may I ask, what is it you want?”

“I want to make her lose interest in me. But I’m not experienced in this field,

so I don't know how to do that. Any ideas?"

"Hmm." Sousuke fell into quiet thought. "Let me see... You could kill an innocent pregnant woman or senior citizen while Inaba watches. She'd surely hate you then."

"Not happening!"

"But isn't beating people to death your specialty?" he asked very bluntly.

"The only thing my Daidomyaku style is designed to kill is the wielder's own ego," Issei told him scornfully. "Don't make it sound sordid!"

"Didn't you call it your 'assassin fist' earlier?"

"Shut up. Anyway, that's not an option."

Sousuke folded his arms and said casually, "Then I'll speak to her myself. I do know Inaba rather well by now."

"Speak to her?"

"Yes. It's usually best to talk things out."

The next day, at lunch, Kaname was eating in the classroom with Kyoko when an unhappy-looking Mizuki arrived.

"Hey, Mizuki. You aren't eating with Tsubaki-kun?"

"I lost sight of him. He's not in any of the classrooms or club rooms. After I made him another special handmade lunch..." Mizuki let out a sigh. "I'm sure he's just being bashful again. He gets nervous when we make eye contact, so he stares up at the ceiling instead. Of course, that's part of what makes him so charming! Heh heh heh..."

Kaname watched her skeptically, though she was partly envious of the nerve it took to talk like that about someone you'd only known for two days.

It was then that Sousuke, who was sitting a few desks away eating a plain roll, addressed Mizuki. He just said, "Inaba."

"What?"

"I must speak to you. Could you come with me a moment?" He seemed

somehow even more serious than usual. Mizuki looked suspicious, but she slowly stood up and followed after him.

Kaname watched them go, dumbfounded. "Sousuke talking to Mizuki? That's unusual," she whispered.

Kyoko nodded quickly in response. "Actually, that reminds me. Speaking of Tsubaki-kun and Sagara-kun, I caught sight of something unusual yesterday after class..."

"Unusual?"

"Yeah. They were talking on the roof together, alone. Which is weird because of how they usually hate each other, right? But it seemed pretty intense..." Kyoko gave a detailed eyewitness report about catching them in a tight embrace in the middle of a clandestine rooftop meeting.

"Seriously?" Kaname asked.

"Seriously. Tsubaki-kun was holding Sagara-kun from behind..."

"Huh? But that seems pretty out of nowhere..."

"I guess so," Kyoko agreed, "but the atmosphere between them was seriously intense."

"Sousuke and Issei-kun? A clandestine meeting?" Kaname folded her arms, a firm crease forming between her brows. *What could they have been talking about? And what's Sousuke talking to Mizuki about now?* A hypothesis began to form in Kaname's mind, and then suddenly, she cried out, her face frozen in surprise. *Is it... Is it possible?!*

"Kana-chan, what's wrong?"

"H-Hang on, I'm going to check on them!" she said and stood up.

As they arrived on a stairway a ways away from the classroom, Mizuki spoke first. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"It's about Tsubaki." Sousuke was standing very still, back turned to her, as he broached the subject.

“Issei-kun? What about him?”

“Watch out for him.”

“Huh?”

“An amateur like you might not understand... but he’s dangerous,” Sousuke clarified. “He’s a man who loves killing, who takes sadistic glee in tearing people apart.”

“Huh?”

After a long pause, Sousuke spoke again with gravity and sincerity. “He has lived a life stained in blood. He developed a love of killing at the tender age of six. His father would get drunk and beat his mother, and one day he shot him with a hunting rifle. Then, as his father bled out from a hole in his stomach, pleading for his life, he shot him four more times in the face.”

“Uh-huh...”

“After acquiring a taste for it, he embarked upon serial killings. He’s killed at least twenty girls before you. The youngest was four years old; the oldest, ninety. He sexually assaulted them all before killing them.”

“N-Ninety?”

“Yes. He is merciless with those he deems his prey,” Sousuke said gravely. “He’s also bombed two airplanes, assassinated ten international VIPs, and stolen three bicycles. A bloodthirsty psychopath... that is the true face of Tsubaki Issei.”

Mizuki said nothing.

“Do you see now?” Sousuke insisted. “Tsubaki is an unrepentant villain. You shouldn’t associate with him any longer. If you do—”

“Could you get a grip already?!” Mizuki said, interrupting Sousuke’s long speech. “*This* is what you wanted to talk about? So you want me to break up with Issei-kun, is that it?”

“Correct.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” she exclaimed angrily. “Who even asked you

about any of this?!”

“I—” He’d been about to say that Tsubaki had asked him, but before he could, another voice interrupted.

“Mizuki... stop it,” Kaname said, interposing herself between them. Her steps were listless, and her eyes had lost their sparkle.

“Kaname? What do you want?” Mizuki asked.

Kaname, who must have heard the whole conversation, looked between Sousuke and Mizuki with the hollow gaze of someone who’d just received a major shock. “I... I heard everything. I know what Sousuke wants. Let me explain.”

“Huh?”

“Listen, Mizuki. Sousuke is jealous.”

“‘Jealous’? What do you mean?”

Kaname gave her an empty smile. “Well... you know? I didn’t realize it all this time... but I think Sousuke and Tsubaki-kun are actually very close. Even though they hit each other and blow each other up, they actually care about each other... deeply.”

Sousuke shook his head rapidly, but Kaname continued on regardless. “It seems that without me even realizing it, they’ve grown close in all kinds of ways... off in secret. That’s why Sousuke can’t stand the thought of you having Tsubaki all to yourself. That’s why he said all that to get you to break up.”

Mizuki clapped her hands in realization. “Really?”

“Yeah... it surprised me too. I always thought it was weird how dense Sousuke seemed to be when it came to romance. But I never thought...”

Sousuke blinked in confusion. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Kaname ignored his question and let out a deep sigh. “That kind of relationship really is dangerous. I can’t stop you if it’s what you both want, but... the world will judge you for it, okay? If you have other choices, then getting off that path would probably lead to a happier life, you know?”

“Chidori. I have no idea what you’ve been talking about.”

“Seriously, don’t worry about it! I... I think this doesn’t change anything about our relationship, even though it did surprise me a little. But Sousuke? I don’t think it’s right to force Issei-kun to stay with you against his will, especially when he’s got a nice girl like Mizuki and things are going well between them. You should be happy for him and let him live his own life.”

“Kaname? What are you saying?” Mizuki asked.

Kaname wiped at her eyes and continued on bravely. “It’s all right. You don’t have to worry about me. Anyway, Mizuki, that’s what this is all about. No need to worry. I think you and Tsubaki-kun make a great couple. So go for it. Make it work!” Kaname said with all her heart.

While not understanding a single word Kaname said, Mizuki found her eyes filling up with tears. “Thank you,” she sniffled. “You’re a nice person, Kaname. I’ll do my best.”

Kaname nodded. “Yeah. Go for it!”

But just as the conversation was about to resolve with the exact opposite result of what Sousuke had intended...

“Why?!” In came the man himself—Issei—from behind a nearby pillar, his shoulders heaving with breath. He must have been listening the whole time, because he seemed extremely distraught as he marched towards them.

He was angry that Sousuke’s explanation had involved casting him as a dangerous criminal. He was furious with Mizuki’s selfish lack of regard for his feelings. And he was incandescent with Kaname for making a big speech that wrapped everything up in a tidy bow of nonsense. *Yes... why is Chidori Kaname encouraging Mizuki?* he wondered in despair. *It’s too tragic a fate to be borne!*

“Tsubaki-kun. What’s wrong?” Kaname asked with an oddly pitying smile.

“What’s wrong?! Chidori, why...” He couldn’t figure out what more to say. Issei had been deeply in love with her since the first day they’d met in that back alley and she’d put that adhesive plaster on his hand. The one true ray of light in a young life otherwise dedicated to the drudgery of martial arts practice—that was Chidori Kaname.



He had never really wanted to ask her out like an ordinary man would. He was satisfied just gazing at her smile from a distance. And yet... she perpetually had that honorless, war-addled idiot by her side. Meanwhile, he was constantly being chased by a completely different bullheaded, love-starved idiot. The whole world seemed to be conspiring to keep them apart.

Is this fate? Issei wondered. And yet, he would fight against that fate, as he had done against all the weaknesses he'd overcome in the past. Yes, he decided. *I won't run away. I'll confess my feelings to her... right here and now, without ambiguity! It will likely confuse her. It will likely hurt Inaba. And Sagara... well, he's hard to predict. But who cares what he thinks?*

"All right... I'll say it!" Tsubaki Issei declared under his breath. This would be a turning point of his life: his once-in-a-lifetime challenge. Now that he was in a fighting mood, everything had changed. The flame of his spirit, dampened these past few days, began raging once more.

"What's wrong, Issei-kun? You've been quiet this whole time..."

"All right, you two..." In order to bare his soul, he slowly removed his thick glasses and showed his penetrating gaze. He was nearsighted, so the three of them looked extremely blurry, but he didn't let that bother him. "Listen closely, Chidori, Inaba. You have the wrong idea."

The blurs looked back at him questioningly.

"I don't want to date Inaba. I'm sorry, but you should pin your hopes on someone else."

"B-But why? I really—"

"Because I'm in love with someone else," Issei proclaimed.

Mizuki froze up as if she'd been hit by lightning, while Kaname looked away in pain.

"I never told them, but I've felt this way since the day we first met. I love this person so much, I'd do anything for them. That's why I can't even consider dating some girl I just met."

"And... wh-where is this person?" Mizuki asked, tearfully.

“Right here,” Issei replied.

“What...”

As if to overcome his nervousness, Issei took in a deep breath, and then pointed, firmly, at the object of his affections.

The whole group gasped.

“Yes! You see now, don’t you? I’m in love with you!”

“Ah... it can’t be...”

“It’s too cruel! How could you?”

“Tsubaki... you...”

After a short silence, Kaname spoke in a trembling voice. “Tsu... Tsubaki-kun.”

“I know it’s not good for either of us,” he persisted, “but I can’t stop the way I feel. Please... Please understand.”

“So... that’s how it is after all. After Kyoko told me what happened on the roof yesterday, I had my suspicions,” said Kaname, “but to hear you state it so plainly... I just don’t know what to say.”

“What?” Mizuki said next.

“I had no idea. So that’s what it’s about. You two... really are more than friends.”

“Er?” Scowling at the strange reaction, Issei replaced his glasses, causing the world to come into focus again. And now he could see that the person he’d proclaimed his love to was... Sagara Sousuke.

“It’s disgusting! Disgusting!” Mizuki said, running off crying.

After watching her go, Sousuke turned pale, sweat rising on his chilled face. “Well, I... don’t know what to say to that.”

Issei was at a loss for words, his mouth flapping like a goldfish.

The rumors of the Sagara/Tsubaki love affair spread through the school at lightning speed and became the talk of all the girls for the next several weeks.

There was much debate over which of the two was the top and the bottom.

When Kaname asked the opinion of Kyoko, who was cheerful even about subjects like that, she responded, “Hmm... I’m not really sure. They both seem like bottoms. Though... well, you’ve seen how they act.” She shot a smile over at them as they fought in the hallway.

“This is all your fault!”

“Don’t blame this on me.”

“Shut up! Get down on your knees and apologize!”

“You’re the one who started it all.”

Issei, weeping, his hands clenched into fists; Sousuke, walking calmly beside him.

And all the students watched them warmly.

〈Off-target Emotion — The End〉

An Error-Ridden Sentence

《Let Your Young Wings Carry You to New Skies》

Our school (founded in the early Showa Period as 15th Prefectural Girls’ Secondary, then converted into a metropolitan high school during the post-war educational reforms) boasts history, tradition, and student freedom. In the year 1994, the curriculum was largely altered to allow students to select their own classes based on their desired path in life. Class content has likewise been tailored in many respects to foster each student’s individuality and preference.

Jindai Municipal High School’s uniform and gym outfits were designed by school alumna and renowned clothing designer Doujy Shiki. Its tasteful and classic design features a simplicity beloved by the current generation and remains popular with our students to this day.

Additionally...

* * * * *

Tsuboi Takako paused in the middle of her writing.

Additionally...

She was working on the prospective student pamphlet that the school gave out every year. As principal, she was writing the manuscript for it personally... but she’d already found herself running out of inspiration.

“Additionally...” she read back. Then she thought, *additionally... what?* Did she even have anything else to say? Were these really her school’s only selling points?

Eighty percent of their students eventually moved on to university, but about

half of those took one or more gap years, and only about ten percent of the students moved on to prestigious colleges directly after graduation. Their baseball club had lost in the second round. Their rugby club's glory days were over ten years ago. Their tennis, basketball, and soccer clubs weren't particularly strong, either. Their kendo club had done fairly well last year, but the leader who had propelled them to success had graduated soon after.

Jindai did have a few distinctive aspects to it. For instance, their student council had an unusually high degree of influence, and the school hosted a surprising number of "unique" individuals who did things like bring firearms and explosives to school... But she couldn't exactly put those things in her prospective student pamphlet. The fewer people who knew about them, in fact, the better.

But aside from those elements, Jindai had become an extremely average high school. It was difficult to think of what it had that would appeal to the local middle schools in the district—about the only thing they were known for was their cute girls' uniforms.

While Tsuboi Takako racked her brain over the problem, there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," she responded, and Kagurazaka Eri, a young, slender teacher from the English department entered. She was dressed in a suit and had a bob haircut.

"Excuse me," she began, "regarding next week's guidance session... Madame Principal? What's the matter? You seem upset about something."

"It's nothing, really..."

"Oh? Is it about the prospective student pamphlet?" asked Eri, casting a glance at the manuscript on the desktop.

"Yes. I'd really like to express our school's appeal... But every time I try to write something, I struggle." Tsuboi sighed. "I'm a math teacher, you know? I hate using it as an excuse, but I'm just no good at this sort of thing. General affairs asked me to do it, and I agreed without thinking it through... I'm really at a loss."

“Ahh...” Eri’s response was rather disinterested.

Nevertheless, Tsuboi looked at her with upturned eyes. “Kagurazaka-san,” she begged, “would you write it for me?”

“Er?”

“You’re an alumna, aren’t you? You spent most of your young life here, and if you stayed, you must have more attachment to your alma mater than most.”

Eri winced in response, which was understandable. Who would willingly take on such an awful chore? “Ah... well, I’m not exactly a skilled writer either. And my lack of objectivity could be an issue... Besides, I’ve been quite busy lately.”

“Busy,” the principal repeated. “Busy, you say?”

“Yes. I’m afraid so...” Eri responded hesitantly.

The principal removed her reading glasses and began to studiously polish the lenses. “Yes, I see. You might be able to wake up early every morning to pack a lunch for your coworker, but you don’t have time for this. I see.”

“Erk!” Eri choked out loud. She froze up, her eyes open wide as if to ask, *How did you know that?!*

“And while you *do* seem to have time to stop at said coworker’s studio to help him clean and prepare his dinner on your way back from work... Yes, I see. You certainly wouldn’t have time to help *me*.”

“Ah... w-well...”

“I don’t mind you having a workplace romance, but it’s important to keep public and private lives separate,” the principal reminded her. “And illicit fraternization is forbidden by the school rules, as you know. It would be a bad example for the students. It’s quite a problem.”

“It’s... It’s not illicit. It’s... It’s just... Do the other teachers know?!”

“No,” Tsuboi said, and Eri sighed in relief. “And I fully intend to keep the matter to myself. You don’t have to worry there, Kagurazaka-san.”

“Thank you for—”

Interrupting her, Tsuboi thrust out the manuscript. “So I’ll need you to take

care of this. You can ask for help from others if you like, all right?” Tsuboi Takako gave her a glowing smile.

After class that day, in the nurse’s office...

“I feel like she’s been harder on me lately,” Eri muttered to Nishino Kozue, her kohai from their high school days who was now the school nurse. “She was so friendly when I first started working here, but lately she’s been forcing the worst jobs on me and saying the meanest things about whatever Sagara-kun’s been getting up to lately. I’ve borne it in the past as a trial from God, but... I wonder if she’s jealous now that she knows I have a boyfriend.”

“Oh?” Kozue prodded her, replacing the small glasses on her face.

“I really admire her, of course. But she’s been a spinster for so long—fifty-some years without a boyfriend, I’ve heard.”

“So you think she’s taking it out on you?”

“I don’t know,” said Eri. “What do you think?”

“I’ve never known what it’s like to be unpopular with men, so I wouldn’t know,” Kozue said with an innocent smile.

“You really are something, you know?”

“Oh, I get that a lot... mostly from men.” It would be an impressively snotty thing to say, but part of Kozue’s natural personality was to say that sort of thing without any malice at all. And she really had been popular with men as long as Eri had known her. They seemed to find the juxtaposition of her childish face and ample bust appealing.

Eri sighed. “Lord Almighty, forgive this debauched kohai of mine,” she whispered in prayer.

Kozue just smiled and sipped her tea as she glanced sidelong at Eri. “So, did you write the pamphlet text?”

“Not yet. I took it to my desk, but... the words just weren’t coming. Iori-san wrote last year’s pamphlet, so that’s no help...” Last year, the art teacher, Mizuhoshi Iori, had overseen the creation of the school guide pamphlet. It had

started like this:

《Consistency, Perfection—Undefined Concepts in Education》

For as long as we, positioned in the field of secondary education, have been forced to deal with isomorphism between the codification of regulations and the real world, then no matter how we attempt to define such concepts, we must examine this system of forms in its relatively simple context. To paraphrase from Hofstadter's masterpiece, the interpretations of code that lie at the bottom of human linguistics, mediated between an isomorphism that lies deeper than the mere archetypal code interpretation of systems of forms...

And it went on and on that way.

No pamphlet had ever received such a poor reaction from students, but for some reason, the instructors and parents hadn't complained. It was possible that adults—particularly those who'd received secondary education themselves—didn't want to admit they didn't understand it. (In allegorical terms, this was known as a 'The Emperor Has No Clothes' phenomenon.) But all that aside...

"Senpai, if you're struggling with writing it that much..." Kozue put a thoughtful finger to her chin. "How about this? Hold a contest for the students to write it and submit the best entry."

"There's an idea... But do you think any students would voluntarily take on a chore like that?" Eri wondered.

"Just make sure there's a prize, like a DVD player, a cell phone, or a mountain bike."

"I can't afford any of that. Besides, I can't sully the sacred profession of teacher with bribery," Eri said firmly.

"But Senpai, you won't get anywhere just relying on the kindness of others."

“Ugh...”

“Besides, you should offer compensation for services rendered,” Kozue reminded her. “It’s not right to put the burden on children.”

“Y-You’re not usually this sensible... But I suppose you’re right.”

“Right?” The kohai she’d known for eight years smiled brightly at her.

In the end, Eri partly accepted Kozue’s suggestion. She’d hold a contest among the students, but the prize would be a 2,000-yen ‘book ticket’—a gift certificate for use in affiliated book stores. She’d paid for it herself, of course, but it would be within ethical bounds. Although she remained dubious, she did end up printing out a contest guideline draft on her word processor.

“The prize is a book ticket?” Kozue asked as she reached for the draft. “You think that’ll get you submissions?”

“I think so.”

“I wonder...” Kozue scowled at it for a moment, then brightened again. “If you like, I’ll make copies and put them in each class’s box!”

“Oh, that’s so kind. Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Senpai.” Kozue walked right out with the printed page in hand.

Something about the interaction nagged at Eri, but she decided not to worry about it and to instead wait a few days to see how the students reacted.

“Yeesh,” Chidori Kaname groaned as she read one of the copies they’d been handed that morning. “Ms. Kagurazaka can do some nutty things...”

“Yeah, it’s surprising. I always thought she was more sensible than that,” Tokiwa Kyoko said, nodding along beside her.

The printout laid out a request for the written text for a prospective student pamphlet and offered a reward. The issue was the nature of that reward:

Reward: 2,000-yen book ticket and illicit extracurricular one-on-one tutoring with Ms. Kagurazaka

The part about “extracurricular tutoring” looked a bit squeezed in, though, as if it had been added after the fact.

Ms. Kagurazaka was their class’s homeroom teacher, but as far as Kaname could see, she’d been acting perfectly normal all day. She hadn’t even looked at the printout, just made an offhand comment about hoping for good submissions.

“You think the boys are gonna leap at a prize like that?” Kyoko asked.

“Dunno. She gives off a weird vibe, like she’d use the tutoring session to make you memorize English sentences... Even if I were a guy, I’d probably pass on it.” Besides, if the draft they wrote made it into the pamphlet, everyone at school would read it. It would be like admitting you were a teacher’s pet. Kaname had no interest in embarrassing herself like that.

“I guess. But I never pegged Ms. Kagurazaka as the teacher-you’re-hot-for type...”

“The what?”

“You know, in dramas and manga, the young female teacher with the knockout proportions, the short skirt, acting all confident and provocative.” Kyoko used hand gestures to illustrate what she meant, and in the end struck a sexy pose with a finger to her lips.

“I don’t know what kind of manga you’ve been reading, but... I’d say Ms. Kagurazaka is as far from that type as you can get,” Kaname agreed.

“Yeah. Even though it’s more popular with girls than with boys. I wonder how that happened... By the way, this is a tangent, but isn’t it weird how many professions just sound kind of fetishy when you add ‘female’ to the front? Lawyer, surgeon, police officer, spy...”

Ignoring Kyoko’s weird little rant, Kaname turned to the other person in their group. “What’s wrong, Sousuke? You seem really interested in that handout...”

The student in question, Sagara Sousuke, was indeed staring hard at the handout. He wore his usual sullen expression and tight frown, but there was a wrinkle between his brows as he read and reread the submission form. “I’m interested in the reward.”

“Uh?”

Sousuke didn’t clarify, but instead looked off into the distance. “A prospective student pamphlet... It might be worth trying.”

Kaname fell silent. Was Sousuke... *interested* in Ms. Kagurazaka? Feeling an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, Kaname just sat there, gazing at him from the side.

Whenever she felt like she wanted to crawl under a rock and die, Eri usually found her way to a bed in the nurse’s office. Now was one such time.

It had taken several days for her to notice the “reward” now listed on the printout, at which point it had long since reached the students’ hands and couldn’t be taken back. *I’d thought students were looking at me strangely of late*, she thought. *If only I’d realized it sooner...*

And so she lay there, hiding under a sheet in the nurse’s office, face buried in a pillow as she wailed at the top of her lungs.

“Senpai...” Kozue said concernedly.

Eri just sobbed and choked in response.

“Senpai, please cheer up. I’m sure it’s not that bad. Honestly, what happened?” And the next thing Kozue knew, a pillow hit her in the face. “Mph!”

“How dare you ask me that when this is all *your* doing!” Eri flew out of bed and grabbed the lapels of her kohai’s white coat.

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

“The reward for the pamphlet contest! You added that part about going on a date with me!”

“Ahh... Well, I just didn’t think the book ticket would be enough. Is it that bad?” Kozue looked confused.

“Of *course* it was that bad! Now I sound like a sex-crazed idiot! Iori-san has been bedridden from the shock and hasn’t come to school for two days!” Eri howled. “Do you realize how hard I had to work to straighten things out with him?!”

“E-Excuse me, I’m having trouble breathing...”

“You are just incorrigible! You’ve been like this since high school!”

“H-Have I?” Kozue asked back.

A vein in Eri’s forehead throbbed with rage. “You don’t remember? You sent that vulgar love letter to my crush, Asano-senpai, without even asking me! With that embarrassing picture of me from our training camp!” It had been a shocking picture of a seventeen-year-old Eri asleep, with the T-shirt she was using as pajamas rumpled in a way that showed her panties and belly button.

“I... I did that to help you,” Kozue protested. “Because you were such a late bloomer... I thought it might help you win him over...”

Incidentally, the love letter she’d sent on Eri’s behalf went like this:

Please forgive my boldness in sending you this letter. I just can’t stop myself anymore. Just thinking of you makes my body burn like fire. I might look reserved, but I’m a very naughty girl deep down. I hope you’ll look at my picture and [censored]

“Yes, and it certainly did... right until he threw himself at me on our first date! I thought the world was going to end!” Eri shouted, her tears gushing like waterfalls.

“Oh yeah,” Kozue mumbled. “So you hit him and ran away...”

“It ruined my first love! And gave me an abiding fear of men until I realized what actually happened!”

“That’s right. I’m sorry, Senpai. I just... I did it to help you. I never even dreamed it would turn out... like that.”

“You’re not allowed to play the victim after doing something that evil!”

Kozue’s sudden bout of tears abruptly stopped, and she slumped over. “But Senpai, a book ticket really wouldn’t be enough to draw in submissions. I thought if you added in a little date as a reward...”

“I get it! I completely understand what you were thinking!” Eri whispered in aggravation, eyes pointed downward. “But let’s assume that I was even okay with the date. The fact that it’s been five days since the ad went out, and nobody’s even talking about it—” Her hushed voice began trembling. “—let alone turning in a single submission... that just makes it worse!”

“Ah, I see.” If she’d been swamped with eager submissions from the boys, it might have at least been flattering enough that she could have dealt with the embarrassment. But the world wasn’t so kind. “I guess that would hurt. A humiliating one-two punch brought about by the tricks of human psychology,” Kozue said calmly.

Eri glared at her balefully... then sagged, sighing. “It’s just so pathetic. I can’t believe not even one person wants to try...”

Just then, there was a knock on the nurse’s office door.

“Excuse me.” The door opened and a boy came in. It was Sagara Sousuke. “There you are, ma’am.”

Eri quickly wiped away her tears and sat up.

Sousuke walked briskly up to them, then clicked his heels together and stood at attention.

“S-Sagara-kun... What is it?”

“Please accept this.” Sousuke held out an A4-sized envelope.

“What is it?”

“My submission for the prospective student pamphlet,” he told her. “I worked quite hard on it. I hope you will find it acceptable.”

“Th-Thank you...” Stunned by the abruptness of it all, Eri took the envelope from his hands. She was so surprised by the person making the submission that she couldn’t even feel happy about it.

Eri and Kozue cautiously read the “New Student Pitch” that Sousuke had written.

《Fear, Pain, Suffering—It Is This Adversity That Will Make You Exceptional Soldiers.》

Let me begin with a preface: Our school is not for the faint of heart. It is only the best of the best—those with the potential to become the ultimate soldiers—who will prove capable of passing our strict entrance exam and seeing our narrow gates open for them.

You have the right to choose. You can go to Chofu West High School. You can go to Fushimidai High School. You’re even free to attend the cowardly ranks of Komaoka Academy (smirks). But true men choose Jindai High, where thrilling trials and adventures await.

The history of Jindai High can be traced back to the early Showa Period. Despite taking multiple air strikes from the US military during the Pacific War, its unparalleled survival instinct allowed the school to endure. This was wholly due to the lofty fighting spirit of its student body of the time.

That tradition carries on to this very day. Through constant training and refinement, our school has achieved an astonishing record of zero deaths in combat for over fifty years. Out of the many schools in our district, it is clear that Jindai High School is the invincible school chosen by God.

Trust in God, trust in your mother school, trust in the student council president. Ask not what your school can do for you, but what you can do for your school. And always challenge yourself.

Jindai High School, now recruiting ambitious young people.

And that was just the opening.

Eri and Kozue looked up from the draft, glassy-eyed. “Um... *this* is a prospective student pamphlet?” Eri asked.

Sousuke snapped back to attention. “Yes. Is there an issue?”

“Er... well... W-Well done. Thank you.”

“It was my honor. Excuse me.” Sousuke turned around and moved to walk out... but he stopped and turned back just before reaching the door. “Ma’am?” he said, sounding like he wanted to confirm something.

“Yes?”

“Do not forget the compensation you promised.”

“...”

His voice was quiet but intense. It almost seemed to say, ‘If you break your promise, be prepared for the consequences.’ His gaze was extremely sincere.



“Er... Sagara-kun? It was Ms. Nishino here who wrote—”

“Ms. Nishino?” Sousuke peered at Kozue intensely, causing her to freeze up as if threatened. “What did Ms. Nishino do exactly?”

“Oh, er... nothing.”

“I see. Goodbye, then.” Sousuke left the nurse’s office behind.

An uncomfortable silence fell across the room as Eri and Kozue looked at each other in silence for a while.

“What do I do?” Eri asked despairingly. “He’s so serious about it...”

“And that terrifying look in his eyes...”

“I... I suppose he is a teenage boy, after all...”

“Do you think he’s going to take you out... and go into beast mode when you’re alone together?” Kozue wondered.

“He’s got those modified toy guns, knives, and more...”

“And even without those, he’d overpower you!”

Both of them felt a chill run up their spines.

Meanwhile, Sousuke walked out into the hall, his imagination soaring about the reward Kagurazaka Eri had promised.

Just what kind of ticket is a ‘book ticket’? he wondered. He knew well about meal tickets, but he’d never before heard about tickets designed for the distribution of paper documents. *Does this country have serious periodic paper shortages?*

A book ticket. What did it look like? Was it round or square? Was it hard or soft? What color could it be? He was intensely curious. Yet at the same time, he felt hesitant to simply ask Kaname about it. She was always mocking him or rolling her eyes at his ignorance. He was hoping, for once, to apply independent effort, acquire the thing, and boast that he knew exactly what it was.

He could picture the scene: unobtrusively whipping the shining gold train ticket-sized object, stamped with an issuance date (which was the form it

currently took in his imagination) out of his pocket and saying, as casual as could be, 'I'm heading for the distribution center now.'

The girls would be rendered agog by his social acumen. *It'll be perfect*, he thought. This was his sole motivation. He'd also noticed some mention of a kind of extracurricular tutoring session alongside it, but had no interest whatsoever in that.

"Sousuke," Kaname said as he returned to the student council room, "are you really going to submit a prospective student pamphlet?"

"I've done so already. I expect to receive the reward."

"I see," she responded dryly, pursing her lips slightly for some reason. She almost sounded rather angry. "That's a surprise. I didn't know you were motivated by such things."

"What do you mean?" asked Sousuke.

"Hm? Oh, nothing. Do what you like. It's a free country, after all. None of my business."

Unable to fathom her meaning, Sousuke just stared at her in confusion. But Kaname refused to say any more, silently turning back to her laptop and resuming some kind of paperwork.

"Ms. Kagurazaka. I thought you were a more serious person than this," Principal Tsuboi said when she arrived in the principal's office, called there via PA. "I saw your recruitment print-out. An 'illicit extracurricular tutoring session'? How in the world did you come up with such vulgar wording?"

"I'm so sorry. There was a little mistake..." Eri made herself look as small as she could. It was to her credit, though, that she didn't just blame the issue on Nishino Kozue.

"I know I said you could delegate, but there are limits to the sort of conduct I'll accept. We have an image to maintain. It seems to me you've been growing rather lax of late. How am I supposed to count on you? It seems like it's one thing after another..." The lecture continued for the next ten minutes, punctuated in the end with, "Do you understand?!"

“Yes ma’am...”

“So? Have you received any submissions?”

“Well, actually... just one. I was thinking I’d scrap it and just write the draft myself from scratch.” It was a very practical suggestion.

The principal didn’t seem to take kindly to that, though. “Don’t you dare! You asked for submissions. Be a teacher and take responsibility.”

“What... What do you mean by that?”

“Use the student’s draft,” the principal told her sternly. “A promise is a promise.”

“B-But...!”

“Obviously, direct them to fix any inappropriate grammar or spellings. But you can’t squelch a student’s passionate effort just because it didn’t turn out the way you hoped. Is that understood?!”

The world went black around Eri. How was she supposed to make Sagara Sousuke’s draft appropriate?

Back in the nurse’s office...

“That *is* a tricky one...”

“Seriously. How am I supposed to ask him to alter it?”

Eri and Kozue were looking hopelessly down at a sheaf of paper—Sousuke’s submission, of course. His “prospective student pamphlet,” packed with hostile and combative terms from start to finish, felt more like a recruitment pamphlet for the Marines. It had come with layout and font suggestions as well as picture attachments. And the instructions were so detailed...

“It’s always the submissions that have no hope of being accepted that go overboard with the instructions and attachments...” Eri observed mournfully.

“Like the newcomer award at a certain publishing company,” Kozue put in.

What made it even more awkward was that there were no grammar or spelling errors to be found. In other words, there wasn’t much to complain

about.

“Why not black parts of it out?” Kozue suggested.

But Eri shook her head. “That won’t work.” The problematic parts far outnumbered the acceptable ones... Adding censor bars to the script would create something that looked like like:

《■■■■, ■■■■, ■■■■■■■■■■—It Is This ■■■■■■■■■■ That Will Make You Exceptional ■■■■■■■■■■.》

It’s creepy. Who wants to be an exceptional ■■■■■■■■■■? I’d never go to a school like that would be the natural response. And yet, the principal had told her to accept a student manuscript. With the deadline tomorrow, and Sousuke the only one who had submitted one...

“W-Well... I’ll have to increase the reward,” Eri decided. “Maybe if we add a date with you, Kozue, we’ll get some submissions! I’ll increase the value of the book ticket to 5000 and add a karaoke pass...”

“I’m starting to get invested in the outcome here,” Kozue muttered.

They kept talking on and on like that until...

“Excuse me. Is Ms. Kagurazaka here?” The nurse’s office door opened and a third-year boy entered. It was Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the student council president.

“Hayashimizu-kun?”

“I heard you put out a call for prospective student pamphlet submissions. I was hoping to submit my own draft.” Hayashimizu nudged his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose.

“Y-You?” Eri stammered. “Why?”

“Why not? I’m still a student here, after all, and the cost of books remains prohibitive. I’ve no interest in that joke about extracurricular tutoring sessions, of course. Ha ha.” He spoke without the slightest sense of shame.

Eri and Kozue brightened simultaneously. Their salvation had arrived—the school’s best student, a tasteful, witty young man, would surely submit something they could use. And Sousuke would never object to her taking

Hayashimizu's manuscript over his.

"Thank you! That would be a huge help. I never expected you to submit a draft..."

"It was easily done. And the prospective student pamphlet is very important to my alma mater's continued prosperity."

"Yes, very much so." Eri laughed in relief. "So, is that your draft?"

"Yes. I attempted to make it as appealing as possible to the new generation. Have a look, if you please." Hayashimizu handed his freshly printed draft to Eri.

《Get the Most Out of Life at Jindai High!》

You only get three years in high school! If you want to spend them having fun, Jindai High is the place to be! There are barely any rules, and our teachers don't really care that much what we do. So if you just want to do what you want all day, this is the school for you!

Did I mention it's co-ed? We've got girls and boys studying side by side, which means lots of chances for romantic chemistry! Our data shows that 80% of new entrants start dating someone within three months of coming here! You'll never get a chance like that at an all-boys or all-girls school.

The place to meet your soul mate... that's Jindai High!

We've also got lots of cool events like culture festivals, sports festivals, school trips, athletics tournaments, and more!

*Now running an entrance exam bonus campaign!

Recommend a friend for the Jindai High entrance exam and receive this lavish prize: for every friend referred, you

get five points added to your score in each subject! Don't miss these limited-time bonuses. Sign up today!

"Obviously, the students and teachers in the pictures will be hired from a modeling agency," Hayashimizu added, his detached tone a stark contrast to the giddy tone of the text. "I have a connection with a photographer, so don't worry about the cost. I'll be sure not to include the run-down southern school building in the pictures. I also believe that padding the images with pictures of the swimming club or swimming class will greatly increase the number of male test-takers. My rough surveys suggest that these efforts combined will result in a fifteen to twenty percent increase in testing applicants compared to previous years... ma'am?" Hayashimizu frowned as he saw Eri beginning to tremble. "You don't seem pleased."

"Of course I'm not pleased!" Eri screamed, tears streaming from her eyes. "What's wrong with you?! What's with this ridiculous commercialist pitch?!"

"It's not commercialist. It's realist. I feel that this strategy will genuinely let us recruit a great number of students—"

"Even if it does, an educational institution can't put out a pamphlet like this!"

Hayashimizu looked back at her, his gaze pitying. "If I may, ma'am, it's that sort of thinking that leads to organizational atrophy. It's an archetypal malady of bureaucracy. Flexibility and survival instinct is important in an educator—you should be more willing to engage with the turbulent seas of capitalism."

Eri couldn't fully argue, but at the same time, she couldn't agree. "For the love of..." Feeling the blood rise to her head, Eri clung dizzily to her desk.

Hayashimizu waited for her to straighten up, then asked, "Can I assume I've been rejected?"

"Yes!"

"Hmm. What a shame." Hayashimizu shrugged and left.

"Ah, I'm finished..." Eri groaned. "I'm not going to get a single decent pitch. And I'm not allowed to write it myself... What in the world am I going to do?"

“Maybe just write it off as karmic retribution?” Kozue responded breezily.

Eri hit her with a pillow and strode back to the teachers’ office.

There was nothing else for it. She had to submit the pamphlet’s draft within the week, and there was no way she’d receive a decent submission by then. If she just explained things to the principal, she’d get another tongue-lashing. Worst of all, if she accepted Sousuke’s manuscript, she’d have to go on a date with him. He seemed like a nice enough boy, but he was always so inscrutable. And then...

“Do not forget the compensation you promised.” The intensity in his statement at the time was strangely anxiety-inducing.

She let out a sigh and returned to her desk in the English department.

On top of her desk sat a brand-new envelope. It was anonymous, though the handwriting was vaguely familiar. It said, “Prospective Student Pamphlet—Draft Submission.”

《A Laid-Back but Fulfilling Life》

When you hear the words ‘high school life,’ what do you think? Maybe you picture something more mature than your middle school days. But the truth is, it’s not that different. You get up in the morning, you go to school, you learn things, you have fun with friends, you go home. I suspect that’s more or less the kind of life you want to lead, too.

Actually, if you had to name one thing you wanted, you’d probably say you want a little more freedom. The teachers at our school aren’t too strict. They let you take responsibility for yourself, more or less. The kind of things that seem like they should go without saying really do go without saying here.

There’s no cutthroat entrance exam battles. There’s no

backbreaking club competitions. That also means we don't have any of the amazing accomplishments that pamphlets like this one usually boast about. It's just a normal school filled with normal people living normal lives.

But I really like this very normal school.



The next week, in their classroom...

"So they took that anonymous draft, huh?" Kyoko asked as she read a story about the contest in the Jindai High News.

"Looks like it. Not that I'd know," Kaname said indifferently.

"Hmm... You think the anonymous writer went on a date with Ms. Kagurazaka?"

"Read it again. It says that whole thing was just a joke."

"Oh, you're right. Boo!" Kyoko said with mock disappointment, then laughed.

Kaname sighed and whispered, too softly for anyone to hear, "Sheesh. If I'd known it was a joke earlier..."

"Eh?"

"Mm. Nothing," she responded carelessly, then turned her eyes to the corner of the room.

Sousuke sat there, slumped over as he stared at his own copy of the Jindai News.

"How does it feel not to make the grade, Sergeant Sagara?" Kaname said teasingly as she walked up to him.

Sousuke sagged even further. "Awful. I felt so confident in my victory."

"It's because your motives were impure. You shouldn't have been so eager to seek that gross reward."

Sousuke hesitated for a minute, then seemed to steel up his nerve about something. "Chidori," he asked, "is a book ticket 'gross'?"

“Huh?”

“I have a confession to make,” he admitted. “I’ve never seen a book ticket. I didn’t know it was a gross thing... That’s why I applied.”

“I... I see...” At last, Kaname understood. Sousuke had never cared about the weird extracurricular tutoring session. *I guess I did a cruel thing*, she thought. “You can have this one, then,” she said, reaching into her uniform pocket.

Sousuke looked up at her questioningly. She then handed him a 2,000-yen book ticket.

“I got it from a relative. I probably won’t use it.”

Sousuke just stared at the dollar bill-sized ticket, hard enough to drill holes through it. When he spoke, his tone was one of deepest admiration. “This is... a book ticket? It doesn’t look gross to me at all. It looks like a wonderful thing.”

Kaname gazed at him and smiled. “Really? Take care of it, then.”

〈An Error-ridden Sentence — The End〉

A Past-Deadline Romance

Classes were over, and Chidori Kaname stood in front of the A/V storage room. She'd come to return some videos but had stopped with her hand just short of the door, listening curiously. She could hear a pair of voices on the other side—one male, one female, both familiar. One belonged to Tokiwa Kyoko, her best friend. The other voice was Sagara Sousuke.

"Hey... I really think we should stop. I don't feel right about this."

"After everything we've done? Why?" he asked.

Kaname could sense the tension through the door. *Are Kyoko and Sousuke discussing something in secret?* she wondered. *It wouldn't be right to snoop...* Yet she remained rooted to the spot, listening closely.

"You're not into me anymore?" he persisted.

"No... It isn't that. I still really like you," Kyoko said earnestly. "And last night... I don't have any regrets about last night."

What the... thought Kaname, and felt her heart begin to pound. Kyoko and Sousuke, going behind my back? No way. And what did she mean by 'last night'?!

"I'll never forget last night either," Sousuke declared. "Why ruin a good thing, then?"

"Because..."

"Is this still about her?"

"Yeah... She's my best friend, you know? And she really likes you," Kyoko insisted. "If she knew about us, it'd really hurt her."

Kaname felt the blood draining from her face as the world around her went dark. Part of her knew it didn't sound like the Kyoko and Sousuke she knew, and yet the words were still deeply upsetting.

"I don't want to betray my best friend."

“So, what about me? Don’t my feelings matter? I’ll admit she’s attractive, but she doesn’t compare to you. She’s got someone better suited to her anyway,” Sousuke insisted.

“B-But...”

“She’ll understand. She’s a tough girl.”

I had no idea they were a couple, thought Kaname. Of course, since I don’t have anything concrete going on with Sousuke, Kyoko might not see any reason to defer. But this is still just... it’s just... “Ah...” Just then, one of the tapes slipped out of her arms. The sound of it hitting the floor brought a stop to the conversation within.

“Who’s there?!” It was Kyoko’s voice.

Kaname looked around in panic, then whispered quickly, “F-Fumoffu.”

“Oh, it’s just Bonta-kun.”

“Anyway, you have to listen to me. I keep saying, I really—”

The two were about to resume their conversation as if nothing had happened, when... “Cut, cut, cut!” A new shout from inside the room cut the conversation off angrily. “That’s all wrong! You’re supposed to follow the script, not improvise! And who said that ‘fumoffu’? Is someone out there?!”

The door burst open right in Kaname’s face. Besides Sousuke and Kyoko, six other students were crammed into the storage room, armed with a variety of equipment: lights, board reflectors, microphones and video cameras.

“Chidori?” Sousuke asked.

“Oh, it’s Kana-chan! Hey!” Kyoko waved to her, smiling her usual warm smile.

“Eh?” Kaname breathed as it sunk in that it wasn’t a lovers’ quarrel after all.

The person who’d opened the door to glare at her was a male student, holding a well-worn script. “Oh,” he said. “You know this girl?”

Kaname looked around at those present and thought for a solid three seconds. “Wait, what? Is this the ‘we were actually shooting a movie’ misunderstanding trope?”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘trope,’ but we’re definitely shooting a movie—the emotional climax of the film society’s next masterpiece! So could you please butt out?!” the student—most likely the director—barked at her nastily before spinning around to discuss something with the student cameraman. It was as if he’d already completely forgotten her existence.

“Kana-chan, what are you doing here?” Kyoko asked, as she and Sousuke began to approach her.

“Oh? Um... Mr. Sayama asked me to return these videos,” Kaname told them. “What are you guys doing?”

“Hee hee,” Kyoko giggled. “Remember Abe-kun from the next class over? He’s in the film society and asked us if we could do a little acting for them. Right, Sagara-kun?”

“Affirmative,” Sousuke said, wearing his usual sullen expression and tight frown. It was hard to believe he’d been talking in such a romantic way earlier, even if it had just been for a role.

“The title is *Seven People in Love*,” Kyoko added. “It’s going to screen at next month’s West Tokyo High School Film Festival. They won the grand prize last year and got awarded 300,000 yen from the executive committee.”

“Three hundred thousand?!” Kaname exclaimed.

“Yeah. That’s why the director, Komuro-san, is so uptight.” Kyoko shot a glance at the student still arguing with the cameraman—who was apparently Komuro, the director.

“Wow. I guess he takes this really seriously,” Kaname said with genuine admiration.

Meanwhile, Sousuke folded his arms. “My foremost mission is to keep an eye out for threats to school security,” he declared. “I deemed it necessary to help with activities such as these so long as time permits.”

“Really?”

“Yes. In Nazi Germany, the Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, stoked support for war through movies and radio programs, skillfully weaving Nazi ideology

into mass entertainment,” he informed them. “As a member of the student council, it is crucial that I learn more about that methodology.”

Kaname tilted her head, imagining files of Nazi officers, hands thrust into the air as they watched a sappy love story. “I think you might have a few wrong ideas about things...”

“Not an issue. The moment I see any content at odds with school policy, I’ll purge it.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely not getting this,” Kaname muttered.

Sousuke just tilted his head in confusion.

Kaname let out a sigh rife with complicated feelings. She wondered, *How could he have given such a lifelike performance when doesn’t even understand what kind of movie this is?* She felt like a fool for feeling so upset about it earlier... though she couldn’t deny she was relieved, as well.

Just then, Director Komuro spoke up from behind them. “I just don’t like this composition! Reflectors, could you come in a little closer?”

“No way,” they replied, “we’ll end up in the frame.”

“I need that dark and immoral feeling,” Komuro argued back. “In the end, I want that sort of... muddy emotion out of Shoko, who’s betrayed her best friend to steal Kousuke away... You know what I mean!”

“Our shooting schedule’s pretty tight. I don’t know if we have time to get everything perfect—”

“But it *has* to be perfect! That’s why I’m so stressed! Maybe it’s an issue with the actress. Shoko needs someone with a darker, more mature air. But...” Director Komuro squinted rudely into Kyoko’s childlike face.

The petite girl with her coke-bottle glasses and braids stared back at him, blinking.

“Tokiwa-san,” he asked, “have you read the whole script?”

“No, not all of it yet...”

“It’s done, then. We’ll change actors. You’ll play Shoko’s best friend, Kanae.

You're a better fit for that role," the director declared.

The room immediately grew agitated as the other club members began shouting their objections: "You can't change actors now!"

"We'll never make the festival!"

Komuro turned purple as he shouted back, "Shut up! What the director says, goes! The shooting team is the Tokugawa government and I'm the grand shogun! I give an order and you follow it! You give your lives for me, unsung!"

"That's insane!"

"Shut up. We're changing actors and that's that," the director declared unilaterally.

The cameraman nodded hesitantly. "All right... darn it. So how are we gonna fill the part? We'll need to find someone to play Shoko."

"I have the perfect Shoko right here."

"Eh?" the cameraman said, and looked over.

The director's eye was focused on Kaname, who'd been silently watching the proceedings up to that point.

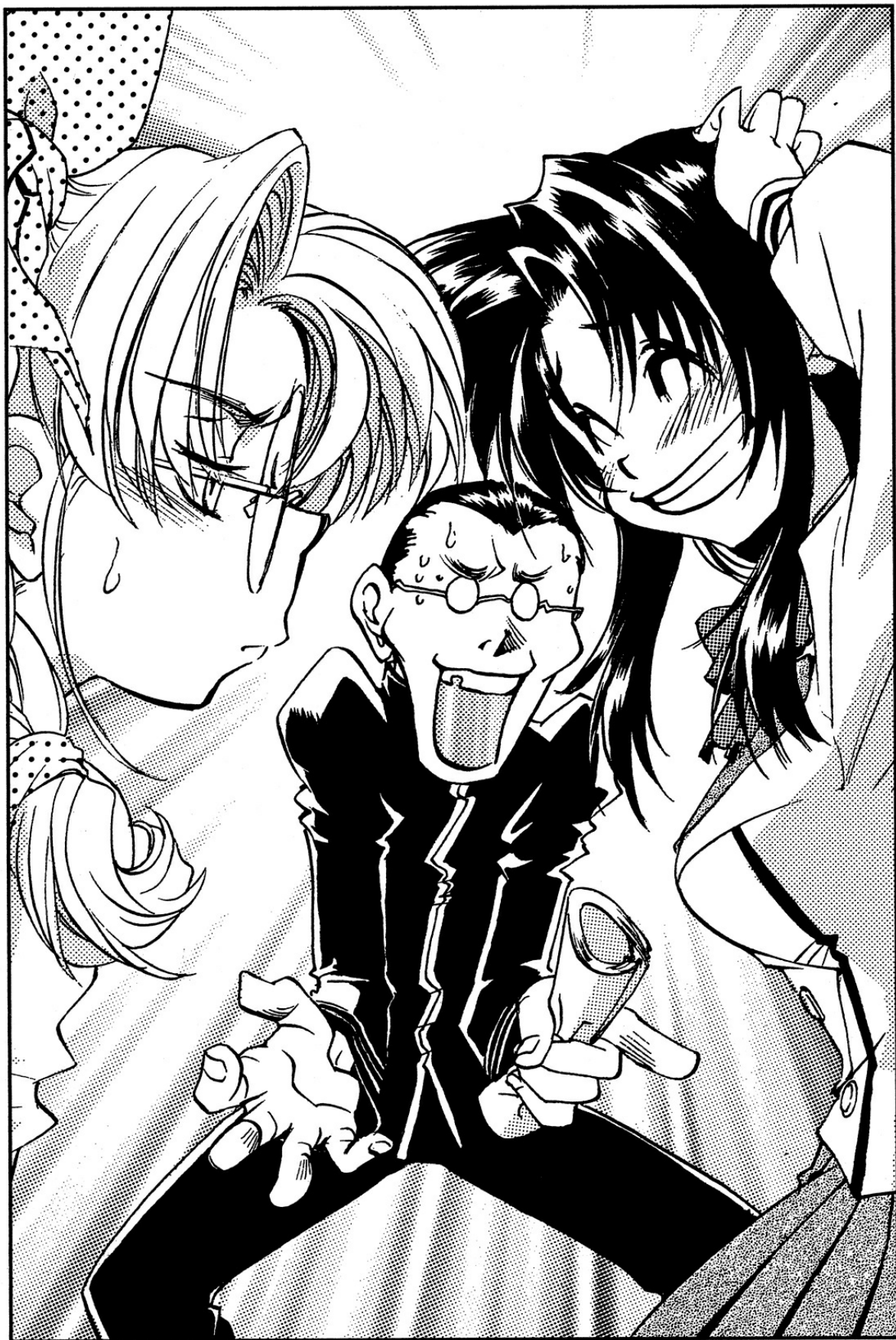
"Um... what?" she said as she stepped back in confusion, looking around at the others.

After a passionate speech by Komuro, Kaname agreed to take the role. *You're perfect. An uncut diamond, ready to shine! Your beauty, your grace, the flawless lines of your face!* He was really laying it on thick, but it was hard to say no in the face of such flattery. And she really was intrigued by the idea of participating in a movie.

"Oh, r-really? Heh... w-well, if you say so... Right, Kyoko?"

She giggled and preened, but Kyoko glared at her.

"You're gonna ask advice from the person whose role you just stole?" she said, sulking.



The script handed to Kaname was a centimeter-thick sheaf of copy paper. Its title, as Kyoko had mentioned, was *Seven People in Love*. It was a love story about a group of seven men and women. A brief glance through the script suggested it was pretty good for an independent film.

“Student films are always ‘artistic’ movies about dark passions and such. Me, though—I use the materials I have on hand to film something relatable. That’s my policy,” Director Komuro boasted confidently.

Kaname was playing one of the “seven people,” a literature club member named Shoko, who was in love with the soccer club captain, Kousuke. Kousuke was Sagara Sousuke’s role, of course.

“There’s not a kissing scene, is there?” Kaname asked with a glance in his direction.

The director leaned forward. “What, you want to do one?!”

“N-No, just checking.”

“Don’t be shy. I can definitely put in a scene like that if you—”

“No, absolutely not!”

“We could have a sex scene, then—”

“Even worse!” she rebuffed him, turning bright red.

Kaname’s shooting schedule began the next day.

The director, Komuro, was a third-year student, short and skinny with a gnarled face and receding hairline more reminiscent of an old man. He also suffered from major mood swings—going from melancholic and thoughtful to exploding with rage on a dime.

Prior to the shoot, the cameraman and assistant director—a student named Sudo—confided in Kaname. “He’s selfish and self-centered, but... he was talented enough to win last year’s festival. Except now that he’s won once, he’s really feeling the pressure. I know it’s a lot to ask, but don’t hold it against him, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The first scene they were shooting that day was the scene where Kousuke and Shoko met. The idea was that a casual conversation in the library had revealed an unexpected side of him, but...

“Shoko-san.” In a corner of the library, within the maze of shelves, Sousuke approached Kaname.

Wearing black wire-rimmed glasses with her hair tied into a braid, she gazed up at him in surprise. “K-Kousuke-kun...”

“Oh-hello-how-are-you-doing,” said Sousuke, whose words came in a monotonous rush—the hallmark of the worst kind of actor.

“F-Fine...”

“Shoko-san-what-are-you-reading-let-me-see-oh-is-it-Harry-Potter-ha-ha-ha-what-a-stupid-thing-to-read.”

“D-Don’t make fun, I like it,” said Kaname. “Anyway, what brings you to a place like this?”

“I-was-thinking-they-might-have-some-books-by-Tolkien-here-I’m-a-real-fan-of-Lord-of-the-Rings-but-don’t-tell-the-club-guys-ha-ha-ha.”

“What? I love those books! You do, too?”

“Yes-why-are-you-looking-at-me-that-way-is-it-that-surprising.”

“Not really... I just thought you hated that kind of—”

“Cut! Cut, cut!” Director Komuro shouted. The camera stopped rolling and the sound and lighting staff relaxed.

“Is there an issue?” Sousuke asked.

“Is there anything *but*?! Your performance was awful! You were just reading your lines in a monotone,” Komuro told him. “You need to change your facial expressions and put inflection into your voice!”

Of course, Sousuke had grown up on the battlefield and so lacked the sensitivity or imagination needed to perform in a movie. One might dare to say he had no acting talent whatsoever.

“Was it poor?” Sousuke asked Kaname.

“Hmm... Yeah, kinda,” she was forced to admit. “No, seriously. At least pause for sentence breaks, you know?”

“Hmm...”

“It’s too bad, since Chidori-san’s performance was pretty good. What happened? You were very natural yesterday with Tokiwa-san.”

“That’s weird, yeah. I wonder why...” Kyoko, who was now on record-keeping duty, tilted her head thoughtfully.

Sousuke folded his arms and thought silently for a while before speaking. “I can’t account for it. When I acted with Tokiwa, I could speak the fictional lines from memory, freely and without hesitation. But when I act across from Chidori...” he trailed off awkwardly.

Kaname, the director, and the others looked at him dubiously, while Kyoko whispered to herself, “Aha... even if he doesn’t realize it himself, maybe he’s unconsciously getting bashful and freezing up from nervousness. And the character’s so different, too...” She then addressed the rest of the group as she read back from the script. “Hey, hey. Why not let him do some ad-libbing, then?”

“What?”

“I think he’s having trouble giving a natural performance as a jock type,” she explained. “If you give him a little more freedom to make the role his own, he might be able to repeat yesterday’s performance.”

“Hmm...” The director folded his arms. “That just might work. What do you think, Sagara-kun?”

“Hm... I do seem to be having more trouble performing today than I did yesterday. There are so many words I’m unaccustomed to. I can read back the script as written, but that may be why it sounds unnatural,” Sousuke said casually.

“What would help you?”

“Simple phrases. Precise language. As Tokiwa said, letting me speak the lines

in my own way might allow me to put on a better performance. I'd like to try."

"You think it'll work?"

"Affirmative." Sousuke's eyes flashed.

Director Komuro thought it over for a while, but finally nodded. "All right. Let's see if that enthusiasm pays off."

"Roger." With that answer, Sousuke looked down and closed his eyes, focusing. He suddenly seemed to have acquired the passion of a true actor.

"Chidori-san, you just read the script as written. Okay? Now we'll take it from the top. Take 2, roll!"

The staff assumed their places again. Kaname and Sousuke returned to their marks and took a deep breath. The clapperboard sounded, the camera rolled, and the director called, "Action!" Then the whole room fell silent.

After a moment, Sousuke stepped out and spoke to Kaname. "Shoko," he said in his usual way. It sounded very natural indeed.

Kaname, as instructed, read the lines as she'd memorized them. "K-Kousuke-kun?"

"We meet again. Have you been well?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"What are these documents? Ah... *Interrogation Techniques of the World*," he observed. "What a foolish thing to read."

Kaname almost felt herself sag in defeat, but managed to maintain her composure. She stole a glance at the director, who motioned at her to keep going. "Oh... D-Don't make fun of me. I love books like this. What do you want, anyway?"

"Me? I'm looking for a document entitled *Illustrated Weapons of Mass Destruction*. It's a collection of information about nuclear and germ warfare."

"What? I love that book!" she exclaimed. "You do, too?"

"Affirmative. Is that strange?"

"Not really... I just thought you hated that kind of thing."

“I’m surprised as well,” Sousuke said, “to see you taking interest in neutron bombs and nerve gas.”

“Oh, shucks... Is it so wrong to want to live in a world like that?” Kaname asked prettily. “I’m a normal girl too, you know.”

“I see. Then you read the new article by the same writer, *The Ebola Virus: Its Terrifying Military Potential?*”

“Yeah! It was so exciting, like a dream. It was so easy to picture... Wait, knock it off already!”

Slam! Kaname’s vacuum knee kick slammed Sousuke into the bookshelf. Books rained down on his head from above as he collapsed.



“Cut, cut!” she exclaimed before arguing, “How long were you going to make us carry on that nutso conversation?!”

Director Komuro and the cameraman exchanged a glance.

“Well, it was just...”

“It was so surreal...”

Belatedly, they remembered to stop filming as well.

Moments later, Sousuke poked his head up out of the mountain of books that had covered him and said, expression sullen, “Are you upset about something, Chidori?”

“You shut up!” she bellowed. “What kind of high-school-aged girl wants to hear about torture techniques and killer viruses?!”

Sousuke paused. “No kind?”

“No kind!”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, learn!”

Duly rebuked, Sousuke fell into reflective thought.

Kaname shook her head and turned to the crew sympathetically. “I can’t believe you guys have been making him do scenes all this time. Has the whole thing been this hard?” But when they avoided meeting her eyes awkwardly, she tilted her head in confusion.

“Oh, well... actually...” the cameraman said, trying to help the director. “That scene yesterday was the first time we used Sagara-kun.”

“What?”

“We had someone else playing Kousuke until then, but... we had a little falling out, and he quit. It’s been like that with one actor after another...”

“Huh? Wait, so the only actors left... are us?”

Their silence was an affirmation: it seemed they really had all run away. This must have been news to Kyoko, too, who was staring at them, slack-jawed.

“Hmph. They lacked commitment. I’m glad I fired them,” Komuro said sulkily.

At this, the cameraman looked at him and screamed, with tears in his eyes, “How can you say that? We’ll have to redo most of the scenes we’ve shot! We’ve used up almost all of our money, the script still isn’t finished, and we’re running out of time until the festival! *And* we only have three actors! No one else will work with us! What are we going to do?!”

“It’ll work out somehow,” Komuro told him. “Trust me.”

“Trusting you is what got us into this mess!” the cameraman wailed, and the rest of the staff just sank to the floor in exhaustion.

Having learned the truth about the state of the shoot, Kaname and the others just stared in disbelief. A mountain of issues. An approaching deadline. A budget in the red. No hope of finishing. Was there really a point to going on like this?

Kaname started to say, “It does seem kind of...” and trailed off awkwardly.

“Don’t worry, I’ve been in situations like this before. The important thing is to keep moving!” Director Komuro stood up slowly as he spoke, a dark aura emanating from his body. “Sagara-kun, I feel like I’m facing a turning point here,” he said seriously. “I can fire you and find yet another actor, or I can wager on your latent potential, work out points of compromise, and make the film happen. It’s one of those two. What do you think?”

“I don’t want you to misjudge me,” Sousuke said confidently. “I’m a man who’s survived any number of deadly scrapes. When I accept a mission, I see it through—by any means necessary.”

“Heh heh heh. Excellent.” Komuro grinned. “I’m glad to see you’re so willing. A film set is a battle! The spark triggered when the egos of director and actor clash... It is that electric energy that will power our film!”

“Very well,” said Sousuke, and sparks did indeed fly as the two men locked eyes.

“Ohh... Th-This is...” Kaname whispered as she witnessed the strange power that flowed between them. It was the feeling of a masterpiece about to be born.

From behind her, Kyoko muttered, “But he still sucks at acting...”

Kyoko’s words would prove true: no matter how hard they tried, Sousuke remained a bad actor.

“Scene 3, take 8! Okay, action!” The camera began rolling again.

“We-meet-again-Shoko-san-how-are-you-doing-oh-Harry-Potter-are-you-reading-those-old-documents-again?” Sousuke asked again.

“D-Don’t make fun of me, I like it,” Kaname repeated. “Anyway, what brings you to a place like this?”

“I-was-thinking-they-might-have-some-books-by-Tolkien-I’ve-always-liked-them-but-of-course-that-is-classified-material.”

“Cut! Cut, cut! Die, you lousy actor!” the director shouted, throwing the microphone at Sousuke’s head.

“Hmph...” Sousuke stood perfectly still and let it hit him, but the shooting didn’t get any easier from there. Sousuke had over ten bad takes on a single scene. They would repeat it again and again, waiting patiently for him to rise to the level of ‘decent.’

“T-Take 28... Action...”

“You’re-the-only-one-for-me-Shoko-kun-I-can’t-live-without-you-please-don’t-go.”

“Cut,” said Komuro, who was beginning to lose his steam. “O-One more time...”

It felt less like filming a romance and more like filming a wild animal documentary. The cameramen, waiting weeks in frozen Siberia for a tiger to appear and reveal its mating behavior... It demanded exceptional stamina and superhuman patience from everyone involved.

Then, on the third day after Kaname joined the shoot, Director Komuro finally snapped. “No more! You’re fired! Get out of here!” His shout echoed around the set.

“Me?” said Sousuke. “Fired?”

“Yes! I don’t have any more time to waste on a rotten actor like you! The film festival is next week!”

“Heh. You run away so easily,” Sousuke responded, his manner unperturbed.

“What?”

“You don’t like my performance—that in itself is acceptable. But to turn your back on reality and seek an easier path... You’re a second-rate creator,” he criticized. “I see now that your abilities are limited.”

“I think you just suck!” Kaname added from the sidelines, but nobody was listening.

“H-How dare you! You, of all people, finding fault with my talent?! Second-rate, you say?! Who was it who hired you in the first place?!” Komuro fumed.

“I never asked you to.”

“Shut up! You don’t know the first thing about film! You’re just... You’re just, you’re just—”

Crick. Komuro, in the middle of raising his arms in fury, suddenly froze up.

“Komuro-san?” said Kaname.

There was no response. Komuro, still as stiff as a statue, gradually began to tilt before falling flat onto the floor.

“Komuro-san?!”

“Director!!!”

The group ran up to him as Komuro went into a series of painful-looking spasms.

“Where’s the medic?” Sousuke shouted. “Medic!”

“There is no medic!” Kaname told him, quickly punching the emergency number into her PHS phone.

Wee-oo wee-oo... the ambulance sped away from the school gate with its siren blaring. Kaname listlessly watched it go before letting out a sigh of despair. “Ahh... Collapsing so young,” she said with a sigh. “It really does take a

psychological toll.”

“Overwork, for certain. But to fold before so minor a trial is a sign of his weakness,” Sousuke observed.

Smack! A fan (appearing out of nowhere, as usual) struck Sousuke directly on the top of his head.

“What are you doing, Chidori?”

“Shut up! It’s your fault, you know that?!” she demanded angrily. “Exploiting his lack of replacement actors to torture him like that... Now we don’t have a director!”

“Hmm...” Sousuke looked down, entering his usual ‘apparently sorry, but maybe not about the right thing’ mode.

Kyoko sighed sadly beside them. “One way or another, the film’s done for.”

“Yeah... He’ll be in the hospital a few days at least, and the festival is next week. There was already pretty much no hope of finishing the film, so we might just have to accept it, sad to say... Hmm?” Kaname started to say, then stopped. She’d noticed that the members of the film society, starting with cameraman Sudo, had turned pale and begun to tremble.

“W-We’re doomed...” Sudo moaned.

“What’s wrong?”

“The award we won at last year’s festival was the Harakasu Award. It’s picked by Harakasu Takeshi, the director famous for his violent on-set conduct...”

“And?” Kaname asked.

“The prize money for the award comes out of his pocket. When he gave us the award, he said, ‘Keep going, kids. If you don’t win the prize next year, I’ll snap all your spines with an Argentine Backbreaker and use you as sandbags. Ha ha ha.’”

“I’m sure he was just joking,” she said reassuringly/

“He wasn’t!” Sudo said, panicked. “He’s done it to others in the past. And when he gave us the award, he collected all of our addresses, including Director

Komuro's. He was serious!"

Kaname fell into silence.

"I don't even want to think about what he'll do if he gave us all that money and we don't even *enter*!" Sudo cried out.

"Nooo! I don't wanna diiie!" The other members of the film society had begun to wail in despair.

Kaname spoke in a soothing, motherly tone. "H-Hang on. Calm down. We don't know for sure that you won't enter. We might be able to work it out, even with Komuro-san gone."

"Th-There's no way! We figured before that we might make it through alive if we blamed it all on the director! But now...!"

Kaname said, "Okay, that's... less sympathetic..."

"The script isn't finished! Most of what we've filmed is unusable! The title is *Seven People in Love* but we only have three actors left! It's impossible!" Sudo and the others cried and wailed.

That title, *Seven People in Love*, really did have them in a bind. With all the other performers gone, they didn't have much to work with other than the scenes they'd already filmed. And those scenes hadn't been shot in any logical order, so it was all chaos. In a movie with so many intertwining human relationships, there was no way to string random ones together into a coherent story.

For instance, one of the characters was a boy named Kinji. Kinji was an honor student with a crush on a girl named Saori, but Saori was involved in sex work. Kinji struggles when he learns this shocking truth, but...

"...but the only scenes we actually *filmed* were the one where Kinji is crying about it and the one where he slaps Saori," Sudo explained.

"He'll just look like a crazy person."

"The rest of what we've shot is the same way. None of the individual episodes are finished. There's nothing we can do!"

"Hmm..."

Standing at the school gate at dusk, the members of the film society fell to their knees, weeping. A crow let out its mocking cry as it flew through the sky above them.

Kaname sank in despondency. She'd really been enjoying filming the movie, too...

"I understand the situation." It was Sousuke speaking, which inspired blank looks from the crew. "But it's too soon to give up. As long as the will remains, the fight isn't lost. For the sake of our dearly departed director, we must finish the film!"

"Sousuke..."

His voice brimmed with determination and grim tragedy, despite its usual even tone. "I will take command henceforth. Trust and follow me," he declared defiantly.

Five days later, Sunday arrived. Komuro had been discharged from the hospital and was convinced by the cameraman, Sudo, to come to the West Tokyo High School Film Festival with them. Komuro resisted, claiming that he didn't want to go, that he didn't want to die, but in the end, the film society members forced their way into his house and dragged him to the festival venue.

The venue was an independent theater in Kichijoji, and it was reserved for the film festival all day. Creators from all over the area were gathered there, crowding the entrance hall.

"Where are Chidori-san and the others?" Komuro asked.

"They're here," said Sudo. "Over there."

He looked over and saw Kaname and Kyoko, snoozing away on a bench in the smoking area. Beside them sat a weary-looking Sousuke.

"Director. You're out of the hospital?" Sousuke asked, looking up at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Yes. But what in the world do you think you're doing?"

"We've been editing all day," Sousuke told him. "We've gone days without

sleep. Even she was forced to give in,” he said, indicating the fast-asleep Kaname.

“Editing? The film?”

“Yes. We just finished it,” Sousuke said, as the buzzer to indicate the screening rang out.

On the screen... A title in a delicate font appeared, with a sad melody playing in the background.

《Seven People in Love / La lutte décisive》

The title faded out.

A girl stood on the roof of the school, her long black hair streaming in the wind. Her face, seen in profile, was slender and pretty. Her eyes were filled with loneliness.

It was Kaname.

She trailed her fingers quietly along the railing and let out a quiet sigh. In an affected voice, she went into a monologue. “I wonder how this happened. I had no idea... that love could be so cruel.” The raw power of those words. The pain in them... The viewer couldn’t help but be drawn into the story to come.

The scene seemed to melt into another. Another girl appeared. She was crying. A frail young man spoke to her, saying, “Why are you crying? Did you fight with your parents again?”

“No,” the girl said. “I would never cry over something like that...”

Then the scene changed. It was a shot of Sousuke, watching their conversation from a distance.

The scene changed again, and another couple appeared.

“I’ve made my decision. I’m going to trust other people more. And so...”

“Hiromi, I’m sorry. I... I...”

This, too, was intercut with a scene of Sousuke watching from the nearby school courtyard.

The scene changed again.

“This is cruel. It’s too cruel! You just can’t... you just can’t...!” A young man choked and sobbed, fists clenched and trembling.

Sousuke’s grim shadow watched him in secret.

The montage continued on for a while. Fragments of love stories—a mosaic of men and women, loving and then hurting each other. It was sometimes sweet, sometimes sad. But watching them all silently was a man with the faint smell of gunpowder about him.

The story took a sudden turn. A couple was having a soulful conversation, just like the others before them.

“Are you sure you’re all right with a girl like me? I don’t want to be hurt again.”

“If you get hurt, I’ll share that hurt with you. So don’t be afraid. We’re in this together, don’t you see?”

“Takaya-kun!”

“Hiromi!”

Then suddenly, there was an explosion.

Glass went flying. Flames rose. Black smoke billowed and the warped air shook the camera. Screams and shouts rang out. Sirens blared as firefighters and police raced to the scene. Ambulances wailed and citizens wept—they were all foreigners for some reason, with the CNN logo visible in the corner of the screen.

The scene changed to show another explosion. Blurry images cropped up of houses blown up and burning.

“Kinji-kun!” shouted Kaname’s friend, Inaba Mizuki, out of nowhere.

Their classmate Onodera Kotaro appeared beside her. “It’s no use,” he said. “Not even his bones are left!”

An explosion. An explosion. Another explosion. For some reason, there was even a cut of an F1 crash. There was a maelstrom of red flame as the characters burned.

It all cut to black.

Now a ruined hospital appeared on the screen. On the cold floor strewn with rubble lay Kyoko, covered in blood. Kaname ran up to her. “Kanae?!” she cried, “Speak to me!”

“Sh-Shoko-chan... Listen to me,” Kyoko choked out. “Watch out... Watch out for Kousuke.”

“Wh-What did you say?”

“He’s... He’s the one behind the bombings. He was tortured by enemy forces in the Gulf War, and it made him hate the world. If... If his rampage isn’t stopped— ghk.”

“Kanaaaaa!” Kaname howled. There was a clap of lightning and the heavy strains of Shostakovich (used without permission) rang out. “This can’t be forgiven,” she sobbed. “I will have my revenge!”

And so, Kaname’s quest for vengeance began.

There were night scenes in debauched cities. Dangerous jungles never trodden by human foot. Red wastelands scarred by war (mostly borrowed from *Denpa Shonen*). With the perseverance of a snake, Kaname pursued Sousuke.

Then at last, in the ruins of some building somewhere (to the observant viewer, this was the same hospital as before), the two of them faced each other down, armed to the teeth.

“It’s time to die, Kousuke,” she declared. “I won’t let you hurt anyone else!”

“Very well,” he returned. “You’ve chosen a path stained in blood. If you wish to stop me, then go ahead and try!”

The battle, a John Woo-style gunfight, began. The scene, of both characters double-wielding pistols and firing at each other, was surprisingly convincing. The guns they were using, in fact, looked just like the real thing (because they were).

As the grand battle ended, it was Kaname who managed to survive, though that survival had come with a heavy cost.

“Hrk!” Sousuke fell to the ground, shot through the heart.

As he lay there, the light going out of his eyes, soaked in (a rather excessive amount of) fresh blood, Kaname stood over him and said, “Why? Why did you perform those acts of barbaric terrorism?”

“Heh... All for love,” he choked out. “All of my sins have been out of love for you...”

It wasn’t much of an explanation, but nevertheless, tears fell from Kaname’s eyes (the quantity here, too, was a bit excessive). “You stupid man,” she wailed. “You had another love already...”

“Shoko. Forgive... me...” And with that, Sousuke died.

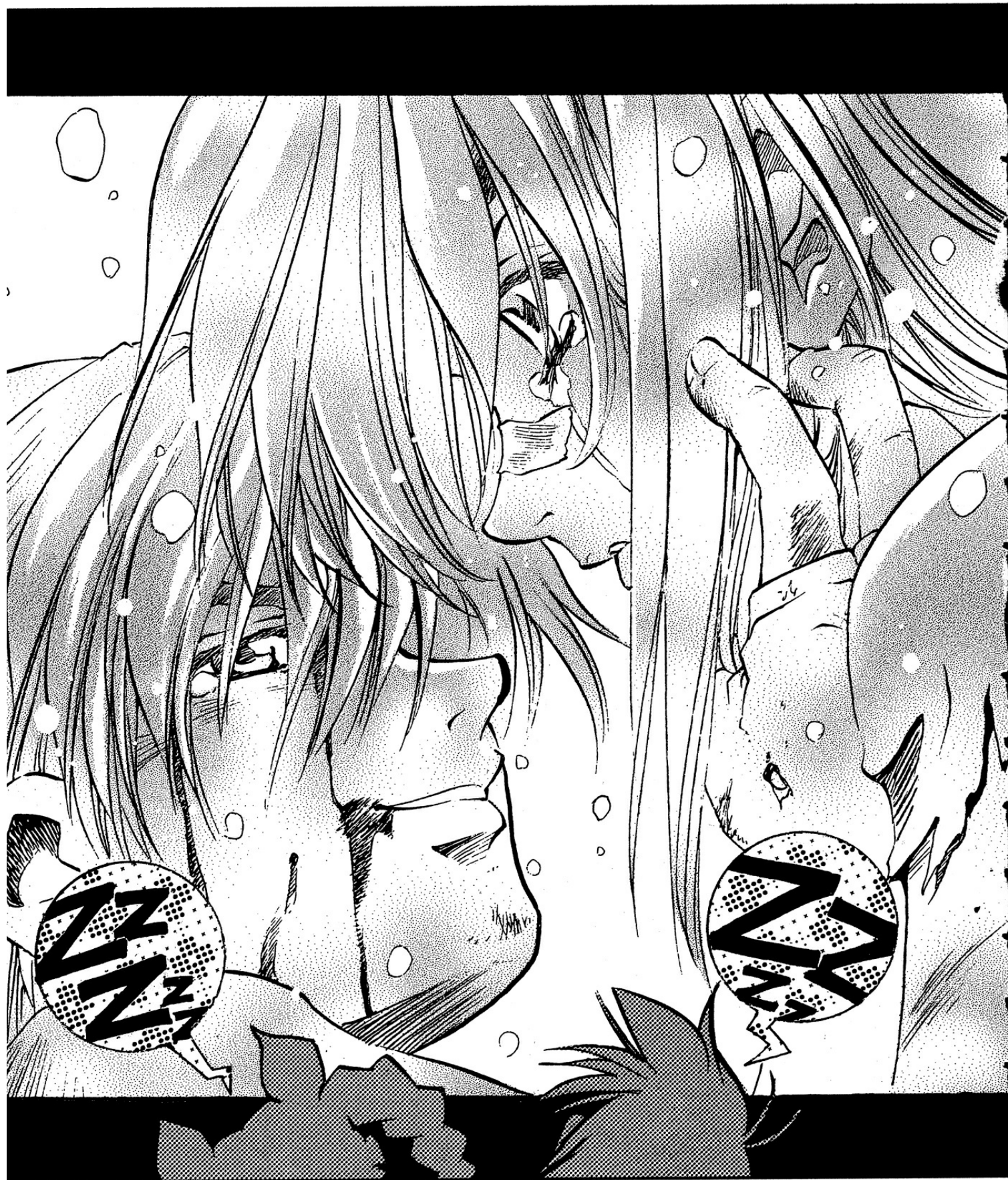
Kaname was back on that lonely roof. As a cold wind blew, her long black hair streamed in it (for just a few milliseconds, the tip of a fan entered the frame, but few people noticed.) Once again, her monologue played over the visual.

“I wonder how this happened,” she intoned again. “I had no idea... that love could be so cruel.”

As the camera slowly panned out, the word “Fin” appeared on-screen. A song by Sahashi Toshihiko (used without permission) played as the credits rolled. And at the end, in large font...

《A film by Komuro Takahiro》

And so ended the Jindai High School film society’s *Seven People in Love/The Final Battle in Hell*.



Director Komuro lay on the ground, seizing and foaming at the mouth. He had to be carted out on a stretcher. Sousuke watched him go, wistfully. “All the hard work was worth it,” he said. “Look, Chidori. The genius of our work caused the director to faint from happiness.”

“Your sensibilities sure are a kind of genius...” Kaname whispered to herself, then looked around the spectator seats from the back row. It was about the response she expected—confused chatter and scattered applause. “Well... it wasn’t the worst it could have been, given that Sousuke was in charge. We managed to make something resembling a coherent narrative, at least.”

Just then, a man appeared in front of them. He was swarthy and muscular, with a mohawk and rugged features. This was the violent producer that Sudo had mentioned earlier. “Are you the ones who made that?” the towering giant asked, his gaze as penetrating as knives and his voice reminiscent of the growl of a bear.

“Um, well... It’s not quite as simple as that, see—” Kaname started.

“Are you or aren’t you?!” he shouted, freezing her stiff.

Sousuke then answered boldly in her place, “Affirmative. We made it.”

“You did?!”

“We did.” He puffed out his chest.

At this, Harakasu’s face contorted... and he began trembling. And then, as if tremendously moved, he began to cry waterfalls of tears.

Kaname and the others stared at him in confusion.

“Ungh... unnngh. Magnificent. I’ve never felt so moved by such a thing. ‘You had another love already...’ What a beautiful... a beautiful line,” he choked out. “I feel so... so... ohhh, ohhhh!” The man let out a strange cry and clung to Sousuke. Apparently it had truly touched him.

“N-No way...” Kaname whispered.

“I don’t entirely understand, but it appears love is a very convenient thing,” Sousuke said, stone-faced.

〈A Past-Deadline Romance — The End〉

The Fifth Period Hot Spot

The international signal connected, and a digitized voice spoke up in English. “Hello,” it said politely. “You have reached the revolutionaries of homeland defense, friend of the soldiers who make tomorrow happen: Brilliant Safetech, Ltd. Your representative is currently unavailable. Please leave your name, message, and contact information after the tone. Thank you, and good luck.”

Beep.

“Béart, it’s Sagara. I received your package, but the contents are incorrect. I asked for a special ‘Homeboy’ sight from Birdman Weapons Systems, but you seem to have sent me some kind of strange canister. What is it, exactly?” Sagara Sousuke held a 500 milliliter, soda can-sized canister as he spoke into his cell phone. The cylinder was made of sturdy stainless steel and had covers on both sides made of reinforced plastic. It was plastered with stickers warning against strong impacts or exposure to heat, but otherwise had no specific instructions.

“It came with some sort of manual, but the manual is in French, so I can’t read it,” Sousuke continued. “Please return my call soon. Also, I’ve written a report refuting the claims in the complaint filed by the Miami Police. Please tell me where to send it. That is all.” With that, he hung up.

It was lunchtime in their classroom, and his fellow students were talking all around him and enjoying their meals. “Sousuke. What were you whispering about just now?” asked Chidori Kaname, who was sitting a few desks away and munching on a custard roll.

“I was on the phone.”

“Well, duh. With who?”

“The agency of an old arms dealer acquaintance,” Sousuke clarified. “He’s based in Belgium and facilitates arms trades as well as in-house development of new weapons. It’s a small company, but they can get most anything you ask for.

He likes to say ‘if you have enough money, I can buy you the Kremlin.’”

“Huh...”

“He’s also recently begun dealing in illegal weapons leaked from the Soviet Union. The other day he asked if I wanted to buy plutonium.”

“Pfft!” Kaname spat out her custard.

Tokiwa Kyoko, who was sitting in front of her, shifted her chair with an uncomfortable expression as she complained, “Kana-chaaan...”

“Ugh, sorry,” said Kaname. “But... p-plutonium?”

“Yes, as used in nuclear missiles. Unfortunately, I have no use for nuclear weapons,” Sousuke lamented. “What I ordered were mere pistol parts... but Béart seems to have shipped out the wrong product. He sent me this mysterious canister instead.” He gazed sternly at the unknown canister and its documentation in French.

“Maybe you should rethink your friendships a little?” Kaname suggested.

“Why should I? Béart is stingy and frequently foolish, but he is a principled man. He’d never betray me.”

“That’s not what I—”

Just then, the chime of the school PA system sounded out. “Sagara-kun of Class 2-4! I have a question to ask you regarding the club building currently under repair! Please come to the staff office at once!” The hate-filled voice belonged to their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri.

“She sounds mad,” Kaname observed. “Did you do something again?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“She mentioned the club building under repair...”

Sousuke shook his head. “I just couldn’t say. There was barricade tape around the construction site yesterday, so I thought it would be considerate to reinforce it with high-voltage traps. But I can’t imagine why anyone would be angry about that.”

“She’s *definitely* angry about that!” Kaname’s fan came whistling down. *Slap!*

Sousuke rubbed the top of his head and clicked his tongue lightly. “I failed to catch it again. Tell me, Chidori. Where do you pull that weapon—”

“Shut up! For the love of... A construction worker probably triggered one of those traps, and that’s why she’s furious! Now get going! I’ll come with you to explain!”

“Hmm...”

Kaname grabbed Sousuke’s arm. “Just come on! Hurry!” She ran out of the room, pulling him along in her wake.

Kyoko watched them leave. “And there they go,” she reflected leisurely. “Despite what she says, Kana-chan sure seems to like looking after him...”

As the two of them were leaving, one of the class’s boys, Onodera Kotaro, was making his return. He walked with triumphant steps and seemed to be in a very good mood. “Ha ha!” he crowed triumphantly, “I bought it!”

“Bought what, Ono-D?”

“The latest from Hanamaru Pan—okay, I kind of sounded like Sagara there, but never mind—the flaming hot God Curry Roll. They’re always sold out, and I finally got it!”

“That’s a strange name.” Kyoko said blankly.

Meanwhile, Kotaro broke the wrapping on the roll. “They say it’s pretty darn spicy, so I figured I’d give it a try. Here I go! Hamph...” He took a bite of the curry roll, and several seconds passed. His leisurely chewing suddenly stopped, and the color of his face turned slowly from white to crimson. Then, as Kyoko and the others watched, he began to arch his back, limbs flailing.

“Ah, knew it.”

“Is it that spicy?”

“W-Water...” Kotaro’s trembling hands grabbed one of the girls’ small water thermoses.

“Ah, sorry,” the owner apologized. “That’s empty.”

“Water!” he gasped. Whirling around, Kotaro reached for the stainless steel canister on the empty desk next to hers.

“Ah, that’s Sousuke-kun’s—”

“Hnnnngh!” Failing to heed Kyoko’s attempt at a warning, Kotaro began messing with the canister, eventually managing to get the seal off and twist the lid open.

Fwssssh... There was the sound of escaping air as Kotaro tilted the bottle towards his mouth to drink down the contents, but no water or tea came out. Instead, a sludgy fluid and a solid object the size of a thumb slid into his mouth.

“Geh?! Hrk!” He tried chewing the small object and discovered that it was some kind of plastic capsule. The fluid was also extremely bitter. Realizing that what was in the bottle wasn’t water at all, Kotaro spat it out into a bucket in the corner of the classroom. “What the hell was that?! Peh! Peh!”

“Wow, nasty.”

“Someone! Water, please!” Kotaro returned to his torment while the rest of his classmates laughed at him.

“Here, Ono-D, drink this,” said Kyoko, handing him a can of barley tea.

“Ah, thanks. Whew... Boy, that was close. This curry bread is way too dang spicy! I can’t handle it. I’ll never buy it again,” Kotaro declared. “What are those sellers thinking?”

“You knew it was spicy. What did you expect? What a stupid thing to do,” Kyoko said chipperly.

Kotaro rubbed his head meekly. “Hmm. Guess you’re right. That was pretty pathetic of me. Ha ha ha...”

The other students joined in his laughter.

“Just be more careful next time, okay?”

“But that’s Ono-D for you.”

“Yeah, that guy never thinks things through.”

“Hey, you guys are mean!” he complained. “I’m done with super-spicy stuff

from now on, I swear!”

“Ha ha ha ha.”

In the leisurely manner typical to the resolution of a school drama episode, the whole class laughed and joked. These were good times among good friends. The weather outside the window was sunny and nice, with songbirds singing in the trees. It was as peaceful an afternoon as one could imagine...

Except for the broken capsule in the bucket in the corner of the classroom, which had begun to bubble ominously.



“I’m sorry to interrupt, but...” Sousuke stood up and loudly addressed the class midway through fifth period English. “Does anyone know what happened to the contents of this canister?” In his right hand he held the empty canister; in his left, a French dictionary he’d checked out from the library. His face was pale and greasy sweat hung on his brow. He seemed genuinely distraught.

“Sagara-kun, class is in session. Say what you have to say when it’s over!” their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri—who was also their English teacher—hissed at him.

“I’m unable to follow that order.”

“What do you—”

“This is an extremely urgent matter,” Sousuke insisted. “Someone please tell me—what happened to the contents of this canister? I promise I won’t be angry or litigious. Just say who it was!”

The gazes of the students all fell on Onodera Kotaro. He raised his hand meekly. “Ahh... Sorry, Sagara. I mistook it for a thermos.”

Sousuke’s response sounded more desperate than angry. “What did you do with what was inside it?!” he screamed.

“It’s over there. In the bucket in front of the cleaning closet—”

Before Kotaro could finish, Sousuke strode over to the bucket and looked inside. Here, he let out a gasp.

“Sousuke? What’s wrong?” Kaname asked, watching from the sidelines.

“I’ll explain later. Remain inside the classroom. I’m going to my locker. I’ll be right back. Listen to me—you must not leave this room, no matter what!”

“What? What the—”

Before anyone could stop him, Sousuke flew out of the room.

“What’s with him?” Kaname wondered.

“Just let him go, Chidori-san,” Kagurazaka Eri whispered, trembling.

“Interrupting class and then running off... The absolute nerve! Maybe he did grow up overseas and doesn’t need to study English, but that’s no excuse to... to...”

While Eri was crackling with an aura of rage, the students continued talking and gossiping. “Quiet! Back to class now!” Eri declared, and English class resumed.

Three minutes later, Sousuke rushed back into the classroom.

“Sagara-kun?! You can’t just barge in and out of class as you please! What do you think you’re—” But as she saw the state Sousuke was in, Eri fell silent.

A brand-new gas mask and a yellow work suit—no, it looked like protective clothing—now covered him from head to toe. The silhouette was rotund, evocative of a firefighter’s gear; less “flashy” and more “sinister.”



“(Kssh... hahhh...) Sorry I’m back late, ma’am,” Sousuke said, his voice muffled through the suit.

“What are you wearing?”

“(Kssh... hahhh...) NBC protective clothing.” It wasn’t exactly a transparent answer.

“I just asked what you’re dressed in,” Eri said pointedly.

“Please wait. Before I explain...”

“H-Hang on!”

While the rest of the class watched, Sousuke walked towards the back of the room in his strange protective clothing. He opened the thick plastic bag he was carrying and carefully put the bucket in question inside of it. “Stand back, everyone.” He pulled out a canister similar to a fire extinguisher and sprayed some kind of cleansing fluid into the area around the bucket. Then he walked all around the classroom, sealing up cracks in windows and doors with black tape.

“What the...”

“Hang on a minute...”

For once, the class seemed to find Sousuke’s strange behavior truly intimidating instead of absurd.

Sousuke grabbed the bag with the bucket inside and returned to the class lectern.

“Sagara-kun, what do you think you are—” Eri began.

“I’ll explain now,” Sousuke spoke up harshly, interrupting her attempt to scold him. “Listen to me, members of Class 2-4. I’m sorry to say this, but English class is canceled for the day.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Please remain calm and listen to me,” he continued. “A calamity has befallen our class. A bacteriological weapon, currently undergoing tests in a certain country’s research facility, has escaped its protective capsule.” With that, he held up the bucket inside its plastic bag.

“‘Bacteriological weapon’?” Eri asked tersely.

“Affirmative, ma’am. An extremely dangerous bacteria, created with cutting-edge biotechnology. It’s both ambitious and ferocious, infecting the body through aerosols, and doesn’t stop working until it devours its target... That’s what the manual says.”

“And it’s here?” she clarified. “Inside this classroom?”

“Yes.”

“Am I infected? And my students, too?”

“Yes, I’m afraid that’s very likely,” Sousuke responded gravely.

Eri looked around the room in silence for a few seconds, and then said, “Ah.” She collapsed on the spot and fell still.

“She merely passed out due to shock. Stay quiet! Everyone, calm down!” Sousuke shouted at the students, who had begun to make noise, all of them on the verge of panic.

“How the hell are we supposed to calm down?!”

“You said it was a killer virus!”

“What was that thing doing in our school?!”

“What’s going to happen to us?!”

The students shouted at him one after another, all of them sounding desperate.

“Keep your heads, everyone! You can’t leave this room, and panicking won’t fix the situation.”

“Shut up, Sagara!” One of the boys pointed at Sousuke in his dumpy costume. “You’re keeping that awesome protective suit and mask to yourself... and you tell us not to lose our heads?!”

“I understand what you mean,” Sousuke sympathized, “but I’m the only one who knows even the slightest bit about dealing with biological weapons. I may have already been infected, but if there’s even a chance—”

“Shut up! You’re just trying to save yourself! I thought you were a better guy

than that!”

“Yeah! Yeah!”

“How could you do this to us?!”

The artillery of criticism volleyed at him from all sides. Sousuke simply stood there at the lectern for a while, silently, but finally worked up his nerve and said, “Very well.” He slowly and deliberately removed his gas mask. There was a rush of air and he revealed his face.

“Ah...”

“Do you see now? I’m not doing this to protect myself,” he insisted. “As an experienced battlefield professional, I’m just trying not to make the situation worse.”

The students watched him warily.

“Listen to me, all of you: abandon your hatred. Stop finding someone to blame and focus on what we must do. This tragedy isn’t anyone’s fault.” Sousuke spoke in an unusually sincere voice, trying fervently to convince them.

His classmates, who up until then had been silently furious, now looked down, trembling.

“Sagara...”

“You understand, everyone?” Sousuke asked hopefully.

Then they all fixed their glares on him. “This tragedy is *your* fault!”

About half the students present stormed the lectern, raining fists and kicks and fan strikes down on him. Unable to fight back against the worst violence he’d experienced in six whole volumes, Sousuke fell unconscious, blood dripping from his mouth.

“Darn it!” Kaname was huffing for breath after taking her rage out on Sousuke at the head of the crowd of students. “Guns and bombs are bad enough... but now, germ warfare?! Why’d he bring something so dangerous to school?!”

“Well, guns and bombs are pretty dangerous already...” Kyoko muttered from beside her.

“What even is this thing? Just saying it’s deadly bacteria doesn’t give us much information... Is anyone here not feeling well?!” Kaname asked the class.

Nobody raised their hands.

“Maybe we should go to the nurse’s office? We could ask Ms. Nishino for her —” Kaname started.

“I would advise not doing that,” Kazama Shinji interrupted grimly. After Sousuke, he was the most knowledgeable person in the class about such things.

“Why not?”

“The reason Sagara-kun told us not to leave was so that we didn’t spread the infection,” he explained. “He said it’s airborne, right? If we all flood out of the room, we could spread the disease to the other classes. We could contaminate the whole school.”

Hearing this dire prediction, Kaname and the others exchanged a nervous glance. “B-But we all seem fine, right?” she said. “He was probably just exaggerating.”

“One aspect of bacteriological weapons is that there’s a time gap between infection and the onset of symptoms,” Shinji said, his glasses reflecting the light. “That’s why, although extremely deadly, they’re poorly suited to military use. Tactical purposes aside, they’re strategically very serious and are known as the poor man’s nuclear weapon. I’ve even heard that a certain Middle Eastern country is attempting to cultivate the Ebola virus for military purposes. This could be that.”

“Ebola? The thing where you die bleeding from your pores?”

“Yes, also known as the flesh-eating virus. I can’t be sure, but one way or another, it’ll probably be pretty nasty... heh heh heh.” Shinji took advantage of his moment, letting out a creepy laugh.

The rest of the class, disturbed by Shinji’s abrupt turn into the macabre, felt a strange chill run through their bodies.



“That’s... that’s...”

“No! I don’t wanna die!”

“M-Mommy!”

A portion of them completely lost their heads and scrambled for the door. But the seal tape Sousuke had put there proved extremely sturdy, and the door refused to open.

“Wait, everyone! Didn’t you hear what he said? We can’t leave the classroom!” Kaname shouted at the students who were shoving at each other near the door, but the chaos didn’t die down. “Oh, come on! Just calm down!” Then she grabbed the lectern with both hands, and lifted it above her head all by herself. “Didn’t I tell you?!” She demanded angrily, and threw the lectern into the crowd.

“Wah!” the students cried, scattering, as the lectern knocked over desks and chairs.

“Hahh... hahh... I’ll say it one more time! Don’t disgrace yourselves!” Kaname shouted, her face taking on a ghastly visage and scaring the group into silence. “Do you want to infect the other classes in a moment of panic? You’ll just make more victims!”

“B-But...” one of the boys said, weeping.

“No buts! Think about it. How will history view what happened here today? Will they say we panicked and spread the disease through the school?” she demanded. “We’d go down in infamy. Is that what you want?!”

Kaname clasped her fists in front of her chest as if in prayer and spoke to her audience. “I’m scared, too. I always hoped that if I was gonna die, it’d be after I could first eat my fill of trident-yaki at the Ohio-ya in the shopping district. Or go to the soba place near the station and get every topping I could think of, from egg to croquettes to tempura to kaki-age to chikuwa-age to wakame seaweed, and enjoy the world’s most lavish soba. Then I could die without regret.”

“Your life comes pretty cheap,” Kyoko said snidely.

“However!” Ignoring her, Kaname clenched a fist. “It’s just not meant to be. In the face of destruction, you should keep your wits about you and confront it head-on. The willingness to lay down your own life in the name of destiny, to ensure the safety of your comrades... The shine of that noble spirit is what brings light to our darkest hours! Isn’t that what truly makes us human?!”

“Wow...” The whole group breathed in admiration and scattered applause rang out for Kaname at the lectern.

“Chidori-san. You may be right.”

“Yeah. We should really be more dignified than this.”

“It hurts, but we really do just have to endure it...”

The members of Class 2-4 nodded to each other, their eyes wet with tears.

Kaname rubbed at her own eyes with her sleeve. “Thank you, everyone. I’m so proud of all of you. I’m sorry for saying such harsh things to you.”

“Don’t say that, Chidori-san. We’re the ones at fault here.”

“Yeah. And we’re in this together, right?”

“And it’s not as if we’re dying alone. I’m not afraid!”

The beautiful and fleeting notes of friendship... Forty students cried and sobbed, arms around each other’s shoulders.

It was then that Sousuke, previously abandoned in a corner of the classroom, silently sat up. “Why is everyone crying?”

“Shut up, you,” Kaname snarled at him. “We’re basking in the goodness of humanity! And are you really still alive?”

“Of course I am. I haven’t even told you about the vaccine.”

“Vaccine?”

“The package came with a vaccine for the bioweapon. In case of emergency, I’m sure. Here it is.” Sousuke took out a small test tube and syringe. “But there’s only enough for one.”

All forty students in the classroom stopped crying in unison. Those with arms around each other’s shoulders backed away from each other, crouched down

and prepared to pounce. Forty pairs of eyes locked on the one vial. Gazes met gazes with an air of challenge. A sign had been hung on the door of the metaphorical Beautiful Friendship Shop, and it read, “Out to Lunch.”

“What’s wrong, everyone?” Sousuke asked curiously.

Fountains poured from Kaname’s eyes beside him. “Sousuke. You are... a net negative to every situation you’re involved in.”

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

“Never mind.” Before the first desperate students could pounce on Sousuke, Kaname rapped the blackboard. “We’ll draw lots to decide!” she screamed, leaving no room for debate. “Then it’s all fair! And it means that at least one of us survives, right?”

“Ugh... well...”

“I guess that’s only fair...”

“Of course, it’s only fair. Let’s do it.”

After a few moments, the students all came around.

“Okay! Then let’s get it started!” Kaname prepared forty-two strips of paper, only one of which had a red circle drawn on it. Then she put them all in a paper bag and mixed the contents around carefully. The preparations were complete.

Next, students put their hands into the bag, which was being held by Kaname, and drew their lots one by one. No luck. No luck. No luck. For each failed draw, someone wailed in despair, cried out in agony, or let out a dry laugh.

“Ugh. I’m... I’m done for.”

“I’ve never had any luck with lotteries.”

“Ah, knew it. Ha ha ha...”

Each losing student reacted in a different way: one slumped over to work on their last words; one started sending goodbye messages to their families via cell phone; one confessed their love to a classmate; a member of the manga club decided to get to work on their unfinished manuscript. But not one of them complained of unfairness. They each endeavored to accept their fate with

nobility—truly admirable students.

Kyoko drew a dud as well. She gave a sad smile and said, “It’s tough, but I’m okay. I had a lot of fun,” with confidence.

Kaname couldn’t help but start crying at this. “I’m sorry, Kyoko. It really is awful. It’s just... It’s just...”

“It’s okay. You draw too, Kana-chan.”

“No. I’ll go last,” she sobbed. “I think there’s about fifteen left. Sousuke?”

“All right.” Sousuke placed his hand slowly into the bag. And when he looked at the paper slip he’d drawn... “Hmm.” It contained a red circle. “I won.”

“You won?”

“Yeah. I won.”

Everyone in the class turned to stare at him with dropped jaws. Sousuke nodded a few times, then turned to them and spoke, with great sympathy. “It’s decided, then. I’m sorry, everyone.”

To hear the start of all their trouble say those words so casually... An aura of rage filled the classroom, an emanation of violence so potent that it would bring down any mosquito unlucky enough to be flying by.

“Look. The thing is, there’s actually no way we’re gonna accept that...”

“I can take a whole lot with good grace... but this...”

“Before I die of a bacterial disease, I’m going to die at the cruelty of this universe...”

They all spoke in low, hateful voices.

Sousuke, his expression as blank as ever, held up his hands and spoke placatingly. “I understand how you feel. But I promise you this: I will not forget this tragedy. I’m going to send this data to the weapons developers and write a harshly worded letter to ensure nothing like this ever happens again. So—”

“So what?!”

“Please accept your fate and quietly—” he began to say, but was quickly cut off.

“You can die first!”

The students fell on Sousuke, who was holding the vaccine, from all sides. Realizing they really might kill him this time, Sousuke used a nearby desk to vault lithely over the charging crowd. “Wait,” he cried out. “There are more important things to—”

“Shut up!” someone yelled.

There was no talking his way out of this. Some were trying to give Sousuke his just deserts, others were trying to stop them, and still others were just trying to snatch up the vaccine in the chaos that ensued. They came and went, grabbing and screaming. Sousuke ran around the classroom as the other students chased after him madly. It was pure pandemonium.

“You wanna resist, huh, asshole?!”

“Gimme that vaccine!”

“Give back my lost youth!”

They’d reached the point where not even Kaname could quiet the classmates who had given in to bloodlust. No matter how she screamed, they failed to hear her. “Stop it, everyone! Don’t disgrace yourselves any further! We can redo the drawing! Which is to say—get a grip, you idiots!” But at last, even she gave in to her rage and began to swing a folding chair she’d picked up. Even the weak-willed students who’d just been watching things in horror now began tearing around, unable to escape the chaos.

Just then...

“Quiet down in here!” The classroom door on the teacher’s side opened with a bang. The seal that Sousuke had placed there had ripped free from the repetitive beatings it had taken. Standing in the door was the classic lit teacher, Mr. Fujisaki. He would’ve been teaching at Class 2-3 next door.

“What’s all this ruckus?! This isn’t some elementary school! Education is serious business! Do you want me to fail every single one of you?!” Fujisaki, a vein throbbing in his forehead, glared across the entirety of Class 2-4. “I swear, this is what happens when you don’t allow corporal punishment!”

“Ah, he opened it. The airborne bacteria...” Kazama Shinji whispered in despair.

“What have you done?”

“Fujisaki... what the hell were you thinking?!”

“We’re finished!”

These were not the reactions he was expecting at all, and Fujisaki drew back in non-comprehension. “Wh-What’s going on?”

“I... I don’t care about contaminating the school anymore!”

A few students plowed into the classic literature teacher and ran past him into the halls.

“Hey! Wait, everyone!” Kaname tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t listen.

“Shut up! I want to tell Saeki-san in Class 1 how I feel!”

“A-And I want to confess to Mikihara-san in Class 6!”

One by one, the students shouted out the confessions of their souls without regret.

“I want to die looking up at the sky from the roof!”

“I at least want a cup of tea before I go!”

“I wanna go trash the teachers’ office!”

Each of them, with their own dying wish, ran and ran and ran. One might be forced to say they were running a little too hard, even.

Dodging around the group still interested in the vaccine, Sousuke called out in warning. “Stop it! The bacteriological weapon— ah!”

“Shut up!”

A French-Japanese dictionary hit Sousuke square in the head and knocked him out. As it did, the vaccine in his hand fell to the floor and broke open with a clink.

“The vaccine!” someone wailed.

“We’re finished!”

“Oh, how could we have let this happen?!” the students cried out. After a few moments of staring at the ceiling, they all immediately reconsidered their objectives and went running out of the classroom. It was as if they’d forgotten about Sousuke entirely.

The ability to so swiftly change on a dime...

“Hmm... truly impressive situational awareness,” Sousuke said.

“This is no time to be admiring them! You just let infected people loose in the school!” Kaname screamed at him. “What are you going to do?!”

The next thing they knew, the classroom was empty. Everyone had left except for Kagurazaka Eri, who was still passed out in the corner.

“Give up,” Sousuke said, helplessly.

“You can’t give up!” Kaname shouted, kicking him back to the ground. “What is it that made you this way? What kind of life leads you to this moment? At least I’ll finally be free of your troublemaking. I don’t know if I’m happy or sad...” said Kaname, letting out a sob.

While Kaname wept her eyes out, Sousuke quietly opened his French-to-English dictionary and began re-reading the manual in French.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know French, so I was only able to get through part of the manual. Further investigation might reveal additional countermeasures. I don’t even know what, specifically, this bacteriological weapon does.” Sousuke continued flipping through the manual until suddenly, he stopped. With the help of the dictionary, he read the contents of one page very carefully. “Chidori.”

“What?”

“Come with me. Right now.”

“Eh? H-Hang on a minute...”

“Hurry!” Sousuke grabbed Kaname’s hand and pulled her swiftly down the hall. They headed down the stairs to the nurse’s office in the southern school building. The usual nurse seemed to be out, so there was nobody there.

Sousuke pulled back a partitioning curtain and told Kaname, “Take off your uniform.”

“Huh?”

“Take it off,” he insisted.

She hesitated, looking back and forth between his face and the white bed. “Wh-What are you talking about?! I-I don’t think I’m emotionally ready for this... And in a place like this... I can’t. I don’t want to. It’s just too—”

“Just take it off! Now!” Sousuke said desperately.

Tokiwa Kyoko was wandering around the school building unsteadily. The familiar school building, the atmosphere she knew so well... the thought that this would be her last time seeing it filled her with an almost mysterious degree of affection and sorrow.

The idea that she was infected with a bacteriological weapon still didn’t feel real. Although she did feel like she was developing a fever... Was this the killer virus at work?

“Mm... ohh...” came a voice just then. She spotted a student at a nearby drinking fountain, collapsed on his knees. It was Onodera Kotaro.

“O-Ono-D?” Noticing Kotaro’s desperate state, she began to approach him.

“H-Hey, Tokiwa...” Kotaro said, sounding like he was in the grips of the fever.

Kyoko made the connection immediately. Who was it who had taken the first dose of the bacteria from the canister Sousuke had brought in? Who had even had it in his mouth? The symptoms were finally manifesting. “Ono-D!” she wailed, “Hang in there!”

“That’s... a pretty tall order right now, y’know?” he choked out.

“Onodera-kun!”

“Sucks being the first in line, huh? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cry before...”

“D-Don’t say that. Please... Onodera-kun...” Kyoko clung to him, tears spilling

from her large eyes.

“Since it’s the end, I might as well tell you how I feel about you,” Kotaro said falteringly. “I think... I think I...”

“Onodera-kun...”

Kotaro told lots of girls he loved them, but of course, these could be his last words. Kyoko was waiting sincerely for him to finish, when suddenly his brow furrowed and the tenor of his voice changed. “Gotta tell you how I feel... Mm. Huh?” He suddenly stood up and cracked his neck back and forth.

Kyoko, in tears, looked up at him wistfully. “How do you feel about me? And what’s going on?”

“Hmm? Oh... it’s just weird. My shoulders and back suddenly feel really loose. Actually, I feel kinda great... huh?” Kotaro stood up suddenly. A moment later, the right sleeve of his uniform rolled down and hit the floor.

“Huh?” said Kyoko.

And it wasn’t just his right sleeve. The left arm, both legs, the chest, the waistband... every part of his uniform was melting away like cotton candy. “What the... hey, hey! Hey!” All that was left was his striped trunks and white tank top. “M-My uniform...”

“Wh-What in the world?” Kyoko blushed bright red and began to dither around.

Just then, the half-naked Kotaro’s eyes went wide and he pointed at her. “H- Hey, Tokiwa!”

“What?” she asked, but then she heard it.

Rustle.

Kyoko’s own uniform began falling apart the same way. Her jacket, her blouse, her skirt... “What? What? What?! No!” Leaving only her checkered undies behind, nearly all of the clothing she’d been wearing fell to the floor. Kyoko’s delicate, pale body was entirely revealed before Kotaro’s eyes.

Kyoko’s wail of despair echoed out all around the water fountain.

“You get it, Sagara? It’s not a virus, it’s a bacteria!” President Béart of Brilliant Safetech stressed on the other end of the phone.

“How do the two differ?”

“Haven’t you heard? They’ve been studying bacteria that can break down plastics and other petroleum-derived substances,” he explained further. “There’s even a few fool researchers who think they can use it for military purposes. In the process, they created a bacteria with a very strange property.”

“And that’s the bacteriological weapon you sent me?” Sousuke checked.

“Yes! That bacteria is mostly inert at room temperature, but with enough heat—around 36 degrees Celsius—it begins to rapidly propagate and activate. In other words, with human body heat, this ‘Full Monty Bacteria’ clings to its host and eats away aggressively at any nearby oil-based substances... specifically, polyester and nylon. And once that bacteria gets going, it’s extremely aggressive!”

Polyester and nylon: needless to say, these were fibers that made up people’s clothes.

“What can be done about it?”

“Nothing! Nothing but the vaccine! It dies on its own after about twelve hours, so just don’t wear petroleum-derived fabrics until then,” President Béart advised. “Cotton or silk only! In particular, polyester is a favorite food of the Full Monty Bacteria!”

“I see. So that’s it...”

“But be glad. As a side effect, it relieves stiff shoulders and back pain. So...”

“I’ll settle this with you later,” Sousuke promised. Then he hung up. It was clear that his own uniform was in shreds beneath the NBC protective suit.

“So? What does it mean?” Kaname asked from behind the curtain.

She’d removed her uniform, which now hung on a hanger nearby. The terrycloth blankets that the nurse’s office used were 100% cotton, so she’d been told to keep one around her, but...

“At the very least, it’s not a deadly disease,” said Sousuke.

“Oh? It isn’t?”

“But one way or another...” he trailed off, as screams of anger rang out all around the school—the agonies of the bacteriological weapon’s victims. The PA chime rang out as fifth period ended, and students from the other classes emerged noisily out into the halls. It was time for the bacteria to spread even further.

Who could say what kind of hell would spread around the school for the next hour? After it was all over, what kind of beating would he receive?

“One way or another... I personally expect to die very soon,” Sousuke said in deepest despair.

〈The Fifth Period Hot Spot — The End〉

The Goddess Comes to Japan (Suffering Chapter)

At the top of the large underground submarine dock, overlooking a greatly damaged, massive submarine, sat the bare-bones office of its maintenance director. It was currently occupied by a young girl (the captain of the amphibious assault submarine Tuatha de Danaan, Colonel Teletha Testarossa) and also her executive officer, a middle-aged man named Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas.

“And I think that’s it for what needs repairs,” Teletha Testarossa—Tessa—said, as she tapped at her clipboard-shaped tablet’s LCD screen.

“Indeed. Well done, Captain,” Mardukas said.

The craft had taken serious damage during an incident on their way back from the Perio Archipelago and required drastic repairs. First made to take reckless actions in its full autopilot mode, driven below its maximum depth, suffering a torpedo explosion in close vicinity, followed by an AS battle in its hangar... after which it had been forced to run silently for hours and hours at a high speed...

Having undergone that much strain, it was only natural for the de Danaan to need a litany of checks and repairs. Certainly, the submarine was Mithril’s trump card and super-weapon, but it was still just a machine—without proper care, it was a worthless hunk of junk. And using the AI’s self-diagnostic abilities and all their man power to the fullest, Tessa had managed to compile over the course of a few days a list of everything that needed attention.

Thankfully, the damage to the reactor and hull had been minor. The main issues were repairs to the port-side machinery room, checks and replacements on all the air hoses, and swapping out the damaged hangar infrastructure. The sub had thankfully been designed for easy repair, so it was projected to take, in total, just a bit under three weeks. Tessa, who had thought it might take at least six months of work and hundreds of millions of dollars to repair, was relieved to hear this.

Of course, any weapon that had suffered through such a violent engagement

would never be like new again. In a sense, the Tuatha de Danaan was older now than it had been before, but so long as it didn't capsize or suffer some other great accident, it still had a long life ahead. Seagoing vessels tended to last a lot longer than most people imagined they would, and given that she'd designed this one herself, Tessa could vouch for its toughness and dependability.

If she lived to see her submarine decommissioned from pure wear and tear, how old would she be then? Forty years old? Fifty? Would she have a husband and children by then? No... In all honesty, as long as she shared her submarine's fate, the idea of falling in love, getting married, and having children remained unthinkable for Tessa, who already lived a life very different from any other girl her age.

A normal girl would be going to school and having silly conversations with her class friends. Tessa let out a sigh at the thought.

Mardukas continued speaking, seemingly ignorant of her woes. "That's all on the schedule, but I believe we can leave the more direct supervision to the other officers. It's a good chance for them to take care of things without you."

"You may be right," she agreed.

"Full repairs will take over two weeks. Once you've finished your immediate paperwork, it might be time to use up your leave."

"Leave?"

"Yes, leave. I doubt you'll be able to truly relax here at the base," Mardukas pointed out. "You should take a holiday somewhere far away."

"Hmm..." Tessa gazed at the stark ceiling of the submarine dock for a while, then nodded firmly. "You're right. If I stay around here, I'll just stress about things. Yes, I'll take some time off!"

"Excellent. Let's start the planning at once." Mardukas immediately produced a sheaf of travel pamphlets from the file case tucked under his arm and fanned them out at her.

The degree of preparation suggested he'd intended to push her into leave from the start. Tessa privately winced at his presumptuousness.

“I’ve done a bit of research on the matter,” he told her next. “What about Tahiti? If you desire a companion, I could send Sergeant Mao to be your bodyguard. And if you’d rather somewhere more temperate, the southern hemisphere... Yes, New Zealand could be ideal. Or perhaps you’d prefer Canada? There’s a hotel in Vancouver, run by a subordinate of mine from my navy days. The sunset over the Burrard Inlet is quite—”

“All right, all right. I appreciate your kindness,” Tessa interrupted gently, cutting him off in the middle of his speech. Then she thought for a minute and said, mischievously, “But there *is* a place I’ve been wanting to go. If I’m going to take leave, I’d like to spend it there.”

“Is there? Then I highly recommend doing so. If there’s any way I can assist you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Really?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“I see. Then, if I might ask...” After a moment’s pause, Tessa told him the place where she wanted to spend her leave.

Upon hearing it, Mardukas just stared for a moment, slack-jawed. Then he remembered himself and began to argue fiercely. “Unacceptable, Captain. I can’t approve of this!”

“Why not?”

“W-Well... it’s simply unacceptable! Why would someone of your station even *want* to go there? Bad air quality and worse scenery! And we cannot ensure your safety—”

“You liar!” Tessa said with a glare fixed on him. “Mardukas-san, you just said I had your full support!”

“I... I did indeed, but—”

“You said you highly recommended it.”

“But...”

“And when I asked if you were sure, you said, ‘of course.’”

Mardukas shrank silently.

“So, it’s decided. Let’s get it arranged, shall we?” the captain declared, while giggling and dancing in place.



It was five days into their second term, after class on Saturday, after a very eventful summer vacation. Sousuke, feeling relieved after having handed in his summer homework, was approached by Chidori Kaname.

“You look tired, Sousuke,” she observed. “What’s up?”

It would take a keen eye to perceive my present condition, he thought suspiciously. But nevertheless, he responded, “Insufficient sleep. I struggled with my classic literature homework, but managed to meet the deadline.”

“You were still working on that? I figured you for the type to hand things in well before schedule.”

“I usually am,” he admitted. “But writing a report for my main employment monopolized my time until two days ago.” The report was about an incident that had occurred just last week, before the end of summer break. There had been an attack on the amphibious assault submarine Tuatha de Danaan, which belonged to the mercenary group, Mithril, with which Sousuke was affiliated.

“Paperwork, huh? You do more than just fighting all day? Must be hard,” Kaname commented.

“It *is* hard.”

Just then, their classmate Tokiwa Kyoko ran up to them in a flurry. “Oh, there you are! Hey!”

“What is it, Kyoko?”

“There’s a predator in the girls’ changing room!” she shouted, heaving for breath. “Th-This weird old guy just busted in and said, ‘Oh, my’ in English! Then everyone screamed and ran out of there! He was just talking and talking and we couldn’t understand any of it...”

Kaname tried to soothe Kyoko, who was panicking. “Slow down. You’re not making any sense.”

“But... but...”

“So the predator wasn’t a student?”

“No, it was a middle-aged man! He was tall and thin and wore glasses. He looked like the total groper-on-a-train type...”

“Not a teacher, then? An outsider?” Sousuke stood up and checked the rounds in his pistol. “A bold move. Not content to simply infiltrate our school, he even invades places to which student council authority does not extend. I admire his daring, at least.”

“You’re making a standard pervert sound like some kind of awesome secret agent...” Kaname muttered.

Meanwhile, Kyoko pleaded with him. “Please, Sagara-kun, catch him! I think he’s still wandering around the southern school building.”

“Understood. I will apprehend him.” Sousuke roused himself up and ran out into the hall.

Kaname chased after him. “Wait, Sousuke! Don’t hurt him!”

“Why not? Why should I restrain myself with a lecherous intruder?”

“I mean, pervy stuff like that isn’t okay, but that’s no reason—”

“He has to learn that inflicting painful humiliation on others and intruding on our school territory comes with a high price—in a manner such that he never forgets,” Sousuke told her firmly.

“Stop saying that dangerous stuff! Just stay calm, okay?”

“Understood. I’ll calmly teach him a lesson.”

“Grr...”

As they argued back and forth, they eventually reached the area near the teachers’ office on the southern building’s second floor when...

“Oh. Is that him?” Kaname wondered. “I don’t think I’ve seen him around before...”

A middle-aged man was indeed standing next to the long bulletin board posted in the hallway. He was tall and thin, wearing a plain gray suit, and was

facing away, staring at the works of the photography club pinned to the board. His vibe certainly matched Kyoko's testimony about him, but he seemed surprisingly unconcerned for someone who'd just been caught peeping.

"Remain here, Chidori."

"Ah, wait—"

Before Kaname could stop him, Sousuke soundlessly approached the middle-aged man, then abruptly spoke. "You."

"Eh?"

The moment the man turned around, Sousuke knocked him to the floor. The man ended up on his back, with Sousuke's gun (which had been drawn at some point) aimed right at his nose. The man could do nothing but let out a muffled groan while Sousuke said coldly, "What is your business at this school? If I don't like your answer—" He got that far and then froze, staring wide-eyed down at the man.

"Why are you always so violent? Sousuke, I just told you not to hurt him! Are you listening?!" Kaname scolded him as she ran up to him, but he didn't seem to hear her. "Sousuke?"

Sweat was pouring down his face. His shoulders, his arm, and his gun had all begun to tremble. He just stood there, frozen, uncertain of how to deal with what he'd done.

"What kind of greeting is that, Sergeant Sagara?" the man asked in very calm English. "Do you address all of your superior officers around here like that?"

"Well, er... I... I..." Sousuke worked hard to try to switch over languages. "I'm sorry, Colonel. I was really out of order. I don't know what to say... If I'd known who you were, I wouldn't have been so... brash."

"Before you apologize, lower your weapon."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir!" Sousuke sprang back and holstered his pistol. As he then came to attention, the colonel stood up, dusted off his suit, and straightened his posture. At a distance he'd looked like a Japanese salaryman, but he wasn't Japanese at all. He was Caucasian, with a pale, gaunt face, and

wire-rim glasses. He had a cold and dour air about him.

“What in the world are you... ah.” Kaname, confused by Sousuke’s sudden total change in demeanor, let out a noise of surprise as she saw the man’s face.

The gentleman cast a quiet glance at Kaname. “You look full of vim, Ms. Chidori,” he said in tones far more friendly than the ones he’d used with Sousuke.

“You... You’re...” she said, mouth flapping. “You’re... that bossy old man!”

“No!” Sousuke argued, panicking. “This is the executive officer of the Tuatha de Danaan, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas!”

Mardukas held the rank of lieutenant colonel in the mercenary squadron, Mithril, and Sousuke was a sergeant in the same hierarchy. It was like the distance between a vice president of the company and a mere shift manager. In other words, this Englishman was far and away Sousuke’s superior. As executive officer, he was second in command of their battle group of hundreds.

Mardukas led Sousuke, who was now acting extremely formal, through the school hallways. After a while, he spoke up. “I met with your principal, Tsuboi, earlier.”

“T-Tsuboi-sensei?” That one word filled Sousuke with a bottomless fear.

“Yes, Tsuboi-sensei. A good woman,” Mardukas commented, “though I felt ideological and political tensions with her.”

“Aha...” said Sousuke. He wondered, *what in the world did the colonel and the principal talk about? He couldn’t possibly have come here to debate philosophy with her...*

“After finishing my business with her and taking my leave, I took it upon myself to tour your school building. But it appears I stumbled upon a changing room in error. I did my best to apologize, but I’m not sure the young ladies understood me,” Mardukas admitted, not sounding particularly thrilled about his error. Perhaps he really saw Japanese high school girls as children and nothing more.

“You didn’t bring an interpreter? That seems... less than advisable.” As far as Sousuke knew, Mardukas didn’t speak any Japanese.

“I brought Private Kasuya, the cook, but gave him his leave earlier. He said his home was in the area, and that today was the anniversary of his parents’ death.”

“I see.”

“I was hoping to ask you to fill in for him,” said Mardukas. “Will you act as my interpreter henceforth?”

“Er... me?”

“Is that an issue?”

“No, certainly not,” Sousuke told him hastily. “I’ll do anything you ask of me, sir.”

“Excellent,” said Mardukas, without a hint of a smile. “My name is Richard Mantissa, an instructor from Cambridge about to embark on a years-long employment at a laboratory in Tokyo. My field of specialty is acoustics, but I’m also interested in educational studies. I’m an old friend of your on-paper guardian, the Russian political refugee Andrey Preminin. I came to this school on his recommendation, hoping to learn about the true state of Japanese education.” He easily rattled off the cover story meant to hide his real identity (‘Andrey Preminin’ was Major Kalinin’s alias). “You and I have met before—you’ve come fishing with me and Preminin several times. It was through these activities that you met my daughter. Practice this information until you can recite it on call.”

“Er? Yes, sir!” Sousuke responded, coming to full attention. again.

Kaname, who was quietly following along behind them, poked at Sousuke’s shoulder and asked him in Japanese, “Hey. What in the world is he doing here?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think he came to check in on how well you’re doing your duty?”

“Perhaps,” Sousuke admitted nervously.

“Hey, are you scared of the guy?”

“Does... it appear that I am?”

For another hour or so, Sousuke and Kaname walked through the halls after school, giving Mardukas a tour. The gym, the courtyard, the AV room, the music room, the biology room, the art room... the older man gave them all scrupulous attention, examining them with intense curiosity before asking Sousuke various questions. “What does it say here?” he asked about the writing on the blackboard in a classroom.

“Celebrating Daiei’s six straight wins,” Sousuke faithfully interpreted.

“What does it mean?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, sir.”

“Oh, it’s a pro baseball team. A fan wrote it,” Kaname explained in his place.

Mardukas smiled at her. “Aha... I see. The writing is so mysterious, I thought it might be some kind of magical chant. But of course, it’s something so mundane.” Then he whipped around and glared at Sousuke. “Sergeant Sagara, I question your ability to blend in with the citizenry while being unaware of the local baseball teams.”

“I apologize, s-sir.”

“It suggests a lack of due diligence and commitment to your mission,” Mardukas said critically.

“I promise you, sir, that’s not the case...”

“Enough excuses. Fix it. The battle group is not paying you merely to assault your superior officers.”

The comment stung. Sousuke thought Mardukas had forgiven him for his earlier insubordination, but apparently not. “Y-Yes sir,” he said. “I will attempt to do better.”

Without waiting for Sousuke’s response, Mardukas quickly moved for the window. “This is your classroom, isn’t it? Is it secure?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Is it hygienic? No nasty germs or parasites?”

“Sir. That is not... an issue, I believe. The school meets the appropriate standards.”

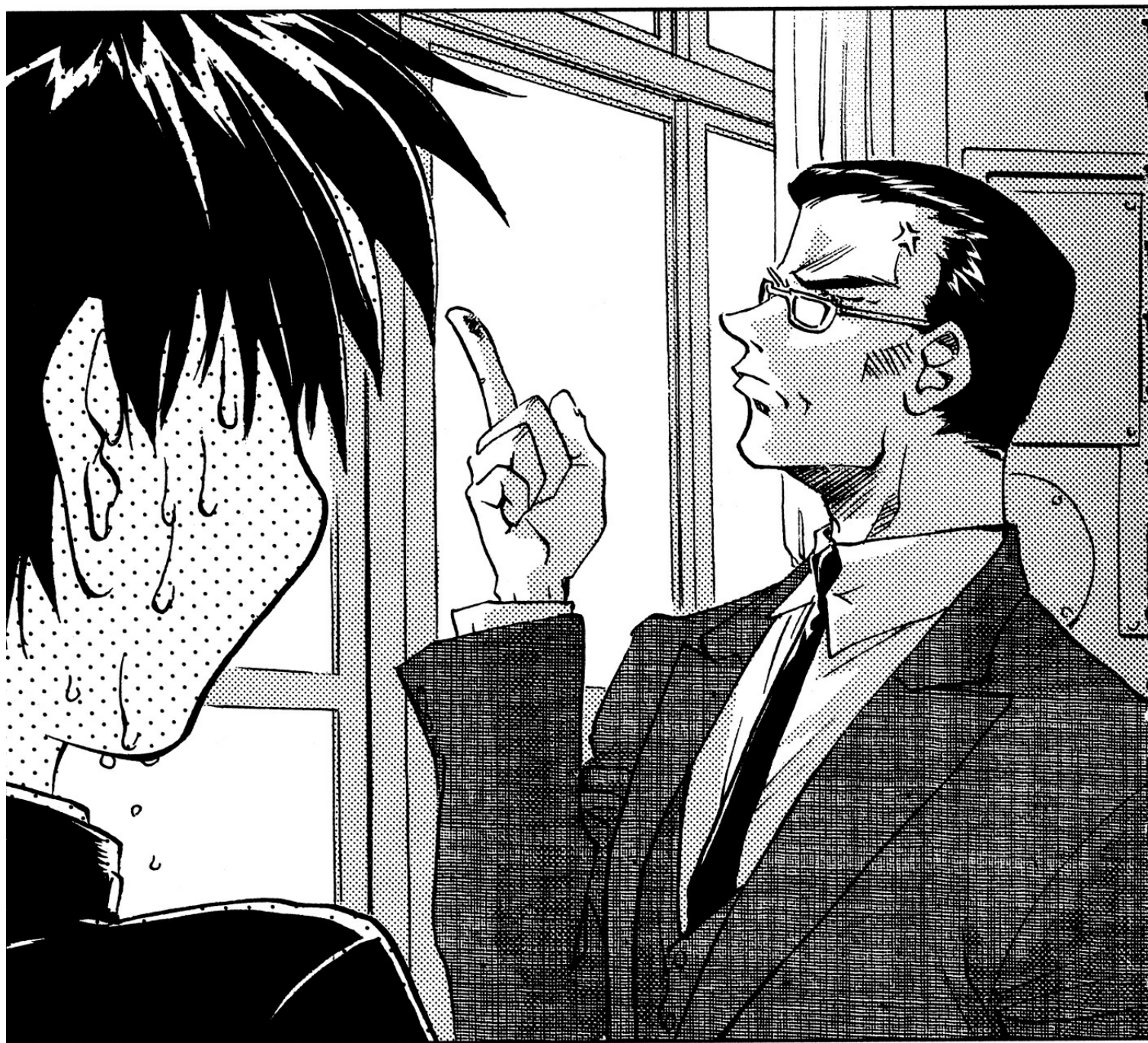
“It’s clean, then?”

“Sir.”

“You’re certain?”

“Sir.”

Madukas traced a fingertip along the windowsill. He eyed the dust picked up by his finger suspiciously, and let out a disapproving hum. “You call this ‘clean’?”



Sousuke said nothing.

“If your apartment is in a similar condition, I’ll be forced to lower my opinion of you.”

“I’ll take that to heart,” Sousuke replied.

Mardukas shook his head. “I can’t believe the captain... for a man like you...”

“Sir?”

“Nothing. Be quiet. I didn’t say anything.”

“E-Excuse me, sir,” Sousuke responded, still completely lost.

Kaname whispered from beside him in Japanese, “Does this guy hate you or something, Sousuke?”

“I don’t know,” he told her. Mardukas certainly was cold with Sousuke. He’d always been a dour man, but he wasn’t this hard on his other subordinates. And yet... “What did I do wrong?” Sousuke quietly agonized.

Ignoring his dilemma, Mardukas looked out of the classroom window into the courtyard. “Well, we’ve spent enough time here. Let’s return.”

“What? Return whe—”

“Where else? To your apartment.”

For a moment, Sousuke felt his soul leave his body.

The weekend had been a complete nightmare.

When he’d returned to the Mithril safe house that acted as his apartment with Colonel Mardukas, the officer had ordered him to clean his room thoroughly. The fastidious Sousuke always tended to keep his surroundings clean regardless, but the colonel was completely unforgiving with him.

Once the cleaning was done, the older man had even more orders for him. *“Put your firearms somewhere inconspicuous! Your apartment needs decoration! Buy more proper dishes!”*

Sousuke was forced to simper, saying things like, “I’m sorry, sir,” and “I’ll

aspire to improve, sir” over and over again.

“As I thought,” Mardukas had declared, “this is completely outrageous. I must have this room completely remodeled by tomorrow.”

So, on Sunday, they’d headed to the area around Chofu Station to do a lot of shopping. Curtains, carpets, a high-quality mattress, bedding, a tablecloth, high-quality silverware and dishes, cooking utensils, decorative plants, et cetera, et cetera... A lot of which Sousuke didn’t even understand the purpose of, so he’d ended up calling Kaname and asking her to accompany them.

During the outing, Mardukas had turned to Kaname and said cheerfully, “You’re quite a big help, Ms. Chidori, always so considerate. I wish there were some way I could thank you.”

“Really, it’s nothing,” she’d protested. “But why are you buying all this all of a sudden?”

“You’ll find out in good time. Sergeant, keep up the pace. Hurry!”

“Sir,” said Sousuke, who’d been struggling to keep up with them while carrying a small mountain of parcels.

Once their shopping was done, they’d gone about remodeling the apartment itself. Mardukas’s interior design sensibility didn’t seem particularly refined, and the color of the curtains and such weren’t quite right.

“What do you think, Miss Chidori?” he’d asked anxiously. “Would the beige be more calming than the stark white?”

“I think so...”

It was here that Sousuke had broken in. “Colonel. If I may, neither color is calming. These ordinary curtains will leave the room completely exposed to enemies with infrared sensors.”

“Don’t bring that nonsense into this, fool.”

“...”

It had just been that exchange, over and over again.

Kaname had left around ten o'clock that night, but their work had continued long after that. It was only sometime after midnight that the room finally seemed to be gaining some semblance of civilization.

But what in the world are we doing this for? Sousuke had wondered.

The answer to that question would arrive early the next morning. With Sousuke already feeling completely exhausted by the two intense days he'd spent with Mardukas, an even more superior officer would arrive at his apartment.

Entering the front door while awkwardly trailing a large suitcase behind her, Colonel Teletha Testarossa declared, "I'm taking extended leave to attend your school. Thank you for taking care of me!" She had luminous ash blond hair and large gray eyes. She was currently wearing a sleeveless dress—civilian clothing—and seemed unusually energetic despite the early hour.

Second Lieutenant Santos of the transport helicopter squadron followed along behind her with more luggage. There was probably an ECS-enabled helicopter parked somewhere in the nearby Chofu Airfield.

Once she was inside, Tessa explained the situation: the incident last month had resulted in the de Danaan taking a great deal of damage, forcing it to need a few weeks' downtime for repairs and maintenance. Because of that, the battle group would be able to function without Tessa for a while, as long as no more emergencies popped up.

"So... you've transferred to my school?" Sousuke asked hesitantly.

Tessa responded a bit bashfully, "Well... I've always wanted to try attending school with you, Sagara-san. Is that strange?"

"No, not at all. Please attend school until you're satisfied, ma'am." Nevertheless, he felt a shudder run through him as he said it. He hadn't expected not just Mardukas, but also Colonel Testarossa herself, to come and directly monitor his work in Tokyo. Was his competency under question from all his battle group superiors?!

"Then I should get ready to attend school," said Tessa, who then helped

herself to the bathroom in order to take a shower.

While she was gone, Mardukas beckoned secretively to Sousuke.

“Y-Yes, sir?”

“I must return to the base now. I have a great deal of work to do.”

“D-Do you, sir?”

“I do. Now, listen to me, Sergeant... I believe you’re aware of this, but Colonel Testarossa is an invaluable resource to us.”

“Sir.”

“Without her, the de Danaan is as helpless as an orphaned infant,” Mardukas reminded him. “Although I think of myself as not placing a hierarchy on the value of life, I will say this: One of her is far more valuable than one hundred NCOs like you. Do you understand?”

“A-Affirmative, sir.”

Mardukas slowly lifted his gaze to the ceiling, his gaze distant. “I believe the recent incident has dealt her a grievous psychological blow. The death of a subordinate will hit anyone hard the first time it happens—even more so when one is possessed of as kind and gentle a spirit as hers. That is why I have chosen to indulge this little flight of fancy.”

“Sir?” asked Sousuke. “What do you—”

“Be quiet and listen. However—if she suffers any physical or mental distress while she’s staying with you, I fully intend to throw the book at you. Prepare yourself for the most severe punishment I can think of. You have been insubordinate multiple times already. Do not forget that. Understood?!”

“Yes, Colonel!”

“Excellent. Now, one last thing.”

Sousuke waited, sweating.

“As long as the colonel is in Japan, Sergeant Mao will be here to support you. Having another woman present should help smooth over any issues. However... one other point of caution. I’ll tolerate you two living under the same roof, but

if you display the slightest unacceptable behavior towards her...”

A dark aura began to flare behind Mardukas—a strange combination of anger, fear, and anxiety—burning in pitch black, as if he was just barely keeping control of himself.

“...I swear to God and Queen that I will rip you to shreds,” he promised. “I’ll load you into a torpedo tube with three hundred kilograms of powder and fire. No, worse—I’ll make you do silly walks around the base until you go mad, send you to training camp to teach self-defense against people armed with bananas and raspberries, then dispatch you in a suicide mission against the Kremlin as part of the Scottish Kamikaze Regiment. Understand?!”

It was completely incomprehensible, but... “Sir, I absolutely never—”

“Do you understand or not?!”

“I understand, sir!” If Kaname could have seen Sousuke’s face in that moment, she might have described him as a Bonta-kun about to cry.

It was at this point that Tessa came bursting energetically out of the bathroom. “Look at this, look!” Wearing a Jindai High School uniform, she did a light twirl from the other end of the hallway, which made her miniskirt flare out and sent her red ribbon fluttering. “Well? Isn’t it perfect? I wanted to surprise you, so I had it arranged in secret. They only had the winter uniform, but I thought it might be nice to have the summer one for a few days... er?” Tessa trailed off suddenly. “What’s the matter, you two?”

Sousuke and Mardukas just stood there awkwardly for a few seconds. At last they shared a look, simultaneously cleared their throats, and spoke up calmly.

“Nothing. It suits you well, Captain.”

“I agree, Colonel, ma’am.”

The two men immediately returned to their usual stone-faced bearings. And in a corner of the room, Lieutenant Santos, who had seen the whole thing go down, whispered a quiet, “Weirdos” in her mother language of Portuguese.

Two hours later in Class 2-4’s homeroom...

“My name is Teletha Mantissa. Please call me Tessa!”

Just the sight of her standing at the lectern and introducing herself caused most of the boys in the class to cry out in excitement. About half of the girls were equally excited, whispering about how pretty she was, while the other half murmured dubiously about waiting to see what her personality was like.

The only two divergences to this general trend among the students came from Sousuke and Kaname. Sousuke’s expression was highly guarded as he kept his eyes and ears peeled to the windows and the hall, while Kaname’s jaw had dropped open in an expression halfway between surprise and exhaustion.

“Wh-What an absolute cliché,” she mumbled. The other members of the class didn’t seem to notice, though.

Their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, sounded like a lion tamer as she tried to soothe her rowdy students. “All right, settle down! Mantissa-san will be joining us for the next two weeks,” she said. “Her father is a professor at a famous university, and he’s interested in learning more about the Japanese education system. In other words, it’s a matter of international goodwill. So... Sagara-kun?”

“Yes?”

Eri’s voice took on an unusually threatening tone as she glared at him with bloodshot eyes. “I’d like you to avoid showing her your own *particular* worldly point of view... Is that understood?”

After a long pause, Sousuke said, “I’ll do my best.” For the first time, he felt he understood the concept of irony... though, obviously, he didn’t laugh.

When break time arrived, a mass of students formed around Tessa’s seat. A group of girls (headed up by Kyoko) and a group of boys (led by Onodera Kotaro) began to barrage her with rapid-fire questions. It was the kind of situation where most people might give someone space, but the students here were all very friendly. They wouldn’t hesitate to make a fuss over even the most intimidating of beauties.

“Hey, hey! Where are you living right now?”

“Your Japanese is so good!”

“Are you free after class? I’ve got a karaoke pass...”

“What’s your father like?”

“So cute! You look just like a china doll!”

“Excuse me, Tessa-san. Would you be free to model for the photography club?”

It was all that sort of thing.

Sousuke, meanwhile, was feeling extremely agitated. He couldn’t imagine his classmates would try to do Tessa any harm, but there was no way to completely avoid accidents. Mardukas’s warning was the foremost thought in his mind: *if she suffers any physical or mental distress while she’s staying with you...* Also, standing at the back of the crowd of excitable students while paying close attention to his chaotic surroundings proved to be exhausting.

Tessa, meanwhile, was cheerfully responding to the barrage of questions, when she suddenly felt her eyes fill with tears.

“Eh? What’s wrong, Tessa-chan?” Kyoko asked in surprise.

“Nothing,” Tessa responded as she quietly wiped at her eyes. “I just never thought I’d be welcomed this warmly by people my own age. It made me so happy...”

“Oh, is that it?” All members of the group folded their arms and nodded in understanding. “Well, I’m glad you’re okay. If you ever need any help, feel free to ask. Right, Kana-chan?”

“Huh?” Kaname, still sitting in her seat some distance away, looked up, eyes wide.

“Tessa-chan, that’s our class representative, Chidori Kaname-san. She’s also the student council vice president. She’s fluent in English and super reliable, so ask her if you need anything at all,” Kyoko said with a smile. “C’mon, Kana-chan. Come over here.”

“Oh... Sure.” Kaname slowly walked up to the group and spoke in a monotone, like a bad actor reading from a script. “A pleasure to meet you,

Mantissa-san. I'm the class representative. Feel free to ask me anything, from how to use Japanese toilets to how to help out the captain of a hunk-of-junk submarine."

Tessa replied, unfazed and smiling. "Thank you so much, Kaname-san. If I'm ever having trouble in the field of romance, I'm hoping you'll be there for me."

"Oh, of course. Heh heh heh..."

"Much appreciated. Heh heh heh..."

The rest of the class drew back a few steps, intimidated by the exchange for reasons they couldn't quite account for.

By around second period, news of the transfer student in Class 2-4 had made it all through the school.

"Did you see?"

"I saw. It's true!"

"She's gorgeous. Better than the rumors said!"

Such were the conversations among the boys.

Tessa performed well in classes, too. After borrowing a textbook and a few notes from others, she only had to stare at them for a few seconds before being able to answer the teacher's question perfectly. Her third-period physics instructor suffered the most from this—to a girl who had designed the world's most advanced submarine, a basic lecture on thermodynamics was child's play.

But for Sousuke, who was worried about Tessa standing out too much, this was all also extremely exhausting.

Even at lunch break, it was chaos around Tessa. Students from other classes wanted to drop in and see her, including first-years and third-years he didn't know on sight. *What if an assassin has infiltrated the students I don't know, hoping to approach the colonel?!* he fretted. More than a few times, he'd been forced to draw his gun and shout "Stay away from her!" on instinct, confusing everyone around him.

He ate his lunch while remaining extremely on-edge. He could barely even

taste the bread roll, dried meat and tomato, which even his stomach seemed poised to reject. Ignoring its protestations, he washed the roll down with a hard swallow of orange juice.

My exhaustion is reaching unprecedented levels, he realized. He'd barely slept these last four days. Between the report, his homework, Mardukas's visit, and Tessa's... invasion, his life had been particularly stressful lately, especially since the Saturday when Mardukas had arrived.

Obviously, he'd had extreme experiences in the past—spending a week infiltrating a dangerous enemy base without sleep or rest; spending several days in an AS cockpit with nothing to eat, waiting for the enemy's arrival. Compared to that, this trial should have been nothing, but...

He couldn't shake the vague thought that he might not survive this one.

Eventually, the chaotic day began to reach its end.

Fifth period was gym, the one potentially awkward subject for the ever-clumsy Tessa. Since they'd just entered their second term, the subject of the class was swimming. The students gathered around the pool in the northern school building in their swimsuits. Girls from classes 2-3 and 2-4 stood next to the starting blocks, while a group of boys from the same classes were lined up on the opposite shore.

The competitive swimming uniform for the Jindai High girls was a curious one, colored in orange on white. Among those largely light-colored swimsuits, Tessa stood out in a classic indigo one, complete with a white cloth patch in the front that had "2-4 Tessa" written on it. In comparison to the other girls, her short stature and underdeveloped body only made her stand out more.

"What's with the weird fetish costume?" Kaname asked her quietly in English. She herself was taller than Tessa, with more mature proportions.

Tessa, beside her, flushed bright red and wriggled nervously. "Well... Weber-san said that it was a must for attending a Japanese school..."

"That pervert gaijin," muttered Kaname.

"I-Is that why? But Corporal Yang was with him and he said, 'I s-seem to recall

that being the case too.' I'm sure he was being serious..."

"They were in cahoots."

"Oh... That explains why he apologized to me afterwards with tears in his eyes. Perhaps I should sit the class out." Tessa, only now seeming to realize how close to naked she was, tried to hide her body with her arms.

"No, it's fine," Kaname told her. "It does look good on you."

"Really? Then I'm sure Sagara-san will like it... hee hee..."

Kaname said nothing, and the two turned their eyes to the opposite shore. Beyond the crowd of leering boys, they could make out Sousuke, who looked worn to the bone. He was sitting the class out, wearing his usual high-collared uniform, and staring at them, his face pale but expressionless.

The girls' gym teacher gave a toot on her whistle. "All right, enough chatter! And get those towels off! If you act too modest right out of summer break, the boys will know you didn't get any action at all!"

About half the girls cackled in laughter.

"Today we're practicing starts. As competitive swimming comes down to milliseconds..."

Following the teacher's brief lecture, the class started their warm-up exercises, using the first four lanes to get used to the water for a few minutes before jumping into the day's lesson. After a demonstration by the swimming club, the girls took turns jumping from the starting platforms into the water for practice.

"Are you all right?" Kaname asked Tessa, standing beside her.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not going to drown, are you? You have enough trouble walking."

"I... I fall down *very* infrequently," Tessa insisted, "but I'll be fine, really. I can hold my breath for a very long time!"

"I'm not sure that's the issue here..." said Kaname,

Soon enough, Tessa climbed onto the starting board. As Kaname watched

nervously—and all the other students just watched—the signal whistle blew.

“Here I go!” Tessa threw her little body forward clumsily. There was a massive splash, and she disappeared below the water. *Burble burble burble...* A few small bubbles came to the surface, and then the lane that she’d plunged into—the second lane—went silent. Kaname and the others watched for ten seconds, twenty seconds... The pool remained silent beneath the bright sunlight. They waited and waited, but Tessa didn’t surface.

N-No way... Did she hit her head on the bottom and drown? Kaname recalled how often such incidents appeared as human interest stories in the newspaper at this time of year.

It was Sousuke who moved first. Despite still being in his regular uniform, he leaped into the pool from the other end. Jumping past the lane rope into the second lane, he splashed into the water, and swam out like a human bullet.

“Sousuke?!”

While the whole group stared in disbelief, Sousuke sped his way down the second lane into which Tessa appeared to have sunk. He seemed to be searching for her, skimming around recklessly at the pool’s bottom. He surfaced once with a gasp. “Help me find her!” he shouted, and without waiting for an answer, dove down once more.

Kaname, the gym teacher, and several others prepared to leap into the pool, when just then...

Far along the course, almost to the finish line, a little head burst up above the water. It was Tessa.

As Kaname and the others stared, she waved back at them. “How did you like that?! If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s swimming!” she said smugly. Being able to swim over twenty meters without taking a breath was certainly a boast-worthy feat. It would be rather tragic for a submarine captain to be a poor swimmer, after all.

“Oh, don’t scare me like that!” Kaname said in relief.

But Kyoko spoke up trepidatiously behind her. “Hey, Kana-chan? Sagara-kun’s still down there...”

“What?”

“Clothing turns as heavy as lead when it gets wet, you know?” Kyoko reminded her, “and he’s been under the weather all day...”

Kaname scanned the bottom of the pool until she made out a human form lying there, limbs fluttering like seaweed. This time, it was Kaname who dove into the water in a panic.

One minute later, with Tessa’s help, Kaname pulled Sousuke up limply at poolside. It was the most pathetic sight imaginable.

The students looked down at Sousuke in concern.

“Sagara-san... He did that for me?” Tessa’s eyes filled with tears and she knelt down next to him. Her face then turned determined. “Stand back, everyone. I’ll take responsibility to help him recover!”

“Can you do that?” Kaname asked, running her fingers through her wet black hair.

“Of course,” said Tessa. “Watersports are my specialty, after all.”

“I don’t think that’s the phrasing you want...”

“Never mind that. Besides, I’ve committed the US Navy’s entire first aid manual to memory. You have to start with artificial respiration. That’s how it goes—you make sure the patient’s airways are clear. You pinch their nose, then put your lips on theirs... It’s embarrassing, but someone has to do it. Now, if I may...” Tessa drew towards Sousuke, who was groaning quietly. Heart racing, she narrowed her eyes and moved her face close to his. “Sagara-san...”

“Hang on, you!” Kaname grabbed Tessa’s braid from behind.

“Ow, ow, ow!” she cried. “What are you doing? Don’t you care if he dies?”

“He’s not going to die! You just heard him groan! His airways are clear!” Kaname shouted, her face bright red.

“But... that could just be an auditory hallucination! A pure psychological phenomenon, stemming from your unreasonable resistance to letting me have him! You’re hearing voices that aren’t really—”

“Gnnn...” Sousuke groaned.

An uneasy silence fell over everyone, Tessa included. As the entire group watched, she cleared her throat and said, brightly, “Oh, thank goodness! Be careful in the water, everyone!”

“You can’t wrap this up with a pithy phrase, y’know,” Kaname told her tartly.

“Oh, dear... What will I do?”

“You think I care?”

“Don’t say that. It’s cruel!” Tessa shouted, grabbing the hem of Kaname’s swimsuit and weeping.

“Don’t cry and cling to me!” said Kaname, struggling against her.

“Hey... Do you two know each other or something?” Kyoko asked as she watched.

“Huh?”

“I mean, you’re acting pretty buddy-buddy, talking to each other in English... like old friends or something.”

“Er... well...”

While Kaname struggled to give an answer, Tessa answered plainly. “Oh, I ran into Kaname-san just yesterday by chance! I was lost in Chofu and she showed me how to get around. Right?”

“Huh? Oh... right.”

“Oh, so that’s it! No wonder,” Kyoko observed. “Running into a classmate the day before school starts... Total transfer student cliché!”

The whole group clapped their hands in understanding.

“But... what about Sagara-kun?” Kyoko wondered next. “He’s seemed especially worried about you all day. He even dove into the pool to save you, despite not being dressed for it...”

“Yeah, that’s pretty suspicious.”

“Totally. That isn’t normal.”

Kyoko and the others nodded to each other in agreement.

“Oh, well...” Tessa cleared her throat again. “My father and his guardian are old friends. And... we played together often as children.”

“Oho!” said the group, watching as Sousuke began to sit up groggily.

“He saves me when I’m in trouble, encourages me when things are hard... and teaches me all kinds of things. He’s really my... my...” Tessa wrapped her arms around his chest, smiling. “Yes... my most special male friend!”



“My, my!”

Gossip ran through the crowd like a group of bored housewives.

“Oh, no. A rival for Kana-chan?!”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?” Kaname said in panic.

“C’mon, don’t play dumb! Oh... oh, and he’s awake. Hey, Sagara-kun!” Kyoko called.

“What?” he responded, pressing a hand to his forehead as he tried to fully regain consciousness.

“Do you and Tessa-chan have a special relationship?” she asked, brimming with curiosity.

Sousuke looked around in suspicion. “Eh? Ah... affirmative. I can’t reveal the details, but our relationship exceeds whatever you could imagine.”

“Kyaaa,” she squealed. “So bold!”

Sousuke just shook his head in non-comprehension.

As the rest of the group squealed in excitement, Tessa blushed as if to say, *“Oh, don’t tease...”*

Kaname alone simply looked down at Sousuke, expressionless.

“Ch-Chidori?”

“I’m diving next.” She turned around swiftly and walked away to the starting platform.

Sousuke’s mental reserves were reaching their limit. Why did so many awkward problems have to explode on him all at once? None of it made any sense to him. On top of that, when the day ended, he was going to have to share his apartment with Tessa. Just imagining the psychological pressure that would inflict on him was terrifying.

Once fifth period was over, Sousuke used a secret line on his cell phone to connect directly to his superior officer, Major Andrey Kailnin.

“What is it, Sergeant?”

“Andrey Sergeyivich. Tell me the situation. What in the world is happening here? I’m reaching my limit.”

“There’s nothing happening. I sympathize with you, but... Just try to make the best of it.” It was a rare sentiment to hear from Kalinin.

“But by myself—”

“Don’t worry. Mao left the base this morning. Her helicopter should be arriving in Hachijoji Island around now,” Kalinin told him reassuringly. “From there, she can take a civilian Cessna and be in Chofu Airfield by tonight.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Of course. Rest easy tonight.”

“Thank you. Goodbye, sir.” Sousuke was truly relieved.

Fifty minutes later, after classes were over and just as Sousuke was thinking the clouds looked ominous, his cellphone rang. “Yes? Sagara here.”

“Ah, hello?! It’s me!” He could hear his comrade, Melissa Mao, shouting from the other end. Behind her was the sound of powerful rushing wind.

“Mao? Where are you?”

“Um, the airport in Hachijojima! We just arrived, but there’s a typhoon coming in! All flights to Tokyo are canceled!”

“What?!” Sousuke asked in alarm.

“Canceled, I said! So I’ll be stuck here tonight! Look after Tessa, okay?!”

“Wait, you can’t—”

“Guess it’ll be just the two of you! Go on and have your way with her if you want! You have my permission! Oh, you macho man!” Mao said teasingly.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Sousuke yelled. “Are you abandoning your comrade?!”

“Learn what it’s for other than storing water, okay?! See ya! Good luck!”

“Can’t you hear me?! Respond, Uruz-2! Reinforcements needed urgently...

Uruz-2!”

Click. The line went dead.

In the classroom, which was abuzz with students getting ready to go home, Sousuke turned pale. Shakily, he approached Kaname, who was putting textbooks into her bag. “Ch-Chidori...”

“What?”

“I... realize this may be a strange question, but... would you stay at my apartment tonight? Mao was supposed to come, but an... unfortunate issue arose. If you would come instead, I’d be... so grateful...”

“No way. You have a special relationship, right?” Kaname said coldly.

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“Besides, I have plans tonight. Fifty handsome Johnny types are staying in my room tonight, so I don’t have time to deal with a war-obsessed fool like you. Bye!”

“Chidori!”

Kaname stomped off, leaving him entirely on his own.

“What’s the matter, Sagara-san?” asked Tessa, who was holding her bag and wearing her school uniform as she ran towards him.

Those worried gray eyes. That beautiful face. Even I can see that she’s a highly appealing girl, he thought. But why does she make so much trouble for me? Rather, why do I feel so troubled by her? Where does this intense psychological pressure come from? I don’t know. I just don’t.

I’m... I’m finished, he realized. I can’t see. I can’t breathe. My ears are ringing and the back of my mind is sounding alarms. I can just barely remain standing. In fact, am I even standing? The floor of the classroom seems to be rapidly approach—

“Sagara-san?!” Tessa exclaimed.

Sousuke had collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

“We have a communication from Colonel Testarossa. Uruz-7 has collapsed. Reason unknown, but most likely exhaustion...” Sergeant Shinohara, the communications officer, relayed the message at the Merida Island communications center.

“You see that?!” Colonel Mardukas screeched. “I knew it was a mistake to leave her in the hands of that young man! He behaves that way only when our precious captain is around! It’s unacceptable! I’m utterly disappointed!” He sounded outraged, but his manner was that of an ‘I told you so.’ “That’s exactly why I was against it,” he continued to rail. “Someone that soft isn’t worthy of the captain. When her leave ends, I’m going to have to give her a piece of my mind! And perhaps I’ll introduce her to my nephew. He’s a lieutenant in the Royal Marines, a boy with everything to recommend him. Why, in the Gulf War —”

As the lieutenant colonel babbled on and on, Major Kalinin whispered to himself, “I’d likely have collapsed in his place as well.”

“What did you just say, Major?!”

“Oh, nothing.”

“That’s right,” Mardukas continued angrily. “Still, the captain is still a young girl. She’s likely to make mistakes of this sort. If you ask me, young women these days are simply—”

With Kalinin observing him, the lieutenant colonel ranted on and on about his views on family, society, and everything else. Kalinin thought to himself, *I don’t think Sagara’s going to do anything to her...*

“What did you just think, Major?!” Mardukas demanded to know.

“Oh, nothing,” Kalinin responded with a poker face, and then left the communications center behind.

That night, Sousuke was taken back to his apartment by Kaname and Tessa, where he spent the rest of the evening unconscious in his room. The days to come would bring even more shenanigans with Tessa and the students of Jindai High...

But that's a story for another day.

*Author's Note

These are notes and concepts about the *FMP!* world that most people won't care about. I've actually got a pack of setting notes about ten times this long, which could probably fill a volume all their own... but since I feel bad about not providing a proper extra story for this volume, I'm instead presenting a selection of not-too-spoilery entries from those notes. If you don't care about military and mecha stuff, you probably won't find any of this interesting, so I humbly ask forgiveness for my indulgence.

▼ Arm Slave

AKA "AS," "assault soldier," "armored mobile master/slave system."

[History and Uses]

The AS didn't originate from the idea of making giant, piloted robots. Instead, it's an extension of the concept of powered suits and exoskeletons; the initial design was as a piece of squad support equipment, under one ton in mass, designed to enhance a soldier's lifting power and defenses. All such designs, right up to the US military's initial XM3, were conceived with this 'large powered suit' concept in mind, but issues with power generation, electrical output, armoring and firepower kept them out of the realm of practicality, which caused development to stall.

The XM3 itself was a humanoid weapon about three meters tall. It lacked an internal generator, instead relying on a battery-based drive system that limited its operation time. Its armor plating was just strong enough to stop a 12.7mm bullet, and its best armament was a 20mm machine gun. These combined factors made it both logistically infeasible for accompanying an infantry unit and too vulnerable to accompany an armored unit. It also lacked the mobility required to serve in an anti-tank capacity, so its only purpose in the end was as a glorified mule.

It was the Geotron prototype, the XM4, that completely overhauled this neither-fish-nor-fowl idea. Common wisdom in weapons development is “the smaller the better,” but Geotron’s development team decided to go in the completely opposite direction. They submitted a plan to drastically increase the machine’s size, therefore increasing its defensive prowess, mobility, and power generation, as well as carrying capacity for fixed armaments and electronic warfare equipment. The contemporary explosion in material and control system technology is what made the concept feasible.

While this made the XM4 far too large to function as part of an infantry unit, these modifications gave it the attack power, mobility, and scanning power to oppose enemy AFVs (armored fighting vehicles) and armed helicopters. In addition, the flexible limbs of the XM4 allowed it to maintain high speeds on any terrain, and even camouflage itself with appropriate preparation time. In other words, this new AS concept could plausibly serve as an AFV under any battlefield conditions. Having the potential to show up anywhere at any time meant the AS would create massive headaches for any opposing force, representing a similar threat on land that submarines posed on the sea.

The XM4 subsequently proved its usefulness in a variety of exercises, and it was officially adopted in a limited capacity as the “Armored Unit Support Weapon,” the M4. It remained an irregular presence within armored units, primarily reserved for ambushes and urban warfare—but its successor, the M6 Bushnell, would have a far more aggressive personality.

Labeled “the second generation of AS,” the M6 boasted maneuverability and versatility far exceeding that of the M4. While the M4 had slower reaction times that required advanced notice in order to move and change position, the M6 could move even faster than a trained infantryman, allowing its use in far more high-level and coordinated operations. The optional armaments and electronic warfare devices available to it also increased dramatically, further expanding the operations it could undertake and limiting the countermeasures available to any opposing force.

A further refinement of the M6, the M6A1, was pioneering for its integration of the revolutionary stealth device, the ECS. Inclusion of this device made the AS extremely difficult to detect remotely with radar and infrared sensors. The

battlefield conditions this led to—one in which close combat engagements became far more frequent—put the humanoid ASes at an even greater advantage. By the early 1990s, the only places in which tanks and attack helicopters could be said to have a true advantage against ASes were flat terrain, such as fields and deserts. Meanwhile, the new arm slaves boasted an overwhelming advantage on any terrain with lots of ups and downs—in other words, most land with strategic value.

It was during this period that not just the US and the USSR, but all developed nations with sufficient industrial power, began to work on integrating ASes into their militaries, as England, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, and China each developed their own AS models. Meanwhile, OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) also raced each other into this brand-new weapons field, resulting in an explosion of variety in optional armaments and equipment. Many excellent pieces of equipment were made during this time period, as were some hopelessly inferior ones.

In the late 1990s, as the M6 shock first began to wear off, the US army began work on an even more advanced AS concept: the third generation AS, known as the M9 Gernsback. Integration of a palladium reactor and brand-new muscle package system would give the M9 a fully electrified drive train, reducing the machine's base weight. This both vastly increased its stealth abilities and granted it a level of mobility that far eclipsed that of both traditional ASes and combat helicopters. The reduced weight also made the M9 easier to carry on helicopters and transport planes, increasing their deployability.

The elimination of the hydraulic system used in second generation and previous models also opened up the M9's payload, granting it even more options for increased specs (this is why Mithril's M9s have internally mounted weapons racks, ECS, and an embarrassment of riches in terms of sensors and vetronics.) The new muscle packages were themselves also relatively bulletproof, which increased the defensive capabilities of the third generation ASes, while the integration of next-generation ECS also further increased their stealth capabilities. Other major improvements included a highly developed datalink and AI support, which significantly lightened the load on the operator system. (In other words, speed is not the only advantage our protagonists' M9s

have over machines like the Savage and the M6.)

The AS began as a powered suit for infantry, but by the time our story starts, it's a far more advanced and promising armored system. Since they're treasured in the third world where guerrilla fighting is rampant, ASes from major arms exporters like the USA, the USSR, China, and France have proliferated worldwide. As ASes become more and more common, the chances increase of older models falling into the hands of guerrillas and terrorists who don't necessarily have a lot of money to spend. Sousuke, during his Afghani days, was an early forerunner of such guerrillas (having stolen theirs from their enemy, the USSR). The terrorists from "Engage" in the short story collection, and A21 in *ONS*, are further examples of this phenomenon.

Even older models of ASes are a terrifying threat to infantry units and police forces who don't have any of their own. Of course, M9-class cutting-edge machines will only be seen in militaries with significant budgets.

▼ Argyros

One of Mithril's front companies, an international security agency that offers advisors and consultants to aid in companies' crisis management, as well as actual security services. They're known for composing their work force and executive levels primarily with retired military personnel. Most of Mithril's ground forces are employees of Argyros on paper, including Sousuke, Kurz, and Mao. They have their own employee IDs and are enrolled on the company health insurance, and use these identities when they're on vacation in the city.

Incidentally, naval personnel like Mardukas are frequently employed not by Argyros, but by a shipping company called Umatac, or one of Geotron's shipmakers.

▼ NATO Phonetic Alphabet

Amateur radio operators may know this already, but words that appear in the text such as "Alpha" and "November" are used to make sure similar-sounding letters of the alphabet (such as B, D, and G) are conveyed clearly via radio, even

under static. So, in the story, when a character on the radio says something like “Alpha-1,” what they actually mean is “A-1.”

Here’s the list of code words:

A = Alpha, B = Bravo, C = Charlie, D = Delta, E = Echo, F = Foxtrot, G = Golf, H = Hotel, I = India, J = Juliet, K = Kilo, L = Lima, M = Mike, N = November, O = Oscar, P = Papa, Q = Quebec, R = Romeo, S = Sierra, T = Tango, U = Uniform, V = Victor, W = Whisky, X = X-Ray, Y = Yankee, Z = Zulu.

▼ Gas Turbine Engine

These are the engines that power most second-generation ASes. They work by pumping in air, compressing it via turbines, then injecting fuel to combust it. This internal combustion mechanism is similar to that of a jet’s turbofan or a helicopter’s turboshaft engine, with the only difference being the method of power extraction. Its pros? A lightweight system with excellent output and great reliability owing to a simple structure. Its cons? Bad gas mileage.

That said, the gas turbine engines of the *FMP!* world reap the benefits of black technology, which allows them to integrate new materials with increased heat resistance and makes them far more resilient than our own engines. (This idea came from Fujimi Shobo’s Takuzo Suganuma, so let me use this opportunity to say thanks.) Since this reduces overheating issues, the fuel economy of a gas turbine engine is, in practice, about the same as our diesel engines. Of course, if diesel engines are incorporating the same heat-resistant materials, they’ll also have better fuel economy, but... well, this reduction in the efficiency gap at least makes it easier to put more stock in the aforementioned pros.

Because they use gas turbine engines, second-generation ASes are extremely loud when running (exactly like a jet engine, it goes *vreeeeeeeeeeee!* And *whooooosh!*). This adds to their coolness, in its way, but the new M6A3s (which made up the special forces unit that Gauron took out in *ITB*) also have an on-board high-capacity capacitor, allowing them to run silently for a brief time as needed.

In second-generation ASes, the driving force of each joint is generated

through a combination of the expansion and contraction of the electromagnetic muscles (through electric power sent directly from the generator to the engine) and torque transmission from fluid tentacles. Electromagnetic muscles from the second-generation era had excellent spontaneous power, but their overall output was still lacking, which is why this binary drive system was adopted. (This idea came from Ihara, the mecha designer for the anime. His rough images have some amazing power concept designs for the Savage, so check them out if you get a chance). The insufficient output of electromagnetic muscles has been fixed in recent years, which is what allows for the all-electric drive trains of the third-generation ASes (the M9s).

The recent M6A3 and improved Rk-92 make use of the latest high-output muscle packages, so in terms of continuous maximum output, at least, their binary system puts them on even footing with the M9. In an arm-wrestling match, the M6A3 might even beat an M9, if it came in prepared to receive frame damage in the process.

▼ Assault Soldier (Kyoshu Kihei)

The Japanese term for an AS. This word had taken root before the JSDF ever integrated ASes into its forces. In the mid-80s, when the US Armed Forces debuted the M4, a misunderstanding in the media promoted the idea that “AS” was an abbreviation for “Assault Soldier.” This misinformation spread and was translated back into Japanese. In the early 90s, when the Ground Self-Defense Force did begin to incorporate ASes, the use of this “hostile” terminology led to long debates in the Ministry of Defense (the same national character that caused “destroyer” to be translated as “escort ship” and “infantry” as “general enrollment”).

The Minister of Defense at the time thought up the rather sad term “armored mobile master-slave system,” but like the “E-den” term for the Japanese subway, it didn’t stick. The localized Japanese word for “Assault Soldier” (kyoshu kihei) became the default term. The “armored mobile master-slave system” term is still only used in extremely limited public documents.

Incidentally, those in the field just call it an AS.

▼ Undersea Supersonic Projectile Fluid Dynamics

The essay Tessa was reading in the “R&R” story. I based the idea on research published on the website of the NUWC (US Naval Undersea Warfare Center) a few years back (between 97 to 99 or so), which proposed the idea of objects traveling at supersonic speeds even underwater. The NUWC collaborated with DARPA (the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) and civilian contractors to experiment with firing small underwater projectiles at 1549 meters per second.

Rationally speaking, it’s probably impossible to build a supersonic submarine (and who would ever need to?) but the concept is out there, at least. In our setting, even the world’s fastest submarine, the TDD, still has a maximum speed far below the speed of sound. The famed Russian superfast torpedo, the Shkval, also only moves five to six times faster than the TDD (and is supposedly useless in the real world).

The field of undersea supersonic projectiles is a largely unexplored one, so even the use cases are only vaguely known. That said, an intercept system for approaching torpedoes—an underwater version of a CIWS (close-in weapons system, like Phalanx or Goalkeeper)—has been raised as one such possibility. I don’t know if they’ll ever be able to make such a thing practical, but it might be handy in various ways if they could (at least for fictional purposes). That said, NUWC recently took down all the information they’d published about it, so maybe someone decided the idea really had potential, gave it some funding, and now they’re working on it in secret.

Convenient though it may be, by the way, the TDD doesn’t have a supersonic intercept system like the one mentioned above. If a torpedo is coming at it, its only option is to fire a decoy and run. But as Tessa is a superweapons nerd, she likes to read essays like this and fantasize about how she could make a system like that lighter, cheaper, and more practical.

▼ The Old Man From Nantucket

An ID code Tessa uses in *ONS* to get in touch with the TDD. It’s from a limerick, a kind of comical five-line poem that often ends in a pun.

The “Old Man From Nantucket” poem goes like this:

There was an old man from Nantucket

Who kept all his cash in a bucket

But his daughter named Nan

Ran away with a man

And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

You can really hear the pun; “Nantucket” at the end is a pun on “Nan took it.” I felt like it somewhat reflected the situation in *ONS*. The old man is A21, the bucket is Takuma, Nan is Tessa, and the man she runs away with is Sousuke.

▼ Boxer

A powerful short-barreled 57mm AS shotcannon designed by OTO Melara. It tended to have issues with handling and accuracy in M6-class machines, but packs a real punch when wielded by M9 and ARX-7 class machines, so it’s Sousuke’s preferred weapon. Structurally, it resembles a Mauser. It’s compatible with all kinds of ammunition, from APFSDS to HESH projectiles. As befitting a scaled-up shotgun, there’s no rifling in the barrel. It’s a shorter and structurally different version of the smoothbore guns that Kurz often uses.

Its finicky nature earns it mixed reviews from those in the business—when Kurz first met Sousuke, he was shocked to see him choose the Boxer as his weapon. In terms of human-sized firearms, it’s as strange as someone on a SWAT team using a .44 Magnum revolver. (Of course, snipers like Kurt have a tendency to look down on shotguns regardless. They respect the power, but find the concept of a shotgun itself aesthetically displeasing.)

Of course, as readers know, Sousuke can wield the Boxer just fine. No one on the team complains about his choice anymore, but Sousuke usually urges others not to imitate his behavior.

▼ Muscle Package

The muscles of an AS. These packages were first integrated into second-

generation machines, allowing them to be swapped in and out easily. With hydraulic cylinders and air pressure out of the question, they became an indispensable part of the AS, bringing together three crucial conditions: fine motor control, spontaneous power, and high output. They boast ten times the power of human muscle relative to cross-sectional area, and are made from a special resin known as shaped memory plastic that expands and contracts when a current is run through it. This material is extremely lightweight, which makes ASes roughly as light as aircraft despite being land weapons. Recent models not only have much higher output than before, but also offer some degree of resistance to bullets.

Though the muscles expand and contract in response to electric current, it's not merely a matter of more current = better; it's important to supply the right amount of power at just the right time. All actuator types have a max current, and flooding will just wear out the system without increasing output. In addition, an AS's muscle package will lose performance with use, gradually lowering efficiency (the FOE, or fiber oxidization effect). Fine breakages in the muscle fibers produce the same symptoms as muscle pain in humans, but because they lack self-regenerative properties, the phenomenon only gets worse with time.

As a benchmark, most ASes used in live combat require muscle package replacements after ten sorties (or combat trainings). After ten uses, FOE results in max current (\neq max output) falling to 70% of new. This can present budget and readiness issues for the squads and armies using them, so there are organizations that don't replace them even after twenty uses, and organizations (like the JSDF) that replace them after five. Special forces in organizations like Mithril always need to have their ASes running at maximum ability, so they replace all muscle packages after just one battle.

There are also muscle packages that offer limited FOE in exchange for a lower output. These are usually employed for training purposes. The output of these training packages is 70 to 80% of normal, but they last two to three times longer than the live combat ones.

In other words, there are two types of muscle packages: high-quality ones, and training sets. This is similar to what you find in engine oil and ammunition.

There are also muscle packages of various thicknesses, similar to what you find in spaghetti and ammunition. An engineer will order muscle packages in a manner like, “Twenty Delta Chemical, 56mm No. 3 MP.”

When regional conflicts are on the horizon, the AS engineers for the armies involved tend to get very busy swapping training MPs for live combat ones. Right after the swap is complete, all of the system’s MPs must be fine-tuned to the system. Israel makes the best software for this, while Japan makes some of the worst—because there’s no competition, the system is completely bloated. The Type-96s that were destroyed by the Behemoth in *ONS* didn’t have time to run their software and were therefore forced to deploy with their training MPs in play. Had they had their combat MPs installed, they might’ve put up a better fight.

▼ CH-67 (MH-67)

A twin-engine mid-size transport helicopter developed through a joint venture led by Sikorsky and Martin-Marietta in the early 90s. Its primary purpose is the transportation of weapons systems, ASes in particular. It’s a compact version of the H-53 helicopter, based deliberately on a mainline concept with no eccentricities. But since it integrates 90s era technology, it has similar takeoff capacity, speed, and carrying distance compared to the MH-53, despite its size. It’s also very reliable and easy to maintain. It’s standard to haul a single AS alongside its optional armaments, but for emergencies it is capable of carrying two ASes at once (in this case, optional armaments have to be abandoned.)

The TDD carries eight MH-67s, which are slight upgrades to the CH-67. The MH-67s of the TDD are equipped with an ECS capable of turning invisible. Their fixed armaments consist of one 12.7mm machine gun (the same type as the one mounted to the M9’s head) and two M134 miniguns. They can also fire AGM Hellfires and Stinger missiles if needed.

Incidentally, the common name for the MH-67 is the Pave Mare.

▼ EMFC (Electromagnetic Fluid Controller)

The electromagnetic fluid controller is the Tuatha de Danaan's "smart skin." The craft's surface is covered in lines of super-mini superconductive devices, guiding water in the desired direction under Fleming's left-hand rule (when a current-carrying conductor is placed in an external magnetic field, the conductor experiences a force perpendicular to both the field and the current flow's direction.) In addition to eliminating water resistance, use of this system limits the generation of turbulence. This, combined with its superconductive propulsion, allows for speed and quietness unthinkable in submarines that came before it.

Even when not in combination with other methods of propulsion, EMFC alone can propel the TDD in any direction underwater (though such movement will be slow—just a little over five knots.) After the near miss with the Pasadena at the start of *ITB*, the TDD managed to hide itself from detection by using the "sneaking steps" enabled by the EMFC to continue moving just behind or beneath the scanning range of the Pasadena's short-wave arrays. If Sailor had wanted to find the TDD under these circumstances, he'd have to lift silent running, barrel forward at maximum volume and speed, then do a sudden 180 turn... in other words, he'd have to pull a Crazy Ivan. Of course, Tessa knew this as well, and made sure to keep her submarine underneath the Pasadena... which meant the ability to catch traces of turbulence behind them would have been up to the skill of the Pasadena's sonar tech.

With all this in mind, the EMFC could be called the TDD's greatest strength. I was hoping to explain more about how it works in the main story, but it was too far outside the interests of the Fantasia Bunko audience, so I restrained myself.

It's not quite this advanced, but in real life, a similar project is currently under development at the NUWC.

▼ Amphibious Assault Submarine

A submarine designed to carry land units into enemy territory and mount swift and sudden raids. The TDD is the prime example. These submarines don't exist in real life (though plans for them do). Risk, operational cost, cost-effectiveness, and technological issues make them an extremely unrealistic

platform if you think about them seriously (though they're very fun to have in entertainment). In the case of the TDD, extremely high speeds to prevent pursuit, silent running while either submerged or surfaced, and the ability to use ECS after surfacing make them great cheats in the world of fiction, so they're useful for the first time.

Incidentally, the following has been written about these submarines in the world of the story:

* * * * *

〈Excerpt from 'Annals of Underwater Development' from British Armed Forces Analyst T. Brooks.〉

Amphibious Assault Submarine

The idea of a submarine as a means to port ground forces into enemy territory to mount guerrilla-style raids is a surprisingly old one. The US Navy had several transport submarines in use at the time of World War II. The old Japanese military also had similar plans, but never brought them to fruition.

The reason the concept of an amphibious submarine never became practical is obvious. Any submarine, by its nature, will have hard limits on its carrying capacity. Securing space for troop transport means that other functionalities must be sacrificed. Even if special production lines were used to build them, troop transport capacity would likely max out at about one company's worth, and combat results and deterrence capability would likely not be worth the exorbitant expenditures required.

In spite of all this, in the late 1980s, the Soviet Union began work on construction of these obviously absurd vessels, with the intention of transporting the new weapon, the arm slave. The submarine, which they labeled Project 985, was a refinement of the transport submarine plans first proposed in the 70s, reborn through the latest technology. With a sturdy three-hull design, its total length came to approximately 180 meters. If completed, it would have become the world's largest submarine, surpassing the Typhoon-class ballistic missile submarine.

But construction on Project 985 halted in the early 1990s as an effect of the coup d'état and ongoing civil war. Failure to pay wages, material shortages, and

a refusal of technicians and laborers to work led to the unfinished vessel gathering dust in the Severodvinsk drydock for fourteen months. The military authorities designated its completion hopeless, and officially canceled production. It was then towed to the Arctic Ocean, where it was detonated and abandoned at a depth of several thousand meters. (Much of this information is unconfirmed. One hears the odd theory that the incomplete hull was hauled away and purchased by the Chinese government, but the credibility on these is low.)

One way or another, the vessel was scrapped. If Project 985 truly had any legitimate strategic worth, it wouldn't have been. Thus, I believe it can be said that the amphibious assault submarine is nothing but a large toy for childish idealists.

To symbolize the degree to which this is the case, there's a particular anecdote I like to tell. Several years ago, I attended a conference at the NUWC where I spoke about the tragicomedy of Project 985. Among the listeners was a girl of twelve or thirteen years of age (most likely the daughter of an NUWC official). This charming little lady with ash blonde hair shook my hand and said to me,

"Mr. Brooks. You call the vessel a child's toy, but I believe you don't give it enough credit. I will repurpose it into something wonderful—the world's greatest submarine."

This wonderfully innocent declaration was met with scornful laughter from all in attendance.

▼ Glock19

An automatic pistol made by the Austrian Glock Ges.m.b.H. Its caliber is 9mm, and its capacity is 15 + 1 (if memory serves.) It's a slightly more compact version of the Glock 17, made by the same company.

The G17 is famous as the first gun to use drastically reinforced plastic parts in its frame and elsewhere. Due to the quantity of plastic used in its makeup, it was originally rumored to not show up on scanners and metal detectors at the airport, but that was untrue (even McClane in *Die Hard 2* spread this rumor,

which was disappointing). The slide and other crucial parts are still metal, so if you tried to pass it through bag inspection, the inspector would know immediately that you had a gun.

Its main distinguishing features are its trigger-only safety and double-action design that cocks and releases the hammer in one action. In other words, it's a very inconvenient gun for fiction, since it takes scenes where the awesome veteran tells a beginner 'You have to remove the safety first' or the bad guy cocks the hammer to prove he's just about to shoot off the table. Because of this, I sometimes regret giving this gun to my protagonist.

The G19 has been frequently established as Sousuke's preferred firearm, but although he uses it all the time in the short stories, around this point in the novels (up to Part 2 of *DBD*), he hasn't fired it once. In other words, the G19 has barely gotten any spotlight in the story. In that sense, it's rather a strange gun for our protagonist to be wielding. In the novels, Sousuke is a very rational person, and the threats he deals with are quite substantial, so he tends to prepare more substantial firepower like shotguns, submachine guns, and assault rifles.

The G19 isn't the best gun for elite soldiers by any means, but their portability, concealability, reliability, and carrying capacity gives them a passing mark. The trigger safety mentioned before (designed to release just by putting your finger on the trigger) means that sometimes just drawing the gun can trigger an accidental discharge... at least, there are famous stories about that, but maybe it says something about me that I think such things are the result of the incompetence of their wielders. Well, maybe I shouldn't go quite that far, but given the skill, experience, and coolheadedness of protagonist-class fictional characters, it feels like those sorts of accidents shouldn't be possible for them (unlike police who don't draw their guns half as often, right?).

Sousuke himself doesn't seem to have any particular obsession with anything other than the G19, but Mao does, having bought her expensive high-quality SOCOM.

Afterword

This book consists of rewrites of short stories that ran in Dragon Magazine's June and November 2000 issues, its June 2001 issue, and its October 2000 extra edition, plus a little bonus track.

So, um... well... the next book out was supposed to be another novel, but I kept having to put it off, and this is the result. Plus, it's completely lacking an original story... I'm really sorry about that. It's all the result of my own lack of discipline and experience. I truly am sorry (kowlows).

I'd like to use this opportunity to talk about the state of the *FMP!* series as of June 2002. The novel series will, starting at the end of last month (May 2002) be serialized in *Monthly Dragon Magazine*. After it's published in portions for about six months, I'll go back to publishing the school comedy stuff for a period of time (for those who love the short stories, the comedy will continue, so don't worry.)

I've been so slow in my releases, people have begun to speculate that I'm sick of *FMP!*, but that's not the case at all. On the contrary, I've been killing myself trying to figure out how to conclude the series in a way I'm satisfied with. It leaves me feeling like I'm trapped in a maze of my thoughts. (As I said earlier, the novel I'm currently working on will have a fairly light feel, of course, but...) Lately, though, I've finally started working things out. I've more or less made up my mind about how the main characters will end up, and I've thought up about ten scenes I'm really confident in. I hope that if I can focus on how best to execute them, I can finish up a really good story.

Of course, that's all far in the future. For now, let's do our usual commenting on each story.

"Uncooperative Blue Bird"

When I reread the version of this published in the magazine, I was so taken aback by the shoddiness of the writing that I screamed, ran away from my

computer, and remained trembling in bed for a while. So I basically did a whole lot of rewriting here. Incidentally, I don't have any experience with picking up girls. I did go out for a good time with a girl I met at an izakaya once long ago, but I'm just really bad at that kind of thing.

“Off-Target Emotion”

When I reread the version of this published in the magazine, I was so surprised by the shoddiness of the plotting that I (you get it.) This is another major rewrite. Tsubaki is such a manga-style character, not the kind I write about very often at all. As the series gets longer, characters like this become more necessary, and I consciously force myself to include them. Fortunately, this means that lately I'm getting used to them.

“An Error-Ridden Sentence”

This is a story that basically only works in written form. It was fun writing imitations of various styles. Incidentally, Mizuhoshi-sensei's complex phrases are picked at random from Hakuyosha's book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. It's a really heavy read, but the contents are pretty fun, so I recommend challenging yourself with it some time.

“A Past-Deadline Romance”

I was part of the movie club in college. We never made anything but silly, hopeless movies, so it was a lot of fun. (If I tell you we made movies with titles like *The Miracle Monkey-Man* or *Fart Person Poo*, you'll probably get the idea.) But recently, Tsukiji-san, writer of *Maburaho*, told me that I was in a film showing at an independent screened film with “dog” in the title and asked if it was true. I know nothing about it. I've never run around wielding a shotgun or danced half-naked while wearing a bow tie.

“The Fifth Period Hot Spot”

I wrote this right after concluding the extremely serious part 2 of *DBD*. I really wanted to come back from that with a totally over-the-top silly story. If I took

one wrong step, it could enter the territory of *Harenchi Gakuen*. Risky business. It could be the end of the series itself... Still, I didn't rewrite this story at all. And I like it quite a bit.

“The Goddess Comes to Japan (Suffering Chapter)”

It feels wrong not to have an original story, but I did a rework of one of those rare special chapters appearing in a magazine's extra issue. It's a follow up to *ITB*, and it's a bit over the top, but that can be nice now and then. I'm preparing follow-ups to this story, by the way. “Part-time Job Chapter” and “Braintrust Conference Chapter.” Lots of stuff between short story and novel characters who don't get to meet each other often.

“Excerpts from the Author's Classified Notes”

I felt a little bad about not including an original story, so I included some excerpts from my setting notes. I was hoping to keep it brief, but... I know a lot of people aren't interested in that sort of thing. Please don't hold it against me.

Last time around, I asked readers to submit titles for this short story collection, and (in Japanese) we settled on *Unreliable Six Legal Codes?*. It was a pretty makeshift contest, so I assumed I'd be lucky to get just ten entries, but the response was really something else. I got several hundred submissions, and I was so incredibly grateful.

A lot of people submitted the title I ended up using, so they're all receiving a free book with an original telephone card. A lot of people also requested the second-place finisher, *Useless Six Legal Codes?*. It was a very close call, so I'll send a prize to people who submitted that title too as a consolation prize.

And sorry to those whose titles weren't accepted. Thank you so much. I read them all.

Incidentally, for volume 7... There's a lot to choose from (in Japanese), so I'll probably figure it out by myself. The next tough one is... 9? I feel like I can make 8 work.

Sorry this afterword got so long. Once again, I appreciate everybody's patience. To my editor and everyone involved, and Shikidouji-sensei, thank you as always. And Ryo Mizuno-sensei, who warmly encouraged me when I was feeling low, and Takuzo Suganuma, thank you so much.

Until next time, when Kaname's fan will roar again.



**"Knock it off
already!"**

**The hot dog cut
to look like an
octopus was cast
aside, along with
Mizuki's innocent
dreams of love.**

**FULL METAL PANIC!
INEVITABLY SIX FEET UNDER?**

As they walked
through the
park at dusk,
side by side,
even the
normally
oblivious
Sousuke felt
flustered.



**Tears streamed
from Eri's eyes.
Kozue said calmly,
"I guess that would
hurt, huh, Senpai?"**





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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 6

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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