

INTRIGUING ONE-MAN BAND?



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METAL  
PANIC!  
! — O —  
SHORT STORIES

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ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

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# Man from the South

*I love you.*

*Your sincere gaze, your dignified countenance, your confident walk; I watch you from afar and sigh with longing. I wish I had the courage to tell you how I feel, but writing this letter was the best I could do. I know I'm a coward. You can mock me if you like. Thinking of you makes my heart race so fast that I think it might burst. If only it would stop beating and put me out of my misery...*

*Do you think we could meet up and talk? It's all right if you don't return my feelings. I just want to talk to you. I'll be waiting behind the gym after school.*

●

The gaunt head teacher opened the door with a shout. “Madame Principal!”

Needless to say, he was at the door to the principal’s office.

The principal—a short, middle-aged woman in a fine red suit—was seated at her desk in the middle of the room. “You don’t have to shout. What’s the matter, now?” she asked with annoyance, laying the morning paper (which she’d only just begun to read) down on her desk.

The head teacher thrust a sheaf of documents at her. “Madame Principal, have you seen this?!”

“Seen what?” said the principal. “Aha...” It was a stack of invoices: two hundred thousand yen for replacement windows; sixty thousand for floor tiles; a hundred and ten thousand for wall repair; sixty-five thousand to replace used fire extinguishers... In all, the total came to four hundred and thirty-five thousand. “Goodness!” she exclaimed. “This was just for last month?”

“Just for last *week*!” said the head teacher. “It’s been like this ever since that transfer student came!”

“Transfer student? What transfer student?”

“Sagara! Sagara Sōsuke!” the head teacher screamed, thrusting the

student's documentation at her, with a picture attached. It showed a boy with a sullen expression, a tight frown, disheveled black hair, stern eyebrows, and a sharp gaze. He radiated a strange sort of tension, an almost murderous air that seemed completely out of place on a high school student.

"Oh, him..." mused the principal.

"Madame Principal. I have worked at vocational schools that cater to the absolute worst of the worst, yet I've never seen a problem child like Sagara Sousuke," the head teacher declared. "In my entire career, I've never witnessed property damage and class disruptions on the level of—"

"Excuse me, sir," the principal interjected. "I believe I have explained Sagara Sousuke-kun's background in the past?"

"You mean the fact that he was raised abroad?"

"Indeed. And not merely 'abroad,' but in some of the world's most unstable war-torn regions. His guardian was a Russian mercenary, of all things!"

"But that's no reason to let him get away with breaking windows!" the head teacher protested. "Just yesterday, I hear he confused a softball flying in from the courtyard for a grenade and—"

"Excuse me!" the principal said, interrupting her colleague. "Sagara-kun is a *victim* of war. He has been traumatized by the horrors of battle, and it is our duty to heal that trauma as best we can. I know that it's frequently said that the Japanese people are addled by peace, but..."

"You think he's addled by war?" the head teacher asked incredulously.

"Yes," said the principal firmly, folding up the newspaper (the *Asahi Shimbun*) on her desk. "To take in someone scarred by war and guide him to a better way... As beneficiaries of uninterrupted peace ourselves, isn't that our responsibility?"

"So you just want me to look the other way?"

"Precisely."

"And that anonymous donation I've heard mention of in the Board of Education—"

“Has nothing to do with it.”

“I heard it was quite a significant sum—”

“You may go now!” said the principal, pointing at the exit.

“So sleepy,” said Chidori Kaname with a yawn from beneath the clear blue sky. She was a girl with a delicate, slender face and striking, slightly almond-shaped eyes. Her long black hair, bound just at the bottom, swayed back and forth with each step she took. “So very... very sleepy...” She stood about 165 centimeters tall, but she looked taller, perhaps because the girl walking beside her was so short.

“You’re *so* not a morning person, Kana-chan,” said her companion and classmate, Tokiwa Kyoko.

“Mmm... Yeah, I’m really not. Wanna sleep.”

Kaname’s school, Jindai High, sat along a privately owned rail line on the outskirts of Tokyo. It was a completely unremarkable school, close to the station’s shopping area and nestled between a forest and a temple. The two girls passed through the school’s front gate and proceeded directly into the building.

“You all studied up for today’s quiz?” Kyoko asked, peering at Kaname through her round glasses as she slipped her vocabulary cards back into her bag.

“Ha ha ha... Those hairy barbarians’ language is nothing. I have a harder time with my first morning crap!” Kaname declared.

Kyoko’s glasses slipped abruptly down her nose. “Kana-chan... It’s a little early in the morning for that kind of potty mouth.”

“Oh, chill. I’m just so...” she yawned. “So tired in the mornings. Gotta find a little punch somewhere... Huh?” Kaname stopped to observe that a nervous crowd had formed in a corner of the entryway hall, around one of the many shoe cupboards that lined it. “What’s going on?” she asked. “That’s the shoe cupboard for our class, isn’t it?”

“Given how these things usually go... it’s probably got to do with *him*,” Kyoko predicted.

“Him? Oh... right. *Him*.” Kaname said direly. Then she strode boldly through the onlookers until she reached the shoe cupboard in question.

“Sousuke!” she proclaimed to the boy she found there, who was pressing a stethoscope to one of the cubbies and listening intently. He wore a sullen expression and tight frown, as well as the same high-collared uniform as the other male students.

He twitched as she called to him, apparently surprised at having been so suddenly addressed. “Keep your voice down, Chidori,” said the boy—Kaname’s classmate, Sagara Sousuke—with a hint of urgency. He had the area five meters around him bound off with yellow tape that had the words “Caution: Keep Out.” printed on it in black.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Kaname demanded. “People can’t get by!” She stepped recklessly over the tape and strode right up to Sousuke.

Sousuke held up a hand. “Stay back,” he warned her. “It’s dangerous.”

“What’s dangerous?”

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he pointed to the cubby in question—his own. “It’s a bomb,” he told her.

“Huh?”

“I noticed telltale signs of tampering,” he explained. “They may have rigged it to explode upon opening.”

Kaname just stood there, her head of righteous fury quickly slipping away. “Um... Wait, are you saying someone messed with your shoe cubby?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re assuming they set a *bomb*?” she asked incredulously.

“Precisely.”

*Quite a leap of logic... Kaname thought. More like a warp jump, really.*

She pressed her fingers to her temples. “Sousuke,” she began, “I know you

grew up in war-torn regions like Bosnia and Afghanistan. But Japan is at *peace*. We just don't have the kinds of lunatics who'd set a bomb in a person's shoe cubby here!"

"If only that were true," he said. A closer look revealed that Sousuke's face was tense and pale from stress. "Such individualized terrorist acts are in fact the most likely kind seen in peaceful nations. A retired United States Navy captain recently had his head blown off by a mail bomb. I can't afford to let my guard down."

"Lots of people out to kill you, huh?" Kaname asked, voicing her skepticism.

"Yes," agreed Sousuke, with total sincerity. "I have made many enemies in my time. It could be Soviet KGB assassins, or mercenaries working with a drug cartel. I can't rule out fundamentalist Islamic terrorists either..."

"You have way too many weird friends. How'd you even know someone messed with your cubby?"

"I placed an inconspicuous hair into the seam of the door," he told her. "This morning, the hair was gone."

"Hang on. You put a hair in the seam of your cubby door *every time*?"

"Yes. Is it that unusual?"

*Is this guy okay?* Kaname was starting to get seriously worried. She'd seen him in action once before and knew that he was for real, yet she couldn't completely shake the feeling that he suffered from massive delusions of grandeur.

"At any rate, I want to inspect the inside of the cubby," Sousuke continued. "I intend to insert a fiberscope from behind to identify the nature of the trap."

"Uh, you walk around with all that stuff?" she asked.

"I keep a tool kit in my locker for times just like these."

"Times just like *what*?"

Sousuke attached a device resembling an 8mm video cassette case to a black tube and flicked on the light at the end. He then checked the battery on his electric drill and cautiously resumed preparations for his inspection.

“C’mon, Sousuke, class is gonna start soon,” said Kaname. “I promise you there’s no bomb. If you’re too afraid to open it, why not just leave it be?”

“I can’t. Too dangerous.”

He seemed so certain, yet Kaname still couldn’t imagine there being a bomb of any kind in play. “Then clear it up fast,” she told him exasperatedly. “Don’t use an endoscope or whatever like you’ve got all the time in the world.”

“Yeah! Yeah!” The students, watching from afar, voiced their agreement with Kaname.

“Just finish it, Sagara!”

“We can’t stand around forever!”

He nodded slightly in the face of their jeers. “I see. That will require a rather more extreme solution, but...” Sousuke pulled a large tube from his bag, squeezed out a piece of brown clay from within, and stuck it to the outside of his shoe cubby.

“What is that, toothpaste?” Kaname asked suspiciously.

“No...” Once the clay was attached, he implanted a device that looked like a four-battery pack, then pulled out a tape cassette-sized remote control. “Please step back. No, farther.” Sousuke shouldered his tool kit and retreated to a safe distance, pushing Kaname along with him.

Her expression remained dubious. “Hey, c’mon,” she insisted. “What’s that clay stuff?”

“Plastic explosives.”

“Um—”

Sousuke removed the safety from the detonator remote and shouted at the spectators, “Fire in the hole! Cover your ears and open your mouths! Is that understood? Starting now!” Despite his warnings, not one of the students did as they were told, and before Kaname could try to stop him, Sousuke pressed the red button on the remote.

“Don’t—”

*Bwooooom!!!*

A shock wave rippled through the entry hall as everyone present was thrown to the floor. Tiny flames licked at the ceiling, splinters went flying, and white smoke filled the room. The recoil from the explosion had tipped over the entire Class 2-4 shoe cabinet, scattering slippers everywhere. Some people were coughing from smoke inhalation, some were cringing from the sudden noise, some were weeping over the sight of their burned Air Max sneakers...

“Hmm.” Souseki stood up swiftly. “It seems there wasn’t a bomb after all.”

“How can you tell?” Kaname stood up, a little more awkwardly. She was so overwhelmed by it all that she’d briefly forgotten to be angry.

“I only heard one explosion. Besides, look at the other side of the box: completely unscathed. Had it truly been rigged with a bomb, the explosion would have come out the other side, accompanied by shrapnel to increase lethality.” Souseki unpacked the tragedy he’d just wrought with great precision, gesturing slightly to help with visualization.

“So, you messed up everyone’s morning for no reason, huh?” she asked.

Souseki was silent for a while. Then he said, “No, my precautions were necessary. Detonation is the safest way to deal with unknown quantities. My judgment was correct.”

“Youuu...” Kaname snarled, snatching up a slipper from the floor and using it immediately to slap Souseki on the head.

“Ouch,” he said stoically.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” she fumed. “What am I supposed to tell the teachers?!”

“You’re the student council vice president. Use your authority to—”

“Yeah, right! Why should I— Ah!” A flaming scrap of paper landed just then on Kaname’s shoulder. She quickly brushed it off onto the floor, then started stomping on it to put out the fire.

“Ah... Wait,” said Souseki, squatting down to seize her ankle.

“Hey! What are you doing?!” Kaname shrieked, struggling to hold her

balance.

Without sparing a single glance at her leg, Sôsuke picked up the tattered scrap of cloth.

“What now?” Kaname demanded.

Sôsuke stared at the strip of paper. “It has my name on it. It appears to be a letter.”

“A letter? Oh, guess it is...”

Half-hidden by the soot, Kaname could just make out the word “Sagara.”

“Now, Chidori-kun. Could you tell me how the fire this morning started?” The question came from Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the student council president, whose back was to the noon sun streaming in through the window.

Hayashimizu had a long oval face, slicked-back hair, and wire frame glasses that he wore over narrow, intelligent eyes. In stark contrast to Sôsuke, he projected an air of calm authority, and his dignity seemingly went unchallenged by the presence of the two people sitting sulkily across from him.

The student council room was on the fourth floor of the southern school building, with a view of the whole courtyard.

“Can you tell me why I should, Senpai?” Kaname grumbled. She and Sôsuke had been called to the student council room by PA announcement during lunch break that day.

“You were a witness to the incident,” Hayashimizu reminded her, “and you’re my right hand.”

“I’m not your right hand,” she objected hotly. “I’m just the vice president!”

“Even so, I require objective witness testimony. Please tell me what you saw.”

“Not exactly sure what you want me to say...” *Sôsuke blew up a shoe cubby. What else is there to explain?* Kaname thought. But while she struggled to find the right words to express that...

“I will explain myself, Mr. President,” said Sôsuke, who had been silent up

until now.

“Please do.”

“Sir. At 0815 hours today, I arrived at school and identified the presence of a suspicious object in my shoe cubby.”

“A suspicious object?”

“My initial reading was an explosive device, but I wasn’t certain,” Sousuke admitted. “Regardless, it was clear that my shoe cubby had been tampered with. Vice President Chidori and a small crowd of students objected to my attempts to investigate more cautiously, so I resorted to a swifter method of disposal.”

“Hmm,” said Hayashimizu. “Which was...?”

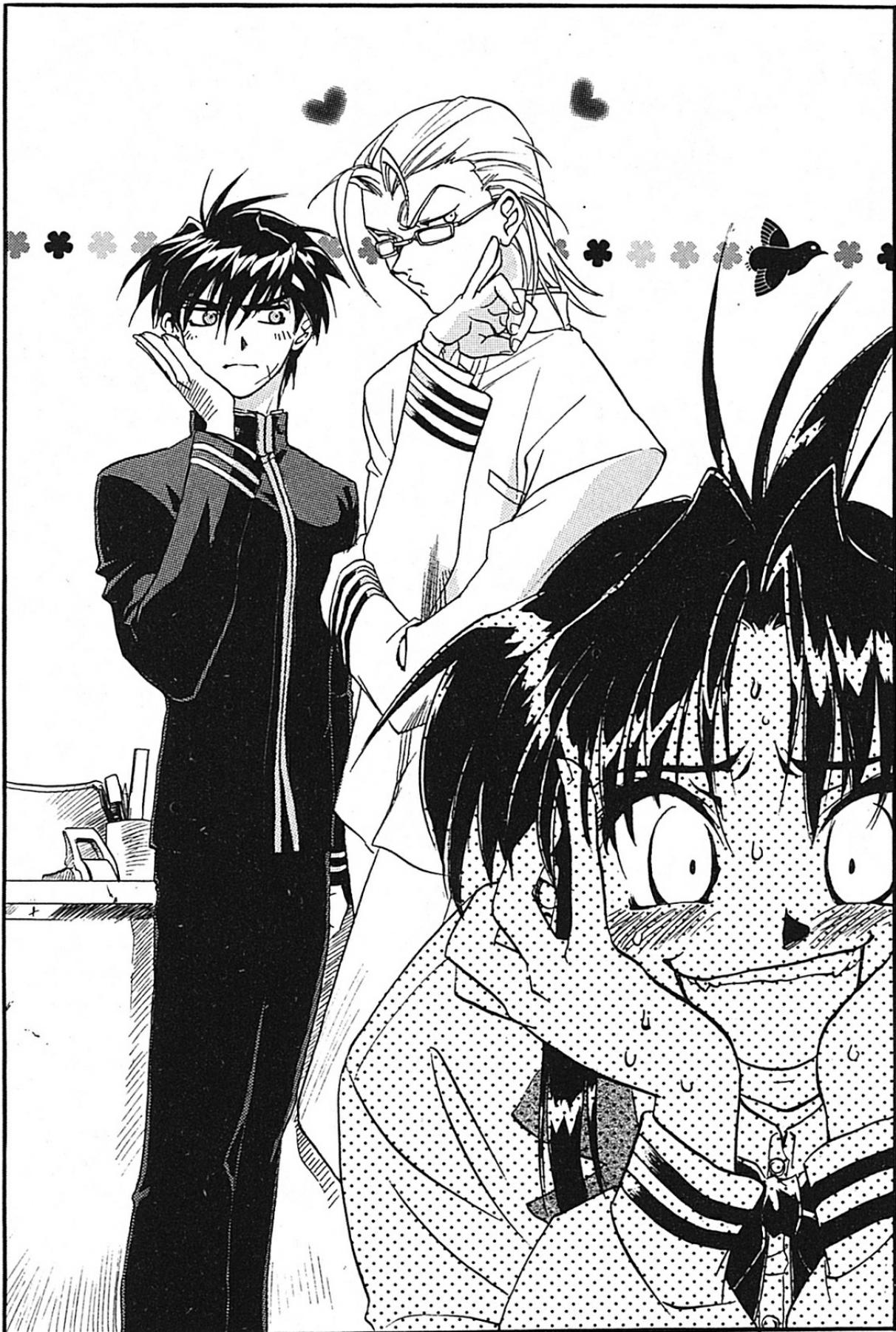
“Detonation via high-performance explosive.”

“Detonation?!” Hayashimizu’s eyes flashed, and it was clear to Kaname that he was angry.

*Ah, perfect! she thought. Sousuke respects the president. If he gives him a good scolding, maybe he’ll finally tone down the craziness!*

While she watched in anticipation, Hayashimizu took in a deep breath, then said solemnly, “I see. That *would* settle the matter swiftly, wouldn’t it?”

Kaname fell backwards, tipping over one of the room’s tables.



The two boys turned to her, both of them frowning unhappily.

“What’s wrong with Chidori?”

“She can be a very dramatic girl sometimes.”

“Senpai! You really don’t see anything wrong with this?” Kaname demanded.

“Students just can’t blow up their shoe cubbies!”

“This one clearly can.”

“It was a figure of speech!”

“I’m aware. But you appear to have missed my point...” Hayashimizu nudged his glasses up his nose, a sign that he was about to launch into his personal specialty—the rhetorical argument. “Chidori-kun,” he said next, “let’s assume that a strange man places a package on your doorstep. You pick it up and hear scratching sounds from within: it’s faintly warm, and smells obscene. You likely know what’s in the package. Would you nevertheless open it to confirm its contents?”

Kaname’s face contorted in disgust. “No way. I’d throw it out.”

“In your apartment’s wastebasket?”

“No, in a plastic bag outside the building!”

“Agreed,” said Hayashimizu. “But what if, rather than a package, all these things applied to your shoe cubby? You wouldn’t be able to take it outside. You’d have no choice but to blow it up.”

“Uh, is that the same thing?” she questioned.

“It is,” the president said pretentiously, turning his gaze up to the ceiling. “It was clear to him that there was something unpleasant in the shoe cubby. Detonating it was the natural response.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I will smooth things over with the faculty, then.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sousuke said with a salute.

“Indeed. That’s all, then.” Having dismissed them, Hayashimizu turned his

chair away and went back to reading the *Asahi Shimbun*.

Upon returning to the classroom, Sôsuke ate some shifty-looking jerky, then began carefully inspecting the tattered note he'd picked up that morning. It seemed to be written on pink stationery, but most of it was unreadable now.

"Any headway?" asked Kaname, who'd come by to check on him after eating lunch with her friends on the roof.

"I'm afraid not. It's definitely addressed to me, though..." He pointed to one burned scrap. The name on what looked like the salutation clearly did say "Sagara."

"Hmm... So the only thing they put in there was the letter?"

"Most likely."

As she squinted, Kaname could just barely make out a few words. *I'm always watching you— coward— heart— stop beating— put— out of— misery— wait — behind the gym after school—*

"It's clearly from a hostile third party," said Sôsuke.

He went on to speculate on the remainder of the letter's contents: *Sagara Sôsuke. I'm always watching you, you disgusting coward. I'll make your heart stop beating and put you out of your misery once and for all. Wait for me behind the gym after school. That's where I'll kill you.*

"I'm certain that's what it said," he declared.

"Why's that your first guess?" Kaname wanted to know. "It's written in a girl's handwriting."

"Don't be so sure. It could be a fabrication meant to fool handwriting analysis. A sign I'm dealing with a professional."

"What kind of professional would that be?" Kaname felt a chill run up her spine as she imagined a burly hit man scribbling loopy handwriting onto a sheet of cute pink paper. "I think it's just a mash note. Someone in the school probably wrote it."

"Mash note?" he said suspiciously. "That's extremely threatening."

“Why do you take everything the worst possible way?!” she yelled. “I’m talking about a love letter! Someone’s confessing their feelings for you!”

Sousuke continued to look at her impassively.

“Didn’t you hear me? There might be a girl with... romantic interest in you. Doesn’t... that make you happy?” Kaname asked hesitantly.

“No. I’ve seen this same thing before. Several years back, in Cambodia, there was an otherwise very earnest NCO in my squadron who grew close to a local woman while on assignment,” Sousuke reminisced. “We celebrated their relationship, but she turned out to be a spy for the guerrillas.”

“Uh-huh...”

“She leaked word of our upcoming surprise raid to the guerrillas and nearly got the entire squad killed. The NCO shot himself that night out of guilt.”

“Uh, really...” Kaname didn’t quite understand what these two situations had to do with each other, but it was a pretty serious subject, so she couldn’t exactly call him out on it.

“Ah, memories,” Sousuke sighed. “The major and I were arm slave instructors in that squadron together.”

*Who’s the major?* Kaname wondered, but decided she was better off not asking. She did know that “arm slave” referred to the humanoid weapons that had recently begun to dominate modern warfare.

Sousuke placed the tattered paper inside his desk and stood up.

“Going somewhere?” she asked.

“Yes. Whether it’s a threat or an attempt at seduction, they’ll be waiting for me behind the gym after class,” he concluded. “I’ll have to prepare.”

“Prepare? Uh, how? Hang o—”

Sousuke ignored her and walked away.

“Sousuke!” she called after him. “Fifth period’s coming up!”

“Security takes precedence,” Sousuke informed her. “I’ll be missing the rest of my classes today.”

And with that, he was gone.

As Kaname's fifth period class, Math II, drew to a close, her classmate Tokiwa Kyoko tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, Kana-chan. Where'd Sousuke-kun go?"

"How should I know? He's not my dependent... or my pet, for that matter," Kaname said with a groan.

"Is it true someone sent him a love letter?"

"Yeah, saw it myself. Don't ask me what kind of weirdo ends up falling for that dumbass..." She pulled her bundle of textbooks and dictionaries out of her desk and slammed them on top of it.

"Are you in a bad mood, Kana-chan?"

"Why would I be in a bad mood?!" Kaname asked, louder than she meant to.

Kyoko took it with practiced grace. "Well, it sure looks like you're in one."

"Ugh... You think?"

"You're thinking about Sagara-kun, I'll bet. He is your closest friend among the boys."

"I-Is not! He's totally not!" Kaname insisted firmly. "I don't even like the guy! It's just that as student council vice president, it's my responsibility to deal with problems—"

"Uh-huh, right," Kyoko agreed. "Anyway, wanna go see what he does? It could be hilarious."

Kaname turned her nose up stubbornly. "No way," she retorted. "Who cares what happens to him? No one's gonna want to date that war-obsessed jerk."

Yet Kyoko pressed on, fanning the flames of Kaname's concern. "You sure about that? He's pretty cute. And I'll bet he seems pretty normal if you don't know him."

Kaname laughed mockingly. "Yeah, right," she scoffed. "And the minute he opens his mouth, it becomes clear he lives in the worlds of *Mission: Impossible*

and *Platoon*."

"So you're really not going?"

"Yeah, why waste my time?" Once her bag was stuffed with school supplies, Kaname stood up. "I've got student council business today, so I'll be stuck here a while. Head on without me?"

"Yeah... guess I will."

"See you tomorrow, then."

They waved to each other as they parted ways in the hall.

Ten minutes later, behind one of the gym's pillars...

"Kana-chan!"

"Yeek!" Kaname seized up as someone called her from behind. "K-Kyoko! Don't scare me like that!" she hissed.

Kyoko was grinning wickedly. "Oho? I thought you had student council business."

"I... I thought that's what it was, but Hayashimizu-senpai just sent me to check in on Sousuke!" She paused. "Really!"

"Really?" Kyoko's expression was skeptical.

Kaname averted her eyes. "A-Anyway, you're one to talk. I thought you were heading home early?"

"Changed my mind."

"You did, huh? Well, aren't you a charmer..." said Kaname, trailing off as she peeked out from behind the support to see what was happening in the space behind the Jindai High gym.

The area in question couldn't be seen from the school building itself. It was lined with hydrangea and azalea bushes, and it tended to be pretty abandoned after class. Except, about ten meters away from the support they were hiding behind...

"Hey, it's her!" Kyoko whispered, peeking out to look. Beneath a cherry tree—

green in mid-May—stood a second-year girl. Her layered chestnut hair curled inward at her shoulders, and she had a voluptuous figure.

Kaname twitched and said, “H-Hey... she’s kinda pretty.” The girl also had that palpably bashful, vulnerable air unique to girls in love. Kaname, who was always stomping around with tightly balled fists, had to doff her hat to the girl’s overall charm.

“That’s Saeki Ena from Class 1. She took second place in the Miss Jindai High School contest at the school festival last year,” Kyoko said.

“She did, huh? How ‘bout that.”

Kaname hadn’t taken part in said contest herself. She’d stayed up the whole night before getting things ready, then passed out cold in the student council storeroom. The boys from her class had tried to get her to participate, but had they seen her snoring away in her tracksuit, they might have rescinded their nominations.

“Well... she’s pretty enough, from a male perspective. But I’ll bet she’s got beauty supplies where her brains should be,” Kaname said viciously.

Kyoko shook her head once again. “I hear she’s smart too. Placed fifth in last year’s finals.”

“Geh. D-Dammit...” Kaname herself had placed 160th, exactly in the middle of their grade’s 320 students. She always did great in English and social studies, but science and literature tended to drag her down.

“Sagara-kun is still a no-show though,” Kyoko muttered thoughtfully. The fidgeting Saeki Ena stood alone behind the gym, and there was no sign whatsoever that the man she was waiting for was on the way. “He said he was coming, right?”

“He said he would *prepare*, actually...” said Kaname.

“Prepare? How?”

“Dunno. Maybe he’s picking up a tank or a battle mech or something.”

“Could be,” Kyoko said with a chuckle. “Anyway, let’s wait and see!”

“Hmm. Yeah, sure.” The girls grabbed their bags and squatted down to settle

in.

Six o'clock came and went, but Sousuke never showed.

"It's getting late," Kaname breathed. The crimson light of sunset was starting to shift into dusky purple, and the voices of the sports clubs at practice faded as electric lights snapped on around the gym. "You think he's coming?"

"Dunno. It's been two hours, right? Ahh..." Kyoko let out a little yawn. "I'm getting hungry. Maybe I'll head home..."

"Yeah? See you tomorrow, then."

"You should go too, Kana-chan. I really don't think Sagara-kun's coming."

It was a reasonable opinion, but Kaname folded her arms and said, after a moment's consideration, "Think I'll stay a while longer."

"Yeah? Well, I'm off. Just don't give yourself a cold, okay?"

Once Kyoko was gone, Kaname reevaluated the situation behind the gym. Saeki Ena was still standing there, her back was to the wall, her eyes pointed down. She looked heartbreakingly lonely. She'd been waiting two hours, after all. Kaname could almost hear her thinking, *He's probably not coming*. Yet she kept on waiting. And still, Sousuke didn't come.

Another hour passed. Seven o'clock came and went. Night fell.

*Guess he really did just go home*, Kaname thought. At some point, her irritation with Saeki Ena had transformed into a strange form of sympathy. She felt an irrationally despondent feeling growing in her chest, as if she were the one who'd been stood up.

*He's such a creep*. She felt angry, too. Sousuke might have been violent and reckless, but Kaname had always believed he was a genuinely nice guy. How could he do this to someone? But just as she'd had that thought...

"Hey, look. Someone's still out here," came a male voice.

"Oh? Who is it?"

"Whoa! What a cutie pie!"

“What’s up, babe?”

They didn’t seem to be talking about Kaname. Instead, she just watched as the small group of male students appeared at the back of the gym to surround Saeki Ena.

“Um... I...” the girl stammered.

Ignoring the clear discomfort in her eyes, the men continued on. “You’re from Class 1, right? Saeki-san, was it?”

“It’s not safe here at night. You might run into guys like us.”

“Yeah. And we might do something like *this!*” One of them seized Saeki Ena in his arms.

“S-Stop it!” she cried.

The men just laughed.

“Wahhh! S-Stop it!” one mocked in falsetto. “You hear that? Boy, that shit gets me hot!”

“Damn, how’s a guy supposed to keep it in his pants?” The men forced her against the wall, flicking her hair and her skirt in a half-joking manner.

“Ah, shit...” Kaname breathed. Every school had its bad kids, and even Jindai’s relatively calm and welcoming student body was no exception. These jerks were particularly infamous in the region. At this rate...

*Should I go out and yell at them? she wondered. Yeah, right, as if they’d listen to me...*

*Should I run off and call for help? But the light in the teachers’ office is out...*

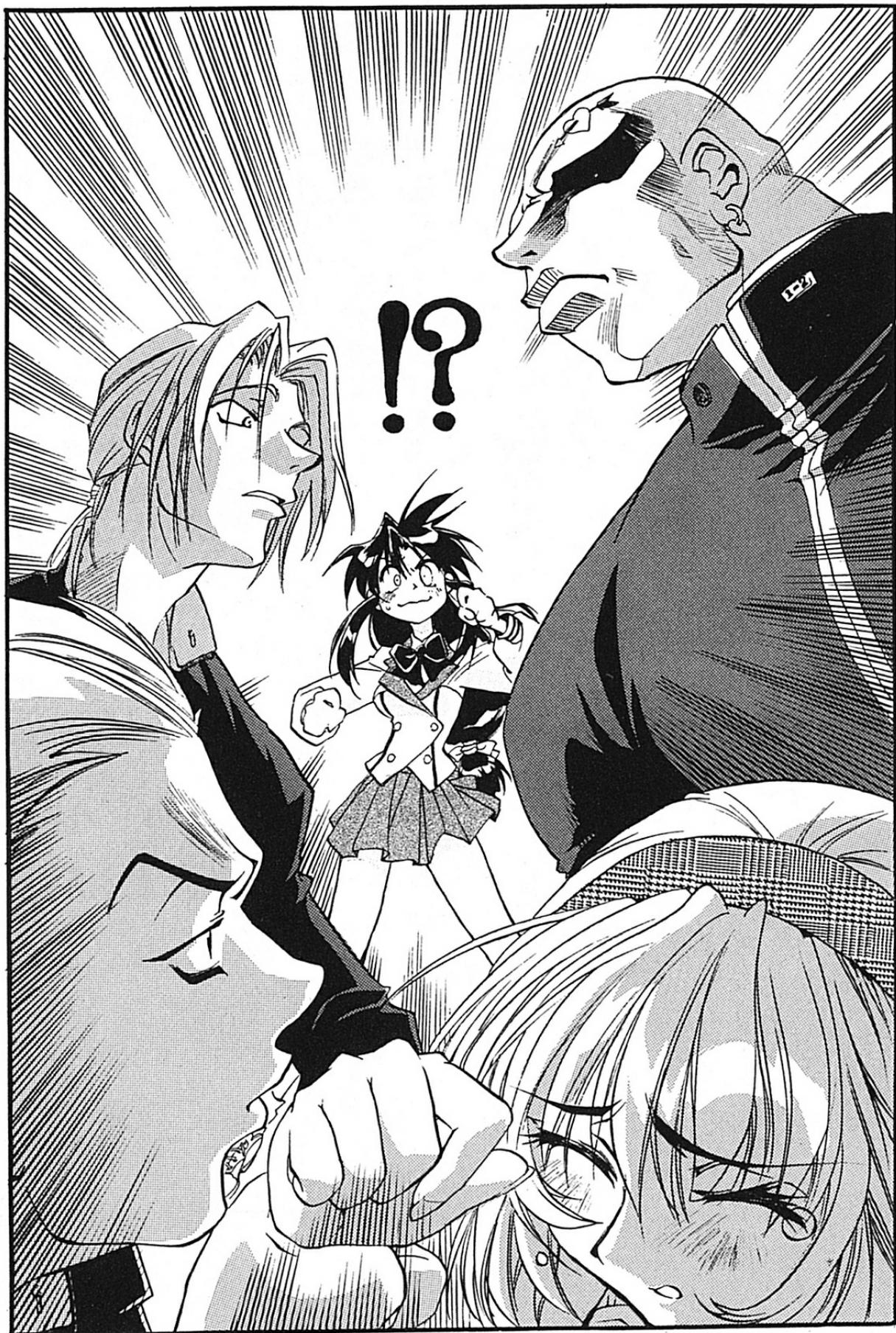
*Should I turn around and walk away?*

Kaname paused for a second.

*That might be the smartest choice... It’s not like I owe her anything. This doesn’t fall under my vice-presidential duties. And besides, she’s...*

“Yeah... who am I kidding? Dammit,” Kaname grumbled. Having put an end to that train of thought, she sprang out from behind the support and shouted, “Hold it!”

“Huh?” The men turned to look at her. The shadows cast by the lamplight made their faces look even more wicked than usual.



*Ugh, total regrets right away... I really should've just gone home,* thought Kaname, even as her legs carried her inexorably forward. "Sh-She doesn't like that!" she yelled. "Let her go!"

*The important thing is not to look weak, she reminded herself. Come out swinging. You'll carry the day... somehow...*

A man with a clean-shaved head, who seemed to be their leader, walked up to her. "Chill out, sweetie. We're just playing around."

"Liar!" Kaname said accusingly. "I saw what you were doing!"

"Hey, listen to you. Maybe you wanna join in, huh?" The skinhead put his arm around Kaname's shoulders.

"Don't... Don't you touch me!" She smacked his hand aside and socked him in the nose.

The man wobbled on his feet and groaned. This silenced the laughter, but a taut and dangerous atmosphere replaced it.

"Hey, you see?" one of the men demanded. "You see what that bitch just did?!"

"You okay, Taka-chan?" one of the lackeys asked the skinhead.

The skinhead was silent for a moment, cradling his face, before he said, "Dammit. I'm bleedin'." He then glared at Kaname, his gaze menacing. "How's about we strip her down?"

At his demand, a different sort of tension immediately overtook the group.

"We're gettin' serious?" one asked. They began looking Kaname up and down with new appreciation.

"Huh? Wait... serious? Does that mean... you were joking before?" Kaname asked slowly. And then, as the men stepped up and fanned out around her, she realized this meant that they *weren't* joking now.

Kaname drew back. "Um, I think there's been a misunderstanding..."

They *weren't* responding now. The delinquents edged closer, then sprang on her all at once.

"No... Hey!" she shrieked. "Cut it out! I mean it!"

"Too late!" crowed one of the boys.

There was no way Kaname could break out of their grip, and they quickly wrestled her to the ground. She was a strong-willed girl, but she couldn't stop the tears from welling up in her eyes. "Let me go! Assault! Rape! S-Someone help!" she shouted, but there was nobody around to hear her. There was no way she'd be lucky enough to have Sousuke show up now.

"Someone shut her up already." One of the men reeled back to punch her in the gut, when just then...

*Blam!* Something slammed into the man from the side. It sent him flying into the gym's outer wall, where he immediately fell, out cold. The other men looked around in confusion. There was nobody around but them. Nobody knew what had just happened, and yet it continued.

*Blam! Blam! Blamblam!* A string of mysterious, merciless blows blasted the men away from Kaname, one after another. One flipped over and slammed into the ground, one fell unconscious against a support, one ended up motionless with his butt pointing to the night sky...

And then, there was silence. Kaname sat up slowly and fixed up her rumpled clothing.

Saeki Ena just stood there uncertainly. "Do you know... what...?"

"Nope," said Kaname. "Sure wish I did..."

Rubber spheres the size of pachinko balls lay scattered all around the unconscious men. Kaname's nose picked up the faint scent of gunpowder. And then...

She heard a rustling from a nearby azalea bush.

"No way," she said quietly, even as a ragged figure emerged from the bushes.

The person was dressed in camouflage netting, worn over green-and-brown-patterned clothing that had hidden the contours of their body amidst the foliage. To those in the business, it was known as a ghillie suit.

"Are you all right, Chidori?" the ragged man asked. He had an Italian-made

semi-automatic shotgun in one hand, which had likewise been painted in camouflage. He stripped the netting off of his head to reveal a face painted pitch black, only his eyes standing out starkly against the darkness of the night.

Kaname stared speechlessly at Sousuke for a moment. Then she said, “Hang on. Have you been there the whole time?”

“Affirmative. I’ve been camped out since fifth period.”

Her knees began to shake. “So you were hiding just two meters away from her the whole time?!”

“And quite easily so.” Sousuke sounded like he was puffing out his chest, but the camouflage netting made him look more like a pile of garbage about to tip over. “My disguise was perfect,” he continued. “She didn’t even notice me. The plan was to knock her out with the rubber rounds from my shotgun if she showed any sign of suspicious activity.”

For hours, he’d remained motionless in the bushes, his gun trained on Saeki Ena. The stupidity was so towering that Kaname almost had to respect it.

“But she simply stood there the whole time. And just as I’d begun debating the merits of a preemptive strike, those men—”

*Crash!* Kaname kicked Sousuke as hard as she could, reducing the “pile of garbage” to a twitching mass on the ground.

“That hurt!” he protested.

“Shut up!” she snarled back at him. “If you were there, why didn’t you do something sooner?!”

“I couldn’t. If it turned out they were working in collaboration—”

“Can the excuses! Didn’t you see what I just went through?! Take this! And this!” She kicked him again and again as he rolled helplessly from side to side.

“Ah... I can’t get up,” he moaned. “I’m tangled in the netting...”

“Not my problem!”

Saeki Ena stared down at the helplessly struggling Sousuke. “Is that... Sagara-kun?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied emotionlessly. “I am Sagara Sousuke.”

“But... you’re so...” As the girl struggled to find the right words, Kaname could see the disappointment manifesting on her face. “S-Sagara-kun... Did you read my letter?”

Sousuke stood up with great effort. “The threatening letter?”

“No!” Saeki Ena protested. “It was pink, and...”

“I blew it up.”

“B-Blew it up?” She swayed on her feet from the shock.

*This is one hell of a conversation...* Kaname thought with a sigh.

“Who are you exactly, anyway? You don’t appear to be hostile,” he observed. “What are you really here for?”

“Here... for?” the girl echoed.

“Out with it already. It’s not to your benefit to hide anything,” he said next, with a pump of his shotgun.

There wasn’t a girl in the world who’d continue to hold romantic feelings for someone after being treated this way. “I don’t have to take this... You awful boy!” Saeki Ena declared, and then ran away crying.

Kaname could do nothing but watch her go. “Ah, poor thing...” she said with sympathy. Then she thought, *Still, it’s probably for the best. Now she can go fall for a half-decent guy...*

Sousuke shook off the rest of his camo netting. “A curious woman,” he said. “She calls me out here, then declares me ‘awful’ and runs off. Does she suffer from a psychotic persecution complex?”

“I think maybe *you* do...” Kaname heaved a deep sigh, then left Sousuke behind as she began to walk home.



The next morning, when Sousuke arrived at school, he noticed the existence of a new suspicious object in his (just-repaired) shoe cubby. “Not again,” he sighed, once again removing the plastic explosives from his bag. He was about

to dispose of it quickly when...

“Don’t you dare!” Kaname shouted, appearing at his side to smack him one.

He rubbed his head. “Chidori. That hurts.”

“Morning,” she said shortly. “No explosions today. Just be a man and open it.”

“I can’t afford to,” he protested. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Is it?” Kaname reached for Souseki’s shoe cubby, opening and closing it rapidly.

“Sto—” Souseki shielded his face, then stared in disbelief when nothing came of it.

“It’s fine, see? Meet you in class,” Kaname said, and then took off.

Silently, with timid hands, Souseki opened the shoe cubby. There was no trap —just a new pair of slippers, on top of which sat a lunch box wrapped in decorative cloth. He removed the box and found a note tucked inside. It read...

《Just a little thank-you for saving me yesterday. A man can’t live on jerky alone!

Sincerely,

A Mysterious Terrorist.》

“Hmm...” Souseki placed the note in his pocket, carefully tucked the lunch box under one arm, then put his slippers on and headed for class.

〈Man from the South — The End〉

# Propaganda of Love and Hate

Chidori Kaname heard a strange sound on her balcony and opened her eyes. A *peeping tom*? she wondered, reaching for the alarm clock by her bed. It was her beloved English-made penguin clock, which she'd been using for three years now.

It was just after seven o'clock in the morning, and the morning sun shone bright through the window. *Way too early for a peeping tom, right?* Kaname thought next. "Geh..." Then she climbed out of bed, rubbed her weary eyelids, and walked to her apartment's balcony while still in her pajamas.

A local white cat was perched on top of the outdoor air conditioning unit. "Meow."

"Oh," she said sleepily. "Morning."

The cat regarded her for a moment, then departed for the next balcony over.

Kaname took a leisurely shower. The lukewarm water put her in such a haze that she found herself on the verge of falling asleep on her feet. She managed to drag herself to the changing room and, still naked, brushed her back-length black hair until her mind finally woke up. After washing, she picked out her underwear and put on her uniform.

Three minutes later, she glanced at the mirror. Her face was slender, with delicate features. When silent and still, she looked terribly mature, almost cold. "Heh. Ha ha ha..." When she forced herself to smile, she looked charming and girlish. *Eh, she told herself. That's pretty typical, though...*

She got breakfast, brushed her teeth, then checked the contents of her bag: wallet, student ID, PHS phone, lipstick, compact, cotton rounds, tissues, handkerchief, band-aids, baby oil, nail file, candy, headache medicine... *No issues here.*

She pulled a gold watch out of a drawer. Its design seemed far too grown-up for a teenage girl, but she put it on her left wrist.

"Right," she declared, "all set." She turned to the picture frame on the table, which held a picture of a smiling woman in her thirties. The woman had features very similar to Kaname's, and a capable air about her. She was sitting on a beach somewhere, holding a nine-year-old girl in her arms. "See you later, Mom." Kaname smiled at the photo, then headed down the road to school as usual.

*Better hurry! she told herself. Got that classic lit quiz in first period!*

Sagara Sousuke heard a strange sound on his balcony and opened his eyes. *An enemy?* he wondered, reaching for the 9mm pistol by his bed. It was his beloved Austrian-made Glock, which he'd been using for three years now.

He looked at the clock. It was twenty past seven in the morning.

Sousuke crawled out from *under* his bed, listening closely at the sliding glass door before stepping firmly out onto the balcony. His gun was trained on the culprit: a black cat, which was perched on the outdoor air conditioning unit.

"Meow."

He stared at it silently.

The cat regarded him for a moment, then departed for the next balcony over.

*Time to set out*, he told himself.

He ate his breakfast: a slice of ham, a tomato, mineral water, and a pinch of salt and sugar. *A luxurious breakfast indeed*, he thought. On the battlefields of Central Asia, he'd sometimes gone a week without food or drink. It made him appreciate such things all the more.

He swiftly washed up and brushed his teeth, then glanced at the mirror for exactly three seconds. Severe features, drawn into a sullen expression. Haphazardly cut black hair. A sharp gaze, a stern brow, and a tight frown.

*No issues with my complexion*, he decided. *Internal organs all functioning.*

He went through his possessions: automatic pistol, revolver, combat knife, Swiss army knife, throwing knives, hand grenades, stun grenades, plastic explosives, all-purpose digital transceiver, night-vision goggles, special anti-

personnel mines, survival kit, spare ammo, various medicines...

“Good. Perfect.” His preparations for the day’s expedition were complete.

He looked at a picture stuck to the wall. It was a faded photo of a line of men in camouflage clothing. They were seated on the arm of a beat-up arm slave, automatic pistols raised. He straightened up to attention. “I’m heading out,” he announced.

Sagara Sousuke then put on his high-collared student uniform, placed his textbooks and notebooks in his bag, and took the morning road to school.

*It’s time to steel myself, he thought. I have a classic literature quiz in first period!*

●

Kaname got off the train at Sengawa Station, which was on the Keio Line on the outskirts of Tokyo. The area had a large number of girls’ colleges, junior colleges, and high schools, so there were a greater-than-normal number of young women on the station platform. They were roughly equal in proportion to the white-collar workers on their daily commute.

“Chidori-san!”

“Hmm?”

The young man calling to her on the station platform was good-looking. He was a student at Jindai High School, which Kaname also attended.

“Shirai-kun, right? Morning,” Kaname said indifferently, quickly turning away again.

“Wait! Did you think about what I said yesterday?” he pleaded. “I could really use your answer...”

“What was that again?” she questioned.

“I asked if you wanted to go out with me!”

“Oh, that? Nah, pass. Denied. Buzz off.” Kaname punctuated her statement by walking swiftly away.

“W-Wait!” Shirai-whoever said, grabbing her shoulder from behind.

Kaname looked back at him with open displeasure. “Did you not hear me?” she asked coldly. “I said no.”

“Why not?! I’m breaking up with my current girlfriend, so—”

“So what?” Kaname brushed his hand away.

Nevertheless, he persisted. “I said wait!” He grabbed her wrist, this time roughly.

“Ow!” Kaname cried.

“I’m begging you! Really think about it! I’m serious about— Eh?” A sudden cold sensation on Shirai’s neck struck him silent. “Huh?!” Someone had twisted his arm behind his back and pressed a sharpened combat knife to his throat.

“That’s enough, dangerous figure,” commanded the owner of the even-more-dangerous knife.

“Ah, Sousuke. Morning,” Kaname said casually, as she caught a glimpse of the familiar face looming behind Shirai. That sullen expression, that tight frown, that Jindai High uniform—it was her classmate, Sagara Sousuke.

“Chidori,” said Sousuke, “who is this man?”

“Shirai-kun from Class 2,” she told him. “He tried to talk to me after class yesterday. That’s all.”

“Is this correct?” Sousuke whispered into the other man’s ear.

The young man nodded swiftly in response. “Y-Yes.”

“Why are you after her? Is it political? Has someone ordered her kidnapping? Talk.”

“Wh-What are you— Yeek!” The blade, cold as ice, dug a few millimeters into Shirai’s skin.

“I said, *talk*,” Sousuke snarled.

Kaname, uncomfortable with the sight of a squirming Shirai, tried to talk Sousuke down. “It’s okay, Sousuke,” she said reassuringly. “He’s an ordinary civilian. Let him go.”

Sousuke looked at her dubiously. “You’re certain?”

“Of course I am!”

“You’re not being coerced into saying that?” he pressed. “To protect a hostage, perhaps?”

“Of course not!”

“Hmm...” Souseki relaxed the pressure on the knife and began to speak slowly to the trembling young man. “Listen to me. The woman you laid your hand on is the vice president of our student council. In other words, the second-highest-ranked person in the school.”

“R-Right...”

“I’ll let you off with a warning this time. But never do this again. Your family will pay the price if you do. Understand?”

“C-Come on...”

“Removal of their fingernails will just be the start,” Souseki promised. “I’ll inflict unimaginable pain on your wife and children.”

“He doesn’t have a wife and children!” Kaname protested.

Souseki ignored her and released his quarry. “Have I made myself clear? On your way, then.”

Shirai scrambled away, tearing through the gathered onlookers.

“Honestly... Couldn’t you have found a gentler way to stop him?” Kaname grumbled. “You war-addled man...”

“I wasn’t really serious,” Souseki admitted.

Kaname genuinely never knew when he was being serious and when he wasn’t. Souseki had grown up overseas—moreover, in some of the world’s most dangerous war-torn regions—and had only recently transferred to their school. He still didn’t seem to grasp how life worked here in peaceful Japan. So, at last, she just let out a sigh. “Fine, thanks anyway. Now let’s get to school. First period is classic lit.”

“Ah...”

Kaname grabbed Souseki by the arm and marched him off the platform.

That day at lunch break...

“Can’t shake the feeling that I’m being watched today,” Kaname muttered, reclining in her seat by the window. With her back to the blue sky, she carried on with eating her bland melon roll. A few girls from the same class sat across from her, pecking at their boxed lunches.

“Watched? Like, by a boy?” one of her friends asked, while sipping her Banana Au Lait through a straw.

“Dunno. It’s hard to describe... I just feel all stiff in the shoulder area,” Kaname said, craning her neck around to demonstrate.

“Huh... Is it that guy who tried to ask you out on the way home yesterday? Shirai?”

Kaname suddenly snapped to attention. “Oh, that reminds me! He accosted me on the station platform this morning. Right, Sousuke?”

Sousuke was eating lunch a little ways away, using his combat knife to shave off pieces of some kind of smoked meat and bring them to his mouth. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he denied.

“You know! This morning—”

It was just then that a young man appeared at the classroom door. “Is Chidori-kun here?” asked a calm but penetrating voice.

“Ah, Hayashimizu-senpai...”

He was a tall and lean third-year boy with a quiet but imposing demeanor. He had wire frame glasses and slicked-back hair, and looked like he’d be more at home in a tailored English suit than the school uniform he actually wore. His name was Hayashimizu Atsunobu, and he was their student council president.

“What are you doing in our classroom?” Kaname asked, not bothering to hide her umbrage at his presence.

Hayashimizu replied simply, without pleasantries, “Oh? Am I bothering you?”

“Nah.”

“But your face doesn’t exactly say, ‘Ah, my esteemed superior and wise mentor, Student Council President Hayashimizu Atsunobu, graces me with his presence. I’m the luckiest girl in the East,’ either,” he pointed out.

“Have you been watching N\*rth K\*rean propaganda?” she asked suspiciously.

“Kindly do not compare me to that particular leader,” Hayashimizu told her loftily. “I have nothing but respect for personal freedoms. I’m even in favor of showing genitalia in X-rated comics.”

“You see why you bother me? It’s because you just *say* stuff like that!” Kaname shouted, turning red as she felt her classmates’ eyes turn towards her.

“Calm down, Chidori-kun,” he advised, “I merely came to offer you a warning.”

“A warning?”

“Yes. Given your reaction, I assume you haven’t heard... First, look at this.” Hayashimizu handed her an envelope. She dubiously opened it to discover a stack of Polaroids inside.

“Pictures of the bathrooms?” she asked. “What the heck?” There were twenty-two in total, each with the site where it had been taken written in magic marker on the back. The photos themselves were of gray tile walls or stall partitions, each covered in absurd graffiti. It was typical stuff—delinquents’ boasts written in overly complicated kanji, “Looking for a good time? Call Gon in Class 3,” and that sort of thing...

“What about it?” Kaname asked.

“Look at the red markings on the walls,” Hayashimizu pointed out. “The newest additions.”

Kaname’s lips pursed slightly. Each of the walls pictured did indeed contain new graffiti done in red magic marker.

*Student Council Vice President C.K. got the election supervisor to pad out her votes to get elected. As a reward, she gave him the panties she was wearing that day.*

*Chidori Kaname from Class 4 takes younger girls home and rapes them.*

*Chidori Kaname (2-4) has a sugar daddy who bought her that Cartier watch.*

*C.K. lives alone and will take up invitations from anyone to spend the night.*

*Chidori Kaname of Class 2-4 buys uppers from drug dealers in Kabukicho.*

It was all that kind of thing.

By this point, her friends had clustered around her to read over her shoulder.

“Wow, that’s not cool...”

“Yeah, that’s just mean,” they said to each other.

“It’s especially prominent in the girls’ and boys’ bathrooms in the north building and on the west side of the south building. I received the report before noon and had a subordinate take pictures,” Hayashimizu explained lightly.

“Um... Did you *only* take pictures?” Kaname asked pointedly.

“Don’t worry. I hid the graffiti itself behind paper.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Certainly,” said Hayashimizu. “Needless to say, this is baseless slander; anyone with common sense won’t pay it any notice. But I fear that ‘common sense’ isn’t as common as I would like.”

“Nobody’s gonna believe this crap!” Kaname shrieked.

The girls around her nodded in agreement.

“It’s totally made up!”

“Kana-chan’s not that kind of person!”

Hayashimizu stood there quietly as they made their protests, then said, “Your friendship is admirable, but gives people too much credit. A single credulous fool can change everything—in most cases, bad money drives out good.” He was basically saying that the stupid people who believed the lies would drown out the smart people who didn’t.

*But... sexual favors and stimulants? Kaname wondered. What kind of idiot would believe that?* It was then that she noticed that Sousuke—who had previously been eating lunch on his own a ways away—had joined the group to

stare at the Polaroids. She asked, “What’s wrong, Sousuke?”

Clearly taken aback by the content of the graffiti, he turned to Kaname in shock and suspicion. “Chidori. Are you... Are you...”

“Don’t just believe it!” Kaname yelled, and sent Sousuke flying with a full-power kick. He plowed through about eight desks, knocked over a boy eating lunch, and then fell unconscious with said lunch on his head. Kaname watched him, shoulders heaving.

Hayashimizu waited for Kaname to catch her breath, then said, “Well, Chidori-kun? Do you have any idea who might have done this?”

“No,” she told him. “I honestly can’t think of anyone who’d do something this extreme.”

“If you have even the smallest suspicion, please tell me.”

“Well, also... I don’t really want to know,” she confessed.

“No one will hold it against you,” he told her.

Kaname knew President Hayashimizu to be a shrewd man, despite how he sometimes presented himself. He even held sway with the delinquents and teachers. Still, she couldn’t imagine anything he could do making things better for her. *It’s not as if punishing whoever did this will make them stop hating me*, she thought.

“It’s fine, really. Don’t try to find the culprit,” said Kaname, standing up.

“Ah, Kana-chan. Hey...”

“Sorry. Not feeling well.” She cut off all attempts at discussion and strode out of the classroom. She didn’t even spare a glance at Sousuke, who was still buried under the desks.

Once Kaname was gone, President Hayashimizu gave two five-thousand-yen notes to her classmate Tokiwa Kyoko and told her, “Once school is over, take her out for drinks on the way home. Don’t forget the receipt.”

Kyoko, with her braids and coke-bottle glasses, said uneasily, “Um, I appreciate the sentiment, but we’re still high school students...”

“That’s fine,” he said absently. “Now, excuse me.”

“Wait, Senpai!”

Hayashimizu ignored Kyoko and left the room. While the rest of them just stood there, wondering what to do, Sousuke finished extracting himself from the fallen desks.

“Sagara-kun, you survived that?”

“Yes, although it was quite painful.” He gathered up the pictures that had fallen on the floor and tucked them into his own pocket. Then he made a great show of thinking. “In the places where I was raised, lying and disseminating false orders is a serious offense. Those who disrupt the chain of command and contribute to societal unrest would traditionally be executed by firing squad.”

“Well, I don’t think this is quite that serious...” Kyoko said, while internally lamenting, *Ah, I forgot there was someone even weirder than President Hayashimizu in the room...*

“Regardless, she seems suspiciously disinterested in pursuing the culprit,” he observed. “I can’t help but feel that there’s something else at play here.”

“Um, like?”

“Perhaps the perpetrator has blackmail material on her,” he said firmly. What if Kaname feared that finding the culprit would be to her disadvantage? What if most of the graffiti was false, but part of it was true? What if the graffiti was a warning: ‘Cross me and next time I’ll tell the students your real secret’?

“It’s possible that Chidori knows who the culprit is and fears what they might do if cornered,” he pointed out. “They might know some terrible secret of hers that she doesn’t want revealed.”

Kyoko, who was somehow still listening to this, was genuinely impressed. “That’s incredible...”

“It was a simple deduction,” he protested.

“Not that part,” she told him flatly. “I mean, it’s incredible that you’re willing to believe such awful things about your own classmate.”

“But it would explain her reticence in pursuing the matter.”

“Yeah? But I think there’s a more obvious reason...”

“What do you mean?” Sousuke asked with a frown.

Kyoko gazed at him despairingly. “Oh, forget it. Poor Kana-chan...”

Yet Sousuke puffed out his chest at this. “No matter how tragic and terrifying Chidori’s secret is, it won’t sway my feelings,” he declared. “Even if she’s a weapons smuggler, a drug dealer... even an assassin for President Gorbachev...”

“She’s not gonna be any of those things!” Kyoko protested.

“Regardless, I must learn her secret,” he continued, completely ignoring her. “If it’s a scandal that could undermine her administration, I could nip it in the bud.” Sousuke pulled a gun from his belt. “Fortunately, I have an idea of who the culprit might be.” He pulled back the slide and checked the bullets in the chamber.

“The culprit... Dare I ask?” Kyoko asked.

“A boy from Class 2 that I met this morning.”

“That Shirai guy? How come?”

“He accosted Chidori at the station and made demands of her,” Sousuke explained. “He told her to ‘really think about it,’ and assured her that he was ‘serious.’”

Kyoko’s glasses slipped sharply down her nose. “I really don’t think that’s it...”

“Of course you don’t. You’re an amateur, after all.”

“No, that’s not what I— Hey, Sagara-kun, where are you going?”

“To see the president,” he declared. “I’m going to advise him to get Shirai to confess Chidori’s secret so that we can formulate a counter-strategy.”

Kyoko watched him go despondently. “Honestly. There’s no way Hayashimizu-senpai is going to allow that...”

Unfortunately, she was wrong.

After class that day...

Someone called to Kaname as she was walking down the hall.

“U-Um, Chidori-san...”

“What is it, Kazama-kun?”

It was a mousy-looking male student, Kazama Shinji, who was in the same class as her. He was gingerly carrying a manila envelope, which he held timidly out to her.

“What’s this?” she asked.

Kazama Shinji replied bashfully, “Um... there’s eight thousand yen in there. I- Is that enough?”

“Huh? For what?”

He took out a digital camera and fidgeted. “Um, I heard you were willing to pose for lewd pictures, two thousand yen apiece...”

Kaname hefted up her bag and smashed it down on Shinji’s head, taking extra care to get him with the corner. “Get the hell out of my face, you gross pervert!” The boy dropped his camera and slammed face-first into the wall. She gave his envelope of money a hard stomp, then strode swiftly off.

Tokiwa Kyoko, who’d been watching passively, quickly followed after her.

“Darn it, that’s the fourth one today!” Kaname exploded. “Why did Hayashimizu-senpai have to be right?!” The graffiti also explained her curious feeling of being watched earlier.

“Hey, Kana-chan, you sure you’re okay?” Kyoko asked, worried.

Kaname waved her off dismissively. “I’m fine. These rumors are no big. Everyone’ll forget them in a day or two. Besides, I’m used to this kind of thing.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s kinda been my thing for a while now, y’know?” Kaname said with a laugh.

Kyoko didn’t seem reassured by her clearly forced mirth. She did, however, seem to remember something. “Oh, Kana-chan. During lunch break, Sagara-kun —”

Just then, a shriek rang down the hall.

“Oh?” Kaname mused.

She ran around the corner and saw Sagara Sousuke about ten meters away, dragging a male student along at gunpoint. The student was...

“Shirai-kun,” she said flatly.

Sousuke was trying to pull him into the nearby boys’ bathroom.

“H-Help me!” the boy cried.

“Quiet,” Sousuke ordered. “You’re just making this harder on yourself.”

Poor Shirai wept like a fool as he clung for dear life to the bathroom door frame. “I swear I don’t know anything! It’s true! Please believe me!”

“I told you to be quiet.” Sousuke gave Shirai’s hand a solid rap and finally succeeded in dragging him inside.

“Yeah, this is what I was gonna tell you,” Kyoko said.

“Oh, that idiot...” moaned Kaname, as both girls ran to the boys’ bathroom entrance and looked inside.

Sousuke had just dragged Shirai into a stall and closed the door. They couldn’t see them from their current vantage point, but they could hear threatening noises and Shirai’s pitiful wailing.

“Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me!” Sounds of struggling ensued.

“I won’t kill you. Yet. Whether I do or not eventually depends on how cooperative you are.” This declaration was followed by the sound of handcuffs clicking into place.

“Nooo...” cried Shirai, weeping in a high falsetto.

“Tell me Chidori’s secret and I’ll guarantee you respectful treatment,” Sousuke suggested. “A warm meal and a soft bed too. But if you continue to hide it...” he trailed off suggestively, followed by the sound of a gun being cocked.

“Wagh!” For some reason, this shriek was followed by the sound of a toilet being flushed.

The fact that the girls couldn't see what was going on made everything that was happening inside the stall seem even more horrifying.

"Ah, this is bad," Kaname muttered.

"Kana-chan," Kyoko said urgently. "We have to stop Sagara-kun."

"You're right. Ugh... fine, let's do this." She'd never been inside the boys' bathroom before, but Kaname steeled herself and took a step in. The moment her feet hit the tile, she was filled with a feeling of *Ah, I'm unclean.*

*But there's no time for that now!* she reminded herself, striding up to the stall and flinging the door open. "Sousuke!" she cried.

Sousuke had Shirai sitting down on the Western-style toilet. He'd covered the boy's head in a burlap sack, and he'd also just pulled out his combat knife.

"Chidori?" Sousuke said, sounding surprised. "The girls' bathroom is next door."

"Yeah, duh!" she scoffed. "What the hell are you doing?!"

Sousuke met Kaname's gaze unashamedly. "I'm sorry, but I have to find out what he has on you."

"Huh?" she echoed. "'Has on me'?"

"There's no need to hide it," he told her earnestly. "I already know the broad strokes of the matter."

"What in the world..."

Sousuke held out a sheaf of papers. Its concise contents read thus:

Sagara Sousuke (Head of School Security and Aide to the Student Council President)

I give you full authority to pursue the matter of slander against Vice President Chidori.

Jindai High School Student Council President, Hayashimizu Atsunobu

"The hell?" Kaname asked incredulously.

Aide to the Student Council President Sagara Sousuke puffed out his chest and said, "It's a commission from the president. I have full authority on this

matter now.”

“This is the absolute craziest—” Kaname started to say dubiously, but he cut her off with a gesture.

“Everyone has elements of their past they don’t want known,” Sousuke told her. “But I must learn them, in the name of school order. No matter how humiliating the secret might be.”

“I bet you’re imagining some *really* offensive stuff...” she mumbled.

“Ah, you understand, then?”

They seemed to be talking right past each other.

“Chidori-san, save me!” Shirai wept to her.

“Yeah, yeah,” she agreed with a sigh. “Hey, Sousuke. I think you’ve got the wrong idea here. Could you maybe knock it off? Shirai-kun didn’t write that graffiti.”

“Of course you’d say that,” he retorted suspiciously. “You’re afraid of me learning your secrets.”

“I don’t have any freaking secrets!”

“Are you sure about that? There’s not a single thing you’re hiding?”

“Geh...” Memories of a little accident she’d had last fall rose up in Kaname’s mind. She’d started a campfire in the forest behind the school to roast sweet potatoes, which had quickly gotten out of control until the fire department got involved. She and her friends had fled the scene, and they’d never been fingered for the crime.

“As I expected,” he said. “You do have a dark secret.”

“Oh, c-come on... Stop imagining the worst!”

Sousuke waved his hand as if to dismiss any further argument, then turned back to Shirai. “Leave now, Chidori,” he advised her. “What’s about to happen won’t be suitable for women or children to witness. Now, Shirai, was it? Tell me her secrets.” He resumed his bizarre interrogation.

“Cut it out already!” Kaname protested again. “Hey, Sousuke, are you

listening to me?” As she tried to move closer— “Stop it!!” A girl pushed past Kaname and ran into the stall. She was short, with medium-length hair in a bob cut and eyes that were childishly round, yet intense. “What’s wrong with you people?” she demanded. “What are you doing to my Shirai-kun? It’s awful, just awful! Shirai-kun, speak to me!” She threw herself on Shirai (whose head was still in the sack), weeping hysterically.

“Geh... Mizuki? What are you doing here?” Shirai asked.

“I heard Sagara from Class 4 was manhandling you,” she said. “Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, think so...”

The girl named Mizuki heaved a sigh of relief.

Kaname looked at her suspiciously. “And you are...?”

“Shirai-kun’s girlfriend!” Mizuki declared. “We’re *totally* in love! And you’ll pay for messing with him!”

Hearing this, Souseki’s eyes glinted. “Girlfriend,” he noted thoughtfully. “In love. You’re Shirai’s woman, then? Perfect. I can use you as leverage—”

As Souseki reached for Mizuki, Kaname slammed him in the back of the head with her bag. “Just shut up a minute, okay?” she said in disgust, then turned back to Mizuki. “Look, I’m really sorry about all this.”

But Mizuki met her sympathetic gaze with a glare. “You’re Chidori Kaname, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah...”

“You’re a horrible person. Just because someone’s spreading mean rumors about you is no reason to treat Shirai-kun like a common criminal! And you get this... lackey or boy toy or whatever of yours to assault him!”

“Huh?” Kaname stared in confusion.

But Mizuki continued to lay into her. “Everyone knows what a slut you are. And my father’s friends with the principal! You’d better get ready, because you’re going to pay for this!”

“Hang on a minute. I was just—”

“Shut up, *whore*!”

Kaname was speechless.

Mizuki continued triumphantly. “You really are disgusting. I’d bet at least half of what they wrote about you was true. Getting a sugar daddy to buy you that watch... It’s definitely way too expensive to— ow!” Mizuki shrieked as a fist conked her on the crown.

Kaname stared in wonder at her fist, curious about how it had moved on its own like that. “Sorry,” she said, “but could you not insult my watch?”

“Y-You hit me!” Mizuki wailed. “My own father never hit me! You’ll pay for this!”

“Um, y’know... I could just hit you again?” Kaname suggested next.

As the tensions between the two women escalated, Sousuke, currently collapsed outside the stall from the earlier bag-slam, stood up abruptly and approached.

“Stay down already. And get away from me; you stink,” Mizuki scoffed at him as he closed in.

“My scent isn’t relevant at the moment,” Sousuke said. “I’m more concerned with you. Mizuki, was it?”

“Don’t you use my first name!” she hissed as she folded her arms defensively. “You can use my surname, Inaba.”

“Inaba Mizuki, then. You were just talking about Chidori’s watch. Who told you about that?”

“Nobody told me,” she denied. “I saw it in the bathroom. It’s written all over. What a laugh!”

“Hmm. Yes, it is indeed humorous...” Sousuke quietly pushed her aside to enter the stall where Shirai had been chained. “Come here, both of you.” He beckoned to Kaname and Mizuki.

“What the heck?”

“What is it, Sousuke?”

They both leaned forward as he reached for the “Please keep the bathrooms clean” notice posted on the stall wall by the student council. “Look at this.” He tore down the newly applied sign. Behind it was the graffiti written in red marker. And it said...

*Chidori Kaname (2-4) has a sugar daddy who bought her that Cartier watch.*

Inaba Mizuki’s jaw dropped and her face went pale.

“It’s curious,” he continued. “I wonder how you could have seen this graffiti, when it was posted in the boys’ bathroom.”

“Er... ah... well...” Mizuki’s mouth began to flap helplessly.

“The graffiti was written this morning, during class,” he pointed out thoughtfully. “Which means the culprit most likely bowed out of the classroom for an hour or so during that time, using health concerns as an excuse.”

“Y-You can’t prove—”

“An investigation will quickly bring the truth to light,” Sousuke went on. “Attendance records, the suspect’s bag, desk, locker... Your mouth gave you away, Inaba Mizuki.”

Shirai, overhearing their exchange, stared disbelievingly into Mizuki’s panicked face. “Mizuki... you did this? Why?”

“Because she deserved it!” she screamed back with tears in her eyes. “You tried to pick her up at the station! I saw it!”

Now it was Shirai who went pale. “What? I... I didn’t...”

“What, I’m not good enough for you anymore?” Mizuki pushed back. “You creep! I bought you a PC-FX for your birthday. I made you lunch. I bought you tickets to that JB concert!”

Shirai was suddenly rolling his eyes. “Just because you bought me a PC-FX...”

This snippet of conversation was enough to give Kaname a very clear idea about the strained nature of their relationship.

Meanwhile, Sousuke had pulled out a new set of handcuffs. “There have been

numerous twists and turns, but we know the true culprit now,” he declared. “Inaba, please tell me Chidori Kaname’s terrible secret.”

“Are you still on that?” Kaname looked at him in disgust, and Sousuke seemed to have his worldview shaken for once.

“So... it wasn’t blackmail?” he asked cautiously.

“I’ve been saying that this whole time!”

Sousuke reluctantly seemed to accept it. “Hmm... But the crime of spreading false rumors remains. Should we refer the case to the staff and have her suspended?”

The word “suspended” sent a shudder through Mizuki.

Kaname made a face. “No, c’mon.”

“Then shall we slander her in the bathrooms in exchange?” he suggested next. “‘Inaba Mizuki is a Communist,’ perhaps?”

“No way,” Kaname denied. “And boy, the punishments you think of are on another level...”

“Then what shall we do?”

“Nothing,” she told him. “Just let it go.”

A faint expression of surprise appeared on Mizuki’s face. “Huh?”

“I’m saying we’re letting it go,” Kaname said easily.

She genuinely understood how Inaba Mizuki felt. The girl must have really and truly loved Shirai... and Kaname honestly found herself a little envious of how honestly she expressed her feelings. So, it was fine.

*Yeah... she told herself, deeply lost in thought. Because I can justify it to myself...*

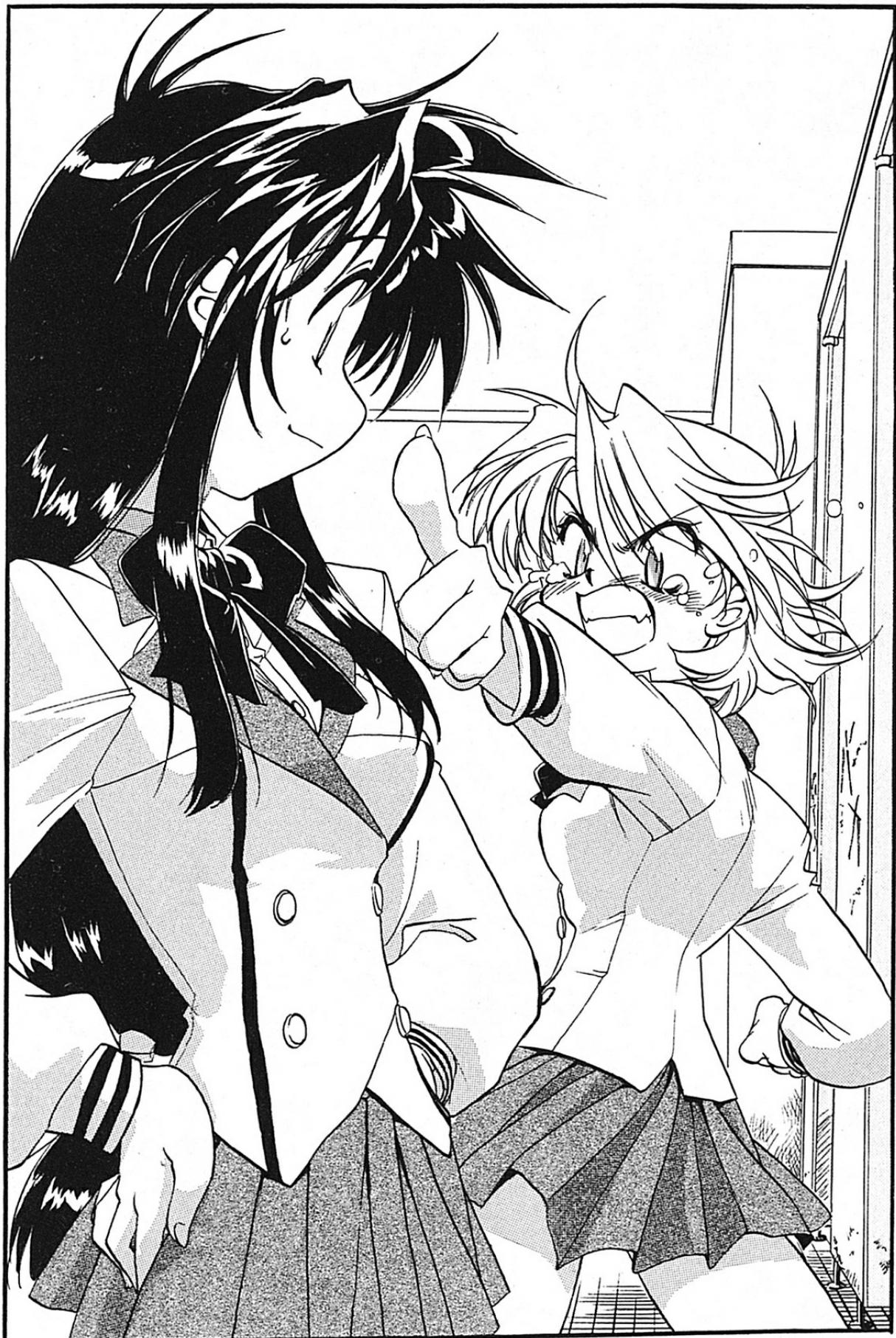
But Sousuke doubled down. “Still, it’s necessary to set an example for others,” he insisted. “Some kind of harsh punishment is required.”

Kaname suddenly felt the vein in her forehead throbbing. “For the love of... Don’t you ever think about my feelings, or matters of feminine delicacy?” she asked.

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

She thought about smacking Sousuke one, but swallowed her frustration and said, “Anyway, Inaba-san. Do you feel better? I’m really not interested in dating Shirai-kun. You can rest easy.”

“R-Rest easy?” Mizuki turned her tear-stained eyes to Kaname. “Chidori Kaname! You are truly *the* most irritating woman, especially at times like this! Just because you’re a little popular with the boys, you act like you’re the queen of the world or something! This isn’t over!”



The girl was the definition of unapologetic defiance. She shoved Kaname away and ran off, as if fleeing.

“Ah, she’s off...” said Kaname.

“We know her identity. We can catch her any time.”

“Uh, that’s not what I meant... And Sousuke, maybe you should apologize to Shirai-kun? He’s innocent, remember?”

“Ahh. Indeed.” Sousuke removed the cuffs from the exhausted Shirai and patted him on the shoulder. “Well done. The president will likely send you a letter of appreciation in the days to follow. Isn’t that nice?”

“Nice,’ my ass!” In the end, Kaname did indeed smack Sousuke one.

The next day at lunch break, Kaname was eating her extra-spicy curry bread in the classroom when Kyoko came back from the bathroom and beckoned to her. “Kana-chan, follow me. Right now.” She led Kaname to the girls’ bathroom near their classroom.

“What is it?”

“Look at this.” Kyoko pointed at the graffiti on the wall of a stall. The student council sign had been torn down, and in red letters it said, *Chidori Kaname from Class 4 takes younger girls home and rapes them.* It was one of the bits of graffiti from the pictures.

“What about it?” asked Kaname.

“Look underneath it.”

In the same red handwriting, the phrase, *This was a lie. Chidori Kaname is actually pretty nice. Don’t believe the rumors!* was added at the bottom.

“It’s the same in all the other bathrooms,” Kyoko told her.

“Really? Huh...” Kaname folded her arms and said, with a smile, “I guess sometimes, it pays to be kind.”

⟨Propaganda of Love and Hate — The End⟩

# Summer Illusion of Steel

The sky was blue, the sun was bright, and the sound of the waves was ever-changing.

A girl could be seen walking down the sandy beach. From behind, she looked beautiful; her black hair tumbled all the way down her back, and her white swimsuit seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. She walked along swiftly and carried three bags, each containing a watermelon. With every step, the sea wind gently tousled her hair.

“I want to meet her...” From the balcony of a villa on a hill, he whispered the words, his eyes locked on his binoculars.

“To whom do you refer?” asked the man standing a respectful distance behind him.

“That girl. I really...”

“But Masatami-sama—”

“Washio,” said the watcher, cutting him off. “I said I want to meet her.”

“Sir,” the man said after a pause. Then he bowed and withdrew into the mansion.

“Ah... She’s as invigorating as a sea breeze...” The watcher sighed.



Chidori Kaname, unaware that she was currently being considered “beautiful” and “invigorating,” let out a groan. “So freaking hot...” She was covered in sweat, and her eyes were glazed over.

She finally arrived at the beach umbrella, practically dragging the three watermelons behind her. There were bags for six strewn about, but no actual people present.

“Jerks,” she mumbled. “Making me do the shopping while they run off and play...” Just as she was parking herself down on the sand, she heard cheerful

voices drawing closer. She looked and saw that her Jindai High classmates, who'd all come with her for a day at the beach, were on their way back.

It was a fifty-fifty ratio of men to women, all in swimsuits. But Tokiwa Kyoko, who was carrying an inner tube, ran up to her first. "About time, Kana-chan!" she exclaimed. "We were just swimming! Did you get the watermelons?"

Kaname knocked on one of the fruits in question. "Right here," she answered. "But did you really just leave all our things here with no one to watch them? Doesn't seem safe. We've got your wallets and stuff in there too, remember?"

"No worries there," said the previously silent Sagara Sousuke, who was standing behind the group, his expression sullen with its usual tight frown. His boxers were camouflage, and his body was all lean muscle.

"What do you mean, 'no worries'?" Kaname asked suspiciously.

He reached into the pile of bags and retrieved an anti-personnel grenade the size of a baseball.

"Uh..."

"A classic trap, designed to blow if the bags are moved," he explained. "A painful lesson for any would-be thief." Sousuke had been raised overseas, in regions rife with conflict. This had left him seriously addled by war, and he had precious little common sense regarding basic rules of conduct in a peaceful country like Japan.

Kaname pressed her fingers to her temples. "You didn't consider that you'd be blowing our wallets and stuff up along *with* the thief?" she asked.

Sousuke said nothing, but greasy sweat arose on his brow.

Kaname took his silence as confirmation. "You are just so..."

"Demonstrating that theft comes with a high price would be an effective deterrent for overall crime in the region," he said defensively. "A very important—"

Kaname smacked him upside the head, but it was so darn hot that the hit lacked conviction. "Fine," she sighed. "Just drop it already." Even her objections lacked impact.

“Hmm...”

“Besides, what if *I’d* triggered your little trap?” she asked next. “It’s dangerous.”

“I took that into account, of course. I left a marker that you would recognize.” Having said so, Sousuke picked up the grenade safety pin he’d inconspicuously laid on top of their bags. Apparently, she was supposed to have seen that and taken it as a warning.

“You expected me to notice *that*!?”

“You mean you wouldn’t? You should be more careful in the future.”

“Oh, whatever,” she scoffed.

Throughout all of this back-and-forth, Kyoko had been waiting impatiently. “C’mon,” she exclaimed, “let’s bust up some watermelons! Can we, Kana-chan?”

“Yeah, fine. Here we go.” Kaname laid some old newspapers out on the sand nearby, and set the watermelons down on top of them.

Kyoko pulled an aluminum bat out of her bag. “Okay, who wants to start? Sagara-kun?”

“Do it! Do it! This’ll be hilarious!” their friends cheered, as Kyoko and the others pulled Sousuke by the arm.

“What are we doing?” he asked.

“Breaking watermelons,” Kyoko explained. “The object of the game is to smash ‘em up while blindfolded!”

“Is that all? It sounds trivial.”

“Well, *somebody’s* confident! C’mon, let’s get you blindfolded! Then we’ll spin you around!”

“Hmm...”

Kyoko and the others squealed and laughed as they gave Sousuke’s body a couple of spins. “There, that should do it. You said it was trivial, right? Let’s see you do it, then!”

With the bat in his hand and an air of great confidence, Sousuke strode in the opposite direction from the watermelons, instead heading for the beach umbrella where they'd left all their things. The kids giggled to themselves, calling out unhelpful advice like, "More to the right!" and "You've got it, keep going!"

Meanwhile, Kaname was standing next to the watermelons, away from the group. "Give me a break..." she mumbled, not liking it one bit. Ever since they'd arrived at the beach, Sousuke had let himself be dragged around by Kyoko and the others, so much so that he'd barely given Kaname a second look. He hadn't seemed to notice her swimsuit, either.

*I mean, I thought it was pretty good. Her smooth skin, slender legs, pinched waist, ample bust... She'd thought the white lace swimsuit highlighted her proportions very well. She'd spent a lot of time mulling it over last week in the store before choosing it, and she'd really liked it, but—*

*Blam!* An abrupt roar tore her from her thoughts as the watermelon beside her exploded. Chunks and droplets burst out with hideous force to shower Kaname from the side, and all she could do was gasp in outrage.

Sousuke, having walked to the beach umbrella while blindfolded, had pulled a shotgun from his bag and blasted the watermelon.

With Kyoko and the others watching him in stunned silence, he removed the blindfold. "A direct hit," he declared. "As I said, this task is trivial for—" Then he fell abruptly silent, only just now having noticed that Kaname was standing so close to his target. She was covered in watermelon from head to toe, leaving her white swimsuit in a sorry state. Bits of rind were stuck in her silky black hair.

An awkward silence hung over the group as Kaname walked to the beach umbrella and took a towel from her bag.

"I... didn't anticipate that," Sousuke commented. "But watermelon is non-toxic. And swimsuits like that one are easily disposable, so the soiling hardly matters—"

It was this last comment that caused Kaname to snap. She picked up the bat and slammed it full-force into Sousuke's side. As the boy doubled over, she glared at him with tears in her eyes. "You freaking suck!" she told him,

snatching up a T-shirt and striding away at full speed.



Thirty minutes later, she was sitting on top of a breakwater on an isolated part of the beach.

“Hey, you alone? Wanna hang out?” came a cheerful but feckless male voice.

Kaname slowly turned her glare in his direction, and said icily, “Go. Away.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” the man squeaked, then dutifully left.

Kaname took a sip of her lukewarm Dr. Pepper. “Hmph,” she snorted. She felt a little bad for running off like that, but she just couldn’t bear to stay around Sousuke any longer. *I know that’s just who he is*, she told herself. *I know it’s my own fault for thinking he’d compliment my swimsuit*. Her head knew that, but her heart refused to get with the program.

The night before, she’d been trying her swimsuit on at home, and the way she’d been giggling to herself and striking silly pinup model poses in the mirror now seemed so pathetic that she couldn’t even bear to show her face around people.

*Why did I even come here?* she thought gloomily from atop the breakwater.

Then, suddenly...

“Madame, have you a free moment?” someone called to her.

*Not again*, she thought, as she turned around in disgust. “Would you people leave me a...lone?” she began to ask, and then her voice cracked.

The man standing there was extremely conspicuous. He had an almost stereotypical “Eastern Mystery” vibe to him, being big and round with a catfish mustache. He also didn’t appear to be sweating, despite the black suit he wore beneath the blazing sun.

“Would you join us for tea?” The mysterious man asked in a surprisingly sonorous voice as he began to approach her.

“Uh... I think I’ll pass.”

“I beg of you, be accommodating,” he said solemnly. “If you refuse, I will be forced to kill myself.”

The man was making such a hard sell that Kaname had to stop herself from

openly groaning. “Ha... ha ha ha... Well, that’s one of the better pickup lines I’ve heard,” she was forced to admit. “But I’m afraid I prefer guys on the leaner side.”

“That should hardly prove an issue, then. My master is quite slender.”

“O-Oh?”

The man gestured to the cape, where she could see a large house perched on a distant overlook. “Indeed. And he desperately wishes to meet you.”

Kyoko spat out a watermelon seed as she looked all around the beach. “Kana-chan’s still not back, huh?”

Sousuke nodded in response as he cut at the watermelon with a kukri machete. “Indeed. It’s been quite a long shower.”

“Yeah... I wonder if there’s something else going on?”

“Like what?”

Kyoko gave him a wincing smile. “You really don’t know, Sagara-kun?”

“Hmm...” As Sousuke thought it over, several possibilities presented themselves: an accident; a sudden illness; an unlawful arrest; a land mine. Discovered by an old enemy and currently being tailed... or perhaps in the process of losing them? Or... a kidnapping.

The most likely suspect was...

“A land mine?” he asked, hazarding a guess.

“I really don’t get how that mind of yours works, but... No. Kana-chan is mad at you!” Kyoko said, openly scolding him. “It’s partly our fault too, but it’s mostly yours. You’ve got to go find her!”

“Yeah!” added one of their friends.

“It’s your fault, Sagara!” chimed in another.

Sousuke, seeming to accept this, closed his eyes and nodded. Then, standing up swiftly to put on his windbreaker, he said, “All right. I’ll do that, then.”

Meanwhile, in the mansion on the cape...

Having allowed herself to be guided by the mysterious man, Kaname now found herself entering a spotless white living room. It was a high-ceilinged space, illuminated warmly by natural light from the windows.

“Just a moment, if you please,” the man said before taking his leave.

She’d accepted the invitation out of idle curiosity, but inside she was thinking, *The minute things look dicey, I’m outta here.* But...

*I guess he really is rich,* she’d concluded. On her way here, she’d been shocked by the breadth of the yard, the size of the house, and the expensive brands of the cars in the garage. The interior decorating was also tasteful, like something out of an Italian magazine on architecture.

*I’ve come this far. I might as well put in some face time with the weird old guy who invited me,* Kaname thought as she sat down on the living room sofa.

She’d been waiting about five minutes before a boy appeared in the doorway. He looked to be about thirteen or fourteen years old, pale as a fresh snowfall and wearing a crisp dress shirt. He had a dainty, delicate look about him, and held a tea set on a tray as he stared at Kaname.

*One of the servants?* Kaname wondered, before speaking up. “Um—”

Before she could say anything, the boy dropped the tray. What looked like expensive china shattered with a crash and splattered tea all over the floor, yet his eyes remained locked on her.

“Ah, you’re...” The boy took a step forward like a man in a trance. And then suddenly he cried out, “Waaah!” He’d stepped on a shard of teacup, and the pain of that, combined with the heat of the tea water, sent him toppling. He collided with the wall, tipped over a dresser, and then lay still.

*What’s with this kid?* Kaname thought as she approached the boy trepidatiously. “A-Are you okay?” she asked.

“Y-Yes, I am. Ah, I’ve acted horribly...” the boy replied, and then sat up sheepishly. “My name is Hyuga Masatami.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I beg your pardon for the circumstances of my invitation,” he apologized. “Normally I would have come to see you myself, but my doctor has advised me to remain indoors. I’ve been ill, you see, and I’m currently convalescing here in our villa.”

“Wait, huh?” said Kaname. “You mean you’re...”

The boy—Hyuga Masatami—turned red and nodded slightly.

*A sick little rich boy, huh? I always figured you only saw that stuff in stories...* Kaname found herself strangely awed by this realization, staring at Masatami like he was some kind of rare endangered animal.

Flustered, he said, “I-I’m sure this must all be quite overwhelming... but would you please join me for, er, tea? I can bring a new set out at once.” It was clear this was an attempt at a romantic overture.

“Hmm... I’m not sure,” Kaname said.

Masatami gulped. His expression was so pathetically earnest that she started feeling bad for him. *Aw, she thought. Okay, he’s kinda cute.* His large eyes, with their slightly droopy cast, triggered a sort of motherly instinct in her. It was a far cry from a certain war-addled idiot who reacted to everything with hostility and paranoia. Besides, it wasn’t like she had anything better to do.

“Hmm. All right, I’ll stay,” she said with a bright smile.

Masatami’s face lit up. “R-Really?! Thank you so much. Well then, er...”

“Kaname,” she supplied. “My name’s Chidori Kaname.”

“Kaname-san. Ah, what a lovely name,” he declared. “It has a certain... slug-like slickness...”

Kaname just looked at him, unsure of how to respond.

In that moment of silence, the intercom beeped. Masatami switched it on. “What is it?”

“You have a visitor, sir.” The voice coming over the speaker was the mystery man who’d escorted Kaname here. A security camera feed popped up on the LCD screen, showing a young man in a windbreaker standing in front of the main gate.

*Sousuke?* Kaname wondered. It was him, no doubt; his penetrating gaze was locked right on the camera.

"He said he's looking for Chidori Kaname, and he believes that she's here. What should I do?" the servant asked over the speaker.

Kaname didn't know how he'd tracked her down, but he'd apparently come here looking for her.

"Do you know him?" Masatami asked.

"Huh? Oh, he's..." She was about to say he was a friend from school, but reconsidered. *I don't want to talk to Sousuke right now*, she thought angrily, and then... "Oh, h-he's a dangerous pervert. He follows me like a stalker. It's just the worst. Send him on his way!" she said, improvising with the first thing that came to mind.

"A dangerous pervert?" Masatami echoed.

"Yes, a dangerous pervert."

"I see," he replied. "We don't want filth like that loitering around at our door. Washio, send him on his way. Tell him there's no one by that name here."

"Yes, sir."

Masatami turned off the intercom. "That takes care of that. Now come this way, Kaname-san. I have a room with an excellent view."

"Er? Oh... all right." Kaname followed Masatami, already feeling a little abashed.

"There's no one by that name here," Washio told Sousuke.

"That can't be correct. Could you check again? Height, 165 centimeters. Age, 16. Nationality, Japanese. Long hair, dressed in a white lace swimsuit, with an ideal physique. No previous pregnancies. Her accessories today include a red ribbon and stud earrings. She's had a recent manicure, the color of which—" Sousuke rattled the information off quickly. He was particularly adept at watching someone without seeming like he was.

But the response he received was brusque: "She's not here. Please leave."

*The testimony of the locals made it clear that she was in this mansion,* Sousuke thought. *The man is clearly lying.* But intentionally, he didn't press the issue. Instead, he walked away from the front door and then began to trace the wall that surrounded the estate.

*Now, how to proceed.* He could see surveillance cameras mounted on the wall here and there. The grounds themselves likely contained infrared motion sensors, perhaps even anti-personnel mines... *A direct infiltration will prove difficult,* he realized. But the fact that he was thinking such things was proof that he'd already made up his mind to proceed.

Sousuke completed a full lap around the mansion's perimeter, then jogged back in the direction where he and his friends had been swimming. *Either way,* he decided, *I need to ready my equipment first.*

"Imprisoned?" Kyoko asked incredulously.

"Yes." Sousuke put on his fatigues and combat boots, then began pulling unidentifiable object after unidentifiable object from his backpack. "I don't know why, but it's the only explanation. I must save her before something terrible happens."

"But—"

"Don't offer to help," he told her. "Having an amateur along would only slow me down."

"Uh, that's not where I was going, actually," said Kyoko. "I'm saying, I don't think she's been kidnapped or imprisoned—"

Sousuke quickly began attaching equipment to his clothing. "Excessive optimism can be fatal. While we sit around here, she might be..." he trailed off midway. He seemed calm enough at a glance, but was genuinely rattled: Kaname was imprisoned. He didn't know who the enemy was, but they might be subjecting her to some terrible torture.

*I can't let that happen. I can't...* Sousuke began to imagine the torture that might be playing out as they spoke, based on his wealth of knowledge about the practice. Ruffians in bandanas tormenting a bound Kaname with fire, water,

electricity... And in the end, they'd resort to drugs to strip away her reason.

"Ugh," he muttered. "Trash."

Kyoko gazed at him coldly. "Sagara-kun. You're not using Kana-chan to imagine pervy stuff, are you?"

A heavenly aroma wafted up from the black tea set that sat before Kaname. It was the family's private blend, using leaves direct from India. "Mmm," she said appreciatively. "It's really good."

"I'm so pleased that you like it," Masatami replied with a smile.

"It really is great. And I love the view." The large glass door offered a view of the whole beach nearby. If she'd had a telescope, she might have been able to pick out her friends.

*I wonder what Sousuke's doing, she found herself thinking. Maybe Kyoko and the others are messing around with him again...*

*Wait, hang on. Am I really expecting him to give up that easily? Kaname fell into a worried silence, until...*

"What's the matter, Kaname-san?"

"Huh? Oh..."

"If you're worried about that deviant, you need not concern yourself," Masatami reassured her. "Our mansion has one of the finest security systems in the world. It would take extraordinary measures to break through it."

"Extraordinary, huh?" she commented, knowing that Sousuke certainly had extraordinary stupidity on his side.

It was then that the mystery man appeared at the door.

Masatami looked at him unhappily. "What is it now, Washio?"

"I have detected an intruder on the cliffside," the servant informed him. "What should we do?"

"That deviant. He hasn't given up yet?"

*I knew it, Kaname thought with resignation. That idiot... It was definitely*

Sousuke. She didn't know what he was planning, but he was apparently determined to see her.

Masatami noticed her fretting. "Please, don't worry," he said reassuringly.

"Samejima! Hyodo!" he called out, clapping as he called their names. Less than five seconds later, two new men appeared. One was tall and lean, the other short and squat. They both had leering expressions and dangerous glints in their eyes.

"You've already met my driver, Washio," he explained. "The tall one is my cook, Samejima, and the short one is my gardener, Hyodo."

"Ahh..." said Kaname, as the three servants bowed to her in unison.

Masatami continued proudly, "They're also my bodyguards. Washio knows kung fu, Samejima is a master with a knife, and Hyodo uses a crossbow. All three served in the French Foreign Legion. They're combat professionals."

"Geh..." Kaname knew that this was the part where she should act impressed. But instead, she just groaned.

"Geh?" Masatami echoed curiously.

"Oh, uh... Ah ha ha..."

"Hmm? Ah, no matter," he decided. "Washio! Samejima! Hyodo!"

"Sir!" the three said in unison.

"The intruder is a pervert stalking Kaname-san," he told them. "Dispose of him promptly! Get to it!"

"Sir!" the servants responded confidently.

This turn of events was making Kaname nervous. "Um, actually, the truth is..."

"Is what?" Masatami asked, stopping to stare at Kaname.

"What is it?" the servants asked together, doing likewise.

Kaname wanted to admit that she'd lied earlier and apologize for it. But she found herself so cowed by their combined gazes that, in the end, all she said was, "The truth is... I hope you do your best." It was a strange way of phrasing encouragement, but she committed to it.

“Leave it to us, Kaname-sama!” the three servants declared together before rushing out of the room.

Masatami saw them off with a smile. “That’s unusual,” he commented. “The men really seem to like you.”

“D-Do they?” she asked uneasily.

“Yes. They’re usually so curt with my visitors, but I think you’ve really inspired them.”

“R-Right...” she agreed. His words were like dumping gasoline on a fire, and now Kaname could do nothing but pray. *In that case... please let them chase Sousuke away quickly!*

*Hmm*, thought Sousuke as, with a series of hefting motions, he pulled himself up along the sheer cliff by a rope.

About halfway up, he saw a small man appear at the top of the cliff. The man was holding a crossbow, and there was a cold smile on his face as he took aim. “Heh heh heh... Die, pervert!” the man declared. With another cry, the man fired a bolt at his head, but a fortuitously-timed gust of wind caused the bolt to just miss him.

*Pervert? To whom is he referring?* Sousuke paused to wonder, even as he pulled the grenade launcher from his back. He held the rope skillfully between his legs, readied the launcher with both hands and...

*Fwoom!* A large, round grenade burst from the muzzle and hit the small man right in the face. It was a training round, so it didn’t explode, but to his opponent it was the equivalent of a Tiger Uppercut from Sagat.

“Erk! Ah... ahhhhh!” The small man cried out as he pitched over the cliff and fell into the sea.

Sousuke saw the splash far below, then resumed his climb up the cliff. *Wait for me, Chidori!*

Masatami smiled as he watched Chidori fumbling nervously. “It’s all right,

Kaname-san.”

She didn’t feel very reassured, but plastered a smile on anyway. “B-By the way, Masatami-kun... you said you were sick or something? Are you still feeling ill?”

“No, it’s not so bad now. My illness is more a psychological one,” he explained. “It’s called ‘autonomic ataxia.’”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that,” she said. “It’s when stress and worry causes incontinence, right?”

Masatami looked a little flustered. “W-Well, it’s more shortness of breath and headaches in my case. It makes it difficult to concentrate on my studies.”

“Oh? I hope I’m not prying, but what’s got you so bothered?”

“W-Well... I don’t mind telling you, Kaname-san...”

“Sure,” she said, waving him into her confidence.

“I have a cousin six years older than me,” Masatami began.

“Really?”

“Yes. We used to play together when we were younger. We were devoted to each other... so much so that when I was five years old, we promised to get married when we grew up.”

“Ahh...”

“She’s very beautiful. But two months ago... well, she was in this terrible traffic accident—” Masatami balked, and an expression of terrible pain appeared on his delicate white features.

Kaname gasped at the sight. *She must have died*, she thought, and fell silent, unsure of how to comfort him.

Masatami continued, half in tears. “—In which she met a florist, with whom... she eloped just two months ago.”

“Uh?” said Kaname, now thoroughly confused.

As he walked through the pine trees that grew thick on the grounds, Sousuke

was greeted by a tall, slender man.

“Ho ho ho!” the stranger chortled. “You made it this far, pervert. But can you defeat me?” He produced two small knives with snake-like agility. “No one can escape my whip-like strikes, a gift of my long reach,” he declared. “I’m Samejima, the cook. In my mercenary days, I was feared under the name Sammy the Slicer—”

*Thunk!* One of Sousuke’s grenades hit the man right in the gut. It was another practice round, so it didn’t explode. Yet it still sent the knife-user rolling end-over-end across the ground, stopping only when he hit a pine tree and collapsed.

“W-Wait... You...” The man was still twitching when Sousuke stepped over him and continued towards the mansion.

*Wait for me, Chidori!*

“She didn’t give me any warning,” Masatami said, his voice openly resentful now. “She just sent me a postcard from the Netherlands a few days ago. ‘I’m very happy now. I hope you come by to visit, Ma-kun,’ it read. The nerve of her! The sheer betrayal!”

“Uh-huh...” Kaname agreed weakly. It sounded like he’d been harboring a one-sided crush on an oblivious, much-older cousin. She probably didn’t even realize she’d hurt him. “So... is that the only reason for your medical condition?” she asked.

“The *only* reason?!” Masatami responded indignantly, slamming his fists on the table. “I was betrayed by the woman I trusted most in the world! I’ll never trust anyone again! It’s turned me into an absolute misanthrope!”

“But you made that promise when you were five, right?” Kaname asked.

“It’s still a promise!” he cried out. “She lied to me! She hurt me! I’ll never forgive her! If I ever see her again, I’ll tear her limb from limb!”

“H-Hey...”

Masatami’s rage was reaching excessive levels, but after a while, his heaving

shoulders finally calmed. “I’m sorry about that,” he apologized. “Just thinking about it gets me so upset; there’s nothing I hate more than being deceived.”

Kaname fidgeted in her seat a bit. “Well, everyone’s got pet peeves,” she told him nervously. “N-Nothing wrong with that...”

Masatami let out a relieved sigh and immediately returned to his previous state of bliss. “Thank you so much for saying that. You’re a wonderful person, Kaname-san!”

Kaname was giving him a strained smile when suddenly, a commotion sounded out from the lower floor of the mansion.

As Sousuke entered the mansion, he found himself on the other end of a nunchuck attack. The man who wielded them was big and round, but extremely quick on his feet.

“Huuu!” the man cried.

Sousuke dodged the whistling nunchucks a second time, and then a third. He leaped back to get his distance, readied the grenade launcher at his hip and...

*Pow!* He fired. But shockingly, the nunchuck wielder dodged the grenade! The man’s kinetic vision and reflexes were almost superhuman!

“Hah! You fool,” the man said scornfully. “Long-range weapons like that—”

*Kra-pash!* The grenade hit the wall behind him with an explosion that shook the whole building, scattering wood splinters and plaster bits. It even brought a piece of plasterboard down from the ceiling, which landed right on the man’s bald head.

“Blugh!” The man, collapsed on the floor, stared at Sousuke with wide-open eyes. “You are a terrifying foe,” he gasped. “Did you plan your grenade blast this way?! You even calculated where the plaster would fall...”

But Sousuke just stared at his launcher shamefully. “No,” he admitted. “I accidentally used a real round instead of a training one.” *Everyone makes mistakes, after all.*

“Damn you... pervert...” the man said, before finally losing consciousness.

Sousuke stepped over him and continued on further.

*Wait for me, Chidori!*

“Wh-What’s going on here?” Masatami questioned in open panic. They’d heard an explosion, after which the mansion had fallen silent.

*Yeah, of course it didn’t work, thought Kaname, planting her face on the table.*

“W-Washio!” he cried out.

No response.

“Samejima!”

No response.

“Hyodo?!”

Only eerie silence met his calls, and Masatami swallowed hard. “K-Kaname-san,” he said shakily. “Stay right where you are.”

“Huh?”

“I have a weapon, too. And with this...” Masatami drew his final weapon from his pocket. It was a folding knife, named for its resemblance to a butterfly!

“M-Masatami-kun? That’s dangerous in a whole lot of ways!” Kaname told him urgently, and began to go pale for more than one reason.

Just then, the door to the room crashed open, and Sousuke stepped out, dressed in his fatigues. “There you are,” he said, coming closer step by step as broken glass from the door pane crunched under his boots.

Before Kaname could stop him, Masatami brandished his blade. “H-Hraaah!” He charged at Sousuke.

“Hmm...” Sousuke drew a large kukri from his belt and slashed at the boy unceremoniously. The blade went flying out of Masatami’s hands and stuck right into the ceiling.

“No!” Masatami wailed.

Sousuke just spoke quietly. “You’re an amateur. That knife of yours was

designed for one-handed utility purposes. If you want a knife for combat..." He pressed the kukri, sharp enough to behead a cow in one slice, to Masatami's chest. "...you should choose a weapon like this." His voice was grave.

And right into the side of Sousuke's face... *Wham!* Kaname's fist embedded itself.

"Chidori," he said. "That hurt."

"Shut up!" she fumed back at him. "Quit scaring the poor kid with that pretentious crap!"

"What in the world? I came here to save you," Sousuke complained.

"Oh, did you? Not to *apologize* to me? You really are the biggest downer...!"

"But weren't you being tortured?"

"Why would you assume I was being tortured?! I was having tea! Tea that *you* interrupted!" Kaname shouted, then suddenly realized that Masatami was staring at them.

"Kaname-san, what's going on?" he asked. "You said he was dangerous..."

"O-Oh, well... I was just about to explain that. We're actually... friends." Suddenly embarrassed about the lie she'd told, Kaname's voice became audibly tinier.

"How could you..."

"I... I'm sorry..."

"I thought you were different," Masatami lamented bitterly. "But you were mocking me too..."

"I... I really wasn't..."

"But you were," he insisted angrily. "I was trying my best to save you, and you were laughing at me the whole time! You betrayed and tricked me!"

Kaname didn't know how to react.

"You're awful... I believed you. You trampled on my pure feelings— bwah!" Masatami suddenly hit the floor, laid out by a shoulder-throw from Sousuke.

“Sousuke?!”

“I don’t know what’s going on here,” Sousuke said calmly. “But if you were deceived, it’s your own fault.”

“Wahhh...” cried Masatami.

“You only have yourself to blame for hiring incompetent subordinates and letting your judgment be clouded,” Sousuke went on. “If this were Afghanistan, you’d be dead ten times over.”

“That’s not what this is—” Kaname tried to protest, but Sousuke just seized her hand and stepped up onto the balcony’s railing. Beyond was the sheer cliff facing the ocean. “Er... we’re not going to jump, are we?” she asked.

But Sousuke ignored her. “Still, it took backbone to come at me like that with a knife,” he admitted. “I give you credit for that.”

Masatami looked up in surprise.

“What you lack right now is primarily emotional control,” Sousuke advised him. “Don’t lie to others, but don’t be naive. Project confidence, but never leave yourself open. That is all. Goodbye.”

With that, Sousuke threw himself off the cliff, dragging Kaname with him.

“Waaaaagh!” she screamed.



Kaname's voice echoed over the beach as they went into free fall.

Washio entered the third-floor living room, rubbing at his injured head. He was relieved to see Masatami standing on the balcony. "Masatami-sama, are you all right? Where did that ruffian go?"

"Over there," said the boy, pointing to a black balloon that was slowly descending over the distant sea. "Washio, I really do think I've been naive."

"Eh?"

"Project confidence, but never leave yourself open. That's the only way to truly protect the woman you love. He's right." Masatami nodded in response to his own nonsense.

"I should probably write him an apology," Kaname said from Sousuke's arms. They were dangling from a balloon a few meters in diameter, slowly descending to the ocean's surface.

"Why is it necessary to apologize?" he asked, curious to know.

"Well, he's probably feeling really hurt. Kids his age are really sensitive."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I've been through the same thing," she admitted. "Haven't you, Sousuke?"

"Well, I have been injured."

"Figured you'd say that. By the way, Sousuke... You really did come to save me?"

"Yes."

"You really were worried about me?"

"Yes."

Kaname was silent for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm just glad you're safe," he told her.

“Sure. Ha ha...” Kaname rested her cheek on his shoulder and smiled.

〈Summer Illusion of Steel — The End〉

# My Boyfriend Is a Specialist

Tears spilled from the girl's eyes. "Unk... Hkk..." As she lay splayed on her bed, paging through the telephone book, she thought back on what had happened after school that day:

"Sorry, Mizuki." In the six months they'd been dating, she'd never heard him sound so callous. "*I just don't think we work together. We have different... values, I guess...*"

"Are you dating Chidori Kaname in Class 4 after all?!" she'd asked.

"No, of course not. This is a girl in another class... Come on, it doesn't matter."

"It matters to me! I can't live without you, Shirai-kun!"

"Sure you can," he'd told her easily. "There's got to be someone better for you out there."

"But you said you loved me! What happened to that?!"

"I... I meant it when I said it. But now, I just... I'm really sorry."

"You're disgusting, Shirai-kun. Selfish, stupid...!" she whispered hoarsely, before taking out her cell phone to punch in the number for Pizza-Le Shibasaki.

"Hic... I'd like to place an order for pizza delivery: ten large Mandalay curry pizzas, and ten large Nesso-styles. The name? Oh... Shirai. My address is..." She gave the address and phone number, then hung up. She then placed orders at the soba noodle shop Kirishima-ya, the sushi place Nadashio, and the Chinese restaurant Enra Daikyosatsu.

"...Hic. Shirai, third block in the second district. Yes, I'll be there. Thank you." She set down her phone, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "Goodbye, Shirai-kun. It'll be hard, but... I hope you find happiness," she whispered, trembling.

She buried her face in a pillow and cried for about three minutes. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she picked her cell phone back up and called

the emergency line. “Guh... Hello? There’s a rotting meat smell in the house next door. It’s been like that since yesterday... Yes. Third block in the second district, Shibasaki. Shirai household...”

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The heavy rains of June spattered against the window. It was only a little past four, but it was already dark out, and the rows of ginkgo trees beyond the courtyard looked like misty shadows in the rain. It was a gloomy day to be in school after class. The halls were deserted, with the only sound being the wind ensemble’s practice echoing in the distance.

Chidori Kaname sat on the windowsill of the student council room, staring glassily out at the yard. “What awful weather...” she said to no one in particular. Her lovely face, framed by the misty rain, took on a different cast than usual.

In a corner of the same room sat Sagara Sousuke, recently promoted to the position of Head of School Security and Aide to the Student Council President. He had a student council laptop in front of him and was leisurely moving the mouse. “Rain is a good thing. It refills reservoirs and makes hard fighting difficult,” said Sousuke, without taking his eyes off the laptop’s holoscreen. He wore his usual sullen expression and a tight frown.

“What are you talking about?” she retorted. “Haven’t you heard the phrase, ‘in Japan, water and safety are free’?”

“I haven’t. But there’s no country on Earth in which water and safety come entirely without cost,” he argued back. “Any such saying would merely be shrewd propaganda by the Japanese government.”

Despite how it seemed, Kaname knew that Sousuke was probably engaging with her in good faith. He’d been raised in war-torn regions and come here just a few months ago; in other words, he had never known peace, and she was finally becoming accustomed to what that meant for his thought processes.

“Yeah, maybe. What are you up to, by the way?” A *combat game*? she wondered, walking up to him and peering at the screen. But shockingly, what she saw was the headshot of a buxom anime girl. “What in the world?”

“It’s a romance simulator,” Sousuke told her. “The first-year who provides our

equipment recommended it. He said it would teach me a great deal about the romantic customs of high school students.”

“I’m not sure you’ll learn much of anything from this... But why are you trying to learn about romance?” It only occurred to her afterwards just how rude her question was.

But Sousuke didn’t seem to mind. He told her, “I’m in charge of security and advisor to the president. Understanding students’ motivations is crucial for these tasks, so I decided to start with romance. This simulation will help me to understand the mindset of a person experiencing the stresses particular to romantic relationships.”

Kaname stared for a moment, then said, “Well, give it your best shot.”

“Thank you, I intend to.”

The girl on the screen was scowling at him. The dialogue on the screen below her read:

《Sousuke-kun, you’re mean.》

“The system allows for a wide selection of dialogue prompts,” observed Sousuke. “I’m currently in the middle of a date. The woman said she wished to buy a swimsuit. I told her to go on and do it, and she grew angry with me.”

“I can see that,” Kaname said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Look, man... She wants you to help her pick out a swimsuit.”

“Is she incapable of making the decision herself?” he asked.

“Uh, it’s not about that...”

“I could provide assistance if she were buying military equipment, but I’m a novice in regard to civilian clothing. Hence my refusal. Why did that make her angry?”

“I’m telling you—”

Just then, the door opened with a bang, and the two turned around to see a short girl standing in the doorway. Her hair was cut in a medium-length bob.

She had a childish face, a fierce gaze, and an overall headstrong demeanor.

“Ah... Inaba Mizuki-san, was it?” Inaba Mizuki was a student from Class 2 they’d met a few weeks before. She wasn’t on particularly good terms with either Kaname or Sousuke.

Inaba Mizuki said nothing as she strode into the room. Then she gave Sousuke a scrutinizing glare. “Not bad,” she said, and then hummed, as if reaching some kind of internal decision. “Sagara, wasn’t it?”

“Yes? How can I help you?”

“Will you go on a date with me tomorrow afternoon?”

Kaname had been so shocked that she couldn’t even be angry.

The girl had laid out the circumstances: until two days ago, she’d had a boyfriend—her classmate, Shirai Satoru. A lot of girls liked him. He was handsome, fashionable, and generally desirable. But after a roller coaster of a relationship, the two of them had broken up. It seemed unlikely that they would ever get back together again.

“And that’s fine. It’s all fine. I’ve made my peace with it and sorted it all out,” Mizuki had concluded.

Kaname didn’t know what she’d done exactly, but it sounded like she really was over it. “So, what’s the problem?” she’d asked.

Mizuki had answered thusly: “I promised some of my middle school friends that I’d let them meet him.” It turned out she’d been bragging about him to her old friends quite a lot—how fashionable he was, what a good singer he was, how handsome he was—but the other girls had been skeptical, so she’d agreed to let them meet. That meeting was scheduled for tomorrow, Sunday afternoon. The other girls would never believe her if she told them they’d just broken up, so she needed a standin to get her through the day, after which she’d share the news. And she wanted Sousuke—a complete stranger—to serve as that standin.

“He’s unpolished, but good-looking enough. Besides, you two are the reason cracks started forming in our relationship. I’d say you owe me this much, don’t

you?" she'd stressed.

It was pretty tortured logic, and the request was so selfish that Sousuke should have just refused. Kaname had been just about to tell her so when Sousuke had given his answer: "Very well. I shall date you."

"Sousuke, are you nuts?!" Kaname had screamed, staring at him in shock.

But he'd just pointed to the laptop screen. "I perform poorly in the simulation because I have no field experience," he pointed out. "A single day in the field is equivalent to a week's worth of training. This may be a perfect opportunity to learn more about ordinary student rituals."

Kaname hadn't known how to respond to that. *It's not as if I'm dating Sousuke myself*, she'd concluded. *If he wants to go on a date, let him! No skin off my nose...*

And with that justification, Kaname had gone home.

That had all been about four hours ago.

"But... how did I end up like this?" she wondered. Breaking out of her long flashback, she set down her chef's knife and looked towards her living room, where Sousuke and Mizuki sat facing each other on the leather sofas, the latter fervently quizzing the former.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Mizuki demanded. "You've been buying underwear from the *Polo Jeans Company* lately! Remember it already, stupid!"

"I do remember," he replied. "I receive my standard equipment from the Polo Jeans Company. On top of it I wear a black suede Western shirt and black chino pants. This allows me to achieve low visibility at night."

"I don't think that last part was quite right, but... listen. When they ask about your clothes, just repeat what I told you, okay?"

"Understood. I spend money on clothing," Sousuke affirmed. "I recently bought an expensive jacket from Ermengildo. The jacket's cost was roughly equivalent to a single Steyr AUG rifle used by the Austrian Army, or six rounds

of 40mm anti-AS cannon—”

“Stop throwing in weird trivia! Next, what are your special skills?”

“Espionage, demolitions, and arm slave operation.”

“Wrong! *Shirai-kun*’s special skills!” It had been like this all day. Mizuki was determined to get Sousuke acting like her old boyfriend, but it was doubtful as to how well this was working.

Kaname finished dicing the tomatoes and piled them on top of their bed of fresh lettuce. “C’mon, food’s done,” she said, laying the dishes on the table.

Mizuki stood up and grumbled as she moved towards the dining area. “We’ll get back to this later,” she said. “You really are useless, you know that?”

“I’m sorry,” Sousuke responded.

The three of them took their places around the table, which contained dishes of beef curry and salad.

“Wow... that actually looks pretty good. Do you cook a lot, Kaname?” At some point, Mizuki had started referring to Kaname by her first name and without an honorific.

“Well, I do live alone,” Kaname pointed out. “I’ve got to cook or I’d end up eating instant stuff all the time.” Her mother had passed away, and her father lived in New York. Kaname had already been accepted to Jindai High when her father got his work transfer, so she’d opted to remain in Tokyo on her own.

“Hmm... Do you make curry and stuff a lot?”

“Not a lot. It takes forever to get through it when I’m by myself.”

“Hah. Then you should be grateful! Having us here means you get to eat curry for once!” One of Mizuki’s more impressive qualities was her ability to say things like that with a straight face.

“So, here’s a question... Why are you guys having your little study group here, again?” Kaname grumbled.

Mizuki responded while piling salad onto her plate, “I told you already. We have to pull an all-nighter, but I’m not allowed to have boys overnight. My dad

would be furious.”

“So... stay at Sousuke’s place?” Kaname suggested. “He lives alone too.”

“I can’t be alone with a *boy*! What he tried to force himself on me?” Mizuki pointed her fork at Sousuke. “You’d have only yourself to blame! Unlike you, Kaname, I have a sensitive disposition!”

“I wouldn’t hurt you,” Sousuke responded simply.

“Hmph. That’s what boys always say. Who knows what dark desires lurk behind that unassuming expression?”

Sousuke’s expression was unchanged, but... *Oh, he’s hurt.* Kaname caught the slightest movement in his brow, and smiled to herself privately.

Later in the night, she woke up and looked at the clock by her pillow; it was three o’clock in the morning. It was dark outside and she could hear the distant sound of an ambulance siren. “Hmm...” Kaname had lain down in her bed without removing her sweatshirt and culottes, and must have fallen asleep at some point. She could still hear Mizuki and Sousuke talking in the next room over.

*That’s right, these walls are pretty thin...* And the neighborhood was pretty quiet at this time of night. If she strained her ears just a little, she could make out what they were saying.

“Ready? This time, really pretend to be him. We’ll have a conversation.” Mizuki sounded a little fretful.

Sousuke responded casually. “Understood. I’m ready.”

Kaname heard the rustling of clothes—this was probably Mizuki, sitting back on the couch. It seemed they were reviewing what they’d gone over so far. Kaname was curious to see how far he’d come.

After a few seconds of silence, they began their couple act.

“Okay... Hey, Shirai-kun,” Mizuki began. “Where do you want to go this Sunday?”

“I’d like to see a movie. We saw that romance, *Poverty’s Paradise* recently, so

let's try a different genre," Sousuke responded. "How about *Sneakers 2*?"

"Oh, yeah, I wanna see that one!"

"It sounds like it's good. It has River Phoenix, your favorite." His tone was typical Sousuke, but he was sounding pretty good. He must really have been studying hard.

He went on, fluently describing the movie. "From what I've read, the depictions of hacking are very realistic, and it's also suspenseful. Although I doubt civilian hackers would have computers capable of competing with the NSA."

"What are you talking about?" Mizuki asked.

"NSA, the National Security Agency. They're the world's largest intelligence service, outstripping even the CIA." Sousuke was slowly dropping character.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's understandable. You're an amateur, after all."

"Um... Aren't you an amateur too, *Shirai-kun*?"

"I'm under no obligation to answer that question," Sousuke said flatly.

*Yeah, they're doomed... Sousuke can only go so far in the role of "ordinary guy."* Kaname let out a small sigh and shook her head in the dark.

"Nobody talks to their girlfriend that way!" Mizuki said angrily, banging her fists on the glass coffee table. "Get serious already!"

"I'm always serious. Now, try me again. Ask another question." By contrast, Sousuke was perfectly calm.

"Fine. Shirai-kun... Do you love me?" Mizuki cooed at him, slipping back into character herself.

"Yes."

"Aw, don't just say 'yes'! Say it the way you always do."

"Ah, you're right. I love you, Mizuki," came his hushed whisper.

Kaname's heart skipped a beat.

“Say it again, Shirai-kun.”

“I love you, Mizuki.”

“Again.”

“I love you, Mizuki.” This one had a surprisingly warm, effortless feeling to it. The fact that she couldn’t see Sousuke’s face suddenly filled Kaname with a queasy sense of unease.

“Shirai-kun... Do you still love me?”

“I still love you, Mizuki.”

“Will you always love me?”

“Yes. I will always love you, Mizuki.”

After this, Mizuki fell silent, and the conversation trailed off. The only sound from the living room now was her quiet sniffling.

A little while later, Sousuke asked her in his more typical blunt tone, “Why are you crying, Inaba?”

“Oh, shut up. I hate you!”

“But you’re the one who—”

“I said shut up!” she wailed. “And stop staring at me!”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

The image of Sousuke beginning to panic in confusion rose up in Kaname’s mind’s eye. Unable to sort out her feelings in full, she pulled her blanket back over her head.

The next day was sunny, and the humidity rising up from the puddles on the roads made the June heat feel that much more sweltering. At Kichijoji Station on the Keio Inokashira Line, Kaname and Mizuki stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to the south entrance near the ticket gates. Lots of people were passing by, and other young people were waiting to meet their own friends nearby.

“It should be about time,” Mizuki whispered, tapping one high-heeled sandal

on the pavement. She wore a blue sleeveless dress and a black lace cardigan, as well as a wealth of bracelets on her arms and a Gucci bag on her shoulder.

“It’s three of your friends, right? Do they all go to the same school?” Kaname asked. She was wearing a graphic print T-shirt, a denim miniskirt, and a well-worn black jacket. It was the kind of casual outfit she’d usually wear when hitting the local video store at night. She hadn’t planned on coming at first, but Mizuki had insisted, so she’d been forced to throw something on.

“Yeah, the same high school. I ended up in a different district when I moved.”

“Aha. By the way...” Kaname looked at Sousuke, who was standing beside her. “I’m impressed you managed to muster up a decent outfit.”

“I acquired them in a trade with Kurz,” Sousuke told them. He was sporting a chic brown knit top and sharp black pants, with ankle boots and an unassuming silver necklace as an accent. He looked like a million bucks, all told.

“Oh, that guy?” Kaname asked curiously. “What did you give him in exchange?”

“A vintage Government.”

“A what?”

“It’s an old gun,” he explained. “It has little practical value.”

“Aha...” Kaname’s mind immediately went to the gun wielded by Lupin III (though in fact, the Government was the pistol of Inspector Zenigata).

“Mizukiii! Sorry we’re laaate!” came a cheery voice. Kaname turned and saw three stylishly dressed girls waving to Mizuki. “Has it been three whole months? How have you been?”

“Those sandals are so cute!”

“Hey, Mizuki, have you lost weight?” The three girls surrounded Mizuki and peppered her with questions and comments.

“By the way, where’s the boyfriend? Shirai-san, was it? Is he not here yet?” pressed the first girl.

That was when Sousuke stepped forward, shoulders back and hands behind

him in a military rest posture. “I am Shirai Satoru. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

For a minute, all three girls were intimidated into silence.

*I sure hope this works...* Kaname thought.

After all that, Mizuki introduced Kaname. The three girls gave the all-clear for her coming along on the outing, and then they introduced themselves. The lively one with the bracing smile was Akagi Manami. The childish-looking one with the slight lisp was Tsuge Madoka. The one with quiet eyes and a breezy manner was Midorikawa Yoko.

*Akagi, Tsuge, Midorikawa—Red, Yellow, Green. Like a traffic light...* Kaname usually had trouble remembering names, so she just assigned them the colors corresponding to their names in her head.

The first order of business was lunch. They accompanied the shouting and giggling girls through the crowds for about five minutes before finally arriving at a small Italian restaurant on the edge of the business district.

“This is it! Wow, it’s been forever!”

“Yeah, has it been a whole year?”

Mizuki and her friends barely paid Sousuke and Kaname any mind as they looked back on old times. Apparently, they used to come here a lot together.

As the group crowded in, they found the shop still empty. It seemed like a pretty chill place, with warm natural light coming in through the windows.

A young waiter came to greet them. “Welcome. How many will it be?” he asked.

“Six. Do you think you could get us a table by the window?” Mizuki answered, with an air of self-importance.

The waiter managed not to wince. “Very well,” he replied politely. “Right this way.”

“No,” Sousuke said abruptly. He pointed to a corner in the back of the shop. “We should sit there. And turn off the lamp over the table, please. It’s too bright.”

“Er?” The waiter was silent for a moment, then looked at Mizuki for assistance.

“Sou— Shirai-kun, what are you talking about?”

“It’s dangerous to sit near a street-facing window,” he told her. “And that spot has a poor view of the entrance as well.”

“How is it dangerous?”

“An old colleague—I mean, an old middle school teacher of mine—was once ambushed in the middle of dinner. A terrorist shot him with a machine gun through the glass. If it hadn’t been for his bulletproof vest, he would have been killed.” The other three stared at him in disbelief, but Sousuke continued unflappably. “It’s true. Mr. Osumi from Jindai Middle. He has a scar from a 9mm bullet on his right shoulder. He truly helped guide me on my course in life. A fine teacher indeed.”

It was an absurd story to attribute to a middle school teacher.

While Mizuki and Kaname stood there at a loss for words, the traffic light trio suddenly...

“Ah ha ha ha!”

“Shirai-san’s so funny!”

“I didn’t entirely understand that story, but he does sound like a good teacher.”

...burst out laughing.

“I think maybe your friends have a couple of screws loose,” Kaname whispered to Mizuki, who just let out a sigh.

They ended up sitting by the window. Each of Mizuki’s friends spoke up in turn while enjoying their plates of pasta.

“Shirai-san, you’re not very much like Mizuki described you,” Red observed.

“I agree!” Yellow put in. “Um, um, he seems so...”

“Stoic and practical,” supplied Green.

“An incorrect assessment. I gladly wear clothing items that have no practical value whatsoever,” Sousuke responded with utmost forwardness. “I enjoy pointless chatter, and I’m delighted to spend time with women without any particular goal in mind. That is my personality.”

“Really?” Yellow asked doubtfully. “It doesn’t look that way to me...”

“That’s understandable. You’re all amateurs, after all.”

“Amateurs at what?” Kaname muttered, but he ignored her.

“Despite my tremendous frivolity, Mizuki remains with me. She is magnificent,” he said, patting Mizuki—who was sitting beside him—on the back.

“Ah! Lovebirds!”

“I’m so jealous!”

“You really do seem passionate...” the three said in turn, heckling them.

“S-Stop that, Shirai-kun,” Mizuki told him. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Embarrassing you how? You are very important to me. As important as...”

“As...?”

“As the political value of nuclear weapons.”

The date continued more or less in that vein.

After the meal, they did karaoke. The three girls had been told he liked Ozawa Kenji, and urged him to sing something out of his catalog. Obviously, Sousuke knew little about Japanese songs.

“Perhaps I’ll sing a different song today,” he said, then began the folk song *Moscow Night* in fluent Russian. His voice was poor and off-key, enough to chill the heart of any listener, but Mizuki’s three friends did nothing but cackle.



Later, when Mizuki demanded to know why he'd sung that song of all things, he'd simply replied, "It's the only song I know."

After karaoke, they went to a movie.

The local theater was showing a film that currently had a lot of buzz over featuring a popular male idol. It was a dramatic love story set in China during World War II, depicting the tragedy of lovers torn apart by war.

During the scene where the protagonist's battalion was gunned down by the enemy's army while trying to protect civilians returning to the Japanese mainland, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. Except...

"The man's death was inevitable," Sousuke said of the dead protagonist as they left the theater. "Despite having more than enough ammunition, he foolishly ordered a bayonet charge. Why did he not lure the enemy into the hills nearby, stretch their forces thin, and pick them off?"

"Well, uh, it wasn't really that kind of movie..." Kaname hedged.

"It's not a matter of genre," argued Sousuke. "He let his men die unnecessarily, wasted crucial resources, and died in a manner designed to suit his own ego. It was officers like him that lost Japan the war."

Mizuki's three friends laughed over his "joke" again, but there was a hollow, incredulous tone to their laughter now.

They went to an arcade.

They took pictures in a photo booth out front and printed out stickers. Sousuke pulled the 9mm pistol from the holster on his back and planted one of the stickers on its slide.

"Um... is that a toy gun?" Red asked.

Sousuke shook his head. "No, this is my cellular phone," he responded casually, then returned the black steel to its holster.

They played a crane game too. Yellow said, "Shirai-san, you're good at these, right? Get me that one!" before pointing to one of the stuffed animals. But even

after ten tries, Sousuke was still failing. He was about to break the glass with the grip of his pistol in frustration, but Kaname and Mizuki hit him from behind to stop him.

They also took a personality quiz. The question read, *You're walking through the forest when you come upon a wall. How do you get past it? A, climb over. B, go around. C, give up and turn back.*

As Sousuke thought it over, Green whispered to Kaname, "This question is actually about how you deal with matters of pride. For instance, if he chooses C, it means he's a hopeless person without any pride." She'd apparently played this game before.

"I'm not sure how to respond. My choice isn't any of those options," Sousuke said.

Green then asked with interest, "What would you do, Shirai-san?"  
"I would blow a hole in it."

By the time they'd wandered through an accessory store, a CD shop, and a big bookstore, the three girls' faces were seriously clouded by doubt. Their initial carefree laughter was gone, and they began to regard Sousuke with scrutinizing gazes. They grew more careful with their words around him, and occasionally broke off from the larger group to whisper to each other.

"You think the jig is up already?" Kaname said casually enough as they strolled around the lake in Inokashira Park.

This earned her a glare from Mizuki. "We're still fine," she insisted. "If we can just hold out until we leave the park, we're home free!"

"You sure about that?" Kaname replied with skepticism.

The sun was already low in the west, giving the lake water a bronze tint. Sousuke and the three girls were sitting on a bench a ways away, sharing awkward conversation. Sousuke then stood up and headed their way.

"What is it?" Kaname asked.

"I was asked to fetch drinks," he said. "What would you like?"

“I’ll take a Dr. Pepper.”

“I’ll have any kind of tea.”

“Understood.” Sousuke went off to buy the drinks.

Kaname looked over and saw Red beckoning the two of them over. As Kaname and Mizuki approached her, the girl hesitated and then said, “Hey, Mizuki? He doesn’t quite seem how you described him, y’know?”

“He says such scary things!” Yellow burst out. “About explosions and snipers...”

“I suppose he does technically talk about drama and music and such, but...” Green trailed off.

The girls were probably referring to the fact that the things he said about them seemed labored and unintuitive. That was understandable. After all, he was just repeating things he’d memorized.

“Wh-What are you talking about? He’s the Shirai-kun I’m always telling you about,” Mizuki objected.

“Well, we get that, but... We feel like you’re forcing him to be something he’s not,” Red told her gently.

“I-I’m not forcing him to be anything!” said Mizuki. “If you think there’s something wrong with him, it’s probably because you’re crazy!”

The three got a little riled at this.

“We don’t deserve to be spoken to that way,” said Yellow.

“But it’s true!” Mizuki insisted. “You called me here, begging and pleading to let you meet him! And now it’s like nothing he does is good enough!”

“More hysterical rantings?” Green sighed. “You haven’t grown up at all, Mizuki.”

“I am not hysterical! As if *you’re* so mature!”

As the quarrel grew more heated, the mood between the four girls became more dangerous. Kaname was watching uncomfortably when she suddenly heard a male voice behind her.

“Ah, Mizuki? Is that you, Mizuki?!”

She turned to see a small group of men and women heading their way. A familiar boy was among them—handsome, with well-defined features. Kaname lamented the cruelty of fate. *Ah, at the worst possible time!*

The man approaching them now was Shirai Satoru, Mizuki’s actual ex-boyfriend. “What the hell is your problem, huh? What the hell were you thinking?!” Shirai Satoru stormed up to her, nostrils flaring, for reasons Kaname clearly wasn’t privy to.

“Huh? Um, I...” Mizuki froze in place, shoulders heaving as she hesitated. “Um... who are you?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!” he fumed back. “The pizza place, the soba shop, the police... They all said it was a young girl’s voice that called in! You’d better have something to say for yourself!”

“Um, I j-just...”

“I was gonna confront you at school, but this is way better. You did this, right? You just can’t let it go, huh? I’m gonna— ack!”

The next thing she knew, Kaname had delivered a chop to the back of his neck.

“Hey! Wh-What was that about, Chidori-san?” Shirai demanded, seeming to have only just noticed Kaname’s presence.

Kaname laughed awkwardly. “Er, sorry. I don’t know what you’re talking about with pizza and soba, but could you maybe do it somewhere else? In a more constructive manner, maybe?”

“No way,” he retorted, “I’m squaring this with Mizuki right here and now.”

It was around this time that Sousuke got back with the drinks, which only exacerbated the chaos.

“S-Sagara’s here too?!” Shirai said in surprise.

The three girls promptly turned their gazes to “Sagara.”

Sousuke seemed to grasp the situation immediately, and told the three girls,

“This man is mentally ill. He was moved out of our school to a mental hospital a year ago. He has a persecution complex and is convinced that Mizuki is his girlfriend.”

“Wait, Sagara, you—”

“Please don’t indulge him by listening to anything he says,” Sousuke went on, cutting him off. “He’ll use obscene language. He’s a sadist who revels in women’s distress.”

“Who are you calling a sadist?!” Shirai demanded.

“Silence, psychopath. When did they let you out? Are you trying to harass Mizuki again?”

“I’m not harassing her, I’m her—”

“Hah!” Kaname delivered another fierce elbow to Shirai’s neck. She must have hit him in a more sensitive spot this time, because Shirai crumpled completely this time, unconscious. “Ah. Uh, you okay?”

“Shirai!”

“You wanna fight?!”

“Now you’re really ticking me off!”

The threats came from Shirai’s three companions, all of whom seemed ready for a fight.

Sousuke clicked his tongue and drew his pistol, still with the photo sticker on it, and aimed the weapon at their feet. *Blam! Blamblamblamblamblam!* A total of seven 9mm shots hit their target.

“Leave before I kill you,” he said.

Shirai’s coterie ran off in a hurry, dragging their unconscious friend behind them.

Moving to hide the seven bullet holes in the asphalt, Kaname explained things to Mizuki’s friends. “Sagara is his father’s last name. Right, Sou— Satoru-kun?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “My father’s last name is Sagara.”

“Their parents got divorced, and his mother became ‘Shirai,’” Kaname continued helpfully. “Right, Mizuki?”

“Y-Yes... I forgot to explain that,” Mizuki agreed. “That guy had been in the hospital for close to a year, so he wouldn’t know about the divorce.”

“Yeah, it’s awful,” Kaname concluded. “It’s an awful world where dangerous people like that can run free!”

“Yes, truly,” agreed the man who had just fired seven live rounds at civilians.

They had managed to cook up a cover story that papered over things well enough, but the girls continued to regard them suspiciously.

“Wh-Why are you looking at us like that? You think we’re lying or something?!” Mizuki shouted at them.

The three girls shared a glance, and then teasing smiles appeared on their faces.

“Oh... We’re certainly not doubting your relationship,” Red denied.

“We just wanna see you get romantic,” Yellow suggested innocently.

“Yeah,” Green agreed. “For instance...”

The three spoke up in unison: “You could kiss.”

Mizuki and Kaname both turned pale, while Sousuke just looked confused.

“We can’t just kiss in front of people!” Mizuki protested.

“You can’t? But you’re dating...”

“W-Well...”

“It’s just weird if you can’t kiss,” Yellow said firmly.

Meanwhile, Sousuke whispered to Kaname, “Chidori. To ‘kiss’ means to touch mouths together?”

“Y-Yes?” she stammered back.

“Understood.” Sousuke walked up to Mizuki, put his arms around her waist, and before she could even react...

“Hey— Mm!” He pinched her nose, then boldly and brazenly put his lips to

hers! Mizuki's eyes opened in shock at first, but then she went limp, and sagged into his arms. One second, two seconds, three seconds... He released Mizuki after just four seconds, then turned back to the stunned trio.

"Well? Do you believe us now?" There was a note of triumph in his voice. "Kissing is easy. Easier than shooting a puppy."

*Well, I guess that much is true,* thought Kaname, stunned.

Mizuki slowly recovered her senses, putting a trembling hand to her lips. "What's wrong with you?!" she shrieked, before slapping Sousuke three times. Then, after a moment's pause, as if to summon up the nerve, she slammed her palm into the bridge of his nose.

Sousuke tottered, tipped over the railing, and splashed into the pond.

"Creep! I didn't say you could kiss me!" Mizuki continued to rail. "How dare you take advantage... Ah!" Suddenly remembering who was watching them, she came to an abrupt halt.

"Mizuki..." said Red, stepping forward.

Mizuki took a step back. Her eyes filled with tears, which began to spill down her cheeks as she blinked. "I... I hate all of you!" she choked out.

"Ah, Mizuki—" Kaname began to say, but she ran off before anyone could stop her. The remaining three girls and Kaname shared an awkward glance.

"Chidori-san, was that person from before the real Shirai-san?" Red asked.

"Yeah," Kaname said with a sigh. "The guy in the lake right now is a dummy called Sagara Sousuke. He's not Mizuki's boyfriend, he's just a war-obsessed nutball. A stupid, perverted, trashy, jerky..."

"You probably don't have to go that far," Green interrupted.

"Oh, but I do," Kaname replied. "What's wrong with that loser? Just doing whatever people tell him... What a creep! I hate him too!" She said it loud enough for Sousuke, who was looking up at her while up to his shoulders in water, to hear. She wasn't sure why, but she felt a bit like crying herself.

Green poked Red in the shoulder and said, "Hey... Manami. We should probably go."

“Oh, right,” Red agreed. “Yeah, c’mon.”

The three of them quickly stood up.

“You’re going home?” Kaname asked.

“No, we’re going after Mizuki,” Red told her. “She’s probably feeling pretty down.”

“She’s selfish and stubborn and sneaky and vain,” Green admitted. “But...”

Yellow finished with, “She really does need friends...”

The three shared a look, then smiled.

“See you, Chidori-san. Take care of Sagara-san!”

“Huh? Um, it’s really not that kind of...” But before Kaname could finish, the three girls were gone with a wave. “Sheesh,” she grumbled. “Anyway...” She looked down at Sousuke, who was still soaked in the lake. He was so forlorn, reminiscent of a Siberian Husky that had just received a scolding.

“Well,” she said briskly, “how long are you gonna stay in there?”

“Well...” For once, Sousuke was at a loss for words. “Am I... really that bad?”

“You kissed a young girl without her permission,” Kaname reminded him.

“That’s practically rape.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” he protested.

“Then how did you mean it? Can you just kiss anyone you feel like?” she replied scathingly.

“If I have to, yes,” Sousuke told her. “I’ve kissed various men as well.”

“Huh?”

“A Turkish mercenary who’d taken a bullet to the stomach,” he went on. “An old Tajik man who was too close to an explosion. A technician who’d taken a hundred-meter fall... Some I saved, some I failed to.”

*Oh... I guess he doesn’t know the difference between a kiss and mouth-to-mouth, Kaname thought belatedly. He doesn’t realize that putting your lips to someone else’s can have a special meaning. That’s why he didn’t think twice...*

"Fine, whatever," she said after a moment. "Just come on up."

"But you're angry with me," he sulked.

"Just come up," she coaxed. "You'll catch cold in there."

Sousuke obediently climbed onto the bank.

Kaname took on an even more big-sisterly attitude than usual and said, "You're in pretty bad shape... Here, let me have a look." She took out a handkerchief and wiped the mud from Sousuke's face. Their faces were close now, less than ten centimeters apart.



*If I stood up on tip-toe just a little, I'd be just on his level...* She imagined it playing out in her mind. She'd put her hands on his shoulders, tilt her face up, shift her weight to her toes, close her eyes...

"What is it, Chidori?" Sousuke's voice brought her back to her senses. "You've turned red."

"R-Really? Well, I've cleaned you off..." said Kaname, stepping away from him as she set out to leave the park.

Sousuke followed behind her. "Are you feeling under the weather?" he asked.

"R-Really, it's nothing..." She laughed awkwardly.

"It could be damage to your circulatory system," he said. "Perhaps you should see a doctor—"

"I told you I'm fine! J-Just leave me alone!"

"You're still angry."

"Am not!"

They argued on and on as they walked through the park, rendered dark by evening.

⟨My Boyfriend is a Specialist — The End⟩

# The Hamburger Hill of Art

“C’mon, c’mon! Gather round, everyone!” Kagurazaka Eri shouted to her students through her bullhorn. She was a woman in her midtwenties with black hair styled in a bob. She was wearing a checkered blouse and stonewashed jeans.

The young people, drawing boards in hand, gathered around her at a leisurely pace amid the sun-dappled greenery. They were about 160 in total and came from her own class—2-4—plus the three preceding classes.

Jindai High ran its life drawing classes in a fairly unusual way: four classes participated each day while the rest went about their usual routine. They cycled in and out for a week until all students had participated.

“All right! Good morning, everyone,” Ms. Kagurazaka continued. “Today is life drawing class. I know that being outside might incline you to lower your standards for behavior, but please keep everything in moderation and conduct yourselves as representatives of Jindai High School.” With this, she turned her eyes to one particular student: Sagara Sousuke.

A sullen expression and tight frown, a piercing gaze, and a total awareness of his surroundings—this infamous problem child, who’d been brought up in war-torn regions, had been listening carefully and quietly to everything Ms. Kagurazaka was saying. Nevertheless, she still felt uneasy enough to ask, “Do you understand, Sagara-kun?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Sousuke, standing at attention like a soldier receiving a briefing. “I will use the skills I’ve honed to protect my mother school.”

“Really, just relax... Moderation is the keyword today, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Even if force of arms is required, I shall endeavor to keep it minimal.”

“Force of arms will *not* be required for drawing!” She’d started raising her voice, then caught herself, remembering that other students were watching.

“Ah, ahem,” she coughed. “Now, please give your attention to Mr. Mizuhoshi from the art department.” Ms. Kagurazaka handed the megaphone to the art teacher standing behind her.

Mr. Mizuhoshi had the long hair and stubble vaguely reminiscent of a musician. “Our theme today is ‘nature and humanity,’” he began. “Ah, environmental issues have been at the top of our minds for a long time. The employment of your youthful sensibilities to astutely—and with great diversity of experience—transplant humanity’s relationship with nature to the picture frame is a highly significant act of civic service. Need I cite the example of Mondriaan, who...” he droned on for a while, “...but rather exploring harmony with the whole, conveying a kind of true wisdom to the observer. There is no better way for us, the generation that has witnessed the third atomic bomb, to demonstrate...” Mr. Mizuhoshi went on and on, and nobody understood him in the slightest.

“Er... Mr. Mizuhoshi...” Ms. Kagurazaka tried to interject.

“A great man once said, ‘No one likes to admit to the follies that spring from their youth,’ but I want you to strike back with the iron fist of ‘I’ll correct adults like you!’... Ah, what is it, Ms. Kagurazaka?”

“Could you please tell the students, concretely, what it is that they’re supposed to be drawing?”

Mr. Mizuhoshi fell silent for about five seconds, his brow furrowed, and looked around aimlessly. Then he slapped himself on the forehead. “Oh, right. The theme is ‘nature and humanity.’ Environmental issues have been heartily debated for a long time, and the employment of your youthful sensibilities to depict what humanity has lost—” Apparently, he’d just looped back around to the start.

Ms. Kagurazaka let out a sigh.

After about thirty minutes of lecture, they were told to be on their way.

“So we’re supposed to draw the model and the scenery together, right?” Chidori Kaname asked. She wore her black hair long and was, as per usual, dressed in her school uniform. Today she carried an old drawing board under

her arm, which had the words, “Grape Class, Chidori Kamamme,” inscribed on one corner in a childish hand.

“And we’re supposed to choose someone in the class to be our model, right?” she asked again, looking out over the members of Class 2-4. Kaname was the vice president of the student council and also their class representative. Looking over the paper titled, “1998 Jindai High Life Drawing Class Rules,” she said, “Whoever chooses to serve as model will receive a grade ranging from C minus to A plus based on the rest of the class’s drawings.’ Huh. Well, that’s unreasonable...”

“Well, you know Mizuhoshi. He’s a real jerk,” one of the boys said.

“Anyway, let’s pick the model. Any volunteers?” Kaname asked, and the students of her class shared an uneasy glance.

“I don’t want to get a C based on someone else’s drawing...”

“And you have to stand the whole time, right?”

“Being a model is boring. You’re not allowed to move.”

Nobody seemed eager to volunteer.

It was then that one of her classmates, Tokiwa Kyoko—a girl with braids and coke-bottle glasses—said, “How about Sagara-kun? He’s really good at standing still.” Kaname turned to Sousuke, who was standing quietly at the back of the crowd. And it was true that he was the only person in the class who regularly engaged in what he referred to as ‘ambush and surveillance’ missions...

“I don’t entirely understand, but I’m happy to be of assistance,” Sousuke said.

“Wow, nice. Shall we say it’s Sousuke, then?” Kaname asked.

Some complained about having to draw a guy, but as nobody else was willing to volunteer, the group agreed in the end.

“Next is the location,” she continued. “Where should we go?”

The drawing site was a municipal campground located about five kilometers from the school. It was a park made up of mainly virgin forest and hills. There were lots of ups and downs, as if it were a hiking course in the country.

“Hmm... How about here?” she suggested. They were standing in a circular clearing in the middle of the campground, surrounded by forest.

“I think there’s a place with a nice view on the east side,” Kyoko put in, “but Class 2 ran to claim it right away.”

“Okay. Let’s stay here, then,” Kaname decided.

Since nobody objected to this either, the forty students immediately began to get their art supplies out. The birdsong around them was pleasant; the noisy streets of the city weren’t far away, but at least in this area it was all lush greenery and no houses. When Kaname had been in elementary school, she’d frequently ridden her bike to play at this campground. She remembered there being a small river nearby, which came from a natural spring, where she’d frequently caught crayfish with the boys.

Kaname was recalled to the present when she saw Sousuke sharpening a pencil with a combat knife. “Hey, Sousuke, what are you doing?”

“Preparing to draw. Is there an issue?”

“But you’re the model,” she pointed out.

“The model doesn’t require a pencil?”

“You won’t need art supplies or paper,” she told him. “You just stand there.”

“But I can’t draw like this,” he protested.

“Of course not! Anyway, just wait there for now.” And with that, Kaname went back to her own preparations.

Sousuke stared down in confusion at the new drawing board he’d brought with him. He’d never drawn anything but battleground diagrams in his life, and he’d never even seen artistic paints before. *I’m an art model, he thought, but I won’t be making any art to model. What in the world does it mean?*

At last, the forty-student class finished their preparations and—completely ignoring Sousuke’s confusion—began to discuss what pose the model should take. Everyone seemed to have their own ideas, and didn’t seem likely to come to any quick agreements.

“He can’t do a handstand all day!”

“What about a headstand backbend?”

“No circus stuff!”

“What if he acted like a twintail?”

“What are you even talking about?”

About three-quarters of the students continued arguing in just that manner, while those who remained—i.e., the “don’t give a damn” faction—continued chatting normally. Meanwhile, Sousuke just stood there.

“So, you’re going to draw here?” came the voice of Mr. Mizuhoshi, the arriving art teacher.

“It does appear so,” said Sousuke.

Then Kaname noticed the teacher and said, “Oh, sir. He’ll be the model. Report finished.” And with that, she went back to the debate.

Sousuke stood next to Mr. Mizuhoshi, watching as the others continued their discussion. “Sir,” he began. “I was assigned the role of model, but I don’t understand what it consists of.”

“Hmm. What *is* a model, you mean? That’s a very good question,” Mr. Mizuhoshi mused. “It takes an extraordinary student to ask a question like that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Ah, it’s wonderful,” said Mr. Mizuhoshi, who appeared to have taken a liking to Sousuke. He looked up at the sky, eyes narrowed. “Given today’s theme, the title ‘model’ might not be entirely appropriate for your role,” he advised. “You actually have a far more important job.”

“What do you mean?” Sousuke asked.

“It’s difficult to describe: words can be so limited. The disappointment that such realization inspires in me is like the stagnant air of ancient ruins, which...” Mr. Mizuhoshi proceeded to pontificate for a while before returning to the subject at hand with, “...and regarding those things around which words fail, we

have no choice but to be silent. But to come right to the point, you should be like the antithesis of the artists, blending in with the depths of the rich green..." He went on a while longer, and eventually rambled, "...rejecting absolutes, simultaneously a beast fighting for the existence of nature, and at the same time, helpless prey—"

His words were as difficult for Sousuke to understand as they would be for anyone. But, realizing that his role would prove a far weightier one than he'd initially expected, Sousuke asked, "So, what do I do?" He was openly nervous.

"You must become nature itself. You must blend in with the trees and deceive the eyes of the artists. Recognize that you cannot disappear from them entirely, yet you must effectively become something that their eye does not perceive... This is my concept. After all..." Mr. Mizuhoshi spoke passionately, continuing on and on until he finished with, "...more or less. Do you understand?"

Sousuke knew that he definitely didn't, but replied earnestly enough. "I won't be perfect, but I'll do the best I can."

Mr. Mizuhoshi took out a notepad and a pen. "What was your name again?"  
"Sagara Sousuke."

"Hmm. Class 4, model Sagara. There. Well, give it your best today."

"Sir. I shall endeavor to blend in with nature." Sousuke responded at attention, then watched as Mr. Mizuhoshi walked away.

If only Kaname had been present to witness this conversation, trouble might have been averted. Unfortunately, she was too busy giving a heated lecture about Sadaharu Oh's "flamingo" batting stance.

"Okay, so we'll just have him sitting under that tree, right?" They'd eventually grown tired of debating special poses and gone with a safer route. "So, Sousuke, sit over— Huh?" When Kaname turned around, she found that Sousuke was gone. *But he was standing there with his bag just a minute ago,* she thought exasperatedly. Out loud, she said, "Hey, where's Sousuke?"

"Dunno. Hey, yeah, haven't seen him in a while..." The other students of Class 4 looked around for Sousuke, but saw no sign of him.

“He was talking to Mr. Mizuhoshi earlier.”

“Think he went to pee?”

“Yeah, that’s possible.”

They decided to wait for him to come back, but even thirty minutes later he was still nowhere to be seen.

“Guess he’s not coming back,” Kyoko grumbled.

“Yeah,” Kaname agreed. “Let’s see if my Pitch works here...” She looked at her PHS’s LCD screen. “Oh, it does. Huh.” Impressed, she manipulated the digital dials and brought up Sousuke’s number.

After a pleasant ringtone, Sousuke answered brusquely. “Speaking.”

“Sousuke, what are you doing?” she asked incredulously. “We’re all waiting for you. Come back, okay?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Huh?”

“I am the model,” he told her solemnly. “I need to blend in with nature and deceive the artists’ eyes. If I came out where you could see me, I would fail to achieve my mission.”

*Deceive the artists’ eyes?* she wondered. There had clearly been some kind of misunderstanding.

“Cut the crap and get back here already,” Kaname told him. “We can’t draw without you.”

“I am here, although you cannot see me. I am meant to blend in with the rich green until the last moment... similar to an anti-tank missile.”

“You’re a model! That’s *all!*”

“Incorrect,” he responded. “I am more than a model. I’m playing the crucial role of rejecting you with absolute chaos... similar to an electromagnetic jamming pod.”

“For the love of...”

“I have informed you of my parameters. Now, draw. I will watch over you from here.”

“Excuse me?”

Sousuke hung up on her. She called again, but he didn’t pick up this time. *He said he was watching, she figured. So he can’t be far...*

“What should we do?”

“I’m not sure...” said Kaname, trailing off. “Sheesh, this sucks. I guess there’s no choice: we’ll need to pick a new model.”

“But who?”

The forty students looked around passively, and Kaname sighed. “Fine, I’ll do it. Heaven’s sake...”

Class 4 gave her a hearty round of applause. But when she and a few others went to report the change to Mr. Mizuhoshi...

“No! No! Absolutely no change of models!” he told them, angry enough that a vein popped out on his forehead.

“But what do we do?” Kaname protested. “Sagara-kun’s gone missing.”

“No! No excuses! I taught him the heart and soul of modeling, and he accepted my passionate plea!” Mr. Mizuhoshi declared. “Trying to remove him now... What exactly are you plotting?!”

“We’re not plotting! We’re just—”

“Just what?! Oh, how typical of the great unwashed! You have no true artistic convictions, instead pursuing whatever cheap and vulgar...” Mr. Mizuhoshi ranted vehemently for a few minutes. “...And that’s what’s wrong with you! Capitalists!”

“You can’t talk to your students that way!” Kaname told him angrily.

But Mr. Mizuhoshi seemed more than a little off-kilter, because he raised his fists resolutely and shouted, “My point is, if you can’t draw him accurately, your class receives a C-minus! You won’t get your art credit! Prepare to be held back a year!”

“What?!”

“What the hell?!”

“Then shut up and draw him! Stop being picky about your subject matter, understand?!” Then Mr. Mizuhoshi strode off, still muttering with anger. There was clearly no room for compromise on the matter.

“That’s ridiculous!” the other students shouted after receiving Kaname’s report. Everyone began voicing their complaints.

“Seriously! What a tyrant!”

“Dammit... I’ll kill that Mizuhoshi bastard!”

“But you won’t just get held back a year, then—you’ll get expelled.”

Kaname made a megaphone with her hands. “Calm down, everyone! Let’s think up a plan. Let’s see... What if we use a male model who looks like Sousuke? You can just do the face from memory.”

All forty students simultaneously clapped in realization.

“Oh, great idea!”

“Yeah, it’s not like we’re taking photographs! He might never know it’s not Sagara-kun!”

“But...” Tokiwa Kyoko said limply. “We’re supposed to spend all day drawing, right? What if Mr. Mizuhoshi comes back around before we’re done? When he sees Sagara-kun’s not here, he’ll know.”

“Ahh...” all forty students sighed in unison.

“Geh... In that case, let’s get searching for Sousuke. Sounds like he hasn’t gone far,” Kaname offered.

“Yeah...” said one of her classmates.

“There’s enough of us. It can’t take too long,” another agreed.

“Let’s get to it, then. If you don’t have a phone or a pager, team up with someone who does. When you find Sousuke, call my Pitch.” Kaname swiftly gave instructions. “Also, Sousuke’s great at hiding. Keep your eyes peeled up in

the trees and down by your feet, too.”

“Huh?!”

“Okay, dismissed!”

Four boys walked together up a path surrounded by tall grass.

“Here they are...” Sousuke whispered. He’d just finished laying his traps. He was hoping to prove a point to anyone who might interfere with his responsibilities as a model. But to spend the day undiscovered by forty people was a considerable challenge, even for someone with his battlefield experience.

*Art is a truly harsh mistress*, he philosophized to himself.

Van Gogh was an impressive man. Sousuke had heard he’d lost an ear, surely from a wound sustained in combat. Klimt, Renoir, and more—all of them storied veterans. The dangers inherent to the artistic profession must have been why so many painters died young.

His classmates approached in complete ignorance of his presence. Their footsteps were loud and their movements were uncoordinated. *They haven’t even assigned roles like PM, TL, RTO, and TG. They’d fall into even an amateur’s trap. The fools.*

“That should do it for this route,” he whispered, then disappeared into the forest once more.

The boy leading the group of four suddenly pitched over with a scream.

“What is it?!”

“Ah, stepped in a hole...” His right leg was down to the shin in a small sinkhole cleverly hidden in the brush. “What’s this little hole even doing—” But as he tried to pull his foot out, he failed. “It’s not coming out. Ugh, what is this crap?!”

The hole seemed to be filled with a viscous liquid that was hardening by the second.

“Is this glue? What the hell?” No matter how he struggled, he couldn’t get the

mysterious resin to budge.

“Sagara’s behind this! C’mon, let’s go! He must be right ahead!”

“Wait! Hey, Sakata!”

The student named Sakata cruelly left his trapped friend behind. “We’ll come back for you later. First— Wugh?!” This time it was Sakata who succumbed to an identical pit trap. “I-It’s not coming out! Dammit!”

“Hah, serves you right for leaving me behind!”

The remaining two boys looked slightly disturbed. “This path seems a little dangerous, huh?”

“Yeah. Let’s leave them behind and take a detour,” one said, then began to back into the underbrush to get off the path. As he did, his foot caught on a wire. A log from a dead tree swung at him like a pendulum!

“Wagh!” One of the boys was knocked down and the other ended up pinned to a tree. To add insult to injury, this tree seemed to be covered in the same mysterious resin.

“H-Help!”

“Who goes to these kinds of lengths?!”

“Call Chidori! Sagara must be at the top of the hill!”

“You think we can get reception here?!”

“Help! Help! Help!” All four wept and cried in a panic.

“Huh?! What did you say? I can’t hear you!”

“I’m sa— gara se— raps— elp!”

“Ugh, whatever. Just come on back.” Kaname hung up on them. She was standing in the clearing where the students had stored their things, acting as operations commander. She was surrounded by three girls who were shouting at their front line squadrons, effectively serving as comms officers.

This was the fourth team now rendered immobile by some kind of trap.

“Ah, that idiot,” she grumbled. “I bet he thinks he’s home free.”

It seemed Sousuke was hiding in the underbrush on the hill just ahead, as evidenced by the fact that anyone heading in that direction seemed to end up in trouble.

It was then that Kaname heard her PHS ring again. “Yes? Speaking.”

“Chidori! We found Sagara!” This breathless announcement came from Onodera, a member of the basketball team. His group was made up primarily of athletes.

*This sounds promising...* she thought. “Excellent work, Ono-D! Catch him!”

“Got it. The four of us can—” Suddenly there was a *pop*, and powerful static washed over the call. And a moment later, from a distance... *Ska-bam!* The sound of an explosion reached the clearing, and they saw a flock of birds take flight from about halfway up the slope, followed by a plume of white smoke.

“A-An explosion?!” Kaname was just awestruck for a moment, but immediately snapped back to attention. “Hey, Ono-D! You alive? Answer me!”

“I stepped on... a mine. We’re wiped out.”

“Ah, that’s awful...”

Onodera responded weakly. “Listen, Chidori... Remember in first year when I asked you out? You turned me down then... but my feelings haven’t changed. Guh... hkk...”

“No, Ono-D! Don’t die!” Kaname shouted tearfully.

“Heh, happy to hear you say that... but if I come back alive, will you go out with me? If you do... I...”

“Ahh, that’s a different issue,” she said apologetically. “Hard pass.”

“So cruel... erk.” With that, Onodera had apparently died.

Kaname quickly hung up. “Sousuke... I’m going to make you pay for this. Just wait!” She glared at the top of the hill, shaking her fist.

“C’mon, Sagara. Help a guy out here?” Onodera, a.k.a. Ono-D, looked down at

the black resin covering his entire body. He'd ended up stuck to a tree trunk with his cell phone to his ear. He and the other three caught in the explosion with him looked like adventurers being devoured by slime.

"I can't free you just yet. But... impressive. It worked much better than I expected," Sousuke whispered, staring at a mine the size of a beer can.

"What is that, anyway?"

"An anti-personnel adhesive mine. An arms dealer specializing in non-lethal weaponry sent me a sample. It explodes," he explained, "dispersing a special kind of urethane foam that expands eight hundredfold upon exposure to air."

"Ahh..."

"I should have brought more. This is the last of the adhesive cans..."

"C'mon, let me out," Ono-D begged. "I'm tired."

"Stay strong. This is all for the sake of art." And with that, Sousuke disappeared back into the forest.

About twenty hale and hearty students remained in the clearing with Kaname. "It's almost time for lunch," she said to her remaining forces. "We need to catch him soon or we won't even be able to do our sketching. If that happens, it's all over."

A disheartened air hung over those assembled.

"Sousuke is at the top of that hill," she went on. "The paths leading up to it are full of dangerous traps. However!" She raised a decisive fist. "We must catch him, no matter what it takes! For our lost comrades! For our human dignity! And most importantly... for our class credit!"

"Yeah..." the group agreed. Her forceful speech had gotten energy percolating among the dejected students.

Kaname hearkened keenly to the mood and continued. "We are about to walk into hell! If you meet a man, slay him! If you meet a god, slay it! Without question! Without mercy! We must take the head of our mortal enemy, Sagara!"



“Y-Yeah!” Everyone, male and female alike, responded intensely. Had their class ever been so united before?!

Like the goddess of battle herself stood Kaname, beautiful and undaunted, hair streaming behind her as she gestured to the top of the hill with her brush. “You must rush forward or die trying!” she declared. “I’ll send you to Valhalla myself!”

“Yeah!!!”

“All forces, charge! And don’t stop until you get there!”

The twenty students under Kaname’s command charged the hill, trailing dust behind them.

Sousuke, watching the scene through his miniature telescope, whispered to no one in particular, “The fools...” He’d assiduously laid traps on every possible route. There was no way they could reach the summit where he was hiding, and a mere speech to raise morale wouldn’t change that. It would be easy for him to hide until evening at this rate. His mission was nearly complete.

*And yet... he wondered. At what point will we actually be drawing?*

“Stay strong! Keep going!” Kaname rushed up the treacherous slope, shouting to those around her.

A girl tripped over a wire and screamed as she was sent flying into the trees. A log came swinging in from the side, knocking away a boy beside her. A student stepped into a pit trap, taking out another behind him as he fell.

“Ignore the losses!” she hollered. “Charge! Charge!” Globs of mud rained down from overhead, but she dodged them with shocking spontaneity. One glob caught the comrade just behind her and sent him rolling back down the hill.

A net made of vines streaked towards her. She quickly rolled forward to dodge it, but heard the sound of another loss behind her.

“K-Kana-chan!” came the cry.

“This... This is nothing!” she insisted, even as drum canisters came rolling noisily down the hill. “Hah!” Kaname vaulted these as well, and continued her dash for the peak. It was then that drops of black resin began to shower down on her.

“Hah, hah, hah!” She swatted them aside with her drawing board, undaunted. The resin immobilized comrade after comrade, yet Kaname continued her charge. She triggered a tripwire. Something launched into the sky overhead. A *soft drink can? No, not a can—*

*Blam!* The mine exploded two meters overhead. Before the black birdlime could rain down on her, Kaname crouched down and held up her drawing board as a shield. “You won’t stop me!” she cried, casting aside the drawing board (which was now sticky with resin) to continue her charge.

She was reaching the end of the green corridor. The light beyond—the white light of salvation—drew closer and closer. *Almost there, she told herself, I’m almost...!*

*Rustle, crack, snap!* The deafening bang of the final trap sounded out and then faded. Quiet returned to the hill.

*Is it over?* Sousuke, hiding at the summit, turned his eyes down the slope from the bush in which he was hiding. He couldn’t see from here, but it seemed safe to assume that his enemies were neutralized.

The last trap was a suspended ceiling hanging from a tree branch. It was covered with the quick-dry urethane foam, and the victim had likely ended up squashed like a hamburger between it and the ground.

“Art is truly cruel,” he whispered philosophically. Then he climbed down the hill to check the state of battle and found the place where he’d set the suspended ceiling trap. As he arrived, he scowled: the sprung trap was nowhere to be seen. All he could see on the ground was hardened urethane foam and scraps of cloth. Finding it suspicious, he looked around at the eerily silent trees around him and...

“Sousuke!!!” Kaname leaped out of the brush to his right. Her skirt and blouse were in shreds, her bare white skin visible here and there through her torn

clothing. She inched towards him, tottering under the weight of the suspended ceiling stuck to her back.

*Impossible, he thought. How can she still be moving?!*

As he stood there in shock, she spoke to him. “Those are some pretty gnarly traps you set up, huh?” As she went on, one student after another from Class 2-4 appeared, their clothing similarly in tatters. Yet more were coming up the path from below.

“We meet at last.”

“You sure did slow us down...”

“You ready for what’s coming now?”

There were only about a dozen, but their eyes were narrowed, and a bloodthirsty air hung around them. Their intensity sent a chill up the spine of even the battle-hardened Sousuke.

*They’re going to kill me, he realized.* Sensing this imminent threat to his life, he took a few steps back, then turned around and ran like the wind.

“Don’t let him get away!” Kaname and the others took off, charging after him into the brush.

“Your tea, miss.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Eri Kagurazaka, gratefully accepting the steaming cup she’d been offered by an old woman in a samue coat. She was seated at the edge of the porch of an old traditional Japanese house. The teachers from Class 2-1 through 2-3 were with her, as was the art teacher Mr. Mizuhoshi. They were all calmly sipping their tea.

“Ahh, peace at last...” From the porch they could see a well-kept garden, a green hill towering beyond, and a cloudless blue sky above. The campground where the students would be busy drawing lay just beyond the hill, about a five-minute walk away.

“I can’t believe your house is so close to this place, Mr. Mizuhoshi,” she said admiringly.

"This is your first time here, isn't it, Ms. Kagurazaka? This is the one thing I inherited from my father."

"I see. It really is wonderful, like an urban oasis. Even the air feels fresher..."

"Ahh... I've poured my heart and soul into the layout of this garden for some time now," he boasted. "Prioritization of organic curves, the balance between 'stillness' and 'motion'..." he went on. "In other words..."

Ms. Kagurazaka smiled at him vaguely, nodding along with his words. *He'd be very attractive if he didn't talk quite so much*, she thought, though she didn't say it aloud. Instead, she subtly checked her watch. "Ah, I think it's time to check on the students."

"Is it? But I'm sure Class 2-4 is all right. The model was very enthusiastic, and I gave him quite a pep talk."

"Oh?" she inquired. "Just who was the model?"

"A polite and serious young boy. His name was... ah, Sagara."

"Sagara?!" Ms. Kagurazaka felt as if the blue sky overhead was suddenly covered in thunderclouds. It was hard to imagine what trouble he could cause on a simple day of drawing, but... but...

"Maybe I should see how they're—" she managed, just before hearing voices in the distance. *Angry voices*, she realized. *Shouting voices*. They were coming closer.

"Get the hell back here, you...!"

*That sounds like—*

Suddenly, Sagara Sousuke appeared, vaulting the fence that surrounded the garden. He tore through the plants and trees on a beeline course for where the teachers were sitting.

"Sagara-kun?! What are you doing h—" Before she could protest, Ms. Kagurazaka saw a group of a dozen students appear behind Sousuke. They were charging like wild bulls, crashing right through the fence and trampling the greenery in the garden beyond. At the lead ran Chidori Kaname, dressed in a tattered school uniform. They didn't seem conscious of anything but Sousuke.

“Hang on, you kids—”

Sousuke made it to the porch, ran past the shocked teachers, and dashed into the house with his shoes still on. Before any of them could scold him for his lack of manners, Kaname and her apparent posse followed him into the house, trampling on the pristine floors of the Japanese-style rooms.

“He went that way!”

“The hallway!”

“No, the kitchen!”

“Catch hi— Ah, dammit!”

“He’s headed for the baths!”

They busted through screens, overturned tatami mats, and knocked over dressers and tables. The once-tranquil house was now a flurry of chaos.

“S-Stop it, all of y— Wagh!” Mr. Mizuhoshi, bowled over by the frenzied students, fell off the porch and was knocked unconscious.

“Corner him! We’re almost there!”

After barely managing to avoid his pursuers and completing a full circuit around the house to his entry point, Sousuke reached for the old woman cowering next to Ms. Kagurazaka—Mr. Mizuhoshi’s mother.

“Eek!” the woman cried.

Sousuke turned to face his pursuers, holding the old woman in front of him like a shield with his combat knife pressed to her throat. “Don’t move, or the woman—”

That was as far as Sousuke got before Kaname scooped a teacup up from the floor and threw it at his head with unparalleled form. He released both knife and old woman as he flew backwards, crashing through a paper sliding door. *Smash!* The rest of the students were on him instantly, pinning him down.

“Say you’re sorry, asshole!”

“Kazama-kun, watch your hands!” shouted a girl.

“That’s my butt!” responded a guy.

Sousuke just lay there, staring up at Kaname, who stood astride him.

“We’ve got you at last, Sousuke.”

“J-Just kill me...” he choked out.

“Hah! Bold words indeed,” she scoffed. “But you do have a duty... And you’ll get to live until it’s served.” With the attitude of a heartless female commander, Kaname gave an order to the group. “Now, take him. We can start our sketches immediately!”

With that, they roughly began to drag Sousuke away.

It was then, at last, that Kaname seemed to realize that she was being watched. “Ah, sir, ma’am...” She looked around at the teachers, who were all watching her, mouths agape. “I’m sorry for all the trouble. Class 2-4 should be finished drawing by this evening. Everything is fine.” She apologized with a surprisingly aggressive tone, then left, looking quite satisfied with herself.

One week later...

A long bulletin board stood in the hall near the staff office. It was about fifteen meters from end to end and covered in watercolor paintings—the best three from each class.

“Truly wonderful!” Jindai High’s principal breathed appreciatively as she walked along, gazing at them each in turn. The vice principal and Mr. Mizuhoshi came along behind her. Each one lovingly depicted the class’s chosen model standing amid the greenery of nature. “Yes, truly wonderful,” she continued. “The delicacy of adolescence, the vigor of youth! I look forward to this every year.”

It was high praise indeed, but Mr. Mizuhoshi seemed glum. “Ah, well, thank you for that,” he said listlessly.

At last, the principal came to the Class 2-4 pictures. “Oh! Well, this is... er...” She clearly expected to praise them, but found herself struggling for words instead. “...What in the world is this?”

The three paintings chosen were every bit as technically proficient as those of

the other classes. But, bizarrely, the paintings' subject was tied up and suspended upside-down from a tree. The surrounding scenery was bright and cheerful though, lending a truly bizarre aura to the art.

"It... It appears they went with an avant-garde experiment," said Mr. Mizuhoshi, improvising. "One can clearly see the influence of T. Ousler. Representing the emptiness of one stripped of all power, exemplifying the..."

"Ah-hah..." said the principal.

Incidentally, the titles of the three paintings were "Fruits of the Hunt," "Crime and Punishment," and "The Death of a Fool."

⟨The Hamburger Hill of Art — The End⟩

# Cinderella Panic

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a beautiful girl.

She had strong features, flowing long hair, and eyes that shone with wit. She had grown up in a great mansion, with kindhearted parents who saw to it that she wanted for nothing. But then one day, her dear mother passed away from illness. Despite her great spirit, Kaname-chan—er, the girl, I mean—was brokenhearted.

To put an end to his daughter's sorrow, her father sought a new wife. The girl would later tell a friend that it was all a terrible misunderstanding... and indeed, the stepmother was a cruel and vicious woman. Vain, petty, and avaricious, with three young girls of her own, each more blackhearted than the last.

Why, you might ask, did he choose such a woman for his new wife? Sadly, the widower was so blinded by his loneliness that he could see little else. The girl's new mother and stepsisters resented her beauty, and treated her terribly when her father wasn't looking. They filled the mansion's bathrooms with cruel graffiti about her and mocked the precious clock she'd been gifted by her mother just before her death.

But, as all people know, it never rains but it pours—for soon afterwards, her father also passed away from an unexpected illness. The cruel stepmother saw this as a perfect opportunity to throw out all of the girl's possessions and beautiful dresses before casting her into the attic.

The story had reached its culmination. What could the girl do if not laugh? She spent her days in torment, denied proper meals or education. She was put to work on the house's hardest and dirtiest jobs, until she ended up covered in cinders. Eventually, she came to be called Cinderella.

That is the origin of the name “Cinderella,” you see. Isn’t that nice to know?

Such was the pitiful state in which Cinderella spent her days.



“Cin... de... rel... la!” Stepmother Mizuki shouted, giving Cinderella’s bottom a hard kick. As a result, Cinderella—who had previously been wiping the floors with a rag—was forced to kiss the cold floor.

She looked up, spitting out the dust on her lips. “Ow... What are you doing?!”

“Oh, shut up! This is my house, and if I see a butt I don’t like, I kick it! And I certainly don’t like your butt, Cinderella! Take that! And that!” Stepmother Mizuki yelled, stamping on her again and again.

Poor Cinderella could do nothing but curl up like a pill bug and endure. “Y-You...”

“Oh, what fun! Come, girls! Come here and torment Cinderella with me!”

“Yees, mother!” Mizuki’s three daughters—Manami, Madoka, and Shoko—took out pins of various sizes which they stabbed into Cinderella.

“Take that!”

“And that!”

“Hi-yah!”

*Stab! Stab! Stab!* It was domestic abuse that bordered on torture, which was now a familiar scene in Cinderella’s household.

“All right, enough!” Stepmother Mizuki finally said.

When the dust finally cleared, Cinderella could be seen in a heap on the floor. “D-Damn you...” said Cinderella, glaring up at Mizuki.

But the woman looked down at her, undaunted. “Hah! It serves you right, Cinderella,” she said, taunting her stepdaughter. “Learn your lesson from this and never talk back to me again. Is that understood?”

Cinderella remained defiant, but she kept quiet in hope of avoiding further punishment.

“Now, finish wiping the floors already,” Mizuki ordered. “When that’s done, you can clean the bathroom. I want it clean enough to eat off of it. In fact, I’ll be making you lick the toilet to prove that it’s clean!”

“Ugh. No way...” Cinderella groaned. This was truly beyond the pale, even for

her typically cruel stepmother.

“Be quiet. And just be grateful you don’t have to cook tonight!”

“Huh? Why?” Cinderella asked in surprise. Preparing dinner was part of her usual nightly routine.

“Don’t you know, Cinderella?” asked the eldest daughter, Manami.

“There’s to be a ball at the castle tonight!” declared the second daughter, Madoka.

“The prince has invited all the eligible maidens, to take one for a bride,” said the youngest daughter, Shoko.

“Wh-What the—”

“—Precisely,” said Mizuki, cutting her off. “We’ll be attending the ball, so you can stay here and dine on leftover sardines and cold rice. If we’re struck by a generous spirit, perhaps we’ll bring takeout from the castle for you. Oho ho ho.”

“Um... I’d sure like to come too...”

“You may not!” her new family chorused.

“Yeah, thought so...” said Cinderella, who remained despondent beneath the callous gazes of the four bullies around her.

Of course, these were their roles in the story, but they were perhaps relishing them a bit too much?

“Now, girls, to action!” Mizuki ordered her daughters. “We’ll deck ourselves out and steal the prince’s heart! Then the kingdom will be ours! We can control the entire government from the shadows, and get that sweet bribe money from contractors and bankers!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the three girls responded enthusiastically, and then skipped away with their mother.

“Now, you stay here and watch the house,” Stepmother Mizuki told Cinderella as she and her daughters, all of whom were dressed to the nines,

boarded a luxurious carriage. "After you've washed the windows and cleaned the hall, you're to go right to bed. Is that understood?"

"Fine..." Cinderella responded gloomily.

"And don't even *think* about sneaking into the ball after we're gone! You have neither an invitation nor a dress, after all. Oho ho ho!" said Mizuki, laughing as nastily as she could. "A dingy little girl like you could never sneak her way inside. The castle is locked down tight, guarded by elite counter-terror special forces."

"What kind of castle is this again?"

"Silence. Now, take us away!" Mizuki ordered. Then the coachman cracked his whip, and the carriage sped away from the house, kicking up dust behind it.

"They're gone," said Cinderella, who felt a weight lift off her shoulders. The departure of her tormentors spelled a moment of reprieve for the girl.

And so, Cinderella finished up her work and returned to her dingy attic room. Sitting there on her old, creaky bed, she stared through her window at the castle in the distance and sighed longingly. The castle was lit up as brightly as Tokyo Disneyland in the dark. Tonight, in that castle, the handsome prince would be choosing a bride. *Delicious food and groovy music...* It sounded like such a joyous occasion.

"Hmph... I'm not jealous. Not one bit," Cinderella pouted. "Let those gold-diggers do what they like. They make me sick." Now she was just being defensive, you see. "It's not... It's not like I belong there. This attic is where I belong. It's my fate. Besides, the path they follow is one stained in blood. The raging winds suit me far better."

She kept at her strange, nonsensical ramblings until she finally began to pity herself enough to cry. "Ah... Mother and Father up in heaven," she sobbed. "Why did you have to die? Leaving me to pay your debts... It's far too cruel."

But then a voice came to Cinderella in the depths of her sorrow. "Why don't you stop crying already?" The voice was gruff and male.

Cinderella turned and saw a young magician standing before her. He had a

sullen expression and a tight frown, wore a pointed hat and urban camouflage robes. In the place of a wand, he carried a Panzerfaust, a single-use anti-tank rocket. This appeared to be his attempt at a fantasy outfit.



“Who are you?” Cinderella asked.

“I’m the wizard, Sergeant Sagara Sousuke. I was dispatched here by the politically unaligned top-secret magician’s society, Mithril. My ID number is B-3128. My call sign is Uruz-7.”

“Uh-huh.”

The magician Sergeant Sagara scanned keenly around her attic room. “I have been tasked with providing multilateral support to those in need. If you wish to attend the ball, I’ll enable you to do so, Chidori.”

“Um, I’m Cinderella...”

“I have heard you use that name as well,” said the wizard, effectively brushing off her correction.

“S-Still... am I supposed to believe you’re really a wizard?”

“Can’t you?”

“Not really. You don’t really have the aura of a wizard, for one thing,” Cinderella pointed out. “You look a little more like a cheap knockoff.”

Cinderella was certainly right about that. This man had none of the air of mystery that was typically expected from people in his line of work. Instead, he was wreathed in the faint aroma of gunpowder and smoke. “And yet,” he declared, “I am the genuine article.”

“Well, words aren’t gonna convince me,” she said. “I think I’ll need proof. Cast a spell or something.”

“A spell, eh? All right,” the wizard spoke boldly, then withdrew a small spoon from his robe. “Bippidy boppity boo,” he said, reciting the magic words.

The spoon abruptly bent. And that was it.

“...Is that it?” Cinderella asked suspiciously.

“There’s more.” The wizard pulled out a small fork, but Cinderella just waved her hand in disgust.

“Enough.”

"I also have the ability to levitate from a sitting position," he told her solemnly.

"Why is it all huckster stuff?" Cinderella scoffed. "If you wanna show me some magic, at least whip out a fireball or something..."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh, forget it." Realizing that talking was a waste of time, Cinderella decided to change the subject. She let out a sigh and splayed herself out on her bed. "So? You said you'd take me to the ball, right?"

"Affirmative."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but... how exactly? I don't have a dress, an invitation, or a carriage," she said bitterly, looking down at her dingy clothing.

"Not an issue. First, prepare for me the following..." The wizard retrieved a notebook from the folds of his robe and began listing things off. "One pumpkin, four house mice, one lizard..."

"Right..."

"One assault rifle, one shotgun..."

"Uh?"

"Two dozen anti-personnel hand grenades, 160 rounds of 5.56mm bullets, three cases of C4, six Claymore mines..."

"What in the world?" she asked the wizard.

He looked back over his notepad, then became abashed. "My mistake. That was my personal shopping list. I only need the pumpkin, the mice, and the lizard."

"Uh-huh..." Cinderella was starting to have serious doubts about whether she could really trust this guy.

Cinderella searched all around the mansion until she found what she'd been asked for. She set a cage containing the mice and lizard, as well as the pumpkin, before the front door. "Got 'em all," she told the wizard. "What now?"

“All right. Stand right where you are,” he instructed, “close to the pumpkin and the animals.” As the wizard spoke, he strode away from Cinderella. He held up the anti-tank rocket he was using in place of a wand, adjusting the firing lever and the sight.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to cast a spell. My wand may look like an ordinary Panzerfaust, but it’s actually a magical rocket. Instead of regular blasting powder, it’s loaded with magical blasting powder that utilizes the latest in magical technology,” he boasted. “It has a simple interface, as well. I simply peer through the magical scope and pull the magical trigger.”

*I guess you can get away with anything as long as you call it “magical,”* Cinderella observed.

Sergeant Sagara the wizard walked some distance away before he knelt down and readied his anti-tank rocket.

Meanwhile, Cinderella began to panic as she found herself in the lethal weapon’s sight. “Hey!” she exclaimed. “What are you about to do?!”

“Remain still! This is one-use-only, so I only get one shot at it.” He was telling her that failure was not an option. The wizard was serious. He peered through the scope and adjusted his positioning to get Cinderella, as well as the pumpkin and cage nearby, in view.

“A-Are you trying to kill me?! If you fire that thing—”

“Enough talk. Fire!” And with that, the wizard did so.

The anti-tank rocket warhead streaked straight for Cinderella, and the poor girl could do nothing but scream. She, the pumpkin, the mice, and the lizard were consumed in crimson flames.

“Direct hit!” With his robe flapping from the force of the explosion, the wizard released the empty rocket tube. The mannerism itself was perhaps his only display of dignity so far.

Now, reader, do you think Cinderella died a spectacular death?

Ah, but of course she didn’t. When the smoke and fire cleared, there simply

stood a beautiful girl in a magnificent dress. It was Cinderella, transformed by the rocket's magic, and coughing rather severely. So, too, did the pumpkin transform into a carriage, the mice into horses, and the lizard into a coachman.

Cinderella looked down at herself in shock. "Is this... me?" She was now wearing a stunning white dress with glass slippers, a dazzling necklace, and a diamond tiara. Her sleek black hair was arranged perfectly to match. She had always been pleasing to the eye, but in the right clothes she became truly, strikingly beautiful.

The wizard stood before the girl, arrogantly puffing out his chest. "You see? That is the power of my cutting-edge magical technology."

Cinderella slumped a little. "Couldn't you at least say 'You're beautiful' or 'It looks great on you,' you war-obsessed downer?"

"What was that?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "Anyway, I admit it's pretty good, and now I can go to the ball. Thanks!"

"No need to thank me. It was all in the service of my mission. And... take this." The wizard handed her a scroll of parchment.

"What is this?"

"An invitation to the ball. I forged it."

"Uh-huh..."

"Go now, Cinderella. I don't know what enjoyment there is to be had at a ball, but I hope you dance until you're satisfied."

"Could you try to find less irritating phrases?" Cinderella grumbled as she got on board her carriage.

The wizard called out to her as she went, "The spell will expire when the clock strikes 0000 hours. If you do not complete your objective and withdraw before then, your identity will be exposed and you'll be arrested by the castle's GIGN."

"Okay, but... what's a GIGN?"

"French special forces. Elites," the wizard clarified.

“Wait, since when were we in France?”

“Don’t think about it too hard,” he advised her.

Cinderella said nothing, but stared at him in great disapproval as the pumpkin carriage carried her away.

Girls in lavish dresses had gathered in the castle’s grand ballroom. Some had earnestly come to try to win the prince, while others had come to window-shop. Others still were selling boxed lunches and drinks, while others were running betting pools, et cetera.

The music of the kingdom’s greatest symphony orchestra resounded through the cheerfully lit hall. Despite the setting being a ball filled with girls, the song was Beethoven’s “Destiny,” a far too dark and oppressive choice for any dancing to be done.

“Um, Father. Could you put on another song already?” asked Prince Kyoko, star of the ball. Despite being a prince, she was actually a charming young girl with coke-bottle glasses and braids. (Please disregard the incoherence of this sentence.)

“Hmm. I happen to like it... Is it a problem?” asked King Hayashimizu. He had an intelligent air about him, accented by his slicked-back hair and wire frame glasses.

“But the purpose of this ball is to choose *my* wife, isn’t it?” Prince Kyoko pointed out. “I don’t think I want to marry anyone who can dance well to stuffy music like this...”

“I suppose. But either way, it’s your bride. You should choose whomever you like best.”

“Well, that was the plan...” Prince Kyoko started to agree.

“Good. But you can’t just choose anyone,” said King Hayashimizu, nudging his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want your bride having any extreme ideologies. Pacifists and communists will be expelled immediately—this is a monarchy, after all. No religious fundamentalists either, or spendthrifts or gold-diggers. And while they would preferably have gone through higher

education, let there be no economists.”

“Uh-huh...” said Prince Kyoko, who only understood about half of the words coming out of the king’s mouth.

“At any rate, the most important aspect in our future queen is that she do no harm to our kingdom,” King Hayashimizu concluded. “Thus, her social graces are largely irrelevant.”

“But then why hold a ball?” asked the prince.

“It does feel contradictory, but this has been our custom for eight generations, and it’s part of the royal family’s duty to respect tradition, within reason.” King Hayashimizu’s logical mindset was well known throughout the neighboring kingdoms, and Prince Kyoko decided it wasn’t worth it to argue any further.

“With all that said... Prince Kyoko,” asked the king, “have you found anyone that catches your eye?”

“Hmm, well...” Many girls had come to pay their regards to Prince Kyoko since the ball began, but none had really caused her heart to race. “Not yet,” she admitted. “Though they’re all very pretty.”

“I see. What about those three sisters from earlier? They seemed energetic enough.”

“Definitely not,” Prince Kyoko opined, “though they might make good friends.” They were talking about the daughters of a widow named Mizuki who had come by earlier. They’d quickly begun fighting over Prince Kyoko, and were taken away by the castle guard.

It was then that a quiet stir of gossip began among those in attendance.

“She’s beautiful!”

“What noble house does she belong to?”

“She’s a Hepburn-class beauty...”

The whispering crowds slowly parted, allowing a girl to pass through them and up to Prince Kyoko. It was Cinderella, transformed by the magic of Sergeant Sagara.

“Ah...” Prince Kyoko gasped.

The girl wore a silk dress of pure white. Her hair was long, sleek, and black. She had big, clear eyes. Her skin was smooth and unblemished. She was truly the epitome of grace and beauty.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness.” Cinderella bowed her head and curtsied graciously.

Prince Kyoko was enchanted. “Kana-chan... you’re beautiful.” she whispered achingly, and a flush came to her cheeks. It was as if she might take the girl in her arms right then and there.



Cinderella was at first stunned by this reaction, and hesitated, but then coughed and regained her good sense. “Ah, ahem. Your Highness, would you do me the honor of this dance?”

The dreamy-eyed Prince Kyoko nodded firmly. “Yes... Let’s dance, Kana-chan.”

“Oh, um. I’m not Kana-chan, okay?”

“Yes... of course you’re not, Kana-chan...” It appeared that Prince Kyoko was already hopelessly head-over-heels for Cinderella.

At last, the music in the ballroom reached a stopping point, and the orchestra launched into a proper waltz. The prince and Cinderella danced to it, reducing everyone around them to admiring spectators. Cinderella was taller than the prince, and one would be hard-pressed to claim that the prince was leading, but they were both terribly happy nevertheless.

Meanwhile, the king issued a quiet command to his nearby chief of intelligence. “Investigate the girl’s background and family. And don’t forget to tail her.” He was the master of both castle and kingdom, after all.

The music in the ballroom continued on and on. After the waltz came tango, jazz, rock, reggae, and then hip-hop. Even the king of soul, James Brown, came out at the end, wishing them a gleeful “Get-up-pah!”

Cinderella and the prince danced to a variety of genres. She was so enjoying the moment that she completely lost track of time, and the midnight bell began to ring just as they were engaged in a lively twist.

“Ah!” Cinderella went pale. She’d just remembered the wizard Sergeant Sagara’s words: *the spell will expire when the clock strikes 0000 hours...* She was truly at a loss. If she remained here any longer, the spell would break before everyone’s eyes, and she would be humiliated and arrested by the castle guards.

Prince Kyoko peered curiously at Cinderella as she stopped. “What’s wrong?”

“I... I’m sorry! I just remembered something I have to do,” she said hastily. “I’ve got to feed my cat.”

It was unusual for a noblewoman to attend to such errands. “Eh?” asked Prince Kyoko.

“It’s been fun, Your Highness, but goodbye now!” Before Prince Kyoko could stop her, Cinderella whipped around and fled the ballroom, dashing down the long hallway and arriving at the stairs.

“Wait!” The prince ran after her, but our Cinderella wasn’t such a fool as to wait on command.

“Oh, goddammit. It’s so hard to run in these things...” said Cinderella, swearing under her breath and kicking off the precious glass slippers. Then she took off running again, moving so quickly that she lost the prince, who was still in pursuit.

“Guards! Someone! Stop her!” the prince cried, and the castle guards moved to stand in front of Cinderella. There was no way that Cinderella, a combat amateur, could stand a chance against such professionals.

“Urgh... this is gonna be tough...” Cinderella took a deep breath, and...

*Blam! Blam!* A sudden roar sounded out, and the guards collapsed. “Eh?” The shocked Cinderella saw the wizard, Sergeant Sagara, standing in front of her. He was still in his pointed hat and urban camouflage robes, carrying a shotgun in one hand.

“Can you run?” he asked her.

“Um... yeah.”

“Follow me, then,” he told her, and took off running, with Cinderella on his heels.

“Wh-What are you doing here?” she asked breathlessly.

“Aftercare,” he said shortly. “It was extremely difficult to infiltrate the castle without a fake invitation.”

“What’s that weapon?”

“A magical Remington M870. I’ve loaded it with rubber slugs.”

Cinderella just looked at him silently once more. But as the two hurried for

the castle gate, even more guards appeared. *Blam! Blam!* With almost terrifying accuracy, the wizard hit the guards with magical stun rounds, forcing them into unconscious heaps.

“I-Incredible...”

“This way,” the wizard urged her. They ran through the castle garden to the place where the pumpkin carriage was waiting. He called out, “Get in! Hurry,” while still firing at the advancing guards.

Cinderella swiftly boarded the carriage. “I’m in!” she called back.

“Now, move out!” the wizard yelled to the coachman, who cracked his whip. The pumpkin carriage’s wheels began turning swiftly, and the wizard managed to jump on board just in the nick of time. But the castle gate was already closed, and there was no way for the carriage to leave.

“Dammit, there’s nowhere to go!” Cinderella cursed, but the wizard pulled a hand grenade out from under his robe and removed the pin. “Is that a magical hand grenade?” she asked skeptically.

“No, this is a holy hand grenade,” he told her piously. “Legend says it was once used by King Arthur.”

Cinderella said nothing once more.

And with that, the wizard threw the grenade. There was a massive explosion that blew the castle gate apart.

“Break through!” the wizard ordered. At his words, the pumpkin carriage plowed through the smoke and fragments, bearing them at last outside the castle walls. One second later, the chiming of the midnight bell came to its end. The carriage began to turn back into a pumpkin, the horses into mice, and the coachman into a lizard.

“Eek!” Cinderella was thrown out into empty air as her carriage abruptly vanished. The magician twisted dexterously in midair to catch her, then hit the ground a moment later. The two of them rolled end-over-end into the river that ran along the road. There was a huge splash, and then the river fell quiet.

The pursuing guards passed them right by as a result.

Saved by the wizard, Cinderella crawled up onto shore, coughing. “That was a close call,” she said. She was soaked from head to toe, and her beautiful dress had turned back to dingy rags. “Ahh...” she sighed, looking down at the terrible state she was in. “And the prince and I were getting along so well... I guess it’s back to my life of suffering.”

“Would you prefer if there were a ball every night?” the wizard asked.

“It’s not about that, really...”

“Holding such an occasion nightly would collapse the kingdom’s economy,” he pointed out.

“Look, I think I was pretty close to marrying the prince, okay? And if I’d succeeded, I could’ve escaped my rotten life. Maybe people are better off without dreams...”

The wizard Sergeant Sagara just stared at the despondent Cinderella.

“Wh-What?” she asked.

“Cinderella, that is a defeatist attitude,” the wizard said with his usual sullen expression.

“What?”

“You can’t always rely on reinforcements to turn around a disadvantageous battlefield situation. Read the terrain and the weather, learn the enemy’s strengths and weaknesses, endure when you have to, and make the best choices you can to survive. A soldier who gives up on these things has no future,” he lectured.

Cinderella was stunned. It appeared to be the first common-sense thing the wizard had said since they met.

“Nothing would change if you lived in that castle,” he continued. “You will still find enemies anywhere you go. Would you have to rely on your prince every time one manifested?”

“W-Well...” Cinderella didn’t know how to respond.

The wizard stood up. “Use your head. Work it out. Even without magic, I believe you can do it.”

“W-Wait—”

“Farewell.” The wizard turned to leave.

Cinderella cried after him. “Mr. Wizard!”

“Yes?” he asked, but didn’t stop.

“Where are you going?”

“Into the west. My next mission awaits.” And with that unceremonious reply, the wizard disappeared into the darkness.

“...And there he goes.” Cinderella, now alone, carefully reflected on his words.

*It’s true that I’ve been relying way too much on the idea of someone else solving my problems, she thought. And when I really think about it, there’s no way I could be with a prince. Instead of chasing impossible dreams, I should figure out what I want to do with my life. Men tend to be pretty unreliable when you need them... My late father kinda proved that, didn’t he?*

Cinderella found her thoughts heading in a more pragmatic direction. *And after all, that mansion belonged to my parents! Why am I letting those total strangers order me around? Even if that is the law, I don’t have to go along with it. Right? I’ve been so stupid...* The barefoot Cinderella embraced her growing anger as she began the long walk back to her home.

Prince Kyoko was dearly fond of Cinderella and wished to take her for her wife. But she didn’t know the girl’s address, surname, or telephone number—in fact, the only clue the girl had left behind was her glass slippers. Prince Kyoko’s father, King Hayashimizu, seemed to know more, but he refused to tell his heir, hoping to see what she could find on her own.

Prince Kyoko gave the following order to her retainers: “Try the shoe on all the girls in the kingdom, and find the one it fits! Create 128 perfect copies, and search in 128 teams!” The prince was so serious that she was behaving with logic unbecoming of a fairy tale.

Later that same day, the retainers set out into the kingdom with replicas of the shoe. One such retainer, Lord Kazama, ended up at Cinderella's house, which was close to the castle. He knocked on the mansion's door with the slipper in hand, and Stepmother Mizuki opened it.

"Yes?" The woman looked exhausted and faintly disoriented. Finding it strange, the retainer asked to come in. "Ah, certainly..." she replied.

The retainer entered the grand mansion. The parlor was empty, with no furniture or decorations anywhere, and the other rooms seemed to be in a similar state. The mansion's three daughters were squatting in a corner, still in their ball dresses, despondent.

"Um, may I ask...?"

"Cinderella did this," the stepmother said, holding back her seething anger. "We spent a night in the castle dungeon, and when we returned the house was in this state! She sold our mansion's treasures in the city and took off with the money! That rotten little brat even took our underwear and sold it off to a used clothing shop! Who does that?!" the stepmother cried, her anger irrepressible.

"Ahh... that's quite a story," the lord agreed tactfully.

"I went to the police and they just told me to give up on it! They called me a tax cheat! You're not going to pull that on me too, are you?!" As the stepmother laid into him, Lord Kazama tried to soothe her anger.

"A-Anyway, I brought these shoes," he said. "Would you like to try them on?"

The stepmother and daughters looked at each other in exhaustion. "I suppose... we might as well."

Needless to say, the shoes didn't fit anyone.

Sergeant Sagara walked alone down the empty road. As a mere NCO, he lacked truly useful spells such as teleportation, and had no choice but to walk along silently to his next post.

Around the time the sun was setting in the west, a simple, but sturdy-looking carriage came up from behind him and stopped at his side.

“Hmm?” The wizard looked up at the girl sitting in the coachman’s seat, and was surprised to find he recognized her.

“Hello there, Mr. Wizard,” Cinderella said. She was well fortified in new traveling clothes and sturdy leather boots.

“What’s going on here?” he wondered aloud.

“I’m doing what you said,” she told him, “using my head to work something out. And I’ve gotta say, I’m feeling weirdly optimistic about the whole thing.”

“I see.” He folded his arms and nodded approvingly. “That’s a good way to be.”

At that, she smiled brightly. “So, what are you up to?”

“Like I said, I’m going into the west.”

“What a coincidence, I’m heading west too. Wanna ride?”

He thought a minute before giving her his answer. “I believe I will.”

“Good boy,” Cinderella said approvingly. “Okay, let’s go.” As he sat down beside her on the coachman’s platform, she started it off again. The carriage began to clatter off into the setting sun with both of them aboard.

“By the way,” Sergeant Sagara said. “What do I call you?”

“That’s a good question. I guess ‘Cinderella’ doesn’t exactly fit anymore... Of course, no need to rush into any decisions.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’ve got all the time in the world, after all.” With that, she smiled, her face beautifully illuminated by the setting sun.



Prince Kyoko was disheartened to learn that there were no maidens in the kingdom who fit the glass slippers. But the king gave her all kinds of schoolwork and practical work to distract her, and she cheered up again in time. In addition, the realization that she couldn’t have everything she wanted eventually helped her to become a wise and benevolent ruler.

And they all lived happily ever after.

〈Cinderella Panic — The End〉

# Afterword

This volume contains touched-up versions of the *Full Metal Panic!* short stories that ran in *Monthly Dragon Magazine* from July through November, plus one more story I wrote just for this. It shares the setting and characters of the novel *Fighting Boy Meets Girl*, which is already on stands, but I think you can enjoy these stories as stand-alones. Big concepts from the novels like Mithril and the ASes will appear very rarely in this series. Instead, it's a pure school comedy. I hope everyone enjoys it, young and old.

Well, okay, so I'm not sure my grandmother would really enjoy it...

Anyway, I'll offer a few comments on each story.

## **“Man From the South”**

The love letter story. Incidentally, in middle school I received an anonymous love letter. The handwriting was all very feminine, but for some reason, the initials at the end read “J.D.” My thoughts immediately went to Daigouin Jaki... or maybe Jaiko? It made me so nervous that I just ignored the letter. Later I was strangely relieved to learn it was just a prank set up by a friend of mine. (Regarding the initials, he said he just made them up. He could really use more attention to detail.)

## **“Propaganda of Love and Hate”**

This doesn't have much to do with the main story, but I think graffiti in school buildings and stuff is really interesting. It's always stuff you could never put in print, and you sometimes see an absolute gem. In the building where I attended club in college, I saw lots of first-rate phrases I'd never think up myself, like “Children of the flowers blessed by God, dance in the morning sun,” and “Overthrow the imperialist government of modern Japan and revive the Muromachi Shogunate!” Go out and find your own graffiti gems!

## **“Summer Illusion of Steel”**

When you look at *GUN Magazine*, you frequently see pictures of people blasting watermelons with rifles. It feels like such a waste. What will the farmers think when they see you wasting their food like that? Ah, I guess I’m being needlessly antagonistic. I’m sorry.

By the way, in times like these, I guess that particular knife doesn’t seem like much. There are lots of stories around me where the protagonist uses a blade that’s a meter or longer... But I guess I’m being needlessly antagonistic again. I’m sorry.

## **“My Boyfriend is a Specialist”**

I’m the kind of person who always sings anisong when I go to a karaoke parlor. You typically don’t hear words like “fight” and “justice” showing up in pop or enka songs, you know? I’m a little unsatisfied that recent anisong tend to be singing more about love and such (seriously). I can’t get my blood racing with talk about love. Give me an aggressive song. You know, “Our enemy is D\*stron, with its armies straight from hell” or “Watch me, H\*niwa G\*njin, I’ll destroy you!”

But still, I get it. You really shouldn’t have people talking about destroying each other in *Pokemon* songs.

## **“The Hamburger Hill of Art”**

I’m a horrible artist, personally, and the main reason is that I don’t have any patience. Once, during a middle school art field trip, I copped out by just drawing a close-up of an empty soft drink can someone had left on the ground. Of course, I got in trouble for that.

## **“Cinderella Panic”**

This is the new story. Is it okay to write this? I mean, this is already a parody series, and now the writer’s doing a parody of the parody? It felt like I was treading on forbidden ground, but I put those concerns aside and went for it. It

was a pretty nerve-wracking experience for a writer... *Gulp*.

I guess those aren't particularly good comments. Maybe it's recoil from my attempt to sound smart, cool, and professional in my afterword for *Fighting*. It's not good to force yourself into the wrong mold for too long, so I'll probably do things like this from now on. I ask for your understanding.

Anyway, I got a lot of help from the people around me when writing these stories up and getting them published. I should probably offer my official thanks here. Thank you very much.

See you next time, when Kaname's fan howls through the air once more.  
(Although, did it actually do that this time?)

The sight of the  
bathroom graffiti sent  
a tremble of shock  
through Sousuke.

"Chidori... Are you..."

She promptly sent the  
idiot flying with a kick!



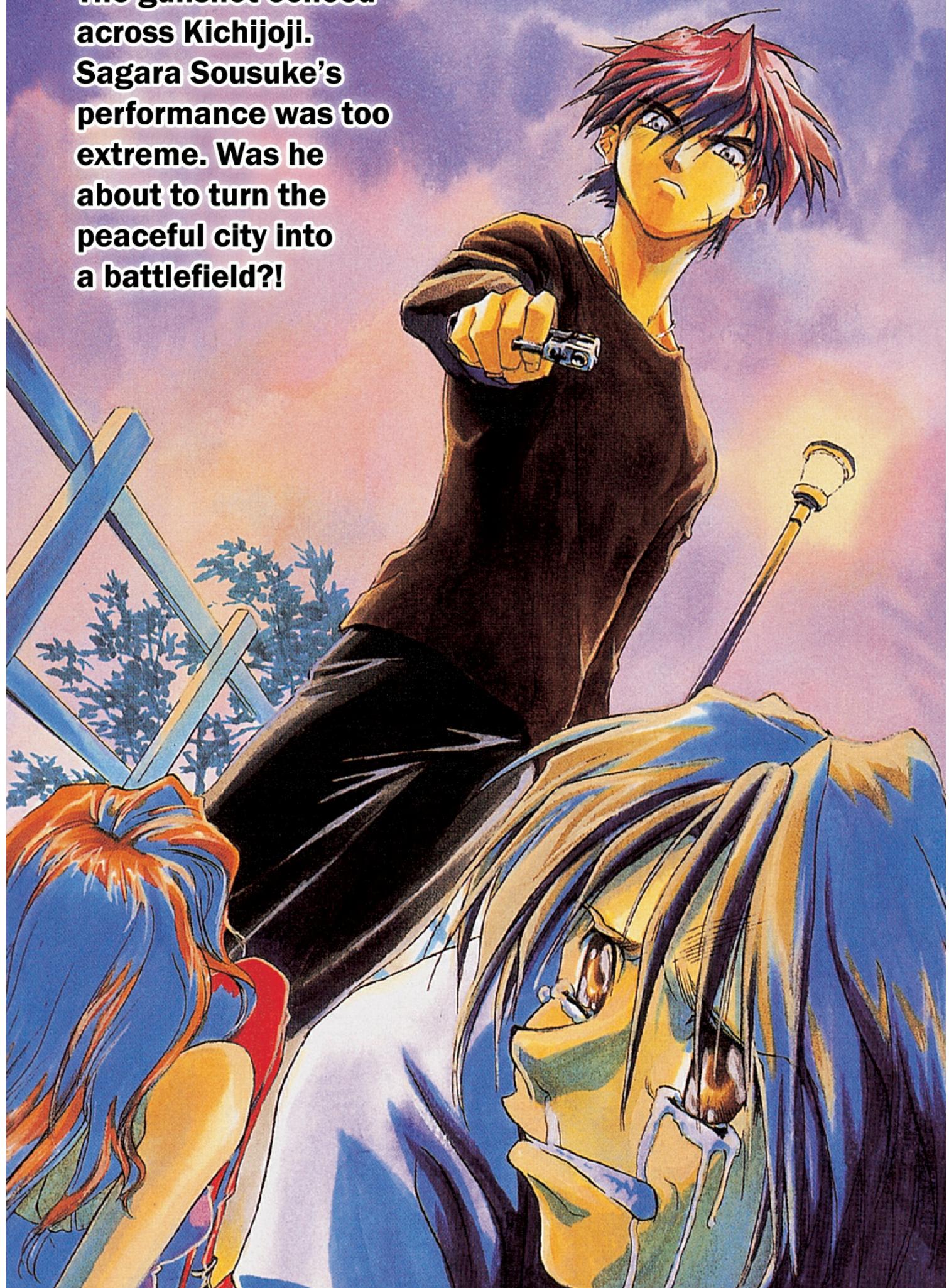
**FULL METAL PANIC!  
INTRIGUING ONE-MAN BAND?**

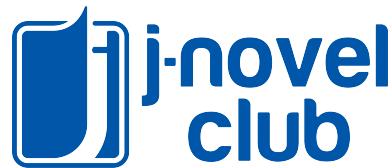


Over the ocean  
stained by evening  
light, Sousuke  
descended with  
Kaname in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” Kaname  
whispered sincerely.

**The gunshot echoed  
across Kichijoji.  
Sagara Sousuke's  
performance was too  
extreme. Was he  
about to turn the  
peaceful city into  
a battlefield?!**





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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 1

by Shouji Gatou

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Vol.1: 1998 HOUTTE OKENAI LONE WOLF?

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022

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