

UNTENABLE SEVENTH HEAVEN FEELING?



FULL METAL PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU

ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

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7



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A Concealment Full of Holes

Four people were sitting in the office of the principal of Jindai High, scowling around a rectangular table: the principal herself, the homeroom teacher of class 2-4, the student council president, and its vice president.

“Now, as I’ve explained...” said the principal, Tsuboi Takako. “The representative from the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly who’s coming to observe our school, Mr. Hayami Nobuhiko, is a very, very, very serious person. And he’s particularly concerned with youth issues.”

“What, precisely, do you mean by ‘youth issues’?” asked Kagurazaka Eri, class 2-4’s homeroom teacher who also taught English.

“Dangerous behavior among young people—assault, drug abuse, and... the possession of dangerous weapons,” the principal clarified.

Eri fell silent.

“Our school is an extremely normal school for the most part,” Tsuboi continued, “but it has one serious problem that we can’t afford to see go public: a certain student with whom you’re all familiar.”

“A certain student...” murmured the student council vice president, Chidori Kaname.

“Yes,” the principal affirmed, “that very unfortunate student who, as a result of being raised in dangerous war-torn regions overseas, lacks any understanding of how things work in Japanese society and has completely failed to adapt to life here. It isn’t his fault, of course, but it’s difficult for me to imagine Mr. Hayami having a positive impression of him.”

“So... what do you propose?” Kaname asked.

Principal Tsuboi cleared her throat. “I propose... well... I was wondering if perhaps there would be a way to ensure he wasn’t in school that day.”

“Aha...”

“After all, try to imagine it: what if... what if he were to fire off a gun in front of Mr. Hayami, or detonate an antipersonnel mine, or wave a combat knife around...”

These things were indeed very easy to imagine, and a mutual tremble ran through both Kaname and Eri. Their imaginations ran wild with images of gunshots, explosions, sprays of blood, and the death rattles of the representative himself. They felt a chill run up their spines as they pictured the reactionary headlines—typical of a certain brand of stupid and lazy reporter—that might fill the newspaper’s society page:

Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly member slain by male high school student

Homeroom teacher ignored warning signs

Was influence from games and anime the culprit?

“We’d be finished,” they said in unison.

“Yes, finished! Which is why I would like to take him out of school just for tomorrow. Obviously, as an educator myself, I cannot discriminate against a single student. But... you understand, don’t you? There are things a person needs to do to survive! I’m not talking about throwing away rotten oranges, just putting one slightly more threatening orange out of sight for a while. I think this is the rare case in which it would be valid. Don’t you agree? Don’t you?!” the principal pressed them.

Kaname and Eri answered together firmly, their faces pale.

“You’re very correct, ma’am!”

“We’ll make sure it all goes smoothly!”

While the three of them nodded in mutual agreement, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the student council president—who had been quiet up until that point—began to speak. “I disagree with this course of action.”

The principal, Eri, and Kaname all turned to glare at him in unison.

“Hayashimizu-kun. Might I ask why?” the principal inquired.

The tall, pale, intelligent-looking man in question nudged his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. “It is true that he tends to act with a logic that is alien to you, but he means no harm. Nor is he a wild beast incapable of taking direction. If you explain the situation to him, I believe he will prove capable of self-mediation.”

The principal struck the table with a fist. “Absolutely not! Do you hear me? The stakes are far too high if something goes wrong!”

“She’s right, Hayashimizu-kun! He’s too dangerous to leave at large!”

“Yeah, Senpai. And it’s less that he’s a wild beast incapable of taking direction, and more that he’s an inflexible combat machine... a cold-blooded Terminator!” Kaname insisted.

“That may be going a bit too far, even for passionate rhetoric...” Hayashimizu whispered, an uncharacteristic trail of greasy sweat running down his temple. “Besides, although the representative is very stubborn and inflexible, the reason he chose our school is very likely—”

“Enough quibbling!” the principal barked. “This is one time when I won’t yield, even to the student council president. Sagara Sousuke will *not* attend school! I will prevent his attendance by any means necessary!”

These were shocking words to hear from a supposed educator, yet the principal declared them without shame.

That morning, after getting ready for school, Sagara Sousuke grabbed his bag filled with textbooks, notebooks, various equipment, and spare ammo clips before leaving his apartment. On his way out, he found Chidori Kaname waiting for him in the front hall.

“Morning, Sousuke.” She was a slender girl in a school uniform, with long black hair punctuated by a red ribbon. She was standing there with her hands behind her back and, for some reason, an ingratiating smile on her face.

“Chidori. What is it?”

“Well... I was thinking. Maybe we could walk together today.” She punctuated the offer with a giggle.

“Hmm?” Sousuke was surprised by this turn of events. Kaname never acted this way in the mornings. She was more likely to slouch along like a zombie, with eyes half-closed and mouth slack-jawed, moaning occasionally about how tired she was.

“C’mon, Sousuke,” she continued regardless. “Wanna ditch today? We could go to the aquarium.”

“What?”

“I’m just not in a school kinda mood today. I’d rather just kind of hang, you know? But I’d be lonely doing it on my own. So how about it?” She looked at Sousuke with upturned eyes. It was the kind of alluring expression that would make any normal man’s heart skip a beat, but...

He reached quickly towards her face and pinched her cheeks hard.



“Eh?! Ggggh... eh?! Wh-What are you doing?!” She shook his hands free, then knocked Sousuke over with a hit from her bag.

“Hmm. Indeed,” he observed, “you are the genuine article.”

“Of course I am!”

“I thought you were an enemy in disguise.”

“Well, I was trying to be cute... It kinda ticks me off if that’s your reaction,” Kaname muttered.

Sousuke stood up and dusted himself off. “Regardless... you said you wanted to skip school to go to the aquarium, but I’m afraid I must respond in the negative. My grades are already poor enough due to my work for Mithril. I cannot afford to be careless with class attendance.”

“But... it’s just one day...”

“Even one day can be fatal.” Sousuke said firmly. “Education is a treasure. In the many poor countries I have been to, there are those who wish to receive a high school education but cannot. Japan is a blessed nation in comparison. To take the day off from school on a whim, despite being afforded such a precious opportunity... Chidori, you should feel ashamed.”

“Why do you always have to have integrity on days like *this*?” she demanded with exasperation.

“Days like what?”

“Oh, nothing.” Kaname looked away, whistling.

Sousuke shook his head. “Regardless, that is my position. I will happily accompany you anywhere this afternoon—to the aquarium, to the zoo, even to the Smithsonian. But for now, we must attend school.” Sousuke strode forward, pulling Kaname along by the hand.

“H-Hey—”

“Move swiftly,” he urged her. “We will be late.”

“B-But... I think I’m coming down with something. I have a headache, and I’m nauseous. I might seriously die without someone looking after me all day... Hey,

Sousuke, are you listening?!”

“Hurry. The train will arrive soon.” Sousuke then pulled her along down their usual road to school.

Sousuke arrived at the entrance to the school, dragging an unusually passive Kaname with him. Just then, their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, came running. “Sagara-kun?!” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I’m sorry! I meant to tell you earlier, but it’s about next month’s student council training camp...”

“What is it?”

“The truth is, we haven’t done a proper investigation of the lodging arrangements. We need one of the students to go there and talk things over with the inn’s owner.”

“I see.”

“I was hoping you might be the one to do it.”

Sousuke recalled that the training camp location was far enough away that a round trip by train would take half the day. “Right now?” he asked.

“Yes. Immediately.”

“But what about my class—”

“Don’t worry about classes! I talked to all the teachers and they’ve agreed to mark you present. Well? It’s a good deal, isn’t it? You get to take the day off from class and enjoy a nice trip.”

“But ma’am, surely there’s no reason for me to rush out on a weekday—”

“There is! There absolutely is!” Eri said, pressing in. “I told the people at the inn that we’d be coming by today, and you’re the only one who can evaluate safety issues there! The success of next month’s training camp is all up to *you*!”

“Is it?”

“Yes! So you have to go!”

Sousuke fell quietly thoughtful for a moment. Then at last, he straightened up and responded, “Yes, ma’am. I will leave at once. Chidori?” He turned to Kaname, who had been anxiously watching their exchange.

“Wh-What?”

“You heard her. I may not return to school before the day ends, so I wish you good luck with your studies.”

“All right. Good luck to you, too.”

“I’ll be going, then.” Sousuke turned around and left the school.

He was in no position to see Kaname and Eri sigh with relief as they watched him go.

“Welcome, Mr. Hayami! I am Principal Tsuboi. Did you run into much traffic on the way here? Route 20 is always so congested, with so many dangerous intersections... Ha ha ha ha...” said Principal Tsuboi, greeting their guest with forced cheer.

“Not at all. Thank you for having me, Ms. Tsuboi.” Representative Hayami was a slightly fastidious-looking man of just under 50 who had arrived in a black chauffeur-driven car. He was the archetypal politician; dressed in a gray suit and black-rimmed spectacles, he walked swiftly, straight-backed, with two secretaries always in attendance. He and the principal exchanged the usual overly polite pleasantries as they headed for the employee entrance.

Fourth period classes had just begun. The school was quiet, and there were no students in the halls or the courtyard at the moment.

“It really is an honor to have a man of your status observing our school,” Principal Tsuboi insisted. “The staff and the students are all so delighted. I’m only sorry we couldn’t hold a welcome ceremony.”

“No need to go to any trouble. I want to see your school in its typical state,” Hayami said to her casually.

“Yes, yes. That’s the best policy, really. Ha ha ha...”

“I’m happy to hear you agree.” He nudged his glasses up the bridge of his

nose with his index finger. “I’ve been on a few school visits like this, and they all seem overly practiced in anticipation of my evaluation. It doesn’t give me an idea of what they’re really like. To be honest, it’s both disappointing and irritating.” There was a subtle anger in Hayami’s voice.

“I-Is that so?”

“That attitude—enacting superficial pleasantries while they wait for the storm to pass—gets under my skin very deeply. What kind of an example are they setting for the children? All places have their issues. I want to see those issues for myself.”

The principal felt sweat rise on her back as she eyed the representative from the side. *But... honestly... if you saw our typical state, you would be far angrier,* she thought. Nevertheless, she cleared her throat and reassured herself. *Well, stop worrying. Sousuke won’t be here today. Eri and Kaname got him out of the way. Everything will be fine!*

“That’s a wonderful attitude to have, Mr. Hayami,” she said out loud.

“Thank you. By the way...” Hayami stopped in the middle of the hall, and pointed to a wall, close to the ceiling. “What is that?”

“What?”

There was a small hole there with a radial crack around it. It was a place Sousuke had shot with his handgun.

“I’ve been wondering,” Hayami said thoughtfully. “I’ve seen a few similar points of damage here and there around the building. They almost look like gunshots.”

“Certainly not! No gunshots!” the principal shouted in denial. “Nothing so horrible ever happens at our school! Absolutely nobody ever shoots bullets into the walls! Our students are extremely peaceful and never carry firearms!” Her reaction was completely over-the-top. Realizing how it had bowled Hayami and his secretaries over, she gasped and tried to course-correct. “Th-That is, er...”

“Well, of course they’re not gunshots,” Hayami said dazedly. “It was merely an example.”

“Of course... ha ha ha... it’s probably just air bubbles in the concrete. This school is getting up in years, after all!”

“I see. But what about that window?” This time, he pointed to one of the windows in the hall, which had a spiderweb fracture patched up with duct tape. This damage, too, had been caused by Sousuke.

“Th-That was from the baseball club. We have a very promising new slugger. He actually hit a ball all the way here from the athletic field!”

“I see. But it really does look exactly like the bullet holes I’ve seen before...”

“Seen before?” Principal Tsuboi exclaimed.

“Well, you see, I once had a bit of a squabble with a particular political association,” Hayami explained. “One of their members shot at my office to intimidate me.”

“I see...”

“Really, it’s nothing to worry about. The culprit was arrested and is currently serving time.”

“I’m... glad to hear that.”

“Indeed. And all the leaders of the organization to which he belonged have been duly chastised by society.”

“I... I’m very glad to hear that,” said the leader of the school to which Sagara Sousuke belonged, her voice trembling.

“Indeed. Japan is a country based on rule of law, and those who carry firearms within her borders are unforgivable,” Hayami insisted. “Those who look the other way from such acts belong in prison as well.”

Tsuboi said nothing.

“Oh, I suppose the conversation’s gotten rather dark. I apologize. Now, show me what Jindai High School is like during class.”

“Right. Th-Th-This way, please...” the principal stammered as she led the way back down the hall.

Kagurazaka Eri was writing a phrase in English on the blackboard when the door to her classroom rattled open. Kaname, Kyoko, Kazama, Onodera and all the other members of class 2-4 turned back to look.

“Hello. Pardon us,” Principal Tsuboi said as she poked her head inside.

Representative Hayami entered the classroom after her. The students had been told about his visit in advance, so they weren’t surprised or shocked to see him. The primary feeling hanging over the classroom was relief that Sagara wasn’t there.

“Sorry to intrude, all. Please continue as if I’m not here,” Hayami said.

Most present realized it was a ridiculous request, but Eri gave him a strained smile and said, “Everyone, let’s continue class as normal, just as Mr. Hayami asked. I don’t think we have anyone here who would try to eat lunch early behind their textbook, or read a Fantasia Bunko paperback, or fall asleep and snore loudly, do we?”

“No, ma’am!” the class responded in eager unison.

“Good. Now, the next sentence. ‘Kigen 79-nen, Rome no toshi Pompeii wa, Vesuvius-kazan no daifunka ni yotte, ichiya de ushinawareta.’ Can you translate that into English, Chidori-san?”

“Yes, ma’am. Um... In the year 0079, Zeon declared war against the Earth Federation for its independence,” Kaname read smoothly from her notes.

“Very good. Thank you.”

Class continued smoothly in that manner, completely quiet except for the distant sound of a helicopter. Hayami, the principal, and his secretaries sat in folding chairs set up in the back of the classroom, quietly watching things proceed.

“All right. I think we’re home free.” Eri had been very nervous, but it seemed things were working out fine. Hayami seemed to find the class rather boring, but that was preferable to being the subject of his rage. *If things keep up like this, we might just ride this out*, Eri thought.

But it was at that exact moment that the door to the classroom opened forcefully, and a male student entered. Of all people, it was Sagara Sousuke.

“I have returned,” he said.

“Erk!” Eri, the other students, and the principal all reeled back and choked in unison.

Sousuke scowled as he looked around at their expressions, which were universally twisted with surprise and confusion. “Hmm? What’s the matter?”

“Oh, n-nothing... S-S-Sagara-kun, y-you’re back early...” Eri gasped.

“Yes. The round trip took a mere ninety minutes in an MH-67 Pave Mare.”

“A pave... what?”

“It’s a transport helicopter,” he clarified. “They happened to be nearby, so I asked them to give me a ride, though I cannot tell you the affiliation of the helicopter, nor its current assignment.”

“I don’t quite understand, but... did you scout out the training camp accommodations already?” Eri wanted to know.

“Yes. Allow me to prove it.” Sousuke held out a Polaroid photo, which showed two people standing in front of a sign that read “Hikage-so Inn.” The owner of the inn wore a strained smile as he held up that morning’s newspaper, shaking hands with a typically sullen Sousuke.

Eri just stared in disbelief.

“It all checked out. I also scouted out escape routes and defensible points in the event of an emergency. I’ll explain the details later. By the way...” Sousuke turned his attention to the back of the room and pointed at Representative Hayami. “Who is that man?”

Hayami didn’t seem to like that mode of address. He and his secretaries scowled at Sousuke, while the principal, Kaname, and the others all turned white as a sheet.

“S-Sagara-kun... That’s Representative Hayami from the Tokyo Assembly. He’s a very important guest.”

“What business does a politician have in our school?”

“He’s here to observe our educational systems!” hissed Principal Tsuboi.

“I see.” While the others watched him in panic, Sousuke scrutinized Hayami carefully. “Very well. I don’t see anything suspicious about him just yet.”

“Of course you don’t! Now, take your seat at once. A-And... please, don’t do anything rude!”

“Understood. I will do my best.” Sousuke quickly headed for his seat. Unfortunately, it was at the center of the back row, very close to Hayami and his retinue.

Eri resumed class. Sousuke sat down at his desk, opened his bag and removed the contents: a textbook, a notebook, a pencil box, a pocket dictionary, a digital transceiver, a first-aid kit, a smoke bomb, a strobe light...

Hayami, watching from nearby, whispered to him, “Can I ask you a question, son?”

“What is it?” Sousuke whispered back, pausing.

“I want to know more about what high school students carry around with them these days. May I see?”

His question caused the students nearby and the principal to freeze up in terror.

“Feel free.” Sousuke proffered the smoke bomb he was holding.

Hayami took it, then scrutinized it carefully as he turned it over in his hands. “Is this something students walk around with nowadays?”

Ignoring the principal’s gaze, which urged him to keep quiet, Sousuke launched into his explanation. “It has numerous uses: moving safely through open territory, marking LZs, indicating targets to FAC. It can be used for COIN in some situations as well. And you can rig it up for a few other uses, too.”

Hayami frowned at him. “I see. You young people use a lot of newfangled slang. What is ‘LZ’?”

“It means ‘landing zone,’” Sousuke said, using the English words.

“And ‘FAC’?”

““Forward air controller,”” he said in English once again.

“And... ‘COIN’?”

““Counterinsurgency.”” English once more.

Hayami frowned. An extended silence followed. The only sound in the classroom was Eri, who was still reading from the English textbook. But most of the students were no longer listening to her lecture, focused instead with bated breath on the tense conversation happening in the back of the room.

But despite the strange atmosphere that hung over them...

“I just don’t understand any of it.” In the end, Hayami seemed to give up on trying to work it out and turned his attention to another piece of equipment. This was Sousuke’s digital satellite transceiver. “That’s a rather large cell phone you have. I’ve heard of those... It’s one of those iModes, isn’t it? Could I see it?”

“Absolutely not,” Sousuke replied bluntly.

Hayami exchanged a glance with his secretaries. “And why not?”

“Its settings are classified information. I can’t let an outsider view the frequency and encryption algorithms.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“It means that you are not authorized to handle this device,” Sousuke said, his eyes expressing pity for the man’s foolishness.

“Not authorized?” Hayami exclaimed. “Do you know who I am?”

“Sir, even if you were the President of the United States, I could not grant your request.”

“You’re a strange child. Who exactly—”

“Excuse me, Mr. Hayami?” Eri called from the podium. “I’m sorry, but we *are* in class right now. Do you think you could save your questions for the students until after?” Eri said apologetically.

Hayami cleared his throat and returned to his seat. “I beg your pardon. Please continue.”

The principal and students breathed a sigh of relief as Eri awkwardly resumed class.

It was then that Sousuke, undeterred, pulled a new item out of his bag.

“Son. I have one more question for you,” Hayami whispered to him, persistently.

“Yes?”

“What is that block-like thing there?” He was referring to the plastic explosive on his desk. It looked like nothing more than a pencil box-sized lump of clay, but in fact, it had the power to explode and kill everyone in the classroom.

“Composition C4.”

“Compo-what?”

“A fusion of trinitrotoluene and other elements with plasticizer added,” Sousuke explained.

“What exactly does that mean? Do your friends all carry it as well?”

“It seems unlikely. It’s a high-performance explosive, difficult to acquire in Japan.”

“A high-performance... what?”

Sousuke sighed, and explained again, slower and louder. “C4 is a highly destructive plastic explo—”

Crash! A sudden flying cross chop bowled Sousuke over. The toppling of his desk and chair with him produced a terrifying racket.

“What?!” Hayami cried as he and his secretaries drew back.

“Ha ha ha ha... S-Sorry!” Kaname picked herself up off the floor, laughing hysterically. “Sorry... It’s a chronic condition. A few times a day, I just find myself flying through the air!”

“A... chronic condition?”

It was then that a girl with braids and coke-bottle glasses, Tokiwa Kyoko, stood up and shouted, “Th-That’s right! Chidori-san has Spontaneous Mil Máscaras Syndrome. It’s an extremely rare condition. Isn’t that right,

everyone?!” This utterly bizarre cover story caused everyone to briefly freeze up.

Mil Máscaras, AKA the Man of a Thousand Masks. He’d had a long and glorious history as a luchador in the Mexican pro wrestling scene and specialized in beautiful flying finishers—in particular, his artistic flying across chop. But all of that aside...

“Oh! Y-Yeah, that’s it!”

“It’s true! Poor Kana-chan!”

“She just can’t help it! It’s that Mill thing of hers!”

Once time began moving again, the others piped up in agreement.

“But I’m okay now. The urge has died down. Sorry, Sagara-kun! Are you okay?” Kaname helped Sousuke up as she forced a smile.

“Where did that come from?” he inquired with a frown.

“Honestly, you shouldn’t be talking about personal matters during class. And would you please put your extremely non-dangerous personal items away? Now? Please?” Kaname hissed.

“But Chidori. Our guest was asking about my plastic ex—”

Smack! Taking a full-force elbow to the back of his head, Sousuke hit the ground once more.

“S-Son?!” Hayami called as he and his secretaries blinked in surprise.

“Ha ha ha ha! What? How weird! It usually doesn’t trigger multiple times in a row like that,” Kaname laughed as she whipped her arms around, making sounds like out of a kung fu movie.

“For what sounds like a chronic condition, those are very precise moves. Even a dedicated spectator like me can sense clear fighting spirit and killer instinct in them,” Hayami insisted.

“That’s just your imagination. I don’t want to hurt anybody. I just want to be a normal girl. But... but...”

Sousuke stood up for the third time. “I don’t understand why can’t I talk

about my plastic ex—”

Crash! A dazzling rolling sobat from Kaname once again reduced Sousuke’s health bar to zero. “Oh, there I go again!” she said brightly. “Are you okay, Sagara-kun?!”

This time, he didn’t respond.

“Ms. Kagurazaka! I’m going to take him to the nurse’s office! I feel a duty as class representative, as student council vice president, and most of all, as a fellow human being!”

“Excellent initiative, Chidori-san!” Eri said approvingly. “Please take him to the nurse’s office as quickly as possible. And make sure he stays there!”

“Right!” she responded immediately. While Hayami and his secretaries watched, dumbfounded, Kaname dragged Sousuke off.

“Nicely done, Kana-chan!”

“She doesn’t even hesitate to play the heel...”

“You are truly the school’s savior!”

The students of class 2-4 whispered their approval and pumped their fists in gratitude.

“Where am I?” Sousuke awoke to find himself in the nurse’s office, handcuffed to the bed.

“It’s nothing personal, Sousuke.”

“Chidori?!”

Kaname was silently looking down on him from the folding chair in which she sat. “I’m doing this all for the sake of the school,” she said. “We can’t let that representative know what you really are.”

“‘What I really am’? What do you mean? I am a model high school student working to maintain peace at this school!”

“I’m starting to realize... you really do believe that, don’t you?” Kaname peered into his face, a vein throbbing on her forehead. She was close enough

that he could feel her breathing. “One way or another, I need you to stay here. Quietly. Until the representative leaves.”

“Why?” Sousuke demanded to know.

“Listen to me,” she begged earnestly. “Society these days doesn’t have a lot of room for humor. The things you did that we previously thought of as silly little stories—firing your little gun off inside the school, blowing up shoe cubbies—aren’t as funny as they used to be.”

“Really?”

“Really! And another thing! There’s a whole lot of scrutiny on us right around now, given the second you-know-what coming up! So at least for this volume, we need to pretend that this is just a completely normal, harmless school! Please try to restrain yourself!”

Greasy sweat streaked down to Sousuke’s forehead. “You say the strangest things from time to time...”

“Shut up! Anyway, that’s the situation, so...”

“What’s the situation, exactly?”

Ignoring him, Kaname stood up, her shoulders heaving with breath. “The point is, you’re staying exactly where you are. Ma’am, I’m leaving the rest to you.”

Nishino Kozue, the nurse who had been listening quietly to their conversation in the corner of the room, smiled brightly and nodded in response.

As Kaname left, closed the door, and could be heard walking away, Kozue asked him a question. “Now, Sagara-kun. Is there anything you want? Are you hungry? I’d be happy to bring you anything you need while you’re here.”

“A wire, if you please.”

“A wire?”

“Yes. As sturdy a wire as possible,” Sousuke said, eyeing the keyhole on the handcuffs that held him to the bed.

After sitting in on Class 2-4, Representative Hayami and his secretaries looked around at a few other classes. It all went quite smoothly. Fortunately, the non-Sousuke problem students didn't cause any particular trouble that day.

Eventually lunch break arrived, which meant Representative Hayami would be taking his leave. Having finished observing the school, he was walking out of the front door with his secretaries. The principal, the teachers, Kaname and a few members of the student council saw him off.

His chauffeured car drove up and opened its door. "I'll be going now, if you don't mind." Hayami bowed while standing in front of the car, so Principal Tsuboi and Eri responded quickly with deep bows in kind. The students followed their example.

"It really is a shame. We would have liked you to see more of our school," the principal said with a smile. Kaname and the others reflected to themselves about her obvious insincerity.

"I'm terribly sorry. I'm a busy man, after all." Hayami took one last glance over the faces of the students around him. "By the way, is your student council president off today?"

"What? O-Oh, well, there appeared to be a scheduling conflict... I'm sorry."

Hayashimizu, the student council president, had said there was no need for him to put in an appearance and had ended up being a no-show.

"Very well, then. Thank you for having me. I hope I can stop by again some time."

"Yes! We'd be honored to have you."

"And you," Hayami said, suddenly looking past her. "I'm sorry I distracted you in class. I truly apologize."

"No, not at all," came the response from a familiar voice.

The students turned back and felt all the blood drain from their faces. Sousuke was standing there as if he'd never left. "But curiosity killed the cat, Mr. Representative. I would advise you not to pry too deeply into the secrets of our school. Take care."

Hayami furrowed his brow. “That sounded a bit like a threat to me.”

“Not at all. It was a warning.”

“Oh?” Apparently annoyed by his phrasing, Hayami took a step forward. It was then that a Super Cub motorcycle, apparently on a ramen delivery, passed through the front gate, but nobody paid it any mind.

“Mr. Hayami. You see... this student is rather uninformed in the ways of manners...” the principal tried.

“It’s true. As his teacher, I’m often scolding him... so, please, indulge him...” Eri tried.

“Yes, he just watches too many movies! But he’s not a bad person, so please overlook him...” Kaname tried.

But Hayami ignored their attempts to intervene on Sousuke’s behalf. “That’s what the others have to say about you. Do you have any final words for yourself?”

“Final words?” Sousuke murmured.

The delivery motorcycle was approaching the group.

“If I had to say something, it is that I am an excellent bodyguard.” Without batting an eye, Sousuke sprang into action, grabbing Hayami by the lapels and pulling him down to the ground.

Hayami exclaimed in surprise, but there was no time for anyone to react as Sousuke threw up his uniform jacket, drew the pistol from the holster on his back, and...

Blam! Blamblam!

He fired swiftly at the approaching ramen delivery motorcycle. Bullets hit its wheels, its engine, its cowl, and its headlights before the driver fell over, frothing at the mouth.



“...What?”

To say that the art for all of the students went off-model in that moment would be an understatement.

“What?!”

As the entire group stood there in silence, as if watching the world end, Sousuke ran up to the collapsed motorcycle driver and kicked him hard. The ramen shop delivery man let out a muffled scream, but then lay still.

“Sousuke? What are you doing?!” Tears appeared in Kaname’s eyes as she stumbled forward. “I really wasn’t only thinking about the school, you know. I was worried about keeping you safe, too... Now you won’t be able to go here with me anymore! That’s the one thing I didn’t want to have happen... but you... you... you hurt that innocent ramen delivery man!”

“Look closer.” Sousuke gave another light kick to the ramen delivery man lying on the ground. A small submachine gun slid out towards Kaname’s feet.

“What...”

“It’s a vz.61, a Czech submachine gun known as the Skorpion. It’s apparently used frequently by Japanese terrorists.” While Sousuke calmly explained the situation, Hayami turned pale and looked back and forth between the submachine gun and Sousuke.

“What? What... What in the world...”

“When a VIP is getting into or out of his car, that’s the best time to assassinate him,” Sousuke explained calmly. “He pretended to be a delivery driver in order to get close enough to shoot you.”

“You mean... from the political organization I fought with before...?” Hayami whispered.

Everyone, not just Kaname, stared at him in shock. “You mean... it was a real attack?” they squeaked in unison.

“Of course.” Sousuke puffed himself up, more confident than they’d ever seen him. His always sullen face seemed to project the aura of, “*Well? I was right this time!*” Even though it had been a horrifying act of attempted

terrorism, he seemed almost happy about it.

Meanwhile, Kaname and the others were close to panic. *A genuine attack! An honest-to-goodness assassination attempt!*

“Th-That was horrible!” Principal Tsuboi exclaimed. “Someone call the fire department!”

“No, ma’am! We need to call the JSDF!” said Kaname.

“N-No! Have you forgotten that field trip?” Eri demanded hysterically. “Call United Nations Command!”

While they lost their minds arguing, Kyoko let out a sigh and dialed 110.

Even so, the problem wasn’t solved. No matter the reason behind it, Sousuke had drawn a gun and fired it right in front of Hayami. He seemed sure to report the incident to the police. And yet...

“‘Suspect apprehended on-site, no one injured’?” That afternoon, at the student council room, Kaname stared in confusion at the society page of the newspaper. The only report on the incident was a small article on the right-hand side. “What could have happened?”

“It’s all over, Chidori-kun,” Hayashimizu said indifferently as he walked in. Right after the assassination attempt, she had seen him appear quietly on the scene and whisper something to Representative Hayami. “Even the bullet holes in the bike have been attributed to the culprit’s gun. Don’t worry.”

“But, but...” she whispered.

“I know quite a few things about that *particular* representative. Everybody has skeletons in their closet.”

“What?”

“He may appear to be an upstanding member of society, but even he has things he doesn’t want known. And so I decided to play one of the cards I’d kept in my hand in the event of a worst-case scenario. The rest is politics.” With that, Hayashimizu turned to Sousuke, who was camped out at a far corner of the table. “Sagara-kun. I wish to speak with you.”

After urging the other students to leave so that it was just the two of them, Hayashimizu spoke to Sousuke.

“This information is available for anyone who digs a bit, but that prim and proper ‘Hayami Nobuhiko’ is actually using the pen name he used as a writer before he became a politician. His real name, unknown to most people, is Hayashimizu Nobuhiko.”

“What?”

“I haven’t heard from him for over two years, and we hate each other, but... your father is your father, right? And since you saved his life, I wanted to thank you personally,” said Hayashimizu with a self-effacing shrug.

Even Sousuke was forced to stare in wonder.

〈A Concealment Full of Holes — The End〉

The Self-Serving Blues

The overactive, quirky young person who marches to their own drumbeat—every school has at least a few, and one of them, here, was Onodera Kotaro.

His friends called him Ono-D. There was no special meaning behind the name; it was just a standard sort of nickname. Someone had just started using it one day, and soon enough, it had caught on.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with tanned skin, thick eyebrows, and narrow eyes. His hairstyle was a dyed yellow buzz cut. The guys on the basketball team with him laughed and said he looked like Dennis Rodman, but he thought it looked good on him.

One day, when it was pouring rain outside, Kotaro was spending his lunch period hanging out in the classroom. He was paging through a seinen manga magazine that had come out that day, which someone had left in a corner of the classroom. Fighting stuff, adventure stuff, pervy stuff... it was the usual range. Once he'd read through all the comics, he turned his gaze back to the color pinup at the front.

It was one of those sexy idol-type girls with sharp features and slender limbs. The suggestive curvature of her legs combined with her provocative gaze left a striking impression.

"Cut me off a piece of that," Kotaro whispered to himself. "Yeah, that's right. Older women are where it's at. She's got it where it counts. That whole mysterious, all-knowing thing. Yeah..."

"Lemme see! Oh, it's her?" Kazama Shinji, who'd just finished eating the lunch he'd brought, peered over at the pinup. Shinji was Kotaro's classmate, a boy with shaggy bowl-cut hair and rimless glasses. He was short and as far from athletic as one could get, but for some reason, he was one of Kotaro's best friends in class.

"Hey, Kazama. You know her?"

“Yeah, she’s been all over lately. And she’s currently attending university, I hear. Keio, I think.”

“Huh... So she’s smart too. Out of my league, I guess. Too bad.”

“Did you think you had a chance before that?” Shinji wrinkled his nose, then, seemingly realizing something, he adjusted his glasses. “Speaking of... don’t you think she looks a little like Chidori-san?”

“Chidori? Huh...” It was true that there was a resemblance in the features and the body lines. He’d never seen Chidori Kaname in a swimsuit like this, but the pinched waist and ample bust were certainly reminiscent of hers.

But just as Kotaro was thinking that, he heard a sound from the hall.

“Die! Die! Die! Say you’re sorry, dammit!”

Crash!

The door at the front of the classroom burst open as a boy, Sagara Sousuke, came tumbling in with a cry of distress.

“Security, my butt! Effective measures, my ass! Time to find a new line, dammit!” Kaname shouted as she strode into the room and grabbed Sousuke—who was trying to pick himself up after crashing into the lectern—by the scruff of the neck.

“It’s hard to breathe...”

“Shut up, you lousy little creep! I’m gonna make you writhe in pain, then dance the Tokyo Ondo! Now, dance the dance of madness! Step the steps of death!” she cried as she throttled him mercilessly.

“But... it was the best way to ascertain who’d been secretly smoking—”

“You’d have to be an idiot or an interdimensional alien to think that makes it okay to set up hidden cameras in the girls’ bathroom! Shiori’s been talking about how she’s ruined for marriage, like some character from an old manga!”

“She misunderstood. I only put the camera at the entrance. The individual stalls just have miniature smoke detectors and micropho—”

“It’s still peeping, asshole!” Kaname shouted as she moved him into a

headlock and slammed him against the blackboard repeatedly, the female students egging her on.

Each successive hit sent chalk dust flying. "Ow. Ow. Ow."

"Yeah, it better hurt!" Kaname taunted him. "I hope you burn in the fires of hell!"

Kotaro and Shinji stared in disbelief as she gleefully manhandled him. They looked between her and the sexy idol pinup, comparing the two.

"It's really not like her at all, huh?"

"Yeah, guess not..."

The girls shouting as they poked and prodded at Sousuke looked more like an army of amazon commandos. Kotaro and Shinji were forced to sigh at the barbarity of it all.

"You know... there's something pretty childish about the girls in our class."

"You think?"

"Yeah. They're like little kids, always babbling on about something or other. It's just so disappointing. Especially when they flip out like a bunch of psychos..."

Just then... "Who are you calling psychos?" Chidori's ears had a Devilman-like sharpness. She paused in the middle of her torment of Sousuke and turned her attention to Kotaro and Shinji.

Shinji looked away, whistling innocently.

Kotaro was about to respond with his usual equivocation, but... "You, Chidori," he chose to respond for some reason.

"Ono-D..."

"You know what I mean? You're girls, right? You gotta knock this crap off already. Quit running around like shrieky little kids and act more mature," Kotaro said with a sneer.

Kaname was far from chastened, instead responding with a challenging smile. She tossed away her poor victim, Sousuke (our protagonist), who had

completely lost the will to fight back at this point. She fixed her eyes on Kotaro, her hands on her hips. “Oh? More mature, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s just sad to watch. You oughta get your act together.”

“Ha. You don’t usually wise off to me like that... Is your crush today on some college girl or office lady?”

“H-Hey...” He couldn’t immediately deny it. Her excellent intuition had left Kotaro briefly at a loss for words. “Wh-What are you talking about? O-Of course not...”

“Ha. It’s clear your motives here are far less than pure. Besides, if you don’t like it, you don’t have to watch. It’s not like we’re happy having you staring at us like a perv anyway.”

“Hey, I never—”

“You’re a man, aren’t you? Don’t try to excuse it.”

“Yeah! Yeah! Ha ha ha!” The group of girls cackled.

“Geh...” Unable to think of a comeback for that one, Kotaro was left sputtering helplessly.

It was here that Tokiwa Kyoko interrupted. She was another of their classmates, a petite girl who wore braids and coke bottle glasses. “Come on, guys, enough. Don’t be so mean to Ono-D.”

Kyoko probably thought that she was helping, but Kotaro couldn’t help but take her words as mockery. “Oh, screw you.”

“What?”

“I said, screw you! I don’t need a shrimp like you making fun of me, too!”

Kotaro’s sudden aggression caused Kyoko to wave her hands quickly. “I wasn’t! I was just—”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! Like I care what any of you *children* think! Just leave me alone from now on!” he shouted, like a child, and raced out of the classroom.

The rest of the group stared after him blankly.

“Huh? That’s weird. Is something actually going on in Ono-D’s life?” Kaname asked suspiciously.

Shinji tilted his head thoughtfully. “I don’t think so. I think he’s just at that age.”

“Hmm... Well, whatever. Anyway, Kyoko, you okay? Don’t let that jerk’s nasty words get to you,” she said to Kyoko, who was standing there, shoulders and braids both sagging.

“What? Oh... I’m okay. He just caught me off-guard a little bit,” Kyoko responded with a forced smile.

Incidentally, Sousuke had begun patting the chalk dust off his head, causing the students around him to complain.

The next morning...

“Morning! It’s a fine morning, everyone!” Kotaro proclaimed, beaming as he entered the classroom at the start of the day. He was in an excellent mood now, in stark contrast to the day before. “Kazama-kun, looking as gloomy as always! Cheer up, man! The world’s your oyster!” He roughly patted Shinji, who was sulking in his seat, on the shoulders. “Hey, Sagara-kun! Hope the battle’s going well! Looking good, man!” He gave another rough pat to Sousuke, who was fiddling with some kind of strange electronic device.

“You seem oddly cheery today. Has something happened?” Sousuke glared up at Kotaro. The sudden force had caused his hand to slip, bending the base of the IC chip he’d been working with.

“Oh, damn straight something happened! C’mere. Over here, quick!” He dragged Sousuke and Shinji into the corner of the classroom.

“What now, Ono-D? I’m sleepy...” Shinji complained.

“I was hoping to complete the detonator before class started...” Sousuke said unhappily.

Ignoring their objections, Kotaro thrust a picture at them. “Feast your eyes on this!”

“Eh?”

It was a picture of three beautiful girls, most likely in their twenties. The photo must have been taken at a tennis court, because they were all dressed for the game.

“Girls? What about them?”

“Ha ha ha... they’re third-years from Suiren Women’s College. They’re all single and looking for boyfriends.”

“Uh-huh...” Shinji eyed him suspiciously.

Meanwhile, Sousuke was staring at the picture hard enough to burn holes in it with his eyes. “Are you certain they’re students? The woman on the left resembles a terrorist currently wanted by French authorities. Perhaps it’s my imagination...”

“It’s your imagination,” Kotaro and Shinji said in unison.

“Are you certain? She shot two police officers and bombed a NATO facility. The latest intelligence said that she was hiding somewhere in East Asia—”

“It’s not her. Anyway, you’ll see when you meet her.”

“Meet her? I don’t understand.”

“You’re so stupid. I’m talking about a mixer! We set up a date. The one on the right is the big sister of a friend of mine from basketball club. He introduced us, and the next thing I knew... heh heh heh!” Kotaro snickered as his face contorted in a lecherous manner.

Shinji watched him dubiously. “A mixer?”

“Yeah. She asked me to come and bring some ‘cute guys’ from my class. But the guys in basketball club are all big, burly dudes. So...”

“Y-You want *us* to come?!”

Kotaro grinned. “Show a little gratitude. You guys might be a zero on the sex appeal front, but you’re at least pretty good looking.”

He had a point. If not for Sousuke’s stiff soldier attitude, he would be a properly handsome “quiet type.” And when Shinji wasn’t going on about some

geeky topic or other, he would look like a pretty and delicate young man that would inflame a woman's protective instincts.

"Well... I'd love to go, but... I really don't have any experience with this kind of thing. I think I'd probably be too nervous to say anything," Shinji said, worried.

Kotaro patted him on the back. "You'll be fine, man. I'll take the lead."

"The lead? Ono-D, have you ever been to a mixer yourself?"

"S-Sure. It's easy stuff."

"Did you stammer there? You stammered, didn't you?!"

"Wh-What's wrong with you? D-Don't be so worried about everything! Ha ha ha..."

"You stammered again!" Shinji now had tears in his eyes.

Kotaro snatched him up in a firm headlock. "Don't be such a whiner. Just shut up and come along!"

"Ow, ow..."

"You were complaining about the girls in our class yesterday too!"

"I know, but..."

"I swore an oath that I'd be through with childish women after that. I want older women! The kind that won't smack a guy around!"

"Hmm..." Hearing this, Sousuke thought of an "older woman" that he personally knew. She was a 26-year-old, single, Chinese-American former Marine who frequently smacked around a colleague of his.

Ignorant of Sousuke's inner thoughts, Kotaro went on. "Look. I want you guys to really think about this one. They're college students. College students! Chances like this don't come around every day. We gotta take this one! Sagara, you're coming, right?!"

"To this... mix-thing of yours?"

"Yeah. It's tonight at six in Kichijoji. Come dressed to the nines!"

At this, Sousuke fell into thought. "To what does 'to the nines' refer?"

“Well... just wear the most expensive thing you have. Got it?”

“Understood.”

After class ended, Sousuke was busily preparing to leave when Kaname spoke to him.

“Sousuke, Kyoko and Mizuki are coming by tonight. I was gonna make a nice meal. Wanna join?”

Kaname’s and Sousuke’s apartments were close to each other, so this kind of invitation wasn’t unusual for him. Normally, Sousuke would agree without a second thought, but...

“Hmm. I’m afraid I can’t go tonight. I have a prior engagement.”

Kaname just shrugged, not looking especially disappointed. “Oh, really? What kind of prior engagement?”

“I’m going to a mix-up in Kichijoji with Onodera and Kazama.”

Kaname blinked at him. “A... what?”

“A mix-up. I believe that was the word. Anyway, I’m in a hurry. Goodbye.”

“W-Wait! Wait a minute! A mix... are you crazy?! Sousuke! Ah, there he goes...” He flew out of the classroom, not listening to her admonitions to stop.

That night, in Kichijoji...

The college girls who arrived at the designated meeting spot near the station did indeed look very appealing. Their mode of dress wasn’t flashy at all; they just wore ordinary clothing with just a few accents, which gave them an unpretentious appeal. Meanwhile, their aromatic perfumes tickled the nose.

“I’m Mutsu Mutsumi. A pleasure to meet you!”

“I’m Kaizu Kaiko. Let’s have fun today!”

“I’m Kujo Kumi. A pleasure.”

They all seemed like very energetic ladies as they introduced themselves.

Kotaro and Shinji, who had arrived ahead of time, whispered to each other.

“Their name kanji... land, sea, sky. Very militaristic.”

“I like it. Makes it easy to remember.”

Just then, the active-looking girl with shoulder-length hair and the “land” name kanji, Mutsu Mutsumi, asked, “By the way... Onodera-kun, right? Is it just you two? I thought there would be three of you.”

Sousuke hadn’t shown up yet. He’d called Kotaro earlier to say he’d be about five minutes late, so he’d probably show up soon. Even though he’d told him to wear the most fashionable outfit he had, Kotaro was still worried he’d show up in some weird camouflage outfit or something.

Nevertheless, Kotaro hid his concerns and grinned. “Ah, yeah, there’s one more coming! He said he’d be a little late, but he should—”

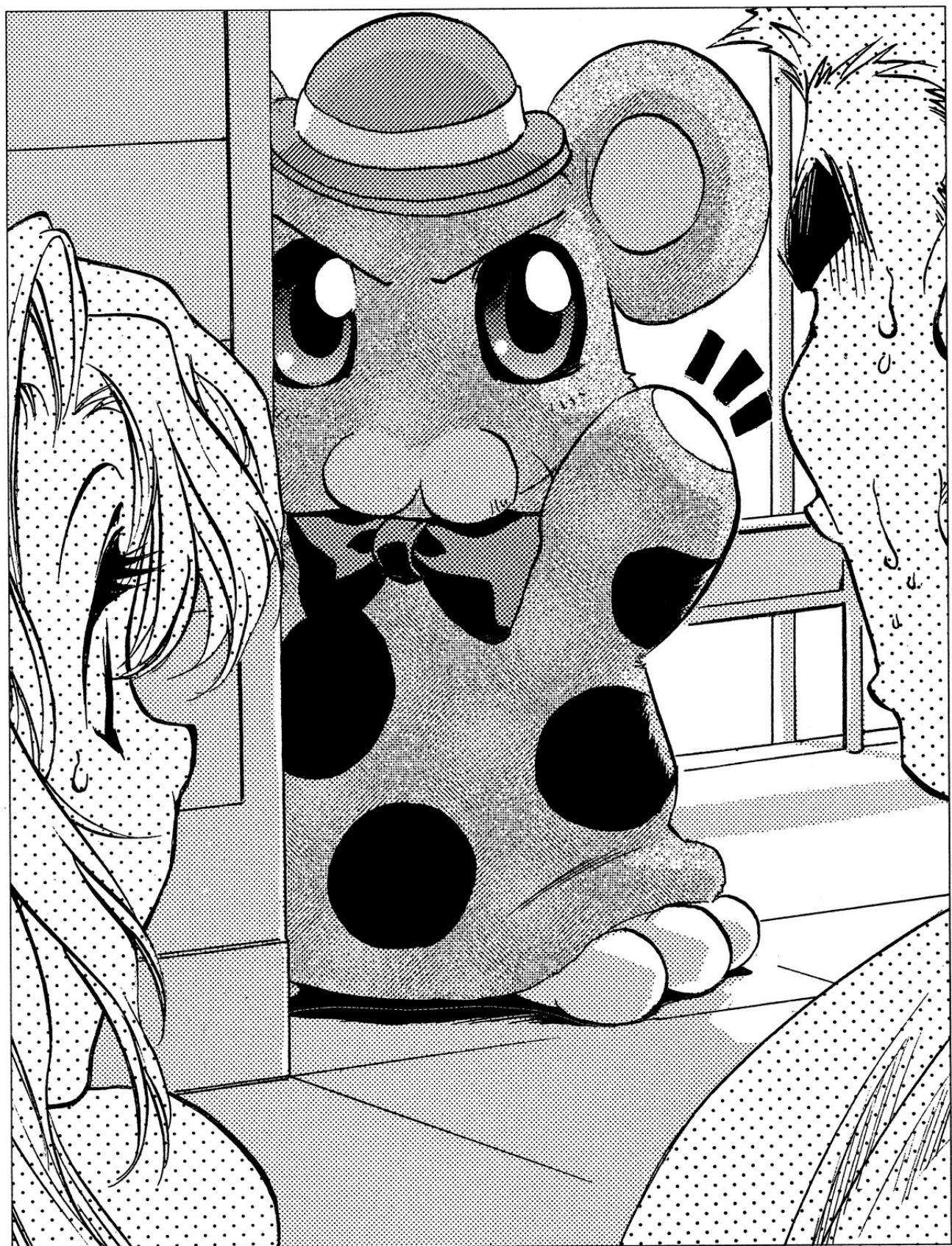
Just then, a strange voice sounded out nearby. “Fumoffu.”

The group looked over and saw Bonta-kun standing beside a pillar.

They all stared in silence as it began to speak.

“Fumoffu. Fumoffu. Fumo, fumo.”

“Bonta-kun” was two heads tall, a creature halfway between a dog and a mouse. It wore a snazzy hat and bowtie. It approached and gave Kotaro a friendly pat on the back.



After a long period of silence, one of the girls spoke up hesitantly. “Um... Onodera-kun? This isn’t the third person, is it?”

“Moffuru.” Bonta-kun puffed up as if to say, *Affirmative*.

Kotaro remained locked up for a few moments, but finally stepped forward, awkwardly. “W-Wait just a minute. Bonta-kun. Come here. Come on. This way...”

“Fumo?” Bonta-kun said as Kotaro and Shinji each took one of his bushy arms and walked him away.

Once they were out of sight, they shouted, in unison, “Take off that head!”

Bonta-kun did as he was told. As expected, the person inside it was a sullen Sousuke.

“I thought it was you!”

“Hmm? Is there some issue?”

“There sure as hell is! Why the hell are you wearing that mascot outfit?!”

“As you instructed, I wore the most expensive outfit I own. I poured approximately twenty thousand dollars into this power suit. Recently, I even added BC defenses and a power assist function.”

“What, really? Let me see!” Shinji said, his eyes suddenly sparkling.

“No, stop that! Just take that thing off and stash it somewhere. Kazama, you’ve got a buddy who works at a local arcade, right? You can stash it there.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Good. Now, Sagara, what are you wearing under that thing?”

“Fatigues and a tank top,” Sousuke responded. He sounded a bit despondent, perhaps because his “to the nines” Bonta-kun suit had been rejected.

“Geh. Still military, huh? Sagara, you are just...” Kotaro trailed off, shaking his head in disgust.

Shinji just nodded along meaningfully. “Well, I do feel like we should have

seen this coming... And it does make me more sympathetic to what Chidori goes through every day..."

"Well, whatever. Let's just start over. We're gonna score tonight, guys. Let's put our hearts into it! Right? What do you say?!"

"Okay," Sousuke and Shinji responded, not sounding especially excited.

The mixer was being held in a dark, western-style pub, the kind of place where you could eat a lot on a budget. Surprisingly enough, nothing in particular went wrong during the meal.

At school, Kotaro was known as a bit of a class clown, always running his mouth. Here, though, he easily slotted into the role of the guy who went on and on about something or other until the girls called him silly and forgave him.

This was unexpected.

Shinji was frozen with nervousness at first, but this, too, proved a popular quality. Acting flustered when they fawned over how cute he was suited his character perfectly. As long as he didn't bring up his camera obsession, they'd be none the wiser about his nerdiness.

This, too, was unexpected.

The biggest potential problem of all—Sousuke—had been warned at the start not to talk much, so much of his own nature remained under wraps. Instead, he just nodded along silently and occasionally agreed or disagreed. He'd unintentionally stumbled into the 'strong but silent' archetype.

This was *entirely* unexpected.

In other words, for a trio of useless sixteen-year-olds with no previous romantic experience, things were going pretty well!

"Hey. Excuse us a minute." Around the time the meal was reaching its end, the girl faction left their seats.

"Hey, where are you three going? Take me with you! Mutsu-san!"

"Ha ha ha. Silly." The three girls laughed and headed off to the powder room, looking even better from behind.

Shinji whispered, “I guess girls really do go off to the bathroom together, huh?”

“Stupid! They’re off to talk strategy. They’re gonna pool their thoughts about us—who likes who, and what they wanna do when we leave and stuff.”

“Huh? That’s kinda scary...”

“Don’t be scared. We gotta talk strategy too,” Kotaro said, pulling them both into a huddle.

Meanwhile, in the women’s powder room, the three girls were indeed talking.

“What do you think, Kaiko?”

“Hmm. I think... I like that Kazama kid. He might be fun to play with.”

“For real? That type can get weird and stalkery, though. Don’t blame me if it backfires.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. Besides, I’m totally desperate lately.”

“Wow, awful. That’s all you talk about.”

“Hee hee hee. What about you, Mu-chan? Going home? You’ve got work tomorrow, right?”

“Oh, well... I’m not really sure. That Sagara kid has been making eyes at me here and there. So... I’m not quite sure what to do.” Mutsu Mutsumi didn’t realize that the reason he was eyeing her was because he was evaluating the likelihood that she was a dangerous terrorist.

“Ahh. He is the hottest, right? And he’s got that bad boy aura.”

“That’s why I’m so torn... When he runs his eyes over me like that, I feel my heart skip a beat...”

“Ha ha ha ha! Really? A high school kid?”

“I know, right? I’ll never live it down!”

Mutsu Mutsumi and Kaizu Kaiko laughed and joked around with each other as they fixed their makeup. What accounted for this turn of events? It seemed that, despite Kotaro’s expectations, even girls in college were still more or less

children.

But the last one of them, Kujo Kumi, let out a soft sigh.

“Aw, Ku-chan. Not having fun?” Mutsumi asked her seriously.

“Huh? Oh, no, I am...”

“Ku, you need to forget that guy already. You’ll miss out if you keep stewing over him. Right? If you want Kazama, you can have him.”

“No, thanks... Ha ha ha...” But despite her response, Kujo Kumi’s expression didn’t grow any more cheerful.

Meanwhile, at the boys’ strategy meeting...

“Personally, I like Kaizu-san. She’s got that sarcastic air. But Mutsu-san is also nice. And Kujo-san too... heh heh heh. Ah, what to do?” Kotaro leered while swinging around a tankard filled with Calpis Sour.

“You just want them all. Sheesh.”

“Yeah? So who d’you want, Kazama?”

Shinji blushed at the question. “Well... I th-think I might want... Kaizu-san. She seems very magnanimous...”

“Oh, yeah? She’s yours, then! Have a blast! What about you, Sagara? Any girl you like?”

At this, Sousuke folded his arms and seemed to think very deeply. “Hmm. That one, Mutsu Mutsumi... I find her intriguing.”

“Really?!” Both boys leaned forward, fascinated by the idea of Sousuke showing romantic interest in someone other than Chidori Kaname.

“Mutsu-san, huh? For real?”

“Yes. Her Japanese intonation is perfect. And though I’ve been projecting hostility in her direction all night, she’s shown no reaction. But still, she does greatly resemble the wanted poster issued by the French authorities...”

“Oh, just that again?” Both his friends slumped over in disappointment.

“We’re back!” the three girls called as they returned.

“Hey, wanna go somewhere else?” one of them said. “Karaoke after dinner is classic, so...”

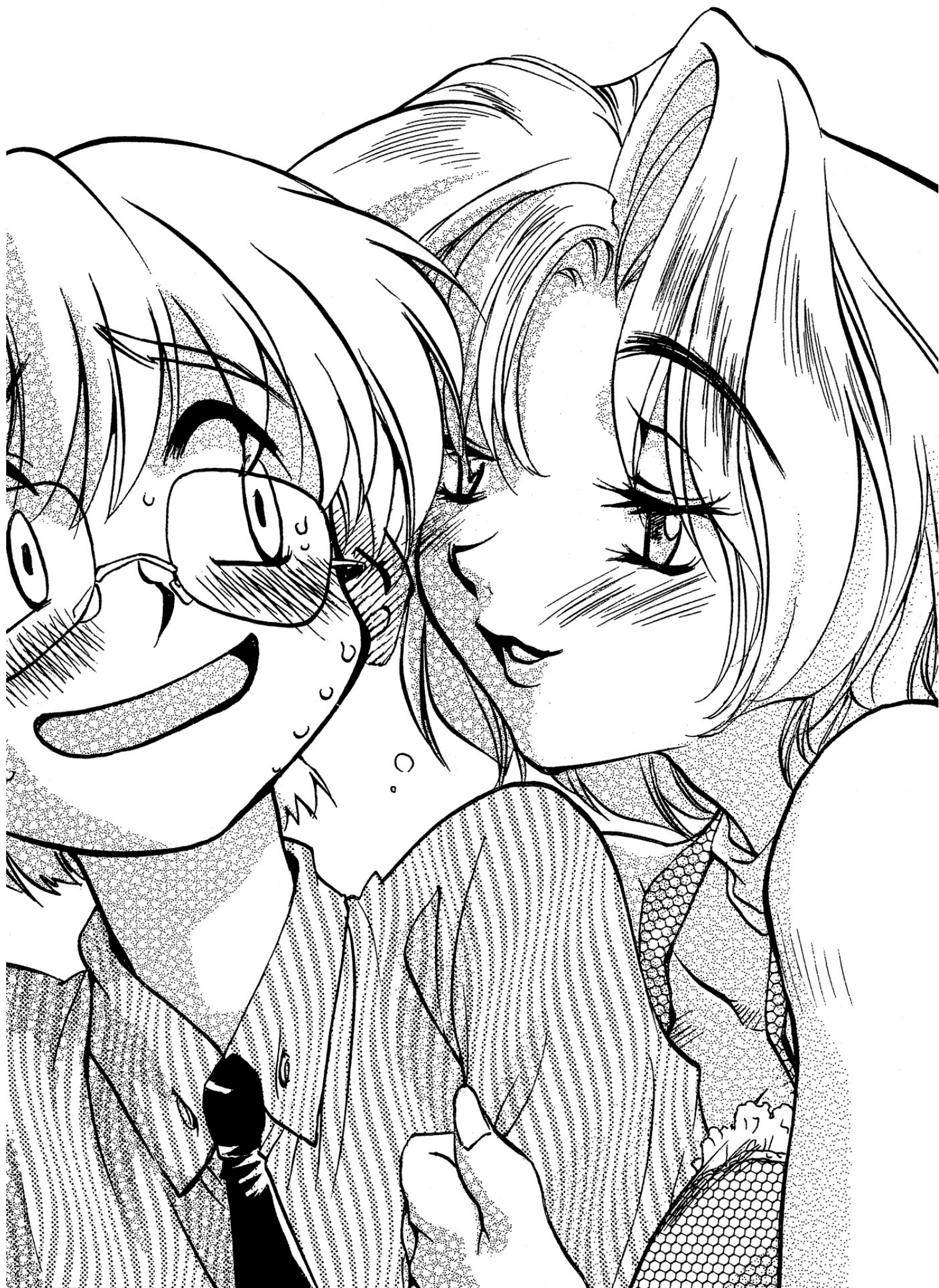
“Sounds great to me! Let’s go!” Kotaro shot up his hand before the others could say anything.

They paid their tab and were about to leave the restaurant when Kaizu Kaiko said, “Um, sorry. I think I need another drink.”

“Oh, really?” Kotaro said.

“Yeah. So would you stick with me a while... Ka-za-ma-kun?” she said coquettishly, naming Shinji out of the blue as she gave him a bewitching smile and tugged his arm towards her. Given that she also had the biggest bust of the three, she of course didn’t neglect to press it up against him.

Shinji, who had no experience whatsoever with women, was naturally flustered by this. “Um... um?! I... I really...”



“I know a place with a nice atmosphere. Don’t worry, it’s not too expensive. Okay? And maybe you can listen while I get some things off my chest...”

“Um... w-well, really? I’d be happy to, uh... lend an ear, yeah...”

“Really? Thanks so much! See you guys!”

Shinji didn’t even get a chance to protest as Kaizu Kaiko disappeared into the night, dragging his petrified body with her.

“Kazama... That bastard!” Kotaro hissed.

“Remain calm, Onodera. She’s harmless. It’s this Mutsu girl we need to keep an eye out for.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Kotaro hissed, tears filling his eyes.

They entered the karaoke parlor and spent about two hours there.

Sousuke sang the Soviet National Anthem a cappella in fluent Russian, claiming he’d been reminded of it recently. Obviously, the two girls were put off by it... To get things back on track, then, Kotaro did a great rendition of a harmless pop song. The mood returned to normal. Then Sousuke sang an Afghani folk song, which put the girls off again. Determinedly, Kotaro came in with a passionate rendering of Van Halen, and the mood returned to normal.

While it was touch and go at first, the two girls eventually seemed to start enjoying the whiplash. The alcohol probably helped matters as well.

“Ah, that was so funny!” Mutsu Mutsumi said as they left the parlor. “Sagara-kun, you’re so weird. Do you get that a lot?”

“Affirmative. Though I don’t like hearing it from someone who shot an innocent officer of the peace.”

“What?”

Sousuke glanced over at her coldly and whispered, “If it’s a performance, it’s an impressive one.”

“I don’t understand... Hey, Sagara-kun, want to take a walk through the park? I’m feeling a little tipsy. And there’s so many people around here... You know?”

Mutsumi said suggestively, and took Sousuke's arm.

Sousuke thought for a second and a half, then, "Very well. I wouldn't want anyone else dragged into the conflict." And with that extremely grave response, he started walking.

"H-Hey, Sagara..."

"Don't worry, Onodera. I'm a veteran."

"That's not what I meant..."

"We'll meet back up at school."

With that, Sousuke and Mutsu left, leaving Kotaro and Kujo Kumi alone together.

"Um, s-so..." Kotaro stammered. He'd tamped down on his earlier breezy manner, perhaps out of consideration for her—during the mixer, she was the one who'd come off the most modest and aloof. "Th-They're all gone, huh? What should we do? Head home?"

"Um, I guess..." Kumi agreed. Her hair, the longest out of the three girls, swayed as she turned. She wore a white blouse and knee-length skirt, seeming like the prim and proper type. But then, unexpected words came from her pale pink lips. "Um... Want to come by my apartment? It's close. I have coffee."

"Huh? Uh... you sure?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't."

"Ah... s-sorry. I'll come along. I love coffee. I really do." With that, Kotaro began walking beside her in an awkward way, left arm and left leg together.

He couldn't believe what was happening. His legs were trembling. His vision was blurry. His ears were ringing. He wasn't quite sure where he was anymore. Even his own voice, as he talked to her, sounded like it belonged to someone else.

It was night. The sky was dark. The apartment building looked pristine in the moonlight.

They walked up the stairs. They walked down the hall. She pulled out the key, opened the door... and went inside.

Oh... ohh, wowww! Kotaro thought as he followed her in. It was an ordinary studio apartment with a loft and understated decoration. Holding a poker face, Kotaro sat down next to the bed. She brought him coffee, and he thanked her and took a sip.

"It's just instant," she said. "Sorry."

"Hey, that's fine. It tastes good. Really."

"Oh. Thanks..." Kujo Kumi let out a short laugh, and sat down next to him. After a long silence, at last, she spoke. "So... Onodera-kun..."

"Yeah?"

"Onodera-kun... Do you have someone you like?"

"Oh, well, not right now... Though I guess I've felt something like that before."

"Really? But if you thought about that person entering another man's apartment like this... you wouldn't like it, would you?" She sounded self-recriminating.

"What? Um, well..."

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh, right on. Yeah... ha ha." Kotaro laughed along, while thinking, *What the heck is she talking about?* Kotaro could only duck his head sheepishly as he tried to play along.

"I've been really depressed lately," Kumi went on. "Then Mu-chan invited you to hang out with us... I've been on mixers like that a few times, but the men who come to them are always so shallow. They don't think about anything but... that."

"R-Right..."

"So I thought, what about younger guys?" She laughed quietly. "Silly, right?"

"Huh? Y-Yeah, silly, right?" Confused, Kotaro just decided to nod along (even though normally he'd be more sensitive about his age).

Kumi slumped over. This caused the hem of her skirt to move, revealing just a bit of the fair flesh of her thighs. The girls' uniforms at his school showed quite a lot more leg, but for some reason, this particular sight caused his breath to quicken.

"You're very nice, Kotaro-kun. I can call you Kotaro-kun, can't I?"

"S-Sure. No problem." Kotaro shot her a thumbs up.

Kumi put her hands on his shoulders and laughed softly. "You can call me Kumi, then."

"G-Got it. K-Kumi-san..."

"My heart's racing. I feel so strange..."

"Yeah, it's weird..."

"Kotaro-kun... go ahead."

Suddenly, Kotaro's mind went blank.

Go ahead! Go ahead! Go ahead! He'd been given permission. He'd been authorized to remove all limiters on his manhood. To transform into beast mode. To take what he wanted, without holding back in any way, shape, or form!

Master arms, on. Seeker, activate. Switch engine mode from military to max. Targeting reticle and velocity vectors began to swirl around him. G-forces assaulted his lower torso. High yo-yo maneuver. Enemy in sights. Lock on target: Fox-2 (whatever that means).

"Excuse me!" Breathing heavily, Kotaro pushed Kujo Kumi down.

No one can stop me now. I've gone too far. Time to put myself ahead of all those idiots from school! To bound up the stairs to adulthood! Are you watching me, my guide in middle school, Kiuchi-sensei? I'm about to reach a new stage of my life. Kotaro, Kotaro is now a fully-fledged adult!

As these thoughts raced through his mind, he puckered his lips like an octopus.

It was just then that the front door flew open.

“Kumi!” came a shout. Standing in the door was a man, 180 centimeters tall and very burly. A home invader? Unlikely.

Kujo Kumi was surprised by his appearance, but she pushed Kotaro off her and called the man’s name. “R-Ryuji? What are you doing here?”

“Kumi! Forgive me! I’ve been a fool!” He didn’t even seem to notice Kotaro as he rushed into the room and began spilling his guts. “I’ve realized that I can’t live without you, so... so please, can we try again? Please? I’ve quit pachinko and horses for good! I’ll never cheat on you again either! I swear! I’m gonna go straight! So please... please... please take me back!”

Ryuji passionately spilled his heart to her, sounding like a real louse of an ex-boyfriend.

“O-Oh, honestly... It’s a little late for that, don’t you think? I mean... I mean...” Despite his entreaties, she turned away from him, sniffing. “Y-You think you can just come crawling back? You know, I...” She sniffled. “Stupid...”

“But I love you! From the bottom of my heart! I know that now!”

“R-Ryuji...”

“K-Kumi!”

What in the world? While Kotaro remained plastered against the wall in terror, the two of them charged at each other. They threw themselves into a passionate embrace, tears streaming down their faces. The spontaneous and theatrical manner of their reunion suggested they’d had quite a history together.

And then...

“By the way... who’s this guy?” The man named Ryuji whispered as he cast a glance in Kotaro’s direction. It was as if he’d only just realized he was there.

Kujo Kumi gasped. Having never been in a situation like this before, Kotaro didn’t know what to say. An awkward silence fell over the room.

Seconds later, though, Kujo Kumi turned away, her manner suddenly icy. “Well... I met him at a bar. I didn’t like him and I told him no, but he basically forced his way up into my apartment.” Her expression was regretful, yet

detached.

Kotaro would never forget the look in her eyes in that moment. He just sat there, dumbstruck. “Uh?”

Meanwhile, she went on easily enough. “I mean... you know? He just wouldn’t give up. I was just about to call the police.”

“What... What in the world?” Kotaro continued standing there, slack-jawed.

Meanwhile, Kujo Kumi’s burly boyfriend stepped forward. “You got some guts, kid. Trying to make moves on my Kumi-chan...”

“But... I... None of that is—” Kotaro started backing off, trying to explain.

“Time to die.”

Pow! The man slammed his fist right into his face.

That single blow was enough to send Kotaro flying into the door. The man was amazingly strong. Kotaro was left dazed by the shock wave to his brain.

Smack! Another punch to the face. Kotaro stumbled back into the apartment hallway.

“You’re not getting off that easy!” The man pursued.

Wow... this hurts like hell. I haven’t hurt like this since the fights I got into in middle school... yeesh... Kotaro thought hazily. He was definitely stronger than your average high school student, but that didn’t mean he knew his way around a fight. And the overwhelming night he’d had already had left his brain in a fog.

The only thing he did understand was how shallow the woman was. He felt like a fool. He felt completely pathetic—and he felt another, deeper sort of sorrow, as he watched the man draw back his fist before his eyes.

The next instant...

Blam!

A gunshot rang out, and the man went flying back. He crashed into the railing outside the apartment.

Kotaro paused, and stared, trying to comprehend. “Huh?” he said, then looked up.

Sousuke was standing there, a small shotgun in his hand. For some reason, he was soaked from head to toe, his head and shoulders covered in leaves and vines.

“Sagara?”

“I’m glad to see that you’re safe. I’ve been looking for you,” Sousuke said, sounding very cool as he lowered his firearm.

After helping Kotaro up, Sousuke explained. “Mutsu Mutsumi was innocent after all. She was unconnected to the terrorist in question.”

“Like I told you, right? Sheesh...” Kotaro cursed as he squatted down in the communal hallway.

“She was angry about how I’d pressed her to confess. In penance, I agreed to do one thing she ordered me to, which was to swim across Inokashira Park’s pond while clothed. An easy task for me.”

“Aha. That explains why you’re soaked...”

“Indeed. I could have subsequently returned home, but it was then that Mutsu Mutsumi received a phone call. It was from that man there. He said he was ‘going to see Kujo.’ Mutsu told me that the man was quite a violent sort. So I went to check on you.”

“Oh, yeah? Great timing, huh... Dammit.” The explanation didn’t make Kotaro feel any better. It wasn’t exactly the kind of situation you could just laugh off.

It was then that Kazama Shinji approached them, looking unsteady on his feet.

“Kazama? What happened to you?”

“Oh... Listen. The truth is... I went to Kaizu-san’s apartment, and...” he responded listlessly.

“And... what?”

“And then Kaizu-san made a bunch of advances... With really dynamite style... And I really got right to the verge of learning all her womanly secrets. But...” Shinji let out a sigh and gazed up at the night sky.

“But?”

“That big bust of hers... It was padded.”

The others said nothing.

“And she had a huge pimple on her side. And her stomach was weirdly swollen, like she was constipated. And when I got up close, I could smell the garlic from dinner on her breath... And it just made me so sad I ran away. I mean... she’s really pretty, and a really nice person, right? But... when I saw the stubble under her arms... you know?”

It was the reality that every boy of a certain age wished he could ignore. The unfortunate reality that every woman, no matter how radiant her beauty, had flaws hiding somewhere... a reality that stopped any fantasy cold in its tracks.

It couldn’t be helped. It couldn’t be avoided. They were people, after all. And it was their duty as men not to get hung up on such details—that was part of the reality as well.

Kotaro cradled his head and cried out, pathetically, “Oh, whatever! Just shut up!”

“Yeah, let’s stop talking about it. It won’t make anybody happy. But I can’t unsee what I’ve seen...” Shinji sighed. In a way, he’d ascended past the first step of his youth that night.

“Now, Onodera. What shall we do with this man?” asked Sousuke, who had been nonchalantly attending to his own affairs. (In fact, he simply didn’t understand what they were talking about.)

He was referring to the man lying at the entrance to the apartment. Kujo Kumi was currently at his side. She looked up nervously at Kotaro from time to time, but said nothing.

Sousuke spoke proudly. “Blood could be paid with blood. We could also do something to make him regret taking you as an enemy. Feel free to use this.” He thrust out his shotgun loaded with rubber ball ammunition.

Kotaro spat some of the blood out of his mouth and took the gun from him. A tremble ran through Kujo Kumi’s shoulders. The girl he’d been getting close

with just minutes ago...

But still... I dunno. To be frank, he just felt sad. No matter what a scumbag this “Ryuji” might be, he was the guy she’d chosen. They’d probably been through a lot in life. He couldn’t compete with that. Even if she had turned on him pretty damned fast... It was tragic, but she now saw him as nothing but an intruder on her happiness.

Which meant he didn’t really have a choice. He grabbed the man by the lapels, pressed the shotgun’s muzzle to his chin, and said, “Hey, big guy.”

“Muh... Wha?” the man said dazedly.

“I’m gonna tell you something you better not forget. Never betray that woman again. If you ever do, we, the three Jindai brothers, will show up, and put an electric drill up your ass until you beg for mercy. Got it?”

“Y-Yeah. I got it...”

“With respect.”

“I understand, sir. Yes, sir!”

“Good.”

Kujo Kumi watched Kotaro with mild surprise on her face. “K-Kotaro-kun?”

“Hah. Kotaro-kun, huh? Don’t act like you know me.” With that sour reprimand, he handed the shotgun back to Sousuke.

“Please, forgive me. It was the only thing I could—”

“Shut up, ugly!” Kotaro suddenly shouted.

“I...”

“I hate you. Never talk to me again. I hope you die!” He spat out those words, then strode away from the apartment. Sousuke and Shinji followed behind.

“Ono-D...” Shinji said.

“What?”

“You were pretty darned cool back there. You had this smoldering feeling... It was nice.”

“More like the sadness of a loser.”

“Yeah, that kind of thing.”

“Shut up! All of you, shut up!” Onodera Kotaro snapped, partly in tears.

Sousuke, Kotaro, and Shinji were on the way home from the unfortunate mixer, shoulders uniformly slumped.

“It was a disaster in the end.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess age doesn’t matter as much as I thought.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I wonder what Chidori-san and the others would say if they knew what we were doing.”

“Probably laugh and make fun of us.”

Inokashira Station at night was packed with students drunk from their various parties. The three boys cut through the crowd and arrived at the end of the second platform. And there...

“Hey, they really were here!”

“Hey, you’re right! Onodera-kun!”

Familiar voices rang out behind them. They turned around and saw Chidori Kaname and Tokiwa Kyoko standing there in their street clothes.

“H-Hey... what are you doing here?” Kotaro asked.

Kaname scratched at her head. “Well... Sousuke said something weird about you guys going to a mix-up or something... We got worried, so we came to keep an eye on you.”

“What she said. We thought that if Sagara-kun made some trouble, we’d be able to tell where you were immediately. But you guys kept way quieter than I expected, you know?”

“Though we are glad that nothing went wrong. You guys can do pretty stupid

things sometimes, you know? So we got really worried,” Kyoko laughed.

The three boys stared in disbelief as Kaname and Kyoko stood there beaming at them. Their smiles were so radiant, they could compete with the goddesses seen in picture books.

Feeling the corners of his eyes start to burn, Kotaro whispered, “Sorry.”

“Huh?”

Kotaro fell to his knees, tears pouring out of his eyes. “I’m sorry! I’ve been a fool!”

“What?”

“I was totally wrong. I’ll never stray from the path again. I’ll never cheat again! I won’t say any more stupid things about maturity! So please... please, don’t abandon me!”

As tears fountained from his eyes, Kotaro clung to Kyoko, the closer of the two girls.

“Hey... Ono-D? What’s going on?”

“Tokiwa! You’re a million times better! I’m sorry about today! Forgive me!” Kotaro wailed, crying on her.

Kyoko turned red and flustered.

Kaname whispered, slightly unsettled, “What happened to him?” she asked suspiciously.

“Many things. Many things indeed,” Sousuke said profoundly as he watched her. “Mature women are truly formidable.”

〈The Self-Serving Blues — The End〉

The Turnabout Drunkards

They were sitting in their usual seats in the student council room, when...

“All right, everyone. Regarding the cultural outing coming up in a few days... ahem,” Hayashimizu Atsunobu began to say, before his words were cut off with a cough.

Hayashimizu was a tall, pale young man who wore wire-rimmed glasses that gave him an intellectual appearance. He was standing as upright as ever, but somehow, he seemed vaguely despondent—or more precisely, perhaps, a little unfocused. His brow was furrowed as he fell silent, looking almost as if he couldn’t really see the other student council representatives sitting around the large table with him.

“Senpai?” Chidori Kaname prompted.

He snapped back to reality and shook his head slightly. “Oh... excuse me. I’m fine. Now, let us discuss the upcoming cultural outing— ah, ahem!” He coughed again, then placed his hands on the table and hung his head heavily.

“Mr. President?” Sagara Sousuke asked.

Hayashimizu simply waved at him dismissively. “Oh... no need to worry. Merely a minor cold.”

“That’s a surprise. I never knew you *could* catch cold, Senpai,” Kaname said.

Hayashimizu pressed his fingertips to his temples, “Is that a reference to the old superstition that fools do not catch cold?” he asked groggily.

“Of course not. Though they do say that there’s a fine line between stupidity and genius...”

“I am as human as anyone else,” Hayashimizu told her. “I eat, I sleep, and roughly once a year, I catch a cold.”

“Really?” Kaname mused skeptically.

“Now, let us discuss tomorrow’s cultural outing,” he said, regaining his

composure. “This year, the whole school will be going to watch the Gekidan Uki troupe’s musical, *Love, Youth and the A-Team — The Hellish Battle of Khe Sanh*. The hall is sold out. After the performance is finished, we would like to present flowers to the actors and the director. I expect our membership to handle that. Any objections?”

No objections were made.

“Excellent. Then, afterwards, we will hold a short Q&A. We will therefore need to choose a student to act as host...”

Feeling Hayashimizu’s eyes on her, Kaname stiffened up. “No way.”

“Rest easy; I will handle hosting duties,” he said reassuringly. “The troupe’s director, Harakasu Takeshi, is an extremely unforgiving person who likely won’t tolerate foolish questions and verbal slips, even from students. There are rumors that, at a similar event some time ago, he sucker punched a middle schooler who asked an untoward question right there on stage.”

“Aha...”

“And not just that. He then executed a piledriver on the student, assaulted them with a smuggled-in bottle opener, knocked out all the others who tried to stop him, then shouted, ‘I pity the fool!’ into the microphone.”

“And he’s... a director?” Kaname asked.

“And so, Chidori-kun, I’ve decided it’s a bit too much to put on your shoulders,” said Hayashimizu, completely ignoring her question. “Therefore, I’ll handle hosting duties.”

“Happy to let you... but are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If the director’s already kind of a heel, your backhanded way of phrasing things might set him off...” Kaname pointed out.

“I won’t be backhanded. I’ll play the role of an ordinary high school student and smother him with insincere flattery.”

“That’s kind of what I meant...”

Ignoring her response once more, Hayashimizu paged through the documents in his hands. “I hope to meet up early on the day of the performance to buy the flowers. Thirty minutes beforehand should do. The venue will be Chofu Burning Hall, so— ahem. Ahem!” he trailed off in coughs again.

The council’s secretary, Mikiyara Ren, was also beginning to look worried about this. “Senpai,” she said, “you appear to be in distress...”

“This mild illness will not distract me from my duties— ahem!” Hayashimizu suddenly went limp and collapsed on the table.

“Senpai?!” Ren ran up to him to try to hold him up. “Please be careful, Senpai! The documents will get soggy if you drool on them.”

Without responding verbally, Hayashimizu merely pushed aside the documents beneath him. “At any rate... two days from now,” he wheezed. “Do not be late. That is all.”

The next day, after class, Sousuke heard from a PA announcer acquaintance that Hayashimizu was staying home from school that day.

“He apparently has a cold,” the announcer said. “I’m not sure if he’ll be in shape for the cultural outing tomorrow.”

“I see...”

“You might want to start thinking up a Plan B.”

“Thank you for the advice.” He and the student parted ways, and Sousuke started walking down the hall to the student council room.

“Sousuke. Have you seen Hayashimizu-senpai today?” Kaname asked as she caught up to him from behind.

“No. It appears he’ll be absent today.”

“The cold?”

“Yes. Which leaves the question of what to do for tomorrow’s cultural outing,” Sousuke reminded her. “He was supposed to host the Q&A after the... ‘musical,’ as he called it.”

“Ah...” Kaname put a hand to her mouth.

Sousuke then continued, his voice grave. “In the president’s absence, his duties should be taken on by the vice president—in other words, you. I believe you to be a valiant woman, but I have my doubts that you can handle the director in question. It is possible that the president had some special measures in place, after all. But you, alone, might end up subjected to brutal humiliations in front of the entire student body. It would cause irreversible damage, both physically and psychologically. In fact, the trauma might be so great that you will come to hate even the concept of the musical—in time, you might find yourself committing acts of terrorism against innocent theaters and directors. The authorities will be forced to act. They will hunt down, arrest, and even shoot others in your organization. It is difficult for individuals to fight the power of a state. As the walls close in around you, you’ll be forced into a last resort—I see you charging a stage, a bomb strapped to your chest. Over 500 casualties, including innocent women and children. Those seeking revenge lead to new terrorism against the theater world. And then—”

Pow! Kaname dealt a hard kick to Sousuke’s butt.

Sousuke caught his balance and turned back to her. “What are you doing?”

“Lay off the weird and overly elaborate delusions already!” she told him.

“Hmm...” Sousuke rubbed at his sore rear end.

Kaname returned to reality and cradled her head in frustration. “Ahh... it really is trouble, though.”

“Is it?”

“Even if it doesn’t turn out *that* bad, hearing old artist types going on and on about stuff is exhausting,” Kaname complained. “And I don’t want to be embarrassed in front of everyone.”

“Don’t worry. I will protect you. If necessary, I’ll snipe the director in his chair.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Then what if I stand on stage with a machine gun to his head?” Sousuke

suggested next. “The silent pressure of the muzzle will surely force him to provide smooth and clear answers to your questions.”

“Sounds less like a Q&A and more like an interrogation.”

Sousuke sighed with a scowl. “You’re shooting down all of my suggestions.”

“Because they’re all bad! And stop scowling like that; it’s kind of annoying...”
A vein throbbed on Kaname’s forehead as she glared at him.

Sousuke let her hostility roll off his back. “Still, the matter of tomorrow’s hosting duties remains unresolved. What should we do?”

“Do? Good question... Let me make a call first.” As they walked, Kaname pulled out her PHS and called Hayashimizu’s phone.

“Anything?” Sousuke prodded her.

“He’s not picking up. What about you?”

Sousuke made the call on his own cell. “Nothing. He may have turned his phone off.”

“That really is trouble. I’m getting seriously worried,” Kaname admitted.

While they were talking, they arrived at the student council room. The treasurer, Okada Hayato, and equipment manager, Sasaki Hiromi, were hanging around inside.

“Hey. Anyone know what happened to Hayashimizu-senpai?”

“Nope, no idea,” said Hayato.

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him today,” said Hiromi.

“Anyone else? O-Ren-san?” Kaname asked.

“She went home. Said she had urgent business to take care of,” Hayato responded.

“Hmm...”

“Why don’t we check in on him, then?” Sousuke proposed.

“Check in on him?”

“Yes. If he won’t pick up his phone, we should go see him in person. It would

be the most efficient way to come up with countermeasures for tomorrow.”

“Good idea... and we can buy some health drinks on the way,” she decided. “If that helps him get better, he might still make it to the cultural outing.”

“Very efficient.”

“It’s a plan, then. Anyone know where he lives? It’s near Kichijoji, right?” asked Kaname, while busily rooting around in the desk drawer.

The mention of visiting Hayashimizu’s house had led Hayato and Hiromi to ask if they could come along. Okada Hayato was a darker-skinned student with dreadlocks and an overall “street” look to him, while Sasaki Hiromi was a pale, pretty boy type with silky hair. Both were on the shorter side.

The reason they wanted to tag along was out of sheer curiosity—none of them had ever been to Hayashimizu’s house before. One time they’d been out in Kichijoji with him and had asked Hayashimizu if it was all right to stop by his house. Hayashimizu had merely responded, *“I can’t recommend it,”* with an uncomfortable expression. He’d gone on to add, *“I’m afraid I can’t elaborate, but it wouldn’t be to anyone’s benefit to go. I think it would lead to nothing but regrets.”* And that had been that.

Obviously, hearing him talk that way just made everyone even more curious, and most members of the student council were constantly thinking up potential reasons to drop in on the president unannounced. Checking in on him while he was sick was the perfect excuse, and they weren’t about to let it slip by.

They got down off the bus halfway between JR Kichijoji Station and Nishi-Ogikubo Station, at a bus stop along Itsukaichi-kaido Avenue. The address on the mailing list suggested Hayashimizu’s house was nearby.

It was around dusk, in a neighborhood filled with grand estates. The group wandered around, occasionally checking the address they’d written down.

“Bet he lives in a mansion or something,” Hayato speculated.

“I think it’ll be a normal house,” Hiromi argued.

Just then, from the opposite street, another student from their same school

approached. She was a girl with sleek black hair and an old-style beauty about her—the student council secretary, Mikihara Ren. In her right hand was her school satchel; in her left, a bag from the supermarket. She plodded along, looking disheartened.

“O-Ren-san?” Kaname asked.

Ren suddenly noticed them and stopped. “Oh, my...” She looked around, flustered, as if surprised to see them.

“What are you doing here?” Kaname asked. “I thought you’d gone home for the day.”

“Oh... well, for no particular reason, I decided to stop here on the way home and have a walk around the area...”

“Isn’t your house in the other direction?”

“Why, I suppose it is. I must have gone the wrong way home,” said Ren. “Silly me. Well, take care, all...” She began to swiftly walk away.

But Kaname grabbed her shoulder. “Did you come to check on Senpai?”

“Yes, I did,” Ren admitted with surprising ease. “As his secretary, I feel a certain responsibility to him... But I’ve never been to his house before. I took his address from the mailing list, but I’ve been walking around for a while now, unable to find it, and I seem to have gotten lost...” Ren’s cheeks grew redder and redder as she spoke.

“Hmm... As his secretary, huh?” Kaname said skeptically.

The others laughed knowingly.

“Incidentally, the president’s house should be right here,” Sousuke said as he looked between the written-down address and the map.

They stopped and looked up inquisitively at an old, Western-style estate. It was a red brick building and showed signs of age; vines grew thickly along the walls, and it seemed quite antiquated in comparison with the modern houses around it. The yard also seemed to be poorly tended, and the modestly sized lawn was thick with weeds.

“You’re sure?” Kaname asked.

“This is the only house number 30 in the third district,” Sousuke said, once more looking between the district marker written on a nearby power pole and the note in his hand. “We should check inside and confirm,” he proposed, then opened the rusty gate and began marching up to the front door.

“Hey, Sousuke?”

“I guarantee there are no traps. Come along,” Sousuke said before knocking.

After a brief wait, the heavy door slowly opened and a young woman looked out. She was Caucasian rather than Japanese, a very sexy lady dressed in a tank top and shorts. She had blue eyes with a rather sleepy cast to them and long, sleek blonde hair.

“Um...”

“Can I help you?” she asked in fluent Japanese, causing Hayato and Hiromi to draw back in surprise. “Sorry, but if this is a fundraiser, I have to turn you away. We don’t have any money to spare.”

“Oh... actually, we were wondering if Hayashimizu Atsunobu lived here?” Kaname asked.

The woman ran a hand through her blonde hair. “Oh, Atsunobu?” she asked. “Why do you want him? Who are you people?”

“We’re his kohai at school. We’re... wait, who exactly are *you*?”

The girl gave them a suggestive smile and a wink. “I’m his *woman*. I live here with him.”

“What?!”

“Eh?!” All of them except for Sousuke started in shock.

His woman? Hayashimizu Atsunobu’s woman?! Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the school’s biggest overachiever and president of the student council, was cohabiting with a blonde bombshell?!

“Senpai’s cohabiting?! It’s the song *Kandagawa* come to life!” Hiromi shouted.

“Senpai’s a mature man. An adult. And an international adult, at that...”

Hayato mused.

“Oh, Lord! Have pity on this forsaken world!” Kaname shouted to the heavens above.

The woman just shrugged as she watched them. “Um, I was actually kidding.”

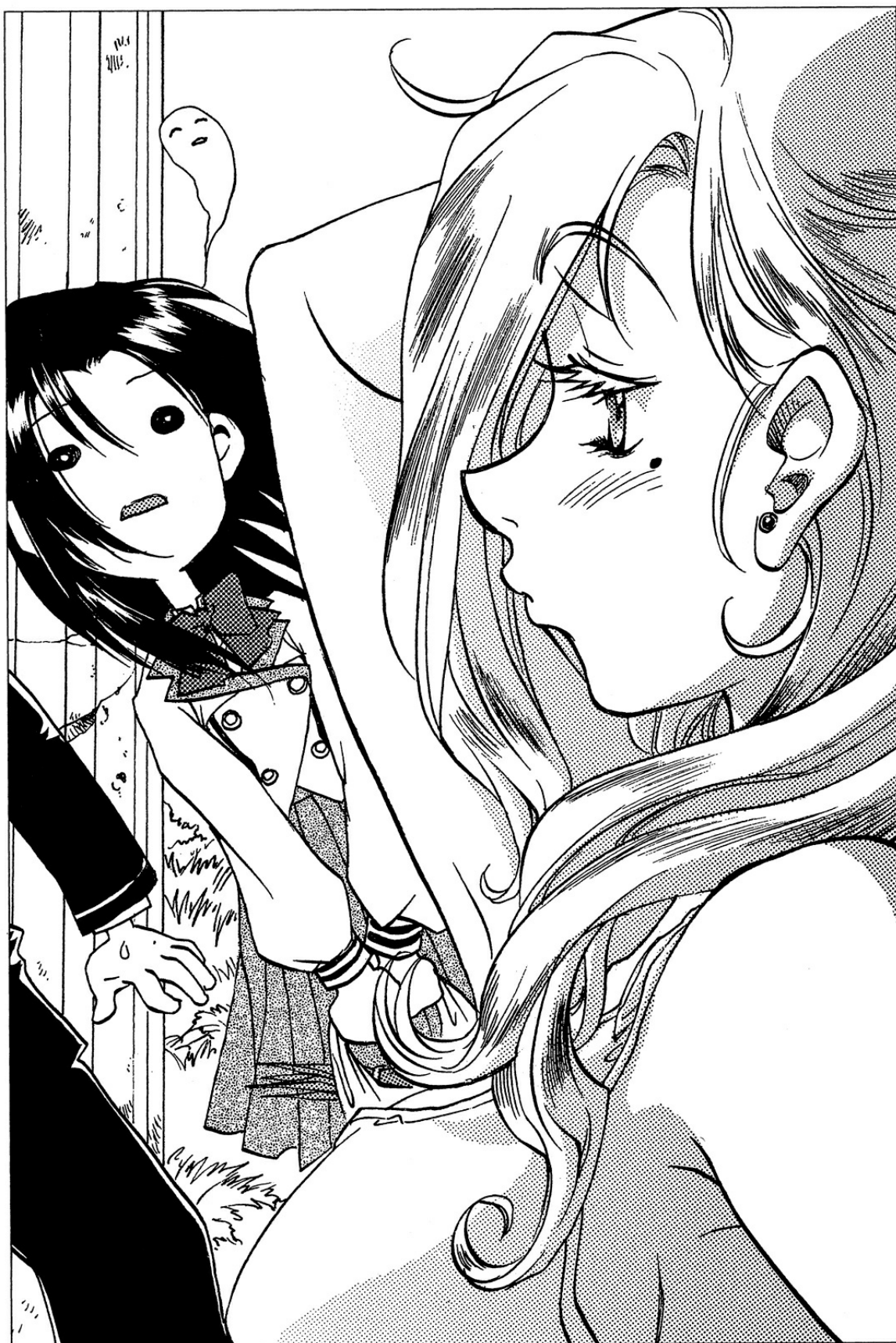
The three overwrought students froze in place.

“Kidding?” Hiromi asked.

“Yes, though it’s true that we do both live here,” the woman admitted. “My name is Natalia Tudakov. I came here on a work visa to escape the civil war in Siberia... ah. Excuse me, miss, are you all right?”

Kaname noticed Natalia was looking behind them, and turned to see what she was looking at. “O-Ren-san?”

There was no response. No expression. And then, as they watched, Ren began to tip over, and... *Crack*. She hit the back of her head on a pillar on the porch and fell still.



Using a traffic safety signboard that happened to be leaning against the power pole as an impromptu stretcher, the others brought Ren into the mansion.

“Hurry! Call an ambulator or an ambulance or Dr. Green from *ER*!”

“Mikihara-senpai, can you hear me? I swear we’ll make you better!”

“Patient is a sixteen-year-old girl. Blunt trauma to the back of the head. Blood pressure, 110 over 60. Breathing rate, thirty—”

“I need four units of O negative and a two-liter saline drip! Prepare for intubation!”

“Do you guys even know what you’re saying?” Hayato snarked.

Her fellow council members brought the unconscious Ren into the mansion, acting like they were in some kind of medical drama.

The house’s interior matched the exterior’s Western-style aesthetic. It was like a house you’d see in a horror movie: a vast, empty atrium-style hall, flanked by doors on the first and second floors. A large chandelier hung from the ceiling, and below it, for some reason, sat a few beat-up sofas and a table.

“Should we lay her there?”

“Right. Transferring! One, two, three!”

As they moved Ren to a nearby sofa, Sousuke knelt by her side and quickly checked her condition.

“Well?” Kaname breathed nervously.

“No issue, it seems. She should wake up soon, but she should have tests done at a hospital within the next few days to be sure,” Sousuke responded calmly.

“It must have been the shock of the cohabitation announcement...”

“The way she acted yesterday, I assumed she wasn’t interested in him after all... but this...”

“Yeah. She even bought ingredients to make him a home-cooked meal,” Kaname muttered, then asked Natalia, “By the way, what is this place?”

“Oh, well—” Just as Natalia was about to explain, the door to one of the rooms on the second floor opened.

“Geh... What is all this fuss about?” A swarthy young man speaking strongly accented Japanese came out, rubbing his eyes sleepily. “No, no, no, this will not do. Do you not know what time it is? I cannot sleep like this.”

Then the next door opened and a Caucasian man entered. His hair was disheveled as he uttered to himself in a thick Kansai accent, “So annoying... Natalia-chan. I’m real delicate when I’m sleepin’. Please, I’m beggin’ you...”

Then another door opened and a bald black preacher walked out. He wore round sunglasses and a high-collared priest’s uniform, carrying a laptop under his arm. “Amen! Morning, all! I hope you’re feeling well. It’s as if I’m hearing the groovy voice of the Lord himself out here,” he said with the sonorous voice of a true public speaker. “And welcome, guests! I don’t know why you’re here, but make yourselves at home and rest your weary souls!”

The students looked up at the foreigners in wonder.

Japan was currently in a recession. The bursting of the bubble had made it so that even the most basic rental units were standing vacant for long periods of time. Apparently, more and more landlords were deciding that renting rooms to foreigners—to whom they normally wouldn’t cater—was preferable to empty real estate.

The resulting lodgings were known as “foreigner houses,” and this Western-style building had been converted into one such space. Few modifications had been made to the interior; the residents used the open rooms as bedrooms, and the bathrooms and kitchen were all shared. The hall they’d taken Ren into was a communal space for the residents.

“So, is Hayashimizu-senpai here?” Kaname asked the eccentric figures who had come down into the hall to sit down on the sofa facing them.

“Yes, I believe he said he had a cold yesterday, but I haven’t seen him since. Have any of you heard?” Natalia asked the group.

“I have no idea.”

“Nah, me neither.”

“Only God knows!”

The three lodgers all shook their heads.

“Which is his room?” Kaname asked.

“There, on floor number two,” Natalia told her. “Number one is wee-wee.”

“Thanks.” Kaname strode up the stairway and knocked on Hayashimizu’s door. No response. She listened in but didn’t sense anyone present. “Looks like he’s not here,” she announced as she returned to the hall. “Any idea where he could have gone?”

“None. I was asleep until just now, myself,” Natalia answered. “He may have gone to the hospital. There’s a clinic open until late nearby. Why don’t you wait here a while and see?”

“Hmm...”

The four students discussed it and eventually decided to wait for Hayashimizu’s return. Ren was still unconscious either way, after all.

“All right, that’s what we’ll do,” Kaname said, then acknowledged the other residents with a small smile.

“Yes, take all the time you like, my children!” said the suspicious preacher, who clapped his hands and leaned forward. “Now, let’s have some introductions. My name is Biz O’Neil; a servant of the Lord, if it wasn’t clear enough. We’ll do our best to entertain you as you pass the time. No need to worry; none of us have anywhere better to be today. We have a variety of drinks available: Coors, Budweiser, Heineken, Super Dry...” The preacher produced various cans from a fridge behind the sofa and lined them up on the table.

“It’s all beer?” Kaname asked.

“You don’t drink?”

“Actually, we’re underage.”

“So what?”

“You’re not supposed to give alcohol to children,” she reminded him.

Preacher O’Neil nudged his round glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Beautiful girl, those are man’s laws. To deny humans what they desire is the work of Satan’s servants, acting in the guise of righteous men. That’s how they defraud our brothers and sisters all over the world.”

“Uh-huh...”

“But you must not fall for their lies, my girl. Anything they forbid, we must have courage to embrace,” the preacher instructed. “Pull the tab like this, and then...” The beer can opened with a pop. “Put your mouth to the opening, and...”

Gulp. Gulp. Gulp.

“Mm... ahhhh! Great! Truly delicious! We thank you, O Lord, for these, your bounties!” Preacher O’Neil chugged the rest, then turned his face gratefully to heaven above. “Do you see? This is rebellion. Use the power of your youth to follow my example.”

“Is he really a man of God?” Kaname asked under her breath.

Meanwhile, Hayato casually reached for the beer on the table. “All right, I’ll take one.”

“Er, Okada-kun?” Kaname protested.

“Don’t be such a stiff,” he said teasingly. “Everyone does it nowadays. Our class even had a drinking party after the sports tournament, remember?”

“Yeah. It’s all right to partake in moderation,” Hiromi agreed, reaching for his own can of beer.

“Magnificent! You are the truly righteous men who shall cast their light on the valley of death! Drink deep, now!” With O’Neil egging them on, Hayato and Hiromi opened their cans.

“Cheers. C’mon, Chidori-senpai, Sagara-senpai, join in,” Hayato urged them.

“Right. Join them in taking this enormous step!” O’Neil opened the pop-tab on a Super Dry and thrust it out at Kaname and Sousuke.

Kaname looked at it silently. It was a cold silver can, dappled with clear water droplets. The foaming inside the can was pleasant to the ear. It suddenly occurred to her that she was feeling a little thirsty, and she was curious, so... “Just a little, then,” Kaname said, holding the can gingerly in both hands as she took the tiniest sip.

“Whoooah!” The entire group, except for Sousuke, applauded. The other residents then merrily popped their own tabs and started drinking.

“What a cute little drinking style,” Natalia gushed.

“For sure. So innocent. It really gets me goin’.”

“Eh? I did not see it. Pretty girl, please drink again!”

Kaname felt a little uneasy in the face of the strange praise. “Huh? Um, I...”

“Drink! Drink! Drink!”

Unable to resist the call, Kaname took another sip.

“Whoooah!” came another encouraging cry.

Kaname smiled bashfully. “Ha... ha ha. What about you, Sousuke?”

“I’ll pass,” Sousuke said immediately.

Natalia leaned forward. “No convincing you?”

“No,” he denied adamantly. “Alcohol destroys brain cells.”

Natalia thought that over for a moment. Then she said, “How about orange juice, then?” as she pulled a juice bottle from the refrigerator and poured some into a tumbler.

“Thank you.” Taking the glass, Sousuke drank down the juice in one gulp. “A curious flavor.”

“That’s real orange juice, containing the true light of the sun and the hearts of Ehime farmers. It’s not like most juices,” Natalia boasted.

“I see. How educational.”

“Want a little more?” Natalia grinned.

“Perhaps. I will try one more.” Sousuke said, holding out his glass.

The impromptu drinking party was still going an hour later. O'Neil brought out a CD cassette player and started blaring James Brown's greatest hits, which had Kaname feeling fired up.

O'Neil was right. We'd be really bored waiting for Hayashimizu to come back otherwise, but this is a really fun time! And he still hasn't shown up, anyway... she thought. "Oh, by the way..." Kaname then spoke aloud, her third beer in hand. "What's Senpai doing, staying in this run-down old guest house? Er, sorry for the phrasing, but..."

"Of course, this is because the rent is cheap,"

"Nothin' wrong with a Japanese person livin' here."

"I admire that he earns all of his school and lifestyle funds himself at his young age," Preacher O'Neil put in. "It's truly inspiring! Even God Almighty is surely weeping from the firmament!"

The strange foreigners all testified merrily on Hayashimizu's behalf.

Kaname recalled something Hayashimizu had said once about being effectively disowned by his father. He'd been expected to go to a prep school, but certain events in his life had led to him pushing back and attending Jindai High instead.

"Senpai's a harder worker than I expected," Hiromi whispered, his face bright red.

Kaname smiled groggily. "Yeah... He's pretty amazing. Trying to live all off on his own like this without relying on his father's money. It's pretty darn cool... I'm looking at him in a whole new light."

While Kaname was singing his praises, Sousuke suddenly shook his head and arms rapidly, as if trying to assert his presence.

"What's that? Pantomime?" Kaname asked.

"No, I just..." Sousuke, looking vaguely hurt, turned his eyes downward as Kaname just drank more of her beer.

"Hmm... I'm not sure I'd call him a hard worker, though. I don't know what he

does to make money, and he is the most well-off of the lodgers here,” Natalia murmured, arms folded.

“Really?”

“Yes. Every morning he reads the Nikkei, so perhaps he plays the stocks,” she mused. “And he never loses in our poker or mahjong games.”

“Not exactly making his money through hard work, then...” Kaname muttered, shoulders slumping. *It’d be more impressive if he was delivering newspapers or something.* But just as she thought that...

“Whoooah! I feel good! Da-na-na-na-na-na-na! I knew that I would, now! Da-na-na-na-na-na-na-na!” Okada Hayato, who was now on his sixth beer, began dancing and shouting along to the song on the tape player. The lodgers all leaped to their feet and clapped in time.

“Ahh, Oka-pii’s all worked up. Keep it together, man. Ha ha ha...” Kaname laughed before turning her eyes to Sasaki Hiromi, who was seated across from her.

Hiromi seemed to be engaged in a fervent conversation with the Kansai-accented Caucasian, and just as Kaname looked over, he suddenly stood up and shouted. “You just don’t get it!”

“Don’t get what now?” the Kansai speaker asked.

“The VF-0 and the SV-51 are superior to the fighter jets that came before!” Hiromi insisted. “They already have electromagnetic stealth features like ECS, which means contemporary radar can’t even track them!”

“But then why does the VF-17 look like that?” the Kansai speaker demanded to know. “It doesn’t make sense!”

“The polite thing to do is to interpret it as a stealth shape designed to foil electromagnetic scanning methods that came about in the years *after* the VF-0! In other words, the second generation of the AVF’s active stealth system!” Hiromi told him hotly. “The VF-1’s radar also probably works on different systems than any before it—an ultrawideband radar like an ECCS instead of a phased array. Darn it! Those well-meaning geeks of old were doing the best they could at the time, but you young otaku these days can’t stop nitpicking

their work! Do you think that makes you feel like a big man? You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“D-Did you just insult me?! How dare you!”

“Yeah, I did! Go ahead and get mad!”

They moved on from the baffling war of words into a proper grapple, but Kaname and the others didn’t interfere. It was clearly a deep-cut conversation that only the two of them understood.

“Don’t get too rough, you two,” Kaname said with a cackle as she finished her beer. She was feeling great. The fact that she had to get up early tomorrow, the fact that they were waiting for someone here... all of it had slipped her mind.

Yeah. This is nice, she thought. I feel all melty and warm all over. Actually, it’s getting pretty hot in here... I should take off my jacket. And my ribbon tie’s kinda stuffy, too, so off it goes. And I’ll undo a few blouse buttons... Boy, you can see all of my cleavage. Whatever, though. My toes are on fire, so I’ll take off my socks. And my skirt is digging into my stomach— ah, better not do that one. Ha ha ha...

Sprawling slavishly over the sofa, Kaname popped the tab on her next beer can. Amid the commotion she glanced over at Sousuke, who was still sipping his orange juice. “Still on the juice, huh? Stubborn jerk... Take this!” Kaname poked the back of Sousuke’s head with uncharacteristic familiarity.

“I am technically Muslim, you know,” Sousuke reminded her.

“Ha ha ha. Really?”

“Technically, yes. I was raised in Afghanistan,” he pointed out. “All of the guerrillas were Muslim.”

“First I’ve heard of it. Ha ha ha...” It was the kind of thing she’d normally have a strong reaction to, but today, Kaname just laughed it off.

Sousuke continued on. “We weren’t particularly strict adherents, but we did follow the basic tenets.”

“Hmm... So alcohol’s totally out?” she asked.

“Well... Technically, not all alcohol is forbidden.”

“Have a drink, then.”

“No. Drinking is foolish. The alcohol, but also... women. Especially... you know. That.” He gestured vaguely at Kaname’s bare legs. “There were many things... about Japanese schools that surprised me. One of them... the women’s dress. You all wear those short skirts...”

“Huh?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. Ah... How do I say it?” he mused. “No woman in Afghanistan dressed that way, so you look almost naked to me. For the sake of my mission, I put it out of my mind, and I’ve grown accustomed to it by now, but... By the way, it was the same with the beach. That swimsuit... It’s not that I was surprised so much as... it seemed like a poor choice. There were so many men around you who weren’t your husband... Not to mention the lack of protection from the sun... Ah, yes... so much skin exposure is really... not good,” Sousuke went on, although his thoughts seemed rather jumbled.

It was unprecedented for Sousuke to talk like this in any situation. The Sousuke she knew was always poker-faced and calm, no matter how he was really feeling! But the inner workings of Kaname’s own brain had also slowed down severely, so all she could think of was, *What a weirdo.*

“Hmm... I don’t think I really get it,” she admitted, “but...”

“Obviously, I will not berate you for it,” Sousuke said. “But I wish you’d have a bit more self-awareness. It sometimes... gets to me. You, especially, are...”

“I’m what?”

“Oh, you’re... ah, I forget.”

“Aw, c’mon! I wanna know!” Kaname cajoled him, clapping Sousuke on the back.

“Sorry. I think... there’s alcohol in this juice,” he told her. “Anyway... you are... a good person.”

“Of coursh I am,” said Kaname. “Weirdo... Ha ha ha...”

“Chidori, get offa me...”

“Ahaha... Sho bashful. Like Bonta-kun. Cuuute!” When Kaname gave Sousuke

a tight hug and clapped him on the back again, he turned bright red and began to flail around.

Meanwhile...

“Wa ha ha ha!”

Hayato and the others were laughing uproariously. Hiromi and the man with the Kansai accent seemed to have achieved a ceasefire, because now they were shaking hands firmly and congratulating each other on a debate well fought. And Mikiyama Ren, who’d woken up at some point, was sipping some Japanese sake, encouraged by O’Neil. Sousuke, the cocktail seeming to disagree with him, had turned melancholic. Natalia revealed that she worked as a topless dancer and was greeted by a round of applause for some reason.

“Woow! Huh? You mean that thing where you grab a pole that goes into the ceiling and the floor and move your hips around, like in American cop movies?!” asked Kaname, clearly impressed.

“Yep! That’s the standard way to do it,” Natalia confirmed. “You want to try, Kaname-chan? You could quit school.”

“Hah! Great idea!” Miming grasping an invisible pole, Natalia and Kaname began grinding their hips in the manner of an exotic dance.

Sousuke grabbed her arm, looking tormented. “No... I won’t allow it. Chidori...”

“Aw, I’m just kidding around! Why’d you take it so seriously?” Kaname laughed, wapping him cheerfully on the back of the head. Her vision and mind were growing hazy, and she felt strangely floaty. She found herself asking the group, “Was I awesome?”

“Awful!” they shot back.

“Agh, this is fun!” she crowed. “What time is it?”

“I dunno, but they had baseball news on the TV earlier...”

Which meant it was after eleven o’clock at night. But who cared? Hayashimizu-senpai still wasn’t back.

“Great, great!”

“Number one, Chidori Kaname, getting undressed!”

“Ohhh?” the group called.

“Don’t do it... Chidori...” Sousuke moaned.

“Just kidding!” she teased them. “Clothes stay on!”

“Boo! Boo!” came the jeers.

Sousuke slumped in disappointment.

Beside him, Ren suddenly cried, “Cohabitation? You can’t!”

“That conversation is over!” Kaname barked.

“Really? I’m so sorry...” Ren slumped over.

Then Hiromi shouted out, “I’m telling you, the stealth function of the VF-0—”

“That’s over too!”

“But the stealth—”

“Shut up! No one cares!” *Blamblam! Blamblamblam!* Kaname fired a pistol at Hiromi’s feet. Sparks and bits of concrete flew as smoke rose from the black muzzle.

“Gwah! Chidori-senpai, stop!”

“Hmm?” Kaname tilted her head at the sight of Sousuke’s pistol, which seemed to have appeared in her hand out of nowhere.

Sousuke grabbed her shakily by the shoulder. “Chidori... give the gun back,” he told her urgently.

“No way. Revenge time. Ha ha ha ha ha...” *Blamblam! Blamblamblamblamblamblam!* Growing even more encouraged, she began firing wildly at the ceiling. A ricochet severed a chain overhead and brought the chandelier plummeting to earth.

Crash!

It crushed the table they were sitting around, casting glass shards, sprays of beer, and scattered kaki-peanuts all over the floor.

“Everyone okaaaay?” Kaname called.

“We’re okaaaay!” came the lively reply.

“Right. Okay, let’s try this next!” Kaname tossed aside the spent gun and hefted up a grenade she’d found somewhere.

“Chidori... that’s not funny. It’s dangerous Give it ba—” Pale and breathless, Sousuke tried to warn her.

But Kaname just leaned in to him, close enough for their noses to touch. Her manner turned a little teasing. “Nope,” she said. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were dewy. Her flushed face took up the entirety of his vision. “You’re always, always makin’ me shuffer like this. Sheriously, ev’ry dang day. Don’tcha know how much ya make me worry? You can’t just always make trouble for us.”

“I’m... sorry about that. I’m sorry, so please, give it back.”

“I’ll forgive you fer ’pparently starin’ at my legs all this time... Guess I feel a little happy ’bout that, acshully... Ha ha. Sheesh...”

“Chidori...” he tried again.

“But nope. I’m gonna make you feel how I do for onshe. Got it?”

Sousuke leaned forward. “But—”

Bip. Kaname suddenly kissed the tip of his nose, and Sousuke froze at the sensation. His brain locked up and he was rendered totally immobile.



“Hee hee...” Kaname pulled away innocently, then shouted to the group, “Okay, here we go! Blow it up! Blow it up!”

“I don’t get it, but go! Go!” The group waved their hands.

“Okay, I took out the pin! I’m gonna throw it now! Everyone, get down!”

The group did as they were told. The grenade rolled along the floor...

Ka-boom!

A roar rang out as the grenade detonated. The shock wave and shrapnel shook the house as the glass in the windows shattered, and ceiling plaster showered down.

“Tamayaaa!” the group shouted, clapping, as if it were a fireworks show.

“Ch-Chidori...”

“There’s a lot more where that came from! Get down, get down, get down!” Kaname pulled out even more grenades and began tossing them all over the hall.



Around six o’clock the next morning, on the road leading west from Nishi-Ogikubo...

“Turn right here, right?!”

“Yes! Turn right!”

The motorcycle’s driver, Kusakabe Kyoya, shouted his question, and Hayashimizu Atsunobu strained to respond from the sidecar. The helmets they were wearing, combined with the wind rushing past, made it difficult to hear.

“And then what?! Straight?!”

“Right across from the next intersection! Let me off there!”

The motorcycle stopped in front of an old Western-style mansion at the center of the residential area. The engine noise died down and the area around them fell into silence. Dawn was just breaking.

“Thank you for letting me stay with you, and for the ride home,” Hayashimizu

said as he removed his helmet and disembarked from the sidecar.

Kusakabe turned away sulkily. "Don't thank me; it's weird. So, you live here now, Atsunobu?"

"Yes."

Kusakabe hummed as he looked over the guest house that Hayashimizu now called home. "What the heck? It's dirty, but it's a damn mansion. You said staying there would make your cold worse, so I assumed it was some slumlord apartment..."

"I meant what I said, but the real reason is that my co-residents hold a loud drinking party every evening. They'll even bring it into my room if I don't stop them. It requires a great deal of stamina to resist them."

"Hmm..."

"My condition has greatly improved, so I should be able to attend today's school event," Hayashimizu concluded. "Although I'll unfortunately have to continue resisting their invitations to drink..."

"Sheesh," said Kyoya. "Sounds like a tough life."

"Well, it's good experience as well. Do you want to stop in?" Hayashimizu offered.

Kyoya hesitated for a minute, then shrugged and said, "Sure. And while we're at it, you can return that CD you borrowed from me ages ago."

"CD?"

"The one I borrowed from Tomoko."

"You'd borrowed it from her?" Hayashimizu asked in surprise as the two left the motorcycle at the gate and headed for the mansion. They passed through the gate, walked up to the porch, and...

The double-doors that usually marked the front door were gone, now lying in pieces all over the lawn. The soot-stained fragments suggested there'd been an explosion inside.

"What happened here?" Kyoya asked.

“I don’t know,” said Hayashimizu.

The two of them frowned as they passed through the entrance and then fell silent as they took in the entry hall’s sorry state: the table was crushed; the chandelier was in pieces; the walls had caved in; the ceiling and floor were riddled with bullet holes. The smell of gunpowder and booze pervaded the room, and the bodies—

Human bodies littered the hall and stairway. From time to time, one let out a low moan that echoed emptily through the hall.

“It hurts... It hurts...”

“N-Need water...”

In addition to the usual attendees of the house’s wild parties, Kaname and other members of the student council were collapsed there as well.

“Goodness... what happened here?” Hayashimizu whispered.

“World War III?” Kyoya responded, as they stood there staring from the door.

In the end, only Hayashimizu Atsunobu attended that day’s cultural outing. The others gave the excuse that they’d caught colds, but the truth was that they all had hangovers.

It turned out, though, that the rumors had been greatly exaggerated, and the director they had to interview wasn’t nearly as violent as they’d feared.

Incidentally, when Kaname finally woke up around noon, she did so with no memory of the night before. She was furious when she saw the condition of the guest house and started smacking Sousuke around, insisting he’d “done it again.”

Sousuke’s own memories were hazy, and while he felt something wasn’t quite right with her accusations, he decided not to argue. He felt like the scolding was undeserved, but he was used to it by now.

Still, the destruction of the mansion aside, there was something he couldn’t get out of his head...

What was that sweet sensation lingering on the tip of his nose?

〈The Turnabout Drunkards — The End〉

Undercover of Obligated Empathy

It was lunch break at school one day, when Chidori Kaname and Tokiwa Kyoko decided to take advantage of the nice weather and have lunch on the roof. They came out, engaged in a fiery debate about the K1 match they'd watched on TV the night before.

There, they found their classmate, Kazama Shinji, surrounded by a small group of boys.

Kyoko gasped as she saw them—they all had a “bad boy” look to them, with shaved heads or pompadours, and wore uniforms that didn't meet regulation standards. Some wore flashy accessories, while others had tattoos on their faces.

It was Jindai High's small delinquent contingent.

“Um... just don't break it, please. It's very expensive. I worked so hard to earn the money for it...” Shinji begged the boys in an almost impressively timid voice. They appeared to have stolen his beloved camera and were fiddling around with it, showing no regard for its well-being.

“Shaddap. Quit worryin' so much.”

“Don't be a damn miser.”

“If we break it, we'll buy ya a QuickSnap.”

The delinquents were carelessly snapping pictures of the courtyard while Shinji watched them anxiously.

“Wh-What do we do, Kana-chan?” Kyoko asked.

“Leave them to it, I guess? It's his own fault for not putting his foot down,” Kaname opined.

“I guess, but still... I'm a little worried.”

Kaname thought for a moment, then concluded, “Well, I guess it would be hard to enjoy lunch under these conditions.” She sighed and walked up to the

boys accosting Shinji. "Hey, you."

"Huh? What now?" The student who'd been rubbing the camera's lens with his grubby fingers gave her a strained smile. His hair was done in the full pompadour style, rare to see these days. His height, weight, and looks were all average.

Kaname hadn't talked to him much, but she remembered his name. She was pretty sure he was a second-year student called Maeda Eiji. "You're bothering the camera's owner. Give it back."

But Maeda just cackled and hung a comradely arm around Shinji. "Botherin' him? No way! We ain't botherin' him. Right, Kazama-kun?"

"Er... eh? Um, well... um..."

"We ain't, right? Right?!"

"Um... right."

Maeda grinned back at Kaname. "You heard the man. Now get lost. Vice president, viceroyalty, whatever you are... just stay outta people's business."

"Th-That's an unusual word for a delinquent like you to know..." said Kazama.

"Or hey, you want your picture taken? Izzat it?" Maeda squatted down and held the camera up to his eye. "I'm down for it. Just strip. Piece by piece, and with feelin' if you please."

The delinquents around him cackled. Kaname was dumbstruck for a moment, then she smiled and said, "All right. Just make sure you get my good side."

This seemed to catch Maeda off guard.

"C'mon," she cooed. "Look alive, big boy. You won't get another chance like this." She undid one button on her uniform seductively.

"Erk..." Maeda snapped himself out of his daze, readied the camera and leaned forward.

Kaname abruptly planted a knee into the camera. Maeda let out a stifled grunt as it hit him in the nose.

"Bwa ha ha. You fell for it!" Kaname laughed.

“Whaddya think you’re doin’?! ”

“It’s what they do in the commercials,” she told him. “Sexual harassment must be repaid in blood. This is a public service announcement.”

“I ain’t never seen a commercial that aggressive!” Maeda objected, right before lunging at Kaname.

She slipped out of his grip, showing some impressive footwork. She then readied her fists in a K1 style and declared, “Oh, it’s a fight you want? Watch me, Kyoko. I’ll show you a replay of last night’s third round!”

“You can’t beat them, Kana-chan!” cried Kyoko.

And indeed, she couldn’t—the other men immediately flew at her from either side, catching her easily.

“Geh... weird. I think I was possessed by the spirit of Bob Sapp for a minute there...” Kaname had to admit.

“I guess it’s pretty common... People who watch a fight on TV and are suddenly convinced they’re super tough,” Kyoko said, eyes filling with tears as the delinquents grabbed her too.

“Now ya done it, girlie. We’re gonna give it to ya now,” Maeda said.

The other punks cackled with eager expressions.

“Yeah! Get ’er, Maeda!”

“I’m down! Do it, do it!”

Spurred on by the onlookers, an even more lascivious leer appeared on Maeda’s face... yet at the same time, a trail of greasy sweat seemed to trickle down his forehead. His expression showed the slightest hint of hesitation—of uncertainty. As if to hide whatever it was, though, Maeda just grinned bigger. “A’ight. We got the camera and all, so let’s take ourselves a... a panty shot. Sounds good, huh?”

“N-No way, dammit!” Kaname protested. “Besides, what kind of low-ambition punks are you?!”

“Okay, here it comes. J-Just sit back while I make you a page in the album of

my teenage years!”

“Eeeek!” Kaname wailed.

Maeda readied the camera in both hands and rushed up to Kaname, close to the ground. Then...

Bwoom! A flash of light and a roar of sound exploded between Maeda and Kaname. The whole group ended up bowled over, forced onto the concrete.

The explosion had come from a flash grenade.

“Fighting is prohibited in this area.” A male student appeared from the rising smoke, his voice amplified by a megaphone. He wore a sullen expression and tight frown—it was Sagara Sousuke. “I am head of school security and aide to the student council president. As the enforcer of safety and morality on school grounds, I cannot stand idly by while this outrageous behavior continues. Especially when the staff is currently holding a meeting to consider limitations on roof access. Stop this reckless behavior and—”

“You’re the reckless one!” *Whap!* Kaname, being the first to regain consciousness, leaped high into the air, pulled out her fan from somewhere or other, and slammed it down on him.

Sousuke cringed, shaking his head. “I missed where it came from again...”

“Shut up!” she shouted with her full diaphragm. “At least shout ‘hold it’ or ‘stop’ next time first! You even got the victim mixed up in it! Do you even understand the concept of good faith?!”

“Victim?” Sousuke protested. “You appear to have been the one who struck first...”

“If you were hiding long enough to see that, why didn’t you come out sooner?!” While Kaname was kicking Sousuke around, the hooligans groggily picked themselves up.

“Guhhh...”

“Hmph. Finally awake? Not very tough for such big guys, are you?” Kaname sneered.

“The hell’d you say?!” Maeda and the others said in unison, trying to sound as

menacing as they could.

It was then that a new voice interjected, “Knock it off.”

The whole group looked back. A girl stood at the entrance to the roof. She was tall—around 180 centimeters—with wavy black hair and a pretty face that nonetheless wore a perpetually bored expression. She had an almost foreign air to her. She was wearing the school’s girl’s uniform, modified slightly with black leggings under the skirt and no ribbon tie.

“A-Akutsu-san...” One of the delinquents spoke her name.

Kaname knew this girl as well. Her name was Akutsu Mari, and she was the leader of the local delinquents. She had picked a fight with Sousuke shortly after he’d first transferred to the school.

“Mari-chan?” Kaname said.

“Hmph,” the delinquent girl scoffed, “don’t act so familiar.”

“Oh, really? Akutsu-san, then. You really go here?”

“I do. Got a problem?”

“But I’ve never seen you at school before,” Kaname pointed out.

Mari shrugged. “I’ve been traveling. Busy with work, too. I’m repeating a year anyway, so I can finish my last credits easy.”

“Really? Although...” She stared in disbelief at Mari in her uniform, letting out a thoughtful hum. “You look pretty cute in the Jindai High uniform.”

Kaname’s idle words sent a shiver through the delinquents.

“D-Did she just...”

“...say the reason Akutsu-san doesn’t like to come to school like it was nothin’?”

“You know that’s the reason she got held back a year, right?!”

Meanwhile, Akutsu Mari’s reaction was nothing more than a slight trembling of her fists before she took in a slow breath and calmed down. “That’s fine. Anyway, Maeda...” She fixed her eyes on Maeda Eiji, who was holding the camera. “Knock the stupid punk act off. It’s one thing for that war-obsessed fool

to beat you, but you also got outwitted by a girl. You gotta have some backbone. Get a grip.”

“B-But... Ow!” Maeda cringed as she slapped him on the back of the head.

“I hate sexual exploitation crap anyway. Here I am, coming back after so long to check in on things, and this is what I see? Why don’t you get your priorities straight, eh?”

“S-Sorry...”

“Darn it...” She snatched the camera from Maeda’s hands and tossed it to Shinji.

“Th-Thanks...”

In response, Mari just sniffed, cast a glance at Sousuke, and then left the roof. Maeda and the others followed after her swiftly.

Kaname just stared at the door they’d left from. “Boy, she is something else... She’s got those delinquents wrapped around her finger. They must be pretty scared of her...”

“At one time, they were. But she’s been away from this school for a long time. We’ll see if she can maintain her previous status,” Sousuke said with the tone of a baseball color commentator.

“You knew she was a student here?” Kaname asked, surprised.

“Of course. I acquired information about Akutsu Mari from multiple sources. In addition to buying her brother Yoshiki a light-up super-electromagnetic top, I also—” Sousuke suddenly stopped. After looking at Shinji and Kyoko, who were just standing there, listening, he said, “The rest is classified,” in a somewhat forced manner.

“What the heck? Why’d you make it so tantalizing?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“How am I not supposed to worry about it?! Darn it...” Despite her griping, though, Kaname didn’t press Sousuke any further.

Kaname would end up learning Sousuke's "classified" secret a few days later, anyway, when she and Sousuke were called in by the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, following class. He handed them two complimentary passes to the local karaoke parlor and said, "Urgent business. I want you to go to this karaoke parlor immediately."

"Why?" asked Kaname.

"A valuable student council collaborator is at risk," Hayashimizu told her shortly. "He's currently waiting in Room 8. Seek him out, ask him what's going on, and find a way to ensure his safety."

"At risk? Who's after him?" she asked, intrigued by the term 'collaborator.'

"I'm not entirely sure. He was vague on the phone, but seemed agitated."

"Why don't you go yourself, Senpai? It's not exactly a long walk."

"I would be glad to, but..." Hayashimizu folded his arms and stared at the mountain of documents on his work desk. "Would you prefer to deal with the documents to be sent to Tajiren member schools in my place?"

"We'll go," Kaname declared immediately.

"Good. It would be problematic if I were to be seen meeting with him anyway. We officially have nothing to do with one another."

"Ahh..." Kaname sighed.

Hayashimizu stared at Sousuke. "Sagara-kun, it's the one you know. Take care of him."

"Right. Leave it to me, Mr. President," said Sousuke, snapping to attention.

The two of them headed quickly to Baru-Baru, the karaoke parlor in the local station area.

"Why a karaoke place?" Kaname wondered.

"To avoid prying eyes. It would make trouble for him if he was seen making contact with those connected to the student council."

"Sousuke. The conversation you had before made it sound like you know this

guy. Who is it?”

“You’ll see soon enough. You’re familiar with him as well.”

“Eh?”

They took the elevator to the fourth floor and headed to Room 8 in the karaoke parlor. They opened the soundproof glass door, went inside, and...

Sitting there alone was Maeda Eiji—the delinquent with whom Kaname had fought the other day.

“T-Took you long enough,” Maeda said, fidgeting.

“Sorry for the wait, Maeda, but you’re safe now,” Sousuke told him. “You believe you’ve been exposed, then?”

“Yeah. They’re gonna rub me out for sure. You gotta help me!”

Kaname frowned as she watched the two talk like old friends. “This is the ‘collaborator’?”

“Affirmative. More precisely, he’s an undercover agent the president sent to infiltrate the school’s delinquent faction. In order to catch truly despicable acts—large-scale violence and bullying, exploitation of women—before they happen...” While Sousuke explained eloquently beside her, Kaname fell over, cradling her head.

“You people... you people...”

“Is there some kind of issue?”

“You bet there is! You’re not some American vice squad detectives! What kind of student council sends spies into delinquent groups?!” she demanded to know.

“Your reaction is surprising. When you were taken hostage in that abandoned factory, the information Maeda leaked to me was a great help in saving you,” Sousuke pointed out. “I was extremely impressed by the president’s foresight in that matter.”

“Yeah. You oughta be grateful,” Maeda said haughtily. “I even came up with the panty pic idea earlier to keep ’em from doing worse to ya. Have a little

sympathy, okay?”

“Ugh... fine. But why would you even take a job like that?”

“Hayashimizu-san was my senpai in middle school. He took care of me, and I owe him a ton. That’s why I was willing to play the part,” Maeda explained.

“Uh-huh...”

“I was originally a prep school kid, about as far from the delinquent world as you could get. But I threw myself into the role and got a full high-school makeover. Now I’ve got the speech pattern and attitude down pat. Get it?” He leaned back arrogantly and stuck a chocolate cigarette in his mouth.

“I’m not really impressed by some kid playing dress-up...” Kaname grumbled.

“Keh. Shaddap,” Maeda snapped back.

“So, Maeda. You said you were in danger. Could you please explain?” Sousuke prompted him.

“Y-Yeah, I am! I’m in big trouble! You gotta help me!” Maeda said, begging and clinging to him, as if he’d only just remembered the threat he was facing.

“Calm down. Tell me everything.”

“I th-think my cover’s blown. They know who I really am.”

“What? But how is that possible?”

“Well, I messed up. I got careless and let Akutsu-san get a glimpse of what was in my bag,” Maeda confessed.

“How could that be an issue? We’ve been very cautious in our operations. You shouldn’t have anything that would identify you as an agent—a spy camera or a listening device or anything like that.”

“It was... It was...” Maeda clung to him harder.

“Were you carrying something you shouldn’t have been?” Sousuke pressed.

“Y-Yeah. Something that’d prove I wasn’t a delinquent on sight. Akutsu-san’s smart. She’ll know.”

“What was it, then?”

“The latest issue of *Maburaho*.”

Sousuke went silent for a while, then quietly cursed. “How could you do something so foolish?” he demanded. “What kind of delinquent would walk around with that?!”

“The volume just came out!”

“You should have endured! Your life is on the line here!” Sousuke continued berating him while Maeda desperately argued back.

Meanwhile, Kaname just slumped over. “Sounds like it’s a bad situation, huh?”

Sousuke looked down, shoulders heaving with breath. “We’ll need to come up with a countermeasure. It’s clear what people like Akutsu’s gang do to traitors.”

“Hey, hang on. No need to be so hasty. She just caught a glimpse, right? That doesn’t necessarily peg him as a spy.”

“Chidori. Don’t be naive,” Sousuke said, his eyes glinting. “Once, our squadron took out a heroin kingpin who’d executed a man simply because he didn’t think he behaved like a real punk who grew up in the country. He was completely paranoid about the possibility of undercover agents.”

“Uh-huh...”

“Maeda’s situation is surely the same,” Sousuke insisted. “Akutsu will likely first subject him to torture. She’ll tear off his fingernails, rub salt into his wounds, pull out his teeth without anesthetic and...”

Sousuke went on to describe various torture methods Maeda could be subjected to in great detail. Maeda himself just sat there, teeth chattering. His face became paler and paler as he listened, until he looked like he was about to pass out.

“...and she’ll continue in that fashion until you give the answer she wants,” Sousuke concluded. “The underworld doesn’t believe in ‘innocent until proven guilty.’ Maeda’s life is currently hanging by a thread.”

“N-N-No... please...”

“Sheesh...” Kaname breathed, casually enough. Meanwhile, Sousuke was

stone-faced, and Maeda was on the verge of tears. An uncomfortable silence hung over the karaoke room.

At last, Sousuke spoke again. “I don’t think we have a choice. We need to evacuate you at once.”

“Evacuate me... how?” the confused Maeda asked.

“A school transfer. We need to get you far enough away to escape Akutsu’s information network. I’ll introduce you to a go-between of mine, and you can choose your next location. Pakistan, Cambodia, Colombia—anywhere in that vein.”

“Those all sound really dangerous!”

“You’ll be fine. You just have to keep an eye out for land mines and terrorist bombings. They’re beautiful places, with lovely night skies. And very low costs of living.”

“Guh... how could this have happened?” Maeda groaned. But as he listened to Sousuke’s not-very-reassuring reassurances, a chirpy tune started to play from his pocket. It was the ringtone for his cell phone. “It’s Akutsu-san,” he breathed as he stared at the LCD screen.

“Maeda. Where are you now?” came Akutsu Mari’s voice.

“Er... uh... the shoppin’ district.”

“Yeah? You vanished at lunch, so I thought you’d gone home. Where are you in the shopping district?”

“Um... a karaoke parlor called Baru-Baru.”

“Anyone with you?”

“No! Uh, I mean, nah... Figured I’d expand my repertory, so I’m practicin’ here on my own...”

“Oh?” Akutsu Mari hummed. Her voice through the phone sounded about the same as ever. No... perhaps there was something off about it. A sense that she was hiding something. “Get out, now. We’ll come meet you.”

“What?!”

“We’re in the neighborhood.”

“Um... But I... I mean, c’mon, I just got here. Uh...”

“I said, get out. Do it.” Her voice had the tone of a threat to it. “I *said* I was looking for you. Don’t try to slip away or you’re dead.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. See you soon.” He hung up.

“What did she say?” Kaname asked.

“It’s bad. She told me to head out and meet her... What do I do? Sh-She’s gonna kill me!” Maeda grabbed Sousuke, desperately clinging to him again.

Sousuke looked at his watch. “Don’t panic,” he advised. “It seems like a difficult situation at a glance, but it could also be an opportunity.”

“Eh?” Maeda said.

“Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll use a hidden microphone to record Akutsu’s gang about to torture you. I’ll stop them before things get too bad, and then we can expose her evil deeds at a staff meeting,” Sousuke decided. “With the president’s power and pressure from the student council, we can work to have them all expelled.”

“I... I see...”

“Even if we choose not to expel them, we can use the threat of expulsion as leverage. Then they’ll have to leave you alone.”

“B-But... that also seems a little extreme...” Maeda said, hesitantly, eyes turned down. “Akutsu-san and her gang are normally good guys. They can be a little rowdy, but... y’know...”

Sousuke looked fed up with Maeda’s hesitation, but Kaname peered at him with interest.

“What is it, Chidori?” Sousuke asked.

“Oh? Nothing... Just nothing.”

“Anyway, let’s execute the plan. Take this.” Sousuke handed him a MiniDisc Walkman with recording function, as well as a mini-transmitter. “Have the MD recording when you meet her. Then, when danger seems imminent, press the

red button on the transmitter. I'll burst in and save you. Understood?"

"But..."

"It's the only way. You don't want to lose your school life, do you?"

"Mm... F-Fine," Maeda responded listlessly.

Maeda Eiji walked out the front entrance alone, with Sousuke and Kaname watching secretly from behind. Akutsu Mari, who was waiting for him outside, wrapped her arm around his neck and basically pulled him along. The goons around Mari smiled suggestively as they walked along, clustered around her. They did seem to be plotting something indeed.

Once Mari and her group were gone, Kaname muttered, "You sure this is the way to go?"

"Not an issue. I'll be with him. Even if they do begin to torture Maeda, they probably won't get more than a tooth or a finger."

Chidori said nothing.

"Still, Chidori, remain cautious. The worst thing we could do is tip them off to our presence," Sousuke said seriously, as he ducked behind an electric pole.

Kaname stared at him for a moment, sighed, then said, "Maybe I shouldn't be a part of this."

"What?"

"I mean, I'm not exactly the fighting type," she pointed out. "And... getting them all expelled? It's all going a little far for me. I'll let you handle the rough stuff. Seriously. I'm not being sarcastic."

Sousuke just looked at her in confusion.

"So, see you. Don't do anything hasty. I'm going back to school." Kaname strode away, leaving Sousuke behind.

Mari and her goons formed a wall around Maeda as they dragged him to the north side of the shopping district, giving him no choice in the matter. He'd

been pretending to be a delinquent at their school for a while now, and in all that time, they'd never treated him like this.

"Um..."

"Just shut up and come along," Mari said bluntly. The goons around them just offered thin smiles.

"What's going on here? C'mon, Big Sis... Did I do somethin' wrong? This all seems a little... y'know..."

Mari then stopped in place and peered into his eyes, a cryptic smile on her face. "Are you serious?"

"Eh?"

"Heh... hee hee hee." The goons' shoulders shook with laughter. They were wicked laughs that seemed to make Maeda's upcoming fate very clear.

"You're a damn dummy."

"Even I'm sick of you."

"Hey, Maeda-kun. You're one big idiot! Heh heh..."

They laughed menacingly at him, then started walking again. They were heading for a basement pub on the outskirts of the shopping district. It was clear they weren't going to give him a chance to run away.

Before they even walked down the stairs, Maeda felt sure. *They're gonna kill me!* He'd once seen Mari beat a snooty karate club member half to death in this underground pub. She wasn't just tall; she'd studied a comprehensive martial art called Daidomyaku Style and was a terrifyingly skilled fighter. It was how she'd been able to keep the neighborhood delinquents under her thumb.

Can it be? Mari, who knows all the weak spots in a human body, is gonna torture me down there?! He wouldn't hesitate any longer. He pressed his sweaty thumb against the red button on the transmitter in his pocket. Then, shoved along by Mari and the others, Maeda entered the basement pub.

"Heh heh heh..." laughed one of the delinquents "No annoying cops'll come sniffing around here, no matter how much noise we make. It's all rented out." He was right; the dark store interior didn't have any ordinary customers.

Everyone there was lowlifes like them—and they were all lowlifes that Maeda recognized.

Oh, hell... Maeda knew that the owner of this place was a former delinquent from their school, and he could clear it of outsiders on request. Maeda also knew that no one would hear any cries for help from here. *It's all over*, he thought, gritting his teeth to prepare for what was to come. Pushed to the brink of panic, he was about to let out a scream...

When just then, someone shouted. “Woo! Maeda Eiji-kun! Happy birthday!”

Applause rang out. Firecrackers popped. Confetti fluttered around them.

“Er...?”

The lights popped on, letting Maeda see the large birthday cake and luxuriant feast spread out over the shop's tables. The delinquents, who'd been staring at him suspiciously before, now broke out into bright smiles.

“Ha ha ha! Got you, eh?”

“Guess he forgot his own damn birthday!”

“Look at him! We totally got him! Ha ha ha!”

His birthday—he really had completely forgotten about it. Maeda, who simply stood there, stunned, watched as someone approached with a large present in their hands.

“Okay! If there's one thing our Maeda wants, it's gotta be this, right? Go on, open it!”

Stunned, Maeda tore off the wrapping paper. Inside was a beautiful leather jacket with an embroidered dragon on the back. It was something he'd seen in a magazine before, and at the time, he'd said it was the coolest thing he'd ever seen. They must have remembered that... and actually gotten it for him!

“Be grateful, Maeda. We all chipped in for it. Though Big Sis Akutsu was the one who put in the most.”

“Idiot! I told you not to say that! Cut it out already, it's pathetic,” Mari shouted, her face red.

“Ha ha, someone’s bashful. Everyone knows you’re the one who cares the most about Maeda.”

“Cut it out. Dammit...” Mari scratched bashfully under her nose.

“Hey, Big Sis...” Maeda started.

Mari patted him hard on the back. “Still, I can’t say it’s not true. Enjoy your day!”

“Yeah!” The pub-goers all raised their glasses.

“Geh...” Maeda couldn’t take it anymore. Tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. The world turned blurry around him, and his chest grew hot.

“Maeda?”

“I... I’m sorry, Sis. I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” His voice cracked, and he wiped the tears from his eyes.



The delinquents all chimed in.

“Come on, man. What’s with you, Maeda?”

“What’s got you all sentimental?”

“It’s not like you. Go on, have a drink.”

They were just... such a nice bunch of guys. What was he thinking, narcing on them all this time? *I’ve had enough. I’m gonna go full delinquent. I feel bad for Hayashimizu-senpai, but I’m gonna drop the student council job and live my life for the gang from now on!*

It was just after he made that decision that he suddenly remembered... He’d put out the call to Sagara Sousuke to save him earlier. *Even though I don’t need saving anymore. If he comes here now...!*

“Oh, crap...” he whispered.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry. I just realized I left something in the karaoke place—”

“Just pick it up later.”

“But... it’s important to me! Oh, I know! It’s a memento from my old man. An old catcher’s mitt he left me—”

“Your old man works at city hall. Didn’t he play in that grass lot ball game last week?”

“Oh, er, I meant a memento from my mother. A pendant she left me—”

“Your mother works part-time at the Maruzen Mart. I saw her running the register the other day.”

“Sorry, I meant a memento from my big brother. He was an archaeologist who excavated a Moai statue from the pyramids in Egypt—”

“You don’t have a big brother.”

“Right. A memento from my little sister. We aren’t related by blood, but she puts everything she has into making me a lunch every morning. And I left the lunch—”

“How’s that a memento?”

“Ugh...” Fully out of excuses, Maeda was left trembling, when...

Ba-bwoom!

The door to the pub exploded open. Wood splinters and glass shards came flying in. Among the showering shards stood a man holding a shotgun. It was, of course, Sagara Sousuke.

“Nobody move!” he barked.

“What the hell do you want?!” As a delinquent tried to come at him, Sousuke mercilessly fired his rubber rounds. The man went flying backwards, ending up splayed on the floor below.

“I told you not to move,” he said.

“D-Damn you!” Mari, holding back the angry men, took a step forward. “What do you want, Sagara?”

“It’s simple. I came to make a trade for Maeda Eiji. The student council will take him into custody.” Sousuke’s tone was like ice as he held his shotgun at the ready.

“What?”

“You have my compliments for figuring out that Maeda was a spy, but you won’t be able to seal the deal.”

“A spy?!”

And... he just said it. Maeda, who’d been on tenterhooks for so long, merely slumped over in shame as he felt the gazes of all of the delinquents fall on him.

“Is this guy serious, Maeda?” one of the delinquents asked.

“Well... th-the thing is...”

“It’s not true, right? Because that’d really suck. Tell him he’s wrong, Maeda.”

“H-He’s wro—”

“I’m not wrong,” Sousuke insisted, casually speaking one fatal phrase after another. “Maeda is a spy. His supposed friendships with you were all

friendships of convenience, pursued merely to protect the security of our school. In order to ferret out your secrets, he—”

“Cut it out already!” Kaname appeared out of nowhere like a whirlwind, giving him a hard kick to the back.

Sousuke blinked. “Chidori. What are you doing here?”

Kaname snorted, her arms folded. “I figured out my own way to resolve this. Just put the gun away already.”

“Hmm?”

“Senpai. Over here,” Kaname said as she turned back.

A man in a white high school uniform entered. “Sorry to intrude, all.” It was the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu.

“Hayashimizu. Mind telling us what you’re doing here?” Mari fixed her eyes on Hayashimizu.

Unfazed by her glare, he spoke in a sonorous voice. “It seems the situation has gotten rather out of hand. I came here to deal with things directly.”

“Hmm?”

“Let me ask you one more time. Will you turn Maeda Eiji over to us?”

“Huh? What makes you think we’d do that, eh? Besides, he’s a spy, right?” Mari grabbed Maeda by the nape of the neck. “So I’d like a little explanation here before I do anything.”

“It’s true. He is a spy.” Hayashimizu, too, admitted to it easily.

Maeda hung his head in despair.

But just then, Hayashimizu corrected himself. “No. I suppose he’s not a spy. He betrayed us in the end.”

“What?” asked Mari.

“It all began about a month ago. As student council president, I had the idea of keeping deeper tabs on your organization. To accomplish that, I made up my mind to take in one of your ranks to use as an informant. And the one I chose was...”

“Maeda, huh?”

“Yes. At first, I thought I could simply buy him off, but he rejected my offer with foolish talk of ‘comrades’ and honor.’ So, instead, I called on Sagara Sousuke.” Hayashimizu gave Sousuke a pat on the shoulder, a wicked smile appearing on his face. “I told Maeda Eiji, ‘Think of what a man raised on the battlefield might do to you if you don’t cooperate.’ An underhanded move, to be sure, but it appeared to have worked.” He nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose, the picture of a heartless villain.



“That’s a dirty trick, you know...” Mari observed.

“‘A dirty trick?’” Hayashimizu repeated. “How humorous. But he ended up fleecing us all.”

“What?”

“Maeda Eiji pretended to cooperate with us, but all the while, he was stealing valuable student council secrets. He eavesdropped on my secret conferences with the principal and recorded them on a minidisc. If that minidisc were to fall into your hands, it could put me in a difficult position.” Speaking with the air of a white-collar criminal, he glared balefully at Maeda. “Maeda-kun, this has been a tremendous disappointment. Did you really think you could beat me?”

Maeda said nothing.

“Well, there’s your explanation. I’ll be taking him now. Sagara-kun?”

“Yes, sir.” Sousuke, after hearing Kaname whisper into his ear, nodded. With his shotgun at the ready, he strode up to Maeda.

Mari stepped in between them.

“Get out of my way, Akutsu,” Sousuke warned her.

“Can’t do that. I’m not letting you have him.”

“If you don’t move, I’ll shoot you.”

“Do what you want. That pea-shooter won’t take me down that easily. And even if I do fall, the rest of the guys’ll take my place. Because we’re comrades. Isn’t that right, guys?” She looked out over the group, and the delinquents nodded in agreement.

“That’s right! Get outta here!” one shouted.

“You ain’t takin’ Maeda!” called another.

Hayashimizu remained silent for a while as the jeers rang out around him. Then at last he raised a hand, and said, “Very well.”

“Oh?”

“I dislike pointless conflict. I’ll allow you to keep Maeda Eiji. However, you

must give me the minidisc he is carrying. This is one matter upon which I cannot yield.”

“Heh, fine. Nobody gives a damn about your secret little conversations anyway,” Mari scoffed. “Give it to him, Maeda.”

“Huh?” Maeda just stood there, silently.

“That minidisc or whatever. I know you probably worked hard to get it, but the effort you put in is more than enough for me. Let him have it.”

“B-Big Sis... All right.” Maeda pulled the minidisc player from his pocket, and handed it to Sousuke, who passed it on to Hayashimizu.

Hayashimizu put the minidisc player’s earphone into his ear and listened. “Good. This is it.”

“Now, let *me* give *you* a warning. Never try a dirty trick like that again—if you do, you’ll have to deal with me,” Mari said, hands on her hips.

“Hmm. I suppose... this time, I lost,” Hayashimizu admitted. “I underestimated the bond that you shared.”

“You sure as hell did. Never underestimate us again.”

“I’ll remember that.” Hayashimizu shrugged, then turned to walk away. Sousuke and Kaname followed after him.

“Yahoo!”

“Serves ’em right!”

“Come on, let’s get back to the party!”

As the three of them left the pub, they heard cheers ringing out behind them.

“And that’s the end of that,” Hayashimizu said as they walked through the shopping street at dusk.

“Sorry, Senpai. I forced you into kind of a nasty role,” Kaname said.

The scene they’d just been through, had it been a play, would have had the following credits: “Planning/script: Chidori Kaname; director/star: Hayashimizu Atsunobu.” Sousuke’s role would have been listed as “Enforcer A.”

“Oh, please. I’m the one who started it all. I was just thinking that Maeda-kun was reaching the limit of his abilities, anyway. I was about to recommend that he leave the spy game.”

“Oh, really?” Kaname asked.

“He was something of a loner back in middle school, so I was truly pleased to see him make close friends at last.”

“Oh?”

“But Chidori, I’m impressed that you were able to identify the trust that existed between Maeda and Akutsu and the rest of their gang. That’s the only way you could have thought up that performance, right?” Sousuke said, sounding genuinely astonished.

“That’s the power of human perception, man.”

“Human perception?”

“Yes. Like, look at me right now. Look very carefully,” Kaname said, grinning.

Sousuke narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Kaname as she walked along.

“What do you see, at a glance?”

“A teenage girl. Japanese. Height, 165 centimeters; weight, 50 kilograms. Unarmed. No military training. No combat training. No internal diseases. No previous pregnancies likely. And...” Watching the furrow form on her brow, Sousuke added, “Quite abruptly in a very bad mood.”

“Right answer,” she said, giving Sousuke a whap on the back of the head.

〈Undercover of Obligated Empathy — The End〉

The Midnight Raiders

The police had established the cordon in record time. Their officers darted through the streets, calling to each other through their radios. Their patrol cars wailed along the roads.

Maybe we shouldn't have stolen those jewels after all, the man thought despairingly. Breaking into the mansion, tying up the residents, cracking the safe and stealing the jewelry inside... that had all gone well enough, but now it was all crashing down before his eyes. He and his partner had split up to run away, but he'd been the one the police ended up following.

He was running through the dark, quiet streets of the residential neighborhood, panicked and sweating. He turned corner after corner before arriving at a fence, leaping onto it and clambering his way over. Beyond the fence, he found a school. In the darkness, he could vaguely make out the shape of unoccupied buildings.

Panting and heaving, the man ran along the athletic field, trying to get through the school grounds. But beyond the fence he was making a run for, he could already see the flashing lights of a patrol car. He came to a stop.

"Erk!" He was trapped. Behind him, he could already hear the crunch-crunch of footsteps on fallen leaves and the shouting voices of police officers.

This isn't fair! I'm gonna get arrested before I even get a good look at the jewels I stole! They coulda kept me in the lap of luxury for years, but now— Wait, he realized, *of course!* With no time to waste, he crouched down and began to dig in the ground with his cheap knife. Once he'd dug a hole deep enough, he pulled out a metal canister roughly the size of a soda can.

See you again in a few years. Without even time to bid proper farewell to the jewels within, the man buried the can in the ground, then concealed the upturned earth under fallen leaves. After chucking the knife away too, he began running back in the direction he'd come.

As he cut across the athletic field again, he heard somebody shout, “There he is!” Ignoring the voice, he ran into the school building... where he’d find himself arrested three minutes later.

He would end up insisting to the prosecutor, the police, and the judge that his escaped partner had all the jewels—and miraculously, they would believe him. He would go on to spend his time in the penitentiary acting as a model prisoner, although every minute there would feel like an eternity...

Until at last, the day of his release arrived.



“Ah, now, that was a rough night,” Onuki Zenji whispered as he poked his chopsticks into the pot sitting atop the kotatsu. He was in his mid-50s and had a suntanned face, thinning hair, and unfashionable glasses. He’d been the live-in custodian at Jindai High School for twenty-five years and knew the comings and goings of the school during that period better than anybody.

Onuki took a swig of hot sake and continued. “The police poured into the school. The culprit had already been arrested in the earth science room, but... with all their investigations and such going on, I didn’t catch a wink of sleep.”

“Oh? I had no idea.” Sitting across from him was Chidori Kaname, also poking at the pot. She was currently wearing her Jindai High School uniform with a striped hanten coat overtop.

“Hmm. Sounds like a lot of commotion over one minor hooligan,” Tsubaki Issei said distastefully as he snagged some enoki mushrooms from the earthenware pot with his chopsticks. He was a short, pale young man, with drawn-back hair and a bandanna wrapped around his head. He cast a glance at Sagara Sousuke, who was sitting opposite him. “Personally, I’ve always wondered why the police never swarmed the school to deal with a certain malicious fool currently in attendance.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Sousuke said airily, enjoying his meal.

Onuki, Kaname, Issei, Sousuke—the four of them were presently sitting around a kotatsu in the custodian’s room at night, enjoying kimchi hot pot. The bright red kimchi sauce bubbled away with just the right level of viscosity. The

bok choy and boiled tofu inside released a delicious looking steam.

After savoring a piece of piping hot tofu, Issei went on. “*He* deserves to be locked away more than some petty little burglar. It would be a far greater service to the world at large.”

“Yes, perhaps.” Sousuke blew on a piece of pork swimming in kimchi sauce as he brought it to his mouth.

“Sagara. You know I’m talking about you, don’t you?”

“Yes, I see.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Ah,” Sousuke sighed happily, “delicious.”

“Sagara!” Issei barked at him.

It was here that Sousuke looked up, as if noticing his presence for the first time. “I’m sorry. What was that about long onions?”

“Nobody was talking about long onions! Where did that even come from?!”

“Hmm...” Sousuke thought a minute, but found his focus drifting back to the pot before he could produce an answer.

“Th-That insufferable man...” Issei trembled in frustration at being ignored.

Kaname patted him on the shoulder, laughing. “Come on, just chill out and eat,” she told him. “Onuki-san, fish out the tofu already; it should be just about perfect now. Issei-kun, don’t put the shirataki there. I’ll do it, so— Hey, Sousuke! Have you been eating nothing but meat?! You need to eat a balanced meal!” Kaname was a true hot pot facilitator. Picking up the package the pork had come in, she shouted, “Look, we’re out of meat already! How did that happen? I’ve only had two slices!”

“It’s not an issue,” Sousuke said, chewing.

“I thought you were a Muslim! Isn’t eating pork forbidden?”

Sousuke’s chopsticks stopped immediately. “This is pork?”

“Of course it is!”

“I see...” Sousuke thought for a minute, then stabbed his chopsticks back into the pot, and silently gobbled up the last bit of pork.

“Hey!” Kaname and Issei shouted together.

Sousuke *was* Muslim, but he wasn’t a particularly observant one—just as most Japanese people, though technically Buddhist, still ate meat and drank alcohol. Despite there being regions that were far more strict, many Muslims in the world also practiced in the same manner. Japanese media tended to focus on the religious leaders issuing orders for assassinations, fundamentalist bombings, and other acts of extremism. But at its heart, Islam was a peaceful and generous religion. The reason for conflict in the Middle East wasn’t religion, but poverty.

Now, back to the subject at hand...

Kaname and Issei were very annoyed to see the last piece of meat being stolen away from them.

“Wh-What’s wrong with you? Don’t you have any shame? Any shame in any single regard?!”

“I only ate three pieces myself! You ate the rest?!”

“Wait a minute,” said Sousuke, speaking with a vaguely satisfied expression on his face. “Last night, I spoke on the phone to a German mercenary who’d grown up in Japan. I asked him about the custom of hotpot. He told me that it’s a battlefield.”

“And?”

“On a battlefield, it’s eat or be eaten,” he explained. “Take this as a learning experience, and at our next battle—”

“You won’t live to the next battle!” they both responded. Kaname started things off with a smack to Sousuke’s face, followed by a rain of stomps from Issei. To finish it off, they both lifted him up and suplexed him towards the kitchen.

“Eat or be eaten, my ass!” Kaname snarled.

“If this was *Shoten*, we’d be confiscating all your cushions!” Issei told him.

Sousuke was just lying there limply, but the two ran after him, intending to dish out even more punishment.

But Onuki interrupted to shout, “Hey, you two! Knock it off! You almost knocked over the pot! Darn it... we can always buy more meat! I’ll even pay for it!”

Kaname’s fist stopped midair. “Really?”

“The supermarket on the shopping street should still be open. Send Sagarakun to buy some.” Radiating a maturity befitting his age, Onuki opened his wallet and held out two thousand-yen bills.

“Oh, thank you!” Kaname gushed. “Onuki-san, you’re wonderful!”

“Eh... Right. I just don’t approve of violence, that’s all.”

“Yes, understood!” She grinned and turned to look at the glassy-eyed Sousuke. “Hmph. You’re off the hook... this time,” she said distastefully, while Issei just let out a wad of venomous spit.

Normally, a protagonist wouldn’t be subject to this level of aggression. Let this be a lesson of the danger hotpot poses to interpersonal relationships (I mean it).



“Sheesh. Wasting my time...” Kaname grumbled as she put her shoes on at the entrance.

Issei saw what she was doing and asked, “You’re not going to make Sagara buy it?”

“No way. Sousuke is awful at shopping.”

“I see. I’ll accompany you, then. It’s dangerous for a woman alone at night.”

“Oh, don’t. I’ll be fine—the shopping street is right there,” Kaname pointed out. “I’d rather have you managing the hotpot. See you.”

Kaname picked out the best pack of shabu shabu pork you could expect to find at a shopping street supermarket, then headed back to the school. She looked up at the night sky and the stars above her as she walked. The air was cool, and her breath came out in white puffs as she passed through the front gate. She was heading for the custodian’s room, on the outside of the school building, when she suddenly caught sight of a faint light.

It was far away, on the other side of the athletic field—the woods south of the grounds. Deep among the dark trees, she could see a small, swaying light. *Is somebody there?* she wondered. It could be one of their students, up to some shady business in the middle of the night. If they were smoking and started a fire, it could be real trouble.

Thus, Kaname cut across the grounds, heading for the source of the light. Just as she entered the trees, though, it suddenly went out. She tried searching around for it, but just then...

“Don’t move!” Someone leaped out of the darkness behind her and grabbed her.

“Fmmph!”

“Don’t scream, you hear me? Be a good girl and we won’t hurt you. We’ll let you go soon. Okay?”

She could tell from the voice that she wasn’t dealing with a student.

Another human figure stepped out from behind a tree in front of her. “Do

what Bro says,” he advised her. “We’re just gonna do what we came here for, then leave. So keep quiet.”

“Um... Okay, I will,” Kaname agreed meekly.

The other man relaxed his grip. “Oh? Thanks a bunch, little girl—”

“Eek! Groper! Pervert! Invader! Enemy! Enemy! E— mmmgh!”

The men quickly worked together to clamp a hand back over Kaname’s mouth.

“Mmgh... fmmfh!” Kaname struggled, pounding the men all over with fists and elbows.

“Ow! She broke my nose!” The first man wailed.

“What’s with this kid?” the other man asked exasperatedly. “I told her to stay quiet!”

“Bro, I brought duct tape in case this happened. Let’s tie her up so she can’t do squat.”

“Great thinking, Johnny. We’ll start with the wrists... hey, hold still!”

“Mmmph! Hffmmmf!”

“This girl smells like kimchi, man.” Turning their faces away from the struggling Kaname, the men began wrapping her in duct tape.

“She’s late,” said Sousuke, looking down at his wristwatch.

“You want the pork that badly, eh? Fair warning—I won’t let you have one bite of it,” Issei promised him.

“Surely I’ll have at least one.”

“Shut up! You can sit there and chew on the bok choy heart.”

Sousuke fell silent.

Issei, seemingly motivated by some strange sense of duty, added water to the hot pot and whispered, “I’ve been wondering, anyway... Why *were* you invited to this?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Sousuke pointed out.

“If I’d known you were coming, I’d have turned Chidori’s invitation down.”

“As would I.”

“Sagara, you know what your problem is? You’re too willing to accept charity from Chidori,” Issei told him, “You should learn your place already.”

“You’re the one lacking in humility,” Sousuke replied. “You’re like a starving beggar, asking Chidori for scraps.”

“Oops. My hand slipped.” Issei tossed a bundle of bok choy into the clay pot, causing kimchi juice to splatter onto Sousuke’s face.

Sousuke regarded him evenly for a moment, then said, “There’s still a lot of shiitake,” and threw some shiitake mushrooms into the pot. It was now Issei who was splattered with bright red juice.

“Oh, slipped again,” Issei said, this time throwing the enoki directly into Sousuke’s face.

“Eat these, too. Don’t hold back on my account.” Sousuke hit him with a bundle of shirataki.

“Eat up! How about some udon?”

“Do you enjoy long onions?”

“Lots of tofu, too!”

Ingredients soared back and forth across the pot. Soon, the two were rising from their seats, and...

“Stop wasting food!” Onuki, who’d been silently watching and trembling, suddenly shouted. The two men stopped in place. “You two are always at each other’s throats. But I won’t stand for this wastefulness! Clean it up at once! Wash what you can in the kitchen!”

The two of them fell silent and obediently did as they were told. They knew all too well what they’d be facing if Onuki really lost his temper.

“I’m also worried about how long Chidori-kun’s been gone,” Onuki admitted. “Tsubaki-kun, go look for her.”

“Okay, on my way.”

“Onuki-san, I could do it my—” Sousuke started.

But Onuki waved him off. “No, Sagara-kun, you stay here and clean up.”

“But—”

“No! Do as you’re told!” Onuki said firmly.

Issei laughed smugly and left the custodian’s room.

The thieves wandered around the forest with shovels in hand, digging here and there. As far as Kaname could see, it was just the two of them: one was a rather large but comparatively timid man called “Bro;” the other was a small but domineering man called “Johnny.” Neither seemed a particularly cautious type, freely talking about what they were doing and why right in front of the bound-and-gagged Kaname.

“Bro. You sure you buried the jewels at this school?”

“I’m sure! Well, I think I’m sure... It was three years ago, and I didn’t exactly have a lot of time to think with the cops on my heels...”

“There’s a lot of schools in this area, man. Girls’ colleges and junior colleges, too. Maybe we should ask kimchi girl here if there’s any other place like this in this area,” Johnny suggested.

“Fmmu! Fmmu fumu, mumufumu?!” *Who are you calling kimchi girl?!* was what she was trying to say, but the duct tape wrapped around her face made Kaname sound more like Bonta-kun.

“Nah, can’t afford to have her screaming again,” Bro decided. “We’ll keep searching the old-fashioned way.”

“Let’s give it a rest. I’m getting stiff, and besides, I’ve got work tomorrow. Gotta make the tonkotsu soup.”

“Shut up. And how come it so happens that *you* got away that night, while I spent three years behind bars in Abashiri?” Bro asked pointedly. “And then, while I was gone, you used the jewels *you* ran away with to buy a new identity and open up a ramen shop!”

“I sure did,” Johnny boasted. “It was even featured in *Tokyo Walker*. We do great business.”

“And on top of that, you got a wife and even a kid. You’re riding high, eh?”

“Yeah, real high. That’s why I’m letting you have the other jewels.”

“Damn straight you are,” Bro snarled. “Now, help me out! We could get 50 million selling those on the black market!”

Fifty million?! Even Kaname was stunned to hear this. They buried jewels worth that much at this school?!

Just then, a new voice interrupted. “I see. That explains everything.”

The men turned around to find that a short young man had appeared from behind a tree. The light was behind him, so his face couldn’t be seen, but...

“Mummum fmm!” *Issei-kun!* Kaname shouted, her voice still muffled.

“Don’t worry, Chidori. I’ll rescue you soon. Now, you louts... surrender peacefully and I won’t hurt you. But if you resist...” Issei lowered his hips and took a stance. “I’ll give you a taste of the secrets of my Daidomyaku Style.” Fighting spirit wafted from his outstretched fist.

“Bro. This guy looks tough.”

“Dammit. If it’s not one thing... Hey, kid! Get lost!” Bro held up his shovel and charged at Issei.

Issei let out a quick exhale. The shovel swung down, but hit nothing but air until it planted itself in the ground. The next instant—or perhaps even sooner—Issei had plunged a vicious palm strike into the man.

Wha-bam! It made a sound like the earth cracking, and the man flew back until he hit a tree. “Blugh!”

“Secret technique, Gatling Palm! It’s too good for scum like you, really... Be grateful.” Indeed, Issei was tough as hell. There were few who could best him in a fight. “Now, you. Are you ready?”

“Heck no!” Johnny said, moving to hold Kaname like a hostage. “Sorry, but I owe Bro here a whole lot... I won’t let you get in his way!”

“Damn you...” Issei cursed.

“Don’t move, man! Come any closer and I’ll grope her boob! I’ll do all *kinds* of X-rated stuff! Even if it’s just for a second, that’s lasting trauma... How are you gonna make that up to her, huh? Psychological issues can get pretty thorny, see?!”

Kaname screamed. “Fumuuuughn!” she wailed.

Issei flushed bright red. “D-D-Don’t be a fool! You think I’ll fall for such an empty threat?! Release her now or die! That’s not a bluff! I *will* kill you!”

But Johnny was too clever for that. “Heh heh heh... But you can’t move now, can you, kid? So young and delicate, so unwilling to tolerate gutter eroticism. You can’t protect the peace of your school like that, can you?”

“D-Dammit...”

“Meanwhile, I’ve got a wife and a kid. I didn’t wanna do this, but I’ll do it—for my grand purpose, and for Bro. Now, pick up the duct tape over there and wrap yourself up in it!”

“I refuse!” Issei said, fists trembling.

“Oh? Then you’re gonna watch as I let the girl have it?” Johnny flexed the fingers on both of his hands.

“Geh... Chidori, I’m sorry. Just one instant... Bear it for one instant! When that instant is over, I will send that man to hell!” Issei promised.

“Mm?! Mughuhh, mumgh!!!” Kaname was focused on the area behind Issei, shouting some kind of warning.

But Issei remained with his eyes pointing downward, whispering melancholically. “I understand. After it’s done... I’ll commit hara-kiri.”

“Mmummfum! Mm! Mm! Mm!”

“Please... Please don’t accuse me like that,” Issei begged. “I feel just as bad about—”

Clunk! Bro, who’d regained consciousness at some point, had snuck up behind Issei and whacked him on the head with the shovel.

“Urk... mmgh.” Issei toppled over.



Shoulders heaving, Bro picked up the duct tape lying nearby. “Sheesh, what a tough little brat...”

“He made a good showing, but couldn’t seal the deal,” Johnny agreed. “I bet that gets the best of him most of the time.”

Kaname couldn’t say so, but she had to agree.

“Let’s tie him up quick,” Bro suggested. “Whew, that hurt... Almost thought I was dead back there.”

“You’ve always been tough, Bro. You might not always win, but you definitely never lose.”

“Shut up. Anyway, these two are taking up a lot of space, and I bet they’ll be annoying. Let’s throw ’em in there.” Bro pointed to a shed standing at the edge of the woods.

“They’ve been gone a while,” Sousuke said, looking at his wristwatch once more. He didn’t much care about Issei, but was concerned about Kaname’s absence. He was also concerned about the whereabouts of the meat she was supposed to bring back.

“Hmm? Ah, wonder if they got into talking about something. The concerns of love and life... Ah, youth. Those were the days...” Onuki was pleasantly drunk on hot sake by now. They’d shut off the burner beneath the pot.

Sousuke tried calling Kaname’s PHS with his cell phone, but her cheerful ringtone played from her nearby bag. The transmitter he had her walk around with for certain reasons was currently in the room as well—also in the bag. “I told her to carry it wherever she went...” he grumbled.

“Hmm? What was that?”

“Nothing. I’m going to look for her myself.” Sousuke stood up.

“Ah, buy me some booze while you’re out. The cheap stuff is fine. I’m counting on you, Sagara-kun! You may have your issues, but if you’re to be my successor someday...”

Abandoning Onuki, who seemed to be rambling in his own little world,

Sousuke left the room. He walked around the shopping street, but saw no sign of Kaname. He asked a takoyaki seller with whom he was acquainted, and learned that she'd been spotted heading for the school with a shopping bag about an hour ago.

As Sousuke was searching around the grounds, he noticed a suspicious sight in the woods around the south side. He could see a man digging around in the darkness, muttering to himself. Two men, in fact—both unarmed. Their guard was down. They must have been amateurs.

Sousuke silently mounted the fence and ran through the forest like a shadow as he approached. Then he fixed his pistol on them and demanded, "Don't move."

"Eh?!" The men jumped in surprise, then turned in Sousuke's direction.

"There's a gun trained on you," he warned them. "Don't try to escape or resist."

"H-Huh? What kind of nonsense is—"

Blam! A shot hit the ground at their feet, causing them to jump again.

"The next one won't miss. Now turn around," Sousuke instructed, "lay the shovels on the ground and put your hands up. Then kneel down and cross your legs."

The men couldn't help but do as they were told.

That was easy... I can't help but be impressed, Kaname thought as she stared, eyes wide, out the barred window of the shed into which she'd been thrown. She was still bound and gagged. Nevertheless, she'd managed to heft herself up against the wall to peer out the small window.

Sousuke seemed to be interrogating the men, but she couldn't make out much from here. *One way or another, they'll have to tell him what they're after soon enough. Then he'll know we're trapped in here. Boy, I guess this all worked out after all...*

“You’re looking for something?” Sousuke asked, furrowing his brow.

“Yeah. We’re alumni—we’re looking for a precious memento we buried here on the day we graduated,” the smaller man said.

“Yeah, yeah! We’re alumni!” the larger man agreed.

Sousuke regarded them skeptically. “In what year did you graduate?”

“Uh... 1992.”

“Hmm. The student council president in 1992 was Kazama Shinji, wasn’t he? Tell me a few things about his platform and the policies of the student council in those days,” Sousuke instructed.

“What? Well, uh—”

“A student from that time should know these things.”

Pushed to the brink and looking desperate, the larger man shouted, “H-How should we know that?”

“Bro, this ain’t good...” Johnny muttered.

“Shut up! I never heard of no Kazama! I don’t know about any damn student council either, dammit!” Bro yelled.

At this, Sousuke heaved a sigh, relaxed, and lowered his gun. “You passed, Senpai.”

“Uh?”

“As you know, from 1991 through 1994, our student council was shut down due to pressure from the school. This was described in the historical records compiled by our current student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu’s, as ‘Jindai High’s Great Interregnum.’ In other words, there was no student council president named Kazama Shinji in those years,” Sousuke concluded.

The men stared at him blankly. “I... I see...”

“If you had pretended to know about this nonexistent president, I would have known that you were up to no good and shot you right here. Please forgive my rudeness—I tested you to ensure the safety of my mother school.”

“What? Wait, I—”

“Hey, so you learned your lesson. Good boy,” said the smaller man immediately.

“I thank you. Now, what are you looking for at this late hour? If you tell me, I can mobilize the students into searching for it tomorrow.”

“No, don’t!” said the large man immediately.

Sousuke frowned in confusion. “Why not?”

“Well... because—”

“The canister we’re looking for is full of embarrassing pictures of your senpai here! It’s of him, buck naked at the culture festival except for a bow tie, dancing the lambada with another naked guy,” Bro confided. “He’s got a wife and kids now, so he feels embarrassed about his younger days. He asked me, the one friend he could trust, to sneak out here to retrieve the photos.”

Hearing this, Sousuke nodded deeply. “I’m unfamiliar with the dance known as the lambada, but everybody has things in their past they wish to hide. I completely sympathize, Senpai.”

“Uh-huh... Sure. Thanks.”

“I would like to help you both, but unfortunately, I am searching for the missing student council vice president, who—” Just then, Sousuke’s cell phone rang. “Just a moment. Hello?”

“Sagara-kun! Where’s that booze?”

“Onuki-san. I don’t have time to look for that right now. Besides, alcohol destroys brain cells. If you wish to have a long career as a custodian—”

“Don’t you talk back! Hic... Just buy me the booze! Chidori-kun’s furious with you! I know what happens when you make her mad!”

“Chidori is there? With you?”

“What? Oh... yeah, she is! She just made it back! So, you’d better buy that booze! Got it?” said Onuki. Then the call cut off.

Sousuke waited a while, gazing at his cell phone, then seemed to snap out of his daze. “It appears that the issue has resolved itself. I can now aid you.”

Kaname, watching from the warehouse window, began screaming in tones halfway between furious and hopeless. *What?! That idiot!* She was hoping he would tie up the thieves, interrogate them, and run to save her... but of all things, he was actually helping them dig their damned holes!

“Hmmgh! Fummgh, mmgh!” Issei, who also had his arms and legs bound, seemed to also have seen them working together out the window, and was infuriated by the sight. Excessively so, in fact. “Mmgh... mmmmmmmgh...” Issei began rubbing his face up and down against the bars covered in red rust. It seemed like a motion likely to cause injury, but he kept at it until he forced off the duct tape that served as his gag. “Mmgh... Bwah. That idiot Sagara is working with those men!” he said, furiously.

“Fmmgh?”

“Yes! If the talk of the 50 million yen jewels is true, it would be easy to buy off a jerk like him!”

I’m pretty sure that’s not what happened, Kaname wanted to attest, but the only things out of her mouth were inarticulate barks.

“Chidori. I know you don’t want to believe it, but think!” Issei implored. “He already stole all of our pork!”

“Fmmgh...”

“He’s going to pay for this. If there’s one person my fists must punish, it’s him! Yes, this time, for sure...!” A violent aura wafted off of Issei’s body. Fighting spirit welled out of him—the power of rage. He was calling up the true strength that dwelt deep inside him... Or something like that. “Grrrrrah... Hah!” His passionate shout of release was accompanied by the sound of something snapping.

“Mgh?!” Kaname watched as the duct tape that had bound him broke into pieces. Had he invoked some secret power to break out of his bonds?

“I... I did it, Dad. The ultimate secret technique of Daidomyaku Style, Inner Snap Flash!” Issei whispered, weakly going down on one knee.

That's a very handy secret technique to have, I guess... she thought.

“Wait here, Chidori. I’m going to slaughter Sagara and those men!” Issei promised.

“Mmgh! Fummgh, fummgh!”

Perhaps his use of the technique had expended a great deal of his stamina, because Issei stumbled a bit as he headed for the door. Apparently he hadn’t even considered the idea of freeing Kaname before he left.

“We’re not gonna find it,” Johnny grumbled.

“Come on, don’t slack off,” Bro urged him. “Keep digging!”

Bro, Johnny, and Sousuke were digging all around the forest.

A young tree about the height of a person was growing in the most likely spot, so they worked together to dig it up at the roots, then pulled it out of the ground.

“Sheesh, stupid tree... Pretty sure this wasn’t here when I buried it...”

“Bro, it’s not here either.”

“Dammit!” Bro gave a kick to the uprooted young tree.

“Senpai. What does the item you buried look like?” Sousuke asked.

“What? Oh, well... it was a dark-colored cylinder about this size.” He indicated the dimensions of a soft drink can with his fingers.

“I see...”

“Hey, bro!” Johnny shouted, digging at a patch of ground some ways away. He picked the mud off the item he’d pulled up, revealing it to be a dark metal cylinder. “Right here! I found a can! Is this it?” He held it up in triumph.

“What?! Great work!” Bro reached for the dirty can. But then...

“Oh, that’s—” Sousuke immediately snatched the can away.

“Hey, what’re you doing?! That’s mine!”

“No, this is—”

“Are you betraying your senpai? Give it back!” The angry men tried to grab Sousuke, but he slipped out of their grasp. “D-Damn you!”

“Wait just a minute. This is—”

It was just then that a commotion rang out from the shed on the outskirts of the forest. The door, which had previously been firmly locked, blew out from within.

“Eh?”

Stepping over the fallen metal door, a figure rushed out at them with the force of a gale. It was Tsubaki Issei. “Sagara!” he howled. “You bastard!”

The two self-styled alumni turned pale.

“H-How did he...?!”

“This seems pretty bad... I think he’s powered up, even!”

“Graaaah! Prepare to die!” Issei rushed at them, leaped, and unleashed a powerful kick—at Sousuke, for some reason.

“Eh?” Sousuke dodged the kick by the skin of his teeth.

Issei kicked up a plume of dirt as he landed, then charged Sousuke again.

“What are you doing, Tsubaki?” Sousuke asked.

“Shut up! You shameless man, siding with thieves!”

“What thieves?”

“It wasn’t enough to eat all the pork, now you have to have the treasure to yourself?! Your greed knows no bounds!” Issei said accusingly.

“Treasure? I don’t understand that part, but I do understand your disappointment about the pork,” Sousuke said sympathetically. “I, too, have faced starvation—”

“Shut up! I’ll throw *you* into the pot next!”

The brawl continued, as did their roundabout argument. Sousuke wove through the machine-gun-like flurry of punches, then countered with a roundhouse kick. Issei dodged that and struck back with a full-power palm

strike. The fact that he was actively dishing out blows suggested that Sousuke wouldn't have much luck talking Issei down.

The two outsiders watched them fight in total shock.

"This is bad, Bro," said Johnny. "We've gotta get those jewels..."

"Y-Yeah. Dammit, it's too dangerous to even get close. Who are these guys?!"

"It's simultaneously awe-inspiring and cringe-inducing."

Then a new voice sounded out. "Hey! What are you doing there?!"

The whole group turned to see the custodian, Onuki, standing nearby.

"Onuki-san," Issei panted. "Perfect timing. This bastard, Sagara—"

"Shut up!" Onuki snapped. "I thought it was strange you'd been gone so long, and here's what I catch you doing? You've snapped me sober, dammit! What will the neighbors think?!"

"Onuki-san, Tsubaki is the one in the wrong," said Sousuke, attempting to plead his case. "He came out of nowhere—"

"You shut up too! And where's Chidori-kun? She's the one who arranged that hotpot party to try to help you get along— ahh?!" Onuki suddenly broke off mid-lecture.

The whole group stopped what they were doing and looked at him.

Onuki's gaze had fallen on the small name tag on the tree that they had uprooted earlier. "Th-That tree..."

"What about that crummy-looking tree?" the four asked him in unison.

"You people... That tree was..."

"That tree was...?" they prompted in unison again.

"A cherry tree sent by the governor of Tokyo and planted here in a grand ceremony two years ago," Onuki finished. "I've worked day and night caring for her ever since..."

"I see..." they all said.

"I thought she'd eventually grow tall enough to reach heaven, with the most

beautiful flower petals you'd ever seen... I named her Grace, after that famous American actress."

"Ahh..." they all said.

"Do you understand? Do you see what I'm saying? All right. Wait here a few minutes." Onuki turned his back on the four of them and quietly began walking to the shed.

"Mgh... hmmgh, fumummgh!" The bound and gagged Kaname had just crawled her way to the collapsed door when Onuki came in. "Hmmgh?! Hmm! Fummumgh!"

Ignoring her cries, Onuki rooted around in the back of the shed and produced a large chainsaw.

"Hmmgh?!"

Onuki didn't seem to see Kaname at all. His eyes blazed brightly in the darkness around him. "I must avenge my Grace."

"Hmm... mmgh! Mnngh!"

Vroooooom! Rumm, rumm, rumm... The chainsaw's engine revved up.

"Hmmgh, hmmgh!"

"Kill them all," Onuki whispered before charging out of the shed like a demon from hell.

Soon after, Kaname could hear terrible screams and commotion from the direction the men had been standing.

"I thought I was really dead that time..." the battered Sousuke and Issei said together, resting against the wall of the gym.

Using a grenade launcher, a .50 caliber rifle, and anti-personnel mines, Sousuke had coordinated artistically with Issei's super-ultimate secret technique, Heart-Cutter, to finally put Onuki Zenji down. It had been a truly intense battle which they'd survived only by the skin of their teeth.

“The school staff here are made of sterner stuff,” Sousuke mused. “In another life, he might have been history’s strongest mercenary...”

“Seriously,” said Issei, “we should seal him in concrete and drop him 20,000 meters under the sea.”

“Agreed. Though I wonder if that would really stop him...”

“Heh. Good point,” Issei said with an ironic laugh.

Sousuke snorted in agreement.

They’d survived a powerful enemy by working together. The feeling between them was like rivals at the end of a buddy movie.

“Hey! What are you two looking so satisfied about?!” After great effort, Kaname had finally broken out of her own bonds, and now ran up to them, shouting. “While you three were fighting, the thieves got away!”

Issei snapped back to reality. “Ah... dammit. They even made off with the can of jewels that Sagara was carrying.”

Sousuke, for his part, just looked confused. “Can?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. The one you dug up with them.”

“Oh, that? Our senpais took that with them? That’s not good...” said Sousuke.

“It’s way more than ‘not good’! What were you even thinking?!”

“I have to find them and tell them at once.”

“Tell them? About what?” Kaname asked.

“What they took wasn’t a can,” Sousuke confessed. “It looked like a can, but it was actually a special anti-personnel mine.”

“A m-mine?!”

“I buried them as a security measure the night before the culture festival. You yelled at me to remove them, and I thought that I had... but it seems there’s one I failed to recover. But just as I was trying to explain that to them, Tsubaki interrupted and—”

Bwoooooooooom! An explosion rang out in the distance. There was a roar, like a

crack of thunder, followed once more by silence.



After a few minutes of sitting in the quiet, Sousuke closed his eyes. “It appears it’s too late.”

Whap! A fan appeared out of nowhere and slapped down hard on Sousuke’s head.

“That hurt.”

“Oh, shut up!” Kaname shouted, then let out a little sigh. “Well, I guess they got what they deserve. They probably just made up the 50 million yen jewels, too. Anyway, let’s get back to the custodian’s room. Onuki-san will catch cold if we leave him lying here for long.”

Working together, they carried Onuki (who was lying on the ground restored to normal mode) back to the custodian’s room.

In a corner of a park several hundred meters away from Jindai High, Bro and Johnny lay on the ground, covered in char.

“Mgh... Why’d my jewels blow up?” Bro asked blearily. “And what’s with that school, anyway?”

“It hurts so much,” Johnny moaned. “Think my nose is bleeding.”

“Tell me. Someone, please, tell me!”

“I gotta get back and make the tonkotsu soup...”

“Someone just tell me...” Bro sat there, weeping, as Johnny walked unsteadily home.



Several weeks later, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, student council president, was taking a walk after class in the woods when he spotted a translucent rock covered in mud. It had been reflecting the light from inside an eroded can sticking out of the ground.

Hmm? This doesn’t look like a fertilizer pellet... he thought, wiping it off with his fingers. With the dirt removed, it sparkled more beautifully than he’d expected.

“Senpai? What is it?” Mikihara Ren, who just happened to be walking the same way, asked him as she came up to him.

“Well, I found this.”

“My... what a beautiful piece of glass,” she said.

Hayashimizu thought for a minute, then said, “Mikihara-kun. Would you like it?”

“What? Oh... yes, please. I’d love it. I’ll treasure it.”

Taking the dirty gray rock, Ren smiled dazzlingly.

〈The Midnight Raiders — The End〉

A Fugue for Old Soldiers

Tessa might hold the rank of Colonel, but she was still a sixteen-year-old girl. She couldn't compete against the Machiavellian cunning of the head of the Mithril operations division. Ah, that Admiral Borda was a wily one! He'd engineered everything around her to make sure she was free on the weekend of January 9th and 10th. Specifically...

The battle simulations, which she'd been scheduled to run with the top officers of each battle group, had been pushed back a week at the admiral's discretion. This was to ensure that she had the day before, the 8th, free for planning. She'd scheduled the parts necessary for fixing up the base's security system to arrive on the 9th, but the base's supply manager had suddenly said that they wouldn't show up until the 11th.

As a last resort, then, she'd used her own authority to reserve the 9th for seaworthiness tests for her amphibious assault submarine. The R&D engineers had said it would be best for them to run the TDD-1's reactor diagnostics on that day—so, thinking it was an excellent chance, she'd said she was obligated to spend the 9th doing checks on her vessel. But just before the day arrived, R&D had canceled those plans.

It ended in checkmate; Borda's level of scheming almost rose to the level of art. It seemed possible that he'd maneuvered everyone in Mithril—perhaps even international affairs all over the West Pacific region—with ruthless efficiency, to ensure Tessa had the new year off.

"So, Teletha," Jerome Borda said triumphantly over the phone, "I know you're free tomorrow and the day after. You can't hide it from me. Mardukas and your secretary didn't even deny it. And as you have no key tasks to perform then, I'm ordering you as an authority—and pleading with you as a parental one—to come to Guam. The party is waiting for you."

"The party" was a celebration with Admiral Borda's old friends. They'd originally scheduled it for November, but she'd persistently avoided his

invitations, and so for a while he'd stopped asking. She'd assumed he'd given up, but after all the chaos of Christmas died down, he'd suddenly said they'd moved it back to January—and to Guam—in order to accommodate her. This meant she had to come.

Tessa didn't respond to his statement, silently fuming.

Admiral Borda then continued, nervously, "Why so quiet? Look... you can't get out of this by being angry. I already told them that you were coming. So do it, all right?!"

Slam! Beep, beep, beep... Tessa slammed the receiver onto its cradle and glared at the two subordinates in her office with her—her XO, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas, and her secretary, Lieutenant Villain.

"I merely told the admiral the truth, Captain," Mardukas said airily, standing at attention but avoiding her eyes.

"I'll take care of everything while you're gone, Colonel," Villain said, doing likewise.

"Traitors," Tessa growled.

"Well, I have work to do. If you'll excuse me," said Mardukas, back still ramrod straight as he turned to leave.

"Traitors!" she howled.

As Mardukas closed the door behind him, Tessa threw her memo pad as hard as she could after him.



On the second weekend of the new year, Sagara Sousuke arrived at the Merida Island base. He was here to retrain his scouting skills, which he suspected to have atrophied during his city life in Tokyo. Hiking through the jungles of Merida Island while carrying equipment on his back felt like just what he needed to restore those fading instincts.

He felt like his sharpshooter and AS piloting senses had also dulled. *It's a dangerous situation*, he reminded himself. *I have to get myself back in shape ASAP.* Thus, biting back his desire to join Kaname and her friends on their

bowling expedition, he had flown thousands of kilometers to be here instead.

When the beat-up propeller plane landed after a flight that had lasted over six hours, Sousuke picked up his luggage and came down the ramp. “Hmm?”

Standing on a canopy-covered portion of the large apron was Teletha Testarossa. She was dressed in civilian clothes for some reason, a long dress and a cardigan. Her ash blonde hair was tied back in a simple ponytail.

He hadn’t had a proper conversation with her since the events at Christmas. They’d both simply been too busy... Not to mention that the situation was awkward. He’d cut off any chance at a relationship between them, after all. Still, that didn’t mean he didn’t like Tessa anymore. He found her attractive, respected her, and wanted to help her. He was hoping, if anything, that they could go back to how things were before. It was a typically male attitude, the kind that usually ended up hurting the other person worse than the alternative... but of course, that thought hadn’t occurred to him at all.

Unable to think of what to say to her, Sousuke just straightened up awkwardly and saluted.

She returned a rushed salute of her own, then said immediately, “Sagara-san. You have a mission.”

“What?”

“A bodyguard mission. Please accompany me.”

“Ah. I haven’t heard anything about that,” he denied. “I’m here for field training—”

“It’s canceled. Now, hurry.” Tessa grabbed Sousuke by the sleeve and began walking, giving him no say in the matter whatsoever.

“C-Colonel? Where are we going?”

Tessa didn’t respond, but just kept walking them away from the plane Sousuke had arrived on and towards a nearby mid-sized jet helicopter, which was preparing for takeoff. The keening of its turbine engine and the roaring of its spinning rotors echoed around them. She began striding up the ramp to the cabin, pulling the confused Sousuke along behind her.

“Excuse me, Colonel. I really don’t understand. Where is this craft heading—”

“Don’t ask! Just get on!” she commanded him. Still, whatever the cause of her anger, it didn’t seem to be Sousuke himself.

“Colonel? What is this? Wait, Private Stanley! Why are you closing the door? I’ve only just arrived—” Sousuke, pulled into the cabin, argued with a member of the base’s airstrip personnel.

The private just responded easily, “Take care, Sergeant!” and firmly closed the hatch.

Tessa marched them into the back of the cabin. “Sit down. Fasten your seat belt.”

“But I—”

Ignoring his objections, Tessa picked up a headset hanging next to her barebones seat and spoke to the captain in the cockpit, “We’re here, Lieutenant Santos.”

“Roger, Colonel. Taking off now. Merida Control, this is 2nd Assault Transport Squad 03 Alpha, call sign Gebo-9. Merida Control, respond. Gebo-9 seeking takeoff permission from short field. Flight mission TSF-02. Flight plan A-0351...” The helicopter’s pilot began her communications with the base’s control room as the engine’s roar grew louder. Then the helicopter glided slowly forward and entered the liftoff area.

“Colonel, please, wait. What’s going on here? I’m here to... er, more importantly, my luggage is still outside,” Sousuke said, gazing out the window at the bag he’d left on the apron. “It contains the math homework I need to turn in on Monday—”

“Sergeant! Sit down and fasten your seat belt!” the cabin crew barked at him.

Tessa just stared silently out the window the entire time.

“But my homework... And my training...”

“Did you hear me, Sergeant?!”

“Will someone tell me what this is all about?!” Sousuke wailed.

But ignoring his distress, the helicopter carrying them took off from Merida Island.

It was common for field NCOs like Sousuke to be thrown into battlefields without any explanation. The officers weren't obligated to inform him of the larger picture or background of the operation. "Go to Area X and clear it of enemies," or "Secure Hill Y and protect it no matter what"—those were the sorts of abrupt and nonsensical orders that Sousuke was accustomed to.

Even so, this was a bit *too* abrupt, and so his confusion was understandable.

The helicopter flew into the West Pacific skies. Tessa seemed as sour as ever. Her cheeks were puffed out sulkily and she muttered to herself from time to time.

Afraid of setting her off again, Sousuke avoided making conversation for about thirty minutes. But he at last steeled his nerve and asked, "Colonel. May I ask a question?"

"What?"

"Er... where are we going?"

"Just around the corner," she told him shortly, "Guam."

Their Mithril base was on Merida Island, an isolated island in the West Pacific. The nearest patch of civilization was Guam. It was even closer than Tokyo—close enough that the multipurpose helicopter carrying them, the MH-67 Pave Mare, could reach it in just a few hours. It could even make a round trip without refueling.

The personnel stationed at Merida Island frequently visited Guam or Saipan when they had free time. Since it was a tourist destination anyway, their presence there wasn't particularly noteworthy, and the place had a diversity of delicious food. It also had lots of beaches for relaxing, and lots of opportunities to pick up girls or shop. It was definitely a convenient place to have nearby. Some of the married personnel even moved their families to Guam (though of course, the nature of their workplace was kept strictly confidential).

"What are we doing in Guam?" Sousuke asked.

Tessa gripped the hands on her knees into fists. “It’s a high-level political gathering. If it doesn’t go well, it could do unparalleled damage to our battle group and hinder our potential in future operations.”

“I... I see.”

“I’m going in entirely without backup. Mardukas-san, Kalinin-san, Melissa... they all abandoned me. I thought they respected me as their superior... I never knew their loyalty was so fleeting!” Squeezing tears of frustration from her eyes, Tessa spat the words out.

“C-Colonel?”

“However! I must see my duty through. I must navigate this unpleasant gathering. And that’s why I’ve asked you to come, Sagara-san.”

“But Colonel,” said Sousuke, “I still don’t know anything about—”

“When Kaname-san is in trouble, you always help her, don’t you?!” Tessa demanded. “And a long time ago, you said you’d always help me if I needed it!”

“Yes. Well...” Greasy sweat rose on Sousuke’s forehead.

She looked up at him pleadingly. “I know what happened between us the other day. But a promise is a promise.”

Sousuke said nothing.

“You don’t have to worry. I spent a whole night crying, but I feel more or less better now. I’m not doing this to punish you.”

It probably wasn’t quite as simple as she was making it sound, but... She really was impressive. Of course, Tessa was a commander who oversaw hundreds of the world’s toughest soldiers. She wasn’t some fragile little princess.

“So please, just come with me. If you refuse, I’ll order you,” she warned, “without mercy.”

What do orders matter now that I’m already trapped in the helicopter? And why is she in such a bad mood? And what in the world is this high-level political gathering? Sousuke thought, but just sat up straight and said, “No need for that.”

Normally at times like these, she'd smile and say, *Thank you, Sagara-san*, but... "Good. Now sit there and work up your nerve," was all she said this time before turning her despondent gaze back out the window. It was as if she had no interest at all in Sousuke.

Sousuke, at a loss for words, could only fidget nervously in his seat.

Soon, the pilot said, "Colonel, we're passing Point Echo now. LZ will be at Point Delta, as planned. ETA, five minutes. Get ready."

The helicopter would soon be arriving in Guam. Since it was an unscheduled flight, their plan was apparently to land secretly on the outskirts. Had this been a regular flight, they would have arrived in a civilian airport in a regular fixed-wing craft. The Mithril intelligence division could manipulate the control tower's schedule for such things.

It was already after 6 pm, but it was still light in Guam, and the dusk didn't seem to be coming any time soon. The view of Guam from the helicopter window was like a sepia-tone picture seen through a purple filter; this was because their invisibility mode ECS, the electromagnetic camouflage system, was engaged.

Soon, the helicopter landed on a wide road among the summer homes on the south side of the island. It was a hilly area with few people or cars around.

"We're getting off now, Sagara-san."

"Ma'am." Tessa disembarked with the crew's help, while Sousuke grabbed Tessa's suitcase and quickly followed after her. The broad-leafed trees on either side of the road billowed before the powerful wind kicked up by the rotors, as did Tessa's hair and skirt.

Before they even had time to salute the crew, the helicopter took off again. They couldn't actually see it, though, and once they were outside of the ECS aura, the clear blue of the sky and dazzling green of the trees returned. The area around them turned quiet moments later.

Sousuke and Tessa stood there in the middle of the quiet road. After about five minutes, a pickup truck came driving towards them from beyond the hill.

The truck held five men, divided between the cabin and the bed. They were all older, roughly in their sixties or seventies with salt-and-pepper hair and beards. They were uniformly dressed in flashy Hawaiian shirts and sunglasses. Some wore bracelets or necklaces, and some of them even held bottles of beer.

“Hey! She’s here, she’s here!” The men waved enthusiastically at Tessa.

“It’s Tessa-tan, Tessa-tan! We missed you so much!”

“Ah, ponytail-version today! She’s the spitting image of my wife when she was younger!”

“Honestly. You’re so charming, darling!”

“F*ckin’ good!”

They were creating an uproar, hooting and hollering, clapping their hands, stamping their feet and pounding the roof of the truck—a strangely energetic old bunch.

“Colonel,” asked Sousuke, “who are these people?”

“*They* would say they’re my friends,” Tessa replied sourly.

“Thanks for coming, Teletha!” said a smiling man in early old age—the only one of the five who’d previously been silent—as he walked up to them. He had gray hair and seemed in good shape for his age, but his aviator shades and floral-print Hawaiian shirt made him look like some kind of shady event promoter. “I just met up with them now myself!” The old man laughed at this, though the joke was not apparent. “Anyway, let’s get out of here! We’ve got great rooms at the hotel. You can leave your luggage there, then we’ll eat at the restaurant. The cook from Thomas’s old ship is the chef there—food’s apparently great. You can eat a lobster this big!” The old man gleefully spread his hands apart to suggest a size surely bigger than any lobster could ever be.

“Ahh...”

“Might be too big for you, of course... but it is what it is.” Then the old man turned towards Sousuke, who was still wearing his fatigues, and said casually, “Hey, kid! Sergeant! You can help her out. I bet you’ve got a growing kid’s appetite. Be grateful, all right? Today’s all about fun, so just let your hair down!”

Ah ha ha!”

But Sousuke said only one thing in response. “Who are you?”

“Hmm?” The man’s eyes narrowed behind his sunglasses. The men behind him abruptly stopped laughing and regarded Sousuke with interest.

“I asked, who are you? I think you’re being too friendly with the colonel. You should show more respect. The colonel is far too important a person to dignify hoodlums like— What is it, Colonel?” Sousuke stopped as he felt Tessa nudging him from the side.

“That’s the admiral, Sagara-san.”

“Eh?”

“Admiral Borda,” she reminded him. “Operations division chief of Mithril.” Admiral Jerome Borda—the man in charge of the operations division that oversaw all of Mithril’s battle groups. In other words, an even more important person than Tessa.

“Er... well...” Sousuke suddenly remembered that he’d seen a hologram of Admiral Borda in an online meeting once. Though the image had been fuzzy then, and the man had been wearing the uniform of a decorated officer, thus looking more or less nothing like he did now...

While Sousuke panicked, the admiral just stood there calmly.

“F-Forgive me, Admiral,” Sousuke stuttered. “I... I...”

Suddenly, Admiral Borda and the other men burst out laughing.

“Ah, look at him squirm!”

“Look at his face! You really got him there!”

“Nice work, Jerry!”

“Looking pretty bad in front of Tessa-tan, kid.”

It was incredibly rude behavior. Sousuke felt deeply frustrated, but he had no choice but to endure.

Admiral Borda then patted him on the back. “C’mon, get in the car, Sergeant! It’s no-holds-barred tonight!”

Admiral Borda had befriended the four other old men during his US Navy days. Some had attended the Naval Academy with him, some he'd met later in the field. Sousuke was surprised to learn that the oldest of them had traded fire with the Japanese Imperial Navy during the second World War.

He and his friends got together once a year to talk about old times. Last year, they'd gone golfing in Maryland, and on a whim, they'd invited Tessa to join them on the last day's drinking party.

"It was absolute torture," Tessa told Sousuke as they dropped off her luggage in her room. They'd arrived at a hotel in the center of the city, and Borda and the others were waiting in the downstairs lobby, making all kinds of ruckus. "Chugging their beers and guffawing in the restaurant of a luxury hotel. When the manager tried to warn them, they switched tactics to lecturing, asking if he'd ever fought in Vietnam. They were so rude, security had to come and kick them out. You'd expect that to settle them down, but instead, beside the entrance to the restaurant, they performed... a very vulgar act of resistance."

"Hmm? What was it?"

Tessa turned red at this. "They all... lined up, faced the wall and... No, I can't say it out loud."

"Ah-hah..."

"Then they ran away, packed themselves into a Corvette, and drove around town making catcalls at women on the streets. They even drove parallel to a bus and showed their buttocks to the passengers! And to top it all off, they dragged me, against my will, to a topless bar to 'learn about the world.' One of the dancers almost dragged me up onto the stage. They were so drunk, and they were hitting on me, and it was just awful..."

Sousuke could picture the awful scene. The old men's raucous behavior on the drive from the helicopter landing point to the hotel had been seriously extreme. They'd been so excited to see Tessa that they'd almost leaped out of the bed of the moving truck.

"I don't understand. Why would a man of Admiral Borda's standing want to

hang out with these hoodlums?” Sousuke asked in the elevator to the lobby.

“I wish they were just ordinary hoodlums. But despite how they look, they’re all prestigious retired military men. They fought through the major wars of the second half of the twentieth century, earning rare honors. I know their names and careers from reading their papers and theses, so I was honored when they invited me. But...” Tessa whispered. “But I never thought they’d turn out to be... such... incorrigible punks.” Apparently at a loss for words after that, she just turned her eyes down and trembled.

It makes sense, thought Sousuke. Day to day, she worked with the extremely uptight Mardukas and Kalinin. Being accustomed to those men—who were serious to a fault, even compared to most English and Russian men—running into that group of randy old jackasses would be a shock to the system.

“But aren’t you an American as well?” he finally thought to ask.

“I was born in an old city on the East Coast!” Tessa wailed. “I’m nothing like those West Coast-style fools with palm trees growing out of their heads!”

“Ah. I’m sorry,” Sousuke responded dumbfoundedly.

“Last year was so traumatic that after I returned to Merida Island, I couldn’t leave my bed for two days. And now, with so many unanswered mysteries about the Venom and such... any period of incapacitation on my part will be a massive blow to the team. That’s why, Sagara-san, I brought you here to be my bodyguard, and to stop those old men with extreme prejudice if they attempt to mistreat me.”

“But—”

“Just do it! Whatever it takes! I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now, let’s go!” Nostrils flaring, Tessa psyched herself up. If she wasn’t already wearing a short-sleeved dress, she’d be rolling up her sleeves right now.

Their elevator arrived on the first floor. As the doors opened, they could immediately hear the ruckus in the lobby. Screams of women and the clatter of

destruction—it sounded like a fight.

“Eh?”

They ran to the scene and found a group of young Japanese men laid out on the floor, the remnants of chairs and vases scattered around them. The last standing member of the group was currently being manhandled by a group of five old men.

“Take that!” one of them shouted as they threw the slightly dazed young man into the lobby fountain. There was a splash, and then he floated back up to the surface, face-up but motionless.

“Take that, ya little punk!”

“Shouldn’t’ve assumed we were easy marks because we were old!”

“Now, get up! Or do you ladies got no other talents than s*cking d*ck?! Show me your guts!”

The old men yelled all kinds of vulgar things.

Tessa came running up to them. “Wait!” she interjected. “What’s going on here?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s Tessa-tan. These little punks didn’t know what was good for ’em, so we taught ’em a lesson or two.” They claimed that the Japanese men had been picking a fight with the hostess, making all kinds of unreasonable demands.

“Yeah, that’s what happened. We didn’t start this, Teletha,” Admiral Borda said, heaving for breath. His nose was bleeding. Even he, in such an important, high-ranked position, had apparently taken part in the violence.

“Jerry’s right. Tessa-tan, you should’ve come a minute earlier.”

“Yeah! We woulda f*cked your eyeballs with how f*cking cool we were!”

“More’s the pity,” she remarked acerbically.

“Well, never mind. I think we’ve got the right mood going. Now, let’s get to the food! The lobster awaits!”

While the old men raised up their victory song, Tessa slumped over and

sighed deeply.

One hour later...

Though it wasn't quite as large as Borda had insisted, the lobster that was placed on the table was indeed big enough to inspire gasps. It was joined by an enormous rack of spare ribs, a mountain of mashed potatoes, fried chicken and roast beef. Faced with a menu—glistening with fat, packed with calories—that would increase her weight by half in a week, Tessa was, needless to say, demoralized.

Meanwhile, the old men gobbled the food down, cackling, as if they had never heard of the modern low-calorie, low-cholesterol diet. They were as bombastic as ever in their speech, as well. The restaurant, well-ventilated and decorated in a Mediterranean style, offered a great view over the ocean at dusk. The men sat there around Tessa, making raucous conversation over the most trivial of things, ignoring the way the other guests frowned at them.

At the last seat of the table, Sousuke listened quietly to their stories, and came to understand the men's various histories:

Beside him sat Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Kevin Skyray, a former fighter pilot. He'd had countless brushes with death in Vietnam before going on to serve as a wing commander—and even captain—of an aircraft carrier. He'd also been a member of the Caterpillar Club, a title available only to those who'd successfully bailed out of an aircraft. Skyray had once been forced to use his ejection seat upon being downed by a cluster of North Vietnamese anti-air missiles. He'd landed in the enemy-infested jungle and spent about a week avoiding their armies.

He'd been a slim and handsome man in his piloting days, and had then been known to be quite a playboy. Apparently he'd missed out on a Silver Star medal because he'd stolen the mistress of an unpopular superior officer. Now, he was a rotund old man with a double chin and thinning hair—though he apparently still thought of himself as quite a catch, because he was constantly making advances towards Tessa. *"Hey, Tessa-tan, ever had a taste of dangerous love?"* he'd ask, and Tessa flatly turned him down each time.

Kurz might be like this when he gets older, Sousuke thought rather rudely.

Next was the party's organizer, the LtCol. (Ret.) John George Courtney. He was the one marine in the group, a belligerent middle-aged man with a big bushy beard. He'd apparently had a rather complicated and enigmatic career, but he'd attended military school with Borda. Normally he'd have gotten a flag commission like the others, but he liked being in the field too much, so he'd prevented his own promotion by punching out a superior he didn't like. Even after retirement, he'd still head out to the local marine base and push past the protesting subordinates in order to take out the latest arm slave, which he seemed to enjoy doing quite a lot.

Courtney wasn't especially lascivious, but was extremely foul-mouthed. His voice was loud and he was liberal with F-bombs. *"So those f*ckin' ASes are no better than that worthless piece of shit f*ckin' ArmaLite. You hear me, Tessa-tan? But they still wanna use the f*ckin' choppers in the f*cking Air Force to haul them around like a bunch of f*ckin' assholes. And their f*ckin' engines are f*ckin' Geotron, so..."* It was that, over and over. Tessa, trembling, just implored him to speak at a normal volume.

He sounds a little like Mao when she gets on a drunken tear... Sousuke thought to himself, very accurately indeed.

The fierce-looking Naval Capt. (Ret.) Roy Sears was a Navy Seal veteran of many missions. Until five years ago, he'd been with Navy SEAL command, directing numerous top-secret missions. He'd apparently been through a lot in Vietnam—judging by what they said, he'd gotten a variety of medals for missions he still couldn't talk about. He'd likely come close to death more than a few times.

Though he hid it with a thick goatee, he had a large scar on his cheek, and if you looked closely, you could see he was missing part of his right ear. Despite his time as a member of the intimidating Navy SEALs, whenever he got a chance, he'd tug on Tessa's sleeve and say, *"Hey, Tessa-tan, want to go on a walk alone with me?"* It was intimidating, in its own way, and she'd pull away from him and politely demur.

Major Kalinin might be like this if he were a bit more lovesick... Sousuke

thought, once again with extreme rudeness.

Rear Adm. (Ret.) Thomas Ross was a submariner. He'd commanded a nuclear submarine, flirting with danger against numerous Soviet Navy subs. He was known for his meticulous planning and bold navigation, but had also earned the ire of a superior fifty years ago and gotten stuck captaining a hunk of junk. Nevertheless, he'd made it back to a top-of-the-line ship, and later worked in fleet command.

He was extremely excitable, and seemed very eager to undress in front of Tessa. He'd fool around with his belt and say, *"I never got to show you! I've got a tattoo on my butt. C'mon, Tessa-chan, look at it! C'mon!"* He was a truly awful man. Tessa would close her eyes tightly and insist that he put it away.

If Colonel Mardukas went a bit mad, he might act a bit like this? Sousuke thought, a statement that might make the man in question angry if he heard it.

That was a rough summary of the group, whose members were acting wildly in a public space before the sun was even down all the way. It was quite problematic, but even Borda, the most responsible of the men, simply laughed along with a beer in hand. He would be no help at all.

"Hey, Tessa-chan. You can just take a peek, right? See?!" Thomas, the submariner, kept trying to show off his filthy butt despite her protests. Unfortunately, he genuinely seemed to be enjoying himself.

Tessa took Sousuke's arm. "I can't take it anymore," she declared. "Sagara-san, do it!"

"Yes, ma'am." Sousuke gravely picked up one of the flip-flops he'd been wearing and... *Slap!* He wapped Rear Admiral Thomas Ross as hard as he could on the back of the head, causing him to splay out across the table. He couldn't deny that it felt very nice to do it to someone else.

"Where'd that come from, boy?!" The self-proclaimed playboy, Kevin, asked as he tried to help Thomas right himself.

"The admiral said it was a no-holds-barred party," Sousuke replied casually. *Chidori would have shouted "Shut the hell up!" right now,* he mused. "Think of me as a moderator. Anyone who makes her uncomfortable will get a merciless

hit from a flip-flop, sir.”

“That’s right. A suitable punishment for actions unbecoming. As military men, you should understand the concept,” Tessa told them angrily.

Kevin and the others just grumbled to themselves, some of them with tears in their eyes.

“Hmph... outrageous. You get your fun by bullying frail old men like us?”

Tessa trembled in anger. “You just beat up five young men!”

“Eh?”

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

The group stared blankly up at the ceiling, exploiting their elderly status to its fullest.

Tessa fumed on. “Anyway, Sagara-san won’t stand for any more foulness. Well, he *may* stand as he slaps you, but you know what I mean. Right, Sagara-san?”

Sousuke nodded silently.

“We don’t agree to that, Tessa-tan! That young man has no right to judge us. He’s just your tag-along, isn’t he?!” The four men (Borda excluded) just thought Tessa was some sort of research staff at the facility where Borda worked, and that Sousuke was some sort of bodyguard there.

“Your understanding is incorrect. I didn’t want to say this, but...” Tessa cleared her throat. “Sagara-san is my lover.”

It was a shocking statement that left all the men stunned. Naturally, Sousuke was too.

“Whaaat?!”

“Which means hitting on me won’t get you anywhere,” Tessa insisted. “Right, Sagara-san?”

“Er?”

“Just say yes,” she ordered.

“Y-Yes...” Sousuke responded, his face thick with nervous sweat.

The men spontaneously all looked like they wanted to cry.

“It can’t be true!”

“It’s cruel!”

“You’ve destroyed our dreams!”

“It’s a bluff! It’s a f*ckin’ bluff!”

One faceplanted on the table, weeping; another stared blankly at the ceiling; two others comforted each other. Even Borda, for some reason, purpled with anger and glared at Sousuke. “Sergeant!” he said angrily, “I’m disappointed in you!”

“A-Admiral?” Sousuke choked out.

“I took you for a promising young man, not a filthy sneak-thief! How will I make this up to poor, dead Carl? How long has this been going on, eh?!” Borda grabbed him by the lapels of his shirt and shook Sousuke back and forth.

“P-Please calm down, Admiral...”

“Since the September break,” Tessa said cleanly. “I slept at his apartment every night, so we had more than enough chances then. Although that incorrigible Sagara-san barely let me get a single night’s sleep! He made love so passionately... I honestly found myself nodding off during the day. It was awful!” Tessa continued spinning her lie, seeming to enjoy the way it made the men around her slump in disappointment. At the end, she let out a little snort, as if to say, *‘serves you right.’*

Sousuke argued with her in whispered Japanese. “Colonel, you can’t tell them that!”

“Why not?”

“It’s one thing to say it to the outsiders, but even Admiral Borda believes you... He’s white as a sheet! You’re putting us both at risk, professionally!”

“It’s fine,” she insisted, “just let him stew.” Tessa clearly wouldn’t be talked down this time.

“But Colonel—”

“They’re always getting a rise out of me! It’s time I taught them a lesson!”

“Ahh...”

“And why do *you* look so unhappy about it?!” she demanded sulkily. “Is it that upsetting to play my boyfriend?”

“N-No, not at all...” Sousuke replied.

“Then shut up and wipe that expression off your face. Besides, I think we’ve settled them down, and that’s all I wanted to achieve.”

“Hmm...” He couldn’t argue with that. The men really had quieted down, and had even turned morose. “Yes,” he finally agreed, “it’s acceptable.”

“Right?” said Tessa, proudly reclining in her seat.

But seconds later, the men all raised their glasses and shouted weepily,

“All right, we’ll drink our troubles away tonight!”

“We’ll party until we all pass out!”

“We’ll go eighty percent harder than last year!”

“And you, kid! We’re gonna have a talk with you later! Got it?!”

The old men were immediately back to their pomp and bluster. It would be too much to say that Tessa was hoisted on her own petard, but her plan certainly hadn’t gone the way she’d hoped. She and Sousuke both faceplanted on the table at the realization of their failure. And then...

“Eek!” A waitress near the restaurant’s entrance let out a piercing scream, accompanied by the sound of crashing plates.

A tall and thin man stepped into the restaurant and shouted, “Okay, nobody move!”

The shocked customers ducked down in their seats while the waitresses crouched down, covering their heads.

A robbery? Sousuke thought. Being experienced enough in these sorts of situations, neither he nor Tessa panicked. They just glanced up at the intruder

to examine him in an unobtrusive manner.

He was a Caucasian man just over thirty, wearing a printed T-shirt and jeans. He held a cheap-looking revolver in one hand and was sweating all over; his hair was a mess, and he seemed extremely agitated. “Dammit!” he screamed. “Stay in your seats! Anyone who tries anything gets a lead slug! Hey, girl! No cell phones!”

The whole restaurant went silent in fear. No, not completely silent—The five men at Sousuke’s table continued happily, raising their glasses and singing *You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling*, from the soundtrack of a certain movie. “Baby, baby! I know it!” they crooned. “You lost that lovin’ feelin’! Whoa, that lovin’ feelin’!” They hadn’t even noticed the new intrusion.

It was impossible for the atmosphere to get any more awkward. Tessa turned beet red, feeling the eyes of the other customers on her.

Before even thirty seconds had passed, multiple police cars had pulled up in front of the restaurant. It appeared that the armed man was a fugitive who’d taken refuge here. The sirens blared. The local cops used their cars as barricades, propping shotguns and pistols on top of them. More cars came rushing up to support the first responders, and soon the restaurant was surrounded.

The man with the gun checked out the window, and began cursing violently to himself.

“This is quite troubling,” Tessa whispered.

“Colonel,” Sousuke responded in a low voice, “I can take care of this, if you wish.”

Someone with his skill set could disarm the man using just one knife from the table. But despite knowing that, Tessa appeared to think it over. “Ah... But if you stand out, the police will want to ask you about it later,” she pointed out. “You’ll have to undergo an interview and everything...”

Meanwhile, the group of old men continued singing. “You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’! Whoa, whoa! Lovin’...”

“We might not make it back tomorrow...”

“Now it’s gone, gone, gone, whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“As long as he doesn’t try to hurt anyone,” Tessa decided, “I’d prefer to stay out of it, and—”

“Now there’s no welcome look in your eyes! When I reach for you!!!”

“Excuse me, gentlemen? Could you please be quiet?!” Tessa barked at the old men, who had continued to sing their drinking song despite everything going on around them.

“Why, Tessa-tan?”

“You look even cuter when you’re angry!”

“F*ckin’ good!”

“How can you be thinking about *that* right now?! Can’t you see what’s going on?” Irritated, Tessa pointed at the man in the T-shirt skulking around the restaurant’s entrance.

“Oh, him? Bet he’s just lookin’ for the crapper.”

“He’s not!” she insisted. “He clearly has a gun! And can’t you see the police cars outside?!”

The old men looked outside and hummed speculatively to themselves.

“They’re here for you, Kevin. You broke the f*ckin’ window in that f*ckin’ hotel last night.”

“Don’t be stupid, it’s your reckless driving that did it,” Kevin retorted. “You were racing down the beach ogling girls in bikinis!”

“I think it was Roy punching out that snotty MP at the naval base.”

The old men went around the table, recounting their recent list of crimes.

“D-Did you do all that?” Tessa asked, and then fell silent as the man with the gun began to stride up to them.

“Hey, you old bastards!” the fugitive shouted. “Haven’t you heard me telling you to be quiet?!”

At this, the old men looked at each other and shrugged. “Okay, guess he’s the

one they're after."

"Aw, no fun."

"How many battalions of f*ckin' police do they need for one hooligan?"

They seemed completely dismissive of the situation.

Suddenly the fugitive flew into a rage, pointing his .38 caliber revolver at the men and causing a waitress to scream. "You see this?!" he demanded. "I'll blow your brains out right here!"

The old men remained unfazed.

"Ohhhh, noooo! Pleeese, don't kill me!"

"Oh, saaave us, save us!"

"Take the lobster, just leave us alone!"

They pleaded with him sarcastically, before bursting into laughter.

"Wh-What if I shot this girl, eh?!" The man turned the gun to Tessa.

The men then all raised up their hands as if to guard Tessa. "Oh, nooo! Please, not her!" And then they all laughed again.

"I-I'll shoot! I really will!" The fugitive's anger seemed to have reached its boiling point. With nervous sweat running down his face, he held the gun tight in both hands. His eyes were serious.

"Ah, go on and shoot. Don't let us stop you."

"Just make sure you're aimin' right, kid."

The old men jeered at him while continuing to chow down on fries and spare ribs.

"Ngh... hnngh..."

"What's wrong? Scared?" asked Roy, the retired Navy SEALs commander. "If you don't wanna shoot a girl, you can shoot me. Go on."

"Urk... hng..."

"That's right, relax. You've got the safety off, right? Good. Then shoot any time you want," Roy offered, pointing directly at his own forehead. "Pucker

your asshole and look straight at me. You gotta keep your eye on the target. Yeah, that's right! Straight forward! Right here!"

"Ngh... ah..."

"That'll do it," Roy told him encouragingly. "Now, shoot!"

The gun's barrel trembled as tears formed in the man's eyes.

"What's wrong with you? Shoot!"

"C'mon! Hurry it up!"

"Show us your f*ckin' guts!"

"Just shoot already!"

It had gone well past the level of bluffing. The old men were really urging the man to shoot, banging their utensils against the lobster and shouting, "Shoot! Shoot!" in order to urge him on.

Roy held out his steak knife. "I'll give you three seconds," he offered again. "If you don't shoot, I'm gonna stab you! Now, shoot! Three!"

"Ngh... ahh... ahhh!"

"Two! One!"

The man sucked in his breath.

"Shoot!"

"Aaah... ahhhhh!" Clenching his tear-filled eyes hard, the man pulled the trigger.

Click. A dull metallic sound rang out, and then nothing more.

"Mmmmgh! Ahh... hmm?" Scrunching up his tear-stained face, the man pulled the trigger again and again, but nothing came out. Panicking, he turned the gun over, examining it.

"Gya ha ha ha ha!" The old men erupted in laughter with the force of an atomic bomb exploding. "Gyaaaaa ha ha ha! Gyaaaa ha ha ha! Gya ha ha ha! Hyee, hee hee hee! Mwee hee hee! Waa ha ha ha ha! Kah kah kah! Wa ha ha! Hee hee! Heee hee... bwaaaaa ha ha! Ha ha ha! Kyaaa ha ha! Bwa ha ha, hee

hee hee, gya ha ha!” The laughter was so over the top that it was vaguely irritating, as they clapped their hands and banged on the table obnoxiously to mimic the way the crying man had fired.

The man with the gun seemed completely at a loss.

Unable to look on any longer, Sousuke said kindly, “Look at the cylinder.”

“Eh?”

“With a revolver like that,” he explained, “it’s easy to see from the front how many bullets remain.”

The fugitive was out of bullets; the mean old men had known this from the start, and had just been messing with him. They continued to laugh while pointing at the criminal, who just stood there, red-faced.

“Hee... heh, heh... So? What’d you do, exactly?” submariner Thomas wiped at his eyes and asked after their laughter finally died down, about a minute later.

“Ah... well... I robbed a currency exchange counter for tourists... ah, thank you.” The man, who’d gone totally docile now, sat down in an empty seat as Tessa beckoned him. “I got the money and ran away and... lots of stuff happened. I tried to shoot out the tires of the cars coming after me, but it didn’t quite go the way it does in movies... ah, thank you.” Tessa poured cold water into an empty cup, and the man abashedly scratched his head.

“Please, try to calm down,” she said.

“I appreciate it.” He drank down the water, as urged. “Mmh! Delicious. Well, anyway... so now I’m here.” The man only had one gun, which was out of bullets. But the local police didn’t know that, and so they’d surrounded the restaurant with their cars.

“How much did you steal?”

“Well... I didn’t have time to count it, but I took as many thousand dollar bills as I could grab.” He searched around in his jeans pockets and placed some crumpled bills on the counter. Thirteen bills with the number “1000” stamped on them. Had they been thousand dollar bills, he would have had himself quite a tidy sum, but...

“These are thousand *yen* bills,” Sousuke whispered. In other words, 13,000 yen—about 110 dollars’ worth. The number of police currently surrounded the building made the tally feel even more pathetic. “Even holding up a restaurant like this would’ve fetched you more.”

“Yeah. I really feel like crying,” the man agreed, placing his hands on the table to stare down at the 13,000 yen. “I bought that gun from a guy on the street. It cost me 130 dollars. That leaves me about twenty in the red...” He took the paper napkin Tessa offered him and wiped his tears and blew his nose. “Thanks, lady. You’re nice. Sorry about threatening you before.”

“That’s all right,” said Tessa. “Er... what’s your name?”

“Dennis. Dennis Falkowski.” The man gave up his name easily, and the old men narrowed their eyes.

“Falkowski, eh? Where do you hail from?”

“Hawaii. Some stuff happened and I ended up a truck driver in Guam.”

“So, Dennis... What do you plan to do next?” asked Kevin, the retired fighter pilot.

Dennis let out an exhausted sigh. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t think 110 dollars is going to fix much of anything, so I guess I’ll just go to jail.” Tears spilled from his eyes as he looked down. “Dammit... Danny... I’m sorry. I’m an awful father.”

“You have a son?” Tessa asked.

Dennis nodded. “Yeah, he lives in Saipan with my ex. I always saw him once a month. But the other day, I got a call from my ex’s lawyer. She doesn’t want to let me see him anymore. And she wants six months’ worth of back child support.”

“And that’s why you robbed that counter?”

“I didn’t have a choice. I messed up an assignment and the freight company fired me. I really needed money! Five thousand dollars by Monday morning...”

“Hmph. Serves you right,” said Thomas, the retired submariner, while munching on his Mediterranean-style seafood tacos drenched in sauce. “That’s

what you get for being a damn layabout. Just give up on your kid, turn yourself in, and do your time. Seems right for a loser like you.”

“Admiral Ross. That seems a bit harsh...”

“No, Tessa-tan. Thomas is right. That f*ckin’ guy waved his f*ckin’ gun around and tried to f*ck us all.”

“Yeah, yeah. Idiots like you are the reason we need gun laws.”

“Can’t even enjoy our drinks like this...”

Collectively, the old men gave him the cold shoulder. In this particular case, they were entirely right, so Tessa didn’t comment any further. The room was silent except for Dennis’s crying. The old men’s fun had been properly ruined at last.

Just then, the restaurant’s phone rang.

The nearby waitress picked it up and began a whispered conversation. She looked at Dennis and, pointing to the receiver, said hesitantly, “Er, it’s the police. They want to talk to you.”

Dennis flinched. “Wh-What do I do?”

“What else can you do? Talk to them, say you’re sorry and go out there.”

“All... All right. Um, but first, could you do me a favor?”

“What is it?” The mariner asked suspiciously.

Dennis dithered a little, then pulled an old watch from his pocket. It was a dull gold color, and the glass was fogged over. “Will you get this to Danny... to my son, who lives in Saipan? It’s a memento from my dead dad. I was hoping to give it to him one day... but I don’t think I’ll get to now.”

“Why not just mail it?”

“I can’t,” Dennis told them gloomily. “My wife would just throw the package out without even looking at the contents.”

“Hmm...”

“And could you give my son a message? I might be a loser, but my dad—his grandfather—was a wonderful man. My son will be a teenager soon. I don’t

want him to grow up feeling like a burden. I'd like to give him a little... just the tiniest thing he can take pride in."

The old men fell silent. They folded their arms thoughtfully, then exchanged a glance. Then, at last, they all looked at Admiral Borda.

"Well... it's not impossible, but..." Borda said hesitantly. "All right, we'll do it!"

The silent conference—which excluded Tessa and Sousuke—seemed to have reached a conclusion.

"Um... The policeman is asking when I'll put you on," the waitress said.

"Let me talk." Roy, the retired SEAL, stood up before anyone could object. The surprised Dennis tried to follow, but John, the retired marine, stopped him. Roy marched up to the phone, took the receiver from the waitress and started talking. "Hello! No, no, I'm a customer in the restaurant. I'm talking to you in place of the perp. Hmm? No, nobody's hurt here. Now..."

He was probably talking to the officer giving orders on the scene. He sounded as casual as could be as he did so, but the responses he gave were very guarded. Lots of 'I'm not sure' and 'I couldn't say' and 'I didn't see'—ambiguous answers that could be interpreted a variety of ways after the fact.

After a while, though, he said, "Weapons? Oh, *his* weapons. Yeah, he's heavily armed. Listen up and write these downs—first, he's got an M4 carbine. For handguns, he's got a Desert Eagle .50 caliber and a Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum. He's also got Claymore mines posted at the front and back entrances, and a pound of C4 strapped to everyone in the restaurant. It's all tied to his heartbeat and it'll blow if it stops. Nah, you won't be getting in here anytime soon!"

"Er?" Tessa, Sousuke, and Dennis were all caught off guard. Meanwhile, the old men were cackling with laughter.

"No, stupid, I'm not messing with you. Demands? *His* demands? Oh, er..." Roy covered the receiver with his hand and looked back questioningly. Kevin and John both spread their arms wide. "Oh... two million dollars. That's right, two million. Not a penny less. Tell your boss, all right?"

They could hear the negotiator shouting on the other end of the line.

“Ah, screw this. I’m hanging up now.” Roy covered his ear in annoyance and hung up the phone.

“Wh-Why are you trying to make this worse? You’re making me sound like a hardened criminal! Or a heavily armed terrorist!” asked Dennis, suddenly extremely agitated.

“There’s no way they’ll believe all that crap,” Thomas said, also covering his ear in annoyance at Dennis’s shouting.

“But they were still plausible-sounding lies. What in the world were you thinking?” Tessa asked him with an icy tone. She understood what they were getting at, but she was in no mood to support it.

Roy spoke. “It took me just a few seconds to peg the guy on the phone as out of his league. He was just reading out of the negotiations manual. Typical bureaucrat. But that BS’ll slow ’em down a few minutes. He’s probably passing it on to his superior as we speak.”

“So?”

“If we leave here right now, acting like hostages, their commander’ll probably say, ‘Don’t shoot! Let them go!’” Thomas pointed out.

And indeed...

“Don’t shoot! Let them go!” the nervous police commander shouted through his megaphone. The officers held their shotguns and rifles firmly as they watched the old men, Tessa, and Sousuke leave the restaurant surrounding Dennis, cold sweat on their brows. Nervous young officers watched as they headed for a nearby pickup truck, but...

“Ahh... Help!”

“Please, don’t shoot!”

“It’s a bomb! There’s a bomb around my waist!”

...the old men’s exaggerated calls kept them from pulling the trigger. Dennis, meanwhile, held his cell phone high in the air (as the old marine, John, had instructed him). From a distance, it looked like it could have been the detonator

for a bomb.

Kevin, the retired fighter pilot, quickly set himself up in the driver's seat as the rest dove into the bed.

"Okay, gun it! Gun it!" they called.

"Hang on tight!" he shouted back at them. Then, with the force of a jet out of a catapult, the truck roared up the avenue, swaying side to side and crushing shrubs beneath its tires. Naturally, police sirens immediately began to wail in pursuit.

"Ya see? We made it out!" Roy shouted.

"But what do we do now?!" Dennis cried, shedding waterfalls of tears as the wind buffeted him. "If I'd just turned myself in, they might've lessened my sentence! Now I've got even more charges, *and* I'm on an island! An *island*! A tiny island you can circle in one hour! There's no way to escape!"

"Boy are you a pessimist," one of the old men observed. "You know, Dennis, you're the one who started this!"

"I've had enough! Let me off!"

Sousuke quickly moved to stop Dennis from throwing himself off the speeding truck. They were moving so fast that they wove into the opposing lane, just as a car appeared, coming in the other direction.

"Waaaaaaaagh!"

They just managed to slip by it, then heard a loud crash behind them as a police car flipped into the air.

"God! Oh, God! I won't do anything so stupid ever again!" Dennis screamed. "I won't steal ever again! Please, save me! Save me..."

"Waaaah ha ha ha! Pedal to the metal!"

It was hard to tell who the real villain was here. Dennis wept while the old men cackled.

Sousuke clung to the truck bed and called to Admiral Borda beside him. "Admiral! Admiral, sir!"

“Hmm?! What is it, Sergeant?!”

“General Skyray’s driving is impressive, but we can’t escape them! The police have helicopters! They’ll eventually catch us!” No matter how they drove, there’d be no way to evade a helicopter’s watchful infrared eye.

“Yeah, we know!” Borda waved off Sousuke’s concern and turned to Tessa, who was desperately engaged with a tablet in the middle of the truck bed. Undeterred by the shaking around her, she tapped away at the keyboard.

“Teletha!” he bellowed. “How’s it coming?”

“Don’t talk to me now!” she yelled back. “I’m contacting Dana!”

“See, Sergeant? Nothing to worry about!” said the admiral, patting Sousuke on the shoulder. He tended to forget that Mithril had the power to hack into any computer system in the world. It was powerful enough to erase information about the Tuatha de Danaan from US surveillance satellites, so they could easily use it to interfere with regional police search nets—a fact which had come in handy during the Behemoth incident in Ariake. Of course, Mithril’s head of operations typically forbade such lawlessness, but...

“Go for it, Teletha!” That same head of operations, Admiral Borda, was currently the one egging on the lawlessness.

“The helicopter’s moving away! We’ve scrambled the police’s information networks! They shouldn’t follow us for a while, but... Uncle Jerry?! This is insane... I won’t be responsible for any of this!” Teletha yelled.

“Oh, don’t worry about that! Just focus on escaping for now!”

“I’ve had enough!” she howled. “I’m *not* coming next year!”

“Wah ha ha!”

They drove and drove and drove. Carrying the whole lot of them, the truck swerved down a wide avenue full of tourists and into a nearby yacht club. There were boats of all sizes in the harbor there, and the truck came to a screeching halt. The old men dragged the reluctant looking Dennis and Tessa out, throwing them onto a small boat which surely didn’t belong to any of them. Thomas, the retired submariner, and former sailor Borda went through the necessary

processes to get the engine started.

“Moving out!” It wasn’t clear who made that call, but the old men quickly unfurled the sail and pulled up the anchor, taking the boat out of dock with much ruckus.

“Let me oooout!” Dennis’s scream of agony echoed throughout the harbor.

It was at that moment that the police came running, and they interpreted the scream as coming from a hostage. None of them heard Sousuke’s mutter of, “Just give in already.” The old men opened the beers they’d made sure to bring from the truck and had a toast, even forcing Tessa to take the helm.

“C’mon, Tessa-tan!” they cried encouragingly. “Hard to starboard, starboard!”

“Enough!” With tears filling her eyes, Tessa pulled the wheel. She knew how to pilot a boat, after all.

They managed to give the port police the slip before pulling up to a sandbar in their stolen vessel, at which point they abandoned it. Then they transferred to an inflatable raft, and moved away as the boat slowly sailed out to sea. The old men saluted its departing form.

“Farewell, mother vessel...”

“Why are you getting sentimental over a boat you stole thirty minutes ago?!” Tessa interjected.

The old men frowned, as if their feelings were hurt.

“Don’t be mean.”

“Don’t you have any poetry in you?”

“You’re too serious, Tessa-tan.”

“And would you stop calling me ‘Tessa-tan’?!” she cried out in exasperation. “Where did you even *learn* that phrase?!”

“Never mind that. Now, let’s head for the opposite shore.” With that, Borda picked up one of the oars that came with the raft, and led them in paddling to the nearest shore.

Their raft washed ashore deep in a rocky inlet. It was a desolate area, far from

the central city, which had been crowded with tourists. The men crawled out onto the rocks in the moonlight and sank the raft.

Then Kevin, another of the old men, said, “So? Have we lost the police?”

“It appears that way. There’s no sign of them nearby,” Sousuke, who’d been getting dragged around this whole time, whispered glumly as he stared out into the darkness.

“Good,” said Admiral Borda. “Now, blindfold Dennis.” The old men surrounded the exhausted Dennis, blindfolding him with a towel and elastic cord.

“Um...?”

“All right. Now we just wait,” Borda said, looking at his watch. A few minutes later, the familiar sound of rotors approached them. It was the MH-67 Pave Mare transport helicopter that had brought Sousuke and Tessa to Guam.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Dennis asked nervously. “What are you—”

“All right, kid, shut up. If we think you can’t keep your mouth shut, we’ll kill you, toss your body in the ocean, and go on our way.”

“R-Right...” Dennis quickly went quiet.

Even with its ECS invisibility mode activated, Sousuke was surprised to see the Mithril transport helicopter setting down in front of Roy, John, Thomas, and Kevin, which permitted outsiders to hear the sounds of that organization’s rotors and machinery. He looked over at Tessa. “Colonel,” he said, “is this acceptable?”

“Ask the admiral,” Tessa said with a shrug.

“Admiral?”

“It’s fine, Sergeant. These guys know that the secret battle group I work with has helicopters mounted with invisibility ECS. They’re tight-lipped, and they’ve been a lot of help to our operations division in the past. There’s nothing to worry about,” Borda reassured him. “Right, guys?”

“Yeah.” The old men nodded absently.

“For instance,” he continued, “Thomas’s connections helped us out a lot on Berildaob Island.”

“What?!” Tessa asked in surprise.

Admiral Thomas Ross grinned at her. “It’s true, Tessa-tan. You still think I’m an incompetent old harasser, good for nothing but taking his pants down? Eh?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Tessa insisted.

Thomas sagged. “So cruel...”

“Excuse me, gentlemen. The helicopter’s touched down,” said Sousuke, looking up at the helicopter. It was slowly descending, warping the air above them.

The blindfolded Dennis and the (relatively) uncompromised old men boarded the Pave Mare, which quickly climbed again before heading for Saipan, an island near Guam. The old men—Roy, Kevin, Thomas, and John—looked around the helicopter’s cabin, but didn’t seem to take any particular interest in it.

“We’d never do anything to compromise Jerry’s work.”

Tessa still had her doubts, but since Borda insisted it was fine, she couldn’t exactly object.

The helicopter they were on approached an ordinary neighborhood in Saipan and touched down near the neighborhood that Dennis Falkowski had mentioned. It let them off, took off again, and then took its time ascending back into the sky.

Dennis stared as the blindfold came off. “Isn’t this... Saipan?”

“That’s what we said.”

“And... it’s right near where my son Danny lives!”

“That’s what we said!” the old men barked in annoyance.

“I think we’ve done enough,” Admiral Borda announced pointedly. “Go say goodbye to your son. You just wanted to give him that watch of yours, right?”

“Right, but...” Dennis hesitated. “I... I don’t understand. Why would you all...”

“Don’t ask now,” said Borda. “Do you want to turn yourself in and end up in prison, or do you want to start over in a new world? If you want to try the latter, call this phone number.”

“What...”

Borda offered Dennis a piece of paper with a phone number on it: the number was for Mithril’s operations division. “But once you call this number, you’ll never be free again,” he warned. “You’ll be choosing a totally new way of life. Either way, recognize that a miracle like this will never happen to you again. Understood?”

“Y-Yes sir.”

“Goodbye, then. No need to thank us. Go.”

Nevertheless, thanking them again and again, Dennis ran into the residential block currently sinking into darkness.

Tessa whispered as she watched him go, “Uncle Jerry, are you sure this is for the best?”

“It’s fine,” Borda said. “The word of a man like him can’t harm Mithril anyway.”

“But why show so much to those four careless old men?” she wondered.

“That’s fine too,” Borda said again. “As I said before, they’re trustworthy. They’ve been a lot of help with Mithril operations and cleanup. I’m telling you, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Aha...” Tessa replied limply.

The Mithril helicopter, which had been on standby up in the air, now began to descend again. Preparing for the landing, Sousuke ran towards a flat piece of land nearby, the landing zone.

“But I just don’t understand it,” Tessa said nevertheless. “I’m sorry to say it this way, but why did they bother to save a worthless hooligan like Dennis? Not even I would have done this much for him. Is there something else going on here?”

“Yes, there is,” the admiral admitted hesitantly. “His... Dennis’s father was

named Louis Falkowski. We were in the same class in Annapolis. He died in Vietnam.”

Tessa was silent.

“He was brave and earnest and funny. All the guys who came today knew him. Thirty years ago, before he died on the Laotian border, Louis bragged that he’d just had a son named Dennis. He was gonna give his wristwatch to that son someday. That’s pretty much it...” said Borda, trailing off.

Tessa didn’t know what to say. For the first time, the men she thought of as nothing but a bunch of gross old perverts suddenly seemed like great men on the level of Sousuke, Kalinin, and Mardukas. “Uncle...”

“It’s all right, Teletha. But try to be kind to them, if you can,” Borda asked simply. “They still bear the very painful scars of war. Your smile is a great comfort to them.”

“Right...” Tessa looked down and whispered. But just then...

“Oh, Tessa-tan’s lookin’ sexy!”

“Bet she’s thinkin’ of lewd things!”

“F*ckin’ good!”

The old men approached, shouting the most outrageous things. Tessa trembled but held in her rage. They had a sixty minute flight ahead, after all.

Once they returned to Guam from Saipan, the old men resumed their carousing. One would expect them to be worried about pursuit from the police, but apparently they didn’t raise much suspicion.

Sousuke, who’d had to continue to play Tessa’s lover, spent his last day there being teased and shouted at by the old men. Obviously, he never managed to do his homework for school—to disastrous results.

After several weeks, Borda gave Tessa a new annoying task. When she saw the name of the new base logistics crew members joining the Tuatha de Danaan battle group, she just barely managed to keep a wince from her face in front of her secretary.

D. Falkowski.

As she signed the document, Tessa wondered what she might say when she ran into the new private.

〈A Fugue for Old Men — The End〉

Afterword

This volume contains edits of short stories that appeared in *Monthly Dragon Magazine's* October 2000 issue, its January, July, and November 2001 issues, and its April 2002, plus one bonus story.

I feel like there's a theme of immorality to these stories in a different way than usual, but that wasn't particularly intentional. By the way, everyone in these stories is drinking, aren't they? How writerly of them.

The month before this book comes out, at 2:28 in the morning of August 5th, the second anime, *Full Metal Panic? Fumoffu* will start airing. This one draws solely on the comedy shorts. I've seen storyboards for a couple episodes, and the Bonta-kun and custodian action scenes are a sight to behold. The scene where the custodian fends off a hundred attacking Bonta-kuns brings up shades of *The One*, it's so powerful (just kidding). In order to create the action scenes, the director, Takemoto-san, went to the USA and studied gun fu, as well as Seagal's brand of martial arts (also just kidding).

All that aside, let's have a few words about each story.

"A Concealment Full of Holes"

This story ran in *DM* at the end of September 2001 to coincide with the original anime's broadcast. We were getting a lot of attention over the anime adaptation, so I thought it would be funny to do a story like this, but the terrorism and delays made it a lot less funny. It was a very memorable episode of my life, though. I'm just going to pray that we don't get some idiot shooting up a school this time.

"The Self-Serving Blues"

I made Kazama-kun say something very cynical here, but I didn't want to make our young male readers feel entirely hopeless. Look, facing that reality is

nothing but the start of an all new road to walk. Once you break through that initial disappointment, you'll find so many new things. The road may be long and treacherous, but... Laputa does exist! Absolutely! Surely! Probably! Maybe... (gradually getting weaker.)

“The Turnabout Drunkards”

This is a story about finding out where President Hayashimizu lives. There's a real-life model for the lodging house described there, but the people who lived there weren't that weird. Later, a friend said, “It's a lot like ****son Ikkoku*” but I didn't notice until then. Maybe it was subconscious.

Also, underage drinking is illegal. If you hold a drinking party and your teacher or a policeman catches you, please do not blame it on *FMP*! And if you're in high school, you should be more discrete in your drinking and smoking because (further commentary omitted).

“Undercover of Obligated Empathy”

I have a tendency to write yakuza and delinquent characters more sympathetically as time goes on. I've met a lot of criminal types, so I guess I don't have any weird illusions about them. They're better than people who do terrorist bombings or start wars based on baseless criticism.

This probably doesn't matter, but my alma mater, which I based Jindai High on, also appeared in an old Jump manga called *Rokudenashi Blues*. The writer went there a few years before me (though I never met him).

“The Midnight Raiders”

I wrote this one because I was really craving hotpot.

When I first started writing, I wanted Jindai High to come off as a normal school, but as episodes went by, I started to realize it had to be pretty weird even in Sousuke's absence. The fate of any school comedy, I guess.

And while readers might not care about this, I think Kaname is cutest when she's wearing a hanten coat over her uniform. Rather than idol-type costumes, I

think she looks better with more everyday outfits: aprons, track suits, old lady sandals...

“A Fugue for Old Soldiers”

The bonus story. I might get some flak for having Tessa acting like this right after the Christmas novel, but personally, I prefer the feisty Tessa to the one that's always mooning around. Though the story ended up being more about some weird old men anyway...

I'm starting to realize bit by bit that I prefer writing old man characters. If I wrote a story about five beautiful girls instead of five old men, I'd probably have five times the writing energy and pain at the same time. I understand what Tsukiji-san goes through now.

By the way, I've been to Guam countless times, and it's full of both signs in Japanese and Japanese people. It feels less like a foreign country and more like a tourist spot like Izu.

Now, I've received a lot of patience and support from a lot of people this time around. Thanks, as always. Next book will be a novel, I think. The enemy's coming into view for real, and the battle's going to grow more violent. Sousuke's and Kaname's lives as they know them will come to an end.

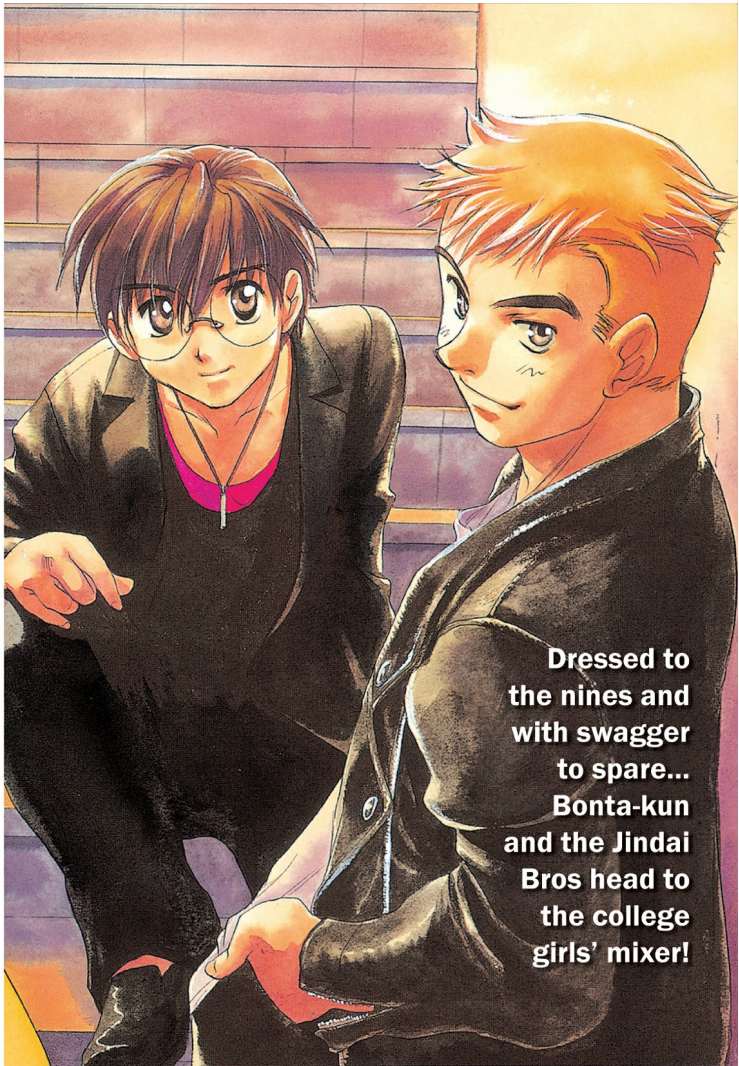
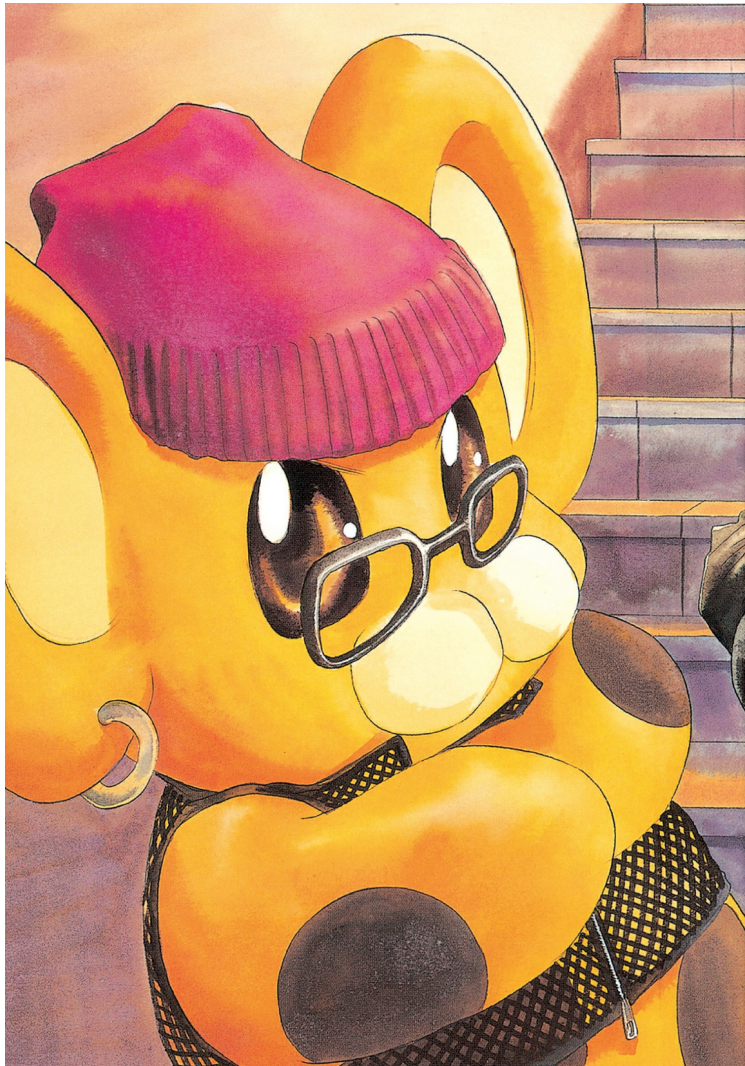
Until next time, when Kaname's fan will roar again.

“Like Bonta-kun!”

**Kaname hugged
Sousuke tightly,
causing him to
flail around.**



**FULL METAL PANIC!
UNTENABLE SEVENTH HEAVEN FEELING?**



Dressed to
the nines and
with swagger
to spare...
Bonta-kun
and the Jindai
Bros head to
the college
girls' mixer!



**Bold and
unwavering!
Kaname took
a K-1 stance
against the
delinquents.**

**“Perfect timing!
I’ll show you a
replay of last
night’s third
round!”**



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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 7

by Shouji Gatou

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