

UNQUENCHABLE FIVE-ALARM FIRE?



FULL METAL.. PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

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A Pure Yet Impure Grappler

Chidori Kaname and Tokiwa Kyoko were running. Dressed in their street clothes, covered in sweat, panicked and flailing, they scrambled down the dark alley. Hot on their heels was a trio of obvious delinquent-types, sporting the usual array of tattoos, piercings, and eye patches. Determination glinted in their eyes as they pursued.

“Come back! Ya can’t get away!”

“Come back or we’ll kill ya!”

“Come back *and* we’ll kill ya!”

Their fury must have clouded their judgment, because their requests were unreasonable and contradictory. These were not men open to compromise or discussion.

“Sheesh, these guys don’t give up!” Kaname, a girl with long black hair and pretty features, said ruefully while panting and heaving for breath. She was holding her paper bag from Parco under one arm as she pulled Kyoko along with the other.

“It’s probably because,” her companion, Kyoko, likewise panted, tears hanging at the corners of her large, round eyes behind coke-bottle glasses, “you threw your drink on them... then hit them with a vacuum flying knee kick...”

They were in the shopping district on a Sunday. They’d come here to hit up the local stores and were grabbing a meal in a fast food place when the delinquents had approached. They’d surrounded Kyoko, going on about how cute she was, trying to jokingly put their arms around her, and more.

Kaname had happened to be away at the time, so when she’d returned, she’d unleashed a stream of verbal abuse on the trio. She had indeed thrown her drink on them and inflicted a jumping knee kick before spraying them with a fire extinguisher and hitting them with the empty tank when she was done. Then she’d taken off like a bat out of hell, leading to their present situation.

Some might even say the delinquents' rage was understandable.

"Hahh... hahh... c-can't go on..." Kyoko struggled for breath as she stumbled along in her high-heeled shoes.

"C'mon, Kyoko, get a grip!" Kaname ordered. "If they catch us, we're done for! We'll be sold to work on a tuna boat!"

"I really... doubt that..." Kyoko panted. "Ah, can't go on..." But despite her exhaustion, she continued to run while being pulled along by Kaname. They knocked over piles of cardboard boxes, charged straight through a heap of trash bags, rounded the corner, and then... "Ahh!" Kyoko cried, finally tripping and falling flat onto the ground.

"Kyoko?!" Kaname ran back and helped her up, but not fast enough; the delinquents had caught up to them at last. "Geh..." she choked. "This is bad."

"I'm sorry... sorry, Kana-chan," Kyoko said with tear-filled eyes.

The three men surrounded the two girls, mouths slack, heads uniformly tilted forty-five degrees to the left.

"Little bitches."

"You're gonna pay for that, eh?"

"Really thought you could get away, eh?"

They were, indeed, furious.

"C-C'mon, guys. Let's not fight. Let's live in peace and friendship. As-salamu alaykum, peace be with you," Kaname said soothingly, putting her right hand upon her left breast.

"You messin' with us, eh?!" a delinquent demanded.

"Yeah, partly..." she was forced to admit.

"Hey! Whaddyawa?!" he replied in a barely comprehensible shout. Then he raised a fist and swung it at Kaname with full force.

At least, that had been her expectation. In fact, before he'd had a chance to bring his fist down on her, someone had grabbed it from behind.

"Eh?" the delinquent exclaimed in surprise.

The one who'd seized his hand was a boy, about the same age as Kaname and Kyoko. He was on the short side—about the same height as them or a little shorter. He had a very pale, attractive face, almond-shaped eyes, and long black hair tied back tightly beneath a red bandana. He also had a strangely dingy air about him—perhaps he was a cook at a local restaurant.

“A real man doesn't hit women.” The boy's voice was as cold as ice, yet a flaring passion seeped out around the edges.

The seized delinquent sneered back at the boy, “Eh? What the hell do you think you're— ow, ow, ow!” His barks became a whine the second the boy began to twist his wrist. “Ow! Cut it out! Quit it! Hey, cut it out, I said... ahh, stop, stop, stop! Mommy... lemme 'lone... won't hurt nobody... I'll go straight, I promise!” Here, he began wailing openly. The horrific pain seemed to have caused him to relive memories of his less-than-ideal childhood.

“He told you to cut it out, asshole!” the other two delinquents shouted as they leaped forward. One held a riot baton, the other a knife. They came at the boy from both sides.

“Ah, look o—” Kaname and Kyoko tried to shout.

But the boy moved into action before his assailants reached him: first to the left, then to the right. Sharp slams rang out around them. It looked like he'd executed a pair of Bajiquan-style stomps. The next thing the girls knew, the two attackers had been slammed into either side of the alley, their weapons flying off. Kaname was completely in the dark about what had happened; it had occurred faster than the eye could follow.

The first man took off, weeping, as the other two slumped to the ground, unconscious.

The boy stood there for a while in a low stance with a blue aura rising from his fists. Then, at last, he relaxed and straightened. “Hmph,” he said with an indifferent snort before once again picking up the trash bag at his feet and beginning to walk off.

“E-Excuse me...” said Kaname.

“What is it, woman?” the boy asked bluntly as he stuffed the trash bag into an

orange trash can.

“Thank you. Um... for saving us.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” he told her.

“Er...?”

“This is where I work,” he said, indicating the nearby door with his chin. “I didn’t want a commotion bothering our customers.” The delicious smell of gyoza wafted out from the exhaust fan; it appeared to be some kind of Chinese restaurant.

“Ah... I see.”

“I would never go out of my way to save tawdry women like you,” he clarified. “Now, make yourselves scarce.”

Kaname found herself annoyed by his attitude. It was one thing to be stoic—she knew someone with a similar demeanor, in fact—but to address her as “woman” in this day and age... it was a little offensive, frankly!

“Y-You...” she seethed. Normally she’d follow up with, ‘What the hell is wrong with you? Who do you think you are?!’ but for once, Kaname held her tongue. After all, the boy had saved her life. She recited a chant in her heart, *Endure, endure, endure...* and then concluded, *Okay, I have endured.* Kaname then took a deep breath, and said, “But... before I go, can I ask a question?”

“What?” The boy looked a little bit surprised. Most girls, when addressed that way, would either lay into him or run off crying, and perhaps that was the reaction he’d been expecting.

“Show me your hand,” she requested. “You’re bleeding.”

“Eh? What are you—”

Without waiting for his response, Kaname grabbed his right hand. There was a small cut on the edge of his fist. Perhaps he’d scratched it on a piece of the delinquents’ jewelry. Kaname pulled a Band-Aid from her pocket and placed it straight on the wound. “There. My way of saying thank you.”

The boy fell silent as he stared at his hand, the adhesive bandage, and Kaname’s slender fingers.

Kaname just looked back at him mischievously. “But that’s it. Of course, if you’d been a little nicer, I would’ve given you a lei, a hula dance, and a passionate kiss. Your loss, I guess.” She giggled.

“K-Kiss?” the boy stammered. “What are you...”

“Just kidding. Anyway, thanks. Come on, Kyoko, let’s go.” Kaname turned away and left the alley behind as the boy stood there, paralyzed.

Kyoko, who’d been watching the whole thing, gave him a quick bow, then followed after Kaname. After a little bit of walking, she said, “Hey, Kana-chan... why do you always tease guys like that?”

“Do I tease them?”

“Yeah. But seriously, that guy was pretty tough. Was that some kind of martial art?”

“Dunno. It didn’t quite look like karate...” She spoke indifferently enough, but Kaname was definitely curious. She hadn’t met anyone that strong besides Sousuke. It had been a genuine surprise to see the boy in action.

Whether she realized what Kaname was thinking or not, Kyoko said, “He was seriously awesome. He just laid them out. Too bad Sagara-kun’s not more like that.”

“What’s he got to do with this?” Kaname asked curiously. “Although...”

“Although?”

“Those martial arts types are pretty hot...” Kaname whispered, not thinking about it particularly deeply. From behind her, Kyoko let out a noise of surprise, but she didn’t even notice.

The next day, at the edge of the school grounds after class...

“Did that happen to you?” Sagara Sousuke asked. He wore his usual sullen expression and tight frown, but his brow was furrowed beneath his disheveled black hair.

“Yeah, it was incredible. He looked like Bruce Lee!” Kaname said pointedly, gazing at Sousuke from the side. “You just can’t beat a barehanded fighter! So

gallant and striking...” She watched him closely as she spoke in a manner designed to elicit a response.

Sousuke’s response was serious and cold, “That’s a naïve way of thinking.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I suspect that restaurant staffer was merely forced to fight barehanded because he didn’t possess a proper weapon.”

“I don’t think... that’s what happened...”

“It’s a shame,” Sousuke continued. “Perhaps he lacks a decent arms supplier. As a show of gratitude, I should provide him with an assault rifle. Or antitank rockets, perhaps.”

“I doubt he’d like that... Anyway, I’m talking about *cool factor*,” Kaname told him.

At this, Sousuke tilted his head. “I don’t understand. Does ‘cool factor’ offer a strategic benefit? I don’t believe it increases the accuracy of artillery shells or the smoothness of logistics...”

Kaname let out a sigh. “Oh, whatever. Just forget I said anything.”

“Very well... Ah, I believe this is the place.”

They were on the outskirts of the school grounds, a quiet place on a lonely path lined with cherry trees. Come spring, the cherry trees would be in full bloom, and the place would be lively with students engaged in flower viewing. But for now, there was no one in sight.

At the end of the path lay an old wooden structure: a single-story building the size of an ordinary house. It looked rather ramshackle from the outside, with broken windows and many holes in the walls.

“Wow... it really is an old beat-up judo dojo,” Kaname said in disbelief. From inside, they could hear shouting male voices and bodies being thrown; the sounds of a violent practice.

As the judo club didn’t currently have enough members to function, the dojo was currently home to the karate society. They were the ones that Sousuke and Kaname had business with today.

The school also had a proper karate club—the karate society had formed out of a handful of their disgruntled members. Apparently, these members wanted to abandon the art’s formal rules and structure in order to develop more practical real-life combat styles. They believed the karate club was lacking in that regard.

“Which isn’t an issue in and of itself...” the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, had said when he’d given them the job. *“The issue is the judo dojo. The building is badly damaged and in violation of the fire code. Previously, the fire department looked the other way, but there was a change in leadership last month and now they’re on our backs about it.”*

Which meant the dojo had to be torn down. This had been decided at a staff meeting, and Hayashimizu hadn’t objected. The karate society, however, had—it was the only place where they could practice, after all. The student council had sent them several notices, all of which they’d ignored. Hence, Kaname and Sousuke had been dispatched to give them their notice of eviction in person.

“Why am I always dealing with weirdo sports clubs?” Kaname mused.

“Perhaps you’re simply well suited to the task,” said Sousuke.

“I’m sad that I can’t deny it...”

They were about to open the dojo’s door when... *Crash!* A large man came flying out, bashing straight through it. Corkscrewing through the air, he flew over Kaname’s and Sousuke’s heads before landing hard against the ground, back first.

The next thing Kaname knew, Sousuke had forced her to the ground, his gun drawn. “Hey... get off me!” she protested. “I can’t breathe!”

“Hold still,” Sousuke cautioned. Then, after training his gun a full 360 degrees around them, he finally relaxed and released her. “All right. It’s safe.”

“For the love of... Why are you always like this?” Kaname muttered to herself, dusting off her arms and backside. She then addressed the collapsed man. “Excuse me. Are you all right?”

“Ah, I’m... I’m fine...” His face was stained with tears and blood, and one wrist was bent in a strange direction. His karate uniform was fairly shredded, with red

lumps visible on his body here and there. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Forgive me!” the man then screamed tearfully toward the door and ran, half-crawling, away from the dojo.

“Er... what?” Kaname breathed. While the two of them watched him run in shock, they heard a low laugh from behind them. It had come from the dojo.

“Ha. Gutless coward!”

“Runs off crying over one broken wrist!”

“Maybe he’ll finally learn his lesson!”

Kaname turned and saw three men in a variety of positions in the dark dojo hall. They were all huge figures, with necks as thick as tree trunks and broad, burly chests. Their square jaws and hard-edged faces made it hard to believe they were high school students. They had a particular intensity—the kind of aura commonly referred to as “fighting spirit”—welling up from their bodies. The word “menacing” even seemed to be written over their heads, like a manga sound effect.

“You two there! What are you looking at?” one of the men called haughtily.

Their school was known as a pretty laid-back place... she’d had no idea that there were students like this here. Kaname let out an awed breath as she watched them with a shiver.

“So this is the karate society,” Sousuke said calmly.

They took off their shoes and entered the dojo.

When Kaname introduced herself as being from the student council, the three men’s expressions hardened. Their faces, already seemingly hewn from stone, took on an even more threatening cast.

“So, what do you want?” they demanded in unison.

Kaname, with very deliberate motions, drew some documents out of her file case, then proceeded to explain the situation in the manner of a bank employee. “Well, as you may know from previous notices you’ve received, it is the decision of the teachers and the student council that this dojo should be

demolished. There have been requests from the fire department as well. Therefore, I must ask you to pack up your things and leave. Today, if possible.”

At this, the three men sneered.

“Too bad we can’t do that.”

“We don’t got nowhere else to go.”

“Foreclose on those karate club pussies instead.”

The three of them, all sitting there in the formal kneeling style, arms folded, truly looked like mountains of men. Their curious haughtiness gave them the air of video game boss characters. She didn’t know their names, so from right to left, she decided to label them Marron, Waffle, and Chocolat.

“Well... our intention isn’t to shut down your club,” Kaname explained. “It’s to tear down a dojo that violates the fire code.”

“Like we care,” said Marron.

“If you really want this place...” said Waffle.

“...you better take it by force,” said Chocolat.

Then they let out a unanimous guffaw.

Kaname sighed, and Sousuke nudged her with his elbow.

“What?”

“Chidori. They’re saying that we can have it if we take it from them,” Sousuke clarified.

“So?”

“Why don’t we simply expel them by force, then? It seems like the simplest means available.”

Veins bulged on the three men’s foreheads as they heard this.

“Oh, yeah?” said Marron.

“What an interestin’ proposition,” said Waffle.

“You think you can beat us, eh?” said Chocolat.

Upon hearing this, Sousuke's normally tight frown took on an even tighter curve. "It seems cruel to say so, but it's the unavoidable truth. The three of you cannot defeat me."

"Wait, Sousu—"

Wham! Just as Kaname was about to speak, a tremendous roar ripped through the dojo.

The middle man of the trio, Waffle, had stood up and slammed his heel onto the floor. The resultant shockwave shook the building itself, dislodging dust from the walls. Kaname looked and saw that the hit had opened a large hole in the floor below the tatami mats. As old as the building was, the floor would have been built to resist those sorts of hits. A single barefoot stomp shouldn't have been enough to break through it!

"Sagara, right? If you don't wanna end up like this floor, or that karate club reject before you, you might wanna shut your big mouth," Waffle hissed.

"Yeah. Your eyes! Fists! Muscles! They all tell us how strong you are—or ain't. So take it back, get on your knees and apologize, and maybe we'll let you off the hook," Marron said.

"Exactly. There's a saying that the Amazon River can't take the Tama to task. But that's not how we roll," Chocolat said.

Sousuke frowned at them, then sighed quietly. "You seem quite confident in yourselves. It seems you won't recognize the size of the ocean outside your pond until I beat you."

"Oh?!" At this, the shaved giants grinned down at him, eyes flashing.

"All right... we were just feelin' a little bored. We'll humor you," Marron said.

"Pick one out of the three of us. If you can beat him... we'll leave the dojo without a fight. However!" Waffle said dramatically.

"If you lose, you gotta pay a price. Let's say..." Chocolat spoke and made a big show of thinking.

Their gazes then converged on Kaname. "Give us that girl," they said in unison.

“Wuh?”

“We’ve been wantin’ a manager.”

“She looks pretty classy.”

“Yeah. Good birthin’ hips.”

The men with faces as craggy as cliffs by the sea were saying terrifying things. Kaname was just starting to squirm, when...

“Very well,” Sousuke simply agreed, without even asking her first.

“Hey, Sousuke!”

“Don’t worry, Chidori. I just have to win.” Having made that calm declaration, Sousuke smoothly stood up. He pointed unceremoniously to the man in the middle. “I will fight you. Don’t regret your offer.”

“Ha, we’ll see how long your big talk lasts,” said Waffle, “though you do seem like you know what you’re doin’...” They at least seemed to recognize that Sousuke had a degree of fighting skill. A fierce smile appeared on the man’s face as he walked to the center of the dojo. It seemed they were going to start fighting immediately.

Tension ran through the quiet dojo as Sousuke moved to face off against him.

“Lemme start by sayin’,” the man said, cracking his neck audibly. “Us karate society guys train to fight in real life. ‘Karate’ is what we call it, but it’s really a mixed martial arts style incorporatin’ throws, strikes, kicks, you name it.”

“I see,” Sousuke said neutrally.

“In other words, this won’t be one of those fights where we put on armor and hold ourselves back with a buncha stupid rules. Even biting’s fair game. No killing, of course, but major injuries are just fine.”

“Real-life combat, then? That’s fine by me.” Sousuke didn’t even bother removing his high-collared uniform as he stood there, his posture relaxed.

I hope he’ll be okay... Kaname hadn’t heard anything about Sousuke practicing martial arts, but given the skills she knew he’d acquired growing up in war-torn regions overseas, she wouldn’t be particularly surprised if he had. And she’d

seen him knock out bigger, tougher men time and time again. She wondered, was he about to reveal some kind of military fighting style?

No, wait a minute. It came to her in a flash. *Raised in war-torn regions...* At times like these, Sousuke, an actually experienced real-life fighter would—

“I’m ready anytime,” he said.

“Okay! Yeah, let’s do this!” Waffle slapped himself on the cheeks and charged at Sousuke.

In response, Sousuke flipped up the hem of his high-collared uniform and drew the small shotgun he kept hidden behind his back.

Cracka-POW! There was a sound like a bolt of thunder, and the large man toppled over, fingers twitching, a rubber stun bullet lodged in his face. It had struck with the force of a heavyweight boxer.

“Hang on! Hang on just a—”

Blam! Blam, blam, blam!

Sousuke unloaded his entire stock, causing the giant to spasm with pain. Poor Waffle, the recipient of the merciless blasts, soon fell still, his eyes rolling back in his head.

“I win,” Sousuke said quietly, gun still pointed quietly at his foe. “If you want to fight in real-life situations, your first task is to ascertain whether or not your enemy is armed.”

“Yeah, figured...” Kaname muttered. Then, in an almost obligatory fashion, she slapped Sousuke on the back of his head with her fan.

Needless to say, Sousuke’s conduct had enraged the other two men, who insisted that the round didn’t count.

“You damned coward!”

“You used a gun!”

Greasy sweat appeared on Sousuke’s forehead as the men took him to task. “But,” he said in confusion, “what’s wrong with using appropriate weaponry to

defeat—”

“Shut up! No guns, dammit!”

“I don’t understand,” Sousuke protested. “He said you train to fight in real-life situations. Is it not the nature of real-life combat to utilize equipment, terrain, weather, training, and information to their fullest?”

“Guns still aren’t allowed!” The two men fumed.

“Foolishness. There’s nothing in the rules of engagement that forbids the use of firearms. I would understand it on missions in no-fire areas, such as oil refineries or tankers... but this is merely a wooden building. Are you trying to get your soldiers killed?!” Sousuke demanded.

“That’s just not how we do it! No guns allowed!”

“I see...”

“Now, we’re gonna try this one more time!”

“Very well. I won’t use guns.” Sousuke relented with a sigh after a moment’s hesitation. He handed his firearm to Kaname. Then he faced off against his next opponent, Marron.

“Time for revenge. Get ready!” the man said and then charged at him fiercely.

Sousuke took a stance, reached into his pocket, and... *Fwssssh!* Teargas flooded out from the can he’d produced, potent enough to quell even the most violent riot.

The white gas hit Marron clean in the face, sending him rolling around the dojo floor, screaming and coughing. He began to wail, shedding tears and snot, as his opponent inflicted further punishment with a series of kicks and even more gas. “Stop! Stop!” Marron cried.

Sousuke, wearing a gas mask he’d pulled from somewhere or other, said simply, “I win.”

“No gas, either!” Kaname and the remaining man screamed, stamping their feet.

“Hmm... I don’t understand what you’re basing this on,” Sousuke said,

thoughtfully.

Kaname pressed her fingers to her temples. “Listen, Sousuke... These guys are only any good at fighting barehanded. They want you to play along with that,” she explained bluntly.

“Only barehanded? But I thought they were preparing for real-life combat. Where in the world would you be fighting barehanded in real—”

“Those are just the rules, okay?!”

Sousuke nodded hesitantly. “Understood. Any damage I deal barehanded is acceptable, then?”

“Precisely.”

“One more time, to confirm. Weapons aren’t allowed, but punching and kicking is?”

“Right. Now, do your best!”

“Hmm...” Sousuke was ready to go again. He turned to the last man, Chocolat, and both moved into a fighting stance.

“Here we go!”

“Roger. Take this.” Sousuke whipped a hand grenade out from under his coat and tossed it at his opponent.

“Wh-What?!” The man caught it without thinking and, panicked and confused, was about to throw it out the window, when...

Pow! Sousuke landed a jump kick into his side and sent him toppling. It was a kick hard enough to break a less burly opponent’s neck.

Poor Chocolat hit the back of his head against one of the dojo’s pillars. While he was in a daze, Sousuke stepped up to stand astride him, and then... *Bam! Wham! Crack!* He struck every vulnerable point the man had in a blinding series of blows.

“Stop! Stop it!” Kaname grabbed Sousuke from behind and tore him off of his now-unconscious opponent. “Knock it off already! That was a nasty trick!”

“But I defeated him barehanded,” he pointed out.

“You used a *grenade*!”

Sousuke plucked the grenade off the floor as he looked down at the felled giant. “It was simply a bluff. I hadn’t removed the safety pin, so there was no danger of it exploding. I used his lack of cool-headedness and careful observation to open him up for a strike.”

Smack! Sousuke fell over, having taken Kaname’s own jump kick head-on.

“Chidori,” he said in tones of great admiration, “That was a fine kick...”

“Shut up!” she snarled. “I thought we were setting up for something out of a fighting manga... but you keep cheating!” Bringing in illegal weapons, hitting his opponents in the back... It was the kind of thing a pro wrestling heel would do.

“But this is simply how I fight...”

“War really is hell; it produces immoral idiots like you in droves...” Kaname lamented.

Ignoring her protestations, Sousuke started dragging one of the bodies of the men he’d knocked out toward the door. “At any rate,” he observed, “we’ve neutralized all of them.”

“Are you stupid or something? The karate society isn’t going to accept this result,” Kaname groaned.

It was just then that a new voice spoke up. “That’s right. I do *not* accept it.”

The two of them turned around questioningly to see a boy standing at the entrance to the dojo. He was on the shorter side of average and wore a high-collared uniform with two lines on the sleeves, which suggested that he was a second-year like Sousuke. His long hair was tied back beneath a red bandana, and he was fair-skinned with almond-shaped eyes.

“Ah...” It was the boy from the Chinese restaurant who had saved Kaname and Kyoko the day before. Kichijoji certainly was close to their school, but she hadn’t expected him to actually go here! Kaname’s mouth flapped in shock, but the second-year boy ignored her as he slowly approached Sousuke.

“And you are?” Sousuke asked.

“Me? I am Tsubaki Issei. And you must be Sagara, the student council’s lapdog,” the boy—Tsubaki Issei—said. He didn’t even seem to have noticed Kaname at all.

“Hey, hang on a minute!” she called.

Issei didn’t even spare her a glance. “What is it, woman?”

“It’s me. Me! You remember—”

“Shut up. I don’t care about what any irritating woman has to say,” he spat in annoyance, then focused his attention fully on Sousuke. His indifferent attitude suggested he really didn’t recognize her.

Kaname just stood there and stared in confusion. *Maybe a coincidental resemblance? Or a twin?* But he really did look exactly like him... She looked at his right fist, and saw the blue adhesive bandage she’d applied yesterday still there. He couldn’t possibly have forgotten her, could he?

“How long have you been watching?” Sousuke asked.

“Not long. I don’t know the exact situation, but I assume the three idiots here promised to hand over the dojo if you beat them or something like that.”

“Indeed. And I beat them. So, move out.”

“I can’t do that,” Issei replied.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m the society’s president, and you haven’t beaten me yet.”

Kaname was even more surprised. *The society’s president?* Those three burly men served Tsubaki Issei, a boy even shorter than Sousuke? Although, from what she’d seen yesterday, he had serious skills...

A slight smile appeared on the boy’s face, as porcelain white as a noh mask. It was the expression of someone who, even knowing what Sousuke could do, remained unintimidated.

“Tsubaki-kun! You’re here!”

“Please... please, avenge us!”

“He’s a tricky one! Please... beat him!” The men begged Tsubaki Issei.

“Silence, you fools. Get out of here this instant,” Issei barked.

“So I just need to defeat you?” asked Sousuke.

“Yes,” Issei affirmed. “By any means you wish.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, go ahead.”

Sousuke fell silent. He and Issei stood within arm’s reach of each other. Both looked relaxed, their arms loose at their sides.

And then, after a moment of silence... the two of them moved.

To Kaname’s eyes, it just looked like they’d sprung into a grapple. In fact, a very complicated exchange had taken place. The two of them had swiftly taken each other by the wrist, then knocked the grabbing hand away. There was likewise a lashing out of knees and elbows, and dodging of the same. Each tried to knock the other over and failed. This had all happened over the course of a few seconds.

Then Issei dipped down, and... *Crash!* With a dull, heavy sound, Sousuke’s body went flying. Issei had channeled his full strength into a powerful palm strike.

Sousuke shouted wordlessly as his body flew through the air, hit a wall, and then collapsed. He lay there, face-down and immobile.

So much power in such a small body... Where in the world does it come from? Kaname wondered.

“The killer strike passed down through generations... the Ketsuzensho, the ultimate move of Daidomyaku style... No one who takes a hit from that can ever stand up again,” Issei explained.

“Sousuke?!” Chidori cried out in alarm.

“Stay back, woman,” Issei chastised her as she was about to run to Sousuke. “The idea of a female in my sacred dojo sickens me enough. If you don’t want to meet the same fate, get out of here at once.”

Kaname glared at him. “Would... Would you quit calling me ‘woman’?! I have

a name, and it's Chidori Kaname!"

"Hmph. 'Woman' is sufficient for the likes of you," Issei huffed back.

"How dare you!" she fumed. "You seemed like a decent guy yesterday!"

"Yesterday? What are you talking about?" Issei asked with a scowl. He narrowed his eyes and gazed at her from afar, then muttered dubiously at length. "Hmph. Ignore the foolish female... I've won! You'll have to give up on tearing down the dojo!" Issei declared, when just then...

"It's not... over yet," Sousuke whispered as he slowly stood up.

"Sousuke?" Kaname breathed.

"I'm all right. Though it was a fairly effective hit," he said, spitting a gob of blood from his mouth.

Issei's eyes narrowed, and he let out a hum of appreciation. "Oho... I've never seen anyone get up right after taking that hit. Interesting."

"It won't hit me again. And..." Sousuke looked over at Kaname. "I believe I've begun to understand the feelings of those who exclusively fight barehanded now. A gun would be inelegant in a situation like this." With that, Sousuke removed his jacket. He dropped his pistol, his knife, and his other equipment. It appeared his fighter's heart had been lit aflame. "Let's try this seriously," Sousuke said.

Kaname let out a noise of awe. "Oh... yesss! It's battle manga time!"

"I don't know what that means, but never mind. It's not an issue."

"Hah. Never knew there was someone this tough in our school. I've been blessed with interesting encounters of late. Just yesterday... heh." Issei looked down at the blue adhesive bandage on his hand. For just an instant, his expression looked uncustomarily joyous, almost innocent.

"What's that bandage?" Sousuke asked.

"It's none of your business. I met a goddess, that's all."

At this, Kaname narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

Meanwhile, Issei approached Sousuke again. "Now, come at me, Sagara

Sousuke. I'm ready any time. But the next time I hit you won't be like that one... You got lucky then." Issei produced a pair of horn-rimmed glasses from his uniform pocket.

"Hmm? What's all this?"

"This." With a slightly self-recriminating smile, Issei put on the glasses. The thick lenses obscured his almond-shaped eyes and gave him a rather nerdy appearance. Despite being a martial artist, he appeared to have poor eyesight—very poor, given the lenses' thickness.

Nearsightedness? Kaname wondered.

"Don't get the wrong idea. My years of brutal training have prepared me to fight well enough even with poor eyesight," said Issei. "Nevertheless, my nearsightedness does sometimes result in my strikes hitting off-center. Do you see? That's why the damage of my Ketsuzensho was reduced."

Sousuke said nothing.

"Tragic though it may be, it is only with these pathetic glasses on that I can unleash my true power. Then..." Issei, now wearing his glasses, let out a slow sigh and lowered both his arms.

The atmosphere over the dojo became hushed, and a crackling tension raced through it as hostility sparked between the two superb fighters.

"All right, let's begin."

"Mm." Though he appeared to just be standing there, Issei didn't show a moment's opening. The very air around him seemed to form an invisible wall. "Make your everyday stance your combat stance... It is only in this way that the fist can thrive."

Sousuke was silent.

"Heh heh... Now, Sagara, attack me as you please."

It was a truly touch-and-go situation. But as Kaname anxiously watched the two facing off, preparing for a violent battle, she remembered something important. The requirement that if Sousuke lost, she would have to become their manager... Was that still in play? She clenched her fists and spoke up,

dazedly, “Um, could I ask a question? Is the manager thing—”

“Later, Chidori,” Sousuke said.

Issei turned his gaze keenly to Kaname. “You, woman! I told you to leave this place... at... once?” For some reason, Issei’s speech suddenly slowed. The gaze of his coke-bottle glasses fixed on Kaname... and his face first paled, and then went bright red. It was the face of a man who couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Kaname blinked in confusion.

“Y-You go to... our school?” Issei stammered.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” she asked.

Issei, with the proper distance vision afforded by his glasses, stared at Kaname, sweat rising on his forehead. His mannerisms were suddenly extremely awkward. “Ah... well. I’m sorry. I just... all the yelling I did. I really... didn’t mean it.”

“Huh?”

“I’m g-g-grateful to you for... the bandage. I mean it. I’m not lying. I... I just didn’t realize...” Issei wasn’t looking at Sousuke at all now, and squirming with obvious awkwardness.

Kaname stared at him for a while, then clapped her hands together. “...Oh! Did you not recognize me until now? Because of your bad eyesight?!”

Issei began to panic openly. “N-No! I would never... Ah, well, your voice just sounded different... I, er... I simply... Oh, yes. Chidori Kaname, was it? That’s a very... very nice name... ha ha...”

It was true that she’d kept her voice a bit aloof yesterday, while today she was being her usual assertive self. It wasn’t surprising that he hadn’t recognized it. What was much stranger was how flustered Issei had become since recognizing her. He was no longer a fierce fighter capable of defeating a man raised on the battlefield. He was simply an awkward, blushing teenager.

“What’s wrong?” Kaname asked. “Are you okay?”

“Um... ah...?”

Seeming to think that the fight was still on, Sousuke strode up to him with clenched fists. Issei simply watched him come in a daze, as if he had no idea what was going on. “Let’s begin, Tsubaki,” Sousuke commanded.

“Begin? Begin wha—”

Wham! Skreeeeeeeeeeeeeeee, crash!



It was a critical hit. Issei took Sousuke's punch head-on, and his HP instantly hit zero.

"You left yourself wide open, Tsubaki," Sousuke said, looking down in surprise at the body on the floor.

"That's... cheating..." Issei said faintly.

"I don't understand how," Sousuke said, "but nevertheless, I appear to have won."

Issei fell silent.

Kaname frowned as she walked up to him and examined the fallen young man. "That's weird," she remarked. "You went down so easily... I thought you were tougher than that."

"You said your combat stance was your everyday stance. That certainly looked like an everyday stance... I suppose I don't understand barehanded fighting at all," Sousuke admitted.

"That's... that's not what I... meant..." Issei moaned as he writhed on the floor.

Three days later, as planned, the aging judo building was torn down.

"Even if I question its fairness, a loss is a loss. We'll abandon the dojo. You've shown me how inadequate my training has been," Issei sighed as he watched the destruction take place. "However! You won't have it so easy next time, Sagara. I won't make the same mistake again. I... I... I will defeat you, and make Chidori Kaname the manager of the karate society!"

"Very well, Tsubaki. Do your best. But Chidori will have a long wait ahead of her," Sousuke said, provoking him openly to his face.

Sparks flew between the two men, standing so close that their noses almost touched.

"Excuse me! Don't I get a say in this?!" Kaname argued from the sidelines.

But neither Sousuke nor Issei heard her.

〈A Pure Yet Impure Grappler — The End〉

A Trespass on Good Faith

Tsubaki Issei was waiting on the roof of the school, where a chill wind whipped his hair around. He was alone; his only companions were the whistling of the breeze, the shouting of the baseball club on the athletic field, and the distant playing of the brass band club.

He was a short boy, only about 160 centimeters tall, with fair skin, long hair drawn back into a tail, and almond-shaped eyes which were currently narrowed like razors. He'd removed his high-collared uniform jacket to stand in just a T-shirt, on the dead center of the roof, in a confident pose.

The dark, leaden sky seemed to warn of the vicious battle to come.

Now, come to me, Sagara Sousuke... Issei declared internally to his mortal enemy. *Today, at last, I'll humiliate you. I'll take you out in one hit with a strike from my body and soul!*

Issei was the president of the karate society; a grappler developing a unique fighting style that incorporated a variety of martial arts. Last week, he'd lost to Sagara Sousuke in a one-on-one duel. He'd relaxed his guard then—or rather, completely dropped it—and though he'd admitted defeat at the time, the loss continued to nag at him. That was why today, he'd challenged Sagara Sousuke to a rematch.

Here, on this roof. Now, after class. Let us settle this, man to man, once and for all!

He'd summed up these feelings in a letter of challenge, which he'd written with an ink brush and placed in Sagara Sousuke's shoe cubby during lunch break. When he prepared to leave school for the day, Sousuke would surely see the letter in the cubby and come to meet him here. He'd told Issei he would fight him at any time, after all.

I shall be... victorious! thought Issei, clenching his fists and widening his eyes. Fighting spirit began to emanate from his body.

Just then... the sound of an explosion echoed out from the southern building's first floor. It came from the direction of the entrance hall, where the students' shoe cubbies sat.

Issei looked over for a moment curiously, then forced the distracting thoughts out of his mind. *No... ignore it*, he told himself. *Focus on the coming fight*.

Sagara Sousuke would surely come. Issei just had to keep waiting here, patiently, until the moment he arrived. No matter how many minutes, hours, or days it took!



"You... You human bomb!" Chidori Kaname leaped up high, readied her fan double-handed overhead, and slammed it down on Sagara Sousuke as hard as she could. *Whap!* The sound rang out through the entrance hall, which was still filled with white smoke.

"That hurt quite a lot," Sousuke said, rubbing his head.

"Oh, shut up!" Kaname shouted at him. "How many thousands of times will you do this same thing?! How many shoe cubbies must you destroy before you're finally satisfied?!" She pointed at a pair of freshly fried shoes from which smoke was still rising.

"But there was definitely a foreign object in my cubby."

"That doesn't mean you have to blow it up!"

"But the moment I lower my guard to accommodate social exceptions is when the real trap—"

"Oh, traps, traps, traps! Has there ever really been a bomb here?!" Kaname demanded. "Answer me now!"

"I agree that this also wasn't a bomb and instead some kind of letter, but..." said Sousuke, gathering up the letter's burnt fragments. Due to having been in close proximity to the explosion, there was little on them that was legible.

"Show it to me," she said. "Oh, for the love of... you can't even read it anymore! What now?"

"It was unavoidable. I'll take it back and attempt to restore it, but..." Sousuke

responded, his expression blank.

“Just make sure you clean all this up. I’m out!”

“I see.”

“It’ll probably rain today... The weather report said it could go all night long, and it’ll probably get cold, so get home ASAP. See ya.” And with that, Kaname left.

The weather report was right: it rained all night that night. Kaname pulled an extra blanket out of her closet and slept soundly through the deepening chill.

The next morning, in the 2-4 classroom...

“Sagaraaa!” The door burst open, and Tsubaki Issei stomped in, looking like a drowned rat. His hair and clothing were soaked, and his face was blanched from cold, wet, and exhaustion. His lips had turned blue, his eyes were bloodshot, and he burned with a violent anger.

Sousuke and Kaname, standing in the corner of the classroom and arguing about something or other, whispered in unison.

“Tsubaki?”

“Tsubaki-kun?”

Issei strode into the classroom and pointed straight at one of their classmates, Kazama Shinji. “Why did you run from me, Sagara?! You coward!” he shouted at him.

Shinji cringed back from him. “I... I’m sorry! I don’t have any money!”

“Eh?” At this, the extremely nearsighted Issei’s eyes narrowed, and he leaned in to peer at him more carefully. “I’m sorry,” he said, “wrong person.”

He then walked up to the next desk over. “Sagara! Why didn’t you come?! Did you run in fear of me?” he howled again.

This time, it was Tokiwa Kyoko who scooted back, wincing. “Um... my name’s Tokiwa, actually.”

“Eh?” Issei narrowed his eyes once more as he leaned forward to inspect her.

“Wrong person again. Forgive me.”

This time, he scanned his furious gaze around the room. The students looked away, consciously avoiding his gaze.

“What a curious man,” Sousuke whispered.

“I forgot how super-nearsighted he is, yeah,” Kaname added.

Perhaps hearing their voices, Issei seemed to finally pinpoint Sousuke’s location and walked straight up to him. “Sagara!”

“You’re looking poorly, Tsubaki.”

“Silence! You backed out of our duel, you impudent coward!” Issei shouted, pointing straight at Kaname.

Kaname indicated Sousuke beside her with her thumb. “Wrong person. You want him.”

“Ngh... Ch-Chidori, was it? A fine morning to you. Ah, but no matter... My business is with *him* today!” Though he blushed red as he recognized Kaname, Issei eventually turned back to his correct target. “Sagara. I was waiting on the roof all night. Don’t tell me you didn’t read the letter of challenge I placed in your shoe cubby!”

Kaname eyed Sousuke. “So it was a letter of challenge, huh?”

“I didn’t know that until now,” Sousuke protested. “I attempted to restore it last night, but I was unable to make it legible.”

“What are you talking about?!” Issei howled.

“Tsubaki, I detonated your letter of challenge. You should attempt to make an appointment through conventional channels next time,” Sousuke said in a businesslike manner.

Meanwhile, Issei trembled. “Y-You detonated it? Impossible. I... I... I spent all night in the rain... ahh... achoo!” He sneezed, his shoulders heaving with breath.

“Were you really waiting this whole time? From yesterday after class until now?!” Kaname asked in shock.

Issei looked downward. “Yes...”

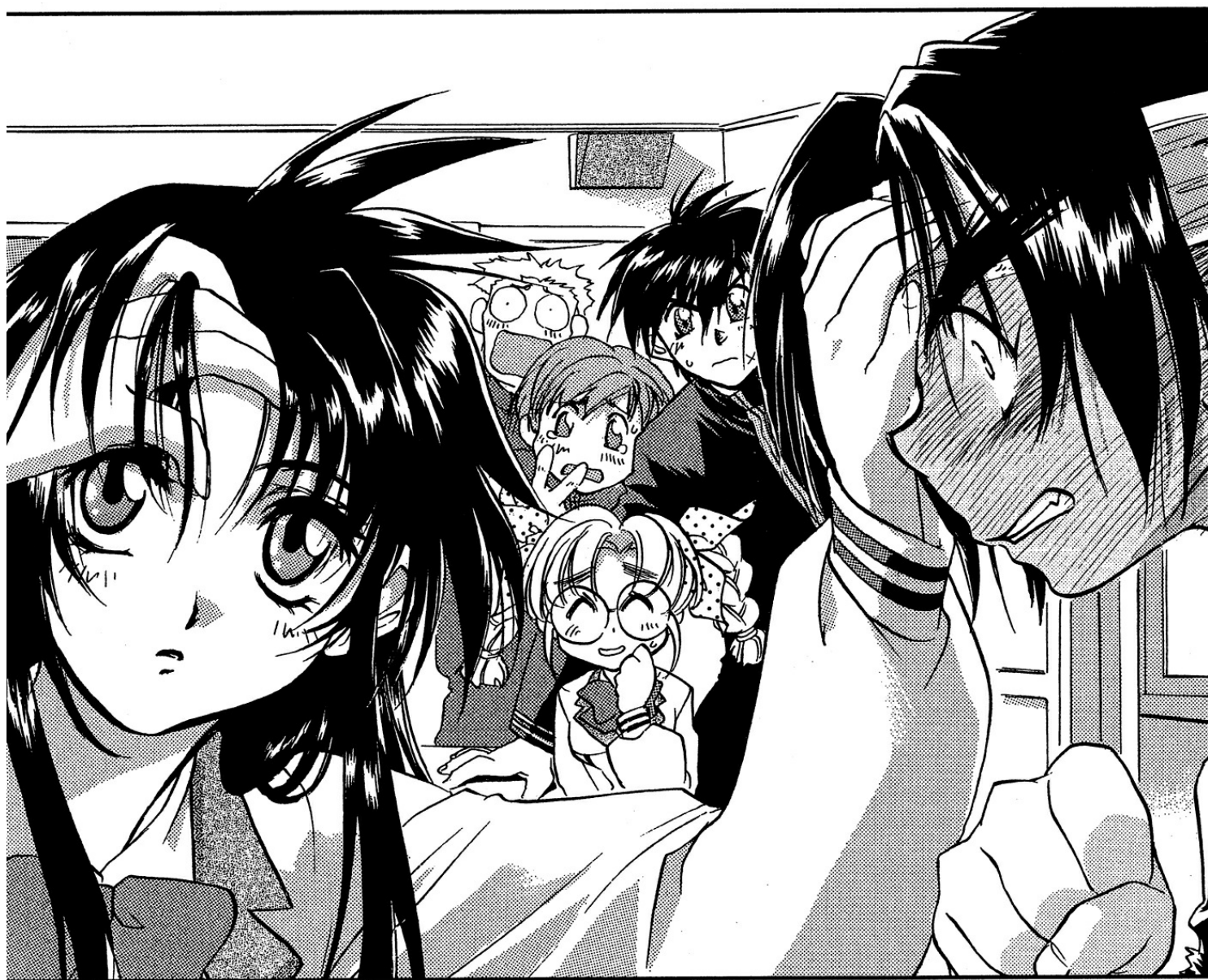
“Hold on; let me check you,” she said, walking up to Issei and putting a hand on his forehead.

Issei flushed crimson, while the rest of the class just watched curiously.

“That’s the kind of thing that gives a man the wrong impression,” said one.

“Kana-chan can be really thoughtless now and then,” said another.

“Look, Sagara-kun! Doesn’t that tick you off?” asked a third.



Ignoring the presumptuous whispers around her, Kaname released Issei. "Yeah, feels like a fever," she told him. "I bet you've got a cold. You should've given up and left sooner."

"Oh... I wanted to, but someone must have locked the door to the roof, and the door was too sturdy to break with my fists, and... ngh..." Issei held back tears as some kind of emotion seemed to well up in him. "I thought I was going to die there. It was cold. So... so cold..." He pursed his lips tightly, clenching his bloody fists.

Kaname patted him soothingly on the head. "Poor thing. Sousuke, this is your fault, okay? You need to say you're sorry."

Sousuke had simply been staring at Kaname and Issei silently up until now, but... "Very well," he responded sullenly after a moment's pause. Then he placed a hunk of dried meat on top of the desk in front of Issei. "You must be hungry, Tsubaki," he offered. "Eat this and go."

Issei said nothing.

"Well? Eat it. It's delicious. And it's yours," said Sousuke, speaking with a strange sense of calm.

Meanwhile, Issei trembled violently. A hostile air hung between them, intimidating the students around them into silence. "And now you treat me like a stray dog..."

"Don't worry. It's not poisoned."

"I'll kill you!" Issei shouted, charging at Sousuke with tears in his eyes. He furiously released a straight punch, which Sousuke dodged just in time. Issei's fist hit the blackboard behind him instead, creating a hole with a loud cracking sound.

"You appear to be doing well enough after all," Sousuke observed.

"Shut up! Get on your hands and knees and apologize, you... you...!"

"But you still can't hide your exhaustion, Tsubaki. Your movements lack their customary sharpness."

"Ngh... nnngh, you...!" Issei flailed around like a spoiled child, continuing to

strike at Sousuke as the other man fled. Sousuke used desks and chairs as shields, lithely dodging each blow as they ran around the room.

It was extremely bothersome. Finally Kaname, unable to take it any longer, shouted out, “Excuse me! It’s almost class time, got it? Are you two listening?!”

They certainly weren’t— They knocked over the lectern, broke a vase, crashed through the cleaning supplies... and finally ended up out in the hall.

“No more!” yelled Issei. “I’ll use my ultimate strike and bury you at last!”

“Try it,” Sousuke offered.

“Graaaaah!” Issei took in a deep breath, then lowered his hips and pulled back his right fist like he was drawing a bow. “Daidomyaku style, ultimate fist! Near-Death-Inducing Punch!” The sound of Issei’s strike ripping through the air was almost audible as his fist plunged itself into the torso of the person in front of him—

Who happened to be a passing custodian.

“Bg!fwuh!” the old man shouted. Blood spurted from his mouth as his body went flying. Eventually, he landed before sliding for a long time down the corridor... and then, he lay still.

“Ah... what did you do?” Kaname ran out of the room after them, her jaw dropping in dismay.

“Heh heh heh...” Issei remained with his fist thrust out, eyes lowered, laughing quietly. “Well? How did you like that, Sagara?!”

Sousuke, who was still standing right next to Issei, merely folded his arms with a frown.

In the student council room after class that day...

“A week’s recovery, they say,” said Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the student council president, who was a young man with slicked-back hair and an intellectual air about him. He was dressed in a white uniform with a high collar and wore wire-frame glasses.

“So... it wasn’t that bad?” Kaname asked.

“It’s not merely a matter of the injury’s severity, Chidori-kun. For a student to grievously harm Mr. Onuki, the school custodian, is in itself the issue,” he reminded her. “I spent all day considering a variety of solutions to the unpleasant matter: to cover up, to persuade, or to deny student council involvement.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Hayashimizu told her. “But...” he then turned his gaze to Sousuke and Issei, who stood on either side of her.

Sousuke was at attention as usual, chest up and out. Meanwhile, Issei was slumped over, head hung, looking duly chastened.

“Tsubaki Issei-kun, was it? Why are you so dead-set on defeating Sagara-kun? I did hear you had some kind of strange bet over your eviction from the judo dojo. I believe it was—”

“—That if he can beat Sousuke, I have to become manager of their karate society,” said Kaname. “Not that they asked *me* if I was okay with that...”

“That’s right,” Hayashimizu said neutrally. “But Tsubaki-kun, I’m afraid that deal is off. Chidori-kun is the student council vice president; Sagara-kun has no authority to decide her fate.”

“That’s right, Senpai.” Kaname let out a snort as she glanced at Hayashimizu, impressed. It was unusual to see him show such respect for her position.

“In addition, you’re mistaken if you think your organization can possess her,” he continued. “You should feel ashamed of yourselves.”

“That’s right!”

“Remember this for the future—The only one that controls Chidori Kaname is *me*, the student council president.”

“You said it! ...Wait, what?”

Ignoring Kaname’s glare, Hayashimizu scanned Issei for a reaction. A moment later...

“I...” Issei spoke at last. “I don’t care about the manager thing. I hate that I let my guard down and lost to Sagara. He’s such a nothing. Such a... cheating,

sneaky, ignorant, impudent, unpleasant, out-of-control, cowardly, lying, insincere, stupid little *nothing...*” Issei rattled off the list of insults, his eyes still pointed downward.

“That’s quite a list... Though I feel about half of it is correct,” admitted Hayashimizu.

“Hmm.” Sousuke didn’t seem angry about this, but a single trail of greasy sweat trickled down his temple.

“I want to fight him one more time. I want a match whose result I can accept,” Issei pleaded. “That’s all!”

“I see. I believe I understand the situation,” said Hayashimizu, reclining in his chair. “It’s not good to let these resentments fester. And fights breaking out in the school isn’t good for public safety. Very well... I’d like you to have one proper match. If Tsubaki-kun wins, I’ll give the karate society a spare club room. But if Sagara-kun wins, you must abandon all hope of ever beating him. What do you think?”

“Senpai?” Kaname asked, startled.

“I accept, Mr. President.”

“Thank you, Mr. President!”

Kaname blinked in surprise as the boys on either side of her immediately readied for combat. One reached into his pocket, the other pulled back a fist...

“Now, wait a moment.” Hayashimizu stopped them.

The boys looked at him suspiciously.

“What is it?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t condone the use of violence to solve your problems. Why don’t you try a competition method that relies a bit more on your mind and character?”

“Eh?” they both asked.

“Caring for others is also a valuable skill, and a far loftier one than the use of guns or fists. What would you think of something like that?” With that, the

student council president produced an envelope with some documents inside.



Jindai High custodian, Onuki Zenji, lay in bed while letting out the occasional groan of pain. His head was on a flattened pillow, and his body was covered in a stained blanket. He was just over fifty, with thinning hair and stubble. He had a bit of paunch around his stomach and jawline, but due to his daily labor, perhaps, his face was tanned and his arms were well muscled.

Having worked at the school for twenty-five years now, Onuki had been there longer than most of the teachers, and he knew the school building and its other facilities like the back of his hand.

“Hnngh... mm.” The side he’d been punched in that morning ached. Perhaps that was why he wasn’t hungry, even though it was evening. In his twenty-five years here, he’d been on the receiving end of violence from students a few times before. But he’d never taken a punch that hard. Onuki thanked his lucky stars that he hadn’t ended up in the hospital.

Darn it. What’s wrong with them? he wondered, pulling the blanket up to his chin and letting out a sigh.

Indeed, what was wrong with students these days? In addition to this most recent act, he felt like property damages had been far worse this year. Didn’t kids these days have any respect for people and property? It was as if their society had paid for its growing prosperity with the character of its children.

Onuki found himself reflecting on his past.

It was better in the old days, he told himself. The students were so pure, so passionate, so burning with hope for the future. They’d approached him as they would any other teacher and helped him with his work with a smile. He still remembered their cheerful voices...

“Onuki-san, we’ll help you clean!”

“This school is important to all of us!”

“Wow! You do this backbreaking work all the time? Amazing!”

“You’re like a father to us, Onuki-san!”

“Yeah, seriously! Ha ha ha!”

That’s how it had been.

Even the delinquent behind most of the violence had sometimes helped him lay tile. Onuki remembered the boy snatching the toolbox from his hands.

“Sheesh, I can’t stand to watch this no more,” he’d said. *“Hand it over. My pop’s a carpenter.”* The words had brought tears to his eyes.

How many years had it been since those students, so kind deep down, had left him behind? Students these days did nothing but treat him like he didn’t exist, throw their garbage everywhere, and destroy school property. It was a truly lamentable situation.

And then, just as he’d curled up on his futon to wallow in the nostalgia...

There was a knock at the door to the custodian’s room.

“Come in,” he responded, wondering who it could be at this hour.

“Excuse us.”

“We’re coming in.”

Two boys entered, and Onuki scowled as he saw them. One of them was the culprit behind most of the recent property damage—Sagara Sousuke was the name, he believed. The other was the one who had hit him this morning—Tsubaki Issei, he believed. The latter was currently wearing glasses as thick as the bottoms of milk bottles.

The two boys stepped into his six-tatami-mat room and looked silently down on Onuki. Both wore sullen scowls.

Have they come to finish me off? Onuki wondered as they began to address him.

“Are you still in pain?” Sousuke asked glumly.

“What are you doing here?” Onuki asked.

“Are you still in pain or not? Answer the question!” Issei demanded impatiently.

“Y-Yes, I am still in pain...”

“Good,” they said in unison, before tearing the blanket off his bed and beginning to strip him down.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Onuki demanded, floundering in protest. Ignoring his objections, Sousuke and Issei poked and prodded at him violently.

“He’s got internal bleeding,” Sousuke announced.

“He needs a hot compress,” replied Issei. “Go fetch one.”

“We can’t let him get too cold. Get his head down, warm him up, then get a urine sample—”

“First, ask how he’s feeling. What’s his pulse? Is he dizzy? Well, Mr. Custodian?”

“Ow, that tickles. S-Stop it!” he shouted, and the two stopped in place. The half-naked, middle-aged man snatched his blanket back and pulled away from them, his face deathly pale. “Wh-What in the world are you doing? Don’t tell me... You’re exploiting my vulnerable state to take my ripe old body by force?! You want a taste of the fruit moments before it falls from the tree?!” *What kind of world is this? I knew that young people these days were degenerate... but to think that their perversions have gone this far!* Onuki thought, trembling in fear.

Sousuke and Issei shared a sullen glance, and then...

“You appear to be under a misapprehension,” observed Sousuke.

“Calm down. We aren’t here to hurt you,” Issei added.

“What?”

“We were assigned to nurse you back to health,” Issei clarified. “We’ll be living with you and working for you until you’ve recovered.”

“Yes. We have permission from the principal and the student council president. Leave your work to us, and focus on your convalescence,” Sousuke advised.

“R-Really?”

The two of them nodded firmly.

Onuki stared at them... and after a few seconds, he welled up with tears.

“Ngh... ahh...”

The boys tilted their heads in confusion.

“In my twenty-five years as a custodian, I... I’ve never been so moved! Why was I so convinced, as the century draws to an end, that people’s hearts had become lawless?! Ah, there is still mercy in this world. Thank you. Thank you, both of you!” Onuki cried manly tears as he shook each boy’s hand.

Sousuke responded noncommittally and then said, more officially, “So we’ll be helping you here for a few days. During that time, please pay close attention to the mission execution performance of Sagara Sousuke, Class 2-4.”

“Eh?”

“No, Mr. Custodian! I’m the one whose name you should remember! Watch and see how I, Tsubaki Issei of Class 2-8, apply myself to your care!”

What strange things to say... Onuki thought, sitting there in stunned silence.

Sousuke then stood up again. “Are you hungry? I’ll cook. Lie down, please.”

“Wait! Your cooking is dog food. I’ll cook,” said Issei. “My knife skills, which I acquired at my part-time job—”

“You can’t be trusted with a knife,” Sousuke scoffed. “You might mistake Mr. Onuki for a side of pork and carve him up.”

“I would not!”

“At any rate, lie down, four-eyes. You’ll just get in the way.”

“Hmph. You’re the one who should lie down!”

“I can’t do that.”

“You little...!”

Ignoring the confused Onuki, Sousuke and Issei raced each other to the kitchen and began to snatch ingredients and tools from each other.

“Give me that cutting board, Sagara!”

“If you want it, give me access to the fridge.”

“Never! And how do you expect to use the burner without a pot?!” Issei

demanded.

“Then you’ll never get these green peppers,” taunted Sagara.

“Are you threatening me?!”

The two fought and insulted each other inside the small kitchen. It was so pathetic that Onuki Zenji grimaced. “B-Boys... I appreciate the concern, but could you please be a bit quieter—”

“You want me to take them by force?!” Issei bellowed.

“Go ahead and try,” Sousuke invited him. “I’ll shove this ham down your throat and watch you choke to death.”

“Try it!”

Crash!

Issei threw a bowl, which Sousuke blocked with a cutting board before swinging at his opponent with a ladle. Issei lithely dodged the blows and counterattacked with a daikon radish. Sousuke created a smoke screen with flour and pepper and—

“S-Stop it...” Onuki choked out, but Sousuke and Issei heedlessly continued their battle.

The next afternoon, in the student council room...

“Are you really sure about this?” Kaname asked Hayashimizu.

He stopped talking and held up a hand to Mikiyara Ren, the secretary—who was taking dictation on a word processor nearby—signaling for her to stop.

“Excuse me,” he replied. “Am I sure about what?”

“Sousuke and Tsubaki-kun,” Kaname clarified. “Giving them free rein for three days, then asking the custodian to judge which one of them was more earnest and helpful...”

“Hm. As a pacifist, I cannot condone open conflict among the students. I thought it was a good idea, myself...”

“It wasn’t a good idea at all! You know what they’re like. They’ll each spend

three days threatening him to choose them on pain of death. The poor custodian...”

Hayashimizu smiled quietly at this. “You worry too much, Chidori-kun. They’re both decent men deep down. If the rules require them to offer their services, then they will, at a minimum, do that. Even if they go too far and cause some kind of problem... the damage will at least remain limited to the school.”

“Uh-huh...”

“And there we are now. See? They’re working hard.” Hayashimizu indicated outside the window, then cut the conversation off and resumed his dictation. “Ahem... As seen here, as a matter of conflict resolution, rules forbidding the use of physical force are the basis for the minimal understanding necessary to ensure the survival of humans in a way that transcends politics, race, nationality...”

The secretary continued tapping at the word processor, taking down Hayashimizu’s strange thoughts.

Kaname decided to leave well enough alone and instead looked out the student council room window at the athletic field.

Wow, she marveled, they really are working...

Sousuke was jogging along a corner of the athletic field, shouldering a long, thin plank. He eventually arrived in front of the sports clubs’ building and dropped the plank on the ground, about to get to work fixing a bench with a hole in it.

Just then, Tsubaki Issei ran up to him, also carrying a plank, and attempted to fix the bench himself. Sousuke ignored him but kicked Issei’s plank away and hammered his own plank onto the bench. Issei shouted something and smashed Sousuke’s plank with a hammer from the side.

Or... maybe not?

Perhaps in retaliation, Sousuke drew his gun and began shooting at Issei’s board. Issei, enraged, drew back his fist. Sousuke fought back with his plank fragments, and after a brief exchange... Somehow, the bench they’d come to fix ended up broken entirely in half. They seemed to notice it shortly thereafter,

standing there for a puzzled moment before turning to glare at each other... and then resuming their unsightly bickering.

Maybe letting them punch each other would've been better, thought Kaname, who shook her head with a grimace as she watched it all go down.

Onuki Zenji wandered the school that night. Normally, around this time, he'd be patrolling for things he should fix, clean, or check, but the places Sousuke and Issei had attended to were in such bad condition that not even a maestro like Onuki could fix them.

"Unbelievable..." he muttered. The floor with a single loose tile had been fixed back into place with so much glue that it was now three times higher than the tiles around it. The wall whose paint had begun to chip was now repainted in a sloppy camouflage pattern. The flowerbed beside the school had been so excessively watered that it now looked like a bottomless bog. The chain-link fence off the athletic field that had only had a small hole in it was now reinforced with forbidding barbed wire and high-voltage current. The bench in front of the club building had been "fixed" into a tilted L-shape, and the bronze statue near the entrance now had its head turned 180 degrees. And that wasn't even all...

"Hmm..." It was all so awful, even groaning about it was draining for Ozuki. He felt so disheartened, in fact, that he couldn't even bring himself to check the pond where he kept the koi he'd been raising for ten years now.

No, no... Don't be angry, he told himself. They'd worked all day for him, and their intentions were good, in their own way. Even if their execution was awkward, it would be ungrateful to scold them for it. *Yes... that's right. Endure,* thought Onuki. *You've worked here twenty-five years. You've endured countless frustrations and overcome many trials. No one can endure like you!*

But even as he had that thought, he felt the sweat rise on his face.

As Onuki returned to his room, clinging unsteadily to the walls...

Crash! A low table went flying, busting through the door. It struck Onuki in the head and knocked him over.

“Ngh...” As he lay there in the hallway, he could hear Sousuke and Issei yelling at each other within.

“What’s wrong with you?” Issei yelled. “Why do you always try to get in my way?!”

“I think you’ve got it backwards,” Sousuke told him. “You’re the one in *my* way.”

“Just tell me why! Why did you throw the cloud-ear mushroom I bought in the trash?!”

“Was that supposed to be food? I assumed it was silicon or some kind of wood shavings— wait. Mr. Onuki is...”

“Hmm?”

The two of them finally seemed to notice Onuki’s presence, abandoning their quarrel to run up to him.

“His head’s split open,” Sousuke said accusingly. “Tsubaki, what were you thinking?”

“Only because you dodged the table!”

“Which I wouldn’t have had to do if you hadn’t thrown it at me.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do things that make me want to throw tables at you!” Issei replied.

“A brazen abdication of responsibility. But it won’t excuse the fact that you killed Mr. Onuki.”

“He’s not dead yet!”

“Anyway, let’s get him inside.”

Undeterred from their verbal sparring, the two of them carried the custodian to the bed in his room.

An hour later, Onuki had somewhat recovered, and managed to swallow down his temper with superhuman patience and effort. He still felt the urge to have a go at them both with a kitchen knife, but somehow managed to swallow

that down too.

Endure, endure... he told himself.

That's right. They didn't mean any harm. In fact, they had hurried to tidy up the room and were now seated in the traditional kneeling posture before him, looking very deflated indeed. Still, he had to give them a talking to. It was for their own good!

Onuki sat up and spoke formally. "Sit there, both of you."

"We are sitting, sir."

"Just sit already!" he snarled.

"But we're already sitting..." Despite their protestations, Sousuke and Issei awkwardly stood up and sat down again.

Onuki cleared his throat and then, with the archetypal inflections of an old man, said, "Let me say this first: I am extremely grateful for your loyalty and passion. Results aside, I acknowledge the impressive effort it takes to attempt sophisticated and taxing custodial duties."

"Sir."

"However! There's one thing I cannot forgive, and that's how badly you two seem to get along. You fight, you hurt each other, you quarrel over meaningless things. It's pathetic," he told them witheringly. "You're not old friends by any chance, are you?"

"Absolutely not!" they voiced in unison.

"I only met him last week."

"And even if we were stuck together for the next fifty years, we'd never be friends! Never!"

"I... I see." Briefly dumbfounded by their vehemence, Onuki recovered enough to say, "Even so, you need to find some spirit of cooperation. Conflict does no one any good. I personally think you two cooperating on something might help, but..."

With that, Sousuke and Issei shared a glance.

“Hmm. Regarding that...”

“The truth is, we did cooperate a little bit just now...”

“Oh?”

Sousuke stood up and headed for the kitchen. He picked up a dish sitting beside the stove and placed it onto the table. It was fish stewed in miso.

“Tonight’s dinner.”

“Sagara arranged the ingredients, and I cooked. It’s delicious,” said Issei. “Try some.”

Onuki looked at it hesitantly, then took the chopsticks he was offered and tried the soup. “Well, well. It’s... delicious. Truly, truly...” The fish was fatty and rich, and there was exactly the right amount of ginger in the soup. Onuki devoured the fish, feeling suddenly very pleased, and said, “You actually did something competently for once. Amazing. By the way, what is this fish? I can’t quite place the flavor...”

“It’s koi,” said Sousuke. “I caught it in the pond behind the school building.”

Onuki’s smile froze in place.

“It was quite large,” he boasted. “It struggled quite a lot, and took a long time to kill.”

Onuki quietly laid down his chopsticks. Then he slowly stood up, opened the closet in the room, rooted around in it, and pulled out an old chainsaw. The custodian then said, smiling, “You know, you two. That koi...”

“That koi?” the two asked, slowly moving into defensive postures.

“I’ve been raising her for fifteen years with great care. I cared for her so much, I even thought I’d stand a chance at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forest, and Fisheries Award. That’s how much she meant to me. Her name was Catherine,” he told them. “I named her after a famous French actress.”

“Aha...”

“And you caught her?” Onuki asked, his voice deceptively friendly. “It took a long time to kill her? And then, of all things, you made me eat her?”

“It appears so,” Sousuke lamented.

“Yeah, yeah... I’ve finally caught on. There’s not a single good intention in you. Everything you’ve been doing since yesterday has been a way of spiting me.”

“Eh? Onuki-san, you—”

Vroooooom! Rumm, rumm, rumm... Onuki started up the chainsaw’s engine. A roar rang out as the jagged blade began to spin at high velocity.

“Mr. Custodian?” Issei asked nervously.

“I must avenge my darling Catherine. I’m sorry, but it’s time to die. Sagara-kun. Tsubaki-kun.” With bloodshot eyes, Onuki raised the chainsaw high, and...

“Wait—”

“Die!” Smiling a smile that would make Jack Nicholson blush, Onuki Zenji leaped into action.

A misty rain was falling that morning.

When Kaname arrived at school, in the middle of stifling a yawn, she found the inside of the building a total mess. The parts of the walls and ceiling that weren’t made of reinforced concrete had been torn apart. Glass was broken, tiles were shattered. Sparks and water gushed from severed electric cables and sundered water pipes. Kaname accosted and asked several of the nervous-looking students standing nearby what had happened, but nobody seemed to know.

The anxious Kaname wandered around the school before classes and eventually discovered a gaunt-looking Sousuke and Issei in the gym storehouse.

“Wh-What happened?” she asked him.

Sousuke replied, as pale as death. “I spent all night with the rampaging custodian. I’ve never struggled so much against a man who wasn’t in some kind of combat vehicle. My bullets didn’t even slow him down. Unbelievable,” he responded listlessly.

Issei seemed to be, if anything, in even worse shape. “Never again. I’ll never fight again. I’m out forever. Never again...” he whispered, hugging his knees.

She wondered what kind of bloodbath they'd been witness to, but it seemed like the kind of thing you couldn't imagine unless you'd been there.

The competition between Sousuke and Issei thus ended inconclusively.

Mr. Onuki himself regained consciousness that afternoon, and when Kaname asked him what had happened, he responded, absently,

“Eh? I don't remember at all...”

〈A Trespass on Good Faith — The End〉

Fancies Without Honor or Humanity

Repeated spiteful acts and incursions on their turf, countless subordinates and associates killed... capped off with arson in their precious lumberyard. Now, the chivalrous yakuza of Kibamasa would explode with rage against the cowardly Okiyama.

On the screen, the lead actor, Ken-san, spoke gravely. "My dead pop had a saying: 'A man should fight once in his life. Just be ready to give up your life in that fight.'"

"Boss!"

"You'll do it?"

And with that, Ken-san and his underlings threw themselves at the enemy yakuza.

Ah, what a bloodbath... this movie was enough to make Chidori Kaname, the viewer, find it all a little excessive. Since it was the climax, many "good guys" died, including an extremely young Matsukata Hiroki. Then Ken-san chased the enemy boss around, killed him with a dagger, and that was the end. Pretty much everyone involved, friend or foe, was dead—it was an ending without hope or redemption.

"Why are yakuza movies always like this?" Kaname whispered, gazing at the TV in the student council room. She'd been sitting around on a Saturday, channel surfing, when she'd come upon the old movie, *Chivalrous Story of Japan*, and ended up casually watching it for ninety minutes. "He didn't have to charge in and stab him like that," she said. "There were smarter ways of fighting. Set a bomb in their base, or shoot the boss from a distance..."

Here, Mikiyara Ren, who was doing paperwork silently nearby, cocked her head curiously. She was a second-year who worked as the student council's secretary. Her classic good looks and sleek black hair, combined with a graceful bearing and demeanor, had earned her the honorific nickname "O-Ren-san."

“What a violent thing to say, Chidori-san. Talking of bombings and shootings... you sound like Sagara-san.” She was referring to the war-addled problem child, Sagara Sousuke.

“Geh...” This unpleasant comparison had Kaname at a loss for words.

“Besides... a stabbing is a fine thing. My respect for a man increases if he uses an honorable weapon like a knife rather than resorting to firearms,” Ren chastised her quietly.

Kaname was feeling a little flustered now. “You like yakuza movies, O-Ren-san?”

“No, not particularly,” she responded with a placid smile.

Kaname blinked in confusion and began packing up her things to leave. She said, “Well, whatever. Where’s Sousuke?” Sagara Sousuke had been watching the movie with her for a while, but he’d vanished not long ago.

“I saw him exit into the hallway with his cell phone,” Ren told her.

“Hmm...”

Just then, the door opened again. Sousuke returned to the student council room, looking unhappy.

“Where have you been?” Kaname asked. “You missed the rest of Ken-san’s movie.”

“Did I?” Sousuke responded listlessly, as if he didn’t care about the movie at all, before slumping back into his seat. He wore his usual sullen expression and tight frown... but Kaname felt like he seemed more forlorn than usual.

“Is something wrong?” she tried again.

“I just received word that one of my personal investments failed.”

“Investments? You play the stocks?”

“No... I was developing new equipment for military and police purposes with an old arms dealer acquaintance of mine,” Sousuke explained. “It integrated a number of high-tech systems and it would have been a revolutionary product... but there are almost no buyers. Only the FBI and the Miami Police Force

invested.”

“Hmm...”

“I’ll have to take the rest myself,” he concluded.

Kaname laughed. “I don’t really get it... but life always has its ups and downs. Just cheer up! I’ll treat you to some trident-yaki at the Ohio-ya on the way back. C’mon!” She slapped him on the back and tugged at his arm.

Sousuke slowly stood up and began packing up to go.

“O-Ren-san? You’re not leaving yet?”

“I just finished now. I’ll accompany you,” said Ren, tidying up her own documents.

Kaname, Ren, and Sousuke walked together through the crowds on the shopping street in the evening. They turned off the main avenue crowded with shopping housewives and stopped at a taiyaki shop in a narrow back alley. Kaname made Sousuke try its specialty, trident-yaki (yogurt flavor), and he said, “delicious” with his usual expressionless face. If he’d had a tail, it might have been wagging back and forth.

“He really is a dog,” Kaname observed.

“Indeed,” said Ren.

“What are you talking about?” Sousuke asked suspiciously, diligently working at finishing his trident-yaki.

Just then, raucous voices echoed from an izakaya across the street from the taiyaki place, followed by the sound of glass breaking and a scream. The door opened with a bang, and two men rushed out. They had the traditional “hoodlum” appearance—a middle-aged man with a shaved head and a young man with a pompadour.

“Bring it on, ya piece of shit punks!” screamed one of the men.

“Come out! Come out an’ fight, assholes!” shouted the other, a beer bottle in hand.

It was then that six men of similar appearance filed out from the back of the pub. It looked as though, for reasons that were unclear, the two-man group had picked a fight with the six-man group.

“Whatcha want, asshole?!”

“Yeah, y’wanna geh, ehheh?!”

“Grah! Yeah! Ragh!”

The men recited some kind of strange, inscrutable chant as they launched into a brawl. All the while, passers-by fled, signs were broken, and the izakaya staff panicked.

“Ah, a brawl. Don’t see those all the time,” Kaname said, swallowing her taiyaki. It wasn’t any of her business, so she’d gone straight into rubbernecker mode. Sousuke acted similarly, quickly returning the gun he’d drawn at some point to its holster.

Kaname held out her hand as if she were holding a microphone. “Sergeant. What’s your take, from a professional standpoint?”

“Sloppy. Their movements are too telegraphed. Even new recruits would do better,” he responded sternly.

“I see... Aha, here comes the trademark of any yakuza, the ax bomber. That one hurt. Oof, that one hurt too! By the way, who do you think will win?”

“Neither side has firearms or any particular fighting skill,” Sousuke told her. “In such situations, the force of numbers always prevails.”

While the two of them seemed completely nonplussed in their discussion, Ren looked deeply flustered.

Kaname laughed kindly. “Is it scary to watch, O-Ren-san?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“C’mon, they’re just yakuza. Let ’em fight if they want.”

“Actually... I really can’t just...” Ren stammered, looking very upset indeed.

Kaname tilted her head questioningly.

While they were talking, the fight came to an end with exactly the result

Sousuke had predicted. The two-man gang, which didn't seem to know how to do much besides charging and grabbing, ended up being bested by the six men. They were promptly kicked around, spat on, and robbed. Then, to finish the job, several of the men hefted each of them up and gave them a powerbomb of love and friendship.

After being slammed into the asphalt like that, the two-man group fell still.

"That'll teach ya."

"Now keep your noses outta our business."

"You get it?!"

With one last line of threats, the six-man group cackled and left. As they departed, one of the hoodlums said, "The Mikihara Gang ain't shit. Buncha gutless cowards. Ha ha ha."

Kaname, hearing this, blinked in confusion. "Mikihara... Gang?" She looked over at Ren—*Mikihara* Ren—standing beside her.

But the girl just ignored her and ran across the road to the two hoodlums. "Shibata-san?!"

"H-Hey... Mistress?" the bald yakuza said with a groan as Ren called his name. "Geh... wish you hadn't seen that... Ha ha..."

"Shibata-san. Were you harmed?" Ren drew closer to the man, who was unquestionably harmed.

"...Well, I think it's pretty obvious I was... But I'll be okay. Ow, ow..."

Ren helped "Shibata" up. "Who were those men? Friends of yours?"

"Oh, c'mon, Mistress," Shibata scoffed. "They're from the Ryujin Cooperative."

"Oh. Were they?"

Shibata spat on the ground, his saliva mixed with blood, as tears entered his eyes. "Those Ryujin guys... they've been hornin' in on our turf worse than ever lately, takin' advantage of the boss bein' sick. Just now they tried to shake down that pub, which is our usual stompin' grounds... and when we tried to stop 'em,

well, you saw the rest. It's pathetic. Hrrrk..." He clenched his eyes shut in frustration.

"Don't cry, Shibata-san," Ren said soothingly. "There's no shame in losing at an impromptu wrestling match."

"Sorry. I'm so sorry..."

They seemed to be talking past each other entirely.

It was here that Kaname spoke up from behind. "Um, excuse me, O-Ren-san? First things first... Who are these men?"

"Oh, they're workers at my father's company," Ren answered. "He runs a small business, you see..."

"A... business?" *She has to mean a gang, right? And she means underlings, not workers, right? Wait... is O-Ren-san the daughter of a mob boss?!* Kaname wondered. They'd known each other for a year, yet Kaname knew nothing about Ren. But before she could get too far with her reasoning, she was forced to back off as one of the underlings, the young man with the pompadour, started pointing at her with a scream.

"What is it, Takigawa?" Shibata asked with a frown.

"Bro, don't you remember? It's her! The one who sicced Bonta-kun on us at the amusement park!"

Shibata tilted his head, and then... "Ah."

In that instant, the two of them recognized each other.

"Y-You're...!"

"You're...!"

Both moved into a defensive stance. Sousuke's hand also moved for the holster on his back.

There was a reason for this reaction. Kaname and Shibata's gang had gotten into a scuffle at an amusement park once. At the time, the one who'd saved Kaname had been Sousuke, dressed in the suit of the park's mascot, Bonta-kun. Bonta-kun had taken the yakuza out with the force of a gale, thoroughly and

without mercy.

To think those same men lived so close by... Kaname thought, and kept her bag raised cautiously as she stared the men down. “Wh-What,” she said defensively, “you wanna fight? I’ll call Bonta-kun again! He’ll fumo you within an inch of your lives!” This was clearly a bluff, but it caused both men to twitch.

“You... You can call him?” they asked, horrified. “Just like that?”

“Y-Yes, you bet,” Kaname told them. “I’ll whistle and he’ll come flying to my side!”

The two yakuza stood there frozen for a while. The younger, Takigawa, looked completely terrified, while Shibata seemed to be giving serious thought to something. Then he nodded firmly, placed both hands on the ground and prostrated himself before Kaname. “Ma’am!”

“Eh?”

“I didn’t realize you were Mistress Ren’s friend,” he said apologetically. “I’m so sorry for the trouble I caused you! Please... I beg you to forgive me!”

“B-Bro?! Where’s this coming from?” The young underling seemed as surprised as Kaname was.

Not sure what he was getting at, Kaname just stood there hesitantly as Shibata proclaimed, “And as I ask your forgiveness, I ask you a favor as well!”

“A... A favor?”

“Yes! The truth is...” Shibata explained his request.

As she heard it, Kaname sank to her knees, dumbstruck.

The office of the seventh generation of the Mikihara Gang sat in a corner of a residential block about a kilometer away from Sengawa Shopping Street. They called it an office, but it was really just an old tucked-away civilian residence, a wooden building with a flat roof and a large garden, and just a truck and an old domestic car parked in front.

The house’s master, Mikihara Kanji, was head of the Mikihara Gang, and a no-nonsense man. He had short-clipped salt-and-pepper hair, thick eyebrows, high

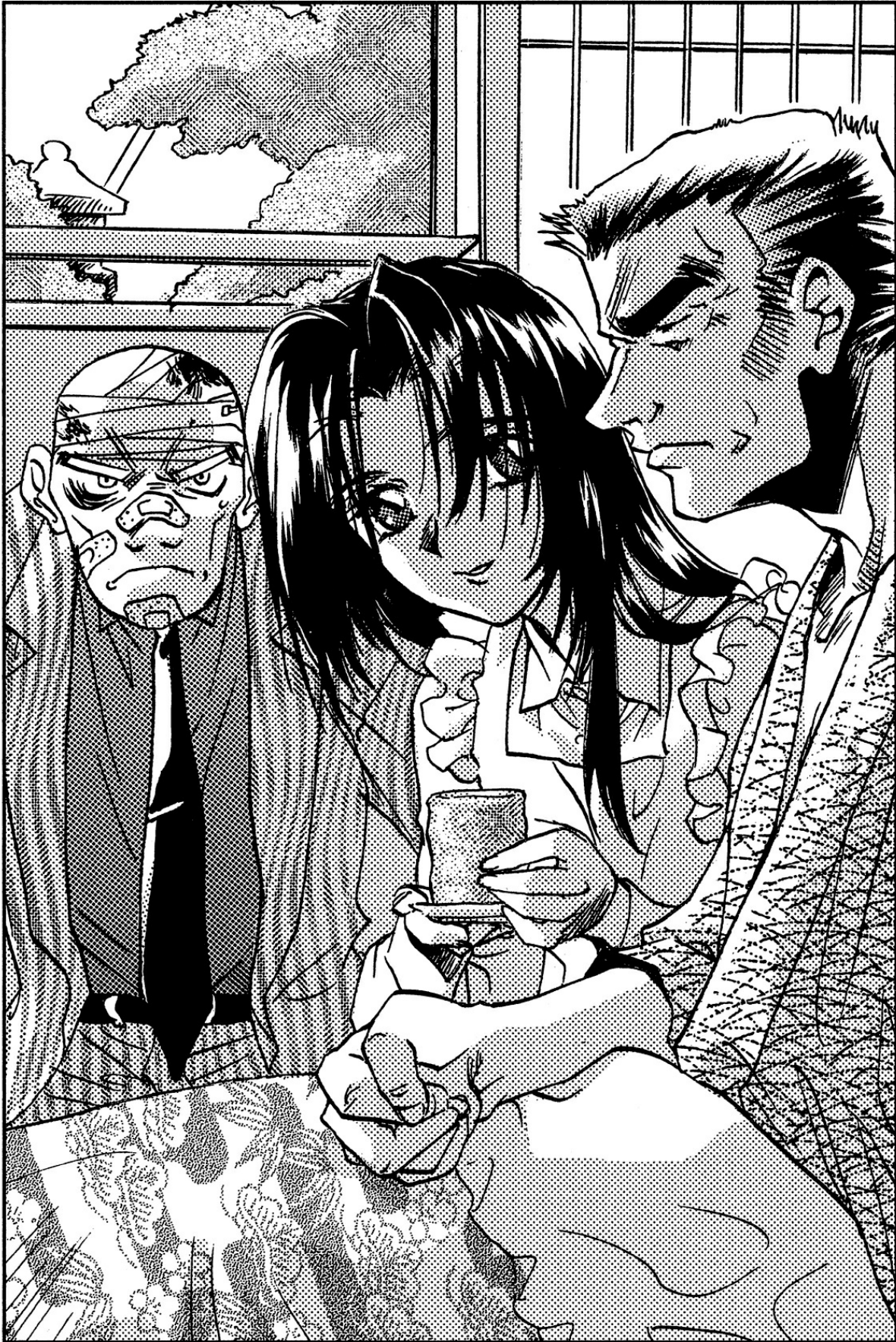
cheekbones, and a narrow jawline without a trace of excess fat. There was an indomitable light in his eyes that hadn't waned even in his illness.

He was sitting up in bed, gazing out at the trees of the garden, when his only daughter, Ren, arrived. His underboss, Shibata, was with her.

"Father," she said, "it's time for your medicine."

"Ah, thanks again."

Ren, in her apron, poured tea into a cup and held it out to him with a pill. He took it, downed the medicine with the lukewarm tea, and then coughed a few times.



“Father?!”

“I’m all right...” he continued hoarsely through a few more coughs. “I’m fine.”

“Try to be more careful,” she advised him. “It’s very hard to wash tea out of a futon.”

“...”

Ignoring the way Kanji had slumped over, Ren looked over at the waiting underboss. “Now, I believe Shibata-san has something to say to you, Father.”

“What is it, Shiba-san?”

His underboss, Shibata, was a man just over thirty. He was loyal and single-minded, but he was also overly belligerent and a bit too fond of drink. Once again, his shaved head was wrapped in bandages, and he had adhesive plasters on his face.

Kanji glared at Shibata. “Another drunken brawl? I told you to knock it off. You’re setting a bad example for the youngsters.”

“Ah. Well...”

“A man only needs one fight in his life, but you seem to get one a week. I don’t like seeing you treat your life so cheaply. You’ve got a five-year-old child, for pity’s sake.”

“Sir. But... it was different this time,” Shibata argued, abashed.

“Different how?” Kanji asked.

“It was the Ryujin Cooperative. They’re hornin’ in on our turf.”

“Hrm...”

The Ryujin Cooperative was a rising crime syndicate that had been rapidly growing its numbers lately. They had the backing of the Kadoyama Gang, a syndicate that controlled all of Kanto, and weren’t afraid to use force in the pursuit of profit.

Conversely, Kanji’s Mikihara Gang was a small one with only seven members, but their history and social standing traced back to the Edo Period, and their prioritizing of the traditions of loyalty and chivalry earned them the respect of

the other bosses. Yet the Ryujin Cooperative was now muscling in on the Mikihara Gang's extremely meager territory.

"Boss. Maybe this ain't for me to say, but... we really can't protect our turf all by ourselves," Shibata was forced to admit. "It ain't that me and the other guys don't have guts to match the Ryujin Cooperative guys, there's just too many of them. There's no way we can fight 'em. Yesterday really proved that."

"Hmm..."

"So... we need outside help, right? Why don't we bring in a hired man? I happen to have just met someone who could do the job right."

A hired man, eh? Not a bad idea... Kanji leaned forward. "Is he tough?"

"Yeah, for sure. He served as a soldier abroad for years, I'm told."

"Aha."

"The truth is, boss, I've already called him here," Shibata confessed. "I really hope you'll meet with him."

"That's awfully sudden... but ah, well. I'll meet him."

"Oh? Well then, in the interest of speed..." Shibata bowed, then from the breezeway facing the garden, he called to the front door, "Sensei! The boss will see you! Come on in!"

Soon after, the "Sensei" in question entered the garden. Appearing from the underbrush came... a curious mascot. It was two heads tall and rotund, with a face that was a bit like a dog and a bit like a mouse. It had two big, button eyes and a dapper little hat and bow tie. Behind it stood a pretty girl about Ren's age.

The mascot walked up to Boss Kanji and said, "Fumoffu."

"..."

"Boss. This is the mercenary, Bonta-kun." Shibata introduced him. "And the girl behind him is his interpreter, Chidori Kaname-san."

"Hello there. A pleasure," Kaname said with a bow.

Bonta-kun bowed with her and said, in some strange language, "Fumo fumo

fumoffu, fumooo... Fumoffu, fumoffu.”

“Er... Bonta-kun says, ‘I’m honored to meet you, Gang Leader. Leave the combat instruction to me,’” Kaname interpreted.

“Fumofumo, moffuru, fumoffu...”

“Er... ‘I’ll train your subordinates to be first-class fighters. There’s nothing to worry about. I am a professional.’”

Boss Kanji listened silently, then spoke. “Excuse me...”

“Boss?” said Shibata.

The next instant, Kanji sprang out of bed, grabbed a nearby dagger and drew it smoothly from its sheath.

“Boss?!”

“Father?!” The sudden act of hostility caused everyone present to freeze up immediately.

“Shibata... This is quite an intricate prank to play on a sick old man. But I’m the man they call ‘Buddha-slayer Kanji.’ I will not be mocked!” Kanji trembled, his husky voice straining.

“B-Boss!”

“Prepare to die, you ungrateful bastard!” Kanji slashed the long knife at Shibata, who tried to dive back. But just in the nick of time...

“Fumoffu!” Like the wind, Bonta-kun, who’d made it inside by this point, executed a spectacular jump kick on Kanji.

“Gah!” The boss was sent flying through a folding screen and hit the corridor wall.

Bonta-kun landed neatly in a crouch, then straightened up. To the now unmoving gang boss, he boldly said, “Fumo fumo. Fumoffu...”

“Calm down, Bossman...” Kaname continued interpreting.

“Fumoffu, fumoffu. Fumo, fumooo. Moffuru.”

“Don’t judge a person by appearances,” she continued. “That can get you

killed on the battlefield.’”

“Y-You blasted mascot...” Kanji, using the dagger as a cane, attempted to stand up, but... “But you really are strong.” He collapsed again with a groan.

Soon after, Kanji returned to his bed and told Shibata to do as he liked. There was a sense of mournfulness about him. None of them knew that he would later be weeping into his pillow, grieving the death of the gang that had lasted for seven generations.

Regardless, Bonta-kun was now the Mikihara Gang’s hired man.

Obviously, it was Sousuke inside the suit. For some reason, activating the electronic equipment inside the Bonta-kun suit also activated the strange voice-changer mechanism, which was why Kaname had come along to interpret. In fact, she had a small transceiver that let her hear Sousuke’s voice in her ear.

On Bonta-kun’s instructions, the Mikihara Gang’s henchmen had gathered in the garden. They numbered a mere seven men, Shibata included.

“Fumoffu!” Bonta-kun cried from where he stood in front of the men.

“What’d he say?”

“He said, ‘line up,’” Kaname explained, and the seven gang members slowly formed a line.

Then Bonta-kun drew a pistol from somewhere and fired it at their feet.
Blam! Blam! Blam!

“Wah!”

“Wh-What are you doin’?!” the gang members cried as they were forced into an impromptu tap dance.

“Fumo fumo. Fumoffu, fumoffu, moffuru...”

“Er... He said, ‘This gun is your enemy’s main weapon, a Norinco T54. Remember the sound and impact of its shots!’” Kaname told them. It was a Chinese-made Tokarev: cheap, easy to find, and easy to use as well. It was basically made for the Japanese underworld.

Bonta-kun went on. “Fumoffu. Fumo fumo. Fuuumo, fuuumo. Moffuru, fumo fumooooo...”

““Every single one of you is a piece of useless lowlife trash. But if you accept the training I offer and do as I tell you, you’ll be able to execute any mission asked of you. So you’d better take it seriously,’ he says.” Kaname hesitated as she felt the glares of everyone assembled on her. “Hey, don’t look at me! Bonta-kun said it,” she insisted, looking victimized.

“Er, sorry...” The gang members turned red and lowered their eyes. They seemed almost bashful.

Guess they’re actually pretty innocent types, Kaname thought.

“Fumoffu! Fumoffu!”

““First, let’s work on basic stamina. One lap around the block!””

“Right. Okay...”

Blam! Blam!

“Erk!”

“Fumooooooooooooooooo!”

““Hurry,’ he says!”

Urged on by Bonta-kun’s pistol, the gang members took off in a desperate run.



One week later...

Their after-school training sessions with the Mikihara Gang weren't going great. The henchmen seemed incapable of processing new information. *Always keep your attention on all sides around you, and don't shout when you charge the enemy*, he'd told them. But they seemed incapable of focusing on anything that wasn't right in front of them and continued to roar whenever they charged. No matter how Sousuke tried to teach them the basics of close-combat fighting, in the end, they always just lashed out with their combat knives, shouting, "I'll murder your ass!"

"Fumoffu! Fumo fumo, fumoffu!"

"Get a grip already. You have to use your heads in combat,' he says."

The gang members looked confused. "But Sensei, my body moves before I can think."

"Fumo fumo. Fumoffu, fumo fumo."

"Don't be stupid. You're not some local gang of punks.'"

"Um, we *are* a local gang of punks, actually..."

"Fumo..."

Inside the Bonta-kun costume, Sousuke was feeling frustrated. *I thought those gutless rugby players were bad*, he thought, *But these men have the exact opposite problem*. Their hot-tempered attitudes made them sloppy, and Sousuke was trying to curb that impulse. They didn't have to be actively stronger than their opponent, after all; they just had to put up enough resistance for the enemy to decide that dealing with them was too much trouble. It was the ideal strategy for anyone, from a weak nation to a bullied child.

But for the Mikihara Gang members themselves...

"Sensei. We've gotten pretty good, huh?"

"Bet we can take out all those Ryujin punks now, eh? Heh heh heh..."

The week's training had given them inexplicable confidence, even though

they were still terribly weak.

“Fumoffu,” Bonta-kun (Sousuke) barked.

“‘Don’t get the wrong idea,’ he says.”

“Fumo fumo, fumoffu, fumoffu.”

“‘You’re still delicate little greenhorns,’ he says,” Kaname told them bluntly.

“Not sure about that ‘delicate’ part...”

“Fumoffu. Moffuru. Fumo, fumo fumo. Moffuru, moffuru.”

“‘Shut up. Avoid combat with the enemy until I say otherwise. That’s an order,’ he says.”

“Right...”

“Fumoffu!”

Blam! Sousuke fired the Chinese-made Tokarev into the air.

“‘You get it now?!’ he says.”

The gang members straightened up and squeaked out a “Y-Yessir!”

A group of men stood on a building in the distance, watching the training go down. They wore chain necklaces, alligator-skin boots, high-quality smoked glasses—all typical hoodlum attire. They also had the nastiest faces you could imagine.

These were members of the Ryujin Cooperative.

“Heh heh... What’re those Mikihara Gang goons up to?”

“Playin’ house with a big stuffed animal?”

“How the mighty ‘Buddha-slayer Kanji’ has fallen...”

Each member let out a cold chuckle with his words.

“Looks like those little hurts we put on ’em ain’t done the job. Time to give ’em a final warning.”

“Yeah, you said it. We can up our game, too.”

“Hmm... like how?”

“Their boss’s got a daughter in high school, right? Let’s take her, and...”

“Ohh?”

“You know what I mean. Lots of fun and dirty things... heh heh heh.”

“Heh heh heh... You perv.”

The men’s expressions twisted into leers.

It was Saturday, the eighth day of Sousuke’s employment by the Mikihara Gang. When afternoon classes were over, Sousuke briefly parted ways with Kaname to recover the Bonta-kun costume from his apartment. Then he walked to the park near the yakuza office, suit in tow, and put it on in a public bathroom.

Systems activated. Sensors functioning. Drive system functioning. Communications functioning. Voice changer... functioning, despite my best efforts.

“Fumoffu... (Right...)” Brushing off neighborhood children that approached him, Sousuke as Bonta-kun headed for the office. But as he passed through the door, the gang’s members ran up to him in a panic.

“Ah! S-Sensei!”

“Fumoffu? (What is it?)”

“Takigawa went to school to pick up the mistress and Kaname-chan... and he just came back here, wounded...” The underboss, Shibata, seemed so rattled that it was hard to follow what he was saying. But the henchman, Takigawa, surrounded by the other gang members caring for him, was able to elucidate.

Sousuke exclaimed silently as he saw him. The man was battered all over, covered in blood and wounds. To add insult to injury, they’d also written “肉” (lit. “meat”) on his forehead in magic marker.

“S-Sensei... O-On the way back... these masked guys attacked...” Takigawa was heaving for breath and crying as he spoke. “I’m sorry... Sensei. The mistress and Kaname-chan... they took ’em... Ngh. Sensei... I fought as hard as I could,

just like you taught me, but...”

“Fumoffu... (I see...)”

“Th-Those guys... they wore masks, but they were definitely Ryujin guys. Sensei, please... please, save the girls!” Takigawa took Bonta-kun’s squishy paw between his hands as he cried manly tears, and the other gang members teared up as well.

“Fumo... (Hmmgh...)” The news that the girls had been kidnapped had Sousuke feeling very nervous. He had to save them as soon as possible.

But the Ryujin Cooperative had forty members. There was no way even Sousuke could beat them all by himself without killing anyone. Given SAWs, Claymores, grenade launchers and high-performance explosives, he could certainly wipe them off the map, but he didn’t want to cause a rain of blood and leave behind a mountain of bodies. If he had even a few allies, he could come up with a relatively bloodless plan, but...

Perhaps pegging to his thought process, Shibata said, “Sensei! We’ll help you. I don’t know how much help we may be... but we’re prepared to lay down our lives if we have to!”

“Yeah. We’ll do it.”

“Me too. I’d give my life to save the mistress!” the men shouted, one after another.

“Fumo... (But...)” Sousuke thought and thought. They were awful fighters who couldn’t even use cover effectively. Even if he brought them along, they’d just die pointless deaths. But at the same time, he couldn’t do it alone...

If only we had appropriate equipment... Wait. That’s right. He *did* have equipment. Excellent equipment. Equipment he’d developed but failed to sell just the other day...

“Fumoffu. Fumo. (Come with me. Hurry.)”

Bonta-kun beckoned them to follow and ran for the gang’s truck.

After being shoved into a shiny black Benz, Kaname and Ren were taken to an

old mansion on the outskirts of town. *Our kidnappers' base, I'll bet*, Kaname thought. There were the expected tough guy sorts loitering around the gate, the garden, and the grounds. Security looked tight, with some even wearing submachine guns they wore openly on straps over their shoulders.

The two girls were then shoved into a dank, mildewy basement.

Kaname whispered despondently, "Yeesh. I sure get captured by bad guys a lot, huh? Wonder why..."

"Oh... You have prior experience with this, Kaname san?" Ren asked, as if she didn't fully realize the grim situation she was in.

"Yeah. And I could guess what idiot is behind it, but..."

"Goodness me," said Ren. "I hope you take better care in the future."

"You're in this situation too, y'know..." Kaname reminded her.

About an hour later, several men arrived in the basement. "Hey... You're as pretty as they say, girls," the man standing at the front said appreciatively. He wore a green vest and spectacles with a towel tied around his neck.

"Um... Who are you?"

"Boss of the Ryujin Cooperative, Suganuma. Incidentally, my grandfather was stationed on an English tank destroyer for some reason. Ah, that's not a joke anyone's gonna get, of course," he said offhandedly, and drank straight from the bottle of beer in his hand.

What a strange gang leader, Kaname thought. "Ahh... So, I guess I should ask. What exactly do you plan to do with us?"

Suganuma smiled. "Isn't it obvious? It's the old classic: I'm gonna use you to get the Mikihara Gang to forfeit their turf. Heh."

"Use us? You don't mean..."

A few men brought various objects into the basement. Lighting equipment, a video camera, and... maid, miko, and nurse uniforms.

Kaname gasped.

"First, we need to show them we're serious... Heh heh heh. Hey, Kudo!

Seino!” Suganuma snapped his fingers and the men approached the girls, fingers flexing wickedly.

“H-Hang on a minute!” said Kaname, beginning to panic.

Meanwhile, Ren seemed utterly clueless. “Er. Might I ask what you want from us, exactly?”

The Ryujin Cooperative members kept descending on them, grinning... When just then, there came a distant roar. The roof of the basement shook, shedding dust. The sound of an explosion burst out from elsewhere in the house.

“Eh?” Suganuma’s brow furrowed as he ordered his underlings to go check out the commotion.

The front gate of the mansion was a maelstrom of shouts and screams because a pickup truck had burst through the gate and was now racing through the grounds. It kept on driving until it crashed into the mansion’s front door, whereupon the whole wall crumbled, releasing a cloud of rubble and dust.

“What’s going on?!” The gang members on watch duty drew their pistols and shouted at each other as they fell on the truck.

But the driver’s seat was empty. There was no one there. The confused hoodlums looked around... and then, one by one, their eyes turned back towards the wrecked front gate.

“What...?”

“I-Is that...?!”

The blowing, swirling smoke slowly cleared, and beyond it, they could see seven figures.

“...?!”

They were all stout and two heads tall, their heads a bit like a dog and a bit like a mouse. Their button eyes sparkled red with malice.

It was seven heavily-armed Bonta-kuns, each of them carrying powerful firearms and distorting the air around them with furious auras.

“Fumo...” said the central Bonta-kun, raising a plush hand. In return, the six Bonta-kuns at his side pointed their weapons at the Ryujin Cooperative’s members. There were shotguns, rifles, submachine guns, Gatling guns, grenade launchers...

“Fumoffu!” The chief Bonta-kun cried out, and fire burst from each and every one of them. Tear gas, rubber bullets, and the flash of tasers rained down on the men.

“Gah?!”

“Gweh...”

“Hrrrk!”

One by one, the men fell. This blazing blitzkrieg attack had crippled the Ryujin Cooperative in seconds, and now the Bonta-kuns fell upon the mansion in a living torrent.

“Get them!” One gang member yelled from the entry hall, unloading his Tokarev on a Bonta-kun. Such an assault might have been fatal against an ordinary human, but his super-aramid fiber hide could stop even a rifle shot.

“Fumofumo... fumoffu!” Ignoring the merciless gunfire, Bonta-kun smiled confidently, then filled the gang member with rubber bullets in turn.

The man flew back, weeping at the unfairness of it.

The Bonta-kuns cleared out the room with overwhelming power. Not even the enemies who hid behind doors and walls could escape them. The Mass-Production Bonta-kun suits that Sousuke had doled out to the Mikihara Gang possessed infrared cameras that could seek out body heat and ULF sensors that could detect human heartbeats. They even had a power assist function adapted from arm slave control systems, which meant the wearer didn’t even feel the suit’s weight. With all that plus their bulletproof properties, their side hadn’t lost a single man yet.

They’re useful after all, Sousuke thought from inside the prototype model, tilting his head in confusion. *Why didn’t they sell?* He just couldn’t figure it out. He’d developed the power suit in cooperation with a Belgian arms dealer, and the only issue they’d had was that without the exact same voice changer as the

prototype installed, for some reason, the electronic equipment wouldn't work right.

The strike team, led by Sousuke, charged through one room after another.

"Fumoffu. (Clear.)"

"Fumoffu! (Clear!)"

"Fumoffu. (Clear)."

The strike team checked in via radio. They questioned one of the enemies they'd captured and, upon learning the girls were in the basement, headed straight there.

"Fumoffu, fumo! (Alpha, go!)"

Slam! They used a directed explosive to blow in the door, and the Bonta-kuns poured in.

Inside, the head of the Ryujin Cooperative was using Kaname and Ren as hostages with a pistol in his hand. "I-Impossible. Bonta-kuns?! My underlings were taken out by *Bonta-kuns*?!" the man shouted in fear as the four figures barged in.

Pointing his gun right at the man's forehead, Sousuke responded, "Fumo, fumo. Fumoffu. (There's nowhere to run. Surrender!)"

"He's probably telling you to stand down," Kaname, the hostage, interpreted with curious ease.

"D-Don't be stupid!" the gang leader shrieked. "If I lose to a bunch of mascots, the other yakuza will laugh at me! I'll be finished in this business!"

"Fumoffu... (I see...)" said Sousuke, shooting a rubber bullet straight into his opponent's face with merciless accuracy.

"Gwah!"

Looking down on the collapsed gang leader, Bonta-kun said, coldly, "Fumofumo, fumoffu. Fumo, fumo. (You made one mistake. You underestimated your enemy's firepower.)"

"I c-can't understand what you're saying..." the boss of the Ryujin Cooperative

wailed as he spasmed in pain.

After the Bonta-kun team withdrew, the police, having received an anonymous report, descended on the building. The weapons and narcotics stored in the mansion came to light, their bribery schemes were exposed, and that was the end of the Ryujin Cooperative.

The gang members just seemed to mumble “Bonta-kun, Bonta-kun” in fear, and the police didn’t know what to do with that. (Except one female officer from the Sengawa Department who, when she heard the rumors, began ranting in a hushed whisper, “It’s him. He’s out again!”)

When the Kadoyama Gang, who controlled all of Kanto, heard that the Ryujin Cooperative had been crushed by a group of mascots, they kicked them out of the group. Yet word got around, and soon the yakuza world was awash with fearful awe of Bonta-kuns.

“The Ryujin Cooperative was defeated by Bonta-kuns?!”

“Watch out for Bonta-kuns...”

“Always do what Bonta-kuns say.”

And so, the rumors spread.

That resolved the issue at hand, but...

“What a pathetic way to be saved,” Kaname grumbled unhappily as they escaped in the truck driven by Shibata, who’d removed his own mass-produced Bonta-kun outfit. “I know that when I was watching that yakuza movie earlier, I said it was pathetic to see everyone wiped out like that... but I wasn’t expecting a mass of Bonta-kuns to come to my rescue instead of Ken-san...”

Ren just smiled brightly in response. “Really? I think it’s quite wonderful. And they’re all so adorable.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kaname sighed.

Meanwhile, in the bed of the truck, the other Bonta-kuns were singing a song of victory.

“Fumoffu! Fumo! Fumo?!”

“Fumo fumo! Fumooo?”

“Fumo, moffuru! Fumoffu!”

The cheerful but incomprehensible song echoed throughout the town as evening approached.



Extra

[Several weeks later, from a US news station]

TV Anchor: “This evening, the Miami Police executed a large-scale drug bust at a South Miami shopping mall. Officers took eight suspects into custody and confiscated fifty kilograms of cocaine. According to a press conference with the Miami chief of police, their forces had acquired new equipment with special funds to perpetrate the sting. This new equipment allowed officers to apprehend the criminal group ‘with extreme swiftness’ and dealt ‘a serious blow’ to their morale. One of our reporters was successfully able to interview a member of the SWAT team in their new equipment just after the sting. We’ll go to video now...”

Reporter: (*holding out microphone*) Well done. Did you feel in danger at any time?

Officer: Fumoffu!

〈Fancies Without Honor or Humanity — The End〉

The Afterschool Peacekeeper

The conflict between the two forces was irreconcilable. Each side sought the eradication and eternal exile of their enemy from their “holy land,” with no room for compromise or negotiation. The roots of the conflict proved too deep for peace talks to make any headway. Each side’s hatred ran so deep that they would tear the other to pieces the moment they had the chance.

That day, both sides had gathered in the holy land to at last decide who had sovereignty there. The tension was like a powder keg as the forces stared each other down, each side roughly the size of an infantry platoon. That scale might sound small, but it was surprisingly large for this particular battlefield.

After all, the “holy land” they were fighting over was a residential children’s park.

One side consisted of thirty children, mostly boys from Sengawa Elementary’s Class 5-3; the other side, thirty-two children, composed mostly of interested parties from Shibasaki Elementary’s Class 5-1, alongside a few fourth years.

Both sides were armed to the teeth with plastic bats, old mops, cracked buckets and water balloons. For artillery support they had bottle rockets, firecrackers and poppers. (Incidentally, metal bats and rocks were forbidden by the rules of engagement negotiated by both sides, due to the threat of mutually assured destruction.)

From an objective standpoint, both sides were roughly equal. Nevertheless, each leader underestimated the other’s prowess and possessed total confidence in their own victory. This was an extremely bad omen; most of the worst quagmires of the 20th century had been the result of one army underestimating the other. For instance, Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 had been conducted under the assumption of a quick victory. But the Soviet resistance had proved more persistent than expected, and the result was a bloody war that lasted four years and took millions of lives. Rather than learning from history, though, these elementary schoolers were doomed to

repeat it.

Both armies' commanders gave their final declarations.

"Beat it, shit-for-brains!"

"*You* beat it, dick-faces!"

It was a ceremonial declaration, as spoken in the orthodox language of children everywhere. At this point in time, it signaled to the sixty-two people involved in the conflict that the tensions over the children's park had escalated to the point of no return.

A humid wind blew between them. Crows cawed in the distance. "It's a Small World" played from a nearby crepe truck. And breaking the quiet was...

"Get 'em!" someone cried, and both armies charged.

Warriors armed with brooms and drawing boards advanced in a line like an ancient Greek phalanx. From behind them, smaller soldiers rained down firecrackers and water balloons. But these smart strategies wouldn't last long—the battle quickly descended into chaos, punching and grappling without rhyme or reason. As war cries bellowed and firecrackers and poppers burst on both sides, a truly tragic sight unfolded. Some fled, some wept, some had their clothes torn off by rabid mobs.

"Crush 'em!"

"Ow, my nose!"

"Give 'em back, thief! Give back my undies!"

"Hold the line, dammit! Fight!" shouted Akutsu Yoshiki, a clever-looking boy in a green bandana. This was Shibasaki Elementary's commander, who was swinging a broken broom around to keep his attackers at bay in the thick of a chaotic battle. He cheered on his allied soldiers, "We're gonna push out those Sengawa Elementary assholes once and for all!"

Just then, a girl ran up to him, weaving through the chaos. "Yoshiki-kun!"

"Takami?! What are you doing here? It's not safe! Get away!" Yoshiki warned her.

But the girl called Takami didn't leave. Instead, she clung to his arm and shouted, tearfully, "Please, Yoshiki-kun! Please, stop fighting!"

"Shut up! Get outta here!"

"No, Yoshiki-kun! This... This isn't right!"

"Is too!" he retorted. "Get off me. Get off me, dammit!"

"No!" Takami cried. "I won't ever let go!"

"I can't move! Get away, I can't—" *Slam!* The next instant, a plastic wash basin came out of nowhere and struck him straight in the face. Yoshiki slumped to the ground with a moan.

But Takami only held him tighter. "Yoshiki-kun? Please, Yoshiki-kun! Speak to me! Please!"

"Y-You're... throttling me..." he choked out.

"Don't die, Yoshiki-kun!"

"Dying..."

"No, Yoshiki-kun! Don't leave me!" Takami sobbed. "Yoshiki-kun! Yoshiki-kun!!!" Wailing and crying hysterically, Takami accidentally wrung Yoshiki's neck, as her cries rang out across the chaotic free-for-all.



"My dog's dead," said Sasaki Hiromi. He was a small boy, the first year in charge of their equipment. His eyes, usually overflowing with curiosity, were now sunken and glazed over, reminiscent of a dead fish.

They were in the student council room after school. Hiromi let out a sigh from where he sat, at the corner of their usual large table. "He was a Shih Tzu," he said sadly. "We'd had him for twelve years, and I played with him every day. We ate together, slept together... He was like my little brother. He died of heart failure two days ago. He was lying in my arms, drooling, seizing... I could see in his big eyes how much he was suffering, but I couldn't do anything. I even tried cardiogenic drugs and palpitations. The vet came after he was dead and said there was nothing I could've done. But just an hour before, he was begging me for treats like always..."

"I... I see," Chidori Kaname said reticently, even as she listened.

"I was in a fog after that. For hours, I lay next to his body, just staring up at the sky."

"Th-That sounds rough..."

"I feel like... I don't care about myself or the world anymore," Hiromi said dully. "Even getting out of bed felt pointless."

Kaname listened patiently through all of this, and at the end, she asked, "And that's why you can't write your essay for this month's student council newsletter?"

"That's right," he told her. "I'm sorry."

Sasaki Hiromi wrote a humorous essay for the Jindai News every month, which even the students loved. Around the time of the deadline, he'd taken two days off from school. And when he'd come back, he'd declared that he just couldn't write it.

"It's already past deadline and the other article drafts are in. It's gonna be huge trouble for everyone else if we don't have it. But you can't write your article, because your dog died?" Kaname asked carefully, in a hushed voice.

Hiromi nodded listlessly. "Yes. I'm sorry," he said, sounding half dead. "Even if you slap me with your fan or give me some embarrassing but delightful *Boys Be-style* comfort, I won't be able to do it. Even if the principal came by and threatened to expel me, I wouldn't be able to do it. I just don't feel like doing anything anymore. Berate me all you like. Tell me it's a shallow excuse. It won't help. I don't care about the essay. I can't write a single line. The words won't come to me."

"Hmm. That is a problem," Kaname concluded, and let out a small sigh. She was this month's editor-in-chief and had been hoping to avoid blank space in the Jindai News if possible. Still, it was clear that there was no way Sasaki could write a lighthearted essay in his current condition. "Well, I guess we don't have a choice but to—"

"Chidori. Let's give him a little more time." These were the first words out of the mouth of Sagara Sousuke, who had otherwise been sitting on the opposite

side of the long table, silently doing editing work.

“Sousuke?”

“As ‘production assistant’ is my assigned mission, the completion of the Jindai News falls under my authority.” Sousuke stood up smoothly and walked up to Hiromi.

Hiromi looked up at Sousuke, eyes still glazed over.

“Sasaki,” said Sousuke, “Let’s assume that, during an operation in enemy territory, your comrade steps on a land mine and dies.”

“Er...”

“This was a comrade you’d fought alongside for twelve years,” Sousuke continued. “But now he’s dead. The enemy guerrillas will have heard the detonation and be coming to surround you soon. If you remain, they’ll catch you and tear you apart. Now, Sasaki: will you simply stay there, cradling your comrade’s dead body?”

“Um...”

“If you do, you will die. You’ll be throwing away even the possibility of survival. No matter how physically and mentally exhausted you may feel, you still have it in you to run from the enemy. You can still pull the trigger to fight back as well. There’s always something more you can do.” Sousuke spoke with his usual sullen expression.

Kaname just looked on, dumbstruck.

“If you try to escape but fail, and others come upon your battered corpse, they’ll laugh at you, calling you stupid or a coward. But never mind what they say. There are things that only those who have returned alive from the depths of enemy territory can understand, and these people will say a prayer to their various gods on your behalf,” Sousuke told him seriously. “Whether you fight to the end or give up halfway, your real comrades won’t blame you. The decision is yours, and yours alone.”

“Sousuke...” Kaname whispered.

But Sousuke ignored her and continued to peer into the listless face of Sasaki

Hiromi. “What will you do? Will you just give up? Or will you at least *try* to fight? It’s up to you to decide.” And with that said, he returned to his seat as if nothing had happened and resumed his editing work.

About thirty seconds later, Sasaki Hiromi rose to his feet. He grabbed the laptop sitting on a corner of the table and told Kaname, “Wait just a little while. I can at least generate words to fill the space.” Then he listlessly left the student council room.

Kaname stared keenly at Sousuke, with open surprise on her face. “What in the...”

“What?”

“I mean, for once, you actually... encouraged someone in a reasonable way. I’m almost kind of impressed,” she said slowly.

Sousuke briefly stopped editing and scratched at the tip of his nose with his index finger. “They’re words... passed to me from someone else. Someone who saved my life said something similar to me once,” he said indifferently.

“Huh? Who?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Oh, c’mon. Just tell me,” Kaname said teasingly.

Sousuke cast her a sidelong glance. “You really... don’t know?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” Sousuke waved his hand dismissively and changed the subject. “Still, Sasaki is a surprisingly promising person. Even after receiving a talk like that, putting the sentiment into action can be difficult.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “totally.”

“If that hadn’t worked, I was planning to point a gun between his eyes and say, ‘Write that lighthearted essay or I’ll start shooting, starting with your right knee. Now, write. And make sure it’s lighthearted.’”

“I take back what I said.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Kaname.

Just then, the student council’s president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, and its secretary, Mikihara Ren, entered the room. As was typical for them when walking side by side, they looked like a young entrepreneur and his private secretary.

“Is the editing of the newsletter proceeding apace?”

“Affirmative. Sasaki has been struggling, but I remain optimistic,” Sousuke responded.

Ren frowned and whispered with lonely eyes, “Really? We just passed Sasaki-kun in the hall. He seemed deeply despondent, almost like Sugawara Bunta when his little brother was killed during a gang war...”

“No need to worry, Mikihara-kun. Under classic storytelling tropes, that’s when the counterattack begins. He’ll surely find his fire once more and throw himself back into the bloody brawl,” Hayashimizu promised her.

“Of course,” she said. “I hope you’re right, but...”

“Are you sure about this?” asked Kaname, their conversation bringing a cold sweat to her brow.

“At any rate, we have a visitor.”

“Yes... she’s right here.”

Hayashimizu and Ren stepped aside to clear the way. From behind them appeared a ten-year-old girl. She had short hair and large eyes, and carried a bag that was far too big for her.

“Who’s that?” Kaname asked. “Your daughter?”

Ren blushed self-consciously, while Hayashimizu remained unflappable. “Several students on the way asked us that, but I’m afraid I’m still only eighteen years old. I couldn’t possibly have a ten-year-old daughter.”

“That’s true, now you mention it,” Kaname agreed. “Though it seems hard to believe, somehow...”

“Still, this little lady is the matter at hand.” In a gentlemanly manner,

Hayashimizu gestured the girl towards Kaname and Sousuke. "I found her wandering the building. She said she was looking for you and Sagara-kun."

"For us?"

The girl then spoke for the first time. "Um... it's been awhile, Sagara-san, Chidori-san."

Despite the girl's words, Kaname didn't recognize her. A friend of her little sister's, maybe? She turned it over in her mind but couldn't put a memory to the face. "Um, and... who are you again?"

"Amemiya Takami. You don't remember me?"

"A friend of Akutsu Yoshiki's, I believe. We met her in that old hospital. Her primary physical characteristics are a match," Sousuke said swiftly. His memory was a frightful thing at times.

"Yes. I was dressed as a ghost then, so you might not remember me, but..." said the girl, looking at her with upturned eyes.

"Oh, right, from that haunted hospital thing..." Kaname said, finally remembering. Akutsu Yoshiki was a boy Sousuke knew, and this girl was Yoshiki's classmate. "So, um... Amemiya Takami-chan. What brings you here?" Kaname felt that, if she'd come to this school full of strangers, seeking out people she barely knew, there must really have been special circumstances at play.

"Well, er. The truth is... There's something I wanted to ask your help with," Takami told them reluctantly.

"What is it?"

"I want you to stop a war."

The war was between the children of Sengawa and Shibasaki Elementary Schools, who had been engaged in a violent territorial conflict over a nearby children's park. Takami and Yoshiki went to Shibasaki Elementary, and Yoshiki was the Shibasaki army's commander.

"Both sides just want a place to play," Takami explained. "The park is flat and

paved, perfect for racing RC cars and playing basketball.” These were things you couldn’t do in a standard park, which tended more towards sandboxes and swing sets. “It started when the Sengawa kids made a Shibasaki kid cry for a silly reason, which inspired a gradually escalating cycle of revenge.”

“Like a yakuza turf war,” Kaname muttered.

“Yes,” Takami agreed sadly. “In the end, both sides decided that annihilation of the enemy was the only option.”

The Shibasaki kids said, ‘There are three evils in this world: alcohol, gambling, and Sengawa Elementary,’ while the Sengawa kids said, ‘The kids of Shibasaki aren’t human. They’re slimes worth five EXP apiece.’ They couldn’t share space without a fight breaking out, and the conflict had turned the area near the park into a crucible of violence and terrorism.

“The park is currently a danger zone,” she continued. “The adults of the neighborhood all look the other way for fear of making it worse. It’s almost like East Timor or Northern Ireland...”

“Those are strange things for a child to know about,” Kaname observed.

“Don’t focus on that part,” Takami said calmly. “The point is, if nothing is done, Yoshiki-kun and the others will keep fighting until one side is wiped out. I was hoping you two would step in before that happens. Yoshiki-kun told me stories about you two, and I saw how fierce you were, breaking through all those traps in the hospital...”

“I’m not sure about ‘fierce’...” said Kaname, not entirely happy about that description. She looked at Sousuke beside her. “Based on what Takami-chan says, what do you think we should do?”

“Hmm...” Sousuke folded his arms and was silent a while, and eventually answered, “Very well. If you’d asked us to serve as hired guns on Yoshiki’s side, I would have refused. But I’m happy to play mediator. War is an unfortunate business.”

“Seriously? Thanks!” said Takami, her face lighting up.

Meanwhile, Kaname glanced dubiously at Sousuke and whispered, “Oh? Didn’t expect to hear that from you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he told her calmly. “I’m always opposed to pointless wars.”

“Are you?”

“I am. I’m thoroughly against wars being waged between aimless amateurs,” he clarified. “If you’re going into battle, the most psychologically effective way would be to first kill one enemy in as gory a manner as possible, then write ‘You’re next’ in blood, perhaps—”

An offhanded kick from Kaname sent Sousuke into silence.

In the end, with Hayashimizu’s blessing, the two headed for the park in question. His justification for letting them go was that it was a ‘matter of regional security.’ It took about fifteen minutes for Sousuke, Kaname, and Takami to get there from Jindai High by bus.

The children’s park turned out to be an empty square lot, paved in gray concrete, with basketball nets on either side. Large apartment buildings towered over the northern and southern sides. Their sterile walls flanked the lot, which made them perfect for practicing basketball passes or soccer goal shots. The lot itself was about half the size of a school gym. There was no playground equipment there, so if not for the low hedge that surrounded it, someone might mistake it for a parking lot.

Still, the lot was in a sorry state. It was deserted, for one thing. Typically, this far from sundown, a park would be filled with the sounds of children playing... but the only sound now was the distant cawing of crows. The ground was littered with trash and rubbish as well: broken mops, cracked buckets, dirty scraps of cloth, bent frying pans, broken bicycles, scraps of paper, broken water balloons, et cetera, et cetera...

And thick, sloppy graffiti could also be seen here and there. It read:

Fear and kayos to Sengawa Ellementary

Go home, Shibasakki pigs

Death too the Sengawa invadars

Droun Shibasaki in blud

“All the childish misspellings... kind of makes it more intense,” Kaname found herself admitting.

“Yes,” Sousuke agreed, “reminiscent of a serial killer or a suicide cult.”

They looked at each other, feeling a vague chill run up their spines.

“Now, Takami-chan. Why isn’t anyone here? We can’t work things out between the sides if we can’t see them,” Kaname said, striding out onto the paved surface.

“Oh, actually—”

Suddenly, Sousuke had drawn his pistol from his back. He pointed the gun right over Kaname’s head, where she stood at the center of the square. “Don’t move,” he shouted, and fired a shot.

Kaname froze up as, about a meter behind her, she heard an empty plastic bucket hit the ground. It would have hit her had Sousuke’s shot not sent it off-course.

“Eh?” Surprised, she looked up and around.

Several children stood on the roofs of each apartment building that straddled the park on both the northern and southern sides. They all stared blankly down at Kaname.

“Er...?”

The children silently raised plastic bottles and water balloons over their heads. Then, they began to rain them down on Kaname.

“Run, Chidori!” Sousuke urged her.

“Ah... ahh, ahh!” He didn’t have to tell her twice. Barraged by the bombs, Kaname dove left and right to dodge them and ran for dear life to the park’s edge. Water from the bursting balloons showered onto her. As she finally arrived back at where the others were standing, the assault from the children stopped. “Wh-What in the world?!” she exclaimed.

“Since hostilities were declared earlier this week, anyone who enters the park is now attacked indiscriminately with water balloons and buckets. Countless preschoolers, senior citizens and high school couples have fallen victim to it,” Takami explained calmly.

“A free-fire zone,” Sousuke muttered, taking a few steps out.

“What are you doing?”

“First, a declaration of intention.” He told her. Then, he shouted to the roofs, “Forces of Shibasaki and Sengawa Elementary Schools! We are the Jindai High School Student Council Executive Committee! This children’s park is henceforth under our jurisdiction! Any further hostile action is forbidden! Please lay down your arms and come down at once!”

In the shadows of the roofs, small human forms could be seen moving. Eyes flashed with murderous light, but no answer came.

“Hmm...”

“Well, obviously ordering them around like that won’t do any good. At times like these, you need to invoke universal truths.” Kaname pushed Sousuke aside, stepped forward, took in a deep breath and shouted, “Listen, kids! We heard what happened! You’re getting innocent people hurt, and it’s getting a little ridiculous! Think of what your parents would say! Just come down already!”

“That seems similar to what I said,” Sousuke muttered.

But Kaname repeated, “Just come down! You hear me? You need to stop this wicked behavior at—”

A water balloon hit Kaname in the head.

“Chidori?!”

“Nngh...” As she stood there, looking like a drowned rat, the children began to shout taunts at her in addition to their attacks.

“Get lost, horse-face!”

“Go whore yourself out, stupid bitch!”

“No one wants you here. Screw off!”

Kaname was silent for a moment, her eyes glazing over. But then a new aura of anger blazed out of her, and she whispered, too soft for others to hear, “I’ll... kill them...”

She was about to run out when Sousuke stopped her.

“What?!” she snarled.

“Calm down, Chidori.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! We came out here in good faith to mediate, and that’s how they act?! I’m not letting that slide! I’m gonna drag them all down from those roofs and teach them what good manners are!”

“You can’t let them rile you up,” Sousuke said with determination.

“Grr... B-But... they just...”

“I said no,” he told her sternly. “A mediator who loses their cool will mire the situation even more. Please, just leave this to me.”

“Wh-What are you going to do?”

“Negotiate. If I patiently talk it out with each side, I’m sure we can find a point of compromise. It’s the first step towards forging a peace treaty.” He spoke with utmost confidence, walking away from them as he strode up to the northern apartment building.

Sousuke had decided to start with Shibasaki, since he had inroads there. He climbed over the fence of the fire escape and swiftly ascended until he reached the roof, where a group of about fifteen children were waiting for him. As expected, they were armed to the teeth with plastic bats, kettles, and pots.

“Is Akutsu Yoshiki here?” he asked politely. “I wish to speak to him.”

“What is it, Sagara-san?” Yoshiki asked, cutting through the wary crowd.
“What do you want? Takami called you in, right?”



“Something like that,” Sousuke admitted. “I was asked to mediate.”

At this, complaints burst out from all around them:

“Stupid Takami!”

“No one asked!”

“Girls suck ass!”

Yoshiki looked just as mad as the others were. “Sagara-san. Sorry, but you need to butt out here. We’ve got nothing to say to those Sengawa jerks. They started it, anyway.”

“Tell me your side,” Sousuke suggested.

“We were using this park first,” Yoshiki insisted after a glance down at the lot below, and then to the opposing building’s roof where the enemy stood. “Nori-RC is really popular at our school right now.”

“Nori-RC? What is that?”

“It’s a new kind of RC car, from a company called Geotron Toys. It’s mounted with a CCD camera that sends a real-time video feed to an HMD, so it feels like you’re driving a real car when you use it. It’s super lifelike. You can also customize it like a mini-4WD.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Sousuke asked, confused.

“You gotta drive a Nori-RC on pavement,” Yoshiki explained. “If you try to drive ’em off-road, the feed bounces all around and it makes you motion sick. So this park is the only place where we can race ’em.”

“I see.”

“But then the Sengawa kids showed up and busted up Kenji’s car with their basketball! They won’t pay for it or even apologize. They’re assholes, right?”

“Was that how the conflict started?” asked Sousuke, avoiding the question.

“There’s other stuff too,” Yoshiki told him. “Like the fact that their boss, Ehara, has it bad for Takami. I think that’s the real reason he wanted to start shit with us.”

Upon hearing this, the other children cackled.

“I’ll ask the other side for their perspective,” said Sousuke, turning around and heading for the other side—the south-side apartment across the lot.

The camp belonging to the Sengawa faction seemed more or less the same as Yoshiki’s. Sousuke faced the sixteen children armed with sports equipment and kitchen utensils and spoke. “Is Ehara here? I was told he’s your leader.”

A boy about a head taller than the rest emerged from the crowd. He had almond-shaped eyes and a crew cut, and wore a baggy graphic print T-shirt. This appeared to be Ehara. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m the representative for peace negotiations,” Sousuke told him. “I’m here to mediate a ceasefire.”

“Drop the college words. What do you really mean?”

“I want you to make up and get along.”

Ehara’s eyes opened wide in outrage. “You gotta be kiddin’ me! Why should I make up with those Shibasaki asswipes? They’re the ones who started it all!”

“Tell me your side,” Sousuke requested again.

“This park was our turf originally. Back when it was just an empty lot, it got used by older Sengawa Elementary kids for ages.”

“Oh?”

“Six months ago, an ‘under construction’ sign went up on the lot,” Ehara continued. “We figured they were building another apartment, so we gave it up and started playing basketball on the school athletic field. But they’d always kick us out at 4:30. It sucked.”

“I see.”

“But instead of building an apartment, they put up a playground, see? And when we came to check it out, we found the Shibasaki guys already using it. Just running their stupid RC cars around like a bunch of lousy jerks.”

“I see.”

“So we started playing basketball and they ran one of their stupid RC cars into our game,” Ehara explained. “Then they asked *us* to pay for breaking it! It’s bullshit. They suck!”

“In other words, this was your land in the past?” Sousuke clarified. “And you only returned to it recently?”

“Yeah, but it was our park forever,” said Ehara. “They took it over without our permission!”

“You can’t agree to a rotating schedule for its use?”

“No way. I might *think* about letting ‘em use it once a week if Akutsu gets down on his knees and begs me. But he’d never do that in front of the girl he’s got a crush on.”

“What girl?”

“Takami. He’s always tryin’ to look cool in front of her.”

The children around him cackled at this.

“Understood. Goodbye.” Sousuke nodded and walked away. He climbed down the fire escape, walked along the edge of the park, then spoke with Kaname and Takami, who were waiting for him.

“How’d it go?” Kaname asked.

“They’re at quite an impasse,” Sousuke admitted. “I suddenly understand what Swedish diplomats and UN representatives go through.” With greasy sweat rising on his brow, he walked back to the Shibasaki Elementary faction’s camp.

Upon being presented with the other side’s terms, Yoshiki and the others exploded with anger, brandishing their weapons and stamping on the floor. “No way!” Yoshiki declared. “Make them apologize to *us* on their knees. That park is ours!”

“Would a constructive compromise be conceivable?” Sousuke asked. “A three-to-four day usage one week, followed by a four-to-three day usage another?”

“No way,” Yoshiki said defiantly. “We’re not disarming until we chase ’em off forever.”

“I see.” Sousuke nodded seriously and returned to the Ehara faction’s roof.

He explained the situation to them, and the Sengawa children exploded with even greater rage:

“Is that supposed to be a joke?!”

“Don’t bug us with this useless stuff. You suck!”

“Yeah, you suck. You’re like a kid on his first errand!”

Sousuke, the messenger, felt the brunt of their anger. But he remained patient and spoke soothingly, “What would satisfy you, then? Let’s work together to find realistic solutions. You can’t annihilate your enemy and it’s pointless to try. Do you have a more flexible suggestion that would allow us to reach a compromise?”

But Ehara and his men rejected the possibility. “Shut up! If we give ’em an inch, they’ll take a mile! Besides, they gotta apologize before we even touch it!”

“Hmm...” At this, Sousuke persistently returned to Yoshiki’s side, where he was once again on the receiving end of jeering:

“Boy are you useless!”

“Bet you’re working for them!”

“Get outta here!”

Some of the boys even threw scrap paper, plastic bottles, and raw eggs at him.

Nevertheless, with tremendous endurance, Sousuke continued to travel between sides, proposing compromises and asking for concessions.

The entire time, Kaname and Takami were watching from the sidelines like disinterested spectators. They remained squatting beside the hedge at the park’s entrance and watched as Sousuke came and went, heads turning back and forth like at a tennis game. From their perspective, Sousuke seemed to be

growing more and more exhausted. Each time he came down from a roof, there was a little more trash on him. It seemed like the stress was really starting to weigh on him.

“Maybe it’s not possible after all,” Takami said.

“Maybe. But... it’s kinda weird. I’m not used to seeing Sousuke so determined to solve things through talking,” Kaname mused.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Usually he’d just pull out his gun and order them to get along like adults.”

“Hmm...” Takami muttered, looking up at the sky stained with the first colors of sunset. “Maybe because he wants to look good in front of you, Chidori-san?”

“Huh?” Kaname’s eyes went wide as this idea caught her off guard. “N-No way. That’s silly. Ha ha.”



“You think? If that were so, it’d explain things for me, too...” Takami said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Kaname asked.

“Well, Yoshiki-kun and Ehara-kun and I originally went to the same kindergarten. They both proposed to me then.”

“Aha...”

“And they’re both still nice to me,” Takami told her. “Really nice. So, I was thinking that maybe the reason neither of them will give in is because I’m watching. And, I mean... it’d be kind of nice if that were the case.” she looked down, smiling.

In that moment, Kaname felt the girl seemed even more mature than her. *Dang... she’s precocious...*

While Kaname looked on in silence, Takami snapped back to her usual childish expression. “Am I being strange?”

“Nah, not really. In fact, I think your idea as to why neither of them will compromise might be on the money,” said Kaname. “Which makes Sousuke’s effort even more pointless. Maybe it’d be faster if you went to each of them and told them to make up?”

“I’ve been doing that, but neither one will listen...”

Just then, Sousuke returned to them from the southern apartment.

“Well, Sousuke? Do you think you can do it?” Kaname asked, thinking it likely to be impossible.

Indeed, as expected, he slowly shook his head. “It’ll be difficult. They don’t seem willing to compromise at all.” He seemed extremely disheartened. Were this a manga, there would be a black smoke cloud hanging over his head. Finally he said, “I may have to employ a different method.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kaname.

Sousuke didn’t answer. Instead, he stepped out onto the grounds of the park, where the agitated children began to throw more dangerous rubbish at him. He

ignored the barrage, walked up to one basketball hoop and started rigging something up to the backboard.

Kaname blinked at him questioningly.

He did the same thing to the other one. Then he walked to the middle of the playground. "Listen to me!" he shouted. "Despite the various compromises I've offered, you have been unwilling to engage with any of them. But Jindai High School has no intention of allowing you to continue your conflict!"

As Sousuke shouted, a large pumpkin fell with a splat nearby.

"Shut up, you stuck-up jerk!"

"Get outta here!"

"We'll tell the PTA on you!"

As usual, the feedback was negative. It felt like anarchy.

Yet Sousuke raised his voice again, unfazed. "Therefore, I'm going to remove the origin of your conflict. Then you'll have nothing left to fight over!"

At this, the children tilted their heads in confusion.

"Prepare yourselves!" With that, he pulled a small shotgun from his bag. *Blam!* The gunshot rang out over the desolate park.

The group went quiet, holding its breath... but they soon realized that Sousuke's slug had only broken the concrete at his feet. As Kaname and the others watched, Sousuke fired the remaining rounds of the shotgun randomly at the ground around him.

"And there's more," he continued, pulling out a remote control and casually working it. *Bwoom!* The basketball nets on either side of the park simultaneously toppled. Their steel poles snapped and their backboards crashed into the ground.

Sousuke then swiftly approached the girls, told them to get down, and pressed another button on the remote control. The plastic explosives he'd scattered here and there on the ground began to blow, leaving holes far bigger than what his gunshots had done.

As the smoke gradually cleared, they could see the staring faces of Yoshiki, Ehara and the others on the roofs of the opposing apartments.

Sousuke nodded firmly and proclaimed, “You may now play basketball and drive RC cars here as much as you want. That is all!” Then he turned his back on the demolished park and strode away. As he neared Kaname, who’d been rendered speechless by the extremity of his actions, he said, plainly, “I feel like I’ve finally recovered my senses. At any rate, the matter is resolved. Let’s return.”

In response, Kaname dealt Sousuke a powerful spin-kick.

The next day, Takami gave Kaname a call. She said that Yoshiki’s faction had lost the desire to fight over the playground and that they’d called off their feud with Ehara’s faction. Sousuke bragged when he heard it, but Kaname wasn’t in any mood to praise him for it.

Incidentally, Sasaki Hiromi also finished his essay for the newspaper. The experimental content received mixed reviews, but he seemed satisfied with it.

〈The Afterschool Peacekeeper — The End〉

The Lost Old Dog

One evening, on the way back from the station to his apartment after school, Sagara Sousuke noticed someone tailing him.

“What’s wrong, Sousuke?” Chidori Kaname asked. Sousuke typically found himself walking home with her once or twice a week, especially on Fridays, when they stayed late doing odd jobs for the student council. Today was one such Friday.

While walking, they’d ended up in a fierce debate over whether the best accompaniment for curry was bread or rice. Kaname had mentioned, as they left the station, that she was thinking of making curry tonight, and offered him a rare invitation to stop by. Sousuke had readily agreed and requested bread to go with it. That’s how the argument had started, but now...

“Cat got your tongue or something?” she asked him.

Sousuke said nothing.

“Or are you ready to acknowledge that rice is the superior side?”

“Actually...” Sousuke responded vaguely, his eyes narrowed. They were walking along a city road that was light on automobile traffic. As they moved away from the hustle and bustle of the station’s surroundings and entered a residential area, old high-rise apartments towered over them to the right. The thinning of the crowds was what had made it so easy for Sousuke to notice that someone was tailing them. “This way,” he said, pulling Kaname by the arm to enter a small nearby pharmacy.

“What now?”

“Just act normal,” he ordered. “Pretend you’re shopping.”

“Huh?”

Sousuke pretended to root through the medical products on the shelf, grabbed one without looking at it, and headed to the register.

“H-Hang on a minute!” Kaname cried out in panic.

“What?”

“You really shouldn’t buy that!”

The item Sousuke had brought to the register was a pregnancy test. The middle-aged cashier narrowed her eyes at them. Her gaze seemed to say, *Goodness, young people these days...*

“Don’t worry about it. Leave it to me.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry about it,” Kaname insisted, “*Listen* to me!”

But Sousuke’s attention was focused outside the store as he went about absentmindedly completing the purchase. Kaname hadn’t noticed, but a figure in a coat was watching them through the glass door at the entrance. It was the same man who’d tailed them from the station.

He’s not passing by. Was he hoping to ambush me? Sousuke thought.

It was an old man with a beret worn low over his eyes. He seemed quite advanced in years, with a thick white beard, yet his back was ramrod straight, and his mouth was fixed in a tight line as he glared into the store. For a moment, Sousuke’s eyes met the man’s. The old man frowned in response, then turned away and disappeared from sight.

I didn’t detect any hostility... But what’s he after, then?

The woman at the register handed Sousuke some coins. “Your change: 450 yen.” Then she said to Kaname, encouragingly, “Make sure he does right by you, dear. When the chips are down, men always try to shirk their responsibilities.”

“I-It’s seriously not like that!”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It’s about your own body, after all. Hang in there.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not— oh, for the love of...” Kaname slumped over in disappointment.

Just then, Sousuke nudged her from the side. “Let’s go.”

Kaname kept grumbling but left the pharmacy with Sousuke. The minute they were outside, she tore into him. “Darn it, what’s wrong with you?! That’s the only pharmacy around here that’s open this late. Now I’ll be too embarrassed to ever come back!”

“Why would you be embarrassed?” he asked.

“Because! Buying that thing with me made it look like—”

“Look like what?”

Kaname stammered. “Like... Like you and I are...”

“Like you and I are...?”

“Well... er... like we’re doing *that*.” For some reason she tapered off at the end there, flustered.

Sousuke looked at her in suspicion. “I don’t know what ‘that’ is. Could you explain in precise and concrete terms? What exactly does it seem like we’re doing?”

“Er... do I really have to say it?” Kaname asked plaintively.

“I won’t know what you mean if you don’t,” Sousuke insisted. “Please explain.”

“...”

“What’s wrong? You’ve turned red.”

The next instant, Kaname’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and she smacked her bag into the side of Sousuke’s face, bowling him over. “Just get lost!” she hissed, then took off in the direction of her apartment.

Moments later, Sousuke sat up, rubbing his head in confusion. *I was just pretending to buy something in order to throw our pursuer off the scent. What in the world could the problem be? I’m analyzing the situation, but I’m coming up cold. Chidori Kaname is such a mystery sometimes...*

He wouldn’t be allowed to eat her curry tonight either. Even Sousuke knew that following her to her apartment now was pointless. She’d probably just tell him to eat some dog food and run him off. It was a pity. Sousuke, who had

grown up with a limited diet, always saw Kaname's cooking as a true feast.

But who was that old man?

Just as he was wondering that... *Crack!* A walking stick came crashing down on his head from behind. Sousuke stumbled but righted himself and turned back quickly. There stood the old man from before. He must have been hiding in the alley beside the pharmacy.

Impossible. Sousuke was truly stunned by what had happened. As preoccupied as he had been with the thought of losing out on the curry dinner, it was unthinkable that he'd let someone sneak up on him and catch a hit on him by surprise. "What are you—"

"Shut up!" the old man barked at him, louder than seemed strictly necessary. "I don't know what the situation is, but no man makes a woman cry on my watch! It's an appropriate reprimand for your gutless action!"

"I don't believe I made her—"

"Quiet, you! A real Japanese man doesn't make excuses!" The old man puffed out his chest proudly and glared down at Sousuke.

Sousuke was well familiar with his type. Blustery and straight-backed, with a gaze that spoke of total confidence in its evaluation of any and every situation. This was a military man, and a commissioned officer, at that.

"And... who are you?" Sousuke asked, now cautiously.

The old man just sniffed and puffed up further. "Me? I'm Komura Shujiro."

"Aha..."

"Former lieutenant of the Imperial Navy," the old man continued, "one of the few survivors of the 302 Patrol Squadron destroyed at Solomon."

Sousuke had rarely met a Japanese man willing to openly brag about serving in the forces of Imperial Japan. And a lieutenant at that... Had this man really taken part in the Pacific War more than fifty years ago?

"I see. Goodbye, then." Sousuke turned around, his instincts warning him that getting involved with this man would be more trouble than it was worth.

“Hold it, you,” the old man, Komura Shujiro, snapped after him.

“Yes?”

“What kind of fool runs away after an introduction like that? I want to know who you are! State your name, rank, and affiliation!”

“Sergeant Sagara Sousuke. I can’t state my affiliation,” he responded instinctively. It was, perhaps, part of his NCO nature to do so.

Komura narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin in response. “A sergeant, eh?”

“I am a sergeant,” Sousuke affirmed.

“Not a student?”

“I am both a student and a sergeant.”

It wasn’t much of an explanation, but the old man seemed to accept it. Maybe he’d picked up on the particular air of alertness and gunpowder that always hung around Sousuke. “Hmm... I don’t know what to make of that, but you seem to have a little more backbone than the weaklings around you,” Komura decided. “Sergeant Sagara, was it? Come along!”

“Eh?”

The old man turned around and began walking back in the direction of the station he’d come from. After about ten paces, he turned back to Sousuke, who hadn’t moved to follow. “Well, don’t just stand there! Get to it! Chop chop!” he bellowed.

Left with no other choice, Sousuke followed the old man. A lieutenant outranked a sergeant, after all—even if their affiliations were different, the hierarchy was important.

Although... this old man was definitely tailing me earlier, Sousuke thought, trying to wrap his mind around the situation. Sousuke didn’t recognize him at all, and the old man seemed to be treating this as their first interaction. *What in the world is going on here?*

Kaname returned to her apartment, fit to burst with irritation. She tossed aside her bag and flopped onto the living room sofa.

Darn it. That idiot... Why does he have to be so dense and insensitive and stupid? It's basically sexual harassment, even though I know he's not doing it on purpose, she thought with exasperation. *Isn't there any way to make him more considerate? It's not like I can exactly walk him through stuff like this...*

She let out a sigh and was getting up to change out of her uniform when the phone in her room rang.

"Hmm?" *A telemarketer, at this hour?* she wondered as she picked up the receiver. "Chidori here," she said casually.

The voice on the other end, meanwhile, was as formal and brusque as could be. "Kaname-san? It's been some time."

Kaname's face fell. "Oh... hello. It's been a while."

It was her aunt who lived in Kanazawa, the older sister of Kaname's mother who'd passed away three years ago. The woman hadn't even come to her funeral and had merely called sometime after to say that it was 'a regrettable loss.' Even though her own sister had died! This was the first time Kaname had heard from her since then.

"Are you alone right now?" her aunt asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Then I have nothing to say to you," the woman said briskly. "So sorry to call."

Click. Beep beep beep...

"What the heck? Darn it..." Despite her aunt's incredible rudeness in hanging up on her like that, Kaname wasn't especially angry. Her relatives in Kanazawa had always been like that. Her parents had effectively eloped, she'd heard, which was why she so rarely interacted with her mother's family.

In fact, she'd met the family in Kanazawa just once when she was little. Kaname remembered their house being a big, quiet, traditional Japanese estate. Even as a child, she could tell that she and her mother weren't exactly welcome there. Her relatives had looked at them with scorn, and all of their interactions were curt and cold. According to her mother, family tradition prevented them from even meeting her grandparents then.

The only thing she remembered clearly from that trip was the figure of a little old man. Kaname had been alone, watching the koi in the garden pond when the old man came up and scolded her. “That’s not safe. You’ll fall in and drown.”

The old man had squatted down then and peered into Kaname’s face with a sullen expression. Kaname had been so small then, and the man so intimidating, that all she’d been able to do was deliver a panicked apology and run straight away. After reaching the mansion, she’d then turned around to see the old man still standing starkly at the pond’s edge. He’d seemed almost sad.

Who was that old man, anyway? she paused to wonder.

It was just then that she noticed the light blinking on their answering machine. Curious, she pressed the play button.

《The ninth. 3:54 pm. One message,》 the electronic voice stated, giving that day’s date before playing the message.

“Ahh. Ah, ahem...” A speaker could be heard clearing their throat, then went silent. She could hear the sirens of the station platform and the distant sound of trains in the background. Then, about fifteen seconds later... “Geh?! H-Hey, you!” the same person barked. Then the recording cut off.

《Message complete.》 The machine let out a beep, and then went silent.

After several minutes of walking, Sousuke and Komura arrived at a kiosk near the station, and the old man said, “Here we are. It all began here.” The sun had begun to set and the town grew darker as students leaving school and shopping housewives filled the area.

“Komura-san,” said Sousuke, “I don’t understand what’s—”

“Lieutenant, please.”

Sousuke hesitated. “Lieutenant.”

“Well done, Sergeant,” said Komura.

“Very well, Lieutenant. What exactly started here?” Sousuke asked after a pause.

Komura narrowed his eyes up at the sky. “I had my luggage stolen.”

“Luggage?”

“Yes. I got off the train and was using that prepay phone over there, when...” He pointed towards the nearby payphone. “The bag I’d left at my feet was stolen by a thief. He was a youngster about your age, wearing a strange school uniform.”

“A school uniform...” A middle or high school student from the area, perhaps? “And you want me to find the culprit?”

The man nodded as if this went without saying. “That’s right. You’re a local. I’ll bet you know the area well.”

“I’m not sure that’ll be enough,” Sousuke had to admit. “Do you have any other clues?”

“Nope. That’s it.” Komura puffed out his chest. “The bag was that famous brand. I forget what it’s called... Louie Vito.”

““Louie Vito?”” Sousuke repeated. “And what was inside?”

“Something extremely valuable. If it were to fall into the wrong hands, the consequences would be dire.”

Valuables with dire consequences; the old man’s choice of words set Sousuke on edge. “A gun or a bomb?” he guessed.

“Nothing so trivial,” said Komura. “Something much more important.”

Something more valuable and important than a gun or a bomb, already so difficult to acquire in Japan? “You mean...?”

“Well, I’ll admit it’s enervating...”

Sousuke’s stomach sank. “A nerve agent?!”

“Yes, enervating. Depressing to think that thief took it without knowing its worth!” Komura lamented. “He might think it’s garbage and do something we’d all regret!”

“I can’t believe it,” Sousuke said. “A nerve agent...” A nerve agent: something like Tabun, Sarin or VX gas... These were tremendously deadly weapons, their

use forbidden by international law. If breathed in through the lungs or skin, they could fatally interfere with the functions of the nervous system.

“What’s wrong, young man?” The old man scowled as he noticed Sousuke trembling in fear.

“Why were you walking around with something like that?!” Sousuke exclaimed. “It’s exceedingly careless!”

“Well, what do you want from me?”

“We need to call in the police. You can’t possibly attempt to retrieve it on your own.”

The old man furrowed his brow in response. “You can’t count on the police. Look at the newspapers. Nothing but corruption and abuses of power.”

“Not all of them are like that,” Sousuke told him. “We need the local police to evacuate the citizenry and bring in JSDF specialists. Many people could die if we don’t.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Komura wanted to know.

Sousuke found his attitude extremely frustrating. “How can you be so calm about this? Don’t you even care what you’ve unleashed?”

“Eh? You’re not making any sense, son.”

“You’re the one who’s not making any sense!” said Sousuke. “I need you to acknowledge the severity of this situation.”

“Are you making fun of me? I won’t have a little sprout like you—”

“My age is not the issue! I just think we need to deal with this the right way.”

“Enough! I don’t need a lecture from some NCO!” Komura bellowed.

“Then as a *lieutenant*, you should behave like a proper officer and give the appropriate orders!” insisted Sousuke. It was rare to see two people talking past each other to such a degree.

“Argh! Now you’ve asked for it!” Komura grabbed Sousuke’s collar, completely enraged.

Sousuke struggled to knock the man’s hands away without being too rough.

“Let me go! Lives are on the line!”

“I don’t care!”

“It’s that attitude that caused you to lose to the US forces!”

“Oh, you’ll pay for that one!”

Their pointless sparring was interrupted by a low voice nearby. “Excuse me, you two.”

They looked up to see two uniformed police officers looming over them.

“Picking a fight, in a place like this?” said the first.

“You’re making trouble for the neighbors,” said the second. Their tones were awfully high-handed.

Sousuke pushed the old man away and addressed them. “Perfect timing. We have an emergency situation. This man had an extremely dangerous substance stolen in transport. A deadly military-grade nerve gas.”

“Eh?” said Komura. “What are you talking about?”

“Apparently it was in a Louie Vito bag, stolen by a young man in a school uniform,” Sousuke pressed on. “That’s all I know, but you need to put out an emergency notice to apprehend him at once. You must apprehend the culprit, dead or alive—”

“Whatever, kid. Just come along with us to the station. We’ll sort it out there.” The two officers waved him off dismissively and started herding Sousuke and Komura along.

“We don’t have time to lose on discussion,” Sousuke insisted. “You must issue the evacuation order.”

“Right, we’ll do that. Later.”

“We don’t have time for ‘later.’ If the nerve gas gets out before then, it’ll be too late!”

“Shut up and walk!” said one of the officers, giving Sousuke a shove.

“What are you doing?”

“Shut your mouth,” the officer warned him. “Don’t give us any more trouble or we’ll give you worse than a lecture.”

“I don’t need a lecture. I need to secure that nerve—”

“That’s enough outta you!” The two officers moved forward to restrain Sousuke.

“Ngh...” Sousuke moved away instinctively, his sidestep catching one of the men off-guard.

That man was thrown off-balance but caught himself, while the other barked at him furiously. “Are you resisting arrest?!”

“Of course not. It’s just the gas—”

“Damn you!” The officers flew at Sousuke, who was now clearly intent on resisting. Just as he was wondering if he should resist or turn himself in...

Pwsssh! A jet of white smoke hissed out beside him.

“What?!”

“Cough... cough!”

The smoke continued to billow, quickly reducing visibility to zero. Sousuke then realized that it wasn’t smoke, but a plume from a fire extinguisher.

“Hey, Sergeant!” Komura emerged from the mist and rapped Sousuke with his walking stick, holding the spent extinguisher in his other hand. “Let’s make tracks,” he said. “Hurry!”

The old man dropped the extinguisher and ran swiftly away. Sousuke hesitated for a moment, but then, left with no other choice, followed after him.

“Wah ha ha! That’ll teach him!” Komura laughed heartily as they hid behind a nearby bicycle rack.

“Why did you do that?” Sousuke asked plaintively. “Now we can’t ask the police for help.”

The old man just snorted. “Oh, shut up. If I hadn’t acted, you’d be on your way to a cell right now, boy.”

“So you broke out a fire extinguisher?”

“Yeah. More than enough to take out those hooligans of local law enforcement.”

“Well, I can’t argue there, but—”

“Oh? So you *can* be reasonable, eh?” said Komura, who seemed to be in surprisingly good shape for having run that far at his advanced age.

Even so... Sousuke thought. He’d only just met this old man, yet he felt like he knew him quite well. No... Perhaps it was more like there was something familiar about his various idiosyncrasies. The way he walked along, fists balled. The way he barked at him to shut him up, the tremendously stubborn and hard-nosed personality, the decisiveness that seemed to explode in the clutch... Sousuke felt like he knew someone very much like him, but...

Wait... The name and face were on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t get them to manifest. At last, he gave up on the attempt, shook the uncertainty out of his mind, and told the old man, “Anyway, our only option now is to find the bag ourselves. We must do what it takes to prevent a nerve gas explosion.”

“There you go again with that nonsense,” grumbled Komura. “Though I’m glad you’re finally on board, at least...”

“Let’s hurry, before it’s too late,” said Sousuke, who began walking swiftly.

But even with their minds made up, they had very little to go on. Komura had only seen the culprit from behind, after all, and because the policemen were still searching for them, their attempts to ask around at the train station were slow going. Over and over they nearly ran into the fuming officers, and each time they were forced to hide behind something or duck into the crowd.

“Hard to make progress with them stalking us like that,” Komura said as they were hiding behind a minivan in the parking lot following a third near miss.

“It’s your fault that they are,” Sousuke told him.

“What? Don’t you blame this on me!”

“It’s the truth!”

“Oh, pipe down!” Komura ordered. “Why do you have to argue about everything?”

Both of them were panting hard.

“A-Anyway, let’s continue our search,” Sousuke suggested.

“G-Good idea.”

And so, undeterred, they resumed their questioning.

At last, about an hour later, they found something like a clue. It was around 7:00 pm, just after the sun had gone down. A young man handing out fliers for a beauty parlor said he might have seen the culprit.

“You did?” Sousuke asked eagerly.

“Yeah. When was it again?” the young man mused. “I was giving out flyers, and some kid with a bag crashed into me... I was about to tell him off, but he ran away and didn’t look back.”

“A Louie Vito bag?” Komura pressed him.

“Actually, old man, it’s called ‘Louis Vuitton.’”

“Oh, is it? Was he in a school uniform, then?”

“I think so,” the young man told him. “One for West Chofu High, if I’m not mistaken.”

West Chofu High was a municipal school located close to the station.

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s about it. I didn’t really see much of him.”

“I see,” said Sousuke. “Thank you anyway.”

With that, Sousuke and Komura turned around in perfect sync.

The young man called after them. “Oh, wait.”

“What is it?”

“If he really is from West High, head for a cafe across from the north entrance called Alabama. The West High delinquents always hang out there.”

“You know a lot about it,” Sousuke observed.

The flier guy grinned. “I graduated from East High. We tussled with the West guys all the time.”

“Hmm...”

“It might be a little rough for a Jindai student like you,” the young man advised. “Be careful.”

Sousuke and Komura thanked him again, then headed for the north entrance and the cafe in question.

They found their destination in a more or less empty corner of the shopping district. Kaname had once told Sousuke that, ever since the large commercial center was built near the station ten years ago, business had been slowly dying down in that area. It had grown more and more run-down as a result.

“What a grimy little place. Seems riddled with disease,” Komura said with a scowl. Indeed, the sign looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in years. The glass in the windows was yellow with tar, making it hard to see inside. “Ah, well,” he finally relented. “Let’s go in.”

“Sure,” Sousuke said with a nod.

They opened the door and stepped inside. As expected, it was thick with cigarette smoke. There were a few old poker arcade game cabinets in the corner, as well as a number of well-worn tables. There were seven men present, shifty-eyed, all hanging around the game cabinets. They wore the Chofu West uniform, but it was the kind modified to go with a delinquent style—it was clear at a glance these were far from model students.

“Do any of them look familiar?” Sousuke asked.

“Ah, can’t be sure,” Komura said.

“You two lookin’ for something?” one of the men asked. His attitude was haughty but not especially aggressive.

“We’re looking for a thief,” Komura said before Sousuke could. “Seems there’s a good chance it’s one of you lot. Stole my bag at the station earlier.”

Sousuke added on, “There’s a very dangerous object inside. If you know anything about it, please tell us.”

“Ah, it’s not that dangerous,” Komura contradicted him. “No one’ll hold it against you. Just help us out here.”

The men exchanged a blank look.

“You know anythin’ about it?”

“Nah, nothin’ here.”

“Who’d even want some old man’s stupid Vuitton bag, eh?”

They all laughed mockingly.

In that instant, the eyes of both Sousuke and Komura flashed.

“Did you say *Vuitton*?”

“How did you know what brand of bag it was?”

The two experienced combatants spoke with perhaps unnecessary forcefulness, and the delinquents in the shop all glared at the idiot who’d spilled the beans.

“Well, seems we hit a bullseye right out of the gate,” said Komura.

“It appears we have,” said Sousuke. “I’ll have to thank that advertising man tomorrow.”

The two took a single step forward in unison, then said together, “Hand it over. Now. Don’t try to resist.”

At this, the Chofu students sprang to their feet.

“I said we don’t know nothin’ about it!”

“Get lost before we gotta get rough!”

“You wanna fight us? Well, do ya?!”

Sousuke and the old man took another bold step forward.

“Geh...” Though momentarily cowed by their intimidating auras, the students found their courage and glared back at the two.

“S-Screw you!” It wasn’t clear who’d shouted it, but in that moment, all seven men leaped into action.

Sousuke didn’t even bother drawing his gun. Instead, he used minimal movements to slip to the side as the lead man struck at him, then smashed the heel of his hand into his jaw. Tables and game machines were overturned. Cups, ash trays, and mugs all fell onto the floor with a crash.

As the one man fell, another came at Sousuke. He knocked this second man down with another spectacular move, twisted the wrist of a third and elbowed a fourth. This one went crashing through the glass door and out the shop.

Sousuke had survived a hundred battlefields. He didn’t need a gun to fight hoodlums like these. *But what about the lieutenant?* he wondered. While knocking out a fifth man, Sousuke turned in time to see a man grabbing at Komura.

“Old bastard!” the young man shouted.

“Heh.” The old man calmly drew back and caught his attacker’s ankle with his cane. With his feet swept out from under him, the delinquent flipped end-over-end and hit the back of his head on the floor.

“Oh?” Sousuke was impressed. The man had a sense of balance that spoke to more than just natural athleticism. He must have studied some kind of martial art—judo, perhaps.

The last man marched up to Komura.

“What is it, young man?” the old man asked with a smile. “You look scared. I’ll bet you’re not good for much more than kicking puppies. Though that might still make you tougher than the US soldiers I’ve fought.” The old man planted his walking stick on the floor, his feet placed shoulder-length apart. That was all he did... and yet, the young man seemed frozen to the spot. He’d clearly never faced a killer aura like this before, and it was filling him with feelings he’d never experienced.



“Wh-What the heck is with this old man?!” The delinquent’s face contorted with terror, and he quickly turned to scramble away, right out the door.

“Ah, boring.” The old man’s body, which had seemed towering moments ago, now shrank back to its original size. “Pathetic bunch. No guts at all.”

“It would be cruel to expect any more of them,” Sousuke said with a shrug.

This time, old man Komura smiled with glee. “You said it. But the same’s not true of you, I’d say. You’re not bad for a young sprout.”

“And you fought well for a senior citizen.”

“You bet I did.” The old man smiled with even more glee.

Just then, a haughty voice rang out through the pulverized glass door. “Another fight?! Hey, where’s the staff... Ah, you two?!” The uniformed officer who stepped in turned crimson at the sight of the two combatants.

At first, it seemed like another fight would break out, but the rather formally dressed Komura explained the situation, and the officers both deflated and shared a look.

“Oh, so...”

“Yeah. It’s one of those.”

Apparently there’d been a string of luxury bag thefts of late: Hermès, Vuitton, Hartmann... All brands that would fetch high prices at a pawnshop. Upon realizing that they’d stumbled upon the ring behind it, the police had forgotten all about the fire extinguisher incident.

The officers questioned one of the beat-up men, who revealed that the stolen bags were being stored in an alley behind the building. He said everything they couldn’t sell was still inside the bags. Then, hoping for special treatment under the circumstances, Sousuke and the old man asked if they could search through the stolen goods for Komura’s bag first and were given the go-ahead.

Behind the dumpster sat a tarp, under which they found a mountain of luxury bags. There were roughly fifty of them, of various sizes—together, they’d fetch a small fortune.

“Now we just need to find the bag with the nerve agent,” Sousuke said as he picked through the mountain of bags.

“That nonsense again? You really are a strange one,” Komura said with a sigh. “I think I just realized... Sergeant, do you think what I’m looking for is some kind of dangerous weapon?”

“You said it was,” Sousuke told him.

“Did not. What I’m looking for is far more precious.”

“What do you mean?” Sousuke asked, tossing aside a Seeger briefcase.

“It’s a diary,” Komura told him, “kept by my dead daughter.”

Sousuke paused for a moment. “Your daughter?”

“Yeah. She got sick and died about three years back. It came as a shock, as no one had said a word about it to me. Such a disloyal daughter.” Komura Shujiro sat himself down on a nearby fire escape with a bit of an arduous manner. Gazing up at the narrow strip of sky visible from the alley, he spoke haltingly. “She was as strong-willed as I am... eloping with a young Waseda graduate like that. Some kind of UN bureaucrat or something. A boring, stupid man.”

“What’s ‘eloping?’” Sousuke asked, tossing aside a Tanner Krolle bag.

“You don’t know? Eloping is... ah, getting married without permission,” Komura told him. “Even though she’s a descendant of an old warrior family from Kanazawa, she left us behind to run off to Tokyo with some nobody.”

“I see.”

“Even though she had two children with that man, I never really met them. I don’t even know what my grandchildren look like. Only once, over ten years ago...”

“That sounds troubling,” said Sousuke.

“That’s right. She was troubling— ah, but it wasn’t just her. I was at fault too. I couldn’t simply say I forgave her, in the name of preserving family face or something foolish like that. And now that she’s dead, it’s too late.” Old man Komura’s voice took on a hint of vulnerability. “But the other day, I chanced upon my daughter’s high school diary. It got me thinking of her and the

grandchildren she left behind... And I don't have much time left, after all. Before I bite the big one, I thought... I might try just one more time... so I came to Tokyo on my own to hand over my daughter's diary."

"And the bag it was in was stolen?" asked Sousuke, who had finally grasped that there were no chemical weapons inside the bag.

"Yes. I'm growing timid in my old age, so I thought... unless I brought something like that with me, my granddaughter wouldn't want to see me. It's my fault my family treated her the way they did. She probably hates me," Komura admitted. "She might not even remember me, in fact."

Sousuke said nothing.

"And so, after the bag was stolen, I wandered hopelessly around the station until I happened upon a girl who was the spitting image of my daughter."

"The spitting image?" Sousuke repeated.

"Yeah. I knew at a glance that it was her. She was walking with a classmate who seemed about her age. So I found myself following them quietly for a while. The girl and the young man looked awfully happy together. Even I could see that. And the young man has also been of great service to me," Komura hinted.

"I see." With that absent reply, Sousuke found the Louis Vuitton bag toward the back of the mountain. Inside were clothes, toiletries, and an old diary.

"He's a truly fine young man," Komura went on. "Stuck it out for ages with some old man he'd never even met. Knowing my granddaughter had such a man at her side has put me at ease."

"Aha..." *What is he talking about?* Sousuke thought. But before he could turn around to say that he'd found the bag...

The old man said, "Ah, enough. Do you know that young man's name?"

"Eh? No..."

"It's Sagara Sousuke," Komura told him with a meaningful smile that befit his age. "And it's rare to see a true warrior like him in this day and age."

Kaname had just poured hot water into her cup noodle and set the timer for three minutes when she heard the doorbell's pleasant chime.

"Coming..." She picked up the intercom phone.

A familiar voice answered. "Chidori, it's me."

Kaname grimaced. "Sousuke? I don't want to see you. Why don't you go eat dog food or something?"

"Ah, I'm not trying to get dinner... Could you come out a moment?"

"What now?"

"I think you'll find it worthwhile," he told her.

"Hmm?" Suspiciously, Kaname headed for the door. She removed the chain and poked her head out unhappily. In the apartment's communal corridor stood Sousuke and an unfamiliar old man. "Yes?"

"Lieutenant, the offensive is on. Go on." Sousuke gave the old man a nudge.

The old man had just been standing around nervously, but now he cleared his throat and spoke. "Ah, ahem. I am Komura... Shujiro... from Kanezawa."

"What?" asked Kaname.

"Well, you see... I am your mother's... father. This might be hard to understand, but I recently found... my daughter's diary. I knew it would be trouble to drop in on you so suddenly, but I thought... while I'm still healthy, I should... make sure you got it..." Komura spoke haltingly, the words coming in fits and starts, as he held out a diary.

"Um... Grandpa?" said Kaname.

"Y-Yes..."

"You're really my grandpa?! What were you doing out so late?" Kaname asked, eyes wide, throwing her arms around the old man.

"Oh. Well, there were circumstances..."

"That's awful! Come in, quickly. Sorry it's a little messy," Kaname told him. "You dropped in so suddenly. If you'd called me, I could have picked you up... Honestly!"

“Oh... sh-should I have?” Komura asked hesitantly.

“Yeah. Mom told me all about you... That you were stubborn, but a good man. She said you’d come around someday. So... Grandpa.” Kaname choked up for a minute, but quickly pushed through it. “Come on in, hurry. You’re tired from your trip, right? I’ll make you tea. And are you hungry? I’ll whip up something.”

“Oh... I suppose. I’m embarrassed to say I am rather... hungry. I’m glad I came. I really am glad I came...”



He couldn't say any more than that. Komura Shujiro just stood there, eyes down, one hand pressed to his eyes and shoulders trembling.

While coaxing her unexpected guest inside, Kaname looked over at Sousuke, her eyes red and puffy. "What happened out there?"

"Ah." Sousuke stared with great interest at the ceiling and said, "I simply did my duty as an NCO. It's not an issue. Goodbye."

Sousuke saluted them smartly, then turned away. But lastly, he said with some slight regret, "Circumstances being what they are, I'll go without the curry for today."

〈The Lost Old Dog — The End〉

The Relatively Uneventful Days of a Battle Group Commander

[0736: Woke up. Inspected TDD-1 control room. No issues found. Exchanged thoughts with NCO in sonar shack.]

—Excerpt from personal log of Colonel T. Testarossa.

She'd dreamt of her beloved submarine sinking. They were cruising along at a super-fast sixty knots, when a sudden underwater gust—a phenomenon known as an internal wave—had forced them down fast. She should have ordered an emergency blow but misread the situation and tried to use standard piloting to correct their depth instead. But because they were moving at super-fast speeds, her mere ten seconds of hesitation had ended up dropping them a full two hundred meters. Before she could even issue her next command, they were below their collapse depth.

The ship buckled under the pressure and came apart. Their ammunition stores detonated. Water flooded in.

Her precious subordinates had been swept to the bottom of the sea. As if she were doing a jigsaw puzzle, she tried desperately to piece their scattered limbs back together on the ocean floor. She tried and tried, but nothing seemed to fit. If she could just work fast enough, some of them might still be saved. But no matter how she thought, no matter how she tried, they just wouldn't come together.

She was frustrated, on the verge of tears, like a child struggling with a task. She lamented her own stupidity and despaired at her own incompetence.

Then, after much tossing and turning, Teletha Testarossa awoke, crying. She'd had the same nightmare dozens of times, so she recovered from it this time quickly enough. The only thought that went through her hazy mind was, *Ah, this again.*

The on-board physician and acting counselor, Captain Goldberry, had said that nightmares served a healthy psychological function, as a way of processing emotions for people in high-stress jobs. Insomnia would be the real danger sign, so as long as she could sleep soundly when she was tired, things weren't especially serious. Tessa still slept well and ate even better (to a degree that left her slightly disappointed in herself). There was no issue there.

"Mmgh..." she murmured unhappily, and cast her blurry vision across her surroundings. She saw her simple desk and the familiar walls of her cramped little captain's stateroom of the amphibious assault submarine, Tuatha de Danaan. Tessa was curled up in the stark white sheets, perilously close to falling off the pull-down bed.

She tried to sit herself up but got her foot caught in a sheet and went tumbling. As she heroically managed to right herself, a corner of her still-hazy brain reminded her, *That's right. I have to take command...*

I've apparently been fast asleep, but for how long? What sector of ocean are we in right now? I can't remember... Tracing back events in her sleep-addled mind, she picked up the internal phone on her desk and called up the control room.

Nobody answered... even though normally, the officer on duty would pick up within seconds. It was too strange. Too quiet.

Tessa threw off her sheets and stumbled out of her quarters, heading for the control room. The corridors were dark and hushed, with no sign of the crew anywhere. Her blurry gaze swayed back and forth, up and down. After nearly tripping several times, she finally arrived at her destination.

It was pitch black here as well. Abandoned. There was nobody at all to be found here in the brain of the submarine. The front screen was off. The various displays and consoles, large and small, were silent.

"Dana?" she called to the ship's AI, but not even that responded to her call. She stood in the center of the control room, her head in a whirl. Uncertain about what to do next, she grabbed the microphone for the ship's PA system. "Um..." she started, then paused to yawn. "This is your captain speaking. Is anyone there? I want all departments... to report in at once. All officers... please

come to the control room.”

There was no response. The ship’s PA system was down.

“Mmgh...” *What’s going on? Where has everyone gone? Someone, please answer me...* she begged internally. *Or is this... ah, of course. Probably still the dream.*

Just then, a voice called to her, its tone suspicious. “Colonel?” An NCO from their ground forces poked his head out of the sonar shack at the back of the control room. He was East Asian, with a sullen face and tight frown, dressed in olive-colored fatigues. This was Sergeant Sagara Sousuke of the Special Response Team.

When he saw Tessa, for some reason, his eyes opened wide, and he looked quickly away. “C-Colonel... Is there some kind of issue?”

“Sagara-san?” she asked in confusion. Sousuke of the ground forces, here in the empty control room? It was definitely an unusual state of affairs. And what was he doing in the sonar shack? Someone of his station would normally never have business here. It had to be part of the dream.

“Sagara-san...” Tessa approached him, then without hesitation threw her arms around him.

“C-Colonel?!” he said in confusion. She could feel his breath on her bangs and the faint warmth of his body. “Colonel. What’s going on? I need an explanation of the situation.”

“Situation? I don’t want to admit it, but I was having the most frightful dream earlier... so when I saw you, it made me so happy...”

“Oh? Well...”

“And... I was thinking I might just ask you a little favor... hee hee. Sagara-san, would you call me Tessa, like you did that time before? This is just more of the dream, so I don’t need to hold back, do I? I want to have... a nice dream... for once.” She spoke with all the sweetness she had, rubbing her cheek against him. She’d never do anything so bold in real life, of course, and certainly never here in the control room, a symbol of the burden and authority that came with her captaincy.

“A d-dream?” he stammered. “I’m sorry, Colonel, I don’t fully understand...”

“Oh, don’t be so mean, Sagara-san,” she pouted. “What can I do to get you to call me Tessa? Just say the word and I’ll do anything you like... Hee hee hee...”

“Th-Then... Tessa... please return to your senses. If you don’t, I’ll have to call the base physician. It’s all right. If you just stop now, I won’t tell anyone about this. So please...”

Tessa paused. It was around this point that her mind, which had so far been chugging along at one-ten-thousandth of its usual speed, suddenly started turning at a normal rate. Her thoughts, which had been as jumbled as mushy tofu, regained their usual clarity. Had she been a computer, her hard disk would currently be spinning like wild. *Force-closing all applications. Rebooting OS. Scanning disk. Checking for errors. Checking for viruses.* Icons appeared on the taskbar one after another. Her senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell... they all recognized the situation. It was far too detailed to be a dream.

Which meant it wasn’t a dream, and she was currently leaning on the real Sagara Sousuke.

“Eek?!” Tessa shrieked as she pushed him away.

“Erk...” Sousuke grunted in response.

“Oh, what was I... It’s n-n-not like that... I honestly didn’t mean—” Panicking, she ran through a new mental checklist. Was she really out on the open seas right now? No, the Tuatha de Danaan was docked at the Merida Island base. They’d finished maintenance yesterday and were now awaiting their next mission. The crew had disembarked, which was why nobody had answered her call. How could they, when none of them were on board?

But if that was the case, what was Sagara Sousuke doing in the sonar shack? She remembered this as well. He’d been checking the M9 Gernsback’s underwater sound production with the sonar technician, Sergeant Dejirani. They’d asked her for permission to use it yesterday, and she’d granted it. They’d probably spent all night poring over the data. If she listened hard, she could hear Sergeant Dejirani’s snoring from the back.

Yet in her sleep-addled haze, she’d thrown her arms around Sousuke... said

those ridiculous things... and made that foolish come-on?!

“Colonel,” he started to say. “How are you—”

“L-Listen, I’m utterly fine! I didn’t mean it, and I’m not crazy, and I didn’t intend any abuse or sexual harassment, although that’s not to say I *don’t* want you to call me that,” Tessa babbled, “but I certainly didn’t intend to *say* that to you, and I assure you there are special circumstances for why I said that in my sleepy haze, as I *do* have extremely low blood pressure, which as you know can often lead to difficulty waking up properly, and I *know* that I’d never make a mistake like this while we’re at sea but I *always* feel so uncertain on land so that explains why I’d be sleeping in my captain’s quarters even when we’re docked, and I know that making this clear isn’t a good thing for a commander to do but it’s *true*! So I really... er, Sagara-san?”

Her speech spoke more of her impressive lung capacity than her lucidity, but as she made it, Tessa realized that Sousuke was looking much more flustered than one would reasonably assume.

Why? Why is he staring off into the distance with his face covered in sweat? Why won’t he look at me— Her stomach dipped, and she looked down at herself... Yes, she was dressed only in her lace underwear with her unbuttoned uniform blouse pulled on over it, revealing her slender form beneath. The braid her ash blond hair was done into was also disheveled. She must have forgotten to actually dress herself before coming to the control room.

“Oh, oh no... What was I thinking?!” Tessa pulled the sheet up around her and took a few steps back before tripping over a step. “Ah...” She fell clean over and, just as her bottom smacked into the floor, the back of her head hit an armrest. The world briefly went dark and stars flashed around her.

Sousuke ran up to her in panic. “Colonel. Speak to me, Colonel!”

“I... I’m fine. It’s all fine...” Tessa stood up quickly without needing his help, her head still spinning. Unable to think of what to say to excuse herself, she just insisted, “I’m fine, I’m fine,” over and over again as she ran out of the control room...

All Sousuke could do was stare after her.

[0941 hours: Inspected AS hangar. Received explanation from project head about joint project between SRT and crucial members of 11th AS maintenance platoon. Malfunctions identified in E-005 and E-008. Assigned project head to deal with it.]

“I know you can be pretty out of it when you first wake up, but that’s a new low even for you,” Master Sergeant Melissa Mao said as she banged away at her keyboard in the base’s hangar. A Mithril arm slave, one of the M9 Gernsbacks, was crouched nearby in its landing posture.

Behind Mao stood Tessa, who had finally gotten her appearance in order. Over her usual khaki-colored uniform she now wore a flight jacket and hat with TDD-1 stitched onto it. Those few small changes gave her a very dynamic air, so this served as her usual outfit when she had to do a lot of walking around the base.

Mao went on, “So, what then? After acting like a total weirdo and making a pass at your subordinate, you just fell over? That’s nuts. You’re like an old man with early-stage dementia.”

“An old man...?” Tessa echoed hollowly.

“Or a cat in heat, if you prefer. Anyway, there’s no coming back from that one. Maybe you should tell him you’re sick in the head and apologize your brains out?” Mao’s carefree comment caused Tessa to pout.

“I am *not* sick in the head!” she protested. “I’m just not a morning person. I do better when we’re on maneuvers.”

“Okay, but that only accounts for so much,” Mao pointed out. “Even if you’re just waking up, who walks around a submarine half-naked?”

“You did the same thing once, Melissa.”

“Sure, but I was pretty doped up at the time. You should be fine, though, right? The rest of the crew didn’t see and Sousuke’s not the type to gossip.”

“But he’s the one whose opinion I care about...” Tessa flushed red, tugging her the brim of her hat even lower over her eyes. She sighed and went on. “If I

was going to try to get him to dote on me while half-asleep, I could have at least done it in a more dignified fashion... It was too pathetic. I wasn't even alluring. He probably just thinks I'm awful."

Mao clicked around a CG design on her LCD display with her mouse and let out a hum. "I'm sure it's fine. Maybe it'll help him realize you're a normal girl."

"But I was acting extremely *sub-normal*!" wailed Tessa.

"Hmm, fair enough," Mao replied indifferently, cigarette in mouth.

"Er... Please don't agree so easily."

"Hmm. Y'know, you don't seem to have much to do today."

"I don't, unfortunately..." Having some tasks to attend to would have been a good distraction, but Tessa was indeed relatively unoccupied today. In fact she'd worked hard yesterday to open this time in her schedule; Sagara Sousuke had arrived back on Merida Island last night and she'd hoped to contrive ways to spend time with him. Unfortunately, that morning's experience had soured those inclinations. She'd be too humiliated to even show her face to him now.

Tessa was a battle group commander, with the wisdom and judgment to exploit any opportunity to its fullest in the fight against terrorists. But when it came to matters of the heart, she was like an indecisive rookie lieutenant.

Not good, she told herself. *It's so not good...*

While she was spending all her time here, he was spending his far away in Tokyo, getting closer and closer to Chidori Kaname. Kaname, in turn, was always feigning indifference and insisting that she found Sousuke annoying... but then she would turn around, make dinner and brazenly invite him to join her! Sousuke's decision during the recent incident in Hong Kong had filled Tessa with despair at the time, but even now, Sousuke remained as dense as a rock and Kaname still refused to be honest with herself—according to intelligence she'd received from Mao and Kurz, things hadn't actually advanced between them at all.

Tessa liked Kaname, but that didn't mean she was going to step aside for her. Be as honest with your feelings as the situation will allow—this was the precious training she'd received in her short life so far. *That's right*, she told

herself. *The battle isn't over yet!* Mustering up her willpower and acting decisively had been more her usual attitude lately.

And yet, this morning, she'd made a complete fool of herself, and now she was stuck crying on her own, lamenting the loss of what could have been. Her thoughts spiraled in on themselves. Love really was a constant battle, and she'd wanted someone to listen to her as she opened up about her pain. That was why she'd come to see Mao... but Mao seemed lost in her own work, and wasn't engaging with her earnestly.

"Why were you sleeping on the sub anyway?" Mao asked. "You were in your room in the base last night, weren't you?"

"Yes. That's what I'd thought, but..." Tessa had taken care of a lot of paperwork last night, hoping to free up her schedule today all the more. Afterwards, she'd returned to her room in the base while sleepily rubbing her eyes, and found Mao there as usual, gulping down her beer. On her recommendation, Tessa had taken a canned drink from her, and... It was more or less a blank after that. "I'm not entirely sure. My uniform was in my stateroom with me, so I don't think I was wandering around the base naked. And..." Tessa hesitated.

"And?"

"When I got back to my room on the base, she was missing."

"She?" Mao echoed.

"My stuffed animal," Tessa clarified. "The one I always keep next to my bed."

"Oh, the little puppy."

"She's very important to me. I wonder if I went out in some sort of fugue state and left her somewhere. When did you leave last night, Melissa?"

"Right after you got back. I offered you a canned highball to see what would happen, and you chugged it. Then you fell asleep in your clothes, and I got bored so I left. You don't remember?"

"I'm afraid not," Tessa admitted. "Might I ask what a canned highball is?"

"It's a Japanese cocktail. A hard drink, shochu cut with juice."

“I see. I didn’t know that... Wait, a hard drink?! You made me drink alcohol?!” Tessa asked with a start. That explained why she’d woken up with a headache and vague feeling of nausea.

“So what?” Mao asked carelessly. “It’s fine in moderation.”

“No! Alcohol kills brain cells! If I want to do this job for as long as possible—”

“Yeah, fine, whatever. Quit being a stick in the mud.” Mao waved her hand in annoyance, pressed the enter key on her keyboard, and shouted at the maintenance man standing on the M9’s shoulder next to the cockpit hatch. “It’s done! Boot it up!”

“Right!” The maintenance man unplugged a tablet hooked up to the machine’s cockpit and closed the hatch. With practiced motions he descended to the ground and jogged away from the machine.

“May I ask a question?” Tessa asked, her gaze slightly pleading. “What exactly have you been working on?”

“I sent you the proposal, didn’t I? The one about studying the M9’s movement algorithms to make them capable of doing more varied and advanced maneuvers without a pilot,” Mao reminded her.

“But our current generation of AIs can’t perform combat maneuvers on complex terrain without a pilot,” said Tessa. “They might be able to make split-second decisions faster than a human, but the ability to evaluate a situation and make difficult decisions based on all factors is something that only human instinct—”

“Right, yeah. That proposal was just an excuse.”

“Eh?”

“Just watch,” Mao told her as the M9 stood up, executing the program she’d installed. Another M9 waiting across from it stood up at the same time. For some reason, this one was wrapped, from the waist down, in a waterproof tarp.

“Why does it have a skirt?” Tessa asked skeptically.

“Flavor.”

“Er?”

The hangar was large, even relative to the rest of the underground base, with a space reserved for performing simple movement tests. The two unpiloted M9s stomped up to the test space and faced each other down. Neither carried weapons, but stood across from each other like gladiators at the coliseum.

Are they about to wrestle? Tessa wondered. Even in such a vast testing space, the M9 was a powerful machine. It was against squad regulations to hold mock battles with them anywhere except the practice grounds on the surface.

Just before Tessa could remind them of this, Mao shouted, “Okay, let’s get started!”

“Right! Now... start!” The member of the maintenance staff pressed a button on a CD player, and an old-fashioned song began to play. A sad melody by an instrument that sounded like an organ rang out... It was a tango.

The M9s began stepping in time to the grandiose intro. One had masculine movements. The other, with the skirt, had feminine movements.

Guitars joined the organ, and the song grew more intense and passionate. *Dun! Dundun, dun dun!* The machines clasped each other in an embrace with perfect timing, sensor gazing into sensor. Then they took hands, turned their faces to the side and, still embracing, began walking to the left and right. The two M9s continued their brisk dance, their feet making a terrible ruckus on the floor.

“Yes, yes, yes! It’s totally working this time!” Mao said as she and the maintenance men watched excitedly from a distance. The back of the “female” M9 arched back in the arms of the “male” M9. “He” yanked “her” up, and then “she” spun away and then back into “his” arms, skirt flaring.

“Heh heh heh,” Mao chuckled. “Amazing, ain’t it?”

“It’s bizarre,” said Tessa. “This is your research project?”

“Yeah. Since they’ve got humanoid forms, I figured I’d play around a bit.”

“I wish you wouldn’t play around with cutting-edge weapons that cost tens of millions of dollars! I’m your commander. What am I supposed to say?!” Tessa jabbed her colonel rank insignia as she stared up at the other woman.

“Here it comes!” Mao crowed, completely ignoring her. “Right there... yes! Perfect!”

“Excuse me,” Tessa tried again. “Are you listening?!”

“Now the turn... yes! I’m totally winning the Christmas party talent show!” said Mao, who clearly wasn’t listening.

The M9s danced. The maintenance personnel cheered. And then it happened—the hands of the two machines, entwined as they whipped around in a circle like figure skaters, slipped. As a result, the “female” M9, spinning around the “male,” went flying with tremendous centripetal force.

“Ah...”

The M9 plowed through empty containers and crashed into the wall with an eardrum-splitting ruckus, snapping exposed pipes and girders in its wake. Water and steam began gushing from the severed pipes, and warning alarms began to blare.

Even now, in the middle of the practice ground and with its partner missing, the “male” M9 continued its strange dance moves. The maintenance men ran every which way, shouting and issuing orders:

“Dammit, what happened?!”

“Stop! Stop!”

“Close the valve! No, stop, you’ll be electrocuted!”

“Shut off that alarm, dammit!”

Watching the chaos unfold before her, Mao slumped over dejectedly.

“Another failure,” she sighed. “I was so sure it was gonna work this time.”

Tessa patted her lightly on the back. “Don’t be so down. Cheer up, Melissa.”

“Thanks, Tessa.”

“I don’t need your thanks,” Tessa told her brightly. “I’ll bring the hammer down personally. Our battle group is poorer than it seems, you know.”

After freezing for a moment, Mao asked, “Um, I guess you’re cutting my pay?”

“Reports and damage estimates from all involved... Could you have them

ready by tomorrow?" Tessa asked with a beatific smile.

[In office until 1056 hours. Spoke with head of operations division on the phone. Received a commendable invitation but politely declined.]

Tessa left the hangar, which was in a flurry to clean up after the accident, and arrived at her office. She'd told her secretary the night before that she'd be in late the next day, so this wasn't an issue. She replied to a few emails and did a little more light busywork before getting a call from the operations division headquarters in Sydney. It was Admiral Borda, head of the division.

They made a little small talk, and then the admiral said, "By the way, Teletha. Are you free over the weekend two weeks from now?"

"I could make myself free if need be," Tessa answered. "What is it?"

"Oh, just a little get-together with some friends from my Navy days. I brought you to see them once before, remember? They really seemed to like you. I was hoping—"

"No," she said flatly.

"But why?" Borda protested. "They're all respectable men of the sea."

"I know that, but..." She'd attended this get-together about a year ago and found it exhausting. Everyone in attendance was the admiral's age or older, veterans of the major wars of the latter half of the 20th century—Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf. Besides this, they were exhausting to deal with: all of them were macho, belligerent old men, puffing on their cigars and cigarettes, throwing F-bombs willy-nilly. They acted like a bunch of children, but as they were all her respected elders, she didn't feel comfortable voicing her discomfort.

On top of that, they were so delighted to meet a teenage girl able to keep up with their talk of naval battles and geopolitics that they never let her get a moment's peace. And when she told *them* about her cutting-edge weapons systems, they did nothing but find fault. "*What in the world?*" they'd scoffed,

"Can't modern sailors read a sea chart without relying on machines?" She didn't want to participate in something so nerve-racking again.

"Tell me why," Borda pleaded. "Was it Kevin's talk of his female conquests?"

"Not just that."

"Roy's talk about the STD he caught in Saigon?"

"I thought I might faint."

"Thomas showing the tattoo he got on his you-know-what?"

"Of course!" Tessa exploded. "I've been traumatized for life! I'd admired him as a fine submariner before then. Can you imagine my disillusionment?!"

Borda's friends were old-fashioned types for whom sexual harassment was a foreign concept; they all seemed to think that hitting on a beautiful girl was how you showed her respect. Some of them were even legends on a global scale, but the impression they'd made on Tessa was that of a bunch of nasty old men who thought with their private parts more than their brains.

"Don't be like that," Borda told her. "They're all good men."

"They're more like a group of delinquents in heat!" Tessa replied tartly.

"Fine, fine. I'll remind them to be on their best behavior. Can't you make time?"

"I don't trust you."

"It's educational, isn't it? And despite how they look, they've been through a lot in their lives," he reminded her. "I think it's all right to give them a party, surrounding a beautiful girl as comfort in their empty retirement years."

"Liar," Tessa said flatly. "You just enjoy tormenting me."

"Hmm... well, there is that, but... No, Teletha! Don't hang up! I'm joking!"

Tessa was about to hang up but stopped. "We have nothing more to talk about, do we? I'm sure you have business to attend to."

"Don't be so stubborn," Borda tried again. "It's an honor to be invited to a gathering like this, you know. Only men of Mardukas's standing or higher get invites."

“Then why don’t you invite *him*?”

“Dick is boring. He’ll probably spend the entire time in a corner with a calculator in one hand, tallying up the party expenditures.”

Tessa’s eyelids began to droop as she imagined this very plausible scene. Incidentally, the American Mithril veterans all called Richard Mardukas “Dick,” though the English Mardukas himself hated the name.

“Regardless, I’m not going,” she told him. “And the venue is on the East Coast, isn’t it? I certainly don’t have time to travel that far.”

“All right. So if it was nearby, you’d make time? Hawaii or Guam, maybe?”

“Stop it. I’m not going.”

“Just think it over,” Borda wheedled. “John G’s organizing this year, and I’m sure he’ll be flexible. I’ll check back in later. See you.”

“Wait a minute. Uncle? Oh, for...” After he’d hung up, Tessa gazed at the phone for a few moments and let out a sigh. She’d have to send him an email reiterating her position. If they changed the venue to accommodate her, she wouldn’t be able to refuse. They might be a band of bad-news brats, but they were also storied veterans. Some had experience as flag officers, and some were admired even within Mithril.

“Colonel.” Likely having waited for her call to be over, Tessa’s secretary, Jacqueline Villain, poked her head in the office door. Villain was in her mid-twenties, a striking woman with blonde hair and tanned skin. Though she seemed like the athletic type, she had the aura of a head librarian.

“What is it?”

“Message from MM regarding the upgrades to the MH-67 Pave Mare. They’re going to send us the sound-dampening system specifications.”

“I see,” said Tessa. “Any other messages?”

“No, ma’am,” the secretary responded briskly before leaving.

Villain was always blunt like that. She felt like the kind of person who’d never had a private conversation in her life. Initially, Tessa had wondered if Villain perhaps disliked her, but that seemed not to be the case either. She would

kindly refill her tea and occasionally brought her homemade chiffon cake. Last Christmas, she'd given her a lovely music box as a present. *She's probably just the no-nonsense type*, Tessa had realized then.

She booted up her email and looked through the plans sent by Martin Marietta. She made a list of problematic elements and replied. It took less than five minutes.

"Now..." Tessa adjusted her position in her office chair. She'd found herself in the unexpected position of having absolutely nothing to do. What an awful prospect! Unable to withstand the thought of being alone with her thoughts, she rose to her feet.

Yes, that stuffed animal... She had the idea of looking for the missing stuffed animal under the pretense of wandering around and observing her subordinates. She was certainly hesitant to ask Villain to lead a search for a missing item.

For instance...

'Lieutenant. Contact all squads in the base and tell them to search for my stuffed animal. Make it a priority.'

'Yes, at once, ma'am.'

'It's a brown puppy. I can't sleep a wink without it. Is that understood?'

'Understood, Colonel.'

Such a conversation would surely lower the morale of all the officers. So instead, Tessa pulled her flight jacket on over her uniform, put on her Tuatha de Danaan hat, and swapped her pumps for sneakers.

The base's effective lost and found was located in the base's engineer corps office. She told Villain she was heading out and left her office.

[1144 hours: Paid a visit to the engineer corps and observed their systems in action. Met with SRT lieutenant and learned more about his personality and interests.]

“C-Colonel, you really didn’t have to come all this way. If you’d just called us, we could have searched for you,” the private in charge of the lost and found office, which happened to be part of the engineer corps, said nervously.

His behavior was understandable; she was the lofty commander of a battle group that included old, respected hands like Colonel Mardukas and Major Kalinin, after all. To a rank-and-file soldier like this one, Teletha Testarossa would possess a powerful mystique. Although Tessa herself didn’t realize it, the private’s expression as he stared at her was one of awe.

A gentle smile appeared on Tessa’s face as she responded, “Well, it’s a very personal item. And I happened to be in the neighborhood anyway.”

“Oh, really?” he asked. “What are you looking for?”

“Well... er...” She was hesitant to admit she was looking for a stuffed animal.

It was then that a uniformed NCO appeared in the office, a handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes: Sergeant Kurz Weber of the SRT. “Well, well, if it isn’t Tessa. What brings you here?”

“Weber-san? Oh, I just...”

“Lost something?” he suggested. “Lunch box, gym clothes, textbook, pencil case?”

“I’m not a child... It’s just a personal item,” Tessa grumbled in protest.

“Oh? All right. Anyway, you the lost and found guy?” Kurz asked, turning to the private.

“Yes, Sergeant. I’m usually the storekeeper, but this week I’m on desk duty.”

“Oh, yeah? Anyway, I found these,” said Kurz, placing a large paper bag on top of the desk.

The private searched through it and pulled out a few VHS tapes. “What are these?” They were all animated movies, Disney films like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Hercules*, as well as Japanese films like *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Kiki’s Delivery Service*.

“Found ’em in the locker room,” Kurz said. “I figured someone’s gonna come looking for ’em, so hand it over when they do.”

“Yes, sir. Now, if I could have your signature in the log—”

“Oh, sorry. I’m in a hurry right now.”

“Wait, Sergeant! Your signature—”

“Just fill in whatever. See ya.” Kurz took off without a second glance.

The private turned back to Tessa, who’d been watching quietly the whole time, and whispered pleadingly, “I don’t know what to do. The rules say they need to be signed in.”

Tessa giggled. “I’ll cover for you. None of it is especially valuable, after all.”

“Th-Thank you, Colonel...”

“You’re welcome. Now, regarding my lost item...”

“Oh, of course. Sorry, ma’am.” The private opened up the log and looked through it. “Four lost items have been brought here over the last two days other than the videos. A watch, a sketchbook, a makeup kit, and a hardcover book. Is it any of those?”

“Oh, is that all you have?”

“Yes.”

Tessa let out a quiet sigh. “I suppose not, then. I’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“What went missing? I can call you if it shows up.”

“N-No, it’s all right. I’ll try again later.” Tessa forced a smile to her face and was about to leave when Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau entered.

Clouseau was a tall African-Canadian man with an extremely trim appearance. He’d been appointed SRT team leader back in October, and he tended to keep a very busy schedule.

“Oh, Clouseau-san.”

“Greetings, Colonel,” Clouseau responded with a salute.

Just then, Tessa realized that he looked rather tired. Clouseau’s skin color made it hard for her to read changes in his complexion, but she could tell that his eyes were bloodshot. His tapered jaw was darkened with five o’clock

shadow and his usually pristine battledress was rumpled. “Did you lose something as well? And I must say, you look rather tired,” Tessa mentioned, looking worried.

Clouseau responded abashedly, “Well, I’ve had a lot of all-nighters lately. It’s about the new equipment. Now that I received the summary, I’ve been reevaluating our tactics from square one.”

Tessa knew just what he was referring to: new equipment for the M9 they were developing with the help of an external agency. It wasn’t exactly a weapon, but it could be quite useful if employed the right way. “I see,” she replied. “But it won’t be complete for a while yet, and she still may change the final plans on a whim. If you work yourself too hard, you’ll have a breakdown.”

Clouseau gave her a sheepish smile. “I appreciate the concern, but I can handle what I’m doing. I’m still capable of executing any mission in top condition.” Though he said that, there was no real confidence in Clouseau’s manner. Tessa was just wondering if he was really all right when, seeming to notice that, he added, “Of course, I do plan to take it easy today. I was hoping to have a nice cup of tea in my room while watching some movies, but the tapes themselves have gone missing.”

“Tapes?” she echoed.

“Yes. Some videos I’d left at my last posting arrived here yesterday. They were left in the locker room, but...”

“Oh, I think those just arrived. Right?” she prompted, turning back to the private.

“Yes. Right here.”

Clouseau took the paper bag full of videos from the private and checked the contents.

“Is that it, Lieutenant?”

“Hmm? Ah... hmm, yes. These are mine. Sorry for the trouble.” Clouseau thanked the private, then drew in close and whispered something into his ear.

The private’s eyes opened wide, and he responded with an earnest, “Yes, sir!”

Next, he walked up to Tessa. “Colonel,” he said with an odd tone in his voice.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry to ask this,” Clouseau said, “but... did you see what was in this bag?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“Well, er... I don’t know exactly how to put this, but I was hoping you could not mention to the others that I watch these kinds of movies.”

“Why is that?” she asked out of innocent curiosity.

Clouseau responded abashedly, “I’m the leader of the SRT.”

“Yes?”

“I’m next in rank to Major Kalinin in the ground unit. In order to maintain unity among experienced officers, I must present myself as the model soldier,” he explained. “I’m not so foolish as to try to insist that I come off as macho, but I don’t want them thinking of me as a sentimental man. An officer like me should be watching more serious movies. Socially conscious documentaries and such.”

“R-Really?”

“Absolutely,” Clouseau declared firmly. “And so... If the men beneath me knew that the way I unwind after a tense mission is to watch these sorts of movies, that I read hobbyist magazines to learn more about upcoming works in the genre, and that I’m a regular on certain internet review sites... it would be extremely bad for squad morale.” He rattled off the explanation, greasy sweat appearing on his forehead.

It made Tessa wonder how others would feel if they knew she was searching for a stuffed animal. “Enjoying animation isn’t such a big deal,” she told him.

“Yes, it absolutely is!” Clouseau said in irritation. “Colonel, please consider what I’ve asked. Keeping my proclivities secret is a necessity to preserve the ground unit’s battle readiness. It’s not my own standing that I’m worried about. I’m asking you this in the name of maintaining unity among the squad—”

“If you’re that worried, why don’t you stop watching them?” Tessa asked.

Clouseau froze up as if he'd been struck by lightning. After a very... very long pause, he responded, as if squeezing the words from his throat. "Well... I-if that's your order, I'll certainly follow it." His reply was a pained one, as if she'd ordered him to shoot an innocent civilian.

"I'm joking," she said kindly. "Don't worry, Clouseau-san. I won't ask you to drop the small pleasures from your life, and I won't tell anyone about them, either."

Clouseau let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Colonel. Forgive me for my rudeness. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He gave her a polite salute, then strode out of the room.

Well, of all people... He'd come out of the super-elite SAS and was a skilled AS operator who had even beaten Sousuke easily in battle. *I would have never thought he had that side to him.* Tessa meditated on these thoughts for some time.

[1303 hours: Did some investigation regarding matter of import from this morning (content classified). Shared lunch and conversation with ground unit operations commander. Came to understand him more deeply.]

Where could I have left it? While trying to figure out where her stuffed animal could be, Tessa walked along through the base's main artery, Corridor No. 0, by herself. It was wide enough to easily accommodate the base's electric transport vehicles, and each side had a slightly elevated pedestrian sidewalk.

Most of the Merida Island Base, which stretched to two kilometers in length, had been built underground. Because most of their funding had gone into the amphibious assault submarine, the facility itself was as bare-bones as could be. Even the passage she was walking through now was extremely Spartan—all concrete, girders, and exposed plumbing and wiring. It was just like an underground tunnel under construction, and once every few days the roof began leaking. When part of the base's drainage system had broken down, the entire base staff had been forced to mobilize into a bucket chain.

Had they built the same base on the surface, they could've made something much better for the same amount of money, but there were reasons not to have done so. Mithril was a top-secret mercenary organization, and the best way to keep their plans and operations secret from empires like the United States and the USSR was to build the base underground. It kept them hidden from various spy satellites, particularly the USA's Keyhole series.

Most modern spy satellites were equipped with infrared sensors with a resolution in mere centimeters. Building a base on the surface and using the jungle above it as camouflage wouldn't be enough to fool them. Just by analyzing various heat sources—personnel and active vehicles—a specialist would be able to estimate the exact scale and status of their organization.

But all that aside...

While she walked down Corridor No. 0, fragments of memories replayed themselves in Tessa's mind. *Let's think a bit more about last night*, she reasoned. *I drank Mao's spiked drink, then what? I went to my bedroom, I'm sure. I didn't take off my uniform, just dove into my big bed, hugged my stuffed animal tight... and then what?* She couldn't remember. Logically, she should have gone right to sleep and woken up the next morning. *Why did I leave my room?* she wondered next. *Why would I get out of my bed after falling asleep?*

"The phone..." she murmured. Yes. The phone had rung. The phone in her room.

But who called me? That she couldn't recall. She pressed her fingers to her temples and hummed as she attempted to trace her memory back, but failed to do so. Left with no other choice, she caught a ride on a passing base vehicle and returned to the living quarters.

She messed with the phone beside her bed to check her call history. The most recent number had come in last night at 2 am.

0148 KALININ. A (MAJ)

This would have been Major Andrey Kalinin, commander of the ground unit.

Eh? 0148 hours... What could he have wanted from her at that time of night? The major would never call on personal business so late. It had to be work-related, but then...

She called his office, but his secretary, a corporal, answered and told her the major was off today. Tessa recalled that, at one of their regular meetings a few days ago, she'd asked the major to take a few of his saved-up vacation days. He must have done just as she'd asked.

She could have called him in his room, but as the officers' block was nearby, Tessa decided to go there herself.

She knocked on Major Kalinin's door, which opened a moment later to reveal a large, gray-haired Russian. He was tall, roughly 190 centimeters, and for some reason wore a red checkered apron over his fatigues that frankly looked a bit silly.

"Colonel? What is it?" Kalinin asked, looking surprised to see her. He held a large wooden ladle in his right hand, while in his left there was a bottle of wine.



“Oh... Kalinin-san. I’m sorry to disturb you,” said Tessa. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No, of course you aren’t.”

“I wanted to consult with you on some minor business.”

“I see. By all means, come in.” Kalinin stepped to the side in order to let Tessa into the room.

She’d never been into Kalinin’s private quarters before, and now discovered they had a staid color scheme. There was dark oak furniture he’d brought in from somewhere, and the bookshelves that took up two whole walls gave it a sense of maturity.

Tessa looked at the books on the shelves. Unlike his cabin on the Tuatha de Danaan, which was stocked with technical manuals, most of these were literature. Many were in Cyrillic, but there were exceptions, like a collection by William Blake, the English poet, which was sitting at the edge of his desk.

“Colonel. Have you had lunch yet?” Kalinin asked as he led her to the dining area and indicated a seat.

“Oh. I haven’t yet, actually.”

“Would you like to join me?” he suggested. “I was making my special borscht.”

Tessa could smell a delicious aroma wafting up from the kitchen in the back of the dining area. Needless to say, borscht was a famous Russian dish, a soup filled with beef and vegetables that took its dazzling red color from beets.

Kalinin cooks? she thought in surprise, then answered with a smile, “You’re certain? I’d be delighted.”

“I would be honored,” he replied. “Shall I invite Sergeant Sagara as well, as long as we’re making it an event?”

“Oh...”

Without waiting for Tessa’s response, Kalinin picked up his room phone. He punched in the number, waited, and... “It’s me. I’m making that borscht again.

Yes, I see. Understood.” With that bare-bones exchange, he hung up the phone. “What a shame. He says he has other plans and can’t come.”

“I see,” Tessa whispered. Her feelings on the matter were fairly complicated: she was anxious about the idea of seeing Sagara again, so she was genuinely relieved to hear he wouldn’t be coming... Yet in the same thought, she was sad about his absence.

Kalinin, whether or not he was aware of her emotional turmoil, continued on easily. “It’s strange how often he’s busy when I call him. Bad luck, I suppose.”

“It does seem that way,” Tessa agreed neutrally.

“Now, wait just a moment. I think it should be finished in...” Kalinin checked the clock on the wall. “...245 seconds.”

“What?”

“241 seconds. Excuse me.” With that, he withdrew to the kitchen.

She could hear the sound of bubbling soup and the repeated sound of the ladle splashing in and stirring. It seemed like an extremely precise ritual, performed every fifteen seconds exactly.

He’s... cooking? Tessa decided not to think about it too deeply and simply do what she’d come here to do. She called to the kitchen from the dining room, “Kalinin-san.”

“Yes?”

“Did you call me last night?”

“Affirmative.”

“And... this is hard to ask, but what did we talk about?” she asked hesitantly. “I was very tired, and my memory is hazy.”

“You don’t remember?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll be sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“There’s no issue there,” he said easily. “But it wasn’t anything particularly important. I was simply seeking permission to run a basic test on the base’s early warning system.”

The moment he'd said it, she remembered. Kalinin had informed her of the test over the phone, and Tessa had replied groggily, "Yes, that's fine. Do whatever you like."

"You said you'd come to watch the test yourself, and I told you not to trouble yourself and to go back to sleep. Nevertheless, you insisted you were coming. But you said you might be a bit late and that we were free to start without you."

"D-Did I say that?" She couldn't quite remember that part.

"Since I had your permission, I conducted the test. Then Colonel Mardukas contacted me to say you wouldn't be there. I assumed that you'd demurred due to exhaustion from your daily duties."

It wasn't an important test, but Tessa still felt embarrassed about having entirely forgotten it. And... "Mardukas-san told you I wasn't coming?"

"Yes," Kalinin affirmed. "Around 0300 hours."

"..."

Which meant... Had she run into Mardukas after the phone call? Had he seen the condition she was in, declared her unfit for duty, and called Kalinin to let him know? In other words, had the finicky Mardukas seen her falling-down drunk? *Oh, of all the awful blunders...* she thought. Tessa, now deeply depressed, slumped over the table.

"Colonel. Is there some issue?"

"No... It's fine. I'm repenting a hundred times over in my mind," said Tessa.

Kalinin made no more than a small sound of inquiry, but soon after, the sound of the burner turned off. It had been exactly 245 seconds since Kalinin's initial declaration. "It's done," he said, returning to the dining room. He laid out dishes and bread on the table before placing a pot stand in the center. He went once more into the kitchen and returned with a copper pot. Here he conducted himself with extreme caution, as if handling a live bomb. "I hope you enjoy it," Kalinin said as he dealt the borscht out into the white china bowls. Once again, his motions were as if he were handling explosive nitroglycerin.

“It’s rather mysterious, but it smells wonderful,” Tessa said as she sniffed.

“Yes. I believe that as far as the smell goes, this is the most successful test batch I’ve created,” Kalinin told her modestly.

“T-Test batch?”

“I’ve only recently begun experimenting with home cooking.”

Tessa gulped silently.

“This dish was my late wife’s specialty. During my time in the Soviet army, when I returned home after a mission, my beloved Irina would always serve me borscht.” Kalinin’s gaze briefly became distant. “It was apparently a special recipe. She added some kind of extra seasoning to the usual borscht ingredients... but I couldn’t tell what it was. The illness took her before I could ever ask.”

“I see,” Tessa whispered mournfully.

“I’ve been running experiments to try to replicate the flavor of my wife’s special borscht. I add various ingredients and take detailed notes each time, then run careful analyses when I have a free moment.”

“Aha...”

“My hard work seems to be paying off, as my recreation of her special borscht has been nearing completion. And today I arrived at my definitive conclusion: the ingredients missing from my previous borscht attempts were cocoa powder and miso paste,” Kalinin proclaimed with confidence.

Tessa just stared at him a moment before asking, “Excuse me?”

“Cocoa powder and miso paste,” he repeated. “You’re familiar with miso paste, aren’t you? It’s an ingredient in Japanese miso soup.”

“But aren’t you making borscht?”

“Yes, but it requires cocoa and miso.”

Tessa fell silent as she looked down at the borscht—rather, the borscht-like substance—and felt a slight chill run up her spine. It was a red soup filled with thoroughly boiled ingredients, with a dab of white cream in the center. It

looked perfectly normal from here... Or was the soup a little too brown to properly be called “crimson”? In fact, was it perhaps a bit cloudy?

“Help yourself, Colonel,” Kalinin invited. “I’m honored to have you be the first to taste my successful recreation of my late wife’s special borscht.”

“Th-Thank you...” She gave him an awkward smile and picked up the spoon. She swallowed hard, not from anticipation, but from fear. Timidly, she scooped up some soup with the spoon and brought it to her lips. After a moment’s hesitation, she delicately placed it into her mouth.

A sweetness immediately spread through it, difficult to quantify. It was a truly indescribable flavor. If forced to compare it to something, she would say it was a bit like the Dr. Pepper she’d had at Chidori Kaname’s house once before. Warm Dr. Pepper, at that. If nothing else, it didn’t taste like borscht in the slightest. “Mm? Mmgh?!”

Kalinin sat down opposite Tessa and carefully watched her reaction. He was always so businesslike and no-nonsense; this was the first time she’d ever seen him relaxed at all. He was the picture of a man finding a fleeting moment of peace in the middle of bloody days spent fighting terrorism. Could she really afford to spoil this precious time with a subordinate she relied upon so thoroughly?

“It’s... delicious,” she proclaimed confidently, her face pale and her body trembling. Had Mao been there, she likely would have patted her on the back and praised her for her benevolence.

“I’m glad.” Kalinin poured some of the mystery soup into his own bowl and promptly ate a spoonful.

Tessa held her breath as she watched for his reaction.

He let out a small sigh. “Yes, this is it,” he whispered. “Whenever I was due to leave from Moscow on military business for an extended period of time, Irina would always take me to task. She’d call me a rotten, inconsiderate louse. Yet when I would return after the mission was over, she’d silently serve me this borscht. I’d say it was delicious, and she’d always say, ‘You really mean that?’ And even now, I... No. Enough sentimentality.” Kalinin truly seemed to be enjoying the strange soup.

“Um, I think...”

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing.” Tessa was about to say that it sounded like his wife had been trying to get back at him, but she stopped herself. She couldn’t help but feel sympathy for a man who ran the kind of missions that would make even this meal seem delicious.

“Now, Colonel, please help yourself,” he invited her again. “There’s enough soup for five, after all.”

“Y-Yes...” Feeling something close to despair, Tessa’s trembling hand brought a second spoonful to her mouth. She felt keenly aware of why Sousuke had said something about previous plans and begged off.

[1421 hours: Witnessed a serious incident between an SRT officer and NCO in Block D3 of Corridor No. 0. Attempted to mediate as battle group commander, then received advice from battle group vice commander.]

Tessa commended herself for making it through exactly half a bowl of borscht, but begged off the rest, using her diet as an excuse. Then, conveying all the regrets in the world, she finally left Kalinin’s room. She wanted to get back to her original objective of figuring out what she’d done the night before.

Last night, in a daze, she’d left her room with her stuffed animal, then interacted with Mardukas somehow. That meant her next stop had to be Mardukas’s office. She could have just called him but knew he could be even more prickly on the phone than he was in their normal daily interactions. She’d probably end up awkwardly stumbling over her words and getting nowhere.

So instead, she left the residential block for the office block once more. This time, though, she didn’t take a car, instead opting for the slow walk down Corridor No. 0 by herself. It wasn’t as if she had anything to do today, and this would let her put off the conversation with Mardukas for as long as possible.

As she was walking, Tessa heard a commotion and the sound of angry

shouting in the distance. She'd stopped to listen when suddenly, Kurz came running out from around the corner. He didn't even acknowledge her presence as he slipped in between two stacks of small containers in a parking area nearby.

"Excuse me, Weber-san?"

"Shh! Tell him I ran that way! Got it? Thanks!"

"What in the—"

Without responding, Kurz lifted up a waterproof tarp and hid underneath it. Then, before Tessa could even begin to figure out what was going on, Clouseau arrived. His shoulders heaved with breath, his bloodshot eyes scanned the area desperately, and he held a mop in his hands.

"What's the matter?" she asked dazedly.

"Colonel. Have you seen Weber?!" Clouseau asked, whipping his head around. His lack of salute suggested that he must be completely beside himself—while their squadron wasn't particularly hung up on such formalities, Clouseau himself usually was.

"Well... I do believe he ran that way..." Tessa responded hesitantly, pointing in the direction Kurz had asked her to.

"Thank you. Goodbye." Clouseau was about to run off when she called after him.

"Wait a moment, Clouseau-san. What happened?"

"I..." he stopped, hesitated, then said, "It's about... those videos. I'd just taken them back to my room to watch them, when... at the climactic moment..." He turned his eyes down, shoulders trembling, as if desperately trying to repress the aura of rage rising up within him. But, failing to find the right words to explain, he began to sum up the situation in a low, dark hiss. "Extraordinarily effective psychological warfare. Completely ruined the atmosphere. I know who did it. I'm going to find him and make him pay for defiling a masterpiece. Goodbye."

"Wait—"

But Clouseau was gone before she could say another word.

“And off he goes,” Kurz said as he rustled off the tarp and revealed himself behind Tessa. “I didn’t think it’d get to him that bad. What a laugh. Now I’ve gotten him back for beating us up at the pub. Heh heh heh...”

“What in the world did you do to those videos?” Tessa asked.

Kurz grinned. “Oh, nothing much. Just messed with them a little before turning them over to lost and found. I doubled some shocking images over the movies’ climaxes—scenes from a meat processing plant, hardcore gay porn, underground shockumentary stuff...”

“That’s awful.” It was like taking the stuffing out of someone’s favorite stuffed animal and replacing it with worms and garbage. It must have been extremely traumatic for Clouseau, who she’d learned was quite sentimental beneath his hard-nosed exterior. “Weber-san, you went too far.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she said firmly. “I would have used more subtle and clever subject matter. Like an awful Roger Corman movie or a closeup of Saddam Hussein’s face.”

“You call that subtle?”

“The point is, what you did is unacceptable. Everyone has things they value. Apologize to him later,” Tessa told him. “That’s an order.”

“Okay, but I don’t think the lieutenant is gonna—”

“Weber! There you are!” barked a voice. Tessa turned back and saw Clouseau, mop still in hand, striding over to where they stood.

“Heh heh. So you finally caught on. I was getting tired of running and hiding anyway.” With a cocky smile, Kurz pulled a hefty ball shooter seemingly from out of nowhere.

“Wait, Weber-san!” Tessa cried to no avail.

“Take this!” Kurz declared. There was a *whump!* as a rubber ball the size of a fist flew straight at its target.

Clouseau showed no sign of surprise or panic; instead, he just thrust the tip of his mop into the ball, shattering it into pieces on impact. It was a nearly superhuman move.

“Not bad, Lieutenant,” Kurz said with admiration.

“Very precise shooting, Sergeant,” Clouseau replied. “But too easy to see coming.”

“Um... Clouseau-san? Weber-san?” Tessa panicked.

The two elite soldiers faced each other down, sparks flying between them. “I hope you’re prepared for what’s to come, Sergeant...” Clouseau said darkly.

“Oh, and what’s that?”

“The crime you’ve committed is deeper than the sea. Kiki was... Kiki was... She was working so hard to save Tombo from the airship... and you spliced in footage of the Hindenberg?! There are some things that simply aren’t done...”

“I don’t remember doing that,” Kurz commented neutrally, “but let’s say I did. What’ll you do about it?”

“I’ll close that smart mouth of yours forever.”

They both moved at the same instant. Kurz firing his gun with practiced movements, Clouseau swinging the mop fast enough to cause a sonic boom. They collided and separated, struck and dodged, evaded... then collided again. Clouseau was by far the better melee combatant, but Kurz’s skills as a soldier were nothing to sneeze at. He slid with great precision through his opponent’s attacks and tried to fire a rubber ball into his abdomen.

“Sheesh, you’re a grown man!” said Kurz. “Have a little grace!”

“Shut up!” Clouseau bellowed in reply. “I’ll never forgive you for this!”

“Take this, and this, and this!”

“All pointless!”

Tessa was at a loss for what to do. Ridiculous origins aside, this was a titanic match she almost wished the other soldiers could witness. “Please stop this already,” she implored them. “Do you hear me, you two?!”

“Enough already! Both of you!” came a sudden rebuke.

Clouseau and Kurz both froze in place.

Tessa turned in surprise and saw Lieutenant Colonel Richard Mardukas, her vice commander, standing there. “Heaven’s sake... I thought I’d heard a commotion over here. Didn’t you hear your captain’s order?! Explain yourselves!” Mardukas shouted, hands behind his back.

This must have snapped him out of his furor, because Clouseau suddenly came to attention. “Forgive me, Colonel! I’ve been acting in an unbecoming manner.”

“Clouseau. You are the SRT’s team leader, are you not? What kind of behavior is this for a role model? For shame!” lectured Mardukas.

“Yes, sir. I don’t know what to say. I lost my head.”

“You’re damn straight you lost your head,” Kurz said.

Immediately, Mardukas whapped Kurz across the head with the documents in his hand, full-force.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“Quiet! Show some respect to your superior officer! Do you want another pay cut?” Mardukas threatened.

“Uh? I’d rather not...”

“Then fix that attitude of yours!” The vice commander shouted at him, the vein in his forehead throbbing. His shoulders were heaving, and he had a hand over his solar plexus as if to staunch a stinging pain.

“Ah... Are you all right, Colonel?” Kurz asked.

“Y-Yes, I’m fine... Ah, but stop worrying about me and fix your posture!” As Mardukas began to jab at his back and knees, Kurz came to attention. “At any rate. I don’t know what’s come up between you two, but I can’t have you fighting over personal business out here. I simply won’t tolerate it. The next time you do something like this, I’m transferring you to sewage processing duty, permanently! I mean it,” Mardukas told them. “Understood?!”

“Sir,” Clouseau confirmed.

“Sure,” Kurz answered.

“Besides, don’t you realize that your current actions are a waste of your talents? Can’t you channel your excess energy in a more productive manner? Youth is a treasure,” Markdukas continued. “Time can’t be turned back, but you want to spend yours on these silly little fights? When I was your age, I channeled all my efforts into mastering advanced knowledge and skills. I didn’t have time to quarrel with anyone else. Call it a boring youth if you wish, but as time passes, such efforts are always rewarded. In fact, twenty years ago, I competed with a man my age serving on the same ship and beat him in skill to be assigned to day duty. Do you know why that is? Because while he was spending *his* spare time on fun and games, I was poring over technical manuals and essays. Do you hear me? It always pays off. In other words, the most important thing here is—”

Mardukas’s lecture went on in this manner for five more minutes. He’d gotten so far off the subject that even the quick-witted Tessa had completely lost the thread. He finished with, “...and that’s what the Persian Gulf taught me: a superior soldier beats superior weaponry every time. So that’s what I’m telling you! Do you understand?!”

“Yes, sir...” Kurz, Clouseau—and for some reason Tessa—all replied weakly. None of them really understood what they were supposed to take from it, but also knew that admission would just prolong the encounter.

“Yes, good. Dismissed.”

Kurz and Clouseau’s first reaction was to turn and look at each other guardedly.

“Didn’t you hear me?!” Mardukas repeated. “I said, dismissed!”

The SRT personnel reluctantly began moving in different directions. Each was muttering resentfully to themselves, but Mardukas was still glaring at them, so they didn’t fight any further.

Once the two men were gone, Mardukas cleared his throat. “Goodness, what a troublesome bunch they are.”

“Oh? Ah... yes. They certainly are,” Tessa replied, forcing an awkward smile onto her face.

She then remembered why she’d been walking down this hall in the first place, which was because Kalinin’s testimony had suggested she’d left her room last night while half asleep and half drunk to wander around the base. He’d also said it was Mardukas who’d informed him that she wouldn’t be showing up for the drill, which suggested Mardukas had seen her in some kind of compromised position... That fussy Mardukas, of all people! And of course, it being entirely her own fault, she wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if he chose to take her to task for her behavior...

How... How should I ask him about it? she wondered uneasily.

There were two people in the battle group who could strip Tessa of her authority. One was Captain Goldberry, their doctor, and the other was Mardukas.

Captain Goldberry, a kind woman, could strip her of command for health-related reasons. Mardukas could do likewise, with the agreement of three or more senior officers, if he felt her judgment had become compromised. It was appropriate, given the cutting-edge submarine and ASes under her command, to give watchdog power to the battle group’s second in command and its doctor.

While Tessa trusted and relied on Mardukas, she was always worried about whether he truly had faith in her abilities. Her worst fear was about to come true.

“What’s the matter, Captain? Is something troubling you?” he asked.

“Well...” Tessa said meekly. “Er... about last night.”

“Yes? What about it?”

“I really am sorry. Very sorry. It was behavior unbecoming for someone upon whose judgment so many lives rest. I’m going to make sure it never happens again... so could you please overlook it just this once?” Tessa hadn’t meant to sound so needy, but she couldn’t help it.

Mardukas, in turn, simply adjusted his silver-rimmed glasses and scowled.

“I’m sorry; I don’t fully understand. Is choosing to watch the submarine’s sonar test rather than the base’s early warning system test really that grievous an error?”

“Er...?”

“I received a call that said ‘Colonel Testarossa is needed for discussion in the sonar shack, so she won’t be able to make it to the base’s command center. Please tell Major Kalinin,’” he explained. “I passed the message on.”

Tessa fell silent. Someone *else* had told Mardukas she wouldn’t be there, and then he’d passed the message on to Kalinin? Which meant Mardukas hadn’t personally seen her walking around the halls holding a stuffed animal? “Er...”

“Tell me, Captain, did something inappropriate occur?”

“No, of course not! Just a misunderstanding. Forget everything I said,” Tessa responded reflexively while thinking, *I don’t have to tell him. Just make sure he never learns about it!*

Mardukas regarded her silently for a minute, then, looking slightly unsatisfied, said, “I see. That’s fine, then.” He cleared his throat. “Regardless, it’s good to have Kalinin in charge of the SRT. They truly do seem to be a band of ruffians. It’s understandable that you would struggle with them. Now, farewell.”

“Ah... wait, Mardukas-san.”

“Yes?” Mardukas stopped and turned around.

“Er... who was it that told you I wouldn’t be coming last night?”

“Ma’am. It was...” His expression clouded over slightly. “...Sergeant Sagara.”

“Sagara-san?” Tessa repeated with surprise.

“Yes. Speaking of which, it’s about time for him to be returning to Tokyo, I believe.”

Tessa ran, shoulders heaving, through the commotion that surrounded her.

The Merida Island Base’s airfield consisted of one two-thousand-meter runway and an underground hangar. The surface airstrip was covered in a

canopy camouflaged to look like broad-leaved trees, and only when aircraft were given clearance to take off or land did the control room give permission to retract it. It was a two-thousand-meter-long canopy, after all—130,000 square meters in terms of simple area, many times larger than any baseball stadium with a retractable roof.

The noise it made while it moved was also so intense that it could be heard even from underneath the base.

“Hahh... hahh...” Tessa ran willy-nilly through the large hangar directly beneath the runway. It was several times larger than the hangar deck of the Tuatha de Danaan and bustling with the work of maintaining and refueling the various C-130 and C-17 transports, as well as the other aircraft that lined it. On one side of the hangar sat a massive elevator, sized to ferry transports back and forth from the surface. Alarms indicating elevator’s ascension were currently blaring through the hangar.

The various base staff hard at work around her watched Tessa’s passage curiously, but she just kept running, ignoring them all.

She’d finally remembered. When she’d left her room in the middle of the night to wander around the base, the person she’d run into was Sousuke. She’d said all kinds of self-serving things to him—telling him that she hated him, that he clearly didn’t care about her. Nevertheless, he’d looked after her with great care, urging her to keep her voice down and promising to look after her. After much sturm und drang, she’d said she was going home. But when he’d attempted to escort her to her room on the base, she’d insisted he take her to her captain’s quarters aboard the Tuatha de Danaan instead.

The large elevator carrying the small turboprop craft had slowly begun to rise. Tessa just barely managed to climb onto it, earning wide-eyed stares from the base personnel as they went through their final takeoff checklists beside the plane.

“Sagara-san!” Tessa shouted, trying to be heard over the engine’s roar.

Sagara Sousuke, wearing a large backpack, had just begun ascending the ramp. He turned to her, eyes wide in disbelief, then tossed his backpack into the plane and walked back down the ramp to approach her.

Tessa doubled over, hands on her knees, struggling to catch her breath. She then walked up to him and said, “I... last night... I know I made a lot of trouble for you... and I wanted to apologize...”

Sousuke just stared at her.

“Sagara-san, I’m sorry,” Tessa said with more confidence now than when she’d spoken to Mardukas. She was covered in sweat, her braid in disarray, her shoulders heaving. “I just... I love...” she gasped the last word out with all the feeling she had, struggling to be heard over the roar. “So please... don’t hate me.”

Sousuke regarded her with a confounded expression. Then, after making sure no one else was watching, he leaned in toward Tessa and said, “I’m sorry, Colonel.”

“What?”

“I’m aware of how you feel, but I don’t feel the same way. Please understand. It disgusts me.”

Tessa gasped and stared at him, frozen in place.

He then continued, “And, if I may be so bold, I don’t believe that ‘I love booze’ is an appropriate thing to say to anyone. Alcohol destroys brain cells. If you want to continue doing this job for a long time, you should moderate your intake. I did attempt to drink a little bit during the Hong Kong incident, and it was truly disgusting. I never want to drink again.”

“Er...?”

“At least now I know the rumors spread by the chef’s wife were true.”

“E-Excuse me?!” she spluttered.

Sousuke spoke again, more seriously and forcefully than ever before. “Please take this as a warning from a friend. Tessa, please. Stop drinking. Don’t become like Mao and Kurz. Nobody has to know about this.”

“No, that’s not what I was—”

“Sarge! Time for takeoff!” the soldier with the air group shouted.

“Understood! On my way! Goodbye. I left your stuffed animal with Mao. Take care.” Sousuke gave her a hard pat on the shoulder, then ran back to the plane as the roar of its engine grew louder.



Tessa tried to shout back, “No! Listen to me! Oh, this is ridiculous!” But he couldn’t hear her now. The elevator had arrived at its destination. The plane’s hatch closed, and it began to accelerate.

As Tessa sank to her knees and watched, dumbstruck, the turboprop plane carrying Sousuke took off from the runway and disappeared into the northern sky.

[2258 hours: Met with SRT senior NCO. Exchanged ideas about future strategy, then went to sleep.]

That night, in her room on the base...

“I just can’t take it!” Tessa, dressed in her pajamas, slammed her can of oshiruko drink onto the table, wailing. “He’s just the worst, mishearing my confession like that. After all I did to work up my courage...”

“Hmm. Well, you might have to make a harder sell with a clueless lunkhead like that,” Mao said, tapping away at her laptop with an indifferent air.

“As if it doesn’t concern you at all...” Tessa muttered irritably.

“Hmm. Yeah, guess it doesn’t.”

“You know it was *you* making me drink that alcohol that got me into this!”

“Hmm,” Mao replied carelessly, “sorry about that.”

“By the way, what are you up to?”

“Hmm. Just, I thought maybe if the tango won’t work, maybe the lambada will.”

“...I’m going to bed.” Tessa stood up, her eyes wet with tears. As she shuffled her way to the bedroom, she heard Mao call to her from behind.

“Tessa.”

“What is it?”

“How was your day?”

Tessa thought for a moment. The faces of all the subordinates she'd interacted with that day rose up in her mind. "Utterly awful."

"Yeah?"

"But at the same time... I wish they could all be days like this one."

"Yeah, I feel the same." Mao finally took her eyes off her computer and smiled back at Tessa.

"Well, good night."

"Night, Tessa." As her friend wished her goodnight, Tessa sank into her bed while hugging her stuffed puppy, and fell into a deep sleep.

The nightmares would probably come again. But she wasn't alone.

Afterword

This volume comprises the short stories published in *Monthly Dragon Magazine* between December of 1999 and the summer of 2000, as well as one additional story. This means I wrote some of these stories two years ago, which surprised even me when I looked back on them. Incidentally, the *FMP!* anime is in production as I'm writing this, though it's been put off due to real-world issues.

That's a real shame, but to mark the occasion I decided to make a call to the anime's director, Koichi Chigira, and asked him for a comment. Take it away, Chigira-san.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Chigira, and I've just woken up from a nap on my animation desk. In the studio, a young member of the production staff is running down the hall with a pack of key frames. Beside me I can hear the scratching pencil of the supervising director Horiuchi, quietly correcting layouts. We also just moved to a new studio, which is a nice change of pace. I feel like everyone's much more excited. The abrupt delay of broadcast is a true shame, but everyone's working to get things ready for when *FMP!* does get the go-ahead, so we hope you'll all cheer for us."

Yes, thank you. Sounds like it's pretty touch and go there... Let's imagine it a little more like this.

Gatou: So this is being broadcast from the base in Khe Sanh, currently under attack by North Vietnamese forces. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Chigira, a comment, if you will.

Chigira: (*over distant artillery and sporadic gunfire*) This is Lieutenant Colonel Chigira with the defense forces! I just saw a young corporal running off, carrying orders. I can hear the sounds of battle from Echo Platoon led by Captain Horiuchi from the nearby 861 high ground (*sound of mortars exploding and the roar of planes*). North Vietnamese shelling has forced us to move from Ogikubo to the battalion command center, which is a nice change of pace. Our group

morale is high, but... What?! I can't hear you! Never mind! Fire, fire!

Gatou: Hello? Hello, Colonel?

Chigira: Yes! The sudden order to retreat was regrettable, but we're ready to take back our base at any time! My officers are working to the death, so please support them! Can you hear me?! I need air support! A large supply of napalm bombs... what?! Yeah, drop it on me! I get it! I don't care!

Gatou: Colonel? Please respond! Colonel?!

Chigira: You damned gooks! Come get me! I'll take you all on! (*gunshots and screaming*)

Gatou: Colonel Chigira?!

That's basically what it's like in a chaotic anime production line.

Now, let's have the usual comments on each story.

"A Pure Yet Impure Grappler"

The idea behind this story was to challenge myself. Looking back on it now, I think it works okay. Incidentally, the only martial art I've ever practiced is kendo. I remember always feeling very stressed out about the rule that you can only attack three places (in middle school, thrusts were forbidden).

"A Trespass on Good Faith"

Another Tsubaki and Sousuke episode picking up on the last one. It feels like a continuation of the last story, but I seem to like old man characters. I think that male characters pick up fun idiosyncrasies as they get old. It's a kind of tragic comedy. Their previous life experiences have given them flavor, you could say. I don't know if it's connected to that, but Shiki-sensei also seems to like old man characters.

"Fancies Without Honor or Humanity"

Third in the Bonta-kun series. I wonder if we'll ever make those Bonta-kun

dolls? And after Suganuma-san, head of the Ryujin Cooperative, promised ‘We’ll give it a try. Fumoffu’... (Just kidding). If you want them to exist, send letters to the editor saying ‘Plushies, fumoffu!’ Though I can’t actually guarantee it’ll ever happen.

“The Afterschool Peacekeeper”

I thought about changing this one a lot but decided to leave it more or less the same. At the time I wrote this story (only two years ago), I was optimistic about the territorial conflicts it was based on. Though now in 2001... I feel like I’ve come to realize just how deep the problems are.

“The Lost Old Dog”

I don’t know why the adventures between an old person and a young one are so easily mined for drama. I went to Hiroshima with my grandmother when she was still alive. She was stubborn and never listened to anyone, but getting little glimpses of her life and her past gave me a lot to think about. She’s no longer with us, but I still think about all the things I wish I’d asked her about regarding her past.

“A Relatively Uneventful Day in the Life of a Battle Group Commander”

This is a different style of story from any before it. I was drinking with some people involved with the *FMP!* TCG and the next day I had a hangover and thought up the concept. It’s kind of like a way to clear through a bunch of elements of the various characters’ everyday lives that I can’t find time to depict in the novels. At the same time, I feel like I’m exposing their weaknesses. Especially Clouseau—so much for his serious image. Of course, I designed him like that from the start, and his relationship with Kurz is like this by default. I just didn’t have time to depict that due to the mood and pacing of *Day by Day*. I’m sure it’s fine, though.

We’ve made it to the fifth volume of short stories, and I feel like coming up with the titles is getting hard. I’m sure *Five-Alarm Fire* is fine enough here. I’m

always tossing ideas around with my editor, and now we have to do six... I'm not sure how much longer I can keep it up. I think I'm just too stupid to manage it. So I'll be recruiting requests for the next title. If I take your idea, I'll send you a super-rare telephone card and a signed edition of the next short story volume! Send letters to the Fujimi Fantasia Bunko editorial department with the heading 'I've got the sixth short story collection title!'

But enough of my pathetic requests. The next release should be the light and unserious novel I previously mentioned.

Anyway, see you. Next time, Kaname's fan will roar once more.



**"I'm sorry, but
it's time to die."**

**That smile, like ice,
was a sign that the
battle to the death
with the enraged
Onuki Zenji was
about to begin.**

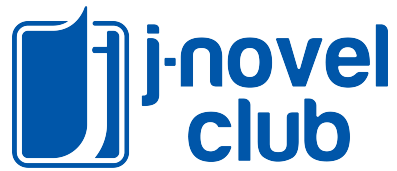
**FULL METAL PANIC!
UNQUENCHABLE FIVE-ALARM FIRE?**



**Wh-Why can't I
remember last
night?!**

**For reasons she
couldn't explain,
Tessa woke up in
the stateroom of
her submarine
wearing nothing
but a button-up
shirt.**





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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 5

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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