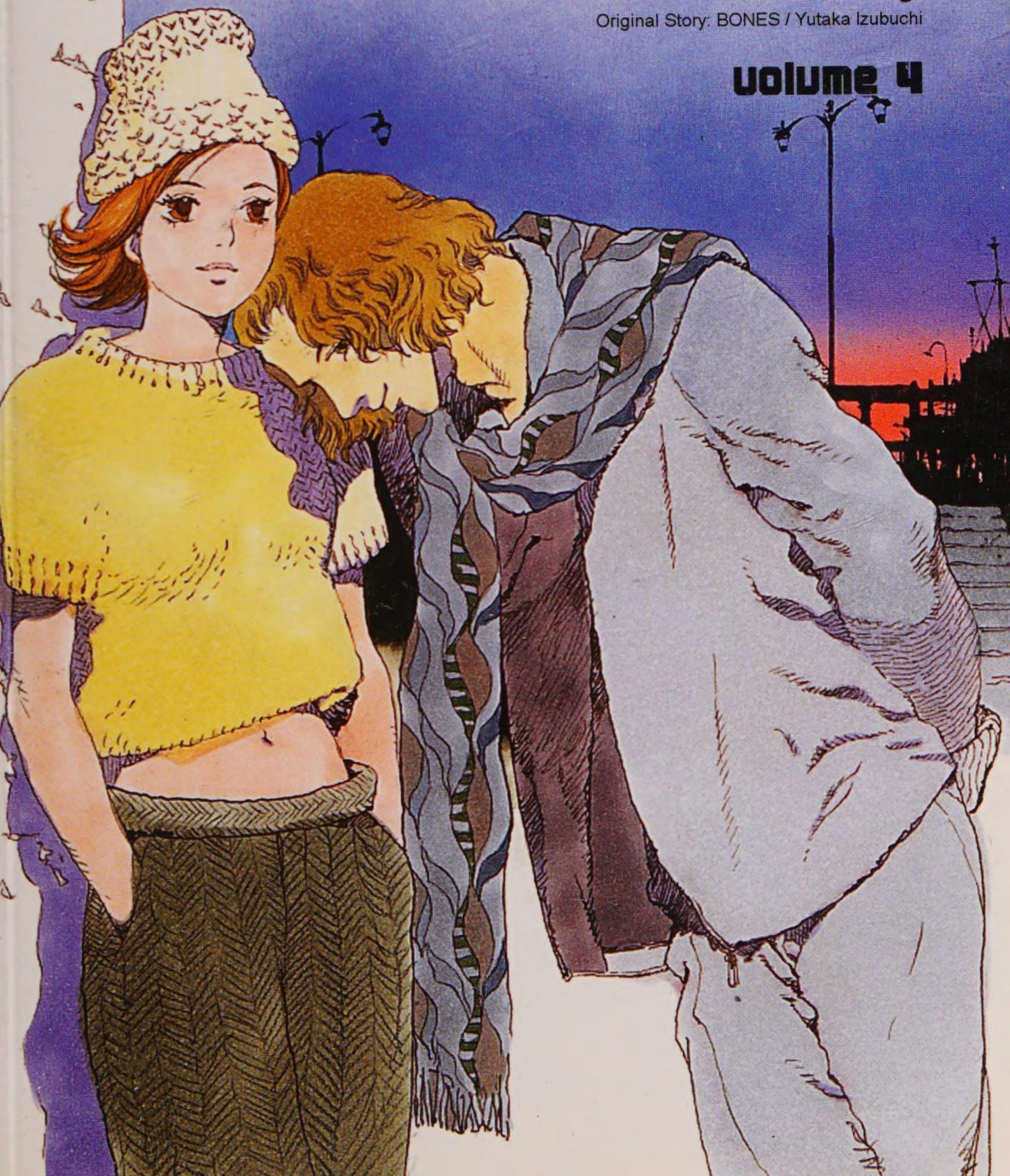



RAKXEPHON

Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONES / Yutaka Izubuchi

Volume 4





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RAHXEPHON Volume 4

Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONES / Yutaka Izubuchi

RAHXEPHON

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Ohnogi Hiroshi

Author. Born in 1959, Tokyo.

Made his debut in 1982 as a scriptwriter for *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*. Other key works include *Gundam Z* and *Magical Play*. Joined the *Rahxephon* staff at the “14th Movement” and was subsequently charged with its novelization.

Yamada Akihiro

Original illustrations and design. Born in 1957, Kochi Prefecture.

Key works include *The Record of the Lodoss War: The Lady of Pharis*, (with Mizuno Ryo, Kadokawa Publications), and *The Twelve Kingdoms* (with Ono Fuyumi, Kodansha X Bunko Publications).

Sano Hirotoshi

Mechanical director. Born in 1962, Fukuoka Prefecture.

Worked as a mechanical director on *Mobile Fighter G Gundam* and *The Vision of Escaflowne*. Often referred to as the “Robot Artist.”

Kanno Hiroki

Animation character design. Born in 1965, Iwate Prefecture.

Previous key works include *Cowboy Bebop* and *Hiwou Senki*.

Sato Michiaki

Mechanical design. From Tokyo.

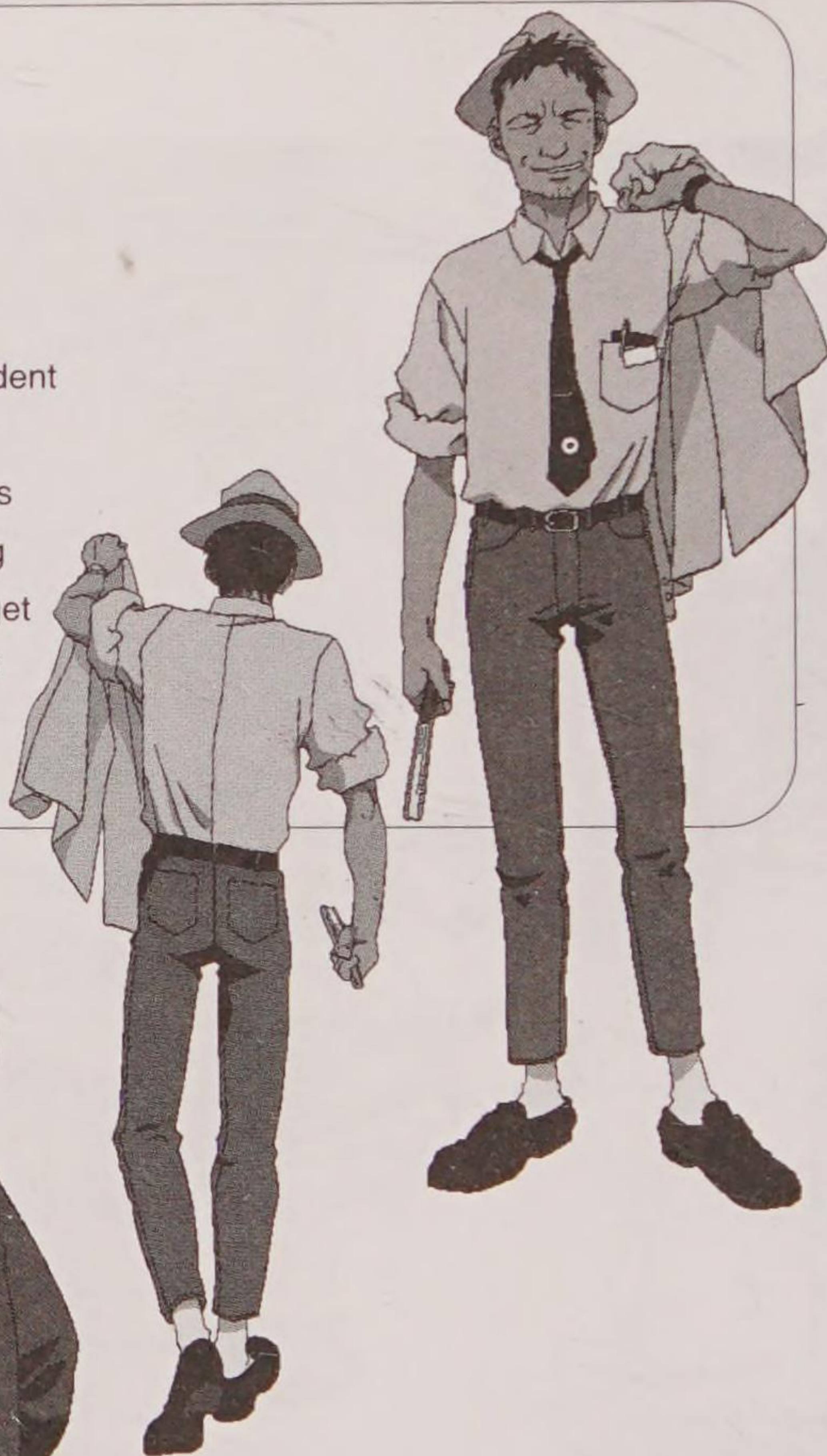
A jack-of-all-trades, Sato has done work as a fine artist, writer, illustrator, book designer, and web designer.





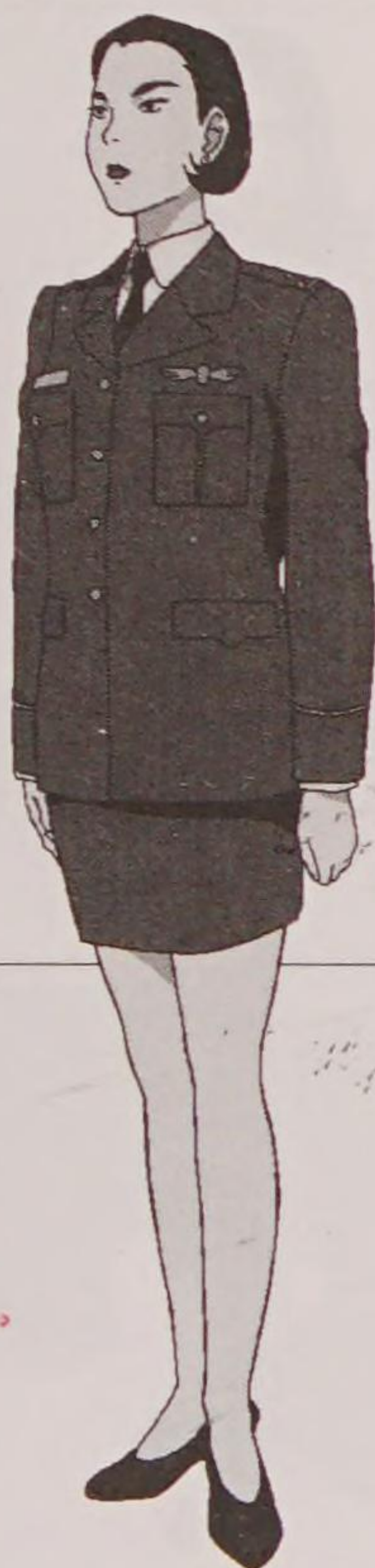
Futagami Johji

A reporter for Amato News, Johji has permission from TERRA to do independent research on Niraikanai. Contrary to his appearance, he has remarkable insights and is good at collecting and organizing important clues. He often manages to get straight to the core of an issue. Age: 36



Rikudou Shougo

An archaeologist who lives on Nirai Island and houses the Shitoh sisters and Ayato in his home. He is a man of reason and common sense, who has taught Megumi to treat others as she would want to be treated. He is an old friend of Watari and Kunugi. Age: 62



Miwa Shinobu

She works with Kuki commanding the MU Tokyo Government-General. Her rank is captain. She is also ex-Defense Force, and there is reason to believe she has also been transformed into a Mulian. She secretly fears Maya greatly.

RAHXEPHON CHARACTERS PROFILES

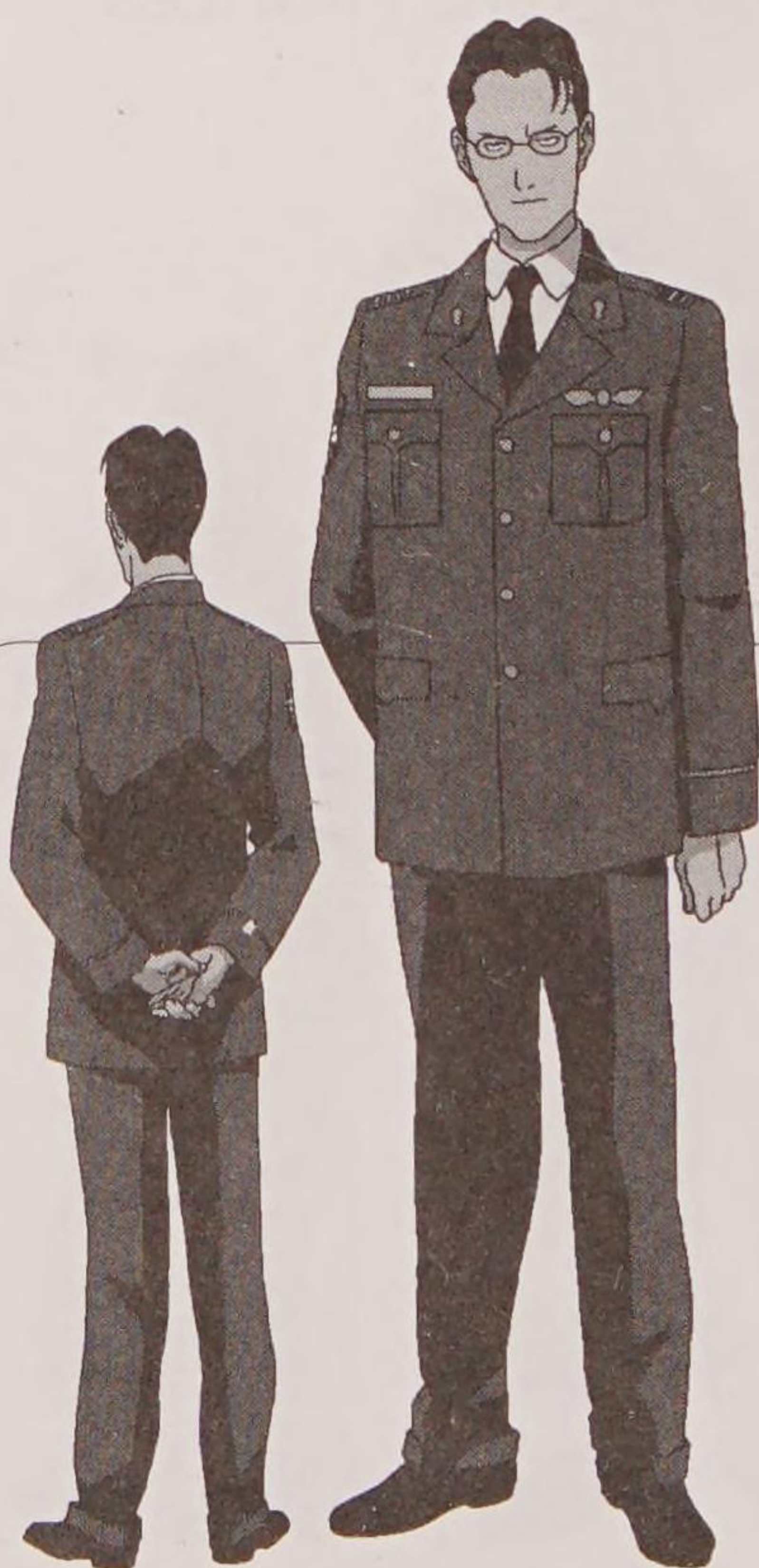
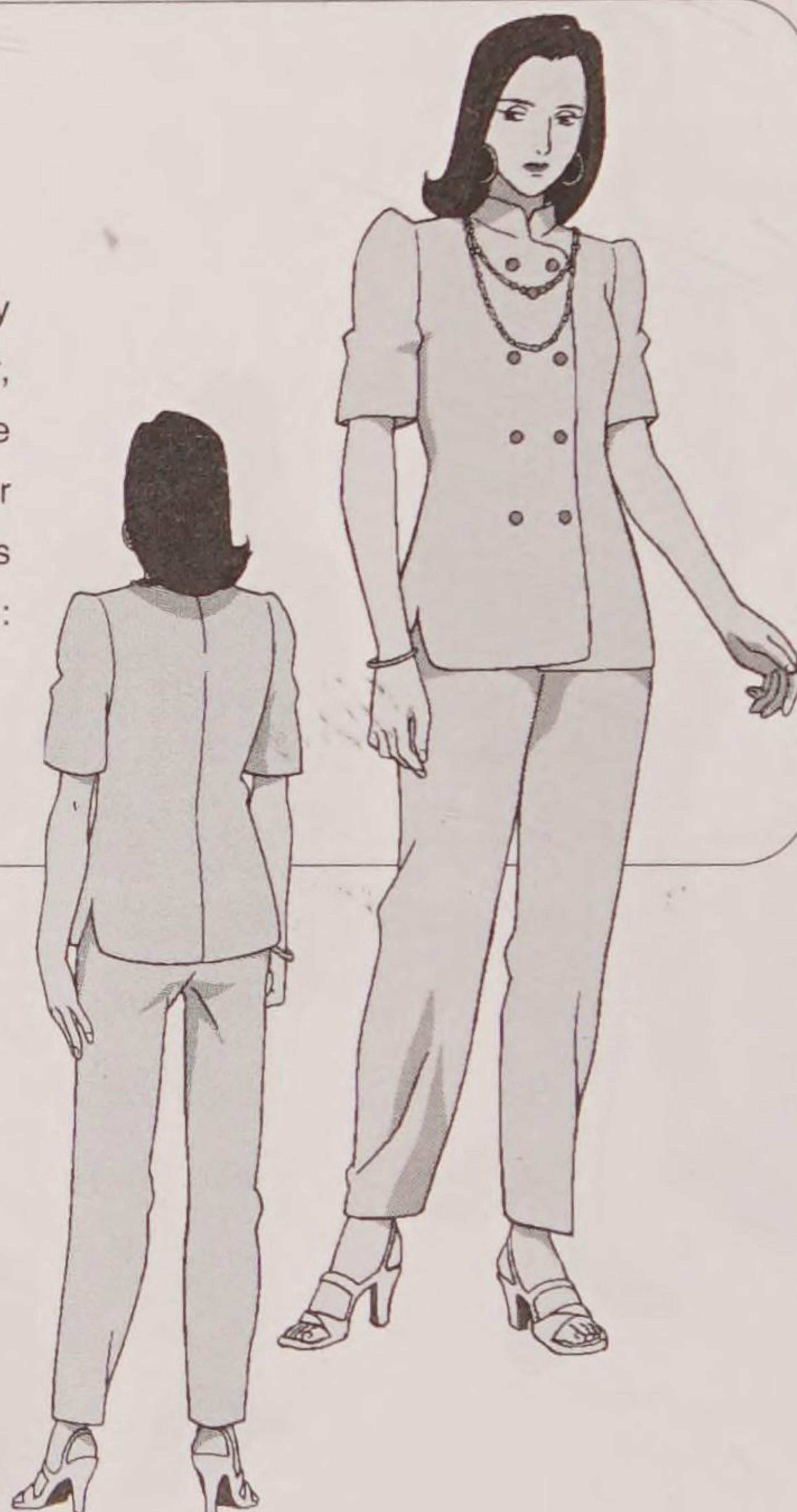


Isshiki Makoto

An inspector sent to TERRA from the Earth Federation. After this, he becomes Commander. He is a nasty character and does things like exploiting Nanamori's feelings for Itsuki to get information. Isshiki, Itsuki and Helena all lived in the Bahbem estate when they were young.

Kamina Maya

A single mother who raised Ayato by herself. She is actually the Mulian leader, and gives orders to Kuki and Miwa from the MU Tokyo Government-General. Even after learning her blood is blue, Ayato has obstinately tried to contact her. Age: Unknown.



Kuki Masayoshi

Commander of the MU Tokyo Government-General. His rank is colonel. Before the MU appeared, he was an officer in the Defense Force. He gives orders to the Metropolitan Defense Army according to Maya's command. It is believed he has been transformed into a Mulian. He is cautious and cunning.



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RAHXEPHON Volume 4

Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONES / Yutaka Izubuchi / RahXephon Project

First Movement: Return to the Maze

1

It had been a long time since we last went to Shibuya together. We walked, jostled every step of the way by the crowd.

"Come on! This way!" Asahina called out to Mamoru and me as we were about to head out into Center-Gai.

"If you wanna go to Tokyo Hands, we should go this way!"

"I said we were going to 109 today, remember?" Asahina poked Mamoru's head.

"Oh, right. That's right. Let's go, Ayato."

We were just tagging along with Asahina on her shopping trip. I wondered why I was dragged along. I'm not too into fashion and clothes; I just wore whatever my mom bought for me.

Even at 109, we pushed our way through crowds from store to store. Asahina browsed, not looking for anything in particular.

"Oh, this is nice." Mamoru called her over to look at a skimpy swimsuit. "Get this one."

"I'm not here to buy a swimsuit."

"Why not? It's summer, so you should buy a new swimsuit. Ayato, you'd like to see her in it, too, huh? Hiroko, if you buy this new swimsuit, we can all go to Toshimaen amusement park!"

Don't drag me into it.

"You're gonna annoy Ayato! Besides...."

Asahina lowered her voice and whispered something in Mamoru's ear. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I could tell from her gestures. She was rubbing her stomach, which meant she was talking about my birthmark. Well, fine. I looked away and saw a star.

A shockingly yellow star on a swimsuit. A yellow star.... I felt like I'd seen it before somewhere. On someone's clothes, wasn't it? But whose?

"Hey, Kamina!" Mamoru said, clapping a hand on my back. "You're staring at that swimsuit hard enough to burn a hole in it. Skimpy, ain't it?"

"N-no."

I shook my head, flustered. I hadn't been staring at the swimsuit. But Mamoru stroked the starred swimsuit and narrowed his eyes.

"S'not my place to judge your tastes. I can't even tell if you have any fashion sense or not. What's up with this giant star? It's like that ... what was it?"

Mamoru was trying to remember. So, he'd seen it, too.

"On someone's clothes?"

"Yeah. You know it, too? What was it? I got it! It was *Oba-Q*! There was a yellow star on Doronpa's clothes!"

"*Oba-Q*? That's old! Why do you know about it?"

"My dad really liked the *Oba-Q* manga."

I sighed as the two of them went on good-naturedly ribbing each other about pointless matters. It wasn't from a manga. I wasn't sure, but I thought it was something I'd actually seen. I tried as hard as I could to remember, and thought I'd come up with something. I felt like I could smell the sea air. It must have been on some beach that I saw it. But

where?

Just when I'd remembered that much, Mamoru slapped me on my back.

"Let's get some ice cream and go home."

The memory that had teased me for a moment vanished like foam on a wave. It was gone. What could it have been? I hadn't been to the sea in years, so why had I smelled the ocean air?

We went to Center-Gai for ice cream and ate it on the sidewalk.

"It's *so* hot!" Mamoru whined.

"It's always hot in August. You were complaining yesterday, too," I said.

"But it's *so* hot!" he repeated.

"It gets hotter the closer you get to me. Go over there."

"You don't have to be so cold," Mamoru said, *sotto voce*, and snuggled up to me.

"Cut it out. You're all sweaty. Don't hug me."

"You say no, but I know you like it."

"We're both guys. That's sick."

"Jealous? I know you are, Hiroko."

"Yeah, right." Hiroko gave Mamoru a condescending look, then stood up.

"Are you going home?" Mamoru looked up unhappily.

"Hey, are you going to see Quon?" Asahina said as if she'd just remembered it.

Who was Quon?

Quon? Quon.... Oh, right. She was unconscious after a traffic accident. Poor thing. She was such a sweet girl, too. Everyone had been

shocked to hear she'd been in an accident. Afterwards, there had been a lot of talk about it. Why hadn't I been able to remember that?

"All right."

I stood up, but Mamoru remained seated.

"What's wrong?"

"There's something I don't like. Seems weird to just go visit her out of the blue."

"What's wrong with it? I'm sure Quon would like it."

"She won't be up."

"We can at least go see her."

"I hate the smell of hospitals."

"I see. Well, I'll go with Kamina, then," Asahina said, and hooked her arm through mine.

Hey, that's a bit much....

"Since you seem to have taken root there, you might as well stay forever."

"Fine, I'll go. I guess I should."

Mamoru stood up, but looked annoyed.

The hospital where Quon was staying was just one bus ride away from Shibuya, right beside Setagaya Park.

It wasn't just Mamoru; I had never liked the smell of hospitals, either. The smell of antiseptic and medicine, mixed in with another scent. I guess you could call it the smell of death or disease or something like that. And in the room where Quon was staying there was yet another smell.

"What's that?" Mamoru wrinkled his nose.

"I guess the fruit people brought as gifts went bad."

That was it. It was the heavy smell of fermented fruit.

"Quon. Have you been doing well?"

Asahina spoke softly. There were various life support systems placed around the single bed in the room, with tubes leading from them into Quon's body.

Kisaragi Quon. When was it that she'd played violin on the roof? I'm pretty sure it was "The Polovtsian Dance." She'd always been a little spacy and tended to say things like "La la." And now she was stuck in a bed. It was hard to believe, that someone, who had just until recently been happy and full of laughter, was now lying there expressionless. I was looking at her, but it hadn't really hit me yet.

"Look, it's the lilies you like so much," Asahina said, showing them to her.

"She can't even see them," Mamoru said bluntly. "She's unconscious so she won't even know you've brought them."

"Why are you acting like this, Mamoru?" Asahina turned around angrily.

"Sometimes people are unconscious, but their soul is floating around watching everything that happens nearby. I read it in a magazine article."

"Oh, really? Hey! Quon!" Mamoru called up at the ceiling. "If you don't take your finals, you'll be held back a year!"

"Jerk!" Asahina hit Mamoru on the head.

"Oww!"

"Cut it out, both of you." Someone had to break them up. "We didn't come here to make fun of Quon. We're here to pay her a visit."

They turned to look at me, afraid I'd gotten angry.

"I'll go get some water. Asahina, can you take care of getting the flowers in a bunch?" I said, grabbed a vase from near the bed, and headed out into the hallway. I wondered where the bathrooms were. I looked around, but didn't see anything promising. There was no one around to ask directions. Well, there had to be one somewhere on this floor. I walked around holding the vase.

I stared at it while I walked. The bottom was dry and it even had a fine layer of dust on it. It looked like it hadn't been used for a while. I guess no one had come to see her. Quon was popular in school, so it was hard to imagine that was true. How long had she been in here, anyway?

I halted in my tracks, surprised.

I didn't know. I couldn't remember at all how long she had been in the hospital. How was that possible? I remembered my classmates had been in an uproar when we heard she had been in the accident, but I couldn't remember when she had been hospitalized. It could have been yesterday or it could have been over a month ago.

Just then, shades of yellow began to color the edge of my field of vision.

Looking up, I saw a girl dressed in yellow begin to fade away. *It's her.* I'd seen her before somewhere.

"Hey, wait!" I called out before I realized it.

I turned the corner of the hallway, but she was nowhere in sight. I looked around to see if she could have gone somewhere else. As I turned back toward the direction from which I'd come, I saw her standing there.

"Hey, you!" I called out loudly, but she must not have heard, and turned down another corner. I followed after her quickly. I rounded a cor-



ner and nearly ran straight into Asahina.

"Ah! You startled me!"

"Did you see a girl in yellow come by here just now?"

"What?"

Asahina looked down the hallway she'd just traversed. We both looked, but there was no one there.

"I must have been seeing things...."

"Are you all right? You look tired," she said, and suddenly I did feel tired. Lost memories, the girl in yellow. They whirled around my mind.

"Sit down a minute."

At her suggestion, I sat on a nearby bench.

"What's wrong? You said you were just going for water, so after a while I got worried and came looking for you, and I find you running through the hallway, pale as a ghost."

I shook my head. "I'm fine."

"Really?" Asahina looked a little sad.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

"When was it that Quon was hospitalized?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten! It was two weeks ago Friday."

Now that she mentioned it, the memory came together clearly, as if the last piece of the puzzle had been found. That's right. Our first period math teacher hadn't shown up and the class was getting wild, until a noticeably pale homeroom teacher had run in to say Quon Kisaragi had been in an accident. Now I remembered. How could I have forgotten that? But if it had been two weeks ago, why was the vase empty? Had no one

come to see her before today?

"Kamina....," Asahina said and looked worriedly at my face.

"Asahina.... Today's ... been kinda weird. I couldn't even remember when Quon was hospitalized.... I had no recollection of it at all until you told me."

Asahina put her hand to her mouth and her eyes widened.

"Don't make that face at me." I could only force a weak smile. "I don't think I'm going crazy. It's probably...."

"No." She shook her head. "I wonder about myself, too, for the same kinds of things."

"What?"

"I've been meaning to ask you lately. Do you remember when we were in middle school?"

"I remember. Of course I do."

"Oh.... See, I can only remember it in fragments. Like, the winter term when I'd just registered for classes and the shrieking noises of the steam, or how Maeda in math was always worried about his hair, or any one of a million little details that don't matter. But when I really try to remember, they just slip out of my grasp....," she said, and smiled at me. It looked playful, but she was serious.

"What are you doing?!"

I turned in the direction of the loud voice and saw an angry-looking Mamoru standing at the end of the hall. He walked toward us in long strides.

"Jeez, Ayato goes out and doesn't come back, then Hiroko does the same, and I'm in there thinkin' Hiroko fell into the same abyss that stopped Ayato from comin' back, and here I see you two were just tryin'

to get away from me."

"It's not like that."

"Then what's it like?"

"Sorry. I wasn't feeling well." I tried to stand up, but my legs felt weak and fell out from under me. I ended up plunking back onto the bench.

"Hey, you all right?"

Even Mamoru was worried about me. I hadn't done it on purpose. It was because I had looked out the window as I stood up. Through the window I could see another wing of the hospital. That girl was standing in the second floor hallway there. She was smiling at me in her yellow dress. When I saw that, I lost all strength in my body.

She knew. She knew what the meaning of these strange circumstances was.

Fragment 1: Souichi Yagumo

It was not unexpected, but the Rahxephon ignored all our attacks and entered Tokyo Jupiter. Now we had to discuss our next course of action.

"I understand it was TERRA Tactics Command who created the B-3 manual."

It was Commander Isshiki who got the ball rolling. How commanding of him, jumping right in to play the blame game.

"Isn't it because there was a flaw in the manual that this event occurred?"

"It means the Rahxephon's capabilities exceed the manual. Also,

to repeat what was said earlier, the B-3 manual received formal approval from the United Nations."

This was no time to be bickering about whose fault it was, but he was not the sort of person who would be able to go on without placing blame on someone else.

"It's also possible that there is a problem with the Foundation, since scrambling stopped the Vermillion's launch."

"That is not possible."

Miss Helena turned to fix her cold eyes on me.

"We merely requested the Vermillion's launch be postponed, because it was being repaired, due to a malfunction discovered during yesterday's practice run."

Requested? If you can't take responsibility for the pilot's life, then you had no choice but to stop it.

"The final adjustments for the on-board TDD unit have not been completed. There are no plans at this time to send it on a test run through the Absolute Barrier."

The TDD unit was a system proven in Operation Overload. So why didn't they want to let the Vermillion go chase after the Rahxephon? I left a space in the conversation while I pondered this and Commander Kunugi gave me a reproaching look and opened his mouth to speak.

"Sooner or later we will need to send it on that test run. Why shouldn't we do it now?"

At his words, Miss Helena's icy expression wavered.

"Once repairs are completed, we will send it on a test run at once. Agreed?"

"Very well." She had no choice but to agree.

The commander nodded, and then fixed his eyes on Haruka. She was sitting in her chair, looking dazed.

"So, intelligence was unable to predict this?"

Haruka seemed to have not heard the commander's words. This was bad. And we couldn't expect the inspector to step in to say anything to support her.

"Captain Shitow. Were you unable to predict these events?"

Surprised, Haruka whipped her head around. It seemed she had finally remembered where she was.

"What? Oh, no, it was completely unthinkable that Ayato Kamina would steal the Alien Artifact class 5A and run away with it."

"Unthinkable? That's a handy little word the vice-commander was also fond of using," Inspector Isshiki muttered sarcastically.

"So, do we have any suggestions from the intelligence division?"

"I suggest we send the Vermillion out as quickly as possible. It is our most important task to recover the Rahxephon, that is, the Mulian Alien Artifact class 5A and its pilot, Ayato Kamina."

Of course, when Haruka said "our" she meant TERRA and the Foundation together. It seemed Miss Helena had picked up on that.

"The Foundation will," she interjected, "cooperate on all fronts in the recovery of the Mulian Artifact class 5A."

What did it mean that she had not mentioned Ayato? Was the Foundation uninterested in him? No, that wasn't it. The greater part of the Operation Overload was about acquiring him. Then, why? Between that battle and present time, had something happened to change the Foundation's principles?

"How much longer until the repairs are complete?"

"It should take about ten days."

"That's a long time." The commander looked intently at Miss Helena as if he were trying to see through to her intentions.

"It needs some fundamental repairs."

"As a system, it is a fairly unstable weapon."

"Weren't you the ones who were strongly urging us to deploy it?"

Miss Helena's eyes shone mischievously. I had heard that Director Watari had directly requested that of Lord Bahbem.

"Understood. Souichi, send it out for recovery in ten days' time. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

They were the commander's orders, but how was I supposed to plan in such a short time? There was no way the United Nations or the Defense Force would help. The only strength we had was one Vermilion. To imagine that we were expected to duplicate the results of Operation Overload with just that. The battle plan could be summed up in one line: "Enter Tokyo Jupiter, acquire the target, and bring it back." You couldn't call those tactics, but we had to do it.

"Well, we've decided on a future course of action. But who is going to be held responsible for these events?"

Inspector Isshiki looked around at everyone with a chilling smile.

"I'm sorry to say it, but I must report this incident to the United Nations. Ayato Kamina has stolen the UN's greatest secret weapon, and taken it to Tokyo Jupiter. Ayato Kamina has committed treason, and whoever allowed that to happen cannot go unpunished."

The inspector fixed a meaningful gaze on the commander. *I see.* Pointing out the flaws in the B-3 was just to lead up to this moment. He'd soon do himself justice. But the commander did not go for it.

"Then inform the inspectors. I resign myself to any punishment they should see fit."

"Heh, then you've said your prayers?"

"On the condition that it wait until this incident is resolved. At present, I believe the more appropriate decision is for me to complete my duties."

"I see. Very well. But, make sure you do not forget your head is only being held on by a piece of skin. It will roll depending on the success or failure of this incident."

The inspector gave a cold smile, but was worried. For the commander's sake as well, this mission had to go perfectly.

Fragment 2: Haruka Shitow

By the time I arrived home, dead tired, it was nearly dawn. Because my input as intelligence officer was needed, I had been staying overnight at the command center for over a week. Because I had been so busy, I'd hardly even noticed he wasn't around.

As soon as I stepped into the foyer of the main building, I looked at the stairs. It looked like he would be running down to welcome me home any minute. But that was only a fantasy. I knew that, but even so, I went up the stairs in pursuit of it. I stood in front of his room.

I opened the sliding door and caught a whiff of his scent. Smelling it, I felt I would collapse right there. His scent. Even though he

was gone, it was there, as strong as ever, surrounding me.

I sighed and a sob escaped with it. How many times would I have to lose him? How many times would I have to watch him slip through my fingers? But this time was different. This time I had let him go. Without crying and throwing myself at his feet, or begging him not to, I had let him go. I knew feeling sorry about it wouldn't get me anything, but regret pierced my heart like a needle.

Even though I had known it would end like this, why had I let him do it?

Because I knew how determined he was to do this? That was only my excuse. Even knowing that, it was my duty as captain of the intelligence division to keep him from going, and it was my duty as Haruka Shitow to keep him here. If I hadn't let him go, he would have looked at me, his eyes full of rejection. Even so, I should have stopped him....

No. This was something he needed to do. He had to go to Tokyo, to see with his own eyes what it was really like, and experience how it was different from the outside. If he thought there was no place for him here, he had to go to Tokyo to look for it. No matter what the result, it was a decision he needed to make for himself.

That was why I let him go.

I understood all that, but could not stop the tears that rolled down my cheeks.

I stood, holding myself there, where his scent was so redolent I could cut it with a knife.

I thought I heard a chuckle. When I looked up, I saw a painting he was working on hanging on an easel. Had the girl in the painting

laughed? It couldn't be. There was only silence between me and the painting at which I looked. It was a picture of a girl in a yellow dress standing on a precipice looking out toward the sea. He had gone without finishing it. That girl and I had both been abandoned when he left. I tried to laugh at the metaphor, but I could not draw my lips into a smile, and they just shook.

I looked at his desk and saw he had set his mobile phone and watch there. It was my old TERRA watch. Left behind by its owner, it showed the time both here and in Tokyo, the hours between us ticking away cruelly. For every six seconds that passed here, one passed in Tokyo. With each passing second, our two times became farther away.

"Ayato...."

Reflexively, I squeezed the watch. It no longer held his warmth. It only felt like cold metal. The metal burned from my hot tears hitting it. They soaked the watch in an endless stream. I held onto the watch and cried.

I turned and saw my uncle standing behind me.

"Uncle...."

I hurried to wipe my tears away, but my uncle shook his head to stop me.

"If you want to cry, don't dry your tears."

At his words, I felt more tears well up.

"Everybody cries sometimes. You should cry when you need to. Cry as hard as you need to."

"Uncle...."

Without thinking about it, I buried my face in his shirt and was crying loudly. I sobbed without pretension or finesse. My uncle patted my

back gently and talked to me.

"I wonder what became of the old woodcutter who sent Princess Kaguya to the moon. I wonder if he would have gone, if he could have. Not to bring her back. To see how she was getting along on the moon."

Since my uncle had let Maya go, more time had passed than he had spent raising her. During that time, my uncle had only wished for her happiness. Just as the old woodcutter had been unable to go to the moon, my uncle had been unable to go to Tokyo. But I, on the other hand....

"Uncle ... I had something I needed to do."

"Really? Do what you can. It's never too late to cry."

"Yeah. Hey, next time I need to cry, can I cry in front of you?"

"Of course. You should cry until your tears dry up."

"Thanks."

I wiped my tears away and stood up.

Fragment 3: Elvy Hadhiyat

I was walking down the road to take the Vermillion out for a ride, when I found Shitow standing outside the hangar.

"You're going to bring him back, aren't you?"

"No. My orders are only to bring back the Rahxephon and to secure Quon."

"And what about him?"

"The life of the pilot is of no consequence. I have clearance to shoot him if he resists."

As if she hadn't thought the orders would be that harsh, Shitow was at a loss for words for a moment.

"Who?... Did Commander Kunugi give those orders?"

"It was the Inspector ... Isshiki or somethin'. He assumed the rank of director due to the current state of affairs, he said."

"How very like him."

"Orders are orders, but I guess you're not too pleased."

"I haven't said anything."

"You're standing with your insulated jacket and a determined look in your eyes. Anyone could tell."

"Take me with you."

"The Vermillion only has one seat."

"There's enough space in the architecture. That's why I brought my jacket."

"You know what would happen, don't you? I'd be demoted. You'd be doing time in the brig."

"I know."

That was it. Normally, she'd have something to say in her dry tone, like, "Who do you think it is who looks after you when you're drunk?" If she made no comment, it meant she was unusually determined.

"You're going to bring Ayato Kamina back?"

"No. I'm going to see if he's happy in Tokyo."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"What if I'm trying to carry out my orders and Kamina resists?"

"If Kamina looks happy, I won't hesitate to shoot you."

She won't hesitate to shoot me, huh? If she puts it like that, I guess I've got no choice but to bring her along.

Fragment 4: Quon Kisaragi

Vague consciousness. Hopes that cannot be realized. Bleached whiter and whiter. Dream time and real time. Where am I? Eyes staring at me. This smell, this depth is familiar.

"Are you awake, sis?"

Who is it that has called me sister? There is only one in this world who can call me sister. Only Ayato Kamina. Only. Onlylylylyly. Another bug? Synapses are not firing well.

"Long time no see."

Yes. How many decades had it been since last I saw you? You've grown up since last I saw you. You've already become a performer.

"That's true. It was a mistake that we appeared there."

A mistake. An error. A fault. A slip. No matter how many layers of words I piled onto it, there is no stopping what happened.

"Do you remember? The world of MU?"

Fragmented memory. Sound, song, world, views of space behind closed doors, memories from when people were people, one possibility ruined.

"I remember. Clearly. Perhaps those memories will fill the space between us, but it may also have been those memories that split us apart in the mistaken time."

It may be. It May bee. My soul shall not be awakened by the Naacal brethren. Nor shall yours be. Yet the sole that became twain shall not merge again. Mistaken. Mistaken.

"Good night. When you awaken, I am sure you too will understand what I have done. For what reason I created this world. I will

remember that."

That may be. The dreams of those who slumber may, with their clear, clear colors, call forth the memories sealed within the temple of my soul. Perhaps the color of blood, it may raise a call of hatred. It may be. Maya's finger touches my lips. Her cold finger traces a line down my throat, my chest, and strokes my mark.

Maya, Maya, you should have one, too. The exact same thing should be on your stomach, too. For you are a performer as well. Although you are no longer Ollin.

2

After classes let out the next day, I went to the clubroom. It smelled of coffee, as always.

"Hey, Kamina. I've got some Colombian Supremo today."

I tried a sip, but it wasn't as good as usual. There was no aroma or body. It was just bitter hot water. But why did I think that? Up until yesterday, I'd thought this was the best taste in the world.

"Did you know Kilimanjaro tastes really good if you roast it until the acidity goes away?"

"No, I didn't know. Where'd you hear that?"

Where did I hear it?

"By the way, have you talked to your mom about art school?"

"That's not something I can just casually work into a conversation with my mother."

"Then where does she want you to go? Medical school?"

"She wants me to go into, like, math or science."

"Like? I really hate that way of speaking," Kuma said and scratched his head.

Huh? That's weird. I felt like I'd had this conversation before.

"Haven't we talked about this before? That I should draw a picture when I don't know what to do. You said pictures are honest."

"Did I? Oh dear. I'm getting forgetful. Must be getting old."

Kuma laughed and stroked his thinning hair.

"Anyway, you have to decide yourself what to do with your future."

I have to decide myself.... My future. It was all too vague and I didn't know.

I stayed a while longer, joking around with Kuma and sketching, before I left the clubroom. Walking down the hall, I passed by the music room. I don't know why I do it, but every time I pass by there, I look inside. There was no one there.

The red and black curtains flapped heavily in the wind. The light that streamed in from the setting sun cast a red glow on the shining black piano. Watching this scene, I felt a faint memory tease my subconscious. What was it?

Even if something had happened, I couldn't remember it, so it didn't matter. I left my forgotten memories there and headed home.

I arrived home and was killing time in my bedroom when I heard the chime in the entranceway sound. I could tell from the sound it was my mother. I unhooked the door chain, and there she was, sure enough.

"I'm home."

It looked like she'd stopped at the late-night supermarket for some things. The bag looked heavy.

"Ready for dinner?"

"Not yet. I had some bread when I got home."

"Well, I'll make it now," she said and put an apron right over her work clothes. The smell of her cooking soon came from the kitchen.

"What are you making?"

"That Chinese-style fried chicken you like, and tofu with red beans."

Lately, mom had been cooking my favorite foods a lot. It was like she'd suddenly become nice.

"Hey, how long's it been since you last cooked a proper meal?" I asked.

"Is that sarcasm?"

"No, I was just thinking it had been a while," I said quickly.

"Has it? I guess so. I hadn't really noticed it had been so long."

"Well, it doesn't matter. It's always good when you make it."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she said, teasing me.

My mom was in a really good mood. The phone rang.

"I'll get it," I called out to my mother.

The phone call was from Asahina.

"What?"

"What are you mad about?"

I hadn't meant to sound angry, but since my conversation with mother had been going unusually well, there might have been knives in my voice.

"Nothing. Did you want something?"

"It's nothing big. I could have asked at school, but didn't have a chance. Um, so we went to see Quon yesterday, and were talking about

how we couldn't really remember the past?"

Now that she mentioned it, we had. But then Mamoru had come, and we didn't go any farther.

"Hey, when we were in middle school, did anything happen in the music room?"

Those words recalled a rough feeling in my ears. The music room.... The piano, lit by the setting sun. The black of the curtains that appeared brown in the light. The song someone was playing. I couldn't remember the song's name or tune, but I remembered the feeling it left behind. And the person sitting at the piano. Who was it?

It was....

Fragment 5: Haruka Shitow

It was cold. Even with my insulated jacket zipped up, it was very cold. Because I was back here, Elvy wouldn't try any risky maneuvers, but the illegal service hatch was by no means air-tight, and I felt the cold outside air directly.

"You still alive?"

I heard Elvy's voice through the wireless I'd taken back with me.

"I'm alive. But your new car doesn't ride well."

"Considering it's got no passenger space, you're complaining a lot."

If they found out someone besides the pilot was aboard, against orders and against regulations, she'd be suspended or demoted. Even so, Elvy had let me on. I was thankful for her friendship.

"Hey."

"What?"

"Are you really all right with not bringing Kamina back?"

Cut it out. Don't say things that'll make me change my mind.

"Yeah. If he's happy in Tokyo, that's enough."

"But wasn't Operation Overload designed to get him out of Tokyo?"

"Yeah, but ... you know that behind TERRA and the UN was the Bahbem Foundation, right? That mission happened according to the Foundation's design."

"Was that it? What was the Foundation plotting, taking him out of Tokyo?"

"Dunno. I have no idea."

There was no other way to respond. No one knew what the Bahbem Foundation's, what Lord Bahbem's plans were.

"And so now, he's ordered the Rahxephon be brought back. Do you think the Foundation's plans are involved in that, too?"

"Most likely. It was an order from Inspector Isshiki, right? He's with the Foundation."

"Is he?"

Along with surprise, her voice sounded like she understood everything in that moment.

"And so, he won't be drawn into the grown-ups' schemes anymore. He'll walk his own path."

"Is that what you believe?"

She was as blunt as ever. I didn't even know what I believed. *If he's happy, that's enough. Or will I want to drag him back, no matter what?*

"Yeah....," I muttered.

"If I must say it, I just want to see him smiling one last time...."

There was no reply over the wireless for a while. After a long silence, I finally heard Elvy's voice.

"That must be the closest to your true feelings I've ever heard you say."

She was probably right. If he were to leave my side forever, I'd just want to see him smile one last time.

"Elvy."

"What?"

"Thanks."

Over the wireless, I could hear a puff of air, like she'd just laughed.

"All right, I'm gonna start up the TDD unit pretty soon. It'll get a bit tight back there."

"I'm ready."

I curled myself up as tightly as I could into a fetal position.

The Piercer Sequence began. I couldn't see it from where I was, but the TDD unit, which looked like two wings folded on the Vermillion's back were opening. They made a sound I had never heard before. It was like metal scraping metal repeatedly. Or like a woman's scream.

There was a series of dull impacts, and the sound changed slightly. It probably meant the Piercer Sequence had entered phase two. The probability resonators were opening.

There was another impact.

The Vermillion was entering Tokyo Jupiter. The Feynman Diagram that composed Tokyo Jupiter and the probability resonators

rubbed together, letting us through. Yomoda said it before, but it's like wearing girls' clothes to sneak into the girls' dormitory.

But even so ... it was....

I had come prepared, but going in without a safety suit was risky, even reckless. I was losing consciousness....

I woke up to the sound of Elvy's voice on the wireless.

"Shitow! Shitow!"

"...I'm all right."

My head hurt. I shook my head from side to side, hoping it would wake me up, but I only became dizzy.

"Good. I thought you'd died."

Elvy gave a sigh of relief.

"Sorry for making you worry."

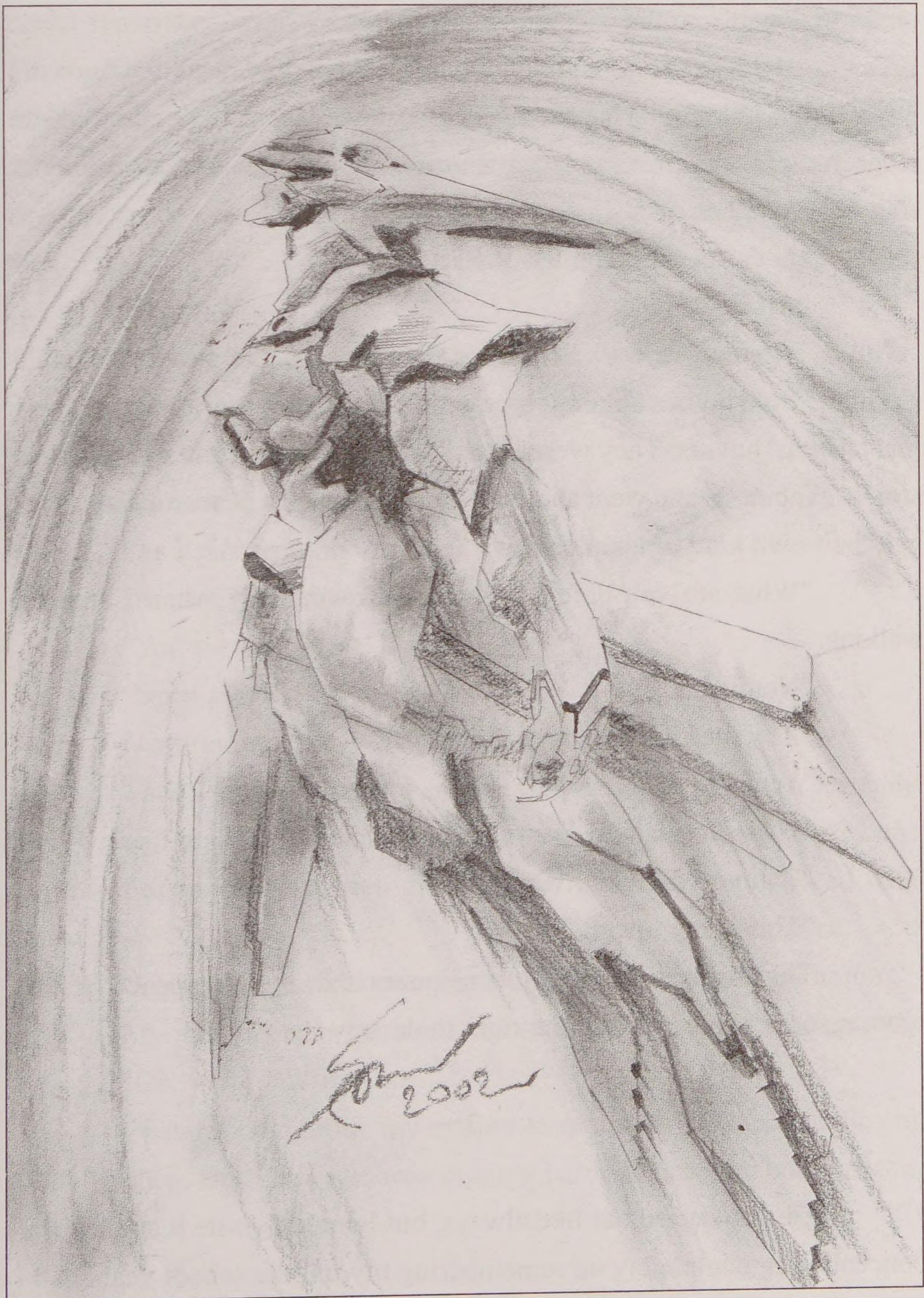
"It's all right. The Vermillion's landed. You can come out."

We were in Tokyo. In the city where I grew up. The town where time had stopped.

As I released the lock and opened the hatch, a burst of hot air rushed in. Even though it was night, the air was still warm. Even though it was May in Niraikanai, it was still August of the previous year in Tokyo. Only one month had passed since I'd last come inside. Throwing open the hatch, I smelled a thick pungent smell.

Where were we? I looked around where we had landed. Peering between the trees, it looked like we were near Tama Hills. The Vermillion was lying on its side between some trees. The environmental camouflage worked with the Chameleon Camouflage System to hide it.

"Can you really just leave it here?" I called to Elvy as she was



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jumping down from the cockpit.

"Here it's at least a little bit hidden. We just pray no one finds it."

No kidding. What we needed now was luck. Elvy checked the magazine on her pistol, replaced it in her shoulder holster, then looked slowly around her.

"Let's get off this hill, for starters."

"All right."

Together we walked down a path through the grove. We could see lights from houses shining through the trees. They were perfectly normal citizens' houses. They were houses belonging to people who enjoyed simple happiness, and went about their daily lives in a peaceful way. They had their own kind of happiness....

"What are you doing?" Elvy asked worriedly when I stopped walking.

"Nothing...."

"Any idea where you're going?"

"Yeah."

Where else would Ayato go, but his home?

"Can you find your way?"

"This is my town...."

This is my town. My town, ignorant of its false peace. If that ignorance was bliss, we had the right to destroy it.

3

Dinner started out like always, but I couldn't taste it at all. I was concentrating completely on remembering my middle school years. All I

could remember were fragmented pieces, just like Asahina had said. Playing around sticking our butts in the steam, friends' laughter, the sound of chalk scraping across the blackboard, the dusty stuffed creatures in the cabinets in the science room, the smell of the schoolhouse on rainy days, the dust that swirled around the schoolyard on clear days. Just things like that.

"Hey."

I held my chopsticks still and asked my mother as normally as possible.

"What was I like in middle school?"

"In middle school?"

For a moment, my mother's eyes clouded.

"From a mother's perspective."

"You were a normal boy."

"Normal how?"

"Just normal."

Then I was struck by a sudden impression. I had been reaching for it with all my might, but it slipped away every time. Now, the very tips of those fingers that had been grasping for memories were soaked with them.

"I guess. Hey, did I ever bring any girls from my class home?"

My mother's eyes became cold, so cold it made my flesh crawl.

"Oh, we're out of sauce."

Changing the topic, my mother took the empty sauce bottle out to the kitchen. But I saw she was digging her nails into the bottle as she squeezed it.

Dinner ended awkwardly, and I escaped to my room. I lay down on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. Why had my mother's eyes gone so cold? I continued my pursuit of fragments of memories. It was an image of a girl, I don't know who, sitting in my living room. I didn't know why she was there, or if she was happy or nervous. It's a faint image, but she's sitting on the sofa.

Who was she?

Why did it make my mom so angry?

As I asked myself questions I could not answer, lounging on my bed, I happened to see the picture on the easel in the corner of my room.

Huh?

Had it always been like that? The scene was the same: a girl standing on a precipice, her back to the viewer, but hadn't I finished more of it? And I thought I'd made the sky a clear blue, not this uneasy shade. Maybe I just dreamed I had made it that color, and thought I had in reality, too.

Well, it doesn't matter.

I looked away from the painting and returned to my thoughts. Given her glacial expression, my mother had to know what had happened in this house. I had forgotten, but my mother remembered.

"Mom ... tell me the truth."

I hadn't been asking anyone, but a voice responded.

"You want me to tell you?"

I looked up, surprised, and saw Mishima standing beside my bed.

"Mishima?"

"Do you want to know? You do, don't you?"

Mishima smiled cruelly and pointed at my window.

I mustn't look. Once I looked, I'd never be able to turn away from reality. As aware of that as I was, I slowly turned my head toward the window ... and there I saw it.

Outside my window was a strange room. It looked like a military command room, but the design was weird. It was warped. It wasn't the kind of place a person could feel comfortable. There were two people inside, with their backs to us. One man and one woman. The man noticed something and looked away. The name Masayoshi Kuki appeared in my mind, as if hit by spotlights. Why did I know his name? The woman looked away, too. She was Shinobu Miwa. The names came to me naturally. Why?

When I looked where they were looking, and saw what they saw, I gasped.

"Mom...."

It was without a doubt my mother who was standing there. She was wearing some bizarre tribal clothing, but it was definitely my mother.

"What's happening?"

It was a cold voice, one I had never heard at home.

"Quon Kisaragi, who was riding with him, is not doing well because she has been too long without her Life Module."

My mother brusquely cut off Kuki's words.

"I know the cause. Just tell me what you plan to do about it."

"But...."

"But?"

My mother's cold eyes looked at him questioningly.

"Kuki, you've become conceited to dare to talk back to me, the representative of Tokyo Government-General."

"I was certainly not talking back. I only wish to serve you, Lady Maya."

Kuki bowed his head and made a humble apology. My mother calmed at being called "Lady Maya." Inside my mind, I heard a voice I had never heard, but was somehow familiar.

"The group who betrayed the rest of the world is still in Tokyo. They say they're swaggering about the Tokyo Government General like they own the place."

Betrayed the world....

Tokyo Government General....

Miss Haruka....

Suddenly, the floor shook like a great weight had hit it.

No.

It was the impact of the memories that came rushing back like a muddy stream. I remembered everything that had begun on my birthday last year. Leaving Tokyo, Niraikanai, TERRA, the lie called Tokyo Jupiter, people I'd met, Megumi, Yagumo, Commander Kunugi, Quon, Doctor Itsuki, and Miss Haruka. I remembered it all clearly. And I remembered why I'd come back to Tokyo.

I had come back to find the truth.

That truth was before me. My mother was praying in a strange language, as the representative of MU, as the representative of the Tokyo Government-General.

"This is the truth."

It was enough to make me laugh. My mother had formed Tokyo

Jupiter, and I was her son.... And my life in Tokyo was made of artificial memories.... They were all lies. The memories I'd thought were my own, that I'd thought I would retain, even if everything else was taken from me, they were artificial.

"So that's it!"

I hurled my chair at the window as hard as I could. The glass broke with a terrific sound, and I saw the night sky. I saw the false window. I had come to be able to see what I could not before. I saw faint, doll-like Dolems spread through the sky like paint in water. They were floating all over. That was the real Tokyo sky.

Fragment 6: Elvy Hadhiyat

There were countless strange, doll-like Dolems hanging in the night sky. Lit from the bottom by the streetlights, they looked even more disturbing. Even so, not a single person riding the train or waiting on the platform seemed to take any notice of them.

"Why doesn't anyone notice the Dolems?"

"They weren't there before."

Shitow was gazing with heavy emotion at a couple, their bodies swaying rhythmically together on the train.

"It's mind-control."

But why? Why did they need mind-control?

The train sped through the dark night, carrying us and our doubts. I saw the side of Shitow's face reflected in the window. She looked harsh, but sad.

"Hey, can I ask you something? Why are you so concerned with

Kamina?"

Shitow's expression looked like she was asking herself the same thing, but she quickly covered it.

"He's important...", she said and looked back out at the city. *Important, huh? That might be the strongest confession she's ever made.*

4

My face stared back at me in the bathroom mirror. The face I thought was mine. But it might not have been. How could I prove the mirror reflected reality? It was really my face alone, a false face, a different face. What if everyone knew and were just lying to me? That shouldn't have been possible, but it could happen in Tokyo.

It was a city of lies.

I was made of lies, before I left Tokyo.

Then who was I? If my memories were not my own, who was I? What did I really look like? Was I human, or was I Mulian? What is the truth? Reality. Where is reality in this city made of lies? I can't tell if it is true or false. If there is one grain of truth in this city, it is my body. My body does not lie. If I bite my lips, I feel pain. Only this pain is real.

I've read in magazines about girls who were cutters. They don't cut themselves to commit suicide. They did it to feel they were alive. I hadn't understood when I read it. There were plenty of ways besides cutting yourself to feel you were alive, I had thought. Now I knew. Only this pain could let you truly feel you were alive. Only this pain....

I had bitten myself very hard, and my mouth filled with the metallic taste of blood.

I put my finger to my lips and it came away covered with thin, red blood. Red. Red. But it might not really have been red, but blue. How could I be sure it wasn't blue? I couldn't trust anything I saw.

I looked up and saw my mother reflected in the mirror.

No, the woman I called mother.

Who are you? Are you my mother? My real mother?

As if she could hear the voice in my mind, she smiled faintly, then bit her lip, just as I had, and touched a finger to the blood. She reached around from behind and held her finger in front of me.

It was blue. A thin, blue liquid covered her finger.

Blue. Her blood is....

My blood is red.

Then who are you?

She did not answer, but gently touched her finger to my lips. I saw in the mirror that blue blood dripped from my lips. And I saw my mother standing behind me, no expression on her face. Her face was like a cold, beautiful piece of porcelain. Her mouth laughed silently.

It was more frightening than her icy expression.

I was afraid of my laughing mother.

I screamed, and ran from her. My legs became twisted up and I fell on the floor. I could not run away, and I pulled myself along the wall. My mother looked down at me coldly. Her eyes were icy to the core.

I shouted at the top of my voice.

It echoed through the false house.

Second Movement: The Bond of Blue Blood

Fragment 1: Haruka Shitow

The middle school was as quiet as you'd expect from an empty building at night. Even the courtyard, usually full of boys' and girls' voices, enjoying the bloom of youth, was still at night, lit by the eerie glow of florescent lights.

Without hesitating, I jumped over the low gates.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Elvy asked, and followed.

"What'll you do if someone finds you here?"

"Mr. Suzumoto, the guard, is taking a nap."

"How do you know that?"

"Some of my friends from class snuck into the school before. We found out the guard just sleeps at night."

That had been half my lifetime ago. But here, only two years had passed. Not nearly enough time for the guard's habits to have changed.

"This is it. My middle school."

Memories came flooding back of the happy and embarrassed feeling I had when I first tried on the school uniform. I had always worn trousers to elementary school and was not used to the skirt. That feeling of a mix of embarrassment, vulnerable anxiety, and pride in being slightly grown-up, came back in feelings, not memories.

"This place is full of memories. We walked here together, studied together...."

"So, that's it."

It seemed Elvy had figured out who I was talking about, without

really knowing.

"This way."

I led her around, creeping around the school. One of the windows in the back did not lock properly and wouldn't shut. I'd heard about this from a school troublemaker. It was just as he'd said. I landed in the empty hallway and Elvy snickered.

"This brings back memories. It was my childhood dream to sneak into the school at night. So, Japanese kids have the same dreams?"

"Yeah. Schools have a certain creepy appeal at night."

We walked past the quiet classrooms. We climbed the stairs to the second floor. There, too, the empty classrooms were silent.

"This was my classroom. 2-D. Ayato's was next-door in 3-A. His year had a lot of pupils and one class was on the same floor as the second-years...."

I felt anxious, and I knew it was making me strangely talkative. I cut myself off there and muttered to myself.

"I looked up to him. To Ayato."

Those words opened a floodgate of memories. To an adult, one year was no big difference, but to a middle school student, it was the world. Even though he was only one year above me, Ayato seemed very grown-up. I'll never forget how my heart raced in my chest, under newly-budded breasts, the first time Ayato and I passed each other in the hall. I found out he was in art club, and I tried my hand at drawing. My best friend Satomi pushed me to join the club, too, but I was ashamed of my bad drawings and did not want to draw. At least not in front of him. So I practiced alone at home, but I only found out I had no talent for drawing.

Even so, we went to the same school and breathed the same air,

and that was satisfying.

During class, I'd look onto the schoolyard and see him running in gym. When class let out, I'd find him in the hallway joking with friends. Just hearing him laugh made my cheeks hot.

"Hey, you're a second-year in Mrs. Sasaki's class, right?"

"Y-yes."

"Mr. Maeda said to give this to Mrs. Sasaki."

"All right."

Our first conversation was very short, but for the rest of the day I was walking on air. I had been that happy from such a small thing. No ... I still was. My memories opened up one after another, here in the corners of the linoleum floor of the hallway, in the crack in the classroom door.

Asahina was here, too.

"Haruka, it's awful!" Satomi said breathlessly one day. "There's a girl called Asahina in my sister's class."

"She's pretty, right? I know."

"She's after Kamina! She's liked him since elementary school!"

The aggressiveness of "she's after Kamina!" hurt me. I had pains in my chest the rest of the day. It was only natural. He was so wonderful that it would be strange if no one had liked him. I didn't want to be attracted to someone no one else liked, but I also didn't like the idea of having a rival. And if that rival was the same age as him, had known him since elementary school, and could act at ease around him, then what chance did I have?

I thought I should try to smother my feelings, but like a flower planted in the shade grows desperately toward the sun to blossom, the

more I tried to suppress my feelings, the more they reached for him.

"We should go soon. We can't bask in memories forever."

I noticed Elvy was about to walk out, and I hurried to stop her.

"Just a bit longer. Please."

"Hey!"

Without listening to her protests, I ran for the third floor. The music room was on the third floor. I quickly flipped the switch on the fluorescent lights. It was just like sixteen years ago.

"What'll you do if someone sees you?"

Even though she was shocked, Elvy did not try to stop me.

The music room was exactly as it had been then. The faded black curtains smelled of dust, but were somehow comforting. The cardboard-colored, sound-absorbing screens; the portraits of Mozart and Beethoven, whose eyes people said moved at night; the piano with its black cover ... they were all the same as ever.

Tears were welling up. It had been sixteen years, but just seeing this was enough to give me goosebumps and make my chest tight.

"You all right?"

If Elvy hadn't asked me that in a worried voice, I might have crumpled to the floor in tears on the spot. It was only because she was there that I was still able to stand.

"I'm fine.... This is it."

"This is what?"

"Where it all started. What decided everything for the next sixteen years started here."

The ends of my words trailed off in tears. Elvy put an arm

around me.

"You don't have to say anything."

I learned then how much kindness could hurt. I was glad Elvy was there and could understand without asking me questions, but my emotions, once sealed inside me, were coursing through my body, looking for a way out.

"It's all right. Will you listen?"

Fragment 2: The Music Room

One day, after I got out of class, I came here. There was no one there, and the piano was covered, like it is now. It looked lonely in the light from the setting sun. It looked like it wanted to be played. I had to quit when I started middle school, but I had taken piano lessons from preschool all the way through elementary. I liked it, and I was pretty good. When my parents told me to quit piano to concentrate on studying for exams, I had had a big fight with them. Eventually they forced me to quit. I still remember. In preschool, I got to wear colored ribbons on my fingers: red for do, yellow for re, green for mi, orange for fa, and so on. And my teacher was so nice....

Oh, sorry. That's another story. But that day...

It had been a while since I'd even sat at a piano. Did you know pianos have a special smell? I think it's the varnish or something, but it's not pungent at all. It's a nice smell. I breathed it in deeply and ran my fingers over the keys.

I played a song that was popular at the time called "Fate of Ka'tun." It was a love song, of course. The lyrics were something along

the lines of, "It doesn't matter how much time passes, because our love is eternal." I played that. And then, I saw him standing in the doorway. Ayato. No, at that time, I still called him Kamina. He asked what the song was called, just asked me totally naturally. I was so surprised. I think I must have opened my eyes wide and stared at him for a while. I was thrilled, but I was really scared, too. I felt like he could see right through me.

"It's 'Fate of Ka'tun.'"

It had taken all my courage to get those words out. And then he walked inside and came right up next to me. He was close enough that I could smell him. I couldn't control the beating of my heart. I couldn't stop my cheeks from burning red.

"That's a nice song. I didn't know the title, so I couldn't look for it at the store."

"I have a recording. I could lend it to you if you'd like."

From there we had a lively conversation about our favorite artists and TV dramas. It was a mystery to me how we talked so easily. Here I was, sitting next to the boy I liked. Shouldn't I have been tongue-tied and at a loss for words? But that day I'd talked to him completely naturally, and I was thrilled. Until she showed up.

Asahina came.

In the red light that poured in from the evening sun, the two of us sat without moving, as if we were frozen. It wasn't as if we were dating. We were young, but all three of us understood what our situation signified. I think Asahina saw how intimate we looked, and felt what there was between us. Her open eyes froze and filled with tears. She pursed her mouth and ran out.

"Asahina!"

Kamina got up to run after her, but I reflexively grabbed his hand. And then, the words I had always wanted to say, but couldn't, flowed out of my mouth.

"I like you. I've always liked you."

For a second, it felt like electricity coursed through our joined hands. Something did anyway, because then his hand grew warm and began to sweat. He looked ashamed, and blushed before speaking.

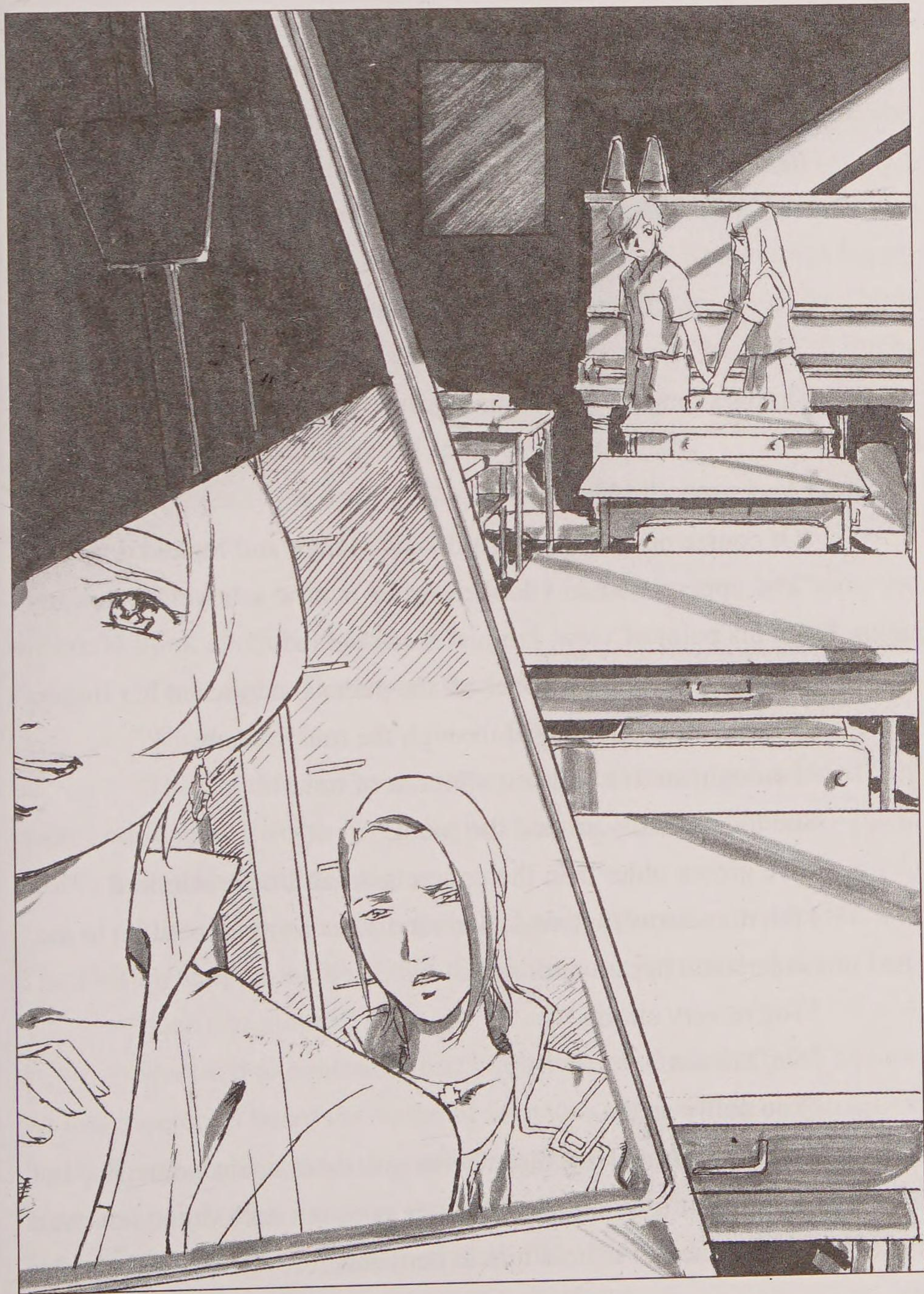
"Me, too...."

Even now, I don't know where I got the courage to say that, or how I said it with that timing. You could say it was a god-given chance.

I felt like I understood what true happiness was on that day. Even the trees on my dull walk to school seemed brighter, and I smiled whenever I thought about him. The world I had thought was meaningless before then suddenly seemed wonderful. It was like the shift from a geocentric theory to the heliocentric theory. No, the other way around. It was like the earth started revolving around us. Oh, sorry to get so mushy.

But our happiness did not last long. During winter break, my father had to move suddenly because of his job. I cried every day. But the world doesn't stop because a child cries. We were forced apart. Of course we still wrote and called each other. But what came up were complaints about our parents and our cruel fate. Looking back now, it wasn't such a big deal, but in middle school, it was crushing. All we did was whine about it.

"I'm sorry I can't give you a Christmas present. I'll be back in



Tokyo for New Year's, so we can meet then."

"All right. It's a date."

Those were the last words we exchanged on the phone.

Before New Year's, Tokyo turned into what it is now. That time never came. Until Operation Overload, that is.

Fragment 3: Elvy Hadhiyat

Shitow's long story eventually came to an end. Ah, so that's how it was.

"And you still like him?"

"Of course not." She gave a derisive laugh and looked down.

"The upperclassman I looked up to is now a boy 11 years my junior. From his point of view, I'm just some old lady."

Then, she slipped the cover off the piano and touched her fingers to the keys. The soft sound spread through the music room.

"I thought so. It's still just a bit out of tune."

She looked sadly around the room.

"I've grown older than the upperclassman I once admired...."

I felt the sorrow that made her cut off her words spreading to me. I had misunderstood her up until now.

"You're very strong."

"No, I'm not."

"You really are."

Lovers separated by distance might meet again someday, but these two, split apart by time, would never even see each other, not even if she was strong enough to hold him in her heart forever. She was not the

only one whose love was split between Tokyo and the outside. It wasn't common, but there were quite a few. Most of them gave up, and none of them joined TERRA and went inside to bring back their love, like she had.

All this made me less certain she was really all right with just seeing whether he was happy in Tokyo. No, if she saw Kamina was happy here, she'd probably withdraw. In the more than ten years she'd liked him, she had never shown a hint of it, so she probably would back off. It might be fine, but I didn't believe it.

I wouldn't allow myself to be separated again.

"You really *are* strong. How else would you have kept on liking him for so long?"

"I told you before. I'm just some old lady to him. Not someone he could think about romantically."

"Yeah, right. That's just like Grimm's fox."

"What's that?"

"The fox that saw some grapes out of his reach, and decided they were sour and not worth it. You're just fooling yourself like that. You're still in love with Kamina."

I got that out in one breath, and Shitow's eyes opened wide, like I had hit the nail on the head, but then she shook her head weakly.

"Don't be stupid...."

She tried to contradict me, but her words trailed off into silence. At that moment, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching us. On reflex, I pulled my gun out, and shut off the lights. Relying only on the small amount of light that came in through the gaps in the curtains from the streetlights outside, I pushed myself flat against a wall, but Shitow

grabbed my hand and we hid behind the piano.

Trying to mask my breathing, I heard the sound of footsteps draw near. The door to the music room opened, and someone did a perfunctory sweep of the room with a flashlight. Peeking out, I saw the guard was a sleepy-eyed, weak-looking old man. Unable to find us, he shook his head and left. Once we were sure he had gone, we left the same way we had come in.

When we were some distance from the school, we started laughing for no reason.

"It really was just like in middle school! It felt like being a kid and making trouble while the teacher wasn't looking."

"Same here. I haven't felt that way in ages."

Shitow laughed for a while, then looked at me with a serious expression.

"Thanks, Elvy."

She said it so sincerely that I felt shy and turned away from her.

"Let's go."

Neither of us knew exactly where we would go. Our footsteps echoed through the night.

"Hey, Elvy?"

"What?"

"That fox you mentioned? It's not from Grimm, it's from Aesop."

Figures you'd get that from Intelligence.

Fragment 4: Hiroko Asahina

My mom might be an alien.

She was getting things ready for dinner. I was trying to remember middle school. I had talked about it on the phone with Ayato, too, but I couldn't remember clearly. I was certain something had happened in the music room, though. I was still thinking about it, when my mom shrieked. She had cut herself with the knife. Blood flowed out of the wound ... but it was blue. As blue as the sky on a summer day.

"I need a bandage!" my mom said, taking out the first-aid kit.

"Mom!"

"What, Hiroko? Don't scare me, yelling like that."

"But, the blood!"

"It's all right. It's not a deep cut."

"Not that, the color."

"Huh? What's wrong?" she said, and when I looked again, it was normal red blood.

After dinner, I sat squeezing a stuffed animal, trying to suppress my feelings of worry. Her blood really had been blue before. I couldn't believe it had turned red the next time I looked. It hadn't been a trick of the light. I was under some kind of mind control. It reminded me of a B sci-fi movie I'd watched late one night. In that movie, the aliens replaced the people on Earth, so well that even their family members didn't notice. The boy who was the main character caught his father in a huge fight. But the next day, all his injuries were healed, and the main character couldn't remember it because of some really strong mind-control. In the meantime, the main character got help from an old man, who was the only one not affected by the mind control and everyone thought he was crazy, and they lifted the mind control, but were attacked by human beings. It was a

silly story. But it was just like what was happening at home.

No one was supposed to have blue blood.

And in addition to that, I couldn't remember the past. Neither could Kamina. Mamoru avoided the question, but I bet he couldn't remember either. And no one thought that was strange.

"I'm scared, Ayato."

I hugged the stuffed animal tighter, but I didn't feel any less afraid.

What had become of this city?

1

I ran around the house screaming. Eventually, I was chased into the bathroom, and fell. By some chance, I hit the nozzle, and the shower started pouring water on me. I was in a panic. My breathing was quick. Too quick. My heart felt about to explode. The shower rained hot water down on me, but I could not get up, and just lay there, watching her approach.

My mother.

Without saying a word, my mother looked down at me.

She smiled, with a tenderness befitting the Virgin Mary, and bent down to pick me up. I wanted to fight her. I was a teenage boy. I was too proud to lose to a woman. But in my panicked state, I couldn't, and let my mom do what she would.

"There's nothing to worry about," my mom said as she held me.

I felt cold pain in my neck. It was an injection. At the same time, I felt a calm warmth spread through my body.

"You're a good boy. You always were. I know that better than anyone. I raised you myself."

Good boy....

I'm a good boy....

With those words, a sluggish feeling spread to the corners of my mind.

It was not that I felt calm, exactly, more that I felt like my mind was somewhere else. My body felt as distant as if it belonged to someone else.

The shower had stopped. When had my mom turned it off? She was talking to someone.

"It's a temporary electrical charge anomaly in his brain. Stop Xephon's automatic activity."

Who was she talking to? It must be ... Kuki, was it? The Defense Force soldier in the picture Mr. Futagami had shown me. What's Xephon? Is that Rahxephon? Come to think of it, where is the Rahxephon? I wondered if it was still in that shrine.

While I was vaguely pondering such things, my mother came up to me.

"Who am I?"

I finally worked up the strength to get that out in a strained voice, but I wasn't sure I had really said it.

"You're Ayato."

My mother's voice sounded distant, although she was right in front of me.

"Ayato Kamina.... Really?"

"Now, you are who you believe you are. You are no one else."

"Even if my memories aren't real?"

"If you lose all your memories, will you stop being you? Even if your memories aren't real, you're still Ayato, my dear son."

"This is real...."

It didn't feel very real.

"This is my world...."

"This world exists for you, Ayato. It exists solely for you."

"For me?"

"But you went out to become a true performer."

"No, I...."

My mom shook her head with a smile that said, "Oh, poor little boy, you don't understand."

"You might have wanted to leave of your own volition, but that's not true. I thought you needed to go in order to become a true performer, so I sent you out."

My mom sent me.... I see....

"So, this world has changed. It doesn't need to keep tune with you anymore. You understand, don't you?"

I see.... I looked at my palms. They had blood on them. Red blood. It had mixed with the water from the shower that flowed in a red stream.

"Poor thing. You must have hurt yourself running like that."

My mother held my hand and touched her lips to the wound. On my distant palm I felt a warm gentleness. I remembered she used to do this for me when I was little and fell and hurt myself.... But that might be an artificial memory.

"Your blood is red now. Soon it will become blue, the same as

ours. It will be proof you've become a true performer."

A performer.... I remembered having heard that word before, but that might have been an artificial memory.

"What am I?"

"You are Ollin."

I heard a familiar voice. I looked up and saw a girl in a yellow dress reflected in the mirror.

Reika Mishima....

No, that might be an artificial memory.

"Mishima...."

Mishima stared at me from the mirror, and slowly smiled.

"You are Ollin."

"Ixtli...," my mother said, looking at Mishima in the mirror with an icy gaze. My mother could see her. She could see Mishima, even though she wasn't here. I see. She wasn't a dream.

My consciousness faded.

Fragment 5: Quon Kisaragi

The girl who wore yellow looked down at my face and spoke, "Awaken, Quon." Was I already awake? It hurt around my womb. It was a terrible pain. Along with those waves of pain, I could see a black egg in a blue sky. It was my egg. That which called to me. It was mine alone. I had to call it. Here. I had to beckon it to this world where the flow of time was warped. It was like an infant without its parents. It was no different from a newborn who yearned for its mother and her milk. Yearning for me, yearning for my arms, dreaming of being held. I shall sing. Sing "The

Polovtsian Dance." Along with the waves of pain, my song shall alter the Feynman Diagram, and send love out of this sphere. Distance is meaningless, time does not exist, my love shall arrive directly at my egg. And the egg shall begin a quantum breakdown and speed to its mother's side. Once they have beheld that, the Naacal brothers shall know I have awakened. Yet, this is not a true awakening. The day of true awakening shall not be long in coming. And yet, the sounds from dreams do not twist themselves around my fingers. The sounds the world dreams. That is why I sing. To call my egg, to hear the sounds of the world.

Fragment 6: Haruka Shitow

We were hidden on a landing of an apartment building that overlooked Ayato's home. The tension was even worse than it had been during Operation Overload. Public Safety officers who should have been hidden were stationed all around the Kamina household, and there were even cars from the Defense Force. They were afraid of Ayato being taken away, too.

"Looks like Ayato might not be so happy in Tokyo after all."

"Looks like he's in custody."

You couldn't call that happy.

"How do you wanna get in?"

"We'd need a lot of power to get inside," I said with sarcasm as we looked on.

"Let's wait a bit and see."

"Sounds good."

We watched the street a while longer. Then we saw a girl walk-

ing down the street. In a flash memories from ten years ago came flooding back. The girl who had been my elder was unchanged. It was Asahina.

Fragment 7: Hiroko Asahina

"Where are you going at this hour?"

"To the convenience store. I need markers."

Mom didn't care at all and let me go out. Same as always. Except her blood was blue.

I walked out into the night, still trying to suppress my worries, hardly caring where I went. The street and night were the same as ever. But tonight they looked different. The drunk men walking around, the ladies walking their expensive-looking dogs, the couples talking good-naturedly, any of them might have blue blood. I could see a light in the police box. The policeman was sitting at the desk writing up some papers. He might be able to help me. No, no good. What would I do if he had blue blood? I walked quickly past the police box. I couldn't go home, I couldn't go to the police. Then where could I go? Who would help me?

I walked in the direction of Ayato's house without realizing it. I climbed the hill and saw armored vehicles from the Defense Force.

"What?" I said, and several soldiers aimed rifles at me.

"Who the hell are you?"

Why had they sworn at me? Why were soldiers here?

"I-I...."

Then I heard a familiar voice.

"She's all right."

The soldiers turned around to face the voice. Its owner was a

back-lit silhouette. When he stepped out from behind the light to direct the soldiers, I gasped in shock.

It was Mamoru.

"So, you thought you'd come out to see Ayato in the middle of the night, without telling your boyfriend?"

"Why? Why are you here, Mamoru?"

Mamoru smiled.

"I'm here for my pal, Ayato."

"Don't play dumb. What are these soldiers here for?"

"Why do you think?"

He spoke in the same mocking tone he always used, but his eyes were cold and cruel. Who was this? This wasn't the Mamoru I knew!

"Who's that?" A man wearing glasses and a military uniform stepped out from behind Mamoru. He seemed close to Mamoru.

"She's not important."

It was a derisive tone. It seemed the man in glasses thought so, too.

"Even so." He put on a tough tone, but stepped down with one word from Mamoru. This wasn't the Mamoru I knew. This wasn't something a normal high-school boy could do. Then a woman came out the front door of the house. She was pretty. She was Ayato's mother.

"Kuki," Ayato's mother called the man in glasses over.

"Ixtli has appeared. There's no time. Dispatch Allegretto and Falsetto and restrain Xephon."

"Yes!"

The man in glasses bowed deeply to Ayato's mother. What on earth had happened to Mamoru and Ayato's mom?

"And then send some men to the hospital. Quon is singing."

"But we've received a report that she's already awakened...."

"I know!" Ayato's mother said the words like a slap. "Do you still doubt me?"

"N-no, of course not." The man in glasses shook his head.

As if she had finally noticed I was there, Ayato's mother looked over at me with an expression as if she were staring at a doll or a worm.

"Who's this girl?"

"She seems suspicious. I think she should be questioned," the man in glasses said, but Ayato's mother didn't seem to be listening. She turned immediately to Mamoru.

"I'll leave this to you. Handle it well."

Mamoru responded politely in the affirmative.

"I'll leave the rest to you all. I still have things to take care of."

Having said that, Ayato's mother slipped back inside the house. Once she'd gone, the man in glasses gave Mamoru an exasperated look.

"Master Ayato has to deal with Lady Maya, too. I wish she'd give him a break for once."

Master Ayato? Why would anyone call him that?

"So, what'cha gonna do with the girl?"

"You'd better watch your mouth. If you don't, you'll end up wishing Lady Maya would give you a break instead."

The man in glasses made a very sour face. Mamoru looked disgusted to have stooped to reprimanding the man. *What did it mean? What do you know of Ayato's mom? Why are you acting so full of yourself? Tell me!*

"Mamoru, who are you?"

"Hmm, now who could I be?"

His teasing, laughing eyes looked colder at that moment than I had ever seen them.

2

I collapsed onto the living room sofa, limp as a rag. The Giants game was playing on the TV in front of me. The enthusiastic announcer and commentator were talking about something, but I didn't catch any of it. It was nothing more than static. And I could see two women in strange clothes through a glass door that looked out onto the lawn. But they weren't real. They were only reflections. I'd seen them before somewhere. When I was sucked into an illusionary Tokyo inside a Dolem, I'd often seen a woman reflected on glass. They looked similar. They had similar masks. That one had been naked, but these were wearing clothes.

I stared vacantly at them, not even thinking it was unusual or weird. I had become completely calm. My mother came back. Come to think of it, those reflections had shown up right after my mother left.

The transmission of the baseball game suddenly went fuzzy and was replaced by the Rahxephon. It was hanging over the streets of Tokyo like a puppet. Its face was covered by wings and I couldn't read its expression. I heard the D1 Aria. The Dolem that looked like a mushroom was singing. Another Dolem, with blue wings shaped like inverted triangles floated up behind the Rahxephon.

The two Dolems began firing grains of light, like mist, from their mouths. The Rahxephon writhed in agony and screamed. The Rahxephon was crushed by the grains of light. Just when I thought I

would hear the sound of its body being crushed, the light stopped. The Rahxephon fell like a puppet from cut strings. As it fell, the Rahxephon fired countless blasts of light from its hands. My only response was that it all looked very pretty. Stray bits of light spread across the sky like a fan. The one with the blue inverted triangles was quick to move aside, but the mushroom was slower to move and took some damage. It took several blasts of light to its front. It disappeared into the night sky like several swelling bags.

At the same time, one of the women reflected in the glass collapsed in pain. My mother just watched intently. Just as the woman was about to reach her arm out to my mother in a plea for help, she disappeared, like she had been blown away. Nothing remained. The other continued singing as if nothing had happened.

The television went black, and the baseball game was gone.

I wonder if the Giants won....

"Good-bye, Falsetto."

Staring quietly at the empty spot where the woman had been, my mother muttered without emotion. Then she looked over at me.

"Have you calmed down now?"

"Who ... is that?" I looked toward the remaining woman.

"A Mulian. Most of them haven't been able to come over here yet. We've only been able to salvage the smallest number of them. As it is, the blue-blooded people are unable to survive without being synchronized with a Dolem or a human. Yes, Mulians are people, too. We aren't monsters."

Ah. So those men who had tried to take me away long ago had

also been Mulians synchronized with humans. They had bled blue. Dolems did, too.

"Am I a Mulian, too?"

"You are."

"And my father who died when I was young?"

My mother did not respond, evading the question silently.

"I love you, Ayato."

"Then, is it true?"

"Is what?"

"That you betrayed the world. That you're the one who led twenty million people to their deaths."

All emotion left my mother's face and she fixed her eyes, as still and cold as a frozen lake, on me.

Fragment 8: Hiroko Asahina

Mamoru brought me up to the front of my apartment building. Or rather, the armored military car did. Mamoru pointed at the door, prompting me.

"Go to sleep and you'll forget all about tonight."

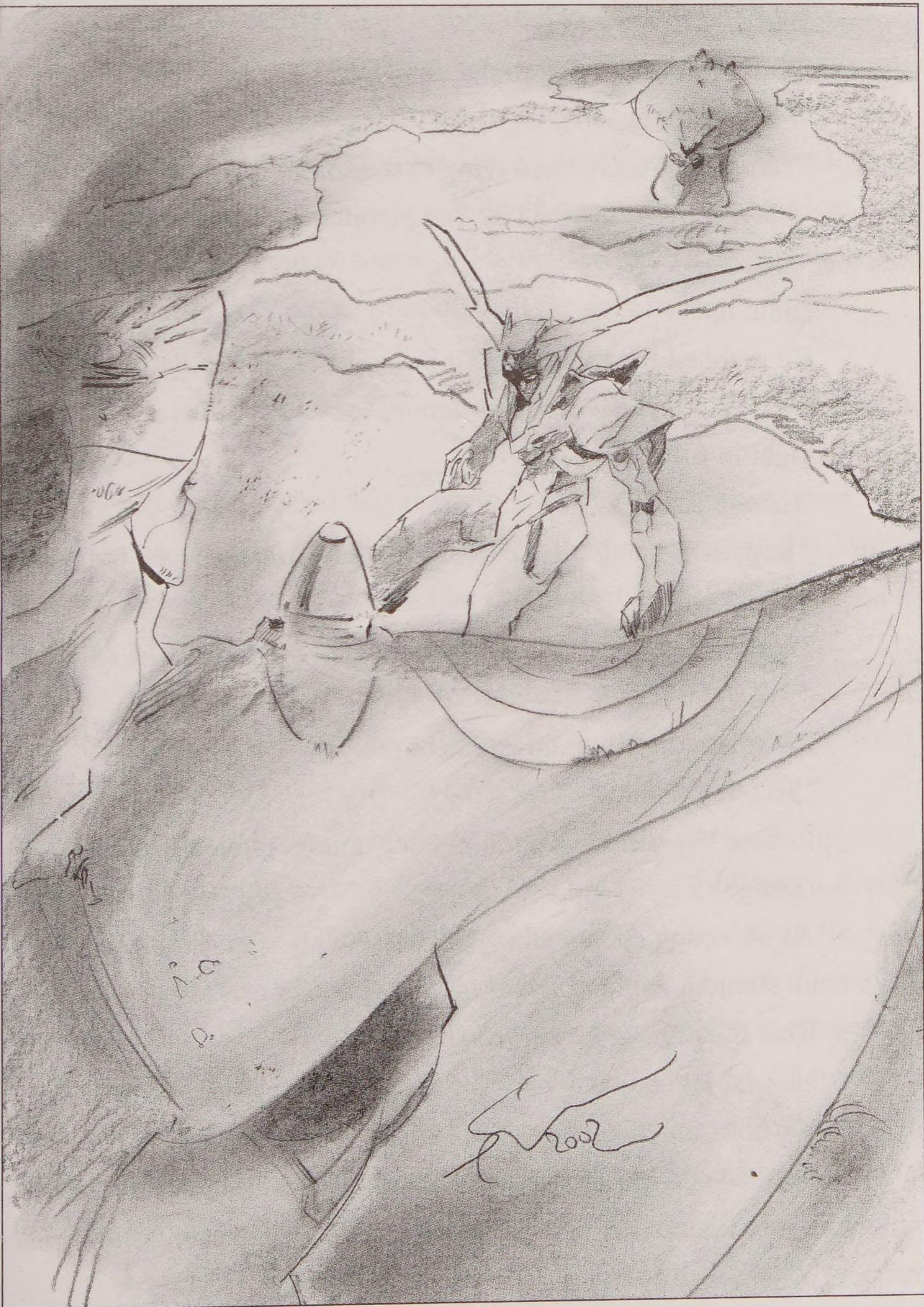
He said it casually, like you might after a close call in an accident. I stopped walking and turned to face Mamoru.

"Who are you?"

"I'm me. Mamoru Torigai."

"The Mamoru Torigai I know is just a silly high-school kid. He doesn't provide taxi services in military vehicles."

Mamoru looked hurt.



"I'm ... me."

"Have you been lying to me all along?"

"I haven't been lying to you."

"You have. You've been lying to me for a long time. How long? Since we first met? That's it, isn't it? You planned this all along, that you'd trick me, and...."

"Shut up!"

He grabbed me roughly by the shoulders, and I shut my mouth without thinking. I had never seen Mamoru look so serious, and now his face was right in front of mine.

"Hiroko ... I ... I...."

The pain of being unable to explain who he was began to appear on his face.

That's not it. You had things you couldn't even tell me. I trusted you.

I felt hatred welling up inside of me.

"You lied to me!"

I raised my hand to slap him, but Mamoru moved to stop me.

"Let go! Let me go!"

As we struggled, my elbow impacted with Mamoru's face. There was a blunt sound and blood fell at his feet. It was blue.

Blue blood just like my mother's.

Non-human blood.

We both stared silently at it.

I turned and ran as fast as I could away from Mamoru, rejecting him with every fiber of my being. He was too stunned to even follow after me.

I ran for my life.

I heard a quiet sound and then felt pain in my arm, like I'd just been jabbed with a hot poker. I turned around and saw the soldiers holding guns ready. Mamoru was behind them. Had he ordered them to fire?

"Stop!" I heard a voice call, but I wasn't sure it was Mamoru. I didn't have the courage to check. All I had was the terror that made me want to run from this place. I ran off into the dark streets.

3

My mom turned her back to me. She was rejecting me. Her reflection in the window layered above the reflection of the Mulian woman already there. It looked like my mother was wearing a Mulian costume. She looked more natural that way.

"Mom ... are you really my mother?"

I saw my mother's eyes flit over at me, then sink to the ground.

"If I could have, I would have given birth to you...."

Mom.... Various memories of her floated through my mind. Memories of playing with educational toys, of when I'd taken a friend's toy away and she scolded me quietly, of the smell of her hair in the bath. She never came to visit me at school, and no one ever cheered for me at sports meets. I had gotten in a fight with a boy named Ken in elementary school who said my mom was weird. I came home crying and my mom didn't say anything. Neither did I. I still have a small scar from that incident on my knee. Even so, she was my mother. I had thought that was an absolute truth. But it wasn't....

I heard it begin to rain. No, it was just that the television had

turned on again, making a sound like a snowstorm in the middle of the night. The picture was of a huge park somewhere. A small, black curved surface appeared in the sky above it. It was surrounded by a glittering belt of light. The belt of light was pulled down, and the black, curved surface rose up, and began to form a shape. It was an egg. An egg had appeared above a park at night.

I felt like I had seen it before somewhere. Ah, that's right. Once Quon had appeared in the cockpit of the Rahxephon, and we'd seen that egg in the ceiling. Now it was glowing black, in stark contrast to the bright Tokyo sky.

My mother watched with a harsh expression. She turned to the Mulian reflected in the glass and began talking about something. They were not human words, but some other kind of language. The atmosphere was so changed, it did not seem like she had been the person speaking to me earlier. She was the Mulian who had betrayed the world and brought the deaths of twenty million people. My mother ... my mother was not even human.

It would be a lie to say my life since coming back to Tokyo wasn't fun. There was nothing to fight here, and no truth that made me want to run away. My memories had been changed, but if I didn't pay attention to it, I could live happily. The house I grew up in was here, with my own room, where I was surrounded by my favorite things. But they were all things my mother had prepared. No, things the Mulian who called herself my mother had prepared.

"Mom...."

One last time, I spoke in a whisper. But either she hadn't heard me, or had no time to spare to listen, and continued speaking with the

Mulian in their strange tongue.

I couldn't stay here any longer.

I had come here because I couldn't stay in Niraikanai any longer, and now I couldn't stay here either. I had seen the truth I needed to see. Now, the person I saw before me was everything.

I couldn't stay here any longer.

I stood up slowly. It seemed my mother had not noticed her son was trying to leave.

Fragment 9: Haruka Shitow

There was a booming noise approaching, like heavy machines building a structure. I was going to take a look to find out what it was, when I saw a giant form step out from beyond the row of buildings. It was the Rahxephon. Several helicopters flitted through the air, and searchlights illuminated the Rahxephon, making its strange form stand out clearly against the night sky.

"It's the Rahxephon."

"Why is it moving? Can't it only move if Kamina is piloting it?"

"I don't know. But it's coming this way."

"Is Kamina calling you?"

Was he calling me? For what reason?

"I'll start the Vermillion."

"What for?"

"Ostensibly, to bring back the Rahxephon."

Elvy began entering coordinates into the remote command system she wore strapped on her arm.

"How long will that take?"

"It has to start and run a system check so I think it'll be about twenty minutes," Elvy said as she read off system data.

I couldn't wait twenty minutes. If the Rahxephon was coming this way, something must have happened in that house. Elvy was absorbed in starting the Vermillion, so I'd have to get inside on my own. I released the safety on my gun and left the apartment landing alone.

People were rushing all around Ayato's house. I wonder if they were trying to take some action against the approaching Rahxephon. The tires of armored vehicles made a grinding noise as they turned. It was the perfect chance. I ran down the alley, which was now clear of guards. There were some men in civilian clothing. Just as they heard my footsteps, and were turning toward me, I karate-chopped one, I kicked the other unconscious. Then I ran to the end of the alley and hid in the shadow of a building. From here I could see the back door to Ayato's house.

Memories from more than ten years ago came flooding back as I tried to remember the house's layout. I tried to calculate how long it would take me to reach Ayato's room once I was inside.

Just then I saw someone dash out the back.

"Ayato!"

Fragment 10: Maya Kamina

Ayato had vanished without my noticing. The Rahxephon was approaching. In a situation like this, I could not act without regard for appearances. As much as I did not wish it, I would have to go directly to Yo Meseta Pukeh. I heard the back door open. He must have gone out. I

rushed out and heard a voice.

"Ayato!"

I saw a woman running toward him. She noticed me, and stopped. Her eyes were wide with surprise. She seemed to know me, but held her gun steady in her hands.

"Ma'am."

Who would call me Ma'am?

"I'm Shougo Rikudoh's niece."

Rikudoh's niece? Ah, I see. So that's it. I finally remembered, and could not suppress a smile at the irony of fate.

"Ah.... So that's why you...."

As I started to move closer, she held her gun in both hands and shouted, "Don't move, or I'll shoot!"

She had certainly changed. The girl who had sat stiff and nervous on the couch was not pointing a gun at me. With her gun still trained on me, she began to move, step by step, then ran off. To chase after Ayato.

I seem to remember her name was Haruka. Yes, written with the character for "distant."

Three years ago, when Ayato was in middle school, he had brought his girlfriend home. The idea annoyed me, but I met her anyway. She had long hair and her cheeks were still round and youthful-looking. She had been shaking with nervousness at meeting her boyfriend's mother, and I should not have cared a bit about her either way, but I found myself bearing a strange grudge against her, deep down. She was completely normal, but I did not like her one bit.

Later, I told Kuki about her and learned she was Rikudoh's niece. I had known he had relatives in Tokyo, but I had not expected they

would be so close. Now I know he did not set that up, but then I had not yet come into power. I had made trivial mistakes. I had tried giving Ayato the same excuses every mother has, that he needed to study for exams and couldn't have a girlfriend, but he just shouted back at me. He had always seemed perfectly willing to do whatever I said, so it was unusual that he would talk back. So, I had the Foundation meddle with her father's company. I think they had him demoted and moved to Kansai. I don't know what happened after that.

But I had never expected she would enter TERRA and do so much to chase after Ayato. I had thought Watari would take care of it, and let it be, but now I would have to check into this further.

No, first I would have to regain control of Ayato.

4

I ran. I felt like I was always running these days. I was always running from something. Where was I? Might be near Shakujii Park. I turned around and saw the town behind me was quiet. As soon as I realized no one was following me, I ran out of breath, and my legs stopped on their own. I was all right. Looking back frequently, I began walking along the long wall around Shakujii Park.

When I came to a corner, I cringed. There was a black shadow standing there. It staggered and held its arms out to me. It looked like it needed help. I was thinking of turning and running, when I finally saw it was Asahina.

"Ayato."

Asahina sank to her knees. I ran to her.

"Asahina. What's wrong?"

She looked up at me, but her eyes were out of focus.

"Look...."

She touched a blue shape on her arm, and held her palm up to me. It was covered in blood. Blue blood. It couldn't be.... Even Asahina's blood was blue!

She looked up at me and laughed quietly.

"My blood.... It's red, right? It's red, isn't it?"

Looking at her pleading eyes, I couldn't tell her the truth.

"Yeah ... it's red."

"Good."

Relieved, she lowered her head.

"Good...."

I could hear her words trailing off into tears. She was crying at my lie. She was crying and she knew I'd lied. Now I felt sad, and my heart seemed ready to close.

I thought I heard something behind me. I turned around and saw no one, but we couldn't stay here. The Rahxephon's footsteps were approaching. I had to hurry.

"Asahina. I can't stay here. I have to go."

She jerked her head up when she heard that.

"Then I do, too!"

"I'm sorry...."

I can't take you with me. I'm trying to get out of Tokyo. No, I'm trying to go home. You should stay here. You have blue blood.

"My mom's blood is blue."

Asahina caught me in a hug.

"Everyone's gone all weird. Mamoru isn't the Mamoru I know. I can't remember things from before."

"Asahina...."

"Take me with you!"

I can't take you. How do you think you'd be treated outside? Everyone thinks the Mulian's are the enemies of humankind. I tried to stand up, but Asahina was clinging to me and dug her fingers into my shoulders.

"Take me with you! Take me with you! Please, Ayato!"

She still clung to my neck, and I still couldn't stand up. I could hear her breath, ragged with fear, in my ears. Her arms were clamped around me as tight as a drowning person's to a lifesaver.

"Take me ... wherever you're going."

Wherever I'm going...? Where was I going? I couldn't stay in Niraikanai anymore, and even though I'd come back to Tokyo, I could not stay here either. Then where should I go? Asahina was in the same situation, when I thought about it. She had nowhere to go. She couldn't stay here, but had nowhere to go if she left.

Then, as two people with no place to call home, we could set out secretly for someplace to hide.

We had no other options....

"Let's go."

I stood.

"Where?"

"Somewhere. Anywhere but here."

And so we walked off into the darkness of night.

Fragment 11: Quon Kisaragi

Twée-la-la, tree-la-lee, just like a round chicken egg, I alone stand on the jet-black floor. The pale black egg hovers in the night sky, the breeze dances around it. In the name of custody, I was taken to a detention center, of the name of a hospital; laying down without the restraining clothing, of the name of life-module; and called my egg, of the name of Belxephon. Puef lou monotos rah gyllands. Laemeh cae eseh kilargwey lau. I did not call that. That is a string of meaningless words that formed within my heart. Tsuranaley. My egg called me, 'Yuiriri Yuu-yuu' and I came here from the hospital. I am standing here. The beams of light released by the rotating machine blades cut us from the darkness of the dark. Tears flow silently at the pain of being cut. The rotating machine blade split to both sides and flew to pieces like terracotta. Cotta. Cottva. Bodhisattva. Bodhisattva Vajra, by your vajra and greatness, destroy all suffering in the world. My consciousness has begun to wander a bit. I know the reason for it. Because the one is approaching with a blue thundering, its wave sullies and offends my consciousness, toying with it, it is not the fault of the roundness of this egg. It is the fault of that one. It causes the same distortions as a mirror black with dirt. Don't. Don't. Don't come. Don't destroy me. Don't destroy the egg. As if ignoring my yells, the blue clay doll like a winged woman approaches, raising screams of carnage from the halo on her head. The sounds of destruction are obstructed by the strength of the egg, twisted around, and scatter. The large-blossomed flower of death blooms in the sky, and the countless scattered beams of light destroy the park at my feet. Rock gardens, locomotives, fountains, the fire of eternal peace. Things that were there up until a

moment ago disappear in the next instant. All is vanity. All that which has a form will someday be gone; it is the similitude of change. So, honorable maiden, for what reason do you blame us? The egg appeared as guidance, it is fate. Crushed remarkably, the worries of the seventh month, the suffering of the ninth month, there is nothing for the tenth month, but this egg like polished stones, like lapis lazuli, is all mine. It ain't yours. The Allegretto seems ready to howl again. I won't let her. As if responding to rage, part of the egg cracked off and a fat black arm came out, and I thought it would release a black ray beam, but then allegretto reversed time, and went to another world. And the arm went back inside the egg, and the cracked off part of the egg went back just as if nothing had happened. I could feel in my fingertips that the consciousness of the one who wandered my world and had been synchronized with Allegretto had disappeared. I will try not to forget this sadness, this suffering. Let us go home, I hear a voice say. "I can't... There's still something I have to talk to her about."

"Don't be afraid."

I turn around, and that girl is there. The girl in the yellow dress is there. She is smiling as she stands, but when the searchlights from the helicopters that have returned shine on her, they cast no shadow. That is because she has no real body.

"This belongs to you. There, you will meet the other me."

There, here, rehe. The snow falls. I bask in the moonlight, alone in a snowy field on a cold night. Oh no, my consciousness is about to flow again. I must hold tightly to myself. Thinking that from the start, the girls fingers are warm, yet merciless, and they touch my spirit. The images that compose my body are exposed. I am absorbed by the egg, in the round

space filled with amniotic fluid, I float, supported by the chalaza. Is it the world that is tied to these floating dreams, or is it falling? That good feeling. That comfort. My consciousness melts into the amniotic fluid, and I don't notice the egg is beginning quantum breakdown. The mysterious behavior of quanta send me back to that island in an instant. To the island of the Naacal brethren.

5

She's heavy. I didn't know unconscious people were so heavy. On TV and movies, you always see people walking easily with their wounded buddies leaning on a shoulder, but it's not as easy as the shows make it look. I thought it might be easier to carry her piggy-back, but once I put her down, we'd both probably tumble to the ground. Encouraging myself and Asahina, I walked on, step by step.

The sound of the helicopters' rotors was near. The Rahxephon was standing silently in the light they threw about. Just a bit more.

"Hey, what happened in the music room?"

"Be quiet."

"Something must have ... I can't remember."

"I said be quiet. Worry about getting up these stairs first. Pick up your foot. Pick it up."

I helped the weakened Asahina up the stairs. The Rahxephon was waiting for us in the middle of Kuei Grand field.

The Rahxephon....

That's what had started it all. If not for the Rahxephon, I'd still be in Tokyo Jupiter, completely unaware of everything, leading a totally

normal life. I'd yawn at my boring classes, joke around with friends, draw quietly with Kuma. The Rahxephon had ruined all that. But thanks to that, I knew it was all lies. My school life, even I, we were all lies. They were an illusion my mother had created. I might have been better off not knowing they were lies, but now that I knew, there was no going back. I couldn't live in Tokyo Jupiter. But, what about the outside? Everyone out there seemed likely to stick me in a detention center if they found out I'm a Mulian. Could I go out despite that? Even if it was a lie, wasn't it better to be in a reality that was warm with life? I wouldn't go to a world that was cold and harsh.

I was losing my resolve.

I looked up at the Rahxephon again. It said nothing, but folded its wings and stood there silently. It couldn't have a will of its own, but it was just like it was asking me, "Well? What will it be?" Memories came flooding back.

And I shouted.

Responding to that, the Rahxephon opened its wings on both sides. Its calm eyes were turned toward me. *This is it, then*, they asked me. *This is it*, I answered back in my heart. Slowly the Rahxephon bent down on one knee and held us on its palm. Asahina passed out, and was as heavy as water in a vinyl bag. Leaving her in the palm of its hand, I was bathed in light and assimilated into the Rahxephon.

I sat in the space filled with the quiet scent of water. As if responding to my will, a ring of light appeared immediately above us. It spread slowly. To take the Rahxephon.

I looked around once more at the town. The "gentle" town where my mother was. It was filled with bright lights. Under each light was a

tiny bit of happiness. People might be laughing with their families as they watched television. Couples might be spending happy hours alone together. Some might be all alone, holding onto their hope for the future. But it was all false happiness. I tore my gaze away from the happiness and looked up at the ring of light.

Slowly, the Rahxephon rose up into it.

Fragment 12: Haruka Shitow

No!

The Rahxephon rose up into the sky. Ayato had slipped out of my grasp yet again. *Why?* Why was it? Each time I thought I had him, he slipped through my fingers and ran off. *Why? Why? Why did he always leave me?*

"No! Ayato!"

I shouted, and ran up the stairs that led to the Grand. But the Rahxephon was already up to its toes in the shining circle of light above my head. And, as if to further prevent me from going there, the Grand's fence stretched out in front of me.

Clang!

I grabbed onto the fence.

"No! Don't go! Ayato! Come back! Come back to me!"

I shouted until my throat was raw, but my voice did not reach them, and the Rahxephon disappeared into the circle of light. The circle grew gradually smaller, and eventually the night sky looked as if there had never been a circle of light there.

I stood alone, holding onto the fence.

He had gone. Pain welled up in my heart. How many times must I go through this? *I quit. If it's going to hurt this much, it would be better by far to give up on chasing him.*

But I know all too well I can't do that. Still holding onto the fence, I sank to my knees and cried.

I wonder how long I was like that. I heard Elvy's voice behind me, along with heavy footsteps.

"Shitow! We can't stay. Come on!"

So what? Ayato left.

"Shitow!"

It took an awesome amount of strength for me to lift my head. I smiled.

"Hang in there, Haruka Shitow!"

She shook me violently by the shoulders several times.

"What am I supposed to do if you fall apart?"

I came to. That's right. Ayato couldn't stay in Niraikanai or here anymore. He had run away somewhere all alone with his wounded heart. I couldn't leave him alone. I couldn't let him bleed alone. I had to help him.

The Vermillion finally arrived, making a low hum.

"Hurry! Follow Ayato!"

"Now you're talking!"

We got inside the Vermillion, and put Tokyo behind us.

Fragment 13: Shinobu Miwa

Miss Quon, who was in my care, has disappeared. When I went

to Lady Maya's residence to inform her of this, I found Master Ayato had gone as well, and there was quite an uproar.

"Oh," Lady Maya said quietly after hearing my report. "I understand. Follow after her and I will give you further instructions."

Her quiet voice, free of inflection was even more frightening than usual. It was a sign she was angry. Even so, Commander Kuki seemed unaware of this, and interrupted.

"Lady Maya. We await your orders for an attack on TERRA's mobile suit weapon."

Lady Maya thought quietly, not even glancing in the Commander's direction. Mistaking this for simple neglect, the Commander prompted her, though he should have just left.

"Lady Maya."

"Do not speak to me."

"But..."

"Kuki," Lady Maya finally turned toward him, and smiled. "I will kill you."

With those words in such a contrast to her smile, Kuki stiffened. Even I, listening alongside them, drew my breath in sharply. It was not a lie or a joke; Lady Maya would do it.

But why, I wonder. Why had she let Xephon escape, and even let TERRA's mobile suit get away from her. It was the same with Quon. Why? Allegretto and Falsetto were gone, but we had many other Dolems we could use. If she summoned the Mulians immediately, we should be able to capture TERRA's mobile suit, at least.

No, that's not it. When I look at Lady Maya's face, set in cold determination, I see there are deeper thoughts there. There is no doubt she

has plans that one such as me could never comprehend. It must be.

6

We're out.

We've left Tokyo Jupiter. We can't go back again. I threw aside that false happiness myself.

Turning around, I see the great dome of Tokyo Jupiter glittering dangerously behind us. That I can see it in its totality means we must have come out somewhere pretty far from it. I wonder where we are. It doesn't matter. As long as it's not Tokyo Jupiter or Niraikanai.

I look down at my right hand. The honeycombed screens display the Rahxephon's right hand layered over my own. I see Asahina laying there, as if floating. Asahina, who has nowhere to go, and myself, who has nowhere to go. Where can we go from here?

I don't know.

Third Movement: Blue Friend

Fragment 1: Megumi Shitow

The sensors at TERRA Headquarters picked up a quantum wave on the Tokyo Jupiter display. The Vermillion came out nearly a week after leaving. There was a lot of interference due to the effects of the quanta, but we secured communication.

"This is V1 Alpha. I've succeeded in leaving Tokyo Jupiter. No anomalies in the TDD unit. I'm coming home."

"This is TERRA Control. Roger, that."

Just as I was about to ask about the Rahxephon, I heard an unexpected voice come over the headset.

"What about the Rahxephon? He left just before us."

My sister.

She had gone out in the Vermillion.

Since she had disappeared the same time Miss Elvy left, I thought that might have been it, but I just told myself she had gone out on work for the Intelligence department.

It wasn't fair.

Why did she get to go to Tokyo all by herself?

I've been patient. Even though I wanted to go to Tokyo, to where Ayato was, I waited patiently. But then she....

It's not fair!

Kim responded for me, since I wasn't doing so.

"We confirmed the Rahxephon's appearance fifteen minutes ago.

However, he's gone north without responding to our hails, then we lost them in some TJ magnetic anomalies. Currently, our early warning air defense system is looking for him. Report on the current status. How are the Rahxephon and Ayato doing?"

"What happened in there?!" I burst out. "Why didn't you bring Ayato back? Why isn't Ayato coming back here?"

But my sister didn't say anything. I only heard a little moan, like the sound of trying to hold back tears, in my headset.

What had happened in there?

"How is the Commander?"

Kim turned around to him and asked for instructions, but it was Inspector White Snake who answered.

"For the moment, give the order for the return of V1 Alpha."

"Understood."

"This should be fun."

Still standing, the white snake looked down at Commander Kunugi and twisted his mouth into a cold expression.

"In deploying only one unit, without any support, to infiltrate Tokyo Jupiter, you failed to bring back the Rahxephon. It was a splendid play at battle tactics, Commander Kunugi."

Commander Kunugi did not bat an eye.

If it were me, I'd be pummeling that snake's face right about now.

"Captain Shitow is another problem. Without the authority or orders to do so, she snuck aboard our top secret Vermillion, and covertly went along to Tokyo. We won't know until we hear the reports, but I suspect she may have sabotaged the mission. This should go to military

court."

The commander glanced up at the white snake.

"Oh, are you displeased? Unfortunately, you'll soon lose your rights. Also...."

The white snake melodramatically pulled a piece of paper from his pocket.

"This is a command received this morning from the UN. Colonel Jin Kunugi, as of today, all your responsibilities are revoked, and you are to stay in disciplinary confinement until further notice. That is all."

He looked purposefully at the Commander's face. What a jerk.

"Well, if you have any complaints about your punishment, you have the right to formally submit them within three days' time. Would you like to exercise that right?"

"No," Commander Kunugi quietly responded, and the white snake nodded, looking very satisfied.

"Very well. You have said you resign yourself to your punishment, whatever it may be. You should stop your futile resistance."

With that, he folded up the orders and slipped them into the Commander's chest pocket, giving them a mocking little pat. Everything was really going to hell.

The white snake was already through with the Commander and turned a sticky eye on us.

"Well. With my authority as Inspector, I, Makoto Isshiki, shall now assume command of TERRA."

Ugh, we were gonna be working under him?

Hiroko Asahina's Diary: May 24th

The outside.

The defense barrier, oh, they call it the absolute barrier out here. I can't believe I'm outside it. There's so much green out here, it's like a fairy tale. I'm surprised because we were taught in school that outside the absolute barrier was nothing but a barren, uninhabited wasteland. Even the air doesn't seem that strange. Kamina joked that the first time he had come out, he had unconsciously covered his mouth. I understand what made him do it, though. We had always believed what we were taught. How were we supposed to believe the time was different? It was like some kind of prank that this was the year 2028. That the war hadn't ended two years ago, but sixteen. Sixteen years. That's as long as I've been alive. I can't believe that just because I'm told it. I don't feel it. It's like being told the Earth revolves around the sun, when you've believed it was the other way around for so long. You just wanna say, "Oh, really?"

What made me think it might be true is the cold. Even though we are in the mountains, I couldn't believe it would be this cold in August, in the height of summer. Maybe, just maybe, what Ayato was telling me was true. That's what made me think so.

Looking behind me, I saw Tokyo Jupiter peeking through the spaces between the mountains under the night sky--they say the city lights reflect on the barrier, and make it appear to glow. I was glad it was night. If it were day, I think my distance perception would get weird. Even though the mountains look small in the distance, there's something even bigger beyond them. I'd come out of there. I knew that intellectually, but

it didn't seem real.

We were standing on one end of a dam. The reservoir was full of water and it lapped at the dam as a giant robot--Ayato says it's not a robot, but it sure looks like one--went down under the water. We rode that through the defense, no the absolute barrier. Why does Ayato pilot a robot with such awesome powers? Even when I ask him, he won't tell me. He just says that he's the only one who can pilot it.

In Tokyo, I thought Ayato was the only one I could count on not to change, but I think he might actually be the most changed of anyone I knew.

When we were there, at least he was a completely average high school student. And now, in such a short amount of time--Ayato says it was about a month in Tokyo time, but half a year out here--he's turned into this, even though I don't remember his being gone.

But now I can only follow him. He's the only one I can rely on.

Following him, I made my way down the mountain path. Not a single car passed by us on the one-way road down from the dam, and I felt very forlorn. The bugs were frighteningly loud, and sometimes a bird would give a high-pitched whistle, but apart from that, and the sounds of our own footsteps, it was silent.

"Where are we?" I asked, but Ayato couldn't answer. He didn't seem to know either.

"Anyway, once we get into the town, we'll figure things out."

That's all he would say. But I think he was strong to be so sure we would figure things out. I wouldn't be able to say that. I was afraid.

As dawn was breaking, we finally found a bus stop. Looking at the posted schedule, it was almost completely blank, except for two buses

in the morning, and two in the afternoon. Compared to Tokyo, it was unbelievable.

I was going to ask the time, but Ayato shook his head.

"I left my watch before I came to Tokyo. This is one my mom bought me, with only Tokyo time. It's the same as yours, and not the real time."

Here it wasn't the correct time, but it was our time.

My legs were tired from walking so far, and I sat on the bench at the bus stop. He went over to a scenic lookout platform, so I was able to take my shoes off for a bit. They had a heel, so my feet were covered in blisters. But I hadn't whined. I have to follow Ayato wherever he goes.

Then, I heard someone calling me. Surprised, I put my shoes back on. I was quick and no one had seen. Luckily, he was engrossed in the scenery, and hadn't looked at me.

From the platform, I could see the whole area. Morning fog hung on the mountains, and there were still traces of night in the shadows. It glittered like someone had overturned a box of jewels. People's lives were sparkling. Ayato looked out over it with a bright face, but I was frightened. The lights of what should have been a warm city were....

We were both worn out, and fell asleep on the bench propping up each other's shoulders. By the time the bus horn woke us, the sun was already high in the sky. The bus took us down to the town--Kyouda--we had seen from the platform.

It wasn't as big as Tokyo, but it was full of people. I didn't know any of them, and I clutched Ayato's sleeve out of worry.

"It's all right. The best place to hide a tree is in a forest, and the

best place to hide yourself is in a crowd, as the saying goes. It's safer in a big city."

That might be. But I don't know why. It's natural that I want to run away. But what about Ayato? He had already lived outside. Who had he run away from then? He won't tell me. It must have something to do with that robot he calls Rahxephon. Because unless it was stolen from the military or something, a high schooler wouldn't have a thing like that. I think he must have run away from the military.

"Hey, gimme your watch for a sec," Ayato said suddenly.

I asked him what he was going to do, and he said he'd take it to a pawn shop. We'd run out with only the clothes on our backs, and didn't have any money left. What little we'd had, we used for the bus fare, and there was nothing else a high-school kid would have worth selling. So I took off my watch and gave it to him.

I entrusted our time to him.

Wait here, he told me, and left me outside the pawn shop. People looked at me as they walked by, and their gazes felt like jabs. I was afraid they could tell we were from Tokyo. Actually, they saw I was wearing light summer clothes and thought I was strange. When Ayato was away, I felt very lonely. I thought of running into the pawn shop several times, but stopped myself. He told me to wait here, so no matter what happens, I'll keep waiting.

I don't think he was more than twenty minutes, but it felt more like two hours. Ayato finally stepped out of the pawn shop. I asked how it went.

"I got more than I'd expected. Your watch was a model that was supposed to go on sale the year after the MU war, and it's almost impos-

sible to find in stores. It's rare," he told me. I think he was lying.

The expression on his face didn't look like he'd gotten a very good price, and anyway, that was a cheap watch I'd gotten as a gift when I started high school. It shouldn't have sold for much. But I smiled wide and wiped his cares away.

1

Actually, I'd taken an unreasonably low price in the pawn shop. Looking up the watches, I saw they showed the date 2013 along with the make and model, and I thought I'd say they were rare items that hadn't been sold in many markets, but I couldn't get a decent price. When I complained, the man just pointed to a sign which read in large letters, MINORS UNDER 18 MUST HAVE THEIR GUARDIAN'S SIGNATURE. Damn. Way to take advantage of me. But I needed the money. I had no other choice, so I took what he offered in the form of a prepaid card.

When I got out of the store, I saw Asahina sitting on the guard rail. She looked so lonely I thought my heart would break. And when she saw my face, she lit up so plainly it made me sad. I had to take care of her.

"How'd it go?"

"I got more than I'd expected. Your watch was a model that was supposed to go on sale the year after the MU war, and it's almost impossible to find in stores. It's rare."

"Really? That's great," Asahina said, smiling. Then she sneezed loudly.

"We should buy some clothes."

"That's true."

She blushed with embarrassment and nodded. For the moment, we would buy clothes with the money I'd gotten. The end-of-season sales were running, so we were able to buy cheap ones. Asahina got a fluffy parka. I got sneakers, an Apollo cap, and glasses. The glasses had no lenses and were just for fun. Looking at my reflection in the window, it didn't seem like much of a disguise, but I might be mistaken for someone else at a glance. Thinking it might be better if I wore my cap pulled down low, and trying it out in the window, Asahina looked at my reflection.

"Thanks for bringing me...."

Huh? What did that mean? Thanks for bringing her the money? Or thanks for bringing her out of Tokyo Jupiter? I looked at her, but she had turned her back on me, so I couldn't see her face.

"My present," she said in a sing-song tone, bouncing to dance in time with the words. Ah, so she was glad I had gotten the money.

"Half of the money is yours. It's like you bought it yourself."

I'd meant it to sound casual, but Asahina suddenly stopped moving.

"No, you're the one who brought me...."

The way she was standing, and the way she said it, I knew she was regretting having left Tokyo.

"Asahina, are you really all right with this?"

"It's fine. I'm fine."

Her over-emphasized response gave away her true feelings. She didn't know if she was all right with it. I couldn't just tell her she was wrong, and that it really was better out here. I wasn't sure myself.

"Let's get something to eat."

"Sounds good."

We exchanged fake smiles and nodded.

"Excuse me, I'd like to buy a long-distance ticket, may I pay with a prepaid card?" I asked at the green window of Kyouda station. I had heard that in big cities they didn't like you paying with prepaid cards instead of credit cards, but that was not the case here.

"What destination?"

"Kagoshima. One, please."

I bought the ticket without wearing my hat or glasses, looking on purpose exactly as I had when I left Tokyo. I had a reason. Asahina would return the ticket for another prepaid card, and buy tickets for the overnight bus to Aomori. Then, I'd change into my hat and glasses, and board the bus a bit after Asahina. I'd pretend I didn't know her.

It was a bit of a pain, but it might throw them off our tracks. It wasn't exactly my idea--I'd read it in a crappy mystery novel. I wasn't confident, but I couldn't think of something like this.

I watched the night fall through the windows of the overnight bus. Kyouda was a small town, and the bus had left it within ten minutes. Before I knew it, we were out in the middle of rice paddies. The scenery was all the same, except for the occasional street light we passed. I watched Asahina's reflection in the window, of where she sat on the opposite side of the bus. She looked lonely.

I wonder if I had looked the same when I first left Tokyo Jupiter. I wonder how Miss Haruka had felt when she'd seen me. I had been told everything I believed was a lie, and was brought into a world where I had nothing to count on. Miss Haruka had been kind and done everything she

could for me. Even though I was a Mulian, they'd welcomed me warmly like family on Niraikanai. I wonder if it was because I could pilot the Rahxephon that they were so nice. Except for Miss Haruka, I don't think that was the case.

I wonder how they're all doing. They must be angry. I'd taken the Rahxephon without asking, snuck in and out of Tokyo Jupiter, and ran around while they wondered if I'd come back. If I were Lieutenant Yagumo, I wouldn't forgive me. I knew that, but I had to run away all the time. Because I was the only one in the world who Asahina could trust.

I gazed at her reflection in the window.

Hiroko Asahina's Diary: May 24th part II

I gazed at Kamina's reflection in the glass window. There was nothing else to look at.

We had gotten on the overnight bus in a really confusing way. Kamina said doing this might erase our tracks to an extent, but still. Who is he running from? But he needs this. There are people looking for him in this world.

I can't see anything but dark outside. I'm unbelievably uneasy.

Instead of going to the last stop, Aomori, we get off in a town along the way called Ootake. As soon as we stepped off the warm bus, I shook at the cold night air. We've come pretty far north. The rest of the way, we got a ride in a truck. The driver asked if we were eloping, but he's a nice man and told us lots of interesting stories, and let us off outside a city called Fuchiana. Fuchiana is by the ocean and makes you feel like

you're shriveling up. The artificially-made ground is like Tokyo's gulf coast, with lots of new, unusual buildings side-by-side. Except that these are all low, and there's only one towering skyscraper. That's what it's like.

"What now?" I asked, and Kamina said we'd hide here a while.

We'd arrived late at night, so the hotels were closed, and the one flashy-looking hotel that was open was a little ... well, we ended up staying in an all-night movie theater. It was the first time I'd been in one. As soon as we went inside, I noticed a strange smell. The floor was sticky, like juice or something had been spilled all over. Even the chairs were really old and uncomfortable. But we couldn't have luxuries. A B-horror movie was showing, one with lots of red blood spurting everywhere. I hate movies like that, but I just listened to the English and didn't care once my eyelids started getting heavy.

We'd have to look for a real hotel the next morning. We'd be here a while. I wonder how long "a while" is. Since we would be hiding, we would be living together. Even though I was very worried, I was also a little bit happy about it. I hated that. It was like I had become ... filthy. Up until yesterday I had had a proper boyfriend in Mamoru Torigai, and now, here I was getting excited imagining living with Ayato.

I fell asleep thinking that.

Then, I let out something close to a scream and woke up. I had had a nightmare. It had been really scary....

But I can't remember what it was. Something with blue blood on my hands. I caught my breath and looked up, where a "government report" was playing on the screen. Then, there was a simple animation like it was something for kids, with a narration over it.

"The enemy of humankind, that makes us live in terror, is the Mulians. They bleed blue. If you see someone with blue blood, contact the police immediately. Destroy the Mulians! Mulians are the enemies of Earth! They are fearsome invaders."

The narration was cruel. It hadn't clicked when I asked Kamina about it, but everyone in Tokyo was on the side of the Mulians, who had killed twenty million people.

Goosebumps rose on my skin. I remembered what had happened in Tokyo. My mother's blood, Mamoru's blood, and my own blood. No, my blood was red. When I bled that time, it was red. It only looked blue because I had seen Mom's and Mamoru's before. I had the handkerchief Kamina had used to bandage my wounds. It was only blue because of the design.

And Kamina had said so. He said it was red. I believe that.

I looked beside me, and saw he was sound asleep. I held his hand lightly so as not to wake him. The warmth. That was all I could believe in now. The rest of the world was out to get me. What would we do?

Fragment 2: Johji Futagami

He looked like he'd been sitting at that counter for thirty years, and in that time had seen every kind of happiness and sadness life had to offer. Also, he wore a face that seemed to say, "Do you know the meaning of 'right to withhold information?'" The "right to withhold information" didn't mean a tinker's damn to me.

"I know you check IDs with that thing." I pointed at an outdated

ID checker on the table.

"Play nice and show me what he sold you."

The man hesitated for a moment. Just as he was wondering if I was carrying a gun with UN authority, he sighed and brought out two watches. So he'd sold watches, huh. He must have been in trouble to sell his watch. But, Level One, you don't have much time left, because I'm on your trail.

"These are evidence. Don't expect me to bring them back."

I wrapped the watches in a handkerchief to preserve the fingerprints, and the old man protested. *Don't get uppity with me when you've just bought something rare at a low price.* I slowly tapped at the sign hanging in front of him. It said right there in big letters that MINORS UNDER 18 MUST HAVE THEIR GUARDIAN'S SIGNATURE.

"A kind-hearted entrepreneur like yourself wouldn't stoop to making illegal interactions, I'm sure."

My voice was dripping with sarcasm, and the man sighed and shook his head. That's right. It's smart not to try to fight city hall.

It was pissing rain outside. To use an expression my dead father liked, "It's a real turd-floater." I closed my umbrella a bit getting into Kusanagi's car, and my shoulder was absolutely soaked.

"Let's go."

"Where to?"

"Just pull out. That's good for starters," I growled at Kusanagi, and he pulled out.

"Around here somewhere. The 5A is probably somewhere in the mountains. Hey, gimme a map."

"I'm sorry, I only have the GPS," Kusanagi said apologetically.

"Idiot. I guess you need that to drive, but for detective work, a map is a necessity."

I looked at the GPS as I muttered. *The mountains ... mountains.... Ah, Okazaki Dam. This is probably it.*

"Hey, check with the administrators if the water level in this dam changed yesterday or the day before."

"You think the water level of the dam would change just from the Rahxephon?"

"You talk too much. If they sunk something that big, it'd cause some waves. Shut up and drive."

"Just tell me where."

Jeez, this guy had a one-track mind.

"The train station."

The JR Kyouda Station was nearby, but we got soaked before we made it in. Well, no matter, I could get reimbursed for the cleaning bill this time. It was just a matter of catching the prey first. I showed someone at the ticket counter a photo, and she said she was sure he had come to buy a ticket.

"His hair was like this, he was wearing short-sleeves, and I remembered because I wondered if he was cold."

Still in short-sleeves? That stinks.

"He wasn't wearing glasses or any sort of disguise?"

"No, he looked just like in this picture."

"Where did he buy a ticket to?"

"To Kagoshima. It's strange. From here, it'd be quicker to take a plane."

It certainly would. I had thought my prey would be a little

tougher than this. *Short-sleeves, Kagoshima, short-sleeves, Kagoshima, short-sleeves, Kagoshima.* Those two words blended together somehow. I thanked the ticket seller, and got soaked in the rain again before getting in the car.

"Have you found him?"

"Sort of. Do you know where the ticket buy-back office in this town is? Particularly one that's not too picky about ID."

Kusanagi told me to leave it to him, and began typing on his keyboard. In a flash several locations were listed on-screen. The third one was it. Someone had come selling a ticket to Kagoshima. But it was a girl. She had given her name as Yoshiko Ooyabu, but that was probably a fake name. She had been young and had just come in to sell the ticket. He only remembered she was wearing a parka and had short hair. We checked in the other stores if anyone had sold tickets to Kagoshima, but the third one was the only one that had.

It was a little complicated, but it seemed he had a companion. It was lucky for us that he was traveling with someone. That made it harder to run. As I was returning to the car, I made a call on my cell phone.

"He's bought a ticket to Kagoshima. I think he's hiding out around there. No, no.... Good-bye."

Bah, as always, a nasty character.

"Whom did you call?"

"That damned Isshiki."

"Ah, the white snake."

So even Kusanagi was calling him that. I suddenly felt a little sympathy for the guy.

"Send an encrypted message to the UN: Target appears to be

headed to Kagoshima, but is actually running somewhere else. Continuing the search. Stop."

"Yes, sir. And to TERRA?"

"Nothing."

I wouldn't send them anything. Because, besides from TERRA, the supervisors were going to use the 5A, which is why they assigned me to track down Level One, and now I have to start over from scratch. *Oh ho ho, that is a decision for the underlings to make, isn't it? If you get sloppy, and the government gets involved, it's not something to keep quiet about.*

"Well, let's wear down the soles of our shoes."

"Mr. Futagami, you seem happy," Kusanagi said, taking off.

"A terrier gets more interested, the more clever the fox."

Well then, my fox, let's see how long you can keep me interested.

Hiroko Asahina's Diary: May 25th

It was already bright by the time we came out of the movie theater. Both of us had sore backs from sleeping in the cramped seats, but the morning air felt great. Plus, we had the town information center give us the names of several cheap hotels. We had so little money that we had to walk everywhere, but what had seemed like a small town was much larger once we were walking around it. We decided against the first hotel. The second only had expensive rooms available. We walked around all the hotels like that, and before long it had become evening. My legs were worn out. But we finally found a cheap business hotel where we could stay.

We wrote our names in the guestbook on the counter. Kamina wrote "Mamoru Mishima" without hesitating. It hurt me to see the name "Mamoru" written. I wrote "Aya Mishima" under his.

The room was very nice, with a window on the sea. But there was just one large bed. There was nothing we could do. There was a price difference between the double and twin rooms. It's all right. We're siblings. According to the guestbook, that is.

"Tired?" Ayato asked me gently when we got inside our room.

"Nah."

"Liar."

The truth was, my legs were about to give way under me.

"Do you want to take a shower first?" he asked, and my heart beat quickly.

He saw I looked surprised, and quickly realized what I'd been thinking.

"Oh, not like that!" he quickly corrected, his face red.

I thought he was really cute when he was flustered.

Once he'd suggested it, I decided to take a shower. But first I had to brush my teeth. It had been so long, they were feeling disgusting. I brushed them with the toothbrush the hotel provided. It sure was hard. Before long, I'd made myself bleed. I took the toothbrush out of my mouth to rinse...

...and saw the tip was bright blue.

It was as if it had been dipped in paint. I threw the toothbrush down.

It couldn't be. Kamina said it was red. The handkerchief had had a blue design. Carefully I lifted the handkerchief and saw the small wound

under it.

It was as blue as the sky, betraying me.

"The enemy of humankind, that makes us live in terror, is the Mulians. They bleed blue."

The government report I'd seen last night replayed in my head.

"If you see someone with blue blood, contact the police immediately."

I had to call the police. I'd seen someone with blue blood. It was ... me. What would happen if I did that? Would the police come here and have me executed? Or would everyone chase me out of town with sticks and stones?

"Destroy the Mulians! Mulians are the enemies of Earth! They are fearsome invaders."

Kamina was saying something, but I couldn't respond and just staggered away from the bathtub and leaned on the door.

"Asahina! Answer me! Are you sick?"

I grabbed the door knob in a panic. If Ayato got in, he'd find out I'm a Mulian. I have to answer, I told myself, and my voice caught in my throat.

"It's nothing," I finally managed. "Nothing. I just felt a little dizzy. Probably from hunger...."

Liar. I lied because I didn't want the people of this world to attack me. I lied because I didn't want Kamina to leave me. No, that's a lie. I lied because I didn't want to see the hate I saw in Kamina's eyes when he found out I'm a Mulian.

"Oh, is that it? Then let's go get something to eat."

Kamina's bright voice pierced my back. It hurt, and I cried.

2

With the hungry Asahina in tow, I headed out onto the town at night.

"What should we have? Well, it's not like I know what's around. We should find something if we walk around."

"You can decide."

Asahina did not seem well. Well, she was probably tired out from walking, and she was hungry enough to feel dizzy.

"How about pork cutlets?"

"I'm not in the mood for meat."

"So something light. Do you prefer udon or soba?"

I turned around, and Asahina was standing stock-still.

"You really aren't feeling well."

She shook her head, but didn't look well. I wonder if it was because of the green traffic light.

"Kamina, um ... I...."

She wanted to tell me something, but couldn't.

"There's something I want to tell you."

"No need to be so formal about it."

"Um, you see...."

The light changed to red. Asahina tried to speak, but her voice was lost in the rumble of a passing truck.

"What?" I urged her on, and she gave a strange smile.

"I want to eat vongole."

"Ah."

We exchanged what we hoped were real smiles, and nodded.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

Asahina looked up from her plate of vongole. We were having a late dinner at the spaghetti shop we finally found.

"I was wondering about Mamoru."

I could see clearly her face had become as hard as ice.

"Those glasses really suit you. Can I see them for a sec?"

She evaded my question. She didn't want to talk about Mamoru.

Come to think of it, before we left Tokyo, she'd said something like "Mamoru isn't the Mamoru I knew." I wonder what had happened.

"How do they look on me?"

But the glasses couldn't hide the uneasy look in her eyes.

It had been the same before. I could guess what she had wanted to say back at the stoplight. I think it was about her being a Mulian. The reason for that is simple. But, if by chance you hadn't found out like me, you would have lived a lie of a normal life, I didn't want to put myself in Yagumo's place.

I should avoid talking about Mulians and Mamoru if I could. Right now she was as fragile as a thin, glass wind chime. If she took any more blows, she might break.

"Do you want to try some vongole?"

"Yeah, I'll take some."

She wrapped a bite of vongole and spaghetti on her fork. It was salty. It was the flavor of Asahina's tears.

Fragment 3: Johji Futagami

The rain kept on falling. It was a nasty rain. Even for a woman's tears, it was too much.

I was checking some things out at the cross-country bus station. Checking things out with the bus driver would take a lot of time. I was dealing with someone whose trips out and back took a whole day. There were even some who would spend the night at their destination before coming back. Sitting in a damp chair in the waiting room, I just kept smoking my cigarettes. Kusanagi was checking out the taxi stations in town, one after the next. While I didn't think someone without a lot of cash would use a taxi, some were the sorts to think that if he had left the 5A in Okazaki Dam, he wouldn't want to go far from it. Of course, there was also the possibility he'd want to get as far from it as possible. But it was hard to understand what people want, which is why I was sitting in a bus station watching that damned rain. And the chair made my ass hurt.

Just when I was thinking of kicking the damned thing, the Aomori driver finally came back. From my checking the 'net, it seemed likely he was one of the ones who had had a young man on board. While one of his legs was still on the steps of the bus, I grabbed him and showed him Level One's picture.

"Yeah."

Ah, the face of recognition.

"He was wearing glasses or somethin', but I'm pretty sure it was this kid."

Bingo. I've finally caught onto your trail, my fox.

"Was anyone with him?"

"I dunno if she was with him, but he was sitting by a girl about his own age."

"Where'd they get off?"

"Ootake."

"Ootake?"

"It's right before Aomori," the driver said and pointed to an old map on the wall of the station. It was two stops before Aomori.

"Thanks."

Before the end of that word had reached his ears, I was off. A terrier who's caught the scent is quick. I contacted Kusanagi as I ran, and had him bring the car around.

I clapped him on the shoulder and told him to drive without worrying about the speed limit. You couldn't drive carefully in a sports car like this. When I was younger, and had a fully gasoline powered car, I loved the low rumble and vibrations I could feel in my gut that I'd get from going fast. But you didn't get the same hum out of an electric car. If you sped up, you'd just get a flat squeal.

After a while we arrived in Ootake. There was nothing here but a small town attached to a JR station.

"That's a piece of luck. If he's here, you'll find him in no time. If he went into the mountains it'll be a bitch though," Kusanagi said ignorantly.

Level One was not a Mulian spy with survival training. He was just a kid, and what kid would walk up into the mountains when they were still snow-capped?

"Idiot. If a boy and a girl ran away here, they'd stand out like

Japanese tourists in the *Côte d'Ivoire*. They hitched a ride out of here."

"But where to?"

Kusanagi brought out a map.

"If they took the highway north, they would have gone through Kagura to Aomori. If they went south, it'd be Miyamae, Fuchiana, Sannoshita..."

North or south. At times like this, it wasn't my head that did the work, but my feet.

"All right. Time for some legwork."

Hiroko Asahina's Diary - May 26th

When I woke up this morning, Kamina was already dressing to go out. He said he was going to work. Some kind of job that pays by the day.

"Are you all right?" I asked, and he said he was fine, but he'd let me have the bed last night, while he slept on the hard floor, so he couldn't have slept well.

"Don't work too hard. I'll get a job, too. Women get paid more."

When I said women get paid more, Kamina didn't seem to get it, so I added, "Night work...." He looked really afraid. I thought he was going to collapse. But he just took my hand and patted it gently.

"Don't say that. If you worked, I'd get depressed."

He was smiling while he said it, but his eyes looked really sad. I'm sorry, Kamina. I won't say anything like that again. I'm sorry. But I was serious. I don't mind dirtying myself if it's for you.

"Don't work too hard."

"I know. Bye."

I watched him walk out of the hotel from the window.

The room seemed very empty without Kamina. It felt cold. Just then, I felt alone, like I'd been tossed aside. I turned on the TV in the room, but I was shocked to see a young actor I'd watched in dramas before the war was now an old man. It cut to commercials right after that, and that government report played again.

"The enemy of humankind, that makes us live in terror, is the Mulians. They bleed blue."

I flipped the switch. The TV went off and silence seemed to creep in through the windows. I felt like I was suffocating, so I turned the TV back on, figuring I could turn it off when that report played. There was a morning talk show on, but I wasn't at all interested in gossip about actors I'd never heard of. My heart raced at each commercial break with fear they would play that report. I couldn't stand it, so I turned it off. Then the silence crept in again. Then, I'd turn the TV on, and feel afraid and turn it back off. I went through that many times before I finally pulled the plug.

I never threw myself on the bed. The time stretched on longer than I could bear, and each time I looked at the clock, I'd get mad that under a minute had passed.

I thought a lot about Tokyo. About Mamoru and my mom. About middle school. The image of the music room came to mind again. I was certain something had happened there. Probably something with Kamina. But I still couldn't remember. But, because it had left such an impact on me, I was sure it must be something good.

It must be something good. I'm sure of it.

I wonder when Kamina will get back.

There was a knock at the door. He's back!

Now Ayato is asleep. He's put cardboard from the site on the floor and curled up like a ball in the blanket. I couldn't say for sure, but it looks like he's doing physical labor of some kind. It might be the only kind of work where they're not picky about identification, and they pay by the day.

What will I do if anything happens to him?

3

It's Sunday. I've only been working two days, but I was so exhausted I slept all morning. When I woke up, Asahina was staring at me.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just watching you sleep," she said, smiling, but I was sure she had been holding her breath so as not to wake me.

"Sorry."

"What?"

"Nothing."

As soon as I got up I felt my sore muscles. I guess someone from art club wasn't really suited for manual labor. If it was going to be like this, I should try to bulk up with some weight lifting. It wasn't like piloting the Rahxephon built muscle.

"You should sleep in the bed from now on, Kamina. I'm fine on

the floor."

"I'm fine. It's masculine vanity."

Actually, I was afraid I'd never wake up again if I slept in something as comfortable as a bed.

"Have you eaten?"

I looked at the bag of bread I'd bought, but it didn't look like she had touched it.

"You should eat, and not worry about me."

"I'm not that hungry."

But it was clear she'd been waiting a long time for me to get up.

"Let's go out to eat."

"But we have bread."

"Bread won't give me enough strength to keep working manual labor. Let's go out!"

I hurried Asahina and brought her out. The springtime sun shone brightly.

Once we'd had our brunch on the town, we walked around the shopping districts. It was hard, living on your own. My mom did everything for me in Tokyo, and now I had to do everything that Miss Haruka and Megumi had done for me in Niraikanai. I'd have to buy new sneakers soon. I was thinking about that, when we heard a refreshing sound. We both stopped at once. One of the fancy shops had a glass bell hanging and it had chimed in the wind.

"That's a cute sound."

It was just an ordinary glass chime with a bluebird painted on it, but it had resonated in our hearts somehow. I thought about how Asahina sat quietly in our hotel room all day while I was away so we wouldn't be

found. The room was too quiet. It would be a little better if we had a chime.

"Should I buy it?"

"Don't. It'd be a waste of money."

"Well this much we can afford."

"It's fine. It's a luxury."

I felt so bad that Asahina would call a wind chime a luxury that I wanted to hug her.

On Monday I went down to the port and was surprised to hear, "We didn't think a little weakling like you would be back." They must have been really surprised because I found my wages were a little higher that day. I bought what we needed, paid for the hotel room, and still had a little leftover. I decided to buy the chime.

Hiroko Asahina's Diary: May 29th

I fell asleep while writing in my diary. When I woke up, it was night. The moon filled the room with a pale blue light. I hadn't had a blanket on me while I was writing in my diary, but when I woke up, I had one. I was confused, but then saw Ayato had come back.

"Did I wake you?"

Ayato was smiling kindly in the reflected moonlight.

"No."

"Good. I'm worn out, but I can't get to sleep."

"Welcome home. Sorry I fell asleep."

"It's all right. I was watching you."

He blushed bright red all the way to the tips of his ears.

"Was it bad?"

"Was what?"

"Do I roll around a lot or anything?"

"Oh, yeah. You gnash your teeth and were having a feverish nightmare. It was pretty incredible."

"Liar."

"Yep," he said and smiled again.

"Jeez, even if you're just joking, there are things you don't say to a girl."

I jumped up lightly and heard a quiet sound. What was it? I looked and saw it was the glass wind chime we'd seen yesterday, blowing in the faint wind from the air conditioner.

"You bought it."

"It was cheap, so yeah."

"We don't need it."

"Doesn't matter. This room is too quiet. The silence can be a lot to get used to when you're coming from Tokyo."

I was so glad he'd been able to empathize with what I'd been going through every day when I was left alone. I felt like I was about to cry.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Let's go to bed," Ayato said and curled up on his cardboard. Even though he must have been tired, it looked very uncomfortable.

"Do you want to sleep up here?"

"I already told you, this is masculine vanity. Pride. So just leave it."

"Not that. It's a double bed, so we can each take half."

Ayato was silent for a while.

"No, we can't. If we did, I ... I'd...."

He cut off his painful words there, and pulled up his blanket and turned his back to me. I felt like he was rejecting me. No, he was rejecting my hopes.

I didn't understand that about boys.

But I wouldn't mind if it were Ayato....

He's asleep now. I'm writing this by the light of the sideboard.

The wind chime just shook.

It made a quiet tinkle.

It sounds sad.

I don't know how long we'll have to live like this. I know this is like fragile glass. But I want it to go on forever. Just like this.

The chime just made another refreshing tinkling sound.

Fragment 4: Johji Futagami

Shit. Up here I'm always the rain-man. It was raining the whole time we were in Hachinohe and Sannoshita. The forecast for Fuchiana today was cloudy, but as soon as I arrived, it started sprinkling.

Level One and his companion are in this city. I've walked around enough the past few days to really wear down the soles of my shoes. The higher-ups keep saying "send reports, bring results" every day, but I just tell them to give me more men and more money. If they'd done that, I could have found the truck driver who gave the two of them a lift in a day.

They don't give me money, they don't give me men, they just give me mouth.

But anyway, I've tracked them here. Now it's just a matter of time. I'm not going to think about the possibility they went somewhere else from here. My intuition tells me they're laying low here. Fuchiana is small, but it's big enough to hide two people. Where should I start? I could look at a list of hotels in the city. Or at apartments that rent by the week. Fuchiana is a harbor town, so there must be work available there that pays by the day and isn't too picky about ID. That might be a good start. First I should grab something to eat. Fuchiana is famous for its baitang ramen, after all.

I stepped into the ramen shop, ordered, and my ramen had finally arrived when I got a call from Kusanagi.

"The 5A is on the move!"

"What?!"

Sniff. My poor, delicious-looking baitang ramen. I'm sorry I can't eat you. I paid and got a receipt. Even though I couldn't eat you, at least I'll get reimbursed.

"Gimme the details."

I ran out into the downpour and shouted into my cell phone.

"That's-ah!"

I thought Kusanagi's voice sounded like he had thrown his head back from his phone, and I heard a sound like something big moving, and dripping mass quantities of water.

"...direction ... moving...."

Shit. I couldn't hear from the static. Did he mean the 5A was moving?

"What's going on?"

I yelled into the phone, but I got nothing but static. Damn. What was going on? I looked up at the sky that was pouring down rain.

Hiroko Asahina's Diary: May 31st

It's been six days. But I still can't believe that not even a day has passed in Tokyo.

I thought Ayato had gone out this morning, but he came right back. At work they had said he could go home because the ships that were scheduled to enter the harbor hadn't come. It wouldn't do us any good to stay cooped up in the room, so I asked him if he wanted to go out with me.

It was sprinkling.

I had an umbrella, but I shared Ayato's. We must have looked like a couple.

"Where should we go?"

"Let's go to where you work."

"The harbor? All right."

We went to the harbor. It smelled like the sea. There were some parks by the sea, like at Odaiba, but there was almost no-one there because of the rain. It was like we had the whole place to ourselves. There was a covered bench, so we sat there and watched the ships pass by. Ayato would explain all sorts of things to me, like "that's an LPG ship," or "that's a trade ship from Panama." He'd learned a lot in just the past few days. That's true. Everyone on the docks must have told him all sorts of things.

"I wonder where that ship's going," I pondered aloud, and Ayato

said, "Abroad. Probably to Europe or Africa."

"How nice. To think I thought there was no more to the world than Tokyo just recently."

"Me, too. I was just a little bit quicker."

Ayato either wanted to go to America or Africa. America, I could understand, but I asked him why Africa, and he said he wanted to see the African art that had influenced Picasso and other artists. I laughed, imagining him standing on a savanna with lions. It felt like I hadn't laughed in a while.

"Where would you like to go, Asahina?"

I hadn't thought about it before, and didn't have an answer.

"Anywhere's fine. Anywhere, but not this country. Somewhere far away."

A steam whistle blew sharply. Wet seagulls rested on railings. I felt jealous of them. They could go anywhere they wanted with those wings. But I had no wings. There was no boat I could land on that would take me to another country. There was no country on Earth that would have me if they knew I was a Mulian.

If there was one, it was Tokyo. But I couldn't go back there.

I felt sad.

I was a Mulian. I was not a human.

That's when it happened. Ayato made a quiet noise and pressed a finger to his lips. He had caught his finger on a splinter on the wood bench.

"Let me see."

Thinking I'd pull it out for him, I casually took his hand, and saw blood coming out as if he'd stuck it with a needle.

It was red blood.

Different from my own.

I felt like I had gazed into the deep river that flowed between Ayato and me.

I couldn't hold my tears back. Ayato, the only one I could trust, was a red-blooded human.

It was too much.

4

"What are you writing?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

Asahina quickly covered her notes. Her eyes were still red, and her voice sounded like she had been crying.

The rain at the park had come down as hard as Asahina's tears. I had to drag her home from the park, as she was still crying. I had my umbrella up, but we both got soaking wet. I asked Asahina if she wanted to take a shower, but she was sitting on the bed and shook her head. The rain kept coming down. I couldn't stand the atmosphere so I decided to take a shower. With the hot water pouring down over me, I began to lather up, but the soap stung my finger. Looking again at the red blood, I thought this must have been why. She was worrying about her own blue blood.

I regretted not having talked to her about this.

We'd been tricking each other, avoiding the subject. But we couldn't any longer. I decided we'd have a good talk about it, and when I

came out of the bathroom, Asahina was on the bed scribbling away in her notes. She turned around, and she shone from the rain that was still on her.

"Do you want one?"

"I'm still fine."

"You're not cold?"

"I'm all right."

I'd done what I could, so I sat on the other end of the bed. I couldn't see any way to start the conversation. What should I do?

"Um...." I started, but couldn't finish it, so the words rolled uselessly across the bed.

It was still raining. The sound filled the room, but it just made the silence seem worse. This silence was like the silence at home in Tokyo. That was it. I could talk about my mom. At least if we talked, it wouldn't be quiet anymore.

"Um, my mom, she isn't my real mother. She's pretty cold, but she's got her good points, too. I can't really explain it, but I trusted her."

As I spoke, I envisioned my mom's face. Her kind, smiling face.

"It's funny, isn't it? She's not my real mom. Where's my real mom? What am I? Why was I born?"

I cut myself off painfully. Why had I been born?

"My mom told me that someday my blood would turn blue."

I could tell without looking that Asahina had turned toward me.

"It's true. I am a Mulian. That's why I couldn't stay out here, and ran back to Tokyo, then decided I couldn't stay there after all, and.... I'm just like you."

I felt a gentle, hot lump pressed into my back. It was Asahina. I heard her sniffing voice.

"Asahina...."

"I'm sorry," she said, crying.

"I haven't thought of anyone but myself. I wasn't thinking of you at all."

"I...."

"Be quiet and let me do this."

She pressed her face to my back, and her voice quavered. I could feel my back growing hot with tears. I could feel her pain and I felt like crying, too.

"What happened in the music room?" Asahina said, trying to change the subject.

"I don't know. I can't remember either."

"But it must have been something good. I'm sure."

"Yeah, it must have been."

"That's right. It absolutely must have been good. That's why we haven't forgotten. Neither of us can forget it, so it must have been something good that happened to us."

She spoke in a bright voice, but swallowed sadly.

"I can't even remember what happened a long time ago. I can't trust my own memories. I don't have anything but you, Kamina. I can't trust anything else. All I can trust is...."

She wrapped her thin arms around my chest.

"This warmth."

I put my hands on hers. They were still cold from the rain. I squeezed her poor, cold hands. I would have held them forever if it would warm them.

"Asahina...."

I don't know which of us fell into bed first, but next thing I knew, Asahina was holding me and lying on top of me. That was the first time I'd known how nice the weight of a person can feel. It was the first time I realized how warm people's bodies are.

Asahina's face was right next to mine. Her hair smelled good. It smelled like her.

"Asahina ... I ... can't."

It was all I could do to get the words out. My voice sounded weak.

"Kamina ... Ayato ... you're so warm."

Her cold hands grasped mine. But beneath the cold, there was a heat. I felt about to melt into that heat.

I looked at her eyes. Had they always been such a deep color? I'd known her since elementary school, but I didn't know anything about her.

I could see myself reflected in her eyes. I wonder if she could see herself reflected in mine.

Her lips were right there. They were moist and had become plump from fever.

I could hear her breathing.

She could hear my breathing.

I could hear the beating of her heart.

She could hear the beating of my heart.

They counted the seconds of our time together.

It hurt. I knew I shouldn't do this, but my heart wouldn't listen. I held her hands, then let them go several times.

"Go on."

Hearing those words, I resisted myself.

Just as our lips were about to touch, I felt a strong presence.

"What is it?"

Asahina sounded surprised at being interrupted, but I couldn't worry about that. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window, pulling the curtain aside.

"Ayato!"

There was a heavy, thick cloud spreading outside the window. The glass began to shake slightly. There was a light inside the cloud I thought was lightning, but then the hotel shook with a blast. The cloud split apart into circles, and I could see the full moon in the gap. I saw a dark shape rise up in front of the moon. It was a Dolem. It looked like it was wearing a skirt, and was heading toward me with arms outstretched.

It was my mother. TERRA weren't the only ones looking for me. My mother was still after me, too. To take me back to Tokyo.

The Dolem had a kind but cold smile on its lips, and was approaching slowly from above the town.

"What is that?" Asahina clutched at my clothes.

"A Dolem."

"A Dolem?"

"Our enemy."

"Enemy?..."

That's right, our enemy. That one word cut through my heart.

The approaching Dolem made a different noise. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a dark shape speeding alongside the Dolem. It was the Rahxephon.

The Rahxephon positioned itself between the hotel and the

approaching Dolem. It stood right in the Dolem's path.

The Rahxephon was trying to protect me. But if not for the Rahxephon, I would not have been targeted. I smiled unconsciously at the irony.

But I could not escape this fate. I had to do this. I had to.

"Asahina. I didn't think I'd lost anything in Tokyo."

The Rahxephon had started projecting the light that would take me in.

"But I was wrong. I had something to protect."

I took off my fake glasses and looked at her. She looked uneasy in the light from the Rahxephon.

"I will protect you. I want to protect you."

Her face wrinkled with happiness and she looked ready to cry.

"Kamina...."

"I'm going to fight. I'll beat that thing."

"There's something I have to tell you."

Asahina looked at me with serious eyes.

"It's all right. I'll be back. Just wait here."

"I ... I ... I have so much I want to talk to you about."

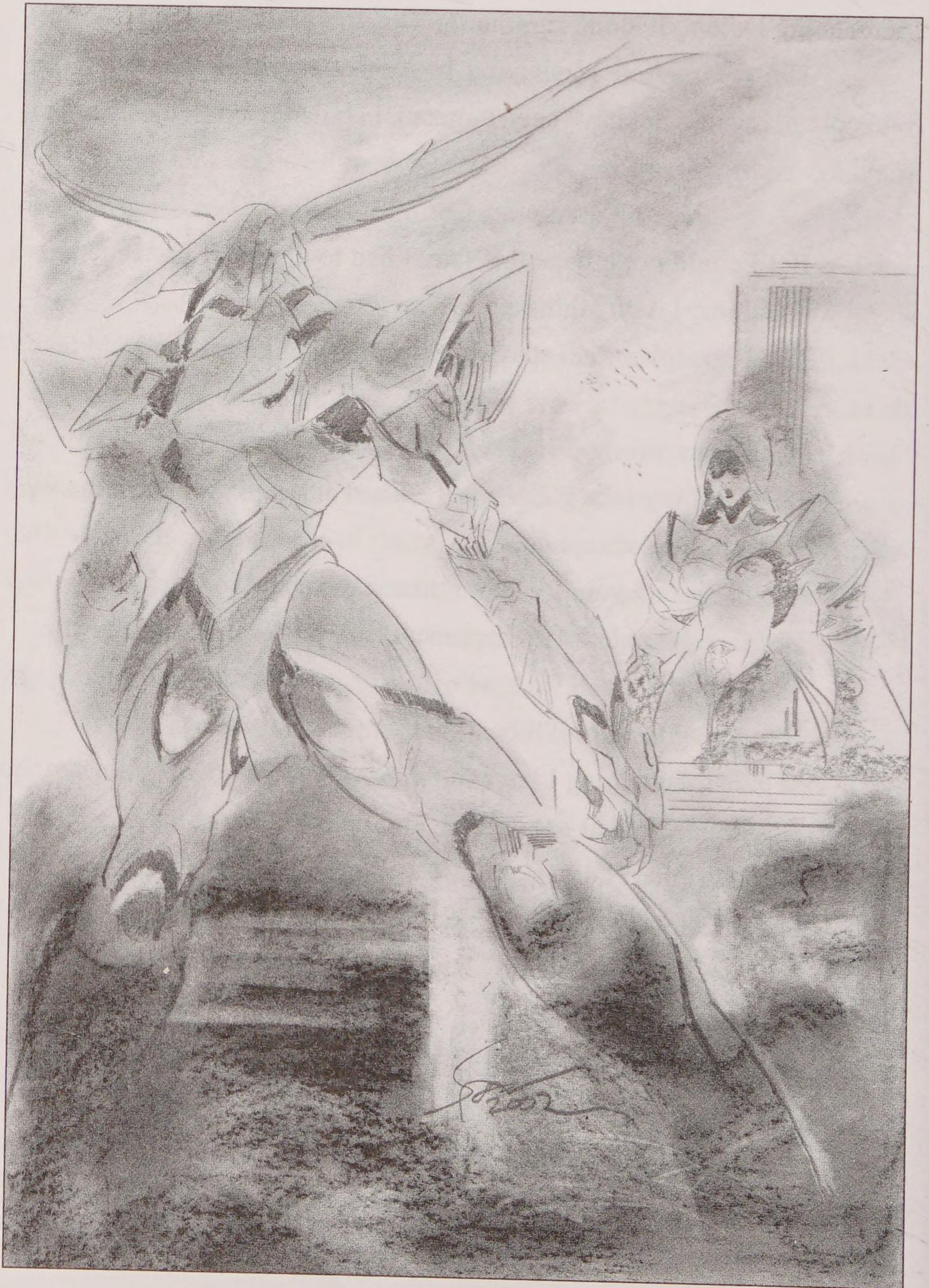
Me, too. But I was already being drawn away by the Rahxephon.

"Kamina!... Ayato!"

She held out her hand to me.

"Hiroko."

I held my hand out to touch hers, but just as we were about to touch, I could no longer reach. The space between us grew larger and larger.



"I'll be waiting! I'll wait forever and ever!"

With her hand still outstretched, she shouted desperately, and the light and shadow fell about her, giving her what looked like blue wings. She looked just like an angel.

The wind chime tinkled. Ah, the bluebird painted on the chime was reflecting the light from the Rahxephon.

I was being brought into the Rahxephon, and my body passed through the window. The window of the hotel where Asahina was grew smaller and smaller.

"I'll be waiting here for you, Ayato!"

I heard her voice as I was drawn inside the Rahxephon. *Just wait! I'll beat this thing and come back.*

"I'll do it."

If my mom was willing to go to these lengths to bring me back, I would fight her.

Certainly, from an adult perspective, we were just playing house, though.

It might have been something fragile.

It might have been a castle built on the sand of deception.

However small, it was still happiness.

How dare you destroy that! How dare you make Hiroko sad!

I had to protect Hiroko.

The Rahxephon howled. It was a song of battle.

As if in response to that, the Dolem started singing again.

The battle had begun.

Fragment 5: Johji Futagami

What a mess this was turning into. The town was a mess. Using the city as a setting for the confrontation between the 5A and a Dolem was too much like a Toei monster flick. The one saving grace was that it had stopped raining.

As for the townspeople, they were all watching the scene in shock. There were even some in the crowd with video cameras. Had they forgotten their fear of Dolems in just over ten years? They hadn't even seen the 5A before, so how were they supposed to know which was the good guy?

There was a sound like fireworks going off and the power in the city flickered. I looked up and was a little surprised. What was that? The lights in the windows of a large building started flickering on and off to make shapes. It was like how the buildings in Umeda made a tree at the end of the year with the lights in their windows. Letters were going by like the ones on an electronic billboard.

"H ... E ... L ... L ... O ... H ... O ... W ... A ... R ... E ... Y ... O ...
U...."

What was going on? Looking around, I saw the same words on the TVs in the windows of electronics stores. They were even on the screen of my cell phone.

"A ... Y ... A ... T ... O...."

What was this? Why was it talking to Level One? That Dolem couldn't be talking to him, could it?

"S ... T ... O ... P ... I ... T...."

Hey. This was gonna be bad.

"Level One! I mean, Kamina! Stop right now!"

I shouted as loud as I could, but he couldn't have heard me. Even if I had been within hearing distance, he wouldn't have heard me, not the way he was now.

5A raised its voice in song and charged at the Dolem.

Our Song

"I will protect you."

Ayato's words echoed hotly in my heart. *But don't get injured in the fight. If you got hurt protecting me, I'd never forgive myself.*

The Dolem, or whatever it was called, and Ayato in the Rahxephon, I think it was, were fighting right before my eyes. The Rahxephon's back was turned toward me, and the Dolem was beyond it. Although it seemed to have a hood pulled down over its eyes and I shouldn't have been able to see them, they were glittering clearly, and I knew they were looking at me.

I felt the muscles on my back tingle.

Something was pressing on my back.

It hurt.

I couldn't breathe.

My breath escaped between clenched teeth, and my chest hurt like something was squeezing it.

No. I didn't know what it was, but it wasn't good.

Even though I had rejected it, it bound my soul with the discomfort that grasped at my heart.

I screamed.

I saw the Rahxephon in double before me.

One, I saw from the back, and the other was facing me.

That could only mean one thing: that I was the Dolem.

The weight on my back caused me to fall forward onto the table by the window. My body was no longer my own. It was like something had possessed me. Ayato had said it before. Mulians are from another world, and cannot survive on this one without a human to synchronize with. A real Mulian was taking over my body.

And it was making me fight Ayato.

I wouldn't do it! But no matter how hard I tried to shout that, my voice caught in my throat and wouldn't come out. I forced my eyes open and saw my notebook in front of me.

I have to tell him ... I have to tell him.... I have to tell Ayato. Tell him my true feelings.

I gritted my teeth and grabbed my pen.

The D1 Aria echoed through the Rahxephon's body.

"Uwaaaaa-ooooh!"

Inside the Rahxephon, I screamed loud enough to rival that

sound. I brought the Rahxephon in at once. The Dolem coming right at me. It Dolem raised its right arm.

I ran the Rahxephon in to charge into it at full power, but was stopped easily.

Damn. Now I'll start playing serious.

As it raised its right arm, the Dolem opened its mouth and attacked with a strong D1 Aria.

It was a fierce attack.

The Rahxephon lost its balance and fell, scraping the ground and bouncing up again.

This was bad!

At this rate, I'd crush the hotel where Hiroko was.

Using all the main strength, I twisted the Rahxephon around and somehow managed to stop it.

This was some Dolem, to knock the Rahxephon out like that from just one D1 Aria.

The screens were dilled with the charging Dolem.

Pressed down with an incredible mass, the Rahxephon's body sank into the ground.

At the same time, the Dolem's right arm crashed into the Rahxephon's stomach.

The attack spread waves across the water where the pilot's seat was, and even churned up my head.

It was enough that I went spacy for a second.

This was bad. It might beat me, at this rate.

I couldn't protect Hiroko.

Someone was pressing on my back. They were trying to steal my will. I put everything I had into writing with that pen. The only letters I could write were shaky, like they were written by a young child.

I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS....

I don't want to do this, Ayato. I don't want to hurt you. I really don't want to hurt the only person I can trust.

Help. Don't make me do this.

But I just drove the Dolem's right fist into the Rahxephon.

I heard an awful sound.

It was the sound of the Rahxephon's body cracking. That attack echoed directly into my body.

With its right arm still in the Rahxephon's stomach, the Dolem lifted its rear end.

Underneath the skirt-like flare, there was a swollen part like a bee's abdomen. There was a stinger that moved in and out like breaths. The tip looked wet, like it was coated in poison. It probably meant to stick that in the Rahxephon.

Next thing I realized, I was screaming.

"I said I'd protect Hiroko and I *will*!"

That voice became the Rahxephon's voice. Light came out every part of its body, and that wave pushed back the Dolem.

I flew off the table as if I'd been hit. It had been with such great force that I lost my voice. For a while I could only moan where I lay on the floor. But I had to get up. I had to get up and finish writing. I tried with all my might to get up.

Why did it get up? It should have stayed down.

"I'll protect her! I will protect her!"

The hotel shook lightly. The light was on in our room. I had to protect that light.

"I will protect Hiroko!"

Putting the brunt of my strength from my anger into song, I lashed out at the Dolem as it tried to get up. It was tossed about like a rag doll, and crashed into a large storage area by the harbor, half destroying it. *Serves you right.*

"I have to tell him ... I must tell Ayato...."

I tried to get up and grab the pen. But my fingers were shaking so badly from the pain that they wouldn't do what I wanted, and I dropped the pen. I had to pick it up. Pick it up and tell Ayato.

I WANT TO TELL THE TRUTH.

I WANT TO TALK WITH YOU.

But my fingers.... I was blinded by the pain, but I picked up the pen and kept writing letters. My final thoughts....

It was trying to get up again.

I sent the Rahxephon flying and closed the gap in one leap.

The suffering Dolem raised its arm using the last bits of its strength.

But that wouldn't do anything.

I thrust the Rahxephon's fist into the Dolem's raised arm.

The fists met.

For a second, there were beams of light making it as bright as

day, and everything was light and shadow.

Then there was a shattering noise as the Rahxephon's fist destroyed the Dolem's.

The Dolem gave its death cry.

The scream echoed across the town and sea. The scream was enough to cloud the moon.

But I won't forgive you. I won't forgive you for destroying my happiness.

It's all your fault for making her so sad.

Using all my strength, I lifted my right fist.

This one was for Hiroko!

It's done.

I don't feel pain...

I don't suffer...

I didn't hurt Ayato. I can be at peace.

Ayato, I enjoyed this week. It was like a dream.

"A Y A T O"

I could feel myself smiling. I bet it was a great smile. One good enough to show Ayato.

And then the Rahxephon's fist went through my chest.

The silence spread.

The last sound I heard was that of the wind chime.

I thrust the Rahxephon's fist into the Dolem's chest with all my rage. It was enough force to piece through.

The Dolem's sad song echoed through the night air and I could

see all its strength was gone. The Dolem stopped moving like a doll pierced through with a stick. *Serves you right.* My breath was ragged as I glared down at the Dolem. I had won. I had protected Hiroko. I had carried through.

Just then, I heard the wind chime.

I looked up, confused, and the tall building caught my eye.

There were words written on it in the lit windows.

I L O V E Y O U

It couldn't be.

Just then, the Dolem in the Rahxephon's hands burst open, spilling a blue liquid around. The blue liquid got all over the Rahxephon, but I was frozen still.

The words on the building continued.

G O O D B Y E A Y A T O

It couldn't be.

It couldn't be!

It couldn't be!

My scream became a song which echoed on the full moon.

I heard a wind chime in the distance.

Fragment 6: Johji Futagami

I had the shocked manager wait outside. When I opened the door, I smelled blood. It was always a nasty smell. Even blue blood stank the same as human blood.

Inside the room was quiet. Though it wasn't the season for them, a blue wind chime made a fragile sound.

Blue blood was splattered on one side of it.

Level One was sitting, as if dead, in the middle of the ocean of blood. The word "good-bye" was written across the open pages of the girlish notebook he held in his hands. The bottom of the last letter stretched down like a tear; it must have been the last thing she wrote before she left. Level One sat staring at that notebook as if he had frozen in that position.

The girl's motionless body was lying on the bed. She had died with a peaceful expression on her face. I knew he was upset, but he could have at least folded the deceased's hands together. I did it, and muttered "May you rest in peace." I'd leave the rest to the Japanese government's anti-Mulian department, and just had to get Level One out of there.

"Come on." I used the nicest voice I could muster and even offered him my hand, but Level One was limp as a puppet with its strings cut.

"Get up!" I raised my voice and he finally noticed me.

"Mister ... Futagami?..."

"Yeah, stand up."

I helped him up. There was a lot I wanted to say to him, but see-



ing his eyes full of blank sadness, I couldn't say a word. I just handed him the girl's watch I had taken in as evidence and had figured was his companion's. Even I have some semblance of emotion. There wouldn't be any horrible repercussions of my letting him hold this watch.

Level One was blank as he grabbed it with shaking fingers and stared at it.

A small sob escaped his lips. Just then, his emotions must have broken the dam, and he started to cry. If you took away the fact that he could pilot the Rahxephon, that he was Ayato Kamina, the son of the leader of the Tokyo government central, Maya Kamina, he was just a regular kid. It must have been the first time he'd lost someone dear to him, let alone killed such a person with his own hands.

But once you've been alive long enough, you get used to that sort of thing. Now's the only time he'll be able to let loose and cry like this. Now's the only time.

I felt a little uncomfortable and looked away. *Hmm, might be because of my age.*

There was one picture hanging on the wall. It was a print of René Magritte's *La Grande Famille*. It was a cloudy sky with a cut-out part, in the shape of a bird, of blue sky. It was a knock-out idea. It was from Magritte's twilight years, wasn't it? But I wonder why it was called *La Grande Famille*. Was the blue sky in the shape of a bird against a cloudy sky the large family, or was the sky around it the large family? And was there even a bird there? Or was it just the sky?

The bird in the picture kept on flying, its empty blue wings spread wide, as if ridiculing my interpretation.

I left the hotel, dragging Level One behind me.

Some people had the gall to be waiting for us to come out up front. They were men dressed all in black, holding guns. They even had a gun to Kusanagi, who had both hands in the air. Don't smile sheepishly when you've got a gun to you, idiot.

There was a woman standing in the middle of the men. She was unbelievable. The witch of the Bahbem Foundation had come herself.

The witch looked at me and chuckled.

"Well done, Mr. Futagami."

I was tricked. Just when I thought the Foundation was cooperating, they leave me to do the hard work, and jump in once something big happens. Just like the Foundation to be so efficient. They didn't wear down the soles of their shoes like fools.

I guess I've gotta throw in the towel on this one. On both my prey and my pension.

"Terriers aren't used to being chased."

Fourth Movement: The Fight of the Manipulated

Fragment 1: Kim Hotal

I haven't been talking to Sou lately. Ever since Commander Kunugi was removed from his post, and Isshiki became Commander, he's been following him around wagging his tail like a puppy. That's not right. Commander Kunugi was his benefactor. Can he really go around throwing sand in his wake like that? When I asked him about it, he just laughed and avoided the question. If he's got a plan, it's awfully cruel of him not to ask me about it. If he doesn't have a plan, it's even worse. Even though I'm angry, Sou acts like there's nothing going on. That's why I went to his room yesterday and left the key in his mailbox. This morning he just said, "Hello, Kim." Have I been dumped? Does it even matter?

I feel ill when I think about it. Maybe it's because of what happened with Sou that I'm not feeling well. I feel like I'm going to be sick. Thinking it would make me feel better, I've been drinking carbonated beverages and eating sour lemons, and I feel all right then, but the ill feeling comes right back.

Oh, come to think of it.... No, I couldn't be.... But ... it's not as if I don't have my suspicions.

Sou brought Kamina into the Command Center.

I didn't see him, but they said that when he was brought back by the Foundation, he was in shock and hardly reacted to anything. I think

he was hospitalized for four or five days after that, but he really seemed like his mind was somewhere else. Wispy and elusive.

"Commander, I've brought him."

Commander Isshiki turned slowly around to face me. More of his melodrama. He didn't have to have his back to everyone all the time.

"You must be surprised."

A proud smile of victory played about the Commander's lips. But with Kamina in his current condition, there was no competition between them. He did not look remotely surprised, but just looked up at Commander Isshiki with eyes that were not entirely in or out of focus.

"Commander Kunugi was removed from his post due to questions about his ability to command. He is currently in disciplinary confinement in his home."

Even hearing that Commander Kunugi was in disciplinary confinement, Kamina did not move. The words seemed to pass right through him.

"You've been up to all sorts of trouble. I hope you understand the seriousness of your actions. I dislike you, whether or not you're a Mulian. But I am a fair person. I believe in using things that are worth using. Human relations are nothing more than mutual interests. I will allow you to live."

After everything he'd said, I expected him to snap out of it and talk back, or hit him or something, but Kamina did not move a step.

"Come on now, Commander, Ayato's just come back, after all."

Sou stepped in between them. Whaddya mean he's "just come back after all"? Don't be such a sycophant. I can't watch this.

"If you're not going to follow my orders, I'll have you put in dis-

ciplinary confinement just like the former Commander."

Commander Isshiki looked at Kamina with cold eyes. Then another person I haven't been talking to lately showed up. It was Haruka.

Haruka was distant, too. I didn't know what had happened in Tokyo, but as soon as she got back, she was promoted to Information Analyst working directly under Commander Isshiki. And Captain Elvy was put on probation? She had just let Haruka ride along, so why was Haruka getting the benefit of the doubt?

She stood next to Commander Isshiki, and Kamina's eyes did move at that. The Commander laughed now that he had finally gotten a reaction. Ah, but he hadn't. Kamina's eyes had moved toward Haruka, but in the opposite direction. What? There was suddenly a long-haired girl standing next to the Commander. She was wearing a TERRA uniform, but who was she? Even the Commander looked surprised.

Kamina moved just as I was reaching for the intruder alarm.

"Mishima? It's you isn't it, Mishima?" Kamina said, and moved toward the girl.

Did he know her? But she just looked back at him without saying anything. She looked away, and fixed her gaze on the Commander. He looked like he had either come back to his senses, or had remembered something.

"Yes, she is a new candidate for TERRA executive officer. Her name is...."

He paused, as if trying to remember, and the girl twitched her lips slightly.

"I'm Haruka."

Ah, yes. Lieutenant Haruka. Why had I forgotten her when she

was just introduced yesterday? She seemed to leave a strong impression, too. Was I so wrapped up in what was going on with Sou?

Lieutenant Haruka smiled kindly at Kamina.

"It's nice to meet you. I hear you draw. I'd love to see your work sometime."

What was that supposed to mean?

Fragment 2: Haruka Shitow

I sat alone in the empty lounge. Gomi and Yomoda came by laughing, but when they saw me, they looked away and left. Kim had given me a clearly scornful look when she went by. It was only natural. I'd become the closest adviser to the man who had had Commander Kunugi removed.

But I had no choice.

If I hadn't done this, Ayato would have been taken to the Mulian detention center.

"It's up to you."

The words Isshiki had said when I'd gotten back replayed in my mind.

"I'll put Kamina in a detention center. That's a good place for him. They have no consideration for human rights. Then you'll have your rank suspended and you'll be drummed out on a variety of charges. If you don't want that, then promise to be loyal to me, Makoto Isshiki."

I had been prepared to stand before a military court before I got on the Vermillion. I was prepared to lose my rank, even if everything had been a success. Even after we left Tokyo, I had planned to continue

searching for Ayato on my own.

I had thought that no matter what happened, the Foundation that stood behind Isshiki would never let go of Ayato. I had just imagined that "never letting go" of Ayato would mean leaving him to TERRA. But Isshiki would do it. Whether he was left to TERRA or to a detention center, it was certain that Isshiki would not let go of Ayato.

I had no choice.

This was my only option. But I could not make that public. Even if the Command Center became like a bed of nails, and Gomi and Kim and everyone all hated me, I could not tell them.

But the worst part of all was seeing Ayato just now. It hurt to see the way he looked at me when I was standing next to Isshiki. It was painful to see the surprise and hate in his eyes. I nearly pleaded with him not to look at me like that, but I knew what Isshiki would do if I had.

It's pitiful, but I have no choice. I may be misunderstood, I may be hated, but it's best this way.

I'd sell my soul to the devil to protect him. And now I have sold my soul to the devil. I've become Isshiki's right-hand man.

The sofa in the lounge sank a bit.

I looked up and saw Elvy sitting not far from me. I'd done unforgivable things to her, too.

She didn't try to make eye-contact with me, but just kept staring off into space.

The awkward silence continued. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I stood up and walked right in front of her on my way to the command room.

She wouldn't look at me as I walked past. I didn't look at her

either. Fine. I was a conceited, back-stabbing bitch anyway.

"You'd do anything to protect the one you love."

Elvy's words sounded amazed, but kind, behind me.

I turned around in surprise, and saw Elvy had gotten up and had her back to me. I could tell that not only did she understand everything, she forgave me.

Thanks, Elvy.

I kept standing there and watched her leave.

Thanks, Elvy.

1

I went home. I went the other way down the road I had taken when I left for Tokyo. Quon had been with me then. But she was not here now. I had left empty-handed, but now I was carrying a small bag from the convenience store. Inside were the wind chime and watch, and a notebook. Memories of Asahina. I was sorry to put them in such a cheap bag. But I didn't have the courage to throw the bag away and carry them in my hands.

I wasn't able to protect her. And even though I'd promised Doctor Itsuki, I hadn't been able to protect Quon. Was this all the strength I had?

My legs felt heavy. They felt about to be crushed with weakness. No, I wished they would give way. That might be better. I kept walking, thinking that, when I heard someone call my name.

Who could it be? It was a voice I'd heard before. I looked around and saw someone appear from between some trees.

"I thought it might be you."

It was Mamoru.

Suddenly, the plastic bag felt much heavier.

I wanted to run away.

But I couldn't.

"I'm glad I bumped into you here," Mamoru said fondly, but to me it sounded like he was exposing my sins. It sounded like he was announcing the fact that I hadn't protected Hiroko.

"How's it going? Surprised to see me?"

The watch and wind chime bumped together inside the bag and made an awful noise.

"What's wrong, Ayato?"

Mamoru clapped a hand on my shoulder. Then he looked around us.

"I was followed. You'll take me in, won't you? We're friends, right?"

It was all I could do to nod my head.

Fragment 3: Megumi Shitow

Jeez, what was he up to?

He sure was taking his sweet time considering he said he'd just go down to the convenience store to buy some snacks.

You're not in elementary school, so don't loiter.

Megumi will get impatient.

Ah, I just heard the door open.

It was Ayato.

I flew out into the hallway and almost fell over in my haste. I fell over at almost the exact same time Ayato stepped inside. That would make a nice reunion scene.

So I didn't look too awful catching my balance, I looked up and smiled.

"Welcome home!"

Ayato opened his eyes wide.

"What is this? At least say, 'I'm home!'"

"I-I'm home."

His voice sounded flat. His expression looked a little tired, too.

What had happened in Tokyo?

Well, no matter. He was home and he could tell me any time.

"I went to all the trouble of using a vacation day, so you can show a little more emotion if you like."

"A vacation day? Do part-time jobs have those?"

Ah, the jerk didn't even listen to my message before he left. He didn't know I'd passed the test to become a full-fledged TERRA employee.

It was so long ago, that I was surprised there were still people who didn't know.

"Don't just stand there, come in!" I urged him, and Ayato looked behind him.

That's when I saw a boy I didn't know standing behind Ayato looking embarrassed. Who was he?

"Who's that?"

"A friend."

"I'm Mamoru Torigai. Nice to meet you."

He was pretty cheerful.

He was a nice complement to the gloomy Ayato.

His hair had a slight curl, like it was naturally wavy. He was pretty good-looking. Not really my type, though.

"Ah, I'm Megumi Shitow."

I quickly sat down again and glared at Ayato.

You should have told me if you were gonna bring a friend home!

Then I wouldn't have to have made such an impression at our first meeting.

"He ... might be staying a while," Ayato said.

What did he mean by "a while?"

What did he mean by "a friend?" Did he have any friends besides people he knew in Tokyo?

"Where's your uncle?"

"He's out. At a friend's, he said."

My uncle went to drop by a friend's house, and a friend dropped by here, huh.

Fragment 4: Jin Kunugi

Rikudoh-sensei was good enough to stop by my house to visit for the first time in a while.

"Do you mind if it's Toraja coffee?"

"No, that's fine."

Come to think of it, how many years had it been since I last ground coffee and had a nice, long drink like this? As I poured hot water into the pot, the coffee grounds swelled and began to fill the air with a

rich scent.

"It's nice of you to see me, despite your busy schedule."

"Is that irony? An officer in disciplinary confinement doesn't have anything to do. I've just been reading the books that have been piling up and listening to old records."

"No different from my own life."

"It was rude of me to say. I misspoke," I said, and Rikudoh-sensei laughed on the bench by the window where he sat.

"You're so uptight. You should relax more."

"I'm sorry. I'm clumsy at life."

"No one's particularly graceful."

That might be true. But there were those who appeared graceful, and there were those like me who always looked awkward.

"I hear Ayato's back."

"Yeah, sorry for all that."

"It's nothing to apologize for."

"No, you went through a lot for him. For his safety. I heard about it."

The coffee maker stopped dripping, and I poured the contents out into mugs. Director Watari was meddlesome. He didn't have to tell sensei everything.

"I think he is lucky. It's not just you. Lots of people have done a lot for him. I'm thankful."

He really sounded like he was grateful himself. How had he reached that state? I still felt quite distant from Kamina.

"I'm envious of you, sir. It sounds like you're not at all concerned about the color of his blood. How can I learn to think like you do?"

Rikudoh-sensei looked up at me and broke into a wide grin.

"It's simple. You should eat a meal with him. If you try it, you'll see."

A meal? That might not be a bad idea.

2

"Wow, I can see the ocean. This is a nice room."

Mamoru sounded just as carefree as he had in Tokyo. My hand holding the wind chime froze. I swallowed my words, and put the wind chime down on the window sill. I put the watch and notebook in a drawer. There, if things went wrong, Mamoru might see them. I'd think of a better hiding place for them later. Then, I put the watch I'd left on my desk back on my wrist. The TERRA watch showed two times. Tokyo's and the outside time. No, the time here, and another time.

"Hey, you keeping vigil or something?" Mamoru said jokingly, looking at how somber I'd become.

"No. It's just a lot has happened to me."

I couldn't tell him now. Not really.

"Ah. A lot's happened to me, too."

That's right. It was all about him.

"You managed to get out."

"Finally, he asks! It was an adventure. I was taken out by TERRA or some such. In some robot I'd never seen the like of."

"The Vermillion?"

"Yeah, that's the one. So I was forced into that whatever-you-called-it and brought out. They were gonna put me in some facility, but I

heard you were here, and when they weren't looking.... I evaded gunfire, lost the guys on my tail, made my way through a minefield...."

I had to smile at Mamoru's usual antics.

"There wasn't any gunfire."

"No, I told a lie. I'm very sorry," Mamoru joked and bowed deeply, but when he lifted his head again, I saw he was a little uneasy.

"But I ran like hell 'cause I was afraid all that might happen. I'm really glad I found you then. If not, who knows where I'd be right now...."

Mr. Futagami and the Foundation had chased me that persistently. It wouldn't be surprising if TERRA had sent the Vermillion to Tokyo. Nor was the possibility that they'd brought Mamoru as an experiment. Mr. Kunugi probably wouldn't do those things, but it wasn't unthinkable that that bastard Isshiki might.

I'd have to ask Miss Haruka later. No, now that she was Isshiki's personal information analyst or whatever, she hadn't even looked at me. It would be hard to ask. Megumi probably didn't know anything.

"Can I come in, Ayato?"

Megumi came in with a tray of snacks. She looked a little down. I wonder what was wrong with her.

"Would you like some, Torigai?"

"Heck, yeah. Oh, and you can call me Mamoru. All my friends call me that."

Mamoru was in good spirits as usual. Megumi smiled shyly.

"The storage room over there is empty. You can use it, but it's a little bit dusty."

"Thanks. Sorry to trouble you, Megumi."

"Will you keep it a secret from your uncle that he's here?" I

asked, and she looked shocked.

"Why? I don't think he'll mind the extra trouble."

"I don't want to bother him. Harboring someone from Tokyo and all."

"Ah, so he is from Tokyo!"

"Aw, yeah. Born and raised, baby," Mamoru added.

"I'll talk to him about it when the time comes. But for now, let's keep it our secret."

For some reason Megumi looked surprised, blushed lightly, and looked away. I was probably imagining things. A secret wasn't anything to get that worked up about.

"All right. But you have to explain it to him sometime!"

"I know."

"And ... can I have a minute?" Megumi looked over at Mamoru and indicated she wanted to talk outside. I got up and told Mamoru, and she and I stepped into the hallway.

"What?"

"Y'see, I don't mind, that you're...."

She seemed to have a hard time getting the last of her sentence out.

"That I'm a Mulian?"

Megumi looked up, surprised.

"I don't mind either. Not anymore."

I didn't mind anymore. If I didn't mind that I was a Mulian, I felt sorry for Asahina. She was still her, even if her blood had turned blue. The color of your blood didn't matter.

"That's all I wanted to say."

Megumi smiled.

"Well, I've gotta go make dinner."

I watched her go down the stairs, thinking what a nice girl she was.

When I went back in the room, Mamoru was staring out the window at the ocean.

"The ocean goes all the way back up to Tokyo."

He sounded like I had once.

"Yeah. Except there's the absolute barrier there."

"The absolute barrier? It's what's keeping me from Hiroko."

My chest tightened into knots when I heard him say that name.

"Y'know, Megumi kinda reminds me of Hiroko."

"D-does she?"

"Totally. Their demeanor, I guess. I wish I could swim back to Tokyo."

"I'll take you back sometime."

"Can I trust you?"

"You can."

This time. This time I'd make that be true.

Fragment 5: Megumi Shitow

Hmhmhmhmhm!

I just burst into humming.

I was a simple fool.

"Our secret" just has such a nice ring to it. I had been in a bad mood because after I went to all the trouble of getting the day off, and my

uncle was out, he had to go and bring a friend home. But that bad mood had vanished.

Hee-hee!

It would be secret from Haruka, too. She had gone all the way to Tokyo to follow him, but now she was in thick with the white snake, so she had lost points. But he and I shared "our secret," so my points had gone up.

Plus, it was probably because Mamoru was here, but he had used the less polite word for "I." He probably hadn't noticed it himself, but that was the first time he'd said that in front of me.

Points for me!

I wonder if I should start a bath for Mamoru. That would be even more points for me.

3

Mamoru went to go sleep in the storage room. I'm sure he was very tired. He'd finally made it here after running for a long time around a place where he couldn't trust anything.

I took Asahina's watch out from the drawer.

It had stopped. I had stopped it.

Could I tell Mamoru? Could I tell him that I'd killed his girlfriend?

I couldn't. There was no way I could. At least, not now. If I waited a little bit, and got my feelings under control, maybe then. And maybe once Mamoru had had some time to adjust to life out here, we'd be in a position to talk about it.

I told myself that, and put the watch in a Boston bag with the diary where Asahina had recorded her last thoughts. I shoved that deep into my closet.

I was doing this for Mamoru's sake. I had to tell him things bit by bit, just as Miss Haruka had done for me when she brought me out of Tokyo. If she had told me everything all at once, I would never have been able to keep on going.

I had to do that, for Mamoru's sake.

The glass wind chime tinkled.

Fragment 6: Mamoru Torigai

I could hear Ayato -- no, Ollin -- doing something in the next room. When he saw me come out of the woods before, his face was ... sort of surprised, but also sort of guilty-looking.

If you're going to make a face like that ... then bring back Hiroko.

My cover was that I was here for TERRA research. *But y'see, Ollin, I came to make you suffer. I'm gonna make you suffer long and hard, then kill you slowly.*

At the time I had been in the director's room, and when you pummeled the Vibrato, I heard Hiroko screaming. I couldn't do anything. All I could do was stand there next to Maya and watch you beat Hiroko to death. I want you to taste that powerlessness and desperation.

You killed Hiroko. But even so, I didn't have the courage to tell you, and just acted like old friends. Whaddya mean I can "trust" you? Who could ever count on someone like you?

Fragment 7: Elvy Hadhiyat

With nothing to do, I sat down at a table in the pilots' lounge to watch the Vermillion take off on a training flight. They'd deployed it while I was gone, apparently.

By the looks of it, it was Cathy. As usual, she came in too steep when she was doing high-speed drops in altitude. If she tried that, she'd get the enemy off her tail, but it'd take time to get back up again. It would be just enough time to get one round of shots off.

On the other side was Donny, for sure. I could tell right away from his almost-too-careful precise movements.

I could tell someone was beside me, and I turned to look, I saw Maestro was standing there. He was holding two coffee cups.

"Have you gotten homesick for the shitty coffee here?"

I took a mug without saying anything, and took a sip. It really was bad coffee. I had been put on disciplinary leave, and Cathy and the others were taking the Vermillion out. I was glad at least one thing hadn't changed.

"Even on leave, you're worried about the people in your command, huh?"

"Nah, you're here, so I'm not worried."

"So you say, but you looked worried when you were watching them out there."

"I'm not. It's just there's nothing to do when you're on probation."

Maestro looked into my eyes, then shook his head.

"Your face tells me that's not all. Why don't you try talking about it?"

That was just like Maestro. There are things we share just because he used to be my instructor. Even so, I couldn't decide if this was something I could talk about or not, so I sipped some more of the awful coffee. But in the end, I could see the bottom, and I started talking.

"I joined the defense army to fight the Mulians. That was my goal in joining TERRA, too. To fight the Mulians. I wanted them to hear twenty million of their kind had been killed. But then ... when I saw them in Tokyo, they were just like people, living their lives. I hadn't been able to see that during Operation Overload, but they were just living out normal lives. Some parts were strange, but everyone smiled normally, lived normally. But I knew. I knew their blood was blue. That they were Mulians."

"Are you still worked up over Kamina?"

I smiled grimly without really meaning to. Maestro was sharp. I hadn't noticed until he mentioned it, but I still wasn't over the fact that Kamina was a Mulian.

Maestro nodded and put the key ring that had been on his belt on the table. The key chain was a 20mm shell.

"I've been shot once. During the civil war after the MU war. That may be the last real dogfight I remember."

Ah, so that's why the tip's flattened like that. It was probably a dud.

"The man who fired this shot, he's my friend now."

So that was it. Now that I understood what he was saying, my heart felt much lighter. I was almost moved to tears with happiness.

"Thanks, Maestro."

Maestro didn't say anything, but put his key ring back, took a sip of his coffee, and scowled at the taste.

Just then a D1 alarm sounded in the lounge.

A Dolem!

Could I fight it? No, that was a Dolem. Not a Mulian. Besides, the wounded, beat-up Kamina would be called out to fight it. I had to prevent that.

I ran out to the hangar, but all strength seemed to have left my legs.

I was on disciplinary probation. I couldn't fight even if I wanted to. I couldn't even pilot the Shinsei.

Fragment 8: Kim Hotal

"D1 rapidly approaching!"

"What's the status on Squadron Alpha?" Commander Isshiki's voice nearly reached a scream.

"They were in training, so the Baus-Ghazal gun is loaded with fake ammunition. It's currently being reloaded," Gomi shouted.

"Launch the EIDOLON!" The commander's orders flew.

"What is Megumi Shitow doing?"

"Shitow is on paid vacation today," I answered, and the commander slammed a fist down on the console.

"Who approves paid vacations in a time of crisis? She's only just become a real employee!"

You're the one who approved her day off, I thought patronizing-

ly. I picked up my phone to call her, but she didn't answer.

"What are you doing, taking a bath in the middle of the day?"

4

Megumi was in the bath. Mamoru had declined a bath, but then said he was too tired to fall asleep and got back up.

"What a great view," he said looking out at the ocean.

"It really made me feel I had left Tokyo when I saw the horizon on the water. If you're taken out blindfolded, and they just tell you you're outside, you don't really know it, y'know. But when they showed me the horizon, I really felt it."

It had been the same for me. When I saw the horizon, I thought, *I'm outside, whether I like it or not.*

"I haven't seen it since before the War. I'd love for Hiroko to see it, too."

I felt a stab of pain in my chest. The wind chime rang in the breeze.

She would never see that view....

"Hey, what's that?"

Mamoru pointed up at part of the sky. Looking up, I saw the cloud-like trails of airplanes in a complex pattern like a broken-line graph. It was the EIDOLON!

Was there a Dolem? Just as I was wondering that, the D1 Aria, which was pressurized to the point that it was visible, took out one of the EIDOLONS. Sparks flashed across the sky at the explosion. One of the EIDOLONS, its wings destroyed, gave a high-pitched squeal and headed

in this direction.

"Look out!"

I tackled Mamoru, who was spacing out, to the floor. The crash made a terrific sound, and it was close enough that we could see the detail on it.

One passed close enough to skim the roof with a roar.

The supports and walls were shaking, and dust fell everywhere.

Then, there was a moment of silence, and a loud explosion, and the whole house shook.

Fearfully, I looked up to see how things were outside. It seemed the EIDOLONS and Dolem were still fighting. I couldn't see the Dolem because of the clouds, but the EIDOLONS dropped one by one. Raising my head up higher, I could see some smoke over the mountains.

"Looks like one fell in the mountains."

I looked down at Mamoru and saw he was covering his head and shaking.

"Hey, what is it?"

Suddenly, Mamoru, overcome with fear and unease, grabbed onto me like he was possessed.

"Save me! I don't want to die like this!" he said, and grabbed my shoulders with enough force to make me wince. But then, his strength left him, and his head bent forward as if his neck had just snapped. I heard him sob.

"Ayato ... I don't want to die. Please. Save me...."

Oh. That was it. He didn't want to say it, so he was pretending everything was fine, but something had happened before he was taken out of Tokyo. Something bad enough to make him shake with this terror.

Mamoru looked small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. I had to protect him.

I stood up. He clung to my legs.

"Where are you going, Ayato? Don't leave me!"

"It's all right. I'll be right back. I will protect you. This time, I swear I will."

I took Mamoru's clinging hands off me, and ran out of the room. When I got down to the entrance, I saw Megumi had come out wrapped in a bath towel.

"Ayato, where are you going?"

"To the Rahxephon. I don't want to lose anyone else."

This time, I would protect him. I didn't want to fall into that sadness again.

I raced outside.

Fragment 9: Mamoru Torigai

You swear you'll protect me? Yeah, right. You've never been able to keep that promise before.

I hope you suffer in the fight.

5

When I flew out in the Rahxephon, I was amazed when I saw the Dolem.

It was wearing a skirt and a hood.... It was Hiroko's Dolem. That was impossible.

"Squadron Alpha, fire the Baus-Ghazal gun!"

I turned around and saw Cathy and the rest holding the Baus-Ghazal gun ready.

Stop!

By reflex, I opened the Rahxephon's shield of light.

It blocked all the pellets fired from the high-speed Baus-Ghazal rail gun.

"Damn you, traitor!"

Isshiki was screaming over the transmitter.

"No! Wait a minute!"

"Shut up! Squadron Alpha, defeat the Rahxephon and the Dolem together!"

The Vermillion was hesitant, but it aimed the Baus-Ghazal at the Rahxephon.

"No! Listen to me!"

The three Baus-Ghazals fired at once, their plasma cannons sparkling.

"Just wait a minute!"

Then, the plasma blasts impacted on the Rahxephon's shield of light. Even if it was a shield of light, it didn't stop everything. The awesome impact even shook me in the pilot's seat. The Dolem attacked at the same time from behind. This Dolem was.... No, even then, Hiroko had attacked without wanting to.

The Dolem brought both arms down, and the Rahxephon was flung into the sea.

A huge wave from the impact sucked the Rahxephon under.

"Are you Hiroko?!"

The Dolem's mouth under the hood twisted into a smile. It raised its arms again. Then, the Baus-Ghazal fired.

The Dolem screamed. At the same time, letters appeared on my screen.

O U C H O U C H O U C H

Stop it.... That was just like when I'd fought Hiroko.

I D O N T W A N T T O D O T H I S

I turned away. The letters moved where my eyes were.

H E L P M E

"Stop it!"

I kept yelling. I shouted, but the letters didn't go away. It felt like my heart was being squeezed, and I had clenched my hands into shaking fists from rage.

I heard the sound of a wind chime somewhere.

"What do you want to do?"

What was that? Mishima's voice.

Just then, the Dolem had recovered and was pressing down on the Rahxephon, hitting its chest. The Rahxephon sank into the water. Pain coursed through my body.

The Dolem kept hitting the Rahxephon's chest.

The Rahxephon's body began to crack, and it writhed in pain. But I still couldn't fight back.

But the Vermillion wasn't just standing by, and it kept sending out attack after attack.

Each time it was hit, the Dolem would scream. The letters like Hiroko had written continued.

O U C H O U C H O U C H

It was too much to watch.

"I ... don't want more pain like Hiroko's."

"What do you really want to do?" Mishima's voice asked again.

"I want to protect."

"Whom?"

"Mamoru.... Everybody...."

"Who do you really want to protect?"

Huh?

When I heard that question, the first person who came to mind was Miss Haruka.

I opened my eyes.

The letters danced across the screens.

A Y A T O S T O P I T

Beyond the screens, shaking from the blows, I saw the Dolem's cold smile.

"No! No! You're not Hiroko!"

I heard the sound of a wind chime somewhere.

I shook off my confusion. This wasn't Hiroko. Hiroko was dead. This was just trying to invoke her memory. It was just trying to defeat me by making me think of her. I hit it with the Rahxephon's fist. The Dolem screamed and writhed in agony. Its back started to swell, and a Dolem with long legs and arms appeared inside it. I was right! It had been imitating Hiroko's Dolem.

It was soiling Hiroko's memory.

I wouldn't let it!

Fragment 10: Souichi Yagumo

The beat-up Rahxephon grabbed the Dolem's arm.

Its arm was crushed by the Rahxephon's hand, and blue blood flowed out. The Dolem screamed and pulled back. The Rahxephon slowly stood up, eyes fixed on the Dolem. I'd never seen the Rahxephon like this before.

The Dolem tried to attack again. But the Rahxephon moved out of the way and brought a fist down into the Dolem as it went past. It caused a huge splash of water as it fell into the ocean. The Rahxephon straddled it and punched it over and over with the brute force of rage.

The Rahxephon let it go, and the Dolem got up shakily. It still wanted to fight, and it tried to raise its remaining arm toward the Rahxephon. The Rahxephon saw that, and punched it. A wave spread from the impact, and both stopped moving. A second later, the sword of light was pierced through the Dolem's back, stretching out into the sky. The Dolem burst open and blue liquid went flying.

The poisonous blue liquid spread in the sea. The Rahxephon, still giving off waves of anger, stood in the middle of that. Everyone in the Command Center was speechless at the sight of it.

"The D1 Aria has completely lapsed," Kim announced coolly.

At the sound of her voice, I came back to normal.

"Quickly, confirm the pilot's safety.... We need him," I said quickly.

For a moment, Isshiki was still stunned and wore an unshuttered expression, but he soon returned to his usual self.

"Do we need him? He betrayed us. Send Kamina to the detention center."

I saw out of the corner of my eye that Miss Haruka had put her hand up to her mouth. *It's all right, leave this to me*, I tried to communicate with my eyes, and she nodded, as if to say she understood.

"We only read some indications of danger. And he did defeat the Dolem. I don't think you could call it betrayal."

"Is that your opinion as vice-commander?"

So you avoid taking any responsibility to the very end, I see.

"It is."

"All right. I won't dispose of Kamina. However, write up this incident in a report."

"Thank you, sir."

As I was thanking him, I noticed Miss Haruka winking an apology at me. No, this was the least I could do.

Fragment 11: Mamoru Torigai

The Dolem sank. *Well, it wouldn't have been any fun if you'd been killed by Hiroko's illusion. I want you to suffer more. I want you to suffer gradually, losing everything you care about one by one, so I can listen silently as you cry out at the pain. I only felt hurt at hearing Hiroko's but I bet your scream will feel good.*

A breeze caught the wind chime on the window and it started to tinkle.

It's annoying. Come to think of it, Ayato looks at it every time something happens. I don't know what memories you have of it, Ayato, but I hate everything dear to you.

I picked up the chime and threw it out the window.

It broke with a dry shattering sound.

Serves you right.

6

I dragged my exhausted body home, and walking across the lawn, I heard a crunch. Looking down, I saw some broken glass under my shoe. It was Hiroko's chime! I looked up and saw my window was open. I must have hung it badly, and it fell in the shaking from the fight.

Another one of Hiroko's memories was gone.

I felt like I was going to cry.

Now I was no different from that Dolem, crushing the memories of Hiroko.

I gathered as many pieces of the chime as I could, and buried them in the garden. It was a little grave for the chime.

I clasped my hands together and apologized in my heart. *I'm sorry, Hiroko. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you.* Then, I heard Mishima's words echo in my heart.

"Who do you really want to protect?"

I felt hurt, and looked away from the grave. Of course I'd take care of Mamoru, but I knew. I knew who I really wanted to protect. I knew who was in my heart.

Miss Haruka... I want to protect you. I want to be someone who can protect you.

Afterword

Hiroshi Oonogi

I give you the fourth volume of the *Rahxephon* novelization.

It's gotten remarkably cold, but I suppose it will be colder by the time anyone reads this.

Praying mantises have laid eggs in my neighbor's garden. I think they're in a higher place than most years. That means Tokyo might be blanketed in more snow than usual.

There's nothing more to write about the changing seasons. Once I'd polished my scenario for this novelization, the fourteenth plot was last year on August 31st. (Incidentally, now it's exactly August 31st.)

Wow, I've been working on *Rahxephon* for exactly a year.

A year is a pretty long time. 365 days. 525,600 minutes. I didn't bring out my calculator to add it up, but it's a pretty long time. The praying mantis eggs laid last year have hatched out little praying mantises as small as flecks of eraser, and during the summer they eat flies and moths and grow as big as their parents, then it's time for them to lay eggs like crazy, and die. It's enough time that, if worse comes to worse, a couple can get married after the lady's been knocked up, and the kids are born, and they're really cute, even if they weren't planned, and you can say all that to the relatives and it's fine. It's enough time that you can start reading *Brothers Karamazov* like you always said you would, get five pages

into it, then stop, and leave it to collect dust, and that's perfectly fine. The children who started elementary school last year.... OK, that's enough. Anyway, it's quite a long time.

I can't believe the broadcast is about to end.

It must have been in May, when I joked to the director, "It must be nice to be a director. You're done when the series is over. But I've got my fill of *Rahxephon* this year." But that director is busy with preparations for the movie version now.

--Hiroshi Ohnogi

To be continued in volume 5...

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NOVEL



In the fourth installment of the novelization of the popular anime "Rahxephon", Ayato feels unable to stay in Niraikanai after learning he is a Mulian, and returns to his home in Tokyo, followed by Elvy and Haruka in the Vermillion. But he cannot stand the falsehoods and deceit there, and runs away, along with Hiroko Asahina, who has just discovered her own blue blood. They manage to stay one step ahead of everyone trying to track them down, until a Dolem appears who is unusually persistent. Ayato fights again in the Rahxephon, but something makes this Dolem different from all the rest...