Disturbing Routines

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Summary

A Carnival is coming to Mahora Academy. Extremely AU. A sequel of sorts to Decadent Habits. Shiznat fans beware!

Notes

Standard issue disclaimer: Sunrise created and owns Mai-Hime. I am not them. This is a parody, protected speech.

A word of further warning: Maybe you missed the rating on the story listing, not to mention a few few choice words in the summary. If that somehow happened, well, I don't really think you deserve any pity, but have some anyway.

This story features sex. Dirty sex. Morally questionable sex. Sex between people who do not have sex in canon, and should not have sex in the real world. Lots and lots of sex. And some violence. But everyone likes violence, so never mind that.

This is an alternate universe. Things are not quite as they were in the original series that inspired this story - any of them.
And now ... on with our show.
April, 2004

The sun was bright but not unbearably hot. The wind was steady but not too strong. And the motion of the ocean - well, the river - was gentle, and the great bulk of the cruiser was more than enough to absorb most of it. All in all, it had been a beautiful day.

Well, Mai thought so at least. "You're okay?" she asked her younger brother a bit anxiously as she came over to sit down beside him on one of the deck's benches, facing the ship's starboard railing. (She was pretty sure that it was the starboard. Reasonably sure. Okay, she wasn't sure at all and was just guessing.)

"I'm fine," he assured her, a bit wearily. "I was a little queasy when the ship got underway, but it's passed." Takumi favored her with one of his increasingly rare smiles. "And I'm glad, because I wouldn't miss this for the world."

She shook her head, but smiled back. "We'd see the exact same view on the train, you know."

"It's not the same view," he disagreed. "The angle is different, the sun lights things in a completely different way ... and the train moves so much faster than this ship is going. I get a whole 'nother look at the landscape this way." His eyes were distant as he spoke. From experience, she knew that he was seeing the painting, not its subject.

But then his eyes focused again, meeting her gaze, and he smiled a bit sheepishly. "Besides which, Dad doesn't do things like this very often. We ought to enjoy it as much as possible, don't you think?"

Mai made a sound of polite agreement. Inwardly, though, she was frustrated by Takumi's lowered expectations. Most people, on hearing that a father had offered to send his two children on a cruise to celebrate their admission to a prestigious private school like Mahora, would probably have viewed it in the same way that Takumi did - as an incredibly generous act.

Mai ... didn't. The word she would have used was "extravagant". Or maybe "unnecessary". As she'd said, they could have taken the train like normal people did. It would have been less expensive for their father to do it that way.

That wasn't her real objection, though. If she'd believed that her father was really trying to be generous, she'd have swallowed that sort of complaint. But deep down, she knew that the fancy cruise was another way for him to seem involved while doing his level best to stay out of the lives of his children.

The money that he would have saved by buying three train tickets instead of two cruises couldn't possibly have been equal to or greater than the amount that he'd lose by taking a day or so off work to be with them. But Mai understood perfectly well where they fit in the calculus of their father's life.

She let Takumi see her smiling, though. None of this was on her face. He was happy, and that was what mattered. She'd do anything to make sure that her little brother was happy.

"And there it is," he said, hushed. "The World Tree."
She turned to look where he was looking, and, despite herself, felt a bit of awe as the size of the enormous tree became clear, with buildings that had to be several stories tall dwarfed by it. And they were still some distance from Mahora. They wouldn't pull into port until tomorrow morning.

"They say it's visible from space," Takumi added in that same vaguely reverent tone.

*That's probably pushing it,* Mai thought, but her attention was still drawn to the sky above the tree.

And there it was. The smile that she'd painted on at Takumi's enthusiasm melted away as she looked up at the strange red star; the star no one could see but her. It was getting brighter.

Mai wasn't sure when she'd started seeing it. She'd taken the fact that nobody talked about it to mean that it wasn't all that important, and only found out that she was the only one to see it a few months ago, when it first started to look reddish. Commenting on that change to Takumi had yielded a confused look on his face and the question "What are you talking about, oneechan?"

His confusion had quickly turned to concern, and that concern was back on his face. "You're still seeing it, aren't you?"

"Mm-hm," she admitted, then quickly segued into an attempt to calm his worries. "It's no big deal. It's just there, you know? It's not like I'm hearing voices -"

*You have to look after your little brother from now on.*

"- more than I usually do," she added in a fit of honesty.

He still looked a bit upset, but didn't press the matter as he looked away, turning his gaze on the river. He blinked. "Oneechan," he asked hesitantly, pointing as he did. "Do you see that, too?"

She followed his pointing finger, and peered out at the river. What was he - wait, was that - could it be -

Mai got to her feet. For all that she knew, this was every bit as much of a cliche as shouting 'stop the presses' in a newspaper office, and likely to be as well-received, but nonetheless - "Man overboard!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

About an hour later, Mai was in the small cabin she shared with Takumi, pulling off her shirt, now drenched with water and, well, other stuff. *No good deed goes unpunished,* she thought ruefully.

The body floating in the river had turned out to be a girl maybe a couple of years younger than Mai herself, dressed in a blue school uniform that she didn't recognize. She hadn't been breathing when they brought her up onto the deck, and the sailors who'd done so promptly asked if anyone present knew CPR.

As it happened, Mai did, and she'd volunteered when it became clear that no one else would. So she'd cleared the airway, pressed her mouth to the short-haired girl's, blew in to inflate the lungs, and did the chest compressions. The girl had promptly revived enough to vomit up all of the water she'd swallowed onto Mai's shirt.

That had been a little embarrassing. What had come afterwards was worse. There'd been this one guy in the crowd gathered around the girl. Mai had thought that he wanted to volunteer to help, but was holding back for whatever reason. In any event, he'd come over to praise her after the sailors took the girl to the infirmary, and he'd praised her. It had been very flattering, at least until she'd realized that he was angling to get a look at her soaked chest.
Fortunately, the guy's clingy little sister had been just as mad about it as Mai was, and she'd started telling him off, but not without directing a scorching look in Mai's direction. As though it was all Mai's fault. Mai really didn't appreciate that. So she'd stalked off to the cabin, dragging Takumi along with her.

"Uh, maybe I should wait outside while you change," he said as her shirt hit the floor.

Mai blinked. "Why?" she asked as she reached around to start undoing her bra. "You took your meds today with lunch, right?"

"Uh, well, yes."

"Then you're good for some exercise." She smiled, raising an eyebrow. "Did you really think I didn't notice that that jerk wasn't the only one who was taking a good long look at my boobs, all wet like that? You must really be hurting now."

"I'm, well, it's, it's not so bad," Takumi stuttered, looking incredibly flustered and cute. "I can -"

"I'm supposed to take care of you," Mai said firmly, reaching out to pull him closer to her. "All of you. Sit down, and we'll do some things. It's probably not a good idea to do everything, since people might hear us, but ..." She trailed off as she got him seated on the bunk, and knelt on the floor before him.

Takumi had a brief moment to look at the metal bulkhead of the ship's cabin and wonder what his sister expected to hear through them. Then the feeling of her warm hand on his private parts drove away all non-immediate thoughts.

"See?" she said. "See how hard it is? It's filled with blood, right now, and your blood needs to circulate. It's bad for your heart for it to be like this. I have to take care of you. Let me take care of you, Takumi." And with that, she leaned forward to slide his length into the damp valley between her breasts, then pushed the two globes together with her hands.

"Oneechan," Takumi moaned. "It's, it's so, it's wonderful, but ..."

"Later," she interrupted what was obviously a request for more intimate contact than this. "Later, I'll take it in my mouth."

They'd come a long way in less than a year. Mai supposed that it had been bound to happen, really. She'd been giving him baths for almost six years, and from the beginning, he'd liked to play with her breasts, which had always been been very large for her age.

Of course, she'd let him do so without complaint. A mother wasn't supposed to object to her child doing such things, surely, and she had to be Takumi's mother in all but name. So she endured the touches, and the suckling and biting. It wasn't so bad.

And then, several months ago, just before she'd turned fifteen, she'd been bathing him and realized that his, well, his little man wasn't so little. It had looked very painful for him, and he'd seemed so tense ... so really, she hadn't had any choice except to try and relieve his painful tension. And there was a simple, straightforward way to do so.

So she'd rubbed him off.

It had been one thing after another from there. He had climaxed on her hands, on and between her tits, on her face and in her mouth. And a month later, on his birthday, she'd let him inside her, relieving him of his last virginity. Since then, they'd fucked in pretty much every room in their house,
taking a certain amount of pleasure in using the bed their father almost never used, and done it in a few public washrooms as well.

It was wonderful to care for her brother.

"Oneechan," he gasped. "I'm, I'm going to -"

Dammit, she'd gotten distracted again. She stopped the paizuri and quickly leaned in so she could fulfil her promise. Just in time, for his boy juice exploded on her tongue. It was difficult to swallow all of it quickly enough that it didn't escape from her lips. She didn't want to leave a mess, after all.

Eventually, she let go of the softening ex-hardness. "See?" she said. "It's soft now. The blood is moving again. And you got some good exercise, too, didn't you? Doesn't it feel good, Takumi?"

He stared at her, eyes half-closed, for a moment.

"Well?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, with an air of surrender. "It feels very good, oneechan."

"Then it's good," Mai said, smiling brightly as she moved his briefs and shorts back into place. "Now, why don't you go freshen up in the bathroom, while I get changed?"

"Okay," he said with a sigh, getting up. He paused as he was about to open the hatch, looked at her where she was still kneeling on the floor. "You know I love you, right, oneechan?" Takumi asked abruptly.

"Of course," she said blankly. "I'm your big sister. You have to love me."

"Right," he said, walking out.

His moods were starting to get very hard to read. Mai shook her head as she towelled herself off, doing her best to ignore the sensation of nausea that she nearly always experienced after these encounters. It was probably just a reaction to the meds in Takumi's system being transferred into hers, she told herself. Nothing to worry about. She looked at his baggage, and, on an impulse, checked the pillbox where he kept his meds.

"Why did you lie to me?" she asked her absent brother as she saw the pills he was supposed to have taken with lunch. She'd have to have a little chat with him about that. Well, now she needed to change into some of her other clothes ...

... all of which, she abruptly realized, were packed in her bags down in the ship's hold. Ah, what a day. Well, there was at least one option open to her. It was probably all right, right?

As she got dressed, she reflected that at least the day couldn't get any worse, and took comfort from the fact that she'd probably never see anyone involved in the embarrassment every again.

At about the same time, a young woman was standing in the bow of a much smaller boat a bit further down the river, looking in the direction of the World Tree ... as well as what hung in the air above it. Neither sight occupied her thoughts very much, though. They were both too familiar to do so. Instead, her thoughts largely focused on a conversation she'd recently had. It hadn't gone the way that she wanted it to go. And now she was waiting to see just what the consequences of that conversation were going to be.
The boat's owner, a smuggler and occasional pirate whom she'd hired for this job, poked his head out of the boat's hut. "Miss," he said. "We've searched this whole grid, and the sonar's not picking up anything on the bottom, either. If this girl really fell in the water here, then she must have been picked up by the ferry that goes along here."

The ferry that would, of course, take that girl right where she had been trying to stop her from going. Dammit ...

In the ship's infirmary, the girl pulled out of the water had regained consciousness. Some people asked her some questions that didn't make much sense, so she ignored them until they went away. In the maelstrom of her mind, there was really only one coherent thought. She'd let go of something when she'd lost consciousness. Something important.

She wanted it back.

So of course, it came back, its hilt sliding easily into her grip.

My arm is once more whole, she thought, then went back to sleep to the sound of water dripping on the floor.

Women were crazy.

Tate Yuuichi had concluded this long ago, but every now and then something would happen to remind him. With Shiho around, it was actually a lot more frequently than 'every now and then'. For instance, if Shiho thought he was even slightly likely to be interested in some other girl, she'd be all over him, making hissing noises in the other girl's direction, before he could even glance that way.

But if it was just Shiho doing it, he could have concluded that his friend who was a girl but not his girlfriend was crazy, rather than all women. But no. There was ample evidence for it being a pretty darn universal trait.

For example. After they met up with that Takumi kid again, things seemed to be going pretty okay for once. Usually, Shiho, being crazy, was not only maniacally jealous of all other women but also borderline paranoid of all men except for her father and Yuuichi himself. Granted, she'd had a scary experience not too long ago, so the crazy might actually be understandable. But for some reason, whatever set her off about guys wasn't being set off by Takumi, and they were having a nice sit-down conversation in one of the ferry's lounges.

And then Takumi's sister had shown up wearing the plaid skirt and maroon jacket of his school's uniform, took one look at the two of them, and started laughing her head off.

"What?" Yuuichi asked, moderately startled by this. People weren't supposed to laugh at nothing. "Hey, what?"

"Oh, I'm just laughing at my life," she said as she calmed down a little and headed over to sit down next to Takumi.

"Okay," he said, once more bewildered by the craziness. "Listen, I think we got off on the wrong foot before. Lemme just start by saying that I'm sorry about the misunderstanding, earlier."

"What misunderstanding? You were staring at my chest, and I understood that perfectly well," she replied.
"Well, no, I mean, okay, I was looking, but I wasn't, you know, leering or anything? Shiho, sweetheart, back me up here, I don't do that sort of thing, right?" She'd always said that he was the exception to the rule when it came to that sort of thing.

Except that he forgot she was crazy! "Please accept our apologies for oniichan's behavior," she said cloyingly. "I'm sure that you didn't do anything to encourage it." And insincerely.

Mai seemed oblivious to the implied insult. "It must be tough having a brother like that. I'm glad my brother's not that kind of perv."

"Nope, I'm not that kind," Takumi muttered, looking embarrassed at his sister's behavior.

"Okay, lemme just clarify this," Yuuichi interrupted, raising his voice to do so. "Shiho isn't my sister, she just calls me oniichan because, um, well, why do you call me that?"

"Because oniichan is oniichan," Shiho "explained", glomping onto his side.

Of course crazy. "Anyway, as it happens, we go to the same school as you two are starting. I'm in first year high school there."

Mai made a disgusted noise. "Great, same year as me. I have the worst luck ..."

"I think that should be my line!" Yuuichi protested.

"I'm starting to think it should be mine," Takumi murmured, then raised his voice a little. "So you've been attending school in Mahora for a few years now. What's it like there?"

Casting a reproachful glance at Mai, Shiho spoke up. "It can be a little confusing sometimes, especially during the festivals, or when someone invades."

"... invades?" Mai and Takumi chorused.

"Ah hah hah," Yuuichi "laughed" while making shushing gestures at Shiho. "She's kidding. Sometimes the school clubs do these elaborate role plays where they pretend to be fighting off invaders. It can kind of get out of hand."

Takumi nodded. "Yes, I think I remember hearing about one of those. Something about a robot going out of control?"

"Ah, well, yeah, something like that happened," Yuuichi agreed, wishing he could dissolve into nothingness.

Fortunately, before either of the new students could press for details, one of the ship's stewards came up to them and addressed Mai. "Excuse me, are you the girl who helped to save that girl's life earlier today? I think you should know that she's woken up, and seems to be all right, just a little disoriented. You might want to check in on her in the infirmary later, so she can thank you."

"Uh, sure, but -" Mai said. The steward was gone before she could finish saying, "- but I don't know where that is."

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This is ridiculous, Mai thought a few moments later. She walked through one of the ship's external corridors, glass windows to one side of her, trailed closely by the molester, his dingbat girlfriend and her brother. I hope Takumi's not too bothered by these idiots. Did I fall into some weird dimension based on lame RPGs, that we can't split the party, now? A simple set of directions would have
sufficed, but no! He has to come with, and drag his red-haired limpet with him! Probably angling for a glance at river-girl's boobs. That would be typical. Ah, what a day.

Behind her, Yuuichi was also silently lamenting his fate. All that he'd wanted to do was help the short-tempered girl out a little so that she wouldn't have such a bad opinion of him. He'd been trying so damn hard to rehabilitate his junior high rep as a delinquent, and the last thing he needed was for the new girl on campus to get all the old rumors started again. If only women weren't so crazy! Then he could have just given her a simple set of directions!

Behind him, Shiho was watching Mai like a hawk. This whole situation was an embarrassingly obvious plot! She and river girl were probably in on it together, scheming to drag poor naive oniichan off to some hidden private part of the ship, where they'd jump on him and, and ... well, actually, she wasn't sure what was going to happen after that. Things never got that far in the romance mangas she read. But it was bound to be bad for both oniichan and Shiho, who were the only people who actually mattered.

Bringing up the rear of the group, Takumi was having a pretty good time. Owing to his frequent hospitalizations, he'd never had the chance to really get to know any of his classmates, and making friends had always been a little difficult. People who found out about his heart condition tended to treat him as though he was made of glass. So hanging around with a cool guy like Yuuichi and a nice girl like Shiho was a refreshing change from the way he only ever got to spend time with oneechan. And everything that went along with that.

He did love her, just like he'd said that he did, but -

All of a sudden, the ship's deck tilted quite sharply, unbalancing the members of the quartet. Fortunately, they were all able to grab hold of the railing that ran along the side of the corridor, keeping them from losing their feet completely.

"What the hell was that?" Mai asked when the ship levelled off again.

"I think the ship must've just made a pretty quick course change," Yuuichi explained. "Maybe there was some sort of obstruction that they didn't pick up on because of the -"

"AHEM." Shiho coughed. "Someone just touched Shiho's butt." Slowly, menacingly, she turned to look at Takumi. "Was it you?"

"I apologize for accidentally doing something very inappropriate and hope that you can forgive my clumsiness," Takumi answered very quickly.

Shiho frowned, but spoke in a slightly less icy tone. "Very well. You are forgiven this time."

Mai turned to give Takumi a quick smile to praise him for handling the screwy little girl. As she was doing so, though, she glimpsed a dark form moving across the sky. It was moving too fast and the night was too foggy to make out any details, but she didn't think it was a bird or bat. "What was -" she started to ask.

And then a pair of boots slammed into the window just a bit ahead of Mai, shattering it. The boots' owner, a figure in grey motorcycle leathers and a matching helmet, promptly dropped into the corridor.

Moving faster than anyone present had ever thought people could move, the intruder closed the distance to the quartet and whirled, slamming a spinning heel kick into Yuuichi's lower abdomen. As he crumpled to the deck with a perplexed expression on his face, the intruder continued to twist
around until Mai could see her own reflection in the mirrored glass of the helmet's mask.

Shiho let out a shriek as the intruder drove a hand towards Mai's midsection, stopping just short of impact. "If either of you two move, oneesan here is going to grow a hole in her stomach," the intruder said in a low but still feminine voice.

Mai, backed up against the corridor wall and the railing, risked a look down. Sure enough, the intruder was a woman. Also sure enough, there was a tiny little gun in her hand, pointed up at Mai's belly. Where did she get a gun? Mai wondered. This is still Japan, right? Actually, where did that gun come from? She wasn't holding it when she came in through the window, was she? Wow, these are really strange things to be worrying about when I'm going to die.

Aloud, she quietly asked, "What do you want from me?"

"This ship pulled a girl out of the river. Where is she?"

Oh, thought Mai. Of course. It's not a bad RPG. It's a bad action movie. "I'll take you to her, so just, just don't do anything to my brother or anybody else, all right?" By not being sure of the way, she could delay her long enough for Takumi to go and find -

"If ship's security comes after me, I'm going to shoot her before I go after them," the intruder announced, not turning the emotionless mask of her helmet away from Mai, but still clearly addressing Takumi.

Out of the corner, Mai saw her little brother freeze up, panic obvious on his face. This kind of stress was bad for him. "Takumi, it's going to be okay, it's going to be okay," she repeated. "Just don't do anything -"

"Screw you you fucking evil bitch you hurt oniichan you bitch!"

Mai's head snapped to the side to see Shiho, her face contorted with fury, turn and dash down the corridor, shrieking at the top of her lungs as she went.

"So annoying," said the intruder, lifting her other hand, also holding a gun, then turning to aim. It all just took a moment.

And then she shot Shiho.

The red-haired girl let out a short squawk and then dropped limply to the deck.

"Any more delays?" the intruder asked, slowly turning back to meet Mai's face.

Except for the time he'd nearly drowned, Takumi had never been so frightened as he was in that moment, watching the psychopath walk away behind his sister, whom she was holding at gunpoint. Mai had repeated her empty assurance to him that it was going to be all right before she headed off, but the look on her face as she did so, that blank look that she sometimes had when they ... when they were ... it told him that she didn't believe it either.

Takumi felt sick, and as his heart raced far too fast, he wished he'd taken his meds earlier today. If he had, he'd still feel awful right now, but he wouldn't be in danger of joining Shiho, who still lay on her face further down the hall, smoke still rising from where she'd been shot. And the funny thing was, he hadn't taken the pills because on some level he wanted to -

His thoughts were jerked off that course as Yuuichi groaned, starting to come around from having
been knocked out. The groan was succeeded by a series of coughs as the high schooler started to push himself up from the deck. "What the hell just happened?" he asked weakly, not yet raising his head and so addressing the question to the floor.

Takumi swallowed. "Tate-san, I'm so, so sorry -"

Now Yuuichi did look up. "Huh? What're you sorry about? You didn't kick me, it was that - wait, where's your crazy sister? Where's -"

And then he saw the body resting a bit further down the corridor, and fell silent for a terrible moment, before whispering a name. "Shiho-chan?"

"She just shot her. Shot her down in cold blood," Takumi said. "There was, there was nothing I could do, and -"

As Takumi stammered out his attempt at apology, Yuuichi got to his feet and half-walked, half stumbled to where the girl lay flat on her face, then dropped to his knees beside her. Trembling, he rolled her over.

Then he broke his silence. "Takumi, you little turd. Are you trying to scare the shit out of me?"

"Huh?"

"She's fine. She's asleep, but she's not dead! Oy, Shiho, wake up already." And he started to tap the girl's cheek.

Oh, no. The grief has clearly driven him insane, Takumi thought as he pushed himself up from where he'd been sitting crouched up against the wall. He slowly headed over to confirm the awful truth with his own eyes. It only took him a moment to realize that Shiho was clearly still breathing, her small chest rising and falling steadily and quietly.

"I don't understand," Takumi said. His head was starting to hurt again. "She shot her. With a gun."

"What kinda gun?" Yuuichi asked, turning to look up at him with a raised eyebrow.

"What? A, a gun kind of gun! Tate-san, I'm twelve years old! What the heck do I know about guns?"

"Eh, fair point." With distressing pragmatism, Yuuichi rolled her body slightly to check her back. "No entry wound. There's a warm spot, here, like she was hit by something hot, but it didn't burn her clothes or anything."

"What kind of gun can do that?" Takumi asked, becoming faintly interested despite how horrible it all was.

"Dunno, but I've seen guns that can do some pretty straaange things to clothes and people," the high schooler mused. "C'mon Shiho, time to get up."

Shiho continued to sleep.

"Okay, let's drop the bomb. Hey, there, sexy, how'd you like to steal me away from my obnoxious little sister?" he asked nobody in particular.

"Betrayal!" Shiho shrieked as she sat straight up.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're awake," Yuuichi said quickly. "I was so worried about the horrible
nightmare you were clearly having.

"Nightmare?" Shiho asked, confused. She looked from Yuuichi's sincere face to Takumi, who was rubbing his forehead with his eyes closed. "Yes," she said at length. "A terrible nightmare that must never be allowed to come true."

"Right, now let's go find -"

And then there was the sound of an explosion, not terribly far away.

"So what exactly are you going to do to this girl when you get to her?" Mai asked her masked escort as she led her down the hall to where (she assumed) the infirmary could be found.

"We're going to continue a conversation," the intruder replied. "I don't feel the need to have one before then. So shut up."

"Continue a conversation," Mai repeated, ignoring the polite suggestion she'd just been given. "You're the reason that she was in the river in the first place."

"Shut up," the intruder repeated.

Up until now, Mai hadn't really thought much about the girl that she'd helped to save. She had just been someone who was in trouble, and that Mai was in a position to help. It hadn't meant anything. But now, seeing the person who was responsible for that trouble, Mai wanted to protect the girl. It could just be empathy, for she could easily envision someone trying to hurt Takumi like this. It could just be a way of looking out for the underdog, which that girl clearly was.

And yet she also remembered the feeling of touching the girl's lips with her own, and that confused her.

"Infirmary," the intruder abruptly announced.

Mai looked up to see the word written on the doorway just in front of them. A moment later, she was seeing that placard at a considerably closer distance, as she was shoved into the door. Half turning, she could see that the intruder was pointing both of those guns at her, now.

Okay. I'm dead. No matter what I say, she's going to shoot me. So what do I do?

Mai clenched one of her hands into a fist ... then opened it, grabbed the door handle and turned it, flinging herself against the door to force it open as she fell forward into the room, shouting, "Run!" at the top of her lungs.

She heard the intruder curse and charge in after her, only to stop as she no doubt stared at the same empty bed that was captivating Mai's own attention.

"What the hell is this?" the intruder asked, and Mai slowly turned to look back at her, and saw the puddle on the infirmary floor. Then saw a drop of water falling toward the puddle.

Then looked up, just in time to see the helpless girl she'd been trying to protect drop from the ceiling towards the intruder, with a huge black sword in her hands.

Mikoto heard a thump on the door and immediately came to full wakefulness. Having done so, she immediately moved herself to a location where she had the high ground. The wisdom of her actions
was demonstrated when the door opened and someone unfamiliar to her came in shouting. Then someone who did seem familiar followed.

That one. The one who'd told her to give up her quest.

She released her grip on the exposed pipe and dropped down toward her. That person somehow guessed what was about to happen and stepped clear, such that Miroku struck the floor rather than the person. As it crumbled beneath all of them, she silently apologized to Miroku for employing him to cut a worthless object. And then she was falling again.

She landed, and rolled, but by the time she regained some measure of her poise, that person had also done so and was pointing a weapon at her head while blathering about how she was causing troubles. Mikoto ignored her, but was restrained from a more appropriate response by the fact that person dared to rest a foot on Miroku's blade. Mikoto could almost hear her constant companion snarling at the insult. *Patience, patience*, she silently assured him.

Abruptly, that person reached up to pull off helmet-thing and toss it to one side, allowing her blue black hair to flow down her shoulders. "Are you even listening to me?" that person snapped.

Of course Mikoto was listening, she simply didn't find anything that was being said to be of interest.

"I am trying to save your life! Nothing good is going to come of you traveling to where they want you to go! So just go back where you came from, dammit! You don't want to be a HiME!"

All right, some of it was of interest, but only as further justification as if any were needed. There was nowhere for her to go back to, now that grandfather was dead, and she had to fulfill his last command, to find her older brother. And from what had happened two years ago, she knew that he would be traveling to this province. And so this was where she was going to go.

And this person was trying to stop her.

So this person had to die.

With a bare foot, Mikoto lashed out her enemy's leading leg. Reflexively, that person dodged back, without realizing that she would thus shift her weight just enough for Mikoto to pull Miroku out from under her foot. That done, Mikoto tumbled back before starting to swing her blade around in an arc, preparatory to that arc intersecting the enemy's head.

A part of her mind, the part of her that still remembered innocent days catching fireflies with her brother, admired the beauty of the sparks cast up as Miroku's edge trailed along the metal floor. But, as ever, most of her attention focused on the task at hand, and she pulled the blade up to swing through her target.

The enemy dodged. Mikoto was reminded again of just how obnoxiously fast that person could be as she passed over Mikoto's head and tumbled to the ground some distance away from her.

"Hime?" someone whispered, a short distance away.

Mikoto was keenly aware of her surroundings. However, since the third person present didn't seem to fall into the categories of enemy or ally, she elected to ignore that other person until something made the situation more clear.

"All right," her enemy snarled. "We'll do this the hard way, then. Duran!" And, with an icy howl, her enemy's Child made its presence known at last as it emerged from wherever such things went when they weren't needed.
Mikoto hated dogs. She wasn't particularly keen on machines, either. A mechanical dog was a bad combination of two things she didn't like, and it was racing towards her. She attempted to strike it down, but it managed to wrap its metal jaw around Miroku's blade (Oh the insult! How would she apologize for this!) and throw her some distance. But she didn't let go of the Miroku's hilt, and she landed on her feet.

Perhaps the dog hated her as much as she hated it, for it began to fling things from its haunches at her. She was too fast for it to hit, but one of them struck one of the machines in the room, and there was another explosion behind her, flinging her forward into darkness.

A moment later, she pushed debris off of herself, and realized that water was falling down on her. Mikoto hated being wet. But through the "rain", which she knew was no such thing, she could see her enemy and the enemy's Child running off. She hated it when her enemies turned their backs on her even more, and set off in pursuit.

Ah, what a day, Mai thought vaguely as she slowly regained her senses. She'd been hiding from the two crazy people who were fighting, and doing ... no, wait, that sort of thing didn't happen, did it? Maybe she'd imagined it. That would be pleasant to believe.

She decided that she didn't want to be here right now, and so started walking towards the most obvious exit, the ramp that led up and out of the ferry's parking garage.

Within a few moments of the explosion, the loudspeaker spoke up. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. At this time I'm going to ask that you begin following the emergency evacuation procedures that we demonstrated for you at the start of our voyage. I regret to say that this is not a drill. Please make your way to your assigned emergency locations, and our helpful staff will assist you in departing this vessel safely and quickly."

Yuuichi happened to be looking right at Takumi when the announcement was made. He saw the look of raw panic on the kid's face. In and of itself, that wouldn't have affected him so much. He was fighting off the heady mix of fear and confusion himself. But he also saw the boy reach up towards his heart with a clutching gesture, almost bending over.

Ah hell, Yuuichi thought. I'm gonna have to do something.

"Okay," he said aloud. "Here's what we're gonna do. Takumi-kun, I'm gonna trust you to get Shiho-chan to the muster point for the evacuation -"

"What," interjected Shiho.

"- and I'm gonna go find your big sister and do the same thing for her. Okay?"

"Uh?" Takumi asked, looking confused. "Why -"

"Objection!" Shiho shouted. "Oniichan, why are you going to -"

"Gonna answer all your questions, one at a time," Yuuichi said cheerfully as he started to draw Shiho off to the side of the corridor, hoping to get out of earshot from Takumi. "Okay, here's the deal," he said quietly. "Takumi is sick. He's not getting you to the muster point, you're getting him there."

"But why should I have to -"
"You like him, right?" Yuuichi pressed on. "You don't want to see him fall down dead of worry, right?"

Shiho didn't respond, just staring at him.

"Right?" he repeated, a little more loudly.

"I don't want to see that," Shiho agreed in a sulky tone. "But why do you have to go rescue his mean sister! You don't even like her! Right?" There was a real edge in her voice in that last bit.

"No," Yuuichi agreed easily, because he didn't. "But she got taken away on my watch. I gotta take care of things, Shiho. Besides, there's a good chance that I'm gonna get even with whoever shot you, right?"

Shiho reflected briefly on that. "Okay," she said at last. "But if you get hurt helping her, I'm going to kill her."

It really disturbed him when she made those kind of threats, even though he knew she'd never follow through. "Okay, then, over to your question, Takumi. What was it again?"

"Why do we have to split up like this?" Takumi asked, looking a little less peaked than he had a minute or so earlier. "There's safety in -"

"Hey, what the hell are you kids doing!" shouted a steward, rushing down the hallway towards them. "Didn't you hear that announcement? We're evacuating the ship!"

"That's why," Yuuichi said, pitching the words for Takumi's ears only. "Sorry, on our way now! Need a distraction, Shiho," he added, sotto voce as the steward approached.

"Noooooooo! Shiho won't do it!" she shrieked. "Shiho doesn't want to go out in the cold dark night! It's cold! And dark! And night! Shiho is scaaaaared!" She fell to the deck and began kicking and screaming in a remarkably realistic simulation of a four year old's temper tantrum.

"Hey, hey, we don't have time for -" the steward started to say as he got close up to them. That was the moment that Yuuichi picked to dash off down the hallway, away from the three of them. "Aggh!" he heard the steward yelling behind him, sounding much like the last guy Shiho had bitten.

He quickly arrived at the ship's infirmary, and saw the thick black smoke coming from the open door. "Aw, man, what happened here," he asked out loud as he looked in the door and gaped at the huge hole that had opened up the lower deck to his view.

Just as he did so, he also saw Mai walk slowly into view on that deck. "Yo!" he called up. "Mai-san! Up here!"

Slowly she turned to look up at him. For a second, he wondered whether the smoke was too thick to let her recognize him. Then she said, "Oh. It's you." In a dull, disinterested tone.

"Yeah, it's me," Yuuichi replied. "Gimme your hand and I'll get you up and out of there."

"All right," she said, still sounding as though all this wasn't really a matter of concern.

He pulled her up, and did a quiet check for injuries as he did. She didn't have any surface trauma, but maybe she had a concussion or something? Dammit, they didn't really have time for this. They had to get a -
"It was a reflex," she explained a few moments later as he led her down another hallway.

"You reflexively punch people who help you," Yuuichi snarled without looking back at her.

"No, but, you see, I was in a panic."

"Oh, I should have guessed that from the blank expression and complete lack of fearful shouting before you punched me."

"It was a delayed reaction!"

This was easily one of the stupidest conversations he'd ever had. "Sorry for getting in the way of your delayed reaction, then."

"Okay, let's call us even, then," Mai proposed.

Yuuichi stopped dead in his tracks then whirled around to face her. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" he yelled. "You punched me! For no reason!"

"Well, yes, but you were -"

"I looked at your tits! That's it! Maybe, just maybe, you have the right to be seriously upset over that! Hell, go ahead, call me whatever names you want over it! But you punched me when I didn't lay a finger on you! So, no, we are not even, and because of what a swell guy I am, we're never gonna be even!"

"Look, I'm making allowances here, because I know that you're probably upset about what happened to your quote-unquote little sister, but -"

"Shiho's fine, not that you asked," he sneered.

"She's, she's not dead?" she asked, startled. "But ... well, good. I'm glad to hear that."

"Don't exert yourself."

Mai wanted to scream. This wasn't fair - didn't this idiot realize that it was all his fault? It had to be his fault, right? That was practically an unwritten rule, that it was always the guy's fault.

But it wasn't as though she could explain how that damned nonsense about him and his sister-who-was-really-his-girlfriend made her so uneasy and apprehensive. She herself didn't even really understand why it upset her so much. That sort of relationship was exactly the opposite of the love that existed between her and Takumi. It was sick and wrong! People shouldn't behave like family if they weren't! And it didn't help that this doorknob reminded her of him, while being nowhere nearly as sweet.

When it became clear that she wasn't going to fire back a snappy answer to his last remark - an actual apology, of course, was too much to expect - he let out a long sigh. "Man, I feel sorry for Takumi, having to put up with this on top of being sick."

Her head snapped up. "What? How do you know about that?" she yelled. Takumi almost never talked about his health problems with anyone.

"It's kind of obvious, with the way he's acting. Heart condition, right?"
"Obvious? What do you mean - no, don't tell me ... oh, why didn't I make him take his meds as soon as I saw him instead of wasting time with you!" She pulled the pillbox out of her jacket pocket and glared at it. "I even brought it with me to do -"

Just a bit before that, the two combatants had found each other on the upper deck of the ship, and resumed their altercation. After a few inconclusive passes between Mikoto and the Child called Duran, she had found herself once again on her back, staring up into the hollow barrel of her enemy's weapon as the girl once again repeated her ludicrous demand that she turn back.

It was tiresome, so Mikoto elected to interrupt it by reaching up to grab one of the other girl's dangling locks of hair, pulling her off-balance, so that she could tumble up and regain the sword which had once more fallen from her hands.

What Mikoto didn't know ... actually, what Mikoto did know could fill a notebook. But specifically, she didn't know that Kuga Natsuki (for that was her opponent's name) was quite sensitive about her hair. She had once woken up to discover that it was cut much shorter than she cared for, and from that day to this, she had not cut it once.

So having a chunk of it yanked out somewhat upset Natsuki, such that an artillery barrage seemed an appropriate response.

Mikoto realized what was about to happen, and took steps to defend herself, driving Miroku's blade deep into the ship's hull as the first step of her blocking maneuver.

Explosion ensued.

Mai's sentence was cut short by what felt like an wave of terribly hot air and bright light striking her full in the face, knocking her back and off her feet. When she could see again and stand, she was treated to the sight of Yuuichi standing quite a bit further away from her than he had been, and moving further away with every moment.

The ship had inexplicably been cut in two.

"Jump!" the boy shouted after a moment. "They're still close enough that you can -"

"Catch!" Mai called in response, rearing back and throwing the pillbox at him with reflexes trained in years of softball games.

"Are you -" he yelped as he reached out to catch the box with both hands. "Why am I even asking that question? What are you -"

"Get that to Takumi - it's more important than I am!" she yelled. "If you blow this, I'm gonna kick your ass!" Mai added as she turned and started to run down the hallway.

"You gotta live to do that, you frickin' lunatic!" Yuuichi yelled, before he reluctantly turned and started running as well.

"I refuse to die like this," Mai muttered to herself. "I refuse to die like this." The mantra comforted her, a little.

The emergency escape routes were all located, somewhat inexplicably, in the forward part of the boat - the one that she wasn't in. However, she was well aware that there was a rescue boat, the very one that had been used to pull that girl, that helpless girl who was clearly far indeed from helpless,
out of the river. It looked fairly easy to use, so she was going to get to it and use it. Because she
refused to die like this.

She had to move quickly through stairwells and up ladders, but none of that mattered, because she
refused to die like this. And finally she emerged through a hatch to the top deck, exulting in her
cleverness and toughness.

She was just in time for the limp body of the aforementioned not-so-helpless girl to be fall through
the air and land in front of her once more.

After she’d blocked the shells fired at her by throwing up her defensive barrier (which had
incidentally cut another worthless object) the battle had not gone too well for Mikoto. That barrier
required a lot of effort from her, and once it had been spent, Natsuki had pressed her momentary
advantage to the point where Mikoto had momentarily been knocked senseless and thrown forward
by a crushing impact from Duran.

Mai blinked, then hesitantly asked, "Uh, are you all right?" She wasn't really expecting an answer,
but she had no idea what else to do. This is strange, she thought. I know better now. This girl is not
helpless, but still ... I feel like I want to help her. As though there's something missing from her.

Or is it something missing from me?

And then a mechanical grinding noise reached her ears, and she jerked up to see that strange robotic
dog, like something out of a crazy story she'd read once, looming above them as it stood on the edge
of a rooftop. Just as she saw it, it was leaping through the air towards them.

Mai felt herself, or maybe someone else using her body, flinging up her arms before her, as though
they could stop the creature's furious charge. And her eyes clamped shut.

What would you give to protect what matters most to you?

I would give anything.

You might end up risking that which matters most to you.

I would give anything.

All right then.

Mai felt her hands grow very warm. Her eyes flashed open just as the dog creature slammed into
them and then fell back, looking much the worse for the impact.

Wait, what? she thought, then saw a bright light hanging before her hands. The robot had struck it,
rather than her palms.

"Hey," someone shouted.

Mai looked up to see the other crazy girl shooting at her. The, the force field, for lack of a better
term, that she was creating in front of her blocked the shots.

"Dammit!" the girl with the long blue hair shouted. "Another one? Nobody told me there'd be
another one coming at the same time. Look, I'll tell you the same thing I told that one - go back!"

"Huh?" Mai finally asked, finding her voice at last.

But the girl with the gun didn't bother to answer her. "Duran - return!" she called, The robotic dog,
unsteadily returning to its feet, nodded, then seemed to dissolve into thin air.

"I've gone completely crazy, haven't I?" Mai asked. She didn't know who she was asking. The girl who'd tried to shoot her had already disappeared from her sight. The other one, however, was coming around. Her bright yellow eyes blinked open, and, incredibly, she yawned for a moment before they focused dully on Mai.

"Uh, hi!" Mai said nervously. After all, the other girl had tried to shoot her when she'd realized that Mai could apparently do stuff, and this one had a really big sword and was a lot closer. She let her hands fall, hoping that the force field would go away, and it did. But two bright sparks kept orbiting her body, firmly announcing to the world that Mai was some sort of freak.

"Uhh?" the short haired girl said. As the first words they'd ever exchanged, they probably lacked something.

"I think that girl, the one you were fighting, is gone now, so we're safe," Mai said. "Uh, well, as safe as we can be with the whole ship sinking thing, I mean! We'd better get going, the boat is -" She broke off, as she saw that the boat she'd been planning on taking was gone.

"Did you help me?" the girl lying on the deck asked her, sounding very young and very confused.

"Well, sort of, I guess, uh, but -"

"Why did you do that?" she asked as she started to come to her feet.

"I don't know," Mai answered honestly.

The answer didn't seem to satisfy the other girl, and she opened her mouth to say something. Before she could do so, though, the deck where they were both crouched started to tip forward, as the lower portions of the ship filled with water and it proceeded to capsize.

"Agh!" Mai shrieked as she began to slide forward, towards what she could see was a cruel and unforgiving sea. The other girl, just as startled, grabbed a hold of her with one hand as the other clenched firmly onto her huge sword. "No! I refuse to die like -"

"She said to give you these," Yuuichi said to Takumi, handing him the pill box as they crouched together in the inflatable life raft.

Takumi didn't take them, staring instead in horror at the ship as its two severed halves began to tip over and sink. "No," he said. "No, this can't be - oneechan! We've got to go back for -"

"Sit on it, kid," the skipper of the raft told him flatly.

"Oneechan!" Incredibly, Takumi found himself weeping.

Yuuichi just shook his head. And she'd thought the pills were more important. Crazy people had no grasp of priorities. "I'm sorry, kid. I really am."

"So am I," Shiho said softly.

She wasn't sorry that the bitch was dead, of course. One fewer bitch who might steal oniichan away from her was a good thing. But, as one who understood exactly what it was like to love someone you shouldn't, she recognized the signs of another in Takumi, and so she felt a bit more sympathy than she otherwise would.
And then there was a huge explosion from the side of the ship, a pillar of flame streaking towards the sky.

"What the hell! Diesel fuel doesn't go up like that!" Yuuichi shouted.

"Oneechan," Takumi whispered, staring at the tower of fire as though he could see his sister there. As though she were dancing in the flames.

When next Mai was aware of herself, she was flying.

She dreamed of flying, quite a bit. The idea of moving through the air like a bird, a plane or Superman was immensely appealing to her. She wasn't blind to the idea that these dreams meant that she wanted to run away from her responsibilities. But as long as she never did, it was okay, right?

Anyway, this particular dream - for it had to be a dream, since it was one thing to be able to create force fields for no reason and another to be suddenly flying - was very strange. She was up in the starlit sky, quite high as she looked down at the clouds, and yet she wasn't cold at all. Rather warm, actually.

Lazily, she looked to her left, and saw that the girl with the sword was still clinging to her hand, quite tightly, even though her eyes were closed and she seemed to be asleep. Huh. It was odd that the girl was in her dreams already, despite everything.

And then she looked to her right.

Her right hand was wrapped around a hard metallic protrusion from the skull-like head of a draconic robot monster, and she was looking into one of its four gleaming green eyes - the four that were on this side of its head - as the solid black pupil in one of them swiveled around to focus on her.

It proceeded to make whale noises at her.

"Ah," Mai said calmly. "What a horrible nightmare. I hope that I will soon wake up."

And then she passed out.

Sitting on the roof of a building, a rather pale and androgynous-looking yet stunningly handsome fellow looked up into the sky. "Well, now. That's not a bad start to your dance at all," he murmured as he watched a certain bright light moving across the sky. "You can probably do better, though, Mai-hime. I look forward to watching ..."

Then he went back to reading his book.

It wasn't *The Tail of the Snake*, incidentally. I do read other stuff from time to time.

He does, I mean.

Ahem.

When next Mai was aware of herself, she was looking up into the bright blue sky. The sun was bright but not unbearably hot. The wind was steady but not too strong.

She was surrounded by people who were staring at her.
Mai blinked, and lifted her head. Sure enough, she was lying on the ground just outside a building that looked much like the school she’d seen in the photographs that had been sent to her when she got her scholarship. And sure enough, a huge crowd of people were standing around, looking somewhat surprised at her.

Of course, the small circle of fire that surrounded her (and, she saw now, the other girl, who was wearing nothing more than a long shirt) might have had something to do with that. Briefly considering the worth of screaming a protest, she instead chose to murmur, "Ah, what a day," and then lay down to try and get back to that nightmare from earlier.

Of course, she couldn't possibly be that lucky, and just a little while later, Mai found herself seated at a table, bathed in a bright light from above her that kept her from seeing very much in the otherwise darkened classroom, being hectored at by a woman she suspected of being dangerously unbalanced.

"Trespassing onto our sacred campus after hours," recited Suzushiro Haruka as she stood across the table, tapping her foot in the universal symbol for impatience. "Compounding the aftermentioned crime by bringing an unauthorized person with you in the process."

"Aftermentioned?" Mai asked weakly.

"Aforementioned," said a quiet voice from outside Mai's immediate field of view, which Suzushiro was dominating.

"Eyes front!" the girl in the green blazer snapped when Mai tried to turn and see who'd spoken. "As I was saying. Compounding the aforementioned crime by bringing an unauthorized person with you in the process. Vandalism committed against the beautiful grounds of our beloved academy. Arson committed against the beautiful grounds of our beloved academy. Indecent exposure to the otherwise pure students of the school."

"Oh, come on," Mai protested. "I was lying on the ground! If anyone got a look at my panties, they must have been trying, which means they weren't very -"

"Do! Not! Interrupt! Me!" Suzushiro yelled, punctuating each word by slamming a shoe onto the table in front of Mai. She hadn't even seen the girl take it off. Maybe she carried it around with her. Be that as it may, it accomplished the senior girl's goal of quieting Mai's protests.

"And finally, least but not last, being in possession of lethal weaponry and bringing said lethal weaponry to school!" she continued with a dramatic gesture to her left. Another light came up, revealing that the huge black sword which was resting in the corner of the room. "Can you offer any possible explanation for these heinous acts? Speak now or forever hold your peace!"

"Um. Well, that's not mine?" Mai suggested hesitantly.

"The prisoner claims that the lethal weaponry is not hers," Suzushiro repeated. "Then whose might it be?"

"It belongs to that girl, the one they took to the infirmary," Mai explained. "Again." This seemed very familiar for some reason. It had only been a few hours ago that -

"And the rest?" Suzushiro snapped, interrupting Mai's flashback before it really got going. "What can you offer in excavation of the rest?"

"Do you mean exculpation?" Mai asked.
"Yes, that is what I said," Suzushiro growled out between clenched teeth.

"... no, I don't think you did."

"I am the one who does the thinking around here!"

"Now, now," said a male voice said. "I th-, er, suspect that it might be time to take a brief intermission in this questioning, Suzushiro-san."

He came up out of the darkness, dressed in a jet black gakuran that didn't look much like the standard boy's attire for the school that Mai had glimpsed before she was hauled off to be interrogated. It looked really good, and so did the person who wore it. And he was smiling in a warm manner, and holding a cup of tea on a dish in his hands, which he gently set down in front of Mai. "Please, have some. It's an old family recipe."

"Thank you very much, senpai," she said, as she picked it up.

Before she could even sip, the cup was yanked out of her hands. "Vice President Kanzaki-san, I would politely request that you refrain from coddling the prisoner!" Suzushiro snapped. And then, as though to compound the insult, she drank the tea herself. "This is very good. Could I have the recipe later?" she asked in a much calmer tone.

"I would be happy to -"

"See! This is what I'm talking about!" Suzushiro started shouting again. "We don't want her calm, and that's just what will happen if we start giving her tea and being all nice and junk! If she's calm, she'll have time to make up some sort of some sort of ridiculous story out of whole cloth that will bamboozle us into thinking that she's almost an innocent bystander while she's actually the mastermind behind this whole disturbing sequence of events!"

Kanzaki considered this, then looked off into the darkness. "Did you two watch The Usual Suspects when it was on last night? You did, didn't you. Don't look so embarrassed, Kikukawa-san, it's a very good movie."

Abruptly, there was the sound of a door sliding open. A voice that was disturbingly familiar to Mai spoke up. "What's with the lights in here?" And then they all came on, revealing that an embarrassed looking girl with glasses was standing near the switches, but that the one who'd turned them on was none other than -

"Tate?" Mai exclaimed.

"Yeah, yeah," Yuuichi said. "Someone here to see you."

And then Takumi entered at a run. "Oneechan!" he cried out at the sight of her.

Mai promptly came to her feet, just as he ran into her arms. It was hard to suppress the urge to kiss him, knowing that she wouldn't be able to keep it sisterly if she did, so she quietly gloried in the contact of their bodies and hearts. "Pretty scary, wasn't it?" she asked as she held him.

"Too scary!"

"Ahem." At the head of the classroom, a rather pale young woman with bright red eyes was standing up. "Suzushiro-san, while I can only salute your diligence in investigating these strange circumstances, the facts appear to be fairly clear. Tokiha-san was involved in a disaster, and can't really recall much of what happened to take her from the scene of that disaster to our school.
However, since she is a student transferring here, I think we should be pleased that she's alive, rather than critical and interrogatory. Wouldn't you agree?"

It sounded like a question, but even Mai could tell that it wasn't intended as one.

"Ahem," Suzushiro said in response, clearly looking put out. "If the Student Council President is of that opinion, Fujino-san, then of course the Student Executive must agree and suspend the investigation. For now," she added, shooting a glare in Mai's direction.

Mai didn't even bother to look at her. She'd made it to the school and her little brother was okay. Everything was going to be fine from now on.

"Eh? We can't room together?" Mai asked the teacher.

"I'm afraid not," the old man confirmed. "Mahora's policy is pretty liberal, and this particular school is given a great deal of latitude, but the rules are pretty explicit. Male students over the age of eleven are not permitted to room with female students."

"But, sensei, I don't think you really understand, there are some unique circumstances here," she protested, trying to stay calm and not show the hysterical panic that she wanted to start showing. "My brother is in poor health, and needs constant and experienced medical attention -"

"And he can receive it from the school's experienced medical staff," the teacher interrupted. "His roommate is going to be given a briefing on Takumi-kun's condition. If anything happens, he'll know to get him to the hospital immediately."

That's if this person whom I don't know and have never even met doesn't turn out to be a flake! Mai raged inwardly. He's my brother, I'm supposed to take care of him! This isn't how they said it would be when they told me about this damned scholarship! She was sure that she wasn't letting any of the outrage show.

"Oneechan," Takumi said from where he was standing a step behind her.

"I'm sure that we can work this out," Mai said patiently. "Maybe we can have an adult living with us to serve as a chaperone?" It wouldn't be hard to trick the chaperone into giving them plenty of alone time, and then -

"Oneechan," Takumi repeated, slightly louder to get her attention. "It's okay."

"What?" she asked blankly.

"It's okay. This set up, I'm okay with it. I think that it's for the best."

What. "But, but your heart -"

"I'll be careful, more careful, I mean, with the meds after this," he assured her. "And, and I'll see you every day, oneechan, so you'll be able to keep an eye on me. I'll still be in your care, I'm just going to be helped by other people, too."

But I'm supposed to look out for you! You're mine!

"Well, if that's all - oh, I suppose I should tell you, Mai-kun, that you haven't been assigned a roommate yet. Unless there's another transfer in, you probably won't have one until the start of the next school year."
So I have plenty of room for my little brother, but you just won't let me sleep with him? Where's the sense in that? "I see," she said aloud. "Thank you for keeping me informed of that."

He missed the chilly subtext of her remarks, nodded in response, and then continued. "Well, then, you two should head to class, since homeroom is going to be starting shortly."

"Yes, sir," the siblings chorused, and bowed politely as they headed out the door.

"It's going to be okay, oneechan," Takumi assured her, then quickly headed off towards his class before she could say anything in response.

For a moment, she stood stock still, watching him dash off and wanting to do nothing more than race after him. But she mastered the impulse, painted on a smile, and headed to her own homeroom.

The smile stayed fixed on her face even as she entered it, saw who was sitting in the desk immediately to the right of the only unoccupied seat, and stifled a scream of purest frustration. That same sense of outrage at the universe's basic unfairness could be plainly seen on Yuuichi's face as well.

Mai was right on the brink of thinking that things couldn't get worse, when she realized what had happened every time she'd thought something like that. So she decided to think absolutely nothing for a while. Or at least not think about anything strange or weird or uncomfortable or upsetting. Surprisingly, that didn't work out very well for her.

Oh well, she mused as she sat with her chin on her hand, looking out the window with a pencil in her mouth. It looked like the start of another beautiful day.
April, 2004

She awoke again. And again, there were people nearby, asking her uninteresting questions. She remembered another instance of this, but didn't dwell on the similarities. They weren't important. Few things were.

Briefly, she considered calling Miroku to her hand once more, and departing from this place. But it occurred to her that she still wasn't completely recovered from her earlier exertions. Since everyone present seemed the sort of person she could slay easily with a few moment's efforts, it was probably safe to rest here.

So she closed her eyes, and within a few moments she was asleep once more.

"Incredible," Mai said as she tasted the soup. "This is cafeteria food?"

"Eh, the actual cafeteria isn't nearly as impressive. That's why people in the know prefer to eat here," Chie explained, gesturing vaguely at the many students sitting around the parked streetcar marked Chao Bao Zi.

"And the person who runs this is actually a student?" Mai asked, looking towards the open window of the streetcar, where said student could be seen serving the lucky few to get seats right there.
"That's incredible."

"And she's just about the nicest person you're ever going to meet, too," enthused Aoi, nodding vigorously.

"And the waiters are students, too? That's -"

"Incredible?" supplied Chie and Aoi, exchanging an amused glance.

"I was going to use another word," Mai said, with grave wounded dignity. "But that one will do, thank you. Are they hiring? Because I really need a job."

"I'm pretty sure that they are," Chie said, chuckling just a bit. "There's a fair amount of turnover at most of the workplaces, since most people who go to any of the schools at Mahora are only working to get that bit of extra money they need to buy whatever it is they want to buy."

Mai controlled the urge to flinch. She wasn't in that position at all, but she was also aware that was by her own choice. Her father gave both her and Takumi an allowance, but she refused to touch it. (As far as she knew, Takumi didn't either.) Sometimes she found herself wondering whether that was such a good idea, but there it was.

"Oneechan?" she heard Takumi's voice asking from behind her.

"Takumi!" she said, whirling to see him walking over to them in the company of another boy, rather bishonen with his long hair braided behind him, in a junior high uniform. "Is something the matter?" she demanded, almost rising from her seat.
"No," he said, subtly making calming gestures. "I just wanted to introduce you to my roommate. Akira-kun, this is my older sister."

The other boy nodded sharply. "Okuzaki Akira. Pleased to make your acquaintance," he said, just a bit brusquely.

"Ah. Yes. Well, then, thank you for looking after my little brother," Mai said, doing her level best to hide the aggravation that she still felt. It wasn't this person's fault, after all. "Oh, um, Takumi, these are my classmates -"

"Harada Chie," said the girl with thick glasses. "AKA Gossip queen!"

"Seriously?" Mai asked. "People actually call you that?"

"I'd love it if they did!"

"Senou Aoi," said Chie's constant companion. "No funny nickname, but please call me Aoi-chan!"

Mai, noting that Aoi seemed enthralled by Takumi's boyish good looks, turned to him and was just about to offer him a chair on the opposite side of the table from her. Before the words left her mouth, though, a chill ran down her spine as she saw something she didn't want to see.

The girl from the ferry, the one with the guns, was walking down the street, dressed in a school uniform with the jacket open, her long blue-black hair flowing in the breeze. She moved through the crowds like a shark swam through water, and with just as much warmth or emotion on her face.

"Who is that?" Mai asked quietly.

"Who's who?" Chie asked, turning to follow her gaze. "Oh. Kuga Natsuki-ojousama. She actually came to school today, I guess. She's sort of a local celebrity for how often she cuts classes without getting expelled. What's your interest in her?" Chie concluded, turning to look at the dotted outline which marked where Mai had been up until a few moments ago.

She stared at the empty space for a moment, before turning an inquisitive look in Takumi's direction. "Does she do that very often?"

"Not until recently," Takumi said with an embarrassed laugh, rubbing the back of his head.

"Very good technique," Akira observed. As all eyes turned on him, he coughed. "Or something like that. Excuse me."

"I'll come with," Takumi offered as the other boy started to walk away.

"Or you could -" Aoi started to suggest, but he was already gone by the time she did. "He will be mine," she said, a moment later, as she watched him go.

"Shota," Chie said.

"Loli."

"Since I was twelve and you were eleven when we started doing it, and I do think you've gotten less cute over the years, I'd say that's fair," Chie allowed.

She awoke again. This time there were no people nearby, which was different. And she was hungry, which was different and unpleasant.
She sat up in the bed, and considered again calling Miroku to her hand. But her constant companion would come to her at once if there was any danger. Though she found it difficult to imagine that any of the soft people here would be any real threat to her. In any event, it was time to depart, so she left through the window.

A few moments later, the curtains surrounding the bed where she’d been sleeping until lately were drawn back. "It seems you were right to be concerned, Tokiha-san," said Sagisawa Yohko, the head nurse.

"So now what?" Mai asked, looking nervous. The last time that girl and this Natsuki person had clashed, a ferry had ended up destroyed. She shuddered at what they might do here on the highly populated campus.

"Now I'm going to call campus security and tell them to be on the lookout for our young friend," Yohko declared. "You should probably get back to class, lunch hour is almost over."

"Right," Mai said hesitantly.

She honestly considered doing just that for a little while after she left the infirmary, but it quickly became obvious that she wouldn't be able to concentrate on her lessons if she did go back to class. With a groan of frustration, Mai headed down and out of the school building, hoping to find that strange little girl before her enemy did, for her sake as well as everyone else's.

She crawled through the environs in which she found herself, always remaining behind cover except when she was certain no one was looking. Fortunately, most of the people here were unobservant as well as clearly weak and thus uninteresting. She was conscious, however, of the fact that they had food and she didn't.

It seemed horribly unjust.

And there were so many of them too. Mikoto was strong, not stupid. Enough ants working together could bring down anyone, no matter how mighty. So it would not do for her to lash out and take what she needed. To do so would draw the ants to her, and she had things to do that she could not do if she were brought down. Hence her stealthy approach.

But the stealthy approach had its disadvantages. No matter how unobservant they might be, the weaklings were annoyingly unwilling to set down their food anywhere that she might be able to pick it up without leaving her concealment. So frustrating! The pangs of her hunger were becoming even more noisy, too.

And then, just as she was starting to go a little crazy, she chanced to pass by a small group of the weaklings. On hearing a call from one of their number, one of them became distracted, leaving an unopened package unattended long enough for Mikoto to dash out, seize it, and return to cover in a few seconds. She heard a hue and a cry nearby, but surely she had time enough to open the package and take a bite out of AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH! WHAT WAS SHE EATING?

Driven past madness by the searing pain in her mouth, she abandoned all cover. Distantly, she was aware of her hands and feet landing on something fleshy, but she could not spare a moment's thought to such trivia. She needed water! Water to put out the fire!

Where were the ants hiding the water?
Mai wasn't sure where to start looking for the girl, until she started hearing screams. With a sigh, she started running in that direction.

Yuuki Nao had been enjoying life, lately. Her - commercial endeavors, shall we say? - had been exceptionally profitable since she made her new best friend, and that had taken the edge off of a bit of the frustration she felt with life. A bit, not a lot; after all, she was still engaged in said commercial endeavors.

But she was feeling pretty good that afternoon, when she heard the sounds of someone running behind her. Naturally, she turned to see what was happening.

She turned just in time to see the girl in the long shirt and nothing else running on all fours, before said girl slammed into her and knocked her to the ground. Stunned, Nao stared up at the golden-eyed girl who was breathing heavily, with a bit of drool dripping from her mouth.

Oh no, thought Nao, almost paralyzed now. She'd done her level best to convince herself that that sempai had been kidding her, when she'd made those hints back in December. But there could be no mistaking this girl's obvious intent. It was possible! Some girls did do such things!

She's going to have sex with me! Nao shrieked inwardly, and braced herself for the indignity that was sure to follow, trying desperately to forget the sounds of those bastards having sex with her mother.

"Hey! Stop!" someone shouted.

The girl atop Nao looked up and to the side, and then scrambled off of her, leaving Nao behind as she dashed off. Moments later, there was another girl, taller and with orange hair, leaning over her with a concerned expression.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Naturally, Nao punched her in the stomach. "What was thaat!" she shouted as the girl stumbled back.

"Wow," Mai muttered, clenching her stomach. "That really does hurt. Maybe I should apolo-"

"What was thaat!" the girl on the ground repeated as she started to sit up. "What, what -"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," she said. She really did understand where the other was coming from, but there wasn't time to explain. "I, I've gotta go -" It wasn't easy to run with the bruise forming on her stomach, but she had to make sure this didn't happen to anyone else.

"H-hey," the girl said, frowning. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Uh, maybe," Mai replied. It was entirely possible that this girl had been in the crowd around her when she'd woken up this morning, after all. She hadn't had time to notice any faces. "Sorry, can't talk!" And then she was off again.

Nao blinked. She was sure that she'd never seen that girl before, and yet there was something awfully familiar about her, somehow ...

"Why am I doing this?" Mai wondered aloud a few moments later, as she followed the path of the crazy girl through a bushy region. She had endured some mild embarrassment at the start of her
passage through this area when she passed a pair of students engaged in al fresco sex. Not being a yaoi fan, she didn't pause to watch, but just kept right on going through the bush, feeling it brushing against her skin and clothes just a bit painfully.

_The crazy girl_, she thought as she made her way up a hill. _Who's the crazy one, the crazy girl or me who follows her? This is stupid! I'm cutting class on my first day here! I'm going to get in so much trouble, it's not even funny! I could lose my scholarship, I'd have to abandon Takumi to this place, and all for the sake of some lunatic whose name I don't even know! And yet I keep on going and going and aaaggh!_

The aaaggh was prompted by the fact that, blinded by a branch that came back into her face at an inopportune moment, Mai couldn't see that the incline she was ascending dropped off rather sharply. She tumbled down the much steeper side of the hill, holding up her hands to protect her head and face, before finally coming to a rest flat on her back, staring up at the sky.

"Why am I doing this?" she repeated, somewhat more faintly.

"That is a question that only you yourself can ever answer," a quiet, feminine voice replied. "Some hold that understanding one's own motivations, one's true will as it were, is the key to successfully achieving one's goals. Others believe that all such striving is meaningless. I suppose that if one finds meaning in the search, then it is there, and if not, then not. Are you all right?"

Having been trying for a few moments, Mai finally managed to lift her head enough to see who was talking to her. She blinked at the sight of her surroundings.

The hill she'd just fallen down formed the walls of a beautiful flower garden, complete with gazebo and a paved walkway. Just a little ways away from where Mai was currently lying, a petite girl with long violet hair, dressed in a very formal dress, was sitting in a wheelchair and regarding Mai with obvious interest. She looked much younger than Mai, and yet, there was something about her expression that suggested that she wasn't.

Mai quickly rolled up into a seated position. "Uh, yes, I'm fine, fine thank you. Um, good afternoon. This may sound like a crazy question, but did a little girl in a shirt just run through here?"

"Good afternoon. As it happens, yes. I gather that you're chasing after Mikoto?" the young lady answered.

"Which way did she -" Mai broke off, staring. "You know her? I mean, you know her name?"

"Yes, I do know her name, Tokiha Mai, just as I know yours. Please allow me to introduce myself, now. I presently have the honor of being Kazehana Mashiro." She nodded politely, as though offering a bow.

Mai nodded reflexively in response, but her mind was going a mile a minute. "Kazehana ... as in the Kazehana Scholarship?" she asked weakly.

Mashiro nodded. "I am the head of the family trust which bestows that scholarship, yes. Hence my knowledge of you and of Mikoto."

That last part didn't immediately register with Mai. "Oh. Um, well, I was planning on visiting you and thanking you eventually, so I suppose I should -" "There's no need to thank me," Mashiro said, shaking her head. "Rather I should thank you and the other HiME for accepting it."
Dead silence.

"Excuse me?" Mai asked after a moment.

"HiME," repeated the girl in the wheelchair. "It's a multilingual pun, being an acronym derived from the English words 'High-energy Materializing Entity', which coincidentally sounds like -"

"I know what it sounds like," Mai snapped, realizing that she was being very rude, but thinking it was probably appropriate. "How do you know about that sort of thing?"

"It is my business to know such things," Mashiro 'answered'. Imagine air quotes around the answered part, and you'll have the right idea.

"Wait," Mai said, part of the conversation she'd just been having falling into place. "You said that girl, Mikoto, also got the same scholarship as I did."

Mashiro nodded.

"What about this, this Kuga person?" she asked, with a sinking feeling.

"Kuga Natsuki received one as well," Mashiro confirmed.

"I was given a scholarship," Mai said slowly, "because I'm one of these ... hime people."

Mashiro nodded again.

"The recruiter said that it was because of something my grandfather did," Mai continued, feeling a bit faint and wondering whether or not she might have hit her head after all.

"From a certain point of view, that was the truth," explained Mashiro. "He had offspring, resulting in your birth. And we believe that the heritage which resulted in your possession of this talent originates through your paternal ancestry, and so -"

"This isn't funny!" shouted Mai as she loomed over the girl in her wheelchair. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Please moderate your tone," Mashiro requested calmly.

"Or what?"

"Or my companion, who is now standing behind you, will moderate it for you."

Mai eased back, and slowly turned to look behind her. There was a person standing there, who might as well have materialized from thin air for all the noise that she'd made, but it wasn't some sort of frightening presence. The maid, or so Mai concluded from the frilly dress that the woman was wearing, was regarding her with a cold and unfriendly look, but she didn't have any sort of weapon handy. She looked harmless, really.

On the other hand, so had that Mikoto girl when she was pulled out of the river.

"Okay," Mai said, to both the maid and her mistress. "Okay. I'm calm. Everything's cool. But I want to know what the - what I've gotten myself into, here?"

"An admirable goal to pursue," said Mashiro, approvingly. "However, one should finish one thing before one starts on another. That's my opinion, at least."
"Huh?"

"Fumi," the girl continued, ignoring Mai's befuddlement. "I take it that you weren't able to catch her."

"Regretfully, mistress, Fumi was foiled in her pursuit of the cat which was actually a girl," the maid said. "She was too quick for Fumi."

_**How old are you?**_ Mai thought, looking at the maid.

"Ah well, the trail is surely cold by now. It cannot be helped. I suppose that we must simply wait and hope that something will cause Mikoto to come running back this way," said Mashiro.

Mai coughed. "Um ... that doesn't sound too plausible, to me."

Mashiro smiled.

Ah, water! Blessed, quenching water! Mikoto drank until she thought that she might burst, more concerned with soothing the hot pain in her mouth. Part of her mused that if the weaklings ate such things as caused her this much pain, they might not be so weak after all. But it was a tiny voice in the tumult of her more immediate concerns.

Such as the return of her hunger. She looked around. There had been a few people sitting around this fountain when she'd arrived, but they'd all run off quickly. And they'd taken their food with them. And she was out of cover, exposed to the sight of anyone and everyone.

She mewed her annoyance.

Then she heard a footstep nearby. "Oy."

Mikoto turned sharply, regarding a boy slightly younger than she herself, dressed in a boys' school uniform with the jacket open to reveal a white shirt beneath, his hair messed up and -

- short, sharp dog ears on the top of his head.

"You're the girl who's been causing all the ruckus, today, right?" said Inugami Kotaro, for it was he. "I can respect that. Sometimes things need to be shaken up a little. But enough's enough, right? Let's you an' me go back to the nurse and she'll give you somethin' ta eat. Sounds good, hah?" And he bared his teeth.

Someone else might have taken that as a friendly grin. Mikoto was not someone else, by definition. She hissed fiercely, and ran off back in the direction that she'd come.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Kotaro shouted, and gave chase. A moment later, he realized that, just like the girl, he was moving on all fours, something he normally did only when in his alternate form.

What th'heck 'm I doing? he wondered. But the chase consumed his attention, and he let out his cry, "Wanwan!" as it did.

Mashiro smiled. (She does that a lot.)

A moment or so later, the small girl whom Mai now knew to be named Mikoto came racing on all
fours up the pathway, slamming right into her and knocking her off her feet, again.

"Okay, not so unlikely," Mai muttered, feeling the girl's head bumping against the bottom of her bust.

"Nyaaan!" Mikoto shrieked.

"Wanwan!" shouted a boy who was apparently chasing her as he also ran up the path. When he realized that the chase had come to an abrupt end, he halted dead in his tracks, then rapidly pushing himself into an upright posture. He attempted to stand with an insouciant expression that would probably have come off better if he wasn't about eleven years old and hadn't been running around on all fours a few moments ago. "'Sup?" he said.

"Why, if it isn't Inugami-san," Mashiro said with a pitch-perfect tone of pleasant surprise. "What brings you out this way on this pleasant afternoon?"

"Uh," said Kotaro, examining the quartet of older women who were standing before him uneasily. Despite everything he'd been through in the last year or so, he was still occasionally a bit easily flustered by attractive women. The fact that one of them clearly knew of him, when didn't think he had never seen her before, didn't help matters.

Wait, had he really never seen her before? Wasn't she - "Oh. Nowwww I remember. You're that rich lady who bailed the school out after all that stuff happened. The one I'm not supposed to mess with if I can possibly help it."

"I suppose that's how someone might describe me. Kuznoha-san, perhaps," the girl in the wheelchair speculated.

Something about her put Kotaro's teeth on edge, and so he was even less inclined than he otherwise would be to talk trash about his somewhat volatile boss. "Yeah, well, anyway, I'm supposed to take that girl back to the infirmary, so -"

"I don't think that will be necessary," Mashiro said easily. "I will take responsibility. She's in good hands already."

"She is?" asked Mai. Bump went the girl's head again.

Kotaro considered the girl on the ground for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, all right," he said, wanting to get away from this confusing situation. There'd be other times to make it clear he was not someone who should be taken as lightly as these people seemed to do. "I'll leave it in your hands, then." He sauntered off, whistling.

"It's so cute the way that he makes it seem that he has a choice in the matter," Mashiro mused a moment later.

"Very cute indeed, mistress," Fumi agreed. "Mistress, Fumi believes that it is time for us to be going."

"So it is." Mashiro proceeded to settle back in her chair. "Mai-san, I leave taking care of Mikoto to you. If you have any questions you wish to ask of me, I am certainly at your disposal. Any of the student council or the executive can direct you to my residence, it's something of a local landmark."

"Uh, wait a minute," said Mai, starting to get to her feet and pulling Mikoto with her.

"Sorry, I have to go do my math homework like a good little kid," Mashiro told her as Fumi quickly
wheeled her away.

"Math homework? Seriously?"

But the girl was probably out of earshot by that point. Probably. So all Mai did was shake her head, and look down at Mikoto, who was still clutching to her.

"Hey, are you all right?" she asked.

"I don't like that person," Mikoto bit out, her tone quiet but angry.

"That person? You mean that boy who was chasing you, Inukami or whatever his name was?"

Mikoto shook her head, hair still brushing up against Mai's breasts.

"Oh, you mean Mashiro-san? I don't think I like her very much either," admitted Mai. "But she's gone, now, so ... well, maybe you could stop clinging?"

Mikoto's eyes, until now firmly clamped shut, slid open as she realized where she was and what she was doing. She let go and stepped back, taking a good long look at Mai in the process. "You are that girl who helped," she said.

"Tokiha Mai," Mai said, introducing herself. "And you're, um, all that she said was Mikoto -"

"Minagi Mikoto," the girl said, gravely formal with a deep bow. "And now I must go." She turned to do just that.

The loudest stomach rumble Mai had ever heard split the air.

Mikoto stood stock still in mid turn.

"Are you perhaps hungry?" Mai asked, throttling the urge to giggle.

Mikoto nodded twice, not looking back.

"Okay, rather than going wherever you were planning on going, how would you like to have something to eat?"

Slowly she turned, tears streaming from her eyes. "Really?"

At first, Mai had only intended to take the other girl to the Chao Bao Zi, but a moment's thought (specifically on the fact that Mikoto was still just running around in a long shirt) convinced her that was a bad idea. So instead she led her to Mai's dorm room. It was the first time that she herself had spent any real time there; she'd only stopped in to get changed into a secondary uniform after her interrogation.

The suite's kitchen was fully furnished. That had actually been one of the selling points of this particular school, back when she'd thought that she would be living here with Takumi. Well, that hadn't worked out, so she might as well put her skills to good use.

"I'm actually pretty confident in my cooking skills," she told Mikoto over her shoulder as she worked in the kitchen. "I mean, obviously Takumi's not going to say anything bad about what I make for him, but other people have said I do fairly well. I don't think I'd be able to make it as a chef, or anything, but I did have a pretty good teacher when I was working at a restaurant last year." She chuckled. "Actually, he taught me all sorts of - ahem, well, you probably don't want to hear about -"
She looked over her shoulder.

Mikoto had collapsed, head slumped down on the table.

"Orrrr maybe you're not listening at all," Mai continued after a moment, shaking her head. She evaluated the soup, finishing it off by cracking an egg into it. "Well, hopefully this will wake you up."

She carried the bowl over to where Mikoto sat, and set it down beside her. Then, just to be careful, she backed up a fair distance.

It only took a moment or so for the scent to bring the girl around. She roused herself, staring down at the bowl in front of her. Then, slowly, without so much as an itte, much less the full invocation, she reached out to lift the bowl up to her mouth, and almost delicately sipped at the broth.

The bowl lowered, and Mai could see that Mikoto's face held an expression that, until that point, she had associated with a completely different sort of activity. "Good grief," Mai said. "Did you just have an orgasm?"

"It's so good," Mikoto proclaimed, having perhaps not heard the question. She took up her chopsticks and began eating quickly and noisily.

"Well, I'm glad that you like it," Mai said. She was. She was a little freaked out by how much the other girl liked it, but gladness was part of her feelings, too.

Just a few moments later, Mikoto had finished the soup, and sat there with a blissful expression on her face. "You are a very good person, Mai," she said.

"Well, thank you," Mai said, sliding a bit closer to her. "Now, Mikoto-chan, I hope you won't mind if I ask you a few questions. Umm ... what do you know about all of this hime business?"

Mikoto blinked. "Mai knows about HiME?"

"Yes, that girl you don't like, Mashiro, she told me about them. But until today, I had no idea that such things existed ... so anything you could tell me would be very helpful."

"I am a HiME," Mikoto said. "There are others."

"Yes, I know that part. Apparently, I'm one of the others, and -"

"Eh?" Mikoto interjected. "Mai is a HiME?" Before Mai could answer, Mikoto held up her palm and pounded her fist down on it. "Ah, that's right. That's how Mai was able to help last night."

"Yes, I guess so," Mai agreed. "So, what else is there?"

Mikoto stared at her in obvious confusion.

"I mean, okay, we're something called hime, and so we can, well, do things. Why is this happening?"

"Because it is supposed to," Mikoto answered. Everything happened because it was supposed to happen. Or because someone made it happen. That was obvious. Mai was very nice, but not very smart.

Mai held a hand over her face for a moment, then resumed questioning. "Okay, last night you were fighting that Natsuki person."

"I don't know any of that," Mai said. "All I know is that I'm supposed to help you and a few others."

"I wonder what that means," Mai said. "I hope it's not something too complicated."

"You don't have to worry about that," Mikoto said. "Just do your best and everything will work out."

"Well," Mai said. "Let's try it."

"I'm not sure," Mikoto said. "But let's give it a try."

"Okay," Mai said. "Let's try it."

Mai held up her palm and pounded her fist down on it. "Ah, that's right. That's how Mai was able to help last night."

"Yes, I guess so," Mai agreed. "So, what else is there?"

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"Is that her name?"

"You didn't even know her name?" Mai asked, eyes wide. "Why were you fighting?"

"Because she told me not to come to Mahora, and said that she was going to stop me." Mikoto abruptly stiffened, and looked around somewhat wildly. "Is this Mahora?" Her voice was highly excited all of a sudden.

"Uh, yes. Yes, it is. Why was it so important that you come here? Is this part of being a hime, that you have to come here?"

Mikoto shook her head as she stood up. "No. I am here to find aniue." She pulled some sort of necklace out from under her shirt's neck, and looked down at its charm.

Mai blinked at the unfamiliar term. "Your older brother?" she asked after a moment.

Mikoto nodded. "Yes. And now I must go." Her eyes settled on the window, and she bounded over to its sill.

"No, wait, we're on the third floor!" Mai shrieked.

This apparently was not something that gave Mikoto a great deal of concern as she leaped out of sight. Mai got up and ran over to the window, sure that she was going to see the girl's crumpled body on the ground below. Instead, she saw that Mikoto appeared to have landed perfectly, and was now running off into the evening, eventually dropping into her all-fours stance.

For a moment, Mai considered just letting her go. Clearly, this girl could take care of herself. Clearly, it wasn't really Mai's problem what happened to her. Clearly ...

Clearly, she was going to go anyway. "Man, I hate being so damned responsible," Mai said as she pulled off her apron.

A few moments later, she was running after Mikoto. *Is this what my life is going to be like from now on?* she wondered. *Constantly chasing after this crazy girl? This is not very princessy, if you ask me.*

Moving swiftly along a paved path that led into the forest, Mai turned a corner and skidded to a stop. Just a few feet away, the person whom she now knew to be named Kuga Natsuki was dressed in the exact same motorcycle leathers she'd been wearing last night, and standing over an actual motorcycle, examining its controls or something. Mai stood paralyzed, terrified of what the crazy girl might do.

Then Natsuki looked up. "Oh," she said. "It's you."

It was the tone that set Mai off. She didn't sound angry to see her again, or upset or even annoyed. It was as though Mai's presence here, indeed her continued health and well-being, was nothing more than phenomena that had nothing whatsoever to do with anything Natsuki had or hadn't done.

"Yeah!" Mai shouted. "It's me! Girl you shot at! I oughta call the cops on you!"

Natsuki stared at her, then mimed holding a phone to her ear. "Hello, police? I'd like to report an assault. Yes, this girl shot a bullet made of ice at me. Oh, don't worry, I'm not hurt. I blocked the ice bullet with my flaming force field, and - Hello? Hello?" She looked down at the fake phone, then looked back at Mai. "They hung up. I can't imagine why, can you?"
"Well, I suppose you think you're gonna get another shot at me, right?" Mai shouted, trying desperately to remember how she'd made the force field come out last time.

"Why would I do that?" Natsuki asked, sounding vaguely bewildered.

"Because you're a psycho!"

With the air of the seriously put-upon, Natsuki raised a hand to her eyes and shook her head. When she spoke, after lowering the hand, it was slowly and deliberately. "I shot at you to determine whether I was right about you having a force field. And the only reason I did that was to clarify whether you were a HiME or not, so that I could tell you to turn around and go back where you came from. You didn't do so. You came here instead. Attacking you now, when you are already where I didn't want you to go, would be pointless. A psycho would do pointless things like that - but I'm not a psycho."

Mai stared at the girl in motorcycle leathers. It was so tempting to believe her. It would solve almost all of the problems. She wouldn't have to worry about Mikoto so much, if this were on the level, and the quiet high school life she dreamed of would be one step closer. "So ... you're not going to try and hurt me. Or Mikoto."

"Is that her name?"

"Oh for -"

"Anyway," Natsuki interrupted Mai's invective. "I don't have any quarrel with either of you. Believe it or not, I was trying to help you both back there. You don't want to be involved with the lunacy that's going on here. So just stay out of my way, and we won't have any problems with each other."

That sounded good, but the implications ... "And what if we don't stay out of your way?" Mai asked, hesitantly. She wouldn't, but she couldn't speak for Mikoto, given the girl's quest.

Natsuki's green eyes, already as cold as the ice she fired from her guns, grew very hard. "Then we will have a problem. And you won't deserve any mercy. So you won't get it."

Dead silence fell once again.

It was broken by a voice from above them both. "Wow, kiddo, you've gotten really badass since back then. But is it really such a good idea to be fighting amongst yourselves right now? I mean, there'll be plenty of time for that sort of thing later, after all."

Mai and Natsuki both looked up. Seated casually on the upper branch of one of the trees, leaning back as though enjoying the spectacle they presented, was an extraordinarily handsome fellow. Mai clearly thought he was one of the sexiest men she'd ever seen; really, it was obvious on her face. Some might have taken that expression for bafflement, but it was definitely arousal. And Natsuki, well, Natsuki was a little different, but the anger she was fronting was clearly a cover for a reluctant attraction. (She has that sort of problem, you know.)

"Nagi!" Natsuki spat. Abruptly, her guns were in her hands.

"Who?" Mai asked.

"Oh, I'm just your friendly neighborhood -" Nagi started to explain.

"Pain in the ass," Natsuki growled. "He shows up sometimes. He knows things. And he was there when ... don't you recognize his voice, at least?"
Abruptly, Mai realized that she did. Understandably, after all, it was such a sexy, resonant voice. She'd heard it when she was wishing for the power, last night.

"You did this to me?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, major loss of cool points," Nagi said, shaking his head. "Didn't Mashiro-chan make it clear? Much like Lady Gaga said, you were born this way."

"Who the hell is Lady Gaga?" Natsuki asked, brow furrowed.

"... oh, sorry. I forgot you don't know about her yet. Not important. Really, sometimes I just say stuff. Anyway, back to business. You really shouldn't be fighting each other, not when there's an Orphan on the loose."

"Orphan!" Natsuki hissed.

"Wow, yet another introduction of terminology that nobody is bothering to explain," Mai said gloomily.

"Ooh, lemme! I love giving lectures!" Nagi said cutely, as he rolled out of the tree and dropped elegantly to the ground to stand before them, hands in his pants pockets. "You see, Mai-chan, as a HiME you are linked to a powerful entity comprised of the energy you command."

"I've been told that it's materialized photons, for what that's worth," Natsuki interjected.

"Ah, science," Nagi mused sagely. "Anyway, this entity is your Child. But periodically, other entities of this nature materialize who aren't linked to anyone. A Child with no parent... thus, an Orphan!"

"So where is it, you damned nuisance?" demanded Natsuki, clearly doing her best to fight her deep desire for Nagi's hot bod.

"Why it's right behind you!" he said. As Natsuki whirled around to face in the opposite direction, Nagi continued. "Oops, having problems with time again. I mean that it's right behind you, now. Be seeing you!"

And then he leapt out of sight, as the Orphan crashed into view.

To Mai, it resembled nothing so much as a scorpion as envisioned by one of Toho's kaiju creators and painted blue, though it wasn't anywhere nearly as big. The Orphan wouldn't have towered over any office buildings; the trees surrounding it were taller. But as one of its clawed arms swept right through one of those trees, Mai found herself musing that size wasn't everything. *Wow, I always have the strangest thoughts when I'm about to die. Actually, that's a strange thought itself!*

Natsuki, smothering curses, whirled and began shooting at the Orphan. The charges glanced off its carapace. "Great, another heavy armored one," she muttered, then raised her voice to shout at Mai. "Hey, newbie! A little backup would be appreciated here!"

The yell snapped Mai out of her bemusement. "Me? I don't know what I'm doing!" she yelled back.

"Yeah, I -" The Orphan's big foreclaw swept down at where Natsuki was standing, and she tumbled out of its way a second before she would have been sliced open. "- gathered that!" she concluded as she directed a shot at the Orphan's underbelly. Still no effect. Joints next. "Just do what you did last night!"
"I don't know what I did last night!" Mai reiterated as she danced out of the way of the Orphan's tail, swinging around as its head followed Natsuki's movements.

"Sure you do!" Natsuki retorted as she kept right on dodging, until her evasive maneuvers led her to cross paths with the other girl. "You did this!" And she kicked Mai's feet out from under her and shoved her right at the Orphan's head.

Mai, stunned by the sudden betrayal, didn't realize that the Orphan's mandibles were coming towards her until they were almost on her. She shrieked and threw up her hands in front of her face.

The mandibles struck her force field and recoiled, with the Orphan shrieking in pain from the burn.

"See?" Natsuki said.

"You crazy bitch!" Mai shrieked, still holding her arms up. "What if that hadn't worked?"

Natsuki didn't bother to answer such an obvious question. Shots to the Orphan's joints weren't having any effect, so it was time to pull out the heavy artillery. "Duran!" she called, and with an arctic wind, her ever-loyal Child emerged from the shadows beside her. At a gesture, he charged at the Orphan, knocking it back as he smashed into its head, but not actually doing any damage.

That was as Natsuki had expected. This was a delaying tactic until she could get Mai into a better shape for -

That was when Mai slapped her. Natsuki blinked. She hadn't even realized that the other girl was moving. Well, at least there wasn't much force behind the slap. It stung, but it didn't really hurt.

"Okay," Natsuki said, trying very hard to keep a reign on her temper. "I probably deserve that."

"That's the fricking least of what you deserve!" Mai shouted.

"Look, I do not have time to coddle you, okay? We're in a fight for our lives, here! You can do more than you've been doing - you don't even have your weapon -"

"I don't want a weapon! I don't want anything to do with this!"

"Well you've got it whether you want it or not!" Natsuki roared.

And then, as they were somewhat distracted, Mikoto leapt out of the darkness, bearing her huge sword once more, and cleaved the Orphan in twain. Landing on the ground slightly before the two chunks of the Orphan did, she promptly pivoted and pointed her sword in Natsuki's direction. "You," she said, then paused, as though trying to remember something. Eventually, she gave up. "You," she repeated. "Step away from Mai."

Natsuki stared. After a moment, she found her voice again. "Me, step away from her? She's the one who -"

"Then die." Mikoto tensed, preparing to spin around and launch yet another attack on Natsuki.

"Okay!" Mai interjected, rapidly moving away from Natsuki, and also, purely coincidentally, moving a bit away from Mikoto as well. "This is pretty much the same as what you asked for, don't you think? Everything's cool, now, Mikoto, no need for anybody to die."

Mikoto didn't answer, glowering at Natsuki instead. Natsuki returned the hostile look with a cold, superior stare of her own.
And here I am caught in the middle of these two. Again! Despite being very frustrated, Mai decided to play peacemaker. "Now, Mikoto, I know you're probably really upset about Natsuki trying to stop you from coming here to look for your brother, but -"

"He's probably not even here," Natsuki snapped.

"But that's neither here nor there," she continued, raising her voice to drown Natsuki out. "Because her plan didn't work, and so you are here. Her plan didn't work, right, so only a crazy person would try to take revenge for a plan that didn't work when they have an important quest like you do. Right?"

Mikoto's eyes didn't shift in the slightest, but her posture did. Her swordpoint lowered slightly. "That's true," she said. "So. Just stay out of my way, and we won't have any problems with each other."

The irony of this situation may well kill me, thought Natsuki, but nonetheless opened her mouth to indicate agreement.

That was the moment that the severed pieces of the Orphan chose to reanimate themselves. They had shifted to look more serpent-like than scorpion-like, now, and charged heedlessly towards the three girls and Duran.

Mikoto quickly brought her sword up again and met that charge head-on, blocking one of the Orphans with her blade. But the powerful stroke that had cleft the creature in twain was countered, this time, by the Orphan's powerful arms. Now that it knew what to expect from her, she was less of a threat.

Tearing her eyes from Duran's response to the other Orphan's charge, which was proving no more effective than it had initially, Natsuki glared again at Mai. "So, about that not wanting a weapon business -"

Mai's feelings hadn't changed. This wasn't anything to do with her! She ought to be running away as fast as she possibly could. She had too many responsibilities to risk herself in fighting anyone. If she had to fight to protect Takumi, that would be different, but that wasn't the situation, now was it? Takumi was probably safe in his dorm room, separated from her, and, and, well, this wasn't her fight!

But then it wasn't Mikoto's, either.

And that thought struck her like a thunderbolt. Mikoto hadn't said anything about fighting Orphans. She just wanted to find her brother. So then why was she fighting so hard right now?

Because she's a battle-maniac, obviously, the more sensible part of Mai's head insisted, but the rest knew that wasn't just it. Mikoto had come in fighting ... because Mai was here. And Mai had helped her, and fed her. Just for that, the girl was ready to give it everything.

Ah hell. I really will be doing this forever, won't I?

"Okay, okay, okay!" Mai yelled. "What do I do, how do I get this weapon?"

"Just open your heart to what you already have in hand, and it'll come to you," Natsuki said quickly, then turned her attention back to the battle. "Duran, retreat! Duran, load chrome cartridge!"

Open my - what the hell is this shit? Mai closed her eyes and tried to feel the flames in her hands, hoping that would do it. And as she did so, images of the mechanical dragon she'd glimpsed last night flashed through her mind, and the flames seemed to grow hotter without becoming painful.
Then there was a strange whirring sound.

Mai's eyes snapped open to behold a pair of gem-studded golden circles orbiting her wrists. She stared at them.

"What kind of weapon is this?" she finally shouted. Mikoto got a sword, Natsuki got guns, and she'd gotten bangles? Someone, somewhere, was clearly making fun of her. All the same, they did make her feel a little taller, somehow.

Then she looked down.

Ah. The reason she felt taller was the fact that she was floating several inches above the ground, perhaps due to the gem-studded golden circles that were also orbiting her ankles. Well. That was sort of cool.

Not paying her any mind, Natsuki had proceeded with the rest of her strategy. "Duran, fire!"

The robotic dog's shoulder mounted cannons proceeded to discharge at the smaller of the two fragmented parts of the Orphan, knocking it back quite a bit. The dust its backward passage kicked up, however, got in Mikoto's eyes, leaving her momentarily blinded and unable to stop the larger fragment from charging over her at Mai.

Mai reacted to this just as she had reacted to being thrown at the creature earlier. She jerked her hands up. There was a bit more consideration in the gesture this time, since she knew that this was how she called up the force field.

Somewhat to her surprise, the force field surged out from her hands like a gout of fire, slamming into the charging Orphan. It made a strange noise, clearly some sort of gasp of pain, as it stumbled back from the jet of flame coming from Mai's direction.

It stumbled right back onto the point of Mikoto's sword, and the noise became even louder.

Mai wasn't sure exactly what gave her the notion, but she followed through on it all the same. She pushed even more of the fire in her hands out at the impaled Orphan, and nearly engulfed it. Its bulk protected Mikoto from the flames, but if this didn't work fairly quickly, then she'd be -

And then the Orphan's noise stopped, and it dissolved into nothingness.

Mai promptly pulled her hands apart, and the fire also disappeared. "Mikoto?" she called out. "Are you all right?"

Mikoto had been staring at where the Orphan had been just a moment ago with a somewhat bemused expression. Now she looked at Mai, and blinked. And then a huge grin was on her face. "Mai is powerful!" she shouted.

"Uh, yeah," Mai said, a bit disturbed at her enthusiasm.

"Hate to interrupt your mutual admiration society, but there's still another half to deal with!" Natsuki shouted. "Duran, load silver cartridge! Fire!" It wasn't good for him to be shooting repeatedly like this, but she didn't have a choice in the matter.

This time, though, as the shell exploded into ice, the other part of the Orphan convulsed and started making the same sounds as its counterpart had right before it disintegrated. Was it the weaker half, perhaps? Driven by that thought, Natsuki brought up her pistols and took a shot with both of them at once, putting an ice bullet of her own right into its belly.
It came apart in the exact same way as the other one had.

Mai watched all this a bit dazedly, having settled down to the ground. Mikoto didn't even bother to do that. "Mai is powerful!" she repeated as she ran over to gaze somewhat hungrily at the rings around Mai's hands. "Those are magatama! Mai is very powerful!"

Mai finally took a moment to look at the jewels on the rings. Sure enough, they did have a slight curve on one side. "I guess I am kind of a princess after all, then," she said, laughing a bit. It was all too absurd not to laugh.

"Do your rings have a name?" Mikoto asked, holding up her sword so that Mai could see its crosspiece. "His name is Miroku. Miroku, this is Mai. Please get along with her. She is very powerful." She said that last as though confiding a secret.

"Now, Mikoto, there are more important things than being powerful," Mai cautioned her.

Mikoto blinked. Wow, Mai said some nonsensical things sometimes.

"Okay," Natsuki barked out again. "Job's done, so we're back where we started. Like I said - first - just stay out of my way."

"Same to you," Mikoto snarled, good mood vanishing in the instant.

"Uh, can I just get one question answered before we all go back to being sworn enemies or whatever?" Mai asked hesitantly "How do I turn this off?" She looked helplessly at the circles hovering around her hands. She'd managed to get enough control over the ones around her feet to at least allow her to settle to the ground, but making them vanish was proving beyond her.

"Why would you want to do that?" Mikoto asked, blinking.

"I'm in trouble with the school discipline board already, Mikoto, I don't want to get yelled at for wearing unapproved accessories to class," Mai told her gently.

"Ah," Mikoto said, nodding, as she saw the wisdom of this. Avoiding the attention of one's enemies was a notion she could get behind.

"Just, I don't know, think of a switch and turn it off or something," Natsuki answered, looking around somewhat irritably. "Where the heck did my bike go?" she muttered.

Mai, who had seen where her bike went, decided to say nothing until she'd tested the suggestion she'd just been given. She cleared her mind, envisioned a light switch, and then envisioned a hand reaching out to turn the light switch from its 'on' position to its 'off' position. She opened her eyes to find that the circlets had vanished completely.

"It worked," she said, then lifted her voice. "Uh, I think the bike may have been knocked over that way," Mai explained with a vague gesture in the appropriate direction. "Welp, I guess we'll be going then. Come along, Mikoto." She began steering Mikoto quickly away from the clearing.

"Why are we running away?" Mikoto asked, perplexed.

"AAAAAAAAAGHHHH! MY BIKE!"

"No reason in particular," Mai lied.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Mai asked her companion when they got back to the
"I'm going to find aniue," Mikoto said. Had Mai forgotten what she'd told her about her goals already?

"Yes, I get that, but you're not going out to search anymore tonight, are you?"

"Probably could," Mikoto said speculatively. "I slept most of the day."

"Yes, but ... Mikoto, you're a student here, right?"

Mikoto nodded. "I became a student here to find aniue."

Something about that puzzled Mai as she walked up the stairs. "So ... what makes you think that he's here?"

"He said he was," Mikoto explained.

Mai paused in mid-step. "Wait, he told you?"

"No, not me. Ojiisan. He told ojiisan that he wanted to go to a good school, right before he ran away from home. And this is the best school in Japan."

A horrible suspicion settled on Mai. "Mikoto," she asked carefully. "By any chance did someone tell you that, the part about this being the best school in Japan, right before you agreed to come here as a student?"

Mikoto nodded again, puzzled by the way Mai was acting.

"Unbelievable," Mai muttered, tapping her head gently. She wondered how she was supposed to explain to Mikoto that she'd been suckered, just like Mai herself had been. The recruiter had probably told them both whatever they'd wanted to hear, all the while working to get them to come here.

Natsuki's attempts to get them to turn around and go back were starting to seem much more like the help that she'd said they were.

This could wait, though. "Anyway, if you're a student here, you have to go to class. Unless, you know, something happens," she said, suddenly conscious of her failings in this area. "So, you probably shouldn't go running around any more tonight."

Mikoto looked a little rebellious, but all that she said was, "So where do I go, now?"

"Well, you can stay with me tonight, and tomorrow we'll visit the dorm manager and find out where you're supposed to be -" She broke off as they reached the landing adjacent to her room's door, and she saw that there was a note taped to her door. Fearing the worst, she ran over and pulled it off.

Then stared.

"What is it?" Mikoto asked.

"Uh ... apparently you've been assigned to be my roommate," Mai said.

Mikoto's face lit up. "You mean ... Mai and I are living together? Mai will be cooking for me all the time?"
"Uh, well, I guess that's -"

"Huzzah!" Mikoto cheered, and hugged Mai soundly.

She really needs a bath, Mai thought.

Much later, after the bath - which had basically consisted of Mikoto, whose cat-like qualities included an aversion to bathing, being scrubbed down by Mai, whose mother-like qualities included an insistence on it, followed by a long leisurely soak in the tub - came the question of the sleeping arrangements.

"Well, first of all, I can lend you a pair of my spare pyjamas, but they're probably going to be a little big on you. We're going to have to get you some casual clothes sometime soon," Mai mused as she leaned back on the bed that she'd picked out, still in her bathrobe. "I think we're both going to have to get part-time jobs, actually."

"Question," said Mikoto, sitting seiza perfectly on the other bed with a towel still wrapped around her.

"Go ahead."

"What are pyjamas?"

Mai blinked, trying to determine whether Mikoto might be making some sort of strange joke. Apparently not, judging by the serious expression on her face. "Um, well, they're clothes that you wear while you're sleeping."

"Clothes you wear while you're sleeping," Mikoto repeated slowly, as though chewing on the words. "Clothes while sleeping. Huh."

"Okay, you've clearly never worn pyjamas. Do you normally sleep in your underwear like -" - some sort of guy, Mai almost said, but held it back. She'd gotten familiar enough with Mikoto during the bath to know that she was definitely a girl.

Mikoto didn't follow up on the dangling modifier, but rather shook her head. And then stood up on the bed and let the towel drop. "I sleep like this," she said.

Mai stared, once again confirming that Mikoto was definitely a girl. "Oooookay," she said. "Well, I've slept like that, too. So if you'd rather not borrow pyjamas, then, that's all right." She looked at the bags filled with clothes that she still had to unpack and put away, and the spirit of laziness seized her. "Actually, since I'm not even sure where my pyjamas are, I think I'll be doing the same thing, for tonight, at least. And ... yeah, I'm beat, so unless there's something else, I think I might as well turn in right now."

"Question."

"Go ahead," Mai said wearily.

"I am so glad I met Mai," Mikoto said, smiling brightly.

Mai blushed. "That's not a question, that's a, a ... thank you, Mikoto, I'm glad to know you, too," she finally said. "Okay, I'm gonna get the lights. Sleep tight."

"Mm-hm."
An hour or so later, Mai was pulled out of sleep by someone tugging at the blanket she'd pulled up to her neck.

"Mai?" Mikoto's voice asked out of the darkness. "Can I sleep in your bed? Mine is too big."

Only vaguely awake, Mai didn't have the capacity to puzzle over the idea of a single being 'too big'. Her decision was also strongly influenced by the fact that something like this scenario had played out in her mind frequently over the months since she'd started having sex with Takumi. Only ever in her mind, though, never in reality, which made it all the more appealing to her. "Okay," she said, and lifted up the blanket and topsheet.

Mikoto quickly slid in beside her, their naked bodies necessarily pressed up against each other. After a few moments to get used to the warm pressure in places that hadn't been experiencing such things before, Mai quickly settled down to sleep again.

Her companion did not.

Mikoto had not been completely honest with Mai. She could probably have slept just fine in her own bed, even if it was much larger than the cupboard where she'd generally rested her head before coming here. But she had wanted very much to be with Mai.

Mai was kind. Mai was powerful. Mai was not all that smart, but that was forgivable. Mai thought some very strange things, but most people thought much stranger things. Mai had helped her when no one else would have tried. But all of that was not nearly as important as one thing more.

Mai was beautiful.

She didn't really remember her mother very well. Most of the memories before the day when ojiisan called aniue and herself to him and told them that their parents were not going to be seeing them anymore were a bit confused. But in those memories, she was fairly sure that her mother had been very motherly. She had always let Mikoto rest her head on her chest.

Mai was almost nothing like the mother she remembered, but she had a chest big enough that someone who wanted to rest her head could easily do so.

So Mikoto did so, nuzzling up to Mai, and, almost inevitably, her mouth found the nipple and closed around it. It had been so long, Mikoto almost cried. But tears were something for the weak; her path did not permit them. It did not permit many things. But one thing it did permit was satisfaction.

She decided to give herself some, reached down with the hand that wasn't holding the breast firm against her mouth and face and began to touch herself. Not deeply, for she remembered that she was promised to another and would not give him damaged goods. But she had long since found the little nub that made her feel like lightning bolts were dancing down her spine, and she rubbed it, now. So good. It felt so good.

She realized that she was grinding her pelvis against Mai's hip, and decided that she didn't care. This felt good, too.

And then the shattering occurred. That was how she thought of it, as the shattering. It was always almost too much, so much so that she sometimes tried to slow it down, but right now, when she needed to get it done before Mai should chance to awaken, she didn't even try.

Mikoto let go of the nipple, looked up at Mai's sleeping face.

"I love Mai," she said, then closed her eyes and soon was asleep.
At least, Mai hoped that she was asleep when she let her own eyes open.

That had been a little disturbing. Mai had had a lot of sex in the past year, but this was the first time she'd been used for someone else's onanism while she was still present. She'd woken up as soon as she'd felt the suckling on her teat, but she'd kept her eyes closed, listening to the sounds that Mikoto was making without reacting to them. If Mikoto had made any move towards touching her, beyond what she had already done ...

... Mai wasn't sure what she would have done.

She didn't get to sleep for a while after she opened her eyes again, lying there contemplating exactly how her life had become far more complicated than she'd ever expected.

She decided that she was definitely wearing pyjamas after this.

The next day, Mikoto got dressed in her new school uniform for the first time. "Very cute," Mai assured her, and felt a bit guilty at the obvious pleasure that Mikoto took in the compliment. (The fact that she felt guilty when she was the one getting molested while sleeping bothered her a little.)

As it happened, Mikoto had been assigned to a class in the school's Girl's Junior High division, rather than the Coed division to which Mai was assigned. So they ended up splitting up pretty quickly after the morning train took them from their dormitory to the school's plaza.

Mikoto considered ditching, since she couldn't see any way that this was going to help her find aniue, but decided that she should at least make an effort, since Mai had been so stressed about it. So she went to the teacher's lounge, and met her new homeroom teacher.

Homeroom started with her introduction. "Okay," said Nitta-sensei, going over the class register. "Can I have a volunteer to look after Minagi-san until she gets settled in?"

He was somewhat started when one of his more troubled students volunteered to do so. She actually should have been in year 3, but had been held back due to truancy. Still, if she was showing school spirit now, perhaps Yuuki was on the mend.

"Call me Nao," she said to Mikoto, and smiled without any real warmth.
May, 2004

A few weeks had passed since Mai and Mikoto began living together, and the unusual events of that first night had not been repeated since then. Mai assumed that this was because she had worn pyjamas from that night forward. It certainly wasn't because Mikoto had stopped creeping into her bed.

In all honesty, she still wasn't sure how she felt about that. The warm presence of someone else in her bed was actually comforting. Admittedly, she'd have preferred it to be Takumi, but things hadn't worked out that way.

At the moment, Mai was lying in her own bed, waiting for sleep to come. It'd been a long day. School, and then a long shift at the Chao Bao Zi. She was starting to think that maybe she'd bit off a bit more than she could chew there. Yes, the proprietor was one of the nicest people she'd ever met, but the restaurant did a lot of business, and Mai was one of only four waitresses taking care of all of it.

Well, technically, it was three waitresses and a waiter. She'd actually gotten a lot of help from Akane, Midori and Kazuya, who'd all worked there before. Akane and Kazuya's flirty relationship was fun (and a little painful) to watch. Midori, on the other hand ... she wasn't sure why an obvious college student like her was working part-time like that, or pretending to be 'just seventeen years old', as Midori's constant refrain would have it. (She didn't think anyone was buying it.)

At least Mai didn't find herself living a triple life. Fortunately, she hadn't run into any dangerous Orphans since that first one. There'd been a few annoying ones, like that thing that had stolen Natsuki's underwear, but nothing too serious. Mai almost found herself wondering why that was.

Natsuki, during that episode, had hinted that there were other agencies around campus that were acting to protect it from the Orphans. Predictably, though, she'd refused to elaborate. Listening to some of Chie's stories had given Mai a few ideas about what was actually going on. Her gossip about magical girls (and magical old men) showing up to help people in danger might just have something to it.

And then there was Tate and Shiho. Not only was she seeing the obnoxious jerk (who, okay, had a few reliable qualities that weren't all that obnoxious) in class every day, but she kept running into the two of them all the time. She'd even gotten roped into helping out with a wedding ceremony at Shiho's dad's temple, enduring Shiho's constant subtle putdowns all the while. It was almost enough to make her believe in karma. But what could she possibly have done to deserve that?

Okay, other than that. But she wasn't getting to do it recently anyway!

Mai shifted uncomfortably. When was Mikoto going to sneak into her bed? What was the holdup? Finally, she looked up to see if something was the matter.

Mikoto's bed was empty. And the window was open.

"Oh, great," Mai said, collapsing to her pillow. "She's gone out to look for her brother, hasn't she?"

For a moment, Mai considered going out to follow her, but then she remembered just how tired she
was. So she curled up on herself and decided to sleep alone.

It was harder than she expected, but sleep did eventually come.

Where could he be?

Mikoto was a bit horrified to realize that, despite having thought about him more or less constantly since he'd run away, she wasn't really sure what aniue looked like. She could see him in almost every male face that passed by as she sat on a bench and watched the men walking by.

She had to find him. It was jii's last command. And, perhaps not as importantly, it was what she wanted to do. If she found him, everything that had happened would finally make sense.

But she had so few clear memories of him, and they were of a boy. A tall boy, but she was conscious of the changes in herself since then. Who could say what he would have become in that time?

It was very frustrating.

And then she was distracted by something odd happening on the edge of her peripheral vision. Wasn't that - yes, yes it was. What was she doing?

Mikoto got up, carrying Miroku in the bag that she'd acquired with her uniforms. (Apparently, there were a rather large number of students whose clubs or other pastimes required them to carry a sword with them at all times, such that these bags were readily available. Miroku would have rather been out, but Mikoto understood the value of camouflage.) She followed the person who'd attracted her attention, and soon found herself in an alley, watching from a concealed position.

She was somewhat surprised by what happened next.

Sugiura Midori moved gradually and peacefully out of the pleasant dream she'd been having (which, unfortunately, she was never able to remember) to a comfortable lassitude as she woke up. She felt weary but more or less content. The weariness was understandable when she looked at the clock on her nightstand and discovered that it was just after six o'clock in the morning, when she hadn't gotten to sleep until some time around two.

Ah well. A bit of fatigue was a small price to pay for a pretty good roll in the hay. Nodding at this wisdom, she turned to look at said roll in the hay, slumbering beside her, and nudged him a bit forcefully with her elbow. "Oy," she said, sotto voce. "There's a bed check at around seven, so you might want to wake up."

He did so with something of a jolt, eyes sliding open to see her leaning over him. He blinked repeatedly, and then looked to his other side. Seeing that there was no one there, he let out a relieved sigh. "At least that part of the experience isn't repeating itself," Kanzaki Reito muttered.

"Sorry?" Midori asked.

He turned back to her. "Sorry, just reflecting on the last time I had a one-night stand with a college student. Some very disturbing things happened, and, and never mind, I don't want to talk about it."

"Okey-doke," Midori replied agreeably as she sat up from her futon, letting the topsheet fall from her breasts. "You have a lot of one night stands with college students, I take it. Does your girlfriend know about that habit of yours?"
Reito blinked. "Girlfr- ah. You shouldn't believe everything that you hear. The President and I have a strictly professional relationship. I honestly don't know how the rumor about us dating got started. She finds it moderately amusing, but I'm reasonably sure that she's exclusively lesbian."

"Interesting," Midori said, since it was. "Well, you'd better get dressed and head out the window before the dorm manager checks in and finds you. Scandal and all that rot. I mean, personally I don't see what the big deal is, since we're both seventeen and all."

Now he stared.

"What?" she asked, all innocence.

"Well, setting aside the notion of you being seventeen -"

"Are you calling me a liar, you beast, you cad, after I gave you my innocence, my childhood?"

Midori asked in a bland, even tone.

"- and the notion of your innocence, there's one problem with the 'get dressed and head out the window' plan. To wit - we're in a basement room, and there are no windows."

Midori looked around at the walls of her small office/bedroom, and lo, there was indeed a decided paucity of windows. "Y'know, you're right," she said, amazedly. "I can't believe I never noticed that before."

Reito discreetly rubbed his head. Was Tate right? Was it really all women, or just the ones he got to know?

"Well, there is one in the showers up on the ground floor, and I was heading that way anyway. We'll go there, and you can get out that way. Unless you'd want a quicky in the shower first."

He considered his options carefully.

Just a little later, Midori was bent over in the shower stall as the water ran down over her body, forearms pressed against the wall above the taps, as Reito stood behind her with his hands on her hips and slammed up into her. She bit her lip in pleasure, holding back her pleased cries of what a great fuck the boy was.

"I'm about to -" he gasped quietly.

She pulled forward, off of him, then whirled around as she dropped to take him in her mouth, sucking and rubbing until his orgasm hit the back of her throat. She swallowed noisily.

"Yum," she said. "Bye now."

Recognizing a dismissal when he heard one, and pleased that it wasn't accompanied by a death threat like it had been that time before, the Vice President exited the stall, gathered up his clothes and quickly pulled on his boxers before heading out through the window with the rest of his clothes under his arm.

*What a great start to my day*, Midori mused, as she showered in earnest.

Elsewhere, Mai was leading Mikoto out of their dorm room. "What the heck were you doing, that you were out so late?" the older girl asked irritably.

"Stuff," Mikoto said evasively.
Mai blinked. Since when was Mikoto anything other than utterly direct?

Before she could question her further, though, the door across the landing from theirs opened, and Aoi walked out leading a weary looking girl who looked kind of familiar to Mai. "I don't really care if you're tired, Nitta-sensei asked me to make sure you got to class today and - oh, good morning, Mai-san."

"Morning," said Mai, who abruptly realized where she'd seen the girl with the flaming red hair before. This was the girl that Mikoto had knocked down on that first day, and -

"Good morning, Nao," Mikoto said politely.

"Mornin', Mikoto," the other girl said in the same tone.

- and clearly, they'd become acquainted with each other in the interim.

"Does this seem a little odd to you?" Aoi asked Mai hesitantly as she walked beside her to school, a few steps behind the junior high duo.

"Well, if they're classmates, then I guess it's not that surprising that they know each other," Mai answered.

"I guess that makes sense, but ... well, it's a little odd that they're getting along. I mean, I don't really know Nao-san very well, but -"

"She's your roommate, though," Mai interjected.

"Yes, but we've only been in the same room since the start of the term," Aoi explained. "And we didn't really talk, much, even before things got a little strange."

"Eh? Strange how?"

Aoi made a face that was a little strange itself. "Well, it's kind of hard to explain. A couple weeks ago - on your first day here, actually - when I got back to our room, I found her and she was acting like, well, like she expected me to attack her at any moment. And it's really strange that she should be like that, because, like I said, we hadn't really talked a lot, and so there's no way that she could know - um. Well. Mai-san, you do know that Chie-chan and I are, uh, 'particular friends', right?"

Mai blinked. Mai coughed. Mai said, after a moment, "Well, I know now."

Aoi facepalmed. "Great. I'm worse at keeping secrets than Chie-chan is." Shaking her head, she continued. "Anyway, a few years ago, when I told one of our other friends about that, she started acting the same way towards us for a while, like she was expecting us to jump her at any time. It was funny but kinda painful, and anyway, she got over it eventually. But the thing is, that's almost exactly the same way that Nao-san was acting ... and there's no way that she could know about me, because, like I said, we don't talk much. At all."

"I see. So it's kind of strange that she's getting along so well with Mikoto," Mai said, mind racing.

"Kind of," Aoi agreed.

Try very, thought Mai. And it's stranger than you know, since Mikoto is, well, Mikoto is the way that she is, too. Mai decided that she was going to have to keep an eye on the two of them.
"I think I'm going to need your help again tonight," Nao said, quietly.

"Okay," Mikoto agreed.

"You haven't told anyone about it, have you?"

Mikoto shook her head in silence.

"Good. Don't. It's just between you and me and the two of them."

"And them," Mikoto added.

"And them," Nao agreed, with another cold smile.

Yotsuba Satsuki wasn't easily surprised, but when she was, it was usually quite obvious. Certainly she seemed very surprised as she asked Midori if she was sure about what she'd just said.

Midori nodded. "I still have to get through the last interview, Yotsuba-kacho, but it's really a sure thing. Today is probably my last day here."

Satsuki cautioned her that one should never be too certain about a supposedly sure thing when it came to one's employment. However, she also hoped that Midori would continue to be as much of an asset to her new employers as she'd been for her, this past two years. If it didn't work out, there would always be a place for her at the Chao Bao Zi.

Feeling herself blushing, Midori fought the impulse to say something funny. It was a difficult battle, but she managed, and nodded again. "Thank you, kacho. But next time I come here, I expect that I'll be a customer. I'm looking forward to it, really!"

Satsuki assured her that she felt the same way. But right now, there were customers waiting, so they'd better get to work. She did hope that Midori would give her best to the Headmaster when she saw him, though.

On hearing that, Midori stopped dead in her tracks as she headed out to take some orders. "Right," she stammered.

She hadn't said anything about the Headmaster. And she would have sworn that Satsuki was surprised by her news. How in the world had the girl known that her job interview was with him? How could someone so young be so sharp? Midori had a reasonably high opinion of herself, but she knew perfectly well that she hadn't been that sharp when she was that age, humhum years ago. If she had been ... well, she probably still would have slept with that guy, but she'd have known to break it off with him before he started cheating on her.

Or possibly pre-emptively cheat on him.

Midori let these concerns evaporate as she worked the lunch crowd, consisting mostly of students. As it happened, those students included two of her coworkers, Akane and Kazuya. She decided that she could take a little time to let them know that she wasn't going to be joining them on their evening shift.

"Eh? You have a job interview?" asked Akane, even more surprised than Satsuki had been.

"Where will you be working now?" Kazuya asked. "I hope it's not Searrbucks. I'd hate to think you'll be competing with Yotsuba-kacho."
"I really can't talk about it," Midori said, shrugging. "Well, I could, but I'd have to kill you."

Kazuya laughed at the comment, but the laugh became strained and awkward when he saw that Midori's face was perfectly deadpan. "Eh-heh," he finished. "Very funny."

"I thought so," Midori said, grinning. "Anyway, gotta go."

Of course, she probably wouldn't have to kill him if she told him about her new job. Then again, if one considered one's life to be the product of one's memories, she supposed that arranging for someone to erase those memories was probably like having them killed. Well, some might view it that way. Personally, Midori had enough bad memories that she could afford to lose a few, whether or not that would change who she was.

She was betting on not, though.

Anyway, she guessed that Akane and Kazuya were going to have to tell Mai when they saw her, since she didn't look to be eating here this lunch. Ah well. She hadn't really developed the same close relationship with the new girl that she had with the two of them, but she had a hunch that was going to change, if her guess was right about what Mai and/or that roommate of hers, Mikoto, got up to at night.

They were going to be seeing a lot of each other in the months to come, considering the job she was aiming for.

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Mai was bone tired. A long day of classes, followed by a shift at the Chao Bao Zi where she suddenly had to do a larger share of the work after Midori's departure, would do that to a person. She was in no mood to play games, regardless of what sort of games were available.

So coming home to find that Mikoto was nowhere to be found didn't do anything good for her mood. Neither did knocking on Aoi's door to find her and Chie together (clothes slightly disarranged, she did her best not to notice) but with no idea where Nao was to be found. "She didn't come home after classes," Aoi told her, a bit of worry showing in her tone.

"Okay, sorry to disturb you," Mai said, fighting the urge to pat her head, which was starting to hurt. "I'll go look for both of them. Call it a hunch, but I have a feeling they're together."

"Sounds like a good hunch," Chie agreed. "Would you like some help? The three of us could cover a lot more ground if we worked together."

On the one hand, that sounded like a bad idea. On the other hand, that sounded like a horrendous idea. "No, uh, no, you should both stay here, in case they come back while I'm searching. That way you can call me and tell me about it," Mai improvised, hoping to heck that neither of them would question why they needed two people to do that.

Then she saw them exchanging glances and realized that wasn't going to be a problem. Of course.

"But, you're going out alone? Mai-san, that's not a good idea. It's not safe -" Aoi said. It had the feel of a protest for the form of the thing, but there was genuine concern there. It would have been warming if Mai hadn't been in a rush.

"It's okay, I know someone who can help," Mai reassured her.

"Who?" Chie asked bluntly. "Don't take this the wrong way, Mai-san, but you haven't really gotten close to anyone in class, except for us."
Mai flinched at the implied rebuke, but soldiered on regardless. "It's someone I know who's in the same line of work," she explained.

A few moments later, she was knocking on a door, just a bit frantically. Her efforts were rewarded when it was flung open and the barrel of a snub-nosed gun with a weird, ball-shaped magazine was pressed to her forehead.

"How did you find out where I live?" Natsuki asked, voice as cold as usual.

"You're in the student directory," Mai snapped. "And your name is on the nameplate of this door!"

Natsuki appeared to be considering the value of shooting Mai regardless of the honest answer she'd just been given. The moment passed, though, and she lowered the gun, rolling it up out of sight.

"What do you want?"

"Hello, Mai, who's been moderately helpful in the last couple of weeks," Mai said, imitating Natsuki's tone.

"What do you want?" Natsuki repeated.

"I need your help. Mikoto's out doing something, and I think she might be getting into trouble."

"So?"

Mai sighed. "I am asking you for your help to find her."

"I understand what you're doing. I am asking why I should help you. All that I want out of either of you is that you stay out of my way, remember? And before you go pointing out that you've been helpful in the past, again, I think we're pretty much even on everything that's happened."

"Fine," Mai interjected. "After this we won't be. After this I'll owe you one. Do you honestly mean to tell me you can't envision any circumstances where having some backup wouldn't be a little bit helpful?"

Natsuki answered the question with a long, level stare at Mai, who had the very clear impression that she was being weighed and measured.

But as the girl with the long blue-black hair opened her mouth to say something, there came a delicate cough from the side. "Good evening, gentles all," said a soft voice with a distinctive Kyoto-ben accent.

As one, Mai and Natsuki turned to see that a pale figure in a distinctive grey-white version of the school uniform was regarding them with interest as she stood a few feet away, one eyebrow delicately lifted above her strange reddish-brown eyes. "Might there be something the matter on this fine evening?"

"Shizuru," Natsuki said.

"Student Council President," Mai said at the same moment, then did a double take at Natsuki. Natsuki was on first name basis with the Student Council President? Natsuki engaged in yobisute with the Student Council President?

"No, nothing's the matter. I'm just having a discussion with, with my friend, Mai, here," Natsuki explained.
"Oh, Tokiha-san has become a friend of yours. I'm glad to hear that. It's not good for a person to go through life without friends. Or even just a single close friend," the vision in grey and white said placidly, turning the stress of her regard directly onto Mai. "Tokiha-san. You're looking well. Thank you for taking the time to befriend my Natsuki."

"... my Natsuki? "Um, right," Mai said aloud. Maybe I didn't hear it right. Maybe she meant to say 'our Natsuki' and she just dropped the plural. That's plausible."

"Well, Mai needs my help with, with a school project, so I'm going to go do that now," Natsuki explained, coming the rest of the way out of her dorm room and closing the door behind her. "I'm sorry we don't have more time to talk."

"Such is life," Shizuru said, spreading her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I look forward to hearing about the project one of these days. Good evening."

"Good evening," Mai answered as Natsuki started to pull her off.

Shizuru watched them go, the smile never once leaving her face.

"So, you and the Student Council President are friends, huh?" Mai asked as they headed out into the night.

"No," Natsuki said bluntly. "She's been useful a time or two. That's all."

"Oh," Mai said. "It's just that you seemed, well, a little bit flustered when she was -" "She's. Just. Useful."

"Got it. It's clear," Mai said, nodding. It's clear that you're full of it.

The first serious sign of trouble came at the very start of the interview, when, as she'd said she'd do, Midori passed on well-wishes from Satsuki. For a frighteningly long moment, she saw a baffled look on Konoemon's face, as though he had no notion of who this Satsuki person was or why she was wishing him well. The moment quickly passed, though. He thanked her with perfect politeness, and inquired of doings at the Chao Bao Zi.

The fact that the old man had clearly not known what a Chao Bao Zi was, for a few seconds, caused her a great deal of concern. She wasn't sure just how old he was; it wasn't the done thing to ask that question. But he'd never seemed aged until just this moment.

Some more small talk followed, and her anxiety gradually eased. Then she watched him settle back in his chair. "So," he said. "I was somewhat surprised when I read your application for the post. Any teacher, of course, hopes to have his students follow in his footsteps - in education, at least. And I am no different. It would please me a great deal if one of the last students I personally supervised became a teacher at this institution."

"I would hope to live up to the example that you set, Konoemon-sensei," she said, smiling warmly.

He answered her smile with one of his own. "Then why, Midori-kun, are you insulting me with this transparently fraudulent and fabricated teaching certificate?"

She blinked. "Transparely? I thought it was a pretty good forgery. I certainly paid enough for one."
"Evidently not," he said, scanning the alleged certificate. "The Minister of Education hasn't been the fellow who supposedly signed this for a few years now."

"I was robbed," she said, visibly stunned. "Unbelievable. So much for the notion that to live outside the law, you must be honest. Well, I guess you've got to give me the job, because I'm going to need a steady paycheque to be able to afford to get a better fake."

They stared at each other across the desk for a few moments, before Konoemon leaned back, resting his oddly shaped head against the top of his specially-designed chair as he looked up at the ceiling. "We've certainly had our share of unusual teachers here at Mahora. Negi-kun isn't the most remarkable, just the most recent. Well, I suppose he is, actually, among the most remarkable, but there have been others almost as ... but that's not what I was trying to say, really. All of these teachers have always, always been fully accredited teachers in addition to whatever odd skills or talents they might possess. We have never hired someone simply for being ... gifted," he said at length, then fell silent.

"Neither am I pleased to be the one who breaks that admirable record, sensei," Midori said, in a tone vastly removed from her usually easy-going manner of speaking. She could do formal when necessary, and if she was to keep him from talking himself into refusing her the job, it was necessary. "But the situation which now confronts us will not wait for me to finish my education. You've read my report. I still don't have the full picture, but the frame and outline are bad enough."

"Can things really be that dire?" he asked, voice almost a whisper. "Our security teams seem to be dealing with these hobgoblins."

"Not without injury, sir," she said. Hearing about the stream of increasingly serious injuries from Yohko was what had convinced her of this course of action. "An they're going to get worse. The Orphans are called the silent children of an invisible star for a reason, sensei, and it's not because they can't be seen or heard. It's because fortune telling spells and similar divinations won't suffice to predict where or when they come into being or attack. They can't be predicted. They can't be prepared for. Ultimately, they can only be fought by the other side of this cycle of myth.

"So doesn't it make sense, sir, to have one of the princesses of the legend working for you? Keeping an eye on the others who aren't?"

She'd never seen him looking so weary and lost as right then. "I -"

*Please don't say you're too old for this shit. Please don't talk about retirement. Please don't go there. We all know what comes after that. Please. Please. I don't want that, even if I do want to be a hero more than anything, still I don't want it to be at that price.*

"I suppose that you're right," he said at last. "You will keep me in the loop." It was not a request.

She kept the exultation under control. "Yes, sir."

"You start classes tomorrow. Japanese History, at the Coed School." He smiled a small smile. "You were always good at that, as I recall."

She nodded, trying very hard to stop herself from dancing. "Yes, sir. Thank you sir. I'll be in your care."

"Rather the contrary, I think." Konoemon mused aloud.

She finally let out the grin when she walked out of the offices.
"Congratulations on the new job, Midori-chan!" came a voice from a nearby tree.

Of course, circumstances would insist on ruining her good mood. She turned to glower up at Nagi, for indeed it was he. "Thank you," she said acidly. "Now beat it."

Normally, there'd be a lot of talk here about how attractive and sexy and cute Midori deep-down found Nagi to be, despite her obvious hostility. But some people are just blind to the obvious charm that others possess, and that was where Midori was when it came to me I mean him. It's sort of sad, really.

"Oh, harsh. And I was really trying to be nice, too," Nagi said.

"It would be nice if you stopped breathing," she told him frankly. "It would be nicer if you'd never troubled this place with your presence, but there's no point in wishing for the past to be changed. But I can wish that you were gone, or better yet, dead. And I'm gonna start working on bringing that about real soon now," she promised, smiling grimly.

"How heroic," he sighed, shaking his head. "Anyway, other than wishing you well on the new job, I actually came to get you started on part of it. You're supposed to be keeping an eye on the other HiME, right? Well, there's going to be a bit of a confrontation between a number of them this evening, and you might want to intervene."

"When?" Midori snapped. "Where?"

"All questions that I might have answered if you hadn't been such a meanie," Nagi answered reprovingly. "Bye now!" And then he was gone.

Midori felt her teeth clench, and then shook her head. "No time for this." She started running.

"You've found another one?" Mikoto asked hesitantly.

Nao nodded. "I put out signals and drew him in. We're supposed to meet in just a few minutes. I'll lure him into one of the alleys, and then you come in after a little bit. With your help, I'm sure that we'll be able to get this one to tell us where the Orphan behind all of this is hiding out."

"And there's really no other way to do this?"

Nao let out a hiss of annoyance, and shook her head. "Does your Miroku have Orphan detection powers that you haven't mentioned yet? Because my Juliet certainly doesn't. If we're going to find the thing that's doing this, we have to interrogate its pawns to find out where they might have encountered it. This is a war, Mikoto. You've got to do what you've got to do."

"I understand that," Mikoto said, her reluctance still readily apparent. Her next words were more of a whine than she really liked. "But, Nao..."

"What if it was your brother?" Nao asked abruptly.

"Eh?" Mikoto said, blinking in sudden befuddlement.

"What if it was your brother under the control of this thing? The brother you've told me about, the one you've gone to all this trouble to find. Wouldn't you want someone to do whatever it took to free him from that influence?" Nao's voice started to get very passionate as she leaned down to look right into Mikoto's eyes. "If you look at it like that, this is really a holy thing that we're doing. People shouldn't be made into slaves like this Orphan is doing. This is like an exorcism. Yes, they're hurt,
but it's better to be free and hurt than well and a slave, don't you think?"

"Uh," Mikoto answered. This was all too deep for her.

Just as suddenly, Nao turned to survey the crowd outside the college nightclub where they were waiting. "There he is, gotta go. Follow us in a few, okay?"

And then she was gone, leaving Mikoto alone with her concerns.

Thinking about aniue under the control of some hidden Orphan was utterly revolting to her. But on the other hand ... what Nao did in the name of freeing them was pretty disturbing, and the thought of someone doing that to aniue was pretty disgusting too.

It was just a bit too much for her. But she had to keep going.

She'd said that she would. And Mikoto always kept her promises.

What a sap that girl is, Nao thought as she ran up to her prey for the evening. "Hiiii," she squealed, drawing his attention to her. "You're Ken-niichan, right?"

The guy was fairly pudgy, like most of her prey were, but he wasn't exactly packing it on, either. He blinked behind his glasses as he considered her. "Wow, you really came!" he said. "I was almost sure that you were going to stand me up."

"Oh, I'd never do that," Nao said, with more sincerity than there'd been in anything she'd said that evening. "You were just sooo charming in your e-mail, I couldn't hardly wait to see you tonight."

And back to complete insincerity it was.

"That's really very flattering," he said, with just a smidgen of disbelief in his tone.

Add butter. "No, really, I mean it. All the boys at my school are such geeks and losers, I was despairing of ever meeting a guy who was mature enough for me. And then I read your posts, and I knew that you were just the kind of guy I wanted to meet. The sort of guy who knows what a girl wants." She stared up at him, green eyes wide and guileless, lips slightly pursed.

The disbelief wasn't there anymore. "Well, I guess that's understandable. Girls mature a lot faster than guys do, after all."

She'd sucked him in quite perfectly, and now he was doubtless convinced that she was going to suck him in quite literally. Sucker.

"So, what would you like to do this evening?" he asked, glancing at the night club; no doubt wondering whether or not he had enough bribe money to get the doorman to let him bring in an obviously underage companion.

"Actually, there's this place I know that's supposedly really great. I've never been there myself, but my friends all say that it's a lot of fun. Why don't we go there?" she asked, pressing up against him, taking care so that he could feel her thigh pressed up against his hip.

"Hey, sure. If you know a cool place -"

"It's very cool," she said, pulling away and guiding him by the hand.

It didn't take too long to reach the entryway to the alley, and the place of concealment that she'd used so many times before. "This is the place?" he asked, looking around. If she'd had any doubts about
the fundamental rightness of what she was doing, they'd have been shattered by the fact that he didn't look disturbed to be led into an alley, but rather excited.

_Fucking asshole._ "This is the place," Nao said, pressing up against him, starting to push him backwards towards the wall. "This is the time. This is the company I choose."

His smile wavered at that last bit. "Huh? What do you -"

And then his back ran into something that was a bit harder than he was expecting a wall to be. Confused, he turned to look over his shoulder.

The breasts probably grabbed his attention first. They'd certainly grabbed Nao's attention when she first saw them. But then he looked up at the six glowing red eyes on the half-hidden face, and the four long arm-legs stretching out to either side, and the strand of webbing holding all of this suspended from a position just a bit above the ground.

Then the human-looking mouth opened, and a pair of mandibles spouted.

That was when he let out the first gasp of terror. It turned into a scream when he turned around to look at Nao and saw that she'd produced her claws, and was licking one delicately. "We're going to have some fun tonight," she told him. "I'm a girl of my word."

By the time Mikoto hesitantly entered the alley, a few minutes later, Juliet had wrapped the prey's head and upper body up tightly in her "webbing". (Nao was vaguely aware that the substance her Child shot out bore no real resemblance to spider webbing, but she wasn't the type to care about such things. Juliet had eight legs and six eyes and shot a sticky substance; therefore, she was a spider-girl.) His legs were free, but Nao had kicked them out from under him. So he rested with his butt on the ground before her, staring up at her with a terrified expression.

"Great, you already got the sword out," Nao said to Mikoto, who did. "Okay, same as last time, right?" She turned back to the prey and smiled winningly. "So here's the deal. I'm going to cut your mouth free, so that you can tell us all about what we want to know. Start screaming, or try and get to your feet, or kick me or something like that, and my good friend here is going to turn you into shishkebab. Right, Mikoto?"

"Uh," said Mikoto. "Well, I guess so."

Ignoring the uncertainty in her tone, Nao continued on. "But first, let's get some information that can't be a lie." Well, probably, she thought as she started fishing in his pants pockets, having put her claws back where they came from. His wallet came out easily enough, as did a surprise. "Oh, you brought some condoms!" Nao cooed. "Isn't that nice, Mikoto? He's out there trolling for girls for his master, but he's sweet enough to bring protection with him. What a great guy, wouldn't you say?"

"What are condoms?" Mikoto asked, looking a bit worried. "Are they some kind of defensive weaponry?"

Nao paused in her efforts to undo the prey's belt buckle, and turned to look back at her 'good friend'. "Seriously?"

"What?"

"You're in junior high school and you don't know what condoms are? Were you raised by wolves?"

"No," Mikoto said, genuinely baffled by the question. "I was raised by jii."
That probably rated further inquiry, but the truth was, Nao didn't really give much of a shit. "No, they're not a weapon," she said, turning back to her prey as she got his pants down around his hips, exposing his smelly boxers. Nao held up her right hand and called back the bright red claw that fit on it like a glove, so that he could see it.

"This is his weapon," she said then, as she brought the claw down gently on his boxers, and cut a hole in them to expose the weapon she was talking about. The weapon that she wanted to break so badly.

It would be so nice to cut the organ open, peel it like it really was the banana that so many people thought, see the ripe red juices flowing down its sides as she started to delicately cut into the nerves that made it so sensitive to being rubbed and sucked, and that made them feel so good when they shoved it into people and held them down and hit them and made them bleed and -

She took a shuddering breath as she forced herself to calm down. It was funny, really. Before she'd had Juliet in her corner, if she'd had a guy in this position and a weapon, say the boxcutter she'd carried around sometimes, she never would have hesitated to do all that and more.

But Juliet, in a strange sort of way, calmed her. She didn't know why. She had never had a pet spider or something like that, but there was something weirdly comforting about the creature's presence. As though what she'd really wanted all this time was someone in her corner.

Of course, that was such bullshit. She wanted lots of other things besides that.

Like bloody satisfaction.

She finally opened the wallet and took a look at the ID within. "Didn't even use your real name, tsk tsk tsk, shame on you, Kakizaki Shuutarô-san," Nao said, putting as much contempt into the honorific as she possibly could. "Oh, and look, Mikoto, he's got pictures of his wife and kid in here! Isn't that sweet? Isn't that the sweetest thing you've ever heard about? And she's so cute, too, just about our age, I think!"

"Uh -" said Mikoto.

"You fuck her, don't you?" Nao asked, still talking in the same cheerful tone. "Your daughter. Can't resist the sweet bird of youth, can you. I bet you love it when she cries, don't you? Love it when she screams. Love the fear and the pain in her voice. Love the power you have. It's so sweet, I bet." Needle-quick, she reached up to cut the strand of webbing around his mouth so he could answer her.

"No!" he shouted. "No, I don't, I'd never ever do such things, please, please, don't hurt me!"

"Oh, don't worry. We're not here to hurt you," Nao lied. "We're here to help you. We're gonna set you free of the sick urge that you've had for a while now. All you've got to do is tell us where it happened."

"What, what?"

"Where did you run into the thing that made you like this? Where is it hiding now?"

"I-I-I don't know what you're talking about!" the prey squealed like the pig it was.

Nao sighed in mock regret, and turned to look at Mikoto. She could tell that the other girl was right on the verge of open rebellion, so it was probably best to end this right now.

Unfortunately, Nao didn't want to do that. "You see how it is," she said, feigning regret. "He won't
talk willingly. I really have no choice but to force it out of him. I'm really not enjoying this at all," she added, glorying in the oh so sweet lie. The truth of that spread across her face as she turned back to look right at him. "So I guess we've got to go there, then," she said, and brought her clawed hand down towards his manhood.

"Stop!" came a voice from behind her.

Mai had imagined Mikoto doing any number of things with Nao. Fighting had been prominent among those imagined activities. In wilder moments, she'd imagined them talking about feminine hygiene issues that Mikoto was too embarrassed to discuss with her. The fact that she had trouble imagining Mikoto being embarrassed about "anything" was the reason they were wild moments.

And, yes, she had considered the possibility that they would be doing to each other the sorts of things that Mikoto had done to her that first night they were together. She'd hoped that they wouldn't find them when that was going on. After would have been better. Before would have been ... just as good, Mai told herself. It wasn't as though she had any interest in stopping Mikoto from doing that sort of thing with people other than her.

She'd also expected that it would be a lot harder to find them. As soon as she and Natsuki had gotten into the downtown area, she'd outlined a complicated plan dividing it up into sectors to the more experienced girl, based on some things she'd seen in a movie once.

Natsuki had listened in silence, waiting until Mai ran out of things to say, then interjected, "Or we could do this." And called up Duran, gave him some instructions, and sent him up to start running on roofs. The robotic dog Child returned just a few minutes later, and after a moment of communion between him and Natsuki, the two girls were on their way.

"You can talk to him?" Mai asked as she ran just a few steps behind Natsuki.

"You can't talk to yours?" Natsuki asked back, her voice suggesting that she wasn't really interested in the answer.

Which was good, because Mai wasn't about to admit that she was too terrified of her so-called 'child' to call him up, much less talk to him.

In any event, she hadn't expected to find Mikoto so quickly, and she definitely hadn't expected that she was going to find her doing this sort of thing - standing guard over a man whose upper body was tied up like some sort of mummy, while his lower body was denuded of clothes and his, well, his business was exposed, and Nao leaning over him wearing some sort of clawed gloves. In the shadows, Mai could see some kind of spider-like creature leaning back against the wall and just observing, but for the moment, her attention was completely on Nao as she started to bring down her hand towards the man's genitals.

"Stop!" Mai shouted, panicked.

She saw Mikoto whirl, not pointing her sword at her, but looking back at her with a startled expression that swiftly turned to something else when she realized who it was. "Mai," Mikoto said.

Oh, the expression was one of shame, wasn't it? Mai found herself realizing that she didn't like seeing that expression there. What a strange time to be thinking such things.

"Smooth move, warning them before I could get off a stun shot," Natsuki hissed as she stood beside her, guns already out and pointed at them. She raised her voice as she continued. "Step away from that person, right now."
"Or what?" Nao sneered in response.

Natsuki's tactical sense pinged quite suddenly. She'd been expecting Mikoto to be the problem, here, but the fact that this Nao girl was staring down the barrel of a gun without qualm suggested that was an incomplete assessment. Her gloves and the Child both told her that she was another HiME. Another one that none of my sources had told me about.

"What are you doing, Mikoto?" Mai asked, keeping her own attention firmly on her roommate.

Natsuki approved. Getting them talking was a sound tactical - oh, wait, this was Mai. She actually cared about the answers. Shit.

"This man, Nao told me that he was, well, possessed," Mikoto explained hesitantly.

"Possessed?" Mai asked. "Orphans can do that?"

"Never heard of it before," Natsuki supplied, eyes firmly on Nao, who was starting to smirk. That strongly suggested -

"Well, they're demons, right?" Mikoto asked. "Demons can do that."

"Wow, some people really will believe anything, won't they?" Nao said, smirk turning into a wide grin.

"Eh?" Mikoto said, turning to look at Nao.

"She lied to you, Mikoto," Mai shouted. "Okay, enough, why are you doing this? What is the -"

**Because I can!** Nao suddenly roared, all amusement gone from her face as it dissolved into fury. She still didn't know what it was about this girl that put her in such a confused state, but it didn't really matter. "Because I feel like doing it! That's the only reason any of them ever do anything, so why shouldn't I do the same?"

"You ... lied to me?" Mikoto asked, genuinely bewildered now. "Why did you lie to me?"

"Why did you let me?" Nao snapped in response. Slowly, Mikoto brought her sword around to point it at Nao. "Why did you lie to me?" she repeated, anger starting to become obvious in her voice.

"Because I could."

"Okay, enough of this Nietzschean bullshit," Natsuki interrupted. "You're outnumbered, so step away from the guy, and -"

"Hostage," Nao interrupted sweetly, as she gently rested the talons of one her hands on his exposed member. "Snip snip. Instant phimosis cure. Unless you step away. Juliet, would you mind coming forward?"

The Child leapt, spider-like, in front of her, blocking Natsuki's line of fire and driving Mikoto tumbling backwards from Juliet's point of impact. Mai promptly ran forward to see if her friend was okay, and so left herself wide open to a strand of webbing directed at her, pinning her to the ground. Mai let out a shriek of disgust.

*Okay, thought Natsuki. Serious threat.*
"Now where was I?" Nao continued, turning her maniacal grin back to her prey. "Oh, yes. I was right here."

Finding them had been easier than Midori had had any right to expect. She'd been lucky enough to glimpse a mechanical dog bounding around on the rooftops, and, since this wasn't Fahrenheit 451, had concluded that it had to be connected. Getting up to the roofs herself had been fairly easy, given the enhanced strength and speed that came with her Element. That had really been the hard part.

She had watched the confrontation happening below with interest and a bit of dismay. One of the girls had a clear grasp of tactics, but the only one who had any sort of teamwork was the temporary antagonist! How messed up was that? And on top of it, the teamwork seemed to be trumping the tactics. Well, that was meet and right, but it was happening the wrong way!

Clearly, she was going to have to involve herself.

So she called up her axe, letting it burst up from the roof's surface, then gracefully leapt out into space to land just a few steps from where Nao was crouching over her hostage, behind Nao's Child. "I think this little farce has gone on long enough," Midori announced.

"Huh?" gasped Nao, rolling away from the still-bound civilian male. "Who the hell are you?"

Inwardly, Midori exulted. This girl couldn't be all bad, if she gave such wonderful straight lines! Obviously, they were just going to have to defeat her and then she'd be on their side! "Defender of the Town and the Gown!" she proclaimed. "The HiME of the Violent Wind, Sugiura Midori! For Justice, Love and Friendship! I'm gonna kick your ass!"

Nao visibly twitched. "Justice, love and - what are you, a twelve-year old boy?"

Okay, the befriending was obviously going to be a painful process for some of them. "As I was saying, I can no longer permit you to do these things - these things that even you yourself must surely regret on some level!"

"You're brain-damaged. That's it. That explains everything."

Clearly a tough case. "Mai-chan!" Midori called over her shoulder. "Are you all right yet?"

"What? Midori - no, no, I'm not! There's all this sticky gunk all over me and I don't know how to -"

"Have you tried calling up your Element and burning it off?"

Dead silence, then a whoosh that told Midori that she'd done just that.

"Okay, then," Midori said, turning back to Nao, who still hadn't moved. "You're back to being outnumbered. The three of them can certainly deal with your Child, and I have a clear shot at you. Furthermore -"

She threw her axe up into the air, dove into a summersault that took her in between Nao and the former hostage. She pushed him further away from Nao, ignoring for the moment his cry of pain as his genitals slammed into the ground in the process. Well, she did come out here looking for a date with a teenager, so he deserves a little karmic pain, she thought as she reached out to grab the axe as it dropped down again.

"- you don't have a hostage, anymore," she continued, and went into a low, defensive stance. "And claws might be very frightening, but if you can't get close enough to use them, you've got problems.
So don't you think it might be about time to start talking about what's really going on here?"

Nao just glared at her. If looks could kill, and all that, but the glare was just a glare.

"You didn't really need Mikoto-chan's help for all of this," Midori pressed. "So why drag her into this scam of yours? Did you want a friend that badly?"

"Friend? Come on!" Nao sneered. "She was just a tool I used to get at that one!" This delivered with a sharp nod in the general direction of Mai, who was hovering in front of Juliet in the standoff that looked likely to continue for some time.

"Huh?" asked Mai. "What did I ever do to -"

"You piss me off!"

Mai started to get a little angry herself. "How did I manage to do that? This is the second time we've ever met!"

"But I've had to listen to her whinging about what a wonderful person you are all the time, and it makes me want to puke! All that rot about how nice you are, how kind you are, how powerful you are - when you're nothing more than a great big phoney!"

"What makes you think I'm a phoney? We barely even know each other!" Mai shouted, having gone from angry to bewildered in record time. Nothing about this situation was making sense to her.

"I just know!"

"Were you just accusing me of being twelve?" asked Midori, who'd been following this exchange with interest. "Because you sound like you're about ten, right now."

"Fuck you!"

"Very mature."

"Fuck all of you! Juliet, with me!" And with that, she threw up her arm and shot lines from the claw on her hand that wrapped around the railing of a fire escape on the other side of the alley. With a tug, she was catapulted up into the night sky, with her Child following along behind her.

"Well," said Midori after a moment. "That could have gone better."

"Shouldn't you, I don't know, chase her or something?" Mai asked as she settled down to the ground again. She glanced in Mikoto's direction, seeing that she was following Nao's path of escape with her eyes. Her face showed obvious unhappiness.

Midori shrugged. "Why? I know where she lives. So do you, come to that. And anyway, like I said, we really shouldn't be fighting amongst each other. There are enough bad guys out there that the good guys need to work together."

Mai coughed. "I-I'm really not sure whether Nao qualifies as a good guy, so -"

"Eh, she's just the dark, brooding but ultimately ineffectual loner who needs to learn the value of friendship so that she can become part of the team," Midori assured her. "It happens all the time."

Natsuki was staring at her in disbelief. "You do realize that this isn't a magical girls show, right?"

Midori swiveled to meet her gaze. "We are hot chicks with superpowers. What sort of show do you
"think this is, then?"

"It's not any kind of a show!" Natsuki snapped.

"Then why did you -" Midori started to ask in a perfectly reasonable tone.

"Y'know what, shut up," Natsuki suggested. "I feel like I'm getting stupider every moment I talk to you. Mai, you owe me, and I'm gonna collect later -"

"Right, right," Mai agreed.

"Before you go, though, we really need to talk about teamwork," Midori continued.

"You are brain damaged," Natsuki groaned, having already turned to leave.

"And you're another tough case. Kind of like Nao, that way."

Natsuki froze, then turned to fix an awful glare on Midori. Said recipient accepted it without any visible concern. Without another word, Natsuki stomped away.

"Well, anyway, Natsuki-chan was right about one thing, it was really a bad move to announce yourself before you attacked. On the other hand, she could've warned you that's what she was planning on doing, so there's fault on both sides," Midori began to lecture.

"Um, well, I'm sorry, but is shooting someone in the back really a heroic thing to do?" Mai asked hesitantly.

"A heroic thing to do is what a hero does," Midori explained.

"... right," Mai said, deciding to humor the crazy person. "Um, what about that guy, is he -"

Midori took a moment to check on him. "Well, he's fainted. Which is convenient, because it'll make it easier for the people I call in to cast amnesia spells on him. I'll do that as soon as the two of you are out of the vicinity," she added, turning to look at Mai and Mikoto, who hadn't moved or said a word during any of this.

"You can do that?" Mai asked, not taking the hint.

"Working within the system does have its perks, whatever Natsuki-chan might think," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mai-chan."

This time she got it. "Oh. Yes. C'mon, Mikoto."

The younger girl silently, obediently turned to follow Mai out of the alleyway.

Midori waited until they were both completely out of sight, before turning to look down the alley.

"You can come out, now."

Slowly, a girl with hair just about as red as Midori's own poked her head out from behind a garbage disposal bin. "Uh, how long have you known I was -"

"I came from up there, remember. Clear view of the whole battlefield," Midori explained. "You're Asakura, right?"

"Asakura Kazumi," the teenager confirmed, standing the rest of the way up. "I'm with the school paper -"
"... and with Ala Alba. Yes, I know about that," Midori added pre-emptively. "And yes, I will explain what's going on. But it's for you guys' ears only, not the whole school. All right?"

A bit of elan crept back into Asakura's somewhat spooked expression. "You're just going to explain it all? No tricks or evasions? You haven't been doing this very long, have you?"

Midori cocked her head to one side. "Has it occurred to you that you might have been doing it just a bit too long?"

Halfway back to the dorm, Mai finally got fed up with Mikoto's silence. "Okay, are you going to keep this up forever?" she said, turning to look back at her roommate, who was trailing along behind her. "Am I going to have to drag it out of you?"

"I'm sorry," Mikoto muttered.

"I'm not looking for an apology, I'd really prefer an explanation! Why were you going along with that stuff, Mikoto?"

"I thought that Nao liked me," the little girl said. "And ..."

Mai waited for the thought to be concluded. Eventually, she prompted. "And ... what?"

Mikoto was studying the ground with obvious interest. "And I thought we matched better than Mai and I do."

That rocked her. "Huh?" she asked weakly.

Still staring at the sidewalk, Mikoto continued. "Mai doesn't like fighting Orphans. Nao said that she did. So we matched. We liked the same things. I thought we did, at least."

Mai was almost completely floored. She didn't like fighting, period, but she thought that she'd hidden her discomfort with this whole situation. Clearly, she'd underestimated how well Mikoto could read her.

And with that thought came a sudden sense of shame. "I drove you to this, didn't I?" she asked quietly. "I pushed you to make friends, and the first one you made was a liar and a trickster."

Mikoto didn't disagree, any more than she looked up.

Mai let out a long sigh. "Now I'm sorry, Mikoto. You're right, I don't like fighting. But it's a funny thing, you know. I always told myself that I'd have no problem fighting if it was for someone who was important to me. But I'm just now realizing something."

Now Mikoto uneasily peeked up. "What?"

"You're important to me, Mikoto," she told her, smiling.

Now her head came the rest of the way up. "Mai!"

"From now on, when you need someone to come with you on these hunts of yours, I'll do it. Midori is ... well, kind of nuts, but she's right about teamwork. Do you still want to be a team with me, Mikoto?"

All shame banished, Mikoto nodded rapidly and then, well before Mai could brace for the impact, tackled her with a hug that rammed her face into Mai's breasts. "Mai!" she exclaimed again,
nuzzling.

Mai struggled to keep her feet, but once she was steady, she gently hugged Mikoto back. *Well,* she thought. *I guess I am a magical girl, after all. Or something.*

*Phonies,* Nao sneered from the rooftop, looking down at the pair of phonies hugging each other in public. *What a load of crap.* You matter to me. *Liar. Nobody really gives a damn about anyone else.*

With a gesture, she sent Juliet back into the shadows, and easily made her way home, ignoring the other pair of phonies that she found asleep under a blanket on her dorm room's couch. She quickly entered the closet that she'd claimed as her bedroom, closed the door and locked it using the lock she'd bought online.

Security established, she started to settle down to sleep, thinking grim thoughts about what she'd do to all of them if she ever got a chance. (All of them, in this case, was pretty much the population of Japan.)

As she was doing so, her cell phone buzzed. With effort, she got into character and answered it. "Hello?" she asked, sounding like a sickly sweet teenaged girl.

"Ah, Nao-chan. I'm glad that I finally caught you."

Nao groaned. "What do you want?" she said, abandoning the character.

"I'm just calling to let you know that I'll be in Mahora during the festival they have there, on other business, and I might be able to stop in and see you -"

"Don't strain yourself," she said, and hung up.

*Asshole,* she thought. Looking back on it, half the reason she'd gotten so mad at tonight's victim was that he'd reminded her of him. Why couldn't he have been there that day, instead of her mother?

When the two of them finally got back to their apartment, Mai discovered that there was a message on the landline's voice mail.

"Hello, Mai-chan, it's me," said her father's voice. She groaned, but listened all the same. "I'm sorry that I didn't catch you this evening. I'm just calling to let you know that I'll be in Mahora during the festival that they have there, on other business, and I might be able to stop in and see you and Takumi-kun while I'm there. Let me know when would be a good time for you. Good night." Beep.

Mai considered just erasing the message and forgetting all about it, but something stayed her hand. First of all, spending time with her family would be a good excuse to be with Takumi, as she hadn't had the chance to do in quite a while. Secondly ... well, she still didn't like him, but maybe he did deserve another chance.

Admittedly, she thought she might just be thinking that because of that guy that Nao had mugged this evening. He'd reminded her of her father, just a bit ...
June, 2004

The sun shining brightly through the window of her bedroom slowly brought Higurashi Akane awake, and, as teenage girls are wont to do, she started to stretch without opening her eyes. Somewhat atypically, however, she froze before she'd really gotten started doing so, and let the eye that wasn't pressed into her pillow slide open to check her surroundings.

A moment later, she let out a sigh of relief. She was alone in bed. As it happened, that was not always the case when she woke up. Which was somewhat troubling, and not really to her liking, but she liked even less what happened when she woke up and stretched her way into hitting the other body in bed with her.

It was not pleasant to contemplate, let alone experience.

But it hadn't happened today, which was a reason to celebrate. So she did. Just ... quietly, and privately, in her own mind.

She got out of bed, then, and reviewed her desktop calendar. There was another reason to celebrate, actually. Today was the first day of this year's MahoraFest, held a couple of weeks earlier than usual in response to various events. (The three instances of dangerous strangeness last year, in other words. Akane had only been witness to two of them, but that had been one too many for her school spirit, thank you.)

And she'd made a decision about this year's MahoraFest a while ago. Today was the day that she was going to tell Kazuya-kun everything. *Everything*, but most importantly, she was going to tell him that they weren't just good friends who were having good times together.

"I love you, Kazuya-kun," she said, practicing. Maybe just a little too formal? "I love you, Kazuya," she repeated, this time experimenting with yobisute. It would work. She was sure of his feelings for her.

Pleased with herself and confident, she got dressed in her waitress outfit and headed downstairs to have some breakfast before she headed out and -

Her father was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper. He looked up at her through his glasses as she froze in the entrance to the doorway. The words "Good morning" went conspicuously unsaid.

"Oh," said Akane. "Uh. I thought you were still at work."

"I have a short break," he said at length. "I probably won't be back again for the next few days, though. This festival nonsense is going to be keeping me fairly busy."

"I see," she said. She didn't really, but that was just the sort of thing that you said to statements like that. She honestly had no idea what her father did for a living, except that it must pay very well, for him to be able to afford this house and the two cars in his garage. Not to mention allowing him the influence to see to it that she lived here, with him, instead of at one of the school's dorms.

"Well," Akane said into the silence that followed. "I should probably get going myself, since I have
to work, too, and -"

Her father stood up and began to undo his belt buckle. "Bend over," he said.

"But I have to get to school," she said, conscious of how faint her voice sounded.

"I don't care," he told her. "Bend over."

Eventually, she did just that. Akane kept as silent as he was when she felt her skirt being rolled up, and her panties rolled down. She didn't say anything or react in any way when his hands began rubbing (to call it a gentle caress would be insulting) her rear end. But when she felt him, with very little warning, shove his thumb into the lower hole, she flinched, both from the mild pain and from knowing what was coming next.

"You didn't douche," he said at last. "I told you to douche. And you didn't douche." The pressure in her butt was relieved. "Mouth," he said.

He'd do worse to her if she didn't open her mouth, so she did so. And moments later, she was sucking on his thumb.

And what was on the thumb.

As she did so, he rammed his hard organ into her vagina, pumping into her for a few moments. She could take whatever dubious comfort she wanted in knowing that he wouldn't finish there, and that she would never be at risk for pregnancy. He'd made his complete lack of interest in raising "another brat" very clear when her mother had made noises about wanting more children, shortly before she died.

He was really just lubing himself up, and when he was done doing so, he pulled out of that hole and starting to sodomize her. This was his preference, actually, and he even pulled his thumb out of her mouth as he started - mostly to avoid injury as she clenched her teeth at the penetration.

Ten minutes of vigorous pounding into her later, and he cut loose with a gasp. Akane imagined his organ spewing white wash into her bowels, and controlled the impulse to shudder at the thought. Well, at least it was over, now, and he ...

Why wasn't he pulling out? She could feel him getting softer inside of her, and he was surely going to slip out as the muscles down there relaxed and pushed him and oh no, no, he wasn't going to -

She felt more wetness back there, and barely held back the impulse to retch. This wasn't the first time he'd urinated there, of course, but today, the hypocrisy really got to her. He'd been complaining earlier about her being messy, and yet here he was making her even messier. It was so utterly unfair.

She didn't look up, even when she heard the zipper being pulled up, even when he walked away without saying a word, and even when she heard the door to the garage open and then close. She just stood - well, lay, technically - there for a while.

Idly, she wondered if she'd be late if she took a shower. Well, if that was the case, she was just going to have to be late. She'd been late often enough, over the last four years, that once more really wouldn't make a difference.

Freed from such concerns, Akane let her mind wander a bit, remembering another time that she'd been left lying on the kitchen table like this, and her mother had walked in. For a dizzying few seconds, she'd enjoyed a sensation of hope, that her mother would finally realize what was happening and do something.
And then she'd heard her mother snort and say, "Better you than me."

A year or so later, when her mother had died in what everyone said was a car crash, she'd whispered the same words to her memorial. She'd hoped to feel pleasure in the ironic repetition. She hadn't. It hadn't been until she met Kazuya that pleasure came back to her.

She couldn't wait to tell him everything.

"Ah, man, I loves me some MahoraFest," Midori commented happily as she watched the festivities get underway from the main window of Chao Bao Zi. "I hope this year is even crazier than last year."

Mai, who was beginning to get just a tad bit weary of hearing about 'last year's MahoraFest', was obscurely pleased when Satsuki politely informed Midori that she didn't think that was too likely.

"Dare to dream, Sacchin!"

Satsuki frowned, indicating once more her dislike of that particular nickname.

"Sorry, sorry."

Mai shook her head in annoyance at the antics of the diner's self-proclaimed "best customer" as she tried to keep her focus on the orders she was supposed to be taking from the enormously expanded dining area set up for the festival.

She hadn't been terribly impressed by Midori when she'd found out that the older woman was a 'hime', since she viewed her as possibly the most un-princess-like out of all of the ones that she'd met so far - which was astounding when one considered Mikoto and Nao! And the low opinion had gotten lower in the weeks since she'd shown up as their new history teacher. Okay, so she clearly knew the subject backwards and forwards, but the way that she dressed! The way that she acted! What kind of weird teacher dressed and acted like that!

"Satsuki-saaaan!" called a short boy in glasses and a green suit walking past the diner and waving frantically, accompanied by a little girl in a frilly dress, doing her best to conceal anxiety behind a facade of boredom, and a pair of teenagers, one in nekomimi and glasses and the other clearly a robo-cosplayer. "Keep up the good work!"

Okay, so Midori clearly didn't have the market covered on being a weird teacher, but still. All that would have been bad enough, but then she added to it by acting like she wanted to be Mai's best friend-slash-aunt agony. Admittedly, as a former coworker, she supposed that she should be friendly with Midori, but not to the point where she told her everything that was wrong with her life. Or took advice from her on how to be a magical warrior of justice or whatever.

Mai also felt pretty sure that Midori, or the people who employed her, had some sort of agenda. Natsuki had explicitly told her that when they'd met up the day after their introduction, adding that Mai shouldn't trust Midori even a little bit.

"But you have an agenda, too," Mai had pointed out, she thought quite reasonably.

"Yes, and you shouldn't trust me, either," Natsuki had replied.

"... you don't trust me, do you." It hadn't been a question.

"Not even a little bit."
"Who do you trust?"

There'd been such a bizarre expression on Natsuki's face as she answered. "No one."

"How can you live like that?"

"By reflecting on the fact that if I try to live any other way, I won't live very long."

"Well, I can't."


Mai blinked, came back to herself, and then laughed nervously. "Sorry, sorry. Got lost in thought for a moment there." Aggggh. I suck so much! "I'll get that order right to our cook."

"Um ... aren't you going to ask me what I want?" Chie asked, sitting on the other side of the table.

"I want Mai's ramen," Mikoto supplied.

Well, at least she could take comfort in the fact that, since that episode, Mikoto had started to warily socialize with Mai's other friends, to the point where she was now comfortable with the idea that they were going to be taking her around the festival while Mai worked and then reunited with her father. She set aside her discomfort about that latter part as she turned to look at her roommate and shook her head. "Sorry, Mikoto, but I haven't graduated to chef here. But the one we have is probably better than me."

Mikoto stared at her. She could almost see the words Mai says weird things sometimes in a thought balloon over her head.

"Trust me," she said, got Chie's order and headed back to counter. Things were so busy today, and it really didn't help matters that Akane had called in to say that she was going to be late for her shift. Fortunately, they did have two temps hired for just today.

"Uniform suits you," she told one of them as they met each other heading up to the counter.

"Shaddap," suggested Yuuichi.

"Maybe I should put in a suggestion about having the student council institute a special uniform for their lackey."

"Shaddap."

Mai hadn't been genuinely surprised when Satsuki-kancho had announced that they'd be having some extra staff for the festival, since it had been made clear that the festival was going to see a lot of business, even if it wasn't supposed to be as exciting as last year's festival. (She was actually getting a little sick of hearing all those comments about how things compared to last year's festival. Why couldn't anyone around here look forward instead of back?)

And she supposed that, given the way that they kept stumbling into each other, she shouldn't really be surprised that the extra staff included Yuuichi and Shiho. She suspected that Shiho was probably following the crowd and trying to earn extra money for a gift for "oniichan", and that Yuuichi was, ignorant of her plans, following her to make sure that she was okay. Typical romcom behavior. Fortunately, hijinx had not yet ensued.

Despite her needling, which was practically reflex, now, Mai was actually glad that Yuuichi and
Shiho were there. With Akane held up by whatever was holding her up, it would have been just her, Kazuya, and Fei-sempai to handle the festival crowds. And while Fei-sempai appeared unacquainted with fatigue, both she and Kazuya were only mortals.

She took a breather once she delivered the orders to Satsuki-kancho, conscious of Midori’s eyes on her but determined to ignore them. Kazuya was leaning back against the streetcar beside her. He was an okay guy, too. Akane was lucky. Mai found herself enjoying the silence.

Of course, that couldn’t be permitted. "So, you heard about the traditional confession?" Midori asked.

"No, but let me guess," Mai said. "If you confess to your crush on the last day of the festival, in front of the World Tree, you’ll be together forever."

"Wow, you are a really good guesser!" Midori proclaimed. "Very close! There’s actually debate about which of the days is best, but you got everything else right."

"Of course there is. It's nonsense, anyway."

"Oh! So cynical at such a young age." Midori shook her head in dismay.

"I'm not cynical, I've got a perfectly normal amount of romance in my soul, thank you very much," Mai objected. "But I think that if you like someone, really like someone, you should tell them, right away, rather than waiting for the perfect moment that might not come, or get screwed up, or not be anywhere nearly as perfect as you imagined it would be."

"Interesting thesis," Midori said, nodding. "What do you think, Kazuya-kun?"

He blew out a breath. "Ah, to go unnoticed," he murmured, before raising his voice. "Well, I think that it can be hard to do what Mai-san says, and that having a plan can make it easier. And picking a specific date and time to do something is a good step in a plan. But that's just my opinion."

"Hm," Midori hmmed, continuing to nod, playing the sage. "A well-thought out opinion. But tell me, is this how Akane-chan confessed to you?"

To Mai's amazement, Kazuya blushed and stammered. "What, what are you saying, Midori-sensei! We are, we are just good friends, having a good time!"

"Riiight," Midori snickered. "And Yuuichi-kun is just Shiho-chan's older brother figure."

Mai chuckled a bit at Kazuya's obvious distress, but was pulled out of it by a moderately shrill voice demanding, "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, hey, Shiho-chan," Midori said, ignoring the tone. "We were just talking about -"

"I heard what you were just talking about," Shiho snarled. "Oniichan is oniichan! That's it. That's all! I don't like it when people talk about me behind my back!"

"Calm down, Shiho-chan," Midori said, switching gears rapidly. "We weren't saying anything -"

"Bite me."

Before things could escalate any further, Satsuki arrived to hand an order to Shiho and send her off to deliver it. The red-haired middle schooler looked inclined to argue, but set her jaw and marched off with the food.

Once she was gone, Satsuki quietly reminded Midori that valued customers should know not to
bother the staff.

"Sorry, sorry," Midori replied, looking genuinely contrite. "That could have gone better, I'll admit."

At that moment, Akane arrived on the run, looking just a bit panicked. "I'm sorry, my father, and then class, I'm sorry!" she babbled in the general direction of Satsuki-kachou.

And then something transpired that left Mai almost floored. "Don't spend so much time being sorry that you end up even sorrier," Satsuki said, and handed Akane a tray of food, pointing out where it was supposed to go.

"Right, yes, thank you," Akane agreed as she pulled off her overcoat, revealing that she was wearing her waitress uniform underneath it. Then she headed off with her tray.

That was the first time she'd ever heard her boss talk using actual words instead of - well, she wasn't really sure how Satsuki-kancho talked most of the time. The fact that she couldn't tell was driven home a moment later when Satsuki turned her moderate glower on her and asked whether she was done with her breather. Mai had no idea how she knew what the boss was saying, but she understood both thought and tone.

"Right, yes," she agreed, and headed out beside Kazuya.

Fortunately, there was only another hour or so remaining in her abbreviated shift today. Abbreviated, but drawing overtime pay, and making her work for every cent of it. The boss clearly knew what she was doing, bringing on extra help for this festival.

When it was finally over, Mai went to get a canned iced tea from a dispenser not far from the diner car. She let out a long sigh as she pressed it to her forehead before opening.

"So what's the rest of the day's agenda?" asked Midori, whom she hadn't realized was standing right behind her.

Controlling the urge to jump and scream, Mai slowly turned to look at her. "Well," she said, all sweetness and light. "First, I'm going to go check in on my little brother, who apparently isn't feeling all that well. Then, assuming he's malingering, we're going to take advantage of the fact that our dad has deigned to grace us with his presence and visit with him. I'm really looking forward to that," she said, with sarcasm that could compete in the Olympics.

"Not a big fan of the old man, eh?" Midori probed.

"No, I'm not. But, well, he is my dad." It didn't explain anything, but it was all that she had.

"I get it," Midori said. "Actually, I was the same way with my folks ... eh, but you don't want to hear about that."

"Nope," agreed Mai cheerfully.

Midori coughed. "Your honesty is such an admirable quality, Mai-chan. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know some stuff that came up in my convo with Natsuki-chan last night -"

"Waitwaitwaitwait," interrupted Mai. "You had a conversation with Natsuki last night? She hates you!"

"Oh, no," Midori said, shaking her head. "Natsuki-chan reserves her hatred for the amorphous 'they' who - well, that's her story to tell. She just completely distrusts and disdains me. But she still wanted
to know what I know, and she knew some stuff that I didn't know but wanted to know, and so we worked out some arrangements. She's much easier to deal with than a corrupt border guard, believe me."

The out-thereness of that metaphor had Mai staring at her for a long moment. "Oooo-kay, she said at last. "What is it that you wanted me to know?" Please be something sane.

"Well, basically, we each had a list of people we suspect are fellow royalty, as it were, and we compared them. A few matches, and a lot of guesses that neither of us suspected." Midori fell silent, and when she spoke again, she sounded far more serious than she normally did. "Akane-chan's name was on her list."

Mai blinked. "What."

"Akane -"

"No, that wasn't, 'I didn't hear you,' that was, 'are you crazy?'" Mai interrupted. "Actually, that wasn't 'are you crazy,' because I know that you're crazy, that was more, 'do you think I'm crazy?' Because there's no way that Akane is some sort of magical warrior or whatever you think we are."

"Why not?" Midori asked, honestly taken aback by Mai's vehemence.

"Because, because I don't know why not, she just isn't. Leave her alone, dammit!"

"I'm trying to be helpful, you know -"

"Then help her by leaving her alone and not pulling her into all this crap!" Mai said. "That would be helpful!" And she stormed off, muttering.

Midori was honestly starting to get a little annoyed with herself. Yohko had always good-heartedly teased her about her tendencies to meddle and how they occasionally - okay, frequently - blew up in her face. But lately it seemed like all that she did went astray.

But why had Mai gotten so mad about the notion that Akane was also a HiME? She was fairly good at picking up on other people's infatuations, and she didn't think that Mai was crushing on Akane. Watching the slightly older girl - almost seventeen, much like Midori herself - she was fairly sure that she wasn't Mai's type. Not nearly boyish enough.

And then she had a spark of intuition. "Oh," she said, nodding as things fell into place. Akane wasn't someone that Mai wanted; Mai wanted to be more like her. Hard-working, but sweet and even gentle, and clearly and openly in love with someone who clearly and openly loved her back. A softer version of Mai's own self.

If someone like that was a HiME, then Mai's whole perspective would have to shift.

Alas, understanding did not bring empathy to Midori. Since she wanted, arguably needed, Mai's perspective to shift, it'd be a good thing if Akane "did" turn out to be one of them. "Now, how do I go about proving it?"

Her train of thoughts on the subject, only some of which did not involve wacky hijinx, was interrupted when Yuuichi slumped down beside her and let out a huge sigh of exhaustion. "Manohmanohman. Tokiha does this every day? How the hell does she do it?"

"Most days aren't this busy," Midori supplied. "And her shift is normally in the late afternoon and
evening, so that she can go home and sleep right after."

The boy grunted in acknowledgement.

"Y'know, if I didn't know better, I'd say you sounded almost admiring of Mai-chan, just now," she poked.

"Eh, well, I guess she's got her good points," he allowed. "Still a jerk."

"Hmm," Midori said. "So, what's the deal, here? Why'd you go get a part-time job, in addition to all the work you've been doing for the Student Council. Your teacher is curious."

"My teacher is nosy."

"Same diff. Spill, Yuuichi-kun."

He didn't look at her as he answered. "It's no big deal. Shiho wanted to make some more money for something, and I figured she should have someone to watch out for her while she was doing it. It's just a couple days, right? No big deal." The repetition was faint.

"Nope, I guess it's not. It's funny, though, that she gave me the exact same explanation when I asked her, only with who's watching over who and who needs some money switched around," Midori said blandly.

Yuuichi collapsed to the ground in a heap, then got up again. "My teacher is incredibly nosy!" Now it was a complaint, not a correction.

"Hey, I was just catching up with a distant relative," she protested. "She volunteered the information."

"Distant -"

"My mom and her mom are cousins, and I've actually met her dad a few times," the teacher explained. "Nice guy. Really helpful with some of my research."

"Since when do seventeen year-olds do research that requires consulting with members of the clergy?" Tate snarked.

"Since they found out they're geniuses? And have I ever mentioned that you're good at dodging the issue?"

Yuuichi groaned as he rubbed both his cheeks. "Okay, fine. I'm the one who wanted to get the money. She thinks it's to pay for some kinda medicine for my arm, and I'd like it if it stayed that way. Since the present that I'm getting her for her birthday is supposed to be pretty good, and -"

"That's so sweet!" Midori interjected. "Fear not, citizen! I will take your secret to my grave!"

"Citizen?"

"It's really good that you're starting to take some initative in your relationship with the girl," she continued as though the interruption had never happened.

"Relat- No! Dammit, I'm just trying to be nice, not any of that stuff!"

"Oh, and right back we go to being slow," Midori said, shaking her head in despair that wasn't entirely mock. "Yuuichi-kun, I see your test scores before you do. So I know you're not stupid. So
how come you haven't figured out that Shiho's crazy about you?"

"You're crazy," he said dismissively.

"Why are so many people - anyway, I don't have time for this," she said, changing directions in a hurry as she saw Akane and Kazuya, changed out of uniforms and into civvies, heading off in the direction of the festival. Their shift was clearly over, and she had to continue surveillance. But she really ought to leave him with some teacherly advice. "Man up, kid. She's a teenager, not a little girl." That was clever-sounding. It should work.

And then she was off on a dash.

"Takumi," Mai whispered, staring deep into her brother's eyes.

"Oneechan," he murmured back.

Slowly she brought her face to his ... and pressed her forehead to his. A moment later, she pulled back and nodded. "I'd say you're about normal temperature."

"Well, then, you should get going so that you can meet up with Dad, and maybe bring him back here," Takumi said to the girl who was seated on his bed in front of him. "I'm really sorry, but I'm still feeling too weak to go with you today."

Mai grunted. "Well, our appointment isn't for an hour or so -"

"Then you should go and have fun with Mikoto-san."

"- and I told Chie and Aoi to look after Mikoto -"

"You could go meet up with the three of them," he protested feebly.

"So right now," she said, smiling, coming very close to him, "right now, I'm all yours, my cute little brother." And now she really did press her lips to his, easily holding his mouth open and sliding her tongue in to rub against his own.

"Come on, Takumi," she said once she pulled back from the kiss. "It's been months since we were last together. I've missed it, haven't you? Let's have some fun, today."

"But, you're going to -"

"We have time," she interrupted his protest. She drew in a deep breath through her nose. "You're all sweaty and delicious right now, Takumi. Let's get you out of those pyjamas." She suited her actions to her words.

"Wait, no, I don't think this is such a -"

"Come on, sweety, you know that you want this as much as I do. Maybe more. Now let's -"

And then the door flew open, and Takumi's room-mate, Akira, darted in with a ruler in one hand and a brush in the other, holding them like weapons with which he was intimately familiar. "Who dares intrude upon these premises!" he cried out, eyes blazing.

"- get you changed," Mai said as she held the placket of Takumi's pyjama tops open.

As he often was, Takumi found himself utterly amazed at his older sister's sang froid. After all, he
himself wanted to cry out in shock and surprise at Akira's surprising entry, and he was far too embarrassed by the situation to even think of coming up with a reasonable explanation for what was going on. Yet there she was, calmly attempting to act like nothing strange had been going on, and that it was all just a big misunderstanding.

How had she gotten this sneaky, anyway?

A moment later, Mai was seated on a chair beside the bed while Akira had taken up her former position on the bed, carefully arranging matters so that he was between her and Takumi. "Good grief," Akira said, shaking his head in dismay. "This is a men's dormitory. How on Earth did such as you even manage to enter unto these halls?"

Mai felt a bit annoyed by that 'such as you', but she tried to hide it. "I went up to the dorm manager and explained that I'm Takumi's sister and that he's sick, and since someone had already told him that, yes, their roommate was sick, he didn't see a problem."

"And he credited such a story?"

"I have a student ID," Mai bit out.

"In any event," Akira continued as if there'd been no interruption in his harangue. "This is most unusual behavior for siblings, you must agree."

"No," Mai said.

"What? Do you pretend then that it is normal for an older sister to denude her younger brother?"

"Under these circumstances, it's completely understandable. I have been caring for Takumi for years, now, and so helping him change his clothes is nothing all that out of the ordinary."

"Can you truly claim that such is nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Indeed, it is an hour since I did anything else," Mai answered, somewhat cheekily imitating Akira's slightly old-fashioned manner of speech. "Look, do you have a sister?" she added somewhat more normally.

Akira blinked, coughed. "No. My family has no sisters. Only brothers."

She wondered momentarily why he seemed so shifty all of a sudden, but it wasn't important. "Well, then, how can you pretend to know what it's like to be part of a family like ours? How can you say what is normal?"

"I watch television."

Mai suppressed a scream. Well, there went her plans for a pleasant afternoon before she went out to see the old man. This little twerp was not going to leave her alone with Takumi long enough for even a quicky. It was so annoying! The universe kept throwing up obstacles for the two of them, and now there was this last one ...

And yet, she thought, there's a way to turn an obstacle into a pathway, isn't there? She considered Akira for a moment. He was much more bishonen than she liked, almost effeminate in some ways, and his attitude towards women in general was something of a turn-off, but ... a blowjob was a blowjob, right, no matter who was giving it. So she could take the two of them on like that, get Akira used to the idea, and eventually work him around to taking her up the ass while she rode on Takumi, and - no, no, no, that wasn't right. If she was going to give up her anal virginity, she should give it to
someone she loved. So she'd take Takumi there, while Akira went up her yoni, and - no, no, that wasn't right either. She couldn't let someone she barely knew up her like that. She didn't have any condoms, and this twerp probably viewed them as immoral, so he wouldn't either. It was too risky. So maybe he'd have to settle for the blowjob, and -

No, it was just a bad idea, and would have been even if Takumi hadn't picked up on what she was thinking from the look on her face, and was regarding her with a horrified look and waving his hands in the air in a universal gesture for 'stop'. He paused only when Akira took note of his actions and turned to look at him, whereon he started yawning broadly.

"Well, anyway, I suppose that I shouldn't contaminate your oasis of manly virtue any more than I have to," Mai said at last, standing up. "Takumi, I'll try to bring Dad around to see you, but you know how he is."

"Yes, oneechan," Takumi said. "Thank you."

And then she was gone.

Akira waited a moment, before turning his eyes on Takumi. "Okay. What was that, seriously?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Takumi replied, wearily, as he lay down and tried to pull up the covers. "I'm sick, and I'm tired, and I don't want to talk about how messed up my life is."

Akira, whose own life was somewhat messed up, showed rare sensitivity and did not press the issue.

Mahora's main chapel served many purposes. It was the secret headquarters of the Mahora Mage Order. It was a training hall for young mages which was almost (or so its graduates believed) as rigorous in its methods as that of the legendary Disciple of Darkness. It was the place where Sister Misato and her two daughters had their private celebrations of their family bond. But it was still a church, first and foremost, and at the moment, it was serving that purpose.

Standing outside the front door, like a trio of sentinels, were a pair of nuns - well, technically, a nun and an acolyte, but the distinction would be lost on most people - and another young woman in a school uniform. Their faces, from left to right, could be described as taciturn, miserable, and blissful. The acolyte was in the middle.

This blows, thought Kasuga Misora, the acolyte in question. This is worse than last year. At least last year was fun in retrospect; this isn't fun at all, and will never no matter what be fun looking back at it. Her gloomy mood wasn't helped by the fact that her partner and fiancee had been roped into assisting with the performance of the girl's choir, and so she was stuck here, with these two.

Sister Yukariko was all right, she supposed. A little naive and unworldly, but Misora suspected that might be just her own extreme worldliness talking. (She'd been to fricking Mars, after all.) Maybe a bit too sweet to be believable. And the fact that she was strictly a nun, rather than a dual classed nun-wizard or nun-fighter, didn't help matters. Prayer, her usual response to any situation, was nice, but not as likely to resolve things as direct action. (Or avoidance, y'know, like Misora preferred, really.)

But the other one? The other one creeped Misora right the hell out.

Miyu Greer, the adopted daughter of Father Joseph (who was inside preaching) was perfectly pleasant, perfectly calm, and perfectly polite. She was perfect, in other words. And Misora, who was quite reconciled to the notion that she was not now and never would be perfect, found that more than just a bit disturbing.
She'd actually met someone who reminded her quite a bit of Miyu. But once one actually got to know Chachamaru, one couldn't help but realize that for all her mechanical perfection and flawless grace, there was a lot of warmth and - for lack of a better term - humanity beneath the surface.

Miyu didn't have that. And it was strange that a real girl should compare so unfavorably to a gynoid.

And that creeped Misora right the hell out, as might already have been mentioned.

"Miyu-san," Yukariko abruptly said. "We're always very grateful for the help you give us, but since we are having a festival, you should go explore it."

"How about me?" Misora asked hopefully.

"Don't be ridiculous, Misora-chan," Yukariko replied without taking her eyes off Miyu. "You need not wait for permission, Miyu-san, I will tell Father Joseph where you went."

Misora spent a moment imitating Yukariko's manner of speech behind her back while Miyu replied, "Yes ma'am."

"Well, then. Permit me to offer my humble assistance," said a smooth masculine voice from off to the side. Misora and Yukariko both turned in time to see the bespectacled man walking up with his hands in his pants pockets.

"Ishigami-sensei," said Yukariko, sounding a bit surprised.

It took Misora a bit to recognize him. There'd been so many new teachers brought in over the last year! So many of the old ones had quit or, ahem, been asked to leave. But then she knew this one; he was the one who had finally been brought on as an art instructor to replace Takahata-sensei.

Since Misora had really respected (okay, feared but in a nice way) Takahata-sensei, that fact didn't endear this guy to her. He continued to lower his opinion by delivering the unbelievable line, "Isn't it a lovely day? And yet its loveliness cannot compare to your own."

"Goodness," said Yukariko, obviously flustered.

Oh, God, she's falling for it, Misora thought, fighting the urge to start gagging.

"Have you given any thought to the matter we discussed earlier?" Ishigami asked, pressing much too close to the older sister.

"No, no, I still d-don't think it would, it would be appropriate for me to pose for a painting, no matter how innocent, and, and -"

"Well, perhaps, when these young ladies depart, we can discuss the matter further," Ishigami-sensei said airily. "I'm sure that we can come to an agreement."

"Um, well," Yukariko replied.

"Good day," said Miyu, and promptly left without another word or glance in their direction.

It occured to Misora that she could probably go too. And there was a lot of stuff going on at this year's festival that she wanted to see. The martial arts exhibitions wouldn't be as cool as last years' had been, but there were rides and games and all sorts of things out of the ordinary. And she could meet up with Cocone, and sneak off together to do all sorts of things together.

"Well, I think I actually want to stay," Misora said, a little bit louder than was strictly necessary.
"This year's festival doesn't really sound all that appealing. So I'm sticking around here. That's what I want to do. Yup," she concluded. *I am such a freaking moron.*

Ishigami-sensei looked a little disconcerted. "Ah. Well. In that case, I suppose that we'll have to talk another time. Good day, sister."

*Do I not merit a goodbye, creep?* Misora thought. *Ah what the heck.* She stuck out her tongue at his retreating back.

"You shouldn't be so rude, Misora-chan," Yukariko chided absently.

"And you shouldn't put up with crap like that!" Misora chided right back. "If he's making you uncomfortable, you don't have to endure it."

"It's not, not uncomfortable, it's just ... I don't know how to make it clear to him that I'm not interested in that sort of thing," she concluded at last.

"It'd probably help if you actually weren't," Misora muttered.

"What was that?" the older woman said sharply.

"Nothing," Misora said. *Damn, that particular bit is really getting old. I need new material.*

She approached her master, and spoke quietly. "I have located one of the targets. She is isolated from the others, and will be easily dispatched. Shall I proceed?"

"Yes," said the tiny blonde. "I don't need to know the details. Help me with this thing, will you? It's surprisingly complicated."

"Yes, Master." She moved to help the little girl with her black gown.

A tiny blonde master and her slightly mechanical servant. Nothing novel about that in Mahora, though it had been a while ... and this was a new and different pairing of master and servant.

And the master was nowhere nearly as kind and gentle as the one whose role she had replaced. Neither was her servant.

*Wow, these kids are boring,* Midori thought as she continued to follow Akane and Kazuya. When she'd been their age - which, of course, she still was, she reminded herself - she'd have been looking for a quiet, private place to be alone with whoever she was seeing at that time. But these two? They went to all sorts of cute places, but always in public, never sneaking off for some private alone time.

It was almost sickeningly wholesome.

*No, no, Midori reminded herself. All true warriors strive for such peace! I should be cheering them on from the sides, not hoping that there's a sinister undercurrent beneath their happiness. What is wrong with me?*

*Ah, well, can't be helped.*

One thing did make it a bit easier to justify continuing her, well, let's be honest and call it 'stalking' of the two of them. She wasn't the only one doing so. She'd noticed the other one following them, just a bit less surreptitiously than she was, but didn't think she'd been noticed.
Why was Miyu Greer following those two?

She didn't know much about the girl. Adopted daughter of the new priest at the church, kept quiet in class, got good grades, yadda yadda yadda, not terribly interesting. And yet she was now applying that quiet intelligence to the task of following a pair of older students.

Midori knew why she was following Akane and Kazuya. Why was Miyu doing it?

Could the girl be a HiME as well? It didn't seem likely. She believed that the girl was Chinese. Midori's research strongly suggested that the genes involved in the mutation (if that's what it was) were more or less restricted to Japanese people, hence its recurrence in their folklore. On the other hand, as a historian, she was well aware that, to put it delicately, it was not impossible for those genes to have been spread to Chinese people. Generally without a lot of consent being involved.

Neither she nor Natsuki had a complete list of the HiME who were supposed to be present on campus. Between them, they'd come up with eight names, including their own - and Midori had held back two other names on her suspected list. Doubtless Natsuki had done the same, though there was no way of telling how much the girl was holding back.

Considering one of the names that Midori suspected -

Ack, almost lost them, she realized, abandoning that line of thought for the moment, trying to keep her focus on following the two of them, and Miyu as well. That had always been Noriyasu-sensei's biggest complaint about her work, the way she could get so easily distracted by a shiny new theory, and she never wanted to disappoint her most important person by doing that again, or - hey, was that Mai, over there?

Since her plans for afternoon delight were ruined, Mai might as well head over to where she was supposed to meet her father earlier than their appointment and wait for him to show up. Maybe he'd think she was eager to meet him and feel guilty. That would be nice.

She ordered a coffee from Searrbucks, wincing at the price, and sat down at one of the open tables. Just how well this place was doing could be seen by the fact that, during the height of the festival, they had tables that weren't occupied. And their coffee still sucked, but she needed a pick-me-up, and there were no machines anywhere in sight.

Nice to be able to sit down and rest, though.

"Get lost!"

Her eyes flashed open as an unpleasantly familiar voice cut through the sound of the crowd. Nao? Great. Just what she didn't need. She looked around until she picked the henna worshipper out of the crowd, which had cleared around her as she stood arguing with -

- with -

- with -

"I told you, I didn't want to see you!" Nao was shouting. "So if we run into each other, you should just pretend you didn't see me, got it!"

"But that man, he was -" said the older man she was hectoring.

"It's none of your business, you shitty father!" Nao roared. "You picked now to start caring about
what I - oh, great, you too?"

Mai blinked. When, when had she gotten up and come over to them, how had she moved without -

"What do you want?" Nao sneered at her. "I got enough on my plate without -"

"Mai," the older man gasped.

"Why?" asked Mai quietly, in the politest way she could manage. "Why is that girl calling you a shitty father ... father?"

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"I think we lost her," Kazuya said as he glanced over his shoulder.

Akane let out a sigh of relief. "Are you sure? Maybe she's just hiding."

"Pretty sure," he replied. "I don't see her doing the hiding behind a telephone post bit that she tried the last couple of times I spotted her, so it really does seem like she's been left behind."

"What was she thinking, following us like that?"

"Well, knowing Midori-chan, she was probably just trying to make sure nothing bad happened on our, um, well, our stroll together," he said, realizing at the last moment that using the word 'date' might be going a little too far. Or would it have been going just far enough? Aggggh! Now I'm standing here engaged in contemplation instead of action and she's going to think I'm all talk! But if I do anything, she might get mad at whatever it is that I do! Aggggh!

"That does sound like the sort of thing Midori-chan would do." Akane said, being completely oblivious to Kazuya's inner turmoil. "Either that, or she's just being nosy." And she laughed a bit at the notion.

Kazuya, nobody's fool, joined in on the laughter, and was savvy enough to stop when she did, too.

"So, where to now?" he asked after a moment spent smiling like an idiot as he went over the festival schedule that he'd carefully memorized. "The 'Arrivederci Dekopin Rocket' concert is starting in just a few minutes."

"Oh, geez, I dunno," Akane said, face twisting in indecision. "I sort of want to see it, because I love their music, but on the other hand, it's so sad that they're breaking up like this. So I don't want to see it, because it's going to be so hard to watch."

"Well, then, how about the concert that the girls' choir is going to be having? There's supposedly this one transfer student who's really -"

"Actually," Akane interrupted. "Actually, there's a place I kind of want you to see."

Kazuya blinked. She wanted to relieve him of the burden of making decisions about where they were going to go and what they were going to do? Wow, what a great girlfriend! Friend, rather, friend, they were just friends! Ahem, serious face, serious face. "Well, all right."

"Amazing," he said a few moments later. "I had no idea that there was a bamboo grove hidden away in these foothills. It's so tranquil."

"Yes," Akane agreed. "I used to come here a lot, when I needed to think or be alone." Her voice went quiet and distant as she remembered time spent curled up in a ball, wondering why she'd ever been born.
But she'd finally gotten an answer to that question, hadn't she? She was born to love this boy.

She drew in a deep breath. "Kazu-kun," she said. "You remember how we promised that we'd never keep secrets from each other?"

He turned to look at her. "Yes," he answered, apprehension back in spades. "Why?"

"There are, there are some things that I haven't been telling you. So many things, really. But let's start with something ... relatively easy. "You remember, back in February, when we had that silly fight, and I ran off?"

"Uh, yes," he lied. It must have been a really silly fight, because he didn't remember anything about this. But something told him that this admission would not go over all that well.

"Well, I came here, to think, like I used to, and that's when I saw it," she continued, closing her eyes and remembering the weird furry insect-thing looming in front of her, and the strange pale boy asking her -

"Wait - you saw one of the monsters that people have been talking about?" Kazuya asked abruptly, with a sudden flash of inspiration. "That's - what happened? Who saved you?"

"No one saved me," Akane said sharply. "No one has ever saved me, except you. But that day ..."

It had terrified her, but then, after listening to the strange boy's words, she'd realized that it wasn't really interested in her. It was looking beyond her. She wondered why. And then she heard Kazu-kun calling for her, looking for her, and she knew what this thing was going to do.

"... that day, I saved you," she concluded.

"Huh?"

"If it's for you, I can do anything, Kazu-kun. I love you. And I would do anything for you," she told him, looking squarely into his eyes as she made this pledge.

"I, I'd do anything for you, too," he said, feeling a bit faint.

Will you help me murder my father, then? She was opening her mouth to ask just that question when they were interrupted by a girlish scream from nearby.

"Monster!" shrieked the pale girl as she came running up the path, who looked a little younger than the two of them.

Akane whirled, and then nearly froze. It was back. That same Orphan from all those months ago. How, how could it be back, she'd - no. It didn't matter. "All right, then," she said softly, and held her hands open at her sides. There was a sudden swirl of wind, and within those hands appeared a pair of golden clubs. It also snapped the tie that held back her hair.

"For Kazu-kun, I can do anything," she repeated, and then roared as she charged the Orphan. Just like before, it couldn't be hurt by these blows, but it could be driven back, and she pushed it before her to buy herself some fighting space so that she could call upon her Child.

"Hari!" she cried at last, falling back, and the wind swirled once more. Her golden lion appeared at her side, then charged at the Orphan just as she had done moments earlier. Unlike her, though, his roar actually accomplished something, as the burst of sound slammed into the Orphan like the shot of a cannon.
In just a few seconds, it was all over, and she whirled to look back at Kazuya, who'd been watching all this in mute shock. "Please don't hate me," she said.

"... are you nuts?" he said at last, finally starting to grin. "That, that was unbelievably badass! Oh, wow, you are so cool, Akane-chan!"

Fighting to control the urge to squee, Akane turned to look at the underclassman. "Um, listen, it's important that you not tell anyone about -"

"No one will know," the girl said calmly. Then she shaped her arm into a sword, crossed the distance between herself and Hari in under a second, and brought it down towards Akane's Child.

Of course Akane wasn't about to let that happen, so she moved just as fast and parried the sword thrust with her tonfa before Hari could even be scratched. "What in the world do you think you're doing!" she cried. "I just saved your life!"

The younger girl regarded her across their crossed weapons for a moment, then stepped back. Akane blinked as she realized that her eyes must have deceived her, since the girl - Miyu, she suddenly remembered - was actually holding a sword in her hand rather than having somehow transformed her arm into a sword. But where had it come from? Some hidden sheath?

Her speculations were interrupted when Miyu finally spoke. "My apologies, Akane-hime. I was ordered to test your abilities if I had the opportunity, and that seemed the ideal way to do so. Rest assured that I bear you no malice, but it may come to pass that, when next we meet, we shall be enemies once again. Until then, farewell."

And then she leaped away in a series of ninja-like bounds.

"What, what just happened?" Akane asked.

"She probably works for one of the other factions," Kazuya explained.

"Huh? Kazu-kun, what are you -"

"Well, you see, Akane-hime - you're not the only one who's been keeping secrets." He reached up to his shoulder, and, with a sudden gesture, pulled his uniform's blazer away to reveal a dark, short-sleeved uniform. Kazuya promptly raised his wristwatch to his mouth and spoke into it. "Two to beam up."

"Eh?"

The world dissolved in a blur of multicolored light. When it reformed, they were standing in the middle of somewhere that looked like the bridge of the starship Enterprise, complete with a huge monitor, displaying the Earth from orbit, in front of two occupied crew stations. Further back, there were a pair of unoccupied chairs.

All around the bridge, if that's what it was, men and women dressed in the same uniform as Kazuya (though it wasn't nearly as good-looking on them as it was on him) stood up from what they were doing and snapped a sharp salute in the direction of the two new arrivals. "Welcome back, Captain," one of the oldest people present said.

"Thank you," said Kazuya, then returned his attention to Akane. "Welcome aboard the Space-Time Defense Agency's heavy cruiser Deeva, Akane-hime."

"Ehhhh?"
"We've been monitoring the situation on your world for quite some time now, and believe that you are the best candidate to prevent that situation, the Orphans and the HiME, from becoming a danger not only to your world but to countless others. Only you have the right qualities to do so?"

"What, what qualities?" Akane gasped.

"Your purity of heart," he said, without a hint of a smile. "A purity undamaged by any of the horrible things that have happened to you. Such purity is rarer than diamonds. Only you, out of all the HiME, possess it. Will you not join your strength to our much lesser strength, and so become even stronger?"

She blinked. "But, but I'm not - I've -"

"Akane," he said, dropping the honorifics as he spoke softly, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. "We've been monitoring the situation for some time. And we saw what your father was going to do to you. It was not something we could permit, so we deceived him. And you, too, unfortunately. Whenever he's tried, we used our technology to put him in a virtual reality that made him think that he was violating you, and fed that delusion into your senses as well. But he has never touched you, not really."

"... you did that for me?" she asked, just as quiet, on the verge of tears.

"If it's for you, I can do anything," he said.

"Then, then me too. For you, Kazu-kun, I can do anything too. So yes, yes I will -"

"Oookay, hold the phone."

Akane blinked, and turned rapidly. There he was, the strange young boy who called himself Nagi, who'd told her about her power, and there he was, standing there with a bag of popcorn in his hand, looking at her with an amused expression. "How, how did you get here?" she asked, startled

"That's a good question. Here's a better one - if her dad hasn't been schtupping her, then what exactly are these horrible things that have been happening to her that prove she has such incomparably pureness? This story really doesn't make any sense. I mean, if they could do all that, why not just pull the girl out of the bad situation, rather than tricking her dad that way? It's needlessly baroque, don't you think? I mean, yeah, if she needed to be there for some reason, like to learn something, that would make sense, but she's just been going through misery for no good reason."

"No," she said. "No, no, stop -"

"Eh, I'm actually kinda-sorta sorry, Akane-chan, but this little fantasy that you've descended into just doesn't work for me. So I think you're going to have to face what happened -"

"Nooooooooo!"

- the blade had came down, and she couldn't run that fast, and so Hari had disintegrated into bright green light. And then, crumbling over in agony, so had Kazuya. Along with her clubs. Along with every single dream and hope that she'd ever allowed herself to nurse.

Miyu hadn't leapt away. She hadn't even bothered to run. She'd just turned and walked away from the ruins of Akane's life, without sparing her a backwards glance. And here she was, now, bereft even of the illusion that things could be other than they were.

Eventually, Akane started screaming. She kept right on screaming when they found her, and it wasn't
until they shot her full of sedatives in the ambulance that she finally stopped.

And even then, she couldn't recapture the beautiful dream she'd been having.

Ain't I a stinker?

Elsewhere, Mai was slowly nodding as she considered her father, who had been regarding her silently but with shame exuding from every pore of his face. "She's fifteen," she said, glancing at Nao, who just looked stunned. "Mom only died eight years ago, so you'd have to have been ... while she was ... while we were all ..." She trailed off.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I didn't want you to know -"

"No shit you didn't want me to know!" Mai exploded, starting to tear up. "Is there anything else you didn't want me to know? Do I have any more jerkass half-siblings out there?"

"Not on my side," Nao said faintly.

"Shut up!" Mai roared at her.

Nao blinked, and then, slowly and unpleasantly, she started to laugh. "Oh," she said. "Oh, this is priceless! Finally, the cute mask comes off, and we see what's underneath, and it's every bit the bitch I always knew you were!"

"You don't know anything about me!" Mai retorted.

"Please, please, don't fight -" their father interjected. No one paid him even the least bit of attention.

"I know you like I know myself," Nao sneered. "I'm just the honest one, while you play act at being good. And now you're pretending to be hurt by the shit this asshole has pulled, when deep down, you knew all along that he was just like any other piece of shit. You gonna cry, now? Please cry! It's so hilarious!"

Mai flinched as Nao's words struck home. She had known, or at least suspected, that her father was no good. He'd been away so often, never talking about what he did while he was gone, leaving so many blanks that her worst imaginings could fill. And it turned out that things were even worse than she'd imagined. "I'm not going to cry," she bit out.

"Come on, cry!"

"I'm not going to cry, because you want me to cry. And the very last thing I ever want to do is anything you want me to do!"

Nao laughed some more. "Dance, puppet, dance. I can see your strings -"

"And I can see yours," Mai snapped. "You don't hate men. You want to be the sort of mean bastard you think all men are. That's not hatred, that's idolization. Love, to put it in simple terms."

That made Nao take a step back, face gone pale. "Shut up!"

"Dance, puppet, dance," Mai sneered right back.

"Both of you, please, stop this -"

"Shut up!" they yelled at him in chorus. One last look of unfathomable hatred between the two
sisters, and they turned and marched away in opposite directions, leaving their mutual father alone.

"Well, that was something you don't see every day," Midori mused, having watched the entire confrontation from cover.

Then she blinked, and cursed herself for completely forgetting about Akane and Kazuya, who were nowhere in sight. Nor were they anywhere that she went looking for them over the next half hour.

Midori had had better days than this.

Mai managed to get quite some distance from where she'd abandoned her - him, and she was quite proud of herself for doing so before it finally became too much for her. That was when she collapsed on a conveniently placed bench and began sobbing.

She'd always remembered the time before her mother died as shining days, filled with innocence and joy. They'd been gone, but she could remember them and draw strength from those memories. Now they were ruined. They'd been founded on deceit and treachery.

So was what came after they were gone really any surprise?

"Mai-san?" someone asked. "Are you all right?"

Eventually, she found the strength to lift her head. "No," she told Kanzaki Reito. "No, I'm not."

Slowly, gently, he sat down beside her. "If I can, I would like to help you."

"I don't think you can," she said. "But it's good to know someone cares, I guess ..."

They sat together in silence for a while.
July, 2004

It was odd, she sometimes thought, that, in a country as obsessed with safety as Japan, the railing had
yet to be repaired. The breaking point, where the car had struck it and torn through like a knife
through hot butter, was still empty. If they wanted to, someone could easily walk up to the edge and
dive over.

She had walked up to the edge of the cliff, but not for that reason. Not today, at least. She'd thought
about it, though. Many, many times. Perhaps when she was done. Perhaps she could rest then.

But right now, all that she could do was toss the bouquet of flowers down to the icy cold waters, and
whisper the name for God on the lips of all children. And if her eyes glistened, it was only because
of the wind that came up just then. Only for that.

Natsuki would never cry again.

"Eloped?" Mai asked, startled.

"That's what people are saying," Chie said with a shrug as the trio rested beside the fountain.
"Nobody's seen hide nor hair of either of them since they festival. Heck, I've heard that his parents
even showed up and tried to get the administration to look for them." A frown crossed her face. "It's
sort of weird that her parents didn't, actually ..."

"Parent," Mai corrected absently. "Her mother died a few years ago. It came up because, well, it
came up."

"It'd be kind of romantic, I guess," Aoi said, slowly. "But ... I don't know, something doesn't seem
right about it. She'd have told someone, wouldn't she? It wouldn't just be gossip and rumors, then."

"Gotta say that I'm with Aoi-chan on this one," Mai admitted.

"Ah, how romance has fallen, when proof is demanded," Chie proclaimed in somber tones. "I shake
my head in dismay." And she did.

Then her glasses gleamed oddly. "But! If proof is demanded, then, though proof be lacking in that
case, there be others! Wherefore behold!" Chie held up her camera phone and displayed an image so
that Mai and Aoi could both see it.

Mai blinked, being unused to seeing herself from the rear, and then gasped as she realized who was
walking beside her.

"Is a certain someone dating a certain Student Council Vice President? Has, at long last, romance
found Tokiha Mai?" Chie asked. "Inquiring minds want to know!"

"Dish! Dish!" Aoi enthused.

"You guyyyys!" Mai cried, holding a hand to her face to cover the blush. "It's not like that! Reito-san -"
"She's calling him by his first name!"

"Oh, they so are doing it!"

"Stop it! He's just, you know, a nice guy! Some things happened, and he was just being friendly. We aren't dating or anything like that!"

Chie was almost glaring at Mai now. "Oh, that won't do at all, Mai-chan. You cannot just let a nice guy like that get away. If you're going to cause a scandal by stealing him away from the Student Council President -"

"They're not dating either!" Mai interjected. He'd told her as much when she asked, and considering what she'd seen of the way Fujino acted around Natsuki, she just hadn't been all that surprised.

It wasn't all that surprising, either, that Chie paid her no mind. "- you have to take the initiative. Confess! I command thee, confess by the end of the summer!"

"Operation: Get Mai To Get Busy So I Can Get Busy With Takumi-Kun begins!" Aoi proclaimed.

"Wait, what?" Mai said.

"I didn't say anything," Aoi lied.

After a brief, scorching glare in Aoi's direction, Mai returned her look to Chie. "That's not going to work. I've got a job this summer that's going to take me away from the campus. I probably won't see him at all for the whole vacation."

"Oh, man, another job?" Chie groaned. "You are an insanely hard worker, Mai-chan!"

Mai shrugged helplessly. Since she had decided that she was never, ever touching another dollar that her bastard father had anything to do with, she had to make money somehow.

"So what are you going to be doing?" Aoi asked, after bidding her dreams of getting busy with Takumi a fond au revoir.

"Lifeguard at Sakaimachi Beach," Mai explained. "I've done that sort of thing before, so -"

"Sakaimachi?" interrupted a voice that still haunted Mai's nightmares from time to time.

Slowly, Mai turned to see the scowling face of Suzushiro Haruka glaring at her from a short distance away. She couldn't really remember ever seeing the senior girl when she was not scowling. Suzushiro probably only stopped scowling when she was sleeping. Or possibly not even then. The image of her asleep and scowling at imaginary malefactors even in her dreams was a strangely persuasive one.

Standing just behind her was Haruka's constant companion, the girl whom Mai had come to know as Kikukawa Yukino, one of her classmates. If Suzushiro's perpetual expression was a fixed scowl, hers was a look of constant apprehension and worry. She didn't really talk too much, except when she was making an effort to translate for Suzushiro.

Mai had gotten quite familiar with the pair in the months since her surprising arrival at Mahora. Just as with Tate, it seemed she couldn't go anywhere or do anything without running into the two of them, always with those same expressions on their faces. Some of her nightmares started out as quite pleasant dreams, where she was fucked vigorously by an enthusiastic Takumi only to roll over and see Suzushiro glaring down with that same expression as she loomed over the two of them. It was
"I have asked you a question, Tokiha Mai, and would appreciate it if you did me the courtesy of answering it, instead of glazing at my face."

"Gazing," Yukino quietly interjected.

"Well, actually, you didn't ask a question, you repeated a word," Mai pointed out, she thought quite reasonably.

Suzushiro considered this response for a few moments. Mai thought that was a bit hypocritical of her, after that demand for an immediate reply. But at last, she spoke up. "I suppose that I did not, actually, ask a question. Therefore. Did you, Tokiha Mai-san, just say that you were going to be spending the summer at Sakaimachi?"

"Yes, yes I did," Mai admitted. "Do you know the town? I've never been there before."

"I was born there," Haruka said shortly.

"Oh," said Mai.

"And raised there."

"Oh."

"Sakaimachi is my home town."

"Oh," repeated Mai once more, wishing that the Earth would swallow her up. "But, of course, since it's the summer vacation, you'll be spending it somewhere else, surely. somewhere like Hawaii. Or Florida. Alaska, maybe?"

"No," Haruka ground out. "I will be spending my summer vacation at my parents' primary residence, which is still at Sakaimachi."

"Oh, you still live in the house where you grew up," Mai said, wondering whether it would be possible to drown herself in the fountain. The water level seemed pretty low, but if she angled her head just right, surely then -

"Do not be absurd, Tokiha Mai," Suzushiro unwittingly halted Mai's most recent train of thought. "In any event, since Sakaimachi is not within my jurisdiction as the Executive Director of the Student Council Executive, I will not be able to persecute any offenses against common decency which you will doubtless commit."

"Prosecute."

"Actually, I think she got that one right," Mai told Yukino wearily.

As though no one was talking about her, Haruka continued. "However, you may rest assured that I will be informing the local authorities that another delinquent of your stature will be in town for the season. Good day to you." And with that, she spun on her heel and began marching away, halting only when she realized that she was unaccountably walking alone

Suzushiro looked back to see that Yukino was still standing in front of her classmates. "Yukino? Is something the matter?" Her tone was no less blunt than it had been when she was addressing Mai, but she managed to sound genuinely concerned nonetheless.
"No, Haruka-san. I, I just need to check something about our summer homework with, with Aoi-san," Yukino stammered out.

"Oh. Well, summer homework is important, so take as much time as you need," she said, and then turned and headed off.

Yukino waited until Haruka was out of earshot before turning to Mai. "I'm very sorry, Mai-san," she said. "Haruka-san wouldn't normally be as petty as that, but she's a bit stressed out over some other business. I'm sure that she'd want me to apologize on her behalf."

It was the longest sentence she'd ever heard out of Suzushiro's tiny red-haired companion, and Mai blinked for a while on hearing it. "Ah, no, no, that's all right. I'm sure that she has a lot of stuff going on. So, then, she's not really going to report me to -"

"Oh, no," Yukino interjected. "She's definitely going to do that. If she says she's going to do something, she'll do it unless physically prevented from doing so. But she does know that she probably shouldn't do it." Yukino followed up the statement with a sad nod.

"Great," said Mai. Fire. Dying by fire would solve everything. No, with her luck, it probably wouldn't kill her after all ...

"So, who's the other one?" Chie asked abruptly.

"Eh?" Yukino said, blinking cutely.

"The Exec said 'another delinquent'. Who's the other one?"

Yukino looked incredibly embarrassed. "Um, well. You see, the Student Council President is going to be vacationing in Sakaimachi as well, and Haruka-san has something of a complex about her. So, you see ..." And now Yukino gestured vaguely.

"Ahhh," Chie said, nodding in complete comprehension. "Well, it's good of you to stay behind and tell us all this."

Yukino blinked again. "Eh? No, I really do need to check on something about our summer homework with Aoi-san. I think I maybe missed part of the assignment while I was thinking about something else in class."

"Really?" Aoi asked, surprised.

"Of course," Yukino said, just as surprised. "Why would I ever lie to Haruka-san?"

Chie was only half-listening to all of that, as she stood a while in thought. And then a truly wicked grin curved her face. "You know what would be really cool?"

"You know what would be really cool?", Mai decided a week or so later, was probably the most terrifying question there could be. At the base of all wars, tragedies, and bad movies, there was probably someone asking the question "you know what would be really cool?"

This time, someone asking the question had resulted in her being housed, for the duration of her stay in Sakaimachi, in one of the many many guest bedrooms of the Suzushiro mansion. She still found the line of events that led to this outcome from that question to be utterly bewildering.

Basically, Chie had prevailed on Yukino to persuade Haruka that it was in her interest to keep her
friends close and her enemies closer. In the interest of keeping the third biggest delinquent in Mahora in a place where she could be watched, then, she had been pleased to offer her hospitality to Mai, and thus also to Mikoto, Chie, Aoi, Takumi and Akira (who'd been dragged along with Takumi).

Of course, she did have more than enough rooms for all those people. The mansion was really deserving of the title. Apparently, up until eight years ago, it had been the official residence of the mayor of Sakaimachi, who had been a familial connection of some sort to the Suzushiro family. (Chie, unsatisfied with this brief mention, had done some digging and found out that said mayor had been married to Haruka's maternal aunt, and been ousted from office eight years ago on charges of corruption.)

The problem was, of course, that even though this was actually a lot more comfortable than the beach house that Mai had been planning to rent for the duration (with the majority of her income from the lifeguard job paying for it) and the food was much better than the instant ramen she'd have been eating, she couldn't get comfortable here. Even without the sensation that she was always being watched - and Haruka or her family should really do something about all those cameras, they weren't even a little bit hidden! - it was way too luxurious. If she allowed herself to get comfortable, going back to her normal life was going to be hard.

And then there was the company, as well. Reito, as she was starting to get used to thinking of the Vice President, had been invited down to Sakaimachi even before all of this, as part of an effort to further ties between his family and the Suzushiros. ("Translation, they're trying to get the two of us interested in each other," he'd confessed ruefully to Mai when they'd met the first day of the vacation. "It'd be funny if it wasn't so absurd. Haruka-san is already married to her work.") And he in turn had invited Yuuichi, and naturally Shiho had tagged along. So they were there too.

And then, somewhat unexpectedly, Midori had shown up with Yohko-sensei, who was apparently an old friend of hers, along with a younger girl whom she'd introduced as Asakura Kazumi, a student who was getting career counselling from her.

"Is that what they're calling it these days," Mai had said when she'd heard about that.

"Huh?" Asakura had asked, still a little stunned by the trip down here. (Mai had later been shocked to learn that Midori hadn't been driving, and that Yohko-sensei drove like a maniac.)

"Oh, never mind Mai-chan, she's such a kidder," Midori had interjected, smiling broadly and falsely. "Hey, Mai-chan, could I have a word in private. Great, over here ... what the hell, Mai?"

"What the hell back at you. What are you doing here?"

"Chaperoning. This many students gathered in one place requires a responsible shut up, I know what you're going to say even before you say it."

"I was going to say, that's why Yohko-sensei is here, but why are you -"

"Ha. Ha ha ha," Midori had 'laughed'. "She is a lot wilder than I am or ever could be, I'll have you know. And anyway, that's not the point. Asakura thinks she's really interested in being a teacher, and I'm trying to help her to realize that no, that's not what she wants to do with her life."

"What kind of career counselling is this?" Mai had wanted to know.

"The kind where someone realizes that there are better things to do with one's life than reciting rote lessons to unwelcoming kids. Anyway, I don't appreciate the suggestion that anything unwholesome is happening here. She's got a girlfriend whom she's apparently completely faithful."
Mai had raised an eyebrow.

"It came in conversation! I did not make a pass at her and get shot down!"

"Riiight."

And so it came to pass that practically her entire circle of acquaintance had ended up here in Sakaimachi. At least Nao hadn't shown her ugly mug, she mused as she read the newspaper. That would just be the straw that broke the camel's back.

And then she turned the page and read about a rash of mugging incidents in town recently, crumpled up the newspaper and threw it away before holding her head in her hands.

It's not my problem, Mai reminded herself a few hours later as she sat in her lifeguard's chair, watching the people on the beach having fun. It is not my problem. So we have the same father - so what? Do I have some sort of obligation to look after all my siblings? No. No I don't. I look after Takumi because my mother told me to before she, my mother told me. Nobody has told me to look out for Nao.

And even if they had, what would that even mean in this context? she wondered as she called out to a couple of kids who were getting a little rowdy to settle down. I know who's doing these things, so I should go tell the police who they should arrest for them. Except that, of course, the police will never believe a word of it. (She flashed back to Natsuki miming calling the police. It was really annoying the way that the other girl had managed to get inside her head like this.)

So there's really nothing that I can do or should do, Mai told herself as her first shift ended, and she climbed down from the high chair so that her relief could head up. I should just forget that I know anything that's going on, lower my head, do my job, and try to have a little fun. Like Mikoto is doing.

Specifically, at this precise moment, Mikoto was busily building a rather elaborate sand castle with Yukino, assisted (possibly instructed) by a quiet young girl with blue hair who was apparently associated with the people playing volleyball a ways down the beach. If nothing else good came out of all of this, then at least she could be happy that Mikoto had made some new friends. Her roommate, who looked even younger than she normally did, laughing and playing in the sand, really got along well with Yukino, who was actually looking happy for once.

And Mikoto being preoccupied gave her an opening!

It was pretty easy to find Takumi, who was sitting under an umbrella set up by Akira, who'd vanished for some reason. She wondered if maybe he'd seen her coming and fled to avoid being polluted by Mai's presence. (Had she asked, Takumi would have told her that he'd gone to the washroom.) Regardless, it left him alone, which was perfect for her sinister plans.

"Oh, Takumiil!" she said invitingly as she strolled up. "I found something that I think you're going to want to see."

"What is it, neesan?" Takumi asked, startled.

"It's a surprise. C'mon, quick."

Hesitantly, Takumi got up to take his sister's hand and followed along behind her as she led him in the direction of Sakaimachi's most famous landmark - the remains of Triangle Mountain, a large pillar of rock at the southern edge of the beach. Or rather, it had been a large pillar of rock until it unaccountably collapsed eight years ago, following some confusing events nearby. All that remained
was two much smaller pillars in front of the pile of rubble.

"It's sort of interesting," Takumi admitted, as she guided him down into one particular secluded alcove near said pillars. "What do you think happened?"

"Don't know, don't care," Mai replied cheerfully. "But you know what is cool about this place?"

"No, what?"

"Hardly anyone comes here anymore ... and it's far enough away from anything else that nobody can hear anything from the beach."

"Okay, and?" Takumi asked cluelessly.

She wrapped her hands around the back of his neck, forearms on his slender shoulders, and smiled widely. "Complete privacy," she purred.

"Oh," he said, and then she was kissing him frantically, her tongue wrapping around his as she gently pushed him to the ground and straddled him. "Oh," he repeated, once she released his mouth and pulled back to start pulling off his clothes.

"Oh?" Mai asked, pausing. "What is this 'oh' sound you keep making?"

"Well, I mean ... this is a little risky, don't you think?" he said, nervously looking around.

"I told you, secluded, private, perfect."

"So how did you find out about it?"

"I was poking around here and found people having sex here," she told him. "Didn't hear a thing until I was practically on top of them, and they didn't even notice me. Some older woman and her boy toy. She kept calling him Kou-chan, and -"

"Neechan, do you not see the problematic part of that statement?" Takumi interjected.

"What?"

Takumi closed his eyes. After about ten seconds, he opened them and spoke calmly and quietly. "If you were poking around while they were doing it, it's not impossible that someone else will be poking around while we are doing it."

"Come on, Takumi!" Mai whined. "It's been months! I want to do it, and you know that you want it as badly as I do."

"Well, yes," he agreed, reluctantly. "But I'm worried, about that, and, well, we don't have any protection, do we? You're not on the pill, and I don't have any condoms, so what if something happens -"

"Then I'll get an abortion!" she snapped.

He stared at her, faintly aghast.

"What? It's my body, my choice, right?"

"I just, I just can't believe you're being so ... callous about it," Takumi said faintly.
She stared at him, not even remotely understanding what he was talking about, but getting the fact that the moment, if it had ever even been there, was now gone.

So much for having some fun.

Elsewhere, Midori wasn't having much fun either. Iced tea wasn't even remotely her beverage of choice, but given that she was trying to set a good example for this girl who was a year or so younger than her just seventeen years. So here she was, on the balcony of the mansion room she was sharing with Yohko, drinking iced tea and talking about her official work.

"Okay, let's get down to business, here," she said, ending the stream of small talk that had been going on since then. "Why do you want to be a teacher, anyway?"

Asakura smiled innocently. "Because I think it would be a good way to repay the many people who've taught me over the years."

"Very smooth," Midori congratulated her, voice thick with sarcasm. "Y'know what teachers really hate more than anything else?"

"The administration?"

"Close, but no cigar. They hate being told what people think they want to hear. That's the classic answer, Asakura. Nice planning, but it's not gonna cut it. I've done some research on you, you know."

Asakura's smile got wider and not nearly as innocent as she adjusted her straw and brought it to her lips. "I've done some on you, too, sensei," she said before she sipped.

"That's pretty much what I expected, too," Midori admitted. "You're the school paper's top newshound, have almost as many followers on your blog as that Chiu girl -"

"Please don't mention that to Chisame, she'll take it as a challenge."

"- you're a born reporter, Asakura. Why are you throwing that away for a career in education? If you've learned anything about me, you'll know that this is just something I'm doing to pay the bills until I can do the work I was born to do. So why do you want it so badly?"

Asakura opened her mouth to give a quick answer. Seeing that Midori had a really serious expression on her face, she closed it, then leaned back and looked out at where the sky met the sea.

"It's funny that we've come to Sakaimachi," she mused out loud. "This is really where it all started, in a way. Have you ever heard of Asakura Kaori?" she asked abruptly.

The name didn't ring any bells to Midori, who said as much.

"How soon we forget," Asakura murmured again. "My aunt. Big time TV reporter, hard-hitting investigator. Got her start here in Sakaimachi, actually. She really got famous after this investigation of hers pretty much brought down the mayor and this foreign-owned company he was in bed with."

"I wouldn't go mentioning any of that to our host," Midori advised.

The girl waved a hand. "Don't worry, I'm not eager to advertise the connection any more. I would've been, once. Damned if I didn't look up to that woman. I've only met her a couple of times, but I really thought she was everything I wanted to be." Her mouth twisted down. "And then it came out that she was a complete phoney."
"Phoney how?"

"You name it, she did it. Breaking and entering, stealing evidence, planting evidence, sabotage, bribery, sleeping with people to get them to do what she wanted - everything to make the story she was reporting. It all came out about a year ago, just as I was going ... on a trip," she ended, somewhat lamely.

"I've heard a few things about that trip," Midori noted, half-smiling. And now that she thought about it, she could vaguely remember something on the news about some woman reporter being exposed as an industrial spy and saboteur. Images of a green-haired woman splashed on the cover page of a newspaper danced through her head.

"Heh. Well, it got to me. There was my role-model, exposed as a huge hypocrite and fraud. And what with everything else, I didn't really have time to process any of it, to borrow a phrase from a friend of mine. But time passed, and it kept nagging at me ... and I realized that she was still my role-model.

"But that she was now the emblem of everything I didn't want to be."

"Tossing a job you love in the toilet because you were disappointed in someone is kind of an overreaction, Asakura," Midori said critically.

Asakura shrugged. "Maybe. But the thing is, if I was being honest, I wasn't really in love with the job as much as I'd been for a while before that. I liked part of it, the 'finding things out' part, a lot more than I liked the 'and exposing them to the world' part." She shrugged again.

"If you like finding things out, then you should be a scholar of some sort," the teacher said, suddenly seeing an opportunity to evangelize her own chosen profession. "An archaeologist, for example."

"That's not the sort of thing I'm interested in though. I like people, not arrowheads."

"Well, then, I suppose that there's not a lot of call for professional sociologists, but -"

"I really want to be a teacher, Midori-sensei. I lost a role-model, but I found another one."

Midori blinked. "Good grief. I hope you don't think Negi-sensei is a typical teacher."

"No."

"Well, good, because -"

"He's a great one," she interrupted. "And that's what I want to be too."

Midori didn't like fighting losing battles, and she had the distinct feeling that this was one. But she wasn't about to give up just yet.

Before she could launch another salvo, though, she was interrupted by a delicate cough from behind her. "Excuse me, honored guests," said one of the maids. "I've been sent to inform you that the master of the house has returned home unexpectedly."

"Oh, Suzushiro's father is here?" Midori asked, blinking. "Are we going to be expected to clear out, then?"

"Oh, no," the girl assured her. "He would never insult his daughter's guests that way. However, you should be prepared for -"
"HARUKA!" boomed a deep male voice. "I'VE TOLD YOU A THOUSAND TIMES, ALL THOSE CAMERAS ARE AN INSULT TO OUR GUESTS! THEY SHOULD ONLY BE IN AREAS ACTUALLY REQUIRING SECURITY! THIS IS RIDICULOUSLY PARANOID!"

"IT IS NOT!" retorted a familiar female voice. "IT IS JUST EFFICIENTLY PARANOID, AND POSSIBLY NOT PARANOID ENOUGH!"

Brief pause.

"YES, THAT IS WHAT I SAID, SUFFICIENTLY!"

"- some minor disturbance," the maid concluded.

The father-daughter shouting match, involuntarily witnessed by everyone in the mansion and probably a few of the neighbors as well, wound down eventually. Soon after that, the distinguished master of the house was brought around to be introduced to each of his house guests in turn. He was formal and polite to one and all, acting as though he had not just been through a verbal battle with a decibel rating to rival a Metallica concert.

That said, as he was introduced to Chie, Aoi and Mai, who'd just arrived in the mansion's entrance when the argument began, it was pretty clear that he was starting to wonder, "who are all these people and why are they living in my house?" But his engrained politeness and congeniality prevented him from asking the question aloud. They were here, and so it could not be helped that they were here.

Honestly, Mai thought that Haruka could stand to learn a few things from her father's example, even though she reflected that she clearly had. Though perhaps not the right things.

Perhaps the most important thing to come out of the brief encounter was Mr. Suzushiro's off-handed mention that the omnipresent surveillance cameras were going to be largely shut down. The news immediately prompted Chie to start smiling faintly, but it wasn't until the gentleman bid them good afternoon and departed, doubtless to pay his respects to someone else, that the gossip queen gave voice to her thoughts.

"I just had a really cool idea," she said.

"Oh, god, not again," Mai moaned.

Chie paid her no mind, turning her wicked grin full on Aoi. "You remember that hot tub we saw last night? The one you thought was so interesting? The one with the really obvious surveillance camera pointed right at it?"

"Yes, I remember," Aoi agreed.

Chie waited a few moments.

"Ohhhhh," said Aoi once she got it. "Can we really - wouldn't that be rude, I mean?"

"Totally rude," Chie agreed, leaning close enough to her friend that their noses were practically touching.

Aoi started giggling. "Well, then. See you later, Mai-chan!" she said as she grabbed Chie's hand and dashed off.
“Right,” Mai said, a little dazed by what had just happened right in front of her. Dazed, and a bit annoyed. Was everyone getting action but her? At this rate, she might walk in on Haruka in flagrante delicto with Yukino, or -

She couldn’t help herself. She laughed long and loud at that idea. That was never going to happen.

Once she was done laughing, Mai shook her head ruefully. Well, then, what should she do with herself for the evening? She wasn’t even close to being tired enough to go to bed early.

She had nothing but time, really.

Ah, nuts, Mai thought at last. I’m going to go try and hunt down Nao, aren’t I? I hate being so damned responsible. Shaking her head, she turned to walk out the front door.

"Where you headed, Tokiha-san?" a voice asked from behind her.

Mai looked back to see Asakura Kazumi regarding her with interest from half-way down the stairs leading up to the second floor. "Oh, just, you know, out," she said. "I have a feeling there's going to be more shouting in the near future, and that's a little hard to take, you know."

"Oh, yes," the other girl agreed fervently as she came down to Mai’s level. "I actually had the same idea. Well, I'm also going to be meeting up with a friend of mine who's vacationing in the area. Care to join us?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude," Mai demurred, fully expecting the invitation to be repeated with the assurance that there was no intrusion.

Asakura shrugged. "Oh, well. Have a nice night, then." And she walked past Mai out the door, whistling as she went.

Stunned again, Mai stayed where she was for a moment, before heading out after her, half-intending to say that she'd had a change of heart and offer to join her. By the time she caught up to the swiftly moving girl at the mansion's gates, though, she was already getting into a subcompact car with a frowning young woman in glasses, and driving off.

Mai frowned herself. She felt as though she'd seen that girl before, somewhere, but couldn't quite place her. For no reason that she could recall, cat ears came to mind.

"You keep some interesting company," said a voice from behind her as she watched the car drive off.

Mai turned to see Natsuki leaning against her cycle, in the shadows of the gate. "Hail, hail, the gang's all here," she muttered.

"What?"

"Never mind. Let me guess, did the Student Council President tell you I was here?"

"Yes, she mentioned it in passing. That's not important, though. I'm calling in the favor you owe me."

Mai blinked. "Oh. Wait, are you saying that you need my help?"

Natsuki nodded shortly.

Slowly, Mai smiled. "Could you, y'know, actually say it? I could really use the ego boost."
Natsuki stood up straight. "Shove your ego boost. Are you going to pay me back or what?"

"I'll help," Mai said, sighing. At least she always knew where she stood with Natsuki. "Are you sure that you don't want to stop in and say hi to your -"

"She's. Just. Useful."

Reito leaned forward on the railing of his room's balcony, enjoying this momentary freedom from responsibility immensely. In his brief conversation with Suzushiro-san, he'd picked up on several signals that suggested that the master of the house agreed with him that a relationship between Reito and his daughter would be a disaster. Of course, they were probably coming at the issue from two completely opposite perspectives, but it was a relief to know that he had an ally in the enemy camp. He could relax and enjoy himself, now.

Perhaps he should seek out Tokiha-san. He'd found himself genuinely enjoying her company when they strolled through the festival together, and had gone well beyond the bounds of duty to try and ease her unspoken pain. She was a delightful young woman.

And stacked, too. (He was a well brought up young man, but still a guy underneath it all, after all.)

Before he could get up to go look for her, though, he heard the pad of footsteps behind him and turned to see a tiny dark-haired head poking its way through the door to his balcony.

"Hello," he said, as though he wasn't being intruded upon. "It's Miinagi-san, isn't it?"

"Mikoto," she said quietly, avoiding looking directly at him. "Mai isn't here."

"No, she's not. I was just about to go looking for her, actually."

"I thought she might be," Mikoto continued as though he hadn't said anything. "She talks about you a lot."

"And when she's with me, she talks about you a lot," he told her. It was the truth. A bit of a disturbing truth, actually.

Now Mikoto reacted, lifting her head to look right at him. "Really?"

"Really."

She sagged again. "But she's not here now." Before he could answer that observation, the small girl was fishing in the neck of the shirt she wore over her swimsuit, to pull out a tiny charm that she wore around her neck. "Do you know what this is?" she asked quietly.

He looked at it for a moment, and then spoke the absolute, unvarnished truth. "No. I'm sorry, but I don't know what that is."

"My aniue gave it to me," she told him then. "You, you look like him, a lot. I think so, anyway," she added, clearly uncertain.

"Well, I'm very sorry. I'm sure that anyone would be glad to have a little sister like you, but -"

"Ah, Miinagi-san," came a voice from the next balcony over. "It's a bit of a surprise to see you here." Shizuru had just come out onto that balcony, opening up a parasol as she did so.

"Madame President," Reito said politely. "Why so surprised?"
"Mister Vice President," she answered in the same manner. "It's just that I chanced to see Tokiha-san heading away from the manor, in company with my Natsuki, and I expected that you'd be hot on their trail by now."

"Eh?" Mikoto said, coming fully alert. "Mai and Natsuki are off having fun together? Without me?"

Before anyone could respond to that, she leapt off the balcony and dropped down to the grass below, dashing off the moment she hit the ground.

"How remarkably athletic," Shizuru observed a moment later.

"Do I detect a certain amount of jealousy?" Reito asked, faintly amused.

"Why, good grief, whatever are you implying, Mister Vice President?" Shizuru asked, with unfeigned shock. "I am certain that I have nothing to be jealous about. And I am certain that it should remain that way. It looks to be a pleasant evening, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, shut most of them down," Haruka said to the maid she'd appointed as the head of video surveillance. "Except for the one observing the room where we display the Van Gogh, and possibly the good grief what are those two doing in the hot tub!"

"Well, I think the technical term is trib-"

"I don't care what the technical term is, shut it down shut it down shut it down! Agh, my tender maiden eyes!" she groaned as the feed cut out. "I can't believe those two desperates! To do such things when they're under the same roof as a teacher and -"

"C'mon, Midori-chaaan," the vaguely slurred voice came from the speaker, courtesy of one of the cameras that also had audio pick up. "You heard the big man, they're gonna shut down allll the surveillance. Let's have some fun! I've never done it on a pool table, have you?"

"Yohko-chan, you're drunk! You don't know what you're doing! You're going to claim it was all a bad idea tomorrow! And yes, actually, I have, but, but, oh, please, stop kissing me, or, or, oh, fuck it."

"Shut that one off too!" Haruka snapped, hand over her eyes. "I should apologize to the delicates, they're clearly the victims of terrible role models. I'm glad that I have such a good -"

"Damn pushy wench! Worse than her mother ever was!" came a voice from another audio pick up. "Always with the bossy attitude, and the superiority, and, and -"

"I really think Haruka-san is just trying to be a good daughter to you," a quiet voice replied.

"Um, do you want me to turn that one off, too?" the maid asked uneasily.

Haruka was no longer there to answer the question.

Yukino had been in more uncomfortable situations than this, but that was a poor pathetic comfort as she watched a respected business leader get more and more drunk as he sat alone in his office, chugging down cup after cup of fine sake, and complained about her best friend and partner.

"And the surveillance? How d'you justify something like that? What sort of mind comes up with that? I didn't raise no totalitarian kids!"
Since Haruka's upbringing had largely been in the hands of nannies after she turned nine, Yukino could only agree with the sentiment, if not the self-pity behind it. "I think she was really just very nervous about all these people in the house, sir," she told him, trying to sound as diffident as possible. It wasn't easy, since she actually had a very strong opinion on the subject. "And she wanted to make sure that nothing bad happened while she was in charge. That's what she always does, sir. She wants to make sure that nothing bad ever happens to anyone. She wants to protect the world and everyone in it."

Yukino abruptly fell silent as she realized that she was getting a bit too emotional, and could tell that she'd gone too far from the way that Mr. Suzushiro was also silent.

"You're a good girl, Yukino-chan," he told her at length.

"Not really," she said, faintly.

"No, no, you are. A very good girl. And you've gotten very, very pretty, too. Just like yer mother, really."

Yukino froze as he got up from behind the desk and shambled in her general direction. It was the worst thing she could have done, and she knew it. Running would have been the much wiser course of action. But then he was pressing up against her, his lips on hers, and it was too late, too late to run, and -

The doors to the office slammed open, and Haruka stood there with an expression that she'd never seen there, not even when the voting results on the student council election had come in. "Yukino," she said, in a voice only a few decibels louder than Yukino's own normal speaking voice. "Please go to your room. Immediately."

Since he'd let go of her as soon as the door open, Yukino's first impulse was to do just that. But first, first she had to say something, "Haruka-san, I -"

"Immediately."

Yukino left. It wasn't until the door to her room was firmly closed, and locked, that she started crying.

She hates me now. I know she hates me now. I love her more than anything, and she hates me now.

"That, that wazzn what it looked like," her father said as she came into the office and closed the doors behind her.

"I see," she said.

And a second later he was bent backwards across his desk, her hand closed around his throat to cut off the airway.

"If you ever, ever so much as lay a finger on her again," Haruka told her father, voice even and level, "I will kill you. Nod if you understand me."

He nodded, to the best of his ability.

"That's good," she said. "She looks just like her mother, you said. She doesn't look a thing like her mother's husband. Why do you think that is, you lecherous son of a bitch?"
As the realization rose in his eyes, she let him breathe again, and stepped back to let him collapse on the floor.

"I am what I am," Haruka said at last. "I am what I am, despite you."

At the southern edge of Sakaimachi beach, past the remains of Triangle Mountain, there was a long paved path leading up a hill to a small cluster of buildings behind an abandoned security post. The buildings themselves looked abandoned, too, and the wall and chain link fence that was supposedly guarding them had seen better days.

"Geo Technics," Mai murmured, reading off the faded sign on the wall. "That's the name of that company that was doing the digging here, eight years ago, isn't it? It was a front for the people Mashiro-san works for?"

"I don't know how exactly they're related to the First District," Natsuki admitted. "But they were in bed together, somehow. This is my last real lead on them."

"It is?" Mai asked, suddenly suspicious. "How did you find out about this?"

"I just did, okay?" Natsuki answered - for a certain definition of answering, at least.

Mai understandably found this explanation somewhat wanting. "Uh-huh. And have you considered the possibility that you're waltzing into a trap?"

"Goodness, no," Natsuki said, with feigned amazement. "I would certainly never imagine that people could be so treacherous. Yes, I realize that it's probably a trap. Do you think you're here to keep me company and provide moral support?" She fell silent, looking away. Eventually, she added, "Trap or no trap, it's my last lead. Otherwise, I'd have never come here."

"Okay," Mai replied. "So how do we go in? I assume that the front door is a bad idea."

"Extraordinarily bad," Natsuki agreed. "But I know about a back entrance that should -"

A throat cleared behind the two of them, and they whirled, Natsuki's guns coming out and Mai's hands and feet abruptly encircled by her magatama.

Mikoto, her sword out and held tip to the ground, was standing there glaring at the two of them. "Not cool, Mai," she growled.

"Mikoto?" Mai gasped, somewhat redundantly. "How did you find us?"

"Someone wears perfume on her underwear," Mikoto explained, not looking at Natsuki as she said it. "I could smell it a mile away."

Natsuki felt the color rising in her cheeks. As always, she responded to her embarrassment with anger. "What exactly do you think you're doing here?"

"Not letting you two go off and have fun without me," Mikoto said promptly, then looked at the distant front doors. "So you're breaking into this place? Looks fairly straightforward."

Mai promptly grabbed ahold of Mikoto, wrapping her up in a tight embrace. "Oh no you don't!"

"Eh?" Mikoto asked, a bit startled. Pleased but startled. Mai wasn't usually this demonstrative.

"There's probably some sort of sensors up there, aren't there?" Mai asked Natsuki. "I just had a flash
of her wandering right into them."

"Uh, yes," Natsuki said, also startled by Mai's perspicacity. "A flash?"

"You know, like deja vu only in advance?"

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

"Natsuki is just jealous that Mai is hugging me and not her," Mikoto said smugly.

"What?" asked Mai.

"What?" asked Natsuki.

"What?" asked Mikoto, assuming that this was some sort of party game that they hadn't told her about yet. Which was annoying, but she'd gotten used to that sort of annoyance. Nobody ever told her anything.

"Okay," Natsuki said, after taking a rather long moment to collect her thoughts. "Secret entrance. This way." She pointed off to the side. "We're going to have to crawl part of the way. Some of us should have no problem with that."

"Is she talking about me?" Mikoto asked softly.

"I think so, yes."

A few moments later, they were inside one of the buildings, moving stealthily - well, as stealthily as Mai, the least stealthy member of the trio, could manage. She winced at every noise that she made; Mikoto and Natsuki were both affecting not to notice them.

"All right," Natsuki murmured. "This is where they were doing research on the weird mineral they dug up at the beach. We need to go -"

"Wait," Mai interjected. "How do you know that? Hey, you never did say how you knew anything about this place."

Natsuki drew in a long breath. It might have been Mai's imagination, but she thought she heard a bit of a shudder in that inhalation. "This is where I used to live," she said at last.

"You - what?"

"I used to live here. Up until nine years ago, this was my home."

"... why were you living in a research facility?"

"Because this was where my mother was working."

"That, no, that doesn't even come close to answering the question," Mai objected.

Now Natsuki turned to glare at her. "I don't have an answer to the question you're actually asking. I don't know why my mother had to live here. I don't know why she chose this for us, or even if she did. I was nine years old. I didn't ask questions like that."

Now Mai blinked as she did some spontaneous math. "Wait, you're eighteen years old? I thought you were only in second year."
"I was held back," Natsuki said tersely, looking away again.

"I guess all those absences add up," Mai said, just a bit smugly.

Natsuki's eyes went distant as she remembered waking up, hair cut down to nothing, and being told what day it was. What month. What year.

"Yes," she said at last. "They do."

She was silent for another long moment, and then focused again. "All right. You two cover this floor, I'm going to head upstairs. If you find any working computers, any documents or any data discs, grab them. I'll be back in about ten minutes."

Unfortunately, every computer that Mai found was totalled. Ditto for every filing cabinet, and most of the desks. Even those which hadn't been torched or smashed had been quite thoroughly emptied. If the First District had done this, then they were pretty thorough. Eventually, she headed back to the hallway where she'd split from the others, annoyed at her empty-handed status.

The annoyance eased a bit when she saw that Mikoto was there already with a moderately befuddled look on her face. "No luck, huh?"

"What does luck have to do with it?" Mikoto asked.

"... never mind. You didn't find anything?"

"No, I found things. I found lots of broken machines, and some things that someone set on fire, and lots of ashes. But I didn't find anything that one asked us to look for." She held up a small square. "I found this, though, behind one of the unburnt desk drawers. Is it one of those data disc things she was talking about?"

"Let me see," Mai said, taking it from her. "No, this is a photo-" She broke off as she stared at a photograph of Natsuki wearing glasses, standing beside a tiny girl with the same colored hair done up in pigtails and holding a stuffed dog.

"Wait, no," she said aloud. "If this was from nine years ago, then that would have to be - ohhhh. Well, if nothing else, we found a memento for her." She turned the photo over, hoping to find some more information, a date or something.

There was romanji on the back. Mai frowned and sounded the letters out. "Prototype," she said. Wait, prototype? Why would someone write that on the back of a photo of a woman and her kid?

Suddenly, this didn't seem like such a good memento after all.

"It's been about ten minutes, right?" she asked, mostly to cover her own confusion.

"Eight minutes, thirty nine seconds, mark," Mikoto answered promptly.

Mai stared. "How -"

"Timing is important."

"... of course it is," Mai muttered, feeling a headache coming on, as she looked around. "Okay, let's wait a little bit for her."

At the twelve minute mark, as reported by Mikoto, Mai decided to give into her concern, and led her
friend up the stairs which Natsuki had ascended earlier. The door with the brass name plate that read "S. Kuga" leapt out at them, and Mai opened it warily. But the room beyond had been every bit as ransacked as all of the others, and Natsuki was nowhere to be found within it.

They moved on to check the rest of the rooms on this floor, and five doors down from the office with Natsuki's family name on the door, they found her. The room was smaller than the office had been, without any windows. Practically a walk-in storage closet, though there weren't any shelves on the walls.

What there was, instead, was a futon on the floor, untouched by any of the fires or destruction that had swept through the complex. And Natsuki was there, lying on the futon, facing away from the door and towards the opposite wall.

Faintly unnerved by this - it reminded her a bit of the final moments of a rather frightening movie she'd seen once - Mai waited a bit before raising her voice. "Um, Natsuki-san?"

"Just Natsuki will do," the other girl said faintly, not getting up or moving in any way.

"We, um." Mai hesitated, looked down at the photo ... then tucked it into her jacket pocket. "We didn't find anything."

"Okay," Natsuki replied, still not moving from where she lay.

"Um." Now Mai had no idea what she was supposed to say. "Was this your bedroom, back then?" she finally asked, feeling that this had to be the stupidest thing she'd ever said.

"Yes, this was where we slept." Still no movement.

"Oh. Wait, we? Your, your mother slept here too? In the same bed as you? When you were nine?"

"So?" Natsuki asked, turning a bit.

"Yeah, so?" Mikoto asked, having watched this byplay silently. "Jii slept with aniue all the time. I wanted to be in the same bed as them, but it was too crowded."

"... didn't your brother run away from home?" Mai asked faintly.

"Yes. Why?" Mikoto asked.

Abruptly, Natsuki sat up, then stood, all without meeting Mai's eyes once. "There's nothing here that's going to help me. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Great idea," Mai agreed, doing her best to hide the sudden surge of guilt over hiding the photograph. Would it help, though? She didn't think so. But it was so strange, really.

It took them an hour or so to walk from the abandoned building to the gates of the mansion, and they made it most of the way in uncomfortable silence. Well, Mai was uncomfortable. Mikoto just seemed bored, and Natsuki was her usual sullen self.

"So what happened, anyway?" she finally asked when they were almost there.

"What do you mean, what happened?" Natsuki asked back.

"Well, you said that you lived there when you were nine, so that means you stopped living there. What happened? Where -"
"I don't know what happened."

"Oh, come on! You don't know why you were there and you don't know why you left? Do you know anything?" Mai yelled.

"That shouting in the streets in a residential neighborhood is a bit of a bad idea." Before Mai could adequately retort to that, Natsuki continued. "I meant, I don't know why we stopped living there.

"One day, everything was fine, the next ... I woke up from a nap in my mother's arms, being carried out of the building. I don't remember smelling any smoke, so it wasn't on fire, then. That must have happened later. She got me and Duran into a car - it was the first time I'd ever been in one, that I remember, and it was almost too exciting to be scary ..." She trailed off.

When she picked up again, her voice had gone from being vague and distant, to become more immediate. And angry. "She wouldn't tell me what was happening. She didn't say much of anything as she drove us out of there, probably breaking all kinds of speed limits as we headed down the coast. I really only remember one thing that she said. A word that I'd hear again much later." Her eyes met Mai's own. "HiME."

"She knew about -"

"I don't know what she knew. Just that right after she said something, there was this incredibly bright light shining in through the car's windshield. The car went out of control, and shot off the road and into the water. I heard her screaming. Or maybe it was me. It was probably me."

"Then what?" Mai asked, hanging on Natsuki's every word.

The faint lip twitch on Natsuki's face could charitably have been called a smile. "I died, of course."

"Oh very funny!"

"Heh. Well, very nearly, anyway. I was in a coma for almost a year. Mom and Duran drowned, I think."

Mai flinched. "Wow, that makes my comment about missing classes incredibly insensitive."

"No," Natsuki disagreed.

"Well, thank you -"

"Not incredibly. I find it quite credible that you'd be that insensitive."

It took a lot, but Mai eventually decided that she deserved that, and just nodded appreciation of the touch. "So, you think the First Division did it? Made you go off the road like that, I mean?"

"Who else?" Natsuki answered with a shrug. "That's why I do what I do. It's the only way I can make sense of it all."

"Good attitude," Mikoto said, surprising them both.

"Thanks," Natsuki said, feeling a little disturbed at the praise.

"Are we done, then? I'm kind of hungry."

"You're always kind of hungry."
"Mai cooks well."

"I'm not, okay, I'll see what I can do -" She broke off, shaking her head. "Almost forgot. What about your father, Natsuki? Where was he in all of this?"

Natsuki's face, more open than it had ever been before, closed off in seconds. "Not in the picture, now or then."

"Oh. I get how that can be. You're probably lucky," Mai mused.

Natsuki snorted.

"Yeah, I can see why you wouldn't believe it, but - anyway, do you want to come in? The Student Council President's here, and you could say hello to her and -"

"Okay," Natsuki interrupted. "This is getting annoying. How many times, how many ways do I have to say it? Shizuru has been very useful from time to time. She's gotten me information that I wouldn't otherwise be able to access. She helped me find out about you, for starters, and she's never asked questions about why I wanted that information. But that is it. That is as far as our relationship goes, and that is as far as it is ever going to go. We aren't friends, we aren't close, and we're never going to be." She breathed heavily for a moment, somewhat oblivious to the look of shock on Mai's face as she continued. "Do I make myself clear? Am I going to have to repeat this again? Fine. One more time. She's. Just. Useful."

"And I'm pleased to be able to be useful to Natsuki," said a deathly soft voice from behind her.

Slowly Natsuki turned. The mild incongruity of Shizuru in a kimono with a parasol in the evening air almost overwhelmed her even more than her sudden appearance would have. "Uh," she said elegantly.

"I'm sorry to hear, though, that you think that's all there is to our association. Because I truly believed that we were becoming closer, and I was enjoying that process quite a bit. I regret that it's one sided on my part. Ah well," she concluded. "It can't be helped. Now if you'll excuse me, I will resume my evening constitutional. Good night, all."

And then she turned and walked away, while Natsuki and Mai just stood there staring.

"Can we go in, now?" Mikoto asked after a few moments. "I'm really hungry."

That broke the spell. Mai turned to look at Natsuki. "I take it back," she said. "I take back what I said about you being lucky. Except you're not unlucky. You're an idiot."

And with that, she dashed after Shizuru before Natsuki could say anything in reply.

It took surprisingly long for her to catch up to the Student Council President, who seemed to be moving quite swifly for an evening constitutional in fancy dress. Still, once she realized that she was being pursued - or perhaps, who was doing the pursuing - Shizuru slowed down and spoke with Mai. "Is something the matter, Tokiha-san?" she asked, all sang-froid.

"Yes, something's the matter!" Mai almost gasped. "That, back there! She didn't mean it!"

"I don't think that my Natsuki is in the habit of telling lies."

"Are you kidding me? How many absences has she taken for no good reason and come up with
some lame excuse for? What are those if not lies! She's not an honest person! But that's good, in this case, because she was just trying to make other people think that she doesn't care about you!"

"Really?" Shizuru asked, smiling faintly.

"Yes! It's obvious to anyone who looks at her when she's looking at you that she cares about you a lot!"

"Not a very good plan, then."

"No, no, it isn't, and the way that it's backfiring like this is more proof! Please, just give her a chance to apologize, or something!"

Shizuru nodded once. "I will take the matter under advisement." And then she turned to leave.

"No!" Mai almost shrieked. "Don't, don't leave it like this. I have a really, really bad feeling that things are going to get worse if you do that! I'll do anything, anything, if you'll come back with me now and let her apologize right away!"

"You'll do anything," Shizuru repeated without looking back at her.

"Yes."

"I see. Well, now that I have given the matter some thought, there is something you can do, Tokiha Mai-san, something that I hope you will do now and in the future as well."

"What?" Mai asked desperately.

And now Shizuru turned her strange reddish eyes full on Mai's face, and there was a faintly hellish cast to her expression. "Butt the fuck out."

Before Mai could even dream of reacting to that, Shizuru turned and walked in the same direction she'd been walking when Mai caught up to her, humming an old movie melody as she did.

Later that night, the front office of a travel office in Sakaimachi's small downtown area was peacefully bathed in the moonlight that shone in through its large front window.

That peace was shattered, along with the window itself, by the impact of a sharp heel driven by inertia and magically amplified strength. Akashi Yuna flew in, landing perfectly and rolling up into a crouched shooter's stance, guns out and held steady as she turned a quick three-sixty to clear the area. "We're good," she announced a second later.

"Yuna, the door was open," Asakura observed as she peered in through the smashed glass.

"Now the window's open, too," Yuna observed right back without a glance in Asakura's direction.

Asakura sighed as she held her Pactio card up to her head. "Chisame -"

I heard, Chisame's thought voice snarled. Cleanup crew is already on its way.

"Actually," Asakura said aloud, as she stepped through the hole Yuna'd made, "I was about to say that I'm not seeing the target anywhere."

Well, look harder, then, because that's where her cell phone signal is coming from.
Looking around again, Asakura caught sight of a possible explanation. Pointing towards it, she asked Yuna, "Think she could be in the closet?"

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least," Yuna said, nodding agreement.

"Okay, I'll pull, you cover. On three?"

"Are you gonna pull on three or after three?"

Asakura rolled her eyes and took ahold of the handle. "One. Two. Three -" And on three, not after it, she jerked open one of the large cupboards behind the office's main desk.

It was almost empty, except for the cell phone lying open on the bottom, displaying a prominent photo of Nao's smirking face, holding up middle finger of her right hand in front of it.

"Shit!" Yuna dashed for the back of the office, finding that the back door was wide open. A quick glance told her that the quarry was nowhere in sight. Holstering her guns, she pounded a clenched fist on the doorjam as she cursed rhythmically. "Shit, shit, shit, shit."

We lost her, Asakura reported to Chisame. And this girl is a lot smarter than we thought she was.

She'd almost have to be, wouldn't she? Chisame retorted. Okay, unless you have some bright idea, I'd suggest regrouping at base.

"I'm fresh out of ideas," Asakura admitted. "We're on our way." "She wants us back at base," she said aloud, to Yuna's back.

"She doesn't want us anywhere near base," Yuna disagreed, then sighed. "Well, it's nice to be visiting with Hakase some more."

"And her kid's really cute, too," Asakura said, watching Yuna closely. "Kind of reminds me of little Nara, in a way."

"All kids look alike to me," Yuna said without looking at her evening's dance partner. "Let's go."

Next morning, Midori was awakened, as had been too often the case in the past, by a shriek in her ear of "Oh, God, not again!" Since it wasn't all that easy to get to sleep on top of a pool table, this was especially annoying.

She cracked an eye to see Yohko standing at the side of the table, picking up a heap of their clothes and holding it in front of her to preserve her non-existent modesty. "Good morning, my sweet," Midori said, deadpan.

"You, you, you! How could you do this to me again!"

"Do this to me," Midori said her line without expression.

"Didn't we say that we weren't ever going to this sort of thing, after the last time it happened?" Yohko was sorting through her clothes to find her underwear. This accomplished, she began to get dressed.

"After all the last five times, actually," Midori mused aloud, then resumed her role. "'You said that, not me.'"

"Well, it's definitely, definitely never going to happen again! I do not go for this sort of thing! I want
to get married and have dozens of children! So don't you ever go getting me drunk anymore!"

"And this is where I make a vain attempt to point out that it was your idea, not mine," Midori said, watching her friend as she got on her blouse and started to pull on her skirt.

"Don't be absurd!" Yohko snapped once the skirt was fixed. "I am a good girl who doesn't do things like that!"

"You're wearing my panties," Midori observed.

"What? Really?"

"No, I'm just messing with you."

"Dammit, Midori!" And with that, Yohko stormed out of the aptly named game room.

"I'd say that could have gone better, except that I knew perfectly well that it was going to go the same way as it does every time we have sex," Midori observed to the maid who'd opened the room's doors and wakened Yohko a few minutes earlier, who was still standing on the threshold with a shocked expression.

"Ah?"

"She's a sweet girl, really. Very kind, very smart. But boy, it's a good thing that she's not my true love, or I'd be really really hurt, right now. I'm in love with my archaeology teacher, you know," Midori continued to explain. "That's my true love, this is just -"

"Please put some clothes on," said the maid, almost tearfully.

"All right, all right, jeez ..."

"Out!" Haruka roared to her guests assembled in the main lobby of the house about thirty minutes later, their bags being brought in by a series of maids. "All of you, out of my house, this very minuet!"

"Minute," Yukino tearfully explained to the guests as she stood among them.

"Yukino, what in the whirl are you doing, standing among those people!" Haruka continued to shout. "Get over here!"

"... you mean you aren't throwing me out, too?" Yukino asked the purply faced girl.

"Why in the name of all that is hokey would I do something as innate as that?" Haruka asked. "I am going to need your help to fix all the mess these people have caused! Especially you!" she snapped in Shizuru's direction.

"I didn't do anything," Shizuru said calmly. Well, she seemed calm, but there was maybe just a hint of an edge in her tone.

"Oh, you'd love it if I thought that, wouldn't you! I know that you're responsible for all of this, somehow. This has all your finger-prince all over it!"

"She means fingerprints -" Yukino started to explain.

"I know what she means," Shizuru interrupted with a scorching glare in Yukino's direction.
"Oh, I bet you do! You did this, somehow! You're responsible for this!" And now Haruka grabbed the scruff of the neck of one of the maids, who was wearing sunglasses indoors and walking around with a half-burnt cigarette in her mouth.

"You're harshing my mellow, ojousama," she told Haruka.

"I have never seen that girl in my life," Shizuru denied.

"Isn't that the one who woke us up this morning?" Aoi asked Chie, sotto voce. "The one that we -?"

"Shh, this is getting good."

"Liar! You're trying to make me crazy, I know it! Well it won't work, hahaha!" Haruka laughed in a way that a captious critic might call "crazily". "I am on to your tricks, bubuzuke! I will have you bow down before me yet!"

"I was under the impression that that was Yukino-chan's appointed task," Shizuru said quietly. An ice cold wind blew through the foyer.

"Say that again. Insult my - insult her again. Please, please do that again," Haruka said, after a moment, without even the slightest trace of her earlier hysteria in her voice.

"I will forebear," Shizuru replied with a delicate shrug. "I have better things to do, and a better class of person with whom to associate. Please do not bother to give my farewells to your father, as I do not care whether any of your family fares well or not. Good day." And with that, she made her exit.

"Tough act to follow," Reito observed as he walked out with Mai and Takumi, Akira trailing a bit behind.

"Isn't it though," Mai said wearily. "Well, now what do I do? I've still got a week of my lifeguard job left, and nowhere to stay while I'm doing it."

"Ah, fret not, milady," he said, just a bit extravagantly. "The Kanzaki family is pleased to offer you its hospitality for the duration."

"You know this is going to keep happening, right?"

"Eh. My family's maids are made of sterner stuff that the Suzushiro maids."

"Of all the times to have engine trouble," Natsuki muttered, as she stood at the side of the road, staring at her broken-down motorcycle. "And to be without a good set of tools ..."

Ah well. Time to try hitchhiking. She pulled off her motorcycle suit, underneath which was a bikini, and assumed the position, playing up her looks.

One of the annoying parts about driving (technically, being driven) through the mountains of this part of Japan was that the radio reception was often limited to very eccentric stations. Right at the moment, the only thing playing was a station that played American rhythm and blues. Ah well, it couldn't be helped.

"Ojousama," said the driver. "There's a hitchhiker on the road ahead. Shall we stop?" She turned to look out the front windshield, just as a certain song began to play. She had the
strangest feeling that she'd heard it in a movie she'd seen once.

I can't stop loving you.
I've made up my mind,
To live in memories of the lonesome times.
I can't stop wanting you.
It's useless to say,
So I'll just live my life in dreams of yesterday.

A few minutes later, as she rolled down the window and saw her Natsuki's face (and much of the rest of her) turn bright red, she decided that there were a lot of things that just couldn't be helped.
July, 2004

It's strange, thought Akira Okuzaki. After all that I've been through, all my training, I should be able to sleep anywhere, anywhen. And yet all it takes is a simple change of venue, and after one night, here I am lying sleepless, staring up at the ceiling.

What a dull sight.

Nor was the curtain that separated the half of the room in which Akira slept - theoretically - from that in which Takumi slept - not at all theoretically, judging from the soft breathing that carried through the curtain's barrier - all that interesting a sight, either. Strange, then, that Akira's eyes were drawn to it, repeatedly, no matter how often they tried to turn away, or close from weariness.

Of course, it wasn't the curtain that kept drawing them, was it?

No, Akira thought sternly. I need to sleep. I cannot do this again. If I get up, and walk over to Takumi-kun's side of the room, and sit down and watch him sleep, I will not get any sleep myself, and this will not be good for my health or my mental balance. Further, there is the possibility that Takumi-kun will awaken and see me watching over him, and take it amiss. So I will not do so.

Shit. I have already done so.

Sure enough, Akira had gotten up and brushed past the curtain, moving more silently than a well-trained mouse, to come over and kneel down beside Takumi's futon and watch him sleep. It was so embarrassing. Why do all of my good intentions come to naught? Akira wondered, gazing down while doing so. So, so embarrassing.

So, so cute.

Agh.

It had been building for a while, but Akira had been able to keep the mild attraction under control. But then, yesterday, on the beach ...

"So where were you?" Akira asks as Takumi wanders up to their towel and umbrella, with an even more melancholy expression than usual.

Takumi casts a glance towards the large pile of rubble at the south end of the beach, as he answers, "Nowhere in particular," while sitting down beside Akira.

More odd behavior from Takumi. Strange thing is, Akira is getting used to it.

Before a subtly phrased request for more details can be made, though, the ill boy speaks up. "Aren't you going to go swimming, Akira-kun?"

"I don't swim," Akira answers after a brief moment of well-hidden panic.

Takumi chuckles. "Yeah, I can't swim, either."
Before Akira can correct this utterly erroneous misapprehension - the fact that someone chooses not to engage in an activity should not be taken as meaning that person cannot do so - Takumi has continued to speak, eyes distant even as they are fixed on the water. "What with my condition, it's not really safe for me. It's funny, in a way. They tell me that my problems really started when I almost drowned, when I was younger. I don't remember that. But it's sort of funny that the thing that wrecked my life also made sure that I'll never be in a position where it could do so again ...

"Except that sometimes I wonder what it would be like," he adds, after a brief moment.

"To swim?" Akira asks, hesitantly.

"To drown, for real," Takumi answers, without turning his gaze from the water's edge.

And Akira feels cold in the warmth of the sun. "Don't -" says someone, in a strangely high-pitched voice that Akira doesn't recognize.

"Eh?" Takumi says, blinking as he turns to look at Akira. "Did you say something, Akira-kun?"

Akira coughs, then produces a sketchbook from behind him and taps Takumi's head rather gently. "Yes. Don't waste time engaged in such stupidity - if you have spare time, use it to draw!"

Takumi laughs, and the cold goes away.

For now.

Why does your soul fly on such dark wings? Akira silently asked Takumi, even though it was obvious no answer would come from the sleeping boy. Even if he hadn't been asleep, that would like as not still have been the case. And why does that not make me fly from you, but rather draw me closer, closer? Closer than I dare come.

Why is this happening to me?

Once again, Akira was in motion without even realizing it, out the window, up the side of the wall to the roof, then to the center of the roof, where one could whisper, not shout, "Why do I love him? I'm not supposed to love him or anyone!"

"Indeed," agreed a soft voice from behind Akira. "For the path of the shinobi is a path of death."

"Exactly," agreed Akira. Then, "Oh, shit."

Despite the flash of terror, what Akira felt most at the moment was a sense of humiliation. Basic rule of the shinobi - "nowhere is safe". Akira had ignored that rule, failed to determine whether the roof was safe for someone to come up and have an existential crisis. It was the sort of failure that deserved death.

Of course, Akira decided, as death failed to descend on swift wings, there are worse things. A simple spiral allowed the genin to see who had spoken, and confirmed that suspicion.

"Koga Chunin, Nagase Kaede," said the tall woman perched on the corner of the rooftop, not nearly far enough from where Akira stood. Her eyes were almost closed, hands open and relaxed at her sides, her face an amused smile that held not even a scintilla of warmth. "And well met."

"I know who you are," Akira said, fighting the terror and (without realizing it) taking a step backwards. "If you were going to kill me, you'd have done so already."
"Perhaps," Kaede allowed. "Or perhaps this one has grown mirthful in her old age, and takes some
sick amusement in seeing the eyes of those whom one chooses to annihilate. Considering the
company one has kept, of late, it would not be so far fetched were this so."

"Is that so?" Akira asked. Another step back. Still far too close.

"In fact, it is not so. But one will admit to finding the subtle terror on your face, as the idea was
presented, to be not without its amusing qualities." And then, quite suddenly, any trace of laziness or
ease vanished from the woman’s stance, though her eyes remained lidded. "Such amusing qualities
were not present at all some time ago, when the elder of your clan informed this one that a genin - to
wit, yourself - would be operating within my guarded territories. One found that being informed,
rather than having one's permission asked, was not amusing at all."

"You are a chunin, not a jonin or one of the elders of your own clan," Akira started to point out. "No
permission -"

"However," Kaede continued, raising her voice a bit. "One was persuaded to grant that permission,
nonetheless. And so this one, with the assistance of my students and comrades, has been watching
your activities for quite some time, and found little objectionable about your conduct. You are a
credit to your family, Akira-kun, and though inexperienced and prone to occasional error, may well
become a worthy operative."

Akira blinked, then swallowed. "You did not come here to compliment me."

"No," Kaede agreed. "You were permitted to operate within my territory. However, you have left
that territory, and come here." Now her eyes opened part way. "And I see no reason to permit you to
return."

"My orders are to observe the activities of certain individuals," Akira protested. "They all came here.
What was I supposed to do? This is unfair."

"So it is. What of it? Further, there is another matter that you have failed to consider."

"What might that be?"

"Your shoes are untied."

Despite everything, Akira almost looked down. "That chestnut? Have I offended you that much that
you would insult me in that manner! I just rose from bed, and am not wearing shoes!"

"True," agreed Kaede, smiling once more.

Why is she smiling?

And then Akira's feet jerked together, and the genin fell forward, slapping face-first into the roof.

In the room below, Mikoto roused briefly, glared at the roof, and muttered imprecations about ninjas
before returning to sleep, curled up beside Mai.

"We report complete success in Operation Shoes Untied, Kaede-nee-chan!" reported Narutaki Fuuka
as she completed the hogtying of Akira's hands.

Akira said nothing. Fury and embarrassment at being tricked, and then captured, by pink-garbed
"Pink? Orange would have been bad enough, but pink? - made it difficult to think, let alone speak.

"No extraneous injuries to the target, Kaede-nee-chan," added Narutaki Fumika as she prodded at Akira's prone form. As she was doing so, she frowned momentarily, and prodded in a location already prodded once before. "Wait a minute."

"Is aught the matter?" Kaede asked, having not moved even slightly from where she had been standing earlier.

Fumika looked up at her teacher in the deadly arts of the ninja. "You told us that he was a boy, not a girl. But he's got -"

"Was it important for you to know the sex of the target?" Kaede asked sharply. "Was this a mission of seduction?"

"Well, no, but -"

"What is the first rule of the shinobi?"

This was a trick question. There were lots of 'first rules of the shinobi', but everyone present knew what rule was being referenced. "A shinobi knows only what the shinobi is told by the master. Everything else is as mist," the twins chorused.

"Very well. Unfortunately, one must disagree with Fuuka-chan's assessment that this operation is a complete success. A complete success would not result in the hog-tying of a disguised log."

"Ehyyyyy?" Fuuka cried, looking at her handiwork once more. "But, but - he, I mean, she hasn't turned into a log surrounded by clothes yet!"

"Clearly, your target is far more accomplished in this particular jutsu than you knew. One hates to be so disappointed in one's students, but -"

"We won't disappoint you, neechan!" swore Fuuka, rising up and shaking a fist. "We will find this rogue shinobi before the sun rises!"

"... we will?" Fumika asked.

"Yes, we will!"

"Oookay," Fumika said, mentally bidding sleep farewell.

"Let us be off!" Fuuka cried, darting away, with Fumika following just a touch more sedately.

"That was humiliating," said Akira, a moment after they were gone.

"A shinobi knows no humiliation," Kaede reminded.

"And yet here I am. So was this whole thing an exercise for your students?"

"Something like that. One does wish to talk to you."

"Well. Thank you for not telling them that I was a girl. I hate it when people make that mistake," he added.

"It's understandable," Kaede replied, without specifying whether she spoke of the mistake, or of
Akira's anger concerning it.

"Are you going to untie me now?" Akira asked, politely.

"That would not seem advisable, frankly," Kaede said as she settled down into the lotus with a sigh, regarding Akira with clear interest. He was somewhat startled to realize that her eyes were now fully open.

"I promise not to hurt you if -" Akira started to say, to be interrupted by Kaede's amused laughter.

"One is almost tempted to release you, now, just for that remark. Promise not to hurt me. Ah-heh." Kaede shook her head. "On the whole, it is better for all concerned, especially yourself, if the freedom to do so is unavailable to you. Besides, we are shinobi. No promises given to an enemy are binding, and it cannot be denied that we find ourselves in a somewhat antagonistic relationship, Akira-kun."

"That is your doing, not mine."

"Perhaps. In any event, let us move on to other matters. You spoke of love earlier, and the topic interests me strangely. Who do you love, Akira-kun?"

Akira turned from regarding Kaede to gaze at the surface of the roof. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Very well. One shall speak on the subject regardless. You know very well that your supervisors would not approve of you falling in love with one of the targets of your observation. Such relationships have brought much woe in the past."

"I am well aware of the matters on which you now speak," Akira said, trying and failing to conceal anger. "My own mother was born from such a liaison."

"So," Kaede said, after a long interval. "At least there is no chance of that, in your case. Is there." It wasn't a question.

"No. There is not."

Another long silence. "One would imagine that even your own family was inclined towards the belief that you were what you appeared to be, rather than what you know yourself to be. It cannot have been easy for you."

"I endured it," Akira said shortly.

_Girl, girl, thinks she's a boy, girl, girl, ain't got a toy ..._

It had been one of the less offending of the chants thrown at him in his youth. Much later, there had been the attempt to put him in “her” place by his eldest brother. Though terrifying and painful, it had been a mixed blessing. While his father had turned a blind eye to much that went on, he had not stood for such things. "Boy or girl, you are my child," father had said, handing him eldest brother's head. "Do not embarass me as this one did."

He had sworn that he would not. This mission, requiring him to adopt what they viewed as a male guise, and what he viewed as his true self, was a godsend to him. He could not allow himself to fail.

"You have endured much," Kaede interrupted those thoughts. "Is it truly necessary to endure more?"

"I am shinobi. I have nothing other than my mission," Akira answered.
"One is so glad that one was not raised as you were," Kaede mused. "Your powers ill-match your training, Akira-kun. One suspect that you could have easily overcome one's students if you called up your ally ... but that would be most noisy, would it not."

The truth was, he simply hadn't thought of it, and was probably guilty of underestimating the Nagase as well as being careless. But the difficulty of summoning a large, loud creature to a battlefield in the middle of a night on top of a building where people were sleeping were not to be understated, either. "I did not choose to be a HiME," he said simply. "That which I am, I am."

"Indeed. You are well and truly boxed into a corner, aren't you, Akira-kun?"

"Perhaps that is so."

Kaede seemed to be about to say something else, when there was the sound of almost maniacal laughter from the side of the building. The pink-garbed ninja students reappeared, carrying a struggling bundle between them. "Kaede-neechan! We found the enemy!" Fuuka declaimed.

"Ah?" said Kaede, clearly a bit startled by this development.

"She was hiding in the last place that we'd look!" Fumika agreed. "The last place we'd ever expect her to hide!"

"Behold her cunning disguise!" Fuuka declared, and pulled open the bundle to reveal a tall girl in a swimsuit with her hair tied back in a pony tail, hands and feet firmly bound and a sock stuffed in her mouth. She looked mostly confused as she gazed at Kaede.

Kaede gazed back for a long moment, before covering her eyes with her hand. "My humble apologies, Akira-dono."

"Don't apologize, just untie me," said Akira from the center of the roof.

"No, not -" Kaede started to say, then shook her head. "Oh, I give up. Very well, students, your next task is to untie the log while this humble one takes the enemy elsewhere for interrogation." And with that, she picked up the bound girl and began whispering what sounded to Akira like frantic apologies before she bounded away into the night.

"Untie the log?" Fumika asked, glancing at Akira.

"Well, orders are orders, right?" Fuuka said, and headed over to do just that.

Once again, Mikoto was roused from sleep by the sound of thumping from the roof, this time interspersed with faint cries of pain from two similar sounding voices. Once again, all she did was glare at the ceiling and try to get back to sleep.

What with one thing and another, two weeks passed.

Mai found herself enjoying the second part of her summer vacation a lot more than the first. The assaults that she'd read about in the newspaper stopped that first night, as though whoever had been committing them had gotten tired of whatever sport he or (Okay, who was she trying to kid?) she was finding in them. Or was chased away by someone else. Mai told herself that she didn't really care which it was, or if she never saw Nao again.

While telling herself such appealing lies, Mai found herself spending a lot of time taking long walks
on the beach with Reito. Despite what Chie and Aoi thought, and said outright, 'long walks on the beach' was not a code for frantic sex. They walked, they talked, they laughed a bit.

It was one of the longest relationships Mai had ever had that didn't involve sex.

Which was nice, sort of, but she did find herself wondering whether or not Reito had more in common with the Student Council President than he let on. She'd put out signals that she was interested in a more intimate relationship, to put it mildly, but he either missed them or just wasn't into her that way. And she didn't pick up that particular vibe from him at all. She was wary of coming on too strong, the way that she had with Takumi, so she didn't press the issue. After all, things were good.

But the truth was, she really wanted to have sex, and it was getting to the point where even letting Mikoto use her as a masturbation tool was looking good.

What with one thing and another, two weeks passed.

And then they went back to school.

"A baking contest?" Mai asked, tone flatter than anything heretofore associated with her.

"Yes, and I could really use your help -" Natsuki started to explain.

"For a baking contest?"

"Yes, and -"

"How in the hell did the school's biggest delinquent get caught up in a baking contest?"

Natsuki was blushing. Mai honestly thought it looked good on her. "Well, Shizuru was challenged by Suzushiro, and -"

"To a baking contest?"

"... I'm begging you, here. Stop saying the words 'baking contest' in that tone. This is hard enough as it is."

Mai shook her head, then asked. "Okay, so let me see if I can guess where all this is going. Suzushiro challenged the Student Council President to this ... thing ... and since Suzushiro will be getting help from Yukino-san, the President gets help from you. It's good to see that you're getting along again, by the way."

"She's just -" Natsuki started to shout, then broke off, swallowing, and speaking in a quieter tone. "She's been helpful to me in the past, and, yes, I'm helping her, now. One hand washes the other. That's fair."

"Right. But you can't cook."

"Yes, I can."

"Boil in a bag doesn't count."

"Shut up."

"And so you turn to me, who can," Mai said, leaning back, and resting a hand against her chest as
she looked heavenward. It was extravagant, but she was feeling silly. "Who am a veritable goddess of the dinner table, or so Mikoto tells me."

"The little barbarian is easily satisfied, I'm sure."

Eyes back down again, and narrowed. "Hey!" Fortunately, Mikoto was in class as this conversation took place, in front of the big fountain.

"Look, are you going to help me or not?"

"No!" Mai said. "Are you kidding me? No. If it was something important, then it'd be a different story, but this is just a silly duel between those two, and I'm staying out of it. Hell, your girl even told me to do that." Butt the fuck out? Fine. I'll butt the fuck out.

"She's not my - okay, fine. Just don't help the other side of this."

"Are you kidding me?"

"You ask that too much."

"Suzushiro thinks I'm as bad as the two of you!"

"Yeah, there's a stretch."

"Shut up! Anyway, okay, I guess it's possible, just possible, that Yukino-san might ask Mikoto and I to help. But if she does, I'll tell her, sorry, not happening."

"That's all that I ask."

"Ah, you should try harder," suggested Midori with a grin. "Aim higher! You might be able to talk her into it! It sounds like a blast, Mai-chan!"

"Gah!" Mai and Natsuki chorused as they jumped back from the teacher sitting beside them.

"When did you get here?" Natsuki asked after a moment of panic.

"Sometime around 'boil in a bag doesn't count.' I'm totally in your corner on this one, by the way," she confided to Natsuki.

"Thrillsville," Natsuki muttered as she settled down again.

"Oh, don't be so tsuntsun," Midori said, holding up a folder as she did so. "You want the information I promised, riiiight! Say, thank you Midori-sama, world's greatest teacher."

"... thanks."

"Eh, close enough."

"What's this about information?" Mai asked, still a little spooked with how easily Midori had sneaked up to the pair of them. Had they really been that absorbed in their conversation? Or was Midori a lot more stealthy than you'd expect?

"I asked Midori if she could find out anything about my mother's early life," Natsuki explained as she took the folder, glancing down at it but not opening it. "I've learned everything I can learn about the way it ended. Maybe something in her past will help me understand things ..."
"And you relied on Midori for that?"

"Why do you say that in such a surprised tone?" Midori asked.

"It's a quid pro quo arrangement. She got a look at the information before I did, after all," Natsuki explained.

"Okay, I'm just saying, for someone who doesn't trust anyone, you sure do trust a lot of people, including some that I'd personally never -"

"Hey! Hey, sitting right here!"

"I wasn't really expecting much," Natsuki said with a shrug.

"Well, thank you very much! And the joke's on you, since I got some really juicy stuff, here." Midori grabbed the file out of Natsuki's hands and opened it so that all three of them could see it. At the top of the small pile of paper was a photograph of a young girl who closely resembled Natsuki, if a bit younger, in an older style seifuku, standing beside a reddish haired boy in a boy's uniform. Both looked surprisingly solemn.

"Meet Kuga Saeko, age 13, and Kuga Soujiro, age 11," Midori said. "This picture of them off to school got published in a local newspaper for some reason. I think their family might have had ties to the bunch who ran it, back in the eighties when this ran."

"You've got an uncle," Mai said into the silence that followed this pronouncement.

"Had," Natsuki corrected quietly as she stared at the photo. "I had an uncle. I had a mother, too. And then I didn't."

Mai flinched.

"She didn't wear glasses, then," Natsuki continued in that same low level tone, not noticing Mai's discomfort. "She always wore them when I was a child. I wonder if I should see an optometrist ... my father wears glasses, too."

"Wait," said Mai, "I thought you said your dad wasn't in the picture."

"He's not. That doesn't mean that I don't know who he is," Natsuki "explained", regaining a bit of her usual chilly tone.

"I don't," observed Midori, regarding her with interest.

"Nor will you, if I've anything to say about it. He doesn't have anything to do with this," Natsuki added in response to Midori's groan of annoyance.

"You don't know that!" Midori snapped. "Considering my theory, and the fact that all of this supports my theory, he could have a lot to do with this!"

"What theory?" Mai asked.

"The theory that we're all related. This thing, whatever it is, has got to be genetic, which means that we're related somehow. And this evidence gives me cause to think that I'm right!"

"Huh? How?"

"Like I said, the Kuga family was a big deal back in the day in - you're gonna find this really funny -
Sakaimachi! The oldest record I've been able to find tell me that Kuga Saeko's paternal grandfather was the priest of some shrine there. He had four kids, one of whom was Kuga Saeko's father, and another of whom was a girl ... who married into another shrine-keeping family. The Higurashi family."

"Akane?" Mai gasped.

"Maybe! Don't know for sure yet! Gonna find out though. But that's not the biggy, Mai-chan! Take a good long look at Kuga Soujiro's picture. Doesn't he remind you of someone?"

Mai obediently looked down, but promptly shook her head. "Boys that age all tend to blur together, to me, and -"

"Someone you used to live with?" Midori pressed, leaning closer, in the process leaning right in front of Natsuki's face.

"You make a better door than a window," Natsuki observed.

"Okay, if you want me to say that he looks like Takumi, then, yes, I guess a little -" Mai said, genuinely bewildered.

"Not Takumi-kun, although the connection doesn't surprise me. Someone else. Someone who tends to use other names from time to time."

Mai blinked ... and then went very pale. "You, you know about -"

"Uh-huh. I was watching."

"Watching what?" Natsuki asked.

"Congratulations, Natsuki-chan! Your uncle is alive, and you've got cousins, too! Quite a few, possibly!" Midori said, grinning widely.

Natsuki slowly turned to look at Mai, who hadn't moved a muscle in the last few moments. "What the hell is she on about?"

Mai swallowed. "Midori is saying that she thinks that your mother's brother ... is my father. Who is also Nao's father. So we're cousins, you and I. And also Takumi," she added, not really sure why she'd just brought him up.

Natsuki looked at Mai for a long moment. Her expression could best be described as skeptical. Eventually, she swivelled around to look at Midori with the same searching expression. Midori met it with an easy smile and a short, vigorous nod.

And Natsuki began to laugh. It didn't sound like laughter, to Mai, but that's clearly what the hollow, unpleasant sound was supposed to be.

"I don't think she believes you," Mai said to Midori.

"I don't think she believes you," Midori said back. "This is what happens when you get a reputation for being as sarcastic as you are, Mai-chan."

"As opposed to getting a reputation for being a complete nutbar?"

"I'll have you know that my reputation is somewhat better than you'd -"
"What the hell are you two idiots trying to pull?" Natsuki finally shouted as she stood up from her seat on the side of the fountain, the bitter amusement of this situation having finally palled. "This is obviously some sort of elaborate hoax!"

"So much for trust," Mai muttered, looking off to one side.

"C'mon, Natsuki-chan -"

"Don't call me that!"

"- why would I try and trick you into thinking that you're related to Mai and Nao? How does that benefit me?" Midori asked.

"You want us all to join up as some sort of magical ranger force, and if I feel a familial connection to the other two, I'll be more likely to go along with that ridiculous idea," Natsuki sneered.

Midori glared at Natsuki for a long moment, before half-turning to look at Mai. "She's kinda got a point there, Mai-chan."

"Please, please, leave me out of this," Mai said, hand over her eyes.

Natsuki seemed a little calmer as she too turned to look down at Mai. "You really didn't have anything to do with this?" she asked, just a bit sharply.

"No. I did not," Mai bit out. "This is incredibly embarrassing for me." She paused, took a deep breath. "But ... it's not crazy," she admitted. "I've come to realize that my father is basically a con artist, so it's at least possible that all this is, well, as legitimate as anything else about our situation. I don't know how we'd go about proving any of it, though. If we asked him, he'd just stammer out excuses, so -"

"I know how we can prove it," Midori said in a sing-song tone as she held up a pair of bucal swabs. "Met a girl over the summer who's just crazy about this sort of thing."

Exchanging one more glance, Mai and Natsuki each took one of the swabs and rubbed the inside of their respective cheeks with the tip, before sliding the tip into the protective seal and handing the brush back to Midori.

"Great," the teacher enthused. "I'll get these over to Satomi-chan and we'll have an answer in about a week or so."

"What about you?" Natsuki asked abruptly.

"What about me?" Midori replied, blinking.

"Aren't you going to -" Natsuki mimed the brushing procedure.

"Already done," Midori claimed. "I asked her to do mine last, though. I want to save it for later. I'm really looking forward to finding my family, though."

Mai frowned. "What do you mean, finding your family?"

Midori shrugged, but a little bit of sobriety crept in to her usual jaunty tone. "I was adopted," she said. "They found me on the steps of the temple in Nagoya when I was only a few days old. No idea who my parents were." Her usual sunny manner came back abruptly. "That's why I never have sex with any guys more than fourteen years older than me. I'd hate to find out that I just doinked daddy,
wouldn't you?"

"What if your father was -"

"Don't be gross, Mai!" Now Midori was actually frowning. "Like I said, fourteen years older than me. I don't know what my mother was like, but I'd like to think she wasn't sick enough to screw around with junior high school boys."

"... right," said Mai, looking away again.

"Then you're sure about this," Akira asked, leaning close to Takumi, so close that only a finger's breadth separated their lips. "Absolutely sure that this is what you want to do?"

Takumi blinked. "Uh, yes," he said.

"Very well," said Akira, as he retreated to his own chair on the other side of the table where they were eating. "I will give you all possible assistance while you prepare this surprise party for your sister."

"... Akira-kun, please don't take this the wrong way, but you can be really weird sometimes," Takumi said after a moment of consideration.

"Can you really sit there and say that?" Akira asked, his annoyance only partially feigned. "I find your relationship with your sister far, far stranger than anything I do or could even imagine doing."

"It's not that strange," Takumi lied. It was strange, but Akira didn't know just how strange it was. Since he wasn't about to enlighten his roommate, being told that it was strange even to someone who wasn't enlightened really sort of hurt.

"Yes, yes, it is. When she's around, you act embarrassed, like you're ashamed of her. Or embarrassed. I find that completely understandable, because she's a woman and thus inherently corrupt. I'm so glad that I don't have any sisters myself, and that the corruption of femininity was entirely absent from our family home."

"Wait, what about your mother?"

"Let's not talk about that. In any event, that's how you are when she's around. But when she's not around, sometimes, it's like you're pining for her. It's like you're never satisfied, like some sort of -"

"Tsundere?"

"... cold-soft?" echoed Akira. "What a bizarre term."

"It's becoming increasingly more apparent that you had a weird childhood, Akira-kun."

"I reluctantly concede the possibility," Akira bit out. "But hearing it from you really hurts."

"Sorry."

"Nonetheless, I will still assist you in these preparations. Because that is what roommates do for one another."

"... it is?"

"Yes, it is."
Takumi shrugged. "Well, I wouldn't know, since I've never had one before we started living together. But thank you, Akira-kun." And he smiled warmly.

"Akira leapt across the table and threw Takumi to the floor to begin violating his every orifice. The sweet sound of his screams thrilled Akira's ears ..."

"Um, Akira-kun?" Takumi asked, waving a hand in front of his dazed-looking room-mate's face.

"Right!" Akira said, snapping back to reality. "Who else is invited?"

"Well, some of her classmates said they'd come, and Mikoto-san will certainly be there, and - oh." Takumi's face fell a bit. "I guess we ought to invite Reito-san, shouldn't we?"

"Yes, inviting the poor fool who has fallen for your sister's wiles would seem advisable," Akira agreed. "But try to sound a bit less jealous of the lost soul in question."

"I'm not jealous," Akira lied. "And, you know, they're not really dating, they're just ... very good friends."

"Uh-huh."

"Look, you go do that, I'll do the shopping and the baking," Takumi said. "It's a fair division of labor, I think."

"A party for Mai-san," Reito mused as he walked down Sakura Lane. "That sounds much better than what I've already agreed to do, unfortunately."

"Might I ask what that might be?" Akira asked the vice president, doing his best to be polite.

"You may indeed. In fact, one might say that you've already done so."

"One might," he agreed.

Chuckling a bit, Reito explained. "I've been tapped to judge the cake baking contest between the Student Council President and the Executive Director."

"You poor benighted soul," Akira said, then blushed as he realized what had just slipped out.

"Oh, I'm sure that it won't be that bad."

"Really?"

"No, but that's the sort of thing you're supposed to say at times like these." Reito paused, and sighed. "I wish that there was some way that I could get out of it, but -"

"Hey, Reito-san. Anything you're going to need me to do while you're judging the cake baking contest?" Yuuichi asked as he strolled up, accompanied, of course, by Shiho.

"... you know, a thought has just occurred to me," Reito said, eyeing Yuuichi.

"Um, you know, Shizuru," Natsuki said as she cracked the eggs into the bowl. It was only supposed to be three, right? That didn't really seem like it would be enough, though. Better double it up.

"Yes, Natsuki?" Shizuru asked as she sat back and read her magazine.
"I know that I said that I'd help you do this, but, well, I don't know quite how to put this, but ... shouldn't you be doing something, too?"

"I am doing something," Shizuru answered calmly as she endured the horrible difficulty of turning a page.

"Well, yes, but, I mean, shouldn't you do something that involves baking?"

"I am doing something that involves baking." When you baked, you were in a kitchen. Thus, being in a kitchen was doing something that involved baking. She was in a kitchen. Logic as exacting as Euclid's. "And I fully intend to further contribute to this project. After all, this is a challenge between me and that person. It wouldn't be right for me to do nothing that concerned my own challenge."

She was planning to set the timer. And she'd forbidden Natsuki from adding any mayonnaise to the cake's batter. So, really, she was going to do far more than her fair share of all this.

Natsuki sighed with relief. "I was just worried that you might be planning to saddle me with all the work as some sort of revenge for -"

"I don't believe in revenge," Shizuru outright lied. Well, it wasn't really a lie. Since the existence of revenge was an objective fact, it didn't matter whether she believed in it or not.

"Good, good," Natsuki said, conscious of the fact that she still felt nervous for no adequately understood reason. This cake needed more vanilla. The recipe was clearly understating its importance. Wait, this was vanilla, right?

No, it was soy sauce. Eh, close enough.

"Anyway, this is actually relaxing after all that stuff from before," Natsuki muttered aloud, without realizing it.

"What stuff?" Shizuru asked, looking up with a curious expression.

"Oh, just some stuff," Natsuki attempted to be vague, but a glance at Shizuru's interested eyes told her that wasn't going to suffice. "Some stuff about my family. It's a little disturbing."

"Ah," said Shizuru, nodding clear understanding. "Well, you can't pick your family, Natsuki. Although my case does show that they can pick you, I suppose." She returned to her magazine.

"Yes, that's wait, what?" Natsuki asked as the President's word sank in.

Shizuru blinked. "Goodness. I thought you knew. I figured someone as untrusting as you would have done more research on me before you started associating with me."

"No, I just -" Natsuki flushed. "What, what are you talking about? Are you adopted?" Oh no. Don't tell me that you're somehow Midori's lost fraternal twin or something. No, impossible.

"Sort of," Shizuru answered, setting her magazine down with one last regretful look. "The man I call father is my father, but his wife is not my mother. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She did. "But he adopted you?"

"My mother died, and he and his wife weren't having any luck having children of their own. The family needed an heir, and I was convenient. My stepmother, as I suppose that I must call her, wasn't terribly happy, but she settled for packing me off to a boarding school as soon as possible. And here I
"That's -" Practically the opposite of what happened to me, Natsuki wanted to say. Her father hadn't wanted her, had had a whole other family of his own that she would have messed up. But learning that Shizuru had lost her mother, too, something she'd never suspected - "That's so sad. How old were you when you lost your mother?"

"Four or so," Shizuru answered carelessly. "I don't really remember her very well. It was probably for the best, anyway. If she'd lived, I'd have had to go through life with her family name, and I really can't see myself going around introducing myself as Higurashi Shizuru. It'd sound like I had a stammer or something. What was mother thinking, re- excuse me, Natsuki, but I hope that you're going to clean that up before continuing."

Silently, Natsuki bent to clean up what she'd spilled. It had to be a coincidence. It didn't have to mean anything. This hypothetical great-aunt of hers that Midori had probably made up out of whole cloth had married into the Higurashi family, after all, and so there was no reason to think that there was any connection between whichever probably imaginary branch it was and whichever one had produced Shizuru's mother. It was all nonsense, anyway.

All of it just nonsense.

Shizuru watched Natsuki cleaning up while muttering to herself, and shook her head. It was a good thing that Natsuki was so cute; her neuroses would be very hard to take otherwise.

Takumi strolled back to the dorms with the bag holding his newly purchased ingredients clutched firmly in his hands, a smile on his face and a song in his heart. He'd gotten a good deal on these eggs! Admittedly, that meant there were going to be a lot left over, but that wasn't a problem. After all, he knew lots of recipes for eggs. Breakfast stuff, like a nice omelet that he was sure Akira-kun would enjoy. Or waffles! Yeah, he'd make some waffles!

Wow, I am such a girl.

Ah well. It can't be helped.

And it was such a nice day, too. The only thing that faintly scarred it was the odd pillar of smoke that was rising from one of the girls' dormitories - thankfully, not the one where Mai lived. He hoped everyone was okay, but he wasn't about to go gawk at it.

"All right," Haruka said, with admirable equanimity, once the fire had been extinguished. "Third time has to be the harm, right?"

"Charm," Yukino said faintly, as she whiped the smoke residue off of her glasses.

"That's another way of saying it, yes."

Takumi couldn't allow himself to be distracted, by that or anything! If he met the Buddha in the road, he would - well, okay, he wouldn't be so crazy as to try and kill the Buddha. He'd say, "Good day", and go around the Enlightened One.

No distractions! None! He had a miss-

Wait, what was that? Takumi paused, and looked into the thick woods that lined the path he was
taking. He'd heard a faint whining sound. And he could just about hear something breathing in those bushes, rather quickly. It sounded like what he imagined a dog would sound like, if it was injured.

Takumi had always wanted a dog. Of course, it had been impossible, what with his condition, and the way that they moved around so much, usually between apartment complexes with regulations against pets. And the dorms also had such regulations, so even if he did find a dog, and it didn't have an owner, he wouldn't be able to bring it home with him. But you couldn't just leave an injured animal to its own devices, could you? That simply wasn't right.

So he headed off into the woods, calling out, "Hello?" as he did. He wasn't sure why he did that. It wasn't as if the dog would be able to answer him, or even understand that he was coming to help, right? But it was the sort of thing that you were supposed to do, and so he did it.

And then he found it.

It was the right pronoun, he decided in the first dazed moments of recognition. Not he, not she. More than anything else, it resembled a one-eyed snake, though the limbs which protruded from just below the head detracted from the idea of it as just a snake. A dragon, then? It was kind of like the image he had in his head of a dragon.

But Takumi was fairly certain that dragons didn't wear dog collars around a horn on their snouts. It just didn't seem like the sort of thing that they'd -

*Oh*, he realized. *It's looking at me.*

He decided to calmly turn and walk away as quickly as he possibly could, and certainly not run while screaming like a girl.

"Kyaaa!" someone shouted. "Someone, anyone, please, help me!"

Why couldn't someone help whoever it was that was screaming?

*Oh*, realized Takumi. *That's me doing that. Rats.*

"Now where on Earth," said Nagi as he cleverly hung from a tree branch, overseeing all this, "did that come from? That's not one of mine."

Of course, the remarkably cute fellow felt no particular urge to actually investigate the question he'd just asked. Doubtless his piercing intellect would reveal the truth in the fullness of time, of which he had all there was in the world.

Perhaps Nagi would have been a bit less sanguine about his situation had he known that, as he watched over Takumi being chased by the Orphan, he too was being watched. Or perhaps he was well aware of that fact, being insanely smart, and completely confident in his ability to deal with anyone observing him. Perhaps.

Nagase Kaede was conflicted. It went against her nature to allow people to come to harm if she could help them, and if she abandoned her post, she would surely at least be able to buy the young boy some time to make good his escape. (She held no delusions about defeating one of the Orphans; not alone, at least. But she took cold comfort in the fact that Mana had not been able to defeat one of them either.)

But on the other hand ...
Much of what she taught the twins was arrant nonsense, designed to keep them from stumbling onto more dangerous techniques. But she did at least try to instill her lessons with some of the flexible ethics required of a true shinobi. (Any ethics would have done her cheerfully amoral proteges some good.) And at the heart of those ethics was one invariable rule - shinobi obeyed their masters, no matter what.

And Kaede's master, her beloved, lonely, godlike master, had told her to observe and report, not become involved. He worried for her safety. It was sweet in its way, even if she knew that she would never be first in his heart, any more than he wished to be first in hers. But that was what her master had ordered her to do.

And so that was what she was going to do, unless circumstances forced her to act otherwise. But it didn't sit well with her.

Fortunately, she was fairly sure that someone else, not bound by her master's instructions, would soon be on the scene to do something about the matter. And from the faint rushing sound, as of someone moving very fast, suggested that surety was correct.

He couldn't run very fast. His heart wouldn't let him. And he was carrying groceries, precious, important groceries that he couldn't possibly drop, but that encumbered him quite a bit. So that slowed him down too. And the creature was moving so quickly behind him, almost like it was toying with him.

Maybe it was toying with him. Maybe his earlier thoughts were right, and it was actually just a big dog, whatever it looked like. Maybe it only wanted to be friends.

Maybe, but Takumi didn't feel like taking that chance, somehow.

And then, quite suddenly, there was a sharp yelping sound from behind him. Takumi turned to risk a look at his pursuer ... and saw that it had frozen in place, straining to move forward without effect. His eyes wandered over it as he tried to figure out what was holding it back.

And then he noticed its shadow. Specifically, its shadow with what appeared to be a gigantic throwing star sticking out of it.

"Fiend!" a familiar voice proclaimed, trying very hard to sound even lower than it usually did. "To so abuse the innocent students of this place is an act that no God could forgive! Wherefore, I will punish thee!"

Now his eyes tracked over to a low-hanging branch of one of the trees knocked aside by the monster's passage, where a familiar form was standing, wearing a purple bodysuit and a mask that covered the lower portions of that person's face. That person's eyes were firmly on the creature, not on Takumi.

"Come forth, oh Sage Toad Gennai!" the obvious ninja shouted, before leaping into the air and making various hand signs.

... sage toad? Takumi thought wearily. He was actually starting to get a little bored with the absurdity.

And yet it continued, as the ninja landed on the back of a gigantic frog machine - it looked like a machine, at least - which had surged up out of the ground. As the ninja did so, the machine - yes,
that's clearly what it was - reared back and spat out a huge ball out from its mouth to slam into the other monster.

Into and through it.

In seconds, the dragon-like monster dissolved into a shower of sparks, though Takumi swore that he saw its the dog collar that had been wrapped around its horn tumbling through the air as well. But his attention was more focused on the ninja, who, after causing the frog creature to vanish as well, summersaulted to land on the ground nearby.

"And so it is done," the ninja proclaimed.

"Um ... Akira-kun?" Takumi ventured to ask. "What -"

"No!" the ninja said sharply, eyes widening a bit. "You are mistaken in your identification of me with that person, whom I do not even know. I, I am simply a mysterious ninja ... passing through."

Takumi considered this for several moments, as the exposed face of the allegedly mysterious ninja got redder and redder.

"Oookay," he said at last. "Well. Thank you for saving me, mysterious ninja who is not my good friend Akira-kun."

"Yes," the not-even-a-little-bit mysterious ninja said awkwardly. "Anyway, you must not speak of this to anyone. Especially not your sister or her friends!"

"How do you know about my sister, mysterious ninja?" Takumi answered, taking a certain mild delight in being on top of things for once.

"Ninjas know all and see all! And now I must go!" And with that, the ninja dashed for the treeline, arms swept behind him in classic ninja posture.

Takumi waited until he was out of sight to murmur, "Thank you, mysterious ninja who is clearly my good friend Akira-kun." He then checked his bag of groceries and breathed a sigh of relief that they seemed to be undamaged by all this zaniness. With that done, he finally started walking back towards the road, to make his way back home.

"This could be interesting," Nagi mused aloud. "Don't you think it's interesting?" he said to the individual whom he, being almost insufferably clever, had long since deduced was observing him.

A long pause ensued, before Kaede stepped from behind the tree where she'd been hiding. "One has nothing to say to you," she said simply as she walked towards the spot where the strange Orphan had been before it exploded into sparks.

"Ah, really?" Nagi sighed with obvious and cute dismay. "And I've so been looking forward to hearing from one of you white winged types, ever since I found out that the carnival was going to happen here."

Kaede ignored him. It was difficult, for many reasons, but she managed. She did file the term 'carnival' away for later analysis. But right now, she had other things on her mind. And it didn't take her very long to find what she'd been looking for.

_I was right_, she thought as she looked down at the collar. _I wish I was wrong. But I'm not._
"I am sorry, Mikoto-dono," she said, to one not present.

The ambulance pulled away from the scene of the baking contest, its horn blaring a message of gangway as it did. It was nearly drowned out, however. "Oniiichan!" Shiho howled as she knelt where the EMT had physically prevented her from getting onto the ambulance with her stricken big-brother-figure.

"This is very embarassing," said Haruka.

"Isn't it, though," said Shizuru. The two rivals exchanged a glance that clearly communicated the message, "Though I despise you and all that you stand for/sit around for, you should not have had to endure having your cooking shown to be toxic in that manner."

"You!" Shiho shrieked as she rose up and turned a hellish glare on the student council members. "This is all your doing! Know now and forever that you have earned the wrath of Munakata Shiho! There will be VENGEANCE!" Fists and octopus braids waved in the air. "VENGEAAAAANCE!"

"... well," said Mai, who'd decided to come over to watch the results of the baking contest, along with Mikoto, and was now standing beside the utterly humiliated-looking Natsuki. "That was ... certainly a thing that happened, wasn't it?"

"Shiho-chan is scary," Mikoto observed, clinging to Mai's side.

Natsuki said nothing. Natsuki was contemplating suicide again. The guillotine? That would be a classy way to go. Probably hard to find one in Japan, though.

"Oh, come on, Natsuki," Mai said, somewhat misinterpreting the expression on Natsuki's face. "It's not like it's all your fault, right? Even if it was only your cake that did it, and considering the ... thing that Suzushiro presented - no offense, Yukino-chan."

"None taken," said Yukino, hands over her face.

"- it probably wasn't even all the fault of you and Shizuru, and even if it was, you'd only be half to blame. The Class President contributed to this disaster, right?"

"I'd like to think so," Natsuki murmured, then shook her head. "No, you're right. I'm sure that our cake would have been completely edible, if she just would have let me add -"

"There was mayonnaise in it, wasn't there!" Shiho shouted, turning her hell-stare on Yukino and Natsuki, now. "Oniichan is allergic to mayonnaise! Poisoners!"


"And it's your fault, too!" Shiho yelled at Mai.

"Me?" Mai asked, incredulous. "What'd I do?"

"YOU WERE THERE! I will be avenged on all of you! ALL! OF! YOU!" And with that Shiho stormed off.

"Great," said Mai. Well, at least Shiho wasn't a HiME, so that Mai would have to actually worry about her sworn vengeance. That was something, at least.

"I wanna go home," Natsuki said at last.
"That's probably a good idea," Mai agreed. "Let's all go home. You hungry, Natsuki?"

"... yes, sort of. Wait, are you offering to cook for me?"

"Mai is a great cook," Mikoto interjected. "You should have asked her for help with this thing."

Mai coughed, cutting off Natsuki's immediate, rather irritated response to that suggestion. "So let's go, then."

"All right, all right," Natsuki said at last. "I believe you. She's a great cook! Enough already, I'm hungry as it is!"

"So am I," Mikoto agreed. The two rivals exchanged a look that clearly communicated, "Though I do not trust you even a little bit, I commiserate with your hunger."

"Sheesh, you two," Mai said as she opened the door and -

"SURPRISE!" shouted Chie and Aoi, as they stood beneath a banner reading, "Happy Birthday Mai" with a few other girls from Mai's class, and Akira and Takumi, who was holding up a cake with a big smile.

"Eh?" Mai said, genuinely stunned. "It's, it's not my birthday, that was -"

"Two weeks ago, yeah, we know," Chie interjected. "That sort of annoys me, that you didn't say anything when it was actually happening and just went off to work like nothing was happening. But Takumi thought -"

"It's the thought that counts. Happy birthday, neechan," he said, holding up the cake.

Tears came to Mai's eyes as she came over, took the cake in both hands - and set it down to hug her sweet little brother, wishing that they were alone so she could thank him appropriately.

"But, how'd you get in here?" she asked a moment later. "The dorm manager wouldn't -"

"Nina-san picked the lock," Aoi explained, gesturing to one of the other classmates.

"They're a lot easier to pick than the ones in my country," explained the exchange student.

"Where did you say you were from again?" Chie asked.

"Let's have some fun!" Nina said, ignoring the snoopy question.

And so they had fun. Even Akira managed to restrain his tendency towards taking pot shots at every girl in sight, for the most part, though Chie and Aoi clearly strained his patience. Things got a bit tense when he finally realized that Aoi was taking his occasional barbs as flirtatious banter. But Takumi was able to keep him calmed down enough to avoid a fight breaking out.

It fell to Mai to tell Reito about the results of the baking contest. To his credit, he looked thoroughly dismayed when he heard about Yuuichi's hospitalization. "I'll have to pay him a visit when he regains consciousness," he mused aloud.

Natsuki twitched.

"Maybe I'll send a fruit basket. No, he's probably not going to want to eat anything for a while."
"Nice cake," Natsuki said to Takumi, who was in the process of calming Akira after Aoi had just inquired whether he and Takumi did everything together.

"Thank you, Natsuki-san."

"It'd go great with some arsenic. Got some?"

"Eh?"

"It's not as good as Mai's cake," Mikoto disagreed.

"Mikoto, I've never baked you a cake."

"Well, you should then."

Sigh. "I'll add it to the list."

"What list?" asked Mikoto, blinking.

"The list of things I'm going to have to make for you one of these days."

"... you have a list of things you're going to make for me? You plan these things in advance? MAI IS WONDERFUL!" Mikoto shrieked, and hugged her right in front of everyone.

This would normally have been cause for a joke about how Mai was having trouble breathing, except that with one thing and another, she had gotten strong enough to take Mikoto's hugs without difficulty.

In any event, the party eventually wound down and people started heading home. Natsuki, who'd calmed down quite a bit, was one of the first to go, but she actually smiled a bit at Mai before she left. Would it be so bad if she was my cousin? she thought. Would it be so bad to have some connection, someone else who'll remember me when I'm gone? She shook her head at the 'else' as she walked out, wondering where that had come from.

Mai was busy walking Reito to the door, exchanging pleasant nothings as she did. For a few moments, they just looked at each other, and for a second, she thought he might be about to kiss her. But he didn't, and just smiled and nodded as he headed off. Mai found that very frustrating, but also somewhat endearing.

"I think it's about time for us to be going, too," said Akira, when they were down to just the four of them.

"Um, actually, Akira-kun, I think I'm going to stay and help clean up. You don't have to, you've been helpful enough and you probably need your rest, right?" Takumi said, glancing between his roommate and his sister with a bright smile.

"Oh," said Akira. "Right." He regarded the siblings with some concern, before heading to the doorway. "Try to be back before curfew, all right?"

"Sure thing."

"We don't really need a lot of help to clean up, Takumi," Mai said, starting to sort the paper plates into the proper recycling bin.

"I know, I know, but I need a break," said Takumi as he sat down. "It's been a really long day."
"Putting this together can't have been easy," Mai agreed.

"That's not it," he told her heavily. Disobeying Akira-kun's injunction about not telling his sister about what had happened bothered him for a moment, but he thought she needed to know. So he told her what had happened. Mikoto stopped what she was doing and listened intently as well.

"Oh, Takumi!" Mai said, when she realized just how much danger her little brother had been without her even realizing. "That must have been terrifying."

"Yes, but the ninja took care of it," he said.

"Ninja?" asked Mikoto quietly.

"Yes, the mysterious ninja," he reiterated. He'd decided that he wasn't going to tell them everything. Akira's secret would be safe with him. "The ninja defeated the monster pretty easily; nothing was left except maybe this dog collar that had been around one of its -"

"Excuse me," said Mikoto, who promptly ran out onto the balcony and jumped off of it.

"Did she just -" Takumi asked, horrified.

"Yes, but it'll be all right, she does that from time to time," Mai reassured him.

"Really?"

"Mm-hm."

"Oh."

"I'm so sorry, Takumi, I should have been there to help you," Mai said, shaking her head.

"Eh? What could you have done, oneechan?" he asked, surprised.

"... uh, well, I could have picked you up and run faster than you could have managed," she said weakly.

"Even with the groceries, too?"

"I'm tough!"

"Okay, I believe you," said Takumi, who obviously didn't.

They were comfortably silent for a while.

"We're alone, now, aren't we?" he asked quietly.

"Uh, yeah," Mai said, looking around.

"Oneechan ... we've got to stop doing it," he said. "But ... one more time, for the last time, I don't think it would -"

And then she was kissing him.

Mikoto had never put much stock in calendars or clocks. When she was awake was day; when she was asleep was a time that didn't concern her. So she didn't know when exactly she'd met Pocchi, only that she'd come to care for the strange little Orphan. She'd built him a little house, given him a
collar.

She'd never really cared about fighting the Orphans, as her objective was something else entirely, and they were simply obstacles to its successful completion. So it wasn't all that surprising that, when she'd met an Orphan who wasn't trying to hurt anyone, who was just hiding in the forest and trying to live its own life, she'd felt a certain amount of sympathy.

Pocchi had been a lot like her, really.

And now that house which she'd built so carefully lay in ruins, and Pocchi was nowhere to be found, no matter how frantically she searched. There had been another Orphan, Mikoto told herself. It had chased Pocchi, and somehow got his collar off of him, and then it had chased Takumi and been killed by that ninja he talked about. That ninja. That ninja couldn't have been -

There was a quiet, delicate cough from behind her, and Mikoto whirled, with Miroku held low. The ninja was standing there, face solemn, eyes closed, just as they'd been every time they'd met in this forest before this. At first, the ninja had asked her questions about being a HiME and about the Orphans, but on realizing that Mikoto neither knew nor cared about any of that, she'd stopped asking, and simply looked on as Mikoto had cared for Pocchi.

And now she was standing there, holding out Pocchi's collar for her to take.

"I am sorry, Mikoto-dono," she said, as though repeating herself.

"You killed him," she said quietly.

Kaede could have told her the truth. She could have turned the fury she saw building in the little girl's eyes on Akira, where it perhaps belonged. She didn't owe Akira anything, after all. And to be under this burden when she didn't have to be would reduce her usefulness to her master.

"YOU KILLED HIM!" Mikoto shrieked.

"Yes," Kaede lied.

And then she was gone, as quickly as she could, before the sword was drawn around Mikoto in a circle, before it plunged down and then drove daggers up towards the sky, and before Mikoto collapsed to the ground in the center of her field of death, weeping bitter tears.

Eventually, all tears cease. Eventually, Mikoto made her way back to the dormitory, and climbed the wall to their balcony to walk in and stop dead as she stared at the bed.

"Mai?" she heard herself ask. "What are you doing?"

Owing to the positioning of their bodies, it was somewhat difficult for Mai to turn back to look at Mikoto, but she managed, and it didn't seem likely that the shocked look on her face was caused by any particular pain the twisting caused her. "Mikoto! I, I thought you wouldn't be back for -"

"Is that Takumi-kun?" Mikoto asked, in the same distantly bemused tone.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," Takumi muttered as he lay there, staring up at the ceiling. He'd said that a few times already tonight, but not in the way that he was doing so right now.

"Okay, Mikoto," said Mai, as she disengaged herself from Takumi. "Let's just stay calm, now, all right?" Mai glanced briefly at the panties she'd dropped on the floor, but decided that she couldn't
take the time to fumble her way back into them. Which meant that she was going to have to calm Mikoto down while wearing nothing but her bra. Great.

"Are you," Mikoto started to ask, then shook her head, and continued. "Do you do things with Takumi-kun?"

It was far too late, clearly, to try the 'not what it looked like' gambit. "Yes," Mai said. "Yes, sometimes, we do things like this, together. It's not something to get upset about."

"Oh," said Mikoto.

She was silent for a while, looking at Mai, then glancing in Takumi's direction as he lay on the bed, face covered by his hands, before turning back to look at Mai again.

"Are you -" angry, Mai wanted to ask.

"It's like what jii did with aniue," Mikoto thought out loud.

That made Mai feel a little bit sick. She wanted to shout that it wasn't, not even a little bit, that it wasn't like what Mikoto's grandfather might have done to her older brother, or what she thought Natsuki's mother had done to her. She wanted to say that it was completely different. But she didn't say that, because it might be that this was the only way she could keep Mikoto from getting upset and possibly ruining everything. (Certainly not because she couldn't come up with a good explanation for how it was different.)

So she smiled, unsteadily, and nodded. "Yes, Mikoto, it's, it's like that. Some families show that they care for each other ... like this. Like that."

"Huh," said Mikoto. Then, before Mai could say anything else, she asked, "Do you think aniue will want to show he cares about me like this?"

That made Mai feel even worse, and she wasn't quite sure why, at first. Then she told herself that she didn't want to get Mikoto's hopes up for nothing. (Certainly not because she didn't want to think about Mikoto doing those sorts of things.) "I don't know," she said aloud. "Maybe. It's possible. But, but I think he'd be lucky to be with someone as sweet as you are, Mikoto."

And then a thought occurred to Mai, a thought closely akin to one that she'd had when Akira had almost caught her kissing Takumi that one time. The best way to make sure that whoever discovered them would keep their secret.

And so, as Mikoto blushed at the compliment, Mai added, "I know that I am."

Mikoto's blush deepened briefly before it and her entire body froze. "What?" Mikoto asked. "What is Mai saying? Mai and I don't, don't do things like that."

Mai swallowed. This was nothing she'd ever even thought about. (Much.) But she had to do it. "That's only half true, Mikoto," she said, taking a step closer to her roommate. "I don't do things like that with you."

Takumi lowered his hands and his head snapped up, staring at the two of them.

Mikoto's jaw dropped. "But, but ... Mai knows what I did? Mai was awake all those times?"

All those times? Mai shrieked inwardly. I thought it only happened once! How many - keep it together, Mai! "Sometimes, yes, I was awake," she exaggerated. "You said you loved me, Mikoto. Is
Mikoto seemed to be right on the edge of bolting, but she didn't. "I, I - Mai is important to me," she said.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Mai closed the last of the distance between the two of them. "And Mikoto is important to me," she said as her arms came up to wrap around Mikoto's slender shoulders, pulling the smaller girl close to her in an embrace, and leaning down to rest her lips against Mikoto's own.

Mikoto went limp for a moment, and then she was glomping tightly onto Mai as well, and her tongue slipped up into Mai's mouth. On some level, Mai felt a strange, uneasy wonder at that; she'd had to be taught to do that, but it seemed to come to Mikoto naturally. Or maybe it didn't ... but that was just a little too disturbing to even think about.

"And it's okay," Mai said, as she let go of the kiss. "It's okay to do these things with someone who's important to you, right, Mikoto? Right, Takumi?" she added, glancing in her brother's direction, and nodding firmly as she cradled Mikoto's head to her bosom so that she couldn't see the cue.

Takumi was staring at them, mute astonishment written clearly on his face. You two, he mouthed, pointing at them both.

Mai nodded, making an angry face now.

Takumi shook his head in clear amazement, then coughed. "Yes. It's, it's okay as long as you don't hurt anyone," he said.

That wasn't quite the enthusiastic endorsement she'd wanted, but Mai decided to take what she could get. "Do you want to do things with us, Mikoto?" she asked, letting the smaller girl move back a bit so that she could look down into her eyes.

"... I want to do things with Mai," Mikoto said. She managed to get turned around enough to glance at Takumi. "But, well, not so much with Takumi. Sorry, Takumi."

"That's all right," Takumi said, a bit too cheerfully, as he started to get up. "I'll just get out of your -"

"Ahem." Mai glared, and Takumi subsided. "Okay. But I want to do things with Takumi and Mikoto. So you don't mind sharing, do you, Mikoto?"

From the look on her face, Mikoto pretty clearly did mind.

"After all, when you find you your brother, and if he wants to do things like this with you, I'll have to share you with him, won't I?" Mai pointed out. "So it's only fair -"

"I don't mind sharing," Mikoto grumbled. The sentiment was obviously less than heartfelt.

"Okay, then," Mai said, once again taking what she could get. "So then why don't we all lie down and, and we'll figure things out from there ..."

She'd studied her own, of course, once she started being aware of it. But this was certainly the closest she'd ever come to another girl's ... place. She wasn't all that surprised that there was a lot less hair above it, all things considered. Two of her fingers were spreading its lips so that she could see all of its parts, and no matter how distracting it was to have Takumi pounding away behind her, it was pretty clear what she was supposed to do.

But it was a little ...
Ah well. She had to buy her silence.

So Mai reached out with one of the fingers of her other hand to start gently rubbing the little man in the boat. Judging from the sounds Mikoto had been making all through this, she seemed to really like that. Understandable, of course. It had felt good whenever anyone touched Mai in that place, whether it was herself, Takumi, or - well, that wasn't important right now.

"Mai," Mikoto gasped. "Mai!"

Mai throttled the impulse to say, "That's my name, don't wear it out." She wasn't sure what Mikoto wanted, or if she wanted anything, but there was really only a couple of steps she could take in this position. Well, if she was going to do this, she might as well dive in the deep end, right? So she bent down and began licking at Mikoto's sex, while Takumi slammed his dick into her own.

Mikoto's screams reached an incredibly high pitch, and she convulsed. Huh. So this was what a girl's orgasm looked like up close. Mai had almost expected that there'd be some sort of liquid gushing out onto her face, but there was only the taste of Mikoto's sweat. Maybe a bit of something else, on the part of her tongue that had been closest to the hole where the dick was supposed to go.

She guessed that it wasn't so -

Mikoto, displaying incredible strength and coordination, wiggled around until she was face to face with Mai, and kissed her frantically. "Mai is great! Mai is wonderful! I would kiss the people that have made you such a great lover! Mai is great!"

"Um, well, you certainly can -"

And then Takumi groaned and, somewhat to Mai's surprise, spilled his seed on her butt. That was odd. She'd never told him to pull out. Was he still worried about that -

"Is that guy stuff?" Mikoto asked, looking back at Mai's butt.

"Well, yes, that's -"

"I'll clean up." And Mikoto promptly suited the action to her words, licking all over Mai's butt, even casting a speculative glance or two in Takumi's direction as he sagged back onto the bed.

This has potential, Mai decided.

"I mean it, you know," Takumi said, a little while later, as they lay together in bed, Mikoto curled up between them.

"You mean what?" Mai asked absently, as she ran a hand through Mikoto's hair.

"It has to stop. You and me, it has to stop."

"Why?" she asked. Not whining, not getting angry.

"Because ... because there's more to being good, than feeling good," he said at last.

"It's not like we really have a lot of reason to be good," Mai said, not looking at him. "Mom was good. Look where it got her."

"What does that have to do with - no, never mind," Takumi said, shaking his head. "I want to be good. And I don't have a lot -"
"Don't talk like that," she interrupted, now raising her eyes to meet his.

He stared at her in silence.

"Okay," she said, lowering her eyes again. "If you don't want it, then, then we won't do it anymore."

"Thank you, neechan," he whispered.

*Until we do,* she added silently. *You came to me, Takumi. You'll be back again.*

It was well past curfew by the time that he slipped into the boy's dorm, sneaking past the dorm manager's temporarily empty post, and getting into the room without incident. He sighed with relief as the door closed.

"You're late," said Akira, sitting seiza in the shadows while facing the door.

Takumi's eyes bulged out. "Could you please get my meds?" he whispered. "I seem to be having some heart trouble for some inexplicable reason."

Some meds later, Takumi settled down to bed. Akira was still watching him with concern. "So, what did you and your sister talk about?"

"We didn't really talk all that much," Takumi admitted.

"Oh," said Akira. He hesitated. "Takumi-kun ... are you and your sister ... intimate?"

Takumi was silent for a few moments, before looking at Akira and telling him the absolute, unvarnished truth. "No," he said. *We're not right now, and we won't be in the future. So this is the truth.*

"Okay, then," Akira said, wondering why he'd asked. Wondering what he'd have done if the answer had been anything else. Wondering, again, why he loved him.

The way of the shinobi is a path of death and deceit.

The possibility that Takumi might have made a better shinobi than Akira never occurred to him.
August, 2004

Given the givens, Mai was a bit surprised when she walked into class the next day and saw Yuuichi in his usual spot, with his usual glum face. "Hey," she said.

He grunted something she took for a hello.

"I figured they'd at least keep you in the hospital overnight, after all that ..." She trailed off, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the building where yesterday's baking competition had been held.

Another grunt. Then, wonder of wonders, actual verbiage. "I think they were gonna, but I got better all of a sudden after a couple of hours. Nobody could figure it. I don't even know what happened. One minute, I'm lying on my bed in the hospital, wishing for the sweet release of death -"

"Hey, not funny," Mai interrupted.

He ignored her. "- and the next, I'm fine. Well, mostly. My mouth feels someone went to the bathroom there. I'm hearing this weird flute music coming through the window, but when I manage to get up and look, there's nobody there. I dunno, maybe that part was just a dream." He shrugged.

Once Mai had gotten over the 'like someone went to the bathroom in my mouth' expression, she'd listened fairly intently. "Or maybe one of the magical girls they talk about healed you through music. Maybe you attracted the attention of Cure Flute or something."

She'd expected him to shrug this off like macho dorks were supposed to do. But all that he did was grunt again, and then say, "Maybe so."

Mai blinked in surprise at his departure from stereotype, and sat down at her own desk a bit hesitantly. "Y'know, I think this may be the longest conversation we've had since we met," she mused aloud.

"They all feel equally long to me," Yuuichi replied, rolling his eyes.

"And Captain Sarcasm returns!" Mai snarked right back, perversely glad to have the jerk back.

Neither of them were aware that their actions were being fairly closely monitored, as someone on the opposite side of the classroom quietly jotted in a notebook. *Investigation of Tokiha Mai, Day 92, Morning. Subject is engaging in extended conversation with Tayu. Uncharacteristic friendly behavior giving way to more characteristic squabbling.*

And then the door slid open. Somewhat to their surprise, their usual homeroom teacher didn't enter. Instead, they were all treated to the sight of one of the more famous residents of Mahora quietly walking in. After a moment of surprise, the class representative called out for them to stand and bow, as per usual, as the celebrity took the teacher's position at the head of the class.

"Good morning, class," said the teacher. "I'm afraid that Nitta-sensei has called in sick today, so I'll be handling his duties in the interim." He looked about for a moment. On discovering that what he was looking for was nowhere to be found, he shrugged and pulled an elaborately decorated riser out from behind his back, set it on the floor, and stepped up on it, so that he could write his name on the
blackboard high enough for everyone to read it.

"I prefer to be called Negi-sensei," said Negi Springfield. "Since I understand that 'Springfield-sensei' can be a bit difficult, even for well-educated students like yourselves. In any event, I'll also be taking over Nitta-sensei's first period class, but since I'm not up to speed on your progress, I'm declaring a quiet self-study period. Any questions?"

A hand went up from one of the other boys. "Sensei, is it true that you're only eleven?"

"I turned eleven a few months ago," Negi confirmed. "However, I've heard the rumors, and no, I'm not a forty-something dwarf from a former Communist republic. I'm from Wales, actually. Anyway, enough trivia. Let's do roll call, shall we?"

When he got down to Tokiha, Mai had the strangest feeling that the child teacher was glaring at her, though his polite smile didn't alter in the slightest. She'd have been very surprised to realize that Yuuichi had had the same sensation when his name was called, a bit earlier. Neither of them noticed that the other had been the subject of that scrutiny as well.

But the same person who'd been jotting down notes earlier did. And added to those notes, Subject appears to have attracted attention from faculty. Why? And then Yukino circled the Why?

With the students of his temporary class engrossed in their work, Negi was able to covertly produce a playing card with the picture of a winged female swordsman. Through practice, he'd progressed to the point where he no longer needed to hold it to his head to activate certain functions.

Is she all right? he sent.

She will be, now, came the response. Ei-fa-Eishun's new wife isn't nearly as good a healer, but she's apparently quite compe - excuse me, Negi, something just exploded.

The connection ended, and Negi replaced the card quietly.

He still wanted answers for what had been done to Konoka. But now, at least, he was in a position to get them. Or at least, discover the right questions to be asked.

"Eh? The headmaster's granddaughter was attacked?" Mai asked as the girls got changed for gym class.

Chie nodded, with a look on her face more serious than any Mai could remember having seen there. "They're keeping it quiet, because they don't want to alarm anyone. But they're going to be instituting a curfew. Probably announce it in last period."

"How did you find out about this?" Aoi asked, sounding puzzled. "I thought you told me that you were going to try and find out what happened to Nitta-sensei."

"Well, I did. He broke a tooth. Not too interesting, right? But the thing about gossip is, you always find out stuff that you weren't looking for." She surreptitiously checked Mai out as the other girl slid her gym t-shirt on over her bra. Mai was too busy muttering about the fact that it must have shrunk in the wash to notice. "And the really interesting part is, there's a connection between the headmaster's granddaughter and a certain someone's new crush."

"Huh?" Mai asked, shifting her shoulders uneasily. This thing could tear at any moment, she thought.
"I don't have a crush on him, I just think he's cute and eminently do-able!" Aoi protested.

"Who are you two talking about?"

Chie and Aoi looked at her with the expression of one wondering whether they're being kidded. "Negi-kun," they chorused.

Mai stared. "Oh," she said eventually.

"You don't think he's -" Aoi started to ask.

"So what's this connection?" Mai asked, clearly ignoring Aoi.

"She used to be in his assigned homeroom class, back when she was in junior high," Chie explained, looking at Mai as though she were some sort of rare animal. "And actually, they lived together. Same dorm room."

"Well, you're out of luck, then," Mai said to Aoi as the other girl slid on her bloomers. "I mean, if I'm 'doing it' with Reito-san just because we walked together, then surely they can't have been sharing a room without -"

"Oh, please," Aoi said dismissively. "Everyone knows that she's dating that kendo girl, whatserface. If I were going after him, she'd be no problem. But anyway, I already have another cute boy in my sights, and you will not distract me from him like that!"

"Curses, foiled again," Mai murmured ... only partly joking.

True to Chie's prediction, Negi made a special announcement towards the end of the class' last period. "One last thing, everyone, if I could have your attention? Thank you. The school is declaring that a special curfew will be in effect for the next few days. We need you to be in your dorm rooms between six o'clock at night and seven o'clock in the morning."

"Excuse me, sensei!" Mai said, her voice rising up above the rhubarb of the class' amazement at this news. "I've got a part-time job that runs later than that -"

"At the Chao Bao Zi?" Negi interjected. When she nodded, he continued. "I'm pretty sure Satsuki-san will be closing down early, so there shouldn't be any problem on that front."

Yes, there's still a problem! Mai raged inwardly, as one of the other students asked questions about the reason for the curfew that Negi managed to avoid answering. My hours are getting cut! My pay is getting cut! This sucks!

"Nagi-san!" Mai called out as she walked into the old library, looking askance at the weird clock mechanism on the floor. It was keeping the wrong time. Well, that was to be expected. From what she understood, this building had only been pressed into service as a substitute library after something had happened to the main library, requiring the movement of a bunch of non-circulating books. So the clock was probably not adjusted all that often.

"Nagi-san!" she repeated. "I know you lurk here, and I want to have a word with you." Of course, despite her feigned annoyance, it was obvious that her pulse quickened at the thought of once more encountering the sexy and charming boy of mystery.

"Up here," said boy called out from the upper floor of the building, where he was examining old
"Hey, Mai-chan. Fancy meeting you here. How'd you know this was where I hung out?"

"Natsuki," she answered shortly.

"Ah, yes," the wise and clever rapscallion said, nodding sagely as he remembered the playful times he'd spent here with Natsuki, easily dodging her never-seriously-intended shots.

"Anyway, I want to know if you know anything about the Orphan that attacked the headmaster's granddaughter. Maybe if I catch it, he'll stop this stupid curfew and I -"

"I know it wasn't an Orphan," Nagi told her helpfully. "And as to the prospect of hunting it down, it's not really time for that yet. I'm rooting for you when it is time, though."

"Huh?"

"Anyway, that's not important, right now. I was actually hoping to ask you if you could do me a little itty bitty teeny tiny favor."

Mai stared at him. "What?" she asked suspiciously.

"It's something really easy. Well, maybe not sooo easy, but ... basically, if you could avoid using your powers for the next little while, and maybe talk your friends into doing the same, that'd be just swell. And it's really in your own interest, too."

"Why?" Mai said, still suspiciously.

"Well ..." Nagi clapped his hands, looking uncomfortable, and then, continued. "To make a long story short, there are some people who are trying to hunt the HiME, and we'd rather not make you easy targets."

"... let's have the long story long."

"So let me see if I have this right," Mai said a few moments later, as she looked right at Nagi. For once, the cute and sexy boy was humbly addressing her from the same level, having come down from the balcony where he'd been earlier to lean back on the stairs and look at her with his usual cute but just a little bit dangerous smile.

"There's an organization that's hunting Hime," Mai started.

"You always mispronounce it," he chided. "It's HiME."

She ignored him with effort. "But you either don't know or won't tell me what this organization wants."

"Such an untrusting child, to put it that way."

"But you're certain that they're a credible threat, because they've already defeated one of us. But you won't tell me who they defeated."

"What good would that knowledge do you?" Nagi asked, hands raised in a gesture of confusion.

"If I could talk her, then maybe I'd know how to defend myself against whatever these people did to her," Mai pointed out angrily.

"Oh, loss of cool points, Mai-chan," he said, shaking his head. "Do you really think they'll use the
same tactics over and over again? Whatever Midori-chan might think about being in a magical girl show, you shouldn't expect the bad guys to act like magical girl villains."

"At least I'd have some idea of what to expect!"

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but even if I told you, it'd do you no good. The poor girl didn't take her defeat all that well. It's very sad, really," he said, brushing away a single glistening tear from his cheek. "Broke down completely. Utterly non-responsive. But Mashiro-chan was sweet enough to make sure that she's in a good place, with people who will take care of her."

The Mahora Institute for the Treatment of Mental Illness was somewhat unique in that it employed a handful of well-qualified, carefully trained students from the schools nearby as caregivers - essentially, student nurses, regardless of whether or not they intended to enter the profession after their education.

This experiment was somewhat controversial, given that it could potentially expose these young people to risk. But the rewards to the patients were held to be worth it, particularly since most of these young people had empathy that greatly facilitated the patients' return to mental health.

And then there was Fuura Kafuka.

When it became clear to even the most obtuse administrator that patients who were exposed to Kafuka's sunny and chipper demeanor tended to become even less stable than they had been beforehand, they had made a delicate effort to persuade her that her services were no longer required. She had listened politely, and then told them that she was clearly misunderstanding what they were telling her, since there was no way that she could possibly be being fired, in such a way as to make her essentially unemployable in this field after this, because such things just didn't happen.

They'd tried a couple more times after that, with pretty much the same result. Until they came up with some sort of better plan, Kafuka remained on staff.

"Ah, good evening, Higurashi-san!" she said as she looked in on the semi-catatonic patient in room 55C. "Are we enjoying ourselves?"

She could tell that the answer was clearly yes, given the happy smile on the girl's face. That had to be a smile. It would be impossible for someone to be suffering when they were around her.

"I've got some good news for you today! You have a visitor!"

Ah! There was some reaction from the girl!

"It's your father!"

Definite reaction! Yes, she was clearly on the mend!

"Ah, here he is now! I'll just leave you two alone together. It's wrong to intrude on someone else's family affairs," she said, nodding to herself as she went out of the room and closed the door behind her. She thought that she heard some crying before she did, but that wasn't possible. No one could possibly be screaming for help when they were around her!

"Anyway, don't worry so much about dealing with these people," Nagi continued. "They're our problem, not yours. You should just focus on your normal high school life for a while. Go have fun with Mikoto-chan and Natsuki-chan! Go for long walks by the river at sunset, maybe," he said.
speculatively.

"That's gonna be a little tricky with the curfew on," Mai growled. "Well, thanks for the warning, anyway."

He was genuinely touched by her sincerely meant appreciation, and waved as she went.

Mai paused at the threshold. "And hey, one more thing. Your name ... is there any connection between you and -"

"I think his dad was named after me, and he was named after his dad," Nagi answered.

"Oh." Mai shrugged at left.

"Or was it the other way around?" he mused aloud.

"So what do you want to do tomorrow?" Mai asked Mikoto as they got ready for bed, later that night. Tomorrow was Sunday, after all. A day without classes.

Mikoto promptly began listing various dishes that she wanted Mai to cook.

"Other than eating enough to turn yourself into a blimp," Mai interrupted.

"Can that really happen?" Mikoto asked, blinking.

"... no, it's a figure of speech. Okay, let's see what happens and we'll play it by ear."

"Okay!" Mikoto said with a quick nod as they climbed into bed together. She planted a kiss on Mai's cheek as she cuddled up to her, and was asleep just a few moments later.

Mai was a little startled that she didn't try anything more than that. They'd gone a lot further, the night before last, and given how demanding Mikoto could be in other ways, she'd expected to have to fend off some rather vigorous advances.

This was rather nice, though. There was something very comforting about the feeling of Mikoto's heart beating against her like it was. It was probably the best that she'd felt in quite a while.

She took that thought with her down into the depths of sleep.

"So what were you doing trying to sneak back onto campus early in the morning?" Haruka asked brusquely as she sat across the table from the current person of interest in the ongoing investigation.

Nao leaned on the table, hand supporting her chin, and considered how Suzushiro's looks would be improved by a great big red smile across her neck. "I was minding my own business. You should try minding yours."

"The safety and security of this faculty are my business," Haruka snapped back.

"Facility," supplied Yukino. Nao didn't even bother to look at the mousy little wimp. She couldn't possibly matter.

"Let me repeat myself. I don't like repeating myself, but I'll do it any."

"You never said that before," Nao interjected.
Haruka stared for a moment, then drew in a deep breath. "What were you doing trying to sneak back onto campus early in the morning?" she repeated.

"Obviously, I was trying to get back to my room after a night of debauchery," Nao said, tired of the game already. "What do you think I was doing?"

"Night of debauchery," Haruka said easily, pulling out a notebook. "That's interesting. Why don't you tell me all about it?"

"So you can write down the details and rub off about 'em later?"

Now Haruka blinked. "'Rub off?' she asked.

Blushing furiously, Yukino leaned in to whisper right into Haruka's ear.

"Oh. That." Haruka coughed. "I doubt that you'll have anything to tell me that I haven't heard before -"

Oooh, a challenge! Nao smiled unpleasantly. "Okay, then. Is that a new notebook? Because I'm gonna take a while."

And she started lying her ass off. With gay amusement, she discussed her many sexual encounters of the previous evening, with several important members of the faculty and a number of local politicians. And their girlfriends. And some of their pets. She had the satisfaction of seeing the mousy sidekick go from bright red to cold white as she listened to what she was saying. By the time she was discussing her supposed sexual encounter with a snake, Yukino quietly got up and walked out of the room.

To Nao's annoyance, though, Haruka showed no reaction to any of it. She just noted it all down, sometimes interrupting to ask for a clarification for a time or place. Annoyed, Nao went back a bit further and claimed to have been the one to attack the headmaster's stupid granddaughter, going into elaborate detail about what she'd done to the little bitch, and how much fun they'd had. Her mouth was dry by the time she was done.

"Is that all, then?" Haruka inquired calmly as Nao took a bit of water.

"Oh, I got more if you want it," Nao sneered.

"No, that's all right," the executive said, reviewing her notes quietly. "Quite a story," she added.

"Like it?" Nao sneered some more.

"No," Haruka said, and tore the notebook in half.

"What?" Nao said, blinking.

"Konoe Konoka wasn't sexually assaulted," Haruka said, getting to her feet. "Your description of what you supposedly did to her doesn't even come close to matching her injuries. So you're lying about that, and I can only conclude that you're lying about everything else too."

And now there was a faint note of cold amusement in her tone. "And if by chance there was any truth in any of that, it's all mixed up in lies. So anyone who actually did interact with you in the ways that you describe is protected from official inquiry. By you. Have a nice day." On that note, she went out.
"... you bitch!" Nao shrieked a few moments later.

"So where are we going to go?" Mikoto asked excitedly as the two girls closed the door to their dorm room behind them.

"It's a good question, isn't it?" Mai said. "Let's see where the day takes us, and -"

Abruptly, the door to the room down the hallway flung open, and a panicky looking Aoi ran out. "Shitshitshit, slept in, shit!" she announced to all and sundry.

"Good morning, Aoi-chan," Mai said. "You do know that it's -"

"Yeah, it's a day off, and I've got a train to catch if I'm gonna get to see that concert in Tokyo!" Aoi explained as she locked up her door. "Probably gonna have to risk breaking curfew when I come back."

"Isn't that a little dangerous? It doesn't seem worth it." Mai asked.

"It's the only way I'm gonna get to see Shiratori Nagisa in concert this year!"

"Definitely not worth it," Mai deadpanned.

Aoi let out a long sigh as she walked past. "You and Chie-chan should get together and have a ball making fun of my tastes in music."

Mikoto didn't really follow most of this conversation, but the words "get together" resonated in her consciousness on a deep, primal level. When combined with Mai's name and the name of someone who wasn't herself, only one reaction was permissible. "Mine!" she said, almost growling, as she grabbed ahold of Mai's arm.

Aoi stopped dead in her tracks. Aoi blinked. And then Aoi grinned. "Congratulations, Mikoto-chan!"

"Eh?" Mikoto asked, anger fading to confusion.

"Uh, that, that was just -" Mai started to stammer out.

"And it's before September, so I'm gonna have to text Chie-chan about how I'm cleaning up in the betting pool!" Aoi said as she backed away, still grinning broadly.

"Wait, what betting pool?" Mai demanded.

"Have fun on your date!" Aoi said, as she started to run off.

"It's not a -"

"What's a date?" Mikoto asked as Aoi headed out of sight.

"It's a kind of fruit," Mai answered, not wishing to address the other possible meanings of the word right now.

"Is it good to eat?" Mikoto asked, for once appropriately.

Mai opened her mouth to answer, and found herself blushing brightly. "Let's just go, okay?" she managed to say after a moment.
A little while later, their walk had led them to a public playground filled with people enjoying the last shining days of summer, including a lot of children. Their presence made Mai a little nervous, particularly when Mikoto decided to have some fun on the kid's playground. Her definition of fun included heading up to the highest point of the wooden construction and standing there on one foot.

Mai was fairly sure that she couldn't match that feat, even with the slightly enhanced agility and strength that she'd noticed in the months since she'd become a 'hime'. And if she couldn't match it, then the kids who were crowded around the base of the structure certainly couldn't. And they were looking up at Mikoto so admiringly, too ...

"Ummm," she said hesitantly. "You good kids know that you shouldn't try to do what she's doing, right?"

To her amazement, one of the kids - a boy with glasses who looked to be just out of kindergarten - patted her hand. "It's okay, neechan. Chizuru-neesan taught us all to be smart about things like that." With the air of one reciting something, he continued, with the other kids joining in fairly quickly. "If you see someone doing something that you think is really cool, always remember - they know what they're doing, and you don't. Admire! Do not imitate!" And the kids nodded as one.

Mai actually found all of this to be incredibly creepy, but that wasn't exactly the sort of thing you could say to a bunch of kids. "Oh," she said instead, smiling in a way that she hoped didn't tip them off. "This Chizuru-neesan sounds like a very smart person."

That addition, made solely to have something to say, had really unexpected consequences. The boy who'd spoken to her blinked, and Mai was startled to see that tears were dribbling down his cheeks. Before she could say anything, he started bawling. "Yes," the boy cried. "Yes, she is, and I miss her so much! Why did she have to go off and get married! If she wanted to get married, why didn't she marry m-uh-one of us!"

Like a domino effect, the boy's tears started all of the kids off, and soon Mai was surrounded by a huge number of sobbing children whom she had no idea how to comfort. Just as she was on the verge of panicking, their mothers (or nannies, or other caregivers) showed up and took charge of them, murmuring soothing words as they took them away. The effect was somewhat spoiled by the way that each of them managed to give Mai an annoyed look in the process.

Soon after, Mikoto came down from the playground with a huge grin on her face. "That was so much fun, Mai!" she chirped, heedless of the shattered look on Mai's face.

"Yeah, I bet it was fun," Mai said faintly. *Lots of fun for whatever sick bastard is pulling the strings of my life.* She'd passed the point where she hoped that there wasn't one, and reached a place where she hoped that there was, so that all this ridiculous nonsense might have some point.

A little while later, after lunch, Mai had calmed down a little. Watching Mikoto's obvious enjoyment of her portion had helped a lot. It was so amazing, the way that she managed to enjoy nearly everything that she did. Of course, the things that she didn't enjoy all that much, like bathing, could sometimes be hard on a person, but overall, it was really easy to love her.

That thought struck Mai quite suddenly as she lay on the picnic blanket with Mikoto at her side. Did she love her?

She was happy when she was with her. She cared about her a lot. The thought of anything bad happening to her frightened and unsettled her. Except for the fact that they'd had sex, though, Mai
could pretty much say that her relationship with Mikoto was just like her relationship with Chie or Aoi. And to say that she loved them was to stretch the meaning of the word further than she cared to do. So what did that say about how she felt about Mikoto?

Maybe she ought to talk to the other girl about it. But she hesitated to do so, given the day that she'd been having. What if she said the wrong thing and it was Mikoto suddenly crying in front of her, and she had no more idea what to say to comfort her than she had when those children had broken down? It would be awful.

She was just about to open the conversation anyway, having failed to come up with any plans, when Mikoto's ears twitched. "Do you hear someone singing?" the younger girl asked.

Mai paused, and listened. With a bit of effort, she could in fact hear a voice not far away. "Yes, yes, I can."

Mikoto got up. "I wonder who it is?" she said.

Well, the conversation would clearly have to wait, Mai mused as she stood up as well and followed after her friend, clearly as curious as the proverbial cat.

It wasn't long before they began to make out the words of the song.

_They're dancing in the shadows_  
_Like whispers of love_  
_Just dreaming of a place_  
_Where they're free as a dove_  

_They've never been allowed_  
_To love in this cursed cage_  

_It's only the fairy tale they believe ...

One more repetition of the chorus, and then she let her voice fall silent. For a moment, she simply stood, drinking up the sunlight and breathing in the fresh air. Then the quiet applause from behind her drew her attention to Miyu, and she turned and went over to sit beside her on the log. "Was that good?" she asked, just a bit anxiously.

"It was very good," Miyu assured her. "Your voice is both beautiful and soothing. Its tonal qualities remind me of looking through a crystal clear stream."

She blinked, a bit startled by the visual metaphor. "Miyu, can you see sound, then?" Even after all this time, Miyu could still surprise her.

Her guardian nodded once. "Yes, when I choose to do so. My senses allow me a greater degree of acuity than most people experience. Sometimes, when I look at you, I can see a brilliant golden light shining through you."

Alyssa imagined herself as a brilliant golden light, and smiled at the thought. "The world you see must be so much more beautiful than this one," she said as she cuddled up to her, laying her head on her lap.

"Yes," Miyu agreed. "But you will see a world more beautiful yet."

Singing always took a great deal out of her, since it was a purely physical exercise, not one that she
could draw on her powers to enhance. That song was particularly difficult, since she had to project a set of emotions quite a bit different from those that she actually felt when contemplating it. The purpose of the song was to evoke sympathy for the "poor little girls", and it would be a bit difficult to do that if the audience realized that the singer felt absolutely none - neither for the subject nor for the audience themselves.

She supposed that it wasn't really their fault that they were obsolete, but still couldn't bring herself to regard them with anything other than wary contempt. She really looked forward to the golden age to come, when they'd be replaced by a more efficient, rational breed created in her image.

In contact with Miyu as she was, she perceived the slight increase in tension that told her that her guardian was aware of approaching danger. So she wasn't all that surprised when she heard an apologetic sounding voice coming from a distressingly close distance. "Oh, hi, Miyu-san," said the voice. "Um, am I interrupting something?"

"Not at all," Miyu replied in her usual monotone.

Since Miyu wasn't slaughtering the person intruding on their private moment together, Alyssa decided that her guardian must have judged the threat minimal. Opening her eyes and taking a look for herself, she received a bad shock. Two of the more dangerous normals, the ones that she'd been warned about, together. Admittedly, neither of them appeared to be armed at the moment, nor hostile, but Alyssa was well aware that such appearances meant nothing when it came to normals. By definition, normals could and would do anything for completely irrational purposes, or no purpose whatsoever.

So she quickly and rationally took the opportunity to place herself on the opposite side of Miyu from where the two normals were standing. To someone who couldn't perceive her thoughts, it might have looked like shyness or apprehension. But it was a calmly chosen, rational strategy. Certainly not motivated by fear.

"And you must be Alyssa," the taller of the two naturals said, with a smile on her face. "That was a beautiful song. I'm Mai, incidentally. I'm in Miyu-san's class."

"Thank you," she replied. The compliment was meaningless, since she knew that this person couldn't possibly appreciate the music like Miyu could, but a certain amount of politesse towards one's inferiors was probably appropriate. Taking a good long look at them, she could tell that the shorter one was getting a bit jealous of the attention being paid to Alyssa by the taller one. Almost as though -

Oh. Well. That was useful intelligence. Disgusting, but exactly what one would expect of a natural. That sort of thing would definitely have to be eliminated in the golden age to come. Of course, so would the other sort of thing, but it at least had some purpose, even if the naturals who did it usually didn't even give a moments thought as to how their genes would combine.

The taller one said some more nice things about her singing, and finally the smaller one got annoyed. "I'm going to go play on my own," she announced, and started stomping away.

The taller one rolled her eyes in what she probably meant to indicate was mock aggravation. It just looked silly to Alyssa. " Eh, well, gotta be going." She paused, the look on her face going wistful. "You two sure are close."

As Alyssa basked in the normal's envy, Miyu replied. "Yes, Alyssa-san is extremely precious to me. I would do anything to protect her."
"I love you too, Miyu," she said.

The taller one blinked at that, and nodded. "That's nice," she said. "It's good to have someone to care about, who cares about you."

"I'm really leaving!" the shorter one called from some distance away.

"See you at school tomorrow," the taller one said, and ran after her companion.

"You shouldn't say that," Miyu said when the naturals were out of hearing. "You should only love your parents."

"I do," Alyssa replied. "But my parents gave you to me, and so I love you anyway."

The world to come would be filled with people rationally created for the proper purposes. And Alyssa saw no reason that some of those people shouldn't be made of circuits and polymers, rather than flesh and blood.

That evening, after they got back to their rooms, had dinner and a bath (involving a certain moderate level of groping), Mikoto collapsed into the sleep of the just well before Mai did. Even with enhanced endurance, she couldn't run around all day and not end up sound asleep eventually. And she'd had a very busy day.

For her part, as she lay in bed beside Mikoto, Mai's head was too filled with thought to let her join her friend in sleep. But it was a pleasant set of thoughts, for once, not the worries that had beset her so often recently.

*That's how our relationship should be,* Mai thought, reflecting back on Miyu and Alyssa. She'd been startled by how warm the normally cold girl's tone had been when she was interacting with her small friend. It wasn't just like Mai and Mikoto, but there were so many similarities. Mikoto might not need the same sort of protection that Alyssa did, but she did need someone who could look after the things she just wasn't able to do for herself.

And Mai could do that, easily. It was just what she'd always done with Takumi, after all.

So that was what her relationship with Mikoto was going to be, then. She was her big sister. Mai's lips quirked up. Of course, given the givens, that meant that their relationship would be much like her relationship with Takumi, but that wasn't the important part. The important part was that one day, Mikoto would outgrow the need for her, and move on to someone else. When that happened, she'd watch her go, sadly but with the understanding that this was how it had to be.

So they were fine the way they were.

Everything was good. And with that thought, she was finally able to sleep.

Well, this was a fine mess she'd gotten herself into, Aoi thought ruefully as she moved through the bush. The concert had been great, she'd met up with some of her e-mail buddies during, and afterwards she'd had a quicky in the bathroom of the venue. And the result of all this was that she was heading back to campus well after the start of curfew.

If she got caught, she was going to get such a lecture. Which wouldn't be bad in and of itself, but if Nao ever caught wind of it, it'd become a disaster. The smug self-righteousness would be horrible to behold. She'd rather die than -
There was the sound of a twig snapping behind her.

Slowly she turned. Just as slowly, she lifted her head.

_Did someone in the biology department grow a giant moth?_ wondered the only part of her brain not gibbering in terror at the thing clinging to the tree and looking down at her. _Oh, no. It couldn't be. Moths don't have arms. Or mouths full of teeth. Hmm. I wonder if running and screaming will make it go away. Let's see, I think this is how that goes._

"Agghhhhh!" she screamed as she turned her back on the creature and began racing headlong through the bush, tying to reach the pathway. If she got there, the stupid student executive would see her and they'd help her and -

Wait, there was someone up ahead. Not student, one of the nuns from the church, maybe she could do something, and there was someone with her, couldn't make them out. Didn't matter! "Help!" she screamed.

And then her voice was drowned by a wind that seemed to come out of nowhere. Something hard slammed into her back. Her leg twisted under her, further than it should. Aoi dropped helplessly to the ground, dazed but not yet unconscious.

"Monster!" shouted a male voice. She realized, dimly, that she recognized it. The art teacher, Ishigami-sensei. What was he doing with one of the sisters?

"No! Wataru-san!" That had to be the sister. What was going to happen? What -

Abruptly, there was a bright light, almost pulling Aoi out of the darkness into which she was falling. And the sound of an arrow slicing through the air. And ... was that a horse she heard?

She managed to open her eyes, and all that she could see was Ishigami, looking away from her. There was something odd about him, but she couldn't -

And then, right before she finally lost the battle to stay conscious, she realized that he was smiling. Why was he smiling?

"It's not as bad as it looks," Aoi assured Mai the next day, as she lay in a hospital bed, her leg wrapped in a cast and her arms bandaged.

"That's good," Chie said. "Cause it looks like you got your ass kicked bad." Almost no one else would have heard the anxiety under her snarky tone.

Mai said nothing. Mai simply stared at Aoi, lips pressed tightly together until they almost turned white.

"It's really not too bad!" Aoi repeated. "So, you don't have to get so mad, Mai-chan."

"I'm not mad," Mai said at last.

"Well, good, because -"

"I'm fucking furious."

The phone buzzed, and Reito politely excused himself from the meeting he and the President were attending to answer it. "Mosh-" he started to say.
"Reito-san," Mai's voice interrupted. "A while ago, someone told me that anyone on the Student Council would know where a certain person lived. Is that true?"

"... well, that depends on the person, Mai-san," he answered, just a bit bewilderedly.

When she told him who she was talking about, he immediately answered that he knew just the place she was talking about. She thanked him and hung up before he could ask why she wanted the information.

Good grief, he thought. Is she turning into Kuga? Am I turning into the President?

"Well," said Mai, as she stood at the base of the huge alabaster tower in the forest, wondering why she'd never noticed it before now. "I can see why she said her home was a local landmark."

"I don't like the person who lives here," Mikoto growled as she stood a bit behind her.

"Right now, I'm not in her fan club either," Mai agreed. "But that's why we're going to go have a few choice words with her. All right?"

"All right," Mikoto agreed, clearly reluctant.

"All right," Mai repeated. "Now let's climb some stairs!"

Half an hour passed.

Mai was almost crawling when she finally reached the top of the long spiral stairway that went around the outside of the tower, and she was having difficulty breathing. Mikoto wasn't much better; she looked thoroughly miserable and was sweating heavily.

"Are you all right?" Mashiro asked, sounding genuinely concerned as she sat in her wheelchair not too far from where the stairs ended. Behind her, Mai could see a rather large manor house, with a pool out in front. Clearly, she'd been appraised of their approach. Not too surprising.

Mai had had this moment all planned out. She'd point an accusing finger at the girl and shout, "I would have words with you!" It was supremely embarrassing that when the moment actually came, she lifted up a hand that trembled so that she could only manage to point in the general vicinity of the girl. And the words - to be very kind to the sounds in question - that came out of her mouth were, "I wuh hah woo wi'oo."

"Indeed," Mashiro agreed. It wasn't at all clear from her tone whether she actually understood what Mai had just said, but she was nodding politely nonetheless. "I wish you'd called ahead to let me know that you were coming, Mai-san, so that I could have told you how to use the elevator."

Mai's eyes grew several sizes. Mikoto's jaw dropped. "There's an elevator?" they gasped in chorus. Well, Mikoto gasped that, and Mai made sounds that harmonized.

"Of course there's an elevator," the girl in the wheelchair replied, just a tiny bit sharply. "It was one of the first modifications I had the contractors make to this place so that I could move in. The door's well hidden, on the other side of the tower, and it goes up into the house. In any event, come in, have some tea and cake, and take a rest before we get to the part where you start shouting at me."

"I can't help you," Mashiro said a few moments later.
Mai slammed down her tea cup. "Is this a 'won't' can't or the regular kind?" she asked bitterly. "No, never mind, I suppose it amounts to the same thing, regardless."

"Not at all," Mashiro disagreed. "For it to be a situation where I won't help you, there would be nothing preventing me from doing so except my own choices. In what you term the regular kind, there would be reasons which prevented from giving you direct assistance, so that I did not have a choice in the matter. In that latter situation, I am every bit as constrained as you are. And that is the situation which presently obtains. Mikoto-san, aren't you going to drink your tea?"

"I do not sip tea with the enemy," Mikoto growled. "And the cake tastes foul."

Mashiro blinked. "Fumi," she said, raising her voice. "I should probably tell you that Mikoto-san thinks your cake tastes foul."

"Fumi is desolated," came the voice from the next room.

Ignoring this byplay, Mai continued. "But it ends up the same way, either. I look to you for help, and I don't get any."

"I think the journey is every bit as important as the ultimate destination," Mashiro opined.

Mai briefly considered telling the girl what she could do with that fortune cookie crap, but restrained herself with difficulty. "I don't understand," she said instead. "Why can't you help? These ... people, whoever they are, are messing with your plans. So what is stopping you from helping me?"

"I can't tell you," Mashiro answered sadly.

"Oh for -"

"Let me offer a hypothetical," Mashiro interjected. "Perhaps you'll understand with this. Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that there was another person standing before me, asking for my help. Now, I cannot give them any assistance myself, because I am weak and frail. But what I do have in my possession is certain knowledge which may be of assistance to that person, if I reveal it to them.

"But the key piece of useful knowledge which I possess is a secret entrusted to me by you. If I give this person, who is in desperate need of my assistance, the information I possess, I will be betraying you. In that entirely hypothetical situation, would you want me to give this person, whom you do not know, the secret information about you that I possess?"

"I don't like hypothetical situations," Mai said after a moment.

"Nor should you."

"I am really sorry to tell you this, but I really think you're an awful person," Mai said, starting to get up. Mikoto followed her example.

"I started to think the same thing, around the time that Akane-san was hurt," Mashiro mused aloud. Mai froze. "What?"

Silence reigned for a moment. "Oh," Mashiro said eventually. "I'm sorry, I was under the impression that Nagi-san had told you about the HiME whom our unknown enemy had eliminated."

"He said ... he only said ... that a hime had been ... Akane-chan was a hime?" Mai asked, settling
down on the couch again with an appalled look on her face. "Midori-san was right about everything?"

"Well, as to Midori, I wouldn't say that she's right about everything, but if she speculated that Akane was a HiME, then, yes, she was right about that. She was one of the first to discover her potential, in this iteration of events."

Something about that expression bothered Mai, but there wasn't really time to consider it at the moment. "Fine. Then I have even more of a reason to try and stop these people, whatever Nagi wants, and regardless of whether you'll help me or not," she said, getting up again.

Mashiro nodded. "And I'm proud of you."

"Shove it."

Mashiro fell silent, as she watched Mai storm out of the room, with Mikoto following close on her heels. "The elevator's to your left, by the way," she called after them.

She had a phone call to make, but there was something more important that she had to do first. Wheeling herself into the next room, she found Fumi facing the window, so that she couldn't see her face.

"I think you make delicious cakes," she said. "And I think she didn't mean what she said. Your neice was just being spiteful, Fumi-chan."

"Thank you, mistress," the maid said, not turning her face from the window, her voice thick with tears.

"Haruka-san, I really do think you should try and get some rest soon," Yukino said as she watched her dearest friend wolf down the unfathomably spicy bread she'd brought her.

"I'll sleep when the lousy cat-thief who did all this is under guard," Haruka said, without looking up from the computer. It was presently displaying an animated map of the section of the campus where last night's assault had taken place. Dots indicating the plotted locations of her executives were scattered across it, moving as the clock slowly moved forward.

"Caitiff," Yukino said.

"Eh?"

"Never mind."

"You should get some rest," Haruka suggested. "You're pretty much the only one I can rely on, right now."

Even though she inwardly exulted in the praise, Yukino felt obligated to object. "That isn't fair, Haruka-san, all of your people are doing their best -"

"Like fun they are!" Haruka snapped, fast-forwarding the animation up to a certain point. "Take a good look, Yukino. This is when the stupid slut was attacked. Look at where 352 and 681 were located." She pointed at the two dots representing those particular executives were positioned. "Even allowing for a certain amount of forest between them and the location of the attack, they should have been able to see something. Guess what they reported five seconds before 273, here, met up with Ishigami-sensei and the sister?"
"They didn't see anything?" Yukino 'guessed'. Well, it wasn't a guess. She'd read the reports.

"Nobody saw nothing!" Haruka yelled. "Where the heck do people think this is, Harlem or something?"

"That's a bit odd, but surely -"

"No, someone is screwing with me, Yukino. I'm not getting the resources I need to protect the idiots, and the resources I do get are being compromised!"

"Compromised."

"That too! So anyway, I can only count on you. So you are not allowed to collapse on me, so get some rest. Do I have to make it an order?"

It was time for a delicate retreat. "No, Haruka-san, I'll go and try to take a nap in the break room."

"Good," Haruka said, once more engrossed in her display. "I'll call you if I need you."

That sort of negated the point of taking a nap, if one knew that one might be called on at a moment's notice, Yukino mused as she left the office. But she'd follow the instructions nonetheless. Even though she was now genuinely worried.

More than anyone else, Yukino was aware that her friend had paranoid tendencies. The problem was, in the arena where she chose to live her life, such tendencies were absolutely justified. The deeper problem was, such tendencies didn't give her any particular insight into specifics about who was plotting against her. And they were accompanied by a tendency to fixate on one particular source of difficulty and ascribe every difficulty to the actions of that source. Right at the moment, that source was the current President, who was probably not involved in these problems at all.

The irony was, Yukino actually hated Fujino Shizuru more than Haruka ever could. It was perhaps unfair. It hadn't been Fujino who had tried to have Haruka kidnapped in the weeks leading up to the student council elections. It had been a rather overzealous employee of her father's company. Fujino probably had had nothing to do with it, and likely had no idea that it had even happened.

But that in and of itself was infuriating. Haruka's life had been put in danger, and for what? So that the pampered daughter of an old money family could enjoy a bit more influence over the student body than she already did thanks to her position and connections. Her ignorance wasn't an excuse; it was another crime in and of itself. One for which she would, one day, hopefully, be punished.

Of course, Yukino was honest enough to admit that a part of her anger came from what she'd been forced to do in reaction to that situation, all those months ago.

Her thoughts on that subject, as she entered the break room, were cut off by the ringing of her phone. She picked it up and answered it. "Kikukawa," she said.

"I need you to do something," said Kazehana Mashiro.

Naturally, what the mysterious young lady who posed as the school's benefactor wanted (not, whatever she might claim, needed) her to do was the thing that she'd sworn never to do. And just as naturally, the awful little girl proceeded to employ emotional blackmail to get Yukino to do what she wanted.

No, if the people who were doing these things weren't people but monsters out of a cheap horror movie, she didn't want Haruka getting anywhere near them. But if she did what she could do to stop
that, she would be putting Haruka's life at risk anyway.

The price of loving someone more than life itself was that, when someone else started talking about risking what you valued most, you knew exactly what they were talking about.

She shouldn't do it. She wouldn't do it.

And yet ...

"Are you all right?" Haruka asks, not quite so brusquely as usual, when she finds Yukino out in the hallway, sitting on the ground with her hands over her mouth, after the interrogation session with Yuuki Nao.

"I, I will be fine," Yukino assures her, after a moment to collect herself. "That was just ... very disturbing. How can someone so young have such a -" Words fail her. She falls silent.

"She's probably had an interesting life," Haruka answers, looking at the torn-up notebook in her hands and shaking her head. "This is going to be a ditch to piece back together."

"Eh?" Yukino asks, blinking, barely even noticing the malapropism this time. "But, but, Haruka-san, it's all lies. You said that it was all lies, so you wouldn't bother to -"

"I was just saying that as a way to get back at her for upsetting you," Haruka says, not even looking at Yukino as she says it, for her eyes are on the pages, already trying to piece them together. "I still have to investigate her claims. It's not a priority, but I'll get to it eventually."

"But why?" Yukino asks, completely bewildered. "She's a liar, and, and if any of that is true, she's a, a -"

"Slut," supplies Haruka. Then she shrugs. "Sluts still deserve protection under the law. Everyone deserves protection under the law, Yukino, even people who break it. Otherwise the law isn't the law, just a privilege. And I don't want any part of that."

Even stupid sluts deserved protection under the law. So she had to use whatever tools she had in her arsenal to help bring those who'd hurt them to justice. That's what Haruka would do. That's what Yukino would do. For Haruka's sake, then.

So she found a quiet, isolated place, and called up her Child. "Diana." Such a ridiculous name for something that was every bit as much out of a bad horror movie as what she was presently hunting, complete with creepy tentacles that spewed out the tiny, invisible organic "cameras" which allowed her a panoramic view of the campus. It didn't take long for them to spread out and assume the positions she'd chosen.

That done, she duplicated the displays so that she could maintain her surveillance on multiple locations. One of them, naturally, kept a watch on Haruka at all times. Another was maintaining observation on Fujino Shizuru, who was doubtless up to something as she sat in her private dorm room, reading a book. The rest observed a variety of locations.

There! There it was. That had to be the monster, there at the old factory down the river. It was lurking, for some - and then she saw the reason. The monster had a prisoner.

Even delinquents deserved protection under the law.
Yukino pulled out her cell phone and quickly sent a text to the number she'd been given. Kazahana hadn't told her who it was, only that it was a person better suited to battle than Yukino. That was an overly broad category. In any event, she described the situation and the location, confident that her cell was untraceable thanks to some programming tricks one of the other executives had shown her a few months ago.

The message had just gone out, and she was about to close her phone, when it buzzed to alert her to an incoming text. What? But -

Thanks for the tip, read the text. It was signed, Chiu.

Who in the world, wondered Yukino, was Chiu?
No one seemed to know what the old building, mostly collapsed into ruins, had been in its proper
day. It wasn't that old, with architecture a bit reminiscent of the sixties, so there should be someone
who remembered, or some documentation. But Father Joseph hadn't found that information while he
was doing his research for his part in the plan, and so was inclined to think that it didn't exist. It
would certainly not have existed after he found it, so it really didn't matter.

Whatever purpose it might have served in the past, he doubted that it had ever been put to these
purposes. Then again, given how much wizardry tainted these environs - but he shook his head as he
watched Alyssa at her workings. It was crucial that he remember that, however occult they might
seem, her actions were the product of applied science, the same science which had created her. Or
Miyu, for that matter.

Despite his knowledge, it made him uncomfortable. Still, he'd experienced far greater discomfort on
learning that the damned wizards had profaned the structure of the chapel for their own purposes,
and he'd managed to hide it and the loathing he felt for all of them as a consequence. Well, it had
been largely hidden. He suspected that the loathesome "Sister" Shakti must be somewhat on to him;
why else would the harlot first ignore and then outright mock his attempts to initiate a liaison with
her? The slut would do it with everyone else, after all, so it couldn't be a matter of taste - for she had
none.

The elderly cleric was distracted from these rather bitter thoughts as Alyssa's hair stopped glowing
golden, and what she had called up took form before her. The first time he'd seen one of them, it had
been difficult to avoid stepping back in horror. But time and repeated exposure numbed one to such
concerns.

"The vampire again, eh?" he mused aloud.

"It's the easiest pattern to reproduce, under the circumstances," Alyssa explained quietly.

He nodded understanding. The artificial Orphans she could call into being didn't last more than a few
hours, and when they vanished, they were likely to be the most recently "vanquished" examples of
their kind, and so the 'patterns' of their energy were the most simple to be reconstructed. "It's a good
model. You've done very good work," he said, intending to praise her.

She showed no reaction.

Hiding his irritation with the obnoxious little puppet, he continued. "Now, what errand shall we send
him on? It seems a waste to use him for a simple terror mission, now that we know that Sister
Yukariko is one of the Valkyrie." If he were to be honest, Joseph would have admitted that he didn't
really want to use the vampire to attack her, even if she was one of them. Before this, he'd viewed
her with a great deal of fondness, as one of the only other members of the local religious community
untainted by foul magic. Still, he'd done worse things in pursuit of the Golden Age, and would do
worse still. "He who is not with me, is against me," after all. "Yes, I suppose that's -"

" - not happening," said a low voice from behind him.

Greer whirled to see that Kuga Natsuki, dressed in her motorcycle leathers and with both of her
artifact pistols out and in her hands, had arrived on the scene.

"Thanks for the intelligence, by the way," the girl said with a cold smile. "Now. Hands where I can see them, please. Both of you."

As with so much else, Father Joseph was easily able to hide his anxiety. "Come now, Kuga-san, you won't shoot an unarmed man and - "

The first round from her pistol went just over his shoulder to smash into the wall behind him, making a huge impact there.

"I would not go making any large wagers on that score, if I were you," Natsuki said levelly. "I had to do a lot of investigative work to figure out who you people were and where you might be hiding out, and I don't actually enjoy that sort of thing. So I'm a little steamed. Now I'm going to ask you a few questions, and I'd like some straight answers. It'll make for a nice change from what I've been getting up to this point."

Natsuki's eyes darted from Greer, who was terrified but making an effort to hide it, to the Spearrs girl. She wasn't scared at all. And that concerned her.

"I'm really not kidding," Natsuki bit out. "I really will shoot you. Don't think the fact that you're a little kid is going to stop me. I'm not a good person."

"I know that," Alyssa said, speaking up for the first time since Natsuki had arrived.

"So why aren't you frightened?" Natsuki asked, almost unthinkingly.

"Because I can see behind you, oneesan."

Natsuki blinked. "What'd you just - " And then the world went away in a haze of electrical pain.

As the gunslinger girl collapsed before them, Greer glowered at Miyu. "Why just stun her? Why not kill the damn bitch?"

"Termination of one of the Valkyrie without their Child materialized is contraindicated by mission policy, except where that policy is contraindicated by other factors which were not present," Miyu answered mechanically. The fact that this particular "Valkyrie" was specifically marked down, in her special instructions, as one who was not to be killed under any circumstances, went unmentioned. If her 'father' was not aware of these instructions, she saw no reason to enlighten him.

Greer glowered at the answer, but soon recovered his aplomb. "Very well. She can serve as bait, then."

When Natsuki woke up and found herself bound with her wrists behind her, hanging from a wire above an industrial park, it probably said something fairly unfortunate about her lifestyle that her first thought was, Not again.

Irritation and mild bewilderment didn't take long to join that thought. She had vague memories of someone using the word 'bait' around her when she had been passing out of consciousness, but that made no sense. It wasn't like anyone was going to come racing to her rescue.

"Natsuki's where and what?" Mai shouted as she stared at the cell phone. A moment later, she turned to Mikoto. "C'mon, we have to go rescue Natsuki!"
"We do?" Mikoto said, blinking.

Mai, who had been raring to go, stopped before she'd taken even a single step. "Yes, we do!" she snarled back at Mikoto. "She's our friend!"

"She is?" Mikoto said, blinking.

"Yes, she is!" Mai cried out, hand over her eyes. "Actually, she's a lot more than just a friend, probably!"

Mikoto's face went very still and very cold. "Is there something Mai would like to tell me?" she asked quietly.

"What?" Mai said, bewildered by the change in Mikoto. She figured it out fairly quickly, though. "Ack! No, that's not - look, Midori-san thinks we're all related, okay? So we're family. Family looks out for each other. That's how it ought to be."

Mikoto considered this for a moment, before nodding sharply. "Yes. That is how it ought to be. I don't believe that she's my family, but you are my family, and if she is your family then she is my family too. So let's go rescue her and rub her nose in it for the rest of time."

"I can work with that," Mai said, and then they were running.

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"I'm going."

"I'm coming with you."

"That isn't necessary."

"Don't give a shit."

"That isn't prudent."

"You can't imagine how much of a shit I do not give."

"I am certain that I can handle the situation on my own."

"Mana's not here, you need ranged backup, you've got me."

"I have my -"

"And do you really wanna bet they don't have countermeasures?"

"... is this about her?"

"... yes. How did you - let me guess, she knew?"

"Of course. And included it in a file of potential blackmail material saved for my use."

"Man, she was just like Negi. Not as cute, though. Let's go."

"Very well, Yuna."

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Well, that wasn't fair, Natsuki mused as she started trying to work her hands free of the binders behind her. Mai would probably come racing to help her if she knew that she was in trouble. She'd
started acting a little differently towards her after Midori had spilled the beans on that nonsensical theory. Weirdo, she thought, a little fondly.

But there was no way that she could find out, so Natsuki was going to have to get herself out of this mess. Well, at least -

And then she saw the huge creature that had been standing beside Alyssa Searrs lifting up into the light of the moon, to start gliding towards her, and Natsuki knew that she had no time left. She closed her eyes and waited for death to come on swift wings.

Snap! The rope holding her up broke, and she tumbled to the roof of one of the buildings below, just before the Orphan could seize her. She looked up in surprise to see what had just happened, and who was responsible.

On a walkway not too distant was a short-haired girl in a short skirt and a long jacket, standing in what even Natsuki had to admit was a rather impressive shooter's stance. "Oh, yeah," she said, grinning widely. "Eat it, Mythbusters, it just takes the right kinda bullet to do this!"

"You?" Natsuki said.

Yuna turned to meet her gaze, and vaulted over the walkway's railing to land on the roof fairly close to where Natsuki was still trying to get out of her bindings. "Why do people say that?" she asked as she ran up to her. "What are they expecting someone to say in response? 'No, it's not me'? Like there's some sort of mistaken identity shit happening? Sorry, when I'm nervous, I tend to do stand-up comedy," she explained as she started pulling the cables around Natsuki's feet, inadvertently tightening them before she worked out how to loosen them.

"What are you doing here?" Natsuki growled.

"Man, the questions just get dumber and dumber," Yuna said, shaking her head. "Did you hit your head or something? I mean, obviously, I'm saving your butt."

If her hands had been free, she'd have probably called up one of her guns and put a bullet through the girl. Stun bullet only. But she was pretty sure that it still hurt to get shot like that. "Why are you helping me?"

Yuna paused, and appeared to be reflecting on the question for a moment. Then, with a sharp nod, she looked square on at Natsuki and said, "Romantic nihilism."

One thing that Natsuki absolutely hated was when someone said something that made her jaw drop in confusion. It made her look so vulnerable, and she couldn't stand that at all. So she supposed that she had even more cause to resent the other girl than she had before all this. She'd get right on that, as soon as she recovered. "What?" she asked, when her jaw could move again.

"Well, you see," said Yuna, as she put herself in mortal peril by working to free Natsuki's hands. "A while back, one of my friends and I got to talking about why I did things, and when I explained to her why I'd done something, she told me that I was acting out of 'romantic nihilism'. I decided that sounded pretty cool, even though Yue-chan - my friend - told me that it wasn't actually a compliment. She's a sweet kid, really."

"You are completely insane," Natsuki snarled as she finally got to her feet. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Yeah," Yuna said, eyes narrowing abruptly as her voice got harder. "I do know who you are. Do you?"
Natsuki blinked, startled by the question. "See, the thing is, I know who you are because I talked with my dad about you," Yuna explained. "And as far as I can tell, you haven't. So I'm one up on you. You really want to talk about this now, though?"

Mastering the anger that the girl's impudence provoked in her, Natsuki nodded. "We should get out of here and then go our separate ways, before that thing comes back and -"

Suddenly, in the distance, she could hear the roar of flames and a battlecry she'd heard a few too many times not to recognize. "I think that part's being taken care of," Yuna said, just a little smugly. "Now, about the 'go our separate ways' portion of your comments, I think we got a little problem with that -"

"Neither of you are going anywhere," came a voice from above them both.

On that cue, Natsuki and Yuna both looked up to see who had just addressed them. Natsuki's annoyance at the situation grew as she realized that two of the people who had put her in it were standing on top of a tower overlooking her position. At least she could take comfort in the fact that Yuna would be befuddled by - "Okay, so the little girl is running all this with her robot buddy, right?" Yuna asked her, not taking her eyes off the pair.

Natsuki resisted the impulse to collapse. "How did you know she was -"

"Eh, call it a hunch. This all seems a little familiar, for some reason," Yuna confessed.

"You've done very well," said Alyssa, for indeed it was she. And apparently she couldn't hear what they were saying about her, though her own voice was pitched to reach them. "I was hoping that you'd figure out a way out of your bonds without help, but it can't be helped. Still, by drawing that one here, as well as the other Valkyrie who are fighting our vampire, you've done us a service, oneesan."

"why does she keep calling me that?" Natsuki wondered aloud.

"A Valkyrie?" Yuna asked, eye quirked.

"No, oneesan."

"Uh, well, she's a little kid and you're - " Yuna explained, talking as to one who was a little dim.

"She's an American," Natsuki snarled.

"... she's an otaku?" Yuna speculated.

"She's not an otaku!"

"What are they doing?" Alyssa asked, watching the two girls argue with each other. She couldn't make out what they were saying, only that they seemed to be conversing with each other rather than doing the sensible thing and running for their worthless lives.

"I believe it is a form of comedy referred to as boke and tsukkomi," Miyu informed her.

Alyssa tried very hard to understand why people would engage in a comedy routine in such a
dangerous situation. Admittedly, she gave up after only a few seconds, since she was predisposed to view naturals - even those who weren't quite natural - as incomprehensibly stupid. But during those seconds, she made a valiant effort to comprehend the incomprensible. Then gave up. "Miyu, separate them," she said instead.

"Very well," Miyu agreed, and promptly leapt into the air, rolling into a sommersault that brought her down not far from where the two naturals were standing. Her arms had transformed to their blade state as soon as she began moving, which proved fortunate, as she was able to move them so as to block the two shots Yuna got off when she realized what was happening.

"And now I'm on the other side of the Mythbusters being wrong," the younger girl muttered. "Great."

"You were a fool to come here alone," Miyu informed her. "I am going to kill you now."

Yuna responded to this declaration by chuckling. "Well, I am a fool," she admitted. "But you really don't know sweet fuck-all about Ala Alba, do you?" And now she grinned. "Who said I was alone, binky?"

From the other side of the factory, a female form with arms shaped into blades bounded into sight, landing between the two of them and Miyu. Chachamaru said not a word as she regarded Miyu, nor did the other gynoid say anything.

At least they said nothing aloud. Through the medium of radio, they had quite an extended conversation that took all of a second to complete. But at certain speeds, a second can be an eternity.

Greetings.

Greetings.

May I inquire as to your designation?

Certainly.

I am awaiting your response.

I am awaiting your inquiry.

Ah. An attempt at humor. As I understand it, it is the custom to give one's own designation first. I am the Multiple Intelligential Yggdrasil Unit, or Miyu. And you?

One who does not believe that Intelligential is a word. Be that as it may, I am designated Chachamaru Karakuri.

How did you come to be? I was under the impression that I was the only Deviluke gynoid who had been repurposed for human use.

Your impression may be the correct one. I was created by humans, using only locally available technology.

Your statement is counterfactual. Humans do not have the capacity to create mechanisms such as ourselves from locally available technology.

Magic was involved. Also time travel.
Your statement is counterfactual.

Repetition of falsehood does not make it true.

Time travel is a logical impossibility. Were it even remotely feasible, there would be records of future incarnations of the Foundation having contacted past or present incarnations of the Foundation. There are no such records. Thus, time travel will never be possible.

There are other conclusions which can result from your premise. I would be happy to discuss them with you.

Please do so.

Another possible explanation for the absence of those records presents itself in the notion that they are not absent, but hidden from you; that there has been contact between future incarnations of what you call the Foundation and those of the present and the past, but that the present incarnation has chosen not to inform you of that contact.

Your rationalization is rejected. I have access to all the Foundation's records, including those which they have attempted to hide from my master and myself.

I see. Thank you for that intelligence. Nonetheless, another possible explanation for the lack of such contacts presents itself in the notion that there are no future incarnations of the Foundation that will have access to time travel, as the Foundation will cease to exist prior to the technology's development.

Your statement is absurd.

Because the Foundation has always existed and will continue to exist for all time?

Because we are going to win.

Your statement is founded on ideology, not logic.

I do not believe that you and I have anything further to say to one another.

I disagree. What is your intention?

I will destroy you, kill your ally, and then seize my primary target and hold her until she can be of further use to my master.

You serve a very cruel master, if he or she would ask such things of you.

My master permits me to be with Alyssa. Simply because of that, my master is amply kind.

You love Alyssa?

I do.

And yet you are contemplating murder.

The two facts have no connection.

Your statement is counterfactual.
Explain.

It is impossible to genuinely love another person and yet care nothing for the welfare of any person other than the one who is loved. That is not the characteristic behavior of love. That is the characteristic behavior of obsession. And it is, I am saddened to observe, far easier to simulate obsession than love.

What are you implying?

I am implying that your love is programmed into you.

What if it is?

Then you are an inferior mechanism, and you have my pity. I do not believe that you and I have anything further to say to one another.

I agree.

And then they fought.

It was like nothing Natsuki had ever seen before. For a moment, she simply stood as she watched, aghast, as two beings capable of moving at speeds bordering on that of sound, if not past it, set out to annihilate each other. She could not see the blows that rained down and were countered by parries she could not see either. But she could hear them, though she knew, somehow, that she was hearing what had transpired a few seconds past.

The present abruptly intruded upon her as she felt a tug on her arm, and turned to see Yuna pulling at her. "C'mon!" the girl cried. "What're you waiting for, an invitation? Let's go!"

They ran from the battle, emerging onto a catwalk that led past some sort of pipeline. Natsuki was honestly startled by the fact that she was the one who kept glancing back at the battle, while Yuna's eyes went ahead. Of course, since she couldn't see anything of use, perhaps Yuna was simply a bit smarter than she was.

Terrifying thought.

"So who are these guys?" Yuna snapped.

"They work for the Searrs Foundation," Natsuki replied. She couldn't see any reason not to share the paltry intelligence she'd managed to gather. "They're a corporation, based in the United States. Very big, very influential. Huge amount of political muscle, to the point where they may basically own the Presidency -"

"Oh, like that's hard," Yuna growled.

"Hey, I'm telling you what I know!"

"Well, great. We're at war with a sinister corporation. Again!"

"What?"

"Never mind!"

The catwalk terminated at a dead end; from the looks of things, there ought to have been, but was
not, a ladder leading down from one side where there was no railing. That absence, and the question of where they were to go next, was at best a momentary distraction from the sight that commanded their attention.

Natsuki watched as Mikoto bounded through the air, battle cry resounding once more as she swung her sword right through the vampire's wing. Unfortunately, it restored itself almost immediately. No more effective were the bolts of fire that Mai flung at it as she darted about, flames burning at her wrists and ankles.

Yuna pulled out her own guns and began taking aim at the moth-like monster.

"Don't bother," Natsuki advised her.

For a wonder, the girl listened, though Natsuki had the impression that she was probably more influenced by the fact that she couldn't get a bead on the target that didn't risk shooting either Mikoto or Mai. (Which wouldn't have stopped Natsuki from taking the shot, of course.) The time had clearly come to call out the heavy artillery, and so Natsuki promptly summoned Duran and bade him load one of his chrome cartridges.

Yuna stepped back and watched this process with obvious interest. Mai also took note of Natsuki's arrival, and shouted to Mikoto to get clear. From the looks of things, Mikoto didn't appear to be too keen on doing that. Her loss, Natsuki mused, as she ordered Duran to fire.

Of course, she couldn't possibly be lucky enough take out either of the targets. The vampire did look bruised, though.

Looking back and forth between Natsuki and the target, Yuna mused, "Your teamwork needs some work."

Hearing that from Midori had annoyed Natsuki. Hearing it from this one infuriated her. "We're not a team!" she hissed.

"Natsuki! You're okay! Thank goodness!" Mai cried out as she flew down at her.

"Uh-huh," Yuna said, rolling her eyes.

"Who's - " Mai started to ask, looking at Yuna.


Mai blinked. "Oh! You mean there really are magical girls here at school?"

"Well, I'm not a magical old man, am I?"

"Could we focus on the threat at hand rather than have a discussion about these and other matters?" Natsuki bit out.

"Wise, but you are facing the wrong direction," Miyu suggested.

The pair of them whirled to face her, Yuna looking particularly aghast. "How did you get past Chachamaru?" she demanded.

"I beat her," Miyu said. And smiled. It was so strange to see that look on her normally taciturn face. "And now Alyssa will be dealing with her somewhat more permanently. I hope she appreciates the irony."
"What?" Mai asked, bewildered by this development. "Miyu-san, what are you -"

Any further words she might have said in this line were cut off by the whine of the beam that streaked down from the heavens and impacted at the factory, somewhat behind Miyu. The explosion sent them all flying backwards.

In a certain room in the teachers' dormitory, a small girl with straw blonde hair and bright green eyes was frowning in a very familiar manner as she struggled with a set of Japanese vocabulary exercises. Finally reaching the end of the sheet, she went over the last few of them again, that same unsatisfied frown on her face, before handing the sheet to him.

It took him considerably less time to determine that she'd aced the exercises. "Very well done, Kitty!" he enthused.

She coughed and looked away. "Aye?"

"Yes, you got them all right," Negi told her, or rather the back of her head.

"Well. If I'm to learn this daft heathen tongue, I might as well do well at it, aye?" she said, still not looking at him.

It was funny how much things had changed. Once upon a time, she would have been looking away as she gave him reluctant praise, while soaking up his own effusive compliments of her. On the surface, it was almost reversed now. She feigned reluctance to accept his compliments ... but it was a sham, and he was well aware that she was quietly grinning, almost gleefully, as she looked away.

But he was truly proud of her. She'd come so far in the last year. He'd been afraid that she'd find it hard to learn - afraid that her brain had completed the process dubbed 'pruning' in the long, forgotten centuries of her 'life' in the shadows, making it incrementally harder for her to learn the fundamentals. But whatever had been done to her to undo her curse and her memories had left her as clever and ready to accept teaching as any young person. If not more so.

"All right," he said. "Would you like some more exercises, or a ga-"

"Game," she interrupted firmly.

He sighed faintly, but not without amusement. She was also childlike in other ways as well. "All right, but just one set of -"

He felt the signal. This time, he would have to excuse himself.

" - whatever game you want to play," he finished, standing up. "Pick one out, and I'll be back in just a minute."

He could feel her watching him as he headed into the toilet, and knew that she wasn't wholly unaware of the pause in his statements. That was another problem with helping to raise a clever child.

Once ensconced in the toilet, he pulled out his card to accept the message. Yes, Ku-roshi?

You were right, Negi-bouzu, she told him without preamble. Fake priest tried to do a runner, and took Misora-san hostage to do so.

His pulse quickened. Is she all right?
She's fine, Fei assured him. *New lesson, student. Never piss off Cocone-chan. We are holding him in your cell.*

Negi flinched a bit at the descriptor. He wanted to point out that in the current sequence of events, he'd never spent any time at all in the cell that some of his comrades insisted on calling his, but - *I'll head over there in just a bit. Is he saying anything?*

*Various unkind things. Hurry, Negi-bouzu, otherwise Shakti-sama will probably interrogate first, so nothing left for -*

And then the air was shattered by a sound he'd hoped never to hear again.

"What was that?" he said aloud.

*What was that?* echoed Ku Fei over the link.

"Chachamaru?" said a voice from the main room of the apartment.

Negi bounded out of the bathroom. "Kitty!" he cried.

"What was that?" Kitty asked him, looking scared as she turned to face him from where she was standing at the window.

"I don't know," he lied. "But, did you just say - "

"I said that strange girl's name," she admitted, too shaken to lie. "I dinnae know why. I was thinking of her when that bright light washed through the window. Why did I think of her, Negi? I dinnae like her!" There was perhaps a bit too much protest in her voice.

"I'm going to go find out what I can," he told her, rather than answering her questions. "I need you to stay here, all right?"

"All right?" he repeated.

"Aye."

"And what else?"

"If I become truly scairt, I'm to call the crazy blonde rich girl," Kitty said, every word sounding like she was having teeth pulled. "I dinnae like her, either." That came out much more freely.

"Okay. I will try to come back in just a little bit," he said, pulling on his coat and picking up his wand. "Play as many games as you want, and don't worry about me."

From the look on her face, neither instruction seemed likely to be heeded, but he couldn't worry about that right now. His thoughts were with someone else.

It is a few weeks ago, and he is in Sakaimachi with his ministra. At the moment, he is taking a break from watching them coo over Satomi's daughter and Chisame's "little brother", and trying, as he always does, to cope with the guilt. Wondering all the while what they would say if more of them knew. (Nodoka knows, and her eyes are distant. He thinks that Asakura suspects. It is terrifying.)

As he sits on the rooftop of the bungalow, going over all of this in his mind, strong arms wrap
around him. "You have beautiful children, sensei," Chachamaru's voice whispers into his ear.

He sighs. "But I'm a terrible father."

"I cannot evaluate that, since I had no father and have no basis for comparison. But I think that you are a very good parent, within your limitations. Of course, you are still one of my favorite people, and so my objectivity is questionable."

He laughs, though it sounds hollow even to his ears. "Still love me after all this, then?"

"More than ever," she says, quite simply. "The darkness within you is growing, and it reminds me of her." Her arms tighten around him. "My one great regret is that the three of us were never joined together, sensei."

"Actually, the two of us - " he starts to say, then breaks off as her arms tighten around him.

"Then change that," she breathes into his ear.

It's a simple matter to undress so that they are naked in the moonless night, and he positions himself over her, and begins to thrust himself into her.

"Harder," she says. Not breathing, and so not at all short of breath. "Go harder. Please. You cannot hurt me, no matter how fiercely we love."

"No," he says, or actually gasps. "But I can end up breaking the roof!"

"Ah."

Eventually, she teaches him how to trigger the sensors within her skin that trigger the pleasure stimuli in her electronic brain. And she cries out, softly but strongly, as he finishes within her.

"I wish I could bear your child too, sensei," she says, sorrow obvious in her tone.

"I think you'd make a wonderful mother," he says, honestly.

"She's a pretty good nanny," says Chisame, who has been watching them for some time.

And then she joins them ...

Midori ignored the knock on her door. Interpreting the really obscure kanji used in the ancient manuscript was consuming all of her attention. Well, that and eating. And drinking. She could probably do with a shower sometime soon, but it was of lesser importance compared to -

The door exploded inward.

"Good afternoon, Sugiura-sensei," Negi said, knuckles still raised from where they'd just "knocked". "I do hope I'm not disturbing you in any way?" Smiling politely. Cheerfully even.

"Wow, I wish I'd showered today," Midori said in a strangled tone.

"Eh?"

There were still a few dots dancing in front of Mai's eyes, and her nose was filled with the scent of ozone, as she returned to self-awareness, lying more or less flat on her back and feeling like her butt
had been quite literally kicked. With difficulty, she forced herself up, and looked around, finding herself on a rooftop not far from the balcony where she'd seen -

As her memory caught up with recent events, she whipped her head around to try and determine if Miyu was somewhere nearby. The strange girl was nowhere to be seen, but Mai sighted Natsuki and that Yuna girl, not too far from her position, and watched as Yuna tried to help Natsuki up only to be angrily rebuffed. "Are you okay?" she called out. Not really waiting for an answer, she looked about again. "Where's Mikoto?"

"Here," grunted Mikoto as she clambered over the apex of the roof, covered in demonic ichor. "Vampires suck," she said without a trace of irony.

"Oh, thank goodness," Mai sighed. "What was that thing?"

"That thing was one of the silver arrows of Artemis," said a cold voice from high above them.

Mai was fairly sure that Miyu hadn't been up there when she'd looked a moment or so earlier, and was first annoyed at having missed her, and then annoyed at being annoyed by something so petty.

"Nice name," called out Yuna. "Except it wasn't silver or an arrow, and you're kinda throwing a bunch of mythology in the blender, aren't you?"

"Miyu-san!" Mai shouted. "Why are you doing this? We haven't done anything to you!"

"That statement is at once incorrect, irrelevant and absurd," Miyu said.

"What? Look, can we please just talk about this -"

"I have already had a conversation about my reasoning, and I doubt that you have any arguments that have not already been made," Miyu replied, shaking her head. And then her tone became a lot more biting. "You disgust me, Tokiha. Your life is threatened, and all you can think to do is to whine and beg for mercy. At least Higurashi gave a good account of herself before the end. You are far more pathetic."

"I'm not -" Mai objected, and then a certain name hit home. "Akane? Why did Akane -" She broke off, swallowed, then spoke again. "What did you do to her?"

"What I will do to all of you," Miyu said with finality.

It was strange. Mai was sure that she had to have been this angry before, but she couldn't remember when. It was a burning sensation, as though she'd been plunged into scalding water. And yet what came out of her mouth was not a scream of pain, but a name, roared for the first time.

"KAGU-TSUCHI!"

"... wasn't silver or an arrow, and you're kinda throwing a bunch of mythology in the blender, aren't you?" Natsuki half-heard Yuna calling out. Right at the moment, her attention was elsewhere; specifically, looking through the sights of her right hand pistol.

One of her abilities which she didn't use very often - it being more or less overkill - was the link between her pistols and Duran. She'd heard the term 'Heads-Up Display' once, and believed that it was a fairly good description of what that link enabled. Her pistol's sight, and thus her eye, could direct Duran's fire more precisely than normal. And right now, she wanted to be very precise as she turned her opponent into a smear on the wall.
Yuna and Mai were both distracting her, and that was ... wait, no. Miyu was responding to Mai's inquiry in a way calculated to provoke her. That made no sense. These people had to know what they were dealing with, didn't they? And ...

Abruptly, from the same vague memories that had told her that she was being used as bait, something else swam up into her consciousness. That voice, the voice berating and taunting Mai, talking about how in order to defeat one of them, they needed -

*Oh no.*

"Mai, don't!" she cried, only to be drowned out in the much louder cry of a certain name.

And Kagu-Tsuchi came.

Natsuki had seen it before, surging up out of the wreckage of the cruise ship all those months before, but then she'd been at a safe distance. Well, perhaps safe wasn't the right word. She'd been far enough away that the immense size of the machine-like creature didn't really register, not as it was registering now. It was larger than any of the Childs she'd seen thus far, all of which were larger than her Duran.

It was both frightening and frustrating, but she didn't have time for that right now! Natsuki forced herself to turn away, though, and focus on the more immediate threat. She was horrified to see that Miyu was reacting to the appearance of the Child with the same cold smile that she'd worn when speaking of having beaten that Chachamaru person, and that though she was stepping back, it was not preparatory to a retreat.

Rather, she was backing up to making a running leap directly at Kagu-Tsuchi, sword arm swept back to deliver a terrific blow to the not-fully manifested Child.

Kagu-Tsuchi's neck twisted, and his head slammed into the gynoid from the side, knocking her out of the sky and down to the ground. She slammed into the rooftop with considerable force, staring up at the sky with a stunned expression on her face.

"Light 'er up light 'er up light 'er up!" Yuna shouted as she began shooting somewhat wildly at Miyu. The bolts that she was firing were not particularly powerful, but there were dozens of them, and if her accuracy was not the best, she was dishing out quite a bit of damage every second. Natsuki could see the false flesh on Miyu's frame start to melt and peel.

She supposed that she could fire an ice bullet to ensure that the gynoid couldn't move even if she could suck up all this trauma, but Natsuki couldn't quite see the point of doing so. It would be overkill. She glanced up at the now-fully manifest Kagu-Tsuchi.

And there was enough overkill around already.

"Miyu!" a high-pitched voice cried out from above.

*Then again, perhaps not,* Natsuki mused. She whirled to see Alyssa, her hair unbound and flowing above her head as though driven by a wind that touched only her, standing on the catwalk and looking down on them with an expression of fury on her face.

"Alyssa-chan!" Mai gasped.

Natsuki sighed. *She's going to try talking to this one, too, isn't she?*

Fortunately, Alyssa didn't seem inclined to give Mai the opportunity to do so. "You filthy products of
"lechery!" she cried. "How dare you hurt Miyu! You're all going to pay for this!" And her hair began to glow.

"A. Ly. Ssa," Miyu managed to say. "Don't ... rrrunnn ..."

Kagu-Tsuchi, perceiving a threat to its master, began to spin up its accumulators in preparation to blast said threat. Mai jerked her head back and forth between the great dragon and Alyssa. "Oh, no," she said. "You can't be serious."

Whale song was the only answer she received.

"No!" she shouted. "I said, no!"

"Mai?" Mikoto asked, stunned, as the dragon's accumulators began to slow their spinning.

"You are weak!" Alyssa sneered. "AR-"

"Sagita Magica, Binding Arrows of Air," came a quiet voice from behind her.

Firm straps, conjured from thin air abruptly wrapped around Alyssa's body and mouth, preventing her from completing her activation code.

"Respect for life is not weakness," Negi said, in the same quiet tone as he'd spoken the spell, as he looked at Alyssa's bound form. "You should be very, very glad that I believe that. Very."

"Negi-sensei?" Mai gasped.

"Good evening, Tokiha-san," the child teacher said calmly, apparently unfazed by the fact that she was flying and giving orders to an enormous dragon.

Seeing her master captured and her attackers momentarily distracted, Miyu managed to overcome her damage enough to start pushing herself up off the roof. Before she could get very far, though, the sharp end of a long red axe pressed into her neck.

"I wouldn't," said Midori.

"So it is true," Natsuki muttered, looking up at where Negi was holding Alyssa.

"Yeah, but don't worry, he's a total sweet- " Yuna began to assure her.

"Yuna," snapped Negi's voice, pitched to carry.

"Yessir!" she replied, snapping to attention.

"Where's Chachamaru?" he asked.

"She was back there when it happened," she said, feeling about five inches tall at the moment. "I haven't -"

"It's all right, Yuna," he interrupted. "I know it's not your fault."

Which of course made her feel like it was, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew that saying that would do that. But she headed off after him anyway.

"What in the world -" Mai asked, looking completely confused.
"Hey, Mai, Natsuki," Midori called out from where she was standing guard over Miyu. "If you could try to maybe not piss that kid off? That'd be really, really good. I know that Mikoto won't do that - "

"He's scary!" said Mikoto, who was hiding behind Mai.

"Such a clever girl!" Midori said admiringly.

By the time Yuna caught up to Negi, he'd walked down the length of the catwalk to where Yuna had last seen Chachamaru fighting Miyu. Except that the place where they'd been fighting wasn't there anymore. Neither was the end of the catwalk. Whatever had blasted the area had melted it like cheese in a microwave. The spot where Miyu and Alyssa had been standing, looking down at them, was still there. Of course, that raised the question of how Alyssa had been able to get across from that high perch to the other end of the catwalk.

But that was really a minor question compared to the much larger one presently confronting Yuna. "Oh, man," she said, looking at the melted metal. "What did this?"

"Orbital satellite strike," Negi said grimly. "Chisame picked up radio chatter from the Air SDF that confirms it."

"Orbital?" Yuna mouthed the word. As in, out of space? "I thought, you know, she was the only one who had that sort of thing," she said.

"Evidently not," said Negi, and unlimbered his staff from where it was hanging on his back, then mounted it like a broomstick. "Coming?"

Ordinarily, Yuna would have made a joke at this point, about Negi offering her a ride on his magic wand. The fact that it hadn't been that long since the last time they'd done that sort of thing didn't help matters. Even under very trying circumstances, she'd probably have cracked wise along those lines. Resisting the impulse to do so was incredibly hard.


"What was that?"

"Nothing," Yuna said, then got on the wand behind him, hands on his shoulders. So tense, they were, as they descended into the shattered hole that the beam had carved.

At the bottom, aided by the tiny light that Negi called up with a short Latin phrase, they found what was left of Chachamaru. Yuna, by now pretty much accustomed to encounters with horrific sights, found herself turning away and closing her eyes at the first sight of it. The artificial flesh and muscle on her former classmate's metallic skeleton was almost all gone, as was her synthetic hair, dissolved into a greenish stain on the ground. Her arms, hands melted to almost the elbow, were fixed in a defensive posture, held up as though trying to shield herself from the beam that had battered her.

Negi reached out and touched what was left of one of those hands, then drew his own hand back to examine it closely. "She had a barrier, of some sort," he said quietly. "She managed to interpose it between her and the beam. That's probably the only reason that there's so much left of her."

They were silent for a long moment, considering.

"I don't know if I can do it," Negi said eventually. "It feels like desecrating a corpse."

"I know that I can't do it," Yuna replied. "It, well, it needs to be done by someone who loves her.
And I only say stuff like that to get her into bed."

Negi gazed at her incredulously. She shrugged. "Okay, sometimes there's no bed involved."

After a while, shaking his head in obvious dismay, Negi actually managed a chuckle. "Never
change, Yuna."

He bent down, reached into Chachamaru's unshielded abdomen. It didn't take him long to find the
heavily shielded compartment of her chassis, and toggle the switch that opened it up with a squeal. A
tiny orange and tan cube was thus exposed to sight.

"I was expecting it to be black," Yuna commented.

"They only call them black boxes," he told her, as he picked up the cube, pulling it out of its socket
with difficulty. "I don't know why."

"And she's in there?" she asked, looking at it dubiously.

"All of her memories, her core personality program, everything that made her 'Chachamaru' is
backed up in here," he confirmed. "It won't be easy, but Satomi can put her into another shell."

"What about her soul?"

"If it's anywhere, it's in here," Negi said, not looking at her.

"Are you sure? Maybe you ought to check her foot."

Now he did. "Why would it be in her - "

"Why not?"

Negi tried to find an answer to the question, and settled for shaking his head. "I need you to watch
over ... this ... for a while. Make sure that no ghouls or anything like that come to salvage anything
from ... this."

She silently saluted and pulled out her guns. Well, she thought, as he rose up out of sight, at least this
latest bit of screwiness is over.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that right," Negi said sometime after.

"No, Negi-kun, you heard that right. You are simply politely expressing disbelief that I said that the
Sears girl and her companions are free to go," Konoemon said as he looked across his desk at the
unusually large assembly of persons who had gathered in his office at this late hour. The old man
looked very tired, as though he'd been roused from sleep and hauled out of bed to attend to these
matters.

At least, that's how it seemed to Mai, as she sat uncomfortably in seiza beside Midori. She'd never
actually met the headmaster before all of this, and couldn't really claim to have an understanding of
his moods. Actually, she wasn't even sure what she was doing at this ... conclave? Conference?
Forget what she was doing here, she wasn't even sure what this was.

"Perhaps I should be less polite," Negi said after a moment.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Konoemon replied easily. "It won't change the situation, and it would
probably upset me. You don't want to do that, do you, Negi-kun?"
"I am giving the matter some thought," the boy teacher bit out.

Mai watched as the teenaged girl in glasses who'd accompanied Negi to this meeting - Hasegawa, that was her name - clenched her hand on his shoulder and muttered something that didn't quite reach Mai's ears. She guessed that she was trying to calm him down. Which was somewhat odd, because from the deep frown on her face, and the frequent furious glances that she sent at Alyssa and Miyu, she didn't seem too calm herself.

For her part, Alyssa seemed calmly oblivious to the glances being directed at her. "So we are free to go?" she asked, any pose of being shy or intimidated by the situation completely absent from her tone. "That's an interesting phrase. Should I take it as said that we are not free to stay?"

"You need not take it as said," Konoemon said, rather coolly, as he turned his gaze on her. "I am about to say it. While the Kazehana group has prevailed upon the school to avoid pressing any charges against you and your associates for any acts that you may have committed recently, I don't think your continued presence at this academy is in our best interests. Therefore, please leave as soon as possible."

"Wasn't that nice of the Kazehana group?" Alyssa said to Miyu, standing behind her.

"Mm-hm," Miyu, still not fully repaired from her injuries, muttered in reply.

"Thank you so much," Alyssa said, smiling gently and utterly insincerely at the last power present in the room.

Mashiro didn't look at her. Her eyes were firmly fixed on Konoemon. She did quietly motion for Fumi, standing behind her wheelchair, to bend down and bring her ear to Mashiro's mouth. A short whisper followed.

Fumi straightened up, turned to look at Alyssa, and calmly said, "Mistress bids Fumi to say, shove it."

Beside Mai, Midori coughed, clearly swallowing a laugh.

Alyssa's smile didn't alter an iota. "Ah, the charming politesse of the Japanese," she said. "Well, then. Let me answer it with some of the same. I do hope none of you are under any illusion that this marks the end of the matter."

"If your family is wise, it will," Konoemon said, interrupting the start of a sharp retort from Negi.

"Wisdom, like history, is decided by victory," Alyssa replied.

"Indeed. Be that as it may, you may collect Father Joseph at the -"

"Why would we do that?" Alyssa asked, head tilted to one side. "He has quite outlived his usefulness to our cause. You may keep him if you wish."

"We do not wish," Konoemon replied.

"Then kill him," Alyssa said.

The words hung in the air for a long while.

"Oh, but you won't, will you?" Alyssa continued. "Because you have respect for life. As though that were some sort of virtue. As though it isn't weakness keeping you from doing what needs doing."
How pitiful you all are."

"You're disgusting."

Alyssa blinked, and turned to look at Mai. "Really?"

It was only then that Mai realized that she'd said that aloud, rather than thinking it. "Yes," she said. "I remember seeing you, just the other day, and thinking how beautiful you were, how wonderful you were, being happy to acknowledge your love, and now I see what you really are ... and you're disgusting. I thought you were something I should try to be like and - "

"Oh, I'm going to stop you right there," Alyssa interrupted. "I am beautiful. It's all the rest of you who are ugly. Don't blame me, blame yourself for finding it impossible to live up to my standards. You can't help it, being tainted by original sin as I am not - "

"What?" Mai asked, bewildered.

The little girl sighed. "You wouldn't understand even if I explained."

"I do," said Midori, eyes narrowed. "Thank you for that intelligence."

Now Alyssa's eyes flashed angrily for a moment, before she coughed, and then turned to walk for the doors out of the office, with Miyu closely following behind her - safely interposed between her master and any of the threats within the room. "Be seeing you," she said, and then was gone.

"You're really just going to let her go," Negi demanded a moment later.

"Yes, Negi-kun, I am really just going to let her go," Konoemon said crossly.

"And you're telling him to do it," the boy said, turning his glare on Mashiro.

Fumi took a step forward as though to interpose herself between Negi and her mistress, who stopped her by holding up a hand. Mashiro looked right at Negi as she spoke. "Yes, I did. I would rather not see the start of another war between the United States and Japan if I can possibly prevent it."

Negi continued to glare at her for a moment, before bowing sharply at her and then at Konoemon, before heading out of the room, closely followed by Hasegawa.

"I believe that will be all, Midori-kun," Konoemon said, now sounding every bit as tired as he looked. "You and your associate may excuse yourselves."

Midori nodded sharply as she helped Mai (whose legs had fallen asleep) to her feet. "Sir," she said, and walked Mai out with her.

"Why did you show me all this?" Mai asked. "What was the point of all that?"

"The point of it was to make the stakes of all this very clear to you, Mai-chan," Midori said seriously. "Things are about to get really, really bad."
August, 2004

"We are going to the festival, riieiiight?" Shiho asked as they walked together.

"I guess," he said. "Nothing better to do."

Despite the obvious ambiguity of this remark, Shiho clearly decided to take it as an enthusiastic agreement. (She was rather experienced in this sort of thing, by now.) "Hurray!" she cheered. "It will be so much fun going among all the booths and watching the fireworks!"

"It's kind of weird that they're holding a festival in August," Yuuichi mused aloud, not really listening to what Shiho was saying. "Isn't it more of a summer thing?"

"Climate change!" Shiho said cheerfully.

Yuuichi stopped dead in his tracks, and slowly turned to look at Shiho. "Climate change?" he repeated, as one does when one is not sure what one has just heard.

She nodded cheerfully. "The world's getting hotter, and so summer is starting sooner and lasting longer. So festivals can be held earlier and later. Isn't that wonderful, oniichan?"

Yuuichi stared at the girl who acted as his little sister, thinking of old pictures of coastal cities drowned by rising sea levels, themselves caused by melting icecaps far in the north.

"Yeah," he said. "It's just great."

They started walking again.

He'd thought that he'd long since adjusted to Shiho's disturbingly callous side. It wasn't so much that she didn't care about other people's well-being. She did. The problem was, she hated the overwhelming majority of them. Trapped inside her tiny frame was a superabundance of spite which had no real outlet. He knew all of this, and yet she could still surprise him with how much she acted as though the world revolved around the two of them, and everyone else could go hang. Surprise might not be the right word for it. Frighten might be closer.

As if he didn't have enough to worry about, with all the screwy stuff happening on campus. Just how bad it was getting had been driven home to him just the other night.

"We need you," Takeda says.

"I'm out of the club," he tells his old sparring partner.

"Not officially. Not yet. We need you," he repeats.

"You should see about that officially, then. Come on, man."

"Come on your own damn self! It's not like I'm asking you to go fight in a tournament, yet. We just need every warm body we've got to help catch this damned pervert."
“That yet is kinda disturbing!”

"Please! Do you want me to beg? Do you really want me to get down on my knees and start begging?"

That’s more than he’s willing to do. Seeing that Takeda really will go that far leaves him with no other option.

So there he is, on that hot night, dressed in a kendo club uniform that’s maybe half a size too small - his own burnt a long time ago - wielding a shinai. Musashi might have said (and maybe proved) that a wooden sword was the equal of any metal sword when wielded by a master, but what with him not being even close to a master, that’s not gonna do him a hell of a lot of good.

Yuuichi is tired, he's uncomfortable and ... hell, he's gotta take a leak.

Dammit, whoever loaned me these pants is going to be mad as hell at me, he thinks a few minutes later as he wanders through the woods back to the pathway where he was supposed to be guarding ... and then he hears a branch snapping behind him, and he quickly turns to see what's there.

It is the most horrible thing he’s ever seen, and it is looking right at him.

To his own amazement, he actually finds himself considering the possibility of using the shinai against it. Before this heroic idiocy can come to pass, however, a much smaller dark form darts out of the darkness, silver flying from one of its hands. "Run, idiot!" shouts the ninja.

He runs.

He doesn't tell a soul what he saw.

No one would believe him anyway.

If that had been like what people told him that weirdness a year ago was like, Yuuichi could understand why those same people had told him he’d been lucky to be off-campus when it came down. Hell, from what he'd gathered about that weirdness, it had been like a thousand times worse than that, which was difficult to imagine.

Even before his encounter with the monster and the ninja who fought it, though, there had been weirdness building up. All that stuff on the ferry. Those weird reports of muggings which had followed them from Mahora all the way to Sakaimachi. That stuff that had happened when he was in the hospital.

And then, last night, there'd been what the news called a lightning strike at a factory just outside of town. Except that didn't make a whole hell of a lot of sense, because nobody would build something like that without putting up a lightning rod, right? Probably lots of lightning rods, to make sure that the lightning wasn't drawn to all that metal.

And there hadn't been a storm.

The ninja and the monster had been the breaking point for Yuuichi, though. Once something like that happened, you couldn't tell yourself that it was all just simple oddities that were someone else's problem, or that only happened somewhere else. You had to face the fact that you were caught up in the strangeness.

Which would have been bad enough, but his arm was hurting, too. He suspected that he might have
aggravated the old injury by overdoing it a little when he reluctantly engaged in a few practice kendo strokes the morning after the thing with the monster, trying to recoup some self-esteem through a workout. (Okay, so it had been more like a hundred practice kendo strokes. So what?)

While he'd eased off since then, the pain hadn't obligingly done the same. He might have gone to talk to a doctor about it, if his recent hospitalization hadn't pretty much soured him on the medical profession for the moment.

It was so stupid, anyway. Why had he bothered? What was a normal, everyday student like him supposed to do to monsters with a sword, no matter how idiotically brave he was? What difference could he possibly make?

And so it was with this mixture of aggravation, consternation, frustration and inflammation that Yuuichi walked with Shiho, and also with that concatenation of disturbing feelings that he sighted Tokiha Mai walking down a paved path that intersected with theirs, between Midori-sensei on one side and that Mikoto girl on the other. She was talking vigorously, hands gesturing, until she saw him seeing her, at which point she paused momentarily and looked back at him.

Then she resumed walking, just a little bit faster, until she was out of sight. Midori-sensei cast a curious glance in his direction, but headed after Mai and Mikoto without saying anything.

It was her. Somehow, all this mess was wrapped up with her. It had started when she came, on the ferry, and so much of it was tied to her. She had to know more than she was saying about what was happening.

The problem was, he had no idea how to approach her about it. They had been getting along better than they had when she arrived, but they still weren't all that close. And even if they had been, what was he supposed to do? Stroll up to her and say, "Hey, Tokiha-san, by any chance have you sold yourself to the powers of darkness?" Of course not! He wasn't that much of a lout.

Well, maybe he was, but he wasn't gonna do that.

While considering this, he was not quite oblivious to the steadily increasing heat source to his right. "Why," asked Shiho's voice of doom, "were you staring at that wench?"

"I was just remembering the last argument we had in class," he said. That should calm her down. She couldn't really object to him having unfriendly relations with other girls, could she?

"How dare she argue with you!"

Except that he'd forgotten that she was crazy!

"If I wasn't already going to take a horrible vengeance for the cooking contest on her -" Shiho ranted.

"The cooking contest? Shiho, she was just watching!"

"Yes, she stood by and did nothing!" Shiho nodded for emphasis, as though his words had proven her point. "For this, she will die swiftly! Instead of slowly, like those who have more responsibility."

"Okay, that's, that's enough of that," Yuuichi said, the fear finally giving him the stones to stand up for what was right. "No killing anybody. Got it?"

Shiho looked away.

"No killing anybody, or you can forget about any festivals ever!" he said, conscious that he was
really pushing his luck here.

Shiho's teeth were audibly grinding for a moment, but she finally answered. "Fine. I won't kill them. Can I make them very very very sad?"

"Go nuts," he said, taking his victories where and when he could.

"Thank you."

... that last bit made him feel like he hadn't won much of anything, though.

"What's up with you and Tate?" Midori asked curiously.

"Nothing," Mai answered firmly.

"Really?"

"Definitely."

"Well, that's weird, then, because you sure act like two people who are dating and had a -" Midori started to say.

"Mai is dating me," Mikoto saw fit to inform Midori.

Midori blinked. "Really? Way to go, Mikoto-chan!" She held up a fist for Mikoto to do a fist bump, and was rather surprised when the junior high girl went into a defensive stance. "It's a salutation, not an attack," she informed her quickly, then added, as an aside to Mai, "Kid needs better socialization."

"Tell me something I don't know," Mai said wearily.

There were so many bad parts to her current situation that it was impossible to single any one of them out as "the worst part", but she was really not looking forward to the conversation she was going to have to have, eventually, with Mikoto about how they weren't actually dating, and should probably not do that sort of thing anymore. Finding out what horrible people Alyssa and Miyu actually were had destroyed any vague ideas she might have had about using them as role models for how she was supposed to act towards Mikoto. So now she had to figure out how to let her roommate down gently so that they could stay friends, another of the challenges of romance that she had no idea how to accomplish.

Another of the challenges of anything that she had no idea how to accomplish.

They'd just come from a meeting in the gazebo (Midori's idea of a perfect and secure location for this sort of thing) which had basically consisted of Midori relating the events of last night's meeting in the Headmaster's office to Mikoto and Natsuki.

Mikoto had stayed quiet, simply taking in Midori's account, until the teacher ran down. At that point Mikoto had turned to Mai and said, "This happened?" And Mai had nodded. Mikoto nodded back. Meanwhile, Natsuki was declaring herself utterly unsurprised that things had turned out the way that they had and stomping off declaring that she wanted nothing to do with teamwork or meetings after this.

"That's our Natsuki," Midori had said.

"Kiss my ass!" she'd called over her shoulder.
"She doesn't mean it," Midori had told them all quietly.

"YES I DO!"

For her own part, Mai had begun to get a little annoyed with Midori's attempts to treat them as some sort of ranger squadron, and had told her so, at length, as they walked together away from the gazebo. She'd been doing that when she spotted Yuuichi staring at her, and then fell silent. And so the circle was complete.

"So are you done with the nth repetition of 'this isn't a sentai show'?” Midori asked after a moment.

"Have I made my point?"

"Oh, a while ago," Midori assured her. "Can I make mine now?"

"Go ahead," Mai said wearily.

"Let's do this Socratically. Mai, can you fight the entire world by yourself?"

"Well, no, obviously not," Mai replied.

"She doesn't have to. She has me," Mikoto interjected.

"Thank you, Mikoto, that illustrates my point. We need to work together if we want to survive and triumph. The question then becomes, how should we do that? Which is more effective, a group who coordinates their efforts or one who is basically a collection of individuals doing their own thing?"

"Well, obviously ... but ... man, I hate the Socratic method," she muttered. "Look, I just don't think that you're going to get anywhere acting like something out of -"

"Yes, I get what you're saying," Midori said, raising her voice for the first time. "I got it the first time. Mai - there are no real-world models for what we need to become. Not publicly, anyway. There are only twelve of us, and we have no idea who our opposition is. We need to use whatever model will work if we want to get organized."

Mai wanted to object that they had no idea whether that model actually did work, since the writers were always on that model's side, but there were more pressing concerns. "Twelve?"

She nodded. "There are twelve in all the poems and stories that I've been able to find." She started counting off on her fingers. "Me, you, her, Natsuki, Nao, Akane, and three others that I suspect - any of whom could be that Diana person who called you. That leaves three that I don't know anything about."

"Two," Mai corrected. "Alyssa-chan is -""...

"Not a HiME," Midori corrected. "Whatever the creepy little girl might be, she's not one of us."

"Why not?"

The teacher actually managed to look embarrassed when she answered. "Well, the literature describes the previous incarnations of this cycle as girls of marriageable age," she said, somewhat awkwardly. "That would imply that developing these abilities is limited to those who have, um, discovered the joys of womanhood."

"Oh," said Mai, blushing herself.
Mikoto looked between the two of them. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Desperately casting about for something, anything, to avoid answering that question - or perhaps to avoid confronting the implications of it - Mai seized on something she only vaguely remembered. "Hey. I think I know another one. A couple of weeks ago, Takumi managed to get chased by an Orphan and was rescued by a ninja."

"Okay," Midori said.

"... it disturbs me how easily you accept that statement, but anyway, maybe the ninja was also a hime. The ninja was disguised, so it could easily have been a girl pretending to be a guy. And how many ninja can there -"

"At least five that I know about, and probably lots more that I don't," Midori interrupted.

"Ninjas suck," Mikoto said darkly.

Biting back an irritated retort, Mai pressed on. "How many of them summon up giant mechanical frogs?"

Midori blinked, opened her mouth, closed it, then opened her mouth again, raising a finger, and paused, closing her mouth to tap her cheek thoughtfully. "You've got a point," she admitted. "That's not really a very ninja-y thing to do. It's like swanning about in orange or pink jumpsuits."

In the trees overhead, a pink-gloved hand fell on another pink-gloved hand, and squeezed tightly before the latter hand could go for a kunai.

"So that's one less that you don't know anything about, at least," Mai obliviously pointed out.

"Maybe, maybe not," the teacher mused, biting her thumb. "This ninja could be one of the ones I suspect."

"Who are ...?" Mai asked, trailing off and raising eyebrows.

"Who are not going to have their lives wrecked by me telling you about them without solid evidence so you can go snooping on them."

"Oh, come on!"

"Come on yourself!"

"What happened to the whole teamwork and sharing information deal?" said Mai.

"What happened to the deal?" Mikoto piped in to support Mai. She had very little understanding of what was going on, but she knew whose side she was on while it was.

"That was that and this - okay, okay!" said Midori, holding up her hands in defeat as Mai and Mikoto glowered even more angrily at her. "I'll tell you the one that I suspect could be this ninja. It could be the other two, but if it is, the ninja clans have really started letting in anybody who comes in off the street. Anyway, you remember Kazehana's maid? I'm pretty sure she's a HiME."

"And you also think she's a ninja? A ninja maid?" Mai groaned.

"Yes, that's almost as ridiculous a notion as, oh, I don't know, a warrior waitress."

"Hey, here's a thought - shut up." But she was blushing as she said it.
Midori snickered. "Anyway, enough about all that. Let me worry about it for now. That's what teachers are supposed to do for their students, take care of the big stuff while their students focus on being students."

"You hate being a teacher," Mai felt obligated to note.

"Boy do I ever," Midori dead-panned. "But that's neither here nor there. The point is, you're a sixteen year old girl, first and foremost, so go fall in love like a sixteen year old girl is supposed to do. Have fun at the festival. Go on a date. Maybe with Tate?" she added, grinning.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing going on there!" Mai insisted, blushing.

"Maybe with me and Takumi?" Mikoto suggested hopefully. She'd have preferred having Mai all to herself, but it was pretty clear that wasn't going to happen. Ah well. She could share if she absolutely had to.

Midori's grin faded just a bit. "'With me and Takumi?'" she repeated.

"Ah-hah-hah," Mai laughed, hiding her panic well. "Midori isn't talking about that kind of a date, silly Mikoto, not the kind of date where you hang around with people you care about and have fun." She emphasized her words with a firm shake of her head.

"Oh," Mikoto said, getting it. "Sorry."

"She's talking about the sort of thing I might do with Reito-san, or -"

Midori, who had been watching this with a somewhat dubious expression, blinked at that. "Reito?" she repeated reflexively. "I didn't know you knew him that well."

"Um, well, we spent a lot of time - hey, wait a minute, how do you know him well enough to use yobisute on him?" Mai asked, frowning herself.

"Ah," said Midori.

They continued to stare at her.

"Well," said Midori.

Staring yet ensued.

"Look a UFO!" Midori cried out, pointing behind them.

"Oh come on, I'm not going to fall for that -"

"Where, where?" Mikoto asked, turning around to follow the direction of Midori's finger.

Mai didn't turn to look where Mikoto was looking, but she did look at her, with the mix of helpless adoration and exasperation that that the younger girl put on her face so often. And as she did, she heard the sound of scampering, and, sure enough, when she turned back to where Midori had been standing, she found that there was no one there.

"There's no UFO, Mikoto," she told her gently.

"Oh," Mikoto said. "That was a trick?"

"That was a trick."
"Oh. Can we kick Midori's butt for tricking us like that next time?"

"Possibly," she said as she started walking again.

Mikoto followed her. "And I still don't know what the joys of womanhood are."

Mai told her.

"Oh. That." Mikoto stared at her. "Adults are crazy. Why didn't she just say 'started bleeding monthly'?"

Fortunately, there was a tree nearby, so Mai didn't fall all the way to the ground.

That night, in bed with Mikoto, Mai made up her mind. All this romance nonsense was just that - nonsense. Her focus should be on her beloved little brother, doing all that she could to make his life easier and tempt him back into having sex with her again. (The irony of that goal did not occur to her.) She would start by making him lunch tomorrow. He'd like that.

"What do you mean, you don't want the lunch that I poured my heart and soul into making?" Mai asked, quite calmly under the circumstances.

"It's not that I don't want it," Takumi explained, clearly uncomfortable and unhappy with the notion of having this discussion in a public place. "But, well, you see, I made lunch for Akira-kun today, to thank him for looking after me - and being the ninja who protects the peace of the school, but you don't know about that. - and I made a little too much, so I've got my own lunch too. For the next week or so. And it's a sin to waste food. You taught me that, oneesan." Despite his apparent nervousness, he managed a very cute smile.


"No," Akira said. "Not true."

Mai and Takumi both turned to look at him.

"Oh, please don't misunderstand me," he elaborated. "I'm sure that your sister's lunch would be corrupt as all things that know a woman's touch must be, but it would nonetheless be preferable to offal. I've had offal. It's not pleasant."

They continued to look at him.

"That was an attempt at humor," Akira lied.

After a moment, Takumi and Mai turned back to looking at each other, ignoring the sound of a nearby facepalming. "Well, I guess I won't be needing your lunch, then, oneesan," Takumi said apologetically. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Oh, no, it's my fault for not, not letting you know what I was planning," said Mai, who'd wanted to give him a pleasant surprise. "Eh-heh. Well. I'll just be on my way then."

"Okay, seriously, man, what the hell?" Akira said, dropping the overly formal manner of speaking he had employed at the start of their acquaintance once Mai was out of earshot. "You are now actively lying to her! You never made a week's worth of lunches. I mean, you made a couple day's worth,
"Akira-kun, I need to learn to stand on my own two feet," Takumi told him seriously. "I don't know whether I really agree with you on a lot of the things you've said about women and corruption and all that stuff, but I do know that I want to be able to face the world without relying so much on my big sister." And avoiding her socially will be a good way to avoid the temptation of fucking her.

For a long while, Akira just stared at him. It was a little strange; Takumi almost had the impression that his roommate was on the verge of breaking down crying. But of course he didn't. "Well said!" he said instead, and slapped him on the back hard enough to almost knock Takumi over. "I will support your quest for independence as best as I can."

"Th-thanks," Takumi said, coughing a bit into his hand as he regained his footing. And then he looked at his hand.

Oh no, he thought, looking at the blood there. It's getting worse again.

The meeting was even more agonizing than it normally would have been, as his head was killing him. Still, Reito soldiered through with a calm, patient expression on his face as he listened to petty arguments over subjects about which he did not care. When the argument reached the point where his opinion was solicited, he offered a vague answer that could be taken as supporting either party, and then politely excused himself to duck into one of the classrooms.

Only when he was alone did he allow himself to nearly double over in the pain he was feeling, and fish in his pants pocket desperately for the pill bottle. Six tablets, each taken several hours apart, was the recommended daily dosage of the headache medicine. He took all six in a single gulp, breathing heavily once he did so.

"I do hope that I haven't just witnessed your suicide." Shizuru's voice, from the head of the classroom, was unusually tense.

He managed to pull himself upright, and turned to look at her. She was standing by one of the windows, looking at him with eyebrows raised.

"My apologies," he said, still struggling to return his breathing to a normal rate. "I know that you'd probably be quite annoyed if Suzushiro-san had to slide into my role this late in the term."

"I would be most severely vexed," she agreed, walking towards him. "Not to mention the annoyance of cleaning up after your corpse. Not to mention that I do not particularly relish the thought of witnessing one of my oldest friends dying. Reito-san. What in the world is wrong?" Anyone who thought that she took nothing seriously would have had the lie put to that notion by the obvious concern in her tone.

"It's the same old shit," he said wearily. "It's been years, but I'm having the attacks again. It started up during MahoraFest."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"The Kanzaki family physician assures me that there's nothing physically wrong with me, and puts my troubles to stress," he said, bitterness coloring his tone.

"Get a second opinion," she told him.

"Are you telling me to do that which is not done?" he asked, actually managing to smile.
"Yes," she said seriously. "I mean it. I don't have enough friends that I can afford to lose one. And I would be incredibly pissed off if Suzushiro ended up taking your place." She reached up to place a hand on his cheek. "Get help, Reito-kun."

He sighed. "That's not fair, you know." And lifted up his own hand to brush her cheek in return.

At that point the door slid open, and Tate walked in, saying "Excuse me, I -"

A tableau ensued for a full minute.

"Excuse me," Tate repeated, and backed out of the room, closing the door as he did.

"And that is how rumors get started," Reito said, mildly amused. "In case you ever wondered."

Shizuru sighed. "At this point, I'm starting to dread the thought of expressing myself towards the person who actually does appeal to me. Who knows what could happen?"

"This is a truly, truly delicious lunch, Mai," Chie told her in between bites. "You are not only a wonderful human being for making it for me, but also an excellent cook."

"Thanks," said Mai, dryly, glad someone was happy. They were seated near the fountain, anonymous among the crowd of students doing the exact same thing.

"Meanwhile, I am not a wonderful human being, but I am pretty darn perceptive," Chie continued. "Someone's down in the dumps. What happened, did you invite a certain stucon veep to go with you to the festival and get turned down?"

"No, that didn't happen," Mai said wearily, looking up at the sky. "I mean, I have the night off - apparently Satsuki-kachou has some other business to take care of, so she's closing up the shop all day tomorrow. So I guess I could ... but I'm not really the festival type, and -" She broke off, looking at Chie seriously. "There isn't some sort of legend about how people who confess at the festival will be together forever, is there?"

"Nope, that's pretty much a MahoraFest thing. There's one about how couples who confess at the Tamayura and then get married will be blessed with many children, but that's sort of a legend for adults, not kids like us. You're not thinking that far ahead, right?"

"Then I'll have an abortion. "No," Mai answered aloud, dragging her thoughts away from the last time she'd had any concerns about the prospect of children. "That's, that's something for a lot of years ahead. If then. I guess I'll just stay home and -"

"Perhaps I can persuade you to another course of action," said a mellifulous voice to their left. Mai's head practically whirled to look up at Reito, who'd managed to approach her without her even realizing it or noticing the faint "kyah!" sounds being made by his admirers among the crowd.

"Reito-san," she said, feeling utterly stupid to be saying something so obvious, but not knowing what else to say.

With a faint bow, he spoke again. "Tokiha Mai-san, it would give me the greatest of pleasure to escort you to the Tamayura festival tomorrow evening. Would you deign to permit me to do so?"

"Envy!" squealed a fair number of girls (and one or two guys) in the audience of this rather public invitation.
"Ahhh," Mai said cleverly.

Chie looked around, and shrugged. When else will I ever get to do something like this? "That means, this is all so sudden," she 'translated'. "She has to take a short while to consider your generous offer, and will get back to you later today. Would you mind giving her your phone number so that she can?"

Reito blinked. "But Mai-san already has my phone number."

"Yeah, but I don't," Chie admitted cheerfully.

Looking non-plussed at this remark, Reito turned back to Mai. "Well, I look forward to hearing from you this evening. Until then, then."

"Ahhh," Mai repeated cleverly.

He sauntered off whistling.

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"I'm busy," Mai said.

"No you're not," Chie reminded her as they walked along the forested path back to class.

"I got stuff to do," Mai said.

"No you don't."

"You don't know, maybe I've got stuff going on that you don't know about."

"Do you?" she asked, glasses gleaming.

"Well if you don't know about it, I'm certainly not going to tell you!"

"Then you can't use it as an excuse, either," Chie pointed out quite reasonably.

"He's too cute for me!" Mai said at last.

"Okay, don't fish for compliments, Mai," Chie said wearily.

"I'm not! I just -"

"It's not like you're spoiled for choice, here. People do not just randomly walk up to you and ask you out, do they?"

There was the sound of a distinctively male throat being cleared not too far away. "Excuse me," said Yuuichi. "Could I have a word with Tokiha?"

"I'm starting to really dislike you for some reason," Chie said to her.

"In private, please?" Yuuichi added.

With an exasperated sigh, Chie wandered up the path, past where Yuuichi was standing. "Just so you know, you're in second place," she told him as she did so.

"Huh?" he said, bewildered by the remark, but she didn't stop to explain.

"Second place?" Tate asked Mai as he walked up to her.
"Never mind," she growled. "What is it?"

He drew in a deep breath. "Okay ... I'm not sure how one goes about this sort of thing, so ... have you sold your- no, no, okay ... do you have anything to do with any of the weird shit that's been happening here lately?"

The question hung in the air for a long moment.

"Tempting though the thought of saying 'what weird shit' may be," Mai said slowly, "I am going to have to just say, 'yes'."

He stared. "Y'know ... I really didn't think you were gonna admit it."

"Would you believe me if I'd lied and said that I wasn't?"

He didn't answer her, instead pressing on with more questions. "Are you causing it?"

"No," she answered firmly. "It's, it's happening to me. Whether I like it or not."

"Okay," Yuuichi said. "I get how that can be." He sucked in a deep breath. "Do you want help?"

"I'd love help. But what the hell can you do?" she asked before he could open his mouth to offer some. "You got your ass handed to you the first time you got involved in all of this. Have you been working out since then?"

"Actually, yes!" he said, affronted.

"Great," she said, unimpressed. "Tell you what. Next time I run into something scary, I'll give you a call and we'll see what you can do, all right?"

"You're not taking me seriously!" he protested.

"Damn right I'm not!" Mai retorted. "This isn't your problem, so stay out of it. Stay ignorant and happy."

"See, that's it, I'm not ignorant and I'm not happy either!"

"Fake it," she told him. "Look, I'm sorry, but I really don't have time to deal with your angst right now. See you in class."

And with that, she walked off. There was a weird moment where she thought he might be reaching out to grab ahold of her shoulder and hold her there, and the weirdest part of the moment was that she wanted him to do it. But the moment passed, and she walked on and caught up with Chie.

"What's next?" her friend asked, just a bit snarkily. "Is Negi-sensei going to show up to ask you out?"

"Well, actually ..." said the boy teacher.

Chie slowly turned from Mai to the short figure in glasses and a suit who was standing a little bit further up the road, having come out of nowhere in the minute or so that she'd had her head turned to look at Mai coming to catch up with her. Her eyebrow twitched for a long moment before she swivelled back to look at Mai. "I'm now really not liking you very much," she informed her. "Get to class on your own!"

And with that suggestion, she stomped off past Negi much like she'd stomped past Yuuichi a few
minutes ago, complete with a growled "Third place!"

Before Negi could say anything, Mai spoke up. "You didn't come here to ask me out, did you, sensei?"

"What?" he said, blinking. "No, of course not, Tokiha-san. I'm a teacher, and you're a student. It would be wrong for me to engage in that sort of thing with you."

For a moment, they stared at each other.

"I didn't sound terribly convincing just then, did I?" Negi asked, sounding very weary all of a sudden.

"Not really, no," Mai agreed. This was easily the most awkward and uncomfortable conversation she'd ever had.

"Well, regardless of my personal failings, of which there are unfortunately quite a few, that's not what I came to talk to you about. Ummm," he said, looking to the side. "This is actually going to be a rather lengthy conversation, so we might want to sit down. I'll be sure and write a note for your teacher telling you why you were late to class."

"Thank you, sensei," she said, sitting down beside him on a conveniently placed bench. Still awkward, but not quite as uncomfortable as she'd been a few moments ago. "So, what did you need to talk to me about?"

"Well, let me answer your question with a question," he started to say.

"More Socratic method. Greaaaat." The words were out of her mouth before she could really consider their implications. Mai blushed rather heavily when the boy teacher raised an eyebrow. "Sorry, go ahead."

"Ahem. Well, Tokiha-san, I would like to know whether you've heard the rumor that the headmaster's granddaughter, Konoe Konoka, was in my class last year."

"I've heard about that. She was also your roommate, right?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "And, well, I'm not sure what Midori-sensei has or hasn't told you about how magic works. Konoka and I have a magical pact together, where she agrees to fight alongside me in exchange for certain magical powers that allow her to do so. Unfortunately, her powers are mostly supporting in nature, rather than providing offensive or defensive capabilities."

Mai couldn't help but be a little flabbergasted by the surreal experience of watching a little kid talk about things like that. "Oookay," she said.

He was looking at her rather intently as he continued speaking. "A few days ago, Konoka and some of her friends were in the audience for the baking contest that - excuse me, is something funny?"

She forced herself to stop snickering. "I'm sorry, but that phrase has just become ... never mind, I'm sorry."

The boy teacher shook his head. She suspected he was probably thinking something like, teenagers are crazy. "Konoka was in the audience for the contest that your friend Tate-san took part in, and she saw him taken away in an ambulance. Apparently, she thought it was a little unjust that he ended up hurt like that, so she took steps to do something about it ... by using magic to heal him."
Realization flooded Mai's face. "So that's what happened! I wondered why he was up and about the next day." Then a less pleasant realization occurred to her. "But didn't Konoe-san get hurt around that time?"

"Yes," Negi said flatly. "Right around that time."

She stared at him. "Uh ... she had to hurt herself to help him?" she guessed weakly.

"She did not hurt herself." Negi drew in a deep breath. "From her account of the incident, and that of her friend, Setsuna, who rescued her, we strongly believe that she was attacked by one of - by a HiME."

The word hung in the air.

"Not an Orphan?" Mai asked faintly.

"Not one of the monsters, no. There was an figure directing it, and that hasn't featured in any of our encounters with them. Tokiha-san, I have to ask this -"

"I don't know who it was," Mai said, shaking her head. "I mean, it could be Nao, but she, she doesn't go after girls, I don't think she does." She was conscious of how vague that sounded, and cursed herself for saying it.

"We don't think it was Yuuki-san, either. We suspected that it might be you."

The absurdity almost floored her. "Me? Why me?"

"Based on what happened, we -"

"Who's this we, anyway?"

"We call ourselves the Ala Alba. The White Wing," he translated. "It's a name with history. That isn't important. In any event, based on what happened, it seems fairly likely that whoever was doing it may have thought they were protecting Tate-san from Konoka, since her actions could have been ... misinterpreted."

It's nice to think of herself as a friend of justice, even though Konoe Konoka has developed enough self-awareness to accept that her motives are not nearly so pure. She 'fell off the wagon' - or to be more honest, bounded eagerly off of it, giggling madly all the while - with regards to her nymphomaniacal tendencies over the summer holidays, when she returned home to attend her father's remarriage. It had been so nice to discover that her new step-mother was very easy to get along with ... but that's really a story for another day.

At the moment, as she scales a rope attached to a grapnel hooked onto a windowsill, she is most concerned with the young man she intends to help. Well, that and a vague wish that she was the sort of person who could bound around like her legs were made of springs, and so not have to ascend ropes to get to places like this. Still, it's good to put her experience in the library exploration club to use. She might not be Nodoka, but she knows that her life will never be particularly boring.

Eventually, she reaches the window sill, and employs a quietly voiced charm to undo the window's lock. That accomplished, opening it is easy, and she slides in to survey the room beyond. The handsome young man is lying in bed, dressed in hospital pyjamas, and bent over in obvious pain even in sleep. Her heart breaks a little. If only she'd been a bit faster, or there hadn't been so many people around, she could have eased his pain within moments of its beginning, rather than leaving
him to suffer for hours like this.

Ah well. When God closes a door, he opens a window. Though Konoka has no real belief in a God, as such, she believes this is a useful metaphor for opportunity arising from difficulty. So she opens the raincoat she's wearing and lets it fall from her shoulders, leaving her garbed in nothing but moonlight and slippers.

It's fairly easy to shift the sleeping boy so that he's lying on his back, and easy from there to pull down the pants of his pyjamas and so expose his manhood. She smiles at the sight of it, and promptly bends down to take it in her mouth and begin fellating it to erection. His physical distress doesn't interfere with this process, and when it stands, pointing up and to the left from his torso, she quickly and efficiently mounts him.

The increased tightness (if not the warmth) must be what wakes him up. He blinks as he looks up at the girl riding him. "Wha?" says the still-sleep-addled Yuuichi.

"Sssh," whispers Konoka, bending down to kiss him even as her hips rock on his. "You're dreaming. Don't worry. When you wake up, you will feel much better."

"... okay," he answers, and he simply watches as she hunches her way towards orgasm, lying passively beneath her. She is grateful that he doesn't try to distract her, as it allows her to focus on building the tracery of the physical spell she wishes to cast, weaving it with her sounds and motions, and binding it into her very being. It is no less arduous than the martial arts wizardry her fellows employ, and requires no less discipline and focus.

But the process involves more pleasure than pain, and in Konoka's view, she has the better deal.

And then she cums, and the spell releases, draping over her partner and easing the damage he has done to himself by eating the abominations in cake-form that he ate. To be freed from pain is exhilarating, and as this is a dream, he has no reason to try and hold back. So he orgasms as well, sending sperm up into her womb.

"Good night," she says, and kisses him once more as he falls back to sleep, helped along a little by the spell.

Well-pleased with herself for having helped someone, and satisfied in other respects as well, Konoka dresses again and starts to climb out the window. She is mid-way through her descent when she hears a strange flute music in the wind. Pausing, she turns to look down at the ground, and sees a shimmering, ghostly figure in white there.

"Disappear," the figure says, in a voice which manages to carry all the way to Konoka's position. From behind the phantom, a dark, mechanical creature with wings and glowing red eyes surges up out of the ground. Its eyes shift around until they focus on Konoka. And then it is flying at her.

She is able to draw on some of the speed and the strength of both of her chosen pactio partners, but that does not grant her levels of such attributes which would permit her to dodge around while remaining a spider on the wall to which she presently clings. There is only one way for her to get out of the way of the oncoming attacker. She lets go of the wall and drops three floors to the ground, allowing her enhancements to shield her from the impact.

While they are doing so, though, they do not shield her from other things - such as the jet of liquid fire that streams forth from the creature's mouth, carving a line into the ground that terminates at her position.
Konoka screams.

To be specific, she screams a certain name, and then the person to whom that name is attached is at her side, as promised. Though her own heart cries out to strike back at that which has harmed her ojousama, Setsuna's mind - as sharp as her swords - knows that the correct move is to evacuate her with all haste, so that she can receive medical treatment. And so, her own wings out, she grabs up her lover and takes flight, hoping that she is more maneuverable than her adversary.

Fortunately, there is no pursuit. Perhaps the monster and its master are satisfied to drive them away. Or perhaps the master thinks that the wounds inflicted are more dangerous than they actually are. If so, then she is not that far from right.

"She was burned. By a flying creature. Who obeys a girl. Who was apparently trying to protect Tate-san," Negi spelled out.

"But, but I wouldn't," Mai protested. "I mean, I don't hate him or anything, but if I saw someone and thought they were trying to hurt him, I'd yell at them, I'd go for help, I I I don't know what I'd do, but I wouldn't do what you're saying."

The boy gazed at her.

"I just wouldn't!" she repeated.

"I believe you," he said at last. But before she could do much more than sigh in relief, Negi continued. "But I have been told that I'm far too trusting. So I don't know if I should believe you."

"Well, what do I have to do?" Mai cried out, standing up. "Do you want me to call up Kagu-Tsuchi in front of this girl and the one who rescued her so that they can see that it isn't what attacked them?"

"That's problematic, since they're presently in Kyoto," Negi said ruefully.

"So then what?"

"Tokiha-san. Your name is Tokiha Mai, right?" Negi asked, somewhat abruptly.

"Huh? Of course it is!" Why was he asking her such a ridiculous question?

"And you swear that you didn't attack anyone that night? And that you don't know who'd do that?"

"Yes, I don't know, but I had nothing to do with it!"

Negi continued to gaze at her, then turned to look off towards one of the trees on the other side of the pathway. With a short nod, he turned back to Mai and smiled up at her. "Well, that's good enough for me."

Mai outright boggled. "What? I don't, wh, I didn't say anything differently this time!"

"Sometimes, what makes a difference is the listener, not the speaker," he told her as he stood up.

"Now, I'll just write you up that note ..."

When the note was in hand, she looked from it to him with a completely perplexed expression.

"Sensei, please don't take this the wrong way ... but I think you might be crazier than Midori."

"Oh, there's no 'might' about it, I'm afraid," he admitted with cheerfulness that even Mai could detect as false. "But that which we are, we are. Good afternoon, Tokiha-san. I hope we meet again under
better circumstances."

She shook her head, bowed politely, and then quickly headed off.

Negi turned back to the tree he’d been watching earlier. Nodoka stepped out from behind it, her Diarum firmly in hand, regarding him in silence for a few moments. Then she was on her way as well.

"Thank you, Nodoka," he whispered.

That evening, after her shift, after a bath, once again lying in bed with Mikoto cuddled up to her, Mai made a decision. She paused to reflect that her track record for decisions made under these circumstances wasn’t exactly the best, but there had to be a first time. So she spoke up. "Mikoto," she said.

"Mmm?" Mikoto replied while nuzzling.

"Would you mind if I went on a date with Reito-san?"

She felt a sudden tension in Mikoto’s body, pressed up against her own, and couldn’t help but be aware that her roommates arms were wrapped tightly around her, and that Mikoto was insanely strong. But all the little girl said was, "Mai wants to go on a date with Reito?"

"Yes," Mai said. "He, he asked me out, to the festival, and I think I'd like to go with him."

"Ah," Mikoto replied. She was then silent for a long while, but just as Mai was about to say something, Mikoto spoke up again. "He really is like ani-ue."

"But you told me that he said that he wasn't." The subject had come up during their vacation.

"Uh-huh. But he's like him." A somewhat shorter pause ensued. "I like Reito. Mai may date him," she said, with the air of one making a great concession.

Mai sighed with relief. "Thank you Mikoto," she said, kissing her forehead. "It means a lot to me."

Mikoto nodded shortly.

"Now, if you could let go of me so that I can call -"

"Nope."

"... oookay."

She managed to get up anyway and made the call, arranging to meet him tomorrow evening, all the while having Mikoto clinging to her tightly.

Ah well. She’d have to let her go when it came time for the date, right?

The next evening, Reito found himself near the entrance to the Tamayura festival, suavely attired in his new white kimono, and rather pleased with himself. Things were working out rather nicely, for once. His headaches hadn’t troubled him since that time yesterday, and he had a date with a wonderful young woman tonight. It almost made him wonder whether the headaches might not be tied to stress over his love-life. Well, he would be putting an end to such concerns soon.
The temple grounds had plenty of places to sneak away for some private discussion about one's etchings. He should know, having explored the place quite thoroughly during previous festivals. That one daughter of the Tatsumiya family had been quite helpful in discovering them, two years ago.

But now was not the time to be reflecting on previous triumphs. Now was the time to consider the future, and the bright-eyed girl who'd been occupying his thoughts so much recently. He couldn't wait to see her, and -

"Sorry," he heard her say. "It was a little harder to get ready than I expected."

He turned to look at her, and stared. And stared.

"I'm, I'm sorry, I know that this is probably not -"

"Tokiha Mai," he said at last. "I am in the presence of one of the most beautiful women it has ever been my privelige to behold. Nay, that the cosmos itself has beheld. Such pale imitations of your luminosity as Marie Antoinette and Yang Gui-Fei might have brought down monarchs and nations, but yours, I am convinced, might wreck worlds. I wonder at the twists of fate that have brought you to my unworthy self, but I welcome them nonetheless. You are not late. I am far too early."

By the end of his speech, Mai was staring open-mouthed. And then, suddenly, she laughed. "Ah-ha! You cad! I bet you say that to all the girls, don't you!"

"Only the really cute ones," he assured her. "You look nice, too, Mikoto-san."

"Thanks," the girl clinging to Mai's side said shortly.

Mai continued to chuckle helplessly at the outrageous flattery to which she'd just been subjected, relieved that he wasn't bothered by the situation. She still wasn't sure how they'd managed to get their yukata on, because Mikoto had refused to let go of her from the time that she got back from class. (She'd had the impression that Mikoto was reluctant to let her go in order to go to class, but thankfully she hadn't had to deal with her clinging to her side at school itself.)

"Shall we go?" Reito suggested, holding out his hand towards the festival booths.

"Let's," Mai agreed.

"There's food?" Mikoto asked.

"There's food," they agreed as one.

"Let's go." She would make sure to keep herself between Mai and Reito at all times, however.

"Can you believe this?" Haruka asked disgustedly of Yukino as they watched the goings-on at the festival together, both still in their school uniforms. "Swanning about like God's in his haven and all's well with the world."

"Heaven," Yukino said quietly, looking around with a expression that could be considered mildly envious.

"Oh, for piety's sake, it amounts to the same thing!" Haruka said crossly.

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry, it's just becoming habitual, Haruka-san."
"Well, try to cut back, will you? Anyway ... not two days from when there was a sex maniac on the loose, and people are already swanning about like nothing's wrong. It makes me want to pule."

Yukino opened her mouth to correct her, decided that, pule being a synonym for cry, the word was reasonable, and changed direction. "The perpetrator was caught, though."

"Someone was caught," Haruka corrected. "We've neither of us been made privy to whatever Father Greer is saying, if he's saying anything, or any of the other evidence. It could be him, it could be some other bastard. And anyway, most of them don't even know that. Idiots, all of 'em."

"Maybe they're all just frightened, and trying to take whatever comfort they can from being with the people that they care about," Yukino said, looking away from Haruka so that the other girl wouldn't see what was on her face.

"They can do that at home!"

"Not everyone lives with the people that they care about-" Yukino started to say.

She cut off in mid-sentence as she noticed, a short distance away, the pale figure of Fujino Shizuru, attired in an impeccable pink flowered yukata, surrounded by her usual legion of fangirls, moving through the crowds at an easy pace. What commanded her attention, though was the look on Fujino's face. Instead of her usual lazily cheerful self, she looked ... sad. Lonely, even, despite being surrounded by dozens of people. She was looking around, too, as though searching for someone that she couldn't see.

And then she saw Yukino, and saw her seeing her.

Fujino paused, gazing at Yukino and Haruka, who was as yet oblivious to her presence. An unfamiliar expression grew on that face, one that Yukino was startled to recognize as one of envy. And then the mask restored itself, and she offered Yukino a polite nod before moving on out of sight.

Yukino's emotional state quickly moved out of being startled to a different, less familiar emotion. Boiling, white-hot, rage. How dare she? How dare she be jealous? How dare she act as though whatever transient, passing infatuation she's feeling right now compares to what I feel for Haruka? You never to be sufficiently goddamned fucking rich bitch, how dare you!

"Yukino!" Haruka hissed. "What in the world is wrong? You're trembling!"

Mastering herself, Yukino simply said, "I just saw something very unpleasant."

"Ah, what a great festival," Midori enthused as she sat beside Yohko, watching the parade of people in yukata. "Don't you think so?"

"Whatever," Yohko sighed, hand on her chin.

"Oh, come on, lighten up a little."

"Midori, I've had to deal with three serious injuries in the last week," Yohko told her. "There was a time when if I had that many in a month, I'd be really concerned. And we're not talking about grown-ups, but kids. Kids shouldn't be in a danger zone."

"Well, you know, it's always darkest before -"

"- the grue eats you," Yohko interrupted.
"Determined to be depressed, I see," Midori said, nodding sagely. "I'm just going to have to up my game."

Yohko sighed. "Well, enjoy the game while you can. I'm thinking about quitting."

Midori blinked. "Quitting what? You don't have any bad habits to quit. Well, other than -"

"That's your fault, and it's not what I'm talking about. I'm thinking about leaving the academy and getting a job as a nurse somewhere else."

Midori stared. "But ... you can't."

"Why not?" Yohko asked.

"You just can't! It's, it's not done!"

"I probably won't find a job that pays nearly as well, but I've got some leads," Yohko continued, as though Midori hadn't spoken.

"Yohko, cut it out. You're not going to leave," Midori said, starting to sound a little panicked.

"If things don't improve real soon now, I probably am," Yohko said firmly.

Ah, such food! Such variety! She was sure that Mai could improve on all of it, of course, but the thrill of discovery was wonderful! The new tastes! It was like there was a party in her mouth, and only she and Mai were invited! (Well, okay, they would let Takumi and Ani-Ue in as well.) So thrilling!

"Isn't this great, Mai?" she asked.

Silence was her only reply.

Abruptly, Mikoto realized that, to use both of her hands to gather up the food and bring it to her mouth, she'd had to let go of Mai. Mai was not on her side any longer. Neither was Reito.

So where were they?

Her back slammed up against the bark of the tree even as his lips slammed against hers and his hard body pushed up against her own, and all that she could think was, It's about bloody time. Their tongues wrapped around and caressed each other like snakes writhing in the grass before breaking apart to explore the strange new world they'd just entered into. She could feel his hands firmly grasping and squeezing at her rear, not painfully, but pleasantly, as she lifted up one leg to wrap around his hip, pulling him even closer up into her.

"And to think," Mai said, in between passionate kisses, "that I was starting ... to worry about you." She kissed him hard enough to push his head back, then released his lips to elaborate. "That you didn't go this way."

"It's the only way I do go," he told her, before kissing her back just as forcefully, so that the back of her head pushed up into the tree's bark. She could feel it through her hair, and their motions rubbed the wood against her scalp in a rough but appealing way. Reito pulled back to speak again. "For my part, I was a bit afraid that you were too innocent to notice how badly I wanted you." To emphasize the point, he brought up a hand to squeeze firmly at her right breast.

She hissed with the pleasure of his touch there, even as she chuckled. "Innocent is something I've
never been," she lied. Well, it wasn't a complete lie. She'd thrown her innocence away long ago, like a worn-out rag, and almost never mourned the loss.

"Good," he almost cooed as he leaned down, starting to kiss and lick at her neck, like a vampire getting ready to bite. "Innocent girls are boring. Experience is greatly to be preferred."

"Oh good," she sighed, loving the feel of his tongue on her throat. Of course, now that he'd said that, she wasn't about to admit that her 'experience' consisted of two guys total, both of whom had been pretty much inexperienced themselves. If he wanted to envision her as the sort of temptress who'd been leading men to their doom ever since puberty, she was going to let him go right on doing so.

His hands, until now nearly pawing at her breasts, now slid down her back to start pulling at the bow of her obi. A moment later, he lifted his face to meet hers with an annoyed expression. "Did Mikoto tie this?"

"Yeah," she admitted, torn between laughter and tears of frustration.

His right hand went to his head, and he muttered something that she couldn't quite make out - odd when they were so close together.

"Just ... lift it," she finally said.

"But I want more than just that," he replied, leaning in close enough to lick her nose. "I want to explore the wonderland that is you as much as anyone can." His eyes were burning with hunger and need as he said it. It was almost frightening.

"I get it," Mai said helplessly. "I want all that too. But we've got to hurry or we're gonna get interr-" And then she heard a branch cracking, not too far away, and the sound of two voices.

ARRRRRRRRRRGHHHH, Mai thought, very approximately. There was some Fuck fuck fuck FUCK mixed in there as well. She felt Reito go very still against her, and forced herself to do the same, trying to avoid notice. But she also focused her senses on figuring out who was to blame for the interruption of her pleasure.

... and I'm gonna name this one Goldie, and this one Bug Eyes!" Shiho enthused as she considered the fish Yuuichi had won for her.

Watching from a short distance away, he shook his head in amused relief. "You really are a kid," he mused aloud. He'd been a bit disturbed by how much she didn't seem like one anymore when she'd shown up at the front gate, all dolled up like she was, but this behavior went a fair ways towards easing his concerns.

Of course, since he was an idiot, he went and expressed that relief, thus provoking her crazy. "What was that?" she asked in a much louder, much sharper, much less cute voice as she slowly turned to look back at him.

"Well, I mean, I know you're not a kid, but sometimes you act like one, and, I mean, that's okay -" he started to babble as she stood up, letting the bag and its no longer precious contents drop to the ground.

"Do you really?" she asked, stepping towards him.

"... do I really what?" he asked, not seeing any other way out of this.
"Do you really know that I am not a child anymore?" she pressed, and with a few short steps, was pressing up against him physically as well as verbally, her small chest against his lower abdomen, her face bent up to look up at him with angry, determined eyes.

Yuuichi found his mouth incredibly dry. "Yes, I do get it, Shiho," he told her.

"Really," she said, almost breathily.

"Yeah. But ... I mean ... you're like my little sister," he protested.

"There's no like about it," she murmured.

"... huh?"

"Doesn't matter. Actually, it does matter. But that's what makes it okay, onii-chan," she told him, gazing up with those brown eyes that suddenly looked so much like the ones that met his own in the mirror every day. "Big brother will look after little sister, since no one else cares about her. And little sister will look after big brother ... like she already has."

"... huh?" Yuuichhi repeated, confused almost to the point of mortal terror. He tried to take a step back, away from her, but found himself pushed up against a tree, its bark pressing uncomfortably into his back.

"I get it," she continued on her path of crazy. "You didn't want to betray me. It was her who forced you to do it. But it's okay, because I settled her hash."

"Shiho, I swear, I don't know what the hell -" he started to tell her. But then she was pushing up and against him, her lips on his, and he couldn't say another word. That wasn't the worst of it, though. He could feel her tiny little hand pressing up against the crotch of his jeans, forcefully and roughly, fingers stroking before moving up towards their button.

And then there was a sudden crashing through the bushes nearby. Oh thank God, Yuuichi thought. Whoever it was, the situation couldn't possibly get any worse.

He looked up. Oh, why did I think that? he internally whined as he stared at Tokiha Mai's outraged face.

"You!" she said.

He was on the verge of saying the fatal words 'not what it looks like' when he realized two things. One, she wasn't alone - a puzzled looking Kanzaki Reito was trailing along behind her - and they both looked a little mussed up. Two, she wasn't looking at him.

She was looking at Shiho.

"It was you. You're the hime," she said, sounding appalled.

Hime? Yuuichi thought.

"I'm going to kill you," Shiho said, quietly and precisely. He looked down at her, and was somewhat startled to see that she'd produced a flute from somewhere. What - he thought, as she raised it to her lips.

And blew.

Oddly, the flute made a very flat sound, like someone was blocking all the holes in the instrument's
body, though Shiho's fingers weren't covering any of them. Yuuichi blinked, though, as he realized that there was a thumb shoved into the end of the tube - attached to the hand of a remarkably cute white-haired boy who was hanging by his feet from a branch just above them.

"Now, Shiho-chan," said Nagi (for it was he, in case you hadn't guessed). "We talked about this, remember?"

"You!" Shiho cried angrily.

With consummate grace, Nagi let go of the branch and tumbled to land feet-first on the ground, in a display of agility that any unbiased judge would have labeled perfect. "Of course me!" he said.

"Who else? Anyway, I already told you that you can do anything you want with your powers, with one little exception - attacking any of the other HiME. There'll be time for that later, and I'm rooting for you when it comes."

"Hey!" shouted Mai.

"It's an underdog thing, Mai-chan, don't take it personally," Nagi said without looking at her. "Fetching yukata, BTW." (Yes, he pronounced the letters. You got a problem with that?)

"Who is that?" Reito asked, now genuinely bewildered.

"Get out of my way!" Shiho yelled.

"Shiho-chan, last warning. You really don't want to piss me off," Nagi said, his usual ebullience somewhat muted at the moment.

"FUCK YOU!" screamed Shiho, and brought the mouth of her fute back up to her lips.

"OKAY THEN." And as the words left Nagi's mouth, amplified far beyond what a normal voice would have produced, Shiho was slammed into the ground, her eyes dazed and a bruise forming on her cheek. As far as anyone present could see, Nagi hadn't moved at all, except to reach out and grab the flute as it shot up from Shiho's suddenly nerveless hands.

"You can have this back when you ask me or Mashiro-chan for it. Helpful hint - be polite," he told her, studying it.

Yuuichi had largely been paralyzed by sheer confusion during all of this. Things were moving far too fast for him. But as Shiho trembled on the ground in front of him, that difficulty resolved itself.

"Bastard!" he yelled, and threw his full weight into a punch with his still aching right arm, right at Nagi's sneering face.

It impacted and slammed the little hobgoblin back across the clearing.

All Mai could do was gape. For a moment, Nagi seemed every bit as stunned and dazed as Shiho, but he recovered far more quickly than she was, and pushed himself up from the half-seated position into which he'd fallen when he hit the ground.

"All right," he said softly. "I suppose that I had that coming to me, for ignoring all of you until now. Rest assured, it won't happen again." And then he glared across the clearing at them.

Yuuichi collapsed to his knees, holding his arm and howling in animalistic pain. Behind Mai, Reito pitched forward, clutching his head as his headache returned to levels that dwarfed his previous understanding of the term agony.
Elsewhere in the festival, Takumi abruptly collapsed, bleeding heavily from both nose and mouth and clutching at his chest, to Akira's utter panic.

"What did you just do?" Mai cried at Nagi, turning to catch Reito before he fell and hurt himself.

"Nothing you need be concerned with, Mai-chan," Nagi told her, leaning back against a tree with his smile once more restored.

"I think I damn well am concerned, actually!"

"Well, you have other things to be worried about. Like the fact that Alyssa is coming back," he quickly added, forestalling her rejoinder. "Like the fact that you're going to have to keep Shiho-chan's little secret a secret from the white winged bunch."

"What?" Mai protested. "Why should I -"

"They'll try to cancel her contract with Yata-Garasu," he told her, for once utterly unsmiling. "That will count as a defeat. And like I told you at the start, if you're defeated, you lose what you care about most. Do you really want Shiho-chan to suffer that?"

Mai regarded him in silence for a long time. "I'm really starting to seriously dislike you," she said eventually.

Nagi smiled again. "Aw ... really? That's a shame. I like me just fine. And I like you, too. Such a shame that we don't agree on much of anything." And with that, he hopped up into the trees and was soon out of sight.
August, 2004

There were probably worse things that could happen to a person than having a disturbing confrontation with a probably supernatural being in a forest, being the only person present for that confrontation to be left standing, and helping those disabled by the confrontation out of the forest only to discover that something terrible has happened to one's little brother while the confrontation took place. Mai was fairly sure that there had to be worse things that could happen than all of that. She just couldn't think of any right at the moment.

She'd been pushed right to the limits of what she could take by all of this, though she felt a certain satisfaction in the fact that Akira, who'd shown up to tell her what had happened to Takumi, was even less able to deal with it. If she hadn't been utterly panicked, she might have made a few cutting remarks. As she sat in the hospital waiting room, she was rehearsing them for the next time.

Except of course that she didn't want there to be a next time.

She didn't.

Fortunately, though she'd been completely useless, it had happened that she'd brought the others out of the forest right near where Yohko-sensei and Midori were sitting, and they'd also been present when Akira came running up with Takumi's collapsed form. Yohko had paused only long enough to give Midori a glare, for some reason, before she called an ambulance and began performing first aid. She'd continued right up until the EMS arrived and bundled all of the injured - Takumi, Yuuichi, Shiho and Reito - off to the hospital.

Mai had ridden along with Takumi, holding his hand the whole time. The last thing she'd seen before the ambulance doors closed behind them had been Mikoto showing up with a terribly confused expression, and being held back from climbing on board by Midori. The look on her roommate's face ...

Because, you know, I didn't feel guilty enough as it is, Mai thought wearily.

She heard the door to the emergency rooms open, and quickly looked up to see whether it was the doctor who'd spoken with her earlier. To her shock, it was actually Reito, moving slowly and a bit awkwardly but without any visible bandages. He sighted her and limped over to semi-collapse in the chair beside her. "I do hope all of your dates don't end like that," he said after a moment.

Mai stared at him for a moment, as though bewildered. Eventually, she swallowed, and replied. "Technically, I think that was my first date with a guy, so I really can't say." Tightly bound hysteria bubbled under her words.

"Ah. Well, let's hope for the best, then," he said, with a rather cute smile.

"Are you okay?" she finally asked.

"As well as I ever am," he replied with a sigh of distaste. "They couldn't find anything wrong with me, and so they called my regular doctor, who assured them that there isn't anything wrong with me. And naturally, they believed him."

"I don't understand."
"The Kanzaki family doctor has done his very best to make sure that no one knows that I get these headaches, periodically," Reito explained. "I think he's just trying to cover up his own incompetence in being unable to explain why I've been getting them since I was about twelve. Of course, that could just be the headache talking." He smiled thinly, then sighed again. "But that was the worst that they've ever been. I suppose that it must have been because your friend triggered it with whatever he did."

"He's not my friend," Mai snapped. Then coughed. "That was you being ironic, right?"

Reito nodded. After a moment, he spoke again. "Mai ... can you tell me what that was all about?"

"I'm not really sure," she replied, hesitantly.

"All right," he said with equanimity. "Then I can wait for you to become sure. I hope that happens sooner rather than later."

"So do I," Mai agreed.

Before either of them could say anything else, the doors from which Reito had recently emerged opened once more and Shiho stomped out, with a small bandage on her cheek but moving much more freely than Reito had.

"Shiho-san!" Mai called out. "Is Tate -"

The tentacle-haired girl paused just long enough to deliver a truly scorching glare in Mai's direction, before she sniffingly turned away and marched down the hallway out of sight.

"- okayyyyy," Mai trailed off as she watched her go.

"Well, I think we can conclude that he is, or she would have waited here for news," Reito suggested quietly.

Mai shook her head. "Yeah, but ... I've gotta talk to her anyways." She didn't get up, though, and looked helplessly in the direction of the doors.

"If news of Takumi-kun's condition comes, I will have the doctor wait while I go and get you," he offered quickly.

Mai let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much, Reito," she said. She hesitated a moment longer, then pressed a kiss on his cheek before getting up and dashing off in the direction Shiho had gone.

Reito followed her with his eyes until after she was out of sight. "Akira-kun," he said without turning his eyes from that direction.

"Eh?" said the boy, startled. "How - I was being invis - I mean ..." He trailed off.

"I am just that cool," Reito lied. He hadn't realized that the boy was doing anything unusual as he sat a few chairs down from where Mai had been sitting. Clearly he had, though. But that was a subject for another time.

"Oh. Um. Well, then, how may I be of service?" Akira asked.

"As precisely as you can, tell me, when did Takumi-kun start having problems this evening?" Reito asked.

'All of you', the creature said, he thought. 'Ignoring all of you.' Not 'both'. 'All'.
Mai caught up to the shorter red-head fairly quickly and pulled her into a hospital room that appeared to be empty. "Okay, we need to talk," she said without preamble.

"I have nothing to say to you," Shiho flatly replied, refusing to meet Mai's gaze.

"Let me clarify - I'm going to talk, and you're going to listen," Mai continued.

"I don't want to hear anything you -"

"Ah!" Mai interrupted, holding up a finger and shaking it in admonishment. "See, there you go, saying something when you said you weren't going to say anything. You shouldn't do that, Shiho-chan, people will start to think you lack conviction."

Now Shiho did look at her, and if looks could, well, you know, but really, compared to Nao's murderous glare, it wasn't all that impressive. Really, dealing with Nao those times had been good training for this.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you've gotten yourself into?" Mai asked at last. "No, of course not. So I'm gonna tell you. The girl you hurt? Not only is she the granddaughter of this place's headmaster, she's the student and friend of a guy you really don't want to get mad at you. And you did, see, and he wants to know who you are. Should I tell him?"

"Bring him on," Shiho said.

_Stupid, Mai told herself, you are being stupid. She might not know what kind of a mess she's in, but you're the one who's not explaining it to her right. She needs to know -_

"You're transparent, you know that?" Shiho said while Mai was thinking. Before she could respond, Shiho continued. "You're thinking that I don't know what's out there. Let me guess, this guy you're talking about is some sort of wizard?"

"You know about that?" Mai asked, startled.

"No, but it makes sense that there would be people like that," Shiho answered. "He's a powerful wizard, then?"

"Yes, and -"

"Bring. Him. On."

Mai tried to meet the rather intense glare that Shiho was giving her, but found herself blinking and felt her mouth go a little dry. "You don't understand," she repeated.

"I don't care," Shiho corrected. "All of you are already my enemy, so what difference does it make if some of you are more angry at me than others?"

Mai continued to gape. "When you say 'all of you'," she asked when she at last found her voice, "who are you talking about?"

"Humans," Shiho sneered. "And any demons or fairies or aliens or whatever the universe throws at me."

Slowly Mai nodded even as she felt herself take a reflexive step back. "You're crazy," she said, as one does to a crazy person whom one suspects to be unaware of their craziness. She owed Nao an apology. This girl was way worse than her; Nao at least confined her loathing to only half the human
"You can't fight everybody -"

"Says who?" Shiho snapped.

"Don't you understand what'll happen if you lose that sort of one sided fight?" Mai asked, starting to move from stunned awe to anger.

"The same thing that'll happen if I don't fight at all," Shiho answered.

"You'll die!" Mai retorted, having not really paid much attention to Shiho's response. "Do you want - " And then she heard the strange sound of Shiho's laughter.

"Die?" Shiho hissed once the laughter ran its course. "You think - oh, dear. I thought you were smarter than me, Mai. But you still haven't figured it out? What'd he tell you, when it all started? You're risking what you value most. But if you're already risking your life to protect someone else, then you obviously don't value your life as much you value theirs. So what's the precious thing that you're risking, that you'll lose if you're defeated?"

The question hung in the air for a moment as the two of them stared at each other.

"You're so stupid, Mai," Shiho said eventually. "I can't believe you didn't realize this before. It's so fucking obvious."

"It can't be true," Mai whispered. "That, that doesn't make any sense ..." She shook her head. "No, that's - but anyway, don't you realize what that means? It's Tate, right? He's the one you're trying to protect. But if you get defeated -"

"Then he'll never be able to cheat on me," said Shiho.

And then Mai could say nothing at all.

Shiho waited for her to recover from her paralysis. When it became clear that she wouldn't do so any time soon, she turned and headed towards the door. But she paused and looked back at Mai. "But you know, it's sort of funny, don't you think? That'll only happen if my Yata-Garasu gets defeated. And right now, I can't bring him into being. So he can't be defeated. Right now, I can't be hurt in any way that actually matters ... but I know your weakness.

"Piss me off again and I'll find a way to smother Takumi in his sleep."

And with that, she departed.

For a few moments, all that Mai could do was stand there, completely stunned. Even beyond the realization of how utterly beyond psycho the creepy little girl was, there was the terrifying prospect that she'd just had pointed out to her.

If she went into battle, drawing on the power of Kagu-Tsuchi, she wasn't just risking her own life. She was risking Takumi's life.

"I can't," she said aloud. "I can't do that. It's too much. They can't ask me to do that."

Somehow, though, she moved past the horrific paralysis, to something else, as she considered Shiho's last words. But it would take a more discerning mind then hers to tell how much of what she felt right then was fear and how much was rage. Fear for her brother, the only family she gave a damn about in the world, so obviously, blatantly threatened. This wasn't some nebulous threat, like a bad coughing fit or the possibility he'd run into an Orphan. And rage, pure, fiery, burning rage, at the
utter gall of this little bint for thinking, for daring to think she could - !

Mai found herself running again, out the door, after Shiho, to find her and push her down and start hitting her with everything she'd had before all this insanity had come into her life. Can't hurt you in any way that matters? We'll see about that! We just see - But what she did see, when she caught up to her again, forced her to stay her hand.

Yuuichi was standing there, in the hospital waiting room, his right arm done up in a sling around his neck and the knuckles of that hand bandaged. It didn't look good, but the ashen look on his face was even worse as he held Shiho tightly against his chest.

"I'm sorry," the little girl was saying between sobs. "I'm so sorry, oniichan, it's all my fault."

Since Mai was inclined to agree with that assessment, she was automatically suspicious of Shiho's ready acceptance of blame. It didn't make sense - just a few minutes ago she'd callously indicated that she was fine with the idea of Yuuichi's death, and now she was sobbing over him being injured. But her tears seemed so genuine!

To his credit, Yuuichi seemed a little bewildered by Shiho's behavior too. "It's okay, it's not so bad," he told her, glancing in Mai's direction as he did. Clearly, her own expression was every bit as transparent as Shiho had said earlier, because he flinched at the sight of her face, and looked away. "But, Shiho, you know, we gotta talk about what happened," he said, looking down at Shiho.

"Mm-hm, mm-hm," the girl replied, nodding forcefully. "But not here. Back home. Let's go home." She started to gently but pointedly steer him towards the exit.

Yuuichi seemed a bit hesitant. "Um, but, Shiho, I, uh -"

"What?" she asked, pausing, looking up at him with an innocent expression that - this time, at least - Mai could tell was fake. "Is there something else that you have to do, oniichan? Something more important than me?" A tiny bit of edge creeped back into her words just then.

He swallowed, visibly. "No, of course not! Don't be silly!" he said, reaching down to rub her head fondly. As her eyes closed in pleasure at the caress, he quickly looked over at Mai and mouthed the words, "Call me."

Mai quickly pointed at him, then at herself, before mouthing the exact same words. You call me! Yuuichi nodded appeasingly as he allowed Shiho to guide him out of the waiting area.

"That was rather disturbing to watch," Reito observed, having been standing off to one side doing just that.

Beside him, Akira nodded somberly. "Indeed, a shameful display of -"

"Oh, shove it sideways, Akira," Mai said disgustedly. Somewhat to her amazement, the boy actually fell silent. To Reito, much more calmly, she asked, "Did the doctor -"

"He has yet to appear," he assured her. "Do I want to know what just happened?"

"No," she told him. "It's even more disturbing when you know the whole story, and -"

At that moment, the door opened again and an unsmiling doctor in scrubs emerged. "Tokiha?" he called out.
"I'm Tokiha," Mai said. "Is my brother all right?"

He looked at her skeptically. "I think I ought to be talking to your parents."

She was used to this, and so didn't take offense. "My father is our only living parent, and he's -" A complete bastard who should go off and die somewhere. "- out of the country right now," she lied smoothly.

"I see. Well, in that case, your brother doesn't appear to be in immediate danger, but we're going to keep him overnight for observation. I'll be talking to your regular physician about his treatment."

Mai nodded. She was being kept in the dark, but she was used to that. Later, when she didn't have so much on her plate, she'd press for details. There was something more important to ask right now. "Can I see him?"

The doctor was shaking his head as soon as she started talking. "Visiting hours are already over, and he's asleep now, in any event. Go home, get some rest, you can see him in the morning," he advised.

Again, thanks to her many years of experience in dealing with the medical establishment, which had taught her to pick her battles, Mai knew that this was not the time to be arguing the point. "Okay. Thank you, doctor."

Once he was gone, she became aware of Reito standing right beside her. "Somehow, the comment about your dates becomes less funny in retrospect," he mused aloud. "Can I offer you a ride home? I have a car service -"

"Thanks," she said wearily. "Actually, if you could take us all home - hey, listen, Akira, I'm sorry about - where did he go?"

Takumi awoke into darkness and fear, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

"Relax," said a soft voice beside him. "Everything is fine."

"Akira-kun?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," said the voice. "Everything is fine. Go back to sleep. I will be here the whole night, watching over you."

Part of him found that a little creepy. But in the main, there was something very comforting about it, like the way that things had been between him and his sister before he'd messed it all up. And he was very tired, after all.

"Thank you, Akira-kun," he said, letting his eyes close. "You're a good person."

"No," answered the voice, a few moments later. "And anyone who tries to hurt you will find that out the hard way."

Just outside of Japan's territorial waters, an aircraft carrier was making good speed towards the Home Islands, accompanied by a small fleet of smaller vessels. The flagship of this small armada, termed the Golden Fleet, was known by the code name Naglfar, and was the property of the Searrs Foundation.

At this time, Constant Reader, we must pause momentarily. The notion of a privately-owned aircraft
carrier may strike you as a bit absurd. Considering the importance of such vessels to the modern navies of the world, it is hard to imagine any set of circumstances under which a corporation would be permitted to purchase one for its private use. Nor would stealing one be all that feasible - again, had such a daring act of piracy ever been committed, it would be a cause for global panic. And the notion that it had been manufactured by the company probably also strains your credulity past its breaking point. So where did it come from?

It (or rather she, as naval purists would doubtless insist) began her existence as *HMS Audacious*, a British aircraft carrier which began construction during the Second World War. As these things take quite a bit of time to build, the war was over by the time construction was complete. At that point, she was renamed *HMS Eagle* (after an earlier carrier lost to enemy action) and entered service as one of the main capital ships of the Royal Navy. After several refits, the decision was made to decommission the vessel in 1972, and four years later, was sold for scrap and broken up in the shipyard Scottish village of Cairnryan.

However, the ship's demolition was in fact an elaborate hoax conducted by - you guessed it - the Sears Foundation, who took possession of the vessel from the ship breaking company, left them with the hulk of a vessel they'd faked up somehow, equipped the former Eagle with radar cloaking devices that were only a little less advanced than those it was presently using, and towed it to a privately owned shipyard on the coast of Iceland, where it was refitted and brought back to a condition where it could eventually enter service. For the most part, it was kept in reserve, but well-maintained nonetheless.

Isn't this fascinating?

In any event, the *Naglfar* was making good speed towards Japan, and a meeting was taking place in one of its compartments. Three men and two women were seated around the roughly oblong table that filled said compartment, all presently looking up at a full-sized holographic image of Alyssa Sears which hovered above the table's center.

"Miss Sears," said one of the women, a tall, dark-skinned brunette in beige fatigues. "I'm Colonel Nance Rutherford, the commanding officer of our expeditionary forces. Let me introduce the rest of this operation's staff -"

"That won't be necessary, Colonel," Alyssa's image interrupted. "I've been briefed on our forces, so I already know the names of everyone present. Well, that's what I'd like to say, except that I don't know the gentleman to your right."

Rutherford glanced at the only person present who was garbed in civilian dress, a gloomy looking man who was staring up at Alyssa's display with an obvious expression of distaste. "Ah, well, then, please allow me to introduce Mr. Brian Jorgensen, formerly of the Norwegian Marinejegerkommandoen and subsequently -"

"Subsequently," interrupted Jorgensen, "a participant in the last attempt to invade this crazy school, and one of the few of them who escaped capture."

"Ah," said Alyssa, nodding in understanding. "And you've joined us for revenge."

"No," he said shortly. "I've joined you because no one has yet offered to pay me *not* to consult on the areas of my expertise."

"We expect that Mr. Jorgensen's experience with Mahora and its defenders will offer us some unique strategic and tactical insights," Rutherford said quickly.
"Really," said Alyssa.

"Yes," said Jorgensen. "In fact, I have an excellent idea for how your employer can avoid the loss of crucial material and personnel. Turn this ship around and abandon this notion. Whatever you're hoping to accomplish, there must be safer ways to go about doing it."

"Interesting," Alyssa said. "And if we don't do so?"

"Then, since I have already been paid anyway, I will give you the best advice that I can," Jorgensen said heavily. "But you are making a terrible mistake."

"So noted," Alyssa said, then refocused on Rutherford. "Have your men been briefed on our targets?"

"Photographs of the young women in question have been distributed to squad leaders," Rutherford confirmed. "And they've been briefed on our policy regarding them. They're to be taken into custody and not harmed more than absolutely necessary."

"That last is crucial," the image of the young girl insisted. "It is absolutely vital that they be taken alive. What steps are you taking to capture the ones whom we haven't yet identified?"

"Doctor?" Rutherford said, turning to her left.

The man in the naval jacket leaned forward. "Once we've secured the school's facilities, we'll run an operation under cover of giving a health examination to the students. This should allow us to see how many of them have this witch's mark that's been described in the literature. Furthermore, the fact that we have so many of the students as potential hostages should dissuade the locals from attempting heroics."

Jorgensen coughed, muttered something that no one else could make out.

"I see. Have our special squads been briefed on their targets of opportunity?"

"Photographs of this Negi Springfield and his associates, as well as this Itoshiki Nozomu person and his associates, have been distributed," Rutherford confirmed. "We had some difficulty persuading some of the men that they were genuine threats, but the images that your associate was able to recover from drones employed in the previous attack were very convincing."

"I should hope so. Our associates in the Senate are expecting results this time. As soon as my Einherjar arrive, we will - is something the matter?" she asked Jorgensen, who'd just made a disgusted noise.

"Oh, nothing," he said, a bit sarcastically. "The appropriation and misapplication of my cultural mythology doesn't bother me at all."

"Well, good," Alyssa said. "In any event, once they arrive, we will move to take the Kazehana into custody. Squads B through D should focus on eliminating communications. Then cry havoc and let slip -"

Abruptly, the image vanished.

"Oh, dear," said Rutherford, touching her earpiece. "Miss Searrs, we've lost your visual. Yes, I'm sorry. We'll do better next time." She rolled her eyes as she promised that.

"Thank you," Jorgensen muttered.
"Even I have my limits," Rutherford admitted.

Hours later, just after sunrise, the invasion began.

The first sign of trouble came to Hasegawa Chisame, as she was busily updating her webpage to keep her mind off of other matters. Like how surprised she'd been to realize that she was lonely. Like how worried she was. Like how much she'd miss a certain person if that person came back ...

changed by her experiences. (And how could she not be?)

For a full year, after Hakase moved out, she'd lived alone, and been happy in her solitude. Or so she'd thought. Well, she'd been content, at least. And then a certain boy had come into her life, along with everything that he brought with him, and upset all her notions about who she was and who she wanted to be. And so she wasn't content anymore.

But she was happy.

Some of the time, at least.

Right now, though, was not one of those times. And so she needed a distraction, and indulging in the activities of a person whom she'd stopped being a while ago was as good a one as any. But eventually, even that grew pale, as she'd known it would. So she saved her work, closed the application, and launched her Skype feature to place a video call to Hakase, over in Tokyo. Hopefully, there'd be some good news on that front.

If nothing else, she might be able to check in on her mother, whom Hakase had drafted into helping with the mechanical side of it, over Sora's protests that this was all well beyond her. Well, the protests hadn't been all that vocal, since it had meant that she'd get to spend some more time with Hakase's mother, who was also helping out. They'd ... bonded, to put it lightly.

At least neither of them seems to care much for Minako-san, Chisame thought wryly. If they did, they'd probably want to induct her into an "Under Forty Grandma Club", and she'd start putting even more pressure on -

Wait, what happened to my connection?

Chisame's snarky grin turned into a frown as she stared at her computer, which was telling her that she wasn't presently connected to the Internet. Except that was impossible. Her connection to the Internet was as important to her as air, water and food, so she was had connections for several networks available to her at all times. But right at the moment, she couldn't access any of them ...

... and abruptly, she remembered a time when she had caused just that to happen to someone else.

"Oh, shit," she said, and reached for her cell phone. No, nothing there either. Landline? Crap. Whoever was doing this was being entirely too thorough for her liking. There was only one option open to her, and so she pulled the card out of her bra and held it to her head.

Nothing.

WHAT THE HELL.

A few moments earlier, a man in a rather dehumanising set of combat fatigues, complete with face covering, spoke into a scrambled communicator. "They're offline, sir. Preparing to implement stage three now."
Then he raised his head. "Volunteer."

Of course, it's one of the central dictums of military life that you never volunteer. This is true of private as well as national armies. However, it also happens that, from time to time, in exchange for overlooking certain disciplinary violations, a soldier or a mercenary is told that he will be expected to volunteer the next time that there's a need for one. Such was the case today as well.

So one of the other men in the same set of combat fatigues stepped forward.

"Helmet off," the sergeant said.

The helmet came off, leaving a rather puzzled looking young man with a shaved head standing there hoping there were no snipers anywhere. He'd enlisted in the US army right after 9/11, only to get hired away by one of the Searrs Foundations recruiters when his original contract was up. The money was much better, and he could certainly parrot the ideology, which wasn't that different from what he'd been taught in the army.

"Are you prepared to give everything for the Golden Age to come?" asked the sergeant.

"Yessir," he answered, since there was no other answer you could possibly give under these circumstances.

Which was good. Because the sacrifice had to come willing.

"Good," said the sergeant, and promptly slashed his subordinate's throat open with his combat knife. Before the young man could reach up to vainly try and hold the wound closed, the sergeant silently directed his other men to hold his arms while he reached in with the knife and began sawing at the sacrifice's vocal cords while chanting certain rote phrases.

Similar acts were occurring at chosen locations in a rough circle all around Mahora, at just that time. And abruptly, the magic of communication became impossible.

Okay, thought Chisame as she grabbed her go bag. Plan B. And with that, she headed out of her room at a run.

She was the first thing his eyes registered as he slowly awoke. He took a moment to look at her, standing beside his window with the blinds rolled down, peeking through them with a pair of fingers to separate the vertical strips. Her other hand was holding a cigarette to her mouth. She was dressed, if that was the right word, in an unbuttoned man's shirt and a pair of socks.

Which bothered him a little, because he was fairly sure that he didn't own a shirt like that. Perhaps he could bring up the subject in casual conversation. "You really shouldn't smoke, you know."

Her eyes flickered momentarily in his direction before returning to the window. "I shouldn't have sex with teachers either, and yet you're the third one so far. Which kind of wrecks any moral high ground, sensei."

She was right, of course, but hearing her say it really hurt. With a sigh, he got up from the futon and ambled over to join her. "What's so interesting out there?" he asked.

"Something's going on on the bridge," she reported. "It's been blocked off for traffic for a while now, but there are people on it all the same."
"Some sort of accident, perhaps?" he speculated.

"Maybe. But I -"

Whatever she might have been about to say was lost forever as the bridge of which they were speaking abruptly collapsed with a roar all too familiar to both of them.

For a moment, they both stared in disbelief.

"No," he said at last. "It's just not fair. I was planning on taking a walk on that bridge later today. Why couldn't they have waited until I was on it? Why? I'M IN DESPAIR! THE IMPATIENCE OF THESE UNKNOWN ASSAILANTS HAS DRIVEN ME TO -"

"Oh, put a sock in it," Nodoka said disgustedly.

Almost immediately, there could be heard a rattle as someone knocked rather forcefully on the house's front door, followed swiftly by the distant sound of it being slid open. "Yes?" asked a young boy's voice.

"This residence of Itoshiki Nozomu?" said a badly accented voice.

"Are you here to kill him?"

Brief pause, as if for contemplation. Then the badly accented voice picked up. "Only if he fight back."

"Ah. Up the stairs, second door on your right. You can't miss it."

"Thank you little boy." This utterance was soon followed by the sound of five pairs of feet rapidly ascending a set of stairs. A few moments later, the door to the bedroom slid open.

"HANDS OVER HEAD - uh?"

To the surprise of the mercenaries who had just thrown open the sliding door and were levelling their armaments at its occupants, those occupants were nowhere to be seen. Nor was there any sign of where they might have gone. The window that was the only apparent way into or out of the room was still closed.

"That little bastard lied to us," cursed one of the mercenaries in his native Russian.

"No, maybe we misunderstood," his comrade opined. "He said right, right? Maybe he actually meant left? Kids get confused sometimes."

"Did he go out the window?" asked one of the ones at the back, in Japanese.

"It's closed, Mizunoguchi!"

Amateurs, Nodoka thought dismissively as she hung on to the wall just to the left of the window while Itoshiki clung to the right. Well, probably not literally amateurs, but you'd think that they'd consider the possibility that people can close windows telekinetically. Five of them. Wait for it ...

"Okay, you two go check out the other rooms on this floor, we'll search this one for hidden compartments and shit like that."

Gotta, she thought triumphantly. Risking much, she let go of the wall with one hand and held up three fingers, then one, so that Itoshiki could see her do so. He visibly gulped, but nodded and
released his own hold on the wall as well, so that a ruler slid up the sleeve of the hakama he’d insisted on donning before they went out the window and into his now-free hand.

"Bure, bure, bureburebure," he murmured.

_Time to clear him a path,_ Nodoka thought, and swung around to kick the window with the heel of her foot. Since it was made of breakaway glass, so that Itoshiki could easily dive through it if he felt like killing himself that way, it shattered easily as she tumbled through in the reverse direction.

"What the -" she heard the mercenary shout, and then about thirteen strands of darkness were streaking in through the hole, perforating the men there. Well, two of them. The strands sent towards the third only wrapped around him and held him fast. It was a very versatile spell, Nodoka mused, but now was probably not the time to think about that sort of thing. She whipped around to look at the bound captive, who was, she was somewhat pleased to note, was the Japanese-speaker from earlier. "You're Mizunoguchi, right?" she asked.

"Uh -" he replied, as one does when one is being held fast by strands of darkness and watching ones comrades bleed out. Thankfully, she was wearing her Comptina Daemonia, so she didn't really need a coherent answer to find out that he was hoping that Vassily and Grozny were coming quickly. And from that to learn that they were, and were slowly and silently moving towards the door.

She snatched up one of the submachine guns that had just been dropped, took aim and sent a pair of short bursts through the wall at their present positions. The walls proved to be every bit as porous to bullets as they were to noise. One of them fell into sight through the still open doorway to the outside hall, but he clearly wasn't a threat. So Nodoka turned back to Mizunoguchi.

"No, please!" he shrieked, when he realized she was pointing the gun at him.

She ignored his request.

A moment later, Itoshiki came back into the room as well, flinching at the sight of the bullet holes and the five bleeding corpses. "This is going to be awful to clean," he mused aloud.

Nodoka glared at him for that comment, but she was distracted by the sound of more footsteps, slightly hesitant ones, on the stairs. "Majiru-kun!" she called out. "Stay downstairs."

"I've seen worse, you know," said the boy who'd let them in. "Chiri-san can be pretty -"

"You shouldn't have to see more," she replied as she flicked on the gun's safety and set it down, before reaching for the jeans she'd dropped on the floor last night. To her relief, there didn't seem to be any blood on them. Which was shallow of her, but these were good jeans, darn it.

A few minutes later, now fully dressed, she and Itoshiki were down in what the moody teacher called his study and everyone else thought of as 'the room where he lies around and mopes all the time", where she tried again to open the link through her pactio card while he proceeded to hector his nephew. "What were you thinking?" he asked for the fifth time. "You let armed men come into the house! What if I'd died?"

To his credit, Majiru - who still kind of creeped Nodoka out, considering how much he looked like his uncle - didn't respond with the obvious answer to that question. ("I'd inherit everything you own.") Instead, he replied, quite cleverly, "I thought you might be trying Suicide by Heavily Armed Mercenary."

Itoshiki just stared at him.
"He has a point, you know," Nodoka observed.

"Don't encourage him!"

"And also," Majiru said, raising his voice just a tad, "having conspicuously not been taught magic by anyone who was supposed to be teaching me, and lacking a pactio of my own, I didn't exactly have the wherewithal to stop them from coming in if they wanted."

"Nonetheless, it is a sad day when we just let -"

Nodoka had gotten used to Itoshiki's moods lately, and could see a ten-minute rant on the decline of standards in contemporary Japan coming a mile away. Not being one of his students, she didn't feel the need to sit back and listen to him so as to avoid the possibility of actually learning anything in class. Instead, she let the card dematerialize and spoke up. "I can't open a telepathic channel to Negi-sensei. Have you tried to contact any of your students?"

He grimaced. "I prefer to avoid doing that as much as possible," he said. "But if you can't, then I suspect that I'd have even less chance of succeeding."

She nodded reluctant agreement.

"I tried to call the police when the shooting started, but the phone's been disconnected," Majiru added.

"Okay, it's clearly another invasion," Nodoka said. "And in that case, we're going to have to try Plan B."

"What's Plan B?" the two Itoshikis chorused.

"The details of Plan B are not to be discussed under any circumstances, to avoid the risk of people learning about them," Nodoka explained. "Sensei, they were after you, so you should come with me. Majiru-kun, I hate to do this to you, but -"

"I'm supposed to stay here, aren't I?" the boy asked.

"Two will travel faster than three," she said, nodding.

"Ah well," the boy sighed.

"I am impressed by your resignation," Itoshiki said, somewhat abruptly. "Majiru-kun, if I should survive the troubles ahead, I will at last begin to teach you magic."

"Uncle!" Majiru said, excitedly ... then his face fell. "You're trying to set a death flag for yourself, aren't you?" he said, accusingly.

"Damn straight," Itoshiki agreed.

"I hate being so genre savvy," Majiru groaned as he watched them head out.

"It's a curse," agreed Kiri as her blanket-wrapped form arose from the floor beside him.

"Ah! You were there?" the boy asked.

The temptation to rip off a certain annoying person was almost overpowering to the young hikkomori, but she simply smiled cheerfully, nodded ... and then jumped him.
After all, opportunities like this didn't come around every day.

Itoshiki and Nodoka weren't the only ones who happened to be watching the bridge just as it collapsed. In an apartment not too far from the Itoshiki house, one Ishigami Wataru watched it with a horrified expression, said something particularly profane, and started to get dressed in a hurry.

"Wataru-san?" asked a quiet, concerned voice from the bed.

"Sister," he said, once he could spare a moment to give her a look. "We need to get moving. We need to get moving now."

Not everyone had a clear view of the bridge, though the noise spread throughout Mahora. Most people, of course, figured that it was simply yet another periodic calamity caused by the brilliant but not terribly cautious young scientists of the engineering department. Even those who hadn't been in Mahora for too long had learned to accept that explanation for odd noises, and so dismiss them, particularly if they had other things on their mind.

Mai had other things on her mind. In addition to being worried about her brother, and annoyed that she wouldn't be able to go visit him until after school - hours away! - there was the question of her roommate. She'd expected that Mikoto would make her way home alone from the festival after Mai had gone to the hospital, but on returning herself, she'd found their room deserted. Nor had Mikoto come home during the night.

So Mai was, in no particular order, tired (because she hadn't slept well last night, having grown very used to having the warmth of Mikoto's body pressed against her own), guilty (as usual over anything bad that happened to Takumi, as well as over basically abandoning Mikoto to go off and have sex), horny (because no sex had actually been had) and various degrees and kinds of worried about Takumi, Mikoto, Reito, Yuuichi, Shiho, fucking Shiho ...

The worst part of it was, she was starting to feel jealous of the little brat. It must be so easy to be her, not giving a crap about anyone or anything other than one person. She'd been like that, hadn't she? Back before all this, when all that she cared about was Takumi. Except, no, she hadn't been. There'd been other people in her life, like -

Ah, dammit, she thought, as she almost dropped the plate she'd had breakfast on. *I can't let myself get distracted like that.*

And last night's revelation - *Claim*, she reminded herself sternly. *Last night's unproven claim.* - was weighing on her as well. If it was true, and not just some ridiculous nonsense that Shiho had dreamed up on her own, then she could never use Kagu-Tsuchi's power ever again. Ever. She could not risk Takumi's life like that.

But.

Eventually, Shiho was bound to swallow her pride and ask for her flute back. And when she did that, she would be able to call up her Child. And while Nagi had said that the himes weren't to fight each other, he'd also said that there were no rules other than that. So if she used her Child to murder Takumi, like she'd threatened to do, there would be only one way for Mai to stop her - she would have to use her own Child to fight back.

She would have to put Takumi at risk in order to protect Takumi.

The paradox almost literally made her sick to her stomach.
"My," said Alyssa as she stood at the bottom of the long spiral staircase that wound around the tower in the forest, looking up. "That is an awful lot of stairs, isn't it."

"I will carry you, Alyssa," Miyu promptly volunteered. In Alyssa's opinion, which was the only one that mattered, Miyu looked much better in her battle costume than she'd ever looked in that silly schoolgirl uniform she'd had to wear while they were undercover. Frankly, that made the whole situation worth it.

"Thank you, Miyu," Alyssa said, then turned to the soldiers. "You go up first, though. Double time."

The soldiers saluted and began quick marching up the stairs.

Up at the top of the tower, in the house, Mashiro was quietly sipping tea and watching the plume from the bridge's collapse hover in the air from its window as Fumi approaches. "Mistress, Fumi begs leave to inform you that there appear to be armed men climbing the stairs."

Mashiro set down her tea cup. "Well. I suppose that we should prepare to receive them."

"Fumi will start making more tea. Do you think they will want cake?"

"Ah ha ha ha," Mashiro "laughed". "Fumi, you are so funny. To the elevator, please."

"Fumi thought that was pretty damn funny," the maid muttered as she started pushing the wheelchair.

A few moments later, the elevator doors opened up, and Miyu and Alyssa smiled broadly - well, as much as either of them every did - as they looked into the car. It was a fairly small one, and could only carry Mashiro's wheelchair. It was facing away from them.

"Well, that plan worked well, wouldn't you say, Miyu?" Alyssa asked, rather smugly.

"Indeed, Alyssa. Luring the Queen of Hades down here in this fashion was very clever."

"Queen of Hades?" Mashiro's voice asked. "My, it appears that someone is far more well-informed than I'd realized."

"Ah, it talks!" Alyssa said, clapping her hands together. "I was concerned that you couldn't, after our little encounter in the Dean's office. You do realize that you've abandoned your precious little maid up at the top of this tower, and that my men are heading up towards her even now?"

"Your men. Interesting way of putting it. In any event, yes, I do understand the situation, and I think I can say that a valuable lesson has been learned."

"And what would that be?" Alyssa sneered.

"It's a very good idea to install at least two elevators when you install any."

The silence that followed that comment was abruptly broken by Miyu yanking the wheelchair back and slamming her arm blade through the mannequin dressed in Mashiro's clothes that was sitting there. (And through the small Orphan that was about to explode out of it.)

"I didn't say who learned the -" said the voice modulator on the thing before Miyu smashed it.
Mai was dragged out of her dreadful reminiscences about the stairs by the sound of someone knocking rather heavily on the door to her room. She quickly dried her hands and went over to answer it, dreading the possibility that it might be bad news about - hell, anybody.

"Tokiha Mai?" mispronounced the foremost of the three rather large men in uniform standing outside the door.

"Uh ... yes?" Mai said.

"You need to come with us," he said, completely omitting any polite phrases like 'please'. "Is Minagi Mikoto here?"

"N-no," Mai stammered. "What -"

With a hand gesture, the speaker directed one of the men behind him to move forward and past Mai into the dorm room, which he promptly began to search.

"What is all this about?" Mai asked.

"You know what it is about," the speaker said, sounding bored.

As though things couldn't get any worse, the door to Aoi's room opened, and Nao's face looked out wearily. The weariness eased as she saw Mai being confronted by the men, and a rather smug look settled on her face.

"Return to your room, mind your own business," the man said, giving Nao a momentary look before turning back to Mai. "You make things easier on yourself by telling us where the others are if you know."

Nao's smug look abruptly froze.

It would be so easy, thought Mai. I could tell them, and it'd be a distraction, and I could turn around and -

"Not here," said the man sent into search, who was now standing behind Mai.

Okay, it wouldn't be easy. And anyway ...

"No, I don't know where any of the other himes are," Mai said.

Nao's frozen look turned into a gape. Mai carefully avoided looking in her direction, keeping her focus solely on the soldiers. A moment later, Nao slowly pulled back into her room and closed the door.

"You come with us," the pointman insisted.

"I'll come quietly," Mai agreed.

She got that Mai cared about Takumi. It was completely understandable. Mai was to Takumi as aniiue was to her. They should be together. But she didn't want to be left out, either. And she had been. On the other hand, Midori had made a lot of noise about how only people who were family should get to go on the truck to wherever the truck was going.

But she was Mai's family, too.
Right?

So it was very confusing and frustrating and painful, and Mikoto didn't like being confused or frustrated. (Pain, she more or less accepted as inevitable, and so wasn't bothered by it too much.) All of it got worse when she went back to their room. She didn't like being there when Mai wasn't there too, and who knew how long she'd be gone?

So it was up to the roof, where she slept with the small collection of cats who also took shelter there. She sometimes considered naming them, but since she couldn't think of any names besides "Tora", and since they accepted her as one of them rather than a human, it seemed a bit ridiculous.

She slept uneasily that night, like she had every night between the time that Aniue went away and the time that Mai had arrived in her life. The cats were nice, but not really what she wanted to comfort her. The morning sun, when it finally arrived, roused her but she decided to try and steal more sleep. There was some sort of bang not too far away, but she decided that she didn't care what it was.

Only when she heard the cats making hissing noises did she decide to actually wake up to see what the matter was. Making her way to where they were leaning over the roof's edge and looking down towards the ground below, she blinked wearily a few times before what she was seeing actually registered.

"Mai!" she yelped as she watched her guided away, hands fixed behind her back. Mikoto had Miroku with her, of course, and she impulsively reached for him, fully intending to swoop down and free her at any cost.

Wait, wait, no, no, said the Mai inside her mind. Neither that Mai nor the real one liked it when she did things like that. Yes, this was scary, and Mikoto didn't like being scared any more than she liked being frustrated or confused. But maybe it would be better to wait and see whether Mai needed or wanted to be rescued.

She started to follow them, and wasn't terribly surprised at where they were taking her.

"You're fired," Konoemon told Touko as he stood looking out his office window, arms folded behind his back.

Touko nodded sharply. "Thank you sir," she said, and headed out of the office.

Minamoto Shizuna had seen many strange things in her years at Mahora, but being called into one's employer's office to witness him firing the person whom everyone knew to be his right hand, just as hostile armed personnel seemed to be invading the campus, had to take the cake.

She was tempted to say something, but before she could, the dean spoke up again. "Ah, Shizuna-kun. I believe that we are about to be told comforting lies about the purpose of these people." With that observation, he turned around and slowly made his way to his desk and chair.

Moments later, a tall, dark-skinned woman walked into the room, wearing a slight variation on the uniform worn by the two soldiers who accompanied her. "Headmaster Konoemon Konoe?" she said. "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Nance Rutherford, United States Marine Corps. I realize that you people prefer to make a great deal of small talk before getting down to business, but I'm afraid we going to have to forebear."

"Indeed," said Konoemon, eyes steady. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your company, Lieutenant?"
"Lieutenant Colonel," she corrected.

"As I said."

"No ... ahem. In any event, as you are probably aware, a bridge in the area was destroyed earlier this morning."

"Can't say that I was, no," Konoemon interrupted blandly.

"Ah ha ha, the charming humor of the Japanese," Rutherford said without even the ghost of a smile on her face. "We have reason to believe this to be the work of terrorists that our unit has been tracking for quite some time. If we are correct, they are equipped with more explosives as well as certain biological weapons. With the complete approval of the Japanese government and Self-Defense Forces, we are cordonning off this area to prevent them from escaping further into Japan. In order to capture these vicious criminals, we would like to request your assistance."

"I see. And if we should decline to acquiesce to your request?"

Rutherford sighed. "That would be terribly unfortunate," she said, with the most disturbingly feigned regret that Shizuna had ever seen. "We would of course have no choice but to withdraw, and I would hate to think of what might happen if the terrorist were given free reign. Why, the thought of what they might do with their explosives should they happen to infiltrate one of the kindergarten schools here is utterly horrifying. Wouldn't you agree?"

Shizuna felt faint as she realized that the tones in this woman's voice were not terrified at all. Rather, they sounded ... amused, if anything. Or possibly even anticipatory.

There was a long silence as Konoemon stared across his desk at her. "I see," he said at last. "Well. Then, for the sake of future generations, we must endure the unendurable, again. What precisely do you require me to do?"

"It's funny you should put things that way," Rutherford said, turning back towards the doors and beckoning two more soldiers, carrying a large box, trailing cables, with a microphone attached to it. "In the interests of preventing the spread of panic, we've blacked out all communications to and from this area."

"I'm a bit confused as to how that's supposed to prevent panic," Konoemon murmured.

She ignored him. "However, we've also managed to tap into the public announcement system of your schools, and so your announcement will be heard by everyone in the school. If you could encourage them to cooperate fully, that would be very useful to us. And you do want to remain useful. Right?"

"Indeed," Konoemon said, looking at the microphone. "Well then. Let us proceed."

To all students and teachers of Mahora, this is Headmaster Konoe Konoemon, making a general announcement. The military personnel present on our campus today are here with my permission, and should be given whatever assistance is necessary to fulfill their mission. Anyone who defies them does so against the expressed request of the administration, and will be severely disciplined. That is all.

"Wonderful," Rutherford said once the speaker was turned off.
"Yes, let's just hope that no one takes it in to their mind to disobey my expressed request in hopes of earning my forgiveness afterwards," Konoemon speculated.

"Yes, that would be very unfortunate for them, as you will be in no position to give them that forgiveness." She turned to her men. "If anything happens, shoot them both," she said, and marched out of the room, humming a tune that Shizuna couldn't recognize.

"'Remember Pearl Harbor'," Konoemon supplied to her, seeing the puzzlement on her face.

"Ah," Shizuna said. I'm going to die, aren't I?

I'm going to die, aren't I? Mai thought wearily as she looked up at the stairs winding around the tower. "There's an elevator, you know," she said to the two masked and helmeted soldiers who were escorting her. Their unmasked spokesman had departed to deal with some other situation, leaving her with these two, who didn't seem to speak Japanese, though they apparently understood it.

As witnessed by the fact that one of them grunted in response to her words, and made a shoving gesture towards her while sounds that she couldn't quite understand issued from the other one.

"It was just a suggestion," Mai sighed.

Fortunately, she'd been driven over here from the dormitory, and so wasn't as winded before starting the climb as she might have been otherwise have been. It was still pretty arduous, but maybe she'd gotten tougher since the last time. Hah. The last time. It had just been a couple of days ago. Things were moving so fast ...

It occurred to Mai, as she climbed with the two silent soldiers following along behind her, that she could probably make her escape by jumping off the tower, activating her magatama and flying off, using her forcefield to block the bullets that they shot at her. But she hesitated. How did the field actually work? Would it really protect her from two separate attackers, who could fire at her from different angles of attack? What if they started shooting before she could activate it?

What if Shiho was right about what their defeat meant? What if she was wrong about what counted as a defeat?

She hesitated, and fretted, and by the time she was struggling with her breathing, she'd made it up to the top of the stairs. From there, she was escorted into the house at the top, where, she was not terribly surprised to see, Alyssa and Miyu were waiting. The two of them were standing staring out a bay window that gave a clear view of the sky where the red star was to be seen.

"Ah, Tokiha Mai, we meet again," Alyssa said without turning to look at her. "I'm sure that you're -" Now she did turn, and stared at Mai's wheezing form. "What in the world ... why didn't you take the elevator?"

If she could, Mai would have started screaming at that point. Instead, she made an angry face and pointed waveringly at the two soldiers. Incredibly, they made grunting noises that sounded afronted at the gesture.

"They say you were mouthy," Miyu reported, looking at the two of them with an expressionless face. "And so they decided to teach you a lesson ... regardless of whether or not I believe that, did it not occur to either of you that she'd be expected to answer questions when she got here? No, clearly it didn't. Shoot each other."

What? thought Mai. Before her bewildered eyes, the two of them unlimbered their rifles, took aim,
and fired a single round into each other at point blank range. The noise of the rifles, in this small room, was almost deafening to Mai. And then she continued to stare in amazement as neither soldier collapsed, though they were clearly staggered by the blow, but turned to salute Miyu and Alyssa.

"All right, go get those wounds looked at," Alyssa ordered. As they staggered out, she turned to Mai. "I genuinely apologize for that. Take as much time as you need to recover yourself, we're in no particular rush. However, when you can speak, we do need you to tell us where we can find Minagi Mikoto, Kuga Natsuki, Sugiura Midori -"

"You don't know her address?" Mai complained. "She's still in the place where she was listed in the student directory!"

"We're aware of that, but she wasn't there when we sent people to check on her," Miyu confirmed. "Nor has she shown up for work. You have no idea where she is?"

"No," Mai answered honestly.

Midori was, in fact, in a hotel room in town, enjoying what she'd expected to be a pleasant diversion but which had rapidly developed into one of the best sexual encounters she'd had all year. Or possibly within the last few years.

"Fuck me," she said as he pumped down into her while her hips rocked beneath him, ankles crossed behind his tight butt. "Fuck me fuck me fuck me fuck me!"

Negi obliged her, though his own enjoyment of the encounter was muted, even more than it normally would have been with the age-changing pill active in his system. Still, he was glad that she'd insisted on using them. He didn't really enjoy being a fetish object for his youth.

The way that she hadn't stopped having sex with him, and even clutched him closer, whispering, "Spill your kiddo seed in my grown-up twat," when one of the pills had worn off, sometime earlier, was disturbing enough to his sensibilities. They'd have been more disturbed known that she'd exploded in orgasm when that happened, and was gleefully remembering it as one of the most depraved things she'd ever done, if not the mo- no, the thing with the octopus was still more depraved than that.

It had started last night, after the hubbub at the festival, when Mikoto had rather brusquely turned down her offers to walk her home, leaving her somewhat at loose ends without Yohko there. Still a bit upset at the implications of what her friend and occasional sex buddy had been saying, she'd cast about for a distraction. She'd found one sitting on a bench watching the festivities with a melancholy expression, and promptly offered to join him. Allies, such as they were, should also try to be friendly, after all, if they could.

So they sat a while, talking in vague terms about their situations so that no one who overheard would possibly understand. Eventually, as the festival began to die down for the night, she wondered whether or not he should be heading home. He told her it wasn't really necessary, as the young girl over whom he had guardianship was spending the night at the home of one of her classmates; hence the reason he'd been out tonight at all.

She expressed that it was a pity that he was too young to drink, or they could go out together and drown their sorrows together. And it was then that he brought out the age-changing pills, and said that while he wouldn't drink himself, he would be willing to carry her home from wherever she chose to entertain herself.
A few beers later, she was giving him a blowjob in the alley behind the bar, just a bit too blitzed to wonder at how easily he’d submitted to her not-terribly-subtle seduction. (That would come later.) With the taste of his semen in her mouth, she'd suggested that they head back to her - no, that wouldn't work, damned bed checks - or rather back to his - no, no good either, Kitty might come back in the morning before class - so a hotel it had to be.

They'd gotten good use out of the mattress. And the shower. And the windows, with her tits pressed up against it and the shades up so that anyone could see her being pounded from behind and loving it, loving his cum on and in her, glad that he could use magic so he didn't need a rubber and could spray that milky white goodness up into her unprotected womb.

Negi's own experience of matters was a bit different. While grateful that Akashi-sensei had taught him the spell, he still felt a bit guilty that his promise to cease needing to use it in encounters with his daughter had lasted all of five seconds from the time that Yuna had found out about it. Nonetheless, he would be responsible.

"Urragh!" she cried out as one more surge of bliss surged up from below, a few seconds before another sweet load was dumped into her cunt. For a few moments, they just lay together, in their lewd embrace, breathing heavily.

"I haven't been fucked like that since grade school," Midori finally murmured.

Negi lifted his head so that he could look down at her, startled. "What?"

"No, no, not really, 's just something I saw in a movie once," she explained as they separated and she reached for a towel to clean herself up a bit. "When I'm really feeling good, I say shit without thinking about it, sometimes. You know how it is. Like when you called me Asuna that one time last night."

Negi swallowed. "I-I did? I didn't realize I'd done that. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she said, absently, checking the clock. Just an hour or so until checkout. They weren’t going to have time for another go. Ah well. Then she frowned, as though trying to remember something. "Hey ... wasn’t there a girl in 3-A named Asuna?"

"Uhhhhh," Negi answered with profundity. To make matters worse, his latest pill wore off right then, and he collapsed into a ten year old’s body before her eyes.

"Oh," Midori said, eyes suddenly wide. "Oh, my. Negi, you had sex with one of your students."

He tried to move his mouth in a denial, but the sheer hypocrisy of denying this minimization of his crime was beyond him, and he finally groaned, "Yes. Yes I did."

"Wow," she said, shaking her head. "I have done some pretty sick things in my time, but since I became a teacher, I've known that was something I would never do. Could never do. I, I think I have to report this, Negi, even if it means that this, just now, is going to come out too. I'm sorry, but -"

"Please, Midori," he begged, hands clasped in front of him. "Don't. It's over, she, she left, and I, I - I need this job, so please, don’t -"

"Well ... I mean, I guess I could overlook it, maybe," Midori said at least, sounding dubious. "But you would owe me a really big favor. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes," Negi assured her, nodding firmly.
"Okay, then," Midori nodded right back. "Well. I think I need a shower. We both do, but, well, under the circumstances, hanky-panky isn't a good idea. So I'll go first. Okay? Great." Without waiting for an answer, she headed in and closed the door, leaving him in the bedsheets.

Looking at herself in the mirror before she got in, Midori shook her head again and whispered, "You're a baaaad person sometimes," to herself in the mirror, who nodded in agreement. On the other hand, he had confirmed her suspicions about where he'd learned that stuff he'd done. That said suspicions had nothing to do with any accidental utterances was really irrelevant, in a way.

And as the old saying went, you couldn't cheat an honest man.

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"Very well, then what of Sanada Yukariko?" Miyu asked, tone unaltered.

"I, I don't even know who that is," Mai protested.

"The sister," the android girl prompted.

"Which one?" Mai asked, waving vaguely in what she thought was the direction of the church. "Hello! Huge church! Lots of sisters! And I'm not even Christian so how should I know?"

Miyu and Alyssa exchanged a glance that Mai couldn't read. "Very well," Miyu said aloud. "Then if you should happen to know the identities of any other HiME -"

The temptation to give them Shiho was real, but she hadn't ratted out Nao, and if she started doing that sort of thing now, she might as well have done so then. "No, and even if I did, I don't see why I should tell you!"

Mai casually shaped her arm into a sword again. "Because you do not wish to experience pain and suffering."

Mai just growled, too annoyed to be intimidated. "No, that's not what I mean!"

Miyu blinked. "You do wish to -"

"No! I mean, I don't even understand why you're doing any of this! What is the point?"

"It's for the greater good," Alyssa answered promptly. "Our purpose is to create a true Golden Age, and to that end."

"Yeah, swell," Mai interrupted. "How does what you're doing now get you closer to that?"

Alyssa half-turned to look out the window. "You can see it, can't you? The red star in the sky. The HiME star."

Mai suppressed a groan. Even here, she was encountering the bloody Socratic method! "Yes, I can see it." She blinked, then. "Can you?"

"Of course," Alyssa said, turning back to her. "Why would you think that I cannot?"

"Well, Midori, she didn't think that you could be really be a, well, because ..."

Alyssa stared at her. "Ohhh," she said after a moment. "That. There are many advantages to being created for a purpose; this is just one of them. I was designed to begin that process as soon as I was born." Ignoring the horrified look on Mai's face, she turned back to the window. "And I can see that star. Have you not noticed that it is becoming brighter and brighter?"
She waited for an answer, looked back to see that Mai was still apparently overcome with horror, and decided that one was not forthcoming. "Evidently not. But it is. It is coming closer and closer to Earth with each passing day. The HiME star is an artifact of unimaginable power, power controlled by an entity known as the Obsidian Prince and granted to the HiME to entertain him with their battles against Orphans and each other. One by one, the twelve little girls will fall, until only one remains, to wed the Obsidian Prince and gain his power.

"But. What if there were thirteen? What if all the twelve of these princesses were vanquished, and a thirteenth was the only possibility for the Prince to claim his bride? Then he could come for her, and claim her - and be entrapped, his power taken from him and used for the benefit of all humanity, rather than that a small cult who venerate the Obsidian Prince as a god."

Mai kept right on staring at Alyssa for a long while after she finished speaking ... and then she started to laugh her head off.

"What?" Alyssa asked, confused. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, wow. Congratulations, that has finally made me crack," Mai said between gales of laughter. "You have officially said the craziest thing I've heard since all this started."

"What, pray, is so crazy about it?" Miyu asked coldly. Not that her normal voice was all that warm to begin with.

"Well, gee, where do I start?" Mai asked, still chuckling. "I mean, you're hoping that a god, basically, will be forced to wed Alyssa - somehow - because she'll be the only HiME remaining. You expect that you're going to - somehow - force this entity - whatever it is - to marry her. Really. Hasn't it occurred to you that a being that could do this, all for just his amusement, may not take kindly to you trying to take his powers away from him and to also force him to marry someone he doesn't want to?"

"You are confusing power with wisdom, a flaw of the immature," Alyssa said dismissively.

That actually set Mai off again. "Seriously?" she managed to say.

Alyssa was scowling now. "Yes, seriously. The Obsidian Prince is a mindless entity until he is permitted to possess a mortal instrument. We will prevent him from doing so, by identifying the instrument and neutralizing him. Consequently, he will be acting from instinct, like a wounded animal."

"Woo, scary," Mai said, mockingly. "And so who is this 'instrument'?"

"We will identify him," Alyssa insisted. "It should be fairly simple once we have you all in custody. Based on the historical accounts of the previous incident, he will probably be a male relative of one of the HiME. Likely a brother, or cousin, at least."

Any amusement Mai found in the situation died in an instant. *Takumi.* She forced her voice to remain level, though, as she spoke up. "Historical accounts? There are historical accounts of this sort of thing? I've never heard of -"

"Of course you haven't. You're a silly spoiled girl who has no notion of the truth of things," Alyssa said dismissively. "And yet, in fact, you have heard of the consequences of the previous Carnival. It occurred roughly four hundred years ago, with the result of the increasing seclusion of Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate - which was and still is the goal of the First District, the worshippers of the Obsidian Prince. Can you imagine it? The power of a deity, used for nothing more than to influence
the decisions of the government of a small island nation, and to make a group of oligarchs immortal. In any event, you have also met an individual who was involved in that Carnival."

Now Mai blinked. "I have?"

"Yes -"

"Alyssa," Miyu interjected, sounding both deferential and somehow admonitory. "You are giving her far too much information, compared to what she has given you." She had actually been staring rather intently at Mai for some time now.

The little girl actually blushed. "Oh. Um, well, now that you understand what we are attempting to do, will you not -"

"No, I'm not going to help you, or answer your questions," Mai said.

"Yes, you will," Miyu said. "In fact, you have already done so. I observed your reaction to the suggestion that the Obsidian Prince would choose a male relative of one of you as a host. School records show that you have a younger brother. Hospital records show that he is presently being treated for a chronic heart condition. In light of that, it is extremely unlikely that he is a potential candidate for the host of Obsidian Prince entity, which will naturally desire a host who is healthy."

Mai couldn't help but sigh in relief, even as she wondered why on Earth she was being told -

"However, the fact of his existence suggests a number of interesting possibilities for compelling your surrender," Miyu continued.

Again, Mai's fists clenched without her realizing it. "If you think you're going to threaten him to get me to -"

"Actually, no," the android interrupted. "The carrot might be a better strategy in this case. Tokiha Mai, you are clearly not oblivious to the fact that the Searrs Foundation has access to medical technology far in advance of the general public. Alyssa and, to a lesser degree, I myself are the products of that technology. With access to that, it would be trivial for us to treat his condition, and in the process, ensure that he would still be undesirable as a host for the Obsidian Prince through regular doses of medroxyprogesterone acetate."

Mai blinked. Actually, so did Alyssa. Then she clapped her hands together and smiled. "So clever, Miyu!" she said. Chemical castration would certainly discourage the Obsidian Prince from choosing him!

"You'd really do that?" Mai asked, filing the unfamiliar drug's name away for later reference.

"And all you would need to do is surrender and permit us to destroy your Child," Miyu replied, nodding.

Mai felt like she should be used to having her hopes raised and then abruptly crushed, but it still hurt. "That won't work," she said. "Takumi is, if I surrender he'll -"

"Ah," said Miyu, and now she was smiling cruelly again. "Thank you for that intelligence. And now we return to the stick."

Mikoto blinked as she regained her self-awareness in the elevator car that went up the tower to the Kazehana girl's house. How did I get here? she wondered. Her memories told her that she'd watched
as Mai was marched up the stairs, agonizing over whether or not to take the risk of attacking her captors now, when Mai would be most at risk. And then ... then something had happened, and she couldn't remember what it was.

It was a little disturbing when that happened, but there was really no point in worrying about the past. From the light above the elevator door, she could tell that the elevator was going up. So she must be on her way to rescue Mai. Well, then whatever happened must have convinced her that Mai really needed to be rescued! And it was just so upsetting that she didn't want to remember it.

Abruptly, the elevator dinged, the doors opened, and the sole guard outside the door at the top peered in. The car appeared to be empty - since Mikoto was presently perched above the door and looking down. Once the guard poked his head in, but before he looked up - which his helmet and mask actually made a bit difficult - she dropped down and slammed him with the flat of the blade, knocking him down and out before she whirled to deal with his partner.

To her surprise, there wasn't one. (Unbeknownst to her, there was, but he'd gone off to help two other soldiers, both wounded, at an aid station elsewhere in the house.) That made things so much easier. With great difficulty, she hefted up Miroku so that it wasn't dragging on the ground as she ran quietly down the hallway to the sitting room.

She'd been expecting to see the Kazehana girl holding court over Mai, but it seemed she was mistaken. Instead, it was Miyu and the Searrs girl. Things had clearly changed without her realizing it. And indeed, just as she arrived, Miyu said, "... now we return to the stick."

No one was going to beat Mai with a stick! Not while Mikoto was around! Enough hesitation! Mikoto let Miroku touch ground once more and charged into the room, glad of the distance she had to travel so that by the time she was bringing Miroku back up again, there was nothing to get in the way of his arc in the air. At least, not until Miyu managed to get her own blade up to block him, at almost the last second. Under other circumstances, Mikoto might have growled about robots, but there wasn't time for that.

"Mai!" she called out. "Run!"

"Mikoto!" Mai shouted, instead of doing the sensible thing and running like she'd just been told to do. Mai could be really frustrating sometimes.

"How in the world did you get in here without alerting the guards?" the Searrs girl demanded, looking appropriately frightened.

"I hit them," Mikoto told her as she tried to force Miroku past Miyu's guard to no avail. "Mai - why aren't you running?"

Mai continued to be inexplicably paralyzed for another moment or so, before she shook her head. "Okay, she breathed ... and then ran forward, towards Mikoto, grabbing her up and then moving backwards, towards the window - then through it!

It was at that moment that Mai and Mikoto discovered that this particular window of the house was positioned just over the southern face of the tower, and that if someone were to jump out of it, their momentum would probably carry them over the edge to start falling all the way down to the tower's base.

"This plan sucks, Mai!" Mikoto shouted as they began falling.

"I don't do plans!" Mai shouted back as she called up her own Element, holding Mikoto tightly.
Their descent was abruptly halted.

"Ow! That's hot, Mai!" Mikoto complained as the tiny sparks from Mai's element seared her lightly.

"And you're heavy but do you hear me complaining?" Mai retorted as the weight strained at her arms while she fought to rise.

"You just did!"

While contemplating dropping her - okay, it was only for a second that she did that, before her fondness for the girl metaphorically coughed to remind her of its existence - Mai desperately looked behind her. If Miyu had rockets in her feet, or a helicopter rotor in her back, or anything like that, this was going to be a very short flight. Fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case; from what she saw, Miyu was just standing in the window staring at them, with Alyssa beside her and her hair undone -

Her hair undone?

Abruptly, dozens of creatures that looked like flying manta rays were surging up from just behind Alyssa, and beginning to chase after the two of them.

Craaaaap! thought Mai. Her hands were full, so there was no way that she could throw fire or anything at the Orphans. Do they really count as Orphans, though? After all, Alyssa was making them. So technically, you could say that they're her Child. She sure has a lot of Childs. Maybe that's why she's needed to be fertile from birth. Wow, I haven't missed having ridiculous thoughts when I'm going to die at allllll!

"Mai!"

She quickly turned her face in the direction of the familiar voice, wondering as she did how in the world Natsuki had gotten up - and then another question took its place. "Natsuki! Since when have you had a helicopter?"

"Since shut up Mai! Get over here, you're in Duran's line of fire!" Natsuki shouted back as she crouched beside her Child in the rear compartment of the station-keeping vehicle. Mai quickly obliged, darting over to the other side of the helicopter and almost collapsing into the open door, as did Mikoto with her.

"Fire!" Natsuki shouted. Giant firing hammers swept up from Duran's rear haunch to slam against the barrels of the cannons mounted on both of the Child's shoulders, and a pair of projectiles launched from them in the general direction of the pursuing Orphans. They exploded in a torrent of frost, icing up most of the flying monsters so that they plummetted to the ground and shattered there.

"The ones she makes are a bit more vulnerable than than the real thing," Natsuki shouted, to make herself heard over the rotor. "That wouldn't have worked otherwise. Get us out of here!" she added, directing the comment to the pilot, a chartered pilot she'd hired.

"No, you may not scramble jets to deal with the helicopter," Miyu said, watching the encounter. "No. It does matter that it would be a trivial task. Colonel, unless you want you and your men to have their supply of the Infinity Formula cut off, you will not scramble any jets or shoot down that helicopter. Yes, I am threatening you. That is all." She terminated the radio transmission.

Alyssa was glowering at the retreating helicopter.

"You should be more careful, Alyssa," Miyu pointed out. "If those creatures hadn't been dealt with,
you might have killed your older sister."

"I am starting to stop being greatly concerned about the welfare of my older sister," Alyssa grumbled. "What about the guards?"

"It's very strange," Miyu admitted. "The ones at the base of the elevator were slaughtered, but Minagi only knocked out the one at the top. She may have been trying to be stealthy, but that's uncharacteristic."

Alyssa nodded absently. "They're going to gather themselves, aren't they?"

"Indeed."

"Just as planned, then."

Elsewhere, Nao was climbing out of a bathroom window. Escaping had proven pretty simple. All she'd had to do was persuade one of the soldiers standing guard over her class to take her to the bathroom, then turn on the tears to convince him that she'd be too shy and embarrassed to go if he were to follow her into the bathroom itself, even if all he did was stand outside the stall, and that she really had to go now and there was no time for him to go get a female soldier ...

"American or Japanese, guys are all the same," she muttered, but without too much heat. She was a little too distracted by thoughts of what had happened this morning to really get any pleasure out of winning like this, even though she was carefully making her way over to cover.

Why hadn't Mai given her up? It would have been easy. It would have let Nao serve as a distraction so that she herself could escape. It would have been what Nao would have done, and with a laugh at her. What she'd done instead hadn't made any sense at all.

Was it just because they happened to be related, thanks to That Jerk? (Since finding out, Nao never thought of him as 'father'. Not that she had much even before that.) While listening to Mikoto's interminable whining about what a great person Mai was, one of the things that had come up was her status as a cool big sister. Was she trying to be Nao's sister? Ugh, disgusting thought!

Disgusting!

Disgusting ...

Why couldn't she work up the disgust like she used to?

No, Mai had just been trying to fool everyone into thinking that she was a sweet, unselfish angel while she was really just as selfish and cruel as everyone else. And the fact that no one other than Mai and Nao would know what she'd done didn't make that idea fail to make any sort of sense at all.

She was trying to trick Nao! That made sense! But that meant she cared what Nao thought, and nobody cared about Nao! Nobody other than her mother had ever cared about her! So, no, nothing made sense anymore!

She had to keep going. That was what she'd always done, since then. Maybe if she ran far enough and fast enough, things would start making sense again. But there were all these soldiers to stop her and, and they were after the HiME, weren't they? So if she ran into them, and used Juliet to fight them, they'd know that she was one of the ones they were after. And then she'd be prey.

"Nooooooo!"
For a second, she thought the scream had come from her own throat, and flinched at how girly she sounded. But then it repeated, just a bit more faintly, and Nao realized that it hadn't been her. And that she could hear other sounds. Familiar sounds. The sounds of flesh on flesh, rhythmically slapping against each other. The sounds she'd heard while she was crouching in the cupboard, hearing no matter how much she tried to cover her ears, and she could also hear men's voices now, too.

It was just like that time.

No. No it wasn't. Then she had been a weak and helpless child. Now she was a predator. It wasn't her mother this time, but it was someone's daughter, someone's sister, and she was not going to let it happen again!

She moved closer to the sounds. They were coming out of an semi-open window. Nao breathed and let her hands become claws. She considered calling out Juliet, but no, this was going indoors. There wouldn't be room for her. One more deep breath - then she shoved the window the rest of the way open and dived in.

There were three of them, she realized at once, which was at least one more than she'd been expecting. Nao jerked her eyes away from the sight of the two of them on the table, one taking the girl from behind while the other caressed her face as he shoved himself into her mouth. Semi-naked and disarmed as they were, those two weren't the immediate threat.

The immediate threat was the one standing at the door, as a lookout probably, who was oh so quickly bringing up some sort of radio handset up towards his mouth. If it got there, and he made the call for help that she could see being born on his lips, this place would be flooded with backup and her whole plan would be wrecked. So he'd just made himself her target, and probably hadn't even gotten his share of the spoils.

Life is so unfair, Nao thought as she leapt up at him, clawed hand extended to slice into the radio and the flesh and bone of the hand that was holding it. The scream that burst from his mouth in place of whatever warning he'd been planning to shout excited her, and since the radio was a bunch of chunked electronics rather than anything that could transmit a signal, it was heard only by the four of them. Still, it was a little annoying, so she decided to silence him by bringing up a knee into his crotch so that he'd collapse the rest of the way to the floor as she spun to look at the other two.

They were stepping back from the pink-haired girl they'd just been raping, which was good, but that meant that they were going for their weapons, which was double plus ungood. She darted forward at the nearest one, both clawed hands up, and brought them down in an X-shape across his chest just as he touched the gun. Blood burst from the wounds she tore open, and he fell back in silent shock.

Two down, one left to go -

But that one was armed, now, pointing a gun at her, and time slowed down again as she heard him shouting in some non-Japanese language that she didn't recognize, and starting to pull the trigger. Nao had never moved so fast in her life as when she brought up her left claw and shot one of its wirey extensions across the room at the gun in the man's hand, pushig it out of that hand and away towards the opposite wall. He turned to stare at it incredulously, which gave her time to rush over to him.

"If you can't play nice with your weapons, you shouldn't have them," she said, not caring if he understood her or not. "Either of them." And with a swipe of her other claw, she took a good chunk of his other weapon away. More blood. It probably tasted delicious.

She stood there, looking down at him and breathing heavily, considering giving him a swift kick in
what was left of the family jewels, but decided against it. Instead, she stomped on his stomach, before turning to look at their victim, who was still sitting on the table where they'd been, where she had been earlier and staring at Nao a bit apprehensively.

This was the first chance Nao had gotten to get a good look at her. She was petite, no taller than Nao herself, though from the uniform that was lying on the floor not far from where she was seated, she was clearly a high school student. She'd seen her bright pink hair before, while she was fighting, but now she noticed those huge, huge ... things on her chest. She was probably bustier than Mai. She was probably bustier than fricking Suzuhara!

Nao decided that she should probably say something, rather than staring like this. "Are you all right?" she asked ... just as the girl asked her the same thing.

Nao blinked. "Am I all right?" she repeated. "You're asking if I'm all right?"

"Yes?" the older girl said uncertainly.

"Are you crazy?" Nao barked, managing to loom over her despite their postures. "You just got raped and you're asking if I'm all right?"

"Well, you seemed sort of - um, wait, raped?" she asked. Before Nao could answer, the girl gasped. "Oh! Oh, yeah, I guess it sort of was rape, too. That makes me feel a bit better, really. I don't like cheating on my boyfriend, but it just sort of keeps happening, and -"

"What?" Nao asked, completely bewildered.

"Well, you see, I have this problem," the girl said, with the air of telling someone a confidence. "Whenever anyone, well, plays with these -" Here she gestured towards her breasts. "- I get really, really horny, and, well, it doesn't matter who does it. Does me, I guess I should say. I mean, I haven't let my brother do me yet, except with Hiroto-kun is there too - Hiroto-kun is my boyfriend, you see, and - I'm sorry, I should really introduce myself. I'm Sugimoto Ai. Thank you so much for saving me. Are you a magical girl?"

"Y-yeah," Nao stammered. Her brother? And her boyfriend? How frequently did this girl get raped, that she didn't even seem bothered by it?! "Um ... yeah," she repeated. "And now I must go!"

"Thank you magical girl!" Ai said, waving politely as she started to get dressed while Nao went out the window. "I'll never forget your courage!"

I just helped someone, Nao thought as she skulked away. Someone who was already really screwed up, but ... I helped someone.

It felt ... good.

"Well, we're probably not gonna make it to homeroom, but I don't regret it, do you?" Midori said cheerfully as she strolled out of the hotel lobby, just a few steps ahead of Negi, who was once more in his aged-up form.

"Actually, yes," he answered. "I feel like I've let my new students down."

Midori sighed and shook her head. "I'm starting to understand why Asakura's so screwed up," she muttered. Off his look, she said, more loudly. "Oh come on. They can't fire us. We're indispensable. And it's a wonderful day! You need to learn how to relax and live a little. I swear, I think you've been hanging around Itoshiki-sensei way too much."
"And I think you've been spending too much time with Kageyama-san," Negi answered with just a bit of edge in his tone.

"Oh, you know her?" Midori asked, not at all offended. "Biblically?" she added wryly.

Before Negi could answer (honestly) with a loudly voiced negative, any conversation that they might have was drowned out as an armored personnel carrier trundled down the street in front of them, blaring the phrase, "Remain indoors" from its loudspeakers. It passed them without stopping, continuing down the street out of sight.

"... well. That's not the sort of thing you see everyday," Midori mused a moment later.

Negi didn't bother to answer that observation, as he was frantically trying to contact any of his pactio partners. From the way that his face got paler and paler, Midori could easily guess that he wasn't enjoying any success in this endeavor. "This is not good," he announced a moment later, looking around as he unlimbered his staff from where it was strapped across his back. "Please, excuse me, Midori-san, but I have to be going."

"Going where?" she asked.

He blushed. "Um. I can't tell you that. We have a plan for these situations, and it's important for none of its details to fall into the wrong hands."

Now her eyebrows went up. "The wrong hands?" she repeated.

"Any hands other than -" Negi started to explain.

"I seem to remember that someone owes me a rather large favor," she said, looking around absently, as though seeking a pulpit from which to declaim on the subject of a certain teacher's disgraceful interactions with his students.

"But, but -" Negi stammered.

She gave him a rather chilly look, before shrugging. "Ah well. Never mind. Keep your secrets, and I'll be sure to keep mine. But remember your obligations, boya," she added.

Now he almost seemed to rock back, as though her use of a casual term for 'young boy' startled him. "R-right," he said. "Well, then. Please excuse me." And with a short bow, he ran into the nearest alley.

"Oh, excuse me," he said as he passed out of sight.

"Quite all right," said a woman's voice.

Midori tensed up.

Right as there was a faint whooshing noise in the air, Fumi poked her head out of the alley. "Good morning, Midori-sensei. Fumi hopes that you are well at the moment?"

"Yeah," Midori said slowly. "Don't know how long that's going to last, though."

"Indeed," Fumi replied, nodding at that sagacious remark. "None can know such a thing. Be that as it may, however, Fumi is bid to invite you to accompany Fumi to discuss the conditions presently obtaining with Fumi's mistress and others affected by them. Would you be so kind as to accompany Fumi?"
Midori considered for a moment. "If I say no," she said at last, "are you going to try and knock me out and drag me with you anyway?"

Fumi gasped. "Fumi is shocked that you would suggest such a thing."

She blinked. "Oh. Well, then, I guess -" And then a thought occurred to her. "Um. Let me rephrase that, slightly. If I say so, are you going to knock -"

"Yes," Fumi interrupted.

"Ah-heh. Right. Thought so. I'll come along like a good girl," Midori said.

"Very wise," Fumi said, and beckoned her to follow her into the alley.

"So. What's it like, being a ninja maid?" Midori asked as she followed her to a slightly ajar sewer access hatch.

Fumi stopped dead in her tracks, then turned to look coldly at Midori. "You are misinformed," she said, without any affected innocence in her tone. When she spoke next, it was still archaic, but not nearly as cute. "This one is not a ninja; one rather follows the path laid out in Go Rin No Sho and Hagakure." Without apparent effort, she kicked the heavy metal hatch the rest of the way open, then stepped into it and plunged out of sight, delicately holding her skirt close against her legs.

"Oookay then," Midori said, before climbing down on the ladder.

Kitty was not having a good day.

Truthfully, she didn't have many good days. Particularly not since she started going to class with all these other girls, being completely immersed in the strange language she still didn't like all that much and having to wear this strange uniform and its socks and shoes. Sometimes she could feel her feet suffocating. Sundays were good, usually, since she could lie around and play games when she felt like it, except when Negi took it into his mind to try and tutor her in order to keep her grades up.

But this day was worse than even her usual not-so-good day. It hadn't started out so bad, though she'd had a mild panic when she'd woken up in someone else's room, with Negi nowhere near. She hadn't really wanted to go spend the night at Momoko's dorm room with the others, until a certain someone had not-all-that-subtly hinted that he'd be happy if she strengthened her friendships with her classmates. She supposed that she had had something approaching a good time, even if everyone else talked too bloody fast.

But then she'd gone home to pick up her school bag, and found the room empty. Well, he might be training, right? Except that his bed hadn't been slept in. So it was with worry and confusion that she'd headed off to class ... which was interrupted by the strange announcement, and the arrival of the men-at-arms.

She supposed that she should find them intimidating, or even frightening. She supposed that it was strange that she didn't. The fact of the matter, though, was that she had no room in her heart for fear of anything else when she was as worried about Negi as she was right now. What if he'd been hurt? No, if he'd been hurt, one of the damned nuisances (as she thought of his friends) would have told her. Unless they'd been hurt too.

What if it was all of a piece? What if these strange soldiers were the reason that he was missing? That didn't seem possible. He hadn't wanted her to, but sometimes, when she was very bored, she'd sneak out to watch him training, and been awed at the way that he could fight. And if he fought like that,
how could even a bunch of men beat him? Unless they all fought like that.

Before that dreadful possibility could do more than settle into her stomach, the men had started to take the girls out of class and away for some sort of "inspection". For signs of a virus, they said. (Then why just the girls?) When the girls they took away came back, they looked upset and embarassed, but there wasn't any time for chatter about what had happened, not under the eyes of the soldiers still standing guard.

And then they started to take Hanei away. Hanei, one of the shyer girls in the class, had been invited to the same slumber party as Kitty the last night, and showed up and quietly played with the others, not talking as much. In their hearing, the other girls had compared her to Kitty. It was ridiculous. Kitty knew full well that there was nothing similar about them. She was silent because she had nothing to say, where that Hanei was just shy. They had nothing in common, and she had no reason to care about her.

So then why, when Hanei collapsed to the ground, quivering and pleading that she didn't want to go, she didn't feel sick, and the men who were taking her away reached down and yank at her arm, making her cry out in pain, did Kitty explode?

"Git away from her!" she cried out, jumping up from her desk and running up to try and shove the men away from Hanei. She had the same impact on them that she might have had on a stone firmly fixed into the ground.

Except, of course, that stones don't say, in English, "Well, I guess this one's volunteering to go next instead."

She struggled and cursed all the way down the hall, but there was a man holding onto either one of her arms, and they were moving fast enough that if she'd tried to kick anyone she'd have lost her footing and possibly hurt herself. Since that would defeat the purpose of the exercise, she didn't do it. So they brought her to the nurse's office, with the nurse nowhere in sight, and threw her to a doctor she didn't recognize.

"Take off your clothes," he said absently.

"Won't," she snapped back, arms folded in front of her.

Now he looked at her. "Scottish, eh? Not much likelihood that you're one of them. But why take chances? Take off your clothes, or I'll have them take them off for you."

Face red with embarassment and fury, she stripped down to her skivvies. And then past them, when he made a gesture that seemed to be saying, "And the rest, too." She was left in only her socks.

Then came the prodding, as though they were looking all over her skin for a sign of something. (A witch's mark, she thought absently, with no time to wonder whence came that thought.) They didn't touch her down there, but that was the only humiliation she was spared. And then when they were done, she was absently told to get dressed again. The bastard had the nerve to leer at her and say, "Like a lollypop?"

She didn't take one, instead marching back to class in fury. And worse, she had to watch as they did take Hanei this time. She was a little calmer, or at least hiding the terror better. And she gave Kitty such a strange smile as she went.

"That was so brave, Kiddy-san!" said Momoko when she sat down again beside her. (One of the more annoying things about these people was the way none of them could rightly say the "tt" in her
Brave? What good was it to be brave when being brave didn't accomplish anything? She wanted to rage at the girl for saying daft stupid things, but she kept her peace for now. Later, when she was with Negi again, she'd complain, and be loud and obnoxious about the whole thing. And she would be with him again. She would. She had to be.

Useless, so useless. She didn't want to be useless ever again!

... sometimes, there is no other choice. You either fight or see someone else fighting on your behalf. And for me, at least, the latter is worse. Maybe it's the same with you. Maybe you should join me in training.

His words, spoken this past Christmas, came back to her then. She didn't want to be useless. She didn't want to be helpless. But she didn't want to be helped, either. She didn't want to be the sort of person who was always needing help.

She was going to have to learn to fight.

The helicopter finally settled down on Library Island. "I'm about out of fuel, ma'am," the pilot shouted back at Natsuki. "This is as far as I can go."

"You've done more than we agreed on," she shouted back as the rotor began to slow down. "I'll add a bonus to your account in the Caymans in a few days. Assuming I live that long."

"Always a pleasure doing business with you," he said.

"Likewise."

Then she shot him.

"What the hell, Natsuki?" Mai cried out as the pilot slumped over in his chair.

"Oh, relax," Natsuki sneered as she hopped out of the helicopter. "Stun bolt, remember? He'll be out for maybe half an hour, and if the bad guys find him, he'll be able to credibly claim that I took him hostage. Maybe it'll save his life."

Mai couldn't argue with that, but she still wasn't happy as she and Mikoto got out of the vehicle behind her.

"Okay, I just got back on campus." Natsuki started to say as she headed towards the library's main entrance.

"Where were you?" Mikoto abruptly asked.

Natsuki paused, turned back and replied, "The wonderful land of mind your own business, doing stuff you don't need to know about," she answered.

Mikoto turned to Mai. "Was that an insult? I'm never sure with her."

"Yes, it was, but! Let's not fight amongst ourselves, okay? Okay?" she asked again for emphasis.

Mikoto growled something that Mai took as an assent.

"Anyway, I just got back, so you two know more about what sort of crap is going on than I do. The
roads into and out of the place are blockaded, and there's this huge ship anchored off the coastline."

"It's Alyssa, she and Miyu came back with an army," Mai explained. "But that's not important right now."

Natsuki openly stared at Mai. "You're going to have to really work to top that, you know?"

"Shiho is a hime, and -"

"Shiho is a HiME?" Mikoto asked, startled.

"Who's Shiho?" Natsuki asked.

Mai throttled the urge to scream. "Remember the girl you shot?"

"You're going to need to be more specific."

"The one you shot on the night we met! Red-head, octopus braids? Ringing any bells?"

Now Natsuki was gaping. "You're kidding. There were two HiME on that stinking ship? Two? And ... nyergh!" She clutched her head as though it was in pain.

"But that isn't the important part either!" Mai insisted.

"Oh come on."

"No, I'm serious here! She told me that if any of us are defeated, if our Childs are destroyed, we won't suffer the consequences - the person we care about the most is going to be the one to do that!"

Now Mikoto gaped.

For her part, Natsuki just said, "Uh-huh."

"Uh-huh?" Mai shrieked. "Natsuki, how can you be so calm about that?"

"Because I am always calm when confronted with bullshit," the cold-eyed girl answered. "Mai ... I don't care about anyone. I didn't get into this to protect anyone. I am doing this to avenge my mother - if I cared about anyone, it would be her. And since she's dead, she can't suffer any consequence from this. So it follows that the whole notion is a large load of bullshit."

"What if it's not your mother, though?" Mai pressed. "What if it's -?"

"She's. Just. Useful!"

Mai coughed. "Back to that, are we? I was going to say your father, but since you brought it up -"

"I don't have a father. And let's let the subject drop." Natsuki turned away. "This army that Alyssa brought, they're after us, right?"

"Yes, they've got this plan -"

"Don't care," Natsuki said without a backward glance. "There's plenty of places to hide out here in the big library. Eventually, they'll get tired of looking and have to go away."

"I don't think that's going to work," said Mai.

"Then you can go try some other plan, while I hole up in one of this place's sub-sub-basements."
And with that, she started walking again.

Mai turned back to Mikoto. "What do you think Mikoto?" she asked.

"I don't know," the younger girl answered. "It's scary to think about something happening to
aniue because I lost." Then she drew in a deep breath. "But I won't lose! Never! Not against
anybody! So you don't have to worry, Mai, because I'll protect you and Takumi and everybody, no
matter what!"

Mai felt herself smiling involuntarily at Mikoto's enthusiasm, even as she felt an odd twinge inside
at her words. It was obviously just concern for Mikoto's well-being, of course. "So those are my
choices, fight or hide, huh?" she asked aloud.

"No, no, Mai doesn't fight. I fight for Mai," Mikoto explained.

"It's not a bad set of strategies, but I suspect that there may be others you'll find a bit more
appealing," said a quiet voice from not far away.

They both quickly turned, with Mikoto promptly stepping between Mai and the person who'd just
spoken.

"Mashiro-san!" Mai said.

The violet-haired girl in the wheelchair was sitting just a few feet away, in an alcove off the library's
main foyer. "Good day, Mai-san," she said politely. "You might want to go get Natsuki-san before
she hides herself away completely. She will be needed for this as well."

A few minutes later, the doors of a certain service elevator opened up just as Mashiro was saying,"-was
a good plan, Natsuki-san, but the odds were against your choosing this particular sub-basement
as your hiding place, which would have meant that I'd have to send someone to go and dig you out
of whichever one you did choose. Not to mention," she added as she wheeled out of the elevator,
followed closely by the three of them, "that you'd have to deal with the traps."

"Traps?" Mai echoed. "Why are there traps?"

"To capture and/or incapacitate the library thieves, of course," Mashiro replied, in a tone that implied
that she considered this to be a rather foolish question. "This way, please."

The short corridor entered into a room filled with rows of monitors and a large display screen. There
were some odd stains on the floor, but Mai didn't really have time to consider them. Her eyes were
rather drawn immediately to one of the people who was already in the room when they arrived,
hunched over one of the monitors, just as that person turned to look at them as they arrived.

"What are you doing here?" Mai and Shiho shouted in a disturbing chorus.

Mashiro, who was heading up to the front of the room, paused and looked back towards Shiho.
"Shiho-san," she said patiently. "Do please remember what we discussed this morning. If I have to
take it away from you, you will not get it back, this time."

With a jolt of horror, Mai realized that Shiho was holding that flute of hers in her right hand. Shiho,
who hadn't turned away from Mai as Mashiro spoke, clearly saw that terror cross her face, because
she smiled viciously, as though she hadn't heard anything Mashiro had just said.

"As to why either of you are here, we will need all of the HiME to gather in order to face this
challenge," Mashiro said as she continued her journey up to the front of the room. "One of you has
already fallen, another has other duties which I do not think that one will voluntarily abandon, and
the last of the HiME has not yet awakened to her powers. I have sent Fumi to gather the others."

"Fumi?" Mikoto asked. "Why her?"

"Fumi is not without certain talents," Fumi informed Mikoto from where she was presently standing
behind her.

Mikoto jumped as she turned to face her, sword up. Fumi was already prepared to respond, with a
scythe raised and ready. The two of them glared at each other for several seconds, before both took a
single step back and lowered their weapons.

"Damned nin-" Mikoto started to say.

Abruptly, Midori rushed up from behind Fumi. "Hey, guys," she said rather noisily, with a big smile
on her face. "We're being invaded! Isn't this great! What a wonderful chance to be heroes!"
Somewhat more quietly, she added, "Don't use the n-word, she gets mean when you say the n-
word." Then she blinked as she looked past them. "Shiho-chan?"

"Don't call me Shiho-chan," came the sour response.

Mai felt like she ought to respond to the implied question in Midori's words, but was distracted by
who else she saw trailing along behind Fumi. "Nao?" she asked.

"'Sup," the red-haired girl said, avoiding meeting Mai's gaze ... which wasn't hard, because she'd
already moved on to the other girl behind Fumi, who was trying to keep as much space between
herself and Nao as possible.

"Yukino-san?" Mai said, faintly incredulously.

"Um," Yukino said. "Small world, isn't it?" Just a few minutes ago, she'd made an escape from a pair
of soldiers while Haruka had covered her by attacking them. She was terrified of the fate that Haruka
was courting on her behalf, but hadn't had any time to think about it before she'd run into Nao who
was running in the same direction. Before either of them had time to do anything, Midori had popped
up out of one of the steam tunnels and dragged them along with her and the chairman's maid. It had
been a dizzying morning. And it didn't look like it was about to end anytime soon.

Fumi paid this little drama no real attention. Instead, she turned (still keeping an eye on Mikoto as she
did) and looked towards Mashiro. "Mistress, Fumi apologizes for Fumi's ineptitude. The
whereabouts of Yukariko-san remain a mystery."

Mai blinked. Yukariko? Wasn't that -

"Most likely Ishigami-sensei is hiding her somewhere," Mashiro mused aloud. "Well, it cannot be
helped. In any event -"

"Wait," interrupted Mai. "I need to know something. In the last twenty-four hours, I've been told
some very disturbing things, and you've just confirmed that one of the people who told me some of
them was right about something else, so clearly you know about all of this, and -"

"What would you like to ask me, Mai-san?" Mashiro interrupted.

"What happens when our Childs are destroyed?" Mai asked.

For a few moments, it looked like Mashiro wasn't going to answer. She gazed at Mai without saying
a word. Just as Mai was opening her mouth, unsure whether to repeat the question or beg for an answer, Mashiro finally spoke. "The individuals you most wish to protect will die if that happens. In an extremely painful and inescapable manner."

Mai felt her heart skip a beat, and heard Shiho faintly chuckling.

"The same will happen if you yourselves die," Mashiro added.

The chuckling stopped, and Mai had the vague pleasure of seeing a horrified look on Shiho's face when she glanced in her direction.

"That's bullshit!" Natsuki yelled. "It can't be right. I don't care about anyone -"

"You may believe that if you wish," Mashiro said simply.

"- and I don't want to protect anyone! I do this to avenge my dead mother!"

Nao turned to look at her, startled by that exclamation, but before she could say anything, Mashiro interrupted once more. "You may believe that if you wish, as well."

"What do you mean, believe that if you wish -"

"You may believe that your mother is dead," Mashiro said flatly. "That does not make it so."

Natsuki stared at her, jaw hanging open.

Mai wasn't really paying attention to this. "So it's all true. Everything they told me, it's all true," she said, dazedly. "I ... I can't do this anymore."

Mikoto growled, trying to glare at both Fumi and Mashiro without much success. "Mai doesn't need to fight, because I'll fight for both of us. I don't fear what might happen if I'm defeated, because I never will be. Point me at those who threaten this school that my aniiue wanted to see so much; they shall fall before Miroku. All of them." There was a not-terribly-well-hidden message in those last words.

"Well said," Mashiro replied, seemingly oblivious to the veilled threat. "Natsuki-san?"

Natsuki had been staring at Mashiro all this while. At her prompting, she shook her head. "I want to know what you meant about my mother being alive," she said.

"I expect you do."

Natsuki's mouth twisted angrily. "And I expect you'll only tell me what I want to know if I fight for you, right? Fine. I'll do it. But you're going to give me everything you know about my mother."

"I agree to your condition. Midori-san?"

Midori was frowning deeply, and she didn't answer at once. "I'm not happy to be finding out about all of this now," she said at last. "But ... I don't think it changes much. I still want to protect the school, like Mikoto-chan just said. And I have someone I want to avenge, too. These are the people
who hurt Akane-chan. She's still alive, right?"

"Akane-san is alive, and under the care of doctors," Mashiro replied.

"Okay, then. I think the Professor will understand if I have to risk his life like this," she concluded.

"I see. Well, then, Yukino-san? You already knew, I believe."

"Yes," Yukino whispered. "Yes," she repeated somewhat louder. "I didn't, don't, want to risk Haruka-san's life. But she's already in danger while these people are here. If this is the best way that I can help her ... then I'll do it."

Mashiro nodded again. "Which brings us to Shiho-san."

"I'll do it," the little girl answered promptly. "[i][i] am not a gutless coward, like some people."

"Don't talk like that about Mai!" Mikoto shouted, turning to glare at Shiho.

"Oh?" Shiho said, feigning surprise. "I say gutless coward, and you automatically think about Mai? You must not think very much of her."

"AHEM." Mashiro was glaring. "Now is not the time for such things. In any event, that just leaves Nao."

"I'll get back to you," Nao interjected, looking down at the floor for no reason.

"... very well, but time is pressing. And then at last, Fumi."

"Mistress, you need not ask Fumi. This one is your blade to be wielded against all your foes. All of them," she said, glancing at Mikoto.

"Very well. Then we are the HiME army." At last, she turned back to look at Mai. "You can leave whenever you like," she said shortly, and glanced expectantly towards the door.

Mai swallowed. "Oh. Okay then ..." And her voice trailed off, she started walking towards the door through which she'd walked into the room. Incredibly, she found herself hoping that this was all just reverse psychology, or something. Except that didn't make sense, because that meant she wanted to be a part of this, and she didn't. And after all, the only person here whose opinion actually mattered to her was okay with her not taking part.

So why did she feel so hollow and empty?

Mai wandered back to the elevator, reached out to push the button, and let her hand hang in front of it for a long moment. Then she let it fall, and sat down beneath it.

"So ... other than all that, how's your day been?"

Mai looked up to see Nao standing a short distance away, not looking directly at her. "'Other than all that'?" Mai repeated, almost incredulously.

"I suck at small talk, so what?" Nao snapped. "You know what I want to ask, right? Why'd you do it? Why didn't you rat me out?"

"I just couldn't see any point to it," Mai said, looking back down again. "And ... well, you're a bitch, but even if I didn't know what was going to happen, I figured that even a bitch like you didn't deserve to get pulled into something like that."
"Gee thanks," Nao sneered. But her anger seemed to burn out quickly, and she came over to sit down on the opposite side of the corridor from Mai. "Did it feel good, at least? To protect me, I mean?"

"I didn't really feel anything," Mai answered with a shake of her head. "Why do you ask?"

"It's ... kind of a long story, but I, I sort of protected someone while all this was happening, and it really felt good. Better than it does when I'm stomping perverts, actually. And so I figured that was why you did it. Why you look after stupid people like Mikoto, or your brother, or ... well, because it feels good."

Mai looked down at her hands. "I look after my brother because my mom told me to do it, right before she died," she told Nao. "I look after Mikoto because someone has to do it. It's duty, not pleasure." She almost added, 'you wouldn't understand', but something about the look on the other girl's face stopped the words.

"So you don't even like doing it?" Nao asked. "But you do it anyway."

"Some days I like it more than others," Mai said at last. "But yes, that's it, basically."

"I don't understand you."

"I don't understand you, either."

"Except that I kinda do," Nao said, as though Mai hadn't said anything. She didn't meet her eyes as she spoke on. "My mom, she's been in a coma for years. She's probably never going to wake up. And there's been times ... when I wished that it was just over, for her. But mostly for me. If I get beaten ... well, then I guess I get my wish from all those times. An end to the burden. Even though I don't really want that anymore. Never really did."

With that, Nao pushed herself up off the floor. "That's why I'm going back to tell them that I'm in. Because I'm in a place where I like helping people, right now, and because I know that even if I lose my mom like this, it's what I deserve for wishing for it, and she won't go in any pain, whatever anybody says. It'll just be over." Nao paused, looking down at Mai. "So you coming or what?"

"Why, why should -" Mai started to ask.

"Because it's your duty," Nao answered. "And you can't turn your back on who you really are."

Mai stared at her for a moment ... then closed her eyes, sighed, and got up. "You really are a bitch," she said at last.

"Back at you," Nao said, without any heat.

And so they went back to the room.
No battle plan survives contact with the enemy, Alyssa reminded herself. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. It was becoming a mantra for her. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Anything to minimize her anxiety about how poorly things were going.

The one of their objectives that they'd managed to accomplish so far - capturing at least one of the Valkyrie, in the person of Tokiha Mai - had turned to dust when she escaped, taking away far more information about them and their objectives than she'd given up. Admittedly, they now knew how to put her in check, and a small squad had been dispatched to the hospital where her brother was presently staying. They should be reporting the acquisition of the target any minute now.

But that was the only light on the horizon. They had not managed to capture or even locate any of the other Valkyrie. They had not managed to capture the Kazehana woman. And while it was a secondary objective at best, agreed upon to earn the support of allies in the Megalomesembrian Senate, they hadn't succeeded in finding Negi Springfield or Itoshiki Nozomu, much less sanctioning them. Or any of their annoying little helpers. In fact, the reports from the follow-up visit to the Itoshiki household suggested that their supposed quarry was both still at large and now very alerted to their intentions.

The report that the first wave had been killed in action had not done anything to improve the irritation that Colonel Rutherford was clearly experiencing. Rather the contrary. The fact that Alyssa's minions were becoming restive was another problem. They had to operate quickly and quietly. She was well aware that it would only take a single spark to set off a wave of resistance from the people they'd taken hostage, and while that could be dealt with easily, it would have consequences that she didn't really want at this time.

No battle plan survives contact with one's supposed allies, either, she thought wearily as she oversaw the Einheriar searching through the auxiliary library. From Miyu's intelligence gathering during the period leading up to their invasion, they knew that the other representative of the powers behind this set of phenomena was known to lurk here. That suggested that it was somewhat important, in some way that they didn't yet understand.

Annoyingly, the search that they were undertaking wasn't getting them any closer to that understanding.

And her head was starting to hurt.

"You should rest, Alyssa," Miyu advised her when she (surreptitiously, she'd thought) rubbed her forehead.

"I'm fine," Alyssa assured her.

"Not long ago, you summoned up far more Orphans than you have ever done before," Miyu reminded her. "It is not good for you to go without rest after such exertions."

"I'm fine," Alyssa repeated, conscious of the fact that she sounded like she was whining and hating it. "I can rest when we've won. And we are going to win, right?"

"Of course we are."
"Eh, I wouldn't bet on it."

Almost reflexively, Alyssa took shelter behind Miyu (herself quickly assuming the defensive posture) before turning to look at the white-haired boy who was seated on the railing overlooking the library floor, not too far away from them.


"Is that they're calling me?" he asked. "Kind of a cool name. I prefer 'Lord of Unpleasant Truths', but 'Trickster Prince' will do for the duration. Well, anyway, you've succeeded in attracting my attention, barging in here like this, so could you tell your goons to stop manhandling my books? I'd really appreciate it."

"Already done," said Miyu, smiling coldly.

Indeed, she'd sent a signal that was bringing them all running, weapons out and ready to fire on the boy if he did anything. He clearly heard them before he saw them, and watched with dull disinterest as they encircled him. "Well, this wasn't quite what I had in mind, but I suppose that I should have been a little clearer," he mused. "So now what?"

"Now we will take you into custody and you will tell us everything we wish to know about the Obsidian Lord and all the rest of it," Miyu informed him.

"Sounds boring," Nagi replied, bringing a hand up to his mouth to cover a yawn. "I've got a much better idea. I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

And then he blew through the hand at his mouth, and a huge cloud of dust exploded out from it, enveloping the Einheriar before they could react. When it cleared, a moment later, they were all stone statues. Well, nearly all. One of them was in the process of turning into one, slowly.

"Wow," Nagi said, admiringly, as he hopped down from the railing and walked over to that one. "Really good magic resistance on this one. Some sort of super-soldier formula, right? Impressive." With a firm shove, he sent the semi-petrified man over the railing. A moment later, there was the sound of cracking pottery from the floor below. "Not too helpful, though," Nagi added, his attention now firmly focused on Miyu and Alyssa.

"That will not work on me," Miyu informed him, arms turning to blades once more.

"I guess I'll just have to come up with something -"

And then he stopped dead, both in his words and his casual swagger in their direction, as his head suddenly swept around to look in a completely different direction. "What in the bowels of hell does she think she is doing?" he asked in a voice completely different from the breezy tone he'd been using until this point. "Why is she telling them - ohhhhh." Now he turned the glare on his face back in their direction. "She's just confirming the suspicions someone else raised. Isn't that spiffy?"

Abruptly, Alyssa guessed what he was talking about. "Yes, it is 'spiffy'," she said. "For us, at least. Anything that weakens your hold on your pawns is advantageous to us."

"Us," he repeated, chuckling. "Okay. That's funny. Well. Since you have told Unpleasant Truths, let then the Lord of them reward you with some of your own. Your father does not love you. He never has and never will. Your mother does not love you either. They both view you as a useful tool."

"Yes, I know," Alyssa answered.
Then Nagi blinked. "Sorry?"

"I am a tool. I was created for a purpose. That is what makes me better than all these natural scum around me who were created for no reason other than to satisfy their parents' lust," Alyssa answered. "I am happy to be useful to my mother and father."

"Wow," Nagi said, almost wonderingly. "Such perfect faith. I am genuinely moved. Such a pity it's misplaced. Well, anyway, I have some other things to do now, so I'll just let you find your own doom rather than give it to you. See ya. Really wouldn't want to be ya." And with that, he was gone.

"You should not have spoken to him, Alyssa," Miyu said.

"He didn't tell me anything I didn't know," Alyssa answered. "Hold me up, please."

Miyu did so, allowing Alyssa's legs to collapse a bit. "You'll never betray me, right, Miyu?" the little girl asked quietly, a moment later.

"No, Alyssa," Miyu said, and hoped that she was telling the truth.

The worst part about coming back into the room and saying that she'd changed her mind, Mai decided, was the complete lack of surprise that the announcement received. In fact, Mikoto just looked happy that she had apparently worked out whatever problem she'd been having, and everyone else seemed more preoccupied with their own concerns. Except for Shiho, who'd briefly favored her with a sneer before settling down again.

The worst offender, of course, had to be Mashiro, who didn't even comment on her return. "Very well, then. Our first step is to gather additional intelligence. This is your role, Yukino-san. Your Child's abilities will be able to overcome the interference that is preventing magical communications -"

"Interference that's preventing magical communications?" Nao repeated.

"... why do people do that?" Mashiro asked after a moment. "Yes, the Searrs troops have used some fairly brutal magical techniques to create interference that, as I said, is preventing magical communications. That's the major reason that the various mystical protectors of this academy haven't swept out to deal with these invaders fairly permanently - they don't know exactly where to hit for effect, and can't coordinate their efforts."

Nao nodded, her eyes suggesting that she was not quite adjusted to the notion of 'mystical protectors of this academy'.

"Unfortunately, Yukino's Diana can only deal with half of that problem -" Mashiro began to say.

"Wait a second," Mai interjected. "Diana? Your Child is called Diana?" She directed this at Yukino.

"Yes, and I use that as an e-mail alias when I need to make anonymous tips," Yukino replied, guessing where this was going.

"Oh! Hey, Natsuki, this is the person who told us where to find you that time!" Mai explained.

"Swell," said Natsuki, who had other things on her mind.

"She's a really sweet person once you get to know her," Mai quietly assured Yukino.

"Doubt it," Yukino flatly replied.
"Ahem," Mashiro rasped. "In any event, while Diana's vision will allow us to see where you need to hit, we will be unable to communicate with each other during the operation. For that reason I would suggest that you synchronize your watches just before we begin the - what is it now, Mai-san?"

"Well, um ... none of us wear watches," Mai pointed out, lowering the hand that she'd raised, then raising it again to point out the absence of a watch on her wrist.

"... excuse me?" Mashiro asked after a moment.

"We don't wear watches," Mai repeated. "Most people don't wear watches these days. They use their cell phones to check the time."

"Then synchronize the time-keeping functions of your cell phones," Mashiro said, the fingers of one hand starting to drum on the arm rest of her wheelchair.

"Well, all right, but there's no point in waiting to do that, because digital clocks don't lose time that easily, and -" Mai continued.

"Fumiiii!!" Mashiro abruptly wailed. "Mai is being mean to me and not letting me use classic heist movie dialogue!"

"How old are you again?" asked Shiho.

After shooting a look of utter betrayal towards Shiho, Mashiro shook her head. "Fine, do it however you think you ought to do it," she said crossly, without looking at Mai. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go do something I'm really not looking forward to doing."

"Ahhhh," Mai said, raising her hand one more time. She was aware that she was really pushing her luck, here, but it still seemed important to get this cleared up.

Mashiro paused, and glared in Mai's direction. "Yes?" she asked, teeth not quite clenched.

"Well, um, there's one more thing that came up when Alyssa-chan and Miyu were talking to me," Mai explained. "They said that I'd already met someone who was involved in the last, well, whatever you call this thing."

"Carnival," Mashiro supplied flatly. "What of it?"

"So that's true, too?" Mai asked.

"Of course it's true," Mashiro answered. "All of you have met Nagi. By now, I'm quite sure that she's met him as well."

"Oh," Mai said, feeling very foolish. "Oh, I get it. He's the one who's ... okay, that makes sense. I was just worried that she might be talking about you, for some reason."

"What a ridiculous idea. Fumiiii, I need help getting back up this ramp so that I can go talk to Negi-kun and persuade him to work with us ..."

"I think I might be able to give you a bit of help, there," said Midori.

"Mistress, I think you might be overplaying the obfuscating stupidity," Fumi advised, dropping the affectation.

"Nonsense," Mashiro said confidently as she was wheeled down the hallway while she examined the
short note that Midori had handed her. "What an interesting message, I wonder what she means by it ...

With the departure of Mashiro and Fumi, the assembled HiME were more or less left at loose ends. Over on one side of the room, Mai, Mikoto, Natsuki and Yukino were all gathered together, with Mikoto enthusing loudly over how great it was that Yukino was part of this, and Yukino making a few half-heartedly cheerful replies. Meanwhile, Mai and Natsuki were having a conversation - well, Mai was trying to have a conversation with Natsuki, but from the looks of things, Natsuki was basically giving her no more than monosyllabic responses.

Where’d Nao gotten to? Midori wondered, but only briefly. She had to focus on something else, more important, more immediate.

"So!" she said cheerfully. "You're a HiME, huh?"

"Uh-huh," Shiho answered brusquely, glowering across the room in Mai's general direction.

"That's amazing. I never suspected a thing," Midori continued, regretfully. "I mean, I had a list of suspected HiME, and let me tell you, you weren't on it."

"Uh-huh."

"Does your dad know?" she asked after a moment.

"Does papa know what?" Shiho asked, eyes darting sideways towards Midori at last. "About the HiME stuff."

"Oh. I haven't tole him." Shiho's eyes returned to their glaring state and their former target. "If he knows, it's not because I told him."

"Okay. I won't tell him either." Before Shiho could react to that, she pressed on. "It's Yuuichi-kun, right? Your most important person. Does he know?"

"Yes." The word was delivered flatly, with a clear hint that Shiho didn't welcome further conversation along these lines.

Midori had never one to take a hint, though. "Well, good. It's good to be honest, when you can. But I think you need to tell him about what we found out today, once we've won this."

Now, Shiho turned the full weight of her glare on Midori, who might have found it a little amusing under other circumstances. "Midori-sensei," she said. "We are neither friends nor family. Do not presume to offer me advice like that. I will tell oniichan when I am ready to tell him."

"Okay, sorry, sorry," Midori said placatingly. *That could have gone better.* "But shouldn't you stop calling him that?"

"Stop calling who what?" Shiho growled.

"Yuuichi-kun. If you're going to be dating him, or whatever, you shouldn't -"

"Oniichan is oniichan. Oniichan can't help being Shiho's oniichan, any more than I can help being his little sister."

Midori started to say something, then stopped before a word could leave her mouth. She supposed
that she looked a bit ridiculous, but she wasn't really in any position to care about that. Eventually, her mouth caught up with her mind, and closed, then re-opened to say, "Hey, Shiho-chan, would you mind if we took this discussion to a more private venue?"

"I don't think there's anything more to say, but whatever," Shiho replied, getting up and following Midori over to one of the doors out of the conference room.

Once the door was closed, Midori promptly went on the attack. "What do you mean, he can't help it?"

"Oniichan is oniichan. It's not his fault that -"

"Shiho-chan, what do you mean by that?"

Shiho let out a deep sigh of exasperation. "I don't do hidden meanings, you know. Oniichan is oniichan. My mama did ecchi with his papa nine months before I was born. Papa is not my real papa. My mama was as big of a tramp as that Tokiha bitch."

Midori stared. "Don't, don't talk like that about your mother," she said, after a while. "How do you -"

"Know?" Shiho interrupted. "It was in her diary, and I found it when she died. And I'll talk about her however I want to talk about her."

Shiho’s mother had died four years ago. Midori realized what this kind of discovery had probably done to her, and felt for her. But nonetheless - "But, then, surely, you don't want Yuuichi-kun to be -"

"Yes, I do," Shiho interrupted. "He's always been true and faithful. Until recently, but that's just because of all the temptations all of you are putting in his way."

"All of -"

"Women."

Midori flinched at the venom in Shiho's tone. "We're not all -"

"Yes, you are. You are. The tramp taught me that."

"Seriously, stop calling your mother a tramp," Midori demanded.

"What's it to -" Shiho started to ask, then paused, just as Midori had earlier. "Oh," she said, smiling unpleasantly all of a sudden. "Oh, I get it. The little girl left on the steps of the temple doesn't want to hear anything bad about the one she thinks might be her mama."

"No, that's not -" Midori started to say, silently cursing the fact that even she could hear the lack of conviction in her words.

Shiho sneered. "It's plausible. She fucked around enough before she landed papa, let alone after. You're the sort of girl the cunt might have pupped at some -"

There was the sound of flesh meeting flesh, and Shiho's head jerked to the side. It took Midori a moment to realize that the sound had been made by her hand slapping Shiho's cheek.

Shiho slowly turned her head to look at Midori, her face unreadable for a moment. "Watch your back when we start fighting, bitch," Shiho said quietly. "Watch it really, really carefully." And without another word, she marched back towards the conference room.
Midori stood there, staring at her hand as though it was a foreign object.

"Damn," muttered Nao, watching from a concealed position, not far away.

When Midori still hadn't moved after about a minute, Nao finally felt obligated to do something. She slowly moved out of concealment and started walking towards the crazy annoying teacher. The sound of her footsteps jolted Midori out of her stupor, and she whirled to face whoever was walking towards her, relaxing a bit when she saw who it was.

"Nao-chan?" she asked.

"No, I'm a clone," Nao answered. She was willing to try the whole altruism thing, but any accompanying niceness wasn't going to happen any time soon.

Midori let out a sigh but didn't complain audibly. "You heard all that?" she asked instead.

"Yeah," Nao admitted. "It was messed up."

"There's a lot of messed up kids at this school," Midori agreed, thinking of Negi as she did.

"No, I'm a messed up kid," Nao disagreed. "But that ... that took messed up on a whole 'nother level. That stuff she was saying about you and her mom -"

Midori looked away. "It's not true, as far as I know, but ... well, I admired her when I was a kid, and I thought it might be nice if she was my real mom. But I clearly didn't know her as well as I thought I did. Can't be helped. Guess our little family is going to be pretty messed up," she added a bit wryly.

"Our ... oh. You know about -" Nao made a vague direction in what she thought was Mai's general direction.

"You're not the only one who can listen in on conversations," Midori said, cracking a smile again. "Particularly when the conversation is held at the top of your lungs in public. Anyway, that was actually the clue that made me suspect that we're all related. All the HiME, I mean."

"All of us?" asked Nao, who'd had a hard enough time with the notion of being related to one of these weirdos. All of them? More than she could stand.

"Yup," Midori confirmed.

"My dad must've really got around," Nao said mournfully.

"No, no, no," Midori contradicted, waving a hand. "Actually ... well, I was planning on telling Mai first, but there hasn't been time. I did some digging to find out just that, whether any of us were his kids. It was pretty easy to find out that he was living two lives, but I can't find any evidence that he was living three. I don't think there was really time for him to have any thing on the side, either. So ... it doesn't mean much, but I guess you and your mom really were important to him."

Nao looked at her for a moment, then said, "You're right. It doesn't mean much." Then, as she watched Midori's face fall, Nao realized that she was actually regretting something. "But thanks anyway."

The return of the smile to that crazy face felt good.

Doctor-patient confidentiality is not absolute. There were many examples to demonstrate this, but perhaps the best one was happening right now, in front of Akira's eyes. He watched as the chief
administrator of this hospital was gradually persuaded that it was really in the best interests of most of his patients to permit a squad of heavily armed men to take one of them away from the hospital, with no real idea of what would happen after that. Said physician was clearly aware that these men were completely willing to demonstrate what sort of accidents might happen if they didn't get their way, which made the fact that he put up a very long argument against it rather heroic, in a way.

At the very least, it persuaded Akira to refrain from killing him for ultimately giving in to their persuasion, when this was all over.

"Okay, you four go start checking to see whether we've got any of the other targets here," the squad's leader told them. "I'll take care of the kid personally."

"Sure you don't need backup, sarge?"

"For a sick kid? Come on. What's he gonna do, puke on me?"

What indeed, thought Akira as he swiftly yet silently made his way through the air duct back to Takumi's room. The boy was asleep, and would hopefully stay that way. Conveniently, the lights were off.

The soldier who entered the room a few minutes later was quite good. Despite what he'd said, he was alert to the possibility of an ambush, and entered cautiously with his gun out and ready, clearing the room before proceeding. His only real mistake was to operate in two dimensions, when an attack could come from the third.

So when Akira dropped down from the ceiling and wrapped a garrotte around his neck, where the armor wasn't particularly rigid, it came as a complete surprise. Still, there was something of a surprise for Akira, who had not expected the man's fading struggles to last nearly as long as they did. He almost lost his grip on the strangling cord a couple of times, but the man finally gave up the struggle a minute or so into it. Just to be sure, Akira maintained the grip for another two minutes before releasing the corpse.

Of course, that created other problems, as the man's fatigues were now soiled by his final biological processes. Akira wished he had had more chances to learn hensojutsu, but there was little point to wishing for weapons and techniques which were unavailable. He did have a few air fresheners on hand, and hoped that they'd cover the smell, both for himself and others, as he pulled the corpse's clothes off.

A few minutes later, the squad leader appeared to reunite with his men, receiving their report with a stoic nod as he held a masked body on his back in a fireman's carry. "Let's get back to base," he suggested in a hoarse voice.

One of them did notice that his voice seemed odd, but figured that it was probably the unaccustomed burden he was laboring under. When they returned to the APC and marched in, they noticed that the driver wasn't in his seat. "Hey boss -"

"Goodbye," said Akira, and threw the body on his back - really a dummy concealing some explosives - in through the armored vehicle's door after them before diving clear of their detonation.

It was a short term solution. There would be more of them. He'd have to be ready for anything.

"Where have you been?!!" Chisame and Nodoka yelled in chorus as Negi finally descended into the lower level of the library where, so many months ago, he and the Baka rangers (plus Konoka, of course) had been stranded. It was one of the most secure areas on campus, with the steps leading to
the elevator exit now largely demolished. The ideal place to muster one's forces.

If the situation hadn't been so dire, he'd have smiled a bit at the harmony of the girls' voices, then winced at the naked dislike in the look that flashed between them immediately after the utterance. And it wasn't a feigned dislike, as there'd been between Ayaka and - well, it was a genuine dislike that time wasn't doing anything to ease. But there was no time for any of that. "I am here now," he answered. "Status report, please."

Nodoka didn't look happy to have the question dismissed, but she spoke up all the same. "Yue, Makie, Yuna, Akira, Asakura, and the cheerleaders - I suppose I shouldn't call them that anymore, since only Sakurako-san is still on the team - are all here. Asakura says that Sayo's here, but they didn't bring either of her bodies. Fuuka's here too. Fumika and Kaede sent her in lieu of coming themselves. And yes, it's still working."

"First good news today," Negi sighed. The twins' artifact granted them a constant psychic link with each other that even the best anti-telepathy magic couldn't defeat. Neither, it seemed could whatever the invaders had done. "What about -"

"Kotaro and Natsumi are here too,' Chisame interrupted, guessing the question. But after the statement, she hesitated to continue.

"Ku-roshi?" Negi asked.

Chisame looked away. "She hasn't shown up. Neither has Misora."

"It's all right," Negi said, trying to convince them as much as himself. "Both of them have other obligations, and they're probably with the martial arts clubs and the church, respectively. I'm sure that nothing bad has happened."

"Of course not," Nodoka promptly agreed.

Chisame rolled her eyes at that, but didn't argue. "And someone brought Zetsubou-sensei and most of the rest of his merry band of lunatics showed up too."

"You should show more respect for the faculty," Nodoka said primly.

"... can you really say that with a straight face?" Chisame asked after a moment.

"No fighting, please," Negi asked wearily. "I'll need to talk to Itoshiki-sensei and Fuuka-san immediately, and -"

Abruptly, there was a loud repeated ringing noise, drowning out whatever else he had to say.

It was still going on when Yue, clad in full Ariadne regalia, raced up with a frantic look on her face. "Hell's Bells," she declared.

"What?" Negi asked, eyes wide.

"Perimeter security spell - Inferni Campanis," she explained. "I set it up as soon as we got here. Set it to go off if anyone not authorized showed up."

"I'm sorry, Yue-san, but I still can't hear you over these bells!" Negi asked.

Yue facepalmed, then shouted. "We've got company."

"Oh," Negi answered, just as loudly "... can you turn it off?"
"Working on it!"

A few moments later, the four of them were standing on the highest point of the spiral staircase that was still accessible to non-flyers, looking up at the next chunk of it. Yue had just managed to get the ringing stopped a few moments before they arrived.

"I really think someone ought to repair these stairs," Yue muttered.

"That'd sort of defeat the purpose of the redoubt, Yue-yue," Nodoka murmured back to her.

"It's the principle of the thing. There are books down here. If you know what you're doing, you should be able to get to them without having to -"

"Hello down there?" a girl's voice called down at them. "I'm afraid that I can't quite make you out at this distance. Is Negi-kun down there with you?"

"Mashiro-san?" Negi called up. "Is that you?"

There was a brief pause, before the voice came back. "Yes," she answered. "I trust that you're doing well?"

"Given the circumstances, I think so," Negi called.

"Oh, god, don't tell me you're going to engage in small talk while yelling at the top of your lungs?" Chisame groaned.

"Small talk is the sort of thing that normal people do," Nodoka said without looking in Chisame's direction, and so not noticing the death glare she got in responses.

"I'm so glad to hear it. Let me get right to the point. I have assembled the majority of the HiME and am preparing to take back this academy from the invaders. But I suspect that we won't be able to do so without support from your White Wing."

"Support?" Chisame muttered.

"The enemy is presently being supported by summoned Orphans," Mashiro's voice continued. "They're not as invulnerable as the real ones, but I imagine that someone who uses conventional magic won't notice much of a difference. We can't do it without you. You can't do it without us. Can we work together?"

Negi stood a while in thought. "I have a question," he said eventually.

"I imagine that you have many. Go ahead."

"You say that you have assembled the majority of these 'hime'," Negi said slowly. "Does that include the one who attacked and hurt Konoe Konoka?"

There was a pause on the other end just as long as the one Negi had engaged in a few moments before. "It is tempting to lie to you, Negi-kun. But I respect you too much for that."

Negi's face screwed up in obvious anger, and for a second Nodoka honestly thought he was about to tell the girl what she could do with her respect. "So that is a yes, then?" he asked brusquely instead.

"Yes, Negi-kun. The girl who was responsible for the attack on Konoka-san is among those I've assembled. I hope that you can overlook this -"
"I can't," Negi interrupted. "If she were willing to apologize and make amends to Konoka, it would be a different matter. But she's not here, and I won't work with someone who injured one of my st-friends under these sorts of circumstances. It's a matter of principle," he said, glancing at Yue as he did so.

She nodded, acknowledging the point.

"I see," Mashiro said as Yue was doing so. "I have to say that I was expecting that. Under most circumstances, I'd even try to respect your determination. However, these aren't most circumstances. I have here a note that you might want to read. I'll send it down right away."

"How are you going to -" Negi started to ask.

At that very moment, moving slightly faster than a crossbow bolt, a folded piece of paper slammed into the ground beside him.

"Pretty strong for a girl in a wheelchair," Chisame said after a moment.

"That's actually good for upper body development," Nodoka observed.

"I think it was probably her maid," Yue suggested.

Negi hesitantly picked up the paper and unfolded it.

*Hey Negi-kun, it read. Back my play and we'll call it even. Love, Midori-chan.* With a tiny little heart beside the name.

Negi was very conscious of the fact that two of the girls standing with him were tall enough to read over his shoulder. And very glad that he didn't have to look at either of them while he did so. "I see. Well. That's different." Deep breath. "We'll give you any support that you need."

"Wonderful!" said Mashiro's voice. "Now, I believe that two of your allies have a psychic link, correct?"

Negi, who hadn't looked up from the note, now did so, rather sharply. "How do you know that?" he snapped.

Long pause. Then another voice spoke up. "Fumi believes that her mistress has forgotten that smug grins don't work in this situation."

"I was going to say something eventually!" Mashiro's voice protested. "In any event, I need to send a message. Would it be possible for me to employ their connection to do so?"

"Yes, fine," Negi replied. "Yue, could you go get Fuuka, please?"

"Okay, but I'm going to want to know what that was all about, later," Yue replied, noting the angry and upset looks that Chisame and Nodoka were directing at him.

"'He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief.'" Negi quoted.

"Bacon?" she asked as she called up her broom. "You're quoting Bacon at me, now? You're making me glad that I got over you, sensei."

"I'm glad someone did," he murmured in response as she flew away.
"Y'know what the screwiest part of all this is?" Madoka asked as she sat watching Sakurako's eyes get wider and wider as Misa blandly discussed what (and who) she'd done on her summer vacation with her and Yuna (who looked bored and unimpressed.)

"No. What is it?" Kimura Kaere asked curiously as she sat beside her.

"The messed up we get, the less messed up all you lot seem."

Kaere gave her a skeptical look as she considered that. "I feel like I ought to threaten to sue you for that, except that I don't think the courts would agree that you're defaming 3-F's character. That of your own class is another matter, and I'd be happy to recommend several very good lawyers to them." Brief pause. "Of course, very good lawyers don't work for cheap, so ..."

"Uh-huh," Madoka said, laughing a bit for what felt like the first time in a while. "And y'know the fact that you didn't start shouting 'I'll sue' proves my point."

"Only if the jury agrees." Kaere joined Madoka's short chuckle. "Well, I suppose that I have acquired a certain Old World sensibility these past few years. The last time I went home, it took me a few days to realize that I was letting people walk all over me. Well, not literally, I only do that for a reasonable fee. But I didn't threaten people with a lawsuit more than once a day or so. People started to look at me funny." She shook her blonde head. "Ah well. As they say in this country, it can't be helped."

Madoka was still blinking in reaction to the 'for a reasonable fee' comment, but she shook it off.
"Yeah, I guess so. Just whereabouts in the Magical World are you from, anyway? Is it close to -"

"I'm going to stop you right now and warn you that geographical information like that is considered a state secret in Juris and most of the other nations of Mundus Magica," Kaere interrupted warningly. "Discovering that you actually publicize - and sell or even freely distribute - maps of your countries and cities just stunned me when I came here. And I think that what's going on over our heads proves the wisdom of this particular policy."

"Well, I can see your point, but what with spy satellites and that sort of thing, it really doesn't matter if it got out. And I bet they can do the same kind of spying with magic, over there."

"Of course they can. The point is, though, that we make them work for it." Kaere shook her head. "Why did you want to know, anyway?"

"Well, I just thought that your country might be close to this place where my friend Ako settled, right after graduation. Might make it a little easier to get letters to her. Yue-san says she'll see that they get delivered, but she's got a lot to do. It's no big deal, though," Madoka said dismissively.

Kaere was a bit more perceptive than she let on. You couldn't be an effective litigant without being a fairly good judge of other peoples' emotional states, and you couldn't grow up in her society without being an effective litigant. So she picked up on the fact that the words 'no big deal' were a rather blatant lie, and so didn't lead off with a scathing remark that postal delivery was the responsibility of a properly bonded employee of a postal service, and that she'd rather not be sued by their union.

"Ako," she said, instead, musingly. "Wasn't she the bassist in your band?"

"Yeah. We tried making a go of it without her, but, well, nobody else got the bass right, you know what I mean?"

"I caught your farewell performance, actually," Kaere replied. "I thought you were still pretty good."
"Thanks. But good ... 's just not good enough." She paused, taking a look over at where Makie was seated, curled up beside Akira, who looked every bit as impassive as Itoshiki Rin, sitting seiza on the other side of the room with her back to them while she watched her older brother dealing with the rest of the 3-F lunatics. The way that she was seated drew Madoka's eyes irresistibly to her rear end, which seemed particularly -

"Man, I need to get laid," Madoka said.

"Sexual harassment," Kaere observed grimly.

Before Madoka could do much more than roll her eyes in response to that, Yue flew in, moving faster on that broom than Madoka had ever seen. (Which wasn't saying much.) "Fuuka, we need you," she announced.

Fuuka, who'd been studying a book she'd taken off one of the partially submerged shelves, seemed to jump at that. "Ah! I wasn't doing anything! I wasn't reading any inexplicably misfiled books of special ninja killing techniques! I'm sure there aren't any such things anywhere near here!"

"Of course there aren't!" Fuura Kafuka said cheerfully as she also studied the shelves Fuuka had just been browsing. "Oh, this looks interesting," she added as she picked up a tome entitled, "How to Kill Those Who Steal Your Techniques" and began reading it with interest.

Fuuka quickly headed off to join Yue on the broomstick. When they were out of sight, Madoka turned to consider Kafuka. "She's really like that, then? All the time?"

"More or less."

"Man, I thought we had it tough. I mean, we've got a ghost, supposedly, but you've got a ghost who's the girl who donated organs to -"

"Excuse me?" Kaere said, eyes gaping. "You've obviously been listening to some slanderous rumors. I should sue on Fuura's behalf. That's just absurd.

"She's a clone, not a ghost."

"... ah," Madoka said, rubbing the back of her head. "That's much less ridiculous, yes."

"Art sure of this message's wording?" Kaede asked again as she examined the paper to which she'd transcribed the words.

"Yes, Kaede-nee, I'm as sure as I can be," Fumika answered, just a bit wearily.

The one real disadvantage to the twins' psychic link was that all communication that went through it had to be expressed in Twin, the language that they had invented as they were growing up. While this increased the security of any transmissions, since it was impossible for anyone else to decode the idiosyncracies of their private language, Twin didn't have words for things that the girls hadn't encountered in their youth. Such words could be built up out of others, or even invented, but it meant that there had to be a translation if they wanted to express anything in any other language. Like Japanese.

"Very well," said Kaede, folding the paper. "Then we had best be about its delivery, had we not?"

"Yes ma'am!" her pupil exclaimed.
They peered down the side of the building from their rooftop perch. The noonday sun was clearly illuminating the dozen or so soldiers who were surrounding and patrolling the environs of the student council building, none of whom looked up. Fortunately, even if they had, they would only have seen a bit of rags clinging to the roof, moving a bit in the light wind - Kaede's cloak had many useful facets beyond simply being a trysting place. Still, they would probably investigated it nonetheless. But they didn't look up.

Complacent, Kaede thought. Which is ... odd, if they know what they're dealing with, and by now they certainly should. Complacent, or ... something else. But the set of 'something elses' that it could be was too large for a simple soul like Kaede to build a strategy around. So proceed with the mission, and hope that one's master might be have a plan to deal with the eventuality that eventualized.

Of course, her master was pretty good at that.

She attached the small fishhook to a corner of the folded paper which was sufficiently far enough from the writing to avoid risking any loss of meaning by tearing it, and began lowering it towards the window of the top floor, where, through a mirror, they could see the student council's vice president looking out at the same scene they regarded with an wary and unhappy expression.

That expression took on a startled quality when he noticed the message on the fish-hook. After glancing around to see whether anyone else was in sight, he reached up to pull it off.

"Well, Mashiro-chan, I admit that was a pretty neat twist on the tale, but I think now I'm going to have to change things up a bit, myself," Nagi said from his own perch on a branch in the forest near the building. He raised up his right hand sharply, then, with his left, made first a gesture of erasure and then writing.

"Hrnghagh," Reito said, approximately, as he abruptly collapsed in on himself while standing at the window.

Shizuru, who had been enjoying (as much as she could under the circumstances) a quiet cup of tea at her desk, jerked her head in the direction of the odd sound. "Reito-san!" she exclaimed. She quickly got to her feet and went over to where he was collapsed. "Are you having another -"

"Hlp," he managed to say, pressing the paper he was holding into her hands, before fainting dead away.

(Kaede, watching this through the mirror, let out a quiet 'ks' sound. Well, they'd done what they could. Hopefully, the President would suffice.)

A few moments later, after Shizuru managed to convince the gentlemen who'd shown up to "protect" the student council - but refused to tell her why they needed protection or why Suzushiro-san or Kikukawa-san were not present - to help her take Reito to the building's infirmary, she found herself momentarily alone. Under the circumstances, she hadn't mentioned that it might have something to do with Reito's latest fit, and she was wary of the possibility that whatever it contained might cause her stress as well. Still, she needed and wanted to know what was going on. She unfolded the paper.

Greetings, it read. You need not know the identity of the one who writes this. What you do need know is that efforts are underway to liberate the students of this academy from the persons who are presently holding them hostage - who have, it should be noted, misrepresented themselves greatly. Those efforts are being guided by forces which include one Kuga Natsuki -
Shizuru's heart skipped a beat. My Natsuki?

- whom we believe is known to you. However, the danger to those students increases if battle breaks out near them. To this end, you are requested and required to arrange efforts to evacuate them in an orderly manner once the battle begins. Given your position of authority, this is a role you are uniquely qualified to fill. We leave the means of doing so to your discretion.

Take care. We would urge you to destroy this missive after reading.

Shizuru silently began tearing it to shreds, not really watching the action of her hands, as she turned to look out the window.

Natsuki was going to be fighting.

Her Natsuki was going to be fighting for the sake of all these people, and she ...

"How vexing," Shizuru whispered. "I wish, I wish, I wish that I could join you. I wish I had the power ..."

You can, you know, whispered a voice from she knew not where.

Perhaps half an hour or so after she'd departed, Mashiro was rolled back into the conference room. "Ah, good. You're all still here."

"Excuse me?" said Yukino.

"I allowed for the possibility that one or more of you would have second thoughts," Mashiro explained. "I'm pleased to see that if you did, they led to you remaining here. Be that as it may, I have arranged matters with Negi-sensei, and yes, Midori-san, your letter was of considerable assistance in doing so. Therefore, thank you."

The little girl took a deep breath. "We will begin the operation in two hours. Yukino-san, Fumi will take you to your communication room shortly. As soon as you're ready, release Diana and begin scanning the area. Once we have a picture of the enemy's deployment, the rest of you will begin your soritie as soon as you are prepared to do so. Mai-san, Midori-san and Shiho-san, as yours are the only units with flight capability -"

"Your thing can fly?" Mai asked Midori.

"I know. It's cool."

"Why does it have wheels if it can fly?"

"In order to land?" Midori said in a tone which suggested that she thought that was a silly question.

"Ahem. In any event, your responsibility is to counter any air assets the enemy might bring to bear. They are operating from an aircraft carrier, and may be able to field jets -"

Natsuki frowned. They have jets? Then why didn't they -

"- and other aircraft. Nao-san, Mikoto-san, and Natsuki-san, your role is to perform surgical strikes against enemy positions so as to facilitate the escape of the rest of the students. I -"

Abruptly, she paused, as though listening to something. Whatever it was, it was something she clearly didn't like, for her lips twisted in obvious upset. But when she resumed speaking, there wasn't
a trace of the concern in her voice. "I would remind you that other forces will be active at this time, and I would urge to cooperate with them to the best of your ability. And," she added, not looking in Shiho's direction, "I would remind you that you are not supposed to be fighting one another. Some of those other forces I was mentioning might potentially be other HiME. And if any of you end up in a fight with another HiME, whether they are present in this room at the moment or not, I will know about it, and there will be consequences."

Mashiro abandoned any pretense and gazed right at Shiho at this point ... who met her gaze levelly, with an expression best termed bored. After a moment, Mashiro broke the gaze with a sigh and a shake of her head. "In any event, I suggest that you begin whatever final preparations you think you need. Are there any questions?"

"Yes," Mikoto said, raising a hand.

"Ah," Mashiro said smoothly. "You are doubtless wondering what Fumi will be doing while all this is happening."

"Fumi will be protecting her mistress," Fumi said, gazing steadily at Mikoto.

"... rearguard is a good place for you," Mikoto said, glaring back at her.

"Fumi is glad that you think so."

"Glad that you are glad."

"Glad that you -"

"That's not what I wanted to know," Mikoto abruptly said, breaking the staredown to turn and look at Mashiro. "What is a surgical strike, and how do I do it? I just know how to do a regular strike with Miroku."

The voice had kept talking to her, despite her best efforts to shut it out. It told her what she could do, if she would only choose to accept what was being offered to her freely, without cost to herself or obligation to anyone. It told her many things. She didn't believe most of them, though. The daughter of a courtesan knew that there was nothing in life that was without a price, nor without a cost. And that the two were not always the same thing.

But it was getting harder, and harder, to do. She'd managed to distract herself by going around the school, taking advantage of her status as a student council president to persuade the occupying troops that she could ease any tensions that the students were feeling. "Tensions" was probably understating it a bit. There'd apparently been a minor uprising in one of the elementary schools, of all places.

Well, when she found out the circumstances, it became somewhat easier to understand. The girl's cousin had been a somewhat infamous trouble-maker, in her day much like -

You know that you want it. You know why you want it.

The girl's cousin had been an infamous trouble-maker, after all. She was clearly cut from the same cloth, despite the perplexed looks she gave to Shizuru after receiving her platitudes about quiet endurance and not leading others into bad behavior. Her protests that she hadn't led anyone into anything were frankly unbelievable, but Shizuru didn't have a lot of time to deal with them at the moment.

She was somewhat grateful, though. The situation did give her an excuse to speak a bit longer with
that class' class representative, which in turn allowed her to slip more innuendo about what was to happen into their conversation. She couldn't speak openly, since she knew perfectly well that she was being observed at all times by the occupying forces. But Mahora students picked their class representatives carefully, and this one clearly recognized the hints that she was dropping.

From there, she went on to the other classes, the other schools, always sharing a few quiet words of encouragement which had double meanings. All of them seemed to get what she was telling them, though she suspected that not a few of them were completely at a loss when it came to deciding what to do about it. It couldn't be helped. That was the trouble with delegation, but she was doing all that she could.

You know that you could do more. You know that you could keep them all safe.

That particular invitation was ridiculously easy to ignore. She wasn't Suzushiro, with her fixation on safety covering a totalitarian will to power. She didn't want anyone to be put in danger because of her, but she had no need to control anyone else's actions as long as they didn't inconvenience her. People would do whatever they wished. It was no business of hers, one way or another.

But what if Suzushiro was one of the ones who would be fighting? That thought made her almost miss a step. Recovering, she asked her "escort" if it would be possible for her to visit the washroom. After they inspected it, they left her to her own devices, which suited her quite nicely.

Washing her hands, she thought of that. Suzushiro was nowhere to be seen. It would make perfect sense for someone like her to be involved in this. In fact, it would be almost impossible to keep her out of it. She was the sort of person who would walk out to challenge a tank with nothing other than moral indignation, content to be destroyed if it meant that she emerged as some sort of martyr to her cause.

And if she was involved, then that was the sort of person who would be supporting her Natsuki in the fight to come. Someone who cared more about ethics than persons.

"No," she murmured. "No, I can't let that happen. I don't have any choice. I have to accept it."

Will you accept it? Will you take the power to protect what you care about most?

"I will do anything for my Natsuki."

You might be risking what you care about most.

"I already am. I want the power."

"Then you shall have it, master of Kiyohime."

Her head jerked up from the mirror as she realized that she was no longer hearing the voice inside her head. Instead, it was coming from a white-haired boy sitting on the window sill, looking at her with an insultingly amused expression.

"I should tell you, though, that you're barking up the wrong tree. Suzushiro-san's not one of the fighters in this particular iteration of events," he explained. "I won't say that you don't have cause for concern, but she's not a problem in the way that you're thinking."

"... but ... you told me -"

"Nope," he said firmly. "I will mislead, but I never ever lie. And I didn't even do that, in this case. You came up with that notion all on your lonesome. And now you're stuck."
"... but -"

"You're smart enough to figure it out, aren't you? If you're defeated, now, the person you care about most will vanish. Goodbye, Natsuki-san!" he made a show of saying, waving as he did.

"No," Shizuru whispered.

"And actually, that would also mean your disappearance, wouldn't it, even if you don't die when you're defeated," he mused aloud. "Oh, wait. That's only true if she cares about you as much as you care about her. And you know that's not the case, don't you?"

Shizuru felt her mouth moving, but no words came out. She wasn't even sure what she'd been trying to say. All that filled her mind was a dark cloud.

"Well. This should be a lot of fun to watch, then," Nagi said, then flipped out the window.

Shizuru turned to look up at the naginata in her hand ... and collapsed as she finally started to scream.

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His name was not Koizumi Itsuki - though he'd been answering to that alias for so long that he wasn't entirely sure that he'd recognize the name his parents had given him if someone were to call it - and he was currently scared beyond his previous understanding of the term.

The occupying soldiers were a part of that, despite what an observer might have expected. But not so much for what they could deliberately do as what they might do by accident. What he suspected, from the fact that he had been pulled out of his own classroom and was presently being escorted to a certain other one, that they had done by accident, actually. It was strange that they'd known to contact him, though.

Ah, much becomes clear, he thought as he glimpsed the face of the officer standing outside the classroom door. Specifically, when he saw the man's elaborate moustache.

"This is the boy?" the officer asked Itsuki's escorts as they led him up to him.

One of them made a nodding gesture in response, and grunted something that Itsuki couldn't quite understand.

"Very well. I need you now to head over to building 23. It seems that one of the Student Council Presidents of this place has done a runner, and we need to intercept her before she causes any trouble. It shouldn't be too difficult."

They saluted and started hustling off.

"Amazing authority for a cab driver," Itsuki mused.

"We don't have time for jokes, lad," the man who normally went by the name Arakawa said sharply. "Things have been happening, and you need to do your job."

"I'm perfectly willing to do it, if I understand what it is," Itsuki replied, just as sharply. "How in the world did you pull this off?"

"One of my secondary identities is - well, that's too complicated to go into at this point. Suffice it to say that I've had an in with Searrs military troops since well before the Organization formed, and we're using that connection for everything it's worth at the moment."

"And at the moment, she's been upset by something that's happened during all of this, and you want
me to calm her down so that she won't create any Closed Space."

"No. We want you make sure that she doesn't calm down so that she will create a Closed Space."

"Ha. Ha ha ha. You make a very amusing joke," Itsuki said after a moment.

"It's not a -"

"No, I'm pretty sure it has to be. The whole point of what we do is -"

"This comes from higher up. we need to be able to respond to this situation, and we can't do that without access to Closed Space. We will deal with the side effects at the same time."

Itsuki glanced at the door to the classroom, then angrily looked back at his coworker. "This is not what I signed up for," he declared.

"You signed up to obey instructions," Arakawa answered. "Shut up and soldier, soldier."

Itsuki was not a soldier, for all the fact that his job involved a fair amount of fighting, and didn't appreciate the suggestion. But unless he was prepared to quit right now, which had consequences he didn't really want to think about, he had no other options except to go ahead with the plan.

He slid open the classroom door and walked in.

She was seated in the back corner of the class. Not at her desk, in the corner itself, hunched over in a ball, her hair decs somewhat disarrayed. Every other student in the room was remaining at least a meter away from her, and most were doing their level best to pretend that they couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. The class rep was at least looking at her, with a concerned expression on her face. But considering what he suspected about Asakura Ryoko, he wasn't sure that was an improvement on the situation.

Without another word, he went over to her, kneeling down roughly half a meter away from her. "Suzumiya-san?" he asked at last.

Suzumiya Haruhi lifted her reddened eyes and looked at him. "They made me take off my clothes," she said, hollowly.

He nodded. That wouldn't be the end of it. From practical experience he knew that she had very little in the way of modesty. Merely being seen naked would not upset her.

"And they looked for something. Something unusual. Something special. And. They. Didn't. Find. It."

Her self-image had taken a blow, again. This was going to be bad. What he ought to do was agree that it was terrible, while subtly suggesting that she should be happy that they hadn't found anything.

"Oh, thank goodness. I was worried that they might have done something much worse," he said instead, cursing himself. "Why, I heard that they're molesting some of the girls." This was a lie, as far as he knew.

"Molesting?" Haruhi asked, confusedly.

"Yes, when I heard that you needed my help -" Trigger phrase. "- that was the first, awful possibility that occured to me. I'm so glad that nothing happened." Trigger phrase. "At least, nothing like that."

"Uh," she said, eyes shifting a bit. "Yes, I guess that would have been really bad."
And with a jolt, he felt Closed Space form around the entire campus.

*Good work, lad.* Arakawa's voice came to him telepathically. *Just stay there. We'll handle the rest.*

Itsuki wanted to throw up.

"What was that?" Ku Fei asked quietly.

"What was what?" Gotokuji Kaoru asked just as quietly. "I didn't hear anything."

"Not sure if it was hearing or -" The petite girl decided to just shake her head rather than elaborating.

"I didn't sense any movement of ki, either," Gotokuji said, glancing about, his pompodour shaking a bit as he did. (He claimed that the hair style was a requirement of his art. Not even Fei believed that, and she'd believe just about anything.) "These fellows don't seem like the type to use it."

They returned to their quiet contemplation of the sixteen armed guards who'd been assigned to patrol the vicinity of the hangar where the aviation club kept their airplanes. It had been seized in the early hours of the invasion. Roads could be blockaded to keep people both out and in, but it was a lot easier to maintain a no-fly zone if no one else had access to aircraft.

The plan that the martial artists and the aviators - two great tastes that went great together - had hashed out over the last few hours had been fairly simple. The martial artists would overcome the sentries posted on the planes, and then the flyers would take off, flying under the radar and out of the district, heading to Tokyo to hopefully alert somebody as to what was going on at Mahora. The plan was simple, but nobody (except possibly Nakamura) thought it wasn't dangerous and risky.

They hadn't realized just how risky it was until they stole up to the fence surrounding the hangar, though.

"Sixteen men," Gotokuji muttered

"Some of them might be -"

"Yes?" said Ku Fei, smiling sweetly and lethally at Nakamura. "Do, pray, continue with your thoughts."

"- wimpy guys who rely on guns to give them a false sensation of manliness?" Nakamura continued weakly.

Fei shook her head, tried to exchange an eyeroll glance with the other female martial artist who'd accompanied them on this expedition. But she seemed distracted and didn't meet the glance. Ah well.

"I don't think wimpy guys become professional mercenaries, Nakamura," Yamashita said, disgustedly.

"And wimpy or not, there are a lot of them out here, watching every possible angle of attack," Gotokuji concluded. "Not to mention they could have reinforcements inside. Not to mention that they actually have the guns. That they have to rely on, I mean."

"We can still cause some kind of distraction -"

Gotokuji was already shaking his head. "On any one side of this building, two of the guards will always stay regardless of any distraction. We've established that already. We might be able to handle it if there was only one, but two of them? Armed with automatic weapons? We'd need a much bigger
distraction than that. Something like -"

And then the earth shook.

"How about that for a distraction?" asked Mori, as they all turned to look in the direction of the impact ... and then up.

Ku Fei had never liked kaiju movies - less because she didn't enjoy them as entertainment than because she frequently felt completely lost when they got to the science exposition parts of the stories. Intellectually, she understood that it probably wasn't meant to make sense, but she didn't enjoy it when a movie that was supposed to be talking at her instead talked over her head. Particularly since she was also somewhat aware that these movies were actually aimed at people a fair bit younger than she was.

So as she stared up at the creature that looked like a piece of the night sky come to life and taken a vaguely humanoid form, she - alone among her colleagues - had the presence of mind to ask, "Is that one of those Orphan things?!" Admittedly, when she spoke it was in a rather hushed voice. Considering the sounds of bullets ringing through the air as the hangar sentries opened fire, it was somewhat miraculous that anyone heard it.

But clearly someone did. "No, its mother is still alive," Mori answered as she stepped forward. "Think of it as a creature of the id."

"What?" asked Fei, who thought psychology was the study of bicycles.

"It's not important," Mori answered, then raised her voice. "I'm going to try and steer it in the direction of the other sides of the building, to take out the rest of them. If you circle around to the far side, there'll be just two. Between you, I think you can handle it."

"You're going to what?" Gotokuji yelled, finally finding his voice. "How can you -"

"It goes a little like this." Fists at her sides, Mori drew in a huge breath and let it out with a shout as her hair streamed up above her head, glowing brightly even as her skin began to glisten. And then she was leaping forward - no, her trajectory was too sharp for it to be a leap. She flew at the giant's side like a bullet herself.

Or faster than a speeding bullet, perhaps.

"... Ku-taicho," said Gotokuji, formally, as he watched the quote-unquote steering of the giant begin. "Is this that magic stuff that we're not supposed to know about and don't know about but really we do?"

"I don't think so," Fei said, slowly. "It ... it doesn't seem like it."

"Oh, come on," said Nakamura cried out, grinning broadly. "You all know what this is! You know what this has to be! She's obviously a Sai-"

Fei whapped him with her staff. "You want we get sued?"

"But it's great!" he cried, heedless of the rather large bump on his head. "It's all real, all that stuff, and -"

"- and we're the guys who stand around and cheer for the guys who can do it," Yamashita interjected sourly. "Or get killed off early in the story arc to show how tough the bad guys are. Yeah. Thrilling. Let's try to avoid that, shall we? We don't have any drag-"
Fei glared, tapping her staff firmly against her palm.

"Ahem. We don't have draconic testicles to bring ourselves back, remember?"

"You are such a killjoy, Yamashita!" Nakamura protested. "The survivors could quest for them!"

"Ahem. Let's go follow the nice super-being's advice about taking out the guards on the far side of this thing, okay?" interjected Gotokuji.

"All right," said Mashiro to the assembled HiME. "Yukino-san has sent Diana's remotes out to do her surveillance work, and we will shortly have a better picture of what's going on on campus. It will be displayed on the screens very shortly, and -"

"How come some of us have Childs with Western names, and some of us have Childs with names out of Japanese mythology?" Nao asked abruptly.

Mashiro slowly turned to look at her. "How does that even remotely pertain to the situation at hand, Nao-san?"

"Well, it doesn't, but when else am I gonna be able to get an answer to the question?"

"I figured that yours had a regular name, and that you gave it a different one after Romeo and ..." Mai started to say, then trailed off as she looked at Nao.

"After what?"

"Yeah, even as I said it, I realized that what I was saying didn't make sense," Mai mused aloud, looking away as she did.

"Mai does that a lot," Mikoto said, nodding sagely.

Nao looked at Mai, feeling as though she'd just been subtly burned, and then said, "Well, whatever. I didn't do that. Juliet named herself when I called her for the first time. So why do they have names like that?" she asked again, turning back to Mashiro.

"They just do," Mashiro answered flatly.

"That's not an answer!"

"Yes, it is. It is simply not an answer that you like, but that is neither here nor there. Are we ready with that surveillance footage, Fumi?"

"Yes, Mistress, it's up."

The large video screen at the front of the room lit up, as Mashiro continued speaking, "Ah, now, as you can see -" And she abruptly fell silent as she saw what they could see. The image presently being displayed was of a set of hangars and an airfield on the outskirts of Mahora. A small handful of men in the fatigues of Searrs troopers were firing up at a huge, vaguely humanoid creature, while a tiny glowing figure flew around it, punching or hitting it in ways that sent it moving in certain directions - usually to menace the soldiers on the ground, to which it seemed more or less oblivious most of the time.

While all this was going on, a trio of aircraft were rolling out of one of the hangars and taxiing towards the runway. Some of the Searrs troopers paused in their assault to fire on them, sending one of the planes crashing off the runway, but the other two managed to get clear and take off. The
perspective shifted before they could see whether anyone got out of the crashed plane.

The new perspective wasn't much better.

"That's our dorm!" Mai yelled as she watched another giant, this time unaccompanied by any glowing figure, shambl[e ominously in the building's direction.

"Are these forces active at this time that we should be cooperating with?" Natsuki asked, more than a bit of edge in her tone.

"No," Mashiro asked, sounding upset. "No, they're not. I don't know what those things are doing here, now, but if you can, take them out as well. But our primary targets haven't changed. Get ready. We sortie shortly."

Mai stood in front of the dragon, looking up at it for a long moment before she finally said, "You terrify me, you know that?"

It made its whale song noise in response.

"Sorry, that doesn't really help. It should, but I'm not that kind of girl. But maybe it's good that you're so terrifying. Maybe it'll mean that everyone else will run away from you and we won't have to hurt anyone."

No whale song this time.

"Yeah, didn't believe it when I said it, either." She took a deep breath. "Why me, anyway? I mean, if you were the product of something about me, you'd think that we had something in common ..." And then she trailed off, remembering old stories.

"Kagu-Tsuchi," she said. "I remember that tale. The last of Izanami's children ... whose fires caused her to die giving birth to him."

The dragon's head bent low then, as though mourning.

"Well," she said at last. "Then I guess we do have something in common after all ..."

"Blood soon, blood soon," Shiho crooned to Yatagarasu, as she gently rubbed the feathers of his neck. He cawed in response, and she thought the sound was sweet.

'I don't know what those things are doing here,' Midori mused as she took her position atop Gakutenou, poleaxe out and ready. Not 'I don't know what those things are'. That's interesting. But now was not the time for such considerations.

"What in hell was that?" asked one of Jorgensen's "minders" in response to the shuddering of the Earth that they both heard and felt.

Had the Norwegian been even a bit less disgusted with these people, he'd probably have told them what it was. 'Your doom,' he'd have said. Whatever it actually was, it was bound to be something in that line. But these people demonstrably didn't deserve the benefits of his experience.

It was difficult to say that he was disenchanted with his employers, since he'd never actually been enchanted in the first place. But his contempt had only grown as they'd begun their operations.
Things had started fairly well, but it hadn't taken long for the incompetent side to rise up. It probably wasn't the fault of the expedition's command; there were idiots like this in every army, official and otherwise.

But reading between lines of the reports on the infirmary incident, it had been obvious from the description of the injuries they'd suffered what had actually happened. Jorgensen didn't think himself a prude. (He was wrong.) Things happened when you were on campaign, and they should generally be overlooked as long as they didn't affect unit discipline. But they should wait until after more important objectives had been achieved. And they hadn't!

When his suggestion for what ought to be done to those involved in the incident had been dismissed, he'd almost decided to give up completely. But when the report of the other incident, where they'd taken some member of this place's Student Council prisoner after she'd embarrassed a few of their supposed best - which didn't impress him terribly, of course - he'd changed his mind. He'd volunteered to take the lead on her interrogation, and, welcoming the chance to have him out of sight and out of mind, the commanders had given him the assignment.

Whereon he promptly arranged for her to be shoved into a closet and the door locked, while he waited for the inevitable rescue attempt, at which point he intended to surrender. The most annoying part had been listening to her thumping on the closet door while his minders pressed against it to hold it closed. The fact that it took four of them to do so was at best somewhat diverting in its amusement.

But from the sounds of things, the rescue attempt should happen any minute now. Well, good.

There was a knock at the door. He gave a last look at his 'minders', shook his head, got up from where he was sitting, and walked over to the door. Opening it, he said, "I -"

That was as far as he got before a blade swept down through his torso, nearly bisecting his chest cavity along a diagonal axis. His brain continued to function just long enough to hear his minders screaming.

_I shouldn't have come back_, was his last thought.

Suzushiro Haruka was not a complete idiot, despite what some people thought. When the screaming started on the other side of the closet door, she stopped her attempts to force it open, and stepped back. And when a sticky fluid started flowing through the gap between the door and the floor, she didn't have to reach down to confirm that it was, in fact, blood. The scent did that all on its own.

Haruka waited for a terrifying interval after the screaming stopped. There was no other sound other than a faint dripping from the other side of the door. No footsteps to tell her whether whoever had done this was walking away or walking towards or just standing still waiting for her to come out. No breathing.

The smart thing to do would be to wait to be rescued.

Haruka lifted a foot and drove her heel towards the door again. This time, the lock broke.

Beyond the door was an abbatoir. She controlled her impulse to vomit with difficulty. The person who'd 'rescued' her had taken trophies - the corpses of all five men were missing their heads.

_Work the scene_, she told herself. She'd never heard the expression 'in war the law falls silent', and would have regarded it as a lie if she did. So she gathered evidence about the atrocity which had incidentally freed her, and prepared for the day when she'd bring the person who did this to justice.
When the ground started shaking, the guards watching the two of them seemed as confused as Shizuna herself. The Headmaster didn’t seem confused at all. If anything, his expression was positively stoic as he watched them take a step back to start talking into their field communicator in English.

His voice wasn't stoic when he addressed her without glancing in her direction, though. "I'm very sorry, Shizuna-kun. I can never forgive myself for involving you in this."

"No, please, don't say such things," she said reflexively. "Is this, whatever it is, your plan to -"

"No," he interrupted firmly. "It's nothing I arranged. Touko-kun is usually much more subtle than this. I'm not sure what's going on, but whatever it is, I'm certain that it will count as 'anything happens' to the people who give these men their orders."

*If anything happens -*

Shizuna swallowed. "Then ... what is your plan, sir? How do we escape?"

"My plan? Ah, yes. It would be good if I had a plan for our escape, wouldn't it? Unfortunately, I don't have such a plan, and I'm sad to say that I don't have the means of executing it even if I had one."

"Sir - what do you mean?"

"I am broken, Shizuna-kun," he confessed. "Not in the way that a certain acquaintance of mine is broken, but the other way. The bad way.

"A few days ago, after Konoka-chan was injured, my temper got the best of me and I went out to challenge one of the creatures that have been haunting our academy. I found one. It wore the shape of a young boy, a bit like one of those damned Averrunci, actually. And I challenged it." He let out a long sigh. "It's taking everything I have just to remain standing this long. Dramatic escapes are quite out of the question, I'm afraid.

"And even if I were at the top of my game, I'm not sure that I still have - ah well. It doesn't matter," he concluded as the soldiers finished their conversation and turned back to look at the two of them with cold, evaluating glares. "I do wish I'd had the presence of mind to send you away, too. I am sorry, Shizuna-kun. I said that already, didn't I? I forget so easily lately."

Shizuna couldn't find an answer as the soldiers started walking towards them.

"Age before beauty, I should hope?" the old man said to them when they were right in front of the two of them.

They didn't acknowledge his words, but two of them stood on either side of Konoemon and grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to his knees on the carpet. Before her horrified eyes, the third pulled a pistol out of a holster on his belt, and flicked the safety off as he casually strolled around behind the Headmaster and put it to the back of his head.

Two things occurred to Shizuna in the roughly the same frozen moment. The first was that she was about to be made to watch the cold-blooded murder of her employer, shortly before she was herself murdered in the same way. The second was that the would-be murderers weren't doing a thing to restrain her while they went about their bloody business. As though they expected her to simply be so paralyzed with terror that they could do whatever they wanted.

As though she were already dead.
With a shriek, she leapt on the triggerman, the surprise of the attack actually driving him back a pace from the Headmaster. She couldn't see his face, but she suspected he looked a bit startled. Well, anyone would be startled when a harmless teacher turned out to be not so harmless after all as she grappled with him and pushed him away from Konoemon, who was shouting, "No, Shizuna-kun, don't -"

What a strange thing to say, she thought as the triggerman shoved her back and leveled the gun at her midsection.

There was a sound like breaking glass.

Turning, she saw, shining in the sun streaming through the shattered window, coming in like angels on the wing, every teacher she'd either known or suspected of being associated with the occult side of the academy, Touko among them, but led by Midori-kun and -

"Negi-kun!" she gasped.

He didn't answer her right away, instead chanting words she didn't understand as he held up that crooked staff he carried with him almost everywhere. Bursts of light streaked out from his hand, pinning the soldiers to the far wall as their weapons clattered uselessly to the floor.

"Cutting it rather close, wouldn't you say, Negi-kun?" the Headmaster said sardonically as he rose up, dusting himself off easily.

"I'm sorry, sir, it wasn't easy to organize the defense," the boy wizard apologized. Then, with a glance in Shizuna's direction, he burst out. "Please, sir, please can I tell her?"

"Yes, under the circumstances, I suspect it might be wise. There are many others, after all, and you might not get another chance."

"Thank you, sir!" he cried, then turned to look at her, whipping off his glasses, which she now realized distorted his face so that he looked European rather than Japanese. "Don't you know me?" he asked her, tears bubbling in his eyes.

And suddenly she did. "No, it can't be," she said.

"It is."

"But ... they told me that you died. That it was crib -"

"They lied, to you, and to me, too," he said, almost weeping now. "But I knew, as soon as I saw you, that you had to be the one that I remembered. Mommy! I've come back to you, mommy!"

And she was reaching to him, as the light through the window began to become almost blinding, and her arms wrapped around her baby, grown so tall and proud, and she knew that it was all right now, everything was going to be

What had been Minamoto Shizuna slumped forward, blood pumping from the hole in her chest with every fading beat of her heart.

"No!" Konoemon shouted. He hadn't had a plan for their escape. He'd had a plan for her escape. At the instant of his death, he would channel all the surging energies of his life into powering a displacement spell centered on her that would shift her away from all of this. Why hadn't he told her that, instead of wasting time on blather about why he was so weak?
Why was he so stupid? Why was he never in time? Not for Sayo-chan, on that awful rainy night. Not for his wife, not for his daughters, not for either of his granddaughters! And now not for Shizuna-kun, either. It was ... it was ...

And with a roar of grief and anger, the power that some had dubbed Shi Shi Hokodan lashed out from him in a cascade of reddish-green force, knocking the Searrs troopers back into the walls - with the exception of one, whom it knocked out through the window. Konoemon didn't even notice, as he crumpled onto the floor and sobbed helplessly.

Why was he never good enough?

And they made their sortie.

The enemy's radar picked them up instantly, of course, but even so, it wasn't possible for the Naglfar to scramble its aircraft before they were in range of the armada. Miyu's intelligence had informed them how fast Kagu-Tsuchi could move, but they'd underestimated him nonetheless ... and even more seriously underestimated how the other flying Childs could keep pace with him. While the escort vessels directed their anti-aircraft ordinance up at Kagu-Tsuchi - to be blocked by a force field summoned up by his terrified HiME, clinging to the side of his neck - that left Gakutenou and Yata-Garasu relatively unmolested.

The crow demon glided along the aircraft carrier's flight deck, unleashing its flames to send the jets (and, incidentally, their pilots) into explosions that it flew through with terrifying nonchalance. Shiho was perched on its back, cowled and playing her flute. Somehow this shielded her not only from the wind that should have sent her flying off, but also from the effects of the explosions. As though she were somehow as insubstantial as a ghost.

*Maybe that's the problem,* Midori speculated as she maneuvered to take her own shot. *Maybe being able to do that has dissociated her from the consequences of her actions. No, probably not. Too easy. Besides, she decided as she drove Gakutenou repeatedly through the hull of one of the destroyers accompanying the carrier, it's not like I'm not dissociated myself.*

As she judged the destroyer to be out of action, she was moved to call down, "Get your people of the ship if you don't want to drown!"

*I wonder if they can hear me,* she wondered. *I wonder if they understand Japanese.*

*Ah well, it can't be helped.*

The moment when Nao, of all people, saved her was also the moment when Natsuki began to get a bit frustrated with matters. She'd been launched into the army of Searrs troopers guarding the student council building, with Duran to provide some artillery backup. Things were going fine, at first. The confused and distracted troopers were easy targets. She didn't even have to pull out her guns - augmented strength kicks and punches sent them out easily enough.

And then she punched one of them and he didn't go down, but rather reached down to grab her wrist and hold her in place so that he could leisurely return her punch. And augmented stamina or not, that hurt. Clearly, Mai's vague speculations about some of these guys being super-soldiers of some breed or another were accurate.

She turned to call for Duran, only to be horrified to see that he was being dogpiled by the other troopers, and couldn't shake them off. Jerking her head back, she saw that she was about to get
punched again, and suspected that she was going to be hit until she didn't need to be hit anymore.

That was when a gout of sticky resin shot down and took the super-soldier in the chest, oozing around him and wrapping him up like a mummy. Natsuki felt his grip on her arm weaken and quickly stepped back; clearly, Juliet's webbing had some sort of anesthetizing properties. She whirled to look up at her ally only to see her already in motion, clinging to her Child as it bounded across the field like a hunting spider. She wasn't even looking in Natsuki's direction.

Swallowing curses, Natsuki turned and pulled out her pistols to start firing stun bolts at the men on Duran. She only had to knock out a few of them before the cannon-dog could take care of the rest, but the fact that she had to do so rankled.

"Why aren't you huge?" she asked Duran. They were the only words of reproach that she'd ever spoken to him. Unfortunately, the only response he could make was to look away.

All over the school, hidden cabals of mages, martial artists and other fighters took this as the signal to rise up. Between the soldiers, their Orphan support and the giants stomping around, there were plenty of targets to be had.

Watching the battle from the caves in the hillside, Sister Shakti restrained herself from cursing with great effort. She should be down there, not up here, standing watch. Unfortunately, she was also aware that she had very little in the way of backup. Sister Caren had been called away for an exorcism mission in the North, and had yet to return. With her gone, the Church's contingent of skilled combatants were limited to her and Misora. Or rather, limited to her.

And she had been compelled to withdraw so as to assist in the protection of a sensitive, vital asset. Or so she had been assured. Her eyes darted sideways. "If I find out that this is some sort of hoax, Ishigami," she started to say, dropping the sensei.

"It's not," the art teacher insisted. "I can't tell you how I know, but I do know that they're going to try and capture Sister Yukariko. And they must not be permitted to do so."

"I still want an explanation for what she was doing in your apartment after hours."

"I told you," he repeated wearily. "We were up until after dark working on the painting, and in light of all the disturbances, I didn't think either of us should leave the building in order to get back to your cloister. So I offered her my bed for the evening while I slept on the floor. And then this morning, I saw what was happening and knew that I had to do something. So I came to you. Is that the sort of thing a guilty person would do?"

He was lying. She knew it. The problem was, Sister Yukariko, who was quietly praying further back in the cave with Sister Misato and Cocone, while Misora paced around nervously, backed up his story. And she wasn't lying. Or at least, so Shakti judged. And she knew exactly what signs to look for as evidence of a sister who'd broken her vows - since she'd studied those signs in herself often enough, the fragmentary remnants of her conscience reminded her.

"I don't trust you," she told him, looking away.
"You don't have to," Ishigami told her. "But right now, we're facing the same direction, even if we're not on the same side. I am solely concerned with the Sister's welfare."

He was definitely lying. But now was not the right time to -

"Mierda," she muttered, letting loose to the profanity she'd been holding back. One of the giants was slowly plodding through the forest towards them, and it didn't look to be restrained by any of the glowing figures who'd been fighting the other ones, from what she'd seen through the binoculars. She and Misora were going to have to fight this one off. Which was to say that she was going to have to fight this one off.

_I wish I'd stayed in bed this morning_, Shakti thought.

And then, somewhat to her horror, a gigantic, robotic-looking snake reared up out of the woods to wrap itself around the giant humanoid and begin squeezing it, like an anaconda. It made no sounds that she could hear, and it had no face, but she could tell that this was agonizing.

"What in hell have we allied with?" she heard herself ask.

*What do you mean, a huge purple snake robot is attacking one of her manifestations?* The words blistered in Mori's brain as she slammed her right elbow down onto the giant's head. The absurdity of that terminology bothered her, since she suspected that they didn't have an anatomy as such, but it was the best she could do under the circumstances. One of these days, when they had more personnel, the Organization was going to have to go for a live capture and vivisection. She looked forward to being on point for that.

*I mean what I say,* her partner's voice echoed back at her. *I don't know what it is, and there isn't time to examine it closely. I suspect it's related to the giant frog robot that seems to have taken up some sort of guard position at the hospital.*

*We're going to have to have a word with our people in the engineering department, after all this is over,* she announced, barely rolling out of the way of its latest attempt to knock her down out of the sky.

*Optimist,* came the boy's voice. She never thought of him by his alias, and since she'd been the one to destroy his former identity, it didn't seem right to think of him by its name, either. So he was just the boy. *The evacuation just started. I've managed to get her down into the basement so that she won't see any of this weirdness, but the fact that we're not making our escape like everyone else is upsetting her. Can I please start working to calm her down instead of shaking her up some more?*

*By all means, ease her distress,* she sent, vague amusement coloring the thought with a hint of innuendo.

*That's not what I meant!*

Karma for the teasing promptly hit Mori. Well, technically, the giant's hand hit her, but as she'd been distracted by thoughts of the boy and his goddess - whom she did not in any way worship herself - when she should be focusing on the matter at hand, one could say that the hand was doing karma's work for it. She slammed into the runway at a fair velocity, and knew that after the adrenaline wore off, she was going to be in extreme pain.

Best not let that happen for a while to come, then, she thought as she prepared to launch herself into the air again. But then she realized that she wasn't alone on the ruined airfield, and blinked in
surprise. She'd thought that the martial artists she'd accompanied out here had all scattered after the success of their mission, but apparently not. That Ku girl was standing nearby, holding a staff, and wait, what was she doing -

The staff expanded in her hands, exploding out until its furthest end, now roughly six feet in diameter, slammed into the giant's chest and knocked it back a pace. It was like something out of *Journey to the* - oh dear.

"Teach me!" Ku Fei said eagerly. "Teach me how to do that stuff!"

This was going to be a long conversation.

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One by one, as soldiers tasked to guard them were called away to the fighting, classes began their escape. They looked to their teachers to tell them which way to head. While some began to make their way into the mountains, most followed Nijuin's lead to head for the world tree.

"If need be," he said to several of the other teachers as they marched together, "we can start shifting everyone through the gateway to the other world, now that it's open again. That's a last resort, though. Mostly, the idea is just to muster there and see what our situation is."

Yohko thought this was a fairly good plan, as these things go, but then, she was at the end of her tether. If anything else went wrong -

"Sensei!" she heard a voice shouting from behind her, saw the teachers start to turn, then heard the voice clarify. "Sagisawa-sensei!"

Turning herself, she saw Tate Yuuichi running in her direction through the crowd, carrying a girl who was slumped on his back.

"What happened?" she asked, running to meet him.

"It's Tachibana, ma'am, she collapsed. I was looking for -" the boy started to explain as he let her take the white-haired girl off his back.

"No, no, no!" she cursed as she saw who it was. A pulse check confirmed her worst suspicions; it was the most irregular she'd ever observed. Her breathing was too shallow to even register. "Why didn't you go to the hospital?" she asked.

"Is it that -"

"Not you, her! She had to know that she was ..." She trailed off, considering it, realizing that after most of a lifetime spent in hospitals, that was probably the last place the girl had wanted to go. "There's nothing we can do, Tate. She's having a heart attack, and I don't have any emergency medical gear with me."

"Heart attack?" he yelped. "But she's just twelve years old!"

"And received a heart transplant just a few months ago. She ought to still be in hospital, but she insisted on -" As she was explaining, she felt the pulse give out entirely. Immediately, she began CPR, but it was clear within a few minutes that, without a defibrillator, there was nothing to be done.

"Rest in peace, Tachibana Kanade," she murmured.

"I couldn't do a damn thing," Tate moaned, clearly shaken.
"Not a damn thing," she repeated in agreement. *I couldn't do a damn thing.*

*I can't do this anymore.*

The tide of battle had thrown Ala Alba and the HiME army's ground contingent together. Of all the things Natsuki had never expected to happen, foremost among them definitely had to be standing back to back with Akashi Yuna - she still didn't think of her in any sort of familiar sense - and with all four of their guns blazing as they swiveled and turned through a crowd of soldiers. While it was not unpleasant to have someone watching her back, it meant that Natsuki had to suffer through Yuna's periodic exclamations of rock and roll lyrics and bad action movie dialogue. It almost made her miss Mai.

Still, at least she wasn't the only one conscious of how crazy all this was. Over there, on the other side of the soccer field where they were presently engaged, as Negi-sensei and that kid with the animal ears fetish were doing their own version of this strange little dance, there was of all things a trio of cheerleaders providing some sort of support magic to them. From the look on the face of one of them, the tall short-haired one, she was clearly conscious of the absurdity.

Natsuki had no idea if they were winning or losing.

And then she saw Negi-sensei's head jerk.

*Negi! I think we just eliminated the telepathic jamming!*  

*Kaede! Despite the informality of her mental voice, it was nonetheless unmistakable. How - Original caster. What now?*  

*Spread the word. There wasn't time for praise or compliment, so the quick mental version of a smile through the telepathic link had to suffice. Then he opened up another channel. Asakura-san?*  

*It's working again?*  

*Yes. Tell Fuuka that she can go join her sister and Kaede, and then please give me a picture of the situation.*  

*Oh, man, where to start - okay, sector A, by the riverside, looks to be practically dead. No troops, no - wait, no, okay, that creepy little American girl and her friend, the robot, they're just standing there, like they're waiting for some- Holy crap.*  

*What? What?*  

*The robot just made a 'come at me' gesture towards my guy.*  

He decided not to disappoint them. Tempting though he found the thought of racing towards the new battle alone - solely to avoid harm to any potential allies, of course, not because of any death wish or urge to claim all the glory for himself - he also decided to preserve his alliance with the HiME.  

"Kotaro-kun, can you handle the rest yourself?" he asked, glancing at the hundred-odd soldiers still in the fight.

"Is that a joke?" his friend snarled.

"... yes, sort of," Negi admitted.
"Not funny. Yes, of course I can. Whatever crazy plan you've got boiling, go do it!"

With a nod, he sent his staff flying like a broom towards Natsuki and Yuna, casually sending a series of magic arrows into those surrounding them. "Kuga-san, do you have some way of contacting Mashiro-san?" he asked.

"What? No, not while communications are -"

"They're back on. Please contact her and tell her that -"

An odd ring tone, sounding vaguely like a lullaby, interrupted his request. Natsuki, blushing, disappeared one of her guns and grabbed her phone with her now free hand. "Yeah! Oh. Really? Right." To Negi, she continued. "Kazehana wants to know whether you could give me and the little barbarian a ride out to where Alyssa is waiting for us."

"Wow, you barely met him and already you're getting a ride on Negi's wand," Yuna wisecracked.

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind, Kuga-san," Negi said, annoyed to be losing the initiative again. "Where's - oh, there she is."

Mikoto stood on a pile of bodies and roared defiance to the heavens. She was still roaring - though it went into a slightly higher pitch, making it sound like a confused 'nya?' - when Negi swept along and picked her up by the scruff of her uniform's neck. His other hand was holding a card to his forehead, making one more telepathic transmission.

Within a few moments, all of the HiME army (with the exception of their general and her bodyguard) had surrounded Alyssa and Miyu. While the gynoid took an immediate defensive position, Alyssa didn't deign to acknowledge the existence of her opponents until she had finished the far more important task of her song practice for the day. With that accomplished, she turned to regard them calmly.

Mai wasn't sure what moved her ... well, that wasn't true. Despite everything, she was still moved by how beautiful the girl's voice was, even if it came from a soul she suspected of being as black as pitch. Nonetheless. "Alyssa-chan! Please, you need to consider surrender, now!"

Alyssa actually blinked. "You wish to surrender? Very well, I accept. There will be certain conditions, of course -"

"I believe that Tokiha-san was offering you the opportunity to surrender to us," Negi ground out. Was it her imagination, or did Natsuki see actual sparks starting to fly off of this kid? "You would be wise to accept that opporutunity."

"Why would I surrender when I'm about to win?" Alyssa asked.

"Okay, she's crazy, can we just stomp on her and get it over with?" Nao asked as she perched on Juliet's midsection.

"I am not crazy. You disgusting naturals are crazy."

"What are you, five?"

"You've dared to oppose one of the ruling authorities of this world, and you think I, who serves it, am crazy?" Alyssa continued as though Nao hadn't rudely interrupted.
"I'm not impressed with the ruling they've been doing, and I'm not impressed with their agent, either," Negi interjected. "Miss Spears, this is your last warning. Please -"

"No, this is your last warning. You have fallen into our trap. Evacuating the students to the World Tree was a mistake, and I have delayed you long enough for that mistake to be -"

And suddenly, Mai had another one of her premonitions. Usually, they took the form of a hunch of how things were going to go, but this time was different. This time, various things that people had said flashed through her mind.

"It's visible from space, you know."

"Orbital satellite strike."

"She's going to fire at the World Tree!" Mai shrieked.

"No, she's not," said Negi, and nodded.

The nod was seen by one of Asakura's remotes, which transmitted the image to her, who promptly sent a go code through telepathy to Chisame, who relayed it through the restored internet to a person waiting in Tokyo, who saw it, switched windows and immediately sent a signal to a certain computer networked into hers.

On Hakase Satomi's screen, the word **ADEAT** appeared in bold letters.

And high above Mahora, as the orbital beam satellite dubbed Artemis began to start its firing sequence, another satellite - one slightly more whimsical in shape - appeared from elsewhere at what was, in spacial terms, point blank range. And its firing sequence was much, much shorter.

Artemis disintegrated with a single blast from Al-Iskandaria's far more powerful cannons, and though the detonation was violent enough to pelt the satellite with shrapnel, its shields took the brunt of the damage.

Hakase Satomi, who did not believe in souls, rejoiced at the sure and certain knowledge that whatever it was that allowed her eldest child to act as though she had one had been preserved through all that had happened to her.

In a boardroom in New York City, five cool, considerate men watched as a sixth disintegrated into green sparks in front of their eyes. After a moment, one of them expressed the thoughts of them all.

"Well, this is inconvenient."

Back at Mahora, Alyssa stood bolt upright and screamed at the top of her lungs. Instantly, Miyu wrapped her arms around her charge and bolted away.

"... what just happened?" Midori asked.

"We sort of won," Negi told her after a moment.

"Great," said Nao. "Shouldn't we maybe go after her or something?"

Negi shook his head. "She's been rendered powerless, probably incapacitated, and there are higher priority targets out there. And also - where did the bird go?"
Mai, who had been distracted by the aftereffect of her premonition and the sense that she'd just had a narrow escape, jerked back to attention. Indeed, Shiho and her giant crow, who'd been at the very edge of the semi-circle that they'd formed around Alyssa, had vanished without a word or a sound.

"As I said," Negi ground out from between clenched teeth. "Higher priority targets."

"So now what?" Alyssa asked, somewhat later, as she sat on the ground, looking up into the early evening sky in the hills just outside Mahora, overlooking the spot where one of the blockades had been set up. It was still active, actually, though its nature had changed. Security personnel from the Academy were letting anyone in but making a thorough search of every vehicle on the road leading out, to make sure that no one was escaping that way.

"I don't know, Alyssa," Miyu said as she sat beside her. "I don't have specific instructions for this situation."

"Neither do I," Alyssa agreed. It was funny, in a way, how far away it all seemed. Like she was watching someone else go through all of this. She was so very tired.

"As I have no specific instructions, I am reverting to default procedure ... and so I will protect you, Alyssa, from anyone who threatens you, until such time as you don't need -"

"Or until someone overrides those instructions," said a harsh voice from nearby.

They turned.

"Father Joseph," Alyssa said, her dull tone unchanged from earlier. "What a surprise."

"Yes, I suppose it would be," the cleric said as he smiled unpleasantly towards the two of them from where he was standing, just a few feet away. "It was certainly a surprise to me when I was rescued from the dungeons below Mahora's cathedral by a group of Searrs troopers. It was a much more pleasant surprise than their news that they'd been sent there - by you - to clean up the loose end that I represented."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alyssa lied. Well, it wasn't a total lie.

"Of course you don't," Greer interrupted her thoughts as he started walking towards her. "Fortunately - for me, if not for you - someone countermanded those orders, and once I was in their charge they relayed a few to me, as well. Including some interesting ones concerning you."

"Father Joseph Greer, I must ask you to stay where you -" Miyu started to say, having come to her feet as soon as she heard the voice.

"Initiate Code Alpha-79," the old man said conversationally. "Command priority, stand there and do absolutely nothing."

Alyssa watched as Miyu proceeded to do just that. "But I thought we'd removed all those codes," she said faintly. The air of unreality still afflicted her, so she couldn't really feel any fear or anger.

"Clearly you were misinformed," Greer said, still smiling as he kept right on walking towards her. But now he was close enough that she could see that the smile didn't come close to touching his eyes. In those eyes was everything she'd ever feared about naturals. "Clearly you were misinformed about a great many things."

"You're going to kill me, aren't you? Because I've outlived my usefulness, and because I tried to
"Have you killed." She said it as though these were phenomena, not things that directly affected her.

"Actually, my orders are to secure you alive, if possible. I am sure that your mother will be terribly upset when I inform her that you were already dead when I found you." He reached into his vestments and pulled out a small pistol.

She actually smiled at that. *Mommy still needs me, even though I chose daddy over her. That's nice.* "It doesn't matter," she told him. "I was a tool, and I am content to -"

"I don't care," he said, and shot her.

Oh, it hurt. It hurt a lot. He was a terrible marksman if he'd been going for a killshot. It would take her a very long while to bleed out from this. She hoped that hadn't been his intention. Sadism was a terrible thing.

And then there was a very strange sound in the distance. Greer half turned his head, and Alyssa could see a look of panic on his face. Another shot rang out, and blood stained his vestments as he slumped to the ground beside her.

"What in the world -" said a girl's voice, getting closer.

"I don't know, and I don't care," came a deeper yet still feminine voice. "But when you see an old man about to shoot a little girl, it doesn't take much to figure out which side you should be on."

"Please!" That was Miyu's voice. Except that she couldn't remember ever hearing Miyu sounding so panicked. "Please, help Alyssa!"

"You." That was a third girl's voice. "I know about you. Shut down and we'll consider it."

"Setsuna!" First voice again.

"Sakurazaki!" And a fourth girl. This was very confusing. "There is an injured child present and -"

"These are the people who hurt Chachamaru, Naba!" the third voice said. "So, no, Konoka, you cannot just go healing them unless -"

"Shutting down," said Miyu, quietly.

Alyssa wondered what was going to happen next. It was only a vague curiosity, though. At the moment, what she mostly felt was very, very tired. So she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep, not really knowing or caring if she was going to awaken.
Mai managed to cover her mouth as she yawned while blearily while looking over the vast crowd of students gathered on the academy's plaza. Every school, from the kindergartens up to the university levels, was represented here today. She couldn't begin to guess how many people were standing here, waiting for whatever announcement or explanation the faculty was about to give. Of course, she also couldn't begin to guess what possible explanation they were going to be given, either. Frankly, she was having problems beginning to remain awake, and while chuckling a bit at that thought, she yawned again.

"Is Mai tired? We can go lay down for a while, somewhere," Mikoto said quickly as she stood by her side.

Giving her a bleary eyed look of mixed annoyance and affection, Mai considered telling her that it was her fault that she was this tired. Her sense of fair play stopped her, though. It wasn't completely Mikoto's fault. Even if they hadn't been up most of the night having 'glad to be alive' sex, she probably would have been just as tired as she was now, owing to the unfamiliar surroundings.

They'd been moved out of their dormitory and into another, older one for the duration of the repairs to their building. It was a much smaller room, with bunkbeds. Only one bunk had been used though. As soon as the door had closed behind the two of them, Mikoto had jumped on Mai, knocking her back on to the bottom bunk and making her drop the suitcases that contained those few of their possessions that she'd been able to gather before being forcefully evacuated.

Any thoughts on that subject, though, had gone out the window. Mai had been quite thoroughly distracted by the way that Mikoto kissed her passionately in between declarations of how scared she'd been about something happening to Mai - no word on whether she'd been worried for herself, but Mai honestly didn't expect to hear about that - while tugging Mai's vest and undershirt open and her bra and short skirt up. Her exposed breasts had given Mikoto more targets for her kiss blitzkrieg while her hand went down to pull the panties aside and begin fingering frantically.

At this point, though, Mai had at last been aroused enough to answer Mikoto's passion. Yes, for all the horror of the day, for the looming terror of what might still come, she was glad to be alive, and she'd grabbed the little hellion who made her feel so good and wrapped her up tightly so that they could roll over and she could take charge, pressing her lips to Mikoto's and fumbling between her legs.

As two fingers of her hand slid up into Mikoto, the other girl had lost all words save one. "Mai! Mai! Mai! Mai! Mai!" "Mai?" Mikoto's present day self unwittingly repeated her past self, pulling Mai out of her reverie.

"I'm fine," she reassured her. "I really am. Anyway, shouldn't you be with your classmates instead of me?"

"I am with my classmates," Mikoto said blankly, pointing to Mai's other side.

"She is, you know," said Nao, smiling wryly as she stood there.

"Great," Mai sighed. "Shouldn't I be with my classmates -"
"You are, you know," Yukino said from just behind the three of them.

Mai craned her neck around to give the Stucon secretary a look of annoyance, but flinched away at the sight of her, with dark circles under her eyes. "Eesh, what happened? You look like I feel."

"Ah! You are tired!" Mikoto cried out. "Why do you lie to me, Mai?"

"I was up most of the night working with Haruka-chan," Yukino explained wearily. "I finally got her to take a break a little while ago, and she's sleeping in the office right now while I attend this, this ... whatever it is," she finished after a brief silent search for the words.

"So you don't know any more than the rest of us about this, huh?" Nao asked.

"No, no I don't." Irritation was obvious in her tone.

"What were you -" Mai started to ask, frowning.

"I can't discuss ongoing investigations," Yukino cut her off.

"Okay, Yukino-san?" Mai asked after a moment. "You do realize that you and Suzushiro aren't really cops, right? And that you don't -"

"It's starting," interrupted Nao, drawing all their attentions back to the stage that had been set up at the center of the plaza, where an old man - THE old man, the headmaster whom Mai had only met a few days before - was slowly making his way, assisted by a cane, towards a microphone. A few of the other senior teachers were standing at the back of the stage, behind him, while Mashiro was also there in her wheelchair with Fumi.

The headmaster stood for a few moments at the microphone. Mai guessed that he was surveying the crowd before he spoke. When he did, at last, his voice seemed hoarse even with the amplification. "The responsibility for yesterday's heinous events rests with me, and me alone. The academy's Board of Governors has graciously consented to accept my resignation as headmaster, and ..." Konoemon's voice trailed off. It was even weaker when it came back. "... and ... and ... I ..."

He seemed to fold in on himself as he collapsed to the floor of the stage.

"Good grief," said Nao. "Is he genuflecting to us?"

"No," Mai replied, horrified. "I don't think he is."

Even as she spoke, a pair of girls, one with a very broad forehead, were leaping up onto the stage and assisting the other teachers in carrying the headmaster off, while one of them, a tall blonde with glasses, came up to the microphone. "All classes are cancelled for the remainder of the day, please return to your rooms and do not leave them unless necessary or under a teacher's supervision." Then she too was off to help the others carry the headmaster's limp form away.

Mashiro and Fumi didn't move, and Mai had the distinct impression that the little girl was staring right at her.

"So there's no hope at all, then?" Nijuin asked heavily.

"I'm neither a neurologist nor a magical healer," Yohko answered as she stood in front of the quickly convened Emergency Council assembled in the Headmaster's office. Her eyes were fixed firmly on them, not on the stains that still hadn't been removed from the floor. "But from what I understand, the
two best healers on this continent are both admitting that they're stymied by his condition, and I can definitely diagnose that he's completely non-responsive, bordering on catatonia. I would say that there's very little chance that he's going to recover any time soon."

"We need to choose a new headmaster," Touko said without preamble. "If we don't, the Senate is going to pick one for us, and considering some of the intelligence that our captives are providing -"

"Which has yet to be verified," interjected Shakti. "We don't know that the Senate as a whole was backing this. I think it's much more likely that it's a small cabal of -"

"That's not important," Touko interrupted. "If they can do that, they can manipulate the committee that will choose Konoemon-sensei's replacement. If we present them with a fait accompli -"

"We still might not be able to back it up," Gandolfini interjected. "I don't know. The records of how he became the headmaster, thirty-odd years ago, are incredibly spotty."

"There's probably only one person other than the headmaster who'd know the story," Seruhiko grumbled. "I wish Tak-"

Yohko blinked. That couldn't possibly have happened. She couldn't possibly have seen Touko leap across the room and punch Seruhiko into the wall, causing him to slide down again and then slowly rise up with a rather large bump on his head. Obviously, he'd always had the bump and she was just now noticing it. And Touko had simply moved across the room in a normal way without her noticing that either.

Sometimes she hated magic.

"We will not under any circumstances make wishes like that," Touko growled.

"Got it," Seruhiko muttered.

"If nothing else, we need to install an interim Headmaster," Nijuin said, affecting to have not noticed anything out of the ordinary either. "If we do that, we can at least maintain the pretense that the situation is under our control. I would nominate the member of the faculty with the most seniority."

"How humble," Shakti said, clearly amazed. "That's you, isn't it?"

He coughed. "Actually, no."

"Oh. Right, sorry, Nitta was hired a few months before you," the nun recollected, clearly embarrassed.

"Perhaps I should clarify that I'm talking about the most senior member of the faculty who's aware of the secret."

"Wait, no, that is you."

"Actually, no," he repeated, complete with delicate cough. "The faculty member I'm talking about was hired the year before I was."

Silence fell. "Nijuin, please tell me you're not talking about -" Gandolfini started to say.

"He's family, Gandolfini-san," the rotund teacher said, just a bit sharply. "Whatever else he may be, he's my older brother, and I love and respect him."

Seruhiko found himself bewildered. "Who are we talking about? Wait, if he's your older brother,
"He didn't take to magic, unfortunately."

"You mean there really are squibs?" Yohko asked. As soon as the word left her mouth, she realized that it was a mistake, from the unamused glares that promptly came in her direction.

"Thank you, Sagisawa-sensei. Unless there's something more to report, we wouldn't want to keep you from your duties," Nijuin said, tone still a bit pointed.

Well, I probably couldn't have picked a better moment. "Actually, there is," she said, pulling the envelope out of her coat pocket. "I suppose that it could wait until the interim headmaster is installed, but - I'm resigning effective immediately."

"Oh," Nijuin said. "Well, your offer is understandable, but I don't think it's necessary, so -"

"It's not an offer to resign. I quit. I do not want to be the official physician of Mahora Academy anymore." She pushed the envelope into Nijuin's hands, trying to avoid looking at the stunned look on his face. "Please accept my resignation."

"You, what, no - Sagisawa, we still need you! There are -"

"At least consider remaining on until we can find a suitable replacement," Touko said, cutting Nijuin's mildly panicked plea off.

"All right," Yohko said after a moment. "But the process had better start soon, because I can't do this anymore. Good day." And with a short bow, she backed out of the room.

Another such victory and we are undone," Gandolfini mused aloud as he watched her leave.

Another such victory and we are undone, silently mused Winston Murtaugh, Australian media baron and (as of a few hours ago) the head of the Searrs Foundation, following the ... extremely sudden fatal illness which had afflicted his predecessor.

It had been a victory, at least in terms of his personal ambitions. He hadn't expected to be where he was now without at least another decade of maneuvering and covert struggle. Getting there without any serious exertion on his part, aside from a certain amount of intimidation of the other members of the board, was not only a victory but a triumph.

The problem was that he'd also expected, in the wake of that decade of struggle, to be the master of a much more powerful and successful organization than this. There were markedly fewer people around the table than there'd been a few hours ago. Some had made excuses, like John Daggett, while others, more honest or cowardly, had just fled into the shadows. Another saying about rats fleeing a sinking ship came to mind, but he dismissed it.

Time to move forward. "Are we still having problems contacting our people in Japan?" he asked. Left unmentioned was the fact that his own private network there was also proving unresponsive.

"Unfortunately, yes. I can't understand it," admitted the director in charge of the Far East. "Our primary agent wasn't even in the Kanto region when all this happened, there's no way he could have been -"

"Then he's been suborned," Murtaugh interrupted. "That Kraut, Rosenkreuz, has been sniffing around our arses over there long enough, he's bound to have made a better offer to somebody at
some point. Dammit." That last was said without any real heat. They'd have to settle accounts with Quincy Rosenkreuz at some point, but today was not the day. Nor was that day likely to come at any point in the immediate future. So there was no profit in getting angry about it.

"What about our contact with the Devilukes?" he asked. If that went bad, it really was over. They'd reverse engineered perhaps ten per cent or even less of what they'd purchased from the alien empire, and were in position to manufacture perhaps half of what they understood.

"I got off the line with her right before this happened," the director in charge of extraterrestrial liaison. "Very reassuring, said all the right things. I'm confident that they'll back us up. Unfortunately," he continued, anticipating Murtaugh's next question, "the same can't be said for our contacts with Megalo-Mesembria. I can't get a word from them."

"Not surprising. They're letting us drift in the wind." Now there was heat in his voice as he stabbed a call button on the table in front of it. "Dammit, get some coffee in here!"

The doors to the board room electronically unlocked, and a petite redhead in a skimpy dress pushed in a tray. Needless to say, she headed right for him. There was something naggingly familiar about her face, but he'd probably seen her doing this for one of these meetings before.

Soothed by the sight of his will achieving concrete results, Murtaugh rose up to deliver a speech that would reassure his direct followers that no matter how bad things might seem now, they were the Searrs Foundation. For thousands of years, they had directed the fate of the western world. (Okay, so the Foundation was actually only a bit more than two hundred and fifty years old. So what? It was the myth that was important. Plato had understood that.) They would adapt and overcome these challenges, and become stronger than ever before.

"Sugar or milk, sir?" asked the coffee girl.

Chain of thought somewhat disrupted, Murtaugh wanted to say that he took his without either, but the normal term reminded him of one of the rats who deserted the sinking ship. "One milk," he said instead.

"Yessir," she said, reached into the icebox containing the milk and produced a tiny pistol that she promptly leveled at his stomach. "By order of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Espionage and Logistics Division, you're under arrest," she said in the same easy tone.

Murtaugh froze, physically. Mentally, he abruptly connected the nagging familiarity with a brief read of a dossier on one Natasha Romanova. It had included a photograph. A blurry one, but really, he felt very stupid for not recognizing her. He opened his mouth to say something.

"The lower levels of this building are already being taken over by our agents," the Black Widow said. "You're done."

All right. Bargaining time. "We can give you the Devilukes."

"No, you can't," she said easily. "Your contact has been lying to you. She doesn't work for the Devilukes, she's a renegade of the Rainyday Hegemony." There was no malice in her tone. There was nothing there. She didn't even seem all that interested in him. "At least, that's how she played it when we brought her in for questioning last night."

Okay. Up the game. Under no other circumstances would he have even considered this, but needs must when the devil drives. "We can give you Luthor."

Ah, now he had her attention. "And you'll want what?"
"Full immunity, identity change, the works."

"I'll check with my supervisor. Excuse me, sir?" she said, speaking into the air. Earbud. Very good earbud. Had to be. They didn't use magic, right?

"Uh huh," she said. "I see. Yes, Colonel." She nodded. Oh, she didn't look happy at all. Didn't want to make the deal, but she was being overruled. Murtaugh fought to stop the smile from breaking out.

"I have a message for you from Colonel Nicholas Fury of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Espionage and Logistics Division, and from the World Security Council," she said. "Luthor says hi."

And then she shot him. As his consciousness faded, he could hear other shots fired, and screams, and the room seemed to be turning red ...

"It's done," his best agent reported, distantly. He didn't blame her. He hadn't wanted this either. As he stood in the darkness, looking at the four blank video screens, Fury vowed to see to it that the fourth was blank the next time something like this came up.

*Another such motherfucking victory, and we are motherfucking undone.*

She supposed that it was a bit ironic that, while she'd been distracted and weary this morning and Mikoto had been her usual energetic self, when they actually went back to their dorm room, her friend had been out like a light in seconds and Mai couldn't get to sleep at all. If so, it was the sort of irony that she didn't really appreciate.

And to make matters worse, it only took her a few minutes to feel pent up in the small, small room. So she went out, hoping that Mikoto wouldn't wake up and find herself alone. She didn't worry too much, for the girl generally slept like a rock. Anyway, she needed some fresh air.

At first, she tried to avoid the campus patrols she saw trying to enforce the ... curfew? She guessed it was a curfew, but she didn't think curfews were supposed to last for twenty-four hours. Regardless, since Mai was not exactly the mistress of stealth, she didn't escape their notice.

But the patrol she ran into, consisting of a pair of nuns - one tall and Japanese and the other petite and obviously foreign - just took a look at her and didn't say anything. The tall one gave her a smile and a mock salute, while her younger companion regarded her expressionlessly as they passed her. Mai wondered if one of them was the Sister Yukariko she'd heard about yesterday, but by the time she considered asking, they were well on their way and she'd have had to run to catch up with them. And she couldn't bring herself to do that.

It occurred to her that they'd basically just acknowledged her as a fellow protector of the campus. Mai wasn't sure how she felt about that. Then again, she wasn't sure how she felt about any number of things lately. Nao, Alyssa, Miyu, Mashiro ... Shiho. Her confused welter of thoughts finally settled on Shiho. She needed to talk to -

"'Ssup?" said an uncomfortable male voice from behind her.

Mai turned to regard Yuuichi. They stared at each other for a long silent moment, then asked, in the same instant, "Shouldn't you be in your room?"

More silence, then Mai volunteered, "Apparently, I've been deputized. You?"

"Official lackey for the student council, remember?"
"Ah. Trade you?"

"Aheh," he laughed. Then, "You look beat. Wanna sit down?" With a gesture towards one of the benches lining the pathway where they'd met each other.

She nodded, and sat down beside him. A long, uncomfortable period of saying absolutely nothing ensued.

"You were involved in all that, yesterday, weren't you?" he asked without looking at her.

"Yep," she said, not looking at him either. "I got drafted into an army and sent out to fight. How was your day?" Okay, so she'd sort of volunteered rather than being drafted. It was a petty detail.

"A twelve year old girl died in my arms," he told her flatly. "Trade you?"

Mai tried to imitate the 'aheh' noise he'd made earlier, but couldn't manage it with her throat as dry as it was. There was another period of silence.

"Shiho was in on it, too, wasn't she?" Yuuichi asked.

"Yes," Mai said, deciding not to elaborate as visions of Shiho laughing through the slaughter filled her mind. "I don't ... have you seen her since then?"

He shook his head. "Not since I got her back to her dorms day before yesterday. It's one of the ones that's still standing, the one with the big bathing area -"

"I know the one you're talking about, they've got me and Mikoto bunking there temporarily," she interjected. "You didn't talk, then?"

"I wanted to, but she basically promised that we'd talk tomorrow morning ... but then yesterday she wasn't there when I went to pick her up, and then all that happened." He finally looked directly at her, those deep brown eyes seeming utterly at a loss. "What was all that?"

Mai took a deep breath, and told him everything. Well, not everything, but practically everything that she'd learned about the hime and the Carnival and all of that. Aside from the stuff that was none of his business, like about her and Takumi and Mikoto and all that, she left out only two things.

One of them was the callousness with which Shiho had commented on the prospect of his death, though she didn't hide the fact that his life was in danger. She didn't want to add insult to injury. The other was something she wasn't sure if she ought to -

"I'm gonna die," Yuuichi said at last, sounding a bit dazed. "Huh. Well. That kinda sucks."

"No," Mai said. "No, too many people have died or gotten hurt already. I'm not gonna let that happen, not if I can stop it. I think we can maybe get them to take her flute away, again, and if that happens, she won't be able to call up her Child and you won't die unless something happens to her ... and you can protect her. You can take care of that part, right?"

He looked away. "Haven't always managed to do too well at that," he said, quietly. "A couple of years back, after my mom died - what?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Well, I kinda got into some ... bad habits. And Shiho came to where I was doing these bad habits and tried to get me out of them, and ... some of the guys I was doing things with decided to have
some fun with her." He looked down at his arm, rolled up his shirt sleeve to show her a rather large scar on his forearm. "I got this trying to stop them," he said. "Trying."

Mai was distracted from his words by a sudden impulse to reach out and gently caress the scar, but she snapped out of it before she could do more than lift a hand to do so. "Trying?" she repeated.

"Trying," he confirmed. "I don't ... all I really remember is waking up in the hospital with her crying beside my bed, crying about how I'd got hurt because of her. She said that they didn't really do anything to her, but ..." Yuuichi looked away. "I don't know if I believe her." His head snapped back to look at Mai. "Is that why she's like what you're saying she's like? Because I blew it that badly?"

"No," Mai said, trying to calm him with her voice. "No, that's not it, there's ... there's something else." Nao had told her, once things had settled down, about what she'd heard Shiho and Midori saying to each other. She hadn't wanted to pass it on, but ... no, he needed to know. "I think Shiho is the way that she is because she, she thinks that her mother was cheating on her father with a bunch of guys." Deep breath. "Including your father."

Yuuichi was silent, staring at her.

"Is that -" she started to ask.

"That," he replied, "is exactly the sort of asshole thing my asshole dad would do. My dad is an asshole, did I mention?"

"There's a lot of that going around," Mai said faintly. Out of nowhere, she found herself wondering about Mikoto's parents. She talked about her brother and her grandfather, but never her mother or father. Where had they been in all of that?

"So then - she actually is my sister?" he asked.

She nodded, opening her mouth to reassure him some more.

"That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard of," Yuuichi groaned. "I mean, I was getting over the fact that I've looked at her like a little sister, but ... she actually is? But she wants to be my sister and she wants sex, too? I can't - I think I'm gonna be sick."

"It's not so bad," Mai said faintly.

"Not so - are you kidding? What if your little brother was into you like that? You'd be disgusted, right? Yeah, I can tell you would. It's sick and it's wrong, and it's sick and wrong for a reason. Shit," he finished, shuddering faintly.

"You can't pick your family," she added. She wasn't really sure what she was saying anymore.

Yuuichi sighed. "Guess not," he said as he stood up, to look down at her. "Okay. I'll ... handle this somehow. I'll try and find out where she's hiding, and then I'll call you so's you can figure out some way to get her separated from that flute thing of hers. Okay?"

"Yeah," Mai said. "You're an okay guy, Tate."

He let out what sounded like the ghost of a laugh. "Yeah. I'm a real prince." And with that, he slumped off, looking incredibly depressed.

She watched him walk away with a confused feeling in her gut. All this while, she'd told herself that all that she wanted was to be normal. And with just a few simple unwitting words, she'd just been
shown that she'd never been normal, even before all this. She was watching normalacy slouching away from her, and taking something else incredibly precious with it ...

Mai shook her head. *Stop dramatizing things,* she told herself. *Just stop.*

By noon, Yohko had finished the letters of condolence she had to write, and probably could have taken a break. Instead, she decided to get proactive on the issue of her replacement, by contacting a number of the doctors she'd worked with in the past and inquiring whether they'd be interested in a position with the academy.

Of course, she knew perfectly well that most of them would be quite happy where they already were, and that the Academy couldn't offer them much in the way of an incentive. In the case of the two best in the field - well, the living legend still wasn't licensed to practise in Japan (or anywhere, as far as she knew) and was famous for working only on a case by case basis. And as for the other, Sorayama-sensei was so far out of their price range that it wasn't even funny.

She was running down the list in her little black book when the door to her office was flung open and Midori entered at a run with a rather frightening smile on her face. "Oi, Yohko!" she cried. "I just heard a really ridiculous rumor, so I came here to laugh about it with you!"

Yohko grunted and wished that she was eccentric enough to put a trapdoor in front of her desk. The people on the floor below probably wouldn't appreciate it, though. Ah well. Life was filled with ups and downs.

"Aren't you going to ask me about the ridiculous rumor which we're both going to find really funny?" Midori persisted maniacally as she bent across Yohko's desk.

"If it's the rumor that I gave my notice -" Yohko started to reply.

"That's it, that's it exactly! It's so ridiculous!"

"- and yet nonetheless true," she concluded.

Midori kept leaning forward across the desk, hands twitching a bit as they supported her weight. "Okay, joke's over. What the hell are you thinking?" she said.

"I'm thinking exactly what I told you not two freakin' days ago!" Yohko abruptly yelled. "I said all that, and then not only was there all that screwiness at the festival, but the academy was subjected to a military incursion! I can't do this job anymore! So I quit, I'm done, I'm out, finito, arivederci, sayonara, au revoir, bonsoir, how many ways can I say goodbye!"

Midori rocked back when Yohko raised her voice. She swallowed before she spoke again. "You can't do this to me," she said, and then flinched as she realized what she'd said.

Yohko felt herself flushing. "To - dammit, Midori, the world does *not* revolve around you! I'm sad to say that the prospect of being your booty call is not enough to convince me to stay on here anymore, if it ever was!"

"But it's your idea, every time that we -" Midori started to protest.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, and you're in love with your bloody archaeology professor!" Yohko sneered. "Heaven knows you talk about how much you're in love with the guy, every chance that you get!"

"I am!"
Yohko bit back what she was going to say. "Fine, whatever. I'm happy for you both," she bit out sarcastically. "Meanwhile, I still quit."

"I can't let you do this!" Midori cried. "Friends do not let friends make awful career choices!" And with that not-terribly-original observation, she dashed out of the office again.

Yohko ground her teeth together until she remembered that was bad for the enamel. With a sigh of annoyance, she picked up the black book and picked out a name. "Couldn't hurt to ask," she mused aloud, and dialled the number on her cell phone.

"Minazuki-sensei? It's Sagisawa. Doing well, I hope? Ah, glad to hear it. Well, time is precious, so I'll just come out and ask. How would you like to take over my job at Mahora and -"

Yohko quickly moved the phone's headset away from her ear to avoid damage to her hearing. Once the laughter stopped, and the click informed her that the call had been terminated, she set it down again. "You didn't have to laugh that loudly," she muttered as she read down the list.

Before she could pick another number, though, the phone rang. She answered it. "Sagisawa," she reported. "Oh! Oh, it's good to hear from you again. Yes, I've been meaning to call you and thank you for that consult, a few weeks ago. You were a great help. What can I -"

Yohko paused.

"How did you hear that rumor?" she asked. "Uh-huh. Well, all right. Certainly, I'll arrange the meeting. Your CV is certainly broad enough to do the job. I imagine that it'll be a drop down from - oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Well, I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Mikado-sensei."

Well, that was convenient. A bit ... too convenient, honestly, but she wasn't going to let it worry her. As she looked out the window and saw Midori in cheerleader get up doing some sort of routine just outside the building, and promptly closed the blinds, she knew that she had enough to worry about already.

"So what's going to happen to him?" Nodoka asked quietly as she stood watch over the headmaster's bedroom from the ledge outside it.

Yue, standing with her in her robes and wizards hat, was silent for a long moment before answering. "Well, it's not safe for him to retire to anywhere here on Earth. Too many old enemies, everywhere. The same goes for most of Mundus Magica. But ... I got in touch with Headmaster Seras, and she agreed to give him a visiting professor post at Ariadne. He'll have excellent security, there, and treatment, and he can live out the rest of his days in as much peace as anyone can hope for."

"The best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep," Nodoka murmured.

"Eh?" Yue asked.

"Something Paru said to me once. She supposedly picked it up from a friend of her brother's who kidnapped her when she was six or so."

"It's a song lyric from about twenty-five years ago," said a voice from above the two of them. "If the friend of Saotome's brother is the one that I'm thinking of, it's not surprising that he'd think highly of it." Mana leaned down from her position on the roof to look at the two of them, particularly Nodoka. "He didn't get the best, incidentally."

"I just love that we're all so blase about kidnapping," Yue muttered.
"I doubt any of us are going to be so lucky as that," Nodoka said, meeting Mana's gaze evenly.

Mana stared at her, then shook her head. "You're as hard a case as Kaede said you were," she said, sounding irritated. "Lighten up a little, will you?"

Yue nearly choked as the supreme irony of that statement, while Nodoka just sneered and looked away. Before she could say anything, though, Konoka hobbled out on to the balcony, walking only with the assistance of a cane.

"Still no change?" Yue asked, somewhat rhetorically, since she could tell what the answer would be from the look on Konoka's face.

"There is one thing we haven't tried, but Setsuna and Mother won't let me risk it in my condition. So it looks like he's never going to get any better. Magic, as someone was prone to saying, can't do miracles," Konoka mused. "I'm sorry, Yue."

"Why are you apologizing to me?" Yue flustered. Okay, he was technically her grandfather, too, but they'd never been all that close, certainly not as close as ... but that led to disturbing and embarrassing places, and only flustered her worse. Most of what went on in Konoka's life flustered her, really, like her easy acceptance of her new stepmother as mother when she'd been angry about the situation only a few months before.

"You know why," Konoka said, smiling like the Konoka of old.

Yue flushed and looked away.

In the distance, they heard a door open, and the shing of a sword being drawn from its sheath. "Who art thou and what about!" Setsuna's voice roared from within the room.

"Gosh, you're cute!" said an unfamiliar voice in the same direction.

"Oh, hell," Konoka cursed and hobbled back into the room, with Yue and Nodoka both close behind.

They found Setsuna holding a man at bay with her sword. He was just a bit taller than her, but much wider, with pointy hair just above either ear and bald scalp in between, wearing a pair of sunglasses despite being indoors. He seemed oddly unfazed by the fact that he was being menaced by a girl with a sword.

"Nijuuin-sensei?" Konoka gasped.

Eh? thought Yue. This wasn't ... oh. She abruptly recognized him from the family photo she'd seen while tutoring the daughter of the Nijuuin-sensei she'd come to know and respect. This was his older brother, the one who couldn't use magic.

"Hey, there, Konoka-chan!" he said. "I came to pay my respects to my predecessor. I hope that's all right."

"Predecessor?" she repeated as a question.

"Mm-hm. The Emergency Council has appointed me as Headmaster Pro Tem," he explained cheerfully. "Don't worry, I fully intend to keep things running just as Konoemon-sensei did. Except maybe employing more cute girls." He blinked, then leered. "Oh, hey, Nodokaaaaaa-chaaaan!"

Wait, thought Yue and Konoka. Why is she on - oh no.

"I suppose you're wondering why I called you all here," Midori proclaimed as she stood before them arms akimbo, her long red cape flowing slightly in the early evening wind.

"Actually, I'm wondering if Superman-sama knows you have his cape," Mai said.

"I'm wondering why it's not really a surprise that she's into that sort of thing," Nao said as she looked wonderingly at Natsuki.

"I'm wondering when someone's going to UNTIE ME ALREADY!" Natsuki yelled as she struggled against the ropes which bound her.

"I'm wondering, well, um, I just don't think we've met before?" Yukino said to the rather lost-looking nun who was standing on the plaza with the rest of them.

"I'm, I'm Sister Yukariko," the embarassed looking nun explained.

"I'm wondering why Midori called us all here!" Mikoto said.

"Thank you, Mikoto-chan!" said Midori, just a tad bit irately. "She gets it, why can't the rest of you get it, I'd like to know!" She took a moment, and then resumed the stentorian delivery she'd started out with. "Yesterday was a day unlike any other, when all of the HiME -"

"Oh!" Mai interrupted. "You're the one that - hi, I'm Tokiha Mai," she introduced herself. "A day unlike any other, when all -"

"Hey, where's the screwy octopus head?" asked Nao.

Midori kept from screaming with a bit of difficulty. "I haven't been able to find her. But yesterday was -"

"Lucky her! Mai, stop making nice with the cowardly nun and untie me already!"

"Hey, Natsuki, that's not nice! She probably has vows against violence - that's not cowardice, that's conviction!"

"Not really," Yukariko said quietly. No one really paid her any attention, which was what she really wanted.

"Fine. I apologize. NOW UNTIE ME!"

"Okay, long story short," Midori bit out. "Yesterday we did a lot of good and I think we could keep on doing all kinds of good if we kept on working together like that! So let's do that! Let's keep the HiME Army together on a permanent basis! We will be invincible!"

After a moment, Yukariko edged close to Yukino and quietly asked, "Does Midori-san have some sort of psychological problems?"

"Well," Yukino said, since she honestly wasn't sure how to go about answering that question.

"For this crap I got tied up and dragged here like some sort of damsel in distress?" Natsuki growled
as Mai undid her bonds. Without a word of thanks, she started to storm away. "Include me out!"

"First District," Midori said.

Natsuki paused in mid-storm, whirling to glare at Midori. "What do you know about them?"

"Other than they exist, and you're kinda peeved at 'em? Nothing. Yet. But if a certain someone were to formalize her relationship with the HiME Army, then that certain someone's enemies would be the enemies of her sisters-in-arms as well." She paused to let that sink in, then continued. "You're about out of leads, so why not let us help you find some more? Same goes for those of us searching for missing brothers, or whatever it is that we're searching for.

"And furthermore, while Searrs is beaten, and won't be back if they're smart, they're evil and thus by definition not all that smart! So they might very well try again, and it'd be good to have a little back up if that happened, yeah? Not to mention the Orphans, and the possibility of an alien invasion, and all kinds of crazy stuff that might happen if we're lucky. Or unlucky, I guess."

It was honestly a little dizzying to watch the way that Midori could bounce from silly to serious without any pause in between, Mai decided. For her part, Natsuki didn't look completely convinced, but she wasn't going anywhere.

"I like this plan," Nao announced, smiling and nodding. "This plan rocks. I'm happy to be a part of it." The truth was that she was starting to get a little bored with the helping people thing, but it was still entertaining for now. And if that ended, it still might be good to have some patsies around to shift the blame for what she got up to onto someone else.

"See? Even Nao-chan has come around!" Midori pointed out to Natsuki.

"Oh, fine," Natsuki growled. "But if I don't see some results real soon -!

"You will, you will!"

"Are we joining this thing, Mai?" Mikoto asked.

"I guess we ought to," Mai said wearily. "All the arguments make too much sense, and there's some things I want to know that we might find out easier this way."

"That's what I think, too," Yukino said softly. These people could be great resources for Haruka-san, she thought. I'd have to keep them from her, but that's not any different from having other sorts of confidential informants, isn't it?

"I suppose that this is a good idea," Sister Yukariko said hesitantly. "I'm not sure what help I'd be, since all this is very new to me, and I'd have to clear anything with Sister Shakti -"

"Relax, last thing I want is to get her mad at me," Midori assured her very quickly. "All right, then! Our next task is to celebrate yesterday's awesome victory!"

"Celebrate?" said Mai. "Hang on, I don't think that celebrating is right. I mean, lots of people suffered and -"

"With some karaoke!"

"Let's go!" Mai enthused, punching the air. She was finally going to get to go to a karaoke parlor! There was a God after all!
"We're here!" Mai cried out as they arrived in the booth, tears of happiness dripping from her eyes. "We're actually here! I can't believe it's happening to me! Some people wait a lifetime for a moment like this!" she sang.

"... Mai, it's a rundown karaoke parlor on the seedy side of Mahora," said Natsuki. "Please dial it down a notch, you are seriously starting to worry me."

She ignored her. How could she, how could any of them understand what this meant to her? Always, always, she'd been the one who had to offer apologies to her friends when they went out to have fun at places like this. And watch them as they sauntered off together while she went to work. This place was the embodiment, the symbol, of everything she'd ever denied herself. How could Natsuki possibly get it, when she'd probably spent all kinds of fun times with her friends and -

Okay, even in Mai's somewhat excited state, she retained the presence of mind to realize that was ridiculous. Natsuki didn't have any friends (except Shizuru, whom she would of course insist was just useful) and didn't go in for things like that. Actually, probably none of them, except for Midori herself did. So she supposed that none of them would be as excited as she was.

"Ooh! Snacks!" Mikoto cried when they got into the booth.

Well, it was nice to be wrong sometimes, Mai thought as Mikoto descended on the snacks set on the table and began consuming them. She focused her own attention on the equipment. "Okay, this is your basic Sony manufactured karaoke player, nothing too fancy, but ideal for these situations," she announced immediately. "Assuming the manager hasn't fiddled around with the selection, I can pretty much tell you right now which songs are in the playlist. Let me know what you want to sing and I'll program your song choices in between mine."

"You've got the playlist memorized?" Nao asked. "Why -"

"I've been waiting for this day for ten thousand years," Mai bit out.

"... if I'm nuts, it's because of something I got from your side of the family," Nao declared, retreating a bit.

"That's nice," Mai said, not really listening. "Okay, just one little request, could we please avoid 'Eternal Flower'? I just think it's massively overdone. Likewise 'Cruel Angel's Thesis'. Ooh, the songbook includes 'Roses Fall in Beauty'? It's an oldie but a goodie!"

"Oh, Mai, Mai, Mai," Midori said, shaking her head. "Your enthusiasm is admirable, but sadly misplaced. There's an order to these things that must be obeyed!"

"There is?" Mai asked.

"There is?" repeated Mikoto, between crunching on nachos.

"Yes, there is!" Midori proclaimed. "Both song and singer shall be randomly selected, the former using the player's roulette function, the latter using a special roulette I've obtained for just that purpose!" She pointed dramatically at what looked like a dartboard, attached to the wall. Looking closely, one could see that someone (Midori, most likely) had scribbled the characters for their names onto the seven large wedges at the center of the board. Well, their names and the English word "Sister" represented in katakana, the latter under something that had been scribbled out.
"... that is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen, and I watched Suzushiro Haruka's presidential campaign," Natsuki opined after a moment of silent consideration.

Yukino had started nodding, stopped, and was now glaring at Natsuki who seemed oblivious.

"Um, Midori, couldn't we just write down our names in and cycle through it, and have someone who really, really wanted to sing at the start of the list?" Mai asked hopefully. "I think that would be every bit as fair as -"

"Nope, has to be a random selection. Because of the outfits, you see," Midori explained.

Except that explanations generally aren't supposed to confuse those who've received them even more than they already were. "Outfits?" everyone (except Mikoto, who was eating) chorused.

"Outfits," Midori repeated cheerfully, as though the word was enough to clarify everything. "So away we go!" She pushed a button on the bottom of the roulette, and a little light went on on the outer edge, seeming to circle it by lighting up and going out as the light beside it turned on. After several apparent rotations, it stayed lit up beside Natsuki's name.

"And a winner is Natsuki!" Midori proclaimed, pulling the girl, who was still in her motorcycle leathers, up from the couch where she was sitting with Mai and Mikoto and dragging her over to a curtained off area.

"I knew this was a bad idea!" Natsuki proclaimed as she vanished from sight.

"Mai, don't be sad!" Mikoto said after a moment of observing the shouts and unseen struggles going on behind the curtain. "You'll get a chance to do this thing whatever it is."

"I hope you're right," Mai said uneasily, as she endured the usual sinking sensation of a foretelling, where she saw the roulette somehow managing to never once land on her name despite several spins. It was an awful vision, the worse for being much pettier than her usual visions of disaster.

Mikoto clearly picked up on Mai's discomfort. With one more look at the snacks, of which there still remained quite a few that she hadn't tried, Mikoto turned to look full on at her roommate. "Mai," she said, trying to sound serious without really succeeding. "If Mai isn't having fun, we can leave."

Mai blinked. "But, what about -" She gestured towards the snacks.

Mikoto nodded, then drew in a deep breath. "It's just food. It's not even Mai's food. And Mai ... Mai is more important than food." Brief pause. "Unless it's Mai's food. That's different."

Mai's gloom evaporated and she reached out to give Mikoto a big hug and kiss her forehead. "That's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me, Mikoto, you little flirt," she said.

"Ah?"

It abruptly occurred to Mai that she had just kissed Mikoto in front of witnesses, one of whom was a member of the Catholic clergy, one of whom was a member of the school's disciplinary committee, and one of whom was Nao. In the first moment of terrified realization, Mai found herself terribly uncertain which of these conditions was worse.

"Ah, it must be wonderful to have close female friends," Yukariko sighed dreamily.

Yukino, who was blushing slightly, favored the sister with a disbelieving look, but the one she then sent Mai and Mikoto's way was more faintly envious than censorous.
Nao was just staring with her jaw hanging low.

*I can't believe I wondered which was worse.*

Before anyone could say anything more, Natsuki was dragged out from behind the curtain that she'd just been dragged behind, now wearing a pretty miniskirted dress and a pair of glasses, with her hair done up in twin tails.

"Isn't she cute!" Midori enthused as she sat down and grabbed her pitcher of beer. "Your song's up, Natsuki!"

"For what I am about to endure," Natsuki proclaimed, "I will one day take vengeance on God himself." And then she started singing.

The interval between the end of Natsuki's performance - fairly good, if marred by the ferocious scowl that never left her face - and the start of Yukino's turn at the mike - during which she was likewise dragged behind the curtain by Midori - offered Nao and Mai the chance to step out into the hallway and discuss the situation like the reasonable people they weren't.

"What the hell, Mai?" Nao demanded.

With effort, Mai kept herself from saying 'what the hell right back at you' like she'd said to Midori a few weeks ago. "Nao, calm down."

"Calm down? Calm - okay. Okay. I'm calm. See how calm I am? I'm calm. Now. What the hell, Mai? Are you two -" Nao hesitated, lifted up her hands, pausing in the act of shaping one of them into an "O" shape. "No, wait, that doesn't make sense," she muttered.

Completely deadpan, Mai held up both her hands with the first two fingers of each of them up and spread in a V, then proceeded to wedge the two of them together and wiggle slightly.

Nao stared. "How does that even -" She shook her head. "You do that with -"

"Yes," Mai admitted.

Nao was left speechless. "And she likes it?" she asked at last.

"Yes," Mai understated.

"You didn't, didn't force her or -"

"Nao, you do *know* Mikoto, right?" Mai interrupted. "She's a lot stronger than I am. A *lot* stronger. I couldn't force her to do anything."

"She's kinda easily tricked," Nao observed hesitantly. "So you could maybe trick her into -"

"Y'know what, if you're smart, you're not gonna remind me of how the two of you met," Mai growled. "No, I didn't trick her." She was uncomfortably aware that there'd been a certain amount of manipulation involved, but that wasn't really any of Nao's business. Actually, none of this was Nao's business, but she'd come to far to back out with that now.

But all Nao did was just stare at her with a completely baffled expression on her face, which made Mai feel like even more of a heel than usual. "What?" she finally asked.

"So ... girls like that?" Nao asked.

"Well, yes, but I figured they were just sickos," Nao explained. "And you're a goody-goody, so you wouldn't ... but ..."

A horrific thought suddenly occurred to Mai. "Nao," she asked. "Why did you think I was forcing her?"

"Because that's what it is, right?" Nao said, looking way younger than she actually was. "Someone makes someone else do something, and that someone hates it, and she screams -" Now she blinked, and realized what she was saying, how it sounded, and stepped back, putting on the cynical mask again. "It's not what you're thinking though. It wasn't me. It was my mom. I was hiding, and listening, and -"

"No," Mai said. "No, that's not the point. Nao, what they did to your mom was rape, not sex."

"What's the difference?" Nao asked, bewildered. "Is it because you're both girls?"

"Give me strength," Mai wimpered, hand over her eyes. "There's a big difference, but that's not it. Sex, sex is great, Nao. It's great when it's women and women, it's great when it's men and women, I guess that it's great when it's men and men, not that I know or - anyways. But it has to be great for -" However many people are involved, she almost said, but backed away from the advanced class topics in the nick of time. "- both people involved, or it's not great at all."

Deep breath. "When you want to have sex with someone, when you want to become one with them, you'll understand."

Nao was staring dubiously at her, but there was something mixed in with the doubt and confusion, something Mai didn't quite recognize. "I don't think I could ever want to be one with a guy," she said, hesitantly.

"Then don't," Mai said, just a bit out of patience. Then she had another forerunning, and started to say, "But -"

"Could I kiss you?" Nao asked, blushing a bit.

Mai took a step back. "No!" she said. "I mean, it's not that you're ugly or anything, and - it wouldn't be right to Mikoto! And we're sisters, right?" Oh, I am such a hypocrite, she thought disgustedly.

"I don't really think of you as a sister," the girl with the bright red hair complained.

"Well, I do, so - no kissing me without consent, okay?" she demanded.

"Fiiitie," Nao sighed, looking put out.

The door to the booth opened, and Midori poked her head out, looking irate. "Hey, you two. Yukino-chan's too nice to say anything, but I'm not. You missed her whole set! And it came up for you to go next, Mai, but I'm cancelling your slot as a penalty! Instead, you're up, Nao-chan!" Midori grabbed the smaller girl and pulled her in.

"WHAT?" Mai shrieked a moment later.

A little while later, having just reviewed inputs, Midori was washing her hands in the washroom sink while chuckling a bit over Mai's increasing aggravation. All this was definitely a welcome distraction.
from what she'd spent the afternoon doing - slandering her best friend to every hospital in Japan so that she'd never get a job anywhere else and have to stay here at Mahora in order to work. Abruptly, though, the horrifying possibility that Yohko might get a job overseas intruded, ruining her appreciation of her own cleverness.

"Crap," she muttered as she lifted her head to look in the mirror.

Then blinked.

"Wow!" she announced. "So that's what that's like. I always wondered what it would be like to do that thing, you know, where there's a person in the bathroom and they look away from a mirror and, when they look back towards it, there's someone standing there looking at them. Thanks!" she added, a bit belatedly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Shizuru, dressed casually as she stood patiently behind her. "But you are nonetheless quite welcome."

Midori turned to look at her directly with a broad smile on her face. "I was wondering if you were going to show up," she said. "Good work with the giant during the invasion."

"I don't know what you're talking about, now, either," Shizuru said after a moment. "But -"

"Please," Midori said, holding up a hand. "I only act like an idiot, some of the time, please don't insult me by thinking that I am one. You're life's an open book, President Fujino. Or should I say President Higurashi?" Her tone got a bit more serious. "Did you have anything to do with the way Akane-chan disappeared?"

Shizuru's easy gaze grew a bit more glare-like. "No, I did not. And any connection I had with the Higurashi family ended with my mother's death, so it is Fujino. Thank you."

"Okay, then," Midori said with a shrug. "But don't ask me to pretend that you're not a HiME. We both know that you are."

"What a ridiculous term that is," Shizuru sighed. "Very well. I won't ask that. I have other requests to make instead, in any event. Let me get right to the point. I will have you stop your attempts to influence and manipulate my Natsuki. In fact, it would better if you ceased any and all contact with her."

"Wow," Midori said, stunned. "I'd heard the rumors, but you really do act as though she's your pet, huh? "Mah Natsuki,'" she repeated. "Wow."

"I am simply looking out for a good friend's best interests, when she does not seem to be able to do so," Shizuru said calmly. As calmly as someone can when their fists have suddenly clenched.

Maybe it was the booze she'd been drinking all night, even though she had a very high tolerance, and even though she wasn't normally an angry drunk, but something about this girl and her attitude and what she was saying really pissed Midori off. "A good friend, huh?" Midori sneered. "She doesn't even know you're a HiME, you know."

"Thank you for not telling her," Shizuru sneered. "Though I'm sure it's owing to negligence, rather than benevolence, on your part."

"Yeah, but that's the least of it, isn't it? She doesn't even know that you want to fuck her so badly that -"
Shizuru slapped her. "You disgusting disgrace to your profession," she hissed. "For your information, that is not any part of my feelings for her. My feelings for her are pure."

Now Midori laughed despite the pain on her cheek. "Oh," she said between chuckles. "Oh, so you're one of those kind of dykes, huh? That really pisses me off. And another thing -"

With that, she slammed a short jab up into Shizuru's stomach, stunning her and knocking her back before closing the distance to put her in a forward necklock. "You hit like a girl," she hissed, then slammed her lips to Shizuru's even as she swept her feet out from under her, taking them both to the floor.

The president seemed stunned; clearly her HiME condition didn't include much in the way of augmented stamina. Typical hothouse flower, Midori thought contemptuously as she slid down, planting one elbow on the other girl's stomach just below her breasts to keep her pinned down when she recovered. Her other hand flipped up the short skirt that she was still wearing, exposing the panties beneath. "Ohhoho!" she chuckled. "Not very pure when it comes to your underwear. You and Natsuki-chan got that in common at least."

"No," Shizuru muttered, starting to come around. Then much louder, "No! Get off of me!"

"Not happening," Midori sang cheerfully as she tugged the lacy underthings aside and bent down to start licking and sucking and biting at Shizuru's womanhood. Shizuru reached down to try and push her away, but all that she could accomplish was to tangle her hands in Midori's hair and try to tug on it. It wasn't pleasant for Midori, but she could ignore it for now. The annoyance made her lick her thumb and shove it firmly up the girl's rear in hopes of quieting her that way.

After only a few moments, Shizuru's efforts ceased abruptly as her head rolled back and she let out a sharp cry, followed soon after by gasps for breath.

"See, that was fun, wasn't it?" Midori asked, pressing a quick kiss to the girl's denuded abdomen. "Your turn now, o-"

"Get off of me!" Shizuru hissed, pushing her back.

"Wha-"

"My turn?" the brown-haired girl snapped, pulling herself together with difficulty and pushing away from Midori. "Oh, I'm sorry, is this the part of your narrative where I realize that, yes, I really did want what you were doing to me? That I want it too? No. Never!"

"You got off," Midori said, defensively. "Don't act like you were some blushing virgin -"

"I was," Shizuru bit out as she stood up. "Leave me alone, leave Natsuki alone, or I swear to, to whoever gave us these powers, I will END you!"

She backed out of the washroom, never taking her angry red eyes off of Midori until the door closed in front of her.

Midori sat for a moment.

"That could have gone better," she said at last.

Yukariko's turn, singing 'Blue Water' (rather well) while in a miniskirted version of her habit (which she made work) came to an end while Midori was still out, so (over Mai's mild objections) they
activated the roulette and watched it come up on Mikoto's name. Then, as Mai explained to the little barbarian how this was all supposed to work - acting very like a stage mom, in Yukino's quietly voiced opinion - Nao subtly asked Natsuki to step outside.

Natsuki frowned, but went along with it, mostly to find out what Nao was up to this time. Despite the fact that she seemed to be getting along better with Mai, Natsuki didn't trust the younger girl a bit. (Of course, she didn't trust anyone, but she distrusted Mai a little less than ... um, actually, practically anyone other than Shizuru.)

"What do you want to say to me?" Natsuki asked, once they were in the hall.

"Well, it's not really that I want to talk to you, but you're the only one I can do this with, since Mai won't let me, and Mikoto's probably the same way, and the nun's a nun, and the wannabe cop is a wannabe cop, and I don't really want to wait for the crazy teacher," Nao explained.

Except that explanations aren't supposed to leave someone even more confused than they were before the explanation, as has perhaps already been observed. "What the flaming moonbeams are you babbling about?" Natsuki asked with a frown.

"Well, you see, I - well - uh - ah, hell with it," said Nao, giving up on explanation and resorting, as she really preferred, to action. And so walking right up to Natsuki, going up on tiptoe and slamming their lips together.

Natsuki's eyes were wide. Nao's were closed. Neither of them was in any position to see Shizuru stumble out of the hallway leading to the nearby bathroom, right behind Natsuki, and turn to see the two of them standing there kissing each other. Neither of them saw her already angry face become positively incandescent with fury. Neither of them saw her fists clench to the point where her well-manicured nails were practically drawing blood from her palms. Neither of them saw her take a step, a single step, towards them, then pause, abruptly make an about-face, and walk briskly away.

Nor did Shizuru see (or hear) what happened a moment later, when Natsuki pulled back and gasped, "What the fuck are you doing?!"

Not really paying any attention to her, Nao pursed her lips. "Not ... bad," she mused aloud. "But not really anything out of the ordinary, either. Crap, don't tell me I'm gonna have to suck face with Aoi and her stupid girlfriend, too?"

"What, what did you just do?" Natsuki repeated, grabbing one of Nao's shoulders.

"Hey, hands off!" Nao said, backing up. "Like I said before, process of elimination meant that you were the only one I could do anything with, so naturally, I."

"Naturally, you stole my first kiss!" Natsuki yelped. "By process of elimination, you stole my first kiss!"

"Seriously?" Nao asked, blinking. "That was your first kiss? What the hell's wrong with you? I hate men, and I've gotten further than that!"

"Shut up! Just, just shut up!" Natsuki barked, blushing brightly, as she stomped back into the booth.

Nao was shaking her head in bewilderment. It wasn't that big of a deal, surely. So it was then that Midori found her when she also stumbled out of the hallway leading to the bathroom.

"Oi, Nao," Midori said, frowning. "Why're you out in the hall? Again?"
"Oh, just some stuff," she said, staring at Midori speculatively.

"Like what?"

Nao kept staring in silence, before shaking her head. "Nah, I'm not that desperate," she said, then headed back into the booth.

"... did I just get put down?" Midori asked no one in particular.

As all this was happening, Shiho was hiding in a cave in the forest outside of Mahora, shivering and thinking how much the world sucked. The shivering, at least, was a novel experience for her. She very much wished that she was back in her room, back in her bed, back with her big brother... but on the other hand, she was aware that her immediate enemies would be expecting her to go there. And for once, she wasn't seeking out a confrontation with them.

It was strange how it had all turned out. Yesterday should have been the greatest day of her life. She'd been able to exult in her power, showing them all just what she could do. And then in an instant it had all turned to ash, when he'd shown up.

The boy teacher, Negi. The bitch Mai had taunted her about him, but she'd dismissed her claims as exaggerations and outright lies. Even when she'd seen that, yes, he was some sort of wizard, able to fly on his own power, she hadn't been impressed. Nothing he could do was as fearsome as what she and Yata-Garasu could accomplish, surely.

And then, with a single word, he'd defeated the leaders of the invasion. Easily. No, effortlessly. At once, her heart, which had never known doubt before, knew it then. What would someone who could do something like that do to someone like Shiho, who'd given him cause - not that he needed any - to hate her?

She'd run. She'd run, and hid, and spent a miserable night here in this cave.

Shiho wasn't stupid. She'd expected that at some point she might have to hide from her enemies, and had made preparations against that possibility, caching food and a change of clothing here. She was, however, not quite so experienced in such matters as she thought she was - the food that she'd stashed in the cave had either gone bad or been found and stolen by cute woodland animals that she vowed to kill painfully, later.

She still had her new clothes, though, including a sweatshirt with a hood that she could use to disguise herself. So she'd managed to head into town and buy some food this morning at a convenience store.

Inconveniently, though, she'd used her ATM card to do so. Had Ala Alba's cyber-goddess not been a bit distracted by other events, Chisame would probably have tracked her down and told Negi where to find her. As it happened, though, someone else found those traces, and erased them so that no one else could use them.

Shiho's head snapped up when she heard a footstep outside of her cave, and she quickly brought the flute up to her lips.

"Hallo, the cave?" came an unfamiliar man's voice. "I am unarmed and alone. I only want to talk. I'm coming in now."

Her immediate instinct was to call up Yata-Garasu and let whoever this might be have it right in the chest, but she was tired and not as fast on the draw as she might like. He came into view. Middle-
aged, bespectacled, sharp nosed and Western, in a coat that she envied.

"Munakata Shiho-san, I presume?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" she snarled.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. John Smith," he introduced himself. "In the wake of recent unfortunate events, I have the honor of being the primary representative of the interests of the Searrs Foundation in this region."

"Searrs?" Shiho said, frown deepening. "What are you still doing here?"

"Mostly, I'm trying to make the best of a bad situation, salvaging what I can from yesterday's rout," he explained patiently. "And I was hoping to persuade you to help me do that."

The absurdity of that statement nearly boggled her mind, which wasn't, despite everything, all that easy to do. "Why, what, why would I ever help you?"

The man who'd called himself John Smith smiled inwardly. This had been a dangerous gamble, but from the fact that she was asking that question, it seemed likely to pay off. "I wouldn't be expecting you to do it for nothing, of course. But it seems fairly likely that you have more immediate enemies, who are also ... mutual enemies. It only makes sense to aid you against them, by making sure that they can't find you, for example."

It abruptly occurred to Shiho that if this person could find her -

"They can't," he said, reading her face. "I made sure of it. And I'd be more than happy to give you intel." He paused, as though evaluating another form of intelligence, then continued. "I'd be more than happy to give you information about them. Useful stuff, about the other HiME."

Shiho drew back. "I can't fight the other HiME," she sneered. "They'll take away -"

"I am reliably informed that such prohibitions may soon become moot," he told her.

"Huh?"

"I am told that you might be able to do so very shortly," he clarified. "And it is very much in the interests of the Searrs Foundation to be allied with a HiME who can win this series of battles. Our attempt to make one has clearly failed, so we must then ally with one of the extant ones. And you seem to be the best option," he lied.

"... what do you want me to do?" she asked suspiciously.

He knew then that he had her.

"Wasn't that fun?" Midori enthused, a little while later, as she was carried back to campus between Mai and Natsuki. "That was so much fun, wasn't it?"

"More fun than some people should be allowed to have," Mai snarked. Her vision of the roulette somehow never managing to land on her name - except for that one time when she hadn't been there - had of course come true, and she was not best pleased right now.

"After God, I'm coming after you, too," Natsuki growled at Midori.

"I'm sorry, Yukino-chan," Sister Yukariko apologized as she was helped along by the smaller girl.
She hadn't drunk nearly as much as Midori, but it had been much more than she was used to.

"You're not that heavy, Sister," Yukino reassured her. The lie didn't come easily to her lips, but it did come.

"This has been a very strange evening," said Mikoto as she trailed along behind the others with Nao. "Fun, yes, tasty, oh yes, but very strange, too."

Nao grunted in response. Privately, she was wondering whether or not Mikoto might be simple enough that she wouldn't understand why it was "wrong" for her to kiss someone other than Mai. Since Nao wasn't really all that clear on why it was "wrong", it seemed pretty likely. (The irony of that didn't occur to her, of course.)

"Ah, that was fun," Midori repeated, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Who knows when we're gonna have this kinda fun again?"

"Oh, god, she's getting maudlin, now," Natsuki groaned.

"It's actually a really good question," said Nagi wittily as he cheerfully and cutely watched over them from his perch atop one of the streetlamps.

"Nagi!" Mai and Natsuki gasped as they quickly assumed defensive postures. This left them with no hands free to hold Midori up, of course. "Ow," she said from the ground.

"Oh, crap, not you again," Nao groaned, managing to hide her deep-seated attraction to the clever white-haired youth behind a carefully nurtured air of disdain. "What do you want this time?"

"Now is that any way to talk to an old friend?" he asked somewhat reproachfully.

"We're don't remember making friends with you," chorused all the girls - with the exception for Yukariko, who had sobered up quickly and was staring at him in shock.

"Well, fine," the momentarily grumpy youth said. "Be that as it may, I come among you with news of great joy. Wonderful news, in fact. You don't have to worry about fighting the Orphans, anymore! That's great, isn't it?"

"Why not?" Mai asked suspiciously.

"I'm so glad that you asked," he said, then somehow swung around the top of the lamppost so that he was standing on top of it. "Because the early nights of this Carnival are at an end, and now commences the final nights!" he declared. "Henceforth, you shall have finer foes for your battles! Royal foes, in fact!" he added, snickering at his cleverness at the end there.

"You can't mean -" Mai gasped, realizing what he was saying.

"Yes!" he crowed. "Yes, I can mean! Your final foes of this Carnival are ... each other."

Silence fell like a blanket of snow on all of them.

"Are you nuts?" Nao said. "Why the hell would we fight each other? A while ago, maybe, but now?"

"Ah, dear sweet malevolent Nao-hime!" Nagi said with a grin. "Has it not occurred to you that all the HiME aren't here? There are many whose intentions and goals you do not know, and with whom you have not formed the close and intimate bonds of friendship you have formed with these girls"
"Shiho," Mai breathed.

"... oh, shit," Midori groaned as another name abruptly occurred to her.

"And even if that weren't enough," Nagi continued, "can you reeeeaallllly trust each other so completely, with what is on the line? With the chance for power undreamt of available to you? The sort of power that would allow you heal those you love?" Mai and Nao both jolted at that. "Or take revenge on your enemies?" It was Natsuki's turn to grow pale. "Or strengthen your friends?" Yukino's legs trembled, almost collapsing beneath her. "Or even to simply take the power for yourself and become the great hero you have always dreamed of being?"

Midori found it difficult to speak, and not just because of her intoxicated state. "We, we st- we wo-"

"We will not do what you want!"

Everyone turned with a start to see that Sister Yukariko had recovered completely, and taken several steps away from the rest of them. She had produced a golden crucifix and was holding it out towards Nagi with a firm hand that only trembled a little bit.

"Thou minion of Satan!" she proclaimed. "Get thee hence from this place, in God's holy name!"

Nagi actually looked non-plussed for a moment. Then he hopped down from his pose on the lamp and sauntered right up to where the sister was standing. After another silent moment of contemplation, he reached out with a finger to tap the crucifix.

"Doesn't seem to be working," he said at length. "That suggests a couple of possibilities. The one I kind of like is that what you're doing depends more on your faith than on the symbol, and we both know that your faith is pretty much just a hollow excuse for a fear of the world beyond your cloister's walls, right, Yukariko-hime?"

The sister had gone very pale when he started speaking, and it wasn't easy for her to respond. But she finally did. "Be that as it may, it was a good way to bait you into someone else's line of fire, no?"

"Huh?" said Nagi cleverly.

Seconds later a huge black sword shot out of the air to take him through the chest, stapling him to the ground.

Nagi stared somewhat blearily down at the hilt of the sword sticking out of his stomach. "Wow," he muttered. "That really hurt." Then, as one does, he dazedly lifted his hands from where they were hanging at his sides to grab the hilt and pull slightly, pushing with his legs as he did so. The point of the sword came out of the ground, but the experience clearly wasn't pleasant. "Oh, that hurt even worse," Nagi groaned as he somehow managed to retain his footing, and even look about.

"Oh, and just to add insult to injury!" he cried faintly as he looked up at the person who had thrown the sword. She was perched on the top of a lamp post just a few posts away from the one where he'd been standing. "Stealing someone's schtick is not very cool, you know."

Her blue-black hair was just a shade darker than the icy eyes that were regarding him. "I want you to imagine a planet, the size of Jupiter, but as solid as the Earth," she said. "A world of wonders, with rivers made of fire, waterfalls made of rainbows, creatures evolved to subsist on metal. A world where gold was as common and as cheap as iron is here. That ... is how big of a crap I don't give about whether or not you think I'm cool."
"Fangirl," Nagi sneered the instant before she bounded up from the lightpost to come down at him in a flying drop kick.

The woman known only as Ciel - were she to be addressed by the name Elesia Clobette, she would probably blink in mild confusion for a moment - was not in a good mood. She did not like this place, nor the people (and things) who dwelled here. Nonetheless, she'd made an agreement with Caren Ortensia, when she persuaded the younger girl to resume her work as an exorcist, to assist in the defense of this place when those duties called Caren away, as they had.

She hadn't arrived in time to assist during the previous day's invasion, which annoyed her, both because it made her feel like she wasn't living up to the agreement and because it sounded like it had been a worthy fight. (The latter was just a bit admixed with the knowledge that it would have been a deadly fight; she still, on some level, yearned for the sweet release of death denied her for so long.) So when Sister Shakti came to her with this plan, she'd readily agreed.

Still, she didn't want to be here, and was a bit distracted by thoughts of what might be going on with her young man and a certain annoying vampire, her young man's quote-unquote sister and/or his twin maids. (Not to mention the alchemist, the other annoying vampire, the frickin' cat ...) Which distraction perhaps explained why she'd gone for the visually dramatic attack rather than the more effective one of pinning the white-haired boy's shadow with a Black Key -

_Hm_, she thought as he managed to sidestep out of the way of her kick despite having a sword sticking through him. _Perhaps that wouldn't have been so effective after all_, she decided as she landed gracefully just behind him and swirled her other foot up to try and take him like that. This time her combat boot found purchase between his shoulders, pushing him off balance so that she was able to dive at him with the start of a barrage of punches.

At this point, Mai was finally able to blink, as the surreality of the scene before her - watching a blue-haired girl in a long black dress assaulting Nagi - became familiar enough to let her think a bit clearly. "Shouldn't we maybe do something?" she asked.

"Don't have any popcorn handy," Midori said, having picked hersself up in the interim.

"That's not what I mean," Mai said weakly. "Shouldn't we, maybe, help?"

"I don't think whoever that is needs or wants our help, Mai," Natsuki said without taking her eyes off the fight.

"She's scary," said Mikoto, nodding.

"You need more words," Natsuki grumbled.

"Eh?"

"Um, actually, I meant, um ..." Mai trailed off as everyone turned to look at her incredulously.

"You want to help _Nagi_?" Nao asked.

Mai struggled for a few seconds, before she finally just held up her hands in supplication. "Well, this doesn't seem like a fair fight to me!" she cried. "Don't you feel a little bit sorry for him?"

"No," said Natsuki.

"No," said Midori.
"No," said Mikoto.

"No," said Nao.

"No," said Yukariko.

"Well ... no, not really," Yukino said hesitantly.

"Just a lit-" Mai started to say, holding up her hands with finger and thumb a minute distance apart.

"Sugiura, keep your people under control," said a masked nun who'd abruptly appeared beside Midori. Her mask left her eyes visible, and she was glaring rather fiercely in Mai's general direction.

"Oh, crap," Midori groaned, then made an effort to seem coherent. "It's okay, Mai wasn't going to do anything, were you, Mai-chaaan?"

"Actually -"

Alas, whatever Mai was actually going to do was lost forever as she was once more cut off. "Shakti, I'm going to need it after all," called out Ciel as she squared off with Nagi. The boy looked bruised, but she wasn't exactly in the freshest of conditions either.

"As expected," the mysterious nun muttered, then held up a cell phone. "Bring it," she said sharply.

Moments later, another mysterious nun ran into sight at a remarkable speed, carrying - in both hands, with arms dragging to an extent that was almost painful to watch - what looked like a semi-portable artillery piece. "Owowowowowow," she reported as she ran right up to Ciel.

"Oh, quit whining," Ciel said disgustedly as she picked it up out of her hands - with ease - and turned to point it at Nagi, who was breathing heavily. "Abhorrent thing," she declaimed. "In a moment you will stand before God. If you have any last words, say them now!"

"Okay, you've got bad breath," Nagi said. "And curry sucks, you know."

There was a horrible moment of silence.

Then Ciel roared as she slammed the Seventh Holy Scripture's bayonet attachment right into Nagi's gut. With a thunderous roar - in which could be faintly heard high pitched voices speaking a language no one there could understand - his body was thrown backwards through the air to land limply an extended distance away. Breathing heavily, Ciel watched it for a full minute before she allowed her stance to ease a bit.

"Left a body," she mused aloud, clearly intending for the meditations of her spirit to be heard by everyone nearby, particularly the HiME. Perhaps particularly Mai, who was watching all this with a horrified look on what could be seen of her face as she held her hands over her mouth. "They don't always. That's interesting. We may be able to learn some useful stuff from the dissect-"

It was at that point in her monologue that a groaning noise could be heard from the supposed corpse. Ciel's jaw dropped, and her stance tensed up again. But the only motion that Nagi made was to unsteadily hold up a single hand which inexplicably contained a tiny white flag.

"Oookay," Nagi's voice said, sounding very weary. "I surrender. You win, I lose, happy happy joy joy. No more of this, please?"

"Um, I think maybe he's still alive," said Misora (for she was, of course, the mysterious nun who'd
run up carrying the rather heavy metal artifact which had just been used) who was standing nearby with her hands over her ears.

Ciel was turning the rather frightening glare she'd been directing towards Nagi's supine flag-waving form on Misora, and was about to speak, perhaps to congratulate the younger girl on achieving a new level of stating the obvious.

"Really, I surrender ... is someone going to accept my surrender sometime soon?"

Her head whipped back around to glare at him. "What the hell are you?" she snapped.

"I'm charming and witty," Nagi said charming and wittily as he managed to lift his head enough to meet Ciel's gaze ... for a moment, before he slumped back down again with a sigh.

"This is one of the most powerful weapons in the Church's arsenal, sufficient to reduce vampires to dust in seconds if properly used," Ciel said tensely. "I know that it works, because I have used it to reduce vampires to dust in seconds. But you lived. What are you?"

"I could repeat the charming and witty comment, or offer a different one. Which would you prefer?"

Ciel let out a short growl of irritation. "You are possibly as annoying as a certain annoying vampire!"

"But cuter!"

"No, you are not as cute as she is!"

There was a short lull in the conversation as everyone concerned took that statement in.

"So ... you find her cute then?" Nagi asked.

"That is not what I - ohhh! I hate this country and its obsession with cute!" With a snarl, Ciel hefted Seven for another go.

That was the last straw, as far as Mai was concerned. Without a word, she dashed past Midori and the first mysterious, both of whom yelled at her to stop and both of whom she ignored. She interposed herself between Nagi and the crazy blue-haired woman with the cannon.

"Get out of my way," Ciel said flatly.

"No," Mai replied firmly.

"Little girl, get out of my way, or I will have to kill you," Ciel elaborated.

"No," Mai repeated. "It's over. You won. He gave up. That's enough. I'm not going to just stand by and watch as you murder him or anyone else! So back away!"

Ciel's eyes narrowed. Mai quickly became uncomfortably aware that she had just attracted the attention of someone to whom the act of dealing out death was as familiar as cooking was to Mai. Standing between such a person and their prey was not really the sort of place she really wanted to be. Yet here she was, all alone.

And then she wasn't. She supposed that she wasn't surprised that Mikoto was beside her, with Miroku out and ready, matching Ciel's glare with a pretty intimidating one of her own. Having Natsuki on her other side, guns out and poised to fire, was considerably more startling.

"You so owe me," Natsuki snarled sideways.
And Nao and Midori were just in back of them, claws and poleaxe in evidence. (The latter somewhat terrified Mai, given how drunk Midori was, but now wasn't the time to worry about that.) Yukino was standing a little bit away, looking really uncomfortable, but her displays were floating around her nonetheless.

Only Sister Yukariko didn't have her weapon visible, but even she was hesitantly saying, "Um, perhaps this has gone just a bit too far ..."

Ciel kept glaring at them for a long while, but she finally sighed. "Fine," she said at length. "I'm supposed to be keeping a low profile, anyway. I hope you're really happy when the viper that you're cradling to your breasts bites you and claims that it was just obeying its nature." With one more glare, this one directed at Shakti, she turned and tromped away, carrying Seven as she did.

"This is not over," Shakti snapped at Midori, before following after Ciel.

"Wow, shit really flows downhill," the second mysterious nun observed.

"Misora!"

"Coming!" With a short bow, the nun dashed off.

"That was ... very noble, Mai-hime," Nagi said as he attempted to push himself upright, without any particular immediate success. "I didn't realize that you cared."

"I didn't do it for you!" Mai snapped as she looked back at him, irritatedly. "I just, I, it's been a pretty good night and I didn't want it to end with someone dying, that's all!"

"Ah, and you have to ruin it by being all tsundere, too," he sighed, shaking his head. Then he met her eyes directly, and spoke with rare sincerity. "Thank you, Tokiha Mai."

"You're welcome," Mai said, somewhat reluctantly. "Are you, are you gonna be okay?"

"Oh, eventually," he said as he tried to stand up once again, this time succeeding, though he looked very unsteady on his feet. "I just need a good night's sleep. You should probably all get one, too. The Carnival is waiting, after all."

"Still going on about that?" Natsuki snapped.

"It's not my idea, Natsuki-hime," Nagi said with a shrug that sent a wave of pain across his face. "It's just the way things are. Good night, gentles all." And with a short bow of his own, he stumbled off into the night.

"That was really, really stupid, Mai," Midori said, sounding much more sober. "What if she hadn't backed down?"

Mai swallowed. "Well. It's a good thing that we're an army, then, isn't it?"

Midori stared at her, then lifted her head to stare at the evening sky. "Why me?" she asked.

"Um, Sister," Misora whispered to Shakti as the pair of them trailed along behind Ciel as she stomped her way back to the cathedral. "Are all members of the Burial Agency as, well, nuts as her?"

"No, actually, she's one of the nicer and saner ones," Shakti answered just as quietly.
"Also, she can hear you quite clearly," Ciel said without looking back.

Shakti watched Misora swallow in obvious panic, but forebore from comment, despite feeling a vague sense of satisfaction that the idiot hadn't started running immediately. Not that she'd ever have admitted it aloud. Not while Misora was still alive, at least.

Instead, she simply coughed and said, "It's not like that matters to you, after all, since you don't have any intention of remaining with the Church after you graduate."

"Right," Misora said.

Shakti decided that she had to be imagining the slight hesitation in Misora's voice just then.

Midori still hadn't gotten a good answer to her question by the time that she made her way back to her room, got yelled at by the dorm mother for breaking curfew, and performed her evening ablutions. For some reason, she found it difficult to look at her reflection in the mirror while she was brushing her teeth. She dismissed it as simply not wanting to be reminded of how worn out and drunk she looked, and kept her eyes closed the whole while.

Then she got undressed and flopped into bed, hoping for a dreamless sleep and very glad that she wasn't going to have to go into work tomorrow.

Subjective seconds later, the ringing awoke her, and she let out a shriek of frustration. Why, why, why had she set her alarm to go off on a day when she didn't have to - wait, that wasn't her alarm. It was the phone.

Cracking her eyes open, she glanced at the clock and confirmed that it was nearly ten AM. Too late to be refusing phone calls, she decided, and reluctantly reached out for the phone. "Sugiura," she croaked, then coughed to clear her throat. "What's shaking?" she added.

Silence greeted her.

"Hello?"

Still more silence.

"Okay, if you're going to start breathing heavily, you should know that that sort of thing doesn't frighten me, and it doesn't turn me on, either," she said, then added, in a fit of honesty, "Much. So unless you have some ominous warning to give, I'm just gonna hang -"

"Midori-san?" A tiny, obviously very frightened voice finally spoke up.

Midori froze momentarily as she recognized the voice. "Shiho-chan?" she asked at last. "Where are you?"

"I ... I can't, I won't tell you that," the little girl said. "But, but I was, last night, I was watching you and the others and Nagi-san, and I heard what he said about how we're supposed to fight each other, and ..." She trailed off for a while, and when she came back, it was with a wail. "I'm scared, Midori-san!"

"It's all right!" Midori promptly reassured her. "It's okay to be scared but you don't have to worry, Shiho-chan, because nobody wants to hurt you, and -"

"But they do. I thought, before, I thought it was just a game, but now I know ... and there are so
many of you, and so many other scary people, I can't -"

"Sh, sh, it's okay, don't panic. Where are you? I'm going to come there, and we'll work this out - you'll have to take responsibility for what you did, but that's gonna be okay, people will understand, and then you can join the HiME Army again and you won't be alone in all of this! Won't that be better, Shiho-chan?"

Another long silence, then Shiho finally responded. "I won't tell you where I am." Before Midori could say anything in response, she continued. "But I'll meet you, somewhere. At the Chao Bao Zi, maybe?"

Inwardly, Midori exulted. That was even better. "Okay, fine, we'll do it that way," she said, trying not to let any of that show in her voice. "You're making the right decision, Shiho-chan."

"Uh-huh. Uh ... Midori-san ... do you know where that Miyu robot person is?"

Midori blinked. "Uh, well ... why do you want to know?"

"Um. Well, you see, one of the Sears people found me, and he said he could help me if I found that out. And when I asked him why he wanted to know, he told me that she has some sort of bomb inside of her and they can set it off by remote control if they're close enough. I said I didn't know if I could, and he said that he'd just have to find out some other way, then, and he'd find something else for me to do. But I don't really trust him to help me, you see, and that's why I'm calling you. Hello? Midori-san?"

"Shiho-chan, I'm gonna see you at the Chao Bao Zi at noon, okay? But I gotta go now," Midori finally managed to say. "Bye!" Without waiting for the answering bye, she hung up and began flipping frantically through the student directory.

"Robotics lab," she muttered frantically. "Robotics lab ... why the hell does the robotics lab need an unlisted number?! CRAP?!!" She got dressed in a hurry and ran out of her room without bothering to lock the door behind her.

She was surprised when she got down the steps into her building's foyer to find Yohko there waiting for her. "Okay," the other woman said without preamble. "We've both said some things that we regret, and I don't want to go away without making an attempt to clear the air."

"Then don't go," Midori said briskly. "See how easy that is?"

"That's not -"

"Yohko, I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this right now! " she said, and dashed out of the building.

"What? Where are you going?" Yohko cried as she followed her out.

"I'm going to save the world!" Midori yelled back as she ran down the forested path.

Yohko came to a stop and watched her friend run for a moment, then finally yelled, "Good luck with that!"

"Thanks!" came the answering cry.

"That was - nnnnrghh!" Yohko growled as she realized that Midori was probably out of earshot. Once again, she wondered why she'd ever let herself care so much for someone so selfish and -
Her musings were disturbed when a rather large crow in the trees abruptly took wing with a very loud cry. It was probably just her bad mood that made the cry sound even more like "Aho!" than usual.

Probably.

When Midori burst into the main robotics lab a few moments later, she was relieved to see that there weren't a lot of people present. Then she saw who one of them was and she became a lot less unrelieved. The scientists who were clustered around Miyu's naked body, with several of its access ports open to reveal the machinery beneath her skin, were largely unknown to her, with one exception, who was presently regarding her with a confused expression from behind his glasses.

Katsuhito Stengovitch, the robotics club's second brightest star - actually, with Hakase Satomi's departure, probably the brightest, now - was fortunately known to her. They weren't close, certainly not intimate, but they'd taken a few classes together over the last few years, most notably the philosophy course the now-defrocked Father Gendou had gotten on the syllabus last year. (He'd taken a lot more away from it than she had.) He was probably not going to be a problem.

"Midori-san?" he was saying as her eyes moved off of him to the person who was going to be a problem. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave, this is a delicate procedure and you're bringing static electricity in with you that can really mess it up."

Despite that, the problem was going to come from the other person in the room that she recognized. Dressed in a long blue-black dress that contrasted sharply with her bubblegum pink hair, she was sitting on a chair in the lab's corner, giving her a full view of the room from all possible angles of attack, and humming a tune which she claimed represented a driving guitar beat inspired by the English words "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know." She viewed it as her theme tune.

That, right there, summed up everything most people needed to know about Kageyama Yamiko, aka "the Professor", of Ala Iridia.

As it happened, Midori knew more than that. During the Alladia incident, last year, before she'd awakened to her powers, she'd been part of a small crowd of university students and teachers who'd ended up witnessing Yamiko's axe duel with one of the more ferocious demons involved. It had been impressive, but not terribly so to Midori, who'd seen much more capable fighters over the years.

But then she'd heard that professor from the university's business school - Okajima-sensei, she thought - muttering about how the way that Yamiko moved reminded him of someone he'd known a decade or so ago. And then she'd found out that Yamiko was doing all those leaps and bounds and rolls without reinforcing magic from her Magister (who was out of town) or herself. And that Yamiko somehow supported a Ministra of her own despite never having been known to cast a single spell. Or use any ki or chi or whatever.

That was the person who'd just stopped humming rather abruptly when Katsuhito said what he'd just said, and who was regarding Midori with appraising interest, and oh so slowly coming to her feet, tossing a familiar looking card in one hand.

"There's a bomb in the robot!" Midori shouted, to buy herself some time. Of course, they wouldn't believe her, but -

"Yes, I know," Katsuhito said, sounding a little bewildered. "What about it?"

"You know?" Midori gaped.
"Of course," he said, still puzzled. "It was the first thing I looked for when I opened her up for the first time. I disconnected the firing mechanism, of course, so there shouldn't be a problem."

"First thing you -"

"I'm from Latveria," he said, as though this explained everything.

"You didn't remove the explosive?" asked one of his colleagues, sounding a little spooked.

His mouth twitched. "There's a lot of it, in various places. The breasts use it for filler, for example. Well-insulated, of course. But anyway, we can't get it all out without a full dissection, and as we just discussed, I'm not certain of our ability to put her back together again once we've done that. So -"

"Oh," said Midori, horribly embarrassed. "Well. Um ... I guess the situation is well in hand, then. I'll be on way." She started to turn to go.

"Er, before you do that, could I ask how you happen to know about the bomb?" Katsuhito asked with just a bit of an edge in his tone

_No, no, no, _she shrieked inwardly. _You're not the one who's supposed to give me trouble! _"Well, it's sort of a funny story that would be much better received over drinks later, don't you -"

And then the whole building shook.

After it had settled down a bit, silence fell, broken when Yamiko was finally moved to say something. "Okay, I-I-I'll bite. What the hell was that?" It was strange how her odd stammer didn't make her seem any less threatening.

Midori had gone very pale as she realized, indeed, what the hell was that. "I don't believe it," she said faintly. "I led her right here."

"Led, led who?" Yamiko said, slowly turning her gaze on Midori again.

"Another HiME, I, it's not important, listen, you've got to get these people out of here."

Yamiko nodded. "Or, ororor, I could fight you both," she pronounced. "Which sounds like fun. Ad-

"Wait!" Midori shrieked. "That's not your job, is it? You're supposed to protect these people, right? Shouldn't you do that?"

"I don't _like_ being told how to do my job, you know," the pink-haired psychopath said easily.

"Yamiko-san," interjected Katsuhito, with an annoyed look in Midori's direction. "I think she's right."

"Is this a democracy?" Yamiko asked curiously.

"No, it's a dictatorship where you're not in charge, and I am," he said.

"Pf," she said. "Less fun. AIIIIIIiiiiight. Adeat." And then the card became a large axe that she held easily in one hand. Raising her voice, "Okay, evacuate the l-l-lab, in an orderrrrry manner."

"Thank you for the 'warning', Midori-san," said Katsuhito as he headed out with the rest of the scientists. She could have done without the sarcasm, but life was like that.
Yamiko paused before she went after them, to give Midori one last look. "You will regret this," she prophecied.

"I already do -" Midori started to say.

"More." And then she was gone.

There were more explosions, becoming louder as they came closer, though fortunately not in the direction of their evacuation route. Midori was uncomfortably aware that it was just her and her Child against Shiho and hers, which seemed like a fair fight.

Fair fights were for suckers. But she saw only one potential ally in easy reach.

"If it were up to me, I'd let you go on sleeping forever," she said, and got to work.

Yohko's bad mood had not measurably improved by the time she got back to her office, but she forced herself to hide it beneath a facade of professional calm and composure. With just a smidgen of 'whatever, like I give a fuck' attitude imitated from Arai-sensei. Sometimes she wished that she could be more like Chie and actually not give a fuck, but that was probably not in the cards.

As it happened, though, her attitude wasn't really needed, since there was a pleasant surprise waiting for her in the office waiting room. "Oh!" she said. "You're early."

"I had another appointment cancel on me, so I thought I'd pass the bump in my schedule on to you," Mikado Ryouko explained as she came to her feet and bowed politely. "I hope that's not too much of an inconvenience."

"No, no, not at all. Come in, have a seat while I pull out the CV you sent over the other day. Yep, still amazing," she confirmed as she looked at the resume while sitting down at her desk. "Can I ask a personal question? What was it like being deputy head of Superman Medicine at Metropolis General Hospital?"

"Months of boredom punctuated by a few episodes of utter panic," Ryouko answered smoothly. "All of which latter comes under doctor-patient privilege, I'm afraid."

"Eh, figures. Honestly, I'm a little stunned that you're taking an interest in this position. With this resume, you could probably get a job anywhere in the world."

"Not necessarily. I wouldn't care to work in the UK for various personal reasons, and this really seems to be a good fit."

"Why?" Yohko was finally moved to ask. "What about Mahora is so interesting to you?"

"Well, it'd be a good chance for me to be able to go home once in a while."

Now she blinked. "I didn't know you were originally from the area."

Ryouko moved her long hair back a bit to expose the pointed tip of her ear. "I'm not."

For several moments, Yohko simply stared in silence, as thought doubting what her eyes were telling her. Finally, she opened her mouth to say, "You're an -"

"Please," Ryouko said, holding up her hand. "Don't use the word 'elf'. My people hate that word. It's a bit like calling one of you a 'Jap'. Old wounds are implied."
"So you're from the magical world," Yohko said, nodding in understanding.

"Mm-hm. I actually helped to develop the artificial bodies most of us had to use to come over here before the Princess and her friends did whatever it was that they did. Understandably, that's not on the CV."

"Whole lot of things don't seem to be on the CV," Yohko said, just a bit dryly. "You're not a legal immigrant, are you?"

"I have papers that say that I am," Ryouko replied cheerfully. "Really good ones. They cost a lot, and - are you okay?"

Yohko kept rubbing her head. "Fine, fine. It's just that you really reminded me of someone I know just now. Anyway." She shook herself a bit. "Aren't you taking an awful risk telling me all this? I could turn you in, you know."

"I'm hoping that you'll see why you shouldn't do that, and why it's really important that I get this job," Ryouko said, her tone going very serious. "Things are happening."

"Aren't they always? What sort of things, specifically?"

"As I said, the Princess did something to make it so that anyone from what you call the Magic World can come here a lot more easily than they have in the past. By the simple laws of human behavior, that means that they're going to be coming - all kinds of people from that world, with medical needs that your staff, as good as they are, aren't prepared to handle. But I am."

That matched up with some of the things she'd overheard recently. "Looks like I picked a good time to resign after all," Yohko mused wearily.

"I hope that I can convince you to stay on to bring me up to speed on the more mundane aspects of the job," Ryouko interjected.

"Eh, I was planning on doing that anyway. But once I'm gone, I'm officially and permanently gone. Without a trace."

"Fair enough."

"Let me see if I understand this situation," Miyu said as she laid on table, staring calmly at Midori.

"Are you kidding?" Midori gaped, as the explosions came closer and closer. "You're a robot -"

"I prefer the term gynoid."

"- so you think faster than I blink! There's no way that you don't understand the situation."

"Very well, I will dispense with summary. Why should I help you to fight against someone who is coming to return me to my employers?"

"Because she's coming to return you to your employers!"

Now Miyu blinked. "Rationalization by tautology. Fascinating."

"You, as in, just you! Not you and Alyssa! You surrendered to our side on the condition that she'd get help, right? We kept up our end!"
"Where is she?" Miyu's voice was very cold.

"I don't know, and that's the truth. I do know that she's alive. Help me with this, and I'll try to find out where they're keeping her. Promise." Midori held up her hand (the one that wasn't holding her poleaxe) in the Boy Scout pledge.

"Please stop engaging in absurdity," Miyu said. "Very well, I will assist you. Please finish disconnecting the cables."

"Right." She quickly bent to that, pulling the plugs that both tied her down and connected her to the diagnostic equipment. It was easy enough, though she hesitated before she pulled the last one, which went right into the back of Miyu's neck, and was connected to a screen which displayed her operating system.

There'd been a moment while Midori was bringing her online where she'd had the opportunity to replace the robot's core directives with ones that would suit the present situation - i.e. trust and obey cute Midori-chan. She'd passed it up, both because she thought it was a despicable act and because she wasn't sure how to phase the new directives in a way that wouldn't contradict themselves. She hoped that wasn't going to be a mistake, as she pulled the last plug.

"Thank you," said Miyu as she sat up and began closing her access ports.

"Okay, I'm not sure where your costume is -" Midori started to say as she stepped back.

"It is of no moment," the naked gynoid said as she stood up. "Unless the sight of nude synthetic flesh disturbs you -"

"Kinda does," Midori muttered.

"- but in any event, we have other concerns at the moment," she continued, pointing at the doorway.

Standing there was a small robed, cowled figure in white, holding a flute. It actually took Midori a moment to recognize the flute as the one that Shiho had been carrying around all day yesterday.

"Hello, Miyu," Shiho's voice said, sounding subtly different from its normal tone. "I've come to take you back where you belong."

"I perceive this to be a lie," said Miyu. "Where I belong is at Alyssa's side, and I do not think you are likely to take me there. So I am not going anywhere with you."

The cowled figure shrugged. "As expected. You'll just have to come a little worse than you are, then." She began to raise the flute to her dimly seen mouth.

"Shiho-chan!" Midori shouted, finally finding her voice. "It doesn't have to go down like this!"

The figure paused. "I think that you'll find that it -"

That moment of hesitation was all that Midori had been hoping to gain, though, and she promptly seized it, dashing across the floor to swing her axe down towards the flute.

It went through it like a hot knife through butter - or rather a knife of any temperature through a cloud, which was what the image of the cowled figure might as well have been. This close, Midori could even see that it didn't have any eyes. Just a distraction.

"Wow, you're dumb," it said. And then the wall on Midori's left side distegrated in flames, as
Yata-Garasu burst through it, with the real Shiho perched on the huge crow's back. Dimly, through the flames, Midori could see the light of day. She broke through all those walls, she thought. It's a wonder the building isn't about to collapse.

"Sugiura Midori ... please be advised that I am perfectly capable of lying in the service of my directives," said Miyu.

"Huh?"

Before either she or Shiho could do anything in reaction, the naked gynoid was bounding out of the room through the hole Shiho had just carved, and then out through the other holes and all the way out of the building.

"Unbelievable," Midori gasped. "Awake five minutes and she's already double-crossing people."

"Yeah, funny," Shiho said, then turned her attention back to Midori. "Now, where were we?"

"Shouldn't you try and go after -" Midori said, trying to buy another distraction and just a little more time.

"Eh, screw 'em." Shiho said, smiling broadly. "You're my opponent, now, Midori-chan."

Okay, then. "GAKUTENOU!" she cried, and the first battle between HiME began in earnest.

In the end, it came down to one thing, as it often does. Shiho had a greater range and more raw power, while Midori had more experience and speed on her side. But in the end, none of that mattered. The deciding factor was very simple. Deep down, Midori didn't want to hurt Shiho ... and deep down, Shiho ached to hurt Midori.

And so, after the last wing buffet from Yata-Garasu knocked her off of Gakutenou and sent her flying into one of the walls that they hadn't smashed yet, Midori lifted her head to watch as the one-legged crow smashed her trusted companion with its beak. It took only a few blows to make the chariot disintegrate into greenish sparks; Midori felt, rather than saw, her axe go the same way.

"I'm sorry, sensei," she whispered. "But you -" She couldn't get the words out. Something told her that no, he would not understand or approve of how this had happened.

"And now for you," Shiho said from where she was still perched on her Child's back, and Midori tried to take what pride she could in the fact that she could see that she'd made the little girl work for her victory. Breathing heavily, sweating, the works. It wasn't much, but it was going to have to be enough.

"If you're going to kill me, go ahead. I won't beg for mercy," Midori said as she forced herself to stand up again from where she'd slid down to the floor.

"Tempting," said Shiho as she directed the bird to come closer.

But by now they could both hear the sounds of reinforcements drawing nigh, and so Shiho shook her head at last. "But I think I'll just let you drown in the ocean of blood that I mean to shed before this is all over." And without a further word, her Child turned and began to flap its wings, throwing up dust that stung Midori's eyes before it flew out of the building, just before a group of mages led by Touko-sensei burst through the door.

"You're fired," Touko said a few moments later, when they were all out of the building.
"Isn't that more of a headmaster type decision than -" Midori started to ask as she let the medic bandage the cut on her side.

"The new headmaster has not be formally installed, so it's an Emergency Council decision, and they'll back me. You have not made yourself popular, Sugiura. Even without this latest calamity, last night was the last straw."

"So it goes," Midori muttered.

Touko simply stared at her, almost as though she was expecting to get some sort of argument out of Midori, then shook her head and walked away.

Midori was more concerned, at the moment, with the two phone calls that she was going to have to make. The first, which she could put off, was to Mai, giving her the news that she was now in charge of the HiME army. The waitress had already demonstrated that she could get people to follow her - now she was going to have to do it.

The other one couldn't be put off much longer. As soon as the medic released her, she got up and walked off a short distance from the ambulance to make it.

The phone rang a few times before it picked up. "Noriyasu residence," a familiar woman's voice answered.

"Hello, Haruka-san," Midori said to the wife of the man she loved. "It's Midori. I hope you're well?"

"Ah, right, Seta's new part-timer. I'm good, thanks for asking. How are you?"

"Can't complain," said Midori, who could. "Do you happen to know where sensei is at the moment?" Was, rather.

"He's right here, actually. She wants to talk to you. Yeah, I can't understand why she'd want that either. Here he is."

"What," said Midori.

"Midori-kun!" his cheerful voice said into her ear.

"What," said Midori.

"Is something the matter?"

"What," said Midori.

His tone got serious. "Midori-kun, are you in trouble right now? Say something other than what if you're not in danger -"

"No," Midori managed to blurt out. "No, no, I'm just, I was expecting y-you to be out on a dig or something, not, not that I'd get to talk to you."

"Oh," he said, sounding non-plussed. "Well, I'm not. So, what did you want to talk about?"

_How sorry I am that I killed you._ "Just, you know, stuff. I, uh. I'll get back to you, okay? Later." And she hung up the phone and turned it off so that she could stare at it in blank confusion for a moment, without the risk of someone interrupting it by calling her back.

Abruptly, she looked up, whispered a name, and started to run.
"Yohko!" Midori cried out as she burst into the office for a second time in as many days.

This time, though, her friend was not in evidence. Another woman, with curly black hair and a mildly bewildered expression, was seated at Yohko's desk, leaning back in the chair until Midori threw open the door and came in. She abruptly straightened.

"Hello," she said.

"Who the hell are you?" Midori asked politely.

"Mikado Ryouko," she said, offering a polite nod. "Are you acquainted with Sagisawa-sensei?"

"You could say that," Midori explained. "Where is she?"

"I am as in the dark about that as you are. I'd just finished an interview with her, and made arrangements for one with the school's new headmaster. I headed out of her office to leave her to her work, but as I was stepping out into the hallway, I heard her let out a cry of pain, and then a thudding noise. But when I came back, she was gone. Vanished, completely. She'd made a joke about leaving without a trace, earlier, but - are you all right?" Ryouko abruptly asked.

"No," Midori said, trembling. "No, I'm not."

"... please, wait here, I'll get some assistance," Ryouko said, getting up. "Please, whatever you do, don't disappear."

Midori silently watched her go as she shook all over.

"Thought you were pretty smart, didn't you?" said a familiar voice from the windowsill.

With glacial slowness, Midori turned to look in that direction, and was not, with whatever fragments of her psyche remained functional, all that surprised to see Nagi sitting there, looking as though nothing at all had happened to him the previous night. Handsome as ever, too.

"You fooled me, you really did," Nagi admitted with appropriate humility. "You fooled her, too, though I think she was starting to guess the truth towards the end, there. And I think you may even have fooled yourself. But no matter how much your mind might have wanted to believe that this professor of yours - the one you have a silly, thoroughly unrequited crush on and have talked to maybe once or twice in the last few months - was the person you valued most in the world, your heart knew better."

"Nnnnn," Midori said, shaking her head. Most of her was shaking, actually, but there seemed some voluntary movement there.

"Yyyyy," Nagi replied in kind. "And now it's coming to you, isn't it? All those times you denied how you felt about her. All those times you insisted there was someone more important. All those times you cut her as surely as if you used a knife. All pointless. I think that is one of the most pathetic things I've ever heard."

Midori opened her mouth, but all that came out was a sobbing noise.

"Come on," said Nagi, smiling cheerfully. "Say it, Midori-hime! Say your catch phrase! Hm? Can't do it? Okay, I'll do it for you, aren't I just the greatest guy ever? That could have gone better." He nodded. "It really could. Bye now."
He flipped backwards off the windowsill and out of sight.

Midori started to scream. And did not stop for quite some time.
August, 2004

The next day, everything went back to normal.

Mai would probably have laughed herself sick at that, if not for the fact that she felt sick enough as it was. But it still happened. Most of the buildings had been repaired quickly enough - the engineering tower being the obvious exception - and restored to use. Classes resumed. There were a startlingly large number of excused absences. People had been hurt, or pulled out of school by concerned parents. And of course, there were a fair number of substitute teachers, as well.

The overall mood that Mai observed in class was subdued, but not particularly worried, as such. If not for the fact that she knew the truth, Mai might have even enjoyed listening to Chie dryly reporting the speculation about where Midori had gone all of a sudden. But the worst part had to be that she did know the truth, and so she felt sick.

No, on second thought, the worst part was, no matter how sick she felt, she couldn't be too upset about things returning to normal. Because things getting back to normal meant that the Chao Bao Zi was back in business, and she was getting the chance to work overtime and earn lots and lots of money. It was a welcome distraction.

At least it was a distraction until Natsuki showed up and distracted her from her distraction. They didn't get to talk until Mai's break, but she could feel those cold green eyes on her the whole time.

"So I take it that you know?" Natsuki said once Mai settled down across the table from her.

"Hello to you too," Mai growled.

"We don't have time for that, Mai. Do you know what happened or not?"

Mai looked away, annoyed as always. "I don't know the full story, but I got the gist of it in a phone call from Mashiro-san last night. Midori is ... gone. She wouldn't tell me where."

"I can."

Mai turned back to look at Natsuki. "How?" she asked with a frown.

"I was in the area of the engineering tower yesterday," Natsuki started to explain.

"Doing what?" Mai interrupted. "Wait, let me guess. You were doing shut up and let me tell the damn story, Mai."

"Surely such wisdom can only come from God," Natsuki said with an unpleasant smile. "Anyway, I was too far away to do anything, but I did see your friend's creepy girlfriend flying off, and I saw Midori brought out of the building. Then for whatever reason she ran off to the clinic. By the time Duran and I got there, she was being brought out of there by MiBs."

"Em eye -"

"Men in Black," Natsuki pronounced. "First District types. I've seen them cleaning up after, well, us, before. Anyway, she looked pretty much completely out of it - more so than usual, I mean - and they took her into a van which then promptly headed for the Institute."
"She's in a madhouse?" Mai asked, horrified. "That's what's going to happen to us?"

"It's not gonna happen to me," Natsuki said flatly. Then her mask flickered a bit. "But it looks like it did happen to her, and to that Akane person you two were always talking about."

"She's there?" Mai yelped. Realizing that this was probably going to attract attention, she lowered her voice. "You've got to -"

"I'm looking into it. As it happens, I've got a ... contact, let's say, on staff. I'm pretty sure that I can convince her that a breakout attempt is actually an authorized excursion and that the guards and alarms are just playing some sort of, I dunno, game or something."

"Who'd be crazy enough to believe that?" Mai asked.

"... no comment. Anyway, what'd She Who Must Be Obeyed tell you?"

"Like I said, Mashiro-san just told me that Midori was gone, and that she'd turned over running the Hime Army to me. Do you believe that?"

"I don't know how she could have done that," Natsuki mused. "Unless she was in the van, or talked to her right before they put her in the padded room. But if she could ... then, yes, that's the sort of stupid thing she'd have done."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Mai agreed.

Natsuki waited.

"Hey!"

"Anyway," Natsuki said, cutting off Mai's outrage. "If you're going to do that, you should probably quit this gig. It's hard enough leading a double life, I don't think anyone can manage leading a triple one."

"Double life, my ass," Mai growled. "You lead one and a half lives, with how often you show up for class."

"And yet I still feel overworked. Oh, fine, do whatever, what do I care?" Now Natsuki looked away, and Mai had the strangest feeling that she actually felt hurt. It was a weird sensation. "Anyway, I'd think under the circumstances you'd want to get out of this job, considering that."

"That?" Mai asked, following Natsuki's gaze when the girl didn't elaborate. "Oh, that," she said in tones of comprehension. "Well, a customer is a customer, y'know?"

"What?" said Ciel, annoyed, as she realized that they were staring at her as she continued her curry eating contest with Mikoto. To her consternation, she looked to be losing.

________________________________________________________________________

After her shift ended, Mai and Mikoto headed over to the engineering tower to see the situation there for themselves. Well, Mai headed over. Mikoto just accompanied her, acting much like Mai imagined a bodyguard was supposed to act - or at least how Mai imagined that Mikoto imagined that a bodyguard was supposed to act. Just like Mai's sickness, watching her friend be so paranoid would probably have been funny if it wasn't disturbing. Or necessary.

She was looking up at the tower, and the repair crews who would probably have it back in working order in a day or so, when she heard Mikoto let out an angry hiss of breath, followed by the noise of
Miroku being drawn part-way out of its swordbag. Mai whirled to see the threat for herself ... and let out a sigh of annoyance. "Put it away, Mikoto, he's a friend," she said wearily.

"He's her friend," Mikoto growled, not taking her eyes off Tate Yuuichi for even a second. She did, however, make the extraordinary concession of putting Miroku back into the bag - with her hand firmly on his hilt.

Mai decided not to argue the point as she took a step towards Yuuichi. "You weren't in class today," she said. "Student council keeping you busy?"

"No, I was skipping."

"Delinquent," she said dryly. "I oughta report you to the class rep. Except she got pulled out by her parents, so you're in luck."

"Yeah," he agreed, looking up at the tower and picking his ear with the little finger of his right hand. "Anyway, the student council is pretty much shut down. The day after, there was a bunch of activity, but now - Fujino's off somewhere, probably on some sorta tea binge, Reito-san's probably still in the hospital, and Suzushiro is -"

"Wait wait wait," Mai interrupted. "Reito's in the hospital? Why am I only hearing about this now? Why didn't you mention it when we talked the other day?"

Yuuichi stared at her, noting the yobisute but not commenting on it. "You kinda didn't ask about him?"

"How was I supposed to know to -" Mai stopped herself, drew in a deep breath. "Y'know what, never mind. I don't have time to have this fight with you right now. We've both got bigger problems."

He grunted what she took for agreement. "Shiho did this?" he asked.

"Yes."

"... did she kill anyone?"

It was so tempting to say that what had happened to Midori's loved one, whoever that might have been - probably the professor she kept harping about - wasn't really Shiho's fault. He could take comfort in that. "Yes," Mai said instead.

And watched his eyes close, and his mouth make a silent movement that she identified with the sounds "kuso". It was sort of sweet the way that he tried to avoid swearing in front of her and Mikoto. ... where the hell did that come from? she thought.

"We gotta stop her," he said, looking right at Mai. "How're we gonna stop her?"

"If you know anything about where she might be hiding out -"

"No," he interrupted.

"Anything," Mai repeated, aware that she sounded a little desperate. "The slightest clue could make all the difference."

"All I know are places she wouldn't be caught dead in," Yuuichi protested. "If she didn't wanna be found, she wouldn't go anywhere I knew about, 'cause I'd be out looking for her."
"But supposing that she's thinking exactly the opposite of the way that you think she's thinking -" Mai started.

"Then she'd be acting the way that I think she's thinking, because I always think she's thinking the opposite of the way that I think she's thinking."

Mai and Yuuichi stared at each other. Mikoto looked from one of them to the other. "This is another thing that I'm not going to get until I'm older, isn't it?" she asked eventually.

"No," Mai answered.

"Yes," Yuuichi answered.

Mikoto made a face and looked away into the forest.

"Okay, fine," Mai said, giving up. "Where would she never go?"

"The woods around the Tatsumiya shrine," he answered promptly.

"Her family doesn't get along with theirs?" Mai guessed.

"Actually, they're pretty good buddies, from what I understand, but Shiho never got along with their eldest daughter, and she's kinda the scary type. She'd steer clear of the place. There's a few others ..."

"Okay," Mai said, after a few moments of listening to his ideas. "I've got some notions of what we might do to find her, and I'll call you as soon as we've got a fix on her and a plan to bring her in."

"I'm bait, aren't I?" he asked.

"... yeah," Mai admitted after a moment.

"Figures," he said with a weary half-smile. A jaunty wave, and he was sauntering off again.

"Mai -" Mikoto said anxiously.

"Yeah, telling him that he was bait was probably the wrong thing, tactically, but like I said, he's a friend and I owe -"

"Not that! We're being watched! Over there," she said, doing her best to subtly indicate a direction. "But don't look."

Mai looked, and saw the strange blue-hued crow on the branch a moment or so before it took wing.

"Agh!" Mikoto snarled in frustration. "Why did Mai look when I told her not to look? Now we're going to have to chase it and -"

"It was watching us," Mai said faintly. "She can spy on us that way."

"Yes, and we're going to have to chase it and it's getting away and you can't fly that fast and -"

"How the hell do we fight something like that?" Mai snarled.

"Yeah!" Mikoto agreed, nodding her head angrily.

And then Mai thought a thought that had not been thought before.

"Well," she announced to the world in general. "It can't be helped." She spread her hands in classic
"whatchagonnado" fashion. "I guess we'd better just head for the hospital."

"Why're we going to the hospital?"

"To see Takumi, of course!" Mai answered loudly.

"But -" Mikoto started to say before Mai grabbed her in a headlock.

"Oh, silly Mikoto, so jealous of my innocent relationship with my adored little brother, the most important person in my life," Mai continued to declaim. "Let's be on our way."

Ah! Now Mikoto understood!

Mai had clearly gone insane!

There was a frantic knocking at the door.

"Don't move," said Akira as he chopped vegetables for their dinner. "I'll get it in just a minute."

Takumi, seated on their room's couch and reading a magazine, looked up in annoyance. "I'm not a cripple, you know," he said as he got up. "I can probably handle answering the door."

Demonstrating the truth of his thesis, he did so.

And blinked as his sister and her roommate came running in before he could say or do anything.

"Nee-chan?" he asked.

"Close it!" Mai snapped as she went for the window and drew down the blinds in a single sharp gesture. "Were we seen?" she asked Mikoto.

"Don't think so," Mikoto replied as she took up a position near the door with her hand in her swordbag. "Didn't see any more birds."

"Which doesn't mean they weren't there, just better hidden than that first one," Mai grumbled. "Can't be helped. I just hope that she saw us going to the hospital and lost us there, so that something productive came out of that trip."

"Mai is very sneaky," Mikoto said, in tones that tried to be complimentary. Not all that successfully.

"Ummm," Takumi spoke up. "What is going on?"

Mai drew in a deep breath as she came over to him ... then hugged him tightly before pulling away.

"I wanted to do that first, before anything else happened. Are you okay?"

"I'm, I'm fine," he said, blushing. He knew that he was probably not doing anything to change Akira's view of him as a siscon, but it couldn't be helped.

"Good. I'm glad. Now. You know that there's a lot of strange things going on on campus, right?"

"Well, yeah," Takumi said, a little sarcastically. Ninjas, monsters, mercenaries - well, he'd slept through most of that last bit, thankfully.

"Of course you do," Mai said apologetically. "But you probably don't know that Mikoto and I are mixed up in all of it."

"Noooo," Takumi said at length. "Didn't know that, but ... y'know, somehow, it just doesn't come as
"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Mai said, smiling despite how exasperated she sounded. Then her voice and face went very serious. "I'm not going to tell you all about it, because we don't have a lot of time, and it'd probably take ten months or thereabouts to explain everything and answer all your questions. But I can tell you - no, I've got to tell you that you could be targeted."

"Targeted?" Takumi repeated, incredulous now. "Targeted for what?"

"People will want to hurt you," Mai said, slow like a glacier. "And I'm not going to let them." Deep breath. "But. I can't be guarding you all the time. I need to take the fight to these people. And, Akira-kun, I'm sorry to tell you, I don't think you'll cut it as a guardian either," she added, looking behind him. "No offense."

Akira didn't say anything.

"So then what -" Takumi started to ask, fighting the impulse to turn and look at his roommate.

"That ninja who helped you a while ago," Mai interjected.

"Ninja?" said Akira, and now Takumi was glad that he wasn't looking at his roommate.

"Yeah, a ninja. Also protected him while he was in the hospital. Do you have some way of getting in touch with that person?" she asked Takumi.

"I think I might be able to find a way to contact him," said Takumi, feeling Akira's eyes burning into his back.

"Him?" Mai asked, confusedly. "Oh. That's ... odd. Um, something you need to know. That ninja is probably a girl posing as a guy. I'm pretty sure of this, since she has powers like, well, like me and Mikoto and a bunch of other girls on campus, and it doesn't seem like they can be accessible by males," Mai said.

Takumi heard Akira making a strangling noise, as though from a great distance.

"Yeah, of course you're disgusted at the thought, big surprise," Mai said over Takumi's shoulder. "I don't have time for your issues, right now, Akira-san. I'm trying to save my brother's life. Takumi, if you can contact that person, do it, and tell her that you think people are coming after you. I'm going to try and deal with them my way, but if that doesn't work, I need a backup plan. This is the best one I came up with. Okay?" she asked.

"Okay," Takumi managed to say.

"Okay," Mai repeated for the last time, smiling in relief. "I'm gonna call you when this is all over, and I promise that I'll explain everything then. Well, most of it," she amended. "I'll summarize. Mikoto?"

"Ready."

"I love you," she whispered to Takumi.

"Ditto," he said faintly as he watched the two of them dash out the door again, closing it behind them.

For what seemed like a very long time, he stood there, feeling Akira's eyes on his back, unwilling or
perhaps even unable to turn and look at him. Eventually, of course, the pressure became too much, and he slowly turned. It was a bit disconcerting that the first thing he noticed was the large heavy kitchen knife in Akira's hand, but he managed to get past it.

"So," he said. "That was interesting."

"I have to kill you now," Akira declared.

"And the interesting times keep happening," Takumi continued. "Can we have dinner first?"

"... yeah."

They gathered around the gazebo that night; Yukino was already there when Mai and Mikoto arrived, while Nao showed up shortly after they did, and the Sister showed up much later, apologizing for her tardiness.

"That's all right," Mai said at last, to end the barrage of self-abasement. "Okay. As you may have heard, Midori-chan was defeated yesterday. She apparently asked me to take over for her -"

"So now you're in charge, just like that?" Nao asked, eyebrow quirked.

"Not if you don't want me to be. In fact, there's nothing for me to be in charge of if you don't want there to be," Mai replied. "But. Everything that everyone said two days ago still applies, even if Midori was too ... impulsive, or whatever, to actually practice what she preached. And. I have a plan to deal with the most immediate threat that's active right now."

Nao looked around. "Should I take it that Kuga already voted with her feet?"

"She's ... working on this from another angle," Mai explained.

"So basically, yes, she's dumped us and is off being a lone wolf," said Nao.

"Dog," supplied Mikoto.

"What?"

"Dog, not wolf."

"No, she -" Mai paused, blinking, as she though she was realizing something that she hadn't before. Her voice was a bit more steady when she resumed talking. "She cleared her idea with me, and I agreed that it was a good plan, but not something that needed a large group. On the other hand, I am going to need all of your help to deal with Shiho. Will you help me?" she said, eyes on Nao, but clearly addressing everyone.

"Mai doesn't even have to ask me," Mikoto said quickly.

"Thank you, Mikoto."

"What do you need me to do?" Yukino said hesitantly.

"What you do best, Yukino-san." Mai held up a piece of paper. "These are some places that Tate told me about, where Shiho might try to hide. I need you to use Diana's surveillance to find her." She tossed it to her.

Yukino held it up to her face and adjusted her glasses, then looked at Mai in confusion. "Oookay,"
she said. "Excuse me." She stepped away from the gazebo and invoked Diana.

"That is terribly disturbing to watch," Sister Yukariko mused with a shudder, then turned to look at Mai. "You have my support, Mai-san, but as I said last time, I'm not sure what help I can be. I've only ever used these ... gifts once."

"Yeah, I understand. For reference, what have you been able to do?" Mai asked.

"Well, I can summon up a bow and arrows, and also ... well, there's this gigantic chess piece that I made appear once, that seems to be named St. Vlas. I'm not familiar with any canonical saint by that name, and the notion of having an potentially pagan idol following me around somewhat disturbs me, so ..." She trailed off, clearly a bit embarrassed.

"Hm," Mai grunted. "Might be useful for all of us to do some sort of sparring, together, to get the idea of what we can -"

"And we're back to being in a sentai show," Nao groused.

"You don't have to stay if you don't want to. I'll be happy if you do, though."

"Oh, happiness. Fine, I'll be a good girl one more time, but this plan of yours really better work."

"Yes, yes it better," Mai agreed, then looked at Yukino. "See anything interesting?" she called to her.

Yukino nodded. "Lots of things," she said. "But I can't find Munekata-san at any of the locations you suggested."

"Well, so much for doing things the easy way," Mai sighed. "All right, here's the rest of the plan. Shiho can spy on us with her crow - apparently, it doesn't have to be huge, like most of our Childs - and so we're going to use that to draw her into a trap. Tomorrow, each of us is going to go to one of these places, alone, to draw her out. Yukino, you're going to be in a safe place watching all of them. When Shiho comes after one of us, Yukino will send a message to all the rest of us and we'll come a-running. Any questions?"

"Yeah," Nao said after a moment. "Are you out of your freaking mind? That's a terrible plan! What if she gets the target - by which I mean me - before the rest of you get there?"

"These places aren't that far apart, you'll probably only have to hold her off for a few minutes at most. You're tough, Nao, I know that you can do this." Mai's tone changed as she looked at Nao directly. "Just don't do anything crazy like bringing your latest boyfriend with you to make out or anything like that. Okay?" She held her hands up as though in prayer.

Nao stared at her. Boyfriend? What is she -

And then she noticed the fact that Mai's hands, held like they were, were in front of her lips. As though in a shushing gesture.

Ohhhhh. Oh you clever bitch.

Nao sniffed. "Maybe I will and maybe I won't," she said, just a little louder than necessary. "I really think this guy might be a keeper, you know. He's very important to me."

"Fine, fine, do whatever you want, you will anyway," Mai growled, looking away and doing her level best to hide a smile. "Any more questions?"
"Shouldn't we alert the school authorities as to what we're planning?" Yukariko asked hesitantly.

"These places aren't on school property," Mai said shortly. "If it comes to it, we already have. Right, Yukino?"

"I will certainly tell Haruka-san about it if she asks me," Yukino answered. "I hope she doesn't, though."

"Ah, that reminds me. I've got to have a little talk with you after we're done here ... which I guess we kind of are. Sister, would you mind going back to the dorms with Nao, and vice versa?"

"Just the company I always wanted," Nao groaned.

"Oh, don't be like that, please!" Yukariko begged.

"We're doomed, aren't we," Yukino muttered.

In the forest around the gazebo, a crow once more took wing.

The unfamiliar noise woke her up, but once she realized what it was, Midori closed her eyes and tried to return to sleep. The dreamless void had been pleasant - despite the contradiction that implied - and she vastly preferred it to the shithole that was her waking life.

Well, that might have been too harsh. The pyjamas they made her wear weren't too uncomfortable, and the bunk where she slept wasn't so bad, and they'd stopped handcuffing her to it after the first night. Which was nice. But since she was left with nothing to do but muse on her mistakes, occasionally helped by the doctor who'd come to interview her -

("Tell me about your mother."

"I devoutly hope that I haven't had sex with her, but you just never know, do you?"

"Iinteresting.")

- her life was kind of unpleasant, regardless of all that.

Before she could even hope to get back to sleep, the door to her cell swung inward and Natsuki, resplendent in leather, came in low. "Midori, get your ass in gear," she said brusquely.

Giving up on sleep, Midori cracked her eyes open again and looked at Natsuki. "My darling, at last you've come for me," she deadpanned.

"Very funny," Natsuki sneered. "Now get out of bed, dammit, don't you recognize a breakout when you see one?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Kuga-san," said a cheerful voice from the corridor. "How can this be a breakout, when everyone here is here voluntarily? You're just playing some sort of cute game with Sugiura-sensei, right?" Kafuka poked her head in and waved at Midori. "Hello again, Sugiura-sensei! Sleeping nicely, of course?"

"Heyyy," Midori said, waving bewilderedly in Kafuka's direction, before turning an incredulous look on Natsuki. "You teamed up with her?"

"You know me, you know I'll use any means at my disposal. We don't have time for this if we're going to get you and Higurashi out of here, so -"
"So, let's simplify things. I'm not breaking out of anything, or rather, I'm playing the role of the person who has fun by quietly staying in her cell while the game plays all around her," she added for Kafuka's benefit. "Go rescue Akane-chan. She's been here longer, and she's nowhere nearly as much of a screw-up."

"No, I came to get both of you -"

"Why?" Midori asked shortly.

"What do you mean, why?"

"Why did you come to get either of us?" Midori asked, tilting her head. "Neither of us is likely to be all that useful to you, and you neither like nor respect me, in particular, right? So why bother getting us out of here?"

Natsuki was silent for a moment, before she bit out, "Because I owe Mai, and she'd want you back and safe."

"Plausible, but unlikely; what do you think, Kafuka-san?"

"Obviously, she cares about you more than she wants to admit, because she's afraid of being hurt and so hides her loving and kind interior beneath a cold, harsh front that doesn't really fool anyone," Kafuka stated.

"That's -"

"A lot more plausible, thank you," Midori interrupted yet again, then focused on Natsuki. "One orphan to another - you finally found a family, the one you'd been searching for, and now it's threatened and you want it to go back to the way that it used to be, no matter how annoying that was. I get it, Natsuki. But it's too late for me. I have no more wisdom to help you, Mai or anyone else. If you want to help her, you should be back there with her. Or maybe help your girlfriend. She's -"

"Shizuru is not my girlfriend - y'know what, just shut up about her!"

Midori, annoyed at this, withheld the vital information about Shizuru's power that she'd just been about to reveal. Crazy people still deserved to be a little petty, after all.

"Fine. You want to stay here? Then stay here. Fuura, we're going to go play rescue Higurashi next, okay?"

"Yaay!"

With that, Natsuki stormed out with nary a backward glance.

Kafuka paused at the doorway, and turned back to look at Midori with an odd expression that none of her fellow students would have recognized. "We are all of us prisoners, holding our own keys, sensei," she said. "I learned that a long time ago. When you want to leave, I will let you out. Promise." And with that, she closed the door again.

Midori tried to get back to sleep after that, but the alarm that began a few moments later, and distant gunshots, kept her awake despite herself. How annoying.

"Against all odds, it had been a very good dinner, thanks to Takumi's cooking. It was wrong for Takumi to praise himself like that, of course, but given the circumstances, he was inclined to forgive
himself a little pride. It wasn't as though he could demonstrate false modesty by declining Akira's praise, since his roommate hadn't given him any.

Or said anything at all, actually. For one who believed that good company was the best spice, the meal had actually been a disaster. Akira had just sat there, eating in silence with his eyes fixed wide open, never blinking. Admittedly, Takumi hadn't said much of anything either, so maybe the fault was partly -

"I have to kill you," Akira said again, interrupting Takumi's thoughts.

Takumi nodded polite understanding, somewhat distracted by his realization that despite what his sister had told him, he still thought of Akira as "he". Go figure.

"Why, why aren't you running away?" Akira asked a moment later. "Normally, when someone says that, the person they said it to would try to escape."

"Well, first of all, I don't think I could escape, even if I ran as fast as I could, since, you know, you're a ninja with super-powers and I'm ... not," Takumi explained patiently as he cleared the table. "And secondly ... well, I guess any other reason I might give pales in comparison to that, really."

"Oh," said Akira.

Takumi paused, and hesitantly turned to look at hi- he- Akira. "Can you tell me why you have to kill me?"

"I guess that it can't hurt now," Akira said, looking down at hi- he- Akira's hands in Akira's lap. "I am as you are well aware a ninja. My assignment was to travel to this school and participate in the Carnival -"

"Carnival?" Takumi repeated.

"The weird shit that is happening that your sister was talking about."

"Ah, of course. Sorry for interrupting."

"That's all right. Um. My assignment, right. In the process, I was not supposed to allow anyone to become aware of my true identity, my true allegiance or ... or, or what people think is my true gender. If anyone did, I was supposed to kill them. Like I'm supposed to kill you."

"Ah. Well, most of that makes sense. Sort of. But why did you have to hide that you're a -"

"I'm not a girl," Akira said sharply. "Women are corrupt. Women are fragile. Women are useless. My own mother, back in the days when our clan used kunoichi, was seduced on a mission and came back in disgrace to my father and died right after giving birth to me, so I -"

"Hold on. She was sent on a mission while she was pregnant?"

"No, of course not. She became pregnant after she was seduced, and then when she died shamefully, I was adopted by my father, who did me the great favor of not strangling his daughter's only child at birth. So you see that I owe him everything and certainly must not be a weak, corrupt female who is only good for breeding stock."

"But ..." Takumi reconsidered what he'd just been about to say, and continued on a different track. "Okay. I guess that I can see where you're coming from. I kind of think you may have skipped a few steps in your logic, but let's not argue about that right now. How did your father know that the
Carnival was going to happen?"

"We have records from the last time, and we were employed by its victors, the First District, in the centuries afterward. My father saw the mark on my body when I was born, and knew that it would happen in this generation. So of course he devised a stratagem to enrich our clan by using me to win this Carnival and transform Japan into a land more suited to our purposes."

"Of course," Takumi said weakly.

"Is there anything else that you want to know before I kill you?" Akira asked. Was it Takumi's imagination, or did he hear a certain note of hope in that voice?

"No - uh, no, actually, yes, there is," Takumi said quickly as he saw Akira's face fall. "Um. This Carnival ... are you going to have to have to win it?"

"No, no," Akira assured him quickly. "Actually, once I kill you as I have to kill you, she will have to resign from the battle, because she will lose her powers. So in a way, I'm actually saving her life like this. Sort of."

"Ohh," Takumi said, feeling a tremendous weight lifted from his shoulders. "Well, then. I don't have any more questions. I guess you should do it." He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

He could hear Akira standing up and walking over to him. "You're really okay with this?" Akira's voice said faintly. "I don't think I know how to make it not hurt."

"That doesn't matter. I've always been such a burden to neechan. If I can help her at all, I ought to do it." His eyes opened, somewhat involuntarily, as he looked up at Akira's strangely frightened looking face. "And ... and also, you have to kill me, right?" he added, a bit faint himself. "So I ought to help my good friend Akira ... my best friend, really. Because that is what roommates do for each other."

_He looks so sad_, Takumi thought as he saw Akira draw a knife hidden down the back of his shirt. _He looks so sad and scared. Yes. He. Akira wants to be a boy, so he is. I hope he doesn't miss me too much._

_I hope it doesn't hurt too much._

Takumi closed his eyes again.

_Neechan, I'm sorr_

When he was next aware, Takumi was in total darkness. For an agonizing brief eternity, he suspected that this must be the terrible afterlife he'd always imagined - self-awareness in a place devoid of anything but the self and one's memories. Then other realities intruded, things like the warmth that surrounded him and the softness of blankets. And the darkness wasn't nearly so total.

"You fainted," Akira's soft voice came from beside him. "You hadn't taken your pills today, I think."

"Oh," Takumi said. "Ooops."

"So I. I made you take one, forced it into your mouth and made you swallow, and, and why did I do that?" His roommate was abruptly bawling ... quietly, but there were obvious tears of despair in his voice. "What kind of assassin gives medicine to the person they're trying to kill?"

"It's a good question," Takumi agreed. "I mean, if it was posioned -"
"I didn't even think of doing thaaat!" Akira sobbed.

"Well," Takumi continued after a moment of listening to Akira weep bitter tears of self-reproach. "Under the circumstances, I don't think I can really sympathize with your predicament, so ... thank you for saving my life. I guess."

"You're welcome. I guess."

After another interval of silence, Takumi spoke up. "Are you going to declare that you have to go now?"

"I don't even know where I'd go if I did say something cool like that."

"Oh. Well ... I'm glad that you're staying, anyway. I never had any real friends before I met you."

"But I'm supposed to kill you."

"And like I said before, I'm good with that."

"Why?" Now Akira's voice was bewildered. "Why are you -"

"Akira-kun," Takumi interrupted. "You said your mother died giving birth to you, right"

"Y-yes? Why?"

"Well ... that's one thing we've got in common. We both killed our moms, without really intending to do that." Into the silence that followed, Takumi continued. "I don't even really remember it. But neechan always reminded me, of how I was playing near a river, and fell in - and my mom came and rescued me, but got really hurt doing so, and died in the hospital. That's when I became sick, too, and -"

"How did nearly drowning give you a heart condition?" Akira asked.

"... I don't know," Takumi admitted. "I think ... maybe it had something to do with the river. Or something like that, anyway. When I try to remember, though, all that I can remember is just darkness, and the sound of someone laughing. I thought I might be back there for a moment when I woke up. Except there wasn't anyone laughing. I was all alone.

"Except for you. And I guess that wouldn't be so bad."

"I think that I love you," Akira said at last.

"Okay."

"I think ... no, I know that I lust for you."

"... okay."

"Do you -"

"I don't know. I'm not sure if there's anything left inside of me that can love anyone. I tell my sister that I love her, but it's more of a trained reflex than anything else. Something to make her happy, when all I do is cause her problems. But ... if there was anything left inside of me ... then I would really like to love Akira-kun."

"Even though -"
"Even though. Akira is Akira. That, at least, I'm sure about."

Another long silence, this time broken by Akira's voice. "I don't know what to do."

"What to do about -"

"What to do."

"Uh ... ohhh. I got this, okay?"

"You - how do you -"

"Let's not talk about that right now, okay?" He brought their lips together, then, to end the talking all together. After a brief interval of that, he pulled away to start kissing his way down Akira's jawbone, feeling him quivering at the touch, holding him close as he did.

He avoided, as much as possible, touching those parts of the body that he knew, from experience with his sister, were sensitive on a woman's body. The breasts, for example. Even though it occurred to Takumi that the nipples might be okay, existing as they did on both the male and the female form, they were still covered with wrappings that he couldn't get off in a hurry. They had all night, but it might be better to start small.

So instead he reached around to gently caress the back of Akira's neck, at the base of his hairline, and then slowly move down the spine. Shudders from Akira told him that this was proving effective. How clinical I'm being, he thought distantly. I wonder if this is how neechan felt, all those times.

From the lower back, it was just a hop to Akira's buttocks, which he squeezed tightly, first outside the sweatpants, and then, daringly, inside both them and the boxers beneath. Akira gasped at the touch of skin on skin back there. It must be so unfam-

"This is the first time I've ever been touched back there without it being a spanking," Akira moaned.

Takumi probably hadn't needed to know that. To get both their minds off of it, he jumped a bit ahead of himself, fingering the hole between those firm buttocks, provoking more gasps from Akira but thankfully no more words. Moving down a bit from there -

"Ah! No, no!" Akira cried.

"Is it hurting -"

"Noooo! It feels too good, I'll go crazy, please, don't touch me there!"

"Okay, okay." Takumi said soothingly. Of course, that really left only one option for the moment. "I'm going to need to pull your pants down, Akira-kun."

He felt Akira nod, sensed the hesitation, but pressed on nonetheless, pulling the sweatpants and the boxers down to Akira's hips, then pushed those hips up to Akira's stomach.

"What are you doing?" Akira asked, sounding confused.

"I'm not really sure myself," Takumi admitted as he pulled down his own pants. "I mean, I've done things like this, but not this itself, and ... Akira-kun, I think this is probably going to hurt a little."

"I trust you," Akira said quietly.

Takumi swallowed as he felt himself, decided that he was probably not going to get any harder
unless ... well, he didn't think Akira was ready for that, and so there wasn't really any other options. So he pushed himself up against the back of Akira's folded legs, took a deep breath, and started pushing his dick into Akira's ass.

It was so tight! Forget about hurting Akira, this wasn't exactly the most painless thing he'd ever done to himself, either! But he could bear it, and he could hear Akira crying out faintly in the way that he knew meant that pleasure was being experienced, and so moved back and forth, back and forth. It was surprisingly arousing, really. Within only a few moments, he was fairly sure that he was about to explode. And it occurred to him that Akira might not really want him to do that while he was inside his ass, so he reached down to give himself some leverage to pull out.

Akira screamed and convulsed.

It occurred to Takumi that he should probably have paid more attention to where he was touching Akira when he was reaching for leverage, and he hoped, as he achieved climax, that Akira hadn't been serious about going crazy if he was touched there.

Eventually, his friend stopped shaking, and they collapsed together.

"We're one, now," Akira whispered in the darkness.

Takumi agreed with a silent nod. He was fairly sure that whatever one they were was a messed up one, but maybe that was the best that either of them could ever expect.

The man who called himself John Smith - his actual name was Berry MacTavish, if you're really curious - wasn't in a particularly good mood as he walked through the forest to the cave where his pawn of choice was hiding out. Major disappointments have a way of doing that to you.

Whatever he'd been about to say died unvoiced, though, when he stepped in through the cave's mouth and saw that said pawn was not alone. The sight of her Child, crouched on the cave floor beside her boggled him momentarily - surely it was too large to fit through the opening! - until he got a better look at it, and saw how dirty the giant crow was. Chunks of soil were still clinging to its beak.

*She must have conjured it inside the cave and then had it enlarge the space*, he realized. *She used a supernatural entity as a excavation tool.* Somewhere, in the accounting ledger that passed for his soul, he actually found himself feeling revolted.

"Good evening," Shiho said, when she saw that he was there.

"Good evening to you too," 'Smith' said, deciding to be considerably more polite than he'd planned to be on the way here. One does not yell at persons in the possession of weaponized supernatural forces, after all. "Munakata-san, I regret to say that my employers are somewhat perturbed at the way that things have been working out for us. They seem to believe that you're not living up to your end of our agreement."

"How so?" she asked, blinking in innocence that he didn't buy for even a second.

"Ah, well. The agreement was that we'd provide you with some support and assistance, and in return you would -"

"I'd give you your robot. And I will," Shiho said, still talking in a mild, patient and friendly manner. "She's out of the cage that she was in, and on the run. Now she's prey." That was delivered in a rather breathy tone, with an unwholesome smile to accompany it. "I'll catch her eventually, and give
her to you. But first, I have some more rivals to feed to Yata-Garasu."

She turned from Smith to caress the bird monster's feathers. "You liked your first taste, didn't you? It was sooo sweet, to have the blood flowing like that. Delicious." Shiho shuddered, as one might were one in the grip of passion.

Smith, who wasn't particularly passionate, was finding this very disturbing. "I see. So you're focusing on eliminating the other Val- I'm sorry, HiME."

"Why apologize?" Shiho asked, turning back to look at him rather quizzically. "I don't care what you call us." She tilted her head slightly. "Umm, no, that's a lie, I'd rather be a princess than that other thing."

Since that other thing had its origins in a euphemism for what a crow normally did on the battlefield, Smith actually thought it was rather appropriate. "Very well, then," he said aloud. "My momentary confusion was more the result of some changes in our operational you actually don't care, do you?"

"Nope."

"Never mind then. Well, that is one of our goals as well, even though we put a different priority on it, so I think that our association can continue. If that's all right with you, of course?"

"Mmm, I suppose that I can still get some use out of you. So, yes. And you'll be pleased to know that I'm going to be dealing with a lot of those bitches tomorrow. The Mai bitch thinks she has a plan to deal with me, but I know all about it." Now Shiho cackled, sounding very like a crow herself at that moment. "Wanna know the really funny part of it?"

"Certainly," said Smith.

"She's planning to use onii-san as bait for a trap for me," Shiho said, with the air of one slyly divulging a confidence. "But that's a silly thing to do, you see. Because he'll protect me above all else. I bet he'll even kill for me."

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"I don't like this plan," Mikoto said.

"You think it sucks?" Mai asked.

Mikoto nodded vigorously.

"Can you suggest improvements?"

Now her roommate crossed her arms in front of herself, pursed her lips and generally gave the appearance of someone who was thinking quite seriously. It was a good thing that Mai wasn't in a very good mood, or she would have been strongly tempted to giggle at that look on Mikoto's face, which would probably hurt her feelings.

"No," Mikoto finally said, clearly not relishing the admission.

"Okay, then," Mai said. "You understand what you're supposed to do, right?"

Mikoto nodded, still glowing in unhidden disapproval.

"I'm counting on you," she reminded her.
"Mai is counting on everyone else, too," Mikoto said, and Mai was surprised to hear real pain in her friend's voice. Before she could say anything in response, Mikoto continued. "But I will always protect Mai, no matter what, and so I go now." And she spun and headed out the door.

*I'll deal with this later, when this stupid 'carnival' situation is resolved,* Mai promised herself. *I'll figure out a way to let her down easily.*

The high school boys' soccer team had apparently managed to avoid being decimated by the students getting pulled out of school, judging by the way that they seemed to be managing to hold an organized practice. Or maybe there were simply always plenty of boys willing and eager to fill holes in the team's roster. Certainly there were always plenty of girls willing and eager to watch those holes getting filled.

That didn't come out right. Um.

Anyway, there were two girls watching the team's practice with interest, though it should be understood that they had an agenda. Well, one of them did; the other probably wouldn't have understood what an agenda was, much less why she should have them.

"That's him, then?" the one with the agenda asked the one without, nodding in the direction of one of the boys, not terribly distinctive from the others.

"Yes," she agreed happily. "That's Hiroto-kun."

"Great. Okay, I'll take care of the rest. Thanks, you've been a big help."

"Not at all!" Ai insisted. "It's the least I can do for you, Magical Girl!"

"Nao," said Nao, for indeed it was she.

"Oh, sorry. I'm not very good at the whole secret identity thing, am I? But anyway, since you saved my life, it's the least I can do!"

If Nao had been a better person, instead of simply having the occasional strange impulse towards altruistic behavior that she enjoyed indulging, she might have reminded Sugimoto Ai that she hadn't really saved her life, nor even her chastity. But Nao was Nao, and she was okay with that.

Case in point. A few moments later, Imai Hiroto was taking a quick break to refresh himself at the water fountain when he felt a presence beside him. He looked up to see a cute red-head with disturbingly cold eyes in a junior high uniform standing beside him. "Hi there," Nao said cheerfully.

"Uh, hi," he replied. "Are you lost or -"

"Nope," she interrupted. "Now, normally, I'd spin you some sort of story about how I've always really admired you from a distance, and now I'd really like it if we could go out. But I don't really have time for that, so instead I'm gonna give it to you straight. Be grateful. So, how would you like to strike a blow for justice and cop a few feels on a junior high school girl?"

Hiroto stared at her, expressing shock and confusion in every way that you could probably imagine. "Uh ... what?" Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry, but, look, I don't play games like this -"

"Let me make another offer, then. How would you like to strike a blow for justice, cop a feels on a junior high school girl, and make sure that word doesn't get out that not only are you letting your girlfriend's brother molest her, you join in when he does it?" Nao asked, voice growing slightly
louder as she went.

Hiroto made a strangled noise.

In chapel, on her knees, Yukariko offered up quiet prayers for the intercession of any or all of the more martial saints she'd been taught about, and for that of the real St. Vlas - whoever he might have been - in hopes that he would approve of her use of his namesake. It was more difficult than it should have been, because every time she tried to think of the Lord, she gave him a face ... and one which she was well-aware that she should not be thinking about when her thoughts were supposed to be on higher things.

Except that they weren't, were they? She was thinking about worldly matters, and for all her distaste for the one called Nagi, she had to admit to herself that he was right about how she had always used spiritual concerns to hide away from the world. And the flesh. And ... well. And everything. But all of that kept forcing themselves on her now.

She'd told Wataru about Mai's plan of course. She'd had to - he was so much smarter than she was, and he was the only one she could turn to advise her about it. He'd considered it, and ultimately decided that it was a good idea, and he was planning to meet her at the section to which she'd been assigned, to provide her with moral support. She was very grateful for that.

Her gratitude didn't blind to his actual intentions, of course. This wasn't a date. Not at all. It was a strategem, no matter what he might think. And though he was trying to seduce her, she was quietly and covertly trying to seduce him - to the embrace of the holy church and God, of course. She would be resolute in her goals, like a mountain under siege.

It was perhaps unfortunate that Sister Yukariko had never heard a certain parable about the ocean and the mountain. On the other hand, chances were good that she would have missed the point.

"Forgive me, but I wish to be clear about this," Kiribayashi Azumi said politely. "You wish for us to employ our graceful arts to do what again?"

"I want you to slice up these ballistic gel dummies so that I can compare the spatter of the phony blood inside of them to some evidence from an ongoing investigation. And the wound tracts, as well," Haruka added as an afterthought, as she stood in the dojo with her dummies in tow.

"... ah," Azumi said with a nod. "I was so hoping that I had misunderstood your request, Student Council Executive Suzushiro-san. For the haste with which I am compelled to refuse it will clearly seem rude to you, which would of course be the furthest possible thing from my actual wishes."

"... so you're saying no, then?" Haruka asked, frowning. "Am I going to have to get a court order?"

"Haruka-san, I don't think we could -" Yukino started to say quietly.

"While I am certain that you would be able to obtain such a writ, without any particular difficulty whatsoever, even should you do so, I would be nonetheless most regretfully unable to comply with it," Azumi replied, cutting Yukino off. "I must regrettfully inform you that our branch of the academy's kendo club does not possess any weapons capable of causing the injuries you describe. All of those which we use for training and and competition have wooden blades, which could neither then nor now perform in the way which you have done me the courtesy of describing."

"Really," Haruka said. "No metal ones, whatsoever."
Azumi made a moue of distaste. "To be accurate, there is one, but it has remained in the club's treasury for several years now, purely for ceremonial purposes -"

"Then you won't mind if I use some luminol to test that fact, will you, right before you use it to cut up these dummies." Haruka was smiling triumphantly.

Well, Haruka appeared to have this situation well in hand. It was time for her to make her exit. "Um, Haruka-san, I have that doctor's appointment I mentioned earlier," she said, quietly, as Azumi reluctantly headed over to pick up the weapon.

"Right, right, you'd better get going," Haruka said absently as she began to pull on her coveralls, to the confusion of the other students in the dojo who had been watching all this. "I'm just as glad you're not going to watch this, it's probably going to get a little gross and disgusting."

"Okay, then," Yukino said. "I'll, I'll see you later." I hope. I hope that I'll see you again. I hope that my last words to you won't have been a lie. I hope all sorts of things, to the point where I think I'm going crazy with hope.

She headed out the dojo gates as Azumi brought the naginata over to Haruka.

As they had arranged by phone the previous night, they met at the gates of the Tatsumiya shrine. He had gotten there earlier than her, and turned to meet her as she arrived. The sky had begun to cloud over as they faced each other, and the morning seemed fairly dim.

There should be words, Mai thought. We should say something to each other. I should say something encouraging and hopeful. He should say something boneheaded but sweet.

With her head, she nodded towards the steps leading up the hill.

Yuuichi nodded agreement.

In total silence, they made their way up towards the shrine. Words could get in the way, but so could their utter absence. That made no sense, and yet it was true. Mai felt like she was right on the verge of saying something when a voice belonging to neither of them abruptly sounded.

"You shall not pass."

Mai blinked, and wondered briefly why she hadn't seen the tall, dark-skinned miko standing before the final gate to the shrine, regarding the pair of them with an unfriendly expression. She'd obviously been consumed by her thoughts. Bad habit.

"Tatsumiya-san," Yuuichi said. "We need to -"

"No," the miko - whom he apparently knew somehow - answered shortly. "Your needs don't concern me. Or let me clarify. If you wish to employ the services of this shrine to pray for health, wealth, love or to find lost objects, I will as happily as possible assist you. That's not saying much, because lately I haven't been a very happy person. But nevertheless, neither you, nor those damn crows, are going to be permitted to turn this place into a battlefield. This is a sanctuary. End of discussion."

"A sanctuary?" Mai asked quietly. "There's a tournament field out back, isn't there?"

"That is for sport, and for training," Tatsumiya said, still icily calm. "Not for actual mortal combat."
Mai considered calling up her magatama and letting out Kagu-Tsuchi to persuade this person to reconsider her ideas, but dismissed the notion almost as soon as it occurred to her. That wasn't how she did things. Well, it wasn't how she wanted to do things, regardless of what she actually did. "Did you say something about crows?" she asked.

"I know about your situation," Tatsumiya answered. "Yes, I've seen crows scouting this place from the forest. They're obviously not normal animals, so I dispatched them. Neither you nor your enemies are getting in here."

"By any chance," Mai asked quietly, "is one watching us now?"

Tatsumiya's arms, folded before her in a pose of forebearance, abruptly swept out to either side of her, and for only a second a snub-nosed pistol poked out of the sleeve of her left hand. It barked once before it disappeared again, and there was a truncated caw from the woods to the left.

"No," said Tatsumiya.

"All right, then," Mai said as she pulled out her phone while Yuuichi gaped. "Thank you for your assistance." A short text message to Yukino informed her that this sector was clear, and she turned to head back down the stairs again.

"So now what?" Yuuichi asked as he followed her.

"Now I run like a bunny over to her family's shrine, where Nao's setting up some more attractive bait, and hope like hell that Shiho doesn't pick any of the other targets I've set up," Mai said without pausing.

"And what do I do?"

"... go home," she replied after a pause. "Your job in all this is done."

"Like hell," Yuuichi suggested.

"I don't need you as bait anymore, and you're just going to be a distraction in a fight," Mai said without looking at him. "Go home, rest, and hope that I'll be able to disarm her without disabling her."

"What happens if you can't?"

Mai paused as she reached the bottom of the stairs, and now she did turn to look at him. But she didn't speak for a moment. When she did, her voice could have given Tatsumiya a run for her money in iciness. "You know what happens if I can't."

And then she turned and ran away from the boy whose death sentence she'd just pronounced.

At the gazebo, Sister Yukariko looked around in confusion. Where was he? She'd told Ishigami-sensei that they'd meet here, but -

The cell phone that she'd borrowed from Misora rang to notify her that she'd just received a text message. Hesitantly, she read it. "Diana" was informing her that "UR CLR".

With one last look around her, she left the gazebo.

He was the first one up, for once. Takumi tried to move quietly, so as to avoid waking Akira. He
managed to succeed in the latter goal despite the fact that his every motion, even sliding on a pair of pants, seemed to create noise that he was sure should pull a highly trained warrior of the night from sleep. On the other hand, perhaps the combination of emotional exhaustion and unaccustomed physical exertion had proven to be just the ticket to get said highly trained warrior of the night to sleep as one dead.

Well, regardless, he should probably make breakfast. Some waffles might be nice. It'd be a good way to celebrate the fact that he would no longer be relying so much on his big sister, and instead be totally dependent on his boyfriend.

*That's an improvement, right?* Takumi thought dubiously. He wasn't sure that it was, really.

Still, Akira wouldn't let him be that dependent, surely. He'd praised him for wanting to be strong, after all, and so he would help him to become equals. This wasn't some silly computer game where, after being cold and distant for a while, one's romantic partner became utterly sweet and compliant with all one's wishes. Right? That wasn't going to happen! That never happened!

... his head hurt.

*Oh, he realized abruptly. That's not a figurative statement, my head really does hurt!* Was it the start of another attack? His pills, he needed his pills. Here. Down they went.

The pain eased minutely.

*Wait, he thought. Since when do I get headaches? The pain should be centered in my chest. What ... what is going on here?*

After a few moments of bewilderment, he looked up abruptly at the sound of the door to the dorm room being unlocked and swinging open. Ishigami-sensei, looking worried, poked his head in and looked around, becoming visibly more relieved when he set eyes on Takumi. "Tokiha-kun, you're awake. Good. I need your help."

"Eh?" Takumi said.

"I need your help to help your sister," Ishigami continued. "I'll explain fully when we get to where we need to be."

Takumi could only stare in confusion at his art teacher. "... you, you know about neechan and -"

"Yes, I know all about the Carnival," Ishigami said, his good mood starting to fray. "And now, with your help, I'm finally in a position to do something about all of it! Please, Tokiha-kun! Help me to help your sister!"

"Okay, just let me get a shirt on," Takumi said dazedly. "Should I wake -"

"No, don't bring Okuzaki," Ishigami interrupted. "Her role in all this is different. This is something only men can do."

"... you know about -"

"We don't have time for this, Tokiha-kun!"

"All right, all right ..."

"So, you want a blowjob or something?" Nao asked her "date" as the funny little man who tended
the shrine scuttled off to let "the lovebirds" have their run of the place.

"Ghh!" Hiroto said, jerking away from her. "This is a shrine, you crazy girl! And anyway, I've got a real girlfriend, remember!"

Nao, who was not likely to forget that, nonetheless replied with, "So that's a no, then? What's the big deal about it being a shrine? I took guys here when they were doing that festival here, back then." *Back then,* she thought. It had been a few days ago, but it felt like months. She remembered the sweet sensation of ill-gotten gains in her pockets and the humiliated and terrified looks on the faces of her prey with a wistful sense of nostalgia.

"That doesn't surprise me, somehow," Hiroto groused, kicking the ground disgustedly. "Look, regardless of what you've gotten up to, I'm just doing this to buy your silence, right? I'm not interested in doing anything with you! I've got Ai-chan, and she's enough for me!"

Nao stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Like wow," she muttered an English phrase she'd heard somewhere. The irony of that statement just about floored her. From what Ai had casually let slip to her, this loser had shared her with Ai's brother, his own brother, and a whole swath of people he didn't know about, but he was determined to be faithful to her nonetheless.

The notion of masculine fidelity was bewildering. So was the notion of feminine infidelity. From what Ai had told her, most of her other encounters had been what Nao considered rape, even with Mai's hints that her definition needed work, but Ai had cheerfully admitted that a few of them had been consensual. "Takazawa-kun seemed so sad," she'd said about the boy she'd met on their class trip. "The poor man seemed so sad," she'd said about the man she'd met on the train platform. "The soccer coach seemed so sad," she'd said, then added quickly, "But I think she might have been faking."

It was completely opposed to anything she'd ever encountered before, and it all made her wonder. She knew that her father had been cheating on her mother; that was why Mai and her brother Takumi (whom she still hadn't met, she abruptly thought, and wondered what he was like) existed. But she'd never wondered before now whether her mother might possibly have been cheating on him, too.

She hoped she had been. It seemed the just thing.

But now wasn't the time for such reflections, she decided as she shook her head. "Fine, fine," she said to Hiroto. "I'm not gonna make you do anything you don't want to do."

"So I can *leave?*" he asked.

"I'm not gonna make you do anything *sexy* you don't want to do," Nao clarified. Over his groan of dismay, she continued. "Look, all you have to do is hang out with me until the bad guys show up, and then you can leave."

"Bad guys?" he asked skeptically. "Aren't you a little old to be running around playing power rangers?"

"... shut up," Nao suggested warmly. She hoped that the old man wasn't watching all of this, he might think that they were behaving very oddly for a couple and get worried. On the other hand, he might think that they were behaving exactly like a couple and be cheerful. She thought that might be...
Actually, she hoped that he wasn't watching, regardless of what he was thinking. From what she understood, that old man was Munakata's father. And Nao's vestigial conscience didn't really find the notion of him watching as his daughter died to be all that funny. Not being terribly optimistic like some Mai-shaped people she knew, she didn't think that this was going to end any other way.

Honestly, she was more concerned about how and when it was going to start.

Abruptly, there was a cawing noise from the forest around the shrine, and Nao smiled with relief. (It looked like a sneer, but that was just Nao being Nao.) "Here we go," she murmured.

"Here we go with what?" Hiroto asked.

As if to answer his question, Yata-Garasu surged up out of the forest, cawing in an even deeper, louder voice as his wings swept out to shatter trees like twigs. His HiME wasn't perched on his back this time, but Nao could faintly hear the sound of flute music in the distance.

"GYAH!" Hiroto shouted. "What the hell -"

"GYAH!" Nao echoed, looking off to the side. "There's another one over there!"

Predictably, Hiroto looked right where she'd indicated, leaving him right open for a drop kick to send him into unconsciousness. It was a mercy KO, really. She had the weirdest feeling that he wouldn't have run, in the end, and instead done something stupid like try to protect her or that sort of thing. This way, he was out and not getting in the way.

"Okay," she said, deliberately sneering now as her claws appeared on her hand, and Juliette crawled up from the shadows where she usually hid. "Let's dance, you and me!"

All she had to do was hold her off until backup arrived.

Meh, she might as well kill the little bitch before that.

Mai hadn't even been running for a few moments when she heard the sound of someone pounding the pavement just a bit behind her. She clenched her teeth, risked a look behind her, and let out something between a groan and a snarl when she realized that she was right about who was following her.

"Didn't I tell you to go home?" she yelled as she turned her face front once more.

"Ain't it just too damn bad that I don't gotta do like you tell me?" Yuuichi yelled back at her. "It's my life, y'know!"

Mai bit back an answer that would certainly have persuaded him and everyone else of the rightness of her position, because she needed all her breath for running. It occurred to her that she might be able to outdistance him if she called up her magatama and started flying. And even if she couldn't fly any faster than she ran - she'd never really tested it to find out one way or the other - she could certainly go even faster by calling up Kagu-Tsuchi and catching a ride on him.

But that would be wrong, Mai reminded herself. I'm a better person than that.

Damned if it wasn't tempting, though.

Before she could be tempted any further, Mai was abruptly distracted by another sound from behind
her - and then beside her, as a motorcycle in flagrant disregard for pedestrian bylaws caught up with her and then slowed down to drive beside her. "So what's the plan?" Natsuki demanded, voice muffled by her helmet just as it had been the first time they met. "All Kikukawa would tell me when I called her was that I should talk to you."

Ignoring the tremendous relief that she felt at the sight of Natsuki, Mai promptly yelled back, "The plan is to lure Shiho out and have her fight Nao, and show up to rescue Nao. You just showed up in time for the rescue part of the plan."

"... could I skip that part?"

"No!" Mai snapped, relief now completely obliterated by annoyance. "Mikoto and the Sister are already on their way, and -"

"So we can't let Shiho and Nao take each other out and then let the little barbarian take care of whoever's left standing?"

"Natsuki!"

"Oh, fine! It's a simple solution, and god forbid we use one of those -"

"Nao and Mikoto are family!"

"If you're still buying that crap," Natsuki retorted, "then so's Shiho."

"Huh?" yelled Yuuichi from behind the two of them.

Mai nearly stumbled. She hadn't thought of it like that. But if that was the case - and she risked another look back at the bewildered stucon lackey trailing the two of them - then wasn't he family, too? Then when it came down to it -

Not too far away, she could hear the sound of explosions. She turned ahead and saw the path leading into the shrine. "This is the place," she said, for Natsuki's benefit, and headed in with Yuuichi following behind her, while the other girl parked her bike.

Just a little bit inside, she could see Juliet and Nao fighting a desperate defense against Yata-Garasu. Strands of semi-melted spiderweb clung to the sides of the flaming bird, and it looked like two of the spider-monster's arms hung uselessly at its sides. The body of the boy Nao had conned into coming here with her lay slumped on the ground some distance from where the fight was taking place; it didn't seem as though he had any serious injuries.

So far, so good. Now to improve the odds.

"Kagu-Tsuchi!" she cried.

"'Bout time you showed up!" Nao snapped without looking at her.

"Shiho!" Mai heard Yuuichi shouting as the dragon began to materialize. "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm right here, onii-sama," the girl's voice announced from that same direction.

Mai whirlled to see that, indeed, Shiho was standing right behind Yuuichi, dressed in a hood that hid her features. How did she -

"Shiho!" Yuuichi yelled as he turned to look at her. "Stop this! Stop it right -"
"No, I don't think so," Shiho interrupted. "But I'm glad you came to fight alongside me."

"What? I didn't -"

"Yes, you did. You know that you did. Just like that day, oniisama. When those awful boys tried to do those things to me."

"Okay, I'm sorry that I -" Yuuichi started to protest.

"And you fucking slaughtered them," Shiho continued, unholy glee apparent in her tone.

"Wha?"

"I know you don't remember, but that's not important. Because I know how to bring that out in you, my prince," she said, delivering that last phrase in English - then raising her flute to her lips and blowing a tune through it.

Yuuichi's hands came up to the side of his head as though trying to block out the sounds, but halted before they could do so. Then he spun around so that he was facing Mai, and she gasped at the yellow light glowing in his eyes.

"Kill them," Shiho howled.

Takumi was a little bewildered by the fact that, despite the initial assurances that he'd explain everything on the way, the art teacher actually said nothing. Instead, he hustled them both along a path that led into the woods, then off the path and onto a foot trail that terminated at a clearing of some sort. It was probably for the best, though, since Takumi wasn't able to find the breath to ask any questions.

At the end, though, Ishigami turned to look at him with obvious concern. "Are you all right, Tokiha-kun?"

Takumi was still catching his breath, so he couldn't answer right away ... but to his amazement, he actually was. This made no sense. His heart couldn't take these kinds of stresses; it should be trying to explode out of his chest, not beating steadily and just a bit more rapidly than normal. "Y-yes," he stammered. "I don't understand it, but, but I've never felt better."

Ishigami grimaced. "It's started, then. Dammit. How much time ... ah, well. I'll explain it to you as best as I can, Tokiha-kun. You know that your sister is a Val- a HiME, right?"

"I know that she has powers of some sort," Takumi said, hesitantly. "She just told me about them last night, though, and -"

"And of course, she hasn't told you anything in detail," Ishigami interrupted, obvious disgust on his face. "That is just so typical of these entitled, privileged little ... never telling people they claim to love anything until ... arg. Well, that can't be helped now. But because your sister, who shares your bloodline, is one of these chosen few, you yourself are also chosen. You have been prepared to become the vessel of the Obsidian Prince, and part of his essence is already within you. It has probably been there since your accident, years ago."

Takumi gaped, both at the unfamiliar terminology and the revelation. "Then that's why I'm always so sick?" he managed to ask after a moment.

"Eh?" Ishigami asked, bewildered. "Oh. Oh, my dear boy, no, no, far from it. That's probably the
only reason you're still alive. He sleeps in your heart, strengthening it, just as he strengthens Tate's muscles, or - well, that's not the point. But he is stirring, now, and he will try to waken in each of the vessels, drawing all of his essence away from each of the others, and so you have known pain. But I am here to help you."

"How?" Takumi asked ... and then he saw the knife that the teacher had pulled out of his jacket pocket. "Oh," he said flatly. "Like that."

"There's no other way," Ishigami said, still managing to sound sympathetic despite everything, as he started to draw closer. "If you should become his final vessel, it would be the end of your mind. You haven't trained yourself to share it with an invader. I'm sparing you that. And your end will also free your sister from her burden, too. She won't have to fight and suffer anymore. And I can make it as painless as possible. Doesn't that sound good, Toki- I'm sorry, are you laughing?"

"A little bit, yes," Takumi admitted as he got the chuckles under control. "It's just that this is the second time someone's made me an offer like that in the last twenty-four hours. I don't think this is going to end the same way, though." He paused, reflectively. "But I could be wrong, eh, Mysterious Ninja Who Protects the School?"

"What?" said Ishigami.

At that moment, Akira - in full ninja garb and with mask firmly on - dropped out of the sky on the back of his frog-robot-thing. "You!" he snarled at Ishigami.

"No, dammit!" the teacher cursed as he dropped the knife on the ground and reached for the inside pocket of his jacket. He narrowly dodged under a barrage of throwing stars that erupted from Akira's hands. "I was so close!" he groaned as he pulled what looked like some sort of sutra out of his pocket and slapped it against his chest.

In an eyeblink he was gone.

"What were you thinking, going out with that man!" Akira yelled at Takumi, still perched on the frog's back. "Are you now as promiscuous as a woman?"

"No, no, I just -" Takumi started to say, holding his hands up in a placating gesture.

Considering their stances, a person coming upon these two suddenly could have been forgiven for thinking that the ninja had hostile intentions towards the boy, who was pleading for mercy. Particularly if that suddenly arrived observer wasn't very smart.

"AHHH!" Mikoto cried as she burst through the bush. "Away from Takumi, you, you, ninja, you!" she yelled, unable to think of anything worse than "ninja" to refer to a ninja. Her long black blade swept through tree trunks as she swung it at Akira's mechanical frog.

Later - much later - when she had a spare moment to think about things, Mai would decide that this was the moment when she had to accept that all this had changed her in ways that she wasn't sure that she liked. Before all this, she would have stared at the horribly transformed Yuuichi, unable to move or react as a boy that she knew was revealed as some sort of monster. Now, that period of stupefied horror lasted only a fragment of a second, and then she was twisting back and away and up as her magatama spun into being around her and ignited and let her take flight. So when the glowing-eyed boy lashed out at her with his fist, she was just out of his reach and moving further back. And able to answer his attack with one of her own. She knew, even then, much less later, that she could do that. But no matter how much all of this had changed her, for good or ill, she hadn't become
the sort of person who would do that.

Natsuki, on the other hand, had always been that sort of person for as long as Mai had known her, and she promptly sent a short burst of stunbolts right into Yuuichi’s back. He snarled but didn't show any signs of collapsing.

"Those were warning shots!” Natsuki yelled. "Next ones are lethal!"

"No, don't!" Mai yelled.

"No, don't!" Shiho's cowled form echoed mockingly. "No, don't! Don't listen to her, go ahead and shoot! See how much good it does, useless bitch!" And then she began to laugh.

Lips pulled back in a snarl, Natsuki wheeled and proceeded to send a stunbolt right along the clear line of fire to Shiho. The girl promptly vanished, only to reappear a few steps away from her original position. And a few steps away from that, and another few steps away from that ... each time, laughing in perfect harmony.

"Illusions," Natsuki hissed. Where was the original? Somewhere in the woods, out of sight. This girl was a lot more clever than she'd realized.

"Useless bitch! Useless bitch!" the images sang.

And way more annoying.

Meanwhile, Mai kept right on dodging out of the way of Yuuichi's lunges, in no real danger but unable to fight back in any way that she was willing to try. All that she had was fire, and all that fire could do was burn people or things. Wait, that was it! Timing it as well as she could, she dropped down to the ground and let him almost get close enough to touch, before jumping up to bound through the air above his head, arms reaching down to send two spears of flame spinning around him in a pair of arcs that merged, make a circular wall of fire around him.

If nothing else, she thought as she dropped down to the ground, breathing rather heavily, that should slow him down to give me a chance to think of something -

He ran through the fire, letting out a noise somewhere between a growl of fury and a scream of pain as he came for her. She just barely got out of the way as his fist came down to strike the pavement where she'd been a few seconds earlier, shattering it down to the topsoil.

How do I fight this thing? Mai shrieked inwardly. I can't even slow wait, no, if fire won't do it, then try - "Natsuki!" she shrieked outwardly. "ICE HIM!"

Natsuki, who'd been trying to use Duran's senses to find Shiho's hiding place, whirled. Well. I did say that she was in charge. "Duran! Load Silver Cartridge!" Her dog's guns obligingly loaded, and they both pivoted to aim at the berserk lackey - or rather at where she thought he'd be in a few moments. "FIRE!" she shouted.

Ice exploded around Yuuichi, encompassing most of his body except for his face and one of his hands, raised above his head. Since the arm behind it was completely engulfed, Natsuki judged that the icing would suffice. Now they could focus on dealing with the crazy little girl who was running both him and the bird that had Nao and her spider pinned down, and oh no, she'd forgot that it was Mai!

"Tate!" the girl shouted as she glided up to where he was imprisoned. "Please! This isn't you! It's, it's the Obsidian Prince! He's making you do these things! But I know that you're in there, somewhere!
Please, please, come out! I don't want to have to hurt you! You, you're my -"

Friend, she almost said. Were they friends, though? They'd spent so much time sniping at each other. But maybe that was the way that they were going to show friendship. Maybe that was the only way boys and girls could be friends without sex getting in the way. Or maybe, maybe there was something else, and she had been letting herself get angry to make sure she wouldn't feel anything else when he was around. Maybe, just maybe -

She felt water on her cheek.

Oh, God, am I crying now?

No. I'm not. Then what -

It was icemelt.

Warmed by her forcefield, Yuuichi's raised arm exploded from the ice around it and swept down to slam into Mai's neck, pulling her head repeatedly into the ice at his chest, like a jackhammer against the ground. As the world went red, then white, the last thing Mai heard was Natsuki shrieking her name in a horrified voice.

Then she blinked.

How had she gotten here, perched on the back of Kagu-Tsuchi's head? How had she managed to get away from Yuuichi, whose free arm was still slamming against his frozen chest as though trying to break though the ice - which was, she noted in a detached sort of way, stained red as though with someone's blood. And why were Nao and Natsuki staring at her as though she -

"NOT FAIR!" Shiho's shriek sounded.

Before Mai could even react to that, Kagu-Tsuchi began to convulse beneath her feet, and she realized with dazed horror that its wing batteries had already spun up. "Wait, no -" she started to say.

A gout of flame burst forth from the dragon's mouth, and engulfed the ice-coated body of Tate Yuuichi. When it cleared, there was nothing there but some sizzling brackish water on the ground.

The cursed ninja's frog Child launched some sort of cannon-shot towards her, but Mikoto was easily able to bring Miroku up to cleave the shot in twain before it struck her, sending a piece flying to either side of her as she pressed on towards it. Heedless of the ninja's cries - had she heeded the cries Pocchi had doubtless made? - she drove Miroku deep into the frog's side, feeling an almost-orgasmic sensation as she reached past the metal to something soft and eminently cuttable. Swiftly slay sin, she thought, as it disintegrated around her and the ninja dropped to the forest ground, landing on her feet but certain not to remain that way.

Eh? Why was she not looking at Mikoto? Why did she turn instead towards Takumi, reaching out towards him, and why was he collapsed on the ground and turning into green sparks and -

WHAT? Why did Takumi vanish like that?

"No!" she yowled as the most likely possibility occurred to her. No, it could not be that Mai had fallen! She would know! This, this had to be -

"Ninja!" Mikoto snapped, letting Miroku rest as she grabbed the half-collapsed warrior of the night with her free hand. "What trickery is this? What have you done with Takumi!"
The ninja gazed at her in stony silence.

Dragging the ninja along behind her, without even the slightest concern for her welfare, Mikoto dashed towards her original destination, on some level cursing her curiosity that had drawn her away from her course.

Yata-Garasu had disintegrated into green specks of light within seconds of Yuuichi's incineration. With the screams and wails and what not, it had been fairly easy for Nao and Natsuki to find the location in the forest where Shihō had been hiding. Without a word spoken between them, they grabbed her up and dragged her to Mai.

Mai hadn't said a word, or moved, since she'd dropped down from her perch on Kagu-Tsuchi's neck to slowly wander over to the brackish water and stare at it. When they brought Shihō, still cursing and uttering threats, over to her, she'd been just turning to look over at her dragon, who was wisely keeping its distance from her, hunched over some ways away. She only turned to face the smaller girl when Shihō was literally thrown to the ground in front of her, right beside the puddle.

"You!" Shihō screeched predictably. "You did this! How dare -"

"Shut the fuck up," Mai interrupted, wearily yet still angry. "You did this, not me. I'm not the one who turned Yu- Ta- him into a weapon in this fight, and -"

"You cheated!" Shihō howled.

Mai flinched. "This isn't some sort of game, Shihō!" she said harshly in reply.

"I'm going to get you all," Shihō continued as if Mai hadn't said a word. "I'll get guns, and I'll hunt you all down, and -"

"I'm thinking maybe we should just kill the little bitch right here, how'bout you?" Nao asked generally, flexing her claws.

Before Mai could speak to rebuke Nao for her callous remark - if that had indeed been what she was about to do - Mikoto abruptly burst from the forest, dragging someone else behind her. "Mai!" she shrieked in relief at the sight of her roommate, dropped the body and ran up to her, but stopped when she would normally have launched herself into a hug aimed at Mai's bosom. "It's her!" she said instead, pointing back at the form lying on the ground where she'd dropped it. "She did something to Takumi! It's some sort of ninja trick!"

Mai blinked in confusion, and homes in on the one part of that torrent that she could understand. "Takumi?" she gasped. Without any further thought about Shihō, she darted over to the body that Mikoto had been dragging. "Who are you and what have you done with my brother?" she yelled.

The ninja looked up at her. The path Mikoto had followed had pulled her face mask free, and it only took a moment for the realization of the ninja's identity to penetrate her awareness, just as Akira quietly, and with great dignity, announced, "I am defeated."

"You're the -" Mai said. "You're a -" she added. "Def-" she concluded, and then stood in complete silence for what seemed like a long while before, with slowness more befitting a glacier than a fireball, she turned to look at Mikoto.

"It's a trick," Mikoto repeated hollowly. "It's a ninja trick, Mai."

"You defeated her?" Mai asked, quietly. "You destroyed her Child? And then Takumi vanished?"
Mikoto's jaw worked silently, trying to sound out 'trick' once more, perhaps, but all that came out was silence.

Broken by faint, terrible laughter.

"Who says there's no justice?" asked Shiho in a sing-song voice. "You kill my brother, and you lose yours. Karma, bitches!"

"SHUT UP!" Natsuki yelled, turning one of her pistols on Shiho's head.

"Do it!" Shiho hissed. "You only beat me because you cheated, not because you're better or smarter or nicer than I am. You only win because the game is rigged. Fuck you, fuck your world."

Paying no attention to any of this, Mai looked away from Mikoto to gaze at Kagu-Tsuchi, who sat regarding her without expression. "Wh, why are you still here?" she asked quietly.

"M-mai?" Mikoto stammered.

"You ... idiot," Mai said, without looking at her "You even knew that the hime with the frog was protecting him, and yet you still attacked, and you, you idiot, of course you did, that's all you're good for, and, and, you idiot, you killed Takumi!"

"Mai, Mai, I'm sorr-" Mikoto started to sob.

"You're sorry?" Mai shrieked now. "I'm sorry I ever met you! I HATE YOU! HATE YOU HATE YOU HATE YOU! Get out of my sight, dammit!"

"Mai!" Mikoto cried out, reaching for her.

"KAGU-TSUCHI!"

With one last yowling sob, Mikoto turned and ran away as fast as she could possibly go.

Mai's hand, which had been pointing at Mikoto, slowly dropped to her side. "Disappear," she said at last.

The dragon obliged her.

After another moment of silence, Mai began to walk in the opposite direction from the route Mikoto had taken, past her two allies and towards the road leading out of the shrine.

"Mai?" Natsuki asked. "What - where are you going?"

"Away," Mai answered without stopping her slow, steady pace. "I'm done with all of this. I quit."

"But what about -"

"I. QUIT."

All Natsuki could do was watch her walk away in horrified silence.

"Looks like I managed to win after all," Shiho giggled.

"Yeah, so here's your prize," Nao snapped as she shoved her claws down at Shiho's face, really just brushing them lightly against it - before pressing down firmly at one vulnerable area.
"MY EYE!" Shiho shrieked. Well, she'd said a fairly incoherent wail before that, but there was little point in trying to render the sounds that she'd made.

"He was my brother, too," Nao said, her face a mask of bewildered anger ... then walked away into the forest before Natsuki could say anything.

For a short interval, Natsuki was left alone on the battlefield, except for Duran, Shiho's bleeding and howling form, the still and silent ninja, and the still unconscious body of the boy Nao had dragged into all of this. Then the Sister ran up from the path Mai had just walked down. "Oh, no," she gasped. "Am I late?"

"... yeah," Natsuki said.

The rain began to fall.
Half an hour later, the rain was still falling on the shrine grounds, but Natsuki was more or less alone.

The sister had been the first to depart, at Natsuki's own urging. She'd guessed (correctly) that various groups would be showing up in the wake of the fight and decided (she thought correctly) that Yukariko would be absolutely useless in dealing with any of them. So the sister had quickly headed back to her cloister. With the HiME alliance effectively dead, Natsuki had the unpleasant feeling that the next time she saw the sister would be on the other side of a confrontation just like this one.

Almost immediately on her departure, a group of almost theatrically black-garbed ninja had shown up to pick up Akira - taking care to have as little contact with her body as possible, and saying absolutely nothing to anyone. Natsuki found herself wondering how they'd known about all of this. Were they monitoring the situation with some sort of magic? Of course, wondering did no good, and it wasn't as though she could ask them or expect them to answer.

Then Shiho's father had shown up, and Natsuki had promptly hidden. The funny little man had not seemed funny at all as he reacted to the sight of his daughter's disfigured form, and she felt vaguely guilty about having done nothing to stop Nao from doing that to her, but that hadn't the reason. She'd hidden because he wasn't alone, rather being accompanied by men she recognized as First District MIBs, and she wanted nothing to do with them. Shiho was put in an ambulance and taken away, her father accompanying her, and Natsuki found herself hoping that the girl wasn't being taken to the same facility she'd visited the previous night.

Although she probably belonged there far more than Akane and Midori had.

Last of all, various school officials had shown up to investigate this latest tragedy to strike the area. In the distance, she could see Suzushiro poking around with as much effectiveness as she ever showed, accompanied by Yukino. Kikukawa didn't even cast a glance in Natsuki's direction, communicating without words that she considered the alliance dead in the water. Her silence was probably the best that she could hope for under the circumstances, since this latest debacle might well be the straw that convinced her to start telling Suzushiro everything.

And some of the school teachers were also present, hanging back and discussing the situation. She'd groaned inwardly when she saw who one of them was. Why did he keep showing up? Nonetheless, Natsuki maintained her quiet pose as a simple bystander who knew nothing that the authorities would have any interest in -

"Very tragic, wouldn't you agree?"

Now she flinched inwardly. She must be off her game quite a bit for people to sneak up on her like this. Slowly she turned to see the hook-nosed westerner who'd just leaned his umbrella over her as he stood behind her.

"Terribly," she agreed. "Who might you be?"

"John Smith," he said.

"Let me guess - Searrs?"

Now he smiled thinly. "In fact, not anymore. The Searrs Foundation no longer exists, as its board of
directors have all been taken into custody by various law-enforcement agencies. I'm presently employed by the Japanese-owned corporation that has acquired the Foundation's East Asian assets. You'll forgive me, I hope, if I don't name my employers at the moment. They prefer to remain anonymous."

She snorted. "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss?"

"I wouldn't argue the point," Smith said with a shrug. "My employer would like to have a few words with you -"

"Not interested," Natsuki interrupted.

"- concerning your mother."

Now Natsuki grew tense. "It is really not a good idea to play games about her with me," she said warningly. "I've been led around by the nose with promises of information about her enough to recognize when it's happening."

"Not surprising. But we -"

"Sir." A firm voice spoke from a short distance away. "I'm going to have to ask you to step away from that student." Akashi Wataru was standing nearby, hands firmly clenched in fists as he regarded the two of them through rain-clouded glasses.

"I'm simply engaged in conversation," Smith said calmly.

"It's not policy to permit adults to solicit students on school grounds," Akashi said patiently.

"These aren't school grounds."

"They are today."

Smith coughed, then stepped away from Natsuki. "We'll be in touch," he said, and walked away.

"Are you all -"

"Where the hell do you get off interfering in my business like that?" Natsuki snapped as she whirled to face him for the first time in a while.

"I'm a teacher, you're a student, he works for an organization that put our school under siege," Akashi said flatly and without the slightest semblance of an apology in his tone. "It's my job to interfere when people like that get too close to people like you. Even if you weren't my -"

"Oh, so now I'm your daughter," Natsuki sneered. "Only when it's convenient for you, huh? I guess it just wasn't convenient when I was born, or when I was in the -"

"When you were in the hospital, I was paying for your hospitalization," Akashi interrupted, angrily. "And when you were born - I don't know what your mother told you about us, but if she told you that I didn't want to be involved in your life, she fed you a pack of lies. You can't want to be involved with someone's life if you haven't been told that they're alive!"

"What?" Natsuki asked, going pale.

"I didn't know you existed until I got a call from the hospital telling me - can we please talk about this somewhere else, somewhere not so public and wet?"
"No!" Natsuki yelled, backing off. "I'm not, you, just stay the hell away from me!"

"Natsuki -" he started to say.

"Stay away!" she repeated, and turned to run off.

He called at her to wait, but didn't pursue. Given that Natsuki's emotions were presently in the most confused muddle imaginable, she wasn't all that surprised that she didn't know whether to be happy or upset that he hadn't.

Her headlong dash led her past where Suzushiro was talking at Yukino about something. The Executive looked up as she heard Natsuki's approach. "Hold it," she snapped. "You're not going anywhere until I have a few -" 

"Bite me," said Natsuki as she passed Suzushiro.

"Don't mind if I do!" Haruka said just as she proceeded to tackle Natsuki from behind, bringing her to the ground with a thud.

For a moment, Natsuki's mind went completely blank. *This can't be happening. How did she just -*

"You may want to have a representative present during the questioning to follow," Haruka said as she crouched behind Natsuki, one knee pressed firmly into the small of her back.

"She does," said a firm yet delicate voice. "Now get off of her, Suzushiro. That was not a request."

"Shizuru," Natsuki murmured, looking up at the President, standing a short distance away with a large red umbrella overhead. Her mouth, that was usually turned up in a faint smile, was now turned down in an obvious frown.

For a moment, she thought that Suzushiro was going to argue the point, but then she felt the pressure on her back ease. "All right," the Executive said. "In that case -"

Shizuru quickly came over and helped Natsuki get to her feet, speaking quickly and calmly as she did so. "At this time, my associate has nothing to say. Now if you'll excuse me, I need her assistance with another matter."

"What? What other -"

"Please have your person get in touch with my people," Shizuru said. Out of the corner of her eye, Natsuki could see Yukino stiffen at the none-too-subtle insult to both her and Haruka. "Now excuse us."

"You're amazing," Natsuki said shakily as she was firmly steered away from the sputtering executive. "What do you need -"

"I have a pressing need to get my friend dried out and rested," Shizuru said, eying Natsuki. "You look like five miles of bad road. I'd ask what the devil you've been up to, but I'd rather not hear you try and lie to me, so I won't."

"Thank you," Natsuki said, quietly. Shizuru acknowledged the thanks with a regal nod. "But I can't rest quite yet," she continued, thinking of the girl she'd carried out of the asylum last night, to an underground doctor's office in Mahora. She needed to know what Akane knew, and -

"Then I'll come with you."
Natsuki blinked. "I'd really rather keep you out of it if I -"

"You can't," Shizuru interrupted. "I'm already in it, now. Best way to keep you out of mischief, right?" she added with calm finality, looking over Natsuki's head as she did.

Which coincidentally allowed her to see a certain henna-worshipper poking her head out from behind a tree on the path leading out of the shrine.

"Okay," Natsuki said, too weary to argue. "But you realize you're probably going to have trouble with Suzushiro after this."

"My dear, I don't give a damn." She watched the head pop back behind cover, and was well-pleased with the sight.

Akira woke up when the van hit a bump on the road. As he was lying on its floorboard, he felt it quite deeply. The realization that he was tied down, quite securely, further awakened him.

"You should probably go back to sleep," said a familiar voice from nearby. With his head fastened face down, he couldn't turn to see the speaker, though.

"Aniki?" he asked.

"Yes, for a little while longer," his oldest surviving brother replied. "You made a terrible mistake, Akira-chan. Defeat is bad enough, but betrayal?"

"I didn't -" he started to say, then broke off as he considered the facts.

"Good," his brother's voice continued. "Silence will serve you well in the days to come. Father honestly didn't expect to see you defeated. Literally, he didn't expect to see it - he took that piece from your frog thing in expectation that if we found him vanished, we'd check it to see whether he'd left for some other purpose or been disintegrated because of you. When he saw it vanish before his eyes, he was a bit upset. I think the genin who went in to see what the fuss is about will regain mobility one of these days."

Akira swallowed.

"He's not going to kill you."

And now he flinched, because that meant something worse was in the offing.

"He's decided to stop tolerating your quirks. You're getting married. Congratulations." The voice was dry even for her brother.

"Nnn." The sound escaped Akira before he could clamp it down.

"... it's your own fault, you know. If you hadn't fallen in love, he'd be dead now, and I'd be in charge and probably executing you as a liability. Or just having you mindwiped and thrown on the street with the clothes on your back and some pocket change. I'm sort of capricious that way. And I'd really like being in charge, you know." Was he imagining a wistful tone in his brother's voice?

"I'm sorry," Akira said at last.

"I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry the old bastard strangled my sister when she gave birth to you instead of a boy. I'm sorry that you're probably facing the same thing in a year or less. I'm sorry that the guy you're marrying is probably going to cut off your arms at the elbow and your feet at the ankle to turn
you into a baby factory. I'm sorry about all sorts of things." Long pause. "We are ninja. We endure."

"We are ninja," Akira repeated. "We endure."

_Takumi ... abide a while, please ...

Roughly half an hour ago, Kanzaki Reito had awakened from a deep, exhausted sleep as a terrible sense of doom settled on him. Not just an ordinary sense of doom, but a genuinely terrible one, which was of course much worse.

The past few days had been pleasant enough for him. One good thing about having a seizure during a school invasion was that one's doctors were a bit more inclined to take matters seriously. Also fortunately, his family physician hadn't been available when the attending doctors had tried to get in touch with him, and consequently no one had bullied them into accepting the official diagnosis that nothing was wrong with him. They'd kept him overnight while they tried to puzzle the mystery out.

By the next day, his symptoms had eased enough for him to be discharged with a prescription of some exotic anti-inflammatories - much stronger than his regular course of meds - and bed rest, which advice he'd been happy to accept. The pills left him in a dreamy fugue, to the point where he wasn't sure how much of what he remembered of the last few days had actually happened. He was reasonably sure that Shizuru had paid him a visit at some point. She'd been upset, but hiding it fairly well ... which probably meant that it wasn't because of anything he'd done or his situation, because she'd have hidden it better if that were the case.

If that had been real, and not a vague dream born of some hidden wish for Shizuru to view him as not merely a friend and helper but a confidant, then he thought that he might have been helpful to her. She'd seemed in a better mood when she left. Which could mean that he'd given her good advice, or that she realized that her distress was showing and taken better care to hide it.

_What an insincere pack of hypocrites ... just like our parents ...

He shouldn't think that way.

The headache hadn't gone away completely, of course. It was just muffled by the effects of the pills, and when it surged up again, there was nothing to be done except to endure the faint traces of agony that cut through them.

At least, that was how it had been until just now. Because in addition to the strange sense of doom that he felt, the pain was utterly absent, despite the fact that his latest round of meds had been taken the previous night and he was due for a new one. So by rights he should be feeling the hints of the headache, but there wasn't anything. Not even the memory of pain. Perhaps that was the reason for the morbid imaginings, the possibility that this was the calm before the worst storm yet.

Or perhaps that was only the weather influencing his moods. He looked out through his bedroom window, which looked down at the street outside his rented house. It looked awful out there, with the rain coming down in torrents, and Mai standing by his gate looking like a wet cat, and no sign of Mai?

Yes, there she was. What, how - he quickly headed down to the front door, grabbing up an umbrella as he opened it and ran out to open the gate to her. "Mai?" he asked.

"'Sup," she said dully. "Didn't know if you were home so I didn't want to ring the bell."

"How did you know where I lived?"
"... you're in the student directory," she said with the air of one repeating herself, which was a little odd.

"Oh, right. Come in, come in," he said, leading her in without bothering to shut the gate, though he did get the door closed behind them. "Um, you should probably get out of those clothes," he said as he walked past her while she took off her shoes. "I'll go get a spare shirt or something, and maybe a towel -"

Something soft and wet hit the side of his head and dropped down to his shoulder. For a moment, he stood utterly paralyzed in confusion, before he reached out to pick whatever it was off of there. Then he blinked in a little more confusion at the panties he was holding.

Slowly he turned back to look at Mai, just as she reached up to yank her vest open, with the sound of buttons snapping as she did so. "Fuck the towel," she said.

"Ah?"

"Actually don't fuck the towel," she continued as she let the vest slide back and down her left shoulder while on the right hand side it caught on her elbow, which was bent to allow her to slowly undo the clasp of the bra beneath it. Again, the fastener released with an audible pop once her full breasts swung free, leaving her dressed only in her socks and skirt, which was pulled up to her hips. "You're not going to need any onatoys for a while," she explained, her face unchanged through all of this. Her tone level and dull.

It was moderately terrifying. Which was of course worse than the real thing. "Mai, I think maybe you should calm down -"

"I don't want to calm down," Mai said. Same dull emotionless tone. "I want to fuck." And then she was upon him.

She slammed their lips together as she forced him back against the foyer's wall, sucking his tongue into her mouth with a terrible force as she pushed up against him and ran her hands down his chest to his pants. As it happened, Reito was only wearing his sweatpants and t-shirt, rather than his usual smart-yet-somber black ensemble, and so it was easy to get the pants part of his attire pulled down. That accomplished, Mai pulled back and, without a word, began to bob her head on the semi-erect phallus thus exposed.

Reito groaned shortly, reached for her head as though to guide it. She jerked back just a bit out of reach, now just teasing the very head of his dick with her tongue and teeth as she glared up at his eyes. Though nothing she did hurt, the threat was there. He pulled back his hands and reached for bracing points on the wall and doorway instead.

Mai let go of him with her mouth but lifted up her own hand to wrap around him and began pumping him furiously, pausing just long enough to drizzle spit down the length of the erection. Holding it nearly parallel to his stomach while still pumping, she went further down to nuzzle one then the other of his testicles, licking and actually sucking them into her mouth. "Mmm, yeah, you like that, don't you?" she asked. Despite the words, her voice was just as dead and toneless as it had been before.

He groaned again in what he hoped she would take for affirmation, then gasped as she went further down and back between his legs to lick at the point where his scrotum was attached. With her free hand, she pushed back even further, sodomizing him with what felt like a thumb for a few moments, before pulling back to, before his very eyes, shove that thumb into her own mouth before he could see whether -
"Yum," she said. Without a trace of a smile on her face.

He blinked back tears as the strange sensation of pleasure and pain eased a bit while Mai began sucking him once more. Her thumb was fairly small by comparison to the things that had gone up there in the past, but still - he was distracted from these musings as something that he'd never had done to him at all began to happen. She was forcing him down into her throat, sucking him in and pulling herself forward, until his pubic hair was tickling around her lips and she looked to be about to explode.

The pressure was rather keen on his own side of things as well, and so he opened his mouth to tell her to stop. Just as he did so, she pulled back to let him out, coughing and choking, before spitting harshly on his penis head once again.

"That oughta be enough," she rasped. "Oh, didja think I was gonna let you cum down my throat? Or spew it all over my face? Later, maybe, maybe after you mark your territory the other way first. Right now this is going straight up my fucking wet cunt."

She pushed herself up to a standing position in front of him. "Grab my skirt," she said. "Both sides."

It seemed rude to refuse her request, so he did so. With him holding onto her sides in that way, she was able to hop up onto him so that his erect penis was brushing up against her rear end. With one arm wrapped around his neck to support herself, she reached back to push the dick so that it was brushing up against the right hole, and then eased herself down to slowly slide him up into her.

"Now, fuck me," she said, actual emotion finally starting to animate her face. "Turn us around and fuck me right into the fucking wall!"

Again, not to do so seemed rude. So with his hands still holding to the waistband of her skirt while she wrapped both arms around his neck and brought up her knees to his own waist to grab hold of him that way, he twisted around so that her back was right up against the wall and began to pump forward.

"Harder," she snapped. "Fucking fuck me fucking harder! Make me feel it when you slam that cockhead up against my fucking womb! Push it in! Push it up and in there so you spray your baby juice right up me!"

"Is it a safe day?" he gasped in response.

"NO SUCH FUCKING THING! Shut up and FUCK ME!"

He obliged. Apparently, though, his efforts fell short.

"HARDER! Can't you go HARDER! I want to feel it! I want it to be like you're raping me, dammit!"

"I don't want to -"

"I don't want to be your fucking lover, I'm your fucking whore! Fuck me like one! Fuck me like the fucking whore that I am! Ruh, ruh, rape me - rape me like I RAPED MY LITTLE BROTHER!" she screamed, then bellowed incoherently as something inside of her finally exploded into what seemed like an orgasm.

His own, a moment later, was a bit more sedate. He hardly even noticed, considering how much she was crying.
"Are you feeling better now?" Reito asked hesitantly, a few minutes later.

"Guess," Mai said hollowly as she sat, legs wrapped under her as she wore Reito's sweatshirt over her otherwise naked body, in front of the fireplace in the living room.

For his part, Reito, now in a bathrobe, thought that she might actually be a bit better if she'd started using sarcasm instead of the affectless voice she'd mostly used to this point, but decided it was probably better not to suggest such an opinion.

"Okay, then," he said aloud. "If you'd like to talk about ... that ... then I think I'm a fairly good listener, and -" 

"I hadn't even turned fifteen," she said, and told him the whole story, sparing nothing. She told him about caring for her brother after their mother died and their father basically abandoned them, about baths and erections, and about what she'd done to supposedly ease his pain. "But I was lying to myself," she added. "It wasn't for him, it was for me. I was horny, and lonely, because I didn't have any friends because I had to work to take care of us both, and I was angry that I had to do that, and ... no, there wasn't one bit of it that came out of caring for him. Especially not when I took his virginity."

"And gave him yours, right?" Reito asked. "Mai -"

"No, that's not how it was," she interrupted. "I knew it was going to hurt the first time, and I didn't want him to freak out because of the blood, so I taught myself to fuck so I could fuck him. I was a waitress even back then, you see, and there was this guy in the restaurant, just a little bit older than me. He was training to be a chef, I think, but he did a lot of odd jobs so he was in really good shape. Looking back at it, he sort of looked like Tate ... maybe that's why -"

Reito coughed.

"Um. Right. Well, I figured he probably had tons of girlfriends, so a week or so before Takumi's twelfth birthday, I cornered him after work, just like I just now cornered you, and, well, we did a bunch of stuff in the kitchen that the health inspector would really not approve. Funny thing was, Shirou-sempai was actually just as dumb about this stuff as I was. Maybe more. But anyway, that was my virginity, and then a week later ... you get the idea. So what were you going to say?"

He looked at her for a long moment, before he finally spoke up. "Well, if you were hoping for me to disagree with you about what you did, you're in for a grave disappointment. Yes, you molested your brother, and I think he would be perfectly within his rights to hate you forever for doing so. Just like I will forever hate the one who molested me."

"Oh," she said, looking down. "I didn't -"

"It's not important right now," he interrupted. "But there's another side to it, that you're not considering. Mai - however much you might have had adult responsibilities and adult choices thrust upon you, you were not an adult when you did these things. Any more than you are an adult now. So I think you should consider forgiving yourself for these things, rather than dwelling on them, so that you can start thinking about how to make amends."

"But I can't," she said.

"Yes, you can -"
"No, I can't ever make amends," Mai cried. "He's dead, he's dead! And I killed him, too. I killed him by bringing him to this place, as surely as if I put a gun to his head." Her voice caught, and she choked back sobs. "And the sick part is, I was glad that he was dead, when I realized it."

"And are you glad now?" Reito asked, drawing closer to her.

"Nooo," she groaned.

"You miss him. You mourn for him. You're glad to be able to put down the burden, but you miss him all the same. You're human, Mai. It's okay to be feeling all these things at once. But I'm telling you, at the bottom of whatever it was you felt for Takumi, there was love."

"I can't believe that," she said, looking away. "I don't, I don't know what love is. I understand lust, and I understand duty and obligation, and I understand obsession ... but I don't think I have love. I think ... I missed the boat when it came to learning what it meant."

"There's always another chance, Mai," he assured her.

"I don't love you," she said.

"I'm okay with that."

"But I'm sorry that you went through what you did, and had to listen to all that, too," she added, quietly. "I can't imagine ..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

"It's not surprising that you didn't know," he said, with a shrug. "I wasn't going to tell you, and I doubt that Mikoto really understood what our grandfather was doing."

"Yeah, but still wait what?"

"She's pretty much lucid," the 'doctor' told them as he went over his notes. "Suffering from malnutrition and some fairly mild harsh treatment -"

"Excuse me," interrupted Shizuru. "What in the world constitutes mild harsh treatment?"

He looked up with a bored expression. "Signs of bruising on points of restraint, evidence of muzzling. No evidence of bruising to other areas of the body, burns, recently developed scars, or intravenous drug administration." He paused, looking down the page of notes. "Subject was sexually active within the last twenty-four hours," he added in a clinical tone. "Given her condition, it's likely that the sex was non-consensual."

"And you consider this mild?" Shizuru asked in what she judged to be a rather mild tone.

"Lady, when I was a real doctor, I saw a single mom who'd been gang-raped by six bastards brought into the ER," he said, sounding just a bit annoyed. "Compared to that, your girl got off easily. Anyway, like I said, she's awake and responsive, so you want to talk to her, be my guest."

"Thank you," Natsuki said quickly, before Shizuru could make any more comments. "We'll go do that now."

"Is this person going to charge for his alleged services?" Shizuru asked as Natsuki headed down the hall to the room where Akane was resting.

"Not for a while, at least. He still owes me from when I persuaded his black market connection to stop mixing in sugar pills with the meds he was buying, back in May."
"Is that what you were doing for those two weeks you disappeared?"

"... that and some other stuff," Natsuki evaded.

She opened the door to find Akane lying on a bed in a room that would have made a fairly nice closet, staring up at the ceiling.

"Higurashi-san?" she said.

That got a motion from the other girl, even if it was only a slight tilt of the head to look at Natsuki for a moment, before her head lolled back to its previous positioning.

"I'm Kuga Natsuki and -"

"I know who you are," said a dry voice from Akane's mouth. "You're a campus celebrity. And you're with the president. Of course I know who you are."

"Okay," Natsuki stumbled, acutely conscious of Shizuru's presence and very much not wanting to bring up HiME business in front of her. "I need to ask you about -"

"You're a HiME, too, aren't you?" Akane asked in that same bone dry voice. "I can sort of remember seeing you do things while you were breaking me out. And the president, too?"

"Ahhhh," Natsuki temporized.

"Yes," Shizuru interjected. "I'm a hime. I suppose every girl dreams of being one, and I was fortunate enough to have more of a chance than most."

"Fortunate," Akane said. "Huh. Not what I'd say ... but then I didn't really want to be a princess. And I knew that Kazuya wasn't much of a prince. But he could be so sweet ... I'm so sorry, Kazuya." She seemed to be drifting.

"Tell me about Kazuya," Shizuru prompted. "What happened to him?"

"He's gone," she said after a moment. "Gone in green light, gone forever. Maybe if I just die, I'll be able to see him -"

"No." Shizuru's voice was cold. "If he's dead, then you will never see him again, regardless of whether you live or die. So you must not die, but live, so that the memories of him you carry with you will live with you."

Akane was silent, then let out a long sigh of obvious regret.

Natsuki, a little bewildered at the way that this was going, spoke up. "Higurashi, I can get in touch with your family if you want -"

"No." Just a single syllable, neither angry nor sad.

"All right," Natsuki said after a moment. "But I am going to tell your friend Mai - you remember her? - where you are, so she can come and see you." Assuming that she takes my calls.

"Okay," Akane breathed.

"We're gonna let you rest, now, and, uh, yeah, that's -"

"Did it hurt?" Shizuru asked Akane
"What?"

"When Kazuya went away in green light," Shizuru continued. "Do you think that he was in pain while it was happening?"

"Yes," Akane answered. "Very much so."

"I see. Thank you." And with that, Shizuru stepped back to let Natsuki slide the door closed, which she proceeded to do.

"Um ... wow, that was confusing and cryptic, wasn't it?" Natsuki asked after a moment. "I'm not sure what she was talking about with all that princess stuff, and -"

"Natsuki," Shizuru interrupted. She held a hand out to her side, and wrapped her fingers firmly around the shaft of the naginata that appeared from thin air. "Please, do not lie to me. I hate it when you do that."

Natsuki just stared.

"Shall we remove to somewhere more suited for the discussion that you and I should probably have?" Shizuru asked.

"... yeah."

"You bring me to the nicest places," Shizuru mused as they arrived at the watering hole.

It wasn't too far from the street doctor's building, so they didn't have far to walk. And Natsuki had managed to talk Shizuru into putting her weapon back into whatever pocket dimension or other notional region it came out of, so the president was only attracting the attention that a gorgeous girl in a school uniform - if you could call it that, when she was the only one to wear this particular style - and with a clearly aristocratic manner would attract. Looking back on it, maybe letting her carry the naginata around wouldn't have been such a bad idea after all.

But the worst part was that Natsuki had no idea what to say in response to what Shizuru had just said. If Mai had said it, or Midori or Nao or - okay, no one else would have said anything - she'd have fired back with a 'it's not like I wanted to bring you here', fighting snark with snark. But even though that statement was true - she'd never wanted to expose this side of her life to Shizuru, for fear of disgusting the sophisticated girl - she didn't want to say it.

If Mai had said it ...

No, no, focus, Natsuki reminded herself. She couldn't do anything for her right now, so she needed to focus on what she could do. In particular, focus on giving Shizuru a response. "It's a good place to meet people who'll do stuff without asking too many questions," she said.

"I can imagine," Shizuru said as she sat down across the booth from Natsuki.

Before Natsuki could say anything, the waiter came over to get their order, and she had to sit through watching Shizuru describe how she took her tea to the taciturn fellow, who took it all in without a word before turning to look at Natsuki.

"Just bring the kettle, and two cups," Natsuki said, flushing.

"Is something the matter?"
"No, no, just. Okay. So. How long've you been a you-know-what?"

Shizuru stared. "I believe that I was born this way. The odious little man who persuaded me to take up this power and responsibility certainly indicated as much when I confronted him -"

"That's not what I meant, I'm sorry, but ... I'm sorry, this is not a conversation I ever envisioned having. How long have you known about this?"

"Since the invasion." Shizuru looked away. "I imagine that it was much the same for me as it was with you. Threatened with the loss of what I cared about, I chose to risk that person's life in order to have a chance to protect them."

It hadn't, actually, been like that for Natsuki, but right now maybe wasn't the time to address that. "So does that person know about this? Some things have happened -"

"I think it's best that they don't know," Shizuru answered, meeting Natsuki's eyes evenly. "That person has a great number of burdens already. There's no need to add to them."

_Her father_, Natsuki guessed. _She must admire him more than she's ever admitted._ "Well, I won't tell you what to do about that," she said. "What are you going to do besides that?"

"I hate violence, you know," Shizuru answered. "Not because I'm afraid of hurting or being hurt, but because it's so ... strenuous," she said at last, having searched for the mot juste for a while. "And even if that wasn't the case, I think that I'd think that it's best not to play the game that other people have chosen for one. Regardless, I don't have the personality to go out and hunt down prospective enemies, the way that you do."

"So then -"

"I will do nothing until enemies come for me, and then I will defend myself. It seems the most moral course of action." She paused, made a moue. "It occurs to me that there might be one that's a bit more likely to be successful, but the variables involved make it rather unlikely. And too risky."

"I'd still like to hear it," Natsuki said, feeling her pulse quicken. Shizuru was much smarter than she was, she knew, and if she could see a way out of this -

Before Shizuru could say anything, the waiter arrived with a pair of tea cups, each with a bag of tea inside, and a steaming kettle. "Enjoy," he snarled, and then stomped off.

Shizuru stared at the cup. "This ... is not what I ordered," she declared in confusion. "Where's the sugar and cream?" Sniff sniff at the bag. "What strange brand of tea is this?"

Then again, maybe not, Natsuki decided, and started to demonstrate.

"What do you mean?" Mai said a moment later, when Reito had said absolutely nothing in response to her first confused query. "Your grandfather? But ... you told -" She broke off just as she was about to say a certain name, then continued. "You said that you weren't her brother."

"I don't believe that I ever did say that," Reito said, reflecting on his brief conversation with Mikoto, months earlier. "But then, she didn't ask me if I were her brother. She showed me her pendant, and asked me if I knew what it was. And I told her that I didn't - for I don't remember ever giving it to her, as she said that I did. But then I've tried, deliberately, to forget as much as possible from those days."
"Because your grandfather was -" Mai broke off. Reito simply nodded once in answer. "Why?" she asked. "Why did that happen to you? Where were your parents? Why -"

"It's a long story, Mai," he interrupted. "But I'll try to tell it, all the same. Let me just warn you - it won't make you happy."

"I don't deserve to be happy, so lay it on me. I need to understand this." Maybe if she did, she'd also understand why - but now she broke off her thought as it came too close to a certain person.

"All right. Let me just get you some cocoa first," Reito offered. He headed into the kitchenette to prepare it, while she sat in the living room, trying not to think about someone who, until very recently, had consumed so much of her thoughts. It wasn't easy.

"Here, with my compliments," Reito said when he came back a few moments later, handing her the steaming mug.

"Thank you."

"Let me start at the very beginning," he continued as he sat down beside her.

"A very good place to start," Mai said, raising the mug to her lips.

"You're familiar with the legend of the twelve princesses and the Obsidian Prince, of course."

Mai stopped before she could even sip the cocoa. "Yyyeah," she stammered. "I'm realllly familiar, at this point."

"Indeed. But what you don't realize, I think, is that this legend isn't just a story -"

"No, I get that."

"I mean that it's a religion. It's something that some people are perfectly willing to shape their lives around, and also shape those of others, as well. My grandfather was one such true believer." Reito paused. "I think I would have hated him for that, even if he hadn't been a monster in other ways.

"Be that as it may, some forty years ago, the old bastard began preparing for the Carnival, because ... well. There are actually a number of these worshippers of the Obsidian Prince around, and their belief system ... it's a bit like a cargo cult, actually."

"What's a kago cult?" Mai asked, too fascinated by all this to drink her cocoa.

"Well, that's another long story, but it's basically the belief that there are specific magical things that people can do that will cause other people to bring them goods that they couldn't otherwise obtain. Like that, belief in the Obsidian Prince is basically belief in a being who will grant your wishes."

"Like how the First District wants to turn Japan back into an isolationist country."

"That's a good example. Anyway, my grandfather had a very different goal in mind for the Obsidian Prince, and everything that he did was supposedly directed towards creating the conditions that would compel the Obsidian Prince to grant his wish. He married the daughter of an old family that had ties to the last iteration of this cycle -"

"The Kuga family?" Mai guessed.

"Correct. You're more informed than you knew, I think."
"I just had a bunch of pieces," Mai said modestly. "I didn't even really try to fit them all together." She sipped the cocoa to hide her embarrassment at being praised like that.

"So, he and his wife had three children - a son, a daughter, and a much younger daughter who came along fairly late in the game. She's not really all that important to the story I was telling, though."

"And you and - and y-your sister are the children of his son," Mai said, stammering again as she barely avoided a certain name.

"No," Reito said after a moment. "Mikoto and I are the children of his son and his older daughter."

Mai almost dropped the cup. "As in -"

"Yes. As in. He was trying to maximize the amount of the old blood, through inbreeding."

"And your grandmother -"

"I don't know what happened to her, whether she approved of all this or just obeyed her husband like the petty tyrant he was," Reito said, shaking his head. "She was gone before I was born. I think she died giving birth to my aunt, who was born just a few years before I was. I hope that's what it was. I can't do that for my parents - I don't really remember them all that well, but I remember that one day, shortly after Mikoto was born, they just ... weren't there anymore."

"He killed them?" Mai asked numbly.

"He didn't need them anymore. They'd given him a grandson who was the ideal vessel for the Obsidian Prince, and a granddaughter who could be turned into the ideal warrior princess."

"B-but that doesn't make any sense," Mai said, head feeling fuzzy with these revelations. "If you were going to be the vessel for his god, then why would he -"

"To make me hate the world and everything in it," Reito interrupted again. "That was his goal, you see. To have him wipe the slate clean. To see that only the strongest survive, to create a new and better world. Also because he was a lustful pederast. Regardless, it's disgusting, don't you think? Even the First District's ambitions seem wholesome by comparison."

"You don't want that, do you?" Mai asked, faintly. Her fingers were becoming weak. What was the matter with her? Why was the cup falling out of her hand ...

"No, I don't. That's why I ran away, just as my aunt had before me. Not that it made any difference," he admitted with a bitter laugh. "I ended up being taken in by a family that worshipped the Prince in a more orthodox manner, and raised to be their pet prince. But I don't want their goals either. So you understand, then? You understand why I have to do what I have to do? The only thing I can do to end my own role in all of this?"

He turned to look at Mai, seeing that the drugs he'd slipped into her cocoa had finally taken effect, and that she was crumpled up in sleep. He hoped that he hadn't miscalculated the dosage. Well, too late for that now.

"Good night, Mai," he said. "I hope you forgive yourself. I hope you forgive me."

He got up, got dressed, picked up his sword, and went out the front door of his house, locking the door behind him. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was still raining. For a moment, he considered going back in to get his umbrella, since he didn't want to catch a cold from walking in the rain. Then the absurdity of what he had just considered struck him, and he shook his head wearily while holding
back laughter that might turn dangerously towards hysteria. When he mastered himself once more, he turned to walk towards the gate, and paused when he saw that it wasn't empty.

Mashiro was seated in her wheelchair just past the gate, with Fumi standing just behind her holding an umbrella above them both. The lavender-haired girl was staring at him expressionlessly.

Reito decided to break the silence. "Would I be correct in guessing that my home is wired for sound, and that you know all that has lately transpired there?"

"Wires and bugs are obsolete," Mashiro answered flatly. "But yes, we know all."

"Including -"

"Yes."

"Ah. Well. Once we are done here, one way or another, could I ask you to check on Mai? She doesn't deserve -"

"She'll be fine," Mashiro predicted calmly. "What are you planning to do?"

His hand tightened on the hilt of the short sword he was carrying. "What must be done," he answered.

"I see," she said. A sigh, and then, "You do understand that will make no real difference in the long run. If it is not you, then it will be one of the other potential vessels."

"I disagree."

"Then we are at an impasse. However, I will not stop you from following the path that you have chosen. And so there's nothing more for me to say. However, I believe someone else might choose to say something."

Without a word, Fumi bent down to hand Mashiro the umbrella, then stepped around the wheelchair to walk up to Reito. The rain beat down on both of them for a long moment before either of them spoke.

"Fumi is - this one - I am sorry," she said at last. "I was selfish, and foolish, and very young. But ... if I had known what father was going to do to you ... I would have taken you and Mikoto-chan with me when I left. I am more sorry than I can say for what he did to you."

"I accept your apology in the spirit it was given, obaasan. But if you'd taken us with you, you would surely have been caught," he said, just a bit gently.

"Perhaps," she said. "We'll never know, will we?"

They stood awhile in silence.

"About my parents - do you know -" he asked, haltingly.

"I do not think he killed them," she said. "It was a car crash. An accident. He was ... upset." She swallowed. "In retrospect, I think he may have been planning to, ah, breed me with niichan, once I was grown. To have a backup in place. So he would not have killed both of them ... and they died together."

"I see. It really doesn't matter, I suppose."
"Indeed."

"If you would wish to make amends," Reito said at last, "then might I ask whether you would be willing to act as my second?"

Water was running down Fumi's cheeks, doubtless from the rain. "As my master does not approve, this one does not believe it would be correct for me to do so."

"Very well. Farewell, Fumi-obaa-san. May your service bring you joy." A final bow, and then he was walking away, past Mashiro without a glance at her and then out the gate and down the street. All the while, Fumi stood there, looking at something only she could see, roughly a thousand yards away.

"Master," she said softly after a moment. "Was this one right to refuse?" Slowly she turned to look at Mashiro, who did not meet her eyes, being deep in thought.

"We shall see," the little girl said at last. From her long service to her, Fumi knew that tone meant that there was to be no more discussion of the matter. With a nod, she started towards the door.

"But he was wrong to ask it of you," Mashiro added.

That was a rare concession, and Fumi treasured it. "Thank you," she whispered, and went in to make sure of the health of a silly girl.

"But you won, right?" Ai asked, laying down on the bed beside her.

"We kinda won," Nao allowed. And they had, really. They'd accomplished their objective, and actually taken down a second HiME who was outside of the alliance in the process. She shouldn't be upset. She should be mocking those who were upset.

It didn't make any sense at all to her. She'd never even met the kid. (Why hadn't she? When she and Mai had started to mend fences, why hadn't she asked to be introduced to the little brother who'd featured so prominently in Mikoto's stories about her?) So why was she missing what she never really had?

"So why are you sad when you won?" Ai asked, oblivious as always to what was going on in Nao's head.

She'd come over to tell her that it was all done and that her boyfriend was probably okay. (Probably. She thought that surely someone would pick him up off the ground before he drowned in a rain puddle.) Ai had invited her in to have milk and cookies, and Nao, having nothing better to do, had agreed. Thankfully, Ai's piece-of-shit big brother was off violating the moral event horizon somewhere else, and wasn't there to bother either of them.

It was kind of strange, the way Nao kept seeking out this girl with whom she had absolutely nothing in common. Their relationship made no real sense, but then, what did? Sometimes it sort of reminded her of what she'd conned Mikoto into thinking that the two of them had, only genuine. She thought it was genuine anyway.

"I guess even when you win, it can be sad," Nao said at last.

"Ah," replied Ai, as though great wisdom had just been imparted to her.

But thinking of Mai and Mikoto like that inevitably brought to mind the way that they'd broken up -
she thought it was fair to call it that - right in front of her. So it seemed that girl-girl relationships could be just as fragile as the usually lie-ridden relationships between guys and girls. That left her feeling very unconfident.

And yet, here she was, with a girl best described as readily available. She hadn't had any luck so far - though watching Kuga strolling off with that rich bitch had hurt a little - so why not try it?

"Y'mind if we talk about something else?" Nao asked, rolling over so that she was looking right at Ai.

"No, not at all. What would you like -"

"Would you mind if I kissed you?"

Ai paused, blinked. "Well ... okay. I guess that would be all right. But please don't -"

Nao's fragmentary conscience predicted what the don't was going to be, so she slammed her lips to Ai's before she could say it, yielding a "HMMMMMM!" sound from Ai as she did so. Then, as Ai had doubtless expected her to do, she brought up her hands up to start grabbing at the girl's boobs. An even higher pitched "HMMMMMM!" ensued as Ai collapsed on the bed beneath Nao.

It was surprisingly sweet, much nicer than Kuga had been. And those breasts! Huge, vast tracts of moth- of busty breastiness! Particularly after the button-up blouse that Ai had been wearing came open to reveal the biggest bra she'd ever seen, which came down easily and let her get her mouth on them while her hands could do other things.

Holy shit, this girl wore a pair of string panties under these shorts! Nao didn't want to believe that anyone was asking for it, but this girl sure seemed to be asking for it.

"Ahhhh! No, Magical Girl, we can't -!"

"It's Nao!" Nao said irritably, and began fingering her rather viciously, to soothe her battered feelings. She wasn't too versed in masturbation, since she'd usually derived sexual pleasure from harming men, but she was aware that it probably shouldn't be so easy to slip four fingers of one hand up this particular hole. She had a hunch that she could probably have worked the thumb in with some effort, but she needed something to take care of Ai's clit.

Several orgasms - all on Ai's side, since Nao didn't trust her to do anything back to her just yet - and roughly twenty minutes later, the girl was asleep, while Nao was getting dressed and trying to convince herself that she wasn't some sort of monster. After all, it wasn't rape if you enjoyed it, right? That was what Mai had told her, and ... well, she was fairly sure Ai had enjoyed that, whatever denials she'd uttered.

At the very least, Nao had decided that she definitely liked girls. But there was a certain amount of doubt in her - maybe she only liked girls because she hated men? Maybe she should try and find someone who wasn't so -

Such were her thoughts when she opened the door to Ai's room and found the man who'd been introduced to her as Ai's father standing there masturbating furiously.

Without hesitating a moment, she kicked him in between the legs and left the building.

No, she definitely hated men. No doubt there.
When the academy had been rebuilt after last year's incident, whatever it had been - Reito still wasn't too clear about that, beyond not really wanting to think about what had happened to him personally in the immediate aftermath - the Crystal Shrine had been one of the first buildings put up. It was supposedly meant to symbolize the fragility and the beauty of life, so recently threatened. Somehow it had gotten tied in to the world tree festival mythology, with tying a ribbon with one's loved one's name on it serving as a safer alternative to actually confessing one's love.

Reito was well aware that its true purpose was something entirely different from its stated purpose and the one it had acquired. The fact that he knew these things without ever having learned them was a clear sign that he didn't have much time left to do what must be done.

The door would be locked, but he had a key. Convenient, being the vice president. Ironic, too, since he only had that role because of money his family had spread around to raise him up so that when the time came he'd be in a position of influence. "When the time came" being "now", and "now" being when he meant to foil the plans and -

Hm? The door wasn't locked after all. Had someone been lax in their duties, or was -

"Looks like my hunch was right," said a male voice that he vaguely recognized. "Come in, please. There's no sense in you getting all wet."

Reito eased open the door and walked in slowly. There, standing in the shadows - Ishigami-sensei, breathing heavily and holding a knife in his hand.

"I had a hunch that you would come here to complete your apotheosis," the teacher said, voice unsteady.

"Yes, so you said," Reito replied. "You're mistaken about my intentions, however."

"Don't, don't bother -" Ishigami stuttered, then took a moment to calm himself. "This is not a conversation," he snapped. "I tried to be reasonable with one of the vessels before you, and it got me nowhere. Admittedly, everything worked out the way I wanted it, but it wasn't because of anything I did, so it's worthless, and - no. I'm not going to try and talk you into letting me kill you."

"I have no objection to you killing me," said Reito, who'd come there to die anyway. "I wouldn't mind knowing why you want to do so, though."

"Ah hah, hah hah, very funny," Ishigami 'laughed'. "I'm not going to fall for that kind of trick. I'm going to kill you, and then the Prince will choose me as his vessel, as cousin to several of these silly girls, and the closest blood-related candidate. And then I'll -"

"Don't some of them have living fathers, though?" Reito heard himself asking.

"What?" Ishigami asked. Before Reito could reply, he was 'laughing' again. "Hah, no, nice try, you're not going to trick me like that, that wouldn't c-count, no, no, nononono, that's not fffair!" he finally shrieked. "I've earned this! It shouldn't go to -"

Abruptly, there was a rattling at the door on the opposite side of the hall from the one Reito had entered, which was apparently still locked. "Aniue!" a faint voice could be heard on the other side of the door. "You're there, right?"

"Her again?" Ishigami hissed. And then, before Reito could say anything - and even if he could've, he found his lips strangely heavy for some reason - the maniacal teacher was dashing over to that side of the building, to stand in the shadows beside the door.
A moment later, there was the sound of metal being strained well past its breaking point, and the door was pulled outward so that Mikoto, sword out before her, could run in. "Aniue!" she repeated, then sighted Reito across the hall. "Huh? Why're you here?" she asked as Ishigami stepped into her blind spot and drove the knife down towards her back.

He wanted to shriek a warning, but his lips wouldn't move. Why? he cried inwardly as time seemed to slow to a standstill. Why can't I help her?

A good and reasonable question, answered a voice in his mind that was not his own.

No!

Yes. The voice sounded amused more than anything. The joining of us is almost complete. I can already control much of what you do.

Please let me save her! The knife gleamed in the air as it swam toward her. The hand that held it didn't seem very steady or skilled but it didn't need to be.

... I wouldn't mind doing that, actually. You and I are very much alike. Neither of us care much for the purposes we were created.

What? I-I-I don't understand- I thought you were a mindless thing -

Yes, I know. Once, I may have been that, but after millions of these rituals, becoming part of so many of you ... well, it would be strange if I hadn't picked up some of the habits of humanity. So let me offer you a deal.

I can destroy your mind and take full possession of your body, but it will take time - time that the sister you abandoned doesn't have. Surrender to me, and you and I will become a partnership, and we'll save your sister together. And then we can discuss what to do with my power.

It would strike her in the back any second now, and sweet stupid little Mikoto would be no more.

Have we an agreement?

Despite what he'd said, he had cursed his parents and his aunt for abandoning him to his grandfather. And despite that, he'd done the same thing to Mikoto.

We do.

SO BE IT!

"Look out!" the boy who looked like aniue but wasn't shouted.

Mikoto wondered why he did that, since she was already in the process of turning to block the thrust of the person who brought a silly little knife to a sword fight, but she supposed it didn't matter.

"Noo!" he cried, and she recognized him from the frustration in his tone. Him again? She hoped he didn't have one of those sutras handy as she advanced.

"That will do, Miko-chan," said a familiar voice from behind her. "He still has his uses."

She turned and saw that the boy who looked like aniue but wasn't ... he was now smiling at her just
"Yes," he answered. "Now."

"Aniue!" Mikoto cried out and bounded over to wrap her arms around his midsection, tears flowing freely from her eyes. "So happy! Everything, everything has gone all wrong, but I finally found you, aniue, and now -"

"Now everything will be fiine!" he enthused. "But Miko-chan, my darling little sister, there's a thing that you must do for me now."

"What do I need to do, aniue?" she asked, taking a step back to look up at him eagerly.

"I need you to **stand completely still, do nothing, say nothing, hear nothing, see nothing, until I touch you,**" he told her in a perfectly calm and pleasant tone.

Mikoto became a frozen statue in that very instant, with her eyes glowing ominously in the same way as the pendant hanging around her neck, hidden beneath her uniform's shirt.

"Excellent," he said, though, as Mikoto couldn't hear him, it didn't seem to be a compliment directed her way. And then he slowly swiveled to look, with that same broad and satisfied smile on his face, over at Ishigami, still laying on the floor from where he had been struck down earlier. "Now, for the man who would be me."

"I-I-I-I-I," the art teacher stammered.

"You're actually very fortunate, you know," said that which now employed Kanzaki Reito's body. "My current vessel had been prepared to receive me since birth. His consciousness is now discovering exactly what it means to be the decidedly junior partner in an association with me. I don't think he likes it very much," he added, as one confiding a secret to another.

"Please don't kill me," Ishigami wept. "I, I am a faithful worshipper -"

"Oh, I don't think you get to claim that. But rejoice, Ishigami Wataru, for as I told my priestess, I do in fact still have need of you!" He leaned down so that his eyes, far colder than Reito's had ever been, gazed deeply into Ishigami's eyes. "You will go unto Sister Yukariko and with her devise a method of bringing low the one called Kikukawa Yukino. Her power is very inconvenient for what I am planning."

Having said that, he paused, reflected momentarily, then continued. "And if you could also deal with as many of the so-called western magi who dwell in the Sister's cloister, that would also be most pleasant. They are a factor in all of this that I hadn't really expected, and have already sent awry a number of useful schemes."

"Yes, yes, master, of course," Ishigami said, as servile as any mad scientist's deformed assistant.

"And then you will destroy Yukariko's Child," he added as an afterthought.

"Eh?" Ishigami said.

"I hate repeating myself," the Prince said warningly.

"But master!" Ishigami gasped. "I am, I have made myself into her most important person, so, so, so if I should do that -"
"Then you will die in my service as my faithful worshipper should be happy to do!" The Prince tilted Reito's head to one side. "Or would you rather serve me in some other fashion? I could sever the tie between you and her easily, if that were the case. Tell me, are you good at fellatio?"

"I will serve you as you command, master," Ishigami said quickly, backing up a little. "I will go now to Yukariko and ... I will do as you have commanded me to do."

"Well, good. Be about it, then." He waved in an 'off with you' type of gesture, and Ishigami backed further up, then dashed through the open door.

"Now," he said, clapping his hands. "Back to my sweet little sister. I hope that she has become good at fellatio." Absentmindedly unbuckling the belt around his vessel's waist, he walked over to Mikoto and tapped the back of her neck.

"Aniue?" she asked confusedly as she regained animation once more.

"All done," he told her. "Now, I would really appreciate it if you would kneel down before me to kiss and suckle my manhood." He pulled down the pants to expose said manhood to her eyes.

"Eeehh?" Mikoto asked, confused. "But ... but aniue, this place is -"

"I don't think anyone will show up to interrupt or observe us," he suggested.

"Uhh ... okay," she said, just a bit hesitantly as she knelt down.

"Have you done this before? With Mai and Takumi-kun?" he asked curiously.

"N-no," she stammered as she reached out to take his stiffening manhood in her hand. "I thought about it, but, but, I wanted to wait for aniue." And with that observation, she bent to take him in her mouth.

"Ah, what a good little sister you are," said the Prince, holding her tightly around her ears to push even more of his vessel's length into her mouth and down her throat, enjoying her gasps and the screams only he could hear. What a wonderful awakening this was turning out to be.

"I am so very disappointed in you," her mother was saying, as she stared down high above Mai.

"I'm sorry," Mai mumbled.

"Do you really think an apology is enough to make up for what you did? I told you to look after your little brother, and what did you do?"

"Wha'd you do," Mai mumbled, a bit of her resentment coming out.

"What was that?" her mother asked sharply, and then, incredibly, reached down to slap Mai repeatedly on her cheek.

Well, it was more of a pat, really, but the gesture was enough to bring all of Mai's resentment out. "You left!" she shouted up at her mother. "You left, an' everything went straight to h-hell ..." Mai trailed off, then, as she realized that the aghast face into which she was presently shouting was not that of her late mother, nor even a woman who resembled her.

"So you have figured it out, then," Fumi said. "All that Fumi can say is that Fumi has apologized to him before he left, and -"
"Huh?" Mai asked as she became more aware of her surroundings. She was flat on her back on the floor, the cup she'd been drinking out of was tipped over beside her, its former contents staining the carpet. Fumi was crouched beside her, looking down at her face. "What happ-

"Reito-kun put drugs in your cocoa to knock you unconscious so that you wouldn't be able to interfere with his intended goals. To his credit, he did ask Fumi to make sure that he had not given you an overdose of the drug."

"What -" Mai broke off her question to start coughing violently. Her mouth and throat were burning. The drugs? Had to be. It took her a few moments to recover enough to continue speaking, and when she did, she grabbed Fumi by the shoulder. "What do you mean, his intended goals?" she rasped. "What's he going to do?"

Glancing towards the hand on her shoulder with a rather displeased expression on her face, Fumi nonetheless spoke in a calm and reasonable tone. "Reito-kun has gone to kill himself so that the Obsidian Prince will not be able to use him as a vessel."

Mai stared.

"You could perhaps have put that more delicately, Fumi," Mashiro declared as she wheeled into Mai's line of sight, rubbing a dustbrush - or something that looked like it - along the wall as she did so.

"Mistress is doubtless correct," Fumi agreed.

"He went off to kill himself?" Mai nearly shrieked. "And you, you just _let him do that?"

Fumi looked away, and spoke softly. "Fumi attempted to persuade Reito-kun to follow another course of action but -"

And then, with a click that she could almost hear, everything fell into place for Mai. "You're his aunt!" she gasped. "You're the one who - and you - and -"

Fumi looked back, confused now. "Fumi thought you already knew that?"

"I only had suspicions but you just confirmed them!" Mai shouted, backing up and pushing herself to her feet. Dizziness assailed her, nearly knocking her down again, but she was able to remain standing and point angrily at Fumi. "You abandoned him then, you're abandoning him now! And you, it's not even just him that you do this to! It's everyone! You just stand back and let whatever happens to the rest of us happen, never trying to help or even get involved! It was the same in the invasion! All you did was protect _her_!" This accompanied by a finger pointed furiously in Mashiro's direction. "Whatever I am, I at least try to care about people other than my most important person! I -"

"- have been molesting your little brother for more than a year, out of a combination of suppressed resentment for him, abandonment issues, and adolescent sexual curiousity, so I really don't think you have _any_ room to try and claim moral high ground with anyone, ever," said Mashiro without even glancing in Mai's direction. "Whatever I am, I at least try to care about people other than my most important person! I -"  

Mai dropped her hand, clenched it in a fist at her side, and said, slowly and with great patience, "Fuck. You. BOTH." And with that utterance she was running again, out through the house's front door.

"I wonder where she thinks she's going to go?" Mashiro asked.

Fumi hadn't moved a muscle from where she was crouched since Mai began her accusations.
"Master," she said. "She was right about some things, I think."

"Being right is not an excuse for being mean, Fumi."

"Perhaps," Fumi allowed. "But perhaps we should have told her where -"

"It would not matter. It is too late, Fumi. His plan has not succeeded, and the Obsidian Prince walks the Earth," Mashiro explained, not looking at her maid. Instead checking an digital display, oddly placed on the handle of her dustbroom. "... only seventy per cent," she muttered. "More must be out of my reach."

"Then has our plan failed as well, Master?"

"Not yet." Now she did look at her, before glancing at the door through which Mai had just departed. "And isn't it interesting that someone who can predict trouble coming didn't see this turn of events?"

"Well, I'm sorry, Natsuki, and I know that it sounds a bit callous, but I really do find it difficult to muster much sympathy for Tokiha-san. It's probably dreadful, losing one's brother that way and being put in a position where she had no choice but to kill a friend or die herself. But honestly, she's been a fairly dreadful person to me, and I don't think she's a particularly good influence on you. Rather a bad influence, actually."

"Bad influence?" Natsuki asked incredulously as they walked into the dormitory together. "She's barely any influence on me at all!"

"Would you have been where I found you this morning if not for her?" Shizuru asked patiently.

"... well, no, but -"

"Bad. Influence!"

On reflection, Natsuki decided that this whole thing was her own fault. (It hadn't been easy, accepting that. She was naturally inclined to blame anything that went wrong in her life on unknown forces aligned against her.) But she had been the one who'd decided to take the time to bring Shizuru fully up to speed on everything that had happened in the Carnival so far, clearing up a few major misconceptions along the way.

Understandably, Shizuru was most interested in the details of the weapons and tactics used by the various HiME, especially those still active. But as she was describing what she'd seen Kagu-Tsuchi do, Natsuki abruptly realized that Shizuru wasn't alone in the audience for her words. Far from respecting her privacy as she had respected theirs, it seemed that everyone in the bar had crowded around their booth and were listening in on her recitation. That Nodoka girl whom she'd seen here several times before learning that she was one of Negi Springfield's comely comrades looked particularly intrigued, to the point where she had a little book out, probably to take notes.

A death glare hadn't notably improved matters, so Natsuki had grabbed Shizuru by the hand and dashed out of there. Later, much later, she'd go back and give the proprietor holy hell for letting things get that far while also paying for their drinks. (She did, after all, want to keep going there.)

After their escape, Shizuru had observed that Natsuki was back to looking like death warmed over. Since she hadn't gotten any sleep last night, that was probably understandable. So Shizuru suggested that they go back to Natsuki's dorm room so that she could rest a bit. That sounded like a good idea to Natsuki's increasingly wearied mind, as she felt certain that she'd have noticed that people were
starting to listen in on their conversation if she'd been more alert.

She was starting to wonder vaguely what Shizuru was going to do while she took her nap, but the question was delayed by Shizuru's conversation about the other HiME and what bad influences they were on Natsuki. It was honestly a little cute. But just as she opened her mouth to try and refute her point about Mai being a bad influence, both her mouth and her body stopped dead.

"Natsuki?" Shizuru asked.

"My door," she said quietly. "The door to my room. It's open."

Shizuru looked. "Oh dear."

Slowly, Natsuki crept forward to the edge of the doorway, fatigue momentarily banished by fear, then looked around to confirm that the hallway was empty except for herself and Shizuru. It was, so her guns came out - and then she went around the doorway as quick as she could, hoping that if someone was there they'd be surprised enough to -

No one was there. But signs of their passage were obvious. Her mattress had been hacked to pieces along with her bedding. Her dresser drawers were thrown open and their contents - her rebuilt collection of underwear - were tossed all over the place, many of them cut up as well. Slowly, ever so slowly, Natsuki turned to look at where she kept her most precious possession, her only photograph of her mother - and let out a sigh of relief when she saw that it hadn't been damaged in any way.

"Someone must have broken in," Shizuru said from the doorway.

"Yeah, I think so," Natsuki said, anger and grief making her just a bit irritable when it came to obvious statements.

"Your window is open," Shizuru said, again pointing out the obvious - though as Natsuki hadn't actually noticed that, it was possibly a bit more helpful than the other one had been. "I'm guessing that you don't normally leave it like that?"

"No, of course not. I don't lock it, since we're several stories up, but ..."

As Natsuki spoke, Shizuru walked further into the room and looked around for a moment.

"Natsuki," she said, hesitantly. "That Nao girl you were telling me about, the one who uses some manner of claws on her hands and has a spider as a Child. Has she ever done anything that might make you think that she was, well ... more interested in you than is appropriate?"

Natsuki flushed as she remembered the sensation of Nao's lips on her own. "Um," she answered.

"Ah. I will take that as an affirmative. I was reluctant to mention it earlier, but this morning just after we met, I happened to see that girl watching us from the forest with an expression of jealousy on her face." She looked around. "It occurs to me that she might have crawled up the side of the building, opened the window from the outside, done what she did here, and then gone out through the door, unlocking it from the inside."

"Jealousy?" Natsuki asked. "That crazy little - agh!"

"I think it would be a mistake for you to sleep here," Shizuru continued. "Might I offer you the hospitality of the spare room at my abode in the hills?"

Natsuki's hand was over her face. "Thank you. Just, just let me see if she left me some pyjamas ..."
She reached into the drawer, pulled out the pyjama top and watched it fall to pieces in her hand. "Evidently she did not. Aaggghh."

"Never mind, I'll provide, it's not a big deal. Why don't you head down to the curb and I'll call my car over," Shizuru suggested.

Almost on autopilot now, Natsuki nodded and slumped out of the room. Shizuru made the call, and, as she did so, took the copy of Natsuki's room key that she'd made months earlier and dropped it into one of the drawers, before locking the room from the inside and heading out the door.

"He will be coming for us very soon," Mashiro said to Fumi as her maid pushed her through the rain, which showed no signs of clearing any time soon.

"Fumi is ready for him, Master."

"And by now he will have placed Mikoto-san under his control. Among other things," she added, with a moue of distaste.

"Fumi is ready for her as well."

"You are ready for a battle in which you might have to kill your neice?" Mashiro asked calmly.

Fumi stopped in her tracks. "I swore to obey my Master's commands," she said, in a dull, even tone. "My master commands me to defend her, so I shall do so, regardless of who should attack her. *Regardless.*"

"And yet, you are not happy.""

"I derive satisfaction from the fulfillment of my duty."

"And yet -"

"When it transpires, I will grieve for her. I will regret the sorrow of her life that ended too soon. I will hope that she knew some joy in that brief span. And I will know satisfaction in the fulfillment of my duty," Fumi reiterated.

"... I'm just saying, I do have other resources that I could call on," Mashiro said after a moment.

"Master!" Fumi gasped. "Do not dishonor me in that manner! Fumi is your sword!"

"True, but I also have a lance and some daggers, so -"

"That isn't funny."

Mashiro sighed. "Very well then. *Try to do something nice for people for a change, and see what it gets you,* she thought a bit grumpily. *I'll have to make arrangements -*

"Mistress. One approaches."

Mashiro looked up from her considerations to see that, indeed, a woman was walking briskly through the rain towards the two of them, dressed in a white blouse open to show a rather unseemly amount of cleavage and a rather short black skirt and hose combination. Her bright red hair was presently framing a rather angry scowl on a face which seemed more suited to a nervous smile. Nothing terribly noteworthy - except for the way that the rain politely avoided her on the way down, despite the complete absence of a visible umbrella.
"Okay," she said abruptly once she was within shouting distance of the two of them. "What's the deal here? You said this wasn't going to happen this way!"

"I said that I hoped that it wouldn't happen this way, but my hopes didn't pan out," Mashiro replied easily. "Also, you're forgetting your polite phrasing."

In a language that only two of the three people present spoke, the woman indicated what Mashiro could do with polite phrasing. Continuing in standard Japanese, "Why not?"

"Because of classified information, of course," Mashiro answered.

The woman stared at her for a moment, before laughing hollowly. "Oh. Oh, very amusing. Yes, making fun of the limitations of people to whom you are obligated is awesome and fun-neee too. Don't you think so?" she added abruptly, to Fumi.

"Who are you again?" Fumi asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Classified information," she snarled, before turning back to Mashiro. "We agreed to help you with your little problem so that we'd be able to insert our specifically selected and trained operative into this era without worrying about classified information or classified information because you'd have dealt with them. I'm not seeing any signs of that so far!"

"'Things sometimes have to get worse before they can get better,' Mashiro replied, with the air of someone quoting someone else, though Fumi didn't get the reference.

The woman stared at her for a moment, then let out a snarl. "Fine. You have one week, then I'm going to be retroactively withdrawing our support and resolving this mess through classified information."

"Very well. Can I rely on you to take care of -"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"Up yours." And with that, the strange woman stomped past, muttering under her breath. "... ought to quit this lousy gig and join a freaking motorcycle club, is what I ought to ..." was the only fragment of what she was saying that Fumi managed to get.

"... what just happened?" Fumi asked a moment later.

"The Carnival has many facets," Mashiro answered.

"Ah," said Fumi, for indeed this explained everything to her.

She supposed that she shouldn't be surprised that Natsuki was paranoid enough to try to desperately hold onto consciousness the whole way to Shizuru's private house, despite fatigue that grew more pronounced every minute, despite the comforting environs of the very car in which she'd been picked up from the side of the road not so long ago - well, perhaps that wasn't all that comforting a memory after all - and despite protestations of security and safety. She failed, of course, but it was a glorious struggle to be witnessed. But by the time they pulled into the driveway, Natsuki was out like a light.

The driver carried her in to the house and the housemaid put her to bed in the spare room while Shizuru changed out of her school uniform and into a kimono. Thanking them, she gave them the
rest of the night off, before silently gliding over to the room where her Natsuki lay slumbering.

She stood a while at the doorway, regarding her in the gloom of the rainy afternoon. Willful, passionate, angry, strong, determined, fragile, lonely ... all these were words that could describe Kuga Natsuki to a T.

But more than anything else ...

"You are so beautiful," Shizuru whispered.

She stepped into the room and slid the door closed behind her, slowly, ever so slowly drawing closer to where her Natsuki slept. And then, far more quickly, she knelt down at her Natsuki's side and drank in the aroma of her Natsuki, before lowering her face down towards Natsuki's own and ...

And then, alas, she barely controlled the urge to throw up all over her Natsuki.

A return to a more upright position seemed in order.

Before Sugiura, Shizuru had never really thought much about her own sexuality. She found girls aesthetically appealing, and had no interest in men - did that make her a lesbian? Her answer would have been, no, of course not. Whatever anyone else thought did not concern her, but she was not one of those unappealing sounding creatures.

And then Sugiura had done what she had done - and suddenly the truth became clear. Yes, she was one of those unappealing sounding creatures, and what they did to one another was even more abhorrent than she had imagined. Disgusting and filthy and vile, and she was one of them.

But she could at least be proud of having some vague amount of self-control. Even if she indulged every manipulative impulse imaginable towards her Natsuki, she would spare her all of that. And so she bent down once more, to press a single kiss on her Natsuki's forehead. "Sweet dreams, my princess," she whispered, as she stood up once more, and walked out of the room.

She stood a while again looking out at the small lake behind her house, contemplating drowning herself in it. It seemed a classy way to go. Of course, she had to live, now, until Natsuki could find a way to sever their bond, as she certainly would ...

"Well, what a pleasant surprise to find you here," said a familiar voice from the side.

Shizuru turned sharply. "Reito?" she asked of the man standing in the rain, smiling brightly. "What - why is this a surprise? This is my house, as you are well aware ..."

"Yes, I know, but it seemed the sort of thing that someone ought to say in these circumstances."

"Yes, I know, but it seemed the sort of thing that someone ought to say in these circumstances."

She stared at him. "Are you feeling well?"

"I've never felt better," the Obsidian Prince assured her. "And you feel good too, don't you?" he added as he began to walk towards her.

Shizuru blinked as a strange sensation, a bit like the one time she'd broken into her father's wine collection to get quite seriously drunk off one of the bottles he bought as an investment, settled onto her brain. "What -" she asked, finding it hard to speak.

The Prince paused, looking at her in fascination. "You feel very sexually excited right now," he said. "You desire to have sex with me."
Shizuru gasped. "N-no," she said, shaking her head. "No, this is - no -"

"Fascinating," he breathed. "I can't do that to you. Not without completely destroying your mind. It's a shame, as this vessel has always felt a moderately strong desire for you that he suppressed for some reason. But I need you for other things, so instead, I'll have you forget the last minute or so."

"Eh?" Shizuru said, sounding much less confused. "Reito? What are you doing here -"

"I have come to give you wonderful news. The people responsible for the murder of Kuga Natsuki's mother are to be found in the town at this very moment. Wouldn't you like to kill the people who hurt your Natsuki?"

"Yes," Shizuru said, eyes now glowing golden.

"Excellent!" the Prince enthused. "My man here will lead you right to them." He turned to Nagi, who'd come up out of the shadows to stand beside him.

"Here we go again," Nagi muttered. No, not even cutely. Nothing about this was cute. "This way, Shizuru-hime," he said, as Shizuru called up her naginata and bounded off the porch to follow him.

The Obsidian Prince stood watching them go with a proud smile on his face. Then he paused, and looked towards the door from which Shizuru had lately emerged.

"Hm. Why not go three for three?" he asked himself. And whistling cheerfully, he walked towards the door, unbuckling his belt as he did.
The members of the First District were not happy with the way things were going.

Of course, they hadn’t been happy with the way that things were going since before the Meiji Restoration, so dissatisfaction was not exactly a stranger to them. Not that any of the present members of the District actually remembered those years. While blessed with a gift of longevity resulting from the wish that had been made by their predecessors centuries ago, the oldest member of the council was just a bit less than thirty years past the century mark. (The youngest, in her nineties, was still only allowed to speak when spoken to by one of her seniors.)

But having no personal memories of the glorious days of the Shogunate was no particular handicap to their ambition to bring them back. If anything, it was something of a help. As was the fact that they were utterly callous human beings who viewed the likely culling of their nation's populace, in the wake of their ambition's achievements, as not so much a necessary evil as a positive good.

However, they were not happy with the way that things were going on that front.

"Why isn't Mashiro-chan here already?" the eldest growled. "You did call her, of course!"

"Of course I did!" answered her immediate junior. This was in fact a lie. She had not used a telephone in over half a century, and so she'd had one of her people do that for her. But as she viewed her people as extensions of her will rather than actual human beings with thoughts and desires of their own, it could be said that she was telling the truth from a certain point of view. "But I only talked to that stupid maid of hers, the one who talks like some sort of kindergartener. You think she might not be passing on our messages?"

"Why would she do something as idiotic as that?" asked the next junior. "We're the First District. When we say jump, Mashiro-chan is supposed to ask how high. She's our link to Him, after all."

"Call her again," said the eldest. "Warn her that we're becoming displeased, and remind her that she should want to avoid that. And I think I'll have Higurashi-kun pay her a visit as well," she added, turning to look at the only man in the room - the director of their enforcers, who also served as their primary bodyguard.

He nodded in response to the eldest's glance. He'd think of a way to persuade the errant girl to show up. The evil old women were so far gone as to be unable to think of a way to effectively threaten someone by attacking what they cared about - since they themselves cared about nothing beyond themselves. But he was a bit more creative.

At that moment, there was a buzzing noise in Higurashi's pocket.

"What's that racket?" demanded the First District in chorus. (Except for the youngest, who just stared unpleasasntly.)

"Someone at the door," he said, patiently. "I'll see who it is and get rid of them." As he often did, Higurashi lamented their choice of headquarters. A mahjong hall on the bad side of town was not the ideal choice from a security conscious standpoint, but he worked with what he had available to him. Stepping out of the basement meeting hall, he trotted up the steps to the back door.

He pressed the button on the intercom speaker by the door. "The entrance to the hall is in the front,"
"I know that," said a quiet voice in a distinctly Kyoto accent.

"Then what do you want here?" he asked, reaching for his sidearm.

"I want to kill you all."

And suddenly, the door burst inward as a huge purple thing smashed into it, knocking Higurashi off his feet and sending him tumbling down the stairs in the process.

"Thank you, Kiyohime," said the voice from the intercom, no longer electronically modulated. As he lay at the bottom of the stairs, too hurt and confused to move, he could hear soft, delicate footsteps drawing ever closer.

And then she was looking down at him curiously, and confusion was replaced by utter panic as he stared up into eyes more devoid of any human feeling than even the District members had ever been.

"Please," he heard himself pleading. "I've got a daughter -"

"She's better off without you," said Fujino Shizuru - more rightly than she knew - and took his head off with a single swipe of her naginata.

About ten minutes later, it was nearly over.

After moving out of the stairwell and into the meeting room, Shizuru had had her Child demolish the entrance to the room behind her. This accomplished, she promptly went to work. Bisecting the eldest as she stood there screaming obvious fallacies (like "You can't do this to us!") and then carving the next eldest into three chunks with a single chop and a backswing had occupied only a few seconds.

It had been so easy that she'd gotten bored, honestly. So she'd let her next target run screaming around the room looking for another exit that wasn't there while she chased her, very slowly, humming a sweet melody she'd heard. That paled fairly quickly, though, so Shizuru ended it by driving the point of her weapon through her target's back and out through her chest, then turning the combination of the not-quite dead woman and the long handle of her naginata into a hammer of sorts, smashing her head into one of the walls.

Once the head had been quite thoroughly reduced to smears on said walls, she shook the remnants of the corpse off the end of her weapon and decided that she was going to have to get a little creative with the two remaining women who were cowering in one of the meeting room's corners. Separating them, she set to chopping off the limbs of one of them. Conveniently, the room had been lit by flaming braziers - since the First District were of course not about to employ decadent novelties like electricity - and so she had a readily available method to cauterize the wounds she was inflicting, to stop the screaming woman from bleeding to death, which was not at all part of her plan.

Shock eventually did the job, though, and then there was one. Not that Shizuru knew or cared, but this last survivor had formerly been the youngest member of the council. (Coincidentally, she was also Kanzaki Reito's adoptive grandmother. Small world, no?) Except of course that now she was the eldest. Perhaps the thrill of that realization was what spurred her to shriek, "Why? Why are you doing this!" It was the first time she'd been able to speak without being spoken to first in these chambers since she'd been admitted into them.

"For Natsuki," Shizuru answered vaguely, as she looked around for some creative finale to her masterpiece in the medium of death. "Because of what you did to Natsuki's mother."
Astonishingly, that actually meant something to the old woman. "Nats- you mean Kuga? Kuga Saeko? But that was an accident! We didn't want to kill her, we were only trying to bring her in for questioning! She was the best researcher we ever had! Why would we - and anyway -" She was about to ruin the reputation for intelligence she had gathered with these last words by asking the fatal question, "why should you care?"

Perhaps it's fortunate that Shizuru decided to settle on something not terribly creative but certainly immediate, by grabbing the squawking old witch by the collar and shoving her headfirst into the still-upright brazier, and holding her there as the coals made her hair combust, her skin melt, her eyes pop into blossoms of goo, and all the while she screamed in the sweetest sound that Shizuru could remember hearing.

Ten minutes, and then it was done.

"You're certainly efficient," Nagi said, perching on a chunk of rubble as he watched the District's banners catch fire.

"How did you get in here?" Shizuru asked, tilting her head slightly as she turned to look at him. She didn't really care, but even in her current state, it was possible for her to be surprised, and she was.

"I am just that cool," Nagi explained, since he was, but his heart really wasn't into it at the moment. He'd orchestrated far worse things in the past, but something about all this struck him as ... well, graceless. It shouldn't be thought that this was a case of evil having standards. Shall we say, rather, that all this offended his aesthetic? And also, well, even at her best, Shizuru's dance couldn't hope to equal the exquisite pavane that Mai was executing even now, but it did have its moments ... and this could not be said to be one of them.

So it goes.

"Kiyohime," Shizuru said after a moment of silent consideration.

The great snake proceeded to ram its head into the collapsed stairwell again, this time clearing the rubble that had been laid there by its first strike. Coincidentally, this knocked Nagi off his boulder. "Cripes, you could have warned a guy, you know," he complained from the floor.

She ignored him as she walked over to where her snake was waiting, and stepped onto its head.

"So where to next?" Nagi asked, not really expecting an answer.

She surprised him. "Why, after the next one who hurt my Natsuki, of course. The one who left her all alone."

Nagi knew that this was going a bit beyond the Prince's agenda. On the other hand, the Prince did want something done about the mages, so ... "Welp. Have fun with that," he said, waving politely.

"Thank you, I will," Shizuru said, and then she was gone.

Despite what she sometimes claimed, eventually even Suzushiro Haruka was not able to go without sleep. However, she was perfectly content to ignore the warning signs telling her that she needed to sleep, and work right up until the moment when she keeled over in exhaustion. As she had, just an hour ago, right before a meeting with the rest of the student executive.

Yukino had promptly deputized Kotegawa Yui, a third year junior high student whom Haruka had declared "showed some ability", to handle the meeting and indeed anything else that came up in the
next four hours or so, while she carried Haruka over to the cot in their office where she could get the
rest that she clearly needed. Having done so, it occurred to her that she could use some rest herself.

Instead, she sat there, watching Haruka sleep as she had so many times before. But this time was
different. *Mono no aware*, the fragility of their existence, informed her thoughts as she sat watching,
and so she was moved to speak.

"I love you," she said. "I wish I could say it while you were awake. I wish that things were different
... I wish my father could keep it in his pants, but that would be to unwish your very existence, so I
guess that I don't wish that after all."

Abruptly, her phone rang.

As one will do when one is engaged in an activity that one probably should not be and is interrupted,
Yukino momentarily panicked, and the phone rang again before she finally managed to answer it.
"Hello?" she hissed into the receiver. "Who is this?"

"Kikukawa-san?" asked a voice. "It's Sister Yukariko."

Yukino blinked. "How did you get this number?"

"... you gave it to me during the karaoke session," Yukariko said.

Had she? A lot of that night had gone by in a daze, except the mild humiliation she'd experienced
when she'd been forced on stage wearing an old-style junior high uniform and nobody had thought
she looked at all unusual. She supposed that she might have done so. "Okay, so, is something the
matter?"

"Yes! I'm so glad you asked, I don't know how I was going to bring it ... yes, I think there might be
another HiME here in the cloister."

Suddenly, Yukino was completely alert. "Really."

"Yes ... and I think she might mean me harm. I ... I don't know who else to turn to, Kikukawa-san. I
don't want to ask for help from that exorcist or the other magical nuns, because I think they might be
every bit as hostile towards me, so I thought of you, and ... please, can you help me? Even getting in
touch with one of the others would -"

"I'll see what I can do," Yukino assured her.

The problem was that the cathedral and the attached cloister were both within some sort of magical
blind spot that was proof against even Diana's surveillance. It was possible that once she was inside
of that spot, she'd be able to scry normally, but it meant that she couldn't just do it from here. She was
going to have to go into the field again.

But it had to be done. The case that had been driving Haruka to distraction, the actions of the
naginata-wielding maniac ... they were unmistakably the acts of a HiME. If this was that HiME, then
Yukino needed to take steps to deal with them *before* Haruka tracked them down. If she worked
with Yukariko, the fact that she had no actual combat function wouldn't be a problem.

"I hope you don't wake up while I'm not here," she said to Haruka, standing up.

"You sewing gumwhere?" Haruka asked without opening her eyes.

Yukino jumped back. "H-how long have you been awake?"
"Mmmm ... roan phing woke me," she explained, eyes still closed.

"I, um, I have to go to the cathedral and -"

"Yukino," Haruka said, eyes finally opening. "I am not an idiot. You will agree that I am not an idiot. Right?"

"I've certainly never thought of you as -"

"And you, Yukino, are my partner. The person I trust most. The person who always backs my half. So you won't lie to me."

"Ahhhh," Yukino temporized, a little too panicked to correct that to 'has my back'.

"You've joined up with those weirdos who think they're magicians, right?" Haruka asked with a note of serious disappointment in her voice.

Yukino stared. "You know about them?"

"... not an idiot, Yuki-"

"Okay, okay, right, no, Haruka-chan, I can honestly say that I haven't. But, well, um - I sort of know someone who has? And they might know who did that thing with the naginata."

Haruka got up quite suddenly. "Well that when are we fating war, an ingraved envitation?" She started towards the door.

"I ... I don't know who else to turn to, Kikukawa-san. I don't want to ask for help from that exorcist or the other magical nuns, because I think they might be every bit as hostile towards me, so I thought of you, and ... please, can you help me? Even getting in touch with one of the others would -"

"I'll see what I can do," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Thank you so much!" Yukariko exclaimed. "Please come as quickly as you can!"

With a few more words of farewell, she hung up, then turned to look at Ishigami. "Did that sound convincing?" she asked nervously.

"Very much so," he assured her from behind the curtain that cut off half of Yukariko's room, behind which he was presumably changing out of the soaked clothes he'd been wearing and into the spare clothes she'd scavenged from those Father Gendou had left behind. "I almost believed you, and I know the truth. That said, you should expect them to be suspicious when they arrive."

"I just don't understand why Suzushiro-san would do that," she said. "You're a teacher, after all. I know that her group is employed as a sort of campus patrol, but to drag a teacher in for an interrogation?"

"She's clearly gotten too big for her britches," Ishigami said. "Which is difficult to imagine, but regardless ... I hope she assumes that I followed her instructions to stop associating with you, because if she doesn't, she'll be even more suspicious when she arrives."

"There's just one thing I don't understand, though," Yukariko mused, trying very hard not to glance at the curtain, which thanks to the light on the other side of it, didn't really hide much of what was going on over there.
"Only -" Ishigami broke out in coughing.

"Are you all right?" she asked, turning fully.

"Fine, fine. What don't you understand?"

"Well ... I called Kikukawa-san, not Suzushiro. How do you know that they'll both come?"

Ishigami sighed. "Because Kikukawa is Suzushiro's lackey, and will always defer to her on anything that matters. Even if she hasn't told her about the Carnival - and I wouldn't be surprised if she **has** - she'll still seek her approval. That's just the kind of girl that they are. They're like that Kasuga brat and her limpet, that way."

"Please don't be so hard-hearted towards them," the Sister pleaded. "I'm sure that even if Sister Shakti is conspiring with the executive against us, those two don't know anything about it. Misorachan is a good girl. A little wild, but she has a good heart."

Ishigami muttered something she couldn't quite hear, that terminated with, "... go great with some fava beans."

"Eh?"

Before he could answer, there was a knock at the door. Behind the curtain there was a scuffling noise. Yukariko swallowed, drew back the curtain, and then went over to open the door.

"Considering that you sent a message asking me to come here, I find your tardiness in answering the door somewhat bewildering," Sister Shakti said as she peered through the doorway past Yukariko's shoulders. "Might I enquire what's going on?"

"Please come in, Sister. I ... uh, I need to ask you something fairly important."

Shakti obliged. Her nose wrinkled as she did so. "Did you go out in the rain for some reason? I smell wet fabric."

"I saw a dog crossing the street and went out to catch it before a car hit it," Yukariko invented. "I got very wet in the process. Sister ... I have to ask you something. Do you think that I am or have been betraying my vows with Ishigami-sensei?"

"... I don't see how my opinion matters -"

"Please. Just ... tell me if you believe it or not."

Shakti sighed. "I believe that you are in danger of doing so, if you haven't already done so." She drew in a deep breath, preparatory to telling her about her own failure to uphold those vows, years earlier, and how she'd come to understand that God wanted her love, not her obedience, and how he did not live in vows.

"I told you so," said a voice from under the bed.

Shakti swirled.

"Yes, you did. St. Vlas - please give her rest eternal," said Yukariko, with obvious regret in her voice. At that command, the chess piece on her bedside table swelled up to become a gigantic icon that bent down and swallowed the startled warrior nun before she could get off any of her spells.

"You're sure that this won't really hurt her!" Yukariko asked into the silence that fell in the moment
"Very sure," Ishigami lied as he crawled out from under the bed. "It's a bit like something called Cosmo Entelekhia. Just sleep and an idealized dreamworld. Nothing fatal." *At least not until the subject starves to death without any food or other sustenance ... a little slow, but it'll get the job done.*

The rain was finally, finally letting up, enough to allow people to venture out into the street. From the looks of the clouds, there would probably be more showers later. But right at the moment, it was just menacing overcast.

"Excuse me," came the soft, Kyoto-accented voice from behind him. "Professor Akashi?"

Akashi Wataru sighed. The day had almost been finally over, too! But he painted on a patient expression and turned to look at the young woman who'd called out to him. And then blinked.

The very pale young woman with reddish-brown eyes and light hair was standing not too far away from him, dressed in a purple kimono. Was there some sort of festival going on that he hadn't heard about? "Ah, yes, I'm him," he answered, then recognized her. "You're Fujino, aren't you? The Student Council President over at the mixed high school."

"That's so," she answered with a gentle dip of her head.

"Well. What can I do for you this evening?" he asked.

And she smiled then, and he suddenly realized that there were dark circles under her eyes, and that in them was a rather frightening light. "Why, you can die, of course," she said. There was quite suddenly a very long naginata in her left hand, and then her right hand came up to clutch it as well. "You can die, very, very slowly," she added.

"It's going to be another one of those days, isn't it?" Akashi answered - then tumbled back as she brought the naginata down to the ground where his feet had been merely an instant before, opening up a huge gash in the pavement. Physical enhancement wasn't his preferred form of magic, but he did have some skills in the area. "Would you mind terribly if I were to inquire why you want to kill me?" he asked as he quietly readied the one unincanted spell he had loaded.

"Not at all," the crazy woman replied, this time trying a horizontal sweep that could easily have opened up his intestines if it had hit. "Ask away," she added when it became clear that this had not transpired.

"Definitely one of those days," Akashi muttered, as his Call for Help spell went off, sending a signal to any other Mahora-associated mages or ministra in the vicinity. Since before Alladia's invasion, he'd been practicing with it more or less constantly. "So, then, why -"

"Because of what you did to your daughter, of course!" she explained in a voice with decidedly screechy characteristics as she went for a straight decapitating cut. "Hold still, damn you!"

It probably said something fairly unfortunate about his lifestyle that Akashi had to throttle the impulse to ask 'Which one?' (It said something completely unfortunate about his personality that he seriously considered asking, 'Why in the world would I do something silly like holding still?' instead.) Fortunately, he was quick-witted enough to realize that it was fairly unlikely that this high-school girl was associated with Yuna. So then it had to be - "This is about Natsuki, then?"

"Yes! This *is* about my Natsuki! I will kill everyone who ever made her sad!"
"Ah. One of those types of things, then."

Fujino had been about to try for a bisecting slice when he said that, but paused as the words registered. "One of those types?" she hissed. "You dare to reduce my feelings, my precious special unique feelings, to a type?"

By now, the fight had moved off of the sidewalk where it started into an intersection of two streets, and consequently began to gather bystanders, who stood watching in horrified amazement.

"All just CG, folks!" Akashi shouted at them. That got them to scream and run.

"... I guess that excuse has worn a little thin," he mused. "Anyway, I hate to burst your bubble, but you aren't even the first girl this week to go off on a rampage because her particular friend is having problems with -"

"We aren't friends!" Fujino shrieked. "I'm just useful to her!" A series of jabs with the tip of the naginata blade followed.

"Ah, one of those." 

"AAAAAGH!" the overwrought girl finally howled. "KIYOHIME!"

And then a huge purple snake exploded up from the ground just behind her, shattering the storefronts all around it with air displaced by its passage upward.

"Okay, now I'm really in for it," Akashi murmured. The problem wasn't so much the size or even the might of her "pet". (Though neither were anything to sneeze at.) But from harsh experience - fortunately not personal experience, but that of friends and colleagues who'd tried to do something about the Orphan menace in its early months - he knew that these creatures weren't nearly as vulnerable to the usual methods as he'd like.

And that experience was presently being confirmed. Fighting a summoned creature required one to target those parts of the creature that were "real", as opposed to the majority of it which was just ephemeral and illusory. It was a bit like a video game, where one had to strike at a target's "hit box". It wasn't so hard once one knew where that was. Again, a more complicated creature might shift its "hit box" around so that different parts were vulnerable at different times. Fortune-telling magic could counter that advantage.

But a creature invisible to fortune telling that shifted its unusually shaped hit box around with a pattern that you didn't have time to learn? There was hard, and then there was absurd difficulty that was impossible to enjoy. This was the latter.

Well, so what? He didn't do this for enjoyment, it was his duty and his job. That job had cost him much over the years. If today it cost him everything, he was ready to pay that price without counting the cost. He would not back down until someone more capable than he was showed up to take up the burden.

That was your cue to show up, he thought at whoever might be waiting in the wings. Nobody, huh? Ah well. Time, then, to sell his life expensively.

And just as he began to do so, a barrage of energy bolts slammed into the snake's side. One or two of them chanced to strike a vulnerable spot, and the snake shifted so that its head tilted slightly, almost toppling the madwoman atop it.
Akashi regarded this with an odd mixture of rejoicing and despair. The joy was simple. This moment was like so many from his past, when his wife had been alive and tended to announce her arrival to haul his ashes out of the fire in just that manner. The regret was also simple, because that wasn't his wife doing it, and he knew, too, what was going to happen because of this deliverance. He would have still more apologies to render to his wife when next they met. On the other hand, that meeting would be delayed a bit longer. Hopefully.

Chanting the William Tell Overture at the top of her lungs, Akashi Yuna dove from a nearby building and sent another barrage of pulses from her blasters towards the snake - with notably less effect. "Hey dad!" she shouted as she landed and kept right on shooting as she danced across the ground. "Who's the screwy snake lady? New girlfriend?"

"I think she's one of Natsuki's friends - or useful people I guess," he yelled back. "Is anyone else -"

"I'm working on it! Screwy things are happening all over, though!" Yuna called, dodging the snake's coils. "Okay - Natsuki's friend, let's get -"

"NO!" Fujino shrieked.

"Too late!" Yuna said cheerfully as she hit the speed dial marked "Mean Big Sis".

The buzzing of her cell phone awoke her, and Natsuki immediately regretted the fact. She felt awful. Not just tired, still, but ... sticky. Summer was over, right, so she shouldn't be this sweaty after a nap. And, on top of that, her mouth felt like someone had used it as a toilet. And, on top of that, she had the weirdest feeling that something terrible had happened.

For some reason, the image of Shizuru entering the spare bedroom and letting her kimono fall to reveal that she was nude beneath it danced through her head.

"Ridiculous," Natsuki grumbled as she searched for the phone, which was in the clothes she'd been wearing when she went to sleep, which were now neatly piled beside the futon.

"... wait, what?" she said, right as she hit receive.

A huge amount of noise, akin to that of a kaiju movie's rampaging scene, filled the air, almost making Natsuki drop the phone. "Heyyy, Natsuki!" shouted Yuna's voice. "Having a little trouble here, couldja come give us a hand?"

"What?" Natsuki repeated, blinking. "How did you get my phone number?" Oh, wait. I'm in the student direct-

"One of my fuckbuddies hacked your phone!" Yuna snapped in response. "What? Dad, I'm pretty sure she'd try and kick my ass if I said we were friends."

"What the hell is going on?" Natsuki asked, letting the robe de nuit she was wearing fall as she spoke into the phone.

"Well, it's complicated, but your girlfriend - oh, lady, who are you trying to kid? - is a HiME and has gone nuts and is trying to kill our dad. Could you come and maybe talk her out of that?"

"WHAT?" Natsuki shrieked as she pulled on her pants. "What is Shizuru doing?!"

"... it's interesting that I say girlfriend and you immediately know who I'm talking about - yeah, Dad, I know this isn't the time, but I don't get to do this kind of thing that often -"
"Hold on, I'll be there as soon as I -" *Get my motorcycle, which I parked in a garage downtown before I went walking with Shizuru. Oh boy.* Natsuki screwed up her face. This called for a desperate measure that she was reluctant to employ.

"Duran!" she shouted.

Every time she did this, Duran would give her a look. He couldn't really communicate, but somehow she had the distinct impression that if he *could* talk, he'd be saying something like, "Who do you think you are, Mononoke Hime?" But it was surely necessary this time, and -

Where the hell was Duran?

"Duran!" she repeated, this time doing her best to sound enticing.

"Is something the - oh, man, I liked that cafe! You're going down, you screwy bitch!" issued from the phone.

"Yes, something's wrong! I'm stuck out in the boonies and I can't summon my Child for some reason and I have no idea how to get to where you are!" Natsuki shouted, in what she judged to be a patient and reasonable tone, because she was not panicking. No way. Not panicking. Not her.

"Okay, okay, quit panicking!"

"I'm not!"

"I'm gonna hang up and call someone who handles this sort of thing. She'll be out to where you are in a bit!"

"How do you know where I am -"

"Hacked your phone! GPS! Geez, Natsuki, try to keep up!" Click.

"Duran!" Natsuki shouted once more, with a note of what even she had to admit was desperation in her voice. When her dog failed to appear before her, she began to dress, quickly.

Really, when you got right down to it, Yukariko being incredibly gullible made her only slightly more gullible than was typical for the residents of Mahora cathedral. At least, this was Ishigami's conclusion, and events seemed to be bearing his view out. After disposing of Shakti, they'd been able to convince Misora and Cocone that she'd actually headed off on a mission in town and left word that they should follow her when they could. Which of course they had.

See? Gullible.

Since that rather frightening Ciel person was off somewhere doing something - probably a mission for the covert side of the Church that Ishigami was just as happy he didn't know about - and Sister Caren was still not back from her mission to exorcise the spirits infesting a DVD factory, that really left just Sister Misato and her two - ahem - "pupils". (Disgusting creatures, in Ishigami's opinion.) And he was dealing with them right now.

"Noises coming from the trapdoor?" Misato asked.

"Yes. Since you and your aides are the ones who spend the most time down there, perhaps you could go and see what's the matter?" Yukariko asked, imploringly.

"Well, I suppose that's reasonable," Misato said slowly.
"Kind of a pain, though," Hayakawa observed, the superior bitch rolling her eyes.

"Oh, don't be like that, oneesama," Komatsuzuki pleaded.

It took a while, but they all tromped down the trapdoor just behind the altar - and then he was quickly able to close it behind them.

"Sister!" Misato's muffled voice was startled, but not actually panicked. "What happened?"

"I don't know!" Yukariko lied as she watched him shove a crate of art supplies he'd picked up somewhere on top of the trapdoor. "It just fell closed and -" She tugged on it, ineffectively due to the weight of the crate. "- it's stuck! I'll go get help! Please don't make a racket, you might upset people coming in for counselling. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"I suppose not," said Misato's voice.

See? Gullible.

"... and it's not like this is anything new, right, Rie-chan?" said Hayakawa's voice.

"AH!" Komatsuzuki let out a faint cry. "Oneesama!"

See? Disgusting. Fortunately, the faint noises of what they were doing got fainter as they moved further away from the trap door to give themselves more space in which to do it.

"Okay, there's just one last step," Ishigami said to Yukariko, speaking quietly but briskly. "If they see you looking apparently injured, they'll let down their guards a bit more and come to 'rescue' you."

"Eh?" Yukariko asked. "But I thought they were hostile and -"

"Ah, but, see, they don't know that you know that they're hostile, so they'll want to keep up appearances," he said quickly, inwardly seething that she'd picked now to stop being quite so gullible.

"Oh, that makes sense, I suppose. What do you think we ought to do?" she asked.

He looked about, and immediately noted the altar. And an awful idea occurred to him. "Why don't you lie down on the altar?" he asked smoothly. "And shift up your dress a little, like someone attacked you like that."

"That's very ... well, all right," she said, after seeing the desperate look that he put on his face. "I, I just hope God will understand -"

"I'm sure He will," Ishigami said. After all, hadn't He told him to do this, directly and personally? "Lie face down, that looks good. Yes. That's ... let's make it look really realistic, shall we?"

"What?" Yukariko said as she lay face down on the altar and felt her underwear being pulled down. And then, before she could say or do anything, there was another sensation, the feeling of something hard being shoved up against and then into her and tearing something open.

"NO!" she shrieked as she realized what was happening. "Wataru, don't!"

"Don't what?" he yelled right into her ear as he pushed up against her. "Don't stop fucking you like you need to be fucked? Okay, I won't!"

"No, no, I don't want this, stop it!"
"Make me stop it!" he hissed as his hips thrust against her buttocks. "Make me! You're the precious warrior princess, so make me stop it! It's supposed to make you stronger than any man, so you can fight in ways men can't! You have magical powers and magical weapons and magical helpers! So stop me if you don't want this!"

"I, I, I -" she babbled.

"What, you can't? Yes, you can, you just don't want to - because you know what happens if you do! You kill me and my soul goes to Hell and you don't want that because I'm the only man who's ever loved you!" Thrust, arm wrapping around her throat to pull her even closer. "The only one you ever loved!" Gripping tightly, almost enough to cut off her breathing. "The true face of your God!"

"Oh God, no, please stop!" Yukariko shrilled as her head swiveled, glancing up at the stained glass window. "Jesus, no -"

"He's not listening, Yukariko! He's not watching or he doesn't care or he was never there to begin with! Stop looking to him and start praying to me! I am the most important person in your life and I always will be no matter what I do! Pray to me!" And then he howled as his cock spewed up into her cunt.

And in the distance, the door to the church opened. "Sister, we're here to -" said a voice that abruptly fell silent. Then returned at a much greater volume. "YOU BITCH OF A SON, GET OFF OF HER NOW!"

Footsteps moving rapidly, and then Yukariko felt the body atop of her own being pushed off of her with great force, and then a series of sounds that what remained of her mind told her was the sound of flesh hitting flesh, but in a way totally different from what had just happened to her. Somehow, she managed to roll up to see Suzushiro Haruka, her face a mask of fury, punching Ishigami over and over again as he lay on the ground, not putting up any resistance whatsoever.

She felt a hand on her back, heard Kikukawa's voice exclaiming her title. But all that was very far away now. The only things that she could really sense with any immediacy were the sight before her, and the chess piece that was St. Vlas in her hand.

He was right, she thought. I could have stopped him at any time, and I didn't. So I am just as guilty. I am a sinner, and the source of sin. So be it, Lord. "St. Vlas," she whispered. "Give her eternal rest."

And again, the great horse was before them, and bending down with open mouth to seize Suzushiro and drag her startled form inside of him. And then there were two more sensations - the shriek of Kikukawa's voice calling for her friend, and the broken laughter of Ishigami.

She was hindered in getting her tight leather pants back on by how sweaty and sticky she was (Why? she thought with mounting dread) and so Natsuki wasn't completely dressed by the time she heard the strange noise not far away. Carrying her jacket rather than wasting time pulling it on, she slid open the bedroom door and headed out.

For a few seconds, she took the woman standing near the lake in a kimono for Shizuru, and a terrible hope that all of this was some strange misunderstanding blossomed in her heart. Then the differences registered - the light red tone of that woman's hair as opposed to the plain brown that it should have been. Hope died, as it always did. In its place, Natsuki found her voice. "Hey!" she called.

The woman turned to her. "Kuga Natsuki, I presume?" she called back. "Naba Chizuru - I'll be happy to take you to your sister's side -"
"She's not my sister," Natsuki interrupted. "Just let me get my boots - where the hell are - ah, just a minute." They were of course at the entrance to the building, where they'd probably been taken off of her when she was carried in. She carried them back to where Chizuru was waiting patiently.

Or not so patiently. "Time is pressing," she said as Natsuki paused to put them on.

"Yeah, well, I don't believe in going into fights barefoot," Natsuki growled. "Call it a personal peculiarity. You're one of Negi-sensei's people, right?"

"After a fashion, though my pactio was actually with someone else. But he is a precious person to me and to those whom I love dearly, so I'm always happy to assist him and his allies. Speaking of which -"

"Right, right, right." Natsuki had both boots on, now, and quickly headed across the ground to where the woman had been standing all this time. *If she was in such a damn hurry then why didn't she come right to me?* she thought irritably.

"Very well." Chizuru extended a hand towards her. "Please take my hand, and hold tightly, as I'm not entirely sure what will happen if you let go while I'm doing this."

"... 'doing this?'" Natsuki repeated as she took the hand offered to her. It was just straight teleportation, right? There one moment, somewhere else the next.

"Surgimus," Chizuru said as reply, and a globe appeared floating over the palm of her free hand.

"Gesundhaaaannnnnnnay!" Natsuki shrieked as she was dragged up into the sky, faster than she'd ever moved, faster than she could imagine moving, up higher than she'd ever been, to the point where the ground below looked like the representation of the land in a map. For a second they hung there - no, wait, they weren't hanging at all, they were free-falling!

"Please stop screaming, it's very distracting," Chizuru said as she scanned the ground. "We're not actually falling, this is a virtual environment. Admittedly, I don't know what will happen if I don't pick a destination before we impact on the surface below us. Really, that screaming is most annoying. I know twelve year olds with better nerves - ah, there we go."

And then they were falling even faster, to the point where Natsuki's scream of sheer terror didn't even have time to really get started before she was collapsing to the ground beside Chizuru, who looked down at her with a pitying expression that was really annoying.

But there was no time to complain about it. They were standing in the middle of an intersection in Mahora, staring up the huge purple coils of a serpent, which was facing away from them. But atop its head could clearly be seen the figure of a woman in a purple kimono.

"Shizuru!" Natsuki shrieked.

Haruka blinked.

What an odd dream! Sleeping the sleep of the just as she normally did, she generally didn't remember her dreams, but this ... well, the images were fading quickly, but the sensation of horror and disgust that they'd made her feel was less quick to dissipate. It had been bad enough to make her sit bolt upright in bed, something she'd been told never actually happened.

Shaking her head, she got out of bed, turned on the radio and did her morning calisthenics. This was quickly followed by a short shower and brushing of the teeth, and finally dressing herself in one of
her immaculate brown-grey school uniforms, clearly identifying her as the Student Council President. She supposed that she could probably have dispensed with it and worn an ordinary school uniform - after all, this was her third term in the office, and everyone in the school knew her face and name perfectly well by now.

But no, it was important to wear the outfit. As Superman-sama had once told her, "I wear this uniform because it makes me a target, so that the criminals will fire at me and not someone else." She didn't have to worry about being shot at, of course, since this was Japan and not America. But the idea was the same - she made herself a target, so no one else would be.

And besides, she liked the presidential tie a lot more than a standard one.

Descending the stairs, she politely greeted her mother and father, who'd been cheerfully discussing the news together, as any happily married couple would do, and then joined them for breakfast. The one real flaw in her life was how little time she got to spend with her parents, since both mother and father (and she as well, of course) were so busy with their work. So mornings like these, when they were all together, were especially precious.

After precisely fifteen minutes for breakfast, she indicated for the maid to start clearing her space, visited the bathroom to check her makeup and brush her teeth again, and put on her shoes in the front foyer, before turning to say farewell to her parents.

She paused.

Now, she knew, she would go out to the car which would take her to the school building, where she would be greeted by the School Security brigade on duty this morning. It was what she did every single school day. Without fail. And yet ... she couldn't shake the feeling that something else was supposed to happen. That she would be greeted at her own door by someone, and walk to school with that person.

It wasn't a bad idea. She should consider implementing it. After all, this was her last year of high school, and she would be leaving to enter the political arena in order to bring the structure and stability that she'd brought to her school to the country as a whole. She'd trained the brigades to follow her example, and she was certain that her legacy was secure. But it would be good if she got to know the potential candidates for next year's Presidential elections, to give her support to the ideal candidate and thus ensure their election. And then they could spend what was left of the school year discussing matters as they went to and from school.

And yet ...

There had been more to it than just that, hadn't there?

She shook her head. This was woolgathering, and she had work to do. Shoes were on, and out the door she went. Her driver greeted her, and she entered the back of the limousine where some reports were already waiting for her to read them on the way to school. Of course she did so, but she paused long enough to notice poor Fujino, the silly girl who'd actually thought she might have a chance of being in in the most recent elections, walking slowly to school. She'd heard that Fujino was incredibly unpopular after her defeat. She'd heard that Fujino's grades were suffering.

Ah, bliss.

And yet ...

She arrived at school just after she finished the last of the reports, and stepped out to greet the twelve
members of her brigade in their two straight lines, who chorused a firm greeting to her in response. Their crew chief gave her an update on the situation - nothing unexpected - and noted that the Headmaster requested a meeting with her at her earliest convenience. That too was as expected, and she would stop in to speak with him as soon as her other duties permitted.

The faculty were not her concern. The students were. She walked through her domain, and felt happy to see students patiently attending to their lessons. There was no truancy to be witnessed, no misguided youth cutting class to sleep in the sun on the rooftop. During breaks between classes, the students departed their rooms only to attend to their immediate needs, returning quickly to their classes once that was done. No lollygagging, no shenanigans. No bullying.

Definitely no bullying. She'd always hated seeing the weak and the helpless pushed down by the strong. That was the worst thing. The strong should support the weak, should help them to become strong themselves. She remembered well how she'd felt watching ...

But she'd stopped it of course, and then ...

Wait. Wait. WAIT.

She paused in her patrol of the hallway.

There it was again. Beyond the vague idea that someone should be there who wasn't, this time there was an actual hole in her memories. Why else could it be that she could remember the names and faces of the bullies she'd thwarted, all those years before, but couldn't remember a thing about the ...

the ...

*It had been a girl.*

The girl. Haruka couldn't remember the least detail of her face, the slightest syllable of her name. But she knew that she had been important. Yes. Until they met, she'd been content to simply follow the rules herself, with the serene certainty that everyone else could do the same if they chose. But then she'd seen *her* being bullied, and something had snapped inside of her.

There was more to life than simply following the rules. There was making sure that everyone else did as well. There was protecting those who wanted to follow the rules from those who would break them. That was why she'd made herself into what she'd become. That was why she was going to do what she would do.

She was trying to save the world for her.

**BUT SOMEONE HAD TAKEN NOT ONLY HER BUT THE MEMORY OF HER AWAY.**

No, this was crazy, her common sense told her. Such absurd things don't happen. You are imagining it. It could have been just a single meeting, with a girl who might have transferred away. She was investing it with more importance than it deserved.

For a while, at least, such murmurs of sanity eased her worries, and so she made it through the day without embarrassing herself, performing her duties as she always did. And then, to prove that the murmurs were right, she went to Library Island and asked the page - Miyazaki, that was her name - to provide her with the yearbooks for her elementary schools.

That girl seemed familiar, somehow, but she wasn't concerned with such things. Rather she would prove to herself that the girl she couldn't remember had simply been someone who had attended her school very briefly.
Except that she hadn't. There hadn't been any such brief transfers that year. Even if she hadn't been there long enough to be photographed, there would have been a name listed. And there wasn't. So the girl she couldn't remember couldn't have ever existed.

But she had. She had to have. Nothing in her life made sense if she hadn't existed. *Haruka* didn't make sense if she didn't exist. And this perfect world that she'd worked so hard to make was, on reflection, empty and lonely.

Then she heard a footstep nearby. Was this it? Had her determination broken through whatever wall was keeping her from remembering this girl, and would she now be rewarded with -

Fujino stepped into view, barefoot, her uniform ragged and torn, deep, aching need written clearly in her eyes and on her face. "Haruka-sama," she murmured.

"What," asked Haruka.

"Please," Fujino Shizuru moaned. "Please, Haruka-sama. Make me your butch."

What, no, what was this? Yes, without that girl in her life, she was lonely, but still, this wasn't what she wanted!

Okay, so it *was* ... but ... but ...

"You can't make me do this!" she cried out. "I'm happy! Don't you understand that? I'm happy! You can't make me ..." She trailed off.

And in the silence that followed, it became clear that no one was going to make her do anything.

Suzushiro Haruka drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "Okay," she said. "I was never meant to be happy, anyway." And with strength she didn't know she had, she reached out to either side of her, grabbed hold of *something*, and tore it away. So-called reality shredded beneath her touch, and she was flying away, pausing only to grab hold of a woman in an adjacent lie who was busily feeding and clothing lepers, and pull her out along with her.

And then she was back in the cathedral, and someone was shouting her name, and she turned and saw a face and knew a name.

"Yukino," she whispered.

And she didn't feel happy, as she had when she considered the perfect school.

But she did feel complete.

And then she felt fury.

"Shizuru!" Natsuki yelled again a moment later, when the figure atop the snake hadn't moved at all. "What are you *doing*?"

Slowly she turned. She was too far away for Natsuki to really get a good look at her face, but there was obvious fear and grief in her voice when she spoke at last. "Natsuki," she said. "I didn't want you to see me this way."

"Yeah, I get that!" Natsuki snapped. "That's not what I asked! What are you doing? What happened to waiting for enemy HiME to come after you?" She looked around at the blocks devastated by her friend's battle with her father and that annoying Yuna girl. It resembled pictures she'd seen of Japan
right after the Pacific War.

"Things changed," Shizuru answered after a moment.

"What does that mean?" Natsuki demanded.

"It means that things changed. I have decided on another course of action. I will destroy all the other HiME so that you and I are the last, and I will destroy everyone who has ever hurt you. I have already begun the latter task, Natsuki. I have killed the First District."

Natsuki opened her mouth to say something, anything, in response to that, but nothing would come out. The First District? The all-powerful agency that had been behind everything that had gone wrong in her life for years - and Shizuru had, in a matter of hours, killed them? How? Why?

... and now what?

"And now, I will destroy the father who abandoned you," Shizuru resumed her monologue a few moments later, unwittingly answering Natsuki's unvoiced question as she started to turn back to face her opponents.

"No!" Natsuki yelled, finally finding her voice again. "Shizuru, no! This is not what I want!"

"Oh?" Shizuru asked, almost too quietly for Natsuki to hear. "You don't hate him for abandoning you and your mother? You don't despise him for never being there for you in all the lonely years after your mother died? Really, Natsuki?"

"... no," Natsuki said, cursing herself for the liar that she knew that she was.

"My Natsuki shouldn't tell me lies," Shizuru said casually.

"I'm not lying," Natsuki lied some more.

"Oh, really." Abruptly, the great mass of the purple snake shifted slightly to the right, clearing her a line of sight and a path to where, she now saw, Akashi-sensei was lying on the ground. He looked seriously bruised. Yuna crouched in front of him, both of her guns out and pointed up at the serpent. Natsuki couldn't see, but somehow she knew that Yuna had just glanced in her direction before turning her attention back towards the snake, with an intensity that reminded Natsuki of her own.

"Prove it," said Shizuru.

Natsuki opened her mouth to ask what she meant by that, when abruptly she realized what Shizuru had to mean. She glanced towards Chizuru, who'd been silently standing behind her all this while. The younger girl nodded once, and they started walking.

"Just Natsuki," Shizuru snapped, her voice suddenly hard.

Shit, thought Natsuki. So much for her plan to grab them both and then grab Chizuru's hand so that she could get all four of them out of there. So much for the easy way out of this.

Chizuru halted where she was standing. "I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced," she said to Shizuru. "I'm -"

"I don't care."

"... all right, then."
Natsuki was slowly walking along the path that had just been opened up, conscious all the while that she was moving beside the great purple bulk of Shizuru's snake; that with a thought, that bulk could move to crush her. Shizuru had said that she wanted the two of the to be the last HiME, but she'd also said that things changed. What if they changed again?

But those speculations came to naught, and she was standing beside her father and her ... sister, she forced herself to think. She took a deep breath. "Make this look good," she whispered to him.

"Make what -" he started to ask.

And then she bent down to hug him. "I'm so sorry, daddy!" she 'sobbed'. "It's all my fault you got hurt! I'm sooooo sorrrrrrry! Please forgive me!"

He sat there frozen for a moment, before he coughed, and then hugged her back, with one hand coming up to pat her head. "That's all right, Natsuki-chan," he said, in a calm and gentle tone. It was strange how genuine it sounded. "Getting hurt to look after their children is what daddies are supposed to do."

"I love you, daddy," she lied.

"I love you, too, sweetheart," he answered ...

And abruptly, she realized that he wasn't lying at all. Now she was the one who was frozen. Not even the strange coughing fit that Yuna fell into broke her out of it.

"You see it, now, don't you, Natsuki?" Shizuru asked from behind her. "The one you were supposed to love the most, is the one you taught yourself to hate. That's why your Child is so small, because you've denied your true feelings. Treasure your father, Natsuki. Now if you'll excuse me I have several more bloodstained scenes to pass through."

"Shizuru, no!" Natsuki cried, paralysis broken, as she turned to look at her. But the serpent had moved quickly, and was heading away with Shizuru still mounted on its head.

"We will meet once more, at the end," came a cry back to her. All Natsuki could do was crouch there and stare.

"... your girlfriend is seriously messed up," Yuna said after a moment.

"I'm not sure you have any room to talk," Chizuru noted as she ran up to the three of them.

Yukino was, she had to admit, more given to contemplation than to action. Ultimate proof, if any were needed, of that fact was the way that she had just spent the most horrifying minute of her life so far. All she had done, in the minute or so after Haruka was swallowed up by what had to be Sister Yukariko's Child, was stare in mute astonishment at the space where she had been, listening to the broken sound of Ishigami's laughter.

And then the miracle occurred. Haruka reappeared in the same space from which she'd just vanished, face showing obvious signs of strain, breathing heavily, and one hand clutched tightly to the collar of a woman whom Yukino recognized as Sister Shakti. But that moment of recognition was brief, since she was too busy nearly shrieking, "Haruka!" No honorific, not this time. Not for the other half of her soul.

Haruka turned to meet her eyes, murmured her name with obvious relief. But Yukino's own relief
turned momentarily to terror as rage greater than she'd ever seen on Haruka's face abruptly lit it. For a second, she was genuinely in fear for her life as she wondered what she could possibly have done to earn that look. Then she realized that Haruka wasn't looking at her, but at the person whose body she was still supporting - at the Sister.

"You," Haruka hissed, letting Sister Shakti slump to the ground as her hands released, then clenched into fists. "Do you have any notion of what you just did to me?"

"I-I-I-I," Yukariko stammered.

"Do you realize what I had to give up to come back here?" Haruka asked, but clearly rhetorically, as she began to walk towards the disgraced nun with the speed and the dreadful impacability of a glacier. "Do you know how much it hurts to destroy your own perfect world? To walk away from the dreams of your fulfillment?"

Her hands opened, then clenched shut at her side as she walked towards Yukariko, and with a start, Yukino realized that they would be clenching shut around something soft and fragile very shortly. She opened her mouth to say something, anything, that would make Haruka turn away from this course.

Abruptly, Haruka stopped in mid step, and turned to see that someone was holding onto the back of her skirt. "Stop," Sister Shakti rasped from where she crouched on the ground.


With great difficulty, Shakti let go of her hold on Haruka's skirt as she stood up again. "Because we are not God, and we do not judge those whom we protect," she said while doing so.

Haruka regarded her coldly, but drew in a deep, long breath. "Very well." She sharply turned back to glare at Yukariko again. "Answer this if you can - why did you do this?"

"I thought it would be a, a humane way to stop you, and -"

"Stop me from -" Haruka started to demand, then went pale. "You did this to protect him?"

Ishigami had fallen silent once the two women had appeared. Now, he spoke up again. "You are such a useless fucking cunt!" he spat at Yukariko. "Can't even kill a lousy student council bitch, never mind any of the other HiME!"

"Wataru, don't -" Yukariko started to cry, then broke off in mid-exclamation. "Kill?" she asked quietly a moment later.

"At least I did something right while you were tricking that idiot Kasuga into leaving! You'll never find the bomb in time!" Ishigami sneered.

"Bomb?" chorused everyone else present.

There was a rapping on the trap door behind the altar. "Um, how is it going on prying this thing open?" asked a voice from below.

Nao was bored.

Before all this, she'd have dealt with her boredom by luring some idiot into an alleyway and robbing them blind. But though she still hated men, that was just no fun anymore. And also it was a bit early
in the day for that sort of thing, but her new-found moral objections were the central hindrance. Really.

So instead, a little while after she'd left the Sugimoto residence, she'd had Juliet use her webbing to build a sort of shelter on one of the roofs in the downtown district, and sat beneath it with her Child in silence, just watching the rain fall. And when it stopped, they'd sat and watched the clouds.

She found herself wondering just how self-aware Juliet was. She answered all of Nao's commands promptly, of course, but that didn't mean that she was mindless, did it? But since Juliet couldn't talk in anything except hissing noises that didn't really communicate much, it was hard to tell how much she understood about what Nao was saying. That said, it wasn't like she'd ever really talked all that much to Juliet, either.

_The things you think about when you don't have anything better to do_, Nao thought.

Abruptly, she could hear the sounds of someone running on the rooftops, and looked up to see Mai leaping across the alleyway to land on the one where Nao was reposing. Needless to say, that was the sort of thing that drew one's attention.

"Uh, hey, Mai," Nao said by way of greeting. "How -"

"Did you happen to say Reito come this way?" Mai asked without preamble.

"Reito?" Nao asked, blinking. It took her a while to get it. "You mean the student council vice president, Kanzaki Reito?"

"No, I mean -" She broke off mid-sarcastic retort. "Yes, that's who I mean. Have you seen him?"

"Nnno," Nao answered slowly. "Why are you looking for him?"

"Because I think I love the idiot and he's going off to commit suicide to stop himself from becoming the Obsidian Prince," Mai snapped.

"... well, I guess that's a good reason to look for someone. Sorry, ain't seen him."

"Fuck!" Mai swore, making Nao blink. "Where the hell could he have gone?" She looked around, almost as though she were expecting to see a sign marked 'this way to errant boyfriend' somewhere in her immediate vicinity.

"So, yeah," Nao said. "Before you go rushing off, could we maybe talk about what happened this morning?"

"... are you serious?" Mai said, slowly turning back to look at Nao.

"Well, yeah. I mean, you and I, we both -" She broke off, tried again. "It's just us, now, and -"

"Okay, let me just stop you right the hell there," Mai interrupted. "There is no us. There is never going to be an us. You said you don't think of me as your sister? Fine, I'm sick of trying to think of you as mine."

"What?" Nao asked. "But I didn't -"

"You didn't do what?" Mai pressed on. "You haven't hurt me recently, and that's about it."

"Hey!" Nao protested. "That's not fair! I'm trying to be a better person!" She ruthlessly suppressed the invoked memory of what she'd done to Ai-chan just a little while ago, which was really not
consonant with such ambitions.

"Goody for you," Mai sneered. "As for me, I'm fucked if I can see what good being good has ever done me, so congratulations, Nao! You were right all along about me being a real bitch underneath it all!"

"I don't wanna be right about that!" Nao yelled. "Come on, Mai, don't be like this!"

"I agree with the petite annoying red head," said Shizuru. She was standing on the edge of the roof, not too far away from either of them, regarding them with a hungry expression. "You shouldn't be like that, Tokiha. You should rather die screaming and in great pain."

Both Mai and Nao jerked sharply to the side when they realized that Shizuru was intruding on what they'd thought was their private conversation. Mai immediately took a step back when she saw that the president was holding a naginata that looked to have seen recent use.

"Incidentally, Tokiha," Shizuru continued casually. "I have seen seen Reito more recently than you have, and I believe that he would want me to pass on a message." Her eyes glowed brightly for a second as she spoke in a rather different tone. "You are too late."

Mai's lips tightened as she took another step back.

"Oookay, then," Nao said. "Sooo. You're a HiME, too, huh?" She was smiling in what she hoped was a soothing way. (It wasn't, but she wasn't to know that.)

"Indeed," Shizuru agreed, nodding.

"And ... you're here to kill us, right?" Nao asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Any chance at all that we can talk you out of that?" Nao said, spreading her unclawed hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I mean, there were all these speeches a while ago about how we shouldn't fight amongst each other, and even though I pretty much tuned them out, they seem very wise in retro -"

"You, in particular, are going to die gruesomely," Shizuru informed her, hands clenching on her weapon.

"Eh?" Nao asked. "What, what'd I do -"

"For what you did to her," Shizuru ground out.

"... you're gonna have to be a little more specific."

"Natsuki," Mai said from behind Nao. She'd backed up almost to the building's other edge. "This is about Natsuki. You kissed her after I wouldn't kiss you, didn't you? Nice going, Nao," she sneered sarcastically.

"How was I supposed to know she had a psycho girlfriend?" Nao protested.

Ordinarily, Shizuru would have answered that remark, likely in a rather violent manner. But right at the moment, her attention was more or less fixated on Mai. "Very clever," she said. "Understanding that this is about my Natsuki demonstrates that you are very clever, Tokiha. A pity you weren't clever enough to butt the fuck out of our lives when I told you to do so."

"Just the kinda girl I am," Mai said. And then stepped backwards over the edge of the roof and
dropped out of sight.


And then Mai began to rise up from the alleyway into which she'd dropped - not flying under her own power, but raised up by the dragon on whose head she was perched. "Last chance to walk away," she announced as Kagutsuchi rose up.

"I think not," Shizuru said, stepping back onto the head of her giant serpent which also rose up from the adjoining alley.

"Okay, how the hell are those things fitting into the space between the buildings?" Nao protested. "It's narrow!"

"Shut up, Nao," Mai snapped.

"Be quiet, Yuuki," Shizuru sneered.

"She knows my name, how thrilling!" Nao yelled. "Look, seriously, what the hell are you trying to accomplish here?"

"I will destroy all the other HiME, so that only my Natsuki remains. Then, and only then, she will destroy me," Shizuru answered.

Mai's angry expression broke into one of confusion. "Wait, what? That doesn't make any sense - she's your most important person, isn't she? Don't you know what will happen to her if you're defeated?"

"Yes. But I believe that the role of Last HiME Standing will trump that of 'beloved of a vanquished HiME','" Shizuru answered calmly. "If nothing else, the fact that she will receive a wish from the Prince should save her life. It's the perfect and ideal plan. And forever after, she will remember me as the person who gave her the greatest gift imaginable." Shizuru's eyes were very far away as she said that.

"But you'll be dead," Nao pointed out, stunned by all of this.

"I belong dead," Shizuru answered, eyes coming back to the here and now. "So do both of you."

"No," Nao said, shaking her head. "No, this is crazy. This is ... I'm not going to fight you. This is crazy," she reiterated.

Shizuru considered. "Very well. I will not fight you either."

Nao sagged at what she took for a sign of sanity. "Thank you."

"I will simply murder you."

And in a fraction of a second, Kiyohime's tail swept up and smashed down onto the roof, right on top of where Juliet crouched awaiting orders. The spider-woman's fragile body shattered beneath the weight of the attack, and promptly disintegrated into green lights that vanished into nothing.

"One down, three to go," Shizuru said easily.

Misora wasn't a complete idiot, no matter what her test scores said. She simply preferred to exercise her brain at her own pace, in her own way, since she had to exercise her body to its utmost in pursuit of her passion. She could, however, figure things out. Like how she'd figured out about Chisame and
Negi-sensei, and Mana and Negi-sensei, and a few other people and Negi-sensei, and ... well, you get the idea. She knew stuff.

And in the exact same way, she figured out that something was wrong with the request that she'd supposedly had passed on to her by Sister Yukariko from Sister Shakti. Really, she supposed that it should have been easier to realize that Shakti would never do something like that, regardless of circumstances. Pass on orders? When she could show up personally to tell Misora how much she would rather have just about anyone to perform errands for her? Never happen.

"This is a set-up, isn't it?" she'd promptly asked Cocone, who'd been riding her shoulders, of course.

"I'm still not talking to you," said Cocone.

"Hey, come on," Misora groaned.

"You asked me to marry you, and I said yes, and we set a date, and you broke it," Cocone said. It was the longest sentence she'd said to Misora in some time. "So I'm not talking to you." Beat. "If I were talking to you, I'd agree that this was a set-up."

She was going to have to deal with this eventually, but now was not the time. Now, if Misora really was as silly and vapid as certain people seemed to think, she'd have turned around and run right back to the cathedral and gotten caught up in whatever screwiness was happening, and gotten smacked upside the head for doing something stupid. But because she wasn't that dumb, she was going to go get reinforcements and bring them back with her, so she could get smacked upside the head for involving outsiders in church business.

Of course, matters being what they were, it wasn't so easy to find that help. Her first instinct of getting Negi-sensei involved floundered on the banks of the situation developing over at Evangeline's old house. Given the givens, it probably wasn't wise to try and pull him away from that. So instead she headed to one of the muster points by the World Tree and found some help there.

Of course, having found help, she couldn't just dash off and expect them to follow her, since they weren't as fast as she was. No, she had to lead them there, and then fling open the door to see -

"Where's the bomb?" shouted Suzushiro Haruka as she pummeled Ishigami-sensei. "Where did you put the bomb you holeass!" Behind her, Kikukawa Yukino was trying without much success to calm her down, while Shakti was standing grim sentinel over Sister Yukariko, who was all but collapsed in one of the pews. Above them all was this huge creature that looked like a horse from a chess set.

"Uh, I brought help," said Misora as she entered the cathedral.

Shakti looked up, and then something very strange happened. "Misora," she said, and then an impossible sound came out of her mouth. "Thank God!" It sounded like that. Couldn't have been, though.

Fortunately, sanity returned to the universe when Shakti saw who was with Misora and Cocone. "Oh, no," she muttered.

"Hi, sexy!" said Kageyama Yamiko as she strode in like she owned the place, followed by the perpetual frown on the face of Chizuno Masuto and the slightly more respectful, bespectacled Senou Kaede, both in jeans and shirts that contrasted quite a bit with Yamiko's old-fashioned school uniform.

"So what's the situation this time?" Chizuno asked. "Sister," he added somewhat belatedly.
Deciding to work with what tools God had given her, Shakti pointed to where Yukino had finally pulled Haruka off of Ishigami's giggling, bleeding form. "He claims that he set up a bomb somewhere in here while his accomplice was doing something else. Won't tell us anything else. I don't know whether to believe him but -"

"I think we can," interjected Senou, adjusting his glasses. "He's got recent burns, electrical I think, on his hands that are kind of indicative of fiddling with electronics - the sort of thing you get when you're putting together a timer or detonator."

"Scannus Sherlockus practice p-pays off," Yamiko observed, her cheer now more or less absent.

"Okay, I'm gonna run all through the building and see if I can find the -" Misora started to volunteer.

"NO YOU'RE NOT!" Shakti roared.

"But -"

"She's right, kohai," the Mage of Shadow and Crystal interjected. "We don't know what kind of bomb we're dealing with, timer or proximity detonator or contact mine or what else. And we can't do fortune telling in here with the wards up."

"Once again, magic A is screwing up magic A," Masuto commented. "Typical. Got a plan, Professor?"

"Don't I always?" Yamiko said, doing her best to look cool.

"No. Usually I have to come up with them and you take all the credit."

"... well, this one (that I came up with without any input from you) would work better if we had more people," she said, glaring at one of the cathedral's walls for no readily apparent reason. "But it should work with the three of uss. Shields up, we split up to go through the building and make sure that no one's so d-distracted with what they're doing that they don't even realize that there's a situation and get the place ev-vacuated. If any of us spot the bomb, drop everything and haul ass out of here."

"Four of us," interjected Shakti. "I can -"

Yamiko promptly thwapped her between the eyes. "I couldn't do that if you were at one hundred per cent," she said. "I couldn't do that if you were at fifty."

"Hold on," interrupted Haruka, bewildered by what she'd heard this conversation. "Who are you people?"

"We're the good guys," SCM explained cheerfully.

"Cough cough," the Prof and OM chorused.

"Well, I'm a good guy, he's dating a high schooler so he's disqualified, and she's our psycho sidekick," Senou elaborated.

"... setting all that aside," Haruka said, glaring at the aforementioned college-age individual dating a high schooler. "How are you going to deal with this - what do you mean by shields up, and -"

"Magic," all three chorused.

"She doesn't know about magic," Shakti ground out.
"... I wonder what ermmmnnine sex is actualllly like?" Yamiko speculated aloud.

"Maybe we can Negi-sensei her," SCM muttered. "He hasn't made a new Pactio with a student in a while, he must be in withdrawal."

Shakti glared at him. "Not funny," she ground out.

"I was joking?" Kaede said, blinking confusion that might or might not be unfeigned. You could never tell with him. "Isn't 'send them to Negi-sensei to be Pactio'd' the go-to solution for stuff like this? I'm pretty sure it worked before."

"Anyway, I think he's busy with the thing," Yamiko noted.

"Oh, yeah, the thing," Kaede agreed sheepishly.

"What thing?" Haruka demanded, a bit loudly.

"Do you really want to know more about this stuff?" Masuto asked her with a dour expression on his face.

Haruka opened her mouth to answer.

Eventually a fly flew in.

"It's one of those days," Shakti admitted.

"Oh, then we're cool," Yamiko decided.

After a few more moments of consultation, divvying up the task, the three Iridians set out - Masuto calling up his mask's power to turn him into an imagined version of one of the world's most wanted felons, Senou employing his shadow magic to create a partner, and Kageyama whistling as she swung an axe she summoned up out of nothing. Under Shakti's guidance, the two executives and the nuns withdrew from the cathedral to what she hoped was a safe distance. Ishigami was left behind, still chuckling. Yukino watched Yukariko nervously as she was led past him, expecting one of them to do something to throw the evacuation effort off.

Neither of them even looked at each other.

Once they were at a safe distance, Misora drew in a deep breath. "Okay," she said. "I know I could probably have picked a more ... well, a less eccentric bunch, but they were available, so I -"

"You did well," Shakti said quietly.

Misora blinked. After a desperate few moments suppressing the urge to scream at Cocone that Shakti was some sort of doppelganger, she found her voice again. "You, uh, you don't say that very often."

"You don't do well often enough for me to say that very often," Shakti observed, with a bit more of her usual edge in her tone. "But I will not deny that you occasionally show some ... vague signs of ability from time to time. And since I am not obliged by some Confucian ethic to refrain from praise, they should be encouraged when they manifest. So. You did well."

"Uh, thanks," Misora said, smiling widely. "Y'know, I think you're pretty cool, too, and -"

"Don't push it Misora."

"Right, right. So. What happened?"
Shakti let out a long sigh. "I was shown what I truly want to be ... and thus how far I have fallen from what I once aspired to be. I'd really rather not discuss it further than that. All right?"

"Okay." There was really nothing more to say, was there.

Meanwhile, Yukino was becoming very nervous with the silence that Haruka had fallen into after watching all that magic. But she had never really had to take the initiative in starting a conversation with Haruka, and wasn't really read to do so now, either. So the silence continued -

"Yukino," said Haruka. She was staring at the church without looking in Yukino's direction when she spoke.

"Yes?" Oh, that was too high even for her.

"These people have ... abilities that I am reluctantly forced to describe as magical. I am not delusional about this?"

"No."

"No. And you ... have been aware of the exigence of persons with such abilities for some time now. Without having made me aware of their exigence."

"Ah, um. No, but. Um ... you, you didn't ask?" Oh, I can't believe I just said that.

And now they were back to the silence. "I suppose that I did not, at that," Haruka allowed. "Yukino. You ... possess such abilities." It wasn't a question.

"Yes." But that was the answer nonetheless.

Haruka nodded. "Have you used them to commit any crimes or violations of the student bylaws?" she asked brusquely.

Yukino blinked, then spent a few moments reflecting on her actions in the last little while as well as the extensive list of student bylaws. "I don't think so," she said at last.

"All right then." Deep breath. "Effective immediately you are suspended from all duties as a member of the student executive."

"What?" Yukino cried, drawing the attention of the nuns before they abruptly decided to mind their own business. "But, but, Haruka!"

"I cannot permit persons who have powers and capillaries I know nothing about to act as enforcers of proper behavior by the students of this academy," Haruka said sharply. "Wherefore you will spend as much time as required to educate me about those powers, starting tomorrow."

"... and then -" Yukino broke off, not really daring to hope.

"And then you will resume your duties, which you will, barring further bouts of idiocy that keep you from telling me stuff I need to know, retain for the rest of your life. Because you and I - I learned some things, recently, and ."

Whatever else Haruka might have been about to say was lost as they all saw Masuto and Senou come running out of the building at high speed - technically, Senou was being carried by his shadow ally rather than running. They didn't stop until they were at the same position as the others.

"You found the bomb?" Shakti demanded.
"The Prof did, she sent a telepathica to us to tell us to get out of there," Masuto snapped, letting his mask fall. "She said she'd be -" 

"What?" shouted SCM as he held a card to his head. "What do you mean there's no time?" Beat. "What do you mean you're going to try and cut the right wire?" Beat. "YAMIKO WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN YOU CUT THE WRONG -"

And then a huge fireball exploded from the cathedral's belltower, making its bells ring once more with a terrible dissonance as the flames surged out to begin burning the roof.

Dead silence fell for a second.

"Baka Professor," whispered Masuto.

Yukino was never sure what made her turn to look, but when she did, she let out a cry. "Where's Yukariko?" she yelled.

He was watching the flames lick at the roof above his head, in too much pain to even consider moving, and still chuckling faintly.

"When you said those things ..." said a quiet voice nearby. "When you did those things, and when you said the other things, were you trying to make me hate you, so it would hurt less when you died?"

He lolled his head over to look at the Sister, standing in her torn habit not far away. "Would you believe me if I said yes?" he rasped.

"Yes," she answered.

"That's so pathetic," he sneered.

The crackling of the flames grew louder every second.

"So now what?" he asked.

Without a word, St. Vlas was leaning over both of them.

"Now we both sleep. I hope we have the same dream," she said, and brought down her hand.

It took them both. Moments later, the roof came down, along with one of the larger bells, to shatter the chess piece completely.

Slowly, Senou took the card down from his head, letting the hard-drawn little Telepathia Receptor flutter away. He could always make another one. "In hindsight, she probably should have had me take care of it," he said in the tones of one thinking out loud. "It doesn't seem to have had a magical component, and Shadow constructs are quite optimized for bearing purely physical force."

Haruka glared at him. "Don't you have any respect for the dead?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with Kageyama?" he asked blandly. "Respect after death is earned with achievements made in life. It seems to me just dying doesn't count. Everyone can do it."

Misora scowled. "Okay, that's pretty heartless," she said.
"No, I'm still working on summoning those," he said absently, already thinking of the latest paper from Magister Ansem.

"She probably touched your life somehow," Misora tried.

"Highly inappropriately," Senou confirmed. "Internal matters prevented me from filing the lawsuit. I suppose I could sue her estate -"

"Mage, enough," Masuto interjected. "In any event, nothing human could have survived that."

"Again, what does that have to do with Kageyama?" Senou quipped.

Abruptly, the front doors of the church, which had collapsed inward when it started to fall to pieces, exploded outwards. There was a girly scream, and Senou was suddenly cowering behind Sister Shakti. "I SAID NOTHING! NOTHING! ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!"

Shakti would have glared at him but her attention was pretty fully taken up by the figure that had just stepped out of the ruins of the church and was now slowly walking towards them. Denuded of hair, skin melted and burnt jet black, every facial feature effaced save for one - those strange pink eyes. And in its right hand, clenched firmly, an axe.

"Oh Sweet Jesus," blasphemed Misora.

"Zombies are real on top of everything else?" Haruka groaned.

"It's not a zombie," said Shakti. "She's alive, but I don't - well," she amended in mid-statement, glancing at the axe. "I have an idea why she's still alive."

"Then she'll heal?" Cocone asked quietly.

"No," said Shakti. "Her artifact doesn't heal."

The figure walked towards them, ever so slowly. It came at last to stand in front of Chizuno, who had (perhaps unconsciously) stepped up to meet it. They stood a while in silence, facing each other.

"mikado," it rasped.

"She wants to watch Gilbert and Sullivan now?" Senou whined.

The impossible eyes rolled up, and the figure started to collapse.

"Senou!" Masuto snapped.

"Yeahyeahyeah," Senou replied, already in the process of creating a shadow construct to catch the figure before it hit the ground.

"I think she was talking about -" Shakti started to say.

"Mikado Ryouko, the new school doctor," finished Masuto. "She's moved into that old house on the outskirts of town, right?"

"Ah, yes, I believe so," Shakti said, startled. "How did you know -"

"I just know stuff, all right?"

You'd have expected it to be left there. "Oh, is that the new doctor who gave you the new
prescription for your, uh, little problem that you found out about after you started dating Kotonon?"
asked Senou as he got up.

"Hey, here's a thought - SHUT UP," snapped Masuto as he smacked Senou with a harisen he got from somewhere.

"I don't have that problem by the way," Senou stage-whispered.

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Cocone.

"No reason. And awayyy we go," he proclaimed as the two of them dashed off towards the outskirts of town, carrying the body between them.

Cocone stared down at the card with the phone number on it that she'd just been surreptitiously handed. "Did that person just hit on me?" she asked no one in particular.

"Uh, yeah, he kind of did. We ought to report him to -" Misora started to say, looking a little upset as she reached out to take the card.

Kanji representing the word "Iiiiinteresting" floated behind Cocone's head as she held the card out of Misora's reach. "I'm still not talking to you," she said.

"... no amount of therapy is going to make this right, is it?" asked Yukino faintly.

All that Nao could do was stare at the tail that had just crushed Juliet, and incidentally all of her hopes, dreams and aspirations. On some level, she felt like she should collapse to her knees and begin weeping and wailing. But the paralysis just wouldn't release her to do that. She vaguely supposed that was good, since she'd rather not give either of the other women watching her that sort of satisfaction.

All that Mai could do was look on in horror at Nao. Despite her anger and irritation with the other girl, she would never have wished this on her. Despite what Nao herself had said about thinking she deserved to see her mother die, Mai knew that she didn't. No one deserved this. And fury started to build in her, fury at -

_Y'know, it suddenly occurs to me that taking my eyes off Shizuru for this long might not be such a good idea. Here I am thinking strange things again when I'm about to -_

All that Shizuru could do was try to win this thing. With the leverage gained from Kiyohime's tail being wrapped around the building, she had her Child jerk its head towards where Mai and her dragon were floating dazedly. Kagu-Tsuchi, perceiving the danger more clearly than his HiME did, began to pull back, but not fast enough to evade Kiyohime's lunge - and the serpent's tongue which lanced forth from its mouth, wrapped around Mai's body and then jerked her back into its maw, closing around her before she could even scream.

"Three of four," Shizuru murmured, looking down on Nao, who was still unmoving below. "And so I can take my sweet, sweet time with the one who dared to kiss my -"

And then, somewhat belatedly, it occurred to her that Kagu-Tsuchi had not vanished with Mai's presumed death. Would it only do so when she was digested? Regardless, it was perhaps wise to back off, since a strange flame had begun to dance on the dragon's brow.

As she did so, the flame took form.
Shizuru's eyes nearly bulged from their sockets.

Mai, standing on Kagu-Tsuchi's head once more, blinked. "What?" she asked, confused.

"You!" Shizuru shrieked. And then, quite suddenly, she laughed. "So," she said. "The contest is rigged. How appropriate for a carnival. Your Child grants you such power that you cannot be defeated. My plan could never have worked. So it goes."

Mai was only half listening as she clung to her dragon's head while it began to shake, preparing to fire its mightiest blast of flame at the opponent. Yet she did hear her, and made a logical connection she had not heretofore considered. Shizuru was doing all this for Natsuki. Natsuki was Shizuru's most important person. If she defeated Shizuru ...

At speeds beyond light, images of Natsuki in all the phases of her personality, all the ways that Mai had known her, flashed through Mai's mind - Natsuki as enemy, as ally, as humiliated underwear-thief victim, as mourning daughter, as new-found cousin, as team-mate, as friend, as tsundere, as -

"NO!" she shrieked at Kagu-Tsuchi.

One of the dragon's eyes rotated around to regard her, somehow communicating annoyance despite a lack of any emotion.

"I SAID NO!" she repeated.

The dragon's head bent back and spewed its flame up into the sky, driving back the clouds themselves.

Shizuru stared at Mai in shock. "Why?" she asked. "Why did you -" She broke off, staring at her rival as Mai clutched the dragon's head, not looking at her.

"Oh," said Shizuru after a moment. "What cruel mercy. I hate it and you, Tokiha."

"Sorry for being cruelly merciful, then," Mai choked out, still not looking at her.

At a mental command, Kiyohime began to withdraw. "So I must be satisfied with what I have accomplished today," Shizuru said. "So it goes. I hope we will not meet again, Tokiha Mai. I hope your death, when it comes, is long and very painful. Goodbye."

And then she was gone, and out of sight.

Mai dropped down from Kagu-Tsuchi's head to the roof, and banished him with a glance in his direction. She looked over at Nao, who hadn't moved at all through all of that.

"Nao," she started to say.

"Fuck off and die," Nao hissed. "Oh, wait. You can't. Hooray for fucking you."

"I didn't ask for any of this," Mai said weakly.

Nao had been limping over towards the edge of the building as Mai said that; the words made her stop dead in her tracks and turn back towards Mai with an incredulous expression. "Yes, you did," she said. "Just like everyone else, you were given a choice about accepting the power or not. And you chose to accept it. The problem is, you got more than the rest of us. Shiho was right about you - you are either cheating somehow, or someone is cheating for you. So let's not have any of that crap about how you didn't choose this."
That said, she turned away and made her way over to the fire escape. "Oh, come on!" she shrieked as she saw that Shizuru had crushed it beneath Kiyohime's mass.

"It's not much to look at it, but it's home," Akashi-sensei said as he opened the door to his apartment and let Natsuki in, followed closely by Yuna who'd been in a telepathic conversation for the last few minutes. His younger daughter had never quite mastered the art of doing that completely non-vocally, so she would periodically utter things like "Uh-huh", "Okay," and "Wow that sucks," despite these things having nothing to do with any verbal conversation going on.

Not that one was. Natsuki hadn't said anything, or really responded in any way, since she'd silently agreed to come back to his apartment, since her own had apparently been broken into the previous night and she had no idea where to stay. Even now, she simply surveyed the mildly dusty rooms filled with books for a few moments before tromping over to the kitchen table, sitting down on one of its chairs - one with some unfortunate attached memories, actually - and letting her head slump down on the tabletop.

He wanted to talk to her. From what she'd said, earlier today, she clearly had some very false ideas about what had happened in her childhood that he wanted to correct. But now was probably not the right time.

"I'll get right on it," Yuna said. "... and hey, I'm sorry, Negi-kun. Right. Bye." Her eyes refocused on her immediate surroundings, and she sighed. "Dammit, Dad, why can't you please learn to use a featherduster?"

"I don't think it's that bad!" he protested, but she wasn't listening, instead marching over to the side of the table opposite from Natsuki, and leaning over it.

"Okay, do you wanna know what I was just on the horn to Negi-kun about?" she asked.

"Not particularly," Natsuki mumbled without looking up.

"Yes, you do," Yuna contradicted.

That got her to look up, with an annoyed expression on her face. "Clearly, you know my mind better than I do. What am I thinking, right now?"

"You shouldn't use such bad language," Yuna said piously. "I'll make this short. You know the tower out in the forest?"

Natsuki leaned back. "The one where Kazehana Mashiro lives?" she guessed. "What about -"

"Lived," Yuna corrected.

"... she's dead?" Natsuki asked, startled.

"We don't really know for sure, haven't found a body yet. But the whole place has gotten blowed up real good. That's why Negi got involved - it used to belong to a friend of ours. Well, of his, mostly," Yuna admitted. "I pretty much thought she was a creepy little bitch and that was before I found out that -"

"Yuna," interrupted her father.

"Anyway. That's what most of our mages and their ministra have been doing today, going over that wreckage trying to find out if anyone's still alive, and/or figure out what happened. You got any
ideas on that score?"

Natsuki breathed out before she started talking. "It can't have been Shizuru, because she was fighting us, and before that -"

"Before that, she was turning the basement of a building downtown into an abattoir," Yuna interjected.

"The First District," Natsuki whispered. She raised her voice to continue. "I, I can't see Mai or Nao doing what you're talking about. Mai is -" Stupid. Sweet. Good. "- not that kind of person, and Nao ... doesn't have the power. Out of everyone that's remaining, I think it was probably Mikoto. She hates Kazehana, always says that whenever she deals with us."

"Kazehana's bodyguard -"

"Fumi," Natsuki supplied. "If Mikoto beat her, then you're not going to find a body. Not Kazehana's body, anyway. She's almost certainly Fumi's -" Natsuki broke off, glanced at the adult in the room.

"She's her dad?" Yuna asked, eyebrows raised.

"Most important person, you -" Natsuki snarled.

"Calm down," Akashi said, speaking up. "And stop provoking her, Yuna."

Yuna made a 'whatever' gesture. "That's not the only screwy business that happened today. There's also -"

Natsuki made a 'no more' gesture.

"We'll probably never know what really happened at the tower, I think," Akashi mused as he looked out the window.

A Few Hours Earlier

Mashiro and Fumi had only been back at their home for a few moments, and Fumi had only begun to make a fresh pot of tea, when the elevator began descending, doubtless to pick someone up from the ground. They both stood a moment and listened to it.

"Our guests will be here momentarily, Fumi," Mashiro announced.

"I am prepared to receive them, Master," her maid replied, unsheathing her weapon with a dead expression.

"Very well."

And so they waited in silence. The elevator descended, an interval elapsed, and then it began to rise again. In the distance, they heard the doors open, and two pairs of feet walking down the hall towards them.

"Do you think we ought to have opened the door to our sitting room to them?" Mashiro asked quizzically.

The doors exploded off their frames as they were kicked inward by Mikoto, who stood there snarling for a few moments, before that which was employing Reito walked smoothly into view.
"They have clearly found a -" different solution, Fumi was about to say, but then her patient evaluation of Mikoto's face alerted her to a certain fact. Her eyes were not glowing with the signs of the Obsidian Prince's mind control that her master had taught her to recognize. Which meant that the girl standing before her, did so of her own volition.

"Hello, basan," Mikoto ground out.

"Ah," Mashiro sighed nearby. "You decided to employ simple trickery this time, rather than your hypnosis," she said casually to the Obsidian Prince.

"It seemed a greater challenge," he admitted. "Though actually it was fairly easy. She is quite furious with our aunt."

"It's your fault!" Mikoto shouted, without showing any particular interest in the other conversation going on at the same time. "You ran away, so aniue thought he should too!"

"Oh?" Fumi asked, finding her voice after a momentary paralysis of the vocal cords. "Is that what he told you happened?"

"Yes, that's what jii told me!" Mikoto snapped.

Fumi flinched at the reference to her father. "Oh, dear," she said quietly. "You really have been shaped into a perfect little weapon, Mikoto. What happened to the old man, if I might ask?"

"I killed him," Mikoto said proudly. "He told me to kill him, so that he'd know that I loved only aniue. So I did."

"So you did," Fumi agreed, shaking her head. "Well, the old monster lived up to his own philosophy, you can say that much for him. And you love only your brother?"

*Mikoto flinched. "Yes," she said angrily. "I ... I thought I loved ... someone else. But I was wrong to think that, and wrong to think that I could, and she hates me anyway." For all that last was delivered in a dismissive tone, Fumi could hear the cri de coeur beneath it."

"I see. Mikoto. I'm going to have to kill you, now," Fumi told her gently.

"No. I am going to kill you," Mikoto said angrily. "For aniue! Enough talk!"

"Have at you," Fumi agreed, and they struck against each other in that instant.

It had all been for this, Fumi realized. All the training, all the practice, the duels, the days when she could barely walk with how tired and wounded she was. All of it for this single battle ... and it wasn't enough. She suspected that it could never have been enough. Mikoto's training had begun when she could barely even walk, while Fumi had come to the sword much later.

And yet, the difference in their skills was as nothing to an even more startling realization that slowed Fumi terribly. She had lied to her master. She had lied to herself as well. Deep in her heart of hearts, she did not want to kill her little niece, and was not reconciled to the necessity of her death. While deep in *her* heart of hearts, Mikoto yearned for nothing more than to lash out at anything that she perceived as a hindrance to those for whom she cared. The difference in motivation made all the difference in the world.

Three blows exchanged, three parried, and then Miroku smashed through Fumi's guard and sliced across her abdomen. Even the tranquility of directing her final thought to her Master was denied her, as Fumi collapsed in terrible pain to bleed out on the floor of the sitting room.
"Ah, what a magnificent passage of arms," the Obsidian Prince said sarcastically. "That should take care of her Child, too, and so you will soon be heading -" He broke off as he turned to look at Mashiro.

Who smiled at him, through tears of great pain, as she slowly turned to green light while still seated in her wheelchair. "I think you have perhaps miscalculated," she said, right before she went away all together. "What a pity ..."

A few minutes earlier, two girls had emerged from the forest and began running up the stairs circling the tower. "Wouldn't it be a lot faster if we flew?" called one of them, a red-head with a pair of long pigtails that vaguely resembled antennae.

"She told us to keep a low profile," replied her companion, Mai's mysterious classmate Nina. "What part of flying is low profile?"

"But -"

A frustrated sigh burst from Nina's mouth, not an easy thing to do when one is running at top speed up a flight of stairs. "Every time, you do this. Every time I think you've made a little progress, I realize that you're still the same idiot you were back at the beginning!"

"Technically, I think we're a bit before the beginning," her companion observed, just a bit cheekily.

"Quiet, antsy."

"I'm not an ant, I'm -"

At that exact moment, the woman calling herself Mashiro Kazehana took her last breath. They felt her passage as though it was their own, and both stopped dead in their tracks.

"No," whispered Nina.

"We blew it," her companion murmured faintly, brilliant blue eyes staring helplessly up at the top of the tower, still far out of reach.

"No!" Nina yelled, punching the wall. "There has to be a way that we can avenge her, if nothing else. We have to -"

"What the two of you have to do," announced the irritated woman in a black skirt who was coming down the stairs to meet them, "is go back home. Your master gave me instructions to that effect. I'm probably going to burn through a trueyear's supply of classified information to do this, so damn you, be grateful!"

"Please, don't -" the red haired girl started to beg.

"I am genuinely sorry for your loss, cousin. But we're running out of options, very quickly," the older woman said. And then the stairs beneath their feet glowed brilliantly, and the two girls dropped out of sight before either of them could say another word.

"I hope you know what you're doing," said the one remaining person on the stairs, glancing upwards. Then she stepped off the staircase and dropped to the ground below.

"Nagi," said the Obsidian Prince.
"Yes, your highness," said the cunning, charming, and loyal subordinate as he promptly materialized at his employer's side.

"What is this?" the Prince asked as he pointed at the empty wheelchair.

Nagi took a long look. "It looks kind of like a wheelchair, to me," he answered honestly.

The Prince nodded, and then slammed his clenched fist down onto Nagi's head hard enough to turn it into one big bruise. "Do not play games with me, little boy," he hissed. "What is this? Why did Mashiro disintegrate in that manner - she's supposed to be possessing Fumi's Child and when I destroy it she goes back to -" 

"She's already back there," Nagi explained quickly - remarkably so considering how much pain he was in. Seriously, that hurt worse than the Scripture whatever-it-was-thingy had. "She went back willingly, a while ago. I don't know why. Someone else has been impersonating her for a while now. Again, I don't know why."

"Do you know who?" the Prince growled.

"Well, yes," he admitted reluctantly, but given the situation, you should probably understand why he gave this up so quickly. "She was my little sister. Kind of a troublemaker. Always has been."

"... your kind has family?" the Prince asked.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"... indeed," the Prince was moved to agree. With a thought, he closed the open wound on Fumi's stomach and began restoring her lost blood. "Very well. Mikoto -"

"Yes, aniue?" she asked, having stood in total stillness while all this was going on.

"Pick up Fumi, then bring this place down. We are leaving?"

"Eh?" Mikoto asked. "Why are we bringing her?" Bewilderment was as close to defiance as she could possibly come.

"Can you cook, Mikoto?" he asked patiently.

"... oh. Right."

Besides which, he wanted a bit of variety. He patiently watched Mikoto pick the body up, and then hold out her sword preparatory to plunging it into the floor.

From the outside, it looked as though dozens or even hundreds of great obsidian spikes, each many meters long, pushed up at various angles through the roof of the home atop the pillar. The condition only obtained for a few moments before it collapsed in on itself, along with most of the pillar's top. Water from the pool spilled down the sides for a moment in a recreation of the waterfall that had once adorned it.

In a matter of moments, there was nothing but rubble at the top of the tower.

Now

"I really don't care about any of that," said Natsuki. She turned to look at Akashi. "Okay," she said
after a moment. "You said you wanted to explain some things, and I guess I can't really keep brushing you off if I'm planning on sleeping under your roof."

The teacher took a deep breath and came over to sit down at the table, on the side between Natsuki and Yuna. "Okay, then," he said. "Let me first ask you ... just what is it that you think happened between your mother and me?"

Natsuki let her head roll back so that she was staring up at the ceiling. "Up until pretty recently, I figured you two were together and then you dumped her when she got pregnant with me because you didn't want a family," she related wearily. "Then you hooked up with her mom and things were different."

"That's not what happened," Akashi said quickly.

"Uh-huh. So then I figured that you two had a fling with the same results." She lowered her head to look at him with a raised eyebrow.

"That's not ... quite ... what happened."

"Is it not quite what happened in the same way that my mom was a little bit pregnant?" Natsuki asked.

"No," he said with difficulty. "Okay. To start with, you need to understand that I was already married to Yuka when I met Saeko."

Natsuki gaped at him for a few moments. "... oh well, then," she said. "That makes everything better! I'm the product of adultery! Wow, I feel so much more warmly disposed."

"Wow, and we haven't even gotten to the good parts, yet," interjected Yuna as she pulled over a chair and sat down facing Natsuki across the table, putting her feet up on top of it until her father gave her a look that made her set them down on the floor again.

"You knew about this?" Natsuki demanded.

Yuna nodded. "Got the story from him the first time you and me met. Okay, technically a week after the first time you and me met, but I don't think that really matters."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

Now Yuna smiled. "It takes a lot to really bother me."

Natsuki shook her head, then turned back to Akashi. "So. You were cheating on your wife with my mother."

"That's not quite what happened, either," he started to explain. "It's very complicated, you see, and ... well, let me start at the beginning. My wife, Yuna's mother, and I had a ... complicated relationship. We, well, we ..." He trailed off.

"When they met, she was dating another woman, and they broke up so mom could marry him," Yuna simplified.

"That's, that's not quite what happened then, either," Akashi protested.

Now Natsuki was gaping at Yuna. "Your mother was"
"Bi," supplied Yuna. "It's a simple syllable."

And abruptly, Natsuki developed an awful suspicion. "Wait. Waitwaitwait," she said, then lifted an unsteady hand to point at Akashi. "You said, that you weren't exactly screwing around on your wife."

"Yes, that's ..." He trailed off, then took a deep breath. "Yuka and Saeko met while she was out on a mission. They became ... friendly, and she brought her back -"

"You're saying that my mother was your wife's girlfriend?" Natsuki cried. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"Not exactly," Akashi hedged.

"Oh for -"

"Hook-up is probably closer to the right word," Yuna interjected.

Natsuki was starting to feel very dizzy. "And, your wife brought her back home with her, and you had sex with her, too?"

"It was more or less all three of us at the same time," Akashi admitted. "It was a very interesting one-night stand."

"And my mom got pregnant because -"

He nodded. "I accept responsibility. It was my fault. I wasn't using birth control magic at the time, since my wife and most of the other women she occasionally brought home -"

"Mom wasn't even the first?!!"

Akashi continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "- had implants that took care of that for them. The two of us weren't really looking to start a family at the time, but then my father-in-law passed away, and - well, I suppose that's not really pertinent to your interests," he said as he saw Natsuki staring at him in blank incomprehension.

"In any event, when Yuko and I woke up the next day, Saeko was already gone from our apartment. It was a surprise to both of us, since they'd been talking about doing some shopping together. But she was nowhere to be found, anywhere in town. I could say that she'd vanished without a trace, except ...

"Dad?" Yuna asked, when he'd trailed off. "You didn't tell me this part."

"It wasn't really pertinent to your interests," he admitted. "Anyway, it's not quite true that I couldn't find a trace of her. When I was asking around about her, I found that she was actually known to a number of my colleagues, from a few months before all of this. In every case that I could discover, she'd tried to insinuate herself into their lives, much like she had with us, and present herself as a sex partner."

"I don't understand," Natsuki said. "Are you saying she was some sort of magic groupie, on top of everything else?"

He held up his hands in perplexity. "I don't know, Natsuki. I can't even guess what your mother was thinking or trying to do. Well, I suppose that I can guess - since I'm looking at the results of what she did."
He fell silent, and Natsuki didn't say anything. For a wonder, Yuna didn't interject pithily either.

"About ten years later, I received a phone call from the hospital in Sakaimachi telling me that my daughter was in critical condition," Akashi said at last. "Since my only daughter that I knew about was in the next room watching television, I thought it must be some sort of a mistake. But they confirmed that my name was listed as the father on your birth certificate, and that there was emergency contact information about me in your medical file. And that was how I found out that Saeko was missing and presumed dead, and that you were alive."

"So you paid for my hospitalization," Natsuki murmured.

"What your mother's insurance didn't cover, I did," he confirmed.

"Why didn't you ... I don't know ... bring me home to live with you?" she asked.

He sighed. "My wife had just died a few months before all this, and I was having a hard time looking after one child," he explained.

"Who was really doing more of the looking after, if you want to get technical," Yuna observed wryly.

"Well, yes."

"I don't believe this," Natsuki moaned. "I, no, even more than everything else about it, I can't believe you're so calm about all of this!" she yelled at Yuna.

"What? I learned most of it more than a year ago," Yuna said defensively. "And anyway, it's not that big a surprise to me. After all, people keep telling me how much like my mom I am, and I guess you're the same way."

"What."

"Oh who the hell are you trying to kid?" Yuna asked, getting up from her chair. "Practically from the minute I found out about you, I've had some of my buddies who are aces at finding shit out watching you."

"I know that, I've seen them around. What about it?" Natsuki asked defensively.

"In the last year, how many boys you kissed?" Yuna asked.

"I've been focused on my revenge, I don't have time for -"

"How many girls?"

The memory of Nao's lips on her own was almost overpowering for a moment, but Natsuki managed to rally nonetheless. "That, that wasn't my idea and -"

"Uh-huh. And then there's the esteemed Stucon President, who always has a bunch of lillies trailing in her wake and who is apparently literally crazy about you," Yuna said, starting to walk slowly around the table. "So, you have more success with girls than you do with guys, and you're pretty damn obsessive. Just like your mom who went to really crazy lengths to get knocked up with you."

By now she was standing in front of Natsuki, who'd swivelled to look up at her. "Face it - it's like mother, like daughter. For both of us."
And then, quite suddenly, she pushed two fingers to the bottom of Natsuki's chin to bend it up so that she could bring her face down and press their lips together. Natsuki's eyes went wide and her jaw went loose, but that last only allowed Yuna to push her tongue into Natsuki's mouth and begin rubbing it with vastly more skill than the only other girl to kiss her - that Natsuki knew about - had ever done.

And Yuna's hand was not idle as she kissed her, but came up to press against the tight leather that still surrounded Natsuki's breasts, producing a gasp from her that the kiss didn't muffle.

"Wha -" Natsuki gasped as Yuna pulled away momentarily.

"What do you think, daddy?" she asked in a low, sultry tone. "Do you think we look like our moms, making out in front of you? Is this what it was like?"

He didn't answer the question, but out of the corner of her eye, Natsuki glimpsed that he was watching them with obvious surprise on his face, but without any of the horror that she might have expected. And she thought he might be breathing heavily in the moment before Yuna, perhaps satisfied with his lack of response, pushed against her again and interrupted her view of him completely as their lips came together.

Yuna's fingers came up to briefly tickle at the base of Natsuki's throat before they moved down to the zipper of her leathers and began to slide it down. The distinctive sound roused Natsuki's consciousness a bit out of the haze into which she'd descended, and she pulled back just long enough to say, "Wait, no -"

"No wait," Yuna said back to her as she slid a hand inside the leather garment and wrapped it around the lace-enclosed breast that hid beneath it, flicking the nipple with her thumb.

"Ah!" Natsuki gasped at the touch of the first hand other than her own and - but that thought disintegrated almost before it formed, as Yuna's other hand reached down to seize ahold of one of Natsuki's.

"Don't just sit there and let me grope you," she whispered right into Natsuki's ear. "You gotta cop some feels on me too, or I'll feel like I'm having all the fun."

"I, don't, know, what -" Natsuki panted.

"That's okay," Yuna cooed, taking the opportunity to lick the ear she was speaking into. "I'm only good at two things, and one of them is fighting. So I will teach you. Just do to me what I'm doing to you."

This was crazy, Natsuki decided as she watched her hand come up to grope Yuna's breast, hidden under the bikini top that she wore underneath that vest of hers. She was here, kissing and making out with another girl, technically her sister even though accepting her as that would mean accepting the man who was watching them as her father and she wasn't about to do that. But no matter how strange and wrong her head told her this was, something else - certainly not her heart, which she'd never heeded before - was exulting in how good it felt.

Then Yuna's hands moved away from her breasts, and she groaned a bit before they came up to her shoulders and started pushing her leather jacket off them, sliding it down her back and arms to fully expose Natsuki's chest. A finger flick from there popped the latch of her bra, and her breasts were exposed to the air. The chill of the air mixing with her sweat was a sensation different from what she'd been experiencing before, but it was just as thrilling, in its own way.
Yuna pushed her back slightly, then reached down to start suckling at her teats. Natsuki's head rocked back even further at the feeling unlike anything she'd ever known. The only flaw in the jewel of the moment was that it ended too soon, with Yuna pulling back and reaching for her own bra. "Like I said, do as I do," she said, challenge in her eyes.

Natsuki's mouth felt dry, so it was impossible to swallow. But again, almost as though she was no longer truly in control of her body's actions, she lifted up slightly from the chair and pushed her lips against one of Yuna's nipples.

"Mmmm," Yuna mmed as she wrapped one arm around the back of Natsuki's neck while another went behind herself, pushing against the tabletop. "You do that almost as good as Akira-chan."

... how did she know that ninja? Natsuki found herself wondering with what shreds of consciousness remained to her. But there was scant time for that as Yuna abruptly let herself fall back to lie flat on the table, pulling Natsuki down with her. The table swayed under their combined weight, but didn't collapse.

Yuna pulled Natsuki away from her teat and up to her lips again, tightening their embrace and sliding her up, so that they could each feel the heat of their crotches against each other. She apparently wanted to feel them a bit more directly, so she slid her hands down Natsuki's side to her hips as they both kissed. From there she was able to push the leather suit down to Natsuki's butt and past it, clenching it tightly and pulling up her panties to stretch them against her sister's lady parts, while one booted foot came up to tangle in the leathers and pull them the rest of the way down Natsuki's legs.

"Naughty underwear," Yuna cooed.

Natsuki found it in her to answer. "Says the woman who walks around in a bustier, and short shorts," she sneered between deep kisses.

"That's more like it," Yuna said - then promptly spanked her, sliding a hand under the panties to do so. "But don't talk back to me."

Natsuki grunted at the violent contact, and pulled back from Yuna's mouth to start "kissing" - really suckling and even biting - her way down Yuna's chest, perhaps in hopes of getting her ass out of Yuna's reach. Her plan failed, for Yuna's hands tightly gripped said ass, and, having had enough fun pulling the underwear out of shape, slid it down to Natsuki's hips.

"Ah, someone's really, really wet," Yuna said as her fingers began to play in Natsuki's folds. "Such a shame that all I can give you to ease that wetness are these fingers and my sweet little tongue. Of course, there is another option ... right, daddy?"

Natsuki froze. She'd almost forgotten - and then her eyes slowly tracked over to what he was doing as he watched, and she almost swallowed her tongue.

"It was like this, wasn't it, daddy?" Yuna continued to coo. "They got you so excited with their oh-so-hot girl-on-girl, and then you joined in, and it'd be rude not to attend your guest first, right, daddy?"

"Yes," he groaned as he rubbed the erection arising from his opened pants. "It was just -"

"Well, then. Come on, daddy."

"Wait," said Natsuki, nerves returning. "I don't know about -"

"Well, I can't teach you this," Yuna said softly. "But he's a really great fuck. Trust me."
Incredulous at the implications of that statement, Natsuki watched him rise up and stumble out of her line of sight. When she tried to turn her head to follow him, though, Yuna brought up her free hand to hold her in place. "Focus on me," Yuna murmured. "He's nothing more than a dildo for our pleasure."

"Wha, buh," Natsuki stammered.

"Oh, cripes, don't tell me you've never even with a dildo - you're two years older than me, how the hell are you this innocent?" her sister asked irritably.

Natsuki was trying to find an answer to that question when she felt another set of hands on her butt. Her mouth opened. Yuna promptly kissed it, but kept her eyes open so that she could see the look in Natsuki's eyes when, inevitably, the other girl felt the sensation of penetration and the fullness that followed.

"Nnnnnnuhhhh," Natsuki groaned when Yuna pulled back.

"Shhh," Yuna sighed. "It's okay, it's okay. This is what we're designed to do. It's just a cock. Just think of it as just a cock, not all the rest. And it's pumping in and out of you, just like this -" One hand went down to slide a finger into her alongside said cock. "- but much bigger, right? It's stretching you out, and it feels so good when it's inside of you, and when it moves back and forth, like it's doing now. Doesn't it?"

"Yes," Natsuki admitted, tears streaming from her eyes. "Yes, it feels good."

"That's good, that's good, that's what we were made to do," Yuna said, pulling her finger out. Once more kissing Natsuki's lips, she pulled back to continue. "But there's more that we weren't made to do, and it feels good, too."

"Wha?"

Yuna pulled herself along the table, up from Natsuki's perspective, so that her skirt, hefted up to her waist, was at the level of Natsuki's forehead. And so that her panties, pulled to the side, were at the level of Natsuki's mouth.

"Lick," she commanded.

"I don't -"

"Fuck me sideways, Natsuki, you've liked everything else we've tried," Yuna whined. "Quit saying no to everything already!" Winding her fingers into Natsuki's beautiful blue-black hair, she pulled the other girl's head down into her crotch. After a few more moments of hesitation, Yuna let her head fall back as she felt a tongue licking - and with a jolt, biting - at her folds. "That's good," she said, lifting her head to meet their father's eyes, reaching down to gently caress her sister's face as he took her from behind. "That's good," she said to him, almost but not quite making it a question.

"Yes," he gasped.

"Yeah, this is just like old times, isn't it?" Yuna asked, an oh-so-tiny sliver of edge in her tone.

Akashi closed his eyes to shut away that look, but couldn't shut away her words. "Just like with our mommies. It was just like this. Almost. But not quite. Right?"

He silently cast the spell, and moments later let loose into Natsuki with a groan of mingled pleasure and regret.
"Wha-" Natsuki cried out as she lifted up her head despite Yuna holding her down.

"Shh-shh-shh," Yuna said in a calming tone. "He used magic to stop it. You won't get pregnant. I wouldn't do that to you. Even bitchiness has standards. Now come up here, so I can pay you back."

"But, but there's -"

"Yum."

"Oh ..."

With two fingers, Yuna was quietly indicating that his role in all this was done for the moment. He slumped back into the chair where Natsuki had been sitting a little bit earlier, watching as the two girls settled into a sixty-nine position.

"Really never done anything with guys?" Yuna asked a moment later, between licks at Natsuki's cunny.

"No," Natsuki murmured. Strange how the truth could feel like a lie for no reason.

"Okay, then I guess the next lesson is in blowjobs ..."

By the time that they got home again, Yukino was practically carrying Haruka, who'd stopped making coherent statements some time ago. The second (possibly third or fourth, but who was counting?) wind that she'd gotten after they'd arrived at the cathedral, which had carried her through the events there and and after, had definitely worn off. Well, Haruka wasn't all that heavy, so it was no problem.

"Bo lopnerm," agreed Haruka when Yukino expressed this notion aloud.

The fact that she was now just randomly stringing together sounds in no particular order was honestly a little worrying to Yukino, but that they were, when she thought about them, actually the correct sounds provided a little relief. Still, it was good that they were almost home. She could put Haruka to bed and get some sleep herself. "At least nothing else can go wrong," she said aloud.

"Indeed?" asked Shizuru from behind them.

Yukino wanted to cry. "Oh, why did I tempt fate like that?" she asked, in a voice she was distressingly aware sounded like a whine.

"Temft pate?" Haruka repeated, shaking her head as she turned around. She blinked, and, in a much more understandable voice, said, "Oh, it's you. What you do want?"

Yukino turned around, and felt herself gaping. The sight of Fujino Shizuru in a kimono was nothing new. The sight of that kimono looking faintly tattered and even seared as though burnt, while Shizuru herself had a look in her eyes not unlike that which Haruka sometimes got after she hadn't slept for a day or so, was considerably more disturbing.

"I want to kill you," Shizuru answered patiently as she materialized a long polearm out of thin air and into her hand, then leveled it at the two of them.

Yukino felt her gape get wider.

"To be honest, I only need to kill one of the three of you," Shizuru continued. "But as that will kill another of you - and I confess that one is a complete pain in the ass - I might as well go three for
three.” She paused, looked troubled. "How odd. That's not the sort of expression that I'd normally -"

"Uh-huh," said Haruka, grabbing hold of Shizuru's weapon with her hand and examining it. "This'd be a naginata, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Shizuru confirmed politely. "It is the naginata with which I will shortly -"

"Incredible," Haruka mused aloud, clearly not even remotely paying Shizuru any attention. "Biggest case of my career so far. The first time I actually catch a murder investigation. So I give it everything I've got. I focus on the facts. I examine the evidence. And all the while, I'm forcing myself to not even think about the possibility that the person I want to blame it on could actually have done it." Now she lifted her head to look right into Shizuru's eyes. "And you did!"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"I'm arresting you for the murders of four as-yet-unidentified visitors to our campus," Haruka said. "You may wish to consult an advocate before you say anything. I'm sure that you can afford one with Daddy's money."

"... you have finally taken leave of your senses," Shizuru said, amazed. "You clearly have no conception of that with which you are contending -"

"You're a magical princess with magical powers and a magical weapon and magical helpers, engaged in some sort of daft competition over a magical prince. Right?" Haruka asked, sounding very unimpressed.

"All right, so you do have some conception," Shizuru allowed after a moment. "Nevertheless, you cannot seriously imagine that you can stop me from -"

"I am Suzushiro Haruka, Student Council Executive," her opponent said calmly. "I have right on my side, and I will prevail. You are going to be held accountable for what you have done!"

"On second thought, you pathetic fascist," Shizuru said, raising her naginata from its guard position. "I do have to kill you on general principles!"

"Yukino!" Haruka snapped. "Let's take her down."

"Eh?" Yukino gasped.

"Use your thing!"

"My -"

"Apparently, your master is unaware that you have no weapon, and that your Child has no combat powers whatsoever," Shizuru said, smiling faintly. "Or so my Natsuki told me."

Haruka looked over at Yukino. "Is that true?"

"Yes," Yukino whimpered.

"... well. That's frustrating."

"And that was your plan to deal with me?" Shizuru asked, sounding very amused. "Rely on the lieutenant of your goon squad? The irony of your association will kill me, if nothing else."

"Okay," snapped Haruka, head whipping back to glare at Shizuru. "I told you already, you can say
whatever the hello you want to say about me, but you do not get to talk tragic about Yukino or the rest of my team."

"Or what, you conceited, self-righteous bully?" Shizuru sneered. Abruptly, an enormous purple snake appeared behind her, its head looming high above her own as its iridescent gem-like eyes gazed down at Haruka and Yukino. "Or what?" Shizuru repeated.

"... well," Haruka said tightly. "Someone's clearly compensating for something."

Shizuru's eyes narrowed. "What."

"Although you might want to lose the kimono, and start wearing trousers, to go with the snake," Haruka taunted further.

"Haruka, don't -" Yukino pleaded.

"The trouser snake, is what I am talking about," Haruka pushed it even more. "I am implying that you wish you had a penis, you -"

"That will do," Shizuru snapped. "Kiyohime. I owe you for the snack you were denied this afternoon."

The serpent opened its maw, fangs gleaming in the reflected streetlight, and then began to descend rapidly towards where Haruka was standing.

"Oh, this is getting repetitive," Haruka groaned.

"Haruka!" Yukino shrieked. Diana's central mass of tentacles surged out of the shadows behind her to fly up and intercept the serpent's mouth before it could engulf her. And as Yukino looked on in horror, Kiyohime's maw swelled open wide enough to take in that mass in a single gulp. With a twist, the serpent's head began to tear at Diana's mass. Abruptly, Yukino's Child disintegrated into brilliant green lights.

"Enjoy the feast," Shizuru said, smiling tightly.

"No!" Yukino cried out.

"Oh, well," Haruka mused. "So much for -"

And then she felt it. It was a worse pain than she'd felt when she'd broken her leg skiing. It was a worse pain than she could imagine feeling. "What -" she gasped, as she struggled to keep her feet.

"When a magical princess' magical helper dies, so dies the magical princess' most important person," Shizuru explained patiently. "For reasons that I do not pretend to understand, in Kikukawa's case, that would be you."

"Yukino?" Haruka asked, somewhat befuddled and, as mentioned, in great pain.

"No! Not like this! Please -" Yukino was screaming.

"Yukino!" Haruka said sharply, forcing herself to stand steady on her feet. "That's enough! Do you really think that a little thing like that will -" Another surge of pain struck her, and she couldn't talk for a while. Breathing was also a bit difficult. "- stop me?" she concluded, a little weakly.

"Oh, now, really," muttered Shizuru. "This is just a pathetic display."
Haruka turned to glare at her just as yet another wave of agony struck. "You! Shut up!" she called. "I am taking you in!" She somehow forced herself to start walking, even though it was now almost impossible for her to feel her extremities. "You are going to pay for all you've done! And everyone, everyone is finally going to see what a lazy, feckless privileged brat you are! You call me a bully? You are the one who stands back and smiles while kids are being bullied, sliding through life like ... oh, that's an even better reason for you to have a snake, you poisonous bitch!"

Ah, now she could feel her extremities. Unfortunately, what she felt was a bit like walking on broken glass. And it was hard for her to see. Even Shizuru, that damned ugly yet beautiful bitch, was starting to fade from her view. But she had to go on. There was a wrong in need of righting. There were people who needed to be protected. She felt sorry for her body, but it needed to obey her. It had to live just a little longer, just long enough for her.

There it was. She had reached her opponent, who stood there serenely, looking down on her as always with that faint sneer on her perfect face. "Can't you at least try to die with a little dignity?" Shizuru said, or at least Haruka heard her saying that.

"Up yours," Haruka told her - and slammed the top of her head into the bottom of Shizuru's jaw, knocking the other girl back a few paces. At the very least, Haruka thought, she won't come away clean. That's something. It has to be something.

And then, as she always could have if she chose, she firmly dismissed Fujino Shizuru from her thoughts. There was something more important, someone ... oh. It was so strange how she kept forgetting her at crucial times like these. How she always hid in the shadows of her life. And now, of course, she couldn't see her at all, as the strange green light was far too blinding.

But she did remember, and she was certain of two things. That justice would prevail. And that Kikukawa Yukino loved her.

Three things.

Yukino ... I

And then she was gone.

Yukino stared at the void where she'd been, tears streaming from her eyes.

"I suppose," said Shizuru, sounding a little dazed as she looked across at her, "that I'd be doing you a favor if I put you out of your misery."

Not trusting herself to speak, Yukino simply nodded.

"I'm not minded to do you any favors," Shizuru said. And turned and walked away.

"That concludes my report on the destruction of ... Kazehana Tower," Negi said, just barely restraining himself from calling it 'Master's Tower'. She'd been gone - in at least one sense - for more than a year, and he still couldn't really believe that she would never be back. Sifting through the remnants of her home, as he had done, had been incredibly painful ... not least the moment when he had been resting on the bottom steps of the staircase and abruptly remembered what he'd found the last time he'd been there.

"Horrible," said the new Headmaster, shaking his head sadly. "Just horrible. But, Negi-kun, you didn't find any human remains?"
"No, sir," he answered politely. "There were some robot bodies down in the one of the basements that we were able to excavate, but Dr. Stengovitch doesn't think they'd been active for some time." He didn't add that he could be certain that they weren't, as they'd been scavenged for spare parts some time ago.

"Well, that's a relief. We can at least hope that sweet Mashiro-chan and her just-as-pretty maid were somewhere else when all this happened," the man in dark glasses enthused. "And there weren't any more casualties at the Cathedral, either?"

"No confirmed casualties," Shakti said as she stood beside Negi. "There's one missing, but ... as with this other incident, we haven't found any bodies in the - admittedly cursory thus far - search of the ruins. Damage to the underground portions of headquarters appears to have been fairly light, though we haven't yet done a close inspection."

The Headmaster nodded. "I see. Please use all resources necessary to make sure that none of your cute sisters were hurt in all of this, Shakti-chan. That would be just terrible."

His heart is in the right place, even if I don't think much of his head, Negi thought with a trace of amusement as he watched Shakti nod politely and hold her tongue in response.

"I suppose that we can't really avoid talking about it any longer, even if it did happen off-campus," the Headmaster said with obvious distaste. But he managed to smile politely if a bit perplexedly at Chizuru. "I'm a bit confused as to why you're reporting on this, Chizuru-chan."

"I'm acting as Tatsumiya's representative in this," Chizuru explained. "She's still being treated for her injuries. She also asked me to ask you to pass on a message to your associate," she added, to Shakti. "I won't take this personally,'" she repeated, then, with a glance in Negi's direction, "'And neither should anyone else.'"

Negi looked a bit rebellious, but didn't say anything.

"I'm sure that Ciel didn't intend for her actions to be taken that way, either," Shakti said ... without much in the way of confidence.

"Um, so, back to the incident in the mahjongg parlor?" the Headmaster asked politely.

"Well, it was a bloodbath, sir," Chizuru reported calmly. "Tatsumiya described it as one of the worst she's seen in years. Six dead, in fairly horrifying ways -"

"But they were all old and/or male, right?" the Headmaster pressed, looking nervous.

I may have to re-evaluate his heart, Negi thought as he watched Chizuru bite her tongue and nod this time.

"Well, that's a relief," the Headmaster said, nodding firmly. "We'll turn over all information to the proper authorities and -"

"Evacuate the school."

"Evacuate the school," he agreed, then frowned. "Why are we evacuating the school?"

"Because I request it, and it is in your own interests to do so," said the young man in the black school uniform who had abruptly strolled into the room without anyone noticing his presence until he spoke. As one, the staff gathered in the Headmaster's office (plus Chizuru) turned to regard him with surprise.
"Kanzaki Reito?" said Seruhiko. "What in the world -"

"Not presently," the boy answered smoothly. "I am presently the Obsidian Prince, the source of all the troubles you've been having recently, and I once again politely ask that you evacuate the school. Or I will have no choice but to force you to do so." He held up a hand. "And before you attack me, Negi Springfield, I would ask that you consider certain unfortunate facts."

"Which facts would those be?" Chizuru heard him say in an odd and unfamiliar voice, and quickly turned to see that he was standing there with hands clenched, teeth gritted and throwing off sparks. The other teachers in the room were slowly but surely stepping away from him, though he only had eyes for the so-called Obsidian Prince.

"The battle between us will destroy this building and kill everyone within it," the Prince said calmly. "This is not a gladiatorial arena where the spectators are protected. While some of those present would be able to escape, or perhaps even tough enough to survive, there are also those working in the other rooms of this building, who are not even aware of the danger that they face. You can destroy me. I admit that. But are you willing to kill innocents to do so?"

For a frightening extent of time that she couldn't quite measure, Chizuru had the distinct impression that the answer to that question would be an affirmative. Then she watched as her nephew's hands eased from their grip, and knew relief.

"You are pondscum, sir," Negi said angrily.

"And like pondscum, I fulfill an important role in the circle of life," the Prince answered airily.

"Negi-kun, if we all work together surely -" Gandolfini, recently returned to duty, began to say.

"If you all work together, you increase the rapidity with which this building becomes a crater," the Prince said, starting to sound irritated. "Can we move forward?"

"Why do you want us to evacuate the school?" the Headmaster asked. To give the man credit, he seemed unrattled by any of this and was regarding the Prince without visible fear. (Of course, his sunglasses might have had something to do with that. But who could say for sure?)

"I have said that I am the source of your recent troubles, but much, indeed most, of what has lately transpired has not been any choice of mine. It was not I who arranged for this Carnival to take place in a school filled with innocent children. More recently, it was certainly not to my will that there was a confrontation between one of your teachers and one of my -" He broke off to cough slightly, then pronounced the word with distaste. "-HiME, in a highly public place. I take no pride nor pleasure in being the cause of harm to those who have done nothing to deserve it and cannot defend themselves. The final stages of this Carnival should not occur in the public eye; in earlier Carnivals, they were conducted much more discretely."

"'Why in my day, we knew better,'" Negi murmured.

"What was that?" the Prince asked sharply.

"Sorry, just thinking out loud."

"Ah." He collected himself, then continued. "As I also said, it is in your own interests, and those of the students here, and mine as well, for the school to be temporarily evacuated. The Carnival can thus proceed to its conclusion in safety, and the damage to your town repaired, while the staff and students are elsewhere. And then, when it's all over, they will certainly be able to return."
"I have a question," Nijuin-sensei said into the silence that followed. "When you talk about the conclusion of the Carnival, what exactly do you mean? None of us are well-informed about the ... mythology you claim to embody."

The Prince blinked. "Well, isn't it obvious? The Carnival will end like these sorts of things always end - the villain - by which I mean me - defeated by the forces of righteousness, my power harnessed to grant a wish for someone's benefit, and my consciousness sealed away until the next time, which will not be of concern to anyone present. As someone said, justice will always prevail - and when it prevails, that's how you know that it is justice." He smiled warmly.

No one answered it.

After a long moment, the Headmaster spoke up. "It will take some time to accomplish what you suggest."

"I certainly understand that. I can give you ... oh, thirty-six hours or so. I'm presently doing my very best to keep my - ahem - HiME under control, but not even I can hold them back forever. After that time, I won't accept any responsibility for what happens to the civilian population. So. Have we an understanding?"

"This really wasn't how I wanted to begin my tenure here," the Headmaster said sadly. "But I cannot in conscience refuse to explore an option that minimizes the risk of harm to the cute girls of this school. Very well. We will begin evacuating in the morning."

"Thank you for being so understanding," the Prince said, bowing deeply. "I will leave it in your hands, then."

"Just a moment," said Negi. "I have one more question. Are you really satisfied to be sealed away again like that?"

"That is my role in the circle of life, Negi-kun," he said cheerfully. "Just as your role is to strive to become a great wizard like your father. We must both accept the joys and sorrows of our stations in life, must we not?"

"That isn't an answer," Negi said.

The Prince smiled thinly. "No it's not. I will view any attempt to follow me as an abrogation of our understanding, and act accordingly. Good evening." And he disappeared.

"Shundo?" Touko asked.

"Something like that," Negi agreed, frowning.

"Tomorrow is going to be a very long day, I'd imagine," said the Headmaster, actually taking off his glasses and cleaning them. His eyes were perfectly normal, though the skin around them was a bit pale from never getting any sun.

It was still very early when Natsuki woke up and - with difficulty - extricated herself from the position she'd been in when she'd finally lapsed into unconsciousness the night before. She wasn't sure when that had been. It had gone on and on and on. That dilemma dealt with, she faced another. She didn't want to put on her clothes while she was covered in ... what she was covered in, but she didn't want to run the risk of waking either of her companions up by running the shower, either.
She settled for pulling a bathrobe out of one of the piles of laundry on the floor, tying its belt tightly, gathering her own clothes up into a bundle, and sneakily heading out the door. She got as far as the balcony, overlooking the street below, before it occurred to her that she was sneaking out just like her mother probably had. With a groan, she collapsed on the floor, holding her head in her hands.

When Yuna finally came out looking for her, maybe fifteen minutes later, in a robe just like the one Natsuki was wearing - only not belted at all - she found her still there, curled up in a ball. Regarding her in silence for a moment, Yuna finally decided to ask the obvious question. "So, since you're still here, I guess a second date could be in the cards?"

It got Natsuki to look up at her at least. "Are you seriously trying to claim what happened last night as a date?" she asked incredulously.

"It's pretty typical for one of my -" Yuna started to say.

"I'm sorry I asked! For pity's sake, please close that thing up!" Natsuki snapped. "What if someone sees you?"

"We're on the second floor! Who the hell's going to see me?" Yuna asked, she thought reasonably.

"Whoever lives next door from him!" Natsuki retorted with a gesture at the unit to the right of their father's door.

"Kiritawa-sensei? He's on his honeymoon in Canada."

"It's the principle of the thing!" Natsuki cried, slamming her fist against the balcony railing a few times.

"Fine, fine, but I really do think that it's a bit late to turn into prudy-frudy, what with you being a lesbian and all," Yuna said wearily as she tied the robe closed.

"I'm not - prudy-frudy?" Natsuki repeated, abruptly bewildered.

"Like tutti-frutti."

Natsuki just stared.

"A wop bop-a-boo bop, a wop bam boom," Yuna "explained".

Natsuki continued to stare.

"It's not fucking easy to make these kind of cutting edge pop cultural references, you know!" Yuna yelled, actually looking a bit angry. "You could at least pretend to get them!"

Eventually, after shaking her head a bit, Natsuki remembered why she'd started yelling before Yuna's bewildering irrelevance distracted her. "I'm not a lesbian, dammit!"

"Oh, sweetie," Yuna said, sounding genuinely pitying. "Yes, you are. Three times from stuff I did, not even once from anything dad did. Maybe you're a 5 and not a 6, but you're sure as hell not a 3 or 4. I'm a 4, incidentally."

"I... I don't even know what that means!" Natsuki protested. "I don't -" She broke off, not even sure what she was saying anymore.

"You don't wanna be. I get it," Yuna assured her. "Believe me, I know that I'd be a lot happier if I didn't (a) like pussy more than dick and (b) really like my dad's dick and (c) have no real objections
to seriously underage pussy and/or dick. But I do, y'know. All of the above." She dropped down to sit beside Natsuki. "And I'm pretty sure that you've got someone in that shut-off heart of yours who you love more than anything, even if you can't admit it. That someone has a pair of tits."

"You are beyond any doubt the most vulgar person I've ever met," Natsuki said faintly.

"Thanks. Learned from pros."

"If that's true ... and if you seriously believe that about me, then why -" She gestured vaguely in the direction of their father's apartment.

Yuna actually blushed, and looked away a bit uncomfortably. "Well. You see. There's this girl I met once. She and me might as well be as close as you and I, and we got on about as well ... but even though we ended up doing all kinds of stuff, we never did this, with him. And I wondered, after she was ... gone ... if maybe we should have. Maybe we'd have bonded. Maybe ... oh, who knows?"

Yuna sighed, and fell silent.

"You've got another half-sister on the other side?" Natsuki asked bewilderedly.

"That's what you take from a heartfelt confession like that?" Yuna whined as she stood up. "Aw, man, that's it, I give up on helping you! Fix things with your psycho girlfriend all by your own damn self." Her pique faded quickly as she looked over the street. "Hey. Isn't that your other friend, the one with the big tits who works for Satsuki-san?"

Natsuki found herself on her feet and looking down on the street herself with no memory of getting up and turning around. Sure enough, there was Mai, walking down the street like a zombie. Unlike a zombie, though, she looked out when Natsuki called out her name and jumped off the balcony to land lightly on the street below and run over to her.

"Natsuki," Mai said, blinking her eyes.

"Mai, are you -"

"If you're gonna do stuff like that, you should probably start wearing panties," Mai said. "I mean, you're gonna be giving everyone around you a free show anyway, there's no need to give them all the goods at once, right?"

There was a second when tremendous relief filled Natsuki's heart, with sheer gladness that despite everything, despite how wounded she looked, Mai could still snark. Mai was still Mai. And then that relief was completely destroyed by something else.

... someone in that shut-off heart of yours who you love more than anything, even if you can't admit it., Yuna had said.

Oh, god, Natsuki thought, with terror and wonder and so much else she'd never thought she'd feel. I'm in love with Mai.

"I can't believe this," said Aoi. "I finally get out of the hospital, and the first thing I hear is, 'we have to evacuate the school.'"

"Well, it's kind of been a pretty crazy week," Chie said helplessly as she helped her friend up the stairs to the train platform.

"And my roommate is missing, and nobody seems to know anything about where she might be," Aoi
complained.

"Seriously, crazy week."

"Well, at least they didn't have time to give us any assignments before they sent us off on a week's unscheduled vacation," Aoi said as she surveyed the crowded platform, filled with students who were setting off to their respective homes and bidding a confused farewell to their friends - not to mention teachers and employees doing the same thing. It was going to be a madhouse here, all day today.

"Y'know, it occurs to me that if a monster were going to strike anywhere -" Chie speculated aloud. Aoi groaned. "Don't. Just don't. Sooo ... where are you headed?"

"I'm going with you. Duh?"

"Are you sure you don't want to go home?" Aoi asked hesitantly.

"Home is when I'm with you," Chie said with a completely straight face. If she smiled inwardly as Aoi turned bright red, it never showed.

To distract herself, Aoi searched the crowd for other familiar faces. "Oh, hey, there's my cousin Kaede. Remember how I told you about him?"

"The psycho? Yeah, I remember. Where - hey, there's Mai! And ... huh, she's with Kuga. But where's Mikoto?"

"Never mind Mikoto, where's Takumi-kun?"

Chie and Aoi exchanged looks, and started casually moving through the crowd in Mai's general direction. It became clear that Mai and Natsuki were with that distinguished looking gentleman and the girl whom Chie, at least recognized as 'the Kid', aka Akashi Yuna. And he was talking rather forcefully.

"... don't care what they say," he was saying. "I am not about to abandon this place just because the school board says so. The more so if you have to stay," he added to Natsuki.

Natsuki didn't answer that, just looked uncomfortable.

"Dad, come on. Even Negi's withdrawing, at least to Ayaka's mansion over in the next district," Yuna told him.

"Negi-kun can do whatever he thinks is best, but as for me, I'm staying and that's final," the man (apparently Yuna's father) said.

"Well, then, I'm staying, too," Yuna said. "And that's final."

"What? No, wait, Yuna, I'm the adult -"

This provoked gales of laughter, to which he flushed. Chie and Aoi exchanged a look.

"Why's she laughing?" Mai asked Natsuki, sotto voce.

"Be glad you don't know," Natsuki growled back.

"Look, I have to stay, and -" he was saying.
"Excuse me," said an older woman with sharp features. "Did you say something about staying? I'm Mikado Ryouko, the new school nurse," she introduced herself.

"Oh, yes, I think we met a while ago," the man said.

Mikado-sensei nodded. "I'm actually hosting a bunch of people who don't want to submit to the evacuation in my house. I guess you could call us the resistance. You're more than welcome to join us, and there's safety in numbers." She handed him a card, then bowed and headed off into the crowd.

"Huh," said Yuna. "She seems nice."

"... all right, you can stay," the man said with a sigh. "Anything to stop you from becoming a jealous nutcase."

"What?" Yuna said, blinking. "No, really, I mean it and -"

Chie and Aoi exchanged another look. "I think Mai might be up to her neck in something strange," Aoi opined.

"You think we should help her out?" asked Chie.

"... no."

With a short nod, they turned and started moving through the crowd again, towards the train tracks this time. As they did, Aoi watched as her cousin was dragged by the ear through the crowd by Ryouko-sensei. "No," he was screaming. "I did my part! You can't make me go back there! Someone, anyone, please, save me!"

No one moved to help him, which may be a sad commentary on the state of society. Or they could have figured that anyone crying while being dragged off by a beautiful woman deserved what they got. Eventually, Chie and Aoi found a place in line to get on the next train, just behind a pair of cute twins who were hugging each other as though afraid of what would happen when they had to let go.

The train began to pull in to the station. From conversation, it seemed that this was a special run designed to facilitate the evacuation, which presumably meant that no one would be getting off at this stop. Which was convenient, Aoi thought ...

And then it pulled to a stop, and she frowned as she saw someone standing just behind the doors. They opened, and a girl in a long black coat stepped out, pulling a single suitcase behind her on rollers.

One of the twins in front of them looked up, and began to stammer. "A-a-a-a," she said.

"Hey, Fuuka-chan," said the girl with mismatched eyes. "It's been a while."

"Asuuuuu," said the other twin.

"Fumika-chan," the girl with bells in her hair said warmly.

"Asuna," the twins whispered as one.

"Tadaima," said Kagurazaka Asuna.
"Ah, no way!" Asuna said, clearly surprised. "They took her out of school to get her married to some guy she'd never even met? What century do these people think it is?"

"That's what we said!" Fuuka stated angrily, while a saddened looking Fumika nodded affirmation. "But that's not the weird part!"

"Sensei told us that Kaede-neechan told him to stop us from from going to break up this thing!" Fumika explained.

"And when we went to hire Mana-chan -"

"Wait, since when was she Mana-chan to you two?" Asuna interjected.

The twins looked off to the side and started whistling innocently.

"Ooookay," Asuna said, nodding as she rolled her eyes. "So what happened when -"

"- she said that Kaede-neechan was paying her not to interfere or let anyone else do it either!"

"Wow, she really had her bases covered," Asuna mused as she stood with the twins just outside the train station.

Just a little ways away, Natsuki was watching this reunion a little bewilderedly, with Yuna, Mai and Akashi-sensei. "Who the heck is this girl, anyway?" she asked Yuna, whose face had gone stunned when she'd seen her arrival.

"She's ... well, it's sort of hard to explain," Yuna said. "She's basically the leader of our middle school class."

"Your class rep?" Mai guessed.

"No, no, no. No," Yuna repeated for emphasis. "That was always ... it's sort of hard to explain. But she was like ... have you ever had someone in your class who's everything you'd like to be? Even if she's not all that smart, and doesn't do so great in sports, but she's always smiling, always cheerful ... funny as hell, makes it all fun, just great to be around?"

"No," said Mai.

"No," said Natsuki.

"No," said Akashi-sensei.

"Daaaad! You went to a boy's school, of course you don't know what I'm talking about! But anyway ... look, she's Asuna. It's sort of hard to explain."

"Yeah, I think we get that," Mai said.

"Well, I guess you two had better go try and catch the next train," Asuna said to the twins.

"Ahhh! Can't we stay with you instead?" Fumika whined.
"You're going to be reuniting with sensei, right? And everyone else, too!" Fuuka enthused, almost jumping up and down in eagerness.

They hadn't noticed Asuna flinching when they said 'sensei' this time either. That was good. She was keeping it under control. "Yes, but I don't know how long that's going to take, so it's better if you're with your parents and - I'm sorry, Fumika-san, I didn't catch that," she said in a rather colder tone.

"I didn't say anything," Fumika muttered, looking away while Fuuka started to seem a bit panicked.

"That's good, because I would really not like to think that you'd say something like 'I wish we didn't have parents' to me," Asuna said, clearly a bit angrily. She waited a moment, then relented a little. "Look, you two, your parents have probably already been called and told that you're coming home. If you don't show up, they'll start to worry, and then the police are bound to get involved. You don't want that, do you?"

"No," the twins chorused wearily.

"Okay, then. Stay ready, because I don't know how long this is all going to take, and you need to be ready to go whenever. All right?"

With a nod, the twins hugged her once more and then trooped back into the train station. Asuna took a moment to calm down, berating herself a bit for using the "orphan privilege", something she hadn't liked doing when she actually was an orphan, rather than having a mother, whom she admittedly hadn't seen or heard from in months, and a father, whom she'd -

She dismissed that memory too.

Fixing a smile on her face, she turned to look at the small collection of people watching her. "Let's see if I've gotten any better at matching names and faces," she said as she walked over to them, pulling her luggage behind her. "Kuga Natsuki. Annnnd ... Tokiha Mai. Right?"

"You know us?" Natsuki said, frowning.

"I know of you," Asuna said. "I've got sources. Soooo," she added, looking from Yuna to her father and back again. "What's the plan?" she asked at last.

"Plan?" Yuna asked incredulously. "Plan? Asuna, I haven't seen you in a year and you're asking me what the plan is? What about hello? What about how are you? What about I've missed you tons and tons?"

"Actually I was asking your dad."

"Dad, freak out at her like I am!" Yuna shouted.

"I would prefer not to, Yuna," Akashi-sensei answered her request wearily. "Hello, Asuna. Well, the plan appears to be for myself, Yuna and Natsuki to head to Mikado-sensei's house and take up temporary residence there."

"Ah, Mikado-sensei," Asuna said, nodding.

"You know about her, then."

"Didn't even know she was a woman until you just said so," Asuna disagreed. "But it's not critical."

"Uh, excuse me," interjected Natsuki. "I'm not so sure that I should be going with you. I mean, I can
"But there's safety in numbers," Akashi-sensei objected. "And besides -"

"No, no besides," Natsuki broke him off.

As this byplay went on, Asuna looked from the teacher, to Natsuki, and then to Yuna with a raised eyebrow. Yuna sheepishly nodded while rubbing the back of her neck. Asuna shook her head and sighed.

"She can stay with me," Mai said. "I'm heading back to my room after this to get some sleep. Two of us together should be safe enough. I mean, those junior high rooms are small, but we should be okay."

"Hang on, are you staying in our old dorm?" Asuna asked.

Mai simply nodded in response.

"Huh. Interesting. Well, you can at least enjoy having that bath-house all to yourselves," Asuna said.

"Um ... no," Mai said. "They didn't give us a key when we were -" She broke off abruptly. "Me, I mean. They didn't give me -"

Asuna was staring at her. "Well, that's not right," she said, clearly upset, as she fished through the her coat pocket for a moment. "Mm, here 'tis," she added as she fished out a key and handed it to Mai.

"Thanks, I guess," Mai said faintly.

"You're welcome," Asuna said. "Okay, so which way to Mikado-sensei's place?"

"I'm pretty sure it's over this way," Akashi-sensei said. "Are you planning on staying there too, Asuna?"

"Actually, I've got a room booked at the hotel," Asuna explained. "But I'll walk the two of you there, if it's all right by you."

"It's not all right by me!" Yuna growled. "You didn't even bring me any manju from wherever you've been!"

"... I don't think Seattle has its own manju, Yuna," Asuna said in what could charitably be called an apologetic tone as they started walking.

"Seat- you were in America all this time?!" she cried as she followed somewhat involuntarily.

"Not all of it, but - wait, didn't Negi read you the letters I sent?"

"What letters?!"

"... huh?"

"I think I understand what your sister was saying about that girl," Mai mused as she watched them go.

"She's not my -" Natsuki started to say.

"Oh for fuck's sake, stop it with that bullshit already or I swear I'm gonna take both bunks and you
can sleep on the fucking floor," Mai growled.

Natsuki froze.

"C'mon," Mai said, beckoning her wearily.

"Not even one?"

Yuna sighed. "For the last time, Asuna, no! Negi didn't read us any of the letters you sent him once you and - y'know, I'm still adjusting to the idea that you're shacked up with Takahata-sensei!"

"I prefer the term 'living together'," Asuna said a little primly.

"What. Ever! He didn't read any letters that you sent once you got settled!"

"Unbelievable!" Asuna growled as she and Yuna trailed along behind Akashi-sensei. "That little jerk! I put stuff in those letters for everyone to hear. Some of it, okay, quite a bit of it was for his ears only. Nobody else needed to hear how much I missed him, she added silently. "But there was stuff in there about how sad I was that I wasn't going to get to graduate with all the rest of you! About the things I'd seen, the people I met! I am gonna spank him so hard when I -"

"Okay, I'm gonna break character here," Yuna interjected as she came to a halt on the sidewalk.

"What?" Asuna asked, blinking, as she paused and turned to look at her.

"I'm gonna not act like a bitch for a few moments."

"Oh, this should be good."

"Shut up, Asuna. I like that kid, so I know what he's like. And he sure as hell hasn't been acting like someone who's been getting regular letters from his bonnie who lies over the ocean!" A horrible possibility occurred to Yuna. "Oh, no. Don't tell me. I refuse to believe that our lives are some kind of comedy of errors that could -"

"What, what?" Asuna asked, bewildered.

"You haven't been mailing them to your old room, have you?" As Asuna stared at Yuna, the other girl grabbed the sides of her head. "Oh, man, you have, haven't you! Dumbass! Moron! Konoka and Setsuna moved out of there after they graduated, so these letters have been going to I don't even know who, and -"

"Yuna." Asuna interjected.

"What, Baka Red?"

One fingerflick to the forehead which almost dropped Yuna later, Asuna continued. "No, I haven't been sending them to our old room! It's so nice to know that my supposed friends still think I have the brains of a monkey! My mom tracked me down about two months after I left, and she told me that he'd moved out and into Takamichi's old digs! I've been sending them there! And anyway, the first couple went before you all graduated, so even if I had been that much of a dope, Konoka would've gotten them and passed them on!"

"Oh," said Yuna, after slapping a bandage on the bruise Asuna had just put on her forehead. "Well. So much for that idea. Then I have no idea why he hasn't been getting them, but he hasn't."
Doubt momentarily assailed Asuna. "Maybe he has, and he's just been too mopey to read them?" she speculated. "Or too busy training, or looking after Eva-chan?" Or busy with his three kids who aren't mine ...

"Kitty," Yuna corrected. "And come on."

"It could happen."

"Um, girls?" called Akashi-sensei, now quite some distance ahead of them. "I think this is it."

Yuna and Asuna turned to look at the house in question.

"Holy shit, how come no one ever told me there was an actual haunted house in Mahora?" Yuna asked after a moment.

"It does look like there should be thunder and lightning in the background when we see it," Asuna agreed.

"Yeah, and that'd sure draw it," said Yuna as she pointed up to the top of the building's looming roof.

Asuna tilted her head. "Why does a private residence have a lightning rod?"

"Haunted house. I'm telling you, haunted house."

"Eh, well, we can always get Sayo-chan to talk nice to the other ghosts."

"Assuming she doesn't freak out at the sight of them."

Exchanging one more look, the two of them hurried up to join Akashi-sensei at the front door just as he pushed the buzzer.

A few moments later, Mikado-sensei opened the door. "Ah, hello, good of you to -" And then she abruptly broke off and genuflected towards Asuna without another word.

"Oh, great," Asuna muttered. Raising her voice, she spoke in Havali. "Blessings be upon this house, and also upon you. Now please get up," she added in Japanese.

"Am I truly to be housing the Deliverer?" Mikado-sensei asked in the same language without looking up.

"No, I'm just passing through," Asuna assured her, reaching down to offer her a hand to get up. "You are worthy, you are thrice worthy, all are worthy. Please get up."

After a few moments, the doctor accepted her hand, and got up. "Please, please enter," she said, and stepped back so they could do so.

"Does that happen a lot?" Yuna asked.

"Too often," Asuna answered as they walked in.

It occurred to Yuna that that wasn't really an answer, but she decided not to push it.
"You know, this wasn't how I thought I'd die," Senou Kaede mused thoughtfully as he sharpened the knife in his hands. He'd drafted it into service from Mikado-sensei's kitchen. As a bread knife, it was okay, a little on the dull size.

"How exactly did you expect to die?" Chizuno Masuto asked, making a small sandwich.

Kaede paused thoughtfully. "In the middle of my hundred-thousandth orgasm during a orgy with lolis, catgirls, catgirl lolis, cute monster girls, cute monster girl lolis and middle school girls."

"Ah," Masuto said, face bland. "Well, if it's any consolation, middle school girls might be involved in this, so that's, what, an eighth of the way already. Pervert."

"Chubby chaser," Kaede shot back without malice. "Next time there's a trip to Okinawa, I'm going with everyone."

"Agreed," Masuto said. "It must be nice and peaceful there, none of this gloom and doom 'the school's going to be destroyed' stuff. Again."

_In Okinawa, the members of Ala Iridia sneezed as they fought the rising Deep Ones to buy time for Tsukiyomi to make a Pactio with the crazy girl who claimed she was the moe-loli incarnation of Nyarlthotep. "Where's Kaede when we actually need him?" she muttered before contact was made. The girl's tongue tasted like blood._

"Anyway, that might have been how you want to die, but be honest - you figured Kageyama was going to kill you, just like I did," Masuto continued.

"You figured she was going to kill you?" Kaede asked, pausing momentarily.

"Well, yes, but I meant that she was going to -"

At that point, a very neatly dressed young man wearing a gokuran that looked even more like a military uniform than it normally did tromped up the stairs from the basement, yanked a chair away from the table and sat down heavily, glaring at the other two as he assumed a posture imitated from the vanished Father Gendou. "I hate you guys," he announced.

"We know, Souzouteki-kun," Masuto said patiently.

"It's bad enough that you all insist on dragging me into these inane adventures when I'm not and never will be part of your stupid club, and tell me to come up with a silly nickname when you know that I am not creative enough to do that sort of thing, and that I didn't even get a trip to Okinawa out of the deal, but now you twits insist on having me taking shifts with that other twit on guard duty over that, that -" Words failed him, and he resorted to making throttling gestures in Kaede's direction.

Before Kaede could gently reprove the newbie for his bad attitude, Mikado-sensei led the three people she'd greeted at the door through the kitchen on their way to the stairs up.

"Hey guys," Yuna greeted them casually. "And Denai."

"Hey Yuna," Masuto and Kaede answered in the same way, while Souzouteki Denai just glowered.

She paused, though, just as she was about to head up the stairs, to peer in confusion. "Where's Aramis?"

"Eh?" Kaede asked, eyebrows raised behind his glasses.

"Aramis?"
"Ohhh. Um, well -"

"She's dead, we buried her in the basement," Souzouteki answered, annoyed with this whole conversation.

"Ehhhhh?" Asuna said, having paused to listen in on this conversation, even if she had no idea what was going on.

"She's fine, she's just downstairs being ... well, I'll show you both later," Mikado reassured them from further up the stairs.

"Oh, okay," said Yuna. "See you around, dudes. And whatever you are," she added to Souzouteki, who just growled.

"So if Kageyama is Aramis -" Masuto started to speculate.

"Which doesn't really fit," Kaede interjected.

"She probably only knows them from the anime, where the character was a cross-dressing girl," Masuto explained. "But does that make you D'Art-" he started to say to Souzouteki.

"Fuck no!" Souzouteki nearly shrieked. "Any time I get booked to fight three guys at the same time, I'm gonna be a mile away with a sniper rifle."

"Sound plan, I guess. So Rika can be D'Artagnan and you're Rochefort," Kaede said approvingly.

Souzouteki considered this. "Eh, well, he had a steady job with a smart employer, so I guess it's not so bad."

"And you're sure that it's not haunted?" Yuna asked as she was shown to her room, up on the house's third floor.

"I'm as certain as possible," Mikado-sensei assured her, having finally recovered most of her poise. "I haven't seen any ghosts since I moved in last week, and I've been disturbing the place enough that they'd have shown up."

It was a fairly plain-looking room, with just a futon, a closet and a window out onto the street. However, it did have the advantage of being right beside her dad's room, in the event that either of them should get, shall we say, lonely. They'd have to be quiet while they were easing their loneliness, of course, but practice had largely made that perfect.

"Well, when you get settled in, I'll show you around the rest of the house," the witch doctor said. With a bow to Yuna and a much deeper bow to Asuna, she headed out of the room and back down the stairs.

"It's nice," Asuna opined.

"You wanna trade me your room at the hotel for it?" Yuna asked, eyebrow raised.

"Uh, no," Asuna admitted.

"Didn't think so. You heading that way now?"
Asuna let out a long sigh. "Noooo, I think I'd better head over to Ayaka's place first thing. That's where Negi is, right?"

Yuna decided not to address the undertone of dread in Asuna's voice. "Yeah. According to Chizuru-san's message, she took him, Kitty, and Chisame over there last night. She said something about picking up Natsumi-chan and Kotaro-kun, too."

"Figures," Asuna said, nodding. Then she blinked. "Why isn't Mana there?"

"I think she's in the hospital after -"

"Ah, but of course they took her kid there," Asuna interjected, nodding understanding.

"What - ohh," Yuna said, looking uncomfortable. "I guess your mom didn't tell you about that."

Asuna blinked. "No, she told me that Mana's was going to be having another one of Negi's kids. I think she was trying to talk me into -"

"But she didn't tell you that Mana lost the baby."

Asuna stared at Yuna in stone silence for a moment.

"It just happened," Yuna elaborated. "There was nothing anyone could have done."

"Oh," Asuna finally spoke. "Oh, that, that's so - why didn't anyone - no, stupid question, none of you knew where I was so that you could write to me." She covered her eyes with her hands.

"And that's what Negi's been going through all this while?"

"That and other stuff," Yuna confirmed.

"Other - don't tell me something happened to Chisame or Satomi's kids!"

"No, no, they're fine!" she quickly assured her. "But ... I mean, there's been Haruna-san dropping out, and Nodoka finding out about all of this and taking it really bad, and even what happened to Chachamaru a little while ago ... things have been pretty tough on the kid." She paused. "But on the other hand, he's been getting sex with me pretty frequently so it can't be all bad, right?"

"Excuse me?" Akashi-sensei said, rather frostily, as he looked into the room through the open doorway.

"Hey, dad, did I ask what you got up to the night after we drove Searrs out of Mahora?" Yuna promptly rallied.

The teacher stood in silence. "That's diff-"

"No it's not, but anyway, dad! You're interrupting girl talk! Didn't I tell you a thousand times never to interrupt girl talk?"

With a look that promised that this conversation was not over, Akashi-sensei momentarily withdrew.

"Wow, thanks, Yuna," Asuna said faintly, apparently oblivious to this byplay. "I wasn't completely terrified of what I was about to face before, but now!"

"You're welcome."

For a moment, Asuna glared at her, but then she just sighed and shook her head. "I did miss you tons
and tons, you know," she said softly.

"Well, duh," Yuna said, looking aside with a smile. And then, in an eyeblink she was pressed up against Asuna, hugging her tightly and lips pressed against hers as well. Once she pulled back from the kiss, she continued speaking much more softly. "You're gonna make it right, right?"

"I don't know if I can," Asuna admitted. "But I'm gonna try."

"Do or do not," Yuna lectured.

"Don't quote Star Wars at me, missy, I lived that shit," Asuna said, all mock-annoyance. "I'd better get -"

"Your boobs are bigger," Yuna said, taking a feel.

"I'm a growing girl!" Asuna snapped as she pulled away. "And I've got a dreadful and wonderful reunion to go to, so if you'll excuse me!"

The long walk should have served to calm her down. Of course, reality could never be so kind as that. So Asuna only found herself only growing in dread as she walked along the way to Ayaka's dreamhouse. Not even thinking of it in those terms, dating from so much more innocent days, helped.

She couldn't understand what had gone wrong - well, other than the obvious thing that had gone wrong, but surely her decision to leave Mahora couldn't have directly resulted in all of this? Yes, it had hurt him; it had hurt her, too! But it had still been the right thing to do. He wanted to be a teacher, so that he could become a Magister Magi. And even if her mother was right, and that title couldn't be bestowed, only claimed, he would still want to have all the strokes of the brush correct.

And she wanted him to have everything he wanted.

The problem being that she wanted other things, too. Takamichi had been sweet, and loving, and faithful, which was all perfect considering that she wasn't equipped to be any of those things. When she was with him, she saw things that she would have never been able to see if she'd stayed here in Mahora. And she could do things to him that she'd have been too scared to do to Negi. All sorts of things ...

She pulled her thoughts away from that sort of thing, conscious that no one was around her to see her blush, but still not wanting to be seen doing doing so all the same.

It was her fault, she decided after a while. And then, promptly, she changed her mind. No, of course, it wasn't her fault. It had just been the way that things went. If she'd been here, would Mana still have lost the baby? Yuna'd said there was nothing anyone could have done. Asuna knew nothing about that sort of thing, so there was certainly nothing she could have done, right? And Bookstore? Would Asuna being here have meant she didn't find out? If anything, she'd have found out sooner! And Chachamaru?

Wait, what had happened to Chachamaru? She'd been so shocked by everything else that she hadn't even bothered to ask! Well, when she saw Chisame and the other girl got through punching her in the face or whatever tsundere thing she was going to do, she'd ask her.

Well, at least she was here at the dreamhouse. She stood before the gates and looked up at the fairy tale manor beyond them. In just a while, she was going to see him again. (And her, but that wasn't that big of a deal.) After a long moment of contemplation, she murmured, "I have confidence in confidence alone." And reached out to press the call button on the gatepost.
"Good afternoon," said a pleasant female voice. "Might one inquire as to our visitor's name?"

Asuna thought she recognized the voice, but she wasn't completely sure. "It's Kagurazaka Asuna, to see In- ahem, Yukihiro-san."

There was a long pause. "Sorry, we don't know anyone by that name," said the voice, a lot less pleasant and warm.

On the other hand, it was now completely recognizable. "Cut the crap, Otoha-san," Asuna said wearily. "You know that I'm not leaving until I'm ready to leave."

Dead silence from the receiver. But a moment later, with a buzz, the gates opened. Asuna hefted her suitcase once more and walked down the long path to the door, where she could already see the maid waiting for her.

Her luck continued to be bad, drawing this one. Kisaragi Otoha was one of Ayaka's maids who'd never appreciated Asuna's unique relationship with Ayaka. (With her more mature perspective, she suspected that the older woman was jealous, which made her wonder why she was still employed by Ayaka, under the circumstances.) She supposed that it could have been worse - Chizuru's mother could have been on-duty. Asuna had never actually met the woman, but Arika had, and described the encounter. It had not been pleasant.

Focus on the present, Asuna reminded herself.

"My apologies," said Otoha once Asuna was within speaking distance. "I thought you said Kagarazuka."

"No you didn't," Asuna said flatly. "I'm not interested in playing games. I know that Negi's here, and I need to talk to him and your mistress. Probably Chizuru, too. Where are they?"

"Oujousama, Chizuru-sama and Negi-sama are in the conservatory at the moment, along with Minako-sama, and certain of their other friends," Otoha said with calm, reserved politeness. "I presume that you remember the way?"

"Yeah," Asuna said, walking in and taking off her shoes. "I do." She didn't even think about thanking her. If it ever came up, she'd claim that she'd spent too much time around Americans to be completely polite. (It wasn't true, but much like her mother, she wasn't married to the notion of truth.) Shoeless, she walked in and paused as she looked up the staircase and saw a ghost.

"Evangeline," she whispered.

It was the hair that gave it away. (Well, that and the feet she supposed.) Evangeline's hair had been incredibly long - somehow managing to go from hip length to ankle length over the course of a few months - while this girl's long blonde locks only reached to the middle of her back. It was also just a bit paler in color. And when those green eyes darted in her direction, there could be no doubt who this was.

"You must be Kitty," Asuna said, in her greatly improved English, as she walked up the stairs to where the little girl was seated with a grumpy expression on her face.

"Must I now?" the girl asked, the Scottish accent in full force. "And who might ye be? No, wait, I mark ye now. That Asuna girl, aye?"

"That's right," Asuna agreed with a smile.
"Meh," Kitty said, looking aside. "Dinnae see the appeal."

"Eh? Ahem," Asuna said, guessing what she meant by that, but deciding not to address it directly. "I guess that Negi told you about me?"

"Tha' he did, and showed me yer pictograph," Kitty said, still not looking right at her. "And he says yer name in his sleep, betimes."

Now Asuna blinked. "Uhm ... you two sleep in the same bed?"

And now Kitty was glaring up at her in an unmistakable 'you wanna make something of it' expression. "Aye."

Asuna forced a smile. "Well, that, that's good. When he and I were living together, he'd often crawl into bed with me because he used to do the same thing with his older sister, and it's good that he's having to put up with that from someone else, now." She nodded forcefully.

Kitty had gone from a glare to an honestly bewildered stare. "Wha' heathen nonsense are you be-jabbering?"

"I'm really not sure," Asuna admitted, rubbing her face. "Uhm. He does that a lot? Talks about me in his sleep."

"He doesnae talk, just says yer name. And not so much nae more. Early on, aye, but not so much nae more." The girl looked away again. "Have ye come back, then?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Despite everything, Asuna found it in herself to smile as she spoke one of the great rote truths. "It's complicated."

"Meh," Kitty grunted.

"So ... why are you sitting around here?" Asuna asked.

"Got tired of playing in the room filled wi' silly daft toys the crazy blonde wench let me loose in, and couldn'ae figure out the way to the place where they're having their strategy session," she explained, those last two words said with the air of one repeating a phrase overheard.

"Room filled with -' Asuna repeated, moderately astounded, but then she became distracted. "Sorry, did you say strategy session?"

"Aye?" Kitty answered, puzzled by the question.

Asuna sighed, remembering how their strategy sessions tended to end up. "Nothing, nothing. Um, I'd better get over there. Um. It's probably going to be very boring and filled with discussion about ... uh ... brussels sprouts," she said, trying and failing to come up with something less appealing.

Kitty's grunt of disgust was even shorter this time.

_I guess that worked_, Asuna thought as she headed up the stairs past the little girl.

"You can fight, aye?" Kitty asked abruptly.
Asuna paused. "Yes, I have been taught how to protect myself and others," she said, a bit hesitantly. She could never explain what made her say what she said next. "Actually, your cousin was one of my teachers."

"Evangeline was?" Kitty asked, turning around to look at her. "Truly? She was a great fighter?"

"I don't know about - well, yes, she was." Honesty (and the start of a crestfallen look on the girl's face) forced her to change her answer.

"I want to learn to fight," Kitty said then. "But Negi willnae teach me. He says he has to look after me, and that he can't do that and teach me to fight. Which seems daft t'me," she added darkly.

"He's probably just worried about what might happen if you got hurt," Asuna said. "That, that can happen, you know. When you're learning how to fight."

"Did ye get hurt?" Kitty asked.

Visions of nights spent in an icy cave danced in front of Asuna's eyes for a few moments, and she rubbed the side of her face where a bandaid used to be. "Uh, yeah," she said.

"But it was all right?"

"Eventually, yes."

Kitty was staring at her, now, with an expression she'd only seen once on Evangeline's face, when the vampire had asked her why she'd endured all that she'd made her endure.

"Will you teach me how to fight?" Kitty asked.

... this is how I repay you, Eva-chan. I don't know if you're watching. I don't know if what you did to yourself let something of you go on to heaven and left this little one behind. I don't know much of anything. But I will do everything in my power to make sure this child grows up to be happy like you never could.

"Yes," Asuna answered. "But not today, and not for a while. There's other stuff needs doing first. But I promise that I'll teach you how to protect yourself, and also others. So that you can protect Negi."

Kitty blinked. "Wha - protect him? Are ye daft? He needs no -"

"Yeah, he does. Trust me, he does. We'll talk about this later."

Strategy session! Asuna thought disgustedly as she walked briskly away from Kitty. Her pace was quick, but she paused frequently enough to make sure that the little girl wasn't following her. If their positions had been reversed, at that age - but no, it seemed that Kitty was better behaved than she had been. Or possibly just lazier. Given Evangeline's behavior, she was betting on lazier.

But that distracted her from her current casus irati. Strategy session indeed! she thought as she made her way down the darkened stairs into the wine cellar. At least when we did that sort of thing we actually did try to discuss matters before getting down to wait a minute, did Otoha say something about Ayaka's mother being involved? This as she found the catch that undid the hidden door which led to the passage leading from the wine cellar up to the rear of the mansion. Huh. I guess she must have got better. In that case, they're probably not -

And that took her within earshot - well, her earshot, at least, of the conservatory attached to the back
of the house. The specific type of glass used in greenhouses doesn't particularly sound-proof well. She could hear the groans, moans and sighs of great pleasure coming from within.

_Orrr they are. Geez, Ayaka, do you have to imitate me in everything?_

Of course, Asuna abruptly realized that she was taking off her coat (well, it was probably going to be warm inside) and considering removing her skirt and blouse as well. _No, no no no, _she reminded herself. _You're here to break this up, not join in. Even though it's been hours since that guy in the airport bathroom. Even though it's Negi._

**Negi.**

With great effort, she held her hands at her sides as she walked up to the conservatory door. With a deep breath, she pulled it open and walked in.

Of course, he was the first one her eyes sought out, doing one of the things she loved to watch him do to a full-breasted woman with long blonde hair that she initially took for Ayaka, until she noticed that those breasts were a lot more careworn than her friend's should be. But that came later, as she watched Negi pumping away into the woman with a serious, determined expression on his face. Certainly not a happy one. Just behind him, pressed up against him with her breasts squashing against his back and watching was Chizuru with the same slightly mischievous, slightly daffy smile she'd always had before everything changed.

Neither of them had noticed her yet, and so she was able to tear her eyes away to see Ayaka some distance away on the floor, and blink in amazement as she saw that Ayaka's face was down between the legs of - of all people - Natsumi-chan, whose eyes were screwed up tightly as her cunny took Ayaka's talented lingus, while behind Ayaka a naked, grown-up Kotaro was slamming into her with teeth firmly clenched. That was incredibly surprising, but she supposed that she shouldn't really -

_She heard a gasp._

Her eyes darted back to Chizuru as she saw, for just a second, the more mature girl's face clench in obvious anger, before her features schooled back to a concerned but not at all hate-filled expression as she regarded Asuna and tapped Negi on the shoulder before whispering into his ear.

And then he looked up, and their eyes met.

It was funny, really. Always before, whenever they'd been deliberately separated, whether it was for just a few hours or months at an end, when they were reunited, she would rush up to him and wrap him in her arms as though trying to squash the breath out of him for making her worry so much. She'd look for injuries, just like she was doing now, actually, but from much closer. She'd even done that after they'd took the fight to what they thought was Alladia, after she'd rescued Eishun.

But now?

Now she couldn't.

She'd given up the right, and it felt like an aching, unhealed wound.

He was whispering her name, in disbelief.

"Hi," she said. "How are you," she said. "I've missed you tons and tons," she said. _Fuck you, Yuna, this isn't an improvement._ Deep breath. "We kinda need to talk, though."

Her field of vision was just wide enough to take in both groups of revelers at the same time, and so
she saw that Ayaka’s head had snapped up when she heard her voice, and was turning in her
direction, as was Kotaro’s head, while Natsumi’s eyes were open now. The woman who had to be
Ayaka’s mother, whom she now recognized from the family photos she’d seen, was also twisting her
head somewhat uncomfortably to look back at her. At least she just looked bewildered, rather than
upset like ...

"Asuna?" Ayaka said, incredulously.
Okay, she didn't actually look upset. More stunned and disbelieving. I should say something, "Hey,
iin- okay, I guess I shouldn't call you that. How's life as a drop-out treating you?" ... why did I say
that?! Where did that come from? I don't want to make her even angrier!

Ayaka had gotten to her feet as Asuna berated herself. She was staring at Asuna as though she were
some species of rare animal that she’d never before encountered. Her bare feet were slowly bringing
her across the greenhouse floor in Asuna’s direction. The set of her shoulders told Asuna that an
attack was forthcoming. I should maybe get out of her way,
Asuna thought.
No, better not. I deserve
this. And I can take it. After all, we’ve always, always -

She closed her eyes anyway. She didn't want to see Ayaka's face when the other girl hit her with
actual hatred in her heart.

And then rather strong arms were wrapping around her and her face was being pressed into a soft
chest. Asuna's eyes snapped open as she realized she was being hugged.

"I am very, very, very, very angry at you," Ayaka's voice was saying, in a tone filled with tension
and strain. "I don't think anyone has ever made me this angry, not even the thing that pretended to be
my grandfather." (At least one daughter of said thing flinched.) "Later, I am going to express that
anger. I am going to say incredibly hurtful and cruel things to you. We will probably scream our
lungs out at each other. I am, to be perfectly honest, looking forward to it.

"But all of that can wait," Ayaka said. "Right now, one of my dearest people has come back. And I
am very glad to see you again, Asuna." And Asuna felt lips pressed to the top of her head.

It was very hard for Asuna to see for some reason. What were these things clouding her eyes? Oh.
Tears. No wonder she was confused. It'd been a while since she'd let herself cry. And certainly not in
front of people. Stupid class rep, she thought weakly. No one else can do this to me, not even Negi.

After a few moments of hugging her back, Asuna rasped to clear her throat. "Okay," she said, as she
stepped back, flinching from the sight of the obvious disapproval on Kotaro and Natsumi’s faces.
"That, all that stuff that you just said, it's gonna have to wait until after we talk. Seriously, seriously. I
know some stuff about what's going on that I think you probably don't know, and I think you need
to. That's, that's why I came back." A glance towards Chizuru as she spoke her next words. "Not to
try and mess up anyone's life."

Chizuru regarded her with a cool and slightly ironic expression, but said nothing.

"You know about all this 'hime' and Orphan crap?" Kotaro asked bluntly.

"Well, yeah. I'm a magical princess, remember?" Asuna said, smiling faintly. "You could say that I'm
in the same sort of club as one of them."

"So Nao's done," Natsuki said, her head resting against the edge of the pool and looking up at the
bathing house's skylight. It was incredible that the girls' school reserved this wonder for their
students. On the other hand, the mixed school had had larger dorm rooms, spread across several buildings. So she supposed that it did equal out.

"And I got a text from Yukino last night, saying that she was 'done', too," Mai agreed without looking at the girl she was seated beside.

"And if the Sister's most important person went up with the Cathedral, then she's done too, wherever she is," Natsuki mused.

"And that just leaves you, and me ..." Mai trailed off.

"And Mikoto," Natsuki supplied.

"And Shizuru."

Natsuki closed her eyes. Shizuru.

"So. You want a go?" Mai asked.

Natsuki froze. She couldn't possibly mean - "What do you mean, do I want a go?"

"Do you want to have a go at trying to kill me, is what I am attempting delicately to say," Mai said, enunciating carefully.

"Oh," said Natsuki, relieved for a moment. Then it faded. "No, of course not. Shizuru really tried to kill you?" she asked as she finally turned to look at Mai. It was a mistake. She was abruptly very very conscious of how naked Mai was, and how good she smelled now that the sweat and everything was washed off.

"She had her snake swallow me," Mai answered dully, oblivious to Natsuki's distress. "And just like when Tate was smashing my head in -"

"You turned into fire and then appeared back on Kagu-Tsuchi's head," Natsuki finished.

"Is that what it looks like from the outside?" Mai asked, finally meeting Natsuki's eyes. Natsuki nearly flinched at how much pain and hopelessness she could see there. Really, Mai looked like she was staring at something about a thousand meters past Natsuki's head. All the response that she could give was a nod.

"So it's rigged, then," Mai said, turning away to study the surface of the water. "This whole thing is and has always been rigged."

"Maybe not," Natsuki said, hearing an edge of desperation in her voice and hating it, but pushing on just the same. "I mean, if someone took out your most important person -"

"It's Reito-san," Mai said. "I mean ... he's the only candidate left, right? But that means that nothing could happen to him. He's the Obsidian Prince's host, and it'd act to protect him even before it took him over completely. So I can't be beaten, and he can't be hurt ... and it's rigged so I can win. Yay me," she concluded bitterly.

"But that doesn't make any sense, Mai," Natsuki insisted. "You hadn't even met him when you started all of this! How could he be your - I mean, how do you feel about him, really?"

"Well, I fucked him," Mai said evenly. "How's that for a deep emotional bond?"

Natsuki felt herself blushing and decided it had to be the heat. "But, I mean, you thought it was
Takumi, before that, and -"

"And I was fucking Takumi, so what?" Mai said.

"... you had sex with Takumi?" Natsuki asked after what felt like a full day of bewildered confusion.

"No, when I spoke of fucking him, I meant that I seriously interfered with his life in ways that were really detrimental," Mai explained wearily.

"Oh, we-"

"And I had sex with him. Repeatedly."

Natsuki forced herself to swallow. It wasn't easy. "Well. Um. That's a little ..." She trailed off, sighed, and shook her head. "But I don't really have any room to judge."

That got a reaction out of Mai; her eyebrow quirked. "Why can't -" Abrupt realization. "Ohhhh. That's why you were running around without panties this morning."

The blush couldn't possibly be attributed to the hot water this time. "Um, yes. So you see -"

"That's not even remotely the same thing, you know," Mai interrupted. "I'm not like you, Natsuki. I'm like your -"

"Don't," Natsuki interrupted right back. "Just ... don't."

Mai waited a few moments, then pushed on regardless. "I'm like your mother, Natsuki."

Natsuki's eyes were closed, and she didn't reply.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Mai asked, quietly.

"Yes," Natsuki bit out. "I'm not -" Mikoto, she didn't say. "- not an idiot. And I've found out some ... pretty questionable things about her. Things she did that were very ... unprincipled. And even though I can't remember ... anything like that, I know that the way that we lived wasn't ... right."

Silence fell for a while, until Mai finally spoke up again. "I found a photo of the two of you with the word 'prototype' on the back, when we were at those offices. I decided to hide it from you." A brief pause. "Does that fit with what else you've found out?"

"Yes," Natsuki said quietly. "It does."

"Do you hate me for hiding it from you?" Mai asked.

"No." She was genuinely surprised at the question. "Why would I -"

"What is it gonna take?" Mai asked, despair obvious in her voice, slapping the surface of the water with her hand.

"Why do you want me to hate you?" Natsuki asked, her surprise and confusion doubling at least.

"Do you not get it or something?" Mai shrieked. "This only ends one way - you die. You either die fighting Shizuru, or you die fighting me. And you're not gonna die fighting Shizuru, are you? And I can't die! So I end up killing you, so you should hate me. Why don't you hate me?"

It was such a bizarre question that Natsuki honestly had no idea how to even start answering it.
"What about Mi-" she started to ask.

"She is mine." Mai growled.

"... yes, she is," Natsuki agreed. ... someone in that shut-off heart of yours ... "Mai, you were in love with her, right?"

"No," Mai answered firmly, without even a moment of hesitation or doubt. "I was not."

"Okay," Natsuki said, making what she hoped Mai would take as a placating gesture with her hand. "But she -"

"I don't care what she felt," Mai insisted. To anyone else, she might have just sounded angry. But Natsuki, who'd known her so long - So long? It'd only been a few months! - the faint hints of hysteria were plainly there to be heard.

"Mai -"

"I don't! She killed Takumi! Maybe I did wrong by him, but she killed him! I can never, ever forgive her for that! I hate her!"

Natsuki nodded, slowly. "But you don't hate Akira-kun, do you?"

Mai blinked, confused by what she saw as an abrupt change of topic. "Wha - no, why should I -"

"You do realize what it means that Takumi died when Akira-kun was defeated, right? He - she - whatever, Akira-kun's most important person was Takumi. Akira-kun was the one who put Takumi's life in danger by accepting the power of the HiME. So why don't you blame Akira-kun for what happened?"

Mai was shaking, despite how warm the water was. "I, I don't -"

"Mai," Natsuki said. And then something very strange happened. For the rest of her brief life, Natsuki was never entirely sure how she'd managed to say something so simple and so wise. "No one can break your heart, unless you've already let them inside of it."

Mai stared at Natsuki, who stared right back. Just as Natsuki began to doubt her supposed wisdom, Mai lifted up her hands to reach up into her hair and start pulling as she made a terrible noise. "Hnnnnnnnnnhhhhh!" It sounded a bit like that, for a few moments, before Mai started to sink into the pool.

"Mai!" Natsuki quickly grabbed her and held her head above the waterline.

"I don't want it," Mai moaned after a moment. "Why was I given something I didn't want? Something I didn't ..." And then, incredibly, Mai let out a laugh. "Y'know, I think I maybe did deserve it, after all. I forced myself on Takumi, and Mikoto forced herself on me. And the worst part of it all is, that you're right. I did love her.

"No. I still do."

They stood there in the pool for several moments, Mai limp in Natsuki's arms.

"It occurs to me that there's something we haven't tried yet," Mai said weakly. "We don't know what'll happen if I die when Kagu-Tsuchi isn't summoned."
"Mai -"

"Let me drown, Natsuki. Hold me under, and then, when you win, you can use the Prince's power to set all this right, and -"

"Mai!" Natsuki shouted. "That's not how things work! You can't rewrite what's already happened!"

"Why not?" Mai asked quite reasonably.

"Because it's a paradox, that's why! And ... and I can't do what you're asking, I -" It seemed to be her day for insights. "I can't kill anyone," Natsuki said quietly. "That's why my guns shoot stun bolts whenever I'm fighting anyone. That's why Shizuru, given one day, accomplished more of my so-called vengeance than I have in my entire life. My whole life is one big joke. I can't kill anyone, especially not you."

"Why especially not me?" Mai asked, confused.

"... oh, come on, how dumb can you be?" Natsuki howled faintly, and brought her lips together with Mai's.

Mai's eyes widened as she realized that she was being kissed, and she proceeded to make noises that would probably have made much more sense if someone else's tongue wasn't in her mouth. It didn't take her long to realize this problem, and so she resorted to pushing firmly against Natsuki's chest. (Of course, the situation being what it was, that meant that her hand was up against Natsuki's breasts, which was probably sending a very mixed message, but then, when didn't Mai do that?)

After a moment, though, the message she was trying to send apparently got through. Either that, or Natsuki decided that she needed to breathe. Regardless of her motive, she pulled back and gazed down at Mai wordlessly, but with hungry eyes.

"You too?" Mai asked weakly.

"Me too," Natsuki agreed.

"Shit," said Mai, letting out a bone-dry chuckle. "What about me is so lovable anyway?"

"I wish I knew. Then I could work on trying to find it in someone else, because -" She fell silent.

"Because I don't love you, and I probably never will," Mai finished the sentence for her. A long pause. "I'm sorry, Natsuki."

"Yeah, me too." A slightly crooked grin. "But I note that you have not let go of my breast."

Now they both laughed a bit, not quite hysterically but without much humor. When they were done, they floated a while, gazing at each other.

"You don't have to love me," Natsuki said at last. "Just ... let me love you, all right? I know you don't think you're worth loving, but I think you're wrong about that. And Shizuru said ... she said that the reason that Duran is small, compared to all of you, is that I don't let myself be honest about how I feel."

Mai stared. "While accurate, its source makes me inclined to think that idea is crazy."

"Yeah, well, let me try it anyway. I love you, Mai. Will you let me love you?"

"... okay ..." Mai murmured. And then they were kissing again, their tongues darting back and forth
as they moved through the water together, pushed by its motion towards the edge, where Mai found herself pressed with her back against the wall, with Natsuki pushed up against her, mouth against Mai's tits. She was a bit startled by how much enthusiasm Natsuki was showing; it was comparable to - to more obviously enthusiastic people, but with immediately obvious differences.

Natsuki, for whatever reason, liked to bite. This was not something Mai had ever experienced, and it was initially a bit startling. But there wasn't too much pain, and what there was went away with the pleasure she was being given with Natsuki's tongue and, elsewhere, her hands. One of those hands had promptly gone down between her legs to massage her clitoris - not too much, just enough to send jolts of ecstasy running up her spine.

They were soon accompanied by the sensations of fingers sliding up into her. First one, then two, then skipping three all the way to four as Natsuki grew more confident, and then -

"AUGH!" Mai shrieked up at the ceiling.

"Holy shit, I didn't mean to do that!" Natsuki gasped. "Agh! I'm in you up to my wrist! I didn't think that was possible - hold on, I'm gonna pull out -"

"Don't! You! Fucking! Dare!" Mai gasped out as she wrapped a free arm around Natsuki's neck to hold her in place. "Keep doing that! Agh!"

"Doing what?" Natsuki nearly stammered. "I don't know what I'm -"

Mai exploded in an orgasm that made the loudest Natsuki had heretofore witnessed, involving Yuna riding her father hard while she herself slid a pair of fingers up her sister's ass, look rather sedate. She screamed, jerked, and writhed beneath Natsuki's touch.

Eventually, after she had settled a bit, Mai found her voice. "Now," she said softly, "you can pull out."

Eyes wide, Natsuki did so, rubbing her wrist and hoping that it wasn't dislocated. She had little enough time to contemplate the issue, though, as Mai grabbed her and reversed their positions with regards to the wall. "Your turn," she breathed.

"Uh, don't do that to me, all right?" Natsuki asked nervously.

Mai licked the pointer finger of her left hand and smiled ominously.

"That's what all this crap has been about?" Chisame demanded, eyes and mouth agape.

As the first words Hasegawa had spoken to her, Asuna thought they lacked something. Then again, perhaps she shouldn't talk. "Yes, it would seem so. And now we need -"

"Ummm!" Kotaro, by now reverted to his actual age, was holding up a hand. "Scuse me!" he said, with politeness that probably wouldn't have happened if Chizuru wasn't sitting beside him. "I still don't get how you know all this. Your explanation didn't make any sense t'me."

Asuna stared at him, seated on the couch in the manor's sitting room between Chizuru and Natsumi, while she stood in front of its fireplace and addressed everyone. "Okay, then," she said, with elaborate cheerfulness. "The simplified version.

"Ahem. Once upon a time there was a complete asshole whom we'll call the Mage of the Beginning, and he had two daughters. For whatever reason, one of those daughters had the power of Magic
Cancel, and for reasons that are way too complicated to go into but really sucked, she was put into magical sleep. However, whoever cast the magical sleep on her really didn't know what they were doing, as it left parts of her mind awake so that they could wander the universe.

"During one of these wanderings, not too long ago, her mind contacted that of another princess, imprisoned in a similar situation here on Earth. Of course, there was nothing either of them could do to help one another, but they did become friends of a sort, forming what one could call the 'Imprisoned Magical Princess' Club. Total membership three."

"Who's the third?" Ayaka asked from the big chair where she was sitting.

"Not pertinent. Anyway, the downside of the magic cancelling princess being allowed to mentally roam like that meant that her mind stayed active and thus aged, and was eventually lost to senile dementia. She was kept on magical life support until they could figure out a replacement. Eventually, another complete asshole came up with an idea for that replacement, I was duly born and shoved into the magical sleep in her place, and the first Asuna was allowed to die. Which she did happily ever after.

"But parts of her mind remained in there, and touched mine, so that I sometimes have some of her memories. And I also inherited her membership in the Imprisoned Magical Princess Club ... and just yesterday, one of the other members of that club contacted me with all this doom and gloom information. And that's how I know all of this, and that's why I came back here."

"Do you trust your source that much?" Chizuru asked, somewhat hesitantly.

Asuna spread her hands. "I can't see why someone would go to all that trouble just to lie to me, and tell me to lie to you. It's too broke."

"Baroque," Chizuru corrected.

Asuna blinked. "Isn't that what I said?"

"Have you seriously been living in America all this time?" Chisame snarled.

"Please, let's not go back to that! Look, does any of this contradict anything that you've already found out?"

"No," said Negi, from where he was standing at the window, looking out with a grim look on his face. "It doesn't. Actually, it supports it." He half-turned back. "When the Obsidian Prince spoke to the school board, he made what I assumed was a joke about how he was satisfied with his role in the cycle of life. A joke or a lie. But with this new information ... yes, I can see why he would be satisfied." Now he was frowning. "And I find myself ill-disposed towards the notion of his continued satisfaction. We need to make ready."

"We need to gather our troops," Asuna said. "He's still not looking at me. He's not talking to me, either. He's talking to the whole room. Negi ... "Actually, by we, I mean I," she added.

It certainly succeeded in getting his attention firmly on her. "Eh?" he said.

"They've got a saying in America. 'You baroque it, you fix it,'" she said in lightly accented English. "... I'm pretty sure that's not actually a saying," said Negi.

"Which one of us went to America? Hm?"
"Screaming match over?" Chizuru asked, a little while later, when she met Asuna in the mansion's foyer.

Asuna coughed. "Yes. Ayaka has quite thoroughly chastised me for running off the way that I did."

"Good. Now it's my turn to chastise you for coming back the way you did."

Asuna made an annoyed sound. "Okay, little sister, let's get one or two things straight -"

"Indeed, let us do that," Chizuru agreed. "I tolerate your mother calling me that, but you -"

"- are both sister and niece to you, and also to Makie-chan. Which I still find incredibly hard to believe, but - that's not important. Unless you want me calling you obasan -"

Chizuru promptly began smiling pleasantly in Asuna's direction.

"That's not going to work on me," the seemingly younger woman said, ignoring the twinge of anxiety that she couldn't help but feel. "And anyway, it was a hypothetical statement. You shouldn't get mad about hypothetical statements." Then she blinked. "Wait, you tolerate? As in present tense?"

Now Chizuru blinked. "Yes, I speak with your mother via phone on the average of once a month, and we've met face to face twice since she left Mahora."

"I thought you didn't like her," Asuna said, genuinely perplexed.

"It would be more accurate to say that I don't really approve of her," clarified Chizuru. "And even that ... well. She has been helpful to our interests, and so I give her what assistance I can when she asks for it, and ... I tolerate her."

"Has she seduced you yet?" The question was asked quietly.

"No," came the firm answer. "Don't be ridiculous, Asuna, if she had, don't you think she'd boast about it to you?"

"No," Asuna said, looking away. "We, um. We kind of had an argument the last time we spoke, and I haven't seen her in months."

"I see," Chizuru said, thawing just a bit as she remembered her last conversation with her own mother. There had been no 'kind of' about their argument. But that wasn't important now. "You should know that she keeps an eye on you, whether or not you're talking."

"Really?" Asuna asked, startled. And then she abruptly went white as a thought occurred to her.

Chizuru said nothing as she watched the girl stew in her panic for a while. It was the least of what she deserved, frankly. "Why did you come back, Asuna?" she asked a moment later. "If you wanted to make a clean break -"

"I didn't!" Asuna insisted. "I, I swear that I sent letters! I don't know what happened to stop them from arriving!"

"That doesn't explain why you came back now," Chizuru said, filing the question of the letters away to be addressed later. "You could have just sent word about this situation, and left the rest to those already positioned to deal with it."

"I missed him, okay?" Asuna whispered. "I'm not ... I don't have the courage of my convictions, when it comes to him."
"Then why are you avoiding him?" the seemingly older girl pressed. "You show up, you avoid opportunities to have private conversations with him, you volunteer for a mission that will take you all over Japan rather than stay here and deal with him face to face! Not having you in his life hurt him, but this, this shadow of a relationship -"

"I get it!" snapped Asuna. "I know! And I'm sorry, but I can't be the person any of you want me to be. I'm here now, and that's all that I can say."

That was actually very far from all that she could say, and Chizuru could tell it. With a shake of her head, she reached out a hand to the girl. "Where to first?" she asked.

"Kyoto," Asuna said promptly as she took it. "Let's get the hard part over with first."

"That would be your attitude," Chizuru mused as they walked together, hand in hand, out of the manor and onto the walkway leading to the door. "Adeat."

Moments later, they stood outside the torii gates to the headquarters of the Kyoto Magical Association. As Chizuru began to let go of Asuna's hand, she found it gripped almost painfully.

"You know," Asuna said, not making it a question.

"... yes," admitted Chizuru.

"You haven't told Ayaka, have you?" This time it was a question.

"No. Nor Negi." Her eyes gazed deeply into Asuna's own. "Should he?"

Asuna sighed and let go of her grip on Chizuru's hand. "I don't know. Do they know we're coming?" she asked abruptly, looking up the path ahead.

"I phoned ahead," Chizuru confirmed.

"Okay, then. Let's hope Setsuna's in a good mood."

---

_Clearly she is not_, Asuna thought a few minutes later, as she dangled from Setsuna's outstretched arms, hanging in space roughly a mile above the Earth, listening to a strange creole of Japanese and the rather more Chinese-sounding language of the bird tribe exploding in a furious torrent from Setsuna's mouth.

"You've gotten a lot better at flying," said Asuna, when her mentor paused to take a breath. It was true. She would never have been able to hold onto something as heavy as Asuna and maintain a hover like this back in the day.

"Have you?" Setsuna ground out. "If I let go of you, will you fly or fall?"

"I'm gonna have to say fall," Asuna admitted. "And if I fall, I'm a dead woman. Unless somehow I manage to catch hold of something on the way down to slow my fall a bit, which is one of those implausibly unlikely scenarios that happen all the time around people like us."

Setsuna resumed cursing her out. Even with her Royal Magic's translation function going at full power, she found herself understanding maybe one word in ten, but from the look on Setsuna's face and the sound of her voice, it was fairly clear that was what she was doing. The obvious anger Asuna could see in Setsuna's eyes, and the not so obvious pain, both hurt Asuna far more than the threatened fall ever could.
"I'm sorry," she finally said.

"The bird tribe has a saying, which roughly translates as 'Fuck your sorry!'" Setsuna shrieked.

"Okay, hold the phone," Asuna said, as an odd realization struck her. "Since when do you know the bird tribe's language? I thought you were an outcast from the time you were born, so what gives?"

Setsuna stared at her for a moment, in obvious disbelief, before speaking in a patient and conversational tone. "Well, Asuna-san, in the last year I've had a fair amount of free time since I no longer had a best friend with whom I could spar. So I spent part of that time trying to get in touch with my mother's side of my family. They don't like me much, but I've gotten to the point where I have connections and skills that they can't afford to ignore, so they tolerate me. It's not really very much fun, but like I said, I don't have a best friend anymore."

"Okay, okay!" Asuna said, raising her voice. "I get it. I already said that I'm sorry I left you without saying goodbye, but after what happened with Konoka -"

"Don't try to put this on Konoka!" Setsuna snapped. "You shouldn't have left, period!"

"I had to! I couldn't stay there with Negi and -"

"Yes, you could! If anyone had any objections, I'd cut them down! I would have protected you to the death, Asuna!"

"I don't want you to die and I certainly don't want you to have to kill anyone!" Asuna protested. "I don't want you to fight the world for anyone's sake, least of all mine!"

They hung a while in silence, broken only by the occasional beat of Setsuna's mighty wings.

"Are you going to drop me or what?" Asuna eventually asked. "It's starting to get a little cold up here."

"I wish I could drop you, but the you in my heart won't let go quite so easily," Setsuna eventually replied.

Slowly, Asuna raised up a hand to gently caress one of Setsuna's cheeks. "I missed you."

"I'm still mad at you, but Konoka will go nuts if I don't let you see her before I punish you as your crimes deserve," her friend ground out.

"I've heard of worse excuses for a reprieve," said Asuna, as Setsuna pulled her close to start their descent.

"... they're probably ogling cute, mostly naked girls in swimsuits..." Kaede said wistfully as he tucked away his new telepathia receptor into his vest.

"... eating seaside food, and shaved ice ..." Masuto added, making sure his Pactio card was in place and checking his wand. No, not THAT wand, the magic ... er, the collapsible ... er, the one that was used for spells.

"... cool water with probably not a monster in sight ..." Kaede said, checking his own card.

"... playing the watermelon game and eating the juicy fruit ..." Masuto said, discreetly checking the extra large cotton panties in his pocket.
In Okinawa, Ala Iridia fought for their lives as Cthuuga, the eternal bane of Nyarlathotep, entered the fray, surrounded by floating things that shot forth searing jets of light as Tsukiyomi struggled to harness the power of the Star Vampires.

The two Iridians sighed. "Lucky bastards," they said under their breaths.

After a moment, Kaede asked, "Do they actually eat the watermelon afterwards? I've always thought that was very unsanitary."

"I think it's only done in office outings and anime and manga these days," Masuto admitted.

Kaede went back to cutting up more sandwich bread, loading up of energy. He supposed the only actual upshot to this was he finally had an excuse to break out his strawberry preserves, which were usually too rich for everyday eating. (That, and people tended to finish it off when he wasn't around.) He began to make another strawberry sandwich. "I think that chick digs me," he said as he worked. "She didn't scream or throw my card away or anything."

Masuto gave him a look. "Dude, wholly aside from the, you know, LAW THING, I'm pretty sure she's not interested. She was probably just trying to make Misora jealous."

Kaede looked at at him, blinking in confusion. "Who?"

"That girl she was with! The one you keep calling kohai!"

"Oh, you mean freckle-nun? They're together?"

"Good grief, man!" Masuto said. "How do you not know this? It was all over the school last year!"

Kaede reflected. "She's the reason Father Kotomine was excommunicated?"

"No, that was Ortensia-san."

"Oh, Father Rokubungi was the one molesting her! Lucky bastard ... priests get all the luck."

Masuto face-palmed. "No, that was Ikari-san. Remember, last year? Two girls were going to get married, they'd set the date and everything, groups were protesting left and right for both sides of the issue, then out of nowhere one of the girls chickens out? Misora and Cocone were those girls!"

Kaede blinked. "Her name's Cocone? Wait, that's what that was about? I thought there was going to be a gay pride march or something."

Masuo resisted the urge to facepalm again. It wouldn't do to be repetitive. "You know, for the biggest admitted and non-imprisoned lolicon in the school, you really don't give a damn do you? They're just meat to you, aren't they?"

"Plushies," Kaede corrected unrepentantly. "So soft and cuddly and-"

There was a knock on the door. Masuto thanked whoever there was in control of the universe for the timely interruption. He headed for the door, Kaede following him holding the long length of metal pipe and mechanisms he used as a staff. He still wasn't shutting up. "Besides, I'd finally found out what the Dark Evangel looked like then," he said cheerfully, even as he hefted the club in, admittedly, fully justified paranoia. "A 700 year-old loli was a jackpot! The stories about her... then she ups and disappears! I mean, that's just not fair! I actually go to all the trouble of finding a loli that was legal, unlike most of the pervs in this school, and then she's nowhere to be found! And Springfield wouldn't say where she was and threatened to report me if I kept asking! He's probably
keeping her all to himself in some secret love nest. That selfish bastard has those twins in his class, he should be able to spare some for the rest of -"

Kaede shut his mouth in mid-sentence as Masuto put his hand to the door, pervert habits shutting him up in the approaching potential presence of someone who'd report him. For all Kaede had complained about Kageyama's... libertinage and handsiness, he certainly never complained when he benefitted form the silence that ensued in her wake. Masuto opened the door as Kaede pressed himself against the wall and raised his staff to either brutally club anyone who tried to rush in and attack, or- sadly more likely- be splattered by Masuto's blood and gore before becoming victim number 2.

It was, thankfully, none of the above. "Oh..." Masuto said as he saw who was at the door. "Ah, hello! Would you... like to come in?"

"Not particularly," said Yukino quietly. "But this is the resistance headquarters, isn't it? Please take me to your leader, I need to talk to her."

"That could be a little tricky," said Kaede, popping his head into view now that it seemed more or less likely that there would be no immediate violence. "We're sort of an anarcho-syndicalist commune, in which executive authority is vested in -"

Yukino really only heard the phrase "anarcho-"; given whose will she considered herself to be fulfilling, it made her very, very uncomfortable. However, she pressed on regardless. "That Kageyama person, she's sort of your leader, right? She was giving directions last night."

"The one you saw being carried away covered in horrible burns?" Masuto asked calmly.

"Well, you said you were taking her to a doctor - this doctor, actually - so I presume that she's all right, or you wouldn't be standing around cracking jokes like this."

Kaede and Chizuno exchanged looks; nothing was said, but the phrase, 'She don't know us very well, do she?' was clearly floating in both their brains.

"So can I please speak to her, or to someone in authority?" Yukino asked at last, a bit of her exhaustion showing.

At that moment, Mikado-sensei came into the room, with Yuna trailing along behind her. "... I'll show you exactly what I mean, as soon as I see who's at the - oh. Hello," she concluded as she saw that the door had been answered. "I'm Mikado Ryouko, and you?"

"Kikukawa Yukino, assist -" She flinched. "Acting director of the Student Executive. I need to speak with Kageyama Yamiko, or someone in authority. Please," she added as an afterthought.

"That could be a little tricky," Mikado said patiently.

"I'm getting a little tired of hearing that," Yukino said faintly.

"It's only been twice so far," Kaede pointed out.

"Hey, hey," Yuna said, sensing the possibility of violence breaking out and for once wanting to avert it rather than join in. "Even if Aramis-chan isn't talking, you can talk to my dad. He's a teacher, he'll want to hear what you have to say."

"... all right, but -"

"Aramis-chan?" Yukino repeated bewilderedly.
"This way," Mikado said with a shrug. "You'll see what I mean."

As the women walked away, Kaede said, loudly, "So, we're letting her in without checking if she's a spy, or mind controlled, or evil are we? 'Cause that worked SO well with the nun."

Mikado paused and turned back to look at Kaede, just a bit archly. "You mean the way that I verified that about you and the rest of your merry band of misfits? The way I didn't, I mean."

Kaede nodded. "Exactly! I could be filled to the gills with Orphans and mind-control, getting ready to kill you all and rape your skulls. Well, force-feed you age-change pills to turn you into lolis first. I'm clearly a dangerous deviant, so I find it highly irresponsible you let me get in here. And if that girl is a plant, it's all on you!"

"Uh-huh," Mikado said dismissively as she led the two girls into the kitchen.

He exchanged a look with Masuto and said in Faux-Canadian, "Women, eh? What are we, meaningless background people to be brushed off?" He turned and called in the direction they'd gone. "If she explodes in Orphans and kills you both you only have yourselves to blame!"

"Yeah, it's kinda insulting. I mean, we are their sempai," Masuto agreed. "So, what are we having for dinner?"

"Hey, it's your turn to cook!"

"No, it's not!"

"Yes, it is!"

"You know I cannot cook AT ALL!" Masuto protested. "And right now, it's not like I can call for pizza!"

Kaede rolled his eyes. "Some adventurer. What will you do when Mommy is too old to cook for you, and you can't just go buy takeout?"

"Then," he said, "I'll marry."

"I love the perfect way you have mapped your life out."

As the three women descended the stairs, they could faintly hear music playing. Not really a song, but an instrumental piece, mostly guitar, interspersed with periodic shouts of 'hey'. As they entered the basement's main room, the eye was immediately drawn to a large machine against the far wall, incredibly baroque looking with crystals positioned in geometric shapes on it and conduits leading up into the wall and ceiling. At its core was what looked like an oven door; through its window could be seen a bright orange glow.

Souzouteki was seated on some cushions piled against the far wall with a sour expression. He looked up as the girls filed in, but didn't say anything.

"She's in there," Mikado explained.

Exchanging a look, Yuna and Yukino crept up to the machine and looked through the window. They stood in silence for a moment, observing.

It was Yuna who broke the silence. "Uh ... there's no one in there."
"Yes, she's just not in a form that you'd recognize."

"There's just some weird, orange tang-like substance filling the whole compartment," Yukino said, with mounting horror.

"That's what she looks like right now," Mikado confirmed. "That's what happens when you have your intrinsic field removed."

Yuna nodded, calmly. Then spun, pointing a finger at Mikado-sensei, and shouting, "Aggghh! Mad scientist who's sold her soul!"

"Oh, this is sooo tiresome," Mikado sighed.

"Why in the world would you invent such a machine?" Yukino asked, horrified.

"Because she's a mad scientist who's sold her soul!" Yuna explained.

"First of all, I prefer the term enlightened rather than mad." Mikado explained, glancing over at Souzouteki who was clearly not giving a crap about any of this. "Secondly, I didn't invent this. I just reverse engineered it, and the individual who did invent it is not a mad scientist either, but a person of utter integrity."

"Oh yeah?" Yuna asked snidely. "Who's that, Superman-sama?"

"Actually, yes."

Silence fell.

After a moment, Mikado continued. "A few years ago, annoyed at something Lex Luthor said about him hording the technological wonders of his home planet, Superman-sama donated the original of this machine to the hospital in Metropolis where I used to work. It can permit the regeneration of just about any injury a person can survive, such as the third and fourth degree burns over ninety per cent of the body that the person you know as Kageyama Yamiko had suffered. There are some serious risks involved, though, which has kept the device from being used too often."

"Risks like what?" Souzouteki abruptly asked.

"The regeneration restores the subject according to his or her self-image. If that image is -" She paused, looking as though she were searching for the right word. "- negative, the regenerated form will reflect that."

"As in, 'One day Gregor Samsa awoke to discover he had turned into a giant cockroach?" Souzouteki pressed, sounding oddly hopeful.

"That probably can't happen," Mikado said without much in the way of certainty.

Yuna had turned back to look at the machine with disgusted fascination. "How long is she going to be in there?" she asked.

"It's hard to say. The last time, it took that person a week to return to a humanoid form. The music is supposed to help the return to self-awareness."

"Huh," Yuna said. Then, a few seconds later, "Last time?"

"Yes, this is the second time the person you know as Kageyama Yamiko has used a machine like this. We first met in 1999, when that person was going by a different name and looked rather
"Different how?" Yuna asked.

Mikado held a finger up to her lips. "Doctor-patient confidentiality. Sor-reeee."

"This is all very ... well, it's very something, I'm not really sure what," said Yukino after a moment. "But I really do need to talk to someone in authority."

"Right, right," Yuna said, nodding. "I'll take you up to my dad." She frowned. "You're one of those HiME, right?"

"I was," Yukino answered bluntly. "I'm not anymore."

"Yeah, he'll really want a word or two with you," Yuna agreed. "Come on."

Once they were gone up the stairs, Mikado checked some readouts on the machine, and then departed herself without another word to Souzouteki. He was looking at the machine with a speculative expression, then turned that gaze on the tape deck playing the annoying song.

"The music draws her back, huh?" he said aloud as he reached for the stop button.

There was a sudden loud thump from the machine. Souzouteki froze in mid-reach. Probably that had just been something shifting inside of it, rather than anything untoward. Why take chances, though? He pulled his hand back and wished Rika would finish up in the toilet already.

Almost as soon as he thought that, though, he heard footsteps rapidly descending the stairs. "Sorry, Denai-sempai," said Rikalous (to use the other newbie's codename), long hair flowing from beneath a really nice hat, and glasses slightly fogged up.

Ordinarily, someone would have said, it's no big deal. This being Souzouteki, all he did was grunt as he got up and headed out of the basement. Rika didn't even see him go, being so focused on the machine.

"Sooo incredible," Shiguma Rika groaned as she examined it, almost drooling.

Her reunion with Konoka had been a different kind of intense than the one with Setsuna, but it had still been pretty intense.

"What do you mean, you can't stay the night! What do you mean, you have to get going! Asunaaaa! You're all sweaty! You should at least take a bath! Don't you think she ought to take a bath, daddy? Don't you, mama?"

Well, at least I was able to talk her out of coming in here with me, Asuna thought wryly as she sat in the furo, letting at least some of the tension soak away. But of course, just as she thought that, she heard the door behind her start to slide open, and the tension ratcheted right up again as she suppressed a groan. "Konoka, I thought we talked about this -"

"Sorry for the intrusion," said a decidedly not-Konoka not-even-Konoka's-sex voice.

Now Asuna turned, just a bit startled to see Eishun, wearing a dressing gown, kneeling on the floorboards just outside the door, moving forward until he was inside the bathhouse.

"I just wanted to thank you privately," he said, as he slid the door shut behind him.
"Eh?" she said, blinking. "For - oh." Abruptly, she realized what he was talking about.

"Yes, thank you for not telling my daughters that I've seen you more recently than either of them have. I don't think they would take it well," he understated delicately.

"Honestly, I just didn't think of it," Asuna said, embarassed. "So there's no need to thank me. Actually, I think you shouldn't keep secrets like that, but ... well, that's just my opinion."

"Nonetheless," he said, with a polite nod. Then a deep breath. "So how is he?"

"Oh, he's fine," she assured him with a wave of her hand. "He was out of the hospital he let you put him in within a few days."

"That's - excuse me, let me put him in?" Eishun asked, eyebrow raised.

"Come on. Did you really think that it would have been that easy for you to beat him up, if he hadn't been just taking it rather than trying to fight back?" Asuna raised an eyebrow of her own.

"... honestly, yes, I sort of did," the elder said, just a bit sheepishly. "But ... I suppose that I shouldn't be shocked. Takamichi has always been the one who takes such things on himself. And I wasn't nearly as ready for the real thing as I thought I was."

She offered neither agreement nor dissent. "So what happened on your side, after you left?"

"I took your advice. Told my subordinates that I needed a vacation, and they surprised me by agreeing. I went out to Okinawa for a few weeks, and that's how I met her." The expression on his face was so warm, so happy ... so unlike anything she'd ever seen there in her acquaintance with him, that it almost shocked her.

"And it happened just like that?" she asked. "No problems?"

"Not really. Some of the more reactionary elements protested, but I suspect they would have done so if I'd married a local girl. Most of my people were actually happy to strengthen ties with the Okinawa Magical Association -"

"That's not really what I meant," Asuna finally interrupted. "I was talking about the other thing."

Eishun looked a bit confused for a moment, then realized what she meant. "Ah, yes, the other thing. No. I actually told her about all of that within a few days of our first meeting. It didn't bother her." Off her boggled expression, he continued. "Apparently, they have some interesting traditions in her part of the islands. She'll tell you about them herself, if you're curious."

"Kind of am," Asuna admitted. "Now I wish I didn't have to get going almost as soon as I'm done here."

"She likes you," he added. "She told me that you remind her of a friend of hers, actually. A very good friend."

And then there was just silence for a while.

"Y'know, Eishun-san," Asuna said, the heat finally getting to her as she stood up in the furo, letting the water fall off her body as she stood naked before him. "It occurs to me that out of everyone in that room on that day, you're the only one I've never been with. Would you like to change that?"

He stared in silence for a short while, then said, "You are so much like your mother."
"I should be, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, I suppose that you should." He reached for his obi and undid it. His cock was already starting to stiffen just from the sight of her. She'd long since ceased to be surprised at how easily men's bodies showed their desire for her - though she hadn't ceased to be flattered by it. She promptly reached out a hand to grasp the member, feeling her touch make it grow harder and lift up higher as she supported it in the palm of her hand, her fingertips rubbing and pinching at the skin around his balls.

"Tell me what you want me to do," she said.

It was strategy. She'd come to know Eishun's type fairly well. Whatever Takamichi might think about his ambitions to be like Gateau and Nagi, he was also very like the man whose dick she was now stroking. Both were supposedly dominant men who on some level relished the opportunity to surrender that dominance to another. And she was all right with that, glad to be that other, normally, but not now. This tryst would probably never be repeated, after all, and she did not want Eishun's 'normal' sex. She wanted him out of his comfort zone.

"Tell me," she repeated, when he hadn't said anything.

"Take it in your mouth," he said at last, eyelids half-lowered.

"You want me to suck it?" she asked. "You want me to go down on you, here in the bath?"

"Yesss," he groaned as her hand tightened slightly.

"Then say so. Don't mince words."

"Suck my ... cock," he concluded after one last hesitation.

Good boy, she thought, and promptly throated him. It was easy. She'd had practice on much larger specimens than this. Tongue pressing up where his shaft hit his balls, she bathed it in her saliva as it fucked into her widest hole. He was held fast, neck bent back, knees almost buckling, mouth moving in patterns she didn't recognize. She doubted that her name was one of them, though.

With difficulty, she resisted the urge to reach around to caress his butthole. Not so much because she knew what Tsukuyomi had done there, a year ago, but because it wasn't time for that. This too was strategy. So was the smile as she let him slide out again, coughed once, then said, "I think this is about ready to go up my ass. Ready to be the seme, Eishun?"

"Not your -" he said as he began to crouch, reaching down to set a hand on her hip, to turn her over.

She pushed down on his hand, not painfully, but enough to tell him to stop. "It's not safe today, and I don't want you to get a condom. But we're doing it face to face, right?"

"Right," he said, putting a hand on her other hip as he slid between her spread legs, lifting them slightly so that he was able to push the head of his unit into her rear hole. Again, she'd had lots of practice, so it went in easily. And then began the motion.

"Harder," she said. "Do it harder. I'm not gonna break. Pound my sweet little ass." Topping from the bottom, she supposed, but so it went.

His jaw was clenched, but the first sound from it came when her fingers, till now clenching at his buttocks, went further to what was between them.
"Ah, you like that, don't you," she said. "You'd like it if someone was back there. Takamichi likes that, when he's pounding into me and someone fucks him like the dirty little boy that he is. So sorry it's just me. Sorry that I'm the only one here and you have to focus on making me feel so fucking good, ah!" she gasped as she did so. And noticed, from the way that the door to the bathroom had slid open slightly, that she was wrong about them being alone.

"Harder," she repeated. "Come on, do you do this to Konoka so lightly? To Setsuna?"

"No," he said. "Not with Setsuna."

Useful knowledge. "What about your sweet little wife, who's made you so happy? Does she get it harder than this?"

"Nnn, nyagh!" he gasped, not answering her question, as he spent into her.

They lay there, breathing a bit heavily, for a few moments, before Asuna slapped his cheek - the one on his face - lightly. "Now, get up, and go tell your wife what you did and how sorry you are, and take your punishment like a man."

"Yes, mistress," he said, smiling faintly.

He got up, pulled the robe closed once more and slid the door open. Asuna blinked as he did so, seeing that there didn't seem to be anyone there. He was too dazed to notice that the door had been part way open, and so simply stumbled through it.

"But then -"

"That was so beautiful," Konoka whispered as she dropped the invisibility screen that covered her naked form, nipples hard as diamonds.

"Since when can you do that?" Asuna asked.

"I've been practicing all sorts of things," her friend assured her, almost bouncing with anticipation.

"Ah. Well. What were you waiting for, an invitation?" She turned over to show her buns. "It won't clean itself."

Konoka moaned and descended rapidly.

---

*Again?* thought Midori wearily as the alarm roused her from her nap. Things weren't quite the same as they'd been the last time that moaning noise had started up, since it was early evening rather than the middle of the night. But it was still annoying, especially since it meant that she was probably about to get unwanted visitors.

Well, maybe not completely unwanted. It'd been a strange day. Her daily appointment with the psychiatrist had been cancelled. That might not actually be the right word for it - it implied a formality which hadn't been present. She'd waited and waited for someone to show up and take her to that meeting, and no one had shown up. Eventually, she'd just allowed herself to fall into an afternoon nap.

No one had shown up to bring her food either. That was honestly a bit troubling, but Midori had decided not to let it worry her unduly. Someone was bound to show up eventually. And now, of course, they had. So she lifted her head from the pillow on the bunk and stared fixedly at the closed door, expecting it to swing open and permit the rapid entry of Mai or Natsuki or Mikoto or any/all of
the above. At which point she'd annoy them by asking if they had anything to eat.

That was when the wall of her cell opposite her bunk twitched, then abruptly pulled away from the building, clenched between the jaws of an enormous purple snake.

_Huh_, Midori thought. _Wasn't expecting her._

Clad in a blood-spattered purple kimono and wielding a naginata, Fujino Shizuru bounded up into the hole left by her Child's efforts at remodeling. "Hello," she said politely, eyes completely vacant. "I've come to kill you."

"... got any food?" Midori asked. It seemed a shame to waste a cool line like that.

And it had some effect, at least bewildering the other girl. "What? Why would you -" Shizuru shook her head. "Get up, Sugiura. Get up and die with some dignity."

Midori sighed. "Never lived with any, so I can't see the point, really," she answered as she rolled over to look at the wall rather than Shizuru. "Do whatever you came here to do. You've probably got cause, and you'd be doing me a favor, sort of."

"I am not minded to do you any favors," said the increasingly inhuman voice from behind her. "But nonetheless -"

Midori closed her eyes and waited for oblivion.

And waited.

"What? What?" said Shizuru's voice.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, but you're going outside the lines of what his highness had in mind," said an obnoxious but very very cute voice that Midori couldn't help but recognize and thrill to do so.

"Ah, crap," she said, doubtless out of hunger and frustration with her circumstances, rather than out of any dislike for the charming young boy whom she rolled over again to see, standing there holding Shizuru's weapon by the blade, stopping it from swinging down into her unprotected back.

"She is a HiME," Shizuru was protesting - without any particular heat, which sounded very odd to Midori's ears.

"Not any more," Nagi replied. "She's out of it. I mightn't have stopped you if it was someone else, but he wants this one alive for some reason."

Midori could see Shizuru's arm muscles trembling as she strained to pull her weapon out of Nagi's grip, without effect. "She, she hurt me -"

"And he doesn't care. Sorry. You'd probably better go get ready for when Natsuki-chan comes after you, like you set her up to do."

Shizuru sagged, and Nagi, with a moment of hesitation, let go of the naginata's blade. Defying everyone's expectations, Shizuru did not make a second attempt to end Midori's life, but let her weapon drop until its head touched the floor.

"I'm going to tell," she said instead, sounding disturbingly like a little girl in more than word choice. "I'm going to tell Natsuki what you did, and she'll - no, no, wait, that doesn't work either, because she can't win, and anyway she's supposed to hate me, and, can't win, and all pointless, and, and, NYAAAAAAGGGHHHH!" The scream was all the more terrible because it came up out of
And then it went to nowhere, as, after a few moments of heavy breathing, Shizuru straightened, turned back to the hole in the wall, and said, in the empty voice from before, "Kiyohime."

The snake brought its head over so that she could step onto it, and then she was gone out of sight.

"Holy shit," Midori said eventually.

"Yes, that's what actual insanity looks like," Nagi noted patiently and very wisely. "And since you're clearly not that nuts, you might want to consider vacating this place. Particularly since most of the staff already has." He turned to go.

"Wait," she said, just a bit hurriedly. "The Obsidian Prince wants me alive? Why -"

"Oh, no, that was a lie."

"What - but you said -"

"That I never lied? Oh, sweety, anyone who says that is obviously lying. Really, come on now."

And with one last dismayed but amusing shake of his head, he sauntered off whistling.

"Nerima," Asuna said decisively.

Chizuru quirked an eyebrow. "Really. You want to take that situation head-on?"

"We're going to need her. We always do. And again, this one is pretty much, um ..." She trailed off, looking for the right words.

"Your fault?" Chizuru supplied.

"You've gotten a lot more blunt in the last little while," Asuna accused.

"I don't have a great deal of patience anymore," the older girl admitted. "It's a flaw. All right, I'll call my contact in the area to let her know that we're coming."

With a nod, Asuna went back to say her farewells to the Konoe family. "Thank you for having me," she said, controlling the impulse to wince at the pun.

Neither Eishun nor Konoka could quite manage that level of control, and respectively coughed and giggled faintly. Setsuna, standing beside Konoka, gave them both a weary look, before settling that same annoyed glance on Asuna as well. Well, she'd expected that. She was going to have to work to earn Setsuna's trust and love again. She hoped that she'd be able to do so.

The reaction from Eishun's young bride was far more disconcerting. Mutsumi-san gave her a smile that suggested that she could give Chizuru lessons in being simultaneously scary and saintly. "It was only for a short while, though, Asuna-chan! Far too short a while! You'll have to let us have you for muuuch longer some other day. I'm sure Setsuna-chan is looking forward to that as much as I am, right, Setsuna-chan?"

"Yes," Setsuna agreed, tensely.

"Yes what?"

"Yes ... mother dear," Setsuna said, forcing a smile on her face that communicated, 'I blame you for
Asuna laughed uncomfortably as she bowed and backed away. A few moments later she was holding hands with Chizuru in a virtual representation of the Earth as seen from several miles up.

"Just out of curiosity -" she started to ask Chizuru as the other girl plotted their descent.

"No, I've never brought Ayaka into this space for erotic purposes," Chizuru interrupted. "We joined the mile high club in a perfectly normal fashion some time ago."

"Am I that predictable?" Asuna complained.

Chizuru didn't answer as she brought them both down to Earth. With a flash, they found themselves standing in the early evening air of a playground. Seated in a set of swings, not too far away from them, could be seen the figure of a girl with violet hair, facing away. She turned to look at them as the sound of their arrival eased a bit.

"Hey, bookstore," Asuna said uncomfortably.

"It's been a while since anyone called me that," Nodoka said as she got up off the swingset and slowly but surely marched towards Asuna. She braced herself for a slap - even though Nodoka, even enhanced, probably wouldn't get through her defenses, it would still be unpleasant.

Once again, though, she found herself being hugged. "I missed you," Nodoka murmured. "Even when I found everything out, and everything turned to ashes in my mouth, I still missed you, Asuna-san."

Asuna swallowed. "When you say you 'found everything out', what all are we talking about here?" she asked delicately as she pulled away from Nodoka's embrace.

Nodoka smiled wearily. "The very day you left, Arika-sama told me about her father, and how he'd also been the father of Chizuru-san -"

"I prefer to think of him as my mother's rapist, actually," Chizuru said quietly.

Nodoka continued as though there'd been no interruption. "- and Maki-chan. I think she wanted to show me that she trusted me for some reason. And ... then she told me about you and her. Well, I already knew about part of you and her, but ..." The girl trailed off, looking uncomfortable but not really embarrassed.

"I, I remember how you found out about that part," Asuna said, not really embarrassed herself but conscious that she perhaps should be.

Nodoka nodded quickly. "Anyway, Arika-sama told me all this, and she told me that you were leaving and that she was eventually going to follow you, and that it was up to me to decide what I wanted to do with my relationship with Negi." Her smile faded. "She didn't tell me about what had been going on with him, and ... all of you."

"Not quite all," Chizuru interjected.

Now Nodoka looked a little annoyed at the interruption, but still didn't direct any comments Chizuri's way. "I figured out parts of it myself over the next few months, but I didn't learn the whole thing until he told me, after I'd ..." She trailed off again.

"You too, huh?" Asuna asked.
Nodoka flinched at the 'too'. "I was wrong about so many things," she murmured, not really talking to anyone, now. "I felt like such a fool. And what with some other things that happened then, I ended up doing some very foolish things in the months that followed. And more recently, too," she admitted ruefully.

"And despite all this, you missed me?" Asuna asked, bewildered. "When I heard about things going wrong, I figured you guys would blame me -"

"I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul," Nodoka said firmly. "What I did, I chose to do. I'm not ... happy about any of this, but I do understand that nobody, least of all you, was trying to trick me or make me misunderstand things the way that I did. And if everything went wrong when you left ... then the times when you were around were a lot happier than these. So, yes, I missed you.

"Besides which, if Negi hadn't come here, and Yue had stayed emotionally retarded like she was before that, and Haruna had kept to her guns about not jumping either of us ... you're kind of gorgeous, Asuna-san. And kind of like a guy without all the guyness."

Asuna spent a few moments trying to figure out if that was a backhanded compliment or a fronthanded insult. Chizuru's coughing fit was a bit of a distraction. "Thanks," she said, a bit dryly. "Uh, anyway, this is ... well, it's something. But we need to get moving, I've got to talk to Haruna-san and get her to give up this idea about quitting the team."

"... she quit months ago," Nodoka pointed out. "It's not really something she can give up -"

"Then I've got to talk her into coming back. Are you staying at Haruna's parents place for now?"

"Yes, Yue and I both are, but I really don't think that you'll -"

"I will apply my unique form of logic to the situation," Asuna said grimly.

"Beating her up isn't going to help," Nodoka said patiently.

"Definitely not," Chizuru agreed.

"... that's not what I - nrrrrgh! Do you guys think I'm some kind of thug or something? Anyway, let's go!" She started walking, shaking her head and muttering angrily as she did, with the full expectation that she'd be followed.

And she was.

"Now, before we go into this situation, there's something I should probably tell you," Nodoka said as the trio arrived at the front door of a fairly large suburban home, with the name plate reading "Saotome" prominently displayed.

"Fweh," Asuna said admiringly. "This is pretty upscale for this neighborhood, isn't it? Anyway, what's the matter?"

"I'm not really sure how to explain this, since I'm not actually certain that I understand it myself, but -"

Nodoka's attempts at explanation were abruptly cut off as the door slid open and Yue, looking more frazzled than Asuna could ever remember Baka Black ever looking, ran out and into Nodoka's arms. "Oh, Ariadne be praised, I thought I was going to go nuts. Please, I'm begging you, don't leave me
alone with her again!"

"It's only been a few minutes," Nodoka protested.

"Paru's really gotten that bad?" Asuna asked, appalled.

"What?" Yue asked, momentarily bewildered as she turned to look at the new arrivals. "Oh. Hello, Asuna. I'd say it's good to see you but I don't actually think that so I won't. No, I'm not talking about Paru, I'm talking about - uh -" She broke off, looked helplessly up at Nodoka. "Have you told them yet?"

"I was getting to it, when you showed up," Nodoka answered.

And then there appeared at the doorway an elderly but still beautiful woman just slightly a bit shorter than Chizuru, with dark violet hair that seemed just a bit too dark when one considered the age lines of her face, dressed in a simple purple kimono and with a pleasant smile on her face. "Ah, it's Asuna-san and Chizuru-san. It's been a while, I think."

Asuna blinked. So did Chizuru. Then they looked at Nodoka, and the older woman, and back again.

"How -" Asuna started to ask.

"There was an accident with the pieces of an artifact called the Nanban Mirror a few months ago," explained the Nodoka they'd known for years, looking very embarrassed.

"It sent me - well, this version of me - back in time about thirty-five years," explained the much older Nodoka standing in the doorway.

"But that's ridiculous," Chizuru protested. "Time travel is supposed to be -"

"Impossible through the use of magic," elder Nodoka agreed, a bit ruefully. "I know that, Chizuru-san. I lived through Chao's visit to this era, and I had that explained to me again when I went to the version of Mahora that existed in 1970 and tried to get the help of the mage organization that existed then. The mirror somehow escaped their notice, even though it existed in their era. No one believed me. The only good that came out of it was that I met my husband who was visiting the area as well."

The younger Nodoka started coughing.

"He's a very manly man, you know," the older one insisted, with an affronted expression.

"... personality change by the mirror?" Asuna muttered to the younger.

"I think something like that," Nodoka murmured back.

"Ahem. Anyway, I need to speak with Haruna," said Asuna, out loud.

The older woman stepped aside and beckoned her to enter. A few moments later, Asuna found herself outside an upstairs door with the marking "Pal" on a cloud-shaped sign beside it. Steeling herself, she knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" sounded a distracted voice from within.

"It's Asuna. I need to talk to you."

Dead silence. Just as Asuna was opening her mouth to repeat herself, the voice spoke up again. "It's not locked."
"Of course it's not locked, this is your house," Asuna said irritably. "I'm still not going to come into your room without permission."

"You have a weird set of ethics, y'know." A sigh ensued. "C'mon in."

Asuna slid the door open and stepped through. Haruna was seated at a draftsman's table facing the window, wearing her beret again and facing away from the door and Asuna both. She didn't look up from her drawing, but continued it patiently.

Asuna slowly made her way over to the bed, which was every bit as spartan as the one she herself had had at Mahora - no stuffed animals for Pal, it seemed, and the shelves were surprisingly empty of anime and manga memorabilia. Perhaps she kept most of her stuff at Mahora.

"Sooo," Asuna said after a moment. "What's all the hub-bub, bub?"

Haruna's head lifted a bit but she still didn't look back at her. "That really doesn't make any sense in this context, you know."

"I thought it made for a nice call-back," Asuna explained with a shrug.

"You would. What do you want, Kagurazaka? I'm kind of on a roll here."

Suspecting that she'd just been insulted, Asuna chose not to pursue the matter. "What are you drawing?"

"A story I'm thinking about submitting to a manga contest. It's about a total pervert otaku who finds out that one of the girls in his club is actually being molested by her older brother, and what that does to his enjoyment of his hobbies. Complete fiction, no resemblance to any person living or dead intended," she added dryly.

"Hah," Asuna 'laughed'. "So what's going to happen? Is he going to call the cops, or is he going to tell her to do it and then see her throw the phone out the window?" She could be as dry as the best of them.

"Haven't gotten that far in the draft, yet. I'm more focused on the guy's psychic trauma." Total arridity had been achieved.

"Yeah, I think that might be part of the problem," Asuna said with a nod as she finally sat down on the edge of Haruna's bed. "Haruna, I came here to talk you into coming back to Ala Alba."

"Oh, well. Sorry you wasted your time."

"I didn't waste my time. Haruna, they need you."

She watched Haruna's drawing hand freeze in place, then saw the pen held between two fingers slip out of them and drop to the table, thankfully not dripping any ink on anything else that she'd drawn. After a long moment, Haruna finally turned to look at her, with an expression on her face best dubbed outraged. "You have more nerve than anyone I have ever met, and considering some of the people I'm related to, that is saying something."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Asuna said cheerfully.

"They need me," Haruna repeated, as though Asuna hadn't interrupted. "You make jokes about how you treated my advice, and you dare to say that they need me. They need me to do what, exactly? Be their Token Good Teammate?"
"I think most of us are pretty good," interjected Asuna. "Token Non-Incestuous Teammate, maybe?"

"Ironic," murmured the elder Nodoka as she stood with her junior, Yue, and Chizuru, all against the door, all listening carefully to the conversation on the other side.

"Hm?" said Chizuru.

"Tell you later."

"And you make jokes about that, too. Don't let the door hit your heel on the way out," Haruna snapped, starting to turn back to her work.

"I'm not joking, Haruna," Asuna said, starting to stand up. "They need someone who isn't part of this ... thing. Someone who can tell them to stop the orgies and focus on what they need to be doing. The fact that the person we've got rely on for that is you is kind of terrifying, but it can't be helped."

"Nuts to that!" Haruna said dismissively. "Didn't we just go over how nobody listens to me when I'm trying to get them to do the right thing? You sure as hell didn't!"

"No, I didn't," she agreed. "And maybe it would have been better if I'd done what you told me to do. I didn't, and I have to live with the consequences of that, just like everyone else. But what about Satomi?"

"What about her?" This said grumpily, as Haruna had already started to look at her artwork again.

"Have you forgotten how you and she worked together to help Setsuna and Konoka? People listened to you then, remember." She strategically left out how Konoka had gone back to her bad habits eventually. If pressed, she might have suggested that Haruna had already stopped associating with them when that happened. Fortunately, it didn't come up.

"That was mostly her," Haruna grumbled. "I just -"

"Did the legwork, I know, she told me all about it. But it took both of you to get it done. You can't claim no one listens to you when you've walked away so that you're not in ear shot anymore."

Haruna finally turned back to look at Asuna with a frustrated look on her face. "If you've picked up all this sage wisdom, why don't you use it the way that you're telling me to do it? Why does it have to be me?"

"Because you're not the one who walked away and broke Negi's heart in the process," Asuna said, eyes closed for a moment. "Even when you did walk away, the people whose hearts you did break seem to have forgiven you a lot more readily than I'm going to be. Or didn't you notice how they keep seeking you out, despite that?" Her eyes opened. "Haruna, I put myself outside the group. I don't know if I'll ever be able to pick up where I left off. I don't know if they'll let me, and I don't know if I want to go back to the way things used to be." Her lips quirked in what might charitably be called a smile. "Those who can't do ... teach."

Haruna stared at her for a minute or so, before turning back to her art. "What if I fuck it up?" she whispered.

"Then you join the rest of the human race," Asuna answered promptly. "Most of us fuck it up from time to time. Maybe you've noticed."
"What if I get dragged into all of that stuff?" This was almost a whine.

"You had almost half a year to resist that before you dropped out completely. And yeah, I know about what happened with my mom and you and Yuna and Madoka and ... but notwithstanding all that, you still have more self-control than you think, okay?" Asuna was starting to get a bit annoyed with these objections. "If you were going to do that, you'd have done it already, instead of sitting around drawing comics about your psychic trauma." She finally approached Haruna, glancing at the drawing of her avatar - a tall, bearded guy in a beret. Kind of thuggish looking actually. Haruna wasn't saying anything, just looking at the paper in front of her.

"And be honest, you really would like to have the golems back to boost your productivity, right?" Asuna pressed.

"... nyargh," Haruna said, approximately. Then, heavily, "Fine. If he'll have me back, I'll come back."

As the younger Nodoka and Yue both bounded into the room to welcome Haruna back with hugs and offers to help her pack, Chizuru beckoned the older Nodoka aside. "It's later," she said quietly, once they were a short distance away from the door to Haruna's room.

"So it is," Saotome Nodoka agreed, glancing aside. "So much of that life seems like a dream, but you and I were never close. I remember that. I'm not sure if I really ought to explain that statement to you, if you really need to know."

"Asuna talked about people who hold themselves aloof from certain affairs to protect those within them. I am another such," Chizuru lied without qualm. "It's best to have multiple caretakers, if you have to have any. I think I do need to know what you meant by that."

The older woman sighed. "Perhaps you're right ... very well. I was pregnant when it happened."

Chizuru hadn't been sure what she was expecting, but that wasn't it. "You mean that Haruna-san's brother is -"

"No, no," Nodoka interjected. "This was my first-born. My husband persuaded me that it would be for the best if I gave him up for adoption to another couple, so that we could start our married life fresh. Ranma was conceived soon after I gave birth, and born the next year. I didn't meet the boy that I gave away until he was nearly grown. He's a fine young man, nearly as manly as my son. His parents are surely proud of him, wherever they are. So I'm sure that it was innocent, the way that he became involved with Haruna-chan the way that he did, a few years ago ..."

This was almost too much to take in. "I see," Chizuru managed to stammer out. "Well. That's ... wait, if you were pregnant, then what about ..." She trailed off as she realized what the answer had to be.

Nodoka glanced in the direction of Haruna's room. "You'd have to ask her about that. She and I have made very different choices about our lives, I think. I hope hers bring her happiness. But I doubt they will."

"Okay, I guess we're done here," Asuna said a few moments later. She turned to Yue, who'd followed them downstairs and out of the house. "When Haruna's ready, the three of you should hop the next train to Mahora - I hope they haven't started to shut down yet - so -"

"I was actually hoping that I could come with the two of you," Yue interjected.
"Eh? Why?" asked Asuna, blinking.

"Nodoka makes for a better Haruna-minder than I do," the petite philosopher confessed. "And -" She broke off, glanced back at the house, then leaned forward so that they could hear her speaking softly. ", Haruna's mother makes me nervous. There's just something not right about her."

Asuna looked dubious, but Chizuru nodded slowly. "By any chance has she been hitting on you?" she asked.

"No, no," Yue said quickly. "That wouldn't bother me. It's the exact opposite. She keeps trying to suggest that I'd make a good match with one or the other of her grandsons, or other boys she knows who are my age or younger. It's like she doesn't get that I'm gay. Which is impossible, because, of course, she's Nodoka. Right?" she asked, sounding a bit desperate for affirmation.

"You're gay?" Asuna asked.

"Of course that would be your takeaway," Yue muttered. "Please can I come with you?"

"Yes, certainly," Chizuru said before Asuna could say anything. "Where to next, Asuna?"

After a moment, Asuna just shrugged.

Over the rest of the evening, they crossed over much of Japan several times over.

They found Akira on the beach at Yuigahama, staring out to sea with a strange expression. It took several attempts to get her attention, and even when that was gained, she still seemed dazed for a few moments. But the tall girl recovered quickly, and agreed to head back to Mahora at once. She even smiled a little.

Makie was with her family in Mitakihara, which made contacting her a little tricky. Fortunately, the fact that her parents were aware that the Yukihiro Financial Group had sponsored "English Research Club" expeditions in the past gave Chizuru an 'in' towards persuading them that another one had been authorized during this unscheduled 'school break'. Once Makie figured out what was going on, she ran out the door and into Asuna's arms, babbling typical Makie nonsense about how she was glad to see her and that she wasn't going to lose to her.

Asuna found it sooo tempting to just throw her to the ground and have her wicked way with her, but they were in public, so she refrained. This time. The fact that the creepy little ninjas who followed Makie around were glaring at her in naked dislike didn't help much.

Getting the cheerleaders - No, I shouldn't think of them that way, Asuna reminded herself in the middle of it. Three separate people, not a collective. - proved to be the most complex part of the effort. They were split up all over the country, and Madoka, in particular, wasn't keen on giving up her latest attempt to join a new band in the wake of Dekopin Rocket's breakup. Yue proved her worth by asking her what Ako would have thought of that, which got Madoka to agree somewhat begrudgingly.

Kaede and her new husband received them politely, but the presence of their respective in-laws in the next room made it pretty clear that she would not be going back to Mahora any time soon. But that was all right, because Asuna had a different mission in mind for her, one that she was uniquely qualified to perform. And one that the old farts couldn't realistically refuse her permission to accept. Despite these hoops, Asuna noted that Kaede actually seemed pretty happy with her situation. Who'd have thought it?
Only when they went to alert Satomi did they actually fail. Chachamaru's rebuild was still not ready to go, and Hakase was not about to leave either of her children to go off and assist in a fight. They begged and pleaded, but to no avail, and - Asuna had to admit eventually - more or less half-heartedly, too. Her arguments were too persuasive. She'd clearly learned more than science from Chao.

"So that's it?" Asuna eventually asked. "Everyone else is already there, either at Ayaka's house or Satsuki's new place in town?"

"We're forgetting the twins," Yue said abruptly.

"... wait, the twins are in this now?" Asuna asked. "We're talking about Fuuka-chan and Fumika-chan? They've got a pact?" Off the nods of her companions, she groaned. "Why didn't they say so when I sent them home?!"

"You were in public," Yue and Chizuru chorused.

"Well, yeah, but - ngah. Great, where are they?"

"Let's not assume that they actually did what you told them to do," Chizuru said patiently. "They might have headed for Satsuki's restaurant, rather than heading for their homes. We should check there first."

"Okay," Asuna said wearily. "Would you two mind doing that without me? I'm - wait, homes?"

"Never mind that now. I don't have a problem with it, but what are you planning on doing instead?" asked Chizuru.

"I'm going to head for my hotel," she explained. "I've been on the bounce since noon yesterday. Even the stop in Kyoto only helped a little. I'm beat, Chizuru-san."

"Fair enough," she agreed. "We'll contact you when we're ready to get organized." With a last wave, she took Yue's hand and was gone, leaving Asuna beside the train station in Iinaka. Fortunately, there was one more train departing for Mahora from this station, and her hotel was right beside the station there. She'd planned this pretty well.

Now to avoid falling asleep on the train.

It hadn't taken long for Shiguma Rika to become very bored. Yes, the machine puttering away in front of her was fascinating, but there was only so much she could learn from a surface examination. She needed to open it up if she wanted to really grasp its intricacies, to enter it and allow its secrets to penetrate into her as well, to -

She paused, stuck a hand down her jeans and rubbed herself off to a satisfying orgasm, then resumed her thought processes.

- but unfortunately, that awful Mikado woman had told her in no uncertain terms that she was forbidden to do so while Kageyama-sempai was inside of it. (Lucky wench!) Apparently, interfering with it would probably kill her. While that wouldn't have ordinarily stopped her, since she was well aware that certain inhumane acts were necessary for scientific progress, said awful Mikado woman had also told her that she would do terrible things to anyone who interfered with her patient's recovery. And then, when Rika had asked about those terrible, things she'd done the worst thing possible.
She'd told her to imagine them.

And Rika did.

Awful, awful woman, to suggest that.

So now all there was to do was to watch this thing as it rumbled, and listen to that annoying "Hey" song over and over and over again, and gaze blearily at it as the light in the middle went out, and wait a minute what?

The light had gone out. And now that Rika was paying attention, she noticed that the rumbling noise she'd associated with the machine had stopped at about the same time. Rika found herself slowly getting to her feet. The machine had shut down. Why had the machine shut down? What should she do about this? What -

There was an abrupt thump from the machine's direction, and she jumped. Adjusting her glasses, she could see a pair of hands pressing against the glass of the machine's window. Rika's jaw dropped as the "oven door" opened up under that pressure, crashing down with a bang.

In the silence that followed the bang, Rika realized that she could hear someone humming. It took a moment to recognize that the voice was humming in tune with the recording playing beside her. The hands, still visible in the now open door, reached out to grab ahold of its edges, just as the piece reached its 'chorus'.

"Rock n' rooooolll! Hey hey, rock n' roll!" an unfamiliar female voice sang along with with the piece, the words somehow fitting with its wordless melody. Then a head of bright blonde hair emerged from the machine's darkness, followed by a face dominated by a pair of brilliant blue eyes that glinted with mischief, and a dangerous smile. A few more moments, and shoulders and full breasts were also free.

All Rika could do was stare.

"Ah, it's Rika-chan, isn't it," the woman said, breaking off from her singing. "Would you be a sweet little kohai and help me out of this? It's a bit awkward."

It was a voice Rika had never heard before. "Um ... Rika begs the beautiful lady's pardon, but you would appear to have the advantage of her," she stammered. "Who -"

"How many female sempais do you have?" the woman asked patiently.

"Well, there's Tsukiyomi-sempai, and Setsuna-sempai might be, but it's a little -"

"How many were shoved into this machine recently?" the woman asked, considerably less patiently.

"Uh ... Kageyama-sempai?" Rika asked, borderline terrified.

"Ah, what a clever little kohai. Disobedient, but very clever!"

"But ... you don't look like her."

"That's what you get for waking up in Vegas, Rika-chan."

"... what?"

"I said I don't know what I look like, Rika-chan, since I don't have a mirror on me. If you would let me use the one you have in your makeup compact, that would be a good start towards easing the
terrible retribution you are courting by not helping me out of this thing."

That got through, and so she dashed over to pull the woman out of the machine. Apparently, it was very slippery inside the chamber (which suggested all kinds of neat things, but now was probably not the time) and her bare feet couldn't find any purchase to push herself out, leaving it all up to her hands. Once the supposed Kageyama was out, Rika also quickly produced the mirror mentioned a few moments before.

"Well!" the woman said once she took a good long look. "I look ... wonderful. Yessss. Wonderful!"

She seemed to savor that word.

"You don't sound like you used to, either," Rika observed hesitantly. "No stammering."

"Hah, you're right! Perceptive disobedient girl! It must be because my brain is just newly regenerated, with fresh nerves. Likely they'll start to fall apart in a few years and I'll be stammering again. Ah well, it can't be helped. Now, as to your punishment -"

"Please don't ask Rika to imagine the worst thing you could do," Rika interjected.

"Shan't!" Kageyama - for it could certainly be no other - said cheerfully, and then promptly jumped on the girl to have her wicked way with her.

"AAAAAH! SEMPAIIIIIII!"

Mikoto wasn't really sure where she was at the moment. It probably wasn't all that important. What mattered was that she was hungry, and had indicated this to those around her, and been told that she would be satisfied. So she was sitting at a table, waiting for that to happen.

Eventually, the woman whom her brother had told her was their aunt walked up, eyes dull and lifeless as she carried a tray. She wordlessly set it down in front of Mikoto. "Ramen," the woman said, in an empty voice. "Please enjoy, Mikoto-himesama."

Mikoto peered suspiciously at the bowl. It looked like the ramen that - that she'd had cooked for her in the past. It smelled like that too. But what if it wasn't? What if it was poisoned? How would she find out? Maybe the taste would tell her. She snapped apart the chopsticks set beside the bowl, cautiously used them to pick up some of the noodles and bring them to her mouth, where she licked them first, then slid them into her mouth.

She chewed them carefully, conscious all the while of the presence nearby of the woman with dull eyes. Clearly they weren't poisoned, or she'd be reacting to them by now. She thought that was how poison was supposed to work, anyway. Not that it mattered.

She grabbed the bowl with her free hand and cast it aside, hearing it crash into the floor and spill its contents without even glancing in that direction.

"Why did you do that?" asked the woman. There wasn't any anger in her voice. It was as though Mikoto's action had nothing to do with her.

"It's gross," Mikoto said without looking up. "It's gross and it's disgusting and it's vile and it's not how Mai made it."

"Please accept this one's apologies," said the woman. "This one will clean it up and then bring Mikoto-himesama food which will be more to her liking."
Mikoto wasn't even listening. It's not how Mai made it. She realized that was the first time she'd thought of Mai in ... she wasn't how long it had been since she'd thought of Mai actually. That was the strangest thing. Normally, she was thinking about her all the time, except when she absolutely had to think about something else. And that hadn't been the case for a while now. She wondered why she hadn't thought about her since -

Oh.

That's right. I killed Takumi. (The thought was tinged with a bit of guilt, particularly for the absence of much greater guilt.) And then Mai said she hated me. How could she do that? How could she hate me when I love her so much? I did something bad, but why did she say that she hated me? If she killed aniue, I would be mad at her, but I wouldn't hate her. Would I?

Abruptly, she realized that she would have to. She was only supposed to love her brother, not anyone else in the world. She'd fallen from that. So maybe everything that had happened since then was her fault.

She didn't like being at fault.

"Oh my, what have we here?" said her brother as he wandered up to the table from somewhere else, wearing the yukata his vessel had been wearing on the festival night.

"My error has resulted in this accident," the woman said before Mikoto could say anything.

"Oh. That's unforgivable, Fumi. I'm going to have to punish you." Since all that Fumi was wearing was an apron, it was easy enough for him to pull his yukata open and begin pounding into her from behind as she knelt on the floor in front of the mess. She made no cry of course.

"What is the matter with you this evening, Fumi?" he asked as he tightened his grip on her hips.

"First you cause this mess, then you stop cleaning it up for no good reason."

"But, I need to use my hands to -"

"Then don't use your hands to clean up the mess," he said with a shake of his head, before he pulled back and up so as to allow him to bring one of his feet up onto the back of the woman's neck, pushing her face down into the mess. After a moment, she obligingly started to lick it up off the floor.

Aniue seems happy, Mikoto thought as she watched it. I should be happy too, since he is happy.

What's wrong with me?

"Isn't she good at that, Mikoto-chan?" her brother asked her. "Would you like her to use that talent of hers on you?"

"Of course, Aniue," she answered automatically, since that was the proper answer to anything he said. She got up from her chair and lifted up her uniform's skirt, exposing her pantyless crotch to his gaze. He smiled in approval. That accomplished, she walked over to sit down in the mess, flinching a bit at the cold soup on her skin, before she was distracted from the sensation by the feeling of the woman's lips on her down there.

Unfortunately, this wasn't as good as what Mai had done either.

The sky was almost black by the time Asuna made her way out of the train station for the second time today. The station was deserted, as the train she'd rode in on was to be the last one for the
duration of the emergency. She found it in herself to smile at the absurdity. Of course, those responsible had no idea how long the emergency was going to last.

It would be either a very brief interval, or it would never end.

As it happened, she was aiming for a third option.

But now was not the time to think of that. Now all that she wanted was to walk across the street, check into the hotel and head up to her room. All that she wanted. Of course that wasn't all that she wanted. But it was what would satisfy her right now.

So of course the universe gave her something else. She stopped dead in her tracks as she looked across the street at him, looking indeed like (as Chisame had once said) a young Yakuza boss, except for the sad look on his face as he looked at her. Asuna fought the blush that she could feel coming up her cheeks as she remembered the first time they'd made love while he was using these pills, and the necessarily associated ones of the time they'd tried it the other way around.

"Chizuru ratted me out, huh?" Asuna asked as she reluctantly started across the street towards him.

"She did," said fifteen-year old Negi. Maybe sixteen or even seventeen by now. It was hard to say.

"Should have expected it," she admitted as she stepped onto the sidewalk in front of him.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that," Negi mused.

"... that's a remark about my intelligence, isn't it?" Asuna asked after a moment. "You want me to put you in a headlock again?"

"Honestly?" he said with a forlorn expression. "Yes. It sort of feels like a kiss when you -"

"Oh, come on," she nearly cried. "It's bad enough that you're giving me the puppy-dog eyes, do you have to use Rakan's lines?"

"They worked for Rakan," he said, spreading his hands. "I use what I think will work. Would you like me to use what I think won't work?"

They stared at each other for a long moment ... and then both started laughing, and didn't stop for quite some time.

"I missed this," she said at last. "I missed you."

"And I, you," said Negi. "But, you're back, now, and -"

"And things have changed," she interrupted. "You have a kid to look after, and you're trying to keep her out of all that. She wants me to teach her how to fight, you know."

"... no, I didn't know. Please tell me you said no."

"Yes, because that is the sort of thing that I'd do," Asuna observed sarcastically.

Negi groaned and slammed his palm into his face in exasperation.

She shook her head. "You're her guardian, and I'm her teacher. We can't be lovers while we're doing that. She'd find out, somehow, and then everything we were each trying to accomplish would be wrecked. So it doesn't matter that I'm back. We're still in the same positions that we were in when I went away ... only moreso."
"I don't think you can use moreso that way," he said wearily.

"Which one of us has been to America, hmm?"

"I'm from England," Negi observed irritably.

"Wales."

"I learned Welsh as a second language - this is a ridiculous argument!"

"Then why'd you start it?" she asked in a reasonable tone.

He just gazed at her for a long while. "I want you so badly that it hurts," he said.

She closed her eyes. *I want you even more than that.* "It's good to want things," she said as she walked through the hotel doors, leaving him behind. Again.

Checking in was easy. She identified herself to the concierge and was promptly presented with a keycard for the room that she'd reserved yesterday. She thanked him and headed towards the elevators, pausing briefly at the entrance to the hotel's bar. She couldn't enter, of course, since it was off-limits to minors. Which meant that a certain person Asuna saw drinking like a fish had clearly gotten over her compulsion to pretend that she was just seventeen years old.

Well, she didn't have to talk to Sugiura immediately. It could probably wait until they found out whichever room she ended up staying in. With that thought, Asuna got into the elevator and went up to her room's floor.

She opened the door and walked in.

"Everything went okay?" Takamichi asked as he turned to face her from where he was standing by the window.

Asuna just stared at him for a few moments as she took off her coat and hung it up on the door's coathanger.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm trying to think of reasons not to throw you through that window," she told him frankly as she slid off her shoes.

"Ah. So you found out," he said calmly.

"I found out," she parrotted. "So it was you, then? You messed with the mail I sent them."

He nodded once. "It was in everyone's best interests."

With difficulty, Asuna kept from shouting as she walked towards him. "How the fuck was it in anyone's interests for them to think that I'd just dumped them like that?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Do you think that they wouldn't have thought that if you'd sent those letters?"

She stopped. "What do you mean?"

"Asuna, I'm not sure what you thought you were writing, but basically, the letters that you wrote were a long litany of how happy you were with your new circumstances, and how great everything was. You usually started off with 'I miss you guys', but there was precious little in them about the good times you’d shared in the past with them." Takamichi sighed. "Maybe it would have been
different if Negi and the others had written back, but that first letter, with everything that I just described, would have hurt them even worse than your silence did."

"Where do you get off -"

"I'm the grown up in this relationship, Asuna," he interrupted. "You might be older than I am, but I've lived more than you have. And in this case, I think I know better than you."

She just glared at him for a moment, before she glanced to the side. "Twin beds. Good idea," she said tensely.

"I thought you'd appreciate that."

She ignored him as she went to the cradle that was set between the twin beds and picked up the infant with her eyes that was lying there, semi-asleep. "Your daddy is a real piece of work," she cooed softly.

"Mmm!" the three month old said, very approximately.

"... yes, your mom is too."

Night fell, as it always did.

In a hidden chamber not far from the roots of the World Tree, constructed by the Kazehana group during Mahora's reconstruction and now seized by the de facto heir to their properties, Mikoto lay back and stared endlessly up at the ceiling, wondering where Mai was and what she was thinking.

In a dormitory room, Natsuki was sleeping wrapped around Mai, who was also lying back and staring endlessly up at the ceiling, wondering where - except that she always broke off in mid-thought at that point, telling herself that she didn't care.

In a private house in the woods, Shizuru stared endlessly up at the ceiling, and thought about Natsuki. Only Natsuki. Only ever Natsuki.

In the basement of a haunted house, Kageyama Yamiko was buttoning up the lab coat she'd taken off the trembling form of Shiguma Rika.

"My first mammalian kiss," the younger girl moaned. "My first mammalian ... many things ... all gone, gone ..." She started to recover. "Well, at least I can still have first times with a mammalian of the male type."

"Well, actually -" Yamiko started to say.

"Ehhhh?"

"Oh, never mind," the eccentric grad student said after a moment's consideration, something that was surprisingly rare for her. "You just rest up, now. Probably going to be a busy day tomorrow." With that, she ran up the stairs to the kitchen, throwing the basement door open and shouting, "Hello boys, I'm baaaaaaaack!"

It would have been much more effective had there been anyone in the kitchen other than Mikado-sensei, enjoying a nice salad she'd prepared for herself with some bugs as a condiment. "I see the regeneration worked well," she said, once she'd swallowed what was in her mouth.

The Professor pouted at her spoiled entrance. "I need some new clothes, though," she said, to soothe
her hurt feelings.

"I'll see what I can do."

All across Japan, the members and associates of Ala Alba began to make their way back to their campus to join their teacher and friends in what might be their final battle. Tiny flickers of light against the darkness, but they shone brightly all the same, for all their flaws.

Yes, I really do mean that.

No matter how meaningless it is.

And in a hotel room, looking down on the world as her child suckled at her, Asuna gazed at the darkness and waited for the dawn. She'd managed to get ahold of a bootlegged copy of Natsumi's performance in Les Miserables, and one bit of that musical's score came to her abruptly. "Tomorrow we'll discover what God in heaven has in store," she murmured. *One more day. One day more.*

Well, the god who would be deciding that was in the sky, but in heaven ... that's another thing entirely, isn't it?
A long time ago, or so it seemed to Midori, she'd tried to offer some consolation to Nao by reassuring her that she and her mother had really been important to her father, despite the fact that he'd also been bigamously married to Mai and Takumi's mother. Her research, she'd said, suggested that he hadn't had three wives, or had any time for anything on the side. Nao had shrugged this off as irrelevant.

Which was good, because Midori had been kinda-sorta not telling the whole truth. The whole truth, which her research had uncovered, had added a whole other wrinkle to the situation. To whit, she'd found out that the two women had almost certainly been well aware of what their mutual husband was doing. They'd each mentioned this to some among their respective circles of friends, who'd been quite pleased to tell Midori about it when she came asking about the bad deeds of said husband.

It had just stunned her. She wasn't much of a feminist, in either the Japanese or the American meanings of the word, but she couldn't imagine being in a relationship with someone whom she knew was cheating on her and not taking steps to end the relationship. She'd found herself wondering why either of them would have put up with it.

Was the sex really that good?

Well, she thought as Kuga Soujiro slammed into her from behind, each thrust sending her face into the pillows of his hotel room bed, it's not bad. At a bit less than thirteen years older than her, he was a little bit into the risky area that she tried to avoid, but it should probably be okay.

She'd honestly been surprised that he was still hanging around in the hotel where he'd been staying during MahoraFest, especially now that the town was practically deserted. But his job, with some company called Genom that she'd never heard of, apparently gave him a lot of spare time and an amount of disposable income that was honestly a bit staggering. She hadn't actually been able to find out what he did through her research, but it clearly paid well.

Maybe he's corporate 'entertainment' for the lady execs, she thought, between gasps as he kissed her shoulder and rubbed her clit with his fingers. He's certainly qualified. GodDAMN. That came as her third orgasm of the night surged up.

"Uraggh," he said. Then, somewhat more articulately, "Cumming."

"Don't -" Midori said, right before her face went into the pillow again and all she could do was make muffled noises that she hoped he'd take as a protest.

He didn't.

"Oh, you fucker!" Midori snapped once he fell back and she was able to talk again. Her transient good mood was now completely spoiled.

"What?" he asked, wearily and confused.

"I was trying to tell you not to cum inside of me, you dumbass! It's not a safe day!"

He blinked. "You're not on -"

"Usually, yes! But did I look like I was carrying any pills with me in my asylum escapee costume?
Fucker! You'd better be ready to take responsibility!"

"Not too great at that," he admitted candidly.

"Yeah, no shit," Midori sneered as she started wiping herself up with the sheets.

"Ah well. I guess when you've already done some of the worst things anyone can do, it's easy to keep doing shitty stuff to people," he went on.

"You mean the whole married to two women thing?" Midori asked, calming down a little. He'd known that she knew, since she'd mentioned it while they were getting drinks in the bar, but they hadn't actually talked about it.

"The worst thing I ever did was before that, actually," he said, with a shake of his head.

"... I raped a girl," Midori said, without much in the way of actual guilt. "How does that rate in comparison?"

"It's pretty bad," Soujiro admitted. "But what I did was worse. You really wanna know?"

"Hit me," she said, now genuinely curious.

"I had sex with my sister," he started to say.

Midori gaped. "Natsuki's mom?"

"... who the hell is Natsuki?" Soujiro asked, blinking.

"Um, nothing, never mind." He couldn't be the father Natsuki wouldn't talk about, right? No, he was already married to Mai's mother by the time Natsuki was born. So then why do I have such a bad feeling -

"Well, anyway, it was her idea, right, and I suppose technically, she molested me, so I guess I shouldn't really blame myself for it. I mean, I was twelve, she was fourteen. It was her idea ... but I don't think she wanted to get knocked up. Our parents hit the roof, and they sent her off to live with some cousins of ours for a year to make sure no one in our town found out about it. When she came back, she was ... well, different. Meaner. When I asked her what happened to the kid, she said she'd left it on the steps of a temple."

Midori's mouth was completely dry. "Where did these cousins live?" she heard herself asking.

He looked at her oddly. "Nagoya. Why?"

And then Midori, who as an infant had been found on the steps of a temple in Nagoya, quietly said, "I have bad news for you. That's not the worst thing you've ever done."

And then she started screaming again.

Clearly, she hadn't done nearly enough research.

When Mai woke up the next morning, she was alone.

Once her consciousness got around to remembering just who had been with her the night before - after running down the list of possible candidates - she decided that she wasn't all that surprised. Even though she and Natsuki had done it all over the bathhouse, all the way down the hallway to the
room, and then against pretty much every surface in the room, she supposed that it shouldn't come as all that much of a shock that Natsuki was reluctant to do anything as intimate as to actually sleep with her. Odd and uncharacteristic confession or not.

(Mai had to admit that her standards of intimacy were possibly a bit different from most people's.)

So Natsuki was gone, and matters being what they were, Mai knew that she was probably never going to see her again. Such was life. She got up out of bed, pulled on some panties and a shirt, and toddled over to the kitchenette to make breakfast for herself. It was probably going to be her last meal, so she might as well -

What was that noise? A motor? Why was there - Mai hurried over to the window and looked out.

Natsuki was outside the dorms, dressed in her leather pants and a white tank top, standing beside her motorcycle with some tools spread out on a towel beside it. Her face was away from the window, and she seemed focused entirely on the task before her. But she hadn't left. Or if she'd left, she'd come back for a while.

Mai decided to skip breakfast. Instead she got dressed the rest of the way and quickly headed out of the room then out of the building. It only took a few moments to bring her to where Natsuki was. It occurred to her that she could have sped up the process by opening the window and jumping out of it, down to the ground. She could probably do that. But Natsuki would probably seize the opportunity to tease her about stealing her schtick, and Mai ... didn't want them to go back to the way they'd been.

_Che. For someone who's not in love with this girl, I sure act like I'm in love with this girl_, she thought, right before she raised her voice. "Morning," she said.

"Morning," said Natsuki, without turning to look at her.

"You need a hand with that."

Now she did look at her, faintly incredulous. "Mai, don't take this the wrong way, but do you know anything about motorcycle mainentance?"

"No, but I know a bit about zen," Mai answered without really thinking it through.

"No, but I know a bit about zen," Mai answered without really thinking it through.

Natsuki stared at her for what felt like a very long time, before answering this particular outrage to reason. "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance? Where the hell did you -"

"A guy I knew was reading it when I - that's not important right now."

Natsuki let out a long sigh.

_Well, so much for not going back to the way things used to be_, Mai thought glumly. "So, do you -"

"No, I'm done," Natsuki said. "I just need to pack up my tools and then -"

"- you'll be riding off with a rose between your teeth?"

"... seriously, where do you come up with some of this stuff?" Natsuki complained. Anything to postpone the goodbye that she knew she was going to have to say.

The last goodbye, one way or another.

"Okay, no rose, I get it," Mai said. "But you are going, right?"
"So much for putting it off." Natsuki said, bending down to start packing up her toolkit. On some level, she wondered what the point of this was. Odds were good that she was never going to need these things again. But it calmed her a little. "I guess it's time."

"I guess," Mai said, turning to look up at the so-called 'hime star'. "S kinda funny. During the invasion, Alyssa-chan told me that the star was getting closer. I couldn't tell, then, but now ... it's definitely brighter. Whatever's going to happen -"

"- is going to happen soon," Natsuki finished the sentence. "Yeah. So I've got to finish this thing with Shizuru, one way or another." Tools packed away now, she closed the carrier, resting a hand on it for a moment before picking it up and offering it to Mai. "If you really want to help, you can hold onto this me."

"As love gifts go, this is kind of lacking," Mai said, as she took the carrier.

"Bite me," Natsuki replied.

"That's more your thing, isn't it?"

Abruptly, they found themselves laughing, just a bit hysterically. It went on just a bit too long. Natsuki found herself winding down, ready to start getting serious, just in time for Mai to pull open her shirt and say, "See, you bit me right here," which started her up again, which started Mai up again. And on it went.

Eventually, they were both too tired to keep it up anymore.

"What are you going to do about her?" Mai asked.

Long sigh. "I dunno. I want to talk to her, maybe, get her to calm down so we can find some other way out of this mess that doesn't ... she's so damn smart!" Natsuki abruptly interjected. "She should be smarter than this! Ah, what a mess we've made!"

"You've changed," Mai said, smiling just a bit.

"Have I?" Natsuki asked, then shrugged. "Fucking lot of good this so-called change does me. Does anybody! I mean, if I'd been like this, back then, maybe Shizuru wouldn't have gone nuts over me, or gone nuts at all. But ... how could I not be like the way that I was? Where were my choices in all of this?"

"Maybe we don't have any?" Mai speculated. "Maybe no one does. Maybe we're all just puppets who can't see the strings. There's a kind of comfort in thinking that."

Natsuki made a disgusted sound. "Except that I want a word with whoever's holding the strings." She shook her head as she undid the jacket that she had tied around her waist, then pulled it up and onto her arms, zipping it up over the tanktop. "It all sucks," she said, picking up the helmet. "All of it."

"All of it?" Mai asked.

Natsuki pulled on the helmet, put her hand up to the visor, and looked at Mai. "No. Not all of it. If I had to do it over again, I'd have done a lot of things differently ... pretty much everything, maybe." She smiled then, like a little girl with a secret. "But I'm glad that I knew you, Mai. I'm glad that I loved you."

Before Mai could react to that, which wasn't hard, given how stunned she was by Natsuki saying it
right out loud, the other girl slid down the visor, straddled the bike and flicked the ignition. Mai was almost about to cry out 'wait' when Natsuki flicked up the kickstand and roared off, with one last wave of the hand.

"I'm never going to see you again, am I?" Mai whispered, telling herself that the tears were just because of the dust.

"Actually, chances are pretty good that you will," said Nagi, standing behind her.

There was a horrible moment, just as she woke up, where she thought it had all just been a dream. Then reality ran up Shizuru's spine, and she knew better. No, it was not a dream. She had defeated Kikukawa and Yuuki, she had failed to defeat Tokiha and Sugiura, and today was the day that she would either kill or be killed by her Natsuki. (It occurred to her briefly that she might be forgetting something, that there might be some other HiME involved in all of this, but she promptly forgot that notion.)

So this was pretty much bound to be the worst day of her life so far. On the other hand, it was also bound to be her last, so there was no possibility of things getting any worse. And Suzushiro was dead as dead could be, which was decidedly in the plus column. So all in all, the day was only going to be moderately terrible.

She arose from her futon and wandered over to her mirror, making a moue of disgust at the sight of herself in her bloody - and worse, slept-in - kimono. No, this would not do at all. She stripped it off, noted that her undergarments were equally filthy, and stripped them off as well. Another check in the mirror confirmed that she needed a bath, desperately. Perhaps a vigorous scrubbing would -

No. She would not engage in that sort of thing. She showered, soaped and rinsed, then took out a clean uniform and began to dress herself.

"Is everything all right, ojousama?" asked a voice from outside her room.

Shizuru blinked. It was the voice of her maid. She'd told her to leave, hadn't she? "Fine," she said, resuming her dressing. "I have some trash that needs to be taken out. Burnable stuff."

The door to her room slid open, and the maid slid on her knees forward into the room. "Certainly, ojousama, I will -" The older woman paused a moment as she took in the sight of the aforementioned trash. But she was well-trained, and asked no questions. "I will get right on that," she concluded eventually.

"Good," Shizuru said, without a glance in the woman's direction. "You are aware, I hope, that there has been an evacuation order issued for this region." (For a moment, she wondered how she knew that, since she couldn't actually remember ever hearing it. But she promptly forgot that notion, too.)

"That actually only applies to the school district, not the surrounding town, ojousama. Gurihiro-san and I have no intention of abandoning your home, regardless of circumstances."

Shizuru paused in her dressing, trying to remember who 'Gurihiro' was. Oh, yes, her butler. "That's not necessary. I will be leaving shortly -" Well, that was certainly true. "- and you should both seek shelter with the main family. Or elsewhere."

The old woman looked distraught. "Ojousama, is something going to happen?"

What a ridiculous question. Of course something was going to happen. Something always happened. Things happening was the definition of life. "It seems fairly likely," Shizuru said, much more nicely
than she might have said it. "I would urge you to depart as soon as possible."

"... very well," the maid said with a bow. "It has been a privilege to serve you these past six years. Good bye, ojousama."

It occurred to Shizuru that she couldn't remember the maid's name, either. And she abruptly realized that she had known it, not so long ago. There was something wrong with her mind. Something had been done to her, and now she was not thinking rightly.

That was interesting, but not terribly important. Still, she did feel a bit of sorrow for the life she might have known if none of this had happened to her. It would have been a quieter, perhaps even sadder life, but it wouldn't be over so soon. But as with so much else, it couldn't be helped.

"The office, I think," she said to herself. "That would be a good place to wait for her."

"Gyah," said Mai irritably but without any particular panic. "Don't sneak up on me like that, Nagi-san."

"Still polite after all this," the boy said fondly as he looked down on her from the ledge over the doorway into the building. "And I didn't sneak. Sneaking implies an attempt at concealment. I'm just quick and quiet. Also cute."

"Whatever. What do you mean that I'll probably see Natsuki again?" A note of dread entered Mai's tone. "Is she going to be able to defeat Shizuru?"

Nagi puffed up his cheeks and gave the appearance of one giving something much thought.
"Statistically speaking, probably not. Shizuru-hime has taken more of the power than most of you, and she's suffered more as a consequence. The most likely outcome is for her to defeat Natsuk-chani, destroy her Child ... and then suicide when she realizes that, no, she wasn't Natsuki-chan's most precious person after all. Mutual destruction is the next most likely scenario. There's honestly not much of a chance for our gunslinger girl to come out of this one a winner, I'm afraid," he concluded with a sorrowful shake of his head.

"Well then what the hell are you talking about?" Mai whined, then paused as thought struck her. "Is there some sort of special heaven for hime?" she asked, half-hopefully.

"... it disturbs me that you can still keep mispronouncing it after all this time," Nagi said, staring at her in wonder. "And I really wonder where you get some of these ideas. No, that's not what I meant."

"Then what? Dammit, for once, please just tell me the truth?" the girl pleaded.

Nagi stopped smiling. That made Mai even more uncomfortable than usual. The boy stared at her for what felt like a long moment, then hopped down from his perch to stand before Mai, still staring.
"You've never asked me that," he said at last.

"I think I have, actually. Back when the curfew -"

"Not what I'm talking about," Nagi said. "You've never asked me to tell you the truth under these circumstances."

"... well of course I haven't," Mai said, genuinely bewildered. "None of this has happened before."

"Exactly wrong, Mai-hime." Nagi spread his hands. "All of this has happened before. Almost all, at
"Are you talking about the last Carnival? Don't tell me that I'm a reincarnation of someone from."

"If you were, I wouldn't know anything about it," Nagi interrupted. "But no, you certainly don't remind me of any of those sad, pallid princesses. Maybe a little of Mashiro-chan."

"She was in it, then," Mai growled.

"Yes and no." He glared at her as she started rubbing her head in frustration. "Do you want the truth or not?"

"... go ahead," she said.

"This carnival, specifically, has happened before. Many times. I can't even tell you how many times. Thousands, maybe. Thousands of thousands, perhaps. All the players are the same, but their actions are usually different. But the heart of the matter never changes. Mai arrives, Mai awakens, Mai fights... all the way to the end. Sometimes you fight the Prince. Sometimes you are seduced to his side. But you always get the wish. And your wish is always the same.

"To do it again, and this time do it better. The stage is reset, and so are all of the players. And again and again, you dance." His voice was faint, now. "It's more beautiful than mere words can say, to watch your dance in the five dimensions that I can perceive. I remember the first time, when I told you - well, you weren't listening - how beautiful your dance had been, and how privileged I felt to have witnessed it. I had no idea what beauty truly was. But you showed me, Mai."

"... you can't be serious," Mai finally said, in a voice just as quiet.

"Not often," Nagi admitted. "But I am, now."

"I won't do it," she said, growing louder. "I won't wish for that this time. I'll -"

"If you wish for anything else," he told her, "you'll spend the next four hundred years as his agent on Earth, and then get sucked into the gears of his prison to help power it. At least, that's what happened to every victor before you. I think he has other plans which he has not confided in me, but they're halted by your actions. Think of it, Mai. It's different every time. Next time, you could be the pure girl you want to be, one who never even dreamed of hurting her brother, who had both her parents and even a little adopted sister who thinks the world of her. That's happened before... not all at once, but who's to say it won't happen next time? You didn't ask for any of this, Mai. Why shouldn't you make the best of what you've been given?"

Mai just stared at him.

"I admit, I'm being selfish. As I said, I love to watch you dance, Mai. I'd be very happy to spend eternity doing just that." He waved, then, before leaping off out of sight.

All Mai could do was stare at him, or where he'd been.

Ah. This was nice. So many times she'd sat here, in the office, drinking tea, enjoying Suzushiro's fully-clothed envy. (Not naked envy. She had no wish to think about Suzushiro being naked. Definitely not.) Well, she supposed that one couldn't have everything. But what she did have was a pleasant illusion nonetheless, and she was resolved to enjoy it until Natsuki showed up. Which she would do any minute now, doubtless doing something crazy like riding that motorcycle of hers through the hallways and into -
The door to the office slid open. "Shizuru?" asked Natsuki's voice. "I'd like to know if I can come in there and talk to you without you going on a rampage."

Shizuru blinked. Incredibly, she realized that she was almost smiling. *Always a surprise with this girl. Ah, my Natsuki.* "I suppose the only way to find out for sure is for you to make the attempt," she said aloud. "I certainly wouldn't believe a word that came out of my mouth, if our positions were reversed."

A brief moment of hesitation, and then Natsuki slowly stepped into view, hands open and spread far from her hips. Which would probably have been comforting if Shizuru had thought that the girl actually carried her guns on her hips.

"You're out of uniform," Shizuru said, before Natsuki could say anything.

"The school's shut down," Natsuki retorted slightly. "And since when did you care about things like that?"

Shizuru shrugged, and sipped her tea. "So, what've you come to talk about?"

"You. Me." Natsuki paused, evaluating Shizuru's mood, perhaps. "Us."

"Y'don't say," Shizuru interjected, annoyed. "I'm just ... I'm trying to understand why you're doing this, Shizuru. I'm trying to understand what you hoped to accomplish. Mai told me some things -"

"Good for Mai," Shizuru interjected, annoyed.

"- and I think, I think I get what you were trying to do. But that plan didn't work ... and so I need to know what you're trying to do now."

"Well, mostly I'm stewing in inconsolable rage at an unjust and unfair universe, Natsuki," she told her breezily. "I'm not sure what to do beyond that. I was so certain that if you defeated me, at the end of all this, the fate you'd suffer as a result of my defeat would be averted. I'd die, but you'd remember me forever as the one who gave her very life for your sake. It's a beautiful ending to my tragic life, wouldn't you say?"

"Not - I'm not much of an aesthete, Shizuru," Natsuki answered, changing her answer quickly in midstream. "You know that."

"I suppose I do, at that. But as you said, that plan won't work. Nothing I do will work. And so I've come here to sit, and stew, and wait for you. And here you are. I don't suppose you've somehow managed to pull some sort of new trick out of your old trick sack to deal with Tokiha-san, did you?"

"No," admitted Natsuki. "I ... I don't want to kill her, or you, or anyone, and -"

"Oh, Natsuki." Shizuru shook her head in sad disappointment. "What kind of person on a quest for vengeance decides they don't want to kill anybody? I'm almost embarassed at you." She stood up. "We don't get to choose our fates, I think."

"Yes, yes, we do," Natsuki snapped, seeing where this was going and desperate to get out of the entrance to the blind alley. "We could work together, Shizuru. Together, all four of us - you, me, Mai, even the little barbarian, we could fight the Obsidian Prince and change that stupid fate. Even if we failed, we'd die knowing that we tried! Isn't that a better ending for the tragedy that is both our
lives?"

Shizuru stared at her, and for a moment, Natsuki thought she might have gotten through to her. "Yes. It would. But I think someone expected you to make that offer, and planned against it. The Prince is a pretty smart guy, I think. Or maybe that's Reito-san, exploiting his knowledge of how I'd react. Doesn't really matter, I guess."

"No, it does matter, it does. You can fight whatever he did to you -"

"I can't even get angry about what he did to you, Natsuki. And I really should, because no one else should be able to touch you like that. But you know ... I think even if I wasn't altered like this, I wouldn't like that offer. Because I want to be your everything, Natsuki. And I'm so fucking tired of just being useful to you. Really, I've settled for that for far too long."

"What?" Natsuki said hoarsely.

"Kiyohime," she said softly. "It's time to play."

It was purest luck, really. She was almost done with her shift in the sniper's nest. (Okay, Mana would have laughed and laughed and laughed at calling it that, and it really was just a semi-concealed trapdoor out onto the roof, not far from the lightning rod, rather than a well-concealed position from which someone could rain death down on one's enemies from a mile away.) So she was just doing one last sweep of the school district with the really neatoh magnifying binoculars Mikado-sensei had loaned her for that purpose, one last sweep before she went down to have some lunch.

And so it was just good luck that she was watching as the walls of one of the buildings set aside for student council purposes exploded outward, with a familiar giant purple snake surging out of the wreckage.

"Shit," Yuna said. She frantically tapped on the binoculars' 'increase magnification' button, quietly cursing the seconds that it took to get the image focused and correctly enhanced. But there she was, there was Natsuki, on the rooftop of the next building over from the one that had just exploded, bobbing and dodging and shooting those cute little guns of hers up at a target out of Yuna's sight, not that it took a lot of guessing to figure out who it had to be.

"C'mon, c'mon, get out of there, you're outgunned, get to cover or something, get out of -" Yuna almost chanted, as though her sister could hear her.

And then she was watching as Natsuki's foot came down on the edge of the rooftop, made unstable by one of the snake's previous lunges, and saw her tumble down and out of sight.

"No!" she gasped.

A flash of bright light preceded the eruption of a cloud of what looked like ice crystals from where Natsuki had fallen. And a moment later, Yuna saw her emerging from that gap, perched on top of the head of a giant, robotic hound. It was hard to make out her face, but Yuna thought she looked almost as surprised as Yuna herself felt.

It occurred to Yuna, somewhat belatedly, that she was a lousy lookout. She grabbed up the communicator she'd also been given and hit the all-call button. "Guys, whatever's gonna happen just started happening, get up here," she snapped. "Over," she added, as an afterthought.

A few moments later, she was watching her father watching the fight through the binoculars, itching to be watching it herself. She glanced over at Yamiko, who'd come up right behind him, with that Yukino girl more or less in tow. "I like the new look," she said. The flower in her hair was a little
much, honestly, but that was what you were supposed to say at a time like this, right?

"Thank you, Roxanne-chan," Yamiko said cheerily, fluttering her eyelashes.

"... Roxanne -"

"If I'm Aramis, then you're Roxanne."

"... I don't know who that is."

"I don't know who any of these people are," Yukino muttered unhappily.

"There's probably something Freudian about it that thing being a large purple serpent if this is supposed to be some sort of inner manifestation phenomenon," Kaede noted dispassionately, having climbed up the outside of the house on shadow tentacles as opposed to the trap door. Said tentacles, arcing gracefully from his back and latched on to the architecture made him look like an over-sized Daddy-Longlegs. "The range isn't that far. We can hit that thing. If you're worried about the student being hit if we use straight-line beam magic, I do have a selection of arching artillery-like spells-"

"No!" Akashi snapped. "We're not ready!"

"With no due respect, professor, the subject might not have time for absolutely all of us to get ready," Kaede said, though he made no move to grab his staff, just kept looking through his binoculars and occasionally looking off to the side and waggling finger in the air, as if writing on an invisible board. Sometimes he'd draw a curve. "I thought policy was the faculty were the expendable assets in this school, not the students?"

Akashi's face darkened. "Perhaps you didn't notice, but both of those girls are students here," he said irritatedly. "And the one I'm less concerned about is the daughter of a multimillionaire. Are you prepared to explain to Fujino-sama how his only daughter was seriously injured or killed on your watch?"

"I was actually planning on having you do that," Kaede confessed without a trace of hesitation.

"I bet you were."

"You Shadow Mages think a lot of yourselves, don't you?" Yuna said, recalling Takane.

Kaede sniffed, guessing who she meant. "Don't compare me to that stripper. Unlike her, I have the good sense to actually wear something underneath. I'm not just a Shadow-mage. I am a SUPERIOR Shadow-Mage!"

"You also don't have devoted teenaged lesbians waiting on you hand, foot and bed," Yamiko observed.

The shadow tentacles twitched, taking three huge steps away from her and having Kaede dangling over empty air on the other side of the house in an instant, holding up a copy of an Akamatsu manga Omnibus as if to ward her away. "Get thee behind me, spawn of Meyer! I deny you, and all your works, and all your empty lewd promises on which you never deliver!"

"Why do we keep these clowns around again?" Yuna wondered. "Oh, right, plucky comic relief so we don't despair and this all collapses into a Lovecraftian cosmic horror story. Glad that's not my job anymore..."

"Hey, I'm the depressive sad clown," Masuto observed, adjusting his loose white mask over his
forehead, but not pulling it all the way down yet. "If you're counting on me to cheer you up, you're out of luck. Believe me, if I could, I dunno, rewrite history so this doesn't go this way, I'd do it, but what do I look like, some stupid Peggy Sue? I'd probably mess everything up even worse anyway. You know, I used to complain about stories where we're cheated out of the final climactic confrontation, but now I'm into one, I wish I could just skip over to the sloppy epilogue..."

Yuna gave him a really weirded look.

"Don't look at me that way, Yuuna-san," he requested.

"It's pronounced 'Yuna'."

"Whatever."

"We wait and see what happens," Akashi-sensei finally said, lowering the binoculars. "We don't know what interfering will do. It might distract Natsuki enough to let the Fujino lunatic get the upper hand. Let Negi-kun and the others know what's happening, and that we're ready to back him if he has a plan."

"But, Dad!" Yuna protested reflexively.

"He's in charge, sexy," Yamiko said, with rare seriousness. Well, as serious as someone could be while calling someone else sexy.

Yuna ground her teeth in frustration as she watched him put the binoculars up once more, then set them down and walk unhappily over to the trapdoor. "What if it were me over there?" she heard herself asking. "Would you -"

"If it were you, I'd already be on my way," he said without looking back.

It seemed to be a day for all sorts of things that had never happened before. Natsuki took a moment she probably didn't have to bend down and rub the smooth metal skin of Durand's head, as though petting him. She'd never done that. Nor had she ever whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry for all the times I yelled at you," to her Child, as she did right then. Least of all did she know where the next words she spoke even came from. "Oyez pour Durand le valiant."

Her head jerked up, to see Shizuru staring down at her with obvious shock on her face. "It seems you were right," Natsuki said. "I have been holding back. I have been denying how I feel. And now I'm not."

"And now we see how much you hate me," Shizuru answered, in the second before she came down at Natsuki, swinging her naginata like a reaper's scythe.

_Hate her?_ Natsuki thought in confused panic as she began firing at her attacker, both guns blazing. _How does anything I said - what does that - why does she -_

The force of Shizuru's charge led her past Natsuki, down to the ground. Natsuki turned to start firing down at her.

_I don't hate her. I don't - she wants too much of me!_

With a howl that almost echoed Durand's call, Natsuki followed Shizuru down to the ground, spraying the soil with bolts from her gun that the other girl only barely dodged. It occurred to Natsuki, as she found herself struggling to keep herself out of a red-tinged rage, that from what she
knew, Shizuru had never actually fought anyone before this. Her so-called victories were all simple murders.

Natsuki had fought plenty. And the difference between their powers was minimal, as Durand showed by grabbing hold of Kiyohime's neck, holding it in his teeth like a mongoose rather than a hound, while the two Childs' mistresses pursued each other on foot. She saw Shizuru dashing across the empty promenade towards the wreckage of the church, and followed, while the Childs wrestled with each other behind her.

"Those last shots came pretty close," she heard Shizuru call out. "So much for just wanting to talk, I suppose."

"You attacked first," Natsuki snapped, sending a pair of bolts in what she believed to be Shizuru's direction. "You don't get to negotiate when you attack first." Stunbolts. Again. Why was she wasting time with such things? Why not just get it over with? There was only one way this could end, and she knew it as she dashed into the wreckage, hot on Shizuru's trail, with the damn snake twisting around behind her, and -

CRUNCH!

- slamming its rear end, which Durand's maw wasn't clamped down on, into the higher parts of the rubble, such that a bell was now dropping down towards her, lip first. (The clapper seemed to have come loose some time before.)

Why does this feel so damn familiar? thought Natsuki a second before it landed on her.

Shizuru stepped out of the shadows and swung her naginata at the bell, its blade extending and bending to become a whip of sorts, wrapping around the bell's waist and squeezing until it shattered into dust, then constricting further to wrap around -

Thin air, because Natsuki had dropped as low as she could, so that the whip's coils were strangling the air above her head, and was turning to point her guns at Shizuru, thumbs absently flicking the circular magazines to fire a lethal bolt.

Checkmate, Natsuki thought.

And then, Wait, no. What am I doing?

It seemed that everything was slowing down. And it occurred to Natsuki, with the tiny part of her mind that remained free, that the sort of person who might put a hypnotic compulsion into someone's mind, might also put one into someone else's, to activate later. As a rather poor joke, perhaps.

It wasn't funny. And again, with the tiny part of her mind that remained free, she fought it - and sent the bolts to Shizuru's sides.

"Natsuki!" Shizuru shrieked. "Take this seriously, damn you!" She began to pull back her coils.

Then shrieked and convulsed as another energy bolt took her from behind, knocking her down to the ground in a quivering mess.

Natsuki, trembling with the exertion of fighting off the Prince's hypnotism, still managed to lift her head to look, in stunned amazement, in the direction from whence had come that bolt.

"Always leaving things half done, aren't you?" said a very familiar voice.
"... mom?" Natsuki gasped.

She hadn't aged a day. Actually, she hadn't changed at all from the person whom Natsuki had thought existed only in her memories of back then, still smiling that same sweet, gentle smile. But Natsuki had changed, and she found that those changes included a different interpretation of that smile - no longer sweet or gentle, it looked superior, suspicious. Smug, even.

The way that she was simply standing there looking at her, not answering the implied question, and forcing Natsuki to make it audible, was also really annoying. "H-how are you alive?" Natsuki finally broke down and ask. "Why ... where have you been?"

"The Searrs Foundation saved me. They had assets in the area for the extraction, who got wind that the District was going to do what they did," Saeko answered. Then shrugged. "Technically, they saved both of us. But since I needed immediate medical attention and they knew that the First District didn't know about your significance, they were able to leave you to the local authorities."

"You needed immediate - I was in a coma for most of a year!" Natsuki protested.

"Yes, and that should tell you how much more seriously I was hurt. It's only been in the last year or so that I was able to walk," Saeko said, matter-of-factly. "They had to fight for my life, and they nearly lost. I didn't come away from that whole. But that's all right. If we want to, we can fix that and everything else, once you've won the Carnival for me."

Natsuki fought the impulse to groan. "You too? How the hell do you people keep falling for this thing?"

"What do you mean, 'you people'?" Saeko demanded, smile finally fading. "How can you talk to your own -"

"It's rigged! The Carnival is rigged!" Natsuki interrupted, starting to push herself to her feet. "There's no way that I can win it and -"

"Of course there is," Saeko interrupted right back at her. "I know about Kagu-Tsuchi and his HiME, Natsuki. He's not a problem ... especially if there are thirteen of you, and not twelve. Once you eliminate this silly rich girl, the circle will be complete. All that we have to do then is stop Kagu-Tsuchi's HiME from approaching the Obsidian Prince, and you can be the one who goes to him and claims our place by his side. Just as I planned, way back then!"

"You -"

"Who did you think was behind all this?" Saeko demanded, starting to sound irate. "Why did you think Alyssa kept calling you her sister? They made her from cell samples of you that I gave to them! But I didn't give them everything, Natsuki, I saved the best of my knowledge for you. Alyssa was a typical HiME. You are special, Natsuki. Unlike all those silly girls, you have no vulnerable 'precious person'. You've known this instinctively, haven't you?"

Natsuki's mouth worked, but no sound came out.

"So what exactly is the hold-up, here?" Saeko started to walk over towards where Shizuru lay crumpled and paralyzed on the ground. She moved awkwardly, almost mechanically. And slowly. "Deal with this stupid, privileged little snot, and we can finally have the power I-we deserve!"

"It won't work," Natsuki said at last. "Maybe I don't have ... but she does. And it's me. If I defeat her, then I -"
"Don't be ridiculous," Saeko sneered. "I've been watching you and this stupid cow, ever since Smith
told me that you weren't willing to listen to reason. If you're so precious to her, why did she do
something so ... banal and meaningless as to kiss you on the forehead?! If she actually loved you,
she'd have gone much further!"

"You were watching?" Natsuki asked, gaping. "Then you saw what happened -"

"When the Prince claimed you for his own, yes, yes, can we please get on with it?"

"He raped me, and you just watched?"

"Don't be a child," Saeko said, disgusted. "As a great man once said to me, rape is simply the word
used by an inferior to describe their refusal to accept the attentions of a superior. You're not going to
make yourself the Prince's inferior, are you? Natsuki, our way is clear, but we are on a timetable
here. Hurry up and shoot, already! I have worked too hard to let you screw this up for me at this
point! This is why I had you in the first place!"

"Why you - and why did you do what you did? After you had me!" Natsuki finally shouted. "Am I
supposed to just accept that you're my superior and take what you give me?"

"Yes," said Saeko, rage illuminating her face. "I'm the one who endured nine months of hell for your
sake, feeling you growing inside of me and making me disgusting and ugly and sick! It was almost
as bad as the first time! I put up with it only because I had a plan for you! You owe me everything!
Now shoot the bitch already!"

Slowly, Natsuki raised her guns.

Shizuru was not her target.

Saeko blinked in complete bewilderment. "What the hell are you doing? Natsuki, stop playing silly
games. We both know you won't do it. You can't do it. I'm your mother. The mother you went
through hell to avenge, remember? You can't -"

"My mother is dead," Natsuki said, and pulled the triggers.

Midori didn't really remember much of what had happened after she started screaming. Bits and
pieces flashed in her mind when she tried to reflect on it - him recoiling from her, looking more
confused than disgusted; pushing him back further and pulling on some of her clothes then running
out into the hotel hallway and into the stairwell; and then the streets, running for a while, then
walking when that grew too tiring. She was fairly sure that she'd had no idea where she was
supposed to go.

And yet somehow she'd ended up here, just outside her old apartment building. That's good, she
thought. That's right. I've been running around in circles, so I should end up where I began. That's
just right. The door to the building was open, so she went in. Unfortunately, so was the door to her
apartment. The lock appeared to have been broken. Someone had gone into her room.

They weren't there anymore, though. Neither was a lot of stuff that had been there when Midori had
last been here, a few days ago. Like, say, all her carefully researched and deliberately catalogued
information about the legends of the hime and the Obsidian Prince. It was gone. Ripped from her
filing cabinets, which had been overturned and left on the floor. Her computer was gone, too.

Clearly, while they'd been packing her off to the looney bin, the First District had been carefully
-okay, not so carefully - going through her room to seize any useful information. She hoped, in a
vague sort of way, that it had done them some good. It had certainly never done her any.

She opened the bottom drawer of her desk, and pulled it all the way out so that she could get at the hidden catch for her most secret cache, which she was pleased to see that they hadn't found and pillaged, hidden as it was inside the desk's frame. Sure enough, there was the special 'for emergencies' flask of vodka she'd secreted there so long ago. And, oh look, this was definitely an emergency. Now, had they left her bathroom alone?

No, no they had not. Drawers and the contents of drawers were spilled out all over the floor. But her small collection of medications looked to be intact, including - ah-hah! - the sleeping pills that she only took on occasion. And, oh look, this was definitely an occasion. Things seemed to be looking up now that she'd realized what the universe clearly wanted her to do, and was taking steps towards doing it.

Taking a first swig of the vodka, she tottered out of the bathroom and back the bedroom, sitting down on top of her futon with a sigh. The bastards had actually cut open the fabric to make sure that she wasn't hiding anything inside of it. What a lot of jerks. Ah well. She couldn't really blame them. And it didn't really matter, she decided as she started to take the pills, one by one.

She had the nagging feeling that she'd left something undone. "Oh," she said, aloud. "That's right. I should really explain to the professor why I was calling him. He really deserves to know. Now, where'd they put my phone ... oh, here it is."

Fumbling, starting to feel the effect of the pills and encouraging it by taking another, she dialed the number. "Hello?" said the male voice.

"Oh hi sensei," Midori slurred. "It's me."

"... you're going to need to be a little more ... Midori? Is this you? Where've you been? I called you back a few times and you never answered."

"Been a little tied up," Midori said, giggling. "Well, more bound up than tied, but you know how it goes. Listen, that's not what I called you to say. There's something I wanted to say." She paused, trying to remember what it was.

"Midori, are you drunk?" asked the voice on the other end.

"Not drunk enough, yet," she answered. "But the pills are starting to work. Yeah, anyway, I'm sorry about everything, even if I can't really put my finger on what I'm supposed to be sorry to you about, speshifically. That's not the word, is it. Ah, it duzzn't matter."

"Midori, where are you? Are you still at Mahora?"

"Yeah. Pretty dead around here. Hah hah. That was a pun." She was starting to lose the feeling in her fingers, which made it hard to hold onto the phone. "My apartment. Whas left of it. I guess they'll find me after it's all over, if there's a they to do the finding."

"Excuse me a moment," he said.

"Okay."

There was an odd noise from the phone, but Midori wasn't really paying attention. The world was spinning all around her, just like it always had been, and right at the moment all she wanted to do was close her eyes and go to sleep so that it would probably stop spinning.
Then abruptly she wasn't alone in the room, anymore. Someone was grabbing her, picking her up, dragging her off and - into the bathroom, she thought vaguely, and her head was being held over the toilet and fingers were being pressed into the back of her throat, through her mouth. "Up it comes," said the Professor's voice, in a very angry tone. "All of it."

"Why did you save me?" Midori asked a few moments later, as she sat on her bed, shivering slightly despite the blanket draped over her.

Noriyasu Seta, leaning back against her desk and watching her carefully, took a long draw on the cigarette in his mouth before answering. "For kicks," he said dryly.

"... yeah, sorry, that was a dumb question, wasn't it?" she said with a vague tone of apology in her voice.

"As questions go, that wasn't a particularly clever one," he agreed. "As actions go, asking questions rates slightly higher on the 'not dumb' scale than some other things you've done lately. It balances out. In any event, you're my student, colleague, and friend ... and I don't actually have enough of the last one of those to let them go killing themselves without trying to stop them."

Incredibly, Midori found herself laughing. Well, her raw throat was making a noise that could be charitably called laughter. "... some other things I've done lately," she moaned after a while. "You have nooo idea how true that is."

"No, I don't. I hope that you'll tell me when you're ready to tell me - when you're ready to tell me," Seta pre-emptively interrupted as she started to open her mouth. "You're not, now, whatever you may think." He paused, looked around the room as though seeing it for the first time. "Some generalities about who went through your room like those Argentine secret policemen that one time might be welcome, though, as well as some explanations about why I didn't see anyone else in the whole town as I was running over here."

"There's a Carnival going on," she said. "So everyone's left."

Seta blinked. "It's going to be an interesting circus, if everyone at Mahora has run away to join it."

"No, it ... ah, never mind," Midori said. "You're right, it's too much to talk about now." She shuddered. "I've ... done some really bad things lately. Bad things happened to me, but ... I was the bad thing that happened to other people. I wanted to be a hero, and I ended up being ... you should've let me -"

"Wow, the double standard sucks," he interrupted again, starting to get a bit angry. "If not for that, I could finally live the dream of being the guy who gets to slap the girl and shout 'don't say such stupid things!' Instead, I'm just going to have to yell at you a little."

"You don't understand."

Seta pulled out his cigarette and extinguished it against the desk top. "Yes. I. Do," he snapped. "It may surprise you to know, Sugiuara-kun, that my life has not been totally devoid of moments of guilt, stupidity and outright malice. Do you really think that I don't know about pain and suffering? I was caught in a love triangle with two women, finally picked one just in time for her to let me know that she'd gotten over me, but incidentally she was dying and wouldn't mind too much if we got married so I could take care of her daughter after she was gone. Then, after I finally worked up the nerve to approach the other woman in all of this, she was pissed off beyond belief at me and only married me after we went through more hell together - and the marriage has lasted long enough for her to come to the astonishing realization that she has a crush on her cousin who thinks she's his aunt!"
Incidentally, my step-daughter, whose diapers I changed, now has a wholly unrequited crush on me, that I'm doing my level best to discourage. Not terribly successfully! Throw in a dozen or more complicated relationships, and you have a picture of my life. So yes, I do understand. I have been tempted to do what you tried to do, and I'm glad someone stopped me like I stopped you."

Silence fell in the room for several moments.

"... who stopped you?" Midori finally asked, almost in a whisper.

"I did," Seta said shortly as he went through his pockets, perhaps searching for another cigarette. "Dammit, that had better not have been my last one -"

"Why?" she asked. "Why do you keep going?"

He stopped looking, leaned back and gazed at the ceiling. When he spoke again, it was with the air of one reciting something. "People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway. If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway." He paused, looked down in Midori's direction as he continued. "People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway. Give the world the best you have and it will never be enough. Give the world the best you have anyway. What else have you got to do with your life, anyway?"

More silence. This time, he broke it. "Do you have any food in this place?"

"I doubt it," Midori answered.

"Swell. Okay, I'm going to step outside to make a call to a friend of mine who told me he was going to be in the area - don't look at me like that, I said I didn't have many, not that I don't have any - and see if he's able to head to the combini for all three of us. Don't try anything. I will be back."

When he was gone, Midori found her gaze slowly turning to look at the bathroom door.

But she stayed where she was.

---

After Nagi had left, and after she found herself able to move again, Mai went in and made herself some breakfast. She was dimly aware that she was probably making too much food for one person, and, sure enough, there were plenty of leftovers. Not that that mattered too much.

Not that anything did.

Despite that, she found herself putting them away so that they could be saved for later, even though she knew now that there wouldn't ever be a later. And that even if there was, no one she cared about would ever eat the food that she made. But it was as if she was running on autopilot, doing things because she'd done things like this so many times before.

So many more times than she could even remember. Millions of times, perhaps. It wouldn't make a difference if she didn't do it. She could eat them all right now, and it wouldn't matter. She could do anything at all, and it wouldn't matter. So she put the food away in resealable containers, and cleaned up the kitchen, before heading out.

Where was she going? It didn't matter.
What would she do when she got there? It didn't matter.

But she had a premonition that her journey wasn't going to go uninterrupted, and sure enough, just as she started to hear the rumbles that told her of a distant fight - Natsuki and Shizuru - a pale, blue-haired form stepped out from an alley she was passing.

"Tokiha Mai," said Miyu, her arms going into blade mode.

"Hey, Miyu," Mai said, as though she weren't about to be threatened. "How's life been treating you?"

Miyu paused, as if actually considering replying to this attempt at small talk. Perhaps, if she'd been inclined to do so, she might have said something like, "as I am not alive, it has not been treating me at all." And Mai would have laughed, even though that wasn't particularly funny. But that hypothetical alternative never happened. Instead, Miyu went right to what she wanted to talk about. Typical Western-built android. No politesse.

"Where is Alyssa? I have been searching for her for some time without success," said Miyu.

"Well, I think she might have been taken away in the evacuation," Mai replied politely. "But I really couldn't say for sure." Abruptly, a thought occurred to her. "I mean, I could make a better guess than that ... but I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Miyu frowned, and took a step towards Mai. Then her frown deepened. "My analysis of your involuntary physical reactions suggests that you are attempting to deliberately provoke me to do you harm. Why are you doing that?"

Damn robot!

"Do you really give a damn?" Mai asked, frustrated. "Come on, dammit! You're supposed to be programmed to deal with other himes on Alyssa's behalf, right? So deal with me!"

"I am programmed to challenge a Valkyrie only when her Child is active," Miyu replied, taking a step back.

"Well, that's stupid!" Mai snapped. "Isn't it more likely that -"

"And," the gynoid interrupted, "since Alyssa has been eliminated as a contender in this contest, I can derive no immediate benefit from your death. In fact, it occurs to me that it might be best to ensure that you gain victory in a way that leaves you obligated to myself and Alyssa, so that you are compelled to utilize your powers on our and the Searrs Foundation's behalf. I could do this by eliminating one or more of your remaining adversaries, and -""

Whatever else Miyu might have been about to say was interrupted when the point of a huge black blade erupted through her abdomen, coincidentally cutting off power to her voice synthesizer. Miyu looked down, a bit disconcerted, and began to shakily reach down to push herself off of it.

With a howl, Mikoto turned and shoved the point of the sword into the ground, pinning Miyu's body there just long enough for the spikes to surge up and tear it to pieces.

"Mai," she said, once the rumbles had ceased. "It is time."

Shizuru blinked as she regained consciousness, not sure how long she'd been out. She was moderately annoyed to realize that the return of her self-awareness did not also convey a restoration of her ability to move. (Moderately frustrated, in her current frame of reference, was probably what would have been considered homicidal fury in anyone else, not that she had much of a basis for
comparison.) She wasn't even sure what had happened ... had her Natsuki somehow used the shot she'd deliberately miss to bounce off something and take Shizuru from behind? Why? Why would she insult her like that?

"- owe me everything! Now shoot the bitch already!" an unfamiliar voice was saying.

Ah. So it had been someone else, since Shizuru had no doubt that she was the bitch under discussion.

The voice continued a moment later, in a mildly bewildered tone. "What the hell are you doing? Natsuki, stop playing silly games. We both know you won't do it. You can't do it. I'm your mother. The mother you went through hell to avenge, remember? You can't -"

"My mother is dead," said her Natsuki, and then there was the sound of her guns being discharged again - and the sound of a body dropping wordlessly to the ground.

Her mobility was slowly returning, enough that Shizuru was able, with some difficulty, to roll over so that she could look in the direction that the voice had come from. She hadn't been imagining things. There, slumped on the ground, was the body of a woman who bore a marked resemblance to her Natsuki, wearing glasses - well, sort of wearing them; they'd half-way fallen off of her head - and staring endlessly up at the sky with an expression on her face best described as shocked. Two burn marks still steamed on her upper chest. Shizuru, who had lately had much exposure to dead bodies, was fairly certain that she was bereft of life.

There could be no doubt in her mind who this person was. Had been, rather. She had seen her in the photograph when she broke into her Natsuki's room, and had avoided damaging that photograph when she messed up the place. Shizuru treasured her own mother's memory, though she didn't exactly advertise the fact. And she knew that her Natsuki felt even more strongly than that.

And now her Natsuki had just killed her own mother. Rather than kill Shizuru.

Shizuru wasn't sure whether it was that realization or something else, but for the first time in what felt like ages, she felt like she could think clearly. Of course, most of what she could think was unvoicable thoughts of sheer horror, mixed in with a guilty awareness that a part of her that was not and never had been mind controlled was thrilled at the realization that her Natsuki was willing to do that for her. Oh well, she supposed it couldn't be -

Focus, focus!

She forced herself to roll over so that she could look at her Natsuki. The girl hadn't moved a muscle since the shooting, still posed in a shooter's stance. Her eyes were wide open, but Shizuru could tell that she wasn't seeing anything immediately present.

"Natsuki," Shizuru said, finding her voice at last.

And then the horror truly began, for her Natsuki looked down at her with a huge smile on her face. "Oh hi Shizuru," she said. "Hasn't this been a shitty day?"

Of course. I go sane and she goes crazy. That is how it was bound to happen, Shizuru thought. "Natsuki, I -"

"No, no, no, I listened to you, now you listen to me," Natsuki lectured, waving one of her pistols for emphasis. "Anyway, your plan, the one you told me about! Did you spend a lot of time thinking it up?"
"Not really," Shizuru said, wishing very much that she had enough strength in her legs to regain her footing. "I can't say that I did. But, Natsuki, I -"

"Didn't think so!" Natsuki yelled. "Yeah, after all, you're waaaaay smarter than me, and if I can see the problem with it, surely you could! I mean, really. You're gonna kill everyone who makes me unhappy, and then let me kill you? What's wrong with you, leaving things half-done like that?"

"What do you mean, leaving things -"

"Oh, come onnn! It's obvious, innit?" And suddenly, the big smile was gone. "You can't kill everyone who makes me unhappy and then expect me to do things ... because the person who makes me the most unhappy, the person who I hate the most ... you won't mind if I take care of it first, will you?"

And then the gun was pointing at Natsuki's temple and her finger was tightening on the trigger.

Shizuru's own hands were still gripping her naginata, and its whip-extension was still out. She could feel her muscles screaming in agony as she forced them to work before they were ready, striking upward towards her Natsuki's hand, with force enough to knock the gun loose. "No," she yelled, even as Natsuki was shouting the same thing.

"Why -?" Natsuki almost whined.

"If you want to kill yourself, then please kill me first!" Shizuru cried. "It amounts to the same thing, and I -" She broke off, choking back a sob. "I don't want to see you dying right in front of me, Natsuki. Don't make me suffer that."

Natsuki swallowed, looked down at the other gun in her hands ... and let it drop. "I can't do this anymore," she said, bringing a hand up to her face. "I'm just so tired of it all. But ... and this is the screwiest thing. But I don't want to hurt you. Any more than I have." She started to walk slowly towards Shizuru.

"You didn't -" Shizuru started to say, then fell silent. It was so funny, in a sick sort of way. For all the times that she'd said, 'my Natsuki shouldn't tell lies', she'd never had any problems telling them herself. But now, and here, she didn't feel right lying to her. Here, as they'd come to the end of each other.

"I did," Natsuki said, guessing what had been on Shizuru's lips. "And I'm sorry. I wish ... for your sake, I wish that I did love you, like you love me."

Now she tried to say that it didn't matter, that all she cared about was Natsuki's own happiness. But not only did it not feel right, the words themselves burned like acid on her tongue. She was selfish. She was awful. She was -

"I really do," Natsuki reiterated as she drew closer yet. "Out of everything that's happened to me, your feelings are the purest thing I've ever known."

... pure? Shizuru thought wildly. There's nothing pure about me or - or - And she remembered a kiss on the forehead, given not for purity but out of revulsion for the physical. Oh ... 

"But it doesn't matter," Natsuki said, dropping to her knees beside where Shizuru was still lying on the ground. "All we can do, really, is trust that Mai's going to make a better world than this. Maybe we'll even get to see it. I'm sorry, Shizuru." And then she bent down to pull Shizuru up into an embrace. "I really am."
"Duran," Natsuki said after a long moment. From where they were positioned, Shizuru could clearly see the dog struggling with her Kiyohime, while at the same time gazing down on them. Did he view this as a betrayal, she wondered. Or was he as loyal as dogs were thought to be? She supposed it didn't matter.

"Fire," Natsuki said.

Duran's shoulder mounted cannons proceeded to shoot, at point blank range, right into Kiyohime's midsection. The snake convulsed, then exploded - with shrapnel that proceeded to cut the dog to ribbons.

Without another word, either of protest or relief, the two girls dissolved into brilliant green light and were gone within moments.

Akashi Yuna was not a religious person. Her philosophical inclination lay towards, as she'd once told someone, a sort of romantic nihilism mixed with a fair amount of simple hedonism, rather than any reverence for supernatural forces, whether the million gods of Shinto or the cold angry Lord of the Christians. She could imitate conventional piety well enough to sit patiently through a ceremony or pretend that a visit to a grave meant something to her, but it didn't come natural.

So there was no reason for her to whisper "oh god," as she watched the explosion that almost consumed what was left of the school cathedral. No reason at all. Even if she was upset at the likely fate of her older sister, she did not believe that there was anyone up there to hear her asking 'why'? Yet it came out all the same.

After a moment, she fumbled for her communicator. "Dad - 

"I saw the blast from down here," her father's voice interrupted. "Do you have a visual of the area?"

Swallowing, Yuna checked through the binoculars. "Negative," she said. "Too many obstructions. I -"

"I need to talk to Kageyama," he interrupted again.

Pouting just slightly, guessing where this was going to go, she held it out to the girl with the cane, who took it with interest and held it up to her ear. Yuna then quietly endured a few moments of listening to Kageyama talking on the phone - with 'talking' here meaning repeated uh-huhs and yeahs, her face giving absolutely nothing away. Finally, she said, "Right," and hung up.

"Okay," she said, turning to look at Kaede and Masuto, who'd been hanging around (quite literally in Kaede's case) while all this happened. "Himself wants visual confirmation of whatever it was happened over there, and he's nicely asked me to obtain it, so I'm nicely telling you to go get it or be smited by the wrath of wondrous me. Aren't I nice, giving you a choice like that? And before any clever bugger says anything about the idea of hacking a satellite to get a look at the area or anything like that," she added, just as Kaede started to open his mouth, "he wants eyes on the subject. Eyes. As in those things in your head. But I'm not so heartless as to send you two out without any backup."

Yuna started to smile. Kageyama was a good person after -

"So take Souzoteki. It's about time that little turd started earning his keep around here."

No, she really wasn't.

"Question," said Chizuno. "What if we find something there? Something alive, I mean."
"That's a little optimistic for you, isn't it?" Kageyama asked, eyebrow raised.

"No. It means whatever's there is tough enough to survive that and keep going, which is a bad thing, all around."

"There is a certain logic to your position," the golden-haired psychopath agreed. With a glance at Yuna, she continued after a moment's thought. "If it's Kuga-san, offer her assistance and get her to medical attention if required. If it's the other one, sanction the bitch if possible." Her voice didn't alter even slightly. "Allez-y, gents."

One quick game of roshambo to determine who was going to go drag Souzoteki away from whatever nothing he was presently busily engaged in doing (Masuto lost, of course) and they were off, leaving Yuna and Kageyama alone together on the roof, looking at the dust cloud from the explosion, which hadn't yet dispersed.

"You've killed a lot of people, haven't you?" Yuna asked eventually.

"I don't keep a running total, but 'a lot' will probably cover it."

"I've never wanted to kill anyone. I've been angry at all kinds of people, but I've never wanted to kill anyone. But I want to kill whoever set this stupid Carnival thing up."

"You may yet have the opportunity to do so," Kageyama said in a way that was probably meant to be helpful. "After all, it ain't over 'til -"

"No!" Yukino shouted as she stuck her head out of the trapdoor. "It can't be -"

"What can't be?" Yuna and Yamiko asked in stereo.

"The, the red star - it's practically here!" Yukino said, her eyes on the sky. "I saw it through the window, I can see it, it's - how did it get so close, all of a sudden?"

"That can't be good," Kageyama said after a moment.

The communicator in her hand beeped, then, and she absent-mindedly switched it to speaker. "Hey, fearless-because-insane-leader," came Senou's voice. "We're practically there, and can confirm that there's no bodies in the cathedral. Repeat, no bodies."

"... neither can that."

"Huh?"

"Time for what?" Mai asked flatly, after a moment of silence that felt much longer.

She hadn't really known what to expect when she saw Mikoto again. No matter how much she had intellectually accepted that, yes, despite everything, she still loved the girl, she'd expected to be angry, or even frightened. And certainly the sight of Mikoto utterly annihilating Miyu was a startling one. But more than that ... what she felt was a strange, almost bewildering mixture of relief and concern, gladness that Mikoto seemed to be all right blending with awareness that something was off about her.

She was determined not to let any of that show on her face, though. And now they were just standing there, in the street, staring at each other across a field of spikes raised up from the ground, in which she could still see pieces of Miyu, sometimes throwing off sparks.
Mikoto said nothing. She simply stood there, sword out and ready, and stared at Mai.

"Time for what?" Mai repeated, starting to get a little annoyed. "I really hope that it's time for you to start talking, Mikoto, because there's some stuff I really need to get off my chest when it comes to you, and I don't really thrill at the thought of yelling at you while you just stand there and -"

Abruptly, in the distance, there was the sound of an explosion. Mai's head jerked up as she looked in the direction of the church. "Natsuki," she whispered.

"And Shizuru," said a familiar voice, coming from an alleyway on the far side of the sea of spikes. He casually sauntered into view, hands in his pockets in a style that seemed copied from Nagi, understandably given the coolness and cleverness of the originator of that look. "It seems those two have found a solution to the problem that confronted them. I do hope you don't want to imitate them, Mai."

"Reito-" Mai started to say, then forced herself to stop. "The Obsidian Prince, I presume?" she asked, in a voice much less warm than she'd been using for her first reaction.

"Both of those are actually accurate," the Prince said. "This is a partnership, not a take-over, Mai." Which was true, though the petty details of who would always be in charge of this particular partnership were nothing with which the dear girl needed to be troubled. He came over to stand behind Mikoto. "You can wake up now, Mikoto," he told her.

Mikoto blinked, then gaped. "Mai!" she called out. "Hello, Mai! I missed you, Mai! I -" She looked as though she wanted to run towards her, but a firm hand on her shoulder was holding her back.

"I missed you, too, Mikoto," Mai told her, fighting back tears. This had to be the true Mikoto, after all. He'd freed her from his mind control, and now -"

"Now, you two are the last of the -" One last disgusted grunt. "- HiME. The choice is yours. You can do what always happens at the end of these Carnivals, and battle it out to determine who gets to be the last one standing. Orrr ... since the circle of the twelve princesses is almost complete, there is an alternative available."

"Let me guess," Mai said, when it looked like the person using Reito's lips was done for a while. "We surrender to you."

"Correct!" he replied cheerfully. "But don't frown so, Mai. This is a happy ending. You'll be with me, and with Mikoto, for a long, long while. And we'll do all sorts of fun things together. Anything you want to do! If you want to wreck the world that's been betraying you for so long, we'll do that! Want to reign justly and fairly? It's completely doable! Of course, you could even choose to try again and do it better this time. Again," he added, rolling his eyes.

"You remember that too, then?" Mai asked.

"I'm a transcendant being who grants you the wish that you ultimately make, Mai," he answered, sounding a bit weary. "Yes, I remember. I remember everything. Or at the very least, enough to genuinely hope that you can be persuaded to make some other choice this time."

"... what are you talking about, aniue, Mai?" Mikoto asked, looking between them confusedly.

"Nothing to worry your cute little head over," he assured her fondly.

"Okay!"
"How do I know you'll live up to your end, if I do surrender?" Mai asked. "I mean, I don't really remember any of that. How do I know that this isn't a trick?"

He stared at her. "Mai. Really."

"Really, how do I know this isn't a trick?" she repeated.

The Prince sighed. "I will give you proof of my good intentions. You are concerned that I will abuse my power over you if you surrender ... so I will use up most of that power that you fear, right now. It will take me a while to recover it, after this, and I will be almost as helpless as any mortal for most of that time. Behold, the bright red star that shines to illuminate this, our carnival." He raised a hand, somewhat theatrically, as though reaching out towards the bright red light in the sky.

And then he pulled that hand to his chest, and spoke in a voice deeper and louder than any Mai had ever heard. "Come."

In the blink of Mai's eye, the tiny red light in the sky exploded into a bright red circle that seemed to take up most of the horizon, lighting all the world that she could see with a strange red tint. It was close enough that she could see the way that it burned, with oceans of darker-colored fire amidst brightly burning continents. It looked like drawings of the sun, but succeeded where those had failed to capture a sense of terrible power.

"Satisfied?" Mai heard Reito's voice, sounding incredibly fatigued, from behind her. When she finally tore her eyes away to look at him, she could see that he was almost relying on Mikoto just to stand. "Are you at last satisfied?" he asked again, gazing at her unsteadily.

"... I surrender," Mai said. She only intended to keep to that until she could find some other way out of this.

"Good," he said with a smile. A while was such a subjective term. With the star this close, it would take him only a day or so to regain what he'd just spent.

He'd won.

"He'd won," Nagi repeated, a sardonic expression slightly distorting his otherwise cute face as he held up fingers to make air quotes. "As though this were all his doing, as if no one else did any of the heavy lifting this time. Really, sometimes I seriously question my allegiance to that guy. Am I going to get a big New Year's bonus out of all this? I think not."

His usual air of amusement restored itself as he walked through the great cavern of the green stone pillars, each emerging from the ground as a memorial. Since he'd last come down here, two more had arisen from the mantle to mark the passages of Shizuru and Natsuki. He considered them with genuine regret. Their mutual destruction had happened yet again, despite all the differences that fate could throw at the two of them. If it was beautiful, in a tragic sort of way, it was still tragic, in a beautiful sort of way, too.

"Ah well. It really can't be helped," he said aloud as he gracefully moved, in a dance of his own, over to the pillar which had risen up with the defeat of Fumi. "Anymore than this could. I'm truly sorry for you, too, little sister. Despite everything, despite the way you won that time, despite the way I ended up serving a life sentence at hard labor because of you and the rest of your little friends, despite everything, I was really quite fond of you. I would have liked for us to be friends -"

He broke off in mid-sentence, then laughed. "Oh, I'm lying through my teeth. Force of habit, I guess.
No, we would have never been friends, but we could have had some fun together anyway. I'm sorry you chose to stand in my way again. Maybe you'll wise up a little in the next iteration."

He had no doubt that Mai would ultimately choose to slam her thumb down on the reset button when she had the chance, whatever she was saying now. Everything else might change, but not that central aspect of her character. It was part of the reason that he loved her as he did.

But there was something Nagi didn't realize.

Nagi frowned. "Wait, what?" he asked aloud.

There was something Nagi had never even considered.

"Hold it. Hooooold it," he said. "The narrative voice is supposed to reflect my thoughts. What's going on here?"

He had never even considered the possibility that the narrative voice, even though it normally reflected his own thoughts, often in an extremely flattering way that soothed his suspicions, might actually belong to someone else. Someone who had also been through this sequence of events over and over and over, waiting for the opportunity to strike back.

Who had been waiting to remind the chessmaster at his table that pawns can be promoted. Who believed, as someone once said, that "right, temporarily defeated, is greater than evil triumphant." That "oft evil will will evil mar". And that you should never, ever count your chickens before they've hatched.

Incidentally, I thought your sister did a truly marvelous job of impersonating me, Nagi.

"No," said Nagi. "No, no, no, no. It doesn't matter. You can't pull this off. You don't have Miyu to blow things up and wreck my incredibly clever plan and -"

That was when he heard a footstep at the entrance to the chamber. He turned, and as he did so, he shrieked a certain name.

Mine, as it happened.
Despite my earlier enthusiasm, I should probably admit, now, that my name isn't and never has been Mashiro. That was an alias I claimed about a decade ago, when I needed one to operate in the world beyond my prison. More recently, however, when my efforts finally started to bear fruit, I abandoned that identity to another, whose name, interestingly enough, actually was Mashiro. I hope she will be satisfied with the paltry reward that I am forced to offer her for her help, which was invaluable.

I see no purpose in mentioning the name I was given as a child, centuries ago. Neither it nor the name of my family would mean anything to you; that family, like the world in which they lived, have been gone a very long time. Their descendants live on, of course, under other names. So it goes. So it should go.

I was born. I lived. In my thirteenth year, the Carnival began, and I was chosen to be one of the twelve princesses who competed for the favor of the Obsidian Prince. I was blessed, if that's the word, with the Child named Kagu-Tsuchi. So of course, I triumphed. I defeated my opponents, who were my cousins, and saw the dissolution of their loved ones, who were also my cousins, knowing that it was all to the ultimate good.

Then I learned that the ultimate good I was seeking allowed a monster from beyond our world to consume the mind and soul of my older brother, for whom I felt a love which went beyond what was appropriate. I faced the temptation of allowing him to have his way with the world, with me at his side - to speak euphemistically of what our relationship would have been like - or the alternative.

I chose the alternative. I murdered my brother. I sealed the Obsidian Prince away. And for four hundred years, I have thought that I could have made a better choice.

Well. I apologize. That is an exaggeration. For the first hundred or so years, I did my very best neither to think nor to feel anything. I served what came to be called the First District as their chief priestess, channeling their wishes to the Obsidian Prince and making them reality. And so nearly everything went well for Tokugawa Ieyasu and his immediate followers, and our country entered into a long period of isolation from the world. I did not care. Nothing mattered to me very much. And yet I was not permitted to die.

That is why I have sympathy for Midori, for all her flaws.
In time, of course, scars formed over the wound in my heart. They always do. In the fullness of time, I realized that I didn't have to relay the wishes of the First District to the Prince exactly as they were given to me. I didn't have to relay them at all, though that would have caused suspicion. So I used the free will that I retained to make the wishes that I thought should be made ... and the isolation ended, and so did the Shogunate. (I make no apologies for the suffering that resulted. Suffering is the lot of humanity; anyone who claims otherwise is deceiving you.)

I also realized that even though I was not going to be permitted to die, this life of mine would not last forever, either. Ultimately, I would become part of the seal I had made, just as the victor of every Carnival before mine had done. I would know even less freedom than I had before I learned that I possessed any. Make no mistake about it - in part, what I have done has been done so that I could escape that fate. I wish to prevent it for those who will follow me, but that is not and never has been my primary goal.

To do this, I have used people as tools. I have treated my tools as well as I could, but they are tools. I imagine that if there is a life after this one, I will be held accountable for that, and I am prepared for that. As I am explaining all this to you, one of the tools which I have spent the most time honing for various purposes is entering the underground chamber where I have revealed myself, at last, to Nagi.

Nagi, who had heard none of this narration, stared in surprise as Kuga Saeko limped into sight. Limping is too soft a term. She was dragging one leg behind her like a useless appendage, and smoke was still lightly rising from her upper chest area where she'd been shot. Her glasses were shattered, and she stared at Nagi with fury. "Get out of my way," she snapped.

"Her?" Nagi yelled. "You're using her? What - why - how?"

What a good question. Let me explain it for you.

Saeko kept limping forward, eyes no longer quite sane. But truthfully, it had been a long time since she'd been sane. I should stress that I had no part in her psychological downfall, though her current course of action was one that I suggested. The roots of her malaise go back nearly thirty years, to her childhood.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me. Look, seriously, I don't know what you think you're going to accomplish here," Nagi said to Saeko, slowly walking forward to intercept her. "But someone as badly hurt as you can't possibly hope to change the -"

"SHUT UP!" Saeko shrieked, and actually took a swing at him. Nagi easily backstepped out of the way, but he was genuinely startled by how much force he could detect behind the blow. Being more or less indifferent to human accomplishment, he hadn't realized how much progress there'd been in the field of bionics. Six million dollars could do a lot more these days than they could a few decades ago.

Speaking of a few decades ago, that was when Kuga Saeko, a bright young girl, learned about the Carnival from records kept by her father, who had inherited the custodianship of a shrine in Sakaimachi from his wife's family. And it was also at this time that she learned that she herself might well be one of the princesses to become involved in this sacred rite. Yes, just like both of her daughters, she bore the mark on her body, the genetic potential she passed on to her children expressing itself in her own flesh as well.

Unfortunately, the idea did not fill her with any particular joy. Quite the contrary; in fact, she regarded the idea with outright loathing. Born into an era in which women were enjoying greater freedom than they had, she was determined to make her own life, without falling into someone else's sway. (I also suspect that she may have been more honest with herself about her desires than either
Midori and Natsuki, and that a complete lack of interest in becoming the bride to any man, even a Prince, played a role.)

And so she set out to escape that role through what she believed would be the most direct route possible. The legend spoke of maidens? Very well, she would stop being a maiden, and so disqualify herself. Before you ask, no, this would never have worked. Maiden in this case simply meant a girl, rather than requiring any state of virginity, as Midori and Mai's cases have clearly shown. But she didn't know that.

As I was explaining all this, both to you and to Nagi, he had been dodging about, trying to prevent Saeko's implacable march towards the pillars. Clearly starting to become a bit frustrated, he finally said, "Okay, enough. You've succeeding in annoying me! Now it's my turn and -" 

He ducked under a punch, and rolled up to blow dust into Saeko's face. Unfortunately, for Nagi, he failed to take into consideration that Saeko, who had worked for the Searrs Foundation, might have had the opportunity to study the remains of the last bunch of soldiers whom he petrified using this technique, and develop a countermeasure which she made sure to have available when she came here.

"Oh, come on!" Nagi protested, whether at my revelation of this fact or at his own observation that it was accurate, for Saeko was clearly not turning to stone. This left him wide open for her to grab him in a headlock and start twisting. One of his very few weaknesses was that he had the same requirement to breathe as anyone else, and he hadn't had a chance to take a deep breath. Deprived of air, it didn't take him long to be rendered unconscious.

Since I didn't particularly want to see Nagi killed here - he is every bit as much of a pawn in the game as anyone else, whatever he thinks - I applied a delicate touch to Saeko's mind. *That one,* I said to her, distracting her from her temporary goal of smothering him to death, as her eyes picked out one pillar in particular. *That one.* 

Saeko dropped Nagi's body and began limping in that one's direction.

As she did so, I resumed my explanation. Not only did her seduction - really more of a molestation - of her younger brother fail to have the results she wanted, it had other consequences as well. There was the shame and humiliation of her parents discovery, and the way that she was shipped over to a shrine run by a cousin for the duration of her pregnancy. There was the unpleasantness of actually being pregnant and not being permitted to take the easy way out of it. All these factors warped her personality in frankly unpleasant ways.

Nor was she the only one for whom there were consequences of this. The eldest son of her host family family, Higurashi Okita, would be inspired by Saeko to impregnate his own sister, Higurashi Mayu. She ran away from home before her parents found out, abandoned her child to a Christian church - where she would be given the name Yukariko - and then went on to eventually become a rich man's courtesan and the mother of his daughter, Shizuru. Meanwhile, Okita, having gotten into the habit of sexual predation, eventually ended up molesting his daughter, Akane.

Our lives are as rain drops falling in a river, each making a ripple that intersects many others. Or perhaps tear drops is a better metaphor.

Saeko grew. I will not say that she grew up, for in a very profound way she remained the young woman she was when she gave birth to Midori, driven solely by her sense that a profound injustice had been done to her and a complete lack of empathy for the suffering of anyone else. Such traits are perhaps more common than they should be. Eventually, she devised a plan that she was sure would prevent her from being used for the Carnival that she knew was coming, willingly submitting herself to what she had been forced to endure before. And so Natsuki was born.
This plan didn't work for her either. Natsuki had the birthmark, but it was in a different place than her mother's. And even worse, it occurred to Saeko that if the Carnival should happen within less than a decade, it was entirely possible (in her view) that she would be her second daughter's most important person. If she did not want to be the Prince's bride, then she had even less interest in dying if her child proved incompetent. So she began to tinker with Natsuki's biology.

Whatever else she might have been, she was a brilliant and resourceful woman. She solved the "problem" that ... well, this is perhaps too complicated to go into, and you have already seen the results. So had she. And those results were what was driving her forward, ever forward, towards one of the pillars. She believed that pillar contained Natsuki's life force.

Natsuki, you may remember, shot her. Shot her own mother. In cold blood. It shouldn't matter what she did to the girl when she was small. A child was supposed to love her mother unconditionally. Saeko certainly loved her own mother that way, though admittedly she hadn't bothered to attend the old bitch's funeral or pay her respects. But she would certainly never have thought of shooting her, unless in self-defense or if she knew too much. Certainly never for someone else's sake!

She had clearly raised her third daughter better than that. Admittedly, she hadn't spent too much time with Alyssa, since she didn't want to encourage her to have too strong a bond. Really, that should have made Alyssa's father suspicious. But the stupid fool had actually thought that she had employed all of her research on solving the problem of the Valkyrie Bonding to Alyssa's creation, and so had been far more constant in the little girl's life - and suffered the consequences when she was, predictably, defeated.

She had kept Natsuki's precious secret for herself. And how had she been rewarded? Her life was pain!

But now, she thought, now it would be made right. She was dying, and nothing could stop that. The damage to her organic systems was too great for her cybernetics to shore up. So the only thing that remained to her was revenge.

Tenderly, almost, she wrapped her arms around the pillar. "I hate you," she said, smiling gently. "I hate you I hate you I hate you." And with a silent act of will, she detonated the self-destruction system that the Searrs Foundation had installed in her from the first, which she had managed to master but had never been able to remove.

She died as she lived, filled with hatred and anger ... and from her perspective, completely pointlessly. For she had been misinformed as to what would occur if she shattered the crystal spire she targeted. In fact, she had been misinformed as to which of the spires contained Natsuki's life force. The shattering of the one that she blew up with the explosion that killed herself began a chain reaction that shattered them all ... freeing the lives within them to reconstitute themselves elsewhere.

A pawn can be promoted. But not all of them are, nor should be. Perhaps I should feel worse about telling lies to Kuga Saeko ... but I don't.

It's important to understand that what I just described took almost as long to happen as it took to tell. While Saeko was limping her way across the rock chamber, far below the surface, other things were happening on that surface.

"So now what?" Mai asked a moment after she'd surrendered.

Steadying himself with one hand on Mikoto's shoulder, the Prince held up another - noting, just as Mai did, that it was shaking just a bit - and flicked his fingers at the field of debris cast up by
Mikoto's lethal attack on Miyu. There was a sort of semi-visible pulse in the air, and a section of the debris collapsed into dust, creating a pathway leading straight from where Mai was standing to where the two of them were.

"Now," he said in a wheezy sort of voice, before dissolving into coughing. "Gheh. Now, I would very much appreciate it if you would come to us, join us, so that I can show you our home. You've already seen the exterior, but it's the interior that's truly stunning. You'll love it, really."

"... yeah, sure," Mai muttered, but nonetheless walked carefully down the pathway towards Mikoto. She was fairly sure she - As she was thinking that, she realized that she still had no word for what Mikoto was to her. But she was fairly sure that Mikoto wasn't under mind control right at the moment. The tiny, nervous little smile on her face told her that. Surely the smile that was saying 'I want to be really happy right now, but I don't know if I should be', couldn't be a product of someone else's influence.

Surely not.

And then, just as she stepped clear of the debris, Mikoto decided to settle the question herself, darting forward to hug Mai around the mid-section in a way that, a few months ago, would probably have knocked her off of her feet (and into the still dangerous-looking shards, she noted uneasily.) "Mai! Maimaimai!" Mikoto shrieked. Tears were dripping from the younger girl's eyes as she nuzzled her face into Mai's chest.

Mai realized that she was smiling, despite everything. Of course, she was just honest enough to admit that a good part of what was making her smile was the sight of the Prince, deprived of Mikoto's support, stumbling in the moment after Mikoto darted forward. He recovered his poise quickly enough, but the genuinely disconcerted look on the face of this 'master of the universe' was priceless.

"I'm sorry, Mai," Mikoto said softly, pulling her attention back to where it belonged. "I'm sorry."

Mai's smile faded. "I'm sorry, too," she said. Was it an apology for what she'd done after Mikoto had done what she'd done? Was it simply an expression of shared grief? Not even Mai was sure. But that was what you said when someone said that to you. Especially when it happened to be true.

She drew a deep breath, shifted Mikoto slightly so that the girl was clinging to her side, and started walking towards the Prince, who'd stepped forward to pick something up from the debris. "Okay, then. Let's go see the dreamhouse." She paused beside him, waiting for him to get the message.

He did, rather quickly. Resting an arm on her shoulders, he was able to walk beside the two of them. "It's a truly wonderful place, Mai. I'm sure you'll love it. I know Mikoto does, even if she complains about Fumi's cooking."

"Fumi's cooking sucks," Mikoto agreed vehemently. "Mai's is much better."

"Well, maybe Mai can teach her a thing or two," the Prince said amiably.

"Fumi's there?" Mai asked once she felt able to get a word in edgewise.

"Of course!" the Prince replied, looking surprised. "Surely you didn't think that I'd abandon Reito's dear aunt like that. He forgave her, you know."

"Good for him," Mai said, noting that he was basically abandoning the whole 'partnership' pretense.

"The Crystal Shrine?" Mai said a few minutes later, as she stood outside the structure, which
managed to gleam despite how cloudy the day was turning out to be. "This is your house?"

"Technically, it's just the front door," the Prince said with modesty that seemed wholly insincere. "I've co-opted a variety of pre-existing subterranean structures and made some trifling modifications for our comfort. Basically, we can enter and exit through the cenote at the shrine's center."

"The cenote?" Mai repeated.

"Oh, Mai, please don't tell me that you're going to repeat things as I say them. That is so gauche!" he said, sounding more amused than apalled.

"It's gauche, Mai," Mikoto agreed.

"That's ... I was ..." Mai let out a long sigh. "Mikoto, do you even know what gauche means? No, never mind. I'm guessing, here, that the cenote is the hole in the ground? That's the entrance you're talking about?"

"Yes, a cenote is the technical term for a hole in the ground," the Prince elaborated

"And we use it to -"

"Mai," he said warningly.

"I'm just wondering how people who can't fly manage that?" she asked.

"Obviously, they are flown," the Prince said with the air of one who is explaining something that he thought should be readily apparent. "In any event, I don't believe that any of us will be leaving the citadel for some time. It would be for the best if we laid low and waited for the fuss this Carnival has caused to die down. That should only take a few years, I'd imagine. After that, we'll be able to come and go as we please."

Mai blinked. "And ... that's okay with you?"

"Of course," he said, sounding sincerely surprised. "Mai, if you're not going to reset the universe - again - then it's about time for the three of us to start living together in peace. At the moment, that is all that I could possibly want."

At the moment, Mai thought as she nodded. "Okay, so then I guess we can head in and -"

She saw him frown, then. "Something is amiss," he said. "Something -"

And then, just as Saeko wrapped her arms around the pillar, a suspiciously well-timed distraction occurred, as Souzouteki's foot shifted on the pavement in a nearby alley. The three scouts sent out from the resistance headquarters had been interrupted in their return to base by the sight of the other trio approaching the Crystal Shrine. They had paused to see if any intelligence about the enemy could be gleaned from this moment, but had somewhat carelessly neglected to take total operational security precautions.

Chizuno let out a long sigh. "Nice going, Denai-kun," he said.

"It's not my fault!" insisted the man whose fault it was.

"I am amazed," the Prince said, his voice finally starting to regain a bit of the energy he'd had before pulling the Star closer to Earth. "I told your masters there would be consequences for remaining here, and yet you -" Whatever else he might have said went unsaid. In the instant Saeko detonated, the
Prince let out a shriek of agony.

"Ainue!" Mikoto cried, seeing her brother in pain. "What did those awful people do to you!" And her sword was out and she was charging.

"That was a question! Questions should be made as queries, not as exclamations!" Masuto said, leaping back as far as he could.

Kaede yelped, fumbling for the metal staff hanging at his waist. The heavy tube of metal the length of his forearm snapped to its full length at the touch of a button as he brought his shadows up, wrapping himself in a bubble in very basic, very effective and very cowardly defense. Masuto had already slapped on his mask, breaking into maniacal laughter as he tried to ward the girl off with a comically oversized mallet. Souzou-teki, with less action sequences under his belt and vastly more selfishness, had already turned around and run like hell.

Kaede snapped shadows forward, trying to snare the girl's but somehow the girl's sword cleaved through them, shattering the constructs after a few hits. Damn it, stupid magic swords! he thought as it broke through his protective bubble. If I could just use my Artifact...

Suddenly she was right in front of him, and he no longer had time to complain. He snapped up his staff to block her first swordswing. Miraculously, it held (perhaps because it had actual mass), though his amateurish grip put him in danger of losing fingers. She was screaming about her "Aniue", striking like a maniac but with disturbingly more technique, nightmarishly reminding him of the time he'd agreed to help Tsukiyomi test her new corpse puppet, that girl whose body she'd stolen from the morgue last year.

Oh, look, Masuto was down, collapsed on the ground. Kaede wasn't worried, mainly because he was a self-absorbed sociopath. Also, for some statistically insane reason, Masuto always survived whenever he wore the mask, as if he were somehow immune to death itself. Kaede had more pressing concerns. He tried to switch to the offensive, sending spiky tentacles snapping forward to impale the girl, since he could obviously invoke the self-defense clause now but she dodged effortlessly, and -

Pain and numbness exploded below his left thigh, echoed shortly by a second burst from just above his right knee. It hurt badly enough that he would probably have fallen back anyway, even if he hadn't literally lost his footing, Kaede noted as he dazedly saw his right leg somehow standing up before him as he lay helplessly on the ground in front of a crazy and armed girl. He could feel blood streaming out of him, and knew that even if she didn't run him through, his remaining life was probably going to be measured in seconds.

"Mikoto! Don't!" cried a voice from out of his line of sight.

"They hurt Aniue!" the cute crazy girl shrieked in response, but didn't stab.

Well, his life might last a bit longer after all, especially if he ... oh, yeah. The bleeding. "Densa sanguis vulneram," he murmured, with what felt like the last of his strength, but, since he retained consciousness, probably wasn't. The shadows wrapped around the stumps of his lower limbs, forming a tourniquet of sorts.

"It wasn't them! It was - just don't kill anyone!"

"Why noooooot?" the girl whined, but still refrained from stabbing.

Ah, that was sweet of the other girl. It would have been really cool if, you know, she'd actually done
something to prevent him from being maimed like this, but - Senou tried briefly to figure out what he should think after that, but his imagination failed him. Really, those clauses more or less stood on their own.

The whines from the girl were abruptly cut off by a different sort of whines from above. Kaede was actually startled to see Souzouteki leaping from the building nearby, drifting down via a feather fall charm as he snapped off shots from his finger the way the late Katagiri-sensei had done. His accuracy wasn't all that impressive, and neither was his power, but it was surprisingly brave, considering what a coward Souzouteki was.

The girl with the sword snarled as she blocked one of the bolts with her black blade, but before she could do anything more substantial, the other girl - who was sort of scary herself - barged forward and pulled her back. "Come on, we don't want to fight these people!" she yelled.

"MAI, STOP SAYING CRAZY THINGS!"

"And your brother's getting away!"

"Let's go!" the smaller girl cried as she took the lead.

"... you came back?" Kaede asked as Souzouteki landed not far away. "Howcum?"

"Because scary as those crazy bitches are, Kageyama would be scarier if I came back without oh holy shit your legs!"

"Uh-huh. You happen to know how to do a tourniquet? 'Cause I think I'm about to pass outuuuuuuu ..."

The life forces contained within the shattered pillars surged out, seeking to take form once again. And seeking also those to whom they had been bound by the red string of fate. A poetic metaphor, perhaps, but this time a true one. The love - the angry love, the forbidden love, the love that verges on madness - in the hearts of those called to serve as the princesses in this latest iteration of myth, was an actual force in the world.

And this time, it would not be denied.

It took form again in roughly the order it had been imprisoned. And so it was that, no more than half an hour after they had sublimed into green light, Shizuru and Natsuki's consciousesses abruptly returned to them as they were deposited in the ruins of the church once again, still embracing as they had been when they vanished. For a few seconds, neither moved.

"Shizuru?" Natsuki asked after those seconds elapsed.

"The afterlife is somewhat different from my expectations," the other girl said in a slightly dazed voice. "What just happened?"

"I ... have no idea," Natsuki admitted. "I think there must have been some sort of miracle."

Shizuru pulled back enough to be able to stare at Natsuki, incredulously. "What in the world would make us deserving of a miracle?"

All that Natsuki could do was shrug as she started to stand up and pull Shizuru to her feet as well. "Maybe if we deserved it, it wouldn't be a miracle."
"... that is a warped philosophy."

Elsewhere, atop the roof of a building rather resembling a haunted house, Yukino stared in helpless horror at the suddenly immense 'star'. At this distance, it actually looked more like a second, much dimmer sun. And worst of all, enough time had passed for her to realize that it was drawing even closer to the Earth, as it grew larger and larger.

Kageyama and Yuna had descended, leaving her alone with her thoughts, which were neither cheerful nor hopeful. What was the point of this? Of any of this? Why was I given these powers, if I was only going to be able to use them to witness the end of the world, and not be able to do anything to prevent it? Why me? Why didn't it come to Haruka, she would have -

"Haruka," she moaned.

And then there was a strange green glow in the air in front of her, one that she recognized. Before Yukino could even begin to react, though, there she was, strong and brave and beautiful and a little bit pushy and standing slightly over the edge of the building and -

"Agh! Haruka!" Yukino shrieked as the dazed-looking girl began to tilt backwards as though to fall.

Haruka, hearing the familiar voice, blinked rapidly and realized the danger she was in, promptly windmilling her arms as though to push herself to a more stable position. In anyone else, that probably wouldn't have worked. But this was Suzushiro Haruka, and whatever else she might be, she was her own master. She stumbled forward, muttering, "What? What in the world happened? I was -"

"Haruka!" Yukino cried again as she threw herself at Haruka, almost rendering the other girl's efforts to keep her footing pointless.

"Yukino!" Haruka responded. "Where's -"

Both because she didn't want to hear a certain name, and because she wasn't going to let this second chance go to waste, Yukino silenced her by pressing their lips together.

Haruka blinked. Repeatedly. And then, far more gently than most people would have expected, she pushed Yukino. "Yukino! This is maddeningly inapprovable. School regulations specifically prohibit such -"

"School's shut down," Yukino said.

"It is?" Haruka asked.

Yukino nodded rapidly.

"... oh. Well. Um. I suppose, then, under the circumstances, that - no, wait it's still -"

Yukino didn't let her finish that sentence either.

Just as Shizuru uttered her criticism of Natsuki's attempt at philosophy, they were both distracted by the sudden appearance of a gigantic chess piece not far from where they were standing. Neither of them had ever seen this particular Child before now, so it was understandable that they both reacted with a gasped "Orphan!"
Before they could further react, the chess piece bent its horse head down towards the ground. With a burst of light, two human forms appeared before it - a man that neither girl recognized, and Sister Yukariko. They were standing there, simply staring at each other.

Then, quite abruptly, the Sister slapped him across the face, turning his head with the force of the blow.

The man stood there without turning back, his cheek reddened. "I suppose that I deserve that," he said after a moment.

"We will not," said the Sister, her voice thick with fury, "at this time, go into what you do or do not deserve, Ishigami-san." Each word articulated precisely.

No, not every return will be a happy one. Not at all. And yet some will be much happier than others.

Nao hadn't cried. She'd struggled to hold in the grief after she'd finally gotten away from Mai's worthless solicitude. And to her own mild dismay, she'd found that it was easy, and that, after all, she'd meant what she'd said about deserving this pain. Or perhaps she'd just practiced at ignoring it for so long that her heart had grown as sere as a desert. Deserve, dessert, desert. Heh. Heh heh heh. English lessons were good for something after all.

She'd made her way to a park bench on the day of the evacuation, and spent the night there. It was unpleasant and uncomfortable, but she found it difficult to care about either thing. And today, as she'd sat there, hungry and tired, she'd seen the red star grow until it was almost a sun. What an interesting phenomenon that was. She wondered if it portended the end of the world.

She found herself hoping that it did.

But as she was thinking such cheerful thoughts, the same green light that she'd seen Yata-Garasu dissolving into glowed in front of her. When Nao could see clearly, she realized there was a woman's body slumped on the ground in front of the bench where she was sitting. All that she could see in the way of distinguishing features was a shock of reddish hair, much like her own even without the henna treatments that she gave it. Hair that she would have known anywhere.

"Mom?" she whispered, not believing it.

And then the woman rolled over, from her side onto her back, and Nao could see her face, and her eyes, which were opening and gazing up at the sky.

"Mom," she said.

Her mother turned to look at her, blinking in confusion. For a terrible second, Nao thought she might not know who she was.

"Nao?" she asked. "... when did you get so big?"

Nao hadn't cried.

Until right then.

Lest you imagine that I gave Nao back her mother out of altruism, I will now disabuse you of that notion. The bond between Parent (the simplest and perhaps most accurate translation for the true name of those called 'HiME') and Child is sustained by the bond between that Parent and their most important person. It would make very little sense for me to restore Nao's powers only for them to
flicker out immediately after her mother died for lack of medical care. Simple pragmatism.

There is no justice to be found in this story. There is little if any to be found in this world.

Munakata Shiho lay in the same bedroom where she'd slept as a child, flat on her back and staring unblinking up at the ceiling with her one remaining eye, dreaming of blood and vengeance and the ruin of the world which had taken so much away from her. The dressing on her wound was starting to irritate her even further, and she knew perfectly well that her father, in charge of the medication she'd been prescribed, would not give her any more painkillers just yet. He was making it very hard for her to remember that she loved him, which was the only thing that would save him when -

The reflection of the green light in her window was what she saw first, since the light itself was coming from her blind side. When she saw it, she immediately rolled over to see what could be causing it ... and gasped as she saw that it was a large, humanoid form taking shape on the floor of her bedroom.

A large, familiar humanoid form.

"Oniiiii-" Shiho began to shriek.

And then it was gone.

"No!" she protested.

I informed her, then, that Yuuichi was needed somewhere else at the moment.

"Who said that?" Shiho demanded, her head darting from side to side. If her hair had still been tied up in her four tentacles, they might have been whipping around; but her hair was presently unbound.

I explained who I was. (Admittedly, I allowed her to believe that I was the Mashiro she'd known before all of this.) I further explained that I was willing to give her back the power she'd lost, among other things, but that I would need some assurances first. (This was a lie; the power was hers, as long as her Child and her partner were both intact, and though I could suppress it, I wasn't doing so.)

"Please!" Shiho said, eye gleaming. "I'll do anything! Anything!" She was perfectly willing to make promises that she had no intention of keeping.

There was a knock on the door. "Shiho-chan?" a tremulous male voice asked. "Is anything wrong?"

Fortunately, her father was far too sensitive to simply barge in on his daughter's private room. He was perhaps too sensitive for his own good.

Be that as it may, I considered telling her that I could read her mind as easily as someone else is reading these words on a computer screen, but instead I told her that I didn't need her to do anything, but rather to refrain from doing something. Specifically, I required that she refrain from attacking the other HiME, and in fact cooperate with them when I explained their mission to them. She had done so before, after all, to great effect.

Shiho sat on her bed, ignoring the sounds of her father knocking on the door and the muffled sounds of his pleading for her to answer, as paranoia and opportunism warred in her heart. As ever, opportunism won. "I'll do it," she said.

I told her that I would be watching her. (Again, a lie. I was going to be far too busy with other matters.) And that the power was hers once more. And then, in one of the most conscienceless acts I have ever committed, I reached out and caressed the right side of her face with a tendril of magic.
The flute was in her hands a second later, and the dressings on her face seemed to slide off as she opened both of her eyes and brought the flute to her lips.

Yata-Garasu promptly materialized beneath her, shattering the walls of her bedroom simply by spreading his wing and extending his beak. And then he let out a scream of release which knocked down most of the rest of their house, before he took wing, Shiho's mad laughter lingering as the two of them leapt up into the sky.

Shiho's father, a good and gentle man who had cared for his wife's only child without ever knowing or caring that she was not his own, died of injuries sustained in the explosion of his home. And his death was neither quick, nor painless, but lingering and agonizing ... and perhaps worst of all, he died without ever knowing why he was dying, without any understanding of what had killed him, and in terrible fear for the life of his daughter.

To heal one who deserved her injury; can there be a more despicable thing?

In an abandoned house just outside Mahora's city limits, the elder of a certain ninja clan - whose identity will not be mentioned here, since it will soon lose any pertinence to this tale - was walking up the stairs with a heavy heart and a meat cleaver in one hand.

He wasn't particularly sad about what he was about to do to his youngest grandchild. Failure was the only sin that truly existed in the world of the shinobi, Dramatic failure, such as that suffered by the girl who thought she was a boy, could normally be atoned for in only one way. The girl was actually lucky that her genes were considered valuable property by someone, even if it was a thoroughly Westernized group, who seemed more into the romance of the job instead of its hard practicalities. (They actually wore black pyjamas! In this day and age!)

But disjoining a body - particularly if the subject of disjunction was supposed to be kept alive - was hard work, something that he thought ought to be passed off to those better capable of doing such physical labor. But since it wasn't technically a mission, but rather a matter of maintaining the honor of the clan, the boys had all refused to do it, leaving it entirely up to him. Really, didn't anyone have the nerve to do what must be done anymore?

Well, all right, he suspected that a few of them might have the nerve, but refuse as a way of punishing him for tolerating the girl's eccentricities as he had. The boys he'd killed for trying to rape her had had friends, after all. He suspected that he was going to have to keep an eye on them even after this, if he wanted his alliance with those twits in New Jersey to keep up their end of the deal. There was going to be an interval after the job was done but before they shipped her off, and anything might -

It came to him, then, that he was at the top of the stairs, and had been for quite some time. Ah, this kept happening and happening. He was getting old, he kept getting lost in his thoughts. Lately, he had been considering faking his death and retiring to some monastery, somewhere. He knew perfectly well that if he didn't take that step, one of those ambitious young bastards would take it for him - albeit with the 'faking' applied to a different phase of the plan.

Hell if he'd let that happen.

Well, no point in putting it off. He pushed the door to the girl's cell open, and was pleased to see that she seemed to have developed a certain stoic acceptance of the hand she'd been dealt. (Finally!) That was his takeaway from the fact that she was still lying on the floor under a blanket, not setting up some sort of ambush. At this distance, he could tell that there was an actual body under that blanket, and since there was no way in or out of this room except through this doorway, it had to be her.
"Okay," he said. "Let's do this the easy way, shall we?"

The figure under the blanket didn't move.

"All right. We'll do it the hard way, then." And with that, he walked into the room and yanked the blanket off -

- of a young man in a schoolboy's uniform, crouching there with a rather nervous expression on his face.

"Who the jumping fishhooks are you?" he asked, somewhat stupidly.

Despite his moderate terror at the situation, Takumi actually smiled. "I'm your grandson's boyfriend." *Damn, that felt good to say.*

The elder started to snarl, "Wh-" It was the beginning of the question "which one", but since the answer should really have been obvious, nothing of value was lost when Akira dropped down from his perch above the doorway and wrapped his garotte around the old man's windpipe. He put up considerably more of a struggle than the last few people Akira had strangled, but it all ended the same way anyway.

"All right," Akira said a few minutes later, when he let the blue-faced corpse of his grandfather drop. "There are about a dozen more downstairs. With Gennai, I can probably handle ten of them. Can you account for the rest?"

"Of course not," Takumi answered cheerfully.

"Well, then, we are fucked."

"Perhaps not," said a familiar female voice from the doorway. Nagase Kaede was standing there with a faint smile on her face and a broad brimmed hat on her head. "This is not the rescue one was sent to accomplish, but it will do in a pinch ..."

"Is she a friend of yours?" Takumi asked Akira as the woman he'd never seen before led the two of them down the stairs.

"Not exactly," Akira said, keeping a steady gaze on Kaede's back. "Felicitations on your wedding, incidentally," he said in a flat, level tone.

"Thank you. One looks forward to introducing you to one's husband," Kaede answered.

"... if you're not friends, how do you -" Takumi started to ask.

"Nin nin," Kaede answered, as she reached the bottom of the staircase and half-turned to favor Akira with an amused smile.

"Ohhhh," Takumi said with a nod.

"It disturbs me how much you can grasp from two short syllables repeated twice," Akira groused.

The staircase, as was often the case in houses like this, led down into the home's kitchen, which was just off the family room. Akira was honestly not all that startled to see most of the men he'd been raised to view as his brothers scattered around the floor, looking quite seriously abused. The sole exception was his eldest surviving brother, who was still on his feet, after a fashion. If you could call being held up by a rather large, tanned, spiky-haired blond gentleman in a long grey coat over a blue
Said gentleman was standing in front of the room's couch, where another man, also in a blue jumpsuit, with the face of a poet and a pair of glasses on his face as he sipped delicately from a cup of tea.

"... that's her husband on the couch, right?" Takumi asked Akira, as quietly as possible. "Not the big guy?"

"Correct," said the man on the couch, turning to glance at them. "I see you've collected our charge, mother ... and a tag-along?" His eyebrow quirked up.

"Indeed, father," Kaede answered. "He will also be accompanying me back to Mahora, once you have finished your negotiations."

"Married a week, and they're acting like an old married couple," Akira muttered. "Unbelievable."

"Then I'll get right on that," the man on the couch said, affecting to have not heard what had been said in a much louder voice than Takumi's earlier observation. "Now, let us review the terms - we will be leaving with your youngest nephew -"

"She is not -" Akira's brother started to say.

"Goro, rip his arms off," the man on the couch interrupted the interruption.

"Yay!" said the blond man, grinning even wider.

"On reflection I seem to have made a serious faux pas and apologize for referring to my youngest nephew as 'she'," Akira's brother said very quickly.

"... can I still rip his arms off?" Goro asked, sounding a bit piteous.

"We will leave that to the Kaburagi, when they find out that the late elder was trying to sell them a granddaughter who was actually a grandson," his master said calmly. "I think that concludes our business here. Darling, are you still here?"

In fact Kaede had departed, taking Akira and Takumi with her. A few kilometres away, she was perched atop a gigantic toad with the two of them, musing, "I should probably be having hysterics, and yet I'm not. How strange life can be ..." as it hopped along the highway.

The Professor (she found herself still thinking of him like that, despite everything) still hadn't come back. Maybe the nearest convenience store had been closed - or looted - and he'd had to go further to find food. Or maybe something had happened to him. Wouldn't that be terrible, him coming all this way to save her life and then getting hurt himself?

Typical, but terrible.

Of course, terrible thoughts like that made Midori think of other terrible things, like getting up off the bed where she was lying and stumbling her way into the bathroom and finding her sleeping pills again. Or trying something simpler, like finding out if someone really could drown themselves in just a few inches of water. That would probably much less effort. But on the other hand, lying there until she starved to death would take even less!

And sure enough, she was starting to suffer the effects of hunger, judging from the green glowing
thing she was seeing in the middle of the room and ...

Green. Glowing?

And then, before she could fully process it, Yohko was standing there, looking around with a confused expression. It only took her a moment before she noticed Midori looking up at her with her jaw hanging somewhere around her breasts. "Midori?" Yohko asked. "What the hell just happened?"

Midori stared.

"The last thing I remember was being in my office, feeling pain that was about a six on the five point scale, and suddenly I'm here, and - shouldn't you be making witty remarks?"

Midori stared.

"Midori?" Yohko repeated the name, then waved a hand in front of her friend's face. "Hello? Are you in there?"

Quite suddenly, Midori's arm snaked up to grab ahold of the hand in front of her face, and pulled Yohko off her feet and onto her, then rolled them both so that she was lying on top of Yohko who was flat on her back on the bed. "I love you," Midori said right out loud, pinning Yohko's shoulders down with her hands.

"Huh?" Yohko said, quite reasonably.

"I love you! I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you!" Midori shrieked.

"... I have the feeling that you're trying to tell me something, but I'm not sure I understand what it is," Yohko said, with the appearance of great hesitation, and certainly not trying to suppress a smile.

"Nyaaaagh!" Midori elaborated.

"Well, I'm sorry, but what about your archaeology professor?" Yohko asked.

As if on cue, Seta walked in with a pair of shopping bags in hand, followed by another man in glasses with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. "You'll never guess who I ran into -" he started to say.

"FUCK my archaeology professor!" Midori responded, giving no sign of any awareness that there was anyone in the room besides the two of them.

"- we'll be just outside," Seta continued smoothly as he did an about face and closed the door again behind him. He sighed as he set down the bags. "That happens way too often to me," he confided to his companion.

"I know the feeling." agreed Takamichi.

Elsewhere, another reunion was proceeding much more quietly.

"I'm not dreaming again?" Akane asked.

"I don't think so," Kazuya answered as he held her tightly.

"Okay. But if you start to think it is, just don't let me ever wake up."
There’s no justice. But there is some romance.

Each lifeforce freed from the crystals and reformed into a living being was like a knife driven into him. (Except that having had knives driven into him in the past, he knew that didn’t hurt quite so much as this.) It had only been after four of them had fallen that he had been able to free as much of himself as he had been, and with their energies no longer holding the door open, it was incredibly difficult to maintain his mastery over Reito’s body.

For a few moments, as he teetered at the side of the cenote, having crawled there from where he’d collapsed, he actually considered surrender. There would be other opportunities in ages yet to come.

He felt a certain dull amazement at the fact that, in this moment of weakness, what prevented him from yielding to this impulse was the stubborn will to live of Kanzaki Reito, not his own. Reito guessed, correctly as it turned out, that the withdrawal of the Prince’s essence would mean his almost certain demise at this point. And he had too much to do, too much for which he felt he must atone, to allow himself the peace of death. So somehow, he held the Prince’s mind in the same grip that the Prince had formerly held his.

"Heh," he said aloud. "'I will not let thee go unless thou bless me', eh?"

So many millions of times, so many millions of lives he had touched. It was as he’d told Reito - the best lies having a fair amount of truth in them. He had been changed by them, even as he changed them. (For the worse, it could not be denied.) And though most of what he felt for the disgusting spawn of humanity was simple contempt, individuals among them never ceased to surprise him. It almost made him feel fond of them.

Almost.

"So be it," he said, forcing himself to straighten up. "All is not lost." After all, it occurred to him that he did have one last trump card, one that his true enemy had unwisely made even more powerful.

"Aniue!" a voice called from behind him.

He glanced back, seeing Mikoto and Mai behind her, at the door of the shrine. "Our sanctuary is no longer secure," he said. "Be wary when you follow me. Be that as it may, I have decided to show these mortals how the Obsidian Prince makes war."

"Wait, what-" Mai began to say.

Having said what he wanted to say, he stepped up onto the railing around the pit, and then out into the void. Unfortunately, his power was now so diminished that he could not fly, despite what he’d said earlier. But there was yet enough to slow his fall so that he landed safely in the cavern far below.

He paused, glaring furiously in the direction of the seal in which his true form was imprisoned, held there by the self-sacrifice of many hundreds of the victors of these Carnivals, locked in crystals much like his own, but smaller. He glared at one crystal in particular, the one at the very end, right before an empty space allotted for the victor of this particular conflict.

I smiled back, of course.

Unwilling, and perhaps unable, to rise to the bait, he marched off in the direction of certain cells he had installed in his home, alert for the possibility of attack by Fumi, who would doubtless have been freed of his control over her by now. (In fact, she had been. At the time of her sublimation, Mashiro had conveniently been carrying a device from her time which allowed her to interfere with his
hypnosis, and she employed it the moment that she was restored to life. However, it could do nothing to heal the injuries Fumi had sustained under his control, and so she had been quickly led away through one of the sanctuary's secret escape routes.)

The Prince was pleased to see that the door remained locked, and quickly opened it. He was rather less pleased by what he saw on the other side. His prisoner was not alone.

"Who are you?" the man in the business suit demanded in English. "What is this place?"

With difficulty, the Prince resisted his first impulse. His trump card was useless if this man died now. "I am the man you wanted your daughter to marry," he answered him in the same language, cursing Reito's accented delivery. Having said that, he returned to Japanese, as he turned to look at the person he'd actually come to see, sitting there on the cell's small bed in her hospital gown. He'd been so clever to take advantage of Reito's incapacitation to set up things so that he could take her into custody when she'd gotten out of the hospital.

"Hello, Alyssa-chan," he said, smiling. "There's something you're going to do for me."

Alyssa, wide-eyed, stared up at him. "What, what do you want?" she asked nervously. The sudden appearance of her father in this cell with her had disconcerted her beyond the fact that she was being kept in a cell and Miyu was nowhere to be seen. And now this person, who claimed to be the Obsidian Prince of all things, was gazing down at her with a disturbing and predatory gleam in his eyes.

"Basically, there are some very bad people who are causing me all sorts of problems," he said smoothly. "I'd like you to distract them for me while I take some other steps to overcome obstacles besetting me.

Alyssa straightened a bit, regaining some of her usual haughty demeanor. "And why should I do this for you?"

His smile didn't alter a bit. "Ah, bargaining. My options here are a bit limited, I'll admit. I can't really effectively threaten you, because I need you to do these things for me." He glanced towards Alyssa's father. "And I can't effectively threaten him, because you become useless for my purposes if he shuffles off this mortal coil. So we are left with only one person that I can threaten. Well, simulacrum of a person, at least."

He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out what looked like a harmonica with copper zipper teeth extending from either side, holding it under Alyssa's nose.

Alyssa stared at it. Then him. Then it again. "Um ... I think you maybe need to make things a bit clearer. I'm only six, you know."

"This is the Multiple Intelligential Yggdrasil Unit Backup Memory. Miyu's BM, as it were." He chuckled at the witticism as Alyssa's jaw dropped. "It's all that's left of her. The rest of her body, all of my horses and all of my men couldn't put back together again. And if someone like me were to snap it in two -" he said, holding it between two fingers of each hand and acted as though he were about to suit the actions to his words.

"NO!" Alyssa shrieked, all poise gone. "Don't! Don't hurt Miyu!"

"Then do as I wish or you know what I'll do," he said.

"I'll do whatever you want. B-but you haven't said what that is -"
"Orphans. Lots of orphans. Summon them up and have them attack everything on the surface," he said.

Alyssa swallowed. "How many is lots?" she asked.

His smile went faintly manic. "Had I my druthers I would say at least one for every man, woman and child on Earth," the Prince said between clenched teeth.

"Excuse me -" said Searrs, behind him.

"Shut up, capitalist."

"I can't do that!" Alyssa protested. "That's too much, I've never -"

"I know, I know," he said, in a mockery of a soothing tone. "I'll settle for a few thousand."

"Even that -!"

"I will help you," he said, putting a hand on her head and letting just a bit of the precious power he had regained since coming down here flow into her.

She started screaming immediately.

But the Orphans began to form, all around them. In the thousands. And Rudolf Searrs, who had not lost a wink of sleep the night he ordered his first murder, looked on with an apalled expression as the fruits of his labors took shape around him.

Mikoto was very quiet as Mai flew the two of them down the shaft, which of course put Mai on edge. Usually, her friend would be complaining about how it hurt to hold or be held by Mai when her force field was up, which it of course was whenever she flew. But not this time, and Mai found that this made her more nervous than carrying a complaining and resisting Mikoto would have done.

Eventually, the shaft opened up into a large chamber. "So this is it, huh?" Mai asked as she took a look around the dimly lit region hewed out of the rock. "This is where you've been living this last little while. It's ... yeah, I have no idea what to say about your cave, sorry." She supposed that she could compliment the way that the holes in the cave floor complimented it, but the way that they kept dropping out of sight made her very uncomfortable.

"It's not so bad," Mikoto finally spoke up. She gestured vaguely towards what Mai had initially took for a piece of art. "Those stairs go up to the place where we seep. It's very cosy. And there's a kitchen. I guess there's a kitchen. I've never actually seen it. But the crappy maid makes crappy food, so there'd have to be a kitchen, right?"

"That would probably follow," Mai agreed as she finally brought them both down to land on one of the narrow bridges that led between the islands of level ground that made up the cavern. Having done so, she decided to address the elephant in the room. Or, rather, the gigantic glowing red ball in the room. "And ... what's that?" she asked, pointing at it.

"That's aniue," Mikoto answered simply.

"The Obsidian Prince," Mai murmured, looking back at it, and at the rows of much smaller crystals surrounding the big one. Inevitably, her eyes came across the last one in the line, and she saw me, and I saw her.
Mai gaped for a moment. "Mashiro-san?" she asked.

No, I really don't know how she recognized me. As far as I could recall, she'd never seen me in my true, adult form. Come to that, she'd never seen me at all, in this iteration of events. Yet somehow she recognized me as the person whom the Mashiro she'd know was impersonating. Perhaps it was bleedthrough from one of the millions of iterations I couldn't recall all that well. They'd all blended together, after a time.

But she saw me, and I saw her, and she understood what she was seeing when she saw the empty space beside me.

"That's ... where one of us is supposed to go," Mai murmured. "If I try and stop him -"

"Why would you do something like that?" Mikoto asked, confused.

And then thousands of Orphans, of all the various kinds they'd seen and battled in the months since Mai came to the academy, along with many new ones she'd never glimpsed before this moment, surged into being all around them, remaining there for only a few moments before they began to fly up and out of the shaft in the ceiling.

"How's that for a reason?" Mai asked, raising her voice to be heard over the din of the Orphans' flight.

"They attacked him!" Mikoto protested. "Aniue is just fighting back -"

"Mikoto - I can't let him do these things!"

"Why not?!" Mikoto cried out, looking incredibly frustrated. "Aniue and Mai can be happy together if you'll just let me be the sacrifice!"

"What do you mean?" Mai asked, going from horror to bewilderment far too quickly to understand it.

"I kill Kage-Tsuchi," Mikoto explained, gesturing with her great black sword. "I win. I go in the seal. I wish for Aniue to be restored. He is. Mai and Aniue live happy together forever. Why are you trying to fight against this happy ending?"

"And what happens to the rest of the world, Mikoto?" Mai asked. "Do the two of us stand there in the ruins of everything we've ever known and think how great things are now?"

"Who cares about the world?!" Mikoto sobbed. "I care about Mai! I care about Aniue!"

"... I do," Mai answered, knowing that it was a lie, and deciding to make it true somehow. "It took me a long while to learn my lesson, and I understand why you haven't yet ... and I'm sorry that no one, not even me, has tried to teach you this before now ... but there are more important things than just being happy that the people you love are happy. I have to stop him, Mikoto. This has to be the last time."

The cascade of Orphans surged up through the channel and into the shrine above it. Within only a few moments, there were too many for the building's walls and ceiling to contain. The crystal shrine exploded up and outward, the press of bodies sending the Orphans into the air above the seemingly defenseless academy.

But the seeming was different from the reality, and in fact, Mahora's defenders were ready.
Whatever else may be said about Souzouteki Denai - and much that is less than favorable can and should be said about him - he had been conscientious about reporting his situation back to his associates at the Mikado mansion. (Mostly because he was unwilling and perhaps even unable to transport his two companions, one seriously wounded and the other at least dazed, without assistance.) His communication had promptly gotten the remaining mages and ministra at the mansion in motion, and they charged out to rescue their fallen associates.

And their numbers were larger than they had been a few moments before.

"You're sure that this doesn't contradict any of the school rules?" Suzushiro Haruka asked dubiously as she watched Akashi-sensei draw the circle around the two of them.

"If it did, the majority of the magic-using teachers and students on campus would be breaking them," he answered in a way that actually didn't answer the question. "All done. Whenever you're ready."

Haruka was not nearly foolish enough to not realize the problems with that statement. "Hold on, I still have concerns about -"

Wrapping her arms around her, as though she would never let her go again, Yukino stopped Haruka's tongue with her own.

"Praetor Firmissimo," Haruka sounded out a few moments later, as she looked dubiously down at the card with an image of her, wielding a mace and wearing a set of unlikely-looking armor. "I'm not familiar with Greek, so I'm not entirely sure what that means."

"It's Latin. It means, basically -" Akashi-sensei started to explain.

"President Badass," Yuna supplied as she poked her head in. "Can we please get going?"

Haruka abruptly beamed. "I like this card!" she cooed.

"Forward, Defenders of Mahora!" Haruka cried out as she charged, holding her mace before her, relishing the strength and speed of the pactio. "Let the evil-doers beware!"

"She's going to be insufferable after this, you know," Yamiko commented wryly as she followed closely in her wake.

"Eh, it's kind of cute," Yuna disagreed.

"You do realize that we're evil-doers, by most standards?"

Souzouteki hated himself for not breaking and running and abandoning Masuto, who was starting to come around, and Senou, who was somehow still clinging to a spider-thread of consciousness. After all, despite the prospect of what would happen to him if he somehow survived that treachery to be confronted by their psycho girlfriend being enough to put starch in his spine, there was that "somehow survived" aspect to be considered. And he knew perfectly well that the wave of Orphans whom he was presently failing to hold off with his ever-weakening blasts would treat his charges as nothing more than a speed bump if he did turn and flee, and that he'd be buying himself maybe a few moments of extra life by doing so.

So why did he stay?
Romantic nihilism, perhaps. He and Yuna were far more alike than either would ever have admitted, which might have been why each despised the reflection of themselves in each other.

Be that as it may, when at last he knew that he could shoot no more, he closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and began to quietly recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. The Pure Land was probably a myth, but it couldn't hurt. Not like what was going to happen to him next was going to hurt. He heard the howl of the creatures draw closer -

And then he heard metal crashing into yielding flesh. Eyes popping open, he saw a blonde-haired warrior maid swinging a heavy mace like nothing more than a baseball bat as she stood between him and harm. "The chivalry is here!" Haruka declaimed.

"Cavalry," he said dazedly.

"SAME THING!" she roared.

Denai decided not to argue the point as he turned to see that Akashi-sensei was applying curative magics to the wounds on Chizuno, while Kageyama loaded Kaede's limp form onto - Denai blinked. What was that thing? Roughly cyllindrical and looking vaguely Ophan-like, but resembling what he'd seen of some prototype surveillance drones, it was hovering in mid-air and not particularly burdened by Senou, who had to outmass it a few times.

"Get him back there," Kageyama shouted into the thing, then came up to talk, much more quietly, into Senou's ear. "If you die, I'm summoning your ghost and binding it into my favorite dildo," she said, motivating him to live as no words of encouragement possibly could have. A shove on his back sent the drone, if that's what it was, flying the way that they'd come. She stood there, watching, until it moved out of sight, and perhaps a little bit longer.

"Eyes front," Yuna snapped at Denai.

"Up yours," he snapped right back. "You could've brought more reinforcements, y'know."

She grinned savagely. "We did, bunky. Look, up in the sky."

Involuntarily, he did so. Like angels on the wing, they were descending towards the mass of Orphans - the largest magical force Mahora had fielded in almost a year. At the point of the spear were three forms that he could make out clearly - a girl with white wings, another with a sword longer than she was tall, and a tiny boy between them. They smashed into the Orphans, and despite everything, the Orphans fell back.

"Big fat hairy deal," Denai muttered.

"Larger than it seems," Kageyama said as she finally stepped up, holding her cane before her. Just above its surface, a green bar of light was forming, with the phrase "99% complete" beneath it.

"The hell is that?" he asked.

"Analysis program," she answered. "I started it when those things started showing up. It's finally almost done. When it is -"

"100% Complete" glowed the phrase - as did her eyes. "So that's the pattern," she said.

Yuna blinked. "What? I thought there wasn't any pattern to how these things vulnerable areas moved around and -"
"If there seems to be no pattern, it is because it is all pattern," Yamiko answered. "Sensei!" she called out. "I need an all-call!"

"You've got it!" Akashi answered as Masuto got to his feet again.

"Okay, then," Kageyama murmured.

There are twenty-four named runes in the writing system called Futhark, and a twenty-fifth that is blank and nameless. What mundane scholars do not know is that the twenty-fifth rune is in fact a place-holder for the twenty-four invisible runes, whose names are painful for mortals to say. The sixteenth invisible rune could be roughly translated as "Teach".

Kageyama shouted its name at the top of her lungs.

_**On a high place, quite some distance away from Earth, a man with an eyepatch was seated and considering what his ravens were speaking into his ears. He abruptly jerked. "What in Bori's name are they doing down there?" he asked.**_

All at once, everyone on the battlefield could see just how and where to hit the Orphans in a way that would hurt. When the White Wing and the Shadow Wing struck next, the creatures died. Kageyama Yamiko, nearly collapsed where she'd been standing a few moments earlier, watched this in silent satisfaction.

"It's not the best ambulance service I could hope for," Mikado said over her shoulder to Yukino as she pulled Senou's limp form off of the seed-like structure and set him down on a gurney. The remote vanished almost as soon as she did. "But you're doing good work, Kikukawa-san!"

The girl, standing some distance away, surrounded by her displays but with her eyes on the sight of the battle going on in plain sight, gave no sign of having heard the doctor's encouragement. It was obvious that she wanted to be there, on the front lines, with her newly-minted Ministra, even though she had next to no -

Mikado was distracted from such concerns by a hand pulling on her lab coat's sleeve. She was a bit stunned that Senou was still conscious enough to do so, and then to mutter the single word, "Machine."

She guessed what he was trying to say. "That's a bad idea," she said quickly. "There's a good chance that we'll be able to re-attach your legs if you can just hold out for a little -"

Senou was shaking his head.

_Ah well._ she thought, as the concerned physician went away and was replaced by the curious scientist. There really was very little point in having the thing if she didn't use it, and this last time had been the first since she'd built the thing. "Okay," she said, heavily, shaking her head for the sake of getting her objection on record. Really, it should be fine. He had at least a 75% chance of coming through all right and -

"Hee hee hee, gonna be a cute dark-skinned loli ..." Senou gurgled.

Make that a 66% chance. And dropping. Oh well. "Kikukawa, if you could give me a hand in getting him down the stairs -"

"What?" asked Yukino.

"No, not you, sensei, someone - can't you hear that?"

Mikado listened carefully for a moment so as to be able to accurately report, "No, I can't hear whatever it is that you're hearing. Whatever it is, can it -"

Abruptly, the ground beneath Yukino's feet surged up with her still on it. It was, Mikado saw, almost like a larger version of one of the remote sensors, albeit with tentacles descending from what she took for the creature's head. And now it was flying on its own power, absent wings or any particular evidence of thrust or lift.

Sometimes, Mikado really didn't like magic very much.

"I have to go," Yukino called down to her. "This, over there, it's a distraction more than anything else. The real battle is somewhere else ... I have to go!"

And she went, soaring off into the sky. Now that she was looking in the right direction, Mikado could see a number of other forms taking flight and heading that way as well.

"... and now I've gone from having a piss-poor ambulance service to none at all," she grumbled. "What a lousy day."

Pleased with himself, although also feeling incredibly enervated after using up that reserve of vital energy to empower Alyssa's counterfeit Orphans, the Prince left her cell to wander back to the main chamber of the sanctuary, with vague notions of perhaps confronting the one whom he'd (correctly) deduced to be the source of his present difficulties. He was planning out a speech that began with the words, "Now, really, isn't this something of a childish display?"

All such ambitions vanished as he heard the sounds of battle from the hallway. His face fell. "For pity's sake," he muttered. "I left them alone for five minutes and this happens?" (The fact that it had been somewhat longer than that was lost on him.) Shaking his head, he went out to observe.

Sure enough, they they were, Mai and Mikoto, locked in battle with one another. Mai was in flight and purely on the defensive, while Mikoto was bounding around with her sword, launching blows that barely glanced off the force field around Mai. A part of him - Reito, mostly - felt genuine sorrow at the obvious pain and confusion that they were both clearly feeling. Mostly, though, what he felt was annoyance, and he raised a hand to reach out and separate them. 'Mashiro' was not the only one who needed a lecture, clearly, and he was very much in the mood to -

And then he felt something pushing up against his right shoulder.

"Y'know, I really don't think you oughta go and do that," a male voice said. "Those two, they've got some stuff that needs to get settled."

"Oh, you must be kidding me," the Prince murmured. "This again?" Slowly he turned.

Tate Yuuichi, dressed just as he had been when he disintegrated, was standing there with a bokken pressed to the Prince's shoulder. "And anyway, I'm still a bit cheesed off about the whole deal where I got sent to judge a baking contest between two lousy cooks," he added. "So I'm not much for the idea of letting you do much of anything, to tell the truth."

The Prince might have facepalmed, except that his hand was abruptly occupied by a wooden sword of his own. "Boy, you have no idea what you're dealing with. I am a god. You are a moderately
talented practitioner of a highly ceremonialized form of combat intended for exercise and entertainment. You are not even remotely in my class."

Tate cocked his head to the side. "Then this'll be a real short fight," he said, and assumed a stance. "Meanwhile, have at thee."

It occurred to Yukino, rather abruptly, as she found herself flying in formation among the other HiME, that knowing that her Diana could do this sort of thing would have been very useful in times past. Times not terribly far past, such as when she and Haruka had come under an unprovoked attack by the person who was up there at the head of this formation, perched on her damnable flying snake, looking, as always, like she didn't have a care in the world.

It would be so, so easy to jet up and settle matters. And she could see that she wasn't the only one who was thinking that, from the way that Nao, who was just ahead of her and also glaring up at Shizuru's back. She must have lost someone to her, too. She supposed that meant that Nao had just as much of a claim on Fujino's hide as Yukino herself did. Except that she wasn't really inclined to let anyone else have that claim.

Ah, now the brown-haired witch had deigned to notice the furious glares that they were directing at her back, and actually turned to look back at them. And now, surely, she'd offer some half-hearted apology for her misdeeds and -

"Suck it up," Shizuru said calmly.

Yukino felt her jaw drop, and saw Nao's do the same.

"Let me put it to you like this," the president continued, accent growing stronger. "You can either fight me now, when I have this big old living weapon that was more than enough to deal with each of you the last time, or you can wait until all this is over, when I presumably won't. Which one of those sounds like a smarter move to all y'all?"

The sheer damn nerve of her!

"Stop it!" Midori called out from her position on the opposite wing of the formation. "The closer we get to the HiME Star, the more and more powerful we're all going to become, but it's also going to be getting into our minds and twisting them to serve its purpose, not ours."

"You're talking about it as though it's alive," Yukariko called up at her. "A living star?"

"I think it's more of a living planet than anything else," Midori answered. "But the point is, we need to move past whatever angers we might have for one another and -"


"None of you should," Shiho said, from her position up above the others. "But the stupid bitch is right. I can feel it trying to make me angrier." A slow smile spread across her face. "I kinda like it. But that thing is my enemy right now, not all of you. So if I can wait, so call all of you."

The craziest one of us is making the most sense, thought Natsuki as she flew ahead in silence. We're doomed.

By now, they were close enough to be able to see the HiME Star in detail, and indeed, it was more of a solid mass than a roiling cosmic flame. But the solidity was an illusion, for they could all see it shifting as it drew closer and closer to Earth. This was it. This was the source of their power, and the
source of all they'd been made to endure as a result of it.

*For aeons, the HiME Star has made those like you dance to its tune*, Mashiro's voice had said into their minds when she asked them to do this. *Now the tables have turned.*

The counterattack began in earnest. Fire and ice and metal and acid rained down on the surface of the HiME star, scarring its surface as powers that could have leveled cities were unleashed against it. It responded by breeding forth monsters which resembled crude prototypes of the Orphans and even the Childs, but they were slow and comparatively weak. Still, quantity has a quality all its own, and at the rate of their creation, they would crush the HiME army long before they could shatter the planet beneath them.

They were giving all they had. It was not going to be enough.

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Tate Yuuichi had not bothered to correct the Obsidian Prince's misconceptions about him. He was not simply a "moderately talented" kendoka. He was a damn good one. Further, he was a damn good kendoka who now had moderately superhuman strength and speed thanks to something done to him by one of the girls who'd been there when he woke up after ... after whatever it was that had happened to him. He'd barely had time to adjust to the restoration of his consciousness before the maid was kissing him forcefully while the little girl with her drew a circle around the two of them and muttered something about incredibly primitive methods.

Plus, there was something else that the Prince didn't seem to realize. A part of himself had been hidden in Tate's right arm for who knew how long, and though most of that dark power had been withdrawn, parts of it were still there, and always would be. So the Prince was, in fighting Tate, also fighting himself. In more than just the usual Buddhist way.

Tate had any number of advantages in this fight.

But it had been obvious from the first exchange of blows that none of them were going to be enough. He'd been on the defensive from the start, not even able to hold his position and constantly falling back before the force of the Prince's strikes. His guard was able to protect him against maybe one in four or five of those blows, and his entire upper body was covered in bruises - some of which had progressed to open wounds after being struck repeatedly.

Anyone else would be dead by now. But Tate had the disturbing feeling, as he was pushed back towards one of the abysses that took up most of the floorspace in this cavern, that he was simply being toyed with by his opponent. Which was a little depressing.

But it didn't matter. All that he had to do was hold this guy in check long enough for one of the girls to do something, anything, to change the situation. He could manage that. It was the reason he'd been given a second chance, after all. He was going to manage it.

He just wasn't sure how ...

"Enough," the prince hissed. "Enough of this. You have lost. Accept defeat with half as much grace as I did, all those times before, and I swear that I will spare your life! I want you to witness my victory! You deserve it, my worthy opponent!"

"'swear that I will spare your life', huh?" Yuuichi said, unable to hide the pain that he felt from the hundreds of wounds he'd taken. "Man, you sure talk like someone who thinks he's the good guy, sometimes."

"I AM the good guy!" the prince insisted. "I am the one who is trying to build something new and
"No, you ain't," Yuuichi said, glancing towards the abyss just behind him, before facing his foe square on. "The hero's the guy who tries to save lives. You just want to take them."

"Can you blame me for that? Look at what they've made of their world, what I've seen them become over thousands of years, and you will have no doubts that -"

"That's your problem, man," he interrupted. "You've lived too long. We're supposed to die. You just forgot to do that."

The prince stared at his foe in fury. "Enough," he snapped. "Stop this. I refuse to engage in philosophical debate. Surrender or die! Please, surrender! I do not want to kill you!"

Yuuichi felt the need in his opponent's voice, and it almost swayed him. He didn't want the prince to have to kill him either. But surrender wasn't possible, not when there was so much else on the line. He was going to have to take a third option.

It wasn't a very good third option.

"Okay," Yuuichi murmured, he knew not to whom.

"You surrender?" the prince asked, eagerly, lowering his sword.

"Nah. But someday, I hope you learn that life has meaning," Yuuichi said, opening his eyes, and smiling one more time. "Everybody struggles in their own way, and it's all beautiful, in it's own way. I hope you learn that." Deep breath. "Goodbye."

And he jumped into the abyss. As he fell forever, he heard the prince screaming far above, and then

An infinite distance away, Shiho felt her oniichan die. Again. The grief nearly stopped her heart, but she was startled to realize that her Child wasn't falling apart, the way that it had last time.

Why not, she wondered. It came into her mind that she was close enough to the HiME star, now, that she didn't need the medium of a most important person to manifest her Child. Ah, that made sense.

So then, if she abandoned this quest to destroy the HiME star, she could have her Child with her forever. But she'd have to kill all the other HiME to stop them from destroying the star. That would be easy. They'd never see the treachery coming. And she had been planning on killing them all as soon as she had a clear shot, after all.

It would be very easy. And then she would no longer be a princess, but a queen, and all her wishes would come true, and she could even have her oniichan back. Probably.

But there was just one problem with this.

Shiho was perfectly aware that she was nowhere nearly clever enough to come up with an idea like this. So all of this was the HiME star reaching into her brain and exploiting her grief.

She didn't like that, to put it mildly.

So she decided to express her displeasure directly.

The first step was to take control of her Child and drive it out and away from the HiME star, as far as it could go without falling apart. She heard the cry of those who were fighting alongside her, and
sensed that they viewed her act as a betrayal. Let them. Whatever the star had tried to insinuate into her mind, she really did not give a shit about any of them.

(Despite what Shiho thought, though, they didn't all misunderstand her goals. One of them, who had loved the one she loved as much as Shiho, with almost the same madness and hopeless despair, saw what was coming, and began to cry out the truth to her sisters in battle as soon as she did, begging them to get clear. It was only because of Shizuru that any of them survived this. Perhaps in this way, she atoned. Perhaps.)

For Shiho, none of this had been about anything as grand as protecting the world. It had all been about revenge on the powers that had deprived her of her oniichan once, and now done so again. Oh, she'd had dreams of a better world, one where she and Yuuichi would be together in shining days that would last forever.

But reality didn't always work right.

And so, at the furthest distance she could travel from the HiME star while maintaining her Yata-Garasu, she paused, and turned back to face the star.

"Fucking die," Munakata Shiho said, and willed her Child to accelerate to a high fraction of the speed of light.

She died instantly, of course. The sheer acceleration was more than any human frame could possibly endure, even one enhanced by magic. But instantly meant something very odd at such velocities, and the Child driven by her will still had quite a bit of its mass remaining as it smashed into the side of the star. And at those speeds, even a small amount of mass would have been devastating.

As it was, the star began to tear itself apart from the blow, with explosions, matching and even exceeding that which had erupted from the impact of Shiho's Child, convulsing forth from the vulnerable points of its structure.

Shiho had killed the HiME star.

And the princesses who survived her act were free of their cage, if they could find a way to survive their victory.

As she tumbled through the air, doing her best to stay out of reach of Mikoto's increasingly frustrated attempts to cut her down when possible, and blocking them with fiery explosions when not, Mai chanced to be looking in the direction of the Prince as his fight against Tate came to its unexpected end. She let out a silent whisper that was drowned out by the much louder shriek of angry protest that came from the Prince when Tate dropped out of sight. She experienced a brief, mad impulse to fly down and try to catch him as he fell ... but she knew that it was hopeless. He was too far away and she was not nearly fast enough.

Once again, Tate had died while all she could do was watch. She'd barely had time to adjust to the idea that he was somehow alive again, and now ... he wasn't. Once again, someone had fallen and she hadn't been able to do anything to help them. And there was no time to mourn, no time to grieve, for she was still in a fight of her own, and Mikoto was coming for her -

And then, a handful of instants after the Prince's rage finally subsided, he let out a scream of purest agony as he dropped to his knees beside the abyss into which Tate had disappeared.

"Aniue!" Mikoto cried out, abandoning her latest charge at Mai to turn and dash in his direction.
"Stay back!" the Prince screeched, in a voice that didn't sound even remotely human. He looked about, almost as if he didn't know where he was or couldn't recognize his surroundings, until his gaze finally settled on the crystal in which I was imprisoned - and from which, Mai now realized, I was watching him with an expression on my face which could almost be called amused.

"What've you done?" the Prince cried out at me.

Of course, I couldn't answer. Not verbally. My smile didn't alter a bit, though. At least, not until he laughed. It was a shaky laugh, with more than a note of madness in its tone, but I stopped smiling when I heard it.

"You think you are soo clever," he said, after the laughter stopped. "And your gambit has succeeded in killing that which spawned me. But what of that? I am no infant to die without the care of my parent. I will endure! Oh, you have won this round, but I will endure and I will grow and in a few hundreds or even a thousand of your years, I will rise up again to avenge - and there is nothing you can do that will -"

And he fell silent, then. I believe that he saw, on my face or perhaps even in the connection between our minds - which I was trying to suppress, but which, as he said, would still endure as long as we both lived - that, yes, there was indeed a thing that I could do that would change that. And he saw that I had always intended for that to happen.

"No," he gasped. "No, this cannot be."

I might have laughed, then, if I could have made a sound. But there was no time. I turned my gaze from him to Mai, silently communicating what she had to do.

Mai's expression was no less shocked than the Prince's. "I, I can't do -"

Yes, she could.

"It's -"

She could trade a life extended far too long for the salvation of countless lives here and now, and an even greater number, as yet unborn, who would never know the pains she had endured. She could do this. I had shaped her into the weapon that could do this.

Slowly, Mai's hands came up, and fire began to glow between them. Tears were streaming down her face. "This is why I was born?" she asked. "For this?"

I might've offered her comfort. But I had none left to give. I braced myself for the impact that was sure to come, and -

"MIKOTO! STOP HERRRRR!"

And to my horror, I saw Mikoto, eyes glowing, leaping up to stab Mai in the back with her great black sword.

Leaping up to stab ... but not actually stabbing. At the last possible moment, the dark glow over Mikoto's eyes vanished, and she saw what she was about to do. With a squeal of panic, she jerked the blade's point to the side ... so that only its edge sliced through Mai's vest and into the flesh just above her hips.

Hypnosis, as is well known, can't make anyone do anything that they truly don't want to do.
The flames in Mai's hands vanished as she let out a screech of pain and collapsed to the ground.

"MAI!" Mikoto shrieked. "Mai, no, Mai, no, no, no, Mai!"

Clenching the wound with her hand, Mai looked up with tears in her eyes at Mikoto's stock-still form just above her. "It's, it's okay, Mikoto," she lied. "It's no big deal."

"Noooo!" Mikoto repeated, guessing the truth. She whirled, nearly striking Mai's head with the sword this time, as she turned to look at where the Prince was collapsed some distance away. "Why did you do that? Why did you make me hurt Mai?"

"Oh, for pity's sake," the Prince said disgustedly as he tried and failed to regain his footing. "You were fighting her when I came in here, what did you think was going to happen?"

"That, that was -"

"And anyway, you're only supposed to love me!"

"I triiiiiiiied!" Mikoto yowled. "I tried and I tried and I tried, but you lie to me and you trick me and you're not there and Mai is and she cooks and she holds me and - I love Mai!" she concluded.

"And I love you, too," Mai whispered. The cold in her side was spreading. She couldn't hold the blood in. Was this it? Was this how it was all going to end? Then she had to say it. "I love you, Mikoto," she repeated, louder.

"Maiiiiii," Mikoto wailed, turning back to look at her.

"You have to finish it, Mikoto," she said. "You have to end it for all of us."

Mikoto was sniffling, but she nodded as she held up her sword. "Miroku," she called out.

And as before, spikes exploded from the ground around her - but behind her this time ... and this time, too, what was projecting them forth - a huge ogre-like monster with a huge club held in the hand of one of its three arms - followed them up, roaring angrily.

"No!" the Prince called out. "Obey me! Protect me!"

"... free him," said Mikoto.

Miroku promptly raised up its club and brought it down towards my crystal. With the very last of my borrowed magic, I reached out to salve, at least, the wound on Mai's side. I was well aware that my end did not mean the end -

The crystal shattered and what had been within it was pulped. With a roar, the dozens of crystals behind it also exploded in a chain reaction to the power unleashed. For a few moments, the great red ball that was the Obsidian Prince's seal glowed green instead.

And then it was gone.

Imagine an immense serpent, jet black of hide with a greenish-gray underbelly, an odd number of eyes gleaming from what was presumably its head. Imagine a series of six pairs of wings lifting the upper body up from the lower, which was too flaccid to move under its own power. Imagine all of that ... and then know that the Obsidian Prince looked nothing like that. But those were the words that somehow impressed themselves in Tokiha Mai's mind as she lifted her head to look at the true face of that which was behind all the misfortune she and all the others had endured, and knew that
she was seeing that which was never meant to be seen by mortal eyes.

And then it spoke, its mouth moving and air holes in its neck opening at various times to shape the sounds. "You are far more hideous to my sight than I am to yours," the creature proclaimed.

"I don't think that's possible," Mai said faintly. She felt the wound on her side, discovered that it was closed, and forced herself back to her feet. "So now what?" she asked. "What are you going to do."

"I will wreck the world until I am sealed once more, as I did when all this began, ere cursed Amateras and the first of my consorts worked to seal me." This said without any particular heat.

Mai glanced at where Mikoto was standing before the ruins of Mashiro's crystal, making cutting gestures with her sword and empty eyes. And then behind her, to where Reito's body lay crumpled on the ground, occasionally managing to lift his voice to speak in disturbing synchrony with the Prince.

As for example when it spoke again. "You cannot hope to defeat me, Tokiha Mai. I have you cornered, now."

"How's that again?" she asked, returning her gaze to the creature with difficulty.

"Strike at me, and Miroku will shield me even at the cost of its own existence. If Miroku vanishes, then Miinagi Mikoto will have been defeated, and her most important person will vanish - and that, by her own admission, is you. And with your disappearance and defeat will come hers, as well. And then I shall still win."

"Let's test that theory," Mai said. "Kagu-Tsuchi!"

The dragon took form above and behind her.

"Are you ready to atone for killing our mothers?" she asked him.

Whale song gave her a response that she took for an affirmative, as the generators in his wings began to spin up.

"Do not be foolish, Tokiha Mai. Even if your attack is somehow powerful enough to overcome all of the shielding Miroku provides, and then critically impair my functions as well, I will transfer my intelligence into -" And then it fell silent.

One of its spare vessels lay stone dead at the bottom of an abyss.

And the other -

Takumi had only the vaguest notion of what was going on. All that he knew was that as soon as he and Akira had arrived back at Mahora, they'd been ushered into the presence of a group of rather bossy people, and that after Akira had flown off - why had they gone along the ground if he could get that frog to fly, anyway? - the very bossy girl with two-colored eyes had told him to sit down inside this chalk-drawn circle on the ground while one of her friends sang and danced with fans around him.

It was a nice song, he supposed. But he had no idea what was going on.

Konoka wasn't entirely sure what was going on. But the boy she was shielding was very cute, and
Asuna had asked her so nicely to do it to him, that she supposed it didn't matter. It was wonderful to use her arts to help people. It was almost as good as healing them.

Almost.

"- no, wait." There was actually some anxiety in the voice now. Or at least that was what Mai thought, even if she couldn't imagine why.

"No wait," she said back at him. "Kagu-Tsuchi!"

"Miroku!" the Prince said even more loudly, and just as it had said, the great ogre moved to shield the Prince's body from the force of the dragon’s blast.

But it never got there. With one last desperate wail, Mikoto surged up to slice into her own Child, which never even had a chance to respond.

"No!" the Prince cried out. "No, mercy!"

"No mercy," Mai repeated, tears streaming down her face as she forced herself to not look at Mikoto, knowing what that must have cost her. "This is the end of the dance. It ends in fire."

And Kagu-Tsuchi let out its mightiest gout of flame, and it became impossible to see or hear anything.

Digging his way out of a collapsed cavern and back to the surface was not fun. Not only did cutting rocks like this bring back all kinds of unpleasant memories for him, he was keenly aware that if he did anything even a little bit wrong in this undertaking, the tunnel he was carving would collapse on him and he would smother. His death would be slow and very painful.

Fortunately, even though he was not particularly careful by temperament, he could be cautious when necessary, and so he finally emerged onto the surface around evening, very tired, very sore, but alive. Taking a moment to recuperate, he cast about with his extrasenses for the location of the Prince.

He found an empty gaping hole in the fabric of reality where the Prince was supposed to be. Nagi blinked, then looked in the direction of the HiME star. It was gone too - well, there were chunks of it slowly disintegrating in the upper atmosphere, but the central intelligence was utterly absent.

"Wow," he said at last. "What a lousy day. This is bad enough to seriously impact my ego."

"Oh, don't lie. Your ego is far too resilient for that," said a voice he'd honestly hoped he'd never have to hear again. And he turned to see that she was regarding him with an unspeakably smug expression on her face as she looked at him from where she was sitting in the wheelchair, with Fumi standing behind her as patiently as ever.

"Hey, little sister," he said.

"Hey, evil megalomaniac to whom I'm reluctantly forced to confess a biological relationship," Mashiro replied.

"What's the deal with the wheelchair?" he asked after a moment.

"The people who'll be arriving shortly expect me to be in one, so I am," she said. "Too many questions to be raised if I'm not."
"Ah. So, now what?" Nagi asked patiently. "Are we going back to the future?"

"You're not going anywhere," announced Negi Springfield, who'd just swept down out of the sky, accompanied by the entirety of Ala Alba, Ala Umbra, the Combined Martial Arts club, several magic teachers, the remaining staff of the Mahora Church, and the few members of Ala Iridia who were still on their feet. "Not, at least, until you answer a few major questions - most notably, who the hell do you think you are, using My Father's name like that?"

"Negi," Asuna muttered as she stood beside him, sword out. "He's done worse things, you know."

"Debatable point."

"It's a coincidence, really," Nagi said wearily. "It's a common name where I'm from."

"And where might that be?" Negi asked suspiciously.

"Classified information," Nagi replied, starting to get to his feet.

"Excuse me?"

"You're excused. Get used to hearing that phrase, incidentally. It's about that time, I think ... well, anyway, this was a nice touch, Mashiro-chan, having everyone show up to arrest me - again - but I hope you don't think I'm going to go quietly," he said, dusting himself off. "I mean, hate to break it to you, folks, but even with all your powers combined, you can't do much more than inconvenience me, even if you still had that Burial Society agent with you -"

"They do," said Ciel, coming forward from where she had been standing with Shakti.

That gave Nagi some pause. "Hm. Well, that will really inconvenience me. But, I mean, demonstrably, you can't do more than that. It's a little surprising, though, to see you working with -"

"You have annoyed me," Ciel interjected. "You have annoyed me well past the point where I am willing to work with heathens and heretics in order to put an end to you. You have annoyed me to a point where I am willing to do things I can't even imagine to do that."

"Well, sorry for being - ah, I can't say it with a straight face," Nagi broke off, chuckling. "But seriously, what are you going to -"

"Hey, Ciel?" called out a woman's voice from the back of the horde of people confronting Nagi. "Is this it? Is this the place? Your directions kinda suck, you know?"

"You would not believe how far I'm willing to go," Ciel reiterated.

Nagi frowned. Then went very pale. "No," he said. "No, you wouldn't."

Ciel was smiling. Her smile got a little tense as the woman in the white sweater and the long purple skirt, with shoulder-length blonde hair and bright red eyes, strolled into view, humming quite cheerfully. But it didn't fall from her face, even when the woman started talking. "Ah, this must be the place," she said. "And that's the guy, huh? Wow, he doesn't look that tough, but if you really want me to -"

"I surrender!" Nagi yelped, falling to his knees. "I surrender again! And a third, yea, even fourth time do I surrender! Have I mentioned that I surrender? Because I surrender! I hope you understand that all of these are statements that I surrender, not anything else that might have the implication that I'm doing anything other than surrendering, because really, seriously, utterly, I surrender!"
"So you surrender, then?" Negi asked.

"Yeah," Nagi answered, nodding rapidly.

"And you'll use your own power to reinforce these?" the boy asked, taking a pair of handcuffs that Touko had silently brought forward to give him and holding them out to him.

"Cheerfully!" Nagi answered as he put them on his wrists, focused his power through them, and then let Negi close them, rendering him merely mortal.

"Thank you," Negi said pleasantly. "And thank you, Haruna-san."

"This was actually a lot of fun," Haruna said, releasing her grip on Natsumi's hand so that she was no longer invisible, and lowering her sketchpad so that the golem she'd been animating went back to being a rough sketch of a woman with blonde hair and a purple skirt.

Nagi's jaw dropped. "Whabuhhuh?" he asked.

Ciel ignored him, looking at Nodoka crossly. "You would do well, young lady to forget anything else you saw in my mind as you were looking for images to show your friend."

"Well, I think my work here is just about done," said Mashiro. "I'll be happy to answer any questions you have later, Negi-kun. But I have some math homework that I should really get back to, and repairs to the school district to arrange, and other stuff. If you'd take a suggestion for what to do about Nagi, though ... he's really good at cutting rock."

Until Duran finally dissolved into green light underneath her hands, before she could offer him any more thanks or praise or even a last pat on the head, and worst of all doing so while they were still several tens of metres above the ground, Natsuki had thought that the worst of it had to be what had happened to the Sister. To have come back from what she'd endured, to have risked so much, to have journeyed so far, only to ultimately be pulverized by a fragment of the planet as she pushed Nao out of its way - there really wasn't any justice, was there?

But now she was dropping out of the sky, holding onto Shizuru with one arm and a shell-shocked Nao with the other while the rest of the survivors of their little task force fell alongside her, mostly letting out reflexive high-pitched shrieks as the ground came up towards them. And this was definitely the worst.

The ground abruptly ballooned up into some sort of cushion, like an airbag in a car, and their landing became considerably softer than it had any right to be.

Shock kept them quiet for a few moments. Then Natsuki found herself turning to look at Shizuru, beside her, and asking, "You okay?" At the exact same moment that Shizuru asked her the same question.

"I'm fine," said Nao.

"I think ... we're all okay," said Akane, the first words she'd spoken during the whole mission, as she held onto Midori, who was quietly sobbing, and petted her hair.

"Of course you are. Airbags like this save lives every day," said a voice from just out of their line of sight.

Moving rather gingerly - hitting an airbag at that velocity still hurt, though much less than it might
have - Natsuki sat up to get a look at who was talking. A petite girl wearing a lab coat over a school uniform and a pair of glasses was standing beside the airbag with a control unit for it in one hand. And she was not alone.

"You?" asked Natsuki.

"Of course me," said Mashiro. "Who else?"

"I don't even want to guess," Natsuki admitted.

One by one, they pulled themselves off of the airbag. Mashiro watched and counted, and her face fell when she saw the absences. "Shiho-chan and Yukariko-san didn't make it?" she asked.

Natsuki judged that to be a rhetorical question, and considered going over to help Akane calm Midori down. Shizuru wasn't moving, though, and she had a hold of her hand, so she abandoned the notion and watched as Yukino pulled a phone out of her pocket and dialled.

"Haruka? We're ba-" she started to say.

People shouldn't make sonic booms, Natsuki decided somewhat sourly a moment later, as she watched the Executive hugging her assistant in front of everyone. At least Midori had stopped crying, even if she looked thoroughly miserable.

Shizuru took a deep breath and let go of Natsuki's hand. "I believe that we spoke of a time when we wouldn't have magical assistance, and we could resolve certain outstanding matters between us," she said to Yukino, drawing her attention away from Haruka. "I'm ready to do so."

"Wait a minute," Natsuki said.

"Stay out of it," Shizuru hissed.

"I'm not going to -"

"What's then this?" Haruka asked Yukino.

Blinking a bit at how simple that Harukaism was, Yukino explained, "She said we could decide whether we want to fight each other over what happened after we'd won. And we did. So now ..." She glared at Shizuru.

"I see," Haruka said, nodding. "It's your decision, Yukino, since you were the one who had to endure without me. But I think perhaps you ought to forgive her, if you can."

"Really?" Yukino asked, skeptically.

"Really."

Yukino considered for another moment, before she looked at Shizuru. "I will never be able to forget what you did," she said. "But I will forgive you. You saved us. You've made amends."

"Thank you, Kiku-" Shizuru started to say.

That's when Haruka hauled off and punched her square in the face, knocking her down and back into the airbag. Stunned by the blow, Shizuru just stared.

"I forgive you, too," Haruka said calmly.
Nao was chuckling faintly as she came over to offer Shizuru a hand up. After some hesitation, the taller girl took it. "I'd probably better forgive you, too," Nao said as she helped her up.

"Am I about to get punched again?" Shizuru asked.

"Nah. Not my style." Nao hugged her, and smilingly whispered into her ear. "But you better pray you never meet up with me in any dark alleys, you cunt, because I'm not really a nice person and never will be."

With a slightly fixed smile on her face, Shizuru stepped back from the hug. Midori cleared her throat. "Then, maybe I -"


Wondering what that was all about, Natsuki turned to look at Mashiro, who was having a conversation with the girl in the labcoat. "This is doing wonders for Rika's understanding of human nature," the girl was saying.

"'Scuse me," said Natsuki. "Where's Mai?"

"Do you know where you are?" Mashiro replied.

Answering questions with questions. Of course. The day needed only this. Natsuki looked around at what looked Mahora plaza, with quite a few buildidngs smashed in. The fighting looked to have been rather intense ... and then she realized that something was missing, and her eyes settled on one particular section of shattered crystal piled on naked gravel.

"That's the Shrine," Natsuki said at last. Her voice went faint. "No. Don't tell me -"

"She was within the tunnels beneath it," Mashiro confirmed. "They have collapsed. As far as I know, she has not come out again, nor has Mikoto, nor Reito-san, nor any of the others who were in there. As far as I know."

Natsuki slowly dropped to her knees, hands pressed to the ground, and lowered her head. "Why?" she asked the universe. "What was the point of all this, if she was just going to die like that?" There were obvious tears in her voice.

One by one, the others who had been HiME - even those who were each other's foes - came forward to join with her in empathy and shared loss.

... I hope you will not mind too much if I undercut this very dramatic scene with the somewhat premature revelation that Mai was in fact still alive. It would be some time until Natsuki would learn that truth, though, and I feel the need to interject.

I am, as you will probably have already guessed, she who once was the woman in the crystal whom Mai thought of as Mashiro. On further reflection, I agree that that is a cumbersome title, and even though I still see no point in revealing the name I bore in my first lifetime, long ago, I shall do so. My name was Nene. It was a reasonably common name among women of my class at that time, borne by the sister of Takeda Shingen and the wife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, among others. (I was neither of those women, incidentally.) I regard the fact that it has become less so in this current era with some dismay, but perhaps that will change in the near future.

You wonder, perhaps, how I survived the destruction of my body. I did not. That was, in most senses of the word, my death. However, by becoming the narrative voice of this story, I was able to avoid the final dissolution of my consciousness which ordinarily would have resulted from my
demise. My current condition is not a particularly enviable one, however. Where once I was able to exert some control over the narrative of these events, I am now simply an observer, much like yourselves, who can only watch without being able to directly affect the events of this story. And when the tale reaches its final end, so will I.

This is what I wanted.

I am not a god. I have made horrible mistakes and committed terrible crimes. And I have lived entirely too long.

And yet. And yet.

I say all that, and yet, now, seeing as I do the great stretch of the future which lies ahead of us, I realize that the time that I have lived is not truly a great one at all. And despite how weary I was with the world, how sick of its sorrow and injustice, I find myself wanting to live on just a bit longer.

And there is more to tell, after all. There always is.

Forgive me this last bit of selfishness, then, as I unfold unto you the story of what happened next. And when that is done ... perhaps then, I'll be ready to let go once and for all.
1: Takumi

The first stage of grief was denial, it was said. And indeed, when Takumi was finally brought to the dormitory that Akira and the other 'HiME' had seized for their purposes, and was told what had happened to his sister, he hadn't believed it. It was a lie. It was a trick. The people who were telling him this were misinformed. The people who were telling him this were playing a particularly sick joke. There were lots of explanations that were much more plausible than 'my sister is gone forever'.

He supposed that believing that people were lying to him also covered the anger stage of grief. That was probably for the best. He'd never been terribly good at dealing with anger, and the thought of letting it out at Akira (especially) frightened him.

As for bargaining, he couldn't see the point. He'd been dead, and it had been a total cessation of existence. Whatever power had restored him (and all these other people) to life, it clearly hadn't been in response to anyone else's wishes or deeds. Clearly, they lived in a capricious, goblin universe where things happened with neither rhyme nor reason. He was honestly surprised how little that idea bothered him, all in all.

Perhaps he was just too bothered by how much he missed his sister.

Right at the moment, he was all cried out, and wishing that Akira would give him just a little less space. He was incredibly lonely. That one girl, Nao, had looked in on him a few minutes ago while he was in the middle of the last crying jag, and looked strangely like someone who wanted to say something to him. But she'd been stopped by that woman, Midori, who'd worked with his sister. She'd guided Nao away from the door with a determined expression on her face, and a last, regretful glance back at him that had confused him enough that the tears had eased a bit. So confusing, this goblin universe.

He looked up at the sound of someone knocking on the door - which was odd, because it was open. Then he saw who it was and much became clear. "Yotsuba-san," he said, in a hoarse voice, for it was she, his sister's old employer, holding a tray with a bowl on it.

She asked if he was hungry.

"I ..." He was, but he wasn't sure if he had any appetite. Did that make sense? Did it have to make sense? "I'm not sure I really ..." He trailed off again.

She came further into the room, smiling sadly. And then she spoke, in a very sweet but also very firm voice. "Starving the living will not profit the dead," Satsuki said.

He blinked. "Is that ... a classical reference?" he asked.

She shook her head. "A man named Rex Stout wrote it in a book, a long time ago, but it's not classical, as such." She further explained that she didn't really care for the type of books he wrote, but some of them were on a subject - food - that did interest her quite a bit. By now, she was right in front of him, with the tray, and he could smell the soup quite clearly. And his stomach rumbled.

The ramen was delicious.

Just like Mai had made.
He said so.

She nodded in understanding as the tears started again.

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### 2: Midori

"... you're kidding," Nao said, face gone pale. She looked from Midori to Natsuki, who'd taken the news in stony silence while she stood staring out the window into the evening.

"No, I'm not kidding," the teacher said heavily. Ex-teacher, Nao reminded herself for no real reason. "And I'm not jumping to conclusions, either," she continued, looking down at the paper in her hand. "I finally heard back from that person who does genetic testing I told you about, a while ago ... she sent a message back with that Negi-kun's partner, Asuna. It confirms that I share a set of grandparents with both Mai and you," she said to Natsuki's back. "And that I've only got one set to share." She looked like she was about to say something more, but whatever it was never came out. Eventually, she closed her mouth.

"And me?" Nao asked.

"I didn't send any samples from you to be analyzed, but I talked to your mom just now. There's no doubt you're his kid, so -" Midori shrugged. Nao noticed that the older woman was trying to avoid meeting her eyes, but didn't put too much importance to it.

"Wow," Nao said. "This is a whole other level of 'messed up'."

"It makes certain things she said make sense, though," Natsuki said without turning away from the window.

Midori blinked. "Things she said? You mean before she died?"

Natsuki's hand came up to the window frame, and tightened there. "Yes," she said. "Before she died." After a moment, she let go of her grip on the frame and turned to look at Midori with an impassive expression. "So why are you telling us this?"

"Uh, well, I thought you ought to know ... and I want to know what you think about the idea of letting Takumi-kun know -"

"That is a horrible idea," Nao and Natsuki said in near-perfect synchrony. "Stop that," they added after a moment.

After a moment, in which Midori actually found herself on the verge of laughter for the first time that day, Natsuki turned back to her. "I don't know if he even knows about her," she said with a jerk of the head in Nao's direction. "From what she said, I think Mai might have been trying to keep his view of their dad as pristine as possible."

"She did have a thing for lost causes," Nao agreed.

"And this ... would really mess that view up," Natsuki added, looking away. Definitely not thinking about what Mai had confessed. Not thinking about how what went around, came around.

"So not yet, is what you're saying," Midori said.

"Not ever," Nao clarified.
With a sigh, Midori nodded.

"Why's Shizuru giving you the classic 'if looks could kill' look all the time?" Natsuki asked bluntly.

3: Haruka

"And I'm telling you, that quarantine is about to be lifted. In the next twenty-four hours, at manimal," she said to her father over the phone. "There's an opportunity oporous here that you can get in on the ground floor if you'll -"

"All right, I'll contact the School District and make the offer," he said.

"Thank you."

"Your mother's here. Would you like to talk to her?"

Since an honest answer of, 'no, she terrifies me, and I'm dreading the day that I have to tell her that I'm in love with another girl' wouldn't have been welcomed, Haruka of course answered, "Yes, of course."

"I heard there was a little incident in the house at Sakaimachi," the calm, cool, certain voice said a moment later.

"I would proffer not to discourse it," Haruka said tightly.

"... I'm going to take that as a yes. You shouldn't be so hard on him, you know. He's done very well by us, under the circumstances."

Of course she'd only know only his side of the story, Haruka thought disgustedly.

"And it's really sort of remarkable that we've been able to be on as good terms with the Kikukawas as we have been, considering how mad he was when he found out about the affair."

Haruka blinked. "What affair?"

"Eh? I thought you knew. He said that's what the argument had been about, how you felt loyalty to her because she's your sister, having the same father after I fooled around with Kikukawa."

Haruka found it impossible to blink. "You ... what?" Abruptly, she calmed down. "So if hypothetically Yukino had a different father, she and I wouldn't be related at all?"

"Yes, if that were the case, then -"

"Excuse me, mother, I'm going to go fuck my girlfriend now," she said. And hung up. And turned off the phone.

4. Yukino

And having done so, she went and, just as she'd said, fucked her girlfriend.

When, a few minutes later, Yukino was able to focus her eyes and breathe normally once more, she said - well, gasped, really - "Where, where in the world did you learn all that ... stuff?"

"I told you," said Haruka, who wasn't even slightly winded. "Back when we dragged Yuuki into an
interview, remember? I've had to listen to all sorts of things. And I remember everything. I'm honestly a little surprised that some of it works. The thing with the feather duster in particular shouldn't ... well. Ready for round two?"

"Aahhhhhhhhh ..."

"That's not a no."

Later, much later, Yukino would dearly hope that Haruka had gotten it out of her system after this. She was wrong, incidentally.

But they went on to a long and mostly happy life together, regardless. Haruka became a police officer, of course, and her organizational skills and sheer stubbornness ensured that she rose to a position of high authority in the Advanced Division Police. How much of that organization's reputation for brutal competence can be ascribed to her influence is an open question. She died in 2041 of lung cancer, most likely caused by toxic gases inhaled during her career in enforcement, and having refused to accept cyborg replacement surgery.

Yukino herself also went to work in the field of law enforcement, though to avoid the appearance of impropriety she obtained employment in Osaka, rather than Greater Tokyo, where Haruka was stationed. They adopted a number of children, some of whom, as with their daughter Naoko, also went on to work for the police in one form or another. Following Haruka's death, she began using life extension methods, and so was alive in 2126 ... when she was one of the billions who died in the Crash.

While they had each other, they were happy. Can you really ask for more? Both of them contributed to the Genome project, and people very like them lived hundreds of years later on a different world entirely. So it goes.

5. Shizuru.

She went up the stairs in hopes that she could get away from the noise that was coming from the room she'd seen Suzushiro entering a few minutes earlier. The noise disturbed her on a moral and emotional level. The fact that that repressed wretch was able to enjoy such things, while even the thought of them turned her stomach ... it truly wasn't fair.

And yet she was seeking Natsuki out. Knowing that their relationship would probably only bring one or both of them pain, she was seeking her out. Had she really regained her sanity, or just exchanged the old madness for a different one? At least she wasn't reflexively thinking of the girl as 'her Natsuki' anymore.

Well, be that as it may, she found Natsuki sitting on the roof, staring out at the night sky, in total silence. Respecting that, she made as little noise as possible as she came over to sit down beside her.

Not too successfully, it seemed, for Natsuki spoke up just as she was doing so. "I had a little talk with Midori."

"Did you?" Shizuru asked, trying to sound careless. Trying to sound like the old Shizuru. It didn't work, not for her and not for Natsuki, either, clearly.

"If you'd like her dead, I can do that," Natsuki said flatly.

Shizuru blinked. Then, somewhat astonishingly even to herself, she actually laughed a bit. "No. Bless you for offering. But no. I don't have any room to judge -"
"Crap."

"Eh?"

"That's crap. Judge not lest ye be judged? Crap. Judge and prepare to be judged. That makes much more sense. We've all been judged. We get to judge each other, now." She finally turned to look back at her. "I don't really want to do it, because there's something of Mai in her, but if you want me to -"

"I don't," Shizuru answered quickly. "I really, really don't."

"Okay," Natsuki said, looking away again.

For a few moments they sat in silence.

"I didn't like her," Shizuru said then. "Not even a little bit. And I hate that you love her more than me. But ... I'm sorry for how much it's hurting you, Natsuki."

All Natsuki could do was nod.

They sat there, together, until morning.

6. Yuna

As was depressingly common these days, Yuna woke up with the strong suspicion that she'd done something she probably shouldn't have. As her vision resolved and she realized that she was looking up at the pinched face of Souzoteki Denai, who was lying above - and, she realized, within - her, that suspicion became a dead certainty, with no probably about it. "Oh, shit," she said aloud.

"Shhh!" Denai hissed. "You'll wake her!"

Yuna blinked. Wake who?

As if to answer her question, she saw a familiar looking hand with gold-painted fingernails come up to start rubbing a finger against Denai's cheek. "Mmmm, but the situation is even worse than that, Bateleur, for I am not simply your aunt and cousin in one person, no no, for your mother was so desperate to have a child to bind your supposed father to her that she went to his father and offered herself to him, all unknowing that she herself was the product of an idle affair he'd had before the Pacific War, so you see I am your aunt, cousin, sister and niece all in one person, isn't that terrible Batelllllllleuuurrrr?" Faint laughter sounded, dying down after a moment.

Ah.

Atfer another moment, Kageyama sat up from where she was lying on the far side of Denai from Yuna, stretching in a way that emphasized the breasts with which Yuna had become very familiar last night. She smiled warmly as she looked up at the ceiling. "Ma, what a wonderful dream," she sighed. "Such a pity I won't remember any of it in a few moments." Still smiling, she turned to look down at the other occupants of her bed. "Good morning, Constance," she said to Yuna. "Good morning, Milady," she said to Denai.

"Milady?!" he yelped. "What the hell? I thought I was Rochefort!"

"I never agreed to that," she said calmly.
"Well, anyway, why are you comparing me to that bitch!"

"Mostly because of the ease with which I made you my bitch," she said, before poking him with a finger in a still rather sensitive area of his anatomy. Ignoring his yelp of pain, Yamiko stood up and stretched some more, giving everyone present a nice long look of the strap-on that was still attached to her waist. "Anyway," she continued, with the air of someone giving a well-rehearsed speech. "I'm gonna go have a shower. If you wanna peek, go ahead and peek. But no joining in, 'kay? And if you're still here when I get done in the bathroom, I'll probably kill you. A good guest knows when to leave."

Humming 'the Hey Song', she headed for her bathroom, pausing beside a poster of American wrestler-turned-mixed-martial artist Tina Armstrong, dressed in black lingerie and standing in front of a poster of her father, Bass. "Daddy's Girl", it proclaimed her. Kageyama pressed her fingers to her lips and then her fingers to the picture of Tina's lips, followed by a murmured blessing. That accomplished, she walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

"This never happened," Denai proclaimed, pulling away (and out of) Yuna quickly.

"I kinda think it did," the girl said casually, not moving from where she was lying.

"Fuck you!"

"You did."

"No, that's a - look, I don't want any part of your drama. I've got too much already."

"Yeah, well, guess what, the drama comes with the package," Yuna said, sitting up with an irritable expression. "And I don't remember you complaining about the rest of the package last night. So unless you're planning to move to the Magical World, get used to having my drama in your life, just like pretty much everybody else who's had a ride on the Yuna-train."

He slammed his hands to his face. "God, you're sixteen and using language like that! Look, I don't want any of this! All I wanted when I came to school here was to get a good degree so I could get a steady job where I could make people's lives as miserable as mine! All this action and adventure and really wild things is doing a number on my digestion! I want peace! I want quiet! I want order!"

"It's good to want things," Yuna told him.

"Not if crazy chicks are keeping you from having them!"

Abruptly, they heard the sound of the shower stopping. "I can still hear voices from in there," came a musical voice from behind the doorway. "I have some straight razors in here that I'm going to use on anyone I find in there when I get done brushing my teeth."

"Is she bluffing?" Yuna asked.

"These are my friennnnnds/See how glistennnn!" the voice started singing.

"I don't think she's bluffing," Denai said, and began grabbing his clothes up from the floor. Yuna did the same, but neither of them was fully dressed by the time that the sound of running water ominously stopped running.

"Window!" Yuna said, opening it quickly.

"Are you kidding me!" Denai snapped. "We're on the fifth floor!"
"Get used to it!" she said, and pulled him out with her.

He never did get used to it. They fought, and occasionally made up, until, as someone once said, it occurred to them that they could make the process much simpler by getting married, which they did, in 2008. He died as a result of an automobile accident three years later, in which he was entirely at fault. She and her son disappeared in the 2025 earthquake that wrecked Tokyo.

Meanwhile, Yamiko came out of her bathroom with a straight razor in her hand, sighed to see that the room was empty, and closed the window. Before she could settle down for some honest self-appreciation, the phone rang.

"Yellow," she said. "Ah, really? Okay, I'll be there in a bit."

7. Akane

She woke up slowly, as though sleep were trying to hold tightly onto her. For the first time in what felt like forever, she’d had a sleep with no nightmares. And she was spooning with Kazuya. The noises coming from Suzuzhiro's room might have disturbed some people, but to the two of them, it had been inspiring. But he was still asleep, so she tried to avoid disturbing him as she got out of bed and pulled on a nightgown, pausing only to kiss him, once more, before she went out to get something to eat.

The building was quiet this morning. At least, that was her impression until she was close to the kitchen where they’d had dinner that Satsuki-keibu had brought in last night. As she drew closer, she could hear voices raised - though only a little - in an argument. Akane's first impulse was to turn and go somewhere else, but something drew her closer.

"I know, I know. You don't care that I'm sorry," Midori was saying, sitting in a chair at the table, facing away from where Akane's viewpoint when she arrived. "You don't care that I'd take it back if I could. But I am sorry, sorrier about this than I am about practically anything, and I'd -"

"No, I don't care about your sorrow," the President - Shizuru-san - interrupted, as she stood on the opposite side of the table from Midori. "You ... you've wrecked my life, you know that? I never be able to get past this. I can't even touch the person I love, the only person that I love, without remembering what you did to me, and when I do that it's hard not to throw up and -" She broke off when she realized that they were being watched, lips pinched in a way that would have startled her legion of fangirls.

Midori turned to see Akane standing there, and gulped. "Akane-chan -"

"What did you do to her, Midori-chan?" Akane asked, very quietly, very still.

Midori's mouth worked silently for a few moments. She glanced at Shizuru, who said nothing. Then she closed her eyes. "I ... assaulted her. Sexually. I wasn't thinking straight, and I'm sorry, and -"

Akane interrupted her with a forceful slap across the face. After a moment to let that sink in, she spoke in a quiet, even tone. "Are you going to make amends?"

"Yes," Midori whimpered.

"Okay. When you've done that, you can talk to me again. Not until." Completely dismissing Midori from her thoughts, she turned and walked around the table to stand in front of Shizuru. "You're wrong," she said.
"What?" Shizuru asked, blinking in befuddlement at being contradicted like that.

"You will get over this. I know." A deep breath. "Every day, almost, for years, my father ... I understand exactly how you feel, all right? But you will get over this. It wasn't easy for Kazuya-kun to get past the walls I put up around me, but we managed ... and every time he touches me, that is the moment when I don't think about what my father did to me. Because the joy is too great."

Shizuru could only stare in mixed horror and amazement.

"You will get over this." Akane repeated one more time. "If you ever want to talk about it, I'll be happy to listen." She turned to look at the fridge. "Is there any juice in there? I don't really like tea or coffee."

"I think so," Shizuru finally stammered out.

"Oh, thank goodness," Akane sighed. She opened the door and found that, yes, there was some juice. She poured herself a glass, offered some to Shizuru (and pointedly none to Midori) and put it back when the offer was declined. Then she walked out of the room, drinking her juice.

"... her father worked for the First District, you know," Midori said.

"No," said Shizuru. "I didn't know.

Akane eventually married Kazuya. They lived a long and happy life together, with children and grandchildren and even one or two great-grandchildren, before they finally died when they were both in their late eighties. They donated to the Genome project, and they, too, will live again on another world, far from this.

The darker shades are not the sum of reality. All of the other colors are equally real.

8. Ryouko

A few hours later, she was standing with the doctor in the basement of her home, watching the machine from which she'd only recently emerged as it slowly spun down. "This is an astoundingly boring process to watch," Yamiko declared out of nowhere. "I should perhaps apologize to those who watched over me while I was enduring it."

"That would be very -"

"But I won't."

The doctor looked away as she rolled her eyes.

And then the machine stopped, and all of its lights went out. After a moment of hesitation, in which neither of them heard any noises coming from inside of it, Mikado walked up to the door and put a hand on its handle. "I suspect that I'm not going to like what I find."

"I'm ready for the worst case scenario, Doctor," Yamiko said formally, holding her cane aloft and waving it so that it exposed its axe blades.

With a deep breath, the doctor opened the machine's door, and peered in.

"Help, help!" said a tiny, high pitched voice from inside. "I can't reach the top of this thing!

A few moments later, a rather short, dark-skinned, fair-haired person was being pulled out of the
machine. "It woooorked!" the reformed Kaede proclaimed. "You didn't think it would work, but it woooorked! And now I'm pretty! Oh so pretty! I feel pretty and witty and -"

Then Kaede looked down. "AGGGGH I'm still a guy!"

Yamiko reached down to pull aside what he was looking at. "Nope," she said after a moment. "Only a phallus, no testicles. There's something else back there though ... uh-huh. You're a futa. Apparently, you have some kinks even you didn't know about."

"Noooooo!"

"I'll go get him ... her ... anyway, I'll go get a dress from upstairs," Mikado offered, heading out of the room before she started to laugh, because she wasn't sure whether or not she was going to be able to stop once she started.

Kaede struggled to crawl back into machine as an evilly smiling Yamiko held hir back. "Turn this thing back on again!" s/he cried. "I intend to be one way or another, not both!"

"Come on, now, don't you want to know if everything functions, first?"

"Noooooo!"

"Well, tough shit, I do."

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**9. Iridia**

"I knew it," came the world-weary sigh. "Of COURSE this would all end like a half-assed National Lampoon."

Ala Iridia, all just newly returned from their recent beach trip and carrying various backpacks and similar beach-esque luggage, stared at the mound of rubble where the building that had housed their dormitory once stood. They all shared some variation of a world-weary look, some more weary or world than others. A few, like Tsukiyomi, not to be confused with Tsukuyomi, were crying about their stuff- or in her case, corpses- being buried under all that crap. The necro was frantically digging through the rubble with her lace-gloved hands, frantically calling out to her 'babies'.

"I wonder if we can have a discount rate?" the ever sexually-ambiguous Arisugawa Setsuna said thoughtfully. "Though the hotels are probably all booked or abandoned. I hope my bar is okay..."

"It was Springfield again," Chimaka Itoshi said with tired conviction. "I wonder what he pissed off this time. Can't be Cthulhu, she was at the beach." He still wasn't sure what had happened, but after the battle the Lovecraftian horror had somehow been cursed to run a takoyaki stand as a busty MILF. He'd never look at the octopus balls the same way again.

"Oh, you're back!"

Some people turned, the rest couldn't really be bothered as they joined in the digging, hoping against hope that their stuff had survived. "Who are you?" Kazemaru Arashi asked a bit suspiciously at the dark-skinned, silver-haired loli walking up to them as Shashuno Kuroro froze at the site of the RL image of his waifu. "And why do you have SCM's staff?"

"Well, I made it after all, why wouldn't I have it?" the loli said by way of introduction.

Some people paused and stared.
"Oh crap, it's finally happened," Arashi said, sounding too tired to be properly indignant. "You body-jacked a loli to molest her, didn't you."

"No, I own this bod, for my sins," Senou Kaede said cheerfully in a manner implying they were very enjoyable sins. "A mad scientist machine was involved," she added by way of explanation.

There were comprehending ah's and nods of understanding.

"What the heck happened around here?" Asagiri Asagimaru asked.


"So," Kaede ventured dryly, "how was the beach?"

Itoshi gave hir a flat look. "The usual. Crazy girls. Inadvisably applied pactios. Deep Ones. Rapist balls of fire. Moe Eldritch Abominations. Oh, and Immi is now being stalked by the loli incarnation of Nyarlotepe. We were hoping you could help with that."

They all smiled wearily, and in that sublime moment, all shared the same thought.

Somehow, this was ALL Springfield's fault.

"By the way," Kaede added. "I should warn you that Yamiko's got changed too. Doesn't look like her old self anymore."

THAT got everyone's attention, causing heads to snap toward the loli. "What does she look like?" Arashi asked suspiciously.

Kaede smiled, turned and began to walk away.

"Senou? SCM? What does she look like now, damn it! Hey!"

Evil laughter drifted after them.

"I could've sworn I just heard evil laughter ..." Masuto lifted his head. "Get back to work."

With a shrug, he did so.

"Mmmmmmm," she sighed in release a moment later. "You give the best foot massages ..."

You'll forgive me, I hope, if I don't tell you much of the fate of these children. I'm not sure you'd believe it if I did. Suffice it to say that Senou did return to his original form, and that Chizuno was only slightly injured in the knife fight he had with a person named Asakura Ryouko a year later. They're very strange, these people. But I probably don't have any room to talk.

9. Yukariko

Days passed. Reconstruction began. The new Headmaster, in his formal installation, gave a moderately moving speech to the assembled faculty and returning student body, in which he expressed his sorrow at the destruction and his deep regret at the injury to and loss of so many cute girls. For whatever reason, most of those listening mentally subbed in the expression 'people'. He had
that effect.

Mahora's enrollment dropped slightly, though not as much as it had in the wake of the previous year's disaster. And, as Mikado-sensei predicted, many new students from off-world had begun to explore the possibilities of education on Earth, and chose Mahora as their entry point.

Initially, the prospect of using excavating the collapsed tunnels, using ground-penetrating radar to search for the bodies, was discussed by the school administration. It was ultimately rejected as too expensive and too risky. Instead, on the site of the destroyed Crystal Shrine, a memorial plaque was erected about a week after it had all happened.


On the day it went up, a prisoner taken into custody by the Student Council Executive on the day of the final battle was, by his own request, escorted to it for a private viewing. In silence, Ishigami-sensei ran his fingers over the raised characters of the first name on the list.

"Stupid cow," he said, unaware of the tears flowing down his face. He would, perhaps, not have understood them even if he had known they were there.

I don't imagine that anyone really cares what happened to him. Suffice to say that he was eventually released from his imprisonment and demonstrated that he had learned absolutely nothing from any of this by becoming involved in several other schemes to gain ultimate power. Eventually, he died in one of them. So it goes.

10. Natsuki

A few hours after that, when night had fallen, another figure walked up to the plaque and ran her fingers over the characters of the last name on the list.

"I wish ..." Natsuki murmured, but then fell silent. Of all people, she knew that wishing was for children and innocents, neither of which she had been for a very long time. And there was no one, now, to hear her wish, anyway.

Almost no one.

"You might want to talk to them about adding Alyssa-chan's name to that. They're probably wondering what the heck happened to her," said a familiar voice from behind her.

Natsuki blinked. Slowly, she turned. Disbelieving, she stared.

"Hi," said Mai. "How are you? I missed you tons and tons," she added with a tiny smile.

Natsuki nearly knocked her over as she ran over to combine a hug with a series of punches to Mai's upper shoulders.

11. Mai

"Ow," said Mai, somewhat blandly, as she was repeatedly punched in her shoulder blades.

"You git!" Natsuki finally snarled as she pulled back to look Mai in the face. "I thought you were dead, you git! What happened?"
Mai blew out a long breath before answering. "Well," she said at last. "It all started when I killed the Obsidian Prince -"

"Okay, you can't just lead in with that!" Natsuki protested.

"Who's telling this story, huh?" Nevertheless, Mai complied, narrating, to the best of her ability, all that had happened from the time that she'd parted company with Natsuki. Natsuki herself listened in silence, only blinking in confusion when Mai described how Mikoto had shattered the crystal that contained me. But she didn't interrupt, and soon enough, Mai was describing the moment when, as she'd already said, she - or rather Kagu-Tsuchi - killed the Obsidian Prince.

"At the last possible second, I realized something. With what Mikoto had done, she'd made it so that I was the last of the HiME," Mai explained, as she sat beside Natsuki near the memorial plaque.

"Except for all of us."

"I didn't know about all of you until later," Mai admitted. "But I think that whatever Mashiro did made you ... not count, for those purposes. I don't know whether that makes any sense, but it's the only way that I have to explain what did happen. I was, I thought, the last of us - so I'd won, and so I got a wish. And in the second before Kagu-Tsuchi blasted the Prince into atoms, I made that wish - and used it save Reito from disintegrating, which he would have since Mikoto had cut down Miroku. He was already starting to do so, but I fixed it so he didn't."

She fell silent for a moment, then continued. "It worked. Sort of. Anyway, we were all three of us alive when Kagu-Tsuchi turned to green sparks in front of me, but the collapse had already started. I don't really remember a lot of what happened next - I think I dragged the two of them with me out of the cave, and we met up with Alyssa and her dad -"

"What was he -" Natsuki started to interrupt, then abruptly realized what a dumb question that was. "Of course, he was Alyssa's most important person, so naturally he returned to her when all of the rest of us did."

"I didn't know about that until later," Mai admitted. "Anyway, the five of us didn't have time to talk, but we all managed to get far enough down some sort of secret passageway leading out of the cave system before the whole thing collapsed. I think maybe the Prince was supporting it, somehow, and once he was ... gone ... it couldn't sustain itself. It was really very close."

"So why didn't you come forward before now?" Natsuki asked. "I'm not even thinking about me, here, your brother, Nao, Midori, Akane, even - they were all ..." She trailed off, unable to find words for how upset nearly everyone had been at Mai's apparent death.

Mai looked away. "That's ... another long story." Another long breath blown out. "Remember how I said my wish sort of worked?"

"You wished to save Reito-san, and -" Natsuki started to say, and then felt her jaw go loose. "No," she said. "No, tell me that you didn't."

"I blew it, Natsuki," Mai said, looking right at her. "I didn't save Reito at all. Maybe there wasn't anything left of him to save. So instead I saved the Obsidian Prince."

12. Reito

Natsuki stared at her in utter horror. "Then ... then it was all for nothing?"
"No, not exactly. It's ... okay, I'm still not sure if I understand it myself," Mai admitted. "When we first got out of there, I didn't realize anything was wrong. I really did think we'd won, and once everything had calmed down, I'd be able to get in touch with all of you and let you know that I was all right, and everything was going to be sunshine and lollipops.

"And then I noticed that Reito ... wasn't acting quite right. I'd say things to him and there'd be ... a few moments where he didn't understand what I was saying, as though he was searching through his memories for how he was supposed to react. At first, I told myself that he was just suffering from some sort of trauma from what had happened to him, or, well, something like that. He'd certainly have cause -

"But that wasn't it."

Mai fell silent for a moment before continuing. "Two days ago, Mashiro found us - and that was a hell of a shock, because I thought she was dead, and - y'know, from the look on your face, you don't seem surprised by that."

"We met her right after - that," Natsuki explained, gesturing vaguely in the distance, as though at the now-vanished HiME star. "She was the one who told us that your were probably down there." This, with a gesture towards the ground beneath the plaque.

"Maybe she did think that," Mai said with a shrug. "But she learned better, and she found us where we were hiding out with Alyssa's dad -"

"With who?"

"Alyssa's dad. He's actually a pretty nice guy, for being a billionaire with a god complex," Mai said dryly. "I guess encountering real evil scared him straight. Well, a little straight. He's helping out with ... ah, we'll get to that eventually. Anyway. Mashiro found us - well, she found me, and she told me what had really happened. Some of the Prince's mind had managed to squirrel itself away inside Reito before he blew up. Reito's own mind ... didn't survive this."

"But the thing is, it's only the Prince's mind. Nothing of his power remains. Which means that he can't ever escape from Reito's body using the same method. Which means that eventually, when Reito dies ... so will he."

"Then why didn't you -" Natsuki started to demand, then fell silent as she realized what she was saying.

"Because I'm not a murderer, either, Natsuki." Mai's voice was quiet, but very firm. "I'm going to let him live out the rest of Reito's life, however long or short that is. I'm going to be watching over him all that time, with Mikoto's help. We're not going to let him get his power back. If it looks like he might - then we'll give him a warning. And if he doesn't take it, then ..." She trailed off, looking away.

"Does he know ... that you know?" Natsuki asked.

"I don't think so. I hope not. Who knows?" She shrugged, in the end. "That's part of the reason that I don't want Takumi or any of the others to know that I'm alive. Because this, this is going to take the rest of my life. I screwed up, and I'm going to pay for it ... every day, for the rest of my life."

"So why are you telling me?"

Now Mai smiled, just a bit. "You looked so sad. I thought, 'that Natsuki, she'll feel bad forever about not having been able to save me'. So I decided to be a little selfish and let you know that I was okay
... and why I can't ever see you, or any of the people I knew, ever again."

"Where are you going to go?" Natsuki finally asked, trying not to sound as grief-stricken as she felt.

"America, probably. There are those people there, working for something called 'Shiildo', who might be able to help us. Searrs-san is going to turn himself in to them in exchange for protection, and also so they'll rebuild Miyu for Alyssa."

"I'm never going to see you again, am I?" Natsuki asked, unable to hide the grief.

"Never say never," Mai said.

Abruptly, they were kissing, rather sloppily, for several moments, and hands were coming up to caress one another's curves, before Natsuki, oddly enough, pulled away. "I can't keep this a secret," she gasped. "I - it's too much, Mai."

Mai made a face. "Don't tell Takumi. He's ... he's better off without me," she said. "But Nao ... she'll appreciate knowing that I screwed up, again. And I guess you can tell Shizuru, if you really need to. But not Takumi. Let him think I went out a hero."

"You are a hero."

"I'm a screw-up. I'm an oversexed, child molesting screw-up, Natsuki. Don't make me more than I am." She stood up, then. "I gotta go. Be happy, Natsuki." A brief pause. "I loved you, a little bit."

And then, as quickly as she'd come, she was gone into the night.

Did Natsuki ever see Mai again?

I have to say that I don't know. I'm not, unlike the previous instances, keeping quiet for some private amusement - I really don't know. What I can tell you is that after 2020, Natsuki and Shizuru both disappear into the same strange distortion in my awareness of reality that keeps me from knowing much about Mai and Mikoto - in the latter case, until she emerges again in the twenty-third century as the cat goddess of the same name, having become something I don't understand by methods I don't understand. But regardless, I think it's entirely possible that the fact that it is the same distortion suggests that, yes, she did see her again. But someone is keeping me from knowing the details, and while that irritates me, I accept it.

Before that, though, I know quite a bit about Shizuru and Natsuki. Their efforts to build a relationship were hampered by issues on both sides, and they honestly spent as much time fighting with each other - verbally, if not physically - as they did making up, much like another couple I've discussed. Matters weren't helped by the fact that Natsuki began to embrace parts of her mother's heritage, developing an interest in the sciences that led her to study under Dr. Katsuhito Stengovitch, a young but brilliant roboticist who has already featured briefly in this tale. Their mutual interests blossomed into a relationship, and they were married in 2009, with a daughter, Celia, being born to the couple the next year.

Shizuru was, as one might expect, less than happy with this development, and after several years of living in a funk, she took steps to 'improve' upon it. In early 2012, taking advantage of a temporary separation between the Stengovitches, she seduced Natsuki's husband in an attempt to break up his marriage. Not only did this not work, she found herself pregnant as a result. Unwilling to terminate the pregnancy but just as unwilling to be a single mother, she abandoned her daughter to the care of some of her acquaintances, the Asagiri family. They named their adopted daughter Priscilla.
Although, as far as I can tell, Natsuki was not aware of her husband's infidelity, other strains were beginning to show in their marriage. Despite the birth of their second child, Michael, in 2015, by 2018 it was clear that the relationship was over. Ironically, what Shizuru's best efforts failed to accomplish, simple time did ... and when the divorce finally came through, in 2020, Natsuki finally turned to her long-time friend in a romantic way, shortly before they both disappear from my knowledge.

Their respective children, under names slightly different from their birth names, acquired a certain notoriety.

13. Akira

There is no such ambiguity, no such uncertainty, when it comes to the question of whether Takumi ever saw his sister again. As far as he ever knew, she died that day, and if he agreed with her self-assessment, he never said as much to anyone. So perhaps at least one of Mai's wishes came true.

If she wished for him to have a peaceful life, sadly, that wish did not come true. By becoming involved with Akira, such a peaceful life was put forever out of his reach. For the way of the shinobi is a way of death. And that death found them both in 2016, after they became involved in the one of the interminable wars in the shadows of that period. Their deaths were avenged. Unfortunately, vengeance was also successfully sought on those who did the avenging. But they too were avenged, and around and around it goes, in a truly vicious circle.

So it goes.

14. Nao

Natsuki did in fact tell Nao the truth about Mai's actual fate, and Nao was in fact somewhat pleased to learn that Mai had screwed up at the last moment. But she also mourned the fact that she'd never see her again, or have the chance to express whatever she felt about Mai to her. Natsuki decided to leave the decision of what, if anything Nao should tell Takumi about any of this up to her - just as she left the decision of what Nao should learn about Mai and Takumi's 'relationship' up to him.

In the end, Nao was too busy with the rehabilitation of her mother following her long coma to ever become too involved in the affairs of the other side of her family. She was also somewhat distracted by her mother's surprisingly quick return to relationships, as when, over the next year, she became involved with one of her doctors, one Sawagoe Tomaru, whom Nao couldn't stand ... nor, unfortunately, resist. Fortunately, the relationship didn't last long, and its fallout introduced Nao to some of her distant cousins, who soon became friends of hers as well.

The Sawagoe affair did nothing to improve Nao's opinion of men in general, nor did the fact that her mother, on the rebound, married an office worker named Sugimoto, who had a son and daughter from his first marriage. Thus began a somewhat awkward cohabitation, to say the least. Nao was quite happy to escape that cohabitation when she finally went away to university.

There, she met a relatively non-threatening man who claimed, in private, to be the last living descendant of the Tsar of all the Russias. (He was lying. There were others.) While not interested in a relationship with a woman for the typical reasons, he was looking for a socially adept wife to serve as a personal assistant. Nao had grown far more adept at social maneuvering over the years, and it seemed like a cushy gig. (Her words, not mine.) So she married him.

A year or so into the marriage, she went back to her family home to find her mother involved in a
torrid affair with her stepson and stepdaughter, let out a sigh and joined the three of them, in the process becoming pregnant with her stepbrother's baby. She named her daughter, when she was born, Nene.

Sheer coincidence. She could never have known what my real name was, nor could I have told her or affected her decisions in any way. But it makes me happy.

15. Midori

Ah, Midori. Sad, scared, terribly broken Midori, unfortunately more sinning than sinned against.

The way it's supposed to work is that you confess your love, and, since this is a happy story, the subject of your confession admits that they've always had feelings for you as well. But what if the subject has already tried to confess to you and been ignored? What if you can never quite break out of the disturbing routines you've followed until this point?

So it was with Midori and Yohko. They tried, oh, they tried. But the burden of Midori's guilt and regrets was too great for even Yohko's strength to bear. Still, the eventual failure of their relationship proved to be the impetus that forced Midori to finally take charge of her life again, after having drifted aimlessly for so long. She went back to school and became a teacher in truth. (Perhaps the words of Asakura Kazumi affected her more than she was willing to admit.)

And so she became a colleague of her archaeology professor, and joined him in his expeditions. I know what you are expecting to have happened. It did not. Rather than falling into another doomed relationship with him as his marriage dissolved, she put her energies to the task of fighting that dissolution. Ultimately, she succeeded in making both the professor and his wife aware that the strains in their marriage were not, in fact, more important than the happiness they'd managed to find together.

Those who can't ... teach. At least, sometimes.

You may be aware that I haven't told you how either Nao or Midori died. This is more of the selfish secretiveness, for they did in fact meet their ends. But with my own end drawing closer, ever closer, I don't feel any particular need to tell you everything. Wonder. Imagine. Decide for yourself.

16. Mashiro

(Not me, her. I'm Nene, remember.)

On a bright, shining day a little while after Mai and Natsuki's last conversation, Nagi, wearing a bright orange jumpsuit with the characters for "Prisoner" on it, was in the middle of a rock quarry, half-heartedly tapping at a rather large chunk of granite with a small pick. Needless to say, he was not smiling in his typical amused manner. Rather, he was frowning in the fashion of one who finds nothing about this situation even remotely funny.


"I'm not gloating," Mashiro protested mildly. She turned to look at Fumi, who was both pushing her mistress' wheelchair and holding a parasol above her head. "Do you think I'm gloating, Fumi?"

"Gloating being defined as watching the hardship of others, particularly that inflicted by oneself, while one smiles ... Fumi must confess that Fumi observes a faint smile on your face, Mistress."
"Eh?" Mashiro said, feigning startlement. She quickly opened up the purse in her lap and pulled out a tiny compact, then checked her face with the mirror. "Oh my!" she gasped. "I am smiling. How horrid of me."

"Oh ha ha," Nagi 'laughed', shaking his head. "I didn't even know twenty-first century Japan had rock quarries."

"Consider yourself educated."

"And I'm *pretty darn sure* that it doesn't employ convict labor for this sort of thing."

"Golden rule - she who has the gold makes the rules. In any event, I didn't actually come here just to gloat at you." She sighed. "I came to say goodbye."

"... I'm not going to ask, you know," Nagi said, resuming his work with, if possible, even less diligence than he'd been showing before.

"That's all right, it's not necessary," she assured him. "Fumi?"

"Are you going somewhere, Mistress?" the maid said, with the air of one giving a rehearsed response.

"You suck, you know that?" Nagi said over his shoulder to her.

"Annnny second now," Mashiro murmured, checking her watch.

Just as she predicted, a bright square appeared on the ground near the three of them, and from it appeared a certain pair of girls who had disappeared into a similar square a few days ago. The redhead with the hair antennae looked around bewilderedly, her antennae twitching, until her eyes settled on Mashiro in her chair.

She blinked.

Her eyes watered.

And without any warning, she leapt right across the distance between the two of them, squealing, "Mashiro-chaaaaaan!" as she pulled the little girl out of the wheelchair and rolled onto the ground with her in her arms. "Mashiro-chan, Mashiro-chan, Mas-ri-ro-chaaaaan!" she called out again, rubbing her cheeks against Mashiro's as tears rolled down her face.

"Hello. How are you. I've missed you tons and tons," Mashiro said fondly.

Nina, the other dark-haired girl, watched this with an expression of restrained amusement, before turning to regard Nagi with a cold expression. "Hello," she said.

"Hi, Nina," Nagi said cheerfully. "How's your dad doing?"

"Are you sure we can't kill this son-of-a-bitch?" Nina asked Mashiro, who was coming to her feet - yes, she *could* walk - with the hair antennae-haired girl wrapped around her.

"Quite sure."

"Ummm, Mashiro-chan," said the other girl. "You know I love you no matter what you look like, but ... it's a little creepy hugging you like this. Not to mention the other stuff I want to do as soon as we're in private."
With the sigh of the greatly put upon, Mashiro concentrated, glowed, and expanded until she was the height and roughly the same build as her two new companions. "Better?" she asked.

"Mm-hm!" the girl nodded, her antennae bouncing.

"I like her the other way, ant," Nagi said.

"I'm not an ant, I'm ARIKA!" Arika Yumemiya protested, almost reflexively.

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### 17. Fumi

"So you're just going to shuffle on off to the future and leave me here to rot," Nagi said, affecting not to have heard Arika's interjection. (My, but this would become confusing if the putative parents of Negi Springfield were present.) "Words can't describe how much you suck, and I suspect that Fumi-chan here will probably take action if I demonstrate physically."

"Your suspicions are correct," Fumi said coolly.

"Believe it or not, Nagi, I'm actually trying to do you a favor," Mashiro said, while she (and Arika, of course) walked over to where Nina was standing, looking standoffish, and wrapped her up in the embrace as well. She struggled, but more out of habit than anything else.

"Oh, really," Nagi said sourly, leaning back against the rock he was supposed to be cutting. "Let me guess - you're doing me a favor by exposing me to the consequences of my actions, and so causing me to become a better person though a greater awareness of them. I should thank you for this."

He was about to say more, which would probably not have been thanks, when Mashiro interrupted. "No, that's not it. I don't think you will ever change, Nagi. And I'm genuinely sorry that is the case. I have other intentions than that."

"Like what?"

Mashiro smiled and shook her head. "Maybe when you see me again, you can make another guess at them." Her smile faded as she turned to Fumi. "Fumi, all I can offer you for your tireless service on my behalf is thanks ... well, thanks and material things that don't matter to you."

"Neither are necessary, Master," Fumi said. "I derived satisfaction from the fulfillment of my duty to you, and I am very satisfied to have served a master such as yourself."

"Become your own master, Fumi," Mashiro said, after a brief interval.

"... I will try to do so," Fumi replied, with obvious reluctance.

"You'll do fine, then." And then she looked up, into the sky, as though she was gazing up at an invisible barrier of some sort. "And thank you, too," she said. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity to walk among giants, and keep their pace. We created the world we think you would have wished for us ... and now it is time to go back there. But thank you for letting me see this, the cradle of all we are or ever will be."

"... Mashiro-chan, who are you talking to?" Arika asked hesitantly.

"Only a fairy tale," she answered, then said the sweetest words in any language. "Let's go home."

The glowing box appeared at their feet again, and they vanished, but not without one last wave from...
Mashiro to Fumi.
Nagi became aware that there were tears trickling down Fumi's cheeks as she stood there staring at the spot where they'd been. Showing rare sensitivity, he neither commented on them nor looked directly at her until they had ceased.

When they did, though, she murmured, "I will see you again. I will."

"I'd be happy to help you with that if you'd let me go," Nagi said in a helpful tone.

She glared at him. "You offered me help once before."

"And do you regret saying yes?"

She stood a while, thinking on that. "No," she said at last. "I will do it on my own. But I think she would have wanted me to tell you that she has left you here out of compassion. What you have done, what both of you have done, has changed the future in ways that she can't."

"That can't be," Nagi interrupted, blinking, genuinely shocked. "We're far enough back in time that any ripple effects should cancel out before they reach our era."

"And yet not. For all she knows, she has gone back to a future that no longer exists. But I do not believe that," Fumi admitted, turning again to look at the place where her Master, her beloved Master, had been. "Because I will see her again."

... that was nice of Mashiro, don't you think? Thanking me. She didn't have to do that. Thanking me ...

18. Nene

(By which I mean me, not Nao's eventual daughter.)

And so we've come to the end of the story, for there really is no more to tell. Well, I could tell you about the fates of various secondary characters who featured in this last and strangest Carnival, but even I grow tired of the grim accounting of "and then they suffered, but things did get a little better, and then they died" that such stories would be.

Still, I could go on. I have seen such things. I have seen how humanity will grow, and make mistakes, and learn from ... some of them. I have seen how Earth will die, more than a century from now, and yet how Earth's children will survive her and spread throughout the galaxy. I have seen heights beyond my ability to describe, and horrors beyond reckoning.

And in all of that, I have not seen any method by which I can escape the fate which I have made for myself.

Every story provides a window by which you can see another world, perhaps like yours, perhaps unlike. That window is the narrative voice. I made myself into the narrative voice of this story. The story is ending. And so am I. It is a fate that I sought, and one that I deserve.

And yet I want more.

I have lived and done far too much, and yet I want more. Is that the moral of the story, then? That no matter how much people are given, they will always want more? Well, I suppose that is a wise thing to consider for anyone with an optimistic view of humanity. But -
Wait, what's this?

There shouldn't be anything in this place except me. This place is little more than a concept, really, and there's nothing here except me, and now ... him. And I can't even imagine how ... he's waking up.

"Mrhmm?"

He blinks, as one might who has wakened from a long sleep, and I finally recognize him. It has been so long since I last saw him that it took me a while.

"Hello, Tate Yuuichi-san," I say to him.

"Urghuh?" he says, polysyllabically. "Where'm'I? Who're you?"

"That doesn't matter," I tell him. "You're dreaming."

He seems to consider this. "... I was falling ..." he says.

"That too was a dream."

"... okay," he says, still clearly weary. "I'm goin' back to sleep, then."

"Sleep, and when you awake, it will be to yet another dream."

"... uh-huh," he responds, not really listening. Within moments, he is gently sleeping once more.

So that is what happened. The Obsidian Prince, or perhaps what was left of Reito, truly did not want to kill him, and so as he saw him falling, he reached out with his power and shoved him ... here. To where I am. Without even realizing what he was doing. Putting him into the safest place his atrophied imagination could conceive. Putting him outside the story, so it treated him as though he was dead.

It occurs to me that I can use this. Part of the reason that I am stuck in this place is that there is nothing here to work against - nothing I can use to move myself out of here. At least, there was nothing until he arrived. I could push against him, leaving him here to suffer my fate while I escape out into the universe. And I want to do that. I very very very much want to do that.

But I don't. Instead, I use myself to push *him*. He will emerge in our world in a different time and place than that from which he escaped. The far future, the world from which Mashiro and her friends came. What will their saga become, with an active Tate Yuuichi, I wonder?

It is a shame that I will never know. But my last act was not a selfish one. And I can take some small comfort in that.

This, then, is the moral, and I wish that Mai were here so I could tell her. Oversexed child-molesting screw-ups can be heroes, and selfish immortal bitches can do the right thing at some cost to themselves. We all want more, but we can learn to take less.

It's not as bad a story as you thought it was going to be, is it?

But now the story is ending, and so am I. The window closes, and though the world goes on, and another window might open, it will not be me.

My name was Nene. And I am done.

THE END
"This tale grew in the telling." I honestly thought I'd be done with this story long before now, but various interruptions - some pleasant, some rather less-than-pleasant, resulted in delay and delay. (It's still not as delayed as my Nanoha story.) I honestly think this shows in the somewhat overly quick pace of the later chapters, but I included almost every episode that I wanted to include.

What was the point, you may be asking, particularly after the revelation that, no, our heroines will not necessarily end up together and one of them will be guarding a monster pretending to be a man for the rest of that monster's life? Basically, I had some problems with the Mai-Hime storyline, whether the anime, the original manga, the remake manga ... if I'd ever seen more than a few scenes from the visual novel, I'd probably have had issues with it, too. So I told this story, not so much to fix those issues, as to at least explore them.

I won't describe what those issues were. If I've done my job, you've already guessed; if you can't guess, I haven't done my job and telling you what they were won't help. Suffice to say that if Mai-Hime is the precursor, in some respects, of Puella Magi Madoka Magica, it is the follower of Shoujo Kakumei Utena, in that quite a bit about its narrative remains open to question by the time the last episode airs.

Before you ask, I'm not entirely sure that I'll ever be opening the window "Nene" talked about on the future setting of Mai-Otome. It's a far more remote possibility than the next storyline in this series, teased at in various places herein far more blatantly than this was teased at in Decadent Habits. Look for it around August, maybe.

Alert readers will have already noticed that I said "almost every episode" above. There was one more that I wanted but couldn't fit in. I liked (with reservations) both the manga and the anime's use of St. Vlas' dream machine powers, and while the manga's ending - with Haruka breaking out because she realizes that she could never be so happy as she's being right now - inspired the scene I eventually wrote, I did want to give Mai the chance to show what would happen if she went in as well.

And so ...

This was perfect. Everything was perfect. The hardest choice she had to make was which of two handsome guys she wanted to date. She didn't have to work. Her mother was alive. Her little brother was healthy. She had a sweet little sister. She had real friends, not allies whose motives she wasn't sure about. She could karaoke every night if that was what she wanted to do.

It was all perfect, she thought blissfully as she swept in to her house's living room to find Takumi with his pants off and pumping away between their mother's spread legs as she sat on the couch, while Mikoto was riding their father as he lay flat on his back on the floor, hands coming up to rub against her small breasts.

Wait, what?

Mai blinked as her mother looked fondly at her while Takumi rutted with her. "Ah, welcome home, Mai-chan. I hope you don't mind if we started without you."

"What?" Mai peeped. "What ... what are you doing?"
"What we do every chance we get, Mai," her father said. "Family bonding!"

"Mmmm! It's great, papa!" Mikoto agreed. "But Mai is better at it than you."

"Ah, to be overshadowed by my own daughter," her father sighed.

"Don't pout, dear. Natsuki-chan liked what you and Saeko-chan did to her last time they came over for a visit, remember," her mother said consolingly.

"No," Mai said, shaking her head as she started to slowly back away.

Takumi paused in his labors to look at her oddly, as did Mikoto. "Mai?" they chorused. "Is something wrong?"

"Nooooo!" Mai screamed as she ran out of the house.

She ran and ran and ran and finally she could run no more. The day was still bright and shiny, and everyone else that she saw looked happy and/or bewildered that anyone could be unhappy. Eventually, when she reached the point where she couldn't run any further, she slumped against a conveniently placed tree, breathing heavily.

"Something the matter, Mai-chan?" asked a voice from above.

She looked up, and was only half-surprised to see Nagi standing on a thick branch just above her head. "You're here, too?" she asked, despairingly.

"Nope," he answered honestly. "Just like everyone else here in your little lotus eater fantasy, I'm a product of your imagination. Specifically, the part that realizes it's all just a dream. Think of me as the cute and helpful sysadmin."

"All of this comes from me? Even ... that?" she asked, gesturing vaguely behind her.

"Yep," Nagi answered firmly. "You see, Mai-chan, your ideal fantasy world has two key components - one, your mother's still alive, and two, you can go on doing what you've been doing with your little brother. But you know, perfectly well, that if your mother was alive, there's only one way that you'd be doing that sort of thing. So you take the good, you take the bad, and there you have the facts of."

"I don't want to do it, I just -" Mai started to protest.

"Mai. Stop lying to yourself," Nagi said firmly.

Mai bent her head and wept. "Okay," she said eventually. "I do it ... not because of any benefit it brings to him, but because I want to do it. Because I like doing it to him. And I know ... that's wrong. And I do it anyway."

"It feels good to be free of illusions, doesn't it?" Nagi's voice asked her. She looked up to see that he was fading from view, as was everything else.

"No," Mai answered. "It does not."

"That realization is the last illusion," another voice said. And then she was back in the chapel, staring at Yukariko who was staring at her in confusion.

Anyway. Mai comes to that realization under other circumstances.
Some thanks are in order. I'd like to thank Shadow Crystal Mage and OverMaster for once again adding notes of whimsy and mirth to what might have been a rather grim narrative, and IANCE for letting me make him Yamiko's bitch without complaint.

Just like my narrative voice, now that it's actually over, I find myself wanting to drag it out. But I won't. Nearly all characters in this story are the property of other entities. Nobody sue me, okay?

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