

~12. The Stray Cat of Kabukicho~

“Hyahaaaaa!” Satsuki exclaimed, spinning about in her swivel chair. “I am *so* good!”

ESO2 was a live service game, and while Satsuki's guildmates were not so deep into the game that they could keep on the cutting edge of content, it was at least fun for them to handle tough content a bit behind the curve.

<Citron> Excellent work, everyone! ^^

<SATSUKI> woohoo! nice shooting, citron!

<2ND> My, my! That was exciting. Video games are thrilling, aren't they, Citron?

<Citron> They sure are! To think there are so many...

<ToRo> To be honest, I'm not sure SATSUKI hasn't made up a few of the ones she's told me she plays.

<SATSUKI> OK OK LISTEN LISTEN LISTEN

<SATSUKI> listen ok toro

<SATSUKI> listen.

<SATSUKI> i dont make jokes. heck “jokes”. everything i post is real. raw insight without the horse crap. no, i will NOT follow trolls.

<Citron> There are trolls in a zone some distance back. Should I not follow them? ND-nee, what do you think?

<NDni> I followed them for a bit myself~ They mostly go in circles, but I managed to get one very confused about where it was meant to go.

<ToRo> Is this the adult woman's version of cow tipping?

<NDni> Cow tipping? Isn't that a myth, Toro-kun?

<SATSUKI> wait are you telling me beavis and butthead lied to me

<Citron> What are 'beavis' and 'butthead'?

<SATSUKI> oh it's a show from the 90s over in america. by mike judge, the king of the hill  
guy

<ToRo> I love King of the Hill!

<SATSUKI> dubs or subs tho

<ToRo> Oh, subs, no question.

Since her time in high school, two more people had joined Satsuki's gaming group. First, there was NDni, or just 'ND', or 'ND-nee'. Supposedly, her first choice had been '2ND', for reasons Sumie did not know, but that had been taken. From what Sumie had gathered about her and how she presented herself, ND was a mother who was getting on in years who had started getting into video games to try to understand the youth, or something like that. She'd gotten started with a few others before jumping into ESO2, but she said it was her favorite for helping her pass the time when she had nothing else to do.

ND was a playful woman, who occasionally self-described as an 'old biddy' or other such terms, but had an amusingly youthful vigor. She loved interacting with those younger than her. Apparently, her children and family weren't the gaming type either—according to her, “the only other one who plays video games in my family is my little sister, and I do mean *little*, she's hardly twenty! I thought I'd try them and see what she saw in them.”

Citron, meanwhile, was a girl younger than Sumie, who had apparently never played a video game in her life before being granted access to a computer with ESO2 pre-installed. Video games began as being utterly mystifying to her, but thankfully she had chanced into being found by Satsuki's group, and been taught the ropes as best they could. She was wisely cautious about explaining her living situation, given her age, but Sumie suspected that she was quite sheltered, as her lack of knowledge extended to more basic things than video games at times.

Still, she picked up on things quickly, and had the ability to absorb knowledge more thoroughly than Sumie could manage on a good day. She was, as far as Sumie was concerned, a good kid. The origin behind her username was apparently simply that it was in fact her name, which Sumie had told her not to tell anyone outside their group.

Four people was not a particularly large group, but it was enough to do quite a lot, and they could get public players to fill in slots if they needed to. Sumie did not much mind this state of affairs, and considered this group a good bunch.

<ToRo> I'm opening in two hours, so it's about time for me to head out, you all.

<Citron> Oh, is it that time already? Gosh, I hadn't realized.

<NDni> It'll be tomorrow in the blink of an eye, don't you worry~

<SATSUKI> yeah ive got stuff to go do here too. later trails, strangers. you get to bed on time, y'hear, citron?

<Citron> Hey, I get to bed on time!

<SATSUKI> nihihhi.

The sun had set by now, so Kabukicho was in Sumie's favorite state—lit up. She never got tired of the shining lights from wall to wall at the entryway, even on days when she didn't have much to do or look for. Bouncing between them, letting the ambiance of the city soak in, was enough for her to feel

satisfied.

“So, are we hitting anywhere in particular tonight?” SATSUKI asked. “Mizu-tenshi? Karaokekan? Maybe the koi-koi house over at the Dragon Palace?”

Satsuki's nose twitched. “Nah,” Sumie said, “I've got a feeling this is a big one. Pull up the map for me?”

The scent of this opportunity was moving faster than she'd expect a simple treasure to move, and it had been quite strong. “It's between the Arau Building and Bijin Chaya,” SATSUKI said, “heading west.”

Heading straight north from here was the fastest way by. Satsuki had become quite adept at weaving between crowds of people and surmounting obstacles like stray bicycles while keeping up speed—in the blink of an eye she was in front of Hotel Gracery, further down the road. “Right turn in front of Hotel Listo... then left from there, it's passing by Customa... Oh, it's heading to Okubo Hospital?”

“Probably stopping off in Okubo Park unless it's an ambulance or something,” Sumie said. She couldn't hear any ambulance sirens, at least, so she decided to trust her gut and head north past the hospital to Okubo Park.

Okubo Park, just past the hospital, was a hundred-meter asphalt park with courts for a few sports, nestled away amidst the hustle and bustle of Kabukicho. The most notable thing there was a spicy food festival held yearly in August and September. Also notable, of course, was the fact that it was past closing, but Satsuki had scaled the walls with a deft leap and a climb enough times to know that was no obstacle.

Hidden in the shadows behind the wall was a woman who was doing a very good job not standing out this time, seeing as she was wearing dark clothes and a hat over her blonde hair. She was leaning against the wall, sipping a milk carton with one hand, but started when Satsuki landed next to her. “W-whoa!”

“I knew I recognized that smell!” Satsuki said, clapping her hands together and leaning in to take the advantage and get closer. It was unmistakable—she'd run into Vespa, the runner from a few years ago. “Man, I always hoped I'd run into you again! I have so much to ask you.”

Vespa lowered her sunglasses, took another sip of her milk, and said, “Uh, sorry, do I know you?” Now she leaned in, giving Satsuki the stinkeye. “Yeah. No. I've never seen you before.”

“Not like this, anyway,” Satsuki said, unfazed, wagging her finger. “I don't blame you for not recognizing me. After all, the last time you saw me, I was shorter, I had a different hair color, my vibes were like, way different.” The wagging finger changed into an open handshake. “Hi! It's been a few years, but I'm Sumie. Good to see you again!”

“Sumie, Sumie...” Vespa put her hand on her chin, then spun around in place before she dropped her milk carton and her jaw in shock. “Wait, what?! That was you? You're that?!”

“The one and only,” Satsuki said with a catlike smug grin. “You on work in Kabukicho again?”

“Uh...” Vespa tried her best, to Sumie's eyes, to reconfigure herself into looking cool, by leaning against the walls and putting her sunglasses up. “Yeah, I just got off a job. No biggie. I mean, I had both my arms working this time, so hey, it was kid stuff.”

“What was up with that, anyway?” Satsuki asked.

“Hey, a girl's gotta have some secrets, right?” Vespa said, and Sumie supposed that was true. “Good to see you're not dead, kiddo. Would be easy for you to be dead.”

“So,” Satsuki said, leaning up against the wall to mimic Vespa, “so I was thinking, if I ever saw you again. First off, obviously we should be friends, like on a more permanent basis. Duh. Maybe exchange phone numbers.”

Vespa snorted. “What, you think I keep a phone? You think an expert runner of the shadows like myself would keep a centralized hub of information?”

“Yes,” Satsuki said.

There was a moment of silence before Vespa pulled out her phone and said, “Well, you're lucky you're right. Yeesh, when'd I pick up a fangirl?”

“Second, this one's more important, okay, listen, so I'm nineteen, right?” Satsuki said, nodding to her own question. “Like, I'm basically an adult at this point. I've got my own place and sure, I do freelance stuff and all that, but I want to find some more fulfilling work—”

“No.”

“—might actually be like, the coolest person I've ever met, and as it happens I've got some talents I think—”

“Nope.”

“—really want to learn about this kinda clandestine work from you!” Satsuki said, stars in her eyes.

“Oh my god,” Vespa said with a grunt and a scoff, slapping her forehead. “A sidekick. I've got a kid who wants to be my sidekick.”

“Hey, maybe I also want to do this kinda stuff on my own, you don't know.” Satsuki huffed.

“You know that most of what I do's illegal, right?” Vespa said, raising her eyebrow. “Like, I break into buildings, run from the police, stuff like that. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” Satsuki said, nodding her head. “Totally. I mean, I'm a bit limited to Tokyo, but it's Tokyo, it's a huge city, lots going on. And rescuing people from debts and stuff sounds like a cool thing to do!”

Vespa chuckled. “Well, it is. That's true. Still, you don't think you could hack it at a more

normal job?”

“I probably could,” Satsuki said, “but... it's like this. There's a whole bunch of stuff happening in the world that I just don't know about. And thanks to people like you, I know that. So I'm curious. I wanna know about it. And the only way to do that's to dive head-first in!”

“Well, if you say so,” Vespa said with a shrug, “I can at least stay in town long enough to show you a route or something.”

Pumping both her fists in the air, Satsuki let out a squeal of, “Niiiiice!”

<SATSUKI> so you remember how i told you i ran into that foreign lady a few years back

<Citron> I do remember this story!

<SATSUKI> okay so get this

<SATSUKI> i totally ran into her again today. and i'm gonna get her to teach me how to do what she does.

<Citron> You said she was a transporter, right?

<SATSUKI> yeah, yeah.

<Citron> Wow, cool!

~13. The Transporter~

It was hard to get Vespa to talk about herself much. Well, that wasn't true—she was actually quite prone to self-aggrandizement, but it was hard to get her to talk about herself in the same sense it was hard to get Sumie Kazuki to talk about herself. She liked saying that she despised nothing more than introspection.

“We'll talk about my nuclear option later,” Vespa said as she leaned against her motorcycle in a mechanic's garage spot she'd rented. (Incidentally, her motorcycle was a deep yellow, the color of honey, and she called him Chaser. The prevailing wisdom is that vehicles are women, for some reason, but Vespa insisted that Chaser was a 'good boy, who's a good boy', and became very upset if he was ever harmed in some way.) “First off. There's lots of toughs in these parts. Can you fight?”

“Haven't figured that part out yet,” Satsuki said, leaning against the door to mimic Vespa. “I'm really good at running and jumping.”

“Well, can't argue with that,” Vespa said. “How's your information gathering? I get about half of my gigs through looking for them myself.”

“About a month ago I used the deep web to gank a bunch of confiscated cat toys from the Kabukicho police station because the strays by my apartment looked sad,” Satsuki answered.

Blink. “What?”

“I really like cats!” Satsuki said with a smile. “They're great at finding information themselves, y'know. Cats can tell you just about anything if you know how to speak their language. People don't really pay attention to what a cat sees.”

“Okay, okay,” Vespa said with a nod, “you're getting it. I think.” She raised her hand in the air and began wringing her fingers about. “But you are gonna need to get into a fight. Me, I can get into a fistfight and win just fine, but you, well, that muscle's for running and jumping, like you said.”

Vespa got off of Chaser and walked around him to a pile of what looked to Sumie like assorted mechanical junk. The older woman seemed to know what she was looking for, though, as she reached her hand into the pile and pulled out a small knife. Though it was clearly a bit dull from both use and disuse, its blade still carried a small gleam. Its handle was black, metallic, and straight—and now that Sumie looked a bit closer, it looked like a switchblade.

It was placed in Satsuki's hands, and Satsuki gripped it in her right hand and began hefting it to get the feel for it. “This thing's pretty reliable. The guy who runs this place gave it to me, and I used it. It's good. Remember, stab if you're trying to injure, slash if you're trying to disable. Better to hit the large muscles.”

“Stab to injure, slash to disable,” Satsuki said, nodding. “Got it.”

The metal in the knife felt like it rang out a curious tone in Sumie's head. It made sense to her—though what 'it' was, she wasn't sure, she was nevertheless able to understand the general flow of how to swing this. “Yeah,” SATSUKI said, “like that. You're getting it. Good swing!”

Vespa had stood back to let Satsuki swing a few times, but couldn't help whistle. “Whoa, what the hell? You sure this is your first switchblade, kid?” she said, as Satsuki continued practicing. “Wait, am I just bad with knives? ...Nah. I'm badass.”

“You're getting it!” SATSUKI said as Sumie swung. “Great. Nice swing. Good shot!”

“How do you know how to wield a knife?” Sumie asked.

There was the sound of a shrug. “Because I've got great intuition?” SATSUKI posited.

“Okay, okay,” Vespa said, putting her hand on Satsuki's shoulder to stop her, “you can practice that on your own time, Jethro. Tell you what. Since you're so dang excited about this, I'll call you in next time I've got a small job, you can help out. You got a good place to meet up?”

<SATSUKI> hey toro

<ToRo> Speaking.

<SATSUKI> you mind if i use eightfold to like, meet someone

<ToRo> Assuming I have the space. Try to come when I'm not full up.

<SATSUKI> we'll paaaay

<ToRo> Oh, of course. I let you stay without paying, but whoever your friend is, they're paying.

<SATSUKI> www the businessman arrives!

“Okay,” Vespa said, having passed her bowl of curry off to Satsuki claiming she wasn't hungry, “so the Fukuda family's had to move up here since the Sumaderas kicked them out from Yotsuya. This guy's family are all ready to get up and go with what they've got, but we need to get the guy from this building, here...”

Vespa pointed a spare chopstick at a building on the east side of Kabukicho. “...to Tokyo Station, where he'll board the Tokaido for Shin-Osaka. I'll handle transporting the guy from here to there, and I've told his family where to head from there. I'm gonna have you work on the building and the grunts—just make sure they don't notice me.”

Satsuki nodded. “Mmhm, mmhm.”

“We've got three hours before the last Tokaido train leaves, but I can call in a favor if we miss that,” Vespa said. She looked around. “By the way, this place looks way better than the last time I was here.”

“Oh, yeah,” Satsuki said with a smile, “Toro's done a great job. Haven't you, Toro?”

“Thank you for acknowledging that I'm here,” said Rokuro, who was turned around at the pot. “You're lucky I'm used to this kind of talk, you know. A weaker businessman might be reporting you.”

“But you're not weak,” Satsuki said with a wink. “You're Rokuro Togetsu. It's a powerful-sounding name, isn't it?”

“It's nothing special,” Rokuro said, “but I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“So who is this guy, anyway?” Vespa asked, raising her eyebrow. “You know a lot of middle-aged bald guys?”

“We play video games together,” Satsuki said, finishing her bowl of curry and moving onto Vespa's as she spoke. “He's a good guy.”

Vespa blinked. “Oh, wait, oh. To-ro. Togetsu... Rokuro, okay, got it.”

It was a compact, six-story building that Satsuki was tasked with canvassing. The business inside was a front of some sort, and Vespa was preparing to head in from a window on the fifth floor, where the target was. (As Sumie understood, the man's name was Susumu Gohda, a businessman in the employ of the Japan-wide Shigure Shipping, who had been used as a middleman in dealings between the head of the company and the Fukudas to bully a rival shipping company out of Shinjuku.)

What Vespa needed out of Satsuki was a distraction, and Satsuki figured that cutting the power at an opportune time was a good idea. The power room was on the ground floor, and could be easily accessed through a side door behind a steel fence that Satsuki could easily lockpick through.

“Alright,” she said to Vespa over the phone, “I'm going to mess up the air conditioning unit, sneak in the inside, and flip the main breaker. They've got a guy with repair tools on site already, so he should come out.”

“Sounds good,” Vespa said. “Top of the hour, got it?”

Waiting completely silently back here was a bit nerve-wracking for Sumie, who had to forcibly steady her breathing. “Hey, no biggie,” SATSUKI said, “we've got this.”

—Go! Satsuki dove over to the air conditioning unit, and she used her knife to deftly slash the wires. She leapt back into the shadows, then waited for another few moments before the *click-clack* of the door signaled the man with the repair tools.

“Stupid thing,” the man in question (a scruffy old fellow whose nature is largely unimportant aside from his role as air conditioner repairman among the Fukuda family) said, as he walked out to check on the units. “Wait... ah, shit, was it those punks again? Slashed the damn wires. Aw, shit.”

The door was unlocked behind him, so Satsuki slipped into a plain white hallway. The power room was two doors on the left, and was similarly locked, but they'd had the repairman over here as the sole watch, so Satsuki swiftly picked the lock and ducked into a small breaker room.

Moments later, a flipped switch bathed the building in the dark of night, as complaints and grunts became audible from the upper floors. Satsuki left the power room, peeked out the door to ensure the repair guy wasn't looking, and walked out, keeping her footsteps as quiet as a cat's.



The gate was squeaky, though, so she couldn't manage to get out without making a bit of noise. She ducked to the side, far enough to be out of the repair guy's view when he looked over in that direction, but the mutterings he'd made gave her an idea. Satsuki reached down and picked up a loose rock off of the side of the pavement, then hurled it at a window on the fifth floor. It did not break, but it audibly cracked.

“Who the hell's screwing with us?!” yelled someone from inside, before the window was opened, and another yakuza looked out to see the rapidly-fleeing form of Satsuki, dashing in the opposite direction from Vespa's route out. Sumie knew by now that yakuza tended to be easy to anger, especially from small families like this, so she was pretty sure that they'd probably be paying attention to her.

Of course, she also knew that she was faster than them. Ducking into an alleyway pre-emptively, she started turning at every intersection she could find. She just needed to run for long enough to ensure they lost track of her, so making her route complicated was a good way to help that out. Eventually, she turned out onto Yasukuni-dori, the avenue she'd turn on to enter Kabukicho, and decided that she could end her route over in Don Quijote.

<Vespa> It's been pretty quiet. Got the guy on the train. Nice job, kid.

<SATSUKI> yeah np! lemme buy some cat food and we can meet up

“Okay,” Vespa said, after they'd both snuck into Okubo Park again. She sipped a coffee. “You run into any guys after you leave?”

“You kidding? I'm the fastest, baby,” Satsuki said. “I'm the beautiful Satsuki.”

“Decent handle. Mine's better, though,” Vespa said, taking another sip of her coffee. She sighed aloud and made a show of shrugging. “Okay, fine. You're alright. If I ever need your help or something, I'll call you up if I'm in the area.”

“And you'll teach me to be badass?” Satsuki asked, leaning in with the sparkles back in her eyes.

“One step at a time, kid,” Vespa said, putting her hand on Satsuki's face to push her away. “You've gotta learn to not be bad or ass first before you can be badass.” This was, apparently, so she could make this quip and then deliver fingerguns to Satsuki. Satsuki fired the fingerguns back.

~14. (Ab)normal~

Satsuki had a natural aptitude for sneaking about places, with all of the scurrying about she'd done beforehand. As it turned out, she also enjoyed it—there was something thrilling about busting into buildings you weren't meant to be in. Making a hobby about it—another part-time job, with the occasional recompense—just made sense.

With the ability for Sumie and SATSUKI to digest building plans faster and more accurately than the average person, she had at times considered getting work as a physical penetration tester—that is, someone who breaks into buildings to test the vulnerabilities in the system. However, the allure of being able to take what she needed from criminals or the government was too strong to ignore—often literally, as the scent of the opportunities would waft into her nose.

As such, assisting Vespa in her transporting work was a natural step up. Sumie had already used the deep web fairly frequently to obtain reading material for when she was off (for instance, textbooks to memorize), so using it to search for records of those in poor situations was a logical extension. Kabukicho was a busy area, so she had no shortage of work right near home.

This was about the time, incidentally, that she began streaming. She'd started off doing practiced parkour routines about Tokyo, but her videos had become well known through Satsuki's quirky personality, enough so that she felt justified making videos of her other hobbies. She was not overly popular, but she had enough of a following to feel proud of.

It is hard to describe this as a “double life”, seeing as there was really very little difference here between her 'public' and 'private' lives. She was doing much of the same business, and doing it with the same irreverence for authority. Really, it is a wonder she managed to avoid arrest, but she had some factors on her side—for one, she was well-liked in Kabukicho, so it was easy to find hiding places and evade capture. Second, trawling the deep web frequently gave her solid blackmail material, so if she was caught by unsavory elements, she could worm her way out socially.

Eventually, it was easiest to just lie back and let things happen, for Sumie. Whether she was having a good time inside or outside, day or night, it was wonderfully simple to lie back and go with the flow, allow Satsuki to do as she did. She felt blissfully unworried about her fate. Life just fell into place, and she was falling with it, so she let herself fall.

“Sumie? ...Sumie?”

That was right. SATSUKI was her, and she was SATSUKI, so it didn't really matter who it was that was in charge. It was fine if she didn't do anything. It was fine... if she just closed her eyes...

“That's alright. If you need to rest, I can handle it.”

Thus did life continue for Satsuki.

Her schedule was busy, with streaming, work, gaming, caring for the stray cats she'd picked up along the way, and generally being the beautiful Satsuki, so months passed in the blink of an eye. Everything was enjoyable for her. She was a hero.

<NDni> You know, SATSUKI, you have a lot of cats, don't you?

<SATSUKI> i think theyd kill me if i said i 'had' them but ya i'm friends with a lot of cats

<NDni> As it happens, lately I've started a cat food business~

<SATSUKI> yoooo fr? can i get a discount

—To say that Sumie was startled to open her eyes was an understatement. In the middle of typing a witty followup, she let out a loud gasp, her body going rigid. “Wha, what, I, I, um?” Sweat began to break out from her forehead, and her muscles continually flexed themselves to ensure they were awake. “Where am—I—?”

What the hell had just happened to her? She was doing things normally, and then—wait, but how long had she—it wasn't like she didn't remember what had been happening, but—

“You okay?” SATSUKI asked.

Sumie clutched her head. Her breath came out in shuddering gasps, and she staggered out of her chair, supporting herself on the wall of her apartment. There was something deeply, deeply wrong. Had she...

“I'm... Sumie, right?” Sumie mumbled to herself. “I'm Sumie. And you're—You're SATSUKI. I'm not Satsuki, I'm Sumie.”

—Had she... vanished?

“Don't do that,” Sumie said. She shook her head. “Don't do that. Don't, don't do that. Don't do that!”

“Huh? But, I mean, you needed the help, right?” SATSUKI asked. “Was it really that big of a deal?”

“Yes!” Sumie shouted, clutching her head. “Yes, it's... Oh my god. Oh my god.”

To suddenly become aware that she had been thoroughly dissociating for months on end sent chills down Sumie's spine. She stared at herself in her mirror, grabbing it and saying, “I'm Sumie, I'm Sumie, I'm Sumie,” again and again, trying to fight back the tears in her eyes. Her memories sat, strange and malformed, in her skull. Eventually, they would reform into their proper shape, but at that moment she felt a deep disquiet with herself.

“Don't do that. Don't take me away,” Sumie said, shaking her head. “You... You shouldn't do that! I need to... I don't want to disappear. Please.”

“Okay,” SATSUKI said. “Sorry. Is it really that scary?” Sumie nodded. “Okay. Sorry.”

<SATSUKI> sorry about the wait. so it's 'meowden's', huh? what's the name from?

<NDni> Oh, my. A lady's got to have some secrets~

~15. A Single Thread~

“I saw your last stream!” Citron said. “It was really cool! All the buildings were so tall, and you scaled them so well. You're incredible, Satsuki!”

“Ehehehehe,” Satsuki said, rubbing the back of her head (not that Citron could see it, seeing as they were on a voice call), “no, no, it wasn't THAT much. Geez.”

Seeing as Citron didn't seem to have many friends in real life, to Sumie's eyes it seemed as though she saw her as something of an older sister—though Sumie didn't want to presume, exactly. “Really! I wish I had a talent like that,” Citron said. She shook her head. “Well, I do, but they aren't really good enough.”

“Says who?” Satsuki said, leaning in to her computer (again, not that Citron could see it). “I bet you've got a lot you can do.”

“Well, um... Oh!” Citron said. “I'm pretty good at decorating my room. Do you want to see?”

“Obviously!” Satsuki said.

The picture in question came through their chat. “This was taken from my door,” Citron said. To Sumie, it looked as though it must be Citron's room—it was a spacious, rectangular room with white and yellow floral wallpaper. There was carpet, and an orange and red circular-print rug sat under her computer setup in the left corner. Citron had her own bookshelf full of books—on the bottom shelf were larger, thinner books, picture books for children, but the subjects became more advanced as it went upward, so perhaps she'd kept the same bookshelf since she was a child. Her bed was similarly flower-printed, with a quilted comforter that Sumie could certainly curl up under. There were a number of stuffed animals about, as well, including a stuffed hippo large enough to sit on as a chair.

“Aaaaaah, your room's so cute!” Satsuki said, clapping. “There's no windows or mirrors, though?”

“Oh, um, there's a mirror behind me, but no windows, no,” Citron said. “The air is good enough without them, and I have sun lamps for when I need them.”

“I like windows,” Satsuki said, “cause I can get in and out of them. I'm tricky that way.”

“So, you think it's good?” Citron asked. “I-I don't have much else to do with my days, so I ask for things sometimes.”

As far as Sumie had gathered, Citron was homeschooled, so it made sense she didn't get out much. Still... “Well, do you ever, like, *want* to do things?” Satsuki asked. “Get out there and stuff.”

“Oh, of course!” Citron said. “But... oh, um, I think I have to go, actually. I'm sorry. Talk to you later?”

“For sure,” Satsuki said. Sumie's curiosity was piqued, but barging into a friend's private life would be rude, so she didn't bring it up again, even when she spoke with Citron over voice calls again.

That was, until November, 2018—when the story of Sumie Kazuki once again took a sudden, sharp turn.

Searching the deep web for classified government footage was old hat to Sumie by this point, and as there were many like-minded individuals, these sorts of videos appeared with some frequency. However, today's was quite curious. Its title?

*Footage of half-cat, half-human in underground facility*

“Well,” Sumie said, “this is relevant to me, so I might as well.”

It was two minutes and thirty-seven seconds. The footage in question was of a T-junction hallway, stark white walls all the way down, leading to a door on the opposite side. For approximately one minute, there was nothing. Then, two people walked down the hallway. One was a colossal man in a dark suit, and 'colossal' here means 'the largest, buffest man Sumie had ever seen'. He had very short, dark hair, and sunglasses, but his strongest point was the clearly visible amounts of muscle mass present on his brick wall-like body.

The second, though, was the truly startling one—following the muscular suit was a girl with a long head of snow-white hair. She was barefoot, and wore a plain white dress—when she turned to look down the other hallway, words that the camera didn't pick up coming from her mouth, her bright blue eyes sparkled in the light.

And, of course, there were the cat ears. This girl did not possess a pair of human ears, but instead, a pair of cat-like ears on the top of her head, clearly part of her hair, with tufts of white fur inside. They twitched as she looked about, presumably having heard some noise. As far as humans went, she didn't look all that old, perhaps about sixteen or seventeen. Her frame was small, and her skin a pale pink, much different from the clearly Japanese man leading her about.

Sumie's eyes were glued to the screen, pausing the footage every few frames to study it. While the video was not in the best quality, the lifelike motions of the ears the girl had, as well as the absence of human ears on the side of her head, were hard to argue. She had been expecting something fabricated or much easier to fake, but this looked startlingly real. A real-life cat girl.

“bet this'll make the otaku happy, eh” SATSUKI added.

The cat girl seemed to know the suit, as she didn't appear frightened of him, but a sort of anxiety came from Sumie watching this video, seeing her go deeper into the hallway. The suit opened the door at the end of the hall, and the cat girl walked inside. The angle was low enough that a bit of the carpeted room inside, very distinct from the rest of the video's setting, was visible for a few seconds as she walked inside. Then, she entered, the door closed, and the suited man left.

Sumie wasn't sure what to think of it. She made sure to download the video file in case it was taken down, but as she spent an hour or two poring over it for details, she tried her best to find any break in the footage that could be evidence of fabrication. Nothing. Even with two minds scanning over it, nothing.

The next day, she returned to her work, but when she was off, she thought again about it. Then

the next day, and the day after that.

<ToRo> Satsuki, are you alright?

<SATSUKI> oh yeah ive just been like. distracted

<Citron> Oh, no! Has something happened?

<NDni> I'm sure a busy girl like her has quite a lot happening.

<SATSUKI> yeah i just got like. presented with a weird mystery. and im trying to figure it out but i think ive hit a wall.

<SATSUKI> tl;dr im trying to figure out if a video i saw is fake. not sure i should send it over bc like if it's real it's a big deal

<ToRo> Did you get sent footage of a murder or something...?

<SATSUKI> what. no

<NDni> Ooh, or perhaps something a bit more scandalous?

<SATSUKI> what. no. im not staring at a sex tape, ND.

<Citron> That would be very improper! I'm glad you're not.

“So I just can't figure this out,” Satsuki said to Vespa as they hung out at the bar at Eightfold. “I don't know why I keep coming back to it but I can't find anything that makes it look fake. It looks real.”

“Well,” Vespa said, scrolling through the footage, “you're a bit of a pain in the ass about that kind of thing, so I'm not surprised.” She made a few noises as she looked it over. “Not the craziest thing I've ever seen, but if it's true, it's big. An experimental subject like this would be a big deal.”

“Right?” Satsuki said with a few nods. “There's something that's bugging me in here, too. I'm not sure what it is, but it's just... something's bugging me.”

“Whoa!”

It was only then that Sumie realized that Rokuro had been staring over her shoulder, and had jumped back, causing a ladle to clatter a bit. “Don't be so jumpy, Toro, it's a bad look,” Vespa said, leaning one arm on the counter.

“Well, I'm sorry, but I don't know how else I'm meant to react,” Rokuro said, reaching up and re-adjusting his headband, then using one of his hands to rub the belly of the Buddha of the future, Maitreya.

“It's weird, right?” Satsuki said, staring intently at the footage.

“What? Oh, the girl with the cat ears, yes, but that's not what I'm talking about,” Rokuro said.

“That's my brother.”

Pause.

“What?!” Satsuki and Vespa exclaimed at the same time.

All three of them huddled around Sumie's laptop that she'd brought for inspecting the footage, and Rokuro pointed at the colossal suit leading the young girl along. “I'd recognize him anywhere,” Rokuro said. “That's my older brother, Jiro Togetsu.”

Satsuki and Vespa looked at Rokuro, and Vespa raised her eyebrow and gave Rokuro a once-over for appraisal before saying, “Yeah, I can see the family resemblance.”

Satsuki's first thought (coming from SATSUKI, as it happened), meanwhile, was “Your older brother's name is Jiro and your name is Rokuro?”

“Yes,” Rokuro said, his lips going flat and his eyes narrowing, “yes, that's how Togetsu boys are named. I'm the sixth of seven sons and our names are Ichiro, Jiro, Saburo, Shiro, Goro, Rokuro, and Shichiro.”

Anyhow, back to the footage. Rokuro was given the chance to scroll through the footage, and he made small grunts as he did. “Yes, there's no doubt. That's Jiro leading her along.”

“So is this the kinda thing your brother'd be doing?” Vespa asked.

Rokuro nodded. “It's the family business. Political work—espionage, assassination, protecting the interests of politicians—is the role of a man of Togetsu. As you can no doubt see, Jiro is... large, so he's been used fairly frequently as a bodyguard or a protector for financial or political interests.”

Pause.

“Oh,” Sumie gasped as her eyes widened, “emphasis on *honest* businessman.”

“Yes,” Rokuro said.

—Then that settled it. This footage was almost certainly genuine. At the very least, these two people likely existed, and the lack of visible editing on the footage made it seem as though this was... real...

Two minutes, fifteen seconds. Jiro has opened the door for the young girl, but she has not entered yet. The angle was low enough that Sumie could see into the room, and she noticed something—part of a circular rug, with orange and red print. The wheel of a swivel chair was present on it.

“...Hold... hold on,” Sumie said, her arm trembling briefly. She recognized that rug. But that was impossible, wasn't it? That would be ludicrous. Outright insane. What were the odds? There was no way something like this would simply happen to her.

—But it wouldn't be the first time, so she pulled up the picture. “What's this?” Vespa asked.

Sumie pointed at the rug. The chair was present, too, and its wheels, a shiny white, were the same color. “Is that the same rug?”

There was a moment of silence.

“If this is of that room, it would've been taken from in front of that door,” Sumie added. She pulled up the still frame of the footage again. “It's the same rug, right? In the same position, with the same pattern.”

“Hold up,” Vespa said, staring intently at the still frame. “Based on the angles in these photos... and in the footage...” She muttered to herself for a moment. “...Yeah, what the hell? That's identical. I'm pretty sure it's the same distance from the door. The carpet's the same texture, and... yeah, you can see a bit of the wall.”

“So, this picture is of *that* room?” Rokuro exclaimed. “How on Earth did you get a picture of the inside of a government facility?”

One more moment of silence. This one was longer and deeper than the rest. It stretched to two, then three.

“That's Citron's room,” Sumie said. “She sent me this photo herself. That's her room.”

“Huh?” Rokuro said, before chuckling. “Oh. Is that meant to be a joke?”

“No,” Sumie said, “I'm serious. I think that's what's been bugging me.”

“Well, that's impossible,” Rokuro said with a smile on his face. “I mean, certainly it's not *impossible*, but what are the chances? We've been playing ESO2 with a catgirl from an underground government facility?” He laughed. “Ah, that would be insane, wouldn't it?”

“Yeah, crazy,” Sumie said. “Just wild.”

“I mean, if it were true,” Vespa added with a shrug, “it'd be the scoop of the century.”

Ah, but then there was one more moment of silence.

“What?!” Rokuro exclaimed, leaping back and bonking his back against his door, causing the entry bell to jingle. “Ow! What?! No! You mean to tell me that's Citron?!”

“I mean, seems like!” Sumie exclaimed, throwing her hands up. “You think I think it makes sense? I'm just saying what makes sense to me, man!”

So there was that.



~16. An Old Friend~

<SATSUKI> hey citron, random question.

<Citron> Yes? What is it?

Sumie briefly considered asking if she knew a Jiro Togetsu, just to confirm, but that would be too obvious. Whoever owned that facility was likely reading the talks Citron had to ensure no security leaks occurred.

<SATSUKI> you mentioned before that you don't get out much. does that, like... bum you out?

<Citron> Well... kind of. But... I have a condition that prevents it. My caretakers tell me it would be a bad idea for me to go outside much.

<SATSUKI> ah. gotcha. that sucks.

<Citron> It's not all bad, though. I have you, and Toro, and ND-nee. That's three more friends than I had before. I'm sure I can make lots of friends on the internet if I try!

What was she meant to do about this? About all of this? She couldn't just leave it alone, but what was she supposed to do? Her friend was stuck underground in a cold facility. Even if she had a nice room, and even if she was theoretically cared for, that wasn't good for anyone. But what was she meant to do? Petition the government? She'd probably get assassinated if she tried—and most politicians on the ground probably had no idea this was even a thing.

If she didn't know what facility this was, though, and where it was, Sumie had no hope. Tracing the signal of Citron's posts would be difficult at best and a terrible idea at worst. The people running this facility surely took security seriously. As she'd expected, the footage of Citron and Jiro had been scoured from the internet after less than twenty-four hours—there was a real possibility she possessed the only surviving copy of the footage, though anyone else who did also likely wouldn't let go of it.

November turned to December, and then to January. Sumie had no choice but to continue on her daily routines, though more daring work was put off of the itinerary. She lived in fear that one day, Citron would simply vanish, and this thread of the world's history, of her history, of her friend's history, would vanish with her. But, as was often the case with Sumie Kazuki, she managed to live alongside that fear.

Then, in January, there was a minor incident.

<ToRo> Is this a bad time, Satsuki?

<SATSUKI> nah i'm not up to much wassup

<ToRo> I've got an... odd customer. He's the only one in the store at the moment, but I'm a bit concerned about his well-being and I need to step out. How soon can you be here?

<SATSUKI> gimme fifteen

“—can't get drunk off of milk, sir, there's no way you're drunk.”

“I can get drunk off of *whatever I want* to get drunk off of, *sir!* Don't assault my misery!”

“You know this is a restaurant, yes? I know I serve alcohol, but if you want to get drunk, you could go to a bar.”

Thus was the conversation Satsuki walked in on, when she entered Eightfold. A young man was hunched over at the counter, thrusting a half-emptied glass of milk at poor Rokuro's face. Rokuro turned to the door as the bell rang out and breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank goodness. You're here.”

“What's the sitch?” Satsuki sat up on the bar next to the young man, who was dressed in a long, dark overcoat, his silver hair looking shaggy and frazzled—wait, actually...

“Now you've brought a friend by to ponder me? Leave me to wallow in my sorrow, you heartless wretch!” The young man waved his glass around a bit more, before turning to look at Satsuki. “That goes for you as we—er, uh?”

There was a moment of silence as the two blinked at each other. Rokuro took that moment to slip out. Then, Sumie exclaimed, “Senpai!?”

This man was unmistakable—despite a bit of dishevelment, it was most certainly Kirimaru Ayanokoji drowning his sorrows in milk. “S-Sumie-san,” he mumbled, putting his glass down and sitting up straighter. “What are you doing here?”

“Uh, Senpai, you know I come to Kabukicho all the time, right?” Sumie said, staring at him. “I'm friends with the owner, we play games together. What are *you* doing here?”

“Ah, yes,” Kirimaru said, staring back down at the counter, “isn't that the question. Of course the world would present you here to marvel at the prodigal son at his lowest. The one person left to hold me to any standard, here to witness the spectacular train wreck that is Kirimaru Ayanokoji.”

“I'm not marveling at you, I'm concerned about you. C'mon,” Sumie said, putting her arm around him, “look, it's been a while. What's going on? Are you okay?”

“Are principles principles if we apply them selectively?” Kirimaru asked to his glass and Sumie simultaneously. “Can I call myself a man of principle, of order, if I fight to defend interests that represent a toxic order, ungermane to my own feelings?!”

Sumie blinked. “So... uh, your job not going well?”

“I quit,” Kirimaru said.

“Ohhhh,” Sumie said, patting Kirimaru on the back, “okay, yeah, that would kinda hurt you, wouldn't it?”

“For years, I've been battling myself to remain ignorant of the interests I was protecting. Certainly, I thought, if the authorities in my life needed them protected, they were worth protecting!”

Even in the darkness of Okitama's M Ward, I battled myself. But I could remain ignorant no longer, Sumie! That which Unit 8 of Murakumo battled for—I had been made a slave to the interests of those interested only in an order I could not support, those who would make weapons and experiments out of innocent people!” Kirimaru said. “So my parents are very displeased with me, and I am no longer employed. My principles stated I could work no longer.”

“Aww, Senpai,” Sumie said with a smile, “I knew you were a good guy.”

“I am no good guy! I am a dog of the military!” Kirimaru exclaimed. “Serving as a loyal guard for human experimentation, pah! My record is stained with blood!” He clenched his fist, gritted his teeth, and allowed tears to flow down his face. “Don't look at me, old friend. I don't deserve your eyes upon me!”

Sumie leaned in and put her face directly on Kirimaru's coat, including her eyes. “No!” Kirimaru exclaimed. “No, don't do that. You might hurt yourself.”

Sitting back up, Sumie said, “I think it matters what you do now, not what you were doing before.” She grinned. “You were just doing the best you could. I get it.”

“You... you are truly too kind of a girl, Sumie. I hope you are aware of this,” Kirimaru said with a sniffle. “That you could extend such compassion to a wretch like me...”

“Dude, you're ordering milk and pretending to get drunk off of it. You're one of the purest people I know,” Sumie said. “It's really good to see you again, even if you are an emotional wreck. I missed you.”

—To go into detail regarding the human rights violations of Murakumo would be belaboring the point to an almost comical degree. You do not need to be told about the human rights violations of Murakumo again. You might already be sick of hearing about the new ways in which they had committed human rights violations, and yearn for the even-handed and genial leadership of a milquetoast lab rat who wishes people would refer to him by a cool nickname, but unfortunately we are still in reminiscence, and as such must discuss one last form of human rights violations.

As such, we will move to after Kirimaru spent some time unloading on Sumie about human rights violations committed by his agency and the political parties it assisted, and Sumie had sat and listened for some time, and Rokuro had returned to the store to be surprised that Sumie and Kirimaru were old friends.

“—the United Nations party,” Kirimaru said with a swig of milk, “are bastards. 'Nations united under Japanese rule', hah! What a load of malarkey. True order comes through the unification of nations under common cause, not imperialism. If you ask me, it's good that Kozakura didn't come to power, though of course I don't approve of his murder.”

“That was the guy who was gonna become Prime Minister, right?” Sumie asked.

“Yes, the United Nations party candidate, and head of the party, as well. He was a dangerous man, keen and shrewd, with an eye for using any method he could to get the leg up on other nations. Murakumo was frequently used as his dogs for the sake of funding the president's interests, like that ghastly project down in Okitama—oh, Kozakura would've been happy to be the beneficiary of that,

believe you me.” Kirimaru had not gone into too great of detail regarding the Kannon Soldier Project, as he did not have much detail to give, but Sumie had gotten the gist that it turned out to have been bad.

“There are many political interests I'm not a fan of, myself,” Rokuro said, working on a bowl of nikujaga as per Kirimaru's order, “but the UN Party frightens me. I'd much rather not go to war if we could help it.”

“And now,” Kirimaru said, “now, even after Kozakura's death, they've continued on with some of his ghastly experiments. Cloning of some ancient genome—they managed a successful clone, you know—”

Sumie pulled out her phone at light speed, and pulled out the photo of Citron's room, shoving it in Kirimaru's field of vision. “Hold on. Do you recognize this room?”

Pause.

“How do you—?” Kirimaru sputtered. “Yes, this—well—I-I, having this is highly illegal, you know.”

“Citron took it and sent it to me herself. We play video games together,” Sumie said, as Kirimaru's expression grew further and further shocked, seemingly beyond human limits. “Toro here does too. Me, him, and another friend of mine figured out a few months ago that Citron was a catgirl held in an underground facility, and that one of her attendants is Toro's older brother.”

Kirimaru calmly took a drink of milk, swallowed it, and then loudly exclaimed, “I'm being served by a Togetsu?!”

“I'll have you know this Togetsu is an honest businessman,” Rokuro said, handing Kirimaru his bowl of stew. It was plain and simple, how Kirimaru liked it. “But yes. My name is Rokuro Togetsu.”

“To think... The group of friends she had included a Togetsu, yes, but you as well, Sumie?” Kirimaru said. He put his head in his hands. “That's a coincidence beyond imagining. Yes, she is one and the same—the United Nations resurrected her from the genome of an ancient species of beastmen who lived on this planet well before human memory.”

“Why?” Sumie asked.

“These beastmen had the curious talent of metallurgy,” Kirimaru said. “The hope was that they could be used as a weapon. Citron is the only experimental subject who was successfully revived thus far, but she does possess this... 'ATL Code', they've called it, in her genes. She can psychically manipulate metals into different shapes—it's startling to see.”

“Seriously? Citron? A weapon?” Sumie shook her head and scoffed. “Have they met her? She's so sweet.”

“It doesn't matter their disposition,” Kirimaru said. “Those who work in the shadows of our government will use anyone as a weapon if it suits their needs. I... I could do nothing. Nobody deserves to live their life trapped in a pit such as that, and yet I could do nothing! I ran away.”

“Hey. Senpai,” Sumie said, turned away, her head looking at the wall. “So... You wanna get her out, right?”

“In an ideal world—”

“So do I,” Sumie said. “It'd make her happier, I know. You're right. Nobody deserves that. So let's do it. You know where this lab is, right?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then let's do it!” Sumie turned her head back, with a wide smile. “I've gotten pretty good at breaking into places, y'know. We can make a plan, figure it out—I've got experience in this kind of thing now.”

“Eh?” Kirimaru blinked. “Why do you—ah, why should I question this? Of course you do.” He clapped his cheeks. “You know what? Sure. Why not? We can attempt to figure something out. It goes against everything I know as a man of order, but nevertheless my heart screams to enact my own vision of justice!”

“Great!” Sumie clapped. “Okay, first—”

The entry bell for Eightfold rang. “Welcome in!” Rokuro called out, and then said, “Ponder this later, kids.”

~17. The Plan~

“Alright,” Kirimaru said, sitting down on a stool at Eightfold. Sumie sat next to him, as did Vespa. “To be clear, ma'am, this is quite a large job, and I highly doubt Citron possesses any money.”

“Hey, it sounds fun,” Vespa said, leaning over the bar counter and nursing a drink, “and I got paid last week, so fuck it, right?”

“That's Vespa for 'I want to do the right thing too',” Sumie said. Vespa threw up her middle finger at her. (When Sumie had mentioned this to her in the first place, Vespa's first response had been 'you son of a bitch, I'm in'.)

“Citron is held at a UN Party facility in Yokohama,” Kirimaru said. He pulled out a map of Yokohama and pinpointed the location. “The location is in Kanagawa-ku, amidst the industrial sector. It's disguised amidst those buildings.”

“Why's a nationalist party got such a big place in Yokohama?” Sumie asked. “I mean, if they hate foreign people, that's the biggest port in Japan. What, do they wanna take it over from the inside and close it off again?”

“It is rather ironic, yes,” Kirimaru said, “but I believe it was largely logistics. You might not be wrong, though.”

“Kanagawa, huh?” Vespa said, rubbing her chin. “Okay, I can work with that.”

“The facility possesses five underground floors,” said Kirimaru, drafting up a plan on a piece of paper for Sumie and Vespa to look over. “Citron, naturally, is on the deepest. Emergency stairs exist in this facility, but otherwise, there is only one elevator that goes this deep.”

“What are the guard patrols like?” Vespa asked.

“This is the UN Party's primary scientific base,” Kirimaru said. “Naturally, it's quite well-guarded. Members of my own Murakumo Unit 8 have been placed on guard, as well as many of Kozakura's elite now that he himself no longer needs guarding. The outside is not visibly guarded, to maintain the illusion, but covert security cameras are spread about the premises.”

Kirimaru's ability to draft up a map was really something. The underground floors of this facility were like a maze—twisting hallways strewn about with hardly any consideration for ease of use. There were many small rooms about the deepest floor, but on each of the previous floors, by the south end was a large square. “What's that?” Sumie asked.

“That would be the freight elevator,” Kirimaru said. “Weapons testing is done as deep as the fourth underground floor, so the freight elevator is used for transport. It's accessible from the ground floor, so if we could access it, that would be our easiest way in.”

He continued marking down spots of interest. The power room was on the third underground floor, the security room on the ground floor. Emergency stairs lined the north end of the building, opposite the freight elevator, and the main elevators were on the west end.

“Access to the deepest floor requires the strongest type of keycard, and only the head guards and scientists possess those. When I visited the deepest floor, I was always brought there—I didn't have access on my own,” Kirimaru said.

“So basically,” Sumie said, “either we get into the emergency stairs or we need one of those keycards.”

Vespa leaned over and started pointing on the map. “We'll need someone in the security room to keep people from catching wise too fast. That's on the ground floor. How hard is it to get into?”

“Er, well,” Kirimaru mumbled, “they never took my... that is to say...”

“Spit it out, dude,” Vespa said, turning her head to narrow her eyes at him.

“They never took my advice on penetration testing for that door,” Kirimaru said, “so there's still a fairly major flaw in the security room's door that I, er, really didn't ever mean to discover...”

“I know a lot about flaws in doors!” Sumie chirped.

“It's the Request To Exit sensor,” Kirimaru said. “The door isn't quite completely insulated, so—”

Sumie and Vespa pointed at each other and declared, “Spray duster!”

“I'm pretty good with security cameras by this point,” Vespa said, “so I'll get in there. Can I disable any of the locks from in there?”

“You could disable the lock on the emergency stairs, but that triggers an alarm,” Kirimaru said, “so that would alert the whole facility that something is wrong. It's standard practice among ground floor guards to check the security room if an alarm is tripped.”

Sumie raised her hand, and the other two looked at her. “Well, okay. So, we need a keycard, right? If Vespa gets into the security room, she can let us know if she sees any keycards left out. Otherwise—”

“I'll head to the scientists' areas,” Kirimaru said. “They're frequently somewhat isolated from current goings-on, but there were some I struck up some repartee with. I could attempt to get one.” He took a moment to mark down Vespa's endpoint on the map. “So... regarding entering, it seems likely we'll have to use the freight elevator. I happen to know the tags used for a UN Party freight delivery vehicle, so we may be able to fake those.”

“Tags? Like, RFID?” Sumie asked, tilting her head.

“Yes, they're verification used to ensure a genuine UN Party vehicle. Had we a YUUHI operative... ah, but that's just wishful thinking,” Kirimaru said, shaking his head.

“Well, as it happens,” Vespa said with a grin and a wink, “ya girl here happens to be licensed as a truck driver, and great at putting on a wig when she needs to. Based on the plan here... hey, where's

the bathroom on the ground floor?" Kirimaru pointed it out. "Aces. I'll take a trip to the bathroom, spray duster the security room door, bust in, knock out the guys in there, and start looking. Then you two'll hide in the freight crate. Bust out when I give you the clear, knock out anyone who's around, and get to work."

Kirimaru and Sumie nodded, and Kirimaru drew that out. "Then, Sumie and I will continue hunting for a keycard," Kirimaru said. "Once we find it, we'll use it to reach the fifth level. From there..."

Sumie raised her hand. "Hold up. What if one of us gets held up?"

"Hm. If I get held up... well, the keycards are rather sturdy, actually... I'll transfer the keycard to you by hiding it in a toilet tank," Kirimaru said. "There, ah, luckily there is a single restroom without any gender designation on each floor. I'll use that one."

"Okay, sure," Sumie said with a nod. "I'll do the same for you if I get held up."

"From there is the matter of Citron's level," Kirimaru said, after marking down the handoff restrooms and the elevators. "The guards are... minimal in number, for the sake of ensuring Citron doesn't become so incensed she attempts to destroy the building, but they're keen and powerful." He marked Citron's room—it was on the east end, naturally. It would take at least seven corners before Sumie got there. "From there..."

Rokuro had been in the background, as this was his eatery they were planning in, so he chimed in. "This is the floor Jiro is head guard of, right?" Kirimaru nodded. "In that case, get a recording of a small dog's barking."

When everyone stared at Rokuro like he'd grown a third arm, he sighed and elaborated. "Jiro doesn't like to tell anyone this, but he becomes quite paranoid around small dogs. He had a poor experience with a chihuahua when he was fifteen that's left him liable to start attempting to show his dominance right back. I have to imagine he'd run straight for one if he heard one down there."

"Ah, true," Kirimaru said with a nod, "not to mention the facility's strict no-pets-allowed policy. So..."

Sumie took the pencil, and drew a path to the south end of the floor. "Set off the sound here," she said, "because it's the furthest away from anything. Vespa, you've gotta tell us where he is so he's in a good place. Then, from there, turn here, here, here, and... here!"

Citron's room had been connected to the line. "Whoever's there busts in and gets Citron."

Kirimaru and Vespa nodded. Then, Vespa said, "From there, Plan A, you take Citron and take the route you took back to the freight truck. I head back up, bring the elevator up, and we jet out with you guys in the box."

"Of course," Kirimaru said with a nod, "but should we be caught? Or—perhaps the elevator is rendered inoperable somehow?"

"In that case," Vespa said, "Plan B, if we get noticed. I trip the alarm and open up the



emergency stairs. You guys run up in the confusion, and we abandon the truck. Chaser's got a side car, so we can fit four people if we really try.”

“What do we do from there?” Sumie asked. “I mean, if they're chasing us—”

Vespa grinned. “You leave that to me. I've got just the place to bring her. We'll drive to Shin-Yokohama Station, and take the Tokaido to Kyoto. From there, we'll take the Super Hakuto.”

“Eh?” Kirimaru gasped. “You expect to be able to get on trains unnoticed?”

“Weeeeell,” Vespa said, “as it happens, I have some blackmail material. I can get us a private train, no problem. We'll take the Super Hakuto to Kurayoshi, and from there we oughta be good. There's this town in Shimane I go to sometimes for people who are really in trouble—small place, but nice, and I know people. That's where we can drop her off once we're there. We can drive, I've got cars.”

“We'll need to come prepared to fight, in either case,” Kirimaru said. “I'm quite practiced in swordplay. You two?”

Vespa pulled out a six-shooter, causing Kirimaru to sputter. “What? We're breaking the law already. I'm damn good with these things. I've got a spare for the kid, and she can do things with knives, too.”

“Put that away while you're in my restaurant,” Rokuro chided. Vespa grumbled, but did so. “And good luck, everyone.”

—Drive a freight truck through the elevator. Break into the security room. Hunt for a keycard in the lower floors. Set off a sound in the fifth floor to avoid the patrols. Get Citron. Get out. Get to Shin-Yokohama Station. Take the Tokaido Shinkansen and follow Vespa's route.

As the days went by and preparations continued, Sumie's heart raced further and further.

“This is crazy, ain't it?” SATSUKI laughed. “But man, I'm excited. You sure about this, though?”

“I'm scared,” Sumie said. “If this goes wrong, I'm... I'm gonna die. But... but I have to.”

“Yeah,” SATSUKI said. “I know. We can do this. Don't worry—oh, hey.”

<NDni> Hello, Satsuki~ Toro told me about this little party you're going to have. Interesting stuff! Do you mind much if I try to help?

<SATSUKI> huh? uh, sure, but what do you wanna do?

<NDni> Just a bit of gathering information. A nice mystery is so satisfying, isn't it?

<SATSUKI> true true. just be careful ok? dont want you getting hurt or something

<NDni> Oh, my~ Do you have that little faith in me?

~18. Getting In~

The date was February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019. A schoolteacher named Megumi Kirisame was to be wed today in Asakusa, but that information was wholly irrelevant to the three currently approaching the UN Party's scientific facility.

The rumble of the road below felt like it was synced to Sumie's heartbeat. In another situation, being in a dark, enclosed space with her Senpai like this might've excited her, but she could hardly focus on that now. She had triple-checked everything she had, and now had quadruple-checked. It was determined that since she had so many pockets, she was the one who was going to carry the recording—and as such, getting to Citron fell to her.

“Are you frightened?” Kirimaru asked. Sumie's eyes had adjusted to the darkness just enough to see him.

“Mm-hm.”

“So am I,” Kirimaru said. “But... if this is it, and we perish in this attempt, then I'm very glad I got to perish with such a good friend as you by my side.”

Sumie sniffled. “Thanks, Senpai.”

The rumbling stopped. So too did Sumie's breath. With Kirimaru's information regarding what experiments were being performed here, they'd managed to come up with what they hoped would be a convincingly fake manifest of supplies, as well as convincing fakes of those supplies—the plan was to send a box full of cargo down to the lower floors while the two got off earlier. The sound of muttering came from outside the crate, but the two could not hear it clearly.

Thump. Thump. Then, a whirr. The crate began to move downward. Slowly, slowly, it descended. Slowly... slowly...

<Vespa> I'm in there. I've got them tied up and knocked out. You're on the first underground floor right now. The elevator's got nobody in front of it on the second floor.

<Kirimaru> We'll get out there. Thank you.

Opening the back of the freight crate, Sumie and Kirimaru leapt out as the elevator moved, running and jumping through the entrance so as not to miss it. The freight room was gray, industrial, with many such crates strewn about.

“See you soon,” Kirimaru said, heading through the door on the right side of the far wall. Sumie nodded back, and headed through the door on the left, toward the elevators. The cold walls and buzzing insulation of the place reminded her somewhat of an office building.

“Can you hear me?” Vespa asked through the earpiece—they'd prepared these for communication's sake. Sumie nodded. “Cool. Satsuki, you've got to go left, then the second right, then the first left to hit the elevators. There's a guard coming down the first right, so look out.”

Sidling against the wall, Sumie looked by. Sure enough, there was a woman in a suit, so likely an in-house UN Party guard. Sumie closed her eyes.

“A few degrees to the right,” SATSUKI said.

Sumie produced a ten-yen coin from one of her pockets, and flipped it against the wall, causing it to ricochet into a turn just behind the guard and clatter loudly to the floor. The guard made a noise of confusion and turned around, giving Sumie time to dart past.

Second right, then first left. On this wall were two plain elevators. “The elevator's on the floor above you,” Vespa said. “Nobody's in it.”

Sumie hit the button, and her heart jumped into her throat as she closed her eyes, scrunched her fists, and waited for it to open. The instant the *ding* rang out to signal it had arrived, she darted in and hit the 'close door' button.

“Haaaah...” Sumie let out a heavy breath, and gasped a few times to catch her breath—

—then hit the button for the third underground floor. She'd smelled something. “How's the third level?”

“A scientist just called down the elevator to the fourth floor... but nothing on the third. You're good,” Vespa said.

Another ding. The next level down was lit a touch darker than the previous floor, but the hum of the fluorescent lighting hadn't changed one bit. The scent led Sumie straight onward. This came to an intersection at the center of the floor—many guard patrols intersected here, but each was currently somewhere else on the floor. Following her nose, Sumie turned right, then left into a door.

Inside the door was a room with much cleaner tiling than usual—in fact, the wood paneling, hung curtains with kanji upon them, shoe cabinets, and whatnot, gave Sumie the strong impression that this was meant to resemble a bathhouse. Its actual purpose, though, was as a shower room for the scientists.

A scent of opportunity wafted from the women's side, so Sumie tiptoed inside under the curtain. The showers themselves were faced away from the entrance, luckily, and each had a glass door for a booth. Two were currently running, and their clothes were hung nearby—their labcoats, pure white, letting loose a tantalizing hint of Sumie's bounty. Stepping quietly and avoiding any puddles collected on the ground, Sumie weaved her hand into the pocket of one of the two and produced a keycard—white and red. According to Kirimaru, this was correct.

Stepping out of there, Sumie took a break before—

“Hey, hold on!”

Oh god oh god oh god! Someone had just opened the door! It was a scientist, by the look of things—well, obviously. This was a man, with a square face, short hair, and a thick layer of stubble across his face. He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Who are you supposed to be? I've never seen you around before.”

Sumie froze up. Luckily, SATSUKI didn't. "Oh, haha, sorry!" she said, laughing and rubbing the back of her head. "I'm new. Murakumo. I just got assigned here, was feeling the place out, y'know?"

There was a moment's pause as the scientist scrutinized Satsuki, before grunting and saying, "The fashion these Murakumo people let their kids wear. These showers are for the scientists. The guards' are two levels up."

"Oh, for real?" Satsuki said, before rubbing her chin and humming. "Man, isn't that weird? Why would there only be one set of showers for each set of people? I mean, we're all expected to spend like, a long time here, right? They should install more showers."

The scientist looked as though he wanted to say something, but then paused, looking downward. "That's... not a bad point. It isn't very convenient. Hm. I'll bring it up to management."

When Sumie managed to run back to the elevator and get inside, the gasp she let out was even louder and more labored than before. "Damn, kid," Vespa said, "that was good."

"Thank you," Sumie panted, "all skill, I'm great."

"What's the situation?" Kirimaru asked.

"Satsuki found one of the keycards, so we don't need you looking anymore," Vespa said. "Take up standby by the freight elevator. If things go south, head for the stairs."

Slashing the keycard in a reader on the side of the elevator caused it to move again, heading further down past the fourth level, all the way to the deepest level of the facility. The walls here were the same completely stark white that Sumie had seen in the footage which had spurred this incident in the first place. There was no hum here—it was silent.

"Three guards in total," Vespa said. "And one of them's Togetsu. You're gonna need to take the first left, then hang a right. Follow the hallway from there."

All Sumie could hear was her own breathing, and even that was as silent as she could make it. Left. Then hang a right. Follow the hallway, through some corners that led into doors. Then, from there, she eventually came to a corner—she recognized this from the map. This path led to the southernmost point of the level.

Taking in a deep breath, Sumie walked up. "You've got this!" SATSUKI said. Sumie removed the audio player from one of her pockets, put it on the floor, gulped, and—

*Yip yip yip yip yip!*

If the rumbling of footsteps wasn't enough to get Sumie running, the fact that the floor was quaking certainly would be. She headed through the north hallway, then down the closest left turn. "Head down this hallway all the way," Vespa said. "Wait—someone's coming! Down the hallway on the second right!"

Thinking quickly, Sumie produced another coin, then took a running leap, catching hold of a light fixture above for just long enough to get the angle she needed to take the shot. Her coin ricocheted down that hallway, presumably whizzed above the running guard's head, and landed behind them. "Go!" Vespa exclaimed, and Sumie did.

This hallway let out to the T-junction. Sumie knew where she was, and—

"Er... what's going on?"

Sumie's target, the door at the end of this hallway, opened, and its occupant looked out. "Eh—"

"Sorry about this!" Sumie mouthed, before dashing towards Citron, picking her up by her shoulders (she was thankfully not very heavy), stepping inside, shutting the door, locking it, and collapsing to her knees. "Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah. Oh my god."

Citron had stumbled backwards at such an angle that she landed on her stuffed hippo. "H-huh? Wait... aren't you—Satsuki?"

Once Sumie had taken enough breaths to speak again, she stood up and waved. "Hi! Yeah! Hey, Citron! It's me. Imagine that, right? Crazy. It's me. Hi."

Seeing a catgirl over security footage was one thing, but it would've taken Sumie's breath to behold her in real life if she had breath to take. The ears were very real—they twitched and bobbed, and Citron visibly lacked any ears on the side of her head. "What... what are you doing here? I mean—I-I didn't think people could get in here."

Slumping over, Sumie sat down in the center of the room to get more on Citron's level. "Yeah, so, we had to plan for a while to get this rolling. Good to see you! Really great. How's it going?"

"Um... well... alright, I suppose...?" Citron said with a blink. "I-I'm very happy to see you, but I don't think you should be down here. You might get in trouble."

"Yup!" Sumie said with a grin and a nod. "I am going to get in so much trouble for being down here, *if* I get caught." Then she put on her serious face, clapped her hands together, and angled them towards Citron. "Okay. Serious face time here. Listen. We don't have much time, so I've gotta be blunt with you here. Citron. I want to get you out of here."

Blink. Ear twitch. "H-huh?!" Citron gasped. "But... w-well, I shouldn't, should I? I'm not..." She looked away. "I'm not... well, human. I shouldn't go out there. People would be upset, wouldn't they?"

"That's not true!" Sumie stood up. "That's bull! If they're telling you that, that's bull! Maybe—maybe some people might get freaked out, but you're a good kid, Citron. You deserve to live out there as much as anyone else does. You told me yourself you'd want to get out if you could, right? Well, Vespa says she knows a place. Me, her, and Senpai—uh, Kirimaru! You know him, right?"

"Kirimaru? Oh, I haven't seen him in some weeks. Is he alright?" Citron asked.

"Yeah, yeah, we're all here and we want to get you out of here. Listen, you'll have to leave your stuff, but—listen." Sumie walked over to Citron, who stood up, and put her hands on Citron's

shoulders. “Do you trust me? Please. I don't want you to live like this, but I need you to tell me you trust me.”

There was a long pause, where Citron looked about her room—her bed, her toys, her computer, all of it. Her ears twitched in contemplation. Then—“Okay,” she said. “Okay. Let's go.”

Sumie pumped her fist. “Yes! Okay!” She looked down at Citron's feet, which were bare, and groaned. “Okay. Do you have any shoes?”

Citron reached under her bed to pull out a pair of slippers, which would simply have to do, Sumie supposed. She also pulled out a red... blanket? No, she tied it around her neck. “This was my favorite when I was younger,” she said, “but it's more of a cape now.”

Standing in front of the door, Sumie closed her eyes and attempted to center her breathing. “Okay. Things are going to get a little hairy when we leave this room, okay?” She looked at Citron, and Citron nodded. “Alright. Then... let's go!”

## ~19. Getting Out~

The sound of the small dog's barking had ceased when Sumie and Citron exited the room, which meant that the guards knew something was up. “Okay,” Vespa said, “they've got a guy stationed in front of the elevators now. Can you get past him? One's heading for the stairs, Togetsu's coming for Citron's room fast.”

Sumie closed her eyes for a moment, then sighed and said, “We're heading there now. I'll have to knock him out.” She began pulling Citron along by the arm, but Citron began whizzing by her—there were treads on her slippers now, formed from the metal beneath her. “Nice. Very cool. I'll think about that later.”

Since Citron could keep up now, the two of them dashed as straight through as they could toward the elevators. It didn't matter if people knew they'd been there after they were gone, so Sumie took a running leap as she ran toward the guard stationed there, tackling him from above and putting him in her best chokehold. It was good enough—out like a light. “C'mon!” Sumie said, running into the elevator with Citron.

“Head for the second floor,” Vespa said. “Kirimaru's got the freight elevator there with the crate ready to go.”

Sumie hit the button, and took a moment to catch her breath in the elevator. Citron was sweating, but said, “Oh, wow, that was thrilling! This is exciting!”

“Yeah, it's crazy, right? Okay, we're gonna be let out on the second—”

From above, a loud claxon blared. The elevator came to a screeching halt. “Wait, wha—?!” Vespa sputtered. “Oh, shit—that wasn't me! Okay, Plan B! Head for the stairs!”

The elevator had reached the third floor, where a few scientists had congregated around the elevator. The lighting was now awash in the red light that accompanied the blaring alarm. Sumie and Citron scurried out, Citron waving and saying, “Sorry, goodbye, everyone!” as she went.

“I'm gonna get out of here and go grab Chaser,” Vespa said. “Get towards the front entrance!”

The other staff, guards and scientist both, were already running towards the emergency stairs—Sumie and Citron waited for a break in the flow of the crowd, then began running. There were two flights of stairs in between each floor, the sound of the siren echoing up and down the tall stairwell. Citron panted a bit; as treads weren't much good for stairs, she'd had to move back to walking. Still, they reached the second level—

—whereupon the door to the second level *burst* off its hinges, crashing off of the back wall and falling down to the depths, missing Sumie by a hair.

In the doorway, having just directed a full-force punch to the door, was Jiro Togetsu—his sunglasses were shattered slightly, which one could surmise the reason for from the cement and dust caking his upper body, as well as a few visible tears in his suit. The colossal man returned his fist to his side, then walked through the doorway to face Sumie and Citron.

“Oh my god,” Sumie muttered, “he’s even bigger in person.” He towered over Sumie, easily over forty-five centimeters taller than her and about twice as wide.

Jiro brushed a flake of the building’s insulation off of his shoulder. Sumie wasn’t sure that the intense aura emanating from him was something she’d ever experienced before. Even being near him, she was certain—this man absolutely intended to murder her. He probably could, too, seeing as his fists were nearly as large as her head. Yes, there she went. If she focused on it like it was kind of funny, then she could act like she wasn’t terrified out of her mind.

“Mr. Jiro, wait!” Citron said, stepping between him and Sumie with her arms outstretched. “Don’t do this! She’s my friend!”

Jiro looked down at Citron, then gently picked her up, placed her in the doorway, and turned away. He then threw a punch at Sumie, which she managed to dodge under, but delivered such force that a guardrail behind her chipped from the wall.

Sumie produced her knife, and went for a slash to his side, but barely managed to cut him by the time he thrust his elbow downward to catch her. She ducked and rolled under his legs and went for a cut to his back, but Jiro launched into a spinning backhand that forced her to leap back. Sumie caught herself against a guardrail, flipped over it, launched off, kicked against the back wall and jumped off to get the chance to leap past him to the doorway.

However, Jiro understood her movement before she could land. Citron had dashed out of the doorway to hide by the side, so he burst through the doorway to ensure Sumie couldn’t escape—she landed to find that he was there waiting for her, with a series of punches she danced past.

“What’s wrong, big guy?” Sumie said, ducking under one, then leaping over a kick to the legs. “C’mon, I’ve faced worse stuff in dance class.”

Of course, as she danced backwards, she came ever closer to a hole in the ground—a pit shattered through the underground all the way down to the bottom level. The absurdity of the fact that this man had leapt that high through all of that was not lost on her, but the very real danger of falling down there was also hard to shake.

“Mr. Jiro, *stop!*”

The metal in the floor lurched up to trap Jiro’s legs. He struggled against it for a moment, then turned his head to look at Citron. “You need to stop!” Citron yelled. “Right now!”

Jiro faced Sumie, but cleared his throat. “Please return to your room,” he said. His voice was shockingly soft for someone so threatening. “You should not watch this.”

“No! I want to leave!” Citron exclaimed. “Mr. Jiro, please. I know you aren’t all bad, so please, let us go!”

Sumie didn’t want to get near the range of his fists, since those were unbound—and what was worse, the metal was beginning to crack. Standing near the edge of the pit, Sumie’s terror began to grip her muscles—



“Ayanokoji School, Secret Strike: Furious Wave!”

Swirling in behind Jiro with a flow like water, Kirimaru entered the scene, coming in to slice at Jiro's back with an upwards slash that cut far better than a dagger did. Jiro grunted in pain, his arms falling to his side for a moment as a reaction. “Thus is the law of heaven!” Kirimaru exclaimed. “Come on!”

It was extremely silly that Kirimaru felt the need to exclaim something so corny at a time like this, but it was also cute, and that was something Sumie appreciated about her Senpai. She ducked past Jiro to join Kirimaru and Citron in running up the stairs.

“You really are here,” Citron said. “That was incredible... though I hate having to hurt Mr. Jiro.”

“Unfortunately, such differences are difficult to brook with words,” Kirimaru said. “My apologies, Citron. Sumie—you've done well. Thank you for getting here.”

“Ehehehehe,” Sumie said. “I like the sound of that.”

“Sumie?” Citron asked. “Oh, that must be your real name. I never asked, did I?”

Reaching the ground floor, Kirimaru opened the door first with his sword drawn, stepping out with Sumie covering his flank. “Vespa,” Kirimaru said, “what's your situation?”

“Hurry your asses up, is my situation!” Vespa responded.

“As though we aren't attempting to hurry?” Kirimaru scoffed. “Sumie, Citron, this way!”

Considering the point of entry, it was likely too risky to attempt the freight elevator exit again. The front entrance was around the east end, but the ground floor was much more open than the underground floors—stealth would not be an option.

This became quite clear when a team of helmeted guards happened to be stationed in front of the front entrance, guns drawn. One said, “Oh, shit, Kirimaru? Sorry about this, man.”

“Please, you needn't apologize,” Kirimaru said, aiming his sword. “My apologies for the beating I am about to deliver!”

While Kirimaru drew their attention with his flashy swordplay, Sumie headed to one side of the formation. This was an entrance to an 'industrial building', so there was more than usual here—for instance, a loading cart for smaller goods. Sumie took a few steps back, then ran and kicked the cart, knocking down two guards in its path.

The shock of this gave Kirimaru the opportunity he needed to get in close and take a swing to the side of one of the guards, staggering them—and Citron provided the assist by manipulating some of the piping in the wall to reach out and tie up the remaining guards.

Before they could escape through the front entrance, though, crashing down from above was Jiro Togetsu, landing squarely in front of the entrance. He appeared even dustier than he had before, but

his movements clearly had not slowed, and now all three were blocked by his presence. “Aw, great,” Sumie said, “it's this guy again. C'mon, man, don't you have anything better to do?”

“No,” Kirimaru said, “I believe this is what he enjoys most.”

The only visible emotion on Jiro's face was a brief scowl at the blood on Kirimaru's sword. His expression was a perfect neutral as he dashed forward again to attempt to bowl Kirimaru and Sumie down. Citron, of course, attempted to ask him to stop, but this was unsuccessful, as Jiro Togetsu was a very stubborn man.

“So I kinda don't think I can do anything to this guy,” Sumie said to Kirimaru, on the other side of Jiro from him. “I mean, I don't think my knives can really cut him much.”

“I'm aware!” Kirimaru said, dodging past another blow from Jiro. “Take Citron and run! I'll hold him off!”

“What?!” Sumie exclaimed, looking around for anything she could do. “I'm not letting you play hero like that!”

“I don't believe we have a—”

The front entrance burst open with the loud growl of an engine as a bright yellow motorcycle burst onto the scene, ramming Jiro and causing him to fall to the ground to the side, groaning. “What's good, motherfuckers?!” Vespa exclaimed, her hair blowing in the wind as she gave the group a thumbs up and a grin. Chaser did indeed have a sidecar, big enough to fit two. “Sumie, you ride behind me! The other two, you get in the sidecar!”

Sumie leapt behind Vespa, grabbing onto the older woman's waist, as Citron took the back of the sidecar, giddily clapping at getting to ride in a real motorcycle, while Kirimaru took the front. He sheathed his sword and grumbled, “I don't suppose you have a helmet?”

“I brought you one all special-like,” Vespa said, handing him a bright yellow helmet that was just on theme. “Now hold on!”

Vespa flared the engine, making Chaser roar, and turned around as Jiro began to get up, then burst out the front of the building, screeching out and turning onto the street. The sun had set by this point, so her headlights glared in the cold night air, whipping past.

“O-oh my gosh, it's cold!” Citron gasped, as she tucked her cape into the sidecar as best she could. “Wow! So this is what it's like outside?”

Sumie turned her head to look behind them. Several guards were running out now, and pulling out guns to take shots at Vespa, but she made the turn fast enough to evade their fire. “Gonna have to take a hell of a route to get these guys off me. We'll get to the station in about twelve minutes! Ready to ride your first train, kid?”

Here was where the lab's secrecy worked in their favor—they could not engage in too much open force, or the UN Party risked losing their privacy. Only their guards chasing in individual cars could take off after the group, and though several of them followed, Vespa was obviously much more at

home evading chases on her motorcycle than she was at foot. She took each turn with expert precision, diving into lanes and alleys that Sumie hadn't even realized existed.

Each time there was a bump in the road, Citron exclaimed in surprise. Eventually, Kirimaru became so disgruntled by the situation that he gave Citron his helmet, and simply made do without a helmet. Occasionally, Citron would ask what something was, and Sumie and Kirimaru would do their best to explain, seeing as Vespa was busy.

Once they were onto public roads outside of the industrial sector, it seemed as though Vespa had managed to avoid them, which made Sumie slump slightly onto her. “Ohhhh man,” she said. “G-forces... too strong... street-fight gun-shooting car-action... this is triple hard action game...”

“Didn't understand a word of that!” Vespa yelled.

A phone call rang out on Sumie's phone. Thankfully, she recognized the number. “Hey! We're almost to the station. You ready to pick up Chaser?”

“Oh, of course!” ND said. “I'm right out front, wearing earmuffs. I'll wave to you! Have fun on the trains~”

—Parking was a bit expensive for motorcycles at the Shin-Yokohama Station CUBIC PLAZA, but Vespa simply couldn't abandon Chaser. They drove into the motorcycle parking lot to meet their drop-off.

Even in the winter coat and earmuffs she wore, Allie was a glamorous woman. She had a thin and bony build with notable elbows, and pointed, angular features that made Sumie feel like she could be a model if she wanted—however old she was, she looked younger. She had short pink hair, artfully tousled and a bit spiky, and never seemed to open her eyes much behind her glasses. Even in the night weather, she still wore her long, multi-tier ruffled dark blue skirt, shiny black high heels, and pantyhose to accentuate her legs.

...So, definitely the kind of woman you'd see running a cat food business. “Hiiii!” Allie was jumping up and down in the lot as they pulled up, only stepping to the side to let Vespa in. “Well, look what the cat dragged in, hm? Aren't we a motley crew?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Vespa said, turning Chaser off and standing up. “Listen, don't hurt him. Keep him safe, okay?”

“Oh, I would never dream of hurting your sweet boy,” Allie said, her ever-present smile not twitching a bit. She walked over to Citron to pinch her cheeks. “Citron! Oh, you look lovely, sweetie! Congratulations on being outside!”

“E-eh?!” Citron squeaked as her cheeks were pinched. “W-who?”

“This is Allie,” Sumie said. “ND. Still won't tell me if it stands for anything.”

“O-oh!” Citron managed to escape the cheek pinching, but then hugged Allie. “It's so nice to meet you in person!”

“You, too, dear. Aww, aren't you cute?” Allie let out a wistful sigh as she ruffled Citron's hair. “I wish any of my children were this cute. Oh, well~ Don't let me hold you up. You've got places to be!” She also happened to have a hoodie prepared for Citron to be in public, which Citron donned.

Kirimaru bowed as they prepared to set off on foot. “Thank you, ma'am. Your help is greatly appreciated.”

“You hear that, everyone? He appreciates me! Oh, be still my beating heart~” Allie said, before making a shooing gesture. “Now go! Get!”

Heading to the station and running through, the four of them hurried to the Shinkansen tracks, dodging through the crowd of people using the station normally. True to Vespa's words, though a Tokaido Shinkansen train had just left, one rolled up onto the tracks just behind it. “In there!” Vespa said, and all four hurried onto the train.

Then—

“Next stop, Kyoto. Kyoto...”

The train began to roll out of the station. Sumie, Vespa, Kirimaru, and Citron, alone in the train car, all slumped onto the floor, exhausted.

~20. 8:00, from Yokohama~

Vespa took a seat on the empty train car, slumping over against the window. “Gonna take us about two hours to get to Kyoto, so get comfy,” she said. “Try not to sleep, though, we’ve got a longer train ride after this.”

Sumie slumped into a seat, too. Kirimaru simply sat down, displaying much better posture.

Citron, however, couldn't sit—she was walking up and down the train car, oohing and aahing at getting to see a real life train from inside. “This is incredible!” she said, as she looked outside to see the nighttime scenery whizzing past. “It's moving so fast! How does it manage that?”

“Honestly, Citron,” Sumie mumbled, “I know how it does that, but I'm way too frazzled to explain right now.”

“You know how trains move?” Vespa groaned. “Nerd.”

“Yeah, I'm kind of a nerd, I thought we established this,” Sumie said.

“It's good to maintain an interest in the world around you,” Kirimaru said, giving Citron a gentle smile Sumie recognized. For some reason, it hit her at just that moment that Kirimaru, too, was now an adult. “After all, you will be spending quite a while here.”

“Right,” Citron said.

Vespa had said not to sleep, but that was a hard request. Sumie was more tired than she had been in a long time. “Man,” SATSUKI said, “we just broke in and out of a secret scientific lab! That's incredible! Great job, Sumie!”

“Mmhm,” Sumie mumbled. “It was real cool.”

“Okay, maybe I'm the only jazzed one here,” SATSUKI said, “but it was really cool.”

“Super duper cool,” Sumie said, yawning. She dug into her pockets and pulled out some granola bars. “Anyone want something bad to eat?”

They did. Citron enjoyed the novel texture. Sumie looked out the window herself. Buildings flying by at such a speed that they looked like blurs ran together into a mess of the same lights that Sumie had become so accustomed to. It wasn't quite right to call them the lights that represented the presence of human life, no, but... they represented something, Sumie was sure.

Well, if she had two hours to kill, this was as good a time as any to handle some Picross in her head until she fell asleep. She still had some coins, so she could use the vending machines if she got hungry. Let's see, she thought to herself. Nine on this row? Wow, that was quite a lot... okay, so... and then...

Sumie was startled awake by a loud sound, which got her, Vespa, and Kirimaru to start up out of their seats. There was a pause, and then another sound. “There shouldn't be anyone else on this train,

right?” Citron asked.

Vespa drew her gun and started walking forward. “...No. We should be alone.”

The next car was Car #10 of this train—this particular car was one which featured an enclosed smoking compartment. “Wait,” Kirimaru said. “I have the melee weapon, so allow me to take point.”

“Your funeral,” Vespa said with a shrug. In the narrow space, all the group could do was wander slowly forward. Kirimaru reached out and slowly opened the door—

“Oh, come on!” Sumie exclaimed.

At the other end of Car #10, Jiro Togetsu had just opened the door. His eyes, now exposed behind his wholly shattered sunglasses, narrowed. Tire marks were visible on his suit from where Vespa had run him over, but he began again to approach.

“How'd this asshole even get on the train?!” Vespa yelled. “Hey, pretty boy, duck.”

“Wha—”

Shooting past Kirimaru, two explosions rang out as Vespa fired a pair of bullets. One hit Jiro in the shoulder, the other in his right flank. Sumie's ears rang from the sound, and behind her, Citron had covered the top of her head and was making a sad little whirring noise.

Jiro, of course, did not stop walking forward. Instead, he reached over and tore one of the chairs out from where it was bolted down, then began to run forward, using it as a battering ram. “Retreat!” Kirimaru said, managing to get over the din of the ringing of Sumie's ears. All four of them ran back into Car #11. Vespa forcibly sat Citron down in one of the seats on the right side, had Kirimaru kneel to the left, and had Sumie waiting further back, then knelt down as Jiro burst into the car.

Two more bullets, one into each of Jiro's legs. He stumbled, dropping the chair. “Alright, man, now I've got two bullets left in this thing and you've got one head.” Vespa said. “You wanna keep taking the chance—”

As he knelt staggered on the ground, Jiro forced his fist into one of the seats to his side. It flew off of its hinges, and careened to the back of the car at such speed that it cleanly removed everything in its way. This happened to include Vespa's right arm.

“—huh?”

It happened so quickly nobody had time to process it. Sumie was the closest, so she was first to see—there wasn't blood coming from where Vespa's arm had been. It was sparks, metal, wiring, which bled from her.

Vespa clutched where her arm had been. Her gun, too, had been launched to the back of the car. “...Ow. Hey, asshole, I needed that.”

“One of Germany's assets,” Jiro said. “I was waiting for help from them. It never came. You should've been unconscious on the floor.”

Vespa coughed, though for what reason, it is uncertain. “Of *course* you guys know them. Who'd you want? One of Zeigler's guys? Or Blaster's, maybe, the kid with the memory disorder?”

Jiro stood up, then, and despite the four bullets inside his body, began to run. “Vespa, *no!*” Citron screamed.

“Get down, you fool!” yelled Kirimaru, who dashed in from his side of the seats to push Vespa to the side—

Jiro's fist impacted Kirimaru's torso directly, causing a loud *crunch* as his ribs shattered under the impact. Sumie's yell was caught in her throat as Kirimaru flew backwards, spinning in the air a few times before landing several rows back, hacking, wheezing, bloodied. His katana impacted the back wall and shattered.

Standing tall, with an armless and beaten android and a harmless and beaten to a pulp samurai out of his way, Jiro Togetsu dusted off his shirt one more time. “When this train stops, we will return to Yokohama,” he declared, looking at Citron.

“Wait, no, please—!”

~21. Ready! Lady Gunner~

Sumie opened her eyes.

“You ready for this?” SATSUKI said.

The two were in the White Room again, sitting apart from each other. For once, Sumie looked like herself. She felt herself, her glasses, her hair. There, across from her, was SATSUKI.

“Everyone's... everyone's gonna die,” Sumie said, looking down at her hands. “Everything was for nothing. He's gonna kill us.”

“Well, it seems that way, huh?” SATSUKI said. “Unless—unless we do something about it.”

“I can hardly slash the guy,” Sumie said. “He'll kill me in one punch.”

Then—

“S-seriously?!” Sumie exclaimed, her eyes widening as she finally looked up at a smiling SATSUKI. “You seriously expect me to—”

“I know you can,” SATSUKI said. “I know you know you can, too. It's not just your knife, or those coins. You know what it is. You can feel it, right? You know what you can do.”

“L..”

The strangest thing was, she did. She did feel it. What 'it' was, Sumie wasn't certain, but she felt something. Something was burning inside her, screaming to break free. She didn't want to die. She wanted to protect these people, protect herself, fight for something, have something that she truly felt.

So Sumie stood up, and leapt out of her seat. She was faster than Jiro, especially after he'd been shot in both legs, so Sumie stepped over Kirimaru and hurried to the back of the car. Under the chair and the rubble of Vespa's broken arm, there was Vespa's gun.

A gun is an instrument which launches small pieces of metal at high velocities, so it was only natural for her to be holding it. With both hands on the grip, she picked it up, turned, and aimed it straight at Jiro. “Stop, or I'll shoot!”

Jiro stopped, yes, to cock his eyebrow. He tore another chair out of its position, this time to use as a shield. “That won't work,” he said.

“I mean it!” Sumie said. “Listen, you—”

No. Take a breath, Sumie. You can do this a lot better.

“Listen, pal,” she said, “you don't wanna see what I can do to you now that I've got this. There's two bullets left, but I only need one.”



Within the next moment, a few things occurred. One, Citron yelled, “Sumie!” Two, Jiro Togetsu hurled the chair in his arms at Sumie Kazuki. Three, Sumie ducked under the chair, having predicted the move.

It didn't matter if she'd never held a gun before. The angle presented itself right there, clear as day—the shining thread of opportunity that would let her win this battle!

“Jiro's got an open wound in his back, right?” Sumie said to SATSUKI. “These bullets aren't going too deep because he's so huge, but if there's already a wound there, it can get deeper!”

“Ready, aim...” SATSUKI steadied Sumie's aim as she crouched down. “And... *fire!*”

One more bullet ripped out of Vespa's gun, causing Sumie to flinch from the recoil. It shot upwards, bouncing from wall to wall until being miraculously reflected directly into the open wound on Jiro's back. The unstoppable guardsman roared in pain, and that jolt of agony caused his wounds to finally catch up with him. Jiro Togetsu, too, passed out on the train's floor.

A moment passed. Two. Three.

Sumie slowly stood from the wreckage at the back of the car, panting and gasping for air. She put the gun back down by Vespa's ruined arm, and started to walk forward.

“Holy shit,” Vespa said, staring down at the unconscious Jiro.

“Sumie, you—that was—just incredible!” Citron exclaimed. “I mean, I'm not happy that Mr. Jiro is so hurt, but—”

Kneeling down, Sumie looked at Kirimaru and said, “He's unconscious. We've gotta... we've gotta call a doctor.”

“Well,” Vespa said, grunting in her own pain, “at least he's unconscious for this.”

The train headed for Kyoto. Jiro Togetsu was admitted to a hospital there for severe injuries when paramedics found him at Kyoto Station by the tracks. For the moments Kirimaru awoke in agony, he insisted on finishing the journey, so Sumie called Allie, and Allie did *something* to get them the first aid supplies at Kyoto Station that they would need to essentially treat him on the Super Hakuto. Vespa supposedly knew a doctor wherever they were going, so hopefully Kirimaru could be more thoroughly treated.

(Incidentally, it turned out that Jiro had gotten onto the train by opening a window and climbing in while it was moving. What this says about his resistance to wind pressure is staggering.)

Alone again on the much smaller Super Hakuto, while Citron looked out at the landscape some more, Sumie said, “So... you're a robot, huh?”

Vespa, still nursing the fact that her arm had been blown off her body, had laid down on the floor of the train. “Yup. Buncha shit about the German army wanting cyberweapons or something. I got sick of it, so I left.”

“...You really are pretty cool, Vespa,” Sumie said with a smile.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Get some rest. You earned it. Hell, so did I. I'm tired. You know what it takes to tire me out?” Vespa asked. Sumie didn't answer. “Less than you'd think, honestly, being made of metal's not all it's cracked up to be.”

Sumie sat down on the train and began to nod off, but there was a small whisper—“Rosalind.”

“Huh?” Sumie stirred. “What?”

“Rosalind,” Vespa said, having turned away. “Rosalind Markham. Legally, it's my name. It's not a bad one, but it's not cool enough for someone working in the hero business.” She paused. “You should still call me Vespa, though. Got it?”

“Mmhm,” Sumie said, smiling and nodding, “got it.”

February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, ended with four battered and beaten individuals on a train to Kurayoshi Station, having managed to escape a brutal battle with the United Nations Party. This was the end of Sumie Kazuki's first grand battle.