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FLCL

**Volume I
Fooly Cooly**

Chapter 1

This story has the potential to be considerably embarrassing for Naota.

Back then, Naota Nandaba was in sixth grade. He was getting pretty good grades and passing his classes without any issues. Secretly, he prided himself on being more mature than the other students his age.

"There are no true adults in this world," was one of Naota's favorite phrases. (However, when watching TV dramas, he did privately think that the famous actor Tetsuya Watari was a "true adult")

At the time, he was involved in a strange intimate relationship with Mamimi Samejima. Mamimi was a high school sophomore who always had her head in the clouds. She often cut class to play games on her mobile phone. And she appeared ready to drop out of school at any moment.

Naota didn't have a particular fetish for older girls, but he couldn't end this peculiar intimate relationship "peculiar" because Naota had just started junior high. Although he had a healthy mind and body, the development of his body hadn't yet caught up to his cool persona.

Simply put, Naota was being toyed with. In truth, Mamimi probably didn't see Naota as the true object of her affection. At best, she regarded him as she might a beloved teddy bear or, perhaps, a pet hamster. No, maybe he wasn't worth as much as

a pet... Naota was merely a substitute. A tragic substitute.

The saddest part about all this was she didn't really need him.

Nevertheless, whenever Naota took a breath of autumn air, memories of her came back to him. For a lot of reasons, autumn held special meaning for him.

His suburb, part of the city of Mabase, was the kind of town found anywhere. In front of the train station, a sculpture funded by a government grant soared unnecessarily high into the sky. A large river cut through both the countryside and the industrial town. On its banks, underneath Mabase Bridge, Naota and Mamimi often passed the time together. That was, unsurprisingly, where they were on the day *she* arrived.

On that day...

Mamimi was swinging Naota's baseball bat and rambling nonsense, as she always did. They were on their way home from school, so Mamimi still wore her school uniform.

Their after-school time was special. This free time spent in transition between the cages of school and home was an indispensable, undeniably meaningful part of growing up. The brief liberation offered a glimpse into the freedoms of the adult world.

When would they permanently obtain this free time? Would the day finally arrive when they would no longer have to study? With these questions in their hearts, they enjoyed their fleeting moments of freedom. "After school" was the special time children could act like real children.

However, despite this, Naota always sat on the riverbank, doing his homework or preparing for class. In the autumn breeze, Mamimi suspiciously eyed Naota, as he sat there with his textbook open.

"Takkun, why are you studying?" Mamimi always called Naota "Takkun."

"Because I don't want to be stupid."

"Will you do my homework, too?"

Naota replied, "You'll turn into some demented woman, playing games all the time."

"What does 'demented' mean? You know such difficult words, Takkun."

He didn't respond.

To be honest, Naota didn't know what the word meant either. Did it have something to do with chewing gum? Didn't it refer to a girl who wandered aimlessly around town, constantly chewing gum? *No, no, no, no!* He decided not to let Mamimi influence him. Anyway, he really didn't care for gum; he lived for Cool Mints.

"Why don't you study at home?" Mamimi asked.

"Because it isn't cool."

In reality, Naota disliked doing his homework where his father could see him. Specifically, he disliked the way his father mocked him for needing to study. Naota's grades were good whether he studied or not. Well, more accurately, he didn't want to show any interest in studying. Naota liked projecting a laid-back persona to avoid his father's bullying.

"What about you? Why do you always come here?" he asked.

Amused by Naota, Mamimi chuckled and responded, "Because..."

"Because..."

"Because I like it."

His pulse doubled, and he asked, "What is it that you like?"

"This place," Mamimi replied without any hesitation. Her tone betrayed her, as she clearly was thinking: "Don't tell me you thought I'd say 'Takkun.'"

He had to remember his role as a "substitute" boyfriend.

Mamimi, who had seen through Naota's expectations and answered cruelly, suddenly hugged him from behind, saying, "Playtime."

She put her hand on top of Naota's. Her hand was cool. Naota's hand, which was holding his pen, stiffened instantly; he'd been caught off-guard. He helped himself to another Cool Mint.

"You reek of cigarettes," he said.

"I haven't been smoking," murmured Mamimi.

On top of that dry, grassy hill, she draped herself over Naota. She felt like a giant plush toy. Her soft breasts gently pressed against his back. Stroking his shoulders and arms, she started nibbling on his earlobe and neck.

Naota did nothing, staying silent for a while. He wasn't really calm enough to enjoy this, but that didn't mean he wanted to resist it. Whenever this happened, Naota's single choice was to let his body go with the flow.

"You know, what you're doing, does it mean "

"I have to do it," she said. "If I don't, I'll overflow."

Overflow? What does she mean? What would happen if she overflowed? Although the growing boy's mind swelled with doubt and curiosity, he was unable to voice these questions while being caressed.

Mamimi hugged him tighter, kissing his neck. Every time they "played" like this, Naota, immersed in Mamimi's scent, looked up at the factory looming on the hill.

The building could be seen from anywhere in town. It looked very much like an antique clothes iron. It was a medical machinery factory called Medical Mechanica (MM), and when it first had been built, it caused quite a stir among the adults. Everyone had stood to benefit if Mabase became an industrial town; furthermore, they wouldn't have to worry about all the young people leaving to find jobs. By the time Naota was a sixth grader, almost everyone in town worked at the plant. When students said they had a part-time job, it inevitably meant they worked at MM. And when you took into account the related businesses that profited from the factory, the majority of Mabase citizens earned their livelihoods from it. The number of plant-associated facilities was increasing steadily, and they now included the MM Hospital, the MM Library, and an MM Croquet Park.

Several times a day, the factory spewed out clouds of steam. As Naota with Mamimi still wrapped around him watched the trail of white smoke ascend into the sky, he felt as if the steam was a culprit, stealing all the color from his world. Draining the world of color, the white plume of smoke dispersed into a semitransparent haze that silently covered the entire town.

"Yum."

Mamimi nibbled lightly on Naota's neck.

There is nothing amazing in this world. Everything is ordinary.

This kind of game that Mamimi enjoyed it, too, was nothing special. Naota thought to himself that reality was merely a flat, tiresome world.

After playtime finished, Naota stood up and put a coin in the nearby vending machine. The inside of his mouth was dry. He felt as if he'd swallowed the same saliva over and over again today. He was about to push the iced coffee button, when Mamimi's finger, which was right next to his, pushed the button for lemonade first.

"Hey! I don't like sour drinks!" Naota protested.

Ignoring him, Mamimi retrieved the can, yanked up the tab, and gulped down the contents.

"Sponging off a junior high kid?"

"Oops, I left a mark." Mamimi touched the fresh bruise a love bite on Naota's neck. "What will you do hide it with a bandage?"

There was no response.

Naota knew he was losing the argument. He, Naota Nandaba, looked upon by so many as the "Cool Mint" of the class, was at a complete loss. A high school girl with papaya-flavored bubblegum for brains was screwing with him.

Mamimi stopped drinking and offered the can to Naota.

"What?" asked Naota.

"It's yours, isn't it? There's still half left."

Taking the can from her, Naota glanced at Mamimi's mouth.

Her lips, moistened with lemonade, looked glistening and alluring... moments earlier, they had been sweeping across his skin. Though they had caressed his neck and ears countless times, Naota's lips hadn't kissed them before not once. Mamimi had refused stubbornly whenever Naota tried. It was the one thing she wouldn't do. Touching their lips together was forbidden.

It wasn't because she wanted to be a relentless tease. The real reason weighed heavily on his heart.

Mamimi called him "Takkun," and Naota knew why. Mamimi had explained she'd taken the "ta" from his name and added "kun" as an endearment. It was a far-fetched explanation a papaya-flavored explanation.

Naota's older brother, Tasuku, currently was studying in America on a baseball scholarship. Mamimi was really Tasuku's girlfriend, and she wouldn't kiss her "substitute" boyfriend. When she and Tasuku were together, she called *him* "Takkun."

Naota threw the can into the street.

"Hey, empty cans go in the recycle bin!"

It wasn't empty, though. The half-full can arced through the sky before rolling along the ground.

In the back of Naota's mind, he remembered a certain letter a Pandora's box that constantly agitated his memory. Enclosed in that letter was a photo of Tasuku with a blonde girl.

"You know," he began, having difficulty finding the words, "my brother, in America, he..."

Mamimi's eyes turned suddenly grave. Her expression was more serious than when she'd rejected Naota's kiss.

In retrospect, she must have known by then; or at least, she must have had an inkling. Naota had no way of knowing that at the time, however.

Should I open it? Should I finally open this Pandora's box now? Maybe I won't be able to spend time with Mamimi on the riverbank anymore. Should I really open it? Do I really want to lose these moments after school when Mamimi fools around with me?

Sooner or later, he'd have to say it. He had to tell her.

Tell her.

"In America, my brother, he..."

Don't hesitate: Say it now!

Suddenly... yes, it happened right then. The two of them, lost in the seriousness of the moment, had forgotten their surroundings. Thus, they didn't notice the sound of the approaching bike until a moment too late.

"*Itadaki* -mammoth!" With this incomprehensible shout, the girl on the bike aimed straight for Naota.

The bike was a scooter. It was, unmistakably, an imported Vespa.

The Vespa girl pulled out an electric guitar that was strapped across her back, getting ready to hit Naota with it as she drove by.

What? It's a psychopath! was Naota's first thought. She must be insane!

The guitar she wielded came at him with tremendous speed, and Naota's knees buckled with fear.

This is it. I'm so dead. Here it comes.

Just then...

"Eh?" said the Vespa girl.

The can of lemonade Naota recently had discarded caught on the Vespa's front wheel, and the girl lost control.

She let out a strange sound: "Rararararara!"

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Just as Naota thought he would be all right, things got worse.

The Vespa itself sailed straight at Naota; the impact sent his body flying. He tumbled along the road. The Vespa girl's shout was the last thing he heard before all the lights went out in his brain.

Mamimi cried out and ran toward Naota's body, which lay limply on the ground. "Takkun!"

"*Stop!*" commanded the shrill voice belonging to the Vespa girl. Having parked the bike next to them, the girl haughtily ordered Mamimi in English, "Stop, native girl."

Mamimi wasn't very good with English, but she had a vague idea what those words meant. Though she had absolutely no obligation to obey this odd girl, Mamimi was weak-willed. She stopped dead in her tracks. She froze, humorously, like a punching doll that had come back up after having been tipped over.

"Taro has hit his head, so he shouldn't be moved," said the girl in a language Mamimi could understand well. She got off her Vespa and approached Naota.

OK she speaks Japanese, Mamimi thought. She had assumed they would be unable to communicate.

"Uh, but his name is Naota, not Taro." Mamimi added unnecessarily, "I call him Takkun."

The girl bent over and put her ear to Naota's chest, as though to assess his condition. She acted as if she had experience with this sort of thing but watching her, it was obvious that she was a fraud.

"Taro is dead!" she proclaimed suddenly in a tone of utter surprise. "This boy is completely yes, utterly dead, Taro-style."

Mamimi thought to herself, "This girl isn't all there."

When the Vespa girl removed her helmet, Mamimi was surprised to discover that she was a beauty. Her eyes were like green apples or pale emeralds. Where could she be from? Maybe they were colored contacts? Upon closer examination, her skin tone was oddly different from that of a normal Japanese person.

Perhaps thanks to her instincts as a high school delinquent, Mamimi guessed that this was no ordinary girl. Mamimi could feel the strength emanating from the other girl's skin. Those green eyes shone with greed and a totally unrestrained wildness. They were the eyes of someone strong, and Mamimi thought they were pretty cool.

"Oh no! I killed him! I finally find the cure for the weather, and then I go and kill him! Argh! Come back to me!"

"Oh!" Mamimi exclaimed, watching as the girl suddenly kissed Naota presumably in an attempt to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The kiss was deep. Without hesitation. Prolonged.

This was bad. Mamimi knew she should do something, but she couldn't decide how to react to the situation unfolding before her.

Mamimi Samejima was fond of smoking and often ditched school. She liked to think of herself as a person to whom rules and regulations didn't apply. However, this crazy girl who had run over a junior high kid with her bike, knocked him unconscious, and then kissed him was far beyond her realm of experience. What could Mamimi possibly do in an emergency like this?

That was it! She had a cell phone, so she could call the police. Just as Mamimi thought of a plan, Naota started coming around, still in the girl's embrace.

Finally, the Vespa girl separated her mouth from his and said, "I did it! Taro, I brought you back to life!"

"I told you, he isn't called Taro," Mamimi asserted again.

"Oh, really? That's good! If he had been Taro, that would have been a real problem. He'd definitely be dead by now. Lucky me!"

Inexplicably delighted, while the poor boy was coming to, the girl raised her guitar and slammed it with all her might onto Naota's head.

Mamimi did nothing but watch the violence, completely stunned.

"Hm, did I miss? It isn't coming out," the girl muttered incomprehensibly, looking at the bracelet on her left arm.

It wasn't a watch, rather some kind of accessory that Mamimi hadn't seen before. The gold band around the girl's wrist had a short chain attached.

Looking at the chain, the Vespa girl shook her head. She started rattling Naota's head, saying, "This is no good. Maybe I'll try again."

As the girl once again readied her lethal guitar, Mamimi ran over and embraced Naota, attempting to shield him.

"I'm about to hit his head, so please don't move him."

With a critical look, Mamimi faced the other girl.

Naota, who had regained full consciousness right then, opened his mouth and asked, "What did you do?"

"What? CPR, of course!"

"Not that," he said, instinctively wiping his moist lips.

"Did she stick her tongue in?" Mamimi asked.

Naota was at a loss for words. Against his will, he had received his first kiss. Moreover, it had a spicy curry taste.

It was terrible.

His biggest problem wasn't that his first kiss had been foisted upon him, but that Mamimi had seen it. A speechless Mamimi stared at Naota.

What's that? It was the sound of a Vespa engine. When they looked up, they saw the girl was on the seat, ready to flee.

"Thanks for nothing!" she yelled to Naota; then, she accelerated away at full speed.

What was that all about? She was a lunatic who had come like a bolt out of the blue.

The Vespa, rapidly getting farther and farther away, seemed to be expensive. Watching the girl's figure grow smaller, Mamimi voiced her sentiments, "That must feel so good."

"Good?"

"Being free." Naota didn't reply.

"She was older than twenty, huh?" Mamimi continued. "An idiotic adult who still hasn't grown up," said Naota. "Ouch!"

The wound left by the guitar suddenly hurt. And that was how Naota met *her*.

Chapter 2

The Nandaba family business was a bakery. It had been started by his grandfather Shigekuni, so the shop was called "Shigekuni Bakery." When Shigekuni retired, he passed the family business to Naota's father, Kamon.

Kamon wasn't Shigekuni's son by blood, rather a man who had married into the family. He had been working at a publishing house when he'd met Shigekuni's only daughter, whom he later married.

When their eldest son, Tasuku, was born, Kamon and his wife had moved to her hometown, thinking that Mabase was where they would like to raise their children. However, the boys lost their mother before Naota had entered kindergarten. Naota had been told she wasn't dead, but that her whereabouts were unknown.

So, Naota's family now consisted of his grandfather, Shigekuni; his father, Kamon; his brother, Tasuku, who currently was studying in America; and finally,

Naota himself. It was a household made up of four men.

They also had an old pet cat called Miyu Miyu. Miyu Miyu was fairly fat, and when he wailed, he sounded like a wild boar.

Speaking of the cat, Naota remembered one particular occurrence. It had occurred right after their mother had disappeared and a large typhoon had hit Mabase.

On one side of the Nandaba house was a river; both banks were reinforced by six feet of concrete. Normally, the water level wasn't very high but due to the typhoon, the current had transformed into violent rapids. The water level rose, raging along like a muddy waterfall.

Alone, the young Naota was watching the muddy river from his bedroom window when he saw a small kitten floating downstream in a cardboard box. He thought the kitten looked at him. He cried out, but the kitten was carried off into the distance. From his place at the second-floor window, there was nothing Naota could have done.

Naota never told anyone about it but six months later, Kamon brought home a cat. Around this time, Kamon had begun leaving the house for frequent walks. Thinking back, maybe his dad had been looking for his missing wife, or perhaps he simply was wandering around in shock. Naota never knew. One day, Kamon brought home a cat and cared for it, saying they wouldn't have to worry about pests in the bakery anymore. From that point on, Kamon changed his careless ways and started taking the bakery seriously.

Maybe that cat now their pet, Miyu Miyu was the kitten that Naota had seen floating down the stream. He couldn't, however, remember any distinguishing characteristics of the kitten that would substantiate this theory.

During long nights, he often reminisced about various things in the faraway past. This was one of those nights.

I can't sleep. Naota was lying awake on the bed, curled up like a fetus. *Can't sleep. Can't sleep. Can't sleep.*

A chill ran down his back. For some reason, he couldn't calm down. *Maybe I've caught a cold?*

He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't keep the idea out of his mind that the Vespa girl might have passed something on to him when she'd kissed him earlier.

He remembered the touch of the Vespa girl's lips from that afternoon. His first kiss had had a spicy curry flavor.

That flavor. I need to forget about that. It was like a bad accident.

He turned over, and the bed creaked.

It was a bunk bed, and Naota slept in the bottom bunk. The top bunk belonged to his brother, Tasuku. Although Tasuku was out of the country, Naota couldn't use it. After all, in a small room shared by two people, the bunks were the single sacred space the two brothers had.

"Good, Naota. I'll take the top bunk, and you take the bottom," Tasuku had said.

I'm always at the bottom of things.

If his brother did become a professional baseball player, their father probably hoped Naota would continue the family business.

Naota raised his head from the covers, sighing. It would be hard to sleep tonight. Thinking he might have a fever, Naota put his hand on his forehead.

What is this?

On his forehead was a large bulge.

A large bulge!

A large bulge!

A LARGE BULGE!

What is this? Am I dreaming? Trying to process the surrealism of the situation, he kicked off the covers and sat up. *Calm down. I have to calm down.*

He touched his forehead in an attempt to assess the situation.

"Ouch!" he cried out reflexively as an intense pain suddenly shot through him.

At the same time, from the center of his forehead, he felt a pulsing sensation. *Ba-dum... ba-dum... ba-dum.*

It was a bit like the drunken feeling he'd experienced when Grandfather Shigekuni had given him a little alcohol but he hadn't touched a drop of booze.

Ba-dum... ba-dum... ba-dum. His head pounded as if it had a heart inside. No, the bulge itself was throbbing.

Naota's face turned pale as he examined the bulge more gently.

As he'd imagined, it was a single, hard, long bulge about five inches long, it extended straight out from his forehead. If he grasped it firmly, the part connected to his head hurt. *What is this?*

Then, Naota remembered that the Vespa girl had hit his head with her guitar that afternoon. Mamimi had said they should go to the hospital; after all, a bike had hit him. Although nothing seemed wrong, he really should have gone to get checked out by a doctor. He had ignored her, saying that all he had were bruises. With Mamimi there, he had played up his "Cool Mint" image.

If I'd gone to the hospital then maybe this wouldn't have happened, he thought. *Ouch!*

Ba-dum... ba-dum... ba-dum...

Naota turned on the light and put on his glasses.

No, it wasn't a dream: There really was something sticking out of his head. A dark blue object projected straight from his forehead. The object actually was less swollen than it was angular. In fact, "horn" was a more suitable description than "bulge."

There's a horn growing from my forehead. What kind of illness is this?

He recalled the diseases described in horror comics like those in the beginning of "Black Jack" rather than any conditions found in more realistic media. *What could this illness be?* Maybe it was some kind of hereditary disease that hadn't manifested in his grandfather or father, but had awakened due to this afternoon's trauma?

No, calm down and think about this scientifically. That's right! I've heard of advanced frontal lobe development in people who are patient. Maybe I've been too patient, so my frontal lobe has grown deformed. Argh! That's not scientific at all!

Naota was overcome with anxiety.

Then, he received another shock: With each pulse, the horn grew a little bigger.

Ba-dum... ba-dum... ba-dum.

This was no a joke!

Naota panicked and pushed down on the growth. Unexpectedly, the horn easily retracted into his skull. At the same time, the throbbing pain eased, as well.

In the silent room, the only sound was the ticking of the clock.

After he'd pushed the horn back in completely, everything seemed to have been merely a bad dream. Had he been asleep, after all?

Yes, he must have been dreaming. Logically speaking, that was the best explanation.

Please, God!

Fearfully, he removed his hand from his head.

Apparently, God was not in a good mood that night. Left alone, the horn kept growing. *Ba-dum... ba-dum... ba-dum...*

It looks like I'll have to keep pushing it in forever. Naota trembled as he wondered: *What the hell am I going to do? There's no one I can talk to about this. I don't want anyone to know.*

And what am I going to do about school tomorrow? Naota Nandaba thought of these details, even in the midst of such an unusual situation. *Well, I'll have to figure out some kind of solution at least for the time being.*

The next day, Naota stuck a bandage over his forehead.

One of his female classmates, Eri Ninamori, called out to him as he neared the school gates. "Morning, Naota!"

"Hey," he answered indifferently, quickly heading toward the entrance.

He'd used an extra-strength bandage on his forehead to make sure his horn didn't burst out. He'd made doubly sure of this by adding a few additional drops of superglue. (Imagine the horrors he'd face when the time came to peel it off.)

Anyone who thinks that maybe he'd gone a bit too far obviously hasn't known the distress caused by having a horn sprout from one's head. However, Naota Nandaba did have a strange horn growing from his head.

Naota, the devil.

He couldn't let anyone know the terrible truth. It certainly wouldn't fit his persona. However, his bandage was pretty noticeable, as it was stuck right in the middle of his forehead.

He knew what would happen: Making such an effort to hide something would, of course, paradoxically generate interest and attract prying eyes. If only they would appear less interested... a bandage itself was commonplace enough. Perhaps people would think he'd grazed himself and then covered the wound with a bandage nothing extraordinary about that.

Naturally, that wasn't the way things would go.

"What happened to you?" Ninamori asked.

"Huh?"

"The bandage."

"Oh, that..." began Naota. "Um, yesterday, my grandpa and a door-to-door solicitor had a massive fight. I tried to stop it, and I ended up with this!"

Naota related the story he'd prepared in advance. He'd been worried that if he

claimed to have bumped into a lamppost or something like that, it would sound suspicious, thus further heightening people's curiosity. Although it didn't really matter if people discovered that some girl had hit him with her Vespa, it was an outlandish tale. He'd decided describing a realistic-sounding story was better than describing the unbelievable actual reality.

In this world, there always will be meddlers who, seeing through the camouflage, feel they must stick in their noses. And thus, here was Ninamori, a perfect example of this type of person. Because her father served as Mabase's mayor, she remained aware of her "princess" persona. She was class president, the sort of person who unfailingly would help out her friends with any problems whatsoever, and who delighted in her teachers' approval. (Indeed, she was also the first to report a schoolmate for skipping classroom cleaning duty.)

Most troublesome of all, she seemed to treat Naota with a strange sense of camaraderie because of his excellent grades. She often sought to confer with him, no matter how run-of-the-mill a matter might be.

"That looks awfully strange. It doesn't suit you," opined Ninamori, looking at Naota's bandage. "You sure you're not hiding something?"

She had unusually good intuition.

I really hate this girl! Naota thought to himself.

It was still early, but Gaku was already in the classroom. He and Naota had been in the same class since the third grade. He was a hot-blooded guy with a clean-shaven head and horn-rim glasses. Stretched out, he was reading an "Adults' Illustrated Weekly." As expected, upon seeing the bandage, Gaku asked if Naota had injured himself; then, he let the subject drop.

"Anyway, did you hear, Naota? That light-speed Vespa showed up again."

"Light-speed Vespa?" Naota repeated.

"You hadn't heard? Recently, over on the national freeway, people have been seeing a Vespa-riding girl carrying a guitar pretty frequently."

"What's a 'light-speed Vespa'?" asked Ninamori.

"A Vespa is, well, a Vespa. It's a scooter. That goes fast."

"A light-speed Vespa..." Naota said.

Without a doubt, Naota was recalling his encounter with the girl from the previous day, who had given him a curry-flavored kiss. It had to be her. If that outrageous girl had been turning up all over town, of course she would have become the subject of conversation.

"According to the rumors, she always appears in front of people who are doing things they shouldn't," continued Gaku. "She stole a spicy curry roll from Kumiko in class and"

"A curry roll? What was it she shouldn't have been doing?"

Gaku grinned suggestively before whispering, "Kumiko was sharing a diary with Koji from Class Three."

"Is that supposed to be pervy?"

"Anyway, the story goes that if the light-speed Vespa touches a person who's being a pervert, then the 'devil's mark' appears on that person's body somewhere.

Kumiko said she hasn't experienced anything like that, but it's still weird. People with the mark eventually will be destroyed by the light-speed Vespa girl."

The devil's mark?

This was terrifying information. Generally, Naota wasn't one to listen to such crude urban myths; but this time, the circumstances were entirely different.

The devil's mark. Could it be the horn that had appeared on his head...?

Suddenly, Ninamori pointed at Naota's neck and asked, "Hey, what's that?"

"The devil's mark?" Gaku said, sneaking a look.

"Of course not. That's ridiculous."

They were looking at the love bite Mamimi had given him yesterday. Normally, he would have tried to hide it but today, with a horn growing out of his head, it had managed to have slipped his mind.

"Have you been doing something you shouldn't have?"

"What do you mean? Of course not."

People being perverted? Don't be absurd. Mamimi and I do that kind of thing all the time, Naota thought to himself. *It isn't the devil's mark...*

Naota pulled up his collar to hide his neck. Ninamori glanced at Naota's bandage, but she didn't say anything about it in front of Gaku.

Several classmates asked about his bandage, but Naota gave appropriate excuses and was able to endure a normal school day.

After school, Naota ran out of the classroom as soon as the bell rang. He started walking home alone, taking a different road than usual.

Naota had two routes he typically took home. One was the normal after-school route. This was the "children, please don't loiter along the road, be sure not to talk to strangers, and go straight home" path. The other way, passing Mabase Bridge, was the road he took for his rendezvous with Mamimi.

In truth, the two of them never made plans to meet up. Sometimes, when Naota went to the bridge, Mamimi would be there also. And if Mamimi went to the bridge, then Naota coincidentally might be there, too. If, on a whim, they decided to come to the bridge, then, occasionally, they would hang out.

The bridge had become their rock, their safety zone.

There had been many times when Mamimi hadn't shown up, and Naota had spent the time alone on the river bank; conversely, there were days when Mamimi had spent time there on her own.

Obviously, the real reason either of them went there was to see the other... but if they made a promise to meet, their relationship would take a strange turn. Naota and Mamimi both feared that kind of commitment, though they were only half aware of this.

Today, however, Naota hadn't chosen either of these paths.

I think I'll go to the hospital after all.

He didn't have much hope that they could get rid of his horn at the hospital. To tell the truth, he wouldn't have been surprised in the least if there wasn't a name for his condition. Naota didn't know what else to do, though. He prayed it might be a simple sickness, something with a cure.

Naota already had prepared for this trip before leaving home that morning, taking his health insurance card with him. Now, he headed to the largest hospital in the city.

As he waited at the crosswalk, a honking train passed in front of Naota.

The barrier lifted, and Naota heard the sound of a bike engine idling right next to him. He stiffened. Reflexively, the color drained from his face, and he sucked in a breath. A jolt of fear ran down his spine. Just as he'd dreaded, it was the Vespa girl from the previous day. Yesterday, he had been in complete shock during their encounter. Today, however, he had the fear of a child who, already having been stung previously, now came across another wasp.

This particular wasp took a bite of her spicy curry roll. There could be no mistake: This had to be the light-speed Vespa girl that Gaku had been talking about. If the rumors were true, then that had to be the food she had taken from the kid.

The barrier had risen, but Naota remained stationary. After all, it might be a mistake to rile up an opponent such as this one.

"Hey, there," she said with an overly familiar manner, "did anything happen after yesterday afternoon? Anything weird?"

You were the weirdest thing, Naota thought.

"Something did, didn't it?"

"What are you talking about something 'weird'?" he asked.

The girl noticed the bandage on Naota's forehead, and she seemed delighted. "Then, what's with the bandage?"

"You hit me yesterday! Remember?"

"That looks awfully strange. It doesn't suit you." The girl eyed Naota's forehead with suspicion, repeating the same thing that Ninamori had said that morning: "Looks to me like you're hiding something."

He couldn't speak. *Does she know about the horn?*

For a moment, Naota hesitated, considering whether he should ask the girl about the changes taking place in his body. However, he had second thoughts when he spied the guitar on her back.

No, he had to get away as quickly as possible. If he spoke to her further, then she might turn violent on him again. This time, she might beat him to death! She was a total maniac.

Once again, the warning bell for the train crossing sounded, and the barrier began to descend. Seizing the opportunity, Naota waited for the barrier to lower almost completely before running across.

Turning, he saw that the girl was still in the same place, watching Naota, her hand shielding her eyes.

The train passed by, separating them.

Look at you now!

Naota fled as fast as he could.

The MM-affiliated hospital was Mabase's largest medical center.

The MM company proclaimed itself the world's leader in groundbreaking

medical technology, and its hospital facilities were the best in the country. They had twenty beds in the ER alone, and the intensive care unit contained thirty beds. These facilities far exceeded the requirements of Mabase's population of sixty thousand.

Light flooded through the skylight, filtering into the sparkling clean lobby.

Neurology, internal medicine, orthopedic surgery... Naota paused for a moment, deciding what department to try. Eventually, he went to reception and signed in for a cerebral surgery appointment before entering the diagnosis room.

Looking around at the room's high-tech equipment (such as the CT scanner and the MRI machine), his heart filled with hope. This really was a technological medical machinery manufacturer's hospital. He felt reassured. Here, they had to have at least some idea of what his strange affliction was and why it was affecting him.

A nurse, her back still turned to Naota, flipped through a chart.

"Um..." he began.

"Please, lie down on the bed."

Following the nurse's instruction, Naota reclined upon the cold bed.

"Please, close your eyes and relax," she continued. "What happened to you?"

"Um... well..." Naota trailed off.

"This is a hospital. You can tell me anything, including things about your growing pains," the nurse said encouragingly. "You don't have to be embarrassed here."

"No, it's nothing like that. It's this completely strange thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"How to describe it...?"

"Please, don't be embarrassed," the nurse reiterated.

"It's some kind of bulge."

"When it comes to teenage problems, a bulge is completely normal. How long has it been going on?"

"In the middle of the night, it just..."

"Always in the middle of the night," noted the nurse.

"Urn, it's right in the center of my forehead."

"So, it's under that bandage?"

Naota explained, "Yes. You see, if I don't keep it pressed down, then it pushes out."

"Very eager, isn't it? I understand."

"Eh?"

"It's Flictonic Clipple Webber Syndrome a psychogenetic disorder, manifesting during puberty, in which a section of skin hardens. With this disease, if the child overexerts himself, a horn grows out from the forehead."

That doesn't sound real!

Naota finally realized, with shock, that he recognized the nurse's voice. Panicking, he opened his eyes to see the nurse was, indeed, the Vespa girl.

"When did you?" he began.

"So, what do you have, exactly, under that bandage?"

"What are you doing here?"

"You thought you'd managed to ditch me?" she asked, grinning boldly as she

suddenly pulled out her electric guitar.

As one might expect, Naota jumped off the bed and ran.

Is she really a nurse here?

Naota had no idea the real nurse was tied up in the waiting room, wearing merely her underwear; she was lying alongside the doctor, who was currently unconscious.

"Don't run," the Vespa girl said. "The fun's just begun!"

"You must be kidding!"

The person bearing the devil's mark will be destroyed by the light-speed Vespa girl.

As though chased by a carnivorous beast, Naota fled the hospital as fast as his legs would carry him.

It was a living nightmare.

Chapter 3

When he finally reached home, Naota collapsed on his bed, exhausted.

His heart kept pounding. He hadn't run this much since he'd been in a marathon.

What's this all about?

The situation was worse than it had been the previous night. Now, this girl Naota thought he'd met accidentally was, inarguably, hunting him.

Light-speed Vespa... Obviously, she wasn't an ordinary girl.

Without hesitation, she'd caused absolute mayhem: driving her bike down the hospital corridors, breaking through glass doors, speeding through a crowded street. She'd even flattened the phone booth Naota had popped into.

For the first time, Naota felt happy simply to be alive.

I got away, didn't I? I managed to get home alive, right?

Whenever he saw that chaotic maniac, it inevitably signaled trouble.

Additionally, the horn continued to grow out of his head. That girl probably would follow him, so now he couldn't go to a different hospital. Speaking of hospital visits, the girl had noticed the bandage.

Maybe she'd given him some kind of terrible virus along with that curry-flavored kiss. Maybe there was nothing he could do to make the horn go away. Maybe he really would have it for the rest of his life.

Was that why the girl was after Naota?

Is it really the devil's mark? he wondered. Will it get bigger? Am I going to die?

Or

Suddenly, his father, Kamon, loudly hollered for him to come downstairs for supper. It was dinnertime already.

In the Nandaba household, meals were formal "gather 'round the table" family affairs. Every morning and evening (and afternoon, when it wasn't a school day), Naota joined his father and grandfather for meals. He had thought it was perfectly normal until recently, when he'd discovered that things weren't the way he'd once thought.

Among his classmates, many didn't eat with their families as much as one time

per week. Whereas adults might pity these children, Naota, by contrast, envied them a little. Eating alone was cool. It seemed like the first step to living independently.

However, eating alone wasn't allowed in the Nandaba household. His father rigidly enforced this policy. It seemed to have some special meaning for Kamon. It didn't matter if you weren't hungry, or if you were running a fever, or if you had one or three horns growing out of your head. You still had to stick to the mealtime ritual.

So, Naota went downstairs to eat.

His family wasn't the kind he could discuss his problems with. Should he catch a cold or something similar, all he could expect in return was a scolding to take better care of himself.

And then... Naota, who had come downstairs, froze when he looked into the room: There she was... right there! The Vespa girl!

"Yo," the girl greeted him casually. As before, her tone was overly familiar. She was sitting with Kamon and Shigekuni, happily sipping miso soup.

Naota began, "You..."

"Let me introduce you," Kamon said. "Starting today, we have a beautiful new housekeeper, so welcome her. Her name is Haruko Haruhara."

"This miso soup is a little bland," stated the girl. "The broth isn't very good."

"I'm very sorry," Kamon apologized. "I'll be more careful tomorrow."

"What? A housekeeper?"

Naota actually meant to say, "Why is this girl the housekeeper?" and "Why, if we have a housekeeper, did you cook dinner, Dad?"

He noticed that his dad sported a bandage.

"Ah, I got hit in a bad accident today," explained Kamon.

"By a bike?"

"Yes, by a bike and also by Haruko, in other words. You know what a sucker your dad is for love..."

Behind his thick glasses, Kamon's eyes were intense. He used to work in Central City as a magazine editor, and he liked growing his hair long and tying it back so that he could pass as some kind of intellectual.

"How can you say that with a straight face, Dad?"

"What's the issue?" asked Haruko, pursing her lips and defending Naota's father. "Everyone needs love, until they die."

Encouraged by her support, Kamon plucked up the courage to ask, "Oh, by the way, Haruko, what do you think which of these roles do you like?"

"Which do I like?"

"The 'oh, Mister Editor, I didn't know you had such a young wife' kind of dream? Or no, no, no perhaps you prefer the 'my hubby is a professional dough roller' model? That's a fine choice, too."

"A shame he didn't die when he got hit," Shigekuni casually remarked.

"That's so mean," Kamon protested to his father-in-law, "especially after I hired Haruko to come and live with us to help you out, Father."

Give me a break, thought Naota.

Haruko sat between Kamon and Shigekuni, and it looked like a fierce love

triangle was developing. Naota's head already ached from the horn; he wasn't about to allow this new mayhem in his home.

"Do we really need a housekeeper?" he asked.

"This housekeeper saw things," said Haruko, glancing sideways at Naota and giving him a knowing smile. "She saw Taro fondling a girl."

"You know I'm not Taro!"

"Fondling?" Kamon homed in on Haruko's assertion, demanding, "Who?"

"No one!"

"Who have you been fondling?" asked Kamon doggedly.

"Mamimi Samejima and I were hanging out."

"She's no good," Shigekuni said, wholly to himself, still eating his meal. "She's not good enough for Tasuku."

Kamon continued, "Exactly what have you been doing with your brother's girlfriend while he's been away?"

"We met up by accident."

"Have you done it?"

"I'm still in junior high!" Naota yelped, "What are you thinking?"

"I knew you'd say that! When I was your age, I used the same excuses. You're just like me. You've done it, haven't you? Yes, I'm sure you must have."

"Oh, really?" Haruko's eyes narrowed. "You're popular."

"I'm nothing to overlook," chimed in Shigekuni. "I'm single."

"What are you saying, Father? Me I'm single, plus, I'm a fine man." Kamon's face stiffened. "Anyway, Haruko, you already know Naota?"

"More than that," Haruko said. "Takkun and I, we already have *that* kind of relationship."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, mouth to mouth."

"Mouth to mouth... as in CPR?"

"Shut up about it!" shouted Naota.

Kamon suddenly stood up, grabbed his son's shoulders, and pushed him against the wall.

"Is that true, Naota? I thought you were a complete washout, but..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Naota needed a break from this madness. Obviously, Kamon was worked up not because he was truly angry, but because he was excited to have a female in the house. And Naota wasn't in the mood to be any part of it.

"So, you've already... with Haruko..."

"No!"

"I bet you thought you'd do it again tonight, eh? Oh, I can see those impure thoughts behind your seeming indifference."

"I'm not hiding anything."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not hiding anything!"

"Under that bandage," Haruko interjected, "he might be hiding something there."

What's going on?

After hastily finishing his nightmarish dinner, Naota climbed into the bathtub.

Is that Haruko Haruhara girl really going to live in our house from now on? I have to do something!

However, Kamon and Shigekuni already had fallen for her, and there wasn't much Naota could do on his own. Of course, there wasn't any way his father and grandfather could have known Haruko was the infamous light-speed Vespa girl.

If he told them, he didn't think it would change their minds, though. Apparently, after living in an all-male household for so long, even a crazy girl like Haruko seemed like a beautiful flower.

However, he had to do *something*. That girl was a dangerous maniac.

Seated in the bathtub, Naota gently touched the bandage on his forehead. He wasn't sure whether being near her would make the horn better or worse.

Through the window, he heard laughter. It seemed that Haruko, Kamon, and Shigekuni were having a drink in the living room.

They're in a good mood.

After his bath, when Naota went upstairs, he noticed a voice coming from his bedroom. It sounded like Haruko: "On the surface, they make medical machines, but I haven't snuck in yet."

A cell phone?

It seemed that arrogant girl had made an uncharacteristic mistake. From her serious tone, it appeared she was making excuses to someone. She sounded like a child who was being scolded for tardiness.

Just then, Naota was further surprised to hear a man tut-tutting in response.

This wasn't a cell phone call! She was talking to another person in Naota's room. There was another stranger in his house! That aside, though, the weird girl had gone into his room without asking his permission. It was a very serious matter.

This wasn't the kind of moment to stand around listening, so Naota quickly opened the door to his room. Inside, contrary to his expectations, Haruko sat upright on the floor, completely alone. There was no one else present.

The only other being was Miyu Miyu, who sat outside on the veranda, visible through the open window. The cat gave a little cry and jumped onto the roof.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Just myself," said Haruko, laughing.

"You shouldn't go into other people's rooms without asking."

"So, there are a lot of things a teenage boy needs to hide, huh?" Looking up at the top bunk, she reasoned, "Takkun uses the bottom bunk, so I'll take the top."

"You must be kidding."

She wasn't kidding. She truly was planning to sleep in the same room with Naota tonight.

"Come on," he said, "what are you really?"

"I'm a wandering helper."

"Earlier, you said you were a housekeeper."

"Under the bandage..."

"You're so weird."

"What's under the bandage?"

Pausing, Naota thought, *Wait a second.*

His theory that his horn had resulted either from Haruko hitting him or from the mouth-to-mouth CPR she had given him seemed to be true. As she was already there in the house, it wouldn't hurt at least to ask her what the horn was.

"Tell me, Haruko, what is this?"

"Yes, tell *me*, what is this?"

"It's your fault."

"It's your own head," she replied maddeningly.

"It's because you hit me."

"So, take it off and show me."

"Don't touch it!"

Haruko approached with a grin, which triggered a sudden, instinctive fear in Naota. He knocked away her hand. *I can't let my guard down. I have to be careful with her.*

He said, "Dad brought you here, so go be with him. Stop bothering me!" Without meaning to, he'd let his tone become harsh.

Haruko fell silent and stared at him with a serious expression, unlike any he'd seen on her face before. Her eyes resembled those of a lover who'd been hurt by an unfaithful man.

"What?" he asked.

"I saw *you* first."

The innocence in her voice took Naota by surprise.

Haruko was trying to explain that the reason she'd come to this house was because *Naota* lived here.

Of course, having a maniacal girl set her sights on him was scary but still, hearing her innocent tone and seeing her expression... When she looked him with those green eyes and said she was here because of him... for that single instant, Naota felt something for her.

Idiot, what are you thinking?

"Anyway, the top bunk is my brother's, so absolutely no one else can sleep there. That's simply the way it is," Naota said, stretching out on his own bed.

He turned his back to Haruko, giving her an unspoken hint to leave.

Now isn't the time or place for weird feelings.

If this girl, Haruko, didn't know what the horn was, he would have to return to the hospital. Tomorrow, he'd ditch her and then go to get it checked out.

"Where is your brother?" Haruko didn't hesitate to ask, despite the fact that Naota had turned away from her to sleep. "Hey," she said insistently, "where is your brother?"

"You're so annoying! He's in America."

"What's he doing there?"

"Playing baseball."

"Wow, he must be good at it!"

"So what?"

"Well, good night," said Haruko.

Maybe she finally caught the drift, Naota thought, as he sensed Haruko standing up. Naota assumed she was leaving, and he felt relieved. The next moment, however, her actions stupefied him.

Does this girl have no common sense?

"You're sleeping here?" His voice rose automatically as he said a second time, "You're sleeping *here*?"

Of all things, Haruko had slipped into bed next to him.

"There's nowhere else," she said sheepishly.

"Fine, do what you want."

Naota knew there was no point in any further argument, so he attempted to push his way past her in order to sleep in the top bunk. As he tried, Haruko shouted in a loud voice, "That's your brother's bunk!"

Naota was stunned into silence.

"That's your brother's bunk! It's his, so absolutely no one else can sleep there! That's simply the way it is!"

In wordless fury, Naota listened to his own strictures thrown back at him.

Such a childish fight, he thought to himself. *There aren't any real adults in the world.*

His place to sleep stolen from him, Naota went downstairs, clutching his pillow. He found Kamon sitting in the darkened shop.

"Naota?" said his father, adopting the same tone he used when petting the cat.

Seeing his father like this was kind of eerie.

"We need to have a serious talk, Naota."

"About what?"

"It's about Haruko. Are you opposed to her?"

Naota had no idea whether his father was talking about employing her as a housekeeper or having her as a wife. Actually, Naota would have opposed either one, but he knew his opinions wouldn't affect his father's decision.

"Do what you want."

"Naota... Nao, innocent little Nao. Oh, right! Mamimi stopped by earlier today."

"Eh?"

What did Dad say? Did he just say Mamimi came over?

Kamon explained, "She came over to ask for the leftover bread."

"Mamimi came here?" Naota said, his voice betraying his emotions.

"Of course, it'll taste fine if she fries it with a little oil. I guess her family isn't so well-off."

Mamimi came here. Mamimi came to my house!

"Where do you think you're going at this hour?"

Kamon's question didn't reach Naota's ears, as he had run out of the house into the night streets.

All thoughts of the horn and Haruko had disappeared.

Chapter 4

Naota ran through the dark streets.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself standing at the place it seemed he usually visited after school: Mabase Bridge.

Mamimi came over!

Mamimi had stopped by his house, knowing his brother wasn't there. It was the first time that had happened. Although all he knew was that she'd attempted to visit, the non-event had propelled Naota to run out, ecstatic.

They'd never made any particular promises to meet each other, but Naota had faith. Mamimi was definitely at Mabase Bridge, waiting alone for Naota to arrive.

They were two parallel lines that would have continued forward into eternity... now, though, one of them had shifted direction, if slightly. Naota ran with all his might, spurred on by the hope that their lines would meet now. At times like this, young men glimpse, if dimly, how big the love they seal inside themselves can be.

Mamimi!

His quivering breath disappeared into the darkness of the street.

A line of white smoke ascended into the starry sky. It was Mamimi's cigarette smoke.

She was leaning against the rail, looking down into the dark water. Despite the hour, she still wore her school uniform.

Naota pulled up and began walking toward her. He seemed unable to slow his quick, gasping breath.

Looking sideways at Naota, Mamimi discarded her cigarette into the river.

"I have a lot," she said, indicating the bag of bread crusts at her feet.

She sat down next to the bag and began silently eating one of the crusts. She wore the same expression on her face that he'd seen so many times after school.

"They're not very good," she commented.

"You said you weren't smoking anymore."

Naota had started to regret that he'd run here as fast as he could.

Why did you stop by my house? he wondered. He couldn't ask Mamimi that question, no matter how much he wanted to not when she had those same after-school eyes.

All the hopes he'd nurtured while hurrying here were nothing but illusions.

"Takkun, you're out of breath."

Now, he silently leaned against the rail and looked down at the black, flowing water.

What did I hope she'd say?

When he thought about it objectively, he realized what he should've known already. He understood why the fickle Mamimi had visited his house out of the blue.

"You want some?"

"No," he said, thinking, *You couldn't have come over simply because you wanted bread crusts.* He couldn't say the words aloud, though.

Mamimi stood up and brushed dirt from her skirt. As usual, she hugged Naota silently from behind. She didn't ask why he had sprinted there. It was very late at night, but everything felt exactly like it did after school.

The night river reflected a ghostly moon.

As Mamimi kept clasping Naota, he resolved, *I can't do this anymore. This can't go on any longer.*

"Have you gotten any letters?" Naota asked.

He felt Mamimi's body stiffen slightly against his back.

"Have you heard anything from him at all?" Naota said, knowing his words were out of pure spite.

He knew Mamimi understood that her relationship with Tasuku was over. Although she recognized this truth, she was too scared to admit it to herself. Tasuku hadn't thought of Mamimi as his lover in the first place; that was why he'd found it so easy to let Naota know he had a steady girlfriend in America.

It was a cruel thing to say, but Naota had to ask, "How much do you like my brother?"

Mamimi held her breath. The moment seemed to last forever; he never felt her exhalation.

"Like watermelon," Mamimi replied, after the silence passed. "Or like a panda with a mean face, or like a store that carries sandals just my size, or like when you wake up and realize it's Sunday... Well, I like him more than old bread crusts, anyway."

"Then, why don't you stop doing this?"

She didn't respond.

"You know, my brother, he..."

Suddenly, Mamimi covered her ears with her hands. It was the first time Naota had seen such anguish. Like a cat clinging to a branch as it washed down a river, Mamimi pushed her hands over her ears, hunching up. Her entire body was begging him not to continue.

Watching her, Naota felt as if his body, too, would burst. *Why not want me instead? I'm here. What's wrong with me?*

Finally, Mamimi, still slumped over, whispered painfully, "I'm going to overflow."

Eh?

"Really, I'm going to overflow..."

"What?"

Abruptly, Mamimi screamed, and Naota panicked.

Denial of this magnitude has to be hysteria, doesn't it?

As he stared in horror, Mamimi closed her mouth, lost consciousness, and collapsed on the ground, as though the lights had been turned off inside her.

"Mamimi!"

Frightened, Naota propped up her body, but

"Ow!"

In that instant, Naota's head was consumed by a violent, burning pain. He went rigid, as if he'd received an electric shock. His forehead started to ache.

At that exact moment, inside the large MM factory that sat on the small hill overlooking Mabase, something started to happen. Suddenly, inside the factory

which, since its inauguration, always ended the work day and turned off the lights at five o'clock every light switched on. The building, which looked like a giant iron, lit up, striking a dignified position against the night sky. To nearby residents' surprise, sirens started blaring, and searchlights spanned across the factory's surroundings.

The building suddenly seemed less like a factory and more like a prison from which a convict had escaped.

And Haruko Haruhara, who had been lying down in Naota's room, suddenly sat bolt upright.

"It's here!"

Her green eyes sparkled with a new intensity.

Like a magnet, the bracelet she wore on her left wrist was reacting to some specific kind of energy wave. Haruko jumped from the second-floor window without hesitation, landed gallantly astride her Vespa, and punched the accelerator.

The frightful sound of the speeding scooter ripped through the city.

What Naota had feared before now became his reality. He had stuck on the bandage using extra-strength instant adhesive, but the bandage suddenly had torn. The horn had come bursting out.

Now, both of Naota's legs were several inches off the ground; he was floating in midair. The horn had begun to emit some sort of anti-gravity power and was levitating Naota's body.

It was a flying horn.

Naota clawed desperately at the horn protruding from his own forehead, terrified now that his feet were no longer on the ground. He shook in horror.

It's gotten bigger!

The horn was longer and fatter than before. Indeed, it was still growing. Could it be "overflowing," too?

Keeeeeeeen.

He heard a loud ringing echo through his ears, and his eardrums threatened to burst. Strangely, he felt no pain in the rest of his body. The actual horn itself was numb to the touch, like some bizarre, paralyzed limb. As if in a dream, he felt only the horrid sensation of a foreign object protruding from him.

He stared at the dark blue horn extending from his forehead, pointing straight toward the sky. There was nothing he could do but leave his body to its fate.

The "horn" wasn't a horn at all. Naota's stomach had turned over, as he helplessly watched the ghastly horns growth. The dark blue horn that he remembered from yesterday revealed itself to be a finger. Of all things, it was an index finger.

And slowly following that index finger was an enormous hand, complete from little finger to thumb. The wrist and arm appeared in turn. As though trying to grasp the stars in the night sky, a massive hand reached up from Naota's forehead.

It was a dark blue, metallic, mechanical arm something exquisite and robotic. In fact, it was unmistakably a robot arm.

A robot was springing from his head. Like a moth that bursts through its original cocoon when it leaves its larval stage, a robot was climbing out of Naota's head.

This is what was inside my head?

He agonized. The truth was weirder than Naota had imagined.

Only half the body had emerged, but that portion alone was a giant metal monster, the size of which far surpassed Naota's entire body mass. Naota still was floating slightly above the ground but if a proportionately sized robot succumbed to gravity and fell downward, Naota definitely would be crushed to death.

"Ah!" As the ringing in his ears reached its crescendo, the robot leapt free from Naota's head. Like the cork of a champagne bottle, the robot briefly arced upward into the black sky before its iron frame landed dexterously on the bridges metal railings. A heavy clanging resounded throughout the area.

The robot's entire body was now completely visible. It had a humanoid shape, with two arms and two legs. The body towered six feet high, and its head resembled a television set.

Although the robot finally had separated itself from Naota, the ordeal wasn't over yet. Right away, another robotic arm had reached out from Naota's head and latched itself onto the first robot's side.

Sparks flew from the humanoid robot's body.

The first robot wielded its empty hand like a sword to chop at the new robot's arm. Using incredibly destructive power, the android severed the second robot's forearm.

With the momentum of a stretched-out rubber band that's cut suddenly, the main part of what was now a severed robotic arm retreated back into Naota's head. It apparently had returned to "the other side." Simultaneously, the oppressive ringing in Naota's ears stopped.

Finally free, Naota's body tumbled to the ground. Once he caught his breath, he called out "Mamimi!" Naota ran over to the fallen girl.

She'd lost consciousness. Given the circumstances, that was good.

The android looked as if it was trying to escape an enemy.

Its adversary still was moving. The freshly severed arm pushed itself along, using its five fingers like tentacles. Moving around on its fingers, the arm looked like it was imitating an octopus or a squid. With unbelievable speed, it distanced itself from the humanoid robot. The arm seemed to be preparing for a fight.

This creepy robotic life form still was ambulatory. And standing up straight, the arm measured about the same height as Naota.

Naota instantly saw that the humanoid robot was the prey, and the arm was the predator.

The android attempted to run away but a few seconds later, it was tripped. The unseen attack must have been forceful, because the robot didn't get up to keep moving away. Persistently, the arm kept pursuing, thwarting all the android's escape attempts.

In medicine, a machine called an ESWL (Lithotriptor) provides noninvasive treatments for kidney stones by focusing high-intensity acoustic pulses that break up the stones. Such pulses seemed to be the arm's weapon, and it aimed that weapon at the areas where the android moved.

The bodies of both robots bore the same mark: It was the logo of MM, the

medical machinery maker.

In one of the rooms at the MM Mabase factory, a siren still blared and a host computer continued transmitting "message received" signals.

Undeterred for a single second, battle reports flashed onscreen, one after another:

«MMR Class [K].001 ATOMSK flees into Mabase. 22:14

MMR Class [J] DH pursues and attempts to capture or damage fail. 22:16

Manipulator breaks off from DH and currently operates alone. Original 82% returns with the closing of FLCL; remaining 18% engages in battle in Mabase. 22:16.

Returning 82% issued code RH; remaining 18% issued code LH. 22:16.

LH uses Shockwave weapon. Engages in battle. 22:16.

Good luck to LH in executing battle strategy.»

LH, the arm, scuttled around, targeting the android's position.

Still holding Mamimi, Naota couldn't move. The area had turned into a battlefield.

The arm pointed a thin, threadlike laser toward Naota.

Shit!

Both combatants had ignored Naota and Mamimi up until then but the arm must have noticed the two bystanders and was calculating how to deal with them now.

What should I do? Naota wondered.

It seemed crazy, but Naota could think of no other option but to jump into the river with Mamimi.

Right then, the humanoid robot which had fled its pursuer until now suddenly turned and attacked the arm. It attempted to destroy the enemy entirely with a single blow. As before, when it had fought the main portion of the arm, the force unleashed by the android was powerful.

However, the humanoid robot moved carelessly close to the arm.

Bright white sparks ran down the android's body, and the robot stopped as suddenly as if it had been deactivated. This time, it appeared to have absorbed a fatal hit. The smell of scorching metal was everywhere.

The arm laughed with an electrical noise.

In a grotesque, wriggling motion, the arm once again grabbed hold of the humanoid robot, ready to finish it off. It tried to crush the android with its powerful grip, a weapon in its own right. Creaks like screams came from the strangled robot, which tottered forward one step, then two.

Suddenly, the android's appearance changed. The navy blue body transformed instantly into a deep crimson color.

As though its demise had been merely a feint, the android snatched the arm,

wrenched it away from its body, and smashed it into the pavement. It was a complete turnaround. Not giving the arm the slightest opportunity, the humanoid robot crushed the center of its opponent's palm beneath its metal foot all within the space of a moment.

Sparks and an explosion followed.

Naota shielded Mamimi from the blast and the heat.

«[K] reacts to ATOMSK. Reason unknown. 22:19

LH movement stopped. Eliminated. 22:19

Awaiting further communication. 22:19»

The humanoid robot pulled apart the scrapped arm's defenses, and then it yanked out the machine component innards, ensuring the arm's utter destruction.

Could it be, Naota thought, it saved us?

It certainly felt like the arm had begun to come after Mamimi and Naota and that was when the android suddenly had started to fight, as if it had been worried about them.

What is it?

The robot that had come out of Naota's head silently continued to dismantle the arm.

This robot came out of my head!

This is the robot that came out of my head!

Then, a roaring noise approached, and Naota recognized the terrible sound of a scooter's engine.

"Haruko?"

As he'd anticipated, the approaching headlights were those of a Vespa.

Guitar in hand, Haruko leapt off the bike and ran toward the humanoid robot. En route, she started up a hand-operated generator mounted on the back of her guitar.

As she lifted it, the guitar emitted bright energy and light. Of course, Naota had no idea it was actually a light-space-modifying weapon in the shape of a guitar.

"Uuuuaaaagggh!" With the beautiful stance of a professional baseball player, Haruko heaved the guitar toward the robot's head. Her aim was perfect.

It was the first time Naota had seen anyone with such an amazing swing other than his brother. To the uninvolved viewer, her gorgeous attack was like part of a flawless dance.

Apparently, the android hadn't expected this new, fleshy opponent to appear, and it reacted a moment too late. Its TV-monitor head took a direct hit. Part of the monitor split apart, coughing out a small stream of smoke. For a few seconds yet, some muddy operating sounds were audible; then, the robot plopped down, as if it had lost the ability to move.

"Eh?" Haruko said, scanning the quiet surroundings, "Where is it?"

"What?" asked Naota, wondering why Haruko had attacked the robot.

Looking down at the bracelet on her left hand, Haruko seemed dissatisfied. She

glanced around again. She was looking for something or someone.

"Why isn't it here?"

"What are you looking for?"

The outrageous girl looked Naota in the eye and moaned, telling him he was utterly useless.

Okay. Now, he understood. It was an amazing experience: Two robots coming out of his head, having a fierce battle, and so on. He realized that's not something every sixth grader got to see. A few days after all that happened, though, he still retained his belief that there wasn't anything amazing in this world. Who was the Japanese philosopher who had said perception and experience were different things? Back then, no matter what happened in front of him, it amounted to no more than something he happened to see. Don't hate him for that. Don't hate who he was back then. After all, he was but a child.

When Naota went to school the next day, he no longer wore a bandage across his forehead. The horn was absent for the time being, as well.

There is nothing amazing in this world. Everything is ordinary.

The robot that had been a horn now was kneading dough at the Shigekuni Bakery. The area of its head where Haruko had hit it still looked a little strange, but the robot could move again.

Commenting vaguely that they had picked up something useful, Kamon had put the robot to work.

"See you later," Naota had called to the robot on his way out.

Along Naota's route to school, Mamimi jumped out at him. She was sipping a canned beverage.

She had fainted the night before, so she didn't have a single memory of what had happened, and Naota didn't feel like explaining everything to her.

"Morning!" Mamimi greeted.

"Hey," answered Naota.

Mamimi offered him the canned drink in her hand. It was lemonade.

"I don't like sour things," said Naota, but then he immediately took the can and gulped down its remaining contents.

The season most special to Naota had just begun.

Fire Starter

Chapter 1

All the sorrows in the world collected within one body.

Although it was supposed to be his special season, Naota felt more depressed than ever.

Outside, students rode bicycles. Elderly couples savored their walks together.

Two crows perched in a ginkgo tree. The cyclists, the elderly couples, the crows in the ginkgo tree everyone seemed to be enjoying freedom. That was all outside the window, though.

It felt like, of the whole wide world, only the students in this class remained unjustly locked up. The freedom to walk between tree-lined avenues under the autumn sky was something they wouldn't be able to obtain until after their hundred-year prison sentences had been served.

Afternoon classes, cleaning time, and all the rest had ended. The other classes were leaving school now all except Naota's. Naota's class still couldn't go home because it was a debate day.

Naota's teacher, Miss Miyaji, was a young, enthusiastic, vitamin-filled type of person. Despite being an adult, she sometimes acted like a spoiled little princess the kind who would have hundreds of stuffed toys lined up in her room, each with a name she'd given it.

At Miss Miyaji's suggestion, the class had to stay after school twice a week for a useless debate. Naota's first thought about this idea had been: *You have to be kidding.*

Naota didn't have much confidence in Miss Miyaji.

One of Naota's female classmates recently had been placed in charge, and she was habitually forgetful. Every time the girl forgot something, Miss Miyaji scolded her in front of the whole class. The teacher wasn't particularly harsh, but the girl wasn't very thick-skinned, so she'd start crying, and then it would be ages before she'd calm down. Whenever this happened, Miss Miyaji would stand next to the girl and then, clapping her hands together, would start singing, "The girl who shed crocodile tears was a geisha girl!"

In the meantime, there was nothing the rest of the class could do but stand by and watch the bizarre performance. Miss Miyaji claimed that her own grandmother had sung her that song during her childhood whenever she'd cried crocodile tears. Regardless, Naota and the rest of his class didn't think their classmate was shedding fake tears.

There was something messed up with this spoiled princess of a teacher. She was pretty enthusiastic, but you couldn't place your faith in her. If you followed her teachings too closely, she probably would lead you very much astray.

As Miss Miyaji had recommended, today's debate topic was fires.

In Mabase, there had been several fires recently, and it looked as if they'd been caused by arson. The incidents had made the newspapers, too.

Last night, a private residence not too far from the junior high had been burned halfway down. The school couldn't ignore this, so it issued a cautionary warning: "Recently, there have been quite a few fires due to arson. Everyone, please keep an eye out for any suspicious people." And that was all. At least, that was all the other classes had been told, anyway.

However, Miss Miyaji had begun an endless story about a memory she had from her school days, when a gas station had exploded, its roof blowing off.

Please, shut up , Naota thought fervently.

Naota, too, remembered a fire. Although it had happened when he had been in kindergarten, he recalled the incident vividly: It had been a night in early spring.

Mabase Elementary School used to be a wooden building alongside the riverbank, but the old building had burned down. Led by his brother, Tasuku, the young Naota had left his house to watch the fire.

Crackle, crackle, crackle.

The scene was strangely beautiful. The school garden's cherry trees were in full bloom, and the falling blossoms were lit up by the burning building.

Naota had been very young at the time; thinking about it, Tasuku must have been in elementary school himself. Whenever Naota remembered that time, Tasuku seemed like a grown-up to him, though, even then. For various reasons, his brother always had been mature.

Naota couldn't forget the fire; it was near that burning school where he had first met Mamimi.

Mamimi Samejima...

I have to meet Mamimi today.

That was the real reason this long after-school meeting annoyed Naota.

Since the night the robot had emerged, Naota hadn't returned to Mabase Bridge once. Frankly, his need to meet with Mamimi was much stronger than before. The single thing on his mind, at home or at school, was Mamimi. At the same time, though, his heart still was conflicted. He got the feeling he shouldn't see her for a while. More than that, he was frightened of being with her again.

His heart wavered with the uncertainty of how he should act the next time he saw her. That strange night, he had planned to end their fuzzy relationship, but he hadn't found the chance to make his resolution a reality.

Today, he wanted to see Mamimi so much that he couldn't stand it just a glimpse of her would be enough.

He hadn't been back to Mabase Bridge, but maybe she had gone there today, all alone. Maybe she was waiting for Naota to meet her there. No, she definitely was waiting, and he was going to see her. He had to go.

I need to see her!

Thus, Naota was infuriated by having to stay behind for this endless debate.

Please, finish already and let us go home. If I don't hurry, then Mamimi might leave.

"So, that was the terrible fire I'd witnessed. Next time, I'm going to show all of you the newspaper reports."

Finally, the words signaling the end of his prison term reached his ears. The second his teacher said, "Everyone, please be careful going home," Naota already had jumped up, bag in hand.

Naota dashed out of the classroom at full speed, but he was hailed by Gaku and Masashi at their lockers.

"What's up, Naota? Why the hurry?" they asked. "You busy?"

He could have said "yes" and gone straight home; without thinking, a lie came out: "No, not really."

He wanted to hide the true reason that he needed to leave so quickly from his classmates. Therefore, he said the exact opposite of what he really wanted to say. He

regretted his response the second he'd said it.

Gaku and Masashi were good friends of Naota. They all lived close to one another, so they often went home from school together.

Recently, that had become something of a concern for Naota, who wanted his classmates to know as little as possible about the time he'd been spending under the bridge with a high schooler. He didn't want to imagine the kinds of rumors that would spread if people knew a twelve-year-old boy was doing such things. His actions would be a capital offense to his friends, like giving up the secrets from a shared diary. Naturally, Naota didn't want to ruin his friendships over gossip, so he had taken great care to hide his meetings with Mamimi from his classmates.

Gaku and Masashi already had seen him with Mamimi several times now. He had explained to them she was just a girl he knew somewhat but if they continued to see him with her time and again, then they probably would figure out that he had an unusual relationship.

"We're going to go look at the burned-down house," Gaku said, referring to the remains from last night's fire.

"You'll come, right, Naota?" Masashi assumed.

"Of course," Naota heard himself answer.

I don't want to go look at that kind of thing.

"Where are you going?"

Startled, he turned around to face the person who'd spoken behind him. It was Ninamori. She must have been standing there, listening to them.

"Don't loiter. Go straight home."

"Busybody class president," Masashi said.

Naota agreed Ninamori was a busybody, but in his heart, he pleaded that Gaku and Masashi would obey her for just this one day. Of course, praying didn't change anything.

Eventually, all four of them left the school gates together.

Disgruntled, Masashi asked why Ninamori was following them. Gaku then teased that there had to be a reason why the class president would want to be with them. A little annoyed, Ninamori grumbled about what he meant by that. Otherwise, though, it was quite a happy group.

Suddenly, Naota was given a start when he'd heard the familiar sound of a portable game.

No way! Seriously give me a break.

When he looked up in surprise, Mamimi stood by the front gates. Still in her school uniform, she was sitting on the asphalt, playing her handheld game.

This is the worst, Naota thought, sighing deeply. *Mamimi's here.*

He had wanted to see her so much, when they could be alone not in front of other people, and *certainly* not in front of his classmates. How dare she inconsiderately come to his school like this? Now, Naota felt rage.

"Hey, Takkun."

"What are you doing here at my school?"

Just for once, think of other people, he wanted to say.

Naota's cold words were lost in the wind somehow, and Mamimi looked at him

with her usual grin. She almost seemed to enjoy Naota's concern about what other people would think.

Ninamori, meanwhile, eyed Mamimi with suspicion. Her thoughts were written all over her face: "Who's that girl acting all familiar with Naota? Dyed hair, red lips, sitting in the street, playing a portable game although she's already in high school totally pathetic!"

"Who's that?" she asked.

"That's his wife," answered Gaku.

"Yeah, he likes his women older," Masashi added.

Naota heard the entire exchange. Embarrassed, he cursed himself for neglecting the evidence that his friends had been suspicious the entire time, after all.

"Are they going out?"

Gaku and Masashi snickered meaningfully. Knowing Ninamori had been paying attention to Naota, they were being pretty spiteful.

Naota tried to think of an excuse to get far away.

"Takkun, that looks cool," Mamimi said innocently. "It really suits you."

Is that true?

She was talking about the bandana wrapped around Naota's head. As soon as she mentioned it, Naota tried to hide the bandana with his hands. He'd been wearing it the whole day.

He needed it now. Because a second horn had emerged.

It had happened the previous night.

Naota had woken up suddenly in the middle of the night, feeling like he couldn't move his arms or legs. It was as though he'd been tied up.

Vague fear immediately changed to very real alarm. He smelled some kind of drug and felt groggy. *Is this the work of that person I heard about in school?* he thought when he felt paralyzed. *The one who ties up people?*

Looking around, he saw Haruko in the dimness. She'd been sleeping in the top bunk, so it wasn't unusual for her to be in his room. However, she looked different than usual. For some reason, she was dressed all in white and was peering down at the motionless Naota.

"What are you doing?" Naota managed to get out.

"Playing doctor," Haruko laughed.

Then, she turned and spoke to someone else who was behind her, "What? The response is strengthening... No, I wanted to ask: Why is it happening here? Looking at the X-rays, you can see this kid's brain is totally empty..."

He thought he heard a man's voice coming from behind her, but he couldn't be sure.

My brain is empty?

Haruko touched Naota's skull. Feeling Haruko's cold hands, he realized for the first time that he was naked. With fear and embarrassment, he tried to yell at her to stop; he couldn't control his mouth, though, and eventually lost consciousness again.

It hadn't been a bad dream. When he regained awareness, a horn protruded from his forehead once again. And this time, there were horns at both the front and back of

his skull. Two horns! It looked like a sharp metal object had pierced his head.

"Since you arrived," he told Haruko, "everything in my life has been awful."

"That's because your brain is empty," Haruko replied. "I had nothing to do with those horns."

Whose fault is it, then?

Unnerved, Naota glanced sideways at Haruko, who offered him the bandana.

The longer Haruko stayed with him, the worse things became. Once again, Naota had a horn situation. Life, indeed, had hit rock bottom.

In the end, Naota had left Gaku, Masashi, Ninamori, and Mamimi at the school gates, going home alone.

He had seen Mamimi today, as he'd been hoping to; but once again, the reality had made him feel awful.

Why do all these terrible things keep happening?

When he arrived home, yet another distressing thing occurred: He saw the robot that had come out of his head the other day, and it was outside again!

Kamon had been putting the robot to hard work at the shop. Now, the android was carrying in some kind of printed materials from the car. From the look of things, it appeared Kamon had not abandoned his hopes of becoming a famous author, and he had written some kind of fan fiction. Of course, Naota, who had no interest in such materials, hadn't read it.

"The neighbors have eyes, you know!" Naota objected.

His father was unabashed about using the robot outdoors in the middle of the day, despite Naota's instructions that he not let it out where other people could see.

"Just because you found it, that means you can hog it?" Kamon seemed completely unconcerned. "Isn't that a little selfish?"

"It's weird. Who else owns a robot?"

"Why shouldn't we have one? A house with a robot think of the significance of such impossible science or technology. Here, we have a humanoid robot combined with a human household. Doesn't it speak to the loss of father figures and the supplementation of lacking family relationships? What's your take on the symbolism and perception of this mechanical robot mixed into a normal family household?"

Naota sighed, not saying a word. His father's one published book was about a robotic machine: *The Mysteries and Meanings of Evangelion*. Unsold copies still lined the Nandaba household's bookshelves.

"Wasn't he walking around on his own last night, too? That dumb robot!" Naota growled.

"He wanted a breath of fresh air. Isn't that right, TV-boy?"

Because of its monitor-like head, Kamon had started calling the robot "TV-boy."

"You've heard about all the fires around here recently, haven't you?" Naota asked. "If it wanders around suspiciously, people are going to start thinking it's the one starting the fires."

As soon as Naota had finished the sentence, he had a sudden thought: *This isn't a fire-spewing robot, is it?*

The fires had begun around the time the robot had emerged from Naota's head.

And now, it was walking around on its own in the middle of the night. There were a lot of worrisome things about its behavior.

No, wait a second, Naota thought. He'd realized it was also true that the fires had started after Haruko arrived. The robot was odd, but all things considered, that coarse, maniacal woman was far, far more suspicious.

He couldn't say it was beyond her. No, in truth, it wasn't hard to believe it had been her. There was simply too much evidence not to suspect that she might be the fire starter.

Damn...

She had brought more bad luck with her than he could have imagined. Because of Haruko, Naota's life was at the lowest point ever.

The shop's phone rang.

When Naota picked up the receiver, he heard the insolent girl say, "Hey, Takkun. It's me, Haruko. I don't suppose you could come and get me? They've kind of caught me..."

Contrary to Naota's expectations, it wasn't the police who had apprehended her. The place where she was being held was a guard station in the MM factory compound.

She had instructed him to bring one of the bike parts from her room (that is to say, Naota's room) when he came.

I can't believe this. She's nothing but trouble.

He thought about ignoring her, but then he thought back to what Haruko had said to him when she'd given him the bandana:

"Hey, it really suits you. You look good."

I guess I have to go. Damn!

He walked twenty minutes and arrived at the MM building, which resembled a clothes iron. As ordered, Naota went to a small office near the entrance gate. Inside, he saw the Vespa and Haruko crouching over it, fiddling with a part that looked like it had been damaged in an accident.

Opening the door, he addressed a middle-aged man who was dressed in a guard's uniform and sitting on a chair, "Excuse me, I received a phone call earlier."

"Hey, this kid is your guarantor?" the guard asked skeptically, looking Naota up and down.

"Did you bring it?" Haruko asked nonchalantly.

When Naota proffered the bike part, Haruko took the part and inserted it into the Vespa without so much as a "thank you."

"Is this girl completely brainless?" the guard asked. "She's acts so suspicious. Anyway, it hasn't been safe around here lately. I heard last night's fire on Second Street was arson."

Naota felt uneasy inside. "Attempted arson?"

"Yeah. That's why I called the police. She hit the fence with that bike. She's a menace."

Yeah, I know.

After Naota's name and address were taken down on a thin notepad, the guard

allowed him to take her home.

"The fence wasn't permanently damaged, so it's okay this once; next time I see her, I'm calling the cops right away."

This is so depressing.

"You're a grown-up," said Naota. "What do you think you were doing?"

"He probably wondered why I had a junior high schooler as my guarantor."

"You have absolutely no common sense."

"You came anyway." Haruko beamed at Naota, her expression unexpectedly innocent. "You came all this way, so I'm going to thank you."

"What kind of thank you?"

"Something more fun than CPR." Haruko gave a meaningful smile.

Hey, don't make me more depressed than I already am.

As they passed through a cluster of trees, they took in the view of the wide ocean. They saw the sky sparkling with sunlight and the fresh blue of the sea.

Haruko and Naota were riding the Vespa along a coastal road. Taking the full brunt of the wind, Naota sat in front of Haruko, who was driving.

"How's the sea?" Haruko asked, sounding satisfied.

"This isn't the season for sightseeing," Naota replied, but the sound of the engine and the wind drowned out his voice, and his words didn't reach Haruko's ears.

She drove at a terrifying speed, zigzagging across the road. As carefree as the expansive sky and the wide sea, she ignored all the rules, wavering left and right at whim.

"Careful!" Naota yelled at her.

Haruko, who must have heard him, twisted the accelerator instead, shouting, "Rider's high!"

"Seriously, you're freaking me out! This is dangerous, and I'm not wearing a helmet!"

However, Naota didn't look entirely unhappy as the wind rushed over his face. After all, this was the first time Naota had ridden on a motorbike. And it was the first time in his life he'd felt the wind like this.

"You have no brain, so what are you worried about?" Haruko laughed.

Then, the Vespa sped up all the more.

The cool autumn air blew straight over him. The stimulating breeze whisked past, exhilarating him.

This feels amazing!

Maybe he enjoyed the feel of the wind rushing past because his head really was empty, exactly like Haruko had said.

Chapter 2

Naota walked down the incline, careful not to slip on the rain-soaked ground.

Mamimi had taken shelter from the rain beneath the bridge.

She sat directly on the concrete, holding a stray cat on her lap. Playing a handheld game, she splashed her legs around in the shallows, although the river

wasn't really shallow anymore. Because of the rain, the river had swelled.

It had been raining since that morning. At daybreak, the sky had been gray and cloudy; by afternoon, a heavy downpour had begun.

After walking through the annoying rain, Naota had arrived home from school just in time to get a call from Mamimi.

"I'm at the bridge," she'd said. "My shoes got washed away in the river, so could you come and meet me here?"

Naota had thought to himself that he'd been getting a lot of calls asking him to do things lately. First, it had been Haruko's bike parts; now, it was Mamimi's sandals. However, while he told himself he wasn't going to become anybody's slave, he proceeded to put some sandals in a bag and set out, an umbrella in hand.

Since "that" night, Naota and Mamimi's relationship had taken a strange turn. Yesterday, she had waited for him in front of the school; today, she had called him. It was the first time she'd done either of these things since he'd met her. A little while ago, if Naota had received a phone call from Mamimi, he would have jumped up and run out of the house immediately, heedless of snow, a typhoon, or anything else.

Ducking out of the rain and under the shelter of the bridge, Naota closed his umbrella, removing the sandals from his bag and offering them to her.

Mamimi looked up and grinned at him, showing her teeth as she had yesterday.

"You're in high school already," he said, "so what do you think you're doing?"

"I was playing with Takkun, and I lost my shoes in the water."

"With who?"

She repeated, "With Takkun," and continued to stroke the cat sitting on her knees.

"That's Takkun, too?"

The cat was Takkun; Naota was Takkun; apparently, any substitute pet was Takkun. Thinking about his unhappy situation, Naota sighed.

This fickle high school girl, she really doesn't care about how I feel at all.

"This Takkun is hungry," Mamimi said. "Do you have anything? Cats don't eat gum, do they?"

"Did you find it?"

"I'm like a god," Mamimi smiled, self-satisfied. "I'm a protector of the weak, like Cantido, Lord of the Black Flame."

The God of the Black Flame, Cantido, was a character in the handheld game Fire Starter. Mamimi had been playing it for more than a year now. "I'm so addicted," she'd say with an innocent expression; she would play it again and again without getting bored.

Suddenly, Naota realized what was missing and asked, "Don't you have an umbrella?"

"It's all right. It'll stop soon."

"It'll stop? Look at it."

"I never carry an umbrella."

"Then, what do you do when it rains?"

"I don't mind getting a little wet."

Naota was getting annoyed again. *She doesn't mind getting a little wet? In this*

downpour, she'll get soaked! She should have said she didn't have an umbrella when she called.

"Let's play some," Mamimi said, not noticing Naota's concealed rage.

By "play," she meant their kind of fooling around. Naota liked the smell of her, her softness, and her mischief. Today, though, Naota felt like staying away from carefree girls who didn't think of other people's feelings.

"I'm busy," he said coldly. Opening his umbrella, he walked away.

"Takkun," she whispered, touching the kitten's nose.

After about an hour, the rain stopped.

The clouds began to disperse, revealing glimpses of a blue sky.

Mamimi put on the sandals that Naota had brought her; then, she stood up, still holding the cat. Whimsically, she walked along the riverbank, wearing the oversized sandals and looking at the dragonflies that had come out after the rain had stopped.

And then...

She saw something that took her breath away.

Next to the river, the tall grass grew thick. In that tall grass, an odd-shaped figure stood, the likes of which she hadn't seen before. It was big, had a dark blue body, and looked like some kind of idol. It wasn't a statue, though; it was alive.

It took three giant steps toward the riverbank, gazing at its surroundings.

"God?" Instinctively holding her breath, Mamimi hid in the grass and watched the figure with excitement.

The odd-shaped figure was none other than the robot that had come out of Naota's head. It must have seized an opportunity when Kamon wasn't looking to leave the shop. What it was doing in this forsaken place was a mystery.

After loitering on the bank for a while, the robot climbed up the concrete shore and began walking off somewhere.

Mamimi, heart pounding in her chest, followed after it.

The place the robot was headed appeared to be the burned-down wooden school building by the side of the river. The grass grew high over the ruins. It was the old Mabase Elementary School. The building still hadn't been demolished, despite all these years, and the ruins were covered in ashes, just as they'd been that night. On the walls, the clocks had stopped at the exact time the fire had erupted.

The robot stood in the center of the building. Suddenly, it turned to face Mamimi. Its television-monitor head stared at her.

Mamimi was taken aback. Had she been chosen deliberately? Yes, she must have been. The girl sensed or imagined some kind of mystical spirit, hidden by that robot's expressionless face.

Among the thin clouds, which had stopped producing rain at that moment, a single shaft of sunlight shone down like a spotlight, illuminating the robot. Cleansed by the rain, the robot sparkled in the light, looking like some sacred object or, at least, that's how it looked to Mamimi, anyway.

"Oh!" Mamimi exclaimed, surprised.

The heavy metallic body began to float into the air. As it continued to gaze

down at Mamimi, the robot disappeared through a parting in the clouds. When Mamimi looked up at the sky, which was now full of light, she saw that a giant rainbow had appeared.

Mamimi felt inspired by the events she had witnessed. In her mind, there was no doubt: She must have seen a miracle.

"You are a god. You really are."

The rainbow cut a clean, brilliant arc across the autumn sky.

In ecstasy, Mamimi stayed for a while, looking up at the place where her god had vanished.

There had been a considerable amount of gossip about the broken-down robot working at the Shigekuni Bakery, which was unsurprising, given how much it had stood out. Neighbors had talked about how it would linger in the convenience store, reading perverted magazines for three hours at a time. They spoke about how it wandered around, checking the vending machines, searching for forgotten change. They gossiped about how it would go to the barbershop, sitting and reading comics in the waiting area before returning home.

Thus, Mamimi rather quickly was able to find out where the robot lived. Although she heard the rumors decrying it as perverted, nothing could shake the firm conviction that Mamimi had derived from her vision. Already, she was wholeheartedly devoted to the robot, for better or worse.

Nowadays, she followed the robot around, her camera in hand. Increasing her photo collection had become an important part of Mamimi's daily routine. She acted exactly like the paparazzi following a celebrity.

Rumors spread that the robot was hitting on girls who hung around the bakery. Therefore, Mamimi now stopped by Naota's place quite often. Of course, it was merely to see the robot.

That evening, the Nandaba family dinner had ended normally. Kamon was cleaning up. Having learned the robot wasn't home, Mamimi had lined up her photos on the porch, showing them to Naota. She elaborated on the ones she particularly liked. Perhaps she thought everyone liked the robot as much as she did. The way she spoke about the robot's greatness made her resemble a fan who wanted everyone else to share her obsession.

Naota didn't know what this new god Mamimi followed was doing there; he was concerned about the robot's actions, though, so he looked through the photos. After all, the robot had come out of his head. Looking at the pictures, he saw the robot had been wandering aimlessly around town. Wearing one of Kamon's old jumpers, it had visited backstreets, the riverside, shopping areas, the library, the school, the kindergarten, City Hall, and the bus stop so many places.

What does it think it's doing? Is it thinking at all?

In any case, to capture all these moments on film, a photographer would have to be dedicated. Recently, Mamimi had been skipping school so she could follow the robot.

Naota didn't really like this development. Maybe it was because she now paid more attention to the robot than to him. *Damn, is this jealousy?*

"You're so lucky, Takkun," Mamimi said. "He doesn't come over to my place."

"You're not allowed pets in your apartment, are you?" Naota asked coldly.

Naota had hidden the fact that the robot had come out of his own head. Keeping the details vague as to how his family had come to have a robot, he explained that it was an automated helper in the Nandaba household.

"Yo, Sameji," greeted Haruko, coming out onto the veranda. She was wearing a sloppy shirt. Haruko had begun calling Mamimi "Sameji," due to her last name, "Samejima."

Mamimi smiled. "Hey, Haru! Good evening!"

Mamimi seemed to admire Haruko an awful lot, something that had surprised Naota. After all, Mamimi had seen Haruko run over him when they'd all met. Despite this, Mamimi respected the young woman, who utterly lacked any common sense. At the end of the day, maybe Mamimi had bad taste. If that were true, then what did that say about Naota, who liked *her*?

Standing on the porch, Haruko looked up at the night sky and said, "Hey, it came back."

Zigzagging across the sky was an illuminated object. It was the robot.

"It's doing that again?" Naota complained. "Can't it do that somewhere no one will see it?"

"It's so cool," said Mamimi.

Its monitor shining like a headlight, the robot slowly descended straight into the Nandaba household garden.

"Turn off your lights," Naota grumbled.

"Lord Canti!" Mamimi started a thankful prayer to the robot, which was still in the garden.

"Canti?" asked Naota.

"The God of the Black Flame, Lord Cantido."

"Always with that computer game. You can't give it a name yourself?"

"Canti, you're late. You got the stuff?" asked Haruko, deliberately using the name Mamimi had given it. She extended her hand toward the robot.

'Lord Canti' handed over a convenience store shopping bag.

Taking out her evening meal of spicy curry bread and a canned drink, Haruko addressed Lord Canti, "I didn't ask for this! I said the juice with pulp in it! You're so useless!"

"Haru, you shouldn't say that," Mamimi cautioned, unable to let it pass. "He's a god. He's going to turn Endsville to dust."

"Endsville?"

"It's from her game," Naota explained.

'Endsville' was another word she had picked up from Fire Starter. It was the name of the town where the game was set.

Sliding open the paper door, Shigekuni peeked out. As always, he regarded Mamimi with scorn. Shigekuni didn't think much of her. Every time he saw her, he made cruel or sarcastic comments.

In truth, Naota thought Shigekuni's behavior was another expression of jealousy. Shigekuni had been a baseball fan since he was little. Thus, he was very proud of

Tasuku, who had inherited his passion for baseball and displayed a natural talent for the game. Because he felt Mamimi somehow would steal Tasuku away from him, he was downright nasty to her.

"Look at my clothes," the old man suddenly boasted. "Tasuku sent them from America."

It could have been an innocent boast, but it was also, likely not coincidentally, an attack on Mamimi, who hadn't heard from Tasuku. That fact alone should have irked Mamimi. However, she ignored the spiteful old man and pointed her camera at the robot, pressing the button to take another photo of Canti.

"Hey, what are you doing, taking pictures of other people's machines? Don't you dare take another picture of our machine. If you do, I'll call the police at once," Naota's grandfather said, pretty much echoing the MM guard. Then, he slammed the screen door shut.

Not fond of Mamimi's newfound obsession, Naota seized this opportunity to speak up, "You know, you really should stop following this robot around. You've been skipping so much school that you're going to get in trouble soon. If you get kicked out of school, there's no way my brother will like you."

Mamimi stood up silently. With a brief, sad expression, she looked at Naota. She started to say something, stopped, and walked out of the garden without a word. She left the photos she had brought over, which were still spread out on the balcony.

"Are you really going to let her go?" Haruko asked. "Why not?" Naota answered. "Nothing bothers her, anyway."

"I see," Haruko said, biting into her spicy curry roll. "Don't buy bread from the convenience store. This is a bakery, you know."

The robot, standing in the garden, watched Mamimi leave.

The next day, on their way home from school, Naota, Gaku, and Masashi went to look at charred ruins again. They'd heard rumors that there had been another fire last night, and that it probably had been arson.

"You can smell the smoke still, huh?" Masashi said.

The remains were surrounded by police tape; several police-related people sifted through the ashes inside.

It had been an abandoned house. Although Naota had seen the site fairly often, now that the ground no longer contained a building, it looked strangely small.

When they moved closer to the scene, one of the workers signaled not to come beyond the tape.

"This isn't merely arson," Gaku said meaningfully. "It's the work of a UFO."

"A UFO?"

"You haven't heard? Recently, a strange object's been sighted in the skies above Mabase. Its picture has been in the paper, too."

Gaku apparently had taken a particular interest in the fire incidents, which was fine but Naota really wanted to avoid the UFO subject.

"These fire outbreaks," Gaku continued, "they're probably caused by that UFO."

Silently, Naota reflected, *He might be right. The arsonist might not be Haruko, but Canti.*

The reason Canti as Mamimi had christened it was here remained a complete mystery. The weird robot had come out of Naota's head; it would zigzag elusively across the night sky, lighting up its shining head. It certainly wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that the robot was responsible for the fires.

Naota recalled the night it had emerged; there had been another robot Canti had defeated. That one had been pretty violent. It might be only a matter of time before Canti became like that. No one had died in the recent spate of fires, but who knew what might happen? He had to do something.

Carefully, Naota retied the bandana in such a way that his classmates wouldn't notice.

Anyway, why does all the bad stuff happen to me?

When he left the others at the ruins to go home, he took a different route than usual. Although normally he wouldn't cross the bridge, Naota walked toward the riverbank, thinking he might swing by the hangout.

Mamimi might be there and if they were alone, maybe he wouldn't feel as irritated as he'd been last night. Maybe he could be nicer.

He reconsidered at once.

As if she'd be there! She's in love with Canti at the moment. That stupid high school girl is having a great time, unaware that I'm hiding a horn under this bandana. It would be stupid to put any faith in that carefree girl.

Still she might be at Mabase Bridge right now!

His irritation battled his desire to see Mamimi. If he saw her, he knew he'd get angry right away. He'd get angry, but he still wanted to see her. Unsure how he felt, he looked at the water flowing under the bridge.

Something brown floated there: Shoes. And two legs.

Looking closer, he saw several high school girls standing at the edge of the river. One girl was surrounded by the others. The girl who was surrounded sat in the flowing water, her skirt billowing in the river. The shoes that had washed away seemed to be hers.

It looked like the others were bullying her.

Come on, grow up, stupid girls.

The bullies left her sitting in the river, mocking her as they walked away. Naota sighed at this intense scene; then, he froze when he caught a better look at the girl slowly standing up in the middle of the river.

It can't be.

She wore the familiar uniform of Mabase Shinda High School. The girl in the river was, without a doubt, Mamimi.

The person being bullied in front of me was Mamimi.

Mamimi silently wrung out her soaked skirt.

Stunned, Naota watched the scene unfold. He thought back to the other day, when Mamimi had called him because her shoes were missing. She had told him the shoes had been washed away while she was playing with Takkun.

When she'd said it, Mamimi had given her typical giggle. Seeing her smile, Naota had thought spitefully how nice it must be for a high school girl with nothing

to worry about.

Last night, when Mamimi had walked away, Haruko had asked if it was okay to leave her like that. "Why not?" Naota had answered. "Nothing bothers her, anyway."

The person being bullied in front of me was Mamimi.

Standing in the riverbed, Mamimi looked in his direction. When she spotted Naota standing on the bridge, she stopped. Halting in the midst of wringing her wet skirt, she didn't move.

For a short time, the girl and the boy simply stood there, staring at each other.

Chapter 3

How much time passed?

The two of them perched on top of the bridge. The town soon was covered in a thin darkness, and the cold air chilled their skin.

"My skirt dries quicker this way," Mamimi had said, sitting down on the bridge. Naota couldn't do anything but silently sit next to her.

The headlights of cars passed over them.

This bridge was smaller than Mabase Bridge, where he and Mamimi usually met. There weren't as many cars, and there were fewer streetlamps.

Naota felt like he was in a fleeting dream. If someone had painted this scene, it definitely would be a gloomy picture. Since Mamimi had sat down, she hadn't uttered a single word. Cigarette in her mouth, she silently played her handheld game.

I should say something, Naota thought. He couldn't think of anything to say, though, so the blips from the game continued softly.

She was like a robot that had been programmed to play a game. The cigarette between her lips glowed red, and that was the only way he knew she still was breathing. *Mamimi* ...

Naota felt as though his heart had been ripped out.

Last night, Mamimi had come over, carrying her photos of Lord Canti, greeting him with a cheerful smile. It seemed so long ago.

Naota felt as if hundreds or thousands of years had passed. Whether something had happened in the ancient past or just yesterday, once the moment ended, it became a part of the inseparable past. "A long time ago" referred to something in the past that would be impossible to experience again. That was why Mamimi's innocent expression was nothing more than a distant memory to Naota now.

She smashed out her cigarette and stood up.

"Is your skirt dry?"

As soon as he asked, he regretted it so much that he felt like dying. Could he have said anything worse? At that moment, he was the most terrible person in the world.

Mamimi gave him a cold, sidelong glance, as if she didn't know him. Remaining silent, she dropped her game next to Naota. It was exactly the same gesture she'd used to discard her cigarette butt.

Naota picked it up and pressed the start button. He felt he wouldn't be able to stand the silence without it. Of course, the handheld contained the game Mamimi

always played: Fire Starter. Naota, too, had played it when it first had come out, but he'd given up after a few times. It wasn't just Naota most of the kids who'd bought it had given up on it almost immediately. It hadn't sold well, either. Fire Starter was a really weird game.

Welcome to Endsville, the devil town.

It is a dark town, a city of devils.

An invisible darkness has infected people's hearts. It eats away at the world and continues to spread. It won't stop until Endsville has consumed everything.

This town makes real the previously unattainable desire for world conquest. Finally, all the world shall be like Endsville, and all the people in the world will be like Endsville's residents. Governments, businesses, and churches will become affiliated with Endsville, and all schools will become like Endsville schools, as well.

Pride, obsessions pretending to be love, weak morals, distorted equality this town is full of easy prey for the devils. It's packed with low-hanging fruit.

Stop Endsville from further consumption!

As apostle to the God of the Black Flame, Lord Cantido, you must stop the growth of Endsville, which knows not how to stop alone.

Take care! If you relax for a moment, then the devil town will enlarge.

The single weapon you have been given to halt this expansion is fire the sacred, purging flame: matches, lighters, firebombs, explosives, and cigarettes. If it burns, you can use it. The devil town's weakness is fire.

Obtain the items, avoid the police, deceive the firefighters, and burn down the devil town.

Now, go forth and unleash the purifying flame!

However...

There is one thing you mustn't forget one thing you cannot do. Despite the powerful flames at your control, you can't burn down everything at once. After all, if you burn down the entire town, you'll be left with nowhere to live.

And so, your battle can't be won. Over and over again, without end, you will burn the heartless town.

That is your mission, chosen one.

Go with the blessing of Lord Cantido, God of the Black Flames.

"Mamimi?"

Naota took his eyes off the screen to look around. While his attention had been diverted by the game, Mamimi had disappeared.

That...

Where could she have gone without her shoes?

Panicking, Naota stood up and ran after her, the portable game player still clutched in his hand.

I don't need a game anymore. I know where I am right now. This is the devil town of Endsville.

In the evening, the shops in front of the train station were busy. On their way home from work, businessmen and office ladies hurried to make their purchases. Naturally, they were *devil* businessmen and office ladies, who'd been spit out by a *devil* company.

Once touched by Endsville, people could do nothing but live as part of Endsville. They could breathe only the air of Endsville, and they could eat only Endsville's food.

Devils wearing ties and devils wearing thick makeup; devils who didn't realize they were wearing masks; devils handing out leaflets; devils passing out election flyers; devils talking loudly; devils with fake faces, flipping burgers; devils selling cosmetics; devils crouched down outside the convenience store; fat devils; old devils; and baby devils, pushed in baby carriages all of them were devils.

Mamimi started feeling sick, so she ran down a deserted alley.

I know.

I'm not an exception. I was born in Endsville, so the curse is in my body too.

However, I am different from the others. The other devils, they don't realize they're devils. They don't know they're in Endsville. Unwittingly, they spread Endsville across the world. That's how we're different: I'm the person who will stop the spread of Endsville, the one who will cleanse this town with holy flame and save the world. I've protected this worldly day after day, with that power.

I pray for the blessing of the God of the Black Flame! Lord Canti, I am your meek servant, the wielder of the black flame. Please, fill me with your holy spirit.

Wandering through the back alleys, Mamimi heard the stray cats meow. Then, between the twilight buildings, she spotted the figure of a robot playing with the cats.

"Lord Canti."

She smiled.

It was the beginning of her holy life.

Naota used a pay phone on his street to try calling Mamimi's cell phone but apparently, she'd turned off hers. No one answered at her home phone number, either.

She wasn't at Mabase Bridge, so he had no choice but to go and look for her.

Where have you gone?

It was time for dinner, but Naota knew he couldn't go home now. He had to look for Mamimi. He had to find her and be with her. Intuitively, he knew this.

He dearly regretted having lost sight of Mamimi just a little while ago. They'd been together a few moments. She'd been sitting right next to him.

It sank in that all he did was make mistakes. Mamimi was slipping away from him a little farther today than yesterday, a little more now than then.

"You there."

When he looked up, he saw a policeman standing next to a patrol car.

"You live around here, don't you?" asked the policeman. "You haven't seen a suspicious-looking high school girl nearby recently, have you?"

A suspicious-looking high school girl...?

For a second, Naota's heart stopped.

"You've heard about the arsons around here," the cop continued. "What a horrible person... You don't know anything? You haven't heard any rumors about the culprit at school?"

"Hey," Naota heard another cop from the patrol car call, "look over there!"

The sky had turned red. It was a fire.

Mamimi ...

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. No, I haven't heard any word from him. I recruited one of the enemy robots, but it's proving pretty useless."

Haruko was in Naota's room, apologizing and bowing. This was atypical behavior from her, given how outrageous, unruly, savage, and generally over-the-top she was.

She was alone in the room, with the exception of Miyu Miyu, who sat on the bed and looked out the window. The flames of a faraway blaze reflected in the cat's eyes.

"That..."

Haruko noticed the fire. She hurriedly opened the window, stepped outside, and walked out on the balcony.

She heard the sound of sirens coming from the river.

The fire was at a small boathouse, located on the riverside. It was an uninhabited two-story vessel.

Very quickly, a crowd of people formed around it. With the recent arson spate, everyone had become very jittery. Among the gathered people, there was much speculation that this, too, was arson. Usually, no one spent much time around this area, so everyone wondered why there'd be an accidental fire in a place like that.

The small building burned splendidly.

It was fortunate there were no buildings nearby, but the flames were high and powerful enough that complete destruction was unavoidable.

Sparks from the flames danced up into the sky.

Naota was part of the crowd; they were cast in a red glow. Stunned, he watched the blaze.

That's right. A real fire is hot like this.

Naota recalled the last fire he'd witnessed: It was the burning school Tasuku and he had watched together. Back then, Naota had been in kindergarten.

Fire... that's it!

Suddenly, Naota realized he'd remembered a place where Mamimi might be hiding. Maybe she'd be there now. Maybe she was crying.

At the charred site of the Mabase School, the wooden building's remains stood under a coating of ash. Nearby residents sometimes used the grounds to garden.

From the section of the old school garden located on the riverbank, the boathouse fire could be seen on the opposite shore. The river reflected the blaze, and the fire engines roared from across the way.

On this side, the school garden was as dark and quiet as a theater box. As if it were onstage, being watched by an audience, the fire across the river was a curiously unreal, fantastic scene.

Mamimi...

Just as Naota had guessed, she was there. The dark schoolyard was lit up with small red lights. It seemed she had put cigarettes in the ground instead of candles.

What are you doing?

Illuminated by the fire from the other shore, Mamimi strangely swayed in time to some internal rhythm. When she stood, she reached her arms up to the sky; then, she crouched down, hanging her head to pray. It looked like a ritual dance.

No, maybe she intended it to be an actual ritual. When Naota looked closer, he could see Mamimi was drawing a magic symbol with her feet.

Nearby, Canti stood, unmoving. The robot looked like part of her ritual, but he was merely a passive observer.

"Mamimi," Naota called.

She looked back at him with cold eyes the eyes of a witch, interrupted in the middle of casting her spell.

"Why did you come here?"

Naota tried passing her the game machine he still held. "Here."

"I don't need it anymore. It's yours."

He didn't have any response.

"Do you remember the fire here?" Mamimi was looking at the old school building. "No, you wouldn't remember. You were so small back then."

Though he didn't reply, Naota did remember that fire six years ago.

That was when everything had started.

It had been right before the start of spring.

That night, Naota nearly had fallen asleep when the town fire alarms began to ring.

Naota had asked his brother what the commotion was.

Tasuku opened the window to look outside and said, "A fire. It looks like the school. Let's go and see."

Sneaking out in the middle of the night was a big deal to the young Naota. He thought about going to see the fire with his brother, and his heart jumped a little. It was a rare chance for an evening adventure. Anyway, no matter what might happen, Tasuku was with him, so he would be okay.

Everyone was headed toward the fire. Mabase Elementary School which Tasuku still attended back then, and where Naota would begin the following year crackled with flames.

To Naota's young eyes, the fire was a glorious sight. He was excited by the waves of heat, which he hadn't experienced before.

It's so warm, isn't it, brother?

His brother told him not to say that kind of thing.

In the wide schoolyard, a large number of people gathered.

"Wait here for a minute," Tasuku said, disappearing into the crowd.

Suddenly, Naota felt uneasy. He wasn't that far from home, but he was uncomfortable being left alone in what felt like an alien world.

"Brother! Where are you, brother?" he yelled, running after Tasuku.

Despite his brother's orders, Naota ran after him, searching desperately. The fear that his brother had gone to the other side spurred him on.

How long had he looked around? The school building had two stories. In the back of the unburned part of the building, Naota finally found Tasuku: his safety blanket, his brother.

Tasuku was with a girl Naota didn't recognize. She was bigger than Naota, but smaller than Tasuku. It looked like she had been crying. When Tasuku spotted Naota, his brother gently stroked the girl's hair and laughed that his little brother had followed him.

The girl, seeing him for the first time, turned to Naota and happily told him that Tasuku had saved her.

Saved her?

Naota didn't ask what Tasuku had saved her from.

The girl was Mamimi Samejima.

After that fire, Mamimi and Tasuku had started dating.

That's right, Naota remembered. Mamimi was bullied back then, too. That's why she always said she hated school.

Over the ensuing six years, he had forgotten about their first meeting. It all happened such a long time ago, and he'd come to think of Mamimi as nothing more than a carefree girl.

Could it be...?

Naota had a terrifying thought. How could he have forgotten until now? Back then, they'd said that the school fire had been arson, but they'd never caught the culprit.

"I hate it here," Mamimi said. "I'm glad it burned down. Besides, that's how I met Tasuku."

What was I thinking? Naota wondered to himself. *I didn't know. I didn't know anything.*

Of course, his brother had known everything. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to rescue her back then.

"Although it's all burned down, the ruins are still here."

Naota didn't reply.

The charred remains of the old school building had been left essentially intact. They stood there, illuminated by the fire.

Mamimi pointed to the burning boathouse and said, "Endsville is burning."

She wasn't talking to Naota. She was addressing Canti. "Now, Lord Canti, a kiss as my reward."

Looking absorbed, Mamimi walked toward Canti. Naota hadn't seen such a

suggestive look in her eyes before.

Finally, Naota thought he understood what Mamimi wanted from Canti. At the time when he'd first met Mamimi here, his brother had comforted her and softly stroked her head. *That gesture probably supported Mamimi during hard times*.

In fact, that one memory had kept this seemingly carefree girl going, all this time.

Mamimi stood on her tiptoes to kiss Canti; her expression was that of a devotee, offering everything to her god. Naota felt a pain in his heart.

Mamimi, I... Mamimi, I...

"Ugh."

At that moment, there was a violent shuddering in Naota's forehead. His entire body stiffened as if he had been electrocuted.

Ba-dum... ba-dum... ba-dum...

His head started to throb.

The sirens and searchlights at the MM factory once again prepared for war.

Haruko, who was watching the factory from the corner of her eye, spurred on her beloved Vespa to the scene. "That" night was starting all over again.

Chapter 4

Naota heard an ear-splitting ringing and felt his feet leave the ground. His body was floating in the air, just as before.

Next up is...

As he expected, the horns burst through his bandana and extended long and fat from the back and front of his head. No, Naota already knew they weren't really horns. As the two protrusions had appeared on either side of his head, he'd predicted they'd each become another robot.

As he'd surmised, the protrusions emerged gradually: Several fat fingers, a hand, and then an entire arm appeared.

Not now, not here!

Similar to the previous time, the foreign objects made the surrounding area feel paralyzed. He felt no physical pain.

Naota had been prepared for this to happen. He'd experienced the strange feeling of having a heart in his forehead before. He thought if something still were residing in his head, he wanted it out immediately. However, he didn't want it to happen right here and now!

If the thing had to come out, he wanted it to happen somewhere no one would see it. He'd known the resulting robot could be a problem. If it weren't a harmless robot like Canti, but more like that violent arm-thing instead, then its emergence in an inopportune place might be fatal.

"Ew!"

Through the ringing in his ears, he heard Mamimi's repulsed exclamation.

Mamimi stepped back instinctively and looked at Naota with a stunned expression. That was natural. Last time, Mamimi had lost consciousness and didn't

remember anything. Seeing this mysterious wonder for the first time, it was no surprise that Mamimi freaked.

Why couldn't it have been anyone but Mamimi to see this? Or is this happening precisely because Mamimi is here?

After pushing through Naota's head to emerge on the outside, the alien objects both appeared to be part of another robotic arm. It was the same kind of arm as before. Of course, this time, it was the right arm. There was no mistaking it. This was the other half of that violent robot.

Run, Mamimi. It's dangerous! Naota wanted to scream, but to his frustration, the words wouldn't come out. Mamimi remained frozen to the spot, dumbstruck.

Canti stood nearby as before, watching what was unfolding.

As Naota's floating body tilted up, the robot's entire form appeared. The sight of a huge piece of machinery jumping from Naota's tiny head was unbelievably grotesque.

The new robot was gigantic. It was human-shaped, but larger than Canti, measuring about nine feet. Compared with Canti's slim proportions, this one had a thick, beefy body. Though humanoid, it would be more accurate to say it was shaped like a sumo wrestler rather than a normal person.

Its arms were odd. The right arm resembled the full manipulator, which had previously appeared. The left arm, however, was similar solely in its upper part. Attached to the left elbow was a disproportionately small metallic arm. This smaller limb appeared imbalanced against the sturdiness of the right arm. Because of the mismatch, the robot's silhouette was reminiscent of a crab.

That strange left arm probably was an emergency replacement for the part that Canti had cut off.

The robot caught sight of Canti through the sensor eye on its head. The gigantic robot began roaring, shaking everything in sight. Most likely, it was delighted at the chance for revenge.

The MM logo had been carved on this one-armed robot, as well.

In the MM Mabase factory, the host computer once again began receiving battle reports.

«MMR Class [J].RH appears in Mabase city. 19:57.

MMR Class [K].001 ATOMSK is caught at close distance. 19:57.

[K] ATOMSK displays no reaction. 19:57.

RH, receiving no reaction and not recognizing the merit of capture, readies battle plan for ultimate destruction. 19:57.

Permission granted. 19:57.

Battle begins. 19:57.

Good luck to RH in executing battle strategy. 19:57.»

The gigantic robot appeared to be starting a fight with Canti.

Its feet remained stuck, however, bogged down in Naota. For some reason, the

robot's feet were still in Naota's head, and it couldn't get free.

"Ugh!"

In pain, Naota grabbed at his forehead, desperately trying to rid himself of the robot. As if it were disgusted by a piece of sticky eggshell from its birth process, the huge robot lifted its foot and shook off Naota. Consequently, Naota was flicked away.

With a scream, Naota fell to the schoolyard violently. Fortunately, the anti-gravitational force generated by the robot's appearance hadn't dissipated completely. This eased the impact, and Naota escaped with no broken bones more or less, safe and sound.

For a moment, Naota thought, *Thank God*. His relief proved premature, however; in the next second, he was hit by a bike and thrown aside. Of course, the bike was Haruko's.

"Waaah!"

"Takkun!" Haruko yelled, stopping her Vespa.

Naota mumbled. Although he had escaped unscathed once more, these accidents, one after another, had taken their toll on his mental state.

Haruko turned to the new robot, enraged (already having forgotten she herself had run over Naota), and grunted, "Look what you did to Takkun!"

The formerly one-armed robot immediately assumed a battle stance; with its giant right fist, it punched Canti.

Canti collapsed with a loud metallic crash.

The weight differential between the two was so immense that the impact was like a giant truck hitting a bicycle. In terms of brute strength, the one-armed robot far surpassed Canti.

Trampling on the fallen Canti, the big robot looked like it was enjoying its revenge.

«How do you like that, [K].001 ATOMSK? Last time, I was careless and let my right arm get crushed; but in a proper fight, you're no match for me.»

Canti remained completely motionless, trampled. It had no will to fight back and lay there, passive.

Mamimi screamed.

Up until now, she'd been shocked; finally, she forced herself to acknowledge the frightening reality unfolding before her. Watching the terrifying one-armed robot, she collapsed as if she were a broken doll.

A demon it's the Endsville demon. Because I tried to burn the town, I angered it, and now it's come here...

The one-armed demon picked up Canti's legs, swung the robot around in a semicircle, and flung it to the ground. The entire motion was a well-programmed fight sequence.

Canti's body slammed down a few feet from where Mamimi sat.

The one-armed robot ignored any surrounding people. It exhibited a single-minded malice. After finishing with Canti, perhaps it intended to annihilate the people there, too.

"Mamimi!"

When he regained control over his body, Naota ran to Mamimi, refusing to think of anything else.

This was the worst possible situation. The robot from his head was going to hurt Mamimi. There was no way he could let that happen!

"Uwaaah!" Haruko, guitar in hand, activated the manual generator on the instrument's back. She attempted to hit the one-armed robot.

The robot seized the guitar with its hand.

Haruko's instrument glowed; where it touched the robots arm, blue and white lights sparked. (Perhaps, during this exchange, another battle occurred simultaneously in some complicated dimension that couldn't be seen by human eyes.) The robot desperately blocked the guitar as Haruko pushed down.

It appeared that Haruko Haruhara really wasn't an ordinary girl.

As the robot guarded against Haruko, it also continued attacking Canti from behind. The air twisted, and the whole area was filled with a disquieting vibration.

Suddenly, Canti squeaked and sank to the ground.

It was as though an invisible foot had stepped on Canti's back. By the looks of it, the enemy robot had utilized some kind of medical machinery as a weapon.

In medical science, hyperbaric oxygen therapy is a treatment in which patients are placed within a high-pressure environment to change the oxygen levels in their blood. This robot was equipped with a pressure-changing unit that could increase environmental pressure at will. That seemed to be the weapon it now employed. Canti's body was attacked repeatedly by high-pressure pinpoints, as if it had been hit everywhere by bullets. The assault was merciless.

As Canti let out a scream and a squeak, Naota and Mamimi grew terrified. Mamimi quivered in Naota's arms, unable to move. The one-armed robot's violent attacks would be directed toward them soon.

I can't take this anymore.

Naota could do nothing but hold the frightened Mamimi. It was maddening to know that he was so useless.

"Mamimi..." Naota whispered.

Canti simply had been absorbing its opponent's attacks; now, Canti's monitor suddenly lit up with a strange light.

Withstanding its enemy's high-pressure attacks, Canti stood and opened up a section of its armor. In the next second, it extended both its arms, seized Naota, and inserted him into its body. The lid closed.

In a flash, Naota had been enveloped by Canti's body, vanishing.

Watching, Mamimi shook in terror. "You ate him."

Indeed, it looked as though Canti had somehow eaten up Naota.

Where am I?

Naota considered the possibility that he was dead, which would explain why he was in an utterly dark space.

As he drifted through the darkness, however, Naota knew he still had his limbs and body.

If I'm still alive, then where am I?

His memories were jumbled up by the shock of what had happened. Finally, he remembered Canti's body had swallowed him.

Common sense would dictate that Canti's slim form couldn't possibly accommodate Naota's body. However, given that an entire robot had come out of Naota's head, common sense wasn't really an issue anymore.

Yes, I'm probably inside Canti's body: However, this isn't the time to float around in darkness. Outside, that horrific robot might be attacking Mamimi! So, what do I do now?

Naota reached out with both hands, trying to feel around, but his fingers encountered nothing.

"Heeeeey!"

When he screamed, his voice disappeared into the endless black. There was no telling how far the darkness extended. He didn't hear an echo; the shout simply was swallowed up.

From behind, something suddenly pierced Naota's head.

"Huh?"

One by one, his limbs and his organs froze; he completely lost control over his body.

He started to hear the ominous sound of something operating around him.

GON... GON... GON... GON... GON... GON... GON... GON...

Afraid of being caught in giant, rotating gears, Naota trembled.

«[K], ATOMSK shows reaction. 20:01.»

After swallowing Naota, Canti turned around in the next instant. It delivered a powerful flying kick to the one-armed robot. That devil, which had been locked in battle with Haruko, collapsed.

Canti carefully braced itself with a powerful command presence, as if it were an entirely different robot. In fact, Canti's outer appearance was changing.

Mamimi and Haruko watched the transformation.

After displaying several incomprehensible signal patterns on its monitor, the entire body color began flickering, changing to different hues. From navy to silver to green to purple it shifted into these bright colors to a dizzying effect. Finally, it settled into a bright crimson.

Canti's body made a feral noise. Something was happening on the inside, in addition to its exterior changes.

Haruko, who had watched what was happening to Canti, glanced at the bracelet on her left arm. The chain link reacted like a magnet, pointing to Canti.

Haruko grinned. This was, apparently, a delightful development.

"Idiot!" Mamimi screamed, running to Canti and beating its back with her fists.

"You're no god! Why did you eat Takkun? Stupid robot! Give back Takkun!"

She pleaded with all her might. She was bawling. It was the first time since the night she'd met Naota that she had let anyone but Tasuku see her tears. Suddenly, Mamimi stopped beating Canti and looked up at the robot, surprised.

The robot, now a crimson color, tenderly patted her head. Softly, as if it were offering her consolation, it said, "You're a good girl, aren't you?"

Mamimi was struck dumb by Canti's unexpected show of sympathy. That moment reminded Mamimi of something that she always had wanted but hadn't been able to get.

Suddenly, Canti's arm quickly moved her away, as if to signal her to get down.

The one-armed robot stood, readying its finishing attack. Its sensor eye locked Canti in its sights. What attack was it planning this time? Its whole body groaned as it prepped itself.

Canti, however, was faster.

The second it had pushed Mamimi back, the whole robot not merely its color transformed. Although it had been an android mere seconds earlier, Canti now had morphed into a giant crimson cannon. The body resembled some strange, scientific weapon; this was Canti's self-propelled gun mode.

A red laser locked in on the one-armed robot. A shot issued from the cannon's mouth. With tremendous noise, it fired an energy cannonball.

Haruko and Mamimi sensed the attack ripple throughout their entire bodies; they felt the blast in the pits of their stomach.

The cannonball headed straight for the one-armed robot, piercing its armor. Upon passing through its enemy's body, the cannonball changed directions, flew up into the sky, and returned to the gun-mode Canti.

Not about to let this opportunity to finish the fight slip away, Haruko swung her time-space interference weapon at the enemy robot, which now had a gaping hole. She couldn't afford any carelessness; this robot's parts could operate as autonomous weapons, which the severed arm previously had demonstrated.

This time, the defenseless robot was hit by the light-emitting guitar. It flew backward, smashing into the side of the wooden building. By all appearances, Haruko's guitar was a super weapon: The entire one-armed robot sparked a brilliant white and then exploded. A huge pillar of flame rose up, incinerating the remains of the school.

Canti returned to its original form and protected Mamimi from the blast. Its body had changed back from crimson to the original metallic navy; from inside, sounds in its belly could be heard.

Naota's body was excreted from the robot's bottom.

"Ouch."

Although Naota seemed almost unconsciousness as he emerged, he returned to his senses immediately. For some reason, his face had numerous scratches. Looking closely, his entire body was covered in little grazes.

Seeing Naota, Mamimi crinkled her nose, saying, "Takkun, you're all sticky. And you smell."

Naota's nicked-up body was covered in sticky goo. He definitely had an acidic

smell.

Looking around, Naota grasped the situation. "So, that nasty robot was beaten?"

The wooden school building was burning ferociously. The flames were quite a bit bigger than those of the fire on the river's other side.

"The remains were blown to bits, too, huh?" Naota murmured.

The ruins made by Mamimi years earlier, which had sat untouched all this time, now were burning into nothingness.

Suddenly, Naota's ears perked up. He heard a siren. Fire trucks and patrol cars were approaching.

"Hey, you two, what are you doing? It's time to hit the road." Haruko was already on her Vespa, ready to flee.

Canti, standing nearby, rose noiselessly and slipped into the evening darkness. Apparently, it could be a shrewd robot sometimes.

Naota and Mamimi, illuminated by the schoolhouse fire, regarded each other. Soiled with tears and cuts, the two of them looked into each other's faces, both completely devoid of expression.

The patrol car was getting closer.

"Let's go," said Naota, taking Mamimi's cold hand. They ran toward the Vespa.

Mamimi is here right now.

They climbed onto Haruko's scooter. Naota sat in front; Mamimi straddled the back, clinging to Haruko. Three people on one scooter that alone was enough for the police to pull them over. There was no way they could let Mamimi get caught, though. As the three-manned Vespa drove away, the night wind stung Naota's wounds.

Despite that night's events, nothing had changed in his relationship with Mamimi. She still loved Tasuku, and Naota still was different from his brother. He had known all that from the start, though.

Although he knew he was just a substitute, Naota thought, *I want to be next to Mamimi for as long as possible.*

"Pull over!" ordered a patrol car.

Dammit! Had they been caught? Each time Mamimi and Naota tried to move forward, something else got in the way.

"No-brain, you'd better hold on tight!"

Enjoying their predicament, Haruko grinned and accelerated to the max.

The Vespa cut through the night town at light speed.

«Mission Accomplished 20:05. Continue to FLCL 2 20:05.»

Commentary by Hiroki Sato (Fooly Cooly Producer)

When reading books, please do so in a well-lit room, keeping a good distance between your eyes and the book.

Reading for extended periods of time may damage your eyesight.

Reading on a moving train has been known to cause motion sickness.
I'm kidding.

I didn't really have to write that stuff, did I? After all, you buy books and read them however you choose. Yeah, that's true. Great, isn't it? This time, we have a medium that you can appreciate however you like. So, why isn't the *FLCL* OVA (for sale and rental) like this?

Leaving that topic aside...

A boy hero, three female companions, robots in other words, it's the archetypical "Japanime" story. The set-up is already very familiar, so I decided to twist it quite a lot. The Akihabara district populace demanded, "Please, make it all GAINAX-weird so that the old men who follow subcultures, all the Shibuya teenagers, and the girls who read cute comics won't get it." I kept my end of the deal but just this once.

When I said I wanted to "twist it," Kazuya Tsurumaki did so without hesitation. Well, actually it took almost a year's worth of hesitation. We didn't want it to be limited by genre. Was it full of gags or was it serious? Was it Sci-Fi or was it comedy? To quote Haruko, "Whether it's a lie or the truth, does it really matter?" We described it as embodying *Zeitgeist* "the feeling of now." Then, we were told that phrase was lame, and that people thought it would read like any other young adult manga.

Leaving that topic aside...

As each episode was a little longer than twenty minutes, if we threw in too many gags, it would have become utter nonsense. Or there might have been people who wouldn't understand anything from it and would say, "This is boring." So, we kept it relatively normal. And we decided to do a novelization an additional link in the greater media mix.

Sharing media is easier now, and one work can have a big impact on other works out there. An element of the novel hints at one of the many interpretations of the anime, but what's wonderful is that the novel is also a completely independent work in its own right. Actually, I've come to realize just recently that a novel, as the medium that further expands the width of our imaginations, might be the most suitable kind of media.

Despite the random jokes, within the Sci-Fi anime genre, you want to keep telling the story whether you've decided on a deep meaning or it never develops one. You might tell the story and it suddenly becomes boring; but if you don't continue until the very end, people often won't understand.

This sure isn't your typical Sci-Fi.

This sure has serious gags.

This sure is juvenile.

We were extremely fortunate to have found a writer who could conjure up the right mix of Sci-Fi and juvenility. Mister Enokido participated in each step of our planning.

So, for all those who've started reading the book by going to this commentary first (Director Tsurumaki definitely will fall into this group), I hope you enjoy Mister Enokido's delicate, creative touch. For those of you who have finished and are looking for the extras, I'd like it if you watched the anime after this. For those of you

who've already watched the anime, I guarantee that you will have various new reactions, such as slapping your knee and saying, "I see now!" or "I still don't get it." It's that kind of work.

Leaving that topic aside...

In the beginning, Tsurumaki's original plot had many ideas that were very interesting when expressed in words but hard to express in art. The visual directors Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, Tadashi Hiramatsu, and Tsurumaki himself shouted on many occasions, "This is hard to draw!" (And they still are yelling about this now.) I can't thank Mister Enokido enough for patiently reading many revised manuscripts with difficult and abstract images, and then going back to novelize it. (At this very moment, he's still on chapters five and six!) Without you, Director Tsurumaki and I probably would not be alive right now.

Please, enjoy the second and third volumes, as well.

Volume II **Marquis de Carabas**

Chapter 1

When had Eri Ninamori noticed she wasn't an ordinary girl?

No, that's not quite the right way to phrase the question. There wasn't a point at which she'd noticed; she'd been special since the moment she was born. Actually, she'd been special even before she was born.

Ninamori was the tallest girl in the sixth grade at Mabase Elementary. That wasn't anything special, though especially considering there were a few girls in the fifth grade who were taller than she was. There was another reason Ninamori was special: She was the only one out of all the girls in the class who'd caught a snake or a lizard with her hands. Of course, that didn't mean she was special, either, but she thought reptiles were cute. She really couldn't see why they were anything to be afraid of. The reason Ninamori was special had to do with something entirely different.

Four years ago just as she was beginning her second year of elementary school Ninamori had modeled for an advertisement for a study desk. All she had to do was open her textbooks on the desk and grin for the cameraman. The ad ended up running in all the education journals across the entire country.

The response from adults to Ninamori's modeling had been very positive, ranging from, "The way she smiles is so professional" and "She could be a top model" to "So pretty!" and "She should go out for some modeling auditions." Although Ninamori had really enjoyed herself, she hadn't done any other modeling work since then. She knew the adults who were lavishly praising her were only seeking her father's favor.

The real reason Ninamori had been chosen for that modeling job was because of her father's position. "We've chosen you to do it" and "please do this for us" were two completely different things. To top it off, the finished photos for the ad weren't that good. The lighting in the shot they used was subpar; and all in all, Ninamori could've

been made to appear much cuter. The girl on the magazine page struck her as an idiot with her wide-open, toothy grin. *Maybe I'm not very special*, she thought. Getting praised by the foolish adults who'd made the photo was meaningless. The reason Ninamori was special lay somewhere else.

Ninamori was aware she was pretty, and she didn't have any of the typical complexes a girl of her towering height usually had. In fact, on days she wasn't at school, she'd wear shoes or sandals with amazingly tall heels to make herself appear taller than she was. At least half the boys in her class had a crush on her. After all, she was the girl who shined the brightest. *Maybe I'm not very special*. Ninamori was pretty, smart, and she was class president. All the counselors and teachers thought she was special. *Maybe I'm not very special*. Above all, her father was the mayor of Mabase. *Maybe I'm not very special*. *Maybe I'm not very special*. *Maybe ...*

SHUT UP!

Occasionally, Ninamori would hear that annoying voice. Every once in a while, there were annoying things in the world annoying actions, annoying people.

That morning, Ninamori was on her way to school in the car. Going to and from school in a car was forbidden by the school unless you were sick or had broken something but if you went to a side street where no one could see you getting out, there wasn't a problem. Of course, Ninamori took care that no one saw her.

The traffic light turned red, and the woman who was driving put her foot on the brake. A second later, the woman pulled out her compact, slapped on some makeup, and quickly sprayed herself with perfume. Ninamori, who was sitting in the back, assumed an expression of disgust as she opened the window.

Every once in a while, there were annoying things in the world annoying actions, annoying people.

The woman who was driving Ninamori was Ninamori's father's secretary. For the past two years, her father's secretary had always been by his side. She was a woman with gaudy makeup a woman who put on too much perfume and who clearly had a bad sense of smell.

"I'm impressed." The annoying woman had an equally annoying voice. "You listened calmly. The mayor had been worried."

The previous night, Ninamori had heard from her father that he might be leaving her mother.

"Daddy still loves Mommy, but they don't go so well together anymore," Ninamori's father had explained. "Because Daddy's the mayor now, he can't publicly divorce her it'd cause too much of a fuss. So, for now, they're going to live separately in different houses. It's an adult thing. You understand, don't you, sweetie?" Ninamori's father had tried to put on an apologetic face, but he still seemed happy.

The thing Ninamori hated most was that when her father had told her about him and her mother, that secretary woman had been right by his side, as she always was.

"It's between my father and mother," Ninamori muttered disinterestedly.

"You're so clever, aren't you?" the secretary replied. "When I was Miss Eri's age, I was so much more childish."

"Well, if they want to split up, there isn't anything I can do about it."

The light turned green and the woman put the car into gear, speeding forward.

Watching the woman's hand operate the gear stick made Ninamori feel like throwing up. The truth was that Ninamori hadn't wanted to ride in the car with this woman, but when Ninamori opened her front door, the woman had been waiting there with a cheerful smile on her face.

"I'll drive you to school," the woman offered. It seemed as though she was pleased by the fact Ninamori hadn't raised any objections to her parents' separation.

Why do you have to be the one driving me? Gross! Ninamori thought to herself, although she really wanted to scream it at the top of her lungs. She grew more annoyed when she observed the woman driving with a self-satisfied look.

Ninamori's father had bought the car a month before, intending it to be the family car. However, the woman had started driving it around as if it were her own. She'd put her own CDs in it, decorated it with ugly toys, and marked it with her perfume.

Take me to school? You must be kidding! You're my hired driver nothing more than an employee. You still have to do what I say. With that in mind, Ninamori got into the backseat instead of the passenger seat. Of course, the idiotic woman hadn't taken Ninamori's hint at all. She really believed Ninamori had no idea that she'd been a part of Ninamori's parents' separation.

"You're holding up so well," praised the secretary. "Don't worry, I won't do anything to damage your father's image."

"That's a relief, secretary. I have faith in your abilities," Ninamori replied with blatant sarcasm. "You stayed over last night, but you're wearing a different suit than you were yesterday."

"Oh, you're very observant."

Once again, the secretary had failed to recognize Ninamori's sarcasm and instead gave her a broad smile.

Ninamori knew her father's secretary had been in his room all night. The reason for her parents' separation was, without a doubt, all because of this woman.

Remembering the sight of her father holding her mother's hand when he'd first been elected mayor, Ninamori could hear him thank her mother all over again. Ninamori's parents had been very close. Any small thing could bring them closer together. If her parents could only enjoy something together again, they'd definitely go back to being a family like they had been before. If this woman weren't in the way, that is.

"You have a change of clothes, too? Why's that?" the woman asked after noticing the paper bag filled with clothes near Ninamori's feet.

It was Ninamori's costume for the Marquis de Carabas. "I'm doing a play for the school fair. I'm the lead role," she explained.

It's at the most painful times that people grow up. The most painful few days of Ninamori's life were about to begin.

This is the story of the girl who pretended to be the Marquis de Carabas.

The thing is... although the types of happiness one can experience are limited, there are unlimited variations of misfortune. One of Ninamori's classmates understood this better than she did. In fact, he'd considered himself the most

unfortunate person in the world for the past month.

The boy was none other than Naota Nandaba.

Naota left the house to go to school with a backpack slung over his back and a baseball cap on his head. Naota had become better acquainted with misfortune because of what was under that baseball cap.

Naota's house was a bakery, but in the mornings when there should've been customers, there wasn't a single person to be seen. Shigekuni Bakery wasn't particularly popular.

In the shop's small parking lot, there was a Vespa and a girl crouched next to it, whistling happily. She was examining her beloved scooter carefully for any problems.

It was Haruko Haruhara. The other day, she'd moved into the Nandaba house as a hired housekeeper.

"Hey, wannabe housekeeper," Naota called out to Haruko.

Although she must've heard, Haruko acted as if she hadn't, turning on the Vespa's motor. Engaging in an over-the-top display of revving her engine and turning her ear to the engine noise, Haruko seemed to be teasing Naota. Her actions clearly indicated that she wasn't going to acknowledge his presence at all.

"Cleaning lady!" Naota yelled out, enraged by the fact that he was being ignored. In class, Naota played it cool, but when it came to Haruko, he became angry very quickly. "Maid!" he continued mockingly.

Haruko revved the engine again as though she still hadn't noticed Naota was there.

"Alien!" Naota shouted, half ready to give up.

Finally, Haruko turned around. When Naota shouted, "Alien!" he'd actually meant, "weird girl who might as well be an alien"; but Haruko, who tended to have a horribly stubborn attitude, reacted in a rather peculiar way. "Yes?" she asked.

"Clean up my room, will you?"

Since Haruko had come to board at the Nandaba house, she'd been staying in Naota's room, taking the top bunk of the bed. Now, the room was scattered with all the bike parts that Haruko had brought with her. There literally wasn't space left to walk.

"What's the big problem?" Haruko asked. "The room matches the store in that way."

When Naota scanned the area, he saw that the empty bakery was, indeed, piled high with cardboard boxes. Every box bore the mark of a printing house.

Naota stared at the boxes, letting out an extended sigh. *More fanzines that didn't sell?*

"Mon-chan said he's a journalist," Haruko said.

"Mon-chan?" Naota replied.

It sounded as if Haruko were referring to Naota's father, Kamon. Before he'd come to the suburbs of Mabase, Naota's father had worked as an editor at a publishing house in Central. Although Kamon was now working in the bakery, it seemed as though he hadn't completely given up his former career and was publishing things himself. Naota thought it was a complete waste of money and effort.

Employing Haruko was a prime example of wasting money.

Whatever you do, please stop with the "Mon-chan," thought Naota.

The idling Vespa engine emitted a small explosion, spewed out black smoke, and stopped. Haruko crouched over her scooter once again and started fiddling with engine parts. "I don't understand why such quality parts are malfunctioning..."

"Junk heap," Naota spat out as a parting shot before heading toward school.

Haruko's greasy arms suddenly reached out from behind, grabbing Naota by the collar.

"That hurts!" Naota yelped.

"You're going to school in that really ugly hat again?" Haruko asked, pulling the hat off Naota's head.

A new horn a double one, no less had been growing under Naota's hat. The pair of horns resembled cat ears and were most unusual appendages, which made Naota the most unfortunate person in the world.

It'd happened a couple nights before; the horns had started growing out of nowhere. To hide them, Naota had worn a hat for the entirety of the previous day. He'd even slept with it on. It was annoying, but if he didn't keep the horns pressed down, they'd grow even more.

This was actually the third time this had happened to Naota. No matter how much one traveled the world, one wouldn't find another boy with cat ears growing out of his head.

"I can't get enough of them. They're so soft and cute and so therapeutic to stroke!" Haruko squealed.

"D-don't touch them!" Naota pleaded.

As Haruko continued to admiringly stroke the cat ears, Naota sank down on the ground. It seemed that whenever his newly acquired ears were touched, he lost control over his body but in a feel-good kind of way.

"See you tonight," Haruko waved, returning the hat to Naota's head.

"Tonight?"

"You're coming shopping with me, right?"

"Shopping?"

What is she talking about? Naota wondered.

"You want your normal curry, don't you?"

Naota suddenly realized what Haruko was talking about. The night before, they'd eaten curry for dinner, but at Haruko's request, the curry roux used hadn't been their normal one. It was super spicy, making it troublesome for Naota to eat. Actually, it was so spicy that he couldn't even manage a mouthful. The only curry Naota could digest was the least spicy curry roux sold, Star Prince Curry, which could only be purchased at a small supermarket outside of town.

"Fine, show me where the supermarket is," Naota recalled Haruko telling him. He was surprised that Haruko really wanted to go shopping with him. He hadn't actually seen her do any housework not even once. The previous night's curry had been made by the robot, Canti, according to Haruko's orders.

Surprisingly, the Nandaba household had a robot in it, too a humanoid robot with a TV set for a head. The robot had emerged from the first horn that had come

out of Naota's head.

A few days earlier, a horn that had grown out of Naota's head had turned out to be a section of a robot that proceeded to separate itself from Naota. Indeed, the kinds of happiness are limited, but the variations of misfortune are limitless.

The absurd robot, named Canti, did more housework than Haruko. Even now, it was standing on the balcony airing the bed sheets while staring down at Haruko and Naota.

"You're late!"

According to the clock on the classroom wall, Naota was only a little late; but the moment he put his bag down on the desk, Ninamori scolded him. She seemed genuinely annoyed.

"You seem to be in a bad mood this morning, Class President," Naota observed.

"I told you yesterday, turn up to morning practice on time," Ninamori replied scathingly.

"Oh..."

Naota's class had decided on a play for the forthcoming school fair, which was three days away. However, Naota, who'd intended to skip practices and push the responsibility onto someone else, had only been half listening. He thought that because only about ten people would actually perform, there wasn't any real reason he should participate. Naota had important business after class, anyway.

"Don't you get it? You're the main part," Ninamori informed Naota.

"You're the main part. Anyone can do my bit. I don't want to."

"We voted on it. You're the cat, Naota."

Suddenly reminded of his cat ears, Naota touched his cap with his hand. He didn't intend to remove his hat in class at any point during the day because it was his "horn hider." He'd told his homeroom teacher that he'd injured his head.

Cat ... Naota grumbled.

Ninamori was right: The class had decided by a vote that Naota would play the cat.

Was it because I have to be the cat that these horns started growing? Naota asked himself.

"You'd better not skip the after-school practices," Ninamori warned.

Class plays are so stupid! Why would she get so worked up about them? Naota wondered. *Is it because she feels responsible as class president?*

The first class of the day was Japanese, the boring, sleep-inducing subject during which one's energy was spent on deciding the direction and quality of little cartoons drawn in the corners of the textbook. If a student became too focused on his craft, he'd end up working at Gainax or Production I.G. (Taking it too far? Okay, okay...)

From a seat in front of the classroom, Masashi passed Naota a small booklet when the teacher wasn't looking. It was a small, cheap-looking mini-comic with "*Come on Mabase*" printed on the front.

"Third page," Masashi whispered.

Gaku, who was sitting diagonally opposite, flashed Naota an expression that

said, "Take a peek and you'll be surprised." Gaku was probably the person who'd found the mini-comic and brought it to school in the first place. He was always bringing stupid things onto campus; no doubt, this comic was the same as the rest.

Upon opening the comic to the recommended page, Naota frowned. "This..."

The contents of what was printed were far more dangerous than Naota had expected, and they certainly weren't anything that should've been passed around that particular class. It was an article exposing the corruption and personal scandal of Mabase's current mayor Ninamori's father.

Without thinking, Naota glanced over at the class president, who was seated a short distance from him.

"Amazing, huh?" Masashi exclaimed. "I found it at that Moniwa shop."

"Moniwa?"

"You know, that shop run by the old lady who always appears as if she's sleeping and is packed with Crystal Pepsi."

"Crystal Pepsi?"

"What are you doing over there?" When Naota's homeroom teacher Miyaji saw him and Masashi talking, Naota thought they were in for it. It wasn't that Naota was worried about being scolded for passing stuff in class he was worried about having to hand over the comic to Miyaji.

Miyaji, who was in charge of Naota's class, was still a novice teacher. Her constant enthusiasm was good, but her inflexibility and denseness were not. In some ways, she was very much like a child.

"What's this?" After Miyaji flipped through the booklet she'd taken from Naota's hand, her face went red. "Oh, this is awful. All the students who read this, stand up!"

Gaku, Masashi, and Naota stood up.

There were more students who must've seen it, but it was a rule that in situations like these, only those who'd been caught had to answer to the crime. There was no way any of them would mention anyone else's name.

Staring at the three pitiful students standing up, other students who hadn't been involved giggled.

After scanning the comic, Miyaji was at a loss for words. As expected, it was too intense for such a princess teacher. "This is not allowed! No, no! From today, class one of the sixth grade is prohibited from bringing in vulgar material!"

The girls in the class tittered, thinking the suspects had been caught with a pervy comic. Ninamori smiled, too.

Please... is all Naota felt in his heart. Please lock that magazine up somewhere. We look foolish standing up here as it is. Just don't let Ninamori see that magazine.

Naota didn't normally care so much for Ninamori, but he didn't want her to be hurt by all her classmates should they find out what was inside the comic. Suddenly overcome with anger, he wondered what kind of senseless idiot would make such a horrid magazine.

"Reading crude material like this is an insult to Ninamori!" Miyaji blurted out, just as Naota had dreaded. His teacher was merely a child, after all. She was the type who'd talk in a loud voice on a battlefield and give away her position to the enemy.

Not surprisingly, Ninamori immediately realized that she or rather, her father

was the topic of the magazine. She was a clever girl.

"Anything of value was taken by your brother, and all that was left was the cat. Now, you're thinking, 'What am I going to do with a cat?' Don't be so stressed. Calm down and take a good look around. You're bound to find something good. Meow."

Chapter 2

What transpired after school was just as interesting.

In the end, Miyaji didn't show the confiscated magazine to anyone. Ninamori still felt as though she had to see it, however; so after practicing for the play, she headed toward the area where Moniwa was located. Gaku and Masashi had become tongue-tied, but Ninamori had gotten the other boys in the class to tell her where to find the mini-comic. It was right where she'd been told it would be, too in a small shop that appeared as if it would collapse at any moment, with an old sign that read, "Moniwa Confectioners."

There was a car stopped in front of the shop, and it appeared as though the man driving was discussing something with the shop lady. Actually, it seemed as if the man were ranting at her more than he was talking to her. He was a suspicious-looking middle-aged guy who had a vicious glint in his eyes.

"Great response, right? I predicted that, didn't I? Investigative journalism is needed. Demand for my mini-comic of justice, *Come on Mabase*, is going to be so great tomorrow you'll probably have enough customers to sell all your out-of-date Crystal Pepsi."

"We don't stock any out-of-date items here."

"How about it? Won't you take a few more? A hundred? Eighty?"

That man had to be the creator of the mini-comic.

Noticing Ninamori shooting him a dirty look, the man said, "Ah, princess, I bet this is what you're after," handing her one of the magazines with a smug smile.

"Takkun ditched school, too, meow! You're becoming a bad kid, too, meow! Yum," Mamimi purred, nibbling the nape of Naota's neck.

They were at a levee near Mabase Bridge. For some reason, Naota and Mamimi had started to meet at the bridge after school the night following the fire. Once again, their peculiar relationship had been reinstated. This was the "important appointment" for which Naota had skipped play rehearsal. Almost every day, Mamimi kissed Naota's cheek, licked and nibbled his neck, and left love bites on him.

"I didn't ditch school. That rehearsal doesn't have anything to do with my grades," Naota insisted.

"I was in a school play once. It was so embarrassing, but it made me happy, too."

"Why did it make you happy?"

"Dad and Mom came to see me together, so I remember it very well."

"What did you play?"

"When I was in kindergarten, Sailor Mars; in elementary school, the Little

Match Girl; and in middle school, Carrie."

"Why are they all about burning things?"

A vision of the fire remained in the back of Naota's mind. Naturally, he recalled what had happened to the two of them that night. In the end, the police never caught Mamimi for starting the fire. They were still looking for the culprit, but there hadn't been any fires since, so it seemed as though the case would never be solved.

No, it can't happen. They mustn't catch the criminal! Naota thought to himself.

"Takkun, you saved me, didn't you?" Mamimi muttered in a serious tone.

"What?"

"That night. You drove Lord Canti. It was so cool."

"Yeah..." Naota replied, attempting to duck the issue.

Although Naota had thought he and Mamimi should talk about it, the fact was that neither of them had bothered to mention what had happened that night until now. A robot coming out of Naota's head, Mamimi starting the fires they hadn't spoken about any of it, in favor of "playing around." However, this was to be expected. The pair were too used to enjoying their days without speaking about important things. That was precisely why they'd started this "play" to escape the important things on their minds. Of course, anything having to do with Tasuku had been put on hold ever since.

Mamimi must know by now that my brother has a girlfriend in America. Naota didn't have the courage to find out for sure today, but it was quite possible that Mamimi knew and was bluffing that she didn't. *Mamimi might even know everything.*

The only thing was that Mamimi had a gross misunderstanding about what had happened that night. Or perhaps it wasn't a misunderstanding as such. To be fair, Naota didn't really understand what had happened either.

Mamimi thought Naota had been operating Canti that night, and it seemed as though she thought he'd done so to save her.

Mamimi's words "*You drove Lord Canti. It was so cool*" rang in Naota's ears. However, in reality, Naota didn't even remember that night clearly. From the moment he'd been sucked into Canti, Naota had wanted to protect Mamimi from the one-armed robot. He'd panicked because of his desire to protect her.

Naota wanted to believe his thoughts were heard by God (or something like God) and that the deity would become one with him to defeat the violent robot. He wanted to believe that he'd fought for Mamimi's safety. Unfortunately, after Naota had been sucked into Canti, Naota didn't have many solid memories. He'd felt his body stiffen bit by bit in the blackness. Everything about the experience was vague.

"Thank you," Mamimi said, under the impression that Naota had done something heroic.

Naota, who didn't feel bad about being thanked, started to think that because his memory was vague, perhaps he really had controlled Canti and saved Mamimi. At least he'd wanted to save Mamimi in his heart.

After that night, Mamimi had stopped following Canti around as much as she had previously. It seemed as though she still considered Canti an important friend, but the thrill had finally worn off, and most of her interest was back with Naota. The result was that the love bites on Naota's neck were increasing in number. In all

honesty, though, Naota was quite fond of the whole situation.

Mamimi yanked off Naota's hat.

Naota panicked, trying to cover his cat ears, but it was too late, as Mamimi's eyes had already spotted them.

Damn! Naota thought to himself.

Within a second, Mamimi's expression had turned to one of fascination, and she started to say things like, "What are those?" and "They're so cute," as well as "So adorable!" as she smothered Naota's cat ears with love. "They're so soft... so much fun!"

Naota felt that the world had lost all common sense when people didn't bother to question the presence of cat ears on his head.

Ninamori's footsteps were heavy as she walked home with a copy of *Come on Mabase* in her hands.

That shady-looking man had no way of knowing Ninamori was the daughter of the mayor of Mabase. Regardless, to give a girl carrying a schoolbag on her back that kind of tasteless comic meant something must've been wrong with the man either way.

The magazine had even worse things than she'd imagined in it. It was almost as if the writer hated her father or wanted revenge, because it delved into scandals in both his private and business life. The first topic covered was the work scandal. It was reported that Ninamori's father had cooperated with a property company to lure the MM Factory to Mabase, and that he'd also received illegal income. At that time, the current Mabase mayor had merely been an upstart in an unknown city, who'd earned his money buying and selling land illegally. He'd ultimately used that dirty money to buy his way into the mayorship of Mabase.

As for Ninamori's father's personal life, the comic featured an exposé; on the affair he was having with his secretary, accusing the mayor of being unscrupulous, using pictures of the two of them leaving his house as evidence.

Ninamori felt sicker with every word of the article she read, but she assumed that pretty much all the things it asserted were true. It was a melancholy feeling. The magazine had been passed around the classroom and everyone in the class was now aware of her father's ugly scandal. Naota had seen it, too. *Naota had seen it, too!* It was unbearable.

At the very least, the situation had made Ninamori want to chase that horrid woman out of her home. Ninamori remembered that very morning the woman had said she was a skilled secretary and wouldn't ruin Ninamori's father's image. But all it required was one look at the comic to see how badly the woman had messed up. Ninamori was going to chase her out today, and she was going to get revenge. She almost wanted to thank the horrible man who'd written the magazine.

After having nearly reached her house, Ninamori glanced up, stopping in her tracks. "What?"

There was a large crowd of people gathered in front of her front door dozens of them and they all appeared to be reporters. There were several cameramen, too. Like lunatics, the horde swarmed around Ninamori's front door.

As Ninamori stood frozen with astonishment, a girl strolled along the road, quickly heading toward her. It was the secretary, wearing sunglasses as if to disguise herself. The woman's unforgettably revolting perfume hung in the air.

The secretary came to a stop after noticing Ninamori standing there. "Oh, this is ridiculous. I can't even use the back door anymore."

Ninamori peered intently at the woman.

"It's dangerous for you to stay here, too," the secretary added.

"I see you're very skilled at running away," Ninamori observed bitterly.

"Of course. I'm a grown-up," the secretary answered before she fled.

Ninamori watched her leave with hatred in her heart. *Grownup? What does being a grown-up mean? A stupid adult who's all talk? Perfumed hag.*

The woman Ninamori had wanted to kick out had beaten her to it by running away. Ninamori had felt the woman was no good from the moment she'd met her, and that first impression really cut to the core of what the woman truly was. Speaking of true colors, when the woman had been caught for breaking the speed limit the month before, she'd ranted on and on about how it was her first demerit. As Ninamori's dad comforted her, the woman had kept repeating how she'd never caused an accident or committed a crime, sulking like a child. Despite the fact that the secretary was so weak that being scolded by the police for her misdemeanor shocked her, Ninamori's father had happily entered into a relationship with her.

Ninamori understood the woman's attitude to an extent. Perhaps that was the biggest reason Ninamori disliked her. The secretary unabashedly believed that she alone was more special than everyone else.

When Ninamori scanned the photos in the magazine, staring at the face of the woman who was linking arms with her father and laughing with her mouth open wide; it reminded her of the study desk ad she'd been in. The woman wore the same idiotic smile.

Maybe I'm not very special, Ninamori thought.

Ninamori had nowhere to escape, but she wisely left that place before being spotted by the paparazzi.

The sun slowly sank behind the MM factory, which had apparently been built under the guidance of Ninamori's father.

Ninamori predicted that when night fell, the journalists would also disperse or that her father would do something to make them leave.

In an effort to avoid her house, and with nothing else to do but waste time, Ninamori had been loitering around town. Feeling just miserable enough to think calmly about everything, she almost started to cry. She was dejected and angry, wondering whether her father would regret anything if she were to die that night. When Ninamori imagined her father bawling and repenting, she felt a little better but then she reconsidered. *No, if that happened, it would make the crazed journalists even happier.*

Reports of Ninamori's father's scandal were probably already on the evening news. As she walked amid the pedestrians at dusk, Ninamori suspected that all the people she passed were staring at her. She felt an unbearable weight, as if she were a

fugitive.

Ninamori decided that she needed to be where no one else was present until it got dark. The riverbank would be perfect, considering it was deserted and quiet, as well. On the way to the river, she bought a curry roll and a Crystal Pepsi. Her father had always told her, "junk food is bad; good girls don't eat that," but today was the right day for a minor rebellion.

As Ninamori had predicted, the riverbank was devoid of people at dusk. Sitting down on the concrete bank, she put down her school bag. "I don't have a home to go to anymore. All I have left is this useless cat..."

Suddenly, words Ninamori had memorized for the play came spilling from her mouth. She recalled the tragic hero, lost, with no place to go. She felt as though the protagonists circumstances somewhat matched her situation now, and that made her even sadder. Far more tragic than the play was the reality that Ninamori had no one on her side. She didn't even have a cat.

I can't lose, Ninamori thought. I'm special. I'm a special girl. A scandal like this only makes me more special.

Holding back the tears that threatened to trickle down her face, Ninamori took a huge bite out of her curry bread. She resolved that there was no way she was going to cry today. Hmm, this is pretty cool. *I'm much cooler right now than that mouthy secretary who ran away.*

"The class president shouldn't be eating junk food," proclaimed a familiar voice coming from behind Ninamori.

When Ninamori turned around, Naota was standing right behind her. She was utterly confused as to why Naota was there, but the sight of a familiar classmate made her feel better. Naota's unexpected appearance must've been the work of God.

Keeping her thoughts to herself, Ninamori addressed Naota in the tone she always used as class president. "You skipped rehearsal. What were you doing?"

Naota pointed to the curry bread in Ninamori's hand. "Junk food! I'm going to tell Miyaji."

"Naota, sometimes I think you're a delinquent."

"Well," Naota replied with satisfaction.

"That hat looks awful on you," Ninamori blurted out, although she thought Naota was quite cute when he pouted his lips.

"Perhaps," Naota started, sitting next to Ninamori, "something's happened at home?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with you," Ninamori asserted.

With Naota sitting next to her, Ninamori really did feel stronger. Despite the fact that she'd been trapped in an unpleasant flow, like an escalator descending slowly toward sorrow, she now felt as though things were returning to normal little by little.

BE HERE. SIT HERE. STAY WITH ME FOREVER! Ninamori shouted in her head.

"Don't worry about that gossipy article," Naota urged.

"All of it was pretty much true," Ninamori replied.

It's all right, though, she thought. I'm not going to lose. And Naota, you're with me now, too.

Of course, Ninamori wasn't aware of the kind of play Naota and Mamimi had recently engaged in.

A bus passed the two of them, stopping at the nearby bus stop. It was already getting dark, and the bus lights seemed to create a small opening into another world.

Where do I want to go? Ninamori pondered. She didn't want to be where she was any longer. She wanted to go somewhere else, together with Naota, as she was at that moment.

"I have a lot of money. I'm the mayor's daughter," Ninamori declared. Her next words flowed from her mouth so naturally: "Hey, do you want to go somewhere?"

"Now?" Naota asked, a little annoyed. "Where?"

Ninamori immediately regretted her spur-of-the-moment words. *Cmon, what was I thinking?*

"Naota, you're Puss in Boots, right?" Ninamori inquired to cover up her embarrassment. "Therefore, you have to listen to what your master says."

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh, who?"

"Our housekeeper," Naota replied.

It was true. Naota was meeting Haruko to show her the way to the supermarket where she could buy Star Prince Curry.

That means you'll go away? Ninamori wondered in horror.

As Ninamori fell silent, overcome by the sadness of being left on her own again, she and Naota heard the sound of a motorbike.

"She's here," Naota said, standing up.

Glancing in the direction of the sound, Ninamori saw a Vespa speeding down the small path cut into the bank, and she assumed that the girl riding it must've been Naota's housekeeper.

The approaching scooter was traveling at an amazing speed, and Naota couldn't help but remember the scene of Haruko fixing her bike this morning. "This isn't good..."

It wasn't by design that Haruko was whizzing toward the duo at breakneck speed. It was because the brakes on her Vespa didn't work.

Sensing the obvious danger, Ninamori stood up. The approaching headlamps illuminated her and Naota's figures right before the quiet riverside became the scene of a riotous accident.

"Get out the way!" Haruko's penetrating yell overlapped with the sound of the explosion that echoed throughout the area.

As Naota had expected, the Vespa's brakes were stuck, and it was barreling directly toward him and Ninamori.

How many times has this happened? Naota asked himself as he soared through the air. *Humans sure can get used anything!*

Naota and Ninamori simultaneously rolled onto the bank. Due to the force of the explosion and the rough landing, Naota's hat blew off, revealing his cat ears underneath. As he bumped heads with Ninamori, there was a momentary flash of light. The Vespa had chaotically tumbled away after launching the pair to their new location.

Grumbling, the girl got up. "Ugh! I should've died."

"Ouch!" Ninamori winced as she touched her hand to her head in the spot it'd been hit. There was a large bump. She really did feel as though this day was the worst day of her entire life.

Gazing in front of her, Ninamori saw that Naota was still spread out on the ground and hadn't come around.

Could it be...? she wondered.

"Naota!" Clinging to Naota's body, the first thing Ninamori noticed even before checking if he was okay or not were the cat ears on his head. "What are these?"

"Don't touch them!" the Vespa girl ordered.

"Eh?"

"An underage girl mustn't touch such things!"

Unfortunately, Ninamori was already firmly gripping the fluffy things protruding from Naota's head. She was the only girl in her class who would hold a snake or a lizard, so something like a pair of cat ears felt completely harmless to her.

Cat ears aside, who is this tall girl? Ninamori asked herself. Naota's housekeeper? Did she just run over Naota and me with her bike?

Haruko didn't seem the least bit flustered about knocking over Ninamori and Naota as she picked up Ninamori's curry bread and started biting into it happily. "Hey, this is yummy!"

She's weird, Ninamori thought. I don't know who she is, but this girl is weird. She may be really, really dangerous. She doesn't act like an ordinary person at all.

"When are you going to let go of those?" Haruko asked.

Ninamori still had Naota's cat ears in her hands. They had a strange feel to them, but upon closer inspection, they were indeed growing straight out of Naota's head. *Cat ears are growing out of Naota's head?*

"What are these?" Ninamori inquired.

"Well, you've given me no choice now that you've seen them," the tall girl said coldly, taking another bite.

Chapter 3

Three people riding a single Vespa headed through the darkness toward the Nandaba residence. Ninamori was on the rear of the motorbike, but not on the Vespa's seat, so she was forced to cling to Haruko, who was driving. They were traveling at an extremely fast speed, and to make matters worse, neither Ninamori nor Naota was wearing a helmet.

"If someone sees us, you're going to get written up," Ninamori informed the driver.

"It'll be fine," Haruko replied. "I don't have a license."

"Well, you've given me no choice now that you've seen them." After Haruko Haruhara uttered that grim line, Ninamori had thought she was going to be eliminated for the sake of preserving Naota's secret. She'd pegged the Vespa girl for that kind of dangerous adversary.

Seizing the unconscious Naota by the collar, Haruko had made him stand up.

After putting his fallen hat back on his head, she then proceeded to slap him violently a couple of times, out of the blue. It seemed as though this type of violence was typical for Haruko. When Naota finally had come to, she'd studied his neck closely and then laughed, saying that he'd been doing naughty stuff again.

"Shut up already," Naota had muttered to the girl.

Such argumentative attitudes seemed to be standard between the two of them.

"Are you okay?" Ninamori had asked.

Naota had panicked and felt his head, worried that Ninamori had seen his cat ears. Not realizing his hat had come off earlier, he found that his hat was on his head and then, with an expression of fake concern, had asked if Ninamori was okay.

"Well, we ran her over, and it's not as if we can leave her. How about taking her in for a while?" Haruko suggested.

"Where are we going?" Ninamori asked.

"Takkun's house." Haruko called Naota "Takkun," as did the high school girl who'd been waiting for Naota outside school the other day.

Takkun, Ninamori had whispered to herself.

Haruko had picked up the fallen Vespa. "Get on."

"Three people on the bike again?" Naota had complained. "I thought your brakes were broken."

"It isn't a problem. I'll make it listen to me this time. Hey, girlie, you too."

"I..." Ninamori uttered.

"You're coming, aren't you? It's a shoddy bakery, but it's Takkun's home."

It almost felt as if Haruko had decided for Ninamori after she'd read Ninamori's true feelings.

Long story short, Ninamori had ended up carrying three people on her scooter, heading for the Nandaba home. Ninamori hadn't been forced to go, though.

Well, I guess if I don't have anywhere else to go, I may as well go to Naota's, Ninamori had said to herself.

"I'll go," she'd declared aloud.

"You're coming, too?" Naota had whined.

Somehow, Ninamori found Naota's peevish attitude cute. She already knew that his house was a bakery, as she'd been around Shigekuni Bread before. At the time, there hadn't seemed to be anyone around, and she hadn't ascertained whether it was still open for business; however, her purpose for being there hadn't been to buy bread, anyway.

When did I start noticing Naota? Ninamori tried to recall.

It wasn't as though Ninamori liked Naota he was merely a boy she was interested in. He was sweet, cocky, and above all else, clever. She thought he was a special boy and deemed him a suitable friend for a special girl like herself.

Ninamori had become increasingly curious about Naota. He was different than the other boys and was rather mysterious. There were so many unsolved questions about him, though: the high school girl who'd waited for him at the school gate; his violent maid; and, if there was no mistaking what Ninamori had just seen, Naota had cat ears growing out of his head. Naota Nandaba had cat ears!

What was that? What happened? Ninamori wondered, hoping she could get to

the bottom of it if she went to Naota's home.

All these questions whizzed through Ninamori's mind as she held onto Haruko, driving the scooter. Once Ninamori realized she'd completely forgotten all her own problems for a short while, she smirked.

When the trio reached the front of the Shigekuni bakery, Haruko screamed, "Stop!" as she kicked the side of the Vespa with the heel of her boot. As if surprised, the Vespa stood up on its back tire, doing a wheelie of sorts, before it suddenly came to a halt. It almost seemed as if the Vespa had listened to Haruko.

Naota and Ninamori thought Haruko's driving was haphazard at best, and although her method of stopping the bike seemed abnormal, it didn't occur to them that it completely ignored the laws of physics in the third dimension.

Breathing in the strong smell of curry permeating the shop, Naota complained that he didn't want to eat the previous day's leftovers.

"You'll eat." Without waiting for an answer, Haruko pushed Ninamori into the living room.

Ninamori, who had nowhere to go for a while, was grateful for the offer.

Gathered around the table were people who seemed as though they could be Naota's father and grandfather.

Ninamori bowed. "Good evening." When she raised her head and saw Naota's father's face, she let out a yelp. It was definitely the shady man who'd handed her the magazine earlier.

"Ah, it's you," Kamon said. "Well, sit down. It's not much, but it's dinner."

What's going on? Ninamori wondered. *I thought he was really dodgy but now it turns out he's Naota's father.*

"Naota's girlfriend?" Shigekuni asked. "Not bad."

"Haruko ran her over," Naota explained.

Kamon wore an uneasy expression and seemed so unnerved that it was almost funny. "What do you mean, 'Ran her over'?"

"Hey hey, let's not worry about the details," Haruko suggested. "Let's eat!"

With that, they all found their seats and started dinner.

A family dinner was a little unusual for Ninamori, as sitting down as a family for an evening meal had become a thing of the past for her. She wasn't terribly fond of the magazine man, but she'd told herself to behave for the time being.

Although she was on her best behavior, Ninamori suddenly started crying. It wasn't out of sadness, however; it was because of the spiciness of the curry. *Spicy! Hot, hot, hot, hot!* Ninamori moaned to herself.

It was as painfully spicy as Naota had warned it would be, and must have been several no, many, many levels beyond Ninamori's curry bread in spiciness. It well exceeded the limits of what humans could tolerate.

Through her tears, Ninamori forced a smile. When she thought about it, though, it was funny. She'd managed to hold back her tears the entire day and hadn't imagined that such a stupid thing would make her cry. There was no notwithstanding this, however. Ninamori simply ignored the tears that flowed freely and continued to partake of the strong spiciness that even made her head hurt.

"You're doing pretty well there, Shigekuni," Kamon remarked, shoving his spoon in his mouth as though he, too, were forcing himself to eat the curry.

Shigekuni appeared to be pained, but kept eating nonetheless. "You know, I think even Indian people would be surprised by this!"

The reason Kamon and Shigekuni were eating without making a single complaint was because Haruko was watching them. Like longtime romantic rivals, they couldn't disagree when she asked if the curry was good.

"You like spicy foods, right?" Haruko asked Ninamori. "It's Manhattan-flavor 'Star Prince Goes to New York' curry!"

"You didn't have to go as far as New York," Naota grumbled. He was the only one who hadn't touched the curry. He'd eaten only the white rice and pickles his way of protesting, apparently.

"You're such a kid! It's an adult flavor," Ninamori explained to Naota before putting some into her mouth. To tout how much more mature she was than her classmate, the Marquis de Carabas gobbled the spicy curry, pretending it was completely normal.

"Hey, w-water..." Shigekuni stammered.

Immediately following Shigekuni's plea, there was a noise in the nearby kitchen, meaning that someone else was there.

Who is it? Could it be that high school girl, Mamimi? Ninamori wondered.

It turned out to be Canti, who was carrying some cups on a tray into the dining room.

Ninamori was more surprised than when she'd first seen Kamon here. "What is that?"

Who could blame her reaction? It was a robot, after all a two-legged, two-armed humanoid robot. Plus, it was wearing an old jacket and was acting unusually human.

The robot handed a cup of water to Shigekuni.

"Wh-what is that?" Ninamori asked.

"It's our television," Kamon explained.

It was true that its head resembled a television.

"But why is it walking around?"

"Because it's a TV walkman, of course," Kamon replied dubiously.

TV walkman? Does Sony sell that kind of stuff in stores now? Ninamori wondered.

"Anyway," Kamon said to Ninamori, "how are you feeling, Little Miss Mayor?"

Ninamori was taken aback, realizing the meaning behind Kamon's words. Naota's father had known she was the mayor's daughter all along, and with that knowledge, he'd still handed her the magazine revealing her father's scandal. Ninamori felt even more disgusted by him. If she hadn't known he was Naota's father, she would've run off immediately.

"You know a lot about Ninamori," Naota remarked, slightly surprised. "How do you know her?"

It came as a surprise to Naota that Kamon knew anything about Ninamori. He had no idea that it was his own father who'd produced that magazine. The name of Kamon's serialized mini-comic magazine, *Come on Mabase*, was meant to mimic

"Kamon Mabase."

Wearing a shady expression, Kamon asked Ninamori, "You're pretty famous now, aren't you?"

Ninamori could only stare in horror. The reason she was "pretty famous now" was all because of that comic. That Kamon could say those words with such a calm face proved that he was a pretty disgusting excuse for a man. However, the Marquis de Carabas wouldn't lower herself to such levels. "No, it isn't really a big deal or anything," she replied modestly.

"Don't go spreading rumors about being hit by the bakery bike, okay?" Haruko urged lightheartedly.

"H-hitting a pedestrian..." Kamon stammered as his abominable expression turned to one of unease.

Haruko's words seemed to have shot down Kamon's proud attitude. Having published the mayor's scandal out of self-righteousness, Kamon felt disheartened that his own housekeeper had been involved in an accident with the mayor's daughter.

Ninamori had been bailed out ever so slightly. As she began to come to terms with the fact that she'd, indeed, been run over, she wondered exactly who this strange girl who made Kamon uneasy was. In her head, Ninamori compared the girl with the secretary who'd fooled around with her father. They were about the same age, but the girl was completely different.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" Kamon suddenly suggested. "Forget all the terrible things at home, right?"

"It isn't a big deal," Ninamori replied.

"No, no, no. You must stay with us tonight. I'll give your parents a call. You can sleep soundly and forget about all the bad things like getting run over."

"Thank you very much, but you don't have to phone them."

"But it would be a bit"

"It's all right."

"They don't know where you are..."

"My parents are my parents. I'm me," Ninamori asserted. "If my father gets arrested by the police or divorces my mother, it has absolutely nothing to do with me!"

Canti stared worriedly at the girl as she spat out her words.

After dinner, Kamon half suggested, half forced Ninamori to take a bath at the Nandaba house. "It's been a bad day, hasn't it? You should at least take a bath to relax. When I wanted to escape my home life, I used to take a bath to get over everything," Kamon revealed.

Because Ninamori really was worn out, and because this was none other than Naota's bathroom, she decided to take a bath, if only to satisfy her curiosity.

The Nandabas' home was an old wooden house, and the bathroom was well used. Compared to the one Ninamori had at home, it was pretty small. Even so, when she got into the hot tub, she felt herself relax a little. (The after-effects of that super spicy curry that'd brought tears to her eyes started to subside, too.)

After letting out a drawn-out sigh, Ninamori began to reflect on her day in the

unfamiliar bathtub. As she began to feel a little better, she started to realize that lamenting over the unfortunate things that had befallen her wouldn't help her in any way. In the end, whatever was going to happen would happen. *Yes, calm down and take a good look around. You're bound to find something good, meow*, Ninamori thought. *This house is full of surprises: that maid, cat ears, a father who makes scandalous magazines, and a TV walkman.*

"How's the water?"

Ninamori panicked when she heard Kamon speaking to her from behind the glass partition. *No way!* she thought, but it was true Kamon had opened the glass door and peeked in without even asking. Flustered, she crossed her arms over her chest, becoming more frightened as she felt the perverted man's eyes scan her skin. *What do I do? My first impression was correct! This old man is a perv like I thought. That's why he wanted me to take a bath!*

"Do you think I'm a bad person?"

Ninamori sat shuddering in silence.

"You don't resent me, do you?"

Resent you? Ninamori said to herself.

"You don't, right?"

"Because of you, that horrible secretary finally left my house."

"Little Eri, you really are a grown-up," Kamon declared admiringly.

Little Eri ... Naota's father spoke in a creepy tone as if he were talking to a cat.

Kamon stretched out his hand and offered Ninamori something. "Here, use this."

Although she was slightly hesitant, Ninamori covered her chest with one arm and reached out with the other to retrieve the offered item. It was a child's shower hat.

When Naota opened the door to his room, Ninamori was fresh out of the bath, sitting on the chair in Naota's pajamas. Her legs and arms were longer than Naota's, so the pajamas were too short and didn't cover her wrists or ankles.

"You're wearing glasses," Naota noticed. He'd never seen the class president wearing glasses, so he was surprised. He had no idea her eyes were bad. She must've worn contacts normally.

"Our secret."

"You have something to hide?"

Ninamori had worn glasses since around the time she'd modeled for the ad. Maybe she felt more averse to people knowing about her wearing glasses than she did about them knowing about her father's scandal. There was something special about only Naota knowing such a deep secret of hers, though.

"You do, too."

"What?"

"Well, I'm in your room, wearing your pajamas." Ninamori looked smug, as though she were victorious. "It's pretty weird, huh?"

"Really?" Naota sat on the bed with a carefree face, but he was panicking on the inside. Ninamori, straight out of the bath, was in his pajamas and in his room. As she'd pointed out, it was pretty weird. Sharing a secret was the first step to having a relationship beyond the ordinary. They'd suddenly entered into one such special

relationship.

This isn't good. This really is not good, Naota thought.

"You'd better not tell anyone else in class," Ninamori warned.

"Of course not," Naota replied, instinctively raising his voice. "If people found out, who knows what they'd say. Starting tomorrow, you shouldn't come near me for a while."

"But tonight, it's okay." For some inexplicable reason, Ninamori got up from the chair and sat next to Naota.

His heart pounding at being alone on a bed with a girl, Naota thought he was in a dangerous situation. *Tonight it's okay? What does that mean?*

"I'll sleep downstairs," Naota said coldly and stood up.

Ninamori grabbed his arm. "Wait. Stay here a little longer. I didn't mean it like that. It's an unfamiliar room and I only need to relax a little."

How did I get myself into this situation? This is so not cool. Worried that he and Ninamori would become the gossip of the school, Naota knocked her hand away.

"Go home. This isn't okay. It's too weird," Naota insisted.

Ninamori, somewhat annoyed, decided to play her final card. "What's weird is what you have on your head."

Naota instinctively pulled his hat on tighter. He'd been wearing it the entire time he'd been in the house. *She's seen my cat ears. It must've been when the bike hit me earlier. Damn! This really isn't good.*

"You saw it?" Naota asked.

"What is it?"

"What is it you saw?"

"Cat ears perfect for playing a cat!"

"I told you, I'm not doing the play. Anyway, why was I chosen to play a cat?" Naota moaned.

"You didn't notice I rigged the voting, huh?" Ninamori replied with a sharp smile.

"What?"

"No one suspected that I, the class president, would do such a thing, right?"

"You mean the class vote on who would play...?"

"I'm the lead role and you're the cat."

Naota had thought it was strange at the time. It was a bit unlikely that the class would have chosen the cool Naota to play the cat. There was no reason someone like him should play such a comic character. Things made more sense knowing they'd been altered by trickery, though. Even so, Naota still couldn't understand why Ninamori was so obsessed with the play.

"You're not mad, are you?" she asked.

"Why did I have to be the cat? And why did you want to play the lead role so bad?"

"The Marquis de Carabas deceives the princess for happiness, never once revealing who he really is. He lives the lie and finds happiness. The lie becomes the truth. Isn't that nice?"

Just as Ninamori said, *Puss in Boots* is the tale of a poor young man who

borrows a cat's wisdom and becomes a success story. The hero, who gets close to the princess under false pretences, is, to put it unkindly, a con artist.

Suddenly, the pair heard a girl's voice: "Is that really okay, meow?"

Glancing up, they noticed that at some point, Haruko had laid down on the top bunk.

"You were there before?" Ninamori asked.

"I was here, meow," Haruko replied.

"You've been listening the entire time?"

"Not really. Why would I care that you cheated to get the lead role, meow?"

"It isn't as if I hurt anyone!" Ninamori insisted in a defensive tone that belied her inner guilt.

"You hurt me!" Naota argued.

"I'll keep your secret, meow, if you keep his, meow," Haruko proposed.

"Who is your maid?" Ninamori inquired all of a sudden.

It was a question that Naota wanted the answer to, as well. *Really, who is she?*

"Where does your maid sleep?"

"Here, meow."

"You sleep there every night?"

"Yes, right here every night with Takkun. Ahhhh!" Haruko replied, pulling off Naota's hat and stroking his cat ears.

"Stop that! Don't touch them! They..." Although Naota attempted to protest, he appeared to be somewhat happy.

This woman was a completely different kettle of fish compared to the secretary, but as Ninamori watched Haruko and Naota play, she knew she was up against another enemy.

Chapter 4

It was dark again. There was no light no one there. Time had stopped. He stood in a dark place, but he'd been to this dark place before.

Yes, he knew it well. This was the darkness in which he mustn't turn around the darkness in which he couldn't turn around. If he turned around, that girl would never come back again.

Girl? What girl?

If he listened closely, he could hear something a murmuring.

There seemed to be a river flowing in front of him. At the center of the darkness, the surface of the river had gradually lit up.

There happened to be something floating in the river. It was a cat floating in a cardboard box.

He ran out quickly. He had to help her. There wasn't any time. He couldn't catch her, though, and the box with the cat in it had begun disappearing into the darkness. Although he knew it was futile, he chased the cat as fast as his legs would allow, because if he couldn't save it, the cat would be carried to the depths of the never-ending darkness, swallowed by the abyss.

He had to catch up... had to catch up. He had to save her. In spite of the

urgency, he started to tire and finally collapsed in the darkness.

It wasn't any good. He couldn't chase any longer. The cat had already disappeared and the river was also disappearing. Once again, everything was becoming utter blackness.

"You came all this way, didn't you, Your Highness?"

Standing in front of him was Miyu Miyu, wearing boots.

"I'm not Your Highness," he answered as the Nandaba pet cat shook its head.

"No, you are, Your Highness the proof of that being your ears are donkey ears."

"I don't have donkey ears."

"Remove the crown you're wearing from your head and see for yourself."

"My head... a crown?

But I can't take this off. I can't take this off! he panicked.

"Why can't you take off the crown? If you don't have donkey ears, why can't you take it off? Your Highness, you're a liar. As punishment, you will be food for the man-eating demon."

"Man-eating demon?" He asked, sensing someone. Before he knew it, the man-eating demon was coming at him from behind. When he turned around, the man-eating demon was a girl riding a Vespa and carrying a metal guitar. She had a bloodthirsty laugh, and her red mouth was wide open.

"Stop it! Stop!" he yelled with all his might, but the man-eating demon closed in on him.

Smooch! Haruko kissed Naota's sleeping face, which caused all his classmates around him to start giggling.

Having been asleep for half an hour, Naota lifted his head from his desk, finally noticing the presence of Haruko and Canti in front of him. What?

Naota was in a classroom after school on a Saturday. He'd been searching for an opportunity to escape so he could skip rehearsal, but he must have fallen asleep at some point. *Why are Haruko and Canti here?* he wondered.

Holding ukuleles and other stage props, Naota's classmates stood in a semicircle, watching him from a short distance. Among the crowd was Ninamori, who'd stayed over at the Nandaba residence the night before. She wore a foul expression and was glaring at Naota and Haruko.

"Sh-she just smooched him, didn't she?"

"It's a robot!"

"Is someone in it?"

"Who's that lady who smooched him?"

Hearing the voices of his peers, Naota finally grasped the situation. He realized it hadn't been a dream when someone had kissed him, prompting him to touch his cheek instinctively a moment ago. *What's going on?*

It seemed that Haruko and Canti had come together, Haruko kissing Naota while he was sleeping, with all his classmates watching.

What's going on?

"What are you doing? Here's your lunch," Haruko said as she took the lunchbox Canti had been carrying and offered it to Naota. "Saturday rehearsal, huh? I'm such a

good housemaid, aren't I?"

"Ugh, whatever. I'm not doing any dumb rehearsal."

"Well, you still need to eat lunch."

"I don't need it. I'm out of here."

"No, you can't ditch today."

In an overt display of strictness, Ninamori cut in between Naota and Haruko.
"Everyone decided this was how we were going to do it!"

Ninamori's voice was loud, but her classmates didn't find it odd that she had reacted so emotionally. No one said anything, although everyone now knew about her father's scandal and had noticed Ninamori was paying more attention to Naota recently.

"I won't let you go," Ninamori insisted, grabbing Naota's arm. That she would do such a thing to prevent him from skipping rehearsal was a reasonable thing for a responsible class president to do.

As for the other students, the question at the moment wasn't whether Naota would skip class, but the identity of the girl who'd kissed him so shamelessly and the story behind the robot she'd brought with her.

"More important, what's with the robot?"

"Isn't that the Vespa girl?"

"No way..."

Haruko and Canti, who'd suddenly appeared in the classroom, made quite an impressive combo. However, Ninamori was blasé about the maid and the TV walkman, having stayed at the Nandabas' house the night before. As Haruko and Canti were familiar characters to her, she was far more stressed over Naota.

"You have to do what we decided!" Ninamori ordered Naota.

"You must be joking! I have things to do!"

"Everyone is coming."

"No one will come to see this play!"

"They will!"

"They won't!"

"I want them to see it!"

"Because you're a show-off!"

"My father and mother are coming to see it together!"

It's so embarrassing, but it makes me happy when Dad and Mom come together to see me, too. Now I see Ninamori is looking forward to her parents enjoying the play together, Naota thought.

Unfortunately, Naota had already gotten caught up in the emotion of the moment and shouted, "School plays are for kids!"

"*You're a kid! You can't even eat spicy foods!*"

"*Playing a cat is embarrassing!*"

Enraged, Ninamori pulled off Naota's hat. "How can you say that when you have a head like this?"

As a result of Ninamori's ruthlessness, everyone got to take a close look at Naota's head, and of course, everyone saw that he had cat ears.

They saw them! Naota thought in horror. Although he'd taken great care to hide

them, everyone had found out that he had cat ears growing out of his head. He hoped that if he covered the unsightly things with his hands, no one would believe from merely a glimpse that he actually had cat ears. They all would simply shake their heads, wondering why someone as cool as Naota would want to wear such an ugly hat on his head. *They'll think they didn't see properly*, Naota assured himself. There was always a way out... always a way out.

In mid-panic, Naota let his mouth get away from him. "You're one to talk. You're the one who rigged the votes so you could play the lead role!"

Ninamori's face froze and turned white.

Within seconds, the classmates' eyes moved from Haruko to Canti to Naota's cat ears, before stopping and staring at Ninamori or so she felt.

"Argh!" the class president screamed, clutching her head and doubling over.

At the same time, Haruko's chain link that was attached to the bracelet on her left hand started to move, reacting strongly like a magnet, and then pointing toward Ninamori. Haruko's green eyes became unusually serious and had a cruel glint to them.

Ninamori's body started to convulse, and suddenly, all the onlookers noticed a strange change: Her pores started to ooze out sweat before their eyes.

Several girls ran to Ninamori and screamed into her face.

"Eri? Are you okay?"

"Get her to the nurse!"

"Owww!" Ninamori screamed in pain.

Much to her classmates' horror, Ninamori began to transform. Somehow, cat ears suddenly started to grow from Ninamori's head.

"A magic trick?" asked one of the girls who'd rushed over.

The person who was most surprised, however, was Naota. The cat ears that were now growing out of Ninamori's head matched his exactly. But when Naota put his hands to his head, his cat ears were gone.

Meanwhile, at the MM factory, which Ninamori's father had lured to the city back when he was committing fraud, the battle watch commenced once again. It was a Saturday, so there wasn't a single person working in the building. The warning siren blared to no one. In one of the rooms, the host computer started to receive battle reports.

«MMR Class [L].PS, whose appearance was halted at the cranium, has found another exit that has opened at close distance. At short notice, testing the change in approach. 13:13.

In addition, presence of MMR Class [K].001 Atomsk is confirmed at the expected area of emergence. 13:13.

Executing the capture or destruction of [K] 13:13.

Good luck to PS in executing battle strategy. 13:13.»

Ninamori screamed as the insuppressible transformation took over her body.

Not knowing what was going on, her classmates stood there dumbfounded. Only Naota understood what was happening to Ninamori's body.

The spectacle was analogous to seeing a monster jump out of someone's head.

Naota guessed that, at the moment, Ninamori was probably hearing a loud ringing in her ears and was having to deal with the horrible feeling of her own head pulsing. He'd experienced it twice in recent past, after all. The first time, the robot Canti, who was standing beside him, had jumped out; and the second time, the one-armed robot Canti ultimately damaged had jumped out.

Wait, Naota thought. Does this mean a strange robot is going to leap out of Ninamori's head in the middle of the day, in the classroom?

Ninamori's cat ears were extending up to the ceiling in the form of long metal arms. The bits everyone assumed were ears were actually more like foam pads attached to the tips of the arms. There weren't only two arms, either. Another one resembling the first two had appeared at the back of Ninamori's head, making a total of three.

Each arm bent at the joints, and the suction pads at the ends latched onto the classroom floor. It was very reminiscent of a camera tripod a gigantic tripod, actually. Ninamori's head attached at the center, where the three legs joined, and her body suspended in midair. Extending from her gym shorts, her long legs didn't touch the floor and were violently kicking the air with all their might.

No one continued to think this was some sort of magic trick.

Suddenly, an elongated egg-shaped metal ball popped out from Ninamori's head at the center of the three legs, causing gasps of surprise from her classmates. Well, of course the metal ball was several times larger than the girl's head. This was the first time Naota had witnessed such a large metal monster appear from such a small portal. It was an absolutely grotesque scene. It seemed as though "they" were able to distort space to pass through.

The robot revealed itself completely. It was probably a robot, anyway, as it wasn't human-shaped. Its form resembled a three-legged **octopus** more than anything else. The three legs bent considerably, no doubt because the thing had to stoop down on account of the classroom ceiling being too low.

Lemon squeezer, Naota thought. On the only occasion he'd visited Mamimi's house with his brother, Naota remembered Mamimi's family had a lemon squeezer that looked very similar.

Everything above Ninamori's nose was melded into the robot's rounded body. As if she'd lost all power to fight back, her legs and arms were covered in sweat and dangling limply. The only things that moved were her lips to breathe.

I have to do something. I have to separate Ninamori from this lemon squeezer thing, Naota told himself.

When the one-armed robot had appeared, Naota's head hadn't fully separated either, and he'd lingered on the border between life and death for a short while. Ninamori's situation felt a lot more urgent, though. The lemon squeezer was treating Ninamori as if she were part of its own body.

«PS has integrated the route device as part of its own body
13:14.

No problems with battle movement. 13:14.

Possibility that the route device's conscience will interfere with the control systems...»

Ninamori's classmates stared, speechless, at the transformed body of their class president.

All of a sudden, the lemon squeezer started moving, heading straight for Naota.

"Argh!" Naota grimaced, finding himself pinned against the wall by the monster's amazingly quick movements.

For some reason, the lemon squeezer was trying to push a part of its metal body onto Naota's mouth. It almost appeared as if it were trying to kiss him.

"What are you doing? Stop that now, Ninamori!"

The class' homeroom teacher, Miyaji, screamed hysterically, and the lemon squeezer immediately stopped moving. Miyaji, who'd come to oversee the play rehearsal, had observed the chaos and decided it was Ninamori's doing.

"If I'd known it was going to turn out like this..." Haruko gave a little tut that she hadn't brought her guitar weapon with her, but she was relieved when she noticed one of the boys nearby had a ukulele in his hand that he'd been using as a stage prop. "Let me borrow that," Haruko demanded, snatching the ukulele and raising it high above her head.

Unfortunately, simply because Haruko held the ukulele in her hand didn't mean it was going to turn into a super weapon. The moment she brought the instrument down on the metal robot's body, it splintered into tiny bits. "Ukulele no good." After uttering such a nonsensical statement, Haruko whistled with all her might.

In a flash, the Vespa that had been parked outside Shigekuni Bread started its engine, turned on its lights, and drove off.

There wasn't anyone on the scooter, so it had to have been summoned by Haruko's whistle.

The driverless Vespa headed straight for Mabase Elementary School.

The classroom had descended into a panic.

The lemon squeezer had integrated Ninamori's body as a functioning part of its own and was running wild.

Moving like a bug's jaw, the two pale schoolgirl legs gnawed at Naota's body.

"Let me go!" Naota insisted, trying to pry apart Ninamori's legs, which were wrapped around him tightly.

Haruko snickered cheerfully as she looked on. "Ooooh, that looks dirty!"

With Naota still in its grips, the lemon squeezer aimed its sensor eye at Canti. It seemed the control system had merged with an impure entity and had meaninglessly captured the young boy; however, it suddenly remembered what its original prey was.

With an exaggerated holler, Haruko jumped into the corridor with Canti by her

side.

Still holding onto Naota, the lemon squeezer used its remaining three legs to chase the antagonistic duo.

"Let me go!" echoed Naota's futile scream down the corridor.

After kicking open the metal hatchway and exiting onto the roof, the lemon squeezer searched the surroundings for its fugitive prey.

"Up here!" yelled Haruko, gazing down from the water tower. Behind her, like a faithful dog, was her Vespa. Haruko smiled cruelly before opening the Vespa seat and retrieving her guitar-shaped, time-space interference weapon from the storage space. "Better get ready. Time to meet your maker!"

"Stop!" Naota screamed, still in the lemon squeezer's clutches. He already assumed Haruko wouldn't spare a thought for him or Ninamori and would go all out in her attack on the lemon squeezer.

Naota was right. With an evil smirk, Haruko started the hand-operated generator on her weapon.

Sensing the threat from its opponent's shining weapon, the lemon squeezer took a few steps back and prepared to fling Naota in the direction of Haruko. Ninamori's long legs hurled Naota's body, turning it into a weapon.

"Waaahhh!" Naota screamed as he shot through the air.

"Get out of my way!" Haruko demanded, mercilessly knocking Naota aside. It was only a halfhearted swing, but it nevertheless sent Naota's body high up into the air like a fly ball. That guitar was a terrifying weapon.

"Hiii-ya!" With her super weapon in hand, Haruko leapt from the water tower and used all her strength to inflict a blow on the lemon squeezer's round body.

All of a sudden, a lightning-like bolt illuminated the midday roof. Immediately afterward, the lemon squeezer began to emit a cranking sound as though something wasn't working properly, and it then began to move irregularly, stumbling around the rooftop without direction. It appeared to be in great pain.

"Uggghhh!" Practically in sync with the lemon squeezer's groans of pain, Ninamori began shrieking in anguish. Her legs thrashed about, and her body twisted and squirmed as if she were being administered electric shock treatment. The violent thrashing alone would've been enough to break her bones, but fortunately, the struggling girl managed to separate her body from the lemon squeezer before falling limply to the ground.

Haruko smiled boldly.

In the meantime, Naota, who'd been thrown high into the air, was thinking that he must be the most unfortunate person in the entire world. His misfortunes seemed to have infinite variations. After Naota reached the apex of his flight, his body made a small arch and was pulled down by gravity.

Canti stood on the roof at Naota's exact point of landing, as if the robot had been predicting the boy's course all along. Opening up a part of his frame, the robot gobbed up Naota's flying body. It was a nice catch.

In an instant, Canti's dark blue body changed to a deep crimson, and his humanoid appearance once again evolved into a giant cannon, the form it took when

he was in autonomic gun mode.

The fight was decided in a single shot. At light speed, a red laser shot out from near Canti's cannon mouth, locking onto the position of the lemon squeezer. With a great blast, the cannon ball pierced straight through the middle of the lemon squeezer's metal body, destroying it, and proceeding to create a gigantic hole in the roof of the school gymnasium on the other side.

"Oh, that takes me back. I was in a play when I was in middle school. This is the picture my father took of me in the lead role. The cat boy he was my first love. He's kind of cute, isn't he? It's nice that you can say such things lightly as you get older. Oh and that that's not a spotlight. When we did a performance, there was a big hole in the gymnasium roof, and that's the light coming in. I look pretty tall, don't I? I was the tallest in the class then, you know. And the glasses, they were..."

A couple of days later, class one of the sixth grade at Mabase Elementary School performed *Puss in Boots*.

The tension mounted as the sound of the announcer's voice and the echo of applause filled the hall.

Ninamori was at the side of the stage dressed in costume, waiting for her entrance. In the end, it was decided that the play would be performed with Ninamori in the lead role. No one in the class ever mentioned the rigging of the votes again.

There wasn't sufficient evidence to prosecute Ninamori's father, either, so he continued as city mayor. Ninamori didn't completely object to her father's shameless attitude, however. She was his daughter, so she would grow up more brazen than her father ever was.

"You cheated to get the lead role?"

"You became a robotic monster and ran amuck?"

Ninamori's father had told her she should transfer if she didn't like all the rumors that were going around, but Ninamori stayed in town. That was Eri Ninamori's decision at the age of twelve.

"You'll do wonderfully, Ninamori," Miyaji encouraged her.

Ninamori nodded.

Dressed as the cat, Naota seemed surprised when he saw Ninamori's face. She was wearing glasses. The role of the Marquis de Carabas didn't require glasses, so why was she performing wearing the very glasses she'd tried to hide before?

Ninamori poked her finger through the rim of the glasses, showing Naota there were no lenses. They were fake.

Why? Not understanding, Naota cocked his head.

Suddenly, a bell rang and the curtain lifted.

Ready to play the part she'd rehearsed to perfection, Ninamori took a step out onto the stage.

Full Swing

Chapter 1

On a cool, breezy autumn afternoon, Naota Nandaba was sitting on a bench on the first-base side of the baseball field near Mabase River, waiting for his turn to bat.

The uniform Naota was wearing was that of the town's amateur baseball team, the Mabase Martians. Their opponents that day were the Umaguma Fragments, their fated rivals from the next town over.

The game was in the throes of its final innings, and the Martians were at bat. The scoreboard showed that the Fragments had a large lead against the opposing Martians, who had yet to score a run.

"This is pathetic," commented old man Shigekuni, who sat on the bench wearing a Martians uniform. Naota's grandfather, Shigekuni, was the Mabase Martians' coach.

Although they were now perennial bottom-dwellers, the Martians were a legendary team around the time they'd entered the local amateur baseball league, as they'd formerly monopolized the top spot. The old players' proudest moment had been in 1988, when they'd defeated PL Gakuen, the strongest school historically, in a practice game. (It was all talk, however. No one could be sure if it'd actually happened.) At the time, their team had been dominated by their ace pitcher and cleanup hitter, Shigekuni.

The reason Naota had come on as a substitute player for his grandfather's amateur league team was essentially because Shigekuni had forced him into it.

"This is *really* pathetic. The Martians lineup used to be compared to the eruption of the active volcano Mount Olympus. Now, we can't even score one run."

This season, the Martians were at the bottom of the league again. As the winter progressed, they would continue rewriting the record for most time spent at the bottom. Their best hope was to win the three-game series against the Fragments that started today, which meant their longstanding rivals would have to repeatedly lose against the Martians.

"Although you said it wouldn't make a difference," the player who was sitting next to Shigekuni said unsupportively, "I think we expected more out of the sub."

Upon hearing the player's comment, Naota, who was sitting on one side of the bench, began to feel uncomfortable. The thing was, each time Naota had batted, he'd struck out when he was looking, no less.

"That sub hasn't swung the bat once!"

"Active volcano? More like a dormant volcano."

The players complained, each adding something more insulting than the previous remark. They started griping about how they were always going to be losers, and that their offensive rhythm had gone out of whack when Naota was inserted into the lineup.

Shigekuni gazed at Naota with disappointed eyes.

It was never meant to be, Naota thought, wearing his hand-me-down uniform. Fully aware of his own batting inability, it wasn't a complete surprise that he'd struck out. What was surprising was the difference in expectations that his teammates had of him.

Shigekuni had pressured Naota into joining the team, claiming that the sport was

"amateur baseball," but the teams were full of adults. An elementary school kid like Naota was bound to be ridiculed for being filler, and would probably be relegated to playing right field and ninth. A substitute player was merely another head to meet player requirements.

Naota failed to grasp the impact his revered brother Tasuku, who was now in America playing baseball, had left on this amateur baseball team from a very young age. Tasuku had been a legendary boy substitute who'd pulled off miraculous wins for the team time and time again, when he was even younger than Naota was now.

As soon as Tasuku had entered middle school, he became busy with his own sports activities, so the amateur baseball team had refrained from asking him to be a substitute. There was a sustained tragic plea from the weakening team for the great Tasuku to return, though.

Ultimately, the team's plea was in vain, as Tasuku had gone to America. Eventually, the team had started talking about the existence of Naota, Tasuku's younger brother. They'd heard he always walked around with a bat, and those who saw him became fired up with great expectations.

"The little brother of the genius baseball player Tasuku Nandaba still carries a bat around with him. The moment we've prayed for is here..." And so it went: Suddenly, Naota had the cleanup spot, and a lot of overblown expectations placed upon him.

The reality was that Naota's baseball skills, even among boys his own age, weren't particularly high. Actually, the truth was that they were pretty low. Naota knew this, of course that's why as soon as he learned he'd be wearing his brother's uniform and number, he got a sinking feeling. Naota became easily frustrated if people he interacted with on a daily basis held a low opinion of him. Being expected to do great things in an unfamiliar territory and ultimately failing was an especially brutal kind of agony.

The third batter had struck out, and it was Naota's turn to bat. Standing in the batter's box, he gripped the special bat he'd brought. Because Naota always carried his brother's bat, everyone expected him to be as good at baseball as his brother was. However, aside from one practice swing, Naota had never swung the bat during a game. The special bat was only for holding. Naota's swing wasn't even something his brother had taught him; it was something he'd made up himself.

I'm sorry I'm a dormant volcano, Naota thought remorsefully.

He could hear supporters' voices coming from the bench.

"Whack it, Tasuku's brother!"

"Just get on base, Tasuku's brother!"

Not one person called Naota by his name. His name in this game was simply "Tasuku's brother."

Out of nowhere, a terrifying fastball came hurtling toward Naota, who remained uncomfortably in his stance. Exactly like his other times at bat, he couldn't do anything except stand there with his bat in hand and watch the ball fly by.

"Strike!" the umpire shouted.

The opposing team's bench applauded.

Naota stared at the pitcher, who was grinning menacingly, and attempted to

catch his breath. The Fragments' pitcher was, surprisingly, Haruko Haruhara.

Haruko, who'd become the Nandabas' housemaid, was dressed in a Fragments uniform and faced Naota on the mound. Feeling full of herself, Haruko blew a kiss to her supporters on the bench, causing the old men on the opposing team to go wild with joy. They were lovestruck. Haruko and her aged admirers were just like a pop star and her fan club.

The tall Haruko had a great style, and her uniformed figure certainly was attractive. It wasn't a big surprise that old men would enjoy watching her move around, throwing and batting as she played. In fact, every motion Haruko's arms and legs made completely captivated men of all ages on the Martians bench. Observing the scene, Naota felt somewhat proud of her. The same Haruko everyone was admiring lived with Naota in his room and had even performed CPR on him. The roommates had a special relationship, and when Naota remembered that, feelings of superiority managed to overtake his feelings of futility.

"Strike two!" the umpire yelled.

As expected, Naota hadn't moved an inch in response to the second pitch. Anyone could see that he didn't intend to swing. His own team was heckling him with questions like, "What on Earth do you think you're doing?"

From Naota's point of view, Haruko Haruhara was a monster that had fought strange robots to draws or victory. He wasn't even considering trying to hit a ball thrown by that fiend. Regardless of whether he could follow the pitch with his eyes, there was no way Naota was going to be able to hit the ball. There wasn't any point in attempting the impossible that was all there was to it.

Haruko's control was also good. Up until now, Naota had gone down with three pitches, which meant that he'd suffered three strikes each time at bat.

At least I'm smart enough to realize it's useless, Naota reasoned. *Nobody here knows how amazing this girl is. I'm the only one...*

Staring at Haruko's form as she threw the ball post-windup, Naota's vision suddenly went black. His body felt light, and soon, he felt a blunt, heavy pain in his head. *No, don't tell me "that" started again!* What he feared was the extraordinary spectacle of a robot coming out of his head. Naota feared that the process had begun again (which had recently become an obsessive habit that he couldn't snap out of).

As soon as the umpire called out, "Take your base!" Naota began to understand the situation.

The pitch had struck Naota's head, and he'd collapsed in the batter's box. That was all there was to it.

After being replaced by a pinch runner, Naota returned to the bench. To be safe, Naota wound a bandage around his head.

That was a pretty dangerous pitch, Naota said to himself. As he watched Haruko on the mound with a sulky face, he heard a camera shutter behind him. Canti was standing behind Naota and, for some reason, had taken a picture of Naota's bandaged head. The robot had a tendency to do things for no reason whatsoever.

The photo developed instantly and printed out from part of the robot's body. It was an X-ray, and the white circle in the middle of the black film was Naota's skull.

Canti nodded happily while reviewing the picture.

Staring at the robot, one of the players commented, "Taking X-rays of players during a game seems a bit dangerous."

"It's one of the machines MM makes, isn't it?" another player asked, studying the logo on Canti's chest. "Is the radiation safe?"

"Does MM do weapons research for the American military?"

"Hey, we started losing right around the time that the plant was finished!"

Canti's reputation wasn't very good among the Martians. Everyone was suspicious of this robot that wandered around town, whose true colors and intentions were unknown. To make matters worse, because the Martians were a team based in an older shopping district, they were critical of anything MM.

"Cut it out," Shigekuni ordered, feeling there was no point in finding fault with such a convenient machine, which would run and fetch things for the team. The players didn't say another word about their coach's possession and stopped the badmouthing of the robot then and there.

The batter who went up after Naota also struck out, and the Martians once again ended their stint at bat without having scored any points.

It was time to take the field again, but Naota, whose head was wrapped in bandages, remained on the bench without going out to play defense. He probably could've said a quick apology and left the game, but he decided to stay and watch the Fragments' turn at bat.

The first batter up was Haruko, and that alone was enough to warrant watching. After all, Haruko's swing kind of reminded Naota of his awesome brother. It wasn't that Haruko's swing itself was similar to Tasuku's it was the level of skill with which she swung. Both of their swings were so complete, each the epitome of perfection.

"Hiii-ya!" With a loud shriek, Haruko swung the aluminum bat without holding anything back.

As the ball soared skyward, it was clear to everyone that it was a home run. With another run for the opposing team, the Martians drooped their shoulders. The ball quickly disappeared into the blue sky, and the players gave up trying to follow it with their eyes.

There was something that kept watching the ball for a long time, though Canti, the robot.

When the game was over, the scoreboard showed a massive difference in scores. It was an overwhelming win for the Umaguma Fragments. Sadly, the Mabase Martians didn't score any points and had suffered indisputable, utter defeat.

Regardless of whether the Martians had won or lost, it was customary for the team to hold a meeting after every game to reflect. Naturally, all the players could talk about this time was Haruko.

"We need a substitute player like that girl."

"Every time she batted, she hit it out of the park!"

"She even hit home runs off our intentional walks."

"Who is that girl, coach?"

Shigekuni usually severely scolded the players after a defeat, but today, he

silently gritted his teeth. Of course, he kept it a secret that the girl the team was curious about was his housekeeper.

Shigekuni had been surprised when he'd first seen Haruko wearing a Fragments uniform. He was the person who wondered the most about why she was on the other team. What wound him up was the fact that he and Haruko had been so close, but he'd never known she was so good at baseball.

I have to do something, Shigekuni said to himself. There were still two games left against the Fragments, and something needed to be done, or the Martians were sure to lose all three games. He didn't know what he could do about it, though.

"Wow, take a look at that," one of the players exclaimed.

Upon glancing in the direction the player pointed, Shigekuni saw balls flying into a basket near the bench, one after the other. The sight of the skillfully aimed balls landing one by one in the smallish basket almost seemed to be a trick.

The responsible party ended up being Canti, who'd been instructed to tend to the grounds. The robot had been retrieving the scattered balls and throwing them from long distances.

Shigekuni and his surprised players all stared at one another. It was obvious that everyone was thinking the same thing. The team members quickly got Canti to stop cleaning up the field and gave the robot a glove to see if he would catch some balls.

The team pondered the possibilities of Canti being a real find, but the robot turned out to be *more* than a real find. No matter what kind of fly ball or grounder the players hit at Canti, the robot cleanly fielded it with perfect form, throwing it back. His nimble movements were far better than the Martians had hoped. To top it off, the robot pounded his glove with his fist, as if to say, "Bring it on!" showing he had heart, too.

"He's amazing, coach!"

"With him, we're going to win the next match."

"A hidden jewel, our secret weapon we're going to ride that robot to victory!"

The players ate up Shigekuni's excited boasts.

"Plus, Tasuku is coming home soon," the proud coach added with conviction.

"Hooray!" yelled the players.

The news of Tasuku's return brought even more joy to the players who'd excitedly observed the robot's prowess. That's how much the amateur baseball team revered Naota's big brother.

Nobody was thinking about the substitute player from earlier any longer. As the team cheered in unison, "Tasuku's brother" stood up and left dejectedly, without anyone noticing.

After walking up an embankment, Naota found a Vespa on the waterside road with Haruko standing by it, counting several bills that looked freshly swindled. The money was probably the reason she'd played in the game earlier. When she saw Naota, she shoved the money into her pocket.

"The bandages look good on you," she said.

It was unlikely that Haruko felt an ounce of responsibility for beaning Naota with the ball. Actually, he could envision her telling him, "You couldn't get out of the way? Gosh, you suck at baseball, Takkun!" and she did.

"Whatever," Naota sulked. "I don't care about baseball."

"That's not cute at all."

"Stop it," Naota insisted, covering his head.

Haruko reached for her guitar case that was strapped to the Vespa, so Naota thought for sure she was going to hit him as she usually did.

Idiot, don't play around where people can see us. They're going to start gossiping, Naota thought. *Then again, I wonder what the players from both teams who were making fun of me would think if they saw me and Haruko together?*

In the end, Haruko simply slung the guitar over her shoulder, glancing at the bat Naota held in his hand and saying matter-of-factly, "If you don't swing, nothing will happen."

"Well, it isn't as if I can hit your pitches anyway!"

"Takkun, you think you're special, don't you? That's why you don't swing. If you swing, people will know you're not special."

What is she saying? Naota wondered.

Haruko slapped on her helmet and sped off at full speed, leaving Naota standing there.

Shigekuni and the other players had gone somewhere else to hold a second "meeting of reflection," which meant they probably went to the barbecue restaurant near the station.

When Naota made his way back home, he found Haruko on the living room floor, still wearing her uniform, and Kamon massaging her back.

"Ooh, it hurts. Not so haard," Haruko moaned.

"Sorry, Haruko."

Naota was more than a little shocked by what he saw. Kamon was openly giving a massage to Haruko, who was calmly accepting it, as if it weren't strange whatsoever. It was strange. When had they forged such a comfortable relationship?

"Welcome home, Naota. Dinner soon," Kamon declared cheerfully.

"What are you doing?" Naota asked dryly.

Kamon ignored Naota's question and continued his suspiciously sordid massage. He was now using his own chin to press down on Haruko's back and rub her.

"Oh, your beard!" Haruko exclaimed with delight in her voice. "That feels good like an electric massage."

Naota felt as though a cold hand had ripped out his heart and sensed that he'd been betrayed. *"But I saw you first..."*

The night Haruko had first come to the Nandaba house, she'd uttered that very phrase to Naota. She'd insisted she'd come to the house because Naota was there. That moment had been special to Naota, if only a little.

"You stink of sweat. At least change out of your uniform!" Naota suddenly complained in a vicious tone.

"Takkun isn't sweaty at all. Oh yeah, that's right you just stood there."

"Why are you playing for the other team, anyway?"

"Part-time job," Haruko replied. "I thought I should pay a little something toward the electric bill."

The Nandaba house's electric meter had been running at least ten times higher than usual. Naota wouldn't find out the reason for this until later, though.

Canti, who was wearing an apron and had made dinner, carried the dishes from the kitchen. The robot was an ideal housemaid who worked for no pay at all, but his repertoire of dishes didn't exceed that of an elementary school home economics class. Tonight, the menu comprised a large plate of fried eggs, sunny side up.

"Oh, Haruko let me..." Kamon insisted, taking one of the fried eggs in his chopsticks and offering it to her in a sensual manner. Haruko opened her mouth wide to accept the egg. It was exactly like something a newlywed couple would do.

Needless to say, Naota was incensed. "What are you two doing?" What he really wanted to say was, *When did you two start having that kind of relationship?* but nothing came out.

What Naota was feeling was simple jealousy, although he wasn't going to admit that to himself. That's why he couldn't complain. All he could do was grip the bat tighter in his hand. When he could bear it no longer, he left the room, enraged.

"What about dinner?" Kamon called out. "We have your favorite genetically modified bean curd!"

To Naota, Kamon's jovial voice sounded like nothing more than antagonistic.

Naota darted out to the front of his house and instinctively hit a guardrail with the bat in his hand, leaving a scratch on the rail and causing a metallic sound to ring out.

You said I was the one you saw first! Naota shouted to himself, lifting the bat high and hitting the guardrail at least three more times. This time, there was a large dent left in the white rail.

"Hey, you're damaging public property!"

Surprised by the man's voice, Naota turned around. Standing under a streetlamp was a man he'd never seen before. The man was dressed in a suit and was tall and muscular like a professional swimmer.

"Look at the poor rail getting hit by a bat," the man said.

That incident with the bat was the first time the man appeared.

Chapter 2

Dusk had fallen at Mabase Bridge.

Naota was sitting with Mamimi on the bank.

"So, you had a fight with Haru?" Mamimi asked.

"As if I'd argue with her."

"Ha! So grown up!"

Naota remembered that Mamimi had looked up to Haruko in the recent past. She often said how cool she thought Mamimi was or how sexy she looked. Naota, who'd been fuming about the dodgy relationship between Kamon and Haruko since yesterday, had reluctantly revealed all the things he was unhappy about to Mamimi. He couldn't talk to his classmates about it, so he didn't have anyone else he could talk to.

It was at times like these that Naota wished his brother were around, but if Tasuku were around, Naota wouldn't be spending time alone with Mamimi. He had mixed feelings about it all.

"Why is your head bandaged?"

"It doesn't matter. That has no bearing on anything."

The truth was that the injury to Naota's head was Haruko's fault, too, but he didn't really feel like explaining that. Perhaps he didn't want to tell Mamimi that he'd struck out three times and was hit by a pitch.

Mamimi, who'd been sitting back to back against Naota, turned around and stared into his eyes, as if searching for something. "You're in a bad mood, Takkun. Why?" Her eyes smiled, revealing that they'd seen his thoughts.

Mamimi's eyes got on Naota's nerves, too. Somehow, it seemed as though her eyes were saying, "Takkun likes Haru." After all, one only gets in a bad mood after fighting with someone one likes.

You must be kidding me, Naota thought. *Who could ever like that untrustworthy witch?*

All of a sudden, Naota remembered the face of the man from the night before, who'd also assumed that Naota liked Haruko. When Naota had snapped and started hitting the guardrail with the bat, that strange man had suddenly spoken to him.

Who was that man anyway? Naota wondered.

After the guardrail incident, the man had come into the shop, and with a tray in hand, started choosing bread. Naota didn't think he'd seen the man before, but nevertheless, he was grateful for a customer, who placed the unsold bread onto his tray one by one.

The well-built man appeared to be in his late-twenties, and he had two strangely thick eyebrows. They were *really* unnatural eyebrows. If inspected closely, they appeared as though they'd been drawn on and were shifting from their original location.

"Very spicy curry rolls," stated the man as he read the label on the counter and furrowed his bizarre eyebrows. "You didn't stock these before, did you?"

At that moment, Haruko's gleeful voice emanated from the back of the store. It sounded like the selfish laughter of someone who could enjoy life without worries or stress.

The man peered toward the back of the store with a sideways glance. "Seems you guys have more and more pointless things. They don't sit well with me."

Naota knew that "pointless things" both referred to the curry rolls and to Haruko, who was responsible for the curry rolls' existence in the shop. The rolls had been added at Haruko's request when she'd first come to the Nandaba house.

Naota was on his guard, perplexed by how this man knew so much about Naota's family.

"How about you? Haven't you noticed that if you force yourself to eat it, you become addicted to it in the end?"

"I hate spicy food," Naota replied. The only thing Naota could manage was Star Prince Curry.

"She really seems interested in you. Are you aware of that?"

Naota wondered if the man was someone from the police. Off the top of his head, Naota could count about ten or twenty crimes that Haruko had committed. It wouldn't surprise him if the authorities were now watching her. The thing that was most surprising was that she hadn't been caught until now.

When Naota failed to say anything, the man smiled. "Keeping your mouth shut. Clever. It's best you don't let too many people know about her. You'll know soon she is no ordinary woman."

Naota still couldn't force out a reply.

"You should give up older women anyway. They cause nothing but pain." After uttering his final words, the man paid for the bread and left.

"Give up older women"? Naota repeated to himself. The man must have assumed Naota was currently involved with an older woman. *You must be kidding me.*

Who could ever like that untrustworthy witch? Naota felt angry when he thought back to what had happened the night before, but Mamimi paid it no mind as she embraced him from behind.

"I'm going to leave my mark on you!"

Naota hadn't forgotten that on the night of the fire, he'd decided to stay by Mamimi's side forever. Today, they were together, their bodies attached; however, ironically, though touching each other, Naota could sense Mamimi had no particular attachment to him. He was a substitute and a tragic one at that.

It probably wouldn't bother Mamimi if Naota liked someone else.

Like always, Mamimi pushed Naota down into the grass and started nibbling on his earlobes.

White steam from the MM factory slowly drifted across the red sky above them.

Because it was autumn, the sun set rapidly and the streets were already getting dark.

After he finished playing with Mamimi, Naota headed home, feeling slightly guilty. *I really am a bad person*, he thought.

One day back in kindergarten, Naota's teacher had decided the class was going to play a stupid game where each of the kindergartners confessed the name of someone he or she liked from the opposite sex. Even in kindergarten, children liked one another.

Naota, who'd already matured by the age of five, resented this infringement on his human rights. That sort of rage had been limited to Naota, though. All the girls had kept their mouths shut while the boys sat on the edges of their seats and said aloud the name of the girls they liked, blushing. It probably would've been better to remain quiet or swear there wasn't anyone they liked, but the boys were too simple. If one of them hadn't said a name, there was a danger he wouldn't have been considered manly.

It'd finally been Naota's turn, and there was a girl Naota fancied in the same class. When Naota was asked, however, he didn't say the name of the girl he actually

liked. Instead, he named the girl who occasionally sat next to him. He hadn't once noticed the girl next to him, and he definitely hadn't interacted with her enough to like her. Why had he named her? Anyone would've done it. The girl had occasionally sat by him, so hers was the first name that had come to mind.

Naota could've been scared of people knowing the name of the girl he really liked. Even when he was very young, he was the kind of boy who didn't like people knowing his true feelings. He basically used the girl who sat next to him; it was quite a cowardly thing to do.

One day, not long after the game, the girl who sat next to Naota asked him to play, and Naota ditched weeding the kindergarten yard. They hid together in the closet, eating candy the girl had snuck in her pocket. With sweets stuffed in their mouths, they didn't say anything, simply gazing at each other, smiling. For some reason, it'd felt extremely comfortable.

After that day, the person Naota was keen on became the girl who sat next to him. He couldn't remember the girl's name any longer, but he remembered it happening.

Kindergarten was such an easy time. Even as a boy, Naota had tended to go with the flow of love. So, what was this guilt Naota was feeling now?

When Naota returned home, Haruko was in front of the shop swinging her bat. There was another game between the Martians and the Fragments the next day. It appeared as though she were preparing for that. Her swings cut sharply through the wind. As Naota studied the way Haruko swung the bat, he had to admit that she was good. She was the only person who he admired almost as much as his brother.

"Been practicing your swing all day?" Haruko asked, noticing that Naota had been carrying around Tasuku's bat again.

Considering he hadn't hit the ball once in the last game, Naota felt Haruko was being sarcastic, so he ignored her and tried to enter the house. *This is a girl who might get with my dad. I'm not bothering with her anymore.*

"Why are you ignoring me?"

"Don't talk to me anymore. You've been getting close to my dad, right?"

Haruko pointed to Naota's neck. "You've been playing around, too."

Naota quickly tried to cover his neck, where there was a fresh love bite. *Although this girl told me she came to this house because of me, she isn't bothered by Mamimi and me. Anyway, doesn't what she just said mean she admits to messing around with my dad?*

"I'll coach you. I'm good."

"Don't need it."

"You could hit a home run and be better than your brother."

Haruko's swing was still burned into the back of Naota's mind. He'd always wanted to be as good at batting as his brother, so he decided to let her coach him right then and there.

Naota took a few swings with the bat in front of Haruko, who dropped her normally blithe expression and watched with a highly unusual earnestness.

"Drop your hips a bit more and relax your stance," Haruko instructed.

Naota did what he was told and tried to pay attention to keeping his lower half

steady. The sincere tone in Haruko's voice had helped alleviate any initial skepticism he had. Just as he had in kindergarten, Naota was going with the flow.

Surprisingly, this girl's kind of a good person, Naota thought.

"See, better already!" Haruko cheered, holding Naota's bat from behind and casually putting her hands on top of his.

Naota was very sensitive to the feeling of Haruko's hands touching him. Although he did much more sensual things with Mamimi on a regular basis, this felt even more thrilling than those things had.

Perhaps... Naota thought, I don't hate Haruko?

"Try swinging," Haruko suggested. "Hit it into the sky. A true slugger imagines creating an arch right before he hits the ball."

Maybe I'm over-thinking what's going on between Haruko and my dad, Naota speculated. Haruko was always playing around like that with people. To get jealous over such a thing was childish.

Suddenly, what Haruko had said to Naota the day before came rushing back into his mind. "What did you mean by, 'If you swing, people will know you're not special'?" Naota asked. "Were you suggesting that I think I'm special?"

Haruko laughed. "You do think you're special, don't you?"

Naota didn't know how to respond.

"Whatever happens, if you don't swing the bat, you'll be special, but you'll also be running away." Pointing to one of the stars shining in the night sky, Haruko asked, "See that star? Swing for that. It feels better if you swing the bat for all you're worth."

Strangely, the star that Haruko had chosen appeared to be flickering. It really *was* flickering!

"Um... doesn't that star appear to be moving?"

"You think so?" Haruko smiled happily as she gazed up at the flickering star.

The flickering star was actually a static satellite more than twenty-two thousand miles up in the sky. The reason it was moving was because it'd taken a direct hit and its orbital control systems had been destroyed.

Ever since the stationary satellite had first been launched into orbit, its speed and trajectory had been fine-tuned by its internal control system. The satellite had been programmed to change course or make alterations to its position, if necessary; however, the machine was no longer taking orders from the ground and was out of control. It was because of Haruko Haruhara.

In an underground room beneath Mabase City Police Station, twenty-four-hour surveillance was being conducted on the man-made satellite. Monitors and computer screens were lined up on the wall, and numerous operators were adroitly dealing with the displayed data. The people present had been working in the monitor room with no rest for several weeks, but they weren't police employees; they'd merely borrowed the police facilities as a war room.

"Commander Amarao, we've now completely lost control," reported one of the female operators to her superior, who was sitting at the back of the room.

The operator's superior scowled upon receiving the information. He was the eyebrow man who'd bought bread from Naota's house the previous night.

Commander Amarao was a member of a public safety organization that served as a special advisory council to the cabinet. The organization was known as the Department of Interstellar Immigration Bureau by the people involved.

"TTR, target tracking radar, image feed live," stated the report as an enlarged satellite feed was displayed on the monitor.

The satellite had a baseball stuck in it, which, of course, was the home run ball Haruko had hit far into the blue sky during yesterday's game. None of the players had noticed, but the ball Haruko hit had broken through the atmosphere and traveled into space, hitting the satellite above Mabase. It certainly wasn't something that happened every day!

"Part of the position-control jets, remote access, and communication antenna took damage. The operations unit took a direct hit."

"Atmospheric entry: double-zero sixty. Descent beginning."

"Predicted point of impact?" Commander Amarao asked, frowning.

It was late that night, and the residents of Mabase, unaware of the menace threatening their lives high above their heads, slept peacefully as they always did.

In the Nandaba house, Naota, who'd been sleeping in his room, was awoken by the sound of a cat's cries. When he glanced at the balcony, he saw Miyu Miyu. He listened blankly to the mewing for a few moments, but then his cat suddenly stopped and ran off somewhere on a whim.

Naota tried to go back to sleep, but his head itched because of the bandage. During the game, he'd been hit by Haruko's ball and had wrapped a bandage around his head. The impact had only left a bump, though, and it didn't hurt.

Naota got up to remove the itchy bandage. The ball that had hit his head was probably thrown at it intentionally and could've been quite dangerous, but at least there wasn't a horn coming out of his head this time. Remembering back to when he and Haruko had finished batting practice earlier, Naota recalled that Haruko had hugged his head and said, "Yours is the only head that works." That must've meant that his was the only head robots would come out of.

Naota guessed that it was because of those incidents that Haruko had come to live at his house, but no matter what, Naota was happy and believed that Haruko's primary reason for being there was definitely him.

Maybe I don't really dislike her, Naota thought.

Glancing up, Naota noticed that Haruko wasn't on the top bunk. They both had gone to bed and said goodnight, but her bed was empty. According to the clock, it was almost midnight. *Where did she go?*

Naota feared the worst when he spotted a light shining from his father's room. The bakery opened early. What could his father still be doing up at this hour, unless... Terrible scenes floated through Naota's mind.

HARUKO IS IN MY FATHER'S ROOM?

But wait, Naota told himself, *Haruko isn't sleeping in her bed, and my father's light is on in his room. That doesn't mean anything. Dad could've forgotten to turn off the light and Haruko could be in the bathroom.*

HARUKO IS IN MY FATHER'S ROOM?

Naota heard something that sounded very much like Haruko's voice.

"Oh, you're so bad!"

There wasn't any doubt about it it was coming from Naota's father's room.

Naota couldn't help but listen, standing stock-still.

"Haruko... Haruko..." Kamon repeated in a gasping moan.

Suddenly, Naota's ears started ringing. "Owww!" he howled as he grabbed his head to try to alleviate the violent, surging pain.

Bursting through the bandage, another horn emerged from his head.

"Marker beacon confirmed," the female operator in Amarao's monitor room called out concurrently with the events transpiring in the Nandaba house.

An extreme wavelength was being displayed on one of the screens. Using a simulator, the girl immediately displayed the area where the satellite was predicted to impact. "I have it. Right hand monitor."

Amarao stared at the screen and muttered, "I knew it Mabase."

"Classification: half-active pulse wave. Something is guiding the satellite's descent directly into Mabase."

After hearing the report, Commander Amarao narrowed his startling thick eyebrows.

Chapter 3

After that horrific night, things continued to worsen.

The next morning, Naota couldn't stand seeing Kamon's and Haruko's faces, so he left the house straightaway.

It was the day of the second game between the Martians and the Fragments, but Naota didn't have any desire to go, so he slowly walked toward the bank near Mabase Bridge, where he bumped into Mamimi. She was the same as always a high school girl without anything to do.

They started "playing" in the morning.

White steam poured from the MM factory on the hill and slowly spread across the sky, robbing the world of its color.

Day after day; I'm always in the same place, always looking at the same scene, and repeating the same things over and over again, Naota reflected. *Will I be able to go somewhere else someday?*

Mamimi drew on Naota's back with her finger. It was the beginning of an innocent game where he had to guess what she'd written. The first thing she drew was a character for "ta," probably for the first character of Tasuku's name.

Someday, somewhere, just like my brother... Naota started to say to himself.

All of a sudden, the sound of an approaching motorbike engine interrupted their game.

"Oh, it's Haru!" Mamimi exclaimed happily.

Naota had left the house so he wouldn't have to see Haruko, but she'd seen the two of them and stopped nearby. She was wearing her uniform and appeared to be on her way to the baseball field.

"The game's started already! Are you doing unwholesome things again?" Haruko asked.

At that very moment, Mamimi was hugging Naota from behind. Indeed, for a young boy to be doing what Naota had been doing was pretty unwholesome, but Naota didn't want to hear that from the likes of Haruko.

Naota's head bandage was tied tighter than it had been the day before, to keep the horn pushed in.

What exactly were you up to last night? Naota felt like swearing at Haruko. He didn't want Mamimi to hear him sound that jealous, though, so he swallowed his words.

Not knowing what Naota was thinking, Haruko said, "Hey, c'mon, let's go take a swing."

"Takkun's in the game?" Mamimi asked, surprised. "But Takkun isn't the kind of person who would actually swing the bat."

Mamimi's casual remark troubled Naota even more. *Not "the kind of person who would actually swing the bat"?*

Did Mamimi think of Naota the same way Haruko did?

"You can ride with me to the field," Haruko offered.

With his lips still pursed, Naota declined the offer. "No thanks, I don't play baseball."

"It's Canti's first game."

Hearing that, Mamimi's eyes lit up, and she jumped excitedly. "Lord Canti?"

"It's worth it just to see him field," Haruko promised.

"I want to go see!" Mamimi pleaded.

"You know, your home runs yesterday weren't anything special." Naota's words, which were nothing more than those of a sore loser, were already lost on the girls.

"I'm coming, Haru!" Mamimi exclaimed.

"Okay!"

With the elated Mamimi clinging to Haruko's back, the Vespa sped off.

Left alone, Naota shouted, "I'll never let you be my coach again!" bitterly to no one, and then he went home, clenching the bat in his hand.

Until that point, he never would've been able to imagine he could kill his own father.

The house Naota returned to was eerily quiet. Shigekuni and Haruko were at the game, and Kamon wasn't in the shop.

As Naota thought how the bakery might as well shut down, he heard a noise from the back of the house. It was their pet cat, Miyu Miyu, in the corridor.

Miyu Miyu glared into the living room with a strange shimmer in her eyes. Lore said cats could see mysterious things humans couldn't, and it seemed as though their cat had spied something unusual, given that it looked like it was glaring at a monster in the living room.

Naota shared the cat's suspicion and definitely sensed there was someone in his living room. Instinctively squeezing the bat tighter, he peered into the room and saw Kamon sitting alone. At least, Naota thought it was his father. The person looked a

little different than his father usually looked. The man wasn't wearing a shirt and was disheveled, leaning against the wall with his mouth open. There was a sense of indecency about him.

Naota thought back to the night before, when he'd felt sickened that Haruko had been in Kamon's room.

"Oh." Noticing Naota, Kamon quickly tried to hide his exposed stomach. He then peered into Naota's face and shot a satisfied smile as if he were gloating about something. "Oh, Haruko, I asked you not to leave any marks. If Naota sees them, there's going to be trouble."

Naota glanced at Kamon's abdomen. It was obvious that what he was trying to hide were love bites. Naota could feel his face stiffening up and his disquiet quickly turned to rage.

To provoke his son further, Kamon said, "You see, your father and Haruko have *that* kind of relationship."

"That kind of relationship?" Naota felt an unspeakable bitterness toward such a blatant display of self-satisfaction and felt completely betrayed. His mind replayed the words Haruko had said to him about seeing him first. *Damn it! Despite the fact that she said that...*

Kamon leaned against the wall, trying to stand up straight. "You must be hungry. We have your favorite genetically modified bean curd Naotaaa."

Having addressed Naota with an odd intonation, Kamon made Naota feel as though he were being made a fool of even more. Then, Kamon inexplicably repeated Naota's name over and over again like a broken record. "Naotaaa, Naotaaa, Naotaaa..."

Naota screamed at his father to shut up, gripping the metal bat in his hand.

That was when the switch flipped on.

Naota suddenly whacked the television in front of him with the bat, causing the cracking of Braun tube and the shattering of plastic.

Although Naota had only hit the television, his father made a sickening "ugh" sound, like one a chicken makes when its neck is broken.

When Naota glanced over, he saw that Kamon's neck was bent at an unusual angle and that Kamon had collapsed on the floor in front of him. Actually, the brass clock that'd been on top of the television had flown up with the force of the whack and landed directly atop Kamon's head.

Naota sucked in his breath and took a step back.

An hour after the crime, Naota was in the interrogation room at the Mabase Police Station. As he waited alone in the sparse room, he stared through the barred glass window and could see the midday sun shining brightly outside.

"Shock! Sixth Grade Elementary Schooler Snaps, Beats Father with Bat!" That would be the next day's newspaper headlines.

"No, no he was such an ordinary, mature, good kid. You never would've thought it of Naota..." That's what Naota's homeroom teacher Miyaji and other people would say on chat shows.

I killed my father, and now I'm in an interrogation room facing homicide

charges. It's still light out. Hey, what time did I get up today?

Naota was finding it difficult to breathe, not due to lack of air in the room, but because he was thinking of the wide-eyed, fallen Kamon, and was having flashbacks of his father's fallen corpse.

No, my dad isn't dead. As if my dad could be dead! It was a bad dream all a bad dream. Homicide? Ludicrous. "Homicide" is a word I've only heard on TV dramas. Murderer? It's a word I've heard on the news. As if my dad could be dead.

MY DAD IS COLLAPSED ON THE FLOOR AND HIS HEART WASN'T BEATING.

What happened to me? Why did I turn out like this? What would my brother and grandfather think?

Another flashback: the corpse with both eyes wide open...

I killed someone. I'M A MURDERER. Maybe they'll publish the essay I wrote at school in the weeklies.

"Future Dreams: When I grow up, I think I'd like to leave this town, because I smell something rotten about the phrase 'age of local autonomy'..."

Damn, if only I'd written something better than that. All the specialists who analyze my psychological state are going to interpret it as "Boy A's internalized psychopathic tendencies."

What time is it? Why doesn't this room have a clock? How did I get here? Why didn't I go to school today? Oh yes, it's a holiday. I would've been better off going to the baseball game rather than this. I should've been standing in the batter's box, even if all I'd done was stand. Why am I not holding the bat anymore? That's my brother's special bat. Help me, Tasuku. I can't breathe. I feel heavy so heavy. The chair I'm sitting on feels like an elevator descending down.

SOMEBODY... HELP ME!

The sound of footsteps approached in the corridor outside the interrogation room.

"I'm going to be the one dealing with this," a man's voice declared. It was a voice Naota remembered from somewhere.

When the door opened, the eyebrow man, Commander Amarao, was standing there.

Just as I thought he's a policeman! Naota said to himself.

Amarao shut the door and sat down in the chair opposite Naota, removing an electronic organizer from his wide chest pocket and reading its display. "Naota Nandaba, sixth grade student, Mabase Elementary School. Father: Kamon Nandaba, baker, forty-seven years old. Until ten years ago, worked at a publishing house in Tokyo as an assistant editor-in-chief for a subculture magazine. About a month ago, a female, whose full identity is unknown but who is going by the name Haruko Haruhara, took up residence in the Nandaba house."

The eyebrow man had really done his research. He'd probably been watching Naota's house for quite a while in order to capture Haruko, but it surely had taken him by surprise when Naota committed murder.

"You shouldn't have used a bat," Amarao said. "Your house is a bakery. You could've at least used some unsold French bread."

"I didn't hit him," Naota replied quietly.

It was the truth. Naota hadn't hit his father; however, he didn't think Amarao would believe him.

"It must've hurt," Amarao assessed, pouring two cups of coffee from the pot that was sitting on a server next to him and offering one cup to Naota. The man put sugar cubes into Naota's cup one by one. "Here, you like sweet stuff, right?"

Naota thought super-sweet coffee must be an interrogation method, but surprisingly, the man put the same amount, if not more, into his own cup, stirring it with a spoon. He really must've enjoyed sweet stuff, because he put the cup to his mouth without hesitation.

Naota had decided to tell the truth, regardless of whether anyone believed him. "I only hit the television."

"Hit?"

"It was an accident."

With a serious look in his eyes, Amarao said, "I thought you were the kind of guy who couldn't swing at anything except for guardrails."

"Couldn't swing at anything"? Naota became increasingly confused. *What does "you were the kind of guy who couldn't swing at anything except for guardrails" mean?*

Amarao calmly drank his coffee, which was more like sugary soup. "An older woman was a mistake after all, eh? She wasn't worth fighting with your father over?"

"Haruko doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Haruko? You call her by her first name. You must be close."

"I don't know."

"She's your batting coach, isn't she? Well, she is quite attractive."

"I said Haruko doesn't have anything to do with this!" Naota repeated, raising his voice because Amarao had gotten to the heart of the matter.

"Well, why did you hit him?" Amarao asked somewhat harshly.

"I didn't hit him!" Naota replied. "I hit the television."

"So, you hit the television."

"Yes, because"

"Because you were jealous?"

Naota fell silent and nodded.

"Don't worry. You won't be charged."

He must be talking about juvenile law, Naota thought.

Naota wasn't yet twenty years old, but the reality was that he'd committed a crime. He had no idea what was going to happen to him legally.

"You're a victim, too," Amarao added. "You were merely caught up in something."

"Victim," Naota whispered. *Victim? Why am I a victim?*

It seemed as though this man had made a gross error. Even if he'd indirectly caused his father's death, Naota felt as though he had to take responsibility for it.

"Do you really think you killed him yourself?"

Naota didn't know how to respond.

"More important, look at this, Naota."

"More important?" Naota asked, wondering what could be more important than a violent incident in which an elementary school student had killed his father.

After Amarao tapped on his electronic organizer, something appeared on a nearby TV monitor. It was sky, but there was also something shining in the very center of the screen that appeared to be a man-made satellite. When Amarao enlarged the picture, Naota could see that the satellite was shaking violently.

"This is a real picture. Right now, in the sky above the city, a satellite is falling. This isn't an ordinary satellite, either. It's a satellite bomb with massive destructive capacity."

What is this man saying? Naota wondered as he took a sip of the coffee. It was far sweeter than he'd expected, and the dramatic taste increased the glucose levels in Naota's befuddled brain. *What is this man saying about a satellite bomb?*

"If the satellite bomb explodes, it will destroy Mabase. Do you understand what I'm saying? If that happens, no one will be saved. You get it? No. One. Will. Be. Saved. Not a single kitten. Of course, you have to keep what I'm saying to you now a secret even from your father."

"Eh?" Naota muttered. "My dad, he's... still alive?"

"Everyone will die, regardless of whether we evacuate now. No one will be saved."

Naota flashed back to his father's corpse once again.

"So, go home quickly and tell her we need her to hit another home run. Tell her the message is from a hometown fan."

Amarao was referring to Haruko. Somehow, this man was familiar with her.

"Why Haruko?"

"She's from the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood."

Naota didn't bother probing into what a Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood was. It didn't sound like something he would understand, even if it were explained to him. Naota noticed Amarao's unusually fat eyebrows again. They simply were *not* natural eyebrows.

"You're a victim, too," Amarao had said previously. A victim. It seemed as though he'd actually meant a victim of Haruko, which meant there were other victims like Naota out there. Every time Amarao had mentioned Haruko, he'd seemed oddly emotional. Maybe he'd been a victim of Haruko, too.

Naota got confused trying to process all the information.

Chapter 4

When Naota got home, he wandered into the backyard, which was connected to the living room, the scene of the crime.

As he intrepidly stepped up into the living room from the yard, he was startled to see his father's feet beyond the door, and he froze. Just past the door was his father's corpse the corpse Naota had created with his own hands.

On the ground nearby lay the violent weapon Naota had used. It didn't appear as though anyone had been at the scene since he'd run out, and there wasn't any evidence suggesting there had been a police crime-scene investigation.

Naota was confused again. He'd gone to the police and had confessed to everything, yet they'd released him, and he was back home. What was all this? In spite of his cool mint head, Naota found it difficult to figure out what was going on.

"*You can check with your own eyes. You didn't hurt anyone,*" Naota repeated the words Amarao had said to him earlier, as Naota was leaving the police station. *I didn't hurt anyone? Then, what's this dead body?*

Naota heard Miyu Miyu's cry at his feet. The cat's relaxed meowing seemed inappropriate for the moment. Having mustered up his courage, Naota entered the living room, where his father's body lay on the floor, with his head still at a grotesque angle and his eyes wide open, staring ghoulishly at the ceiling. Naota didn't have to check for a pulse; this body wasn't breathing. It definitely wasn't the body of a living thing.

Exactly as Amarao had said, however, it seemed that Naota hadn't committed murder. A green, sparkling liquid that resembled some type of oil oozed from the corpse's head, which meant that the corpse wasn't human; it was an android. No one could've predicted that Haruko would've brought such an extraordinary thing into the house.

"That damn housekeeper," Naota sneered.

Upon hearing a vague noise coming from the closet, Naota forcibly pulled open the door and was surprised to find a mummy. Actually, it was a man dehydrated like a mummy. That must've been Kamon, his real father.

The father-like mummy turned to Naota and laughed weakly.

He's still alive. HE'S STILL ALIVE!

"Ahhhhh!" Naota hugged his father's shriveled body joyfully, kicking the android onto the balcony and running into the bathroom.

Naota was thinking about dehydrated food, like dried Shitake mushrooms, which could be revived if water were added to them. Relying on the same theory, he sunk Kamon into the bathtub, turned the tap on full blast, and poured water onto his father's body. It was possible that a ridiculous solution would work in a ridiculous situation. It was ludicrous, but Naota's simple, direct method was right on, and Kamon quickly revived.

"The returned," Kamon whispered. "I'm thirsty."

Naota took a breath before realizing the reason for his relief and the reason his brain was no longer stressed wasn't because he wasn't a killer. It wasn't the relief of having escaped a crime, either. It was because he was happy. His father was alive and he was happy. The distress he'd felt before was because he couldn't come to terms with the sudden loss of his father.

"Your father wasn't useful for Haruko," Kamon said serenely. "She asked if she could borrow my head and, delighted, I agreed. But it seems as though I died for a while."

Naota was speechless.

"Haruko really is out of the ordinary," Kamon commented, wearing an unusual expression of good cheer as he glanced up at Naota from the bathtub. "Well, Naota, it seems as though you love your real father."

Naota felt a bit spiteful after hearing his father's last remark, but his displeasure

couldn't suppress the happiness he felt when he saw Kamon's sunny face staring at him.

Dad's here. He's alive, right in front of you, Naota told himself.

Suddenly, the sound of a motorbike roared from the backyard. It was a noise Naota was extremely familiar with.

It's her! Still irate, Naota ran from the bathroom to give Haruko a piece of his mind, but as he hurried to get to her, he tripped over the android Kamon that was still on the balcony and fell into the garden. "Ouch!"

Haruko was on her Vespa in the garden, still wearing her baseball uniform. "You should be careful, running around like that."

Gazing at Haruko's happy-go-lucky face, Naota asked, "What's with this robot father?"

All of a sudden, the upper torso of the android sat up and spoke: "If Naota sees, there's going to be trouble."

Haruko violently kicked the imitation Kamon, causing the android to short out and collapse again. A lid on its bare chest opened, revealing the internal electronics.

"Oh, Haruko, I asked you not to leave any marks," the android said.

The chest marks the android had tried to hide hadn't been love bites they were a panel.

Naota inadvertently smirked, but in truth, he felt like laughing and crying at the same time. When he thought about it calmly, however, he knew it wasn't the appropriate time for either. Surely this housekeeper who'd changed Naota's father into an android was more dangerous than a housekeeper who merely fooled around?

"Who are you *really*?" Naota asked.

"I'm a manifestation of your boyhood desires."

"Stop messing around."

"Takkun."

"What?"

"I saw Takkun first, right?" Haruko smiled.

Enraptured by Haruko's smile, Naota's heart skipped for a second and only for a second. *Idiot, what are you thinking?* he scolded himself.

Naota quickly changed the topic for fear that Haruko could read his thoughts. "Do you know about the satellite falling?"

Amarao had said an artificial satellite was going to fall on Mabase. Even scarier was that the satellite was a bomb, and the only person who could avert such a disaster was Haruko Haruhara. Considering there was a massive bomb about to explode right on his head, why wasn't Amarao more panicked?

"Doubleheaders take a lot out of you," Haruko remarked. "Better tell the hometown fan it'll cost him."

The mock satellite steadily hurtled toward Mabase.

It wasn't a typical man-made satellite, and it didn't have a normal descent. As it plummeted, it began to break up, taking the shape of a metal globe. The fact that it resembled a round, implosion-type nuclear weapon was the reason the satellite was so dangerous.

The satellite was the ultimate airborne bomb, adjusting its friction with the atmosphere using simple gravity controls as it descended toward its target area. Most of it had been constructed in Japan, and the satellite's fuse and gravity control modules bore the logo of MM.

There was very little time left before it would collide into Mabase.

The bomb was set to detonate when it came in contact with the Earth's surface and had stopped for one fiftieth of a second.

Meanwhile, in an underground surveillance room, Amarao and his team were monitoring the satellite bomb's descent.

"I think we should file a complaint to the Brotherhood," one of the female operators called out.

"No," Amarao replied. "This satellite bomb was set up so we could use it in case of an emergency. Raharu is simply using that."

"Raharu?"

"Galaxy Space Police Agent Raharu Haruha, a terrifying woman. She's using the satellite bomb as a pickoff throw against Medical Mechanica and the Japanese government diplomats."

Everyone remained silent, but they were naturally growing increasingly frantic on the inside. The truth was that they didn't have the spirit to sacrifice their own lives for their mission, and they knew the underground room they were in provided no shelter.

One of the other monitors displayed a careening Vespa ridden by two people. The scooter was being driven by Raharu Haruko and behind her, Naota was clinging on.

The operators' hearts were frozen, knowing their lives depended on that strange pair.

As a result of the satellite's gravity controls, the sky above Mabase had started to become stormy.

On top of one of the houses, a carefree high school girl gazed up at the storm clouds gathering overhead. It was Mamimi, and next to her was Canti. Together, they studied the swirling black formations.

By some unknown means, Canti was able to display the satellite's descent on its face monitor, which impressed Mamimi.

"Oh, Lord of Fear, you're very late!" Mamimi exclaimed with regard to the satellite. "I wonder if we'll get tomorrow off school."

Without replying, Canti switched the display to show Haruko and Naota, who'd finally reached the baseball field.

Mamimi wore a curious expression. "Takkun... what are you going to do?"

What am I going to do? Naota worried as he arrived at the baseball field. He'd thought that because Haruko was involved, he'd have to use Canti to deal with the satellite bomb; however, there wasn't a single person or robot on the field.

Staring up, Naota could see the thick black clouds billowing violently across the

sky. The storm had developed into a terrifying sight. It was like a black sea of tar raging in the heavens.

Naota sensed in his skin that far beyond the thick black clouds, the dangerous weapon was heading straight for the baseball field. "It's coming?"

The satellite bomb wasn't visible to the naked eye, but it wasn't actually falling toward Mabase, anyway; it was aimed directly toward the bulge on Naota's head. The satellite and Naota's bulge had been communicating through half-active pulse waves.

It's heading straight for me. My pounding head is drawing that thing right to me! Naota thought when he realized this frightening reality.

"Well then..." Haruko began as she put her hand in her pocket.

Just as Naota thought Haruko was going to pull out yet another super weapon, it turned out to be a child's shower cap simply an everyday shower cap people used in the shower to avoid getting soap in their eyes when washing their hair.

"What's that?"

"No matter. No matter," Haruko replied, tearing off Naota's head bandages. She quickly put the shower cap on Naota before inserting her hand into his head. Yes, right into the inside of his head. Haruko's arm reached deeply into Naota's head as if she were putting her hand into liquid.

"Whoa, wait a sec. What are you doing?" Naota's skin crawled. Having a hand in his head felt a hundred times worse than swallowing an internal camera. He could feel Haruko's hand wriggling inside his body, through his head and down his throat, and he couldn't help but think that she hadn't used antibacterial lotion or sterilized her hands.

As if she were looking for something in a barrel of rice, Haruko didn't hold back when pushing her hands into the depths of Naota's head. "I see this is what it feels like inside a boy."

"Hey, don't touch that from behind," Naota said randomly.

Haruko was clearly enjoying it. With an indecent smile, she finally located the thing she'd been looking for and pulled it out, gripping some sort of metallic instrument in her hand. It was the next horn that would've come out of Naota's head, the bulge that had been communicating with the satellite. Haruko had intended to pull the horn out of Naota's head, but the annoying object hadn't separated from his head and had gotten caught.

Haruko braced her feet on Naota's head and aggressively tried to pull out the horn. "Hey, c'mon! Hurry up and come out."

"No, don't rush it," Naota pleaded. "If you rush it, it won't come out. Ugh, not so hard!"

The object finally dislodged with a satisfying popping sound. It looked a lot like the bass guitar that Haruko always carried with her. "What's that?" Naota asked. Haruko grinned. "Your bat!"

"Entered Earth's atmosphere. Altitude: fifty-six thousand feet."

Tension was at its boiling point in the underground surveillance room. Unlike normal residents, the people in this room knew the danger of the bomb hitting its destination. They also knew their chance of survival with the bomb this close was

low. However, Amarao, who'd been tracing the satellite's course, had discovered another faint hope that didn't involve Haruko.

"We might be safe with this," Amarao suggested.

His idea had to do with the angle of entry. Even with gravity controls and speed adjustments, the satellite would skip off the Earth's atmosphere and veer away at an angle. His hopes were immediately shattered, though, when he realized the satellite's angle changed sharply not because of a velocity change, but because of its rotation.

"It's a sinker!" Amarao yelled instinctively.

Their only hope now was Raharu Haruha Haruko. If she didn't have a secret plan, their lives, and all fifty thousand lives in Mabase, would be lost.

Several of the monitors were showing Naota and Haruko on the baseball field. Haruko had pulled an unknown object from Naota's head that looked exactly like the Brotherhood's guitar-shaped time-space interference weapon.

Amarao knew Haruko was a top-notch expert at that weapon. *I see*, Amarao thought. *You're going to hit the satellite bomb back with this new weapon.*

Jumping out of his chair, Amarao yelled again: "What are you doing? There's no way that kid can do it!" He was referring to the monitor, which had just revealed Haruko handing the weapon over to Naota.

What a fool I am! I shouldn't have trusted Raharu, Amarao thought, beating his fist against the desk. *She always does this. She plays stupid games at critical moments. It was the same back then*

All the operators in the room became startled as they watched their superior quickly lose color in his face.

Needless to say, all the color had drained from Naota's face, too. Haruko had told him to hit the falling satellite bomb back into space with the thing in his hand. It sounded far too ridiculous.

The unfamiliar weapon intimidated Naota, but Haruko smiled as coolly as always. "It's okay," she said. "Just do it like I showed you."

"Like I showed you..." Naota racked his brains, trying to remember what she'd showed him.

"In other words, I think I'm special?"

"But you do think you're special, don't you? Whatever happens, if you don't swing the bat, you'll be special, but you'll only be running away. See that star? Swing for that."

That star. Gazing upward, Naota could see the satellite heading steadily toward them with his own eyes. There wasn't anywhere to run. He had to swing or die. In his heart, Naota understood: If he didn't want to die, the only thing he could do was swing the bat. In this case, if he did swing, he'd be special.

"But you think you're special, don't you?" Haruko had said.

But, Naota thought, until now, I'd never thought of myself as that special. I think. Maybe. What is "special," anyway? The reason I couldn't swing the bat in the game was because I knew I couldn't hit it back. It was only because of that... I GET IT. I'M NOT REALLY ANYTHING SPECIAL!

Naota gripped the guitar-shaped weapon and assumed a relaxed batting stance

that Haruko had shown him, keeping his gaze firmly on the incoming satellite. From an outsider's point of view, it was simply suicide. However, Naota knew from experience that if Haruko was involved, common sense meant nothing.

Just giving it a shot is enough, right? Just trying... Naota reminded himself.

Perhaps without Naota realizing it, Haruko had greatly influenced his character.

Readyng himself, Naota looked up and watched the approaching satellite in slow motion. He could clearly see it in its entirety, as if it were a balloon falling. In other words, it was as though Naota was in a state in which he could see the ball to its seams.

Feels good... I can do this! As his body reacted to his enthusiasm, Naota swung, hitting the satellite bomb dead on. With the weapon in his hand, Naota squarely bludgeoned the giant black metal baseball, which was several meters in diameter.

Holding their breath, the operators watched Naota's swing. "He swung the bat!" Amarao exclaimed, stunned. "Uraaagh!" the boy on the monitor screamed. All of a sudden, the Shockwave from the impact blew through the surroundings, and the satellite disappeared into the blue sky.

Naota had really hit it back. When it was reported that the satellite was flying toward another planet at warp speed two, there was a huge, long-awaited sigh of relief in the monitor room.

Amarao still couldn't believe Naota had swung the bat. "Maybe he really did hit his father."

If it hadn't been an android, could this boy really have killed his father?

Amarao stared at Naota on the monitor as the boy frolicked with Haruko.

Haruko hugged Naota in delight, rubbing his head with her finger. "See, you can do it if you try! See, see?"

"Stop it! That hurts!" Naota exclaimed, although he was happy, too. His palms were numb, but it felt good. It was the same feeling he got when he'd ridden on the speeding Vespa the time when his brain had been empty.

Maybe this is how Haruko always feels.

Unaware of the harsh fate that awaited him, Naota laughed out loud.

Commentary by Kazuya Tsurumaki (Fooly Cooly Producer)

I thought about what it means to be a grown-up and what it means to be a child.

As the twentieth century comes to a close, I don't believe that all children will become grown-ups. They may get older, get taller, pay taxes, and get married, but there are people who will never become grown up. Take someone who ends up having to climb the ladder to being an adult two steps at a time due to some intense trauma. While this is happening, he may look at trivial things such as manga, sex symbols, railways, and fantasies. Then, there are the rest of us in the year 2000 a.d., whom those people pass on the stairs. More people fit into the latter group.

According to [Japanese] law, you're considered an grown-up as soon as you turn

twenty, but this isn't the case. When I turned twenty, I was still in front of the television, critically hitting Metal Slimes in the *Dragon Quest* I'd bought at a used game store, and resetting when I got frustrated. A real grown-up wouldn't have reset. It's a kind of "Time out! Time out!" cheat particular to children. If Nintendo started to make an adult system that could play erotic games, I'd ask them not to include a reset button. Grown-ups, who don't have the luxury of resetting as they walk through life, have a right and duty to experience that struggle in games, as well.

Being a total kid, I buy a BOMB every month. To a proper adult, BOMBs are more childish than multicolored bonbons for kiddies. I can tell simply by comparing how they smell. Just as Kenzo Kitakata said, to be an adult is to smell like squid and breasts. (No, he didn't really say that.) However, once you pass thirty, another problem arises. In my workplace, there are seven desks, and four of them have BOMBs on them. What do you think about this? And it won't do you any good to run away saying, "Oh, but I want to read Lilly's column" or to take out an adult's secret weapon, a balance sheet. That only makes it worse. At a nearby Sunkus, seven or eight BOMBs are stacked up every day, and we ask ourselves, "Isn't this a first in Japan to have these at a convenience store?" Even if we were to talk about economics, we'd still be kids. Those people who still can't accept it should shut up and go observe Haruka Suenaga or Masami Nagasawa. A Lolita complex is merely an adult admiring a child a grown-up metamorphosis.

I think I've become a bit too preachy, so I'll change gears. This sort of improvisation is kind of grown-up.

I like Diet Coke. This is grown-up. The children I want to direct (being the adult I am) will choose Pepsi. It's like what Koikeya is to potato chips, Lee is to jeans, and the Dom is to mobile suits. To choose the main road of Coca-Cola is adult. If you're looking for zero calories, you have Diet Coke for the same price. But how much is really for your diet? Drinking Diet Coke won't make you lose weight. The cool thing about it is the accompanying positive thinking that tells you, "This won't be an obstacle to your diet." Because simply taking the main road is adult and will turn you old-geezer-like before you know it, you try adding the negative value of "diet" to control this. Then, you have the really off-the-wall Fanta. Grape, no less. Be careful with those, or it'll be, "If he's so grown-up, why is he messing around with that stuff?" You might fool your mother, but the girl at Sunkus won't let it slip by her.

Many of you will say, "He didn't talk about FLCL at all." I'm sorry. You know, deciding what I should write is tough. As a director, interpreting your scriptwriter's novelization of your original anime is tough even for a proper grown-up. If I'd been too intricate in my wannabe-Kenzaburo Oe interpretation, the book itself would've become vague. The very adult Mr. Enokido said, "Isn't the best way to understand *Fooly Cooly* to read into all the various subtleties yourself?" I agree.

Volume III Brittle Bullet

Chapter 1

Huff, huff, huff. Naota's heavy breath condensed before dispersing into the autumn evening air.

Next to him, Haruko huddled up.

That day, that afternoon, that moment, on the bank near Mabase Bridge, sixth-grader Naota and housemaid Haruko were crouched down in the long grass, hiding themselves and keeping vigilant.

The air around them was full of danger. The situation was serious, and they were feeling the anxiety of the hunted.

Damn, they've got us!

At that moment, Naota and Haruko were being targeted by a sniper and were trapped in their position.

Only moments ago, they had exchanged numerous deadly bullets, the dry sound of gunshots ringing out emotionlessly. And in their hands, they clutched guns that glistened an ill-fated black. Naota was holding an Mil Ingram; Haruko had a bigger Uzi submachine gun.

This was a battlefield.

The area around Mabase Bridge had turned into the front of a dangerous battle.

And although the air was cool, the handle of Naota's gun was dripping with sweat.

The only noise now was the quiet babbling of the river, which only increased Naota's disconcertion. *Don't panic. Don't be scared*, Naota told himself, holding his breath.

Haruko tapped Naota softly on the shoulder. She was squinting at a thicket in front of her. *"Look over there."* She indicated the base of the concrete pillar holding up the bridge.

That was definitely where the enemy was hiding. He could sense their presence. His anxiety on the battlefield had proven to be unusually perceptive... of course. After all, the moment he let down his guard, he would end up part of that other world.

With the mouth of the machine gun, Haruko signaled for Naota to go first.

"Am I your decoy?!"

Haruko shot Naota an annoyed expression in response to his complaint. And then, she kicked the boy flying. "Go! Die for our love!"

"WAAAAHHHH!"

Naota lamented his bad luck at falling into this situation. *Why did this have to happen to me?*

It all had started the night before.

The night before, around dinnertime, Natota was practicing his swing in the backyard, which was buzzing with crickets. His batting form didn't look as though it had improved at all, but Naota's expression now bore a confidence that hadn't been there a few days before.

In this very special baseball season, Naota had gained confidence to the point that he was feeling a little high. The basis for Naota's confidence was that he had saved the town with his batting. That was, of course, when the satellite bomb had fallen to Earth, and Naota had knocked it out of the atmosphere with a guitar.

My batting saved this town. Perhaps I'm already a great man, an equal to my brother. No. My brother never would've been able to hit a falling satellite bomb with a guitar. I'm already stronger than my brother!

When it came down to it, Naota had indeed saved Mabase from ultimate destruction; however, he couldn't deny that Haruko, that superhuman girl, also had been a part of the equation. Remembering that fact, Naota doubted that he'd surpassed his well-admired brother, and that thinking so was just his imagination gone wild.

When you're happy, though, you don't notice that you're mostly just pleased with yourself. Having some confidence in oneself is not such a bad thing, of course; after all, if you don't believe in yourself enough to meet new challenges, then you'll never grow. True confidence is not simply the result of growing older, though; for true confidence, one must possess grace. And true diligence is needed for someone to believe he really has tried his best.

For Naota to realize that kind of true confidence, it would take some more time still.

"Good swing."

"Grandpa!"

Although Naota had been unaware of it, Shigekuni had been watching the boy's swing from the balcony.

"Haruko said so, too. You have potential."

"Yeah?"

Looking at his grandson with an expression that wasn't all that dissatisfied, the old man nodded.

Now, coming from Shigekuni, those words didn't actually mean Naota's grandpa was impressed with Naota's batting. In fact, when Shigekuni compared the boy to his older brother, batting genius Tasuku, the Martians' veteran coach could see that the younger child was nothing more than second-rate when it came to baseball.

But though he suspected Naota would never live up to his older brother's promise, this grandson of Shigekuni was still only twelve, too young for his grandpa to second-guess what lay in store for him. And watching him practice his swing, it seemed as if he wasn't adverse to baseball. And he continued to train even though he was bad, which wasn't entirely a wasted effort after all, he could learn a lot from team play. At any rate, the old man was satisfied that Naota had some interest in baseball; he would just have to nurture him with a lot of praise. Or so thought Shigekuni, who had built his whole life around baseball.

It was a picturesque scene, the old man who loved baseball watching his grandson play.

The problem lay in what happened next.

After practicing his swing to his heart's content, Naota cheerfully made his way up to the second floor, walking into his room without thinking twice, and stopping dead in his tracks. There, in his room, was Haruko. Haruko had been sharing a room with him for a while now, so it wasn't surprising that she was there; what was surprising was her appearance.

Naota was confused about where to direct his gaze. Haruko was wrapped up in her towel as though she'd just gotten out of the bath, and it looked like she'd just

moments ago put on her underwear. This was the first time since they'd started living together that Naota had seen her like this. Plus though he had merely dismissed her as a ridiculous girl in the beginning, Naota had found himself having other thoughts recently when he'd casually glanced at her body.

"Me, have personal feelings for him?" Haruko, clad only in her underwear and a towel, was pacing up and down, and talking to someone who wasn't there again.

"That's not true. That's not the reason this mission is taking so long. The N.O. channel is still open, so it doesn't make a difference if I like him or not... Oh, hey, were you listening?"

Haruko finally noticed Naota. Of course, she didn't care at all that he was there while she was half-naked. Instead, she took off her bath towel and started adjusting her bra.

Naota averted his eyes from her naked skin and looked around the room. Only Miyu Miyu was present, sitting on the desk, so Haruko had been talking to no one again.

But today, rather than worrying about her talking to herself, the contents of what Haruko had said were on Naota's mind.

Haruko had said, "*Me, have personal feelings for him?*"

"Is there... anyone?" Naota asked, pretending to be calm.

"What?"

"Anyone you like?"

Me, have personal feelings for him? Him. Maybe that person was himself. Haruko had come to live here because of him, after all.

"Do you like it? The way I smell straight out of the bath? Here, sniff me."

Instead of answering Naota's question, Haruko laughed provocatively and suddenly pushed out her breasts, covered only by her bra, toward Naota. She was a childish girl.

As she aggressively pressed her body against him, Naota brushed off Haruko with words: "Put on some clothes."

"You're blushing. You should grow up some more."

"Who are you to talk?"

Embarrassed, he forcefully pushed away Haruko's arms, which hugged him from behind but then, he lost his balance and fell over. His feet got tripped up, and he fell face up, coming directly into contact with Haruko's clean skin. It almost seemed like he had been pushed over.

Suddenly, their faces were right next to each other. Feeling as though those green eyes could see straight into him and sense his hidden desire, Naota went pale.

"Want me to teach you guitar?" Haruko asked.

Guitar?

"Why?"

"Why doesn't Takkun try using his guitar again? *Bam!* You were so great last time."

As she said that, it almost looked as if Haruko blushed but perhaps that was just Naota's imagination acting up again.

No, Haruko definitely just praised me. She definitely praised me!

His heart started to thump wildly. It was a weird sensation, as though he were being enveloped by a powerful magnetism coming from Haruko's eyes, mouth, and breasts. The scent released by her bare skin seemed to assault Naota's senses.

From the back of the boy's head, another bump suddenly popped out. And as the force of the horn pushed him forward, his lips pressed against Haruko's.

Mouth to mouth, the feeling of Haruko's lips...

"Oh, Takkun, that's it!" Haruko beamed deliberately.

"No, the horn, it"

"My first kiss..."

"Liar! You've done it loads!"

"... with Takkun. Ah!"

"No, it was the horn!"

While attempting to push in the horn that was coming from the back of his head, Naota desperately tried to explain. It was because of the horn that he had kissed her. Explaining that he hadn't done it of his own volition seemed to be more important to him than the new horn at that moment.

"Naota!"

Suddenly, Kamon screamed from outside the window.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"That's what I wanted to ask!"

Oh no, Naota thought. Apparently, Kamon had been out on the balcony, spying on them. He'd probably been watching Haruko change. It was unfortunate or perhaps fortunate that his father couldn't see the horn growing out of Naota's head from the balcony. All Kamon must have seen was Naota giving Haruko a real kiss.

Kamon's expression was one of pure jealousy.

"Naota, you and I will duel for Haruko."

"I'm in!" Haruko answered.

For such a stupid reason...

Now, on this day, this afternoon, this moment, everything depended on what happened in the match between him and his father. After Kamon's strongly worded challenge, they had decided upon a survival game.

A survival game... otherwise known as Airsoft or a BB gun war. Surely, everyone knows what a survival game is a game that came to Japan in the early '80s from America, wherein the participants armed themselves with toy air guns and split into two teams to battle it out.

Kamon had been really into the sport when it first came over to Japan, and he was the reason everyone was fully dressed up in goggles, boots, and gloves today. He himself was completely covered from head to toe in camouflage clothing.

Apparently, Kamon held a very strict aesthetic with regards to toys. For example, he had a fair collection of air guns, but he made fun of those who collected model guns. (By way of explanation to those not in the know: The difference between air guns and model guns is the ability to fire bullets. Air guns have the capability to shoot out little plastic balls called BBs, whereas model guns are things that exist only to be looked at; though very realistic-looking, they have no working parts.)

According to Kamon, an air gun was a "real toy," but a model gun was a "fake gun." It was his policy that function was more important than appearance when it came to the toys.

Naota thought this was idiotic. Whether a real toy or a fake gun, they both were toys when it came down to it, and not something an adult should be into.

He thought of himself as grown up, but Naota eventually had agreed to participate in this survival game per Kamon's conditions because Naota didn't entirely dislike this kind of game himself.

It would be helpful to note that the rules of a survival game are not totally fixed; rather, the rules of combat are dependent on the participant and the region. The ones that Kamon had selected that day were standard rules used in a match up called Center Flag, a simple game wherein the participants divided into two teams, and the first team to capture the flag in the center of the field would win.

Naota and Haruko were the blue team, and Canti and Kamon were the opposing red team.

Kamon had objected to the pairing, but Haruko wasn't going to concede. It seemed she had wanted it to be dramatic, with Naota protecting her from being reclaimed by Kamon.

And so, Haruko and Naota wore blue headbands, Canti and Kamon wore red ones, and they fought. Only, Naota was covering his head with the hood of his parka, considering that as of the day before, a horn was growing there one much different from all the others. Even when Naota pushed on it, it wouldn't go back in.

The horn this time very much resembled the hammer of a pistol.

"Hurry and go!" Haruko shouted, kicking Naota in the back.

"Stop it!"

Pushed into the open, Naota quickly tried to hide himself in the grass again, but Haruko wasn't going to allow that. She pushed him out again.

"Don't use me as a human shield."

"Then, was that kiss just a game?"

Mouth to mouth... Haruko's lips...

"What's the matter, Naota?" Kamon called from somewhere. "Be a man! Come out and fight me face-to-face!"

Bullets came flying at Naota, narrowly missing him.

In a survival game, there is a strict rule whereupon if an enemy bullet hits you, you have to declare it out loud and then sit out for the rest of the game as a "corpse." In other words, you say, "dead," and then fall to the ground without another word. It is a *terrifying* game.

"Come on, what's the matter, son?" Kamon called again. "If you run away scared, then your dad is going to take Haruko from you."

"Oh no, Takkun." Her voice very helpless, Haruko clung to Naota.

"Cut it out, already!" But even as Naota said that, he looked kind of happy.

Their bodies close, he was surrounded by the scent of Haruko again the scent of Haruko, who was in love with him.

Nothing I can do, I guess, I'll have to protect her.

"Wait here."

"Oh, you're so amazing, Takkun."

Gripping the gun, he carefully and quickly scuttled toward the clump of grass where Kamon's voice was coming from, keeping his upper body down low. He felt pretty confident Naota had this one in the bag.

Kamon had lost by calling out and revealing his position. If Naota could use the element of surprise, he would win. He already had the big advantage of stealth thanks to his smaller body, but he couldn't let his guard down, as Canti could be waiting somewhere to ambush him.

He saw a shadow coming from the other side of the tuft of grass camouflage gear. It was Kamon, and it didn't look like he had noticed Naota yet.

I've got you! Naota leapt into the grass to catch his father from behind. Without a moment's hesitation, he pulled the trigger of his Ingram. Four shots, five shots, bullets that would hit their target without fail...

However, what Naota had shot was a decoy. It was a log dummy dressed in camouflage gear.

"Too easy!" A speaker from next to the dummy suddenly screamed. "You're just too easy, Naota."

Sensing the danger, Naota tried to flee but suddenly, the ground underneath his feet disappeared. A hole! It was a trap that Kamon had set. He'd probably prepared it the night before.

Naota was barely able to cling to the edge of the pit and heave himself out from the deep, well-like, which even an adult would find difficult to get out of. The bottom of the hole was dark, the sun unable to reach it.

He went this far... ?

Kamon loved survival games, and he was obsessed with Haruko. For these two reasons, he was not treating this game as a laughing matter.

Right then, enemy bullets came flying toward Naota, who jumped feverishly back into the thicket.

Unbeknownst to the players, there was someone secretly watching the entire survival game through a scope from a car parked on top of the bridge... a young woman.

When the woman finally caught Canti in her scope, she took out a large military transceiver and flicked the switch.

"Target sight confirmed," she reported. "It's blue. Repeat: blue."

"So, it isn't red," confirmed a male voice that sounded as if it could be her superior. It was the voice of Commander Amarao.

The woman who was watching Canti through the scope was an officer of the Department of Interstellar Immigration. She was one of the operators who'd been in the monitor room beside Amarao at the time of the falling satellite bomb incident.

She had a childlike face, but she was in her twenties. The dark, freckled woman was called Kitsurubami.

"They're just playing a game. Looks pretty stupid. I think I can do this myself." Having given that report to her superior, Kitsurubami got down off the car and pulled out some equipment. She looked pretty happy to do so.

The truth was that Kitsurubami had long wished for this kind of front-line work. This was her ideal job. What she removed from her car was an oversized, long-barreled, black firearm a Degtyaryov sniper rifle, which made a perfect addition to this battle.

Hers, however, was no toy.

Chapter 2

Situated on the top of the hill, Medical Mechanica had decided to show its true form and take action.

Canti's escape combined with the intervention of the brotherhood had MM more alarmed than it had ever been before. Recently, there had even been signs that MM was going to ignore the treaty and try to capture Canti, because the robot threatened planetary security. Under normal circumstances, MM facilities the resident factory would just observe, but to MM, Canti's capture was more important than observing a treaty.

Therefore, given the emergency situation, it was essential for the Department of Interstellar Immigration to capture Canti before MM could.

Things have gotten pretty hairy.

As he pondered the instability of the situation, Commander Amarao sat in a beauty salon in town. His surroundings were in contrast to the danger of the situation as his head stuck out of a white cloth and a stylist combed his hair.

Communicating through a neck charm, Amarao gave orders to Kitsurubami. "Okay, if we screw this up, then MM is going to get involved for real, so wait until I get there. And whatever you do, don't mess with Raharu it'll just get even more complicated.

"I have a lot of work to do, so make it a quick cut, please. I want to look good, though I want to look dignified for a girl I haven't seen in a while... dependable, if you know what I mean."

The latter half of Amarao's speech did not consist of orders to his subordinate, rather directions to the hairdresser next to him.

As Kitsurubami hung up the connection, those incomprehensible words echoed in her ears. "A girl he hasn't seen in a while?"

She suspected that he was talking about Raharu, also known as Haruko.

She'd wondered why Amarao had made time to go to the hairdresser when they were about to begin battle plans for the urgent situation that had developed but if the reason was Haruko, Kitsurubami could understand; Amarao was a bit more concerned with Raharu than was absolutely necessary.

According to rumors, he had worked with Haruko before. And then, ever since that girl had showed him her special power, he'd been afraid of her. But it wasn't just Kitsurubami's imagination that underneath his fear, Amarao seemed to have an admiration for Haruko. Most likely, Amarao had gone to the salon in anticipation of finally coming in contact with Haruko again.

Well whatever, Kitsurubami thought. It doesn't matter to me.

Still looking through the scope, she refitted the large receiver to her belt in a habituated manner. She didn't use the standard issue one that was designed to look like an ordinary mass-market cell phone, instead preferring to employ this large Russian military-use transceiver. Similarly, the Degtyaryov sniper rifle she wielded was not issued by her organization, rather something she owned because of her own personal hobbies.

Three months earlier, Amarao had been dispatched by the center to be a part of the special immigration team situated in Mabase. And because of that dispatch, the recently admitted Kitsurubami was now able to realize her desire to become a field agent, a wish that derived from her military hobbies.

Guns those beautiful, heavy, metal machines, cool things that could kill a person and the senselessness in using them... Indeed, her passion for her job didn't come from patriotism or responsibility, but instead from her interest in using military weapons in a real fight.

Her current task was to watch a robot that had escaped from MM. But if she had intended only to watch, then she wouldn't have brought a personal battle rifle with her.

Amarao had told her to wait until he got there; however, if the robot's body color changed to anything besides blue, then she had been given permission to act as the situation demanded. All it took was a change of color and she was the only one there. She had plenty of excuses she could use.

She could see that the target robot was hidden in the grass.

While looking through the Degtyaryov's sniper scope with a self-satisfied look on her face, she slowly pressed the trigger.

The enemy bullets attacked endlessly, and Naota was the only one countering. No longer able to tolerate Haruko relaxing next to him, he screamed at her. "What are you doing? Do something! This is a shootout!"

"What's shooting out?"

Haruko lazily pointed the barrel of her Uzi in no particular direction, pulling the trigger. *Rat tat tat* came the dry sound of gunfire.

Then, Haruko saw Kitsurubami aiming for Canti from the top of the bridge.

Several bullets hit the railing of the bridge, right beside where Kitsurubami was stationed. Kitsurubami, who had been about to pull the trigger on her rifle, knew that she had just been threatened with a terrifyingly accurate attack.

Panicking, she looked through the scope in the direction of fire. There was Haruko, looking her way with a bold smile on her face.

Haruko's position was several meters from the bridge where Kitsurubami was, quite a distance farther than the effective range of an air gun. That meant the gun Haruko had was the real thing; the bullets had hit dead on, burying themselves in the bridge's concrete barricade. Kitsurubami shuddered. She was afraid, not so much of the fact that Haruko had a real gun, rather of the marksmanship that Haruko had displayed. Haruko was not an enemy to be taken lightly.

But when Kitsurubami touched the unfamiliar bullets buried in the barrier, her

fear turned to confusion.

They were BB bullets! The things that had managed to get buried into the barrier were small plastic balls for use in an air gun.

What's going on?

Confused by the impossibility of this, Kitsurubami forgot for a moment that she was still holding onto the heavy sniper rifle as she leaned over the bridge railing. The moment she noticed, it was too late: Her world tilted.

"Eh!"

Losing her balance, Kitsurubami fell into the river along with her beloved gun.

Her fall was followed by an "ugh" the strange yelp of a man. The place where she'd fallen, right into a patch of tall reeds, coincidentally happened to be where the unlucky Kamon was hiding. Kitsurubami had landed right on top of him.

The two rolled into the deep section of the river and were swept away by the fast water current.

Kamon's fighting spirit with regards to survival games was indomitable, though; perhaps his battle spirit even surpassed Kitsurubami's in that respect. So, having suddenly been involved in an accident, even as he was being washed away, he yelled out a parting cheer for his teammate: "I'm leaving the rest to you, TV booooooyyyyyy..."

When it heard its teammate's parting words, Canti jumped out from the grass where it had been hiding to challenge Naota head on. Although Canti was in fact equipped with a laser sight, it had put it away without anyone instructing it to do so, simply having decided that kind of thing wouldn't be chivalrous in today's game. Indeed, it was a robot with sense and reason.

"Damn!" Naota panicked. The enemy had caught him from behind.

Unfortunately for Canti, who was at the point of certain victory, the only thing that came from his air gun was the lonely clicking sound of the trigger. It had run out of bullets after its previous full-on assault.

With this development, the certain victory clearly reversed to Naota.

"Heh heh, I win!" Naota praised himself and turned his guns on Canti.

The robot realized it was in a bad spot and so quickly fled.

It was a "center flag" match, so the game could be decided if someone stole the flag from the middle of the field but Naota had decided to win by way of the gun, and thus chased after Canti. It seemed he'd discovered the joy of this game as it had progressed.

Elated, Naota chased Canti over the dry riverbed. However, when he turned the corner at a small boathouse...

"Waaaahhhh!"

Naota was thrown into confusion.

Canti, whom he'd thought was unarmed, ambushed him with a new air gun in its hand.

Having planned meticulously for this battle, Kamon had prepped by hiding guns in that small boathouse. Once again, the tables had turned.

With a loaded air gun right in his face, Naota was up against a wall.

"Timeout, timeout! I said timeout!" Naota yelled. "We get three timeouts."

Upon hearing this new rule, Canti protested unhappily, but without words. *There's no such thing as timeouts*, it seemed to say with its silence.

"Don't give me that look," Naota shot back without hesitation. "Okay! I just made it up right now."

It was at that moment that a three-wheeled truck approached the boathouse from a riverside road and honked its horn.

"Hey, Naota," Naota's classmate Gaku waved from the passenger side. Their classmate Masashi sat in the driver's seat.

What? Naota played it cool, but on the inside, he was surprised. Since when did Masashi start driving that car?

"We're helping at the shop," Masashi said nonchalantly.

"Delivery. Part-time job," Gaku added casually.

No way!

On the truck were the words "Masamune's Sake." Naota knew that Masashi was the son of a sake storeowner; he had even heard that Masashi helped out by delivering goods. But to actually be at the wheel of a truck...

"It's okay! We won't get caught. We only drive beside the river."

Masashi's calm explanation made Naota all the more surprised. *Does he... does he do this all the time?*

"You look pretty cool." A girl's voice spoke.

When Naota looked for its owner, he saw Eri Ninamori relaxing on the back of the truck, sucking on a popsicle.

You're in on this, too? This was behavior unbecoming of the class president.

"But," she asked casually, "it's only a toy, right? Does it shoot bullets?"

When Ninamori had said Naota looked "cool" only a second before, she must have been referring to the air gun Naota was holding. Naota now felt awkward and tried to hide his gun, flustered.

What's going on? he panicked.

His classmates, who were doing really grown-up things like driving a car and working part-time delivery jobs, must have been wondering if Naota Nandaba liked playing war.

Well I don't really like it...

"No, I mean. This is, well, I mean... Oh, Canti... go and get us some drinks."

Trying to cover up the fact that he had been playing with a toy gun, Naota turned to Canti at his side, trying to shift focus to the robot. However, Naota's confused brain didn't really handle this very well, and his attempt to hide his embarrassment became terribly obvious.

The domesticated housekeeper robot launched upward immediately in response to Naota's stammered request.

Canti always had the ability to fly through its gravitational controls but once again, it had chosen not to use this advantage during the survival game. If there was work to be done, though, the robot would immediately change modes.

Of course, Naota's classmates knew what Naota was trying to do; they could see it as clear as day. But it wasn't as though Gaku, Masashi, and Ninamori were making

fun of Naota. They were actually thinking, "Oh, survival game. Looks cool." Naoto's worrying was really just a product of his personal pride, and it came from his insecurity and shame. He wanted to believe that he was more adult than anyone else, cooler than everyone.

When Canti received Naota's order and flew off, it surprised his classmates.

Indeed, Naota had gotten used to living with this robot, so giving Canti orders, like telling it to buy something, had become an everyday thing to Naoto. But wasn't controlling this robot as he wished so much more amazing than driving a car?

"Did you hear, Naota?" Gaku asked as watched the robot fly off, using an unusually calm tone for Gaku.

"What?"

"The rumors?"

"What rumors?"

Gaku exchanged looks with Masashi at his side. They seemed to be using their eyes to consult with each other about how much they should ask. Ninamori, who kept sucking on her popsicle, quietly glanced at Naota from the side.

Naota felt an eerie mood descend; it felt like there was something that only he didn't know, something that involved him being hidden from him.

"What? What rumors?"

"You know, that satellite thing that happened?" Gaku said. "Everyone is saying that it was you who saved the city. And didn't you interact with the robot that time at the school, too? Everyone's saying you can pilot the robot!"

The time at the school when they'd been practicing for the class play, a robot had come out of Ninamori's head and run amuck.

Naota already knew there were rumors going around that Canti had crushed that violent robot. It seemed those rumors had grown, and now it was going around that the person who controlled Canti and had resolved the satellite crisis was Naota.

Hmm. It's not entirely untrue, Naota thought.

To be more precise, Naota hadn't used Canti to resolve the satellite crisis; rather, he'd smacked the sphere back with a guitar in his own hands meaning Naota was more a hero than they thought. And, well, it was kind of true that he had operated Canti; Naota had become a part of Canti and smashed wild robots twice now. Just as the rumors said, he had operated the robot and saved the city.

However, Naoto had taken a secret pride in the fact that he couldn't disclose these details to people. He knew that no one would've believed him if he'd said, he'd hit a bomb back into space with a guitar during the satellite crisis. But now that those events had entered the realm of rumor, all bets were off.

"Oh, I didn't know you guys knew so much."

"So, you really did save the city then?" Masashi confirmed.

"Really, really?" Gaku was pretty excited. "That's pretty amazing!"

"Well, you know..." Naota beamed proudly.

Yeah, I guess I really am something. The impatience he had been feeling immediately changed to an air of coolness. *I guess I really am amazing.*

But then, with a "hey, hey, hey," Haruko suddenly appeared behind the beaming Naota, embracing him and recklessly grabbing his groin.

"Look, Takkun."

"Hey, stop that. Don't touch me."

"Doesn't it feel good?"

"That's not the point!"

"Hey, we won the game!" Haruko was holding the game flag in her hand. "With this, I'm all Takkun's!"

"I told you not to touch me!"

Seeing this open display of indecency with a minor, Gaku and Masashi could only stare transfixed. They thought to themselves that this housekeeper of Naota's was no ordinary person, after all, but their minds didn't make the connection between this sensual girl and the light-speed Vespa woman who they had once told scary stories about at school.

"Huh?"

Ninamori spotted a shadow over the embankment. It was a high school girl who was gazing toward Naota and Haruko with a sad air.

Mamimi Samejima.

Haruko noticed Mamimi and waved the flag cheerily. "Hey! Mamimi!"

Having been called to, Mamimi looked perplexed. She had planned to stand there unnoticed, but having been spotted, she had nowhere to run.

Naota also raised his head as he looked up at Mamimi. However, considering he was being embraced by Haruko, Naota felt awkward, as well.

For a moment, Naota and Mamimi met each other's eyes, and then they both quickly looked away.

Chapter 3

What kind of disaster are those three involved in? Ninamori thought.

Having separated from Naota and the others, they were once again driving the Masamune's Sake truck alongside the river.

"Bye! See you in school!" they'd said. "We still have some deliveries to make, so we'd better get going." But the truth was that they didn't really have any work left to do; Masashi simply had the good sense to get out of there.

It was a wise decision. When Mamimi turned up, the atmosphere had become quite uncomfortable.

Ninamori's feelings toward Naota had changed from before, though; even with Haruko and Naota frolicking around in such an indecent manner right next to her, she hadn't felt a thing.

I gave up being the Marquis de Carabas.

During the school play, the reason Ninamori had worn fake glasses over her contact lenses was that she'd wanted to pretend she was a child. In real life, she'd pretended to be an adult, maintaining that appearance with contact lenses. So when she'd worn glasses on stage, she'd actually showed her true face, that of a simple child. That's how Ninamori made sense of it in her head.

In her mind, those who pretended to be grown up were children, so to prove that she had indeed grown up, she'd pretended to be a child by wearing glasses in the

school play, it wasn't until a little while after the play was over that she'd realized she didn't have to pretend to be a child.

I really am still a child. When I want to cry, then it's okay to cry. I can enjoy riding in a truck with my classmates. And I can enjoy eating this soda-flavored popsicle as much as I want to.

When she looked at the stick from the popsicle she had just finished eating, she noticed there was something written on it. Ninamori had bought the popsicle at Masamune's Sake shop, so she extended her hand into the front seat and showed it to Masashi, who was driving.

"Look. I won."

"Oh yeah, you did. Wait a second."

Masashi took a small paper bag out of a box on the front seat, offering it to Ninamori.

"What is it?"

"Free gift. Hope you like it."

Ninamori took out a small item from the paper bag a water pistol. It was a toy, a water gun made out of transparent green plastic.

"It's pretty."

She smiled and held the water gun up to the sun. It cast a bright-colored, translucent shadow across her face.

With one eye closed, she looked through her newly acquired jewel at the world beyond. The green world spread into the girl's eyes: Green sky. Green clouds. Green river. Through the plastic, everything looked like she was in another world. Ninamori was now on a green planet in another universe.

"That high school girl," Masashi said from the front seat, "that's Naota's brother's girlfriend."

That was news to Ninamori. So, Mamimi Samejima was the girlfriend of Naota's brother, who was playing baseball in America. Somehow, Masashi knew this, as did Gaku.

"But you know," Gaku said, "that maid likes Naota more. That touchy-feely girl *really* seems to like Naota. Naota's, like, popular."

Is that really right? Ninamori thought. Wasn't it dangerous for a high school girl and an adult female to hold special feelings for the same sixth grade boy?

Pointing her water pistol into the sky, Ninamori aimed at the sun and fired.

Well, Haruko and Mamimi both seem pretty dangerous.

Naota drank some canned juice Canti had bought for them. Right after Canti had delivered it, the robot had disappeared somewhere. And then, Haruko, the person who'd created this disaster by calling to Mamimi, also disappeared somewhere. So, now it was just Naota and Mamimi left by the river near Mabase Bridge, the area that had until just a while ago been the scene of the survival game.

Naota was sitting on the bank as he always did. Mamimi was holding Naota's air gun, playing with it while she rambled off nonsense with no train of logic. She seemed to be pretending she was a gunman she'd seen on TV.

"This body here will be the defense, continuing to neutralize the AT field. We

have to defend from their dissolving solution. Backup, move down. Withdraw your rifles, and hand to the offense. Now, offense fire together, destroy target... NOW!"

"Don't point it at me; it's dangerous."

"You got the one with bits in it."

Naota was startled. Mamimi was commenting at the can of juice in Naota's hand, having noticed that it was orange juice with pulp in it.

"You've been getting the ones with pulp in nowadays?"

"Well, I don't like the bitter drinks."

"She likes the pulp, too Haru."

Now that she'd said it, Naota noticed for the first time that he had only drunk canned coffee previously. It was true that he had started to enjoy drinking the pulpy juice that was mixed with bits of fruit only recently... and that it was Haruko's drink of choice. Without him knowing it, Haruko had made an impact on him at least, as far as his choice of cold drinks.

"I was watching," Mamimi said. "I was watching."

"You noticed that?"

She must have been talking about the disaster, when Haruko had gotten caught up in animal lust.

Of course, Naota felt a little guilty that Mamimi had seen him messing around like that with Haruko. It had been careless. How much had Mamimi seen? It wasn't as though he had looked very happy about it, had he?

"I don't really think anything about Haruko." Naota's voice sounded apologetic. "Haruko was just really happy and was just jumping all over me; that's what she always does. Well, what I mean is, that's what she's always like; I don't mean that she's always doing that kind of stuff."

Mamimi looked at Naota with sadness hers was the troubled face of an abandoned cat.

Naota was strangely embarrassed, but also happy. Why? Because a truth had become clear. The reason Mamimi had noticed and been bothered by the pulpy juice was obvious! Mamimi was feeling jealous over him.

Mamimi is jealous! It's tough being so popular, Naota said to himself internally.

"You're really amazing," Mamimi said. "You drove Canti, you hit back the Lord of Fear and saved the city..."

"Oh?"

"Hit back the Lord of Fear and saved the city?"

She must have been referring to when he'd hit the satellite bomb. Mamimi must have known about that, as well.

Indeed, at the time of the incident, Canti had been with Mamimi, and had somehow shown her the same images from Amarao's spy cameras, so Mamimi had seen the whole thing.

"You're really amazing now, Takkun."

"No, it's no big deal..."

Masashi and the others seem to have known, too; perhaps rumors about the whole satellite incident have spread all over the town, Naota thought. Maybe there had been people watching it. *Well, whatever, as long as my success is spreading.*

He was starting to feel very satisfied with himself when Mamimi suddenly approached Naota from behind. She was probably going to cuddle him as always.

Although he knew that it couldn't go on forever, at the moment, he couldn't stop this "play." Ever since Tasuku had left for America, Naota had "played" with Mamimi on this bank, countless times. He wondered how much longer it would go on.

"Ouch!"

In contrast to his sweet expectations, Naota felt a sharp pain at the back of his head. Mamimi had fired the airgun she was holding.

"What are you doing?"

If fired at this close a distance, BB bullets were pretty painful. Naota had been wearing his parka hood, which had protected him from a direct hit. Now, to make sure that the hidden horn wasn't revealed, Naota quickly covered his head with it again.

"Is it Fooly Cooly under your hood again?" Mamimi asked. "Takkun, you're just too amazing. You do furry wurry and lumpy bumpy. When did you become like this, Takkun? It was when Haruko came, huh?"

"Hey, are you..."

I knew it, Naota thought. I knew it. Mamimi is jealous. This pain in the back of my head must be proof that I'm a popular guy.

He looked at Mamimi's lips. Naota didn't know the taste of those alluring lips. Kissing them was the only thing that Mamimi had firmly objected to, that she hadn't let him do.

But those faraway lips could be close so soon. Today. Today, they were going to be his.

Naota grabbed Mamimi's hand. He stood up and pulled her away from the river. "Come on!"

"Don't come near me!"

Finally having managed to stand in a shallow part of the river, Kitsurubami took a small hand pistol from her waterproof holster. The mouth of the gun was directed at none other than the robot Canti, who was standing on the riverbank.

Canti was motionless like a statue, looking straight at Kitsurubami.

I'm scared...

Kitsurubami hadn't been planning to do anything more than snipe at a distance. Now, when unexpectedly encountering the target at close range, she was overwhelmed by the threat, and having almost no real battlefield experience, she instinctively pulled on the pistol trigger. Although all her bullets hit dead on, they merely made dull metallic sounds. The robot's blue body was built with a resistant quality that bullets could not impact.

Kitsurubami had looked through the robot's data file, of course, considering it was her target. She knew that it couldn't be defeated by a pistol's bullets, so she had prepared her favorite anti-tank rifle. But after that lethal rifle had been lost somewhere on the riverbed, she'd had to try feebly attacking it with a powerless pistol to make it clear that she was an enemy.

It was a terrible situation to be in, but it wasn't entirely unsurprising. Although she regarded herself as a fully fledged soldier, Kitsurubami didn't have any formal training. She was simply playing make-believe at being a soldier.

And as she continued frantically pulling the trigger, she quickly ran out of bullets.

The expressionless monitor head of the robot faced her as Canti took a step toward Kitsurubami, who was still standing in the river.

"Argh!"

Fear pierced her entire body. She regretted getting ahead of herself. A strong enemy was closing in on her. Unarmed, she could do nothing but tremble. What kind of vengeance would it take?

Now is the retaliation. I'm done for!

With no hope of escape, she felt weak at the knees. It was hardly noticeable on her wet body, but something warm spread down between her legs. The pistol fell from her fingers and dropped into the river. And Kitsurubami, resigned to her fate, closed her eyes.

"Kitsurubami! Kitsurubami, hey! What happened?"

Amarao was still in the hair salon in town. As he was being shampooed, he was reclining, his body covered by a sheet and his face hidden by a gauze.

"Answer me. Hey, Kitsurubami!"

"Hot, hot, HOT!" Suddenly, he screamed in pain. The water they were using to rinse his head was too hot.

Without apologizing, the hairdresser asked him, "What hair color would you like today? Your normal chestnut brown color? Or would you rather Fooly Cooly color?"

It couldn't be! Amarao recognized that stylist's voice. Panicked, he swiped the gauze from his face and saw Haruko standing there.

"When did you...?!"

"Thought the clean cut would make the chicks dig you?"

"What are you doing here?!"

"Thought you'd send your minion to get me?" Amarao jumped up quickly, grabbing his pistol. Then, with one hand, he reflexively checked to see if his eyebrows were still on his forehead.

"Huh?"

Kitsurubami felt her body being carried gently. She opened her eyes.

The robot had lifted her up with its large hands, saving her from the cold river water; now, it was helping her stand up on the bank.

And then, to her surprise, as if to say "sorry," it gently patted her on the head.

Kitsurubami's pulse quickened but not out of fear. She felt her heart accelerate and her blood warm in an instant.

In truth, the late-bloomer Kitsurubami had dated only three guys up until that point. The first had been an assistant professor when she was attending university. The second had been a workplace romance with a superior. And the other had been a man who'd been fooling around, cheating on his wife; he had wooed her, and then

they had started dating. She had finally told the married man she'd wanted to break up, claiming it had been because they went out only when it suited him, but the real reason that she'd broken up with him was because men just weren't enough for her. Now, for the first time, she felt like she understood what men had been lacking.

So gentle.

She felt a mysterious aura, and the warm surge enveloped her.

She touched the silent robot.

This was Kitsurubami's first love.

"That robot is too dangerous."

Aiming his gun at Haruko, Amarao slowly got up from his seat. It was like he was trying to move a wild beast into a pen gently, so as not to excite it.

Just as Katsurubami had predicted, the reason Amarao had gone to the hairdresser was to prepare to meet Haruko. The woman he'd told the stylist he hadn't seen for a long time was, in fact, Haruko. Although he had a strong attraction to Haruko, though, she also was a source of fear for him.

"You must have noticed," Amarao said reasonably, "that when the robot turns red, it has some connection with Atomsk. If we don't do something soon, MM is going to make a move. They're ready to destroy this planet."

"So what?"

Just hearing her rude words set off Amarao's primal fear, and he ran outside on impulse. It was no good. He couldn't take her alone.

Seeing their boss running out the building for his life, the subordinates who had been waiting outside the hair salon grabbed their own guns.

"Wait!" Amarao screamed, but his subordinates fired at Haruko when she showed herself at the shop entrance. It seemed all the people who worked under Amarao were lacking in battle experience.

Suddenly being shot at, Haruko smiled boldly and waved some metallic object in her hand.

Amarao and his inferiors watched. In front of their eyes, all the bullets had been cut cleanly in two and were now laying on the floor.

Haruko wore the cruel smile of a carnivorous beast.

The metal object in her hand was a razor that had been on the hair stylist's counter.

Amarao was reminded of how terrifying this woman truly was.

"She's really something."

"She's nothing," Naota assessed Haruko as he pulled Mamimi along by the arm to the front of the station. "She's nothing but an idiot."

"That hurts! Why are you pulling me?"

Naota had kept a tight grip on Mamimi ever since they'd left the riverbank, and she'd complained about it again and again, but Naota hadn't paid attention to her protests at all. It was like none of Mamimi's words reached Naota's ears.

"Seriously, since she came, she's been nothing but trouble. We haven't been able to spend time alone, just the two us, for ages. It was better before."

Today, Mamimi is going to be mine.

That's how much he liked Mamimi he'd decided the girl he had always been thinking of was going to be his. Naota was excited. Three months ago, he had made a decision about his relationship with Mamimi. He didn't like his position of being his brother's substitute, and he was going to tell Mamimi the truth: Mamimi's ideal partner Naota's brother, Tasuku Nandaba already had a girlfriend in America. Naota was going to come clean with the hidden reality.

As a result, even Naota didn't know what would happen to his own relationship with Mamimi. He thought that perhaps all the time they had spent together up until now might mean nothing. He knew that she didn't have any particular attraction to him. Yet Naota came to understand that he couldn't just stay being a substitute. Still, Naota had become stuck on his final decision, and had kept playing around with Mamimi to put it off.

Now, however, the situation had changed: Haruko Haruhara had appeared.

Amid the unpredictable chaos and disaster that had surrounded him ever since she'd arrived, Naota had held on to the ill-defined situation with Mamimi... and bit by bit, something between them had changed.

Probably, above all, he himself had changed, Naota felt. He was stronger. Different from before. Tougher. More manly. He had saved the town. He had grown up, and the world had opened to him. Now, Mamimi was jealous of his relationship with Haruko. Mamimi was in love with him. Now... now, he was going to be able to pursue his relationship with Mamimi.

"How about here?"

Finally, Naota stopped in front of a small coffee shop. Of course, elementary school kids couldn't go into coffee shops unaccompanied. But that was why Naota had chosen a coffee shop. He was going to break the school rules and shatter the stagnant situation, all with one stone. He was going to do today all the things he hadn't done, the things he wasn't allowed to do. He was going to become someone new. His heart was pounding, but he opened the door to the coffee shop, maintaining the pretense of being cool.

"Are we going in?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Why this coffee shop?"

"You came here with my brother, didn't you?"

A coffee shop a place Naota considered to be where real lovers spent time together and shared real words of love together. If they could spend time here together, then it would mean they were real lovers.

Though Naota's thinking was a bit humorous, the fact was that it wasn't that far from the truth. You might say it was unexpectedly accurate.

By the river, the two of them had played around like lovers but only when they were on the riverbank. The pair had never had anything more than a riverbank relationship. Naota had noticed at some point that the riverbank was simply the place where Mamimi spent time with her "substitute" boyfriend. That was part of the reason Naota had brought her to this coffee shop. *Today; we're going to go from a riverbank relationship to a coffee shop relationship.*

But at about this time, Mamimi managed to break loose from Naota's grip. Angrily, she said, "What are you doing?"

"What?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"But don't you *"like me"*, was what he was about to say, but he suddenly got nervous and couldn't say it.

Mamimi looked really angry. She was really angry that he had brought her to a coffee shop. She looked as though she didn't like this.

Naota grew anxious. Was he wrong? Did Mamimi not like him? But then why was she jealous of Haruko?

"This is because of Haru, isn't it?" Mamimi asked.

Naota managed to get a little of his confidence back when he heard that. He'd been right: Mamimi was jealous of Haruko. She did like him. *Yeah, she likes me, so there's no point in being nervous.*

"Don't worry," Naota said. "I'm not involved with her."

"How much do you like Haru?"

"No, I like "

"Takkun, you like Haru, don't you?"

What are you saying?

Mamimi was looking at Naota sadly. Behind her eyes were thoughts that Naota couldn't comprehend. In the overconfident state that Naota was now in, he wasn't able to understand the meaning of the loneliness in her eyes.

Mamimi had watched Naota messing around with Haruko on the riverbank with sadness but it wasn't with a jealous heart as Naota had suspected; Naota had it wrong.

The truth was that, as she'd watched him hit the satellite, Mamimi had seen a certain kind of manliness in Naota. And although seeing something more manly in Naota had improved her opinion of him as a man, it didn't mean that she now desired him. In fact, it was precisely the opposite: Manly Naota was not what she wanted. What Mamimi needed was a substitute Takkun.

Naota had lost interest in being a substitute, but Mamimi didn't need him as anything but a substitute. She didn't need a manly Naota, because to Mamimi, a real man was someone who might throw her away..

Of course, that was Mamimi's made-up logic. It would have been useless to try to explain to Naota.

Mamimi looked down at Naota silently; however, Naota could see only Mamimi's soft lips. There they were, a boy and a girl, each with thoughts not understood by the other.

Naota stood on his tiptoes... Naota stood on his tiptoes, grabbed Mamimi, and tried to kiss her.

But Mamimi turned her face away and refused him.

"What's the matter?" Naota yelled at her. "You like me, don't you?"

The loneliness was in Mamimi's eyes.

And at that moment *KACHIN!* the horn inside the hood at the back of his head, the hammer of a double action-type pistol, moved.

The time was 3:32 pm.

With a loud pistol shot, something unnatural fired out from between Naota's eyebrows.

That was the beginning of the massive transformation.

Chapter 4

What had fired out from was not a small thing like a bullet; rather, what flew from his forehead with incredible force was a liquid metal not unlike a jet of water from a fire engine's water cannon.

All Naota's previous strange horns were robots that had used Naota's head as a route, allowing them to pop out from the other side. Those past experiences hasn't been particularly pleasant. Naota expected this one would turn out to be the same kind of humanoid robot as the others, and he prepared himself for that horrible feeling once more.

But... this time things were a bit different from his other extraordinary experiences.

"It's overflowing from Takkun!"

Even Mamimi, who had witnessed such a thing happen before, was sitting down on the ground and staring dumbfounded in amazement. She wasn't incredulous in regard to the incident happening, but she was blown away by the *size* of the incident.

This new projection was already a lot larger than the past robots that had come out, and it just kept on coming from Naota's head with incomparable momentum and speed. The thing was of an unimaginable scale, and it just kept coming and coming, like a never-ending snake firework.

That liquid metallic snake firework soared into the sky above Mabase, where it started to gather into a giant ball before morphing into a particular shape. It was a weird sight, almost like watching a clay model of a skyscraper take form.

And because of its size, the spectacle could be seen from anywhere in Mabase.

At the riverbank, Kitsurubami, who had been doting over Canti, opened her eyes wide with surprise. "What is *that*?"

Engaging his gravitational controls, Canti suddenly floated up and flew off into the sky.

The Masamune truck that Naota's classmates had been driving by the side of the river came to a sudden stopped. Intuitively, Masashi had hit the brakes. The three truck passengers sucked in their breath at the huge shape they saw developing in the sky.

"Let's go take a look," Ninamori said to the boys.

Realizing the danger, the city residents started to evacuate. But a massive blackout, caused the traffic lights to go out on the chaotic roads, resulting in traffic jams near the intersections. People started climbed out of their cars and running which would've caused a much greater panic if Mabase hadn't been blessed with a small resident population.

In the sky above the chaos, the MM factory siren blared out.

Inside the MM Mabase Factory, a medical machinery site with the exterior shape of an iron that was situated on a large hill in Mabase, a host computer started receiving battle reports.

«MMR Class [B].GH manifested in Mabase. Manifestation configuration M mode. 15:33.

Manifestation area is 1600 meters from Mabase plant 15:33.

From now, GM mode commences movement on ground through walking 15:33.

PS, this is to lure MMR Class [K].001 ATOMSK 15:33.

End 15:33.

Good luck to GH in executing battle strategy 15:33.»

The fluid metal jet kept shooting out, and the giant coagulating structure in the sky continued growing, becoming a towering metal obelisk as it ate up the endless stream.

Amarao and Haruko watched the scene with serious looks on their faces but Amarao's inferiors fled out of terror.

Still in her hairdresser's uniform, Haruko watched the drama unfold. Needless to say, she knew where that giant snake firework was coming from; the chain link on the bracelet she wore on her left arm was receiving some kind of special energy, reacting like a magnet. It was probably indicating Naota's location.

Finally, the liquid metal stream stopped spewing. It seemed it had all come out, right down to the very last drop. But that enormous fluid thing was stilling changing shape in the sky. What in the world could it be?

When the solidifying body finally finished arranging itself, its true form appeared above the skies of Mabase: Thrusting into the heavens like a giant tower, the monster still had two legs. With the exception of the head portion, its entire body was covered in a thin, gleaming, metallic sheet. It looked exactly like a giant wearing a poncho or a giant long cactus. Only the two feet at the bottom of the poncho and huge manipulator arms hinted at a humanoid shape. Any way you described it, though, it was absolutely enormous.

The head towered above the tallest building in Mabase. If it was a robot, how was this giant thing going to move?

"Look!" Amarao pointed at the enormous robot and pleaded, "MM is sending those monsters! They're going to destroy this planet! It's over. That's a Class B robot."

But Haruko didn't act at all daunted as she regarded her enemy; she simply took the bass guitar from her back.

Amarao already had lost all his composure. "You're responsible for all this."

"Shut up and watch, Sir Eyebrows." (She meant Amarao by "Sir Eyebrows")

"That guitar is not up to it!"

"You, SHUT UP! You're a hundred years under-evolved, primitive MONKEY!"

"That's derogatory language toward people of developing planets!"

Haruko looked like she was disgusted with this fussing man next to her, and she started to wave her guitar angrily. She made only a light swing through the air as if she were waving a tennis racket, but

"Uwagh!" As if he had been stuck by an invisible impact, Amarao flew back and landed on the floor. At the same time, those very peculiar eyebrows were torn off his face and sent flying somewhere. Those unnaturally fat eyebrows which had looked as though they'd been drawn on actually were thick black stickers.

"My eyebrows!"

When he realized his eyebrow stickers had fallen off, Amarao's face went pale. He went into a panic so frenzied that it was comical. He always had been frightened of Haruko, but now he was so scared that he looked like an herbivore plucked up by the claws of a natural predator. Apparently, those eyebrow stickers were precious to him. He was more shaken by the loss of his eyebrows than by the menace of the enormous robot that had just appeared.

Amarao looked up at Haruko from the spot where he was sitting on the road. When she took a pose with her guitar in hand, his body began to tremble from the fear. "No... you can't!"

"Fooly Cooly Fooly Coola, Fooly Cooly Fooly Coola..."

Haruko suddenly started chanting words like a curse. And as she chanted, she spun the guitar at the ends of her fingers as if it were a cheerleader baton. Then...

Through some incomprehensible technology, the rotating guitar started emitting light, which spread into shimmering particles and scattered through the vicinity. It seemed that Haruko's "dance" was for the express purpose of causing this phenomenon.

Those shining particles surrounded and enveloped Haruko, who hoisted her arms high and closed her eyes.

It was a beautiful, heavenly sight. Haruko's tall, perfectly proportioned body was adorned with countless fragments of light like rays of the sun. She was a miraculous image, like a star in space surrounded by an aurora.

Then, as if reacting to the swirling particles of light, Haruko's body itself started emitting light.

"Ah... No... No!" Amarao groaned. Apparently, he found Haruko's heavenly condition to be utterly terrifying. Even so, he couldn't take his eyes off her newly developed beauty and light.

Finally, what stood in front of Amarao was a transformed Haruko.

How does one begin to explain that new form? Like a peacock spreading its feathers, her new form had the purpose of attracting men, fanning their sexual fantasies. The act of showing bare skin for sex appeal is called "display" in the animal world, and Haruko's new form was, in short, a display.

"Eyebrows... I don't have my eyebrows... Ah, the horn!"

From Amarao's forehead, now without fake eyebrow stickers, a horn had popped out. It was a minuscule horn in the shape of a Y.

The truth was, the reason Amarao had stuck those eyebrow stickers on was to keep this horn sealed in. He had cruel memories of when he'd met Haruko before and

when he'd seen her sexy display, this horn had grown. Vowing that he wouldn't make the same mistake again, he'd plastered those eyebrow stickers to his head.

"Small, as usual." With one finger, Haruko grasped the horn sticking out of the frozen Amarao's forehead. When she pulled out that small, Y-shaped stick, it turned out to be... a small, Y-shaped stick.

"Takkun's is much bigger. Well, I guess I'll try it out, anyway."

Having said this, display-mode Haruko activated the hand-powered generator on the back of her guitar.

"Curses! I've been played like a fool again!" Amarao spat out bitterly. "What does that kid have that I don't?"

When the projection from his forehead finally stopped, Naota was struck dumb as he looked up at the robot that had come out of his own head.

Mamimi was still sitting next to him on the concrete. And the sun having been blocked by the monstrosity, both Naota and Mamimi were encompassed by a giant shadow.

It was like a building, but it was a robot.

GON GON GON...

They could hear complicated mechanical movements from deep inside it.

"It's going to move," Mamimi whispered, still in awe of its size.

And then, the enormous robot took a step and walked. When one of its enormous feet hit the street, the sheer weight of it caused large earth tremors.

Mamimi and Naota were nothing but ants next to that enormous foot.

The enormous robot took one step and then another.

As they supported an incalculable weight, every time its feet met the ground, a boom rang out across the city that was loud enough to shake one's very insides.

The robot made its way farther down that same road, shattering all the windows of every building it passed and trampling over pedestrian walkways. It continued forward unopposed, heading from the city to the hill. It must have been heading for MM Factory.

Amarao watched the enormous robot from where Haruko had left him. "This is bad. It's headed for the plant. It's going to activate the plant!"

Amarao knew what would happen if that enormous robot touched the MM factory. Indeed, this was a situation that threatened the entire human race.

It was at that very moment that a high-speed flying object approached the robot in attack mode.

«Hostile approaching Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood agent.

13:37.

Caution required. Crosscheck with biological reaction reveals that space life form holds the record for fighting with Red Pirate King. 13:37.

Until present time, the biological reaction has been hidden by

some method. It has probably been concealed in Mabase. 13:37.
Emergency security measures. 13:37.»

The approaching flying object that soared through the blue sky was Haruko, in display mode, made over in a red leotard suit, high heels, a butterfly tie choker, and bunny ears... in other words, her display-mode transformation had resulted in none other than a bunny-girl outfit! [Ha ha ha ha. Here's where you laugh. I'm laughing as I write this, so you all should laugh, too.]

Using her signature guitar as a flying surfboard, Haruko zipped through the air like she was sky surfing. And to keep her balance, the flying bunny girl stuck out her butt, which had a bunny tail attached. It was a cute sight.

"DAICON V!" With those cryptic words, Haruko fired the weapon in her hand. Her time-space interference weapon guitar was currently under her feet, so she was using the Y-shaped stick that she'd pulled from Amarao's head as a weapon. By attaching a string to the top end of the Y, she'd turned it into a makeshift slingshot.

Her target was huge, so the slingshot bullets the bullets she'd fired from those plastic BB guns earlier all found their target.

And when peppered by those plastic BBs, the gigantic robot suffered damaging blows equivalent to cruise missile strikes. It lost its balance, tipped over, and fell.

Because it was so huge, the buildings it collided into were destroyed, and concrete was shed everywhere. In other words, as a direct result of Haruko's attack, the damage to the town was increasing manifold.

"Look out!"

Next to Mamimi and Naota, wreckage fell to the concrete, including pieces that were the size of cars. If they were hit by debris that size, they'd be beyond saving.

Naota instinctively covered Mamimi in his arms. She was trembling with fear but she was nothing more than an ordinary high school girl, so it was normal for her to be frightened and trembling when caught up a catastrophe of this magnitude.

Naota was outraged. *Damn! What is this?!* But Naota's rage wasn't directed at the enormous robot destroying the city, rather at the shuddering Mamimi.

In Naota's arms, Mamimi had her eyes shut and was repeatedly muttering as if it were a chant: "Help me, Tasuku, Tasuku, Tasuku..."

For the moment, the rain of debris had stopped. But the fallen robot was getting up again.

Hell, I was the one who saved the city! She knows that! So why doesn't she see how amazing I am?!

"I'm not my brother! Got it? I'm the one who's going to save you!"

Mamimi looked at Naota with a surprise expression that indicated she didn't understand what Takkun was saying.

That made Takkun angrier. *Mamimi, this girl, she really thinks of me only as some pet, as my brother's substitute. She doesn't see me as a man.*

"Look at me. I'm going to save you."

I'm going to save you!

From above them came a violent gust. At some point, Canti had arrived, and it now hovered over Naota's head. Apparently, it had come for its pilot. It was a smart robot.

Good, Naota thought. This is my opportunity, my chance to show Mamimi how great I am. I'm going to show her that I can pilot Canti and defeat this giant enemy.

With that resolve, Naota shouted as loud as possible: "CANTI!"

As ordered, the robot landed next to Naota, and its abdominal area opened up wide like a cockpit hatch.

Naota looked at Mamimi and asserted, "You got it? I'm Naota. Never call me 'Takkun' again!" And then, he jumped inside Canti.

As soon as the gap closed, the robot's body changed to a crimson color.

"Uraagh!" Not letting up, the bunny-outfitted Haruko let loose another slingshot barrage.

The bullets once again found their target but with just a slight shift in stance, the robot was able to easily withstand the slingshot bullets that had caused such an impact earlier.

At some point, the metallic sheet poncho that covered the robot's body had changed color subtly, and the slingshot bullets probably had stopped working because of something to do with that.

MM used a seventh generation alloy in the bodies of its products, the culmination of human-subject testing wherein the alloy had been transplanted into joints, organs, blood, and living bodies. The final product was a miraculous metallic material than could become plasticlike and, in response to neutrino signals, could change into several patterns based on heat, electricity, conductivity, insulation, acid resistance, luster, solidity, catalysis, and mass. It was the same type of metal that made up Canti's body, allowing it to change color.

When the giant robot had taken Haruko's first attack, it had instantly devised a countermeasure based on the weapon's makeup, sending the data to its covering sheet.

"Drat." Realizing that it was having no effect, Haruko threw away the weapon in her hand without a second thought.

Conversely, the enormous robot had taken what looked like a handgun from under its sheet. Although the weapon held by the arm manipulator was in the shape of a gun, because of its size, it was more like a missile launcher, with a gun barrel that measured almost two meters wide.

Surprisingly quick on the trigger, the giant took aim and fired at the soaring Haruko. Twice. Thrice. The gunshots shook the air above the city, but they did not hit. Haruko's movements were just a little faster. And aiming at her was much like trying to shoot a fly with a gun.

"Heh, you suck." Haruko laughed boldly, but without a weapon, all she could do was run away. Just when she thought she would have to call for her Vespa, the bracelet on her left arm started to react again.

Something red was flying her way Canti.

"Just my luck!" Haruko approached and leapt on top of Canti in midair; then,

she took the guitar, which had been under her feet until now, in her hands. It was the guitar-shaped time-space interference weapon, an ideal choice in this situation.

The robot swiftly aimed for the approaching bunny girl riding on top of Canti; it fired, but could not hit because of the nimble, zigzagging flying maneuvers. Haruko had been amazing, but with its ability to close in and dodge bullets, Canti's flying skills were godlike.

Is that Takkun? Mamimi wondered as she watched this battle. *Is Takkun really piloting that?*

When they reached a close range, Haruko jumped from Canti's back. Her bunny ears streamed against the sky. She then fearlessly landed on the gun that the giant robot was holding or rather, she landed on its barrel. Using the momentum of the speeding Canti, she had leapt over fifty meters.

Haruko calmly ran up the robot's manipulator arm and unleashed a blow on its chest area with all her strength.

White sparks flew out and the smell of ion filled the air.

Haruko kicked off the robot's body and retreated, placing the guitar underneath her feet, and once again sliding through the air as though riding a surfboard. With one guitar alone, she'd been able to engage in full aerial combat.

Haruko's attack did not result in victory, though. Indeed, the sheet area around the spot she'd hit had burned away, but that was all. The opponent was simply too large.

As Haruko tutted, Canti, who had been circling around, signaled with its thumb as if to say *my turn to attack*.

In midair, Canti transformed into a crimson cannon, its autonomic gun mode. Apparently, judging that there was no way to miss an opponent of that size at that distance, it didn't even use its laser sight, instead firing immediately. Of course, the result was a direct hit. Though the robot avoided getting pierced straight through by the bullet, it sustained heavy damage this time, staggering backward. The strike seemed to have been effective.

The unleashed bullet changed direction and, as always, returned back to Canti's gun barrel. It was a recyclable bullet.

Without a moment's hesitation, Canti fired again.

However, the giant robot also aimed its gun, firing as it was falling down.

The two weapons made simultaneous blast sounds, and then the two bullets collided in midair. They both had been unleashed at the same exact angle and with the same exact timing. There was an instant explosion, obliterating the bullet the giant robot had fired. While that bullet scattered to fragments, Canti's bullet, having been knocked off course, slammed into the side of a building close to where Mamimi was. Though the impact wasn't enormous, it still caused concrete debris to scatter across the vicinity.

Despite that, Mamimi continued to stand in place, without dodging the debris, transfixed by the bullet that was buried into the wall.

Its cannon mode having failed, Canti returned back to humanoid form and continued flying. It seemed it didn't have spare bullets, having always recycled that

one shot. When it lost its one bullet, the cannon was no longer of any use.

However, bright light started spewing forth from Canti's face monitor. Then, from the face of that shining monitor, a protrusion appeared. Canti gripped the horn coming from its face and quickly pulled it out.

"That's..." From where she'd hid on a rooftop to shield herself from the blast, Haruko saw the protrusion coming from Canti's monitor. She watched in shock.

It was a guitar. No, it was probably the same as Haruko's a guitar-shaped superweapon. But they way it differed from hers in shape was what made Haruko unable to believe her eyes.

"A Gibson EB-0!"

This was the first time she'd been this surprised since coming to Mabase.

Watching the battle unfold, Amarao also was shocked when he saw Canti's weapon. It seemed the weapon Canti had pulled out was highly recognizable for everyone involved.

With a stunned expression on his eyebrow-less face, Amarao whispered, "*It's him. It's the real Pirate King.*"

With the guitar in hand, the crimson Canti took off like a flash Land in the next instant, it swung into the giant robot's body. It was a magnificent, lightning-quick attack, with beautiful, elegant movement.

The belly of the giant robot flew up, and its internal parts scattered through the sky. It seemed that Canti's one hit had destroyed it, because it no longer made any response, and the sound of its internal machinery ceased completely. Its balance controls must have stopped working, as well, because as it flew back, it flipped and went completely upside down.

Just barely grazing the tops of civilian homes, what used to be the head of the robot sank into ground and caused a local earthquake.

And then, the sheet that had covered its entire body dropped.

It was a warm gaze. With flush cheeks, Haruko looked up at the brave figure of crimson Canti. Haruko Haruhara had become a simple girl in love with the one she loved right in front of her.

The girl whispered the name of her beloved: "Atomsk."

The truck that Gaku, Masashi, and Ninamori were riding in finally reached the area where the action had unfolded. And because all the adults had been thrown into complete panic, there was nobody to stop the children for operating a vehicle without a license.

When they came across Mamimi, she was still staring at the side of the building. And when they turned their gaze in the direction of hers, they also became captivated by the bullet that had sunken into the side of the building.

The embedded bullet slowly peeled away from the wall and fell to the earth, making a heavy sound on the asphalt.

That "bullet" was Naota Nandaba.

As the cellular stiffening mode dissipated, Naota sprawled out untidily in that place, his eyes still closed. From his light breathing, they knew he wasn't dead.

Mamimi muttered, "Looks painful."

The MM factory on top of the hill spewed out white smoke. Usually, this was only momentary, but today, the gushing did not stop. Mabase was immediately enveloped in that smoke, reducing the field of vision.

And within that mist, a large, eerie shadow became visible. As the upside-down sheet peeled off, the entire giant robot was revealed and what appeared within the mist was a giant hand.

FLCLimax

Chapter 1

"Today, we're all going to learn how to use chopsticks."

The school lunch menu that day at Mabase Elementary School was rice and mushrooms, and Miyaji was using this as an opportunity to instruct them on the correct way to hold chopsticks, a plan that must have been decided in the staff meeting that morning.

However, Miyaji couldn't seem to use chopsticks very well herself, so she was finding it doubly hard to teach. From the way she held her own chopsticks, it appeared that she'd grown up handling them the wrong way, by crossing the sticks but to set an example for the students, she'd tried to correct herself quickly, all while attempting to maintain the respect of her students. Perhaps this was her way of giving her all to something that had come back to haunt her after she'd grown up enjoying her incorrect method.

Naota, however, was not showing even the slightest indication of interest; he was daydreaming and gazing out the classroom window. Recently, he hadn't been speaking much, instead spending most of his time staring out the window at the world outside, which was shrouded in a thick fog.

Since that memorable day, the white smoke had become like a fog and settled, covering the city of Mabase without any sign of clearing. Coming out of the center of that fog, you could see the imposing robotic hand, which the people in town called "the towering hand."

The giant hand extended from the earth upward, as if it were trying to grab the heavens themselves. And considering the robot the size of a building was in actuality one giant hand, its size was unparalleled. That hand was on the same scale as the MM factory, which it was situated next to on a large hill.

On a morning ten days earlier, the day after the incident, their homeroom teacher, Miyaji, had instructed them to make sure they didn't get close to the hand that towered near the factory, which only the day before had been a violent robot.

That warning similar to the ones given when a typhoon was coming was the

only reference made to the towering hand at school; no other explanation was given.

But that towering hand near the MM factory was far, far, far more dangerous than a typhoon. In fact, it had the potential to be more destructive than a nuclear meltdown. The residents didn't know this scary truth, and so had not evacuated, instead continuing to live in Mabase. That was because the public authorities were skillfully working to manipulate information.

And so the school children went to school as normal, and now it was mealtime. It was truly reckless.

"Naota, do you want to help out with the part-time job?" Masashi called out. He was talking about his part-time job making deliveries with his truck.

"It's pretty nice," Ninamori said. "Next month, I'll be able to buy a new computer game."

But Naota had no interest in his friends' invitation; he stood up, tray in hand, as if being spoken to had been annoying.

"Hey, Naota..." When Gaku saw the plates on Naota's tray, he was surprised; his classmate hadn't touched his food at all, having left all his mushrooms and rice.

It was a school rule that students weren't allowed to waste food. But Naota was permitted to leave the classroom, anyway, satisfying Miyaji by saying that he wasn't feeling very well.

"Why didn't Naota eat anything?" Gaku puzzled.

"He couldn't eat it," Masashi said.

There were people who lost their appetite when they had a big responsibility, and Masashi knew that Naota was that kind. That was why he had invited him to take part in the part-time job ever since that incident, Naota had been locked away inside himself.

The robot that he had boasted about controlling had been using him as a bullet. Though that was pretty amazing in itself...

Masashi thought that Naota held an unusually high ideal for his self-image.

For a while, his friends gazed worriedly at the door through which Naota had just left.

After leaving the classroom, Naota stood in the corridor, staring out at the outside world with a blank expression.

He really had no appetite anymore. He had an empty stomach, but he didn't have any desire to eat. Furthermore, no matter how much he ate, he wouldn't be able to fill the sense of loss he was feeling now.

The town was full of the white mist coming from MM Factory. Day and night, the white smoke came pouring out, covering the city.

I knew it, Naota thought. *I always knew the white smoke was at fault for taking all the color from the world. It's the bringer of nothingness, changing everything in the world to gray.*

Even if he looked straight up, he could no longer see blue sky, just overcast white fog. It had enveloped the town as if there was nothing existing in the outside world. Maybe there really was nothing outside this town. Maybe this place was a little island floating in another dimension. If so, that meant Naota always would be

stuck in this place with his feeling of loss.

But then, where had they gone, the housemaid and the stupid robot? After the incident, Haruko and Canti disappeared from the Nandaba home, and the family hadn't heard from the two since.

But that was to be expected, perhaps. The duo were wanted fugitives now. There were posters with their photos posted up on the bulletins and walls in the town, all declaring that the whole incident with the giant robot had been their fault.

In the underground war room of the Department of Interstellar Immigration, Amarao and his subordinate, Kitsurubami, were watching a monitor that was displaying the giant towering hand next to the MM factory.

At that moment, the computer terminal display Kitsurubami was operating displayed the central department's analysis report. They finally had data with specification for the towering hand, which had been compared against data from other MM robots.

Kitsurubami whispered as she read the report, "*It really is a hand.*"

"A hand."

The first answer from the analysis results said that it was a giant manipulator, and Amarao had responded angrily because they'd already known that. In fact, he had already worked out what the hand was for.

That MM factory on top of the hill... the residents of Mabase were well used to seeing it now, this factory that looked like an iron. It was unavoidable. However, what would their reaction be if they were to find out it wasn't a factory that looked like an iron, rather an iron that looked like a factory?

The meaning of the towering hand became obvious then: It was an enormous hand for an enormous iron. The iron-shaped building even had a proper handle; in other words, the hand had a place to grab the iron.

"Is it going to grab it?"

"I think it wants to grab it."

"It's so obvious, huh? I mean, it looks exactly like an iron."

"Yep, it really was an iron all along."

It was an incredibly dangerous situation, but Amarao and his team had been saved by the propaganda or the successful manipulation of information that stated there were two criminals who had looted in-development MM machines and run wild with them.

The petrified giant machine is not of an explosive nature, nor does it pose any radiation risk. MM is accepting responsibility and compensating the town's victims. The criminals are now on the run.

That "criminal" pair was Haruko and Canti. Amarao's team had set them up, of course, to hide any government involvement. However, that concealment had its limits. If this towering hand moved, then the propaganda creators would not be able to escape the finger pointing.

They had to do something and soon.

The analysis report continued. One of the monitors held a freeze-frame of the moment when Canti had beaten though the giant robot with a guitar, along with an

image of one of the internal components the towering hand had shed but even when they zoomed in on that picture and applied a CG touch-up, the object wasn't very clear.

Regardless, Amarao's team knew what the part that had flown out was. Finally, they had some useful information: The analysis results in the central office confirmed their suspicion.

"If that's the terminal core that controls the giant robot, then that explains why it hasn't moved."

The so-called "terminal core" unit was like an electronic brain that controlled the MM robot. Furthermore, the report noted that, due to significant differences in the electronic nerve center of this robot, an alternative would not work.

In other words, there was no concern that MM might get another one to move the hand, and that gave them some options for negotiating with MM.

"We have to make finding the terminal core our main priority," Amarao ordered his subordinates. And the war room went on red alert.

After school, rain started coming down, but it didn't clear away the clouds. Instead, the rain clouds and the mist mixed together to make a solid gray block.

Naota was at Mabase Bridge, on the way home from school. He pressed the canned black coffee button on the vending machine, and as he reached into the inset where the can dispensed, he spotted Mamimi under the bridge.

Although it was pouring rain, Mamimi was not carrying an umbrella, as usual. Already, her clothes and hair were soaking wet and sticking to her body, but she didn't care; she was focused on peering into the long grass. She was probably looking for that stray cat she had called Takkun.

"I never carry an umbrella."

"What do you do when it rains then?"

"I don't mind getting a little wet."

As he thought back on a conversation they'd had before, Naota yanked on the pull ring of the canned coffee.

Mamimi had left him in front of that coffee shop. Mamimi had refused Naota's kiss. They hadn't seen each other even once since.

Masashi, Gaku, and Ninamori who were walking home together with Naota from school also noticed the rain-soaked Mamimi.

"Hey, look over there." Gaku pointed to her. "Isn't that Naota's wife?"

Naota had wanted to show Mamimi that he could pilot Canti, and that he was a man now. But in truth, Naota had been nothing more than a bullet. Now that Mamimi knew as much, Naota wondered what she thought of him.

Naota told himself that Mamimi didn't matter anymore; then, leaving his classmates there, he walked off alone.

"Hey Naota, is it okay to leave her out there?" Gaku called out.

Silently, Masashi had watched Naota go. But as she gazed down at the rain-drenched Mamimi from under her umbrella, Ninamori wore a complicated expression. The cat that Mamimi was looking for was in Ninamori's house now; Ninamori was looking after it.

Sorry, but it was your fault...

Last week, if Ninamori hadn't taken the cat home, it would have died. It would have most definitely starved to death. Ninamori had come across the freezing cat cowering in the rain. When she'd picked it up, she'd found it had injured one of its legs, and its skinny body was convulsing. It didn't even have the energy to cry out. And when she'd realized it was the cat that Mamimi always was carrying around with her, Ninamori had become angry. She'd immediately decided that she would take care of it herself.

"I'm sorry, it doesn't matter how much you look; you're not going to find it. That cat is at my house now. It's my cat. If you pick up a cat, then you have to look after it properly. You can't just do things by halves," Ninamori whispered to herself.

Not knowing any of this, Mamimi continued looking for the cat along the riverbank in the rain.

Naota, who had walked ahead sulkily, suddenly stopped in the middle of the road. No one was there, but when he heard the sound of a scooter approaching, Naota's grumpy, sulky face suddenly filled with anticipation.

Could it be?

A scooter came to a sudden stop behind Naota, employing its emergency brakes. Right behind him, the scooter stopped.

It stopped right behind me.

Instinctively holding his breath, Naota turned around, and there on the scooter... was Amarao.

Naota, obviously disappointed, took a sip of the black coffee.

Idiot, what were you hoping for?

"You've already grown up, so you drink the bitter stuff," Amarao said. "Your brain needs glucose. If your brain is to get back to normal, it's better to drink the sweet stuff. You must be pretty tired of it now. Every time something jumps out of the N.O. in your head, it causes trouble. N.O. is a technology that uses the pulses between the left and right brain to cancel each other out and open a hyperspace channel. I don't think your housemaid is going to be coming back... but just in case."

Amarao took out a small paper bag from the pocket of the coat he was wearing, and he offered the bag to Naota, who found two black stickers inside. The pair looked exactly like Amarao's eyebrows.

"Do you know why Raharu got close to you? Oh, Raharu is your housemaid that's her real name. She's after Atomsk. They say that he is so skilled with N.O. that he can steal whole star systems. It was about a year ago that he fell into the hands of MM. Raharu is after him, and so came to this planet. She's in love with him."

Naota couldn't understand half of what Amarao was saying, but the final thing he'd said hit Naota hard: *"She's in love with him."*

Naota silently walked away, ignoring Amarao.

It was raining that day, too, when several children holding umbrellas gave chase. Takkun was a small weak kitten and couldn't run away. The chasing children looked like ordinary elementary school kids, but they were actually demons, residents of the

demon town Endsville.

That day, the other girls in her class had been teasing Mamimi again, and her shoes had been washed away in the river in the aftermath. For Mamimi, whose feet were small, it was always difficult to find pretty shoes that would fit her. She'd just bought some she liked, but now they'd thrown them into the river, saying that the style was against school rules.

Walking along the street without shoes was pretty pathetic. Mamimi's feet got hurt easily. But as soon as she'd seen the kitten being chased around by the kids, she'd run over barefoot and picked it up. And she had glared at those little demons.

If those kids teased Takkun again, then she was going to do a whole lot more than just stare at them: She would hit them with rocks, that's what Mamimi decided. As if she should care about them. They were demons.

"Takkun, where have you been?"

She had been searching for almost two hours for him. The wind blew off the river, chilling her. Even though the rain had finally ended, her soaked clothes stole away her body heat. Tired, she put a cigarette to her mouth and lit it.

She'd finally started to consider the possibility that maybe someone else had taken him in. Mamimi couldn't have pets at her place; if they'd had the money, then they would have moved straight away to a place where you could have pets but that just wasn't possible now. And Takkun was a cute black kitten, so it wouldn't be too surprising if someone else were to pick him up to look after him. But that meant she couldn't have Takkun anymore, which upset her. Mamimi was really upset, because she needed a Takkun.

If I don't have Takkun, then I'm all alone.

At some point, Mamimi took her cell from her bag. There was only one number in the phone directory displayed on the tiny screen, Tasuku's number, in America. That was Mamimi's last link to Tasuku.

Of course, Mamimi had given Tasuku her number, too, so she always made sure to carry her cell with her. However, she had never once received a call or text from him. The phone had not rung once. She already knew that Tasuku was never going to call her.

Since Tasuku had gone to America, Mamimi had not called his number once, either. That was a number that she could never call herself.

"Well, see you sometime, Mamimi. Get yourself a nice boyfriend!" Tasuku had said to her, smiling as he departed the city.

She understood what he'd meant.

So, it didn't matter if she carried around the phone. It would be better just to get rid of it. But because she carried it, she was still attached. They were linked. *Still... maybe , she thought, maybe, just maybe this will be the moment it rings. Maybe I'll get an international call*

"Hey, it's me. I'm fine. I don't like it here. No good girls here. You really are the one for me. I'm coming home next week, and I'm really looking forward to seeing you. I've bought you so many gifts."

How long have I been waiting? I'm an idiot.

It was then that something weird appeared in the river a small machine, in the

shape of a small, four-legged table. It walked around on those four legs like an animal, and it was about the size of the palm of a human hand. It had crawled from the river about two meters from where Mamimi was.

Filled with interest, Mamimi crouched down next to it, and that machine looked at her, too. Mamimi and that weird machine stared (if it could stare?) at each other.

Thinking how cute it was and wondering what it was, Mamimi blew out a puff of tobacco smoke.

When she did that, the machine sucked in some of Mamimi's expelled smoke and started to move around, delighted. *Clink clank*. The machine used its legs to roll around by Mamimi's feet.

Not knowing what to do, Mamimi watched it for a little while.

"You're an energetic little thing."

It was then that the machine, which had been, innocently moving in circles, suddenly jumped up at Mamimi and stole her cell phone. Perhaps it was going to play with it and kick it around like a small dog. Part of the phone was in its mouth.

Then, it opened its mouth wide and attempted to eat the cell phone.

"Tasuku's number! No! Stop that!"

Instinctively, Mamimi restrained it. The robot unexpectedly listened to her orders, and with its mouth still wide open, stopped exactly where it was. It looked like it was begging.

That had been close. That phone was the only place that she had Tasuku's number saved. If she lost it, then she would lose her link to Tasuku; he wouldn't be able to call her anymore.

Call me anymore...? Mamimi stopped to ask herself. Even if I carry this phone, is he going to call me?

Was he going to call her?

The link with Tasuku, this thing, gone... She'd never really had it in the first place.

When she looked back down, the robot was still standing there innocently, its mouth wide open, waiting for Mamimi's next order.

"You can have it," Mamimi said.

The robot must have been hungry, because it chomped down greedily on the phone at first but then it began carefully chewing and swallowing.

"You're responsible then," Mamimi said. "I'll call you Takkun."

Chapter 2

Outside, it was as dark as if it were already nightfall. The autumn sun set early.

In the dullness of his unlit bedroom, Naota stared out the window from his bed.

On the balcony, the fog and the darkness of the night created a thick mass. It was like the bottom of the sea, dark and unreachable by the sun, Naota thought. *A prisoner, trapped by water pressure. That's what I am now.*

He heard the sound of a passenger jet flying high above the city. *Perhaps that's a boat on the surface of the sea. They don't know about me, trapped in this underwater colony, and those tourists are probably traveling to some faraway land, a*

world outside that I don't know.

Naota lay on the bed face up. He was sleeping on the bottom bunk, so he could see the base of the bunk above him, the place where his brother Tasuku had slept until recently.

The people who had disappeared from Naota's life...

Leaning against the bed was the guitar, the one that had been pulled out of Naota's head when the satellite had descended.

She had smiled and told him it was his bat, and then she had left this petrified city. Where had she gone?

Getting up from the bed, Naota picked up the guitar and tried playing a chord. The single tone resonated across the bottom of the deep sea floor.

Finally, his father's voice called to him for dinner, and Naota descended the stairs. But when he entered the room, he instinctively stiffened and yelled.

"Aaah!"

It was her. There.

Who? The Vespa girl, of course!

"Hey." Haruko was sitting at the table calmly, looking entirely innocent; for some reason, she was wearing a colorful lei around her neck, looking like a Hawaiian tourist.

"You!" Naota's voice was shrill. "What are you doing here, acting like nothing has happened? You're a fugitive!"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Kamon started to explain. "I let her take a vacation so she could go on a six day celebrity holiday to gorgeous Hawaii."

Over the past few days, investigators had come to the Nandaba house a number of times, asking about Haruko's whereabouts. Each time, Kamon had replied coldly that she had nothing to do with the people in that house. Even though he'd said he liked her before, as soon as the police had come, he'd acted like she was a stranger. Naota had been enraged over how selfish adults could be.

But now it seemed that Kamon hadn't been writing Haruko off, rather had known her whereabouts and kept the information hidden. It was a staggering realization for Naota: From the way Kamon was talking, he had definitely known where she was when she'd left the house.

"Look, Haruko brought us gifts from Hawaii." Shigekuni was currently showing Naota one of the presents she must have given them, a wooden bear with white chocolate. It was a common souvenir.

No, wait a second, Naota thought. A wooden bear? White chocolate?

"That's not from Hawaii!"

"Next time, I want to go with you," Kamon said, drawing close to Haruko.

"Hawaii chocolate really does have a different taste, doesn't it?" Shigekuni bit into the white chocolate with a very pleased expression.

The two of them were so elated by Haruko's return home that they weren't listening to Naota at all.

"Next time I go," Haruko said, "I want it to be just me and Takkun."

"What?!" Shigekuni and Kamon cried out together in dismay.

Naota was still standing frozen in place when Haruko took his hand and suddenly pulled him to her. She hugged his head to her chest and then, as usual, started rubbing his head up and down her.

"I'm not going anywhere with you! Stop that! It hurts!"

"You're blushing!"

"I wish she'd rub me up and down like that," Shigekuni muttered, looking jealous.

That really hurts.

Naota finished his dinner early and then got into the bath. In the bathtub, he touched his head where it had been rubbed against Haruko.

That hooligan!

From the window, he could hear laughter Haruko, Kamon, and Shigekuni in their drunken revelry. Considering they were a wanted fugitive and people harboring said fugitive, Naota felt the adults in his house had lost all sense of the crisis and themselves.

"They're so loud," he complained, but Naota's expression contained a happiness it had not over the past few days.

It was deep in the night when, after having caused as much chaos as she could during their drinking spree, Haruko came into Naota's room as if everything were completely normal. When she turned out the light, she climbed up onto the top bunk as if her past few days' disappearance had never happened.

Of course, the top bunk was her place, but it still disturbed Naota, who was on the bottom bunk with his eyes closed but not yet sleeping.

He couldn't fall asleep. Haruko was in his room now, in bed right above him. It was such a small thing, but that alone seemed like a miracle to Naota.

Naota whispered in a low voice, "Are you asleep?"

Haruko didn't reply, though; he could hear only the sound of her gentle breathing. She must have fallen asleep straight away; she must have been really tired.

"Who on Earth are you?" Naota muttered half to himself. "Where did you come from really?"

"What's this?" Suddenly, Haruko popped her head out from the top bunk above and looked down at Naota.

"What, you were awake?!"

"Did you think you could confess your love for me while I was sleeping?"

"Idiot, of course not!"

"You're blushing."

He was annoyed by her smile, so he frowned at her. "Why did you come back?"

"For you, Takkun."

"Liar."

"Hey, should we do it?" Haruko lowered her voice.

"What?"

"C-P-R."

"You do it all the time, don't you?"

"Not that, the *real* thing the adult thing, the amazing thick one."

"Stop with the thick."

Haruko had jumped down from the top bunk and was leaning over Naota in his bed, her face right up to his. In the middle of the darkness, Haruko's face was coming straight for him her breath, the feeling of those sensual lips.

I can't. This is nothing but Haruko's usual mischief. I can't do this on her terms.

As she watched Naota's confusion with the bold look that was always on her face, Haruko smiled gently for some reason. Then, she murmured, "Do you want to come with me? Throw everything away and come away with me?"

Naota didn't know where she meant, but he didn't need to ask. He knew Haruko was inviting him to go to a world outside this one, somewhere not here. That was the place Naota had been dreaming of for so long.

"Why are you being so nice?"

"Takkun, you're still a kid."

Naota surprised himself when, in the next moment, he pushed himself with all his might against Haruko's chest. He clung to her, buried his face in her, and wept.

"Where did you go? You disappeared all of a sudden!"

When was the last time, Naota thought, I cried like this? I haven't cried for such a long time...

Haruko quietly comforted the crying Naota.

The suffocating feeling he'd been experiencing wasn't just about the town, it was about his heart, about discovering that it was only an illusion that the everyday things in front of you were the best things could get, about the loss of imagination and possibilities.

In this town covered with white mist, the feeling of being trapped had been eating away at Naota. Gradually, he had even started to forget there was another world. He had tried to get used to *an ordinary world, where nothing amazing happened. But, Naota thought, then Haruko came. She's here, hugging me now, so I won't forget that there is a world beyond this place.*

A week after that moment, Miyaji was training her students to high jump in the schoolyard of Mabase Elementary. It was a PE lesson of course. Since the day before, the students had been fired up as they'd tried to clear the bar at a height higher than they'd been able to jump before. Ninamori, Masashi, and Gaku were there in their gym clothes; Naota, however, was not present.

Since the day Haruko had returned, Naota hadn't come to school once.

"I wonder when he's coming back," Ninamori said.

"It's bad, huh?" Masashi sighed.

"What's bad?"

"It's bad. I heard Miyaji is going over to his house tomorrow. But he's not there, either."

"He ran away?"

"Could he?" Gaku chipped in, "Could he have eloped with that touch-feely older girl?"

"It's bad."

"But..." *But, Ninamori thought, if he had the courage to do something like eloping, then he's probably fine*. The troubles that Naota had in his heart were something that, in the end, only Naota could understand. But she thought she could guess at what those troubles felt like being trapped in a labyrinth with no exit, wandering aimlessly with no hope of rescue. Ninamori had passed through that labyrinth herself, so she knew there was a way out. You simply had to cry. You merely had to examine what was weighing on your mind. You had to stop pretending to be a grown up.

Ninamori had cried to her parents. The day before the school play, she'd acted like a child no, like a child should act. She'd stamped down her foot and then broken down into tears, telling them how she felt.

Naota would be okay if he cried to someone, too, Ninamori thought. Even if he didn't come to school. Not coming to school wasn't a big problem.

Naota was with Haruko. Ever since she'd returned, he'd been skipping school and hanging out with her. For entertainment expenses, they'd simply been getting by with Naota's meager allowance or with Haruko's bold personality (she didn't hesitate to run out of a restaurant without paying).

Naota had never imagined this feeling of freedom he now possessed. None of his summer vacations could match the pleasure of the past few days. It truly was a special season.

They had been in all-night cinemas. They had made big wins at the horse races; then, they'd lost it all on the next race, but they'd laughed happily about that, too. They had spent a day at a hotel pool. And at night, they'd stretched out their legs at a baseball stadium and watched a real professional ballgame. And although Naota was just a school kid, he had been to some shady places that it wouldn't be fit to mention in a publication like this, and had some very daring experiences there.

But it didn't matter what dangerous places they went; because he was with Haruko, he felt safe. It was the same as the thrill he'd felt when he'd snuck out with his brother one night to watch a fire.

There was even a day when they'd had to evade the pursuing police after violating the speed limit with two people riding the Vespa. That day, in fact, two patrol cars and a police motorcycle had smashed into the barrier and crashed. As usual, though, Haruko, hadn't concerned herself with such small matters.

Today, they were standing on top of a tall hill in front of a convenience store, eating cup ramen.

Mabase was enveloped with smoke as usual. Due to the smoke, the sun looked like a lazy giant red king in the west.

Haruko took a bite of her ramen and made a disgusted face.

"Yuck."

"I told you so," Naota said, satisfied. "The regular stuff is always safer than the new stuff."

At the convenience store, Naota had chosen a brand he'd eaten frequently, but Haruko had made straight for the new stock lined up in the shop. Naota had predicted that it would probably be disgusting, and it seemed he'd been right.

Haruko pouted over her bad luck in choosing it, and then she screamed, "Change!" and forcibly exchanged hers for Naota's.

What a selfish girl, Naota thought. That kind of selfishness was below that of a child.

"When you act selfish all the time, bad things are bound to happen, you know."

"Oh, well," Haruko replied. "If bad things happen, I'll deal with them. It's like eating bad ramen; it's part of the richness of life." She started slurping on the delicious stolen ramen.

"Well then, you should eat your own ramen," Naota complained.

They had been hanging out together for the past week, and Naota had been reminded how selfish a girl Haruko was. That girl only thought about what was good for her, and she didn't even try to hide it. It almost seemed like she was proud of this part of her character even.

And every time Naota saw the selfish parts of her personality, for some reason, it made him smile.

"This mist is so obnoxious." Haruko continued eating the ramen as she gazed at the city beyond the MM factory on the hill, completely vexed. The factory was hazy from the smoke it itself produced.

Naota knew that Haruko had been at war with MM this whole time. "Why do you hate MM so much? Is it your job?"

"They have something I want," Haruko said with a broad smile. "They took something, and I want it back."

The thing that she really wants must be that man Amara spoke about, Atomsk. Naota didn't ask any further questions; even if he had, he probably wouldn't have gotten straight answers. That was Haruko's way; she was rather crude, yet she rarely spoke directly about why she was really there.

Anyway, there was something more important that Naota wanted to take this chance to ask her. "Why did you really come back?"

What's the real reason you came back to me?

Haruko replied, "I need you, Takkun."

What a terrible lie! Naota knew that Haruko didn't really need him at all. He knew it well. As he chewed another mouthful of the ramen he had shoveled into his mouth, Naota scowled; it really was disgusting. But then, he smiled again because he was with her.

In contrast to that pleasant scene, below the fog of the city of Mabase, an unknown threat was growing.

In the night-cloaked back alleys, Mamimi and her new pet were hiding. The robotic Takkun had been growing, and it was now the size of a dog. Mamimi had been looking after it ever since she'd found it by the river, giving it cell phones as food.

After it had eaten her own cell phone, she'd gotten it into her head that it only ate cell phones. And nowadays, there were more than a few shops near the station that would hand over a cell phone if you were to leave a name and address, so Mamimi had collected as many phones as she possibly could, giving them all to Takkun.

Takkun had eaten them up and with his ridiculous appetite, after he'd eaten them all up, he'd wanted even more. It was quite a lot of work for Mamimi.

But soon, it had become clear that her new pet could eat things other than cell phones, as well. He had a number of things he liked, but they were mostly metal or electronic things. And as soon as he ate something, he would increase in size by roughly the same amount.

Now, robotic Takkun had become Mamimi's holy beast, complete with a collar attached to it. She called it a "holy beast" because that name came from the Endsville game.

It was a new unknown menace that was being cared for.

Two days earlier, the fire incidents had started up again, burning homes of students at Mabase Shinda High School to be more precise, burning homes of students who had bullied Mamimi.

But Mamimi wasn't responsible. The culprit had been seen at the scene of the arson: In the dark night, a suspicious four-legged robot holding cigarettes in its mouth had set the homes on fire. Several passersby had reported the same thing.

It wasn't Mamimi who'd done it Mamimi's pet had.

"Good Takkun," Mamimi said to it. "Don't do things that Mamimi doesn't like. Listen to what Mamimi tells you, and then Mamimi always will be with you. Mamimi likes Takkun when he's good."

"Gi gi gi."

Perhaps Mamimi was having a profound effect on the robot. As she pulled along the four-legged robot that made odd screeching sounds, the dangerous high school girl again began to prowl the city the devil city, where the people of Endsville slept. "Go, holy beast!"

Chapter 3

The following morning, Miyaji went to visit Naota's house on her way to school.

Naota hadn't been in class the whole week, and when Miyaji had tried to call his home, his father had replied casually that Naota wasn't coming in that day, either. With no reason given, a student skipping school for a week was quite a serious matter.

"Good morning. It's Miyaji..." She peeked into the shop, which had no customers or shopkeepers. It was a bakery, but for some reason, the inside of the shop was full of stacked magazines, as though it were a publisher's warehouse. They looked like freshly printed mini comics. When she spotted the tide, "*Come on Mabase*," Miyaji cocked her head, feeling as though she'd seen it somewhere before.

"Good morning, teacher," a man from the back of the shop acknowledged her politely. It was Naota's father, Kamon Nandaba.

"If it's about Naota, I don't think he'll be going to school today, either."

"Is he unwell?"

"No he's perfectly fine probably very well."

"If he isn't ill, then he really shouldn't be skipping school." Miyaji sounded like she was pleading.

Kamon was gazing at Miyaji with a knowing look, grinning broadly. With his long hair tied at the back of his neck, he looked far removed from practicalities, and he wore quite an impudent expression. She couldn't tell what those eyes behind his glasses were thinking. She hadn't had much experience speaking to him before, so she felt a little awkward, but that didn't mean she was going to back down. She was a person of conviction.

"When I was in school, I was in charge of looking after the hamster," Kamon said out of the blue, using a very serious tone. "You know, I had to make sure the hamster was fed."

Where was this story coming from all of a sudden?

"But once, I took off school for three days. I was watching videos at home the whole time Monty Python. You know it? It's really good. And in those three days that I didn't go to school, it died, the hamster. I was the only one in my class who was responsible for the hamster, so while I was away, no one took care of it. I learned my lesson, that I couldn't skip school. A son's failings are his father's failings, so I will sort this out myself."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Kill him."

"No, that's going a bit far." Miyaji was swept away by Kamon's words. "Fortunately, Naota wasn't in charge of the hamster. Anyway, could you please let me see Naota for a moment?"

"No, this is not just about boycotting school."

"Just?"

"Boycotting school isn't all. He hasn't come home at all for a while. For a while, we haven't really known "

"He isn't here? Naota?" Miyaji was naturally quite distressed. "For a whole week? Mr. Nandaba, for a student not to come to school "

"He gets good grades, doesn't he?" Kamon asked calmly.

"Class is important."

"His grades are always all fives. But once, it was written on one of his school reports that he could be a little more obedient. You're that teacher, aren't you? It's okay. Don't worry about his studying. We have a very good home tutor."

Terrible. This is a terrible family. The father is a little weird.

Even so, Miyaji thought, if Naota wasn't at home, then where was he now?

Morning rush hour was nearing in Mabase. The traffic on the roads increased, and the sidewalks were full of residents rushing to work or school.

Behind the station, there was a large park alongside a straight road. There was a slide and a sandpit there, and ginkgo trees surrounded the area. Of course, the rushing residents did not turn to see them the homeless. They slept there as if they were dead, but the residents were too caught up in their own lives and so did not pay them any attention.

But now a girl was standing there, regarding two people sleeping on a park bench.

The girl was Ninamori. And the two people sleeping on the bench, rolled up in a

single wool blanket, were none other than Naota and Haruko, the pair of traveling vagabonds. They looked like two animals sleeping in the same nest.

For a moment, Ninamori gazed down at the two sleeping faces.

Naota's eyes were closed, and his breath was strangely relaxed.

He cried, Ninamori thought. *He's stopped pretending to be a grown up.*

The class president who had found her classmate in the process of skipping school now wore a small, gentle smile on her face.

"I couldn't buy you boots, but try your best, Mr. Cat."

After some time had passed, she once again started toward the school to move on with her own day.

A thick mist surrounded the town. This wasn't morning mist, though, and it was even thicker than the day before.

Mamimi walked down a small alley to escape the clouded air.

Next to her, making strange mechanical sounds as it walked, was her mechanical Takkun. Takkun had grown up even more, and it was larger than a dog and closer to the size of a donkey.

"After tonight, I'll be able to forgive them," Mamimi muttered as she gazed down at a notebook. There were dark bags under her eyes, and one could tell she was tired just by looking at her. She had been "working" every night, but this was the first time she'd done it around the clock.

Mamimi's "work" was revenge, and the notebook in her hand contained a list of the people who deserved punishment, no doubt all names of people who had bullied her.

When Mamimi suddenly heard voices in front of her, she quickly hid herself in the shadows. She couldn't let anyone see her leading Takkun around.

When she peeked around to see the source of the voices, she saw a sake shop with a sign reading "Masamune's Sake." The voices belonged to two boys, Masashi and Gaku.

"Last night, I heard that Fujipyon's older sister's moped was done."

"That girl with the bleached blonde hair?"

"Everyone from Second Street over, everyone got something damaged..."

They were talking about Mamimi's work. Although arson was her preferred method, Takkun was more faithfully obedient to his own appetite than to Mamimi's orders, so she'd changed her battle plans a little. In other words, instead of setting fire to the house she wanted to attack, if it had a car or a bike, then she offered that to Takkun as food.

Now, as a result of her feedings, Takkun had grown in size, and Mamimi was a little troubled about where she would hide him that day. As she continued dragging Takkun down the alley, he began roaring out of nowhere: "Gi gi gi gi!"

That was the noise Takkun made before he jumped at food he'd spotted and the thing that had taken Takkun's fancy was the sake store's three-wheeled truck.

Mamimi panicked and tried to pull on the chain attached to the robot's collar with all her might, but Takkun had grown so big that Mamimi's strength was no match for its own.

"Stop that. They're not on my revenge list."

The four-legged robot knocked away its master's powerless arms, though, and ran straight at the three-wheeled truck.

Mamimi was enraged. *Why, why do you never do what I want you to?*

"Why are you doing this? You have to listen to what I say, Takkun."

But Takkun ignored her words as it skillfully grabbed the truck and started chomping down on it. The metal frame and components were chewed to bits in its mouth and then swallowed completely. It had a terrifying bite and appetite.

The surprised ones were naturally Masashi and Gaku. After all, a robot beast had come bounding down the alley out of nowhere and eaten up their beloved truck.

There were people who were trying their hardest to hunt down that robotic monster: Amarao and the Department of Interstellar Immigration members.

Today, Amarao was in the passenger seat of the car that Kitsurubami was driving, reading a map on a panel that was installed in the car. It looked like a GPS system from its appearance, but it was actually a radar system for use on special missions, a piece of equipment designed to search out the components and terminal core that had separated from the giant MM robot.

Amarao and Kitsurubami had been searching for several days, but hadn't a clue yet as to where the terminal core had gone, although it shouldn't have had any mobility capabilities.

The terminal core had been communicating through special electronic waves with that towering hand, so they'd been tracing that electronic signal. But the signal had been weak and unstable, so the mission had encountered problems.

Finally, though, the car that Kitsurubami was driving was heading toward the correct destination. What had made all the difference to their mission was that, as of the night before, the electronic impulses from the terminal core had become clearer. Gradually, they had become stronger in output power, and now the team had narrowed down the area it could be in to a radius of a few hundred meters.

But that didn't mean they were overjoyed. This could be evidence that the damaged terminal core might be trying to self-repair.

Kitsurubami wore an uneasy expression as she drove the car. On top of the hill, the factory that had been emitting continuous smoke was now shooting out an even larger quantity of thick white smoke. It was almost as if it was angry that it couldn't fill up the entire world with smoke.

Now, she also had come to understand the true threat the MM factory posed.

"You saw it, too, didn't you? The footage?" Amarao asked.

"Last week, at the department," Kitsurubami replied.

A few days earlier, Kitsurubami had been dispatched to the central office, where she'd been shown some terrifying video footage.

At first, she'd thought the footage was of one of the poles. A flat mass of land spread out smoothly, like a frozen lake, and the land was flat as far as the eye could see, as smooth as a mirror. But it wasn't a polar cap she was seeing; it was a scene from another planet. In the sky, there was no familiar moon, but a floating satellite instead.

The strangest part of the video footage, stranger than the scenery, was the presence of a giant iron on the vast flatness. It looked exactly the same as the MM factory that stood on the hill in Mabase. Moreover, it wasn't just an ordinary building; it moved across the continent. And it didn't just move. When it sensed a wrinkle on the surface of the ground, it would approach and flatten the offending imperfection.

Kitsurubami understood immediately without explanation: The planet was so completely smooth as a result of that giant iron's actions. The giant iron had wiped out the hills, the mountains, anything that wasn't flat. It was the embodiment of an obsessive desire to systematically smooth out the whole world.

Looking deeper in the far off distance of the footage, Kitsurubami was able to make out a number of irons moving across the land. The dead surface where nothing lived was a surreal world where irons slid silently.

Kitsurubami had shuddered when she'd understood the dangerous position their own world was now in. One of those giant MM irons had come to this planet.

"It's all right. If we can just get to the terminal core first, it will be all right," Amarao said. "We have to do something, or it's the end of the world."

"But..." Kitsurubami put all her energy into expressing a thought that had been nagging at her, "if that rumored Pirate King is here, then won't he do something?"

At the polar opposite of MM's obsessive principals of equality, a universal organization called the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood was fighting with all its might. But MM's most feared enemy wasn't a part of that brotherhood, rather a single man known as Red Pirate King Atomsk. Although he didn't belong to any camp, he had halted MM's progress on many planets in the galaxy, thwarting its ambitions.

"He's not one of us, so we can't rely on him," Amarao said. "Besides, there still has been no real sign of Atomsk."

Amarao had received information about a year prior that Pirate King Atomsk had been captured by MM. And then, they suspected that robot Canti also had some kind of connection to Atomsk, which would explain why it gave off Atomsk's personal organism magnetism sometimes. If that were the case, then MM's persistence in trying to capture Canti made sense. And as Amarao had said, there had been no sign of Atomsk, so if he had fled from the danger, then they had no other hope except seeking the terminal core.

The signal turned red and Kitsurubami put her foot on the brake.

Amarao caught a glimpse of her white stocking-covered legs up her mini skirt, and he moved his eyebrows oddly. His eyes remained in that sideways glance position, looking at his subordinate's body.

Kitsurubami noticed his gaze immediately. She understood straight away what her boss was thinking; it was so easy to read.

As expected, Amarao spoke: "What do you do on your days off?"

Hey, the tone of your voice has changed, Kitsurubami thought. At this critical time, you shouldn't be falling for feminine charms. Anyway, you're still in love with Haruko, aren't you?

"Um, that's kind of private..." she trailed off, wanting to maintain a smooth working relationship.

I don't want to talk to you.

"Don't say such sad things. People weren't made to live alone." Amarao had placed his hand on top of Kitsurubami's on the gear stick.

Not again, Kitsurubami thought. This man wants any woman in front of him. He thinks he can make any of the women working under him his. Idiot.

"Work relationships can be problematic."

"What are you saying? Any problems that arise tend to be so small Argh!"

They both were surprised by something suddenly coming at them from the intersection a giant, four-legged walking monster robot. A high school girl was clinging to it from its collar.

"Stop it, Takkun!" The high school girl screaming was, of course, Mamimi Samejima.

"Takkun! Terminal Kore!"

Even while misunderstanding the reason Mamimi had named the robot what she had, Amarao still correctly recognized what it really was.

"Commander, its size!"

"Geez, it's massive."

Amarao and Kitsurubami were taken aback by the size of the terminal core. They had been looking for something about the size of a kitten, but the thing that appeared before them was a robot the size of a horse. There was no questioning that the four-legged machine was the terminal core, though even the radar panel was indicating it was.

Amarao had been wondering why the electromagnetic waves the terminal core gave off suddenly had gotten stronger, and now he knew. It had grown to a greater degree than self-repair alone would have allowed. But why?

"No, Takkun!" Mamimi screamed. "Mamimi doesn't want this!"

Could it be Amarao thought Could it be that this high school girl has been feeding it?

It hadn't been programmed to be looked after yet peculiarly, it had allowed itself to be. Then again, considering it was an MM robot, was it really so strange that it had unexpected functions?

This, however, was not the time to wonder about how it had happened. Already, the car waiting at the opposite end of the intersection had been bitten and crushed. The terminal core somehow could function by eating cars, it seemed.

Then, the terminal core caught sight of Kitsurubami's car and the four-legged thing started coming straight for them!

Amarao and Kitsurubami both immediately took out their guns and started firing, their bodies hanging out the car windows. But all those bullets rebounded off the terminal core's body. MM products were well known for their high-quality, durable materials.

Realizing they couldn't stop its progress, the duo leapt out the car windows. They had only just gotten out when the car was devoured by the terminal core, which cut into the hood and gobbled up the engine, seemingly its favorite part.

Sensing the danger, Amarao and Kitsurubami already had put some distance between them and the terminal core when they were startled by what they saw standing on the sidewalk next to it.

Kitsurubami muttered, "Lord Canti."

She was right. Standing there, for some reason, was Canti.

Amarao wondered what on Earth it was doing there. No, that much was obvious: It had followed the terminal core's signal. At least, that was the rational interpretation.

He confirmed that Canti's body was still blue. Of course. Only when it was receiving Atomsk's personal signal did it change to red.

"Gi gi gi gi!"

Having chewed up the car, the terminal core started reacting violently. It seemed that discovering Canti was a cause of excitement for it.

"Giii!"

With a speed of movement that they had not yet witnessed from the terminal core, it suddenly bore down on Canti. And as the terminal core unexpectedly changed direction, Mamimi was being dragged violently behind, gasping for breath.

Amarao and Kitsurubami stood frozen in front of the spectacle.

"What are you doing?" Amarao muttered.

The terminal core that had captured Canti didn't eat the robot; instead, it started doing something completely different.

It wasn't just a transformation; it was more a transmutation.

The terminal core had, in an instant, shifted shape, becoming a series of blocks, each less than one millimeter. From the four legs came silhouettes like unstable flames.

And then, Canti was caught up in it, too, synchronizing in response to that transformation.

Amarao started to think that maybe the robot called Canti had in fact been created as part of the terminal core.

After Canti synchronized with the transformation, it returned back to normal, creaking as if it were in pain. Rather than becoming part of the terminal core, it was struggling to keep itself going as a separate entity.

"No..." Mamimi, who also had been caught up in the transformation, was struggling for breath. Getting caught up in the middle of a violently moving series of machines was not the safest thing she could've done.

Amarao ran toward those squirming machines and reached out his hand in an attempt to save Mamimi.

And when Kitsurubami witnessed that act of bravery, she reassessed her opinion of her boss a little.

However, Amarao got too close to the terminal core, and part of the suit he was wearing was caught up in the transformation, too.

"Damn!"

"Commander!"

The terminal core had now taken the shape of a tire a large circle with a radius of a few meters. Canti was caught up in this, as was Mamimi, and now part of Amarao's suit.

It was then that Kitsurubami understood the reason that the terminal core had become a giant wheel. The circle distorted a little like an ellipse; then, using the elastic reaction from returning to its round shape, the core was able to jump or maybe

it was less that it had "jumped" than it had "flown." It rose up and up until it was a tiny speck in the sky.

It was then that a siren started to blare from the top of the hill; it was MM Factory's warning signal, but it was a much louder and more urgent siren than before. It could be heard not just in that area, but every part of Mabase.

And it sounded just like an air raid siren.

Haruko, who had been sleeping on the bench, opened her eyes.

With her phenomenal eyesight, she spotted the figure of a machine soaring through the mist in the sky. And she could clearly make out that Canti was trapped inside that ring.

As she quickly jumped to her feet, she violently kicked Naota, who'd been sleeping next to her.

"This is no time to be sleeping!"

"What...? What is it?"

Haruko gleefully told the still half-asleep Naota, "It's the CLIMAX."

Chapter 4

The terminal core was flying straight toward the towering hand.

In the body that had transformed into the shape of a tire, Canti, Mamimi, and Amarao all were caught up Canti and Mamimi completely solidified in the machine, and Amarao caught only by part of his suit. For that reason, Amarao was clinging on to part of the machine for dear life. If he were to be thrown off, then that would be it for him.

The terminal core was flying several meters above the ground. Amarao could see the whole of mist-covered Mabase in its eye, which was terrifying. If something hit him off, then that would be the end of it for him. Along with the wind rushing past his ears, Amarao could hear the sound of Mamimi screaming.

"Waaaaaaaaah!" Although hers was definitely a scream of terror, it sounded not unlike the voice of a child on a roller coaster.

The terminal core then started to descend. Its destination was the towering hand the giant palm reaching up into its field of vision. If they hit it at this velocity, it would be over for them all. Amarao resigned himself to his fate.

"Takkun, stop it!" Having used up the last of her breath to scream those words, Mamimi lost consciousness.

Whether or not those words had gotten through to it, the terminal core's flying speed started to ease; it violently landed on the towering hand as though a train linking up, hitting with a great *gon* sound.

Barely escaping with his life, Amarao quickly removed his trapped suit, thereby freeing himself from the terminal core.

Now, the terminal core that had landed in the center of the giant hand which was spread out to about the size of a baseball field connected part of its own body with the hand.

And the MM factory next to the towering hand, which was emitting more smoke

than it ever had, started to shake.

It's going to move soon!

From the top of the towering hand, Amarao was looking down at the factory, stunned. The giant hand and the giant iron made him feel small. His phone rang, interrupting that thought; when he picked it up, he heard Kitsurubami's trembling voice.

"The pl-plant is moving."

Not first checking that her superior was unharmed was cold. But that aside, her observation was an important one: As it connected with the terminal core, the towering hand also was beginning to slowly move the giant iron. In other words, it was beginning what would amount to a terrifying clean up one that would wipe out all life on this planet.

But Amarao saw something that indicated the crisis hadn't yet begun, that the world had not yet been abandoned by the gods of the galaxy. "No, it isn't moving yet," Amarao told his cold subordinate. "The terminal core hasn't been able to connect properly."

Although it had made contact with the towering hand, the terminal core was making an irregular mechanical sound and creaking unstably. It seemed that it was trying to change shape again so that it could connect properly, but that transformation wasn't going according to plan.

Something flew out from a part of its body, and the core reacted with a look of alarm.

Amarao realized the reason it wasn't working: The terminal core wasn't pure. Mamimi, who had passed out from shock, was still a part of its body, but she wasn't the problem the impure part wasn't her, but Canti.

The body of the terminal core that was trying to connect now changed its color to red. Canti's part, however, still was blue.

Amarao recalled that Canti turned red only when it was emitting Atomsk's signal. Perhaps the problem was that the terminal core needed Red Canti to dock with the hand. No, that much was certain; if Canti didn't turn red, then the terminal core couldn't connect with the hand.

There was still a chance to save the world.

The quaking MM Factory's host computer started receiving reports.

«Terminal Core MMR Class [B].GH cannot link up. 07:13.

MMR Class [K].001 denies fusion due to lack of signals from Atomsk. 07:13.

Emergency report: earthling catalyst necessary for Atomsk change is approaching.»

Amarao heard an explosion, a terrible sound that was none other than a Vespa engine.

Haruko was climbing vertically on her scooter, straight up the wall of the "wrist"

of the towering hand. And clinging to Haruko's back was Naota, who looked astonished. Haruko probably had brought him along forcibly before he had a full grasp of the situation.

Amarao's immediate reaction was, "This is not good."

Canti had turned red before when it had swallowed up that boy Naota inside.

The terminal core was writhing on top of the giant hand, unable to make Canti turn red. And that was exactly where Haruko was taking Naota; she was going to give Naota to Canti. Why? To bring back Atomsk, of course. She didn't care about the danger it would bring to this planet.

Amarao had come to that conclusion because he knew all about Haruko's past and her motives, all about the way she lived her life.

Haruko, a.k.a. Raharu Haruha, was a member of the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood, which fought with MM, dividing up the galaxy. But the brotherhood was much more than a simple security organization like its name suggested; it was an organization that operated under the assumption that people should make their own decisions about what gave life value.

The opposing MM was a commercial venture, making things like genetic makeup into products. The law of the universe strictly prohibited making a business out of playing with life, but MM had repeatedly engaged in black market transactions and shady development experiments anyway. They had then pursued domination of the entire universe through their imperialist economy. But their true aim was to smooth out the whole of space. With that as their end goal, they had been developing primarily in the medical business area.

To ensure the life support of a group of chosen people, MM had been carrying out human experiments to create an individual who would become the ultimate donor. But a boy who had been created as a donor by these human experiments fled from an MM facility of his own free will. That boy's name was Atomsk. Eventually, that boy grew up and became feared as Red Pirate King. It became necessary for MM to retrieve Atomsk's body at any cost, so it had been pursuing him relentlessly.

On the other hand, the brotherhood had sought out Atomsk's cooperation many times. Because the brotherhood shared a common enemy in MM, it had wanted to protect Atomsk from being captured so they could become beneficial allies. But the man who went by the name Pirate King had not listened to its requests, instead pursuing an independent life. For that reason, the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood had fought endlessly with him, too.

The brotherhood's number one investigator, Raharu Haruha, had fought with him countless times and was his closest rival. By now, the two of them had developed a relationship that was almost affectionate.

Finally, after one incident in which Atomsk sustained an injury, Raharu had succeeded in restraining him. She had joined her arm and his arm with shackles. But on the civilian boat they'd been using as a convoy, the captured Atomsk fell into enemy hands. And there were rumors that Atomsk had sacrificed himself to save Raharu.

All that had been left was the cuff on Raharu's left wrist.

Raharu Haruha had come to this planet as Haruko to capture the space pirate

Atomsk on a Galaxy Space Police mission. She was there to gather evidence of MM's illegal activities, and also out of her own passionate love.

Amarao held a gun in his hand and fired at Haruko on the Vespa without hesitation. The gunshots were dry; they were, for the moment at least, warning shots.

That girl will do anything to get what she wants in the end, to obtain her enemy's amazing power. I can't let her do it. If she takes Naota near it, then she will realize her wish of reviving Atomsk!

Haruko managed to avoid Amarao's bullets, but pushing the Vespa to do so resulted in it toppling, throwing off both Haruko and Naota but only Haruko was dexterous enough to twist her body to land on her feet.

Amarao was aiming for Haruko alone. He wanted to warn her to stop.

But Haruko was smiling boldly, because between the two of them was Naota, who was crying in pain from hitting his hip.

"Owww!"

Amarao looking at the brainless Naota, enraged. Seeing that the boy's face was bare, he yelled, "Why aren't you wearing your eyebrows? That woman is just using you!"

Naota didn't understand why he was being scolded and regarded Amarao suspiciously.

"You can't trust her. She's thinking only about herself. She doesn't care what happens around her. But you're different, right? Hey, look at that high school girl."

When Amarao pointed at Mamimi, Naota was taken aback. Mamimi was caught up in the terminal core. Her entire body was wrapped in a metal belt, and she looked just like a princess caught in a thorn bush. Her eyes were closed, and it appeared she had lost consciousness.

"You want to save her, right?" Amarao said. "You have to take responsibility for all this, too. You'll know when you're an adult. Come here. Don't listen to her."

Right now, this boy holds the destiny of the world in his hands. He can't let Haruko be free to do as she pleases.

But for some reason, the boy got up and walked over to Haruko as he stroked his thigh.

"No! Do you know what that woman is planning to do with you?!"

Amarao was in panic. *This is bad. He can't do it. He thinks that Haruko is on his side. He doesn't know about her bloodthirsty nature, and she has him under her thumb. He doesn't realize what she's going to do now. Brat!*

Haruko grabbed Naota's hand with a gentle smile. "Now Takkun," she whispered, "Takkun, I need you to help me get the thing I want."

As she spoke, that gentle smile turned into a brutal smile.

"Itadaki-mammoth." With those meaningless words, Haruko took the guitar off her back and hit Naota with all her might.

"Waaaah!"

Naota was sent flying as if a car had hit him.

Harsh, Amarao thought. He had taken countless hits from Haruko, but this one had been far more violent.

Naota's body flew up a good distance before it came crashing down, precisely

into Canti's open abdomen.

As was always the case after he'd "eaten" Naota, Canti immediately changed to a red color and just as Amarao had predicted, the robot started merging as part of the terminal core.

And as the electronic brain that was its control center came online, the towering hand began to tremble.

"Look what you've done! This is precisely what MM wanted!"

Amarao had blamed Haruko for the mission and its problems, but he also was actually quite angry at Naota.

For her part, Haruko responded nonchalantly, "Canti has to turn red or Pirate King Atomsk won't come out."

"They're going to use Atomsk's power to activate the plant! They're going to destroy this planet!"

"I told you already: I know. As long as I get Atomsk, I don't care what happens to this planet."

The towering hand was no longer trembling; now, it started to move. It was moving very slowly, but the large hand was definitely making its way toward the iron beside it in an effort to grab it.

Guon... guon... guon...

The palm that had been facing up now started to turn face down so that it could grasp the iron.

For that reason, it was neither the time nor the place for Amarao to be arguing with Haruko; he was, after all, standing on the palm, which was now turning downward. He scrambled desperately to get to the back of the hand, where he wouldn't be thrown off. But this was a fairly difficult and high climb. After deciding a route based on the hand's movements, Amarao had no choice but to climb a vertical wall without equipment to help. If he made one wrong step, then he would fall.

Annoyingly, Haruko was jumping from finger to finger of the giant hand with a calm expression.

Amarao tutted at his own misfortune. *I told him that you can't trust this woman! She does only what's good for her.*

Amarao had just about managed to make his way to the back of the hand but by that time, the palm was facing the iron and moving steadily toward the factory. If the hand grabbed the handle of the factory, then the annihilation of the planet would begin.

But at just the instant it reached to grab the handle, the towering hand's movements stopped suddenly. It was in position now to make contact with the handle, so why wasn't it trying to close its fingers around it?

"Why...?" Glimpsing down through a gap in the giant fingers, Amarao saw something between the palm of the hand and the iron that was getting in the way of them making contact. Yes, he could see it: In between was the luminescent Red Canti!

It must have stopped itself from becoming a part of the terminal core and separated itself. And now, Canti was holding up the giant hand as if it weighed nothing. Canti really might be the infamous Pirate King!

From one of the giant fingertips where she stood, Haruko was watching, too. She looked delighted. This was the first time Amarao had seen her expression so full of pleasure and excitement. What they were witnessing was the power that she had been running around the universe to obtain and now, it was right in front of her. She was passionately excited about seeing her true prey.

There was no doubt about it, Amarao thought that Red Canti really had to be Red Pirate King .

But Haruko's expression suddenly turned to one of puzzlement.

Amarao quickly glanced at Canti. For some reason, the red robot was swiftly returning to blue. Yet its face monitor, which was facing skyward, was emitting a red light.

That red light was a sign of something just about to begin, something no one could have predicted.

Naota thought he must be dreaming. It was a dream that looked very realistic, though a lucid dream. Moments ago, he'd been hit by Haruko and landed inside Canti's abdominal cavity. But stretching out before him, he could see a snowy winter landscape. The landscape was Mabase; he could tell, because he saw the burnt remains of the old elementary school. But there was no school building there. *Oh, that's right, this was the future*, Naota realized. His dream was of the future, but he was remembering a few months back in the future. He was surprised that he already had memories of a future time inside him but because of this, Naota knew why there was no building among the school's remains.

That winter, or the winter in the dream, Mabase had been hit by a massive snowstorm for the first time in recorded history. Under the weight of the fallen snow, the building had listed. And because it became a dangerous place for the kids to play in, it had been demolished. The mayor had reacted quickly to the citizens' demands.

The sun shone over and over, and the scenery changed to spring. In his dream, the flow of time was disordered and arbitrary. Naota realized that he was now in middle school. He was in a classroom after school, and Masashi, Gaku, and Ninamori all were around him. They all had gone on to the same school.

"Naota, come to the basketball club with us," Masashi said.

But Naota didn't reply straight away; he was thinking over what had happened to him as a middle schooler, recalling memories and trying to organize his thoughts.

He could see from the classroom window that the MM factory on the hill was still boarded up. The official announcement had declared that there was no hope for reopening it after an accident had occurred there. The giant iron still sat squarely on the hill, looking down at the town, but it no longer pumped out white smoke. The factory was dead. And because of that, there were now a large number of residents who had lost their jobs. The number of people leaving the city to find work was increasing by the day.

Mamimi had been one of the people to leave in this outflow, quitting high school and moving to Tokyo.

His route to school had changed, but Naota still crossed Mabase Bridge, and as he did, he would remember the days he had spent with Mamimi there.

Mamimi had said she wanted to become a photographer before she'd left. She'd won a prize for a photo she'd sent into a magazine, and she'd made up her mind as a result of that. The photo that had appeared in the magazine was one taken at that critical moment when Naota was hit by Haruko's Vespa, and she'd entitled the picture "Goodbye Naota." Mamimi had used Naota's real name for the first and last time.

Home was the same as ever. Kamon was still operating the bakery and also making mini comics that he couldn't sell. And Canti was still at the Nandaba home, as well alternately being used by Kamon or slacking off. His body color stayed blue for the most part, though.

The mystery surrounding their pet cat, Miyu Miyu, had deepened. Now, Naota suspected that the mysterious voice Haruko had been talking to all that time actually belonged to Miyu Miyu. He suspected as much because, later, he had eavesdropped on Kamon talking with that same mysterious voice, and only Kamon and Miyu Miyu had been in the room.

Moreover, the conversation that he'd eavesdropped on was an astonishing one. He'd been told that no one had any idea where his mother was, but from this conversation, Naota discovered that she was a colleague of Haruko. In other words, she was a member of the space police. Naota kept quiet about what he'd heard, though, and never questioned Kamon further about it. He knew the reason his father had hidden the information from him was because it was best for Naota that way.

Before Naota graduated from elementary school, his brother Tasuku had returned to Japan once to introduce them to his fiancée. After he introduced that blonde girl to his family, he returned back to America. It looked like he was going to become a professional player over there, on a team that MM sponsored. Naota thought that everything probably would work out fine.

Shigekuni kept watching baseball, but Naota never wore his brother's hand-me-down Mabase Martians uniform again. Nor did he walk around carrying his brother's bat when he went out anymore. He'd had enough with baseball; it wasn't for him. Anyway, there were other things that he wanted to do.

"Come on, join the basketball club with us," Gaku said.

Naota hadn't joined any clubs when he'd started middle school, although Gaku and Masashi had recommended the basketball club.

"No, I don't want to play basketball," Naota declined. "I'm going to start a club of my own."

Ninamori, who had been listening to the conversation that was going on right next to her, immediately guessed correctly the club Naota would want to start. "Easy listening, right?"

Naota thought that women were very astute.

In Naota's room, the guitar *she* had left was still leaning there. Naota was waiting for an opportunity to use it. It was the only thing she'd left behind when she disappeared... from this city... from this planet.

Out of nowhere, from above their heads, a bright light appeared. A red light. The source of that red light spoke to Naota.

"Are you okay with this?"

It was the first time Naota had heard this male voice, but he felt as though it

were strangely familiar, as if it were a voice he'd heard many times before. So, Naota wasn't suspicious of the red light source, and instead he answered its question.

"Yes, I'm fine with this."

This is what I chose. If I had chosen another option, then the result would have been different but when it came down to it, this was the only thing I could choose.

Naota sensed that the red light was laughing. And in the next moment, the light source shone even brighter. The source of the red light was getting closer to him.

In that same moment, Naota lost his future memories, and he was once again returned to the moment when he'd been gobbled up by Canti.

Canti's face monitor continued shining and from its red light, something was coming out.

Amarao thought it was going to be another guitar super weapon; instead, it was the body of a child. It was Naota.

He was emitting some kind of glow like a red aura and this Red Naota kicked up with all his might against the palm of the giant hand, which weighed the equivalent of a mountain.

And with that one attack really, just with that **one** attack Red Naota managed to kick away the entire body of the towering hand. It was an unbelievable sight.

Afterward, Red Naota simply stood sedately on top of Canti's head.

Still clinging to the part of the hand that had been moving toward the iron just a moment ago, Amarao gazed at Naota with a stunned expression.

"That kid... he's the Pirate King!"

From Canti's head, which was still at his feet, Red Naota pulled at two guitars; with one neck grasped in each hand, he separated the guitars from the robot's head, and then he merged them with each other, creating a double-neck guitar.

Red Naota kicked off Canti's head and flew. (It appeared he now could fly freely.) And with the guitar in hand, he hit at the still-turning enemy body that he had kicked away moments ago.

There was a flash of blinding light. Instantly, the towering hand stopped moving, almost as though it been petrified.

This was no fight. This was an adult using silent force to punish a child.

It was then that a red shining insignia appeared on Red Naota's head the Pirate King's insignia. Somehow, the Pirate King's power was inside Naota now.

As Haruko watched Red Naota, she wore a cold expression that hid a terrifying rage. With a bloodthirsty voice, she called out, "Takkun, you can't do that! That power is mine!"

With her guitar in hand, Haruko was in fierce pursuit of Naota, who had landed on a fingertip of the hand. But Naota easily stopped her attacks.

Amarao was stunned by what he was seeing but at the same time, he realized this was their chance.

Naota felt betrayed by Haruko, and he was suffering greatly because of this. Amarao could feel Naota's passionate rage in response to Haruko's treatment of him. And Naota definitely held the power of the Pirate King; he had skillfully defeated the giant MM robot, and now, if he could defeat Haruko, the Earth would be secure. Yes,

this was their best chance in one move, they could eliminate all the extra terrestrials.

"I won't let you get in the way of what I want!"

Haruko and Red Naota continued their violent clashing of guitars on the fingers of the halted hand, sending bright white sparks flying with the amazing energy of their battle.

Haruko swung her guitar wildly, but Red Naota was able to blow her away with his lightning fast attacks. And with a loud metallic sound, Haruko's guitar went soaring high into the air.

He did it! Amarao screamed internally with delight. The boy did it! He's the world's hero! This is the last attack. Show that selfish girl your rage!

In the next moment, however, Amarao stood frozen to the spot in fear.

Robbed of her weapon, Haruko glared at Red Naota with fervent fury. Her strong feelings had saturated her consciousness and become thought waves, which now spread into the surrounding area. Those strong thoughts spread to the opposing Naota who stood before her, and then to Amarao, and even to the unconscious Mamimi, who opened her eyes. They all could feel the pure rage.

To be defeated by you... you, who took the power I wanted so bad and fought me with it. There's nothing that can be done about it now; because I used you, you betrayed me, but I don't regret doing it. I knew how senseless the things I've done were, and I did them anyway. I don't expect to be forgiven, but no one has the power to forgive me, anyway. No one has the power to punish me. The way of the brotherhood is to live by one's own values. That's the difference between that evil MM and us: We both do bad things, but they make up excuses for their evil deeds. Their machines have a weak spirit with their forgiveness of others, their unsatisfactory value system, and their inside-out, obsessive, extremist equality. So, Takkun, do what you will under the name of your justice, turn that super weapon against me.

"Do it!" Amarao screamed. If he hadn't screamed, then he wouldn't have been able to hold up against her intense thoughts. Amarao was swamped by the primitive fear of a person who had angered the gods; he screamed so as not to lose control, and his entire body was invigorated.

"She's not going to do anything about MM! She's too dangerous to this world... You must recognize it!"

Red Naota looked straight into Haruko's eyes for a moment, gripping the double guitar in his hand. A few tense seconds passed.

Then, the red aura around Naota's body disappeared.

The insignia on his forehead also dissipated, and Naota returned to his normal self.

It was then that Naota offered the Pirate King's guitar to Haruko.

What are you doing? Amarao couldn't believe his eyes.

I can't believe it, Naota Nandaba! Have you betrayed the entire planet? You threw away an opportunity to save the planet from danger! And why didn't you take revenge on the woman who betrayed you? Why did you hand it over to her?

As she accepted the guitar, Haruko seemed confused by it all, as well, evidenced by the fact that the thought waves around her had vanished. Had Naota escaped from

becoming the Pirate King by his own conscious decision? If so, why? Not understanding his reasoning, she regarded Naota with a baffled expression.

Naota had lost the red aura, but his cheeks now were red for another reason. He then uttered the simple words that he'd been wanting to say to her all that week no, since much farther back than that: "I like you."

He kissed the puzzled Haruko, mouth to mouth. It was a rich kiss, without hesitation and prolonged.

The observers gaped at the two of them, and among them, Amarao stood dumbfounded. Still a prisoner of the terminal core, the recently revived Mamimi watched their kiss with cold eyes.

How much time passed, no one could say. But in the moment when Naota finally took his lips off Haruko's, *it* appeared from Naota's head.

It may have been another one of the hornlike protrusions, but this one was a lot bigger, and it soared high into the sky from Naota's head.

It was a giant bird-headed and winged man with a muscular chest and arms. His entire body was muscled and toned. The large black wings could freely manipulate gravity just from being spread, it seemed, and he floated as he swished through the air. On his right wrist, he was wearing a bracelet one half a pair of handcuffs, with a chain link attached... the severed cuffs.

Haruko was ecstatic at seeing the birdman. "Atomsk!"

It may have just been coincidence, but when Haruko shouted that single word, it acted like the shot of a gun triggering an avalanche: The towering hand MM's robot that they were standing upon started to crumble. As it broke up into separate bits, the entire body of it became unstable and started to collapse, unable to hold up its own weight.

It was like something from a nightmare. If the structure were to fall to the ground, there would be tragic losses as a result. The metal monster was taller than even a skyscraper, and it was going to fall onto the residential blocks like a massive tree.

But something happened to prevent that: The mass of debris stopped mid-collapse and started to float in the air. And then, it started to rise up, as if lifted by an invisible god.

The person creating this miracle, equal to the parting of the seas, was Atomsk, of course.

At some point, the floating Atomsk's head had become a localized typhoon, which created a giant twister that exhibited amazing sucking power. The towering hand was being gradually drawn in. No, it wasn't simply drawn in Atomsk controlled the suction and twister himself.

"N.O.?" While he muttered to himself, Amarao also was pulled up into the swirling air, and soon he was caught up in the twisting air, flying inside it. However, in contrast to the towering hand, Amarao's body slowly descended to earth. Somehow, the power could choose not to suck certain things in; the power was devastating, but also reasonable. Amarao had escaped unharmed only the eyebrow stickers were damaged, having been ripped off Amarao's face and blown away.

Round and round and round... the air around Mabase was being swirled as if it

were inside a giant blender. The brown leaves of the ginkgo trees were blown from their branches and danced like butterflies in the air. And now, the majority of Mabase residents who hadn't deserted after the factory closed were watching the spectacle above their heads, unaware of the danger.

Around and around and around... until Mamimi who had come free from the machine, Canti who had returned to blue, Amarao minus eyebrow stickers, and Naota who had separated from the Pirate King all had been picked up by the swirling wind and then dropped down in a safe place, unharmed. The vortex was Atomsk's energy, which was carefully controlled, right down to the smallest detail.

It was an incredible power the Pirate King held. And to Naota, who had been in contact with it for a moment, it wasn't the slightest bit mysterious. The owner of that red light was definitely an amazing man.

The twister finally sucked everything within the vortex inside Atomsk's head, and then it disintegrated. It had sucked in every single piece of debris from the giant MM robot that, and the smoke. It had cleaned up that gloomy white smoke.

For the first time in a long time, Mabase was filled with the shining sun and blue sky.

The black-winged Pirate King then closed the N.O. and, with the same lightning speed with which he'd appeared, he jumped up into the sky.

In the bright blue, completely cloudless sky, a yellow Vespa floated.

On the seat, of course, sat Haruko. Although she had whistled for her scooter quickly, Atomsk already had disappeared into Mabase's skies by the time she was on it.

Seated on the floating Vespa, Haruko looked down at the bracelet on her left arm. On the metal band was a short chain link, which was pointing up toward the heavens, showing her where Atomsk had flown.

Naota, who was standing on the hill, was staring up at Haruko, looking at her with all his heart.

The wild girl who rode her yellow scooter... that untamed girl who had at first been a hated housemaid... she had hit Naota with her guitar countless times, knocked him over with her Vespa, and used him like he was a fool. She had acted selfishly and violently and irresponsibly. Yet in the end, Naota had confessed that he liked her despite it all.

Haruko lingered, staring affectionately into the sky where the chain was pointing, but finally, she smiled with resignation, knowing that nothing could be done, and looked down at Naota.

"This is all your fault. I've lost sight of him." Haruko's tone was unusually kind. As she came to this realization herself, she smiled a little wider.

The two of them regarded each other as the brown leaves danced to the ground.

Finally, Haruko spoke gently. "Want to come with me?"

Naota thought to himself, *You have no intention of taking me.*

"You can't, huh?" Haruko said. "You're still just a kid, Takkun."

With those parting words, she pulled down her goggles and turned the accelerator. With a massive boom, the Vespa sped away into the blue sky, gradually

getting smaller and smaller, until it was visible no more.

After a short while, Naota noticed the discarded base guitar near him Haruko's guitar. He picked it up and tried to play a chord, but a painful sound came out instead. It was the noise signaling the end of this special season it was Naota's and Haruko's parting.

Afterword

Out of the entire series, the one scene I like most is when Naota ran through the town at night to meet up with Mamimi; also, I really like the atmosphere when those two were playing by the riverbank.

And if that's the case, then when I think about it, I realize that I'm already an adult.

Why's this? Because I find amusement in the feeling of sorrow.

Originally I mean, when I was much younger sorrow was no more than a negative feeling to me. *That* feeling now is very distant in my memories, so the picture I've painted of my childhood years has turned out a little differently from how my life really was then.

One's set of values changes as the years pile on. Only adults are really able to efficiently put the negative emotions to good use, right?

That being said, we must not overlook the fact that even when we become adults, we are still limited beings.

For everything you gain, there will be something lost and for everything you lose, there will be something gained. I thought the person who first made me realize this was amazing.

For example, when you lose a precious treasure, you gain the feeling of having lost a treasure. Or when you finally realize a dream after many years, you lose that passion of wanting to make that dream a reality.

You might think it no more than simple rhetoric, but if you could have a sense of value like from the point of view of an objective god, you would have access to an extremely simple yet profound truth.

But in reality, this thesis is pretty impractical, because there aren't any humans who can peer out from a god's point of view. Humans always will have individual desires, making them unable to see that what's lost and what's gained are equal, that there's usually a relationship between supply and demand.

I apologize to all my future descendants for this example, but people who collect trading cards value those they have multiple copies of differently than those they don't have. From a god's point of view, they are all equal cards, but for humans who are limited by circumstance, that is not the case. The special value of each individual card is determined by the current status of the owner's collection.

Value comes from purpose. Therefore, in reality, when people lose something important, they may not realize they also have the good fortune of making a profit.

Because of this, the words "for everything you lose, there will be something gained" take on a sharp meaning. When considering the concept of a god's point of

view, we can think of purpose and value not as absolutes, but as things that will change to some degree, such as when you've suffered a massive disappointment, or maybe when you've gained the power to save yourself.

Indeed, according to your purpose, the value of all things that surround humans all the rabble will change. If you lose all interest in collecting trading cards, the things that had been treasure up until that day will suddenly turn to waste paper.

This has become a bit of a lecture on the value in economics, but this is a very important element of my own interpretation of the heroine that is Haruko Haruhara.

As you know, this book is a novelization of an anime screenplay. The story was basically created with the combined efforts of Director Tsurumaki and myself. And the ideas of everyone at Gainax can be found scattered throughout.

I would like to give my deepest thanks to character designer Yoshiyuki Sadamoto; animation director Tadashi Hiramatsu; Hiroyuki Imaishi and Yusuke Yoshigaki, who illustrated the novel for me; my editor, Takahiro Yamazaki; producer Hiroki Sato; all the other staff; all the people who sent fan letters; and of course, all of you who are reading this right now.

When we become adults, we lose what it is to be a kid. Even as adults, we are limited beings but I feel it is because we are limited that we can walk tall.

Being a limited being is not an obstacle to filling your hands abundantly. Haruko, who is greedy and free from anyone's restraint, shows us it's quite the opposite. After all, she is no more than a limited being, yet she's able to live a wild life.

"It's like eating bad ramen; it's part of the richness of life." Anyone who can say that with a laugh seems to be a cool adult to me.

To a new century of full hearts.

Yoji Enokido (12/14/2000)