

STORY & ILLUSTRATION

Genma 496





Samsara, or the War Pigs' Feast

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慙愧残兵

Zangji Zangpei
Lieutenant

戦慄海軍次

Second Lieutenant
Mamanani Benriben

関
雲
狼
狼

Captain

Tokiji Urota

金
鹿
武
士

Kaneshika
Takehito

陣
悟
亡
国

鎧
鍬

Second Lieutenant
Yoroi Shikoro

Jingo Horobuni
Lieutenant Colonel

“Gentlemen, I like war.
Gentlemen, I like war.
Gentlemen, I love war.”
– The Major,
from *Hellsing*, by Kouta Hirano

“Generals gathered in their masses; just like witches at black masses
Evil minds that plot destruction; sorcerers of death’s construction
In the field, the bodies burning; as the War Machine keeps turning.”
– “War Pigs”, Black Sabbath,
from *Paranoid*

Samsara Lull – Prison Without Beginning–

Despite an abundant amount of funding that could have gone towards fixing it, the gap in the ceiling of the furthest cell of the military prison complex had remained open. It was hardly worth being called a hole, certainly not wide enough to allow one even to dream of escaping, and yet it graciously allowed rainwater to slip through, letting it drip like blood from a wound.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

With punctual enough regularity to make a drill sergeant smile, the drops of rainwater hit the stone brick floor of the cage, resounding audibly against its walls.

For as long as Captain Tokiji had known of this place, that incessant dripping had been a feature. Some, it had driven insane. But the man sitting before her in the cell, covered in dirty black rags, huddled on the floor and leaning back against the wall, seemed entirely unperturbed by it.

Even as she approached the metal bars dividing them, footsteps echoing against the dismal walls, the man didn’t spare her so much as a glance. Putting her hands on her hips, she studied his haggard form for a moment. Then, snorting in derision, she called out to him.

“Once an illustrious soldier of our great army—now just a caged dog, waiting to be put down. How the mighty have fallen, Kaneshika Takehito.”

The woman’s remark prompted a chuckle from the prisoner. “And yet it’s only now that I deserve to be called by name, huh?” He looked up, his yellowing teeth now visible among his overgrown stubble. “The Internal

Affairs Division of the Military Police, 49th Investigative Team—the Rat Squad. To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting? Ah, but ladies and gentlemen, don't be shy, come on over and say hello, all of you!"



At his insistence, several more footsteps began to echo in the dark hall—three more pairs, to be exact. Soon enough, they were all lined up a few feet behind Captain Tokiji. The sight brought a tinge of delight to Kaneshika's eyes. Staring at them one by one, the prisoner continued his unprompted speech.

"Second Lieutenant Wananami Senritsu, the valkyrie whose voice has charmed the masses; Second Lieutenant Yoroi Shikoro, the silent fortress of a man; and Lieutenant Zangi Zanpei, the man who put me in here to begin with. What a pleasant surprise to see you all like this."

The tall blonde woman, Wananami, offered an elegant smile. "I've never met a soldier as talkative as you."

Yoroi, for his part, remained silent.

Zangi directed his bespectacled gaze away from Kaneshika. "You're the one who put yourself here ...They should have executed you already."

"Ah, but that would have been mighty inconvenient for you, wouldn't it?" Kaneshika sneered. "You're all here for me, after all, aren't you—I'm so honored I could cry." He began clapping his dry palms. "Ah, but of course, I'd be remiss not to mention the great Captain Tokiji Urota. How do you do?"

"I'm fulfilling my duty, unlike you. Hence why I don't intend to waste my time with inane chatter. I'll have you answer some questions, Kaneshika."

"Oh?" he said with an incredulous lilt. "And what, pray tell, about?"

"You know damn well what about," she retorted, clicking her tongue.

“At 09:00 today, during the Arms Parade taking place at the Daiheiji Colosseum, an enemy attack took place.” Second Lieutenant Wananami took one step forward, speaking in a clear voice. “One that the brass is still unable to comprehend.”

“Of course, you’re well aware of that already,” muttered Lieutenant Zangi under his breath.

The Arms Parade—a boisterous showcase of military force to the citizens. The masses of the Central City gathered in the Daiheiji Colosseum to watch the soldiers’ march. And it was in the midst of that supposed show of strength that a glaring weakness was exploited.

Multiple smoke bombs were detonated around the biggest of the parade floats, obscuring the center of the Colosseum. And within the smoke, multiple enemies were sighted. Many of the marching soldiers attempted to fight back, but they were unable to neutralize the threat. When the smoke cleared, there was no sign of the hostile force. Even though citizens surrounded the scene from every angle, even though the sole point of entry was guarded by dozens of soldiers, the enemies had simply vanished as though into thin air. All that remained—

“—Were the charred remains of ten of our troops, alongside a dozen more survivors that suffered severe burns.” Even the Valkyrie’s melodic voice lowered gravely as she concluded her report.

Kaneshika whistled. “So they had flamethrowers, huh? Our enemy sure is scary.”

Clang! “Cut the shit!” The iron bars of the cell trembled from Captain Tokiji Urota’s baton strike, the deafening sound continuing to echo long past her yell. “Don’t act surprised now, Kaneshika. You knew full well this would happen.”

The prisoner smirked back, saying nothing. Tokiji narrowed her eyes.

“That was the meaning of your message, wasn’t it?”

Kaneshika Takehito was imprisoned and sentenced to death for treason and sabotage. He was sentenced without trial, but not due to any failure of due process.

The outcome was just so patently obvious that a trial had been deemed a waste of resources.

Before being stripped of his title, Kaneshika had been a soldier—a nameless, thankless cog in the machine, but a particularly earnest and hard-

working one. He'd been recognized by his superiors as a useful asset against the enemy.

That all changed on a night five months prior, when all three munition storehouses within Kaneshika's base exploded simultaneously.

The commotion had been so great that no one even noticed his absence for at least thirty minutes. And in the hubbub, the inner courtyard had been left neglected, just long enough for Kaneshika to make his move. When the first soldiers patrolling the premises finally arrived at the courtyard, they were just in time to witness his final trick of the night.

He'd taken a few bags of gunpowder and spread them around the yard. From the perspective of the ground soldiers, it appeared to be nothing more than a random conflagration. From the eyes of the superiors rushing to view the scene from their offices above, however, his intention could be read.

The fiery words spelled out the following message:

*A smoky roast to the parade
A juicy mince to feed the judge
One last bite to end the minister
Will the feasting pigs be sated?*

After listening to the end with a placid smile, Kaneshika hummed cheerily. "Kind of you to remember my little attempt at poetry. But here I thought you'd just written it off as the ravings of a madman."

"I had," Lieutenant Zangi replied in a scratchy voice. "Until now. I wish I could have forgotten it. Yet when I learned of this case, your words were the first thing that flashed through my mind."

"Now now, the good men and women of your unit will think we've some sort of special relationship if you say things like that," the prisoner sardonically chided, leaning back against the wall with his hands crossed behind his head. "So? What'd you want from me, again? If it's an enemy attack, just leave it to the brass. What are a couple of rats that can't even sniff out the shit in their own backyard going to accomplish?"

"Not gonna talk, huh? Not that I expected anything different." Captain Tokiji grinned, though her eyes were anything but warm. "This has only been a preliminary greeting. You'll be seeing a lot of me, Kaneshika. I'll rip straight through you, find that rot you're desperately keeping hidden."

"I'm afraid it's rotten all around, little lady. You should get your eyes checked if you can't see that." He shrugged in an exaggerated motion,

dandruff falling from his unwashed hair. “I’ll take the company, but you’re better off forgetting about all this. If it helps you sleep at night, you can chalk it up to me just seeing the future.

“And hey, while I’m trying out the part of an amateur soothsayer, let me make another prediction.” And then, the smirk vanishing from his face, Kaneshika glared deep into his questioner’s eyes. His pitch-black irises, cornered on three sides by bloodshot sclera, made the captain steady her footing—as if she were liable to fall into that cage with him. “If you do solve this case, you’ll never see this world the same way again.”

1st Serving

Later that day, after Kaneshika's preliminary questioning.

By the time the Rat Squad had been permitted to investigate the scene of the attack, every citizen in the audience had long since been evacuated. Being unable to interrogate any of them herself had somewhat frustrated Tokiji, but they would have to make do with the written reports from the Field Investigation Unit.

The scene was still crowded with soldiers, though none of them were in a performative mood. Moreover, any sense of decorum was spoiled by the burnt corpses still laid out on the ground.

"These guys are looking a lot less toasty than I expected," Tokiji said. "Some of their faces are still recognizable, for one."

"The attack only lasted for two to three minutes at most," Zangi replied. "Hardly enough time to vaporize anyone."

The darkish disfigured skin on their faces and hands hadn't entirely melted off, still retaining its shape. The skin covered by the charred, pitch-black remains of their uniforms was in much worse shape.

"Seems like they were sprayed with tank fuel and lit on fire that way. The flame burned quickly, but not particularly deeply."

"That's consistent with the survivors' testimony," Wananami confirmed. "They mentioned sensing the smell of fuel for a few minutes before the attack commenced."

"Hah? Why'd the idiots not brace themselves for attack then?" Tokiji grumbled.

"Come now, they were in the middle of the show. They couldn't possibly have expected anything like that to happen." The Valkyrie defended her soldiers with a smile.

"Tch. Expecting the unexpected is what a soldier's job is."

"These guys are riddled with bullet holes too. Some more than others." Hunched over one of the corpses, Zangi stuck his finger in one of the wounds. "Consistent with rifle ammunition."

"If they timed their attack with the parade shooting, they could earn a few precious seconds." Tokiji grinned. "Clever bunch of devils."

As she looked around the scene from a distance, hands on her hips, trying to take it all in, she noticed her quiet mountain of a companion gazing intently at the deflated parade float.

"What's up, Lieutenant Yoroi?" She strolled up next to him, gazing at the ruined image of the military mascot, Porka the Peccary. "Think they hid inside that stupid thing?"

Yoroi nodded, his eyes not meeting hers.

“So the Department of Propaganda’s tax money sinkhole now doubles as a Trojan horse, how fitting.” She crossed her arms. “Still doesn’t explain how the assholes disappeared though.”

Yoroi turned his gaze down to the ground. Tokiji could tell that the question frustrated him equally as much.

“The commotion would have drawn the audience’s attention to the center of the colosseum. Could the enemy have used that opportunity to sprint away?”

“That’d be far-fetched regardless, but the guards at the exit make it an impossibility. They couldn’t have overlooked fleeing enemy troops.” Tokiji flippantly shot down Zangi’s suggestion.

“What if they turned traitor?”

“My intuition tells me otherwise. We’ll investigate them, sure, but there were four guards. What are the odds they’d all be rotten?”

“I suppose you’re right...”

Before they knew it, they’d all gathered side by side, listlessly gazing at the last vestiges of a ruined celebration. Realizing how pathetic they must have looked, Tokiji stomped her heel.

“Tch. All right, let’s look through that damn cartoon pig’s guts.”

The following day.

The Arms Parade raged on, almost as if compensating for the previous day’s unexpected interruption. Off in the first row of the Daiheiji Colosseum’s audience seating, reserved entirely for ranking military personnel, Tokiji sighed, thinking back to their earlier investigation.

What a waste of time that was. In the end, that slippery eel in the cell was their sole lead. Picturing his self-satisfied smile was enough to make her pop a blood vessel, so she instead returned to the present for a moment.

Tokiji sat with her chin atop the guardrail in front of her, her arms dangling on each side of her head like some sort of mock pillory. She hadn’t been paying any attention to the parade for a while now, and she hadn’t been in the habit of hiding her boredom since she’d graduated cadet school.

“What d’you think of this case, Senritsu?” she thoughtlessly blurted out.

“Permission to pay attention to the parade without distractions?”

“Denied.”

“Figures.”

Sitting to the left of Tokiji, eyes fixed on the marching men below, was the warrior maiden herself, Wananami Senritsu. Even the higher-ups who'd otherwise disparage their unit could only look upon her in admiration. She chuckled lightly as she spoke to her superior. "Can't sit still, Captain?"

"Humor me."

"I think," she began, turning her gaze back to the spectacle as she chose her words. "I think our enemy has shown themselves to be even more despicable than we'd thought."

"Oh?"

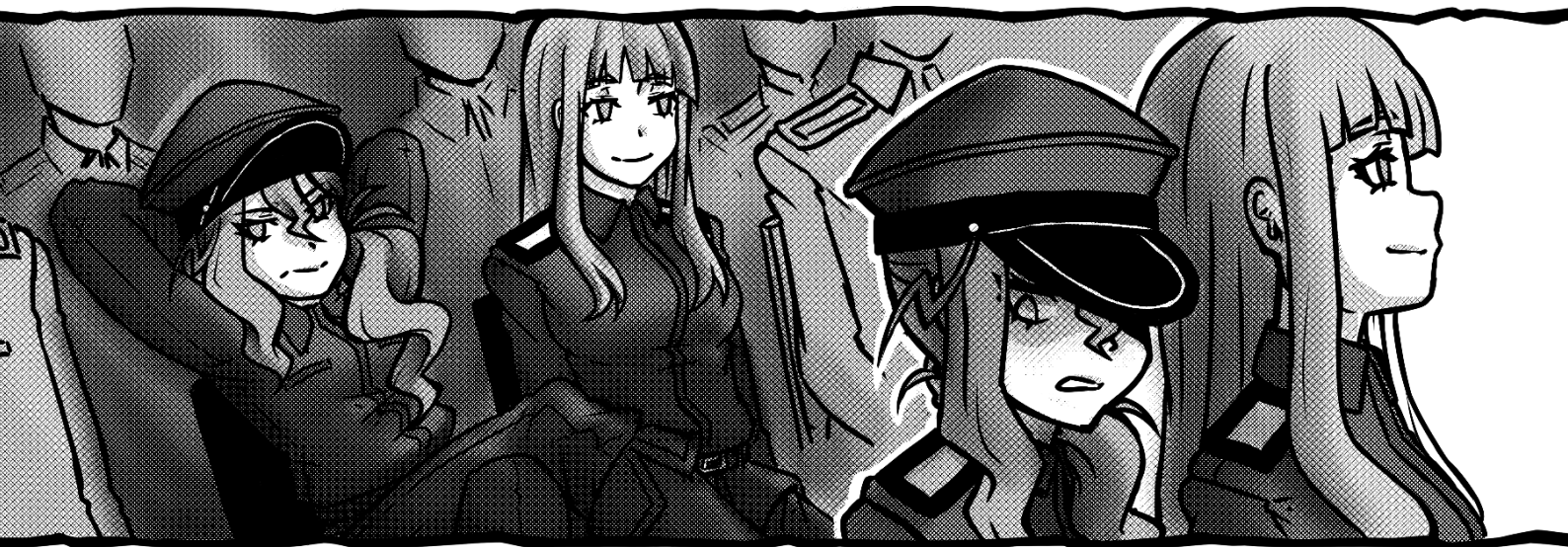
"There was no strategic purpose to this attack. That much, I think, is clear. There is nothing to be gained from murdering a dozen soldiers performing for an audience of civilians. And even if there was, it would be far outweighed by the difficulty of the operation. Our army's commanders would never give their approval to something like this—it's terrorism, pure and simple."

"Terrorism, huh? That our enemies are inhuman beasts is a given, but if you call this terrorism, then that implies there's a message being sent with this act, right?"

"Attacking a performance is a performative act in itself. I can only imagine they must be trying to tell us something. But is it as straightforward as 'be afraid'? I just don't know."

"...Well, don't worry about it. I'd say it's a good thing that you can't think like the enemy."

Wananami turned her gaze downward, falling silent. Tokiji, too, focused on the parade for the moment. It didn't take long, however, for the boisterous discharge of rifles and battering of drums to start irritating her. Unable to restrain herself, she spoke again.



“The enemy just got the drop on ‘em while they were busy posing for the camera, but here they are posing some more. Who do these simpletons think they’re fooling?”

Tokiji’s callous remarks earned her a cold glare from some colonel or other sitting to her right, but she paid it no mind; it wasn’t as if the Rat Squad’s reputation could get any worse.

“That may be so, but I’m glad to see it all the same—their weeks of practice paying off.”

“Ah, right.” Tokiji suddenly recalled. “You’re supposed to go down there, huh?”

“Indeed,” she replied, still facing the show. “My part yesterday was postponed thanks to the attack, so I’ll be performing today instead.”

“Nervous?”

“Nervous or not, duty calls.” As Tokiji stole a glance at her face, however, it betrayed not a hint of trepidation.

“That reminds me,” Tokiji began, facing the Colosseum grounds. “I don’t think I ever told you about this, but back in cadet school, your dorm room was next to mine.”

Wananami said nothing in response.

“There were a lot of lonely nights back then. Not much to do but lay there half-dead after a full day of training. But—” Tokiji paused, hesitating for but a moment. “—I could hear you, through that wall. Every night, you’d practice your singing there. Even though they’d come yelling in a second if anyone tried talking through those paper-thin walls, nobody ever stopped you from singing.”

Wananami gave no sign that she was listening, merely watching the parade intently.

“They must have been charmed by it. I was too, you know. It’s not like you were all that good back then, mind,” Tokiji said, stringing her words along with a self-deprecating grin. “But it was hard not to be fascinated. After all—each and every night, it sounded like you were fighting. Fighting against yourself, fighting something else, I don’t know, but you were fighting.”

“If you’d said something back then,” Wananami at last uttered, “perhaps things would have turned out differently.”

“I know you didn’t want to be doing this,” Tokiji said, still looking up at the sky. “I know you never wanted to suspect your compatriots, to be looked at by them with fear and revulsion.”

“Well,” the Valkyrie said, “I’d just have liked to be able to sing, at least once, while wearing a beautiful dress instead of this uniform.”

And with those words, she sat up and turned to leave. Before she could squeeze herself past the spectators to their right, however, Tokiji grabbed her hand.

She began speaking, a cynical smirk on her face. "Can't stand to sit by me anymore? It's my fault that you're here, in this unit. You must hate me, huh?"

Wananami, however, gave her a gentle look and a kind smile. "I have a feeling it makes no difference. Whatever you did or didn't do, I wouldn't have ended up anywhere else, in the end. There's nowhere else for me to go."

"..." Tokiji found no words to hit back with. With the smile wiped off her face, Tokiji quietly released her hand.

"Now, my part is coming up. I'm going to get ready. See you, Captain."

And so, without another word, Second Lieutenant Wananami Senritsu disappeared into the inner halls of the Colosseum.

"...*Tch.*" Looking up once more, Tokiji raised both feet and planted them on the iron guardrail in front of her. Every ranking official around her glared out of the corner of their eyes, but none dared say anything.

In a gloomy corner of the first basement floor of the military's central headquarters, down two halls and past two doors, was the office of a certain ranking official.

Lieutenant Colonel Jingo Horokuni.

The man must have been over sixty years old, but his toned physique, evident even under his uniform, and his furrowed brow and sharp chin gave the impression of a sword in its sheath, an ancient heirloom nonetheless sharp enough to kill if drawn.

Behind his plain wooden desk, cluttered with the death sentences of hundreds of traitors organized in piles, the man himself sat, stroking his moustache while glaring into the eyes of his subordinate.

Captain Tokiji Urota, standing up uncomfortably straight and with her stiff arm locked in place in a salute, tried maintaining eye contact as best she could, though her eyes kept flitting over to the painting behind her direct superior, a dark, apocalyptic scene of demons slaughtering a helpless mass of trembling humans.

"L-Lieutenant Colonel Jingo, sir!"

"Drop the Lieutenant, would you, Captain Tokiji? Let an old man dream a little," Jingo said, his voice a deep baritone. "So? What was it you wanted?"

“Sir! Shameful as it is, our current investigation requires the testimony of a certain prisoner, and he doesn’t seem liable to give anything away in just a day or two. I wished to request that his execution be postponed until such time that the case is solved.”

Wartime chaos meant that execution dates could be highly irregular. Some prisoners might get rounded up and shot all at once, others might wither in their cells for months before the reaper remembered to pay them a visit. Tokiji, however, couldn’t afford to have some random official just now remembering to do his job ruin her investigation.

“Ah, it’s that business at the parade, right?” Jingo said disinterestedly, his eyes to one of the papers below him.

“Yes, sir! Prisoner Kaneshika Takehito knows something about this attack. I swear I’ll get it out of him, even if it means torturing it out of him.”

“Torture? You’d better quit while you’re ahead, Captain. That man is a trained soldier. He’d sooner die of shock than give anything away.” The old man then looked up from his paper and into the ceiling fan above. “But him, huh? So his madness is finally catching up to us all?”

“Sir...?”

“I was on the scene, back when he pulled that little stunt. The gunpowder burned out in a matter of seconds, but when I caught a glimpse of his eyes I could tell—the fire never went out for him.”

Tokiji blinked.

Lieutenant Colonel Jingo looked directly into her eyes, his stern gaze drilling into her. “Tokiji Urota, you’ve sent dozens of your countrymen to the firing squad with a grin on your face. You’re a rat who can chew on the corpses of your kind. You’ve yet to let me down. You can solve this case. And you must solve it.”

His words begged no question, no protest. It was less an order than a statement of fact, or perhaps a divine proclamation. Something stirred inside Tokiji as she bore Jingo’s gaze. She nodded vehemently.

Satisfied, Jingo tore his deep gaze away from her, looking back down at his desk. He assured her that he’d take care of the bureaucracy regarding the delay of Kaneshika’s execution and dismissed her from his office. As she walked out, however, she couldn’t take her mind off of Jingo’s words, off of the way he looked at her.

As she walked through the empty, artificially lit corridors of the first basement floor, she clenched her hands into fists and grinned savagely.

I don’t need your encouragement, Colonel. I’m going to chew through their guts and lay all the filth bare, just like I’ve always done.

That evening, the sound of the dripping water hitting the cell floor had a rare companion: the irritated foot-tapping of Tokiji Urota echoed throughout the stone corridor.

“What’s got you all fussed, Captain?” Kaneshika asked gleefully from behind the iron bars. “Let me guess—you’ve thought it through over and over again, but all that spinning in circles has led you back to me. And having no choice but to depend on me frustrates you, doesn’t it?”

The woman, arms crossed and brow furrowed, ignored the prisoner’s taunt, not even meeting his gaze. However, despite her posturing, she was well aware that he was spot on. Unlike last time, she had come to visit him alone, unwilling to display her infirmity to her teammates.

So as not to meet Kaneshika’s infuriating gaze, she set her eyes on the guard in front of his cell, back straight like a statue and staring off into nothing.

“Hey, you,” she called out. “Tell me, did this guy ever tell you anything, or do you remember him ever talking to himself?”

The guard didn’t even look back at her as he maintained his silence. *I can never get used to dealing with these field guys. Got nothing to even threaten the words out of a guy like this with.*

Complaining in her mind, Tokiji couldn’t help but click her tongue, and that show of weakness gave Kaneshika yet another in. “Hey lady, I’d recommend you don’t waste your breath. You won’t get anything out of this guy. After all, he’s an active soldier—a different beast entirely from a costumed civvie like you.”

“...What?”

“You think pigs can talk to dogs?” Kaneshika scoffed. “You guys have no real combat experience, right? None of you do, be it your squad or your superior officer. You’re practically a different life form next to this guy. They should just let you come to work in your pajamas, for all the good that uniform’s doing you.”

Tokiji whistled. “So even a guy like you still has steadfast values, eh? What a boring thing to value, though. A uniform means nothing—the heart of its wearer is all that matters.”

“No, no, no,” he wagged his finger, “don’t underestimate the importance of a uniform.” He spoke gravely, as if lecturing an ignorant child. “Heart? What a meaningless platitude. No one cares about that in this world. But a uniform? Now that makes all the difference. Why, it’s basically all that separates you from the enemy.”

Tokiji clicked her tongue. "I have no clue what garbage you're spouting now. What about you, then, traitor Kaneshika? What are you, left without even that uniform you value so much?"

"Oh, I'm no different from that guard. The same kind of wounded dog. If there was any distinction, I'd say I just know my world history a little better. But either way, I'm better off than you. My pride would be in tatters if I was you, an impostor living among swine."

"Hah." Tokiji smirked, finally looking him in the eye as she put her hands on her hips. "I was wondering how you'd try to rile me up, but this is the best you can do, huh? Or perhaps you're daft enough to really believe that?"

"Oh? So you disagree?"

"I may not be out in the field shooting the enemy dead, but make no mistake—this, right here, is war." Tokiji spread her arms wide. "Taking those fat cats by surprise with evidence of their misdeeds, just like an ambush in the cover of dark. Arguing the case to the judge and jury of officials, just like a fierce showdown with every word a bullet. Sending someone whose rank I'll probably never reach to face the firing squad, just like taking down an unfathomable army with a single platoon. That's war, Kaneshika. My war."

"That sure put a smile on your face." Kaneshika leaned back against the hard wall, clasping his hands behind his head in lieu of a pillow. "You like war that much, Captain?"

"The nature of man is conflict. Butting heads is what defines us. We can't live without it. And we can't feel alive without it. That's why this war has been going on for as long as it has—we just can't get enough. And even when we win one day, we'll just find something else to pick a fight with."

"Hah! When we win, huh? Haha, what confidence! You're a real riot, you know that, lady?" Clutching his stomach, Kaneshika fell forward in uproarious laughter. Only after it subsided did he look up once more and address Tokiji. "Hey, you ever heard of *Samsara*?"

She raised an eyebrow. "The hell is that?"

"Of course you wouldn't have. It's a Buddhist and Hindu idea... aah, before you bother asking, those are just some old religions. Don't wanna overload your little brain, so I'll leave it at that."

"Anyway, *Samsara* is one of the neat little ideas they had. The cycle of death and rebirth, the endless suffering of existence... that's the set-up. All of this world's hubbub and strife is a distraction, a meaningless, never-changing show. Aimless wandering, just walking in circles."

"Hah? What a stupid idea. It's because you occupy all the space in your head with that drivel that you're a detriment to the war effort."

“Now, now, hear me out,” he casually said, waving his palm. “The whole point of Buddhism is ascending beyond that cycle of rebirth. It’s about achieving *Nirvana*—the enlightened state, where you can see through all of the worldly, transient desires that bind you. Well, if you wanna say it’s all just a coping mechanism to deal with life’s hardships, there’s not much I can argue back with!

“But here’s where it gets interesting: *Nirvana* is not just an escape from that cycle—‘*Nirvana* is *Samsara*, and *Samsara* is *Nirvana*.’ It’s all a matter of perception. The way to become enlightened is to understand the true nature of the world that’s always surrounded you. It’s like seeing through an optical illusion—once the true picture finally clicks, it’s impossible to go back. A fun thought, don’t you think?”

The longer she listened to him speak, the deeper the scowl on Tokiji’s face became. She held her irritation back with a sigh. “I didn’t come here to chat about this trash.” Fiercely clutching the iron bars, she hissed at the prisoner. “Tell me what you know about the case!”

“Careful there, get too angry and you won’t see anything past the red!” Kaneshika said, cackling in amusement. “Hey, I’m starting to like you, so I’ll throw you yet another bone in the form of a classic. Don’t worry—this one’s so simple, even you should get it.”

“What now?”

“If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.”

And then, three days later, the second course was served.

2nd Serving

“Tch.” Getting back to her seat in the audience gallery, Tokiji watched the courtroom proceedings with a sour expression.

“You delivered your testimony expertly, as ever. So what’s wrong?” Zangi softly asked from beside her, his eyes still on the trial.

“Hmph. That judge is far too lenient. I can tell he intends to spare him the death penalty. A demented fool like that can’t be allowed to walk!”

The Rat Squad was currently attending the trial of a certain soldier. It wasn’t a typical case for them, but they had lent the prosecution their assistance in building the case on special orders from Lieutenant Colonel Jingo.

A soldier gone on a rampage, massacring his fellow troops in what should’ve been a simple training exercise. *That kind of loose cannon can’t be overlooked, especially not after he just decimated a part of our army’s resources, meager though it may have been.*

Tokiji was fully intent on sending the man to his death, but for reasons unfathomable to her, a not insignificant part of the officials selected for the jury appeared sympathetic to him, not to mention the judge.

“The word forgiveness isn’t in your vocabulary, huh, Captain?” Wananami chuckled from the next seat over. “That’s not the real reason why you’re so angry though, is it?”

“Hmph.” A grin escaped Tokiji’s lips. “It was that damn judge. When I insisted that the defendant be put to death, the guy looked at me like roadkill or something. Pity, imagine that!” Just thinking about it made her anger resurface again. “These old farts think that anyone who isn’t on the same page as them is some kind of naive child that’ll one day come around. Nothing more annoying than that.”

Saying nothing in response to her rant, Wananami just covered her mouth with her palm as she let out a giggle. Tokiji sighed, shrugging it off.

“Either way, I busted my ass writing reports on his behalf, so I don’t want my work going to waste,” she said offhandedly, before turning to the hulking man on the other side of her. “What do you think about this anyway, Yoroi?”

“...” Yoroi faced the trial in silence, but his eyes seemed to be looking past it, somewhere beyond the courtroom. Finally, after a slight hesitation, he gave way to his deep baritone voice. “...I have a bad feeling about this.”

And it wouldn’t take much longer for his worry to be proven right. It would strike soon after the defendant was ordered to the stand.

The trial had been cut short by a desperate announcement from one of the bailiffs. And in the frenzy following it, Tokiji and her subordinates soon found themselves in front of the holding cell where the defendant had been kept.

"I guess you were right, Captain," Wananami said.

"No, this is..."

Inside the holding cell, its door wide open, was the defendant, silently curled into a ball, and—

"W-wait!" "—Hey, why the hell'd you do this!?"

Heedless of her squad mates' concerns, Tokiji strode inside—not giving any thought to the squelching sound beneath her boots—and grabbed the prisoner by the scruff of his neck.

He looked at her with empty eyes, a vague smile taking hold of his lips.

"Speak!" she yelled.

And then, with his unfocused eyes looking at something not of this place, his lips slowly formed a shape. They turned like a creaky valve, and out poured a scratchy, barely audible voice.

"—I got the enemy..."

And then he said nothing else, becoming unresponsive.

"Tch. Goddamn it!" she let go of him, letting him hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. And in doing so, some of the *mess* on the floor made a splashing sound.

She stepped out of the cramped room, taking a better look at *it*.

Lying on the floor was an anatomy textbook. That was the closest comparison one could make, for it had long ceased to be human.

"That's a bailiff... Judging by the marks on his neck, he seems to have been strangled. That's probably the cause of death." Zangi approached the corpse and crouched down to examine it.

Eyes rolled to the back of its head, its tongue was out, saliva dripping off of it. And following in the direction that it pointed to, led by the pouring blood, one's eyes would catch on the flesh protruding from its torso. From there, one could simply trail that protrusion—and trail it, and trail it, and keep trailing it, even as it looped under itself and circled back and forth nonsensically, one could keep trailing it, though they'd surely lose the plot somewhere along the way.

The man's guts, laid out on the floor alongside the rest of his innards, reminded Tokiji of a bowl of spaghetti.

"Even though we've all gathered here for him, our guest of honor sure has made a mess of things, huh?" A deep voice—one that Tokiji could easily recognize—addressed the group gathered in front of the holding cell.

"Colonel Jingo!" she called out. "You were here too?"

"I'm the jury foreman. Just one of my many responsibilities," he said, approaching the scene of the murder and taking a long look at it. "I suppose this will become yet another one, huh?"

"Sir," Zangi said, "I believe the most likely scenario is this: when the bailiff turned his back to the defendant, the latter attacked by wrapping the chain of his handcuffs around his neck from behind and choking him to death. After that, it would simply be a matter of taking his musket and using it to cut his stomach open and rummaging through it with his bare hands. Gruesome though it may be, it's feasible."

"Oh dear," Jingo sighed. "I'm afraid we've trained our soldiers a bit *too* well, if even one who's lost his mind can pull something like that off." He took out a cigar from his case, lit it and took a long drag. And then, swiftly, he turned his crosshair glare onto Tokiji. "However, Captain, you look like you have a different idea."

Tokiji clenched her fists. "Sir, I..." Hesitating for but a moment, she asserted herself clearly. "I have reason to believe that this case is more than it seems. Lieutenant, you noticed it too, right?"

"...The thought crossed my mind." Zangi hesitantly acquiesced. "It bears some resemblance to Kaneshika's spiel."

"So you're implying it's connected to *that* case, are you?" Jingo said, taking a puff from his cigar. "Even though the defendant is sitting there literally red-handed, you mean to imply the true culprit is another force entirely?"

"About that," Tokiji said, steeling herself. "Truthfully, in anger, I entered the crime scene earlier and grabbed the defendant. When I put him down, he fell into that puddle of blood. But I hadn't caught sight of his hands before that point. Did anyone else?"

Everyone else simply shook their heads to deny it. When faced with such a brutal crime in a situation like this, even they couldn't calmly take everything in.

"So it's possible that his hands only became bloody at that point, then."

"Oh dear." Jingo put his pointer finger to his temple. "You're boldly using your tampering of the crime scene as an argument, even though I should have you reprimanded for that?"

"I'll make up for it by solving this case for good." Tokiji smiled, even as a bead of sweat rolled down her cheek.

Jingo laughed in a low, resounding voice at her assertion. "I like that attitude."

"So then...?"

"Very well. I'll make sure you'll be in charge." Turning around, he once again inhaled and then blew out a cloud of smoke. "So make sure you find the truth. I'll be waiting for you, Captain."

"So even after posturing like that, you still wind up here empty-handed, huh?" Kaneshika idly commented, taking a sip from a bowl of watery stew.

"Shut it, I'm thinking here." Tokiji paced back and forth in front of his cell, saying her thoughts out loud. "He died strangled by a chain. The wounds are consistent with the chain from that lunatic's handcuffs, but someone else could just as well have snuck up behind him while he was opening the cell. That makes a lot more sense than him turning his back to a dangerous prisoner for no reason.

"Still, how could they have approached without the bailiff showing any kind of caution. Did they sneak up on him? Or was it a man on the inside, someone he'd have trusted? But nobody should have been able to enter the building with a weapon to begin with. This is the military court we're talking about! They'd confiscate even a colonel's handgun. And on top of that, the basement floor had guards stationed on both of the two staircases leading in and out. They couldn't have missed a killer covered in blood.

"What rooms are close to the prisoner holding cell? Evidence storage? Archive room? The men's bathroom? Could he have hidden in one of them? I made the guards search every inch of the place and they didn't find a hair. But before that, when we all gathered at the crime scene. Would they have left their posts unattended for a few moments? Enough to slip past?

"But even if that were so, it would still have been impossible to escape the actual building!" Tokiji stopped in place with a stomp and started scratching her head. "Damn it! No matter how much I think about it, logic and common sense both tell me that maniac did it. And yet still, my instincts are pulling me in the other direction! Is everyone in on this? Are the guards all lying!?"

"Err." Kaneshika raised a hand like a pupil in a classroom. "I sympathize with whatever mental breakdown you seem to be having right now, but do you want anything from me? I'll have to ask you to kindly step away from my front porch, otherwise."

“Having fun watching me struggle, eh?” Tokiji said in a clear voice. “When I finally solve this case, I’ll make sure you won’t get an easy death.” She glared at him with eyes that could stop a weaker man’s heart, but Kaneshika just shrugged exaggeratedly.

“Ooh, how scary. For all that gloating about how you make war through reasoning, in the end you still fall to threats of violence and death. Human nature at its finest.” The scraggy man cackled, waving Tokiji off with his hand. “Don’t worry on my behalf, lady. I know what I signed up for. Let’s say I traded away all prospects of an easy death as my entry fee.”

“Tch. You’re a lunatic too.”

He whistled provocatively. “So to you I’m no different than a nutjob who’d massacre his fellows over a glorified game of paintball? I suppose it’s more comforting if you think of it that way.”

Tokiji made to leave, but Kaneshika’s sardonic question stopped her.

“Hey, captain,” he continued. “Don’t you wanna see him die? Don’t you wanna see him riddled with holes like swiss cheese?”

“What a pointless question,” she grinned. “Of course I do. It’s like dotting your ‘i’s, crossing your ‘t’s. Just can’t call it a job well done without it.”

“Woah, what a merciless woman! Even a sunny sky must look the color of blood to you.” Kaneshika began clapping. “Well, what are you waiting for then? You’ve got him on a silver platter now. No judge or jury would forgive him anymore. Just listen to that easy common sense of yours and you’ll get exactly what you’ve always wanted.”

“No.” She gritted her teeth. “You know what this feels like? It feels like someone’s trying to lead me straight into a mouse trap, but all they have for bait is a pathetic, cornered insect.” She slammed her fist into the iron bars of the cell. “You expect me to bite on that, you bastard? I’ll take nothing less than gourmet cheese!”

“You’re a picky one, you know that?” Kaneshika sneered. “You realize this grand narrative you’re trying to build makes no sense, right? The first attack was supposed to be some kind of grand spectacle, yet the second was a crime so perfect that you’re the only one who sees any room for doubt? What possible commonality would there be between the two?”

Tokiji put her hand to her chin. “...It’s like these attacks are a message... not for our army as a whole, but for *someone* in particular.”

“Hah! A message? And what’s next, you’ll say you’re the super special recipient of this mysterious message?” Kaneshika slapped his knee and leaned forward, glaring at the captain with cold eyes even as he kept his smile. “Convenient, isn’t it? Even with no proof of any kind, all the pieces just seem

to fit. You know what they call self-serving fantasies like this? They're called conspiracy theories."

He shook his head theatrically. "I suggest you lay off it, lady. No one likes a conspiracy theorist. Or else are you prepared to throw away the comfort of the world as you know it, make an enemy of rationality and common sense, all to pursue an idea that is tenuous at best?"

"..." Tokiji listened to Kaneshika's words to the end, looking him in the eye with an unreadable expression. And then, once he was truly finished, she heaved a long, heavy sigh. "Are you finally done? I've never met a man as irritatingly talkative as you, you know? Men are more attractive when they're stoic."

"Hmm?" He raised an eyebrow.

"A hunter has to trust their instincts if they want to survive. Any soldier dumb enough to fuss over appearances on the battlefield will get their brains blown out. I'm not sure what you're hoping to accomplish with your shallow provocations, but I caught the scent of something tasty, so I'll chase it down to the ends of the earth. I'll worry about the consequences after I've had my fill." She declared it so, with the smile of a predator on her lips.

His shoulders shook. "Fuhahahaha! Aha, ahahahahaha! I guess it's idiotic to think petty things like reason or rationality would sway you. I really underestimated you, hahahaha! Sorry about that, forgive me!"

"Doesn't sound like you'll be easing on the disrespect any time soon, though," Tokiji grumbled.

"Very well." Calming his laughter, he clapped his hands as if to clear the air. "But let me lay down some ground rules, if you're gonna go down that path."

"Huh?"

"It'd be the easiest thing in the world to chalk it all up to the men in the field all putting on an act for you. Call them all traitors like you love doing, send a couple dozen men to the firing squad, replace them all and call it a day. If that much'd satisfy you, then you'd be a disappointment indeed."

"What are you—?"

"Soldiers don't lie." He looked sternly in her eyes, no trace of mirth in him anymore. "They may go mad, but they don't betray. Betrayal is for the pigs up top. Even you should know this much. If you choose to pretend otherwise, then you're no better than them."

"What, are you admitting to being mad after all?" Tokiji sneered. "Anyone who'd say with a straight face that they never lie is the biggest liar of 'em all. I know better than to fall for that crap."

“Hey, at the end of the day, you can believe whatever you want. If you don’t want me to influence your thinking, feel free to walk away. But all I’m saying is this: avoid the easy conclusion. It’s no different than abandoning thought. And you wouldn’t be satisfied with it anyway, would you?”

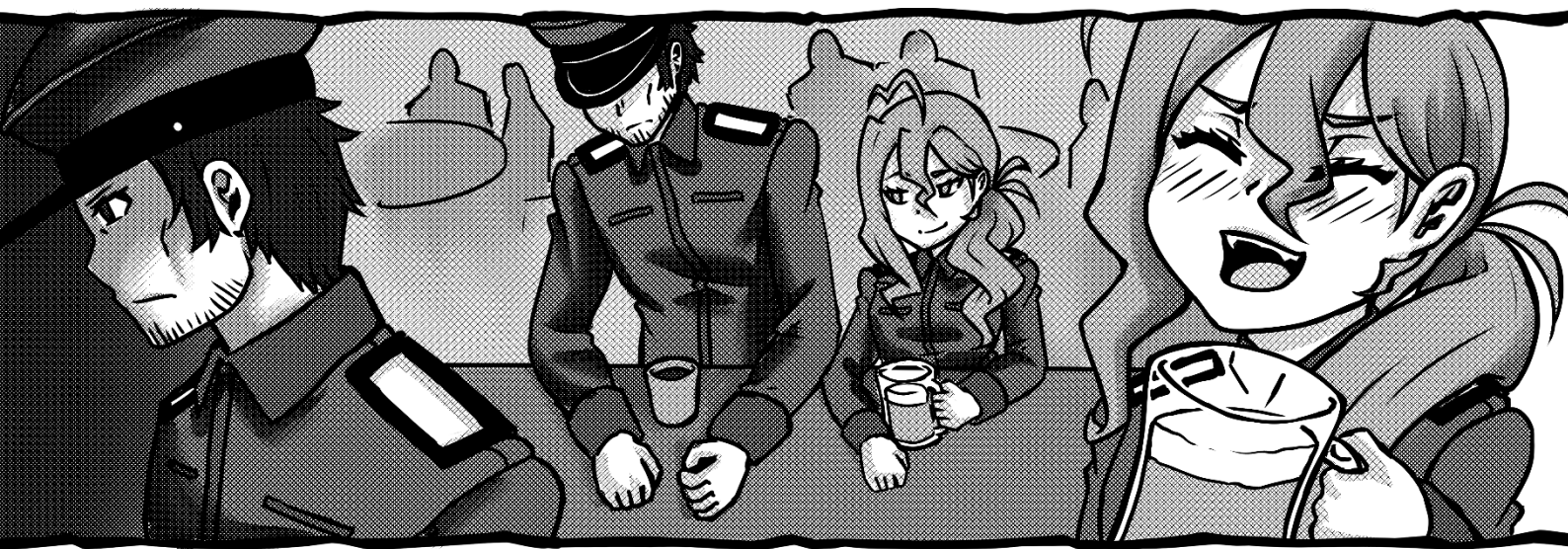
“...I see your lips have gotten a lot looser, huh?” she smiled. “Only a matter of time till you spill the beans, I’m sure.”

Kaneshika blinked at her once, before breaking into a laugh. “Whoops, my bad, my bad. You were just so pitiful, I couldn’t help but throw you a crumb. That’s all you’re getting from me, though. Dance in front of my cell however much you’d like, I’m not saying another thing. I’ll be like those stoic men you swoon over.” Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the wall with his hands behind his head.

“Only,” he added, looking through one half-opened eyelid. “I hope you weren’t saying that just for show, earlier. If you wanna solve this case, you’d best be ready to throw your whole world away.”

That night, in a certain bar, off a side street in the sprawling city.

Sitting side by side next to the counter, shoulders nearly touching in the cramped interior, Captain Tokiji and Lieutenant Yoroi drank silently, the former a significant mug of beer and the latter a cup of tomato juice. Their breaths were swallowed up by the chatter and the clinking of cups resounding around them. There was a significant presence of ranking military officials around them, but none bothered to greet the two.



Neither of them seemed to find the silence particularly awkward, but Tokiji broke it nonetheless, addressing her subordinate in a casual tone.

"You know, you always accompany me when I invite you out like this, but you never drink. Why is that? Can't see the fun in being here without a buzz."

"..." The man didn't respond, merely looking down at his cup. Tokiji, cheeks slightly flushed, continued without waiting for an answer.

"Man, I've never been stuck on a case like this one! That caged dog's gonna pay for giving me the runaround like this." She said with a grin, taking another gulp of alcohol. "Where did they go...? In both cases, a disappearing act." She then pressed her palm to her forehead. "Damn it, I can't think like this. That oughta be the point, but I can't even relax until I crack it."

"There's no way you could relax when you're surrounded on all sides," Yoroi finally said.

"Huh?"

"...You wanted to know why I don't drink, right?" he asked, not looking her in the eye. "It's a pathetic story, but I'll tell you. It's because I'm afraid."

"—Afraid?"

"Of having my guard down. Of losing control. Of weaknesses, of vulnerabilities. I'm afraid of all that. There's no armor strong enough to protect all of your weaknesses. No haven safe enough to sleep soundly. That's why I can't relax." His words trailed off for a moment, Tokiji staring incredulously at him all the while, until he finally continued. "There's this memory I have, one I've kept thinking back to for years now. It's a memory of a thought that went through my mind as a kid. Even though everything around it is blurry, this one thing I can recall with startling clarity.

"I do wonder where it came from, myself. I was playing around with some rugrat friends, a dumb smile plastered on my lips—thoughtlessly, instinctively, like I was drunk. I didn't know why, but at some point I'd started to feel like I was floating. Every word that came out of my mouth felt automatic, like I'd left it all up to the answering machine. Before long, it didn't even feel like it was me anymore. I could almost see myself, like I was looking from a distance. And the child I saw, the naive, dumb kid without a care in the world—he disgusted me. The way he was so open, so full of weaknesses; I knew that if a single drop of malice were to be directed his way, he could so easily, so effortlessly be broken, left with some irreparable wound in his very core.

"And then, when I realized I was that very boy—I became afraid. Deeply, deeply afraid. It was the kind of fear that grips you in the moment you realize

you've evaded certain death. The fear that grips you when you know a single wrong step or a single twist of fate could have doomed you.

"Since then, I've sworn to myself that I'd never again leave my back open, never again lose myself like that. Because I'm scared that, if given another chance, whatever lurks out there will finally sink its claws into me."

Hunched over that counter, Yoroi's massive frame looked no different than that of a small, trembling child desperately hiding in a corner.

Tokiji blinked, remaining silent for a while even after he finished his story. And then, when it became clear that he had nothing more to say, she—

"*Puh! Tahahahahaha!*" She burst into laughter, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes, above her red cheeks. "Did you properly check whether that thing has any alcohol? I think your head must already be spinning, to be saying something so silly.

"Afraid of being taken by surprise? Afraid there's enemies lurking in every corner? Yoroi, that's the world we've been living in since we donned this uniform. It's the only world a soldier can live in. It's what we live for!"

"That might be true of a soldier. But Captain, I'm no soldier."

"..." Tokiji sent him a glare, but he continued unperturbed, his baritone voice unshaken.

"I joined your unit because I'm a coward. Because the only way to make sure I won't be stabbed in the back is to betray everyone first, to sniff out all their darkest secrets."

And then he paused, as if unsure whether he should continue. Sensing Tokiji's expectant gaze, though, he opened his mouth again.

"But you, Captain, you're like a mouse trap. You sit there, waiting with open arms. Waiting to be betrayed. You want to be taken by surprise, to be blindsided, to be rattled by some expert plot. And then, when you've had your fill, you sink your teeth into your opponent, and you tear their throat out.

"Maybe this case that you've been killing yourself over is the best thing that's ever happened to you. Here's something you can keep puzzling over again and again, a beautifully complex conspiracy. Maybe you don't even really want to crack the code at all."

"Hey, now," Tokiji interrupted. "I won't deny that I like my job, but don't insinuate that I'm looking for anything but victory. When I set out to solve a case, I do it."

"Is that so? This is just how it looks to me, but—you smile all the time, when you're chasing a lead or cornering some target. But once the job has been settled, I've never seen you look anything but disappointed. Doesn't look to me like you get much out of this 'victory' of yours."

"..."

“You still feel like you’re on training wheels. Am I wrong? Even as you watch men be executed at your word, you sigh like it was all some cadet school exercise you passed all too easily. Do you feel like you’re not being taken seriously enough? Like you’ve never been really, truly cornered, forced to fight with all you have?”

“ ”
...

“You’re an exceptional person, Captain, but I’m not exceptional enough to follow suit. Believe it or not, it takes all I have just to get by. I’m not looking for anything more than that.”

Yoroi stood up, and dug through his pockets for a handful of coins, which he laid out on the counter.

“But so long as I remain by your side, I’ll never be able to avoid it, will I? Being dragged into that death-wish of yours.”

And with that, Yoroi shuffled out through the bustling bar and out the door. Tokiji didn't try to keep him—she merely turned back to her glass, and drank the remainder all in one go.

Exceptional, huh? What's supposed to be exceptional about me anyway, a rat digging through viscera? As far as I can tell, I'm just doing what I need to feel alive. To keep my bones from rotting, my muscles from decaying.

People need to fight in order to live. They need to fight, because there's no other way to remember that you're still breathing.

All those traitors, they're the very same. When they sit at the top, their chests decorated in gold and silver, having already proven themselves victors, how else are they supposed to remember that they too are alive? Their only recourse is to bite the hand that feeds.

...Will this case really turn out differently, in the end? Will it just be another pig, eating away at whatever they can grab hold of till they're left with nothing? Or, perhaps—

In a dark prison cell, no light at all seeping through the corridor beyond it—

"Ha! Haha! Hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha!
Hahahahahaha hahaha, hahahahahaha hahahahahaha,
ahaahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha,
hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha! Aha,
ahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha! Kah, kaha,
hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha!
Hahahahahaha hahahahahaha hahahahahaha, hahahahahaha, haha, hah,

haahahahahahahahahaa! Hahahahahahaha, hahahahahahahahahahaha,
hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!”

A day later, Captain Tokiji received an official notice of transfer. Lieutenant Yoroi Shikoro would be leaving her unit, effective immediately.

And then, another day later, the third course was served.

3rd Serving

In a cramped office inside military HQ, filing cabinets covering the walls—

Two people quietly worked in the cluttered space, documents piled up in front of them. One of the two, however, seemed to be paying much less heed to the work in front of her than to the quagmire ailing her mind. The other, Second Lieutenant Zangi Zanpei, dutifully ignored the sweaty forehead of his superior, Captain Tokiji Urota, as he efficiently sorted out the papers.

His precise penmanship was brusquely thrown astray, however, as Tokiji pummeled the table in front of her, her fist shaking slightly. That action brought Zangi's eyes up towards her for the first time.

"...I'm sorry, Second Lieutenant Zangi." She sighed deeply. "If it's not too much trouble, could I ask you to make me some coffee?"

The man wordlessly sat up and headed for the coffee grinder on a table further.

"You know," he said, his back turned to her, "there's no need for you to be so polite with me."

Tokiji winced. In truth, she had hesitated to order the Lieutenant, but the office had felt a lot emptier lately. She briefly regretted not getting up to brew the cup herself.

"That may not be the case anymore, but I can't bring myself to boss around someone who used to outrank me," Tokiji said, her voice slightly muffled by the palm holding up her cheek.

"That was a long time ago now. There's no need for that sort of hesitation between us." And then, Zangi brought over a tray with two mugs of coffee on it, a roundabout gesture that, Tokiji couldn't stop herself from thinking, was the clear mark of an herbivore man.

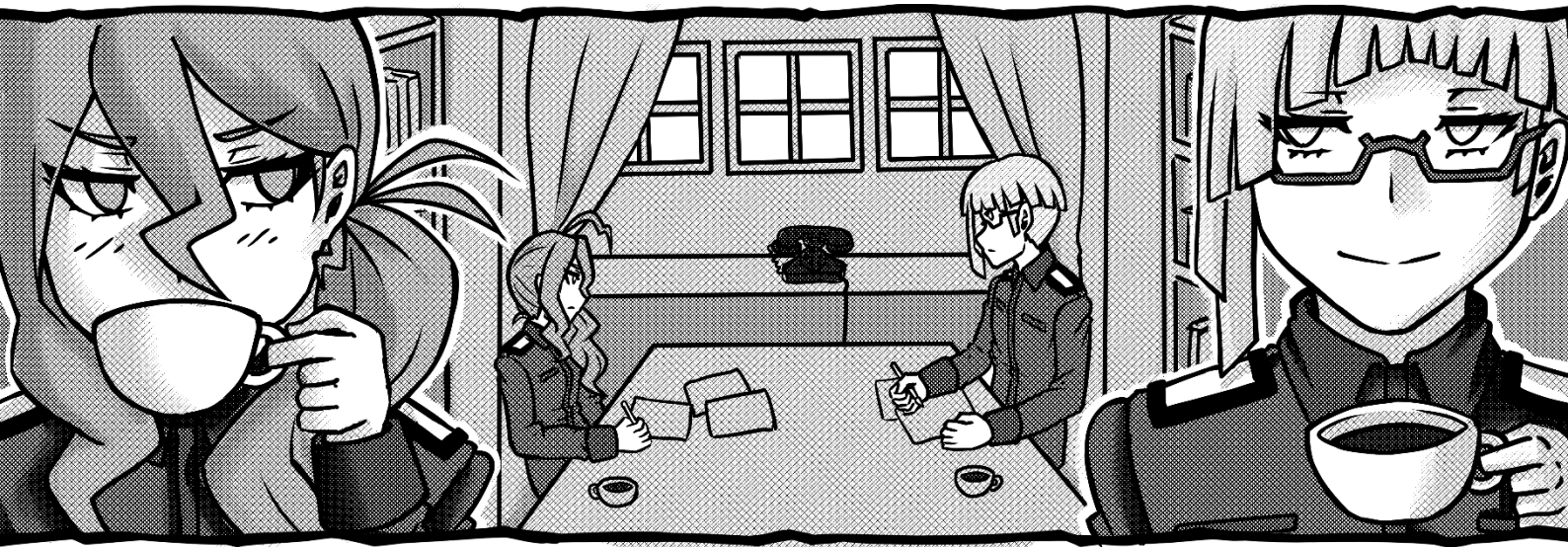
Bringing the cup to his lips, however, Zangi made sure to shatter that impression with a precise jab. "Besides, you didn't hesitate to run your mouth off to me when we first met, as I recall?"

Tokiji barely kept herself from spitting out her coffee. "No mercy, huh? Where was that again, the medical check-up?"

"While in the waiting room for the eye exam, to be exact," Zangi corrected, a slight smile on his lips.

During their first encounter, Tokiji had acted quite haughtily to the Second Lieutenant—no more than her typical measure of arrogance, but that would have been seen as quite rude already by most people's standards. You can imagine the blueness of her face when, the very next day, she was put right in front of him and told that she would be his subordinate.

“Bringing that up is cheating, and you know it.” Tokiji crossed her arms and puffed out her cheeks. “You know very well that I don’t give a rat’s ass about ranks or titles or anything like that.”



“I know,” he clearly acquiesced.

“...But your accomplishments, on the other hand, are nothing I can sneeze at,” she said, her expression softened, eyes tinged with nostalgia.

Zangi said nothing, turning his face back down to his documents. Tokiji, however, refused to let this chance go.

“Hey, Second Lieutenant Zangi... What happened to you? You used to be the fiercest hunter I knew. But now...”

She trailed off, but Zangi had no issues understanding the intent of her question.

“Now I’m just a second-rate lab rat, good only for following directions.”

“...” Tokiji said nothing, but her stern gaze, fixed on him, didn’t waver for a moment.

Zangi hesitated for a moment, then another, and yet one more—before, at last, he raised his eyes from the pages and returned her gaze with a glassy one of his own.

“It may not have seemed like it, but I used to have quite the sense of justice. I wanted to serve my army, my people, with everything I had. But my body has always been weak; I could never do so by fighting.

“So, then, I decided—I’d instead devote myself to weeding out every single clump of injustice from within our force. That, naturally, would lead to a just, righteous army. That’s what I thought. Unlike you, I’ve never taken any pleasure in this job, beyond the inner satisfaction of a clean conscience.

“But...” He paused, his lips shaking with an almost imperceptible quiver. Seeing Tokiji remain fixed on him, he drew in a deep breath, then continued. “It all started in their eyes. Not those of the higher-ups, the soldiers’ eyes. They never said anything, of course, but the way they looked at me... Before long, I could no longer handle it.

“And when you’re too afraid to look at anything but your feet... Well, there are certain thoughts that never cross the minds of those who keep their heads held high all the time. It didn’t take long for my mind to be filled with them.”

Zangi put his hat back on and returned to his work, not before uttering a final declaration.

“Someone like me, no longer able to take any pride in his uniform, has no business being anyone’s superior.”

Tokiji said nothing. She could say nothing, as she watched the man she used to respect the most with a conflicted expression.

Before long, though, her eyes softened. *I’m sorry, Lieutenant... I’m sorry, Captain, but I can never be as good a person as you are.* She smiled, then looked back down to her own stack of papers, now thrice as large as her respected senior’s.

The quiet equilibrium returned to the office—for only a few more moments, before it was again broken, this time by the ringing of the phone.

Tokiji quickly sat up and trotted over to answer it—the voice on the other end of the line was one she’d never mistake anywhere.

“C-Colonel Jingo, sir!”

“Special summons. I want your Squad on the top floor, pronto. This is a top clearance mission, so don’t babble to anyone either.”

The third delicacy would not go unserved.

The fifth floor of military headquarters—

The building’s highest floor was reserved for the top brass, with regular officers not allowed anywhere near it outside of very special circumstances. The Rat Squad had found themselves in one such circumstance. Tokiji didn’t even want to imagine the hoops that Lieutenant Colonel Jingo had to have gone through to get them in front of the door they were sitting ahead of.

Second Lieutenant Wananami had been out to take care of some clerical errands, but she was quickly informed of the situation and grouped back up with the rest of her team.

"This is your only chance to investigate this room, so make it count," Jingo advised, sitting with his back against the wall ahead of them.

"Sir, that's—" Tokiji looked wide-eyed at the gilded inscription on the door, two soldiers standing guard with unflinching eyes to either side of it.

Personal Office – Lieutenant General Sabato Densuke

"You'll see when you go in." Jingo said nothing more, his arms crossed. "My expectations haven't changed, Captain Tokiji. I want you to see through the chaos that's spread all the way into our grand army's guts."

"Y-yes, sir!" Tokiji stepped forward, twisting the doorknob and forcefully walking into the wide-open room—before the scenery laid bare stripped her of all eagerness to continue.

"T-this is..."

"An assassination?" Zangi, having walked in after his captain, narrowed his eyes.

"Doesn't look as carefully planned as that to me," Wananami said.

The office was spacious, but largely empty, most of the furniture being concentrated in the back of the room. An overly wide desk sat centered against the large one-way window on the back wall, bathing the room in warm afternoon light. To either side of the desk, tall bookshelves and a thin table piled with various items, respectively. Before it, a single vintage-looking wooden chair, and not a particularly comfortable one by the looks of it, now overturned onto the floor.

And, set against that background, as if decorated precisely to draw attention to them—were two corpses, like dishes on a plate set out for Tokiji to admire, their blood splattered against the neat furniture and parquet floor in vibrant strokes.

Closest to the entrance, face down and limbs splayed out, was the corpse of a rank-and-file soldier, dark blood staining the midsection of his uniform. He seemed to have twisted around as he fell, for his right arm was folded underneath his torso, both legs pointing to his lower right. Tokiji knelt down next to him, and reached out to turn him over, but—

"Sorry, but I'll have to ask you not to disturb the scene." Jingo's voice called out to them from the edge of the doorway.

"But sir!"

"It was all I could do to even get you in here. You'll have to make do with this." His voice brooked no argument.

"...Understood." The captain sighed. "What's up with this guy, though? He doesn't seem to have a dog tag around his neck, by the looks of it."

“He was likely shot in the stomach,” Zangi said. “No exit wounds on the back, but it’s a safe assumption given the state of this other one.”

Hearing that, Tokiji sat up and walked to the other cadaver—it was clear at a glance that it belonged to a high-ranking official.

“Lieutenant General Sabato Densuke... Not even I’ve heard much about him,” Tokiji said.

“No wonder,” Jingo said, approaching them from behind. “He’s above the sort of trifling treason you all investigate on a regular basis. People like him are the backbone of this army—the pillars keeping this war going, you might say.”

The corpse was sitting on the floor with its legs outstretched, back supported by the desk. The man looked to have been in his 60s, his hair gray and angular face wrinkled—that said, the open-mouthed death mask covering it dominated any impression his living visage might have given. The only thing diminishing the terrifying effect were the tinted sunglasses blocking his eyes; even as his head dangled limply to the side, they hadn’t slid off.

“Could these have prevented him from immediately seeing an attacker?” Tokiji asked.

“Doubt it,” Jingo said. “I’ve never seen the man without them. I think he’d gotten too used to the view.”

“Look, that handgun over there,” Wananami pointed to a spot a few centimeters to the right of the corpse.

“Yeah, it probably fell out of his hand...”

After the words left her mouth, Tokiji jumped. Feeling an intense glare on her, she turned around to see Colonel Jingo staring at her.

“E-er, is something the matter, sir?”

“...No.” He folded his arms, looking away. “You’re not permitted to look at any of his documents. I need to make sure of that.” He seemed somewhat irritated as he said so.

“R-right.”

Taking care not to look at any of the papers too closely, Tokiji made an inventory of every item in the room. On the main desk, a stack of documents, a pen, a telephone, an empty mug, and a framed photograph of some young woman, likely a family member.

On the counter next to the wall, a potted plant, a hardcover novel with a bookmark sticking out of it, a clipboard, some bags of tea leaves and a portable stove. The small cabinet below the counter only held some bottles of water and more varieties of tea.

The walls were barren save for a single medal, hanging pridefully above the counter. The remaining space next to the lateral walls at the back of the room was covered in bookshelves filled with hard-bound volumes, no titles on their spines.

“Done looking around?” Colonel Jingo asked in a gruff manner.

“I believe so,” Tokiji nodded. “Seems clear that some intruder came and shot them, but there are a number of odd points. For one, the lieutenant general would likely have been seated at his desk. Meaning that the shooter gave him enough time to get up and approach him, and only then shot him. That might suggest the shooter was familiar to the general, so that he wasn’t immediately on guard.”

“On the other hand,” Zangi interjected, “supposing the killer decided to take advantage of their familiarity to attack him by surprise, something else doesn’t add up. The general’s drawn handgun suggests that he at least had enough time to attempt a counterattack. But with the surprise advantage, the culprit could have easily dispatched him before he knew a thing.”

“What if the killer shot this soldier first, giving the general enough time to take his gun out?” Wananami suggested.

“No...” Tokiji mumbled. “It’s possible, but whoever the culprit is, their main target must have been the general. Whatever else, they would have killed him first, I think.” Her hunter’s instinct couldn’t accept the reverse. “Sir, what’s up with this small fry anyway? What was he doing here?”

“I wish I could tell you, Captain, I really do.” He sighed. “You might have noticed on your way here that most important offices are guarded. This place was no exception, even before the crime. The guard on duty at the time is currently being questioned. I was only there for part of it, but it didn’t seem like his story was liable to change any time soon. He said that, from the moment he arrived at his post, about three hours ago, until the moment he heard the gunshots about fifty minutes ago and stormed into the office, *he didn’t see a single other person even cross the hallway.*”

Tokiji gaped.

“Naturally, that means no one being let into the office either. In the first place, he was given a strict list of prior appointments and told to turn away anyone else. And he certainly wasn’t informed about any meeting currently taking place.” Jingo sighed. “Not that I’d believe Lieutenant General Sabato would afford over three hours to a mere soldier. That man would barely allow *me* ten minutes.”

“B-but that means—”

“That’s right. We haven’t been able to identify whoever this is, but regardless, *we have no idea why this soldier was in this room or when he entered.*”

A bitter taste filled Tokiji's mouth. Her mind flashed to the previous impossible cases plaguing her, and to the dark grin mocking her from behind an iron cage. *Could this be the final bite...?*

"What are the chances that he's been hiding in this room since before the new guard's shift started?"

"Slim. You can see this place with your own eyes; the only real hiding spot is beneath the desk, and I highly doubt the Lieutenant General would have overlooked that."

Tokiji clicked her tongue. "What about the guard on duty before the one at the time of the crime? Was he questioned?"

"Not yet. To be honest, the entire division dispatched on guard duty here is in a total state of chaos. Rumor goes that there might be an investigation started into possible compromises in the chain of command. As a result, they're being pretty tight-lipped."

"Even under these circumstances, cooperation between departments is no easy task, huh?" Wananami remarked.

"Cooperation is no easy task at all. Not for wild, carnivorous animals like us." Remembering that her superior was present, Tokiji straightened up, regretting letting that sardonic line slip out.

Lieutenant Colonel Jingo sighed. "Unfortunately, our great organization's uncooperative nature doesn't end there. Because of the nature of this crime, there's no way your squad can be officially assigned to this investigation. I managed to get you in here because the brass is panicking, but once a proper investigation team is assembled, don't expect even a drop of their findings to flow down to you. In other words, what you've seen here is all you have to work with."

"T-that's..."

"Sorry." Jingo lowered his head. "This isn't one of your official duties. No one will acknowledge your findings, and even if you do solve it, you won't receive any credit. A military mindset dictates that you should obey the orders given to you; nothing more, nothing less. I won't fault you if you choose to ignore this selfish ask of mine."

"S-sir!" Needless to say, Tokiji had never seen her superior display such humility. She gave a perfect salute as she addressed him. "We would never turn our backs on a mission given by you, official or not. That you value our abilities enough to call us here is an honor!"

Jingo returned Tokiji's earnest gaze with eyes of both expectation and guilt mixed together. Turning his back on them, he began walking towards the door. "Then I await your answer, Captain. You're all dismissed. Return to your previous posts."

In the Rat Squad's office—

"So was it that soldier guy after all?" Tokiji asked. "Did they kill each other? His gun could have been below his torso, where we couldn't check."

"But why would a soldier want to kill a commander?" Wananami asked.

"You don't know what goes on in the minds of insane freaks. Believe me, I've had plenty of time to see that for myself."

"But unlike any normal soldiers, those assigned to guard HQ have very strict psychological evaluations performed on them. We've never seen a case of any of them going rogue before," Zangi added.

"Just means it hasn't happened yet, right? We can't deny the obvious possibility right in front of our faces because of that."

"Funny, I can clearly remember you denying the most obvious and most probable solution before on a basis not too different."

"Ouch. You know how to hit a girl where it hurts," Tokiji said, grinning. "Maybe he was manipulated somehow. He could have been loyal and still fallen for some trick."

"You're thinking this has something to do with..." Zangi trailed off, his brow furrowed.

"Yeah. No way this bizarre crime is unrelated."

"Perhaps... But even if we do assume the soldier was the killer, the strangeness of the circumstances doesn't dissipate in the least. The crime scene indicated that the killer immediately attacked Lieutenant General Sabato. But if the soldier had really been hiding somewhere in the room and suddenly decided to strike, he wouldn't have given his target the leeway to come closer to him, you know?"

"Where could he have hidden anyway?" Wananami asked.

"It's a stretch, but he might have been able to stay just out of sight of the Lieutenant General if he crawled around the desk in such a way that he was always out of sight," Tokiji argued. "But that still doesn't solve our problems. Was he actually invited then...?" She muttered to herself, biting on her thumbnail.

"Hey, who is that soldier in the first place? We've barely given it any thought, but shouldn't someone have been reported missing?" Wananami asked, as if suddenly remembering it.

"That's true, but the chaos going on with their division that Lieutenant Colonel Jingo mentioned might have something to do with it," Zangi said.

“Even if they were keeping their cards close to their chest, they couldn’t possibly keep a missing soldier hidden, especially not when it involves the death of a high-ranking official,” Tokiji said. “That’d be crossing the line into treason.”

“You’re not wrong. But in the end, we’re still left with one looming question: just where did that soldier materialize from?”

In the end, there wasn’t much they could do except for armchair theorizing. Soldiers only ever responded to official interrogations held by special officers, the secret methods of whom Tokiji would have killed to get a hold of. Her typical go-to tactic of light blackmail had no effect on soldiers with no personal lives to speak of, and whatever she pulled, it was doubtful any commanding officer would have given anything away during an internal investigation.

She heaved a heavy sigh. “Is there something I’m just not seeing here, after all?”

“Hm?”

“Oh, no,” Tokiji looked up at Zangi’s questioning eyes. “It’s just more nonsense that Kaneshika keeps putting into my head. Bastard always acts like I’m missing the most obvious thing in the world. I guess I must be more tired than I thought, if I’m putting any stock into it.

“Well, don’t let me keep you any longer. Both of you have other work to do, don’t you? Go on, I’ll keep thinking about it on my own.”

Tokiji’s subordinates sat up, bowed to her and headed for the door. Right before he stepped out, however, Zangi called out to her once more, his back still turned.

“Hey, Captain. You always hesitate to show weakness to us. You wear that smile for our sakes, don’t you? But you must be under a lot of stress right now. Especially after losing a subordinate. It may seem presumptuous coming from me, but you can rely on us more, you know? We are a team, after all.”

He said that in the sober, unmoved voice typical of Lieutenant Zangi, but Tokiji could feel the emotion behind it was genuine. She smiled.

“Thanks, Lieutenant. I’ll keep that in mind.”

And with no other words exchanged, Zangi shut the door behind him and left.

Now alone, Tokiji leaned back in her creaky chair, the battered cushion on it just barely keeping the wooden support beams on its back from digging into her.

You’re a good man after all, Zangi, she thought.

That's why it's so embarrassing to admit this, but you've totally misunderstood me.

I'm not putting on a strong face for your sake, you know? When I smile, I smile from the heart. What manner of facing the world is more proper than that? Gritting your teeth and smirking with all you have, even as the blood builds up in your throat and threatens to spill out—enjoying being beaten down and crushed as much as you do being overwhelmingly victorious, that's the secret to living a happy life in a cutthroat world like this.

Brothers in arms, those who fight together against the same enemy—that's the kind of bond deeper than either blood or love, isn't it?

If so, our battlefields and our wars must have been different from the very beginning, Zangi.

That thought made Tokiji feel just a little bit lonely—and so she laughed heartily, at herself above all else.

Two days later, Lieutenant Zangi Zanpei was found dead in his room.

He was hanging from a rope affixed to a ceiling beam. The door was locked from the inside.

The matter was unanimously settled as a suicide.

Heavy steps resounded against the stone floor of the military prison corridor.

Tokiji resolutely approached Kaneshika's cell, her eyes dark.

"Ahh, you're finally back. Good, good, you're just about the only entertainment a guy can get in this dreary place."

Ignoring his inflammatory greeting, Tokiji turned to the guard standing next to the cell door and gave a sharp order.

"Leave us for a while, soldier."

The uniformed man, however, said nothing, merely keeping his posture.

Tokiji gritted her teeth and, in a sudden motion, grabbed his lapel, forcing him to face her, pulling him down to her level.

"Are you deaf!? Move along!" The guard, however, remained silent and unmoving, his expression an unfeeling mask. His eyes didn't even meet hers.

"What'd I tell you some time ago? You're basically speaking different languages. Let me give you a hand, though, out of the goodness of my heart." Kaneshika prattled on insensitively, then turned his face to address the guard. "Step away for thirty minutes, will you?"

At that, the guard immediately removed himself from Tokiji's grasp, and walked away to the end of the corridor and out of view. Tokiji could only sit there and gape at the prisoner.

"What? He's a more tactful guy than you gave him credit for. You just gotta approach him the right way, is all," Kaneshika said, sneering at her all the while. A vein popping on her forehead, Tokiji slid her hands between the metal bars and grabbed Kaneshika's collar.

"I'm not in the mood for any of your shit today, Kaneshika Takehito," she spat out.

"Woah, woah," he raised his hands up in surrender. "Feeling a lot more violent today, are you? What's the matter?"

With a sigh, Tokiji released him, and took a few steps back. She spoke mechanically.

"Lieutenant Zangi's dead. Killed himself."

"Hm, I see." Kaneshika replied ambivalently. "And so soon after I enjoyed his company—should I feel honored that he's made my cell his final stop?"

"What do you know?" She glared at him, desperately trying to keep the top on her boiling pot of emotions.

"I don't presume to know anything about the inside of another man's heart, but if I may be permitted a guess—I'd say he was a coward, and just a little bit more observant than you."

He smiled despicably. Tokiji, however, could only smile bitterly in response.

"My unit is probably done for, now that I've lost two subordinates."

"Tragic. I'd shed a tear for you, but—well, I warned you, didn't I? Following that trail was always going to lead your world to ruin. You don't have the right to regret a thing."

"The right, huh...?" She smiled bitterly. "Do you have any regrets, Kaneshika?"

"None," he replied without hesitation. "There's no other me I'd rather be, no other place I'd rather be at right now. No—there's no better place at all in this narrow, lousy world. None better than the one I'm standing in right now."

"I see. Me, I'm full of regrets. Can't be good for the skin, always being this frustrated."

"You said you loved war, didn't you? 'Fighting is the only way to feel alive,' yadda yadda. And yet the moment you actually lose something, you're suddenly full of regrets? How dull—disappointing, really." Kaneshika leaned back with a bored expression.

"I'll regret it. Of course I'll regret it. Fighting is a given—if you won't fight, you may as well lie down and die. I'll fight, I'll struggle with a smile on my face. That's what living is all about. But, you know..." Tokiji looked ahead with clear eyes. "All things being equal, I want to win. I'd rather win. Of course I'll regret it otherwise. Of course I'll be frustrated."

Kaneshika met her gaze, an inscrutable glint in his eyes.

"If I didn't care about winning or losing, if I could rot defeated in a cage and call myself satisfied—then that'd be no war, only aimless destruction."

"Hmm." Kaneshika smiled once more. Unlike his previous smirks, carefully crafted only to taunt, it seemed for the first time to be a genuine emotion. And then, he began to laugh. "Hahaha, you say some good things sometimes, don't you? No, really, you got me there. Who'd have thought it possible that someone like you could ever say anything insightful? What do they call it, the blind leading the blind?"

"I must have really struck a nerve, if you're resorting to childish insults," Tokiji said, grinning wryly.

"Forgive me, that's just how I show my affection." Getting the last of his amusement out of his system, his tone gained an edge. "Well, I suppose holding out any more would just be mean-spirited. I should even the playing field."

"Huh?"

"No, I mean, I've been hoping you'd get this for yourself already, but well, that's not happening any time soon. Lieutenant Zangi noticed it, but I guess it's not an entirely fair expectation. Caves and shadows and all that, you know?"

"What the hell are you on about now?"

"I'm talking about a self-evident truth that you've been too blind to see for your entire life." Kaneshika sneered. "You believe something like that could exist?"

"..."

"I've got you doubting yourself, huh? Good. Blind confidence is the enemy of understanding."

"...Stop with the wisecracks and just say it already."

"Haha, fine, fine." Even as he maintained his smile, all the mirth vanished from Kaneshika's eyes as he posed his next question. "Tell me, Captain—what is an enemy?"

"H-Huh?"

"I'm not trying to wax philosophical here. I'm asking a very concrete question. What are we all fighting in this war?"

Tokiji was unsure of where to even begin answering. “W-what do you mean, what? The enemy is the enemy.”

Kaneshika scowled. “I’m not looking for tautologies here. Give me a definition. What is this enemy of ours?”

“A definition? I mean, they’re... the force opposed to us, that we are trying to defeat.”

“Hah! And would you be able to tell at a glance if you’re seeing this enemy, if it just appeared in front of you?”

“Huh? I mean... Yes! Y-Yeah, I would, of course, I’d have to!”

The prisoner hung his head, sighing. “It’s like talking to a brick wall with you people. Those who’ve never been on the battlefield are always the same.” Raising his head, he fixed her with a glare. “I’ll give it to you straight.

“These enemies we’re fighting—it’s people.”

Tokiji gaped, unable to process his statement. “P-people? What?”

“That’s what war is, girl. Without dressing it up in glory or *raison d’etre* or any other bullshit, war is where people go to kill people.” Kaneshika sneered. “Of course, someone like you, parading that uniform around on our home turf and making merry, would have never gotten the chance to learn that.”

“W-wait, what are you on about? If people tried to attack the army, they’d be arrested and executed! They can’t be the enemy!”

Kaneshika raised his eyebrows, speaking in a pityingly sweet tone. “Sure, our citizens would be. But the enemy has their own army, their own government. Just like our army exists to fight the enemy, so does theirs—did you catch that? In other words, for them, *we’re the enemy*, you know?”

Speechless, Tokiji looked down at her feet, her trembling palm in front of her mouth.

“Having trouble accepting it? I suppose I can’t blame you.” The prisoner—the soldier shrugged. As he watched her with his head leaned back, he appeared to look down on her even as he sat on the ground below her. “But y’know, just think about how frustrating it’s been for me, having to watch fools like you bumble about all this time thinking of themselves as authority.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Ah well, s’pose there’s not much point in complaining to you about it.”

Not even hearing his torrent of brazen words, Tokiji stumbled backwards, turning around and preparing to leave.

“Oh, done already? Yeah, guess I gotta let you process it for a bit. But—” punctuating his last word with a heaviness that made her stop in her tracks,

Kaneshika declared: “—that’s all you’re getting, cute little rat. From here on, you’re the one in charge. Your world’s already broken beyond repair—how about you deal the finishing blow? I’ll be waiting. Right here, as always.”

Saying nothing, giving no sign of having heeded his words, Tokiji shambled away into the dark hallway.

Making her way out of the military prison with her eyes to her shoes, Tokiji almost walked straight into the man who cut through her path. Instinctively raising her eyes, she was jolted into awareness as she found the face of none other than her superior, Lieutenant Colonel Jingo.

“S-sir! My apologies, I was...” She straightened her back and made a shaky salute.

“Mm. Men, give me a moment.” Jingo was accompanied by two soldiers to either side of him. At his request, they stopped, though neither moved an inch from his side. “Visiting Kaneshika again, huh?”

“Y-Yeah, I...” Her voice trembling, she looked pleadingly into his eyes. “Sir, may I ask you to confirm if—”

“I don’t have a lot of time. I have some urgent business to attend to.”

“Oh... Right.” Tokiji hung her head again.

Taking a step forward, Jingo put a hand on her shoulder, addressing her while looking ahead beyond her. “You’ll find the truth. I trust the answer you’ll give at that moment.”

And with that, Jingo went on his way, the two soldiers following close behind. Tokiji looked at his retreating back for just a few moments, before she turned and shuffled ahead towards the exit.

That was the last time Tokiji Urota spoke to Jingo Horokuni.

A day later, news arrived by letter to her quarters. She would be placed under a new commanding officer.

The Rat Squad, now a measly pair of soldiers, would of course be dissolved.

Thank you for the meal. And what a delicious meal it was.

Valhalla Fall – Feast Without End–

That day, HQ, and particularly the military police, were drowning in a wave of confusion.

Of course, there was seldom a moment in time when an atmosphere of rushed tension didn't waft in the air there, but even then, the day's incident seemed to have definitively left a mark on the soldiers and clerks on shift.

Everyone was whispering about the very same thing.

An imprisoned traitor has vanished from his cell!

The cell had been bustling with inquisitors all morning, but by noon it had become strangely quiet. Having definitively investigated every nook and cranny of the place, their search had now moved to cover the surrounding area, and the original scene of the disappearance had, with the exception of one sole guard, been left alone.

It was at this time that Captain Tokiji Urota was making her way through the prison complex, headed to that very same dark corner that she'd become frustratingly accustomed to.

Standing in her way, however, a thin figure blocked the staircase down to the bottom level. She was as well-put together as always, her silky hair a terrible match for the dilapidated walls around them.

"Sen—Second Lieutenant Wananami."

"It's not like you to fret over titles, Captain—just treat me as you always have."

"...Right." Tokiji smiled bitterly. "What are you doing here?"

"I had a feeling this would be my last chance to talk to you." Wananami looked to the side, forlorn. "I guess I've been a bit mean in withholding this from you, but I've never hated you, you know? If anything, I'm jealous of you. You make it all look so easy, just... being in this world."

"It's not easy. But it is simple."

"You always were a bit of a simpleton, Captain."

"Never slow with the bite, are you?" Wananami giggled, and Tokiji followed suit. After a quiet moment, she continued. "You know, if you want a world where you can sing on your own terms—you can create it yourself."

"That's why I can't match up to you, Captain." She smiled sadly. "I don't believe that any one person can change the world. Even if someone could, it wouldn't be me. And even if I could, I wouldn't stake my life on it. And even if I did... even if I did, I'd be too afraid to look at it once I was done. I don't know anything else but this, after all."

"...I see." Tokiji muttered, unable to look her in the eye.

“How about you, Captain? How would you like to come back with me? I’m sure we could arrange being in the same unit again. You could continue effortlessly cracking cases, and then come grumbling to me about how unsatisfied you are, over and over again.”

Tokiji smirked. “Sounds like hell—never heard an offer more tempting.”

“But you wouldn’t take it, right?” A glance at Tokiji’s sad eyes was all it took. Wananami performed a perfect salute. “Good luck, Captain.” She then turned on her heels, ready to walk away.

Tokiji, however, feeling a weight in her chest, addressed her again. “Hey... Would you sing something for me?”

Wananami looked back at her, and smiled kindly. “Goodbye.”

Without another word, she was off.

“That stings.” Tokiji smiled one final time in her direction, then whirled around, descending the stairs with heavy steps.

Rounding the corner, the cell at the very end of the hallway came into view—afterimages were all that remained of the shaggy, unkempt prisoner covered in rags which used to occupy it.

Coming just close enough to the cell to be able to make out the creases in the old mattress that served as the prisoner’s bed, Tokiji stopped in her tracks, and silently looked ahead, hands clasped behind her perfectly straight back.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

And after a minute of that stillness, punctuated by the leaking of water droplets from the cell ceiling—a light chuckle rang out, marking the end of the farce.

Tokiji’s eyes landed on the uniformed soldier standing guard in front of the cell. Pushing up the brim of his hat with his right hand, he showed her a malicious smile. His piercing black eyes were unmistakable.

“You’ve certainly groomed yourself nicely,” Tokiji coldly remarked.

“Hah! Couldn’t very well come to our most important meeting in that shabby getup.” Kaneshika took off his hat and bowed, only to put it back on moments later.

“Not our last meeting, then?”

He smirked. “That depends on you.”

Looking away from him, Tokiji walked over to the eastern wall of the corridor and leaned against it, crossing her arms. “You know you’ve got the entire army looking for you, right? Bold of you to be standing here in plain sight. Or are you just stupid?”

“I simply wouldn’t miss your answer for the world.” He opened his eyes wide, looking at her expectantly like a hound waiting to receive its treat. “So? Did you get it? Did you finally get it? I can’t help but notice how awfully calm you are, considering.”

“Don’t misunderstand, would you?” Tokiji smiled widely, showing her canines. “I’m doing all I can to keep myself from trembling.”

Kaneshika laughed heartily. “Very well, then. Don’t keep me waiting any longer. Let me hear your reasoning!”

Tokiji looked down, exhaling quietly. She closed her eyes and massaged her temple, letting her retinas rest. And then, finally, raising her head once more, she began to speak.

“This whole time, the missing piece that kept me from seeing through this whole affair was not understanding the enemy. Without knowing that... that we’ve been fighting humans this whole time, I simply couldn’t understand how they could have manifested in all of these cases. That’s because I had assumed that the enemy was an entity that anyone could recognize and tell apart at a glance.

“Even so, even if they’re people that can disguise themselves however they please, there must be a way to normally recognize these enemy forces, to tell them apart from our own soldiers. There wouldn’t be any way to wage war otherwise. I assume the only means of doing so is their clothing. In other words, just as we have our uniform, the enemy must have their own.

“Yes... Visual recognition. I suppose that’s the key to this incident.”

Kaneshika listened intently, not interrupting her monologue, a wide smile on his face.

“...Regarding the first incident. The core mystery here, the impossibility we’ve been trying to untangle, is the method by which the enemy escaped from the colosseum. Their method of entry is probably as Second Lieutenant Yoroi figured—they hid inside the parade float, jumping out and attacking in the confusion. And in the aftermath, what was left were *corpses which no one could identify as the enemy*.

“The second incident, meanwhile, appears like an open-and-shut case: the only possible culprit, the only killer who could have butchered that guard, was the prisoner, the defendant. I was convinced there had to be more to the story, but... that much was correct. He’s the culprit. There’s no mystery at all here. The only question it raises being—why would he do such a thing? It was

a question no one felt the need to give any importance to—he was no more than a maniac who'd lost his mind, after all—but the answer is clear. He'd done what any soldier would do: *eliminate the enemy*.

"All that brings us to the final crime, the last of your twisted servings."

Having gone that far, Tokiji looked away, sighing.

"All of this... now that I've discovered the underlying principle behind it, there's nothing impossible about it anymore... but it's no less bizarre. People commit treason, commit crimes to further their own goals, to line their pockets or maintain their authority. But this—it's a show, a lavishly arranged spectacle. There's no profit to be gained here. Even after all this, that much I cannot understand."

"Why, that oughta be the most obvious part of it all—it's *for you*. All for you. Has been since the start."

"...I see. So that was it, after all. You really are insane."

Kaneshika said nothing, merely widening his smirk.

"Very well. Then let me unwrap your gift, lay it all bare."

"The means by which soldiers of our army can tell the enemy apart is through their uniform. And the enemy can tell us apart through our uniform. That's all there is to it. And once you remove that uniform, *there's not a single difference between them*."

"—*Pfh*." The uniformed man cracked, hurriedly bringing his palm to his mouth though ultimately unable to stop the torrent from overflowing. "Pha!"

"There's an enemy, sure. There are people our soldiers go out to kill and be killed by, sure. But it's all a sham, isn't it? All of it is orchestrated by someone—maybe the generals, maybe something even higher than that."

"Hahahahaha! Bingo! Yes, you're seeing it now!" Kaneshika tried his best to stifle the laughter as he answered. "But how is that possible? You're a soldier too, or so you say, but you're not that far gone. What is it that makes these guys so different?"

"If... if I'd continued on the regular career path of a foot soldier, if I hadn't been recruited for the military police and promoted to an officer, I probably would be. The seeds were all there. Sequestering us in private rooms, forbidding us from speaking to one another—*taking our names away*."

"Forbidding you from creating human connections—the principal basis for a cannibal army. Who cares that you have to shoot down the one who used to be your brother in arms—when there's no such thing as a brother in arms to begin with." Kaneshika closed his eyes, a picture of hell reflected on the back of his eyelids. "But you were never good at that, were you? Proper decorum, following rules. Could you have really turned into that?"

“Depends on the harshness of the training. I’m not so blindly arrogant as to say I could live through any battle. Sometimes there are wounds you just can’t recover from. Or hell, if all else fails, they could have always just disposed of me like a failure.” Tokiji said with a grin, though she couldn’t keep her legs from shivering as a cold sweat rolled down her back. “I’m more curious about you. How the hell do you go through that meat grinder and wind up like this?”

“Any machine, however well-oiled, has its creaky gears. Let’s say I’m proof of that margin of error.” Kaneshika didn’t elaborate any further, and Tokiji didn’t try to push him. “But tell me, I’ve just gotta know. What was it that finally led you on the right path?”

“Well, it was that thing you mentioned to me last time. About the enemies coming from other nations, other armies.” Tokiji scratched her head. “No matter how much I thought about it, I simply couldn’t believe it. *That other nations might exist, to rival our grand empire—it simply didn’t seem possible.*”

“...Ha.” Hearing that answer, Kaneshika momentarily froze—before ultimately exploding into laughter ever more intense, such that he had to hold his stomach as he crouched forward, barely keeping himself standing. “Ahahahahahahahahahahaha! To think you’d reason it out that way! By now we’re probably the only nation left in the world, but it didn’t use to be that way, you know? Reaching the right conclusion through the most foolish of means, you’re no detective, Captain, you’re an animal after all! Good thing your instincts are as sharp as they are!”

“Why thank you,” Tokiji growled, a vein bulging above her brow. “Feel free to laugh till the guards come take you away. I’ll continue my explanation.

“The first attack becomes simple. The ‘enemies’ reveal themselves, stir up their chaos—and then, once they’ve dealt their share of damage, they *set themselves on fire too*. Their faces may have been recognizable, but what about their uniforms? They were entirely scorched, and whatever indication of foehood burned away with them. When the dust settled, all our soldiers could see was *their own men*. Of course, soldier IDs would be no problem—in either case it’s just a number.

“The second attack, on the other hand, requires taking into account the psychology of our criminal. Sure, he’s a lunatic who can’t tell reality apart from fiction—but he’s still a soldier. He works based on the same principle: *see an enemy, eliminate the enemy*. He just has the problem of casting far too wide a net. Like, for instance, *the paintball training where he first went on a rampage.*”

“Oh?” Kaneshika raised an eyebrow in a mocking gesture.

“Let me make an assumption. This enemy uniform of ours, it’s probably not all that different from our own. Otherwise, you’d be able to see some traces even on those burnt corpses. In other words, all that differs—*is the color*.

“Our crazy friend is simply so delusional that even seeing someone splattered in the enemy’s color will trigger his killer instincts. And so, that’s all that happened in the second incident: using a paintball gun, our mastermind launched a round into that guard’s back. Turning around when you’re hit is a natural instinct, even for a soldier. And so he did—*showing his back, now covered in paint, to the prisoner he just uncuffed*. The rest goes as you might imagine.

“Incidentally, bringing a paintball gun into the military courthouse must have been near impossible for our mastermind, whoever they might be. But that’s no problem at all—there was no need for him to bring one, there was one already in the building, ripe for use: *in the evidence room, the very same paintball gun used in the training exercise that led to all this*.”

“Haha! Wow, spectacular, Captain Tokiji. Here I thought you were just pretending to think with that empty head of yours for all these weeks, but it turns out you had something brewing in there after all.”

“You’re still wasting energy on those taunts of yours? I thought you might have been playing at something, but I guess you just have a nasty personality.”

“So, so!” Like a dog panting in excitement, he rushed her to continue. “What about the final trial? Tough one, wasn’t it?”

“...Hmph. Yeah, that was your meanest trick, for sure. Well, I guess it’s not just you I oughta blame.” Tokiji looked up at the gray ceiling. “...You said before that I was special, didn’t you? I see it now. Special in the worst, most crushing way possible. What a joke.”

Kaneshika smiled as, for the first time, something like sympathy shone through his gaze. “...Sorry. Nothing you can do about it though. That’s how it is in this world of ours—all you can do is wait and see what bucket of shit you happen to land in.”

“Right.” Tokiji sighed and, still looking up at the ceiling, continued her explanation. “For the third and final incident, the answer is clear: the soldier and the general killed each other. The soldier struck first, and the lieutenant general shot him in retaliation.

“But a soldier would normally never fail to take out their target instantly, and the general, in turn, shouldn’t have allowed the soldier to get the drop on him. Clearly, neither of these parties were acting right. They were dazed. Almost like—like *they’d only just woken up*.”

“Hmm.” Kaneshika rubbed his chin.

“Both parties had been drugged. Our mystery soldier was probably the very same guard on shift before the one who was there at the time of the crime. Once the general was asleep, the mastermind just dragged the soldier in.

“But that much doesn’t answer anything. A loyal soldier would never have murdered their own superior—however, if that same superior had been wearing an enemy uniform? Well, that’s a whole different story.

“While he slept, the mastermind changed Lieutenant General Sabato into the enemy uniform. All he had to do at that point was wait for them to wake up. Of course, he couldn’t have exactly calculated that they would wake up at the same time. That much was probably a coincidence. But upon waking up, Sabato was likely to immediately go and try to wake the soldier inexplicably passed out in front of him. And he was unlikely to immediately notice the uniform he was wearing—after all, *he always wore those tinted shades of his, didn’t he?*

“On the other hand, if the soldier had woken up first, he’d have just killed Sabato and then probably be secretly executed. The prediction was vague enough to allow for either outcome, and it would have seemed like an impossible case from my point of view either way.”

“Interesting story. That doesn’t explain everything, though, does it? I mean, for one, your superior told you that they’d already found the guard previously on shift, right? So how could he have been lying dead in that room?”

“What they found was *a* soldier with the same ID as that of the one on shift, nothing more. For nameless soldiers without any individuality, switching identities must be a piece of cake. Procuring a substitute couldn’t have been all that difficult—not for our mastermind.”

“Hah! All right, fair enough. But there’s a far bigger hole to explain, isn’t there?”

“...That’s right. We—I saw the corpses with my own eyes. Lieutenant General Sabato was lying there, right before me. So why...” Tokiji closed her eyes, putting a hand to her forehead. “*Why is it that I couldn’t see his uniform? Why is it that I didn’t notice anything off about it at all? And what about the paint used in the previous case? Why—why was I chosen for the military police, given my name back?*”

Kaneshika waited for her to continue.

“There’s something I’m not seeing. There’s something I just haven’t been seeing. That’s no mistake, though, is it?”

“Why have I been allowed to chase truth in this world of lies? Is it because I’m trusted? Because I’m loyal, no matter what?” She clicked her tongue. “Bullshit. Loyalty doesn’t mean shit to pigs who send their own to die. No, if there’s anything they trusted, it’s that I would be unable to

understand the truth of this world, however much I kicked and thrashed about. It's because I'm special—I lack that function.”

Kaneshika, no longer smiling, merely looked deeply into Tokiji's eyes.

“‘*The sky must look the color of blood to you,*’ huh? Of course I'd take that as meaningless prattle. After all—it's *obvious to my eyes.*” Tokiji looked down, balling her hands tightly into fists. “If you hadn't whittled down my confidence with every word, I might never have even considered it. But there's no other explanation now. My instincts are telling me—that this is the last step in making everything fit together. Even though I'd give everything to be wrong.”

“...So?” Kaneshika asked plainly.

“There's something special—something wrong with my eyes, right? Even though I've never heard of this phenomenon, it's the only explanation I have—I'm seeing something wrong. There's...

“There's a color that I can't see, isn't there? That none of us could see.”

“Yes.” Kaneshika said. “That defect is why you're still human.”

“I knew it... *Damn it.*” Looking down at her fragile, trembling hands, she suddenly swung her fist to the right, striking the wall behind her. She heaved a deep sigh. “The rest is trivial. It's been trivial from the start, for someone with perfect information. While I've been running about like a headless chicken, HQ must have been following a much clearer line of inquiry—which high-ranking official is the traitor causing this chaos?”

“And? Who is it?”

“My boss, obviously. Lieutenant Colonel Jingo Horokuni. I doubt that title applies by now, though.” She said smoothly, without a trace of hesitation. “I'd already been suspecting him, but without knowing the mechanism at play, there was no concrete way to connect him to anything.”

“Wow,” Kaneshika clapped, eyes wide. “No hesitation, huh? You're so ready to throw your superior under the bus. Impressive.”

“Hah? Have you forgotten what my job is? Doubting my superiors is my first train of thought.” Tokiji scoffed. “Obviously, every order, every allocation of troops, came from him. It's not like his position had the authority to do all that, but I don't doubt that he'd put a lot of people in his pocket over the course of a career as long as that. As long as he didn't mind eventually being found out, he could have orchestrated all of this.

“After that, in the second incident, he got his hands dirty for once. He simply entered the evidence room, which he would have had access to as a juror, grabbed the paintball gun, walked through the hallway over to the cell

and, with good enough timing, smoothly performed his magic trick. The guard in front of the evidence room wouldn't have questioned him, not someone of such high rank.

"Finally, in the last incident, tricking us would have been easy. We had no access to any information about the crime beyond what we could see. But his course of action seems simple to predict. While the previous guard, our 'culprit', was on shift, Jingo paid Lieutenant General Sabato a visit. There, it was likely the two would drink some tea while conversing. And as someone of lower rank, *it would be a matter of course for Jingo to be the one to brew it*. Even I've found myself having my subordinates make coffee for me, and I couldn't care less about rank. So of course someone proud enough to hang their medals on the wall would fall into that pattern. Therefore, it would have been easy for Jingo to slip something in his drink. After that, all he would have had to do was drug the guard outside. That much would have been easy—just order him to drink some. And then, drag him into the room, and change Lieutenant General Sabato's clothes into the enemy uniform he would have been carrying on his person, steal the guard's dog tag, and smoothly leave the scene, waiting for his time bomb to explode."

"That easy to make a loyal soldier kill their general, huh?"

"It's because he was loyal," Tokiji smiled wryly. "He would have been used to executing soldiers with familiar faces. All that matters is the uniform, right?"

"Indeed! Dogs don't need any more incentive than that." Kaneshika stretched. "Ahh, that feels good. Really clears my mind, laying it all out like this. I guess there's just one question left."

"Huh? What question?" Tokiji tilted her head.

"Come on, now. It may be the end, but we've got to wrap things up properly. Don't sweep the dirt under the rug and all that." Kaneshika pointed to his own visage. "Tell me now, Captain, and I'll acknowledge that you truly understand everything—*how did I predict the future?*"

Eyes wide for just a moment, Tokiji burst into laughter. "That? That's your final question? How proud of your little gimmicks are you?"

"You didn't predict the future, obviously. No one can. You just wrote down some vague verses that could apply to anything, and had your accomplice cook up *something* that fit. Being a sham fortune teller isn't all that hard to begin with, and when you have an army of trained dogs with predictable responses, it becomes trivial."

"Aww, even though you were all so enamored with it at first, you dismiss my poetry so coldly now." Kaneshika hung his head in mock disappointment.

"I suggest you keep that hobby to yourself from now on." With that, she closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall, signaling the end of her solution.

Swiftly recovering his smile, Kaneshika gave her a dry applause. "Congrats. Jingo might have recommended you, but I was skeptical all the way through. But you weren't half bad after all."

"So I passed your little test, huh?"

"Well, you've earned your qualifications, at least. You'd certainly be useful."

"Useful enough to throw away a pawn like Colonel Jingo? I can't imagine you have many of such high rank. I'm nothing in comparison."

"Jingo's served us well, sure, but his days were numbered from the start. The higher ups were closing in on him. At that rate, his only choices were peacefully waiting to die or going out with a bang. The choice is obvious. Besides," he added with a wink, "rebellion is a young man's game, wouldn't you agree?"

Tokiji hesitated to speak. She steeled herself for the question she knew would be coming. Kaneshika didn't disappoint, fixing her with an intense glare. "I've yet to hear your answer."

"My answer, huh?"

"Yeah. Now that your comfortable cage has been torn apart, you just have two options—no, you're in one of two camps. So tell me. Are you a pig, happy to gorge yourself on food and drink for an empty eternity? Or are you a dog, desperately clawing through the mud, all that's waiting for you a miserable death?"

"..." For a time, Tokiji said nothing, merely looking up at the barely lit stone ceiling above. "You know, it's real humiliating, all this. I thought I was on the frontlines, but I've been nothing more than a novice on training wheels."

Why did you hesitate to sing, Wananami? Why did you run away, Yoroi? What did you die for, Zangi? Why, when this world is all a kid's playground.

We're soldiers too, aren't we? We've never fought a day in our lives, but isn't that what we've been waiting for? And yet you've all left me alone now. What a joke. I guess I was a fool to believe in it so much, in valor and strength and a soldier's spirit. If I was a little more perceptive, maybe I could have taken the hint too—I could've enjoyed a life of thoughtless gluttony, along with everyone else. I guess I can see the appeal. It could have been fun—but I'm not made for it.

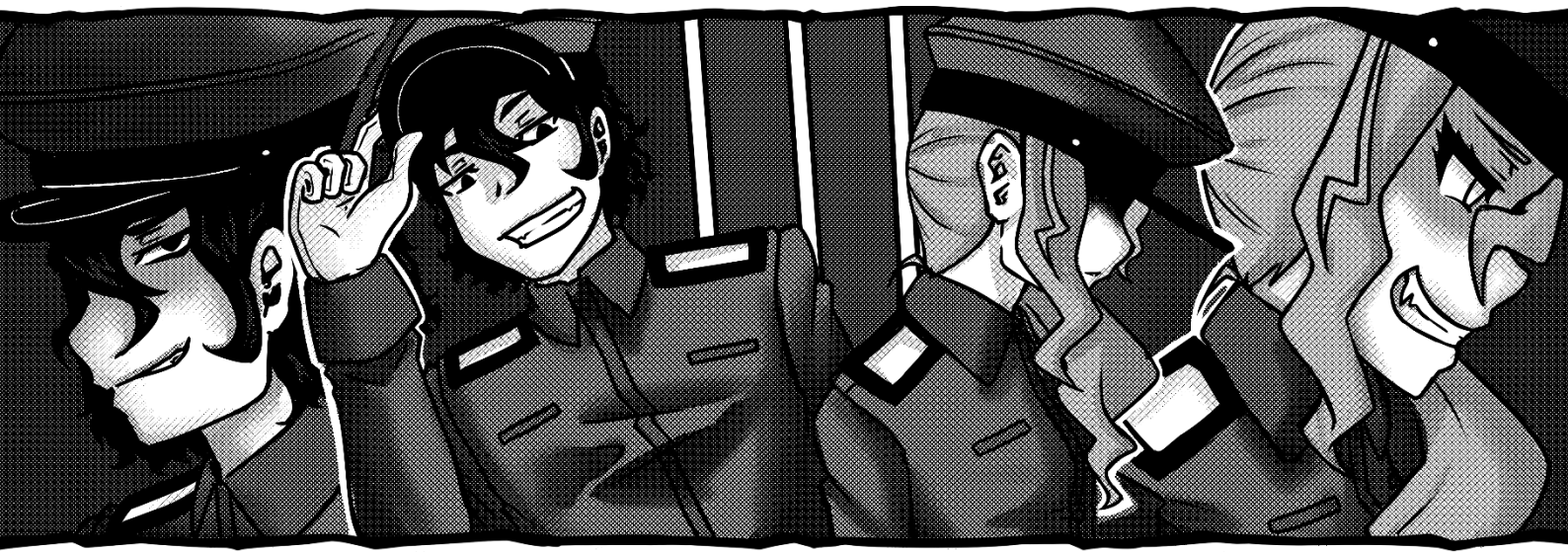
"I'll warn you now, this pigsty of a world has been covered in shit for so long that it's practically fused into the foundations. It's a fool's errand, trying to fix any of it now. So, are you a fool enough to try?" Kaneshika asked.

“Pig, or dog, huh?” Tokiji smirked. “I’m neither of those things, Kaneshika.”

“Huh?”

“I’m a rat. I’ll chew through it all, leave nothing behind. Is that good enough for you?”

He was taken aback for a moment. And then, taking a hold of his hat’s brim and fixing it in place, he—smiled. Deeply, twistedly, like a starving dog with a plateful of flesh in front of him.



Let’s dig in, shall we?

“Samsara, or the War Pigs’ Feast” END

*“No more war pigs have the power; hand of God has struck the hour
Day of judgement, God is calling; on their knees, the war pigs crawling
Begging mercy for their sins; Satan laughing, spreads his wings.”*

– “War Pigs”, Black Sabbath,
from *Paranoid*

*“I can’t see the things that make true happiness,
I must be blind.”*

– “Paranoid”, Black Sabbath,
from *Paranoid*