

The Astonishment of Suzumiya Haruhi

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The Story So Far

Suzumiya Haruhi: beautiful, intelligent, and incredibly athletic. Yet her words and actions are outrageous and unpredictable, and her audacity knows no bounds. On a whim, she creates the "Sowing Seeds of Excitement in an Ordinary World Suzumiya Haruhi Brigade", or "SOS Brigade" for short.

As for the individuals unlucky enough to be driven to exhaustion day after day by Haruhi as members of this Brigade, we have an alien, a time-traveller, an esper... basically, a collection of abnormals. It seems that their true objective is to secretly observe Haruhi, who possesses the potential to alter reality. Unaware of any of this, Haruhi lives out her days doing whatever the hell she wants.

And then on the final day of the Spring holidays, with one school year over and another about to begin, the SOS Brigade members run into an old friend of Kyon's: Sasaki. As though trying to rekindle their old friendship, Sasaki starts getting in touch with Kyon out of the blue, but for some reason she turns out to be surrounded by a collection of mysterious individuals best identified as a "fake SOS Brigade".

Meanwhile, back at school, Haruhi is getting excited by the appearance of prospective new Brigade members. And so things were already exhausting enough before one day, Nagato failed to turn up to school.

Nagato? Ill?! Unsure how to react to this unprecedented situation, the SOS Brigade hastily followed Haruhi to Nagato's apartment...

Characters

Suzumiya Haruhi: Chief of the SOS Brigade. Convinced that the world can't possibly be this boring, she spends her days searching for mysterious incidents. Unbeknownst to her, she may hold the biggest secret of all...

Kyon: An ordinary, average high-school student who happened to catch Haruhi's attention for whatever reason, and ended up forming the SOS Brigade by her side. The primary victim of Haruhi's wild activities.

Asahina Mikuru: A time-traveller, forcibly inducted into the SOS Brigade by Haruhi as a "mascot character". Big-breasted, loli-faced, and a pleasure to be around. Now that's what I call "high-spec".

Nagato Yuki: A girl of few words who happened to be resident in the Literature Club room when it was commandeered by the SOS Brigade. A Humanoid Interface created by the Data Integration Consciousness.

Koizumi Itsuki: An irritatingly cheerful esper, scouted out by Haruhi as a so-called "mysterious transfer student". Any conversation with him ends up long and convoluted.

Today was Monday, first day of the school week, and although nothing out of the ordinary had happened to speak of, due perhaps to the fact that my body was still stuck in a semi-relaxed state after spending a lazy Sunday the day before, the walk home from school seemed to be dragging on even longer than usual.

The first stretch of the journey wasn't too bad, since Haruhi and the others had at least been there to distract me, but now that they had gone their separate ways and I found myself walking this long road alone, I found myself afflicted by sudden feelings of loneliness. It would seem that being surrounded by the members of the SOS Brigade has somehow managed to become my default state. It's not as though I was particularly avoiding this happening, but I'm not quite sure what to think of the fact that I have allowed myself to become so thoroughly tainted by this whole sordid affair. It's as though I was testing some dangerous waters with one foot and promptly found myself up to my neck in it.

"Ah, well..."

For no particular reason, I stopped walking and turned around. Somehow the Spring light seemed to be shining down upon the path more brightly than usual. It could be because the eyes of the first-year prospective new Brigade members who had dropped by after school had been glittering with such charming innocence, but then again it could have just been the effects of a sunlight-related weather phenomenon.

"It's not like it matters to me."

This comment was utterly pointless as well. I sometimes find myself wondering, is there actually any point in talking to yourself if there's nobody else there to hear you? Speech that doesn't convey any information can hardly amount to anything beyond a simple vocal exercise. And for the record, I don't think I have any particular habit of talking to myself. So I can only presume that my words just now were an feeble attempt at self-persuasion. The fact of the matter is, whatever Haruhi may have tainted me with, it happened a long time ago, and even if it were possible for me to wash it out at this late stage, I don't have a single Golgi apparatus' worth of intention of doing so.

As these thoughts went through my head, my homing instincts kicked in, and I once more found myself trudging down the long path home, forcing thoughts of Sasaki, Kuyou and all the other new SOS-Brigade-related irregular factors that had shown up with the new school year firmly away into a deep crevice of my mind, until eventually I reached the end of the day in my own bedroom. All of this had by now become part of my everyday timetable, and unsurprisingly enough, today was no different.

In other words...

Nothing much happened today that was worth writing about.

In theory.

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With all the momentum of a rock tumbling from a cliff... would, I suppose, be a slight exaggeration, but nonetheless the velocity with which Haruhi sped down that hill would have given a world-class athlete a run for his money.

As though dragged along by some invisible net protruding from Haruhi's back, Koizumi, Asahina-san and I rushed likewise down the road from school, and by the time we reached the Kouyouen Station, and with it, level ground, I was thoroughly out of breath. Even Koizumi, who generally seems fresh as a daisy in the worst of situations, was wiping sweat from his brow, and that should say it all. As for Asahina-san, she was curled over panting with her hands on her knees.

Which left just one girl standing there unfazed, as though she had some kind of radioactive power source hidden somewhere in her body.

"What are you stopping for?! We've come this far, haven't we?! Take the last stretch at a run!"

And true to her word, she sprinted off in the direction of Nagato's apartment. Again, her speed was Olympic-worthy, and only a professional athlete at the height of his career could have hoped to keep up with her. Sending Koizumi on ahead, I took Asahina-san's bag, since she was lagging behind, and we headed off after them as fast as seemed physically possible.

"Aahh... haahh..."

After taking care of Asahina-san, whose legs were practically failing beneath her, the whole way, I finally arrived to find Haruhi waiting in front of the entrance to the apartment building. The instant she had determined that everyone was present, she dialled the appropriate buttons on the intercom. 7, 0, 8, call.

The response came immediately, as though the occupant had been waiting for us to arrive.

"....."

"Yuki, it's me. We're all here to see you."

"....."

First came the sound of the intercom cutting out, and then the automatic door swung slowly open.

We bundled in to the elevator which was waiting for us on the ground floor, and Haruhi began repeatedly pressing the "7F" button. It wasn't a particularly large elevator, so it was somewhat cramped with all four of us inside, and I could hear Asahina-san's breathing right by my ear. That, and the soft rumble of the machinery.

The metal box proceeded upwards at such a ponderous rate that one might almost think somebody was physically hauling it, and Haruhi's expression was sour all the while. It wasn't that she was in a particularly bad mood; this visage of irritation was simply what her face naturally settled into when she was unsure of what expression to make.

When the elevator door opened onto the seventh floor, Haruhi marched out with an air of impatience, audibly brushing the very air aside, and began repeatedly pressing the doorbell for Room 708.

The lock was opened with a speed that suggested the person on the other side had been waiting right beside it, and slowly the iron door swung aside. A figure inside was silhouetted against the warm indoor lighting.

"....."

The lone figure framed silently in the rectangle of the doorway was Nagato Yuki, in pyjamas.

"Are you sure you should be up?"

Her eyes vast and staring, Nagato nodded in response to Haruhi's question, and moved towards the closet to take out slippers for each of us.

"You don't have to do that!"

Haruhi, who had kicked off her shoes already, took Nagato by the shoulders and hustled her back into the bedroom. It wasn't only me and Asahina-san who had visited Nagato's place before; all of us had come here at various points in the past, and so naturally, Haruhi was as familiar as any of us with the layout. I had never set foot in the bedroom myself - the living room and guest room were as far as my ventures had taken me - but that hardly seemed worth worrying about right now.

I stepped into the bedroom - a room which indeed contained nothing but a bed - and before even taking the time to reflect on having entered this untrodden ground, peered earnestly down at Nagato, who was being laid down into bed by Haruhi.

"....."

Her pale face, staring fixedly up at the ceiling, was as expressionless as ever, and there were no obvious signs of fever. The only real difference from her usual appearance was the fact that her hair was disarranged from having been lying in bed. My keen eyes were telling me that her eyelids were less open than usual by perhaps two millimetres, but she at least didn't seem to be in any particular pain. And the pyjamas weren't exactly flattering.

I regained a little of my composure, and it was only upon doing so that I realised how close I had been to panicking.

Haruhi placed a hand against Nagato's forehead, and asked,

"Yuki, have you eaten? Does your head hurt?"

Nagato's head shook slightly from left to right upon the pillow.

"You can't just not eat! I thought you might not have, since you live here on your own. Hmm..."

She placed her remaining hand upon her own forehead.

"You do have a slight temperature... Is there an ice pillow in this place?"

Nagato's response was in the negative.

"Oh, well. I'll go and buy you one later. But food comes first. Yuki, I'll use your kitchen and whatever's in your fridge, okay?"

Without waiting for a response, Haruhi stood up, seizing Asahina-san's arm as she headed off out of the room.

"I'll make you my special rice porridge. Or would special udon broth be better? Either one of them should take out any cold in a flash. Mikuru-chan, help me out."

"Ah... okay...!"

Asahina-san had been staring worriedly at Nagato, for some reason with a bundle of slippers in her arms, but she hurried along after Haruhi, nodding repeatedly, until Haruhi stopped short just in front of the door to look back at me and Koizumi, who were still standing motionless like fools in the bedroom.

"You two, get out of the room. It's not nice to stare at a girl when she's sleeping."

"In that case," Koizumi offered, "why don't I go and handle the shopping? An ice pack and some cold medicine... will that do?"

"Just a minute. I have to make dinner, too, so let me just check what's in the fridge. Do you think she'll have any spring onion? We'll need to write out a shopping list. Come with me, Koizumi-kun."

"Very well."

On his way out of the room, Koizumi tapped my shoulder lightly, and gave me a meaningful sort of look before he disappeared.

The room now contained only me, standing blankly with nothing to do, and Nagato, lying flat on her back in the bed.

I could still hear Haruhi's voice from the kitchen giving some kind of orders to Asahina-san and Koizumi. "Why, there's nothing but canned food! That's not going to give her proper nutrition... It's a lack of fresh vegetables that leads to illnesses like this. Mikuru-chan, wash the rice and set up that rice cooker - oh, and that pot while you're at it - and Koizumi-kun, we'll need eggs, spinach, spring onions..."

At times like this, it can be good to have Haruhi around. Though she claims it's because she's the Brigade Chief, it's when it comes to things that have nothing to do with our Brigade activities that she really shows her class. I know all too well from experience that her cooking skills are second-to-none.

Still, this was no time to be getting distracted by the background noise.

Best to just ask.

"Nagato?"

"....."

"How are you doing? Pretty much how it looks like?"

"....."

"Can you not speak?"

"I can."

Her eyes still staring blankly up at the ceiling, Nagato slowly raised the upper half of her body, quilt and all. The movement was unnaturally direct, with no shift to the left or right; it would put even one of those self-righting dolls to shame.

"Is it because of that Kuyou girl that you've ended up like this?"

"Not necessarily."

Nagato's eyes, like polished quartz, gazed directly at me.

"However, it is a possibility."

"Don't you think she must have done it? You know..."

Back in the winter, when Nagato had collapsed in that phantom mansion, how exactly had that worked? We had been wandering the mountains in a blizzard for hours, and when we finally reached a source of light, it turned out to be an inescapable mansion, and Nagato had lost her usual clarity. Hadn't that been...

"Heavy load."

The words came like a whisper from Nagato's lips, and her dim eyes fell downward toward the futon.

Had her body really always been this small? She had only missed a single day of school, and yet somehow she seemed to have become terribly thin and fragile.

In a sudden flash of inspiration, a thought came to me.

"When did it start?"

Thinking back on the events of the previous day, I went on.

"When was it that you started having to lie down from this fever?"

"Saturday evening."

The day of the first town mystery patrol of the new school year. There had been nothing wrong with Nagato when I saw her then, I was sure of that much.

Don't tell me this started around the time that I got that call from Sasaki in the bath.

"....."

Nagato didn't respond, her dim and hazy eyes gazing in the general direction of my chest.

Now that I thought about it, something had seemed off. Yesterday... Sunday. I had been called out by Sasaki, and met with Tachibana Kyouko, Suou Kuyou and Fujiwara, but there had also been an unusual intruder.

Kimidori Emiri-san. A girl in the year above ours, and a Data Integration Consciousness interface different from both Nagato and Asakura. An organic humanoid who, up until now, had never come out into the open, always staying in the shadow of Nagato or the Student Council president. There was no way her presence as a part-time worker at that café on that particular day could have been a coincidence. Kimidori-san had been keeping watch on Kuyou, I was sure of it. But why? To make sure that she didn't try any strange alien tricks on me, presumably. But ordinarily, that role would have been Nagato's. Yet Nagato had been nowhere to be seen.

A sudden wave of anger came over me, and I had the urge to perform a cross-counter right through my own temple.

What an idiot I'd been. I should have seen it back then.

Kimidori-san had taken that role because Nagato was out of action. Nagato's backup, Asakura Ryouko, was gone. Though she may be from a different faction, the only Interface remaining in our vicinity was Kimidori-san. That's why she had been there in the café. Carefully keeping her distance, even going so far as to pose as a waitress.

Nagato's eyes had reached a duller shade than ever. The gleam in them was like that of an ancient coin dug up from the depths of the earth; there was barely any life in them. Their usual shine, like that of a newly-sharpened pencil, was gone completely.

The air in Nagato's bedroom, free of any air-conditioning, was lukewarm. Yet I found myself feeling a different kind of chill. A chill that came not from without, but from within.

"How can I bring you back to normal?"

This illness wasn't something that could be cured by anything as simple as over-the-counter medicine or Haruhi's special cooking. It was an alien virus. The only person who would be able to come up with a vaccine or a cure for a thing like this was Nagato Yuki herself, and she was the one lying here because of it.

"....."

Nagato's now-pale lips remained closed for ten or so seconds before they began to move.

"My recovery will not be decided by my own will. That judgement will be made by the Data Integration Consciousness."

That useless boss of yours? I'm starting to wish he'd show his face. There's a few frank words I'd like to have with him.

"Impossible. The Data Integration Consciousness is..."

Nagato's eyelids slipped down another millimetre or so.

".....unable to make direct contact with organic lifeforms..... that is why I was created....."

And with that, her dishevelled head collapsed back down onto the pillow.

"Hey....!"

"I am fine."

I became all the more certain - this was no simple fever. The virus afflicting Nagato wasn't something that even a dream team of the world's greatest doctors would have a hope of curing.

It was a data offensive from those cosmic horrors known only as the "Canopy Domain". They were sealing away Nagato's incredible alien powers by placing this "load" upon her.

"Can we solve this by negotiating with Kuyou?"

It was the only thing I could think of. If Nagato is the representative of the Data Integration Consciousness, Kuyou is the agent of the Canopy Domain. Communication with her may not be as simple as with Nagato, but I had learned from Sasaki and Kyouko that it was possible. She could definitely speak Japanese, even if only at a very basic level. In which case, she ought to be able to understand what I had to say.

"Words..."

Her voice was so faint, it could just have easily have been nothing more than a sigh.

"Language is difficult. I am not currently fit for communication with another humanoid interface. My capacity for linguistic communication is insufficient."

I knew that to begin with. But your silent nature is an essential part of who you are at this point. For me, and for Haruhi.

"I....."

But Nagato's expressionless face conveyed an evident sense of biting back feelings of bitterness as she went on.

"If I as an individual unit had been conferred with social capacities..."

Every facet of her paper-white face expressed an emptiness that was painfully close to an infinitesimally small *something*.

"The possibility of my being granted tools such as those granted to Asakura Ryouko was not zero. I was not created in that way. I cannot oppose my established index. I will be the way I am..... until the day..... I cease to function....."

Nagato's eyes, closed by around three millimetres or so, stared blankly up at the cold ceiling.

I didn't know what to say.

If Nagato and Asakura's positions and identities had been reversed, how would things have turned out? A silent, unsociable, book-loving class rep. And a charming, caring, ever-smiling lone member of the Literature Club.

The picture was obviously wrong. Hell, I couldn't even imagine it. I didn't want to think about being stabbed with a knife by Nagato, and saved by Asakura. I was glad, from the bottom of my heart, that the enemy had been Asakura, and the ally had been Nagato. I had no doubts about that. Sorry, Asakura. No need for you to come back from Canada or wherever it is you're meant to have gone. Nagato's all I need. Nagato, Haruhi, and Asahina-san - those three are enough to fill me so full of happiness that I think I might just burst.

"Tell me, Nagato."

I leaned in towards Nagato, shifting my own face closer to hers with its dishevelled fringe.

"What am I supposed to do? No... what can I do to bring you back?"

"....."

For quite a while, no answer came.

Taking her time, Nagato raised her eyes to meet mine, and when she finally spoke, the answer was terribly brief.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?! What's that - "

As I leaned even closer towards her,

"What the - ?! Kyon, what are you trying to do to Yuki?!"

There stood Haruhi, an apron tied over the top of her school uniform, with a wooden spoon in one hand, the other hand on her hip, and her eyes like isosceles triangles, fuming with anger.

"Why aren't you doing anything to help out?! Koizumi-kun already went out to buy the things we need! I'm sure you can make yourself useful! In fact, you're the one who ought to be doing this kind of work more than any of us! You're the odd-jobs man of the Brigade - when it comes to menial labour, you're the first calling point! Get the plates out, wash the chopsticks, just hurry up and make yourself busy! Come on, get on with it!"

Haruhi grabbed me by the nape of the neck and hauled me off to the kitchen like one of those sandbags you use to stave off flooding.

So be it. I'll do whatever you like. As long as Nagato recovers, I'll make whatever food you like. In fact, hell, if there's a chance, then this is it. The kind of super-nutritional recovery food that Haruhi's likely to make might just be enough to send even an extraterrestrial organism screaming out the door. And the more disgusting, the better. But whilst I may have been driven almost to tears of joy by Haruhi's cooking in the past, I can't think of one occasion where I've found it unpleasant. I can say this with certainty. Sorry, oh Mother who raised and adored me, but Haruhi's cooking is better than the meals you make.

Not that I can imagine her raising a family, but I'm pretty sure there's no danger of Haruhi's most immediate descendants developing any taste disorders.

Back in the kitchen, Haruhi left the task of monitoring the boiling pot to Asahina-san for the moment, and took a short break to gulp water straight from the tap, before turning back to us.

"I'm a little relieved, actually. I'd never even considered the idea of Yuki not coming to school, so I was worried that this might be something worse than an ordinary cold. But her fever isn't too high, so if she eats a good meal that's easy on the stomach and gets a good night's rest, she should be just fine."

"Yes, it doesn't seem like there'll be any need for her to visit the hospital."

Koizumi took the opportunity to casually chime in. Everybody here apart from Haruhi was well aware that no human doctor would be of any use to Nagato, but come to think of it, it would be unnatural not to bring up the prospect at all.

"I happen to be personally acquainted with a good doctor, so if it does come to that, I can have him prescribe her some excellent medicine."

Wiping her lips with her sleeve, Haruhi went on.

"Medicine isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's spirit you really need for these things."

Haruhi began to lecture us all.

"The reason medicines taste so bad, you know, is to trick the cold germs or viruses or whatever into thinking 'If they're going to start shoving stuff this disgusting in here, then I'd better leave'."

"I... Is that really why~?"

"Sure is!"

Stop lying to Asahina-san with that air of complete confidence. What if she actually believes you.

But I couldn't bring myself to actually voice that retort, and instead retreated to the living room with Koizumi, where we sat under the inactive kotatsu and did nothing very much in particular.

Koizumi, upon returning with the shopping, had been relieved of duty right away, and as I'd never been given any real responsibilities to begin with, I was let off after doing a few simple tasks such as bringing out the tableware and doing a little washing up, so the two of us had nothing left to do at this point but watch as Haruhi briskly got on with the actual cooking with the aid of her assistant Asahina-san.

Still, I'd been aware that Haruhi was good at this stuff, but watching her at it now, she put any professional housewife to shame. From the ease with which she sliced the vegetables to the way she prepared the dashi, I could hardly help but be impressed at how easy she made it all look.

"Oh, anyone can do this sort of thing if they get used to it!"

So quoth Haruhi, tasting the contents of the pot from a small dish.

"I've been cooking ever since I was in primary school, after all. I'm better than anyone else in my family. Ah, Mikuru-chan, pass the soy sauce."

"Coming~!"

Come to think of it, I rarely see Haruhi bring a packed lunch to school. Does her mother not make them for her?

"I'm sure she'd make them if I asked her to, and she does suggest it sometimes, but I turn her down. When I need one, I make it myself."

There was a complicated sort of expression on Haruhi's face.

"I don't know if I really ought to say this kind of thing, but my mum... my mother, she's got a terrible sense of taste. I think there's something wrong with her tongue. And she always measures the seasoning by eye, and never pays any attention to how long she leaves the fish cooking for, so even when she makes the same dish, it never tastes the same way twice. Back when I was a kid, I used to think that was normal - I remember thinking that school meals were the tastiest thing in the world. But when I tried making the stuff myself, it turned out absolutely delicious. Ah, Mikuru-chan, pass the mirin."

"Coming~!"

"These days I make half the dinners at home myself. My mother works, you know, so we sort of help each other out. I suppose it's true that there's no better practice than the real deal. Day-to-day diligence is what it takes. Not that I make a point of putting any special effort into it, but when you make it part of your routine, you just pick up all the important things. Mikuru-chan, taste this for me. How is it?"

"Coming~!Ahh..... it's delicious.....!"

"You see? This is my personal special vegetable soup. It's got every vitamin from A to Z, perfect for stamina-building! One sip of this stuff should send all your fatigues and aches right off to Saturn's rings!"

Where she got that tagline from I have no idea, but at any rate Haruhi began transferring the contents of the soup into a deep dish, while turning off the heat from the pot and removing the lid. My stomach started rumbling at once. This was a smell to bring on hunger.

"This is especially for Yuki. Kyon, what are you putting on that hungry face for? You're not having any, you know. Help me carry it through to her room, will you? You're not going to get punished for doing that much."

Naturally I was ready to devote myself selflessly to whatever task was at hand. Indeed, I was filled with regret that there was nothing more I could do.

I gathered Haruhi's porridge and vegetable soup onto a tray, and carried it carefully into Yuki's bedroom. Asahina brought the teapot and cup. Koizumi followed behind, carrying the herbal medicine that Haruhi had specified and a cup of water, while Haruhi went ahead to open the bedroom door.

"Yuki, it's all ready! Sorry for the wait!"

"....."

Slowly, Nagato lifted herself up, and gazed at the four of us with empty eyes.

"Drink the medicine first, all right? It's meant to be drunk before a meal. I picked out the medicine that generally seems to work best from my experience. You can have the food afterwards. There's plenty more where that came from, so eat as much as you like. You didn't have any lunch, right?"

Haruhi's overwhelming positive attitude was wonderful. I could easily see your average cold virus fleeing in the face of this kind of power. Any bacteria with an instinct for self-preservation would be wanting out about now.

"....."

Nagato attempted to get out of bed, but was stopped by Haruhi once again. Koizumi handed over the packet of medicine and the cup, and after gazing at it doubtfully for a moment, Nagato drank it obligingly.

It seemed that Haruhi would have preferred to personally feed Nagato the meal, but Nagato refused, and took the bowl and spoon herself. She took a spoonful, and swallowed.

"....."

As Nagato drank down the porridge, barely even chewing at all, Haruhi watched intensely over her with a piercing gaze. She wasn't the only one; Asahina-san, Koizumi and I were all doing the same.

"....."

Nagato was gazing down at the bowl in the manner of one observing the colour of an iodine solution poured upon a sample of starch, but eventually she said in a small voice,

"Delicious."

"Right. That's good to hear. Keep on eating. Eat it all up! Here's the vegetable soup. I should probably have boiled it for a little longer, but this should be enough to have brought out plenty of flavour."

Taking the dish Haruhi had thrust in front of her, Nagato drank it down.

"Delicious."

"You see?"

With a look of extraordinary satisfaction on her face, Haruhi watched over Nagato as she ate her meal.

Little by little, Nagato went on eating at a steady rhythm. I have my doubts as to whether she was actually enjoying Haruhi's cooking; while she did seem to be savouring it more than she had when she ate her boil-in-the-bag curry, she could well have actually been forcibly repressing her lack of real appetite. Nagato will eat anything that is presented to her. She will eat even if she doesn't actually need to.

Somehow I found it all difficult to watch.

Perhaps it was because Nagato was sitting there in bed, clothed in pyjamas. Perhaps it was because she was silently eating Haruhi's nutritional meal. Or perhaps it was because even though she was sitting so close that I could reach out and touch her, her presence seemed so much fainter than usual.

"Sorry..."

I apologised to nobody in particular.

"I'm going to go use the bathroom."

Without waiting for a response from anybody, I left the bedroom and shut myself in the bathroom. Though perhaps it didn't show on the surface, I felt as though if I sat there watching Nagato any longer, I might be overcome by a meaningless anger with no identifiable target.

I sat myself down upon the tidy little toilet-seat cover, bit softly into the inside of my lips, and settled into thought.

For the moment, I at least had the great satisfaction of knowing exactly who I ought to make the first target of my interrogations. I may not know what it was I needed to do, but this was one thing I knew I couldn't ignore.

Something had to be done about that Kuyou girl. It just plain wasn't fair that Nagato was lying bedridden while that damn girl walked about in perfect health. It was a question of broken balance. I wasn't having any of it. First, I'd have to get in contact with Sasaki, and...

"Ahh...!"

The mobile phone in my blazer pocket suddenly started vibrating, and I almost fell right off the toilet seat.

I looked down at the display to see who it was that had surprised me with such immaculate timing, and saw that it was an email rather than a call.

"Hmm...?"

The sender's address was an incomprehensible mess of characters. Who on Earth...? I opened up my inbox.

"Huh?"

The screen suddenly went completely black. Don't tell me it was a virus? Crap. I don't want to lose the data I had stored on here...

As I began to panic, I noticed a white cursor blinking in the top-left corner of the black LCD screen, and was struck by a sudden dazing sense of *déjà vu*. I had seen something like this happen to a computer monitor before.

Moments later, the cursor slid softly to one side, leaving a string of plain characters in its wake. This smooth flow of text, defying any need for character conversion, was familiar as well.

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yuki.n> you need not worry
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Nagato. So it is you.

This was just like the time when Haruhi and I were trapped in that Sealed Space together. In which case, I ought to be able to respond in the same way. My thumb darted across the keys. Don't worry? Like hell I won't. This calls for a response. Slowly but surely, I typed in my reply.

"It's those Canopy Domain assholes' fault that you've got this fever, right?"

As soon as I had sent the message, another arrived.

yuki.n> yes

Overcome by the enormity of my own carelessness, I felt like freezing my own head in liquid nitrogen and smashing it to pieces with a baseball bat. Damn it all! That Kuyou girl had just looked so harmless, sitting there with her doll-like features next to Tachibana Kyouko. And at the same time, I'd been making a stupid assumption. That it was only me and Haruhi who they were really interested in.

They had contacted me because they wanted to do something about Haruhi's power - I'd made the assumption without ever doubting it. I have a horribly useless one-track mind. Koizumi had *told* me that Nagato was the greatest asset the SOS Brigade had, I *knew* he was right, how could I not have seen right away that she would be the first target of any enemy attack?!

yuki.n> i will not allow them to harm you or suzumiya haruhi

My thumb punched rapidly across the buttons in frustration.

I don't *care* about me and Haruhi. We can take care of ourselves, and as of right now, we're just fine. You're the one who's been attacked, you're the one in trouble! Do something about it!

Send. Again, instant response.

yuki.n> this is one of my duti[]ata
integrati[]ciuousnes[]ttempt[]municat[]an
opy doma

The characters came to an abrupt standstill.

"What's wrong?"

The scant few metres between Nagato's bedroom and this homely bathroom suddenly felt impossibly far, and the few seconds that followed seemed like an eternity.

yuki.n> my operat????æ-#å -å????@-ã 'ã??\$ã™????æ-#å??? -å@????-
ã 'ã\$???

I thought my mobile must have broken. At least, I *hoped* it was the phone.

yuki.n> ????????ã"ã, @ã?????, ,æ-#å??? -å??@-ã 'ã????•ã"ã, ???@ã
, ,æ????????????-#å -å@-ã 'ã•??

I broke out in a cold sweat. Nagato sending me honest-to-God nonsense was unprecedented. Was her condition really that bad? If it turned out to be incurable, I.....

I felt as though I might black out any moment. My body went so weak that my hand could easily have slipped and dropped the phone into the toilet, and frankly I couldn't have blamed it if it had.

But thankfully, before I managed to really break my phone, the top line on the screen changed once more.

yuki.n> need to sleep

The tiny flickering message appeared clearly for a moment, before fading away as though melting. It was a wonderful message... one hundred percent Nagato.

Let me just say this again. Like *hell* I'm not going to worry. You've got to be kidding me. Sorry, Nagato, but I'm not mature enough to go for that. You must be overestimating me.

Dashing out of the toilet, I sped in a flustered rush straight back into the bedroom.

"Nagato!"

Looking up at my wild expression, Haruhi was taken aback for a moment, but then,

"Stop that, Kyon! Keep it down, all right? Yuki just fell asleep."

She stared at me with a scowl.

"She lay back down as soon as she'd finished her meal, and went straight off to sleep."

And indeed, Nagato lay still on the bed with her eyes closed. Like a princess frozen in ice, even her breathing was undetectable.

"I think she's really calmed down. It's times like these that living alone isn't good for a person, you know. You need to have other people around - even if you're just sleeping on your own, it's important to be able to hear people moving about in the rest of the house. It just helps you feel comfortable. It doesn't matter who, she just needs someone to - "

I turned my back on Haruhi's reasonable explanation. I wanted to listen, but I just wasn't in the mood for it. It wasn't a conscious act; my body moved on its own.

"Kyon? Where are you - "

Leaving the bedroom at a dash, I only picked up speed as I hurtled through the front door as well. I didn't feel like waiting for the elevator to go down to the ground floor, so I ran down the stairs instead. Passing through the entrance and out of the apartment building, I carried on running with no real aim in mind.

Where would Kuyou be at this hour? No idea. But she had been wearing a Kouyouen Girls' School uniform. If she goes to school properly just like Nagato goes to North High, then Kouyouen was as good a place as any to start. I didn't care what the school security might have to say. I could hop-step-jump around them all day. If I went bursting into the staff room, who knew if her address would actually be listed on the register. If it wasn't, then I'd just have to find another way.

At any rate, standing still and doing nothing was the one thing my body wouldn't allow.

Eventually my stride became as loose as if I was wearing winged boots bestowed upon me by some goddess; my useless cardiopulmonary functions had betrayed me, and I had run out of breath. I found myself standing in front of a level crossing.

The very level crossing where, about a year ago now, Haruhi had given me a long private speech.

Overcome by exhaustion, I concentrated for a while on taking long, deep breaths. My gaze happened to wander over to the opposite side of the crossing, and what I saw there made my gaze and body freeze.

Suou Kuyou.

The enemy who threatened both myself and Nagato stood directly opposite me, across the level crossing. As though she had been there all along.

" _____ "

Black uniform. Long, wide hair. And that unfathomably blank expression.

The lights above the crossing gates began to flash. At the same time, the bells that signalled an approaching train began to ring, and the gates themselves lazily began to fall.

Why is she... here...? It's as though she was..... waiting for me.....

Kuyou didn't move. She held that same distance from me, the width of a single crossing, and as though she had grown physical roots into the ground, stood stock still, looking less human than a robot hand-crafted out of cardboard boxes.

Clang, clang, clang...

The gates had closed completely now, and the rumbling of the line and rushing of air that foretold the coming of a train became louder. My gaze was fixed upon Kuyou, and where hers was focused was a mystery. The timing was impossible. This was no coincidence. She was...

She was waiting here for me.

With a burst of wind, the train rushed past, concealing Kuyou from view. Though it can hardly have had that many carriages, it seemed almost as though time stood still for those few moments. This horrible sensation, powerful enough that I could have identified the faces of each and every passenger in the train windows that went past, turned into an equally powerful premonition.

As though the future was flashing before my eyes, I felt a sudden conviction that when the train had finished going past, Kuyou would no longer be standing on the other side of the line. Somehow she would be standing right behind me instead, reaching out her pale, ghost-like hands...

A terrible delusion.

The train went past. The red warning lights, relieved of their duty, stopped flashing. And the black figure of Kuyou was standing, as ever, on the other side of the gates. A demonstration of surprising patience? An unnerving scene staged for my benefit? Or perhaps she didn't possess such human concepts as these at all...

After waiting for the black-and-yellow bars to return to the upward position, Kuyou finally moved, as though walking across the ocean floor. She walked towards me. I'd sure like to know how she manages to walk without her hair or skirt shifting in the slightest.

Her figure, like an insubstantial holograph, came to a halt a few metres away.

I clenched my fists by my sides.

"What the hell did you do to Nagato?"

Kuyou's eyes, like giant glistening marbles, gazed upon me. All my instincts were warning me not to meet that gaze. Those are the kind of eyes that you feel might suck your soul from your body.

Kuyou's brilliantly-coloured lips parted.

"I wanted to know about humans... No..."

Though she stood at a distance, her voice came as if from right beside my ear.

"No, that was not... what I wanted to know about..."

She cocked her head to one side. The incredibly human gesture caught me off guard.

"What I wanted to know about... was you..."

What?

"Will you join me.....?"

What is she saying?

"I don't mind....."

She holds out her hand towards me.

Alien.

Clang, clang, clang...

The crossing signal began to ring again. Two red lights, flashing one after the other. Warning that the train was coming... yet to me, it felt as though they were warning of something more terrible than being struck head-on by a speeding train. An emergency situation. What's happening? What is going on? Nothing seems to make sense. What is the meaning of this sudden transformation, as though a lead doll has been brought to life by a witch?

Kuyou's hand is still approaching. Closer, ever closer. The human-shaped hand of a thing inhuman.

A being that cannot possibly coexist with humanity, a visibly unknowable entity from beyond the galaxy, beyond human ken. A girl with hair that flutters like wings.....

Eyes as black as the new moon. No. Don't look. The world will turn to black.

I want to say "stop", but my mouth refuses to move. This is too pathetic. After coming this far.....

"Give it up."

The voice that stopped Kuyou's hand was not my own.

Again, I stood in silent shock.

The female voice that echoed from directly behind me was filled with a cool confidence, and a subtle, all-encompassing gaiety. It was a voice I had not heard in quite some time, and a voice I could not even insincerely claim I had ever wanted to hear again.

"I will not permit you to approach him any further. After all..."

From right by the nape of my neck, the voice broke into a peal of brief, charming laughter.

"This human is *my* prey. If you mean to take him from me, why, I'd rather do this."

An arm reached over my shoulders and past my neck. It wore the girls' sailor uniform of North High, and grasped in its hand was an extremely familiar object. An awful light reflected from its sharpened blade.

The tip of the combat knife gripped upside-down in that terrible hand was pointed directly at the base of my throat.

"I can't say I mind, myself, one way or the other."

Her airy laugh made all the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. A smell so sweet that it could almost be narcotic wafted through the air and into my nostrils. I recognised it all.

"You're....."

Finally, I managed to squeeze out the words.

".....Asakura...?"

"Yes, that's right. Who else did you expect?"

The unmistakable voice of my one-time fellow classmate of Class 1-5, Asakura Ryouko, rang out from behind me.

"Nagato-san is having a little rest at the moment, yes? And so, you have me. Is there something wrong with that?"

I couldn't turn around. I had the unshakable feeling that if I actually witnessed the figure of Asakura Ryouko standing there behind me, then the consequences would be unthinkable. One-time partner of Nagato and member of the Data Integration Consciousness' radical faction, this girl had attempted to murder me twice, and on the second occasion, come incredibly close to succeeding. On both occasions, I had been saved only due to Nagato's intervention, and Nagato was no longer available. Instead, here stood Kuyou. Outrageous. Caught between a wolf and a tiger, and neither one could be reasonably considered an ally. This was the last dilemma I wanted to face.

"An emergency situation was detected. Thus, I appeared. Is that really so strange?"

Her sweet voice went on.

"After all, I *am* Nagato-san's backup. If she can't take action, then I'm next in line. Don't you remember?"

If Nagato can't take action.....

This was an honest-to-God emergency. So serious that the deleted Asakura could return to life. So dangerous that I needed the help of a murderess.

"Now, that's rather rude. I'll have you know I am not a murderess. After all... I haven't killed anyone yet, now, have I?"

Then I'd appreciate it if you could move that knife. I can't even swallow with that thing there.

"Not possible, I'm afraid. As long as she's standing over there, I have to carry out my mission faithfully."

A single finger of the hand gripping the knife extended to point in the direction of Kuyou.

"A humanoid terminal of the so-called Canopy Domain, I believe? Very intriguing. If you were to die in this situation, I wonder how that girl would react."

Every time, she brings up these bone-chilling things in that casual way. She hasn't changed a bit since she was our class rep. No, there's not a damn girl in the world who can pull that off but Asakura Ryouko.

Like a wet cloth left to dry in the blazing desert, I couldn't move a muscle. I couldn't even tell whether I was hot or cold. There was only the blade's sharp glint, cold as outer space, and Kuyou's eyes, calm as four storeys underground.

Too calm.

A sudden realisation came to me. What had happened to the flashing lights of the crossing? Where had the deafening noise of the warning bells gone? Why had the train still not arrived?

I opened my eyes. The red signal lights were permanently on. The gates had come to a standstill, diagonally in midair. No wind was blowing. Not a single person walked the streets, not a single car drove past.....

The world was standing still.

The clouds in the distant sky, too, steadfastly maintained their position, and when I spotted even a crow fixed in the air mid-flight, I finally and belatedly understood.

Everything had been frozen.

"What on Earth is going on.....?"

Asakura let out a sly chuckle.

"I don't want anybody interfering. If I do this, nobody will have to see us at all, you see? Space data manipulation is my speciality. Escape is impossible."

A trap, then. But for who?

"Now then, Kuyou-san."

Ever-cheerful, Asakura continued.

"Shall we have a nice little conversation? Or would you rather fight? I don't mind. I'd rather like to see what you people can do. That's part of my job, as well."

Kuyou stood motionless and expressionless as always, but...

".....Release that human. Threat level extreme..... Your intent to kill is genuine....."

Slowly and carefully, Kuyou blinked, and when her black eyes reopened, they held a light that I had never seen there before.

"It is not you. I have no interest in you. You are not important."

A slight hint of emotion could be detected in Kuyou's voice.

"Well, that's not a very entertaining answer. All right, if that's how you want it."

The hand holding the knife shifted, leaving but an afterimage behind. It happened so quickly that my eyes had no hope of following its motion. I recognised the sensation from a previous experience, caught in the middle of an extradimensional battle between this girl and Nagato in the classroom of Class 1-5. All that I could tell was that Asakura had tossed the knife with a simple flick of her wrist, sending it hurtling towards Kuyou at close to the speed of light - and it was only seconds after the fact that my mind was able to process that much.

".....Threat level increased by two stages."

Kuyou muttered the words to herself, her hand clasped around the knife hilt, directly in front of her own face. She showed no sign of fear towards the knife that had come almost close enough to touch her nose, and from my perspective, it looked almost as though she was trying to stab herself in the face. The opposite was true.

".....And continuing to rise."

The knife, and Kuyou's arm clasped around it, were vibrating minutely. Oh, God. The knife that Asakura had thrown, even after Kuyou had halted its motion, was still trying to stab into her. Kuyou was monstrous enough for having the reflexes to stop that lightspeed knife in midair, but Asakura was more terrifying still. Just how much kinetic energy had she placed behind that knife? I didn't want to think about it.

"Not half bad."

There was a tone of admiration in Asakura's voice.

"It may have only been a test shot, but I did attack with greater force than my calculated forecast of your capacity. This may become rather interesting."

I could feel the air stirring up behind me. Feeling as though if I looked around, I would see Asakura's hair writhing upward like snakes, I kept my gaze fixed dead ahead. But my ears, I couldn't block.

"Expanding data control range. Deploying offensive data. Shifting to Termination Mode. Requesting authorisation for localised combat simulation within limited space for the purpose of analysing specified target."

That was the best I could make of Asakura's rapid vocalisations, and as soon as I had, the surrounding scenery collapsed completely. Like a jigsaw puzzle of an urban scene being shattered into its separate pieces, everything was transformed, and that which lay outside made itself known. For the second time in my life, I found myself surrounded by the twisted geometrical realm that was Asakura's Data Control Zone.

".....Threat level stable."

Kuyou's skin, which had been purest white, began to take on a more flushed hue. Her manner of speech, too, was shifting.

"Move away from that human."

Though she still spoke with an unnaturally unconcerned tone considering the knife that even now stood grasped directly in front of her face...

"You are not worthy of consideration....."

Her sentences were becoming far more intelligible. With a careful, jerking motion, as though taming a wild horse, she slid the knife to one side of her face. Once the blade had reached a sufficient distance not to touch her hair, she cocked her head to one side and released her grip.

The knife that Asakura had thrown assumed once more its original trajectory, speeding off like a missile into the distance, and then...

".....!"

For the third time, and I was getting rather tired of it by now, I stood stunned in astonishment.

A third figure was just visible immediately behind Kuyou - but my mind had barely had time to process this information before Asakura's knife sped directly towards the third figure's face with hyper-mach ultrasonic velocity, and as though copying Kuyou's earlier response exactly, the figure seized the knife out of the air in the instant before contact. The possessor of this arm which was capable of such acrobatic knife-catching feats...

"Kimidori-san."

...was identified by Asakura at once.

"And what would you be doing all the way out here?"

Kimidori-san, in her usual sailor uniform, seemed oddly out of place in this geometric realm. The serene smile on her face was identical to that she wore when accompanying the Student Council president. This profoundly ordinary expression was all very well, but in a world this abnormal, it seemed incongruous by very virtue of its normality. Sorry, I'm running out of reasonable ways to describe all this.

Kimidori-san twisted the hand in which she had caught the knife, pointing the blade back in Asakura's direction.

"I am here to put a halt to your deviant activities. Your actions are not grounded in the consensus of the Integration Consciousness."

"Oh? Is that right?"

"Yes. They are not permissible."

"I see. All right, then."

All too readily, Asakura gave her agreement, and then...

"Could you give that back now?"

Kimidori-san released her hand, and the knife moved through the air, this time at a speed that my kinetic vision could easily follow, back towards Asakura. But in the next instant, Asakura muttered something in that rapid, chanting way.

The knife suddenly accelerated, diverting its course to fly straight towards the back of Kuyou's head. This was not a velocity that could be dodged. It was like a steel laser.

"!!"

I could barely believe my eyes.

In one instant, it looked as though Kuyou's figure had suddenly become two-dimensional, and in the next, she had vanished from sight completely.

It was as though the Kuyou standing before me had been nothing but a cardboard cutout, about a millimetre thick, and that cutout had suddenly been flipped through ninety degrees. Distracted by

this unnerving phenomenon, I failed to comprehend the new destination of the knife until I saw it in Asakura's hand, this time gripped right-way up, right back in its original position, ready to slice open my throat at any moment.

As soon as I did realise what had happened, a stream of sweat erupted from the top of my head.

If Asakura hadn't caught it when she did, the flying blade would without a doubt have pierced straight through the base of my neck. This went beyond terror.

Asakura voiced a doubtful question.

"Did she escape?"

Hold it, you're *ignoring* what just happened to me?

"No."

Kimidori-san shook her head, and lifted her chin to gaze up into the sky.

"She is here."

Kuyou plummeted down before us.

As though lowered from offstage by some kind of rope, she landed in a perfectly upright position, and with one hand grabbed the wrist of Asakura's knife-wielding arm, whilst bringing the fingers of the other hand together for a jab, and motionlessly unleashing it. Towards what?

Towards my face.

"?!"

Everything was moving so fast I felt utterly exhausted. And yet, there was not a thing that I could do. It was only after the fact that I was able to comprehend anything that occurred here, and this was happening now.

A rush of air hit my fringe like a solid object, and I couldn't help but close my eyes tight. Bad move. When I hurriedly opened them in the next instant, the following scene met my eyes.

Kuyou's hand had come to rest only millimetres from my brow, and the only reason it had stopped there was that Asakura's hand was clasped around its black-uniformed wrist. In one hand she held an actual blade, and in the other an equally deadly hand. And like an idiot, there I stood, trapped in between this outwardly human but inwardly what could only be called demonic pair of combatants. Let me say it once more: I felt pathetic.

Was this the second time now that Asakura had literally saved my life? Seriously? Is there not something wrong with this picture?

"Kuyou-san."

There was an air of teasing in Asakura's voice.

"What is it that you want with this human? Do you want to kill him? Or do you want him to live?"

Kuyou's eyes regarded me as one might regard a sandbag, her eyes like blades themselves as their gaze bored into me, but then they shifted to an area beside my head - the direction, presumably, of Asakura's face.

".....Meaning of query unclear. Define 'human'. Define 'kill'. Define 'live'."

She went on, in a voice that seemed to come from some kind of speaker somewhere rather than any actual vocal cords.

".....Define 'Data Integration Consciousness'. Clarify."

She muttered the words as though to herself, before - in a manner that could only be called 'dramatic' - altering her expression.

Kuyou was smiling.

It was a resplendent and beautiful smile.

Though it seemed more like a perfectly-executed simulation of a smile than an expression of any actual emotion, the visage was nonetheless striking enough to infect even the most timid of men with that disease known as love at first sight. None but I could have resisted it. The likes of Taniguchi, unaware of the circumstances, would have been floored in an instant. All words were wiped clear from my mind, as Asakura began her brazen response.

"Why, what a lovely face you have there, Kuyou-san. But I think this is quite enough, don't you? I have no intention of yielding one inch to the Canopy Domain, and the life or death of this human is no exception."

Each with both hands trapped in this strange interlocking embrace, Kuyou and Asakura were continuing their conversation.

.....What the hell are these people even talking about.....?!

I was becoming more and more frustrated.

Now, let me just make something clear - I'm ordinarily a very kind-hearted person. For instance, on the occasion when my little sister took my favourite scarf and tried to wrap it around Shamisen as a joke, and Shamisen, entirely unimpressed by the whole affair, responded as any cat would by flailing tooth and claw in every direction until the scarf was reduced to an unidentifiable mess of wool and fibre, I was understanding enough to let the both of them off with no worse than a poke to the forehead. That's just the kind of guy I am.

When you've managed to drive a guy like that into a proper rage, you know things are getting serious.

Yeah. I get it.

Anyone with the nerve to stand in the middle of this outrageous situation with a smile on their face is out of their mind. The fact that the three girls standing here right now are all from outer space just serves to prove my point.

I'm the only sane one here. That's why I'm scared out of my skin. Got a problem with that?

".....Define 'Canopy Domain'."

Paying no attention to the words that could have come from one of those online chatterbots but were instead emanating from the world's most exquisite smile, Asakura made her own pronouncement.

"Initiating offensive data assault."

The ground beneath us began to foam. Along with a bubbling sound like boiling water, it gave the impression that we were standing in a poisonous swamp. Next, Asakura's knife melted into nothing, like crystallised sand. And Kuyou's hand, its wrist held in place by Asakura's, was engulfed in some kind of bluish-white mosaic. A grid of miniscule hexagons spread up the arm with astonishing speed, but in the next instant, Kuyou's figure seemed once more to become two-dimensional, and another instant later, she was but a fine vertical line in the air.

Bong~~~~~!

"Ngh...?!"

A deafening metallic chime, like two gigantic tuning forks being struck against one another right beside my ear, rang through the air, and I instinctively squeezed my eyes tight shut. But the chime disappeared as quickly as it had come, and everything went as silent as if some giant hand had wiped the notes clean out of the air.

"....."

When I found the nerve to tentatively open my eyes once more, Kuyou was nowhere to be seen. The only figure standing before me was Kimidori-san. And the unnerving presence of a certain girl lurking right behind my back was as clear as ever.

The unsettling world of geometric figures was swept away, and with the return of our earlier surroundings, of the street by the railway line, my world was finally restored to some semblance of normality, but I was well beyond being surprised by these developments any longer.

"Is she really gone this time?"

Asakura's questioning voice came from behind me, and in front of me, Kimidori-san responded.

"The data containment field that you had constructed was penetrated by an unidentified stream of concentrated data. I am currently in the process of tracking the path of the target in question, and repairing the surrounding space."

"A physical dimensional shift in her bodily data... clearly their terminals take a different form to ours. They have no need for authorisation."

"It would seem that she was not created for the primary purpose of communicating with human beings. In fact, I would speculate that she was most likely constructed as an interpretation platform for communication with our own kind. Most likely, even her interest in Suzumiya Haruhi-san was derived from observation and anticipation of the movements of the Data Integration Consciousness."

"I find it hard to believe that she was a simple terminal at all. She deconstructed my offensive data without any need for decoding."

"Their logical foundation differs from our own, so analysis of the algorithms of the domain with which she is connected will be necessary to effect fatal damage."

"Well, I'll leave that to you, Kimidori-san. You must have been able to obtain a fair amount of data from this encounter, yes? As far as I can see, while we may not be able to eliminate the data itself, destruction of the physical terminal should be entirely possible. Would it not be a good idea to pick up the pieces and use those to determine the overall structure of the platform?"

"Unauthorised action is not permissible."

"Oh, you sound just like Nagato-san. Still, I rather think Nagato-san will be more accommodating to my ideas in her present state."

"I will put a stop to your activities. The Integration Consciousness will not permit them."

"Oh?"

Asakura put on an air of surprise.

"And since when did you become the Consciousness representative?"

"The Interface designated by the personal name Nagato Yuki has transferred a portion of her autonomous judgement capacities to myself. She proposed this of her own accord, and the transfer was authorised by the central will of the Integration Consciousness. My actions are in conformation with the consensus of the Integration Consciousness."

"Consensus? You mean those good-for-nothing conservatives always trying to preserve the status quo? Or are you trying to label me a minority party?"

"Both."

Asakura gave a nasty sort of laugh in that model-student voice of hers.

"My behaviour patterns are unchanged from my former station. They have yet to be overwritten."

"You are a backup unit, deployed purely as an emergency measure. Nagato and myself have merely conceded in a professional capacity that your deployment was a necessary measure in the limited context of this emergency. That your potential usefulness was marginally greater than the threat you present."

"Should I be thanking you, then? Seeing as it's thanks to you that I've returned."

"I have been granted the authority to cancel your data integration."

"So there's no point my trying to fight you, then. Fair enough. I only plan on acting according to my own will. Nagato-san taught me that, you know. Where exactly the potential for independent evolution truly lies. Didn't you know, Kimidori-san? She has long ceased to be a simple terminal. In which case, don't you think that we too might hold that same potential?"

Screw that. Nagato alone is more than enough for me, thanks. Sure, I'll thank you for protecting me from Kuyou's attack. But let me just make this perfectly clear.

Nagato is all I need. Asakura, I don't need you.

"How terribly harsh."

Asakura was visibly enjoying herself.

And let me say this, too. Do you have to keep holding this ridiculous debate quite literally around me? It's giving me a headache just listening to all this crap.

"Well, you heard the man, Kimidori-san."

And one more thing. If you've got the spare time to show up in a place like this and hang around pointing knives at me, then why don't you damn well go and make Nagato some food? Just like you used to the last time I saw you.

"Is that any way to talk to the girl who just saved your life from an evil alien monster?"

The smiling tone in Asakura's voice never wavered, and it didn't sound in the slightest as though she had taken any actual offence.

"Well, I'm sorry, but the question of maintaining this form for any extended period is out of my hands. If you have any complaints in that area, I'd suggest you direct them to our lovely senpai over there and the dominant faction of the Integration Entity. Why don't you try asking Nagato-san? If she agrees to it, why, I might even be able to come back from Canada."

I'll pass. I don't see much hope of getting Haruhi to accept a development like that, after all. You just enjoy your little excursion.

"Really? That's a pity."

Once again giving her usual rippling laugh, Asakura went on.

"Well, I'm afraid it's about time for my temporary deployment to come to an end. Call me again any time. I'll be ready and waiting. As long as Little Miss Scary over there doesn't step in to intervene, of course."

Not having any recollection of having called her in the first place, I stayed silent. Asakura's voice moved even closer.

"Nagato-san and I are like reflections in a mirror. Can you understand that? I'm much more akin to Nagato-san than Kimidori-san is. The Interface you're looking at right now won't lift a finger to help you. Her job is, after all, merely to observe."

I could feel a warm breath against the back of my ear.

"Why don't you turn around, hmm? Can we not at least say our goodbyes face-to-face?"

Like hell I'm going to do that. What if I turned around and saw you standing there with that ordinary class-rep smile you always used to wear? It might wipe the fear clean out of my mind. I

might be taken in by that friendly smile you always did so well. As far as I'm concerned, you and Kuyou aren't all that different.

"You really are so awfully rude. Very well... goodbye, then. Until we meet again."

Even after her voice died down and her presence vanished, I was still reluctant to move a muscle. It had become a test of endurance.

Kimidori-san, too, stood watching me without saying a word. I noticed the skirt of her uniform begin to flutter in the wind, and as soon as I did, the sound of the crossing bells started up again, and I jumped about five millimetres off the ground. The red signal lights flashed, and the gates came down. The clouds in the distance drifted on by, and the crow flew off to find its nest.

All the sounds of the city were back. Time was on the move once more.

Kimidori-san began softly walking in my direction, and came to a halt facing me at the perfect distance. I wondered whether she was going to give me some kind of explanation, but no matter how I waited, her lips didn't move from that constant Student Council Secretary smile.

"Kimidori-san."

"Yes."

"That girl... That Kuyou girl... what exactly is she? I can't make sense of her at all. There's no rhyme or reason in the things she does and says. Is that because she's not human?"

"The principles governing the Canopy Domain are beyond comprehension. We have yet to even reach a conclusion as to whether they have an autonomous consciousness. We cannot even state for certain that they can be strictly classified as a living being."

The stiffness of her explanation was a little depressing.

.....Right. I see. Well, that would be a problem, wouldn't it. And I have my own problems to deal with. But there's one thing that I have to say now while I have the opportunity.

"Can you at least do something about Nagato's fever?"

"Nagato-san has been assigned a special task. Her task is to establish high-level communication with the Canopy Domain itself."

"Nagato's bedridden. She can't even move. You call that a mission?"

Kimidori-san's face seemed to be smiling at me whilst actually staring off into the distance.

"Her task is to establish a higher level of communication which does not rely upon language. This is a mission which would be fundamentally impossible for a human being to achieve. For the first time, we have established a measure of physical contact with their kind. It may be indirect, but it is a huge development in comparison to the complete mutual comprehension failure that has plagued us in the past. Nagato-san is serving the role of relay between our kind and theirs. Even now, she is actively fulfilling that function. Please watch over her."

"And you think that's an excuse for forcing all this on her?"

It took all the effort I had to keep that sentence from becoming an exclamation. I was staring daggers at Kimidori-san's unconcerned features, serene as Japanese dandelions dancing in the spring breeze.

"Can't you or Asakura do it instead?"

"It was Nagato-san with whom they first established contact. The Interface with the closest proximity to Suzumiya-san. I would consider their choice to be extremely logical."

Her calm, composed responses were making my head really start to hurt.

In other words, you're telling me to just leave her alone? I guess the Data Integration Consciousness really is made up of nothing but worthless assholes. It must have been a proper

miracle that someone like Nagato was sent here and happened to be the first one of you people I met. Hell, if Asakura and Nagato's positions had been reversed, or if it had been Kimidori-san there in the Literature Club, I would never have made it this far. It was all thanks to Nagato. That damn word "interface" can go get lost somewhere around the orbit of Neptune. I'm starting to feel like it wasn't just "an alien" that Haruhi wanted in the SOS Brigade, it was Nagato Yuki herself. Dominant faction, radical faction, I don't care which - either damn one of you try showing yourselves to Haruhi. And let her weigh you up against Nagato. I'm sure Haruhi would have the sense to pick Nagato every time.

"Please forgive me."

Kimidori-san bowed ever-so-properly in my direction.

"There is very little that I am able to do. The limitations imposed upon me prevent any deviation from this course. If you have any other matters to discuss, I will be happy to be of assistance."

As this gentle upperclassman walked past me, she bowed her head once more, before heading off in the direction of the station. I knew full well that there was no point going after her. I could tell too, just about, that these aliens were trying to accomplish something that was beyond my ability to properly understand. But there was one last thing I wanted to say.

"This is the Earth. It isn't some playground for aliens, all right?"

My words disappeared into a gust of the spring breeze, and Kimidori-san had already walked out of sight.

And yet...

"Such a very..... entertaining joke."

I couldn't tell whose words they were. Whether it was Kuyou, Asakura, Kimidori-san, or somebody else entirely, I couldn't decide.

But I have a hard time believing that those words I thought I heard were simply my mind inventing a human voice from the sound of the wind blowing past my ears.

Mobile phones always have the tendency of ringing when you least expect them. This time was no different.

As I dragged my heavy legs up the path towards Nagato's apartment, it was a call from Haruhi that stopped me in my tracks.

"Honestly! Where on Earth have you got to?! Were you lured away by a demon's voice or something?! Mikuru-chan was so surprised when you just ran out like that!"

"Yeah... sorry. I haven't gone that far. I'll be back soon."

"Let's hear a proper reason."

"...Oh, you know. I realised I hadn't brought anything for Nagato. Thought I'd go and buy a can of peaches or something."

"What century are you living in? Make it a basket of fruit. No, actually, there's no need to go all that far, it's not like Yuki's in hospital or anything. Just buy some orange juice. One hundred and twenty percent pure fruit juice."

I'd like to hear where I'm going to find orange juice like that.

"Then a hundred percent will do. And you'd better be back within three minutes. Got that? Over~!"

She hung up on me without any further ado, but I didn't get mad. It was hardly the first time. Right now, Haruhi's one-sided, straight-to-the-point, entirely self-centred way of doing things was just what I needed to stabilise my mind a little. This was how Haruhi was meant to be. If she wasn't, she could hardly hope to serve as the leader of a group as outrageous as the SOS Brigade.

I headed down to the supermarket by the station, and wandered through the aisles as though sleepwalking, purchased the bottle of 100% Californian Orange Juice that Haruhi had specified, and walked in a rather sullen state back to Nagato's apartment building. Reaching the automatic door, I dialled through to Nagato's room, and Haruhi picked up the intercom and let me in.

By the time I got back to Nagato's apartment, I'd overrun Haruhi's time limit by two minutes or so, but our glorious leader made no comment, simply taking the bottle of orange juice from me and passing it straight on to Asahina-san.

"Put this in the fridge. All right, Mikuru-chan?"

"Okay~!"

Used to being ordered about by Haruhi by now, Asahina-san hurried off in the direction of the kitchen. Damn, but that girl is adorable. This is the kind of thing that puts her in my Top 3 People Who Must Be Protected From Harm At All Costs.

"How's Nagato?"

"She opened her eyes for a little while just now, but now she's gone back to sleep. So no going into the bedroom, got that? It's just creepy to stare at people when they're sleeping."

There was an odd look on Haruhi's face, but she stayed silent for a period of four minutes or so before finally coming out with what was bothering her.

"Something like this has happened before, hasn't it? Yuki getting a fever, and all of us having to look after her. It was just a hallucination, but for some reason it all still seems so real..."

That would be because it was. The "shared hallucination" explanation was just a piece of bull that Koizumi pulled out of his ass. Not that I could explain that to Haruhi, so I kept my mouth shut.

Almost as though praying for something, Haruhi went on.

"It's just like back then, right? Once we got back to Tsuruya-san's villa, Yuki got better in no time. It was just a nasty reaction to the cold up on the slopes. It's the beginning of spring now, and they do say that the turning points between seasons are the easiest times to get a little poorly. This could just be a kind of hay fever."

It sounded as though she was trying to convince herself.

"Yeah. It won't be anything serious. Give her a few days, and she'll be good as new."

This is the point where I feel like interrupting with an "Oh yeah, says who?" but unfortunately the answer would have to be "me". I envy Koizumi his way with words sometimes. No matter how crazy a situation gets, he always finds some clever excuse to wrap it up all nice and neatly. That's one guy who's going to Hades for sure.

The closed door to the bedroom may as well have been covered in yellow-and-black "Keep Out" tape, so I headed straight through to the living room.

Koizumi was under the kotatsu, and as I came in he glanced over.

"Where did you go?"

"A place as nasty as one of your Sealed Spaces."

"So it would seem."

He rested both elbows onto the kotatsu table.

"I received reports that there were sightings of both Suou Kuyou and Kimidori-san." He indicated the mobile phone lying on the floor beside him. "Only for the briefest of instants, but from the look on your face, I would venture that it was more than just a chance encounter."

"Yeah."

I'm not sure if I even know who's an ally and who's an enemy any more. God knows what all those damn aliens are up to. Kuyou, Asakura, and Kimidori-san may all look human enough, but they're monsters, pure and simple. Sure, some humans can come out with the craziest of stuff from time to time, but at least you can work out the reasoning behind it. Nobody knows what goes on in a monster's mind. The stuff they do comes so far out of left-field, it feels like they're NPCs in some badly-scripted RPG. And it doesn't help that their stats are broken as all hell.

"Is there really nothing we can do?"

"Oh, I assure you I will do everything in my power. Who knows what I may find if I provoke Tachibana Kyouko in the right ways, but I'm afraid prospects don't seem high as things stand. I don't believe there is any connection between her faction and Nagato's current condition. Tachibana Kyouko and her associates have chosen the wrong person to ally themselves with. Suou Kuyou is not someone who will respond to reason. It is ridiculous for humans to hope to understand an entity beyond the comprehension of even the Integration Consciousness."

Then what about the time-travellers? That annoying asshole Fujiwara didn't seem to be *afraid* of Kuyou, at the very least. Ugh, I can't believe I'm thinking of turning to *him* for help. We don't know what the hell his agenda is, either.

"Yes, it seems clear enough that his objective is not a simple case of observing Suzumiya-san. In fact, I could say that of both factions of time-travellers. Though I doubt our own Asahina-san has been made aware of that particular fact."

Koizumi's eyes shifted over to one side, settling upon Asahina-san, who was attending to the washing-up in the kitchen. Haruhi was with her, as well, making herself as busy as ever, pouring the contents of the soup-pot into containers, packing away the leftover ingredients and so on.

"Right, I've decided. Until Yuki gets better, I'm coming here every day to make her dinner. I don't care what anybody else says. Even if Yuki herself tells me not to, I'm still coming."

It was an unnecessarily loud pronouncement, considering Haruhi was only talking to herself, but she sought approval from no-one.

You really are the most self-centred girl in the galaxy. And I hope you never change.

After digging out a spare key from Lord-knows-where, Haruhi closed and locked the door to Nagato's apartment, and slipped the key into her skirt pocket like a fragment of gold dust. Having left Room 708 and the sleeping Nagato behind, we decided to go our separate ways after leaving the apartment building.

"The SOS Brigade won't be meeting for a while, all right?"

Looking back up at the apartment we had just left, there was irritation in Haruhi's eyes under the fading twilight.

"Until Yuki comes back to school, nobody needs to go to the clubroom. We come here instead. To Yuki's. Mikuru-chan, I'll be needing your help again tomorrow."

"O - Of course!"

I almost shed a tear at the sight of Asahina-san nodding with such meekness and sincerity. Damn.

It looked like Haruhi and Asahina-san were fully determined to take up the task of looking after Nagato in the days to come. For once, there were no excuses from Haruhi about how this was her duty as Brigade Chief. She knew this wasn't the time.

And I knew there was something that I could do, as well. No, something that *only* I could do.

I had to get back home as fast as I could, and get in contact with a certain individual.

The only one of our new group of acquaintances whose telephone number I actually knew.

"Sorry I took so long to respond, Kyon. I was in the middle of a cram school session, so my mobile phone was turned off. I got your message. Tomorrow evening, after school hours, yes? I don't have cram school tomorrow, so I suppose I can be at Kitaguchi Station by about half past four. Of course, I'll pass the message on to the other three as well. I'd be willing to bet that they'll all be happy to come. I think they may have been waiting for you to get in contact with me. Kyon, you seem to be rather worked up, but I would suggest you try to calm down before tomorrow afternoon. It could well be the case that this reaction of yours is a part of whatever they're planning. Not that I'd know anything about it, you understand. It's just that that's what I would do if I was in their position. Well then, see you tomorrow. Good night.

- Your Friend"

To see what happens next, you'll have to read the full version of "The Astonishment of Suzumiya Haruhi", to be released within the year from Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko. Don't miss it!