

ENCOUNTER AT MIREI HOTEL

“Good afternoon... I’m checking in.”

Namatta looked up from behind the hotel bar which also served as check-in desk. In front of her was a young-ish woman, blonde hair with a bit of a curl, typical brown Kakuri eyes, informal dress and a large, red hardcover suitcase on wheels next to her.

“We’ve been expecting you,” Namatta replied in **Kakuri**¹, “here’s your form to sign under.” She handed over a sheet of paper. The woman looked at it and then gave it back without signing it.

“This one is not mine. Satou Kotomi is my name.”

Now Namatta looked a bit puzzled.

“Then I might have confused you with someone else. **Satou Kotomi**²... You are our new **MP**³?”

“Yes I am...”

“I am sorry about that. I wasn’t expecting someone this... young?”

“I get that all the time.”

“Well... Congratulations on your appointment!”

“Thank you...”

“My name is Oragawa Namatta. I’m running the hotel with my sister Honou. If there is anything you need, just ask. You’re traveling alone?”

“I am...”

“Unusual. We have a suite reserved for you, but we could change it to a room, or if you prefer, I could see if you could share quarters?”

“I have gotten used to staying on my own during the last months, the suite will be fine. I can always change if I have met some of the other residents, I guess?”

“Of course. Here is your key card. Did you have lunch?”

“I had, on my way here.”

“There is always tea and coffee available with something light to eat. How about dinner?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“It’s a perfect opportunity to meet some other residents.”

“Then maybe I should. But tell me... Who did you confuse me with?”

“**Toshi-bu**⁴’s *kotan* is sending a new apprentice. I was told she was a young, blonde Kakuri woman.”

“You were not far off. I’m a Toshi-bu Kotan graduate myself as well.”

¹ Kakuri language: https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Kakuri_languages

² https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Satou_Kotomi

³ Member of parliament: the Kakuri community has a fixed seat in the legislative of Sokoku.

⁴ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Toshi-bu>

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Aya put down her duffel bag to free her hands so she could open the door. She tried to squeeze herself in with the large rucksack still on her back and reached for the bag that was now out of reach.

“Let me help you with that,” a man behind her said in Kakuri with a weird accent. “I can manage,” she insisted. “Fuck...” she uttered right after when she clearly didn’t. The man took a step back and looked at her. A blonde, gray eyed, young woman, almost a girl still, getting crushed by the enormous bags she tried to carry. He recognized the labels on her bag, a short flight from [Mirei](https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Mirei)⁵’s main island to [Kyusigai](https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Kyusigai)⁶, [Sokoku](https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Sokoku)⁷’s capital.

“Excuse me for saying this,” he said “You look cute, but you sound like a punk.” “Thank you,” she replied to his surprise. “That’s the style I’m going for.” She put down the backpack, dragged in the duffel bag and then closed the door behind her. “Now I’m fucking ready for this,” she said. “Are you... managing the hotel?”

“No, I’m not. Namatta is. She’s behind the counter in the restaurant. You can leave the bags here.”

Aya hesitated a while.

“It’s OK. You can trust me.

“How do I know?”

“I am your MP, Tsunsu Suen... and you are?”

“You must be Aya,” the short woman now approaching the front door yelled from behind.

“Matsunoki Ayaka,” the girl replied, “nice to meet you...”

“Welcome to [Exemplar Mirei](https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Exemplar_Mirei)⁸’s Hotel in Kyusigai, honey,” Namatta continued. “Had a pleasant flight?”

Aya remained quiet.

“First time, eh,” Suen re-entered the conversation. Aya nodded.

“Kumo!” Namatta yelled through the corridor. “Kumo, come over here and help the new girl.”

A tall young man with long curly hair entered.

“New girl? She’s older than I am... Hi, I’m...”

“Kumo,” Aya said, “I know... I know who you are...”

“Have we met before?”

“No, it’s not that. I don’t think so anyway. But we could have. I’m from Toshi-bu Kotan. You went to...”

“[Nushuradawa](https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Nushuradawa)⁹.”

“And you were chosen at a young age to continue your studies here,” Aya continued.

⁵ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Mirei>

⁶ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Kyusigai>

⁷ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Sokoku>

⁸ https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Chika_Mirei

⁹ Nushuradawa is the second Kakuri settlement on Carls Island or Kakurijima, previously known as Ny Skiöldavik.

“You have done some homework.”

“A bit.”

“Then you also know Ando.”

“I know about him.”

“And Miki...”

Aya nodded once again.

“Welcome to the band then,” Kumo concluded.

“I’m so fucking looking forward to this,” Aya replied.

“So you’re the new vocalist?” Suen asked.

“She will be sharing quarters with Miki,” Namatta added.

“Who will be the fifth?”

“We don’t know yet. Could be an extra guitarist, could be a keyboardist. We leave that up to *Miseru-ne*¹⁰.”

“The wondrous ways of *Miseru-ne*... You Kakuri never stop to amaze me,” Suen said.

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“There will be a lot of new names for you,” Namatta told Aya when she escorted her into the restaurant. They walked up to a table of six, where two men and three women were sitting.

“May I introduce Aya to you?” Namatta asked the company. All five of them got up.

“This is *Murasaki Yu*¹¹, our *Guso*¹² liaison,” Namatta explained. Yu was only a bit taller than Namatta, but had the longest, pitch black hair Aya had ever seen. It was cut in three lengths, a typical hairdo for higher *Guso* clergy.

“Qi is her assistant”, Namatta continued, pointing at the woman trying to hide herself a bit behind Yu. She seemed to be teasing Aya, not wanting to show herself.

“Then we have *secretary-general*¹³ Hiroto,” she continued.

“Call me Jun, Aya-san,” he took over. Hiroto Jun was around 60 years old, balding and wearing glasses.

“Tsunsu Suen you have already met. He is one of the members of parliament representing Mirei. And with him is his... ehm... assistant Minami.”

“Come,” Minami said, “sit yourself next to us. We’re having rice salad today. You’ll be joining us.”

It wasn’t really an invitation. It was more like an order. That was Minami’s style, as an ex-military, the red-haired Kakuri woman was not only Suen’s assistant, but also his security arrangement.

“It’s really nice to meet all of you. I have heard about this place and the people living here. I still can’t believe I’m actually here.”

“It came a bit sudden?” Yu asked.

¹⁰ *Miseru-ne* is the four headed leadership of the Kakuri community.

¹¹ https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Murasaki_Yu

¹² <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Guso>

¹³ A secretary-general is a member of the executive cabinet of the federal government.

“You can say that again. Two days ago I was still performing with my birth blade¹⁴’s group *Kuratta*. Then our blade elder came in, told us they would find a suitable place in Toshi-bu’s society for us. All the other girls went to other groups. But *Miseru-ne* had different plans for me.”

“It’s not only *Miseru-ne* that has some plans with you,” Yu added mysteriously. At that moment, Kotomi entered the room. She recognized some people at the table and walked up to them.

“Secretary-general, representative, nice to see you. And Aya...”

Aya looked up, surprised.

“Have we met?”

“We’re doing so now. Namatte-san mixed up two Kakuri blondes while checking me in. She tried to get me to sign your arrival form. I’m a Toshi-bu Kotan graduate myself, about 10 years ago.”

“Nice to meet you. And you are...”

“Satou Kotomi, new MP for Mirei. Together with Suen¹⁵.”

“Konishi Minami, I come with the MP,” she said while shaking hands.

“Murasaki Yu, and this is my sister Qi...”

Namatte arrived with an extra chair, while Honou started distributing the rice salads.

“Three beers and two white wines, I assume?” Honou asked. She assumed right. “And what are our new residents having?”

“Do you have wheat beer?” Aya asked.

“Good choice,” Suen replied before Honou could, “I am joining her.”

“Just some fresh fruit juice for me, thank you,” Kotomi added. “Do you often eat together?”

“We all have busy schedules,” Jun replied, “but if we end up here at the same time, we sit around the same table. That includes the band, Aya-san. Sometimes even Namatta or Honou, and Yodan of course.”

“You’re forgetting your wife,” Suen interrupted.

“There’s about 15 or so regulars over here, people living here as good as permanently. This is our home. We can cook and eat in our suites as well, and sometimes we do so. But this is our bit of Mirei right in the middle of Kyusigai.”

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It was a slow evening at the hotel. The residents had spread out a bit in smaller groups. Aya was sitting with Yu and Namatta, while Kumo was chatting with Honou and Qi. Suen, Minami and Kotomi had not left the table at all.

“You’re only setting up quarters, I guess,” Suen asked Kotomi. But she became a bit evasive. “I mean, the boys will come over, won’t they?” he tried again.

¹⁴ A birth blade is an object linked to Kakuri culture, used to cut umbilical cords at birth and then getting engraved with the newborn’s name. The blade represents a generation from a certain area (street) i Toshi-bu.

¹⁵ Tsunsu Suen occupies a different community’s fixed seat in parliament, that of the descendants of Fisks: <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Nubugaru>. His name is Kakurified from Sven Tömse.

“They will come over, every now and then. But they stay in Mirei, with their father.”
“There are good schools here, so I’ve been told.”
“It’s not the schools... Well, maybe it is... The thing is... Kenji has always been very supportive of my career. Until I got this appointment. He... does not like it that he has a lower status than I have now.”

Suen looked at Minami quickly.

“You’re... separating?”

“We’re getting divorced, yes. I will be back with the boys about every other week, if work allows for it.”

“So... You’re alone?” Minami now entered the conversation. Kotomi remained quiet.

“We can’t have that. Suen is from a long [Orkanan](#)¹⁶ bloodline. I have my roots at Midori of the [Nokumo Nobono](#)¹⁷. You can not wake up alone. You’ll have to use our suite.”

“Thank you for the offer. But I don’t want to impose myself. Those suites aren’t that big.”

Now Minami glanced at Suen again. He nodded almost unnoticeable.

“We have plenty of room,” Minami continued. “We have two large bedrooms.”

“Thanks for the offer, Minami-san, but I can’t share with my colleague’s assistant.”

“We’re only using one,” Suen added.

Kotomi leaned back. “Wait...” she said slowly. “But you’re on his playlist?”

“That as well,” Minami added, “it kind of... happened? We started with separate bedrooms, but then you still wake up on your own. So then we moved two singles into the largest room. Conversations got a bit more... personal... Now we have king size and Namatta is complaining about the amount of bed sheets we’re using.”

“Ah... too many details.”

“That single is still in our room. The other one is in the other bedroom. It’s un-orkanan and un-kakuri to wake up on your own.”

“I’m not Orkanan,” Kotomi resisted.

“But you are a Kakuri.”

That could not be denied.

At the other table, Yu was unfolding a different plan.

“It’s not official yet. And probably it is Jun-san or Tera-sama who should tell you this. But I hope you’re a quick learner, Aya. We will need the band quickly.”

“I am bringing our blade’s song material, so I hope Kumo, Ando and Miki are quick learners as well.”

“How are you on the classics? Lock on, Afterlife rulers, Slaughter beach...”

“My style mainly fits the quick songs.”

“Where we’re going, you would be needing the slow grooves as well.”

“So where are we going?”

¹⁶ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Orkanan>

¹⁷ https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Nokumo_Nobono

“This place is called Hotel X Mirei, with the X of [exemplar](#)¹⁸. However, Mirei has only been registered at Blåkulla. We’re going to need to register her biography at one of the other Kulla’s.”

“But... Don’t get me wrong... You’re a Guso soulkeeper? That’s a different religion.”

“It’s the religion of Mirei’s father, and don’t forget her mother was in Blåkulla Stift as well. I was trained by Mirei’s soulkeeper. We have a bond. This must be done.”

“So, we’re going to [Vittmark](#)¹⁹?”

“On official business, yes. A date has already been set. We’re only waiting for one of the three registries to reply. I’m hoping for Grönkulla, they have great beer over there, so I’ve been told. But any of the registries will do. And we will need a band. The band *Misure-ne* wants to show there.”

“We’re all Kakuri,” Aya concluded. “Who’s representing the others?”

“The ambassador is Orkanan. And you haven’t met Oberye Yodan yet, but he’s Anarian as well. Oberye, as in Åberg. He’s your tour manager.”

Then Jun interrupted the conversation.

“Time to go,” he said.

“Where are we going?” Aya asked.

“Livehouse...”

“Ah, cool, live music! I’ve been looking forward to Kyusigai’s live music scene.”

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The livehouse was only four blocks away, a ten minute walk through the bustling streets of Sokoku’s capital. A lot of people were walking around, even if it was past 21:00 (9 PM). Some of them were using kickbikes, some others bicycles, but hardly any cars, beside the food trucks.

The group entered a small restaurant called “Karang”, walked right through it and ended up in an octagonal performance hall. Aya guessed the capacity at around 400 people, but it was completely empty.

“Who will be playing?” she asked.

The entire company stopped walking and turned towards Aya.

“They haven’t told you?” Hiroto replied with a question of his own.

Aya shook her head.

“Good. They weren’t supposed to. It’s you...”

“What?”

“You will be on stage tonight. In 45 minutes, we open those doors, a crowd expecting some live performance will walk in and you will entertain them. It’s a test of fire... Everybody wants to see what you’re made of.”

“I see...” was the only reply Aya had. “But I don’t have my backing track tapes.”

¹⁸ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Exemplar>

¹⁹ <https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Vittmark>

Then a Stoldavian looking man, long hair and trendy glasses walked in.

"I have them right over here. Yodan is my name. You must be Aya."

She nodded.

"Well, let's sort them then."

Aya went over to the sound engineer's table and opened the bag Yodan had brought along. All the tracks of her former group's songs were in it, on small cassette tapes each containing one song. She started sorting them and added some paper pieces between them, indicating she wanted a pause right there. The sound engineer put the first tape in the cassette player and drew up the volume. Then he pointed at a microphone on a stand in the middle of the podium.

"Check the sound, my dear," he added.

Aya walked onto the stage from small side stairs, grabbed the phone and started singing some low "ah"s, slowly increasing the pitch and volume. Then she started singing a line, pointed up with her thumb indicating she wanted more vocals on her monitors, listened a bit more and then yelled "leave the track on!"

She put the microphone back on the stand, climbed off the stage and listened in the center of the livehouse. Then she walked back to the sound engineer, gave him some instructions about dampening the trebles and then walked towards Jun again.

"I'm so fucking ready. Where's my make-up?"

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At exactly 10 PM the doors opened and indeed, a crowd started coming in. About 250 people was Yodan's estimate. He indicated that the light could be lowered and the intro track fired up.

Aya walked from the small backstage area onto the floor, circled the entire venue and then entered the stage from the other side, indicating the audience to start clapping. Then she grabbed the microphone, confirming that she was the person they had been waiting for, took a deep breath and then screamed in **Bahaso**²⁰:

"ARE YOU FUCKING READYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!"

Then the first song kicked in. A bold move to only do her own material, no classics, no Guso chants, just throwing completely new material onto an unsuspecting audience. Yodan however noticed some little timing mistakes here and there, but then again, one of the reasons why Aya had been sent to the Mirei Hotel was to learn.

During the second song she made some bigger mistakes, basically because she was too busy trying to establish contact with her new audience. Apart from a few people she had met at the hotel, nobody knew her, and hardly anybody had heard her material before.

²⁰ Bahaso, short for Bahasa Sokoku, is Sokoku's official language.
https://gothandawn.com/w/index.php/Bahasa_Sokoku

Suen was one of the exceptions. He had been updated as the people's representative about the new vocalist for the continuous Mirei cultural project in the capital. He also had noticed the small mistakes, but could see that no one in the audience really minded. Until she messed up the timing completely at the end of the third song. Well, you can't be at your best every day and it has been a long and eventful one for her, he thought to himself.

But at the start of the fourth song, she started in the wrong key. Suen could see the panic in her eyes when she noticed, as soon as the guitar part kicked in. Then she did something he had never seen before.

"Stop, stop, stop," she yelled in Kakuri, then continued in Bahaso, "wait, wait, just stop for a while..."

The backing track faded out quickly. She looked across the audience, or actually just above it, towards a fixed point somewhere behind the sound engineer's table. For what looked like an eternity, but probably was not more than 10 or 15 seconds, she stood there motionless, staring without blinking, only breathing very heavily from the efforts of the previous songs. Then she looked down, grabbed her water bottle, took a few sips, put it down again and assumed the exact same position.

Suen was worried that she would break and start crying. You only have one chance to make a first impression and she was this close to messing it up. Or maybe she already had. He put up both his fists across his chest, hoping she would get her act together again.

"You know," she suddenly said in Kakuri, almost whispering, "this is my first time outside Mirei. I have never been anywhere else. Haven't seen more from this city than the bus ride from the airport and the walk from Mirei Hotel. I am so thankful you are coming to see me. You don't know who I am. Still you are here. You deserve better than this. Please give me a moment..."

She took another sip from her bottle, gazing above the audience for a short time. Then with a short nod, she tried to signal the sound engineer to start the tape again, hoping he had been so pro-active and rewind it.

He had. This time she nailed the intro and the accompanying high note. Slowly but surely, Suen had lifted his fists from chest height to fully raised above his head. And from then on, she continued as if nothing had happened.

She managed to get the audience clapping at the right parts, also indicating where to stop with a firm hand move, almost like the conductor of an orchestra communicating with his people. She got the audience involved in chanting and singing to songs that were completely new to them and finally she pulled off some synchronized dance moves with the audience responding. The last couple of songs were in pure party mode with Aya now finally in her zone.

Even though the audience yelled for an encore, she was too exhausted to do so. Her almost failure at the beginning had cost her so much mental energy, as well as her compensating during the second half of the concert. There simply wasn't anything left in the frail girl.

“By my ancestors,” Minami turned towards Suen, “what a whirlwind of energy, I don’t think I have ever seen anything like that.”

“Me neither,” Suen replied, but partially for a different reason. Ending a song and starting it again was pretty much not done in the Sokokan music scene, and especially not within Kakuri culture. She could get in serious trouble because of it.

Yodan had a different task in the meantime. He had rushed from the sound engineer’s table towards the backstage area, not knowing in what condition he would find the new Kakuri musical apprentice he had only met an hour or so ago.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” she started apologizing right away.

“How are you feeling?”

“What?”

“How are *you* doing?”

Aya remained quiet.

“The audience loved it,” Yodan continued, “but I want to know how you are doing. That was a tough one.”

She laughed nervously.

“I don’t know what happened...”

“You don’t have to. It happened. Did you see the audience at the end?”

Aya nodded.

“What were they feeling?”

She didn’t really have an answer.

“You had them wrapped around your finger. Just make sure you drink a lot now, then we’ll see how many people are left in 5 or 10 minutes or so.”

“What?”

“It’s custom over here. People will be waiting to get a glimpse of the artist once more, if they enjoyed the show. Could be 25, could be 50, sometimes 100.”

“No one will be there. But that’s OK. Over here I start from zero. I think I literally did.”

“I think you’re wrong. There will be people there, and if you would ask them to cut off their left arm and cook it because you’re hungry, some of them will.”

Aya started laughing. Yodan could see the tension releasing from her shoulders.

“Thank you for your kind words, Yodan-san. But I think I don’t have to start unpacking.

Miseru-ne won’t like this at all.”

“Fuck them. They’re not here. I thought you would start crying and run from that stage. You didn’t. You’re strong.”

“Suen...” she said in a soft voice.

“What?”

“His name is Suen, right? The MP? He was rooting for me. Noticed him from the corner of my eye. Then I could switch off, start over... One person believed in me, even if I don’t deserve that.”

“I am sure he will be here, waiting for you after the gig. Shall we take a look?”

Somebody knocked on the door of Suen's suite. He was kind of curious to see who it was, at this time of the day. Or night, to be more exact. He opened the door and looked at the back of the head of Aya, still in her stage costume.

"Can I come in," she asked, still more looking around her than at Suen.

"You're lucky we're still up," he replied, opening the door completely. "Come on in."

She followed him through the hallway into the kitchen, where Minami and Kotomi were sitting on the couch, both with a beer bottle in their hands.

"Oh, sorry," Aya stuttered, "I didn't know..."

But Suen had opened the fridge and took out a wheat beer.

"Think fast," he said and at the same moment he tossed it towards Aya, who caught it a bit clumsily, but in the end she got a firm grip.

"Please, sit down," he urged her while getting the bottle opener from a drawer.

She put the bottle to her mouth and emptied half of it in one go, then she put it on the table with a victorious smile on her face.

"Ooh, thanks, I needed that."

"You deserve it..."

"Not so sure about that."

"Of course you did," Kotomi now entered the conversation.

"You're too nice," Aya replied. "I just wanted to thank Suen-san for tonight."

"So... what has he done this time," Minami added in a faked worrisome voice.

"I wanted to put back that microphone, leave the podium, crawl into a corner and die," Aya confessed. "But I noticed Suen-san. He yelled 'you got this'..."

"I didn't say a word..."

"I clearly heard you. Noticed you when I tried to find my focus, my concentration again.

Clenched fists, gaze of anticipation, and a clear message."

"It was dead quiet, my girl," Minami said.

"I heard him," Aya insisted.

"Are you a soul keeper?" Kotomi asked.

"They tested me, but were a bit inconclusive."

"I think you could be a soul keeper. Your aura on stage, the way you transfer your energy, make contact while performing."

"I don't know..."

"But I know!" Kotomi insisted.

"But how?" Aya asked.

"I didn't want to tell you this, but I'm a retired soul keeper. They were inconclusive about me as well, but since there was no one else in my year yet, I was accepted."

"Really?" Suen wondered.

"Which group..." Minami wanted to know.

"*Aki Arin*, A Kaiten congregation. I had a different name back then. I still have for the souls I keep. You know the sentiments about soul keepers and politics."

The Kakuri community had been governed by single soul keepers instead of groups two times in history and they weren't the brightest pages in the book. During those episodes, the soul keepers used their charisma in a manipulative way. Since then, the combination of soul keeper and politics had been infected.

"So I recognize a soul keeper when I see one," Kotomi continued.

"Really..." This time it was Minami who interjected, but in a more sarcastic tone. "So you say there's a soul keeper in this room."

Kotomi didn't know what to think about the remark.

"But if I am a soul keeper, then I have to keep Suen's soul?" Aya asked.

"You wish, girl," Minami interrupted once more. "His soul is mine."

"Oh no, I don't mean that. Purely spiritual... hypothetically."

"That's mine as well. Mebe, *Tanoshi* congregation."

"Oh..." Kotomi said in an elongated way, before she started laughing. "Now I see."

"Isn't that unethical?" Aya asked.

"It is." Minami replied. "But it happened after I quit."

"You?" Aya asked Kotomi. But she didn't reply directly.

"You know that in the *A Kaiten* congregation, we don't believe in a single connection between a soul and its keeper. A soul keeper can have 20 souls and still be good, or a soul could have more keepers. Come join us!"

Minami laughed.

"You started late with performing?" she asked Aya, in order to keep the conversation going.

"When I was 18. Then they had enough soul keepers from my year."

"I started at 13, I was the first in my year," Kotomi added. "I think Guso lost a really good soul keeper in you, Aya."

"Funny to see two soul keepers discussing my soul, while I'm actually Orkanan," Suen now intervened. "But I think you're not lost to Guso. I noticed Murasaki Yu having a little chat with you. She has plans."

"Anyway, thanks for the beer," Aya said, "I have to get some sleep now. Always tough in a new place."

"But Miki is not here," Minami said, "who are you sharing quarters with?"

"Nobody..."

"That's not going to happen. We didn't allow Kotomi to sleep alone, she's using our other room. There's a futon there as well. I insist you use it."

"But I still need to shower..."

"It's the same water, and we have towels. Come, follow me," Minami ordered her.

"So where is Miki?" Kotomi asked Suen while the other two were heading to the bathroom.

"Back home, spending time with her blade and family. She had an audit with *Miseru-ne*.

Passed with flying figures."

"Have you seen Aya," Yodan asked Suen at the breakfast table. "Her room is empty. I'm worried."

"I'm not," Suen answered. "She will show up soon."

At exactly that moment, Kotomi and Aya entered the restaurant and sat themselves with Suen and Minami.

"Good morning," Aya greeted them all.

"Slept well?"

"Bit short. Woke up really early. Tried to catch some more sleep. It didn't happen."

"Then it's a good thing you were not alone," Yodan continued, "thank you, Sato-san."

"Ah, yes... no worries..." Kotomi laughed.

"I just picked up Miki at the airport. I want the two of you to meet of course. See us after breakfast in the rehearsal room in the basement. Tera of *Miseru-ne* will be with us on the phone."

Aya sat quiet after Yodan had left. She got some breakfast from the buffet, including coffee, and ate in silence while the others were chatting along. Minami noticed.

"What's bothering you?"

She still didn't say a word.

"It's yesterday evening, isn't it..." Minami continued. Aya wanted to nod, but didn't.

"What were you thinking up there on that stage, with nearly 300 people staring at you?"

"Don't remember," she half whispered. "I don't even remember what I said. But in the end, I thought, if this is going to be my only gig in town, I'm gonna fucking enjoy it. And so will everybody else. Now it's time to face the consequences..."

"It's called a test of fire for a reason. You got burned, but you pulled through. That's what counts."

"I don't know..."

Then Suen put out his right hand, as if he was saying goodbye.

"Well, it's been a pleasure. Maybe we will meet again. I'm looking forward to see someone coming through that door and the first thing she says to me is 'fuck'..."

He then pulled her hand towards him, let go of it half and readjusted, as if he was preparing for a hand kiss.

"Where is that girl that waltzed in here yesterday? She's sitting right in front of me, but at the same time she isn't. Shake it off, girl... Let it go... We all fall flat on our faces sometimes. You didn't even fall, you pulled the emergency brake. But then we say 'fuck', get up again and get going. So, say after me..."

"Ehm..." Aya hesitated, "fuck?"

"Say it like you mean it."

"Fuck... Fuck! FUCK!!"

"Now get that bony ass of yours down the stairs, meet your band mates and get working."

Aya got up, walked towards the door and only briefly glimpsed back before closing the door behind her.

"Oh...Kay..." Minami concluded, "that was odd, even by our standards."

-O-O-O-

Aya walked into the basement rehearsal room through the opened door. She almost immediately bumped into a tall girl, long black hair and glasses.

"You must be Aya," she said.

"Yes... So you are Miki?"

"Welcome to Kyusigai. Sorry I missed last night. Family business. Arrived with the morning flight. What did I miss?"

"Her test of fire, of course," Kumo said from behind. He was sitting with a dark red guitar on his lap, but wasn't playing.

"73 people waited after the gig to meet her," he continued.

"You kept track?"

"I always do. Highest number yet, if I'm correct."

"Ah, you're here," Yodan said. "Great timing. I have Tera-sama on the phone. I'll put her on the speakers."

He fumbled with some buttons and then a typical telephone voice, no treble, no bass, came through the speakers.

"Can everybody hear me now?" they heard.

"Yes, Tera-sama," Yodan replied.

"So are we all there?"

"We are, Ando, Miki, Kumo and Aya are sitting right here."

"Good morning, Tera-sama," they all said at the same time, but not synchronized.

"This will need some work," Tera replied laughing. "Listen, I'm not going to take much of your time and come to the point right away. There are going to be some changes."

Aya dropped her head down, staring at her shoes, waiting for the inevitable.

"Aya," Tera started. "I've heard good things about your first gig last night. How do you think it went?"

Aya looked up, surprised.

"Good things?"

"Only good things."

"Oh, uhm... Well... I think I can do better. No, I must do better."

"That's why you're in Kyusigai. You were entertaining in *Kuratta*, but the other girls were holding you back. Now it's time to develop that full potential. So... bear with me... these are the changes we want to see. From now on, Aya is in charge. She can write the lyrics, or decide who does so. She can pick the songs. The set list. The stage clothing, she does some cool designs... From now on, you're Aya's band. Does anyone have a problem with that?"

Aya was just looking surprised around her.

"I thought Yodan was in charge."

He started to laugh. "I have never been in charge. I'm your assistant. I'm managing stuff that needs to be done. But I never plot the course or take artistic decisions. It never has been my job. But now it's yours."

“She’s that good?” Miki wanted to know.

“What did we call you when we sent you to Kyusigai,” Tera replied over the phone with a question.

“A rough, unpolished diamond,” Miki replied.

“Aya is at least half polished.”

“You should have seen her yesterday,” Ando added.

“You’ll be seeing a lot of her,” Tera interrupted, “or is that a problem for you?”

“Oh no,” Miki replied, “not at all...”

“Good. You all have the choice if you want to continue or not. But we think you’re the right team for this. Although one bit is missing. Aya... guitar or keyboards?”

“What?”

“For the band, what would you need? An extra guitarist or someone on keyboard. Maybe a backing vocalist... You decide.”

“Ehm... can I think about that? I want to get to know Kumo, Miki and Ando first.”

“Perfect. But if you had to choose right away? Anyone more on stage with you? From your blade, or another performing group...”

Aya looked around. Everybody was anticipating an answer.

“Can Yodan be on stage? We’ll always have a backing tape with extra vocals, or extra guitar, or extra synths. I would like the person responsible for the backing tapes to be on stage with us, be a part of the group...”

“I’m not Kakuri,” Yodan objected.

“It’s a temporary thing,” Tera said over the phone. “If that’s what makes Aya happy at this moment, you can try. Any more questions?”

Kumo reached up his hand, which Tera couldn’t see of course.

“Kumo wants to say something,” Aya enlightened since Yodan still was wondering what just had happened.

“Go ahead...”

“Yu told us something about going abroad?”

“Ah... you can send the Guso wayhand all the way to Kyusigai and still she will cause trouble. OK then. We’ve had a request for you to appear at Exemplar Mirei’s registration in Vittmark in two months’ time. Or less than two months. I’ll send over the dates and details. I just want to ask Aya one thing. Are you fucking ready?”

Aya laughed.

“Not yet. But we will be in less than two months.”

“Good, that’s all. We’ll be hearing from you.”

Without waiting for a further response, Tera had ended the call.

“You didn’t tell her about yesterday?” Aya immediately asked Yodan.

“I told them you won over the audience after a struggle, a fight. Both MP’s and the secretary-general did the same. It wasn’t orchestrated, we all just felt we should only mention you were victorious.”

"Nobody mentioned my disaster?"

"What disaster," Miki wanted to know.

"Yeah, what disaster," Kumo added.

"Disaster?" Ando kept the appearances up.

"You put up a fight and won over a completely new audience, that's the only thing that matters," Yodan said. But Miki wanted to know more.

"Did she... misjudge timing? Hit a false note? Sung in the wrong key? Missed some lyrics? Started singing the wrong lyrics?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes and no," Aya admitted. "And something else."

"And you're the half polished diamond?" Miki wanted to know.

"She was awesome," Kumo came to her rescue, "she overcame all of that and smashed it out of the ballpark. Never seen anything like it. It will be a pleasure working with you."