

PARASITE GIRLS

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black bikini, is seen from behind, painting on a large canvas. She is holding a paintbrush and has paint splatters on her back and legs. The studio is filled with various art supplies, including paint cans, brushes, and a small table with a lamp. The background features a poster of the Statue of Liberty and a painting of a woman. The overall scene is vibrant and artistic.

TORU GATES

1 - Mima's World

"So you need to tell me," Mima said, "just why you're here."

Aidan lit a Gitanes and leaned against the rail. The sounds and smells of Tokyo drifted up to the second floor apartment, but he did not take them in. Instead, he smiled and gazed through the French tobacco smoke at his host.

Mima regarded Aidan through the bangs of her short hair and rimless glasses. She wore an old sweatshirt, the cuffs frayed from years of wear and washing. The logo was not of a university from Japan, but an American one. Black tights wrapped themselves snugly about her muscular thighs and calves; Mima's build was a shade thicker than the norm when it came to Japanese women. That mattered not at all to Aidan and even less to Mima, who danced to the beat of her own internal drum machine.

"Well," Aidan replied as he carefully flicked the cinders into a smokeless ashtray, "I have a layout in mind for the book as we discussed earlier. I also felt a change of pace was in order." He hoped that would be enough.

"Whatever you have in mind," Mima replied as she took a step closer to Aidan, a smile on her face, "you're welcome here for as long you need. I am so grateful to see you again."

"I appreciate that." Mima, he knew was appraising him behind her sun-darkened lenses. They'd not seen one another in years, and his long-lost friend was taking stock: Aidan's brown hair remained, but there were now streaks of grey, far too soon. His blue eyes were the same, but Mima detected the changes around them. Aidan was not himself, and while Mima picked up on that, she didn't ask.

Mima had changed too, but in her these things were subtle. Only months younger than himself, Mima appeared ageless. She was a little heavier, chunkier perhaps than Aidan recalled, but from what he saw pass

through the apartment earlier that morning Mima was in shape in more ways than one.

“Anyway,” she said, “I must get back to work. Got a project to deliver this week.”

“No worries.” Mima ambled barefoot into the main room of her apartment while Aidan took his time with that guilty pleasure from the first Paris assignment. Skyward, Aidan’s eyes passed over the high rises that surrounded Mima’s building.

Aidan had experienced many worlds, but Japan was unfamiliar territory. As in any other foreign land, he would immerse himself in it, become part of it and yet remain Aidan Connor.

His cigarette finished, Aidan carefully stubbed it out and slid the butt inside the blue pack. He stuffed this in the breast pocket of his shirt, switched off the curious device Mima provided him and brought it through the sliding door.

“You can leave that out there,” Mima commented from his right. “The rain never comes in; it’s cool.”

Aidan set the ashtray on the black wire table between the matching chairs, and slid the door closed. He turned and again found himself inside Mima’s world--or was this her universe?

The apartment was small: one room with a cramped kitchen to the far left, plus a door that led to a tinier bathroom. Against the far wall to the right of the door was Mima’s futon, unmade with a nightstand next to it to hold her lamp and clock radio. Before this, a TV rested beside an Xbox with about twenty game discs scattered around the console.

There were also odd gadgets of the kind that could only be dreamed up in this land, including a robotic toy dog. The floor was bare, hardwood and without rugs.

On the other side of the door was Mima’s workspace. Beneath an overhead light was a large table that doubled as a desk and drafting

board. A USB hub, laser printer, scanner, and router linked Mima's Gateway and Toshiba Satellite laptop plus two external hard drives. The power cords for all of these snaked off behind the table into not one, but two surge protection strips. Two file cabinets and a wall-mounted rack for discs made up the rest of Mima's "office." Mima was hunched over on the high stool, focused on the ad design she'd talked of nonstop since meeting Aidan at the airport the night before.

To Aidan's left was the low couch that became his "guest room," beside which lay his open suitcase. His Sony Walkman, jean jacket and the case that held his ancient Minolta camera rested atop the jumbled pile of clothes.

Aidan sat here now and looked at the wall above the bed. Mima adorned the bare white walls with her original artworks, sketches, doujinshi and anime creations. There also was a pair of wildly colored abstract canvases, not of Mima's hand.

"Those are Sora's," Mima commented. She did not look up as she guided the cursor across the screen. "We'll be seeing her tonight," Mima added. "Sora is excited to meet you; I've told her so much about you."

"Okay," Aidan joked as he unclipped the battered leather case that held his camera, "what have you told her?"

"Only the good things." Mima turned and giggled; this and the screwed-up facial expression that accompanied the sound never failed to make Aidan laugh. "There is nothing bad about you, Aidan," she went on as she turned back to the screen, "but considering some of the scrapes you've been in, I imagine you acquired a few habits."

"Yeah." Aidan tried not to let his voice change, but failed.

Mima turned again. "You okay?"

"There's a lot of stuff to talk about," Aidan admitted as he drew out the Minolta, "but I need to piece it together before I can explain."

"No," Mima said, "I'm sorry. I get the idea what happened in Kabul was

pretty rough. You don't have to talk about it unless you want to."

"It's all right," Aidan replied, "I will soon enough. The main reason I'm here I think is to get away from that. Not run from it, mind, but to think about from it from a distance. Then maybe I can go back, you know?"

"I do." Mima slid off the stool and came over to sit beside Aidan. She watched as he broke down the camera for cleaning, and noted the care with which he handled the instrument. "Like I told you," she said, "you're welcome here, Aidan. You were dear to me back then; you still are."

Aidan set the pieces down in his clothes. "You were," he replied, "and are too, Mima. Stuff has to change, and some of it is me; I'm working on it."

Mima slid her arms around Aidan's shoulders. "Take all the time you need, Aidan."

He reached up and felt his friend's thick arm, and the hidden strength within as Mima gave him a squeeze. "Thank you," Aidan said. "I'll try not to be too depressed during my stay; you're good for changing that."

Mima grinned, made an odd but cute, "Nyah" sound before heading back to her table. "I am flattered," she replied as she resumed her work.

"Unfortunately, that does not get this finished. I'd like to see the outline down before we hit the streets. We'll go see Sora this evening and find if we can get her out. That cool?"

"It is." Aidan drew out the camera's cleaning kit. "I'm not exactly sure what you mean by getting Sora 'out,' though."

"That will depend," Mima explained, "on which one of Sora is available when we get there." She continued to sketch across the extra-large mouse pad with a slow, deliberate hand, and said no more.

The statement made Aidan pause. Mima's comment about Sora was a fleeting one and sounded like she said it fairly often.

As he carefully wiped the Minolta's lens, Aidan wondered what was up with Sora. She was a talented artist, easy to see by the depth and originality of those paintings.

Aidan then reminded himself that when it came to people, everyone had a story, and there was always more than what they thought they saw.