Translator's Note:

Translating *Saiyuki*: An Examination of Cultural Preservation in an Expanding Marketplace

By Laura Hashimoto

The artistic literary form of comic books has been subordinated throughout North America from the time in which they were first introduced in the mid-1930s. Seen as a childish, sub-standard, medium, often containing content that exists solely in one of two extremes – overly simple or in need of heavy censoring -- "[c]omic books have been stigmatized [...] and this stigma has affected comic books as well as artists, readers, and fans of comics" (Lopes, 388). This opinion of the form that enforces an oppressive hold over the industry prevented North American comics from expanding into a more adult pop culture phenomenon. However, with the explosion of Japanese pop culture in the North American market, the tide is quickly changing, and *manga* are slowly but surely dissipating the overhanging stigma of their art form.

Manga have never been subjugated to the same disdain as their American counterparts, instead their "...sales of manga continue to dominate Japanese publishing. In 1995, they accounted for 40% of all book and magazine sales in Japan" (Allen and Ingulsrud, 674). While those numbers dropped noticeably in 2009 – sales of manga dropped 6.6% and manga magazines dropped 9.4%[1] – the popularity of the genre continues through manga cafes and libraries. Today, they are actively consumed by readers of all age, gender, and occupation, and as such, are beginning to appeal to similar audiences overseas. In order for this cultural phenomenon to take proper root, however, and for the literary aspect of the form itself to be properly appreciated, the translation of such products must be taken seriously and be treated the way any other piece of literature would be treated.

Several now well known companies have taken up the task, such as TokyoPop, Viz Signature, and, more recently, Yen Press[2]. The majority of their translations remain relatively faithful to the original Japanese content, going so far as to preserve dialect accents in as equivalent a manner as possible. However, there is a noticeable preference towards a "...maintenance or revision of dominant conceptual paradigms..." (Venuti, 19) which often leads to an almost overly domesticated translation. In contrast to this, however, is the flawed world of fan translations, wherein the focus on word-for-word translation can often distort the sense. These problems can result from a desire to stay as close to the original Japanese as possible, from a translation of a translation (ie: the *manga* has been fan translated into Chinese, the Chinese then into English), or from a translator whose first language is not English.

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[1] Source: http://www.nhk.or.jp/ through http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2010-03-17/manga-sales-drop-a-historic-6.6-percent-in-japan-in-2009

[2] Source: http://manga.about.com/od/mangapublishers/Manga_Publishers_US_and_Japan_Manga_Publishing_Companies.htm

It can be said, however, that the effort undertaken here is nothing but a glorified fan translation. While this is true, it must also be noted that the translation was undertaken as an example as well; with no intention for mass distribution or peer-to-peer sharing – as most fan translations are – the focus became more on the text and its importance in the selection as a whole. By approaching the work as a fragment of a literary text, as well as a very visual media, the intention behind this particular translation is the preservation of its 'message' – what the piece says about itself, its culture, and the time in which it was produced – without alienating the foreign reader through iron-clad fidelity.

As Edward Fowler argues in his examination of translation of Japanese fiction, "...we obviously need to concern ourselves with more than just the "aesthetics" or "poetics" of translation in order to understand a non-Western narrative's cultural "value" or literary "worth"..." (Fowler, 3). To the extreme, a translation cannot be focused, then, on simply making the work appeal to the North American audience, or it loses what cultural significance or stance it had in its original form. A proper translation should, instead, find the closest balance possible between the source and target cultures, creating a translation "...both fluent and exact, to make for "vivid and compulsive reading" [...] but also [one that] follow[s] the foreign text more closely" (Venuti, 37). As Bassnett describes them, a meeting between Popovic's textual equivalence – "...where there is equivalence of the syntagmatic structuring of a text" (Bassnett, 32) – and Nida's dynamic translation – wherein a translation should aim to create a similar impact in the target culture as it had within the source culture (Bassnett, 33) – is potentially the most preferable translation, and embodies the approach I attempted in my own work.

In order to demonstrate this combined approach, I chose to re-translate a chapter from the massively popular *manga* series, *Saiyuki: Reload*, published in North America by TokyoPop, in

Japan by ZeroSum Comics. This particular chapter was chosen because of its underlying cultural and social statements. Up until this point in the narrative, the main characters believed themselves to be the sole targets of the antagonistic forces, as well as believing themselves to be the only journeyers. Each protagonist is, in and of himself, a representation of the source-culture – or an expression of repressed desires within the source-culture – and as such, the story had been, until this point, reflective of the social structure in which it was constructed. The introduction of a new character, however, as well as the development of more chaotic aggression, discards all of these ideas, and presents the readers with a now opposing view point. With a characterization of the West – perhaps a statement on the western influence/voice in Japan – interrupting and outstripping the main protagonists, not only is a narrative plot advancement created, but a cultural statement is being made.

Kazuya Minekura's particular rendition of an already popular Chinese legend[3] started off as a *doujinshi* – a fan comic usually published on a smaller market – and quickly grew from there. With her more 'modern' approach, her updated and eye-catching new character designs, and her clever combination of both male and female appealing plot lines, *Saiyuki* and its subsequent sequels and prequels garnered a cult following. From its beginnings in the early 90s, it is a series that has retained its popularity for over a decade, and is still seeing expansion.

Like many of the newer young adult *manga* – a genre known to many as *shonen* in North America – *Saiyuki* is part of the central and ever-growing cultural boom of the industry, both domestically and overseas. Unlike many *manga* in this appropriated genre, however, its story goes above and beyond simple story telling, making use of imagery, metaphor, and character representations that make a statement unto themselves. By representing its own source-culture through a combination of characters, settings, conflicts, and humour, by being aware of itself as a manga – and as a phenomenon – , and by portraying sometimes controversial story lines, *Saiyuki* 'asks' its readers to think, to reflect, and to experience what these things may mean. Thus, in translating this *manga*, companies such as TokyoPop are allowing North American fans to "... reflect on their own (national) culture in displaced form" (Newitz, 3).

Once again, however, this is only accomplished through a translation that fights to maintain something of the source-language's culture and the meaning said culture lent to the work. Done improperly, the importation of *manga* without any of the original cultural suggestions or opinions could lead to “... what critics such as John Fiske or Constance Penley might call "appropriation." That is, they are transforming Japanese culture for their own uses, which are somewhat different from the uses to which it might be put in Japan” (Newitz, 3). Admittedly, some level of appropriation is unavoidable. If a translator were to simply leave all cultural references as they were in their original form, target-language readers would be left feeling alienated, confused, and probably unwilling to continue their reading. A middle-ground must be found, in which source-culture references are maintained in a way in which they can be understood, or, if an equivalent understanding is too difficult to reach, an appropriate substitution with a similar impact/effect must be found.

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[3] Originally published in the 1590s; source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey_to_the_West

Ergo, in my approach to *Saiyuki*, I took into account the cultural statements I believed Minekura to be making, both about her own culture – through the main protagonists – and her interpretation and representation of Western culture – through the introduction of the arrogant and flamboyant interloper. Through my own readings of the English and the Japanese, I attempted to maintain the tone, meaning, and imagery behind her story, understanding the genre's focus on image as opposed to text, while still making the reading accessible and understandable. Where her characters used slang or a particular vernacular, I attempted to find an appropriate English substitute, sometimes agreeing with TokyoPop's translators – Athena and Alethea Nibley – and sometimes questioning why they made the decisions they did. The slang in particular posed a challenge, often times proving difficult to read or translate at all, no doubt one of the things most challenging for any translator working in this particular area. My own attempts, then, are based in the balance Venuti suggests between domestication and foreignization, acknowledging that “...the translator's interpretive choices answer to a domestic cultural situation and so always exceed the foreign text,” (Venuti, 37) and doing my best to work around the cultural pressures I myself am victim to.

In my attempts to maintain the feeling of the Japanese, then, I tried to avoid the overuse of aggressive, vulgar, terminology, aware that the Japanese language itself lacks many of the more strongly worded curses that English possesses. Where I felt the aggression or lack of formality called for it, however, I chose what would be considered 'softer' curses, still displaying the frustration and irritation felt, but avoiding the pitfalls of the overly confrontational English. In one particular case, I felt the published translation was too childish in its word choice – "uglies" – and did opt for the word "bastards" instead.

Another point of translation in which I felt it best to stay as close to the original as possible would then be the small, essentially meaningless, noises that the characters made. Sounds such as "□□" and "□" could be most fluently and concisely translated as "Oh~" and "Eh?". Similarly, it is easiest to translate most laughter as directly as possible, and sounds such as screaming, grunts, or any other strictly phonetic element can be kept as close to their original format as possible. However, where I chose not to translate what many other *manga* publishers do translate, were the sound effects. Like TokyoPop, I agree that the best approach to sound effect translation is the index in the back of the book, in which one can note the page number and the appropriate 'translation' of what the sound was meant to mean or mimic. This decision was made due to the highly graphic nature of *manga*. With such a heavy reliance on image for the advancement of the story, removing/editing the incorporated sound effects could – and often does – disrupt the reading. Also, in having an index as opposed to a footnote, translators are given the opportunity to explain why a particular sound effect is used in the original Japanese context, allowing English readers a more comprehensive cultural understanding of the work.

The only other major point in which my translation differed from that of the English publication's is my attempt at fidelity to the shorter Japanese sentence structure and content. Due to the language's unique differences from English, however, this proved to be something of a challenge. Where a Japanese speaker can forgo the mention of a subject, where what appear to be half sentences can be understood as a whole idea, English speakers can have trouble comprehending direct translations properly. The challenge then became finding the shortest way to express a similar idea, most of which involved being very curt and sometimes excluding contextual support. I did not, at any point, however, sacrifice understanding for the sake of maintaining a similar sentence structure. Where elaboration was required, I did as little as was possible to ensure understanding while retaining the expression's original 'feel'.

Once again, the focus of this translation is in finding a way in which Popovic's textual equivalence and Nida's dynamic translation can come together, hopefully melding a coherent foreignized-domestication (a text which both presents the reader with foreign cultural notions but in a comprehensible and accessible manner). These attempts leads one to question the frequent use of colloquial phrases – such as “Tough cookies, losers” – and the almost startling use of English cussing at most available moments. This is not to say, however, that I feel the English publication's translation is lacking or inferior to my own; I simply wonder why the decisions that were made were made the way they were. As Venuti is already quoted as saying, every translator works in their own ways, making their own interpretations and choices, all of which are influenced by the target language in which they are working. Perhaps the use of informal and slang-like language prompted the translators to lean towards the more aggressive English vocabulary.

That understanding aside, I do believe that this alternate translation had its desired effect. In maintaining word order (at two points, sentences were swapped in the English rendition), phonetics, and sentence structure, this re-translation of *Saiyuki* retained more of the original's meaning. In this particular chapter, the meaning behind a specific character was key, and while not much development was allowed for him outside of a brief introduction, I attempted to maintain his image as an outsider. As one who represents that which is the “other”, in a very colonial sense, to the rest of the cast. My attempts to do as much included the maintenance of his dialect inspired accent, his disdainful tone towards the antagonists, the incredulity towards his appearance first, and the confusion suffered by the main protagonists at his involvement. However, without being able to finish the volume – or go into further chapters yet – I feel much of his characterization (as an amalgamation of Western culture and ideals) is left a touch lacking, despite any effort on my part as a translator.

Nevertheless, I feel that my selection allowed for a brief but detailed view into the concepts Minekura was attempting to portray. I feel that the translation and the approach to this particular chapter of *Saiyuki* maintained the feeling of tension, conflict, and dramatics that its original author intended, while not sacrificing, nor giving too much weight to, the humorous aspect she tinges her story with. I also believe that this translation, unlike that of the English publication's, preserved the dialogue in a more concise and accurate way. Where they chose to translate “□□□□ □□□□□□□□□” as “Looks like our party just got crashed.” (a choice I still don't understand), I opted for a slightly more literal, “What the hell are these guys?”

Through this undertaking, I have come to better appreciate translators and the work they do, while also coming to appreciate the capability of being able to read the original. Quite a bit is both lost and gained through translation (Bassnett, 36), and depending on the translator's personal choices and interpretations, a text can take on an entirely different meaning. With the rising popularity of *manga* in the Western market, then, what can consumers really hope to see? Will these collections of Japanese pop culture be twisted and domesticated to reflect the culture in which they are entering? Or will they be allowed to maintain as much of their original context as possible, drawing North American readers into a point of view otherwise unobtainable to them?

While I sincerely hope – and strove for in my own work – the latter, it will always come down to the publisher's decision. The translation of any book, in the end, is the translation of a commercial good. While TokyoPop has done that well, has cornered much of the market in doing so, there is still a sense of over-domestication in their work, and a shift otherwise ought to be encouraged. Through this translation, it is clear that the work can still be understood, can still be portrayed, and can still retain some of its original sense; many of the decisions made by the publishers were unnecessary.

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From *Saiyuki Reload* by Kazuya Minekura

Translated by Laura Hashimoto[4]

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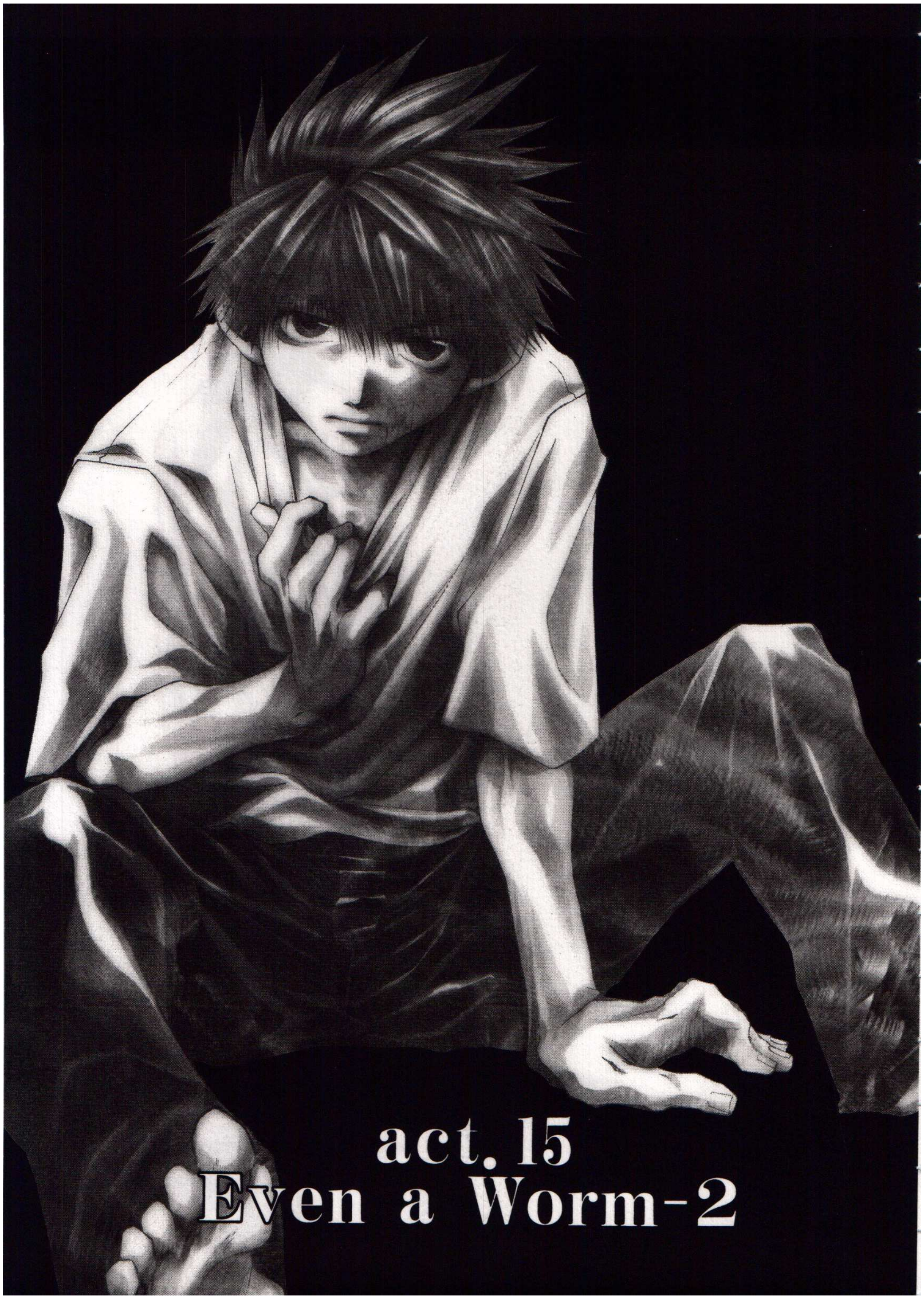
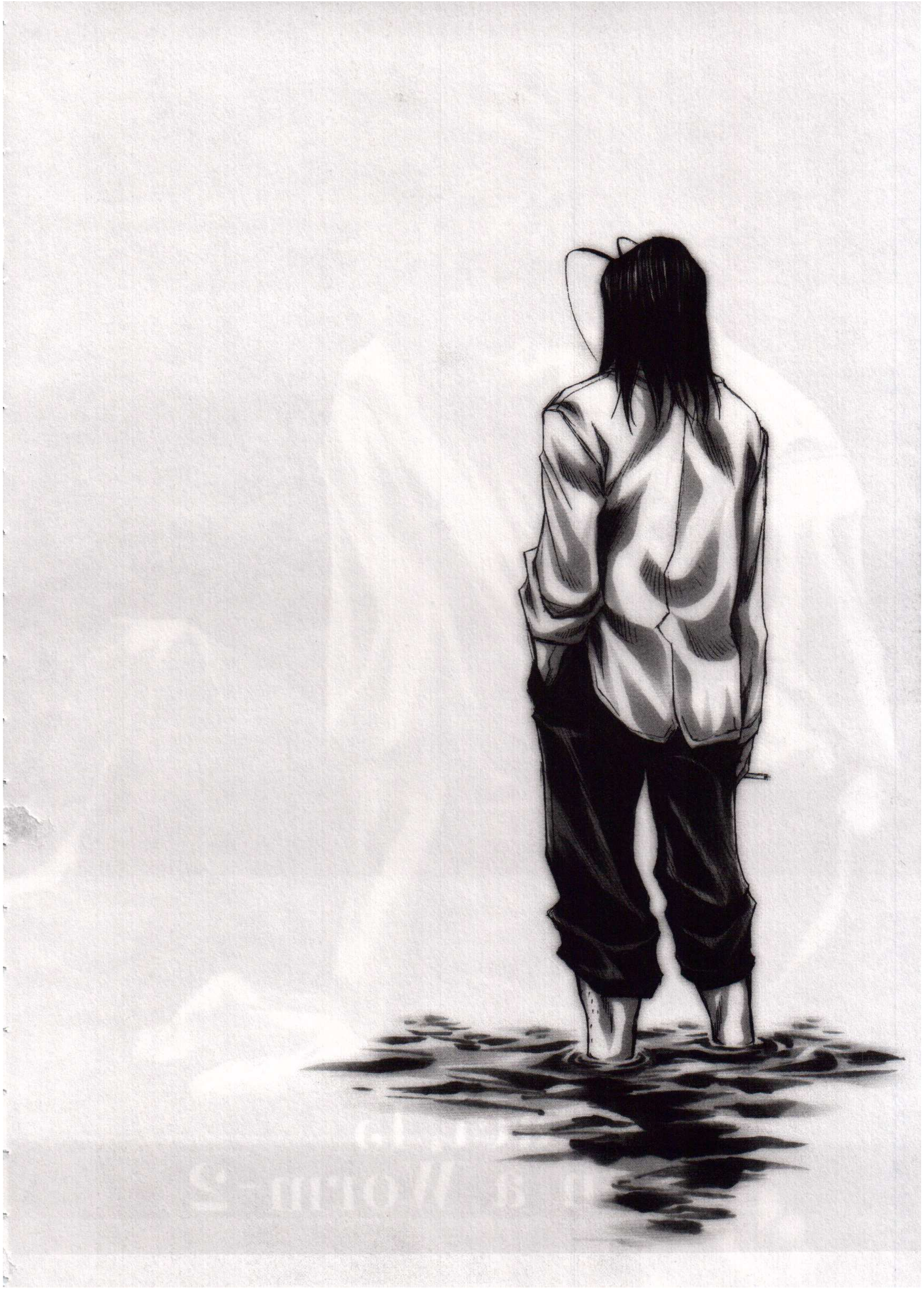
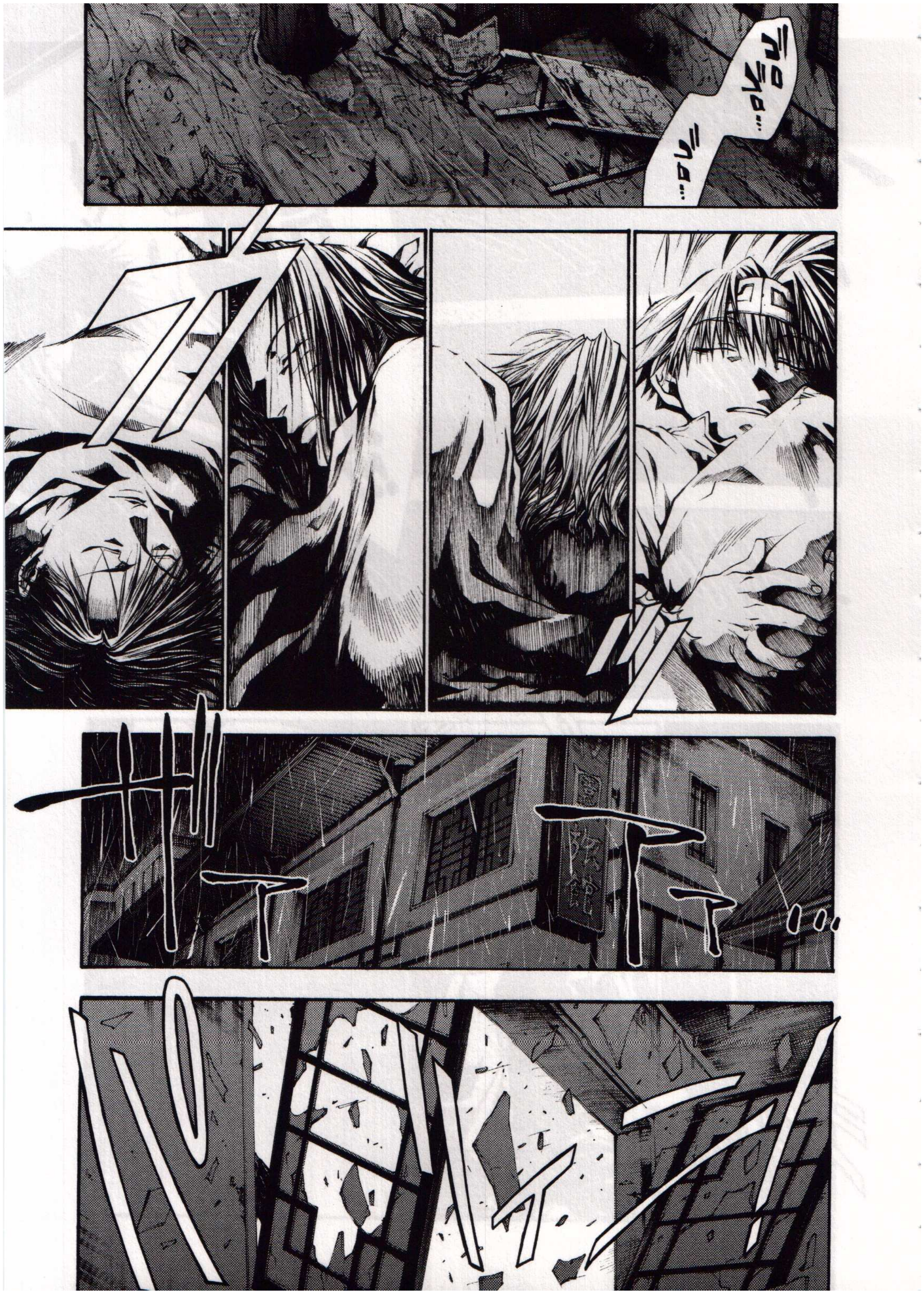
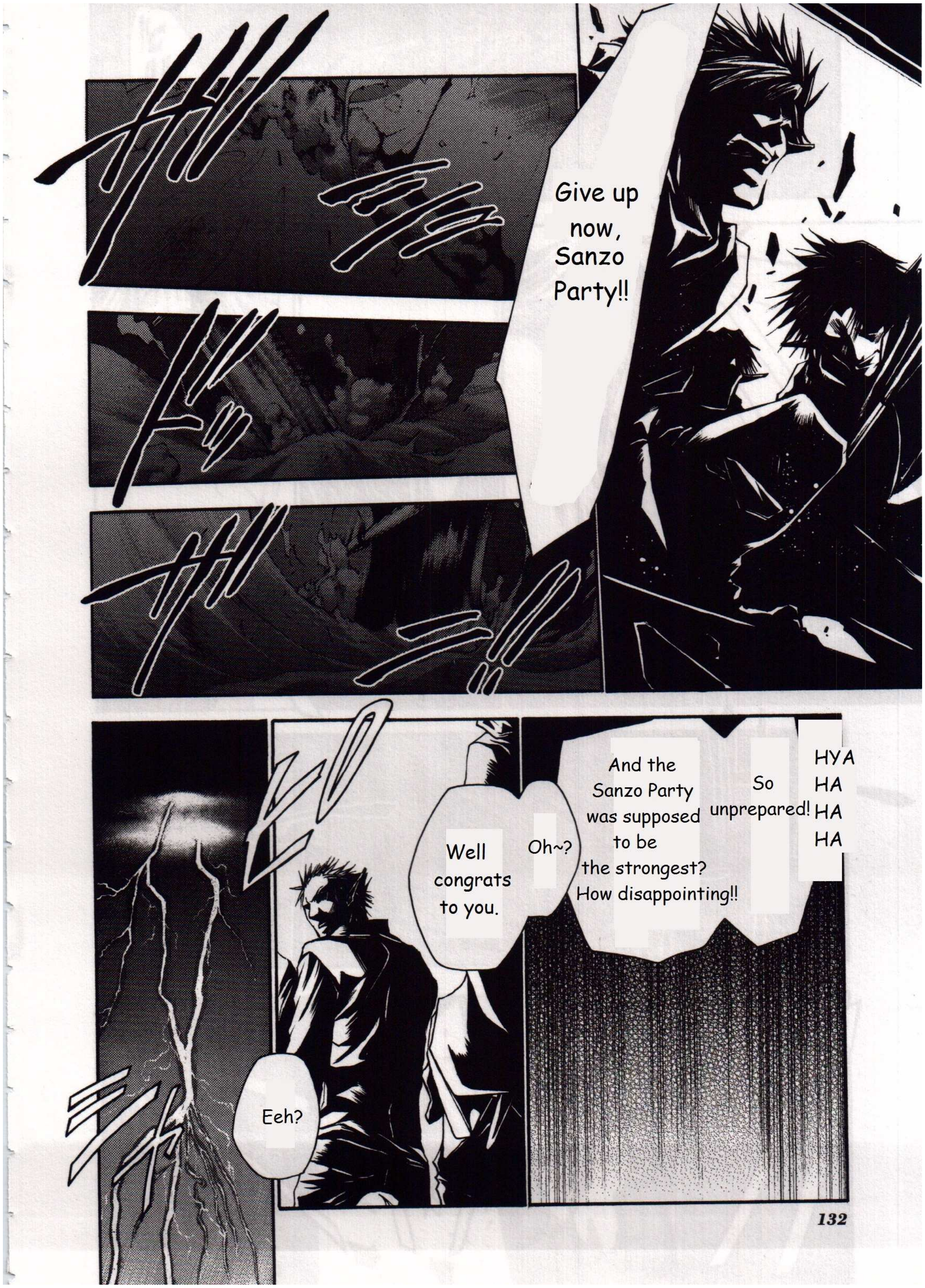
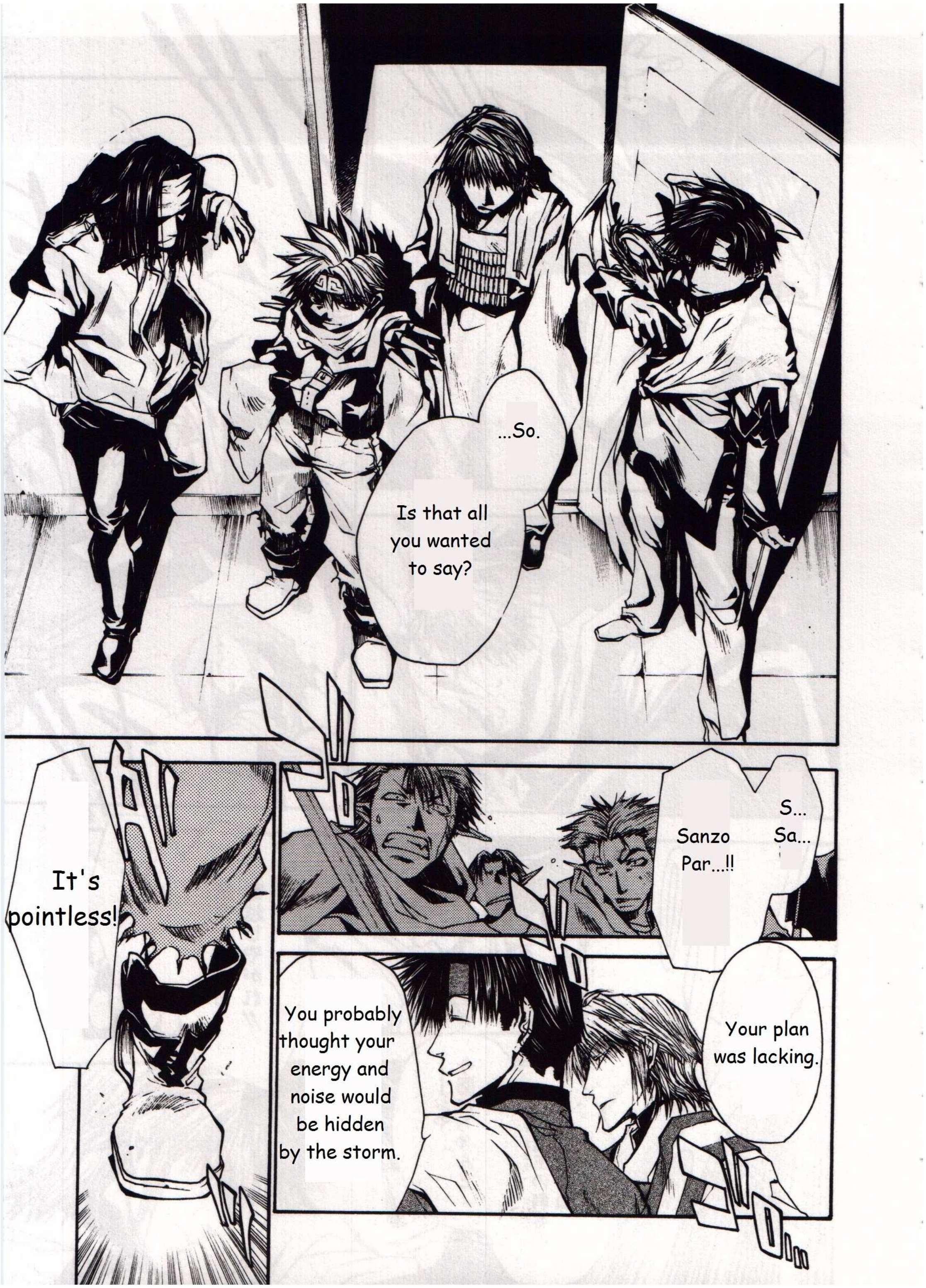
[4] For Original Japanese pages, see http://s657.photobucket.com/albums/uu292/Mithallan/WL%20404%20Project/Original%20Japanese/

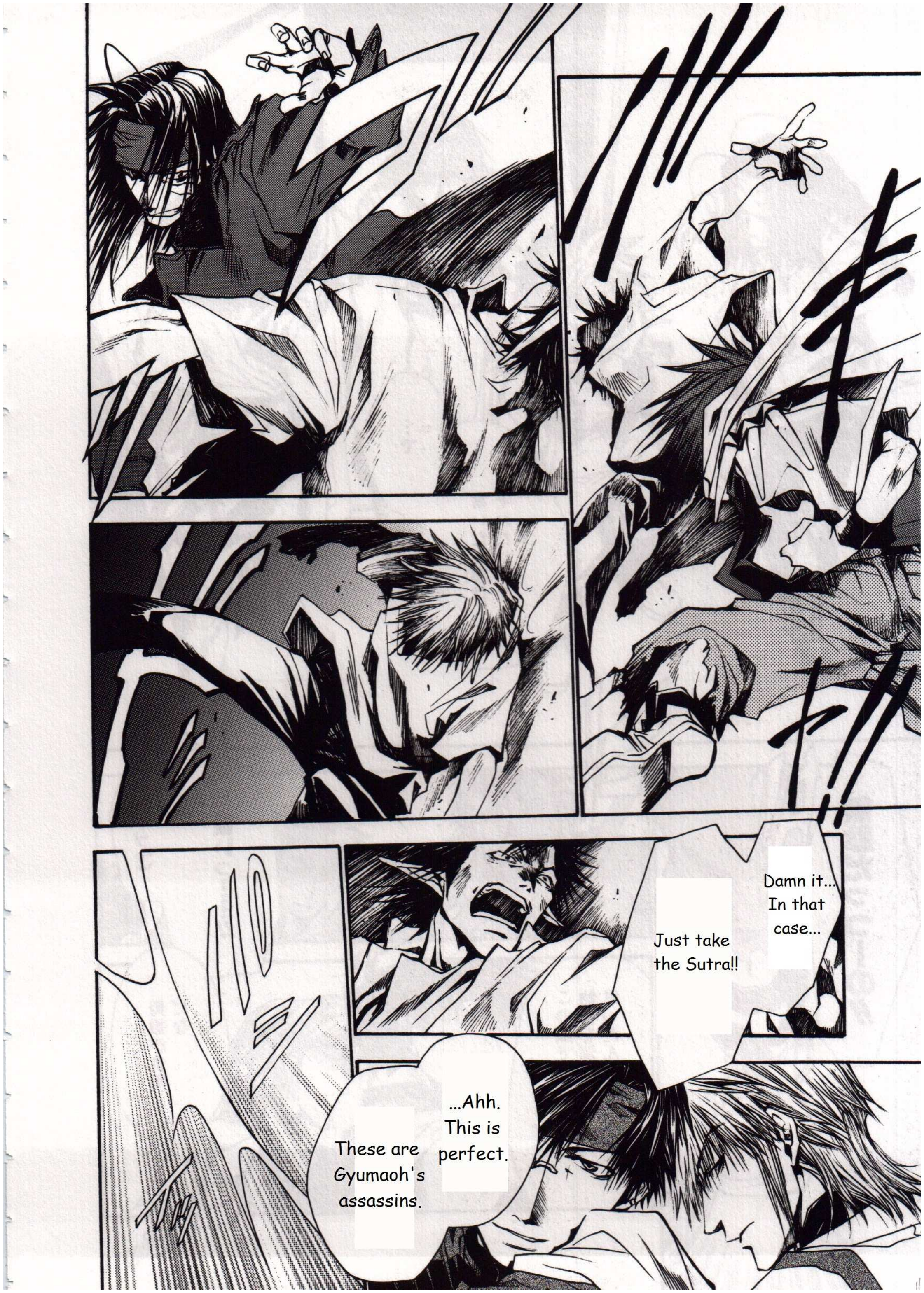

act. 15
Even a Worm-2

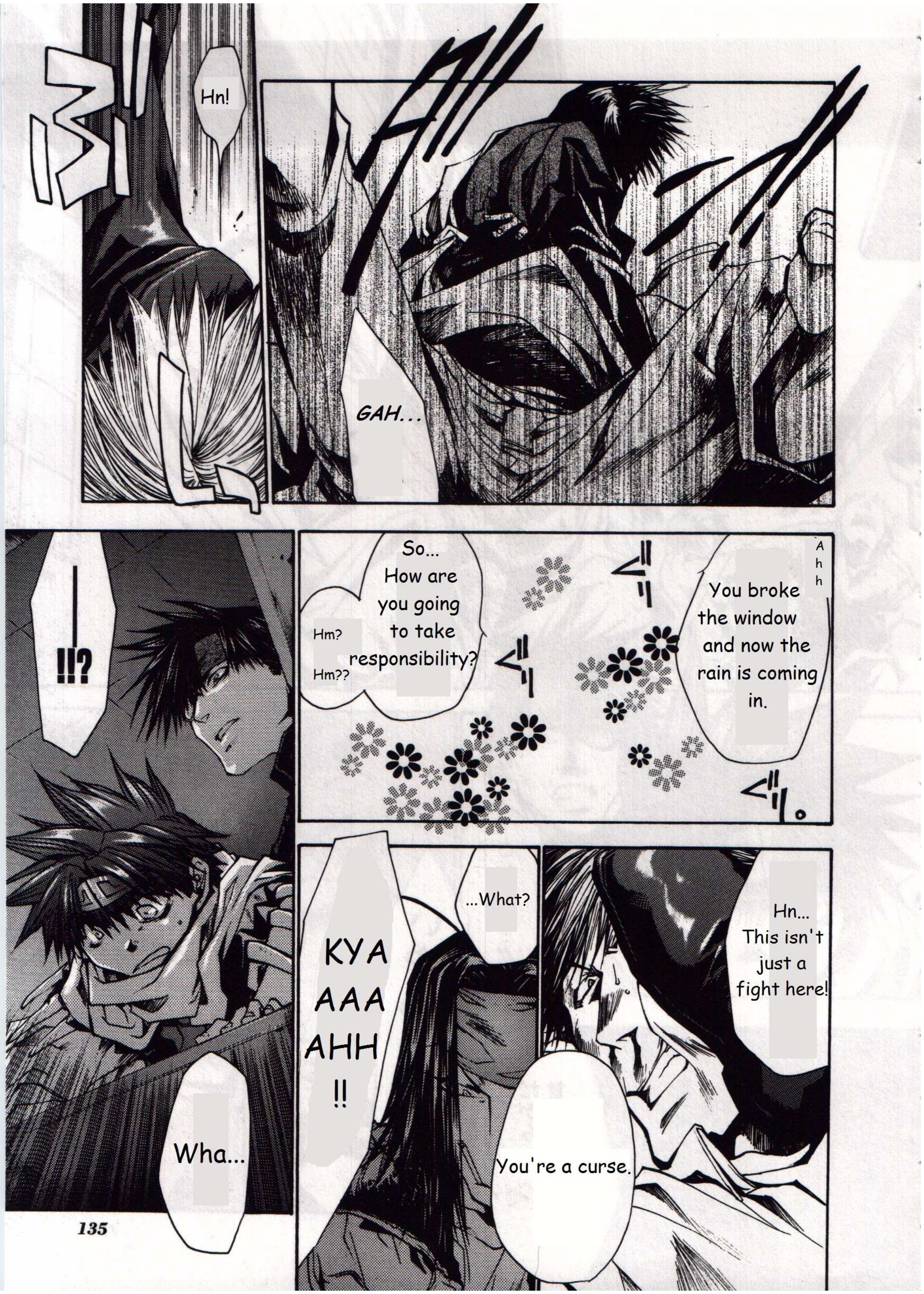


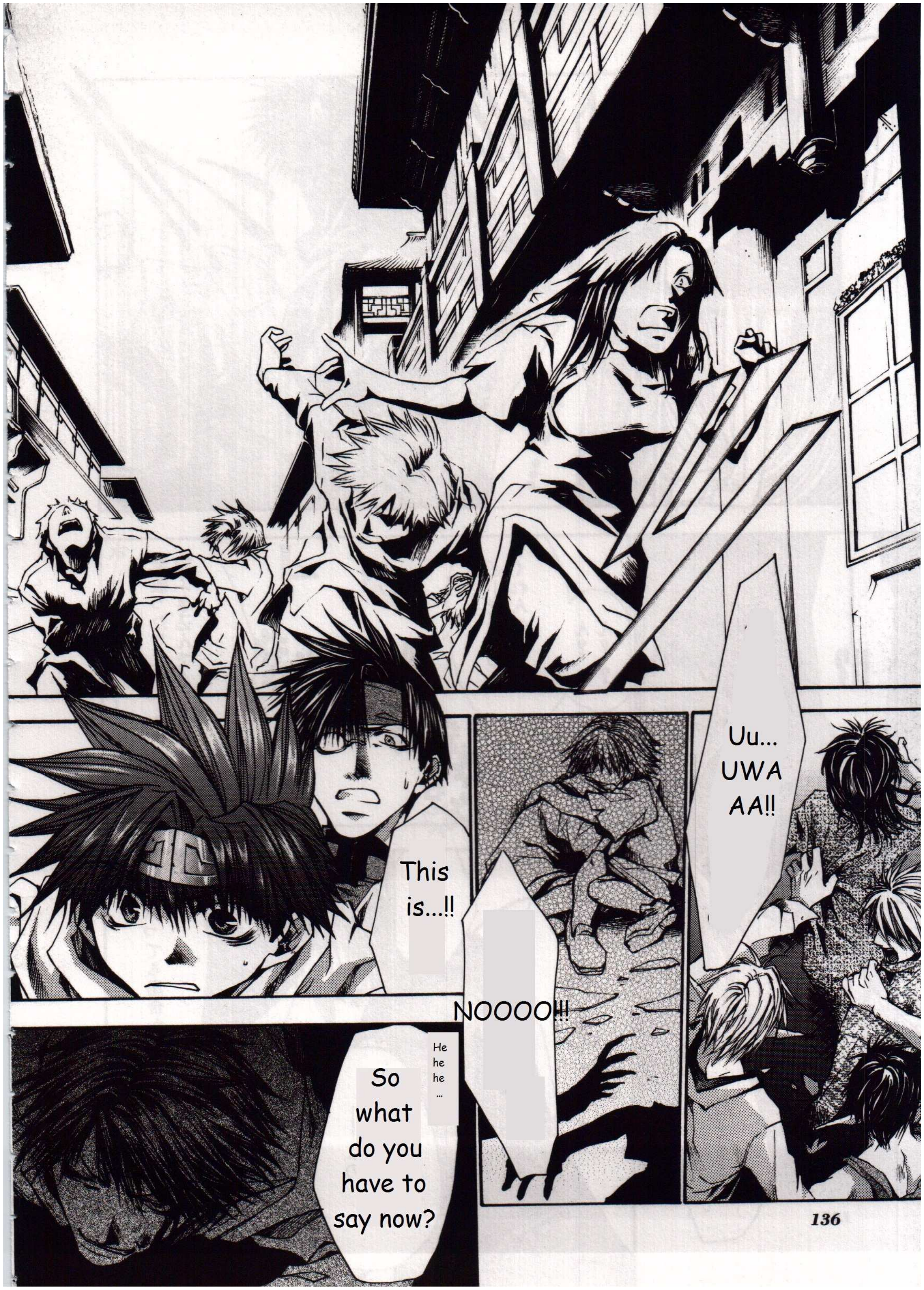

ゴロゴロ…
ゴロ…
ガ
ザァァァァ…
パリィィ

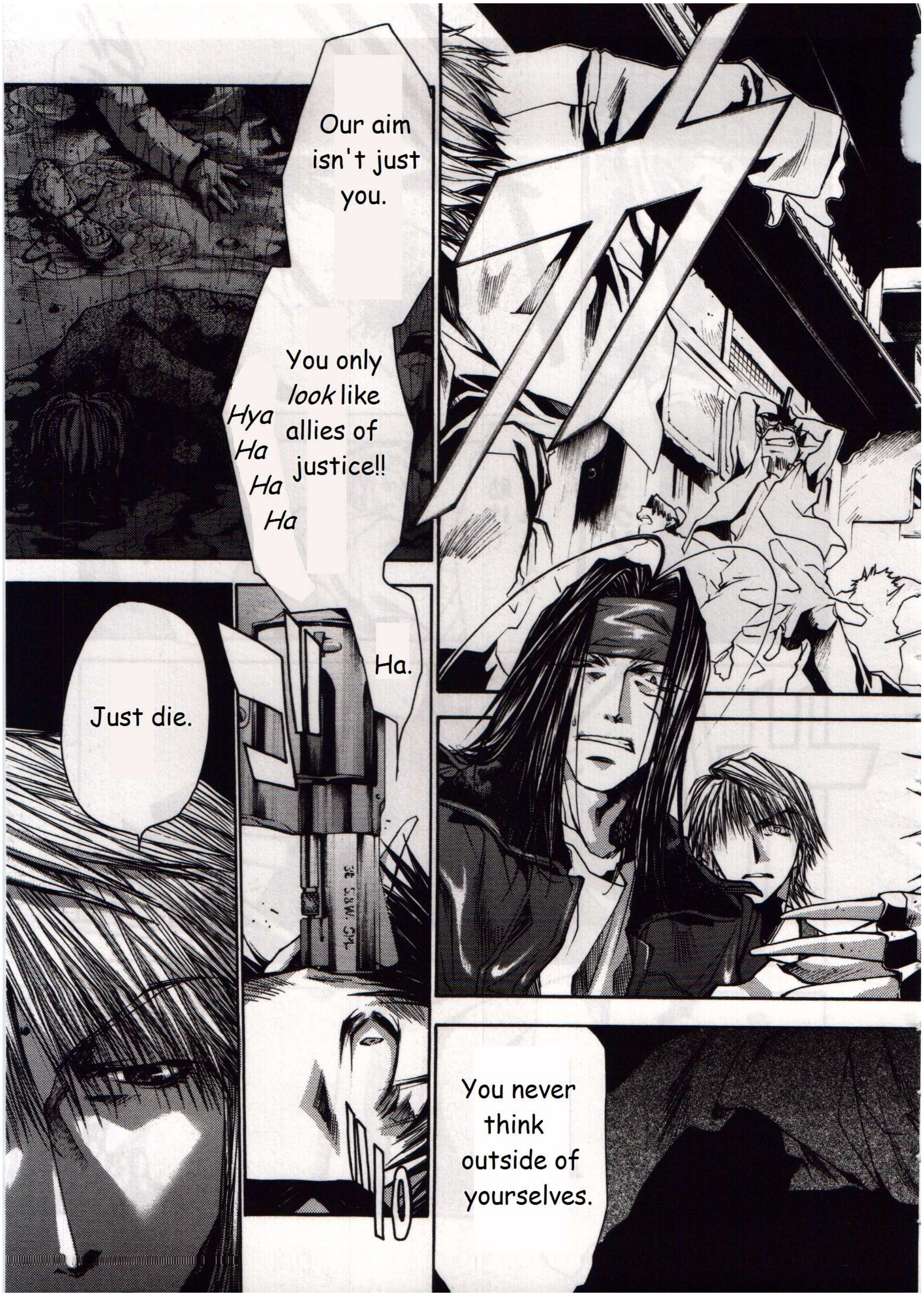

Give up now, Sanzo Party!!
HYA HA HA HA
So unprepared!
And the Sanzo Party was supposed to be the strongest? How disappointing!!
Oh~?
Well congrats to you.
Eeh?
132

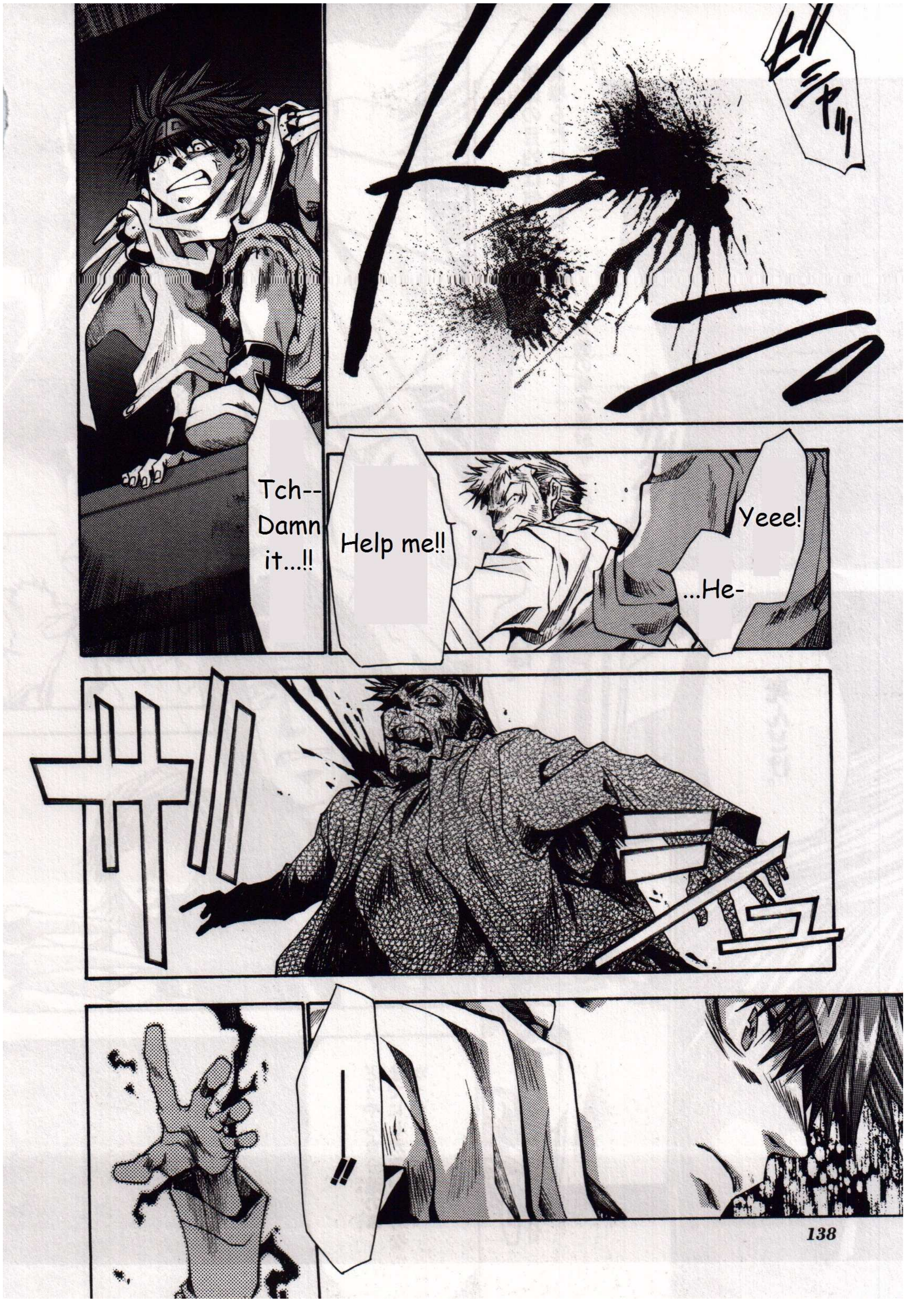

...So.
Is that all you wanted to say?
S... Sa...
Sanzo Par...!!
Your plan was lacking.
You probably thought your energy and noise would be hidden by the storm.
It's pointless!

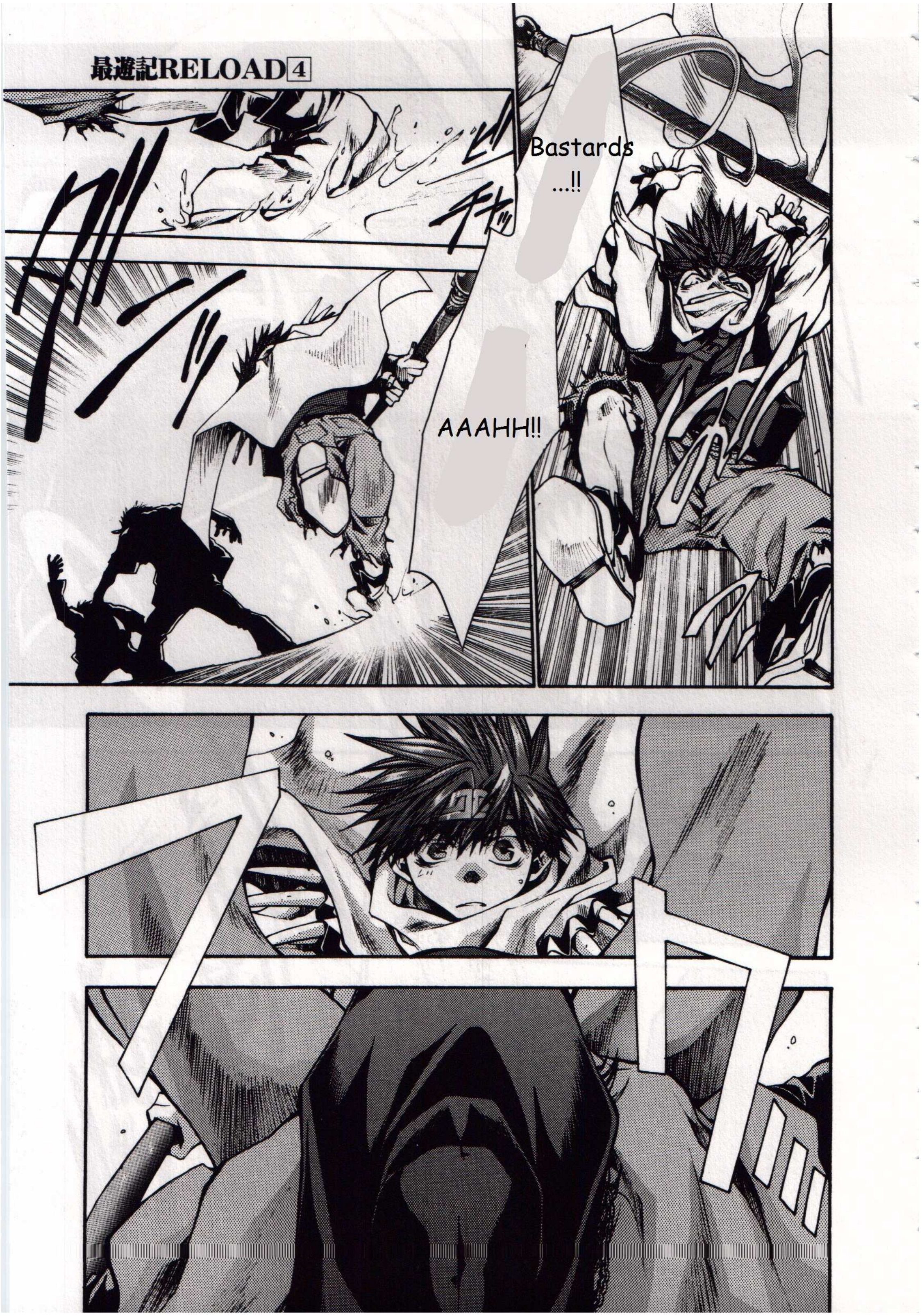

Damn it... In that case...
Just take the Sutra!!
...Ahh. This is perfect.
These are Gyumaoh's assassins.

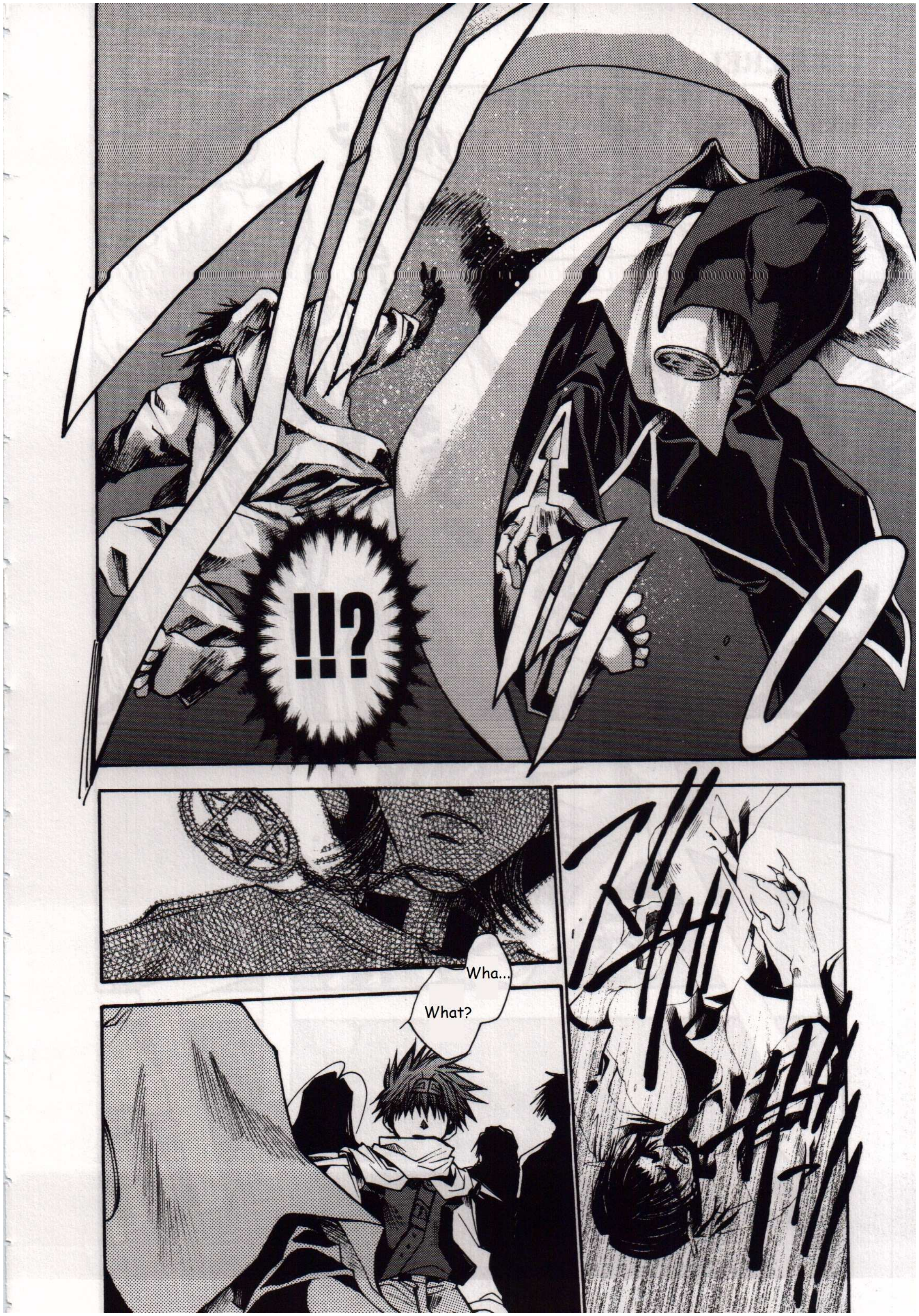

GAH...
Hn!
Ahh
You broke the window and now the rain is coming in.
So... How are you going to take responsibility?
Hm? Hm??
—!!?
Hn... This isn't just a fight here!
You're a curse.
...What?
KYA AAA AHH !!
Wha...
135

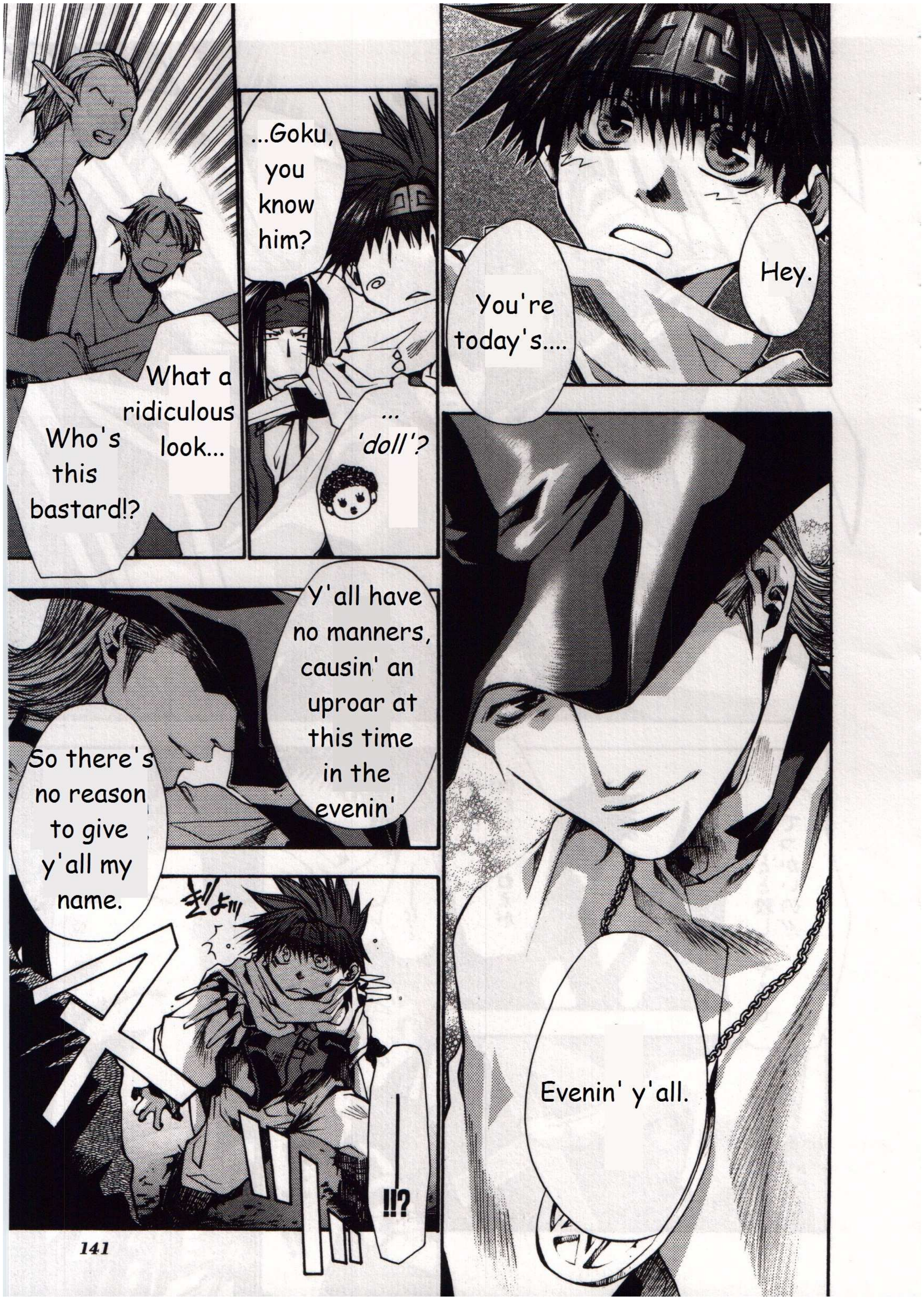

Uu... UWA AA!!
NOOOO!!
This is...!!
He he he ...
So what do you have to say now?
136

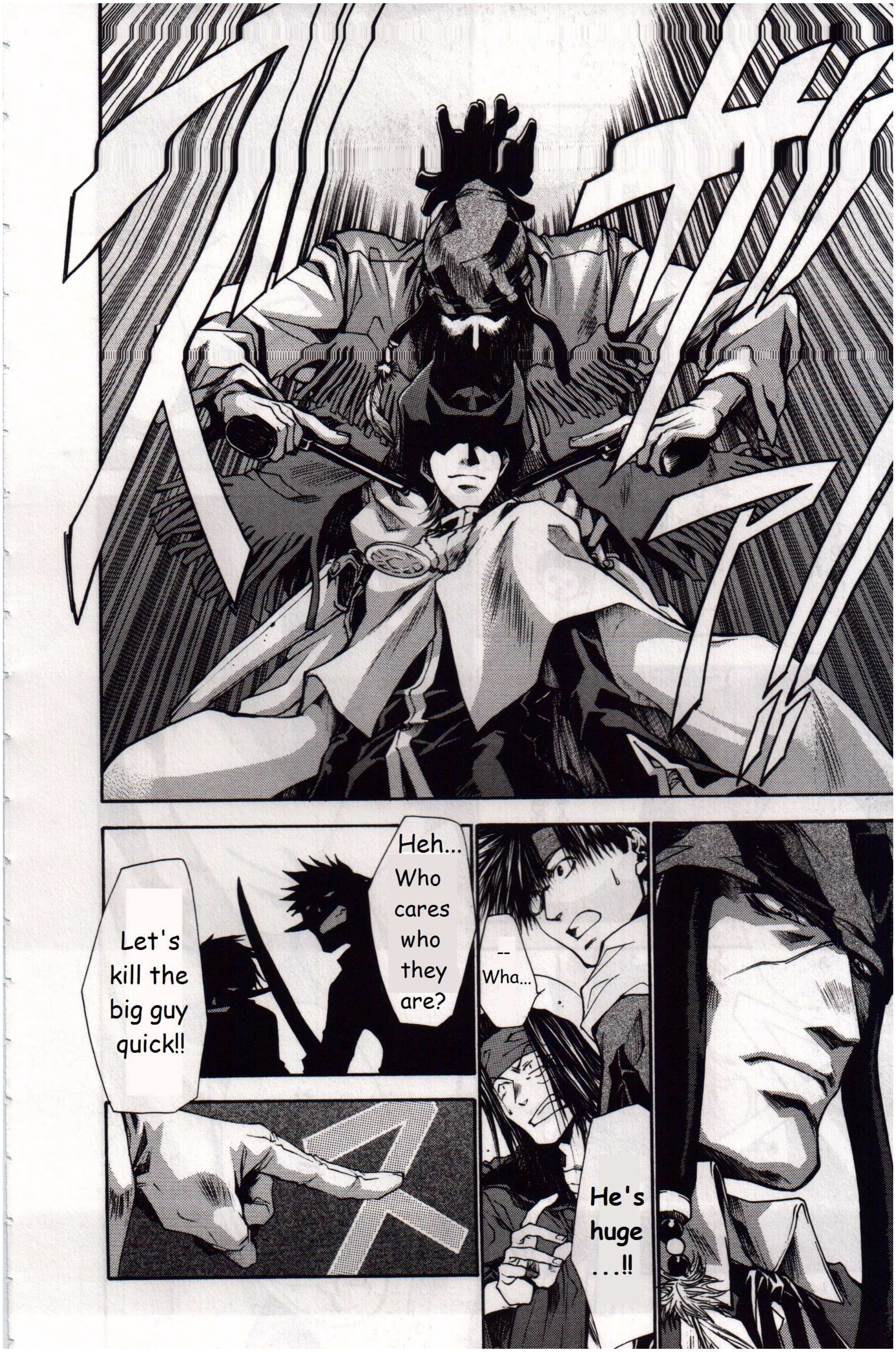

Our aim isn't just you.
You only *look* like allies of justice!!
Hya Ha Ha Ha
Ha.
Just die.
You never think outside of yourselves.

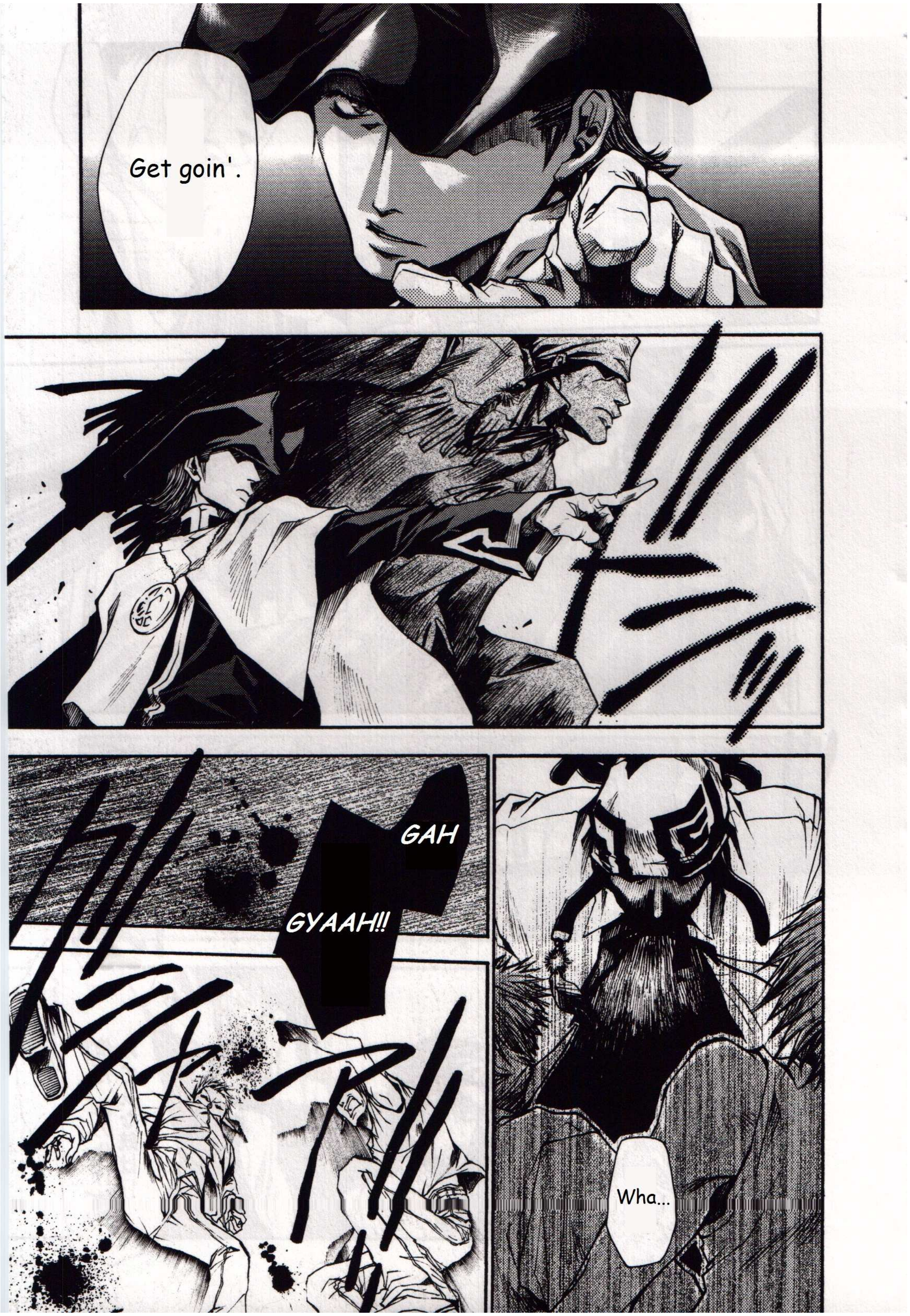

ビシャッ
Yeee!
...He-
Help me!!
Tch--
Damn
it...!!
ザ
ヒュ
--!!
138

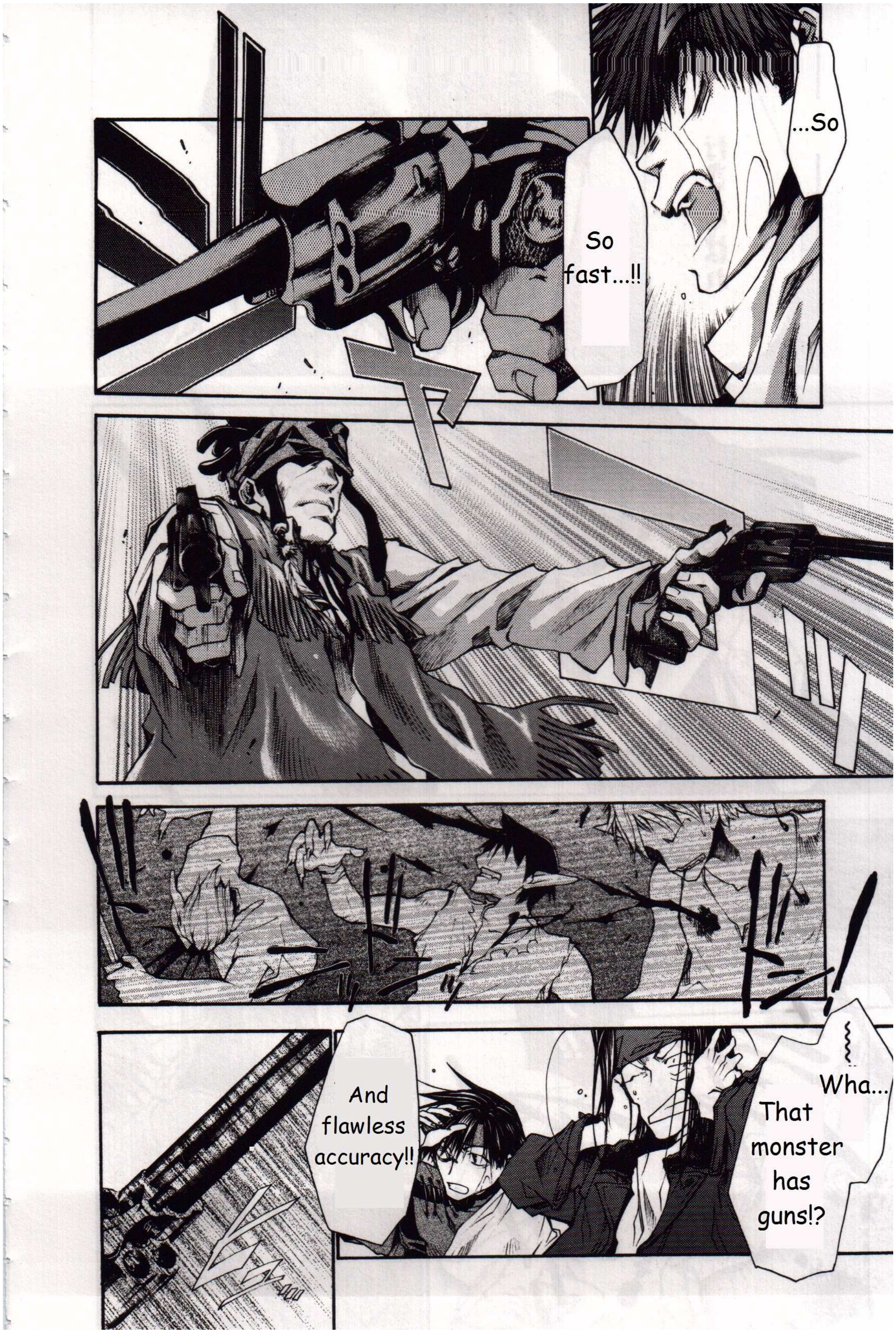

最遊記RELOAD④
Bastards ...!!
AAAHH!!

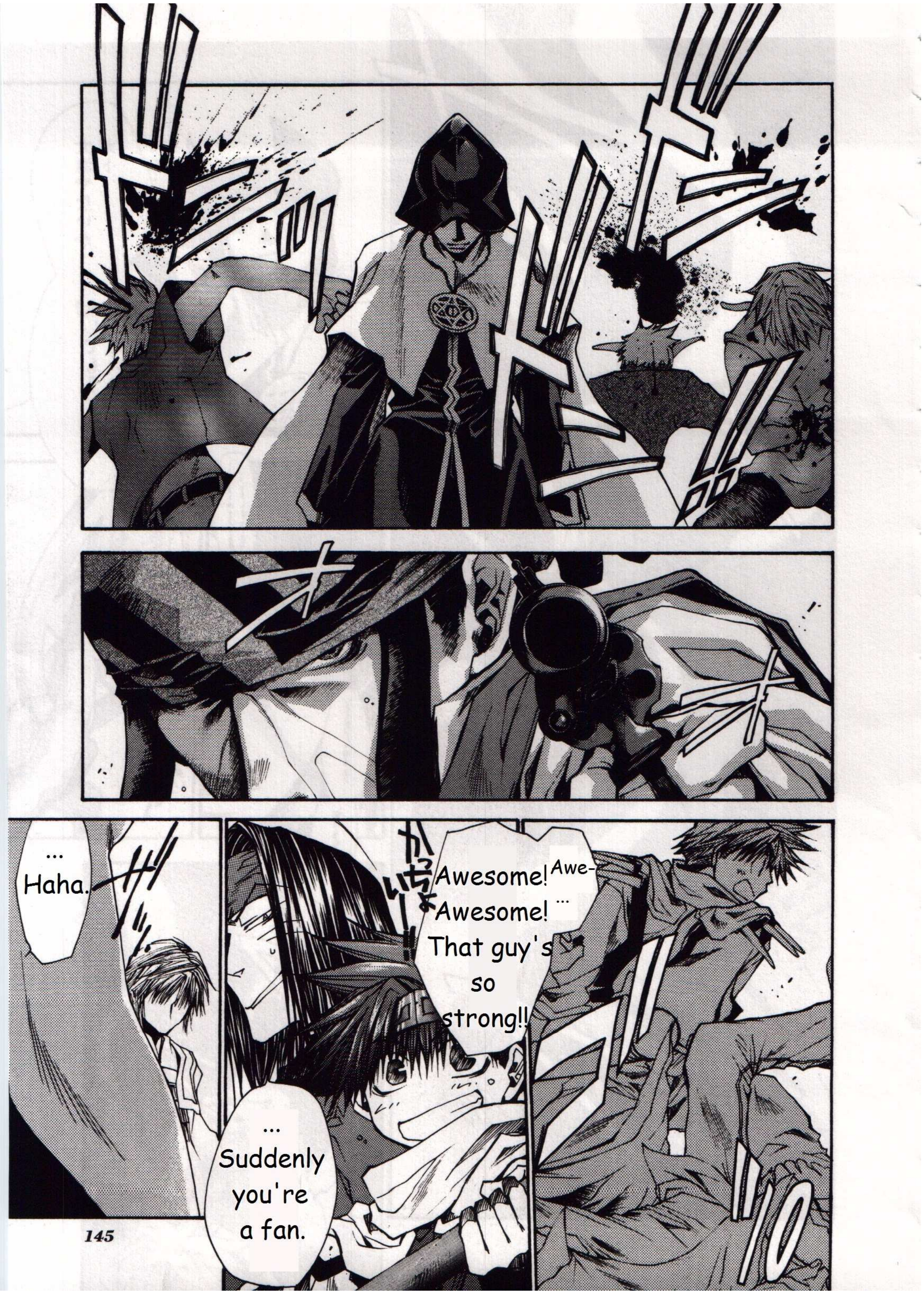

!!?
Wha...
What?

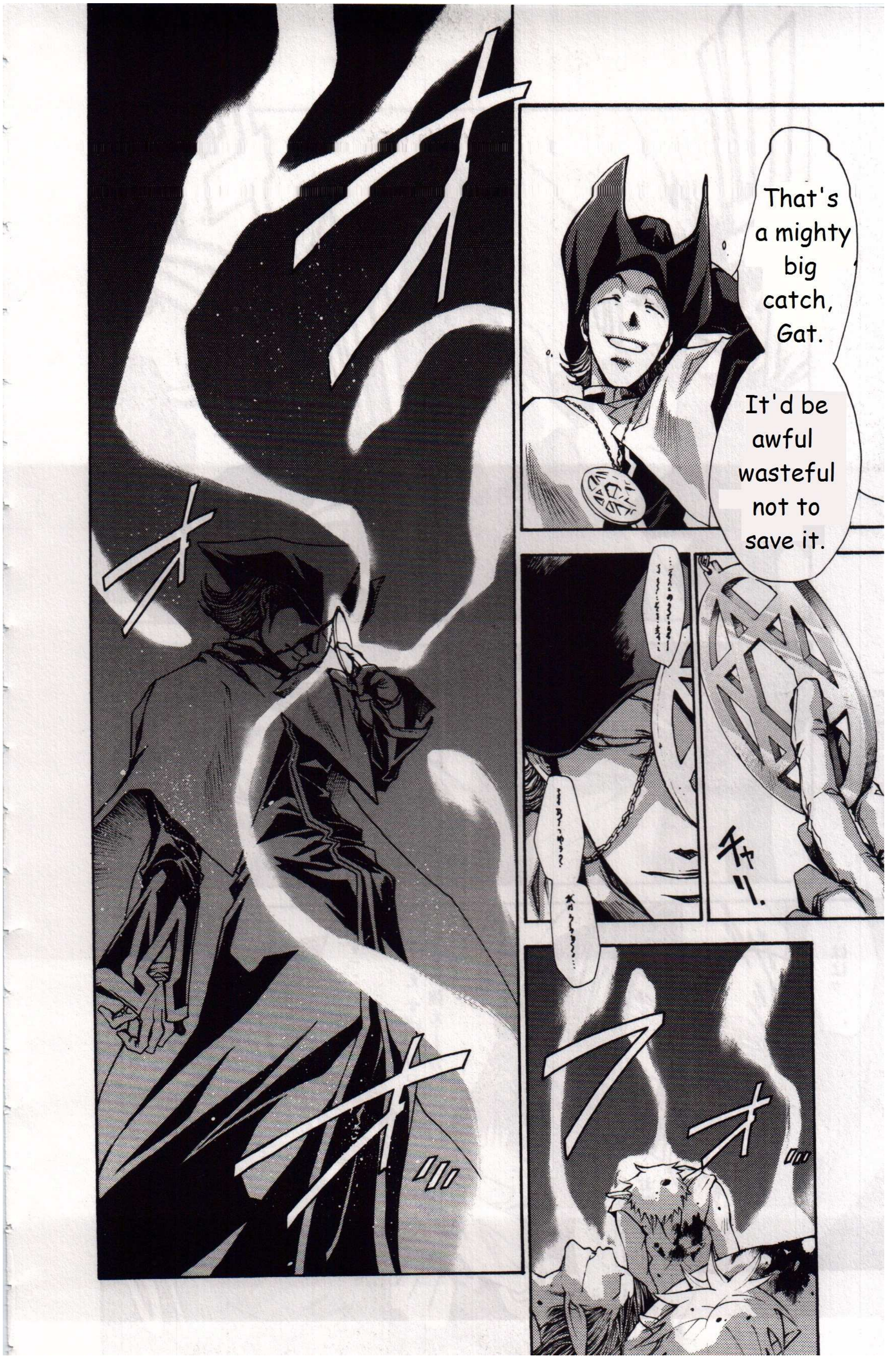

Hey.
You're today's....
...Goku, you know him?
... 'doll'?
What a ridiculous look...
Who's this bastard!?
Evenin' y'all.
Y'all have no manners, causin' an uproar at this time in the evenin'
So there's no reason to give y'all my name.
!!?
141

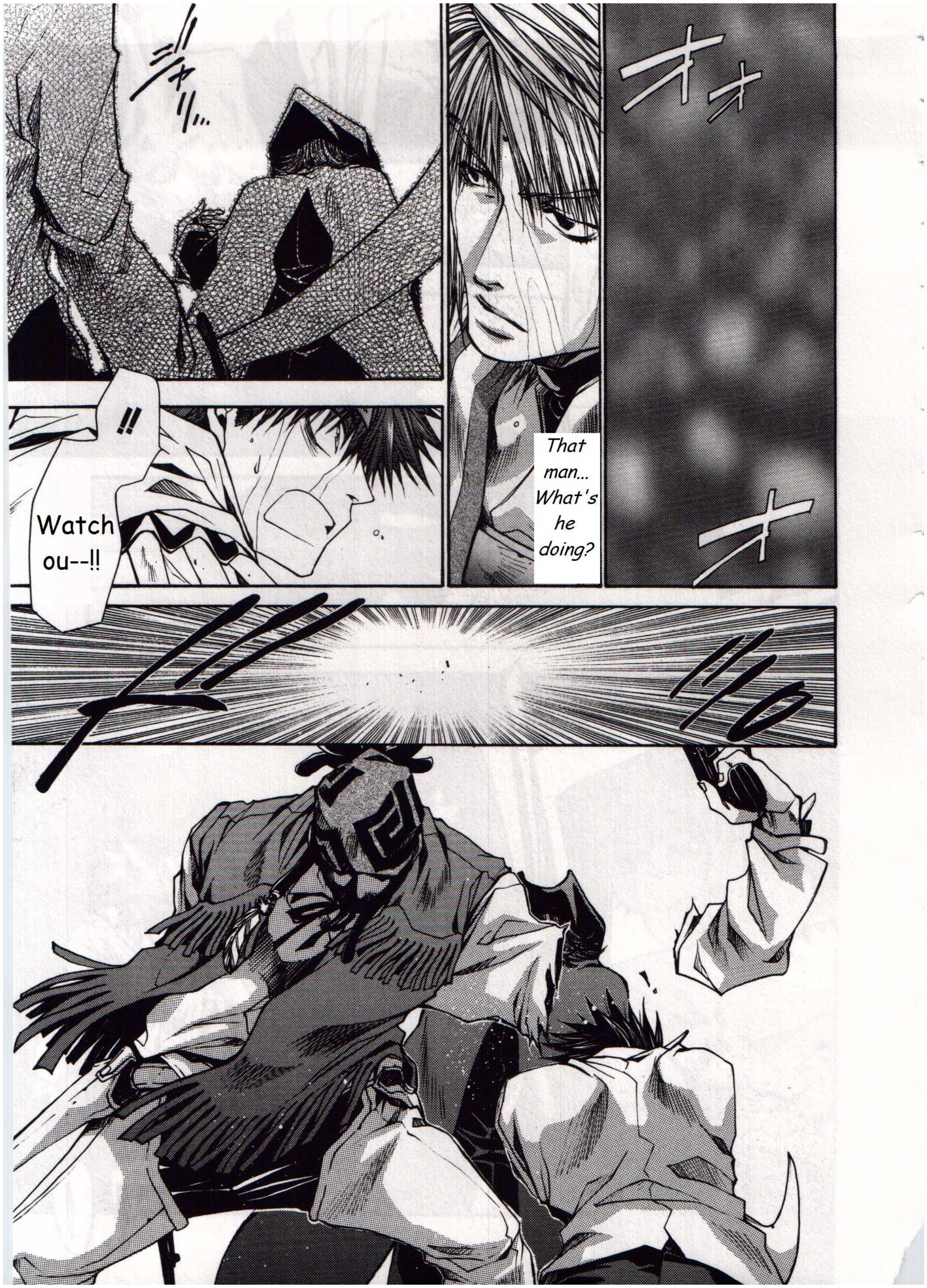

Heh... Who cares who they are?
Let's kill the big guy quick!!
-- Wha...
He's huge ...!!

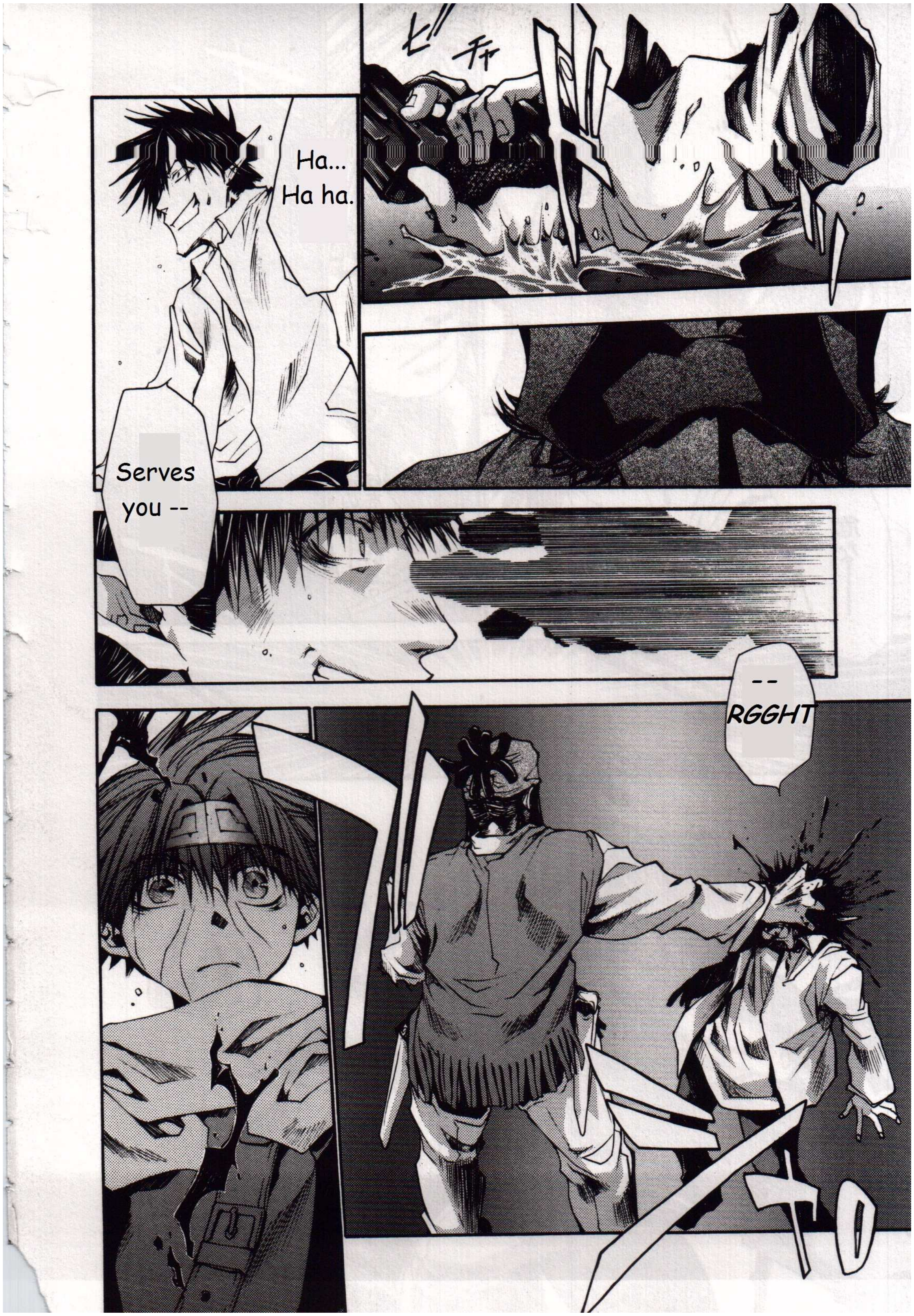

Get goin'.
Wha...
GAH
GYAAH!!

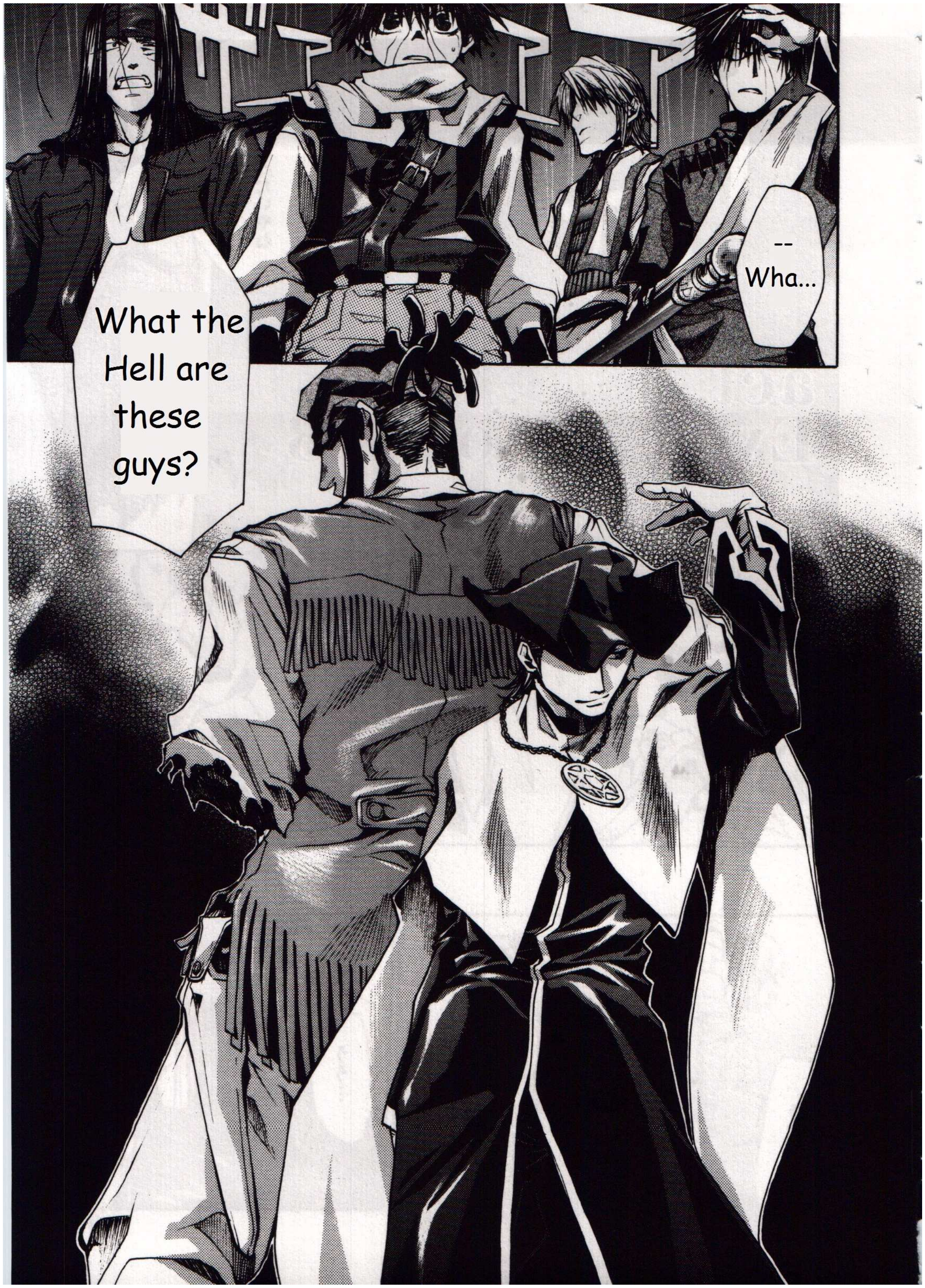

...So
So fast...!!
Wha...
That monster has guns!?
And flawless accuracy!!


Awe-
...
かっちょいー!!
Awesome! Awesome! That guy's so strong!!
... Suddenly you're a fan.
... Haha.
145


That's a mighty big catch, Gat.
It'd be awful wasteful not to save it.
チャリ.
オオオ
フオ


オォ
オ
That man... What's he doing?
ジャリ
!!
Watch ou--!!


ビ!!
チャ
Ha... Ha ha.
Serves you --
-- RGGHT


-- Wha...
What the Hell are these guys?